

ABSTRACT

Medieval Mysticism: Women's Agency Through Contemplation

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Contrary to the pervading opinion that women who chose lives of secluded religious contemplation were repressed by a male-dominated society, Women Religious actually demonstrated a great deal of agency. Drawing from Phyllis Mack's concept of spiritual agency, women who enclosed themselves due to religious conviction actually exercised greater agency than most women in medieval society. The belief that their visions were divinely inspired gave them the authority to pursue their own interests outside of social expectations and even allowed them to engage with leading theological figures throughout Europe. Spiritual piety, in other words, enabled female agency. By examining the lives of three medieval mystics, Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe, this thesis argues that these women established themselves as not only mystics but also authorized themselves as spiritual leaders by emulating the lives of early holy women and cultivating Christocentric piety.

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MEDIEVAL MYSTICISM: WOMEN'S AGENCY THROUGH CONTEMPLATION

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I would like to dedicate my honors thesis to my parents, Robert and Sandra Novak, for all of their love and support. Also, for making me do the honors program, this is for you!

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

After experiencing her first divine vision, Margery Kempe asked Christ to give her a subject for contemplation. She, “then at once [she] saw St. Anne, great with child, and then she prayed St. Anne to let her be her maid and her servant. And presently our Lady was born. And then she said to the blessed child, ‘My lady, you shall be the mother of God’.”¹ Religious visions such as this were characteristic of female mystics. As a religious movement, mysticism was popular in England from c. 1000 – 1400 CE. The term is often used to describe a group of religious people who, like Margery Kempe, experience a direct relationship with God, outside the traditional Church structure. Those people, deemed ‘mystics,’ formed a personal relationship with God and their writings reflect that experience, oftentimes in sensual language.

Christina of Markyate (c. 1096-1098 – 1160 CE) lived isolated from the world for several years and experienced visions of the Virgin Mary, who promised Christina deliverance from Christina’s physical suffering. Julian of Norwich (c. 1343 – 1413 CE) and Margery Kempe (c. 1373 – 1439 CE) lived over two hundred years after Christina of Markyate, but both also experienced intensely personal visions of Christ, the occurrence of which are recorded in their writings. As medieval English mystics, all three women received visions from Christ detailing either a spousal or maternal relationship. Most scholars place Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe firmly within the fourteenth and

¹ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 52-53.

fifteenth century mystics, not necessarily mentioning the earlier Christina of Markyate. However, Christina of Markyate's life exhibits many of the same characteristics as later mystics.²

Mysticism has roots deep in medieval Christianity, and Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe display characteristics of early holy women as well as reflecting the later understanding of mysticism as developed specifically through the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux. When combined with the later impulses of Christocentric piety and the teachings of Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 (which came after Christina of Markyate but stemmed from currents already present in the religious culture), the mystical characteristics displayed by Christina, Julian, and Margery show how they were able to exercise spiritual authority despite making religious choices that either isolated them from public view or made them socially unpopular. By emulating the lives of early holy women and cultivating Christocentric piety, Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe established themselves as not only mystics but also authorized themselves as spiritual leaders.

My argument fits with a growing historical conversation about how spiritual piety enables female agency. In her article on eighteenth century Quaker women, for example, Phyllis Mack argued that by choosing to embrace strict religious observations and to play a submissive role to men, women achieved a measurable degree of agency in comparison to less actively-religious women.³ Rather than viewing Quaker women as simply

² Henrietta Leyser, "c. 1080 – 1125: texts," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*. ed. Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (Cambridge: University Press, 2011), 58.

³ Phyllis Mack, "Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism," *Signs* 29 no. 1 (September 1, 2003): 155-156.

products of a misogynistic society, Quaker women who embraced more traditional gender roles gained public authority as their actions and voices were seen as empowered by God. As Mack argues, “they saw their intentions as inspired by and identical with God’s.”⁴ Mack’s argument draws heavily on the experiences of other religious women from the past, including mystics and holy women during the medieval period. These earlier holy women likewise demonstrated spiritual agency as their empowerment by God provided them with public audiences and established them as spiritual authorities in their own right. By devoting their lives to God and service in the Church, women transcended the traditional boundaries of their sex and were able to influence the behaviors and attitudes of the people around them.

The lives of Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe show how each of these women were able to become religious authorities through their self-effacing piety. Moreover, the fact that writings by and about Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe continue to exist and circulate as didactic texts suggests how their influence as religious authorities has persisted. This chapter first traces the developmental history of mysticism, especially as articulated by Bernard of Clairvaux and as strengthened by Christocentric piety and the teachings of Fourth Lateran Council. While mysticism did not fully emerge in England until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it began developing much earlier. The life of Christina of Markyate displays characteristics of both late medieval mystics as well as exemplifying the characteristics of early medieval holy women (such as the desert mothers and early Christian martyrs) thereby demonstrating that female mysticism has a long history

⁴ Ibid., 156.

indeed. Second, this chapter shows how the mystical tradition combined with the lives of earlier holy women (such as found in the *Gilte Legende* as well as biblical women like the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene) influenced the lives of Christina, Julian, and Margery, allowing them to develop spiritual agency.

A Brief History of Mysticism

The journey to find spiritual completeness through the mystical experience often included religious visions, an emphasis on female virginity, and medieval notions of asceticism. Medieval mysticism is then further described as requiring “reflection and study and humble, daily prayer.”⁵ In short, medieval mysticism, as a historical construct, has three primary components. First, the relationship with God is recognized by the mystic as entirely new and surpassing all previous knowledge of the divine. Second, the mystic and others are aware that this knowledge comes from a deeper, more intimate place in the soul than previous knowledge. And finally, there is no way to adequately describe the mystical experience. Regardless of ability, a mystic can never truly convey the depth of what he or she experienced with God.⁶ In regards to Christina of Markyate, for example, her visions are described either as dreams or in terms of the abstract emotions she experiences both during and after the visions. Interestingly enough, her visions grew more precise and frequent as she received religious training with Rodger the hermit. Demonstrating how Christina’s knowledge and understanding of religion was

⁵ Jean Leclercq, “Preface,” in *Julian of Norwich: Showings* trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978), 5.

⁶ David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 2-3. as cited in: Francis Oakley, *The Western Church in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1979), 90.

guided by male influence, but she still received her visions based on her own merits. These principles are also found in the writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, further proving that these ideas were widespread.

Arguably medieval mysticism is only transcribed through the writings of those mystics who recorded their experiences and visions. They sought to accurately describe the true nature of God in a way that makes the concepts discussed more understandable.⁷ Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe all either recorded or had their lives recorded to share their mystical experiences and provide people with insight into the nature of the relationship between humanity and the divine. Wolfgang Riehle argues that of all the English mystics, Julian of Norwich succeeds in accomplishing this task, especially in her long text where she describes a vision between a lord and his servant, where the lord represents God and the servant represents Christ's humanity (Adam) through whom, God communicates with the entire world.⁸ Likewise, throughout Christina of Markyate's *Life*, the language used plays a major role in determining how she was perceived by her contemporaries as well as dictated how she described her visions of Christ and the Virgin Mary.

But what was the beginning of this mystical journey on which both Julian of Norwich and Christiana of Markyate embarked? The origins of mysticism are usually attributed to the writings of early members of Cistercian Order of monks, St. Bernard of Clairvaux in particular. Cistercian texts created our understanding of medieval mysticism and the mystical experience. The Cistercian order was founded at the beginning of the

⁷ Wolfgang Riehle. *The Middle English Mystics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 76.

⁸ Elizabeth Petroff, ed., *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 311.

twelfth century when a group of monks, led by the abbot Robert, the prior Alberic, and the secretary Stephen Harding, from the Benedictine monastery of Molesme in Burgundy founded a new monastery at Cîteaux in 1098. There is very little information about the early days of the Cistercian order, or indeed about why they left their original monastery in the first place, only that the participating monks wished to follow the Benedictine Rule and have enough amenability to change the Rule if need be.⁹ In addition to a lack of sources about the early days of the Order, those sources that do exist contradict each other and offer different interpretations of the Order's foundation. The *Exordium Parvum* (1113) and the *Exordium Cistercii* (1119) both provide detailed explanations for the founding of the new order, even though different editions contradict each other. The final document attributed to the founding of the Cistercian order, the *Carta Caritatis* (1119) written by Stephen Harding, is copied in several variations. Harding, a monk from a wealthy English family, became the third Cistercian abbot in 1108. While the new order continued to obey the Benedictine Rule, Stephen Harding wrote the *Carta Caritatis* to create an administration for the new order where individual abbots took more responsibility for their own abbeys, and annual meetings were held to make sure that everyone in the order obeyed the new Rule properly.¹⁰ For the most part, the *Carta Caritatis* follows the Benedictine Rule closely, but its more egalitarian tone holds the abbot more responsible for his actions and leadership. While these documents provide the basis for understanding the Cistercian Order, the Order experienced its largest expansion while under the leadership and influence, of Bernard of Clairvaux.

⁹ Martha G Newman, "Foundation and twelfth century," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Cistercian Order*, ed. Mette Birkedal Bruun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25-29.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) entered the Cistercian order at Cîteaux in 1113 with thirty followers and by 1115, was sent to found the new abbey at Clairvaux. Under his influence, the Cistercian order expanded substantially throughout Europe. He is arguably most well known for the series of sermons he composed on the Song of Songs, left incomplete at his death. The importance of the Virgin Mary in the sermons demonstrates the importance to Bernard of the soul's intimacy with God in addition to his emphasis on the inner spiritual joy that accompanies contemplation of the divine.¹¹ According to the sermons he wrote concerning the Song of Songs, the soul's desire to know God intimately is related through "the intense yearning of the bride for the bridegroom."¹² In one of his written sermons, *Sermo 20*, St. Bernard justified and explained mysticism as "contemplation...as a means of enkindling love in those who find themselves in...contemplative life."¹³ This definition is clearly applied in the writings of later female mystics.

While Bernard of Clairvaux's writings heavily influenced the development of medieval mysticism, perhaps more than those of any other theologian, it was Aelred of Rievaulx (c. 1110-1167) who is credited with spreading Cistercian teachings in England.¹⁴ In many ways, Aelred's writings follow in the traditions established by Bernard. Like Bernard, he focused on the importance of love in any person's relationship

¹¹ Wolfgang Riehle, *The Secret Within: Hermits, Recluses, and Spiritual Outsiders in Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 17.

¹² Thomas Bestul, "Antecedents: The Anselmian and Cistercian Contributions," ed. Pollard, William F. and Robert Boenig, *Mysticism and Spirituality in Medieval England* (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴ Riehle, *The Secret Within*, 21.

with God as well as how disobedience detracts from that relationship.¹⁵ Beginning with his *Mirror of Charity* (*Speculum caritatis*) in 1142 and culminating in *Jesus at the Age of Twelve* (*De Jesu puero duodenni*) in 1160-1162, Aelred's language demonstrated his own fervent love and devotion for Christ, and explained his opinions on the expression of that love. For example, emotional outbursts are allowed, if not encouraged, only if inspired by religious contemplation.¹⁶ His emphasis on tears foreshadowed Margery Kempe's emotional outbursts whenever she contemplated the nativity scene or Christ's sufferings.

Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred of Rievaulx were not the only contributors to popular devotions to Christ's Passion, Christocentric piety evolved out of the origins of medieval mysticism. In her book *Patterns of Piety*, Christine Peters explains Christocentric piety as revolving around "the passion of Christ, on the cult of his wounds, on the pieta, and on the mercy manifested towards mankind by the crucified Christ at the Last Judgment."¹⁷ Christocentric piety, the focus of devotion on the crucifixion of Christ, became popular in the late medieval period, but still originated with mystics and those devoted to religious life.¹⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred of Rievaulx made theological contributions to Christocentric piety and mysticism, although they were not themselves mystics. Only later did Christocentric piety spread amongst the laity. Scholars argue that the rise in Christocentric piety emerged from a variety of sources. The following men contributed to the development of mysticism and Christocentric piety

¹⁵Bestul, "Antecedents: The Anselmian and Cistercian Contributions,"14.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

¹⁷ Christine Peters, *Patterns of Piety: Women, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval and Reformation England* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

through their writings about the personal relationship between an individual and God. St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033 – 1109 CE), the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 until 1109, emphasized an inner dialogue to convey the depth of the emotional relationship between the mortal and the divine, writing his own thoughts as a personal conversation between himself and the Almighty.¹⁹ St. Anselm also described the relationship between Christ and humanity as that between a mother and her children, foreshadowing the later writings of Julian of Norwich.²⁰ During Christina of Markyate’s lifetime, St. Anselm revolutionized thinking about Christocentric piety through his widely circulated writings.²¹ Christocentric piety also addressed the physical act of consecration during the mass. Questions arose as to the precise moment when Christ physical body and blood became present in the Eucharist. As a result, devotion transferred away from the actual sacrament and towards the act of consecration, giving people the opportunity to witness the miracle of transubstantiation as it happened.²² Associated with ideas about Christ’s role as a Mother and Christocentric piety, is the importance of breast milk from Christ as nourishment for humanity through the Eucharist, “to medieval philosophers, breast milk was transmuted blood,” further highlighting Christ’s maternal role and emphasizing the growing significance surrounding the Virgin Mary.²³ The idea of being physically

¹⁹ Bestul, “Antecedents: The Anselmian and Cistercian Contributions,” 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹ Henrietta Leyser and Samuel Fanous, eds., “Introduction,” *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, trans. C. H. Talbot (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xiv.

