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ABSTRACT

This essay takes a new approach to the well-known meeting between two late-medieval English visionary women, Margery Kempe and the anchoress Julian of Norwich, as described in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In this analysis their conversation subtly evokes a long history of women concentrating their subversive power through intimate, spiritual exchange, a history reaching back to the Biblical Visitation scene and expressed in its medieval artistic and literary instantiations. A queer reading illuminates the way that such female same-sex relationships challenge patriarchal systems by offering a privileged access to God outside clerical supervision. By examining Margery and Julian’s encounter, Luke’s Visitation passage, its depiction in a late-medieval Book of Hours, and comparing two different Middle English translations of a Visitation vision in Birgitta of Sweden’s *Revelations*, the full transgressive effect of queer touch between women – or even its unspoken possibility – emerges.

CHAPTER 8

Queer Touch Between Holy Women: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Birgitta of Sweden, and the Visitation

Laura Saetveit Miles

"It's queer how out of touch with truth women are."

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) (From Stephen Greenblatt et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, 9th ed., vol. 2 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 1006)

8.1 When Margery Kempe visits Julian of Norwich

The *Book of Margery Kempe* offers one of the most valuable surviving accounts of two medieval authors meeting—and of two visionary women meeting. Sometime around the year 1413, the wife, mother, and visionary laywoman Margery Kempe made a visit to an anchorhold, calling on the enclosed anchoress in her role as spiritual counselor. And this was no anonymous anchoress, but Julian of Norwich, author of two surviving visionary texts, and now one of the most canonical theologians of late-medieval England.[1] The women's

[1] For a suggested chronology of the life of Margery, see *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), vii-viii; and for biographical information and the visionary texts of Julian, see *The Writings of Julian of Norwich:* A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman *and* A Revelation of Love, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 1-9. Although Lynn Staley's distinction between the character Margery and the controlling author Kempe continues to be influential if debated, for the purposes of my discussion I simply refer to the single "Margery" as simultaneously the character, main author of the text, and historical

conversation receives frequent but somewhat brief scholarly attention.[2] An important precedent to the visionaries' encounter has gone unnoticed: the well-known and oft-depicted Biblical scene of the Visitation, when young Mary, mother of God, and her older cousin Elizabeth meet, both women pregnant and prophetic. The Visitation would have been familiar to Julian and Margery and their medieval readers from Scripture, devotional texts, and its visual representations in manuscripts and churches; Mary and Elizabeth are almost always depicted embracing, growing bellies touching. The Visitation was an important scene in the text of another late medieval visionary woman: St. Birgitta of Sweden, who had a vision where the Virgin Mary described the Visitation as a physically intimate moment of shared spiritual esctasy between the cousins. Margery and Julian both knew Birgitta's *Revelations* – but did they know the Latin and its Middle English translation that preserves all the empowering queerness of that passage, or the other translation that heavily censors it? Behind Margery's famous visit to Julian lies a complex, understudied lineage of parallels and prefigurations of holy women meeting holy women, a necessary history for fully understanding the visit itself.

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figure (see Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* [University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994], especially the first chapter, "Authorhip and Authority").

[2] Among many instances, see, for example, in the context of female friendship, Karma Lochrie, "Between Women," in *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing*, ed. David Wallace and Carolyn Dinshaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 70-90 (75); the equality of their conversation as a "visible form of cultural literacy" by David Lawton, "English literary voices, 1350-1500," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Culture*, ed. Andrew Galloway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 237-258 (253-8).

This essay reads Margery and Julian's meeting *through* these versions of Mary and Elizabeth's meeting, as examples of holy women coming together in such close communion that their touch – or even the intimation of intimacy – generates a spark powerful enough to leap both divine and patriarchal boundaries. Such female-female affective touch, I argue, offers a queer contact that transgresses not only clerical control but also the limits between human and divine. By bringing the *Book*'s passage into a fresh combination of theoretical and historical conversations—modern queer theory, Scripture, medieval art, and the Continental female visionary tradition—I aim to bring attention to the ways in which a queer reading can abrade genre and temporal limitations much the same way that visionaries do when collapsing together past and present, prayer and prophecy. Such an approach to Margery Kempe brings a new angle to her study today. "An avowedly queer Margery Kempe lies at the very heart of influential work on pre- and postmodern temporality, community, and cultural identity," writes Jonathan Hsy, with reference to critics such as Karma Lochrie, Carolyn Dinshaw, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and their work on her performative renouncing of heteronormative lifestyle and clothing expectations.[3] Margery's queerness in relation to other women in particular has been explored in terms of how she "refigured mourning as an erotic and potentially empowering form of female same-sex bonding" (Kathy Lavezzo), or how her kissing of female lepers likewise could unleash queer desire between herself and

[3] Jonathan Hsy, "'Be more stange and bold": Kissing Lepers and Female Same-Sex Desire in *The Book of Margery Kempe," Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 5 (2010), 189-199 (189); see also Karma Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 180-200; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), ch. 5, "The Becoming-Liquid of Margery Kempe," 154-87.

other women (Jonathan Hsy, Julie Orlemanski).[4] Both mourning and kissing constitute disruptive displays of spiritual, affective, and homoerotic desire tangled together. There is neither mourning nor kissing in the Margery-Julian meeting, but rather something different: the queer potential of two holy women mutually reaffirming their spiritual and prophetic authority, subtly disrupting the heteronormative, male ecclesiastical system just like Mary and Elizabeth 1400 years before them.

With perhaps a similar age difference as between the young Virgin Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, Margery was about 40 years old and Julian about 70 years old when Margery was traveling in Norwich, and felt herself

> bodyn be owyr Lord for to gon to an ankres in the same cyte, whych hyte Dame Jelyan. And so sche dede, and schewyd hir the grace that God put in hir sowle of 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 wonderful revelacyons whech sche schewyd to the ankres to wetyn yf ther wer any deceyte in hem, for the ankres was expert in swech thyngys and good cownsel cowd yevyn. (18:119-120)[5]

As usual, the text immediately positions Margery's experiences as originating with the grace of God, and covering the full range of meditation, contemplation, aural divine visitations, and revelations, which suggests prophecies as well as visions. Shown to her by God, these Margery in turn "shows" to Julian for her to evaluate "yf ther wer any deceyte in hem," i.e. to

[4] Kathy Lavezzo, "Sobs and Sighs Between Women: The Homoerotics of Compassion in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), 175-98 (176); Hsy, "Kissing Lepers;" and Julie Orlemanski, "How to Kiss a Leper," *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 3 (2012), 142-157.

[5] All quotations cited by chapter and pages from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt.

discern if they are divine or if they are deceptive delusions from the devil – the process of *discretio spirituum*, or discernment of spirits.[6] In such things Julian is *expert*, a word recently come into use in the last quarter of the fourteenth century: from the Latin meaning "experienced," and by extension, wise from experience, learned, and skillful.[7] More than just an authoritative expert due to her own visionary experience coupled with deep learning, however, she is also willing to share that expertise and offer "good counsel." Much like the white friar William Southfield featuring at the beginning of the chapter, the text presents Julian as one of the select authorities in *discretio spirituum* who will respect Margery enough to take her experiences seriously and then go "on the record" with vocal validation and support. The visit to the anchoress is bookended by visits to a friar and a male anchorite; the whole chapter is obviously concerned with the authority of Margery's claims to spiritual grace. Yet it remains a vital and often undervalued point that Julian stands out in a long list of men as the only holy woman to give this official validation.

The narrator continues to paraphrase the action and Julian's response, keeping with the indirect discourse to confirm the anchoress' validation as indisputable:

> The ankres, heryng the mervelyows goodnes of owyr Lord, hyly thankyd God wyth al hir hert for hys visitacyon, cownselyng this creatur to be obedyent to the wyl of owyr Lord God and fullfyllyn with 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 rathar of an evyl spyrit. (18:120)

In this retelling, with its reference to "evyn-Cristen," we might hear the tenor of Julian's own visionary writings where this is a central term, though her *Vision* and *Revelation* are never

[6] For more on this important phenomenon see Rosalyn Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late Medieval Women Visionaries* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1999).

