

QUEERING MEDIEVAL GENDER AND SEXUALITY: PRE- AND POSTMODERN
REPRESENTATIONS OF VIRGINITY

By

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates depictions of the medieval virgin in both pre- and postmodern literature and cinema, including women who chose physical virginity as well as spiritual virginity in their quests to be *sponsae Christi*. I argue that unlike much modern cinema, specifically Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* and Chris Newby's *Anchoress*, which attempts to reify the present at the expense of an Othered Middle Ages, the medieval and post-modern authors in my study use the relative safety of temporal and geographical distance in order to explore and, at times, question cultural constructions of gender and sexuality. To demonstrate the pervasiveness of this phenomenon, I include vernacular texts from different genres, including historical, hagiographical, and fictional, as well as texts such as Robert Glück's 1994 *Margery Kempe* that defy categorization. Using queer theory, especially Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender, and Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, this project reveals the dynamic nature of virginity and gender as signifiers and shows how their implications for society change over time. While there have been a number of studies on medieval virginity in recent decades, this project expands the conversation by including medieval fiction as well as post-modern representations of the female religious in the Middle Ages.

For Bruce

For your unwavering support and confidence in me,
For helping create the time for me to write this dissertation,
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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: She's a Twentieth-Century Virgin:.....	23
The Middle Ages on Screen	
Chapter 2: Resignifying the Abject:.....	51
The Castration of St. Juliana	
Chapter 3: Coming out of the Convent:.....	79
Destabilizing the Binaries in Chaucer's <i>Prioress's Tale</i> and <i>Second Nun's Tale</i>	
Chapter 4: Queering Binaries:.....	107
The Collapse of Dualities in <i>The Book of Margery Kempe</i> and Robert Glück's <i>Margery Kempe</i>	
Bibliography.....	147

**“Consecrated virginity, then, may be described
as a brilliant militia waging war for the
kingdom of heaven.”**
Ambrose, *On Virginity*¹

Introduction

In *De Virginitate* St. Ambrose, 4th-century bishop of Milan, extols the virtues of female virginity by saying, “Where chastity dwells such griefs disappear because there religion will flourish and fidelity be safeguarded.”² Similarly, St. Jerome in approximately A.D. 383 poses the question, “Do you think that it is one and the same thing to spend days and nights in prayer and fastings, and to paint the face in anticipation of the arrival of a husband, to break step, to feign flattery?”³ These early Church fathers believed that, for women, a life of marriage and family was incompatible with and a hindrance to a life focused on God. Ambrose, Jerome, and their followers did not view the woman who chose the more traditional life of marriage with its accompanying superficial pleasures as the equal of the self-sacrificing woman who chose a life centered on Christ and absent of such secular delights. In addition, according to Ambrose, spending one’s time focusing on fulfilling worldly desires is not the path to true happiness.

However, beyond merely raising herself above the temporal concerns of the typical medieval woman, a female religious was indeed, at least in theory, no longer seen as being

¹ Ambrose, *On Virginity*, trans. Daniel Callam (Toronto: Pergrina, 1989). 18.

² Ambrose, *On Virginity*. 22.

³ Saint Jerome, "On the Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary against Helvidius," trans. John N. Hritz, *Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, vol. 53, The Fathers of the Church (Washington D.C.: Catholic U of America P, 1965). 40.

flawed in the same way that other women were. Again, according to Jerome, “[W]hile a woman serves for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wants to serve Christ more than the world, then she shall cease to be called a woman and shall be called man.”⁴ Through the renunciation of worldly concerns a woman could become something more, something less corporeal and more spiritual and rational. Although there were apparent contradictions among the early Church fathers about the gendered status of the virgin as well as much scholarly debate, clearly women who chose the life of a chaste religious were elevated above those who chose the more traditional, and secular, route of marriage and children.

In this dissertation I explore how such concerns about gender and sexuality influence the portrayal of virginity in selected English literature of the high and late Middle Ages.

Specifically, I am looking at textual representations of women who have chosen to live their lives in a state of physical and spiritual virginity. This study will also examine some of these same religious figures as they have been depicted in mid to late twentieth-century cinema and literature. While modern textual and cinematic representations of the Middle Ages provide some rudimentary information about medieval virginity, they ultimately reveal more to us about the gendering of the modern female body. Generally, this project reveals the dynamic nature of virginity and gender as signifiers and shows how their implications for society shift over time. That is, one of my major goals is to show what purpose representations of medieval virginity have for modern women and gender theory. A medieval anchoress would likely not have thought of her chastity in the same way as an early-Christian Roman woman, and neither does a young woman living in the twenty-first century as compared to one inhabiting thirteenth-century

⁴ Quoted and translated in Anke McFarland Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih, "Introduction," *Medieval Virginites* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003). 3.

England. This flexible perspective becomes even clearer when one considers that any type of consensus on the definitions of *virgin* or *virginity* cannot even be reached by people today.

By its very nature, the concept of virginity revolves around socially-constructed binaries: pure/spoiled; innocent/experienced; intact/damaged. However, there has been a shift from the medieval period to contemporary Western society in the predominant dichotomies around which the concept of virginity revolves. In the Middle Ages virginity was highly esteemed by the Church as well as being of great practical importance in people's lives, resulting in its being a signifier of both spiritual and physical wholeness. Consequently, though, due to increased secularization and the resulting diminished role of the Church in twenty first-century Western culture, people now tend to think of virginity primarily in quite literal, physiological terms. It simply informs us about sexual experience (i.e. one's innocence or lack thereof) because, outside of monasteries and convents, virginity is generally seen as something temporary rather than a life choice. How virginity is specifically determined, however, is another matter. Can a woman only lose it by having sexual intercourse with a man? This is the common definition, but it obviously leaves out many other forms of sexual experience. For the purposes of this project, I will be defining modern (i.e., twentieth and twenty-first century) virginity simply as the absence of physical sexual experience, solitary or with another person. While admittedly lacking some precision, my definition does so purposely in order to admit the many other forms of sexuality. It also allows one to question whether a person remains a virgin if he/she regularly masturbates but has never engaged in sexual activities with another person.

In addition to the traditional, largely physiological definitions of virginity that we see in modern secular Western culture, medieval Christians characterized it in a way that seems to highlight more about the woman than merely her sexual status, largely because women often

chose virginity – both chastity and celibacy – for religious purposes.⁵ Clarissa Atkinson divides medieval virginity into two groupings:

At one extreme, virginity is understood as a physiological state. The virgin is a person who has never experienced sexual intercourse: if the virgin is female, her hymen is unbroken. At the other extreme, virginity is defined as a moral or spiritual state – as purity, or humility, or that quality of spirit belonging to those whose primary relationship is with God.⁶

In other words, the potential exists for a medieval woman to no longer physically be a virgin but to have reacquired her “virginity” due to her chastity and spiritual devotion to God, such as we see with Margery Kempe. Because these terms can be at odds, I will refer to them as physical virginity (the physical state) and spiritual virginity (the state of chastity – either physical virginity or renewed chastity for non-physical virgins – and devotion to God). Additionally, Atkinson argues, “By the end of the Middle Ages, although the physical definition survived, the moral definition prevailed – in part [. . .] because of the experience and the reputations of the late medieval saints.”⁷ The women to whom Atkinson refers are Angela of Foligno, Birgitta of Sweden, and Margery Kempe who became holy women after leading a secular life. Such women provided models of chastity to both physical virgins and widows regaining their “virginity.”

Although the physical side of virginity retained its importance throughout the Middle Ages, in the hagiographical and fictional texts included in this study as well as in a great deal of

⁵ Here I am using Ruth Mazo Karras’s definitions of both chastity and celibacy. She points out that in the Middle Ages chastity referred to “absence of sexual activity”; whereas, celibacy was merely indicative of being unmarried. As Karras also notes, one could technically be celibate but not chaste. Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005). 29.

⁶ Clarissa Atkinson, “‘Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass’: The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages,” *Journal of Family History* 8 (1983). 133.

⁷ Atkinson, “‘Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass’: The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages.” 133.

other medieval literature, it is not shown to be questioned or held up for examination in those female protagonists who have chosen religious chastity. The veracity of a nun or other celibate woman's virginity was obviously not irrelevant, but rather it often seems assumed in the literature. For example, in the case of the virgin martyrs, chastity is their own choice; in fact, the legends revolve around the struggles of these women to retain their physical purity. Therefore, it seems unnecessary to question the authenticity of their virginity. In the case of Chaucer's fictional Prioress and Second Nun, their chastity is simply never addressed, probably because it is neither an essential element of the characters that Chaucer is portraying nor is it relevant in terms of them as storytellers, especially in the case of the Prioress. Even in the account of the life of twelfth-century anchoress Christina of Markyate, the truth of her physical virginity is only addressed as she fights to retain it, despite her family and betrothed's wishes to the contrary. Consequently, in medieval fictional and hagiographical literature, the virginity of the woman who chooses it for religious purposes is often not examined; however, both her commitment to God and her behavior are most definitely matters of concern for her contemporaries in the text.

Because of this somewhat broader definition of virginity in the Middle Ages, the concept signified more than merely whether a woman had yet experienced sex. In medieval literature, a virgin's speech and actions often bring her gender into question. The disapproval that we see from her contemporaries largely stems from the fact that the woman's actions do not coincide with societal expectations for appropriate femininity. Medieval scholars Sarah Salih and Stacey Schlau argue that nuns and other virgins became a sort of third gender.⁸ In reference to Jerome's assertion that when a woman leaves behind worldly relationships and desires to serve Christ, she "shall cease to be called a woman and shall be called man," Salih posits that "[. . .] virgins can be

⁸ Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, England: D.S. Brewer, 2001). Stacey Schlau, "Following Saint Teresa: Early Modern Women and Religious Authority," *MLN* 117 (2002). 286-309.

said to be distinct from women, and quite possibly to escape the inferiority of women.”⁹

Because virgins remove themselves from the economy that fixes them as wives and mothers, they essentially also remove themselves from womanhood and, thus, from the binary of gender. Schlauf similarly claims that female virgins were not thought of as either distinct gender but instead “transcended their womanness.”¹⁰ According to Salih and Schlauf, gender was seemingly not as fixed in the Middle Ages as people would like to believe.

One must then wonder how to categorize these women in terms of gender if they are indeed leaving behind what makes them medieval women. Salih and Schlauf would contend that they are neither woman nor man but something new and different. If medieval female virgins destabilize the gender binary by not fitting neatly into the category of “woman,” the question is raised whether they should be considered androgynous, transgender, or something else altogether. Salih seems to disregard androgyny, in the manner that it is often conceptualized, as she states, “Virgins are not a single, unified category; nor is virginity a neuter or non-gendered state.”¹¹ However, she does not immediately explain this other than preceding that claim by saying, “If virgins are not necessarily women, nevertheless they are not men either: the original gender continues to be relevant.”¹² The implication being that the virgin is not a non-gendered state because it is both a gender unto itself and because the “original gender” of the individual is still relevant. While I understand the argument that virginity can be seen as its own unique gender and agree that the original gender of the woman is clearly still important despite the characteristics that she appropriates, I intend to argue that they are indeed androgynous in that

⁹Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*. 24.

¹⁰Schlau, "Following Saint Teresa: Early Modern Women and Religious Authority." 288.

¹¹Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*. 17.

¹²Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*. 17.

they possess characteristics affixed to each gender by society. For example, virgin martyrs such as St. Juliana, who chose a religious life and a life of virginity is portrayed as having a number of masculine characteristics as well as having, at least initially, a certain femininity, thus possessing an ideal combination of both the masculine and the feminine, enabling them to receive the respect of the Church.

Despite this, it is important to remember that ultimately these women were indeed still that – women. There was a distinct difference between women who chose lives of religious chastity and those women who carried out their lives in secular society as wives and mothers. Ruth Mazo Karras posits that women who did act appropriately feminine “did not thereby become not-women; they became deviant women, and the same was true for men.” In this context, she is focusing on the *non*-religious individual who attempts to move beyond the strictures of gender in his or her worldly life, so a lay woman who usurped masculine characteristics in sex would have likely been seen as transgressive.¹³ Responding to Thomas Laqueur’s one-sex model, she reminds us that “[. . .] the binary opposition between men and women was extraordinarily strong in medieval society. Although theorists might write that females were defective males, their defects were significant enough that no one seriously considered them the same as males.”¹⁴ Regardless of the beliefs in the Middle Ages regarding the physical body – at least in terms of reproductive organs – and regardless whether women were merely viewed as “defective” men because of their incomplete sexual development, women were clearly seen as something different from, albeit still inferior to, men.¹⁵ As I show in later

¹³ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*. 5. She also notes that society’s reaction would have been the same for a man taking on a feminine role.

¹⁴ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*. 5.

¹⁵ According to Galenic biology, men and women’s reproductive parts were identical; the difference being that women were merely inversions of men. The theory was that women’s penis/vagina and testicles/ovaries had

chapters, how a woman was perceived by her family and community varied greatly from situation to situation, but at least the potential to move beyond her inferior womanhood seemed to exist for the chaste woman where it clearly did not for the non-religious.

In addition to the work on medieval sexuality by Karras, in recent decades there has been an increasing amount of scholarship published on medieval virginity, both in the secular realm and the religious, a great deal of which is also rooted in feminist theory. Much of the credit for this can be traced in some fashion back to Caroline Walker Bynum's seminal work *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance to Food to Medieval Women*. Although her study is not limited to virginity, it is a landmark text in its comprehensive coverage of female piety in the Middle Ages. Her argument ostensibly centers on the relationship the female religious had with food; however, ultimately it is more than that. Bynum states, "[. . .] I argue that medieval efforts to discipline and manipulate the body should be interpreted more as elaborate changes rung upon the *possibilities* provided by fleshliness than as flights from physicality."¹⁶ Women used their fleshliness, their corporeality (to which food is obviously intricately connected), in their religiosity in order to bring themselves closer to Christ. As Salih acknowledges, "[Bynum's] achievement has been to introduce gender and the body to the study of religious texts [. . .]."¹⁷ In many ways, Bynum began the conversation on women, their bodies, and the connection of both to their religious practices. Nevertheless, I would argue that her work is limited in that she too sharply demarcates the experiences of women versus men. Bynum claims:

failed to descend. Laqueur posits that, "There existed many genders, but only one adaptable sex." Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA Harvard UP, 1990). 35.

¹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: : U of California P, 1987). 6.

¹⁷ Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*. 5.

[. . .] religious women derived their basic symbols from such ordinary biological and social experiences as giving birth, lactating, suffering, and preparing and distributing food. The identification of this characteristic of women's symbols – which contrasts sharply with the enthusiasm contemporary males felt for symbols of reversal (especially the renunciation of wealth and power) – enables me to raise fundamental questions about differences in male and female religiosity.¹⁸

As other scholars have also noted, Bynum is ultimately arguing for a *female* way to express religiosity and a *male* way.¹⁹ However, it is important that scholarship move beyond the limits imposed by essentialism to encompass more of the diversity actually found within medieval gender.

Despite this limitation, her work started a much-needed dialogue exploring the connection medieval women had to the body. A secondary field has opened up over the past ten to fifteen years that specifically studies virginity in medieval society. Not surprisingly with the advent of queer theory in medieval studies, scholarship on medieval gender and sexuality, including virginity studies, has moved away from Bynum's somewhat dualistic view in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. Because virginity meant many things to people in the Middle Ages, as it does today, the scholarship is similarly sweeping and includes a vast number of articles, collections, and monographs. Not only did medieval writings encompass a wide range of religious lifestyles for virgins, but we must not forget the secular relevance of virginity, which has also been included in the ongoing conversation.²⁰

¹⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. 6.

¹⁹ As Salih puts it, “Bynum's text slips from describing a model of female piety to prescribing *the* model of female piety.” Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*. 5.

Taking part in this far-reaching dialogue are medievalists who have more narrowly focused their scholarly gaze such as Maud Burnett McInerney who concentrates on medieval texts about virgins that were actually written by women (and, thus, from the not-often-seen point of view of women) and Gail Ashton who utilizes French feminist theory to examine the “doubled discourse” present in the vitae of medieval female saints, the two discourses being the feminine voice of the saint and the masculine voice of the hagiographer.

However, on the other end of the spectrum, works such as Sarah Salih’s *Versions of Virginit*y more broadly address medieval women’s virginity and how that specifically relates to gender.²¹ It is this scholarship with which this project primarily aligns itself and also where it is situated within the field. Over the course of her book, Salih explores the various forms of virginity in late medieval England through select virgin martyrs, nuns, and the Christian mystic Margery Kempe using Michel Foucault’s ideas of the body and the self and Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Because of this specific theoretical underpinning, she avoids falling into the trap of dualism that is found in Bynum’s work and is reflective of the late 1980s.

Through this theory and the chosen texts, Salih looks at the gendered body of the medieval virgin. She states that in this book she is attempting to answer the question, “[. . .] [A]re virgins, who avoid both heterosexuality and childbirth, necessarily included within the category of ‘women’?”²² She then both answers her question and explains the goal of the book: “This study explores both the potential of virginity to imply that virgins might be differently

²⁰ In regards to secular virginity, I am referring to the concerns of medieval men and women in ensuring that women remained virgins until marriage, not only due to Church doctrine but also due to the importance of lineage, especially for the nobility and gentry.

²¹ Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint* (London: Routledge, 2000).

²² Salih, *Versions of Virginit*y in Late Medieval England. 1.

gendered, and the ways in which this potentially disruptive effect is contained, and virgins reclaimed for the category of women.”²³ Even though virgins might have been considered a third gender in some ways, ultimately they were still women and, as such, faced the same challenges and restrictions placed upon them by a masculinist society. Despite the seeming comprehensiveness of her study, Salih’s work is somewhat limited in that it fails to consider fictional representations of medieval virginity such as how authors such as Chaucer characterize the female religious. Such depictions are important as they reflect more broadly society’s view of both the person and the choices she makes.

Also informing this project, although to a lesser extent because of its narrow focus on virgin-martyr narratives, is the scholarship of Karen Winstead.²⁴ In her book Winstead focuses not only on that specific class of virgins but also on its consumers, as Winstead calls them, including the authors who are part of the larger hagiographical tradition. In her discussion of the martyrs who are depicted in the thirteenth-century Katherine Group and *South English Legendary* as well as those from various narrative texts such as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Winstead argues that “[. . .] the legend’s success is perhaps best attributed to the inconsistencies and ambiguities that allowed the virgin martyr legend, more than any other hagiographical genre, to mean different things to different people. [. . .] [V]irgin martyr legends are rarely definitive about anything [. . .].”²⁵ However, despite (or perhaps because of) this, she does not address changes in the legends over time. Although she does admit to and recognize the value in such an exercise, Winstead suggests that, “[. . .] we should attempt to understand how old elements

²³ Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*. 2.

²⁴ Karen Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997).

²⁵ Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*. 5.

functioned in new contexts.”²⁶ Nevertheless, I would suggest that we do need to study multiple versions in order to see exactly what the old elements of the legends are as opposed to what might be addendums because such changes inform us about changes in the concerns and mores of society.

Finally, my work draws on that of Kathleen Coyne Kelly who focuses to a large extent on the markers of virginity in texts from the thirteenth-fifteenth centuries.²⁷ Kelly is concerned with the ways virginity has been defined and corroborated because it is “such an unstable and relative concept that it had to be repeatedly defined.”²⁸ This methodological question of how a society and its members characterize virginity is one of the aspects of her scholarship that informs mine the most, especially as I attempt to reconcile the medieval and the modern in my later chapters.

Additionally, although her focus (like mine) is largely on the Middle Ages, Coyne Kelly’s final chapter “Multiple Virgins and Contemporary Virginites” brings the topic of virginity into contemporary popular culture by comparing modern virginity and the medieval conception. In her discussion of famous mid-century Hollywood virgins Doris Day and Sandra Dee, Kelly states, “[. . .] it is worth noting that, just as Ambrose and Jerome constructed a semiotics of virginal behavior for the early Church, so did the PR machine of 50s Hollywood create their version of the virginal.”²⁹ Instead of specifically looking at examples of medievalism to explore modern virginites, she uses examples of films with completely modern virginal themes in order to demonstrate the historical transcendence of this concept of virginity and the resulting cultural desire to somehow locate and confirm that virginity. Kelly makes it

²⁶ Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*.16.

²⁷ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000).

²⁸ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*. 3.

²⁹ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*. 131.

clear that she is not trying to argue for an “unbroken chain of theories and practices from the Middle Ages to the present” but merely for virginity and its social importance as an idea that recurs throughout history. While my project is not as concerned with virginity as a “verifiable, testable condition,” it does draw inspiration from Kelly’s exploration into the ways that “culture [. . .] writes the body in these films.”³⁰

My methodological framework is grounded in gender and queer theory, primarily employing Judith Butler’s theory of performativity of gender. However, unlike Salih’s work, I combine that with Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject. I am bringing these theories together because of their natural fit. In fact, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler discusses “those abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered” and how “their very humanness [. . .] comes into question.”³¹ If society cannot read an individual’s gender due to a lack of correspondence between his or her physical body, appearance, and actions, he or she is made to be abject and queer.

Although a common definition of queer is “mismatches between sex, gender and desire,”³² in this project I primarily limit my usage of the term queer to the “mismatch” between sex and gender in the historical and literary figures on whom I have chosen to focus. In other words, each of these individuals is/was a biological woman; however, many aspects of the manner in which each is depicted do not represent appropriate femininity as defined by her society. Whether the medieval readership of the stories of these virgins saw their behavior as queer or not, the seeming incongruity between their sex and their gender proves to be

³⁰ Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*. 121, 134.

³¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993). 8.

³² AnnMarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York UP, 1996). 3.

disruptive.³³ Additionally, the lives of the women in the set of texts I am studying clearly destabilize the hegemonic notion that there is a predetermined way of being a man or woman, that there are fixed sexualities accorded to each, and that these universal truths extend back indefinitely into the past.

Through the lives of the historical women I have included, as well as through the manner in which the quasi-historical and fictional women have been presented, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is made evident. According to Butler, "[. . .] because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all."³⁴ In other words, there is no innate gender; instead it is a creation that constantly regenerates itself through behaviors. Butler describes this recurring process as a "sedimentation of gender norms" that "over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another."³⁵ Such seemingly gendered behaviors are continually being repeated, to the extent that they become seen as natural. It is when something causes a hiccup in this system that gender and any notion of a gendered subject becomes exposed as artificial. Through the manner in which each of the authors – Juliana's hagiographers, Chaucer, Margery Kempe (and her amanuensis), and Robert Glück – have chosen to represent these women, such anomalies, or glitches, become clear. Despite the lives of Juliana being only quasi-historical and the characters in the *Canterbury Tales* being completely fictional, one can see Butler's theories playing out in the way their authors have crafted these individual characters.

³³ I am using the term virgin here to mean either physical or spiritual virginity. All of the women whom I am including in this study fall into one of these two subcategories. If a woman is not a physical virgin – such as is the case with Margery Kempe – she can still be considered a spiritual one.

³⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999). 178.

³⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 178.

As other scholars have done in their inquiries into medieval gender, specifically the female body, I too utilize Kristeva's theory of the abject throughout this dissertation. Bynum was one of the first to do so, at least implicitly, in her book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. She states that women "strove not to eradicate body but to merge their own humiliating and painful flesh with that flesh whose agony, espoused by choice, was salvation."³⁶ As discussed earlier, despite Bynum's perhaps oversimplification of the category of "woman," her work was important in helping to begin the conversation of the connection between the medieval female religious and the body. Additionally, in Karma Lochrie's book *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, Kristeva's theories of abjection are integral to Lochrie's attempt to better understand Kempe as she argues that Kempe takes advantage of the medieval ideas of woman as flesh through the practice of writing. In such an undertaking that attempts to better understand the role of the female religious in the Middle Ages, the theory of the abject fits naturally because of the intimate connection that medieval women were seen to have had with the body, that part of any human which is less valued and less pure. Although not addressed in this project, Kristeva's theories of abjection resonate with medieval studies and medieval theology also through the suffering body of Christ.

According to Kristeva, the term abjection in French "has a much more violent sense than in English. It means something revolting. [. . .] *L'abjection* is something that disgusts you."³⁷ This is a theme that runs throughout this project: From the virgin martyrs Juliana and Cecilia, to the Prioress and the characters in her tale (the little boy who is thrown in a dung heap and the Jews who murder him), to *The Virgin Spring's* Ingeri, and finally to Margery Kempe, all are cast

³⁶ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. 246.

³⁷ Julia Kristeva, "Powers of Horror: Approaching Abjection," trans. Leon Roudiez, *The Portable Kristeva* ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).374.

as abject figures in their respective texts. All are seen as revolting by segments of their society. Again, as Kristeva explains, “The abject is related to perversion. [. . .] The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule or a law, but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them.”³⁸ As we will see, many of these characters are shown to be abject due to their manipulation of their society’s gendered and sexual expectations.

One concern often expressed by scholars when applying modern theoretical models, such as queer theory, to earlier historical periods is that such work has the potential to be anachronistic, and I agree that we must be careful in utilizing such models. While that concern has hopefully lessened over the past decade as more highly-esteemed medieval scholars have undertaken such work, I understand the need to be cognizant about avoiding the thoughtless application of twenty first-century identity labels to pre-modern individuals despite my grounding this project in the concepts surrounding queer theory. As Ruth Mazo Karras points out in regards to sexual labels like heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, etc., “[. . .] the acts may be the same, but each society will determine what the meaning of those acts is and whether they create identities.”³⁹ A man might have intercourse with another man; however, that would not necessarily define him as either homosexual or bisexual in a different society that ascribes alternate meanings to such acts. Thus, throughout this dissertation, I avoid the use of such modern identity labels as hetero-/homosexual, lesbian/gay, and femme/butch.

While I am avoiding the use of most terminology that is commonly applied to modern identities, I do use the term transgender because I feel it does the best job of conveying what I am trying to say. When I discuss a character, such as the Second Nun or Cecilia, being

³⁸ Kristeva, "Powers of Horror: Approaching Abjection." 241.

³⁹ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*. 7.

“transgender,” I mean this in the very literal sense of this word: to cross or go beyond gender. In my particular context I do not mean to imply that Cecilia has chosen to present herself as a male – in appearance, mannerisms, etc. – rather that she has “gone beyond” the feminine gender and perhaps even masculine.

Because of the nature and subject matter of this dissertation, I obviously need to make use of such language as masculine/ity and feminine/ity. When I do so, it is with respect to the period under consideration (medieval vs. modern). Specifically, in chapters two and three in which I am wholly examining medieval texts, I employ the ideas of masculinity and femininity as I believe they would have been understood by the texts’ authors and their different audiences. While one can see some similarities in medieval gender roles to those from the mid-late twentieth century (and even the twenty-first century),⁴⁰ there are many significant differences. For instance, in the Middle Ages the male body was thought to be hot and dry; whereas, the female was cold and wet. As Joan Cadden states, “Many of the differences which defined the two sexes in relation to each other were directly related to warmth and coolness: male strength and hardness contrasted with female weakness and softness.”⁴¹ Along with this idea, because women were thought to be weaker and softer than men, they were also considered more susceptible to weakness and passions of the flesh. In general, women were associated with the body and the flesh while men were thought to be more spiritual and rational. According to Joyce Salisbury, “Male sexuality involved not unbridled lust, but carefully measured behavior.”⁴² It is

⁴⁰ One such similarity would be the association of strength and aggression with masculinity. According to Karras, there were two primary types of medieval masculinity. There was the aggressive – both sexually and militarily – and the “strong in the sense of controlling oneself and one’s body as well as controlling others.” Karras argues that it was this second type of masculinity that Christianity provided. Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*. 37.

⁴¹ Joan Cadden, “Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy,” *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, eds. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996). 62.

only in the first and last chapters where I look at examples of modern texts that turn their gaze back to the figure of the medieval virgin (specifically the films *The anchoress* and *The Virgin Spring* and Glück's novel *Margery Kempe*) that I also discuss modern Western notions of gender and how the values and attitudes of the twentieth century are reflected in the narratives.

In addition, I have refrained from describing individuals or characters as either adhering or deviating from some sense of what is normal. Instead I am following Karma Lochrie's argument that the concept of normal did not exist in the Middle Ages. As she informs us in her book *Heterosyncrasies*, "It was not until the nineteenth century – 1840 to be exact – that the word was metaphorically extended to mean 'constituting, conforming to, not deviating or differing from, the common type or standard,' and as 'regular or usual.'"⁴³ Just because there was no normal, however, one should not infer that there were no societal expectations placed on individuals in medieval England. There obviously were; only the more recent concept of "normal" and the attempts to level out society to the most common denominator did not exist. Instead, society, and especially the Church, was more concerned that individuals endeavor to rise above the ordinary to some sort of (perhaps unachievable) ideal Christian.

This expectation for medieval people then was indirectly tied to the importance that was placed on the paradigm of natural/unnatural. Certain behaviors were not seen as abnormal but instead as *ageynstkynde*, or against nature. In fact, there were behaviors included as unnatural that many people in modern society would not consider unusual, or abnormal, at all. Some of those sexual acts categorized as unnatural were oral intercourse, anal intercourse, coitus interruptus, bestiality, any sexual activity between unmarried individuals, and varied sexual

⁴² Joyce E. Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, eds. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996). 84.

⁴³ Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005). 3.

positions. As Lochrie explains, “The natural form of sexual relations was vaginal intercourse, while the natural position was what is called the missionary position, with the woman on her back and the man on top.”⁴⁴ She goes on to point out that such expectations were not only tied to sexual acts but also to the proper roles of men and women. This is not to say that people did not engage in such acts that were seen as against nature. In fact, because there were so few ways to engage in natural sexual activities, the distinction almost became senseless. Lochrie states, “Only sex in the proper vessels with the proper instruments in the proper positions with the appropriate procreative intentions in orderly ways and during times that are not otherwise excluded ‘counts’ as natural and normative in medieval theology, canon law, and penitentials.”⁴⁵ Despite this broad categorization by the Church of what sexual acts were deemed sinful or not, practically speaking, there were levels of unnaturalness. For instance, intercourse between a married couple during a nonproductive time of the month would not have risen to the level of sinfulness that engaging in bestiality would have. Regardless, it is through this belief in certain behaviors being natural or unnatural that gendered expectations arise. For example, in most circumstances it would have been unnatural for a man to be submissive to a woman – in sex or otherwise – or for a woman to assume a dominant role. However, as we will see, that was not always the case.

In this dissertation I am opening up the category of virginity and suggesting that it can tell us more about an individual and can be seen in a much more fluid way than twentieth first-century society would have us believe. I demonstrate that in the medieval texts *Pe Liflade and te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne* and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Second Nun’s Tale and Prologue*, women

⁴⁴ Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999). 182.