²² Caroline Walker Bynum, “Late Medieval Eucharistic Doctrine,” in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, n.d.), 288–98.

²³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, *The New Historicism : Studies in Cultural Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 270.

present to see the body of Christ is found throughout mystical texts; for example, when Margery Kempe saw herself as physically present at Christ's Passion, witnessing the very moments when He gave his body and blood to nourish humanity.²⁴

While important theologians worked on the expansion of religious life and the meaning of contemplation, clergy in England were eagerly instituting the reforms set forth by the Fourth Lateran Council, including continued education and increased participation of the laity in religious services.²⁵ One of the primary goals of the Fourth Lateran Council called for an elevation of life for the poor by the clergy to improve lay knowledge about Scripture and theology. In addition to this, more regular attendance was required at Mass as well as annual confession and penance.²⁶ The intimate experiences mystics have with the divine demonstrate this increased focus on lay piety. All mystics believed that the ultimate goal of faith and mysticism was to experience union with God; however, the contention often came from the way in which that union was achieved.²⁷ While the Fourth Lateran Council occurred over fifty years after Christina of Markyate's death, the changes instituted influenced the religious lives of later mystics, such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.

In his exploration of the effects of the Fourth Lateran Council, Denis Renevey argued that people more eagerly explored the emotional mentality of religion and

²⁴ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, I. ch. 78-79.

²⁵ Alastair Minnis, "1215-1349: culture and history," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. Fanous and Gillespie (Cambridge: University Press, 2011), 69-70.

²⁶ Donald F. Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 183-184.

²⁷ Bernard McGinn, "Love, Knowledge, and Mystical Union in Western Christianity: Twelfth to Sixteenth Centuries," *Church History* 56, no. 1 (March 1987): 7-24.

attempted to show how a deep emotional love led to greater spiritual awareness and greater knowledge of the divine mystery. The writings of English anchorites particularly emphasized this point more than any other and spread the message of an emotional commitment to God in an accessible way.²⁸ Anchorites chose a lifestyle of extreme religious devotion, living as recluses in solitary cells, often attached to the sides of churches. Mysticism and extreme forms of asceticism, such as becoming an anchoress, held particular appeal for certain women. Considering that the *Ancrene Wisse* (c. 1215) was written specifically as a guide for female anchoresses points to the fact that women were very much involved in the development of anchoritic lifestyles and were encouraged to participate in religious contemplation. Like *The Life of Christina of Markyate* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the *Ancrene Wisse* was written by men, but written for women. This shows how women were leading guides in the practice of mysticism. Combined with the fact that many female anchoresses were well respected as religious teachers and guides for people shows that women were highly influenced by the development of mysticism and considered themselves equal participants in the movement. Also, because women were generally considered the more sexual and emotional of the two sexes, mysticism became an acceptable outlet for their religious experiences,

mysticism was more central in female than in male experience, and female mystics based their claims to authority on their visions of the supernatural. They were especially devoted to the Passion and Death of Christ, to the Eucharist and to the Virgin Mary. Women made full use of their bodies and senses to bring

²⁸ Denis Renevey, "1215-1349: Texts," In eds. Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 91–112.

themselves into contact with God and on the whole developed aestheticism to a more marked degree than was found among male mystics.²⁹

Thus in many ways, the theological development of mysticism, as driven by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Christocentric piety, and the decisions made at the Fourth Lateran Council, all pushed women to deepen their faith. And mysticism held particular appeal for them.

Mysticism and Holy Women

In the case of female anchoresses, they were to model their contemplative lives on those of the desert mothers and fathers although they adopted a more metaphorical lifestyle in comparison to those early Christians “to signify their isolation from the world and their attempt to commit themselves to a life of reading, prayer, and devotion.”³⁰ In fact, the term “anchorite” originally means “to withdraw” in Greek, both accurately describing the extreme life choices of these women as well as mirroring their influence by the desert mothers and fathers who also isolated themselves from daily life in order to gain a “liminal experience” and gain a greater appreciation for the divine.³¹

In the late twelfth or early thirteenth centuries, an unidentified author composed the *Ancrene Wisse* as a spiritual and practical guide for women who chose to become anchoresses. Literally, the title translates to “Guide for Anchoresses.”³² Written for three women of the gentry class who intended to enter into an anchoritic lifestyle, the guide

²⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, “Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages,” eds. Jill Raitt, Bernard McGinn, and John Meyendorff, *High Middle Ages and Reformation*, Christian Spirituality, n.d. as cited in Jennifer C. Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe, 1200-1500*, Longman History of European Women (London ; New York: Longman, 2002), 193.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

³¹ Riehle, *The Secret Within*, 3-4

³² *Ibid.*, 40.

reflects mystical principles and the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux and the early Cistercians. Recent scholarship places the date and authorship of the *Ancrene Wisse* after 1215 and somewhere in the West Midlands (Herefordshire and Shropshire) of England.³³ A central theme to the *Ancrene Wisse* is that of marital love between the anchorite and Christ. Influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux's *On Loving God* (c. 1128), the anchorite is portrayed as a bride seeking union with her new husband, thus equating a mystic's experience with Christ with the sacrament of marriage.³⁴ Although this theme is explored throughout the *Ancrene Wisse* book seven further explains the nature of the relationship between Christ and an anchoress, painting Christ as lover or knight.³⁵

In addition to its focus on the romantic love that grows between an anchorite and Christ, the *Ancrene Wisse* also explains the importance of Christ's wounds from the crucifixion. This theme is also addressed in the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux, again demonstrating the widespread influence he exerted on the development of mysticism. In his focus on Christ's wounds, Bernard of Clairvaux and the *Ancrene Wisse* both emphasize that Christ only suffered out of love for humanity and from that love derives the marital love exhibited towards mystics.³⁶ The inclusion of Christocentric piety as well as the influences of Bernard of Clairvaux among other Cistercians shows how the development of mysticism is evident throughout the *Ancrene Wisse*. The text also

³³ Corpus Christi College (University of Cambridge), *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402, with Variants from Other Manuscripts*, ed. Bella Millett, E. J. Dobson, and Richard Dance, Early English Text Society no. 325-326 (Oxford ; New York: Published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press, 2005), xi-xiii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁵ *Ancrene Wisse* as cited in Renevey, "1215-1349: Texts.", 94.

³⁶ Riehle, *The Secret Within*, 48-49.

includes allusions to the early desert mothers and female martyrs, holding them up as exemplars of the faith and role models after which anchoresses should model themselves.

Many of the early virgin martyr stories from early Christianity describe women who rejected traditional marriage and gender roles,

In many virgin martyr legends, expository and devotional passages are so frequent and so lengthy that the events of the narrative – the trial, tortures, and miracles – seem peripheral. The thematic orientation of these texts was, however, eminently suited to the needs and reading practices of religious communities... hagiographers invited readers to identify with the saint and to reenact her passion. The representation of the virgin as a humble supplicant would surely have promoted such identification.³⁷

The stories focus on women in the early Church rebelling against their families in defense of Christianity and their newfound spiritual beliefs. According to Larissa Tracy, holy virgins were the highest order of religious devotees. The suffering these women experienced at the hands of their families and communities, like the suffering Christina later faced by her family, symbolizes the struggle their souls undergo to purify them and allows them to contemplate God in greater detail.³⁸ The threat to the young woman's virginity both symbolically and physically mirrored the threat to her soul forced upon her by her family. In this respect, the physical body and the soul are not two distinct entities, but rather part of each other. Christina of Markyate's death, her own life, as well as the lives of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe all bear strong resemblances to those early women whose stories are found in the *Gilte Legende*.

³⁷ Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 27.

³⁸ Larissa Tracy, "Silence into Speech: Writing the Lives of Female Saints," in *Women of the Gilte Legende: A Selection of Middle English Saints' Lives* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 7.

Another source on the lives of early female Christian saints comes from the *Gilte Legende*. The *Gilte Legende* provides the stories of these female saints lives for the medieval audience. Medieval women had access to the stories of these women and other female saints from the *Gilte Legende*, a collection of saints' lives available for lay people, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine during the 13th century. Religious women are categorized in the *Gilte Legende* into one of four groups: virgins, holy mothers, repentant sinners, and holy transvestites.³⁹ Christina of Markyate would have been familiar with the women in these stories. Even though the *Gilte Legende* was not compiled until a century after Christina's death, these stories were widespread throughout England during her lifetime. Lay people heard these stories through sermons and were particularly educated about saints' shrines and relics.⁴⁰ Christina shares certain similarities such as a propensity towards religious visions with some of the women in the *Gilte Legende*, and is threatened because of her decision to remain a virgin on Earth as a bride of Christ.

Several prose sermons echo this theme and further demonstrate how widely circulated the stories of early Christian women were, even before the compilation and publication of the *Gilte Legende*. This principle of drawing on the lives of early women also applies to Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. For instance, one sermon written by Simon Winter in remembrance of St. Peter's Chains references the actions of St. Mary Magdalene, St. Catherine, St. Margaret, and St. Dorothy to teach the laity stories from the Gospels, in particular, Matthew 16:19, where Christ tells Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and

³⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁰ Bernard Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), 102.

whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven’.”⁴¹ Another sermon described how “Christ...lived in penance, enduring suffering and crucifixion. The way of penance was so straight and narrow that there was no room for his two feet to be nailed next to each other.” The writer of this sermon includes St. Catherine in this explanation of suffering, a sentiment seen throughout Margery Kempe’s *Book*.⁴² An additional sermon used St. Thais as an exemplum of the power of long lasting prayer for redemption.⁴³ Stories from the *Gilte Legende* combined with the lessons in prose sermons provided models for women to aspire to be like. While this was an unrealistic expectation for the vast majority of women who married and raised large families, those women who devoted themselves to religious contemplation discovered women in these stories who faced similar oppositions in their journeys to deepen their spirituality.

In addition to their focus on Christ, mystics and in particular these women especially focused on devotion to both the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. For most of the medieval period, the cult surrounding the Virgin Mary focused on her role as a mother.⁴⁴ High mortality rates, especially for children, meant that many women understood the pain of burying children, just like the Virgin Mary as depicted in many images of the pietà. On the other hand, Mary Magdalene represents the reformed sinner who dedicates her life to the service of Christ and has an independent role in the early

⁴¹ Matthew 16:19 (New International Version). British Library MS Harley 2321, Sermon 01./001. O’Mara and Paul, *A Repertorium of Middle English Prose Sermons*, 2: 1323-1327.

⁴² Bodleian Library MS Hatton 96, Sermon 025. *Ibid.*, 2: 1999-2001.

⁴³ British Library MS Harley 2247, Sermon 038. *Ibid.*, 2,: 1143-1144.

⁴⁴ Peters, *Patterns of Piety*, 60.

Church as an evangelical preacher.⁴⁵ During the medieval period, the devotional cults surrounding the Virgin Mary and Christ became intertwined proving that in matters of religion, men and women had more equality than in secular matters and how the Virgin Mary was seen as responsible for intercession and how Christ offered mercy for souls.⁴⁶ Through these stories, medieval people, specifically Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe, were provided with religious models upon whom to model religious and social behavior.

