AT: Welcome to Infinite Women, I'm your host Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Beth Hubble, professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Montana. Regular listeners may recognize Beth from previous episodes about transgender histories, the French medieval writer Marie de France, and Italian-French feminist writer Christine de Pizan. But before you rush off to listen to those episodes, stick around, because today we're talking about 17th century Ethiopian noblewoman Walatta Petros.

Listen to Beth's episodes on trans histories (transcript), Marie de France (transcript) and Christine de Pizan (transcript).

BH: For the last 15-plus years, I've taught this class that's a great books by women class. And I inherited a syllabus 15 years ago. I taught it and I taught it. And then probably seven, eight years ago, I started going, "boy, this is still just a lot of dead white women that I'm teaching here in this class," and started trying to think and look for things outside of that. And it's surprisingly hard. And then the other thing going into how I know about Walatta Petros, it's those kind of twofold of looking for authors that fit into important women, but who aren't European or North American. But this one goes to another level in that I am a French medievalist by training. And I have a strong background in religious women's practices in medieval Europe, and into the early modern period. And like five years ago, and it must have been on social media, because I don't know where else I would have seen this, this book that is translated by an American scholar named Wendy Belcher, popped up, and it was all like, "check out this biography of this Ethiopian saint Walatta Petros, and how she kept the Portuguese Jesuits out of Ethiopia." And I'm like, "who is that? How is there a religious woman from the early modern period that I've never heard of before?" And so I ordered this book to start learning about this woman in Ethiopia, who did amazing things and is a saint in the Ethiopian Christian Church.

And it's not just that I had never heard about her. Belcher's translation is 2015. It had not been translated. It was translated into Italian from Ge'ez, which is the Ethiopian, that's like Latin for Roman Catholicism in the Ethiopian Church. It's not a language that's spoken anymore. But it's their religious language in Ethiopia. It had been translated from that into Italian in like 1900. And then nothing. And so Belcher had lived in Ethiopia when she was a child. Her dad had worked in a hospital there. And so she had connections. And then she found someone who really knew the language. And his name is Michael Kleiner. And they were going to monasteries in the 2010, 2012 time, they think they found the original. manuscript in her monastery in Ethiopia that she founded. And so I get this book and I start reading it. And it is just one of the more amazing books I've ever read. I should probably explain what the book is. And so those of us that work in religious studies are fairly familiar with what's known as hagiography. So writings about saints and sometimes we'll say saints lives. And so this is the Ethiopian version of that.

So within about 30 years of her death, a monk sat down and wrote her life. And that's this book, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*. And so he actually would have been able to talk to people who knew her during her life, and wrote her story down. And her story is absolutely, mind-blowingly fascinating, because in her life, the Portuguese had come to Ethiopia, first for trade, and then fairly newly-formed Jesuits showed up to convert them from Ethiopian Christianity to Roman Catholicism. And I kept thinking that I was going to find out how this part of the story was not correct, but it appears to absolutely be correct. The king converts to Roman Catholicism. Most of the noble men convert. All the rich men convert, including the king. The women say, uh-uh. The king's daughter, niece, all of them, they're like, "nope." Walatta Petros, who's a noble woman, is like, "nope." Her husband converts. She says no. And historical records, not just this spiritual biography of her, but other records show that it was largely the women in Ethiopia that drove the Jesuits out. And it's the reason that through to this day, while close to like 50%, more than that of Ethiopia is Christian, they are Ethiopian Christian. And it's kind of connected to Coptic Christianity, but it's its own form of Christianity that predates, the first Christians in Ethiopia were in the 300s. And so it's an older form. Their Bible is different, all those things. And you read this story about her and you see these women who were literate, who could read, all these things, and they're the ones that fought against the Jesuits. And they won. The one king dies, the next king's like, "yeah, no, we're not forcing Catholicism on you anymore." And so it was just reading this

story that really goes against what we think about really early colonial Africa and the power of the women in this area and in this church. And I was absolutely fascinated. And it really adds, for me, texture to my own understanding of religious women in medieval Europe and things like that.

