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Imagination in Exemplary Religious Narratives: An Examination of a Saint, a Goddess, and the work of Paul Ricoeur

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Imagination in Exemplary Religious Narratives:
An Examination of a Saint, a Goddess, and the work of Paul Ricoeur

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the imaginary process employed in the construction of exemplary religious narratives. Exemplary narratives present figures that demonstrate specific virtues or ideals to be imitated, such as the saint in Christian hagiography. Hagiographical scholars, like Peter Brown, have alluded to the fact that the imagination plays a significant role in the construction and reception of these narratives, but have not, thus far, rigorously defined the imagination or its role in narrative construction. Similarly, contemporary writers, like Carol P. Christ, who are presently engaged in the construction of exemplary narratives in order to provide alternative role models and figures, openly acknowledge that they are employing their imaginations during this narrative process. However, they, too, have not presented a clear definition of the imagination nor adequately explained how it is being employed.

This thesis proposes one possible approach to imagination and narrative construction based on the work of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur asserts that the imagination is a crucial component in narrative construction, which he refers to as “emplotment.” However, he does not take these constructions at face value. Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” requires that a distanced evaluation of these narrative proposals be undertaken, which helps to discern biases and other distortions that may be introduced during this imaginative process. He identifies certain forms of ideology and utopia as possible distortions, thereby establishing a template by which imaginary constructions may be examined.

This thesis utilizes Ricoeur’s approach to narrative construction to examine two exemplary narratives that present particular models of conduct for women, “The Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi,” written by Vito of Cortona, a Franciscan friar in the thirteenth century, and the contemporary Goddess narrative presented by spiritual feminist Carol P. Christ.
Although these two narratives present extremely different types of figures, a humble saint and a confident goddess, the imagination is employed by both authors. The “emplotted” nature of these exemplary narratives and the possible distortive tendencies of the exemplary models constructed in this imaginary process are examined.
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Introduction

This thesis is an investigation of the creative process involved in the production of exemplary religious narratives. Exemplary religious narratives present a model person or figure for the purposes of demonstrating exemplary conduct to the religious community. Often these figures will embody certain virtues or ideals that the community values, such as humility, bravery, or patience. I will argue that regardless of the type of figure being presented in the narrative, the same creative process is employed in their construction. Paul Ricoeur attributes this creative capacity to the imagination. For Ricoeur, the imagination is a crucial component in narrative construction. He asserts that it is the imagination that allows an author to construct a coherent plot, which can then be recognized as a story. This act of “emplotment” requires the author to engage their imaginative faculties in a creative synthesis, which can be observed in the text itself. In order to illustrate the role that the imagination plays in the construction of exemplary narratives, I will examine two such narratives as examples of emplotted stories.

There are several observations that prompted this inquiry into imagination and exemplary religious narratives. First, imagination appears to feature strongly in children’s television programming, especially in programs that claim to be educational as well as entertaining. Children are encouraged to imagine seeing and doing things they might never have encountered otherwise; to close their eyes and picture themselves as brave explorers or astronauts in order to explore imaginary worlds and unfamiliar people and creatures. The underlying assumption is that this imaginative play is a necessary learning exercise. But what, precisely, is the imagination and what are the limitations of these imaginative exercises? These questions are never addressed by the “edutainers” encouraging this imaginative play. I also observed that advocates for young women frequently stress the importance of positive role models for girls and
have lobbied publishing companies and film studios to include more female heroines in their content.\textsuperscript{1} What qualifies a person or character as a good role model, however, is open to interpretation. Expectations for behavior certainly change over time and vary from one culture to another. How are these new role models envisioned and subsequently presented to young people and how does the imagination feature in this process? In this thesis I examine exemplary religious narratives in order to understand how models of conduct are imagined and presented for the express purpose of provoking the imaginations of others. I have therefore chosen to examine the role that the imagination plays in narrative construction, specifically, in this case, of female exemplary narratives.

This thesis builds upon research that I began during my master’s degree. I had originally set out to ascertain how certain narratives effectively wove together elements from myth and history in order to create an inspiring story.\textsuperscript{2} During the course of that project, it became evident that I was merely skimming the surface of this creative process. In this, my doctoral dissertation, I am no longer simply alluding to the imagination as a factor in narrative construction. I am conducting an in-depth examination of the imagination at work in the construction of exemplary religious narratives. Drawing on Ricoeur’s work on narrative, I am arguing that the imaginative process undertaken in order to construct stories is an intelligible process – a process that Ricoeur refers to as emplotment. This thesis is therefore a careful analysis of the role of imagination from a philosophical perspective as it contributes to emplotment and is utilized for the specific purpose of constructing an exemplary narrative. I will then use Ricoeur’s concept of emplotment

\textsuperscript{1} For example, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media has voiced the need for both strong female characters as well as equal representation of male and female characters on screen. See “Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media,” <http://www.seejane.org> (Accessed July 14, 2013).

in order to better apprehend the manner in which specific writers employ their imaginations to construct exemplary narratives.

Emplotment, however, is not the only concept from Ricoeur that I will be employing. I will also discuss his concepts of ideology and utopia in order to discuss certain distortive tendencies of the imagination that may occur during the process of construction. I will argue that by identifying specific forms of ideology and utopia as two distinct distortive tendencies, Ricoeur provides a template with which to evaluate imagined constructs and whatever proposals for action that maybe contained therein.

I have chosen to examine and evaluate two exemplary narratives that present particular models of conduct for women: “The Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi,” written by Vito of Cortona, a Franciscan friar in the thirteenth-century, and the contemporary Goddess narrative presented by spiritual feminist Carol P. Christ. Although these narratives were written during different time periods and presented to different religious communities, both authors undertake similar narrative endeavors for the express purpose of presenting an exemplary figure to women. I will show that despite presenting two extremely different types of exemplary figures, a humble saint in Vito’s case, and a confident goddess in Christ’s, the imagination is employed by both authors in order to construct their respective narratives. The “emplotted” nature of these exemplary narratives as well as the possible distortive tendencies present in their proposed exemplary models will be examined using Ricoeur’s work.

I will approach Vito’s presentation of Umiliana and Christ’s presentation of the Goddess as constructed texts that have employed emplotment with its accompanying imaginative devices to both construct and interpret these figures. This is very different from a textual analysis of the type I undertook in my MA. Ricoeur’s work provides both a philosophically based theory of the
construction of texts and an approach that allows for the evaluation of this imaginative constructive process. In this regard, I have found both Ricoeur’s philosophical theory and critical approach to imagined constructs, acknowledging ideology and utopia as possible tendencies present within the imaginative process itself to be extremely helpful. I have chosen the two aforementioned narratives as my case studies because they provide excellent examples of the potential ideological and utopian tendencies to which Ricoeur has alluded; one in an ideological direction, the other in a more utopian. As such, they separately allow for a cautionary illustration of the potential imaginative distortions that may be inherent in the models of conduct proposed in the respective exemplary narratives.

Ricoeur did not address exemplarity or ideal figures in his work. (He adopts a pluralistic approach in order to leave imagination open ended. Thus, he would not want to set up an ideal type as that would limit the unfolding of possibilities.) This application of Ricoeur’s work on narrative and imagination to exemplary religious narratives is an original contribution to scholarship as I have not come across any other work that has, to my knowledge, employed Ricoeur’s philosophical work on the creative imagination in this way. I have also not found any similar critical use that I make of Ricoeur’s ideas in my analysis of exemplary narrative writings and their possible distortions. Again, I would propose that this mode of critical narrative analysis is an original contribution to scholarship.

I begin my examination of imagination and exemplary religious narratives by examining one example from Late Medieval Christian hagiography, Vito of Cortona’s “Life of Umiliana,” which presents Umiliana as an exemplary saintly figure for laywomen by praising her humble, chaste and obedient conduct. In this first case study, a saintly figure is presented by a thirteenth century friar, Vito of Cortona. Vito’s text narrates the life and death of Umiliana de’ Cerchi, a
wealthy laywoman from Florence, whom he praises for being humble, generous, and obedient. In Vito’s biography, Umiliana’s conduct is depicted as exemplary and her life is presented as a model of a new way of life for Christian laywomen. My second case study is an examination of a contemporary composite goddess figure presented by spiritual feminist Carol P. Christ. Christ identifies the Goddess as a prehistoric figure that has re-emerged from the collective imaginations of contemporary Goddess worshippers. The narrative that she presents is a mythical history of sorts, which centers on a deity that survives and thrives through periods of hardship. Emphasizing the strength, power, and creativity of the Goddess, Christ insists that she is a potentially empowering figure for women presently living in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

Although one example is from the medieval period and the other from the contemporary period, both authors present their narratives for the express purpose of describing a possible ideal figure to women. Christ’s goddess figure is strong and powerful, while Vito’s Umiliana is meek and mild. When contrasted, these two figures appear strikingly different. Nevertheless, I will show that both Vito and Christ engage in a similar constructive process, and thus both employ the imagination, in order to construct their depictions of exemplary figures. Moreover, they present their exemplary figures for the purpose of engaging the imaginations of others. There is a deliberate intention to engage the attention of their readers so as to encourage emulation of the ideals that they present. In this way, imagination appears to be a crucial feature of narrative construction, particularly of exemplary narrative construction.

At the core of my thesis is the understanding that Ricoeur’s approach to imagination and narrative allows that the construction of exemplary religious narratives can be approached as an intelligible process. Ricoeur also insists that the products of such an imaginative synthesis must
be subject to evaluation, both critical and ethical, before any actions that are proposed are adopted. Thus, I also explore the possible distortive tendencies of ideology and utopia in Vito’s presentation of Umiliana and Christ’s presentation of the Goddess, to demonstrate the relevance of Ricoeur’s approach. I contend that such a process may be useful in examining other such exemplary figures. In this way, my thesis not only examines the role that the imagination plays in the construction of exemplary narratives, but also in the possible distortive effects it may have on the construction process.

The thesis will be developed in the following order. Chapter one will be an introduction to the study of exemplary religious narratives in the west, with a special focus on Christian hagiographies that depict the lives of Christian saints in the late medieval period. Chapter two will be an in-depth examination of my first case study, the saintly figure of Umiliana de’ Cerchi as she is presented by Vito of Cortona in 1246. Chapter three will present my second case study, the contemporary Goddess figure presented by Carol P. Christ. Before I undertake a comparison of these two case studies, I will introduce Paul Ricoeur’s approach to imagination and narrative. In chapter four, I will outline what exactly I will be taking from Ricoeur’s impressive body of work. This includes both his conceptualization of “emplotment” as the main act of narrative construction, and his approach to imagination as a mode of semantic innovation rather than the reproduction of images. I will also discuss his proposal of “ideology” and “utopia” as contrary forces within the imaginative process and examine the potential distortions these forces may introduce. Chapter five will then apply Ricoeur’s concepts to both the exemplary narratives that I have chosen. I will then highlight a specific distortive tendency that appears in each case. Chapter six will be the conclusion of this study. Here I will discuss the constructive and critical insights that Ricoeur’s philosophical approach can bring to narrative. In addition, I will suggest
ways that his theories of imagination and its distortive potential can contribute to deeper insights both of narrative construction in general, and exemplary narratives in particular.
Chapter 1: Hagiography as Exemplary Religious Narratives

This chapter examines a genre of literature from Christianity traditionally referred to as hagiography. Hagiographies concern the lives of the saints and martyrs and their legendary deeds. Such literature often contains prescriptive descriptions of appropriate religious behavior, which qualify them as exemplary religious narratives. I have chosen to examine the hagiography of a female saint from the western Christian tradition as my first case study. My concern will be the particular models that exemplify the virtuous woman. These gender-based models are often constructed with specific modes of feminized virtues in mind.\(^1\) My primary interest is in the construction of such narratives and models, rather than their reception and implementation – which, it could be argued, also involves imagination – so that I may focus on the role of the imagination in the construction of these narratives.

It is important to note that the descriptions of virtuous conduct do not remain static. They change in response to newly emerging concerns, such as ecclesiastical developments or socio-economic pressures. In such cases, the appearance of new trends and themes can be observed within the literature which, in turn, involves the production of distinctly new kinds of models. It is precisely this development, involving emergent new models of conduct that is the primary focus of my research. The development of new models in response to shifting concerns would seem to involve the imagination. The two case studies I will examine in chapters two and three will reflect such innovative changes. I will argue that by engaging in a creative process that recasts appropriate models for women, the authors of these texts are engaging in a constructive process that requires the employment of the creative imagination. I propose that the imagination is employed during the initial constructive phase when the exemplary model is being woven

\(^{1}\) Although these virtues appear to be recommendations for women, they are, more accurately, “feminine” virtues, which could be for the instruction of either gender.
from pre-existing models and familiar themes and images. Ricoeur also demonstrates that the imagination is engaged during the reception phase as well, when the reader considers the new model. This thesis, however, will maintain a focus on the construction of these models rather than their reception.

The primary objective of this first chapter is to provide the context for my first case study, the “Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi,” which narrates the story of a saintly woman from thirteenth-century Florence, Italy. Before I can begin a thorough examination of this text, however, I must first provide some context for this study. My examination of the text itself will therefore take place in chapter two, while the present chapter will lay the necessary groundwork for my analysis of Umiliana’s Life. Central to this task is a careful review of the current academic discourse on hagiographical literature.

Understanding Hagiographical Lives

Saints, in the Christian tradition, are figures that function as exemplary models of virtue. The accounts of their lives, or hagiographies, were carefully recorded and often promoted from the pulpit because they provided a means of demonstrating proper Christian conduct. These stories model clearly identifiable virtues which were recommended as worthy of imitation by the audience. The assumption was that one could successfully lead a Christian life by simply following in the footsteps of these saintly figures. Ordinary Christians were therefore encouraged to meditate and reflect upon the lives of the extraordinary saints. While the ordinary Christian might not have expected to be able to achieve the same standard of behavior as the legendary saint, they could hope to achieve some measure of self-improvement by striving

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2 The veneration of saints was a widespread phenomenon throughout the Christian world beginning with the popular legends of the martyrs from the Early Church. Thus, the stories and images of saints were familiar to many Christians. So familiar, in fact, that these ‘personable’ saints were sought out as patrons and intercessors between the ordinary Christian and their seemingly distant God.
to become *like* the saint and following their example. However, the reception of the proposed models and the manner in which their examples were implemented will not be the primary focus here.\(^3\)

In my study of Vito’s Umiliana, I will focus on the models of proper “feminine” behavior as portrayed by female saints in Late Medieval hagiographies. I will examine the deliberate process of articulating exemplary conduct involved in the presentation of female saints. I plan to show that a creative process is undertaken in order to construct an exemplary figure for promotion. While other studies like Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell’s *Saints and Society* (1982) have focused on broader trends within hagiographical literature, as opposed to studying the particularities of individual saints and their respective texts, I have decided to examine a single text and a single female figure from Late Medieval Italy as my case study. It is my intention to engage in an in-depth textual analysis so that I may examine exactly how such an exemplary model is constructed. It is therefore more relevant for my purposes to examine a specific example of a proposed “feminine” model that contains certain common themes and trends rather than surveying a plethora of possible “feminine” models from the Latin hagiographical literature. First, however, I must survey the scholarly literature on the hagiographical tradition in order to situate my chosen case study.

While the reading of saints’ lives has had a long history within the Christian tradition, the academic study of hagiography begins essentially with the Bollandists. The Bollandists were originally Jesuit scholars who followed Jean Bolland (1596 – 1665) in his ambitious project to collect the lives of the saints. In the early seventeenth century, they began preserving large

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collections of vitae, or “lives,” along with commentaries on the sources. It was the famous Bollandist, Hippolyte Delehaye (1859-1941), who emphasized the need for engaging in critical studies of these texts. On the other hand, hagiographical scholarship conducted since the Enlightenment has been primarily divided into two camps. Reflecting modernity’s own position, a dividing line can be drawn between the “religious” and the “secular.” This amounts to scholars of Church history standing on one side of the divide, and scholars of secular histories on the other. While Church historians have examined hagiographies for what they could illuminate about the development and spread of Christian thought and practice, secular scholars tended to overlook these hagiographical texts because they deemed the historical information they contained unreliable. When they did choose to examine hagiographies, secular historians used them to verify other existing sources of history, or they attempted to “mine” certain historical details from the sources, while choosing to ignore what they regarded as the more unbelievable accounts of phenomena, such as miraculous healing, transmutation, and demon possession. Later, with the emergence of social history, particularly during its rise in popularity during the 1960s and 1970s, social historians would devise a distinctly different approach. They argued that hagiographical documents could illuminate unexplored aspects of popular Christian belief and practice that had been previously dismissed as “vulgar”, or belonging to the lower classes. The assumption that hagiographies were produced for the lower classes, however, was based on the fact that these texts tended to portray fantastic characters and events that could be dismissed as entertainment for the uneducated masses. It has since been recognized that hagiographical

4 Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700 (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982), 2.
5 Benedicta Ward, Signs and Wonders: Saints, Miracles and Prayers from the 4th Century to the 14th (Vermont: VARIOURUM Ashgate Publishing, 1992), xi-xii.
narratives were not only written and preserved by the literate, but they were also often commissioned by other elites. For example, a wealthy patron might wish to promote the cult of a favorite saint, or perhaps a relative that was being considered for sainthood, and thus a hagiographer would be asked to compose his or her Life. Similarly, it has been shown that private collections of vitae were either composed or translated into the vernacular and included in “household manuscripts” to be used in the educating of the children of the noble and wealthy merchant classes. Thus, “behind the veil” of these texts, James Howard-Johnston explains, vested interests of several sorts (royal, aristocratic, episcopal, monastic) are discerned at work, striving to legitimize or to enhance their power, to solidify or increase their wealth, by sponsoring new cults or by establishing close associations with those already well entrenched. Hagiographical records of the lives and posthumous feats of saints were, it is contended, reshaped to serve such interests, especially in the early medieval West where inherited administrative institutions were increasingly corroded and the powerful turned to the supernatural and to religious institutions to buttress their positions. Thus, saints' Lives are presented as active agents in the interaction between competing social and political forces, as well as more or less efficient transmitters of information about notable holy men and women (and certainly other leaders) for the edification of future generations.

In sum, hagiographical texts are no longer viewed by scholars as the fanciful fictions of the masses, but instead as sophisticated pieces of writing that detailed how the holy person was able to “set about the delicate business of living,” as Peter Brown has put it. It is this exemplary aspect of hagiographical literature, and the way that it has been created, that is the chief concern of my study.

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Saintly Models and “Ideals”

Understood in its most basic sense, the saint is a person identified by the community as “holy” or sanctified.\(^{11}\) Sanctity is often discussed by scholars in terms of “ideals” or “harmonious ensembles of virtues” that characterize saints in given historical settings.\(^{12}\) Ideals, explains John Coakley, “can be a useful way of summarizing the virtues implicitly valued by the venerated of a given saint.”\(^{13}\) One of the first scholars to examine saints in such terms was James Anthony Froude (1818-1894). Froude reflected that the Lives of the saints were written reflections on the ideals of a Christian life. He believed that the lives of the saints provided a necessary means of learning about moral conduct. Froude wrote that “To try to teach people how to live without giving them examples in which our rules are illustrated, is like teaching them to draw by the rules of perspective, and of light and shade, without designs to study them in; or to write verse by the laws of rhyme and metre without song or poem in which rhyme and metre are seen in their effects.”\(^{14}\) Thus, he saw a distinctly prescriptive element present in hagiographical accounts. This reading is consistent with the presentation of saints as examples sent by God for other Christians to imitate. For example, the hagiographer Gregory of Tours, a bishop of Tours during the sixth century, wrote: “[Christ] exhorts us to live after the example of the saints and to fortify ourselves by His incessant precepts. He gives us as models not only

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\(^{11}\) While many figures were put forward for canonization so that they might be officially recognized by the Church, only a few satisfied the requirements for official sainthood. Those who could not be shown to have demonstrated the appropriate number of miracles might not be canonized but their worthiness as an exemplum for others was nonetheless recognized. In these cases the figure was given the title of “Blessed” and lumped in with the rest of the saints who were not officially given the title of “Saint.” On the canonization process during the medieval period see André Vauchez, Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages, Jean Birrell trans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).


\(^{13}\) Coakley, “Friars, Sanctity, and Gender,” 91.

men, but also the lesser sex, who fight not feebly but with virile strength; He brings into his
celestial kingdom not only men, who fight as they should, but also women, who exert themselves
in the struggle with success.”

The precise model of behavior prescribed in the text becomes evident only after the ideals
described are identified. Often the author will explicitly identify which ideals they intend the
reader to take from the text by praising specific virtues of the saint such as humility, patience, or
fortitude. In other texts the ideals are not stated in such a direct manner, requiring the reader to
interpret what model is being presented. Clues are often provided in the text when the saint is
associated with particular themes and images. This is often the case when the saint is praised for
their resemblance to a biblical figure or martyr. The prescribed ideals are thereby identified by
the previously established model and thus their importance is emphasized by this reiteration.

It is important to note that the author of the saint’s Life was often commissioned by the
community, more specifically the elites of that community, to promote specific ideals to other
community members. The saint’s Life should therefore not be considered as the product of one
individual mind in isolation, but rather as the product of a community. The hagiographer,
charged with the task of preserving the life of the saint and extolling the virtues he or she
demonstrated, was bound by the expectations of the community; both the immediate cult
community that grew up around the saint, and the larger Christian community that was regulated
by papal or episcopal authorities. This meant that any presentation of the saint’s life would not
only have to mirror the established models of sanctity approved by the Church, but that life must
also bear a resemblance to the real person remembered by the witnesses who had comprised the
saint’s cult community. This was a delicate procedure, requiring sensitivity to both the concerns

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of the Church and the needs of the cult community. Thus, there was a deliberate project of construction going on behind the text which can be detected within the text itself. As Aviad Kleinberg explains, the influential people who had personally interacted with the saint, “wanted the story of their encounter told, even if it did not convey a clear moral message.”

Thus, if a saint’s Life was written before or shortly after their death, the hagiographer was more “likely to produce a surplus of information that blurred the fine contours of the ideal.” It is in this interesting moment, shortly after the saint’s death, when the writer of a hagiography is torn between the desire to portray an idealized saintly figure and the pressure to recount the life of a real living person, that the purposeful process of construction is clearly visible.

This constructive process becomes even more apparent as the memory of the saintly individual gradually faded away, leaving only the idealized legend of the saint behind. After the saint and their contemporaries had passed away, the peculiarities and contradictory words and actions that were attributed to the individual saint were, according to Kleinberg, “gradually replaced by a more coherent creation.” The oral tradition thus preserved only a simplified “saintly core” turning the figure into a “mnemonic unit”, as Kleinberg puts it. The saint’s image was simplified further still and, subsequently, embellished when it passed into the realm of the written word. In the adaptations and vernacular translations that the later “literati” produced, the saint was “stripped of most of her contradictions and eccentricities and presented to the public in an ideal form.”

Thus, during the transition from oral tradition to written text, the Life of the saint gradually came to resemble the lives of other saints and took on a similar

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17 Kleinberg, 2.
18 The *Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi* was composed within a year of her death and it is partially for this reason that I have chosen to examine that particular text.
19 Kleinberg, 1.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 2.
“idealized” form. This was, according to Kleinberg, because “the biographer was familiar with the canonical models of his trade, Lives considered classics, and wanted his own work to resemble them, just as he hoped to demonstrate that his saint resembled the great saints of the past.” But a fully solidified ideal figure came only after the saint passed from living memory. The saint’s contemporaries would have been able to attest to the “discord and skepticism” that surrounded the saint herself, or the “collaboration and collusion” that surrounded the writing of her biography. Over time, however, “little but the saint’s victories remained.” Thus, the early versions of saint’s lives include some of these contradictory elements because the hagiographer wrote for an audience that was composed of contemporaries of the saint. The later editions and translations, on the other hand, did not have to contend with the memories of the witnesses and were therefore able to embellish and augment the narrative in ways that reinforced the saintly figure as an ideal moral example. This can only be described as a further constructive process which creatively weaves the various elements of the narrative together to produce a document that demonstrates Christian virtues.

By examining the presentation of “ideals” as demonstrated by the depicted saintly figure, it is possible to get a clear impression of the kinds of behavior that were deemed appropriate for imitation initially by the hagiographer and by the community. Having said that, I must make it clear that it is not my intention to explore what was going on in the mind of the author at the time that the text was written, nor is it my goal to discern the intentions of the author behind the text. Rather, my aim is to examine the creative and constructive process in which the author engages for a very specific purpose. That exact purpose is the creation of a figure which will be

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 1.
24 Ibid.
presented as a model to others. To help me in outlining this creative process, I will turn to the work of Paul Ricoeur.

Ricoeur identifies the sociological and historical context that a text is situated within as “the world behind the text.” This refers to the historical world in which the author, the saintly subject, and the cult community that grew up around the saint, lived. Certainly this “world behind the text” influenced the original presentation of the saint. From it, came the impetus that sparked the generation of the text itself and spurred the author and community to conclude that the presentation of such a figure was necessary. However, my interest lies not in uncovering ‘real’ persons from the text. Therefore, my focus will not be on the reality of the subject that inspired the presentation of the figure. Nor am I interested in the original intentions of the author. My primary concern is what occurs within the text itself. With the help of Ricoeur, I am inquiring specifically into the manner in which an imagined figure is constructed and what appears to make the construct appropriate for reception by the intended audience. Thus, my focus is primarily on what Ricoeur refers to as the “world of the text,” that is, the reference of a particular “world” that is presented in the text. That said, the “world in front of the text”, which pertains to the possible worlds generated by the text for the reader, is also a significant world, though it is not the focus of my study. This is because, according to Ricoeur, the reader, who is “in front of the text”, can engage with the different world described in the text. This “world in front of the text” thus corresponds to the reader’s possible reception of the “world of the text.”

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26 Ricoeur, From Text to Action, 88.
In the construction of an exemplary figure, the purpose is to ultimately have others consider new forms of existence or being that are described in the text. In Ricoeur’s formulation, the reader can engage with the figure in their own imaginations, thus entertaining a proposed new way of “being-in-the-world.” While the reception of saintly models is an important aspect of hagiographical literature, and what some would argue is its primary purpose, my own study will concentrate on the actual construction of figure(s) belonging to “the world of the text” as well as the imaginative component of the text which involves the presentation of a proposed new possible way of being-in-the-world. For Ricoeur the ‘world of the text’ remains distinct from both the ‘world of the author’ and the ‘world of the reader.’ The text is certainly the product of an author, who is situated within a specific community and historical context, but it is also a separate entity that takes on a life of its own once written. The text might be read by an infinite number of future readers, each bringing with them their own contexts to the text, the ‘world of the text’ and thus the ‘world of the reader’ must be identified as clearly distinct worlds.

The progression of a text from its initial writing phase to its eventual reception by a reader follows what Ricoeur refers to as a “hermeneutic arc.” He designates three distinct stages along this ‘arc’ which he refers to as “prefiguration,” “configuration,” and “refiguration.” In order to construct a story one must first recognize a plot among the various elements. This initial recognition of a possible story is what Ricoeur identifies as prefiguration. The story is ‘configured’ as such during the writing process. It is then ‘refigured’ by the reader when it is read as a story. In this study of exemplary religious narratives, I shall focus primarily on the first

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27 Ricoeur adopts this phenomenological term to refer to the daily lived experience of a person. What this implies is that the imagination is involved both in the construction of the “ways-of-being”, presented by the figures in the constructed ‘world of the text’, as well as any appropriation of such a way of being. See Paul Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics,” in Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, translated and introduced by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 113.

and second stages of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic arc. It is the constructive act of narrating that I wish to examine and therefore I am concerned with the prefiguration and configuration of an exemplary narrative, specifically, the configuration involved during the act of emplotment. This thesis examines the construction of a text and the manner in which the imagination is drawn upon to create and construct a new possible world for the reader to consider. Thus, it is the configuration undertaken by the author, not the refiguration undertaken by the reader, which I am specifically examining.

There are certain concepts that are central to the discussion of hagiographical narratives that must also be addressed in this chapter, so that a full examination of my first case study, a hagiographical account of a female saint, may take place in chapter two. These are Max Weber’s “ideal type” and Peter Brown’s “exemplar.” I will now examine these two concepts, starting with Weber’s concept of ideal type, so that I may situate this study within the larger academic discussion of hagiography.

**Max Weber’s Concept of “Ideal Type” and the Study of Saints**

It is impossible to discuss the study of saints without acknowledging the influence of sociologist Max Weber. Weber’s conceptualization of “ideal type” has often been employed by scholars studying sanctity and sainthood as it relates to the social realities in which they existed. While the saint had previously been regarded as a presentation of “ideals” or virtues

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29 Weber discussed the saint as an example of a person exercising charismatic authority in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (1947). He identified this charismatic aspect as distinct from other types of legitimate authority, such as legal and traditional sources. See Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, translated by A. R. Henderson and Talcott Parsons, edited by Talcott Parsons, (London: 1947), 329-341. This articulation of “charisma” has helped some scholars envision how saints were perceived by their peers. However, it is Weber’s concept of “ideal type” that, arguably, has had a greater impact on the study of saints. I will not be using Weber’s conceptualization of the saint as “charismatic authority” because it reflects Weber’s sociological approach to saintly figures, as well as examines them as living persons performing their acts for an audience, i.e. their cult community, rather than as a more literary approach as figures within a text.

30 Weinstein and Bell note that in 1941 John Mecklin’s *The Passing of the Saint: A Study of a Culture Type* was written “in the style of Weber” and it discussed the saint as a type that mirrored the changing values of European
for imitation by Frode and Delehaye, Weber’s notion of “ideal type” refers to something quite different. Weber describes the ideal type as a mental “construct” which is created “by the analytical accentuation of certain elements of reality.” The ideal type is a tool used to approach historical reality, but is not a reflection of reality itself. It is a means by which to understand historical phenomena, especially those that exist solely in the mind such as ideas of “individuality,” “freedom” and “justice.” An ideal type, in Weber’s words, “is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct (Gedankenbild).” Thus, Weber’s ideal type cannot be thought of as a description of reality. It is neither an “ideal” in the Platonic sense that is somehow imperfectly reflected in reality, nor is it “an ethical imperative, of a ‘model’ of what ‘ought’ to exist.” It is, instead, a construct that can be compared and contrasted with reality. It is problematic, says Weber, to view such ideas as “real forces” or as “a ‘true’ reality which operates behind the passage of events and which works itself out in history.” Thus, Weber insists that there must a “precise distinction between the logically comparative analysis of reality of ideal types in the

Society. However, Mecklin’s ideal saintly type was a “philosophical meditation” as well as an empirical construct as articulated by Weber (Weinstein and Bell, 2).


32 Weber argues that “hundreds of words in the historian’s vocabulary are ambiguous constructs created to meet the unconsciously felt need for adequate expression and the meaning of which is only concretely felt but not clearly thought out.” Without systematically defined concepts in the form of ideal types, one is left to interpret the sentiments expressed by the historian simply by the tone or “feel.” (Weber, “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy,” 92-93). While some historians might believe that formally defined concepts in the form of “ideal types” are unnecessary, Weber argues that the historian inevitably resorts to using similar concepts, either consciously or unconsciously, which are not adequately elaborated or fully thought out. As a result, the historian “remains stuck in the realm of the vaguely ‘felt’” and thus his presentation also remains vague as it can only gesture towards concepts while their precise meaning remains elusive to the reader (Weber, “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy,” 94).


34 Ibid., 91-2.

35 Ibid., 94.
logical sense and the value-judgment of reality on the basis of ideals. An ‘ideal type’ in our sense, to repeat once more, has no connection at all with value-judgments, and it has nothing to do with any type of perfection other than a purely logical one. There are ideal types of brothels as well as of religions.”

But how, then, is Weber’s concept of ideal type useful for understanding hagiographies that are very clearly documents that make value-judgments with regard to the actions these saintly figures present? These are, after all, presentations of the Vita Perfecta.

Weber’s concept is useful for scholars who wish to analyze hagiographical texts for the insights they provide into the social arrangements of the Christian communities that produced them. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, for example, have employed Weber’s ideal type concept as a means of understanding the changing conceptions of sainthood from one century to the next. Because of the sheer number of saints that were venerated from the Early Christian martyrs to the popular local saints of Later Medieval periods, and the great deal of variation in behavior they display, Weber’s ideal type allows these varied and distinct expressions of religious belief and devotion to be understood in relation to the construct of “sanctity” in time and space. This, in turn, enables many individual figures to be identified as “saints” despite their strikingly varied differences. Using Weber’s notion of the ideal type to orient their discussion of

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Ibid., 98-99 [emphasis his].

There are actually three specific kinds of Weberian ideal types which are distinguished by their levels of abstraction. The first level of ideal types are rooted in historical particularities and appear in a limited number of circumstances, while the second level “involves abstract elements of social reality — such as concepts of ‘bureaucracy’ or ‘feudalism’ — that may be found in variety of historical and cultural contexts” Louis A. Croser, Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 224. At the third level are the ideal types that, according to Raymond Aron, are “rationalizing reconstructions of a particular kind of behavior” Raymond Aron, Main Currents in Sociological Thought, vol. 2, translated by Richard Howard and Helen Weaver (New York: Basic Books, 1967), 204. The manner in which specific kinds of behavior are expressed in hagiographical narratives through the construct of an ideal type is of great interest for the present study. However, I will be relying on Peter Brown’s articulation of “exemplar” which I have found more helpful than the third type of Weber’s “ideal type” because I find Brown’s acknowledgment of literary tradition directly corresponds to the literary aspects of hagiography that I wish to draw attention to.

I am borrowing this phrase from Michael Goodich’s Vita Perfecta: The Ideal of Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1982).
saints and sanctity, Weinstein and Bell identify five specific features as aspects of sanctity: supernatural grace, asceticism, good works, worldly power, and evangelical activity. From Weinstein and Bell’s perspective, the saint is an ideal type which exhibits these five characteristics.\(^{39}\) They argue that “appearing over and over in the veneration of the faithful wherever Latin Christendom took root, this aggregate of perceptions forms a saintly icon, [which] shapes an ideal type that transcends time, place, class, and sex.”\(^{40}\) At the same time, however, they also acknowledge that no two saints display these characteristics in the same way or to the same degree.\(^{41}\) This is because, “as with any ideal type . . . its actual manifestations were varied.”\(^{42}\) Thus, the particulars of one saint’s life may differ from another, because they reflect the historical time and place in which the saint lived. Nevertheless, these reoccurring aspects of sanctity inform the perception of the individual as displaying saintly virtue.

While some scholars have found Weber’s concept helpful, it is not quite appropriate for my study. I am focusing on hagiographical texts as the literary construction and presentation of “value-judgments.” In other words, in addition to the aspect of imaginative construction, I am concerned with analyzing the purposeful presentation of models of behavior in a literary form and the manner in which these texts are produced. Any sociological insights that can be garnered from the documents are secondary to my investigation. Weber’s notion of “ideal type” is rooted in sociology and therefore is helpful for discerning the various features of “the world behind the text.” I have found Peter Brown’s “exemplar” concept to be extremely helpful for my purposes. Brown’s concept of “exemplar” acknowledges the literary tradition to which the hagiography ultimately belongs, and it is the literary aspects of hagiography, the literary “world

\(^{39}\) Weinstein and Bell, 179.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 159.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 179.
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 159.
of the text” and its constructed nature, on which I wish focus my attention. Although Brown initially makes use of Weber’s “ideal type” concept in his examination of the sociological milieu of the Christian “holy man,” his term “exemplar” takes on a distinctly different, i.e. literary, approach. I will elaborate more on this distinction in the course of this chapter.

**Peter Brown and the Saint as “Exemplar”**

Peter Brown’s articulation of the “exemplar” in hagiographical literature has assisted me significantly in my attempt to conceptualize the underlying process involved in the creation and presentation of hagiographical figures. I will discuss Brown’s presentation of the saint as “exemplar,” as it has developed from his conceptualization of the “holy man,” as well the criticisms that have been made of his work. I will then conclude this chapter by identifying which concepts of Brown’s that I will be employing in my study, while clearly distinguishing where my work will diverge from his.

