Alle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thinge shalle be wele

(LT 27:9-11)¹

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come to ask you, are you doing yours?²

In *The Cancer Journals* Audre Lorde interrogates the silencing of pain narratives throughout women’s history. This silence creates a dearth of language adequate to female

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¹ All citations that comes from *A Vision Showed*, which is also the short text of Julian’s *Revelations* will be marked ST and all text from *A Revelation of Love*, the long text of Julian’s *Revelations*, LT. Since the 1970’s there have been numerous translations of Julian, which according to Christopher Abott were “few, late and dialectically at odds” (xi). All Middle English citations are taken from Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and a Revelation of Love* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2006). Print. All translations were taken from Elizabeth Spearing, trans. *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love* (Comp. AC Spearing. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1998). Print.

suffering. Audre\textsuperscript{3} identifies both the potential to map the pain of social marginalization onto the pain of bodily sickness and the insufficiency of language to negotiate the complex entanglement of guilt and pain while ill. Audre writes a pain narrative in order to enter her unique experience with breast cancer into language, which presents an opportunity to re-inscribe meaning to “an event that has left serious marks on our identity.”\textsuperscript{4} Her poems bring awareness to the “tyrannies of silence”\textsuperscript{5} she experienced by asking her readers what words they lack for pain.

Audre’s imperative to find a language adequate to pain demands that we understand the history of female pain narratives.\textsuperscript{6} Illness as a social construct suggests that the sick role is learned\textsuperscript{7} and reflects a long historic relationship between sickness and social stigma. In the late Middle Ages the church linked sin and social deviance to illnesses and plagues. Therefore, women, particularly vulnerable to accusations of social deviance, have long experienced the overlapping silence of marginalization and illness. In the

\textsuperscript{3} To balance my naming practice I will refer to all primary authors, Audre Lorde, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, by their first names to account for the fact that Julian has no last name.
\textsuperscript{5} Lorde, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{6} Florescu examines the connection between medicine and art through autopathography, which is the autobiographical examination of illness and disability. Florescu emphasizes the importance of “emotional recall... when we want to understand an event that has left serious marks on our identity” (271). This essay is very helpful in developing a conversation about the way pain narratives give sufferers an opportunity to claim purchase over their experiences. Florescu is particularly concerned with the devastating effects of the “Christian tradition” on the pain narrative. She observes the way that this develops a negative tradition of blame; “illnesses were thought to be divine punitive inscriptions onto the bodies of those who had sinned” (273).

Talcott Parson’s “sick role” is a sociological theory used to explain the doctor-patient interactions. The study, released in 1951, suggests patterns that the sick person adopts to minimize the disruptive impact of illness. We learn the sick role through socialization and enact it through cooperation of others.
recent rediscovery of female medieval narratives, it becomes clear that women have battled silence stemming from marginalization and illness for centuries. Through an examination of two fourteenth and fifteenth century mystics Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, I will uncover a tradition of female writing, that was systematically silenced, made evident by Audre, who, combatting a hyper-feminized illness—breast cancer—had to invent her own language for pain rather than draw upon a prolific and diverse archive of female writing. This project, to unpack these texts as pain narratives, highlights a greater social phenomenon: the silencing of women’s history, “and where the words of women are crying out to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives.”

A pre-existing feminine discourse for pain that navigates the individual experience of silence as a result of physical suffering will be interrogated, as well as the silence that persists between texts that were never permitted to communicated with one another.

Silence connects the pain of illness to that of social marginalization. There are two moments of silence, the silence of pain and the silence of guilt for that pain. The first silence is primal since pain exists prior to language. Words used to indicate pain from “Ow” to “this headache feels like someone is hitting me with a hammer” are always insufficient, standing in the place of an actual feeling. Language is forever a creation and segregated from an actual sensation. Silence results from the inadequacy of language to explain the feeling of pain. Even once a pain language is located there is a second layer of silence related to the stigma endemic to the vocalization of suffering. Thus, there is a

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8 Lorde, p. 21.
second layer of effort to find a language that negotiates the guilt attached to identifying oneself with the pain of illness and social marginalization. Both experiences with pain are "uniquely bereft of the resources of speech."\textsuperscript{9} The primacy of pain, as the only human experience that is both certain and comes before language, makes it uniquely subjective and implicated in the formulation of subjectivity.\textsuperscript{10} The self is found through hardship, making the process of self-identification contingent on the silencing effects of illness and social marginalization. Pain narratives are vital for the production of self and yet constantly threaten self-destruction through the inadequacy of language itself.

Audre experiences the dual threat of pain language since her illness exaggerates the silence she already experiences as a black, lesbian woman in America. Her poetry is politically situated in a moment when illness and social status were particularly synonymous, writing her poetry and battling her sickness "during the [1992] presidential campaign [where] ‘illness’ became a metonym for the shrinking economic and personal security of the American middle class."\textsuperscript{11} She experienced sickness as an indication of her lower social class and position in society. Her poetry demonstrates the interaction

\textsuperscript{9} Florescu, pp. 271-92.

\textsuperscript{10} In \textit{The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World}, Elaine Scarry presents pain as the only human experience that is certain and yet exists prior to language. As such, pain language often has visual components, "external images of internal events" (8). This imagery reflects a desire for companionship and empathy, which suggests an important relation between expressing pain and getting rid of it. Scarry argues that the language for pain can both increase its visibility by "analogical verification" but can also silence certain aspects of pain by limiting its language to metaphors of violence, weapons and wounds inflicted through a damaging force (13). The silencing effect is that references, like a hammering sensation to describe a headache, are inherently instable and their meanings are never certain. Imagining an action that caused pain gives the pain meaning. Metaphors bifurcate the body as both victim and villain. Scarry’s work builds an argument around the necessity of a pain narrative for healing.

between the initial silencing of physical pain and the secondary silencing related to the feeling of blame for suffering.

