

WOMEN IN THE BODY AND SPIRIT: AN EXAMINATION OF MEDIEVAL TEXTS
AND THEIR IMPACT ON PATRIARCHY AND MODERN FEMINISM

by

Logan Wills Elizondo

HONORS THESIS

Submitted to Texas State University
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
graduation in the Honors College
August 2021

Thesis Supervisor:

Susan Signe Morrison

COPYRIGHT

by

Logan Wills Elizondo

2021

FAIR USE AND AUTHOR'S PERMISSION STATEMENT

Fair Use

This work is protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States (Public Law 94-553, section 107). Consistent with fair use as defined in the Copyright Laws, brief quotations from this material are allowed with proper acknowledgement. Use of this material for financial gain without the author's express written permission is not allowed.

Duplication Permission

As the copyright holder of this work, I, Logan Wills Elizondo, authorize duplication of this work, in whole or in part, for educational or scholarly purposes only.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the women in my life. Without you, I would not have become the person I am today, and for that I am eternally grateful. Thank you, I love you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	5
INTRODUCTION.....	6
CHAPTER	
I. WOMEN’S BODIES AND THE PROBLEM OF SIN.....	9
II. WOMEN’S PATH TOWARDS HEAVEN.....	17
III. WHAT WOMEN HAD TO SAY ABOUT THEMSELVES	30
IV. JULIAN OF NORWICH AND HER THEOLOGY.....	39
CONCLUSION.....	47
LITERATURE CITED.....	49

ABSTRACT

Medieval England was deeply connected to the Christian church in many different ways. Most social and cultural influences came from the church, and one of the major parts of that cultural influence was the established patriarchal society perpetuated by religious leaders. Women were considered to be of a lower class than men, not only in secular circles but religious ones especially. Here, I examine some of the texts which were foundational to this history of misogyny in the church, and what they say about women and their role in the religious world. Additionally, I look at what women writing at the time had to say about themselves and their relationship to God and the church. Through all of this, I intend to question what influence medieval English women had on Christian doctrine and theology, and what impact their writing may have had in the long term.

Introduction

The western world has been living in the shadow of patriarchy for millennia. From Ancient Greece and Rome, through the rise of the British Empire, to the 21st century, women have been considered less than men, their choices for social mobility have been incredibly restricted, and their voices have been silenced. Women have been restricted from positions of power in society, government, and even within their own family lives, such as oppressive inheritance laws and practices. In so many different ways, they have been disallowed from making their own decisions about themselves and their bodies. This has been especially prevalent with regard to the place of women in medieval English Christianity.

Of all the ways women have been deemed less than men, one of the primary reasons is their bodies. Christian tradition has often deemed women as “[daughters] of sinful Eve,” who epitomize the concept of original sin within them, and deserve to be punished for it (*Guide for Anchoresses, Part 8*, 139). For this and other reasons, women, as descendants of Eve, have been deemed more earthly, and therefore more sinful, than men, who are aligned with the mind rather than the body. In this way, women have been considered farther from heaven, and therefore must work so much harder in order to reach salvation. This is what I will examine in my first chapter, looking at texts such as the *Ancrene Wisse*, or “Guide for Anchoresses,” as well as the *Letter on Virginit*y and the *Life of Christina of Markyate*. These texts are all representative of the things which were being said about women and their physical bodies, largely by powerful men in the church. Christina of Markyate, a well-regarded woman who chose to commit herself to

virginity in childhood, represents much of the “ideal” for holy medieval women, which I examine in order to find out exactly what that ideal is.

In my second chapter, I look forward from what has been said about women to the recommended actions these women can take in order to achieve heavenly salvation. Here, I again look at *Ancrene Weisse* and focus more on the *Letter on Virginity*. These texts instruct women on the ways to become more holy through maintaining one’s maidenhood. According to these writings, virginity is a way to avoid or control the inherent sinful nature of women, as it is a denial of their physicality in exchange for pure spirituality. Additionally, I look at the lives of St. Catherine and St. Margaret, two virgin martyrs who famously suffered and died for their faith in Christianity. Many of these texts bring a specific focus on the suffering of women, which I look at in detail. Through all this, I also wish to call into question the cultural obsession with women’s bodies, as the thing that either saves or damns them.

In the third chapter, I look more specifically at religious works written by women, and the difference in how women are portrayed when written by men versus women. I initially focus on the life of Saint Catherine, which was written by a woman, a nun named Clemence of Barking. Here, I return to both the life of Saint Catherine as well as that of Christina of Markyate, juxtaposing them with the *Guide for Anchoresses* and *Letter on Virginity*. These two women are held up as the pinnacle of female accomplishment, so I am interested in seeing how they stack up against the guidelines put forward for common women for their day to day lives. Part of the comparison stems from authorship; St. Catherine’s life is written by a woman, while the details of Christina of Markyate’s life were composed by an admiring and approving man. I also bring up Marie de France’s

Saint Patrick's Purgatory, with her specific perspective as a woman, as she works to translate religious works into the vernacular.

I conclude by narrowing in very specifically on one woman writing in medieval England: Julian of Norwich. She was an anchorite, writer, and mystic in the 14th century, and is well known for her major contributions to theology surrounding women and gender as a whole for the time. In her most notable work, *Revelations of Divine Love*, she writes about Jesus Christ as a maternal, feminine figure, as well as a masculine, paternal one. The theory of Christ as mother, and the feminization of Christ's body had been previously established prior to Julian's time. But Julian is known for honing in on this and expanding upon these revolutionary descriptions of Christ. I read her *Revelations* to analyze what they mean alongside other theological claims about women and their bodies.

On the whole, I look at what men told women about themselves in medieval England, and what women had to say back. Theological debates are as old as the Church itself. In taking a critical look at the argument around the purity or sanctity of one gender or another, it is easy to see the path of certain arguments, and how one writer may influence another. Julian of Norwich is a writer whose work is directly inspired by those who came before her and continues to inspire those who come after. Here, I examine how that happened, and what it means for women in the church as a whole.

Chapter 1: Women's Bodies and the Problem of Sin

"Pure, calm, and chaste"

As Christianity developed, women have increasingly been restricted from central roles within the church. They have instead been treated as less than, something to be contained and forced to play very specific roles. With regard to their bodies, especially, women have always been considered dirty. In many cultures, menstruation has historically been considered unclean, something to be ashamed of. In the Christian tradition, women's bodies have been understood as obstacles to be overcome in their attempts to reach heaven. Medieval theological texts (largely written by men, particularly those with social or religious power) which were intended to be read by women are full of references to the ways in which women's bodies must be strictly policed so they won't turn to sin. There is a particular obsession in these texts with women's bodies and the inherent problems they contain. According to medieval theology, women—like men—are sinful and willful and therefore cannot reach the kingdom of heaven by their own merits. Yet women have the added burden of their female corporal nature. Looking at specific medieval texts, we can begin to understand some of the foundations of western patriarchal society and the roots of restrictions that have been placed on women and the way they are permitted to interact with the world.

Women, especially in the Christian church, have never been permitted to make their own choices for themselves and their bodies without some kind of backlash. This is made obvious through works such as *The Life of Saint Margaret* and *Ancrene Wisse* (also known as the *Guide for Anchoresses*), and *The Letter on Virginity*, among many others.

These perpetuate the theological argument that women's bodies are *inherently* more sinful than men's, making it much more difficult for them to reach eternal salvation. This written theology was written by men, and given to women, in order to tell them exactly how they must lead their lives in order to achieve salvation and avoid eternal damnation. Women were told to become holy virgins, either by secluding themselves within anchoritic cells or joining convents. All of these and more were offered up as choices for women to make should they wish to lead a faithful life. However, within theological writings themselves, women are being warned that if they take this path, they will be made to suffer immensely, be persecuted and rejected by their communities and families, be beaten and burned and attacked for their faith. For most, especially for young people (who seem to be the ones largely targeted to enter these places), it is an impossible decision to be given, to choose which kind of suffering they would rather experience.

