“Eucharistic Devotion and Bodily Miracles in the Lives of Christina Mirabilis and Lutgard of Aywieres” Reflection Essay

Stephanie Berson

In Fall 2017, I completed an Independent Study with Dr. Emily Graham to further my knowledge in medieval religion. I had taken classes with her previously and was eager to study the Middle Ages in a deeper, more challenging way. While working with Dr. Graham, I developed an interest in the restrictive practices of medieval women, particularly those related to food. The book that triggered my interest was *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* by Caroline Walker Bynum, an excellent study into the various ways medieval women used food for religious purposes. According medieval texts hagiographies, denial of food often led to food-based miracles in which mystics’ bodies secreted edible fluids. I was particularly interested in Christina Mirabilis, a thirteenth century mystic who exhibited some of the most extreme forms of asceticism and food-based miracles. Christina Mirabilis is well-regarded as one of the oddest cases of female asceticism, but I wanted to see if similar extreme food habits and miracles were present in the stories of her contemporaries. I chose to compare the story of Christina to that of Lutgard of Aywieres, as they were friends. Furthermore, their hagiographies were both written by Thomas of Cantimpre and I wanted to see whether the similarities in the stories were due to his influence.

Before I began my research, I knew I would need to find many primary and secondary sources and I wanted learn more about how Edmon Low Library could help. Dr. Graham advised that I met with Dr. David Oberhelman, so I scheduled an appointment with him. He told me about a variety of amazing resources I had access to through the library including databases and interlibrary loans. By meeting with Dr. Oberhelman, I learned about the International Medieval
Bibliography, a database which I used extensively and from which I gathered many of my secondary sources. Dr. Oberhelman taught me various strategies for effectively searching through databases like WorldCat to find the information or book I was looking for. This helped me streamline the research process.

Dr. Oberhelman was also very helpful when developing my research questions. Because he was knowledgeable about medieval mystics and had read Bynum’s book, we were able to talk through my research questions. We also discussed how I could use the material I gathered through the library to make an argument. I left my meeting with Dr. Oberhelman not only with the knowledge of databases I could use, but also with a good idea about where I should begin my research. My goal was to not only compare the lives of Christina and Lutgard, but to look at the context surrounding their lives and the writing of their hagiographies. Because both accounts were written by Thomas of Cantimpre, it was also important to examine the possible motives and biases within his writing.

Once I had collected articles and books to work with, the majority of the research process was done in the Edmon Low library. I took advantage of the study rooms, which served as a quiet, comfortable place where I could thoroughly analyze text. For the majority of my research, I was looking at primary source documents, some in Middle English, and I benefited greatly from the peace and quiet of the study rooms. Working in the library also had the added benefit that, if I needed a book, I could just go get it. Since everything was at my fingertips, working at the library made the research process more cohesive.

As I got further into my research, I came across a few hiccups. The major issue I was coming across was that, while many scholars had published on Christina and Lutgard separately, I could find very little about them together. In previous research projects, I would have a
question, find a book or article which answered my question, and then move on. For this project, there was no book or article which had already answered my question for me. My topic was so unique that I could not rely as heavily on secondary sources and had to get most of my information from primary sources. I also struggled with the complicated fact that my primary sources were not written by Christina or Lutgard but by Thomas of Cantimpre, a man with his own motivations. In my resulting paper, I spent a good deal of time unpacking Thomas of Cantimpre’s narration, his relationships with Christina and Lutgard, and his possible motives in writing hagiographies. Through this process, I grew in my ability to scrutinize primary sources and the reliability of their authors. I learned how to think like a historian.

This project and resulting paper could not exist without the aid of Edmon Low Library. Because of my access to databases like International Medieval Bibliography and services like Interlibrary Loan, I was able to gain access to an incredible wealth of sources. Library faculty like Dr. David Oberhelman¹ not only helped me effectively use these resources but helped me develop my research questions and think analytically about my topic. With the resources and skills that I gained from the library, I was not only able to produce research which was unique to my field but I grew in my ability to read text critically and make a compelling argument.

¹ I was deeply saddened to learn Dr. Oberhelman passed away earlier this semester. I am incredibly grateful for his kindness and encouragement throughout the research process.