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Purity in Seclusion: Exploring the Anchoritic Lifestyle through an Archaeological Lens

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PURITY IN SECLUSION: EXPLORING THE ANCHORITIC LIFESTYLE THROUGH AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL LENS

Monica Stewart

An aging woman kneels next to a grave that has been dug in the dirt along the wall of a one-room cell. This is the cell she has been confined to for life, a tiny room off the main chapel of the village church. The grave yawns wide, dark and foreboding, in the corner of her little room. The tips of her fingernails are still black, filled with the dark earth of the grave they have moved for the day. After her morning prayers, she will meditate upon her mortality, the inevitability of death, and on the comparable suffering of Christ as he too, dug his own grave, so to speak, willingly letting himself be taken by the soldiers on the Mount of Olives to what he knew would eventually be his own agonizing death.

The scene above reflects what could have been a day in the life of an elderly anchoress, a specific religious vocation chosen by women in 12th to 14th century Europe. The reconstruction I present is based on archaeological remains from the parish church of St. Anne's, Lewes, in which the remains of a woman skeleton was found in an anchoritic cell, and on various anchoritic texts, which outlined the way an anchoress was charged to live a religious life of seclusion, sexual celibacy, and bodily denigration (Gilchrist 2000: 94). There is a deep tradition in Christianity of the pious seeking quiet isolation in order to more fully develop one's relationship with Christ. However, the life-long asceticism, seclusion, and bodily denigration similar to what is described in the scene above, is what made the anchoritic lifestyle more unusual and extreme compared to other religious orders. Such seclusion and chastity was said to facilitate the purity of these religious women. Yet, I argue that ensuring against sexual or other impurities and secluding oneself to guarantee a more "pure" relationship with Christ does not adequately explain why some women chose this particular religious vocation and why such extreme seclusion was considered necessary or conducive to the lifestyle. Instead, I see the pursuit of such a lifestyle as a means toward spiritual elation in the permeation of Christ's being into the personhood of the Anchoress. This and other possible explanations are considered below.

This paper uses both archaeological and ethno-historical data to cross-examine theoretical explanations for understanding the anchoritic lifestyle, which are grounded in

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gender and feminist theory, sexuality and queer theory, as well as theories of personhood and permeability. For interpretations related to gender and feminist theory, I will cross-examine case studies involving other circumstances of ordained seclusion in Christianity. These case studies include the *monjeríos*, or the separate living quarters built for unmarried indigenous women of Spanish colonial California, as well as seclusion of “wayward women” by the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia. In addition, I examine archaeological studies conducted by Roberta Gilchirst and Michelle Sauer, who interpret aspects of the anchoress’ worldview through the lens of sexuality and queer theory. I offer a critique of these various theoretical frameworks and also consider theories of personhood, particularly the notion of permeability, as a more productive theoretical approach for understanding the lifestyle and choices of the medieval anchoress. The physical remains of the anchoress’ lifestyle and archaeological analysis provide a new lens with which to imagine the anchoritic worldview, a subject which has only been explored using literature written by men from this time. By exploring the anchoritic lifestyle in this way, we can let the anchoresses, who wrote very little, speak a little more for themselves.

BACKGROUND TO THE ANCHORITIC LIFESTYLE

This study focuses on archaeological and ethnohistoric examples from Britain during the Medieval times, although there is evidence that the vocation existed in parts of Germany during this time as well. Like many other religious lifestyles, this vocation required sexual celibacy, however, it was unique in that it also required utmost seclusion and more pronounced forms of bodily denigration. The anchoritic cell was the hallmark of this calling. This tiny room was usually attached to the community’s church and the anchoress was expected to be confined to this room from her initiation until her dying day (Waggoner 2005: 77). Although it was the woman’s choice to become an anchoress, the selection was monitored and overseen by the male religious leader of the community—the bishop (Waggoner 2005: 78). Usually a woman from a noble family who felt this calling would seek the financial, emotional, and religious support of both her community and her priest (Waggoner 2005: 81-82). Anchoritic religious writings, although written by religious men, provide a window into the daily lives and community expectations of these religious women. By observing and analyzing their cells and the small amount of personal affects as archaeological evidence, we begin to discern various ways in which these women could have seen their world and lived their lives.

