

EVE'S SIN, MARY'S PERFECTION, AND THE MYSTICS IN BETWEEN

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers three women situated in the Middle Ages who all produced written accounts of their visionary experiences of the Divine. St. Birgitta of Sweden's *Liber Celestis*, Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and Julian of Norwich's *Shewings* display an intentional construction that was necessitated by the intensity of clerical suspicion towards women. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Europe experienced increasing clerical control and corruption, which was often expressed in the beliefs about male superiority and female inferiority. According to the Church, women were stained by Eve's sin, yet held to the standard of the Virgin Mary's perfection. Additionally, because women were restricted to enclosed religious lifestyles and could only speak about the Divine publicly on the basis of prophecy, these women had to wrestle with how to present their obedience to God.

I argue that St. Birgitta, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe dealt with the challenge of self-construction according to their differing definitions of perfection. Their experiences did not align with the Church's definition of female perfection; therefore, they each had to redefine perfection and mold their work to prove their proficiency as vessels for God to speak through. Their differing definitions are derived from their personal experiences, theologies, and divine revelations. This triad of perfection is formulated according to a body, mind, and soul framework, with Margery Kempe's focus on bodily perfection, St. Birgitta's fixation on mental purity and wisdom, and Julian's idea of perfection in the unity of the soul. Accordingly, in their texts and lives, Margery is overtly present and Julian is almost completely absent, while St. Birgitta's presence finds a middle ground between the two other women. Ultimately, these three women

demonstrate bold attempts to operate under clerical authority in order to encourage reform within the Church.

DEDICATION

To Dr. Craig Kallendorf, a man whose humility, faith, kindness, and love of Virgil have blessed
the lives of many, myself included.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE INESCAPABLE STAIN & THE UNREACHABLE STANDARD

The idea of perfection has been and continues to be a complex concept to define, especially in regards to divinity and human identity. Is perfection possible? If we are working towards a standard of perfection, what is that standard? Is it possible to be perfect in identity while imperfect in deed? In past centuries, Christianity has tackled this issue with a myriad of paradoxical definitions. While tracing the complete Church history of the definition of perfection is a daunting task, I will hone in on a cluster of women situated in late medieval Europe who each defined and pursued perfection in different ways. I have chosen Margery Kempe (c. 1373-1438), St. Birgitta of Sweden (c. 1303-1373), and Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-1416) to analyze in terms of their definitions of perfection¹. These three women are particularly interesting in that they received messages about femininity in a time that was heavily oppressive and silencing for the majority of women, yet they each displayed boldness in dictating revelatory visions of God in order to share with the public.

Women in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were highly regulated by both the Church and the rest of society. They occupied a space in which they were constricted by the stain of Eve's original sin, but also held to the standard of femininity idealized in the Virgin Mary. This conflict had implications for how women conceptualized perfection and strove for that definition of perfection. This sort of internal guide was put on display by Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and St. Birgitta in that they produced spiritual autobiographies. I argue that in their

¹ 1373 was an important year for this triad: Margery was born, St. Birgitta died, and Julian of Norwich received her visions within months of one another. Additionally, these three women are connected through *The Book of Margery Kempe* because Margery discusses her reverence for St. Birgitta as a role model and her visit to Julian's anchorhold for spiritual counsel. These references are found in chapters 18 and 20, respectively.

quest to overcome Eve's sin and meet the standard of Mary's perfection, these three women constructed identities in their writing based in and held up by the ways that they define and live out the pursuit of perfection. In order to understand the context of their writing, and better frame the specific place in society in which these women dwelt, it is crucial to explore the theological beliefs and social implications of those doctrines that shaped how women were seen by others and saw themselves.

The curse of Eve's sin was a stain that no amount of purity or right-doing could ever quite wash away from the perspectives of the men in power over the Church and its teaching. In the Bible, Adam and Eve were both present and responsible for the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, yet Eve, whom the serpent directly deceived, has a history of receiving the primary blame for the fall of man.² Because Eve became the scapegoat, the Early Church Fathers began connecting original sin with sexuality, "thereby initiating the long association of women with sexual temptation and damnation" (Murray xv). With the Fall came a host of curses that God ushered in that contributed to this connection between the female body and original sin.³ This became a precedent for how women would be viewed in light of the curse of Eve's original sin. Because all women experience menstruation (which was unclean by a Levitical standard) and the pain of childbirth (if they had children), a persuasive image of woman was created that connected original sin and the fallen state of the human body. This association would be the dominant ideology for understanding fleshly vulnerability and femininity throughout the Middle Ages (Elliott 4).

² "But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate." Genesis 3:4-6 English Standard Version (ESV)

³ "To the woman he said, 'I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.'" Genesis 3:16 ESV

This belief system was made stronger by the veneration of the Virgin Mary as the standard of feminine perfection. Not only were women born into the shame of Eve's sin, but the Church also painted a picture of what femininity should look like based on Christ's own Mother. The Virgin Mary represented perfection in purity as a virgin, perfection as a host for Christ to dwell in both body and soul, and perfection in love and compassion for Christ. Her image was held up to these women as a beacon to identify with in womanhood and to strive for in holiness. While much of this teaching came from the pulpit, even the literature available to women in this time presented the Virgin Mary as a role model for women in all seasons of life. Because men dominated all the spheres of power in the late Middle Ages, the dominant view of womanhood focused on emulating Mary's obedience, silence, and chastity (Niebrzydowski "Marian" 113). This created a dynamic to regulate female behavior and provide parameters for how to be the best daughter, wife, and mother. At the same time, Mary's perfection was unattainable because her miraculous, virginal pregnancy with Christ could not be replicated by women operating under the curse of Eve's sin. Women could never quite measure up to the Virgin Mary's perfection.

The interpretations of the person of Eve and the person of Mary had implications for the theology behind the differences in men and women. While masculinity was associated with intellect, reasoning, and spirit, femininity connoted carnality, imagination, and emotions. This dichotomy helped affirm the power structures in the Church that favored men and increased the suspicions held towards women. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt summarize the divide between genders in the Introduction to *Writing a History of Women's Writing, 700-1500*:

By the Middle Ages the body had taken on a role as a visceral, female signifier: whilst maleness and masculinity were characterized as warm, dry, rational, and stable, equating with the human soul, femaleness and femininity were cold and wet, irrational and readily

changeable, forever locked in the synecdochal unity with humanity's fallen flesh. Thus, the unruly female became irrevocably subject to policing by a 'superior' male authority.

(13)

Through this lens, femininity implied a susceptibility to spiritual attack and temptation, and a weakened ability to overcome emotion to get to the logic behind issues. Because of their supposed vulnerability and their association with the flesh, women were identified as sexual creatures that were a threat to ecclesiastical purity. This perceived hazard both increased the popular discourse around striving for the purity of the Virgin Mary and influenced the controlling doctrines regarding how and when women could express their femininity.

As asceticism was on the rise, the ideas behind the distinction between the flesh and the spirit established hierarchies of purity and perfection. Dyan Elliott explains that "virginity would retain a privileged status throughout the Middle Ages" on the basis of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary ("Flesh and Spirit" 19). Virginity was the penultimate taming of the unruly flesh, thereby demonstrating the holiness of one's spirit. Widowhood was second in position, and marriage was the last of all options for maintaining one's purity. In this way, perfection in purity was both a spectrum and a binary. Any sexual activity outside of marriage was impure and imperfect, and while marriage was technically a sanctioned place to partake in this 'necessary evil,' it still paled in comparison to the sanctity that accompanied virginity. This ideal was evidenced in the Church-mandated clerical continence. However, the scale was not equal between men and women on this point. For women to gain trust and respect in the Church, virginity was almost a necessity—and this expectation burdened many married or widowed women who experienced heavenly revelations. I will elaborate on the implications of this burden in the subsequent chapter covering Margery Kempe.

These staunchly held beliefs regarding the differences between men and women colored the Church's interpretation of Scripture as well, which had severe social implications for women. The Pauline verses that refer to women being the weaker vessel and unable to teach or to have authority over men were taken to extreme measures because of the inherent suspicion the Church harbored towards women.⁴ According to Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden, women could no longer "perform liturgies, distribute communion, hear confessions, and serve at the altar" as they once had in the earlier Church (3). These roles were exclusively filled by male priests because women were perceived to be inferior. Femininity represented the instability of the flesh and might have been a temptation to the men serving at the altar, so women were perceived as ill-equipped by God to serve in the most important capacities of the Church. Additionally, because the Virgin Mary represented the standard of perfection for women, the fact that she was not an ordained minister of the gospel meant that women had no hope for ecclesiastical authority (Minnis "Religious" 51). Although women had very little opportunity to teach or serve in the Church, there were a few spheres that allowed them some influence.

While preaching and teaching publicly were subsumed in authority and involved gaining knowledge about theology and the Bible, women still spoke publicly during this time. Men alone could teach at the pulpit because they were seen as intelligent in their understanding of Latin. Women had little access to Scripture because it had not been translated into vernacular English yet; therefore, the majority of women were restricted from Latin literacy. Despite the difficulties that the definition of preaching bore for women, "in place of the right to preach, a certain right to speak authoritatively might be recognized for women who had the special gift of prophecy"

⁴ "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet." 1 Timothy 2:11-12 ESV

"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered." 1 Peter 3:7 ESV

(Kienzle 139). This loophole created several avenues for divinely-inspired women to gain some authority.

The few modes in which women were allowed spiritual authority rested in receiving prophetic words, becoming anchoresses, joining a monastery to teach and be taught by other nuns, and having visionary experiences. As a preoccupation with the theology of Christ's incarnation grew, fleshly femininity came to be identified with Christ's own broken, but praised, humanity on the Cross (Elliott 20). This identification resulted in women taking on the role of representing the flesh of Christ and led to the mystical phenomena of embodiment and affective piety that characterized the experiences of women like Margery Kempe, St. Birgitta, and Dame Julian. For these women, visionary capabilities allowed them to break through the 'glass ceiling' that restricted their influence on men (Minnis "Religious" 59).

The doctrinal preoccupation with Christ's Incarnation that colored the medieval Christian tradition actually gave women a foothold in gaining respect and authority. Because women were associated with the brokenness of the flesh, they came to represent Christ in his humanity on the Cross. This allowed women a practical way to imitate the person of Jesus Christ as men would. As Caroline Walker Bynum points out, however, the elements of Christ's Passion that women resonated with became arguments for a Christ-like femininity all its own. In *Fragmentation and Redemption*, Bynum extrapolates the feminine and maternal components of Christ's humanity. His death and redemption, by way of his labor creating new life, represent a mother's labor pains in the process of giving birth (158). In his love for humanity, Christ resembles the tender mercy and pity that a mother has for her children (158). The Eucharistic elements of Christ's body and blood that feed Christians is similar to the way a mother uses her body to feed her children in infancy (158). Because of these associations between Christ's Passion and the fleshly female,

women could draw upon their ‘feminine weakness’ as a means to gain authority⁵. Capitalizing on this opportunity took the form of intense embodiment of Christ’s suffering, affective piety in the experience of his humanity, and ascetism in the renunciation of fleshly temptations. By settling in to the roles that the Church gave them, these women could connect their sufferings to Jesus, which served to elevate them in society (172).

The potential for these women to be taken seriously and not condemned for heresy depended on their ability to follow the conventions of these different roles. They had to demonstrate that their knowledge and insight were exclusively inspired by God (Kienzle 153). For women like Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and St. Birgitta of Sweden who transcribed their visions and prophecies, it was imperative that they constructed their works in a way that aligned with the Church’s teaching and hid away their own personal influence. They had to paint themselves as mere vessels that God used to communicate his words in order to pass under the suspicions of the Church. This dynamic added yet another element to the pressures these women faced in light of Eve and the Virgin Mary. Some women achieved an effective self-construction, while others struggled and paid a heavy price for a boldness that lacked proper constraint.

In order to locate the standards of self-construction placed on these women, it is important to tease out the expectations for the spheres of anchoritic life, monastic life, and visionary writing. In regards to the anchoritic lifestyle, we know much about the conditions and standards from the *Ancrene Wisse*, a book written to anchoresses by an anonymous Dominican Friar with the purpose of clarifying the anchoritic rule. The process to become an anchoress involved the commitment to spend the rest of one’s life “dead to the world” in order to contemplate the love of God to greater degrees. The anchoress would have her last rites read

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Matthew 5:5 ESV

over her before entering the anchorhold attached to the church, in which she would abide until death. With a window to the church and a window to the world, she had minor human interaction and was occasionally consulted as a spiritual counsellor. However, the anchoress's purpose was not to interact with the world. Her particular purpose, or rule, is articulated as follows:

Now you ask what rule you anchoresses must keep. You must in all ways, with all your might and strength, keep the inner—and the outer for her sake. The inner is always the same, the outer is variable. For each must keep the outer according as she may best serve the inner with it. (*Ancrene* 2)

The anchoritic definition of perfection took its cue from a belief in the binary of flesh and spirit. The perfection of the inner spirit was the goal laid before anchoresses by this Dominican Friar. While he spent a great deal of time laying out the specific details for how an anchoress should live in her outer life, he is keen in pointing out that following the guidelines for the outer flesh would inherently benefit the holiness of the inner spirit. This inner perfection is described as a disposition to desire “God alone and those things, for God, that help you towards him” (*Ancrene* 178). Despite stressing an inner perfection, the friar still brings out comparisons to Eve and the Virgin Mary in his directions for the outer lives of anchoresses.

Naturally, chastity was a requirement for anchoresses vowing to remain in a cell for the remainder of their lives. Chastity was mandated on the basis of the Virgin Mary and demonstrated in the friar's admonitions for prayer. In his instruction for different methods of praying to the Virgin Mary he writes:

Lady St. Mary, for the great bliss which you had when you saw that blessed babe born of your pure body for the healing of mankind, without any breach, with virginity intact and a virgin's honour, heal me who am all broken, so I fear, through my will, whatever the

case with my deeds, and grant me to see in heaven your blessed face and at least behold the virgin's honour, if I am not worthy to be in their company. (*Ancrene* 20)

Even the prayer that he has written out for the anchoresses to recite places these women and their "brokenness" in contrast to the perfect holiness and purity of the Virgin Mary. Additionally, he encourages these women to remain hidden and silent as best they can manage. His explanation focuses on Eve's openness to conversation with Satan, since it made her susceptible to deception. He compares an anchoress's temptations to reveal herself and to carry on in conversation to the temptation Eve faced with the appealing apple before her. His claim in this comparison is that talking too much can lead an anchoress into sin. Oftentimes he refers to Eve as the anchoress's mother, but he commands these women: "You, my dear sisters, follow Our Lady and not the cackling Eve" (*Ancrene* 35). He establishes the inescapable relation to Eve, yet reminds the women constantly to pursue Mary's perfection. Although the ultimate perfection of the anchoritic lifestyle is found in the purity of the inner self, the pursuit thereof was often explained in terms of how to live the outer life within the pressures between Eve and the Virgin Mary.

While the anchoritic life centered around seclusion and contemplation, the monastic life was arranged around community and service. Both, however, mandated strict rules of living for all of the women involved. The monastic life for women identified them as the Brides of Christ. There were many different ways this nuptial process played itself out in the various monasteries; however, this identity was the common thread. As Nancy Warren explains in *Spiritual Economies*, "the identity of the bride of Christ is at once constraining and empowering; that which necessitates supervision by the clergy also provides opportunities for spiritual and temporal authority" (3). As the brides of Christ, nuns relinquished all their possessions and assets to the Church, made vows of chastity, and committed their lives to serving the purposes of Christ. According to the different rules of the nunneries, the rhetoric of perfection varied

depending on the emphasis of certain scriptural elements. I will focus primarily on the Birgittine Order, since it was established by St. Birgitta of Sweden out of obedience to Christ's command given to her in a vision.

Nuns at the Syon Abbey were held to the perfection of the Virgin Mary in her humility, meekness, and maternal wisdom. The rule that St. Birgitta received and put into practice is found in *The Rewyll of Seynt Sauioure*: "This religion therefore I wyll sette: ordeyne fyrst and principally by women to the worshippe of my most dere beloued modir" (fol. 42r). This rule demonstrates that this order would be made of women and for women, and based in the nature and worship of Mary, Christ's mother. Not only do Birgittine nuns take on the identity of the bride of Christ, but they also assume the same maternal authority that the Virgin Mary displayed in giving birth to and raising the Son of God. St. Birgitta wielded the maternal aspects of Mary to vie for greater spiritual authority for the nuns at Syon Abbey. Unlike most other convents in which women had little opportunity to further their education and scriptural knowledge, the Syon Abbey encouraged literacy and education for its community. Additionally, the Birgittine abbess had notable command over the assets and stores of the house, while most other convents operated under the stewardship of male ecclesiastical authorities (Warren 56-57). These particularities stemmed from the rule emphasizing Mary's authority as a mother to the nuns. Therefore, because the Birgittine nuns were expected to identify with Mary the Mother of God, they had access to greater female authority than most other convents could offer.