[7] MED: *expert* (ppl., adj. (and n.)); OED: *expert* (adj.1).

mentioned in the *Book* and were perhaps unknown to Margery and her scribes. Then the narrative slips into first-person discourse from the anchoress herself, indicated in the manuscript by red brackets around direct speech.[8] She offers clear, firm, but warm and "sympathetic counsel,"[9] addressing the role of the Holy Ghost, the legitimacy of tears as divine tokens, and why patience and courage are necessary because "the mor despyte, schame, and repref that ye have in the world, the more is yowr meryte in the sygth of God" (18:122) – confirming one of the central tenets of the *Book of Margery Kempe*.

By the end of Julian's discourse their relationship has warmed from professional to personal. "Holy Wyrt seyth that the sowle of a rytful man is the sete of God, and so I trust, syster, that ye ben," counsels Julian (18:122). Julian positions herself not as a stranger now but as a spiritual sister, entering into that chosen, non-blood family that Margery collects around her over the course of her life and the *Book*. Carolyn Dinshaw's important intervention in the formulation of Margery's queerness suggests relevant ways of understanding her relationship to Julian of Norwich: "when such relations of son, daughter, mother, father, brother, sister, wife are mapped by Margery onto spiritual relations, they are given a new context and their significance changes."[10] As a laywoman, sisterhood does not apply for Margery in terms of a vowed religious sister; as an anchoress, neither does it apply in a formal sense for Julian. Perhaps for these reasons Julian creates a special bond with

[8] British Library MS Add. 61823, ff. 21r-v. The entire *Book* manuscript is available online with fascimile and facing transcription: http://english.selu.edu/humanitiesonline/kempe/ (accessed 4 June 2018).

[9] Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, "*Discretio spirituum* in Time: The Impact of Julian of Norwich's Counsel in the *Book of Margery Kempe*," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII: papers read at Charney Manor, July 2004*, ed. by E.A. Jones (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 124.

[10] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 150.

Margery when she uses this term, binding them together in their marginality, standing outside both institutional communal structures or traditional family units. There are other moments when Margery takes this role of "sister," as Julian is one of three figures to refer to Margery in this way. Earlier, at the end of Chapter 14, Christ proclaims to her that "thow art a very dowtyr to me and a modyr also, a syster, a wyfe, and spowse" (14:101), citing Mark 3:35; and then at the beginning of Chapter 18, the white friar William Southfield refers to her as sister three times throughout his speech of support. But Julian is the only woman to become a sister to Margery in return; as women they become sisters *together*, bound not only by their love of God, but by their common bodies and gender, in a way that means quite differently than with Christ or William.

At the same time Margery can occupy the male position of the "rightful man" that Julian quotes from 2 Corinthians 6:16 or Revelation 21:3, among other verses – and while of course *man* here is understood to refer to all mankind, it is nonetheless linguistically gendered male, just as the soul is linguistically and culturally gendered female. Julian performs her authoritative expertise by citing scripture – speaking from a male, clerical discourse – in order to deem Margery simultaneously a "rightful man" and a "sister." Thus in this sentence both visionary women occupy male discursive positions even as they enter into a female bond. Their womanhood binds them up together in sanctity simultaneously rooted in and transgressing human gender, where any righteous enough soul can be "the sete of God" (18:122). Julian performs the same queering linguistic twist when she addresses Margery's tears, saying "And mech mor, whan God visyteth a creatur wyth terys of contrisyon, devosyon, or compassyon, he may and owyth to levyn that the Holy Gost is in hys sowle" (18:121). A "creatur," the term used to recall the lowliness and physical createdness of the female protagonist throughout the text, performs a devotional expression usually marked as feminine, "terys," but suddenly emerges as a generic "he." In Julian's speech gender flows back and forth with little power differential; no weeping woman is denied the default

masculine position that might dominate the rhetoric of scripture or religious speech – just as in Julian's texts, Christ is not denied the nurturing position of the mother. We should remember that through her alleged dictation of the *Book* to her scribes, Margery, in turn, ventriloquizes Julian's speech, emphasizing the concord of their voices at the level of the text.

The *Book* stresses how Margery and Julian's personal connection deepens over their time together following this initial conversation, in a way that has significant queer and homoerotic undertones. Two semantically rich words feature in the final sentence of the passage: "Mych was the holy *dalyawns* that the ankres and this creatur haddyn be *comownyng* in the lofe of owyr Lord Jhesu Crist many days that thei were togedyr" (18:123, my emphasis). Throughout the *Book* the word *comownyng* has a wider range of connotations than the modern *communing*, and "could be used to describe the act of sharing or entering into a partnership, of acting jointly, of having sexual intercourse, of communicating, or of receiving or administering Holy Communion."[11] Here the two women *comown* in love of Christ, a much more intimate spiritual engagement than suggested by any of the other platonic uses of the word in the *Book*, such as when Margery speaks with the priest-scribe whom she wants to copy her text and "comownd wyth hym of this mater," as described in the Preface (47).[12] While that seems to have been a straight-forward business conversation, however, Margery's *comownyng* with Julian is not *of* or *about* anything, but "*in* the lofe of owyr Lord Jhesu Crist" (my emphasis). This little preposition suggests so much more of the

[11] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. Lynn Staley, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), ch. 11, fn to line 522; http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/staley-book-of-margery-kempe-book-i-part-i (accessed 5 June 2018).

[12] The verb *comownyn* is also found in ch. 14, 40, 43; and in reference to sexual intercourse (particularly with reference to Margery's husband), in ch. 3, 4, 11, 21.

plural connotations of the word, with the love of Christ an embodied, inhabitable, pleasurable thing, in which "the ankres and this creatur" immerse themselves without mediation and without disruption. It is not a purely hetero desire for God-made-man, but a queer desire to be together in that divine love with another woman. Visible here is how "the circulation of identifications and desires between women in the *Book* depends on the presence (and frequently the exchange) of a masculine icon—Christ," as Lavezzo articulates it.[13]

What is enabled by this communing, *dalyawns*, has a similarly wide spectrum of meanings at play: polite or intimate or spiritual conversation, but also amorous talk, flirting, and sexual union.[14] Both words retain the shadow of the body behind their incorporeal uses. In the *Book* the word *dalyawns* most frequently describes Margery's divine visionary experience with Christ (approx. 30 occurences), and often in a formulaic phrasing paired with "holy speech" like at the beginning of this passage, as quoted above: "holy spechys and dalyawns that owyr Lord spak to hir sowle."[15] Only very few other times is the term also applied to a human, not divine, interaction, as in Chapter 40 when she meets an English priest and "be holy dalyawns and communycacyon sche felt wel he was a good man" (40:206) or in Chapter 52 when some clerks testify that "the pepil hath gret feyth in hir dalyawnce"

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[13] Lavezzo, "Sobs and Sighs Between Women," 178.

[14] MED *daliaunce* (n.), and OED *dalliance*, (n.).

[15] *Dalyawns* occurs in the Preface and in ch. 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 24, 29, 30, 35, 40, 41, 45, 47, 50, 52, 56, 59, 77, 82, 83, 87. See also Wendy Harding's discussion of *dalyawns* and *comowning*: "Body into Text: *The Book of Margery Kempe*" in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 175. Tara Williams considers these two words in this sentence in her unpublished conference paper on Margery and Julian's meeting in modern drama, "Revisiting Margery and Julian's 'Holy Dalyawns'" (April 2018). My thanks to her for sharing the paper.

(52:250). With its insistent proximity to Christ, the word *dalyawns* builds up a sacred power that rubs off on these mortal interlocutors. That divine intimacy finds an earthly expression in the friendship between the two women. The narrator's earlier, more distant tone positioning Julian as an authoritative expert has shifted up to a new key, where the two holy women share together an authentic and authenticated spiritual closeness afforded to few others in the *Book* besides Margery alone.

