

Minnewater

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Note: The introductory quotations are taken from Beatrice of Nazareth, page 406, and Gilbert of Tournai, as cited in Thiébaux, page 386. See Works Cited for complete reference information.

“Then she feels all her senses made holy with Minne [love], and her will becomes Minne, and she is so deeply sunken and swallowed in the chasm of Minne that all her self is turned to Minne. The loveliness of Minne has enclosed her, the force of Minne has devoured her, the sweetness of Minne has sunk her, the greatness of Minne has swallowed her, the nobility of Minne has held her high, the purity of Minne has sustained her, and the loftiness of Minne has hefted and drawn her above herself, so that she can do nothing else but become Minne and yield to Minne's playing.”

Beatrice of Nazareth, Beguine, 1200-1268

“There were women among us called beguines, some of whom blossom forth in subtleties and rejoice in novelties. They have interpreted in vernacular French idiom the mysteries of Scripture which are scarcely accessible to experts in divine writings. They read aloud in common irreverently and boldly, in conventicles, convents and public squares.”

Bishop Gilbert of Tournai, letter to Pope Gregory X, 1273

Anna is alone in the chapel. She has been staring up at a painted wooden carving of Jesus on the cross for so long that her neck is achy and stiff. Her vision blurs, so that all she can distinguish is the dark red blood spilling from the wound in his side. Opening her mouth slightly, she tastes the blood on her tongue, sweet and warm as milk. Jesus' arms encircle, cradle and rock her. "My child," he says, "drink of me."

Margriet enters the chapel with neither volition nor resistance. Her arm barely completes the motion of crossing herself, so instinctive that forgetting it would be like forgetting to breathe. She gazes at Jesus. His eyes hold a helpless, uncomprehending pain that reminds her of the countless sick children she has nursed. They do not understand why they suffer, do not yet know that God is unjust. Any mother would die rather than let her child be hurt, so how could a benevolent God sacrifice his only son? She lifts Jesus off the cross, washes away his blood, and holds him against her breast until he falls asleep and forgets all his troubles.

Katrin enters last. She does not cross herself – the gesture is not a part of her vocabulary. Instead, she surveys the chapel's architecture. It is simple, without the boastful gilding of the cathedral in the city. The cold, gray walls echo footsteps and the occasional whisper. Through the open windows, without stained glass, sunlight sporadically illuminates patches of the stone floor. Only when Katrin beholds Jesus does she feel any spiritual yearning. She cannot believe that, under that leather loincloth, he looks like other men, shriveled, brown and worm-like. Instead, he must have something beautiful, soft, like a flower that has to be warmed and caressed before it opens petal by petal. She kisses his thin lips until they glow with saliva. After tracing her tongue down

the rest of his body, she fills her mouth with him. He bursts, and she drinks his sweet milk.

Anna's knees are bruised from kneeling for so long. As the other women shift and discreetly look around, Anna concentrates on her tightly clasped hands. Her nails are bitten down to stubs, and the angry red of her cuticles contrasts the soft white flesh of her hands. Though the rest of her body has lost its baby fat in the last few years, her hands still appear childish with vague dimples along the knuckles and smooth uncallused fingertips.

Margriet's hands, by contrast, bear witness to her life of scrubbing laundry in scalding hot basins of water. Stripped of all vanity, she regards them as nothing more than a tool to complete all the chores necessary to her life. Now, not occupied by a child, by the preparation of a meal or by a sock to be mended, they rest uneasily against the polished wood of the pew.

Father Philippe enters with a gangly gait as if he has not yet grown accustomed to his long limbs. Perhaps to compensate for his height, he walks with shoulders hunched. When he speaks, however, his voice is clear and strong, and his blue eyes shine with innocent faith. Margriet follows him in reciting the "Pater Noster," bowing her head to avoid Jesus' penetrating stare that seems to ask a multitude of questions she cannot answer.

Katrin struggles to say the prayer. The last time she went to church was as a child, wedged between a brother and an uncle, who slipped his arm around her and squeezed her bottom, right there with Jesus watching. She remembers His eyes looking down at her from a painting on the ceiling, sad, disapproving and mocking. "Little girl," they said.

“You are not part of my world. You are not one of my people.” That had been her last time inside of a church – and now she stumbles over the prayer, whose rhythm she knows but whose words are deeply lodged in an inaccessible part of her memory.