“It can be argued that the medieval period is the paradigmatic test cast for studying the history of gender,” write Samantha Riches and Sarah Salih in their book on the ways gender factors into holiness and sainthood during medieval times (Riches, Salih, 4). Women, men, and saints all carried different expectations for how they ought to move through the world, based upon different concepts of gender. Much of medieval Christian literature presents images of these noble martyrs, as well as the honorable suffering endured by those more holy and self-sacrificing than the common person. In the case of women, whether they are saints or not, they are expected to go through painful ordeals in order to get to heaven. And, more often than not, this suffering comes in the form of challenges or tortures on their physical bodies, which are already considered to be more earthly, more unclean than men's bodies. The *Letter on Virginit*y and *The Life of Saint*

Margaret are both prominent examples of the focus on physical suffering as a path to salvation from the sinfulness inherent in women's physical forms. These specific works are especially prevalent when discussing the pain and suffering put upon women's bodies that is seemingly necessary in order to be saved "as God's free daughter and his son's bride," according to medieval theology (*Letter on Virginity*, 35).

The *Letter* reviles any person (but specifically mentions women) who engages in sexual activity, or other "carnal filthiness" at any time in her life (19). It is also telling that celibate men are rarely, if ever, mentioned in these texts. The holy virgin Christina of Markyate, during the course of her life dedicated to the service of God, has a friend who has also chosen the path of celibacy. They both seem to struggle with their choices momentarily. But this is one of few times in which men's sexualities with regard to the potential for heavenly reward is even mentioned. Most theological texts primarily focus on women's sexuality and their relationship to their own bodies. The *Letter on Virginity* never mentions men specifically, only expressing repeatedly the utter filth of sex and childbirth, even within the bounds of marriage. It claims that in order for women to have a greater chance at working towards heavenly rewards, they must maintain their maidenhood, never marry, and never have children. The *Letter* begs the "maiden" to "forget your people' who deceive you about the pleasure of a husband and the world," separating holy virgins from the secular, sinful people who surround them (35).

This petition for women to remain virginal if they wished to become closer to Christ is full of language describing sex, marriage, and childbirth as filthy, vulgar acts that would taint one's body and soul forever. Women who engage in carnal sins, in pleasures of the flesh, are indulging their base, earthly instincts, instincts which must be

controlled and repressed. Other instructive texts intended to be read by godly women, specifically the *Guide for Anchoresses*, are also dedicated to the strict policing of one's own body and its natural functions. The *Guide* instructs women seeking to be anchoritic hermits, where every facet of their lives must be performed in a particular way that would focus their minds and hearts solely on their devotion to God. The *Letter on Virginity* also provides guides for the way in which one should live, based upon that same idea of women's bodies being inherently sinful. If women do not work to preserve their souls, through virginity and strict dedication to their faith, then they will fall from the grace of God and never be able to reach his light again.

Furthermore, women are also specifically described as “Will...the unruly wife, who...reduces [the house] to chaos, unless Reason [the husband] as master disciplines her” (*The Custody of the Soul*, 87). The message, according to this text, is that men are the embodiment of Reason. Men embody knowledge and understanding, while the wife is Will. She is temptation and sin, and, as such, must be strictly controlled, otherwise she will tear the house apart. This description of women is one which has been used for centuries, as men have claimed that women can “reduce to folly...[the] wisest of all men...[plunging] him into idolatry until the end of his life” (Heloise to Abelard, 90). These images of women as willful, lustful, and sinful, the idea that they are predestined to be that way and nothing can change that about them, is a means for a patriarchal system to put strict controls on what women can and cannot do. These are some of the early examples of patriarchy being put into words, not merely an understood concept, but theological and academic basis for women being lesser than men. The notion that women are more earthly, more connected to the physical world, and men are more godly, is a

large part of the established patriarchal systems we still live in today. The stereotype of women being “emotional” or “hysterical” comes back to messaging like this, from men explaining to women how they must live their lives, or else “sing a song of lamentation for evermore in hell” (*Letter on Virginit*y, 19).

In *The Custody of the Soul*, Reason rules over his household, including his wife Will, and his daughters Prudence, Fortitude, Temperance, and Justice. Will is immediately described as being unruly and prone to driving the house to disaster, if she is permitted. In contrast throughout the text, the four virtuous daughters are lauded for their strength and capability in preventing demons entrance into the house. However, it is stated that, without Reason, the entire household would fall into disarray at the hands of Will. It is telling that, according to this text, even though they have a noble purpose, the virtues are still capable of falling to pieces if not carefully guarded and monitored by Reason. At first glance, this particular work might stand out as a contrary one to the other texts claiming the inherent sinfulness and willful nature of women, as opposed to men, because of the celebration of the female virtues. However, the four virtues must rely heavily on one another and they cannot protect the house on their own. If they were not controlled by Reason, then the house would run rampant with sin, and be led instead by Will, with the virtues carelessly following her lead.

Christina of Markyate is a great example of the image of virginity that many of these texts laud in women. She, from a very young age, resolves herself to remain a maiden for her entire life. She refuses her parents’ wishes that she be married, and eventually flees from them and goes into hiding for several years. Eventually, she is able to join a convent, where she is a much-loved leader of the women, and is able to guide

them towards godliness, much in the same way that she has pursued it for her whole life. Even though she is so full of spiritual conviction, Christina still spends much of her life abused and persecuted by her family, who do not consider their daughter to be blessed and chosen by God. Rather they see her instead a problem they need to solve. These people represent the secular world and the inherent problems that women would face if they do not devote themselves to God. It is clearly indicated that Christina is a far more holy figure than those around her, who are sinful and, in many ways, outright cruel and evil.

In a very similar way, Saint Margaret also faces immense persecution from the masses who wish for her to compromise her values in order to better fit what they imagine to be right for her. When she continuously refuses a proposal of marriage by a powerful governor in the town, he becomes furious, and she is put to torture, “being so lacerated that...torrents of blood...streamed from her” (St. Margaret, 55). Christina and Margaret are both treated incredibly cruelly for their dedication to their faith, because of the manner in which they have dedicated themselves to God. The governor and townspeople surrounding Margaret, as well as Christina’s family, are obsessed with the inherent value in these women’s bodies, and to what end it should be put to make the best use of that value. They have a need to put strict controls on what these women can and cannot do, especially regarding their pursuit of God and Christ.

Yet, this is not exclusive to the unfaithful people abusing them for their dedication to virginity. The godly people in these women’s lives, as well as the men chronicling them, share this same obsession with their physical bodies as having some inherent value. These theological texts, over and over again, stipulate that virgin women are more godly

than non-virgins, firmly placing any religious capabilities for these women in the context of their bodies and sexuality. Furthermore, the writers of these texts also often place immense stock in the concept of these holy women being physically beautiful. Repeatedly, St. Margaret's "soft, lovely body" is brought up, and much bemoaned by the spectators witnessing her torture that it should be "so cruelly torn to pieces" (St. Margaret, 53). Christina of Markyate is also understood to be incredibly beautiful, as well as faithful. She has many dream-like visions of the Virgin Mary, in which "her beauty...delighted [Mary] and filled her with joy" (Christina of Markyate, 44). Christina is praised and rewarded not simply for her incredible dedication to her faith, but her physical attractiveness. This clear objectification of these women by the men who are chronicling their lives brings into focus the inherent problem with the need for women to remain virgins in order to achieve salvation. The sole focus on the value of women's sexuality, even if the focus is on the lack of sexuality in maidenhood, still deems that the only way women can be godly is by way of their bodies. Regardless of their faith, women are either saved or damned by their bodies only, reinforcing the idea that women are inextricably tied to the earth and to physical matters, unable to reach salvation by way of their minds or spirits, territory reserved only for men.

