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Domenica da Paradiso and the Prophetic Discipline of the Body and Soul

Although some assumptions changed by the end of the Renaissance, women's sexual difference was understood as deeply rooted in their bodies, particularly in their lower body heat, and was usually seen as indicating a natural inferiority (Maclean 1980, 28–46). Judith Butler, in criticizing the idea that the materiality of bodies has no history, identifies the origins of the association of femininity with materiality in classical etymologies that linked matter with *mater* (mother) and *matrix* (womb), hence with reproduction, thus constituting women's anatomy as destiny (Butler 2011, 6–7). Even though Butler is less interested in the sexed body than in its discursive construction, thus setting aside “the concrete, historical and experiencing body” (Moi 1999, 75), the idea that materiality has a history helps to frame the long-standing identification between women and their bodies, which is found as far back as Aristotle and Aquinas. According to the latter, woman “est de intentione naturae ad opus generationis ordinata” (is according to the plan of nature, and is directed to the work of procreation) (Aquinas 1882 I a 92, a1 AD 1). Women's capacity to procreate was interpreted as a sign of weakness, making the body not only “una faccenda anatomica” [an anatomical fact], but also “un costrutto simbolico” [a symbolic construction] (Bock 1988, 13).¹

The case of the sixteenth-century woman prophet Domenica da Paradiso – the most important female religious leader in Florentine society at the time (Polizzotto 1993, 521) – can shed new light on the subjective movements that made so many women think of their own body, and women's bodies in general, not as a mark of inferiority, but rather as an instrument of spiritual and intellectual advancement. Moreover, her writings allow us to deepen our understanding of Renaissance women's ideas on and practices of the dialectic between body and intellect that continues to be key to reconstructing the experiences of late medieval and early modern women (Leonard and Whitford 2021; Wiesner-Hanks 2019, 61–111; Scott and Barbezat 2019).

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While the bodily manifestation of her prophetic charisma played a significant role in the legitimation of her sanctity, Domenica placed particular emphasis on reason and the intellect. She contested representations of female spirituality as merely somatic, which would later be used to support the idea that women could not be included in “an allegedly universalist selfhood [that] emerged through the exclusion of materiality, corporeality, and ‘nature,’ all of which were implicitly feminized” (Scholz 2000, 57). She also questioned emerging conceptions of individuality (Cappuccilli 2022) according to which “the human being about to become a subject was endowed with a virtually incorporeal body, while the non-subject was declared to inhabit a ‘corporeal’ body that was part of the ‘natural’ world” (Scholz 2000, 57). In exalting the knowledge created by the senses, she bridged the traditional philosophical separation between thinking and sensing (Butler 2015, 15). Furthermore, she rejected the separation between mind and body, typical of an idealist view that reduced the body to a mere object entirely subordinated to the mind (Moi 1999, 27).

Domenica’s prophetic practice and her justification of it evidenced a conception of the body as a “situation,” whereby the sexed body “is our grasp on the world” (De Beauvoir 2011, 44) and in turn the world acts upon the subject. While refusing women’s association with the body and nature and simultaneously emphasizing the potential of the senses, she defied women’s ancestral identification with Eve, who fell prey to the senses and the devil, instead preaching the Christian need to govern the body through reason. As a prophet called to channel the divine will and seeking Christ-like suffering, Domenica did not see herself as a passive vessel, but rather as an active and conscious agent, who turned her supposed weakness into strength.

However, an ambiguous and unresolved relationship with her body emerges from her works. She martyred and vilified her body: she made it the object of constant mortification because it represented the irreducible and inescapable reminder of human imperfection and proclivity to temptation. Yet, even though the body remained the material and imperfect part of the Christian subject, it could never be eliminated or humiliated, as it belonged to God. God would not allow the complete annihilation of the body, as it was an essential part of his creation. Behind Domenica’s condemnation of worldly passions and her recognition that the body was imperfect and consisting of impure matter stood an appreciation of the possibilities offered by the senses. The female body emerges in Domenica’s works not merely as the locus of imperfection but as the medium through which it was possible to receive God-given visions. In this way women prophets stood out from other women, to whom this possibility was barred and whose bodies were considered to be a mark of weakness.

But Domenica argued that in order for a prophet to convey the divine message, their body and soul had to be purified and governed through reason. That is why it was necessary to adopt a strict bodily as well as spiritual discipline, in a continuum between inside and outside, as was common in all early modern thinking (Von Tippelskirch 2021, 11).