Audre interrogates the reductive effects of “metonym” by bringing awareness to the silence around her. She asks her readers for the “words [they] do not yet have.” Her poetry links the experience of social marginalization to illness when she implicates this silence in our physical denigration, “what are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them in silence?” Social marginalization makes people sick. She rejects and inverts the use of illness as metonym for inferior social status. While silence stemming from the “tyrannies” of marginalization morphs into an infectious agent, the cure lies in one’s ability to fill the silence. Recovery manifests in the discovery of a language adequate to the feeling of suffering; pain must find words or we are bound to “sicken and die.”

Since women have battled the dual pain of illness and social marginalization for centuries, Audre rages against an unnecessary lack of language. To uncover the systematic suppression of female writing, which has resulted in these “tyrannies of silence” I will first consider the historic relationship between illness and deviance particularly as it pertains to female divine literature. Then I will examine the ways in which Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich rebel against silences imposed upon them. I will consider whether in order to enter textuality women must always work against existing masculine rhetoric or if it is possible to master language to such a point that a woman could transcend the discourse that contains her and silences her.
Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe write or dictate their narratives in a time where female voices were considered innately heretical. Since heresy was linked to female writing through the female body’s unique susceptibility to illness, feminine pain narratives respond to a correlation between illness and social deviance during the late Middle Ages. This relationship developed out of the notion that sickness purged individuals of their sins. Illness suggested previous deviant behavior, while penitence became a mechanism of social policing whereby individuals became responsible for their own spiritual and physical health. More broadly, epidemics were thought to be the result of large-scale social deviance. First, I will examine the ways in which increasing individualism amongst practitioners led to more social policing and stereotyping within the church. Second, I will consider the theory of blame whereby victims of sickness were at fault for their diseases. Finally, I will connect the social ostracization of sick women to the writing and creation of devotional literature, a forum in which Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich found a voice.

The discovery of individualism\(^\text{12}\) resulted from the codification of state boundaries and the formulation of national identities in the thirteenth century. The church

\(^{12}\) Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, "The Consolation of Philosophy.” *The Consolation of Philosophy.* Trans. W.V. Cooper. Ex-Classics, n.d. Web. 24 Mar. 2015. Boethius contextualizes the shift that individualism represents in religious discourse. *The Consolation of Philosophy,* written in early 500 AD paints a highly abstract portrait of a God that is not even specified as Christian. This abstraction allows Boethius to map philosophy, which is truth, onto Christianity, which is also truth, connecting previous intellectual traditions to Christianity. His highly intellectualized God needed to be studied in a classroom to be fully understood and was, therefore, not very popular amongst the masses. Boethius’ text allows the modern reader to understand the outstanding shift going on during this period of medieval history. His work is also predicated on the notion that logic can cure one of grief and bodily passions. In his dialogue with Lady Philosophy, the ultimate arbiter of wisdom and logic, she demonstrates to Boethius that God has created a unified and coherent world, which is made up of all of the many possible paths and iterations a life can take. The human body, bound to linear temporality by its movement towards death, does not feel the unity of the universe, as does God. Humans can only
felt the need to police individualism because it created the potential for heresy. At the
Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, Pope Innocent III strengthened the church’s control over
individual expression by requiring not only annual confessions and communion but also
empowering the church to excommunicate individuals, seize property and force
minorities to wear certain clothing, which separated those considered deviant from good
Christians.\(^\text{13}\) The persecutory practices of the church created the medieval notion of
monstrosity, which took the form of all marginalized characters.\(^\text{14}\) Private confessions, a
central mechanism of control in the church, made sin a personal burden. The emphasis on
personal suffering and inner repentance was best reflected by the iconography of the time.
Images of Christ shifted from radiant and communal to suffering and alone. Christ
suffered on the cross for humanity’s sins. The focus on his pain emphasized the
relationship between suffering and salvation.\(^\text{15}\)

Where the institution of the church failed, illness was another way in which God
purged Christian societies of deviant characters. Sickness became a marker of
individualistic behavior, namely sexual deviance that threatened Christian society.
Blaming the victim was particularly salient during the Black Plague, which defied all
previous conceptions about illness and sin. The church could no longer blame disease on


\(^\text{14}\) Sarah Alison Miller, *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body* (New York: Routledge, 2010) p. 1. Medieval monsters are diverse and take the form of all characters marginalized from society, such as the Jews and Saracens who were not allowed into the church and lepers who through illness were kept on the outskirts of civilization and of course women who were monstrous “pervasive, proximate and necessary on social, sexual, and reproductive grounds” (1).

\(^\text{15}\) Richards, p. 6.
an individual’s “previous carnal pleasures” because everyone was sick.\textsuperscript{16} If good Christians were dying then sin was not only common but also contagious. Flagellants mortified their own flesh thinking that only through physical sacrifice could they purge society of transmissible sin.\textsuperscript{17} Medieval society handled illness by making sexuality and personal temptation issues of heresy because they posed a threat to public health and spirituality. Thus, a contagion model emerges for the relationship between sex, sin and disease. To be sick was to be vulnerable to accusations of heresy and licentiousness.

