

MEDIEVAL WRITINGS ON  
FEMALE SPIRITUALITY

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EDITED AND WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY  
ELIZABETH SPEARING

PENGUIN BOOKS



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## MEDIEVAL WRITINGS ON FEMALE SPIRITUALITY

Elizabeth Spearing holds a D.Phil. from the University of York. She has published articles on the *Amadis* cycle and on Aphra Behn, and she translated Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* for Penguin Classics. With A.C. Spearing (who wrote the introduction and notes to *Revelations*), she has collaborated on editions of Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the anthology *Poetry in the Age of Chaucer*.

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## INTRODUCTION

This volume offers a selection from some of the great variety of writing by and about religious women in the Middle Ages. The focus is on such writing in northern Europe, especially texts which were available in English, either because that was the language in which they were written or because English versions of them had been made. The choice of texts is deliberately wide—varied in period, purpose, and quality. It includes the visions of an aristocratic prophet, those of a narrow-minded and malicious nun, and a profoundly original exploration of the nature of God. When these women lived, it was not normal for anyone who was reasonably rich, no matter how literate, to do their own writing—there would always be someone on hand to do it for them—nor were all the women in this selection literate. Some of the texts, it is true, present themselves as first-person writings by women themselves—whether poems, letters, meditations, or visions—but many are third-person accounts by men of the lives and practices of women regarded as holy.

Even in what may seem to be moments of the most direct self-expression, the writings are shaped by a variety of literary conventions. Some are poetic compositions, including letters, which draw on the tradition of courtliness. Some belong to the field of mysticism in its fullest sense—religious experience directed towards the soul's union with God in this life. Some are prophetic in ways that recall the prophets of the Old Testament and the Apocalypse. Some are visionary writings at a less exalted level, belonging to a tradition that goes back through the early centuries of Christianity to the Bible—visions of heaven and hell, and especially of purgatory, the only place from which spirits could reappear on earth to confirm the Church's teaching about the efficacy of prayer, comforting for laypeople and remunerative for the Church. Some are meditations on Christ's human life, from passionate imaginings of the Crucifixion to Margery Kempe seeing herself as a servant in St. Anne's household and caring for the Virgin in her childhood. Some are accounts by men of women's attempts to imitate Christ and purge sin through various kinds of bodily suffering; they often involve extreme kinds of self-mortification and seem bizarre by modern standards. Some will probably convince most readers of the authenticity of their strivings towards the transcendent. In others there are elements of fantasy and even comfortable self-deception: punishment is promised for enemies, heaven for friends and family. It is revealed to St. Bridget that her daughter would be more useful with her mother in Rome than with her husband in Sweden, and there are a number of instances of critics of a visionary coming to unpleasant ends after she has complained to God: “ ‘That jangling cleric is too proud of his learning to want me. But I shall give him a clout and he will really know that I am God.’ And shortly after that he died of the palsy.”<sup>1</sup>

From the beginnings of Christianity there had been deep suspicion of religious teaching by women. St. Paul's severe prohibitions were frequently repeated: *Let women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted them to speak, but to be subject* [1Cor 14:34], and *Nor I suffer not a woman to speak, but to be subject* [1Ti 2:12]. Many of the women in this collection lay claim to elevated religious insights, and yet they themselves and the men who write about them feel obliged to present them in terms of modesty and humility. Thus we are told that Mary of Oignies was “always modest and as simple as a dove in every way,” and even Hildegard of Bingen, a great aristocratic lady who did not hesitate to denounce the leaders of the Church, felt obliged to describe herself as a “poor little creature.” In the case of Margery Kempe, whose impact on others is a central theme of her book, hostility was aroused not just by her eccentricity but by the simple fact that she was a woman who



dared to make public pronouncements about religious matters. Literacy was far less common among women than among men. Women who could read and write could usually do so only in the vernacular languages; very few learned Latin, the language of the Bible and the liturgy (Hildegard and Bridget were among the exceptions), and this meant that they were cut off from the world of learning and abstract thought and especially of theology. This put them at a great disadvantage but could also be an advantage to them. They could be more individual, more peculiar, and they could think in ways which were not bound by the rigid logic of scholasticism—and might more often be left alone to do so. Julian might not have got away with some of the things she wrote if she had been a man writing in Latin.

The survival and diffusion of texts before printing was dependent on a few people and local circumstances, and this was particularly likely to be true of women. Which women became well known and widely-read must have depended not just on the value and interest of what they thought and experienced, but on which male clerics admired them and whether the women's teachings and ways of life were what the contemporary Church wanted to encourage. Bridget of Sweden, who lived in Rome for the last twenty-five years of her life, reiterated and expanded orthodox views; she had a direct connection with the papacy and was recognized and canonized soon after her death. However, though the Church could be very effective at promoting the works of women it approved, it could not always control the writing of such people as Marguerite Porete: she was not canonized, but burned at the stake. Our access to the women in this volume is through men; even texts that are almost certainly written by the woman herself owe their continued existence to a male scribe, and some exist because of a succession of men. For some women, a male cleric was not just the authorizer but the author of her text. Elizabeth of Spaalbeek had first to be recognized as peculiarly holy by senior churchmen in her area; at the bishop's request, a local abbot, her cousin, became her protector. This man did not just provide for her care; Elizabeth enacted a religious drama through the hours of the day and night, and her reverend cousin "presented" the performance to admiring visitors, selecting and interpreting her behaviour as he did so: "This reverend abbot ... was with us during everything which I have described and was our informant and reliable expounder of the virgin's words,"<sup>2</sup> declares Philip, the monk from Clairvaux who wrote a Latin account of her life in which he also refers at intervals to "worthy men" who had added to his own first-hand knowledge. Before a medieval Englishwoman could read the account of Elizabeth's life, an unknown English cleric had to translate Philip's Latin, sometimes having trouble understanding it, cutting selectively as he went along.

The words of Hildegard of Bingen come to us more directly. She was not only highly literate, but she had an astonishing fluency in Latin for a woman of her era; however, she felt the need for male (and clerical) authorization. In her fortieth year she felt great "pressure of pains to manifest what [she had seen and heard] in visions, and confided in her *magister*. "Astonished, he bade me write the things down secretly, till he could see what they were and what their source might be. Then, realizing that they came from God, he indicated this to his abbot, and from that time on he worked at the [writing down] with me...." Further male approval gave her more fame and influence: "When the occurrences were brought up at an audience in Mainz Cathedral, everyone said they stemmed from God.... Then my writings were brought to Pope Eugene ... he bade me commit whatever I saw or heard in my vision to writing<sup>3</sup>...."