Rather than being understood as a top-down, externally imposed posture (Reinhard 1982), discipline emerges in Domenica's works as an individual effort to pursue a Christian model of virtue and perfection. As a result, she contributed to the phenomenon of social disciplining in sixteenth-century Italy. This category, later theorized in Weber's sociology of power (Weber 1978, 1148–1157), and largely adopted, albeit controversially, by German historiography in the twentieth century, was applied to the early modern Italian context by Gerrard Oestreich, Paolo Prodi and others (see Oestreich 2008; Prodi 1982 and 1994; De Boer 2003; Schiera 1999 and 1994; Cappuccilli 2021b), to indicate

l'insieme dei complessi processi di interazione tra istituzioni e società, [il] tessuto connettivo in cui si formano i modelli di comportamento individuali e collettivi destinati a trasformarsi a loro volta – in un continuo intreccio di elaborazioni e imposizioni, di filtri e controlli – in strutture. (Prodi 1982, 9–10)

[the sum total of the complex processes of interaction between institutions and society; the connective tissue in which individual and collective models of conduct are formed; models which in turn – through a constant interplay of elaborations, impositions, filters and controls – are destined to be transformed into structures.]

However, it was not only interaction but also conflict that characterized the problem of social discipline in Domenica's case, because discipline was the outcome of a struggle against oneself and against ancient society's imperatives for women. In her experience, discipline was the shaping of the early modern subject as a troubled and conflicted union of a sexed body and a sexed soul.

Based on an analysis of Domenica's life, sermons, visions, hagiography and letters, this chapter discusses her understanding of the role of the body and the senses as gateways to God and transcendence, as well as being objects of discipline. It starts by contextualizing Domenica's life in the Florentine prophetic revival, specifically examining her early attempt to fashion herself on Christ's model of extreme suffering and humility. Thereafter it explores the different influences that shaped her conception of the body, above all that of Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373). Finally, it draws some conclusions on how Domenica's stratified theorization and experience of the body emerging from her life and works connect with her idea of spirituality and sexed subjectivity and constitute a source of early modern social disciplining.

A Life in Pursuit of Christ's Imitation in Prophetic Florence

A brief account of Domenica's life is necessary to contextualize her prophetic experience within the tumultuous events that threw Florence and Italy into disarray between the end of the fifteenth century and the first decades of the sixteenth century, and within a proliferation of female living saints (*sante vive*), women who were venerated as saints while still alive (Zarri 1996b; Herzig 2008). Domenica Narducci was born in 1473 in Paradiso, a small town near Florence, close to Santa Brigida monastery, to a lower-middle-ranking family of farmers. Her early life was marked by a brief experience within the Birgittine monastery, with Birgitta of Sweden, a canonized visionary who authored eight books of revelations, being a constant presence in her visions and sermons. Domenica had a fairly good knowledge of the life and revelations of the Swedish saint, probably through manuscripts and excerpts copied and circulated by the scribes at Paradiso, in a context in which the Birgittine influence was very widespread across the whole Italian peninsula (Falkeid and Wainwright 2023).

Domenica's first spiritual director, Domenico Benivieni (1460–1507), was a Dominican and a loyal Savonarolan follower. When he died, Francesco da Castiglione took his place. Probably helped by Domenica herself (Gagliardi 2007, 7), Castiglione wrote her hagiography and transcribed her sermons until he died in 1542. Sources on Domenica include her visions, sermons and 117 letters, her hagiography (in Latin and Italian) and the acts of the 1624 canonization process on her life and miracles (Onesti da Castiglione; Riconesi 1637–1640; Narducci 1984, 1985, 1999, 2004; Scattigno 2011; Piro 2014; Leonardi 2011). She carefully revised the texts she dictated even though she claimed to be illiterate, reiterating the *topos* according to which uneducated women were a purer recipient of God's speech: "Io non so ne leggere, ne scrivere, et sono usa amazolare cavolo et cipolle, perche da piccolina fui hortolana [. . .] porgo quello chel Signore mi mette in bocca" [I cannot read or write, and I am used to picking cabbage and onions because I was a farmer from a young age [. . .] I declaim what the Lord puts in my mouth] (Narducci 1984, 168). She relied on her humble origins and lack of education to prove that she was not reading the Scriptures but was simply divinely inspired, thus defending herself from the accusation of preaching the Gospel, which was banned for women.

Domenica admired Girolamo Savonarola but was not on good terms with his followers from the San Marco convent, who attempted to tame her wayward spirituality. In 1501 she was put on trial, and when asked why she wore the Birgittine habit without being an ordained tertiary, she answered that she did not feel obli-

gated to follow any rule or order, nor did she want to deprive herself of her liberty. In 1509 Tommaso De Vio, master general of the Dominicans, ordered the friars to break off relations with Domenica, to cease to administer the sacraments to her, and to exclude her from all convents in the Tusco-Roman congregation.

In 1511 she founded her own autonomous convent, the convent of the Crocetta in Florence, refused the formal vestition of the Dominicans and became a tertiary. This episode testifies to her search for independence from male authorities, a tendency shared by other female living saints who had, as Rudolph Bell argued, an increasing “hostility to men, a sense of fighting actively against patriarchal structures and the male prelacy” (Bell 1985, 149). But this event also reveals her amicable relationship with the Medici family and the Archbishop of Florence, who approved the birth of the convent after the authorization of Pope Leo X in 1515.