AT: And something that's come up before in our previous conversations is that there have been quite a few saints who seem pretty queer through a modern lens, shall we say. And interestingly, I actually have another conversation with Jessica Scott and we were talking about queerness in South Africa and queer activism. And one of the things that came up in that conversation was that there are certain conservative politicians in particular in African countries who try to claim that queerness, whether that's gender queerness or sexuality queerness, they like to present it as a Western thing because they're trying to other queer people by claiming that like, “oh, this isn't something that is intrinsic to our people. It is something that was brought here.” And we talked about how the irony is that we know for a fact that European colonialism typically had the opposite effect of trying to downplay and eradicate queerness and enforce gender binaries and all of that. So we touched on the irony that, A, that's not really true, but also it's actually the opposite of the impact that colonialism tended to have. And so I find that interesting because we're talking about the difference between Ethiopian Christianity and what the Jesuits were trying to bring in and also the fact that from my understanding of it, Walatta Petros was part of our queer history, shall we say.

BH: Yes. And I can absolutely talk about that. (AT: Please do!) So Walatta Petros gets married to a man at around age 16. They have three failed pregnancies and he's persecuting her religious people. And so not the happiest of marriages. And so she feels like this is a sign. And so she wants to become a nun. She wants to leave the marriage and be a religious woman and dedicate herself to religion. And so she runs off, gets brought back, reconciled, runs off again. She eventually gets to leave. And she must have been an amazingly charismatic person because a community starts to form around her. And so she has some followers and then a man actually says to her, and I'm reading from Belcher's translation. “He said to her, ‘my child, how can you live alone without a companion? That is not good for you.’ Our Holy Mother Walatta Petros replied, ‘how do I do that? From where will I find a companion who will live with me? Am I not a stranger?’ And he said, ‘I myself will bring you one. There is a fine woman named Eheta Kristos who, like you, left her husband and home, became a nun and now lives with her sister. This would be good for both of you.’” And so both of them say, “well, I don't want to live with a woman who left her husband,” which is strange. But then the end of that chapter says, “as soon as our Holy Mother Walatta Petros and Eheta Kristos saw each other from afar, love was infused into both their hearts, love for one another. And approaching, they exchanged the kiss of greeting. Then they sat down and told each other stories of God. There was no fear or mistrust between them. They were like people who had known each other beforehand because the Holy Spirit united them.” The next chapter starts, “they then deliberated together and decided that they would live together. And they lived together until Walatta Petros is dead and then Eheta Kristos becomes the leader of the community of the monastery when Walatta Petros dies.

Listen to Dr Jessica Scott on queer activism in the US South and South Africa or read the transcript.

AT: So you're saying they were “roommates?”

BH: Oh, they were. Yes, they were roommates. They were roommates. When I read that part, my mind went, “oh my God,” because that is something that's witnessed in European nuns as well, that their closest relationships were with other nuns, because that's who they were with. And this one here that is really represented as this passionate love at first sight has really struck people, including Belcher, who's actually written about same-sex intimacies in Walatta Petros. What is interesting here is that there's a passage way later in the book when Walatta Petros, when she has a monastery, she's running it, appears to be over

men and women, which is unusual even in Ethiopian Christianity. She was very highly respected during her life. And she sees a group of nuns and they're flirting with each other. And she has this horrid reaction to it. The title of the chapter is “our mother sees nuns lusting after each other.” She has this reaction to it. She's horrified that they'll be damned for what they're doing. And her reaction is knowing that she lives with Eheta Kristos. The way that I understand it, the way that Belcher understands it, is it is that kind of cognitive dissonance. And that she and Eheta Kristos probably were celibate. They may not have done, we can never know, but that in reading that, because it stands out, it's a really unusual passage in the book. That's not what a lot of the book is about. That she appeared to be overcompensating in that passage for perhaps criticisms of her relationship with Eheta Kristos and things like that. So it's just because she's still going to be within rejection of the body and rejection of sexuality that you see in kind of Christianity overall. And so what happens with her because of that? Because that passage changes nothing, she still leaves the monastery to Eheta Kristosand all those things. That is her most important relationship. Whatever that relationship was like, you can never know, but it's really obvious in the text that her love match was Eheta Kristos, not the husband, not anyone else. Not Jesus, as you see in some medieval European nuns who write wild things about how they feel when they're alone in themselves with Jesus.