The original transcriptions of the visions of St. Bridget seem to have been firmly under her own control; the *Vita* written shortly after her death describes the process in detail: "... the words that were given her from God she wrote down in her mother tongue with her own hand when she was well and

she had us, her father confessors, make a very faithful translation of them into Latin. She then listened to the translation with her own writing, which she herself had written, to make sure that not one word was added or subtracted, but was exactly what she had heard and seen in the divine vision. But when she was too weak she would call her confessor and another scribe ... whereupon with great devotion and fear of God, and sometimes in tears, she spoke the words in her native language in a kind of tense ecstatic trance as if she were reading from a book; and then the confessor dictated these words in Latin to the scribe, and he wrote them down there in her presence. When the words had been written down she listened very carefully and attentively.”<sup>4</sup> As Bridget had begun Latin lessons with her sons in Sweden and continued with her studies in Rome, she would have been able to check the Latin translation.

Margery Kempe could not read or write, but she had access to devotional works by hearing them read aloud, and she obviously heard a great many sermons. She must have been something of an Ancient Mariner, practicing an ever-expanding spoken account of her physical and spiritual lives. As she lived them to sympathetic clerics: “And to this priest she confided her whole life, as near as she could, from her young age, both her sins, her troubles, her trials, her contemplations, and also her revelations, and such grace as God worked in her through his mercy.”<sup>5</sup> ...” In many such cases we might wonder in which direction the current of power was flowing, and might ask, as did a recent scholar, “Holy women and their confessors, or confessors and their holy women?”<sup>6</sup> Their gender meant that by definition these women were weak; many of them suffered from lengthy periods of illness, and yet they found ways to turn their weakness into strength. They were able to manipulate their families, their confessors, and other bystanders into serving them, they gained status and influence in their communities, they founded religious houses and reproved and advised people at every level of society. Hildegard and Bridget counselled emperors and popes; Christine the Astonishing, who had been a cowherd and chained as a lunatic, had only to cry, “Bring the convent to me, so that together we may praise Jesus for his great goodness in his miracles ...” and “At once the nuns came running from every direction.”<sup>7</sup>

The writings in this volume inevitably reflect a variety of developments in medieval piety. One of the most important of these, as far as women are concerned, has been summed up by Caroline Bynum in her remark that “bodiliness provides access to the sacred.”<sup>8</sup> In the course of the Middle Ages there was a general shift in emphasis towards Christ’s Humanity, God inhabiting a suffering human body, culminating in the mutilation of that body in the Passion and Crucifixion. Christ’s pain, and the blood and water that flowed from his wounds, were the means by which it was possible for human beings to be saved. Given that medieval thought associated masculinity with mind and spirit and femininity with body, women, for all their inferiority and subordination, could be felt to have a special connection with Jesus in his Passion, and through their bodies they could hope to have special access to the sacredness associated with his body. This is the train of thought that underlies the intense focus on the bodies of holy women in the texts of the Douce manuscript (see below), the subtler focus on the body in Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations*, and Margery Kempe’s persistent weeping and other forms of bodily obstreperousness. The general link between female spirituality and the body of Christ was brought into especially sharp focus at a moment in Julian’s *Revelations* when, seeing Christ on the cross and imagining his pain, she seems to hear a voice saying, “Look up to his Father in Heaven,” but answers, “No, I cannot, for you are my Heaven,” and proceeds to see the whole Trinity within the Humanity of Christ.<sup>9</sup> The celibate way of life adopted by medieval holy women in its various forms—as anchorites, nuns, and beguines and in less formal ways—was regarded as a way of escaping from

the demands of the body, yet their writings are dominated by bodily practices and meditations.

Adopting celibacy obviously meant renouncing marriage. The biography of a holy woman often includes an admiring account of how she rejects her parents and their plans for her. Parents arranging just the marriage which a kind, sensible couple would choose for their daughter (as in the case of the rich young bridegroom who obviously loved and respected Mary of Oignies) are presented as cruel and unreasonable. And if a woman of special holiness does marry, she must distance herself from her husband (and any children she may have) to attain greater purity and spirituality. However, renunciation could include more than this. Medieval people, lay or clerical, did not see a family as the setting for a truly Christian life. To be closer to God, you had to distance yourself from your relatives. Encouraged by a celibate clergy, there was general awareness of such sayings of Jesus (now often forgotten) as, *If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters ... he cannot be my disciple* [Lk 14:25, 26]. For women such as these, and a great many other people, earthly relationships gave way to the all-important heavenly one: God became Father, Mother, Spouse. “Unless their goodness and innate propensity to holiness commended them, her family relatives shared little of her affection,” says the biographer of Christina of Markyate admiringly,<sup>10</sup> and St. Bridget prayed to God to “rip the thorn which is in my heart, which is bodily love for my husband or children or friends or relatives.”<sup>11</sup> These women had human friends, relatives and spiritual advisers, but more important were God, the Virgin, and any saints to whom they felt particularly close.

## HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

Hildegard (1098-1179) would have been exceptional at any time but was quite extraordinary for a twelfth-century woman. The only playwright and only composer of her time (man or woman) to be known by name, the only woman to be an authorized exponent of Christian doctrine and the only one to preach openly, she was also the author of remarkable scientific writings, a visionary, and a prophet. The tenth child of aristocratic parents who lived in the German Empire, in the archdiocese of Mainz, Hildegard was taken at the age of eight to be brought up by Jutta von Sponheim, whose small group of devout women expanded into a Benedictine community attached to the abbey of St. Disibod, with Jutta as abbess. Hildegard became a nun there at fourteen, eventually succeeding her teacher as abbess in 1136. Sometime between 1147 and 1152, she moved her community to nearby Rupertsberg, near Bingen, building a large convent there. Despite periods of sickness, often associated with moments of special stress in her personal and ecclesiastical life, she displayed extraordinary energy and determination and lived to an advanced age. She travelled widely in the Rhineland area and, aided by the confidence which came from her aristocratic rank, she influenced many powerful figures from the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa downwards. Her most important visionary work is the *Scivias* (“Know the-Ways”); she was also an eloquent preacher and wrote copiously about the science of her time and about theology. These writings are all in Latin.

The texts in this volume are of two kinds: there are a number of extracts from the *Vita*, written with her collaboration, and from a letter to her last secretary describing her life and visions as she experienced them; and there are extracts from *Scivias* in which she gives accounts and interpretations of some of her visions. The visions are intensely dramatic and brilliantly coloured, sometimes

reflecting, it has been suggested, the visual disturbances caused by migraine. They often possess sharp-edged grotesqueness reminiscent of Romanesque sculpture and manuscript illuminations. Their interpretations, too, are clear-cut and authoritative; they leave no room for further interpretation by the reader and in this are at the opposite extreme from the slow crystallizations of meaning in Julian of Norwich. There is little that is distinctively feminine about her visionary works; writing in a period before the development of the strongly emotional Christocentric devotion which had such appeal for later medieval women, she did not practice or recommend extreme asceticism, and presented herself as a prophet conveying God's word regardless of her own gender.