The relationship between sickness and deviance provides a useful framework for looking at medieval female monstrosity. Women, who were considered sick by nature, were particularly vulnerable to blame. Classical authors like Galen and Aristotle both argued that women were “physiologically cold, wet, and incomplete, and therefore by nature sought heat, purgation of moisture, and union with the male.”\textsuperscript{18} The female’s need for heat allowed medical professionals to argue that women were lacking the dominant male humors and were, therefore, in a perpetual state of sexual desire.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, predominant medical theories both reinforced male superiority, fear of female sexuality and the sense that women were biological public health hazards.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} Richards, 20
\textsuperscript{19} Robertson, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{20} Leprosy was linked to sinful behavior like sexual promiscuity and highlights the perception that morally weak female bodies were vessels for illness. Medical experts speculated that leprosy was sexually transmitted. Women were thought to be resistant to the disease because the womb was so thick that no lepers’ sperm could penetrate its walls. Instead, women could hold the infected sperm in their womb and pass it on through the porous tissues of the penis the next time they engaged in intercourse (Nirenberg, 96). Physicians believed that leprosy was propagated through sexual deviance, particularly female promiscuity, suggesting an element of divine retribution in
The sick person, when socially segregated, appeared forsaken by God. Therefore, illness purged the soul by testing one’s devotion. The logic, while circular, made illness a common step in the creation of devotional literature. Illness often led to hallucinations and visions, which in turn licensed medieval women to write, making devotional literature one of the few places in which the medieval female voice found refuge. These texts were designed to be both didactic and to augment religious fervor. The work was not only educational in the sense that it demonstrated a proper relationship between the individual soul and the divine, but it also provided a mechanism for women to work against the blame model for illness and the perverse silence it imposed. Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, while different from each other, embraced a rhetoric of illness and suffering, which allowed them to gain religious authority as visionaries and as mystics.

... 

Margery Kempe, writing in the early 1400’s, depicts the illness and spiritual crisis following the birth of her first child in order to claim religious authority as a visionary and female mystic. Her experience of medieval womanhood was one of silence due to social marginalization. She lacked any control over her body, repeatedly giving birth and suffering from post-partum depression. Judith Butler, a leading feminist and

its spread. Thus, leprosy was linked to the moral degradation of society and “was a disease of the soul, brought on by moral corruption and sin” (Nirenberg, 57). This rational exemplifies the application of the blame framework to medieval women. Public health policies frequently conflated sinful female behavior with the science of female anatomy, reinforcing the dominant perception of women as sickly and sinful.

21 Petroff, p. 3.


There is much evidence to show that Margery suffered from post-natal psychosis and struggled with life long mental illness. This has been a discussion of much debate since her text was first published in 1940: “For example, in 1990, Freeman, Bogarad, and Sholomskas asserted that Margery's behavior showed a cycle of mania and melancholia which distorted her worldview
constructionist, posits that gender is “a series of bodily ‘performances’ rather than a ‘natural’ phenomenon,”23 and indeed Margery performs her gender in order to break this silence by claiming religious authority. I will first examine the way Margery picks up on the tradition of blaming the victim by framing her illness as purging her of sins related to her previous sexual deviance. Then I will examine the way her highly erotic and irrational visions function to redirect the dangers of female sexuality and speech. While Margery takes patriarchal thinking about female religiosity to its logical extreme, performing the dominant perception of female spirituality, she rejects the silencing effects of being a wife, illiterate and mentally ill by exaggerating her female gender as a way of subverting textuality and claiming religious authority.

Margery has visions throughout her life. Her Book begins with the birth of her first child and her failure to confess a previous sin. These events converge in a terrible sickness, which causes her to lose her sense of reason for the better part of a year. She is only healed when Christ appears at her bedside but she does not appear to act on his

while enriching its meaning for her. In 2005, Craun argued that the postnatal psychosis did not fully resolve and Margery continued to have psychotic symptoms for the rest of her life. Craun adds that Margery’s story was an opportunity to hear the voice of a woman with a serious mental illness living 600 years ago” (351). This paper is most invested in the latter part of that statement; it seeks to understand how a woman living with psychosis would cope “600 years ago.” Jeffries and Horstall argue for medieval women “simply being a person or a creature of the world is to be sinful. Her pregnancy and the birth of her first child remind her that she is the daughter of Eve and, as such, she lives in a state of sin” (353). Her Christian context is not only part of her psychosis but also part of her recovery, allowing her to “re-evaluate her relationship with her body, leading her to reject her role as a wife because she did not want to risk further pregnancies. There has been a failure to consider how this traumatic experience of illness affected her and influenced her later decision-making” (351). This allows the reader to see her Christian context as not only damming but also permitting her to explore her psychosis in a productive way.

guidance and instead engages in vain, prideful activities like starting her own brewery and lustful ones like having sexual relations with her husband and continuing to desire other men. She continues to be haunted by demons and bad spirits until a vision of Christ saves her; she sees herself at the births of the Virgin and of Christ. Eventually she turns away from sinful behavior and shows her devotion through constant confessions, pilgrimages and physically torturing herself with hair shirts. Her visions take the place of her earthly carnal pleasures and she enters into a sexual union with Christ, which is erotic but not physical. Margery never leaves her husband or enters a nunnery or anchorhold. Instead, she rejects her husband’s sexual advances and goes on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Her religious life is defined by constant weeping and sobbing as well as self-induced visions.

Margery frames her illness as purging and punishing her for her sins. Her sickness, which was likely related to post-partum depression, is equated to sinful behavior like lust and pride. These qualities seem to encompass not only her choices to start a brewery or have sexual relations with her husband but also appear endemic to her experience as a medieval woman. She picks up on the rhetoric both of female physicality as being “lowe and meke”24 (18: 1022) and of female monstrosity by depicting herself as being possessed by devils and bad spirits due to her deviant ways: “And, whan sche was any tym seke or dysesyd, the devil seyd in her mende that sche shuld be dampnyd, for sche was not

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Her suffering is not triggered by any one error but is made intrinsically linked to qualities that hint at her monstrous female body, “lowe and meke.” She perceives herself as deserving punishment for an unnamable fault: “sche seyd that hir pride and synne was cause of alle her punschyng” (2: 214). Her dictations to a German man and then a priest about her visions, as she was illiterate and unable to write her own narrative, seek a discourse that releases her from the bonds of wifehood and of motherhood, which have left her feeling monstrous and other.