AT: Well, I feel like we need to distinguish here between sexual and romantic because as someone who does identify as asexual but is also married, I am not aromantic. And so I could obviously be projecting because we all have our own biases and something that we actually previously discussed in our trans histories conversation is that it's arguably impossible to put these definitive labels on historical figures unless we have very explicit documentation that we can reasonably assume is fairly accurate. So in a case like Walta Petros, you can see the lesbians wanting to claim her bisexual saying, “well, no, she was married to a man, so she's ours.” And, I'm out here repping the asexuals, although I do have to tell everyone, because this is one of my favorite things every time I talk to Beth, is I get to see her ace flag hair because the ace flag colors are basically white, black, gray, and purple. And that's what her hair looks like, and it makes me so happy every time I see Beth. And you don't get to see Beth, but I'm sharing it with you, so that's the next best thing. So all that to say, what you're describing to me sounds like someone who has what appears to be potentially a romantic interest in this other woman, but has absolutely zero sexual interest, whether that's socialized or innate, because we know there's so many social norms that play into particularly women's attitudes around their own sexuality, and so we have to acknowledge that that could have been socialized into her, is that feeling that, “oh no, this is wrong, this is potentially repulsive.” But with that being said, there are aces, so asexuals, who today will talk about being sex-repulsed as more of an innate feeling rather than anything that was socialized into them. So it is one of those things that we will never have an answer to, but that's kind of my favorite thing to talk about, is these questions and ideas that we can never know for sure.

BH: I think that's one of the reasons that when I've taught this book, and I think it's one of the reasons that it resonated with me so strongly, was that there isn't a simple answer, and my students do tend to be LGBTQ+ more heavily, and they can see themselves in these figures in ways that they can't with kind of the great books, normative texts that they're often being taught. And so for me, I'm going to read it very much in a fairly standard academic, but also cishet way of, this is like Ruth and Naomi in the Bible, and look at Hildegard and Richardus, but I think that one's queer too. But my students read it, and this is why I love teaching books like this, my students read it, and it resonates with them in ways that it doesn't for me, because as someone who is cisgender, who does identify as heterosexual, I read that, and it doesn't impact me necessarily personally. And then I teach it, and my students are like, “oh my God, did you see this part?” And I know immediately when I ask them to share, what part stood out to you, I know whether they've gotten to that chapter, because if they haven't, they won't say anything, because they're seeing themselves in these historical figures, and here seeing themselves in a non-Western historical figure. And because the things that you're saying around asexuality, and there isn't a lot of asexual representation in literature and in historical texts. And so to have that

passage here that can resonate with students on that level as well, it's made it a really interesting book to teach, and one that the students really, really like, because I think they also recognize they're never getting to read African literature, they're never getting taught African history, and here's a queer woman, educated, literate, all these things. And the sense with Walatta Petros is that she really has been erased from history, especially anything to do anything in the West, and that in the 21st century, these manuscripts are still not digitized. Belcher did some of it when she had to travel to the monasteries in Ethiopia, and they have them on their shelves, and so for the students to feel, here's this history that no one has shared, because the point you made about what has happened in African countries, Belcher faced huge backlash for daring to talk about same-sex desire in this text.
In fact, a really interesting part of the whole translation process was the Italian guy who translated it at the turn of the 20th century, but he misread one of the lines in the part about the nuns lusting after each other, so he translated like they were pushing each other instead of flirting with each other, and Belcher shows how the characters are not that different, but they're different enough. Did he do that intentionally when he translated it? And then she was working with people in Ethiopia. One of the women that she was working with said, “if you take this to the experts in the language, they're going to tell you what you want to hear, but they're not going to tell you what they really think, and you're not going to get a clear answer,” so it took her a long time to get to someone that would say, “oh no, they're flirting with each other. That's what it's talking about,” because it reveals exactly what you're saying. It reveals that part of their history that some of the conservative reactionary groups are trying to suppress, because this is a really clear example that in Ethiopia, prior, outside of European contact, here's this passionate relationship between two women. All of those things make this just a story that more people need to know. Women in power, women who know how to work the system to get it to work for them. She was taken in front of the king several times, and they tried to force her to convert to Roman Catholicism, and she just wouldn't. And they did that to a fair number of the women of the court at the time.