In 1519 Domenica was cited for heresy and accused by Fra Tommaso Caiani, a famous Dominican preacher, of *piagnoneria*, that is, of being a follower of Savonarolan ideas. Caiani was the protector of Dorotea of Lanciuole, whom Domenica denounced for “feigned sanctity” because she pretended for several years that she was surviving on nothing but the Eucharist. Domenica, acquitted of the accusations of heresy, took Dorotea under her wing and received her in her community. Domenica was convinced that Dorotea had been encouraged in her deceit by Fra Tommaso Caiani and other friars of San Marco to promote the construction of a convent in Lanciuole. This episode is significant because, on the one hand, it shows the struggle for power within the Dominican order (Valerio 1992, 30–32), and, on the other, demonstrates Domenica’s attempt to sever relations with the Dominican order (Polizzotto 1993, 505). During the 1530s she continued to pursue her pastoral activity and the government of the convent of La Crocetta, as testified in her letters, but in the 1540s, with the death of her confessor, the Counter-Reformation and the authoritarian regime of Cosimo I, her public statements became rare. Domenica died in 1553 in the odour of sanctity. In all her life she followed and innovated models of saintly life that impacted her multi-layered conception of the body and of the different possibilities and states associated with it.

Sanctified and Sublimated Body

Collections of texts on the lives of illustrious women, hagiographies of female saints, and spiritual rules for virgins, widows and wives aimed to transmit certain models of behaviour to early modern women (Zarri 1996a, 7), thus forming a *corpus* for disciplining them. This corpus provided them with “nonliteral mirrors” of

sanctity, giving them information “about certified holy female bodies, those of their predecessors in the enterprise of sanctity” (Jacobson Schutte 1994, 189). The *vita* of Birgitta of Sweden was a fundamental source of saintly discipline for Domenica. The Swedish saint constituted both a prophetic *exemplum* and an embodied “mirror” of sanctity for Domenica, despite the fact that Birgitta’s experience was less related to bodily symbols of spirituality than those of contemporary mystics such as Catherine of Siena (Klaniczay 2020, 160). Birgitta focused on the definition and right employment of the intellect and thus contributed to the transformation of female spirituality by distancing it, but not entirely separating it, from its traditionally corporeal identification. Unlike most representations of medieval mystic women, whose religious expressions were depicted as “grounded in physicality,” Birgitta’s portrayals highlighted the significance of the intellect, which she identified with her uppermost model, the Virgin Mary (Falkeid 2019, 60). Whereas female piety has for a long time been described as primarily somatic, as “the female body [was] a special medium for communication with the incarnate Christ” (Elliott 2010, 21), a growing corpus of research is demonstrating the centrality of mind and reason in the religious experiences of secular and godly women in the Renaissance (Ross 2009).

As a prophetic *exemplum*, Birgitta represented a powerful voice that denounced religious and temporal powers, criticized priestly corruption and their disposition to give in to worldly temptations, stressed the importance of the use of reason, and claimed the authority to interpret the Sacred Scriptures (Cappuccilli 2021a). As an embodied mirror of sanctity and part of what Isabella Gagliardi defined as her “familia celeste” [holy family] (Gagliardi 2007, 171), Birgitta influenced Domenica’s ideas on the spiritual need to govern the body and the senses, but not to repress them. This need translated into a specific language, common to many mystic writers, that revolved around the senses. As Piero Camporesi argued, “Un alfabeto sensuale è alle origini del linguaggio mistico che tende per sua intima vocazione a liberarsi dai sensi e dal corpo, non annullandoli, ma sublimandoli, trasferendoli in Dio” [A sensual alphabet is at the origins of the mystic language that tends by its intimate vocation to free itself from the senses and from the body, not obliterating them, but sublimating them, transferring them to God] (Camporesi 1984, 51).

For Domenica, the experiences of Birgitta of Sweden, encapsulated in her *vita*, were testimony to women’s capacity to sublimate the body and the senses without effacing them. Birgitta devoted herself to religious life whilst also being married, and, after becoming a widow, did not entirely dismiss her earthly affections. However, she placed her spiritual vocation above attachments to her biological children – which, according to Claire Sahlin, was the meaning of her

mystical pregnancy, when Birgitta felt as if a living child was turning around in her heart (Sahlin 2001, 78–109).

A model of discipline for all women and widows, Birgitta was the central figure of the vision contained in Domenica's consolatory sermon dedicated to Caterina Cibo, Duchess of Camerino, who in 1533 had just lost her husband (Stella 2023). Cibo, who was close to the circle of Spirituali and in particular to the Capuchin reformer Bernardino Ochino (Robin 2007; Valerio 1999; Zarri 2008), was a devotee and protégée of Domenica. The latter wrote several letters to Pope Paul III to convince him to lift the duchess's excommunication, which he had pronounced out of fear of her alliance with the Duke of Urbino. The correspondence between Domenica and the duchess included the transcription of the 1533 sermon, in which we find some of the most important traces of Birgitta's influence on Domenica's conception of the body and the senses, as well as on her idea of the need to discipline them.