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE ANCHORESS WORLDVIEW: GENDER AND FEMINIST THEORY

In attempting to explain the anchoress' lifestyle choice through the lens of gender and feminist theory a more oppressive tint may color our understanding of her worldview and the context of her life. The question emerges, could the lifestyle choice of the anchoress have been an implicit expression or explicit demonstration of the oppression of women during this time? This question stems from a more traditional approach to feminist and gender theory which has been criticized more recently for its tendency to project contemporary Western conceptions of female oppression onto the archaeological past without historically contextualizing such claims (Meskell 2007). The so-called "Third Wave" of Feminism (Meskell 2007) has helped to address these biases and add nuance to the question of oppression and its response, cross-examining multiple layers of identities such as sex, ethnicity, age, social status, sexuality, etc. In this study, I attempt to tease out these multiple identities in each of the case studies presented. As Meskell (2007) demonstrates, this line of inquiry leads us to more deeply and holistically consider the worldview of women.

Below I cross-examine the feminist theory that the anchoress lifestyle reflected the prevalence of constant male control and surveillance of women in medieval Britain. If the seclusion of the anchoress was in some way forced upon them by men, we would expect the circumstances to compare with situations where this was the case, such as among "wayward" women of the Magdalen Society or the forced seclusion among indigenous women in Alta California during the Contact period in colonial times. These two case studies are examined below as sources of comparison in an effort to better understand the nature of the anchoress' seclusion and worldview in Medieval times.

MALE CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE

Although in the case studies of the Magdalen Society and the Alta California Spanish colony, the demonstration of control and surveillance is more explicit, there is still an implicit presence of male dominance in the seclusion and purification for the anchoress. The first indication comes from the process following the religious woman's choice to become an anchoress. First I outline the other cases of seclusion and their relationship to sexual abstinence and purity, and then I compare them to the case of the anchoress.

Indigenous women in Alta California were placed under constant surveillance and control during the Spanish colonization from 1769-1821. In addition to the interest of protection from troublesome Spanish soldiers, indigenous women who lived in the Spanish missions were secluded in the interest of maintaining their purity. Missionaries in the Spanish colonies of the Californian coast were usually the most prominent arbiters in the control of sexual activity. From late childhood until marriage, girls and young

women were often confined to the *monjerío*, a long house that served as a barrack for this vulnerable demographic (Figure 1). With its high walls, tiny windows, and single locked door, authorities sought to protect these girls and women from both the sexual violence from soldiers and the “contaminating” sexual lifestyles of the various indigenous cultures, styles that were incompatible to the prescribed Christian sexual lifestyles. It was a paternalistic attempt by the Padres and religious leaders of the mission to protect the sexual morality of unmarried indigenous women and girls (Voss 2000:43-44). The theological framework of these *monjeríos* stressed the need to remove oneself and others from the opportunity to sin by physically separating the (female) body from the (male) temptation (Voss 2000). The separation of these girls and young women from outside contaminants (both indigenous and military) was an attempt to maintain and reinforce their purity.



FIGURE 1. *A reconstructed monjerío developed from ethnohistoric descriptions. Its high barred windows distinguished it from other mission housing and, with its lockable door, emphasized the forbidding and seclusion. (Voss 2000: Figure 2.4)*

Male religious writers exerted a similar paternalistic attempt by trying to guide anchoresses down the path of purity. Although they created similar writings for men, the main difference in the literature was the focus on sexuality. Ælred was monk who wrote religious instructional tomes for both his male and female counterparts. In his tome, the *Rule*, addressed to his sister, an anchoress, there are many overt warnings against sexual or carnal desire, though much less in Ælred’s writings for men (Cheatham 2010: 237-239). Ælred avoids and appears embarrassed to even bring it up in a religious work for men, and uses language to suggest that to give in to lust is an effeminizing weakness (Cheatham 2010: 242). Some suggest that he wrote the *Rule* for monks as well as anchoresses but only felt comfortable enough to broach the subject of sexuality in a tome addressed to women (Cheatham 2010:247). The fact that women in Medieval Britain were more associated with the flesh and therefore more susceptible to its desires

(Cheatham 2010:220) seems to justify this paternalistic concern that the male religious leaders felt for their female counterparts.

