

THROUGH THE VEILED WINDOW:  
FEMININE AUTONOMY, MASCULINE AUTHORITY,  
AND DISCURSIVE TENSION IN ANCHORITIC WRITINGS

by

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DEDICATION

With sincere love, respect, and gratitude, this thesis is dedicated to Nicholas Burgard and Gwendolyn Morgan, without whom it would never have been completed.

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## ABSTRACT

An examination of English Medieval texts produced by and for women who chose to live as anchoresses, pursuing a hermitic lifestyle of religious contemplation and prayer. Contemporary framings and traditional scholarly discussions of anchoritic women have tended to view them as powerless and silenced due to their life of permanent enclosure within their hermit's cell. This thesis argues for a more nuanced view of the personal freedom these women enjoyed and of the awareness of that freedom possessed by anchoresses and by the male religious authorities who supervised them. The thesis invokes close readings, discourse analysis, and historical context to reach the conclusion that anchoresses possessed a remarkable level of personal freedom and social power, and that this was known, if not acknowledged, by the writers of anchoritic texts.

## INTRODUCTION: THE VEILED WINDOW

Throughout the Middle Ages in Europe, a unique form of Christian monastic life developed. Like hermits, those who followed this discipline lived lives of solitary devotion; like cloistered religious men and women, they devoted themselves to prayer and contemplation; and like the lay members of the Church, they were intimately involved in the everyday life of the community. Yet the predominantly female followers of this religious discipline were neither hermits, monks, nor laypeople; the anchorites – and anchoresses – inhabited a space influenced by and yet uniquely different from these other social roles.

Anchoritic life and spirituality was especially popular in England, and much of what we now know about the discipline comes from English sources. In the most common scenario, the anchoress was a single woman of some education who, in a solemn ceremony presided over by the bishop, would be enclosed within the walls of a small one or two-room cell built adjoining the local church. She would remain within these walls, cut off from the world around her with the exception of two windows, for the rest of her life. One of these windows opened into the church, so that the anchoress could hear Mass and receive the sacraments; the other opened onto the world outside, and it was through this window that the more mundane necessities of life were passed. This window to the world was ideally intended to be veiled by a heavy curtain, a symbol of the anchoress's separation; she was "a woman buried," symbolically dead to the world even as she continued to contemplate and pray on its behalf. However, the veil was not impenetrable; while the curtain might have remained drawn, the window to the world nevertheless

served as a conduit for discourse. Ultimately, the window also allowed for the dispersal of knowledge, power, and individuality, as the anchoress exchanged religious and personal counsel with the members of the community as recompense for the substance of her daily life.

In many ways, this image of the window to the world – veiled but not closed – mimics the form of the texts left to us by anchoritic authors. Within these texts, much remains veiled, unspoken, and hidden, buried by a dominant rhetoric which heavily emphasizes giving up and putting away the world and its notions of individuality and power. Yet beneath this dominant rhetoric – behind the metaphorical veil – there lies another, more complicated image of the anchoress. She was a woman who, through the very act of renunciation and putting-away, actually managed to step into a position of individual authority and spiritual fulfillment. Within the walls of the cell that was meant to be her tomb, the anchoress not only lived on – she flourished. In order to catch a glimpse of the anchoress as she truly was, we must look not only at what the texts concerning her claim to be saying; we must look beyond the veil, at what they say without words.

### Anchoritic Texts and Contexts

There are many contemporary references to the practices, reputations, and faith of those who followed the anchoritic way, as well as a rich body of archaeological evidence which helps to support these textual accounts.<sup>10</sup> Easily the two most important

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<sup>10</sup> Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker's *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe* offers a thoroughly detailed and researched reference on the historical details of anchoritic life.

contemporary sources of knowledge regarding anchoritic life and spirituality are the *Ancrene Wisse*, a handbook for anchoresses written in the thirteenth century, and Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, written in the early fifteenth century. At a glance, the two documents seem radically different in tone and subject matter, connected only by their placement within the anchoritic spiritual tradition.

The *Ancrene Wisse* is didactic in tone, written by a male author for an audience of women intending to undertake an anchoritic lifestyle. Part spiritual primer, part instruction manual, the *Wisse* focuses on providing its readers with a blueprint for the anchoritic life of discipline, from the amount of time an anchoress should spend in prayer each day to the strictures she should observe in lifestyle, dress, and conversation. By far the bulk of the work is dedicated to what the author calls the "Inner Rule," the condition of the anchoress's heart as she undertakes the monastic lifestyle. He speaks from a position of masculine authority which is gravely concerned with allowing women to undertake a spiritual life which will be lived largely without masculine control or observation, and as such is seeking to lay down a framework which will act to enclose and control the anchoress even when she is alone.

By contrast, Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* is devotional and mystic rather than didactic. While we know from her own account and from historical contemporaries that Julian was an anchoress, her text focuses very little attention on the details of her devotional lifestyle: instead, it is a deeply poetic and personal accounting of a number of divine visions which she experienced during a period of illness before taking the anchoritic vow. Nonetheless, the spirituality and theology of the *Revelations* is

uniquely anchoritic in tone, particularly in its treatment of concepts such as enclosure and renunciation. The male author of the *Ancrene Wisse* speaks from a position concerned with controlling feminine power and spiritual expression. Julian of Norwich, by contrast, embraces these ideas – albeit while couching them in terms which were acceptable to the masculine authorities which surrounded her.

What these two texts have in common besides their disciplinary tradition is their treatment of feminine faith and autonomy; both the *Ancrene Wisse* and the *Revelations of Divine Love* are texts concerned with women, with their lives and devotions, their outward practice and their inner spirituality. They are texts produced as part of a tradition of spiritual discipline which was largely practiced by women, but predominantly overseen and controlled by men, and as a result they are texts which display an inherent rhetorical tension between the official positions of “orthodox” anchoritic thought and the realities of lived anchoritic experience.

This essay focuses on these anchoritic texts, combining close reading and textual examination with rhetorical and discourse analysis to examine how gender politics and rhetorical strategies work together to shape the writings. Informed by Deborah Tannen’s work in *Gender and Discourse*, I uncover a theme of avoidant rhetoric which weaves itself through both documents, used with equal effectiveness and similar goals by both female and male, dominant and subordinate writers.

### Methods and Theoretical Tools

My approach to the questions of feminine power and identity in anchoritic works relies on three strategies: historical contextualization, close reading, and rhetorical/discourse analysis. While the resulting work may not seem heavily theoretical in tone, it is nevertheless crucially informed by gender theory and discourse analysis, especially by the intersection of these two schools of thought. The *Ancrene Wisse* and the *Revelations of Divine Love* are both analyzed with a view to understanding the function of gendered rhetoric in expressing, constructing, and altering relationships of power between male and female writers, and this project relies heavily on understandings of male-female interaction, rhetorics of power and subordination, and discourses between individuals with disparate levels of power. All of these understandings draw from works of theory, and without a theoretical framework and grounding, the project itself would be impossible.

Theory and the development thereof is not the primary focus of this work; rather, theory functions as a lens through which to closely examine the documents of interest. Thus, the majority of the project moves away from discussions of pure theory and into close reading, using the works of prior theorists as tools to dissect and understand the texts themselves. For this reason, the project does not devote space and energy to a needlessly in-depth reiteration of the works of previous scholars. The aim of the project is to present the reader with a working understanding of the theoretical tools being employed, and then to proceed directly to the far more interesting work of putting those tools to use.

Historical context is, in the case of anchoritic documents, especially important in order to properly understand the attitudes towards gender, identity, and spirituality which are addressed directly and indirectly in the texts. Though the language in which they were written and the religion with which they deal both survive to the present day, the *Ancrene Wisse* and the writings of Julian of Norwich were nevertheless produced in a culture which had its own unique understandings of gender, the concept of the individual, and the correct expressions of religious faith – understandings which in many cases are different enough from modern viewpoints to seem alien or counterintuitive to a present-day reader. One cannot understand the notion of an enclosed anchoress possessing a free and individualistic lifestyle unless one first understands the alternatives she was presented with as a woman within her society. For this reason, this essay presents an overview of the historical social attitudes and expectations which surrounded women, individuals, and cloistered religious persons in medieval England, as well as a discussion of the historical role of the anchoress in contrast to these expectations. This discussion precedes the close readings and speaks in broad societal terms rather than addressing the specific authors of the anchoritic texts of interest; this is meant to ground the close readings of the two specific texts as examples of a larger social discourse, one which was not carried on merely between two authors or texts but which permeated medieval society and the lives of the English anchoresses. It is also for this reason that the chapter on Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* encompasses not only a close reading of the text, but a broader discussion of the text's place in orthodox Christian thought of the period and a comparison of its reception with the public reception of Julian's contemporary,

Margery Kempe. To truly appreciate what the texts reveal to us about anchoritic lives and practice, and the rich nuances of the discourse between the texts, it is necessary to view the texts within a framework of historical and social contexts.

Once a historical framework is in place, the next strategy used for examining the anchoritic texts at hand is close reading. Because so much of the argument hinges upon what the texts *don't* say (and the ways in which they don't say it), it is crucial that detailed, thoughtful attention be paid to what *is* said within the texts. For this reason, a great deal of the project is devoted to examining relevant passages from the texts, exploring what the authors say directly in their writing. By careful analysis of textual choices, the attitudes of the authors can be to some extent uncovered; more significantly, close examination of the texts is the best way to uncover the *lacunae* that exist within what the *Ancrene Wisse* and the *Revelations of Divine Love* say directly – and it is this silence, the space beyond the textual veil, that shows us the anchoress as she really is rather than as she is described.

The third tool employed for examining anchoritic documents is rhetorical/discourse analysis. Once close reading has uncovered what has been said and unsaid, it is this theoretical approach which will be used to examine and dissect *how* it is said (or how it is avoided), and what this tells us. In essence, we are juxtaposing two texts and placing them in conversation with one another, then analyzing the conversation that results. This portion of the project draws heavily on Deborah Tannen's work, particularly in *Gender and Discourse*. In that work, Tannen addresses gendered conversational strategies and expectations of subordinate/dominant behavior in discourse. It is intuitive

to a modern American reader that the subordinate person in a relationship would be more likely to address a subject obliquely or using deferential/avoidant language; however, Tannen points out that, depending upon the cultural and linguistic contexts, avoidance and avoidant phrasing in conversation is not exclusively reserved for the subordinate or powerless speaker. In some cases, the individual who wields the power may use language which, to an outside observer, seems framed to be avoidant or even deferential. “Indirectness,” writes Tannen, “is not in itself a strategy of subordination. Rather, it can be used by either the powerful or the powerless.”<sup>11</sup>

Taking this notion to its logical next step, I examine the ways in which both the masculine, empowered author of the *Ancrene Wisse* and the feminine, ostensibly subordinate author of the *Revelations of Divine Love* both deploy discursive strategies of avoidance and deference in order to “talk around” the topic of female autonomy and power. Beginning with an examination of the dominant or spoken rhetoric which governs both works – and which allies them with the religiously orthodox ideals of anchoritic spirituality – I then move on to reading between the lines, using Tannen’s theories of gender in play with discourse to unpack the topic they are both avoiding by the use of that dominant rhetoric. What this reading uncovers is a richly layered subtext within the works at hand, one which demonstrates a highly nuanced understanding of anchoritic lives, autonomy, and identities.

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<sup>11</sup> Deborah Tannen, *Gender and Discourse* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 34.