In the sermon Domenica exhorts the duchess not to remarry: "Empariamo da questa gloriosa santa Brigida, che haveva tolto lo sposo celeste" [Let's learn from this glorious Saint Birgitta, who married the celestial spouse] (Narducci 1999, 132). Birgitta appears in the vision preceded as in a holy procession by five queens who symbolize the five senses: Queen Light helps Birgitta to see God; Queen Audient enables her to listen to him; Queen Odoriferous allows her to smell him; Queen Taster to taste him; and finally Queen Exclamatory and Governess – who is the most important – serves to praise God, read his words, convey his messages to temporal and spiritual authorities, and govern the necessities of the body. There is no queen of touch, perhaps because the sense of touch was classified as lower, and often associated with the sin of sensuality (Carrillo-Rangel et al. 2019), or because it did not allow one to enjoy the grace of God, who cannot be touched. These queens/senses allow Birgitta to enjoy Christ's grace in a controlled manner:

La regina Luce si sveglia e la regina Audiente ode e la regina Odorifera sente l'odore e diletta in quell'odorare Dio, come fece santa Brigida: non stimava, non odorava se non per necessità de le cose di questo mondo, et a questo modo sentiva odore e conforto di Dio, et era sempre con Dio. (Narducci 1999, 135)

[Queen Light wakes up and Queen Audient hears and Queen Odoriferous smells the scent and delights in smelling God, as Saint Birgitta did: she did not appreciate nor smell the things of this world but for necessity, and in this way she smelled God and felt his comfort, and she was always with God.]

In comparing Saint Birgitta with the queen of smell, Domenica began her discussion of the relationship between spirit and body from one of the lowest senses, thus allowing for a reconsideration of it against the traditionally repressive atti-

tude of the Church. She continued the description of Birgitta by explaining that her choice of becoming God's bride when her husband was still alive refined her senses:

Ella [. . .] haveva tolto lo sposo innanzi che quel [terreno] morissi, et aveva adornato queste cinque regine in lei. Ella lo risguardava con regina Luce, e con regina Audiente udiva l'ambasciate sua, e con regina Odorifera l'odorava, e con regina Gustatrice lo gustava, e con regina Exclamatrice exclamava, apriva e libri, leggeva le sacre Scritture e scriveva a' prelati et a molta gente che ammassino Dio. (Narducci 1999, 137–138)

[She [. . .] married the [celestial] spouse before the [earthly] one died and she adorned these five queens inside her. She watched him with Queen Light, and with Queen Audient she heard his messages, and with Queen Odoriferous she smelled him, and with Queen Taster she tasted him, and with Queen Exclamatory she exclaimed, opened the books, read the Sacred Scriptures and wrote to the prelates and to many people that they should love God.]

Domenica described Birgitta as immune from the calling of sensuality because of her choice of chastity within marriage, but also emphasized the fact that she employed all her senses to love God. Queen Exclamatory stood for a further faculty, the faculty of praising God, reading his word and conveying his messages to temporal and spiritual authorities.

In eulogizing the senses and underlining their spiritual value Domenica expressed one central topic of her prophetic discourse: the relevance of self-discipline *versus* the annihilation of the body that many theologians believed was the true fulfilment of *imitatio Christi*. Although for her the body was “a prison,” it carried within it some inestimable “treasures,” i.e., “our souls” (Narducci 1984, 156). Among Domenica's contemporaries, many preached a radical mortification of the body and the perfect hatred of the self, such as the famous Dominican Battista of Crema, who wrote in *De la cognitione et vittoria di se stesso* that “fare qualche violentia al corpo” [to use some violence on the body] was often necessary (Battista da Crema 1531). Unlike them, Domenica reflected on the role of the body/senses in embracing Christ, an idea that was common among late medieval female mystics (Sancho Fibla 2017). In *Epistola della Croce* (1509) she wrote to her spiritual father and disciples:

il Signore ti ha dato queste cinque porte per le quali hai a operare e ricevere i tesori di Dio, i quali sono mirabili e grandi e pero tieni aperte queste porte [. . .] il Signore ti ha dato le mani, perche governi il corpo per le sue necessita e dipoi abbracci la croce. (Narducci 1984, 158)

[the Lord gave you these five doors through which you must operate and receive God's treasures, which are wondrous and great, therefore keep these doors open [. . .] the Lord gave you hands to govern the body for its needs and thereafter embrace the cross.]

The senses had to be kept “open.” But what did they open onto? To unexpected and unacceptable truths, i.e., to God’s miracles, that, like the Eucharist, were able to defy those certainties rooted in the human and bodily experience of reality achieved through the senses. For Domenica “la verità di Dio [. . .] trova il suo referente nell’esperienza” [God’s truth [. . .] finds its reference in experience] (Valerio 1992, 17).