Hearing about the lives of early Christian holy women also influenced the decisions made by medieval women, and subsequently their agency. In her book, *Her Life Historical*, Catherine Sanok argued that Julian of Norwich's *Showings* represents the earliest documented evidence of how mysticism and early holy women influenced medieval mystic women. Simply by the fact that women were often present during religious sermons and that, when reading or listening to stories about early Christian women, St. Cecilia for instance, "Julian, and perhaps for other audiences, to read the legend as exemplary is to understand it not as a prescription but a comparandum for contemporary practice."⁴⁷ This point is further proven through the prose sermons examined earlier. Because women made up most of the audiences during medieval sermons, widespread explanations of the lives of female saints and their significance to Christianity provided medieval women with strong examples of other women exercising

⁴⁵ Larissa Tracy, trans., *Women of the Gilte Legende: A Selection of Middle English Saints Lives: Translated from the Middle English with Introduction, Notes and Interpretive Essay* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 68.

⁴⁶ Peters, *Patterns of Piety*, 60.

⁴⁷ Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 4-5.

surprisingly large amounts of agency, in some cases converting hundreds of people to Christianity.

Three Female Mystics

During the twelfth century, devotion to the Virgin Mary expanded along with devotion to Mary Magdalene with the publishing of the *Gilte Legende* and the growth of Christocentric piety (the Virgin Mary was specifically associated with the Incarnation).⁴⁸ Throughout Europe, the Virgin Mary was known by an array of names, showing the variety of functions that she served for people. For instance, the Church referred to her as *mater dei*, mother of God. But in other regions of Europe, people also knew her as *Sancta Maria*, *Notre Dame*, or *Madonna*.⁴⁹ The prevalence of sites devoted to the Virgin Mary throughout England highlights her importance during the medieval period. For example, Evesham, Malmesbury, and Worcester all had sites dedicated to Mary. Although her importance continued throughout the medieval period, the Virgin Mary's significance to mysticism is particularly evident in *The Life of Christina of Markyate*.⁵⁰ Christina has visions centered on the Virgin Mary, who also protects Christina when her life is in danger, and her devotions focus on Christ's humanity, echoing the growth of Christocentric piety.

By the time Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe lived, mysticism had a well-established foundation. That is not to exclude Christina of Markyate from the group of

⁴⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 81.

⁴⁹ Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 136.

⁵⁰ Henrietta Leyser, "c. 1080-1215: Texts," 57-58.

thirteenth-fourteenth century mystics. Although she lived almost two hundred years earlier than either Julian of Norwich or Margery Kempe, Christina of Markyate still demonstrated several mystical qualities as evident in her biography, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*. Christina is perhaps most similar to Julian of Norwich in that both women were anchoresses respected for their spiritual insights. Even though Christina of Markyate lived before the development of the *Ancrene Wisse* and before mysticism became a widespread religious phenomenon, her *Life* shares many parallels with later mystics, particularly, Julian of Norwich. Whereas Christina claimed to receive divine visions throughout her life, Julian of Norwich's visions centered around a nearly fatal illness she experienced around age thirty. Her *Book of Showings* combines a short and a long text, both of which describe her interpretations of the divine during her illness, although the Long Text is definitely her life's work, the result of years contemplating the meaning of her revelations. Julian only focuses on her religious in her *Showings*, but like Christina of Markyate, closely examines the nature of the relationship between Christ and humanity, often describing that relationship as maternal.

Margery Kempe, a contemporary of Julian of Norwich's, lived very differently from either Julian or Christina of Markyate. She never became an anchoress, but was married and only convinced her husband to enter into a chaste marriage after the births of fourteen children. Like many women during her lifetime, Margery contributed to her family's income by brewing and selling beer (although this endeavor ultimately failed), and only later left England to travel on pilgrimages throughout Europe and the Holy

Land.⁵¹ As a holy woman, Margery Kempe experienced extreme emotional outbursts whenever she contemplated Christ or saw anyone who reminded her of Christ's sufferings, echoing back to the writings of Aelred of Rievaulx.⁵² As a result, she was often ridiculed and even accused of being a Lollard by the Mayor of Leicester. Lollards followed the teachings of John Wycliffe (c. 1331-1384) and believed that Scripture was a superior basis for faith rather than the establish Church, and that people can achieve a personal relationship with God. By the early fourteenth century, Lollards were considered heretics.⁵³ All of Margery's theological knowledge is based in Scripture and her visions relate a deeply personal relationship between herself and Christ. Therefore, it is reasonable that her contemporaries accused her of Lollardy. Her *Book* demonstrates how ideas about mysticism found in the twelfth century continued to have a profound impact on the lives of holy women in the fourteenth century.

All three women were noted for their spiritual authority. Yet they still acted within a masculine Church hierarchy and were influenced by male spiritual authorities. As particularly evident in *The Life of Christina of Markyate* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, even though they encounter powerful women who demonstrate agency, the men

⁵¹ Jennifer C. Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe, 1200-1500*, Longman History of European Women (London ; New York: Longman, 2002), 79-80; B. A. Windeatt, "Introduction" Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Penguin Classics (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 10-15.

⁵² *Speculum caritatis* as cited in Bestul, "Antecedents: The Anselmian and Cistercian Contributions," 14-15.

⁵³ Bracy V. Hill, "Apocalyptic Lollards?: The Conservative Use of The Book of Daniel in the English Wycliffite Sermons," *Church History and Religious Culture* 90, no. 1 (2010): 1-23; Bracy V. Hill, "Lollards," in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Thomas Kurian, vol. 2, 4 vols. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub. Ltd, 2011), 1381.

in their lives largely control their actions. In fact, male scribes recorded the lives of both women. Thus, even though these women demonstrate a remarkable amount of agency, their writings must be considered within the context of the social pressures they faced in the wake of their quest for spiritual autonomy.

Building on the scholarship of Phyllis Mack, this thesis argues that these women's imitation of Christ's suffering through extreme asceticism displays one way that medieval women exercised spiritual authority as they transcended traditional gender restrictions and served as spiritual guides for both men and women. Mack claims that holy women such as these wield the most agency in comparison to other contemporary laywomen, especially as public figures. Margery Kempe, Christina of Markyate, and Julian of Norwich exemplify the public authority that some medieval women were able to achieve, as each woman during their lifetimes became respected religious mystics (even Margery Kempe) sought after for their wisdom and experience. Perhaps ironically, however, these women articulated their religious autonomy in terms of submission: because all three women saw their lives and experiences as extensions of God's will, they had no choice but to share their opinions with the world.⁵⁴ By examining medieval mysticism and the effects it had on Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe, I will argue that through their extremely harsh lifestyles and religious visions, mysticism gave women the opportunity to create a personal connection with the divine. This knowledge in turn gave them greater spiritual agency than they could have ever achieved if they as regular nuns or members of the laity.

⁵⁴ Mack, "Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency," 154-156.

CHAPTER TWO

Christina of Markyate and Julian of Norwich

Christina of Markyate and Julian of Norwich were both widely respected by their communities for their visions. But their visions differed based on what God allowed them to see. Christina of Markyate frequently experienced prophetic visions, where her predictions of the future convinced people of her holiness. When she met the Abbot Gregory at St. Albans, she sees “a wall, in which her beloved friend was, cemented alive. ‘As long...as he is firmly fixed in it, the protection of God will never fail him’.”⁵⁵ In chapter 35 of the Long Text, Julian asked God to give her a vision, “concerning a certain person whom I loved, if it would continue in the good living which I hope had been begun by the grace of God; and in this particular wish it seemed that I impeded myself for I was not then told this.”⁵⁶ Christina was allowed a prophetic vision, whereas Julian—renowned for her holiness—was denied her request for a prophetic vision. Moreover, Julian’s visions also differed in that hers were more theological, allowing her to contemplate the nature of God the Father and Christ the Son. Christina’s visions, in contrast, were more interactive, including Christina’s conversations and experiences with Christ and the Virgin Mary who both promised to protect her. Regardless of the

⁵⁵ Henrietta Leyser and Samuel Fanous, eds., *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, trans. Talbot, C. H. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 72.

⁵⁶ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), LT, ch. 35, 236.

different nature of their visions, both women gained respect in their communities for their divine seeings.

While Christina of Markyate and Julian of Norwich were respected for their visionary abilities, they were separated by over two hundred years. But, by choosing lives of religious devotion and seclusion, both women exercised considerable, and similar, influence on their communities during their lives and after their deaths. The religious texts that they left behind serve as one marker of their continuing influence. In addition to Christina's *Life*, the St. Alban's Psalter is perhaps the most important text associated with her. The *Psalter* was most likely adapted by the monks at St. Alban's for Christina during her lifetime, while she lived there under Abbot Geoffrey's protection. A picture associated with Psalm 105 is thought to be a portrait of Christina leading a group of monks to Christ.⁵⁷ The *Life of St. Alexis*, is also contained in the *Psalter*, "the first known piece of literature written in Old French to have survived."⁵⁸ *The Life of St. Alexis* and several of the other examples of hagiography in the *Psalter* also point to Christina's ownership of the text. The hagiographical accounts closely mirror Christina's own *Life*, thus suggesting that earlier holy men and women influenced her hagiographer. Finally, the list of names in the *Psalter* names Christina, her family, Abbot Geoffrey, and Rodger the Hermit as having died in that community, lending credibility to Christina's *Life*.

Julian of Norwich is arguably the more well known of the two women. The only surviving documents concerning her are her own *Showings*, Margery Kempe's reference to their meeting in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and several wills, which indicate

⁵⁷ Henrietta Leyser and Samuel Fanous, "Christina of Markyate: The Introduction," in *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman* (Oxford: University Press, 2008), xxi-xxii.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

bequests left to Julian in her cell. Julian expands upon her interpretations of her visions in her second text, *A Revelation of Divine Love*, including the famous story of the lord and his servant. Julian's theology of love and of Christ as the mother figure depart from traditional Church teachings, but their continued popularity shows Julian's lasting influence, like the texts associated with Christina of Markyate.

By choosing such drastic a form of religious devotion as anchoresses, Christina and Julian both gained far greater agency than if they had followed society's expectations for most women. If not for her religious vocation and determination to live as a holy virgin, Christina would most likely have ended up as either mistress to the bishop of Durham, Ranulf, or married to Beorhtred, the nobleman her parents and Ranulf chose for her. While less is known about Julian's life outside of her religious writings (which include very little detail about her early life), research about women's lives during this time indicate what her life probably would have become if she had not pursued a religious lifestyle. Marriage patterns in medieval England suggest that the vast majority of women married in their twenties. After the establishment of a new household, women were expected to properly manage daily affairs, including the raising of children.⁵⁹ Certainly, Julian would not have been able to exercise the religious agency that she did if her life was consumed with managing a household and family.

Although Christina of Markyate lived almost two centuries before Julian of Norwich, both women exhibit many similar qualities, even though much more is known about Christina's life as opposed to only having Julian's religious writings. Both women lived religious lives, becoming nuns and anchoresses, women strictly enclosed, or

⁵⁹ Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe, 1200-1500*, 45-56.

“incarcerated” for several years in order to close themselves off from the secular world to focus more on God and the divine.⁶⁰ Both women also experienced visions of Christ, believing that they had personal relationships with Him. Of greatest significance to this thesis, Christina of Markyate’s *Life* and Julian of Norwich’s *Showings* also show how both women modeled themselves after earlier holy women, as seen in the *Gilte Legende*, and like these early Christian holy women, gained agency through their religious convictions and experiences. In other words, for both Christina of Markyate and Julian of Norwich, they derived power and influence from the fact that they enclosed themselves, experienced visions, and modeled themselves after the lives of female saints.

Christina of Markyate

Christina of Markyate’s biography, recorded by a monk at St. Albans, recounts her extreme sufferings as she resisted the expectations of her family and devoted herself, as a virgin, to God’s service beginning when she was twelve years old. She was born in tenth century Huntingdon to wealthy local merchants and her original name was Theodora, later changed to Christina to reflect her holiness. Rather than allowing her family to marry her off to a wealthy neighbor, Christina took a vow of chastity at the age of twelve and dedicated herself to a life serving Christ. Eventually, Christina fled her family and ran away to St. Albans, the same monastery where she made her earlier vow of chastity.⁶¹ From this point onward, Christina lived as a recluse: “someone who for

⁶⁰ E.A. Jones, “Hermits and Anchorites in Historical Context,” in *Approaching Medieval English and Anchoritic Texts*, ed. Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden, and Roger Ellis, Christianity and Culture: Issues in Teaching and Research (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 8.