Argument in Summary

My argument is that both the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich operate from a single rhetorical position, one which has at its heart an unspoken acknowledgement of feminine power. While the dominant rhetoric concerning anchoresses concentrates on lack and renunciation, the texts themselves reveal a reality in which anchoresses gained as much power as they gave up – but they do so by discussing the lifestyle entirely in terms allied with the dominant rhetoric. This can be seen by examining the rhetorical dissonance of the *Ancrene Wisse* on the one hand and the rhetorical framing of the *Revelations* on the other.

I argue that this strategy of tacitly acknowledging what can't be directly addressed makes the texts themselves *more* successful, both from a historical and a literary standpoint. In the *Ancrene Wisse*, this avoidant rhetoric permits the author to express his subtextual anxiety over female autonomy while simultaneously maintaining the appearance of masculine control and power. For Julian of Norwich, the same work of rhetorical gymnastics permits her to record and transmit her own highly personal theology in a way that renders it palatable to masculine authority figures without robbing it of any of its dignity, power, or uniqueness.

Ultimately, close readings deployed along with theoretical analysis and historical context will uncover the different ways in which two authors use the same techniques to accomplish two very different goals, and the ways in which both texts still quietly demonstrate the freedoms and personal power which they are designed to keep hidden.

## ANCHORITIC LIVES IN CONTEXT

In order to ground our discussion of anchoritic texts and the discourse surrounding them, it is first necessary to touch upon some specific contexts of the anchoritic texts being examined, beginning with a broad introduction of the society in which they were produced – England between the thirteenth and early fifteenth centuries. This chapter will expand on several specific social factors of this time period in greater detail. The first of these will be the role of the individual in medieval society, with an emphasis on the ways in which “the medieval individual” was constructed differently from the modern notion of the same. The chapter will then move to outline the place of women in English society of the time, with specific attention being paid to the lives of married women and nuns, as these are the two established women’s social roles against which anchoritic life is most strongly contrasted. Male hermits and religious Brothers will also be examined, since the lives and disciplines of men religious were instrumental in shaping the masculine discourse about women religious. The chapter will move from these social contexts into an examination of female anchorites, contrasting them with the social roles previously examined (the individual-at-large, the woman as wife or nun, and the religious Brother) to explore the ways in which anchoritic living differed from these other contexts.

The Historical Context of Anchoritic Writings

The *Ancrene Wisse*, the earlier of the two anchoritic texts to be examined in this essay, was composed in England sometime between 1225 and 1240. Julian of Norwich

had the religious visions which led to her following an anchoritic lifestyle in 1373, with the composition of her *Revelations of Divine Love* following over the course of the next thirty years. Thus, our two texts of interest bookend a period of roughly two centuries, and while a thorough historical survey of two hundred years of history is impossible in this context, it is worth briefly examining the historical and cultural atmosphere of these years in order to understand the context of the writings in question as well as the lives of their authors.

As one writer on anchoritic practice has observed, “[t]he twelfth and thirteenth centuries . . . were primarily a time of inner Christianization among ordinary believers, a period in which the personal experience of the Christian faith first penetrated everyday life.”<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the early Middle Ages saw the rise in England and Europe of cultures where Christianity was a dominant personal as well as cultural mover. Individuals from every walk of life found themselves influenced by the Church not only as a force of social organization – one which set the calendar, organized the succession of political dynasties, and drove interactions between classes, sexes and nations – but as a force of personal guidance which dictated the exercise of individual practice, morality, and will. To say that England in the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries was a Christian society is thus not only to say that the dominant culture was one of Christianity; it is to observe that individual identities and practices were also shaped by Christian thought and practice, such that the notion arose of a Christian as not only a member of a congregation but as an

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<sup>12</sup> Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2005) 11.

individual (a notion which we shall examine in more detail later in this chapter). This is not to disregard the driving role which the Church took in English society of the time, for the dominant culture of England was deeply and integrally Christian. Indeed, the Church has long been recognized (along with the nobility and the common people) as one branch of the tripartite division of medieval English society – and considering the influence which it wielded over the other two branches, it was in some ways the most powerful.

### The Individual in Medieval England

It has been frequently observed that the notion of “the individual” in medieval society was very different from the modern counterpart. Naturally, the differences between pre- and post-Enlightenment ideas of individuality and social duty are too numerous to be fully examined in this context; however, a brief overview of the medieval notion of individuality is entirely necessary in order to properly understand the function of the anchoress – a woman fulfilling a supremely individualistic role, yet one which was not viewed as such by most of her contemporaries. Indeed, while the anchoress lived and prayed alone, she was nevertheless seen as part of a larger social whole, intimately connected to the life and activity of her culture even as she lived outside of it.

However, it is a drastic oversimplification to say that the Middle Ages had no individuals, or that the anchoresses were viewed exclusively as parts of the larger whole. The development of the notion of individual religious consciousness continued throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, so that it was, in fact, possible to speak of a “religious individual” (although the concept was still deeply intertwined with the notion

of the religious *culture* within which that individual moved). In some ways, this construction of the religious individual as a distinct person who nevertheless cannot be separated from her culture can also serve as a framework for understanding the broad medieval concept of “the individual” in a secular/social context.

Furthermore, as Peter Haidu notes, “[t]he medieval church and theology knew the modern subject, however. Ideological campaigns [. . .] were constructed against it. Correct belief and submission was seen as granting freedom [. . .] Wrong beliefs and practices [i.e. individualism . . .] were to be repressed, excluded, exorcised.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the modern notion of the individual not only existed in a nebulous, still-evolving state; it was a distinct, existing concept, albeit one framed as dangerous and negative. As Haidu puts it, “The church knew the subject: it was the antagonist, the Devil incarnate.”<sup>14</sup>

This understanding of the medieval individual as analogous to the modern individual, only opposed rather than embraced by the dominant social forces of the time, in some senses is a useful one, for it permits the reading of medieval texts and authors from a standpoint which does not erase the notion of individuality in the way in which many previous criticisms have done. However, it is also an oversimplification to construct the medieval Church as an anti-individualistic entity, one for whom the individual was not only known, but “the enemy.” It is more fair to say that the medieval church, like the medieval society it shaped and guided, was ill-at-ease with the developing notion of the individual while still recognizing – if not entirely embracing – the benefits of individual identity and practice.

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Haidu, *The Subject Medieval/Modern* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2004) 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

Brides of Men, Brides of God

The role of the individual in medieval England was understood primarily in terms of the place that individual held in society – as a member of a congregation, a town, a guild, and a family, as well as a vassal of the church, the barony, and the King. The medieval individual had a role to fulfill as part of one segment of the tripartite society. Within this carefully stratified social order, individuals were expected to fulfill certain specific duties for which they were carefully prepared, whether that was a journeyman taking the place of his master or a son taking up his father's trade.

In the case of medieval women, two broad and yet rigidly understood social roles were available: that of a wife and mother or that of an avowed religious. In short, one could be either the bride of man, or the bride of Christ – but every woman was expected to be a bride. As Shulamith Shahar points out,

in [...] writings from the twelfth century onwards, women are almost always categorized separately [from the categorization of men according to tripartite social role]. They are described as a distinct class, subdivided according to their social-economic, rather than 'socio-professional' position. Otherwise, they are subdivided according to their personal, i.e. marital, status, a division never applied to men.<sup>15</sup>

Discussions of women's roles in medieval literature, then, tend to categorize them separately from the social order to which men were subject. While men are sorted according to profession (monk, carpenter, knight, etc.), women are sorted according to economic placement – noble-born, bourgeoisie, peasant, for example – or according to their marital status: maiden, wife/mother, widow, or nun. It is this second classification

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<sup>15</sup> Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1983) 2-3.

scheme which is of most interest to us, as these roles most clearly contrast to the role held by the anchoress.

Religiously and socially, the medieval woman's worth depended heavily on her ability to bear children. Constrained by religious attitudes which lay the blame for Original Sin on Eve (and thus on all her daughters), a woman was inherently viewed as more fleshly, more sinful, and more prone to vice than a man. At the same time, woman's fleshly nature was also associated with the ability to bring forth more flesh – in other words, to reproduce – and the role of mother was seen as having a redemptive effect on woman's inherent sinfulness. To marry and bring forth children was to imitate the virtuous example of the Virgin Mary, the paragon of medieval femininity; doing so would partially ameliorate the sinful, fleshly effect of female sexuality and female-ness in general. This effect could also be reduced by taking an alternate course: choosing to forswear fleshy practices altogether in favor of vowed religious life and perpetual virginity. In this, women were also seen as imitating Mary – however, the imitation of her virginity was in many cases seen as spiritually superior to imitating her role as wife and mother.<sup>16</sup>

Life as a nun offered an alternative to the difficulties often faced by women who married: the dangers of childbirth and the work of supporting a household and multiple offspring were not present to those who took religious orders. Furthermore, women religious tended to be better educated, were more widely literate, and had more opportunities for leisure than most married women (although these advantages may be partially attributed to the fact that nuns were mostly upper-class and noble women).

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<sup>16</sup> cf. Angela M. Lucas's *Women in the Middle Ages: Religion, Marriage, and Letters*, esp. pp 19-22.

However, taking the veil did not free women from all social constraints; nuns were still bound by strict codes of conduct, subject to the authority of their abbess or abbot, and expected to devote the majority of their time to prayer.

### Men of the Cloth

In many respects, men religious were very similar to their female counterparts. Avowed orders followed similar rules, and male and female monasteries were structured in very similar ways. However, men religious – particularly those following less rigid codes of religious discipline – tended to have very different expectations and social roles placed upon them in comparison to their cloistered sisters. Male religious hermits also followed an entirely different set of rules and expectations from both cloistered men and cloistered women – in many cases, male hermits and anchorites were not expected to follow codified rules at all, but were left to the dictates of their own consciences. If an understanding of the expectations placed on cloistered religious women is necessary to contextualize the anchoress, then an understanding of men's religious roles – both cloistered and individual – is also important in order to understand both the anchoress herself and the masculine religious discourse that surrounded her.

The majority of male religious houses in medieval England were Benedictine, governed by an abbot and following to varying extents the Rule of St. Benedict. Individual disciplines and practices differed from place to place, but certain standards remained the same: poverty, chastity, and obedience were expected of all who lived as avowed religious, and in some cases were also asked of those who stayed as guests within

religious houses. Men who took monastic vows were expected to conform to these standards, and essentially asked to subvert their individual spiritual pursuits to the service of the greater whole of the monastery.

In keeping with this notion of the greater good, the *Rule of St Benedict* is presented primarily as a set of guidelines for men living and working together as part of a religious community. While obedience to these guidelines was expected of those who took Benedictine vows, the main driving force behind that obedience was the furtherance of peaceful cohabitation and effective religious communal living in the group at large; the Rule did not exist for its own sake, but as a tool for streamlining the day-to-day lives and spiritual pursuits of a large number of individuals into a single harmonious whole. Thus, while many religious hermits also conformed to some version of Benedictine spiritual guidelines, it was understood that such rules would be of less use to them due because of their solitary lives and individual practices. Further, male hermits were viewed as being more capable of religious self-determinism; through discipline and prayer, they had reached a level of individual spiritual authority which enabled them to proceed without direct supervision or outside rules.<sup>17</sup>

In both instances, Benedictine codes of spiritual conduct for men were predicated upon the idea that men were, when necessary, *capable* of religious self-expression without a set of codified rules on which to fall back. In the case of cloistered men religious, the guidelines were in place as a means to facilitate successful communal living, rather than as a means of controlling their otherwise dangerous religious individuality. In the case of male hermits, the rules were very often presented as optional;

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<sup>17</sup> cf. the *Rule of St. Benedict*, Chapter One, which treats briefly with the question of guidelines for hermits.

these men had successfully proven that they did not *need* outside codification of their behavior to achieve success as individual religious practitioners. Thus, while men religious frequently were asked to commit themselves to following written codes of conduct, the underlying idea behind these codes nevertheless assumed that men, if left to their own religious devices, would be capable of a certain level of spiritual self-discipline.