Apart from the implicit paternalism present in historical records, writings, and architecture of the indigenous women of Contact Period Alta, California and the Medieval anchoresses of Britain, the two case studies differ in the nature of their seclusion. Although the removal from contaminating influences is reflected in the anchoritic lifestyle expectation, unlike the *monjeríos*, the surveillance and control of the anchoress by men was not as explicit in this form of seclusion. While the anchoress was confined to her cell and her confinement was overseen by a male priest, the anchoress had control over her curtained windows, who could see her, and who could enter the cell (Sauer 2004). The one window that looked to the sanctuary would allow her to see the Eucharist *without* the priest being able to see her (Sauer 2004, Gilchrist 2000) (see Figure 2). Unlike the case of the *monjeríos*, the method of purification and the maintenance of purity were not to be accomplished through the surveillance of any priest or matron but were more closely associated with the removal from the contaminating influences of the world and the juxtaposition of the cell to the church (discussed further below). Once inside the cell, she was also expected to focus on upholding and constantly purifying her state of being and mind through bodily denigration and constant prayer or meditation on the teachings of Christ. This purification of mind, body and soul, in addition to the separation from impure influences, is similar to the purifying seclusion of the women of the Magdalen Society.

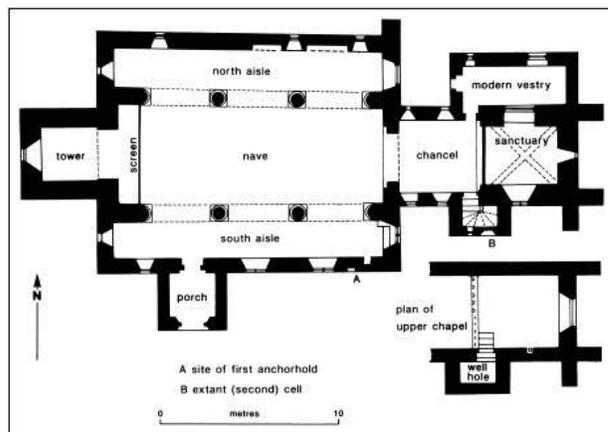


FIGURE 2. *The Compton Parish Church in Surrey. On the wall near the site of an extant anchoritic cell (B), an aperture would have allowed the anchoress to see the Mass at high altar. (Gilchrist 2000, Figure 4.1).*

(RE-) PURIFICATION

The Magdalen Society of Philadelphia and its asylum was a reform house for sexually wayward women from 1800-1916. In the years from 1845-1916, how the institution recruited and treated the “wayward” women varied greatly. However, its main purpose throughout the years was to reform women of the lower and lower-middle classes who had or would likely turn to prostitution to support themselves. The inmates, throughout the home’s history, were women who had engaged in sexual relations outside or before marriage and either came of their own free will or were there by court order. Instead of just protecting the inmates by removing them from contaminating and dangerous influences, the seclusion of this house seemed more for the purposes of re-purification. As DeCunzo (2001:26) explains, during the late 18th century “reform meant discipline, and discipline meant a moral architecture of isolation, enclosure, confinement, separation, and observation.” In one annual report, the officers and the Society Board of the establishment expressed their adherence to this reformist policy writing that “one means of reformation is the retirement and seclusion from the world which is afforded those who seek this shelter” (DeCunzo 2001:26). It was hoped that these women, through diligent instruction and their seclusion from contaminating influences, would be able to re-enter society as productive citizens (DeCunzo 2001). Through DeCunzo’s historical and archaeological exploration, it seems that the Society Board of this project sought to accomplish or induce these transformations not only through “moral architecture,” but through physical architecture as well (2001). Looking at the Magdalen Society as a site of reformation, one of the most important spaces in the house were the 39 chambers that DeCunzo (2001:30) calls the “inner sanctums,” each measuring approximately 10 x 12 feet that were located on the second, third, and fourth floors. It was here that the staff and Society Boards believed that the women would be able to reform through prayer and quiet contemplation and come to understand “their moral transgressions and repent” (DeCunzo 2001:30).