Arguably, Brown’s most influential contribution to the study of hagiography is his 1971 article “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity.” In it, Brown initially takes up Weber’s concept of the “ideal type” in the sense that it can be applied to create some understandable ordering of seemingly chaotic social arrangements. This approach enabled Brown to address the various functions served by the “holy man” in Late Roman societies. He observed that during the fourth and fifth centuries the holy man was the Syrian desert monk; a figure that he argues set the tone for later expressions of the “ideal of the saint.” Brown explains that an individual came to be known as a “holy man” by assuming the role of one. Such a person distinguished himself as such through the visible signs of his ascetic practice and by

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43 Brown, “Rise and Function,” 82. This is in contrast to the assumption that the model saints were the famous Egyptian desert ascetics. Brown notes that “Egypt was the cradle of monasticism. It was in Egypt that the theory and practice of the ascetic life reached its highest pitch of articulateness and sophistication” (Brown, “Rise and Function of the Holy Man,” 82).
carving out a niche as an outsider by resisting relational norms and hierarchical structures.\textsuperscript{44} In Brown’s view, the holy man also acted in many ways like a rural patron who settled disputes and petitioned higher authorities on behalf of his clients, the villagers. Brown saw it as the job of the historian to “analyse this image [of the holy man] as a product of the society around the holy man.”\textsuperscript{45} In order to understand the way in which Syrian farmers and other villagers regarded the peculiar Christian figures that lived on the periphery, he used Weber’s ideal type concept to identify distinct features of the holy man, which could then be amalgamated into a useful concept with which to approach similar figures. Thus, Brown’s “holy man” is a Weberian ideal type precisely because it is a construct that he, a scholar of Christian history, can use to understand the diverse and often ‘colorful’ descriptions of holy figures.

With regard to the actual idealized behavior that was exhibited by the saint, Brown chose to use a different term. He employed the term “exemplar” to refer to the model of specific behaviors which provide the reader with possible ways that they, themselves, might act. In a later essay, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity” (1983), Brown explores the concept of the exemplar in the context of the “culture of paideia”, inherited from Greek and Latin traditions. Within the culture of paideia one seeks out answers to problems by looking to “a constellation of vivid human exemplars preserved in the classics.”\textsuperscript{46} Thus, by turning to their literary heroes and the virtues they demonstrate, one could imitate those examples and become one of those model beings, a hero fit to take on the challenges presented by his or her time.\textsuperscript{47} Brown asserts that “exposure to the classics of Greek and Latin literature was intended to produce exemplary

\textsuperscript{42} Brown, “Rise and Function,” 82.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{46} Peter Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” \textit{Representations} 1, no. 2 (1983): 2.
\textsuperscript{47} Michael Goodich has similarly observed that the saint “was presented to youth as an object worthy of emulation, whose life embodies the noblest ideals of his age, at the same time the saint’s development reflects the social and political conflicts which engaged his contemporaries,” (Goodich, \textit{Vita Perfecta}, 3).
beings, their raw humanity molded and filed away by a double discipline, at once ethical and aesthetic.\textsuperscript{48} From this perspective, the saint portrayed in Christian literature can be regarded as an exemplary hero after which to model one’s own behavior.\textsuperscript{49} This is a distinctly different approach than using Weber’s ideal type concept to examine saintly figures. While conceptualizing the saint as an exemplary hero emphasizes the literary tradition and the model of behavior presented by the portrayed model figure, the ideal type concept emphasizes social and historical realities behind the text and is an abstract scholarly construct superimposed upon the figure.

I will be employing both Brown’s concepts of “ideal type,” as taken from Weber, and “exemplar,” as taken from Greek and Roman literary tradition, in my examination of hagiographical narratives. I draw upon the “ideal type” concept in the sense that it is a term of scholarly origin used to navigate the social and relational world in which a text is situated. More importantly for my research, I draw upon Brown’s usage of the term “exemplar” in the sense that such narratives portray figures that model specific virtues.\textsuperscript{50} Henceforth, I shall use the term “ideal type” to indicate a concept used to identify the saint as a specific construct, and the term “exemplar” to refer a figure that exhibits particular modes of behavior that are prescribed by the text. To make one final point of clarification, I shall be referring to an “ideal” in the singular to indicate a specific virtue that the text values and desires to promote.

There are specific criticisms of Brown that must be addressed before proceeding any further. The first critique raises the issue of whether or not Brown’s insights into “holy men”

\textsuperscript{48} Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar,” 1.
\textsuperscript{49} A significant distinction between the Greek or Roman hero and the Christian saint must be made. The Christian saint is ultimately modeled after the Christ figure. Christ, the exemplar par excellence in the Christian tradition, is the standard by which all other exemplars are measured and thus all other Christian exemplars present some aspect of “christlikeness” (Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar,” 6).
\textsuperscript{50} My understanding of Brown’s meaning of exemplar is similar to Raymond Aron’s articulation of the third level of Weber’s ideal type, in the sense that it is a presentation of an ideal based on the reconstruction of particular behaviors.
adequately address the lives of “holy women.” Elizabeth A. Clark has noted that “the fuller the accounts of such early Christian ‘holy women,’ the less they look like Peter Brown’s ‘holy men.’”\(^51\) She observes that the patronage exercised by holy women was not the sort of behaviour that Brown’s “holy man” demonstrated. Whereas Brown’s “holy man” came to be identified as such by fulfilling a specific social role and function, that of a rural patron and “outsider” in rural Syria, holy women often took on a distinctly different kind of patronage role that required they remain in the urban centers to amass and distribute large amounts of wealth. They could not be considered rural patrons because they operated in cities and towns and appeared to follow “older, urban-oriented models of patronage—except that their gifts are now for establishing churches and monasteries, not for the erection of statues and civic buildings.”\(^52\) Clark also notes that the recounted deeds of early Christian holy women appear to differ from those performed by holy men. For example, “they are not generally recorded as having worked miracles during their lifetimes.”\(^53\) Thus, these holy women did not enact the “wondrous feats” reported to have been performed by Brown’s holy men and therefore did not supply the same “proof” of their sanctity and extraordinariness. Furthermore, Clark observes, holy women “may be said to have Christ ‘in’ them, since as baptized Christians they have ‘put on Christ’ (Gal 3.27), but it is not said that Christ is ‘made accessible’ through them, as it is for Brown’s ‘holy men.’”\(^54\) From these observations one is lead to conclude that “holy women” were conceptualized and presented in very different terms than “holy men.” Therefore, as Clark has remarked, “the women whom we might have imagined as the female counterparts of Brown’s ‘holy men’ in fact are not.”\(^55\)

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 415.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 415.
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 415-416 [emphasis hers].
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 416.
Due to the efforts of scholars like Clark, it has become evident that in the presentation of female figures, culturally specific conceptions of “femininity” or “womanliness” can be discerned in the texts.\textsuperscript{56} Similarly, inherited cultural assumptions about the nature of woman and the limitations of female minds and bodies must have informed the recommendations of female conduct that are proposed in hagiographical texts. Brown has since acknowledged that in his original examination of the “holy man” in 1971, he did not fully anticipate the issues of gender that today figure prominently in any discussion of sainthood. He explains that “holy males were the persons that I met in my sources and I met them because as holy men they fulfilled a particular, highly public, even confrontational role, that women, whatever their reputation for sanctity, were rarely expected to occupy.”\textsuperscript{57} While Brown might not have extensively examined the literature on female saints, he was not entirely unaware of the discussion surrounding the presentation of female figures in the early Christian sources he examined. It is apparent that in time he became aware that the there was some discrepancy with regard to the conceptualization of “women” and the appearance of women in the early Christian literature at least. In \textit{The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity} (1988), he wrote that:

The circumstances of Christianity in the late second and third centuries threw up a remarkable literary genre, that of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. Continent women play a central role in these narratives. Yet the Apocryphal Acts should not be read as evidence for the actual role of women in Christianity. Rather, \textit{they reflect the manner in which Christian males of that period partook in the deeply ingrained tendency of all men in the ancient world, to use women \textquoteleft{to think with}.} There is no doubt that women played an important role in the \textit{imaginative economy} of the Church. Their presence condensed the deep preoccupation of male Christians with their own relations with the \textquoteleft{world,} with the ever present reality of a tainted and seductive pagan society that pressed up against the doors of their houses and abutted the closed spaces of their new meeting places.


Throughout this period, Christian men used women “to think with” in order to verbalize their own nagging concern with the stance that the Church should take to the world. For ancient men tended to regard women as creatures less defined and less securely bounded by the structures that held men in place in society.\textsuperscript{58}

Thus, Brown was aware, at least by 1988, of the tendency for Christian male authors to use women and female figures as concepts they could “think with.” In this way female figures enabled male authors to express how they saw their role, as well as the role of the Church, in the world.\textsuperscript{59} Such is the case with Vito’s account of Umiliana, as I will show in chapter two.

I am interested specifically in the way that certain features became associated with female figures, and then came to be identified specifically as “feminine.” A further concern is the extent these conceived features began to inform the further conceptualization of the exemplary Christian woman.\textsuperscript{60} My intention is to examine the manner in which these conceptualizations of “feminine” features played themselves out in Later Medieval sources, an area that Brown has not examined as rigorously as sources from Late Antiquity. Having chosen to continue with this line of inquiry, it is important to consider how one might approach “holy women,” if they are distinctly different presentations from “holy men.” Is a new scholarly concept needed if Brown’s ideal type presented in his “holy man” is inadequate to examine female figures? Does that mean that another ideal type must be articulated? Is there such a thing as the “holy woman” or are there simply too many kinds of holy women to construct such a concept?


\textsuperscript{59} Brown credits Sally Humphreys for the term “to think with” citing \textit{The Family, Women and Death} (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 33. He also notes, however, that the term belongs originally to Lévi-Strauss and thus it implies more than the creation and manipulation of stereotypes, citing \textit{Structural Anthropology} (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1977), 61-62.

\textsuperscript{60} Sometime during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries these “feminine” virtues would be applied to holy men as well.
It would appear that distinguishing female saints, as distinct from male saints, is necessary when it is conceded that during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there was a significant rise in the number of female saints put forward for canonization.\textsuperscript{61} This significant rise in the overall percentage of recognized female saints suggests, according to some scholars, a shift in the way in which sanctity was being conceived and understood during that time. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell have documented this shift in \textit{Saints and Society} (1982), an expansive study of saints from 1000 to 1700. They observe a difference in the way male and female saints are portrayed and note that “men and women did different things in their holy lives, and different values were placed on what they did.”\textsuperscript{62} Thus, holy women’s and holy men’s lives were reported differently and their acts interpreted according to appropriate (i.e. gendered) roles. They also posit that “women were more rigidly confined to a particular type of holiness than were men.”\textsuperscript{63} One distinct difference was that women were excluded from the clergy and therefore could not be considered alongside clerical saintly types. Thus, although there was an increase in the percentage of women recognized as saints, women were limited in the ways they could display saintly behavior. This was because the proper conduct of a holy woman also had to conform to the expectations of proper womanly conduct held by the Christian community at that time.\textsuperscript{64} Therefore “the holy woman reacted not only to ecclesiastical barriers but also to

\textsuperscript{61} André Vauchez, \textit{The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 172. Vauchez reports that of the new figures venerated in the West between 500 and 1200, less than ten percent were female. From the canonization records between 1198 and 1441 this rose to eighteen percent, which accounted for more than half of all the lay saints venerated. Weinstein and Bell also note this increase in the percentage of female saints at this time (Weinstein and Bell, 220). They also report that there was a definite decrease in the percentage of female saints in the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} centuries (Weinstein and Bell, 221, 236).

\textsuperscript{62} Weinstein and Bell, 220.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{64} This is contrary to the lives of female martyrs and desert ascetic of the Early Church like Mary of Egypt whose actions were described in masculine terms because they were likened to the male warrior monks of the desert. See Margaret R. Miles, “‘Becoming Male’: Women Martyrs and Ascetics,” in \textit{Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 53-77, and David Brakke, “Manly Women, Female Demons, and Other Amazing Sights: Gender in Combat,” in
society’s more subtle yet pervasive definition of womanhood.” According Weinstein and Bell “the approved outlets for women were two: nurturing the sick and cultivating the spirit.” As a result, different qualifications were applied to the female candidates for sainthood than those to male candidates.

Weinstein and Bell argue that displays of penitence and asceticism were the primary forms of religious expression for holy women for “they reinforced rather than challenged the medieval view of what was appropriate to the female sex.” Because Medieval Christians believed that men and women sinned in different manners, the way they avoided sin and strove toward holiness therefore differed. The main “sins of femininity” were vanity, lust and frivolity. These were thought to arise from an internal weakness thought to be inherent in the female sex, whereas in the lives of male saints, sin resulted from the saint succumbing to temptation generated by external influences. Hence the tendency for the lives of holy women to describe them as being focused on their private internal struggle. This assumption of the differing moral nature of men and women informed the identification of holy persons, and also dictated the way their lives were written. The constructed nature of these texts thus becomes clearer when the different patterns between men and women’s holy lives that emerge are analyzed.

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65 Weinstein and Bell, 229.
66 Ibid. Weinstein and Bell also state that “women appear in disproportionately high numbers among the great healer and helper saints” which they rationalize was due to the perception that “nurturing was one of the activities regarded as suitable to women” (Weinstein and Bell, 233). During the latter part of the thirteenth-century and part of the fourteenth, these “feminine” qualities would become emphasized, resulting in the increased number of women canonized as saints as well as the “feminization” of male saints. In other words, male saints also began to display these “feminine” qualities.
67 Weinstein and Bell, 234.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 235-6. Some of these external sources of sin, according to Weinstein and Bell, were the devil and “lewd women” (236).
70 It is also evident from hagiographical sources that holy men tended to devote themselves to the holy life as young men after a conversion experience while women appear to have a calling very early in life. There was likely no
André Vauchez has also examined the marked increase in the number of female saints canonized during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. He concludes that there was a shift in the perception of sanctity during this period, which he has described as a tendency toward “feminization.”\(^7\) Married women and mothers, who were neither members of the clergy nor virgins, became legitimate candidates for sainthood at that time and thus more women were canonized than in previous periods.\(^2\) However, it was not the “wifely or motherly qualities” that attracted the attention of the clergy according to Vauchez.\(^3\) Many of these women were members of the elite with strong social and political ties as well as strong personalities. By associating themselves with these elite women, the prestige of the clergy was “momentarily reinforced.”\(^4\) What is striking in the accounts of these elite women is that the emphasis is not on charitable acts, but rather on piety and contemplation. Gradually, these more passive and humble qualities, generally qualities exemplified by holy women, became prerequisites for holy figures of both genders, which according to Vauchez, reflects a “feminization of sanctity” that occurred during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.\(^5\)

Vauchez also observes that during that period “mystical sanctity, an essentially female phenomenon, sprang into prominence and won ecclesiastical recognition.”\(^6\) Almost all of the exemplars of this new mystical spirituality were women, which is another contributing factor to conversion or “turning point” for these women because they told their stories according to different models. Men’s stories had turning points and externalize motives while women’s stories were focused on a development of deeper and deeper devotion without sudden turning points or crises (Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, 24-25). Women were also more likely to be extremely critical of their own spiritual efforts, which is evident from the fact that they appeared to have more ups and downs in their spiritual life, whereas men’s lives seemed to climb to greater spiritual heights slowly and steadily (Weinstein and Bell, 235).

\(^7\) Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 172.
\(^2\) Ibid., 267. Vauchez examines the canonization of saints during this period at length in *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*.
\(^3\) Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 235-6.
\(^4\) Ibid. 236.
\(^5\) For Vauchez’s examination of the emphasis on female sanctity, and mystical contemplation, by the mendicant orders during the thirteenth century see Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, 207-212.
\(^6\) Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 238.
the increase in the overall number of women canonized during that period. It was elite women who became mystics and prophets and, in turn, recognized as holy persons. Such was the case for Umiliana, a member of the elite merchant class who displayed prophetic abilities. Although Vauchez insists that a “feminization of sanctity” began late into the thirteenth century and Vito’s account of Umiliana was written during the earlier half of that century, it would appear that the Umiliana text emphasizes certain “feminine” virtues that would also be emphasized in later vitae. I will examine the Umiliana case in more detail in chapter two. For the moment, however, I must return to my discussion of the conceptualization and presentation of female exemplars in the Later Middle Ages.

**Exemplarity and the Lives of Female Saints**

If Clark and Vauchez’s observations are correct, then the narrated lives of female saints are representations of gendered concepts of sanctity. Gail Ashton has made a similar observation with regard to vernacular hagiographical literature. She asserts that in the hagiographies of female figures “representations of saintliness become inextricably mingled with representations of ideal womanliness.” Ashton also notes that these texts concern “exemplary standards of behavior, of what the medieval world constructed as [the] ideal woman” and the life of a female saint was “intended as an *exemplum* for others.” The figure was therefore understood to be prescriptive. It was meant to be read or heard by others who were then expected to

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77 Ibid., 231-2.
78 Ibid., 234-5. He stresses that the recognition of these select few did not improve the condition of the majority of women in the Church (235).
79 This may qualify Umiliana as a forerunner of the prophetesses and mystics that came after her. It may also indicate that an emphasis on “feminine” virtues occurred earlier than Vauchez previously supposed. If so, then the “feminization of sanctity” he that describes may have occurred gradually over a longer period of time.
80 Ashton, 2. Ashton’s focus of this work involves the application of French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray’s work to her examination of hagiographical texts and the dominant male voice versus the more subtle female voice that can be detected in the hagiographical text. In her work Ashton appears to draw upon Raymond Aron’s notion of “ideal type” as a presentation of idealized behavior to be imitated.
81 Ashton, 3.
82 Ibid., 11.
appropriate the presented model into their own lives. Exemplarity, of course, could be interpreted in a number of ways.

Catherine Sanok similarly observes that “saints’ lives present idealized feminine behavior and encourage female audiences to adopt it.” However, she asserts that the exemplarity outlined in the text may not be the same for all. Different social groups may be identified with differing expectations outlined for each, such as in the case of widows, maidens, and mothers. The text may also present problematic examples that cannot be imitated literally. For instance, the legends of virgin martyrs were presented as models of good Christian conduct to the daughters of the wealthy and elite, who were intended for marriage to other members of the wealthy and elite classes. These young women were not expected to remain virgins nor become martyrs. They were, however, expected to emulate the saint’s faith and devotion to God. Sanok proposes that medieval women reading the lives of female saints may have used these examples to reflect upon the differences between their own Christian community and the one in which a saintly figure lived. Therefore exemplarity, especially with regard to female saints’ lives, would not necessarily be as straightforward as Brown would seem to suggest.

Brown first presented his emphasis on the saint as “exemplar” in a 1983 article, “The Saint as Exemplar,” in which he argued that the cult of saints played a crucial role in disseminating specific models of conduct. Contrary to Brown’s assertion, Paul Antony Hayward has argued that “the vast majority of saint’s Lives are difficult to construe as serious attempts to

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83 Sanok, ix. Both Ashton and Sanok are interested in the models of behavior portrayed in vernacular hagiographies which are prescribed through their presentation of exemplars. They are more interested in how these texts attempt to cultivate desired female behaviors, and for this reason they draw more heavily upon Brown’s concept of exemplar, than Weber’s abstract ideal type construct.

84 Sanok, 12-13.

85 Although insisting on a literal interpretation could be conceived as a challenge to social and political authorities (Sanok, 15).
provide instruction for would-be saints.” He notes that Latin hagiographies, in particular, provide “much less support for the theory that the cult of saints existed in order to supply models of holiness than Froude and many scholars have since supposed.” While the author of a text might claim to write the Life of their subject in order to provide an example of virtue for future generations, Hayward argues that they may simply be employing a standard prefatory topos common to the literary genre. This “exemplar topos,” according to Hayward, works alongside the frequently employed “humility topos” which allows the author to lament his poor literary skill while demonstrating his fitness to write such an important text through displays of “grammatical prowess.” The exemplar topos is similarly contradicted by the narrative that follows it. As Hayward explains, while the author of a text might openly claim to record the Life of their subject so that others might follow their example, in many hagiographical accounts “there is rarely any sense of how the subject developed into a saint. Although the authors often recount scenes from childhood and note the subject’s educational attainments, the saint is already completely sanctified at birth or even in the womb. The crises and trials of his or her life demonstrate the presence of holiness rather than the method of acquisition.” In this way the text does not succeed in providing the promised example but succeeds instead in promoting the saint’s legend and cult, which is what Hayward believes to be the primary objective of the text. In Hayward’s assessment, “Brown rightly removed the cult [of saints] from the realm of the sensual to that of the higher imagination, asserted the role of the aristocracy in its development,

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86 Hayward, 123.
87 Ibid. It is significant to note that almost all of Brown’s examples derive from Greek sources. Hayward observes that positive admiration for the achievements of a saint rarely seems to have been the driving force behind the development of cult in the West. He concludes that “the use of hagiography to provide examples for imitation may well have been more prevalent in the Greek-speaking world, but it seems to have played little part in the work of Western hagiographers” (Hayward, 123).
88 Hayward postulates that this exemplar topos was derived either directly or indirectly from the Life of Saint Martin of Tours by Sulpicius Severus and was subsequently copied by other hagiographers (Hayward, 123).
89 Hayward, 123.
90 Ibid.
and rightly redeemed its sponsors from the charge of wholesale mendacity.”91 However, Hayward insists that Brown’s theories must be subject to critique the same as any other and, therefore, the exemplarity claim must be investigated and not simply taken at face value.

I have chosen to primarily employ Brown’s concept of “exemplar” in my own research. Like Brown, I approach hagiographies as presentations of exemplary figures. While I find Hayward’s critique to be an interesting and valid one, I believe it pertains to the early Latin sources and depictions of “holy men” that Brown analyzed, more so than to the Late Medieval sources concerning holy women. The authors of the later hagiographies took their cues from the earlier sources. They recycled themes and images presented in the established Lives and utilized the “exemplar topos” they found there. Yet, in the Lives of female saints from the Late Medieval period, exemplarity extends beyond being a mere literary device. It was an earnest prescription, especially in the vernacular translations that were written for (and sometimes by) women.92

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, there was considerable anxiety among the newly founded male monastic orders with regard to the female monastic orders that had emerged alongside them. The Franciscan and Dominican friars were also trying to control the already organized groups of women that sprouted up in the towns and cities. Some of these groups claimed to be associated with specific male orders, while others remained unattached to any. Regardless, both male and female communities were eager to have their legitimacy recognized by Rome. To organize and identify which groups of women they would recognize as their associates, and which they would dismiss as heretical, the friars wrote Rules for these female monastics to conduct their communities and private devotions. In addition to the Rules they

91 Ibid., 141.
92 Michael Goodich explains that there was an increase in the body of literature that was available to thirteenth-century women and, “despite the fact that they probably knew little Latin, [many of] these women were literate in their native tongues and interested in pious as well as secular literature.” Goodich, “Contours of Female Piety in Later Medieval Hagiography,” Church History 50 (1981), 25.
provided, certain friars praised the conduct of women who supported their vision for the Order and whom they deemed to be sufficiently “orthodox” in their behavior, i.e. docile and obedient. The *Lives* of these women were thus promoted as proper models of conduct for the women who sought association with the friars. If their conduct did not quite fit the exemplary model they envisioned, they took some measure of artistic license with the account in order to present it in as pro-Franciscan or pro-Dominican a light as possible. This is certainly evident in Umiliana’s case as her Franciscan hagiographer, Vito of Cortona, was attempting to directly address the behavior of the Poor Clares (the Franciscans’ female counterparts), while promoting specific behavior he deemed appropriate for laywomen who supported the Franciscans in Italy. Therefore, exemplarity has a great deal to do with the presentation of both monastic and laywomen’s *Lives* at a time when new monastic orders were emerging. These orders sought to distinguish themselves from their competitors and thus needed to identify specific rules and regulations which they subsequently prescribed to their members. Their *Rules* were supplemented by these exemplary models which further illustrated the friars’ vision for their female associates and sister communities.

Carolyn Walker Bynum has also observed that “the twelfth-century religious discourse generally was characterized by an intense interest in roles, simulated in part by new possibilities for making life choices.”[^93] She points out that not only did the twelfth century create a “stunning array of new religious roles, many of them hybrid (the military orders, the quasi-religious status only a little later called ‘beguines,’ and so on), but also that many of the ‘reforms’ of older roles and statuses were a kind of hybridizing as well.”[^94] She notes that there was a keen interest in the roles and responsibilities that were present in the world, especially in the Cistercians writings.

Thus, according to Bynum’s observations, the interest in lay roles and responsibilities was part and parcel of the writings of monastic orders in the later Medieval period. This is precisely what I intend to examine.

For the reasons illustrated above, I must disagree with Hayward’s conclusion that exemplarity is merely a topos in hagiographical literature. This is because, at the very least, it was certainly more than that in the Later Medieval Latin and vernacular sources on women. I will agree with Hayward, however, on the matter that hagiographical texts were “a kind of propaganda.”\textsuperscript{95} As he also asserts that these writers were: “not simply passive witnesses to the historical action, they were deeply involved in the ways which distort their presentation of the cult of saints.”\textsuperscript{96} I also think Hayward is correct in asserting that hagiographical texts were not so much “the product of a highly ordered society” but rather the “fantasy of the élite threatened by violence and competition.”\textsuperscript{97} These texts were the products of elite individuals who had a vested interest in promoting the saint’s cult after her death. Many of these saint cults, observes Hayward, “seem to have arisen out of moments of genuine crisis.”\textsuperscript{98} That crisis was often the loss of a patron and pillar of a community.\textsuperscript{99} Thus, according to Hayward “the emergence of a cult was typically a tentative and unpredictable affair in which hope and imagination contended with reality.”\textsuperscript{100} I am in agreement with Hayward on this and I would add that when a text recounting the life of a saint is constructed in such a moment of crisis, as after the death of the saint, it reflects an attempt to engage reality with “hope and imagination” as Hayward puts it.

\textsuperscript{95} Hayward, 124.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 130-131.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 139.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 135.
On that note, I would like to articulate my own critique of Brown. This third and final critique concerns the inadequate defining of “imagination” and its role in the construction and reception of hagiographical texts by scholars. Both Brown and Hayward, as I have just shown, note that the imagination plays a part in the construction and reception of hagiographical texts. It is the holy figure’s ability to capture the imagination that interests me. Brown only vaguely alludes to the role of the imagination in conceiving the “holy man.” He has reflected that in 1971 he thought that the figure of the “holy man” was an indicator of a shift in thinking within the imaginations of Early Christian farmers who came to rely upon the holy man. Later he came to regard the holy man as an inspiring and potent figure, an exemplar demonstrating virtues and ideals to those who wished to model themselves, in some small fashion, after this image. Brown admits that he no longer thinks that the holy man “can be treated as the uniquely privileged, microcosmic essence of a macrosimic change” and has since come to regard the holy man as a more modest innovation.101 In 1997, Brown rearticulated his position, saying that the holy man was no harbinger of a new religious order, implicitly consonant with a new style of social relations. What little ‘style’ he imparted to those around him was more like that of a trusted neighborhood sewing woman, letting in a little here, letting out a little there, in well-warn, serviceable clothes, inherited from a distinct past. He was not, alas, a Christian Dior, creating the New Look for a new age of Roman society.102

Brown appears to be alluding to an imaginative process here, through which older figures are presented in the noblest garments of old that have been tailored with innovative new twists. New hemlines and embellishments, if you will permit me the extended metaphor, make them more striking and, thereby, more captivating to the hearers and readers of their story. This would seem to be one of the only instances where Brown directly articulates how, precisely, a new exemplary holy figure is imagined. He refers vaguely to an “imaginative alchemy” under which the holy

102 Ibid., 365.
man underwent a “‘transformation’ of his person, through a spirit-filled ascetic discipline and
through the imaginative alchemy associated with the return of Adam, in the desert.”103 However, he does not expand upon this assertion. Thus, among scholars of hagiography such as Brown, there is an inadequate treatment of the role of the imagination in the process by which exemplary figures are constructed, entertained, and adopted.

Although saints are frequently said to appeal to the imaginations of Christians in the sense that they “inspire” them to entertain other ways of being, the imaginative process by which they are conceptualized and engaged with is not expanded upon by Brown or other scholars. Therefore, by vaguely alluding to “imagination” and the capabilities of the imagination, it would seem that these scholars are content to take such statements at face value, rather than fully analyzing the underlying processes responsible for these constructed exemplary texts. From this perspective, the process by which new saints are re-imagined from old models would seem to be equivalent to placing the old religious figure (or figures) into a black box with several contemporary elements (such as sentiment and style), shaking the box, and then opening it up to see what sort of new saint emerges. This is simply not sufficient for my purposes, given that there are more sophisticated articulations of the imagination presently available to scholars.

If one wishes to better understand the construction and presentation of exemplary figures, a more sophisticated understanding of the imagination, and the processes that figures and narratives undergo within it, must therefore be employed. This is because the products of these processes are, and rightly should be, critiqued for their prescriptions of essentialist views. I make this assertion based on the fact that these roles and models matter precisely because they are prescribed to people. The female figures that result from such cultural/religious productions are prescribed to and imposed upon real women. I must state once again that I shall not be

103 Ibid., 371.
talking about ‘real’ women, or rather, the historical persons who lived to become saints in the eyes of their biographers. Instead, I am concerned about the fictional presentations that are the products of real persons’ imaginations. The views of “women” they enforce are subsequently presented to real women who must then live with/up to their expectations. By revealing the “framework” or the “seams” underlying such prescriptions, their constructed nature is revealed for further negotiation and criticism.

I will propose one possible model for understanding the role of the imagination in the construction of these religious narratives based on the work of Paul Ricoeur. Before I can discuss Ricoeur’s contributions to the conceptualization of the imaginative process, however, I need to first examine my two chosen case studies depicting idealized figures from Western religious traditions. Having identified the specific concepts, such as ‘ideal type’ and ‘exemplar,’ that I will be employing, I can now return to the task at hand. In the next chapter I will demonstrate the way in which the figure of Umiliana de’ Cerchi was carefully constructed by her hagiographer, Vito of Cortona, for the purpose of presenting a new way of living to the lay women associated with the Franciscan order. It will be shown that by engaging in a process of narration which highlighted particular activities and behaviors as praiseworthy, Vito is purposefully molding his subject, Umiliana, into an exemplar. It will become apparent that the virtues demonstrated by his constructed figure directly correspond to particular concepts of the “feminine” that he believed to be appropriately Christian.
Chapter 2: Umiliana, Clare, and the Franciscans: Constructing Models of Female Behavior in Thirteenth-Century Italy

This chapter will examine Vito of Cortona’s “Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi” as an exemplary religious narrative and presentation of a female exemplar for Christian laywomen. Umiliana’s example will be presented as a literary construction imagined by a Franciscan friar for very specific purposes. After conducting a thorough examination of the Umiliana text itself, I will situate it within both its historical context and literary genre. The Umiliana figure will be compared to Clare of Assisi, another female figure subject to the attentions of the Franciscan friars. It will be shown that the way in which the friars encountered these women was gendered and therefore the ways they wrote about them, and for them, were gendered as well. The intent of this chapter is to show that in the construction of these gendered figures and their texts, the authors of said texts were engaged in a creative process which required the employment of the imagination.

Umiliana de’ Cerchi (1219-1246) lived for only a short time in Florence during the thirteenth century. Her actions during that brief life attracted the attention of the local Franciscans who immediately set about documenting her life after her death in 1246. She would become for them not only a promotional tool, a model of their new brand of lay sanctity, but also a way for them to maintain a presence in Florence as the guardians of a new cult devoted to her memory and her relics.1 The Franciscan friar given the task of recording her life was Vito of Cortona.2 His “Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi”3 can be viewed as a presentation of a holy woman

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2 One friar, Brother Ippolito, later collected several miracle stories which were attributed to Umiliana. He added these stories to Vito’s original account in 1249 and appears to have also edited the account by adding certain details that happened after 1246. See Diana Webb, Saints and Cities in Medieval Italy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007): 93.
3 Vito’s account of Umiliana’s life is the oldest account. This account informed the later vitae written in Italian. These later accounts indicate that Umiliana’s story continued to resonate with the local people of Florence. Due to
in an exemplary fashion, that is, not only as a celebration of her life but also as a document intended to encourage other women to imitate her. It is this exemplary aspect of this text that allows the figure of Umiliana to be understood as a demonstration of Vito’s conceptions of ideal female behavior. Thus, Umiliana will be examined as an exemplar, a literary figure, whose behavior demonstrates proper “feminine” conduct. In this case, the Umiliana figure demonstrates proper conduct outside of the convent that nevertheless adheres to certain “feminine” virtues deemed necessary by the Franciscan Order. By praising Umiliana’s virtuous conduct and repeatedly stressing the humility, charity, and obedience demonstrated by her character, Vito is able to claim Umiliana under the umbrella of the Franciscan organization and show that she is truly orthodox in her belief and practice, thus shielding her from accusations of heresy that other holy women were subject to. It is from this perspective that I shall now proceed with my examination of Vito’s text.

Vito’s account of Umiliana’s life can be divided into two distinct phases. The first took place during her married life which allowed her to perform many acts of charity due to her husband’s wealth. The second phase took place after her husband’s death when she was forced to lead a more restricted life in her father’s tower. These two phases of her adult life, the first focused on active charity, the second on private devotion, are the primary concern of Vito’s text. In contrast to the Lives of other saints, nothing is mentioned about her childhood. Instead, after a long list of witnesses are named, Vito begins his account by simply stating that Umiliana was the addition of certain headings into the text it would seem that Umiliana’s life was used in devotional reading (Webb, 96). This study will not be examining the cult and devotional practice that grew up around Umiliana but rather remain focused on Vito’s document, her Life, and the act of recording her as an example of a Franciscan holy life. For an account of the Italian legend of Umiliana see Maria Romano Franco La Beata Umiliana de Cerchi (Rome, 1977). See also Anna Benventi Papi ‘In castro poenitentiae,’ Santità e società femminile nell’Italia medievale (Rome, 1990) 58-98.
daughter of Oliviero Cerchi and was “given in marriage by her parents” at the age of sixteen. The reader is then told that soon after her marriage, she began to take interest in spiritual, rather than worldly, matters. This is demonstrated by her rejection of the fine clothes and ornaments that she was expected to wear as the wife of a wealthy man. Vito also reports that she began to conspire with another lady, her kinswoman Ravenna, to secretly gather food and clothing from her husband’s household and distribute them to the poor. The two were very zealous in their work, according to Vito’s account, because Umiliana was sometimes beaten by her husband for her extreme generosity. Still, she continued to gather and distribute the food in secret, preparing it at night when her required duties as a wife were finished. She and Ravenna would sneak away at dawn with the help of their maidservants to see that it was delivered to those most in need. She also took care to make special food for holy men and women, so that they would be nourished according to their specific needs. Her husband’s resources were not sufficient for her ambitious charitable work. She would often take food from her own mouth and set it aside for others. In this way she was “like a pious mother,” according to Vito. She is said to have felt a special compassion for the sick as she herself was often sick. Despite her frequent illnesses, Vito reports that she remained a model of patience and humility for she “bore all inconveniences without complaint and with patience, because she carried the fear of God in her breast.”

After her husband died, she continued to give even more generously than before by inviting the poor to her own table. At this time she received her first vision in which she saw

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4 Vito of Cortona, “Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi,” in *Saints and Cities in Medieval Italy*, translated by Diana Webb (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007): 98. All other references to Vito’s *Life* will refer to this translation unless otherwise stated. For the full Latin version of the text, see Vito of Cortona, “De. B. Æmiliana seu Humiliana, vidua Florentie tertii Ordinis S. Francisci” in *Acta Sanctorum Maii IV*, 385-400.

5 Vito of Cortona, 100.

6 Ibid. Umiliana is described as motherly with regard to how she cared for the poor and the sick. However, she does not appear to express any affection for her own daughters when they are taken from her or are struck with sudden sickness (Vito 127).