"Pure, calm, and chaste" are the attributes lauded over and over again for medieval women, especially in the context of the church (*Guide for Anchoresses, Part 7*, 127). Holy women are meant to uphold all the tenets of the church, be kind, and generous, and faithful, as well as pure and virginal. These qualities are emphasized and outlined in these primary theologically-inflected instructional writings, telling women exactly what they should and should not do in order to lead a holy life. The *Guide for*

Anchoresses and the *Letter on Virginity* both give very specific, very detailed rules for how women can live in faithfulness. *The Custody of the Soul* establishes the particular social roles expected for women. The *Guide* is particularly forceful in its rules for anchoritic women, having “not only [set] out to regulate the outer forms of the recluse’s existence, but also intervenes in the anchorite’s inner life,” providing seemingly endless particulars on the spiritual needs of anchoresses (Mills, 4).

Chapter 2: Women's path towards heaven

"What flesh on earth was as sweet and as holy as Jesus Christ's flesh was?"

In much medieval Christian writing, including saints' lives, it is proclaimed that the greatest way for women to maintain their holiness and truly earn their place in heaven is by maintaining their status as maidens: "the image and practice of perfection" (Bernau, Evans, and Salih, 3). Virginity has always carried with it the connotation of being "pure" and "clean..3

Through this connotation, virgins are understood to be on a different level of holiness than non-virgins. This is made incredibly clear by the Katherine Group's *Letter on Virginity* which claims repeatedly that "a maiden by the virtue of virginity surpasses widows and married women" in her sanctity (*A Letter on Virginity*, 39). Similarly, the *Life of Christina of Markyate* and the record of the life of Saint Margaret portray images of virgin women who are blessed by God and who will be honored in heaven for their virtue. These women are celebrated and held above other women in their religious standing. The texts which laud their accomplishments are intended to encourage other women to choose the same path. However, these texts also highlight the immense suffering and difficulty faced by these women for their choice to remain eternal virgins. The women reading them are presented with a choice: to endure incredible suffering and, often, physical torture during their time on earth, or be shamed and devalued for choosing to marry and have children.

Virginity and the refusal of an earthly husband is, according to much of medieval theology, vital for women to begin progress on the path to salvation. Maidens are seen as

“cleaner” and “purer” than their non-chaste counterparts, and are therefore more likely to achieve godly virtues. “A maiden by the virtue of virginity surpasses widows and married women,” due in large part to her controlling of her willful sinful desires (*Letter on Virginity*, 39). According to this *Letter on Virginity*, even sex within the bounds of married life, is nothing more than “carnal filthiness” and should be avoided at all costs (19). This text was intended to be an instructional one, read by women seeking to strengthen and improve their faith and learn about the nature of marriage.

Many of the texts on the values of virginity, including the *Life of Christina of Markyate*, separate virgin women from both men and all other women, creating a separation of gender between maidens and non-maidens. In the space of virginity and dedication to God, there is room, it seems, for women to not entirely conform to traditional gender norms and values. When Christina is escaping from her family, she is escaping their image of womanhood and femininity, instead seeking to make herself anew as the bride of Christ, something other than a man or a woman. She tells herself to “put on manly courage and mount the horse like a man” as she flees in the night (*Christina of Markyate*, 34). The flexibility of gender within religious contexts is a particularly interesting one, especially within the ways that people who have been assigned the traits and expectations of womanhood are able to reject those. These holy virgins, in their moments of greatest strength and triumph, are “neither woman nor man, but somewhere beyond the binary” as Meghan Nestel writes in her article about the fluidity of gender in the life of Christina of Markyate (Nestel, 101). For instance, Saint Catherine also claims that she will never take an earthly husband, rejoicing instead in her heavenly bridegroom. This rejection of what it means to be a “real woman” also allows

Catherine to embrace her intellectual prowess, a field traditionally only allowed to men. Christina also forms deep personal platonic bonds with men, without any particular concern over whether something might develop between the two of them. Christina's commitment to being a maiden of God allows her the freedom to explore the world through a different lens, and to carve out her own place in it, outside of the confines of earthly matters such as gender.

The *Guide for Anchoresses* is part of a wider pantheon of theological works that are meant to encourage women to dedicate themselves more fully to God and the church. Part of this dedication is their commitment to maidenhood. Such works urge women to take no earthly husband, instead to become the bride of Christ. The love for Christ as a heavenly husband is part of what sets these women apart from women who do not choose to remain virgins for their whole lives. Christina of Markyate, as well as Saint Catherine, both proclaim that they will not take a husband on earth, because "surely God is incomparably better than everything in the world?" (*Guide for Anchoresses, part 7, 129*). They are to remain faithful as the bride of Christ, and to love him as much and even more than they would love their husband on earth. This kind of instructive text is indicative of the encouragement of women to profess an even greater dedication to God than other religious figures do (sometimes more than any holy men around them) making their faith their entire life.

These texts extolling the virtues of virginity also talk about the difficulties and active danger one might be in by choosing the path of maidenhood. The *Letter on Virginity* claims repeatedly the challenges of a life of maidenhood, both societal and internal. It goes into great detail about the difficulties endured by those who choose the

path of virginity, particularly referencing the need to remain not only pure physically, but mentally as well, resisting all “physical desire,” pride, anger, etc. (41). Even through all of the hardship that comes to those who have chosen the path of maidenhood, the potential for heavenly salvation shines over it all. The *Letter on Virginity* maintains that “supposing you did suffer want or endured any hardship for his precious love,” it will not matter, as virgins will be rewarded “in heaven many times over” (25).

Even though, according to the *Letter on Virginity*, the suffering of the faithful will be immaterial once they reach heaven, it is an extremely real challenge faced in life by those women who decide to retain their maidenhood. Christina of Markyate, a renowned “maiden of extraordinary sanctity and beauty,” who decides she will be a lifelong virgin in childhood, and maintains that position her entire life, suffers greatly at the hands of her parents and the people around her (Christina of Markyate, 3). She is forced into marriage, and very nearly raped at least twice. Escaping her parents, she only finds safety in the faithful people she eventually goes to live with. Saint Margaret also suffers immensely-- she is tortured and eventually battles hellish demons and a dragon after she turns down the man asking her to be his wife. These women are actively shamed and persecuted for their rejection of the heteronormative pursuit of men and marriage, as they put themselves into immense physical danger for their faith. According to these texts, the best path to heaven that is provided to women is simultaneously a path littered with hardship and suffering. It seems to be a requirement that women go through this immense level of suffering in order to be worthy of salvation.

Furthermore, the way pain and suffering is described in the saints’ lives is incredibly graphic and gory. This quasi- torture porn elaborately describes the ways in

which virgins are made to suffer. The torture scene in the life of Saint Margaret is an absolutely horrifying one, as many spectators watch as she is whipped and beaten with iron hooks, being “so lacerated that...torrents of blood...streamed from her.” Yet all the while Margaret herself remaining steadfast in her faith (Saint Margaret, 55). Her “soft, lovely body” is put on display, entertainment for the masses to watch it be “so cruelly torn to pieces” (53). And yet, she never for a moment yields. We, as readers, watch with the crowd of spectators as this thirteen-year-old keeps her faith in the face of such incredible adversity. We cannot look away from the gory, disgusting scene of her body being endlessly beaten and bloodied. This scene is a common one in saints’ lives, especially with regard to the hardships young maidens are made to endure for their faith. “Agatha, whose breasts are severed, Lucy, whose eyes are gouged out, and Christina, who gathers her severed tongue in her hands,” are a few additional examples of the profound physical suffering that these women are made to go through for their faith, such that it becomes the most recognizable thing about these saints (Beresford, 181). These women are identified and symbolized by the image of the physical torture their bodies have been put through “as if the experience of suffering encapsulates her meaning” (Salih, 77). Their experience of torture and martyrdom is inherent to their significance as saints, it is the proof of their dedication to God.