⁴⁵ Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*. 199.

essentially lose their pure femaleness and are re-gendered through their virginity. This then becomes an avenue for medieval authors to experiment with gender in other ways. Ultimately, we see through the life of Juliana and the Second Nun as well as through Chaucer's Prioress and Margery Kempe that gender does not just manifest itself in one prescribed fashion. In addition to the hagiographer's crafting of a virgin martyr who, on the surface, appears to be the epitome of femininity but actually behaves and speaks in ways that were associated more with masculinity, we see the ultra femininity of the Prioress and the non- and multi-gendered selves of the Second Nun and her virgin-martyr subject, St. Cecilia.

Like Salih, I utilize the theories of Butler in order to better understand the different representations of virginity in the Middle Ages. However, in addition to historical and quasi-historical (or legendary) figures as does Salih, I have chosen to include such fictional characters as Prioress and Second Nun, like Winstead does, in order to understand the depictions of virginity over different genres. My goal is to also demonstrate the fluidity of gender across the spectrum: from the masculinity, or militancy as it has been called, of the virgin martyr to the hyper-femininity of the Prioress to the Second Nun and Cecilia who do not seem to fit into any gender binary. In fact, one of the areas that distinguishes my project from the scholarship that has come before is that I open up my examination to multiple ways of gendering the body and do not focus on either the militant virgin or the romantic heroine.⁴⁶

Moreover, I draw upon and build on the work of Kelly as I examine medieval virginity as it has been depicted in modern cinema. It is here that we can begin to understand that, like many examples (textual and cinematic) of medievalism, what we are reading or viewing tells us more about modern society's beliefs and values than it does about the Middle Ages. Rather than

⁴⁶ See Salih's *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* for her analysis of the romantic elements of the virgin martyr legends and how the genre becomes parodied. Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*. 57-66.

witnessing an author experiment with the gender (and its various permutations) of the medieval religious, in these films set in medieval England and Sweden, virginity comes to signify something more about sexuality than it does gender.

In other words, in contrast to the exploration of the gendered, virginal self in selected medieval vernacular literature, books and films from the mid-late twentieth century featuring the medieval virgin – such as Chris Newby and Ingmar Bergman's films *Anchoress* and *The Virgin Spring* and Robert Glück's novel *Margery Kempe* – replace those concerns with more literal ones over sexuality itself. Such modern films and texts ostensibly provide their readers and viewers with a glimpse into a Middle Ages that was grim, difficult, and overly-controlled by the Church; however, they actually do more to reaffirm the pre-existing opinions of their audience than they do to educate. Rather than truly shining a light on the medieval practice of anchoritism and the lives that were led by the women who made such a choice, in *Anchoress* we instead see how poorly women were treated by the Church and how the Church resorted to trickery in order to lure women into an anchoritic, chaste life.

Audiences today, especially those comprised of independent, highly-educated women, generally would rather believe that the Church would have to coerce young women into such a decision than really believe that this medieval woman might choose it for herself. Ultimately, these films reify our society's closely-held notions about progress and about how much civilization has evolved since the darkness of the Middle Ages. Were modern films and books about anchoritism to portray their female protagonists as actually having chosen life-long enclosure in a small room in order to spend their days in contemplation and prayer, they would have even more limited appeal because they would force their audience to reassess what it believes.

The roots of this exploration ultimately lie within the Middle Ages, largely that of England post-Norman Conquest. However, as I have indicated, this is a trans-historical project, so I explore in chapters two and three how medieval authors such as St. Juliana's hagiographers (Anglo-Saxon writer Cynewulf and the unknown author of the Katherine Group version) and Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Second Nun's Tale* look back to the period of early Christianity in order to reflect and comment on their own society and the place of the female religious. In the first and fourth chapters, I examine the manner in which twentieth-century literature and cinema turn their gaze back to a medieval history, a period which is very foreign for most audiences, in order to make meaning based on their own interpretations of that past. Additionally, in my final chapter the physiological side of modern secular virginity comes together with the re-gendering of the medieval virgin through Margery Kempe, both the Margery created by Robert Glück in his 1994 novel *Margery Kempe* and the fifteenth-century one found in the amanuensis-written account of her life. In weaving together these three different periods – early Christian Rome, medieval England, and the twentieth century – we can see how authors and directors make use of a past, which might or might not be familiar to their various audiences, in order to more safely comment on medieval cultural expectations and modern norms as they relate to sexuality and the socially-constructed roles of women.

Chapter 1

She's a Twentieth-Century Virgin: The Middle Ages on Screen

Introduction

The darkened movie theater is a place of vicarious pleasures. It is where we can participate in that which we might never dare in our real lives. As Lara Mulvey argues, “[. . .] [T]he mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy.”⁴⁷ The film is completely separate from the audience, and yet it is not. We want to be a part of the cinematic action while still retaining our distance. Here the audience can safely participate in that which society deems queer while concurrently proclaiming its otherness. Although the effect of anonymity is clearly not the rationale for maintaining darkness in a theater (although for certain venues, that might be a secondary reason), it is a benefit. It is possible to feel more alone and thus more a part of the action taking place on the screen when one cannot make distinctions among the other members of the audience.

Cinematic virginity, however, would not seem to necessitate the need for any sense of privacy in that we are merely witnessing the absence of sex, except for the fact that in celibacy there is the ever-present potential for sex to ultimately take place. This is not to say that in any movie in which physical sexuality is not present, it really lies lurking beneath the surface; rather, I am referring to those films that specifically, or implicitly, address the subject through its

⁴⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Feminist Film Theory*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York UP, 1999). 61.

absence. As with any pair of opposing signifiers, one cannot exist or have any meaning without the other.

In Ingmar Bergman's 1960 film *The Virgin Spring*, such dualities exist in the virginal Karin and in the sexualized and abjectified Ingeri. Represented here is the focus of the audience's scopophilia and also its ego through both women. One takes pleasure in watching them, especially in seeing them as object, while also identifying in some fashion with them.⁴⁸ However, in Chris Newby's 1994 film *Anchoress*, the young anchoress Christine Carpenter fulfills a dual function – the object of the gaze and someone with whom we might identify. Throughout much of the movie, she represents both virgin/not-virgin and anchoress/teenager. When first enclosed in her cell, Christine appears to be sexually innocent in that she is portrayed as a young unmarried woman who has not yet had any sexual experiences (at least of which we are aware); however, after having been enclosed for an undetermined amount of time, the viewer witnesses what seems to be her first sexual act, that of masturbation. Only after breaking free from her cell does Christine appear to engage in sexual activities with another person. Subsequently, reinternment into her anchorhold is demanded by both the priest and the bishop despite her having left the cell without permission and then having participated (unbeknownst to the two men) in sexual intercourse. Were she to be reinclosed, would those townspeople aware of her escape continue to revere their anchoress as they once did, and, perhaps more importantly, would we, the audience, be able to suspend disbelief and view her in the same non-sexualized way that we did at the beginning of the film? In other words, could we still see her as a virgin?

I would argue that the construction of the film's narrative prevents us from actually ever seeing her as a holy woman. Despite her seeming devotion to the Virgin Mary, which is made apparent from the opening scenes of the film, the audience is not being authorized to see

⁴⁸ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." 61, 62.

Christine as a virgin striving to emulate the holy mother. Regardless of her kissing a statue of the Virgin and later staring into its eyes as if transfixed, a late twentieth-century, largely secular audience is not encouraged to view a chaste religious woman in the same manner in which she would have been regarded in medieval England. To us, she is anomalous, but in medieval England her fellow townspeople would have not only revered her but also seen her as someone to whom they could come for counsel when needed, with Newby also representing them as such.

This destabilization of the binary virginity/non-virginity operates in much the same way in *The Virgin Spring*. Not only does the film revolve around such dualities as sex/virginity and pregnancy, good/evil, and pagan/Christian, but it repeatedly attempts to conflate those polarities within certain individuals. Thus, we can have Karin's father, a largely compassionate, Christian man shown to love his family greatly, ruthlessly kill two men and a young boy to avenge his daughter's rape and murder, an act for which he later feels remorse and which results in his pledge to build a church at the site of Karin's slaying. As movie director Ang Lee points out in a 2005 introduction to the film, *The Virgin Spring* illustrates "good and evil coexisting in our hearts,"⁴⁹ a fact that is most clearly seen in Karin's father. However, as the distinction between good and evil becomes muddled, so does that between virginity and non-virginity – for both Karin and the anchoress Christine. Throughout both films, as the virginity of these two young women is brought to the foreground and subsequently questioned, these cinematic versions of the Middle Ages not only authorize twentieth-century Western views of sexuality and gender by destabilizing the distinction between past and present, but they also break down such dualities as good/evil; holy/non-holy; and Christian/pagan.

⁴⁹ *The Virgin Spring*, dir. Ingmar Bergman, perf. Max von Sydow, Gunnel Lindblom and Birgitta Pettersson, Criterion, 1960.

The Anchorhold – “Rotting Flesh and Drink” or “Milk and Honey”?

Shortly after her character is introduced in *Anchoress*, Christine is depicted as being trapped. She can either agree to an undesirable marriage to the reeve or she can choose the life of an anchoress; in other words, Christine can submit to a secular male authority or a religious male authority. An alternative to these two fates is never presented. What is shown, however, after Christine gets in trouble for stealing apples from the reeve and placing them in the church around the statue of the Virgin, is the parish priest explaining the *felix culpa* at the heart of Christianity: “If Eve, the mother of all wickedness, had not taken the apple, then God would not have given us Mary, the mother of all goodness [. . .]”⁵⁰ Although Christine is perhaps being portrayed in these two scenes as both Eve and Mary (the sinful woman who takes the apple and the innocent virgin who is born from this action), in general what is being illustrated is a representative of the medieval Church presenting two options for a female: sexuality and sin or virginity and holiness – a choice much like Christine is later given. This depiction of women corresponds with the early Christian fathers such as the late second-century/early third century Tertullian who claimed, “Women [. . .] are the devil’s door: through them Satan creeps into men’s hearts and minds and works his wiles for their spiritual destruction.” Likewise, third-century Biblical scholar Origen wrote that “women are more lustful than men and that they are obsessed by sexual desire.” Additionally, he “considered woman a primary source of carnal corruption in Christian society.”⁵¹ It was primarily through a life of holy virginity, such as the priest offers Christine, that such a sexually sinful existence could be avoided.

⁵⁰ *Anchoress*, dir. Chris Newby, perf. Natalie Morse, Eugene Bervoets, Toyah Willcox, Peter Postlethwaite and Christopher Eccleston, Vanguard, 1993.

⁵¹ James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987). 64.

Immediately following the Priest's teaching on Eve and Mary, which is reminiscent of Tertullian and Origen, director Chris Newby visually comments on this female containment. He first shows Christine placing a wrapped doll in a wooden box, ostensibly as some form of earth-based spiritual practice, and then cuts to an image of a trapped dove flapping its wings (one repeated a number of times throughout the film), leading the audience to see her as enclosed even before the ceremony has taken place. Shortly thereafter this image is reinforced when we see the reeve ride up to Christine and her sister working outside; towering above them on his horse, he encircles the two girls several times, effectively attempting to close them in before stopping to speak with them.

Despite attempts to constrain her by male-dominated secular and religious society, Christine appears to be spiritual and to be devoted to the Virgin Mary. Before she is ever enclosed in her cell, this young woman is constructed as being different from her sister through her spiritual connection to Mary. In the opening scenes of the film, Christine is seen in a field kissing a statue-like figure that resembles the Virgin and then later becoming transfixed staring into the eyes of a statue of Mary while she and her sister Meg place apples around it. Finally she is seen polishing that same statue before being accosted by the priest. Christine also cares about the Holy Mother enough to repeatedly argue with her priest about how she has seen in her vision what Mary really looks like and what color her robes really are. What is interesting about Christine's religiosity is that, unlike many Christian women of the Middle Ages who longed to be a *sponsa Christi*, Christ is never, or rarely, mentioned in the film; Christine's religiosity centers around the sole feminine aspect of the Holy family.

Our reading of Christine's motivation for becoming an anchoress, however, is complicated by her also seeing the anchorhold as a way to escape a likely marriage to the reeve.

Her repetition of the word *alone* after hearing the priest's description of the anchorhold reveals that one of her concerns is finding a way to avoid an undesirable marriage while also having a space of her own.⁵² Although Christine's choice cannot necessarily be solely attributed to her special devotion to Mary, she does not appear to really think through what it means to become an anchoress and to be enclosed in an anchorhold for the remainder of her life. She knows that she loves the Virgin, but she yearns to be alone as well. As a result, Christine somewhat hastily decides to become an anchoress – a choice that would also entail celibacy since she is being enclosed in a presumably still virginal state.

These reasons notwithstanding, Christine's choice to be enclosed in the anchorhold could not have taken place without the parish priest, and later the bishop, constructing the correct answers during their interviews with her. Thus, rather than seeing a young mystic yearning for a vocation that draws her closer to Mary and, by extension, God, one mostly sees a teenage girl being taken advantage of by male authority figures. This view is only furthered by the priest remarking, once he is convinced that she has had visions, that “God rises up the least of his creations to humble the right.”⁵³ It is unclear why he characterizes Christine as “the least of his creations” – whether it is her age, her gender, or her family (or a combination of all three) – but clearly the priest has little respect for his budding anchoress, an attitude that is reinforced by the reappearance of the trapped dove immediately following his comment. Prior to this, however, as he is coming to accept the existence of her visions, the priest directs her towards becoming an anchoress by exhorting, “But you must choose: the rotting flesh and drink of the world or the

⁵² Earlier in the film, the audience has seen that the home in which she lives with her family is so limited that she and her sister have to share a bed with their parents.

⁵³ *Anchoress*, dir. Newby.

milk and honey of paradise.”⁵⁴ Of course, Christine knows what the correct answer is. Despite the temptation of worldly pleasures, the fact that the priest characterizes them as “rotting” and then contrasts them with “milk and honey” makes evident that he is attempting to capitalize on Christine’s visions and her innocence. Essentially, he wants the notoriety that an anchoress will bring the village.

Much in the same way that Christine is being directed towards the anchorhold by her priest, the audience is being led by the film itself. However, the latter is being guided towards having a specific reaction to the events taking place on the screen, specifically into having sympathy for this young girl. It is true that, through her naïveté, she has been somewhat manipulated into becoming an anchoress, and it is troubling that Christine seems to have little agency. Nevertheless, enclosure as an anchoress is not necessarily problematic in and of itself, despite what Newby might be encouraging us to think. Within the film, the construction of Christine as a visionary and a recluse seems to be as an Anchoress as if there was some universal way to fulfill such a role, some essential quality inherent within anchoritism. In fact, looking at the title of the film, it is not *An Anchoress* or *The Anchoress*, as if Christine is but one example, but rather it is *Anchoress* – appearing to refer to the entire category of this religious vocation. As such it is removed from any specific modifiers – temporal, spatial, or otherwise – that might serve to make clear that she represents but one example of this medieval Christian lifestyle.

Because the lifespan of the practice of anchoritism was so great, the situation of a specific anchoress could vary tremendously as Anneke Mulder-Bakker discusses. In fact, she points out that there were solitaries who chose to merely be enclosed for a certain period, such as at the

⁵⁴ *Anchoress*, dir. Newby.

beginning or end of their religious lives.⁵⁵ Although it may have indeed been the case that there were women who did not live out their entire adult lives (which could be as long as forty or fifty years) as anchoresses, we should bear in mind that the anchoritic tradition spanned not only a wide geographic area – encompassing England as well as Europe – but also a period of several centuries.⁵⁶ Therefore, the enclosure practices in most, if not all, aspects varied as well.

This lack of uniformity within the anchoritic practice can clearly be seen in regards to the anchorhold itself. Rather than acknowledging any variety in terms of size or layout, Newby depicts a cell built onto the church which consists of one small room. In actuality that did not happen to be the case universally, but portraying Christine's anchorage in such a manner contributes to the sense of her being contained, much in the same way as the trapped dove. Rather than seeing her as freely choosing a life of spiritual contemplation, we are being led to see Christine as her mother does, as being trapped "in a wall [. . .] forever and ever and ever."⁵⁷ There were anchorholds of a similar size to Newby's re-creation, such as Eve of Wilton's anchorhold on the Continent – along with others located in England – which was eight foot square. However, Rotha Mary Clay points out that a Bavarian Rule dictates not only that the anchorhold be constructed of stone but also that it be twelve foot square.⁵⁸ In addition to other

⁵⁵ Anneke Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*, trans. Myra Heerspink Scholz (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2005). 15. Mulder-Bakker theorizes that while women were sometimes informally enclosed at the beginning of their religious lives, "evidently to gain recognition," it seemed more commonly to come at the end of their careers, as with the late 12th/early 13th-century anchoress Yvette of Huy.

⁵⁶ Ann Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985). 3.7. Sharon K Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth-Century England* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988). 20. According to Warren, the 12th century is the point where sufficient written records are available to facilitate her study. Elkins though begins her analysis with Eve of Wilton because she is reputedly the first post Norman Conquest anchoress, having left England for the Continent in 1080 to be enclosed. According to Warren, the anchoritic tradition ended in the 16th century when the English Reformation was begun by Henry VIII.

⁵⁷ *Anchoress*, dir. Newby.

⁵⁸ Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (Detroit: Singing Tree, 1968). 79.

cells found within England, Clay describes the remains of one in York (as well as others) that contained multiple stories.⁵⁹ Moreover, not only did the size of the cells vary, but so did the number of rooms. In addition to the common one-room anchorhold, there were those with multiple rooms as well as gardens or courts.⁶⁰ If more than one woman was enclosed in a single anchorhold, it was not unusual to have two separate rooms in order for the women to have privacy as well as a common “sitting room.”

However, in *Anchoress*, by the manner in which Newby employs elements of imagery (including the previously mentioned dove that chaotically flutters its wings and the doll that Christine places in a box) and characterization, it seems that the concept of the anchoress is being essentialized much like binary gender categories. Granted, this film merely portrays a fictionalized account of one fourteenth-century anchoress and does not profess to do otherwise. Nevertheless, much of Newby’s portrayal revolves around the entrapment of this anchoress. Early in the film, Christine chooses to leave one situation in which she appears to have been granted little choice (i.e. an implied impending engagement to the Reeve) for another that she has ostensibly chosen for herself but which assures (or at least is supposed to) her literal containment for the remainder of her life. Submitted to the gaze of a late twentieth century/early twenty-first century audience, Christine appears to be the victim of an unenlightened, medieval past.

For a modern audience who knows very little, if anything, about the medieval anchoress – let alone the variety within the practice – Christine’s succumbing to the priest’s suggestion and making the choice to become enclosed would likely seem a bit odd. According to a twentieth-century mindset, Christine would understandably want to avoid marrying a man whom she does

⁵⁹ Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*. 83.

⁶⁰ Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*. 31.

not love, but to choose being walled up alone for the rest of one's life? However, that was not necessarily the perspective of someone living in medieval England. If it were, this vocation would not have attracted the numbers that it did. At its peak in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, there ranged between 198 – 214 male and female anchorites throughout the country.⁶¹ These highly-respected men and women were viewed as “carriers of the religious values of their culture and as expressions of those values in lives of exemplary form.” Additionally, Ann Warren contends that anchorites were so admired that their choice was “the fulfillment of lesser men's dreams.”⁶² As a result, England in the Middle Ages was very much an environment that encouraged such a life for both men and women. Warren argues that anchorites were “part of a network of support that enabled [them] to exist and persist,” and that the decision to become an anchorite “was conditioned by its social acceptability.” She adds, in regards to the anchorite's dependence on others, “That commitment implies a society covenanted both to the religious values of the undertaking and to the right of an individual to make such a demand on it.”⁶³ While parents, such as those of twelfth-century anchoress Christina of Markyate, did exist who actively attempted to dissuade their daughters from pursuing a religious, and specifically virginal, life, the culture largely encouraged this decision as is depicted in the case of Christine Carpenter after her installation as the anchoress of Shere.

Newby's depiction of the setting visually though might argue otherwise. As the film opens and as Christine is later being walled in, the landscape is bleak and desolate – almost appearing to be a wasteland (despite the fact that the setting is a small English village) – an effect only intensified by the movie's having being filmed in black and white. In fact, Christopher

⁶¹ Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*. 20.

⁶² Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*. 3.

⁶³ Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*. 15.

Roman points out, “. . . many of its scenes harken [sic] back to Ingmar Bergman’s *Seventh Seal*.”⁶⁴ Rather than celebrating a spiritual decision being made by a young woman who has been having recurring visions of the Virgin Mary, it is her enclosure, along with the fact that she is now dead to the world, which is stressed. As viewers witness Christine’s enclosure ceremony, which is being held in the rain, they hear the bishop intoning, “Dead. Dead to your former life. Dead to the World. You must understand the truth of this.”⁶⁵ Juxtaposing such solemnity, the young religious smiles happily out of her small, dark anchorhold before the final stone is first put into place and then dramatically and thoroughly mortared in.

In our fast-paced world full of colorful visuals – from movies and television to video games to the internet – the striking images in this film are what have the potential for true impact, and they clearly do. Entering the anchorhold “could be likened to a self-imprisonment but was not confused with an actual death sentence by the medieval person [. . .],” and the service of internment was essentially a funeral ceremony through which the anchoress became dead to the world.⁶⁶ Viewers of the film, however, would not necessarily be aware of this, rather they merely see the contrast between the gray imagery and Christine’s joyful – rather than solemn or prayerful – demeanor. Her carefree manner in the face of such a holy, yet life-changing, ceremony emphasizes that perhaps her innocence is being taken advantage of by clergy who want the notoriety that accompanies having a village anchoress. Through this imagery, the average, non-scholarly viewer of the film sees young Christine receiving a life imprisonment in what amounts to a jail cell rather than sincerely making a choice through which

⁶⁴ Christopher Roman, "Teaching the Politics of Mysticism through Film," *Transformations* 15.1 (2004). 107.

⁶⁵ *Anchoress*, dir. Newby.

⁶⁶ Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*. 93.

“[t]he eternal punishment of hell might be escaped” and “[. . .] union with Christ might be achieved even in this life.”⁶⁷

Adding to this depiction of Christine’s decision, substantial emphasis is placed on her immaturity. From some of the earliest scenes in the film where Christine innocently steals apples from the manor in order to place them in the church, the young anchoress is portrayed as a naïve young girl. Rather than witnessing Christine in contemplation in her cell, the audience observes her playing games and making shadow puppets on the stone walls with her hands, and rather than focusing on the sacredness of her calling, she exchanges whistles with a male friend, who is in a nearby field. Continually we see Christine dancing, singing, sitting and looking bored, and listening to conversations outside the cell rather than praying, contemplating, or observing mass. As she engages in such non-spiritual activities, it almost seems as if we are to feel sympathy for her and the fact that she is to spend the rest of her life in this brick enclosure much as she responds compassionately to the elderly man who comes to her anchorhold to seek her advice.

The juxtaposition of the bleak imagery with Christine’s youthful behavior leads us, the audience, to question Christine’s decision to become an anchoress. Not only has she given her life to the Church, but should we also be asking ourselves whether she really made the decision for herself, and if she did, was she was mature enough to make it? Clearly, Christine’s naïveté has been taken advantage of by both the priest, who initiates her becoming an anchoress, and the bishop, who approves her enclosure despite the inadequacy she displays in answering his questions during their interview. In fact, while she is being questioned, her mother and her friend debate the likelihood of Christine’s being interred. He predicts that she will not be made an anchoress because “she won’t answer the bishop’s questions,” but Christine’s mother, who is

⁶⁷ Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*. 93.

savvier about the Church and people in positions of power, asserts that she is “as good as in the wall.” She believes this despite her daughter’s refusal to answer the bishop as he repeatedly asks why Christine thinks “she’s pure enough to live in the Lady’s house.” The closest Christine comes to answering is through the non sequitur, “Can I do whatever she tells me?” Prior to this response, which results in his now speaking English, the bishop has distanced himself both literally and figuratively from her: not only is he sitting above Christine, but he has been interviewing her in Latin, thus necessitating a translator and not communicating directly.

While the anchoress herself has become essentialized in this bleak, one-sided depiction of Christine’s decision, the figure of the virgin is not. In fact, the film complicates the notion of what actually constitutes virginity. This young woman does have a genuine relationship with and devotion to Mary, which is seen both at the beginning of the film and when she consults the Virgin before giving advice to the townspeople who consult her. Nevertheless, we do not ever see her in quiet contemplation or in more traditional prayer. Also, the audience is not led to truly regard Christine as emulating Mary and her virginity, rather more as a teenage girl who loves the Virgin but who also happens to live in the Middle Ages and is presented as having few options for her life: She can marry a man who appears to be at least twenty years her senior and with whom she appears to have little more than an occasionally friendly relationship, or she can avoid that by becoming an anchoress. As Pauline, Christine’s mother, points out, “He can’t touch you in there, can he?” indicating her recognition that part of her daughter’s motivation to enter the anchorhold is to assert her agency and escape the Reeve.⁶⁸

Unlike such religious women as the early Christian virgin martyrs Juliana and Cecilia and fourteenth-century Margery Kempe, in Newby’s portrayal of the anchoress of Shere, she never indicates any desire to remain a virgin and become a *sponsa Christi*. She is merely devoted to

⁶⁸ *Anchoress*, dir. Newby.

the Virgin Mary and wishes to avoid an undesired marriage. As a result, Christine does not express the same reticence to engage in sexual activities that the abovementioned religious women did, seen after the appearance at her cell window of a mysterious visitor. After the woman urges, “Embrace your body, anchoress of Shere. Embrace your body and hold it fast,” the audience witnesses Christine do just that as she masturbates in her cell.⁶⁹ What is interesting about this visitor is that it is unclear whether she is actually present or whether she is merely a vision. When she appears at the cell window, she is wearing a hooded cloak and rings a bell to get Christine’s attention; additionally, in her exhortation to the young woman, the visitor tells her – ostensibly in the form of a warning – that she too used to have a body but no longer does. “It is now scattered,” she says.⁷⁰ The woman seems to be urging Christine not to take her own body for granted but rather take advantage of it so as not to lose it.

The importance of this scene in terms of Christine’s maturation is foreshadowed by Newby’s sole use of color in this black and white film. Following the appearance of the visitor, a bright red line, appearing to perhaps be a vulva, comes into view on the screen on a field of black. The use of color to emphasize this scene not only alerts the audience that what follows will be significant but also, because Christine succumbs to sexual temptations, that the conflict between the flesh and the spirit is a crucial one in the film. Additionally, through its late twentieth-century lens, this scene highlights the difficulty in living a solitary, celibate life, a life so difficult – especially for a young woman so full of life as Christine – that ultimately one must engage in some kind, any kind, of sexual activity.

Through this sexual act by Christine, Newby complicates the concept of virginity. Does her masturbation render her no longer a virgin? In the Introduction, I defined modern virginity

⁶⁹ *Anchoress*, dir. Newby.

⁷⁰ *Anchoress*, dir. Newby.

as the absence of physical sexual experience, solitary or with another person; following this criterion, the young anchoress no longer remains a virgin. Even if we consider the question of whether her hymen remains intact (an admittedly imprecise measure), that is potentially no longer the case for Christine, thus deeming her physically no longer whole but still pure in terms of engaging in sexual activities with another person. According to the thirteenth-century *Glossa Palatina*, “a woman whose hymen ruptured during masturbation or foreplay still counted as a virgin for ecclesiastical purposes.” In contrast, though, if the hymen were torn by a penis, even if it was only slightly and even if there was not full penetration, she would no longer be considered a virgin.⁷¹ While such acts of self pleasure were considered unnatural, for most of the medieval religious lawmakers, masturbation clearly did not rise to the same level of sinfulness of sexual activities engaged in with a partner.⁷² In fact, some medieval medical writers believed that regular emission of seed – for both men and women – through orgasm was beneficial for one’s health.⁷³ However, before totally dismissing Christine’s solitary acts, we must also remember that there were theologians who believed that “[. . .] experiencing even a little [sexual pleasure] kindled a burning desire for more. By its nature sex was a greedy pleasure: just as a tiny spark can ignite a pile of dry wood, so the slightest sexual tingle could set off a burst of insatiable passion.”⁷⁴ Once experienced, sexual pleasure could not be moderated or restrained. Additionally, regardless of the status of her hymen, arguably she no longer possesses the state of mind of a virgin: “[the] purity, or humility, or that quality of spirit belonging to those whose

⁷¹ Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*. 385.

⁷² Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*. 533, 535.

⁷³ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*. 111.

⁷⁴ Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*. 424.

primary relationship is with God.”⁷⁵ Consistent with this, Christine’s physical escape from her anchorhold occurs not long after the scene in which we see her masturbating.

Regardless of the specific conclusion Newby wants his audience to draw, this event leads the audience to question whether she really is a holy woman who has had visions and remains virginal or whether she is merely a young woman who has been forced – by her mother who would have her marry the Reeve and by the Church patriarchy who suggested and then approved her enclosure – to experience her sexual awakening trapped in a brick cell. Rather than ever really being a virgin in the eyes of the audience, with this scene Christine becomes defined as only pre-sexual. Perhaps she technically remains a virgin, but now the audience also sees her as someone who is ultimately more likely, at some point, to engage in sexual activity rather than as a religious who is unequivocally a virgin and who fights to remain so, such as Christina of Markyate and Saints Juliana and Cecilia. As far as the audience knows, Christine is a virgin at the beginning of the film, at least according to twenty-first century, heteronormative notions in which a virgin is generally thought of as someone who has merely not yet had sex, usually defined as penile-vaginal penetration. However, once she escapes her anchorhold and has sex with her boyfriend, she is clearly no longer a virgin; instead, she is now, even more so, a young woman who sought the anchorhold as a means of escape rather than as a noble, religious path.

Christine is seen in this fashion because her decisions and motivations are being filtered through a twenty first-century Western lens, a lens that attempts to reify modern day attitudes and behaviors by defining them against the unenlightened Middle Ages. In our largely secular modern society, despite a resurgence of virginity movements, women do not generally choose a life of chastity. As medievalist Anke McFarland Bernau questions, “Does the virgin whose

⁷⁵ Atkinson, “‘Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass’: The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages.” 133.

virginity is a vocation rather than a transient state appeal to the audience of mainstream Hollywood cinema?"⁷⁶ Ultimately not. Instead, to a modern audience, becoming an anchoress would likely be seen as forced imprisonment rather than a choice that was supported and even held in awe.⁷⁷ Even in Newby's portrayal, the townspeople of Shere celebrate and revere their anchoress. During a carnival that takes place in the village, people line up outside Christine's cell waiting for their opportunity to talk with her and receive advice; in fact, throughout the period she is in her anchorhold, Christine is regularly visited by townspeople seeking advice and bringing gifts to their resident anchoress.