However, although fundamental, the senses are deceptive and should only be used to perform God’s will, and not to try to understand divine truths. A contradictory approach to the potential of the senses lay at the heart of Domenica’s theological thinking. While she recognized the senses’ limits, she subtly asserted the capacity of all people, including women such as herself, to utilize the senses to become God’s instruments.

In her imaginary *Dialogo* with God, she reiterated the *topos* of women’s intellectual weakness, but did so in order to upend it into a mark of divine election. Rephrasing Paul (1 Cor 1:27), Domenica stated: “el mio dolce figliolo molte gran cose ha dimostrato verso le donne bench’elle siano stimate debili d’intelleccto, ma colui che è più debile è più victorioso e più felice vincendo” [my sweet son showed many great things to women, although they are considered of weak intellect; but those who are the weakest are the most victorious and, in winning, the happiest] (Narducci 2004, 87). Domenica asserted herself as a prophetic subject and reversed the traditional understanding of women’s inferiority, but she did not ignore the meaning assigned to women’s bodies.

The metaphor of the senses as doors recalls Birgitta’s vision received after Lord Elziarius, son of the Countess of Ariano, asked her to pray for him. In this vision the doors symbolize the needs of the body, instead of the senses, but still relate to the corporeal field. The vision concerns a king, representing every Christian, who entrusts his daughter, symbolizing the soul, to a guardian (reason) and tells him to defend his house (the body). Among the rules given to the guardian, one is: “[Do] not [. . .] let any enemy get in through the doors.” Then the Virgin Mary explains the symbology of the vision:

Per portas vero dicte domus intelligo omnia corporis necessaria, que quidem corpus non potest excusare, scilicet comedere, bibere, dormire et vigilare, quando que eciam turbati et letari. Oportet igitur custodem, idest racionem, cum sollicitudine hiis portis, idest corporis necessariis, assistere et cum diuino timore inimicis, ne ad animam introeant, sapienter et assidue resistere. Igitur sicut insumptione cibi et potus cauendum est, ne inimicus per superfluitatem introeat, que corpus ad seruiendum Deo accidio sum reddit, ita eciam cauendum est, ne per abstinentie nimietatem, que corpus ad omnia facienda defectuosum reddit, hostis ingressum habeat.

By the doors of the house I mean all the needs of the body, all that a body cannot do without, such as eating, drinking, sleeping and waking, as well as occasionally feeling upset or

cheerful. Your guardian reason must attend to these doors, that is, to the needs of the body, with care, and with godly fear wisely and steadfastly defend them so that enemies do not get into the soul. Just as when taking food and drink one must make sure not to let the enemy in through excesses that render the body sluggish for the service of God, so too one must make sure so that no enemy gains entry through excessive abstinence, which renders the body feeble for any kind of activity. (Birgitta of Sweden, Rev 7.5.36, 37)

Reason – who attends to the doors, i.e., to the needs of the body, making the latter fit for service to God – is then what puts the body and its needs fully at the disposal of God and impedes its degradation either through excessive consumption or excessive abstinence. Reason constitutes the link between the corporeal and the spiritual. A striking resonance with this passage emerges in Domenica's sermon from 1526 where she states that "la ragione, quando conculca el senso, ha occhi per tutto. Significa ch'ella è illuminata dal capo infin a' piedi e che co' piedi e con tutto 'l corpo vede el suo Dio" [reason, when she subjugates the senses, has eyes for all. It means that she is illuminated from head to toe and that with her toes and her whole body sees her God] (Narducci 1999, 111).

Birgitta's vision is also echoed in the 1533 sermon dedicated to Caterina Cibo to which I referred previously. In that sermon the metaphor of the queens/senses reiterates the question of the discipline of the body, but the role of reason is performed by Queen Exclamatory and Governess, who manages the government of the body: "[Come potrebbe] El corpo cibarsi, lavarsi, raconciarsi, vestirsi, se non fusse questa regina?" [How could the body feed itself, wash itself, tidy itself and dress itself if it were not for this queen?] (Narducci 1999, 136). At the end of this sermon Birgitta returns as a lofty model to imitate: like Birgitta, "non [bisogna] si lasciare stripicciare adosso né lasciarsi corrompere da le damigelle de la sensualità" [You should not let the damsels of sensuality rub off on you or corrupt you] (Narducci 1999, 141). Birgitta, the powerful widow who chose chastity before carnal and earthly love, was the highest example of discipline, knowing how to master her passions, senses and body. Domenica contrasted her with Eve, who should have kept the doors of the senses closed, instead of which the devil "trovò le damigelle della sensualità" [found the damsels of sensuality] (Narducci 1999, 137). Unlike the Virgin Mary, whose body was endowed with divine qualities (divine motherhood, virginity, immaculate conception and holy assumption) that could be venerated but not fully imitated by women (Frugoni 2021, 90), Birgitta was an incarnate subject, an embodied model, who exploited the full potentialities of a woman's body. However, a more complex picture of Domenica's experience and understanding of the body takes shape if one looks at her hagiography, from which emerges her conflictual and deeply unresolved relationship with the body.