While the prevalent nuptial discourses in monasteries removed autonomy from the nuns, the maternal discourses present at the Syon Abbey actually encouraged autonomy and authority. Although the Birgittine convent was still subject to the clergy's authority, the hierarchy was quite different from most other monasteries. Because the Virgin Mother represents maternal

authority, this ideology allowed the abbesses places alongside and over the male clergy, as opposed to being subject to their every whim (Warren 9). The meekness, chastity, and wisdom expected of the Birgittine nuns were used to empower these women, rather than to restrict them as these same expectations did in other monasteries. It is clear that St. Birgitta wanted to give the Birgittine nuns opportunities to learn and to read. This desire for education was based on the Virgin Mary's maternal wisdom, which could be cultivated in women's access to textual knowledge and literature (Warren 48). Perfection, for these women, was therefore defined by a desire to grow in wisdom and discernment through Mary's maternal authority, and a commitment to humility and purity, which earned them authority and autonomy. Though St. Birgitta's order did not overtly encourage women to write, Birgitta's own example as a visionary author definitely influenced the establishment of the Birgittine Rule.

While women were not allowed to preach publicly, they did have a sphere to teach in if they claimed to have received prophecies or visions. Often these opportunities came in the form of a written text that detailed their experiences with God. Because writing was one of the few ways that women could have a public voice, these texts were under the suspicion and scrutiny of the Church, to make sure that these women were not "contaminating" the hearts and minds of medieval society. However, if these visionary women were successful at constructing their works according to the mandates of the clergy, they could create "an arena where they were authorized, through scripture, to operate with some degree of autonomy or independence" (Voaden 37). Because women were generally denied access to learning Latin and growing their scriptural intellect, they had to present themselves as vessels of God's words rather than parade themselves as teachers. If they followed the mode of conduct summed up in *discretio spirituum*, these women could avoid the hindrances of their gender in these spiritual discussions.

Discretio spirituum was a method of discerning the spirits associated with visionary and prophetic claims. It was especially important during this time because of the beliefs that the devil could appear as an angel of light in a vision and that women were more susceptible to spiritual attack than men. The seven signs used in *discretio spirituum* are described by Rosalynn Voaden in *God's Words, Women's Voices*. She derives these signs from Alfonso of Jaén's *Epistola solitarii ad reges* found at the beginning of St. Birgitta's *Liber celestis*. The female visionary must demonstrate surpassing virtue in lifestyle under the counsel of a male spiritual director who is qualified to discern the meaning and source of the visions or prophecies. Additionally, after the vision is received, the soul should feel "inflamed by God's love and charity" and encouraged in "obedience and reverence to Holy Mother Church" (50). The visionary should also experience a "deep inward knowledge of the truth of the revelation" (50). True visions are also expected to be in alignment with Scripture and the teaching of the Church, and they should be beneficial for their audience. In regards to the credibility of the female visionaries, the time of their death should also be revealed to them, and after their death, miracles should occur that further cement their status as a visionary (50). All of these benchmarks culminate in either condemnation for heresy or notable autonomy and authority. The stakes were very high, but *discretio spirituum* outlined the way to perfection for visionary women.

Ultimately, when assessing the visionary herself, perfection was defined in her obedience and submission to her spiritual director, scripture, and the teachings of the Church. The greater her humility and submissiveness to the men around her, the more likely she would be heard and respected. She must acknowledge "the 'natural' inferiority of women, and [imply] that she need[ed] guidance" when attempting to understand the visions she had received (Voaden 66). Due to these acknowledgements, authorship was a hazy term because, in reality, these visionary

writers constructed their works with and under the intense supervision of men. Women were not allowed to interpret their own visions; instead, they were supposed to be messengers and mouthpieces, leaving the analyses up to the ‘superior’ intellect of men.

Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and St. Birgitta of Sweden each experienced different nuance in the expectation of perfection placed upon women by the men in power. In tackling the issue of writing about their visionary experiences, they each had to wrestle with the suspicion of the Church, which meant they had to construct themselves carefully if they desired any chance to be heard by the public. They had to conform to the expectations of the Church in order to create the opportunity to confront the corruption of the system they were working within. Each of the three women displays a type of boldness and commitment to communicating the words of God that she had received. However, these women all vary in their contexts, environments, and inherent definitions of perfection, which ultimately impacts the ways that they pursue a “perfect” self-construction in their writing. If perfection can be broken up into the familiar body, mind, and soul triad, I argue that each of these women constructed themselves according to a different type of perfection that they deemed most important. Additionally, they all demonstrate a varying degree of bodily presence in their writing that inherently affects their ability to be taken seriously as a mystic and visionary.

CHAPTER II

MARGERY KEMPE: THE OMNIPRESENT BODY

Margery Kempe (c. 1373-after 1438) is a woman who maintained an overt, physical presence throughout her works and is, for a number of reasons, a controversial visionary. Margery Kempe and her writing, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, have a history laden with debate and disagreement. Until 1934, the only translation available was Wynkyn de Worde's version of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which transformed Margery Kempe's character into an agreeable, submissive anchoress. It was only after Hope Emily Allen discovered the surviving manuscript from Margery Kempe's original *The Book of Margery Kempe* that scholars realized the disruptive nature of Margery Kempe, and the subsequent controversy over her work. She neither represents the submissive, churched woman of the Middle Ages, nor does her work fit well within any particular genre of religious women's writings. Interestingly, most of what is known about her life is from Margery Kempe's account in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. I will therefore distinguish between Margery, the character, and Kempe, the author⁶. As her book demonstrates, Kempe went to great lengths to construct Margery's disruptive character in the midst of the misogynistic attempts to silence her. In light of the standards of perfection I explicated in the previous chapter, Margery's definition of perfection hinges on the body's externalization of internal truths, which she displayed through her desperate longing for virginity, alignment with Jesus's sufferings, and desire for pilgrimage. Additionally, Kempe constructs Margery's physical presence throughout her writings to a greater degree than Julian of Norwich or St. Birgitta of

⁶ In her book *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, Lynn Staley Johnson is the first to coin the paradigm of differentiating between Margery as the constructed character in *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Kempe as the author who constructs Margery.

Sweden, which places the focus of *The Book of Margery Kempe* on external factors of Margery's life that reveal her internal reality.

Margery Kempe, born into an upper-class family in the late fourteenth century, married John Kempe at age twenty and shortly thereafter gave birth to her first child. This intense bodily experience set off a radical spiritual journey in the opening scene of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The rest of the text narrates the changes she underwent, the criticisms she received, the challenges she endured, and the revelations God gave her. Though her status as a mystic is debated, Margery exhibited traits characteristic of other contemporary visionaries. She had the "gift of tears," claims of prophetic wisdom, and spiritual visions throughout her lifetime. These mystical phenomena have given rise to much speculation into the sincerity of the account, but nonetheless are comparable in multiple ways to other venerated holy women. Despite her similarities with them, her life and writings are characterized by a failure to conform to the expectations for her as a woman in the Church.

In her failures there are elements of success, in that Margery unifies herself with the controversy of Christ's life on earth, rather than the uniformity of the Church. As discussed in my previous chapter, visionary and mystic writing was judged for its validity on the basis of *discretio spirituum*. Margery, called "The Woman Who Would Not Go Away" by Rosalynn Voaden, struggled to meet the standards of *discretio spirituum* because of inconsistencies in her obedience and submission that was foundational for validation (Voaden 109). Although Margery secured three male amanuenses who vouched for her visions' authority, her text reveals an inconsistency in her reverence for the Church's hierarchy and in her failure to obey the guidance of a spiritual director. She has several male spiritual directors throughout *The Book*, but her messages from God often conflicted with the direction she was given from her male authorities.

Voaden points out that many of Margery's journeys were spent deliberately seeking affirmation of the truth of her visions from the clergy, yet she was inconsistent in complying with their guidance because God's messages gave her permission to supersede clerical authority in several instances (122). Often in the text, Margery is the interpreter of her own visions, rather than a vessel for the revelations she received. Margery's interpretations took away from her credibility in the Church's eyes and developed the controversy over her devotional practices.

Clearly Margery did not define perfection in terms of obedience and submission to men. Rather, she constructed herself according to the definition that perfection is attained through a bodily representation of the inner life. Towards the beginning of her spiritual journey, this definition is evident in her quest for a chaste marriage and a virginal status. From her first visionary experience of the divine, Margery's spirituality was tied intricately to her body as a wife and a mother. With the birth of Margery's first child came the birth of her affective piety and it was not long before Margery began to resent intercourse with her husband. Several scholars, among them Barrie Ruth Straus, have debated Margery's motives in convincing her husband to make a vow of chastity on the basis of a disdain for the pain of childbearing and a need for control over her body (256). While such an interpretation is possible, as Karma Lochrie points out, Margery exhibits a desire for suffering because it united her to Christ's own suffering, thereby making her more perfect (168). Instead, Margery's longing for chastity was primarily a byproduct of her pursuit of bodily perfection that mimics the internal reality. After remarking that she would rather eat the muck and slime off the streets than have sex with her husband, Margery's initial plea with John Kempe is articulated as follows:

& so sche seyde to hir husband, "I may not deny zow my body, but þe lofe of myn hert & myn affeccyon is drawyn fro alle erdly creaturys & sett only in God." He wold haue hys

wylle, & sche obeyd with greet wepyng & sorwyng for þat sche mygth not levyn chast.

(Kempe 12)

While Margery recognized her Scriptural obligation not to deny John her body⁷, she also offered an insight into the internal reality of her desires. Her yearning for chastity, therefore, was an external representation of the singularity of her internal desire for intimacy with God.

After Margery spent three years of weeping, praying, fasting, and wearing hairshirts (all external representations of her internal sexual turmoil), John Kempe finally agreed to take a vow of chastity in exchange for Margery paying off his debts and eating dinner with him. Although Margery secured a chaste marriage, Liz Herbert McAvoy is keen to explicate her remaining anxiety about her lack of virginity as she steps into her new roles away from the home and ministers to the public (“Spiritual” 16). In the midst of her anxiety, Margery received a command from God:

“And, dowtyr, I sey to þe I wyl þat þu were clothys of whyte & non oþer colour, for þu xal ben arayd aftyr my wyl.” “A, der Lord, yf I go arayd on oþer maner þan oþer chast women don, I drede þat þe pepyl wyl slawndyr me. þei wyl sey I am a ypocryt & wondryn vp-on me.” “Ȝa, dowtyr, þe mor wondryng þat þow hast for my lofe, þe mor þu plesyst me.” (Kempe 32)

Virginity was almost a necessity for women wanting to serve in any religious sphere. These women were recognized by wearing white to depict the purity of their flesh. In his command for Margery to wear white although she was not technically a virgin, Margery perceived an expectation placed on her to outwardly demonstrate her inward, newfound purity and new vow of chastity. This command served as a validation of Margery’s pursuit of bodily perfection and it

⁷ “Do not deprive one another; except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” 1 Corinthians 7:5 ESV

communicated a message to people around her that was contradictory to the teaching of the Church. Wearing white as a married mother would have disrupted religious society and reframed what it meant to be pure. Any suffering she endured was then fuel for her pursuit of bodily perfection because she was suffering for obeying God's command⁸.

An inconsistency occurs at a later moment when God speaks to Margery, because he communicated something contradictory to the command to wear white that Margery claimed to have received. After finding out that she was pregnant again, though she desired chastity, Margery felt ill-equipped for serving God in the manner of a virgin and believed that she had been disobedient to God's will for her life. God responds to Margery and explains the hierarchy of virginity, widowhood, and marriage, but tells her, "ȝet dowtyr I lofe þe as wel as any mayden in þe world" and "þerfor, dowtyr, þow mayst no bettyr plesyn God þan contynuly to thinkyn on hys lofe" (Kempe 49). God's response to Margery's anxiety in this instance is not a command for her to change something outward about herself, but to contemplate the equality of his love between Margery and any virgin maiden. Additionally, he instructed her that to please him, she must think about his love, rather than suffer for it. These two instances send contradictory, but validating messages for Margery. One is focused on the external, while the other encourages her to focus on the internal. Because Margery struggled to obtain and maintain white clothes in the face of intense persecution, her perception of God commanding her to wear white was a sub-conscious actualization of her need for validation of her internal purity. Her need was derived from her belief that perfection rests in an external purity that matches the transformation occurring inside her.

⁸ "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." 1 Peter 4:13-14 ESV

Much of Margery's idealization of purity and femininity came from the example of the Virgin Mother. As a mother seeking the sanctity of virginity, Margery exhibited a Marian devotion that unified her experiences with those of the Virgin Mother and made her definition of perfection attainable because she had both given birth and achieved chastity. Sue Niebrzydowski argues that Margery empathizes with Mary in her experience of giving birth to Baby Jesus, by highlighting Margery's interactive visions of Mary ("Marian" 117). Margery's visions of Mary are unique in that Margery herself is present with the Virgin Mother and acts as her handmaiden in the vision (Kempe 18). Kempe describes her journeys with Lady Mary in that "þe creatur forth with owyr Lady to Bedlem & purchasyd hir herborwe euery nyght with gret reuerens" (19). Margery proceeds to be the provider of Mary's needs in childbirth, visualizing herself as an active participant in the birth of Jesus, travelling with Mary, securing her shelter, and swaddling Baby Jesus. Undoubtedly, Margery has to draw upon her own childbirth experiences to immerse herself in such a vivid vision. Prior to this vision, Margery asked God to give her the experience of Jesus's birth, thereby demonstrating her need for an experiential understanding of her connection with the Virgin Mary. Her bodily presence in the vision shows that Margery must insert herself physically and experientially to validate her own holiness and perfection.

In her prayers at the end of the text, Kempe gives her audience a glimpse into her definition of perfection as she describes and worships the Virgin Mother's perfection:

I prey my Lady, which þat is only þe Modyr of God, þe welle of grace, flower & fairest of alle women þat euyr God wrowt in erth, þe most worthiest in hys sight, þe most leef, der, & derworthy vn-to hym, best worthy to ben herd of God, & þe heyest þat hath deseruyd it in þis lyfe, benygne Lady, meke Lady, chariteful Lady. (252)

Among the many praises and compliments that Margery offers the Virgin Mother, she specifically points to her physical beauty as the "flower & fairest of alle women" which

contributes to Mary's perfection. Though Margery's definition of perfection is far from vain standards of beauty, she still reveals in this prayer that she looks to the outward to judge the inward. She values the external representations and finds that they mimic the holiness of the spirit. In Margery's prayer, Mary's external surpassing beauty parallels that she is also "þe most worthiest in hys sight... & derworthy vn-to hym" (252). There is a correlation between the flesh and the spirit, and Margery's definition of perfection hinges upon it.

Suffering as a mode of being perfected is a theme that Kempe elaborates on in her spiritual autobiography as well. Margery, having given birth to fourteen children, was characterized by her mystical weeping and was intensely focused on the Passion of Christ. Having undergone her own challenges as a highly controversial person, she made the point throughout her text that all of her sufferings served the purpose of disconnecting her from the world and uniting her further with Christ, thereby making her more perfect. In Margery's motherhood, Liz Herbert McAvoy extrapolates the connection between Margery and the Virgin Mother by explaining that the sufferings in motherhood "here expressed in terms of the searing and severing pains of childbirth, can lead to redemption and sanctity" ("Spiritual" 30). In her visions, Margery interacts or talks with the Virgin Mary, and then identifies with her motherhood. This identification is particularly evident when Margery spiritually witnesses the Virgin Mary weeping before Christ on the Cross. Though this is not a childbirth experience *per se*, Margery connects her own sufferings as a mother with the Virgin Mary's sufferings as a mother. The pains of childbirth and the bouts of weeping therefore serve as external representations of Margery's contrition of heart, which ultimately unite her with Christ's contrition in his manhood⁹.