## CHRISTINA OF MARKYATE

The life of Hildegard's almost exact English contemporary was written around 1160 by an anonymous monk of St. Albans Abbey who knew her well in her adult years and had heard from Christina herself about her early life. Though he wrote in Latin, while she would have spoken English and perhaps French, we often seem to be close to her own words and experiences. She was born in Huntingdon in a prosperous Anglo-Saxon family some thirty years after the Normans seized control of England. A childhood visit to the important Benedictine abbey of St. Albans in Hertfordshire moved her to make a vow of virginity—a means by which a medieval girl could hope to escape from the otherwise overwhelming power of the family. When she was about sixteen the worldly Norman bishop of Durham, a family friend, apparently tried to get her into his bed and then, made vindictive by her rejection of him, insisted that her parents should marry her to a young nobleman called Burthred. Christina was eventually forced into a betrothal.

The first extract in this volume, in which she dreams of quietness, flowers, and comfort from the Virgin Mary, occurs in the context of persecution by her parents and Burthred's attempts to force her to consummate a union regarded as binding. Cut off from religious friends, she has been beaten and shamed by her mother and has resisted efforts to make her drunk and attempts by her best friends to talk her round and of her husband to rape her. There follows an account of Christina's desperate escape on horseback from her cruel and powerful family and the persecution of senior clerics in order to become the virgin bride of Christ, which reads like a romantic elopement. (This dramatic phase of her life was later reflected in the inclusion in her personal prayer book, the famous illuminated manuscript called the *St. Albans Psalter*, of the French *Chanson d'Alexis*, a poem about a young man dedicated to virginity who flees his bride on their wedding night.)

In its next phase Christina's life was one of withdrawal from the world into solitude. One form of the ascetic life, dedicated to chastity, poverty, and obedience, was that of monks and nuns living in organized communities; another was solitary, the life of hermits and anchoresses, also under a recognized though less formal rule, but alone or in tiny groups. Christina now took refuge with an anchoress, Alfwen. While with her she had the vision described in extract (b), in which she was protected from angry bulls—a strongly sexual image—and loathsome toads. After two years, she moved to a tiny cell adjacent to that of Roger, an old hermit, with whom she shared her religious devotions. She was virtually entombed there for four more years, in such discomfort that she suffered from many illnesses. Extract (c) tells how Christ appeared to her in her cell and gave her a golden cross. Only two days later, Burthred came to Roger to say that the Virgin Mary had commanded him

to release Christina from her marriage vow. Now Roger began to think of making Christina his successor in his hermitage; in extract (d) Mary appears to her and promises that this will happen. The archbishop of Canterbury himself then annulled Christina's "marriage," and in extract (e) we learn how she struggled against sexual temptation while staying with a cleric in whose charge the archbishop has put her, and how saints intervened to protect her. She was evidently highly sexed and irresistibly attractive to men, and this was no doubt part of the saintly charisma that spread her reputation beyond Markyate and made archbishops and abbots attempt to recruit her.

Christina cured a woman of the falling sickness but suffered from many maladies herself; these, and the miraculous means by which they are healed, are the subject of extract (f), along with her crowning by angels and the divine intervention that brought an end to her temptations. After this (about 1124) she first came into contact with Abbot Geoffrey of St. Albans, who subsequently became her admirer and patron; she converted him to genuine spirituality, and seemed to have miraculous knowledge of his activities and thoughts. About 1131 Christina made her formal profession as a nun at St. Alban. Extract (g) relates how Geoffrey's salvation was confirmed to her in a vision, and another vision revealed that her brother Gregory had found favour with the Virgin Mary while mortally sick. Christina three times received dream-like revelations that Geoffrey would be prevented from going abroad on dangerous political business. Her relationship with him aroused slanderous comment, and extract (h) explains how Christina appeared miraculously to a monk to disprove this and how a divine voice reassured her and her followers after a terrifying appearance by the devil as a headless bodiless figure. The final extract concerns the appearances of a mysterious and handsome pilgrim, who turns out to be Christ himself. Shortly after this the only manuscript of Christina's life breaks off, and it is not known how much is missing. She lived for many more years; in 1145 Markyate priory was founded, with Christina as its head; in 1147 Geoffrey of St. Albans died; in 1155 there is record of a grant made to her by King Henry II; and she is thought to have died between then and 1166.

The extracts given here focus on the many visionary experiences that made Christina's life remarkable for the monk who wrote it. As he claimed, "These visions were not imaginary or dreamlike; she saw them with the true intuition enjoyed by the mystics."<sup>12</sup> The natural and the supernatural coexist, and so do sexuality and holiness: for all that she lived as an anchoress and a nun, there is scarcely sublimated eroticism in Christina's relations with the male clerics who so much admired her, and even with "the man whose beauty had only to be seen to be loved," the Christ who manifested himself to her at Christmas. This is a frequent and even normal element in medieval female devotion, but in the twelfth century it showed itself in an uncomplicated way, with an innocent joy that still resonates many centuries later.

## **HADEWIJCH AND MARGUERITE PORETE**

Two of the writers included in this volume are best considered as a pair, because they were both beguines, and both not only great mystics, but great creative writers in their vernacular language. Beguines were members of loosely organized, unenclosed lay sisterhoods, a way of life that originated in the Netherlands in the early thirteenth century and then spread rapidly through France and Germany (though apparently not England). They lived a communal semi-religious life, supporting themselves by their own work, but were not permanently bound by vows as nuns were: they could hold private

property and could leave to get married. They aided the sick and the poor, but they also practiced contemplation, often of a visionary and ecstatic kind. Some of them expressed their religious insights in the vernacular languages, and at least three are now famous as writers: Mechthild of Magdeburg in German, Hadewijch in Dutch, and Marguerite Porete in French. Because the beguines were women speaking and writing about religious matters without being under strict ecclesiastical control, as the numbers grew they were held in increasing suspicion by the Church, and their way of life was condemned by the council of Vienne in 1312. By the middle of the fourteenth century the beguine movement, which had attracted many women and much attention, both admiring and suspicious, was in decline.