She suddenly feels sick, as she has every morning that week. Knowing she will vomit, she pushes her way through the pews, past an older woman who places a hand on her back. The young girl at the end doesn’t seem to notice the commotion, even though everyone has turned around to look and the prayer has dwindled down to her voice. “Excuse me,” Katrin says. She vomits just as the girl looks up. The relief is almost immediate.

“What have you done?” the girl asks, her gray eyes snapping.

“I’m sorry,” Katrin begins, “it was a mistake.”

“No,” says Anna, “you whores are all the same – mistresses of the devil.”

The burning sensation of nausea rises in Katrin’s throat. Margriet quickly guides her out through the middle aisle. Despite the unfamiliar weight of the habit constricting her legs, Katrin makes it to the courtyard before vomiting again. Margriet hands her a handkerchief, and they sit down on a bench a few paces from the church. The singing voices of the Beguines are audible, but seem far removed from the bright colors of the courtyard. Patches of geraniums nestle against their feet. They are in the center of the Beguinage complex, facing the gate that separates them from the city. Though great poplar trees shade them from the sun, perspiration accumulates on Katrin’s hairline.

“How long have you been?” Margriet asks.

“Excuse me?”

“Since your last curse.” It takes a moment for Katrin to understand. At the brothel, they had not referred to it as a curse but instead as a blessing. The days that she bled had been her break each month. Since she didn’t have to take any men, she went to sleep early and woke to buy fresh bread in the morning. She stands, heavy on her feet.

“I’m sorry, but I should go change my clothes.”

“Wait,” says Margriet. “They don’t know, do they?” Katrin regards Margriet – middle aged yet with a sense of vitality about her. There is energy in her large hands and feet and, sitting still, she seems restless as if she would be more comfortable doing something. Katrin envisions her kneading dough or wringing out the washing. She doesn’t know what to do, stuck between wanting to run away and to fall into Margriet’s arms.

The Grand Mistress approaches seemingly from nowhere and scolds Katrin for making a scene. When Katrin apologizes, the Mistress says, “Very well. But I am watching you closely. I made an exception for you and I don’t want to regret it.” She beckons for Margriet to accompany her. As Margriet leaves, she whispers to Katrin, “Come see me in the infirmary.”

Philippe of Flavigny, humble servant of God, priest and confessor to the holy women at Bruges, sends greetings to our Most Holy Father, Vicar of Christ on Earth in this month of October in the year 1250.

I have recently entered this Beguinage in an attempt to help these women achieve supreme union with the Divine. I am already overwhelmed by their goodness, chastity and poverty. They have truly and generously turned their lives over to our Lord,

abandoning worldly flesh and goods. Not only do they pray righteously but also they spend their non-praying hours selflessly serving the poor and working to support themselves through their weaving trade. Never have I met a group of women more entirely wedded to God. I extend to you my humblest invitation to visit our unworthy Beguinage and witness the wonderful service and devotion performed by these chaste and pious women.

Katrin cannot sleep. The cot feels like a coffin, much unlike her bed in the brothel, which was wide and covered with swaths of red and yellow silk, presents from various men who traded in the Mediterranean. She loved the way they retained the exotic scents of cinnamon and cardamom. When she left secretly in the early morning, with only a small bag, she did not have room for them.

Katrin hears a low crying from down the hall. It is so soft she thinks she might be imagining noises out of the deep silence. Not used to being in bed this early, she rises and pulls on a pair of wool socks that only partially mask the iciness of the floor. She follows a flickering sliver of light down the hall, past the rooms of sleeping Beguines, and peeks through a crack in the door from which the light originates.

Anna stands in the center of the sparsely furnished bedroom, dressed only in a thin white nightgown. Blood stains her white, skeletal arms. Her reddish hair is loose – long and curly as if on fire. Anna slaps a leather strap across one arm so hard that it sounds a sharp *thwack* and leaves bright red stripes on her skin. She whips herself over and over again across her stomach, chest and shoulders. Her head is thrown back, lips parted in a slight smile, forehead and cheeks glistening with sweat. Each time the leather

crosses her skin, she moans – whether from pain or pleasure Katrin cannot tell, yet she never flinches. Finally, she lets go of the whip and falls to her knees in prayer, tears running down her cheeks.