⁹ Karma Lochrie elaborates on this point in *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. She explains Margery's embodiment as further connecting her to Christ's crucifixion and a woman's labor pains. (170)

Throughout *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery comes up against many forms of persecution. She is accused of Lollardy¹⁰, she is abandoned by her travel companions, she is restricted from attending Mass, and she is even taken to jail for her excessive weeping. In Margery's experience in Leicester, she beholds a crucifix through which "beheldyng þe Passyon of our Lord entyrd hir mende, wherthorw sche gan meltyn & al-to-relentyn be terys of pyte & compassyown" (111). This compassionate weeping for the Passion becomes a torrent of loud wailing which disturbs the townspeople and ultimately leads the Mayor to confront Margery. He proceeds to call her "a fals strumpet, a fals loller, & a fals deceyuer of þe pepyl" and sentences her to prison, to which Margery replies "I am as redy, ser, to gon to preson for Goddys lofe as 3e arn redy to gon to chirche" (112). Margery's embrace of this punishment as comparable to going to Church demonstrates her disruption of the Church's definition of feminine perfection. Obeying "Holy Mother Church" was a nonnegotiable for those wanting to grow in perfection as Christians, and women were expected to submit to that doctrinal command. However, Margery understands that Christ was perfected in his suffering on the Cross for the love of God, so her struggles stemming from her contrition for Christ's Passion are a method by which she is made more like Christ in perfection. Unlike Christ's silence in the face of false accusations against him, however, Margery is much more forward in answering accusations and making her case known and heard. Margery's willingness to speak up on her behalf illustrates her definition of perfection as an external realization of the internal. She needs experiential, bodily proof that she is growing in perfection, and part of that pursuit includes making her voice heard by those

¹⁰ As Dolnikowski explains in "Feminine Exemplars of Reform," Lollards represented the conflict between ecclesiastical authority and lay empowerment (201). Lollards took a theological stand against fundamental doctrines that kept the clergy in power and the laity in submission like the transubstantiation of the eucharist and the exclusivity of access to Scripture. David Aers explains how the Lollard movement grew out of the theological views of John Wyclif and the controversy of William Thorpe in *The Powers of the Holy* (44).

around her. Margery's unrelenting voice creates a dynamic in which priests must be for or against her, without a middle ground to stand on. The priests that are for her serve as her validation, while those who are against her serve as persecution that unites her with the suffering Christ.

In addition to many moments of persecution, Margery received confirmation via a message from God that affirmed her despite the hardships she came up against:

Dowtyr, it is mor plesyng vn-to me þat þu suffyr despitys & scornys, schamys & repreuys, wrongys & disesys þan zif þin hed wer smet of thre tymes on þe day euery day in sevyn zer. And þerfor, dowtyr, fere þe nowt what any man can seyn on-to þe, but in myn goodness & in thy sorwys þat þu hast suffryd þerin hast þu gret cawse to joyn, for, whan þu comyst hom in-to Heuyn, þan xal euery sorwe turnyn þe to joye. (Kempe 131)

This message frames Margery's sufferings as unifying her with Christ, pleasing to God, and storing up joys in Heaven. These words give validation to Margery at a time when she is being challenged and accused by Holy Mother Church and the clergy. Through the lens of suffering as a means to know Christ more in his humanity, Margery can resolve the controversy within herself and view her accusers as pharisaical, rather than viewing herself as heretical.

Additionally, the phrase "fere þe nowt what any man can seyn on-to þe" could be used as a justification for saying or doing things that would be disruptive. She receives the message that she should expect, rather than fear, persecution. She expects herself to worry what men think and say about her, so this voice quiets her fear and encourages her to continue in what she perceives to be obedience to God.

Margery's understanding of suffering as a means to perfection justifies her actions and serves as yet another validation for her purity and holiness. These sufferings align her with Christ and make her depend on God's provision in the midst of the many trials she encounters, which

simultaneously sets her in comparison to martyrdom. She has the appearance of recklessness, putting herself in precarious positions and directly defying the authorities of the Church, but she would not see it as such. She is convinced that obedience to God yields suffering in, and detachment from, the world and unites the soul more fully with the Creator. Margery, however, seems to go looking for trouble and engages with her persecutors in ways that do not appear altogether wise. She places herself in the fray, either consciously or subconsciously, because she needs the external validation of perfection that suffering and persecution offer her.

Similar to many of her contemporaries, Margery's newfound spirituality leads her to seek pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where Jesus was born and dwelt. To Margery's satisfaction, and against her confessor's guidance, she has the opportunity to travel to many different locations. Her journeys serve two purposes. She is able to be physically present in the places where Jesus was physically present, which indulges her need for spiritual embodiment of the unification with Christ. She also is able to talk with many clergymen and gain validation for her own spirituality from them. Margery's initial desires for pilgrimage are expressed after a moment where God forgives her sin:

Thys creatur...had a desyr to se þo placys wher he was bron & wher he sufferyd his
Passyon & wher he deyed, with oþer holy placys wher he was in hys lyue & also aftyr hys
Resurrexyon. As sche was in þese desyres, owyr Lord bad hir in hir mend ij 3er er þan
sche went þat sche shuld gon to Rome, to Iherusalem, & to Seynt Iamyas. (32)

This yearning comes about after God speaks inwardly to Margery about his great mercy and love for her, which further demonstrates Margery's need for her internal messages to yield outward fruit in order for her mystical experiences to be confirmed. Karma Lochrie explains that

pilgrimage to the Holy Land was a form of *imitatio Christi*¹¹. Visits to these iconic locations like Jerusalem and Mount Calvary were intended to “inspire remembrance” of Christ and “provide mental geography for meditation” on Christ’s life, death, and resurrection (28). By inhabiting the same physical places that Christ inhabited, Margery embodies more intensely the life of Christ, which contributes to her validation that she is being perfected into the image of Christ in a material sense.

In her arrival at Jerusalem and Mount Calvary, Margery makes the connection between the physical geography before her and the Heavenly Jerusalem she longs for, embodying Christ in her actions in both places. Upon entering Jerusalem, Margery is overcome by God’s goodness yet again: “And, whan þis creatur saw Ierusalem, rydyng on an asse, sche thankyd God with al hir hert, preyng hym for hys mercy þat lych as he had browt hir to se þis erdly cyte Ierusalem a-bouyn, þe cyte of Heuyn” (67). Because Margery is “rydyng on an asse” she mimics Christ’s own entrance to Jerusalem in his final trek to be delivered over to crucifixion¹². Christ’s entrance was a climactic moment in the gospels because many followers of Christ believed that Jesus was coming to claim a physical throne. However, as Jesus knew, he was going to Jerusalem to die and claim an eternal, spiritual throne. Margery imitates the climax of this moment by connecting herself with Christ’s own entrance. When Margery finally arrives after months of difficult travel laden with hardship, she victoriously heads for the place of Jesus’s Passion. Additionally, as she looks upon Jerusalem triumphantly, she asks God to allow

¹¹ Hamburger, Marx, and Marti define *imitatio Christi* as the “lived imitation of Christ” (51). Some of the forms *imitatio Christi* took in practice are pilgrimages, remembering Christ’s work, meditation and contemplation, and image-making (Lochrie 26-27).

¹² “Then Jesus, when He had found a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written: ‘Fear not, daughter of Zion; Behold, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt.’” John 12:14-15 (ESV)

her to look upon Heaven in a similar fashion. Once again, she is making the connection between the physical and the spiritual. She reveals her desire for her physical experiences to be a manifestation of her inward holiness and nearness to God.

At the base of Mount Calvary, Margery has an intense visionary experience of Christ crucified. She weeps, roars, and thrashes about as she pictures his suffering on the Cross (68). Her intense physical reaction and vivid vision of Christ demonstrate the embodied experience Margery hoped to find in occupying the same physical place as Christ. The severity of her bodily reaction is a marker for Margery's intimate experience with God, which confirms her spiritual growth towards perfection in Christ. She gains confidence in her mystical experiences by having the physical proof that God is moving in and changing her drastically with each revelation. As Niebrzydowski notes, Margery's travels and experiences helped her reach her "metaphysical destination: mystical marriage to Christ," which is evidenced in her intense communion with God in the Holy Land ("The Middle-Aged" 267). Kempe explains as well that the impact of this experience affected Margery many years afterward in the form of weeping and roaring as she reflected on her experience at Mount Calvary. This physical reaction seems similar to what a reader would expect from Margery's childbirth experience, which was the original physical catalyst of Margery's spiritual journey. (Lochrie 171) It is no wonder, then, that Margery mystically weds the Godhead not long after the vision.

Margery's pilgrimages also allow her to relate to spiritually wise men and women. Diane Watt, in her essay "Margery Kempe," makes the connection between St. Birgitta's time in Rome and Margery Kempe's time there. By encountering a woman and a maidservant who had known the late St. Birgitta, Kempe situates Margery's position in Rome in comparison to St. Birgitta's own experience. However, as Watt points out, "Kempe also outdid [St. Birgitta] in adversity" by

her level of impoverished living (238). St. Birigitta, as a figure who was in the process of canonization at this time, was a woman with whom Margery identified and respected highly. Therefore, her ability to surpass this incredible woman in physical adversity while being in the same geographical location validated Margery's own perfected spirituality.

Margery also meets and confronts many different members of the clergy throughout her travels. Most of these interactions contain either persecution and miraculous protection from danger or clerical validation that her mystical experiences emanate from the Holy Spirit. In one instance, Margery and her company make the trek to Constance where Margery hears about the presence of an English friar who is also the Pope's legate. Seizing this opportunity, "sche went to þat worshipful man & schewyd hym hire lyfe fro þe be-gynnyng vn-to þat owyr as ny as sche mygth in confession, be-cause he was þa Popys legate & a worshipful clerk" (63). The friar's outward status and prestige draw Margery to share her testimony with him in search of confirmation that her affective experiences are from God and therefore make her more perfect. To Margery's delight, the friar affirms her experiences with fasting, weeping, and traveling, and even defends her despite the disapproval of the other people with them. In this particular instance the friar serves as Margery's external proof of her union with God that she needs in order to validate her perfection.

Part of Margery's pursuit of perfection entails identifying herself in comparison to other notable Christian women. Julian of Norwich and St. Birgitta of Sweden provide material confirmation for Margery that she is moving closer to the standard of perfection. While St. Birgitta's pilgrimages were embodiment opportunities for Margery, St. Birgitta's life and writings also offered Margery a standard that allowed her to understand and explain her own experiences. Laura Saetveit Miles sheds light on Margery's admiration for St. Birgitta as a role

model, which gives context to Margery's mentions of St. Birgitta throughout her text (210).

After a vision of the sacrament moving in the priest's hands like a dove, God tells Margery that "my dowtyr, Bryde, say me neuyr in þis wyse" and further shares with her, "For I telle þe forsoþe rygth as I spak to Seynt Bryde ryte so I speke to þe, dowtyr, & I telle þe trewly it is trewe euery word þat is wretyn in Brides boke, & be þe it xal be knowyn for very trewth" (47).

Because Margery has a reverence for St. Birgitta, this message from God situates her as spiritually enlightened in reference to St. Birgitta. Furthermore, the message establishes the uniqueness and superiority of Margery's experience by placing it in comparison to St. Birgitta's experience. After God demonstrates the vision's ability to surpass St. Birgitta's standard, he also reinforces this measure by assuring Margery that he speaks in truth to her by the same degree he spoke truth to St. Birgitta. This reassurance functions as a measure for Margery to weigh her experiences in light of St. Birgitta's holiness as she is in the process of being sanctified.

Julian of Norwich, as Margery's contemporary, serves the same need for affirmation that Margery desires, but in a more physical sense because Margery was able to actually visit with Julian and discuss her fears. In her trip to see Julian, Margery is compelled to share with the anchoress all of the mystical phenomena, visions, compassion, contrition, and messages that she had experienced thus far. Margery wishes to know if she is hearing from God or from an evil spirit in fear that she might be deceived in her revelations. Julian's response gives Margery the comfort and affirmation she needs in that moment:

What-euyr he put in hir sowle yf it wer not a-geyn þe worship of God & profyte of hir euyn-cristen, for, yf it wer, þan it wer nowt þe meuyng of a good spyryte but rapar of an euyl spyrit. (42)

By sharing with Margery how to discern the spirits, Julian affirms Margery's mystical experiences, which contributes to Margery's validation for *discretio spirituum*. Julian, however,

equips Margery to discern her own experiences without the help of a male spiritual director, which is empowering to someone like Margery, who constantly seeks acceptance and validation. Julian's words satisfy the need in Margery to "see and understand the spiritual in relation to the material" (Roman 182). Women like St. Birgitta of Sweden and Julian of Norwich allow Margery to have embodied reference points for what Christian perfection looks like in the body of a woman. Margery is not confident enough in her own spiritual experiences to claim them as the truth without external manifestations of her internal experiences with God.

While historians cannot verify Kempe's account of Margery, it is evident that Kempe constructed Margery according to the definition of perfection as being external representations of the internal. In *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, Lynn Staley points out that Margery, devoid of any historical footprint besides what is found in her *Book*, is a constructed character, and refers to the authorial Kempe as creating Margery's character with the desire to tackle social issues (11). It is through this lens of creative intent that I analyze Kempe the author. Clearly Margery's character is laden with the need for her external reality to prove her growing perfection, but is that just a construction that Kempe devised? Or is Kempe's definition of perfection actually the same as Margery's? There are specific methods by which Kempe constructs Margery's presence in the text that tell of her own concept of perfection as an outward embodiment that must be demonstrated to be validated.

Primarily, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is about Margery, not about God. This emphasis differs widely from other hagiographies or religious texts about women, in which the focus of the texts is the love or the goodness of God towards the holy woman. By contrast, Margery is the central character in Kempe's writing, rather than the periphery to the centrality of God. The reader is made to see God in between the lines and behind the scenes, but ultimately the reader is

left focusing on Margery's responses to what God gives her or tells her. The story itself is autobiographically focused and Margery, rather than God, is the omnipresent being. Though Kempe refers to Margery in the third person as most holy women's writing does, it does not have the same function of humility as that of Julian of Norwich or St. Birgitta of Sweden. The third person functions as a focal point of the story rather than a means to hide the female vessel. As we will see in Julian of Norwich and St. Birgitta, these women seek to hide themselves from being the focus of the text with the sparing use of third person. However, Kempe's use of third person imposes Margery's presence into the text because she constantly refers to what Margery is doing and saying throughout *The Book*.

Part of the conflict Margery's character creates is based both on her willingness to interpret the visions God gives her and on Kempe's focus towards Margery's response to these visions. As *discretio spirituum* demands, the woman must be a vessel of the revelations and let her spiritual director be the interpreter (Voaden 50). Kempe directly defies *discretio spirituum* by presenting Margery as the interpreter of God's messages and as the focal point in her responses. During her pilgrimage to Rome, Margery experiences a mystical marriage with the Godhead. In transcribing this experience, Kempe places Margery, as the bride, at the center rather than focusing on God as the groom. When Christ suggests the marriage to Margery, Kempe goes into an explanation of how Margery was affected intellectually and emotionally by this proposal. Margery is hesitant keeping "sylens in hir sowle & answeyrd not þerto, for sche was ful sor aferd of þe Godhed" (86). Margery is fearful of the marriage and waits to accept the proposal, which places God at the mercy of her will to marry Him. Margery is inherently given power and agency here as Kempe focuses the circumstance on Margery's answer to God rather than God's love for Margery. Additionally, Christ asks Margery a second time, "What seyst þu, Margery, dowtyr, to

my Fadyr of þes wordys þat he spekyth to þe?" (87). This is the first instance in the *Book* that Kempe uses Margery's first name and it comes at a momentous occasion in Margery's life. By placing Margery in control of her response to the Godhead at this climactic moment, the reader must wait expectantly, looking to Margery for her decision. The mention of her name for the first time further accentuates Margery's overt presence here; she is in the forefront and holds the power of the decision rather than God being the focal point of this experience. Of course, Margery finally agrees to wed the Godhead, but surprisingly the account of this mystical marriage does not describe God as the groom, but mentions notable figures like Jesus, the Holy Ghost, Mother Mary, and other apostles and saints that are present at the wedding (87). Finally, after the vows have been said, Kempe goes on to describe the marriage's effect on Margery in sensory, bodily terms of smells, sounds, and visions that Margery goes on to experience. Though Margery has experienced an intense internal union with the Godhead, Kempe chooses to demonstrate Margery's transformation by describing the physical effects it has on her. Margery's emotions and sensory reactions to God are in the foreground, while God and the reader wait expectantly for Margery to respond.