Christina of Markyate goes through so many physical and emotional trials, put upon her by her circumstances. Her parents abuse her, attempt to force her into marriage, even conspire to have her raped. Though she is not a canonized saint, Christina experiences many of the same tortures and hardships as other virgin martyrs. Not only was she physically “harassed” and punished by her parents, they also “forbade her access

to the chapel” of a monastery which was incredibly important to hear faith (*Christina of Markyate*, 10). Eventually, she is able to escape, and seek protection from other godly people who deeply care for her and her wellbeing. Roger, “a monk by profession...[who] dwelt faithfully in the commandments of the Lord,” cares for Christina, and provides her solace from her family and those who seek to do harm to her (*Christina of Markyate*, 28). This process is not without its own trials, however, including the “four years and more” which she spends locked away in a closet in order to hide from her family (*Christina of Markyate*, 40). During this process, Christina lives the life of an anchorite, “bound to one...position for the term of her natural life,” locked away in a small room where the only activities available to her are prayer and dedicating herself further to her faith (Hughes-Edwards, 133). Her physical body is put through many hardships during this time. She rarely eats, can only emerge in the evenings when Roger can guide her, and becomes incredibly sick for a period of time. And yet, this pain is necessary for Christina to make her escape from those who wish to corrupt and torment her. “She would rather have died in the cell than have made her presence known to anyone,” so afraid is she of what her family has attempted to force her into (*Christina of Markyate*, 41). As she separates herself from her parents by hiding herself away, she begins the process of becoming an anchorite, as it is recommended that they not have many deep connections with their families (*Guide for Anchoresses, Part 7*, 139).

Her life as an anchorite, in many ways, follows the *Ancrene Wisse*, as she only becomes more dedicated to her faith and her virginity through her time locked away. However, according to nearly all of the specificities given in this text, Christina fails. When she is a child, she punishes herself for her own transgressions, something

specifically prohibited by the *Guide for Anchoresses*, along with any other form of self-flagellation (137). Furthermore, her only companion throughout her entire time in her cell is Roger, and the two of them become incredibly close as he cares for and protects her. As he is a hermit, and she something of an anchoress, they are able to share a bond in their faith which allows her a freedom of spirit outside of her cell alone. This particular closeness with a man is again, banned by the *Guide*, which maintains that a woman should “cover her shame as a daughter of sinful Eve,” and wear a head or face covering when she is in the presence of men (*Guide for Anchoresses, Part 8*, 139). There is a contrast between the spiritual dedication required of anchoresses and the guidelines surrounding their interpersonal relationships. Christina, while succeeding wildly at the former, does not accomplish the latter nearly at all. One of the most important parts of the *Guide for Anchoresses* says that, “everything you do, you do either solely for the love of God, or for someone else’s good and advantage,” which is exactly what Christina does, not only during the years she is locked away in her cell, but in her entire life (*Guide for Anchoresses, Part 7*, 111). For this reason, she fits exactly into the description of what an anchorite should be, on a spiritual level. Her dedication to her faith greatly exceeds those of the people surrounding her, and by the end of her life, she has reached a position where people look to her for religious advice, and she is able to guide them.

It is difficult to look at Christina of Markyate and see a “true anchorite”, in part because of the incredibly specific and restrictive instructions given to anchoresses, but also because she did not choose to pursue life locked away in a cell for many years. One of the most impactful parts of Christina’s character is her incredibly strong conviction in her choices, to remain a maiden, to deny and leave her parents, to hide away and put

herself through immense suffering for her faith. She goes through a period of “enforced anchorism whilst in flight from an unwanted marriage,” instead of choosing anchorism as the manner by which she wishes to strengthen her faith (Hughes-Edwards, 133). This element of choice seems intrinsic to the concept of being an anchorite or a holy virgin. Though she cannot be said to be a true anchoress according to the Outer Rule in the *Ancrene Wisse*, it would be impossible to say she isn’t dedicated to her faith. The *Guide*, very early on, states that “a gentle and pure heart can achieve anything.” This, if nothing else, Christina has in abundance (*Guide for Anchoresses, Part 7*, 111).

Much like Christina, Saint Catherine also shows her incredible dedication to her maidenhood, and, by extension, her faith in God. When the Emperor Maxentius demands that she become his wife, she firmly denies him. Instead, she “devot[es] herself to an immortal lover whose love is chaste and pure,” –that is Christ, describing exactly the values laid out by the *Guide* (Clemence of Barking, 5). St. Catherine is as devoted to her maidenhood as Christina is, but she is not locked away like Christina. Instead, she puts herself out into the open, in order to defend her faith and attempt to convert others around her. While the *Guide for Anchoresses* does not necessarily apply to St. Catherine, other medieval writings by the Katherine Group may be looked at to assess whether her devotion to her faith fits into the established standards of the time. The *Letter on Virginit*y stipulates what does and does not fit the ways that maiden women should act and behave. St. Catherine, like Christina, may be held against these rules as an example of them put into action. In her rebellion against the emperor, Catherine is attacked and beaten severely, “wounding her tender body that the blood flowed out from every part,” and left to suffer in a “stinking dungeon” (Clemence of Barking, 25). Though this may seem to

contradict the concept that “virginity preserves a maiden’s living flesh without defilement,” as stated in the *Letter on Virginity*, Catherine never falters (*Letter on Virginity*, 11). Though her body is being attacked and harmed, her spirit remains steadfast and dedicated to her mission as a maiden of God. She is preserved by her devotion to her virginity. Even when her body is attacked, she is able to maintain her strength. Additionally, her continued resistance to Maxentius’s insistence that she marry him also fits well into the parameters set forth by the *Letter*, which constantly rejects the potential benefits of marriage between a man and a woman. It predicts that all husbands and wives will constantly be “at odds with the other,” which we can already see in the interactions between Catherine and Maxentius (*Letter on Virginity*, 29). She denies, again and again, any need or desire for an earthly husband, having placed all her faith in a heavenly one, who may give her greater love and rewards than any earthly man is capable of, having “[come] to hold [all others] in very low esteem” (Clemence of Barking, 9). As the *Letter* states, holy virgins will be rewarded “in heaven many times over,” for their faith and dedication in life, and this is clearly embodied in the life of St. Catherine (*Letter on Virginity*, 25).

In addition to living their lives in dedication to their faith, both St. Catherine and Christina do many good things for others.. The *Guide* specifically writes that anchorites must “always be active in good works, and that will warm you and kindle this fire [of faithfulness] against the flames of sin.” This is exactly the methodology taken by these women in their journeys of faith (*Guide for Anchoresses, Part 7*, 125). Christina is kind and generous to Beorhtred, the man that her parents intend for her to marry, asking him to take a vow of virginity with her, that they might both become closer to God. She is not

resentful or hurt by the role this man has played in her parents' conniving against her wishes. She merely wants him to be more dedicated to his faith, just as she is. Catherine, as well, shows generosity towards those seeking to do her harm, converting many scholars and townspeople, as well as the queen herself, from their pagan beliefs to believe in Christianity. They are all "struck dumb and dismayed" after hearing her words (Clemence of Barking, 19). Both of these women, through their actions, fit into another stipulation of the *Guide for Anchoresses*: that "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink. In this way you will heap burning coals on his head" (*Guide for Anchoresses, Part 7*, 125). By providing spiritual guidance and support to these people, these women are turning enemies into people who share their faith and dedication to God, thereby also saving themselves from danger in many cases as well. For both Christina and St. Catherine, the way they protect themselves from outward harm is by expressing a seemingly endless flow of kindness towards those who would seek to hurt them.

The hardships of maidenhood are discussed at length in *A Letter on Virginity*, particularly with regard to the restraining of one's own lustful desires. They must be put down in order to maintain a godly persona. However, in *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, the titular Christina also goes through many harrowing trials and tribulations because of her commitment to maidenhood. Her trials differ from the ones written about by the Katherine Group. Christina's choice is rejected by her parents, who abuse and neglect her during her whole childhood. As she grows to be an adult, they concoct scheme after scheme to get her married and end her maidenhood. Christina shows remarkable strength of will and devotion to God throughout her life, much in the same way that the knight Owen does as he goes through purgatory in Marie de France's poem.