7 Vito of Cortona, 101.

8 Ibid.
herself dressed in white and surrounded by little children also dressed in white which she interpreted as angels. However, this happy time for Umiliana was cut short when she had to return to her father’s household. Life changed considerably for Umiliana upon returning to her father’s house. She was under significant pressure to marry again. Her father, brothers and other relatives tried to persuade her to take another husband but she could not be convinced. She argued that she already possessed the “worthiest of husbands” and threatened to jump into a furnace if they brought any other husband before her.9 No more talk of remarrying appears to have happened according to Vito’s account. Shortly thereafter, however, her father made arrangements with her deceased husband’s family to get back her dowry. Umiliana was shocked to learn that he had cheated her out of the dowry that was hers by right. This forced her to put her charitable activities on hold at which point she took refuge in her father’s tower refusing to have any more contact with him.10

Umiliana’s self-imposed seclusion in the tower began the second phase of her short life. Instead of amassing large amounts of food and resources and delivering them to the poor, she spent her time in constant fasting, prayer and meditation. She did not abandon her charitable efforts entirely, but continued to visit the poor doing what little she could. She sometimes traveled with her companions under a different name so that no one in the household would notice she was gone.11 “Often, as the companions of her journeys declare, she carried six loaves at one and the same time in her bosom for the needy,12 and she visited holy places as before, not fearing the threats, and certainly the bodily sufferings, this brought upon her.”13 She also

9 Ibid., 103.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 120. Vito believes that this was because she “didn’t want to be a bother to anyone,” rather than for deceitful purposes.
12 She filled the role of a nursing mother bearing food in her breasts in this instance.
13 Vito of Cortona, 104.
stepped out of her tower to ask other noble ladies to give alms to enclosed nuns or “the poor sisters.”\textsuperscript{14} She had tried to join the Poor Ladies of Santa Maria of Monticello who were a group of enclosed Franciscans, but was unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{15} Vito maintains that it was God’s intention that she remain in the world in her tower saying, “God did not want her light any longer to be hid under a bushel, and therefore placed her high up on a candelabrum of life and example, so that she might give light to those in the house, that is in the Church Militant; for she was the chosen vessel of the Lord.”\textsuperscript{16} He insists that Umiliana was sent by none other than “divine wisdom” to be a “wondrous foundress of a new way of holy life.”\textsuperscript{17}

This new holy life that Vito envisioned, of which Umiliana was to be a shining example, was that of the Franciscan Third Order. It allowed laypersons to participate in a holy life focused on charity, humility, chastity and voluntary poverty while remaining connected to the world. Unlike her cloistered counterparts in Santa Monticello, Umiliana remained in the busy urban setting of Florence. However, Vito is careful to insist that she lacked nothing of the monastic life due to the safety of her tower for she had turned her bedroom into a little cell and was able to live in quiet contemplation. She was also guided in her devotion by Brother Michele and other members of the Friars Minor. He declares that she wisely turned away from the “cares of Martha”, those being domestic work and food preparation, and “aspired with Rachel to run to the closer embraces of the Creator.”\textsuperscript{18} Thus began her more serious efforts to seek God though mystical experience.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. These “Poor Sisters” may have been the same Poor Ladies of Monticello.
\textsuperscript{15} Bernard Schlager postulates that perhaps Vito attributes her refusal of admission to Santa Monticello to God’s will because he is reluctant to state outright that her lack of a dowry may have made her an unattractive candidate. “Foundresses of the Franciscan Life”, VIATOR: Medieval and Renaissance Studies 29 (1998): 149.
\textsuperscript{16} Vito of Cortona, 105.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 107.
While in her tower Umiliana was said to have been granted many visions. Vito reports that one night, while fully awake, Umiliana saw a pure white dove which mysteriously filled the room with light until it disappeared into the image of the Virgin Mary she kept by her bed.\(^{19}\) On another night she saw the trinity represented as three spheres of light.\(^\text{20}\) She also claimed to have been visited on several occasions by angelic children who left her heavenly sweet bread and water to sustain her during her long fasts. She often experienced moments of such sweetness that she appeared to be drunk afterwards. She was also able to help others experience this same sweet euphoria when they prayed with her.\(^\text{21}\) Her spiritual director, Brother Michele is reported to have asked her how she came to be blessed with such gifts. Her humble response to the friar is that it must not be due to her own good works but for the grace of God.\(^\text{22}\) Curiously, however, she gave a very different answer to another lady in whom she confided saying that she thought her gift of grace must have been given due to her charitable almsgiving.\(^\text{23}\)

Despite Vito’s assertions that Umiliana lived the best possible life of tranquility and contemplation that could be found outside of the monastery, her life in the tower was not always peaceful. Not only did she have to contend with the everyday vices and temptations of the world when she did venture out, but it was also reported that she was tormented by the Devil while she prayed. He appeared to her many times and struck her often in the hope that he might distract her from her prayers. When physical threats failed, he showed her horrible images of the dead bodies of friends and relatives and tried to trick her with false visions of the Virgin with the child Jesus. Although she desperately wanted to see the child Jesus, she ignored his taunts.\(^\text{24}\)

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 108.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 130.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 114. When she prayed with Brother Michele and helped him experience such sweetness of grace at his request she is called by Vito an “obedient daughter” but acts more like his teacher rather than his student.
\(^{22}\) Vito of Cortona, 115.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 109.
Vito’s account one is lead to conclude that Umiliana was not only able to correctly discern holy visions from demonic illusions, but that she also had the gift of prophecy since she was also able to correctly interpret the true visions granted to her.25

Umiliana’s ecstasies and visions appear to coincide with her bodily suffering. She suffered severe stomach pains for a year before she died.26 During this time she was often observed resting peacefully because she became “enraptured when [she] meditated on God.”27 Sometimes she entered into this blissful state for days. Vito reports that on one occasion, her brothers mistakenly thought she was dead and tried to revive her causing her to laugh at them for their ignorance.28 On another occasion her relatives tried to rouse her from her state by slapping her until she scolded them for tearing her from the embraces of God the Creator.29 When she would come back to her senses, however, she was once again tortured by excessive pain. Vito reports that it was as if a serpent were present to torture her.30 He leaves the reader to interpret this as fact because, as he had reported earlier in the text, the Devil had sent other large serpents to her before and had appeared to her in the form of a terrible serpent himself.31 Vito’s account concludes with the Devil continuing to torment Umiliana on her deathbed. She is able to banish him this last time allowing her to rest peacefully with the image of the Virgin Mary placed upon

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25 Ibid., 124-5. It is interesting to note that she could distinguish between the visions and illusions without the help of her spiritual director.
26 Vito of Cortona, 121, 133-4. Bernard Schlager notes in passing that Umiliana died from extensive fasting “Foundresses of the Franciscan Life: Umiliana Cerchi and Margaret of Cortona,” 148. However, Schlager does not cite where he came upon this information.
27 Vito of Cortona, 121.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 135.
30 Ibid., 121.
31 Ibid., 112-3.
her chest.\textsuperscript{32} After she had passed, the friars took her body “with much joy and honor” and laid it to rest in the church of Santa Croce.\textsuperscript{33}

Umiliana’s story has often been regarded by scholars as a story about laywomen and their cooperative charitable activities.\textsuperscript{34} There are a number of laywomen that appear frequently alongside the friars throughout Vito’s text. Furthermore, although several friars are mentioned in the list of witnesses to Umiliana’s extraordinary life, women’s names comprise the majority. This indicates that Umiliana was closely connected to a number of other laywomen as well as women who were cloistered in monastic houses such as the one run by the Poor Clares of Santa Monticello. However, Umiliana’s story is not exclusively about women. Diana Webb argues that Umiliana’s story “is a document of the important relationships which mendicant friars formed with urban women and their disposition to recognize and promote lay sanctity in female form.”\textsuperscript{35} It is on the relationship between the holy woman and the friars with whom she was in close contact that I wish to focus my attention.

Because the Franciscan friars were active in the world rather than detached from it in a monastery, they came into contact with laywomen.\textsuperscript{36} Umiliana’s relationship with the friars was certainly complex. During her life she was protected by her connection to the Franciscans

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 136. The image of the Virgin contained a special relic which was a lock of her hair. This image was obviously important to Umiliana as it remained close to her in her bedchamber and she had it embellished with expensive gems. For more on this image and its use in Umiliana’s devotions see Hayden B. J. Maginnis, “Images, Devotion, and the Beata Umiliana de’ Cerchi,” in \textit{Visions of Holiness: Art and Devotion in Renaissance Italy}, edited by Andrew Ladis and Shelley E. Zuraw (Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 2001), 13-20.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Vito of Cortona, 136.
\item \textsuperscript{34} See Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, \textit{Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 53. Anne M. Schuchman has also examined how close-knit communities of women feature in “The Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi” in “‘Within the Walls of Paradise’: Space, and Community in the Vita of Umilana de’ Cerchi (1219-1246),” in \textit{Negotiating Community and Difference in Medieval Europe: Gender, Power, Patronage and the Authority of Religion in Latin Christendom}, edited by Katherine Allen Smith and Scott Wells (Boston: Brill, 2009), 49-64.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Webb, 94-5.
\item \textsuperscript{36} On Franciscan preaching in Florence and the growth of the mendicant movement in Medieval Italy see Daniel R. Lesnick, \textit{Preaching in Medieval Florence: The Social World of Franciscan and Dominican Spirituality} (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989).
\end{footnotes}
despite not being able to enter one of their convents. As I have noted earlier, Vito argued that it was God who wanted Umiliana to remain in the world as an example for others\(^37\) so that she could be a “foundress of a new way of holy life.”\(^38\) But this was to be a holy life lived under the supervision of the Friars Minor. Friar Michele, who came to play an important role as her teacher and spiritual director, eventually became one of the primary witnesses to her ecstasies. Therefore, in considering the figure of Umiliana as a model of saintly virtue and exemplary conduct it is important to understand that her *Life* is filtered through at least two layers of Franciscan intervention. First, her actions themselves were carefully guided by Friar Michele. Then, the recording of those actions in a narrative form was assigned to Vito, another member of the Order. This text is therefore a product of the Florentine Franciscans’ efforts to ingratiate themselves into Florentine society and its powerful merchant families.\(^39\) I will return to this point later. For now, it is sufficient to say that it is not surprising then that the friars are portrayed positively in the text as Umiliana’s allies and spiritual brothers, while ordinary males in the story, including her father and husband, are portrayed negatively as usurers and cheats.\(^40\)

The relationship that developed between the holy woman and the friar who became her spiritual confessor was a complex one. Umiliana, and laywomen like her, seem to have fascinated the friars. According to John Coakley, this fascination stems from the fact that many of these women claimed to have mystical experiences which meant they had an extremely intimate relationship with God. As Coakley explains “the friars saw this as privileged, unique, 

\(^{37}\) Vito of Cortona, 105.  
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 106.  
\(^{40}\) Webb, 95. Umiliana’s male family members are often shown to object to her extreme generosity while her maids and female co-conspirators help her to circumnavigate their wishes. Vito indicates that these actions would sometimes result in beatings from her husband. These actions allow him to cast these laymen in a negative light because they appear to be hindering these charitable acts out of greed.
and remote from their own experience.”\textsuperscript{41} This introduced an element of ambiguity into the friars’ authority over these women, Coakley argues, for although they had sacerdotal authority over them because they could administer the sacraments of penance and eucharist, these women were in direct contact with God which highlighted the lack of such a connection in the friar’s own spiritual life.\textsuperscript{42} Often, the friar who was the mystic’s confessor later became her hagiographer. In these accounts the friar included his interactions with the saint as part of the text.\textsuperscript{43} In such cases the friars often focused on the mystic’s experience of closeness with God.\textsuperscript{44} It is also clear from certain accounts that some of them came to think of themselves as facilitators or third party observers of this intimate union. For example, Jordan of Saxony wrote that he was like an escort taking the bride, his subject Diana of Audalò, to Christ her bridegroom.\textsuperscript{45} No such interaction seems to have occurred between the friars and male saints because, according to Coakley, “in the case of the saints who were men, mendicant witnesses did not in general encounter them as subjects or beneficiaries of pastoral or evangelical work, but typically as colleagues in that work, taking an active role in civic life.”\textsuperscript{46} As a result, the friars were not privy to the intimate mystical experiences of male saints, hence the reason why “the men’s vitae have little to say about the personal spiritual matters so important in the women’s.”\textsuperscript{47} Thus, the way in which the Franciscan friars encountered laywomen was gendered for they regarded them as female persons in need of spiritual guidance. Although they appeared to be special persons gifted with mystical visions, church officials thought that these women required

\textsuperscript{41} John Coakley, “Gender and the Authority of the Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and Dominicans,” \textit{Church History} 60 (1991), 450
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 449.
\textsuperscript{44} Coakley, “Gender and Authority,” 452-3.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 451.
\textsuperscript{46} Coakley, “Friars, Sanctity, and Gender,” 93 [emphasis mine].
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 94.
the assistance of a confessor to properly process all that they had seen and heard. Moreover, as I shall now demonstrate, the way the friars wrote about the laywomen that came to be associated with their Order was similarly gendered.48

In Vito’s text a number of friars seek Umiliana out for her perceived direct connection to God. One friar asks her to pray for him because he is greatly troubled by temptation. Her prayers are heard and the friar’s concerns are alleviated.49 Another friar, concerned with the fate of his immortal soul, asks her if she had foreseen his fate in one of her visions. She replies that she had indeed seen him in a vision and he had been dressed in white which she assured him meant that he would remain loved and pure in God’s eyes.50 The complexity of the relationship between Umiliana and her confessor, Brother Michele, becomes apparent when he too requests her to pray for him saying, “My daughter, pray for me, for I am totally dried up.”51 She does so obediently and the two of them are immediately filled with such grace that they are enraptured. Although Brother Michele has the authority to dictate how and to what degree she can practice ascetic devotion, it is apparent that she has the ability to help him when he is lacking in his devotion.52 That said, Umiliana is portrayed as the ever humble and “obedient daughter” by Vito and he takes care to see that the roles played by confessor and penitent are never reversed in his account.53 Brother Michele addresses Umiliana as “daughter” and Vito refers to her as the “daughter of peace” who never complains lest she offend “the father of peace.”54 It is apparent

48 Lezlie Knox has recently examined how certain Franciscan women wrote about themselves. She focuses on the writings produced by Franciscan women who belonged to the reformed Clarisses during the later 15th century and examines how the women used competing images of Clare of Assisi to define their own identity within the Franciscan tradition. See Knox “Writing Female Franciscan Identity” in Creating Clare of Assisi: Female Franciscan Identities in Later Medieval Italy (Leiden: Brill 2008), 157-186.
49 Vito of Cortona, 113.
50 Ibid., 110.
52 Vito of Cortona, 117.
53 Ibid., 114.
54 Ibid., 116.
from the way in which he wrote about Umiliana and Friar Michele’s encounters, that Vito pays close attention to the gendered roles that the two figures, laywoman and friar, were to play. Umiliana is the good daughter and Brother Michele is responsible for her spiritual guidance.\footnote{I should like to point out that although Brother Michele is identified specifically as her confessor (Vito of Cortona 117), Umiliana also confesses several of her visions to other friars who are identified as her close friends (Vito of Cortona, 110, 114).}

Additionally, Brother Michele’s sacerdotal authority over her is never compromised, for when Umiliana receives bread from heavenly angels, she is careful not to break the bread and share it with her confessor although she does so with other individuals.\footnote{Vito of Cortona, 118. Vito further demonstrates Umiliana’s loyalty to the Church and its sacraments by describing how she devoted herself to making Eucharist bread for the mass and how often she observed mass (Vito of Cortona, 114). See Grace M. Jantzen, \textit{Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 170, for the “modesty formula” that the accounts of female mystics often employ in order to gain clerical approval. Vito’s account of Umiliana appears to use this modesty formula because she refers to herself as a “fragile” thing and always defers to the authority of the friars even when they are seeking her assistance. Thus, Coakley’s observation that the way in which the friars encountered laywomen was gendered, is supported by Vito’s account.

Of special interest to this study is how Vito’s Umiliana demonstrates certain “feminine” qualities or roles. There are a number of descriptions in Vito’s account that invoke “feminine” roles which warrant closer examination. Umiliana’s character is not only an “obedient daughter” she is also described as a “pious mother” with regard to her charitable acts. For example, she nurtures the poor and the sick by bringing them food she had saved in her breasts like a nursing mother. These motherly descriptions, however, belong to the author. Umiliana never refers to herself as a mother in the text, even when addressing her female companions. To present herself as a “mother” would mean that she would be assuming a role which exercises some form of authority over others as her “children.” Vito’s Umiliana remains a humble character from beginning till end. This silence on her “motherhood” is certainly interesting, given the fact that Umiliana has had two daughters of her own and is evidently fond of children. This can be
observed when Vito describes her taking on a small boy’s pain to relieve him of his suffering. She also thinks fondly of her nephew for whom she tries to catch the mysterious dove as a present before she realizes it is not what it appears to be. Furthermore, she is delighted when heavenly visitors come to her in the form of little boys and girls and happily meditates on Jesus as a child. Yet, for Umiliana, taking on the role of mother is secondary to that of being a virgin. She values virginity so much that she was not worried about her children dying if they were sick because she is reported to have thought “How blessed they would be if they were to depart thus without spot, taking their virginity with them! I would rather that they should die, if it is the will of God, and enter into glory, than they should live, lest it should happen that some time they offend God and lose a part of his supreme love and eternal inheritance.” It would appear that Umiliana is more concerned with maintaining a state of purity than being motherly. Vito’s attempt to describe her as motherly is likely connected to his continuous efforts to connect her with another exemplary figure, the Virgin Mary, which I will discuss later.

Vito documents several events where Umiliana appears to be attempting to preserve her physical and spiritual purity in order to make herself into a worthy vessel for Christ, her bridegroom. He reports that she frequently fasted for long periods of time and displayed an aversion to material food. Since Brother Michele had denied her desire to practice more extreme forms of asceticism, fasting therefore became her main form of ascetic devotion. Vito

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57 Vito of Cortona, 127-8. She is rewarded with a vision of Jesus as a four year old boy for this act.
58 Vito of Cortona, 108.
59 Webb, 96.
60 Vito of Cortona 101. Umiliana also shows a puzzling lack of distress when her daughter dies in her cell. She is able to bring the daughter back to life through the power of her prayers, but her alarm appears to be centered around the “scandal” she fears would result if her daughter were found dead in her cell by her relatives (Vito 127).
62 Brother Michele not only prevented her from fasting too extremely (Vito of Cortona, 117) but he also directed her not to dress herself in the hair shirt she had taken to wearing (Vito of Cortona, 119). Vito also reports that Umiliana
explains that she often did not eat corporeal food because she had “tasted the sweetness of her beloved Jesus.”

She appeared to desire to live only on spiritual sustenance and when she received a bit of bread which she believed to be left by an angel, she lived off that small piece for a week and also shared it with others. To further keep herself from corrupting influences, she did not tolerate her companions speaking about profane matters in front of her. In addition to this, “because the sense of hearing has no natural obstacle” as Vito explains, she would stuff her ears with wax so that she would not have to hear the “noises and vanities of the world.” Similarly, she lamented that she had not been made blind so that she would not have to look at mortal men and kept her eyes on the ground when she went out into the city. She also appeared to be concerned that her body might come into physical contact with other bodies. On two separate occasions she tightly wraps her clothing around her feet and lower body. The first time she does this she is trying to prevent the serpent in her bedroom from touching her naked body. The second time she is on her deathbed anxiously anticipating crowds of people who would try to claim a relic from her dead body. Such events draw attention to Umiliana’s close proximity to the everyday world and, according to Anne Schuchman, the anxiety she expresses toward such

used to beat herself with a scourge of ropes but Brother Michele does not appear to have objected to this practice (Vito of Cortona, 118-119). On another occasion she attempted to make herself cry tears during her prays and when she found herself unable to do so she nearly made herself blind by putting lime in her eyes. Finally God did grant her the ability to cry floods of tears during her meditations (Vito of Cortona, 109-110) but not before Umiliana had attempted the extreme act of self-mortification.

63 Vito of Cortona, 122.
65 Vito of Cortona, 122.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 112.
68 Ibid., 134. This is in sharp contrast to her desire to touch the incorporeal things that she saw in her cell at night such as the mysterious dove or the three spheres of light. She is ultimately disappointed when she discovers that she is unable to touch such things because she herself is corporeal. (Vito of Cortona, 130).
circumstances indicates that Vito was concerned with Umiliana’s status as an uncloistered woman.

Although Umiliana supposedly longed for a solitary existence, such as a flight into the desert or to wall herself in her tower, she is never totally confined. As Schuchman points out, the “numerous guests in her tower as well as her own visits to the sick, the poor, enclosed nuns, and other laywomen . . . highlight Umiliana’s own lack of enclosure.”69 Umiliana’s freedom of movement throughout the city was thus something Vito needed to address. Although Vito was adamant that Umiliana lacked nothing of the monastic life in her tower, her tower and her person remained open to the world to some degree. This was because she continued to receive visitors in her tower as often as she ventured out from it, and because she was not a virgin.70 Schuchman notes that Umilana’s “‘openness,’ may have made her seem particularly vulnerable to demonic sexual defilement.”71 She argues that Vito’s repeated emphasis on Umiliana’s “extreme self-regulation” allowed him to show that she vigilantly guarded the gateways into her body which thus could be understood as her being cloistered in her own flesh.72 Because of her rigorous self-discipline she is “depicted as a Vessel filled with the Holy Spirit, and therefore the devil/serpent could find no place there.”73 She had apparently made herself impermeable to corruption, which allowed her to walk around the city unharmed and made her fit to struggle with the devil. At this point it is helpful to explore the historical context behind Vito’s text in order to better understand some of the concerns that appear within the text.

69 Schuchman, “Within the Walls of Paradise,” 57.
70 Ibid., 54-6.
72 Schuchman, “Within the Walls of Paradise,” 55
73 Ibid.
The Cloistered and the Uncloistered in the Franciscan Movement

At the time Vito was writing his account of Umiliana’s Life, papal powers were insisting that any woman who wanted to live the Franciscan holy life must be safely cloistered. This was not originally the case, however. Clare of Assisi (1193-1253) had been recruited by Francis himself to start a group of sisters. In 1215, Clare had been granted the right to live in voluntary poverty by Innocent III so that she might truly follow in Christ’s footsteps after Francis’s example. This privilege, however, was not given to the Poor Clares that followed after her. Hugolino Segni, the first Cardinal Protector of the Franciscan Order and later Pope Gregory IX, imposed a form of Benedictine Rule upon the female Franciscans in 1221 and restricted their movement. Although it was not until 1298 that “Boniface VIII prescribed the cloister as formal and absolute rule,” the Poor Clares were prevented from living a life of poverty, chastity and humility as wandering mendicants like their male counterparts by the Cardinal Protectors of the Order. The protectors thought it best that they lead contemplative lives safely behind closed doors and protective walls.

At this time it was imperative that newly established orders gain recognition from the Church in Rome. Patricia Ranft reports that in 1198 “Innocent III began the process which

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75 Ranft, 125.
76 On the shift from Clare’s emphasis on voluntary poverty to the Order’s emphasis on being legally associated with the Franciscans see Lezlie Knox, “Audacious Nuns: Institutionalizing the Order of Saint Clare,” Church History 69:1 March (2000): 41-62.
77 Schlager, “Foundresses of the Franciscan Life,” 146. Ugolino applied pressure to the Poor Clares by forcing them to take on property and housing (Ranft 126,128). This prevented them from living a life of voluntary poverty which they originally had intended to live. On Ugolino’s role as advocate for Franciscan friars, nuns, and laypersons see Lazaro Iriarte, Franciscan History: The Three Orders of Saint Francis of Assisi (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982).
79 Ugolino is reported to have said “…you are imprisoned within these poor walls because you are freed from the world and all the dangers of the world’s vanities, that you may be united in the pure and holy embrace of your heavenly spouse…” as quoted by Ranft on page 126.
would bring these groups into the mainstream of the Church structure."^{80} Francis and his male followers had only recently received recognition from Pope Innocent III in 1209.^{81} Although a number of other mendicant movements had appeared during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Francis and his followers were one of the few groups that actually succeeded in gaining such recognition. Thus, the newly established male communities felt the pressure to conform to the expectations of Rome. The pressure was greater still for the female communities that had been established alongside the male communities, for they felt pressure to conform to both the expectations of Rome and those of their male counterparts. Conflict arose within the Franciscan movement between the male friars and Clare’s “Poor Ladies” over what was to be expected of both groups and what responsibilities each had toward the other.

Francis had expected Clare and her Poor Ladies to behave like cloistered Benedictines. He did not anticipate that the Ladies would either want or be able to live out the ideal of voluntary poverty he and his mendicant friars followed.^{82} He therefore deposited Clare in a Benedictine convent shortly after she took her vows.^{83} Clare did not like the arrangement and she and her sister, who accompanied her, were moved to San Damiano where the group expanded. Francis also did not expect that so many women would eventually claim to be associated with Clare and these “Damianites,” thereby claiming association with the Franciscan friars also. Other convents besides the one at San Damiano emerged and fourteen new convents were incorporated into the Franciscan Order in 1247.^{84} The Franciscans had to address their own “frauenfrage” of what to do with the surplus of cloistered women who had to be provided for. They not only required resources to sustain their physical needs but they also demanded pastoral

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^{80} Ranft, 124.
^{81} Ibid.
^{82} Ibid., 125.
^{83} Ibid., 124.
^{84} Knox, “Audacious Nuns,” 45. These convents were situated in not just Italy, but France and Spain as well.
care from their male counterparts.\textsuperscript{85} As a result many friars were forced to take up residence alongside the convents to minister to the Poor Ladies.\textsuperscript{86} They also had to “collect alms for the women’s sustenance.”\textsuperscript{87} The friars protested, claiming that performing these pastoral duties for the Poor Ladies “prevented them from fulfilling their own vocations.”\textsuperscript{88} Thus, Clare not only had to fight to retain the voluntary poverty that Innocent III had granted her, she also had to fight to maintain her Order’s association with the Friars Minor. On several occasions the friars petitioned the pope to release them from their obligations toward the Poor Ladies. The Poor Ladies responded with their own petition, requesting that the Friars be compelled to continue ministering to them.\textsuperscript{89} Relations between the two groups were strained and, as Lezlie Knox reports, “the papacy frequently had to intervene between the friars and nuns.”\textsuperscript{90} Pope Urban IV attempted to remedy the situation in 1263. He renamed the Poor Ladies the Order of Saint Clare, thereby disassociating them with the ideal of poverty that Clare had fought so hard for the right to practice.\textsuperscript{91} He also urged them to adopt his proposed Rule to unite their convents assuring them that they would be provided for because he himself would assign ministers to their convents. Many of the convents rejected Urban’s proposed rule. But in 1265, Clement IV threatened the sisters with an ultimatum: either profess Urban’s rule or lose the protection of their Cardinal Protector.\textsuperscript{92} Still many convents resisted. Their counterproposal was that they would adopt the Isabelline rule which similar to Urban’s rule except that it explicitly bound them

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 42-44.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 46
\item \textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 42.
\item \textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 43.
\item \textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 48.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 44.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 56.
\item \textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 57.
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to the Friars Minor. Thus, by the latter half of the thirteenth century it would seem that Clare’s followers no longer saw poverty as the primary issue they were willing to fight for. Their primary concern became instead access to pastoral care and the sacraments. It would appear that despite Clare’s urgings, the Ladies were no longer opposing the cloister that had been imposed upon them, but were actively attempting to maintain the many cloistered convents that had been established and the welfare of the ladies housed within them. The long conflict over cloistering and pastoral care of the Poor Ladies substantially changed the Friars Minor as well. As the thirteenth century drew to a close, the mendicant friars had taken on the clerical duties of their priestly counterparts and the Friars and Poor Ladies who originally sought to follow Francis’s example of poverty and humility had become ordained priests and nuns. Having said that, the question that remains is why is it that in 1246, the Friars Minor appear to be very willing to provide pastoral care to Umiliana, a laywoman in Florence, while during that same period of time they were resistant to providing the same for their female counterparts in the Order of Saint Clare?

Umiliana was not able to become one of Clare’s Poor Ladies, but she did attract the attention of the Friars Minor. She was not only visited by her confessor, Brother Michele, but also by several other abbots and friars who are identified as her close friends. It is important to mention that the political atmosphere in Florence at that time was certainly a factor in the Franciscans’ interest in Umiliana. Schuchman reports that shortly before Umiliana’s death Frederick of Antioch took control of the city and began to purge it of Guelph powers which were

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93 Ibid., 59. Knox notes that most Franciscan convents eventually adopted the Urban’s rule (60) but in 1336 Pope Benedict XII ruled that “the brothers owed pastoral care to any nun whether she professed Clare’s rule, Urban’s, or Isabella’s” (61).
The Guelph and Ghibelline conflict had disrupted the entire city.\textsuperscript{95} The fighting that had broken out in many parts of the city also found their way into Vito’s text.\textsuperscript{96} The turbulent atmosphere was evident in Umiliana’s visions of fire and dead bodies piled high in the city. The Franciscans were involved in the conflict as they were supporters of the papacy and therefore on the side of the Guelphs. Because they sided with the Guelphs, the Franciscans were “forbidden to have contact with Florentine men, but were, however, permitted to be spiritual advisors to Florentine women.”\textsuperscript{98} Although the friars had contact with Umiliana before her death, it was after her death that there was definite political motivation for them to promote her cult.\textsuperscript{99} Schuchman argues that “by seizing hold of the cult of Umiliana, establishing her as both Franciscan and Guelph, and by controlling the location and veneration of her remains, the Franciscans were able to establish a focal point for the growing Guelph Resistance.”\textsuperscript{100} This also forced the Cerchi family to side with the Guelphs who until that time had remained more or less out of the conflict by supporting whomever was in power at the moment. “Through the cult and veneration of the family \textit{santa} the Cerchi family joined forces with the Franciscans and eventually became one of the major Guelph powers in Florence.”\textsuperscript{101} This move turned out very well for the Franciscans. Regardless of the outcome, however, the adoption of Umiliana by the Franciscan order, from Schuchman’s perspective, “indicates not only a self-conscious attempt to

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\textsuperscript{95} Schuchman, “Politics and Prophecy,” 107.
\textsuperscript{96} Many Italian cities during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were divided over whether to support the papacy and the Pope or the empire and the Holy Roman Emperor. The Guelphs were those that supported the papacy and tended to be from the merchant class. The Ghibellines were pro-imperial and belonged to the landowning noble class.
\textsuperscript{97} Schuchman, “Politics and Prophecy,” 108.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 110. Schuchman cites Anna Benvenuti Papi’s works “Una Santa Vedova” and “Nascita di un culto.”
\textsuperscript{99} Umiliana’s cult became an active local cult in Florence and her story was translated into the vernacular Italian. For an account of the Italian legend of Umiliana see Maria Romano Franco, \textit{La Beata Umiliana de Cerchi} (Rome, 1977). This study will maintain a focus on the original Latin text and Vito’s presentation of exemplary “feminine” conduct for the Franciscan Tertiary. It is important to state, however, that the later vernacular accounts of Umiliana’s story indicate that her legend continued to resonate with the people of Florence because there is indication in these texts that they were probably used as private devotional reading (Webb, 96).
\textsuperscript{100} Schuchman, “Politics and Prophecy,” 109.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 110.
drape her often extreme spirituality in the garments of orthodoxy, but also a key moment in Florentine politics, as the Franciscans stepped in and overtly influenced the affairs of the state." The political situation in Florence at that time is therefore an important factor in the study of Vito’s document.

Vito’s account of Umiliana’s life contains certain themes and images that reflect the political pressures playing out in Florence at that time. This is not surprising given the fact that Vito was associated with the Franciscans who were involved in the Guelph and Ghibelline conflict. However, the primary interest of my present study of Vito’s document is how it the example she presents reflects certain social pressures that include cultural assumptions about women and women’s roles within the Christian community. I wish to examine the manner in which certain “feminine” virtues were imagined at that time, and the particular way that these assumed ideals are taken up and presented to women by Vito’s Umiliana. Thus, having examined the political and historical worlds behind Vito’s text, I must also address the literary world to which Vito’s text belongs, the hagiographical genre.

**Exemplarity in Umiliana’s Hagiography**

As I discussed earlier in chapter one, hagiographical narratives have been understood as presentations of prescriptive “exemplars” to be imitated. Susan Rubin Suleiman explains that such exemplary literature possesses a “didactic” motive or impulse which attempts to teach or demonstrate a specific moral or idea. This is especially important to note in Later Medieval Hagiographies for beginning in the twelfth century there was a “new emphasis on conforming

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102 Ibid., 110.
behavior to types or models.”

With the emergence of new religious movements and orders at that time, the models portrayed by a founding or admired figure were, according to Carolyn Walker Bynum, “a way in which these groups created group identification.” Thus, while hagiographical accounts and martyrologies from the earlier Christian periods focused on the legendary accounts of Christianity figures as extraordinary feats and wondrous acts, Late Medieval Hagiographies were much more concerned with these figures as models or exemplars to be imitated by ordinary persons which, in turn, created some degree of cohesion within the group that chose to imitate said figure.

Aviad Kleinberg has also noted that this the emphasis on the saints as “models for action, as exemplars to be literally imitated, became more prominent in the twelfth century.” He identifies a new concept of sainthood that appeared at this time, one of “spiritual struggle, often beginning with conversion and continuing with a public effort within society. The saint was seen as a model and an agent provocateur. The old saint inspired in his beholders admiration and confidence; the new saint the more intimate feelings of guilt and shame.” Thus the new concept of sainthood understood saints as exemplars that were meant to “provoke” the audience into changing their behavior according to the ideals presented. Kleinberg identifies Francis specifically as an example of the “new” type of saint because shame “was a very important element in his rapport with his audience. By doing what was right, often by overdoing what was right, the saint could shame his audience into repentance.” Shame is therefore used as a literary device to persuade the reader to alter his or her conduct. While it was recognized that the

105 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
ordinary Christian would certainly struggle in his or her attempt to follow Jesus’ example, it was assumed that they should, at least, be able to follow the saint’s example who was a successful imitator of Christ. The logic was that, when presented with the model of a human being who lived in a time and place closer to their own, the ordinary Christian stood a greater chance of succeeding, although success was never guaranteed. That said, Medieval writers did distinguish between “imitanda (things that should be imitated) and admiranda (things that should be wondered at).” Kleinberg explains that “the elements in the saints’ lives that fell under the category of admirable were to serve more as demonstrations of God’s power, while the elements that fell under the other category were seen as lived moral lessons.” While it might be tempting to simply identify the older saintly figures as belonging to the admiranda category and the new saintly figures as the imitanda category, both of these elements were usually present in a saint’s Life. Which acts were to be wondered at and which were to be imitated was, however, open to interpretation.

Vito’s Umiliana was to be an exemplar for a Third Franciscan Order, an order composed of laypersons known as tertiaries. At that time, many spiritually active women without some affiliation with an Order ran the risk of being marginalized or branded a heretic which happened to some of the Beguines. Thus, like Clare’s Poor Ladies, they too felt pressure to be

108 Ibid., 130. This shaming element is certainly present in Vito’s text. He provokes the audience into considering how they might live like the Blessed Umiliana because she was able to live a life worthy of praise while being in the world without the benefit of a structured convent setting.
109 Kleinberg, 134.
110 Ibid. Kleinberg also notes that “on the whole medieval female saints tended to belong more to the admirable than to the imitable pole of the spectrum. Women were not allowed to assume pastoral duties as men could, so the type of evangelical model that began in the twelfth century to be adopted by men was rarely available to them. St. Clare, for example, shared Francis’s evangelical ideals, but though he originally dressed her in the Minor’s habit, he soon confined her within the convent of San Damiano. In a convent, a woman’s audience was limited. The highly structured life prevented innovation in action and tended to direct women toward a less action-oriented spirituality” (134-135).
111 For example, Marguerite Porete was a Beguine burned as a heretic in Paris in 1310. See Marguerite Porete, A Mirror for Simple Souls, trans. Charles Crawford, (New York: Crossroad, 1990). On the Beguines and other marginalized groups at that time see Walter Simons, “On the Margins of Religious Life: hermits and recluses,
recognized officially by the Church and therefore sought affiliation with one of the established convents or orders. The laywomen associated with the Franciscans became the new Third Order. Vito insists that Umiliana was a “foundress” of this Order which he pointedly described as equally honorable and “rightly guided by the Holy Spirit” as any of the other Orders.\textsuperscript{112} He also insists on the orthodoxy or appropriateness of Umiliana’s example. She was set up to be an exemplar for laypersons. Vito clearly states that Umiliana “preached more by deeds than by words and does not cease to preach now that the body is dead.”\textsuperscript{113} It is her deeds, or rather, her actions, then, that the reader is to take notice of and not her words. This text is therefore identified by its author as an exemplary narrative with a didactic purpose. It is intended to educate and demonstrate proper action rather than to entertain.