Though holy women were supposed to be vessels for God to speak through, Kempe inserts Margery into the process of interpreting and acting upon her visions. Among her travels, there were many instances where Margery interpreted messages that God gave her and shared them with many people without the discretion of a male spiritual director. Quite a bit later in her spiritual maturity, Margery "euyr encresyd in contemplacyon & holy meditacyon" and therefore, received knowledge of who around her would be saved and would be damned (144). First, Kempe centralizes Margery in the context of the vision by demonstrating that through Margery's ability to grow in contemplation, God was then able to give her greater knowledge. However,

Kempe depicts Margery as rejecting this knowledge because it was too difficult to bear. Once again, this focus places Margery's response to God at the forefront of the experience rather than focusing on the visions and knowledge God has given her. Because she rejected the interpretation God gave her, he "blamyd hir þer-for & bade hir beleuyn þat it was hys hy mercy & hys goodnesse to schewyn hir hys preuy cownselys" (144). Margery is then attacked by horrifying visions of "mennys membrys" because of her refusal to embrace interpreting others' salvation or damnation (145). By situating Margery's holiness in terms of her interpretation of God's visions and response to his commands, Kempe rejects the idea that women should not interpret the things that God gives them. Additionally, by differentiating between visions that God gave her and the visions that the devil gave her, Kempe demonstrates her ability to discern the spirits. She sets up Margery's ability to interpret God's commands as essential to her spirituality. Consequently, it is evidence of Margery's greater perfection if she is able to interpret what God tells her.

Margery's reactions in her travels are also evidence of Kempe's attempts to focus the reader's attention on Margery's body. Throughout Margery's pilgrimages, Niebrzydowski is keen to point out that Kempe never describes the physical landscape of the places that Margery goes. Instead, Kempe emphasizes Margery's reactions to places like Mount Calvary, "because it is the *going* and her *spiritual response* to being there rather than the *seeing* that matters" ("The Middle-Aged" 281). Niebrzydowski is pointing to the discrepancy in Margery Kempe's text because most pilgrimage accounts highlight the landscape of the places they are going. Kempe's constructed accounts of Margery beg the question of validity because there is not any direct proof given of Margery having actually visited these places. Instead the centrality of Margery's pilgrimages is her travel experiences with other people, sufferings, poverty, and embodied

reactions to the things she supposedly sees in her journeys. Kempe turns the reader's eye to Margery's presence and movement in these places rather than the places themselves.

In these controversial situations, Kempe sets up scenes that depend upon Margery's presence to give voice and example to God's presence in the story. Lynn Staley demonstrates Kempe's deliberate placement of Margery "in the foreground of every scene" by explaining that Kempe "focuses our attention upon Margery's spiritual growth and her frequently outlandish behavior" (78-79). By fixing the center of the story on Margery's bodily experiences, responses, and interpretations, Kempe reveals her own definition of perfection. She must show that Margery is growing spiritually and uniting herself perpetually with Christ by presenting Margery's physical and emotional affectations overtly throughout the text. Perfection is, therefore, something that must be actualized in the flesh and proven in its physical effects on Margery and on others around her. Kempe must then trace Margery's body-mind's journey through her spiritual experiences which are inextricably tied together.

Though Kempe (the author) and Margery (the character) are not inherently the same person because of the construction that Kempe and her amanuensis went through in transcribing *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the underlying definition of perfection can be inferred for both Kempe and her constructed Margery. In the midst of the skepticism and mistrust of the Church towards women, Margery Kempe had to make sense of her spiritual, embodied experiences. The quiet, obedient, submissive, feminine perfection that the Church idealized was not a definition that Margery Kempe could fit. In order to justify her growth, her decisions, and her experiences she had to find a definition that allowed her affective piety to demonstrate her inward transformation and journey towards God. Her understanding of perfection inherently was wrapped into her bodily experiences and could not be separated from them. While Margery's

experiences were used to justify her growth to herself, Kempe's construction of Margery's experiences aimed to prove to her readership that her visions and union with God were legitimate on the basis of her bodily experience. Despite her efforts, *The Book* ignited controversy and failed to fit neatly into any acceptable mode of women's writing. From Margery's experiences to the literary construction of those experiences, Margery Kempe's presence would be seen, felt, and used to prove to herself and the world around her that she was indeed growing in perfection.

CHAPTER III

ST. BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN: A MATERNAL MENTALITY

St. Birgitta of Sweden (c. 1303-1373) was a politically and socially influential visionary woman. Although she became a canonized saint and created a Rule that spread in popularity across Europe, she was also a controversial figure who challenged the power structures in the late medieval Church. Born into an aristocratic family in Sweden, Birgitta was closely connected to the clergy and royalty throughout her life (Powell 1). She received her first vision at age seven, then married Ulf Gudmarsson at thirteen. She was widowed early in life, which began the onset of many more revelations she received from God, one of which included a calling to establish the Birgittine Order. St. Birgitta had seven hundred visions of God which she transcribed with the help of her amanuenses in her book, *The Liber Celestis*. Birgitta's visionary writing is an excellent example of a well-constructed publication that demonstrates *discretio spirituum* almost flawlessly. As part of her construction of self in her writing, Birgitta is fairly absent in her *Liber Celestis*, but this well-connected, educated woman would go on to influence international and church politics, while also creating the first order established by women and for women. Birgitta's writings and teachings feature a Mariology that divinizes Mary as a co-redeemer with Christ and sets her up as a figure of motherly wisdom. The Birgittine Order would later be characterized by that same motherly wisdom established in the Virgin Mary. This chapter argues that both Birgitta's doctrinal Mario-centricity found in her written works and her educational focus in the Birgittine Order demonstrate that her definition of perfection was centered on a spiritual wisdom and spiritual purity that dwells in the mind. I define spiritual wisdom as the capacity to discern and to make right judgements. This wisdom is a byproduct of

an inward meekness, but is also encouraged by both life experience and education. St. Birgitta's definition of perfection in spiritual wisdom allowed this widowed mother to gain spiritual authority on the basis of Mary's maternal wisdom, even though the clergy held up virginity as a standard of perfection for women in the Church. Because I situate Birgitta in the English mystical tradition alongside Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, I will cite from the Middle English versions of her texts that were translated for the Syon Abbey in England¹³.

In many ways, Birgitta did not lead the ideal outward life of a pious woman. Married early and having given birth to eight children, Birgitta did not fit into the standard of virginity that religious women were often held to. She did not meet the standard of feminine perfection, yet her affective piety was received authoritatively and her life culminated in canonization. How did this married mother of eight achieve this amount of honor and veneration in the Church? Fortunately, Birgitta fit many of the categories that were expected of a visionary even though she was not a virgin. We know from her *Vita* and *Liber Celestis* that Birgitta experienced many different mystical phenomena and was well-versed in an affective piety that was common for women at the time. Even before marriage, Birgitta experienced heavenly revelations and practiced many different meditation techniques and prayers. As a seven-year-old, she claims to have been called to lead a spiritual life in her very first vision, while other accounts describe Birgitta's weeping at a young age as she contemplated the Crucifixion (Morris 39). Through marriage, Birgitta maintained her piety, and she and her husband practiced chastity at different times before her husband's death in 1344 (Morris 60). As a widow, she was freed to live a life

¹³ Birgitta originally transcribed her *Liber Celestis* in her vernacular Swedish language as she was commanded by Christ. However, her confessors would later transcribe these revelations into Latin, which Birgitta would closely compare to her original writing using her knowledge of Latin (Coakley 94). Birgitta's value of the vernacular text was reiterated in the establishment of the Syon Abbey in England, where her text was translated in Middle English because it was "fundamental to spiritual life" for the nuns to be able to read their foundress's texts (Warren 48).

devoted solely to her reverence for God, which she pursued by establishing a monastic order. In her widowhood she embarked on two different pilgrimages, became involved in international and Church politics, and founded the Birgittine Order.

Birgitta embraces affective piety in several ways in her pursuit of God. She claims to experience both a mystical marriage to God and a mystical pregnancy with Christ, which she makes sense of because she had experiences with both earthly marriage and pregnancy (Børresen “Scripture” 259). As was customary, Birgitta drew on her carnal experiences as a woman to inform her spiritual experiences. She also incorporated many ascetic practices into her everyday life through fasting, prayer, meditation, and penances. Her visionary experiences were all carefully recorded under the guidance of a male spiritual director. Many of her visions were received either in an ecstatic, trance-like state, or they were described as a movement within her that she then relayed to her spiritual director to garner his discernment and interpretation of the vision (Mortimer 60). Because of these mystical elements she was given a visionary status; however, her definition of perfection was significantly different from the conceptions of perfection held by other mystics and the Church.

Though there is an evident focus on the body throughout Birgitta’s experiences as a female mystic, Birgitta’s understanding of perfection is actually located in the purity and wisdom of the mind. Part of this conception is a byproduct of Birgitta’s upbringing, in that she was born into a wealthy, powerful family and grew up with access to written culture and with a concern for the law and righteousness (Nyberg 373). She was among the few women who were given an adequate education that allowed them access to many books and the opportunity to read them. Additionally, she familiarized herself with both liturgical and grammatical Latin, which would later empower her to have a hand in the Latin translations of her texts. Bridget Morris describes

Birgitta's affinity for reading and the impact it played on her spiritual life in her biographical account, *St Bridget of Sweden*. Morris explains that "Much of Birgitta's meditation and prayer was no doubt provoked by her reading and listening to reading out loud, and involved complete immersion in the words of the scriptures, combined with the powerful act of reminiscence" (56). Reading was an essential part of Birgitta's life and upbringing, and clearly influenced her spirituality in ways that most women did not have access to. Her desire to grow in a knowledgeable understanding of spirituality through reading Scripture and different teachings demonstrates that she valued the ability to grow through reading and viewed it as beneficial to her relationship with God, though the clergy did not necessarily agree that women could or should read the Scriptures. Additionally, even before her establishment of an order, Birgitta was found credible enough to be a *magistra* for the future Queen of Sweden, Blanche. She acted as a mentor and teacher to Blanche, instructing her in Swedish and court customs (Morris 58). Clearly Birgitta placed much value in the faculties of the mind, and as her doctrine indicates, her conception of perfection would be found in the holiness of the mind.

Though women were not believed to have a strong capacity for reasoning, Birgitta challenges the binary understanding of femininity and masculinity through her doctrinal Mariocentricity. Throughout her *Liber Celestis*, Birgitta's central devotion to the Virgin Mother is evident in her presence in a great number of Birgitta's visions. Because Birgitta's own mother died at a young age, Birgitta looked to Mary as a motherly figure; and when Birgitta became a mother, she identified with Mary's motherhood (Morris 39). While the Virgin Mary was venerated as a standard of feminine perfection in the Church, Birgitta manipulated these doctrinal elements both to prove her own spiritual perfection of mind and to empower future Birgittine nuns. In multiple places in the *Liber Celestis*, Mary is referred to as the "queen of

Heaven” and is the primary person who relays Christ’s Passion to Birgitta. In Book I, chapter seven, Mary recounts to Birgitta her experience of the crucifixion as Jesus’s mother, which sets up her authority as being based in her motherhood. Then, in the following chapter Mary explains that she “lufed him with swilke feruour þat we ware bothe as we had bene one: and so he wirshiped me þat was a vessel of erthe þat he enshawnsed me abouen all aungels. And þarefore þou sall me þus wirshipe” (*Liber* 15). This sentiment demonstrates that Birgitta’s worship of Mary is based on Mary’s authority as mother of Jesus and Jesus’s establishment of Mary as being above angels and as the queen of heaven. However, Birgitta’s Mario-centricity does not stop there; she embraces the doctrinal idea that Mary suffered and shared a unique oneness with Christ.

While many female mystics gained authority by identifying with the feminine aspects of Christ, Birgitta elevated Mary to oneness with Christ to validate her own authority and union with God as a female. Birgitta molds the Virgin Mother into what Kari Børresen refers to as a “Christotypic Mary” (“Scripture” 261). This doctrinal difference is demonstrated in Birgitta placing Mary as a partner in salvation with Christ (or a co-redeemer). In Book I, chapter thirty-five, Birgitta relays an account of a vision from the Virgin Mother describing how she and Christ co-suffered at the Cross: “Right as Adam and Eue sald þe werld for ane appill, so mi son and I boght againe þe werld as with one hert; and þarefore, mi doghtir, þinke howe it stode with me in þe dede of mi son, and it sall noght þan be greuouse to þe, ne heuy, to forsake þe werld” (63). In this statement Mary is claiming that by their unified sufferings, together they purchased the salvation of the world. Additionally, Mary’s sufferings are rooted in her motherhood in that no one else can understand the pain she bore as she watched her beloved son die a miserable death on the Cross. She claims that in her suffering she became the new Eve, as Christ became the new

Adam. In “Religious Feminism in the Middle Ages: Birgitta of Sweden,” Kari Børresen elaborates on this point in explaining that by claiming Mary as the better Eve, Birgitta essentially places Christ and Mary on equal footing as partners in salvation and as redeemers for both genders in the same fashion (301). By reframing Mary’s role in salvation, Birgitta effectively nullifies the effects of Eve’s original sin on women. If this doctrine had been accepted by the Church, it would have invalidated the negative connotations regarding Eve’s curse as being present in all women. Even though the Church denied this particular doctrine, the Christotypic Mariology remained an underpinning of Birgitta’s doctrine.

By presenting Mary as co-redeemer with Christ, she is divinized, which has major implications for women in their pursuit of identifying with Mary as a standard of perfection. Birgitta’s revelations demonstrate Mary’s divinity in that she is continually identified as a mediator between God and humanity. Mary explains to Birgitta that if a sinner turns to her, she can give him or her full forgiveness because of a special grace she has been given as the mother of God (*Liber* 74). Though the Virgin Mother was often called upon as an intercessor in the Church, she is not described as having the ability to forgive sins. Therefore, just as Christ empowers men to reach greater heights of faith, Mary empowers women to break through their ‘glass ceiling’. Mary’s character traits, then, are the focus of imitation for women in Birgitta’s doctrine because Mary is one with Christ in her motherhood. This worship of Mary, therefore, lays the ground for Birgitta to focus on the aspects of Mary that would empower her own authority and the future establishment and function of her Order.

The characteristics of the Virgin Mary that Birgitta highlights most reveal Birgitta’s intrinsic definition of perfection. Birgitta’s revelations often discuss the wisdom of Mary, which Birgitta understands as the mental state that stems from a combination of meekness, life

experience, and the Holy Spirit that Mary exhibits perfectly. Naturally, Mary's physical chastity is worthy of praise, but what sets her apart in perfection is her spiritual chastity. Her spiritual chastity stems from a wisdom and a meekness that is constant in her mind and that inherently transcends to her excellent deeds. In a vision, Mary explains to Birgitta the difference between a spiritual wisdom and a temporal wisdom: "Þe spirituall wisdome is to gife God a mannes proper wille, and with all hert and werke for to desire heuenli þinges. It mai nocht trewli be called wisdome bot wordes and werkes acorde. Þis wisdome ledis vnto þe blissed life, bot it is stoni and harde to come þareto" (*Liber* 175). While spiritual wisdom may not always look like wisdom to the world, making it challenging to practice, Mary is saying that this spiritual wisdom yields a blessed life. On the other hand, temporal wisdom is related to intellect and often yields commendation from the world and builds up one's pride. It is not a true wisdom, which Mary explains in talking with Jesus in a different vision, "þou giffes wisdome to þe meke and kepis it fro þe proude" (*Liber* 91). Therefore, Birgitta asserts that meekness is a precursor to wisdom and demonstrates a humility in spirit, not just in deed. Meekness lays the foundation for growth in spiritual wisdom, which is distinguished from intellect, yet still resides in the mental capacity of a person. It is cultivated in a humble mind in conjunction with experience that is influenced by the presence of the Holy Spirit dwelling inside the Christian. Part of this experience stems from having lived through different phases of life, but also it is gleaned from growing the faculties of the mind through reading the Scriptures and the wise words of other men and women of faith.

It is precisely Birgitta's motherhood that connects her closely with the Virgin Mary and creates her definition of perfection. As a widowed mother, Birgitta does not have the luxury of physical chastity on which to stake her authority. Instead she uses her experience as a wife,

mother, and ultimately a widow to link herself to the meekness and wisdom of the Virgin Mary.

Morris summarizes Birgitta's explanation of the value of her widowhood:

Because chastity of mind is more important than physical virginity, a married woman can be better than a virgin if she lives a spiritually chaste life; thus although a virgin would be ideal as abbess of Vadstena monastery, a widow with proven experience of life would be more pleasing to God than a proud virgin. (43)

As a widow Birgitta developed meekness in submission to a husband, wisdom from learning how to parent eight children and teach them about faith, and freedom to pursue God as her husband after Ulf died. She suffered and gave herself for the ones she loved, yet her devotion to God proved steadfast and foremost in her life, which set her up to have an authoritative voice even as a woman without physical chastity to stand on.