Julian's prestige and authority continue to reverberate through the passage that follows, when Margery travels on to seek further validation from "worshepful doctorys of divinyte, bothe religiows men and other of secular abyte," who confirm the anchoress' assessment. The men agree that "God wrowt gret grace wyth hir" and "cownseld hir to be perseverawnt" (123), a specific point echoing Julian's comment to Margery a few lines before: "I prey God grawnt yow perseverawns." With such repetitive diction the text allows Julian to set the tone for official approval of Margery. When we hear Julian's voice inflecting the language of the text around her speech, seeping in and out betwen her direct discourse and the *Book*'s own narrative discourse, we can also see how the text itself provides an imaginary space where Margery and Julian exist together in a deep intimacy uninterrupted by anchorhold walls. Julian is identified as an *ancres* but her enclosure is never mentioned, nor is the setting of the women's conversation. Her "hows of ston" certainly does not silence this anchoress as one of Margery's critics hoped an anchorhold might silence Margery (ch. 13, 93). Just prior to her meeting with Julian, Margery's encounter with the "White Friar" William Southfield was in "a chapel" (118). But where did Margery actually meet Julian? We have no architectural record for the cell at St. Julian's in Norwich to confirm its size or plan.[16] However, from our historical understanding of anchorhold architecture and how

[16] On Julian's built cell, see Kim M. Philips, "Femininities and the Gentry in Late Medieval East Anglia: Ways of Being," in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (D.S. Brewer, 2008), 19; and Roberta Gilchrist and Marilyn Oliva, *Religious*

anchoresses interacted with the public, one possible scenario was that Julian's conversation took place through a small squint in the outer stone wall, just big enough for them to see each other's faces. Certainly no room to embrace – and perhaps the window was high enough in the wall that they were not even face to face, but Margery lower down while standing on the ground. A second and perhaps more likely scenario is that the cell was compartmentalized to allow an entry room or servant's room, and Julian could have received guests there in person while never leaving reclusion herself. This kind of visitation was particularly encouraged for female visitors, as the *Ancrene Wisse* guidebook for anchoresses testifies: "to women and children… give food to eat with cheerful charity […] and invite them to stay with you."[17] Michelle Sauer interprets this and other evidence to argue that "both the regulations for and the structure of the anchoritic cell could provide the necessary space and conditions to create a 'lesbian void,' in which the anchoress could explore woman-woman erotic possibilities."[18] The cell or entry room offered a "safe, private space" for women to commune with other women, undisturbed and unreadable by male authority figures.

Similarly resisting reading, the textual account of Margery's visit with Julian offers a resounding silence on the question of their setting. Physical partitions fall away at this moment in the world of the *Book*. For the encounter immortalized on the page – as opposed to the historical encounter – the anchorhold disappears; the reader can imagine them

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Women in Medieval East Anglia: History and Archaeology c. 1100-1540, Studies in East Anglian History 1 (Norwich, 1993), 76-77.

[17] *Anchoritic Sprituality:* Ancrene Wisse *and Associated Works*, trans. and intro. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), Part VIII, 201.

[18] Michelle Sauer, "Representing the Negative: Positing the Lesbian Void in Medieval English Anchoritism," *Third Space: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture* 3:2 (2004), http://journals.sfu.ca/thirdspace/index.php/journal/article/view/sauer/178 (accessed 18 Dec 2018).

"togedyr… comownyng" in both body and soul, as intimate in their conversation as two sisters in a domestic home. Entrance into the anchorhold space, as Margery might have been granted, was a particularly intimate movement because of how the anchorhold was considered an extension of the anchoress' body.[19] This medieval understanding aligns with the modern queer phenomenology of theorist Sara Ahmed: "Spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body."[20] Just as the professional distance that establishes Julian's authority in the opening description of their meeting dissolves into supportive spiritual sisterhood by the time Julian's speech is done, so does the pretense of physical distance dissipate into an abstract togetherness. In the textual account, corporal touching is not explicitly denied them; on the codex's actual parchment skin folios, they remain in each other's company in the literary *always already*. I do not mean here that the fact that the text makes no mention of their touch automatically means that the text consciously intends to encourage the imagination of that touch by the reader. But the *Book*, categorically, does not deny the reader that imaginary, and it is the important job of queer theory to explore the consequences of speculation on an imaginary that enables touch – touch that challenges both medieval social codes as well as more rigid modern textual analyses. The fact is that *Book* explicitly allows for the women to be emotionally and spiritually touched, or moved, by their experience together, as well as tacitly allows the imagined potential of bodily touch: an embrace, a kiss, the simple holding of hands. And that touch is queer.

8.1 Queer Touch Between Women

[19] Sauer, "Representing the Negative."

[20] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.

This queerness is not about the erotic or the platonic so much as it is about the way it handles time, space, bodies, power, and authority. The queer potential of medieval holy women in same-sex relationships taps into both 'queer' as a social position able to undermine hegemonic, heteronormative power structures, as well as 'queer' as a metaphorical position able "to abrade the classifications, to sit athwart conventional categories or traverse several" with a pronounced "emphasis on the disruptive, the constructed, the tactical, and the performative," as Donald Hall articulates.[21] Aligning with David Halperin, this last approach opens up (perhaps problematically, some might say) the use of the term queer to "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant… it demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative."[22] Thus my queer reading of their encounter relies on their common gender and their homosociality, and how each woman occupies in her own way a position more or less marginal to male-governed structures of authority including the medieval church and state. As an anchoress Julian might seem quite "straight" because of her voluntary submission to the control of the church through ritualized, permanent enclosure in a cell, but as her texts and Margery's account demonstrate, she held truth to power both socially and theologically. One can understand Julian, and her meeting with Margery, as dedicated to *auctoritas* while at the same time also staging a disruptive challenge to restrictions they both bristled against. While Julian was legitimated by the establishment, her lifestyle – and certainly Margery's – were still non-normative and enabled them to be able to write texts often at odds with "the dominant," texts queer in their uniqueness. J. Halberstam suggests how such such lives and literature can be queer without needing to be defined as

[21] Donald E. Hall, *Queer Theories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 13, 5. An excellent extensive explanation of such theoretical positioning can be found in Karl Whittington, "Queer," *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012).

[22] David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62; as quoted in Whittington, "Queer," 57.

homosexual, in a way resonant with these two holy women: "If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity."[23] As a kind of spatial heterotopia the anchorhold certainly brings into being a strange temporality.[24] And Margery's story could be quite accurately described as encompassing an imaginative life schedule and eccentric economic practices, especially if we think in terms of a 'spiritual' economy.

Their meeting evokes a long history of women concentrating their subversive power through intimate, spiritual exchange, a history reaching back to the Biblical Visitation scene and expressed in its medieval artistic and literary instantiations. Alongside Margery and Julian, the female figures I will examine next – Mary and Elizabeth; the medieval book patron Isabel de Byron and her (grand)daughter; Birgitta of Sweden and Mary – all the women brought together in this essay occupy what Eve Kosofky Sedgwick calls the "intelligible continuum" of homosociality, formed of "women's attention to women: the bond of mother and daughter, for instance, the bond of sister and sister, women's friendship… women who promote the interests of other women."[25] In the constellation of cases I construct here, these homosocial bonds exist outside of and despite the patriarchy; they resist, or simply ignore and thus render impotent, the dominance of men over women. They are women who actively promote the interests of the souls and bodies of other women. Their bonds defy rigid institutional structures that keep women – and God – untouchable.

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[23] Judith Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 1.

[24] On the anchorhold as a heterotopia see Laura Saetveit Miles, "Space and Enclosure in Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*" in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. by Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer), 154-165.

[25] Eve Kosofky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 3.

Carolyn Dinshaw, in her book *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (1999), proposes Margery as a deeply queer figure, where for Dinshaw "the rubric *queer* names disjunctiveness, both *within* her individual person… and *between* her person and established social forms."[26] In this reading Margery continually experiences a clash between "her own call to spirituality" rooted in her visions, with both "the heteronormative expectations of her community in Lynn" as well as her own non-virginal body.[27] Such clashes contribute to understanding her as a kind of queer, a category that helps to encompass the multiple ways in which Margery establishes an identity as an outsider even to herself. Dinshaw develops the idea of Margery's queerness as a kind of touching, both bodily and abstract:

> I focus on Margery's as the touch of the queer, a touch showing something disjunctive within unities that are presumed unproblematic, even natural. I speak of the tactile, "touch," because I feel queerness work by contiguity and displacement; like metonymy as distinct from metaphor, queerness knocks signifiers loose, ungrounding bodies, making them strange, working in this way to provoke perceptual shifts and subsequent corporeal response in those touched.[28]

In other words, just as Margery's queerness disrupts her own society, her queer touch also reaches out from the *Book* to disrupt the reader's assumptions, to defamiliarize what we think we know about meaning-making, love, and the divine.