Margery’s visions are intensely physical and sexual. Her relationship with the image of Christ is erotically charged: “Sche was so meche affectyd to the manhode of Crist that whan sche sey...a semly man, sche had gret peyn to lokyn on hym les than sche myht a seyn hym that was bothe God and man” (2010-2016). She perceives Christ as her lover and takes God as her husband: “And than the Fadyr toke hir be the hand in hir sowle befor the Sone and the Holy Gost...saying to hir sowle, ‘I take the, Margery, for my weddyd wife, for fayrar, for fowelar, for richer, for powerar, so that thu be buxom and bonyr to do what I byd the do” (2027-2032). Since Margery is still married in the physical world she tells her husband: “Grawntyth me that ye schal not komyn in my bed...And makyth my body fre to God so that ye nevyr make no chalengyng in me to

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25 trans. “when she was at any time sick or troubled, the devil said in her mind that she should be damned, for she was not shriven of that fault” (41).
26 trans. “She said that her pride and sin were the cause of all her punishing” (44)
28 trans. “she had so much feeling for the manhood of Christ, that when she saw...a handsome man, she had great pain to look at him, lest she might see him who was both God and man” (123).
29 trans. “then the Father took her by the hand [spiritually] in her soul, before the Son and the Holy Ghost...saying to her soul, ‘I take you, Margery, for my wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler, for richer, for poorer, provide that you are humble and meek in doing what I command you to do’” (123).
askyn no dett of matrimony aftyr this day whyl ye levyn” (567-570).30 Over time, her sexual union with Christ replaces her “many other temptacyons”31 like sex or “hir pride ne hir pompow.”32 Margery’s role as devoted spouse neutralizes the threat of female sexuality by redirecting it into the image of God. Her discourse conforms to the church’s attempts to control women’s biological need for heat by channeling it towards a union with Him. She enacts masculine discourse to narrate her suffering.

Margery works against the silencing effects of illiteracy and post-natal psychosis by exaggerating and performing patriarchal theories of female spirituality so as not to enter the world of textuality explicitly. She experiences hysterical, violent and extreme visions that demonstrate her spirituality as irrational: “this creatur went owt of hir mende and was wonyrlye vexid and labowyd wyth spryritys half yer eight wekys and odde days” (149-150).33 She appears to be out of her mind, which may have been safer than being in her rational mind and proving her relationship to God through language and the act of writing. Instead, she avoids textuality altogether as an illiterate and hysterical vision seer. While she strategically deploys orality to her advantage, female speech remains a twofold threat. First, talkative women were considered equally threatening to sexually promiscuous ones. In the Ancrene Wisse and Aelred’s De institutis inclusarum the connection between speech and sex is made evident. Words, particularly gossip, were seductive and improper: “her mouth open while the old woman pours words into her, suggests orgasm, and

30 trans. “Grant me that you will not come into my bed...And make my body free to God, so that you never make any claim on me requesting any conjugal debt after this day as long as you live” (60).
31 trans. “many other temptations” (42).
32 trans. “her pride of her showy manner of dressing” (43).
33 trans. “this creature went out of her mind and was amazingly disturbed and tormented with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and odd days” (41).
sensual satisfaction is underlined by the exchange."  

Second, words were considered potent and fertilizing. The virgin became pregnant "by the Word of God and was often imagined to have conceived through the ear."  

For women, speech substituted for or carried the weight of sexuality. The dangers of female sexuality are shifted onto female speech, which became clear when Margery was accused of heresy multiple times for her oral performance of spirituality. Rather than negotiate the threat of female language, Margery appears supra rational. Since the church accepted vision-seeing women as religious authorities, Margery's dramatized female spirituality proffers her agency and distinction. She is protected from the dual threat of female speech.

According to the church, writing and reading, extensions of speech, opened up the possibility of women writing heretical doctrines. Margery's illiteracy protects her from persecution from the church as a heretic and forces her to work outside of textuality to gain religious authority. She uses tears and laughter as pre-linguistic modes of demonstrating her unique connection with God: "sumtyme sche wept ful plenteuowsly and ful boystowsly for desyr of the blys of hevyn and for sche was so long dyfferryd therfro" (448-450). Without writing words on a page she demonstrates her passion and love for Christ and claims real spiritual power through these pre-linguistic modes of

34 Maud McInerney, "In Meydens Womb: Julian of Norwich and the Poetics of Enclosure."  
35 McInerney, 161
36 McAvoy, 19
37 Margery was either arrested or charged with heresy three times, first in Leicester where she is released because she claims not to understand Latin. In York she must explain herself to the Archbishop and then, about to cross the Humber, she is arrested and quickly released again. These arrests indicate that Margery was acutely aware of the dangers of female speech, suggesting that her movements away from or around textuality were strategic (Kempe, Penguin, 13-14).
38 trans. "sometimes she wept very abundantly and violently out of desire for the bliss of heaven and because she was being kept from it for so long" (54).
expression: "sche wept wondyrly for hys synnes...yf ye wyl do aftyr my cownsel.
Sorwyth for yowr synne, and I schal help yow to sorwyn; beth schrevyn therof and
forsake it wylfully" (595-612).\textsuperscript{39} Here she saves a monk by weeping for his sins. The
conflation of tears and prayers is one way in which Margery subverts textuality and
deploys her illiteracy to gain religious authority, which works against the silencing
effects of the church.

Laughter and tears are physical ways of expressing oneself, and so degrade the
moral integrity of language, which provides Margery with another form of authority.
Laughter is considered to be a force of moral degradation because it “brings language,
society, and culture down to the level of the grotesque body.”\textsuperscript{40} Her pre-linguistic forms
of self-expression create fissures in textuality: “[an] interdiction, that is, her insertion of
her own voice between text and reader. This interdiction becomes her authorizing
practice, which not only inaugurates the book but resurfaces in the text whenever the
scribe (or reader) loses faith in her authority.”\textsuperscript{41} These moments of excess emotion,
although they play into female stereotypes, are hardly naïve. Rather, they work to both
authorize and undermine her textual work.\textsuperscript{42} Margery deploys these fissures as a
rhetorical device, creating linguistic disruptions to “mock, disperse and subvert the
culture which excludes her.”\textsuperscript{43} In exaggerating her physicality through tears and laughter
Margery escape patriarchal linguistic structure through the performance of her gender.