Birgitta's focus on perfection in meekness and wisdom are increasingly effective in her thorough construction of her published revelations. Birgitta is regarded as a prophetess, yet she was not regarded as such until after her death and canonization (Sahlin 36). While Birgitta never refers to herself as a prophetess, she relays the fact that God intends her revelations to be shared with people so that they may know God more fully. Her articulation of her visions has a singular mission that resembles the prophecies in the Hebrew Bible to many different nations to repent and turn back to God (Sahlin 35). Often in the *Liber Celestis* she is instructed to share a message from God with different clergymen. For example, in Book III, chapter one Birgitta is commanded to instruct a bishop:

If þis bishope purposes for to go bi þe straitē wai, bi þe whilke few folke walkes, and to be one of þe fewe, þan most him lai down þe birdin þat charges him—þat menes, þis werldli coueitise—and take onli his nedefull findinge, eftir it falles to a bishopeli, meke and lawli sustinance. (*Liber* 195)

Her rebukes of different clergymen gain traction because she does not claim authority for herself. As in this message to the bishop, Birgitta addresses the bishops as a mouthpiece of God and relays the message as it was given to her in a vision. The message usually contains encouragement or instruction of how to follow God in greater purity and some version of rebuking the ways the clergymen dishonored God. Birgitta's messages are effective because she disconnects herself from the messages. Her role as a conduit is evident in the *Liber Celestis* in that the majority of the visions are articulated in a dialogue form with God the Father, Jesus, Mary, or some other notable men of faith dictating messages to Birgitta. On occasion Birgitta will ask a question of Jesus or Mary that they will in turn answer, but often Birgitta herself is left out of the revelations. When she is mentioned directly in her visions, she is being commanded to take a message to someone or she is being called to a greater degree of unity with the Godhead. For example, any time Birgitta's voice is heard in the revelations, she is in prayerful dialogue with either Mary, Jesus, or God the Father. Her prayers request help or answers and are more of a catalyst to demonstrate how Mary, Jesus, or God answer her. Though her voice is present, the focus remains on the answer to her prayers rather than her prayers or responses. Additionally, the visions Birgitta was shown in Italy in books III, IV, and VI feature instructions for living and insight into the sin of the Pope, bishops, and other clergymen ("Religious" 301). This kind of information was given to Birgitta so that she could share it for the greater benefit of the Church.

Birgitta's refusal to claim prophetic authority for herself and her willingness to hide her bodily presence from her works demonstrate the restrictions that were required of her through the tradition of *discretio spirituum*. Rosalynn Voaden points out that with the extensive help of her later spiritual director, Alfonso of Jaén, Birgitta's *Liber* became a standard of *discretio spirituum* by proving authenticity via the three categories of authority, knowledge, and behavior (Voaden

80). As her spiritual director, Alfonso writes an *Epistola solitarii ad reges* that is featured at the beginning of Birgitta's text, in which he offers authentication and authorization that vouches for her divine revelations. In the process of speaking on behalf of Birgitta, Alfonso locates her character and her writing in the traditions of notable biblical prophetesses, holy women, and saints. Alfonso compares Birgitta to women like Huldah, Deborah, and Miriam, who all represented the prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Bible and were designated as prophetesses by God, which served to place prophetic authority onto Birgitta's messages (Voaden 83). Birgitta's behavior was authenticated by Alfonso's verification of her submission, obedience, and meekness towards her spiritual directors (Voaden 90). Birgitta's knowledge, however, was authenticated on the basis of the types of visions she received.

There is some debate in the scholarship as to whether Birgitta only received spiritual visions, or if she may have experienced some intellectual visions as well, which would significantly authorize her in the eyes of the Church. In medieval theology, there was a hierarchy of visions which was labeled and defined by St. Augustine. In St. Augustine's *De Genesi ad litteram*, he details the corporeal vision as being discerned through the bodily senses, the spiritual vision as being perceived by the spiritual senses and explainable in human terms, and the unexplainable intellectual vision as being presented in heavenly terms and perceived by the spiritual senses (475). Because corporeal and spiritual visions were subject to interpretation, they were believed to be susceptible to the deception of the devil. However, intellectual visions were fully understood upon reception, and therefore could not contain error. Katherine Zieman points out in *Voices in Dialogue* that women were generally perceived to be incapable of experiencing an intellectual vision and could only receive either corporeal or spiritual visions (315). Voaden asserts that Birgitta never experienced an intellectual vision, but also asserts that Alfonso mixes

the terms and definitions of a spiritual and intellectual vision, which gave the impression that Birgitta's spiritual visions had characteristics of intellectual visions (86). However, Sahlin proposes that a few of Birgitta's visions may have been intellectual and that even in her spiritual visions, Birgitta was given special intellectual understanding of the purpose and inner meaning of the visions (69). In chapter eighteen of Book IV in the *Liber Celestis*, there is potential evidence for the occurrence of an intellectual vision as Birgitta praises the Virgin Mary. In Mary's response to Birgitta, the Virgin states that "þis reuelacione nozt shewid to þe by any fleshly thyng, bot by hym þat was wythouten begynnyng. Þarfor be meke" (274). Mary compares this revelation that goes unexplained to when Peter bore witness to Jesus as God's son. While this showing may not fully qualify as an intellectual vision, there is a definite question as to what Birgitta was shown in her revelation, which she never explains (as she does in her other visions). The articulation of this vision, therefore, reveals that Birgitta and Alfonso aimed to present her as having high-minded visions that entailed divine intellectual understanding or that were in fact intellectual visions by the standards of the Church. Though wisdom is not equivalent to intellect, intellect can contribute to the wisdom of a person. Therefore, this portrayal of Birgitta as an intellectual figure reveals the standard of perfection that Birgitta was focused on maintaining. She defined perfection as being found in the meekness and wisdom of the mind, which could be exhibited in an intellectual understanding of the visions she was shown.

In Birgitta's doctrinal Mariology and written construction of visions, she establishes perfection as spiritual wisdom. This standard of spiritual wisdom, which has its roots in motherhood and its reproductive capacities, supplies Birgitta with the authority to maintain a place in public society where she can subtly challenge the authority of clergymen. Because the Church viewed masculinity as superior and more adept in discernment and wisdom, these

faculties of the mind in men were praised and were seemingly out of reach for women. By reframing perfection as spiritual wisdom found in a chaste mind, Birgitta is able to make a case for her authority as a widowed mother who not only has a prophetic gift, but also is endowed with education, life experience, and the Holy Spirit. It is through this lens that she is able to present herself before some of the most powerful men in medieval Europe with messages and instruction from God. This same lens allows her to establish an order that is singular in the arrangement of authority that is shared by the clergy and the Abbess.

In her travels to Rome, Birgitta notices some major issues with the city that is the center of the Church. She also becomes aware of world politics and the impending Hundred Year's War between England and France. What would give a woman enough boldness to approach several different popes and to admonish them to change their political tactics to vie for change in a world dominated by men? Birgitta was motivated by a command from God and enabled through her construction of self in her visions according to her perceived perfection in spiritual wisdom. In Book VI, chapter sixty-three, Birgitta is instructed to write a divine message to Pope Clement VI in which she declares, "Rise vpe and make pees bitwene þe kinge of Frauns and Ingland, þat are two perelows bestis, traitoures of menes saules, and com þan into Ytaly and preche þe worde of God and þe YYere of hele, and se the stretis holi, þat þai are spred with þe blode of mi saintes" (450). In this request, Birgitta addresses both the need for peace and the need for the papacy to be restored to Rome from Avignon. In her transmission of this message, Birgitta "violated the expectations of both secular and religious women, transgressing the gendered borders of social space and mixing conspicuously in the world of men" (Minnis "Religious" 71). She uses her royal and clerical connections, literacy, prophetic calling, and experiences in Rome to immerse herself in the male public sphere. She does so, however, staged behind the voice of God, in that

the messages she brings to the men in power are written as they were spoken by God and his authority, rather than through Birgitta's voice. Birgitta's combination of attributes and decisions shows her value of wisdom in that she reveals the capacity of discernment and communication that women possess despite the beliefs of the Church, while presenting herself as a medium through which God speaks.

Part of Birgitta's papal confrontation hinges on her observations and rebukes of the city of Rome. In Book IV, chapter thirty-three, Birgitta shares her account of the "desolacion and abhominacion" that Rome has become (*Liber* 284). In prayer she laments the wretchedness of Rome in saying, "A, lorde, how wreched is now þis cite both gostely and bodily, þat sometym was, one both wyse, so blysfull and so worthy" (284). Though this was her first experience of Rome, Birgitta has knowledge enough of what the center of the Church should look like, and her expectations are replaced by horror at how Rome has departed from righteousness. She also admonishes the priests, deacons, and sub-deacons for their unclean living, and for keeping concubines in their houses though they have made vows of chastity (285). Through her different rebukes, Birgitta reveals her understanding of righteousness, the Scriptural commands, and the various monastic rules that have also been abandoned. By abhorring the fallen state, she also sets herself up as following a righteous standard in mind and deed. In seeing the failings of the Church firsthand, Birgitta was determined that returning the papacy to Rome would protect the faith from ruin (Morris 114). Viewing these abominations is motivation for her to address Pope Clement VI directly. Morris also suggests that Birgitta may have had ulterior motives to restoring the papacy, in that it would give her a better chance to establish her own order (116). Birgitta was, therefore, well versed in how to present herself to the Pope and how to strive for a spiritual chastity that would place her above reproach in the eyes of power.

As violence began between France and England at the onset of the Hundred Years' War, Birgitta felt called to speak up and share the visions she had received from God. Understanding that Pope Clement VI had political power in France, she directed her rebukes and messages to him, believing that he was responsible for siding with the French King Philippe (Morris 80). In Book IV, chapters 104 and 105, Birgitta describes visions of the Virgin Mary and Christ informing her about the impending war. In chapter 104 Mary tells of the violence and greed that are engulfing both France and England. She goes into depth regarding their malevolence towards one another and condemns the violence they are subjecting their people to. Christ, in chapter 105, shares a vision of peace between the two countries and explains, "Bot I will þat þai haue one herte and one will in defence of cristendome, wen and whare it may beste be to my wirshipe" (344). Birgitta and Alfonso adequately pair these visions together, which effectively reiterates the partnership between the Virgin Mary and Christ. Mary plays the role of rebuking and convicting the men in power. She offers authoritative warnings, while Christ offers an authoritative call to peace. Their messages are therefore dependent on one another. This interplay develops Birgitta's Mariology and validates her own rebuke of Rome based on her prophetic and motherly wisdom, which gives her authority to speak on these matters. She has clearly taken her cue from the Virgin Mary's rebukes and imitated them. Also, by using Christ's visions for France and England to be united for Christianity, she focuses on the flourishing of a global Christianity. Although she may have had political motives, she is still able to maintain her image of having a third-party wisdom that is untainted by greed or ambition. Birgitta must present her motives delicately and hide behind God's authority in order to have her messages heard and taken seriously by men in power. She clearly walked a treacherous line when it came to these political moves of the Church, France, and England, but because of her construction of self and

according to her doctrine of Marian authority, she created an avenue for herself to have agency in a world dominated by men.

As mentioned above, part of Birgitta's motives in addressing the Pope was to establish favor with him, so that she could establish the Birgittine Order as she had been commanded by God. However, she received this call after the Lateran IV Council, in which it was decided not to establish any new religious orders. Birgitta maneuvered around this decision by claiming that the Birgittine Rule would be under the Rule of St. Augustine, which was already established, but that it would contain modifications from the Birgittine Rule. The Rule that Birgitta received from Christ in her mother tongue was translated into Middle English in the *The Rewyll of Seynt Sauuoure*: "This religion therfore I wyll sette: ordeyne fyrst and principally by women to the worshippe of my most dere beloued modir" (fol. 42r). Birgitta would go on to set up an order that was created by women and for women and that was centered on the worship of the Virgin Mary. Because the Church venerated Mary as the most perfect of all women, she would become a source of potentially disruptive authority that the Birgittine Order thrived off of (Warren 137). This focus on Mary was based on Birgitta's own Mariocentric theology, which reframes Mary's motherhood as a foundation of her authority and perfection because of the wisdom and meekness found in the Virgin Mary. Therefore, Birgittine nuns were encouraged to imitate the Virgin Mother's maternal characteristics, while committing to be the brides of Christ. This identification is proven in the profession ceremony in that the nuns vow to be Christ's "newe spouse" and "virgin modir" (Warren 12). Therefore, maternal wisdom became an essential part of their spiritual pursuits.

The authority made possible for women through this standard of perfection is reflected in the formal structure of the Birgittine Order. Although the nuptial imagery found in the nuns'

professions was often a method of limiting their authority and likening them to the property of the Church, the Birgittine Order counteracted this idea by using maternity as a means to empower nuns in the Order. Warren points out that in the Birgittine Order, the maternal identity that the nuns took on went beyond nurturing and caring for others. This identification actually created a means for women to gain the maternal authority that enabled them to intervene in society in a way that they could not as the brides of Christ alone (9). The maternal identity that the nuns were expected to take on was intended to resemble the sorrowful motherhood of the Virgin Mary. Barbara Newman explains that “like Mary, the consecrated nun has only to give birth to her spiritual child, Christ, whom she has carried throughout the long pregnancy of her religious life” (45). As Birgitta focused more on emulating Mary in spiritual maternity than her earthly maternity, she mandates that Birgittine nuns renounce physical motherhood for the sake of spiritual motherhood to Christ. This maternal sacrifice provides a path, then, for these enclosed women to gain a similar authority to that of the Virgin Mary. This idea is evident in the female authority figure in the Birgittine Order, the Abbess. She had a special influence that was wholly unlike any other monastic structure in medieval Europe. She was placed in a central position in the monastery, paralleling the Virgin Mary’s centrality to the Order’s worship.

The Abbess’s authority and centrality to the Birgittines was unique in that the Birgittines were technically a double order, housing both men and women. Each Birgittine monastery would be made up of sixty nuns, thirteen priests, four deacons, and eight laymen, which was a framework intended to mimic the community of Christians in the Book of Acts¹⁴ (Powell 7). The

¹⁴ In the first Church community that experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit after Jesus’s ascension, the gathering of believers was as follows: “Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.” The Book of Acts 1:13-14 ESV

Abbess's role was initially defined by the Rule as standing "in Mary's stead as head of both male and female members of the community" and was assisted by the Confessor General (Warren 11). The Abbess was also the authority over the Syon Abbey's¹⁵ resources and assets, which challenged the traditionally masculine, clerical headship in monastic orders (Warren 56). The process of establishing the order was problematic because of this straying from monastic tradition. Many changes to the authority structures of the Birgittines were mandated by the Pope Urban V who took away some of the Abbess's authority over the monasteries (Børresen "Religious" 302). Despite the imposed adjustments, the Abbess still represented an image of feminine autonomy that stemmed from identifying with the motherhood of the Virgin Mary.

The standard of perfection in the wisdom and meekness of the Virgin was not only extended to Birgittine nuns, but also to the Birgittine clergy. The Order demonstrated its emphasis on wisdom and maturity in that men could only join the Birgittine community of brothers after the age of twenty-five, because they wanted the few Birgittine men to have a wisdom that came from life experience and education (Powell 11). This mandate created a standard by which the Birgittine priests were among the most educated of men. As Birgitta shared her insight with the world, she placed an expectation on the Birgittine brothers to share their education and wisdom with others as well. Two main roles the Birgittine brethren fulfilled at the monastery were ministering to the nuns and laypeople and translating different manuscripts for the nuns to read. Under Birgitta's Rule, the Birgittine priests were required to share the gospel every day in the vernacular language, which inevitably drew laypeople to the Birgittine monasteries to hear the preaching (Powell 50). They also served to take the nuns'

¹⁵ The Syon Abbey was the only Birgittine Order established in England in 1415. St. Birgitta's texts being translated into Middle English were a precursor to the establishment of the Syon Abbey (Waters 135). This community was both controversial and notable because of the vast access and encouragement the nuns had to reading and literacy (Schirmer 346).

confession and to fulfill other clerical needs of the monastery that were off limits for women. At the Syon Abbey in particular, the priests often copied manuscripts for the nuns to read at the monastery, like *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*, which was written by a Birgittine priest (Powell 15). These roles are a demonstration of Birgitta's values because she constructed her monastic order according to her view of spiritual formation and perfection. Birgitta lived a contemplative and active lifestyle in that she spent time in deep contemplation of God, and would then share his messages with the world. Though she instructed the Birgittine nuns to live an enclosed life, this value of a mixture between the contemplative and active life is demonstrated in her instructions to the Birgittine brothers. Birgitta's ability to use wisdom to discern the context for the contemplative life and the active life is evident in the differentiation between the roles of the Birgittine brothers and sisters. Birgitta understood that it would be unwise to encourage the Birgittine nuns to live an unenclosed active lifestyle, considering the clerical climate of the medieval time period.