Hadewijch lived as a beguine in the first half of the thirteenth century, probably in or near Antwerp. At some time, as is indicated by Letter 29, she may have been head of a beguinage, but she was apparently driven out by opposition. Her biography is completely uncertain because the only documentary evidence is not literal but intensely literary. She is now regarded as one of the greatest Dutch poets of the Middle Ages, but her work was little known in her own time (in England it was completely unknown), and modern translations give little sense of the poetic quality of her writing with its intricate ambiguity and paradox. Passionate love is its motive and theme—"Love is all!" she exclaims in Letter 25—a love that could be directed towards other women, as in that letter, but that had as its focus God in both his Humanity and his Divinity. In Vision 7 she describes suffering and agony of desire, and "such madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me that I did not content my Beloved, and that my Beloved did not fulfil my desire." An eagle appears, telling her, "If you wish to attain oneness, make yourself ready!" Hadewijch sees God as a child, as a man, and as the sacrament, and she enjoys an intensely erotic bodily union with him—he "took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity"—until her ability to experience him fades and "I could no longer distinguish him within me." This moment of ecstasy, though, comes in her youth, and she learns that it is only the beginning of her mystical life, not its ultimate goal. As she writes in Vision 11, Love is to be "a heavy burden and disgrace"; and in Letter 1 she can even assert that God "has been more cruel to me than any devil ever was."

In her poems, Hadewijch writes in the tradition of fine amour, which goes back to the secular poetry of the troubadours. Love is a harsh discipline in which the lover is continually tested by suffering. There is no repose: the lover's life is a never-ending journey, an exile, "night in the daytime" madness, and yet this is the only way of living acceptable to the spiritual elite. In the poetry of the troubadours and their descendents, the lover is usually a knight in pursuit of a distant and haughty lady, and Hadewijch frequently adopts a male identity. "Love" (*Minne*) is God but is also "she," a seemingly cruel goddess who provokes insatiable desire. Her lyrics adopt traditional frameworks—the passing of the seasons or the knight setting out on a quest, and traditional gestures of hope at the beginning followed by despair, of farewell to love, of the contrast between the poet and happy lover—but always as means of speaking about the soul's relation to God. Their most common image is of love as wandering in exile—the bitter relinquishment of normality and its satisfactions, to be dedicated to a power that is entirely arbitrary in its demands. Only when all hope of consolation is abandoned can the lover regain the union with God that gives meaning to life.

About Marguerite Porete we also know little before her last years, except that she lived in Hainaut around 1300. She seems to have begun as a beguine but later to have adopted a more wandering way of life. She probably wrote an early version of her allegorical poem in French verse and prose, the

*Mirouer des simples âmes anienties (Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls)*, in the 1290s. Between 1290 and 1306 the poem was condemned as heretical by the bishop of Cambrai, and she was forbidden to allow its teaching to be circulated. Disregarding this ban, she sent it to three theologians to invite them to confirm its orthodoxy, adding for their benefit a further set of chapters (including the extra from chapter XXVII translated here), intended to help them understand it. She regarded them and most readers as her spiritual inferiors: even more than with Hadewijch, the tenor of her writing is esoteric and elitist, a form of courtly mysticism in which she sees herself as belonging to a spiritual aristocracy with God as its head. The three theologians approved the work as they saw it, though one said it was so exalted that he could not understand it. Marguerite then submitted it to the bishop of Châlons, presumably hoping that he would set aside the earlier condemnation. Instead, in 1308, she was arrested by the Dominican Inquisitor, William of Paris, a powerful man who was confessor to the king of France, Philip the Fair. The expectation was that a person accused of heresy would either defend or retract his or her teachings, but Marguerite would do neither—she simply refused to reply to her interrogators. She was kept in prison, and in 1310 a committee of theologians was invited to comment on propositions drawn from her book. One of them was that “the soul brought to Nothing takes leave of the Virtues, nor is she any longer in their bondage,”<sup>13</sup> an idea repeated in several forms in the excerpts in this volume, as when she writes that the soul in its third state renounces virtuous actions in order to sacrifice what she loves, “fulfilling the will of another so as to destroy her own will” (ch. XVII). Marguerite’s concern was with the individual soul in its most exalted spiritual state of “annihilation”—total nothingness, total absorption on earth of the human will into the will of God—and it was alleged that she saw that superior soul as set above the Church’s normal requirements, such as self-denial, asceticism, the pursuit of virtue, even God’s gifts or consolations, from weeping and mystical ecstasy. For her, the institutional Church was “Holy Church the Little,” by contrast with the true Church of annihilated souls.

The doctrines attributed to Marguerite Porete largely correspond to what is known as the “Heresy of the Free Spirit,” the claim that those individuals inspired by the Holy Spirit have complete freedom of action on earth, because, as St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:17, “where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” Such heretics, it was said, claimed not to be bound by the normal requirements of morality because they thought themselves incapable of sin. In all probability there was no such heresy, in the sense of an organized sect with a teaching programme hostile to the Church, there were only individual mystics like Marguerite, many of them women, whose use of language was daring and ambiguous. The Church, however, felt under threat from extreme ideas and constructed a heresy to account for this, a heresy denounced in 1312 at the council of Vienne, at which the beguines were also condemned.

Marguerite was caught up in this scare, and her obvious contempt for the ecclesiastics who were so much her spiritual inferiors that they could not understand her work cannot have helped. There was no powerful religious order or distinguished confessor to protect her, and she was again convicted and, as a relapsed heretic, was handed over to the secular court and immediately condemned to death. She was burned at the stake in the Place de Grève—the first heretic to be burned to death in the Parisian inquisition. A contemporary chronicler reports that the spectators were moved to tears by her noble bearing as she endured this terrible end. Her book was burned at the same time, but it was already in circulation, and it was too late to stop it from continuing to be read. Only one French manuscript is known, but the *Mirror* was also translated into Latin, Italian, and English. The Middle English translation dates from about 1400. The translator, who calls himself “MN,” did not know that h

source was heretical or even that it was by a woman: he simply thought the *Mirror* an important work of speculative mysticism, though one that needed careful interpretation if it was to be kept within the bounds of orthodoxy. There are three manuscripts of the Middle English *Mirror*, and one of them alone contains the only copy of the Short Text of Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*. All three manuscripts are associated with Carthusian monasteries, which were the focus of interest in contemplative practice and writings in late medieval England. MN may well have been a Carthusian monk. He wrote glosses on the more worrying parts of his French source, and he also had to deal with scribal errors in the manuscript and with his own unwillingness to believe that the author really intended some of her most startling statements, so he explains things away and sometimes writes what does not seem to make sense.