\textsuperscript{39} trans. “she wept amazingly for his sins…‘if you follow my advice. Sorrow for your sin, and I
will help you to sorrow. Be shriven of it and give it up with your whole will’” (62).
\textsuperscript{40} Karma Lochrie, Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh (Philadelphia: U of
\textsuperscript{41} Lochrie, 100
\textsuperscript{42} Lochrie, 135
\textsuperscript{43} Lochrie, 136
These fissures created by laughter and tears deploy the fluid nature of authorship in medieval times. It would seem that Margery’s dependence on a scribe would heavily mediate and limit her voice so as to further silence her. While the use of a male scribe may have sanctioned her voice to some degree, she also deploys the fluid nature of authorship itself to subversively engage with textuality. According to Watts, “medieval textual culture” rejects the simplistic “criteria of originality that is so central to post-Romantic definitions...God was considered the ultimate author or auctor, and the Bible was the source of all written authority.”  

44 While this was not a phenomena confined to female writers it does demand that “our definition of women authors and women writers...[be] flexible enough to embrace a whole range of possibilities.” 45 The question of literacy requires “extending our understanding of literate practices to include activities and processes such as communal reading, dictation, memorization and recitation [to provide]...a fuller picture of women’s engagement with textuality.” 46 This complex relationship to authorship suggests the potency of deferring to God to justify one’s capacity to write. Moreover, Margery may still claim ownership over her text and works against its mediation in creative ways. 47

Margery embraces female stereotypes and exaggerates them to create a discourse for women that is uniquely feminine. She creates a new space where pre-linguistic forms

45 Watt, p. 9.
46 Watt, p. 12.
47 Another way that Kempe seeks agency through illiteracy is through her complex relationship to her scribes. Their capacity to understand her visions and to record them is not a given. Instead, a divine authority permits them to read and write. She first dictates her visions to a scribe who writes illegibly. Despite this fact, she associates the second scribe’s lack of spirituality to his inability to read the first scribe’s work. After a few years Margery miraculously cures her second scribe of his illiteracy; “the story serves as a parable of the relation between the oral and written texts” (Watt, 100). This moment supports a more fluid definition of authorship in medieval times.
of spirituality like laughter or crying can be expressed. Her dependence on pre-lingual modes of expression also reinforces the dominant perception of female spirituality as being other or hysteric. She demonstrates the dominant formulation of female religiosity, a stereotype, which Julian of Norwich transcends to build a new discourse around feminine spirituality.

Margery never finds comfort in textuality. Rather she explodes it from the outside by exploiting notions of female monstrosity, addressing silence not by destroying stereotypes but by exaggerating them and forcing her way into textuality. Julian of Norwich, on the other hand, masters the language at her disposal, repossessing female monstrosity by converting it into a source of salvation. Unlike Margery she is literate and capable of transforming silencing stereotypes. Here I will examine Julian’s theory of God’s motherhood as it transcends the silencing effects of female stereotypes exemplified by Margery’s relationship with God. I will do this through an examination of her movement from short text to long text or from visions to self-exegesis. First I will look at the physical quality of Christ’s suffering on the cross and relate this to the fact that women represent the physical experience. Then I will examine the unique capacity mothers have for empathy to understand Mary’s connection to Christ’s suffering on the cross. Julian demonstrates that motherhood is the ultimate metaphor for communion with Christ.

48 Also physical forms of independence like sexual independence from her husband and going on pilgrimage alone.
In Julian’s short text, she only lays out the visions as they were seen; Julian participates in the scenes from her sickbed and becomes aware of Christ’s comings and goings. She asks him about the nature of sin and is answered in a surprising way:

And sumtime, for the profitte of his saule, a man es lefte to himself. And towtherhere, sinne es nought the cause. For in this time I sinned nought wherefore I shulde be lefte to myselfe, ne also I deserved nought to hafe this blissfulle felinge (ST 9:36-39).

And to benefit his soul a man is sometimes left to himself, though not because of sin; for at this time I did not deserve by sinning to be left alone, neither did I deserve the feeling of bliss (ST).

She learns that both sorrow and joy come from God’s love and not necessarily from sin. While her visions are at times surprising they are mostly within the didactic genre of the “personal meditation” as a “remedy against sin.” In the short text, she does not break from accepted female spirituality. She claims to be a lowly uneducated woman maintaining the stereotypes that link her female physicality to spiritual weakness: “For God forbade that ye shulde saye or take it so that I am a teache. For I meen nought so, ne I mente nevere so. For I am a woman, lewed, febille, and freylle” (ST 6:35-37). Julian had no formal education; the claim that she is uneducated protects her from being charged with heresy by the church. She was not only literate but was also very well read, which becomes clear when she expands upon accepted religious rhetoric in the long text. She is no longer a “febille” woman visionary battling silence imposed upon her because she is hysterical like Margery, but an intellectual, self-assured critic of her own visions. She is no longer a participant but a critical interpreter of her visions, which marks the

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49 Watson, p. 3.
50 trans. “but God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not what I mean, nor did I ever mean it; for I am a woman, ignorant weak and frail” (ST)
beginning of her radical but optimistic self-exegesis and argument about God’s motherhood.

In the Short Text, Julian asks God for three gifts, vivid perception of Christ’s passion, a bodily sickness and three wounds: absolute contrition, kind compassion and a steadfast longing for God. The illness appears when she is 30 years old and she lies sick for three days and three nights. Her illness temporarily paralyzes her from the waist down and she believes that she will soon die. She receives her last rites and is sat up so as to better see a cross being held up for her by the parson. At this moment her sight goes dim so that all she can see is the cross on which she believes that Christ is bleeding. She sees a hazelnut lying in the palm of her hand and the Virgin Mary. She has fifteen subsequent showings that mostly revolve around Christ’s suffering on the cross, the most extensive aspect of her vision.