⁶¹ Leyser and Fanous, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 34.

reasons of religious asceticism has chosen to live an enclosed life, alone or at the most with one or two companions.”⁶²

While the stories of the early Christian holy women after whom Christina models herself, such as St. Christina of Tyre and St. Dorothy, are found in the *Gilte Legende*, that text was not written down until the late thirteenth century, well after Christina’s death. Christina and her biographer would have been familiar with many of these earlier holy women through popular sermons, which communicated biblical stories and the lives of early saints to teach Christian beliefs. Because St. Christine and St. Dorothy are mentioned in some of these sermons, it indicates that Christina and her biographer were familiar enough with these women to incorporate themes from their stories into Christina’s own *Life*.⁶³

From the beginning of her hagiographical account, Christina’s life seems modeled after her sainted predecessors. *The Life of Christina of Markyate* actually begins before Christina’s birth, during her mother’s pregnancy. Christina’s mother, Beatrix, reportedly saw a white dove approach her from the direction of the Augustinian priory of St. Mary’s in Huntingdon. Not only this, but the dove appeared between the Feast of the Assumption and the Nativity of Our Lady, the time of the liturgical year when the Virgin Mary is the focus of devotion. According the author of Christina’s *Life*, this early evidence of divine favor pointed to the fact that Christina would enjoy special protection and favor with the Virgin Mary for the rest of her life:

⁶² Ibid., viii.

⁶³ British Library MS Harley 2321 sermon 001. Salisbury 103 sermon 003. *A Repertorium of Middle English Prose Sermons*, 1224-2276.

she would be taught by the example and strengthened by the protection of the Blessed Mary, ever virgin, that she would be holy in mind and body, and that by detaching herself from those things which are of the world she would find peace in the contemplation of things above.⁶⁴

Other women in the *Gilte Legende* are also vindicated and preserved through divine intervention. For instance, St. Christina of Tyre, a fictional saint based on St. Christina of Bolsena, came from a prosperous Roman family and converted to Christianity against the wishes of her pagan family, fighting to preserve her virginity, even when two prominent judges try to force themselves on her.⁶⁵ St. Dorothy, like St. Christina, chose marriage to Christ over marriage to a local man. Her wealthy family tries to tempt her into marriage, but ultimately fails because Dorothy considers herself married to Christ.⁶⁶

Many of the early Christian women in the *Gilte Legende* converted to Christianity expressly against the wishes of their parents. This mirrors how Christina made religious vows as a child, against the wishes and aspirations of her parents, specifically, her mother, Beatrix. Christina's father plays a limited role in her *Life*, it is her mother who appears to orchestrate her marriage and punishments. After Christina's initial refusal to marry Beorhtred, both of her parents work to convince her to marry, giving her presents before resorting to threatening her. Once the physical violence against her person begins, Beatrix is clearly in charge,

although her whole household and the rest of her kin...her father Auti outdid everyone in this regard, while he himself was outclassed by the maiden's mother...her mother Beatrix, with God's permission but at the instigation of the devil, gave free reign to her fury against her own daughter, neglecting no form of

⁶⁴ Leyser and Fanous, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 3.

⁶⁵ Tracy, *Women of the Gilte Legende*, 28-30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-39.

evil that she thought might harm her integrity...she persecuted her with unheard-of cruelty, sometimes openly, sometimes secretly.⁶⁷

Christina is not the only woman in the *Life* to exercise agency. Her mother Beatrix is credited with much of the actions against her, taking initiative without consulting her husband. This paints a very different picture of the submissive, medieval wife. Instead, Beatrix leads her family's efforts to force Christina into marriage, despite Christina's desire to marry herself to Christ.

Thus, during her childhood, Christina attempted to dedicate herself to God in the same way the women in the *Gilte Legende* had done. Moreover, the monks at the monastery of St. Albans impressed the young Christina with their piety and discipline, convincing her to also devote herself to Christ. Her *Life* claims that Christina scratched the sign of the cross in the door of the church to signify her devotion to Christ and the importance of the monastery in her life. Clearly, her positive experience with the clergy at St. Albans was enough to offset her very unpleasant experience with Ranulf, the bishop of Durham who attempted to rape Christina and then tried to marry her off to a young nobleman, Beorhtred, as revenge for her refusal to consent. This marks the beginning of Christina's suffering, as it leads to her tumultuous relationship with her mother.⁶⁸ Throughout all of her suffering at her family's hands, however, Christina like her predecessors from the *Gilte Legende* remained adamant about her desire to live religiously. By refusing to submit to her family's demands and escaping them in order to pursue that lifestyle, Christina demonstrated a great amount of agency. She disavowed all of her family's expectations to follow Christ. But the type of agency she displayed

⁶⁷ Leyser and Fanous, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 9-24.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-8.

did not stand-alone; it was built on the solid foundation of the lives of other holy women whose own experiences now empowered Christina.

The messages Christina received in her visions convinced her that Christ and the Virgin Mary would protect her from any dangers she might face from her parents or her betrothed, Beorhtred. Christina's visions, beginning after she made her religious vow at age twelve, then acted like a catalyst, giving her the power to exercise her own agency to run away from home in pursuit of the religious life she wanted. Women in the *Gilte Legende* did the same thing as Christina, drawing on their faith to give them the strength to refuse their family's demands. Saint Christina and Saint Dorothy in the *Gilte Legende*, both chose violent deaths rather than be forced into unwanted marriages. Like them, Christina continually refused to submit to the pressures of her family, even though they subjected her to horrible treatments. Saint Christina of Tyre, loosely based on the eastern Saint Christina of Bolsena, was martyred after refusing sexual advances by two judges during the reign of Diocletian (c. 247). Saint Dorothy lived shortly after Saint Christina, but was martyred for refusing marriage to a local noble.⁶⁹ These are just two examples of women from the *Gilte Legende* who bear a strong resemblance to Christina of Markyate. Others include St. Perpetua and St. Felicity, a Roman noblewoman and slave respectively, were also martyred for their Christian faith. St. Perpetua received visions of her heavenly ascent before she died.⁷⁰ But there are other connections between Christina and earlier holy women. Christina was originally named Theodora, meaning “gift of

⁶⁹ Tracy, *Women of the Gilte Legende*, 27-33.

⁷⁰ Jacobus De Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 728-729.

God,” but later changed her name to reflect her devotion to Christ and possibly in the spirit of earlier holy women, for example St. Christina. The name Christina means “follower of Christ.”⁷¹ However, the fact that she changed her name from Theodora could suggest that her biographer was attempting to create an allegory of her life, referencing other early Christian women. In the *Gilte Legende*, St. Theodora is offered presents by a wealthy man who attempts to seduce her, the same way Christina was offered presents by Bishop Ranulf and Beorhtred.⁷² If Christina was responsible for changing her name from Theodora, this demonstrates her possible knowledge of earlier holy women, even before the *Gilte Legende* was published. If not, it certainly suggests that her biographer was familiar with those women and sought to place Christina within that same tradition. Regardless, by mirroring herself on earlier women, Christina places herself within the tradition of women who exercised agency to escape their family’s expectations to follow a religious life.

Even though Christina’s story is her own, the women her *Life* draws upon and helps illustrate how devout women throughout the history of Christianity use their faith to achieve their goals, and that women gain a strong sense of power and agency through religious stories. Women in the *Gilte Legende* are not the only women mentioned in Christina’s *Life*. Christina relates to Beorhtred the story of Saint Cecilia and her husband, Valerian, both of whom were martyred for their faith after living in a chaste marriage. At this point in her life, Christina attempted to convince Beorhtred to live chastely, should

⁷¹ Leyser and Fanous, “Christina of Markyate: The Introduction,” iii.

⁷² Leyser and Fanous, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 7-9; Tracy, *Women of the Gilte Legende*, 89-93. Leyser and Fanous, “Christina of Markyate: The Introduction,” 3.

she unsuccessfully dissolve her engagement. Historian Thomas Head argues that there were several similar stories Christina could have told Beorhtred. For example, the St. Alban's Psalter, composed for Christina later in her life, contains *The Life of St. Alexis*, a Norman saint imported to England, who possibly reminded the monks at St. Albans of Christina's earlier struggles.⁷³ Historians suggest that St. Albans may have been the first source for *The Life of St. Alexis*, and appropriate story similar to Christina's own life. St. Alexis lived in Rome during the reigns of the emperors Arcadius and Honorius. He fled from his home on his wedding night, pledging to rid himself of his worldly possessions and live as a follower of Christ.⁷⁴ This 'plot structure' of early saints giving away their possessions and dedicating their lives to Christ is not uncommon in hagiography. Christina's *Life*, therefore, does not directly follow the life of any particular female virgin saint, but rather, the similarities between herself and other women, are highlighted in such a way as to make Christina appear higher and holier than her surroundings.

While her story is similar to those in the *Gilte Legende*, Christina's *Life* makes a unique departure from those earlier women in that her biographer shows her experiencing sexual temptation and her story depends heavily on her interactions with men. Even though she cuts herself off from the secular world, Christina's story relies on her relationships with at least six men, all of whom influence her development as a mystic, either by sexually tempting her or by encouraging her spiritual growth.

⁷³ Thomas Head, "The Marriages of Christina of Markyate," *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (New York: Routledge, 2005), 122.

⁷⁴ Rachel Bullington, *The Alexis in the Saint Albans Psalter: A Look into the Heart of the Matter* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991), 85-90.

All six of these relationships are more detailed than the relationships women have with men in the *Gilte Legende*, but they also serve to provide a detailed description of Christina's agency. Not only does she share qualities with early Christian holy women, but her faith and visions allow her to demonstrate agency in all aspects of her life. Her faith in the legitimacy of her visions gives her the power to neglect her family's wishes for her marriage and leave home in pursuit of a religious life, and the spiritual authority she gains over time because of her visions allows her to build relationships with men that might otherwise be closed to her had she followed her family's wishes and married. Regardless of how those relationships are perceived, Christina's biographer makes it clear that by the end of her life, Christina was well respected for her visions and sought after as a spiritual counselor and guide. In that respect, she was very similar to Julian of Norwich, who was also sought after as a spiritual guide as a result of her life as an anchoress and her mystical visions.

After making her religious vows, Christina met Ranulf, the Bishop of Durham, through her aunt Ælfgifu, his concubine. Christina's relationship with the Bishop of Durham revolves around the fact that he attempted to rape her and she outsmarted him, resulting in his attempting to force her to marry a local nobleman, Beorhtred.⁷⁵ Much to her mother's chagrin, Christina convinces Beorhtred to live in a chaste marriage, allowing her to keep her vow of chastity. Although Christina's hagiographer claims that Christina's relationship with Roger the Hermit was purely spiritual, there are sexual undertones to the portion of her *Life* dedicated to that part of her story, "affection grew like a large flame springing from two burning brands joined together" and both were

⁷⁵ Ibid., 7-8.

conscious of the scandal that would arise if it were known that they lived together.⁷⁶ The last man who represents a serious threat to Christina's virginity is an unnamed cleric, with whom she lived following the death of Roger the Hermit. Christina and this cleric experience desire, but Christina refuses to act upon it. In fact, her biographer credits her with acting more like a man than the cleric because of her discipline.⁷⁷

As a child, Christina met the Canon Sueno, an older man whose conversations with Christina inspired both of them to deepen their faiths. When Christina made her vow of chastity at age twelve, Sueno was the only person she told. Sueno's reputation for illicit relationships with young women seemed to overshadow any spiritual guidance he gave to Christina, at least in the eyes of the surrounding community.⁷⁸ But Christina's hagiographer insists that Sueno served only as a spiritual guide for Christina, supporting her turn to religious life and confirming the legitimacy of her early visions. After running away from home, she lives for several years with a hermit named Roger, experiencing the physical torment of living in hiding, "cold and heat, hunger and thirst, daily fasting!"⁷⁹ Like all of Christina's previous interactions with men, there are several sexual undertones in her biographer's description of her life with Roger. Christina and this cleric experience desire, but Christina refuses to act upon it. In fact, her biographer credits her with acting more like a man than the cleric.⁸⁰ The final relationship recorded by her biographer chronicles her friendship with the Abbot Geoffrey at St. Albans. More so than any of her

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁸ Leyser and Fanous, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 4-6.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 46.

previous experiences, this relationship appears more platonic, with Christina serving as his spiritual teacher and almost as a mother, admonishing him when he sins. In this respect, Christina's mentorship of Abbot Geoffrey mirrors a moral formal love and allows mainly for his spiritual growth, placing Christina in the position of mentor.⁸¹ In this respect, Christina's relationship with Abbot Geoffrey parallels the guidance later anchoresses received from the *Ancrene Wisse*.