### Anchoresses in Context

These, then, are the social contexts within which we must view the English anchoress of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. She stands in contrast to the individual-at-large; to the wife and mother; to the cloistered woman religious; and to the male religious, both cloistered and solitary. Yet the anchoress is not merely a token of contradiction to these figures; in fact, the role of the anchoress, while unique, also encompasses elements of all of these other social roles. Like the individual-at-large, the anchoress has an expected place in the hierarchy and order of society; like the wife and mother, she is expected to maintain her own household. Her avowed dedication to prayer and renunciation mimics that of the cloistered religious, male and female, while her solitude is associated with that of the male religious hermit. While it bears similarities to many roles within this milieu of social expectations, the life of the anchoress is also unlike any of them – a unique role, one offering freedoms and limitations very different from any other within the medieval social order.

The anchoress is not only asked to conform to a code of behavior which dictates her lifestyle; she is called upon to give up her lifestyle altogether. In a number of texts, those who take anchoritic vows are referred to as "dead" and "buried"; they are seen not merely as people who have chosen a way of life, but as individuals who have agreed to die completely to self and to the outside world, including most forms of social interaction. The anchoress's identity is subsumed by her duty to the Church, one which is expressed entirely in private, hidden forms of devotion and contemplative prayer which keep her from the public eye. Rhetorically, she is positioned as one who has surrendered all claims to individual autonomy and to personal satisfaction. She has volunteered to enter her coffin early as a sacrifice to God and the society for which she prays, but with which she is not expected to be involved.

Of course, while walls and veils may keep the anchoress out of the public eye, there is still the matter of the windows which connect her to God on one hand and to society on the other. Although her specific role as a member of her society involves very little tangible contribution, she is nevertheless understood to be aiding society by her prayer and thus retains a role within it, regardless of her separation from it.

Furthermore, the reality of the anchoress's position is not necessarily convergent with the rhetorical framing thereof; in fact, what we discover by close reading of anchoritic texts is a much more nuanced way of life than that suggested by the image of an anchoress walled off from the outside world. The anchoress took on a position as a local counselor in matters both personal and spiritual, exchanging advice as well as intercessory prayer in return for the donations which served to support her. She was a

source of local news and gossip, and in many cases attained a level of authority in spiritual matters which brought her respect throughout her community.<sup>18</sup>

The anchoress, then, is not merely wedded to Christ rather than a husband, does not function as merely the female analogue of a male religious brother, and is not merely the singular practitioner of the spiritual disciplines pursued *en masse* by cloistered nuns. She is, instead, the holder of a unique social position, at once cut off from society and participatory in it. And, as an examination of anchoritic texts shall demonstrate, this position does not reduce her to a silenced, shut-off figure. Rather, it offers her the space to embrace self-awareness, personal autonomy, and public status in ways which few other social roles would have afforded her.

We turn, therefore, to the close examination of anchoritic texts, with an eye to discovering not only the dominant rhetoric framing anchoritic lives, but the gaps in that rhetoric which reveal a deeper and more complicated narrative. The goal of this examination is to understand the anchoress as she truly is, and hopefully to shed light on the freedoms and status which, paradoxically, she only gained by giving up her claims to public life.

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<sup>18</sup> And, in at least some cases, beyond the community's boundaries; for example, Julian of Norwich was well-known enough for pilgrims such as Margery Kempe to seek her spiritual counsel.

*ANCRENE WISSE* AND THE MASCULINE RHETORIC OF RENUNCIATION

Of the texts produced by the English anchoritic tradition, the *Ancrene Wisse* is perhaps the best-known and most influential. This thirteenth-century work was written by a male author as a handbook for women wishing to enter the anchoritic life and represents an attempt to create a carefully detailed lifestyle manual for the anchoress. In this attempt, the author of the *Wisse* lays bare his own concerns with the freedom his audience stands to gain as anchoresses. The author claims to be addressing women who are giving up everything, couching his instructions in a rhetoric of renunciation as he addresses both physical practices and spiritual/emotional attitudes. Yet, he simultaneously exhibits an awareness of all his audience is gaining, although this awareness is kept carefully under wraps. The rhetorical dissonance produced by this hidden awareness reveals itself in the writer's attitude (and anxiety) towards his audience.

The Contexts of the *Wisse*

The dialect of the *Ancrene Wisse*, what J.R.R. Tolkien calls the "AB language," places its composition in the West Midlands, while the date of composition (based upon references and place-names in the text) was most likely between 1225 and 1240.<sup>19</sup> Several copies are extant in various stages of completion, with the Cleopatra and Corpus manuscripts being among the most complete and earliest versions.

Authorship of the *Wisse* has been a frequent subject of scholarly discussion; the name of the author, his exact relationship to his audience, and his religious order are not

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Hasenfratz, ed. *Ancrene Wisse* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000) 19.

explicitly stated and must be extrapolated from clues in the text. Based upon these clues, the *Wisse* has most frequently been attributed to an Augustinian canon; E.J. Dobson has been the strongest supporter of this identification, going so far as to argue that the author can be definitely identified as Brian of Lingen.<sup>20</sup> Others have disputed both this identification and the Augustinian status of the author – recent arguments have been made (by Millett and others) to establish him as a Dominican friar, and there is currently no consensus among scholars as to the author’s order or identity. What we can say for certain is that the author of the *Wisse* was a cleric, thoroughly conversant in the works of the Church Fathers and literate in English as well as Latin and French; his way of addressing his audience as

mine leove sustren, habbeth moni dei y-cravet on me efter riwle,<sup>21</sup>  
 [my beloved sisters, who have for many days called on me for a  
 rule,]

makes it likely that they were personally known to him.

Like the author, the audience of the *Wisse* can be identified only in general terms. The original text addresses itself to three women, sisters of noble birth who apparently enclosed themselves at a relatively early age.<sup>22</sup> The sisters “were apparently avid readers” with at least a basic grasp of Latin as well as English; references in the *Wisse* further

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<sup>20</sup> Dobson bases this identification upon an alleged anagram in the final sentence of the Cleopatra manuscript, but the reading is problematic. cf. Yoko Wada’s *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, pg 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ancrene Wisse*, Preface, ll. 8-9. Line numbers throughout refer to Hasenfratz’s edition, which preserves the numbering of the original.

<sup>22</sup> Hasenfratz pp. 15-16.

suggest that they were familiar with contemporary French romances as well as written hagiographies.<sup>23</sup>

Some attempts have been made to identify these women with specific trios of known anchoresses, but – like the attempts to precisely identify the author – these efforts remain speculative. Moreover, the identity of the original addressees is of even less import than the identity of the original author; the text seems to have spread to other readers relatively quickly, since the *Corpus* manuscript addresses itself to a larger group of women than the original trio mentioned in the *Cleopatra* version. From the original trio of noble-born anchoresses, the *Ancrene Wisse* spread until it was widely known and read; while the audiences' numbers may have grown, however, the demographics of the audience remained the same – women living in anchoritic seclusion.

The *Ancrene Wisse*, then, is an ideal spot for examining the interplay of male author/authority and female audience/individual within the context of anchoritic life and spirituality. Written by a man who did not himself follow an anchoritic lifestyle, the *Wisse* nevertheless intimately involves itself with the day-to-day lives of the women to whom it is addressed, dictating concerns on every level from inner thoughts to outer practices. Furthermore, the *Wisse* provides an eloquent example of the tension between spoken and unspoken understandings of anchoritic autonomy. While the writer frames much of his work in terms of renunciation and denial, the *Ancrene Wisse* is nevertheless suffused with an understanding of the freedoms and gains available to its anchoritic readers.

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<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, "This Living Hand": Thirteenth-Century Female Literacy, Materialist Immanence, and the Reader of the *Ancrene Wisse*," *Speculum*, 78:1 (2003) 1-36.

The Rhetoric of Renunciation in the *Wisse*

On the surface, *Ancrene Wisse* is dominated by the rhetoric of giving-up, putting-away, and cutting-off. Anchoresses are counseled not to involve themselves in the commercial goings-on of the surrounding community by keeping livestock, conducting business, looking after other people's property, or teaching school – and even their spoken conversation with those outside the cell is meant to be carefully monitored and controlled. The author constantly reminds his readers that they have chosen to renounce the world and separate themselves from the benefits of regular worldly social interaction, as well as from the place they would normally occupy in the outside social order. The enclosed life of a “bride of Christ” takes the place of the married life the anchoress might expect outside the cell:

Ha nis nawt huse-wif, ha is a chircch-ancre.<sup>24</sup>

[She is not a housewife; she is a church-anchoress.]

Anchoritic living is not only emphasized as separate from regular living; it is also consistently described as more difficult. For all its position within the medieval township, the anchoress's cell was still a hermitage, meant to be a place of asceticism and prayer:

Muchel hofles hit is, cumen into ancre-hus, into Godes prisun  
willes ant waldes to stude of meoseise, for te sechen eise th'rin ant  
meistrie ant leafdischipe, mare then ha mahte habben inoh-reathe i-  
haved i the worlde. Thenc, ancre, hwet tu sohtest tha thu forsoke  
the world i thi biclusunge. Biwepen thine ahne ant othres sunnen,  
ant forleosen alle the blissen of this lif, for-te cluppen blisfulliche  
thi blisfule leofmon i the eche lif of heovene.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Part Eight, ll. 52-53.

<sup>25</sup> Part Two, ll. 691-696.

[It is very unreasonable to come into an anchorhouse, *into God's prison*<sup>26</sup> – readily and willingly to the place of misery – and to seek therein ease, mastery, and leadership, more than she might otherwise have had in the world. Think, anchoress, what you were looking for when you forsook the world in your cell: beweeeping your own and others' sins, and completely losing all the bliss of this life, in order to clasp blissfully your blissful lover in the everlasting life of Heaven.]

Here the anchorhold is described not only as a place in which the anchoress “completely lose[s] all the bliss of this life,” but as “God's *prison*” – a deprivation not easily escaped. Other rhetorical framings of the anchoress's cell go even further:

Hoker ant hofles thing is, thet a smiret ancre ant ancre biburiet - for hwet is ancre-hus bute hire burinesse? - ant heo schal beo greattre i-bollen, leafdiluker leoten of, then a leafdi of hames!<sup>27</sup>

[An unseemly and unreasonable thing it is, that an anointed anchoress and an anchoress buried – for what is the anchorhouse but her burial place? – wishes to be regarded more graciously than a lady of the house.]

The rhetoric of renunciation here is so forceful that it positions the anchoress's rejection of outside life as a kind of dying.