A detailed interpretation of the extracts from the Middle English *Mirror* translated here would be impossibly long, but it may be helpful to explain that the work is essentially a dialogue between Love and the Soul, with many interventions by other personified figures, Reason being the most prominent. Love is generally female in the French text but more often male in the English; he/she is the refined love of courtly poetry, possible only for those of high rank and exquisite sensibility, but is also God himself—"I am God, says Love, for Love is God and God is Love" (ch. IV). God, the transcendent being, is imagined as the distant beloved, the object of human love, but also as Love itself, that which makes human love possible. The Soul is God's lover, whose aim is to become perfectly identified with him, to be annihilated into him and thus to be deified. Ultimately the perfected Soul can make the startling claim: "I am the salvation of creatures and the glory of God" (ch. XIII). But the Soul is also Marguerite herself, the writer of this book as well as a character in it. In one sense, the book is about its own composition; it is always a work in progress, a work full of references to itself as a book. It is by Marguerite, but it is also something given to her by Love, the king greater than Alexander referred to in the prologue.

Reason is at a far lower level. She understands only literally and superficially, but her questions provide excuses for Love to expound her teachings more fully, for the benefit of those who are at a lower spiritual level than the Soul. Reason is Marguerite's own rational faculty, but she is also the guiding principle of the institutional Church, Holy Church the Little, the Church that Marguerite despised and that was going to put her to death. For Marguerite, though, the harsher discipline was that imposed by Love, and there is a kind of metaphysical masochism at the heart of her work, which emerges most clearly in the series of thought-experiments in the final extract here (ch. XXVII): nothing will satisfy her but total submission to a God who may after all reject her love. She is forced to accept that her book is no more than a fiction, that she cannot really engage in dialogue with Love, but with her final acceptance of disenchantment comes a release into freedom.

## MANUSCRIPT DOUCE 114

This collection includes the lives of three women whose religious insights express themselves in physical behaviour that by modern standards is fascinatingly bizarre. The lives were originally composed in Latin by distinguished ecclesiastics. That of Christine, known as "the Astonishing," was written by Thomas of Cantimpre (who lived from around 1200 until after 1262), an Augustinian monk who, after meeting the holy woman Lutgard of Aywières in 1230, became a Dominican and devotee.



his life to spreading the fame of contemporary saints, most of them women. The life of Mary Oignies is by Jacques de Vitry (c. 1170-1240), who became her confessor and after her death studied the practices of other holy women until he became bishop of Acre and finally a cardinal. The life of Elizabeth of Spaalbeek is by a Cistercian monk, Philip of Clairvaux. It has generally been thought that medieval religious devotion in England was comparatively sober and moderate, avoiding continental extremes. This makes it all the more surprising that all three of these lives were translated into Middle English, apparently around 1400. They are found together in a single manuscript, Douce 114, from which they are translated here.

## CHRISTINE THE ASTONISHING

Thomas of Cantimpré's choice of Christine for one of his *Lives* of holy women has been called a lapse of judgement and the contents untrustworthy; more recently she has been seen as an exemplar of purgatorial cleansing, or a "fool for Christ's sake" [see I Cor 3:18-19]; a twentieth-century psychiatrist might have called her psychotic or schizophrenic. Her bizarre behaviour and Thomas's interpretation of it certainly proved interesting in the Middle Ages, as it survives in a number of manuscripts in Latin, Dutch, and English. Though astonishing, Christine was not as unusual as one might suppose. There seem to have been a number of people "possessed by the Spirit" in some way, and even those possessed by a devil could be seen as having supernatural authority.

Christine, though her parents are described as having been "respectable," belonged to a family where she could be expected to spend her days watching over the family animals in the fields. Thomas says that this enables her to be particularly close to God, ascribing a sickness and her apparent death to the weakening effect of such contemplation. Despite her extraordinary resurrection during her own funeral, her sisters and the local community see her subsequent behaviour as madness, and she is treated as the insane were treated: she is chained up and neglected. Much of her behaviour does sound like accounts of diabolical possession, a frequent explanation for madness, but Thomas's account could be taken as showing how, after her journey into the next world, she is fulfilling the wishes of God by demonstrating how sin is punished in purgatory—she leaps into fiery ovens, plunges into ice water, hangs with the dead. Much of her behaviour could more easily be seen as holy: she flees to the wilderness, goes into trances in various extraordinary places and ways, she weeps and wails and sings; she has special insights into people's behaviour and the destination of their souls. Christine enjoys the company of nuns, is responsive to priests, and spends a considerable length of time with a recluse.

However, for many years her family try to confine her, until they are persuaded by miracles that she is especially holy. The local clergy also appear to be convinced of this but become uneasy about her public image when people begin to flock to their town and, as it says in chapter XIII, "Then men and women in religious orders in that town fear[ed] that the huge wonder of these marvels should be beyond man's comprehension, and prompt the beastly minds of men to wicked thoughts and deprive God's great deeds of their power, in that Christine fled from the presence of men, and climbed on high things like a bird, and stayed in the water for a long time like a fish." So they prayed that God would make her more like other people—and this was successful, for after plunging into a baptismal font she became calmer, more socialized, and less embarrassing. It is possible that they felt simultaneously that God's great deeds should be truly valued and that they had an image problem of

their hands. It has to be remembered when reading works which celebrate the lives and miracles of holy people that the local community and their clergy and religious houses stood to gain not only spiritually but also financially from the presence of such a figure in their midst, dead or alive. A well-known saint or relic could and did bring large numbers of pilgrims in search of help for their bodies and souls, and often a good holiday. Their money helped the local economy and Church coffers. There was great competition for the physical relics of saints and holy people, with a number of well-documented thefts.

Like other holy women, Christina became a preacher and a spiritual adviser. She even exerted considerable influence over Count Lewis of Loos, who treated her as a priest when he made his deathbed confession to her. A woman who three or four centuries later would have been burned as a witch, who nowadays might have been on medication, in an institution, or even living rough, in the Middle Ages moved from cow to castle, an honoured and valued member of the community.

## MARY OF OIGNIES

Another beguine, the Blessed Mary of Oignies was born in 1176 in the diocese of Liege, remarkable for its spiritual energy in the Middle Ages—Christine the Astonishing and Elizabeth of Spaalbeek were from the same diocese. After her marriage at the age of fourteen, Mary's husband was persuaded to join her in a vow of chastity, and the young couple dedicated themselves and their money to a life of good works. They cared for lepers<sup>15</sup> in nearby Williambrouk where, although her husband disappears from the story at this point, we know that Mary inspired a number of like-minded women to join her. After some years so many devout admirers were coming to visit her that Mary sought greater seclusion in a house of Augustinian canons in Oignies, though she did not live an enclosed life but travelled about to teach the faith and comfort the sick and dying. Here, too, she was the centre of a group of men and women who admired and emulated her. Her fame reached Paris, where Jacques of Vitry was moved to go and see her, and then to remain with her as confessor and friend until her death in 1213, when he began writing her life while moving up the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The life is preceded by a prologue in which he extols the lives of beguines. Though it was strictly speaking his place to give her spiritual guidance, like the confessors of a number of other holy women, he seems to have been guided by her, calling her his spiritual mother; he revered her for the rest of his life and was buried near her at Oignies, where she had lived in the priory since 1207.