A coherent example of humility, charity and obedience is presented in Umiliana’s \textit{Life}. Although Vito insists that she is an example for all laypersons living in the world, nevertheless it is an example that is lived within the confines of proper female conduct as deemed by the Franciscan friars. Thus, it is also a presentation of proper female conduct. Umiliana is a properly humble layperson who defers to the authority of the friars, her clerical superiors, by acquiescing to their instructions. She also appears to regard their authority as superior to that of her husband, father, or brothers who are laypersons like herself. While it is clear in the text that there are different authorities that Umiliana must navigate, it is always the authority of her spiritual advisor, Brother Michele, that is emphasized throughout the text. Such displays of humility and obedience, according to the text, are appropriate for the layperson to emulate. These virtues, along with charity and poverty, are also the primary ideals stressed by the

\textsuperscript{112} Vito of Cortona, 106. The other orders he could be referring to might be the Poor Ladies or the Benedictines.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 107.
Franciscan Order. These Franciscan ideals, as I shall now demonstrate, are slightly modified to incorporate certain Medieval conceptions of “feminine” virtues and ideals in the specific example Vito’s “Life of Umiliana” presents for laywomen.

Franciscan versus “Feminine” Ideals in Vito’s Life

Umiliana has been recognized by scholars like Bernard Schalger and Anne M. Schuchman as a figure who presents Franciscan ideals for the layperson. Diana Webb has also observed that there are distinct “feminine” and Franciscan ideals presented by the text and that there seems to be tension between the two types of ideals. An initial examination of the “feminine” ideals exemplified by Umiliana has revealed that her role as wife and mother were not as important to her hagiographer as was her charity work, her displays of humility and her obedience to the authority of the friars. It is not surprising that Vito, a Franciscan, emphasized the traditional Franciscan virtues of obedience, humility, and charity in his text, for he wanted to claim Umiliana as a Franciscan and, more importantly, an example of the new Third Order. She was to be “a model for Franciscan tertiaries.” Thus, Vito attempted to portray Umiliana as not only an exemplary layperson, but orthodox in both her belief and practice. He therefore describes her humble acceptance of the instruction of her spiritual advisor, Brother Michele, and focuses on certain behaviors that the Church would find acceptable for orthodox Christian women, such as venerating the sacrament of the Eucharist. In other words, Vito is actively

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115 Webb, 96.
118 At this time there were a number of heretical movements that were of great concern to the Church such as the Waldensians and the Cathars. There were also a number of lay communities that were claiming to be orthodox but were not formally associated with the Franciscans or any other religious order. For Umiliana’s possible Cathar beliefs and connections see Lansing, The Florentine Magnates, 120-124.
constructing Umiliana as an example of perfect humility and obedience. These were not simply
the preferred virtues of the Franciscans, but arguably prerequisites for the holy woman.

André Vauchez considers Umiliana’s life to “outline quite clearly the religious ideal
which the Franciscans proposed to women.”\footnote{119} He has examined Umiliana’s life as a study of
the particular brand of female sanctity that was being recognized within the Franciscan
movement. He notes that the Franciscans of Santa Croce tended to channel the ascetic impulses
of the laywomen they encountered into more productive activities such as contemplation and
penitence.\footnote{120} In Umiliana’s case, Brother Michele persuaded her not to live like a solitary desert
hermit and prevented her from practicing more extreme forms asceticism, which the Franciscans
viewed as “excessive and dangerous.”\footnote{121} The model of quiet contemplation, demonstrated by
Umiliana as she lived in her tower within the city walls, was deemed praiseworthy by the
Franciscans and they were interested in promoting it to other laywomen. In Vauchez’s words,
“Umiliana demonstrated that it was possible to live outside of the world while remaining in it, a
lesson which constituted an authentic \textit{exemplum}.\footnote{122} I should like to point out, however, that this
exemplum was not simply a matter of applying idealized virtues to Umiliana’s \textit{Life} after her
death so that it could be narrated in a form that other laywomen could understand and emulate, it
was also prescribed to Umiliana herself by the Franciscans who advised her. Thus, the example
that she demonstrated had already been conceptualized before the saint had finished living and
before Vito set about narrating it.

The friars’ influence on Umiliana seems to have been great. In fact, Vauchez attributes
Umiliana’s shift in concern from worldly to heavenly matters to Franciscan influence rather than

\footnote{119} André Vauchez, \textit{The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices}, edited by Daniel E.
\footnote{120} Ibid., 181.
\footnote{121} Ibid., 180.
\footnote{122} Ibid., 181 [emphasis his].
the loss of her dowry. From his perspective, it was not the loss of the resources that prevented her from doing charitable work but rather it seems that she lost the determination to do those works. Umiliana continued to gather resources for the poor even after she was prevented access to both her husband’s wealth and her dowry. She simply begged for the resources from other ladies in Florence instead like a true mendicant. Vauchez concludes that it was under Franciscan influence that she “gradually renounced the works of mercy and charity to which she had devoted herself for many years, and dedicated herself ever more to contemplation and the pursuit of mystical graces.” He argues that Vito wanted Umiliana to remain enclosed in her tower and focused on her devotions and he therefore presented other persons who sought to involve Umiliana in worldly matters as “diabolic temptations” in his text. Instead of visiting abbots and friends, they appear as visions that urge Umiliana to leave her tower. Vito praises her for successfully turning away from these tempting visions and reports that she increased her devotions all the more intensely.

In a similar fashion, Clare’s mendicant activities were brought to an end through Franciscan influence. In Clare’s case, it was the Cardinal Protector of the Franciscans, Hugolino Sengi, who limited her activities. It would seem that the Franciscan friars were more comfortable when the women associated with their order were safely accounted for within secure walls rather than doing charitable works out among the poor. This applied to both laywomen and the Poor Clares. Thus, the friars who were charged with directing specific laywomen were, as Vauchez puts it, “persuaded of the superiority of contemplation over action” and they

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123 Ibid., 181.
124 Vito of Cortona, 104.
125 Vauchez, *Laity in the Middle Ages*, 181.
126 Ibid.
127 Vito of Cortona, 109, 111.
prescribed contemplation and prayer to women like Umiliana who had previously lived an active
life of charity.

According to Vauchez, women like Umiliana paved a “highway to female sanctity” for the women that came after them.\(^{128}\) The path that these women carved out was the way of the mystic, where one seeks to out a union with God. Mysticism became a legitimate path to holiness during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. However, this path appealed to an elite few who were willing to undertake the rigorous trials necessary to enter into such a union.\(^{129}\) Vauchez observes that this solitary quest was not suited to convent or communal living.\(^{130}\) He also asserts that a ‘mystical invasion’ took place during the later Middle Ages, which shook the traditional monastic framework that distinguished Christian laity from both the clergy and monastics.\(^{131}\) These mystics were laypersons who claimed to have a direct and intimate relationship with God and thus no longer had to rely on the clergy to serve as intermediaries between themselves and God.

It is striking that the exemplars of this new mystical sanctity were almost exclusively women.\(^{132}\) As previously noted in chapter one, Vauchez observes a trend during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that he describes as a “feminization of sanctity.” This trend not only describes the dramatic increase in the number of women canonized as saints during that time, but also the shift toward an emphasis on virtues most often associated with female saints, such as humility. The development of female mysticism can be understood as part of the feminization of sainthood taking place. More importantly for this study, however, the development of female mysticism can, according to Vauchez, also be considered “one of the major spiritual innovations

\(^{128}\) Vauchez, *Laity in the Middle Ages*, 182.

\(^{129}\) Ibid., 234.

\(^{130}\) Ibid., 231.

\(^{131}\) Ibid., 269.

\(^{132}\) Ibid., 231-2.
of the thirteenth century.”

It is the innovations attempted by the hagiographers who narrated the lives of these female mystics that are of interest to this study of imagination and exemplary religious narratives.

It is evident that Umiliana’s example is not gender neutral, despite Vito’s insistence that her life was to be an example for all who had to remain in the world. Her trials and tribulations documented in Vito’s *Life* are directly connected to her being a woman in thirteenth-century Florence. If she had been a man, her enclosure would not have been necessary, assuming of course that she would have gained entry into the male Franciscan order. Similarly, her charitable acts might not have been questioned to the same extent by her family members. This gendered existence also informed the models that were prescribed to Umiliana. As Weinstein and Bell have noted, there were a limited number of ways women could demonstrate sanctity and thus the models of sanctity prescribed to them were also limited by the established and approved models of female sanctity. Thus new models that were proposed must be shown to be reiterations of the old. This is an often-employed literary device in hagiographical literature which enables the more recent figure to be connected to a long line of saintly figures that came before them. In Umiliana’s case, Vito turns to the biblical sources and the exemplary models portrayal there, like so many hagiographers before him.

**Imitatio Mariae or Imitatio Christi?**

133 Ibid., 231.  
135 Diana Webb imagines Umiliana’s life would have looked very similar to other lay male saints such as Pier Pettino of Siena (Webb, 96). For a translated account of Pettino’s *Life* see Webb 191-241.  
136 It is worth noting, however, that Francis himself had a dispute with his father regarding his extreme generosity. This resulted in the often told story of Francis stripping off his clothes in a gesture that signified his severing ties with his earthly father.
In several places throughout his text, Vito identifies Umiliana with the Virgin Mary, an established exemplar of humility. While Vito likens Umiliana’s behavior to the biblical figures of Martha and Rachel, Martha, when she is devoting herself to charitable work and Rachel when she is seeking closeness to God in her ecstasies, it is the figure of Mary that is most often called to the mind of the reader. Mary is not only a paragon of humility she is also synonymous with virginity and purity. Thus, Vito appears to draw the reader’s attention away from Umiliana’s loss of virginity through her marriage by associating her with the ever-virgin Mary. It is interesting to note that Clare, too, was associated with Mary by male writers who later documented her activities, although she herself made it very clear that it was in Christ’s footsteps she followed, not Mary’s. While Vito does say that Umiliana, like all saints, was an “imitator of all perfection,” and that Jesus is her “beloved,” he also calls her an “imitator of the mirror of all humility, that is, the glorious Virgin.” Thus, the intense desire to be like Jesus expressed by these female mystics, to be able to experience his suffering and passion, was acknowledged by their hagiographers. Nevertheless, they appeared to doubt their ability to embody this “Christlikeness.” The underlying assumption here is that as lowly females, Umiliana and Clare could only mirror Mary, not Jesus. Thus, in their texts the friars were insisting that these women were engaged in “imitatio Mariae” rather than “imitatio Christi.”

Furthermore, Patricia Ranft has observed that, in Franciscan thought, it was through poverty that imitation of Christ could be achieved. The Franciscan ideal of voluntary poverty was interpreted by Francis and the Cardinal Protectors as something that could be embodied

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137 Vito also invokes the mystery of virgin birth when he describes her stomach illnesses as labor pains. He says “she suffered severe pains in her stomach and womb, to the extent that she seemed not merely to be in agony but to be experiencing childbirth” (Vito of Cortona, 101). This is significant given that elsewhere it is said that Umiliana’s physical suffering brought about her ecstasies, thus bringing her closer to God.

138 Ranft, 130.

139 Vito of Cortona, 116.

140 Ibid., 115.
properly by a friar but not by a nun or tertiary. Ranft argues that by denying these women the right to practice voluntary poverty, they denied them a way of fully pursuing the *imitatio Christi*. While the Franciscan ideals of charity, humility and obedience were stressed in their lives, they were mainly associated with quiet, contemplative models like Mary.  

She quotes Bynum when she says that by the thirteenth century “*imitatio* became more and more literal” and physical. The physicality of Christ’s male body did not go unnoticed. As Ranft notes that there appeared to be some “male apprehension” toward the Poor Ladies imitating Christ by embracing poverty and that “the church responded negatively, maybe if for no other reason than that they were not sure where such literal imitation of Christ would lead when the imitators were women.”

Through redundant repetition, Vito associates Umiliana with Mary and indicates his concern to associate her also with virginity and purity. It is important to note that this insistence on associating Umiliana and Claire with that of the figure of Mary is part of a trend observed by Dyan Elliott to renarrate particular female figures as inappropriate and present alternative figures such as the Virgin Mary as praiseworthy. Thus, during the Late Middle Ages the male writers of women’s *Lives* assumed that there were proper models or examples for women to imitate and proper models for men. While all saintly models reflect some aspect of “Christlikeness”, certain models were deemed to be “feminine” or specifically for weaker sex.

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141 Ranft, 129.
143 Ranft, 130 [emphasis mine].
To conclude this chapter, I will reiterate that recording Umiliana’s *Life* allowed the Florentine Franciscans to not only promote the new Third Order to laywomen. The presentation of Umiliana as an exemplar of humility, charity and obedience coincided with a rise in a new brand of “feminized sanctity.” Vito’s documentation of Umiliana’s *Life* is one such case where there is an overt attempt to construct a new kind of lay sanctity for women that would be acceptable to papal authorities. Although Umiliana lived her life in the busy and often turbulent urban environment of Florence, she was informally cloistered in her tower. Thus, Vito shows us an obedient Umiliana, who despite the distractions of the world, be they from the devil or from her peers, perseveres in her task of prayer and meditation. Her reward is that she is gifted with divine visions as well as prophetic wisdom which she uses to help the Friars Minor in Florence.

Diana Webb likens Umiliana’s *Life* to “a manifesto for a particular way of life which was to the friars’ liking.”[^146] The life prescribed by the friars was not the life of poverty that Clare and other women aspired to, but it was in line with both Franciscan ideals and the “feminine” ideals recognized by papal authorities. The traditional Franciscan ideals of charity, humility, and obedience, were ideals that could be demonstrated fairly straightforwardly by a laywomen like Umiliana. The manner in which they could be enacted, however, was limited to what the Church deemed to be proper “feminine” conduct. The Franciscan emphasis on voluntary poverty, as it was practiced by the friars, posed a problem for the Franciscans who were eager to maintain their good standing with Rome. It was deemed inappropriate for these women to beg and preach in the city. Therefore quiet contemplation was prescribed, instead of active charity.

The Franciscans’ attitudes toward the women that came to be associated with their order informed their prescription of certain ideals of obedience, chastity, and humility to holy women. In sum, they applied these ideals in specifically gendered ways. From Vito’s text it is clear that

[^146]: Webb, 95.
Umiliana was exemplifying the ideals of obedience, chastity and humility. However, her actions also reinforced established notions of exemplary “feminine” behavior informed by Medieval conceptions of purity. Her actions thus reaffirmed that the appropriate places where female conduct could be acted out were in domestic settings that had secure boundaries. The “feminine” ideals presented in Vito’s text can thus be summarized as: obedience to clerical authorities, then obedience to secular authorities; chastity or purity of both mind and body through ascetic discipline; and finally humility, which amounted to being modest in both speech and dress. Although Vito promoted Umiliana as an example of lay sanctity that could be performed by laypersons of either gender, the careful presentation of “feminine” virtues documented in her hagiography suggests otherwise. As Coakley has already pointed out, the way in which Franciscan friars encountered lay women like Umiliana was strongly influenced by categories of gender. “Feminine” ideals thus informed the hagiographer’s conception of the model holy woman and therefore also informed their writing of narratives portraying the lives of laywomen like Umiliana.
Chapter 3: Carol Christ and the Goddess:
A Feminist Re-Imagining of Religious Symbols and Narratives

This chapter examines a case of exemplary narrative construction from the contemporary period. It focuses on the goddess figure presented by spiritual feminists in order to promote positive images of women and female bodies. “The Goddess” is a re-imagining of older goddesses into a new figure that embodies contemporary feminist concerns. This imaginative endeavor is undertaken by Carol Christ in a deliberate attempt to empower women through the rediscovery and/or reinvention of ideal female and “feminine” images. The intention is to not only provide inspiring models for women, but also to affirm the value of women’s embodied experiences.

Goddess figures caught the attention of second-wave feminists during the early 1970s. At that time, second-wave feminists were evaluating the impact of discriminatory political, social and economic policies upon women’s lives. Meanwhile, feminist scholars of religion, like Patricia M. Doyle, argued that “feminist analysis of culture and society stops prematurely if it does not dare to tackle religion.”¹ Religious institutions, symbols, and images inform perceptions of woman and the female body and, therefore, they must also be subject to feminist critique. While many second-wave feminists agreed that it was necessary to critically evaluate religious traditions from a feminist perspective, the scholars who took on this project did not approach the task in the same way, nor did they reach the same conclusions. Mary Daly, for example, asserted that the language and symbols employed by Western religions were androcentric and recommended that they be rejected.² In contrast, other feminists like Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow saw the deconstruction of religious traditions as only a half measure.

² See Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).
They insisted that “religion could be reconstructed or recreated to speak to the experiences of women.” From their perspective it was not only important to identify aspects of religious traditions that are problematic for women, but it was also equally important to explore those aspects that affirm the dignity and humanity of women. Thus, scholars like Christ and Plaskow saw their task as both deconstructive and reconstructive. It is from this reconstructive activity that a contemporary religious movement known as the goddess movement arose.

The goddess movement began as part of a larger feminist spirituality movement during the second-wave of feminism. In 1979, feminist activist and ritual educator Starhawk observed that “the feminist movement, which began as a political, economic, and social struggle, is opening to a spiritual dimension.” By the late 1980’s, an impressive amount of new writing had been produced by feminists. They not only wrote new feminist theologies, but also new myths, prayers, meditations, and rituals for women. These newly proposed alternatives to Western religious traditions prompted many feminists, who were active members of religious communities, to reevaluate their commitment to their respective traditions. While some chose to remain within their inherited tradition in order to reform it from within, others rejected their tradition. Instead, they chose to explore alternative modes of religious expression that they saw as more inclusive and welcoming to women. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza are examples of religious “reformers” who critique the use of exclusive

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4 The goddess movement developed alongside other new religious movements, like Wicca, which occurred in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand at that time. For an overview of the development of Wicca in the West see Chris Klassen, Storied Selves: Shaping Identity in Feminist Witchcraft (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).


6 Christ and Plaskow present a number of constructive feminist writings on religion in Womanspirit Rising. Plaskow’s contributions to the volume include “Bringing a Daughter into the Covenant” and “The Coming of Lilith” in which she proposes new possible ways that Jewish myth (205-207), ritual and liturgy (179-192) might be re-imagined.
language and entrenched misogynist interpretations of scripture while remaining within their own religious tradition. Unlike these reformers, Carol P. Christ, Starhawk, and others, chose to step outside of their inherited traditions to explore alternative religious traditions. They also chose to explore more ‘unorthodox’ female figures and images. Christ and Starhawk have extensively explored “feminine” imagery through what they identify as “the Goddess.” For feminists like Christ and Starhawk, the Goddess became a new religious symbol with which they could engage alternative expressions of “feminine” strength, power, and creativity.

The Goddess is an expression of feminist values and aspirations, although she has been envisioned in a variety of different ways by her advocates. While some describe her as a nurturing figure like Mother Earth, others describe a powerful and fearsome force like Kali. Still others invoke her as a more personable figure like a wise grandmother or trusted friend. Given the diversity of depictions that have been presented, I will limit my investigation to one presentation of the Goddess. Maintaining a focus on a single presentation will allow for a more in-depth examination of the imaginative process that Goddess practitioners engage in. For this reason I will be primarily investigating the Goddess as she has been presented by Carol P. Christ.

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7 Both Radford Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza belong to the Catholic tradition.
8 Christ and Starhawk could be categorized as “radical” or “revolutionary.” However, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow have noted that the labels “reformer” and “revolutionary” create unnecessary divisions between feminists who are otherwise engaged in a very similar critical enterprise. See Plaskow and Christ, Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 6-7.
10 Starhawk, “Witchcraft and Women’s Culture,” 263.
The Goddess According to Carol Christ

Carol Christ has been credited as a “founding mother of the Goddess Movement.”¹² She was one of the first scholars to draw attention to “the Goddess” as a new theological symbol that women could use to empower themselves.¹³ A self-identified Goddess thea-logian, Christ obtained her doctorate in theology at Yale University. She has taught courses on women and religion at various American institutions, including Columbia University, Harvard Divinity School, Pomona College, San Jose State, and the California Institute of Integral Studies.¹⁴ However, feeling alienated by the academy, she resigned a tenured professorship and moved to Greece in 1987 after having a series of “mystical experiences” which she believes were encounters with the Goddess.¹⁵ Christ has since made her home in Lesbos where she continues to write about her encounters with the Goddess.¹⁶ At present, she is the director of the Ariadne Institute for the Study of Myth and Ritual¹⁷ where she organizes Goddess pilgrimages to Crete.¹⁸

Christ’s experiences of the Goddess have been influenced by her academic studies and her feminism. During her graduate studies at Yale she became convinced that there was a need for language and images that positively reflect women’s bodies and experiences.¹⁹ In Laughter

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¹⁵ Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 3, 117.


of Aphrodite (1987) she explains, “As I became aware of the importance of role models and of the power of language and images, I became increasingly estranged from the Christian tradition.”20 In her assessment, “the biblical tradition is defined by a system of symbols centering around the images of God/He, God as Lord, King, Warrior, Father, and Son.”21 Christ argues that employing only “masculine” images of God enforces the notion that “legitimate power and authority in religion and society is appropriately held predominantly or exclusively by men.”22 She therefore posits the need for alternative language and images that recognize women as full human beings and as sources of authority and power. In her search for such language and images, she examined historical records of women’s religious practices, archaeological accounts of prehistoric goddess traditions, as well as contemporary women’s autobiography and fiction. The feminist theology she developed from these sources became her “thealogy” of the Goddess.23

The Goddess as Theological Symbol

One of the key motifs of the new “noninstitutionalized” women’s spirituality movement, explains Christ, is “a new naming of ultimate power or powers.”24 She asserts that “many women are rediscovering that one of the oldest names for the fundamental energy—the energy of natural processes, the energy of life and death, the energy of sexual attraction and repulsion, the energy concentrated in meditation and ritual, the energy felt vibrating in a room when people are really speaking to one another, the energy of psychic healing—is Goddess.”25 Christ believes

20 Christ, Laughter of Aphrodite, x.
21 Ibid., 60.
22 Ibid. Christ is drawing on Mary Daly’s work in Beyond God the Father in which Daly asserts that “if God is male, then the male is God” (19).
23 For Christ’s understanding of her own attempt to create “thea-logy” see Rebirth of the Goddess (xiv-xvii).
24 Christ, Laughter of Aphrodite, 48.
25 Ibid. [emphasis hers].
that the women’s movement gave her a language with which to interpret her experience of the
Goddess. In *Laughter of Aphrodite*, she reflects that:

> the Goddess is different than anything I ever found in the Christian tradition. . . For me the biblical God was ‘beyond sexuality’ as theological tradition asserts, but ‘he’ retained a certain aura of masculine presence and authority. It wasn’t until I said Goddess that I realized how significant that remaining aura of masculinity was in my image of God. Not until I said Goddess did I realize that I had never felt fully included in the fullness of my being as a woman in masculine or neuterized imagery for divinity.

By naming the Goddess as the ultimate power, Christ is declaring that women are also powerful beings. The Goddess is therefore an affirmation of the potency of female power, the female body, the female will, and women’s bonds and heritage. First and foremost, however, the Goddess is a symbol of female power and independence.

In her article “Why Women Need the Goddess” (1979), Christ insists that “the Goddess has much to offer women who are struggling to be rid of the ‘powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations’ of devaluation of female power, denigration of the female body, distrust of female will, and denial of the women’s bond and heritage that have been engendered by patriarchal religion.” She bases this assertion on her interpretation of the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who describes religion as “a system of symbols which act to produce powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations.” “Symbols,” Christ explains, “have both psychological and political effects, because they create the inner conditions (deep-seated attitudes and feelings) that lead people to feel comfortable with or to accept social...

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26 Ibid., x.
27 Ibid., 67.
30 Ibid., 286.
and political arrangements that correspond to the symbol system.”  

She believes that the Goddess is a symbol with the potential to disrupt dominant presuppositions about women and produce revolutionary moods and motivations that empower women. She also insists that it is imperative that alternative symbols like the Goddess are created because “symbol systems cannot simply be rejected, they must be replaced. Where there is not any replacement, the mind will revert to familial structures at times of crisis, bafflement, or defeat.”  

Christ thus believes that when pushed to ascribe meaning to overwhelming experiences, human beings will naturally resort to old paradigms, thereby reiterating traditional structures of power. However, she also believes that “as women struggle to create a new culture in which women’s power, bodies, will and bonds are celebrated, it seems natural that the Goddess would reemerge as a symbol of the newfound beauty, strength, and power of women.”

Christ explicitly states that the “most basic meaning of the symbol of the Goddess is the acknowledgment of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power.” The Goddess is therefore also a radical rethinking of the way power is conceptualized. Christ argues that it is insufficient to merely replace masculine titles for God with feminine titles such as “Lady” and “Queen” because “these images, like the more common Lord and King of the

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33 Christ identifies a “mood” as “a psychological attitude such as awe, trust, and respect” which she distinguishes from a “motivation” which she describes as “the social and political trajectory created by a mood that transforms mythos into ethos, symbol system into social and political reality” (“Why Women Need the Goddess,” 274).
34 Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” 275. Christ also argues that “even people who no longer ‘believe in God’ or participate in the institution structure of patriarchal religion still may not be free of the power of the symbolism of God the Father. A symbol’s effect does not depend on rational assent, for a symbol also functions on levels of the psyche other than the rational. Religion fulfills deep psychic needs by providing symbols and rituals that enable people to cope with limit situations in human life (death, evil, suffering) and to pass through life’s important transitions (birth, sexuality, death)” (“Why Women Need the Goddess,” 274 [Christ cites Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” 210]).
36 Ibid., 277.
Bible and traditional liturgies, reflect the model of power *over.*”\(^{37}\) The Goddess is fundamentally different from Jewish or Christian conceptions of an omnipotent, transcendental God, insists Christ. She is *immanent,* not transcendent, that is to say, she is present in the world rather than separate from it or ruling over it from a far.\(^{38}\) Furthermore, Christ insists that the Goddess herself is a source of great power and strength, but her power is not derived from domination or coercion, and thus she “can influence and inspire us only if we open ourselves to her power.”\(^{39}\)

In the same way she does not stand outside of the world, Christ’s Goddess does not stand outside of history.\(^{40}\) The Goddess must therefore “work in and through finite and limited individuals . . . and within communities with histories.”\(^{41}\) I will discuss Christ’s understanding of Goddess history in more detail later. It is important to first fully examine Christ’s articulation of the meaning the Goddess as a symbol and how that symbol comes into being.

Advocates of the Goddess do not imagine her out of thin air. They appropriate images and symbols from a plethora of sources. As Christ explains, “Feminist Goddess spirituality is a syncretistic combination of elements of pre-Christian religion with contemporary ideas and experiences.”\(^{42}\) She identifies the ancient Mediterranean, European, Native American, Mesoamerican, Hindu, and African traditions as rich sources for Goddess symbolism.\(^{43}\)

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\(^{38}\) Christ concedes that both Christian and Jewish traditions refer to God’s immanence but she insists that they usually emphasize God’s transcendence over his immanence (*Rebirth of the Goddess*, 102).


\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.


\(^{43}\) While Christ emphasizes the richness of pre-Christian sources for imagining symbols of female strength and power, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that Marion symbolism within the Catholic Christian tradition is a viable source for female language and imagery of divinity. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that “even though any Catholic school child can explain on an *intellectual-theological* level the difference between the worship of God and Christ and the veneration of Mary, on an *emotional, imaginative, and experiential* level the Catholic child
However, she also insists that these traditions “are filtered through modern women’s experiences. Traditions of Goddesses, [that are depicted in] subordination to Gods, for example, are ignored. *Ancient traditions are tapped selectively and eclectically, but they are not considered authoritative for modern consciousness.*” Therefore the act of envisioning the Goddess is a selective process that involves appropriating certain, but not all, symbols and images from ancient sources and adapting them in a way that speaks to the present concerns of modern women.

Christ’s own theology has been inspired by ancient goddess figures. Her presentation of the Goddess utilizes symbols and images of goddesses from ancient Greek and Roman sources. However, she insists that the Goddess is not simply a modernized Athena or Aphrodite. To Christ, the Goddess is a much more nuanced and complex figure that oversees all vital life processes. On the Ariadne Institute’s website, Christ explains to other potential Goddess devotees that:

> At first the ancient images of the Goddess did not interest me. Athena was warlike and stated that she always sided with men. Aphrodite was a sex object, and so on. After much diligent research, aided by other women, I gradually came to understand that beneath the familiar Goddesses of the patriarchy, there is a much more ancient Goddess. The Goddess of Old Europe and Ancient Crete represented the unity of life in nature, delight in the diversity of form, the powers of birth, death and regeneration.

Here Christ is reinterpreting Greek and Roman goddesses as distorted representations of a much older goddess figure. The older figure to which she is referring is the prehistoric goddess that experiences the love of God in the figure of a woman. Since in later piety, Jesus Christ becomes so transcendentalized and divinized that his incarnation and humanity are almost totally absorbed into his divinity, the ‘human face’ of God is almost solely experienced in the image of a woman” Schüssler Fiorenza, “Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision,” in *Womanspirit Rising*, edited by C. Christ and J. Plaskow (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 138-139 [emphasis hers].

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44 Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” 276 [emphasis mine].
45 Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, x.
46 Christ, “Carol Christ: Words about the Goddess and Greece and Her Life.”
47 Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 176-178. This idea that Greek and Roman presentations of goddesses are patriarchal distortions of much earlier more powerful goddesses was proposed by classist Jane Ellen Harrison (1850-
archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994) believed was depicted in prehistoric cave paintings, pottery, carved figurines. Gimbutas claims that a pan-European religion, centered on the worship of a goddess figure, existed before patriarchal religious traditions came to Europe. Her proposals have been widely criticized by archaeologists and historians alike. Christ therefore draws inspiration from unsound archaeological theories in her imagining of the Goddess and she has been criticized for continuing to utilize these sources without addressing their problematic elements. I will return to this issue later. For now, it is important to stress that feminist goddess practitioners like Christ see their goddess as an evocation of an ancient goddess and their movement as a “rebirth” of ancient practices.

The rebirthing of ancient goddess traditions involves re-imagining ancient images and stories in a way that makes them more palatable to modern feminists. Christ observes that “there is something that looks very Western in all feminist writing about the Goddess.” This is not surprising given that the goddess movement is a western religious movement. The Goddess therefore reflects western preferences and tastes which include a tendency to rely on

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Gimbutas asserts that “Old European ceramics are readily identified with the rich symbolic signs and decorative motifs that reflect and ideology concerned with cosmogony, generation, birth, and regeneration. Symbols were compartmentalized or interwoven in myriad combinations—meanders and spirals, chevrons and zigzags, circles, eggs, horns, etc. There were a multitude of pictorial and sculptural representations of the Goddess and subordinate gods, of worshippers, and sacred animals.” Marija Gimbutas, “Women and Culture in Goddess-Oriented Old Europe,” in Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality, edited by J. Plaskow and C. Christ (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 70. See also Marija Gimbutas, The Civilization of the Goddess (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991) and Marija Gimbutas, The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).


This is evident in Starhawk’s work as well. She asserts that “The Goddess has at last stirred from sleep, and women are reawakening to our ancient power” (Starhawk, “Witchcraft and Women’s Culture,” 262).

51 Christ, Laughter of Aphrodite, xii.
monotheistic conceptions of the divine. Individual goddesses from polytheistic traditions are thus reinterpreted as many aspects of a single all-encompassing figure which they simply refer to as “the Goddess.”52 However, the goddess movement appears to be both polytheistic and monotheistic. “Contemporary Goddess religion is polytheistic in practice,” Christ explains, because it employs “a multiplicity of names and images of the Goddesses and even the Gods.”53 But she also insists that there is a “unity underlying a plurality of images,”54 and therefore “neither monotheism nor polytheism is an adequate description of contemporary Goddess religion.”55 According to Christ both polytheism and monotheism are necessary because “we need ‘the Goddess’ as an affirmation of an intuition of the unity of being underlying the multiplicity of life. And we need a multiplicity of ‘Goddesses’ (and Gods) to fully reflect our differences and to remind us of the limitations of any single image.”56 Employing a variety of goddess images ensures that the Goddess does not become fixed as one type of image which would effectively limit her power as a transformative symbol.57

Although “spiritual feminists are adamant that the goddess not be restricted to any one single image,” Cynthia Eller argues that “if one image predominates amidst the manifold incarnations of the goddess, it is that of mother.”58 This is certainly true in Christ’s work. While she employs a variety of images in her depictions of the Goddess, she often returns to “mothering” or “nurturing” themes in her writing. For example, she describes the earth as the

52 Christine Downing has argued that feminist goddess practitioners may fall into familiar monotheistic terms of reference if they exclusively refer to “the Goddess” and proposes that the term “Goddesses” should be used instead. Christine Downing, The Goddess: Mythological Representations of the Feminine (New York: Crossroad Press, 1984), 24 as cited by Carol Christ in Laughter of Aphrodite, xii.
53 Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 112.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Such is the case with the image of God the Father, which Christ argues has become fixed as the image of an old man with a flowing white beard (as depicted by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel). See Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 22.
body of the Goddess, mountain peaks as her breasts, and caves as openings to her womb. This is a common theme for Goddess practitioners, according to Eller, because spiritual feminists often see the earth as a living being, as in Gaia or Mother Earth. They identify the earth as “feminine” because they see it as possessing certain characteristics most often identified with women such as “nurturing, creating, sustaining, [and] giving birth.” Christ purposefully invokes the Goddess as a birth-giving, nurturing mother, because she thinks female power and strength can be found in the image of woman as care-giver and creative force.

While it may seem that Christ is returning to the same maternal image that patriarchal traditions have promoted in order to restrict women’s authority to only domestic activities and settings, Christ does not believe this to be the case. She insists that such a simplistic interpretation does not acknowledge the complexity or plurality that is so crucial to her understanding of the Goddess. She argues that the creative powers of the Goddess can be channeled into many activities, not just the birthing and nurturing of children. In Christ’s view “the life-giving powers of the Goddess in her creative aspect are not limited to physical birth, for the Goddess is also seen as the creator of all the arts of civilization, including healing, writing,

59 Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 25, 90.
60 Christ, Laughter of Aphrodite, 184 - 187, 189, 226. She writes, “caves were once known as the womb and birth canal of the earth, her opening” (226). Earlier she explains: “though our culture’s images of the feminine might predispose us to think Mother Earth to be a flowering hillside or gently flowing stream, the Greeks knew her as the bedrock beneath the thinly layered soil. . . She exposed her power on craggy peaks, majestic towering breasts, and she revealed her mysteries in dark caves with labyrinthine passageways leading to her center, the place of emergence and return. Giver and Taker of Life, Gaia endures while all else comes into being and passes away” (185). Christ believes that caves continued to be a place of sacred reflection in later patriarchal traditions (Rebirth of the Goddess, 51). See also her reflection on her experience of the ‘femaleness’ of a cave at Eressos in Lesbos (Christ, Laughter of Aphrodite, 226).
61 Eller, Living in the Lap of the Goddess, 137. Eller quotes Jeannie Garawitz who asserts that “Women give birth in their wombs and the earth births trees, mountains, nature” and Helen Littlefield who states that “. . .from [the earth] springs food. . .she is what carries me, and she is what I walk upon. . . I think our experience of these things is at a very cellular level. . .we all spring from the mother” (Eller, Living in the Lap of the Goddess, 137).
62 Starhawk also shares this view of the Goddess. In her words: “The Goddess does not limit women to the body; She awakens the mind and spirit and emotions” (Starhawk, The Spiral Dance, 99). Therefore a woman mediating on the Goddess may explore her nurturing or motherly aspects by nurturing a career, a project, or a cause (94), but she is still a reflection of the Goddess by pouring herself and her energy into cherished projects.
and the giving of just law. Women in the middles of life who are not physical mothers may give
birth to poems, songs, and books, or nurture other women, men, and children. They too are
incarnations of the Goddess in her creative, life-giving aspect." Nevertheless, it is striking how
often Christ focuses on the physical features of the female body and its ability to birth children in
her meditations on the Goddess. While she maintains that she does not want to “confine women
to traditional roles” she is quick to insist that “it will not help women to pretend that giving birth
and nurturing children are not important in our lives.” Christ is therefore attempting to re-
imagine the roles of mother and childbearer and the Goddess is her way of reclaiming those roles
which she believes have been undervalued.