AT: Something that came up, not just in the conversation that I mentioned with Jessica, where we were talking about queer activism in South Africa, specifically in the context of South Africa within the broader continent of Africa as a whole. And so when we're talking about countries like Ethiopia, same-sex activity is still criminal. If I'm recalling correctly, over half of the countries where same-sex sexual activity is illegal, over half of the countries in the world where that is the case, are on the continent of Africa. And that is true of Ethiopia specifically. And so one of the things that I remember chatting with Jessica about, as well as before that I talked with Lauren Jae Gutterman, is trying to find documentation and records of particularly women of color being queer. That intersection of racialized history and queer history, both of which are marginalized, on top of the marginalization of women's history in the first place. And so it's like this Venn diagram of marginalizations, where at that center all you've got is often a very small selection of documentation that still exists, and even less that people are actively talking about, that are readily available. So like you said, this wasn't digitized, she had to physically go to Ethiopia to access these documents. And even then, because of the language barrier, she was still at a disadvantage because she is having to trust in people who often are going to have their own biases that they are putting on these translations and the meanings, because we know that the meanings of words change with their context, and so over time a certain phrase or word like intercourse used to mean something very different. Awful used to mean the same thing as what we now consider awesome to mean. Words do change and part of being able to trust a translation is being able to trust that this person understands not just “this word means this word,” it's being able to understand that historical context that the person was writing in. And so there are so many barriers that I could see someone like Belcher facing as she's trying to bring what sounds like a pretty important story for world history, Ethiopian history, and she's just trying to bring it to light, but there are so many of these barriers in her path.

Listen to Dr Lauren Jae Gutterman on lesbian desire in US marriages or read the transcript.

BH: Yes, one of the things that she writes about in the introduction, there are two different editions of this book. One is the super academic one with 50,000

footnotes and an introduction that's 150 pages long, but a lot of detail on the translation theory that they used for this book, and it is to be as literal as they can, as word for word, to be as close to the language as they can to try not to be imposing any of that on there, which is always impossible. And from the 1670s when this would have been written down through to today, things are going to have changed, but not so much necessarily in this language because like church Latin, it's fairly fixed because it's not spoken anymore. But it is to think about all the different ways that this story could be important to people. The manuscripts are illustrated with beautiful Ethiopian Christian symbolism that's really different from European and Western symbolism, and in one of them it shows, Walatta Petros, one of the things that happens when you dedicate yourself to the church in Ethiopia is you shave your head. And so there's an image of her shaving her head and a whole passage in here about her rejecting all of the trappings of femininity to take on this other role. And so those passages resonate with students as well of saying there are other ways to live and other ways to dress and other things like that that are important.

Really interesting that if I understand right through to today, there's still a fairly high percentage of people in Ethiopia who go into monasteries. I'm not surprised by this. One of the things I do when I teach this is I give them all, my American students, a blank map of Africa and a list of all the countries. And I say, fill them in. And let me tell you, they get three right. Egypt, South Africa, Madagascar, because of the cartoon. I'm not a ton better. I can do all of North and West Africa because I have a background in French. So I can do most of the French-speaking part and fill that in. But circling back to your idea about the intersectional parts of it as well, I just think the importance of showing an African woman with power, who on the political and the religious stage was so important in this family and what a role model she could be to people. And barely anyone knows that she existed. It's one of the reasons that Ethiopia was never really colonized. And is still, when you look at the pie chart of religions, it's close to 50% are Ethiopian. There's another like 20% who are Muslim, a very small percentage who are other religions there today. And that it was women that did that. And so on some level, it's an erasure of the queer history, but it's also an erasure just of women's history overall.