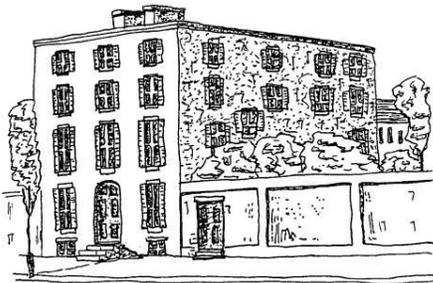


FIGURE 3. *High walls, controlled entryways mirrored the control and surveillance authorities tried to exert over the Magdalens. (Image from DeCunzo 2001: Figure 3)*

Anchoresses were instructed to have similar periods of meditation, especially on humility. According to one scholar, “The anchoritic cell was not described by ecclesiastical authorities as a private space reserved exclusively for the especially devout, but rather a place of self-imposed isolation in which the penitent sinner might profitably contemplate her own sinfulness and repent” (Waggoner 2005: 79). Although, similar to the Magdalen Society, the anchoritic cells were placed apart from the rest of society and were always positioned directly adjacent to the sanctuary of a church (see Figure 2).

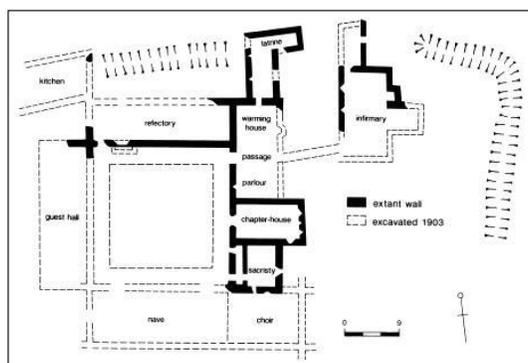


Figure 5- The nunnery at Burnham in the Berkshires. There is a cloister to the north and sacristy with its own external access on its eastern wall for the priest to pass through privately (Gilchrist 2000, Figure 4.2).

SEXUALITY AND QUEER THEORY

The location of the anchoress' cell adjacent to a church reflects another important aspect of her worldview—her relationship or proximity to Christ. Examining this worldview through the lens of sexuality and queer theory helps to illuminate the nature of this relationship between the anchoress and Christ. Queer theory focuses on the interdependence and layering of gendered and sexual identities. One example is the Native American two-spirit whose occupation, dress, same-sex relationships, and specialized spiritual roles define his (or sometimes her) gender roles as different, or opposite, from the gender roles associated with his/her physical sex (Voss 2008:324). Queer theory leaves room for more unfamiliar conceptions of sexuality. The vocation of the anchoress rejects the expected gender roles of a woman from the same time and place (as a wife and/or mother) in favor of another gender and sexual identity—that of the sexually celibate. Her occupation has altered the focus of her gender and redirected her sexuality. As an example of the use of this lens, Roberta Gilchrist (2000) attempts to connect the anchoress' relationship to Christ to a performance of the sexually celibate—a relatively unfamiliar and understudied sexual identity in archaeological contexts.