This contrasts with the attitude of Pauline Carpenter, Christine's mother, whose opinion is that the Church patriarchy in the form of the priest and the bishop are taking advantage of a naïve girl in order to further their reputations. In trying to convince her eldest daughter to change her mind, she advises Christine: "What are you going to find in a wall? Not the Reeve. I can see that. He can't touch you in there, can he? Nothing else can either." Pauline, articulating what the audience cannot, does not seem to believe that her daughter truly desires the life of an anchoress and a *sponsa Christi*. Subsequently, in referring to the attitude of the clergy, she says, "Him [the priest] and the bishop is dancing because they're burying my daughter."⁷⁸ She is the one person in the film shown to stand up to the Church and its representatives, so she also voices what the audience is thinking. However, Pauline is also killed shortly before the film's conclusion, ostensibly under suspicion of being a witch but more likely because she is the midwife to the stillbirth of the priest's illegitimate son. While the Church and the holy life of an anchoress and virgin might ultimately be the path to milk and honey, they are portrayed as filling

⁷⁶ Anke McFarland Bernau, "Girls on Film: Medieval Virginity in the Cinema," *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, eds. Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson, N.C.: 2004). 95.

⁷⁷ Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*. 16.

⁷⁸ *Anchoress*, dir. Newby.

the woman's earthly life with misery. Not only because Pauline's relationship with the Church results in her death, but also the film seems to convey that the unreasonable expectations placed on Christine by the Church are what lead her to the "rotting flesh and drink of the world" of which she is continually warned by her priest. In other words, were she not enclosed in her cell, isolated from close human contact and constantly being critiqued by the priest, Christine would have been less likely to escape her cell and, ultimately, society at the end of the film.

Nevertheless, Newby depicts Christine to be like other medieval anchoresses in that she played an important role in the life of the townspeople. Throughout the period in which Christine is enclosed, inhabitants of the village – both men and women – repeatedly come to Christine's window to seek her advice. As Christopher Roman argues, the film "[. . .] offers a representation of mysticism that does not 'other' the experience of female mystics; rather, it offers a framework in which women's mystical experience is central to the life of the spiritual community," and, in fact, that does seem to be the case.⁷⁹ Often Christine even compassionately holds these people's hands despite the priest's remonstrating her for such physical contact. Whether she is doing it for her own benefit (i.e. having physical human contact) or for her visitors', the sentiment is largely the same. The anchoress is clearly a vital part of the community, and through this series of scenes, the audience can begin to gain some sense of what it meant for a woman to become an anchoress.

This portrayal is complicated, however, by the scenes in which Christine is depicted essentially playing in her cell, and even more completely, when we voyeuristically witness her masturbating to the point of orgasm. Rather than a holy woman – a virgin striving to be like the Virgin Mary – Christine is merely a teenager being sexually awakened. She has now become a young woman whom a modern audience can understand. Rather than the foreignness of a person

⁷⁹ Roman, "Teaching the Politics of Mysticism through Film." 107.

who chooses virginity as a vocation, we are reminded of the circumstances under which Christine became an anchoress. Clearly she didn't understand what she was getting into when she accepted the priest's offer to be enclosed. No longer is her virginity a queer one for the moviegoer; now it has been normalized and ultimately removed. Much like such mainstream movies about virginity as *The 40-Year Old Virgin* or the *American Pie* series, the goal is almost always to "cure" the person of his/ her virginity. Now Christine has similarly been cured: beginning through her own means and later, more fully, with her boyfriend, and through this, modern constructions of sexuality and virginity are reified at the expense of the medieval, the Other.

Ingmar Bergman's Virgin Martyr

Unlike the anchoress Christine Carpenter who has been refeminized according to late twentieth-century standards of gender and sexuality, from the beginning of Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*, Karin is already characterized as a young woman who seems, on the surface, to be the epitome of innocent, feminine beauty as the blond, fair-skinned, only child of her doting parents. However, there are moments throughout the film (specifically, during the first half) in which the audience might question her purity. As Birgitta Pettersson, the actress who plays Karin, points out in an interview, "She's [. . .] on the threshold of her own femininity and how she can use it."⁸⁰ It is this quality that reveals her to be an incredibly spoiled girl who is quite aware of the power she possesses. Despite her father's admonitions to his wife that they must be more forceful with her and less indulgent, Karin is quite narcissistic, a quality made most clear when staring at her reflection in a basin of water and touching up her hair, she complains that her mother is standing in her light.

⁸⁰ *The Virgin Spring*, dir. Bergman.

Bergman's depiction of Karin almost seems to characterize her as a virgin martyr for a largely secular twentieth century. Like Saints Juliana and Cecilia, she is a young woman who was desired by undesirable men for her extraordinary beauty. Although Karin's family does not appear to be overly wealthy, they do seem to be well enough off in that they have land, livestock, farmhands, and sufficient food. In fact, they also have the means to keep a fire burning all night in the manor hall when the three goat-herders/murderers come for shelter. In addition, like the virgin martyrs, Karin's great beauty plays an important role in the story in that it is one of the causes of her death. As Eleusius is attracted to Juliana's beauty, setting in motion her ultimate martyrdom, the goat-herders are similarly attracted to Karin, resulting in her being murdered. Unlike the early Christian virgin martyrs such as Juliana, however, Karin seems much more superficial in her desire for fine clothes and well aware of her appearance and its effect on people, especially her father and her many partners at the dance. Rather than Karin's being portrayed throughout the film as the innocent, saintly virgin martyr who meets her untimely demise at the hands of men who seek to control her, questions arise prior to her rape and murder about not only her desire for holiness but also about her purity.

During a breakfast scene early in the film, in fact before the audience has even seen Karin, she is authorized as a virgin. Her father states that it must be his daughter who takes the candles to the church because it must be done by a virgin; that is why the female house servant cannot do it. According to both of Karin's parents, she is a virgin. Despite this, the audience is not led to really see her as a religious figure – even less so than the anchoress Christine. Although her rape and murder occur as she is taking the candles to the church, Karin is not going out of any sense of religious purpose. Indeed, her agreement to complete the task seems less out of filial obligation than an opportunity to wear her finest dress. In essence, Karin has been

constructed as a misogynistic model of modern (and perhaps medieval as well) femininity: her primary concerns being with her appearance – her clothing, jewelry, and hair – and ultimately, with all the attention directed towards her.

The depiction of Karin as the beautiful young virgin becomes even more apparent when observed in contrast to Ingeri, a young woman who lives with, and appears to be a servant to, Karin's family although the relationship is never made clear. Ingeri, although appearing to only be a few years older than Karin, is unmarried, pregnant, and non-Christian. She has been constructed as abject – the disgusting, corrupting influence – as well as a sort of “primitive other” in that she is darker than those around her, dirty, and pregnant. Chris Weedon describes the idea of primitivism as “see[ing] non-Western, non-white Other as more spiritual, more intuitive, more physical, more sensual and more sexual.”⁸¹ Ingeri has been coded in appearance to be just that. Indeed, this abjectification is revealed in one short scene in which she appeals to the pagan god Odin for help. The audience is led to see her as a sexual being by her obvious pregnancy, and through her appeal to Odin we observe a woman who is clearly more spiritual than Karin; however, that spirituality is constructed negatively as it is not based in Christianity.

While Ingeri clearly acts as a foil to Karin – in terms of class and religion – she does not necessarily do so in terms of sexuality. Through the character of Karin, Bergman complicates the notion of virginity and sexual innocence as she herself is not necessarily as pure as she might initially appear. On several occasions, during discussions of the previous night's dance, her flirtatiousness is revealed and questions arise in regards to how innocent she really is. Initially, attention is drawn to the large number of dance partners Karin had the night before, so many that she counts them off on her fingers for her mother, behavior apparently also noticed by Ingeri

⁸¹ Chris Weedon, *Feminism, Theory, and the Politics of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). 153.

who comments to the household during breakfast that “[Karin] certainly burned with fever at the dance last night.”⁸²

Karin’s budding sexuality is a recurring theme as she and Ingeri travel toward the church together. Ingeri brings it up in an attempt to quiet the other girl’s vocalized feelings of virginal superiority. While sitting in the grass shortly after beginning their journey to the church, the two engage in conversation about pregnancy and sexuality, during which Karin emphatically and somewhat condescendingly states, “No man will get me to bed without marriage.” Taunting her a bit, Ingeri responds by questioning how long her virtue will last when a “man takes [her] waist or strokes [her] neck,” and even questions what Karin would do if she were to be forced into an undesired sexual encounter with someone stronger.⁸³ Through this exchange, Ingeri, who is sexually more experienced, attempts to show Karin that life is often not as simple as she imagines. Neither is determining the extent of one’s sexual innocence as shortly thereafter Karin engages in a brief dialogue with a young man who had also attended the dance the previous night. After thanking her for something that occurred at the dance, the conversation proceeds by Karin’s attempting to correct him, saying, “There’s nothing to thank me for” followed by his mysteriously querying, “Oh, isn’t there?”⁸⁴ The ambiguity of this exchange is only increased when Ingeri subsequently admits to having seen the pair together while she hid in the barn. Through these exchanges, one begins to consider that perhaps Karin is not as innocent and virginal as she would like to appear and as her parents would like to see her.

As the two ride toward the church together, Ingeri, the visibly sexualized other, draws attention to Karin, a seeming distinction initially portrayed through the obvious differences in

⁸² *The Virgin Spring*, dir. Bergman.

⁸³ *The Virgin Spring*, dir. Bergman.

⁸⁴ *The Virgin Spring*, dir. Bergman.

appearance and use of lighting. Ingeri, with a darker complexion and frequently shown in the shadows (even when hiding during the rape/murder scene) contrasts with Karin, the fair-skinned blond who is depicted awash in the sunlight amidst a natural world that is green, lush, and in bloom. Despite such visual distinctions, however, the sexuality of the young servant woman ironically draws attention to that same characteristic in Karin rather than to her supposed innocence.

Clearly this young woman does not demonstrate the same holiness as the virgin martyrs of early Christianity, but her lack of sexual innocence complicates the appearance of the spring at her place of death. In the closing scenes of the film, the waters of this spring are demonstrated to have healing powers as each household member – beginning, of course, with Ingeri who has been constructed as the most sinful of all – wash her/himself with that very water. What does it mean, however, to wash oneself with the water of a non-virginal virgin spring? Part of the answer comes from Bergman's own growing doubts regarding his religious beliefs. *The Virgin Spring* was released in 1960; by the end of 1963, *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, and *The Silence* had been released, all films that Bergman wrote and in which he grapples with his evolving religious uncertainty. His questioning of the nature of good and evil as well as his complicating their seeming duality throughout *The Virgin Spring* makes even more sense when considered within the bigger context of Bergman's work.

Unlike the subsequent trilogy, however, the story told in *The Virgin Spring* is not original to Bergman; rather the screenplay was adapted by Ulla Isaksson from the thirteenth-century medieval ballad entitled "Töre's dotter i Vänge" ("Töre's Daughter at Vänge"). The original story contains no character of Ingeri nor does it contain any reference to Karin's sexuality (or virginity, for that matter) though. The only fault attributed to her is her pride (albeit the worst of

the seven deadly sins); in fact, four times the phrase “Proud Karin” is repeated and begins the two line stanzas. “Proud Karin” brushes and arranges her beautiful blond hair and then adorns herself in turn in her silk gown, her petticoat, and her blue cloak.⁸⁵ Although she is narcissistic, in the ballad the reader does not witness Karin beginning her journey to the church by running into and flirting with one her previous night’s dance partners; essentially, the reader does not see her as a sexual figure whatsoever prior to the approach of the three herdsmen. Even the word choice of the ballad in its English translation from the Swedish lessens the graphicness of the sexual crimes inflicted upon Karin. The men say to her, “[. . .] ‘Come be our wife, / Or though shalt forfeit thy young life.’” After she subsequently refuses and threatens them with the wrath of her father, the ballad recounts, “The herdsmen three took her to wife / And then they took from her her life.”⁸⁶ While they ultimately still rape and murder the young woman, the tale is less explicit partly due to its poetic economy of language.

More importantly, though, the film contains the scopophilic aspect that Mulvey addresses. In fact, in interviews they gave in 2005, both Birgitta Pettersson (Karin) and Gunnel Lindblom (Ingeri) acknowledge this by revealing their own discomfort with watching the rape scene. Referring to her character hiding and merely observing the violence inflicted upon Karin, Lindblom admits, “It was one of the most difficult scenes for me to play.” Pettersson confesses as well that she “found [the scene] terrible just to read about” and that she finds it “still horrible and frightening for me to watch today.”⁸⁷ Indeed, it is a horrific and disturbing scene. As she is sexually and violently assaulted, Karin is subjected to the gaze of not only the herdsmen but also the audience, as well as objectified by both. Whereas pride is the young victim’s primary flaw in

⁸⁵ “Töre’s Daughter at Vänge,” *The Virgin Spring* (Criterion, 2006).

⁸⁶ “Töre’s Daughter at Vänge.” stanzas 8, 11.

⁸⁷ *The Virgin Spring*, dir. Bergman.

the medieval version of the legend, the film now also depicts her through a sexual lens. In the scene in which Karin first appears, she is seen narcissistically staring at herself in a basin of water – in some ways participating in the scopophilia towards herself. As she takes pleasure in looking at herself, the importance of the gaze to the narrative framework is foreshadowed. This pride that is demonstrated from Karin's first appearance, as well as her budding sexuality/femininity, is routinely foregrounded throughout the film. However, her last scene ends with all sense of vanity disappearing as the gaze transfers to the three goatherders (and to the audience); her virginity equally gone.

Despite the graphic violence that occurs when Karin is raped and killed and when her father subsequently avenges her death, sexuality is the recurring issue in the film. The first character we see is Ingeri, visibly pregnant, and the last scene includes not only the young servant woman but also images of renewal and rebirth, via the spring and the father's promise to erect a church at that site. Although the insertion of Ingeri's character by Isaksson and Bergman allows this to be the case, ultimately, the story she inhabits is Karin's, not her own. Ingeri is merely present to create meaning for Karin in that her presence in the narrative not only draws attention to the religious conflict present while Sweden was in the midst of converting to Christianity but, perhaps more importantly, to help to complicate the notions of sexuality and virginity. Despite the vivid physical differences between Karin and Ingeri, the two might not be so different after all, especially if one allows for the destabilization of the virgin/non-virgin dichotomy. Perhaps Karin, like the anchoress Christine Carpenter, is coded as neither chaste nor unchaste in that such a categorization is indefinable and unknowable.

At the conclusion of the film when Karin's body has been found and is lifted up by her parents, resulting in the waters of the spring bursting forth from the ground, she is authorized

anew as a virgin by her parents. This is the virgin spring created by God as a marker of Karin's martyrdom. However, because this signifier occurs *after* her rape by two men, her status as a virgin martyr is complicated. Can one remain a virgin after being raped? In other words, the narrative attempts to remind us in the final moments of the film (not only through the spring, but also through the background choir music) that Karin died the death of a young virgin, and in so doing, queers the construct of virginity. Instead of seeing Karin becoming something sinful and disgusting like Ingeri, the audience is authorized to continue to regard her as a virgin. Despite the questions that arise earlier in the film and despite the events occurring immediately prior to her death that unequivocally strip her of her physical virginity, Karin has been idealized and resignified as a virgin. Through this tragedy, which leaves her parents childless, her vanity and her budding sexuality have been forgotten. She, along with her youth, has now been romanticized as the victim of a horrible crime. While both literal and symbolic differences do exist between the virgin and the non-virgin, perhaps the distinction between the two is not always so clear, as in the case of Karin.

While Karin's sexual innocence might not quite match up with initial impressions of her (i.e. the "good girl" through her youthful, fair beauty), perhaps Ingeri is not as "bad" as she might first appear. This young woman has had sexual intercourse at least once, as evidenced by her pregnancy, but there is never any discussion of her past that might indicate her being an overly sinful, overly sexual-active woman. The only reference to her past comes from Karin's mother who claims, in regards to the two young women, "You two have always been as different as the rose and thorn."⁸⁸ Despite this observation, Ingeri makes a potentially revealing comment – at least in terms of her past – when she responds to Karin's questions about being pregnant. As referenced earlier, Karin maintains that she will remain a virgin until she is married, regardless

⁸⁸ *The Virgin Spring*, dir. Bergman.

of the situation; however, Ingeri's follow up question is interesting. She asks the young woman what she would do if she were taken forcibly by someone stronger. For one familiar with the film, the comment could merely be seen as foreshadowing the events that cause Karin's eventual death. However, it is worth considering that this question might have arisen out of a sense of defensiveness in that Ingeri had also been subjected to sexual violence. The film provides no hints as to Ingeri's past other than that she has been taken in by Karin's family. However, regardless of any potential innocence and lack of responsibility on Ingeri's part, it seems plausible that she would continue to be Othered by the family, especially considering her being a non-Christian outsider.

At the end of the film, this young, abjected woman appears to have been forgiven for all of her sins: her sexual activity out of wedlock, her desire to see something bad happen to Karin, her failure to attempt to help Karin during her attack, and ultimately, her paganism. When the spring bubbles up and begins to flow over the landscape, Ingeri is one of the first to allow the waters to wash over her face and hands. In this moment, as she actively seeks to cleanse herself, her actions seem to indicate a self-baptism as Karin's father promises to build a church on the site and as ethereal choir music rises in the background.

While neither her sexuality nor any culpability for Karin's death can be erased, Ingeri complicates the binaries of good/bad, Christian/pagan, and perhaps even virgin/non-virgin (at least in terms of spiritual versus physical virginity assuming she lost her virginity by force). Ultimately, however, neither young woman can be seen as innocent, despite, perhaps, our desire to categorize Karin as such and despite her parents' seeming desire to see her as their innocent, martyred virgin daughter. Pride, Karin's sole sin in the original medieval ballad, now pairs with perhaps less-than-innocent sexual awareness, much like the growing sexuality of the young

Christine Carpenter in *Anchoress*. These two films, although more than thirty years apart, together reflect post-modern cynicism and a reluctance to rely upon organized religion. More importantly, however, by revealing the blinders modern Western culture often wears, these films queer the medieval past and they queer pre-modern Christianity.

Chapter 2

Resignifying the Object: The Castration of St. Juliana

Introduction

Unlike twentieth-century cinema that draws on the setting of and characters from the Middle Ages to authorize modern attitudes about gender, sexuality, and religion, often the past is similarly appropriated for a different purpose as seen in the early thirteenth-century life of St. Juliana, found in MS. Bodley 34 along with *Hali Meiðhad*, *Sawles Warde*, and the lives of the martyrs Katherine and Margaret. For the writer of this version of the fourth-century legend, the depiction of Juliana becomes an avenue by which he can indirectly challenge medieval constructions of gender. This occurs as the young virgin struggles to control physical and spiritual aspects of herself and, ultimately, the manner in which she is signified.

My argument focuses on the version of the legend contained in MS. Bodley 34, also known as the Katherine Group, and aims to better understand the text's depiction of Juliana. However, I am also concerned with the way the Katherine Group's portrayal of gender departs from Cynewulf's Old English version of her life and, to a lesser extent, the Latin *Acta Sanctorum*. Because Cynewulf's poetic rendering is the most recent predecessor of the early Middle English versions, its importance, at least in terms of my argument, lies in the way it helps shed light on the Juliana of the Katherine Group. Specifically, I am concerned with what the emendations found in MS. Bodley 34 tell us about the gendering of virginity in the high Middle Ages. Additionally, the version which would later be incorporated by Bolland into the *Acta Sanctorum* has commonly been considered by scholars to be Cynewulf's Latin source as well as

the indirect source of the early Middle English legend.⁸⁹ By examining the two older versions in tandem with that found in the Katherine Group, we can see more clearly how the changes reflect the social construction of the medieval virgin.

In 306 C.E. St. Juliana was beheaded, thus finally succumbing to the torture of her enemies.⁹⁰ The hagiographer of her *passio*, as contained in the Katherine Group, writes, “wið þe ilke ha beide hire / ant beah duuelunge adun bihefdet to þer eorðe. ant te eadie engles wið þe sawle singinde sihen in to heouene.”⁹¹ Her fragmented physical body, we are told, is then removed from the scene and made whole again by a blessed woman named Sophia. Although Juliana’s fleshly remains fall to the earth and remain in the physical realm, her spirit is taken to heaven where she can at last become a true *sponsa Christi*. Based on the details of her death, there are certain conflicts at work upon Juliana that become evident, many of which are not as obvious as the attempts on her life. As expected in the *passio* of a saint, the writer makes certain to account for her physical body as well as her spirit.

While such a detail within a saint’s life should not be surprising, according to medieval ideological frameworks, the higher domain of the spirit (and of the rational) was often directly associated with masculinity, and the more base realm of the physical being perceived as

⁸⁹ *þe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*, Early English Text Society, ed. S.T.R.O. Ardenne (London: Oxford UP, 1961). xxii.

⁹⁰ According to S.R.T.O. d’Ardenne in *þe Liflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*, Juliana was beheaded during the rule of Maximian in A.D. 306 in Nicomedia along with 130 other Christians. However, in the preface to his edition of *The Legend of St. Juliana*, Charles William Kennedy dates Maximian’s rule as 308-314.

⁹¹ *þe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne.*, lines 742-45. The Middle English comes from d’Ardenne’s emended text of MS. Bodley 34; however, the line numbers refer to the original manuscript (which is printed above the emended on each page) as the emended text has been rewritten in prose. “With that she bowed herself and fell headlong down, beheaded, to the earth. And the blessed angels took their way singing with her soul to heaven.” “St. Juliana,” trans. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, eds. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson (New York: Paulist Press, 1991). 306-21. 320. All translations from the Middle English have been taken from the Savage and Watson edition.

inherently feminine. Ruth Mazo Karras contends that “[. . .] femininity meant being tied to the body and things of the world in a way in which masculinity did not” while Lochrie, more specifically, argues, “The female body – with all its perviousness to external and internal influences – is the signifier of the frailty of the flesh [. . .].”⁹² This is significant because the writer makes certain to account for her spirit in addition to her body, a detail that might not be expected for a medieval woman. However, throughout the life of St. Juliana, we see such conflicts surrounding culturally-constructed binaries associated with gender, specifically masculine/feminine and spiritual or rational/corporeal. Through the destabilization of these boundaries, Juliana’s struggle to control how she is signified is revealed.

As with many early Christian saints, the legend of the virgin martyr Juliana underwent many transformations in the centuries leading up to the Middle Ages. Subsequently, the story of her death continued to be retold throughout the medieval period: from the early Latin prose, to Cynewulf and Bede’s Old English versions, and finally to versions from the high Middle Ages, including the thirteenth-century *South English Legendary* and MSS Bodley 34 and 285. In each variation of the legend, Juliana is portrayed as a young Roman noblewoman living with her pagan father, Africanus, with her mother only rarely mentioned in the different versions of the legend.⁹³ In addition to the details of her family life, the story recounts that the reigning emperor, Maximian, somewhat conventionally revels in torturing Christians – either more or less depending on the version. It is under such circumstances that Juliana lives. Despite this, however, she chooses to devote her life to Christ, electing to remain a virgin rather than marry

⁹² Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*. 32. Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991). 24.

⁹³ Of the three versions of the legend examined in this study, only the *Acta Sanctorum* references Juliana’s mother, stating that she “abhorred the sacrilegious worship of Mars, yet she consorted neither with the Christians nor the Pagans.” *The Legend of St. Juliana: Translated from the Latin of the Acta Sanctorum and the Anglo-Saxon of Cynewulf*, trans. Charles Willam Kennedy (Princeton: University Library, 1906). 7.

Eleusius, friend to and subordinate of Maximian. After suffering being stripped and beaten and also miraculously surviving a number of tortures designed to kill her (including having boiling brass poured over her naked body, being torn apart by a Katherine wheel, and being burned alive), Juliana ultimately is beheaded under command of Eleusius.

Notwithstanding these basic consistencies in the overall legend, each redactor seems to have had a slightly different perspective on the martyrdom of this virgin. As Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell acknowledge, one of the problems in dealing with saints' lives is "to determine whether the information reflects the world of the saint and his [sic] contemporaries or the experience of a much later biographer [. . .]."⁹⁴ If we take note of the changes that occur in successive versions of the legend, it becomes apparent that each compiler seems to have been quite deliberate in emphasizing certain details in order to make the story more culturally applicable, much the same way that today's cinematic and textual versions of medieval stories highlight and modify those aspects that reflect twentieth- and twenty first-century concerns and attitudes.

Weinstein and Bell, in paraphrasing Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye, point out that "[. . .] the hagiographer was not a biographer, at least in the modern sense. He was an agent of a mythmaking mechanism that served a variety of publics [. . .]."⁹⁵ Further contradicting the biographical nature of such texts, Delehaye compares such legends to works of fiction, arguing, "Certain hagiographic documents are clearly of this nature; they are parables or tales designed to bring home some religious truth or some moral principle. The author relates as a means of

⁹⁴ Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982). 7.

⁹⁵ Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*. 13.

teaching, and never pretends to be dealing with real facts.”⁹⁶ This aim distinguishes the *vita* or *passio* from other medieval texts and allows for its primary function, the edification of the reader, to occur. Through this “mythmaking mechanism,” shifting social and religious mores that occur over time become manifest. Specifically, I am examining how the legend of St. Juliana reveals these shifts and how they help us understand medieval society’s expectations for female virgins, especially in terms of gendered behaviors.

Much like the way the legend was adapted over the centuries to suit its audience, scholarly interpretation of these texts has also shifted. In the introduction to his 1904 edition of Cynewulf’s *Juliana*, William Strunk observes that, “The Juliana of the *Acta* is not wholly a sympathetic character. To begin with she is deceitful. [. . .] She is vindictive. [. . .] She is coarse of speech.”⁹⁷ Rather than understanding the position from which Juliana initially lies to her betrothed Eleusius – specifically about the strict conditions under which she will acquiesce to marry him – and rather than understanding her motivation for wishing harm upon both him and the demon Belial, Strunk merely deems her *unsympathetic*. From this early twentieth-century scholarship on Juliana and other virgin martyrs to what has been published more recently, much has changed. For example, in recent decades, medievalists have begun employing gender and queer studies to study the virgin martyrs, as well as medieval virginity in general.

There is a growing body of scholarship on tracts that extol the virtues of virginity, such as the *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meiðhad*, in addition to other literature that was directed towards the female religious (specifically those texts found in the so-called *Wohunge* group). However, little recent work has been done specifically on the version of St. Juliana’s life found in Bodley 34. I

⁹⁶ Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, trans. V.M. Crawford (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1962). 62.

⁹⁷ “Introduction,” *Juliana*, ed. Jr. Strunk, William, The Belles-Lettres Series, Section 1 (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1904). xxxiii-xxxiv.

say recent because there is scholarship from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries examining the authorship of *St. Juliana* (along with the other lives contained in the Katherine Group).

One notable exception is Gayle Margherita's "Desiring Narrative: Ideology and the Semiotics of the Gaze in the Middle English Juliana." In this article Margherita addresses the story of Juliana as told in the MSS. Bodley 34 and Royal 17A, arguing that the legend (along with that of Margaret and Katherine) serves a purpose of nation-building in its "link[ing] faith and Englishness, theology and (the English) language." Margherita contends that this purpose reveals "discursive tensions implicit in secular as well as religious texts" and ultimately reveals to the reader the almost scopophilic aspects of the legend as Juliana is abjectified (in part by the reader).⁹⁸ Margherita employs Lacanian theory, specifically his ideas of metaphor and metonymy, to argue that Juliana's abject body is used "in the service of ethnic, and finally Christian, ideology."⁹⁹

In her book *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (1997), Karen Winstead takes a much broader look at the life of Juliana in that she is studying the virgin martyr legends more generally from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. In her study Winstead addresses potential audience as well as purpose, and, in so doing, Winstead does consider general changes in the legends' depiction of characters and events despite claiming that her undertaking is not about the "meticulous comparison of texts with their sources."¹⁰⁰ Another larger and more general study is Sarah Salih's *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*

⁹⁸ Gayle Margherita, "Desiring Narrative: Ideology and the Semiotics of the Gaze in the Middle English Juliana," *Exemplaria* 2 (1990). 355.

⁹⁹ Margherita, "Desiring Narrative: Ideology and the Semiotics of the Gaze in the Middle English Juliana." 370.

¹⁰⁰ Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*. 16.

(2001) in which she addresses Juliana and the other Katherine group virgin martyrs as part of a larger study exploring different forms of virginity.¹⁰¹ In her analysis of the Katherine group martyrs, Salih argues, using Butler's theories of gender performativity, that virginity becomes its own gender: "The virgin is both bride and virago."¹⁰²

Finally, Julie Hassel's *Choosing Not To Marry: Women and Autonomy in the Katherine Group* (2002) considers the effect that male authorship has on the depiction of marriage and the women whose stories are told in the Katherine group.¹⁰³ She argues that, despite being likely written by men and despite having a focus on the body, these texts still "contain revolutionary ideas."¹⁰⁴ Regarding Juliana specifically, Hassel concludes that she is a "daring figure" and "in a role not available to its various female audiences, as a preacher."¹⁰⁵ Like Salih, Hassel employs Butler's theories of gender performativity as theoretical underpinning to her ideas to consider how gender is being deployed in these stories. Even though she argues that a medieval female religious, specifically the virgin martyrs, cannot be considered as either man or woman, Hassel also recognizes that "the categories of male and female matter even for religious, and cannot be transcended by thought or prayer."¹⁰⁶ Additionally, in an attempt to avoid the extremes of either of the two positions, she makes use of Diana Fuss's feminist theory about essentialism vs. constructivism. Hassel clarifies that essentialism is useful for her in order to find a point of connection with the women about whom she is writing: "[. . .] some notion of women as a group

¹⁰¹ See my introduction for a more detailed description of Salih's work.

¹⁰² Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*. 98.

¹⁰³ Julie Hassel, *Choosing Not to Marry: Women and Autonomy in the Katherine Group* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁰⁴ Hassel, *Choosing Not to Marry: Women and Autonomy in the Katherine Group*. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Hassel, *Choosing Not to Marry: Women and Autonomy in the Katherine Group*. 79.