Ironically, the author elsewhere positions *leaving* the anchorhold as an equally deadly choice. The third section of the *Wisse* closes with a detailed list of “reisuns hwi me ah to fleo the world” [reasons why one ought to flee the world], including personal security, the chance to “makieth large relief” [practice generous almsgiving] by sacrificing the entirety of earthy possessions, and the opportunity “to habben cwic bone” [to have quick (i.e. living) prayers] – in other words, to sacrificially offer daily prayer for

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<sup>26</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>27</sup> Part Two, ll. 706-708.

the Church, in the same manner as nuns enclosed communally. All these reasons are contingent on the anchoress remaining enclosed and separate:

yef ha entremeateth hire of thinges withuten mare then ha thurfte,  
ant hire heorte beo utewith [. . . ha] is to death i-demet.<sup>28</sup>

[If she involves herself in things without more than is needed, and her heart be turned outward . . . she condemned to (spiritual) death.]

For this reason, enclosure is espoused by the author of the *Wisse* as the ultimate key to remaining spiritually pure and avoiding the corruption of body, mind, and soul which will befall the anchoress who leaves her anchorhold:

Haldeth ow feaste inne. Nawt te bodi ane, for thet is the  
unwurthest, ah ower fif wittes ant te heorte over al, ant al ther the  
sawle lif is. For beo ha bitrept ute-with, nis ther bute leade forth  
toward te geal-forke - thet is, the weari-treo of helle.<sup>29</sup>

[Hold yourself fast within. Not the body only, for that is the  
unworthiest, but your five wits and your heart above all, for there  
is all the soul's life. For if she be trapped without, there is nothing  
but to lead her forth to the gallows – that is, the gallows of Hell.]

In the rhetoric of renunciation espoused by the author of the *Wisse*, the anchoress is essentially dead if she does, dead if she doesn't – leaving the world is a renunciation tantamount to dying, but still preferable to the spiritual death she can expect if she leaves her cell for the world.

The author of the *Wisse* does make some gestures towards acknowledging the gains which the anchoritic readers receive in exchange for this life of renunciation – but in contrast to the physical deprivations emphasized elsewhere, the gains are framed

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<sup>28</sup> Part Three, ll. 597-599, 606.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* ll. 617-620.

almost entirely in spiritual terms. Like nuns, anchoresses are described as Christ's "brides," sharing an intimacy with him which is unlike that experienced by the unenclosed laity. Furthermore, the anchoress gains greater eternal reward in exchange for her sacrifice:

Ah ances, bisperret her, schulen beo ther, yef ei mei, lihtre ba ant swiftre, ant i se wide schakeles - as me seith - pleien in heovene large lesewen, thet te bodi schal beon hwer-se-eaver the gast wule in an hond-hwile. This is nu the an marhe-yeove thet ich seide ancren schulden habben bivoren othre. The other is of sihthe . . . Alle theo in heovene seoth i Godd alle thing, ant ancren schule brihtluker, for hare blind-fellunge her, i-seon ant understonde ther Godes dearne runes ant his derve domes, the ne kepeth nu to witen of thinges withuten, with eare ne with ehe.<sup>30</sup>

[Anchroresses, shut away here, shall be there – if any may be – lighter and swifter, and in such wide shackles – as they say – playing in heaven's large meadows, that the body shall be wheresoever the spirit wills in a moment. This is one of the marriage-gifts that I said anchoresses should have before others. The other is of sight . . . All those in Heaven see all things in God . And anchoresses shall see brighter still for their blindfolding here. They shall see and understand God's hidden secrets and his secret judgments there, who here do not wish to know of things without, either with ear or with eye.]

Yet even these gains are generally not discussed entirely in positive terms; in fact, they are usually mentioned in the same breath as the difficulties and temptations of the anchoritic lifestyle.

For instance, when the author speaks of the anchoritic spiritual life as a sublime experience, he also cautions against the spiritual attacks and difficulties that come with it:

Se the hul is herre of hali lif ant of heh, se the feondes puffes - the windes of fondunges - beoth strengre th'ron ant mare.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Part Two, ll. 546-553.

<sup>31</sup> Part Four, ll. 2-5.

[ Since the hill of holy life is higher, so the foe's blasts – the winds of temptation – are stronger thereon, and greater.]

Here, difficulty is the direct result of spiritual reward, as the anchoress's increased intimacy with God brings with it an increased exposure to temptation. Struggle is also described as a necessary element of the spiritual "marriage" between the anchoress and Christ, used to test her faithfulness and worthiness before she attains the joyful rewards of the relationship:

Hwen a wis mon neowliche haveth wif i-lead ham, he nimeth yeme al softeliche of hire maneres. Thah he seo bi hire thet him mispaieth, he let yet i-wurthen, maketh hire feire chere, ant is umben euches weis thet ha him luvie inwardliche in hire heorte. Hwen he understont wel thet hire luvie is treoweliche toward him i-festnet, thenne mei he sikerliche chastien hire openliche of hire untheawes, thet he ear forber as he ham nawt nuste. Maketh him swithe sturne, ant went te grimme toth to, for-te fondin yetten yef he mahte hire luvie toward him unfastnin. Alest hwen he understont thet ha is al wel i-tuht, ne for thing thet he deth hire ne luveth him the leasse, ah mare ant mare - yef ha mei - from deie to deie, thenne schaweth he hire thet he hire luveth sweteliche, ant deth al thet ha wule, as theo thet he wel i-cnaweth. Thenne is al thet wa i-wurthe to wunne. Yef Jesu Crist, ower spus, deth alswa bi ow, mine leove sustren, ne thunche ow neaver wunder.<sup>32</sup>

[When a wise man newly has led his wife home, he takes notice gently of her mannerisms. When he sees in her that which displeases him, he leaves it be, treats her fairly and with friendship, and in all ways makes sure that she loves him inwardly in her heart. When he knows well that her love is truly fastened towards him, then may he confidently and openly chasten her for her flaws, that he has forborne as if he had not noticed them. He makes himself very stern, with his grimmest expression, to find if he may yet unfasten her love for him. At last when he understands that she is well settled, and that she does not love him less for anything that he does, but loves him more and more – if possible – from day to day, then he shows her that he loves her sweetly, and does all she wills, as one that he knows well. Then is all that woe turned to joy.

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<sup>32</sup> Part Four, ll. 485-497.

*If Jesus Christ, your spouse, does the same by you, my beloved sisters, never think it a wonder.<sup>33</sup>]*

The anchoress, being a bride of Christ rather than a bride of man, is instructed to keep in mind that the potential spiritual and emotional hardships she faces as she pursues her vocation are equivalent to those she would have faced as a traditionally married woman – a reminder which, perhaps, is also meant to keep her from over-idealizing the married life she chose to put away. Marriage to Christ may be the source of enormous spiritual blessings, but it is in no way meant to be seen as free of struggle. This is a rhetorical strategy which the author relies on throughout the *Wisse*. Consistently referring to the joys of anchoritic life in conjunction with its difficulties serves to strengthen the author’s main rhetorical position: the anchoress is renouncing everything about the outside world, and while she gains access to increased spiritual benefits as a result, even these come at a difficult price.

#### The Unspoken: Anchoritic Gains in *Ancrene Wisse*

On the surface, then, the author of the *Wisse* seems to be primarily preoccupied with reminding his readers of the difficulties to which anchoritic life will subject them, and to the loss of outside social contact and status which accompanies their decision to enter “God’s prison.” This rhetoric of renunciation appears throughout the work, even in discussions of the spiritual gains offered by anchoritic living; however, this emphasis on and awareness of renunciation is not the only awareness permeating the *Ancrene Wisse*.

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<sup>33</sup> Italics mine.

While he writes almost entirely concerning the losses associated with the anchoress's choice of lifestyle, the author is also keenly aware that his audience stands to gain more than the spiritual benefits he discusses – they also attain a unique position of social/spiritual authority and a high degree of personal autonomy. The author attempts to navigate the obvious contradictory tension between these benefits and his rhetoric of renunciation by refusing to directly acknowledge them – but the tension makes itself known both in his discussions of anchoritic social and personal life and in his attitude towards his audience.

An anchoress frequently attained a unique and valued social status with the local people. Regarded as especially holy and knowledgeable, the anchoress of a town was frequently sought after for advice and prayer on spiritual matters. These interactions had the added effect of making the anchoress a source of news, part of the network of communication within her community despite her ostensible status as separate from that community:

Me seith upon ancren, thet eueh meast haveth an ald cwene to feden hire earen, a meathelilt the meatheleth hire alle the talen of the lond, a rikelot the cakeleth al thet ha sith ant hereth, swa thet me seith i bisahe: "From mulne ant from chepinge, from smiththe ant from ancre-hus me tidinge bringeth."<sup>34</sup>

[They say of anchoresses that each must have an old woman to feed her ears, a gossip who feeds her all the tales of the land, a rook that cackles all that she has seen and heard, so that there is now a saying: "From mill and from market, from smithy and from anchorhouse they spread tidings."]

The author of the *Wisse* laments this as "a sari sahe" [a sorry saying], indicating as it does that the anchoresses in question are responsible for spreading social gossip; yet

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<sup>34</sup> Part Two ll. 483-486.

at no point does he attempt to put a stop entirely to the anchoress's outside social interaction, as might be expected of a man driven by the rhetoric of renunciation. Instead, he devotes large sections of the *Wisse* to policing the type, frequency, and attitude of the anchoress's speech with outsiders.<sup>35</sup> In essence, he acknowledges the anchoress's standing and role in the community by not forbidding her from participating in it, despite the fact that this participation flies in the face of the rhetoric of renunciation upon which his work is constructed; instead, he settles for attempting to mitigate the degree to which she exercises her social power.

This mitigation is further illustrated in the author's discussion of how the enclosed anchoress ought to behave during her contact with the priest who served as her confessor, and with other priests who might have cause to speak with her through the veil of her window to the outside world. Here again we see the author of the *Wisse* attempting to police the degree to which the anchoress interacts, but not expressly forbidding that interaction:

To preost on earst *Confiteor*, ant th'refter *Benedicite* - thet he ah to seggen. Hercnith hise wordes ant haldeth ow al stille, thet hwen he parteth from ow thet he ne cunne ower god ne ower uvel nowther, ne ne cunne ow nowther lastin ne preisin. Sum is se wel i-learet other se wis i-wordet, thet ha walde he wiste hit the sit ant speketh toward hire, ant yelt him word ayein word, ant forwurtheth meistre the schulde beon ancre, ant leareth him thet is i-cumen hire for-te learen, walde bi hire tale beon sone with wise i-cutthet ant i-cnawen. I-cnawen ha is, for thurh thet ilke thet ha weneth to beo wis i-halden, he understont thet ha is sot, for ha hunteth efter pris, ant kecheth lastunge. For ed te alre leaste hwen he is awei i-went, theos ancre, he wule seggen, is of muche speche.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Part Two of the *Wisse*, "The Outer Senses," which is concerned entirely with the anchoress's social interactions.

<sup>36</sup> Part Two, ll. 206-215.

[To a priest say first the *Confiteor* and then after that the *Benedicite* – which he ought to say. Hearken to his words and hold yourself entirely still, that when he parts from you he knows neither good nor evil of you, nor knows whether to blame or praise you. Someone is so well learned or so wise in words that she would he knows it that sits and speaks to her, and matches him word for word, and *afterwards is master who should be an anchoress*<sup>37</sup>, and teaches him that is come there to teach. She would be that her speech be recognized and known among the wise. Known she is! From the very things that she expects to be held as wise, he understands that she is a fool, for she hunts after praise, and catches blame. For at the very least when he goes away, “This anchoress,” he will say, “Is a woman of many words.”]