Katrin is horrified, awe-struck, and strangely aroused. She nearly throws open the door, to embrace, accuse or worship her, she's not sure which. Then she remembers the hatred in Anna's eyes and her infuriating self-righteousness. White skin eerily glowing, Anna is the one who looks possessed now. Thinking she hears footsteps, Katrin scurries back to her own room, nearly slipping in her stockinged feet.

“Thank you,” says Katrin, exiting the Mistress' office. “I didn't mean to pry but I was concerned about the poor girl's welfare.”

The other women are lining up for breakfast. At the front of the line, face and hair shining from an icy bath, Anna sees Katrin talking to the Mistress. She must have done something wrong already. The thought of these women makes her sick: they breathe the sweat of men who writhe on top of them. The sweat stinks of fields, of liquor, and of something impure and ungodly. Jesus is the only pure man. As the sickening memory overwhelms her, she craves Him and His strong arms to hold and protect her.

After summoning Anna into her office, the Mistress says, “I just spoke with Sister Katrin. She expressed concern after she saw you . . . engaging in some detrimental activities last night.”

“God forgive me for saying so, but we both know Sister's background. You couldn't possibly trust anything she has to say.”

“That is beside the point. I need to know, were you or were you not beating yourself last night?”

Suddenly, Anna appears radiant, flushed as if from a rapid walk. “Jesus spoke to me. He was wearing his crown of thorns and his tears were made of blood. ‘My daughter,’ he called me. ‘You are my beloved child.’ I prayed to feel his pain, to experience his suffering for us. I wanted to bleed for my Father. And God gave me what I asked for,” she finishes dreamily.

“You are aware that this could be seen as the Devil’s work?”

“Oh, but that is not possible. I know it was Jesus. He kissed me just as a mother would. He told me to obey him and nobody else. That is what I have done. I have been good.”

“Calm yourself.” Her voice is softer. “I think it is best that you visit Sister Margriet at the infirmary.”

Both women arrive at the infirmary after breakfast. “How was your talk?” asks Katrin.

“I am trusting in God that you will be justly punished for meddling and ill-will.”

“And you will be punished for consorting with the Devil.”

Margriet opens the door. “Welcome, Sisters. Enter.” The infirmary smells of spirits of wine, clean linen and herbs. Telling Anna to wait, Margriet pulls a curtain around herself and Katrin. “What are we going to do?” she whispers.

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t concern you.” Through the window, the sharp twisted spire of the chapel pierces the blue sky.

Ignoring her tone of voice, Margriet says, "It's not long before you start to show. You need to tell the Mistress."

Katrin protests, "She would send me away."

"Don't you have somewhere to go?"

"You know better than that." They are quiet for a moment. "Can you make it go away?"

"How do you mean?" asks Margriet, though she already knows.

"I know there's something I can take to end it. You must know. Please."

Margriet's voice is sharp when she asks, "How could you want to stop the life that God has placed inside you? It is a blessing, a miracle." She adds softly, "I would give anything to have that again."

Katrin shrugs. "Take it then."

Anna pulls aside the curtain. "I will be late for prayer. Can we start?"

Margriet yanks it back and says, "No we cannot," in such a strict voice Anna is momentarily chastised.

Katrin has already stood up. "If you don't help me, someone else will, and if you report to the mistress, I'll be gone by morning."

Anna has not taken off her clothes. "I've received orders to examine your physical health," Margriet says.

Turning away, Anna unhooks her heavy brown tunic. Her spine is so bony that it looks as though it might slice through her back. Margriet unbuttons her chemise from

behind and pulls it away from the open sores. Anna winces but makes no noise. “Lord have mercy,” Margriet says. “What have you done to yourself?”

“It was Jesus who did this to me. He wanted me to feel his pain.”

“Jesus would not have done this to any daughter of his. It is the Devil’s work if I ever saw it.”

Anna’s eyes are red around the pupils. “You can’t tell me what it was. You weren’t there. I saw him, heard him, touched him.” The girl is beginning to look feverish. Her pulse is fast and faint, her tongue parched and speckled white.

“When was the last time you ate?” Margriet asks.

“I can’t eat,” Anna whispers. “Anything but the blood and body of our Lord repulses me.”