¹⁰⁶ Hassel, *Choosing Not to Marry: Women and Autonomy in the Katherine Group*. 10.

enables me to have access to a temporally and culturally remote set of texts.” However, constructivism is equally instrumental in that it “brings to the fore the workings of culture and history in creating gender identity.”¹⁰⁷

Similarly to Salih and Hassel, my argument addresses the manner in which gender is revealed in the life of Juliana. In a slight departure from Salih, I would suggest that rather than a new gender, Juliana is *more than* merely man or woman. Additionally, the depiction of Juliana reveals more than just the fluidity of gender as Hassel suggests. As I will argue in this chapter and will later explore with Chaucer’s Second Nun and St. Cecilia, the textual creation that Juliana has become has been crafted as both man and woman – an amalgam of desirable parts from each in order to create a self that is more than either gender alone. She is shown to utilize those aspects that are required at any given time in order to create a subjectivity that fulfills her religious objectives.

It should be noted, however, that I am not proposing a sort of self-conscious performance such as that which Judith Butler negates in her clarification of performance versus performativity. In her discussion of Butler’s concept of performativity and in the service of her larger argument about the virgin martyr as role model, Hassel argues that gender is “always in the process of constructing itself.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, what we find in the story of Juliana, whether speaking of the version presented by Cynewulf in the eighth century or that found in the Katherine Group, is a young woman who has essentially been created to be a Christian superhero; however, each author has crafted her using a myriad of specific characteristics, regardless of their typical gendered associations. Using the safety of the past, her hagiographers

¹⁰⁷ Hassel, *Choosing Not to Marry: Women and Autonomy in the Katherine Group*. 10-11.

¹⁰⁸ Hassel, *Choosing Not to Marry: Women and Autonomy in the Katherine Group*. 10.

question contemporary views of gender in order to create a role model for the medieval female religious.

Over four centuries after Juliana was martyred in 306 C.E., using his Latin source, eighth century Cynewulf retold the story of this young Roman noblewoman.¹⁰⁹ Subsequently, the legend was reborn in MS Bodley 34 an additional four centuries later. Over the more than 800 years between Juliana's reputed death and the appearance of the Katherine Group, the *passio*'s intended readership obviously changed as the story itself did. In reexamining the version found in Bodley 34 as well as that written by Cynewulf (and, to a lesser extent, his Latin source), it is important to remember that there are three different groups of witnesses to the events surrounding Juliana's martyrdom: the laypeople and female religious being addressed in thirteenth-century England; the Anglo-Saxon audience of Cynewulf's time; and, finally, Juliana's contemporaries who participate as spectators in her torture and death.

Hali Meidhad, described as an "epistle on maidenhood written for the comfort of maidens,"¹¹⁰ and *Sawles Warde*, an allegorical tale stressing the importance of meditation on heaven and hell, were both likely intended for an audience of female religious.¹¹⁰ The readership of the Katherine group version of the Juliana legend is not as clear. As the story begins, the hagiographer includes a somewhat standard Christian dedication that concludes with the following:

In ure lauertes luue þe feader is of frumscheft,
ant i þe deore wurðmunt of his deorewurðe su

¹⁰⁹ While Cynewulf has traditionally been dated to the eighth century, recent scholarship has reconsidered this, suggesting his poetry might be more appropriately late tenth century. For a discussion of this see Lenore Abraham, "Cynewulf's Recharacterization of the *Vita Sanctae Julianae* and the Tenth Century Benedictine Revival in England," *American Benedictine Review* 62.1 (2011). 67-68.

¹¹⁰ Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, "Holy Maidenhood," *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene_Wisse and Associated Works*, eds. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson (New York: Paulist, 1991).223.

ne. ant iþe heiunge of þe hali gast þe of ham
 ba glideð, an godd unaginninde, each godes ful,
 alle leawede men þe understonden ne mahen
 latines ledene liðeð ant lusteð þe liflade of a meiden
 þet is of latin iturnd to englische leode, wið þon
 þet teos hali leafdi in heouene luuie us þe mare,
 ant þurh þis lihinde lif leade us to þet eche þurh
 hire eadi erndunge þet Crist is swiðe icweme.¹¹¹

In these lines not only does the hagiographer continue to make explicit his religious inspiration and purpose, but additionally, he helps elucidate whom he envisions his audience to be.¹¹² He states that “. . . alle leawede men þe understonden ne mahen / latines ledene liðeð ant lusteð þe liflade of a meiden. . . .” Unlike the writers of *Hali Meidhad*, *Sawles Warde*, and *The Ancrene Wisse* (which is also found alongside the works of the Katherine group in several manuscripts), the redactor of *Juliana* seemed to be writing for a more general lay audience rather than only for an audience of anchoresses and other religious women. In fact, Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson argue that, “The two passions, [*Margaret* and *Juliana*,] which may be the earliest of the anchoritic works [. . .], are also the only ones specifically directed at a wider audience [. . .].”¹¹³

¹¹¹ *þe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iuliene.*, l. 1-10. “In the love of our Lord, who is the Father of creation, and in the precious honor of his dear Son, and in the worship of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from them both, one god without beginning, full of every good: all the unlearned who cannot understand the Latin language listen, and hear the life of a maiden, which is translated from Latin into the English language, so that this holy lady in heaven may love us all the more, and through this false life lead us to the eternal one through her blessed intercession, which is greatly pleasing to Christ.” “St. Juliana.” 306.

¹¹² He has already begun to do so with the sentence immediately preceding: “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, here begins the life and the passion of St. Juliana.”

¹¹³ Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, “Appendix: Editors’ Note,” *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), Appendix, 285.

This claim seems largely based on the authorial address found at the beginning of the text as no additional evidence to support this claim is presented.

There are scholars, such as Annie Samson, who have suggested that we cannot necessarily take these lines as being anything more than a stylistic device, or a convention of the literature.¹¹⁴ However, Bella Millett argues:

Writers cannot compose their works *in vacuo*; they must have some kind of audience, however hypothetical, in mind. And if the 'myth of presence' is to be convincingly sustained, there has to be at least an approximate resemblance [. . .] between this audience and the audience addressed within the work; there is no point in addressing solitary readers as if they were a public meeting.¹¹⁵

Such an address to the reader might be a convention, as Millett suggests, however, we cannot dismiss it as only that. In *The Ancrene Wisse*, the author often speaks directly to the three anchoritic sisters who make up his primary audience. He does, in several sections of the text, include a wider audience in his advice; nevertheless, he always returns to the three sisters. There are no feigned words spoken to an imaginary larger audience; throughout the work he makes it clear that, first and foremost, the work was written as advice to these three women.

The fact that the works contained within the Katherine group were written in the vernacular rather than Anglo Norman also suggests that the author(s) might have been attempting to address an audience beyond merely those in the aristocracy or of gentle birth who

¹¹⁴ Annie Samson, "The South English Legendary: Constructing a Context," *Thirteenth_Century England I: Proceedings of the Newcastle upon Tyne Conference 1985* 1 (1986). Samson states that, "Such devices are common in medieval literature, part of a convention of writing as though the poet were speaking directly to an audience, a reinforcement, if one likes, of the myth of presence" (191). She also argues, "The creation of fictional audience and situation is a device for governing how the work will be received and is not to be taken as reflecting directly any extra-textual reality" (191).

¹¹⁵ Bella Millett, "The Audience of the Saints' Lives of the Katherine Group," *Reading Medieval Studies* XVI (1990). 136-37.

knew French.¹¹⁶ Additionally, it bears remembering that the women living in nunneries at this time (eleventh to thirteenth centuries) were largely noblewomen who would have been familiar with the French language, despite the fact that many of the surviving books and manuscripts from large English nunneries are actually in English (perhaps indicating that the nuns preferred to read in the vernacular). David Bell argues, however, that most of these texts are from the fifteenth century after English had begun to supersede the waning French language. As a result, we cannot use this to make interpolations about the audience of the Bodley Juliana.¹¹⁷

Ultimately, the textual as well as extra-textual evidence does not suggest that Juliana was intended merely as support for the female religious but also for a larger lay audience, one who was not familiar with either Latin or Anglo Norman. The fact that the anonymous writer of this version of Juliana likely intended it for a more general audience is significant because it tells us that this depiction of the virgin martyr as less than strictly feminine might have been less radical than one might think.

Unlike the more general lay audience of the Bodley Juliana's martyrdom, Cynewulf's audience is a bit more unclear, especially since dating him is somewhat troublesome. Shari Horner argues that he directed his poem more specifically to the female religious, that the story of Juliana's torture and eventual death likely had a special significance for the Anglo-Saxon nun. She explores "the implications the poem may have had for Anglo-Saxon female religious audiences facing both monastic ideals of chastity and the real and immediate threat of violence and rape during the Scandinavian invasions of England."¹¹⁸ According to Horner, the story of

¹¹⁶ Millett, "The Audience of the Saints' Lives of the Katherine Group." 147.

¹¹⁷ David M. Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries*, Cistercian Studies, vol. 158 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1995). 67-68, 75-78.

¹¹⁸ Shari Horner, "Spiritual Truth and Sexual Violence: The Old English 'Juliana,' Anglo-Saxon Nuns, and the Discourse of Female Monastic Enclosure," *Signs* 19.3 (1994). 659.

Juliana and her physical suffering for her faith would have been particularly relevant because “[. . .] a number of Anglo-Saxon nuns in fact did endure physical persecution and torture [. . .].”¹¹⁹ In contrast, Lenore Abraham considers the recent shifting of Cynewulf to the tenth century and, if that is the case, posits that his writing of Juliana would have been “especially well suited to meet the teaching needs of the Benedictine-led tenth-century religious revival.”¹²⁰ If this theory is true, it would indicate that Cynewulf’s audience would have largely consisted of largely newly-baptized Christians or, as Abraham puts it, “the nominal Christian, who has accepted baptism but has not ‘taken on the full armour of Christ.’”¹²¹ In either case, Cynewulf would have recognized the needs of his audience, that a heroic Juliana would have provided strength for a convent fearful of attack or newly-baptized Christians.

While the audience of the written words is important in terms of textual transmission and authorial intention, the third audience – the people observing the suffering and death of Juliana – is equally significant. Much like the medieval reader of the legend, the audience less than a century after Juliana’s martyrdom would have been supported in their faith by the saint’s extraordinary words and deeds. As Kate Cooper states, “From the end of the fourth century on, the legendary heroes of the age of apostles and martyrs functioned both as objects of devotion and as patterns for the spiritual progress of the faithful.”¹²² However, the original witnesses to her death would have more likely interpreted Juliana’s actions as inappropriate, especially in her

¹¹⁹ Horner, "Spiritual Truth and Sexual Violence: The Old English 'Juliana,' Anglo-Saxon Nuns, and the Discourse of Female Monastic Enclosure." 660.

¹²⁰ Abraham, "Cynewulf's Recharacterization of the *Vita Sanctae Julianae* and the Tenth Century Benedictine Revival in England." 82. For information on the date of Cynewulf, see note 109.

¹²¹ Abraham, "Cynewulf's Recharacterization of the *Vita Sanctae Julianae* and the Tenth Century Benedictine Revival in England." 82.

¹²² Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996).112.

attempt to usurp rhetorical and religious power. Cooper argues, “The chronicling and advertisement of ascetic behavior at all levels, from abstinence to defiance in the face of death, served as a medium for claims to power and allegiance. The invention of the ascetic hero and heroine was an important element in the formation of a Christian alternative language of power and society.”¹²³ As seen in the legend of Juliana, such an appropriation of power and defiance of authority in the name of what was still a minority religious belief would have been seen as just that, and for which, she would have been accordingly punished.

The fact that these actions were carried out by a woman only further threatened the system. Although the conflict arising from actions such as we see in the legend of Juliana is ostensibly religious, in actuality, it is more than that. In her discussion of stories that involve an apostle who comes to town and proceeds to command the affections of a Roman noblewoman, Cooper contends, “The challenge by the apostle to the householder [. . .] is essentially a conflict *between men*. The challenge posed here by Christianity is not really about women, or even about sexual continence, but about authority and the social order.” She adds that such tales “mask[ed] a contest for authority, encoded in the contest between two pretenders to the heroine’s allegiance.”¹²⁴ This scenario also manifests itself in the love triangle and maneuvering for power among Juliana, her suitor Eleusius, her father Africanus, and God.

Not surprisingly, one thing that does not change throughout the versions of the passio of Juliana is the hagiographer’s reification of Christianity and devotion to God and Christ and the vilification of the non-Christian, whether that be demon or simply pagan. Through each variation in the legend over the centuries, Juliana (and by extension, God) is elevated and the non-Christian is degraded in the eyes of the reader. One important effect of this is the

¹²³ Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. 58.

¹²⁴ Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. 55.

manipulation of gender and the redefining of what it means to be a gendered body, whether that body is male or female. Throughout this story chronicling the period immediately before and including Juliana's death, the reader's expectations in terms of appropriate male and female behavior and speech are inverted, and through Juliana the weak becomes the strong.

The Regendering of the Virgin Martyr

Although the author of the Middle English version portrays Juliana as a spiritual woman from the beginning of the legend, underneath that piety her concern is directed more towards maintaining control over her physical body in order to also have command over her spirit. By the end of her life, however, she has transcended such worldly concerns and fears, now focusing solely on her relationship with and commitment to God. Even in the Latin *Acta Sanctorum* in which Juliana has not as unequivocally committed herself to God at the beginning,¹²⁵ upon being informed that she is about to be beheaded, she is described as being "filled with great joy" and continues to preach to those present.¹²⁶ It is not only this development from more feminine corporeal concerns to more spiritual – thus more masculine – ones that is clearly present.

Additionally, as the hagiographer gradually regenders Juliana, the individuals witnessing both

¹²⁵ In the *Acta Sanctorum* the reader is informed at the beginning that Juliana is different from the rest of her family in that she "being of a wise mind and an understanding heart . . . pondered this, whether there be any true God who created Heaven and earth; and from day to day, being at leisure for prayer, resorted unto the church of God that she might learn the diving writings" *The Legend of St. Juliana: Translated from the Latin of the Acta Sanctorum and the Anglo-Saxon of Cynewulf*. 7-8. This is in stark contrast from Cynewulf who in introducing Juliana to the reader says, "Hio in gæst bær / halge greowe, hogde georne / þæt hire mægðhad mana gehwylces / fore Cristes lufan clæne geheolde" "Juliana," *The Exeter Book*, eds. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia UP, 1961). l. 28-31. ["She in her soul kept saintly faith and firmly intended for the love of Christ to preserve her virginity pure from any sin"] Bradley "Juliana," trans. S.A.J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. S.A.J. Bradley (London: Everyman, 2003). 303. All translations from the Old English have been taken from S.A.J. Bradley's "Juliana" found in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. The Old English comes from George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie's edition of *The Exeter Book*, and the Latin from Charles William Kennedy's *The Legend of St. Juliana: Translated from the Latin of the Acta Sanctorum and the Anglo-Saxon of Cynewulf*.

¹²⁶ *The Legend of St. Juliana: Translated from the Latin of the Acta Sanctorum and the Anglo-Saxon of Cynewulf*. 27.

her struggle to not be controlled and her ultimate transformation comprise increasingly larger groups. These different progressions are important because through them we witness Juliana's ultimately failed attempt to signify herself and resignify "femaleness."

From the beginning of the text, there is a recognition of Juliana's femininity. In reference to her suitor, the Roman nobleman Eleusius, we are told that upon seeing Juliana:

As he hefde an chere bihalden swiðe 3eor
ne hire utnunme feire. ant freoliche 3uhe
ðe. felde him iwundet in wið in his heorte
wið þe flan of luue fleoð. swa þet him þuh
te þet ne mahte he nanes weis wið ute þe
lechnunge of hire luue libben.¹²⁷

Although we would not really expect him – a pagan Roman – to meet Juliana and be smitten by her devotion to God, it is evident that, in addition to the fact that she is the daughter of a nobleman, Eleusius has fallen in love with her beauty, her fleshly body. This initial depiction of Juliana's physicality is quite different from either Cynewulf's rendition of events or that found in the *Acta Sanctorum*. Cynewulf recognizes that Eleusius possesses great desire for Juliana: "Ða his mod ongon / fæmnan lufian, (hine fyrwet bræc), / Iulianan."¹²⁸ However, nothing is mentioned of her beauty. Even less detail is found in the Latin in which the reader is merely told, "[Eleusius] had espoused a certain maiden sprung of noble family, Juliana by name."

Although this earliest of the three hagiographers does comment on her "wise mind," "understanding heart," and "great virtue" several lines later, we know nothing about what

¹²⁷ *Liflade* 33-38. Once he had eagerly appraised her immeasurably fair and noble youth, he felt himself wounded deep in his heart with the darts shot by love, so that it seemed to him that he could not in any way live without the medicine of her love" (Savage and Watson 306).

¹²⁸ "Juliana." l. 26-28. ["Then his heart began to yearn after Juliana, a virgin – desire took him by storm"] "Juliana." 303.

precipitated her engagement to Eleusius.¹²⁹ Neither the Latin nor Cynewulf's version focus in on Juliana's striking beauty. However, this difference makes sense if we consider the literary context in which the Katherine Group arose. As Hassel argues, Eleusius's actions are portrayed in much the same way that a courtly lover in contemporary secular literature would have been.¹³⁰ Moreover, this seemingly feminine behavior in otherwise masculine men hints at the destabilizing of gender binaries that is to come.

Juliana's concern for her physical body, as seen especially in the Bodley version, continues as she fights to maintain control over herself and, specifically, her virginity. She even resorts to the emotional demonstration of "biddinde 3e / orne wið reowfule reames. Þet he wissede hire / o hwuche wise ha mahte witen hire meiðhað / from mones man vnwemmet."¹³¹ Underlying her fight with not only her betrothed Eleusius but also her father is her deep devotion to God; however, in some ways that spirituality becomes temporarily overshadowed by Juliana's struggle to think of ways to forestall marrying, and thus losing her virginity to, Eleusius. Unlike Christina of Markyate who ultimately runs away from her family in order to avoid marrying her intended husband Burthred, Juliana does no such thing. Rather it is at this point that we see her feminine concern with her physical self begin to shift into the domain of more masculine-

¹²⁹ *The Legend of St. Juliana: Translated from the Latin of the Acta Sanctorum and the Anglo-Saxon of Cynewulf*. 7.

¹³⁰ Specifically, Hassel points out, "[. . .] the tempter in this story initially has a very appealing manner, that of a courtly lover. His romantic desire for Juliana, and the way in which her initial response to his approach furthers the love game, make him appear on one level to represent an appropriate choice for Juliana" (70). I depart from Hassel, however, on the point that Juliana "furthers the love game"; perhaps she appears to do so, but I would argue that Juliana does so more in an effort to stall his advances and give her an excuse not to marry him. Hassel maintains that "[. . .] marriage to the man is not out of the question. It is his refusal to convert to Christianity that makes marriage to him impossible" (70). Indeed, Juliana does present his conversion as one of her requirements for her hand in marriage; however, again because she has already privately committed herself to God, I would assert that that final condition for marriage is merely one that she feels safe in making – the likelihood of his converting is small, considering their pagan society; however were he to do so, that indeed might make the marriage slightly more palatable. Hassel, *Choosing Not to Marry: Women and Autonomy in the Katherine Group*.

¹³¹ *Be Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne.*, l. 50-53. "[. . .] praying eagerly with pitiful cries that he would make known to her in what way she might keep her maidenhood unstained by sex." "St. Juliana." 307.

identified rational thought.¹³² In order to avoid marriage to Eleusius, Juliana strategizes, subsequently informing her betrothed:

[. . .]. þet nalde ha nawt lih
 ten se lahe to luuien. Ne nalde ha neole
 chin him for na liuiende mon. ear þen he
 were under Maximien. hehest i Rome. Þet
 is heh reue. [. . .].¹³³

As she makes these plans, the reader sees the writer moving Juliana towards becoming less feminine. Even though her plan does not ultimately produce the desired result, Juliana attempts to usurp Eleusius's masculine role by seizing control over her body as well as her sexuality. As Ruth Mazo Karras points out, "[. . .] one core feature of medieval masculinity [. . .] is the need to prove oneself in competition with other men and to dominate others."¹³⁴ This is exactly what Juliana does: she dominates Eleusius. Her attempt to dominate her betrothed fails, however, because Maximian quickly grants Eleusius's request. Once Eleusius fulfills Juliana's requirements that he be made the high sheriff, she then resorts to sending him a message boldly stating:

‘[. . .] for nawt þu hauest iswech
 te. wreaðe se þu wreaðe. Do Þet tu do wult nule
 ich ne ne mei ich lengre heolen hit te 3ef

¹³² According to Joyce E. Salisbury, "[. . .] men were defined [by the early church fathers] as rational (dominated by mental activity) and strong." Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality." 85.

¹³³ *Þe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*. 57-61. "She would not stoop so low as to love him, nor would she come near him no matter what anyone did, before he became, next to [Emperor] Maximian, the highest in Rome – that is, the high sheriff." "St. Juliana." 307.

¹³⁴ Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men : Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2003). 10.

þu wult leauen. Ðe lahen þet tu liuest in ant
 leuen igodd feader ant in his deorwurðe su
 ne. ant iþe hali gast folkene froure. An godd
 Ðet is igret wið euches cunnes gode. Ich chule
 wel neome þe. ant 3ef Ðet tu nult no. þu art
 windi of me. ant oðer luue sech þe.¹³⁵

Without being overcome by emotion, Juliana emphatically and rationally communicates what she will allow and what she will not. Although this does not conclude their battle, in her desire for physical agency Juliana clearly means to challenge, and ultimately dominate, the authority of the man to whom her father has betrothed her. She pushes this even further in this version, as well as in the Anglo Saxon as Cynewulf allows Juliana to do this in public, after which Eleusius responds by appealing to her father's sense of right and wrong by saying, "Me þa fraceðu sind / on modsefan mæste weorce, / þæt heo mec swa torne tæle gerahte / fore þissum folce [. . .]."¹³⁶ This public challenge to his masculine authority ultimately drives Eleusius to leave all rational thought behind in favor of "progressive degeneration and brutalization."¹³⁷ Additionally, Cynewulf depicts this as occurring in the public sphere furthering Horner and Abraham's argument that the life of Juliana served to support Anglo-Saxon nuns and newly-baptized Christians in their struggles.

¹³⁵ *Be Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*. 76-84. "[. . .] you have troubled yourself for nothing. Be as angry as you please, do whatever you want, but I will not and cannot hide it from you any longer. If you will leave the law you live in, and believe in God the Father and his precious Son, and in the Holy Spirit, the comforter of the people, one God who is glorified with every kind of good, I will be glad to take you. And if you will not, you are rid of me; look for another lover." "St. Juliana." 307.

¹³⁶ *Be Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*. 71-74. "To my mind these insults are painful in the extreme, in that she so grievously assailed me with blasphemy in front of these people." "St. Juliana." 304.

¹³⁷ Jocelyn G. Price, "The Liflade of Seinte Iulienne and Hagiographic Convention," *Medievalia et Humanistica: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* 14 (1986). 37-58, 43.

Having begun, Juliana's progression from being occupied with physical (specifically, bodily) matters to those of the spirit continues throughout the remainder of the text. Juliana steadfastly holds on to what she believes is right. In the Middle English version, calmly (and "softleliche," according to the writer) she informs her father Africanus after being threatened with torture:

‘[. . .]. Ne lef þu nawt leoue
feader Ðet tu offeare me swa. ich swerie azein. Ðe
ihesu crist godes sune. Ðet ich on leue. ant luuie as leof
lukest. ant lufsumest lauerd. Ðah ich cwic beo forbe
arnd baðe lim and lið ileitinde leie. Nulle ich þe
her onont. Preate se þu þreate buhe ne beien.’¹³⁸

Juliana doesn't reply to Africanus's warnings with weeping or apologies but with a simple statement of how she will respond if he indeed carries through with his threats. In contrast to her father's emotional outburst, she is rational and calm. Twice within this single conversation Africanus is described by the writer as being either "wreaðede / sw[earing] deopliche" or "wreaððin swiðe ferliche."¹³⁹ Interestingly, before becoming controlled by his emotions, Africanus's use of language is still what would be considered feminine in that he utilizes language deceitfully. After Eleusius requests that he control his daughter, Africanus calls Juliana to his presence and "feng on earst / feire on to lokin 3ef he mahte wið eani luue / speden."¹⁴⁰ He

¹³⁸ *Pe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*. 112-17. "Don't think, dear father, that you can frighten me like this. I swear in reply to you, by Jesus Christ, God's Son, in whom I believe and love as the loveliest and most lovable Lord: though I be burned alive, limb for limb in flaming fire, still in this matter I will not bend or bow, threaten what you will." "St. Juliana." 308.

¹³⁹ *Pe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*. 106-107, 134.

¹⁴⁰ *Pe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*. 94-96. "[. . .] began kindly at first, to see if he could get his way by using any kind of love." Savage "St. Juliana." 307.

very deliberately appropriates a loving, fatherly tone in an attempt to inflict his, and Eleusius's, will upon his daughter. When it becomes clear to Africanus that he will be unsuccessful, his emotions take control. It is only after repeated threats and whipping that Juliana similarly resorts to excessive emotion by shouting back at her father.

Through this whipping and the other forms of torture, Africanus and Eleusius attempt to bring Juliana's attention back to her corporeal, feminine self. As Gayle Margherita points out, "In *Juliana*, as in much of later literature, the flesh is feminine, fragmented and ephemeral, while the word is masculine, whole, and eternal."¹⁴¹ However, rather than focusing on the flesh, Juliana repeatedly uses language to facilitate her survival. In fact, rather than appealing to any sense of compassion or emotion in these men who aim to defeat her, she petitions their masculine sense of reason. Juliana logically inquires of Eleusius that if he is so scared of Maximian's response to his potential conversion to Christianity, shouldn't she be even more scared of God's response should she turn against him.¹⁴² Even in her prayers to God, Juliana appeals to His sense of reason in asking Him to save her:

Swa þet

tes unseli ne þurue nawt seggen. Þi lauerd þet tu

leuest on. Ant schulde þi scheld beon. Hwer is he

¹⁴¹ Margherita, "Desiring Narrative: Ideology and the Semiotics of the Gaze in the Middle English *Juliana*." 355-74. 365.

¹⁴² Juliana responds to Eleusius's fears by reminding him, "þef þu dredest se muchel a deadlich mon þe liueð al aþein lei, ant leneð al his luue on liflese schaftes, his schuppet to scheome, ant art offruht swa to leosen his freontschipe, schulde ich þenne forsaken Ihesu Crist, godes sune, þe is ort ant ende of al þet eauer god is [. . .]" *Þe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*. 21. ["If you fear so much a mortal man who lives so entirely again the law, and who bestows all his love on lifeless creations, to the shame of his Maker, and are so afraid to lose his friendship, should I then forsake Jesus Christ, God's Son, who's the beginning and end of all that is good [. . .]."] "St. Juliana." 310. The Latin version expresses a similar sentiment, but the writer attributes even more spunk to Juliana through her word choice: "If thou fear this emperor who is mortal and seated upon his dung-hill, how canst thou compel me to deny that Immortal Emperor from whom, by great allurements, thou mayest beguile me?" *The Legend of St. Juliana: Translated from the Latin of the Acta Sanctorum and the Anglo-Saxon of Cynewulf*. 11. Rather than focusing on lifting up God, she tears down the emperor and his pagan rule. The Middle English here is from d'Ardenne's emended text from MS Royal 17A due to a leaf missing in the Bodley MS.

nuðe. Ne bidde ich nawt drihtin þis for deaðes dred
 nesse. Ah false swa hare lahe. Ant festne ipine icorene
 treowe bileaue.¹⁴³

Rather than weeping and wailing in anguish and fear, she discusses the situation with God and reminds Him of the consequences to Him – not her – if her tormentors succeed. She strikes deals with Eleusius and the devil Belial, she makes her father into an interlocutor when he would rather threaten and yell, and she prays to God and Christ to extricate her from the Katherine wheel and from being burned at the stake.

This apparent gender reversal as seen by Juliana’s extraordinary ability to use language to her benefit while her male enemies merely focus on her physicality reflects the overarching struggle within the story over the power to signify Juliana’s seemingly queer body, which is neither clearly female nor male. Stacey Schlauf argues that, “In some very concrete ways, nuns projected themselves as a ‘third gender,’ which functioned as a safety valve for women.

Considered neither men nor women, they lived lives less circumscribed than those of most secular women. Women religious, although not men, transcended their womanness.”¹⁴⁴

Although Schlauf’s thesis ultimately centers on two specific nuns from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we can see a similar notion of a ‘third gender,’ operating within Juliana.¹⁴⁵

Somewhat similarly I contend that Juliana instead represents an amalgamation of both masculine and feminine qualities, retaining her “womanness” as well as appropriating masculinity. The primary male figures in the story, African and Eleusius, seek to use her body as the primary

¹⁴³ *Pe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*. 656-61. “[. . .] so that these fools need not say, ‘The Lord in whom you believe and who should be your shield, where is he now?’ I’m not asking you this, Lord, out of fear of death; but so as to prove their law false, and to affirm true faith in your chosen ones.” “St. Juliana.” 319.

¹⁴⁴ Schlauf Schlauf, “Following Saint Teresa: Early Modern Women and Religious Authority.” 288.

¹⁴⁵ Sarah Salih, in her book *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, also suggests that the category of “virgin martyr” can be seen as a third gender.

signifier of her self while for Juliana, rather than physicality, religiosity defines her. These two men attempt to inscribe meaning upon her body first by erotic means and later through their torture, thus reminding her that as a woman what is important is her corporeality.

As a result, her physical body and what is being inflicted upon it is that which is emphasized to both Juliana and the reader. Winstead points out that, “One obvious source of appeal is the virgin martyr legend’s emphasis on sex, violence, and sexual violence.”¹⁴⁶ As in contemporary Hollywood films, sex and violence attracts an audience – even in a story of a virgin martyr. Interestingly, Frances Beer suggests that, compared to the Old English, “Juliana’s effect on Eleusius is more explicitly erotic in the Katherine Group’s version, and the torments he inflicts seem the more pathological as they are imposed on a ‘desired’ body.”¹⁴⁷ While the reader can see Juliana attempt to control the debate, and ultimately herself, through her rational thinking and through prayers and biblical teaching (only occasionally allowing anger to slip through),¹⁴⁸ what is also emphasized by the author is her sexuality and later the violence inflicted upon her. In addition to drawing attention to her position as an active subject who in the short term (and arguably even in the long term) succeeds in controlling her own life, the writer of *St. Juliana* attempts to portray her as a passive object upon whom actions are performed. Margherita reminds that, “Thus, the specular moments in *Juliana* present a culturally-determined

¹⁴⁶ Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*. 12.

¹⁴⁷ Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992). 68.