Christina's religious agency is empowered by the male and female religious in her life, who support her when she finally has the opportunity to run away from her family. Although the decision to live religiously is her own, Christina would not have lived out her chosen vocation without the help of other spiritual leaders in her community. When Christina, first ran away from home, she lived as an anchoress with a woman named Ælfynn, a hermit living at Flamstead, thirty miles from Christina's home. She lived there for two years before she forced to take shelter with Roger the Hermit.⁸² As soon as Christina successfully evaded her parents, her life was governed by strict religious rules and under the constant threat of discovery. Upon arriving at Flamstead, Christina,

now put on a rough garment as her religious habit. Hidden out of sight in a very uncomfortable chamber, hardly large enough on account of its narrowness to house her...[but] her concealment...irritated the devil...In order to terrify the holy maiden of Christ, toads invaded her prison to distract her by all kinds of ugliness.⁸³

⁸¹ C. Stephen. Jaeger, "The Loves of Christina of Markyate," in ed. Fanous and Leyser, *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Holy Woman*, 111.

⁸² Leyser and Fanous, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 34-41.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

The men and women who helped Christina escape her parents and betrothed also helped Christina exercise her agency. By supporting her, they gave her the opportunity to live out a religious life. Unlike contemporary holy women who chose reclusive lives, like Ælfwynn and the other “anchorites of Huntingdon,” Christina only became an anchoress out of the necessity of avoiding her parents and husband.⁸⁴ Even though these circumstances were forced upon her rather than freely chosen, Christina’s spiritual development accelerated during the years she lived as an anchoress. According to her biographer, the extreme living conditions were conducive to her visions and she received more of them and understood them better during this time.⁸⁵ Christina’s visions are unique, ultimately because they stem from her experiences with people and her living conditions. Her faith, and ultimately her agency, were influenced by the romantic and spiritual love she felt for the men and women she encountered both personally and through religious sermons as well as popular religious beliefs of the twelfth century.⁸⁶

This combination of factors demonstrates that Christina’s actual life and her spiritual *Life* recorded by her biographer were based on the experiences of early Christian holy women and Christina’s own experiences during her lifetime. Her *Life* was consciously modeled after the lives of earlier women. In return, her *Life* influenced later holy women, such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. Christina’s visions qualify as mystic experiences because in them, she interacts with Christ and the Virgin Mary, often playing a key role in biblical stories. Her religious practices are reminiscent of

⁸⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Riehle, *The Secret Within*, 12.

Cistercian beliefs.⁸⁷ She shares these elements in common with later English mystics, such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. For example, the tears Margery Kempe become infamous for are seen in Christina's *Life*, when Sueno hears of Christina's upcoming marriage to Beorhtred and accuses her of wanting out of her vow of virginity,

She was struck with profound grief and set quite rigid and still for so long that you would have thought she was not a living person but an image carved in marble. Heaving deep sighs, she broke into a flood of tears. Sobs punctuated her laments, as over and over again she bewailed her lot as the most wretched of orphans.⁸⁸

Throughout her life, Christina experienced three types of visions: ecstatic, where she experienced intense feelings of passion by the mere presence of God who was often imageless; consolatory, where she dreamed of promises of divine help; and prophetic, where she saw directly into the future.⁸⁹ Christina's ecstatic visions often took place while she quietly contemplated the existence of God. One example in *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, records her "so rapt that, unaware of earthly things, she gave herself to the contemplation of the countenance of her creator."⁹⁰ Christina's consolatory visions begin while she is still living with her family. Christ sends the Virgin Mary to rescue and comfort his bride during her torment.⁹¹ The final type of vision, prophetic, provides Christina with a glimpse of her spiritual future and comforts her through her trials.⁹² All of Christina's visions and experiences contributed to the amount of agency

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Leyser and Fanous, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 14.

⁸⁹ Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, 54.

⁹⁰ Leyser and Fanous, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 65.

⁹¹ Ibid., 25.

⁹² Ibid., 37.

she took for herself during her lifetime. She followed in the footsteps of the female martyrs in the *Gilte Legende*, refusing to obey her family's plans for her and determining to devote herself to religious contemplation, while at the same time, lived earlier than most mystics, but shared many qualities with them. In regards to her visions of the divine as well as her reclusive lifestyle, she clearly foreshadows the late female mystic Julian of Norwich.

Julian of Norwich

Outside of her religious writings, very little is actually known about Julian of Norwich's life. In fact, the name "Julian" comes from the church of St. Julian where she was enclosed as an anchoress and is most likely not her real name. Unlike Christina who consciously recorded (or had recorded) the moment when she decided to change her name, Julian is always referred to as 'Julian.' She does not ever explain how she came to be called this or whether she made the choice to change her name. Scholars speculate that she was born c. 1342 because in her writings, she states that she was thirty years old when she received her visions on May 8, 1373. When she was approximately thirty years old, she suffered a near fatal illness, after which she wrote "A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman," commonly known among scholars as the "Short Text." She revised the "Short Text" as "A Revelation of Love" later in her life, more commonly known as the "Long Text." Together, these texts make up *Showings*. "A Revelation of Love," written in 1393 provides a more in depth look at the revelations in the first writing, which Julian explains she did not understand at the time. By writing down her visions and her interpretations of

them, Julian exercised her agency, gaining an incredible amount of authority as a spiritual guide for people.

Unlike *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, a biographical account of an early mystic and anchoress' life, Julian of Norwich's writings include very little biographical data outside of her illness and her early desire to experience the physical suffering of Christ. Scholars agree that the name, Julian, most likely stems from the name of her church, but other than that, other knowledge about Julian is speculation based on her writings. For example, some scholars believe that Julian came from an aristocratic background, as evidenced by the "courtly ceremonial" which pervades her work, whereas others think she may have come from a merchant class family and received a more formal education, learning about theology and how to write, only after taking religious orders as a child.⁹³ Some go so far as to argue that Julian never actually became a nun, preferring only to live as an anchoress.⁹⁴ Regardless, the only information known with any certainty about Julian's life was that at age thirty, she experienced a near fatal illness, during which time she had mystical visions of Christ, which she later wrote down. If the Long Text is accurate in placing that illness in May 1373, then Julian was born in 1343. By living such an extremely aesthetic life, Julian's knowledge and wisdom has transcended her own life and influenced later Christians, most famously, Margery Kempe.

⁹³ Riehle, *The Secret Within*, 201. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, "Introduction", *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 20.

⁹⁴ C. Hugh Hildesley, *Journeying with Julian* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub, 1993), 83-84.

At the beginning of both texts, Julian describes how she prayed for “three graces by the gift of God” years before she actually got sick.⁹⁵ The first was to have recollection of Christ’s Passion. The second was a bodily sickness, and third was to have, of God’s gift, three wounds.”⁹⁶ In the first chapters of the Short Text, and then expanded upon in the Long Text, Julian recounts her illness, which she wished for as a means of understanding and appreciating Christ’s suffering for humanity. Thus the Short Text follows Julian’s experience and the immediate aftermath of these visions, while the Long Text is Julian’s interpretation and presentation of the theology behind the visions. Julian got sick when she was thirty years old for three days and nights, receiving Last Rites on the fourth night. According to the Long Text,

This revelation was made to a simple, unlettered creature, living in this mortal flesh, the year of our Lord one thousand, three hundred and seventy-three, on the thirteenth day of May. I agreed to fix my eyes on the face of the crucifix if I could, and so I did, for it seemed to me that I would hold out longer with my eyes set in front of me rather than upwards...Everything around the cross was ugly and terrifying to me, as if it were occupied by a great crowd of devils.⁹⁷

During this time she experienced her visions of Christ, which the remainder of her writings expand upon. This four-day period during her lifetime is the only part of her life chronicled by Julian, the rest remains conjecture by historians or inferences made based on outside sources. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery visits Julian sometime between 1400 and 1415.⁹⁸ Even so, those dates would make Julian an old woman by the

⁹⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 125.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 179-180.

⁹⁸ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, I, ch. 18, 76-81. Hildesley, *Journeying with Julian*, 85.

time Margery came to visit her. Another anchoress, Julian Lampet, took over the cell in 1426, suggesting that Julian of Norwich died sometime before that date.⁹⁹ This is the only information available to really provide any detailed account of Julian's life outside of her visions.

Unlike Christina of Markyate, whose time as an anchoress seemed driven by necessity, Julian's experience was more formalized. Based on the guidelines for anchoresses laid out in the *Ancrene Wisse*, Julian lived a very rigid lifestyle after swearing obedience, chastity, and stability of abode before enclosing herself.¹⁰⁰ Upon entering her enclosure, a priest performed a requiem mass before she entered the cell, symbolizing her death to the secular world and her entrance to the spiritual world.¹⁰¹ Everyday from the time of her enclosure until her death, Julian strictly followed her prescribed Rule. Scholars believe that the degree to which Julian followed that set Rule and the presence of servants to help her further suggests that she came from a wealthy background.

In total, Julian experienced sixteen revelations from God through the visions she had while she was ill. These visions are the basis for her unique theology and the authority she had as a powerful mystic. Her first nine revelations focus on Christ's Passion whereas the final seven focus on God's happiness after Christ's suffering is over and how God and the Trinity love humanity unconditionally, regardless of sin. In addition to her visions, the presence of Julian's mother throughout the duration of her illness mirrors the Virgin Mary's presence at Christ's crucifixion. Both mothers were

⁹⁹ Hildesley, *Journeying with Julian*, 87.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

helpless to stop the pain of their children; all the while understanding it's significance.¹⁰²

Introducing the presence of a mother figure in her Short Text, Julian heavily expands upon the role of motherhood in the later chapters of the Long Text, going so far as to portray Christ as the ultimate mother for humanity.

Julian's theology is unique from her contemporaries in that she emphasizes God's unconditional love and pity for humanity rather than humanity's innate sinfulness. Her most famous explanation is found in chapter fifty-one of the Long Text, following her explanation of the fourteenth revelation. She sets up an allegory or parable of a lord and his servant. All the while knowing that the physical bodies of the lord and servant mirror Christ and Adam, where Adam is synonymous with all mankind. In the parable, the lord sends his servant out to complete some task, which the servant joyfully agrees to undertake. Unfortunately, the servant is severely injured on his journey and unable to move or help himself. Even though his lord found him and offered compassion, the servant was physically and spiritually blinded by his pain and humiliation. But, as Julian points out, the Lord never wavers in his love for mankind and waits patiently when that love will be realized,

For in all this our good Lord showed his own Son and Adam as only one man. The strength and the goodness that we have is from Jesus Christ, the weakness and the blindness that we have is from Adam, which two are shown in the servant. And so has our good Lord Jesus taken upon him all our blame; and therefore our father may not, does not wish to assign more blame to us than to his own beloved Son Jesus Christ. So he was the servant before he came on earth, standing ready

¹⁰² Liz Herbert McAvoy, "'And Thou, to Whom This Booke Shall Come': Julian of Norwich and Her Audience, Past, Present, and Future," in *Approaching Medieval English and Anchoritic Texts*, ed. Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden, and Roger Ellis, Christianity and Culture: Issues in Teaching and Research (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 108.

in purpose before the Father until the time when he would send him to do the glorious deed by which mankind was brought back to heaven.¹⁰³

The subsequent chapters of the Long Text focus the figure of Christ, and placing Him within the holy Trinity. Christ knows the sinful nature of humanity, but gives unconditional love and pity for everyone.

That unconditional love and pity transitions to another component of Julian's theology, that of Christ as a mother. While the discussion of Christ's role as a mother originally ended during the fifth century, St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Anselm of Canterbury both revisited that argument. Through her own writings, Julian takes that explanation of Christ's role in the Trinity even further, arguing that Christ is the mother of all humanity.¹⁰⁴ In chapter sixty of the Long Text, Julian describes three ways Christ resembles any mother. First, Christ suffered and bled for humanity that same way a mother suffers and bleeds giving birth to a child. Second, Christ nourishes humanity with his body through the holy sacrament the way a mother nourishes her own children with her body. And finally, Christ loves and protects humanity that same way a mother loves and protects her children.¹⁰⁵ But where a mother pulls a child to her breast, Christ draws humanity into the wound in his side, offering "a foretaste of his divinity and heavenly bliss."¹⁰⁶ Julian literally views Christ as the mother of all humanity, responsible for

¹⁰³ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, LT, ch. 51, 275.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 295. Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1992), 152.