“You need to eat.” After wrapping Anna in a blanket, Margriet prepares porridge. She then spoons it into Anna’s mouth, but Anna refuses to swallow, letting it dribble down her chin instead. Margriet attempts a second spoonful. Anna swallows but, as soon as the gruel hits her stomach, she vomits, her body shaking with dry heaves when there is nothing left to expel. “We’re going to try this until you keep something down. That’s a good girl,” Margriet murmurs in a lullaby singsong. “You just swallow that down.”

Removing Anna’s cap, she brushes the tangled auburn hair with her fingers. Anna finally accepts a bite and, as soon as she has finished the first spoonful, opens her mouth for the next. All of a sudden, she is ravenous and finishes the entire bowl. “Slow down,” says Margriet. “You’ll make yourself sick.”

“I want some more.”

“That’s enough for now.” She dries Anna’s lips and pulls a curtain over the window. “You need to rest.”

The seven o’clock bells are ringing when Katrin brings them dinner trays. Margriet thanks her as she dips bread into beer. She then does the same for Anna, who pushes her away. “I’m not hungry.”

Before Margriet can protest, Katrin says, “Leave your girl. We need to talk.” Once in private, Katrin asks, “Have you thought about my offer?”

“Of course. I have arrived at some other possibilities.”

“What other possibilities could there be for a woman in my position?”

Margriet leans forward, placing her palm on Katrin’s knee. Her eyes are imploring. “I could help you have the baby here. I’m sure I could convince the Mistress.”

“And once it was born?”

“I would raise it. We could raise it together if you like. Don’t you understand? This is a gift, not something to throw away.”

“Well I don’t want this gift, especially considering where it came from.”

“And what of the father?”

“A client. Who did this,” she shows a large circular burn on her forearm that has begun to fade into a purplish scab, “if he caught me with another man or didn’t like how I looked. It got so that I couldn’t go out, couldn’t take any other business. I ran away. Now you understand that I have no choice. If I ever returned, he’ll kill me.”

Katrin notices Anna, who is spying through a gap in the curtain. “This is not meant for your ears. Get away from there.”

“Wait,” Anna says, pulling up her sleeve. “I know him. It’s his signature.” Her wrist bears an angry mark, like a red moon. The scar tissue stands rigid against her skin.

“How is this possible?” Katrin asks.

“My stepfather. After my mother died in labor with my brother, I was left to him.”

The women line up their arms and contemplate their identical burn marks.

“How did this happen?” Margriet asks.

He immobilized them first: Anna restrained by her stepbrothers, Katrin tied to the bedposts with rags. He heated his seal – used to stamp official documents – over the coals until it glowed red. Then he touched the corner of a wet rag onto the seal to make sure it sizzled. The sound satisfied him; he chuckled to himself, while his victim struggled every so often before exhausting herself. He licked a circle on her forearm, spit outlining the area to be branded. With deliberation, he touched the surface of the seal to her skin. It left a faint red kiss. “That’s not quite deep enough,” he said. “What do you think, my dear?” Katrin spat at him. Anna was silent. “You’re not going to tell me? Very well. I’ll try again.” This time, the hot metal sank deeply into flesh. “Now you’re mine,” he said.

Katrin said, “You bastard. I’m not anyone’s.”

Anna said, “No, I belong to the Lord.”

“You poor darlings,” Margriet says, pulling down their sleeves. “No wonder you both ran away.”

Anna nods. “I couldn’t take it anymore. He was trying to force me to get married. So I turned to God, and He showed me the way here.”

Bolstered by this new intimacy, Katrin confesses, "I'm carrying his baby."

Anna looks shocked. "But you'll go to hell!"

Katrin nearly smiles. "My dear child, I am probably going to hell no matter what I do."

"How dare you mock the Lord with your complacency! You must fear Him above all other."

"I don't fear the Lord because I have already survived hell. I have survived my life in spite of the Lord and in spite of everyone else."

"He will punish you for this. Look at you now. He has already punished you."

Margriet lays her hand on each of the tense shoulders. "Sisters, as you bicker, you forget that there is an innocent life involved."

Katrin regards her abdomen, as if an intruder is lodged within. "I didn't ask for this," she says, sinking into a chair. "I want it to go away."

"You don't know how amazing it is to raise a child," Margriet says, "to make something out of your own flesh and then watch it grow."