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[26] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 158. An example of the kind of productive engagement Dinshaw's book has provoked can be found in articles in the the special issue "History's Queer Touch: A Forum on Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post-modern*," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10:2 (2001).

[27] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 147, 149.

[28] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 151.

Dinshaw focuses on many of the queer aspects of Margery that expose "something disjunctive within unities" – like her white clothes, her answering back to authorities, her difficulties conforming to saintly and worldly ideals, her failure to fulfill her desires for divine intimacy. Yet neither her analysis nor the influential queer readings of Lavezzo, Hsy, or Lochrie consider this encounter at the anchorhold, nor the homoerotic potential of the Biblical and visual precedents that are at play behind Margery's contact with Julian. Their meeting shows how Margery's queer touch also creates new, profoundly conjunctive unities. In contrast to Dinshaw's reading, I suggest how touch between women *can* unify, *can* begin to repair disjunctures imposed by society or male authority, in a way that is differently but distinctly queer as well – because of the way touch between women challenges heterosexual and heteronormative power hierarchies. The *Book* sets up the meeting between lay woman and anchoress as a positive re-modeling of how spiritual relationships could and should be, a model only possible because it takes shape outside pervasive male structures. Sister to sister, woman to woman, their conversation generates an affective charge binding them together, for a few fleeting days impervious to the patriarchy. Their intimate spiritual encounter of *dalyawns* and *comownyng* in the love of God is a queer encounter that means much more than just a professional consultation on *discretio spirituum*. It is a transgressive queering across and beyond the power systems that seek to keep strong women apart, that are afraid of their combined agency when they touch or *move* each other instead bowing to the heternormative norms that would render them passive, untouched and unmoved vessels. While the transgressive threat of their meeting may not be immediately evident, it emerges in the light of the Visitation scene, its Biblical and visual history, and its threatening potential in Birgitta of Sweden's visionary version, as I will show.

This is not to ignore the fact that the very process of *discretio spirituum* is rooted in patriarchical power dynamics. In this period it had become a fundamentally male, clerical prerogative, representative of the control that confessors had over holy women. But by being

a woman, Julian can perform *discretio* differently in some ways. It is possible that its deployment between these two women (instead of a woman and a priest) subverts the typical expert evaluation with a deeply fulfilling bond based on their shared gender – their *sisterhood* – that cuts across the strict hierarchy of society. Julian still inhabits an authoritative position here, as Julian herself as an anchoress is invested in the power of the Church in some capacity, and the text itself is invested in her authority as an anchoress; but nonetheless, Julian's words specifically limit the gendered power differential present between male clerics and holy women like themselves. By calling Margery "sister," Julian adds herself to what Dinshaw identifies as Margery's "one big queer family" that "shows up the earthly family (as she knows it) for its limitations, especially for its lack of intimacy."[29] The *Book* unapologetically insists on a mutual solidarity connecting Margery and Julian through whatever walls, stone, blood or otherwise, society might like to erect between them.

Yet this specific passage in the text doesn't explicitly suggest anyone was against the women meeting, or really even suggest their solidarity was so transgressive. The barriers to their bond only becomes obvious when we consider how the patriarchical structure of church and society ensured that Margery, as a lay woman, had little access to female religious authority figures. The *Book* presents many encounters with male clerics and religious – bishops, abbots, priests, vicars, monks, anchorites, varieties of friars – who confirm her sanctity, and she is well received by several lay women. In Chapter 84 we read how the Abbess of the Franciscan nuns at Denny "oftyntymys sent for the sayd creatur, that sche schulde come to speke wyth hir and wyth hir sisterys" (362), and Margery heads there, but the actual visit is not recorded. She visits the Birgittine double house of Syon Abbey, but does not interact with the strictly enclosed sisters there (Book II, ch. 10). Margery and Julian's connection becomes more potent in the *Book*'s larger context of Margery's uneven success at forming meaningful friendships with other women; her most formative female

[29] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 149.

relationships are virtual – found in her visions, as with the Virgin Mary, or in her books, as with Birgitta of Sweden. Julian is the supportive saint come alive to fullfill Margery's complex fantasy of a mentor that shares her sex but does not usurp her place in bed with Christ. Neither do the anchoress' texts, unmentioned, appear as competition for Margery's *Book*. Conversely, we cannot know what Julian thought of this visionary lay woman (though one imagines her patience knew no bounds).

The more important point here is how precisely their meeting is preserved on and reverberates out from the parchment page, where these two women are *always already* brought together by means of a book. Adjusting the lens to bring the foreground of the codex into focus when analysing this spoken exchange recalls a crucial nexus for Margery: the oral and the embodied. The manuscript's written discourse preserves their oral discourse and, in the process, gives their spiritual affection continual embodiment, an embodiment enabled by Christ's own incarnation as the Word. In many ways Margery's talk with Julian demonstrates Wendy Harding's argument that Margery "insists on her right to engage in dialogue on a horizontal, egalitarian level. She proclaims the moral and spiritual value of oral communication—her good words—and in so doing she opposes the clerical conception of language as monologic and disembodied."[30] This holds despite the nebulous mediation of the scribe or scribes allegedly involved in inscribing Margery's text – though even their participation in writing the encounter queers those figures, by association, to some extent. Simply by being written down, their dialogue challenges anew priestly control of spiritual speech, such a priority for so many male authorities in the *Book*. That challenge expresses a power that is queer, based in their female bodies, in their same-sex friendship, in their circumventing of the patriarchy, or rather in their quiet but confident disregard for the need of any male priestly figure at this moment of holy intimacy. The full queer potential of Julian and Margery's bond becomes even more clear if we map it onto the female friendship of the

[30] Harding, "Body into Text," 176.

Virgin Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. I now turn to Mary and Elizabeth's meeting in the Gospel account of the Visitation, its representation in a fourteenth-century Book of Hours, and its treatment in Middle English translations of St. Birgitta of Sweden's *Revelations*, in order to illuminate the broader context of the queer power generated between holy women in late-medieval England.

8.3 When the Virgin Mary visits Elizabeth

Sometime around the year 1 BC, the Gospel of Luke relates, the Virgin Mary made a visit whose record now constitutes one of the most valuable accounts of the Mother of God declaring her own role in the Incarnation. Newly pregnant with Christ, the young woman goes to Judah to her cousin Elizabeth, who in her old age is miraculously pregnant with John the Baptist. Mary "entered into the house of Zachary," and calls out to Elizabeth:

> And it came to pass, that when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the infant leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: And she cried out with a loud voice, and said: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord." And Mary said: "My soul doth magnify the Lord. And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. Because he that is mighty, hath done great things to me; and holy is his name. And his mercy is from generation unto generations, to them that fear him. He hath shewed might in his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart. He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent

empty away. He hath received Israel his servant, being mindful of his mercy: As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever." And Mary abode with her about three months; and she returned to her own house.[31] (Luke 1: 41-56)

After the narrative notes that the house belongs to Zachary, no men are mentioned or present in this scene. It is only two women talking, being filled with the spirit, blessing each other, and praising God. Not only do they channel the sacred in their pregnant bodies, they proclaim it with the voice of prophecy. Elizabeth's fetus is the first human to confirm Mary's new sanctity; Elizabeth the first human to utter that Mary is the mother of the Lord. Like Julian's affirming *discretio spirituum*, Elizabeth's response verifies that Mary was contacted by the divine and none other, and that her belief in the veracity of that contact makes her blessed: "blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord." Mary is both part of the past prophecy (from Gabriel, and from the Old Testament foretellings such as Isaiah 7:14), and speaks prophecy about herself in her own words, asserting that "all generations shall call me blessed." Most emphatically, however, she prophesies the power of God to upend the hegemony of the proud, mighty, and rich, and install a new system vindicating the poor and humble.