¹⁴⁸ I would disagree with Elizabeth Robertson who posits that, “Juliana’s speeches are given not to argue, persuade, or explain, but rather to praise God as he helps Juliana [. . .].” While the element of praise is clearly present, to reduce them to that is to see Juliana merely as a religious prop as she teaches biblical history to the witness through her prayers and responds to and debates both Africanus and Eleusius. Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1990). 123.

set of ‘features’ of the Christian hagiographic code, features which the hagiographer has deemed ‘pertinent.’”¹⁴⁹

Moreover, part of what the writer of *Juliana* has seemed to find “pertinent” is the fact that, at the point at which she’s being tortured and her body is being most inscribed upon, Juliana is also most subject to the gaze of onlookers. Her flesh is being made abject by the torture in the presence of hundreds of observers. Earlier in the text when she attempts to avoid marriage to Eleusius, Juliana has essentially locked herself away. While we are not told specifically where she is, the writer does say that once African learns of Juliana’s refusal to marry, he summons her to his presence. Juliana’s deal-making with Eleusius as well as her subsequent interlocutions with her father all occur outside the presence of any observers. Her appropriation of the masculine symbolic is one of the primary means by which the hagiographer allows Juliana to attempt to re-create herself, but that happens void of witnesses. As Judith Butler questions, “Can language simply refer to materiality, or is language also the very condition under which materiality may be said to appear?”¹⁵⁰ The way that language creates reality becomes evident through the hagiographer’s allowing Juliana to use both the written and the spoken word; however, he also uses language to shape the materiality of the text, and ultimately Juliana by allowing her to speak – but in private. Her message to Eleusius containing the conditions under which she will marry him and allow him to have sex with her, her conversations with African, and even her outwitting of the demon Belial (and his acknowledgement that she has been the biggest challenge he has ever faced in his centuries of temptation) all occur in the presence of only those parties specifically involved.

¹⁴⁹ Margherita, "Desiring Narrative: Ideology and the Semiotics of the Gaze in the Middle English *Juliana*." 363.

¹⁵⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* . 31.

Conversely, upon being made whole again after being torn apart and crushed by the Katherine wheel, Juliana is allowed to use language in front of hundreds of observers, but only in the service of the hagiographic tradition. Only at the end of this long prayer does she reference herself and her trouble; the majority of it consists of thanking and praising God. At this point, we learn that all of these events have occurred in the presence of a crowd of witnesses. Through the miraculous flying apart of the wheel and subsequent healing of Juliana, approximately 500 people who previously supported the torture of Juliana now convert to Christianity and then “prungen euchan / biuoren oðer forte beo bihefdet” upon the command of the emperor.¹⁵¹ Unlike those occasions where Juliana alone seems in control of her surroundings, the scenes where the masculine has reasserted itself – in the form of either the Roman men or God – occur very much in the public eye.

Clearly this is a function of this genre, the virgin martyr legend. In fact, Julie Fromer argues in regards to the virgin martyr Saint Margaret, “The corporeal rendering of Margaret’s suffering allows her body to become a visible sign of the divine, rendered in physical terms in order to serve as an observable object to the spectators who witness her pain and her tortured body.”¹⁵² We can see Juliana’s physical torture operate in a similar manner in *St. Juliana*. The attempt by the Romans to destroy her physical body followed by the angelic rescue and healing of Juliana’s body functions as the catalyst for the conversion of the large crowd of onlookers. However, I don’t believe this scene can be that easily explained.

At this point in *St. Juliana*, Juliana is clearly at her lowest. The hagiographer describes:

[M]e brohte hire uorð as beliales budel bet ant bun

¹⁵¹ *Pe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*. 644-45. “[. . .] crowded each in front of the other to be beheaded [. . .]” “St. Juliana.” 318.

¹⁵² Julie E. Fromer, “Spectators of Martyrdom: Corporeality and Sexuality in the Liflade Ant Te Passiun of Seinte Margarete,” *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture*, ed. Susannah Mary Chewning (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). 89-106. 90.

den hire þer to hearde and heteueste. he dude
 on eiðer half hire. fowre of hise cnihtes. forte
 turnen Ðet hweol wið hondlen imaket þron o Ðet eadi
 meiden se swiðe as ha mahten. ant het olif. ant ole
 omen swingen hit swiftliche. ant turnen hit abuten.
 ant heo as þe deouel spurede ham to donne. duden
 hit unsperliche. Ðet ha bigon to broken al as Ðet isteled
 irn strac hire in. ouer al. ant from þe top to þe
 tan. áá as hit turned. to limede hire ant to leac lið
 ba ant lire. burtsten hire banes. ant Ðet meari bears ut
 imenget wið þe blode. Ðer me mahte iseon alre sor
 hene meast þe i Ðet stude stode.¹⁵³

Whatever successes Juliana had earlier in attempting to regain control of her physical and spiritual reality are nullified in this single scene where she is finally and fully abjectified. It is only through reverting to a feminine use of the language – her having “þeide to godd” – that she is released from the wheel and made “hal” again.¹⁵⁴ But is she truly made whole? Her body, according to the hagiographer, becomes “as þah ha nefde nohwer hurtes ife / let,” and her spirit, again according to the hagiographer, is presumably also intact as she immediately “feng to þonki

¹⁵³ *Þe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iuliene*. 553-65. She was brought forth, as Belial’s officer commanded, and they bound her on it hard and cruelly. On each side, he set four of his soldiers to turn the wheel as hard as they could on the blessed maiden, with the handles fastened on it. And he commanded them to swing it swiftly and to turn it around, as they valued their lives. And they, as the devil spurred them to do, did it unsparingly, so that she began to be all broken as the hardened iron dug into her everywhere, from her top to her toes, as it turned inexorably and tore her apart, dragging at both limbs and flesh. Her bones were crushed and the marrow burst out, mixed with blood. Whoever stood in that place could see the greatest of all suffering. Savage "St. Juliana." 317.

¹⁵⁴ *Þe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iuliene*. 566.

bus god wið honden up aheune.”¹⁵⁵ However, any wholeness she has been granted results from her relinquishing the power she had earlier appropriated.

The emphasis as she is rescued is naturally on her physical self as that is not only where the miracle lies also the cause for the conversion of the 500, but with the return of the gaze to the corporeal, the writer resituates the text within the appropriate realms for a female saint – that of the feminine flesh and that of the spiritual. On the surface, Juliana’s use of language has shifted markedly. No longer does she use it as a personal tool but as a means to thank and praise God. Rather than depicting Juliana as using language to signify herself (as occurs earlier in the text), the hagiographer visibly reclaims it. As he resignifies Juliana himself, he merely loans it to her in order to edify the witnesses and, more importantly, the reader. In allowing her to use the tool of language to lift up God and edify the reader, however, Juliana continues to be masculinized and be a queer figure in her teaching biblical history to her audience – both literal and textual – and preaching the word of God.

Although this is a crucial scene in understanding the legend of *The Liflade*, unlike that of St. Margaret, it is at not the conversion of the crowd when the culmination occurs; rather it is when Juliana is beheaded by her enemies.¹⁵⁶ At that point her queer body – that body which is an amalgamation of masculine and feminine elements – is finally exposed and resignified. The torture which she endures and her ultimate beheading unveils and castrates her masculinity and reinscribes her acceptably as a “female,” a “virgin,” and a “martyr.” Despite this, Eleusius fails to be re-masculinized. As Price points out, “[. . .] he fastens on the possibility of beheading as a

¹⁵⁵ *Pe Liflade and Te Passiun of Seinte Iuliene*. 570-71, 571.

¹⁵⁶ Julie Fromer argues that the climax of the *Life and Passion of St. Margaret* occurs at the point when God’s power is manifested before a crowd who then converts to Christianity en masse. Fromer, “Spectators of Martyrdom: Corporeality and Sexuality in the Liflade Ant Te Passiun of Seinte Margarete.” 102.

kind of release for himself.”¹⁵⁷ Even when he is on the verge of becoming the victor, he fails to relinquish the emotion that has plagued his battle with Juliana. This reveals that even as Juliana is reinscribed back into a more acceptable form, Eleusius remains queerly feminine

The legend of St. Juliana is meant to be a story that edifies its readers by reminding them of the power and love of God. It tells the story of the martyrdom of Juliana and her attempt to devote her life as a virgin to God while living in pagan Rome. The struggle is not merely one between Christian and pagan, however; it represents much more than that. It illustrates “the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely.”¹⁵⁸ Juliana ultimately is not allowed (by her enemies in the story or by her hagiographer) to signify herself as she would choose – as a *sponsa Christi*, but by continuing to worship God and actively placing herself in position to be beheaded, she is able to prevent being completely determined by the norm of those around her.

¹⁵⁷ Price, "The Life of Sainte Julienne and Hagiographic Convention." 43.

¹⁵⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* 126-27.

Chapter 3

Coming out of the Convent:

Destabilizing the Binaries in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* and *Second Nun's Tale*

Introduction

In the life of St. Juliana the reader is presented with the depiction of a young woman who, in her desire to retain control over her body and how she defines herself, clashes with familial and societal expectations. Rather than making a conscious decision to conduct herself in a less than feminine manner according to societal standards, she merely responds to the demands of each situation according to her desire to remain chaste. As a result, Juliana's hagiographer portrays her as having created a self completely antithetical to what her contemporaries in early-Christian Rome would have expected. However, the intended medieval audience of Juliana's *passio* as told in Bodley 34 was familiar and somewhat more comfortable with a woman who dedicated her life to being a *sponsa Christi*; in fact, her story would have had the goal of edifying its intended audience. Similarly, Chaucer uses the safety of temporal and geographical distance to create two women – the Prioress and the Second Nun – whom he depicts as fighting back against social expectations, thus revealing options for women other than completely eschewing femininity.

Much has been written about the characters and tales of each woman, especially the Prioress; however, very little of that has explored the connection between these two traveling companions. In her 1953 article Mary Hostia reflects on the disparity in the amount of information presented in the *General Prologue* about the Prioress and the Second Nun before then contrasting key elements of each nun's *Prologue* and *Tale*, ultimately coming to the

conclusion that the stark differences reveal the Second Nun to possess a truer religiosity than is seen in the vanity and worldliness of the Prioress.¹⁵⁹ While Hostia does link these two female pilgrims and the tales they tell, her character analysis fails to consider the role of gender.

Subsequently, Graham Landrum unites the tales of all three of the “convent crowd” by including the Nun’s Priest in his analysis. Despite his disparagement of the Prioress, calling her “ineffectual” and appearing to not have the “capacity, understanding, or vocation for running a religious house,” Landrum’s conclusions about the mysterious Second Nun have some validity.¹⁶⁰ However, I would argue that he does not go far enough. He acknowledges that her (and, ultimately, Chaucer’s) depiction of Cecilia is “an aggressive heroine who instructs men in behavior and doctrine”; additionally, rather than relying on her physicality, Cecilia depends on her “brain and willpower.” His observations though are somewhat limited, contending that, rather than the Prioress, the Second Nun is likely the one who runs the nunnery and merely concludes that “our Second Nun is a feminist before her time.”¹⁶¹

Most recently Robert Sturges examined the tales of the three women pilgrims and narrators – the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun – arguing that the characters and their tales are linked in that each tries to establish female secular or spiritual authority in addition to poetic authority. However, unlike Hostia and Landrum who link the women because they are traveling together, Sturges merely connects them because they are *the* three female narrators. According to him, the commonality that exists stems from their femaleness, using such phrases as “linking women in time” and “women’s communal solidarity” and describing the three

¹⁵⁹ Mary Hostia, "The Prioress and Her Companion," *College English* 14.6 (1953).

¹⁶⁰ Graham Landrum, "The Convent Crowd and the Feminist Nun," *Tennessee Philological Bulletin* 13.1 (1976). 6.

¹⁶¹ Landrum, "The Convent Crowd and the Feminist Nun." 12.

pilgrims' concerns as "unique to them as women."¹⁶² While I would not presume to argue that this is perhaps not the case, one must be careful not to take this somewhat essentialist argument too far. In aligning pilgrims merely according to gender, where does that leave the Pardoner who likely does not have a lot in common with the ribald Miller and Reeve? Additionally, by isolating the three women narrators, we resort to relying on binary concepts of gender.

Although I agree with Hostia and Landrum that Chaucer links the tales of the two nuns (and probably that of the Nun's Priest as well, as Landrum maintains), I would argue that this connection is more than the Second Nun merely revealing the flaws in her superior and more than her merely being a proto-feminist. The two nuns and their tales instead seem to be connected by the way Chaucer allows both characters to destabilize medieval gender categories: first through the Prioress's hyperfemininity and subsequently through the Second Nun's creation of a new gender as she unites medieval masculine and feminine qualities. Although the Prioress appears to be a model of medieval femininity as she is depicted in the *General Prologue* (but not necessarily a model of the female religious), the manner in which Chaucer builds up socially-constructed binaries in her character and her tale actually exposes the fractures or ruptures in her identity. Later in the tale-telling contest, Chaucer's Second Nun responds with the similarly queer bodies of herself and Saint Cecilia and allows both to transcend masculinity and femininity, exploding these artificially constructed categories. Only when we cast the Prioress against the other nun in the company, the Second Nun, can we understand its performance. Rather than merely creating "a feminist before her time" in the Second Nun, Chaucer demonstrates the artifice behind the Western concept of there being only two genders.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Robert S. Sturges, "'The Canterbury Tales' Women Narrators: Three Traditions of Female Authority," *Modern Language Studies* 13.2 (1983). 50, 43.

¹⁶³ Landrum, "The Convent Crowd and the Feminist Nun." 12.

The Body of the Prioress

Before Chaucer ever allows her to speak, he constructs the Prioress for his readers. In the *General Prologue* a detailed description of both her physical attributes and her demeanor is presented, showing us how he wants her to be viewed. This portrait begins by stating that “. . . hir smylyng was ful symple and coy.¹⁶⁴ Like the Wife of Bath whose depiction begins by pointing out her skill at cloth-making – a typically feminine activity,¹⁶⁵ the reader is first directed to the Prioress’s supposedly quiet and unassuming nature, appropriately desirable feminine qualities. In addition to her demure smile, we are told later in the description that “. . . Hir nose [was] tretys, hir eyen greye as glas, / Hir mouth ful small, and therto softe and reed.”¹⁶⁶ However, Richard Schoeck points out, “Her sparkling eyes, her small soft mouth, her beautifully broad forehead, her shapely nose – all these attributes are conventional in the cataloguing descriptions of medieval heroines. The point is double: not merely that she is physically attractive, but that the reader should be cognizant of that attraction.”¹⁶⁷ This attention by Chaucer in the *General Prologue* to the Prioress’s features and her physical beauty, serving as a reminder of women’s close association with corporeality, also creates a character who is more romantic heroine and less a nun.¹⁶⁸ Rather than creating a portrait of a modest nun embarking on

¹⁶⁴ Geoffrey Chaucer, "The General Prologue," *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). 25, line 119. All references to the *Canterbury Tales* will be from the third edition of *The Riverside Chaucer*.

¹⁶⁵ “Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt / She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt. / In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon” (Chaucer, *GP* l. 447-48).

¹⁶⁶ Chaucer, "The General Prologue." lines 152-53.

¹⁶⁷ R.J. Schoeck, "Chaucer’s Prioress: Mercy and Tender Heart," *Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales*, eds. Richard Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, vol. 1 (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1960). 247.

¹⁶⁸ In her essay “Gendered Sexuality,” Joyce E. Salisbury points out, “In contrast to men, who were strong, rational, and spiritual by nature, church fathers believed women to be not only soft, but carnal” (86).

a holy pilgrimage, Chaucer emphasizes not only the nobility from which she likely comes but also her womanhood.¹⁶⁹

In stark contrast, following this detailed description of the Prioress, her two traveling companions – the Second Nun and the Nun’s Priest – are simply described as, “Another nonne with hire hadde she / That was hir chapeleyne, and preestes thre.”¹⁷⁰ Consequently, of these three pilgrims traveling together, only the Prioress warrants a detailed description or more than a passing reference. In focusing on her and her body, Chaucer reminds readers of her femininity and her corporeality.

Included in the narrator’s portrait of the Prioress are a number of behaviors typically associated with one who is exceptionally meticulous. We learn that when she eats:

She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,
 Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;
 Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe
 That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.
 In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.¹⁷¹

As it has been argued, perhaps Chaucer is mocking the Prioress and her overly-dignified manners through this depiction of her.¹⁷² Nevertheless, he still portrays her as being excessively feminine through the worldly and materialistic concerns that she possesses despite her role as

¹⁶⁹ Women who were sent by their families to live in nunneries were frequently from nobility or gentility as the lower classes would not have been able to afford the expected dowry. Shulamith Shahar and Eileen Power both discuss these expectations. Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Routledge, 2003). 39. Eileen Power, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995). 81.

¹⁷⁰ Chaucer, "The General Prologue." l. 163-64.

¹⁷¹ Chaucer, "The General Prologue." l. 128-32.

¹⁷² Graham Landrum contends that “. . . the telltale grease that had to be wiped from her upper lip after she had taken a good bit from a thigh or a drumstick . . . tells us of her vulgarity and gluttony” (6-7), and like others have argued, that she demonstrates a pretentiousness of both the body and the soul.

prioress. This femininity, however, also begins to hint at her artificiality, that maybe she is merely the sum of her parts rather than a cohesive whole. As Robert Hanning argues, through the descriptions of both her appearance and her actions, “[. . .] the Prioress shows at every turn a cultivation which is never quite effortless or complete enough.” Additionally, she has “replace[d] [her own personality] with an established feminine role – that of the refined, courtly lady – which she has rather painfully learned for the occasion.”¹⁷³ One would not necessarily expect a prioress, a woman who has devoted her life to her religion and matters of the spirit and who should be an example to the nuns she leads, to be seen wearing such expensive accoutrements as a fashionable cloak, coral rosary beads, and “. . . a brooch of gold ful sheene, / On which ther was first write a crowned A, / And after *Amor vincit omnia*” despite the fact that “Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was.”¹⁷⁴

During the Middle Ages, the Prioress was not alone in her retention of the trappings of nobility. Eileen Power comments that “The bishops were especially shocked to find nuns still retaining the vanities of their sex. The three D’s (dances, dresses, dogs) drew special condemnation.”¹⁷⁵ Additionally, Shulamith Shahar describes, “Church synods drew up lists of the articles of clothing and ornaments which nuns were forbidden to wear, but to no avail. Fashionable clothing and pet animals (some nuns kept monkeys, squirrels, birds, and above all lapdogs) did not disappear.”¹⁷⁶ Although Chaucer does not comment on the Prioress in terms of dancing, she does continue to dress in fine clothes as well as keep pet dogs. In fact, the reader is told:

¹⁷³ Robert W. Hanning, "From Eva and Ave to Eglentyne and Alisoun: Chaucer's Insight into the Roles Women Play," *Signs* 2.3 (1977). 587.

¹⁷⁴ Chaucer, "The General Prologue."l. 157-62, 151.

¹⁷⁵ Power, *Medieval Women*. 90.

¹⁷⁶ Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*. 47.

Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
 With rosted flesh, or milk and wastel-breed.
 But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,
 Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte [. . .]¹⁷⁷

Hanning offers that the Prioress's "treatment of her lapdogs, her sympathy for trapped mice, dead or bleeding, suggests an identification with small, helpless things, trapped and punished in a world ruled by men [. . .]."¹⁷⁸ While that might certainly be the case considering her role within both a male-dominated society and religion, her treatment of animals also illustrates her emotionality. Perhaps more importantly, however, it also reveals her artifice: She weeps for suffering animals while feeding them "rosted flesh, or milk and wastel-breed," better food than was available to many people. This misplaced and simulated emotionalism, as well as her worldly concerns, not only hints at the hypocrisy of the Church as a whole, but also calls into question the Prioress's religious devotion. Rather than recounting her work for the Church (of which nothing is mentioned), Chaucer focuses on her appearance, manners, and emotionalism. Hanning points out that Chaucer "presents a woman who, within her socially sanctioned role as nun, assumes the behavior of another role, that of refined courtesan, even though it is inappropriate or at least irrelevant,"¹⁷⁹ and through this characterization, both the medieval nun and medieval femininity begin to be destabilized and revealed to be mere constructions.

¹⁷⁷ Chaucer, "The General Prologue." l. 143-46.

¹⁷⁸ Hanning, "From Eva and Ave to Eglentyne and Alisoun: Chaucer's Insight into the Roles Women Play." 588.

¹⁷⁹ Hanning, "From Eva and Ave to Eglentyne and Alisoun: Chaucer's Insight into the Roles Women Play." 585.

The Femininity of the *Prioress's Prologue and Tale*?

Moving beyond descriptions of the Prioress in which we see a superficial femininity and examining her *Prologue* and her *Tale*, we see her gendered façade become more clear. Through this female character who appears to be the epitome of medieval gentility and femininity, Chaucer reveals cracks in her identity. As Judith Butler argues in her articulation of gender performativity, “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a ‘ground’ will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration [. . .]”¹⁸⁰ In the case of the Prioress, Chaucer exposes the artificiality of her as a gendered subject by continuing to reiterate aspects of medieval femininity.

Despite its violent subject matter, her tale (like the Prioress herself) actually centers on femaleness and appears to reify medieval constructions of femininity. We begin to see that in her *Prologue* when she invokes the Virgin Mary much as the classic poets did their muse:

O mooder Mayde, O mayde Mooder free!
 O bussh unbrent, brennyng in Moyses
 sighte,
 That revyshedest down fro the Deitee,
 Thurgh thyn humblesse, the Goost that in
 th'alighte,
 Of whos vertu, whan he thyn herte lighte,
 Conceyved was the Fadres sapience,
 Help me to telle it in thy reverence!¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 179.

¹⁸¹ Chaucer, "The Prioress's Prologue and Tale." l. 467-73.

This appeal to Mary, continuing for another fourteen lines, is important as it sets the stage for the Prioress's tale, which, as Beverly Boyd notes, falls into the genre of miracles of the Virgin.¹⁸²

The Prioress concludes her prologue by praying to the Virgin to "Gydeþ my song that I shal of yow seye."¹⁸³ Having moved from her physical description to her first words, Chaucer continues to reveal more about the identity of the Prioress. Unlike Juliana who repeatedly turns to God for help, the Prioress looks to Mary, the Christian icon of positive femininity.

As the Prioress now begins to tell her tale, Chaucer first distances the upcoming story by stating, "Ther was in Asye, in a greet cite [. . .]."¹⁸⁴ Whatever the Prioress is about to tell us takes place far away from fourteenth-century England. The tale might still be set in the fourteenth-century, but no longer are we just outside London. We are far away in Asia, an important detail because it allows Chaucer to more safely comment on his own society. Within the narrative itself, this geographic removal also allows the Prioress to make observations to which the other pilgrims might not otherwise be receptive. After distancing the upcoming tale, the Prioress states that the Jews living in the town in which her tale is set are "Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye" before again turning her focus to Mary.¹⁸⁵ While it would not have been surprising for a medieval Englishwoman to judge Jews in such a way, coming from the Prioress who has already been described as fastidious but overly emotional, the venom expressed sounds a bit shocking.

¹⁸² Beverly Boyd, ed., *The Prioress's Tale*, vol. 2. *The Canterbury Tales* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1987). 3. Also, in his article "The Canterbury Tales" Women Narrators: Three Traditions of Female Authority," Robert Sturges makes a similar point about the Prioress's prologue. He points out that, "The Prioress takes up the theme of female poetry in her own prologue, invoking Christianity's most authoritative female figure as a Muse appropriate to women's literature" (46). However, he goes on to compare the relationship between Mary and the Prioress to the widow of the tale and her son as "teacher-mothers."

¹⁸³ Chaucer, "The Prioress's Prologue and Tale." l. 487.

¹⁸⁴ Chaucer, "The Prioress's Prologue and Tale." l. 488.

¹⁸⁵ Chaucer, "The Prioress's Prologue and Tale." l. 492.

Focusing the tale back on the Virgin, we meet the two protagonists of the story, the widow and her “litel” son. From our first introduction to them, they are worshipping and singing to Mary. The Prioress recounts, “Thus hath this wydwe hir litel sone ytaught / Oure blissful Lady, Cristes mooder deere, / To worshipe ay, and he forgat it naught [. . .].”¹⁸⁶ Rather than Christ being the primary object of their praise and worship, it is the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ. For Chaucer’s Prioress, Mary – rather than Christ or God – is the member of the Holy family to whom one turns in times of need, despite her being a somewhat problematic figure in Christianity. She does provide a spiritual role model for women; however, the Virgin also represents that which women can never be – their catch 22. Women could either choose to be like the Virgin Mary, chaste and obedient, or remain “tempresses who constantly reproduced Eve’s initial temptation of Adam.”¹⁸⁷ As Kathleen Hobbs points out, “[. . .] the virtue of the ever-virginal Mary provides the foundation upon which the inherent sinfulness of all women rests.”¹⁸⁸ Despite this fact, the Virgin Mary is the closest thing to a divine representation of the feminine within Christianity; as a result, in the *Prioress’s Tale* the Virgin Mary is the character who largely steals the show. It is she whom the Prioress summons as she begins speaking, it is to her that the widow and her son direct their worship, and it is she who provides the miracle that allows the young boy’s body to be found in the dump. In this religiously-edifying story, the focus has clearly been removed from the wholly masculine Trinity.

In *The Prioress’s Tale*, Chaucer not only excises any male divinity, but he also fails to include any substantial male characters, allowing the femininity present in the Prioress to

¹⁸⁶ Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Prologue and Tale.” l. 492, 509-11.

¹⁸⁷ Salisbury, “Gendered Sexuality.” 86.

¹⁸⁸ Kathleen M. Hobbs, “Blood and Rosaries: Virginitly, Violence, and Desire in Chaucer’s ‘Prioress’s Tale.’,” *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginitly in the Middle Ages* eds. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999). 183.

similarly pervade her text. In this tale we have a widow and her young son. Although the widow is no longer married, neither is she a virgin, but because she is “devoted to her son and to his Christian education and upbringing [. . .], [the widow] is forgiven her fall into marriage.”¹⁸⁹ Thus, her sinfulness as a woman is not focused on. Like his mother, the young boy possesses a somewhat feminine persona, or at least one lacking in masculinity. Rather than depicted as having the power and rational nature of a man, he is weak and innocent.¹⁹⁰ This lack is made clear through his naiveté in repeatedly singing a Christian song through the Jewish neighborhood without ever considering that he might anger someone; we also see it in his physical weakness when “[t]his cursed Jew hym hente, and heeld hym faste, / And kitte his throte [. . .].” He does have the strength of spirit of which Salisbury speaks in regards to masculinity; however, that strength is derived from the Virgin Mary, the feminine, since his songs and prayers are all directed to her.¹⁹¹ When he is found after being killed, it is the *Alma Redemptoris* that he continues to sing. As the boy’s corpse explains to the abbot to whom he is taken, “Wherfore I synge, and synge moot certeyn, / In honour of that blisful Mayden free / Til fro my tonge of taken is the greyn [. . .].”¹⁹² The young boy’s spiritual nature continues to center around the Virgin Mary and the feminine even after having his throat cut.

¹⁸⁹ Hobbs, "Blood and Rosaries: Virginité, Violence, and Desire in Chaucer’s ‘Prioress’s Tale.’" 190. She makes a similar point as she addresses the fact that the only two females in the tale are the widow and the Virgin Mary. She states, “While Mary has the distinction of an official declaration of her perpetual virginité, the widow, devoted to her son and to his Christian education and upbringing (509-512), is forgiven her fall into marriage” (190).

¹⁹⁰ Salisbury describes the medieval idea of manhood saying, “. . . male sexuality was supposed to be a reflection of manliness, expressing power and action.” In addition, “In contrast to men, who were strong, rational, and spiritual by nature, church fathers believed women to be not only soft but carnal” (86).

¹⁹¹ See *PrT*, lines 505-508. “And eek also, where as he saugh th’ymage / Of Cristes mooder, hadde he in usage, / As hym was taught, to knele adoun and seye / His *Ave Marie*, as he goth by the weye.”

¹⁹² Chaucer, "The Prioress’s Prologue and Tale." l. 570-71, 663-65.

Unlike her son who worships in a somewhat more traditional manner through prayer and singing, in her concern for her child's fate, we see his mother demonstrate a different type of religiosity – one focused on the body.¹⁹³ The Prioress describes:

With moodres pitee in hir brest enclosed,
 She gooth, as she were half out of hir mynde,
 To every place where she hath supposed
 By liklihede hir litel child to fynde;
 And evere on Cristes mooder meeke and kynde
 She cride [. . .].¹⁹⁴

In this scene as she searches for her lost son, this fictional mother unites her spiritual faith – “And evere on Cristes mooder meeke and kynde / She cride” – with her body, and more specifically, her tears (much like Margery Kempe who would fall down weeping during a religious experience). According to Karma Lochrie, the main characteristics of affective piety are “its corporeality and the imitation of Christ’s suffering humanity.”¹⁹⁵ Through the widow we see the relationship of her body to her suffering and her praying, but then, more importantly, we see *imitatio Mariae* rather than *imitatio Christi*.¹⁹⁶ Rather than imitating the suffering of Christ, the widow and her situation parallel that of the suffering Virgin Mary as her son is crucified. In fact, it is only a short time later that the widow’s fears are realized and her son has been found slain. The Prioress describes this grief-stricken mother, comparing her to Rachel from the Old

¹⁹³ In her book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* Carolyn Walker Bynum describes “feminine” piety “as historians of spirituality have done, to mean affective, exuberant, lyrical, and filled with images” (105).

¹⁹⁴ Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Prologue and Tale.” l. 593-98.

¹⁹⁵ Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. 14.

¹⁹⁶ See Mooney’s article for a more detailed discussion of the tradition of *imitatio Mariae*. Catherine M. Mooney, “Imitatio Christi or Imitatio Mariae? Clare of Assisi and Her Interpreters,” *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999).

Testament and saying, “His mooder swownynge by his beere lay; / Unnethe myghte the peple that was there / This newe Rachel brynge fro his beere.”¹⁹⁷ Here the body of the widow is more clearly connected with her religiosity, and her grief over her missing son is elevated to Rachel’s great sorrow for the Jewish people. Coupling this scene with the one in which she frantically searches for her lost child, we again see the widow’s *imitatio Mariae* as she imitates the suffering of her model – Mary, the virgin mother. Like Mary, the mother in the *Prioress’s Tale* has an innocent son who has been slain by Jews yet miraculously comes back to life for a short time before ultimately dying.