Detailed descriptions of Christ suffering were common for female visionaries but Julian’s Long Text emphasizes the physicality of Christ’s suffering to an extreme. Her attention to the details of Christ’s bodily pain subtly feminizes his experience on the cross. Rather than focus on the spirituality of his pain, she focuses on its physicality:

And after this I saw, beholding, the body plentuously bleding in seming of the scorging, as thus: the fair skinne was broken fulle depe into the tender flesh, with sharpe smitinges all about the sweet body. The hote blode ranne out so plentuously that ther was neither seen skinne ne wounde, but as it were all blode (LT 12:1-4).

I saw, as I watched, the body of Christ bleeding abundantly, in weals from the scourging. It looked like this: the fair skin was very deeply broken, down into the tender flesh, sharply slashed all over the dear body; the hot blood ran out so abundantly that no skin or wound could be seen, it seemed to be all blood (LT).
She cites Christ’s physical body and how this makes him vulnerable to the pain he felt on the cross: “the fair skinne...broken fulle depe...the tender flesh.” She references specific aspects of his torture, “in seming of the scorging,” where “sem” comes from “seam” and suggests a groove or wound given to Christ with a “sharp knotty schourges” tipped with lead before his crown of thorns.51 The detail would appear to bring his suffering into living form. Not only does she focus on the innately feminine physicality of suffering but she also emphasizes his profuse bleeding. According to predominant medical thinkers of Julian’s time, women purged themselves of their wet, moist composition through menstruation, expelling “the poisons from their humors.”52 This expulsion allowed women to live longer suggesting a “hidden mercy” in the curse of menstruation resulting from Eve’s original sin.53 It was not novel that Christ bled on the cross or that he suffered. Rather, Julian takes rhetoric that the church could not object to and expands upon it in an unprecedented manner. She develops an implicit connection between his suffering and

51 Watson, p. 166.
Robertson notes that classical thinkers like Galen and Aristotle argued that women were too moist and menstruation was a purifying process to “expel residue that cannot be transferred by coction because of the woman’s lack of heat” (145). Wood also calls on classical thinkers to note that menstruation purged women of toxins that allowed them to live longer than men. He goes on to consider menstruation as the mark of sin’s entry into the world: “by sin not just death entered the world, but also fertile carnality; and in women, as Gregory and all later authorities would insist, menstruation was both a mark of that sin—the curse of Eve—and the necessary companion of their fertility” (713). Menstruation relates to sexual desire, reproduction and the necessary weakness and impurity of women. Thus, the problem of menstruation was particularly salient for the Virgin Mary who had to be both pure and a woman: “if, for example, one were to argue that since God is omnipotent, fully capable of doing whatever He wills, Mary was better to be understood as no more than the human receptacle for the Divine Seed that the Holy Spirit had implanted in her..., that would have been completely to deny the Savior’s essential humanity” (719). Wood suggests that Mary’s role as mother is essential to Christ’s role as savior. The Church of Rome decides to preserve her Virgin womanhood through her marriage to Joseph, which occurs after her first menses at twelve years old (722). Thus, menstruation highlights the place of “medico-theological analysis” which runs through most medieval religious dogma (717). 53 Wood, p. 724.
the female body by relating his wounded flesh to menstruation. This connection suggests
a necessary connection between feminine physicality and salvation.

Julian makes a secondary connection between Christ’s suffering on the cross and
female physicality. The female humors were considered wet and cold. Men, on the other
hand, were hot and dry. Julian maintains the accepted male rhetoric that Christ’s
suffering was full of “hote blode,” but expands his suffering so that it appears as an over
abundance of male humors and suggests the necessity of the female humors to lessen his
discomfort: “that other, slow with clinging and drying, with blowing of winde fro without
that dried him more and pained with colde than my hart can thinke—and other paines”
(LT 17:37-39).54 The potential for female humors to balance Christ’s body “clinging and
drying” suggests that female knowledge could aid Christ on the cross. Julian
demonstrates female authority over the experience of pain as if women, due to their
humoral composition, know something about pain that men do not. She experiences a
physical reaction to her description, “pained with colde than my hart can thinke—and
other paines.”55 This suggests the powerful potential for empathetic transcendence
through physicality. Moreover, the sentence breaks down under the intensity of her
description, which subtly suggests the spiritual heft of her prose and strengthens her
authority over his suffering. Through the description of Christ’s suffering and the
suggestion that women hold dominion over physical pain, she, again, connects feminine
physicality to Christ’s suffering.

54 trans. “the first done to the drying body while it was moist; and the second a slow pain as the
body dried and shrank with the blowing of the wind from without that dried him more, and
tormented him with cold as much as I could imagine, and other torments, from which I saw that
everything I could say would be quite inadequate, for they were indescribable” (LT).
55 Watson, p. 184.
Julian deploys motherhood as a metaphor for the ultimate communion with Christ. There is a unique empathy between a mother and her child, and a matchless capacity for love. In her vision Julian observes Mary’s motherly connection to Christ’s suffering:

Which kinde love was most fulsomely shewde in his swete other, and overpassing. For so mekille as she loved him more then alle other, her paine passed alle other. For ever the higher, the mightier, the swetter that the love is, the more sorow it is to the lover to se that body in paine that he loved. (LT 18:4-7)

The natural love was shown in his dear Mother most abundantly, and indeed supremely, for just as her love for him surpassed that of anyone else, so did her suffering for him for the higher, the stronger, the dearer that love is, the greater the sorrow that the lover feels to see the beloved body in pain. (LT)

“Kinde love” can be love between close relatives or lovers. This word choice demonstrates the expansion of Margery’s accepted erotic love for Christ into Mary’s maternal love for her son. Her motherly love becomes a catalyst for her to feel his pain demonstrated by the parallel structure: “she loved him more then alle other, her paine passed alle other.” She seems to physically suffer with him, “the more sorow it is to the lover to se that body in paine that he loved.” Again, Julian suggests unique female knowledge about pain at the sight of Christ’s death but this time through motherhood.56