Immaterial, Angelified and Martyrized Body

The reference to the Birgittine model demonstrates that Domenica conceived of the body as a means through which God communicated an urgent message, and the door through which she could access an ulterior reality. The body had divine attributes, which made it a sanctified object. In other words, the body could be an active instrument of God through the senses, paving the way for an idea of the subject as someone who is simultaneously acting and acted upon, active and passive (Butler 2015, 15–16). The body is not only a symbolic channel, but also a very material one, with material needs that have to be governed. Yet, while the material nature of the body clearly emerges from Domenica's sermons, in the hagiographic narrative the body acquires different traits. Her *vita*, written in Latin by Francesco da Castiglione and personally revised by Domenica, with a fairly faithful translation into Italian by the Dominican friar Anton Maria Riconesi between 1637 and 1640, describes her body as angelic, that is, incorporeal and spiritual. An original drawing by Francesco da Castiglione even depicts her on the cross, identifying her as “alter Christus” (Callahan 2012), deprived of all her personal traits and elevated to a pure symbol of passion. The recurring description of Domenica's spiritual travels, a hagiographic *topos* related to sixteenth-century living saints, hints at the hagiographer's attempt to convey a dematerialized portrait of Domenica.

Indeed, this dematerialization repeatedly emerges in the tale of her mystic flights, as when she was conducted to the symbolic city of Rome to receive revelations on the future: “in spirito fu condotta a Roma e le vengono rivelate molte cose future” [She was conducted to Rome in spirit and many future things were revealed to her] (Riconesi 1637–1640, I 176r). Her ecstasies are often accompanied by miraculous movements in the air, as many examples show. For instance, “Un ratto mirabile nel quale fu veduta da più persone volare in aria” [She was seen by many people while flying in the air during a wondrous rapture] (Riconesi 1637–1640, I 176r), and “Sente angelici canti, viene rapita in estasi e alzata da terra e riportata nella sua cella dal suo angelo custode” [She hears angelic chants, is rapt in ecstasy and lifted from the ground and brought back into her cell by her guardian angel] (Riconesi 1637–1640, I 196r).

The exchange of hearts is another frequent image: “Estratto il cuore, sostituito con un cuore nuovo e Maggiore” [Her heart was extracted and substituted with a new and bigger one] (Riconesi 1637–1640, I 180r). After this substitution, “[i suoi] sentimenti [erano] più acuti e puri, corpo più debole, la sua mente più elevata” [[Her] sensations were more acute and pure, her body weaker, her mind more elevated] and she was gifted with the “dono della sapienza mediante il quale intendeva le sacre scritture e dettava lettere e libri spirituali” [gift of wis-

dom, through which she understood the Sacred Scriptures and dictated letters and spiritual books] (Riconesi 1637–1640, I 188r). Not only did her heart substitution symbolize the purely immaterial nature of this bodily organ, but the heart itself was also a metaphor for the spiritual and intellectual gifts given to Domenica in view of her future sanctification. However, while picturing the saintly body as evanescent and immaterial, as happened in many contemporary hagiographies modelled on the *Legenda Maior* of Catherine of Siena, the hagiographic tale reveals a conflicted conception of the body. In reporting Domenica's deeds, the hagiographer uncovered the uncanny truth of her body: despite the fact that it could fly through the air, fall in ecstasy and be spiritually elevated, Domenica's body was the earthly remains obstructing her complete sanctification.

This contradiction compelled Domenica to strive for bodily suffering and self-torture whilst simultaneously recognizing the untouchable character of the body as a divine creation. Suffering bodies are at the centre of the religious writings of many prophetic and mystic authors, who belonged to a tradition of imitating the tortured body of Christ. Women often performed bodily religious practices centring on violent expressions of divine possession, illness and weakness, especially during the upsurge of religious unrest on the eve of the Reformation, although similar phenomena were also common in later periods, such as the 1640s English Revolution (Purkiss 1992, 144; Thorne 2013, 134).

For Domenica, self-inflicted pain was a reaction to the perceived limits and flaws of the flesh, but also a strategy to validate her own prophetic charisma in the eyes of her supporters and opponents, since her attempts to hurt herself were usually halted by a supernatural intervention. When reason was not capable of governing the body, the latter became an unbearable burden that she unsuccessfully tried to annihilate. A description is given of Domenica praying and reflecting on her weakness, sensuality and self-hatred:

Debilitata la sposa di Cristo e la lunghezza dell'orazione stimando la debolezza, sensualità e odio di se stessa cominciò a scorticarsi la mano sinistra ma impedita da Santa Caterina che li ricuci la ferita, essa la sdruciva, considerando in questo cucito l'opere inutili di coloro che operano senza il nodo della fede. (Riconesi 1637–1640, III 511r)

[During a lengthy prayer, Christ's bride was debilitated and meditated on her weakness, sensuality and self-hatred; so she started to skin her left hand, but, blocked by Saint Catherine of Siena who stitched her wound, she would unstitch it, as she considered this stitching to be the worthless work of those who act without the knot of faith.]