Christ deliberately avoids using motherly figures and images from the Christian tradition,
such as Mary holding the infant Jesus. Instead she favors older images which she thinks
originated in nonpatriarchal contexts. In her meditations she repeatedly utilizes prehistoric
images that depict the female body in a state of pregnancy or emphasize the breasts, buttocks, or
pubic triangles of the female form. She believes these images were used by prehistoric goddess
traditions to celebrate the creative power of the female body to bring life into the world. She
also believes that these images depict key aspects of a Neolithic goddess that was worshipped
throughout Europe as the “Giver, Taker and Renewer of Life.”

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63 Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess," 281. See also Christ, She Who Changes, 204-205.
64 Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 92.
65 Christ does believe that some form of Goddess symbolism survived in the figure of Mary (Rebirth of the Goddess, 42), because she, like the Goddess, often appears in caves which then in turn, also become holy places for Christian pilgrims (Christ, Laughter of Aphrodite, 226 and Rebirth of the Goddess, 51).
66 Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 91.
67 She also believes these images celebrate the special relationship that mothers develop with their children during pregnancy and nursing when they share their bodies with their young. See Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 92-93.
68 Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 55. Christ borrows this description directly from archaeologist Marija Gimbutas’s The Civilization of the Goddess (1991), who writes that “The Great Mother Goddess who gives birth to all creation out of the holy darkness of her womb became a metaphor for Nature herself, the cosmic giver and taker of life, ever able to renew herself within the eternal cycle of life, death, and rebirth” The Civilization of the Goddess (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991), 222, as cited by Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 55.
According to Christ, the Goddess as Giver, Taker and Renewer of Life held powers that were present throughout the life cycle; from birth to death and regeneration. This Goddess was represented by a variety of symbols because “all of nature was part of her body and symbolic of her power.” When depicted as “Giver of Life” she could be symbolized as a bird, a deer, or a snake, or water, or streams, or a vulva, or more abstractly as zig-zag patterns, or even simple “V” or “M” markings. When depicted as “Taker and Regenerator of Life” the vulture, owl, dove, boar, frog, hedgehog, fish, bull, bee, and butterfly were her symbols. As the “Renewer of Life” she was the “Earth Mother” or “pregnant Goddess.” There were also symbols that depicted her as energy unfolding such as the spiral, the lunar cycle, and the caterpillar. From Christ’s perspective, all of these prehistoric images, no matter how different they may appear, reflect the power of the Goddess because they point to life-giving and creative forces.

Christ believes that the symbols of the Goddess as Giver, Taker and Renewer of Life, are appropriate images for modern women to utilize in their own imagining of the Goddess because they are older and untainted by patriarchal (i.e. Christian) influences. She insists that “the strength and independence of female power can be intuited by contemplating ancient and modern images of the Goddess.” This is a power that she believes has long been denied to women. She also believes that the ancient images and symbols themselves have a transformative power. So much so that she provides a series of these images in Rebirth of the Goddess and instructs the reader to reflect upon them. In Christ’s view, a strong independent female power is readily accessible to women by simply imagining the Goddess. These images allow women to access a source of power within themselves without having to appeal to external sources (i.e. the authority

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69 Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 55.  
70 Ibid.  
71 Ibid.  
73 Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 10-21.
and power held predominately by men). Thus Christ is not only engaged in an imaginative act of symbol construction, she is also consciously employing the imagination in order to reflect upon these newly constructed symbols and encouraging others to do the same. I will examine this imaginative endeavor in more detail in chapter five. First, I must fully examine the manner in which Christ imagines the Goddess.

**From Goddess Symbol to Goddess Narrative**

In contrast to other feminist scholars working with goddess imagery, the Goddess is more than just an empowering symbol for Christ. She often describes the Goddess as a real force in the world. In *Rebirth of the Goddess* (1997) she observes that:

> My good friend and colleague Naomi Goldenberg finds the Goddess a psychologically meaningful metaphor yet rejects the idea of divinity. She is quite willing to admit that the experiences of ‘the Goddess’ affirm the body and help women gain self-esteem, but she finds the idea that the Goddess exists outside of the human psyche implausible. I respond to her that it makes more sense of my experience and that of others to understand the Goddess as the ground of being, the sustainer of life, and as a power with whom I am in relation.74

Christ also claims that “the Goddess symbol has emerged spontaneously in the dreams, fantasies, and thoughts of many women around the country in the past several years.”75 This seems to suggest that rather than being created by modern women’s imaginations, the Goddess miraculously appears in the imagination as a mystical vision.76 Therefore, the Goddess, according to Christ, is not just an important symbol for modern women, she is also a presence that can be felt in the world and traced back through history. It is this claim to a history of the Goddess that forces Christ to narrate a particular version of history while at the same time

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74 Ibid., 39. Christ makes reference to Paul Tillich when she employs the term “the ground of being.” She believes this metaphor to be “particular appropriate in a Goddess theology” because it “suggests that divine power is not ‘above,’ ‘outside,’ or ‘beyond,’ the cycle of life and death, but ‘beneath’ or ‘within’ all things as their support or foundation” (Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, 188, n. 13).


76 Christ not only identifies her own experiences as “mystical” but she also identifies the experiences of other women as mystical, although these other women may not necessarily identify them as such (*Rebirth of the Goddess*, 117).
maintaining an emphasis on the Goddess as a symbol for women’s empowerment. Therefore Christ not only constructs a Goddess symbol but also a Goddess narrative spanning from prehistory all the way up to the present.

Christ locates the beginning of her Goddess narrative in prehistoric Europe which she has based upon the highly disputed archaeological interpretations of Marija Gimbutas, whom I have already mentioned. Gimbutas excavated human settlements in southern and Eastern Europe that existed during the Neolithic period (c.7000-3500 B.C.E.). Gimbutas hypothesized that a prehistoric Goddess cult existed long before patriarchal religions came to Europe. Although Gimbutas’s assertions have been rejected by most archaeological circles, Christ extrapolates her own version of history from her work. Christ believes that during the Neolithic period there were human settlements that were “Goddess-centered, peaceful and matrifocal.” Furthermore, not only were women not subordinate to men at this time, they also played important roles in Neolithic religion.

Christ’s historical narrative can thus be summarized as follows: Once God was a woman and many European peoples knew her as such. She was the Great Goddess, the Giver, Taker and Renewer of Life, and her powers were the creative powers of birth, death and regeneration. The people that worshipped the Goddess were peaceful agriculturalists. They produced many pieces of art and pottery, which they decorated with the symbols of their goddess. Their way of life was forgotten, however, when they were conquered by mounted invaders. These invaders

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78 Christ has taken this idea from Merlin Stone’s *When God was a Woman* (New York: Dial Press, 1976). Christ does acknowledge that “Stone’s book contains some inaccuracies that have been challenged and corrected by other scholars”, but she also insists that “Stone brought the history of the Goddess into contemporary consciousness at a critical moment” (*Rebirth of the Goddess*, 189, n.1). This text had a profound impact on Christ (*Rebirth of the Goddess*, 50). See also Carol P. Christ, “Remembering Merlin Stone (1931-2011),” <http://www.goddessariadne.org/remembering-merlin-stone.htm> (Accessed July 23, 2012).
were warriors who worshipped a male sky-god.79 They raped, enslaved, and killed the peaceful Goddess-worshippers. Since that time, the inheritors of the Sky-God religion actively suppressed the symbols of the Goddess.80 And the Goddess slowly slipped into the background of European culture except in small pockets of isolated areas.81 “Eventually,” laments Christ, “all the Neolithic and (isolated) Bronze Age culture . . . fell to patriarchal and warlike invaders.”82 By the time of written record, “societies are ruled by warrior kings; Goddesses are no longer supreme, and women are subordinated by law to their husbands.”83

This is not the end of Christ’s narrative, however. Spiritual Feminists like Christ argue that “Goddess worship was never entirely exterminated.”84 They believe that Goddess religion went underground and that “some of the old traditions, particularly those connected with birth, death, and earth fertility rituals, have continued to this day.”85 Essentially, they are laying claim to an unbroken line of women’s religious practices, which they believe can be traced back through folk religion.86 In sum, the alternative historical narrative that Christ presents is not a tragic one of a forgotten people, but a triumphant one, culminating in the rebirth of the Goddess religion within feminist movement.

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79 Gimbutas, “Women and Culture in Goddess-Oriented Old Europe,” 70. Gimbutas names these invaders “Kurgans” after their burial mounds of earth and stone.
80 Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 156.
81 “In the Mediterranean islands that were more difficult to invade,” Christ believes that “Goddess-centered cultures survived and developed into Bronze Age civilizations, such as that of Minoan Crete (Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 170).
83 Ibid.
84 Eller, “Relativizing the Patriarchy,” 286.
86 Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 45-46. Although Christ concedes that it is hard to tell for certain that “witches” were the direct successor to earlier Pagan traditions due to the lack of “direct verification from free testimony” from the accused witches themselves in the texts (46). Rosemary Radford Ruther has critiqued the claim that witchcraft was a surviving pagan religion and argued that it was never an organized religion at war with the Christian Church (a claim first proposed by Margaret Murray in 1921 and widely refuted by other historians of religion).
When presenting her version of a long-forgotten prehistory, Christ liberally cites the work of Gimbutas. She believes that the prehistoric “evidences” brought forward by Gimbutas indicate that at least some form of matrifocal societies existed before the historical record begins. For Christ, this is a significant discovery, because the existence of peaceful non-patriarchal societies contradicts the commonly-held assumption that patriarchy is the way things always have been and therefore is the “natural” order of things. It also gives Christ hope that an alternative future, without patriarchal institutions and power structures, is possible.

Christ is not the only Goddess advocate to be fascinated by the alternative egalitarian history that Gimbutas presents. Rosemary Radford Ruether believes that this fascination is primarily the result of the narrative that Gimbutas weaves with her “evidence.” Ruether argues that “Gimbutas not only describes the extraordinary pottery and the figurines of Neolithic cultures in the Balkans from 7000 to 3000 BCE, but also embeds these images and artifacts in a story of great mythic power.” In the Gimbutas’ version of European prehistory, two distinct cultures existed. She believes that the culture of “Old Europe” was Europe’s first civilization. She describes the culture of Old Europe as “matrifocal, sedentary, peaceful, art-loving, earth- and sea-bound” in contrast to the culture of the Kurgan invaders who conquered them, which she

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88 Gimbutas is not the one to have suggested that a matriarchal prehistory preceded patriarchy. Christ also refers to the work of Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887), Jane Ellen Harrison (1850-1928), and James Mellart (b.1925) to support her claim of a Goddess prehistory (*Rebirth of the Goddess*, 56-57, 59, and 74-75). However, Gimbutas appears to be the most influential on Christ’s work.
89 Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, 209-210. Marija Gimbutas felt similarly about the importance of presenting her work to the general public. In *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991) she states that she stresses the archaeological evidence for these societies because she firmly believes that “this material, when acknowledged, may affect our vision of the past as well as our sense of potential for the present and the future” (*Civilization of the Goddess*, vii). In other words, by knowing that matriarchal societies thrived in the past it is possible to imagine new possibilities for future societies. For this reason Gimbutas has made many efforts to ensure that her work on these prehistoric societies is presented to the general public as well as archaeological circles.
90 Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine*, Kindle edition. Rather than relying on Gimbutas’ version of prehistory, Ruther instead uses the work of anthropologists M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies (*The Female of the Species*) to introduce the prehistory archeology and wider view of roles of women in prehistoric families and societies and, only then, does she go on to discuss Gimbutas and her controversial work.
describes as “patrifocal, warlike ideologically sky oriented, and indifferent to art.”

Gimbutas believes the remnants of the culture of Old Europe are preserved in their most compelling art pieces, small goddess figurines. She uncovered many of these figurines in various parts of Europe dating from the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. She has noted that they appear to be remarkably similar in style; possessing large breasts, large buttocks, and thick thighs. To Gimbutas, these similarities “strongly suggest a common meaning and linked social or religious tradition throughout Europe.” Although, the main purpose of these figurines remains unclear, Gimbutas believes that they are representations of a goddess giving birth. She also believes that the presence of these figurines, as well as the vast number of them found, indicates that these peoples shared an intricate symbolic system centered around the worship of a goddess figure.

It is important to note that while Gimbutas sees all of these figures as possessing similar features, there are also plenty of variations among them. Many of them include animals or appear to be part female, part animal. Some are marked with intricate spirals or chevrons while others are smooth and plain. Gimbutas nevertheless persists with her original interpretation that they are images of a goddess figure, insisting that these variations indicate a complex system of symbols and images that represent a complex goddess.

Gimbutas believes that the forgotten civilization of Old Europe was matriarchal. She asserts that in Old Europe, the power was with women as it was with the Goddess. Prehistoric

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91 Gimbutas, “Women and Culture in Goddess-Oriented Old Europe,” 63.
93 There have been a few male figurines found, but the majority of figures found appear to be female. Margaret Ehrenberg, Women in Prehistory (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 37.
94 Ehrenberg, 72.
95 Gimbutas presents one such figurine under the title “Mistress of Animals.” It depicts a woman seated on the back of a leopard holding a leopard cub in her arms. Gimbutas, The Civilization of the Goddess, 227, figure 7-7. See also the bird woman that Christ refers to in Rebirth of the Goddess, 18.
97 Gimbutas insists that matriarchal societies are a part of our past that has not been discovered because of previous assumptions about all human societies. In her view, archaeology was conducted exclusively by a privileged class of
religion is one of her main sources in her reconstruction of prehistoric social organization.\textsuperscript{99} Gimbutas found evidence of “temples” inside of which “ceremonial objects have been recovered” such as vases, sculptures, and painted walls.\textsuperscript{100} She has identified these buildings as temples from “the presence of altars, huge altar pieces, altar screens, and, in one instance, a large sculpture of the Goddess.”\textsuperscript{101} Her work on prehistoric societies in “Old Europe” has convinced her that the Goddess was not only an important figure but was widely worshiped in many forms throughout prehistoric Europe. Images of her appear on pottery, cave walls, and in small figurines. From these images Gimbutas has concluded that prehistoric societies valued women as mothers and as community leaders.\textsuperscript{102}

It is not surprising that many spiritual feminists, including Christ, have been excited by the Gimbutas version of prehistory.\textsuperscript{103} “The Gimbutas narrative,” Ruether explains, “tells of a time before patriarchy, war, and violence when humans lived together peacefully and were in harmony with nature, a time when both men and women revered the female as the immanent power of renewal in nature that carried life through creation, growth, decline, death, and renewal

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\textsuperscript{99} Gimbutas, \textit{Civilization of the Goddess}, 342. Gimbutas also draws upon burial and settlement remains to show that these societies also included some form of matriliney and matriocality.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 326.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 328.

\textsuperscript{102} Gimbutas also uses burial evidence to support her conclusion. She has found that “the graves of older women were honored with symbolic items.” She believes this to be an indication that these older women were revered or were given a high status in their society (Gimbutas, \textit{Civilization of the Goddess}, 342).

\textsuperscript{103} Ruether notes that Gimbutas is not the first or only one to speculate about a matriarchal past, but her “credentials as an archeologist” lend credibility to the “new matriarchalism” proposed by Riane Eisler (\textit{The Chalice and the Glade}, 1987) and Charlene Spretnak (\textit{The Politics of Women’s Spirituality}, 1982).” See Ruether, \textit{Goddesses and the Divine Feminine}, Kindle edition.
of life.”" In Gimbutas’ narrative “a small group of militaristic, patriarchal nomads who originated in the Russian steppes and swept down on horse-back . . . conquering the unprotected, peaceful peoples of these regions and imposing their patriarchal culture and way of life on them.” Rather than prehistory being populated entirely with meat-eating, club wielding “cave men” who took their meals and their sexual partners by force, Gimbutas offers an alternative version where only the prehistoric ‘winners’ were patriarchal. The prehistoric ‘losers’ in her narrative were peaceful people living in “matricentric” communities (female centered rather than female dominated) who marveled at the mysteries of life and the living world around them. Ruether observes that this narrative “has caught the imagination of those women and men who are engaged in a search for a more life-sustaining deity and spirituality in the midst of modern dehumanization and threatened ecocide.” For these ecologically and socially conscious individuals, it is a particularly powerful narrative because it provides them with an appealing identity myth. According to Ruether, the Gimbutas narrative:

allows them to imagine a peaceful, matricentric, and ecologically sustainable culture as their own ‘original culture’ and to disown the patterns of patriarchy, violence, and domination that have characterized Western culture from its alleged roots in the ancient Near East and Greece. By imagining a time—indeed, the primeval time—before this culture of violence and domination, one can also imagine a time after it, a day when Euro-Americans can reclaim their original and more authentic mothering, peaceful, ecologically sustainable cultural selves. The culture of patriarchal domination of women and nature thus loses its claim to primacy and ‘naturalness’ and becomes a ‘bad interlude’ that can be overcome."

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105 Ibid.
106 For an overview on the recent trend in popular culture glorifying this conceptualization of the “cave man” in an attempt to reclaim a particular kind of “masculine” identity (including the building of “man caves” within one’s own house) see Martha McCaughey, The Caveman Mystique: Pop-Darwinism and the Debates Over Sex, Violence, and Science (New York: Routledge, 2008).
108 Ibid.
It is evident that Goddess practitioners like Christ find Gimbutas and her Goddess prehistory extremely compelling. So much so that Ruether believes that this narrative has become “a kind of dogma for many people involved in this Goddess quest.” However, there are also plenty of critics of Gimbutas and her Goddess hypothesis and her work is disputed in many archeological circles.

**Criticisms of Goddess History**

Many of the Gimbutas’ claims regarding a widespread prehistoric Goddess cult have been challenged by other archaeologists. Margaret Ehrenberg, for example, believes that “the likelihood of a significant continent-wide cult of a Mother Goddess has been greatly exaggerated.” She argues that it is unreasonable to assume that every human figurine made during the Neolithic period had the same function and the figurines Gimbutas labels as “goddesses” could have been made for any number of purposes. She suggests that some may have been used as a substitute for human sacrifice, or part of a funerary ritual, or buried with women who had died in childbirth. Furthermore, Ehrenberg cautions that the veneration of a goddess figure does not necessarily translate into respect for all women. She observes that while “images of women within the Christian and especially the Catholic Church may represent one particular revered woman, the Virgin Mary, they certainly do not reflect the status of ordinary [Catholic] women in contemporary society.” Therefore Gimbutas’s assumption that the worship of goddesses and female deities reflects the same female-oriented power structure in

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111 Ehrenberg, 73.
112 Ibid., 72.
113 Ibid., 37.
human society is not fully considered.\textsuperscript{114} 

Ruth Tringham and Margaret Conkey have similarly criticized Gimbutas’ interpretations of prehistoric artifacts. They insist that Gimbutas fails to provide the context for the figurines that she refers to as images of a “Goddess.”\textsuperscript{115} They note that Patricia C. Rice has argued that these figurines are more likely images of “womanhood” not “motherhood” as Gimbutas suggests.\textsuperscript{116} They also criticize Gimbutas for interpreting certain structures as “temples” or “altars” without fully developing an argument for such an interpretation.\textsuperscript{117} Tringham and Conkey assert that many possible interpretations have been proposed by different archaeologists “based on multiple interpretations of the function, the meaning and the meaningfulness of the archeological data—including figurines and architecture—and on varying visions of their context in terms of the nature of the prehistoric people and their lives.” They observe that Gimbutas does not present any of these alternative interpretations in her work unless she is purposefully taking the time to dismiss them as “unproven” or invalid.\textsuperscript{118} This is problematic, insist Tringham and Conkey, especially when “leading figures in the Goddess literature such as Riane Eisler, Elinor Gadon and even Gerda Lerner, accept unquestioningly these ideas, reproduce them and

\textsuperscript{114} Gimbutas, \textit{Civilization of the Goddess}, 342. Gimbutas is not the only one to base her claims of a matriarchal prehistory on mythology. Johann Bachofen based his argument of a matriarchal phase of human history on his interpretation of Greek and Roman mythology which he thought reflected the social development of ancient societies. See Ruether’s chapter “Contested Gender Status and Imagining Ancient Matriarchy” outlining Bacofen and other’s work on this subject in \textit{Goddesses and the Divine Feminine}, Kindle edition.


\textsuperscript{117} Tringham and Conkey, 24.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 37. From Gimbutas’ perspective, most other interpretations of the archaeological evidence have an androcentric bias and thus they merely reinforce the dominant narrative of patriarchal human history rather than questioning it.
widen their distribution as ‘facts’ about the past.” These criticisms of Gimbutas are extremely problematic for Christ, because she also incorporates Gimbutas’ interpretations of Goddess figurines and prehistoric Goddess worshipping societies into her work.

**Christ’s Imagining of Goddess History**

Christ believes it vital that modern women “reclaim” history. She asserts that, “The gaps and silences in the androcentric tradition deny women a potentially empowering knowledge of history.” She also asserts that “learning that God was a woman can help women to view ourselves as being in the image and likeness of the Goddess.” Therefore Christ’s attempt to present an empowering goddess figure is directly connected to her endeavor to lay claim to a “history” of women’s religious traditions, including prehistoric goddess traditions. To support her narration of an alternative history from these “gaps” and “silences,” she turns to the work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

Christ believes that Schüssler Fiorenza’s work on the reconstruction of the history of early Christian women “provides an interpretative model and methodological theory that is relevant to feminist research on the Goddess.” Quoting from Schüssler Fiorenza’s *Bread Not Stone* (1984), Christ insists that: “Rather than take androcentric texts as informative ‘data’ and accurate ‘reports’ we must read their ‘silences’ as evidence and indication of that reality about which they do not speak.” Christ also employs Schüssler Fiorenza’s analogy of the feminist critical method being like the work of a detective because “it does not rely solely on historical ‘facts’ nor invents [sic] its evidences but it engages in an imaginative reconstruction of

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119 Tringham and Conkey, 24. Ruether also observes that “Gimbutas’s credentials as an archaeologist gave scientific credibility to the new matriarchalism for popularizers” like Riane Eisler and Charlene Spretnak. See Ruether’s chapter “Gender and the Problem of Patriarchy” in *Godesses and the Divine Feminine*, Kindle edition.
121 Ibid., 153.
122 Ibid., 162.
Therefore Christ regards herself, Gimbutas, and others engaged in the reconstruction of Goddess history, as detectives. She argues “all history is told within the framework of a ‘unifying vision’ that involves all scholars in an imaginative selection and reconstruction of the past.” Therefore, it is not only possible to reimagine the past from the gaps and silences of the historical record in order to include the presence of women and female figures, it is vital for women’s empowerment.

Christ narrates her history by selectively highlighting ancient goddess traditions from Greece and Rome and prehistoric “goddesses” from archeological evidences as her primary sources. However, the sources she relies upon are not always the most credible or academic. That does not matter for Christ, however. She asserts that although we are “nourished by ancient symbols of Goddesses from around the world, women’s imagination is by no means subject to the authority of the past.” She explains that:

Instead, modern women joyfully discover what is useful to us in the past and reject what is not. We understand that many symbols of the Goddess have come down to us from patriarchal cultures, and using feminism as a principle of selection, we reject those aspects of ancient mythologies that picture Goddesses as legitimizers of the power of men. In a spirit captured by Monique Wittig, we seek to remember a past where women were not slaves. What we cannot remember we invent joyfully.

However, this “joyful” rediscovery of a potentially empowering past, coupled with earnest “invention,” is not an acceptable solution to other feminist scholars of religion. Marsha A.

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124 Schüssler Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone, as quoted by Christ, Laughter of Aphrodite, 162 [emphasis mine].
125 Christ, Laughter of Aphrodite, 162 [emphasis mine].
126 Marsha A. Hewitt has argued against this approach. She asserts that it is inappropriate to apply Schüssler Fiorenza’s textual hermeneutic approach to non-textual materials such as figurines and images. Marsha A. Hewitt, “Cyborgs, drag queens, and goddesses: Emancipatory regressive paths in feminist theory,” Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 5, No. 2 (1993), 147. In Hewitt’s words, “Christ attempts to apply Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s historical methodology of ‘imaginative reconstruction of reality,’ in order to make her case for the historical prevalence of the Goddess in prehistoric times and the non-subjugated condition of women. While Schussler Fiorenza’s method of ‘imaginative reconstruction’ and deconstructive hermeneutics may be helpful with feminist interpretations of ancient Greek texts, it is not easily adaptable to non-linguistic evidence from Neolithic times, which is where Christ ultimately wishes to apply it” (Hewitt, 146).
127 Christ, Laughter of Aphrodite, 154 [emphasis mine].
128 Ibid. [emphasis mine].
Hewitt, for example, argues that simply quoting Monique Wittig’s “exhortation to invention when memory fails” is not sufficient. Alternatively, Cynthia Eller has no issue with Christ’s attempts to imagine religious symbols for women to psychologically empower themselves, however, she thinks that presenting a “wishful” history for women does not further the feminist agenda. There are limits as to what kind of history can be reconstructed from the gaps in the sources. From Eller’s perspective, looking for a mythical past will not help women to build a real future for themselves or a real world that is peaceful and life-affirming.

The Current Claims of Goddess Advocates

Some Goddess advocates have since distanced themselves from Gimbutas’ claims to a Goddess prehistory. Starhawk, for example, has become more cautious of the archeological history that Gimbutas presents. In her introduction to the twentieth anniversary edition of The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess, she reflects that:

were I writing today I would probably be more cautious about the history I present. In researching a film on archeologist Marija Gimbutas, I’ve become aware of the controversy that rages in academic circles around the history of the Goddess. When I wrote this book, I was not attempting to do historical scholarship or archaeology. Writing as a Witch, I felt free to involve my imagination in a reconstruction of the past. In reality, the most ‘objective’ of historians do the same; they’re just not so blatant about it. Today I might exhibit a more middle-aged caution but to do so might undercut the real power of this history, which lies in the awakening of imagination and a sense of possibilities.

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129 Hewitt, 147. Hewitt notes the Monique Wittig quote from Les Guérillères as cited by Christ in Laughter of Aphrodite, 121. Full quote reads: “There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember . . . You say there are not words to describe it, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or failing that, invent.” See Wittig, Les Guérillères (New York: Avon Books, 1971), 89.


131 Starhawk, The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess, 20th Anniversary Edition (HarperSanFrancisco: HarperCollins e-books, 1999), Kindle edition. However, Starhawk also insists that “What I and many others are saying is simply, ‘Hey, it wasn’t always like this. It doesn’t always have to be like this! So – what culture do we want to live in? Let’s create it!’” She reflects that “That statement could be read as the short form of the Origin Story of Contemporary Goddess Worship. Recent attacks on the Goddess tradition have tried to discredit our history, often with scholarship that is blatantly biased and inaccurate. The idea seems to be that if they can disprove our origin story, they can invalidate our spirituality…” (Starhawk, The Spiral Dance, 20th Anniversary ed., Kindle edition.)
In contrast, Christ continues to not only insist upon the historicity of the Goddess but she also continues to rely on Gimbutas’ work despite the criticisms that have been voiced against her conclusions. She frequently mentions Gimbutas’ work in her recent contributions to *Feminism and Religion*, an online site for feminist theologians and scholars of religion affiliated with the Women’s Studies and Religion Program at Claremont Graduate University. For example, in her post on St. Brigid she identifies “St. Brigid” as the pre-Christian Goddess of Ireland “Brighid.” She also identifies the rituals that later become associated with St. Brigid’s feast day with the Old European ancestors, the same culture of “Old Europe” to which Gimbutas continually refers. Christ believes that these feast day rituals were once “understood as the celebration of the processes of birth, death and regeneration, in the web of life, which they understood to be the cycles of the body of the Goddess.”

Christ has also found new sources which she believes supports the theory of a Goddess-oriented matriarchal history: DNA evidence. In “A Clash of Cultures in Our Genes,” Christ claims that “the evidence of the conquest of Old Europe is written in our genes.” She explains that certain European women, through their MDNA, carry the legacy of our matriarchal ancestors with them, while European men carry the legacy of the patriarchal invaders through their YDNA. Christ made this discovery when she took part in a program to have her DNA tested to discover her ancient heritage. She discovered that she carried a gene from the “clan

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135 Ibid.
136 Christ directs others who are interested in testing their own genes and discovering their own ancient lineage to take part in The Genographic Project spearheaded by National Geographic and IBM. (https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/lan/en/faqs_about.html#Q3 ) There is a fee that must be
of Tara,” the name given to a common ancestor who lived 17,000 years ago and to whom many other Europeans can claim their genetic heritage.137

According to Christ, “the clan of Tara, dates back to the gatherers and hunters of the late Paleolithic whose religious ideas and symbols, rooted in the caves, were inherited by early agriculturalists of Old Europe.”138 Reiterating the narrative script of European prehistory that she earlier constructed she writes, “according to archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, the cultures of ‘Old Europe’ in the Neolithic c.6500-3500 BCE were peaceful, agricultural, sedentary, highly artistic, matrifocal, and probably matrilineal. The people of Old Europe worshipped the Goddess as the symbol of birth, death and regeneration in all life.”139 With her DNA allowing her to make a connection to a matriarchal heritage, Christ claims that “my female ancestors moved with the seasons as they gathered fruits and nuts, roots and greens to feed their families.”140 She also narrates the cataclysmic overthrow of Old Europe, stating that around 440 BCE, “Indo-European speaking invaders called ‘Kurgans’ by Gimbutas after their ‘big-man’ graves, began to enter Old-Europe from their homelands in the steppes north of the Black Sea. The Indo-Europeans brought with them their languages and a patriarchal, hierarchical, nomadic, warlike, horseback-riding culture.”141 Christ claims that the evidence of the violent overthrow of Old Europe by

paid if one wishes to have their genes tested which makes the consumerism and middle/upper class features of the goddess movement more visible (See Hewitt, 150).

138 Christ, “A Clash of Cultures in Our Genes.”
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid. Christ also turns to linguistic evidence in this post to prove that there were distinct cultures in prehistoric Europe. These were horse riding invaders. The fact that these horse riding invaders “were not agriculturalists” insists Christ, “is proved by the existence of different pre-Indo-European words for farm implements and practices in all the Indo-European languages” whereas the words for ‘horse’ are similar to words from German to Greek to Sanskrit.” She does however admit that “Some archaeologists have disputed the theory of cultural change via Indo-European invasions as ‘simplistic,’ but most scholars of Indo-European languages accept it, and genetic evidence confirms it” (Christ, “A Clash of Cultures in Our Genes”).
141 Christ, “A Clash of Cultures in Our Genes.”
these invaders is also present in DNA.\textsuperscript{142} She argues that the Indo-European invaders “killed so many of the indigenous men—men who were not trained to fight or to dominate—that most of the indigenous YDNA lines died out.”\textsuperscript{143} Certain MDNA lines from Old Europe survived because the females “were raped, wedded, and taken as slaves.”\textsuperscript{144}

Christ concludes her post by once again summarizing the grand historical narrative of a matriarchal prehistory:

The theory that there are ‘two cultures’ in Europe, the culture of the conquerors and the culture of the conquered, explains many things, including the ‘underground stream’ of female images of the sacred and hopes for peace that continually emerge in patriarchal warlike cultures. That ‘another way,’ a way of life not based on warfare, conquest, and domination exists, is written in the mitochondrial DNA that all children—male and female—inherit from their mothers. Perhaps it is not too late to reverse the tides of history.\textsuperscript{145}

Here we see Christ attempting to connect a peaceful matriarchal past with a possible peaceful future. It is clear that she has not changed her narrative of Goddess history, nor has she abandoned Gimbutas’ archaeological interpretations in favor of more recent sources from the field.\textsuperscript{146} It is also evident that no matter what subject Christ happens to be studying, be it cave paintings, clay figurines, or DNA, Christ sees evidence of a utopian matriarchal prehistory.

For Christ, it is not sufficient to rediscover this matriarchal past. She believes that we must also \textit{imagine} what it might be like to live in such a society, so that we might be able to create a similar society here and now. She reflects, “I love to imagine everyone on earth living in societies of peace where the values love, sharing, and generosity are understood to be the

\textsuperscript{142} Gimbutas evidence for this violent overthrow has been found by other archeologists to be “selective” and unconvincing.

\textsuperscript{143} Christ, “A Clash of Cultures in Our Genes.”

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{146} Christ seems to believe that it is the type of prehistoric society that Gimbutas presents in her work that her critics find objectionable, more so than her methods. See Carol P. Christ, “‘A Different World’: The Challenge of the Work of Marija Gimbutas to the Dominant World-View of Western Cultures,” in \textit{Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion} 12, no. 2 (1996): 55-58.
highest values. The ‘golden age’ does not have to remain in our past. I dream that we can bring it into the future.”

She implores others to engage in this line of imagining and has recently posted a “Matriarchal Vision,” a guided meditation of sorts, in which she describes life in this matriarchal society of peace:

You would be raised in a large family with sisters and brothers and cousins, all of whom you would consider your siblings. You would never feel lonely. You would not be taught to compete with your siblings. You would never be hit by or hit others, because violent behaviors would not be considered appropriate in families. As all children have mothers and as all mothers have homes in their maternal clans, there would be no ‘illegitimate children,’ no ‘bastards,’ no ‘loose women,’ no ‘sluts,’ and no ‘whores.’ As sex would be free, there would not be any need for prostitution. Children born of sexual relationships would find their home in their maternal family. Mothers would be helped in the raising of children by their sisters and brothers, by their mothers and grandmothers, and by their aunts and uncles. A young woman pregnant or with a child would never be cast out, nor would she ever be expected to ‘make it on her own.’

Christ instructs the reader to “imagine” this way of life by inserting images of the word “imagine” into her text. In order further emphasize the fact that she wants the reader to imagine such a world, she also includes a link at the bottom of her post to a video of John Lennon’s song “Imagine.” The imagination is therefore an important part of this constructive act for Christ.

**The Efficacy of Christ’s Goddess Symbol and Goddess Narrative**

Despite her efforts to imagine an empowering Goddess symbol and revolutionary alternative human histories, some have found Christ’s work uninspiring and even alien to their own experiences and feminist goals. For some, the Goddess is too ‘earthy’ or biological to be empowering to those living in a complex and increasingly ‘wired’ world of technology. As Donna Haraway famously proclaimed, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.”

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148 Ibid.

149 Linked video is from the beginning of the eighty-one minute film that John Lennon and Yoko Ono released in 1972 to accompany to the *Imagine* album. [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xny5z_john-lennon-imagine_music#UWx17Mp8z1U](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xny5z_john-lennon-imagine_music#UWx17Mp8z1U) (Accessed April 15, 2013).

Nevertheless there are those in the spiritual feminist movement like Christ who continue to advocate the (re)imagining of a Goddess figure to empower modern women. Therefore this imaginative endeavor must be examined more closely and the imagined figures produced by it critically evaluated.

In sum, this chapter has placed the contemporary Goddess figure in context and examined the particular aspects that Carol Christ has emphasized in her presentation of the Goddess. In contrast to the medieval figure examined in chapter two, Christ highlights very different “feminine” aspects for women to embrace and celebrate. She insists that the Goddess is an affirmation of “female power, the female body, the female will, and women’s bonds and heritage”\(^\text{151}\) and emphasizes the importance of the Goddess as a symbol of female strength, power and creativity. However, Christ also claims that the Goddess is an ancient figure re-imagined by contemporary feminists but with a history that can be traced back to prehistoric Europe. As noted above, this claim has been a source of much criticism from both archaeologists and feminists alike.

The Goddess as conceived by Christ is a re-imagining of older goddess figures and images into a new figure that embodies contemporary feminist ideals. Goddess practitioners are cognizant of the fact that they are engaging in an imaginative process when they invoke their Goddess. As Christ asserts, “feminists are engaged in the process of creating symbols that deviate from the so-called archetypes, and they are doing so consciously.”\(^\text{152}\) She argues that the reason for deliberately engaging in symbol construction is because “religious symbols are both

\(^{151}\) Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” 276.  
\(^{152}\) Christ, \textit{Laughter of Aphrodite}, 137. Christ discusses the importance that both C. G. Jung and theologian Paul Tillich placed on symbols for the human quest for meaning. Jung thought symbols spring up from the “deep part of the mind that below consciousness and never fully subject to conscious control” (136), while Tillich believed that “symbols cannot be produced intentionally, but that they grow and die by mysterious unconscious processes and therefore can never be subject to human control or conscious manipulation” (137). Therefore Christ is arguing against both Tillich and Jung and believes that feminist Goddess theologians are demonstrating that, in fact, the opposite is true.
models ‘of’ divine reality and models ‘for’ human behavior.”153 She also asserts that “religious symbol systems enforce attitudes and behaviors by labeling those who deviate from them outside the divine order.”154 Therefore religious symbols, and the models of power they enforce, cannot go unchallenged. Christ is fully aware that she is creating model figures and images for women. She believes that the Goddess celebrates aspects of womanhood that that are often devalued in western religious traditions. From her perspective, patriarchal religious traditions have imposed narrowly defined concepts of “womanhood” and “femininity” upon women. She therefore concludes that women must define these things for themselves. She proposes her goddess figure as a more authentic expression of embodied female experience which she hopes other women will find empowering. Thus Christ is purposefully constructing an exemplary figure for modern women to consider as a possible model.