What is notable here is the way in which the author frames the anchoress’s interaction with the priest, who is ostensibly her spiritual and social superior. His direct attitude is one of caution against and scorn for any behavior which might be seen as threatening this hierarchical relationship: a proper anchoress should keep quiet except when making confession in order to hear the priest’s teachings, rather than attempting to teach or dictate to the priest.

The wording, however, once again betrays the author’s awareness of the anchoress’s potential as a wielder of social and spiritual power – even over those who are her ostensible betters. It is not *unthinkable* that the anchoress should become the teacher of the priest, only *undesirable*; the anchoress herself clearly possesses the potential to upset the acceptable balance between the two social roles, matching the priest “word for word” and offering a level of spiritual knowledge and authority which “teaches him that is come there there to teach.”

While the author of the *Wisse* clearly abhors this possibility, he does not deny its existence, nor does he claim that the anchoress does not possess the necessary spiritual

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<sup>37</sup> Italics mine.

know-how for this scenario to unfold. Rather, his claim is that the anchoress will be thought a fool for *desiring praise*, not because of her lack of authority or knowledge. The author presents a scenario of the anchoress exercising her spiritual and social power as a cautionary tale of inappropriate behavior – but in so doing, he cannot help but acknowledge, and thus legitimize, the very existence of that power.

In addition to a level of social recognition and influence within the community, a woman undertaking life as an anchoress was also privy to a unique degree of personal autonomy. True, a sworn anchoress was not permitted to leave the bounds of her cell; but within that cell, she was largely free from direct supervision in a way few medieval women could claim to be. The author of the *Wisse* is clearly aware of the freedom this arrangement affords his audience; while he discusses physical practice and daily routine in the sections addressing the “outer rule,” the greater bulk of his attention is devoted to the “inner rule,” geared towards developing and policing the anchoress’s thought life and spiritual practice. In these sections, there is an overwhelming emphasis on the virtue of self-control; the author of the *Wisse* is clearly concerned with making sure that his readers conform inwardly and outwardly to acceptable standards of behavior in a context where there is nobody present to monitor them – yet he does so almost entirely without mentioning this lack of supervision.

When the lack of direct supervision is mentioned, it is always oblique and accompanied by a justification of some kind. Discussing the Outer Rule and uniformity of religious dress, the author notes that

hwer-se wummon liveth, other mon, bi him ane, hearmite other  
 ancre, of thinges withuten hwer of scandle ne cume nis nawt  
 mucche strengthe,<sup>38</sup>

[Wherever a woman or man lives by themselves, hermit or  
 anchorite, of outer things from which no scandal comes there is not  
 much importance,]

yet this is directly followed by an admonition to police one's inner attitudes. Here, the unsupervised freedom of anchoritic life is rendered acceptable by the understanding that the anchoress herself will conform to religious authority as represented by the "inner rule"; the fact that this degree of religious autonomy is startling for a woman of the time remains unaddressed.

Elsewhere, the author discusses the relationship between the anchoress and her confessor – the closest thing an anchoress had to a direct spiritual supervisor. Yet here, again, the lack of direct supervision and direct discipline makes an oblique appearance. In discussing the penances assigned in confession, the author instructs that

The preost ne thearf for na gult, bute hit beo the greattre, leggen  
 other schrift on ow then thet lif thet ye leadeth efter theos riwle.<sup>39</sup>

[The priest need not for any guilt, unless it be one of the greater  
 sins, lay any other penance on *you besides the life that you lead  
 according to this rule.*]

The pattern regarding lack of supervision is repeated here: the remarkable degree of autonomy represented by the lack of penance for venial sins is made acceptable because anchoritic life itself is penitential – yet there is no guarantee via direct oversight that the anchoress *does* live a penitential life. Her penance, like her practice, is implicitly

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<sup>38</sup> Preface, ll. 116-118.

<sup>39</sup> Part Five, ll. 523-524.

in her own hands – a fact the author cannot entirely ignore, even though it contradicts his rhetoric of renunciation and lack of power.

This tiptoeing around the issue is one way in which the author of the *Wisse* attempts to deal with the rhetorical contradiction between the renunciation he preaches and the freedoms and autonomy his audience actually gained by anchoritic living. There is a second way in which he attempts to relieve this rhetorical tension: by making an attempt at directly addressing the freedoms of anchoritic life. Of course, explicitly stating anything of the kind would seriously undermine his rhetorical project elsewhere; the author compensates by inserting justifications and mitigating details and by framing his discussion in terms of lack rather than gain.

This attempt at directly confronting the freedoms of anchoritic life comes in the opening section of the *Wisse*, where the author directly responds to the request of the three anchoresses for a “rule.”

Nan ancre, bi mi read, ne schal makien professiun - thet is, bihaten ase heast - bute threo thinges: thet beoth obedience, chastete, ant stude steathel-vestnesse, thet ha ne schal thet stude neaver mare changin bute for nede ane, as strengthe ant deathes dred, obedience of hire bischop other of his herre. For hwa-se nimeth thing on hond ant bihat hit Godd as heast for-te don hit, ha bint hire ther-to, ant sunegeth deadliche i the bruche, yef ha hit breketh willes. Yef ha hit ne bihat nawt, ha hit mei do thah ant leaven hwen ha wel wule, as of mete, of drunch, flesch forgan other fisch, alle other swucche thinges, of werunge, of liggunge, of ures, of othre beoden - segge swa monie other o swucche wise. Theos ant thulliche othre beoth alle i freo wil to don other to leten hwil me wule ant hwen me wule, bute ha beon bihaten . . . The thinges thet ich write her of the uttre riwle, ye ham haldeth alle, mine leove sustren - ure Laverd beo i-thonket! - ant schulen thurh his grace se lengre se betere. Ant thah nulle ich nawt thet ye bihaten ham as heaste to halden . . .<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Preface, ll. 54-71.

[No anchoress, by my counsel, shall make profession – that is, swear as a vow – save for three things: these being obedience, chastity, and steadfastness in dwelling, that she shall never more change her dwelling except when needs be, as force, dread of death, or obedience to her bishop or his superiors. For whosoever takes a thing in hand and swears to God to do it, she is bound thereto, and if she breaks it willingly, the breach is a deadly sin. If she does not swear it, she may still do it and leave it when she will; as of meat, or drink, forgoing flesh or fish, and all other such things, of clothing, of sleeping, of hours, of other prayer – to say so many or in such a way – these and such other things are all of one’s free will to do or to leave alone as one will, unless they are vowed . . . . The things that I write here of the outer rule, you hold to them all, my beloved sisters – our Lord be thanked! – and shall, through His grace, do so the longer the better. And yet I would not have you swear them as vows to be kept . . .]

This discussion of vows is framed to imply that the author is concerned about the sisters’ ability to successfully keep vows concerning outer practice – yet he simultaneously admits that they already do keep them. By stating his opposition to monastic vows for anchoresses, then, the author is clearly *not* actually trying to protect them from their own weakness; instead, I argue that he is tacitly acknowledging the freedom anchoritic life affords them to determine their own spiritual practice without the need for binding vows.

The result of this gesture towards honesty is the same as that of the author’s avoidance elsewhere: these sections of the *Wisse* cannot help but contradict the broader rhetoric of lack and renunciation within which most of the text is framed. The result is a text for avowed religious individuals that explicitly advises against taking vows – a supposed handbook for daily anchoritic life that gives comparatively little attention to the day-to-day details of how that life is conducted. The *Wisse* as a whole is a work aimed at guiding women in living a life which was, by the standards of the time, extraordinarily

free and individualistic, and the masculine author's challenge is to address that lifestyle without directly acknowledging those freedoms or that individuality. Instead, he frames his discussion in terms of lack, enclosure and renunciation.

The question, then, is this: how did anchoritic women navigate the boundaries of the life to which they were avowed? To discover the answer, we turn to the most famous and complete of the texts produced by English anchoresses: Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*. *Revelations* does not deal with the anchoritic lifestyle directly, but as we shall see, it shows the same awareness possessed by the author of the *Wisse*: that anchoritic living offered an enormous amount of personal freedom and expression. Julian's specific theology – which is vivid, highly personal, and radical by the terms of the day – is expressed in terms designed to mask the freedom and individuality of the author, much as the *Wisse* is framed in terms designed to mask the freedom and individuality of the anchoress. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated that the specific conditions of enclosed anchoritic living – which positioned the anchoress as “safe” and “buried” in the masculine mind – permitted Julian to fully express theological notions that would have been met with skepticism and suppression if expressed by a non-anchoress.

## JULIAN OF NORWICH AND ANCHORITIC AUTONOMY

We move now from analyzing the didactic text of the *Ancrene Wisse* to focusing on the devotional writings of a specific anchoress, the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Julian of Norwich. Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love*<sup>41</sup> is certainly the best known and most widely-read text produced by an English medieval anchoress, and as such it represents the most obvious site for a close reading of texts produced by (rather than for) an anchoress. Julian's text asserts a highly personal theology, emphasizing oneness with God and an intimate understanding of the fullness of Divine love, which Julian frequently casts in feminine terms. As such, her writing stands in seemingly radical opposition to both the dominant masculine theology of the time and to the "rhetoric of renunciation" surrounding anchoritic life – yet Julian's writings were accepted by Church and social authorities of the time as satisfactorily orthodox.

This chapter examines Julian's works in light of the tensions previously explored – feminine identity/ individuality as contrasted with masculine authority/anxiety, and the rhetoric of renunciation as contrasted with the reality of fulfillment. Rather than present herself as a radical in direct competition with male authority figures, Julian frames her work in religiously orthodox terms intended to lessen her perceived threat. At the same time, she sets forth a highly personal vision of her relationship to God, thus asserting her autonomy while simultaneously soothing masculine anxieties. Furthermore, Julian's theology of divine fulfillment privileges a discussion of spiritual blessings over temporal

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<sup>41</sup> Also published and known as *Shewings of Divine Love*, among other titles; I have chosen to refer to it by the title *Revelations* because I feel it more accurately reflects the nature of the visions and theology the text contains.

gains – a construction which prevents her theology from clashing with the idea of anchoritic life as a renunciation of the world. Overall, Julian’s texts demonstrate a strongly individual theology which is built around a notion of feminine autonomy. Yet the writings also show a canny awareness of the tensions seen previously and demonstrate their author’s ability to successfully navigate said tensions by couching her theology in orthodox and acceptable terms.

To help emphasize the success of Julian’s project, this chapter will contrast the basis and public reception of Julian’s theology with that of her contemporary, Margery Kempe, illustrating the ways in which their similar theologies were received in radically different ways based upon their physical/social positioning. While Julian’s theology is in many ways *more* revolutionary than Margery’s, her position as an anchoress – a woman enclosed, “buried,” and safely isolated from the mainstream – allowed her a much greater degree of acceptance from masculine authorities than that granted to Margery Kempe (who, as a free woman of means, was essentially “untamed” and unconstrained by either physical walls or spiritual disciplines). This position, coupled with the awareness of expectations previously mentioned, allowed Julian’s writings and theology to gain popularity and lasting acceptance.