And that's one of the things that Belcher talks about is they went through, because the Portuguese Jesuits were keeping records. They wrote home. And so they have both the court records in Ethiopia and they have the Jesuit records of that time. And when you read both sides of it, and you need to read both sides so you can read between the ideological lines of both, that it really was the women that were fighting them. It was the king's niece who just refused. And some stories about this time try to kind of undercut it. And Belcher says, but when you read both of them together, you read what the Ethiopian historians wrote, you read what the Jesuits wrote, these women were causing so much trouble. And for one woman like Walatta Petros or the king's niece is one as well, to come up multiple times in these Jesuit stories when men are not featured in that tension about converting the country is just really telling about what was happening at that time and the power that these women had at that time.

I cannot speak to how well known it is in Ethiopia. When I teach this, my students have no idea that Ethiopia even has Christians, let alone that they have their own church. As we see the United States trying to ban the teaching of any history that isn't white and…(AT: CHAWMs. BH: Yeah. AT: What I call CHAWMs, the cishet abled white men.) Yeah. I felt, reading about Walatta Petros, this world open up to think about this strong woman in Ethiopia in the 17th century who allowed the country to stay with their own traditions in ways that other countries, because of the different colonial powers that came to bear, weren't able to.

AT: I always want to distinguish between when we're talking about, is this person remembered? Just because you and I, two white American women, haven't heard of this person doesn't necessarily mean that she's not celebrated in her own country, because we do see that plenty of times where just because, as you said, I would say most Americans probably can't identify most other countries on a map. And even if you ask them to label all 50 states, I think most of us would be a little sketchy on a couple of them. That's all I'm saying. Geography is not our strong suit. (BH: Yeah.) But when it comes to what you're saying, at least about the queer side of her history, I'm very curious, do people in Ethiopia know who she is? If you said this name to the average

Ethiopian, would they recognize her significance as far as we know?

BH: Because she is considered a saint, they might. She's not the only woman saint written about. And so there is a scholar who has published in, I think it's Amharic, the language of Ethiopia today, and has published on it. It's been translated into the modern language, I think in 2004. And so I do think there is a level of it. It would be really interesting to see. I know that there was a huge outcry over what Belcher said and wrote about in Ethiopia from the conservative church leaders. And so how much did what this story tells lead it to not being shared? And I can't speak to that. Thinking about this idea of these Jesuits blaming the women for not being able to get in Ethiopia. It's not just blaming. They are the actual reason. The women actually stood up to them. And so thinking about how are those stories being read and interpreted, because even Western scholars have read the Portuguese records and said, oh, that's just misogyny. Instead of going, no, it's the truth. These women stood up to them. (AT: It can be both.) It can be both. Yes, exactly. And I've seen that in the hands of even Western scholars, a misunderstanding of the role that these women played in Ethiopia and overlooking passages, taking it as just misogyny, when it might actually be both that and actually what happened.

AT: And what I find fascinating about that is, particularly if we're talking about European scholars, particularly if we're talking about white male scholars, dismissing a historical record saying women did a thing, women had power, they used it, and they were impactful. Dismissing that as not being historically factual is in itself a form of misogyny. You are inherently disregarding the idea that women could have done a thing. And that is a reflection, I would say, typically of someone's own biases at play, but it's something that we see all the time. One of the things that I talk about in my book is even today, you still get articles saying, “did a woman actually do a thing?” And then the article goes on to say, “yeah, it seems like she did a thing.” So then why did you pose it as a question? Why are you not giving women the benefit of the doubt? And I would also assume that there is a racialized component here as well, because one of the things that came up in a conversation that I had with Sarah Bellows-Blakely about international approaches to girls' education in the Global South. So broadly speaking, that refers to Africa and South America. Funnily enough, Australia never seems to be considered part of the Global South. Gee, I wonder why. (sarcastic) Anyway, I digress, often. Point being, one of the things that we were discussing was attitudes around how predominantly white richer countries view these Global South countries, how they view the people there. And this idea that people from, say, Europe are more likely to look down on, underestimate, etc., however you want to describe that particular bias, right? I think there is very much this idea that assuming that particularly women of color from African countries probably didn't actually do a thing. To me, that sounds both racist and sexist.