It is clear that Christ is engaged in an imaginative process in order to construct empowering symbols, models, and narratives for women. This imaginative process requires further examination which I will undertake in the following chapters.

153 Christ, Laugher of Aphrodite, 135.
Chapter 4: Paul Ricoeur on the Productive Imagination

This chapter examines Paul Ricoeur’s contributions to the study of the productive imagination. A philosopher and hermeneutics scholar, Ricoeur identified the productive imagination as a major component in the construction and reception of narratives. For Ricoeur, it is precisely the productive aspect of the imagination that allows the narrative to be understood, both as a coherent story and as a reference to a possible world in which one might live. The primary purpose of this study is to evaluate the two exemplary narratives examined in chapters two and three in light of Ricoeur’s insistence on the potential distortions that may be produced by the imagination. Before I can begin a textual analysis of my chosen case studies however, I must first undertake a careful examination of what Ricoeur’s concept of the imagination entails. Therefore, in preparation for an analysis and in-depth comparison of the two chosen exemplary narratives, which will take place in chapter five, this chapter outlines Ricoeur’s conceptualization of the imagination as it features in both language and text.

Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) produced an extensive body of work during an academic career that spanned more than five decades. From a phenomenological perspective, which he combined with an emphasis on hermeneutic interpretation, he examined a broad range of topics including myth, history, symbolism and poetics.\(^1\) The imagination became a topic to which he frequently returned. According to Richard Kearney, Ricoeur’s desire to articulate a general theory of imagination stems from his interest in the production of new meaning and how this new meaning reconfigures the meanings offered by the past.\(^2\) Ricoeur undertook an examination of the imagination and its role in the production of new meaning in a number of essays which have since been translated and published in collections of his work. While the imagination

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\(^1\) For a study of Ricoeur’s “grafting” of hermeneutics onto phenomenology see Richard Kearney “Between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics” in *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 13-33.

features significantly in many of his major works such as *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977) and *Time and Narrative* (1984), it is in the essays and lectures that he devoted to the subject that he articulates his understanding of the imagination the most concisely. Therefore my examination of Ricoeur focuses on the essays, lectures and interviews in which he spoke of his interpretation of the imagination directly. However, because his exploration of the imagination has taken place primarily in essays, it is an exploration that is, as Kearney has put it, “episodic in nature.” For this reason it is important to note that although Ricoeur sought to outline a general theory of imagination, and he took care to link his work on metaphor and narrative to an overarching imaginative process, his treatment of the imagination remains limited to the scope that he traced out in his essays. It is with this “episodic” quality in mind that I begin my examination of Ricoeur’s work on the productive imagination.

In his 1978 essay “Imagination in Discourse and in Action,” Ricoeur observed that “when we survey the shambles of the theory of imagination today” what appears is a “knot of contradictions.” Taking stock of the ‘shambles’ before him, Ricoeur concluded that although the rivaling theories on the imagination vary greatly, “the range of variation found in these theories can be measured along two different axes.” Along the first axis he placed the theories belonging to Hume and Sartre at opposite ends of the spectrum. Hume regarded the image as a “faded trace of perception” or a “weakened impression preserved and represented in memory.” Sartre, on the other hand, regarded the image as a representation of some absent thing. In

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3 Ibid., 36. Morny Joy has also commented on that fact that despite the centrality of the imagination to his work on hermeneutics, Ricoeur’s work on the imagination remains “unthematized.” See Morny Joy, “Hermeneutics and mimesis,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 19, No. 1 (1990): 73.


5 Ibid., 5.

6 Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 38. Ricoeur also places theories on the reproductive imagination at this end of the first axis (Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action”, 5).

7 Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action”, 5.
Sartre’s view the imagination was “condemned to an ‘essential poverty’” which meant that “the imaginary could not teach us anything new since it was held to be a ‘nothingness’ projected by consciousness.”

Theories along the first axis tend to “explain the process of imagining in terms of the object.” This is in contrast to theories on imagination that focus on the subject processing the image which Ricoeur situates along a second axis. The division between the theories that fall along this second axis is “whether or not the subject of imagination is capable of assuming a critical awareness of the difference between the imaginary and the real.” As Ricoeur explains:

At the one end of the axis—that defined by a complete lack of crucial awareness—the image is confused with the real, taken for the real. Here we see the power of lies and errors decried by Pascal; it is also mutatis mutandis Spinoza’s imaginatio, infected with belief as long as a contrary belief has not dislodged it from its primary position. At the other end of the axis, where critical distance is fully conscious of itself, imagination serves instead as the instrument of the critique of reality. Husserlian transcendental reduction, as the neutralization of existence, is the fullest illustration of this.

Dissatisfied with all of these approaches to the imagination, Ricoeur sought to articulate a new approach which would address it as a phenomenon essential to the production and understanding of new meaning.

While other philosophers had approached the imagination solely in terms of image recollection, insisting that the imagination’s role is to conjure up mental projections of everyday things in the absence of the thing itself, Ricoeur instead focused on the “productive” aspects of the imagination as opposed to its “reproductive” aspects. Rather than treating the image as a copy or reference to an original thing, Ricoeur argues that one may approach the image as fiction which does not necessarily refer to an original absent thing but can instead refer to an

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9 Kearney, On Paul Ricoeur, 38.
10 Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action”, 5.
11 Ibid.
“unreality.” As Ricoeur explains, fiction “because it has no previous referent...may refer in a productive way to reality, and even increase reality.” Furthermore, Ricoeur argues, “fiction changes reality, in the sense that it both ‘invents’ and ‘discovers’ it” in contrast to the imagination that merely reproduces images as copies which does “not increase reality since they [these images] have no referents other than those of their originals.” Thus, from the perspective of image as copy, the image is a mere “physical or mental replica” derived from perception. Any images produced by the imagination are therefore regarded as either poor copies of everyday things (horse, man, bird, etc.) or a combination of these recalled things as in the case of the centaur or the chimera. Nothing new is produced by the image as copy imagination, only new combinations of old “components.” Ricoeur’s approach to the imagination as generator of fiction, on the other hand, allows for the production of new meaning and, more importantly, allows the “world revealing” role of the imagination to be explored. Thus, language and not the visual image became the primary focus of Ricoeur’s work on the imagination.

Ricoeur’s shift from the visual to the verbal was a significant departure from the approaches to the imagination that had been proposed up to that point. As Kearney explains, before Ricoeur, “most phenomenological accounts of imagination concentrated on its role as vision, as a special or modified way of seeing the world. Imagination was thus defined in terms

13 Ibid., 126.
14 Ibid., 127.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 124.
19 Ricoeur, “Function of Fiction,” 125.
20 Ricoeur has argued that one of the major problems with other theories on the imagination can be explained by their emphasis on the example of the portrait. He insists that the distinct shift in referential status has been overlooked “in the transition from image as replica to image as fiction” (Ricoeur, “Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality,” 125).
of its relation to perception.”21 Ricoeur proposed that the imagination was “an indispensable agent in the creation of meaning in and through language.”22 In doing so he not only changed the emphasis from seeing to saying, he also introduced hermeneutics into the phenomenological study of the imagination.23 This shift toward a hermeneutic exploration of imagination also shifted the emphasis away from description and toward interpretation. Thus, Ricoeur situates his work within a new “hermeneutic philosophy” which draws from both “the reflective Kantian tradition” and the “speculative Hegelian tradition” but which he places “at equal distance from both traditions.”24 For Ricoeur, the imagination is a “rule-governed form of invention”, which he identifies with Kant’s conceptualization of the imagination put forward in Critique of Judgment, with the potential to serve as a critique of reality as proposed by Husserl.25 Although Ricoeur appears to hold a more positive view of the imagination than Sartre or Hume for example, he does not take these newly generated meanings at face value, nor does he encourage automatic adoption of the worlds they propose. He maintains that a “hermeneutics of suspicion” must be applied to any products of the imagination which requires a distanced evaluation of these proposals to be undertaken.

In order to demonstrate the creation of new meaning in language by way of the imagination and the new reality it proposes, Ricoeur focused on “semantic innovation” as it occurs in both metaphor and fiction. My examination of Ricoeur’s productive imagination will therefore unfold in the following manner. First, I will explore what Ricoeur refers to as

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21 Kearney, On Paul Ricoeur, 35. Kearney lists Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty as notable examples of philosophers who adopted this “visual” approach.
22 Kearney, On Paul Ricoeur, 35
23 According to Ricoeur, “images are spoken before they are seen.” See Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action,” 6.
“semantic innovation” and its role in the production of new meaning in language as it occurs in metaphor. I will then show how he extends this productive quality to narrative, both historical and fictional narratives, and discuss the role of “emplotment” in the formation and understanding of narratives. I will then examine Ricoeur’s work on the productive imagination, noting the emphasis on the “social imaginary”, i.e. the complex symbolic system that human beings must navigate and interpret in order to create a meaningful way of being-in-the-world. And, finally, I will discuss Ricoeur’s identification of two extremes that may be produced by the imagination, what he refers to as ideology and utopia. I will argue that these extremes provide a means of evaluating products of the imagination and the proposed possible worlds or ways of being that they allude to.

Metaphor and Semantic Innovation

For Ricoeur, metaphor is more than aesthetic wordplay; it is a feature of language which possesses the ability to refer to multiple meanings at once. Thus, metaphor belongs to the phenomenon of polysemy, which Ricoeur describes as “that remarkable feature of words in natural languages which is their ability to mean more than one thing.”

Metaphor exhibits the creative potential of polysemy through its ability to use a single statement to refer to a figurative meaning and a literal meaning simultaneously. For example, the metaphorical statement “Man is a wolf”, has a literal sense that asserts that the creature man is or is like the wolf. This literal sense may at first seem paradoxical which provokes an alternative reading that might make better sense. A figurative reading makes it possible to understand the statement in another way. It is

26 Paul Ricoeur, “Word, Polysemy, Metaphor: Creativity in Language,” in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, edited by Mario J. Valdes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 65. It was his insight into polysemy that led him to inquire into the “creative potentialities” of language according to Ricoeur.

27 Ricoeur uses “Man is a wolf” as an example in his own study of metaphor. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 87-88. Ricoeur is drawing upon Max Black’s work on metaphor in this particular example. See chapters three and thirteen of Max Black’s *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962).
the listener or reader that must interpret the statement so that it makes sense in some way; if not literally then figuratively. Returning to the example “Man is a wolf”, the literal meaning does not seem to be adequate since a man is not, in fact, a wolf. However, man may figuratively be like the wolf. Thus, in order to make sense of the seemingly nonsensical statement, the listener/reader must sort through the various references that are possibly being made. The listener/reader is prompted to ask: What makes a man like a wolf? What do the words “man” and “wolf” both refer to? By noting where their respective references overlap, the listener/reader is able to discern any possible similarities between the two dissimilar things being compared. Man and wolf are different creatures. One walks on four legs, the other on two; one a canine, the other a primate. However, sometimes the two behave in a similar manner. A possible conclusion that might be drawn from a figurative reading then, is man is like the wolf in nature. Perhaps in the sense that man is a solitary hunter stalking his prey or, alternatively, man is an animal that needs a pack to survive and thrive. Both are possible meanings that could be derived from a figurative reading of the metaphorical statement “Man is a wolf.” The point is that the figurative meaning of the statement emerges only when the statement is interpreted as a whole.

Ricoeur insisted that meaning is carried not by the words themselves, but by the whole statement, i.e. the sentence. His attribution of meaning to the sentence rather than to the individual words and their respective references remains one of Ricoeur’s major contributions to the study of metaphor. More importantly, however, for the purposes of this study, he also insisted that understanding the metaphorical statement requires one to engage in a process of interpreting and, for Ricoeur, that process necessarily involves the imagination.

28 Ricoeur, Rule of Metaphor, 65.
In his 1987 essay “On Interpretation”, Ricoeur quotes Aristotle’s observation in Poetics that “to be happy in the use of metaphors consists in the discernment of resemblances.” In other words, this ability to “discern resemblances” is the key to deciphering metaphor for Ricoeur. As he explains, “resemblance consists in the rapprochement, the bringing closer together, of terms that, previously ‘remote,’ suddenly appear ‘close.’” As in the example “Man is a wolf” outlined above, it is the listener/reader’s ability to discern resemblances between man and wolf that makes it possible to produce new insight from the statement. Thus “the establishment of a new semantic relevance” comes about when the listener/reader “makes sense” of the statement as a whole. By bringing together these dissimilar things, the act of making sense out of the paradoxical statement, the listener/reader calls upon the faculties of the productive imagination. It is in the ‘eureka’ moment of sudden understanding that a ‘shock’ of recognition is produced and insight is gained. It is also in this moment that the productive imagination is most visible.

Through the interpretation of the metaphorical statement, the listener/reader produces an innovative new meaning; a “genuine semantic innovation.” They have successfully puzzled out a possible way that the two objects, man and wolf, may be seen to resemble one another.

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Sanford Schwartz, “Hermeneutics and the Productive Imagination: Paul Ricoeur in the 1970s,” The Journal of Religion 63, no. 3 (1983): 296. Schwartz’s assessment of Ricoeur’s approach to metaphor is worth noting here. He explains that according to Ricoeur “a metaphor should be understood not as the decorative substitution of one term for another, but as the act of predicating one thing of another that reveals an aspect of the subject or of both terms which we have not noticed before. . . a new metaphor is a genuine semantic innovation that constitutes a relation between ideas formerly kept apart by existing categories of thought” (Schwarz, 296).
33 A metaphor is insightful only when it enables the listener/reader to perform this act of “seeing as” which creates a shock of recognition. As Sallie McFague insists, “good metaphors shock, they bring unlikes together, they upset conventions, they involve tension” (McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 17). To lose sight of the “unlike” aspects and tension between the two things being compared is to lose out on the most creative and powerful aspect of the metaphor which allows a new way of “seeing as.” Without this tension the semantic innovation is lost and the split reference—that is the metaphor’s reference to both a literal and a figurative meaning—ceases to be, what remains,
This recognition of resemblance is a kind of “seeing as” as Ricoeur has put it in *The Rule of Metaphor*.\(^{34}\) In other words, in order to see a man as a wolf, one uses wolf as a “filter” or a “screen” with which to consider man so that man’s wolfish qualities are highlighted.\(^{35}\) Thus the metaphor “confers an ‘insight’” or a new way of seeing the creature man.\(^{36}\) This insight of resemblance is produced by the productive imagination. As Ricoeur explains:

> [T]he productive imagination comes into play as the schematization of this synthetic operation of bringing closer together. It is the ‘seeing’—the sudden insight—inherent to discourse itself, that brings about the change in logical distance, the bringing-closer-together itself. This productive character of insight may be called *predicative assimilation*. The imagination can justly be termed productive because, by an extension of polysemy, it makes terms, previously heterogeneous, resemble one another, and thus homogeneous. *The imagination, consequently, is this competence, this capacity for producing new logical kind of means of predicative assimilation* and for producing them in spite of . . . and thanks to . . . the initial difference between the terms that resist assimilation.\(^{37}\)

In sum, the productive imagination is at work when a listener/reader deciphers a possible figurative meaning of a metaphorical statement. It is an ability or “capacity” possessed by the listener/reader which enables the interpretive act to take place. Ricoeur’s interest in the productive imagination does not end there, however. Although it is a fundamental key to understanding metaphor, it is not restricted to interpreting metaphorical statements. Ricoeur insists that the ability to produce new meaning via semantic innovation demonstrated in metaphor, can be observed in other modes of language as well. He asserts that “the study of metaphor enables us to penetrate farther into the mechanism of this operation of transfiguration and to extend it to the whole set of imaginative productions that we designate by the general term

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\(^{34}\) Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 61.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 87. In this instance Ricoeur is once again drawing upon on Max Black’s work in *Models and Metaphors*.

\(^{36}\) Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 87. It is important to note that the statement “Man is a wolf” not only redescribes man, it also redescribes wolves for, as Ricoeur explains, “the wolf appears more human at the same moment that by calling the man a wolf one places the man in a special light” (Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 88).

Thus, as Kearney explains, Ricoeur “translates the schematism of imagination from the metaphorical act to the larger scenario of the narrative act.”

**Narrative Text and Semantic Innovation**

For Ricoeur, the same productive imagination essential for understanding semantic innovation in metaphor is also at work in the construction and reception of narratives. He argues that both narrative and metaphor belong to the phenomenon of semantic innovation for in both cases human creativity is clearly evident. The novel, or “the not-yet-said” that arises in language is discernible in metaphor when a new reference is opened up by the metaphorical statement. In narrative, however, semantic innovation is evident in the act of “emplotment” which Ricoeur identifies as the act of interpreting a story out of a series of actions. Like metaphor, narrative proposes a new possible way of seeing, but instead of redescribing things, it redescribes a succession of actions as a connected chain of events. This ability to synthesize not only coherence but also new meaning from a series of distinct actions, and understand them as a story, is, according to Ricoeur, another example of the productive imagination at work in language. In fact, he insists that “a very particular mode of understanding [is] involved in the activity of following a story.”

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38 Ibid., 368.
39 Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 55. This extension of the imaginative act to narrative is significant, according to Kearney, for it allows Ricoeur to extend “his analysis of the functioning of the poetical imagination from the unit of the word (symbol) and the sentence (metaphor) to that of the text as a whole (narrative)” (Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 55).
40 Ricoeur’s examination of the semantic innovation in works of fiction has focused upon biblical parable and the novel. See Ricoeur, “The Bible and the Imagination,” 144-166. My contribution will be to extend this work to hagiographical narratives and exemplary narratives.
42 Ibid.
43 In Ricoeur’s words, “This notion of metaphorical redescription exactly parallels the mimetic function. . . assigned to narrative fiction. The latter operates typically in the field of action and its temporal values, while metaphorical redescription reigns rather in the field of sensory, affective, aesthetic, and axiological values that make the world one that can be *inhabited*” (“On Interpretation,” 369 [emphasis his]).
44 Ricoeur, “On Interpretation,” 367. Ricoeur emphases this point by reiterating it, stating that “the ability to follow a story constitutes a very sophisticated from of understanding” (Ricoeur, “On Interpretation,” 360).
productive imagination through its ability to stress the *intelligible* character of semantic innovation. As Ricoeur explains in “On Interpretation”:

> Plot is the set of combinations by which events are made *into* a story or – correlatively – a story is made *out of* events. The plot mediates between the event and the story. This means that nothing is an event unless it contributes to the progress of a story... I shall say that *the plot is the intelligible unit that holds together circumstances, ends and means, initiative and unwanted consequences*. According to an expression borrowed from Louis Mink, *it is the act of ‘taking together’—of composing—those ingredients of human action that, in ordinary experience, remain dissimilar and discordant*.46

In other words, to understand a narrative one must read pattern and order into the various happenstances portrayed therein. Furthermore, to interpret meaning out of circumstances and understand them as a story is to engage in a selective process, not unlike the act of deciphering figurative meaning from a metaphorical statement.47 While some actions are highlighted as ‘events’, others are downplayed or omitted altogether to create an understandable (i.e. justifiable) path toward the conclusion. Thus, the act of storytelling, of narrating causes and their effects, is a constructive process. Emplotment, then, is the act of imposing a plot upon the various happenstances by selecting them, drawing them into a sequence, and making them into “events” to be read as a beginning, middle, and end.

Plot gives structure and meaning to both the narrative as a whole and the individual events of which the narrative is composed. As Ricoeur explains in “Narrative and Hermeneutics” (1983):

> A story is *made out* of events to the extent that plot *makes* events into a story. An event, consequently, must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot. A story, on the other hand, must be more than an enumeration of events in a serial order; it must make an *intelligible* whole of the incidents, in such a way that we must always be able to ask what is the point of the story, its ‘theme’...

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46 Ibid., 360 [emphasis mine].
47 A metaphor highlights certain features while downplaying others. For example, in the case “Man is a wolf”, man’s wolfish tendencies are focused upon which then obscures man’s ‘sheepish’ tendencies.
Therefore it is the plot that makes the narrated actions into intelligible ‘events’ and the narrative itself into a complete and cohesive story. However, the plot is disclosed only when the story is read as a whole (as a text). Although the reader is guided by their expectations of what might unfold during the act of reading, it is only at the end of the story that these elements are synthesized into a plot and understood as pivotal events. In Ricoeur’s words:

> To follow a story is to proceed forward in the midst of contingencies and peripetites under the thrust of an expectation that finds its fulfillment in the ‘conclusion’ of the story. But this conclusion is not the logical implication of some previous premises. It is the ‘ending’ that provides the vantage point from which the story may be seen as a whole. To understand the story is to understand how and why the successive episodes lead to this conclusion, which, even if it is not predictable, must be finally acceptable as fitting in with the episodes gathered by the story.\(^{49}\)

Thus, just as Ricoeur insisted in his work on metaphor that new meaning is generated not by the individuals words themselves but by the sentence as a whole, so, too, is meaning generated by the narrative only when it is considered as a whole.

Once the theme or plot of the narrative is comprehended, the story can be retold. This act of transmission, of receiving a story and reiterating it in one’s own words, further demonstrates the involvement of the productive imaginative according to Ricoeur. In fact, he states that a “retelling of a story reveals better this synthetic activity … inasmuch as we are less captivated by the unexpected aspects of the story and more attentive to the manner in which it moves toward its close.”\(^{51}\) Thus in a retelling, a narrative is condensed so that it can be expressed as a simple statement or two. For example, “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” can be summarized as “Boy cries ‘Wolf’ and is eaten by Wolf.” Any sidetracks or repetition, such as the boy crying wolf for a number of consecutive days, are left out or forgotten. The original narrative and its plot are


\(^{50}\) Ricoeur, “Narrative and Hermeneutics,” 153.

apprehended by the productive imagination through an act of synthesis. By connecting all of the things that happen in the story and interpreting them as events leading toward a final outcome, one is able to understand them as a complete unit; a coherent thought that can be expressed as such.\textsuperscript{52} However, the coherence that we perceive is false.\textsuperscript{53} Because there is always more order in the stories we tell than the experiences we live, the act of storytelling is, first and foremost, an act of interpretation. We impose order upon the experiences we live and the stories we tell so as to make them intelligible to us and more easily communicated to others. Thus, it is through the act of emplotment that human experiences are encoded as narrative and, subsequently, received and deciphered. However, narrative is not limited to what has been experienced, for a very important aspect of narrative fiction is its ability to present what might be possible; what we fear or hope for.

**On Historical and Fictional Narratives**

From Ricoeur’s perspective, all narratives share the concept of plot. He argues that the concept of plot or emplotment can be taken to be “the structural principle underlying the family resemblances. . . between fictional and historical narratives.”\textsuperscript{54} While historical accounts differ from fictional tales in their purpose and presentation, both share the structure of plot because they present a series of events leading up to a particular outcome. Some historians, however,

\textsuperscript{52} Ricoeur, “Narrative and Hermeneutics,” 153.

\textsuperscript{53} Ricoeur remarks in “Narrative and Hermeneutics” that “we may be tempted to say, on the one hand, that narratives bring ‘consonance’ where there is only ‘dissonance.’ In that way narratives give shape to what is shapeless. But then the forming function of narrative may be suspected of cheating. At best they provide the ‘as though’ of fictions that we know are only fictions, that is literary artifacts. And they console us in the face of death. But when we no longer deceive ourselves with the consolation brought forth by paradigms, we become aware of the violence and the lie, and we are nearly defeated by the fascination of radical shapelessness and its plea for radical intellectual honesty, which Nietzsche called Redlichkeit. It is only by virtue of a kind of nostalgia for order that we resist the fascination and stick to the idea that order is our patria in spite of all. But even then the narrative ‘consonance’ superimposed on temporal ‘dissonance’ remains the work of that force which should be called the violence of interpretation. The narrative ‘solution,’ accordingly, is the offshoot of this violence” (154-5).

\textsuperscript{54} Ricoeur, “Narrative and Hermeneutics,” 149.
resist equating narrative fictions with the same confidence that one might attribute to history.  

Ricoeur responds to this apprehension reflecting that “a naïve notion of narrative, considered as disconnected series of events, is always to be found behind the critique of the narrative character of history. Its episodic character alone is seen, while its configurational character, which is the basis of its intelligibility, is forgotten.” He insists that “ultimately, history cannot make a complete break with narrative because it cannot break with action, which itself implies agents, aims, circumstances, interactions, and results both intended and unintended. But the plot is the basic narrative unit that organizes these heterogeneous ingredients into an intelligible totality.” Thus, histories are emplotted stories that make the activities of human beings and human institutions coherent.

Historian Hayden White is in agreement with this assertion. Drawing upon Ricoeur’s work in Time and Narrative, White argues that historians do not simply “impose a narrative form on sets or sequences of real events that might just as legitimately be represented in some other, non-narrative discourse.” They simply do not need to impose an artificial structure upon historical events because they already “possess the same structure as narrative discourse. It is their narrative structure that distinguishes historical events from natural events (which lack structure).” For the primary subject of historical inquiry, namely human beings, act with an “intentionality” that aspires to that of plot. The historian’s job, then, is to configure the plots

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57 Ricoeur, “On Interpretation,” 362 [emphasis mine].
59 Ibid., 142.
60 Ibid., 143.
61 Ibid., 144. White asserts that “A scientific (or scientistic) historiography of the sort envisioned by the Annalistes, which deals in large-scale, physical and social, anonymous ‘forces’, is not so much wrong as simply able to tell only a part of the story of human beings” (White, “Metaphysics of Narrativity, 145).
that are already “prefigured” in human actions. For this reason White argues, “historians are justified in regarding stories as valid representations of such events and treating such representations as explanations of them.”

According to Ricoeur, fiction and history share the fundamental structure of plot because they share a common reference “the temporal background of human experience.” Thus, both types of narratives ultimately refer to the world of human action and human experience. However, the historian must restrict their narrative to only that which can be supported by the evidence left by the past, while “the novelist can disregard the burden of material proof related to the constraints imposed by documents and archives.” Thus, Ricoeur observes that “an irreducible asymmetry seems to oppose historical reality to fictional reality... the historian speaking of the absent past in terms of fiction, the novelist speaking of what is irreal as if it had really taken place.” This does not mean, however, that both cannot play some part in shaping how human reality is perceived. Ricoeur asserts that “all symbol systems contribute to shaping reality. More particularly, the plots that we invent help us to shape our confused, formless, and in the last resort mute temporal experience.” It is evident, then, that Ricoeur sees both historical and fictional narratives as texts which have an important productive reference. They allow lived human experiences to be interpreted and understood in a meaningful way, although history is not simply imaginative storytelling in the way that fiction often is.

Narratives, whether historical or fictional, not only present an alternative way of viewing lived human reality, they also present an alternative way of living out said reality. The plot

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63 Ibid., 142.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 363.
presents the reader with a possible outcome corresponding to a particular set of actions. It therefore presents an alternative model of how the reader might choose to act themselves. Ricoeur asserts that “the models of actions elaborated by narrative fiction are models for redescribing the practical field in accordance with the narrative typology resulting from the world of the productive imagination.”\textsuperscript{69} From Ricoeur’s perspective then, the speculative outcomes presented in narrative, both those focused on the past and those on a possible future, are the products of an imagination engaged in the act of emplotment.

The imagination, to reiterate Ricoeur’s position, is precisely what allows one to engage in narrative emplotment. It is also the space in which other possible ways of thinking and acting can be examined before they are adopted. Therefore, as Ricoeur insists, “stories are recounted but they are also lived in the mode of the imaginary.”\textsuperscript{70} In other words, the imagination enables the reader to both understand the story and entertain the possibilities presented therein. This, in turn, allows the reader to carefully consider the proposed course of action, to ‘try it on for size’, before acting upon it. What is being proposed, according to Henry Isaac Venema, are “practical proposals for living... [These] prescriptions for identity that are taken up and become constitutive of one’s own identity through the deliberation of decision, the commitment of choice, and the initiative of action. What narratives offer are imaginary linguistic models or configurations for living.”\textsuperscript{71} Thus, long before one adopts a proposed course of action, the action is critically assessed in the imagination.\textsuperscript{72} This is possible, according to Ricoeur, because the

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Henry Isaac Venema, Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 94.
\textsuperscript{72} Venema explains that, for Ricoeur, narrative discourse is “a reflective way station, or critical moment of distanciation, which, while ontologically rooted in the practical world of experience, allows for the imaginative variation of what is received in order that narratives may refigure of reorganize experience into more meaningful patterns” (Venema, 94-95).
imagination provides the space for the reader to consider the possible world opened up before them by the text. The imagination is not responsible for assessing this world, however. One’s reflective and critical faculties, informed by ethics, must assess both the feasibility and integrity of the action being entertained by the imagination.73

The World of the Text

In his examination of written narrative, Ricoeur repeatedly emphasized the text’s ability to disclose other possible worlds. For Ricoeur, “what is to be interpreted in a text is a proposed world, a world that I might inhabit and wherein I might project my own most possibilities.”74 Thus, for Ricoeur, a narrative text is a presentation of a possible course of action and a possible world in which those actions might take place. This ‘world of the text’ demonstrates how a particular action could be carried out as well as the consequences that could accompany such an action.75 The reader then engages with the world presented in the text by interpreting it as a recognizable world, one not unlike their own world, ‘the world of the reader.’ In doing so the reader is able to project themselves into the action, allowing them to entertain other possible modes of thinking and acting. As Ricoeur explains in “Life in Quest of a Narrative” (1991):

To speak of the world of the text is to stress the feature belonging to the very literary work of opening before it a horizon of possible experience, a world in which it would be possible to live. A text is not something closed in upon itself, it is the projection of a new universe distinct from that in which we live. To appropriate a work through reading is to unfold the world horizon implicit in it which includes the actions, the characters and the events of the story told. As a result, the reader belongs at once to the work’s horizon of experience in imagination and to that of his or her own real action. The horizon of expectation and the horizon of experience continually confront one another and fuse together.76

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75 For example, “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” demonstrates what might happen if one were to treat calling out for help as a game. The main point of the story can be summarized as: If you cry out for help when you do not need it, your cries will be ignored when you do need help.
76 Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of a Narrative,” 26 [emphasis mine].
A text therefore refers simultaneously to the familiar world of the reader and to an unfamiliar possible world disclosed by the text. This is what Ricoeur identifies to as a “divided” or “split reference” granting the text the ability to refer to both the immediate ordinary world as well as to an alternative world that has not yet come into being.\textsuperscript{77}

It is important to stress that the world of the text is not a fantasy world that has no relation to the world experienced by the reader. Indeed, it bears a great deal of resemblance to the world of the reader but differs enough to prompt the reader to reevaluate presuppositions about their present world. As Ricoeur insists, “because it is a world, the world of the text necessarily collides with the real world in order to ‘remake’ it, either by confirming it or by denying it.”\textsuperscript{78} The text therefore becomes a tool with which the reader may critically evaluate claims regarding what is possible in their world.\textsuperscript{79} Again, it is the imagination, as Kearney explains, that “liberates the reader into a free space of possibility, suspending the reference to the immediate world of perception (both the author’s and the reader’s) and thereby disclosing new ways of being in the world.”\textsuperscript{80}

For Ricoeur the ‘world of the text’ remains distinct from both the ‘world of the author’ and the ‘world of the reader.’ This is significant for two reasons. First, by distinguishing the ‘world of the text’ from the ‘world of the author,’ the meaning of the text is no longer restricted to the meanings intended by the original author(s). As Ricoeur insists, “what we understand first in a discourse is not another person, but a ‘pro-ject,’ that is, the outline of a new way of being in the world. Only writing. . . in freeing itself, not only from its author and from its ordinary

\textsuperscript{77} This activity of thinking differently in narrative mirrors the activity of “seeing as” that Ricoeur attributes to metaphor.

\textsuperscript{78} Ricoeur, “On Interpretation,” 363. Ricoeur also asserts that the relationship between fictional reality and lived reality is a real one for “even the most ironic relation between art and reality would be incomprehensible if art did not both disturb and rearrange our relation to reality. If the world of the text were without any assignable relation to the real world, then language would not be ‘dangerous’” (Ricoeur, “On Interpretation,” 363).

\textsuperscript{79} The reader may then be able to distinguish what is possible from what is merely normative or permissible.

\textsuperscript{80} Kearney, On Paul Ricoeur, 41.
audience, but from the narrowness of the dialogical situation, reveals this destination of discourse as projecting a world.”

In other words, the text is certainly the product of an author who is situated within a specific community and historical context, but it is also a separate entity that takes on a life of its own once written. In essence, a “distanciation” from the author occurs, signaling the end of the text’s initial constructive phase. During the text’s reception phase, the ‘world of the text’ and the ‘world of the reader’ also remain distinct. This brings me to my second point regarding the separation of the three ‘worlds.’ Because the text might be read by an infinite number of future readers, each bringing with them their own contexts to the text, the ‘world of the text’ and the ‘world of the reader’ must be identified as clearly distinct worlds. Furthermore, in the same way that the meaning of the text is no longer restricted to the meanings intended by the author, Ricoeur also asserts that that the meaning of a text is not limited to “the finite capacities of understanding of the present reader.” Rather, the reception of a text involves an act of “appropriation” though which the text expands the reader’s capacities of understanding.

For Ricoeur, “appropriation” is employed in a specific sense: “to make one’s own what was initially ‘alien.’” Thus, the appropriation of a text involves the interpretation and translation of the world presented by the text into one that is recognizable to the reader. As Ricoeur explains, “the aim of all hermeneutics is to struggle against cultural distance and historical alienation. Interpretation brings together, equalizes, renders contemporary and similar.

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82 For Ricoeur’s summarization of trends in literary and biblical criticism see Ricoeur, “Appropriation,” 88, 93.
83 The meaning of a text is not solely dependent upon the original audience’s understanding of the text because, as Ricoeur explains, “the meaning of a text is open to anyone who can read. . . which opens it to unknown readers. . . From the moment that the text escapes from its author and from his situation it also escapes from its original audience. Hence it can procure new readers for itself” (Ricoeur, “Appropriation,” 96).
84 Ricoeur, “Appropriation,” 96.
85 Ibid., 97.
86 Ibid., 89.
This goal is attained only insofar as the interpretation actualizes the meaning of the text for the present reader. Thus, appropriation occurs when the reader recognizes the familiar elements presented in the text and is able to bridge the gap between the world of the text and his or her own world.

Ricoeur insists that the text remains a distinct projection of a world with which the reader interacts and not simply a projection of the reader. Thus, for Ricoeur, the appropriation of a text is more than the “narcissism of the reader” who only finds themselves reflected in the text. In appropriation, he explains,

what is ‘made our own’ is not something mental, not the invention of another subject [an author], nor some design supposedly hidden behind the text; rather, it is the projection of a world, that proposal of a mode of being-in-the-world, which the text discloses in front of itself by means of its non-ostensive reference. Far from saying that a subject, who already masters his own understanding and interpolates this a priori in the text, I shall say that appropriation is the process by which the revelation of new modes of being – or, if you prefer Wittgenstein to Heidegger, new ‘forms of life’—gives the subject new capacities for knowing himself.