"And, once it is grown, it leaves you alone to die here. Is that any reward for years of care and sacrifice?"

"I need no reward. I did what I was meant to do. It was my duty to God and to my husband."

"That's the difference between us. I refuse to do 'my duty' just for the sake of doing it. My life is mine from now on."

“You think you have a choice, but you don’t. Your body is a vessel to carry and deliver. Once it is tired and dried up, you no longer have purpose in the world. All you can do is go out without a fuss and wait for your time to be up.”

“This isn’t even about me is it? You want my baby because you can’t have your own!”

The words hang in the air for a moment. Then Margriet responds in a tired voice, “You’re right. I am sterile, useless. I’m sorry.” She rises, as if dazed, and looks blankly around the space. “I have to go. I need to . . .” Her sentence trails off and she walks out of the room slowly, bumping into the doorframe on her way out.

Once she is gone, Katrin buries her face in her hands. “How could I have just pushed away the only person who’s been kind to me or offered to help me since I’ve been here? I’m completely alone.”

“You’re not alone,” says Anna, almost imploringly. “You always have the Lord. He will take care of you.”

“The Lord doesn’t give a damn about me and never has. Maybe He cares about rich virgins like you, but not about whores like me. And, judging from those scars across your body, He hasn’t protected you too well either.”

“The Lord has provided for me. He has give me so much.” Her eyes are teary. “I don’t deserve it.”

“Oh please. You’re so perfect, I’m sure you’ve never done anything wrong.”

“I am a sinner everyday, a wretched, ugly sinner.” Anna makes herself very small in the chair.

“No, you’re not,” Katrin says with conviction. “You don’t have to say that about yourself. The priest, everyone really, tries to make us feel guilty and then to make us beg for forgiveness. I don’t need them to forgive me.” She grabs Anna’s hand. “We don’t need them.”

Anna allows her hand to rest in Katrin’s palm for a moment before drawing it back. “Maybe you don’t. But I do.”

Inside the chapel the following afternoon, Katrin senses the walls closing in on her. A few pews ahead, the white of Anna’s habit catches a ray of sun. How can she be so disciplined, so focused? Katrin wonders. The prayers, all in Latin, seem dry and lifeless, like twigs that, when snapped open, show no sign of succulent green. The damp air chills her. She must leave.

Already seated in the back, Katrin does not attract much attention as she slips away, tiptoeing lest her heels rap against the floor. Only the Grand Mistress notices her and frowns. Katrin walks quickly across the courtyard and through the central gate. She is free and alone for the first time since she arrived. Minnewater, the canal, is only a few minutes away. As soon as she arrives, she stops to breathe. All is quiet, except for a breeze that shakes the poplar trees hanging over the water. She sits under one, molding her back into its trunk. It holds her, like a man might but never had, holds her without grinding his pelvis into her rear and clutching her breast like he is juicing fruit.

The sun is low, its pink and orange rays spreading across the water. Momentarily blinded, she perceives only a spot of bright yellow, so brilliant and clear it is almost white. A female silhouette appears out of the light. Tall and willowy, the apparition

hovers above Katrin in shimmering robes. Only her face is visible – a pale sliver of the moon. Long white fingers encircle Katrin’s face with a touch so soft it is barely discernible.

“Who are you?” Katrin whispers, but the lady silences her.

“You must take my child,” she says, disrobing to reveal an infant at her breast. As its lips are wrenched from her nipple, the baby wails.

“He does not want me,” Katrin says. But the Lady places the infant in her arms and instantly the crying ceases. Katrin regards the tiny face. When she looks up, the Lady is gone. “Where did you go?” she cries. “What will I do?” There is no reply. Her arms are empty again. Now that dark has fallen, the chilly wind cuts through her dress. Wrapping arms around her chest for warmth, she realizes that her breasts are slightly swollen and heavy. Placing a hand above her womb, she feels a fluttering, a quickening, an unmistakable kick. “It is inside of me!” she exclaims aloud, laughing. The baby is hers, a part of her, and she will bear it. She feels truly pregnant for the first time.

The door to the confessional creaks as Anna pushes it open. She hears Father Philippe stir on the other side of the wrought iron grate.

“Bless me father for I have sinned. I have sinned so many times; I do not know where to begin.” Her voice shakes. She bites down hard on her knuckle in order to soothe herself. She continues, “I have doubted the Lord today. I have defied Him. I can no longer tell whether it is Him who speaks to me, or whether it is the Devil.”