Both figures, though not canonized saints, are saint-like in their thoughts and actions, and in their times of greatest need, turn themselves to their faith in God to get them through. When Christina is hurt by her parents, or forced to live hidden away in a cupboard for years to get away from them, she prays, turns inwards and puts all of her fears and anxieties in God, Ultimately, she is saved from her hour of desperation, very like Marie de France's knight Owen crying out to God when he is being tortured in purgatory (Christina of Markyate, 13).

Even though she is so full of conviction, Christina still spends her life abused and persecuted by her family, who though they on some level understand her to be blessed and chosen by God, do not see this as a great and wonderful thing, but an obstacle standing in their way. In a very similar way, Saint Margaret also faces immense persecution from the masses who wish for her to compromise her values in order to better fit what they imagine to be right for her. When she continuously refuses a proposal of marriage by a powerful governor in the town, he becomes furious, and she is put to torture, "being so lacerated that...torrents of blood...streamed from her" (St. Margaret, 55). Christina and Margaret are both treated incredibly cruelly for their dedication to their faith, because of the manner in which they have dedicated themselves to God. The governor and townspeople surrounding Margaret, as well as Christina's family, are obsessed with the inherent value in these women's bodies, and to what end it should be put to make the best use of that value. And this is not exclusive to the unfaithful people abusing them for their dedication to virginity. The godly people in these women's lives, as well as the men chronicling them, share this same obsession with their physical bodies as having some inherent value.

The persecution of women, no matter what choices they make throughout their lives, is not a new concept. It goes all the way back to the beginning of western culture, and it is core to many often-used theologies. Women, especially in the church, have rarely been permitted to make their own choices for themselves and their bodies without some kind of backlash. This is made obvious through the life of Saint Margaret and the *Letter on Virginity*. On one hand, these texts are written by men, and being given to women, in order to tell them exactly how they must lead their lives in order to achieve salvation and avoid eternal damnation. On the other hand, within the texts themselves, women are being warned that if they take the path of sexuality, they will be made to suffer immensely, be persecuted and rejected by their communities and families, be beaten and burned and attacked for their faith. For most, especially for young people, it is an impossible decision to be given, to choose which kind of suffering they would rather experience.

It can be a difficult thing to apply modern feminist concepts and ideals to medieval texts. Cultural and historical context can make the same choice made by medieval women and modern women wildly different in their impact and meaning. When looking at virginity, especially with regard to Christina's life, it is easy to see it as a choice made by women to separate themselves from traditional patriarchal expectations. When the secular culture around you tells you that the only thing you can do in order to provide value is marry and have children, that your body is the only thing valuable about you, then choosing instead not to pursue an earthly husband, but a heavenly one, is a radical act. But it can also be looked at from another angle. When we come at the concept of virginity from the perspective of the church, looking at texts such as the life of St. Margaret and the *Letter*

on Virginity, we see more of this focus on the physicality of women, as opposed to their spirituality. If the only way that women can properly achieve heavenly rewards is through their bodies, that is merely a continuation of this obsession with women's bodies and sexuality, even the lack thereof. This perspective, both from a secular and religious standpoint, continues the concept that women's bodies have some inherent value that they are obligated to share for the benefit of others. There is also an extreme focus on the idea of virgins being conventionally attractive. As Margaret is being tortured, her "fair flesh" is brought up again and again, highlighting to the reader that not only is she faithful and dedicated to God, but she is physically beautiful and attractive as well (St. Margaret, 55). This text tells us that part of the tragedy of this moment is that "we are required to see both her beauty and its destruction," that we must witness her beautiful fair skin torn and her lovely face ruined (Salih, 81). This is the messaging given to young women. These are their only options. Either they use their bodies' value to have children and satisfy their husbands, which detracts from their purity, putting them below other, or reach heaven by remaining maidens, but be persecuted and tortured for their choices during their life.

Chapter 3: What women had to say about themselves

“Put on manly courage”

While most of these texts were written by men (including those commissioned by women), some writings by women fall into the same patriarchal pitfalls, especially in the treatment of women’s bodies as problematic and ultimately unworthy of divine favor. Marie de France is often regarded for her *lais*, her short romantic poems, which uphold incredible images of women as the conquering heroes, saving their knights from near disaster, rather than the other way around. However, in her rendition of *St. Patrick’s Purgatory*, there is only one woman in the entire poem, a young girl who is very nearly raped by a well-regarded priest, who he has “cared for.../as if she were his daughter” (*SPP*, l. 2223/2224). More than that, of the extremely few lines describing her, it includes that if the priest were to assault her, he would have been “ruined by the woman,” and not the other way around (*SPP*, l. 2246). The extent to which the image of the dirty, sinful woman permeates itself is such that the true tragedy of this moment is that a man of the cloth would have *his* soul, and *his* reputation ruined by raping a teenage girl who he has raised for years. There is no sympathy for this girl, there is not even any mention of her feelings about the horrifying situation she finds herself in. Furthermore, Marie also writes of another man, “a hermit of good life,” who was assailed night and day by demons torturing his mind and trying to tempt him into sin (*SPP*, l. 2096). These demons, while they try to tempt the wise man, take the form of “naked women,” and try to seduce him in that manner as well as others (*SPP*, l. 2114). He, being a strong-willed and faithful man, resists the demons. This is yet another example of women’s bodies and sexuality being

representative of hell and of sinful desires. It is telling that one of the most well-renowned female authors of the medieval period, known for her shining images of strong women in her writings, does not include these women at all when asked to write in an explicitly religious context. If, in these theological texts, the only images of women that are presented during this time are those of sex, lust, and sin, then what are women to do but devote themselves to virginity, which brings with it its own complications. In the texts given, there is simply no way for women to win. Their bodies are continually problematized and criticized in a manner which is seemingly completely out of their control.

Marie de France is, by and large, a far more secular writer than she is a theological one, and yet that is part of why her writing of Saint Patrick's Purgatory is so important. She translates this poem into French, making it accessible not only to wealthy or powerful people who are able to read Latin, but to the common person who only reads in the vernacular. Translation was and is an incredibly important job, especially with regard to medieval works, because it opens up a new wealth of knowledge to people who previously would have been entirely barred from accessing it were it only in Latin. It is also incredibly significant that it is Marie de France herself who is translating this work, because she brings with her translation her own experiences of being a woman during the medieval era. Having translations by women as well as men is incredibly important, because the work is affected, however slightly, by its translator. If all medieval texts were translated by men, then there would likely be a wealth of information lost because of the lack of a variety of perspectives.

As for Saint Catherine and Christina of Markyate, two women who no one could describe as being unfaithful to God: are they dedicating themselves to their faith in the specific ways which have been laid out for women? Or is it possible for women to define for themselves how one should dedicate oneself to God, and pursue that with just as much faith and dedication as *Ancrene Wisse* and the Katherine Group have decreed? Furthermore, does it make a difference whether the stories of these godly women were written by a woman, in the case of Clemence of Barking's depiction of St. Catherine, or a man, such as the anonymous male author of the *Life of Christina of Markyate* These two women, Catherine and Christina, both represent examples of women that can be held up as dedicated and incredibly faithful, no matter what is thrown at them. They are shining examples of what is good and right, what other women should strive to be. However, does this hold true when they are put up against the rigidity of these guides put forth for other women, such as the *Letter on Virginity* and the *Ancrenne Weisse*?