In sum, the reader appropriates the ‘world of the text’ by interpreting it as a familiar possible world and incorporating the alternative ways of thinking and acting presented therein as possible ways that they, themselves, might act. Before any implementation of new ways of acting or thinking, however, Ricoeur often stresses that an ethical evaluation must take place, as mentioned previously. Such an evaluation occurs at the end of his “hermeneutic arc” to which I will now turn. This step is integral to Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

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87 Ibid.  
88 Ibid., 95.  
89 Ibid., 96-7.  
90 As Kearney has so concisely put it, “Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of imagination looks beyond the first-order reference of empirical reality which ordinary language discourse normally entails to a second-order reference of possible worlds. A hermeneutic approach to imagination thus differs from a structuralist or existentialist one in its concentration on ‘the capacity of world-disclosure yielded by texts’. In short, hermeneutics is not confined to the objective structural analysis of texts, nor to the subjective existential analysis of the authors of texts; its primary concern is with the worlds which these author and texts upon up” (On Paul Ricoeur, 41). Kearney is quoting from his discussion with Ricoeur in “Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds,” in Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers, edited by Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 45.
Ricoeur’s Hermeneutic Arc

Appropriation is the final stage of interpretation, for Ricoeur. He places it at the final point of a ‘hermeneutic arc’ which encompasses the prefiguration, configuration, and finally refiguration of a text. Appropriation occurs during the ‘refiguration’ of a text because only after the text’s story has been ‘prefigured’ or recognized as having a plot structure, and then ‘configured’ or written as a story through emplotment, can it then be ‘refigured’ or read and reiterated as a meaningful story by the reader. Ricoeur’s hermeneutic arc thus outlines the interpretative process “from initial event of writing to the reader’s act of appropriation.” This ‘arc’ traces the general progression from construction to reception that a text follows. However, it does not describe the final destination of a text, for once refigured by the present reader, via emplotment and appropriation, the refigured text becomes, once again, a prefigured text. In essence, when reread and reinterpreted, it enters into the hermeneutic arc once more, thereby completing a ‘hermeneutic circle.’

To contextualize the present study, I shall be first using Ricoeur’s hermeneutic arc to examine the construction of exemplary religious narratives. Because it is the constructive act of narrating (configuration by means of emplotment) that my study is focused upon, I am therefore primarily concerned with the prefiguration and configuration of an exemplary narrative, culminating in an act of “distanciation” when the writer ‘lets go’ of the text and presents it as a possible world that others might entertain. This is somewhat in contrast to Ricoeur’s work which has predominately focused on the act of appropriation and the example of reading in order to

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92 Schwartz, “Hermeneutics and the Productive Imagination,” 291. Schwartz explains that Ricoeur’s hermeneutic arc expands upon traditional hermeneutic approaches. He notes that “while romantic hermeneutics sought the author’s subjectivity behind the text, contemporary hermeneutic belongs instead to the third phase of the interpretive arc in its emphasis upon the imaginative world displayed in front of the text” (Schwartz, 295).
93 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 76.
reveal the productive imagination at work. However, I wish to stress the constructive component of the imaginative process and not just that which is evident during the reception of a text. For this reason I will not be focusing upon the act of reading in my analysis, but rather upon the act of writing. Ricoeur examined the act of reading in order to show how the imagination is at work in configuration to unfold a new possible world for the reader from the text. My contribution will be an extended examination of the construction of a text and the manner in which the imagination is drawn upon to create and construct a new possible world which includes an alternative and meaningful way of being-in-the-world.

**Evaluating Possible Worlds**

For Ricoeur, the productive imagination is, first and foremost, a “rule-governed” imagination. During the act of writing, the rule-governed features of the imagination become apparent through the writer’s attempts to navigate the literary traditions which they inherit.

“[R]ule-governed production,” Ricoeur explains, “is expressed in the construction of plots by way of a continual interchange between the invention of particular plots and the constitution by sedimentation of narrative typology. A dialectic is at work in the production of new plots in the interplay between conformity and deviance in relation to the norms inherent in every narrative typology.” In other words, when an author engages in the act of writing, there are culturally dominant patterns and themes to which they must either adhere or deviate from. This is because “emplotment always works within the framework of cultural tradition.” Ricoeur explains that while “the power of schematization that is at work in emplotment is transcultural... it takes shape

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94 As Ricoeur insists in *Time and Narrative*, “it is the act of reading that accompanies the interplay of the sedimentation and innovation of paradigms that schematizes emplotment. In the act of reading, the receiver plays with the narrative constraints, brings about gaps, takes part in the combat between the novel and the antinovel, and enjoys the pleasure that Roland Barthes calls the pleasure of the text" (*Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 76-77).
through paradigms that are transmitted through traditions. Such paradigms, understood as
typical modes of emplotment, proceed from the sedimentation of the work of productive
imagination and provide rules for their experimentation in the field of storytelling.” In sum,
the author is influenced by the literary traditions they inherit such as their culturally celebrated
tales of heroism, tragedy and betrayal. However, these preexisting paradigms do not dictate the
limits for all future literary texts produced within that community. Because, Ricoeur asserts,
established plots and patterns “change under the pressure of new inventions, since they proceed
from this ongoing process of emplotting, but they change slowly and even resist change, since
they are the sedimental forms of this process.” What Ricoeur is alluding to here is the
possibility of stagnation in the storytelling tradition. Just as the reader must render what they
encounter in the text familiar and understandable through appropriation, so, too, must the writer
make the prefigured elements familiar and understandable through emplotment. Thus, only by
“transfiguring” these inherited conventions and “configuring” them into contemporary stories,
can these new texts resonate in a meaningful way for both the author and the audience. If the
author fails to weave contemporary elements into the already established paradigms, then
nothing novel has been created and “semantic innovation” does not, in fact, occur. The author
must therefore walk a fine line between innovation and sedimentation.

According to Ricoeur, “the balance between invention and sedimentation may be
disturbed in two opposite ways: by servile application of rules or by systematic cultivation of
deviance. . . Deviance and schism are only the opposite of slavish application.” Ricoeur

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97 Ibid., 155-156.
98 Ibid., 156.
99 Ibid., 153.
100 Ibid., 156.
would later expand on these two problems as potential extremes which could distort any imaginative endeavor.

“If imagination is a process, rather than a state,” Ricoeur postulates, “it becomes comprehensible that a specific dysfunction corresponds to each direction of the imagination process.”\(^\text{101}\) In *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986), he warns against two such dysfunctions. He identifies these as harmful excesses, even pathologies, that can occur when engaged in imaginative processes: either a rigidity which hardens into ideology, or a total displacement from reality which becomes an impossible utopia. The main positive function of “ideology,” according to Ricoeur is that it preserves identity. It creates an overarching concept that is used to identify and set apart one group from another. It attempts to “conserve what exists and is therefore already a resistance. Something becomes ideological – in the negative meaning of the term – when the integrative function becomes frozen.”\(^\text{102}\) Utopia, on the other hand, is the opposite of ideology. While ideology can become dogmatic, uncompromising and narrow, utopia imposes very few, if any, boundaries. It is free and unfettered to a fault, casting a wide expansive horizon of possibilities before the reader with potentially disorienting results.

In an interview with Richard Kearney, Ricoeur clarifies these utopian and ideological extremes that can occur while engaged in the act of emplotment. He affirms that:

> Every society . . . possess, or is part of, a socio-political *imaginaire*, that is, an ensemble of symbolic discourses. This *imaginaire* can function as a rupture or a reaffirmation. As reaffirmation, the *imaginaire* operates as an ‘ideology’ which can positively repeat and represent the founding discourse of a society, what I call its ‘foundational symbols’, thus preserving its sense of identity. After all, cultures create themselves by telling stories of their own past. The danger is of course that this reaffirmation can be perverted, usually by monopolistic elites, into mystificatory discourse which serves to uncritically vindicate or glorify the established political powers. In such instances, the symbols of a community become fixed and fetishized; they serve as lies. Over against this, there exists the *imaginaire* of rupture, a discourse of *utopia* which remains critical of the powers that be out of fidelity to an ‘elsewhere’, to a society that is ‘not


yet’. But this utopian discourse is not always positive either. For besides the authentic Utopia of critical rupture there can also exists a dangerously schizophrenic utopian discourse which projects a static future without ever producing the conditions of its realization.\textsuperscript{103}

From Ricoeur’s perspective then, ideology and utopia are two sides of the same coin. Both result from an act of emplotment that proceeds from the creative imagination. However, in both cases, the worlds they represent are problematic distortions. One is like a myopic lens while the other is like a telescope that can bring many other distant worlds into focus, but not one’s own.

Imaginative constructions are the result of a constructive dialectic between old paradigms and new innovations. That said, there are positives as well as negatives that accompany any construction produced by the imagination. When the imaginative constructions that we inherit through our cultural institutions settle into repetitive and predictable or even dogmatic plots, they fall into the category of ideology. In such cases, these stories that we inherit may no longer be informative or relevant to the present context. They can become narrow or one-sided worldviews that limit and distort one’s perception of the world. On the other hand, there is also the possibility that an imaginative construction may be too novel and seemingly disconnected entirely from the world of the reader. In this case, what is presented is an otherworldly fantasy, a utopia. While utopia is certainly innovative, it can fail to be transformative if it remains trapped in the world of the text, distant and unrecognizable from the familiar the world of the author or the reader. It is important to acknowledge that “both ideology and utopia are processes of imagination” and therefore possible extremes that can arise from the engagement of the productive imagination.\textsuperscript{104}


By identifying ideology and utopia as possible imaginative extremes, Ricoeur thus establishes a template by which imaginative constructions can be examined. I propose that ideology and utopia provide a means of evaluating products of the creative imagination by outlining the two possible outcomes of such imaginative processes, either sedimentation or innovation of past meanings. Furthermore, because ideology and utopia are polar opposites, they may also provide a way of balancing one another. Ricoeur theorizes that it is possible to remedy the excesses of each by neutralizing one with the other, thereby “opposing the positive constructive side [of utopia] to the negative and destructive side [of ideology]” and vice versa.\(^{105}\) I am therefore also proposing that a critical evaluation of any imaginative construction would include a critical assessment identifying which extreme is presented therein and a prescription forremedying the identified excess with its counterpoint.

To conclude then, this chapter has examined Paul Ricoeur’s contributions to the study of the productive imagination. Dissatisfied with the existing conceptualizations of the imagination proposed by other scholars,\(^{106}\) Ricoeur proposed an innovative approach to the imagination which is unique in its emphasis on the verbal over the visual, or, rather, its examination of semantic innovation and the production of new meaning through language. In this way, he allows the imagination to escape from the state of “poverty” that Sartre has ascribed to it, and

\(^{105}\) Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 181.

\(^{106}\) While Sartre and Hume are dismissive in their assessment, other scholars seem to hold more positive views toward the imagination. Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), for example, held a more hopeful, if romantic, view of the imagination. Eliade situated his concept of the imagination within a Platonist worldview. For Eliade the imagination that is able to provide sources for regeneration. In *Images and Symbols* (1952) he states that modern man is able to “‘reawaken’ the inestimable treasure of images that he bears within him; and to reawaken the images so as to contemplate them in their pristine purity and assimilate their message” (19). Eliade insisted upon the importance of archetypes as images or exemplary models that have the ability to revitalize symbols from the past. However, Eliade’s views have been criticized as both essentialist and dualist in their insistence upon the superiority of the sacred over the profane and of the universal over the particular. See Bryan Rennie, *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*, Issues in the Study of Religion (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). Eliade’s approach differs from Ricoeur’s because Ricoeur is influenced by the thought of Immanuel Kant rather than Platonic ideal types. Rather than tapping into unchanging primordial symbols and images, the imagination, for Ricoeur, provokes and challenges those that are currently in use.
elevates it to an important status governing the interpretation of narrated human experience. While one might accuse Ricoeur of being a romantic in his insistence upon the imagination’s ability to illuminate infinite possible worlds, he does not advocate letting one’s imagination ‘run away’ with itself. His hermeneutic approach to the imagination also includes a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ because he attributes both interpretive and critical capacities to the productive imagination.

Ricoeur asserts that new possibilities and ways of being are tested through an imaginative process. Therefore, the imagination allows for creative experimentation of symbols, models and ideals to be played out before they are appropriated and then acted upon. As he states in *From Text to Action* (1991) “it is in the imagination that this new being is first formed in me. . . For the power of allowing oneself to be struck by new possibilities precedes the power of making up one’s mind and choosing.”\(^{107}\) The imagination thus points to “practical possibilities,” as Ricoeur puts it, because “it is in the realm of the imaginary that I try out my capacity to do something.”\(^{108}\) But, for Ricoeur, such imaginary explorations are not to be implemented without first having undergone an ethical evaluation, and, it is in the imaginative space that these models and images are critically assessed. In Ricoeur’s words, “it is the imagination that provides the milieu, the luminous clearing, in which we can compare and evaluate motives as diverse as desires and ethical obligations, themselves as disparate as professions rules, social customs, or intensely personal values.”\(^{109}\) This phase of critical reflective assessment belongs to the larger framework of assessing the conceptual content of texts that Ricoeur terms a “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

The primary purpose of this thesis is to examine the construction of exemplary narratives within religious traditions. Ricoeur’s critical stance thus provides substantial theory and method

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\(^{107}\) Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 101.
\(^{108}\) Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action,” 12.
\(^{109}\) Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 177.
to appreciate and evaluate the role of imagination in narrative construction and reception. Specifically, he provides a great deal of assistance distinguishing between the constructive and receptive phases of narrative engagement, by which I mean his description of a hermeneutic arc that identifies emplotment and appropriation as separate and distinct acts during an imaginative process. Emplotment, as it occurs in the act of writing exemplary religious narratives, will be the focus of the following chapter. I intend to utilize Ricoeur’s critical approach in my analysis of the two figures that I examined in chapters two and three, Umiliana and the Goddess. I also intend to evaluate these two figures and their narratives by utilizing the potential extremes that Ricoeur cautions may be produced by the imagination: ideology and utopia.
Chapter 5: Exemplary Religious Narratives and Ricoeur’s Analysis of the Imagination

This chapter will explore the role that the imagination plays in the construction of exemplary narratives. In chapter one, I argued that hagiographies are exemplary religious narratives that present model figures to be emulated. Chapter two examined Vito of Cortona’s “Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi” as a case study. I demonstrated that the Umiliana figure is presented as an exemplar of chastity, humility and obedience that adheres to Franciscan concerns about proper female conduct. In chapter three, I introduced a second case study, the contemporary goddess figure presented by Carol P. Christ. I argued that Christ is similarly involved in the presentation of an exemplar for women, although her goddess is meant to be an encouragement of female strength and power rather than a restrictive prescription of piety and deference. While one figure is taken from medieval hagiographical literature and the other from contemporary Goddess literature, both figures are constructed in order articulate ideal roles for women. The imagination features prominently in the construction of both of these figures. In this chapter I will compare and contrast these two exemplary figures in order to illustrate the creative process involved in their production.

Paul Ricoeur’s work on narrative construction provides a perspective from which to examine these proposed exemplary narratives and the model figures portrayed therein. He refers to the constructive act of narrative writing as “emplotment” and proposes that the imagination is at work in the production of narrative plots. Emplotment will be the focus of this first half of this chapter. The second half, however, will address the need for an appraisal of exemplary figures and analyze the figures proposed in my two case studies. In this later phase, I will draw upon Ricoeur’s concepts of ideology and utopia in order to discuss potential problems that can occur in imaginary constructs.
**Emplotment in Exemplary Narratives**

According to Ricoeur, one must impose a plot upon a series of actions in order to construct a story. Emplotment is the term he assigns to the act of recasting individual actions as a series of events leading toward a conclusion. For Ricoeur, this constructive act necessarily involves the imagination.¹ He asserts that it is the imagination which allows the author to identify a coherent story among various happenstances and to configure those prefigured elements into a plot.² I have chosen to analyze the use of narrative construction by means of emplotment in both of my case studies. The authors deliberately engage in such an imaginative process for a specific purpose: to present an ideal figure. As a result, I will propose that, in the case of these exemplary narratives, the narrative act is not only focused on the task of synthesizing a coherent story, but also in the construction of a clearly identifiable model. Imagination can be seen to be at work in both of these tasks.

**Emplotment in “The Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi”**

In the first case study, Vito of Cortona narrates Umiliana’s “Life” by combining a mixture of historical events and hagiographical motifs. He engages in an act of emplotment in order to frame selected circumstances as narrative events. For instance, he describes in great detail how Umiliana selflessly “bore all inconveniences,” including the mistreatment she received from her husband and later her father and brothers, the pains and sicknesses with which

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² The plot becomes that ‘thread’ that connects these actions to each other and identifies them as a beginning, middle, and end.
she was afflicted, and the torments inflicted upon her by the demons that appeared in her room.³ Vito’s Umiliana endures all of these trials with patience and humility and is rewarded for her efforts.⁴ He therefore crafts her life into an inspiring story of triumph over temptation, while repeatedly emphasizing her obedience to her Franciscan advisors and her humble, modest, and chaste conduct. It is clear that Vito intentionally presents Umiliana as an exemplary model for laypersons, a “foundress,” as he puts it, of a new Franciscan Order.⁵ It is also clear that his narrative is constructed, or “emplotted”, around this exemplary model. For Ricoeur, the selection and ordering required to emplot a story is a synthetic work of imagination.

Vito concedes that he is selecting specific virtues to highlight in his account of Umiliana’s life. While he praises Umiliana as a “model of all humility, exemplar of chastity, way of honour, path of devotion, [and] rule of obedience,”⁶ he also claims that her conduct was always exemplary.⁷ “What virtue, what grace, was not fully present in you [Umiliana]?” he exclaims, “What virtuous practice was lacking to your sanctity?”⁸ Although he may simply be embellishing the reputation of his subject – a common practice in hagiographical literature – he openly acknowledges that he is selecting only a few specific actions out of the many praiseworthy acts that Umiliana is reported to have done during her lifetime. He explains that it is necessary to do so, because “it would take a long time to recount everything about her life and actions.”⁹ Vito likens his narrative task to gathering flowers in a field.¹⁰ While there may be

³ Vito of Cortona, “The Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi,” in Saints and Cities in Medieval Italy, translated by Diana Webb, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 116. All other references to Vito’s “Life” are from this translation unless otherwise indicated.
⁴ She receives visions of angels and other heavenly creatures and is granted the gift of prophecy with which she is able to foresee the glory and honor that she would obtain in the next life (Vito of Cortona, 101).
⁵ Vito of Cortona, 106.
⁶ Ibid., 134.
⁷ Ibid., 116.
⁸ Ibid., 134.
⁹ Ibid., 98.
¹⁰ Ibid., 98.
many beautiful flowers to choose from, only a few will be selected and gathered together in a bouquet. In this way, Vito selects the examples that he believes to be important or striking, gathers them together, and arranges them into a narrative. He then presents his creation for others to admire. However, from his perspective, the business of recording the lives of the saints is a much more serious task than floral arrangement. His creation is intended to be “for the honor of God and for our own profit and the edification of our hearers.”

Thus, Vito is engaging in an act of narrative emplotment when he chooses the events that combine to create a coherent and exemplary “Life.” Not only is he aware that he is engaged in a selective process, but he also makes it known to the reader.

It is evident that Vito was aware of the need for certain kinds of examples for the laywomen associated with his order. His “Life” demonstrates the manner in which a woman might live an exemplary life should she find herself unable to enter a convent. Although he identifies Umiliana as an example for laypersons in general, he presents a gendered example because he repeatedly stresses the need for women, like Umiliana, to defer to the authority of the friars and to engage in prayer, fasting, and quiet contemplation.

In order to present Umiliana’s life in a way that would be both coherent and inspiring, he employs conventional hagiographical literary devices. For instance, he frequently compares her to biblical figures. This allows him to demonstrate that her actions fall within the realm of

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11 Ibid., 98.
12 Umiliana exemplifies this model of quiet contemplation by secluding herself in her tower and acquiescing to the instructions of her spiritual advisor Brother Michele (Vito of Cortona, 106).
13 Vito likens Umiliana to Martha because she fed hungry followers of Jesus from her own table. He also compares her to Rachel when, during her ecstasies, she ran to the embraces of her heavenly bridegroom (107). In other passages he invokes Mary, the mother of God, to describe how she humbly accepted God’s will without complaint (115-116). When he recounts how she fasted for long periods of time, he associates her with Jesus, the exemplar of all Christian exemplars, who fasted for forty days and nights (116).
acceptable behavior deemed appropriate by the Church at that time.\textsuperscript{14} This also gives him the opportunity to reinforce the virtues of humility, chastity and obedience, by invoking other humble and chaste figures, such as the Virgin Mary, and likening Umiliana to them. Once again, Vito is employing images in an idealized construction. Vito has purposefully selected these specific virtues as the underlying lessons that one should extrapolate from Umiliana’s life. He is therefore engaging in an imaginative act of construction, which not only requires him to select which events to incorporate into his narrative plot, but also to promote certain virtues as most appropriate for his model figure.

It is evident that the emplotment in Vito’s “Life of Umiliana de’ Cerchi” is constructed so as to present a coherent and identifiable model of sanctity for laywomen in Late Medieval Florence. It is clear from my examination of Vito’s work that imagination is central to his task, even if he is unaware of it. It is my intention, however, to demonstrate that hagiographers are not the only persons engaged in narrative emplotment for the purposes of constructing exemplary figures. For this reason, I will now turn to my second case study which is an example of a more recent, act of narrative emplotment.

\textbf{Carol Christ and Narrative Emplotment}

Carol Christ is similarly engaged in narrative construction when she presents her goddess figure. She constructs her narrative by combining selective historical sources with elements from myth. Christ’s narrative begins with an imaginative redescription of Neolithic prehistory in which the peoples of “Old Europe” worshipped a goddess who oversaw the birth, death, and regeneration of all living things. In Christ’s version of prehistory, these goddess worshippers were conquered by Bronze Age Indo-European invaders. At this point, the Goddess disappeared

\textsuperscript{14} Such hagiographical motifs are also imaginary constructs that reflect men’s views of specific ways that they believe women should act.
until she was discovered by contemporary spiritual feminists seeking to name a new source of strength and power for women. Christ’s narrative is a story about the birth, death, and regeneration of the Goddess herself. She began as a prehistoric goddess, entered in a period of dormancy when her people were vanquished, and, like a phoenix, was reborn when spiritual feminists invoked her. According to Christ, in her present form, the Goddess is a symbol of the tenacity and power of both the living world and the female spirit. What is striking about this narrative is its persistent repetition of certain ‘feminine’ qualities as exemplary aspects of the Goddess. These qualities are precisely what Christ believes modern women should embrace and incorporate into their own lives.

It is important to stress that the Goddess narrative that Christ presents is, first and foremost, a narrative that is constructed with little, if any, historical evidence to support it. In her own words, she is engaged in “an imaginative selection and reconstruction of the past.”\(^{15}\) She is therefore purposefully selecting her evidence in order to create a cohesive story. In her narrative, various archeological artifacts become images and symbols of the Goddess. The supposed violent overthrow of the peaceful inhabitants of “Old Europe” is described as a pivotal event in human prehistory.\(^{16}\) By imposing her particular interpretation of prehistory upon her sources, Christ is engaging in a creative act of narrative emplotment of her own devising.

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\(^{16}\) Christ adopted the term “Old Europe” from archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, to refer to a supposed peaceful period of European history during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic, or Copper Age, period between 6500 and 3500 BCE. See Carol P. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 54. Gimbutas had been influenced by the work of nineteenth century scholars, such as J. J. Bachofen’s *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right* (1861) as well as Fredrick Engel’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), who asserted that matriarchies existed in Europe before patriarchies but had been overthrown. For an summary of nineteenth and twentieth century interest in a theoretical matriarchal prehistory see Rosemary Radford Ruether’s chapter on “Gender and the Problem of Prehistory” in *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
Christ is fully aware that she is engaged in a deliberate act of imagination. She has committed herself to “re-imagining” not only narratives, both mythical and historical, but also symbols, metaphors, rituals and prayers.\(^\text{17}\) She has undertaken this all-encompassing imaginative enterprise in order to create what she believes to be positive religious language and imagery for women. Although she also presents reimagined symbols and metaphors in her presentation of the Goddess, I will be focusing solely on her re-imagining of narrative. Christ’s narrative makes use of selective “historical” sources, as well as mythical elements from Greek and Roman sources, in order to construct her own examples of empowering ideals for women.\(^\text{18}\)

Christ is not only consciously engaging in her own imaginative construction of narrative, but she also encourages others to engage in a similar imaginative process. She frequently emphasizes how important it is for women, and other marginalized groups, to tell their own stories. She also argues that women have traditionally been excluded from the scholarly discussions about them while their own voices have not been heard. She insists that women need to speak about their experiences and identify stories that are meaningful for them. They must find stories that resonate with their experiences. If they are limited to stories that do not reflect their experiences, most likely because they have been written for them and not by them, then, Christ insists, they will be confused and disoriented. They will begin to doubt their own convictions or become frozen in uncertainty. If, in their search, they do not find any suitable stories, then, Christ concludes, they must construct new ones for themselves.


Christ urges women to engage in narrative construction in order to create stories that resonate with their own experiences. She explains that, “the current interest in feminine perceptions of the ultimate stems from a widespread sensing that women’s stories have not been adequately told. Women have lived in the interstices between inchoate experiences and the shapings given to experience by the stories of men.” ¹⁹ She argues that “men have actively shaped their experience of self and world by creating the stories they have told. Their deepest stories orient them to what they perceive as the ultimate powers and realities of the universe. We women have not told our own stories. The dialectic between experiencing and shaping experience by storytelling has not been in our own hands.” ²⁰ While Christ acknowledges that women have made use of others’ stories in order to process their experiences, she insists that a great deal of effort is often required in order to translate those stories into a form that is recognizable. ²¹ Some women have tried to “read their own lives into the stories men tell about women.” ²² This, however, often requires them to distort the fullness of their experiences to fit a narrowly defined archetype like that of Eve or Mary according to Christ. She also notes that women may instead try to “read themselves into stories about men,” but, once again, this requires some challenging “contortions” to fit into these models. ²³

From Christ’s perspective, it is possible to make use of stories that are not one’s own, but if one must always navigate the world through the experiences of others, then, eventually, one begins to feel alienated from one’s own experiences. ²⁴ She asserts that “women often live out

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²⁰ Ibid., 229.
²¹ Ibid.
²² Ibid.
²³ Ibid. See also Carol P. Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), 5.
²⁴ Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing, 1, 5.
inauthentic stories provided by a culture they did not create." As a result, Christ will urge women to begin telling their own stories, to “seek, discover, and create the symbols, metaphors, and the plots of our own experience.”

It is evident that Christ is insisting that women consciously and deliberately use their imaginations to construct stories from their perspectives as she has. She believes that by telling and retelling their stories, “new being and new ways of acting” will be created by women themselves. Christ is therefore identifying a need for a “re-imagining” of roles and models for women. In *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (1980) she addresses this exemplary aspect of narrative construction directly. “Stories give shape to lives,” she explains. “As people grow up, reach plateaus, or face crises, they often turn to stories to show them how to take the next step.” She is adamant that women need stories that reflect their experiences as women. Christ maintains that “without [her own] stories a woman is lost when she comes to make the important decisions in her life. She does not learn to value her struggles, to celebrate her strengths, to comprehend her pain.” Christ asserts that narrative construction is already happening in consciousness-raising groups where “new stories are born, and women who hear and tell their stories are inspired to create new life possibilities for themselves and all women.” Without such stories, Christ believes that, women may experience alienation from “deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religious.”

25 Ibid., 1.
26 Christ, “Spiritual Quest and Women’s Experience,” 231.
27 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 7.
31 Ibid., 1.
Christ is certainly aware of the intelligible character of narrative and its ability to make sense of one’s experiences. Like Ricoeur, she also asserts that narratives allow one to consider possible courses of action. In her words:

They are the boundaries against which life is played out, the forces against which a person must contend, or the currents in whose rhythms she must learn to swim. They sometimes provide revelation when the self is at a loss—when she doesn’t know where to turn. They may provide a sense of meaning and value which is more potent than that offered by conventional stories. They may ground a person in powers of being that enable her to challenge conventional values or expected roles.  

Perhaps Christ’s own experience is instructive here. She became convinced that women need women’s stories during her graduate studies at Yale. She searched for texts that were written by other women in order to validate her own spiritual experiences. She reflects, “though I found the works of Simone Weil, Teresa of Avila, and a few others, I was not satisfied. I needed to find the story of a woman of my own time whose experience was more like my own.” She recalls that she “wanted to know what to do with her life,” and so she began to examine lives of other women from both fictional and nonfiction sources. Thus Christ’s quest for both myths and histories which she could use to construct her own stories began.

However, it needs to be acknowledged that Christ makes use of questionable source materials when she constructs her goddess narrative. She not only relies upon Marija Gimbutas’ dubious archaeological accounts, but she also misreads her selected myths according to Helen P.

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32 Ibid., 3.
33 Ibid., xi. Christ began to seek out fictional narratives in which she could recognize her own story at this time. She found Doris Lessing’s The Four-Gated City (1969) and Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing (1972) to be more like the “sacred texts” she had been hoping to find (Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing, 12).
34 Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing, 1. Christ likens her quest to the one undertaken by Doris Lessing’s character, Martha Quest, the central character of Lessing’s Children of Violence series. Christ explains that “Martha felt her life opening before her, but she couldn’t shape it out of nothing: she needed a story of another woman whose life was rich and full to provide her with an image of what her own life might be. Like many other women, Martha failed to find the image of a free woman in the literature she read. Instead of creating a new story for herself, Martha found herself half-consciously drifting into roles in the conventional stories of her time” (Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing, 2). Christ cites Doris Lessing’s novel A Proper Marriage (New York: New American Library, 1970), 206
Because of this, Christ inadvertently appropriates certain patriarchal structures in which these goddesses were worshipped, despite her efforts to imagine female figures that are free of patriarchal influences.

To conclude, Christ herself believes that it is vitally important for women to engage in narrative construction because the stories that they have inherited present certain ideas of ‘womanhood’ that are not authentic expressions of women’s experiences. Thus her presentation of a Goddess figure is a part of this purposeful attempt to re-imagine narratives and address expected roles and behavior. Christ hopes that by telling their stories not only will women attain psychological empowerment, but the collective impact of this storytelling may also bring about revolutionary social and political change for the benefit of women everywhere.

While the need for women’s stories may be as great as Christ imagines, these stories, insofar as they assert ideals that are mythical or ahistorical as reality, must be subject to critical assessment. In Christ’s case, critical assessment is especially important, because her narrative presents problematic elements such as inaccurate depictions of European prehistory and essentializations of womanhood. (I should point out that Christ is not the only one actively constructing such prehistoric narratives.) I would argue, however, that the construction and promotion of often implausible prehistoric origin stories emphasizes the need to introduce Ricoeur’s procedures of evaluation of imaginative models before they are implemented.

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35 Foley asserts that the Greek and Roman myths that Christ uses to inform her reimagining of goddess religion do not portray the empowering female goddess figures that she wants them to. Foley demonstrates that the Demeter/Persephone myth that Christ uses to assert the powerful relationship between mother and daughter remains situated within patriarchal institutions, i.e. marriage (Foley, 226-230).

36 Foley, 225.

37 However, which stories are “women’s stories” and which present “authentic” expressions of “womanhood” remains contested.

38 Christ, “Spiritual Quest and Women’s Experience,” 243. See also Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing, 7.

Ricoeur’s Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Exemplary Narratives

Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach to narrative maintains a critical stance toward this constructive process, while nevertheless allowing the crucial role that the imagination plays in it. In *Oneself as Another* (1992), he asserts that “literature is a vast laboratory in which we experiment with estimations, evaluations, and judgments of approval, and condemnation.”\(^{40}\) For Ricoeur, it is the imagination that allows us to engage with the stories emplotted in literature. From this perspective, a narrative plot presents the reader with a possible alternative position for a particular situation. Thus imagination can allow us to consider possible courses of action and possible ways of being before acting upon any such proposed models.\(^{41}\) Therefore the imagination not only allows the author to construct a coherent plot, but it also allows the reader to enter into a story and then to consider a proposed “way of being” contained therein. However, as I discussed previously in chapter four, Ricoeur also recommends that one engage in a “hermeneutics of suspicion” before adopting the ideas or actions proposed. In other words, before the course of action proposed in a text is adopted, it must first be evaluated carefully from an ethical perspective. Thus, while Ricoeur allows that imagination encourages new ideas and ways of acting to be entertained, he admits that “we ought not to demand too much. . . of a theory of narrative.”\(^{42}\) He asserts that the “imagination can be taken to be a means of initiation to the critical function, insofar as it teaches us to dream of a different way just as narrative teaches us to recount things in a different way.”\(^{43}\) In Ricoeur’s view, the evaluation of the

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\(^{43}\) Ibid., xliii.
products of imagination, as they feature in narrative processes, belongs to the realm of ethics.\textsuperscript{44} In this regard, he warns against possible problems that may arise in the actual exercise of the imagination—problematic tendencies that can result in promoting ideology and utopia.

The exemplary narratives that I have presented recommend exemplary figures and ideals for women to emulate.\textsuperscript{45} Both Vito and Christ engage in an imaginative act of construction in order to create and present their exemplary narratives. In the first half of this chapter, I demonstrated how these authors construct their respective stories by imposing a coherent plot upon their source materials via emplotment. I argued that they undertook this imaginative process in order to tell stories that they feel are important for women and to endorse specific exemplars. However, it is not my intention to merely demonstrate the occurrence of emplotment in the creative construction of exemplary figures and narratives. I wish to also explore the imagination’s capacity to describe other possible worlds and alternative ways of thinking and acting. But these possible worlds and ways of being are in need of careful assessment, according to Ricoeur. For this reason, I will now assess the kinds of actions proposed by these two exemplary figures.

\textbf{Ideals Exemplified by Umiliana and the Goddess}

Although both authors engage in an act of emplotment in order to construct their exemplary narratives, the types of figures that they create from this process are extremely

\textsuperscript{44} Ricoeur asserts that neither imagination nor narrative include “within itself the dimension of evaluation. . . the distinction between good and evil, the permitted and the forbidden, requires the whole panoply of an ethics. . . Only then can imagination and narrative be asked to nourish the dream to exemplify concretely and in a way embody the prudential judgment in which the whole of ethics joins together in the everydayness of our daily life and work” (Ricoeur, “A Response by Paul Ricoeur,” xlv).

\textsuperscript{45} Both Vito and Christ acknowledge that men might also be inspired by their stories to cultivate certain qualities within themselves. Therefore these examples are not necessarily exclusively for women. However, both Vito and Christ write their texts in order to address specific concerns about women in their respective communities. In Vito’s case, the women associated with the Franciscans who were not able to enter into a convent but who still wanted to ally themselves with the Franciscans in their efforts to minister to the Poor. In Christ’s case, she addresses women in the spiritual feminist community who express the need for identifiably female figures and stories to assist them in their political and psychological goals of women’s empowerment.
different. Vito’s Umiliana emphasizes charity, humility, chastity, and obedience, while Christ’s
Goddess emphasizes female strength, creativity, and power. It is not surprising that these
narratives emphasize different ideals for women to emulate. These texts were intended for
different audiences and belong to different religious traditions. Umiliana is an example for the
laywomen in Late Medieval Florence who sought association with the Franciscan Order. The
Goddess, on the other hand, is presented as an inspiring model for contemporary women living
in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Therefore these narratives are worlds
apart, and not only in terms of their time and place of composition. The textual worlds to which
they belong also differ significantly. Moreover, the worlds presented in these texts vary as much
as the worlds behind these texts and so, predictably, the model figures presented by these
exemplary narratives are noticeably distinct.

The most obvious differences between these figures are immediately apparent. One is a
god-fearing woman, the other a life-loving goddess. One is passive and meek, the other active
and bold. I would not, however, go so far as to call these figures opposites, because, upon closer
inspection, there are certain qualities that are associated with both figures. For example,
“mothering” and “nurturing” qualities are exhibited by both Umiliana and the Goddess, although
the manner in which they demonstrate these qualities differ significantly. Umiliana nurtures the
hungry, the poor, and the sick through her charitable works. Her desire to “mother” children,
however, appears to be directed toward the infant Jesus and other child figures in the text rather
than her own children. Indeed Umiliana’s attitude toward her daughters appears to be less than

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47 Vito of Cortona, 127-128. Anne Schuchman has observed that Umilana’s own children are nearly invisible in
Vito’s text. Anne M. Schuchman, “The Lives of Umiliana de’ Cerchi: Representations of Female Sainthood in
Schuchman that “motherhood in the Middle Ages was in part a social construction different from those with which
we are more familiar today,” but I also conquer with her assessment that “Vito’s emphasis on Umiliana’s affection
nurturing. The Umiliana that Vito presents is more concerned with maintaining her own bodily purity than playing the doting mother, at least not to her own biological children. Therefore, Umiliana’s nurturing qualities are directed toward Jesus or her fellow Christians and not her own kin. She is certainly a mother figure, but like Mary, the mother of God, she is always humble, chaste and obedient to God and his representatives on earth. Mary is, of course, a perplexing figure in that she is both mother and virgin. That fact that Vito explicitly states that Umiliana was like the Virgin Mary, indicates that he considers virginity and chastity to be extremely important virtues, and he take pains to reconcile them with Umiliana’s character. 