The perfect, spiritual wisdom that Birgitta strived for is evident in her personal study of Scripture and other devotional texts, which she passes on to her order by giving the nuns the freedom to read and gain wisdom through that process. Birgittine nuns were among the most learned of women of their time because of the Birgittine Rule. Though intellect was not the motive behind reading, by consuming devotional texts, these women had access to wisdom from others and from God, and could therefore grow in spiritual perfection by understanding more about their faith and imitating Birgitta. In fact, the nuns had unparalleled access to books¹⁶ according to the Birgittine Rule, which became the focus of their lives outside of singing the divine office or undertaking manual labor (Powell 21). Because of their access, there were a

¹⁶ The Syon Abbey, in particular, became a Latin library where many people donated or wrote books and translations to leave them there as a contribution (Powell 15).

surprising number of nuns who were also literate in Latin (Powell 25). In one of the many devotional texts written for the Birgittine nuns at the Syon Abbey, *The Myroue of Oure Ladye* instructed the nuns to conduct a ‘right’ reading as a form of spiritual progress (Schirmer 349). This ‘right’ reading is demonstrated by an inward agreement to the reading that manifests itself through a correct outward performance of the reader. While the nuns had access to learning and reading, they had to find a balance of understanding while not interpreting the text.

Both the method of reading and the self-monitoring process of gaining knowledge without interpretation shows the privileging of wisdom that took place in the Birgittine Order. The nuns were not instructed to grow in intelligence for intelligence’s sake. They had to approach reading with meekness and humility, but with a desire to grow in the spiritual wisdom that was available to them as the virgin mothers of Christ. The act of reading was intended to encourage imitation of Birgitta as she imitated the Virgin Mary (Krug 162). The primary method of reading was reciting the liturgy, which was a communal act that served “as the model for all reading at Syon, both communal and private, because it provides a ‘script’ against which an individual can measure devotion in terms of accuracy and consistency of the revealed truth” (Krug 170). The performance of the liturgy was the example of ‘right’ reading because the method of reading aloud did not allow for interpretation, but stimulated imitation. By encouraging an imitation of her own rigorous reading, Birgitta insinuates that both men and women can be taught wisdom. Therefore, since learning contributes to wisdom, then spiritual scholarship should be made available to both genders. This striving for female opportunity connects to maternity in that the Birgittines believed that “Mary...encourages an arduous intellectual pursuit of an alternative wisdom that maintains its relation—even if a metaphorical one—to institutions of learning” (Zieman 320). Mary, as symbol of perfect maternity and perfect

wisdom, becomes, therefore, the reason and catalyst for female education. As a result, the faculties of wisdom gained through education were no longer the exclusive property of men in the Birgittine Order.

Birgitta's Mariology and emphasis on reading come full circle in the *Sermo Angelicus*, which she received from an angel that she met with regularly. The *Sermo Angelicus* or *The Word of the Angel* consisted of twenty-one lessons and became the daily liturgical reading in The Office of Our Lady of the Birgittine nuns (Harris 28). As Kathrine Zieman explains in "Playing Doctor: St. Birgitta, Ritual Reading, and Ecclesiastical Authority," this liturgical text was fundamental in establishing a rich communal identity centered on a textual culture created by the *Sermo Angelicus* (307). It was through the ritual reading of this text that Birgittines came to understand and live by the authority of the Virgin Mary. Birgitta's text covers the Biblical narrative from creation to post-resurrection, but instead of centering the narrative on the incarnation of Christ, Birgitta demonstrates how Mary played an integral role in every facet of the story-line. Not only is she referred to as "O Lady, our hope of salvation"—a title generally prescribed to Jesus Christ—and given a stake in the salvation of man, but she is also either the main character or the motivating character behind every Biblical story that Birgitta covers (*The Word* 29).

In chapter eight, Birgitta covers the blessing of God that is given to Abraham and passed on through his son Isaac. This Biblical story chronologically occurred approximately two thousand years prior to the Virgin Mary's birth, yet Birgitta focuses the story on her role by explaining:

Whence it is credible that the Divinity showed beforehand to Abraham that one of the children of his root, the immaculate Virgin, would bear the son of God. It is believed also

that Abraham exulted more over this future daughter and had greater love for her than for Isaac, his son, whom he loved. (33)

This interesting reconstruction of the Biblical story manipulates the original narrative in that it was revealed to Abraham that from his descendants the Messiah would come to the world, but nowhere in the Biblical text is the Virgin Mary mentioned to Abraham specifically. However, Birgitta focuses on the Virgin's maternity with Christ and explains that her ability to conceive the son of God made her more favorable to Abraham than his own son, who would become one of the leading patriarchs of the Jewish and Christian faith. Birgitta's Marian focal point gives institutional authority over a patriarch to the Virgin Mary and thus gives femininity power through maternity. Power and authority were traditionally restricted from maternal women because of the value of virginity in clerical doctrine. Similarly, Birgitta utilizes these earlier Biblical stories to heighten Mary's authority before her birth, but then once she is born, Birgitta's text focuses on Mary's superiority in wisdom and intelligence to her contemporaries. In chapter thirteen, Birgitta demonstrates the Virgin Mary's blessed endowment of wisdom by describing how "the sense and intellect of the Virgin subjected her body and soul to the service of God so that her body was obedient to her in all humility. O how quickly the sense and intellect of the Virgin understood the love of God! O how prudently she treasured it in herself" (46). By ordering the Virgin Mary's bodily obedience after her sense and intellect, Birgitta asserts that Mary's physical chastity reflects her wisdom and humility coming into cohesion and laying the template for her physical purity. This assertion not only opens the door for women to achieve prudence, intellect, and ultimately wisdom, but it demonstrates the female ability to have authority on the basis of the Virgin Mary's attributes.

Texts like the *Sermo Angelicus*, *Liber Celestis*, and *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* undoubtedly shaped the identity of the Birgittine nuns and empowered them to grow in wisdom

and to develop aspects of their femininity that were usually under restriction by the clergy.

Though Birgitta did not encourage nuns to behave as she did in her mixture of contemplation and activity, her contextual understanding served as a representation of her perfection in wisdom.

Wisdom entails a factor of discernment, and understandably Birgitta knew that all women could not do and say the same things to which she, herself, was enabled. However, she encouraged the pursuit of spiritual purity and wisdom in other ways for the Birgittines by indoctrinating them into her Mario-centricity and by giving them agency to read and learn extensively. Ultimately, Birgitta's standard of perfection was cemented in both humility and wisdom that worked together both to submit to clerical control and to empower women to use their femininity to develop an educated authority all their own.

CHAPTER IV

JULIAN OF NORWICH: “HOMELY ONEYNG”

Little is known about Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-1416), yet she is a figure that represents the contemplative life of an anchoress and the impactful life of a visionary, mystic woman. What information we know about her is either presented to the reader in *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, or is the result of speculation according to historical accounts about the anchoritic life, such as in the *Ancrene Wisse*. She lived in a tumultuous time in history, experiencing the horror of the Black Death, the separation of the Great Schism, and the divisiveness of the Hundred Years' War. Undoubtedly these life events played a role in shaping how Julian tackled issues of faith and suffering. According to *The Shewings*, which is broken up into the Short Text and the Long Text, Julian lay on what she thought was her deathbed when she received sixteen visions revealing to her the love of God in different manners. She initially dictated these showings in her Short Text, and then after much contemplation and enclosure in the anchorhold¹⁷, she constructed the Long Text as a theological explanation of the same sixteen showings. Julian demonstrates an affective piety that is characteristic of female devotional writing of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but her work displays many different theological sentiments, such as a theology of integration, divine motherhood, and holistic humanity that are all her own. I argue that Julian's definition of perfection is found in the epitome of union. Julian's treatise demonstrates her value of unity to the Divine, to Holy Mother Church, and to wholeness of self.

¹⁷ Julian of Norwich scholars Colledge and Walsh are the forerunners in the theory that Julian composed two editions of her showings and that the Short Text was written shortly after her visionary experience in 1373, while the Long Text was written some twenty years later, around 1393, after much consideration and contemplation. They elaborate on this theory and its underpinnings in their “Introduction” to *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*. This theory is challenged by Nicholas Watson's theory in “The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*”, dating Julian's Short Text to no earlier than 1382 because of the Lollardy references and dating the Long Text to anywhere from 1393 to later than 1413.

She does not privilege the spirit over the flesh, nor masculinity over femininity, but seeks to present a unified perfection in all things that is found most exemplified in the person of Jesus Christ.

In order to unpack Julian's definition of perfection, it is important to define the framework of terms that she uses to describe humanity and the problem of sin. Julian presents human nature as made up of what she calls "substance" and "sensuality." Common in medieval theology was the idea of dualism between the body and the soul or between the flesh and the spirit. Writers like Walter Hilton or the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* made distinctions between the outer life and the inner life because of this dualistic definition of humanity. Bauerschmidt explains that Julian's contemporary, Hilton, found that sensuality was "the carnal feeling through the five outward senses which is common to man and beast" as opposed to the soul which was defined as the reasoning capacity in humanity (146). The *Ancrene Wisse* demonstrates this duality in expressing the rule that anchoresses must keep: "You must in all ways, with all your might and strength, keep the inner—and the outer for her sake. The inner is always the same, the outer is variable" (2). These dualities of inner/outer and carnality/reasoning are connected to each other and affect each other, and yet they are separate and distinct from one another. Julian's dualism of substance/sensuality cannot fit within the same theological structures that surrounded her, yet they are comparable in certain ways.

Julian refers to a person's "substance" as the higher part of the soul and a person's "sensuality" as the lower part of the soul. Though different in nature, these two make up the entirety of the soul, unlike most dualistic beliefs that distinguished between the soul and the body. Julian explains the connection and difference between these two in chapter thirty-seven:

For in every soule that shal be sauid is a godly wil that never assentid to synne ne never shal. Ryth as there is a bestly will in the lower party that may willen no good, ryth so ther

is a godly will in the higher party which will is so good that it may never willen yll, but ever good. (83)¹⁸

Though within the soul there are higher and lower parts that are connected and abide in the same location of a person, within these two parts there are two very separate wills that have contrary desires. The division here is not in the soul, but in the wills that are housed in different parts of the soul. There is a constant godly will that desires God's desires in the higher part or substance of the soul. There is also a beastly will that desires evil and can only desire evil that dwells within the lower part of the soul, which is where the sensuality is found. These wills are not the definitions of these two parts, but they certainly characterize these two parts of the soul. Julian illustrates these two parts of the soul further in chapter fifty-two:

For the life and the vertue that we have in the lower parte is of the heyer, and it commit downe to us of the kinde love of the self by grace. Atwixen that on and that other is ryte nowte, for it is all one love, which on blissid love hath now in us double werking. For in the lower part arn peynes and passions, ruthes and pites, mercies and forgevenes, and swich other that arn profitable. But in the higer parte are none of these, but al on hey love and marvelous joye, in which marvelous joy all peynis are heyly restorid. (112)

Though this passage may seem to lengthen the divide between the higher and the lower part of the soul, Julian actually demonstrates how interconnected these two are. By being made in the image of God, the very substance of man's soul is the same unchanging, loving, joyous substance of God. This high part cannot be marred and cannot change its substance. The love of God is clear in this aspect of the soul, but interestingly enough, Julian shows that sensuality has also been created by the love of God. However, sensuality displays different characteristics of

¹⁸ For the majority of Julian's citations, I will draw from the TEAMS edition of Julian's Long Text, *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, edited by Georgia Roman Crampton.

the love of God than the substance. This lower part of the soul is variable and fickle, but because it is impacted by a beastly will, it is subject to the mercy and forgiveness of God, which shows God's love when it is extended to human beings. Additionally, the lower part of the soul does not just correspond to the flesh, which is evident in the presence of this beastly will. Rather, sensuality is composed of human consciousness and the embodied carnality that is expressed from the influence of the beastly will. In other words, the flesh does not act on its own apart from the soul. Julian finds that there is a part of the soul that actually wills sin at its core. The question arises, then, as to what the nature of sin is, if even the sensuality in man reveals the love of God.

Julian offers an intriguing definition of sin according to her visions—actually according to the absence in her visions. In chapter twenty-seven Julian explains:

In this nakid word *synne*, our Lord browte to my mynd generally al that is not good, and the shamfull dispite and the utter nowtyng that He bare for us in this life, and His dyeng, and al the peynes and passions of al His creatures, gostly and bodily...But I saw not synne, for I beleve it hath no manner of substance ne no party of being, ne it might not be knowin, but by the peyne that it is cause of; and thus peyne – it is something, as to my syte, for a tyme, for it purgith and makyth us to knowen our selfe and askyn mercy. (72)

In this vision, according to Julian's theological viewpoint, she cannot view sin because it is a non-entity. It has no form or substance to behold it. In fact, sin can only be "seen" in its effect on humanity via pain and sorrow. It is as if sin is a chasm or a black hole of sorts. Julian seems to believe that sin is divisive in nature and is both the cause and effect of a fractured soul. It is the disjointedness that disrupts the unity man desires with God and God desires with man. There is nothing in sin, but a dividing factor that ruptures and breaks apart that which was once whole.

Grace Jantzen unpacks the idea of sinlessness according to Julian's theology in *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*. She explains how Julian finds that perfection in faith is not

sinlessness and that God does not expect people to be sinless, but rather that the humility after sin and consequent repentance is actually better than sinlessness (212). Unlike the contemporary doctrines and religious practices at the time, Julian rejects the idea that growing in perfection in faith is equivalent to sinning less or denying the flesh. Instead she asserts that “synne is behovabil” in that it is necessary because God demonstrates his perfect and merciful love towards the sinner (72). Her conception of perfection is unity, which is paradoxical in that it requires continued striving for unity even after attaining the highest possible unity. In order to extrapolate the structure of this definition, it is crucial to explain the epitome of perfection that Julian looks to in the person of Jesus Christ.

As the perfect representation of unity, Jesus Christ is the quintessential piece of the puzzle that joins humanity with God despite the sinful division that occurred the moment Adam and Eve fell in the Garden. In the parable of the Lord and the Servant, Julian tells the story of a Lord who sits reigning, and a Servant who, eager to do his master’s bidding, runs and falls into a pit. Though this fall was an accident of his own eagerness to obey, the Servant suffers because he loses sight of the Lord. In this falling of the Servant, several concepts are represented and connected. The sinfulness and division of soul that resulted from the falling are found first in Adam, thereby in all of humanity as sinfulness was passed down from the first man. However, the fall became the mission simultaneously, because through “both Adam and Christ, the mission to unite substance with sensuality” was launched in an instant (Tugwell 205). The Servant, therefore, comes to represent not only Adam and humanity, but also Christ himself. It is as though Julian pictures a rope attached from Adam on earth to Christ in heaven. When Adam fell into sin, Christ fell into Mary’s womb. Therefore, the corruption of humanity set into motion the

salvation of humanity¹⁹. Julian demonstrates Jesus's descent in "that ilk tyme that knitted Him to our body in the Maydens womb, He toke our sensual soule; in which taking, He us al haveyng beclosid in Him, He onyd it to our substance, in which onyng He was perfit man" (119). Jesus's mutual descent with Adam meant that he would take on humanity's sensuality, along with the beastly will. His ability to deny the beastly will perfectly, yet suffer completely for every instance that humanity obeys their beastly wills, allowed him to connect humanity's perfect substance to his own perfect sensuality. Therefore, Christ's perfection stems from his ability to unite God to humanity perfectly, which inherently reunites the fractured soul of man as well.