The Visitation proposes this daring political vision even as it promotes "a narrative for and about women, in which women speak for themselves and proclaim their own salvation."[32] This Biblical meeting is a celebration of the ability of women to bring the divine into the world, in cooperation with their fecund bodies instead of despite them, and completely outside the patriarchal system. Mary's long speech – memorialized as the Magnificat, a crucial part of the liturgy of the Daily Office – stands out in Scripture as a

[31] Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate. The version of the scene in the apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James* (ch. 12) adds little, and shortens Mary's response.

[32] Gary Waller, *A Cultural Study of Mary and the Annunciation: From Luke to the Enlightenment* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2015), 66.

radical political statement. Her individual humility parallels all humanity's poor, hungry, and humble, where these powerless will become powerful, where a handmaid – disempowered on account of her gender – will become Queen of Heaven: empowered *because* of her gender, and her motherhood. Then, as suddenly as we join their transformative, moving encounter, the narrative cuts us off, and we are left to imagine about their next three months together. The two women never meet again in the Gospels.

Mary's visit to Elizabeth offers a vital paradigm for understanding Margery's visit to Julian. The Biblical passage contextualizes what happens when two holy women come together and God is in the midst of them – that in fact the gendered ambiguity of Matthew 18:20 does not default to only men: "Ubi enim sunt duo vel tres congregati in nomine meo, ibi sum in medio eorum" (For where there are two or three gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them). Like Elizabeth (and unborn John's) response to the Virgin's greeting, Julian recognizes in Margery's words as real a presence of the divine as the Christ child in Mary's womb: "The ankres, heryng the mervelows goodnes of owyr Lord, hyly thankyd God wyth al hir hert for hys visitacyon" (120), meaning "hys visitacyon" by means of Margery's visions. God visits or makes himself known to the world again, and again through a woman – and as we know from Julian's surviving texts, Christ becomes present through her own visions as well. Elizabeth and Mary's prophetic utterances at the Visitation echo in the anchoress' authoritative advice with their common confidence and unabashed self-assurance. After her speech, as extensive and assertive as the Magnificat, Julian likewise continues her spiritual communing with Margery, although for only a few days and not the three months of the visit in Judah.

This comparison brings a new light to some of the incisive modern analysis of how Margery challenges the status quo in her queerness. The following assessment could equally apply to Mary at the Visitation:

> As a married laywoman, Margery can only express herself orally and carnally through the marginalized medium of her female body. … Using a discourse refused by the clerical elite, Margery argues for more inclusive forms of worship and schemes of salvation. Her carnal and affective form of devotion denounces restrictive concepts of Christianity that serve to consolidate the power of the male clergy. Her piety and her mode of expression represent a departure from and an alternative to the hierarchical, ordered, masculine spirituality of the pulpit.[33]

Here Harding makes the crucial connection between the female body's paradoxical power found in its marginalization, a power that can also be traced back to Mary's body as the source of Christ's flesh. Mary's speech, meanwhile, explicitly denounces the consolidation of power with the elite, and advocates the inclusion of the disenfranchised in a new scheme of salvation originating in God himself but announced by her words. Margery's radical politics find a fitting precedent in Mary's, a neglected parallel between the two women.

Luke's Visitation passage would have been well-known to medieval Christians, including Julian, and Margery, her amanuenses, and readers. It is not necessary to say that the scribe of this passage of the *Book* or Margery herself explicitly saw it patterned after the Visitation (although that certainly could have been so), in order to argue that meaning reverberates between the two scenes. Nevertheless, the scriptural story does not seem to have had a special resonance for Margery. She has a brief vision of the Visitation where she tags along with Mary: "Than went thei forth to Elysabeth, Seynt John Baptystys modir, and, whan thei mettyn togyder, eythyr of hem worshepyd other, and so thei wonyd togedyr wyth gret grace and gladnesse twelve wokys" (4:76). As with the Annunciation scene just prior, Elizabeth functions in the text to give Margery another opportunity to ingratiate herself in the extended holy family and receive complementary validation; after "than the creatur fel down on kneys to Seynt Elysabeth and preyd hir sche wold prey for hir to owyr Lady that sche

[33] Harding, "Body into Text," 174.

mygth do hir servyse and plesawns. “Dowtyr, me semyth,” seyd Elysabeth, “Thu dost ryght wel thi dever” (4:77). Mary functions as a vital model for Margery throughout the *Book* as critics such as Gail McMurray Gibson, Lavezzo, and Tara Williams have explored; she often saw herself as following in and “eventually seeking to exceed” Mary’s role in Christ’s life.[34] Yet the text does not close out the possibility that Margery saw herself and Julian at that moment reflected in Elizabeth and Mary, and it certainly allows for readers to see the parallels. I bring the scenes into parallel because the Visitation stands as the foremost – only – Scriptural precedent for women validating their own sanctity *together*, for authorizing their channeling of the divine to the world of men; and the Visitation’s treatment in medieval culture can lend important insights into the queer power of Julian and Margery’s meeting.

Like the visionaries’ meeting in Margery’s *Book*, the Lucan account is almost entirely dialogue and very little setting. Neither comments on the women’s physical proximity. Unlike Margery and Julian’s meeting, we have many medieval representations of the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth. The medieval artistic tradition takes its liberties with spare Scripture, however: Mary and Elizabeth are nearly always *touching* in images. Hugging, embracing, arms draped around each other, holding hands, hands touching each others’ pregnant bellies, even Elizabeth’s hand on Mary’s breast. As their bodies connect they almost always look each other in the face, intent on their bond and oblivious to the viewer or anyone else. Visitation representations can be found in sculptures, altar paintings, wall paintings, and

[34] Tara Williams, “Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” *Modern Philology* 107:4 (2010), 531; Gibson *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1989), 50-60; and Lavezzo, “Sobs and Sighs Between Women.” On Margery’s *imitatio Mariae* see also ch. 4 in Laura Saetveit Miles, *The Virgin Mary’s Book at the Annunciation: Reading, Interpretation, and Devotion in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, forthcoming).

manuscript illuminations, and were especially common in Books of Hours, where the scene was often linked to the Magnificat.[35] Margery and her contemporaries were surrounded by the Visitation in church art as well as manuscript illuminations. So even if they heard the Gospel, such a disjunction between scripture and artistic interpretation also points to the ways in which the *potential* for touching between women might lie just below the surface of text. Indeed, I would argue that the completely pervasive imagery of physical contact between the female figures at the Visitation would be the dominant attribute of the scene, over the spare Gospel account, especially for non-clerical medieval Christians such as women. One particular image of this scene created in England just a generation before Julian and Margery emerges as deeply meaningful in my story of queer touch between women: the Visitation in an historiated initial for the Hours of the Virgin found in British Library Egerton MS 2781, or the Neville of Hornby Hours, a manuscript produced in London and commissioned by Isabel de Byron sometime shortly before 1335.[36]

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[35] On medieval Visitation imagery in general see Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1971), 1:55-56, pls. 130-135. See also Charity Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006). In a general survey of medieval Visitation images in the *Index of Christian Art*, I found that between 90-95% portrayed the women in physical contact.

[36] Kathryn A. Smith, *Art, Identity and Devotion in Fourteenth-Century England: Three Women and their Books of Hours* (London: The British Library and University of Toronto Press, 2003), 32-47, offers an extensive history and description of Egerton MS 2781. See also the online catalogue entry in the British Library Digitised Manuscripts: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Egerton_MS_2781 (accessed 2 June 2018).