Gilchrist (2000) presents an interesting interpretation of the anchoress' relationship to Christ and how it relates to the seclusion and other lifestyle characteristics of the vocation. She claims that anchoresses turned their seclusion, limited mobility, and bodily denigration "inside out" towards "spiritual," "singular," and "interior sexuality" (Gilchrist 2000: 102). She postulates that the cruder sanitation systems and simpler meals in comparison to the monasteries were probably aimed towards this purpose (Gilchrist 2000: 100). An excavation of an anchoress' cell revealed a self-dug grave at this spot in which the anchoress would have had to kneel every day for her prayers leading up to her death (Gilchrist 2000: 94). Gilchrist (2000) suggests that such morbid and denigrating practices were integral to this life for it also gave women a sense of spiritual power as they felt it made them more empathetic to the suffering of Christ. This focus on experiencing the suffering of the Crucifixion was central to the practices of medieval religious women. For in that ascetic denigration, sexuality and all other pleasures such as food, cleanliness, warmth, comfort was experienced through inversion (Gilchrist 2000: 101).

Through this lens, the guarded seclusion of these women from bodily temptations and other delights was a means to a spiritually ecstatic end. Gilchrist characterizes the archaeological evidence, visual culture, and writings as evidence of "fetishistic sexuality experienced through the suffering body of Christ," and "desire as corporeal intensification." It is a desire expressed for a "sexual encounter capable of overwhelming body, soul, space, and time" (Gilchrist 2000: 101).

The importance of an intimacy or sexual relationship with the spiritual essence of Christ is called into question by Michelle Sauer's analysis. She posits that the anchoritic cell may have actually existed as a space for lesbian sexual encounters to occur (Sauer 2004). She points out that anchoresses live in total isolation except for their female servants who would buy them food, serve them, and remove waste from the cell. Usually, these maidservants were seen to act as the anchoress' pupils (Sauer 2004; Waggoner 2005: 86). However, the power, agency, and privacy the anchoress is able to muster leaves room for such encounters to take place (Sauer 2004). Such an explanation of why women would choose such a vocation may be more palpable to feminists, who would still find this enclosure as oppressive. Sauer's analysis does not reject the possibility of women seeking greater spiritual ecstasy, she simply asks us to leave room for the possibility for the performance of another queer sexuality. Yet, in trying to "find" lesbian encounters, Sauer's analysis resembles the "search for women" in archaeology during the so-called "first wave" of feminism, which has been critiqued over the years for its failure to address the multiple identities of women in the archaeological record (Meskell 2007: 28)

Examining the anchoritic worldview through a lens of sexuality provides other possible motives for women entering into the vocation. However, the art and religious writings describe women who ascribed to the anchoress lifestyle as having a totally different conception of spirituality, suggesting that Sauer's analysis probably does not apply to the majority of anchoresses. Furthermore, the literature and anchoritic texts designed to teach and guide these religious women towards purity do not allude to any kind of relationship with Christ that is at all "sexual" or "fetishistic" as Gilchrist (2000) suggests.

THE PERSONHOOD AND PERMEABILITY OF THE ANCHORESS

Below I explore theories of personhood and permeability and use these theoretical frameworks to re-evaluate the evidence of the anchoress' lifestyle in an effort to better understand her worldview. According to Gilchrist (2000: 97-99), the images of hearts rendered by the anchoress expresses her development of an "interior sexuality." Figure 6, for example, shows a nun in the heart of a crucified Christ and within that organ, a window is carved out to reveal the nun in communion with Him. Similarly, in Figure 7 a carving of a heart is pierced with Christ's crown of thorns.



FIGURE 6. *Heart on the Cross*
(Gilchrist 2000: Figure 4.3)

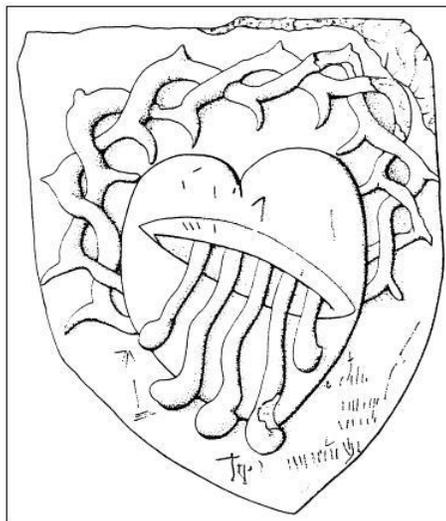


FIGURE 7. *Sacred Heart*
(Gilchrist 2000: Figure 4.4)