### Julian’s Radical Orthodoxy

We know relatively little of the biographical details of Julian of Norwich’s life, and much of what we know is drawn from her own text. Born in about 1342, she received the religious visions that would become the *Revelations of Divine Love* in the spring of

1373, while suffering from a severe illness; these visions ended with a miraculous deathbed recovery, after which she recorded the shorter of the two versions of her *Revelations*. Following this original encounter, Julian took vows as an enclosed anchoress at the church of St. Julian in Norwich,<sup>42</sup> where she eventually achieved widespread recognition, disseminating spiritual advice to those who came to her cell seeking counsel. Twenty years after her original visions, she revised the shorter version of the *Revelations* into the more well-known long text, and it is this longer version which most clearly shows the influence of anchoritic thought and theology.

Any discussion of Julian of Norwich's writings will inevitably focus on their unique properties, with most discussions placing emphasis on Julian's framing of God in feminine terms and on the vivid, extremely intimate nature of the details of her visions. While these readings are legitimate, some analysis of Julian's works has gone too far in emphasizing the radical nature of these details. Julian's visions are highly personal, incredibly vivid, and in many ways groundbreaking and radical, but they are also framed in terms which bring them well within the boundaries of orthodox medieval thought. It may seem a contradiction to speak of a theologian's work as being simultaneously radical and orthodox, but it is an important observation to make, particularly with regards to Julian's *Revelation*. Had her writings not passed the litmus test for orthodoxy, they would most likely not have attained the popularity and clerical support which they enjoyed both during and after Julian's lifetime. Nor would Julian herself have been permitted the

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<sup>42</sup> Indeed, it is quite likely that even her given name has been lost to history, and that "Julian" is a pseudonym based upon her position at the church of the same name.

degree of respect and spiritual authority which she was afforded by Churchmen and laity alike.

It therefore seems not only useful but vital to recognize the ways in which Julian's *Revelations*, both the short and the long texts, reflect Christian orthodoxy as it was understood by the Church of her time. A brief examination of three elements of Julian's *Revelations* will suffice to give a sense of its orthodoxy: the terms in which it expresses the author's relationship with the divine, the emphasis on the sufferings of Christ's passion, and the use of feminine terms to frame and/or approach the subject of the Divinity.

First, *Revelations* displays a coherent orthodoxy in the terms which its author uses to express her relationship to God. Throughout the text, Julian persistently emphasizes her own weakness, unworthiness, and frailty, perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the opening or preface chapters, wherein Julian describes the illness and near-death experience that led to the revelations themselves and emphasizes her contrition coupled with her sinful nature. This is further demonstrated by the deeply orthodox treatment of the position of the anchoress as an enclosed religious figure, which gives further prominence to the notion of the individual as entirely subordinated to the omnipresent Deity.

Second, *Revelations* presents a detailed meditation upon the wounds and passion of Christ, placing it in a historical category of devotional Christian writing which stretches from the early Church through the present day, and which flourished specifically in the Middle Ages. By committing herself to contemplation of Christ's

sufferings, Julian situates her Revelations squarely within this tradition of devotional literature. The fact that her contemplations focus on images and impressions of the Passion delivered to her via mystic visions is also a hallmark of the genre, and Julian is neither the first nor the last Christian writer to claim that God showed her the crucifixion, sufferings, and death of Christ. The reverent attention which Julian pays to Christ's suffering not only allies her with a traditional mode of religious contemplation, but her identification of her own sufferings with those of Christ further situates her as both an orthodox Christian theologian and a practitioner of a specifically anchoritic school of devotion. By emphasizing the suffering of Christ and the suffering of the individual as subsumed by the suffering of Christ, Julian ties her revelations firmly to the orthodox Christian tradition, as well as to the rhetoric of lack and renunciation espoused for anchoresses (although, as we shall see, her alliance with this rhetoric is more complicated than it first appears).

A third way in which Julian's writings present orthodox Christian theology is through the use of feminine terms to frame the divine. At first blush, particularly to modern readers, this seems counterintuitive, since the Christian God is understood to be largely patriarchal. Yet the alliance of the feminine with the power of God has a rich tradition in Christianity, one which stretches back to the reverence of the early Church for the feminine Sophia, the wisdom nature of God as expressed through the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, medieval popular devotion had room for reverence for the feminine, not only in the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but in devotional practices which called for contemplation of God as a nurturer and for declarations of strongly erotic/romantic

attachment to the person of Christ.<sup>43</sup> While Julian's writings introduce new levels of detail and nuance to the framing of Christ and God as feminine entities, they nevertheless do so in ways which hearken back to previous spiritual practices and which depend upon notions already embraced by the orthodox establishment of the patriarchal Church.

### A Woman Buried: Reading within the Text

We have already seen that, while revolutionary, *Revelations of Divine Love* is inherently orthodox: it is also worth noting that while *Revelations* is strongly orthodox, it is also revolutionary. Particularly within the context of an anchoritic author/reader, the text demonstrates a uniquely coherent theological framework which at once presents and subverts the notions of the anchoress as a woman suffering, buried, enclosed and powerless. As the anchoress remained hidden from view within her cell, yet nevertheless in possession of social influence and personal autonomy, so, too, do the representations of the feminine within Julian of Norwich's *Revelations* remain at once veiled and yet endowed with power.

One of the strongly anchoritic and orthodox notions within Julian's text is its treatment of suffering, both Christ's suffering in the Passion and the hardships of the Christian life. This emphasis on suffering harks back to the notion of the anchoress as someone giving up and lacking, but Julian never frames suffering without immediate divine consolation. What is remarkable about this from an anchoritic context is the way it contradicts the rhetoric of renunciation and emptiness. When Julian speaks in the sixty-

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<sup>43</sup> For a more thorough exploration of eroticism in Medieval feminine and religious writings, I would direct the reader's attention to Lara Farina's *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing* and Sheila Fisher's edited collection *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings*.

first Revelation about the reality of a Christian falling into sin, she does not speak of the fallen one as emptied or lost, nor of sinfulness as a permanent state:

For we shal sen verily in Hevyn withouten end that we have grevously synned in this life, and notwithstanding this, we shal sen that we were never hurt in His love, ne were never the less of price in His syte. And be the assay of this fallyng we shall have an hey, mervelous knoweing of love in God without end. For herd and mervelous is that love which may nowte, ne will not, be brokin for trespas.<sup>44</sup>

[We shall see truthfully in Heaven, without end, that we have grievously sinned in this life, and notwithstanding this, we shall see that we were never hurt in His love, nor were we ever the less of price in His sight. And by the trial of this falling we shall have a marvelous knowing of love in God without end. For enduring and marvelous is that love that may not and will not be broken for trespass.]

Of course, the focus on fulfillment is always spiritual, never temporal; this allows for its acceptance by authorities and frames the Revelation in anchoritic terms, but still allows for a rhetoric of *fullness*. If Julian of Norwich emphasizes the lack of anything, it is the lack of emptiness: the good do not, spiritually speaking, go hungry.

In this same time our Lord shewed to me a ghostly sight of His homely loving. I saw that He is to us everything that is good and comfortable for us. He is oure clotheing, that for love wrappeth us, halsyth us, and all becloseth us for tender love, that He may never leeve us, being to us althing that is gode as to myne understandyng.<sup>45</sup>

[In this same time our Lord showed me a spiritual sight of His intimate loving. I saw that He is to us everything that is good and comfortable for us: He is our clothing that for love wraps us, clasps us, and all encloses us for tender love, that He may never leave us; being to us everything that is good, as to my understanding.]

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<sup>44</sup> Georgia Ronan Crampton, ed. *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), ll. 2548-53. Line numbers hereafter refer to this edition.

<sup>45</sup> ll. 144-148.

This is also demonstrated in the call-and-response aspect of Julian's various visions, wherein she asks for and receives divine consolations.

Julian's framing of herself as small, dead, and enclosed also allies itself with anchoritic rhetoric. This is particularly noticeable in the well-known "hazelnut passage" from the fifth Revelation.

Also in this He shewed a littil thing the quantite of an hesil nutt in the palme of my hand, and it was as round as a balle. I lokid there upon with eye of my understandyng and thowte, What may this be? And it was generally answered thus: *It is all that is made.* I mervellid how it might lesten, for methowte it might suddenly have fallen to nowte for littil. And I was answered in my understandyng, *It lesteth and ever shall, for God loveth it; and so all thing hath the being be the love of God.*<sup>46</sup>

[Also in this He showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon with eye of my understanding, and thought: What may this be? And it was generally answered thus: *It is all that is made.* I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: *It lasts, and ever shall, because God loves it. And so everything exists by the love of God.*]

In this passage, the whole world is envisioned as something small enough and dormant enough to be carried in the palm of a hand. If Hamlet could be bounded in a nutshell, Julian could just as easily have been bounded in a hazelnut shell – or an anchoress's cell – while still considering herself to be, or rather to be in the care of, the King of infinite space.

Here, we see a beautifully poetic example of the influence of anchoritic thought, especially the doctrine of enclosure, on Julian's writing – yet we also see the ways in which she refuses to equate enclosure with limitation. Indeed, it is through contemplation

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<sup>46</sup> ll. 148-154.

of the “littleness” of the entire world that an individual is able to come to a sense of fulfillment and rest:

It needyth us to have knoweing of the littlehede of creatures and to nowtyn allthing that is made for to love and howe God that is unmade. For this is the cause why we be not all in ease of herete and soule, for we sekyn here rest in those things that is so littil, wherin is no rest, and know not our God that is al mighty, al wise, all gode; for He is the very rest. God will be knowen, and Him liketh that we rest in Him. For all that is beneth Him sufficeth not us. And this is the cause why that no soule is restid till it is nowted of all things that is made. Whan he is willfully nowtid for love, to have Him that is all, then is he abyly to receive ghostly rest.<sup>47</sup>

[We need to know the littleness of creatures and to reject everything that is made, so as to love and have God Who is uncreated. For this is why we are not all at ease in heart and soul, because we seek to rest here in these things that are so little, wherein is no rest, and know not our God that is almighty, all wise, all good; for He is the only rest. God will be known, and He desires that we rest in Him. For all that is beneath Him is insufficient for us. And this is why no soul is rested until it rejects all things that are made. When they are willfully rejected for love, to have Him that is all, then we are able to receive spiritual rest.]

Clearly, the boundaries of a single cell are not symbols of constriction to Julian; rather, she positions herself and every other Christian disciple as being enclosed by the boundaries of a physical world which is small and insufficient compared to the vastness of God. While the boundaries of an anchorhold may seem limiting compared to the world beyond its windows, in Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations* both are seen as equally “little” – and, conversely, as equally big. The hazelnut of the world, and the small boundaries of the anchoritic cell, both last “and ever shall” because of God’s love, and that sustaining love is framed throughout the text as vast and expansive rather than constricting. The Christian (and the anchoress) are enclosed in Christ, yet the sense communicated in this

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<sup>47</sup> ll. 160-168.

framing is one of liberty rather than limitation. The anchoress within the cell, like the Christian in the outside world, is not dead and buried, merely enclosed – and because she is enclosed by a God who is boundless, still capable of experiences which are both enormous and empowering.