Jacques shows Mary as both practical and fervently spiritual. Like other holy women, she disciplines her flesh, fasting and making her body endure hardships; she prays, performs miracles, prophesies, and goes into ecstasies. Like many such women of her time, she is extreme in many of her practices. She makes her mouth bleed by eating hard black bread, she goes into an ecstasy which lasts for thirty-five days and during which she does not eat or speak; sometimes she cannot stop praying and genuflecting—once “she lashed herself with a sharp stick three hundred times each time she kneeled, sacrificing and offering herself in a prolonged martyrdom.” The whole of chapter V is devoted to her compunction and tears: when she considers Christ's suffering she weeps uncontrollably. Her power with God and the acceptability of her behaviour are shown when a priest teasingly reprimands her for weeping in church; she slips out, but her tears move God to justify her to the “man of bad judgement” who soaks himself and the altar with his own tears. This episode was known in England, as a priest

who was having doubts about Margery Kempe's weeping read it and gave her a detailed account of it.<sup>16</sup>

One of the more spectacular episodes of Mary's life also gives an interesting insight into the way an adolescent crisis or the failure of a young person to conform to the life she was expected to lead was handled in Mary's lifetime. In chapter IX we are told about the strength of her prayer. Eileen Power writes of the extreme youth of some novices, who were occasionally put into convents when still almost babies,<sup>17</sup> and it is clear that girls could make their profession when still very young. They might well have had doubts when they reached puberty and a more thoughtful age. A "young virgin" in a Cistercian abbey begins to doubt her faith; she has "impure thoughts," makes "contemptuous remarks," becomes severely depressed, and makes several suicide attempts. Where a modern child would receive counselling, medication, psychiatric help, she is urged to confess her sins and to listen to holy exhortations, all to no avail. Her behaviour is read as diabolical possession. The meekness of her sister-nuns is remarked on in contrast to the fierce transgression of this adolescent: she hates what is good and shouts out blasphemies. She is finally taken to Mary, who has to fast, weep, and pray for forty days before the wailing fiend will leave the child; the dove is snatched from his jaws, conforms once more, confessing and taking communion, and she goes home to the abbey safe and sound. Holy women, including Mary, are frequently described by their male biographers as meek, modest, dove-like. Mary herself is sometimes referred to as Christ's dove; she covers her head and eyes with a veil and looks at the ground as she walks. In fact, in spite of every appearance of meekness—and usually poor health and physical weakness—these women must have had great strength of mind. To us they appear unusually determined; meekness of manner seems to have covered astonishing assertiveness. They are empowered by their faith and their visions.

In her last illness, while still only thirty-six, Mary virtually stops eating, unable to bear the taste of anything but consecrated wafers. After death her body is found to be so thin that her spine is sticking to her stomach, her bones show through her belly. It seems quite possible that both she and Elizabeth of Spaalbeek, who died in her early twenties, succumbed to anorexia.

The anonymous Middle English version follows the Latin original closely but omits the Prologue and Book III. The translation in this volume includes almost all of Book I and some of the beginning of Book II, stopping at Mary's death.

## ELIZABETH OF SPAALBEEK

The Middle English version of the life of Elizabeth of Spaalbeek begins with male authority: the *compilour* quotes the Church father St. Jerome on the difficulties of translation and is soon using the word *auctorité*. It is a paradox at the heart of this text that while conventional, patriarchal men appear to be in complete control, Elizabeth has made use of their structures to obtain power and to live a transgressive life. The narrator's voice is so strong and clear that the reader does not relate directly to what he is describing, but he only appears to be controlling a text, which is in fact dominated by its subject. The narrator is a constant presence, commenting, interpreting, wondering; to have such a bizarre female behaviour carefully described by a conventional man produces an odd effect. Although Philip of Clairvaux controls her written life, her cousin, the abbot of Sint-Truiden, "worschepful man ... of grete auctorité," has taken over responsibility for her lived life. However,

Elizabeth, an unmarried woman of twenty, has had special accommodation built for her; she has *meynnee*, her own household, devoted to her service. And she also has the constant and devoted attention of her immediate family. At the age of five, when younger sisters were probably being born, she had found in holiness a means of control, a source of power. Normally a female child in this situation would have received less attention herself and would have helped care for younger siblings. Elizabeth stood up against this loss of control and esteem, this loss of self. She not only retains her mother's attention and care as though still an infant (watched over constantly, put to bed, propped up on pillows, fed on little dishes of milk), but the younger sisters, instead of supplanting her and receiving her care, have become her servants. She also receives devoted fatherly care and admiration from various eminent and holy men: her cousin the abbot Sint-Truiden is an active guardian, and the abbot of St. Bernard's famous foundation at Clairvaux, who would have high status wherever he went, visits her and feeds her on sips of milk.

Elizabeth has gained this power and control, and is drawing pilgrims from far and wide, through performance. She lives a daily routine of performance art, which is at the same time religious ritual. She is actor, dancer, gymnast, and priest. She has been performing since she was five, presumably elaborating the routines as she grew up. Her behaviour must have developed partly in response to authoritative adults, and it includes audience participation: "... her fingers hold the picture so tight that if anyone shakes moves or pulls it ... her whole body is moved with the movement of the picture...." Those watching must have been invited to try removing the picture or, at another point, to push her little finger so that her stiff body swayed over. The abbot-cousin who is presenting her must have been not just a spiritual director, but also a dramatic director. He is presenting a performance that he has helped to create. The narrator describes her rituals with reminders that he was part of an audience, and he keeps mentioning the reports of other people who had seen it. Elizabeth, like other women included in this volume, is circumventing the problem of women being forbidden to take on the priestly role: the watchers are both audience and congregation. She acts out Scripture, "... as if she were expounding what is written in the Gospel...." Presumably all this continues to take place when no one is there—but is there ever no one there? A Mass is supposed to have at least one other person present besides the priest. Like the Mass, this is worship, holy ritual, and performance, with carefully chosen and draped garments and attendants to provide and remove holy objects at the right moment.