Through the manifestation of the widow’s affective piety and its focus on the body, Chaucer continues to associate the Prioress and her story with the feminine and more traditionally feminine modes of religiosity. However, he also overplays this gendering of the Prioress and her tale, making visible ruptures in her performativity. In her grief, the widow imitates the suffering of *Mary* rather than Christ.¹⁹⁸ The continued excessive and artificial focus on the feminine and on Mary helps show gender to be both unnatural and performative.¹⁹⁹ Additionally, Mary does not typically signify medieval femininity in that she did not represent the average medieval woman; rather she provided a spiritual role model for women. She was the unattainable ideal. When theologians spoke of woman’s inherent sinfulness and connection with

¹⁹⁷ Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Prologue and Tale.” l. 625-27.

¹⁹⁸ This *imitatio Mariae* although present is not necessarily intentional as opposed to Clare of Assisi who consciously attempted to draw herself nearer to the Virgin Mary by striving to imitate her. See Catherine M. Mooney, “*Imitatio Christi* or *Imitatio Mariae*?: Clare of Assisi and Her Interpreters,” *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 1999) 52-77.

¹⁹⁹ In “Chaucer’s Queer Touches/A Queer Touches Chaucer,” Dinshaw opens her article with a fascinating analysis of the famous August 1993 issue of *Vanity Fair* – the cover of which has a photo of k.d. lang and Cindy Crawford as well as there being a two-page spread of them inside the magazine. In her analysis Dinshaw describes Crawford as “an artifact of high femininity with (as the *Vanity Fair* article describes it) ‘frothy masses of tortured hair, thick layers of makeup, lips dripping with sticky artificial gloss, [and] false eyelashes painstakingly applied with glue.’” Dinshaw then asks, “Who’s the queer here?” (76). Part of my own analysis of the almost queer-like femininity of the Prioress and her tale arises from this discussion (although neither the Prioress nor the widow can certainly compete with Crawford).

the flesh rather than the spirit, they connected her to Eve, not Mary. However, through the Virgin's continued presence in the tale, Chaucer complicates this idea. The Prioress is clearly not depicted as a woman who is without sin despite being a nun, yet she tells a miracle of the Virgin tale. In the feminine excessiveness of the *Prioress's Tale*, Mary is omnipresent, showing that medieval gender was not so simple. As Judith Butler points out, "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found . . . in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction."²⁰⁰ Here we have seen this "parodic repetition" of femininity that Lochrie also points out: "Throughout the Tale, Chaucer hyperbolizes the affective dimensions of the widow and, especially, the abbot and crowd at the end – scenes that dramatically represent, perhaps in caricature, the affective piety of the late Middle Ages."²⁰¹ In this scene, more so than finding fault with the act itself, Chaucer seems to be criticizing the gendered performance associated with demonstrations of affective piety.

As Lochrie reminds us, in addition to the physicality of the mother's piety and response to her son's death, the abbot and the other people gathered around, upon seeing him finally die, fall down weeping. The Prioress describes:

His salte teeris trikled down as reyn,
 And gruf he fil al plat upon the grounde,
 And stille he lay as he had ben ybounde.

The convent eek lay on the pavement

²⁰⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 179.

²⁰¹ Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't*. 67.

Wepyngge, and heryng Cristes mooder deere . . .²⁰²

Although affective piety was practiced by both men and women in the Middle Ages, “[. . .] the characteristics were more often found in women’s religiosity.”²⁰³ Caroline Walker Bynum does point out that “There is nothing specifically female about the late medieval concern with matter and body or about the extravagance of certain fourteenth- and fifteenth-century efforts at *imitatio*”; however, she also acknowledges that “[. . .] this theme was taken up especially intensely in women’s lives and women’s writing [. . .].”²⁰⁴ In *The Prioress’s Tale*, affective piety ultimately loses this attribution as a more feminine form of religious piety, becoming almost genderless, or attributable neither to woman or man alone. Thus this religiosity is queered not only because of its excessive femininity, as in regards to the widow’s performance, but also because by the time the conclusion of the tale is reached, affective piety loses its specific gendered connotations.

Perhaps the most significant rupture in this story, however, is the violence and its associated anti-Semitism. Lochrie acknowledges that, “More recent criticism associates the sentimentality of the Prioress in the General Prologue with the anti-Semitism of her Tale, but it rarely acknowledges the consequent gendering of that anti-Semitism.”²⁰⁵ As has been commonly pointed out, the violence and anti-Jewish sentiment present in the tale clearly seems to be at odds with the prim and proper Prioress who is depicted in the *General Prologue* and who invokes the Virgin Mary in her prologue.

²⁰² Chaucer, “The Prioress’s Prologue and Tale.” l. 674-78.

²⁰³ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. 112.

²⁰⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. 258.

²⁰⁵ Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t*. 60.

The woman who wears a brooch on which is inscribed the motto *Amor vincit omnia* describes the murder of a little boy by a Jew who “kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste” and then the capture and punishment of those involved in the slaying:

With torment and with shameful deeth echon,
 This provost dooth thise Jewes for to sterve,
 That of this mordre wiste, and that anon.
 He nolde no swich cursednesse observe.
 “Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve”;
 Therefore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe,
 And after that he heng hem by the lawe.²⁰⁶

Rather than merely relating to her fellow pilgrims that the boy was killed and that the men were put to death for their crimes, she provides clear descriptions of the manner in which these activities took place. In addition to telling us that the boy had his throat cut, she points out that, “[. . .] in a wardrobe they hym threwe / Where as thise Jewes purgen hire entraille,”²⁰⁷ so not only was this innocent “litel clergeon” the victim of a horrible murder, but he was also afterwards thrown into a dump for human waste.

In addition to the somewhat graphic detail provided, this description illustrates that the Prioress does not overlook the fact that the murderers were Jews. In fact, this is clear even from the beginning of her tale. As Chaucer sets up the context for her story, the Prioress says:

Ther was in Asye, in a greet citee,
 Amonges Cristene folk a Jewerye,
 Sustened by a lord of that contree

²⁰⁶ Chaucer, "The Prioress's Prologue and Tale." l. 571, 628-34.

²⁰⁷ Chaucer, "The Prioress's Prologue and Tale." l. 572-73.

For foule usure and lucre of vileynye,
 Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye [. . .].²⁰⁸

As earlier mentioned, on the surface these hateful images do not seem to fit with that of the Prioress as depicted in the *General Prologue* or with the image of a chaste holy woman. Not only is she initially shown to be a superficially emotional woman who weeps at the suffering of innocent creatures, but as a Christian nun one might expect her to demonstrate a more loving and compassionate nature. Lochrie describes the Prioress as having a “fraudulent mercy and love that [she] so flamboyantly endorses and so dramatically ignores in her Tale.”²⁰⁹ One way we might view this inconsistency in the Prioress and the masculine violence found in her tale is that it is being used to emphasize her own femininity. The extreme violence ultimately draws attention to and complicates the over-feminized Prioress and her tale.

However, in some ways these anti-Semitic sentiments, as well as the violence, might actually seem to be more in line with the medieval construction of the feminine as being inherently more prone to sinfulness. Lochrie argues that the Prioress’s femininity “is implicated in both the violence and the sentimentality of her Tale.”²¹⁰ If we interpret the violence and anti-Semitism as a rupture in the Prioress’s perfectly-scripted femininity, again we see what amounts to a parody and overperformativity of the medieval construction of the feminine through her overemphasis on aspects of the physical. Ultimately we see that both the Prioress, a prim and proper nun who superficially seems to reify medieval notions of femininity, and her tale are more complicated. Through his depiction of this pilgrim and through the story he has her tell, Chaucer

²⁰⁸ Chaucer, "The Prioress's Prologue and Tale." l. 488-92.

²⁰⁹ Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't*. 68.

²¹⁰ Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't*. 66.

challenges medieval society teachings of women being either sinful and trapped within the flesh like the fallen Eve or perfectly, unattainably holy and chaste like Mary.

Transgendering the Second Nun

The *General Prologue* tells the reader virtually nothing about the nun who is accompanying her prioress on this pilgrimage. Only that the Second Nun is the Prioress's "chapeleyn" comprises the totality of our information. This is a marked difference from the incredibly detailed description provided of her superior. This lack of description of the Second Nun is a bit surprising. As discussed earlier, one would expect more physical detail of a woman, such as is seen with the Prioress whom Chaucer seems to attempt to align with the feminine and with the body. Although there are also no details given for the Nun's Priest accompanying the two nuns, that lack of physicality might be more expected for a man and for one who focuses on the masculine in his tale of the rooster Chauntecleer. However, when Chaucer introduces the Second Nun, he clearly distinguishes her from the Prioress by not focusing on her corporeality. Through the character of St. Cecilia in her tale, Chaucer allows this somewhat anonymous nun to provide the critical voice to the gendered debate begun by her superior, the feminine Prioress. Whereas, the Prioress begins to destabilize the inherency of gender not only through her tale but also through her own appearance and behavior, the Second Nun wholly dismantles the masculine-feminine gender binary. Moreover, it is only through the anonymity allotted by Chaucer that she can fulfill this function and become transgender.

This mystery that Chaucer creates surrounding the Second Nun follows her from the *General Prologue* to the introduction of her tale. While the Host directly addresses the Nun's Priest requesting he be the one to tell the next tale, there is no such introduction of the nun. The

conclusion of the *Epilogue to the Nun's Priest's Tale* merely states, "And after that he, with fulmerie chere, / Seide unto another, / as ye shuln here."²¹¹ That is how Fragment VII ends, and Fragment VIII then begins with *The Second Nun's Prologue* and the Second Nun speaking. Even in ordering them according to the "Bradshaw shift" in which *The Franklin's Tale* precedes the Second Nun, there is no hint at what follows. In ordering the fragments either way, for the Second Nun there is no preamble, no introduction, nothing. It almost seems as if she has been completely dropped in here, and in some ways, she has. She alone of the three pilgrims traveling together is in Fragment VIII, so she gets the last word. This is important because, as we will see, in terms of gender, the Second Nun clearly is the Other, being neither completely feminine nor masculine.

The Second Nun's Tale is the hagiographic account of the life of St. Cecilia who lived in Rome during the days of early Christianity. Because of the nature of her story, the Second Nun begins her prologue in a similarly edifying manner by first preaching on the sin of idleness, then including an invocation to her muse the Virgin Mary and, similar to what one would find in Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, also expounding on the name Cecilia.²¹² Taking a closer look at these mere 119 lines of *The Second Nun's Prologue*, we see that Chaucer is having the Second Nun already performing scripts that move beyond typical gender norms.

This nun begins by simulating the role of a minister preaching on the sins of idleness:

The minister and the norice unto vices,

²¹¹Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Nun's Priest's Prologue and Tale," *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). l. 3461-62.

²¹² Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Reading on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993). 318. Voragine opens the legend of Saint Cecilia by remarking, "The name Cecilia may come from *coeli lilia*, lily of heaven, or from *caecitate carens*, lacking blindness, or from *caecis via*, road for the blind, or from *coelum* and *lya*, a woman who works for heaven. Or the name may be derived from *coelum* and *laos*, people. For Saint Cecilia was a heavenly lily by the modesty of her virginity." This reflection continues several more lines as he considers how Cecilia's name applies to her.

Which that men clepe in English Ydelnesse,
 That porter of the gate is of delices,
 To eschue, and by hire contrarie hir oppresse –
 That is to seyn, by leveful bisynesse –
 Wel oghten we to doon al oure entente,
 Lest that the feend thurgh ydelnesse us hente.

Following this stanza are three more that the Second Nun uses to continue to warn her fellow travelers against this most evil of vices concluding with an appeal to the “mayde and martyr, Seint Cecilie.”²¹³ This section of her *Prologue* is reminiscent, to a greater or lesser extent, of the prologues and tales of several of the male narrators in the *Tales* (such as the Pardoner and the Parson) in that she has chosen a subject about which to moralize to the other pilgrims. How radical this depiction is rests on whether the Second Nun is preaching or merely teaching. According to David Herlihy, while women’s preaching in the form of “teach[ing] formal doctrine to adult males within a church” was not allowed, teaching informally – to small groups and/or in private to both men and women – was.²¹⁴ However, she is the only one of the three female narrators to do so. The Wife of Bath and the Prioress both remain within the typically female realm: the Wife of Bath discussing marriage and the Prioress praying to God before transitioning to her invocation of the Virgin Mary. Regardless whether he is depicting her as preaching or merely teaching the other pilgrims in her *Prologue*, Chaucer is making a distinction between the Second Nun and the other two female narrators. This is important because during the Middle Ages, the distinction between the sexes was seen as vast enough that women (such as

²¹³ Chaucer, "The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale." l. 1-7, 28.

²¹⁴ David Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1990), 118.

Chaucer's nun) taking on the role of religious advisor "was doubtless disturbing to many Church officials and explains the reticence with which the biographers describe women as interpreters of the Scriptures or as preachers."²¹⁵ Unlike the Prioress, her senior at the convent, and unlike what Church officials would have seen as appropriate for a woman, Chaucer depicts the Second Nun as verging on unacceptability regarding women teaching

The Second Nun's performance continues, but she now shifts her attention to a long invocation to the Virgin Mary that, while possibly being heartfelt, we can also see as politically savvy considering her Prioress's obvious attachment to the Virgin. It is within this call to Mary that the Second Nun refers to herself as an "unworthy sone of Eve."²¹⁶ The inclusion by Chaucer of this line has been frequently considered and questioned by scholars. One thought is that it indicates that perhaps Chaucer initially wrote the *Second Nun's Prologue and Tale* for a male narrator.²¹⁷ As Thomas Kennedy points out, "A voice, it is argued, that refers to itself as an 'unworthy sone of Eve (VIII, 62)' could not be female [. . .]."²¹⁸ However, Robert Sturges, as well as others, points out that the phrase is part of the "Salve Regina," a liturgy that was daily recited in praise of the Virgin Mary, making it completely appropriate for this female character.²¹⁹ Indeed, Kennedy argues that such a liturgical phrase "transcends gender" and suits the context of *The Second Nun's Tale* because it is about a marriage in which the two people function more as "children of God, as souls" rather than husband and wife.²²⁰ Essentially, the

²¹⁵ Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe*. 122-23.

²¹⁶ Chaucer, "The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale." l. 62.

²¹⁷ In addition to its discussion in scholarship, Larry Benson in his introduction to *The Canterbury Tales in The Riverside Chaucer* states that this lines "seems to indicate a masculine narrator" (19).

²¹⁸ Thomas Kennedy, "The Translator's Voice in the Second Nun's Invocacio: Gender, Influence, and Textuality," *Medievalia et Humanistica: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* 22 (1995). 95.

²¹⁹ Sturges, "'The Canterbury Tales' Women Narrators: Three Traditions of Female Authority." 48.

Second Nun, the one female narrator absent of physical description, has chosen to use a masculine noun by which to identify herself the ambiguity behind markers of gender.

Following the *Invocacio ad Mariam* is the final section of *The Second Nun's Prologue* – the rhapsodizing on the name of Cecilia. Chaucer (and the Second Nun) introduces this part by specifically referencing Jacobus de Voragine and his thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives *The Golden Legend*.²²¹ She is very clearly inserting herself into a male hagiographic tradition here by utilizing the same device commonly practiced by Voragine in *The Golden Legend* and which, in fact, is used in his version of the life of St. Cecilia.²²²

Once the Second Nun has concluded her prologue and thus begun her tale, the queerness of Cecilia is immediately made evident. Like the story's narrator, her protagonist seems to challenge societal expectations. Like a number of the other virgin martyrs, such as those found in the Katherine group, Cecilia is described as Roman and noble but a practicing Christian. As the Second Nun tells her tale of Cecilia, she collapses the artificial gender distinctions to which her superior called attention and makes it clear that her protagonist is a character of multiple layers and contradictions. She is a “mayden bright” conjuring up images of youthful innocence and exuberance and from established nobility. However, unlike Juliana and many other virgin martyrs who fought their fathers as well as Roman officials, her family has “from hir cradel” raised her in the relatively fledgling Christian faith in a largely pagan society.²²³

²²⁰ Kennedy, "The Translator's Voice in the Second Nun's Invocacio: Gender, Influence, and Textuality." 96.

²²¹ “Chaucer, "The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale." 263. Interpretacio nominis Cecilie quam / ponit Frater Jacobus Januensis in / Legenda”

²²² Specifically see Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Reading on the Saints*. pages 318-23.

²²³ As Karen Winstead notes, looking at the “generic” virgin martyr, “The emperor, prefect, or judge presiding over her trial is frequently her father, her suitor, or her suitor's father.” Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*. 6.

This seemingly contradictory nature of Cecilia continues when we discover that she is to be married to Valerian even though the Second Nun has recounted that this young maiden constantly prayed to God “[b]isekyng hym to kepe hir maydenhede.”²²⁴ One would not anticipate that a young woman who has chosen to become a *sponsa Christi* would proceed with an arranged secular one. Instead we might expect her to run away, as did the anchoress Christina of Markyate when faced with being forced into marriage, or perhaps even to abandon her informal religious vows. However, Cecilia chooses neither option, instead essentially taking control of the earthly marriage in which she finds herself.

This is where the setting of *The Second Nun's Tale* becomes important. Although the Roman Empire was dominated by masculine hierarchies much like medieval England was, it was a time and place very distant from that in which the pilgrimage to Canterbury takes place. In essence, it is an ideal (and safe) ground for Chaucer via the Second Nun to illustrate that there are alternative ways to conceptualize gender. Even though she is telling the tale of a female saint who often exhibits a great deal of personal agency, the temporal and geographic distance minimizes any threat to the masculine sensibilities of the male pilgrims.

Chaucer grants Cecilia a control over her life that might not have been imaginable for a Roman (or medieval) noblewoman due to her obligation as a wife. Despite the warnings of Church authorities on the sinfulness of sex, those same authorities also acceded that it was a part of marriage and both parties were responsible for honoring the marital debt.²²⁵ However, in order to maintain her virginity, Cecilia takes the initiative to talk to her husband Valerian on their wedding night and tells him that they must maintain a spiritual marriage. If he does not agree to

²²⁴ Chaucer, "The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale." l. 126.

²²⁵ Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*. 93.

this and touches her sexually, Cecilia warns him that the angel that watches over her will “right anon [. . .] sle yow with the dede, / And in youre yowthe thus ye shullen dye [. . .].”²²⁶ She then informs him of the benefits of a spiritual marriage, or “clene love.” Although Valerian is depicted as ultimately agreeing to Cecilia’s requests with little argument (at least once he has verified the veracity of her claims), historically the practice was not so easily accepted. As Dyan Elliott discusses, “Release from sexual duties, moreover, is often perceived as potentially altering traditional gender-dictated roles and challenging normative concepts like female submission. From the perspective of the hierarchy of sexes, spiritual marriage may then have posed a parallel threat to both husband and society.”²²⁷ This risk is acknowledged throughout *The Second Nun’s Tale* – if not by Valerian (other than initially) then by the authorities who ultimately claim the lives of not only the young married couple but also Valerian’s brother Tiburce. Regardless, Chaucer portrays Cecilia as obtaining something with relative ease for which other medieval women, such as Margery Kempe, had to repeatedly fight.

Ultimately, the threat Cecilia poses is a valid concern as she is always in a dominant role. She is the one responsible for both her husband and her brother-in-law’s conversion to Christianity, and she continually tells them both what to do spiritually. Prior to Tiburce’s baptism she tells him: “Go with thy brother now and thee baptise, / And make thee clene, so that thou mowe biholde / The angels face about which thy brother tolde.”²²⁸ We should take note though that it’s not just that Cecilia has taken it upon herself – unasked – to tell these men what to do. Authorizing her role, Valerian and Tiburce also ask for her counsel. When she is teaching

²²⁶ Chaucer, "The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale." l. 152-58.

²²⁷ Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage : Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993). 5.

²²⁸ Chaucer, "The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale." l. 299-301.

Tiburce about Christianity, Cecilia makes reference to the three persons of the Holy Trinity and ends up confusing her pupil, and so he questions:

“O, suster deere,
 Ne sydestow right now in this manere,
 Ther nys but o God, lord in soothfastnesse?
 And now of three how maystow bere witnessse?”

He asks her and she teaches him, or more accurately Chaucer says she has been “prech[ing].”²²⁹ Whether we see this as medieval England or Rome during the days of the early Church, what the Second Nun is saying in her tale is radical. Joyce Salisbury reminds us, “The early church fathers, too, divided the world by gender, and men were defined as rational (dominated by mental activity) and strong. Early churchmen believed these defining qualities of men gave them authority over women.”²³⁰ It was generally not the other way around as is mostly the case with Cecilia.

The only man throughout *The Second Nun's Tale* who appears to have any authority over Cecilia is the Roman prefect Almachius, and even that is revealed to be minimal when she responds to his questioning:

“Youre myght,” quod she, “ful litel is to dreede,
 For every mortal mannes power nys
 But lyk a bladder ful of wynd, ywys.
 For with a needles point, whan it is blowe,
 May al the boost of it be leyd ful lowe.”²³¹

²²⁹ Chaucer, "The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale." l. 333-36, 342.

²³⁰ Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality." 85.

Rather than succumbing to his attempted intimidation when he asks whether she is afraid of his power, Cecilia turns it around and temporarily renders him impotent by showing how superficial and transitory his authority is. Janemarie Luecke argues that “Cecilia is at her busiest in the Tale during her trial, during which she demonstrates the high-spirited temperament of an aggressive combatant. She counters the judge’s accusations with charges of foolishness, lewdness and madness [. . .].”²³² Through this scene, Cecilia demonstrates her lack of worldly accountability in that she will not submit even to this prideful high Roman official.

Possibly though the most convincing element of *The Second Nun’s Tale* to indicate that this Cecilia is more than just a “feminist before her time” and more than merely a woman with individual agency involves the scene in which Almachius is trying to boil her alive.²³³ The Second Nun tells us that:

The longe nyght, and eek a day also,
 For al the fyr and eek the bathes heete
 She sat al coold and feelede no wo.
 It made hire nat a drope for to sweete.²³⁴

This is a woman who remains, as she sits in a hot tub of water with a fire burning underneath, both cold and dry. This description combines the medieval constructs of both sexes as men were believed to be hot and dry and women were cool and wet.²³⁵ In this final scene before the attempt at beheading, Cecilia is described as neither hot and dry nor cool and wet but rather cool

²³¹ Chaucer, "The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale." l. 437-41.

²³² Janemarie Luecke, O.S.B. , "Three Faces of Cecilia: Chaucer’s Second Nun’s Tale," *The American Benedictine Review* 33.4 (1982). 340.

²³³ Landrum, "The Convent Crowd and the Feminist Nun." 12.

²³⁴ Chaucer, "The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale." l. 519-22.

²³⁵ Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality." 83.

and dry, despite being in a circumstance where she should be the opposite. In this scene, Chaucer most clearly illustrates that St. Cecilia, much like the narrator of the story herself, is clearly a queer body – neither completely feminine nor masculine but in truth a combination of both.

The Second Nun's Tale then ends much like it begins. Unlike some of the other stories that seem to necessitate conversation by the pilgrims afterward, at the beginning of *The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue*, which follows *The Second Nun's Tale*, the only comment made in reference to the preceding tale is, "Whan ended was the lyf of Seinte Cecile [. . .]." ²³⁶ For whatever reason – Chaucer's failure to revise or accident of history – there is not even a reference to the nun herself, merely the powerful character in her story, St. Cecilia.

Conclusion

Each tale on its own is entertaining as well as enlightening; however, when read together, we see how they reveal the fluidity of gender. Not only are these two nuns traveling together to Canterbury from their convent, but, also, their tales are interrelated in the sense that they help us better understand the performative nature of gender. Only when we read *The Second Nun's Prologue Tale* in which gender is redefined against the hyper-femininity of the Prioress and her *Prologue* and *Tale*, do we see how Chaucer uses them to develop a complex image of the expectations for the medieval female religious. In turn, the ruptures and inconsistencies in the Prioress's performativity become more pronounced when measured against the Second Nun. As we have seen, *The Prioress's Tale* attempts to reify traditional medieval gender roles through her focus on the Virgin Mary as well as on physicality and emotion, characteristics of medieval femininity. Because she doesn't completely succeed, however, the Prioress invites the reader to

²³⁶ Chaucer, "The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue." 554.

explore her presentation of herself and her tale more fully to see that she indeed reveals gender to be simply a construction. Even in this tale with a veneer of adherence to the medieval norms of femininity and masculinity, something else lurks beneath.

If we were to look at either *The Prioress's Tale* or *The Second Nun's Tale* in isolation from its companion, such a revelation might not be possible. It is through the queer figure of the Second Nun and her protagonist St. Cecilia that the Prioress's performativity becomes more clear. Patrizia Grimaldi Pizzorno argues that, "The attempt to restore the lost equilibrium is the *raison d'être* of the *Second Nun's Tale*."²³⁷ That might indeed be the case, but I would contend that that is only because she creates a new equilibrium – one that is possible and that arises only when gender binaries have been destabilized.

²³⁷ Patrizia Grimaldi Pizzorno, "Chauntecleer's Bad Latin," *Exemplaria* 4.2 (1992). 405.

**“Virginitas meretur coronam, viduitas
appropinquat Deo, conjugium
non excludit a caelo”
St. Bridget²³⁸**

**“Dowtyr, I behote the the same grace
that I behyte Seynt Kateryne, Seynt
Margarete, Seynt Barbara,
and Seynt Powle [. . .]”
*The Book of Margery Kempe*²³⁹**

Chapter 4

Queering Binaries: The Collapse of Dualities in *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Robert Glück’s *Margery Kempe*

Introduction

Over the course of her life, fifteenth-century mystic Margery Kempe married John Kempe and was mother to fourteen children. However, after a visit from Christ following the birth of her first child and then following later mystical experiences, Kempe reordered her life and chose to live as a virgin in order to become closer to Christ. Ultimately, she dictated the story of her adult life, or her *vita* as some might argue, to two different scribes; this work would

²³⁸ “Virginitas meretur coronam, viduitas appropinquat Deo, conjugium non excludit a caelo.” Quoted in Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999). 148. Dinshaw indirectly quotes St. Bridget from Susan Dickman, “Margery Kempe and the Continental Tradition of the Pious Woman,” *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1984). 157. Dickman is quoting Johannes Jørgensen, *Saint Bridget of Sweden*, trans. I. Lund, 2 vols. (New York: Longmans Green, 1954), I: 45.

²³⁹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1996). 61. “Daughter, I promise you the same grace that I promised St Katherine, St Margaret, St Barbara, and St Paul [. . .].” *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. B.A. Windeatt (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1985). 87. All quotations from the *Book* come from Lynn Staley’s TEAMS edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The translations have been taken from Windeatt’s edition.

ultimately come to be *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In the book *Margery Kempe*, Robert Glück re-crafts her religious narrative for a twentieth-century audience using the account that she herself had previously told in the *Book*.²⁴⁰ In the fifteenth-century text, she explains that, rather than continuing married life with her husband John, she wanted a more divine union and one that was hierarchically worthy of “merit[ing] the crown” of heaven to which St. Bridget refers. Like Bergman’s Karin and Newby’s Christine Carpenter, Margery is no longer physically a virgin at this point in her life. Despite this, however, Kempe recounts in her *Book* Christ’s elevation of her to the stature of the virgin martyrs when he “behote[s] [her] the same grace” that Saints Katherine, Margaret, Barbara, and Paul have been afforded, implying that Kempe wants the reader to view Margery’s attempts at being resignified as a virgin as having been successful.

This construction of Margery as a subject – as she is depicted in the *Book* but perhaps even more so as she has been crafted by Glück in his 1994 work of historical fiction, *Margery Kempe* – is the concern of this chapter. In the two previous chapters, I considered how medieval writers used the safety of the distant past in order to challenge their present. Employing a similar approach, Glück seeks the safety of the Middle Ages by using the textual Margery to question late twentieth-century Western attitudes about gender and sexuality. This is in contrast to the films *The Virgin Spring* and *Anchoress*, which draw on the past in order to reinforce the present, to elevate it at the expense of an Othered Middle Ages. Thus, my primary concern in this chapter is *Margery Kempe* rather than Kempe’s *Book* itself.

Although Glück based his novel on Windeatt’s 1985 translation of the *Book*, it is predominantly a work of fiction that threads details from the medieval text throughout the

²⁴⁰ When discussing the medieval *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Glück’s *Margery Kempe*, I refer to them respectively as the *Book* and *Margery Kempe*. Additionally, following Lynn Staley’s example, I use *Margery* when discussing the character – both in the autobiography and in the novel – and I use *Kempe* when referring her as author.

narrative and structurally alternates between the story of Margery and Jesus and that of Bob and his partner L. In so doing, Glück constructs a parallel, albeit across several centuries and also across the spiritual/earthly divide, between the narrator Bob and L.'s late twentieth-century love affair and Margery's with Jesus, occurring five hundred years earlier. Indeed, for much of the text, Bob sees himself manifested in Margery as he observes himself occupying a similar role to Margery in his relationship with L. In other words, both Margery and Bob find themselves the older, and generally needier, partner.²⁴¹ Additionally, both Christ and L. are of a higher social status than either Bob or Margery: Similar to Christ's spiritual royalty, L. comes from a family of wealth. Bob clarifies the parallel between himself and his female protagonist: "I kept Margery in mind for twenty-five years but couldn't enter her love until I also loved a young man who was above me" and then again notes about himself, "I'm Margery following a god through a rainy city."²⁴²

However, this Margery, who loves a Jesus much younger than herself, is reconstructed in the novel. No longer is she predominantly a mystic and spiritual *sponsa Christi*; she is now reimagined as Christ's literal partner – both sexual and otherwise. He is not only figuratively and spiritually present but also physically, possessing flesh and blood much like the other characters. For example, Glück recounts that after Margery has her first vision of Jesus, she spends several years yearning for him. His eventual reappearance leads to their first sexual encounter, one which occurs very much in the physical world: "He materialized, barefoot on the wood, goose bumps on his thighs and arms." Minutes later, "Jesus's strong sense of occasion took over. He knelt and kissed her, pleasure needling his inner walls. He whispered her name. Once sex was

²⁴¹ In *Margery Kempe* Margery is thirty one years old compared to Jesus being a mere eighteen; likewise, Bob is forty while L. is only twenty six.

²⁴² Robert Glück, *Margery Kempe* (New York: High Risk, 1994). 12, 13.

entered, his eyes shut [. . .].”²⁴³ From this point onward, Margery’s connection with Jesus is cemented as not only spiritual but also bodily, beyond merely the affective piety seen in the fifteenth-century text. Along with the vivid, physical descriptions of Margery’s temptation by demons following the birth of her first child, the literal presence of Christ foreshadows the emphasis on corporeality throughout the text.