Listen to Dr Sarah Bellows-Blakeley on issues around international approaches to girls' education or read the transcript.

BH: Well, and I think you can see in the treatment of these texts, these ancient old, old texts, and it's Ge’ez is the language, these texts dismissing them. And there are religious scholars of Christianity, some who go, “this is one of the oldest resources we have on Christianity. And it's been overlooked because it's in Africa.” And so to go back and say, in the fourth century, fifth century, what did this before, so I believe Christianity came to Ethiopia in the year 330-ish, around there, the New Testament for Protestants and Catholics wasn't even set yet, or it's about that time, 325 maybe for that. And so you have this very old Christianity that's super interesting to look at in comparison to the Christianity that was getting solidified in Italy with the Roman Empire and North Africa with St. Augustine at that same time. And so to overlook this super old heritage, and funny thing with Ethiopia is they have a history of strong women. In the Bible, the Queen of Sheba. In the New Testament, the Candace is the Queen of Ethiopia. And so there are powerful queens in the Old Testament and the New Testament from this part of Africa. And so to now not be recognizing that the importance to something that's actually seen as really Western, which is Christianity, is fascinating. Looking at Ethiopia and the Christianity decenters Christianity for those of us that live in the West. I find that makes everything more

interesting, but there are some people who don't. I have been for a long time fascinated with Ethiopian Christianity because they say they have the Ark of the Covenant in Ethiopia today in a building that people aren't allowed in. And they have a history of Ark-shaped imagery in Ethiopia that is fascinating. Whether they have that relic, that most people in the West know from Indiana Jones, or not, no one can say. But they have these really old connections to the religions of the West that give a lot of interesting nuance and texture to it that makes it all more interesting to me.

AT: Let's get more into the religious side of it then, because I was raised Catholic, but I am by no means a religious scholar. So I'm curious if you could tell me a little bit more about, because obviously these are two different or at least divergent belief structures and sets of practices. But I feel like a lot of people might look at this and be like, “what it's one type of Christian, another type of Christian, what's the big deal?” And so other than obviously the colonial aspect of a white order coming in and wanting to take over in a non-white country, what was going on here? Why were the men so ready to just hop on board with the Jesuits and the women were like, “oh, hell no”?

BH: I think that's capitalism more than religion. I think they wanted the trade. I think the king was lured by the trade promises of the Portuguese merchants who were there first. There were really amazing missionaries that were good at converting people, but the women weren't convinced. My brain wants to go, here's a religion in Roman Catholicism that is more patriarchal. And then you have all these women in power in Ethiopia. It was unusual for a woman to be in charge of men in a monastery, Walatta Petros was over both, but it wasn't impossible. And so I think there is a gender aspect to that conversion. The belief systems actually have some pretty fundamental differences. They were declared heretics by the Jesuits. They don't believe in original sin. They don't think that Jesus had two natures, divine and human. They saw it blended as one. They also saw Jesus more in his human form than in his divine form. Walatta Petros in a vision argues with Jesus. Not believing in the doctrine of original sin, that one I think a lot of people will get. That's a big one. But actually for the Catholic Church, the nature of Christ has been something that they've been calling people heretics for about 1,000 years by the time they're in Ethiopia, because that was a super important debate in the early church. And so there are really, really profound theological differences because there's some of those base foundation things for the church. And something else that's fascinating when you read Walatta Petros's story is that the monk that writes it down, he just has the Bible memorized, but it's not the Bible I grew up with. The stories have little differences to them because it doesn't come down through the same manuscripts. It's connected in some ways to the Greek translation called the Septuagint that predates Saint Jerome's translation into Latin way later on. But it comes down a much different path. And so even for me reading it, it would quote part of the Bible and I'd go, “does it say that?” Well, it does in the Ethiopian Bible, but it doesn't in the Presbyterian Bible that I grew up in. And so that aspect of it as well, there are some pretty fascinating issues there. And while the Catholic Church is super devoted to the Virgin Mary, even more so in Ethiopian religion, she's really looked to, prayed to on a really profound level. They have a sense that Jesus saved us by dying, but Mary's the one who's present in our everyday life, helping us with our daily needs and things like that. So there's several books, The Miracles of Mary and things like that, that aren't stories that we have in the West. And so holding Mary up as well as someone to emulate and then looking at these women going into the church and vowing celibacy and things like that.