Much of Elizabeth's performance is violent and energetic, but there is emphasis on modesty, on seamliness. She is not revealing her body in an improper way, there is no vulgarity. Her whole demeanour is lady-like. Such a show could easily identify her with actors, but the writer keeps emphasizing propriety. It is clear that both physical energy and controlled movement are involved: she is strong and nimble, like a gymnast or a dancer. The words describing her are those used about romance heroines: she performs violent movements "ful honestly and fulle manerly"; she shows "merueilous onest and schameful gladnesse of cheer" and "maydenly schamefastnes"; meanwhile what she is representing is a man suffering at the hands of violent men, and what is being watched is someone actually harming herself: beating herself fiercely, stabbing her eyes until they bleed. Furious expenditure of energy is one of the features of anorexia nervosa: self-discipline in every sense of the word is not uncommon in devout women in the Middle Ages. Fasting was then, as now, a way to control your own life and to gain power over other people. At the same time, it was encouraged by the Church: the less you ate, the more you rejected your body and encouraged your spirit and the nearer you were to Heaven. Periods of fasting were an integral part of Christian life; it must have been just as easy for an adolescent to move on from that into anorexia as it is for a modern adolescent to move on

from dieting. Reading the lives and seeing pictures of saints who had become pure and holy through fasting must have had some of the effect of modern role models of slimness. The description of one Elizabeth's meals sounds very like a "Holy Anorexic":<sup>18</sup> "... her mother brought her a little milk in a little dish, ... the abbot of Clairvaux ... put a spoonful of it to her mouth, and she sipped three sips of it with apparent difficulty, and then she began to gag at it, as if she were being given food which she loathed. And then she was offered her drink ... and when she had tasted it she would not drink it." The only food she seems to accept gladly is the consecrated wafer and that she does not appear to "eat."

The narrator frequently refers to Elizabeth as *mayden* and *virgyn*, and he emphasizes her physical purity. Yet in spite of such assurances, the text seems pervaded by a sense of unease. There is tension between private reclusion and public spectacle, clean and unclean, body and spirit, energy and weakness. This is partly the effect of the performance; men are watching women, watching some moments which should be intimate: putting a daughter and sister to bed, propping her up with pillows. If she is watched so constantly, what about bodily functions? And she is bleeding in many places; not only is the woollen cloth next to skin *defuyled* with blood, but her side, hands, and feet, and "her pappys [breasts] were alle defuyled with blode rennyng fro hir eyen [eyes]." Furthermore, her room is almost consecrated ground, part of her chapel, from which it is separated only by a lattice. There is a central tension between the sacred and the profane.

## BRIDGET OF SWEDEN

We know most about the women in this volume who were of highest social status and were successful and well-known before and after their deaths; the life of Bridget of Sweden is particularly well documented. She was born into an aristocratic family in a country where such families played an important part in government and in which "women of her background were accorded a status which extolled their co-operation and vigorous involvement in public as well as private enterprises."<sup>19</sup> Family interests and connections would have meant that she grew up among leading politicians, lawyers, and churchmen. Bridget was married to a rich and powerful man when she was thirteen, and though her daughter was to give the version of this event which was stereotypical in the vitae of female saints—she had been forced by her family, she would have preferred death to marriage, and she herself in pious widowhood is ashamed of her former sexual desire—her own words elsewhere suggest that she valued the institution of marriage and loved the husband to whom she was married for thirty years. Some of her maternal pronouncements are severe by modern standards, but Bridget clearly felt love and concern for her children. She is unusual among devout medieval writers in conveying a mother's trembling exhaustion after childbirth, her joy—all the greater as she feels the baby has been rescued from darkness, from the fear of limbo—and the tender vulnerability of the infant as it "stretched out looking for nourishment" and its mother "... with her cheek and her breast warmed him with great joy and delight."<sup>20</sup>

After the death of her husband, Ulf, in 1344, Bridget lived in the Cistercian monastery of Alvastra where Peter Olofsson became her confessor; he remained at her side for the rest of her life and became the main transcriber of her revelations, many of which she had received while at Alvastra. During the few years she spent there she issued prophetic denunciations of political and ecclesiastical leaders and undertook to establish a new religious order, the Brigittines, with double monasteries for men and

women. The first woman to found a religious order, she wished to reform what she saw as the corrupt state of monasticism. In 1349 she received a vision in which she was called to go to Rome for the Holy Year of Jubilee in 1350 and to remain until the Pope and the Emperor were there at the same time: this meant that she lived there for the rest of her life. The papacy had left Rome for Avignon where it was under French control ; in its absence Rome was in decline and had lost its sacred character. Bridget helped St Catherine of Siena to persuade the last French pope, Gregory XI, to return to Rome in 1377 and restore order, but within a year Gregory died and the Great Schism began, a scandalous situation in which there were two popes, one in Rome and one in Avignon.

The *Liber Celestis* is one of a number of versions of the large collection of revelations which Bridget began to receive in the 1340s. They were highly influential throughout Europe, including England, where they were eagerly read and explicated before the end of the fourteenth century. It is a completely discontinuous work, and selection, from among more than 700 separate revelations ranging in length from a few lines to several pages, has to be arbitrary. I have brought together revelations from various parts of this manuscript so as to group them under distinct headings: those about the visionary experience itself, those concerning the lives of Christ and the Virgin, satires of the corruption of the times, and finally, a miscellany illustrating some other features of the collection. The selections are often representative: for example, besides the translated revelation on the corruption of the Franciscan friars, there is another, longer revelation on the corruption of the Dominicans. Although the revelations were received by Bridget and understood by her readers to be directly granted to her by God, Christ, and the Virgin Mary, it has been pointed out that they are in fact “a mosaic of reminiscences: of her readings of all kinds (Bible, Liturgy, Hymns to the Virgin, and the older Passion narratives)—and of the works of ecclesiastical art as she had meditated upon them.”<sup>21</sup>

## JULIAN OF NORWICH

We know nothing of the life of Julian of Norwich before 1373, when, in extreme sickness, she had the simple yet extraordinary religious experiences that led her to write the *Revelations of Divine Love*. Even her real name is unknown, “Julian” being taken from St. Julian’s church, Norwich, to which she was later attached as an anchoress. She was probably born about 1343, and the presence of her mother and her parish priest at her sickbed suggest that she was still living at home and had not yet entered the religious life. As she describes herself, she was a young woman who was devout in a manner not uncommon in late-medieval England, and one with the leisure to dedicate herself to devotion, hence presumably from a prosperous family in Norwich, the flourishing major city of East Anglia. She longed to suffer in body for Christ’s sake, even to the verge of death, and to share imaginatively in his Passion. Her wishes were granted, but the experiences that came to her were uncannier than the intense imaginings of Christ’s human life and sufferings granted to other mystics such as Bridget of Sweden and Margery Kempe. At first she saw blood trickling down the face of a crucifix held before her by the priest, but alongside that a vision of God’s sustaining love, in the form of “a little thing, the size of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand” (Short Text ch. 4), which she was told was the whole of creation, so tiny and yet so lasting. The succeeding “showings,” as she calls them, similarly mix relatively conventional visual imagery with far stranger manifestations of metaphysical truth. She explains that what was revealed to her came in three modes, “by bodily sight, and by words formed

my understanding, and by spiritual sight,” and, unlike, say, Bridget of Sweden, who seems to feel no doubt about the absolute clarity of her visions and their significance, she is aware that her words must be insufficient to convey God’s meaning, which is infinitely rich, complex, and beyond human understanding.