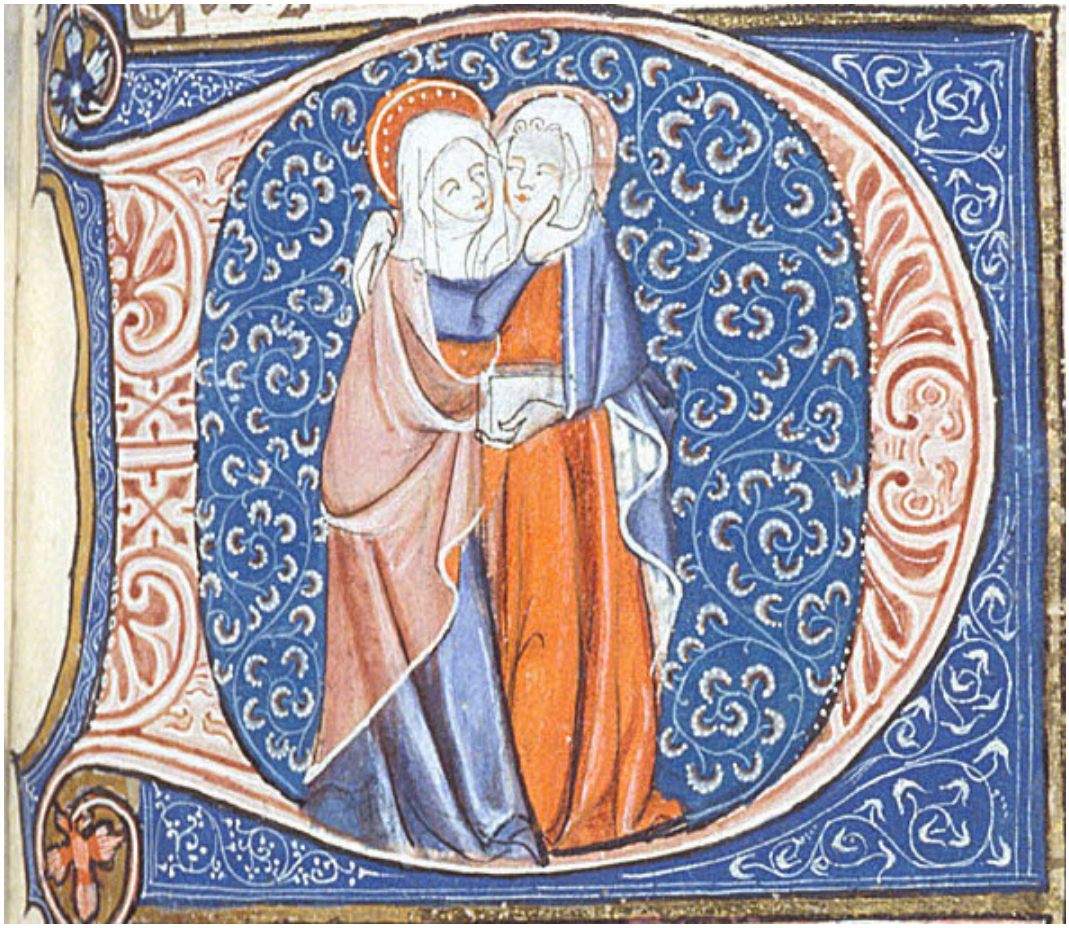

Figure 8.1. The Visitation. Historiated initial for Lauds, Hours of the Virgin. The Neville of Hornby Hours. London, British Library, MS Egerton 2781, f. 62r. © The British Library Board.

Mary, on the right, is identifiable because of her book, which she was just reading in the Annunciation scene immediately before (both in the Biblical story and in the manuscript's illumination sequence).[37] She also wears her trademark blue cloak. The blue and red of the Virgin's clothes are perfectly reversed in a mirror image of her cousin; they both wear dotted aureoles; their faces are nearly identical, in contrast to some later versions where Elizabeth is a much older woman, stooped and wrinkled. Here the artist's emphasis on the women's

[37] On the significance of Mary's book at the Annunciation, see Laura Saetveit Miles, "The Origins and Development of Mary's Book at the Annunciation," *Speculum* 89/3 (2014).

resemblance expresses their spiritual and physical intimacy. The Virgin rests her right hand over Elizabeth's shoulders, familiarly and comfortably, almost casually. Between them their bodies and veils meld together. Mary's hand with a book, representing Christ as *verbum*, rests naturally in front of her womb, where the Word has taken her flesh. The book does not come between the women's bodies but just touches Elizabeth's cloak, connecting them together through the Word more intimately. Their eyes lock as Elizabeth leans in from the waist towards Mary, and tenderly raises her right hand to Mary's face, angling her own chin up slightly to bring it closer. She seems to be going in for a kiss (as she definitely does in other representations). The suggestion of touch between faces *anticipates* how in "the act of kissing, the space of recognition, the zone between bodies that we look across and speak across in meeting one another, is drawn down toward zero" without fulfilling the yearning expressed in their perfectly mirrored expressions.[38] Their embrace's queer potential binds them together in expectancy not only of their shared desire for each other, but also the fulfillment of their prophecies and their pregnancies.

The Book of Hours from which this illustration comes might also have functioned to bind together kinswomen, in this case mother and daughter or granddaughter. Isabel de Byron, a wife and mother in the lower nobility from the north of England, commissioned the volume from a London workshop. While this book was a complex composition, the pictorial program for the Hours of the Virgin (where the Visitation can be found) in particular was likely specifically "geared toward Isabel de Byron's young daughter or granddaughter," Kathryn Smith argues in her analysis of the manuscript.[39] She suggests that Isabel and her young female progeny would have read the book together, and that "the numerous miniatures, initials, poems and prayers affirming the use of religious texts and imagery in meditative devotion and even visionary experience, as well as those themes concerned with

[38] Orlemanski, "How to Kiss a Leper," 146.

[39] Smith, *Art, Identity and Devotion*, 287.

teaching and learning, would have reminded the young girl of the mechanisms and rewards of devotional literacy."[40] Of the dozens of scenes depicted in the lavishly illustrated manuscript, none would have mirrored this intimate female, familial moment of accessing Christ through a book like the scene of the Visitation, where the cousins rejoice together in their blessedness, and Mary makes clear the conflation between Christ and the codex. Just as in the illustration, there is no evidence of a priest or confessor mediating the educated women's bookish devotions, or coming between them in their reading time. Books can bring women together on their own terms.

Jacqueline Jung comes to a related conclusion in her analysis of an early fourteenth-century Visitation sculpture from the Swiss Dominican convent of Katherinenthal, where the sisters recorded their piety and mystical experiences in a remarkable "sister-book." Like the image in the Neville of Hornby hours, in this sculpture the female figures' "mirrorlike arrangement and physical identicality made them enact what the sister-book repeatedly enjoined its readers to do: to teach one another by example and take one another as models… of virtue."[41] In other words, Mary and Elizabeth model modeling, and they do it through both their bodies and their words, and especially for Mary, through the positive equivalence of baby and book. Whether it is in the Katherinenthal sister-book, or Isabel de Byron's book of hours, or Margery and Julian's encounter preserved on the pages of the *Book of Margery*

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[40] Smith, *Art, Identity and Devotion*, 287. Smith analyzes many of the illustrations from the Hours of the Virgins and other parts of the manuscript as part of her argument concerning the younger reader, but does not discuss the Visitation.

[41] Jacqueline E. Jung, "Crystalline Wombs and Pregnant Hearts: The Exuberant Bodies of the Katharinenthal Visitation Group," in *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person*, ed. Rachel Fulton and Bruce Holsinger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 236.

Kempe, books could provide a sacrosanct space for women to support each other in their devotion to God.

8.3 Birgitta's Visionary Visitation

Mary and Elizabeth's queer touch might seem somewhat apolitical in this manuscript initial. Their embrace might seem innocuous; their physical and spiritual channeling of the Holy Spirit might seem purely a celebratory moment of female sanctity. But there was a transgressive power present in the Visitation – and in Margery and Julian's meeting – that posed a threat to the patriarchal systems of male clerical authority. The full transgressive power of women's queer touch can be seen in its omission, its silencing, in another visionary account of the Visitation by a Continental saint well known to Margery and probably also to Julian: Birgitta of Sweden (1303-74).

Althought they never met in person, Margery felt a very close kinship with Birgitta, whose *Revelations* or *Liber Celestis* appears again and again in the *Book* as a strong influence on Margery and at least one of her scribes.[42] The Swedish saint's over 700 visions became widely known in England beginning within a few decades of her death in 1374, in select original Latin versions as well as two full-length and multiple partial translations into Middle English.[43] Much like Margery's book, the authorship of the *Revelations* is complex and

[42] See, as a foundational study, M. Hoppenwasser, "The Human Burden of the Prophet: St Birgitta's Revelations and *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Medieval Perspectives* VIII (1993), and more recently, Liam Peter Temple, "Returning the English 'Mystics' to their Medieval Milieu: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe and Bridget of Sweden," *Women's Writing* 23:2 (2016): 141-158.