The Goddess is also described in motherly terms. However, in contrast to Vito’s Umiliana, Christ envisions the Goddess as a mother to all. Because the whole earth is her body, she not only gives birth to human beings, but also to plants and animals, nurturing them throughout the life cycle. Christ cautions that the Goddess is not simply an idealized human mother. She asserts that the symbols of the Goddess from Old Europe indicate that she is

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48 For example, when her daughter, Rigale, appeared to suddenly drop dead in her bed chamber, Vito asserts that Umiliana “began to nurse her sorrowfully, as is the way of mothers” (Vito of Cortona, 127). However, Schuchman has observed that Umiliana’s distress seems to be caused by the thought of a possible scandal that this incident might create between herself and her kin, rather than out of concern for her daughter’s welfare (Schuchman, “The Lives of Umiliana de’ Cerchi,” 8). When Umiliana eventually does pray to Mary for help, she asks her to free her “from this scandal and tribulation which my kin will inflict on me, and restore my daughter to me” (Vito of Corona, 127). Therefore, it would, in fact, seem that the potential scandal is first and foremost in her mind and the death of her child only an afterthought.

49 Vito asserts that Umiliana wanted to be like Mary “the glorious Virgin” and “sought with all her might to follow her in the path of humility” (115). He is clearly attempting to establish that it is Mary that Umiliana is imitating and not Jesus, allowing him to side step the issue of voluntary poverty that Clare of Assisi had been fighting so fiercely to be allowed to practice. Most likely, Vito is attempting to demonstrate to his superiors that Umiliana was, in many ways, cloistered despite not being confined to a convent. Schuchman has also observed Vito’s attempts to assert Umiliana’s chastity in the text. She argues that by situting Umiliana in her father’s tower for the majority of his account, Vito is essentially taking Umiliana back to the place of her childhood, allowing him to “reconstruct Umiliana’s virginity” and negate the five years she spent as a married woman. Anne M. Schuchman, “Within the Walls of Paradise: Space and Community in the Vita of Umiliana de’ Cerchi (1219-1246),” in Negotiating Community and Difference in Medieval Europe, edited by Katherine Allen Smith and Scott Wells (Boston: Brill, 2009), 51.

associated with fertility, giving birth, and nurturing and therefore one can “read her as a Mother Goddess, but only if we understand that the Earth itself, the Source of All Life, is the Mother to whom the figure refers.”51 The Goddess, then, is more like a personification of nature, a Mother Nature figure, who lives in every living creature as well as the earth itself.52 Although she may be a mother to all, Christ maintains that the Goddess is an important figure for women because she affirms the special bond between all mothers and daughters.53 She therefore does not neglect her daughters in the same manner as Vito’s Umiliana.54

It is clear that the models of nurturing respectively being presented by Vito and Christ are concerned with divergent apparitions of maternity. Whereas Umiliana is an attentive and generous mother to the poor and the sick, the Goddess is a mother to all living creatures. The humility that is stressed in Umiliana’s character is entirely absent from the Goddess. Likewise the self-assured strength and power that is characteristic of Christ’s Goddess is nowhere to be seen in Vito’s account of Umiliana. While Umiliana may have had reason to be confident in the strength and power of her prayers, in Vito’s account her feats of spiritual endurance are accomplished through her faith in God, not by her own initiative.55 Thus, as noted previously in chapter two, Vito is careful to frame his subject as a pious and humble soul who never contradicts the authority of her spiritual advisors, the friars. Therefore Umiliana’s maternity also reflects medieval idealizations of subservient motherhood. The virtues of humility and obedience, emphasized throughout Vito’s account, are further demonstrated by Umiliana’s compliance with Brother Michele’s instructions to fast and pray. Meanwhile, the extreme

51 Ibid.
52 Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, 91.
54 Carol P. Christ, Odyssey with the Goddess: A Spiritual Quest in Crete (New York: Continuum, 1995), 108.
55 She is also confident that Jesus and the Virgin Mary will intercede on her behalf because she invokes their names in order to defend herself against her demonic tormentors.
measures she takes in order to preserve her modesty, such as covering herself and blocking out profane sights and sounds, illustrate Umiliana’s chaste conduct. The culmination of these virtues results in the presentation of a passive female figure.

The Goddess, in contrast, exemplifies female strength, creativity, and power. While Christ’s descriptions of the Goddess are numerous and varied, from a laughing Aphrodite to a radiant Panagia,\textsuperscript{56} she repeatedly emphasizes that the Goddess is associated with female strength, creativity and power. The Goddess’s creativity is inherent in her celebration of both childbirth and the arts.\textsuperscript{57} The Goddess’s strength and power is, more specifically, self-empowerment. She is wholly complete without a male consort or king. She confidently asserts her own will rather than always submitting to the will of others.\textsuperscript{58} However, Christ insists that she does not exercise her power like a bully, by dominating or coercing others to her will, but rather wields her power wisely and “in harmony” with others so that the greatest good is served.\textsuperscript{59} Christ presents the Goddess as an example for women so that they might be able to ‘tap into’ the strong, creative, and powerful aspects in themselves that may have been discouraged or underdeveloped.\textsuperscript{60} The Goddess is therefore an exemplary figure because she is intended to inspire and encourage contemporary women, while at the same time prompting them to consider how they might imitate, if not assume, the qualities of the Goddess themselves.

\textbf{From Description of Ideals to Prescription of Ideals}

While both Vito and Christ employ the imagination in order to construct their vastly differently exemplary narratives, they also appeal to the imaginations of their readers. The

\textsuperscript{56} Panagia, or “All Holy,” is the title given to Mary the mother of Jesus in Eastern Orthodoxy. The Panagia is also a popular iconographic presentation of Mary. The particular icon to which Christ often refers in her reflections is the Panagia Myrtiá (All Holy Myrtle Tree) located in the Palianí Nunnery in Crete. See Christ \textit{Odyssey with the Goddess}, 33-35, 92-94 and \textit{She Who Changes}, 236.
\textsuperscript{57} Christ, \textit{Laughter of Aphrodite}, 125-126.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 126-129.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{60} Christ, \textit{Odyssey with the Goddess}, 77.
models they present are therefore not merely descriptions, but also prescriptions. Certain rewards are promised if the reader successfully implements these ideals in one’s own life. Salvation, life everlasting, and acceptance into the Christian community are promised in Vito’s text, but only if a woman adopts the requisite virtues of humility, chastity, and obedience. In Christ’s depictions of the Goddess, she promises that present day women can attain liberation, happiness, and psychological well-being, by embracing the strong, creative, and powerful Goddess within themselves. Such models are thus not only proposed, but also endorsed.

The outcome of living such an exemplary life, in Umiliana’s case, is not only peace and contentment in this life, but also honor and glory in the next. The scene at her death bed, in which she is depicted as resting peacefully with a picture of the Virgin Mary and Christ on her breast, serves to reinforce this claim. From Vito’s description, it would appear that Umiliana felt secure, knowing that she had lived well and would soon be welcomed into the arms of Jesus, her bridegroom. Elsewhere in the text, Vito reveals that Umiliana was apparently so certain of her own salvation that she insisted that even if a whole host of men and angels insisted otherwise she would not believe them. Thus, in his account, Vito presents Umiliana as an exemplar who is suitably rewarded for her efforts. It appears that the explicit purpose of her biography is to convince the reader to adjust their own conduct and conform to these recommended ideals.

Christ’s Goddess demonstrates how Western women, who have grown up in patriarchal traditions, can reject the shame, fear, and sadness they have come to associate with their female bodies and selves. Christ believes that by embracing her own strength, creativity, and power, a

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61 Vito of Cortona, 136. The picture is placed on Umiliana’s breast by a companion who was watching over her. When Umiliana opens her eyes and notices that it is there, she carefully wraps the picture in a cloth and rearranges it on her breast before settling into rest. Shortly thereafter, her spirit quietly slips away. In her translation Diana Webb indicates that this picture could have been a Byzantine-style image of Mary and the Child Jesus, in which case this final gesture could be Umiliana’s attempt to cradle the image like an infant on her breast in an imitation of Mary cradling Jesus depicted in the image. However, it is also possible that Umiliana is positioning the picture over her breast as a shield to protect herself from further torments should the demons return during the night.

62 Vito of Cortona, 134.
woman can become like the Goddess, a strong being who lives up to her full potential. She urges women to adopt the Goddess as a source of inspiration and power, assuring them that by doing so they can achieve liberation and empowerment. Christ thus presents the Goddess as a definite way of living a more authentic life, a life that speaks to women’s deepest needs and aspirations.

In Vito’s account of Umiliana, the promised rewards and benefits, i.e. salvation and acceptance into the Christian community, are obtained only when the recommended ideals of chastity, humility and obedience are properly appropriated in one’s own way of living. In other words, to achieve salvation and acceptance within the Franciscan Order as a tertiary, the laywoman must conform to this idealized model of proper conduct. On the other hand, Christ’s model is a prescription for nonconformity. She proposes the Goddess as a countermeasure to the passive and obedient models, like Umiliana, that have been presented by patriarchal religious traditions. In this way, the Goddess is a response to the docile models for women that Christ believes have become entrenched in Western religious traditions. For this reason, the Goddess that she presents is a supremely active and self-assured figure that encourages women to explore self-fulfilling creative outlets. Therefore Vito and Christ’s exemplary narratives not only present models for action, they also sanction these models as illustrations, as it were, of the perfection of womanhood. Because these texts can thus be said to not only describe but explicitly prescribe particular ideals, a critical assessment of these exemplary models is therefore warranted. Ricoeur’s cautionary approach to imaginary constructs is one possible way of assessing these exemplary figures, while maintaining an important critical distance.

Possible Problems with Imaginary Constructs

As I discussed previously in chapter four, Ricoeur warns that problems may occur when engaging the imagination. He identifies two possible distortive tendencies that can occur by
means of ideology and utopia. According to Ricoeur, ideology and utopia are themselves simply neutral “imaginative practices.” Both, however, have a “positive and constructive side” as well as a “negative and destructive side.” He explains that every society “possesses, or is part of, a socio-political imaginaire [social imaginary], that is, an ensemble of symbolic discourses. This imaginaire can function as a rupture or a reaffirmation.” In Ricoeur’s words, ideology functions as a reaffirmation when it conserves “the founding discourse of a society. . . thus preserving its sense of identity.” It can provide a concise and readily available narrative to communities or individuals in crisis, thereby providing a sense of clarity when contradictory narratives are proposed. However, the danger, Ricoeur cautions, is that “this reaffirmation can be perverted, usually by monopolistic elites, into mystificatory discourse which serves to uncritically vindicate or glorify the established political powers.” In such cases, ideology reinforces the current power structures and resists any attempt to reorganize those systems. In this way, ideology no longer describes the current sociopolitical landscape, but distorts it instead.

Ricoeur contrasts ideology with utopia, which can serve to rupture entrenched ideological discourses because it “remains critical of the powers that be.” At the same time, it points to an alternative perhaps a better society that has not yet coming into being. Yet Ricoeur also cautions that “besides the authentic utopia of critical rupture there can also exists a dangerously schizophrenic utopian discourse which projects a static future without ever producing the conditions of its realization.” In other words, utopia can inspire change, but without a firm

64 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 29-30.
grounding it remains only a fever dream. The constructive and critical aspect of utopia, that is to say its innovative spirit, will be unable to overcome the inertia of sedimentation should it tend toward fantasy more than reality. In such cases utopia remains a distant and distorted world in the text and fails to inspire concrete action.

The imaginative practices of ideology and utopia are thereby cast as polar opposites by Ricoeur. But, he insists that “it is the polarity between ideology and utopia which makes both its founding role and its specific pathology intelligible.” It is ideology’s tendency “toward integration, repetition, and a mirroring of the given order” that highlights utopia’s tendency toward “disintegration,” disassociation, and rupture. Although Ricoeur describes ideology and utopia as being “mutually antagonistic,” he also insists that “one cannot work without the other.” From his perspective, it is the interplay between ideology and utopia that illuminates the “interplay of the two fundamental directions of the social imagination.” In this way, they provide a system of appropriate checks and balances. Each one complements the other in a dialectic of sedimentation and innovation, providing a constructive reflection of possible courses of action.

While ideology and utopia do have productive aspects, in their distorted forms they can be “representative of two different pathologies which completely mask the productive function of each.” When ideology becomes dysfunctional to the point of pathology, it becomes distortion and dissimulation which is then “grafted onto the [positive] integrative function of the

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70 Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action,” 18.
72 Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action,” 16.
73 Ricoeur, “Ideology and Utopia,” 323.
74 Ibid.
75 Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action,” 16.
social imagination.” This form of distortion is evident as rigid rules and utter imposition of law as in totalitarian regimes. The pathology of utopia in turn is escapism from reality, which may develop into dissociation and in extreme cases even schizophrenic contradiction. It is such possible aberrations that are of interest for this study.

Ricoeur’s identification of these two potential pathologies of imagination – ideology’s dysfunction involving rigid imposition and utopia’s dysfunction involving escapism and losing touch with reality – provides a possible way of assessing the exemplary narratives that I have chosen to examine. Because these narratives are produced by the imagination, through an exercise of emplotment, it is possible to examine them insofar as they might exhibit particular tendencies toward the distorted forms of ideology or utopia. Before launching into an analysis of my chosen case studies, however, I must first acknowledge that Ricoeur has clearly stated that it is often “impossible to decide whether this or that mode of thinking is ideological or utopian.” He remarks that perhaps “the line can be drawn only after the fact and then on the basis of the success of the enterprise.” For this reason I will not be attempting to identify Vito and Christ’s presentations as either specifically ideology or utopia. Instead, I will be discussing utopian and ideological tendencies using Umiliana and the Goddess as examples.

Potentially Problematic tendencies in Vito’s presentation of Umiliana

Vito’s “Life” has the potential to tend toward to the ideological. His account repeatedly emphasizes the authority held by the friars and the Church itself, while praising Umiliana’s humble and obedient deference to those authorities. This repetition appears to indicate Vito’s confidence in the hierarchical patriarchal system to which he belonged – albeit his own

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76 Ricoeur, “Ideology and Utopia,” 323.
77 Ibid., 322. Ricoeur notes that “the utopian imagination seems merely excenreric” when only its pathological tendency is viewed (Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action,” 20).
79 Ibid.
ignorance of this position.\textsuperscript{80} He is not only reaffirming the established order, i.e. the authority of the Church, the Holy Orders and their male representatives, but he is also uncritically vindicating and glorifying them, especially when he describes them as having been sent by God’s Holy Spirit, the ultimate Christian authority.\textsuperscript{81} Thus, Vito is endorsing the authority of the established Orders by asserting that it was bestowed upon them by God. He must do this so as to argue that Umiliana is an acceptable example because she, too, follows the rules of a Holy Order: the Franciscan Third Order. Furthermore, by reaffirming the legitimacy of these established orders, Vito is able to simultaneously demonstrate his own authority as a member of the Franciscan Order. Vito therefore had a decided interest in conserving and maintaining the preexisting social order, which is, according to Ricoeur, a distinct feature of ideology as a support of social cohesion.\textsuperscript{82}

Yet the social order that Vito attempts to uphold specifically involves a hierarchical order distinguishing men from women and the clergy from the laity. While not all friars were priests, as I discussed previously in Chapter Two, the Franciscans at that time gradually began assuming more and more authority over the women, both Poor Clares and laywomen, who became associated with their order.\textsuperscript{83} Vito appears to take for granted the fact that he and his fellow friars had the power, if not a duty, to instruct women in both their spiritual devotions and their everyday tasks. It is certain that Umiliana’s humble and obedient deference to Brother Michele and the other friars is a reoccurring trope in Vito’s text. The didactic message in the text, then, is that just as Umiliana accepts the instruction of her spiritual advisor, so should other women

\textsuperscript{80} I am, of course, approaching Vito’s text from a contemporary perspective where it is commonplace to examine narratives with an attitude of suspicion, as in discourse analysis, as a means of recognizing and clarifying the influence of special interests and the dynamics of power. Vito, a Late Medieval writer, could not possibly have anticipated these concerns.

\textsuperscript{81} Vito of Cortona, 105-106.

\textsuperscript{82} Ricoeur, “Ideology and Utopia,” 314-316.

follow her example. They should also heed the instructions of the friars with whom they interact. It can be argued that, in this way, Vito is dictating rigid rules by which laywomen, and women in general, can attain salvation. By imposing humility and obedience as absolutes, Vito’s text demonstrates a rigid, unyielding attitude of superiority toward women, who were regarded as subordinate. This attitude exposes a mindset that often assumed that unruly women could be severely disciplined for misbehavior, or even, as in later centuries, burnt at the stake. Such a strain of rigid enforcement, which today would be regarded as overly authoritarian, reveals a tendency toward the pathological spectrum of ideology.

**Problematic Tendencies in Christ’s Presentation of the Goddess**

Christ’s Goddess narrative also strays toward questionable tendencies when she idealizes women. Although she insists that she does not wish to present restrictive models for women, she nevertheless reaffirms patriarchal assumptions about women’s capacities for mothering and peacemaking. This is certainly somewhat of a distortion, because she is asserting that all women possess certain “feminine” qualities while dismissing certain images that she does not agree with. For example, she admits that some spiritual feminists have appropriated warrior images into their understanding of the Goddess, such as the fearsome Indian goddess Kali, but she dismisses such adoptions as problematic, or at least not congruent with the Goddess that she envisions.84

Christ’s presentation appears to have definite utopian tendencies because the narrative that she presents is, in many ways, without empirical basis. Her Goddess-centric version of prehistory is, given the controversial archaeological evidence, something of an exaggeration. Her insistence upon a peaceful and matrifocal European prehistory is part of her attempt to show that, because such societies once existed, they could indeed again. This attempt, however,

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displays the escapism that Ricoeur cautions is indicative of a utopian tendency. According to Ricoeur “the pathology of utopia conceals under its traits of futurism the nostalgia for some paradise lost, if not a regressive yearning for the maternal womb.”

Christ’s nostalgia for a matriarchal prehistory, for an idealized era before war and violence and unequal distribution of wealth and power, is patently evident in her writings. She has even recounted her many trips to Crete to revisit the sacred womb-caves of the Goddess to enact a ritualized rebirth from the earth, thus, quite literally, confessing her desire to return to the maternal womb of Mother Earth.

Christ’s Goddess narrative also appears to project a possible utopian future for women, if not all humankind. It is not surprising that Christ’s presentation of the Goddess displays these utopian tendencies. She is deliberately presenting her Goddess in order to disrupt established models of power which is consistent with the productive form of utopia, or what Ricoeur refers to as the “utopia of critical rupture.” As I have already noted, Christ’s deliberate re-imagining of the Goddess is part of her all-encompassing project to introduce symbols, metaphors and narratives that contradict the dominant models and modes of thinking about women and female bodies. Christ should not be simply dismissed, however, as simply a dreamer. She is purposefully trying to disrupt the preexisting order, and the systems of power it upholds, in favor of what she believes to be more egalitarian and just models of power. Christ admits that her Goddess is part of an attempt to re-imagine exclusively male symbols and language for the divine in order to “break the hold of ‘God’ as masculine and male on the human mind.”

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85 Ricoeur, “Ideology and Utopia,” 322.
86 Christ, Odyssey with the Goddess, 45-47, 104-109. During the twentieth century, Crete’s prehistoric sites attracted the attention of many. Among them, English archaeologist Arthur Evans, who took it upon himself to reconstruct the ruins of the Bronze Age Palace of Knossos out of concrete between 1905 and 1930. Evans’ reconstruction took shape from his own “imaginative” interpretations of Knossos. See Cathy Gere, Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
88 Christ, She Who Changes, 48.
believes that the idea of an omnipotent male God “has a hold on the human imagination.”

Thus, she sees the imagination as an important tool for addressing these dominant patterns of patriarchy and inequality, which she believes are present in – what Ricoeur would identify as – the western social imaginary or imaginaire.

The intent behind Christ’s Goddess presentation could be understood as purposeful disruption. This is characteristic of a healthy utopia, according to Ricoeur. He postulates that “utopias always imply alternative ways of using power, whether in family, political, economic, or religious life, and in that way they call established systems of power into question.”

Christ’s continual emphasis on the Goddess as a model for “power with” as opposed to “power over” demonstrates the utopian concern in her work. It is also detectable in her prescription of deviance evident in the subtext of her Goddess narrative. Such intentions may indeed be admirable, but her non-historical assumptions are, nevertheless, problematic. Perhaps it needs to be admitted that for political and social reform, imagination, particularly in its utopian form, is not enough. In recent years, Christ herself seems to have come to the same conclusion, as she has begun to follow Starhawk’s lead by becoming increasingly politically and socially active.

Vito may not have been aware that he was employing the imagination in order to present his proposed model, but only that he was employing a selective process in order to present a coherent example. Christ, however, is certainly conscious that she is using her imagination to construct alternative models and images in order to disrupt dominant modes of discourse. She is deliberately engaging in a large scale project of re-imagining the Western symbolic system in

89 Ibid., 37.
90 Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action,” 15.
92 Christ, She Who Changes, 151.
order to present an alternative possible world in which women are regarded as whole human beings and legitimate holders of authority.\textsuperscript{94} Vito, in contrast, is not attempting to critique the established powers. In fact, he is purposefully trying to reinforce and legitimize the authority of the Franciscan friars. If he is trying to disrupt any claim to authority it is that of Umiliana’s father and brothers, whom he portrays as selfishly trying to prevent her from devoting herself to God. Thus, Vito seems to be reinforcing the power of the friars and the Church over and above the secular authorities. From his perspective, one’s duty to one’s flesh and blood family must not take precedence over one’s duty to one’s heavenly Father and brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore the strict obedience that Vito prescribes appears to mandate the supreme authority of the Church over all human ties. Again, this points to a problematic ideological tendency in Vito’s narrative.

Questionable tendencies are clearly exhibited in both Christ’s presentation of the Goddess and Vito’s presentation of Umiliana. Both present prescriptions for either conformity or deviance from established powers. Vito is attempting to legitimize the authority of the friars and prompting women specifically to be obedient to them. Christ, on the other hand, is attempting to disrupt the ideological discourses that keep certain patriarchal authorities in place, while urging other women to do the same. Having established that these texts contain problematic tendencies, mostly ideological in Vito’s case and primarily utopian in Christ’s case, how should they be approached differently?

Ricoeur has alluded to the possibility of balancing ideological tendencies by appealing to utopia and, likewise, grounding utopian tendencies by appealing to ideology. He has postulated that “we can take possession of the creative power of the imagination only through a critical

\textsuperscript{94} See Christ, \textit{She Who Changes}, 20, 206.
relationship between to these two figures of false consciousness."\textsuperscript{95} In order to “cure the
madness of utopia” one must call upon “the ‘healthy’ function of ideology.”\textsuperscript{96} Likewise, to
critique the rigidity in ideology one must call upon utopia because it is capable of escaping the
bounds of the present to envision other possible worlds.\textsuperscript{97} Although Ricoeur does not explore
how this balancing act might be undertaken in his work, it could be possible to adopt such a
strategy. That is, one could approach exemplary narratives with not only these two possible
distortive tendencies in mind, but also with their critical ideological or utopian counterpoint.
This, however, is beyond the bounds of my thesis.

To conclude this chapter then, I have demonstrated that in the writing of exemplary
narratives, the narrative act is not only focused on the task of synthesizing a coherent story, via
emplotment, but also on the construction of a clearly identifiable model. In my investigation of
this dynamic, I have introduced Paul Ricoeur’s approach to narrative construction, which asserts
that an act of emplotment takes place. Emplotment necessarily involves the imagination,
because it is a process that has the ability to produce new meaning, in this case, new ways of
thinking and acting in the world. From this perspective, Ricoeur’s work brings to this
examination of exemplary narratives a clearer and more sophisticated understanding of this
construction process and the role that the imagination plays within it.

I have utilized Ricoeur’s conceptualization of ideological and utopian constructions to
examine my two chosen exemplary religious narratives. I have explored how such imagined
narrative constructs have the potential to become problematic, should they demonstrate marked
tendencies toward a pathological form of either ideology or utopia. It became evident in this
chapter that both Vito and Christ employ imaginative devices in order to construct their

\textsuperscript{95} Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action,” 22.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
exemplary narratives, even if they are not necessarily conscious of it. They both engage in an act of emplotment, for example, to draw upon their selected sources and impose a coherent plot upon them. Although the products of their narrative construction are vastly different, in both ideals and recommendations, their appeal to the imagination in order to create a coherent narrative is indeed similar. Given that such different figures can be created through the emplotment process, it seemed necessary, following Ricoeur’s warning, to undertake a careful assessment of the products of this imaginative endeavor. Ricoeur’s work on narrative emplotment and hermeneutics of suspicion, with a specific regard to possible distortions or pathologies, thus provided a helpful critical approach to these exemplary religious narratives. Using this approach, I concluded that both Vito and Christ’s narratives fall prey to distortive tendencies. A tendency toward rigid ideology is displayed in Vito’s narrative, while a tendency toward escapist utopia is evident in Christ’s.
Chapter 6: Concluding Remarks on Imagination and Exemplary Religious Narratives

This thesis has examined the role that the imagination plays in the construction of exemplary religious narratives. In chapter one, I introduced Christian hagiographies as one example of exemplary religious narratives. I argued that hagiographical scholars, like Peter Brown, acknowledge that the imagination plays a part in the construction and reception of hagiographical texts, but do not adequately define the term “imagination” or its role. I asserted that in order to understand the construction and presentation of exemplary figures, a more sophisticated understanding of the imagination must be employed. I have proposed one possible model for understanding the role of the imagination in the construction of exemplary religious narratives based on the work of Paul Ricoeur.

Ricoeur’s approach highlights the imagination at work in narrative construction. While Brown vaguely refers to an “imaginative alchemy” which transformed the holy person into an exemplary figure,¹ Ricoeur asserts that the imaginative process should not be regarded as mysterious “mental alchemy.”² For Ricoeur, the imaginative process responsible for the construction of narratives, and any exemplary figures contained therein, is a coherent and intelligible process, which he refers to as “emplotment.”³

I have chosen to examine two case studies, exemplary narratives from the medieval and contemporary periods of the western tradition, in order to bring this constructive emplotment process into focus. In chapter two, I demonstrated that the figure of Umiliana de’ Cerchi was carefully constructed by her hagiographer, Vito of Cortona, in order to present a new way of

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being religious to the laywomen associated with the Franciscan order. I argued that by engaging in a process of narration, which highlighted particular activities and behaviors as praiseworthy, Vito is purposefully molding his subject, Umiliana, into an exemplar. Later, in chapter five, I argued that the construction of this narrative requires Vito to engage in an act of emplotment, which, according to Ricoeur, is an act of imagination. Vito is therefore employing his imaginative faculties even though he does not explicitly acknowledge doing so.

In chapter three, I examined another case study. This time I examined the presentation of an exemplary figure from the contemporary period, Carol P. Christ’s presentation of the Goddess. Christ’s Goddess is a reimagining of older goddess figures, as well as their images and attributes, into a new figure that embodies contemporary feminist ideals. In this case, Christ is not only aware that she is engaging her imagination in order to present her goddess figure to women, she is actively encouraging others to engage in their own imaginative constructions.

I have examined these two exemplary religious narratives in order to highlight the use of imagination in their construction. Although Vito does not seem to be aware that he is employing the imagination to emplot his exemplary narrative, he is certainly aware that he is engaging in a selective process when he narrates Umiliana’s life. Carol Christ, on the other hand, not only explicitly states that she’s utilizing her imagination to envision and present the Goddess, she also asserts that others should imagine their own empowering narratives and figures. While she wholeheartedly advocates such an approach, she does not develop any explanation of what might be philosophically or psychologically involved in such a process. As such, she continues to
employ a simplistic or unthematized approach to the imagination, despite the availability of more rigorous and sophisticated approaches. 4

I have argued that Ricoeur’s work provides substantial theory and method to apprehend the role that the imagination plays in such narrative construction. In chapter four, I examined Ricoeur’s approach to imagination as a form of semantic innovation and discussed specific concepts that he addresses in his work. I also found his concept of emplotment to be especially useful for my analysis of exemplary religious narratives. In addition, I argued that his cautioning of possible distortive tendencies, present within certain forms of ideology and utopia, are helpful for attempting to evaluate certain prescriptions contained in such texts. In chapter five, I utilized these concepts in my analysis of Vito and Christ’s narratives. I demonstrated how both Vito and Christ engage in acts of emplotment in order to construct their respective exemplary narratives. I also evaluated these narratives by identifying the presence of certain possible tendencies toward either utopia or ideology. I concluded that Vito’s “Life of Umiliana” exhibits a tendency toward rigid ideology when he depicts her as deferring meekly to the authority of the friars, while Christ’s Goddess narrative exhibits escapist utopian tendencies when she presents her Goddess as part of an idealized matrifocal prehistory. I also alluded to the possibility of remedying such distortive tendencies by countering the rigidity in ideology with an appeal to utopia and, likewise, grounding the escapism in utopia with an appeal to ideology, although I have not made any specific recommendations for the two case studies examined here.

In this thesis, then, I have not only demonstrated one possible way of critically analyzing exemplary religious narratives, I have also, following Ricoeur’s suggestion, proposed that one

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can apply to these possible distortive tendencies their respective ideological or utopian counterpoint as a moderating influence.

**Exemplary Religious Narratives and Human Actions**

Ricoeur asserts that narratives can propose a possible world in which the reader might live or, rather, they suggest a possible way of acting in the world. I propose that exemplary narratives are particularly relevant examples of this, since they explicitly present the actions of human beings with a primary objective of representing specific models of conduct. The construction of an exemplary narrative necessarily requires the author to depict human (or anthropomorphized) figures as agents of action. These agents demonstrate recommended activities as well as the rewards one can obtain by performing such actions. This is certainly the case in the first case study. Saints are eulogized figures and their hagiographers endorse saintly behavior. In the case of Christ, the Goddess is not necessarily a human being, but her anthropomorphized descriptions effectively demonstrate activities and attitudes that human beings might adopt.

I have chosen to examine exemplary narratives that present female figures and the particular brand of “femininity” or “feminine” ideals as prescribed by their authors. These serve as both a fascinating background and ideal case studies about exemplarity. This is because Christian traditions have been preoccupied with women’s supposed sinful nature and have made many recommendations for proper female conduct, including modes of social interaction, of clothing and ways of treating the body. This apparent underlying anxiety in controlling women’s behavior is displayed by Vito when he reinforces the need for restricting women’s bodies and directing their wanton desires toward the contemplation of a heavenly bridegroom, Jesus. It is obvious that contemporary spiritual feminists, like Christ, reject such attitudes, because they
actively attempt to counter such restrictive medieval models with their own. These contemporary efforts, in contrast, exalt women’s potential for wisdom and strength. By comparing and contrasting the “feminine” ideals imagined by one medieval man and one contemporary woman, I am, in effect, analyzing certain constructions of gender roles. In both cases, these constructions are being presented as exemplary models for “feminine” conduct. They are also constructed and presented in narrative form. These exemplary texts are, therefore, first and foremost, constructed texts. They are constructed and presented with a very specific purpose in mind: to promote an exemplary model. It is my contention that when one narrates for the express purpose of creating an exemplary figure, one inevitably employs the imagination. Thus, exemplary figures are imagined constructs and must be entertained and critiqued as such.

This study approaches exemplary religious narratives as constructed texts that require the employment of the imagination in their construction. It identifies emplotment as the imaginative act responsible for narrative construction. However, the products of this emplotment process may contain distortive tendencies. In this regard, I have found Ricoeur’s cautionary approach to imagined narratives, as well as his concept of ideology and utopia as possible negative tendencies present within the imaginative process itself, to be extremely helpful.

The specific boundaries I set for this investigation were intended to allow me to remain focused on my chosen case studies. I have compared and contrasted one exemplary narrative from Late Medieval Christianity and one from the contemporary goddess movement. The scope of this analysis has only permitted me to engage in a close reading of these specifically selected narratives. Including additional case studies would have allowed me to explore other examples of possible ideological and utopian tendencies, but I believe that the two cases examined here exhibit both of these tendencies clearly enough to render other examples unnecessary. However,
I also believe that future examinations of other types of narratives, such as cautionary tales and identity narratives, would serve to further build upon the study of imagination in narrative construction that I have set up here.

Although there have been many historical and textual analyses of various texts that endorse certain ideals for imitation and investigations of their appropriation – as well as studies that examine endorsements for women in particular, from medieval hagiographies to contemporary idealized depictions of “motherhood” and “womanhood” – I have concentrated on the construction of exemplary narratives and the employment of the imagination in this process. I have found Ricoeur’s work to be most helpful for this task. There appear to be no similar studies at present. Therefore, this application of Ricoeur’s work on narrative and imagination is, I believe, an original contribution to scholarship.

Possible Avenues for Further Inquiry

I have examined exemplary religious narratives that present idealized figures. Such narratives present the actions of a “good man” or a “good woman.” They explicitly address relations between family members (sons, daughters, wives, husbands, grandparents, etc.) or religious insiders (laypersons, clergy, monastics). They can also describe how a good person should interact with strangers, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Exemplary narratives are not restricted to the description of families and religious communities, however. It is possible to extend this analysis to other types of exemplary narratives. I believe that this type of approach to narrative construction would be helpful for discerning distortive tendencies within nonreligious narratives as well. There are many types of narratives that prescribe proper conduct, such as nationalistic or patriotic narratives that depicts what the model citizen does for his or her country, for example. Likewise, there are many companies that present their particular version of the
model employee to their staff. These sorts of presentations could be subject to the same critiques I have outlined here.

Essentially, I am arguing for a more self-aware and self-critical approach to narrative construction, especially in the construction of exemplary narratives. Exemplary narratives are often created in order to outline expected behavior. They are often presented to children, for example, to demonstrate polite conduct or to outline possible roles that they might fill in society in the future. Children are encouraged to engage with these stories; to imagine what they want to be when they grow up by putting themselves in the role of the doctor, the teacher, or the astronaut. They are also instructed to imagine what it might be like to be someone else as a means of developing empathy, thus allowing them to consider how they might act towards other persons in the future by first encountering them as characters in a story. Unsurprisingly, what constitutes appropriate children’s literature is fiercely debated by parents and educators. Many have differing ideas about which stories will instill virtuous or moral characters in children and should therefore be on the library shelves. Others are actively creating new stories for children, which they feel contain more appropriate models and scenarios than the outdated classics. Many, like Christ, have indicated that young girls, especially, need strong female role models that they can look up to. Thus, book publishers and film studios have recently presented a string of heroines, which they hope will be palatable to both children and their parents, such as the fiery Merida in the Disney Pixar animated feature *Brave*(2012) and the persevering Katniss Everdeen in Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy. The critical stance toward exemplary figures and their narratives, outlined by Ricoeur and demonstrated in this thesis, would be helpful for discerning certain distortions and biases in these stories, both the new stories and the celebrated

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5 Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy was published by Scholastic as *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010).
classics. Furthermore, narrative construction is currently being used for therapeutic purposes for both children and adults. A critical stance to this type of narrative construction would, I believe, also be beneficial.

Finally, I would like to reassert that before one carries out any action proposed in a text there must be some form of evaluation. Exemplary narratives must be subject to scrutiny before they are imitated by the reader. According to Ricoeur, this evaluation falls into the realm of ethics. The imagination allows one to entertain possibilities while judgment is suspended. Once the plot has been apprehended by the reader, the proposed action is weighed carefully. The pros and cons of adopting such a behavior are considered. Predictions are made as to how those actions would be perceived by others or affect others. This necessary ethical appraisal, however, occurs during the final appropriation stage of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic arc and not during the constructive phase. The critical stance that I am proposing here is concerned solely with narrative construction and concerns the task of the author, not the reader. I am, however, advocating an initial appraisal of possible utopian or ideological distortions that may have found their way into the text during the emplotment process. My hope is that such critical stances and evaluations of what are today viewed as exemplary narratives could become more widely employed. For imagination may well be an agent of change and a means of producing new meaning, but, as Ricoeur later asserted in his work, it must be employed advisedly.

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Bibliography