Julian also allies herself with anchoritic thought in her focus on feminine spirituality and devotion. One of the most obvious points of respect for and valuing of the feminine in Julian's writings can be seen in her reverence for the Blessed Virgin Mary. Like all orthodox Christian writers of the time, Julian holds "our Lady Saint Mary" in high regard, affording her a level of reverence and meditation which is surpassed only by her focus on Christ and the Trinity. Julian emphasizes Mary's humility and willingness to submit – eminently feminine virtues within the medieval mindset (especially to those following the anchoritic way) and ones that to a modern reader may seem to position the woman as eternally subordinate and disempowered. Julian's writings, however, tell a more complicated story. Julian writes of seeing Mary

ghostly in bodily likeness, a simple mayde and a meke, young of age and little waxen above a child, in the stature that she was wan she conceived with child . . . God shewid in party the wisdom and the truth of hir soule.<sup>48</sup>

[spiritually in bodily likeness, a simple and meek maid, young of age and little more than a child, in the stature she was when she conceived with child . . . God showed in part the wisdom and the truth of her soul.]

Even as Mary's physical stature and maturity are de-emphasised, Julian is quick to make mention of "the wisdom and the truth of her soul," i.e. Mary's willingness to submit to

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<sup>48</sup> ll. 133-136.

God's will and her humility in conceding her simplicity and lowly estate. The focus of the passage is not on Mary's smallness, but on her greatness: Julian concludes that

In this sight I understood sothly that she is mare than all that God made beneath hir in worthyness and grace. For aboven hir is nothing that is made but the blissid manhood of Criste, as to my sight.<sup>49</sup>

[In this vision I understood truly that she is greater in worthiness and grace than all that God created beneath her. For above her is nothing that is created except the blessed manhood of Christ, in my understanding.]

While still paying homage to the anchoritic virtues of humility and simplicity embodied in the Blessed Virgin, Julian emphasizes the ways in which these virtues actually bestow *greatness* rather than powerlessness.

Of course, the Blessed Virgin Mary is not the most powerful feminine figure in the writings of Julian of Norwich; that honor goes to God Himself. Throughout several chapters of the *Revelations*, Julian expounds at length upon the notion of God as a Mother, using deeply affectionate feminine language throughout. In these passages, Julian never proclaims God to be strictly female; instead, she argues that the Holy Trinity, being complete, must contain both masculine and feminine, paternal and maternal aspects:

As verily as God is our fader, as verily God is our Moder; and that shewid He in all, and namely in these swete words where He seith, "*I it am.*" That is to seyen, "*I it am, the myte and the goodnes of the faderhed. I it am, the wisdam of the Moderhede. I it am, the lyte and the grace that is al blissid love. I it am, the Trinite; I it am, the Unite. I am the sovereyne goodness of all manner of thyngs. I am that makyth the to loven. I am that makyth the to longen. I it am, the endles fulfilling of al trew desires.*"<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> ll. 141-143.

<sup>50</sup> ll. 2448-54.

[As truly as God is our Father, so truly God is our Mother; and He showed this in everything, and especially in these sweet words where He says, *I am*. That is to say, *I am the might and the goodness of fatherhood. I am the wisdom of Motherhood. I am the light and the grace that is all blessed love. I am the Trinity, I am the Unity. I am the sovereign goodness of all manner of things. I am that makes you to love. I am that makes you to long. I am the endless fulfilling of all true desires.*]

Despite the presentation of God as all-encompassing and complete, it is His maternal and feminine aspects that take prominence in these chapters; Julian expounds on the natural love of God for His children, which flows like mother's milk,<sup>51</sup> and also advances the notion of "Mother Jesus," whose maternal love is expressed through His sacrifice on the cross. Julian frames the forgiveness of God as a supremely maternal (and thus feminine) act, and describes the compassion of Christ in terms that rely heavily on the metaphor of Christ as a forgiving mother. She even goes so far as to state that God desires the sinner to address Him as "Mother" when asking for forgiveness:

The Moder may suffre the child to fallen sumtyme, and be disesid in dyvers manners for the owen profit, but she may never suffre that ony maner of peril cum to the child, for love. And thow our erthly moder may suffre hir Child to perishen, our hevynly Moder, Jesus, may not suffre us that arn His children to perishen. For He is almyty, all wisdom, and al love, and so is non but He. Blissid mot He ben. But oftentymes whan our fallyn and our wretchidnes is shewid us, we arn so sore adred and so gretly ashamid of ourselfe, that onethys we wettyn where that we may holden us. But than will not our curtes Moder that we fle away, for Him wer nothing lother. But He will than that we usen the condition of a child, for whan it is disesid or dred, it rennith hastely to the Moder for helpe with al the myte. So wil He that we don as a meke child, seyand thus: "My kind Moder, my gracious Moder, my dereworthy Moder, have mercy on me. I have made myselfe foul and onlike to the, and I ne may ne can amenden it but with prive helpe and grace." And if we fele us not than esyid al swithe, be we sekir that He usith the

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<sup>51</sup> cf. Chapter LX.

condition of a wise moder. For if He sen that it be more profit to us to morne and to wepen, He suffrith it, with ruth and pite, into the best tyme, for love. And He will than that we usen the propertie of a child that evermor kindly trosteth to the love of the Moder in wele and in wo.<sup>52</sup>

[The Mother may suffer the child to fall sometime, and be distressed in diverse ways for their own good, but she may never suffer that any manner of peril come to the child, for love. And though our earthly mother may suffer her child to perish, our Heavenly Mother, Jesus, may not suffer us that are His children to perish. For He is almighty, all wisdom, and all love, and so is none other but He. Blessed may He be. But oftentimes when our falling and our wretchedness is showed to us, we are in such great dread and so greatly ashamed of ourselves, that we hardly know where we may put ourselves. But our courteous Mother does not want us to fly away then; for Him nothing would be more loathsome. But He wills that we have the condition of a child, for when it is distressed or in dread, it runs hastily with all its might to the Mother for help. So wills He that we do as a meek child, saying this: “My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my dear worthy Mother, have mercy on me. I have made myself foul and unlike you, and I can no longer amend it but with your help and grace.” And if we feel ourselves not eased entirely, we can be secure that He has the condition of a wise mother. For if he sees that it is more profitable to us to mourn and to weep, he suffers it, with rue and pity, until the best time, for love. And He wills then that we be like a child that evermore kindly trusts to the love of the Mother, in well and in woe. ]

God’s maternal love is celebrated, elevated, and explored through Julian’s writings in a way which still remains scrupulously orthodox.

Throughout the text of the *Revelations*, an overarching pattern emerges: while Julian may ostensibly be equating femininity with weakness, meekness, giving-up and obedience when discussing it directly, she nevertheless frames the most powerful thing in her universe in terms which ally Him with maternity and femininity. While it plays neatly into the orthodox beliefs of the time and draws from a genre of religious writing

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<sup>52</sup> ll. 2558-76.

employed by men and women alike, Julian's theology nevertheless expresses a quite radical notion of power as a feminine trait. Anchoritic documents and orthodoxy may be intended to frame women as powerless and lacking, and feminine agency as incomplete and buried; Julian of Norwich, by contrast, paints God Himself as a feminine figure, or at least as a masculine figure with strongly feminine attributes, and as one who is complete and infinite. This alliance of femininity with the Godhead is expressed in subtle but powerful ways, contradicting the male-dominated mode of seeing femininity without overtly opposing it.

This is true of Julian's writings in general; she expresses ideas which are radical by the standards of the era, but which still remain within the bounds of what the orthodox Church establishment was willing to accept. We can attribute this, in part, to Julian's own theological savvy. She was not only a woman of strong religious feeling but one with a keen understanding of religious dogma and practice and a canny ability to frame her *Revelations* in socially acceptable ways. However, the theology itself (and Julian's mastery of it) are only partially responsible for the acceptance which Julian's writings enjoyed among the Church authorities. Julian's radically orthodox writings also gained popularity because of the status their author enjoyed as an anchoress – a woman who, by her enclosure, served a predefined role in society which (supposedly) mitigated the amount of influence and autonomy she possessed. It was this position as a woman who was both respected and enclosed which granted Julian's theology acceptance and gave her texts a staying power which was not extended to non-anchoritic works of a similar theological nature.

Anchoritic Acceptance in Contemporary Context: The Problem of Margery Kempe

On the whole, Julian of Norwich enjoyed a level of social acceptance and public stature which, I believe, arose equally from the unique and elegant orthodoxy of her writings, the visceral emotional force of her visions as described in the *Revelations*, and her status as a respected anchoress. This last is important; not only because it grants us an understanding of Julian's writings as anchoritic texts, but also because it offers us a site for examining the ways in which these texts – with their subtly veiled presentation of feminine autonomy and power – were granted social acceptance through the same spiritual discipline that produced the conditions of their writing. In order to better understand this point, it is useful to contrast Julian of Norwich – both as an author and as a historical individual – with one of her contemporaries, Margery Kempe.

Margery Kempe was similar to Julian in a number of ways, both personally and – more importantly for our interests – theologically. Like Julian, Margery experienced intensely personal religious visions after a prolonged illness: like her, Margery developed these visions into a vivid personal theology. And, like Julian, Margery recorded her experiences, visions, and theological reflections in a text which survives intact to the present day. This text, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, is widely recognized as the first autobiography of an English woman,<sup>53</sup> and it offers us an invaluable source of firsthand information about Margery's beliefs; said beliefs are in several ways perfectly congruent with those expressed by Julian of Norwich and others. Indeed, the basic tenets of Margery's theology were orthodox enough – and similar enough to those of anchoritic

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<sup>53</sup> Although the extent to which the text should be seen as a collaborative effort between Margery and the cleric to whom she dictated is the subject of much scholarly discussion.

spiritual writings – that excerpts from the *Book* were collected and erroneously attributed to Margery Kempe as “a devout anchoress.” This early-16<sup>th</sup> century collection was the only known version of Margery’s work until an extant copy of the entire *Book* was discovered in 1934.

While Margery’s *Book* is essentially narrative rather than devotional and thus differs in its presentation of theological concepts and detailed visions, the underlying spiritual ideas to which Margery subscribed can nevertheless be clearly traced in the writing. These ideas show the clear influence of contemporary spirituality on Margery’s thinking, including a devotional emphasis on Christ’s passion and a level of erotic spiritual discourse – both of which, as we have noted, were common themes in medieval devotion. In addition to these common orthodox threads, Margery’s theology is specifically similar to Julian of Norwich’s in two principal ways: its focus on the individual believer’s intimate relationship with God and its emphasis on a rhetoric of divine love and fulfillment.

The intimacy between God and the individual is perhaps the most readily apparent feature of Margery’s theology. This is true not only because Margery herself emphasizes it heavily in the text, but because of the uniquely vivid way in which she describes that intimacy. Where Julian’s focus on the love of God framed that love in parental – specifically maternal – terms, Margery frames it in erotic terms. She focuses consistently and reverently on Christ’s “manhood,” positioning herself quite literally as the bride of God:

As this creatur was in the Postelys Cherch at Rome on Seynt  
Laternes Day, the Fadyr of Hevyn seyde to hir, "Dowtyr, I am wel

plesyd wyth the inasmeche as thu belevyst in alle the sacramentys of Holy Chirche and in al feyth that longith therto, and specially for that thu belevyst in manhode of my sone and for the gret compassion that thu hast of hys bittyr Passyon." Also the Fadyr seyde to this creatur, Dowtyr, I wil han the weddyd to my Godhede, for I schal schewyn the my prevyteys and my counselys, for thu schalt wonyn wyth me wythowtyn ende."<sup>54</sup>

[As this creature was in the Apostles' Church at Rome on St. Lateran's Day, the Father of Heaven said to her, "Daughter, I am well pleased with you, because of your belief in all the sacraments of the Holy Church and in all the faith that belongs to it, and especially because of your belief in the manhood of my Son and for the great compassion that you have for His bitter Passion." Also the Father said to this creature, "Daughter, I will that you be wedded to my Godhead, for I shall show you my secrets and my counsels, for you shall be one with me without end."]