In clear opposition to the men writing about the values of virginity, Clemence of Barking's telling of the life of St. Catherine provides an alternative means for women to be godly and faithful disconnected entirely from the value of their bodies, either as maidens or not. Catherine is not merely a beautiful maiden, she is also incredibly educated and intelligent. Her conversion of the pagans who are attacking her for her dedication to her faith comes not from passionate emotional devotion, but from her skill in logic and argumentation. Just like St. Margaret, she is hauled before a crowd and demanded she renounce her faith and publicly dedicate herself to the pagan images worshipped by the powerful male leaders of her community. She does not succumb to the wicked emperor's anger or his threats, but, "like the wise woman she was," responds to

each of his clerks and rhetoricians with comprehensive, well thought out arguments. Through her conviction and incredible wisdom, she inspires the clerks she is debating against to convert to Christianity and devote themselves to God (Clemence of Barking, 15). If the rest of the medieval theological canon perpetuates the concept of women as of the body and men as of the mind, Clemence of Barking presents St. Catherine as a shining example in opposition of that concept. Catherine is beautiful and virginal, but more than that, her great achievements come from her mind and from the fact that she has been educated in secular as well as theological matters. She is therefore more accomplished than all of the clerks who she debates against. Catherine does not face her opponents through sheer strength of will, like Christina, or Margaret, or even Marie de France's Owen, but competes in a battle of wits and minds and comes out on top. This is the inherent difference in theological texts written by women and men. Clemence claims her work to be of little merit and full of problems at the start, and then blows the mind of the reader with her incredible heroine who should be looked up to by all who view her.

When the Emperor Maxentius demands that Catherine become his wife, she firmly denies him, instead "devoting herself to an immortal lover whose love is chaste and pure," in Christ, describing exactly the values laid out by the *Guide* (Clemence of Barking, 5). St. Catherine is as devoted to her maidenhood as Christina of Markyate is, but she is not locked away like Christina. Instead, she puts herself out into the open, in order to defend her faith and attempt to convert others around her. While the *Guide for Anchoresses* does not necessarily apply to St. Catherine, other medieval writings by the Katherine Group may be looked at to assess whether her devotion to her faith fits into the established standards of the time. The *Letter on Virginit*y stipulates what does and does

not fit the ways that maiden women should act and behave. St. Catherine, like Christina, may be held up against these rules as an example of them put into action. In her rebellion against the emperor, Catherine is attacked and beaten severely, “wounding her tender body that the blood flowed out from every part,” and left to suffer in a “stinking dungeon” (Clemence of Barking, 25). Though this may seem to contradict the concept that “virginity preserves a maiden’s living flesh without defilement,” as stated in the *Letter on Virginity*, Catherine never falters (*Letter on Virginity*, 11). Though her body is being attacked and harmed, her spirit remains steadfast and dedicated to her mission as a maiden of God. She is preserved by her devotion to her virginity. Even when her body is attacked, she is able to maintain her strength. Additionally, her continued resistance to Maxentius’s insistence that she marry him also fits well into the parameters set forth by the *Letter*, with its constant rejection of the potential benefits of marriage between a man and a woman. It is predicted that all husbands and wives will constantly be “at odds with the other,” which we can already see in the interactions between Catherine and Maxentius (*Letter on Virginity*, 29). She denies, again and again, any need or desire for an earthly husband, having placed all her faith in a heavenly one, who may give her greater love and rewards than any earthly man is capable of, having “[come] to hold [all others] in very low esteem” (Clemence of Barking, 9). As the *Letter* states, holy virgins will be rewarded “in heaven many times over,” for their faith and dedication in life. This is clearly embodied in the life of St. Catherine (*Letter on Virginity*, 25).

One of the most notable things about the life of St. Catherine is her incredible intellectual prowess, which she uses to defend her faith against the great scholars whom she is brought before by the emperor. Catherine exemplifies the value of educating

women, as she uses the education she has been given in order to convert many people to Christianity. She reasons her way to her faith with the same knowledge that these men supposedly wield over her. This is one of the greatest examples of the difference between texts about women written by men versus women. Clemence of Barking, here, intends for the reader to not only sit in awe of Catherine's beauty, her dedication to her virginity, her incredible strength in her faith as she is martyred in such a horrific way, but also and *especially*, the reader is directed to marvel at the strength of her mind. And not only her mind, but her speech as well. Coming from a culture that would rather have women stay silent, Catherine's speaking to the crowd is perhaps the most revolutionary thing she does. Catherine is revolting against the attempted "control of [her] body," in the controlling of her ability to speak and spread her knowledge (Blud, 23). Her intellect is the direct cause of the conversion of those who surround her, as they are in such awe at her knowledge and reasoning. Clemence of Barking has used her writing as a way to advocate for the education of women. She has "[drawn attention] to medieval gender systems" by presenting her heroine as an individual no one can deny is incredibly faithful and dedicated to God, and yet, is also incredibly smart (Riches, Salih, 7). Catherine possesses great reason, something considered to be the purview of only men.

According to such texts, women are willful, and inherently sinful, with the potential to, "if the household follows her lead, [reduce] it to chaos, unless Reason as master disciplines her better" (*Custody of the Soul*, 87). This is a trope that Christina of Markyate herself falls into, as even she must resist her own impulses at times, as the "devil...titillated her flesh and put ideas in her head," causing her to "[beg] to be freed from temptation" (Christina of Markyate, 46, 48). But Catherine is seemingly completely

devoid of this willful nature which is supposedly inherent in all women, instead being made up of only sound reason and logic. Where Christina is quiet and hidden away, Catherine is outspoken, willingly allowing herself to be observed by the masses, so that she might spread the word of God further and to more and more people. Catherine, at every turn, stands in the face of these traditional misogynist texts, which intend to put all women into a specific box, making it easier for powerful men to deny their capability to achieve great things. Catherine certainly achieves greatness, in her devotion to her faith, performing miracles, saving lives of converts, and eventually, as she is martyred, showering the witnesses with milk from her wounds, symbolizing her purity and dedication. In comparison, Christina does not achieve these great miraculous accomplishments, merely freeing herself from the dangerous situations forced upon her by her family. However, as said previously, Christina of Markyate applies herself with great dedication to the inner rule of the *Guide for Anchoresses*. Her dedication to her faith, while it may not have inspired great numbers to convert, or cause incredible miracles, is nonetheless vital in her leadership of her convent. All of this is not to deny the importance of Christina as a religious figure and representation of extremely early feminist ideals, but only to highlight the clear differences in the portrayal of women by other women, than when they are written by men. Christina's great works are more internal and interpersonal, not immediately visible on a large scale. Saint Catherine performs miracles in front of crowds, and speaks to many people in order to convince them of her dedication to her faith. The difference here, is that Christina fits into many of these traditional representations for women, and doesn't make great strides to change those representations, whereas Catherine breaks boundaries at every turn in her life.

Between Clemence of Barking and the author of Christina of Markyate, they have both done their part to portray these women as accomplished and strong figures of great faith. Both women have their moments where they fit into the guides put forth by the established powers, as well as moments where it would be impossible for them to fit into these restrictions without compromising either their safety or their personal identity. Saint Catherine could not submit to the male authority of Reason, for reason is her own greatest strength. Christina of Markyate finds some of her greatest comfort in her male companions, especially Roger, who protects her for so many years, whose friendship “possessed an importance beyond mere practical necessity.” To separate herself from him simply on account of the difference in their gender would be a betrayal of everything they had worked towards together (Mills, 4). In short, the moments where these women diverge from the “established rules” that women are meant to follow is precisely where they show some of their greatest strengths and their true faith is shown the greatest.