Domenica thus performed an exemplary punishment on herself for those who only superficially acted in the name of God. Then she spoke to her "senses," blaming them for becoming too bold, and soon after she turned against her body:

“veggo ben io che tu hai preso troppo animo, e che sei diventato troppo audace, e che tu vuoi imitare le ranocchie le quali nuotano leggermente nell’acqua e querule garriscono e bevono; queste sono le loro opere che desideri di fare il medesimo [. . .].” Detto questo, infiammata di vendetta contro al proprio corpo, prese il coltello, cominciò a tagliarsi la pelle. (Riconesi 1637–1640, III 511v)

[“I see that you have taken too much courage, you have become too audacious, and you want to imitate the frogs who lightly swim in the sea, and querulously chirp and drink; these are the same works that you desire to do [. . .].” This said, inflamed with revenge against her own body, she took the knife and started to cut her skin.]

She justified her brute actions against herself by saying: “molto più atroci furono le piaghe che sostenne il mio redentore” [The sores that my redeemer bore were much more atrocious] (Riconesi 1637–1640, III 511v). Saint Catherine of Siena, the patroness of the Dominicans, appeared again and scolded her: “Non hai alcuno ius contro questo corpo; egli non è tuo, forse ti sei scordata che hai rinunciato il tuo libero arbitrio?” [You do not have any right against this body. It is not yours: have you perhaps forgotten that you renounced your free will?] (Riconesi 1637–1640, III 511r). Domenica insisted and implored Catherine to help her “scortic[are] questo porco” [skin this swine] (*porco*, i.e., “swine” is an anagram of *corpo*, i.e., “body”). Catherine answered: “offenderesti il signore” [you would offend the Lord], she therefore wanted instead to “ricucire questa ferita” [stitch this wound again] (Riconesi 1637–1640, III 511v). Catherine thus stopped Domenica’s self-torture with a supernatural intervention.

A deep hatred of the body reemerges in a conversation between Domenica and her spiritual father, who told her he could not find any mortal sin in her. The hagiography reports that she blamed her tongue for being incapable of sincere confession and tried to cut it off, but she was stopped. Domenica then bit her tongue until it tore, but the Lord healed it and exhorted her to pray for the people before his plague arrived (Riconesi 1637–1640, III 512v). Domenica’s self-harm was constantly blocked by God or the saints with the double aim of proving her sanctity and testifying that only God could dispose of the saint’s body. Yet, despite these miraculous interventions, Domenica was not completely discouraged from persecuting her body and manifesting a holy self-contempt. The sex-based connotations of Domenica’s self-hatred, i.e., its being directed against her female body as the locus of intolerable sexual impulses, permeated multiple episodes of her life but were particularly evident in the “tale of the eel.” In one instance Domenica wanted to annihilate her inordinate desire for food:

avendo la sposa di Cristo avuto voglia d'una anguilla salata per mortificare la sua gola prese la bambagia del calamaio e assottigliatala in forma d'anguilla, la voleva mangiare, ma proibita dall'Angiolo, mangiò il capo di una anguilla crudo, in terra, come le gatte, per disprezzo di se stessa. (Riconesi 1637–1640, III 529r)

[As Christ's bride wanted a salty eel, to mortify her throat, after taking cottonwool from the inkpot and flattening it into the form of an eel, she was going to eat it. Halted by the Angel, she ate the head of a raw eel while lying on the ground like a female cat, in contempt of herself.]

Here unspoken sexual temptations – implicitly and symbolically recalled by the condemnation of gluttony – torment *Domenica*, whose female body is not only the locus of a specifically sex-based desire to suffer but also the locus of sex-based self-punishment. However, self-harm was not only a way to atone for having a female body, but also a way to shed light on *Domenica's* innate connection with the destiny of the city of Florence. As the hagiography reports, *Domenica*,

Avida di patire da limosina a un'inferma per aver da lei de pidocchi, e proibita di far troppe limosine si trova miracolosamente in tasca alcuni quattrini e li da all'istessa povera e li toglie altri pidocchi quali si pose drento alla camicia per essere da quelli corrosa. (Riconesi 1637–1640, III 523r)

[Eager to suffer, gave alms to a sick woman in order to have her lice. Although she was banned from giving too many alms, she miraculously found some coins in her pocket and gave them to that poor woman. *Domenica* simultaneously grabbed some lice from the woman and put them in her own shirt so as to be bitten by them.]