AT: So even apart from the additional elevation of Mary, because nobody's trying to claim that Mary's not important in pretty much every Christian religion that I'm aware of. But I want to come back to that question of original sin, because I feel like so often the concept of original sin has been specifically weaponized against women. The idea that we are all suffering because of original sin, and the original sin was from Eve, and so it's women's fault. And women are inherently worse people. Like you get this argument over and over again in Western history of original sin means that women are fundamentally more flawed, bad, sinful people because

it's Eve's fault. So this idea that they're saying, “yeah, no, we're good. We're not into that whole original sin thing.” Not that it would have been described as feminist, but to me, that feels like a very feminist distinction.

BH: I think it gets there because of how they view it. It sees humans as having the possibility to become divine. They believe that at the resurrection, both our bodies and our souls will be resurrected, not just our souls. And so they don't necessarily see the distinction between the body and soul because in the forms of Christianity that I'm familiar with in the West, soul: man, body: woman. If you don't see that much of a distinction between the body and soul and see them both as being possibly divine. And on top of that, they actually call Mary the Redeemer. You can see that this reverence for Mary, less of a focus on Eve and original sin does open up a space for female empowerment and leadership in ways. And I don't think that is going too far because I'm going to cite Belcher here who does absolutely go there and say that those are both really important aspects of, how was there a possibility that a woman could rise to the status that Walatta Petros had? She was not an exception. She was a product of those things just emphasized.

AT: So we touched on this a bit earlier, but beyond the simple facts of representation, which is not to diminish representation, representation does matter. But apart from being able to say, here is a queer African woman and your students being able to see themselves represented in various ways through her story. Apart from that, which again is not to diminish, that is very incredibly important for everyone to be able to see themselves reflected in positive ways in history. But beyond that, what do you think is important about Walatta Petros's story for either your students or for anyone who might be listening?

BH: The part that I was always really struck by was that pushback, because this was a really early colonial incursion into Africa because it's late 16th century. And that this is part of that pushing back. So that political aspect of it of here's this woman who stood up to the king, who stood up to the Jesuits, who stood up to all to her husband and all of those things. So that for me, it was putting this woman into history in some ways. When I read it, and I'm super familiar with a fair number of medieval religious women, and I've read their lives and I've read their works and things like that, I was struck fairly often with resemblances here, but also how this text goes farther. Walatta Petros, even after everything I said about Mary and how she's venerated, she's actually compared to Jesus way more than Mary in the text, which is unusual. Usually religious women are compared to Mary or they're the bride of Christ or something like that. She's compared to Christ in the text. And so she just politically, theologically, all those things just engaged my mind. And I was reading it through the perspective as that European medievalist going, that sounds like what's written about Hildegarde. That sounds like what's written about Gertrude the Great and things like that. But then I'd be like, “oh, but you just compared her to Jesus.” So for me, it was seeing her within more of that global history part of it that this story really stood out for me. And I felt like it pushed me to want to know more because my knowledge of African culture history at all was primarily the French colonies along the North Coast and the West African colonies. And this pushed me to want to learn more about Ethiopian history because of this woman who was so important and yet I'd never heard of her. I see her as being important on multiple levels beyond just that representation of giving insights into proto-colonial times in Africa, looking at the government system in Ethiopia, looking at the religion, and even in a literary sense of looking at this monk who wrote this down and seeing how he wrote it, that it's a really rich text on many, many levels. Because you can also do the art history thing with all the imagery and look at how differently they represent iconic Christian symbols in Ethiopia.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.