While the context of the time period may make it somewhat difficult to apply modern feminist theories onto medieval texts, it is undeniable that these writings laid the foundation for the modern struggle between patriarchy and the movement for women’s empowerment, particularly in the church. When the most prominent and frequently read texts intended to be read by women are written by men, there is a warped view of what the “right” path of womanhood is. Even women writers such as Marie de France can fall into the trap of erasing women from her image of heaven wholesale, and reaffirming the problematic nature of their bodies in relationship to divinity. The patriarchal notions woven into our culture are difficult to work against now, much less in a time where the concept of feminism was centuries from even existing. Therefore, we must read from a

broad spectrum of writers and thinkers, and understand that the loudest opinion is not always the best one. Seeking out what women have to say about themselves and each other, rather than what men have to say about them, is a sure way to begin to deconstruct the notions of women as less godly, or less worthy of salvation.

cChapter 4: Julian of Norwich and her theology

“Fatherhood, motherhood, and lordship”

Biblical writings take their inspiration from other writers and theologians over the years, using them to create their new perspectives on related concepts. The same is true for one remarkable 14th-century anchorite, writer, and theologian: Julian of Norwich. Grievously ill and dying in her mid 30s, Julian received a series of visions, or “showings,” from God, which she believed were messages to all Christianity. She was not unique in this either. “In the beguinages and convents of northern Europe, visionary experience seems to have been not only common but expected,” writes Nicholas Watson in his analysis on the structure of Julian’s writing (Watson, 643). Julian is considered one of the most impactful female medieval English mystics, along with Christina of Markyate and Margery Kempe, but her work of primary importance is her work as a theologian (Watson 645).

In the years following her receiving her visions, she wrote on what she believed these showings meant, in her *Revelations on Divine Love*. These revelations largely center around the image of God and the Trinity, and how Christian people, and all people more broadly, might strengthen their relationship with God. She was an incredible writer and scholar, in an environment where many influential religious texts, including *Ancrene Wisse*, actively discouraged “readers against any visions they may have, on the...grounds that...[they are] certain to be diabolical” (Watson, 647). Julian pursued writing her showings anyway, because of her steadfast dedication to the importance of the visions she experienced. Her work was revolutionary, as it was not only theological writing by a

woman at a time when women were forbidden from preaching in public, but also because it was written in English instead of Latin. This particular element of her writing was deeply impactful for a number of reasons. A primary one is her use of the everyday vernacular. Most works of theology written in Latin would not have been accessible to the common public. Her work, written in the vernacular which more people could read and write, had a much broader reach. Furthermore, the people who were reading and writing theological works in Latin were primarily men, and Julian's work was far more appealing to women than most other writings of the time would have been.

The appeal for women reading her work was not only that it was in a language they could understand. Additionally, the style of writing as well appealed to them specifically. Many of Julian's *Revelations* involve descriptions of the nature of Christ, and who He is in relationship to people. She writes extensively of His suffering on the cross, and His dedication to loving all people on earth. Her descriptions of this dedication are deeply tied to the embodied nature of Christ as a man on earth. In Julian's writing, Christ shows his dedication to his children in much the same way that women show their dedication to their families—through physical labor, no matter the difficulty or suffering that labor might put them through. He is not just our savior who died on the cross, according to her *Revelations*, He is a caretaker and parent. His efforts to show his love for his children are shown through physical work, aligning Christ with the physical and earthly, in much the same way that women are understood to be. In maybe the most significant parable of her *Revelations*, she describes a servant, who “is comprehended the second person of the Trinity,” Jesus Christ, and also “is comprehended Adam, that is to say, all men” (*Julian of Norwich*, 121). In this, she paints Jesus as human, and more

importantly, as a human servant and laborer. Furthermore, Julian puts great emphasis on “God’s ‘homeliness,’” in this implying “the full emotional resonance of the home itself” (Spearing, xix). Here, she puts God, the Almighty, into the realm of women, the domestic home. For these reasons and more, *Revelations of Divine Love* was far more relatable to women than most other theology at the time, largely because it was written by someone who deeply understood their experience and wanted to engage women in her writing.

In addition to Julian comparing the sacrifices Christ made for people to the work of women, she also connects the deeply physical nature of His sacrifice directly to His holiness. In an environment where women were shamed and criticized for their bodies, as we have seen, this concept of Christ’s body, rather than His spirit, was an incredibly important one. The image which comes up again and again in Julian’s *Revelations* is the blood dripping down His face on the cross. She writes “I suddenly saw the red blood trickling down from the crown of thorns, hot and fresh and very plentiful, as though it were the moment of his Passion when the crown of thorns was thrust on his blessed head” (Julian of Norwich, 45). She returns to this image, maintaining that it is an incredibly holy one, *because* of the physical nature of the crucifixion. The bleeding body of Christ is what saved humanity, and what continues to save humanity. She even goes as far to say that it is better and more holy for people to be baptized not in pure, clean water, but instead in the blood which flowed from Christ. “We should simply take his holy blood to wash away our sins; for...it shares our nature and...transports us by virtue of his precious love” she says, claiming that His blood is as nourishing and plentiful as water (Julian of Norwich, 60). Here we see Julian celebrating the suffering of Christ, but not because of the spiritual nature, but the *physical*. Unlike so many other theologians, claiming that the

holiest thing is the soul, and that the body is an obstacle in the way of reaching Heaven, Julian takes the exact opposite stance. She claims that Christ's holiness is contained within his embodied nature as a man on earth, that the blood which flowed from his wounds is blessed and should be used to cleanse our souls of sin. His physicality is not the source of sin, but the salvation from it, according to the *Revelations*.

One of the other major themes of *Revelations* which cements Julian's legacy as a groundbreaking theologian is her theory of Christ as mother. She was not the first or last to make this claim, but the "intensity" of her insistence on this theme, as well as the "theological implications" she takes from it certainly make her one of the early experts on this theory (Spearing, xxiii). Julian writes of the Trinity not just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but instead as the three components of who God is, particularly in relationship with humanity. "The properties of the Trinity: fatherhood, motherhood, and lordship," she writes, emphasizing the different characteristics of humanity's relationship with God (Julian of Norwich, 137). The feminization of Christ and the way He interacts with people is a concept which she describes in great detail. She is especially interested in the ways in which one might strengthen a relationship with Christ, through connection with Christ as a maternal figure.

The fatherhood and lordship elements of God as He is known to Christianity are obvious and long-standing. God is seen as an all-powerful force, something of great influence, to be awed and feared. And yet, simultaneously, He is a great protector, the defender of all Christians, a benevolent presence which can be sought after for safety. Julian of Norwich argues that this feeling of safety is specifically a maternal quality. She writes that God as mother provides comfort, love, generosity, and forgiveness, much like

a mother does to her children. By highlighting these traditionally feminine qualities in God and Christ, she sanctifies them, claiming that these traits which are traditionally associated with women are holy, and should be sought after. In a similar manner to Clemence of Barking with Saint Catherine, Julian takes these qualities and highlights them as inarguably holy, separating them, as well as Christ Himself, from traditional binary concepts of gender.

By taking these traditionally feminine qualities and applying them to Jesus Christ, a male figure, she recontextualizes these attributes of motherhood, kindness, and mercy. They are not attributes only of women, but also attributes of God. This separates these particular traits of Christ from the cultural expectations of gender, and exclusively shows them as holy and, inarguably, good. Clemence of Barking does a very similar thing, but reverses it. She places traits which were considered far more masculine (logic, public speaking, rhetoric) in the embodiment of Saint Catherine. In this manner, Catherine does not represent a particular gender, only herself as a skilled and persuasive rhetorician. Clemence and Julian have taken traits considered to be inherent to one gender and flipped the script, thereby separating these qualities from the concept of gender altogether.

Furthermore, Julian considers “fatherhood, motherhood, and lordship,” to be akin to the Trinity, in the way that they are the three disparate aspects of God, contained in one being (Julian of Norwich, 137). She deems them all equal to one another, with equal importance and influence on humanity. God, according to Julian, is a figure to be feared and respected, but also a place to seek protection. These traits, very like those of a father and mother, are equivalent, in their importance in the relationship between humanity and

God. Christians and Christ, she claims, are one family unit. God's children can and should seek out Christ as one would a parent.