Margery's focus is more erotic, while Julian's is more sensual, but the essential similarity remains – both women espouse a view of God's love which is intensely and overwhelmingly personal.

Margery's text is also suffused with a rhetoric of divine fulfillment which mirrors that seen in Julian's *Revelations*. Time after time, she records conversations between herself and God which emphasize love, wholeness, and joy in the outpouring of spiritual affection from God to the individual believer:

And therfor, dowtyr, I telle the trewly thu hast as gret cawse to enjoyn and ben mery in thi sowle as lady er maydyn in this world. My lofe is so mech to the that I may not drawyn it fro the, for, dowtyr, ther may non hert thynke ne tunge telle the gret love that I have to the . . .<sup>55</sup>

[And therefore, daughter, I tell you truly that you have as great a cause to be joyful and merry in your soul as any lady or maiden in this world. My love is so great for you that I cannot withdraw it

<sup>54</sup> Lynn Staley, ed. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) ll. 2000-2006. Line numbers hereafter refer to this edition.

<sup>55</sup> ll. 4898-4901

from you. For, daughter, there is no heart that can think nor tongue  
that can tell the great love that I have for you . . .]

Like her contemporary, Julian, Margery emphasizes the redemptive and peaceful nature of divine love, focusing on sin only as a site where divine intervention can amend human error.

While Margery's theology was essentially similar to Julian's, her public reception could not have been more different. On occasion after occasion, Margery records attempts by spiritual and social authorities to silence her or restrict her actions. This was no doubt due in part to the sheer brazenness of her public persona: while she was married, Margery rejected the expected standards of behavior for a married woman of her time, consulting (and arguing) with religious authorities, weeping loudly in church, leaving her husband at home to embark on religious pilgrimages, and eventually refusing to fulfill her conjugal duties in favor of an avowed second virginity.<sup>56</sup> As a result, she was frequently opposed by members of the clergy, threatened with burning as a heretic on at least one occasion,<sup>57</sup> and ultimately tried on charges of heresy before the Abbot of Leicester.<sup>58</sup> While they were ultimately dismissed, these charges demonstrate how disconcerting the male establishment found Margery as a public religious figure.

Margery did not encounter outright hostility and rejection in all of her encounters with the spiritual authorities, however. In fact, she records one encounter which is, for our purposes, especially telling: the details of her visit to the Church of St. Julian in

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<sup>56</sup> Such vows were not unheard of in Medieval marriages, but the fact that Margery pursued hers against the wishes of her husband was uncommon enough to draw criticism – not least of all from her husband.

<sup>57</sup> ll. 620-673.

<sup>58</sup> ll. 2691-2752.

Norwich, and her meeting there with the anchoress in residence – the same Julian of Norwich whose theology so closely reflected her own.

And than sche was bodyn be owyr Lord for to gon to an ankres in the same cyté whych hyte Dame Jelyan. And so sche dede and schewyd hir the grace that God put in hir sowle of compuncyon, contricyon, swetnesse and devocyon, compassyon wyth holy meditacyon and hy contemplacyon, and ful many holy spechys and dalyawns that owyr Lord spak to hir sowle, and many wondirful revelacyons whечh sche schewyd to the ankres to wetyn yf ther wer any deceyte in hem, for the ankres was expert in swech thyngys and good counsel coud gevyn.<sup>59</sup>

[And then she [Margery] was bidden by our Lord to go to an anchoress in the same city [Norwich], called Dame Julian. And so she did, and showed her the grace that God put in her soul of compunction, contrition, sweetness and devotion, compassion with holy meditation and high contemplation, and full many holy speeches and dalliances that our Lord spoke to her soul, and many wonderful revelations which she revealed to the anchoress, to know if there were any deceit in them; for the anchoress was an expert in such things and could give good counsel.]

This moment is telling because it represents a contemporary account of Julian of Norwich's status as a spiritual authority who was known for her advice. Also telling is the advice which Julian delivers in response to Margery's request for counsel regarding her own revelations:

The ankres, heryng the mervelyows goodnes of owyr Lord, hyly thankyd God wyth al hir hert for hys visitacyon, counselyng this creatur to be obedyent to the wyl of owyr Lord God and fulfyllyn wyth al hir mygthys whatevyr he put in hir sowle yf it wer not ageyn the worshep of God and profyte of hir evyn cristen, for, yf it wer, than it wer nowt the mevyng of a good spyryte but rathyr of an evyl spyrit.<sup>60</sup>

[The anchoress, hearing the marvelous goodness of our Lord, highly thanked God with all her heart for this visitation, counseling this creature [Margery] to be obedient to the will of our God and fulfill with all her

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<sup>59</sup> ll. 954-961.

<sup>60</sup> ll.961-965.

might whatever he put in her soul *if it were not against the worship of god and profit of her fellow Christians*;<sup>61</sup> for, if it were, then it were not the moving of a good spirit, but rather of an evil spirit.]

It is in this advice – and in the underlying social order to which it obliquely refers – that the truly significant difference between Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe can be traced. In her unwillingness to remain home and her insistence on being heard and seen in public, Margery demonstrated a perceived disrespect for her husband – and, by extension, for her role as a wife, mother, and housekeeper. In rejecting her place at her husband’s side, Margery threatened one of the very basic foundations of the society around her, adding an aspect of menace to behavior that was already *outré*. By the standards of her time and society, Margery’s public behavior was seen as against “the profit of her fellow Christians,” since it posed a threat to the social order on which they depended for stability and identity. By contrast, Julian, as an avowed anchoress, embraced her place within society rather than rejecting it; she had no need to worry about the opinion or influence of a husband, nor of how refusing to heed it might be received. Her place as an anchoress was not seen as threatening to the social order, but as assisting its stability through prayer and good counsel.

This, ultimately, accounts for the differences in reception between Julian’s work and Margery’s. While Julian was clearly known to her contemporaries as a spiritual authority, Margery failed to gain a similar position, and her text ultimately faded into obscurity. This seems contradictory; why should the woman whose thoughts were voiced loudly and in public, who was able to travel freely, be the one whose voice was not heard, while the one who was “stuck” in one place was able to be heard and remembered?

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<sup>61</sup> Italics mine.

Ultimately, it is because Julian delivered her words from a position which was, to the eyes of her contemporaries, safely orthodox and unthreatening. Because she spoke – and wrote – from behind the anchoress’s curtain, her words did not pose the same threat to the social order as those of Margery, who actively flouted the acceptable roles for a woman of her place and time. The religious ideas espoused by these two women were eminently similar, yet only within a context where they could be read as “contained” were they able to flourish – regardless of the fact that the notions themselves were very much not as contained as they appeared.

The results of these differences are clear: while Margery Kempe was opposed and silenced by figures both public and private, subject to criticisms familial, religious, and social, Julian of Norwich enjoyed a remarkable degree of acceptance, respect, and dissemination of her ideas – this in spite of the fact that their theologies were, in many important ways, similar if not identical. At first glance, one might be inclined to call Margery Kempe the more free of the two women – it was she, after all, who experienced a great deal of personal autonomy, authorial liberty, and financial freedom, she who was able to make pilgrimage and to speak (however controversially) in public. Julian, by contrast, might seem a woman imprisoned: confined by narrow walls, limited in her access to the outside world, unable to travel, dependant on the kindness of others for her livelihood. But this initial impression is not borne out in one absolutely pivotal way: Julian’s *ideas*, subtly framed in ways that made her theology more acceptable to the authorities of the time and couched in terms that made her *seem* harmless and enclosed,

were much more freely accepted and disseminated. In this way it was Julian – a woman buried – who was most free.

## CONCLUSION: THE WOMAN AT THE WINDOW

As we have seen, the discourse between male authority and female autonomy in the texts of the English anchoritic tradition displays an inherent vein of rhetorical tension that runs throughout every aspect of the texts. Furthermore, the conversation between the two sides of the discourse is far more complicated than an initial observer might believe. A reader looking exclusively at the surface appearances of these texts and the religious disciplinary culture which produced them might draw the not-unreasonable conclusion that the anchoritic tradition represents yet another site of patriarchal oppression and control of women's spiritual and physical individuality and identity. Masculine authority figures, functioning as part of a hegemonic and patriarchal social order, laid down the strictures of anchoritic living. A man quite literally wrote the book on what was and was not permissible for the female practitioners of the anchoritic lifestyle -- a book which, in its highly structured presentation of both an "outer" and an "inner" rule, seems geared towards utterly controlling every aspect of the female anchoress's life, from the pets she kept to the prayers she said and the emotional attitude she maintained. The anchoress, by contrast, was a single individual in the face of a social group, without apparent recourse for opposing the authority's strictures or expressing her autonomy outside the narrow bounds of her cell. It makes for a tidy picture: the vast, masculine, institutional Church on one side; on the other, the single, isolated anchoress, easily silenced and safely hidden from view in a tiny chamber.

What the texts produced by the anchoritic tradition show us, however, is a picture which is much more complicated and rich in social nuance. Both the institutional Church

and the enclosed anchoress paid ostensible tribute to the construction of the anchoritic woman as buried, enclosed, silenced, powerless, and controlled; however, beneath the surface of this rhetoric of renunciation, both halves of the discourse offer unspoken acknowledgement of a more complicated interplay of freedom, individuality, and power. The male authority of the *Ancrene Wisse* addresses his anchoritic charges in terms which tacitly acknowledge the freedom and personal responsibility they will possess within the bounds of the cell, the spiritual fulfillment they will gain for their renunciation, and the social status they will enjoy as members of the community beyond the veil at their window. Julian of Norwich consistently frames herself as small and insignificant, but her entire text resonates with a celebration of the unrestrained power of the female worshiper and the feminine divine. Furthermore, the details of her biography and the social acceptance she enjoyed demonstrate the undeniable fact that her words, personality, and spirituality were in no way confined by the walls of her cell.

Neither side of the discourse between these two texts can afford to directly comment upon the freedoms and gains which anchoritic living afforded to the women who chose it as a calling; rather, they treat with it using tactics of avoidance which allow for the ostensibly unassailable patriarchy to remain intact and unchallenged by direct wording. The "rhetoric of renunciation" which permeates the works of the English anchoritic tradition serves to shore up the image of the anchoress as enclosed, harmless, and de-clawed by the life she has chosen – but in the unspoken textual tensions, the lacunae in the discourse, we see the woman behind the veil as one who is more than capable of self-determination, spiritual fulfillment, and social influence.

What readers most clearly gain from observing this rhetorical dissonance between spoken and unspoken in anchoritic writings is a richer insight into the lives of the women who followed the anchoritic lifestyle. It was the stated intention of these women to renounce the world, to turn their back on social status and personal choice – yet we see from the texts left behind by their tradition that the image of the anchoress as a woman living in her coffin is overly simplistic. While enclosed, the anchoress was not bound; while veiled, she was far from silenced. Though her vows tied her to a single place and a solitary discipline, they also set her free to pursue a self-determined path of autonomy and social status. By drawing aside the veil of rhetoric which presents us with a simple image of powerlessness, we can effectively peer through the window of the texts, revealing the richly layered, complicated and compelling women who lived within the boundaries of the anchoritic cell.

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