¹⁰⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 298.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. Riehle, *The Secret Within*, 207.

nurturing humanity and forgiving humanity's sinfulness.¹⁰⁷ If above all else Christ is a mother to humanity, a traditional female role, Julian also argues for the superiority of motherhood above other occupations and a mother's equality with a father,

As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother, and he revealed that in everything, and especially in these sweet words where he says: I am he; that is to say: I am he, the power and goodness of fatherhood; I am he, the wisdom and the lovingness of motherhood...I understand three ways of contemplating motherhood in God. The first is the foundation of our nature's creation; the second is his taking our nature, where motherhood of grace begins; the third is the motherhood at work. And in that, by the same grace, everything is penetrated, in length and in breadth, in height and in depth without end; and it is all one love.¹⁰⁸

Using this definition of Christ's relationship to humanity, women as mothers can take on the role of guiding their family's to the path of salvation. By extension, this idea gives women an equal role to men in society, if both the first and second persons of the Trinity are equally male and female. However, this principle is not completely original to Julian. Women throughout the *Gilte Legende* take on spiritual roles, finding their own ways to salvation and connecting to Christ on a personal level without the aid of men. As a result, Julian's writings show many similarities to these earlier women.

There are examples of early anchoresses found in the *Gilte Legende*, women who became "anchors" of the early Church and repented for their sins in such an extreme way. For instance, the story of St. Thais shows a young prostitute who understood the nature of sin and repented when confronted by a holy man, Payne. He commanded her to burn all of her possessions and to give away all of her wealth before enclosing herself in a tiny cell for the space of three years as penance for her sins. Thais accepted this punishment

¹⁰⁷ Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*, 143-144.

¹⁰⁸ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, LT. ch. 59. 295-297.

and lived only fifteen days after her release, but was absolved of her sin and welcomed into heaven.¹⁰⁹ Like Julian, St. Thais was given a cell with a small cell, from which she could receive food, but other than that, St. Thais' life was much harsher. The rules governing anchoresses set out in the *Ancrene Wisse* "actively discouraged flagellation and wearing hair-shirts for penance, and does not envision sanitation requirements."¹¹⁰ The fact that St. Thais consciously chose to accept her punishment, unlike the prostitute at the end of her story who does not repent her lifestyle, demonstrates her agency. Her understanding of her faith led her to dispose of her earthly wealth to find favor with God. Thus her redemption came from her own actions, and were not the result of the Abbot Payne, who merely reminded her of her sinful nature and provided her with the means to achieve her redemption.

When Abbot Payne goes to St. Anthony for advice on whether or not to release Thais from her cell, St. Anthony's disciple, Paul, sees a vision of three virgins representing Thais' repentance and redemption for her sins. While he initially thinks this vision occurs because of St. Anthony's presence, "a heavenly voice was heard saying that it was not by the merits of Anthony but by the merits of Thais, a sinful woman."¹¹¹ Thais' prayers and repentance brought about her redemption, not the influence of a holy man. St. Thais' gained power because of her actions, and this was recognized by heaven as legitimate. Even the men in the story acknowledge her merit by the end of their meeting, understanding that Thais has been redeemed by God based on her own conviction and commitment.

¹⁰⁹ Tracy, *Women of the Gilte Legende*, 82-84.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

Although Julian of Norwich is definitely not a reformed prostitute, the agency she gained from her position as an anchoress is very similar to St. Thais' position. Julian is widely respected for her decision to enter such an austere existence. As a result, people turn to her for spiritual advice and guidance; for example, Margery Kempe's visit c. 1415. Like St. Thais, Julian made the conscious decision to become an anchoress, renouncing everything in the world to devote herself to the contemplation of God. Julian and Thais make that decision themselves, only aided in their actions by male spiritual advisors. St. Thais' hagiographer makes it clear that Thais had to be the one to make decide her spiritual future,

She is aware of her position and accepts the opportunity for salvation that is presented to her. Her silence becomes her form of expression because...not every common woman is as open to redemption as Thais, and not every holy man can bring it about. This episode takes the responsibility out of Payne's hands and places it firmly in hers.¹¹²

This episode puts women in charge of finding their own paths to salvation, showing that women do not need to rely on men's intervention to be saved, but rather their own initiative.

Julian's theology is unique for her time, and her emphasis on Christ's role as a mother to humanity could have offended some people within the Church, but she uses her advantage as an anchoress and mystic to lend credibility to her arguments proves how strong her agency was. Evidence of this is clearly found at the beginning of the Short Text, when Julian exclaims,

God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not and never was my intention; for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail. But I know

¹¹² Tracy, *Women of the Gilte Legende*, 81.

very well that what I am saying have received by the revelation of him who is the sovereign teacher.¹¹³

Teachings of the Church warned against women preaching and passages in the *Ancrene Wisse* also guarded against female anchoresses preaching based on their experiences and reputations; for instance, St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.¹¹⁴ But regardless of her own warning, Julian continues to share her revelations with people and includes her own theology in the Long Text, suggesting that either she enjoyed such a strong reputation or she was confident enough in her revelations that she could preach safely.

Unlike Christina of Markyate, who reportedly experienced visions throughout her lifetime, Julian's visions center around her illness when she was thirty. *Showings* is her attempt to understand and explain her visions to a wider audience. A lot of her explanations of her Revelation discuss Christ as a mother, the source of all love. For example, in chapter fifty-nine of the Long Text, Julian claims,

So Jesus Christ, who opposes good to evil, is our true Mother. We have our being from him, where the foundation of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love which endlessly flows...And so Jesus is our true Mother in nature by our first creation, and he is our true Mother in grace by his taking our created nature. All the lovely works and all the sweet loving offices of beloved motherhood are appropriated to the second person.¹¹⁵

The maternal language she uses stems from the writings of St. Anselm of Canterbury and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the same medieval theologians who helped define mysticism

¹¹³ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, ST, ch. vi, 135.

¹¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:34. Joan M Nuth, *God's Lovers in an Age of Anxiety: The Medieval English Mystics* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2001), 105-106.

¹¹⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, LT ch. 59, 295-296.

centuries earlier.¹¹⁶ In addition to these similarities, Christina of Markyate and Julian of Norwich both draw on the examples of early holy women. These actions provide context within which Christina and Julian both receive their visions. Early holy women found in the *Gilte Legende* demonstrated their agency through their conscious choices to reject the secular world in order to pursue a religious life. Christina and Julian did the same, but the extremes to which they took their faiths and their consequent experiences gave them greater agency than the religious women who came before them. Margery Kempe, a contemporary of Julian's, was a mystic, but unlike Christina and Julian, never became an anchoress. Her experiences differ dramatically in that she lived in the secular world her entire life, was married with children, and the sometimes-extreme forms which her visions took.

¹¹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.), 111-112. Julian of Norwich, 8-10.

CHAPTER THREE

Margery Kempe

Perhaps most noted for her excessive tears whenever she contemplated Christ, Margery Kempe first received her tears on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem,

When she saw the crucifix, or if she saw a man had a wound, or a beast...or if a man beat a child before her...she thought she saw our Lord being beaten or wounded ...When she first had her cryings at Jerusalem, she had them often, and in Rome also...just as God would visit her with them, sometimes in church, sometimes in the street, sometimes in her chamber, sometimes in the fields...And they never came without surpassingly great sweetness of devotion and high contemplation.¹¹⁷

Not only did Margery exhibit visible, and often noisy, manifestations of her mysticism, but she experienced these manifestations while traveling and interacting with people throughout Europe. Margery, a contemporary of Julian of Norwich's, differs greatly from Julian and Christina of Markyate in most respects. She actively participated in the world rather than becoming an anchoress, living as a vowess, a third order religious woman, and not attached to a specific order. Thus her agency differs from Christina of Markyate and Julian of Norwich because she does not close herself away in order to contemplate God; rather, she lives actively in the world, seeking out the holiest people and places. However, all three women are similar in that they all believe their spiritual authority comes from God, giving them no option other than to share their experiences and wisdom with the world. Like Phyllis Mack argues, the spiritual agency gained by these actions exceeds any agency they could have had by remaining members of the laity.

¹¹⁷ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, I, ch. 28, 105.

This is particularly evident in Margery's life because instead of inferring her alternative lifestyle had she not pursued a religious life, she experienced life as a layperson for the majority of her life, only fully devoting herself to Christ after the births of all of her children. From Margery's own accounts, she had far greater freedom and agency as a vowess than she ever had as a wife and mother.¹¹⁸

After making all of her pilgrimages and gaining a better understanding of her visions and tears, Margery had her *Book* recorded c. 1436, the first autobiography in English. The religious agency that she experienced is clearly articulated within her book. For instance, after deciding to travel alone to Europe, Margery asks,

If there were any man or woman who claimed any debt against her husband or her, they should come and speak with her before she went, and she, with God's help, would settle up with each of them so that they would hold themselves content. And so she did.¹¹⁹

Margery's inspiration for traveling alone comes from her visions from God. These visions and God's promises to her consequently give her the authority to conduct financial and business matters on behalf of herself and her husband. Perhaps Margery's agency is best seen when she bargains with her husband to release her from her marital obligations so she can live as a vowess,

And then our Lord Jesus Christ with great sweetness spoke to this creature, commanding her to go again to her husband and pray him to grant her what she desired. Then this creature thanked our Lord Jesus Christ for his grace and his goodness, and afterwards got up and went to her husband... Then her husband replied to her, 'May your body be as feely available to God as it has been to me.'¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Ibid., I, ch. 1-16.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., I, ch. 26, 96.

¹²⁰ Ibid., I, ch. 11, 59-60.

She effectively translates the spiritual authority she received from God into sexual and financial authority over her husband.

Margery Kempe's 'Life'

The Book of Margery Kempe is both a godsend and conundrum. It is through this book that we learn about the remarkable life of Margery Kempe. Yet the book itself is problematic. In the Prologue that prefaces her *Book* and at the end of Book I, Margery explains how she dictated her book to a local priest after the described events took place, indicating her illiteracy. However, that copy was so difficult to read that the manuscript had to be recopied at an even later date.¹²¹ This put into question the authenticity of her story because it was recorded by at least two male chroniclers, who may not have recorded her story verbatim or may not have agreed with her descriptions of her visions. All the same though, whether Margery Kempe 'authored' the words herself, her story is so remarkable that it seems unlikely to have been invented by the male chroniclers. At worst (or best?), it is filtered through masculine pens. A very unique woman, however, still emerges through this filtered (possibly heavily so) text. Moreover, the very issue of Margery's incapacity to write her book herself highlights another issue of great import for this thesis: how Margery gained a spiritual education. Margery's *Book* is filled with references to women found in prose sermons and the *Gilte Legende*, combined with her well-informed debates with leading political and religious leaders. When Margery visited Rome during one of her pilgrimages, she spoke to a priest who did not speak English, "told him in her own language, in English, a story of Holy Writ, which she had learned

¹²¹ Ibid., I, ch. 89, 260-261.

from clerics while she was at home in England, for she would not talk of any vanity or fantasies.”¹²² These episodes indicate that, somehow, Margery had a thorough understanding of theology. Evidence from the book suggests that she gained her religious knowledge from people reading books to her, from listening to sermons, and from conversations with clergy. It also shows her holiness because she is able to effectively communicate with a man who does not understand English.¹²³

Overall, *The Book of Margery Kempe* recounts her spiritual journey, not her life. The *Book* chronicles her life only from the time after the birth of her first child, when she suffered severe postpartum depression, and continues only sporadically to mention life events when they connect with moments of spiritual importance. For example, readers learn of the birth of Margery’s first child because it coincides with Margery’s first vision. Christ appeared to her when she was suffering from severe depression and madness as a man wearing purple silk and said to her,

Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I never forsook you? And as soon as he had said these words, she saw truly how the air opened as bright as any lightening, and he ascended up into the air, not hastily and quickly, but beautifully and gradually. And presently this creature grew as calm in her wits and her reason as she ever was before.¹²⁴

After Christ’s arrival, Margery makes an immediate recovery from her sickness. This marks the beginning of Margery Kempe’s unique, and definitely eccentric, mystical experience. For the most part, her experiences are characterized by her violent outbursts of emotions whenever she witnesses or contemplates Christ’s life or death both at home and while traveling abroad on pilgrimages.