Mary feels pain “to se” Christ suffering. Julian not only observes Mary’s connection but appears to embody a comparable space as one “to se” Christ’s suffering. This comparable capacity for empathy shows that Mary’s “sorow” is universal amongst mothers, which, Julian was at one point.57 The implication is that mothers, as women and as “lovers,”

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56 Traditionally, Mary suffered no pain giving birth because that pain was associated with female sin. The pain that she feels while watching Christ die is a displacement of the pain of labor she did not experience.
57 Anna Minore, “Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena: Pain and the Way of Salvation,” The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures 40.1 (2014): pp. 44-74. Minore posits that the “mother-child motif might have reflected the mothers, perhaps including Julian, whose experience of the
have a unique capacity for empathy due to the physical bond that they share with their children.

Julian establishes the positive power of female physicality when Christ is on the cross on multiple levels. On the one hand, she establishes that women represent the bodily experience and thus have a unique capacity for empathizing with their children with whom their connection is quite physical. On the other hand, women provide the fetus with its physicality. Suffering as physical and necessary for salvation, requires the bodily material provided by women. Out of these two notions emerges her theory about God’s motherhood:

For in that same time that God knit him to oure body in the maidens wombe, he toke oure sensual soule. In which taking—he us all having beclosed in him—he oned it to oure substance, in which oning he was perfit man...Thus oure lady is oure moder, in whome we be all beclosed and of her borne in Crist. For she that is moder of oure savior is mother of all that ben saved in our savior. And oure savior is oure very moder, in whome we be endlessly borne and never shall come out of him. (LT 57: 35-42)

[At the same time that God bound himself to our body in the Virgin’s womb, he took on our sensory soul, and in doing so he enclosed us all within himself and united the sensory soul with our essential being...Thus our Lady is our mother in who we are all enclosed and we are born from her in Christ; for she is mother of our Savior is mother of all who will be saved in our Savior. And our Savior is our true mother. (LT)

There is an emphasis placed here on the physicality of humanity’s relationship to Christ when “God knit him to oure body.” Julian artfully places the formation of sensuality “in that same time” as the formation of spirituality. God is imagined to have a womb, “in which taking—he us all having beclosed in him.” The “sensual soule” is bound up in

Black Death was shaped by the loss of a child” (47)...“god perceives the individual to be as innocent and pure as the child she might have lost” (49), the theory that Julian lost a child to the plague also explains why she identified closely with the Virgin Mary.
“oure substance.” The Middle English for enclosed, “beclosed” and uniting “oned” allows for physicality and spirituality to be inextricable bound to one another. This linkage requires God to physically birth people into their “sensual sole.” The translation of “sensual sole” into essential being shows a necessary strain in defining the nonphysical aspect of spirituality. The essential being gets grounded in the fact that it is produced much like a mother produces life. Redemption, which is linked to the Christian notion of self, is understood as the uniting of soul and body, sensuality and substance. Julian saw that this was true at the crucifixion when Christ’s physicality allowed him to suffer for humanity’s sins. Because his mother Mary gave him his physicality, she appears at the origin of salvation. Inversely, another spiritual birth is achieved in watching Christ suffer and understanding his pain through empathy. This communion in watching and being seen allows for a spiritual birth that makes Jesus “our true mother.” He is the mother to humanity’s “substance.”

Her theory about God’s motherhood creates an entirely new medieval female pain narrative. Rather than construing the sick body as wrought with sin, she describes it as one overcome with religious passion.\(^58\) She re-conceives of illness as being a gift from God by claiming that she asked God for her illness and that her visions are didactic rather than punitive: “Julian’s illness also functions as a writing process by giving birth to both a visionary experience and an analysis of that experience.”\(^59\) This theory produces a uniquely feminine relationship to pain that absolves illness of its connection to sin,

\(^{58}\) Julian must have read the medieval philosopher Boethius who argued that “evil is nothing, since it is beyond His power, and nothing is beyond His power” (44). Similarly, for Julian there is no sin but only didactic gifts from God.

\(^{59}\) Miller, p. 103.
shattering the surrounding silence. She transforms her experience with illness as one of deviance to one of transcendence by re-appropriating misogynistic imagery of female “fleshy urges” and making the porous female body in pain central to her text: “[the female body’s] perforated surfaces, uncontrollable flows, enclosures, and fragmentations...shape [Julian’s] mystical experience.” She finds comfort in textuality by repossessing masculine rhetoric and dominion over the act of writing. Visions generally permitted the Church to control female speech through a hysterical and anti-intellectual religious experience but she moves beyond the trope of the speechless religious female visionary. She denies this reality by constructing an intelligent, nuanced argument about a universal religious experience. What is most potent about her work is

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60 Boethius creates some precedent for this argument. In The Consultation of Philosophy, Lady Philosophy tells Boethius that “evil is nothing, since it is beyond His power, and nothing is beyond His power” (44). Her argument was that God does no evil because God is “all-powerful” and God is good. Like Julian, Lady Philosophy says that God does not punish good Christians but that “virtue never goes without its own reward; happiness comes to the good” (46). For both Boethius and Julian, suffering is didactic, leading one towards a better and more virtuous life. Since Chaucer translated and circulated Boethius around the same time that Julian was writing, it is certain that she read him and new this argument.