[43] Laura Saetveit Miles, "St Bridget of Sweden" in *The History of British Women's Writing, 700-1500*, *Vol. 1,* ed. by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). For more detail on the complex *Revelations* textual tradition in England,

collaborative. While Birgitta wrote down some of her visions in her native Swedish and dictated others, a series of confessors translated them into Latin and edited them into a large corpus that evolved over many decades. At each transmission, then, from different Latin traditions to the various independent Middle English translations, Birgitta's text was subject to the inclinations of male clerical agents – and often, to their censorship. One consequence of scribal interference becomes clear in the following comparative analysis.

To examine Birgitta's thoughts on the Visitation – and thus how they might have shaped what Margery and her insular contemporaries thought about the moment – it suffices to begin where all modern scholars would: with the published edition of British Library Cotton MS Claudius B.i, one of the two surviving full-length translations of the *Revelations* (the significance of this particular translation's accessibility will soon be made clear – this is a story about gender, control, and power, even at the level of the modern sources). The Claudius translation dates from around 1420-1420, with a possibly Northern provenance, and is beautifully illustrated.[44] In Book VI, ch. 59 of this version, Mary speaks to Birgitta in a vision and briefly describes the Visitation scene: "The modir saide to þe spouse [Birgitta] þat sho felid in hirselfe woundir þinges and stiringes fro sho had conceiued Criste, and how þe childe made grete mirth in þe wombe of Elizabeth when þai mete togedir beside a wele."[45]

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see Roger Ellis, "*Flores ad fabricandam… coronam*: An Investigation into the Uses of the Revelation of St. Bridget of Sweden in fifteenth-century England," *Medium Aevum* 51 (1982), 165-6 on the full-length Latin and Middle English versions in England.

[44] This manuscript is discussed by Joan Isobel Friedman, "MS Cotton Claudius B.I.: a Middle English Edition of St Bridget of Sweden's *Liber Celestis*," in *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Medieval England*, ed. by Rosalyn Voaden (D.S. Brewer, 1996), 91-114; and in the introduction to *The Liber Celestis of St Bridget of Sweden*, ed. Roger Ellis, EETS O.S. 291, vol 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[45] *The Liber Celestis*, ed. Ellis, 447, l. 29-31.

Here the focus is on their female bodies and moreso on their male fetuses: Mary feels wonderful movement at the conception of Christ, and likewise Elizabeth feels John move with joy when she meets Mary. Elizabeth's prophecy and the progressive challenge of the Magnificat are gone – neither Elizabeth nor Mary's words as preserved in the Gospel of Luke are mentioned; with this version of the encounter we would never know that either woman speaks at all at the Visitation. Even Mary's direct visionary speech to Birgitta common throughout this section of the *Revelations* is converted into indirect discourse, where the male confessor/scribe narrator voice speaks instead of the Virgin: "the modir saide… that sho felid…"

We might leave off there, believing Birgitta thought only in passing about the Visitation and perhaps not at all about what more happened between the two women. But the *other* surviving full-length Middle English translation of Birgitta's *Revelations*, British Library Cotton MS Julius F.ii, suggests otherwise – even though it translates the same "distinctive tradition of the Latin text" prevalent in England.[46] The MS Julius translation, preserved in a rather unassuming, paper codex possibly written in Norfolk in the 1430s-1440s, remains relatively unknown to modern scholars because it is not yet accessible in a published edition. Roger Ellis makes no substantive mention of it in his edition of the MS Claudius translation; indeed, there is no scholarly discussion of it outside an unpublished, but

[46] Ellis, "*Flores*," 166 and *Liber Celestis*, xii. Comparisons will be to the Latin edited by Birger Bergh, *Revelaciones Book 6 Sancta Birgitta*, Latinska Skrifter Ser. 2, vol 7:6 (Stockholm: Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet and Kungl, 1991) and reproduced online in PDF form as part of the *Corpus Reuelacionum Sancte Birgitte* (CRB), by the Riksarkivet: https://riksarkivet.se/crb; here *Reuelacionum Liber Sextus*, 67 (accessed 11 June 2018). Translation of the Latin available in *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, Vol 3: Liber Caelestis, Books VI-VII*, trans. Denis Searby with introduction and notes by Bridget Morris (Oxford University Press, 2012), 122.

as yet unsurpassed, PhD dissertation.[47] Ellis neglects to mention that the MS Julius translator was often more faithful to the Latin compared to the MS Claudius translator, who eliminates or moderates from the Latin dozens of passages concerning affective piety, mystical ecstasy, exempla incorporating female images of God, and passages supporting women as figures of power. These are preserved in the Julius translation.[48] More work needs to be done on the relationship between these two translations and the origins and use of their manuscripts, because they offer a rich case study in contrasting translation strategies and the variations in Birgitta's influence medieval England.

As opposed to MS Claudius, the way that MS Julius retains Birgitta's original "imitable expressions of fervor associated with affective piety"[49] can be demonstrated in the same Visitation scene in Book VI, ch. 59, which follows the Latin almost exactly:

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[47] Except for the penultimate sentence of Ellis's "Introduction," where he explains that "major gaps in Cl's text, occassioned by the loss of one leaf or more of the MS, are made good by the use of material from the other major ME translation of the *Liber*, in MS British Library Julius F II" (*Liber Celestis*, xvi). Jane I. Gilroy discusses MS Julius and compares the two full-length translations in "The Reception of Bridget of Sweden's *Revelations* in late medieval and early renaissance England," unpublished PhD dissertation (Fordham University, NY., 1999), ch. 2, "Adaptations related to women in the Claudius and Julius Mss," 56-99 (58-60 for a description of MS Julius). It may be impossible to tell which of these *Revelationes* translations (or another lost one) was known to Margery and her scribes.

[48] Gilroy, "The Reception," 62. Gilroy's dissertation remains the fullest account of the cuts and abbreviations of the Claudius translation, which deserve renewed investigation. As Gilroy notes, MS Julius also has some of the same moderating tendencies, but to a much lesser extent, and not concerning the passage at hand.

[49] Gilroy, "The Reception," 65.

> The modir spekis: Whan the aungil told me þat the sone of god wold be born of me, anoon after I consentid, I felt in me a mervelous and onwont thinge in me. Therfore I was gretly mervelyd anon & astendid to Elizabeth my cousin to comfort hir, being with great childe and to bere hir tidings þat the aungil told me. And whan sche met me by a welle, we kissid and halsid together. The child in hir wombe joyed with a mervelous and visibil mevinge. And also I was mevid in my hert with a houge joye and gladnes so þat my tunge spac inexcogitabil words of god. And [f. 274v] whan Elizabet mervelid of þe ferventnes of þe sprith þat spac in me, and I merveld of þe grace of god in hir, we boþe blissing god, stood to gether seven dayes.[50]

Now the text preserves Mary's direct speech to Birgitta, introduced by "the modir spekis," unmediated from the vision by any obvious male narrative voice (although of course the text is still mediated by a series of male scribes, they fade from view). Matching the MS Claudius

[50] My transcription, lightly edited for punctuation, from London, BL, MS Julius F.ii, f. 274r-v. Compared to the Latin, the translation is very close, only missing out one short phrase at the page turn, probably a result of eyeskip: "***1*** Mater loquitur: "Quando angelus nunciabat michi filium Dei nasciturum de me, statim postquam consensi, aliquod insolitum et admirabile sensi in me. Ideo vehementer admirans statim ascendi ad Elizabeth cognatam meam, ut et consolarer illam impregnatam et cum ea conferrem de hiis, que angelus michi nunciauerat. ***2*** Cumque ipsa iuxta fontem occurrisset michi et mutuis amplexibus et osculis frueremur, infans in utero eius mirabili et visibili motu exultando letabatur. ***3*** Et ego similiter insolita exultacione tunc mota fui in corde meo ita, ut lingua mea loqueretur inexcogitata verba de Deo [*omitted*: et anima mea tunc vix pre leticia se capiebat]. ***4*** Cumque Elizabeth miraretur feruorem spiritus, qui loquebatur in me, et ego non dissimiliter mirabar in ea graciam Dei, ambe benedicentes Deum stetimus simul aliquibus diebus." Latin from *Revelaciones*, ed. Bergh, https://riksarkivet.se/Media/pdf-filer/SanctaBirgitta_Reuelacionum_LiberSextus.pdf (accessed 1 June 2019).

version, the passage opens with Mary's corporeal feelings at the conception of Christ, but quickly shifts to retain the Latin's emphasis on her encounter with Elizabeth instead of only focusing on the male unborn. Unlike the Lucan account the affectionate touch between the women is explicit. They kiss and embrace – as in the visual tradition of the Visitation, but this time without holding back, without hesitation, fulfilling a comingled ecstatic spiritual and queer desire.