In her *Shewings*, Julian is not concerned with the outward show of faith, so much as the inward focus and wholeness of a person. In chapter ten Julian is shown a vision of Christ's dying face on the Cross and she understands how this suffering was necessary for humanity's redemption:

And like as we were like made to the Trinite in our first making, our Maker would that we should be like Jesus Criste, our Saviour in Hevyn without ende, be the virtue of our geynmakyng. Then atwix these two He would, for love and worshippe of man, make Himselfe as like to man in this deadly life, in our foulehede and our wratchidnes, as man might be without gilte. (52)

Julian explicates that the nature of humanity's likeness to Christ is both the will of God in his creation of man, but also that this likeness is a product of the Christian's "geynmakyng." In *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ*, Bauerschmidt explains this term as meaning "recreation." He demonstrates that this term "is not simply a return to Adam's pre-fallen state, but is both a recapitulation and a crowning of creation—not simply restoration but a

¹⁹ The theology of *felix culpa* was fairly common in the Middle Ages and viewed the sin of Adam as fortunate because it necessitated the redemption that Christ would bring for the elect (Baker 103).

perfection in unity” (153). Thus, humankind should encapsulate a perfection in unity with the divine and, therefore, in their soul, because in this unity they emulate the nature of Christ’s own unity and completeness. The connection between unity and completion is found namely in Jesus’s sufferings on the Cross. By uniting himself to humanity in sensuality and taking on flesh, Julian shows that Jesus also took on the task of suffering in humankind’s place for this failed sensuality. Julian highlights the completed nature of Christ in her description of his suffering when she saw “our Lord Jesus langring long tyme, for the onyng of the Godhede gave strength to the manhode for love to suffre more than al man myght suffryn” (64). She also experiences Christ telling her that “If I myht suffre more, I wold suffer more” (66). In these sentiments, Julian expresses the idea that Jesus suffered the full amount for humanity’s sin and soul-division and that he could not have suffered more than he did. In doing so, he completed the work necessary to unite man’s soul in wholeness and connection to the Trinity. It is, therefore, Christ’s completion of full suffering that accomplishes the union of substance and sensuality and the union of humanity to himself as a part of the Godhead. In this description, Julian shows the absolute importance of the Christian’s ability to focus on Jesus’s suffering.

Julian’s paradoxical “pursuit” of perfection in unity is articulated in how Julian perceives the simultaneous seeking and beholding of God. Though the Christian soul is united to God for eternity, there is still a process by which that soul may grow in greater unity. Julian sums this idea up when she expresses, “thus I lernyd to myn understandyng, that sekyng is as good as beholding for the tyme that He suffer the soule to be in travel.” (52) While many popular medieval doctrines of mysticism favored a hierarchy of spiritual development and contemplative

experiences, Julian levels the playing field.²⁰ She demonstrates that both seeking God and beholding God are equivalent in value because these two acts reveal an inward desire for God that springs up from the union of the soul to God. In other words, the unmet thirst for God and the overwhelming satisfaction in God both point to the “geynmakyng” that has occurred in the soul. Throughout *The Shewings*, Julian represents the act of seeking God as prayer and the act of beholding God as contemplation of his suffering for love.

The seeking (or “besekyng”) that Julian refers to is first demonstrated by her account of the three things she asked God for prior to her near-death, visionary experience. Julian asks for a greater understanding of the Passion of Christ, a bodily sickness in her youth, and three wounds of kind compassion, true contrition, and a deeper longing for God (39). In these initial requests of God, she provides an example of how to seek God in prayer and how God can answer prayer by recounting her subsequent visions. The greater understanding of the Passion of Christ is indeed a type of contemplative beholding that she asks for, one that would be normal for Christian contemplatives to desire. However, it is interesting that she also asks for a deeper longing for God. She is asking for a greater hunger or thirst for God that would inherently make her seek him more. This request is not one for a deeper understanding of God, but for her heart to simply desire him more because there is such intrinsic value in purely seeking God. Julian later expands on the process and purpose of seeking God in prayer in chapter forty-one:

The first is be whom and how that our prayors springyth. Be whome, He shewith when
He seith, *I am ground*; and how, be His goodness, for He seith, first, *It is my wille*. For

²⁰ Walter Hilton, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Bonaventure were mystics and theologians who wrote treatises prior to or at the same time as Julian of Norwich’s life and writings. Scholars like Denise Baker believe that she was influenced by their writings on contemplation, because they outlined levels of spiritual contemplation and explained the process to the highest form of contemplation. Ultimately their theologies, though distinctive, all center around meditation on the Passion of Christ as the means by which a person achieves the highest contemplation of God. This idea is the underpinning of much of the affective spirituality in the medieval time period (Baker 28).

the second, in what manner and how we should usen our prayors, and that is that our wil be turnyd into the will of our Lord; and so menith He when He seith, *I mak the to willen it*. For the thred, that we knowen the frute and the end of our prayors: that is, to be onyd and lyk to our Lord in al thyng. (90)

In her explanation, she shows that prayer is from God because he wills the person to pray for something—whether it is in his will or not. However, in this process she describes how God uses prayer to work in the heart of the person praying, to slowly turn their focus towards God and align their will with his own. Because the Christian soul has two wills at play, godly and beastly, prayer works to tame the beastly will and subject the person to the godly will that also vies for attention. Therefore, the fruit of prayer is not simply the answer to the request made, but rather the heart shift that occurs when the two parts of the soul are brought into greater union. This process highlights the evident union already present between that person and God.

Julian further demonstrates the need for the seeking process of prayer because “thow the soule be ever lyke to God in kynde and substance restorid be grace, it is often onlyke in condition be synne on manys partye” (91). This recognition that the Christian soul can be simultaneously restored by grace, yet still act as if sinful division controls the person’s life, shows that while union has been accomplished in essence, there is still progress that can be made toward a more perfect unity. As Julian realizes that “prayor onyth the soule to God,” prayer becomes not simply an isolated act, but a state of mind in which the person constantly looks to God (Kratz 24). Therefore, prayer both stems from unity with God and creates greater unity with God because as this state of mind develops, so does the Christian’s ability to contemplate God. The focus of this contemplation for Julian culminates in beholding the intense sufferings of Jesus.

The high value that Julian places on the contemplative state of beholding God is revealed during her own sufferings through the sickness and the pangs of death that she lived through. In describing the immense amount of pain she underwent the day she received these visions, she refuses to remove her gaze from the crucifix before envisioning the bloody, disfigured Jesus upon the Cross:

Thus I lerid to chose Jesus to my Hevyn, whome I saw only in payne at that tyme. Me
lekyd no other Hevyn than Jesus, which shal be my blisse whan I come there, and this
hath ever be a comfort to me, that I chase Jesus to my Hevyn be His grace in al this tyme
of passion and sorrow. (64)

Despite the pain and sorrow she found herself in at that moment, it is a great comfort to her to choose Jesus as her Heaven. Rather than imagining Heaven ending her suffering, she instead glories in visualizing Christ's surpassing suffering on the Cross, which she chooses as Heaven. This contemplative moment leads to the development of "three manner of beholdyngs in His blissid passion" (65). The three things she beholds in Christ's Passion are the hard pain he suffered with contrition and compassion, his change in countenance on the Cross that changes our countenance, and the unity in which we suffer with him and will be united with him blissfully in heaven (66). These three understandings are developed by each other in that as Julian understood the great contrition and compassion on the Cross, she also saw Christ's face change from a sorrowful countenance to a "blissfull chere," which she could not help but mimic in her own countenance. In the demonstration of the effects of these first two "beholdyngs," Julian then understands how unity works with Christ. Effectively, when a person chooses the suffering Jesus as his Heaven, that person is united with Christ in his passion, which brings joy because of the understanding that that same unity will yield perfect union in Heaven with Jesus, where pain and sorrow do not exist. These ideas bring Julian's theology full circle because they

are answers to her initial prayer that then set into motion the give and take of seeking and beholding, in which seeking yields beholding, which yields greater desire to seek and therefore the greater ability to behold.

Julian's definition of perfection in unity is illustrated further in how she understands and discusses gender throughout her *Showings*. Unlike her contemporaries, Julian does not fixate on the popular ideas of the differences and the superiority/inferiority that were perceived to be present between men and women. Rather, she demonstrates a belief in men and women being co-image bearers of God. Through her theology of the motherhood of Jesus and the absence of discussion on gender and physical chastity, it is evident that Julian believes in the unity of humanity as image bearers of God over the distinction between men and women. However, Julian intricately demonstrates an awareness of gender and the beliefs surrounding women's inferiority and inability to preach and teach. Acknowledging both the church's doctrine about women preachers and the command from God to share her revelations with her fellow Christians, she asserts, "botte for I am a woman shulde I therefore leve that I shulde nought telle yowe the goodenes of God, sine that I sawe in that same time that it is his wille that it be knawen?" (Colledge 222).²¹ Julian reveals a calculated boldness in her approach to both writing this text and her discussion of the gendered nature of the Godhead. She sets her authority upon the command of God, rather than her own qualifications as a mystic. Lynn Staley also points out that Julian artfully distinguishes between preaching and telling, situating herself in this particular quote as telling the goodness of God instead of preaching the goodness of God, which was severely restricted from women by the Church (Aers 114). By doing so, Julian maintains her orthodoxy, while still establishing herself as a vessel of the word of God despite being a woman.

²¹ This reference is found Julian's Short Text, from Colledge and Walsh's edition of *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*.

The basis for Julian's ideas of human unity and equality is her understanding of the motherhood of Jesus in conjunction with the fatherhood of God.

Julian's trinitarian theology has many layers; however, one of the most distinctive aspects in her theology is the parenthood of the Trinity, including both father and mother in its union. Julian receives this trinitarian theology from God as he declares that "*I it am, the myte and goodness of the faderhed. I it am, the wisdam of the Moderhede. I it am, the lyte and the grace that is al blissid love. I it am, the Trinite; I it am, the Unite*" (122). In this declaration of identity, God encompasses the three elements of fatherhood, motherhood, and love. Traditionally, God is gendered fully male by Church doctrine, which had restrictive implications for the idea of women bearing the image of God. However, in God's trinitarian declaration, "the fatherhood of God...is dependent on the motherhood of God for full realization of the Trinity" (Roman 127). Therefore, Julian is asserting that both motherhood and fatherhood are represented in the Trinity and actually depend upon each other to complete the unity that is found in the Trinity, thereby making the maternal feminine qualities essential to the character of God.

Julian identifies motherhood, fatherhood, and love with each of the three members of the Trinity: God the Father, Jesus the Mother, and the Holy Spirit as the source of grace and love. Julian provides a lengthy description of the role that the motherhood of Jesus plays as the Second Person in the Trinity:

And furthermore I saw that the Second Person, which is our Moder substantial, that same derworthy person become our Moder sensual...And the Second Person of the Trinite is our Moder in kynde in our substantiall makeyng, in whome we arn grounded and rotid, and He is our Moder in mercy in our sensualite, taking flesh. And thus our Moder is to us dyvers manner werkyng, in whom our parties are kepid ondepartid. For in our Moder

Criste we profitten and encresin, and in mercy He reformith us and restorith; and, by the vertue of His passion and His deth and uprising, onyth us to our substance. (121)

Julian's explanation demonstrates how Jesus, in his motherhood, unites humanity to himself and to the Godhead by creating humanity's substance to be like himself. However, he further took on humanity's sensual nature to show mercy for his creation. By these two deeds, in conjunction with his death and resurrection, Mother Jesus reconnects humanity's substance and sensuality and maintains humanity's wholeness as the maternal parent of the Trinity. This "keeping" of humanity is diction that signifies a feminine enclosure of humanity that Jesus demonstrates.

Diane Kratz traces the themes of enclosure throughout Julian's *Shewings* and asserts that Jesus's motherhood serves as "an eternal vessel and fixed container" in which humanity is kept safe and whole in Christ (18). The union of feminine enclosure exemplified in Jesus that Julian describes exhibits Julian's belief that men and women equally bear the image of God because of the different characteristics of the Trinity that make up the Triune unity.

In Julian's extrapolation of the motherhood of Jesus, she feminizes both Jesus's Passion and his care for Christians to fit within a feminine rhetoric that points to the essential female qualities of the Godhead. Caroline Bynum Walker's discussion of the maternal qualities of Jesus's Passion²² resonates in Julian's own description of how Jesus feeds believers with himself: "The Moder may geven her child soken her mylke, but our pretious Moder Jesus, He may fedyn us with Himselpe, and doith full curtesly and full tenderly with the blissid sacrament that is pretious fode of very life" (124). Not only does Julian set up the comparison between Jesus's provision of food for His spiritual offspring and a mother's provision of food for her

²² Caroline Walker Bynum, in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, sheds light on the correlation between Jesus's bleeding on the Cross and feeding with his body and blood and a mother's menstrual flow and ability to feed her children with her own body. Additionally, the suffering body of Christ and the suffering body of a mother bring forth life from their pain in similar ways (158).

physical offspring, but Julian also demonstrates the superiority of Christ's provision over the mother's, which presents Jesus as the preeminent Mother like God is the preeminent Father. Additionally, Julian creates a comparison between Jesus's ability to nurture and care for his spiritual children, and a mother's nurturing care for her own children. Continuing her discussion of the motherhood of Jesus, Julian writes:

To the properte of Moderhede longyth kinde love, wisdam, and knowing, and it is good;
for thow it be so that our bodily forthbrynging be but lital, low, and simple in regard to
our gostly forthbrynging, yet it is He that doth it in the creatures be whom that it is done.
The kynde, Loveand Moder that wote and knowith the need of hir child, she kepith it ful
tenderly as the kind and condition of moderhede will. (124)

In this passage, Julian highlights Christ's characteristics of love, wisdom, knowledge, protection, and tender, care-giving attention to the needs of his children. These characteristics are not simply from the Godhead, but are particularly feminine-labeled characteristics that are an integral part of the Godhead's love for humanity. By demonstrating the correlation of motherhood to the Godhead, Julian connects her audience's understanding of femininity to the gospel message of Christ's death and provision of love for his spiritual offspring as any good mother would provide love for her child. There is an additional reference to the Garden of Eden and the creation of humankind in its entirety. In the first sentence as Julian describes the properties of motherhood, specifically, she mentions "it is good," which must be a reference to the inherent goodness of the creation of not only Adam, but also Eve because God declared his creation of both man and woman as "good."²³ Subtly, Julian is leveling the significance across the gender boundaries by presenting male and female as "ultimately integral to the deity who is simultaneously male,

²³ "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27 ESV

"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." Genesis 1:31 ESV

female, father, mother, son, spouse, same, other” (McAvoy “Julian” 209). She is steadily cementing the idea of the unity of humanity as image bearers of the Creator God.

Part of Julian’s unifying concept of humanity and subsequent feminine empowerment is evident in the concepts that she omits from her text, namely Eve’s role in the fall of man and Julian’s own status of physical purity. In the moments when Julian discusses the fall of man, she specifically mentions Adam and omits Eve’s failure to eat the apple in the Garden of Eden (Appleford 227). In Julian’s Parable of the Lord and the Servant, she explicates the creation and fall of man:

We have in us our Lord Jesus uprysen; we have in us wretchidnes and the mischef of Adams fallyng, deyand. Be Criste we are stedfastly kept, and be His grace touching, we are reysid into sekir troste of salvation. And be Adams fallyng we arn so broken in our felyng on divers manner, be synes and be sondry peynes, in which we arn made derke and so blinde that onethys we can taken ony comfort. (110)

Unlike her contemporary writers and thinkers in the Church, Julian does not place the blame of the Fall solely onto Eve; in fact, she does not even mention her. Common in medieval religious practice, Eve’s taking the apple was used to shame and blame women for the fall of humanity to the extent that women were often referred to as “the daughters of Eve.” Julian’s omission, then, of Eve’s part in the fall is significant in that she erases the gender issue from the fall of humanity. Instead, she unifies all of humanity, male and female, into Adam because she pairs Adam’s effect on humanity with Christ’s subsequent effect on humanity. They each encapsulate all of humanity, regardless of gender, which takes the focus off of gender boundaries and concentrates on Christ’s redemption over sin.

Besides her omission of Eve, Julian removes any gendered emphasis from her text by refusing to discuss her own life in terms of chastity and womanhood. As an anchoress, Julian

would have made a vow of chastity upon entering the anchorhold, and while we do not know whether she was ever married or bore children, it is telling that in an age where virginity and chastity were seen as holy states of living, Julian does not comment on purity or chastity (Jantzen 157). This absence points to Julian's differing definition of perfection. She is unconcerned with the flesh as an entity that needs to be tamed at all costs. Therefore, she does not seek or find perfection in her flesh's ability to remain pure, evidenced in that she mentions how God does not expect people to be sinless (212). Because Julian made the vows of an anchoress, she values chastity as an obedient practice of devotion; however, she is far more concerned with the inward union of the soul to God and of the substance to the sensuality. Chastity, then, is not something to be focused on, but rather a symptom of an inward reality.

In addition to Julian's omission of the importance of chastity, Lynn Staley points out that Julian deletes her female gender from the Long Text, and that by doing so Julian presents herself as male (Aers 139). I disagree with Staley in that I find that this omission is similar in purpose to her exclusion of Eve. Throughout her text, Julian is continually drawing attention away from the flesh to the unity that Christ secured for all of humanity in his death and resurrection. Undoubtedly understanding the intensity of the gendered context within which she lived, Julian's text demonstrates a desire to transcend the gender boundaries by taking the focal point off of the body and onto unity with Christ that mimics the Trinity. If she were to attempt to gender herself male, she would perpetuate the idea that men are the legitimate image bearers of God, with women being secondary. Instead, she unifies all of humanity in Christ and erases the boundaries between genders.