Although Gilchrist associates this with an interior or inverted sexuality, an alternative explanation that I propose here is based on the concept of *permeability*, defined here as the anchoress' desire for Christ, specifically his essence, to permeate her being, to have Him and his love and purity envelope both her spiritual and physical body. The concept of permeability is similar to Gilchrist's description except that the underlying

phenomenon is not an inverted sexuality or fetishism, but a more neutral sense of permeability as part of the multi-authored, relational web of the anchoress' personhood.

Elsewhere, *personhood* is defined as “the condition or state of being a person” and is “attained and maintained through relationships” with human beings, places, things, and, in this case, “spiritual features of the cosmos” (Fowler 2004: 7). One aspect of personhood is that a person can also be permeated by qualities or by other persons, which can affect the constitution of both. Fowler (2004: 9) defines *permeability* as “a state of being in which the person is dividual” or multi-authored through or by these various relationships, “and can be permeated by qualities that influence the internal composition of the person.” For the medieval anchoress, I argue that the idea of permeability—a kind of metaphysical union with Christ that was also a bodily experience—explains both her devotion to spirituality and her choice of seclusion.

The seclusion of the architectural arrangement of the anchoritic cell, ascetic lifestyle, and bodily denigration all contributed to a heightened spirituality and purity, providing the anchoress with unobstructed access and permeability to the essence of Christ. The goal of creating an environment that fostered not just a relationship, but a sense of oneness or permeability with the divine may help us understand the anchoress' worldview and why these women chose this role. Its utmost seclusion facilitated the preservation and development of purity for the body, purity with and for Christ.

To explain this worldview a bit further, we turn to Waggoner's analysis of anchoritic texts and other religious discourse. Since Adam's and Eve's fall, God and humankind had been alienated from one another. Through Christ's sacrifice, God's Grace is granted to human beings even though they are undeserving because of their sin. Ever since the time of the initial fall from grace, the aim of religious life has been to bridge the alienation from God, the Father and Christ in order to “reestablish union with” Him (as a trinity). Though God gives his grace freely, those who chose a religious life attempt to make themselves worthy of the gift through intense “renunciation and mortification” (Waggoner 2005: 2). Virginity and chastity (whether a male or female) “entailed a permanent state of sexual purity which brought human beings closer to God” or Christ (2005: 2). “The more a person disassociated him- or herself from worldly desires, the more he or she prepared the body and soul for an intimate connection with God” (2005: 2). Understood in this light, I conclude that the anchoress sought to constantly purify her state in order to bring or incorporate Christ, as a permeable essence, more closely into her being.

CONCLUSION

This study has cross-examined and critiqued the various interpretations of the anchoritic lifestyle of medieval times and compared the seclusion of the anchoress with other case

studies involving ordained seclusion in Christianity. The monjeríos of Spanish colonial California revealed an implicit paternalism similar to the priests governing the anchoress and the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia served to illustrate the Christian concept of using seclusion to re-purify or purify one's being. Viewing the lifestyle through the lens of queer theory offered some possible, more explicit, reasons as to why women chose this lifestyle. However, in cross-examining the religious texts, art, and archaeological remains, I conclude that the theoretical lens encompassing personhood and permeability best explain the worldview of the anchoress, her reasons for such restrictive seclusion, severe bodily denigration, and ascetic lifestyle choice. Similar to Gilchrist's analysis, the virginity and chastity of the lifestyle may have been a means toward some kind of spiritual elation. However, describing the elation in sexual terms is not supported by the religious texts that guide the anchoress. Instead, the desire lies in the union or permeability of persons as all-encompassing spiritual entities—the soul of the anchoress and the Spirit of God. The lifestyle's purity allowed for a closer communion with Christ.

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