Indeed, as a young adult Margery is portrayed, both in the *Book* and in *Margery Kempe*, as being concerned with her own physicality, specifically with her appearance and the material trappings of the bourgeois. As I referenced in the Introduction, in the late fourth century, St. Jerome rhetorically asks, “Do you think that it is one and the same thing to spend days and nights in prayer and fastings, and to paint the face in anticipation of the arrival of a husband, to break step, to feign flattery?”²⁴⁴ As a young adult and relatively new mother, Margery might not have seen wifely devotion with its attendant feminine prancing as incompatible with extreme religious devotion. Kempe writes in her book that even subsequent to her visitation by Christ, which occurred after she had given birth to her first child, she proceeded to live much as she had before, only with the added sense of devotion to God. In fact, “[. . .] sche thowt sche was bowndyn to God and that sche wold ben his servawnt. Nevyrthelesse, sche wold not leevyn hir pride ne hir pompows aray that sche had usyd befortym [. . .].”²⁴⁵ Margery does this despite the negative response she receives from both her husband and the community. In regards to the ostentatious nature of her dress and her motivation for such sartorial choices, Kempe describes that “[. . .]

²⁴³ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 14.

²⁴⁴ Jerome, Saint, “On the Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Mary Against Helvidius,” *Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, trans. John N. Hritz, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 53 (Washington D.C.: Catholic U of America P, 1965) 40.

²⁴⁵ *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 23-24. “[. . .] she thought she was bound to God and that she would be his servant. Nevertheless, she would not leave her pride or her showy manner of dressing.” *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 43.

sche weryd gold pypys on hir hevud and hir hodys with the typettys were daggyd. Hir clokys also wer daggyd and leyd with dyvers colowrs betwen the daggys that it schuld be the mor staryng to mennys sygth and hirsself the more ben worshepd.”²⁴⁶ At this point, Margery believes that she can continue to live the life she has always had while still being devoted to God.

In her autobiography she recounts that it is only after a number of business failures and other personal defeats that she realizes that those two lives – secular and religious – for her, are not compatible. As a result, Margery comes to believe in the hierarchy between wife and religious suggested by Jerome and St. Bridget. As she becomes more devoted to Christ and begins to eschew such worldly concerns as money and success, it becomes evident that Margery recognizes and understands the teachings of the Church in regards to virginity. Eventually she voices her belief to Christ that the virgin is the most favored and the one who would be dancing with Him in heaven, saying, “A, Lord, maydonys dawnsyn now meryly in hevyn. Schal not I don so?”²⁴⁷ As a result of her desire to please God (and Christ) – as opposed to her previous focus on pleasing herself – reestablishing herself as a virgin becomes one of Margery’s primary goals.

Early in the autobiography and in her newfound religious life (but after having given birth to most of her children), upon being informed by Christ that she is pregnant yet again, Margery expresses to Him her concerns about her sexual impurity: ““Lord, I am not worthy to heryn the spekyn and thus to comown with myn husband. Nerthelesse it is to me gret peyn and gret dysese.”” He responds by consoling and reassuring her, to which she then says, ““Lord

²⁴⁶ *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 24 “[. . .] she wore gold pipes on her head, and her hoods with the tippetts were fashionably slashed. Her cloaks were also modishly slashed and underlaid with various colours between the slashes, so that she would be all the more stared at, and all the more esteemed” *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 43.

²⁴⁷ *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 60. ““Ah, Lord, maidens are now dancing merrily in heaven. Shall I not do so?” *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 86.

Jhesu, this maner of levyng longyth to thy holy maydens.”²⁴⁸ According to the teachings of the Church that Margery has likely been familiar with for most of her life, if she is not practicing chastity, then she cannot be a *sponsa Christi* and take her place at the side of God that is reserved for virgins upon death. As the daughter of a former mayor, alderman, and parliament member, she was once a woman of means who could have afforded to “paint her face in anticipation” of her husband’s arrival as well as possess the other accoutrements that come with having few financial concerns. Nevertheless, her spiritual awakening ultimately results not only in her desire for secular chastity and release from her marital debt but also in a distinctive form of affective piety. Throughout the remainder of the narrative, Kempe tells the story of her journeys – both mystical and physical pilgrimages – and of her frequent interactions with people not able to understand her visions or her tears.

While her signature crying and wailing has caused many medieval scholars to turn their backs on Kempe in annoyance (much like her fellow travelers), there has clearly been no dearth of interest. Beginning in 1934 with Hope Emily Allen’s identification of the manuscript containing *The Book of Margery Kempe*, scholarship on this somewhat polarizing medieval mystic has burgeoned, especially since the 1980s with the increase in attention towards medieval feminist scholarship. Over the past forty years, scholars have investigated her thoroughly: from her connection to Lollardy to her gender (including her role as a female mystic and teacher) to the ways in which she challenged the community and social norms. However, vastness of studies by itself is not always positive in that, as Anne Clark Bartlett observes regarding recent Kempe scholarship, the *Book* is “[. . .] a medieval text that has, thanks to its popularity as an

²⁴⁸ *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 59. “Lord, I am not worthy to hear you speak, and still to make love with my husband, even though it is great pain and great distress to me.” “Lord Jesus, this manner of life belongs to your holy maidens.” *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 84.

object of analysis, become, for many scholars and teachers, a bit routine, perhaps even mundane."²⁴⁹

Although if we juxtapose the scholarly history of the *Book* with that of its companion piece, Glück's *Margery Kempe*, we see the opposite having occurred in that very little attention has been paid to his reimagining of Kempe and her religious life. Upon its initial publication in 1994, a number of book reviewers did take notice, most likely due to Glück's numerous prior publications (including both short and long narrative fiction, poetry, and scholarly essays). However, in contrast to Bartlett's description of the book as a "playful, erotic, and productively disorienting retelling of the *Book of Margery Kempe*," two of those reviews written shortly after publication were not so flattering, betraying modern society's prejudices in regards to the Middle Ages.²⁵⁰ *Publisher's Weekly* describes the book as "liv[ing] up to neither its potential nor its premise" and says that Kempe is "rendered as an offensive creature" and is "so ugly and coarse she doesn't come across as a woman at all." From these descriptions as well as others, the anonymous reviewer suggests that Glück has created demeaning portrayures of women. It is the reviewer, though, who sees and describes this Kempe as "offensive," "ugly," and "coarse." Ultimately, according to him/her, "Whatever Gluck's intention, he has failed."²⁵¹

Slightly less damning is the review by Kirkus Reviews who bill themselves as "the world's toughest book critics," but rather than being overly negative, their language seems to merely highlight the reviewer's underlying personal biases and preconceptions about spirituality and sexuality. This can be seen from the first line of the review in which he/she states, "Glück pushes the envelope way too far as he attempts to use the history of a failed, would-be saint from

²⁴⁹ Anne Clark Bartlett, "Reading It Personally: Robert Gluck, Margery Kempe, and Language in Crisis," *Exemplaria* 16.2 (2004). 438.

²⁵⁰ Bartlett, "Reading It Personally: Robert Gluck, Margery Kempe, and Language in Crisis." 438.

²⁵¹ "Margery Kempe," *Publishersweekly.com*. (October 31, 1994): Book review. Web. July 7, 2011.

the 15th century to explore his own romantic obsession in the 1990s.” In what way does he “[push] the envelope way too far”? Is the reviewer referring to the explicit descriptions of sexuality in the book? If so, Glück is far from being the first to utilize such graphic descriptions of sexual acts, even when paired with spirituality. Or is it the sexuality of Christ that is found to be distasteful? Unfortunately, the reviewer also displays ignorance about the Middle Ages and early Christianity in describing Kempe as a “Jesus-crazed heretic” and especially in stating that Glück is creating a Kempe who “needs Jesus to make the necessary connections to priests, vicars...even to God.”²⁵²

Together, these two reviews of *Margery Kempe* reaffirm what we see with Newby’s film *Anchoress*. Generally (and not surprisingly), modern society does not understand the Middle Ages and only rarely views it from a lens that has not been tainted by either the rosiness of romanticism (i.e. the knights of King Arthur) or notions of temporal progression that view the new and modern as improving upon past models. Our largely secular society has constructed itself around notions of modernity and, like other cultures throughout history, unequivocally defines itself against what it is not – and what it clearly is not is the religious flamboyancy of Margery Kempe. Even many twenty-first century American Christians would either be confused by the historical Kempe or utterly offended by the queerness of Glück’s story. Regardless of the reason, only a handful of articles or book chapters have been published to date that re-envision Kempe and her autobiography utilizing Glück’s retelling as an entry point. This is despite the growing field of medievalism and also despite his recognition that Margery and her resistance to categorization continues to be relevant to contemporary society. This chapter defends Glück’s insightful work and adds new readings to the scholarship that has already been started by Glück himself as well as prominent medieval scholars Anne Clark Bartlett and Carolyn Dinshaw.

²⁵² "Margery Kempe," kirkusreviews.com. (Sept. 15, 1994): Book review. Web. July 7, 2011.

The first scholar to explore the connections between *Margery Kempe* and the autobiographical *Book* was Carolyn Dinshaw with a chapter in *Getting Medieval* (1999). Throughout her book, Dinshaw attempts to make connections across time, between late twentieth-century society and the Middle Ages and between those groups and texts that were Othered then and those that have been Othered now. As she says in her Introduction, “Such an impulse extends the resources for self- and community building into even the distant past.”²⁵³ Consistent with such an aim, Dinshaw does not remain in the Middle Ages with this book. In fact, her coda brings the project back to modern America, and, more specifically, modern American politics.

Her final chapter is devoted to Margery, as represented in both the fifteenth-century *Book* and the twentieth-century novel; Dinshaw investigates the texts via a framework that is both historicist and queer. Her approach is historicist in the sense that she connects Margery (as represented in her autobiography) to the politics and social expectations of her time, including charges of Lollardy and heresy. However, throughout the chapter, the overriding connective tissue is queer theory, both in her discussion of the historical Kempe as well as in her treatment of the modern one. As Margery, on more than one occasion, faces charges – real or potential – of Lollardy, Dinshaw uses those experiences to study her as a social disruption akin to the Lollards. She describes the people of Lynn and how they see Margery: “They are responding to the whole weird, disruptive phenomenon, this mother of fourteen children wearing white and reenacting with lacrimose contortions the birth and Passion of Christ.”²⁵⁴

According to Dinshaw, not only is this medieval mystic (as represented in the *Book*) queer in terms of the way she is an interruptive force but also in that she essentially abandons her

²⁵³ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. 1.

²⁵⁴ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. 146.

husband and children for a spiritual family with Christ, the Godhead, Mary, and Anne in which the roles, including hers, are constantly shifting. Dinshaw describes Margery's new spiritual relationships as being "one big queer family" as, at varying points, Margery is wife to God; wife, daughter, mother, and sister to Christ; and daughter of the Virgin Mary.²⁵⁵ Using queer theory as her foundation, throughout the chapter Dinshaw repeatedly returns to Margery as the "disjunctive" and "resistant" queer woman who attempts to upend power relations, either more or less effectively, by "answering back."²⁵⁶ And, ultimately, this notion of "answering back" – whether it be as queers, medievalists, scholars in general, or novelists like Glück who try to bridge boundaries across time and across people – is central to Dinshaw's aims both for the chapter and the book as a whole.²⁵⁷

Although I do not approach this project from an historical lens to the same degree as Dinshaw, like her I am very much concerned with trans-historicity and narrowing the seeming chasm between the Middle Ages and the present, a gap which manifests when we define ourselves by that distant past which has supposedly been transcended. This rift appears when a modern filmmaker turns his gaze back to medieval England to reinscribe what it means to be a fourteenth-century anchoress as well as a twentieth-century virgin, but it also arises when a medieval hagiographer looks back to the virgin martyrs of the fourth century to didactically illustrate proper modes of behavior for the female religious.

Glück himself explains his intent to destabilize traditional notions of periodization and temporal progress through the book *Margery Kempe*. In a 2001 article, published seven years after his book and two years after Dinshaw's analysis, Glück, not surprisingly, focuses on his

²⁵⁵ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. 149.

²⁵⁶ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. 158, 177, and 180.

²⁵⁷ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. 182.

own novel and attends very little to the autobiographical *Book*. He discusses the queer nature of his project and explains that he is dismantling not only the notion of a sexual and gendered identity but also temporality and genre, something upon which I will build and explore in more detail using his book to help us better understand Kempe's. Early in the article, Glück states that the story parallels the two relationships – Margery and Jesus with the narrator Bob and L. – "until the two stories merge to become one: Bob becomes Margery, L. becomes Jesus. Bob's ability to enter the fifteenth century is 'underwritten' by Margery's own travel through time to the events of Jesus's life."²⁵⁸ Medieval and modern identities become fused. Glück reveals that one of the ways in which he merges the medieval self and the modern self in *Margery Kempe* is by having interviewed forty of his friends during the process of writing the book. Specifically, he was looking for their thoughts and memories about their bodies, which he then "applied to - that is, stitched into - remote fifteenth-century characters."²⁵⁹ Through this crafting of his characters from multiple modern friends' experiences, he begins to collapse the rift between the medieval and the modern.

Since the publication of Glück's article, Anne Clark Bartlett is the only other scholar (either medievalist or modernist) who has responded to the novel, and unlike those negative reviewers, Bartlett describes this novel as an "astute appropriation of the historical Kempe's narrative."²⁶⁰ Notwithstanding her focus on language and its inherent difficulties in both the medieval and modern texts, throughout the article Bartlett makes clear that the *Book* had gotten stale and "inarticulate" for her, and she reveals that her "attunement to Kempe's voice had

²⁵⁸ Robert Glück, "My Margery; Margery's Bob," *Shark* 3 (2001). 36.

²⁵⁹ Glück, "My Margery; Margery's Bob." 37.

²⁶⁰ Bartlett, "Reading It Personally: Robert Gluck, Margery Kempe, and Language in Crisis." 440.

become less acute over time.”²⁶¹ She elucidates what the novel can add to the existing body of Kempe scholarship and how it adds meaning to the *Book*, specifically in its revealing “how intensely [Kempe] strove, desired, and attempted to communicate.”²⁶² In other words, she is writing to reinvigorate Kempe research – her own as well as that of the rest of the scholarly community of medievalists.

Bartlett’s approach is largely based on queer theory, which she employs in her analysis of *Margery Kempe* in order to illustrate how it adds to our understanding of the *Book*. However, in doing so she employs such terminology as *hetero-* and *homosexual*, which seems to contradict her arguments. For example, in discussing the use of drag within the novel, Bartlett states that it is “more complicated than a simple male-to-female impersonation.”²⁶³ If the manipulation of gender within *Margery Kempe* cannot be reduced to a binary structure, how do terms such as *hetero-* and *homosexual* even hold meaning? If, as her example illustrates, Bob, the narrator of the novel, wants to “be a woman and a man penetrating *him*” and also “the woman and the man *he* continually fucks,” what signification do such binary terms have?²⁶⁴ Additionally, Bartlett refers to the “heterosexual desires of the medieval Kempe.”²⁶⁵ Perhaps her *desires* could indeed be described as heterosexual, but is it really accurate to make use of such modern identity categories to describe a medieval individual? Bartlett subsequently refers to “hetero- and homosexual categories” in the next sentence without clarifying to which text she applies such terms – the medieval autobiography or the modern novel.

²⁶¹ Bartlett, "Reading It Personally: Robert Gluck, Margery Kempe, and Language in Crisis." 437.

²⁶² Bartlett, "Reading It Personally: Robert Gluck, Margery Kempe, and Language in Crisis." 455.

²⁶³ Bartlett, "Reading It Personally: Robert Gluck, Margery Kempe, and Language in Crisis." 455.

²⁶⁴ Bartlett, "Reading It Personally: Robert Gluck, Margery Kempe, and Language in Crisis." 455. Bartlett quotes this passage from page 49 of Glück; emphasis is added by her.

²⁶⁵ Bartlett, "Reading It Personally: Robert Gluck, Margery Kempe, and Language in Crisis." 454.

As in earlier chapters and as do Dinshaw and Bartlett, I employ queer theory as my analytic framework. Both scholars have already demonstrated that such an approach provides a way to help better understand Margery, especially by doing so in tandem with Glück's re-imagining of her. However, there is also much that the two texts can reveal about medieval and modern conceptions of virginity. Although Margery's desire for chastity as portrayed in her autobiography has been studied, this is not an area of focus for either Bartlett or Dinshaw. To effectively study the queer contained within the *Book*, her virginity must be taken into consideration as should the ways in which she resignifies and reappropriates this masculinist identifier. Despite being married and having given birth to fourteen children, Margery wants to be relieved from her marital debt, so that she can, in some fashion, reclaim her lost virginity. She desires that which can never be recaptured – at least not without doing so on her own terms and redefining what it means to be a virgin.

This ability to destabilize identity categories and to cause disquiet (both in Lynne and during her travels) is made more prominent through Glück's modern perspective of Margery's story. In his novel everything about Margery – her passionate love for Christ, her sorrow over His suffering (made evident through her weeping and wailing) – becomes even more so; if it is possible, Glück's Margery is über-Margery. While this is definitely reflected in his depiction of her repeatedly having sex with Christ, it is more than that. Glück describes Margery's extraordinary desire for Him and desire to be like the virgin martyrs: "So it was a joy to be punished for speaking of Jesus; she wanted to be murdered for his sake."²⁶⁶ Even at the Passion, Glück's Margery usurps Mary's sorrow and cries out, "Kill me rather than abandon me!"²⁶⁷ Her

²⁶⁶ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 36.

²⁶⁷ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 141.

passion for Christ and her pain become so great that she craves death rather than losing Him. This exaggeration in Margery (much like the femininity that we saw in Chaucer's Prioress) pervades her actions and her words throughout the novel.

The physicality that is already very much a part of the Margery as she is represented in the *Book* actually becomes redefined in some ways for the twentieth century. Although many modern readers would not understand either representation of Kempe (as evidenced in the *Publisher's Weekly* and *Kirkus* reviews),²⁶⁸ Glück's Margery is constructed as a woman who alternates between passionately obsessed with her lover, Christ, and distressed by the lack of respect she occasionally receives from Him. Rather than the medieval Margery whose relationship with Christ is largely spiritual and manifests in physicality primarily on her part (thus making her more foreign to a modern audience), this twentieth-century Margery's relationship with Christ is as much physical as it is spiritual. In some ways, Glück's story becomes more a story of physical desire than the retelling of the life of a religious mystic.

It is as a result of the somewhat extreme behavior of this middle-aged, married woman from the fifteenth century that the queer is made manifest as she asserts her desire to live life as a virgin. In fact, I would argue that in both texts we see Margery behave similarly to the representation of the virgin martyr Cecilia in the *Second Nun's Tale*. As both women attempt to gain control over their futures and accomplish their religious objectives through virginity (or by redefining virginity in Margery's case), they transcend their gender and become an amalgamation of both feminine and masculine characteristics. There is a critical distinction though; unlike the medieval virginity of the martyrs Juliana and Cecilia for whom physical purity could not be questioned, Margery foregrounds both forms of virginity – physical and spiritual –

²⁶⁸ Amy Hollywood also suggests that it is "her pursuit of this religious ideal that makes her 'abnormal' in modern terms." Amy Hollywood, "The Normal, the Queer, and the Middle Ages," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10.2 (2001). 178.

that Clarissa Atkinson suggests were found in the later Middle Ages.²⁶⁹ In the medieval *Book* and modern *Margery Kempe* alike, the physiological side of modern (and medieval) secular virginity becomes unified with the re-gendering of the medieval virgin.

A Margery for the Modern World

Glück's retelling of Kempe's story is very much a new representation of the historical woman whom we previously knew primarily through herself and her scribes. Nevertheless, it provides us with a new dialogue through which we can examine Margery's relationship with Jesus as well as her ability to negotiate the masculinist society to which she belonged. Admittedly, there are elements of the text that might lead one to see Glück as having recreated Margery as a woman who completely submits herself to the phallic power structure, largely through the utter passivity she often demonstrates in her relationship and interactions with Jesus. One might even come away from Glück's novel having assessed her as a needy self-absorbed woman who merely trades her dependency on one male authority figure, her husband John, for a different one. Not only is her desire – for Christ as well as to be a martyr – reflected in her sentiment, per Glück, that, “[. . .] it was a joy to be punished for speaking of Jesus; she wanted to be murdered for his sake,” but we also see her willingness to subject herself to this masculine authority figure.²⁷⁰

Such feelings seem to make it difficult to argue that Glück's Margery does anything but voluntarily objectify herself. However, in her analysis of the *Book*, Karma Lochrie similarly observes that, “The feminization of the body of Christ in medieval devotional texts further

²⁶⁹ Atkinson, “‘Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass’: The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages.” 133.

²⁷⁰ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 36.

problematizes the woman mystic's *imitatio Christi* because it seems merely to reinforce her subjection to repressive social, sexual, and theological hierarchies."²⁷¹ We witness this subjugation quite clearly when Glück's Margery repeatedly asks, "Did you miss me, Jesus?" and pleads, "Kill me rather than abandon me!"²⁷² In his version of her life, Glück often reattributes Margery's trademarked weeping and crying. Rather than arising out of a spiritual motivation, the new Margery cries out in fear over potentially losing her lover. For example, she exclaims, "Jesus, don't abandon me! Your angels offer you my tears."²⁷³ Initially Glück seems to emphasize her dependence on Jesus and to allow her to be subsumed by someone new instead of highlighting her ability to be independent in matters such as her marriage and finances. However, to limit ourselves to such an interpretation would be an oversimplification.

During one of Margery's early sexual encounters with Jesus, Glück acknowledges that for her, "Jesus was the world [. . .]"; however, he continues by describing that "[. . .] Margery rode panting on top."²⁷⁴ Looking at the first part of this observation, we recognize that indeed, Jesus was the world for her, and that the fictional Margery does submit to him both for spiritual as well as fleshly reasons. However, the second part of Glück's description is significant in that "Margery rode panting on top." Admittedly, there are no explicitly sexual encounters such as these in Kempe's *Book*; this scene is Glück's entirely modern invention. Nevertheless, Glück's interpretation of a fifteenth-century woman finds her not subjugated sexually but rather assuming the more active position during intercourse, a detail that seems particularly relevant. Lochrie posits that in the Middle Ages, "The lure of the 'woman on top' must have been as dangerous as

²⁷¹ Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. 14.

²⁷² Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 63, 141.

²⁷³ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 133.

²⁷⁴ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 15.

the lure of the ‘bestial manner’ of intercourse not only for its suggestion of sexual pleasure apart from procreation, but for its fantasy of gender appropriation and, of course, power.”²⁷⁵

Margery possesses power in the relationship, but it is also clear as Glück continues the description of this particular sex act between Margery and Jesus that she derives pleasure from it: “The orgasm pushed her features as though she were travelling into a strong wind.” Jesus indirectly acknowledges her powerful relationship to him when he reassuringly tells her, “Be thankful, St. Bridget never saw me fluttering like a dove.”²⁷⁶ His response also reveals the intimacy in their relationship, an intimacy that is significant in that, through Jesus, Glück grants his Margery superiority to St. Bridget. In this scene, she achieves even more than what the medieval Margery desired. Additionally, this scene reflects what Lochrie calls “an insurrection of gender categories and hierarchies that occurs when men occupy the passive position sexually and women occupy the active position.”²⁷⁷ In this case, it is not Jesus who is acting upon the passive female body during sex, rather it is *she* who is the more active, thus avoiding, as Lochrie describes, being the “surface on which the male anatomy exerts its own impression” or being “conceived as victim.”²⁷⁸

Despite this role reversal, there are inequities within the relationship that Glück’s Margery has with Jesus to which she is not blind, and it is her response to these imbalances that demonstrates her strength and unwillingness to merely play along as a weak woman. On one occasion after displeasing Jesus, she pauses to reflect on how “[h]is somber character really didn’t suit her; he barked orders and walked ahead” and asks herself, “How long could she put

²⁷⁵ Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*. 186.

²⁷⁶ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 15.

²⁷⁷ Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*. 185.

²⁷⁸ Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. 43.

up with that?"²⁷⁹ Glück's glimpses into her thinking help us begin to see that Margery – his twentieth-century re-creation of her echoing the fifteenth-century Margery's resistance to the status quo – does not in fact simply defer to the wishes of a masculinist society but rather refuses to submit herself completely to its expectations.

In fact, Kempe represents herself, much as does Glück, as a woman who moves beyond and gradually distances herself from many of the existing traditional power structures and the behaviors expected of a middle-class woman, such as those found in marriage and mothering. As French theorist Luce Irigaray claims about the traditional role of women in patriarchal societies, "For woman is traditionally use-value for man, exchange-value among men. Merchandise, then. [. . .]. Woman is never anything more than the scene of more or less rival exchange between two men [. . .]."²⁸⁰ Margery refuses to be reduced to this, however. In Kempe's account of her religious life, she consistently portrays herself as being a self advocate: in her marriage in demanding it be chaste, thus reclaiming her "virginity"; in her role as mother in allowing herself not being restricted by it; and in her overly demonstrative form of affective piety. Throughout her book, Kempe shows us that Margery defies and moves beyond culturally-imposed expectations.

Likewise, Glück's Margery has not been granted chastity from her husband only to be placed in a new relationship in which she must assume the role of commodity for masculine desires, even though her fictional sexual relationship with Jesus might seem to indicate that. Glück instead reveals how much she challenges the patriarchy of medieval society – in both his *Margery Kempe* and her own *Book* – through his utter dismantling of traditional signifiers such

²⁷⁹ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 100.

²⁸⁰ Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," trans. Claudia Reeder, *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997). 328.

as virgin/non-virgin; male/female; gay/straight; divine/human; spiritual/physical; fiction/non-fiction; and past/present, concepts upon which such a traditional masculinist society such as fifteenth-century England relies to maintain its power. Despite his seeming emphasis on Margery and Christ's physical relationship (which could cause a modern reader to question the validity of Margery's desire for chastity), Glück manages to incorporate and, ultimately, explode each of these binaries. In so doing, he also draws attention the collapse occurring throughout the *Book* as she refuses to submit to such culturally-enforced distinctions, both as an author and as a character.

The Destabilization of Dualities

At their very core, both the *Book* and *Margery Kempe* are texts that defy classification and reduction to linguistic explanations. Not only are such socially-constructed binaries as male/female, gay/straight, and virgin/non-virgin questioned through the content of the texts, but so is genre. Like the characters contained within the *Book* and *Margery Kempe*, the books themselves resist being labeled as either fiction or non-fiction. Ostensibly, the *Book* is an autobiography, albeit one that was dictated to scribes, which raises the question of how to attribute the authorship of the text. Such a complex question is not easily answered, as evidenced by the debates among scholars John C. Hirsh, Nicholas Watson, and Lynn Staley, each of whom arrive at slightly different conclusions in her/his studies. Exploring such questions of genre helps us understand how Margery enables Glück's experimentation with genre and that this is in itself destabilizes traditional categorization.

On one end of the continuum, and writing in the mid-seventies, Hirsh sees the contribution by the second amanuensis as considerable. He argues that “[. . .] the evidence

suggests that the second scribe did more than transcribe the earlier text, rather he rewrote it, *from start to finish*" (emph. added).²⁸¹ In other words, this priest did not merely work with Kempe to emend and refine the initial work before adding to it; instead he inserted himself in an authorial function. Hirsh concludes by contending that "[. . .] it may be confidently stated that the second scribe, no less than Margery, should be regarded as the author of *The Book of Margery Kempe*."²⁸² In contrast, Nicholas Watson posits that Kempe should indeed be considered the author of her *Book* by exploring how the text came to be and what purpose Kempe intended for it. He argues that, "[. . .] Kempe herself, not her scribe, was primarily responsible for the *Book's* structure, argument, and most of its language, and [that] [. . .] it might have been important to her self-understanding that this be so."²⁸³ In his analysis of the *Book*, Watson attempts to demonstrate that, while there are obviously scribal interruptions throughout the text, they serve to demonstrate that the overall content and writing style are indeed Kempe's, regardless of who actually put pen to paper.

Finally, Lynn Staley approaches the question of the *Book's* authorship – and thus its genre – from a different direction. She suggests that the question of how much text Kempe dictated and how much was written or rewritten by scribes is irrelevant. Rather, she argues that we must consider the function these men serve in the whole of the book as an authorizing trope. According to Staley, regardless of their contribution to its content, Kempe's amanuenses are a critical element of the book in that they "function as witnesses to her holiness and singularity."²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ John Hirsh, "Author and Scribe in *the Book of Margery Kempe*," *Medium Aevum* 44 (1975). 147.

²⁸² Hirsh, "Author and Scribe in *the Book of Margery Kempe*." 150.

²⁸³ Nicholas Watson, "The Making of *the Book of Margery Kempe*," *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, eds. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2005). 397.

²⁸⁴ Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1994). 33.

Additionally, Staley contends that the *Book* is best categorized as a sacred biography in that it functions much like hagiography; as a result, she draws a distinction between *Kempe* as author and *Margery* as protagonist. My point is not to take sides in the debate about who deserves credit for the *Book* but rather to point out how the circumstances of its production trouble traditional categories of genre. Depending on to whom we credit the creation and writing of the text – Margery or her scribes – her book could be less autobiographical and more historical fiction, or even perhaps hagiographical.²⁸⁵

The question of genre is equally problematic in *Margery Kempe*. In discussing Glück's writing, Earl Jackson, Jr., suggests that the "gay male narrative in its localization of a specific range of male experience and its appeal to its own community, operates within the social logic of scandal, thriving on the other side of the heterosexual aversion."²⁸⁶ One might be able to argue that *Margery Kempe* operates in such a fashion through the narrator Bob as he tells of his yearning for the love and attention of his lover L. However, this book is not limited to the categorization as a gay male narrative; nor is it merely historical fiction or biography. It is none of those and all of those at the same time. Glück himself states, "I suppose I have staged the historical in Margery's story in the theater of autobiography, building an aesthetics out of the interpenetration of fact and fiction. For me, the world of fact is largely made up of fiction [. . .]. And, of course, the world of fiction is a fact."²⁸⁷ He dismantles genre and makes it irrelevant by crafting a narrative world in which the love story between Margery and Jesus runs parallel to the relationship between Bob and L.

²⁸⁵ In the Introduction to her edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Lynn Staley argues that "Kempe grounds her work in the conventions of medieval female sacred biography." *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 2. Also, the book jacket to Glück's *Margery Kempe* describes her as a "failed saint." Glück, *Margery Kempe*.

²⁸⁶ Earl Jackson, Jr., "Scandalous Subjects: Robert Glück's Embodied Narratives," *differences* 3.2 (1991): 113.

²⁸⁷ Glück, "My Margery; Margery's Bob." 38.