Part of the perfect unity Julian encourages is demonstrated in how she constructs herself in relation to her "evyn Cristen" and to the Church. Julian is concerned with presenting herself as

a vessel throughout her text, instead of as having a superior spirituality. Understanding that her content could be challenging for her reader, she seeks to clarify that the focus should not be on her as a visionary:

For sothly it was not shewid to me that God lovid me better than the lest soule that is in grace, for I am sekir that there be many that never had shewing ner sight but of the common techyng of Holy Church that loven God better than I. For if I loke singularly to myself I am right nowte; but in general I am, in hope, in onehede of charite, with al my evyn Cristen. (49)

Because Julian desires unity with all of her “evyn Cristens,” she “stubbornly refuses to focus her attention on her own contemplative experience, lest this separate her from her fellow Christians” (Bauerschmidt 55). Additionally, she explains that God imparted onto her the idea that these visions were not just for her, but were intended for her fellow believers. Therefore, in order to achieve this purpose, Julian must downplay her role as a vessel to focus the reader’s attention on God’s ability to show her these revelations. Instead of constantly reminding her reader of her status as a vessel as some visionaries were prone to do, Julian simply seeks to erase her presence from the text. She includes only what is absolutely necessary about herself in these visions. Julian arguably does a better job than most women visionaries in unifying herself with her fellow Christians by hiding herself from view in the text rather than overbearingly reminding her reader that she is “just a vessel.”

Despite her tendency to hide herself in the text, Julian is aware of the controversies surrounding some of her different doctrines. She shows her consciousness of the ways in which some of her revelations might seem to challenge the teaching and doctrine of the Holy Church. Even in her theology that hints at universal salvation, Julian manipulates her text to demonstrate her ability to maintain orthodoxy with the Church, while also trusting that this vision is true

because what seems contradictory to Julian is not contradictory to God. However, Julian openly acknowledges the difficulty in reconciling the seemingly-contrary messages of her visions to Church doctrine, and reiterates her orthodoxy several times with sentiments like this one in chapter nine:

But in al thing I leve as Holy Church levith, preachith, and teachith. For the faith of Holy Church, the which I had aforhand understonden and, as I hope, by the grace of God willfully kept in use and custome, stode continually in my sight, willing and meneing never to receive onything that might be contrary thereunto. (50)

Julian knows that she walks a fine line between her obedience to God and her orthodoxy with the Church, but she stresses that she unifies herself to the Church's teachings and that her unity with Christ mandates her to share the visions she received. Unlike St. Birgitta and Margery Kempe, Julian does not directly expose the Church's misconduct and corruption. However, she aligns herself with righteousness as union to Christ in all things (Aers 145). Therefore, Julian depicts herself as being united with her "evyn Cristens," enclosed in the Holy Church, which is the body of Christ, who is also wrapped up in the Trinity. After Julian's conclusion, there is an additional message that reveals the delicacy with which Julian's text was to be treated in its dissemination. The writer of this message expresses a desire that "this booke com not but to the hands of them that will be His faithfull lovers, and to those that will submit them to the faith of Holy Church" (155)²⁴. This warning message is seemingly contrary to Julian's expressed purpose that these visions were given to her for the benefit of all Christians. However, the message demonstrates the potentially challenging theology that is presented in Julian's text. Though she addresses her orthodoxy multiple times, her text is still viewed as a potential danger if it were to find its way

²⁴ Most scholars believe that Julian did not write the warning message attached to the end of her *Shewings* because it contradicts her central purpose in that her work is intended for all Christians.

into the wrong hands of someone who would use the text to contradict the teachings of the Church.

Though Julian wrestles with challenging theological questions throughout her text, she takes comfort namely in beholding Christ's Passion. Her various visions and messages of God's love for humanity all hinge upon the crucifixion of Jesus. In a vision of Christ's wounds, he beckons Julian to look into the wound in his side:

With His swete lokyng He led forth the understandyng of His creature be the same wound into Hys syde withinne. And than He shewid a faire, delectabil place and large enow for al mankind that shal be save to resten in pece and in love. And therwith He browte to mende His dereworthy blode and pretious water which He lete poure al oute for love. (69)

In viewing this deep wound in the side of Christ's flesh, Julian understands that Jesus suffered enough for all of humanity's sin because she sees that there is enough room in Christ for all of humanity to enjoy the love and peace of knowing God. Drawing upon Galatians chapter three, Julian shows that the love of God as evidenced by Jesus's sufferings on the Cross is what unites all of humanity because God makes no distinction between men or women²⁵. Additionally, the love of God on the Cross unites substance and sensuality for all people who make Jesus their Heaven as Julian does. The unity that Julian advocates for is wrapped up in the wounds of Christ and cannot be separated from his sufferings on the Cross. Julian frames and constructs her text around Christ's Passion in a circular methodology. All of her visions and developed theology move toward and arise from the moment of Christ's suffering on the Cross. Besides unifying

²⁵ "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28 ESV

humanity, Jesus's sufferings unify Julian's text and bring every concept and idea together into harmony that feeds back into itself again and again.

Julian brings her treatise full circle by concluding and summarizing her text in a simple, single sentence: "Thus I lerid that love was our Lords mening" (155). In everything that was revealed to Julian, the purpose was that Julian understand that in all things, God's love is the beginning and the end. The greatest act of his love was demonstrated in that Christ "experiences humanity's fruitlessness, its unfulfilledness, precisely in order to remedy it" (Abbott 144). This love, therefore, creates unity between human and God, but also between humans. The fullness of God's glory, the completion of the work of Christ's Passion, and the unity that humanity receives create a circular image in Julian's text that is reiterated in the Lord's meaning of love. The glory of divinity that suffered completely on the Cross allows for humanity to enjoy union with the divine. However, once union is achieved with the divine, there is still room to grow in unity as the Christian understands more about the love of God that is illustrated in Christ's Passion. Union with God, then, fills the empty well in the human soul, while also deepening the well to take in more of the love of God.

Julian's definition of perfection, therefore, is "homely oneyng" (or intimate union) with the divine, which causes unity within the soul itself. Julian continually comes back to "homeliness" and "oneyng" throughout her text. The term "homely" refers to an intimate place such as the feeling of being at home. The term "oneyng" essentially means to become one or to unify. She demonstrates these concepts in her various theologies of the Trinity, Christ's motherhood, and the Christian's simultaneous seeking and beholding, in that her theologies draw the conclusion that God desires for humanity to be intimately unified with Himself. Even her own structure of the *Shewings*, itself, points to the idea of unity to the Divine. She does not

follow a linear pattern of thinking, but circles back countless times to the love of God in the Passion of Christ. This love is the center of her framework, but also the center of her content. Additionally, she is intent on establishing her unity to the doctrines of the Church and her equality to her “evyn Cristen.” She understands her role as a vessel and refuses to let the stain of Eve’s sin prevent her from sharing her visions of the love of God with the world. Though her works were not circulated widely at the time, Julian’s ability to construct her visions and understand them with profound theology transcended the expectations that society placed on women like Julian. Though she was an enclosed religious woman, her work unified her with her “evyn Cristen” and encouraged humanity to pursue “oneyng” with the Divine, within themselves, and among each other.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Although Margery Kempe, St. Birgitta of Sweden, and Julian of Norwich each worked within widely differing contexts, both in a societal and familial sense, they all had to address the gap between Eve and the Virgin Mary that was established by the organized Church. They each had to wrestle with the concepts of femininity that were created by men and kept men in power spiritually, politically, and socially. Fortunately, the compelling call of God held more authority for these women than the clergy's admonitions for women to remain silent and submissive. As Christian women, with at least two of them lacking virginity, the process of sharing their experiences and the words of God with the world meant immersing themselves into a world of men who would aim to pick apart their lives, their words, and their faith. Perfection was expected of them, but also kept from them. Women could never outrun or outperform the stain of Eve's sin, yet they were obligated to aim for the Virgin Mary's impossible perfection. However, each of these women demonstrated a pursuit of perfection in that they sought to construct themselves in their written works in order to gain any authority to share the mandates that God had laid on their hearts through different mystical phenomena. These women, however, did not fit the definition of feminine perfection that the clergy taught. Therefore, they each had to reframe the definition of perfection that they sought. They had to both convince their reader to view female perfection through their own lens and then prove that they have indeed progressed towards that particular definition of perfection. Additionally, these definitions varied significantly between these three women because of their contexts and individual experiences.

As a blueprint for perfection in faith, first Thessalonians, chapter five, verse twenty-three states, “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (ESV 1 Thess. 5.23). This Pauline verse lays out a triad of body, spirit, and soul that I see at play in the definitions of perfection extrapolated among the writings of Margery, Julian, and Birgitta. The “sanctification” referred to in this verse refers to the process in a Christian’s life of becoming more like Jesus, or in other words, coming closer to perfection. The perfection of the body refers to the taming of the external flesh to submit one’s actions to full obedience to all that God commands of Christians. The perfection in spirit is understood as the growth in submitting one’s thoughts and consciousness to obedience to God. The mind, here, is intended to be kept blameless with the hope of holiness and purity in thought that utilizes the wisdom of God over the wisdom of man. The perfection in soul is found in the recreation of the soul that is believed to occur when a person is united with Christ in salvation. This Christian ideology of the triad of humanity is the structural underpinning that I use to understand Margery, Birgitta, and Julian’s definitions of perfection.

Margery Kempe and her definition of bodily (or external) perfection were explicitly present throughout her *Book*. As a married mother, Margery Kempe could not fit the standards of perfection for religious women, yet her mystical experiences of God were impactful enough for Margery to seek another means to express her affective piety. Her anxiety over her desire for perfection is expressed in her need to see the internal changes in heart externalized in chastity, wearing white, weeping, pilgrimages, and validation from society. She sought to suffer bodily with Christ and was a constant source of controversy regardless of her location, yet these persecutions served to validate her faith and her growth in likeness to Christ because she was

suffering for perceived obedience to what God had called her. Of the three women, she portrays the largest physical presence in her text. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is aptly named in that the treatise is about Margery, rather than focusing on God. Margery's visions are a topic of discussion, but the *Book* is far more concerned with how Margery Kempe receives validation of her spiritual growth. Her body is a focal point in that her actions and affective responses are quite literally all over the text. Even within the narrative, different clergymen are fed up by Margery's overt bodily presence. Try as they might, the clergymen could not silence Margery, who would not obey their mandates if it meant disobedience to what God commanded her in her visions. Margery's bodily experiences of intercourse and childbirth play a huge role in her spiritual formation; therefore, Margery's framework for understanding growth towards spiritual perfection is focused on her somatic responses to God and people's responses to her presence.

St. Birgitta and her definition of perfection in the wisdom and holiness of the mind is a middle ground between Margery and Julian for several reasons. Firstly, her *Liber Celestis*, like Julian's *Shewings*, is mostly devoid of St. Birgitta's own presence. She intends to erase herself from the text to align herself within the tradition of *discretio spirituum*. Her treatise is a carefully constructed work and demonstrates Birgitta's obedience to the Church and simultaneous obedience to God's call on her life through her mystical phenomena. She finds the balance between allowing the clergy to be her authority while also making her voice heard by disguising it behind the voice of God. However, according to historical accounts and the fact of her canonization, we know that Birgitta led a very active lifestyle and immersed herself into the public sphere to vie for political and religious change in both the Hundred Years' War and the papal schism. The mere fact that she was able to have a voice in a male sphere demonstrates her wisdom and discernment towards her self-construction. She hid herself well when needed, but

boldly declared challenges and admonitions to men in power when God commanded. Though she also was not a virgin, she used the fact that she had children to become a source of her own authority by theologically reconstructing the authority of the Virgin Mary on the basis of a Christotypic Mariology. Her particular doctrine that was the underpinning to her definition of feminine perfection transferred into her Birgittine Order. Though her nuns were enclosed, they enjoyed the ability and encouragement to read and write more than any other monastic order, again demonstrating the value Birgitta placed on growing in wisdom and allowing women to access the resources that would contribute to such growth. St. Birgitta found an impactful balance in her ability to hide her presence in order to speak out strategically.

Julian of Norwich and her definition of perfection in unity of soul is the most ambiguous and complex of the three. Julian, herself, is almost completely absent from her text except for the elements about herself that were absolutely necessary to include. Her focus in her *Shewings* was solely on the visions from God that she experienced on her supposed deathbed. Besides her absence from her text, we have very little historical knowledge about Julian of Norwich, except that she was an anchoress at St. Julian's Church in Norwich, England. Therefore, her presence in her context was about as scarce as her presence in her text. She lived a contemplative life with minimal interaction with the world. However, she felt compelled to write and share with the world, not herself, but the visions that God had shown her. Julian's *Shewings* demonstrate a complex, dense theology that Julian wrestled with over many years. She works with many different concepts and theologies from sin as nothingness and Trinitarian parenthood, to the Motherhood of Jesus and his sufferings on the Cross. For Julian, perfection is found namely in Christ, whom people can reach by unifying themselves to Christ and by seeking and beholding the suffering Christ as their heaven. Julian's definition is paradoxical in several ways, in that a

Christian can both achieve perfection in unity with the Godhead and still pursue greater unity within oneself. Julian sets up a holistic view of both the individual and of humankind. She desires to be unified with her fellow Christians and the teachings of the Church. She demonstrates an understanding that some of her visions are challenging to the Church's teaching, but Julian is bold enough to ask hard questions and to trust that God will make all things well despite the seeming contrariness. Julian artfully reshapes gender into a non-issue on the basis of unity and, in doing so, she blends her physical presence in with the rest of her "evyn Cristens."

In each of my chapters I sought to demonstrate each of the mystic's doctrinal beliefs and how those beliefs revealed the ability to redefine perfection in terms of what each one could pursue according to her differing contexts and experiences. The Church's "one size fits all" standard of perfection and degradation of the value of femininity was not an option for these women who fervently believed that they heard from God himself and that they must share these sentiments with the world. My aim was to express how these mystics' written works were constructed according to their definition of perfection in a time period where it was critical to these mystics' lives, well-being, and receptivity with the public that they achieve an effective self-construction. Margery Kempe struggled the most to construct herself in a way that would appeal to the men in power enough to give her the authority to speak. St. Birgitta was arguably the most successful in terms of constructing herself in an approach that appealed to the framework of power. She was not viewed as a threat to clerical control; thus, she was enabled to have a voice in some of the largest world issues of her time. Julian of Norwich, though she was most effective at hiding herself, may be considered too hidden to have an influence. However, while her text did not circulate widely, there are multiple accounts of her *Shewings* being transcribed and greatly valued in different convents during the Early Modern period in particular.

Therefore, it would be unreasonable to assume she had no impact on the theological understandings of the Christian God and his lack of partiality and love for all of humanity.

The varying range of experiences, presence, convictions, and receptions among these three mystics is a perplexing picture of the product yielded when religious experience does not fit within societal or even religious expectations. In an analogy of the “Illuminated Way” of the mystic, Evelyn Underhill extrapolates the varying degrees of contemplative practice and experience that may explain some aspects of difference among these three women:

No image, perhaps, could suggest so accurately as this divine picture the conditions of perfect illumination: the drinking deeply, devoutly, and in haste—that is, without prudent and self-regarding hesitation—of the heavenly Wine of Life...In those imperfect brothers who dared not drink the cup of sacrifice to the dregs, but took part and spilled part, so that they became partly shining and partly dark, “according to the measure of their drinking or spilling thereof,” we may see an image of the artist, musician, prophet, poet, dreamer, more or less illuminated according in which he has drunk the cup of ecstasy: but always in comparison with the radiance of the pure contemplative, “partly shining and partly dark.” (237)

Aside from the contextual and experiential differences in these women, Underhill suggests that the differences in mystics may arise from the degree to which they are willing to behold God in his fullness. The analogy offered by Underhill may provide a different definition of the “success” that each of these women experienced. While Birgitta experienced success in terms of her canonization and clerical acknowledgment, perhaps Margery Kempe, and the lengths she went to in her sacrifices were a contemplative success despite her lack of obedience to the Church. Then again, Julian of Norwich quite possibly experienced perfection in contemplation by her commitment to spend years contemplating her visions in a reclusive state, forsaking the world to

“drink the cup of ecstasy” that she desired from the divine. There is an element in each of these women that piques our interest and perplexes our understanding of divinity and humanity. They all went to great lengths to communicate their revelations as far as they felt compelled by God despite subjugation and the risk of heresy that fueled the Church’s suspicion towards women. Perhaps it is precisely that “here, genius and sanctity kiss each other,” which begs readers throughout the ages to pour over their texts in order to understand the incomprehensible (Underhill 239).

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