¹²² Ibid., I, ch. 40, 134.

¹²³ Ibid., I, ch. 33, 118-119.

¹²⁴ Ibid., I, ch. 1, 42-43.

Unfortunately, because the *Book* focuses solely on Margery's spiritual experiences, concrete details about her life are often out of order. Understanding the timeline of Margery's experiences helps show how her agency augmented over time, particularly after she convinced her husband to let her travel alone. Margery married John Kempe c. 1393 when she was twenty years old. Within one year her first child was born, spurring her eight month long depression before Christ's appearance. Because Margery came from a prominent family and contributed to her family's income (even though her businesses often failed) she was able to make her husband agree to a chaste marriage after the births of her fourteen children and after she agreed to pay off all of his debts, an indication of Margery's financial superiority over her husband. In fact, that was the one condition he would not move on when she begged him to live chastely, " 'Sir, if you please, you shall grant me my desire, and you shall have your desire. Grant me that you will not come into my bed, and I will grant you that I will pay your debts before I go to Jerusalem' ." ¹²⁵ For the next several years, after John relinquished his marital rights to her, she traveled around England and Europe, meeting other holy people and visiting holy sites.

This marital and financial freedom allowed her to exercise her agency throughout Europe and the Holy Land. While on these journeys, Margery became notorious for her emotional outbursts, crying and wailing during sermons and mass services, whenever she contemplated Christ's life and Passion, such as when two priests took her to a church dedicated to St. Michael and she,

burst out in violent weeping and sobbing, and cried as loud, or else louder, than she did when she was amongst people...then the priests had the more

¹²⁵Ibid., I, ch. 11, 60.

faith that all was indeed well with her, when they heard her cry in out-of-the-way places as well as public places.¹²⁶

In addition to this small pilgrimage in England, some of her more famous pilgrimages include travels to Assisi, Rome, Santiago, and Aachen. Although she lived in a chaste marriage and spent years traveling outside of England, she put her pilgrimages on hold to nurse her ill husband until his death in 1431.¹²⁷ She describes her time nursing her husband as penance for previous sins,

She thought to herself how she in her young days had had very many delectable thoughts, physical lust, and inordinate love for his body. And therefore she was glad to be punished by means of the same body, and took it much the more easily, and served him and helped him, she thought, as she would have done Christ himself.¹²⁸

This explanation indicates that she still considered herself tied to her husband, even though she didn't see him for years at a time. While Margery wanted recognition for her spiritual beliefs and visions, she was still defined by her status as a wife, a status she tried to get around for much of her career.

A large focus of *The Book of Margery Kempe* centers on her pilgrimages across Europe and the Holy Land. Even though she was financially able to take care of herself on these journeys, her *Book* also portrays the difficulties a woman traveling alone faced. Accusations of her being a Lollard followed Margery throughout England, and she always faced the threat of physical violence against her person.¹²⁹ Not only does her *Book* highlight the accusations made against a mystic, but it demonstrates how difficult

¹²⁶ Ibid., I, ch. 83, 241.

¹²⁷ Ibid., II, ch. 2, 267-273.

¹²⁸ Ibid., I, ch. 76, 221.

¹²⁹ Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) 78.

religious life could be for a woman traveling alone. For example, when Margery is sent to the jailer's house in Leicester for safe-keeping, he

spoke many foul, lewd words to her, intending and desiring, as it seemed to her, to overcome her and rape her. And then she had great fear and great sorrow, begging him for mercy. [He] struggled with her, making filthy signs and giving her indecent looks, through which he frightened her so much.¹³⁰

Only Margery's confidence in her messages from the Holy Spirit convince the jailer to leave her alone, she claims,

that she told him how she had her speech and conversing from the Holy Ghost and not from her own knowledge. And then he, completely astonished at her words, left off his lewdness, saying to her as many a man had done before, 'Either you are truly a good woman or else a truly wicked woman,' and delivered her up again to her gaoler, and he led her home again with him.¹³¹

Not only does Margery face danger as a woman, but also as a pilgrim traveling alone.

On her journey to Bologne, Margery meets a fellow pilgrim named William Weaver and the two agree to travel together for mutual protection, suggesting that pilgrims traveling alone were particularly vulnerable to thieves and violent persons in foreign countries.¹³²

Considering all of the potential disasters that could have befallen her on her pilgrimages, Margery's agency takes on new meaning. Even though Margery willingly travels alone, should she have no other options, there are times in her *Book* when she appears prepared to suppress her religious impulses. Upon her immediate arrival in Bologne with William Weaver, she meets an old party she had previously traveled with, and is invited back into their group when they realize the apparent power of prayers in keeping pilgrims safe.

Margery accepts their offer, having a thorough understanding of the potential dangers

¹³⁰ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, I, ch. 47, 150-151.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., I, ch. 27, 100-101. Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 67.

facing her if she travels alone. After Margery was kicked out of her traveling group for her excessive piety, she was dependent on the goodwill of strangers to provide food, shelter, and safety for her. When she encounters William Weaver, he expresses his concern about his own welfare should he end up traveling alone if she is captured or arrested. Even though he is a man, there is still a great deal of danger for a man traveling alone in a foreign place,

‘Ma’am, will you ask me, for God’s love and for our Lady’s, to go with you and be your guide, since your fellow countrymen have forsaken you?’ And so the man and she went off together in great anxiety and gloom. As they went along together this man said to her, ‘I’m afraid you’ll be taken from me, and I’ll be beaten up because of you and lose my coat’.¹³³

Not only is there a certain amount of risk for pilgrims, whether male or female, but Margery’s eccentricity presents further danger because she is frequently isolated from groups traveling together. Before her companions on the way to Jerusalem left her,

Her confessor was displeased because she ate no meat, and so were many of her company. And they were most annoyed because she wept so much and spoke all the time about the love and goodness of our Lord, as much at table as in other places. And so they rebuked her shamefully and chided her harshly, and said they would not put up with her as her husband did when she was at home in England.¹³⁴

Part of what annoys her companions so much is her insistence on wearing white and refusal to partake in their feasting. In this manner, Margery aligns herself with early Christian female martyrs, who stood out as exemplars of their faith.

All of the holy women Margery referenced throughout her *Book* face some degree of physical danger, mirroring the threats Margery faces throughout her career, especially from men in authoritative positions who threaten them due to their religious convictions.

¹³³ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, I, ch. 27, 100-101.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, I, ch. 26, 97.

Margery's knowledge about the lives of holy women and the Bible form the foundation for her agency. First, it helps her navigate the dangers of being a woman traveling alone. Then provide some examples from the dangers presented above where Margery faces down the dangers with her defiance and religious conviction.

Second, Margery's knowledge about holy women allows her to interpret her visions and engage in conversations with leading religious figures. Towards the end of her *Book*, Margery experiences a vision of Christ where he explains to her many Christian doctrines and beliefs, including the Eucharist, the Trinity, and the importance of virgin saints such as St. Margaret and St. Catherine,

‘You also pray Katherine, Margaret, and all holy virgins to welcome me in your soul. And then you pray my blessed mother, Mary Magdalene, all apostles, martyrs, confessors, Katherine, Margaret, and all holy virgins, that they should decorate the chamber of your soul...so that I might rest there within.’¹³⁵

Much of Margery's knowledge came from popular sermons that she listened to.

Throughout her *Book* Margery references the number of sermons she listens to, showing how popular these sermons were with the masses. When a certain preacher arrives in Lynn, Margery intends to listen to him as often as she can, but her tears cause the friar to order her to leave,

if she came into any church where he was going to preach, and made any noise as she was used to do, he would speak out against her sharply – he would not allow her to cry in any way...For years she was not allowed to come to his sermons, because she cried so when it pleased out Lord to put her in mind...But she was not excluded from any other cleric's preaching, but only from the good friars.¹³⁶

Margery regularly listened to sermons throughout her life, and these sermons were filled with references to holy women. For instance, there are nine Middle English sermons still

¹³⁵ Ibid., I, ch. 86, 251.

¹³⁶ Ibid., I, ch. 61, 189-190.

extant that stem from late medieval England and were intended for popular preaching, which contain references to St. Catherine and seven similar sermons with references to St. Margaret.¹³⁷ The fact that both of these women were extremely popular female saints in sermons and that Margery was probably illiterate suggests that much of Margery's education came from popular sermons. Considering that many medieval sermons encouraged female expressions of piety, Margery's eccentric modes of expression appear less extreme, and more within a proper context. It appears that several sermons emphasized the role tears could play in a woman's repentance for sin. Three sermons in Bodleian Library MS Greaves 54 approve of tears as a sign on repentance and contrition in women. The last sermon of Easter

Describes how the 'three Marys' arrived at the tomb on Easter morning to anoint the body of Christ. Because of their sorrow and penitent hearts, 'Mary Magdalene, Mary Jacob, and Mary Salome' represent 'every true penitent soul that is out of deadly sin.'...true penitents should bring ointment of confession, the ointment of sweetness (the ability to resist sinning), and the ointment of heartfelt devotion and tears...Mary Magdalene displayed this ointment when she 'sorrowed, wailed, and wept for her sins.'¹³⁸

Because Margery saw most of her earlier life as sinful, tears appear the natural recourse for her repentance and redemption. This practice also proves that Margery modeled her expression on the examples of women in sermons, like Mary Magdalene.¹³⁹

In her discussion of early Christian holy women, Larissa Tracy ranks holy women into four categories: holy virgins, holy mothers, repentant sinners, and holy

¹³⁷ V. M. O'Mara and Suzanne Paul, *A Repertorium of Middle English Prose Sermons*, 4 vols., Sermo, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007).

¹³⁸ Beth Allison Barr, "'sche Hungryd Ryth Sor Aftyr Goddys Word': Female Piety and the Legacy of the Pastoral Programme in the Late Medieval English Sermons of Bodleian Library MS Greaves 54: Female Piety and Bodleian Library MS Greaves 54," *Journal of Religious History* 39, no. 1 (March 2015): 31–50, doi:10.1111/1467-9809.12140, 6-17.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

transvestites.¹⁴⁰ Since Margery was already married with at least one child when her visions began, life as a holy virgin was clearly not an option, but she spent the next several years of her life attempting to convince her husband to live chastely. She only succeeded after giving birth to fourteen total children. From that point, *The Book of Margery Kempe* focuses on Margery's spiritual experiences, detailing the people she met and places she went on her spiritual journey. But as a result of these descriptions, she also provides a clear picture of her agency. Rather than focusing on the physical locales she visited or descriptions of the people she met, Margery emphasizes her spiritual growth and understanding. In this respect, Margery understood her religious experiences as the source of her agency. Her visions and conversations with Christ gave her permission and the authority to travel alone and preach the word of God.

Much of Margery's religious experience centers on the veneration of holy virgins and those women directly involved in some aspect of Christ's life, for example, Mary Magdalene. Scholars believe that Margery's knowledge of scripture and hagiography come from popular sermons because of the way she explains her understanding of these subjects mirrors texts of those sermons and stories, including, the *Gilte Legende*.¹⁴¹ In fact, Margery selects certain holy women and saints to use in her *Book* because they share various characteristics with her, whether spiritually or in their life experiences. Mary Magdalene's biography in the *Gilte Legende* combines the stories of three different women from the Bible, "the witness to Christ's Resurrection; the sinful woman who

¹⁴⁰ Larissa Tracy, "Silence into Speech: Writing the Lives of Female Saints," 8-21.

¹⁴¹ Naoe Kukita Yoshikawa, "Veneration of Virgin Martyrs in Margery Kempe's Meditation: Influence of the Sarum Liturgy and Hagiography," in *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead, pg. 178.

repents and washes Christ's feet with her hair; and the sinful woman from whom Christ drives the seven devils", and the story of Mary of Egypt.¹⁴² The story of this composite Mary Magdalene begins with the tale of the repentant sinner who followed Christ and witnessed His Resurrection. Upon arriving in Marseilles, Mary Magdalene preached to the people about worshipping false idols and single-handedly converted the entire city to Christianity. For a woman such as Margery Kempe, traveling and making an exhibition of her tears and visions, there is a strong correlation between her preaching and Mary Magdalene's preaching in Marseilles.