By itself, the elements of Glück's account of Margery's life that chronicle Margery's relationship with a corporeal Christ defies genre. His text cannot be dismissed as merely fiction because there are events that Glück recounts that are historically accurate such as her father's prominence in King's Lynn, her relationship with her husband, and her pilgrimages.²⁸⁸ However, he transforms her mystical visions into literal encounters, serving to queer the distinction between divine/human and spiritual/physical.

Despite the historical accuracy of certain elements of Kempe's book, the portion of Glück's *Margery Kempe* allocated to Margery's narrative is unclassifiable in its own right. However, Glück then inserts the story of the narrator Bob and his lover L., which is described on the inside cover of the book as "the author's love for a young man, L." – not the narrator's but the *author's*. However, other than the provided plot summary telling us that we are to read the Bob/L. sections as autobiographical, there is little to no evidence that the character Bob is the same as author Robert. This is especially true because High Risk Books categorizes it on the back cover as "fiction/gay studies/historical fiction" but mentions nothing about memoir or autobiography. Likewise, Penguin, the publisher of the Windeatt's translation of the *Book*, classifies it as literature, autobiography, and religion and mythology. If the *Book* is autobiographical and if Glück is retelling events from the *Book*, would there not be elements of at least biography in *Margery Kempe*, as the classification but not discussions of genre imply? Much like the rest of this text, the story signifies something that resists language and categorization. Its ever-changing nature defies the limitations of binaries and other boundaries.

Much in the same way that history, autobiography, and fiction fuse in each of these texts, Glück's interrelated stories of Margery and Bob rather paradoxically revolve around the ability of the earthly and heavenly realms to come together. With the boundary between them blurred,

²⁸⁸ Margaret Gallyon, *Margery Kempe of Lynn and Medieval England* (Norwich: Canterbury, 1995).

the separation between the earthly and the heavenly – or between the physical and the spiritual – becomes almost nonexistent. By re-envisioning Margery's relationship with Jesus as a literal love affair rather than merely a mystical one, Glück forces us to consider her spiritual connection with him in a new way. Indeed, her desire for chastity and her newfound role as virgin becomes even more questionable as Margery and Jesus transcend their respective realms and behave in ways that would typically only be possible within the physical world. One might wonder how sincere Glück believes her desire truly is if she is willing to engage in sex with Christ. It becomes acceptable, however, because even in the *Book*, the object of Margery's devotion is Christ.

By collapsing the boundaries between the spiritual and the physical, Glück also brings the medieval and the modern together. Margery retains her devotion to Christ but her passion is now granted a physical outlet that twentieth-century society might more readily understand. As a result, what is a figurative romance in the *Book* becomes literal in *Margery Kempe*, and that union with Christ for which the medieval Margery longs, she receives in the most literal sense. The couple walks together, has conversations, and has sexual intercourse. Glück describes their first sexual encounter: "He spread her lips far apart [. . .] The muscles in his long passive legs reacted to pleasure with little twitches. 'I spasmed eleven times,' he mused. He'd been counting absentmindedly."²⁸⁹ By including such detail, there is no question that Glück has reshaped the relationship between Margery and Christ into something more relevant to a largely secular twentieth-century society, a society that largely thinks of virginity only in terms of its being a temporary condition. These acts of arousal and penetration, once confined to the earthly realm, are somehow allowed to occur within a world that is at the same time both physical and spiritual.

²⁸⁹ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 15.

Nevertheless, it is the physicality that Glück more often emphasizes throughout his text. For example, he recounts a conversation Margery has with the Vicar of St. Stephen's Church in Norwich (which is based on an event from the *Book*). In this scene Glück describes the Vicar in vivid detail that accentuates the grotesque in the human body: "The Vicar was gaining weight; he was aware of his belly bulging against his chest and his breasts drooping onto the skin beneath. He wondered if Margery was conscious of her body touching itself there or her cunt lips touching each other."²⁹⁰ Glück highlights the physicality of humanness, despite the subject being a representative of the Church and, through his masculinity, supposedly of the spiritual and the symbolic, of language. In contrast, Kempe reveals nothing about the Vicar's physicality in that same scene in the *Book*. Instead the focus is on Margery and the narrating of her spiritual experiences to the Vicar.²⁹¹

Even when Glück depicts Jesus taking Margery back in time to his birth shortly after her visit with the Vicar, this event is framed in physical terms, rather than holy or spiritual as one might expect. He completely reframes a similar episode in the *Book* that contains none of the detail Glück includes. Unlike the very basic account contained in the *Book*, Glück's descriptions are reminiscent of the "grotesque realism" found in the writings of Rabelais. Mikhail Bakhtin explains that in grotesque realism "the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people." Additionally, "[. . .] it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body."²⁹² Unlike the desire of Church fathers to unnaturally separate the body and the spirit, grotesque celebrates the physical. In Glück's

²⁹⁰Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 19.

²⁹¹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 50-52.

²⁹² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT 1968). 19.

formulation, the holy birth is compared to shitting, and the holy parents are described in such a manner: “The tips of Mary’s nipples were long and Joseph’s cock was a length of rotten rope below a pad of gray curls.”²⁹³ In this description we see no romanticized beauty in the human body, merely its raw, component parts. While it again depicts the physical as the grotesque, this portrayal of the holy parents, as well as those of the vicar’s weight and Margery’s genitals, is largely positive and represents “images of bodily life [such as] fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance.”²⁹⁴ As Glück aphoristically elaborates immediately following the depiction of Mary and Joseph, “Being human was a costume party – dressing up in flesh and blood.”²⁹⁵ At this point, rather than speaking about any specific characters, such as Mary and Joseph or Christ, Glück merely observes that possessing a human body comes with the raw physicality that he describes, no matter how idealized the body often is (whether that be Christ’s or a more general ideal). However, this commentary also implies that the essence of humanness is something more than its physical manifestation. There is something already there that “dress[es] up in flesh and blood,” again allowing the physical and the spiritual to collide.

Without this binary of physical and spiritual, medieval gender divisions also begin to break down. If the divine masculine can inhabit the physical realm and if the most highly-emphasized aspect of a male clergyman is his physicality, how can masculinity truly be the more spiritual and less corporeal? Indeed, how can it be only the feminine that is relegated to the flesh? Through Glück’s compression of everything into its raw physicality and through his collapsing of the strict male/female and masculine/feminine binaries, he brings out such aspects in the *Book* as well. While Glück’s Margery often appears subservient and exhibits more

²⁹³ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 24.

²⁹⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 19.

²⁹⁵ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 24.

neediness than does Jesus, this relationship – like the others in the book – is not the equivalent of any other love affair that is defined based on gender (i.e., heterosexual or same-sex). Through his imaginative response to Margery’s narrative, Glück dismantles gender distinctions and, in so doing, demonstrates that such distinctions are merely social constructions. For instance, he draws a parallel between Margery and Bob. As Carolyn Dinshaw argues, theirs are “lives queerly related” through all of the interconnections that take place and the “cross-identifications in the realm of sexuality and gender.”²⁹⁶

Throughout the text, Bob, a twentieth-century male, connects his life to Margery’s and, at times, longs to become – or perhaps even see himself in – this medieval female mystic. About midway through the book, Glück recounts his childhood interest in the physicality of Christianity. Growing up in a Jewish home, he admits that “[. . .] belief attracted and repelled [him], especially beliefs of Christian friends. Eating the body, drinking blood. Sexual sins whispered into hidden ears. The whacked-out saints, their fragmented corpses. Jesus nursing and the glorious fleshy ham.”²⁹⁷ Glück even reveals his youthful desire to become a monk after reading the work of some of the mystics. As he discloses, “Illuminating holy books was a career that suited my temperament and passage to this magical universe was simply belief in it.”²⁹⁸

In addition to Bob’s interest in Christianity and the mystics, however, he sees his relationship with L. mirrored in Margery and Jesus’s. There are a number of times when he echoes the sentiment that “Jesus and Margery act out my love.” He also says, “As I write, I read my experience as well as Margery’s.”²⁹⁹ Not only does Glück see himself as Margery the mystic

²⁹⁶ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. 170.

²⁹⁷ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 81.

²⁹⁸ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 81.

²⁹⁹ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 80-81.

and lover of Christ, in thinking about his lover L. and contemplating the feelings he has for him, Bob says, “I want to be a woman and a man penetrating him, his inner walls rolling around me like satin drenched in hot oil, and I want to be the woman and man he continually fucks. I want to be where total freedom is.”³⁰⁰ He desires neither a traditional heterosexual nor a same-sex experience as his idea of independence – but something more accurately identified as non-gendered. As Bartlett observes, “[. . .] Bob wants to have it all ways, and always.”³⁰¹

This destabilization of gender continues with the manner in which Jesus is constructed. At different points throughout the book, Glück describes his features according to distinctively male and female characteristics and, at times, even those more accurately described as androgynous. Although in one instance Jesus is clearly gendered masculine as Margery describes that on the cross he “hung before her in his manhood,” more often he seems almost feminine in that “his face was softly masculine, almost overdone, eyesockets delicate, nose polished down”; additionally, he has “two tiny points of hair” for a beard and is “basking and effeminate.”³⁰²

Jesus’s having “hung before her in his manhood” is an image that connotes the epitome of masculinity in that it seems to represent a genitally well-endowed male. When a man is described as being *hung* in a physical or sexual context, the implication is that he has a large penis, and because Christ “*hung* before her in his *manhood*” (emph. added), the suggestion is that, on the cross, we should view him as a highly masculinized figure. In contrast, however, “*softly* masculine,” “*delicate*,” and “*down[y]*” is not the way a modern reader might anticipate Jesus, the son of God, to be described. While he is described as “*masculine*,” that is minimized

³⁰⁰ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 49.

³⁰¹ Bartlett, “Reading It Personally: Robert Gluck, Margery Kempe, and Language in Crisis.” 455.

³⁰² Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 61, 131, 115.

by the modifier “softly.” Moreover, “delicate” and “down[y]” seem more appropriate adjectives for a baby or small child rather than an adult male. Rather than emphasizing the patriarchal aspect of Christianity and the son of God, Glück allows him to possess “effeminate” features in addition to his “manhood.”

Such descriptions are actually more in keeping with common imagery of the Middle Ages. Caroline Walker Bynum posits that the medieval softening and feminizing of Christ occurred in part because “[a]s the priest became more distant, God became more accessible; as the priest was ‘divinized,’ God became ‘human.’”³⁰³ Such humanizing of God and Christ often came in the form of maternal imagery. Bynum describes, “Descriptions of God as woman nursing the soul at her breasts, drying its tears, punishing its petty mischief-making, giving birth to it in agony and travail, are part of a growing tendency to speak of the divine in homey images and to emphasize its approachability.”³⁰⁴ However, there is an important distinction between the imagery of the middle and later Middle Ages and what Glück achieves: In medieval texts “the notion of Christ as mother, like that of Christ as bridegroom, remains allegorical.”³⁰⁵ In Glück’s text the softening of Christ is more than figurative. Like His corporeality, it becomes quite literal.

This depiction goes beyond merely making Jesus more “homey,” however. The preceding physical descriptions portray Jesus as having “a face without features,” completely lacking facial characteristics – masculine or feminine.³⁰⁶ Glück continues to asexualize the

³⁰³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984). 19.

³⁰⁴ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. 129.

³⁰⁵ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. 134.

³⁰⁶ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 115.

Divine as he describes a scene in which Jesus and Margery are sharing a pear tart, and “[h]e tucked his cock between his legs and wore a flushed, mocking face. He crossed his legs tighter, displaying only sparse brown hair.”³⁰⁷ We see Jesus purposefully hiding his masculine sex organs leaving his physical gender unclassifiable. Through this action, Glück assigns a portion of the culpability to Jesus for the queering that is occurring. No longer is it merely what Bob or Margery desires, but now the breaking down of binary gender appears almost as if a coming from Christ himself. This permission to be queerly unidentifiable extends to God as well since even His angels are not categorized as masculine or feminine, because they “have full lips; their features are soft but their heavy necks seem masculine.”³⁰⁸ Like Jesus, these individuals cannot be simply identified as one gender or the other.

Through Glück’s assertion that gender is unstable and performative, he redefines the medieval construct of natural versus unnatural. Throughout the medieval period, the Church and, by extension, society generally viewed a natural sex act as one that involved intercourse between a male and a female with the man on top – in the active position – and as occurring during that time in which conception was possible. For example, Frankish bishop, Jonas of Orleans, who lived in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, preached that “Sex for pleasure is an abuse of God’s creation. The reproductive organs are precisely that and nothing else. Sex is allowed only to married couples, only at prescribed times and places, and only for reproduction.”³⁰⁹ Although some medieval people believed that orgasm was a necessary component of sex in order to conceive, Jonas of Orleans seems to be referring to sex merely for the sake of pleasure. Later writers continued with this line of thinking; specifically, “[t]hey

³⁰⁷ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 48.

³⁰⁸ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 160.

³⁰⁹ Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*. 139.

assumed that the proper posture for marital sex ought to be the one in which the man lay atop his wife.” Additionally, “[d]eviations from this posture were perversions, motivated by a quest for unusual pleasures [. . .].”³¹⁰ However, these ideas about sex and what is acceptable and what is sinful lose any sense of meaning once gender breaks down. As Glück acknowledges a few lines later, “The tension between masculine-feminine and inside-outside pervades all levels of my community.”³¹¹

Consequently, this ambiguity and tension revolving around the binary of gender extends beyond Bob and Jesus. This is particularly clear in Glück’s reimagining of Margery’s pilgrimage in Italy. In the *Book*, there is merely Kempe’s account of traveling through the Italian countryside and her describing the generous men and women who offer them both food and lodging. Glück takes the opportunity to further break down the gender binaries. While Margery travels in Italy with her guide and escort Willyam Wever, Glück elaborates on Kempe’s description of the men and women whom Margery and Willyam meet on their travels through the countryside.³¹² He describes a typical pastoral scene with men farming and women carding wool – both acting according to traditional gender roles; however, into this landscape he inserts a woman who “became a man when he jumped over an irrigation ditch and his cunt dropped inside out.” Reflecting on the performativity of gender, Glück adds, “[. . .] gender is the extent we go to in order to be loved.”³¹³ Rather than her sexual organs simply being hidden as are Jesus’s, they are seemingly reconstructed into those of the opposite sex. This transposition nicely reflects

³¹⁰ Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*. 367. See also Brundage pages 240 and 286 regarding the twelfth-century writings of Gratian and the decretist schools that emerged from Gratian’s *Decretum*.

³¹¹ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 48

³¹² See *Margery Kempe*, 72-73.

³¹³ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 57.

the medieval belief that the female was merely an inverted male, but in the *Book* itself there is nothing remotely close to Glück's transsexual man. The inclusion by Glück of such a scene, however, quite literally reveals the artificiality of gender.

Additionally, his contention that gender is something we enact in order to garner acceptance by society might seem, at first, to reflect the common misinterpretation of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (i.e., that performativity is the same as performance). Nevertheless, if, Glück writes, "gender is the extent we go to in order to be loved," must that necessarily imply a deliberate decision-making process? As infants and small children receive input from their families and society, don't most adjust their behaviors and the ways in which they present themselves in order to reflect such expectations? As Butler argues, "[. . .] [A]s a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right."³¹⁴ Society molds children into two very distinct categories – boys and girls – and if they want to be accepted and loved, the children bow to what are often unspoken requirements. Rather than gender being a fixed identity, it is continuously being enacted, and consequently, those roles are constantly fluctuating resulting in the ever-present risk of a "failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition" that reveals the impermanence and artificiality of gender.³¹⁵

While such breaking down of strict male/female and masculine/feminine dualities is more literal in *Margery Kempe*, the modern text reveals Glück's astute understanding of similar challenges in the *Book* as well, ultimately through Margery's appropriation of the language of her masculinist society. Once Margery establishes her relationship with Jesus, she begins to

³¹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 178.

³¹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 179.

leave behind the trappings of her gendered role as wife and mother. The *Book* opens by recounting the incidents surrounding the birth of Margery and John's first child and how she "went owt of hir mende and was wondyrlye vexed and labowryd with spyritys."³¹⁶ During the six months Margery suffered from these temptations and demonic visions, her husband must forcibly restrain her, ostensibly to prevent her from harming herself. This period of suffering for Margery ends, however, when Jesus appears to her, and at that point, she begins to gradually move beyond her socially-imposed feminine role. In the years to follow, Margery (much like the virgin martyrs Juliana and Cecilia) utilizes the characteristics from each gender that allow her to best serve her religious objectives and transcends fourteenth-century expectations for women through both her behavior and her desires.

No longer does she – either historically or fictionally – desire her marriage to her husband John but only to her Lord. In the *Book* Jesus tells her, "[. . .] thu art a synguler lover, & therfor thu schalt have a synguler love in Hevyn, a synguler reward, & a synguler worshep" and then refers to her a few lines later as "myn owyn blyssed spowse."³¹⁷ Margery, having been uniquely set apart by Christ and having received the appellation of spouse, now considers herself to be married more to Christ than to her earthly husband John, a state she would like reflected through her dress, more specifically by clothing herself in white. Additionally, she frequently makes supplication to both her husband and the Church to be granted a chaste marriage to signal her loyalty to Christ. Although there is question as to whether Kempe was granted the mantle and the ring and officially relieved from her marital debt, John does conditionally grant her wish

³¹⁶ *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 22. "went out of her mind and was amazingly disturbed and tormented with spirits" *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 41.

³¹⁷ *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 62. "[. . .] you are a singular lover of God, and therefore you shall have a singular love in heaven, a singular reward and a singular honour." "my own blessed spouse" *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 88.

to live a celibate life.³¹⁸ Ultimately, they cease even living together in order to quell rumors that they are continuing to have sex. Once she is able to remove her attention from fulfilling her duties as wife and mother, Margery proceeds to devote her time to those activities that she believes Christ desires of her.

In order to truly consider herself a virgin once she is released from her marital debt, as a wife and mother Margery must resignify what virginity even means. As she describes her process of resignification, we see highlighted the two forms of medieval virginity – physical and spiritual. While the medieval women in my earlier chapters were unequivocally virgins by both standards, Margery can only lay claim to spiritual virginity. Indeed, she cannot even recover her chastity in quite the same way as a widow because she remains married to John. As it is for Karin in *The Virgin Spring*, virginity is a performance for Margery; regardless of the physical truth, they both want to appear as if they are sexually innocent. To signify her virginity, Margery chooses to wear white, not only because Christ asks this of her but also because it serves as a reminder to her that he considers a married mother of fourteen to be equal to the virgin martyrs. Margery takes this fact so seriously that like the early Christian women who died as a result of their love for and devotion to Christ, Margery “wold a be slayn for Goddys lofe.”³¹⁹ She does admit though that she would be scared to actually do so. While no one can really argue that a wife and mother remained a virgin or that she could even reinstate her physical intactness, Margery’s wish and attempts to make herself whole again point up the artificiality of this social construct. Like the ultra feminine Prioress who, through her excess, exposes the true emptiness

³¹⁸ In her article “Margery Kempe’s White Clothes,” Mary Erler argues that it is unlikely that the Church ever officially granted Kempe’s request to live chastely despite being married. Mary C. Erler, “Margery Kempe’s White Clothes,” *Medium Aevum* 62.1 (1993). 81.

³¹⁹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 43. “would have like to be slain for God’s love” *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 65.

of gender, Margery, in a similarly extreme state, queers virginity and shows it to be an empty signifier.

Her intent to recover her lost purity is later confirmed and made official when Margery symbolically marries Christ in both the *Book* and in *Margery Kempe*. Glück describes the scene that takes place in the *Book* when Margery visits Rome and receives a vision from God in the church of the Holy Apostles:

“I take you by the hand because my wife should be on homely terms with her husband. I lie in your bed. You desire to see me; you boldly take me as your wedded husband, your dear darling, for I want to be loved as a son is loved by his mother, and I want you to love me, daughter, as a wife loves her husband.” Now she’s wedded to Jesus, but father and son decline to remember which is which.³²⁰

Likewise in the *Book*, she recounts, “Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi weddyd husband, as thy derworthy derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd with the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde.”³²¹ Aside from Glück’s additional ending comment, his text is remarkably similar to the original. This similarity emphasizes the queerness in her particular form of *sponsa Christi*, a queerness that is present even in Kempe’s own text: Christ desires Margery as a wife and mother both while he also refers to her as daughter; additionally, the passage closes with a reference to God and questioning whom she has actually married. Through this new union, Margery has become interchangeably wife, mother, stepmother, and daughter to Christ. As Dinshaw argues in her

³²⁰ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 77.

³²¹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 94-95. “Daughter, you greatly desire to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son, for I want to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and I want you to love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband.” *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 126-27.

analysis of this passage, “This is, in fact, one big queer family.”³²² Not surprisingly, once Margery is granted this vision and confirms her choice to live as a bride of Christ, she continues to distance herself, both physically and spiritually, from her former life. No longer is she a woman who abides merely within the strict confines of traditional society. She has already left her family to travel with a group of other travelers on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Rome – relying on others (her husband or nursemaids) to parent their children. Even during the periods when she is at home in Lynn, neither she through her scribes nor Glück reveals many details about her children.

Margery’s lack of involvement with her children indicates a role reversal in which Kempe implies that John is the primary caretaker. This reversal is merely about gender roles unlike similar examples in Glück that, in some cases, are literal regendering of the characters. Kempe provides the reader with no information as to who is responsible for the fourteen children while she is gone for such a long period of time to Europe (and neither does Glück). Regardless of whether John is their actual caretaker, the ultimate obligation for them has fallen to him due to her absence. Liz Herbert McAvoy argues, “It is also presumed that the physical absence of Margery’s children in her account, except for isolated allusions, represents an abandonment and rejection of her own maternalism in favour of pursuing the spiritual life.”³²³ Rather than attempting to fit into a role which society believes she should be placed, the priority in Margery’s life is her spirituality. Moreover, McAvoy sees Margery’s self-removal from the lives of her children as more than a disavowal of her position as a woman:

³²² Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. 149.

³²³ Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Motherhood: The Book of Margery Kempe," *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 24 (1997). 23.

The *imitatio Mariae* [of Margery] [. . .] develops into a merging with the persona of the Virgin whilst on pilgrimage in Jerusalem, which in turn allows Margery unimpeded access to the body of Christ in all its humanity. From this point, Margery is liberated and empowered to become mother to the whole world rather than to a limited number of children in a limited sphere, which would forever have severed her from a personal experience of the body of Christ in all its physicality.³²⁴

This is a physicality that, as we have seen earlier, Glück helps us to understand through his spatial queering of the boundaries between the spiritual and the earthly and the ability for Margery and Christ to literally come together rather than merely in a spiritual manner. Through Margery's decision to leave her family in John's care, she becomes better able to allow herself to experience not only the here and now of fourteenth-century England but also a more spiritual realm beyond the one that she literally inhabits, a notion on which Glück's account clearly builds.

However, Margery can only accomplish this separation from her husband – both geographic and sexual – and the resulting transcendence into a less-defined realm through her attention to the phallogocentric expectations of fourteenth-century England as well as its corresponding constraints.³²⁵ Were she to fail to operate within the “ordered, regulated, and rule-governed” strictures of her masculinist society, or what Julia Kristeva terms the symbolic realm,

³²⁴ McAvoy, "Motherhood: The Book of Margery Kempe." 25.

³²⁵ In this context I am following Judith Halberstam's understanding of queer as beyond referring to merely gender and sexuality; rather, it is more about a way of living. She discusses a “queer way of life” which “encompass[es] subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being.” When she hones in on the word *queer* itself, for the purposes of her project Halberstam defines it as “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.” Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York UP, 2005). 1, 6.

Margery would not be able to achieve what she truly desires.³²⁶ Although the historical “[. . .] Kempe finds language completely inadequate for conveying the intensity of her desire for Christ,” she couples it with her uncontrolled, pre-symbolic weeping to prevent complete abjection.³²⁷ Without also appropriating (or perhaps submitting herself to) the language of those in power when necessary, the signification of her desires would be meaningless and incomprehensible. For example, somewhat early in her religious life (in fact, shortly after giving birth to her fourteenth child), Christ directs her to visit the vicar of St. Stephens in Norwich. There she is granted the opportunity to tell him all she knows about the “lofe of God.” After recounting her experience with the vicar, Kempe tells the reader that, from that point forward, the vicar “evyr held with hir and supportyd hir agen hir enmys into hys powyr aftyr the tyme that sche be the byddyng of God had schewyd hym hir maner of governawns and levyng, for he trustly belevyd that sche was wel lernyd in the lawe of God and indued wyth grace of the Holy Gost, to whom it longyth to enspyr wher he wyl.”³²⁸ Despite being overcome with weakness after hearing a mystical melody, causing her to collapse and lie completely still for a period of time, she was able to communicate her vast stores of religious knowledge to the vicar – so much so that he would be a complete supporter of her. It is through her ability to utilize the “symbolically regulated, grammatical, and syntactically governed language” of a masculinist society that she is able to achieve what she does in relation to her spiritual life.³²⁹ As a result, Margery can consider herself married first and foremost to her Lord, as revealed not only by her

³²⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1991). 151.

³²⁷ Bartlett, "Reading It Personally: Robert Gluck, Margery Kempe, and Language in Crisis." 446.

³²⁸ *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 50, 51-52. “he always took her side and supported her against her enemies as much as he could, after the time when she at God’s command had told him about her manner of life and behavior, for he faithfully believed that she was learned in the law of God, and endued with the grace of the Holy Ghost, to whom it belongs to inspire where he will.” *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 75-76.

³²⁹ Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. 152.

clothing herself in white but also by her living apart from her husband John. Although there is no evidence that Kempe was ever officially granted her request for chastity by the Church or authorized by the Vicar of St. Stephens, she was, in history as well as in fiction, ultimately allowed by her husband to mostly follow the spiritual life of her choosing.

Margery is able to realize her desires because she neither has a need for her husband economically, as the marital finances are hers, nor does she need him sexually.³³⁰ When she is ultimately able to end the sexual aspect of her marriage to John in favor of her relationship with Jesus, it is purely in the earthly realm that she remains celibate thus revealing her disavowal of the strictures of medieval masculinist society. Through her use of the symbolic – of language – Margery is able to reveal and make clear to John the relationship she has developed with Christ. This understanding of Margery is useful to considering the more personal and graphic description of her turning from John in Glück’s narrative. Glück describes, “Margery knew what kind of sex John wanted – recognition, perfection of the moment – because she sought it herself with Jesus. Sadly she turned from John by closing her eyes [. . .].” As this incident continues, she further distances herself from her physical husband in that “Through her pleasure she screamed, ‘Jesus, help me!’ and John’s erection melted. John became fixed, two dimensional.”³³¹ In crying out Christ’s name, she appropriates language and turns it against John (relieving her from having sex with him in this particular situation). This invocation of Christ allows Glück’s Margery to also effectively subvert masculinist society as represented by John in his role as the dominant partner.

³³⁰ Kempe was the daughter of a wealthy and prominent merchant and was apparently able to retain control of at least some of her legacy due to her ability to pay off some of her husband John’s debts. There is a reference to this in the *Book* when she and John are bargaining for their respective desires: He is willing to grant her a chaste marriage if she will resume eating and drinking on Fridays and also pay off his debts before leaving for Jerusalem. Gallyon, *Margery Kempe of Lynn and Medieval England*. 39-42. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 38

³³¹ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 25.

In addition to the redefinition of her marital life, she demonstrates her ability to employ the language of the fathers to direct her response to accusations made against her by secular authorities. At one point in both the *Book* and *Margery Kempe*, Margery has been taken to see the mayor of Leicester. In the *Book* Kempe recounts that prior to her visit with the Mayor Margery has cause to interact with the Steward of Leicester who immediately begins speaking to her in Latin, in an attempt to establish his authority. Subsequently, upon meeting and talking with the Mayor, despite her ability to effectively respond to their religious questioning, the reader is told that “[. . .] the meyr alto rebukyd hir and rehersyd many reprevows wordys and ungodly, the whiche is mor expedient to be concelyd than expressyd.”³³² As is fitting for a spiritual autobiography, Kempe decides not to repeat such improper and indecent words.

Glück, on the other hand, clarifies the situation (as he interprets it) for the reader, as a means of “protecting the state from heretics.”³³³ First of all, he attributes the questioning done by the Steward in Kempe’s account to the more powerful Mayor. The Mayor as a member of the masculine establishment attempts to control Margery not only by speaking to her in Latin, which she does not know, but also, in a departure from Kempe’s version, by expecting her to accommodate his sexual desires. Glück writes, “The Mayor took Margery by the hand and led her into his chamber; he told her he wanted to lick her breasts, that his cock was stiff and he wanted her to taste it. ‘Sir, I am the daughter of a man who was mayor five times.’”³³⁴ In her interactions with this official and in her response to his sexual advances, we see Margery attempt to disrupt the balance of power. Rather than weeping or wailing as she does when overcome by her spirituality, Margery utilizes a more straightforward, rational manner of communication –

³³² *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 117. “[. . .] the Mayor severely rebuked her and repeated many reprovings and indecent words, which it is more fitting to conceal than express.” *The Book of Margery Kempe*. 153.

³³³ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 109.

³³⁴ Glück, *Margery Kempe*. 111.

one more often attributed to the masculine – as she redefines their interaction by making clear her position of authority and invoking her patrilineage.

Margery Kempe's desire throughout both the *Book* and *Margery Kempe* is not to please the secular world, the Church, or her family, but rather to satisfy herself and, ultimately and most importantly, Christ. She does this even at the risk of angering people who would traditionally have power over her, whether that be secular or religious. Through her spirituality she is able to leave behind many of the traditional expectations of her time in order to follow Jesus and imagine herself as a *sponsa Christi*. The representation of Kempe within her autobiographical narrative illustrates how she is able to incorporate the largely feminine-coded affective piety into a life of her own design within a masculinist society. She works within her society to achieve her goals, questioning and challenging, but never completely overturning cultural mores.

However, Glück's twentieth-century perspective of her relationship with Christ dismantles many of the dualities that attempt to contain Margery. Further, he makes more evident her refusal to be abjectified by religious and government authorities. This resistance allows a mother of fourteen to resignify herself spiritually as virgin while also assuming feminine and masculine attributes. Furthermore, by turning his twentieth-century gaze to the fifteenth century and through his reinterpretation of Kempe's spiritual autobiography for a twentieth-century audience, Glück effectively questions modern views of sexuality and gender, views that many would have us believe are permanent, natural, and normal. Rather than Othering the Middle Ages to reinforce late twentieth-century ideological perspectives, as many modern texts and films do, he employs the safety of a past that is distant, but still common in its Western European heritage, to make clear that permanence, nature, and normality ultimately have much less to do with either sexuality or gender than one would think.

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