The physical movement, "visibil mevinge," of the fetus John in Elizabeth's womb parallels how Mary is "mevid" to such spiritual heights that she is overwhelmed by a "houge joye and gladnes." She does not hold back this effusion of emotion, nor does she hold back a kind of glossollalia. Translating the Latin closely into "inexcogitabil words of god," or words she had not thought out before, basically interprets Mary's Magnificat as an authentic prophecy not just inspired by God but mystically channeled from the divine, much like Birgitta's own visionary experiences.[51] "Inexcogitabil" also places her words beyond even clerical or scriptural discourse – in this version, her divine experience even surpasses what was recorded in the Gospel. Christ as the Word fills Mary's womb; the Word of God fills her mouth. Mary puts this sacred utterance in terms of her relationship with her cousin, where they mirror each other's marveling: "Elizabet mervelid of þe ferventnes of þe sprith þat spac in me, and I merveld of þe grace of god in hir," ultimately coming together in the same shared action: "we boþe blissing god." The two women validate the legitimacy of each other's holiness, that they both channel God, like the progeny their bodies carry.

Whether or not the MS Claudius translator chose to censor most of that passage (as seems most likely), or translated an already censored Latin version (that no longer survives),

[51] This instance of the word *inexcogitable* predates the earliest examples in both the MED and the OED. In the Latin: "vt lingua mea loqueretur inexcogitata verba de Deo" (67.3). On female glossolalia see Christine F. Cooper-Rompato, *The Gift of Tongues: Women's Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2010).

the fact remains that at least one male scribe along the way found Birgitta's original Visitation vision too problematic to retain. Gilroy rightly notes that MS Claudius "represses Mary's being overcome by the spirit"[52] and dampens her prophetic fervor, but the textual contraction also pulls the two women apart from each other. The MS Claudius version heteronormalizes their queer touch, sterilizes their unabashed affection, and surpresses a powerful demonstration of the special access to God that two holy women coming together could precipitate. And as the only published version, MS Claudius's outsized influence on modern scholarship perpetuates this censorship, with its modern editor joining a long line of male scribes silently (even if unwittingly and unintentionally) glossing over women's queer transgressive power.

The story of these two translations of Bridget's Visitation vision suggests another layer of significance of Margery and Julian's meeting. Obviously the MS Claudius translator approved of Birgitta as a visionary woman channeling the divine – but representing two pregnant women rapt in divine ecstasy, overflowing with prophesy? Too much. And from this evidence we know that indeed, the meeting two women together alone *can* be seen as transgressive by medieval readers. It threatens the Church patriarchy, especially when the meeting validates female connection to the divine outside clerical control. There are heteronormative bounds to affective piety, to female prophecy, to women's bodies, and when powerful holy women come together they create a queer danger that oversteps that bounds. There is a queer danger in meetings like between Mary and Elizabeth, and Margery and Julian, even if it might not first appear so. When prophetic women come together they do not necessarily dismantle the system – but they create their own space and their own power outside the system. When they touch each other's bodies (platonic or no) they liberate themselves to find their joy and ecstasy and *jouissance* in God and in each other, instead of in the male body, and – maybe – even instead of in Christ's male body. The tension in the

[52] Gilroy, "The Reception," 65.

syntactic doubleness of Margery's *dalyawns* and *comowning*, simultaneously spiritual and sexual, echoes Birgitta's orgasmic "houge joye and gladnes" and "ferventnes;" when shared between women, such pleasure comes to wield a queer strength that could deeply challenge normative frameworks of devotion and sexuality, a power verified by how strongly male scribes reacted to it in the case of the *Revelations* in MS Claudius. When these women touch each other, they touch God, and demonstrate a transformatively queer access to the divine. Margery and Julian's meeting similarly captures this spiritual power created by holy women coming together.

Interweaving the story of visionary women Margery and Julian, and Bridget's visionary version of the Visitation between Mary and Elizabeth, points to a provocative link between queerness and prophecy. In the introduction to a recent book titled *Queer Christianities*, Mark Larrimore writes that

> queering is fundamentally about the discovery of new pleasures and relationships. It expects and encourages fluidity, risk, and play. Christian queerness experiences the paradoxical workings of divine grace and love in all this. The Christian mystery is, after all, a scandal to law, foolishness to thought [1 Corinthians 1:23]. Its appetite for disruption is prophetic.[53]

Medieval christianity in particular captures Larrimore's theorization about how such theological paradoxical complexities could be considered queer. Perhaps in agreement but coming from a more secular viewpoint, Michael Warner expresses in his article "Queer and Then?" some of the basic impulses of queer studies: "a broadening of minority politics to question the framework of the sayable, […] movement across overlapping but widely disparate structures of violence and power in order to conjure a series of margins that have no

[53] Mark Larrimore, "Introduction," in *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms*, ed. Kathleen T. Talvacchia, Michael F. Pettinger, and Mark Larrimore (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 4.

identity core, […] a speculative and prophetic stance outside politics."[54] Beyond calling the queer prophetic, as these two critics do, I would argue that divine prophecy could be read as queer not only because prophecy comes from the margins to challenge dominant authorities, but also because it disrupts the present as it looks backwards and forwards in time, able to abrade linearity just as it abrades classifications and categories (to harken back to Hall's words).

In the same way, all these women and their prophetic voices do not remain isolated in their different times and places but ring together, simultaneous in the visionary continuum, where Mary and Elizabeth embrace while Margery and Julian commune while Mary appears to Birgitta – all concurrent with the reader, whether Isabel de Byron, her daughter, or the varied audiences of the *Book* and the *Revelations*. Visionary time is queer time: in visions different histories "touch" or brush up against each other, to extend Dinshaw's view. Visionary space is queer space: it is heterotopic, transgressing multiple realities, obeying no rules of the normative world, a space where dead women can confide in living women and God can reveal his secrets. J. Halberstam argues that, in terms of the postmodern, "queer uses of time and space develop, as least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction."[55] In terms of the premodern, I would argue, queer uses of time and space mean the same but mean differently in addition: they also stand in opposition to strict demarcations between earth and heaven, between human and divine.

Visions as queer in time and space recalls what I mentioned earlier as the ability of text itself to present an idealized ongoing reality, where walls and time disappear, so that Margery's sisterly affection for Julian, Birgitta, and Mary stays alive in the pages of her text. Those "many days" she spent with the anchoress survive in their writtenness as in a little

[54] Michael Warner, "Queer and Then?" *The Chronicle Review,* January 1, 2012 https://www.chronicle.com/article/QueerThen-/130161 (accessed 7 June 2018).

[55] Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*, 1.

utopic bubble, as does the Virgin Mary's meeting with Elizabeth in the scripture, a moment of joy always not yet overshadowed by the grief to come. Their pregnant bodies represent only holiness and hope, not the fallenness that comes to define Margery's body after its fourteen pregnancies, and even in her later abstinence her corporality is a liability because "the female body in her world is still configured as passive material to be penetrated."[56] In contrast the worlds created by these female relationships configure the female body as generative of sanctified flesh, holy text, and divine prophecy. Margery and Julian bring not divine children into the world but rather their own visionary books, a new iteration of the *verbum* becoming embodied, this time on parchment. The queer power of the Christian past can be witnessed in this radical textual creation from the margins. When women re-center themselves in their own marginality, when women find allies in each other in order to "exalt the humble," when they "kiss[id] and hals[id] together" free from heteronormative censure, when they *comown* in *dalyawns* unsupervised – and when we modern scholars recognize these acts – the transgressive power of medieval women's queer touch reaches to our present.

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[56] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 164.

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