In torturing herself for the weakness of her flesh, *Domenica* risked sliding into worse sins. But instead of letting her fall into the devil's arms, another miraculous intervention saved her, confirming her sanctity and dispelling suspicions of diabolical inspiration:

Come ella fu corrosa da suddetti vermi in modo che versava sangue et apprendoli il demonio in effigie della Gloriosa vergine essa accesa del divino amore lo schernisce e lo forza a pigliar forma orribile li getta della sua carne in faccia e percosso lo scaccia. (Riconesi 1637–1640, III 525r)

[As she was corroded by the above-mentioned vermin so that she was pouring blood, the devil appeared disguised as the glorious Virgin. Enlightened by the divine love, however, [*Domenica*] ridiculed the devil and forced him to reveal his horrible form, threw the lice from her flesh against his face, and beat him away.]

In the end, Christ appeared to *Domenica* who prayed to him to save Florence through her sacrifice, just as he suffered to save humanity:

Nelle morsicature de suddetti vermi considerando la sposa di Cristo la sua passione egli li apparve e li manifesta la causa della suddetta tentazione del demonio e chiedendoli essa di

patire per la città di Firenze il Signore le dice essere necessario che egli mandi il flagello e in un istante la libera dai vermi e piaghe suddette. (Riconesi 1637–1640, III 527r)

[While Christ's bride was looking at the vermin's bites and considering his passion, he appeared and manifested the cause of the above-mentioned temptation of the devil. As she asked to suffer for the sake of the city of Florence, the Lord told her it was necessary that he send the plague and at once freed her from the above-mentioned worms and wounds.]

The Florentine people had gone too far: “essi mi voltano le spalle, ricalcitrano, e non vogliono venire a me [. . .] disprezzano me e quelli che li chiamano: né vogliono udire più la verità” [They turn their backs on me, are recalcitrant and do not want to come to me [. . .] they despise me and those who call them; they do not want to listen to the truth anymore] (Riconesi 1637–1640, III 527v).

Unlike Domenica, whose mortal body was saved, the body politic of Florence could not be spared by God's punishment as a result of the corruption and lack of faith of its inhabitants. As a prophet, Domenica could not prevent the ruin of Florence but, by exposing its causes, she made God's will and justice manifest.

Conclusion

Angelified, sanctified and martyred: these bodily states are always intertwined in Domenica's life and works, confirming the idea that the body is always a *symbolic construction*, and not just an anatomical fact. Domenica did not merely despise the body as the locus of imperfection and impurity: her scorn of bodily and sensual temptations went hand in hand with the recognition of the relevance of the body in facilitating communion with God. Like previous mystic women such as Catherine of Siena, who appropriated a corporeal language of rapture, Domenica extolled bodily powers while arguing for the need to govern them through discipline and the use of reason. Her spiritual raptures, visions and mystic flights angelified and sanctified her body and its faculties.

Domenica's definition of the senses as doors to transcendence – therefore as related not only to the material but also to the supernatural realm – delineates a specific understanding of the body and reality. Corporeal faculties do not simply mediate one's access to reality but can also show what transcends and determines reality itself. In this sense, Domenica employed the body as both a passive and active instrument for realizing God's will. In doing so, she asserted the need to pursue the holy union of body and soul through reason and the government of the senses. Discipline thus constituted a crucial element of her prophetic charisma and was incarnated in her work by Birgitta of Sweden who, in contrast with Eve, proved women's capacity to renounce worldly pleasures and wholly dedicate themselves

to God. Despite being the source of Domenica's prophetic authority, discipline was by no means limited to the elected. On the contrary, as Domenica's sermons emphasized, every individual had to continuously and autonomously cultivate it. This ideal of self-discipline contributed to the rising process of social disciplining in Europe.

But although the use of reason and the government of the senses were fundamental in enjoying divine grace, they were not sufficient. They had to be completed by the love of God, the lack of which (or the impression that it was lacking) had to be corrected through self-inflicted bodily punishment.

Self-harm and mortification afflicted Domenica's body, making it comparable to that of the Christian martyrs, thus worthy of veneration as a saintly body. In the hagiographic narrative, the superior reason of God or the saints intervened to stop the self-inflicted martyrdom, suggesting that God did not demand the annihilation of the bodies of his creatures. Domenica actively performed *imitatio Christi* through intense suffering only to be interrupted by God and her protecting saints: since her body was not her own, but God's, Domenica could not dispose of it as she wished. Miraculous interventions served a double purpose: they uncovered the unescapable nature of the body, which could never be utterly transcended, and confirmed her sanctity. The body could be cleansed or harmed, but never erased, and was both a chain that tied her to the world and matter as well as being a door to heaven. While the body, and specifically the female body, constituted an intrinsic limit to elevation, it could also become the link to otherworldly pleasures and truth. Through discipline, reason and the love of God, the body could turn women's weakness into strength.

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