61 Brian Massumi, “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat.” The Affect Theory Reader. Ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010. pp. 52-70. Further work ought to be done in examining Julian’s showings and the function of pain narratives, more broadly, within the context of Affect Theory. Massumi describes the nature of threat as “a felt quality, independent of any particular instance of itself...it becomes an abstract quality. When threat self-causes, its abstract quality is affectively presented, in startle, shock, and fear...Threat is ultimately ambient. Its logic is purely qualitative” (62). This definition of threat maps onto the fear of female speech, sexuality and illness in medieval times. Rather than germinate from any real event, the threat has “a felt quality” and false origins like the Garden of Eden preserve the potentiality of a threat that, ultimately, “self causes.” The reality of the female threat is latent in the way people feel about certain signs; “the sign is the vehicle for making presently felt the potential force of the objectively absent” (63). Signs or affect, the way faces register fear, happiness or grief, convey more than an objectively real threat. This lends potency to Julian’s Showings; her visions re-engineer the affect of the feminine through religious discourse. The power of her re-imagining is that of affective reality: “The reality of appearance is the ontogenetic effectiveness of the nonexistent. It is the surplus or reality of what has not happened” (66).


63 Miller, p. 4.
that she absolves women of their connection to sin and sexual deviance, “Sinne is behovely, but alle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thinges shalle be wel” (LT 27:9-11). She develops a way of discussing and contextualizing pain that supports women by creating a broader network of love and support in their relationships with God.

The silence connecting the pain of social marginalization to that of illness is rooted in a medieval construction of blame where the individual feels as though they ought to have been able to control their deviant behaviors so as not to get sick. This perception morphs into a modern discussion of personal responsibility; people are made liable for the social categories they inhabit. Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* show a clear and persistent relationship between women, marginalization and illness. This link suggests that the dangers of female speech are as salient now as they were for Margery and Julian. Audre works against the silence imposed upon her through this notion of personal responsibility by rejecting masculine rhetoric just as Margery rejected patriarchal linguistic structures and Julian transformed female stereotypes. Without knowing it, Audre follows in the footsteps of a rich but silenced history of female medieval mystics writing pain narratives.

The existing discourse for cancer recovery is a militaristic one; the body is not healed from cancer but repels the offending invader. This language picks up on Cartesian dualism, which dichotomizes the mind and body. Waging war against illness necessitates the rejection of one’s physical body. Audre is asked by her doctors to reject her physical

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64 trans. “Sin is befitting, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well” (LT).
body through a mastectomy and then again through the pressure to reclaim her lost breast in the form of a prosthetic. Both the mastectomy and the prosthetic leave her feeling strange and other. Villainizing the sick body as other is a continuation of the medieval discussion of female monstrosity. Just as illness was once thought to purge the body of sin, curing oneself of a disease, like cancer, now becomes a form of physical discipline particularly against the “innately diseased, unstable and problematic” female body.\(^{65}\)

Thus, militarism and personal responsibility usurp the rhetoric of sin and repentance.

The process by which people are socialized into seeing their bodies as “combat zone[s]”\(^{66}\) is as powerful as the belief that sin caused illness. Thus working against this paradigm threatens it with its own destruction and acts as a type of heresy. Audre understands that “the body as a combat zone is not ‘natural,’ but is one overwritten on the body to such a degree that it seems that way. While it may seem instinctual to experience disease as warfare...these are social constructions that have become, literally, internalized.”\(^{67}\) Since this discourse is neither helpful nor restorative for Audre she invents her own, shifting from militarism to “woman love,” which echoes Julian’s *Divine Revelations* by transcending masculine rhetoric. Just as Julian deployed female physicality as a mode of salvation in her theory of God’s motherhood, Lorde taps into the common experience of womanhood to formulate a nexus of love and support:

> For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection, which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women.\(^{68}\)

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66 Khalid, 698
67 Khalid, 698
The rejection of “pathological” is a rejection of the medicalization that reformulated a moralistic theory of blame into one of personal responsibility. This shift hurt Audre’s recovery by individualizing her suffering and obstructing access to a support group. For Audre, the need to care for one another is a rejection of the “patriarchal world” because it is a rejection of militarism. For Julian, the “need and desire to nurture each other” also rejects the “patriarchal world” through the one acceptable avenue, maternity. Julian’s reformulation of female monstrosity into a source of salvation transcends dominant male rhetoric through maternity. Julian’s reformulation of God as a mother figure suggests continuity between the Middle Ages and the present. Both Audre and Julian’s narratives suggest a way of working around the heretical potential of female speech and expand upon accepted rhetoric to find comfort in textuality.

While we read a continuum between these texts, Audre was unable to draw upon the empowering work of either Margery or Julian. There is more evidence of communication and archive between Julian and Margery. They both developed their ideas out of a troubled but pre-existing discourse of Christian theology and Margery records having visited and spoken with Julian who encouraged her work: “Settyth al yowr trust in God and feryth not the langage of the world, for the mor despyte, schame, and repref that ye have in the world the mor is yowr meryte in the syght of God” (983-985).69 For Audre no such encouragement existed, rather, the systematic silencing of writers like Julian and Margery left her isolated. Despite Audre’s lack of access, a conversation emerges through this study about the diverse linguistic modes through

69 trans. “Set all your trust in God and do not fear the talk of the world, for the more contempt, shame and reproof that you have in this world, the more is your merit in the sight of God” (78).
which women contextualize their experiences with pain and hyper-feminized illnesses. The comfort that both Audre and Julian find in maternity and community suggest that a rich archive of female pain narratives would be beneficial to health and healing.

While they each attack the silence differently, this comparison between Audre, Margery, and Julian proves that the production of pain narratives is part of healing oneself. The “self-referential” rhetoric of such texts proves restorative because its returns subjectivity to the sick person and works against silence. Seeing the dearth of language as part of the suffering suggests that silence has just as powerful an effect on health as would any infectious disease. Inversely, the curative power of writing suggests the benefits of uncovering a rich history of pain language written by women. Both Julian and Audre identify the healing potential of support networks or a nexus of love. The benefit of identifying Julian and Margery as writing pain narratives is to pull their stories out of the silence so that sick women like Audre Lorde no longer have to reinvent a pain language from scratch. Historic continuity comforts women suffering because they feel no longer alone or silenced.