In the *Gilte Legende*, Mary Magdalene is portrayed as living sinfully, her penance and love for Christ redeem her, eventually making her a preacher and saint. For Margery, a woman who wants to emulate the virgin martyrs of the *Gilte Legende*, but cannot because she is married with children, Mary Magdalene provides an excellent role model for her life and her *Book*. In fact, much of the *Book* is structured to mirror the life of Mary Magdalene. Margery sees herself as a repentant sinner, redeemed through her visions of Christ. After her initial visions and after she convinces her husband to live chastely, she travels throughout England and Europe, dressed in white to symbolize her virginity, preaching her visions. Taken as a whole, Margery's book mirrors Mary Magdalene's "sexual temptation, her dramatic conversion, and personal relation to Christ, her weeping and itinerant preaching."¹⁴³ Margery's tears are arguably her most distinguishing feature, as well as the part of her faith that gets her in the most trouble. However, this also reflects her reliance on Mary Magdalene as a role model. Mary

¹⁴² Tracy, *Women of the Gilte Legende*, 68.

¹⁴³ Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, 127.

Magdalene cried enough so that she “washed the Lord’s feet with her tears,” she cried outside of her brother, Lazarus’, tomb, and she cried before the Resurrection.¹⁴⁴ The tears shed by both women demonstrate how women were continually identified with emotional outbursts.¹⁴⁵

Another strong connection between Margery and Mary Magdalene exists in regards to their debates with educated Churchmen. Margery argues with the Bishop of Lincoln and appeals her case to the Archbishop of Canterbury. In the *Gilte Legende* Mary Magdalene ended up in Marseilles, charged by God to convert the people there after nearly shipwrecking. She single-handedly convinced many of the people in the city and the governor to abandon the pagan gods and convert to Christianity,

she began to preach the word of Jesus Christ and draw the people from worshiping the idols. Then they marveled greatly at the beauty and reason that was in her and at her fair speech, and it was no wonder that the mouth that so debonairly and so goodly kissed the feet of our Lord was more inspired with the word of God than any other.¹⁴⁶

Not only does Mary Magdalene publicly preach the Word of God, but her hagiographer describes her skill and understanding as greater than any man. Following this logic, it is no wonder that Margery so greatly desires to emulate Mary Magdalene. If Mary Magdalene, a reform sinner, can accomplish so much, Margery must be able to do the same. Mary Magdalene then anoints the governor and his wife before they travel to Rome to ask St. Peter about her legitimacy. The governor meets St. Peter who confirms

¹⁴⁴ Jacobus De Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 375. Luke 7:36-50; John 11:1-44, John 20:11-18. Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: University Press, 2001), 207.

¹⁴⁵ Barr, ““sche Hungryd Ryth Sor Aftyr Goddys Word.””, 14.

¹⁴⁶ Tracy, *Women of the Gilte Legende*, 71.

Mary's authority. Not only does Mary Magdalene remain the sole missionary force in Marseilles, but the Church's highest authorities confirm her power and authority. Although Margery cannot quite compete with approval direct from St. Peter, her visions are legitimized by important religious figures in England. Margery wears white, to the chagrin of some of her contemporaries, and is recognized by important ecclesiastical leaders. Only once does Margery agree to stop wearing white clothes, but she quickly reverts, believing, "our Lord Jesus Christ commanded her to go to her confessor, Wenslawe by name, and ask him to give her leave to wear white clothes again... And when she told him the will of our Lord he did not dare once say 'no'."¹⁴⁷ Even though her actions are her own, Margery likes having the approval of male ecclesiastics because they legitimize her visions and agency.

Other women holy women Margery models herself after include St. Catherine and St. Margaret. All three women became virgin martyrs described in the *Gilte Legende*. Even though Margery did not become a vowess until after the births of all of her children, she identified with the way those women became martyrs as Brides of Christ.¹⁴⁸ Margery was very concerned with her lack of virginity as a Bride of Christ. In particular, scholars have found that Matthew 13:44-52, the passages regarding the separation of the good and the wicked during the Last Judgment, were common in popular sermons, giving a basis for Margery's fears about her lack of virginity upon her death.¹⁴⁹ Also, this passage was

¹⁴⁷ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, I, ch. 37, 128.

¹⁴⁸ Yoshikawa, "Veneration of Virgin Martyrs in Margery Kempe's Meditation: Influence of the Sarum Liturgy and Hagiography.", 181.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 188. Matthew 13:44-52.

read during mass services for St. Margaret, St. Barbara, and other holy virgin martyrs, reinforcing this belief that virginity was most prized amongst holy women and further demonstrating the popularity of these women in prose sermons and religious services. Considering Margery's fixation with these women, her devotion to Mary Magdalene, a repentant and reformed sexual sinner, becomes more easily understandable.¹⁵⁰

Perhaps more than any of the other female saints from the *Gilte Legende*, Margery has the most in common with St. Catherine, a wealthy woman whose preaching converts thousands before her martyrdom. At the beginning of her story, St. Catherine observes a procession of pagans, led by the emperor Maxentius (r. 305-313), going to the temple to sacrifice animals to idols of the gods. This spurs her to confront the emperor, face-to-face in front of his subjects, and challenge both his beliefs and his authority,

‘Both the dignity of your rank and the dictates of reason counseled me, Emperor, to present my greeting to you if you were to acknowledge the Creator of the heavens and renounce the worship of false gods.’ Standing at the temple entrance, she argued at length with the emperor by syllogistic reasoning as well as by allegory and metaphor, logical and mystical inference.¹⁵¹

From the beginning of her interactions with the Emperor, St. Catherine makes it clear that she sees herself as his equal, if not his superior because of her Christian faith. Also, the methods she used in her refutation of pagan beliefs suggest she received a very thorough education, and is equal to any man in the Empire. She both impressed and confused the emperor so much that he called the wisest scholars from throughout the empire to refute her arguments, What he did not expect was that she would outsmart all of them and convert them all to Christianity. Before her martyrdom, St. Catherine also managed to

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 188.

¹⁵¹ De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 720-725

convert Maxentius' queen and his entire army.¹⁵² St. Catherine makes it clear at the beginning of her story that she received a thorough education and feels prepared to challenge the emperor in such a public fashion. It is easy to see the influence such a woman would have had on Margery's mysticism and preaching, especially in light of her interactions with important secular and religious leaders. St. Catherine's wealth and education gave her the power to refute that which she deemed as false, the same way Margery's personal wealth allowed her to travel independently and her knowledge of religion learned in sermons gave her the spiritual authority to challenge those men who questioned her.

There are comparisons between Margery's life and the life of St. Margaret of Antioch in the *Gilte Legende*. At the beginning of her life, St. Margaret did not appear to have much control over her life, she could either become a wife or a concubine, depending on her status as a free woman or a slave. However, like Margery her conviction in the legitimacy of her faith gave her the power to refuse the sexual demands of a provost, Olybrius. While in prison for her faith and her refusal to submit to a male authority, St. Margaret physically defeated the devil in the form of a dragon. As the dragon transformed into a man to threaten her, "she grabbed him by the hair, threw him to the ground, set her right foot upon his neck, and said 'Lie still under the foot of a woman, you enemy'."¹⁵³ After the birth of her first child, Margery believed she was physically assaulted by demons attempting to lead her astray. Before she was beheaded for resisting the tortures of her captors and converting the masses to Christianity, St. Margaret prayed

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Tracy, *Women of the Gilte Legende*, 42.

for all women undergoing childbirth, that they “would be delivered without peril to either the mother of child and that both might be saved; the woman to life, the child to the kingdom of Christ.”¹⁵⁴ Considering that Margery Kempe delivered fourteen children, it stands to reason that she was familiar with St. Margaret’s intercessory powers during childbirth.

Even though Margery mirrors her actions on those of earlier holy women, she often looks for validation amongst the spiritual authorities she searches out. Perhaps most famous of these interactions occurs in chapter 18 when she meets Julian of Norwich. Outside of little bit of biographical information in Julian’s *Showings*, Margery’s account of their meeting provides the only information about Julian’s life. Julian, known for her wisdom and her visions, confirms Margery’s favor with God, telling her,

to be obedient to the will of our Lord and fulfill with all her might whatever he put into her soul, if it were not against the worship of God and the profit of her fellow Christians. ‘The Holy Ghost never urges a thing against charity, and if he did, he would be contrary to his own self, for he is all charity. Also he moves a soul to all chasteness, for chaste livers are called to the temple of the Holy Ghost and the Ghost makes a soul stable and steadfast in the right faith and the right belief.’¹⁵⁵

Although Margery completely believed in the legitimacy of her visions, especially after her meeting with Julian, she recognizes the authority that Julian has as an anchoress who has also experienced religious visions. Julian’s mysticism took a much more relaxed tone than Margery’s, but still Julian’s validation encouraged Margery to continue her pilgrimages and her preaching with the understanding that her visions really did come from God.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵⁵ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, I, ch. 18, 78.

All of the methods with which Margery learned about the lives of female saints contributed to her agency. As brides of Christ, holy women gained spiritual authority and the ability to work as “effective instruments of God.”¹⁵⁶ Thus Margery’s religious beliefs gave her the power to interact with important secular and religious leaders such as the mayor of Leicester and the Archbishop of Canterbury.¹⁵⁷ Margery speaks to these men respectfully, but on terms of equality, proving her knowledge of scripture and conviction in her visions. In addition to these dealings, Margery interacts with local people and the other lay pilgrims she meets on her journeys. Unfortunately, these meetings do not always go as planned; for instance, while visiting Canterbury, local monks accused her of being a Lollard and threatened to burn her alive for heresy. Even though Margery meets with such negative attitudes throughout her *Book*, her faith pushes her to continue traveling and preaching, regardless of the danger to her physical person.

All of Margery’s experiences set her apart from her contemporaries as a mystic. Unlike Christina of Markyate and Julian of Norwich, she does not close herself off from the world or devote herself to a life of contemplation. Rather, she continues to actively participate in the world, interacting with men and women of varying social classes. Her *Book* provides a look at lay piety, especially those individuals who traveled to varying holy sites. And through all of her interactions, Margery’s own uniqueness is highlighted. The knowledge she has about early holy women and popular religious teachings from sermons, combined with her financial independence and success in living separately from

¹⁵⁶Yoshikawa, “Veneration of Virgin Martyrs in Margery Kempe’s Meditation: Influence of the Sarum Liturgy and Hagiography,” 185.

¹⁵⁷Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, I, ch. 46, 148-150.

her husband, give her the opportunity to conduct an examination of her faith and the faith of others.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

By deferring to the authority of male ecclesiastical leaders, Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe each legitimized their own claims to power and agency. In turn, once their reputations reached a certain point, they were well respected by both men and women for their wisdom and experience. Margery perhaps had the most obvious display of agency, leaving her family to travel alone throughout Europe, but Christina and Julian displayed agency through their submission and willingness to lead quiet lives. Quiet does not correlate with passivity. All three women appear to control the circumstances in which their stories were recorded and during their lives, taking the initiative to control their living circumstances according to their own desires.

The fact that the *vitas* of these women's lives have survived for so long is a testament to their agency and influence. Enough people regarded these women as important enough spiritual guides and leaders to consider their stories worth preserving. That in conjunction with physical evidence left behind by these women points to their significance. For Christina, the St. Alban's Psalter was thought to have been compiled for her use, and the illumination associated with Psalm 105 is thought to include a portrait of Christina leading a group of monks to Christ, highlighting her role as a spiritual guide. Additionally, the Psalter includes the only surviving copy of *The Life of St. Alexis*.¹⁵⁸ In

¹⁵⁸ Leyser and Fanous, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, xxi-xxii.

Julian's case, the church at Norwich where she was enclosed remains a popular tourist destination, rebuilt after extensive bombing during the Second World War. Margery Kempe's longevity is a somewhat different story. Her *Book* wasn't discovered until 1934, when historian Hope Emily Allen found the fifteenth century manuscript amongst a collection of papers owned by the Butler-Bowdon family.¹⁵⁹ Since then, historians have been fascinated with her unique story of agency.

Christina, Julian, and Margery all demonstrate knowledge of early Christian holy women and evidence of learning from popular medieval prose sermons. Even though they are separated by some two hundred years (at least in Christina's case), the avenues through which they acquired a religious education were remarkably similar. All three women came from reportedly well-off families, and used their educations to exercise their spiritual agency. Their beliefs manifested in the tradition of medieval mysticism, and through their religious vocations, gained greater spiritual agency than they ever could have, had they not pursued religious life.

¹⁵⁹ Windeatt, "Introduction," *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 9.

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