The excerpts translated here are taken from two different versions of Julian’s *Revelations*. They begin with the first seven chapters of the Short Text. This is generally agreed to be earlier than the Long Text, and the traditional view is that it was written shortly after 1373. It describes the “showings” that came to her in that year and her initial, already deeply thoughtful probings of what they meant. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that the Short Text as we have it may have been composed after the rise and condemnation of the Lollard heresies, influential among women, had made it necessary for a woman visionary to stress as strongly as Julian does that she fully accepted ecclesiastical orthodoxy. Chapter 86 of the Long Text mentions a further revelation, received about 1388, teaching that God’s meaning in all that he showed her was love; and it was possibly this insight that led her to write the Short Text. If so, the Long Text might well date from the fifteenth century, perhaps after 1413, the date given in the opening rubric of the Short Text. In any case, we have to suppose that the composition of the *Revelations* was an ongoing process, and one which, as she writes at the end of the Long Text, “is not yet completed,” so that the teaching she has received is no more than “the beginning of an ABC” (ch. 51). For her, it was not just a matter of recording visionary experiences, but of pondering on them as they shifted and developed in her memory, and of exploring ever more deeply the further reaches of their meaning. It seems likely that Julian lived for some years after this: Margery Kempe visited her in 1415, and she is mentioned as alive in a will of 1416. The exact date of her death is unknown.

To comment briefly on the chapters translated here is an impossible task, for Julian is by far the greatest woman mystic of the Middle Ages—the wisest and most generous in her spirituality, the most modest in the claims she makes for herself, the one who can most readily convince modern readers that she was really able to draw on sources outside her own fantasies and her own reading. It is not by accident that the visionary women who rapidly achieved sainthood, such as Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena, did so by adding nothing of significance to what the Church was already teaching (Catherine of Siena’s God speaks to her in exactly the words of a fourteenth-century theologian). Julian, far removed from the centres of ecclesiastical power, develops a speculative theology that while never asserting itself in opposition to the Church or questioning its doctrinal tenets, encourages deeper thought about what God’s love actually means for humanity and its future. What was not shown to her assumed as great an importance as what was. She writes, “I did not see sin” (Long Text, ch. 27), and this absence of the central and obsessive concern of much medieval religious writing gives her vision an extraordinary optimism. She does not underestimate the sufferings caused by sin, either to Christ or to humanity, but what she is taught is that “Sin is befitting, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well” (ch. 27). But how can all be well, given the “one point of faith is that many shall be damned” (ch. 32)? Julian is careful not to contradict the Church’s teaching, but she takes no pleasure in the thought of hell, and her faith in God is such that she believes that he will perform a “great deed ... by which he will keep his word in all things and shall make all well that is not well” (ch. 32). The logical arguments of the theologians, lending themselves so readily to the attribution of human anger and vindictiveness to God, give way to the faith in his love for humanity and his power to do what is beyond human understanding.

Julian’s faith is not without stress, and this reaches its height in chapter 50 of the Long Text, i

which she begs to be allowed to see the truth about sin as God himself sees it. The following chapter, the longest in either text, comes as a response to this plea, in the form of a parable of a Lord and Servant, a simple story in which layer beneath layer of meaning is disclosed. What it ultimately reveals is that the fall of Adam and the incarnation of God as man are in some sense not parallel events but the same event: to God, damnation and salvation are not opposites. Julian's God is infinitely tender in his identification with his children, and, as she puts it in the insight for which she is most famous, he is our Mother as well as our Father. The idea of God as mother was not new: it can be found in the Bible and in monastic writings, and also in some of the other texts included in this volume. Hildegard writes that "God showed me his grace again, as ... when a mother offers her weeping child milk ... "; Hadewijch speaks of the soul being nursed with motherly care; Bridget explains that "this bird represents God, who brings forth every soul like a mother."<sup>22</sup> Julian develops the idea of God's motherhood more fully and with a stronger emotional charge than can be found elsewhere in the Middle Ages, in images of en-wrapping, feeding, and cleaning taken from the daily life of medieval women. Her work repays many readings.

## A REVELATION OF PURGATORY

Other accounts of spiritual experiences are included in this volume because the women who had them were remarkable; this one is included because the woman was not remarkable. Collections generally choose the best and most interesting passages from important texts. *A Revelation of Purgatory* (an account of a revelation which occurred in 1422) is an unimportant text and is given without cuts and without editorial tidying or clarifying because it offers a useful point of reference. Here we have the concerns, the attitudes, the words of a devout nun, but one whose ideas and language are limited—probably representative of many women who spent their lives in medieval nunneries. To read this and then turn again to Julian of Norwich is to be struck with even greater wonder at the quality of her intelligence, the breadth of her thought and sympathy, the power of her imagination and language. She could also provide an explanation for Julian's choice of an anchor-hold attached to St. Julian's church rather than communal life just down the road in Carrow Abbey; she could listen sympathetically when Margery Kempe visited her but might have found it harder to live with this nun, who was probably from the Benedictine abbey of St. Mary in Winchester. While William of Wykeham was bishop of Winchester, he wrote to the then abbess of this house that it had come to his attention that some of her nuns "... will not bear or undergo the reproofs and corrections inflicted upon them by their superiors for their faults, but break out into vituperation and altercation with each other and in no way submit to these corrections; meanwhile other nuns of your house by detractions, conspiracies, confederacies, leagues, obloquies, contradictions and other breaches of discipline and laxities [neglect the rule of St. Benedict]."<sup>23</sup>

The vision came "on the night of the feast of St. Lawrence." The widely read collection of saintly lives known as the *Golden Legend* includes a life of St. Lawrence, which could well have been in the visionary's mind that day: it would give anyone nightmares about tortures and fires. The saint is said to have been burned, clubbed, beaten with scorpions, and whipped with lead before being burned to death on a grill. We are also given details of five external (and metaphorical) fires that he fought, the first of three fires in his heart and three more within him (faith, ardent love, and knowledge of God).



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