Additionally, one of her primary reasonings for Christ as a maternal figure is the way in which his sacrifice washed away the sins of humanity. Not only does she consider his bleeding body to be holy enough to baptize oneself in, she also that it is a nourishing force of "reformation and restoration" (Julian of Norwich, 138). Like a mother feeding her child with her breastmilk, Julian characterizes Christ as feeding the souls of humanity with his own body. The tradition of transubstantiation in the Catholic church aligns with this belief. Christ's body and blood are what gives humanity spiritual nourishment. "Our dear mother Jesus can feed us with himself," she says, aligning His blood and body to a mother's milk given to a child (Julian of Norwich, 141). In another comparison to St. Catherine, when her head is cut off, milk flows from the wound rather than blood. If one agrees with Julian's theological arguments, this would make Catherine a very Christlike figure. Both of these holy people, when tortured and killed, provide pure and nourishing substances from their wounds. Even in their deaths, they are spreading the message of God, through their connection to femininity and motherhood.

Julian discusses sin at length, not only the removal of it by Christ's sacrifice, but also the inevitability of humanity *to* sin in the first place. She writes "I know for certain that we sin grievously every day and deserve to be bitterly blamed," and marvels at the fact that humanity is not blamed, but eternally loved by God (Julian of Norwich, 114). To answer this question of why people are not blamed for their sins, she begins one of the most significant chapters in her *Revelations*: The parable of the lord and the servant. In the parable, a devoted servant of God promises Him that he will go out and serve the

lord, and leaves to fulfill that promise. In the process, the servant falls, and experiences incredible misery and suffering. God, instead of punishing the servant for not serving Him in the way he promised, rewards him immensely for his work.

Julian describes extensively the suffering of the servant, but also that, in studying the servant in his misery, the lord is unable to “perceive any fault in him...for his good will and great longing were the only cause of his fall” (Julian of Norwich, 116). Her realization in this moment is that the servant, representing humanity, should not be punished for experiencing the misery of sin in their pursuit of God. Instead, this suffering is what brings people closer to God, because it causes God to care for them “gently and kindly, with great sorrow and pity,” again in a very maternal manner (Julian of Norwich, 116). “For Julian sin is actually beneficial as a means of achieving contrition,” as Liz Herbert McAvoy puts it, discussing the way Julian writes about such well-known sinners as Mary Magdalene (McAvoy, 70). In this way, she is claiming that sin is not something to be ashamed of or to ridicule, but something to be recognized as a pathway towards receiving heavenly love and salvation.

Within the parable, Julian claims that the servant not only represents Adam, and therefore all mankind, but is also the son of God, sent to earth to suffer and die for the sins of people. In this manner, again, she emphasizes Christ’s embodied nature, and his physical suffering on earth. By portraying Christ in this way, she devalues the concept that women are inherently sinful because of their embodied nature. Instead, one can draw the exact opposite conclusion from her writing. Christ came to earth in a physical form, one which bled, suffered, and died for humanity. His body provided the spiritual nourishment for all people, cleansing the world of sin with his blood. So how could

anyone claim that an embodied nature is problematic in terms of reaching heaven? Do not women's bodies also bleed, just like Christ's? Are they not then *more* holy than they would be otherwise?

Julian of Norwich's writings are revolutionary for a multitude of reasons, both at the time she was writing and today. She provided a new means of understanding the Bible, the Trinity, and the church as a whole. Like many women writing before and after her, she put forth her own claims about women and their role in the structure of Christianity. She is a crucial part of early feminist writing, taking her inspiration from the things which had already been said by and about women, and influencing other women writing in the future. Her representation of Christ as a mother, and the universal love and salvation from God represent a new kind of theology, one whose impact must not go unrecognized.

Conclusion:

As mentioned previously, the works I have looked at here are all part of a bigger conversation, and each can be linked to the other. If there was any uncertainty about the potential for women's voices in theological circles, these writings can put those to rest. It is clear that women have always had things to say about themselves, in response to those in power telling them what is and is not the correct way for them to exist in the world. From Marie de France to Clemence of Barking to Julian of Norwich, these women all put their voices out into the world. They constitute only a small portion of the people who laid the groundwork for modern feminist theory.

In order for a religious culture to grow, it requires the contribution of many different voices. These women represent those voices being added to the conversation, even as those around them attempted to push them down and silence them. Their contributions to translation, chronicling the lives of saints, and crafting theology are crucial to expanding the diversity and inclusivity of traditional Christianity. They also broaden the knowledge of the church more generally. We can see, in the differences between texts by men and women, how their perspectives influenced their faith, and what is considered "good" and "holy." The things written about women by men are, in large part, directly focused on gendered attributes of their subjects. Saint Margaret's beautiful "fair flesh," and Christina of Markyate's speech to herself to mount her horse like a man are examples of how these women's gender is reiterated over and over again (St. Margaret, 55). However, in the life of Saint Catherine, as well as Julian of Norwich's works, their subjects are separated from the concept of gender entirely. Catherine exhibits

many traits that would have traditionally been associated with only men, and it is the very thing that makes her holy. Julian, in her portrayal of Christ, uses gendered metaphorical concepts to praise the attributes she sees in him. While He is both male or female, the key attribute is how He is Christlike. In these ways, these women deny the concept that one's gender determines the way to get into heaven, but instead hold up examples of remarkable, holy people, who should be revered and looked to as examples. Their qualities are unequivocally good, and sanctified, separate from gendered expectations traditionally associated with them.

These medieval women writing were taking a stand for themselves, and for all who would come after them. They set the precedent for women's liberation, in religious and secular circles, and their work should be looked at with awe and gratitude. These women worked to craft a better world for themselves, and we, as a society, are still reaping the benefits.

Literature Cited

- Beresford, Andrew, "Torture, Identity, and the Corporeality of Female Sanctity: The Body as Locus of Meaning in the Legend of St. Margaret of Antioch," *Medievalia*, 18 (2), 2015, pp. 179-210.
- Bernau, Anke, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih, eds., *Medieval Virginites*, University of Toronto Press, 2003.
- Blamires, Alcuin, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*. Eds. Karen Pratt, C. W. Marx. Clarendon Press 1992.
- Blud, Victoria. "Speaking Up and Shutting Up: Expression and Suppression in the Old English Mary of Egypt and 'Ancrene Wisse'." *The Unspeakable, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval Literature, 1000-1400*. NED - New edition ed., Boydell & Brewer, Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY, USA, 2017.
- Clemence of Barking, "The Life of Saint Catherine." *Virgin Lives and Holy Deaths*, pp. 3-43.
- Hughes-Edwards, Mari. "Anchoritism: the English tradition." *Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe*, ed. Herbert McAvoy, Liz, Boydell Press, 2010.
- McAvoy, Liz Herbert. "JULIAN OF NORWICH AND A TRINITY OF THE FEMININE." *Mystics Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2002, pp. 68–77. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20717491.
- Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*. Trans. Elizabeth Spearing. Intro and notes by A. C. Spearing. Penguin Classics, 1998.

- Millet, Bella and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds., "Custody of the Soul," *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse*, Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 87-109.
- Millet, Bella and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds., "A Letter on Virginitly," *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse*, Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 3-43.
- Millet, Bella and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds., "Saint Margaret," *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse*, Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 45-85.
- Millet, Bella and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds., "Guide for Anchoresses, Parts 7 and 8," *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse*, Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 111-149.
- Mills, Robert. "Gender, Sodomy, Friendship, and the Medieval Anchorhold." *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2010.
- Nestel, Meghan. "A Space of Her Own: Genderfluidity and Negotiation in *The Life of Christina of Markyate*." *Medieval Feminist Forum*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2019, 100-134.
- Riches, Samantha J.E., and Sarah Salih, eds., *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women, and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, Routledge, 2002.
- Salih, Sarah, *Versions of Virginitly in Late Medieval England*, D. S. Brewer, 2001.
- The Life of Christina of Markyate*. Trans. C. H. Talbot with Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser. Oxford World's Classics, 2010.

Saint Patrick's Purgatory: A Poem by Marie de France, trans. Michael J. Curley.

Binghamton, New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1993; repr.

Tempe, AZ: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1997.

Watson, Nicholas. "The Composition of Julian of Norwich's Revelation of Love." *Speculum*,

vol. 68, no. 3, 1993, pp. 637–683. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2864969.