In a tenor that almost squeaks, the priest asks, “What has made you mistrust the voice of the Lord?”

“The Mistress, the other sisters . . . they said that it was the Devil.”

“Did the Devil really visit you?” He seems alarmed.

“No Father,” she grips the grate. “I believe that Jesus showed me his wounds for a reason: because he wanted me to experience them.”

“The Mistress is concerned that you harmed yourself,” he admits.

“How else am I to be unified with Christ, when I am hampered with this weighty flesh? It must disgust Him as it disgusts me,” she cries, nearly throwing her hands into the air as exclamation.

“Yet God made you and He would not make anything that displeased him.”

“God made man. I am a girl. My body is stained, marked, so full of impure substances that it bleeds habitually in order to cleanse itself. The residue only builds up again.”

“Is not that a natural part of being a woman?”

“But I don’t want to be a woman!”

“It seems that you must accept this burden.”

Anna throws open the door to the confessional, forcing Father Philippe to exit as well. “So you too doubt . . . I am not the first to have visions as such. You mock the voice of the Lord! I tell you that He has visited me.” She opens the front of her tunic, revealing gouges down her chest, like the imprint of fingers from a large hand. The dangerously low opening hints at the slight rise of her young breasts. Head lifted proudly, her eyes shine. “This is the hand of the Lord,” she says. “Do not deny it.”

After staring for a moment, he shields his eyes. “Cover yourself. I believe you.” Anna turns away to right her clothing. At that moment, light hits her, illuminating her

narrow frame. When she turns back, she seems to glow. He gasps. “You are divine.” She sinks to her knees before him. “You will be my prodigy,” he says. “We will make your name, as well as the name of this Beguinage, known and respected. The Church will no longer doubt us.”

When he seems to have forgotten about her, Anna says, “Father, I am expected at the infirmary. Will you give me my penance before I go?”

“Oh yes.” He straightens his face. “You must do fifty Hail Mary’s. Now, in the name of the Jesus Christ our savior, I absolve you of your sins. Continue to pray that the Lord may guide you and make His will known to you.”

“Yes, Father.” She stands to exit.

“Anna,” he calls as she leaves, “have faith. Do not let others dissuade you. We will do great things.” She nods and smiles. In the empty hallway, however, she sinks to the floor, hugging her knees to chest. The lacerations on her chest sting and she rubs them through the fabric, causing the scabs to break. She tries to pray.

Father Philippe of the Beguinage at Bruges greets the most honorable father once again and keeps him in heartfelt prayers.

Though I have not yet received response to my last greeting, I am compelled to write about an extraordinary occurrence at our humble abode. I have recently met a remarkable young woman. While she was praying, Jesus appeared to her and showed to her the Passion that He received. Upon seeing the gash in His side and the crown of thorns that caused blood to trickle down His skin, she began to weep for His pain and her own sinfulness and unworthiness. Yet He comforted her, embracing her in a most tender

and chaste fashion as a husband would a wife. A fire burned inside this poor maiden of God so strongly and hotly that she fell to her knees. She cried out, "My Lord and master, what have I done to deserve this? How can I ever thank you?" Jesus told her that she must feel His pain to become closer to Him. He commanded her to take only His body in her mouth, and to humiliate her weak flesh until her blood flowed freely. So she took a lash to her own skin, beating herself until she was truly full of the Lord's presence – and thus she appeared to me, this poor handmaiden of Christ, radiant with the Divine.

Margriet lies in bed, fully clothed, staring unseeingly at the whitish gray ceiling. The Mistress enters and tells her that a family across town requested a midwife to sit up with their dead.

Margriet does not look her way. "Not tonight," she mutters. "Let me be."

Mistress taps her foot. "I am surprised at you sister. It is not like you to be slothful. You must do your duty."

"I am tired of doing my duty, just as I've always done." The Mistress begins to speak, but Margriet cuts her off. "Just go away, please."

At this moment, Katrin opens the door, bringing in with her the scent of crisp evening air. Her cheeks are almost unnaturally flushed. She notices Margriet, whose face is gray, the color of old snow. "What has happened to you?" she asks.

"Nothing has happened to me. Nothing will happen to me. I am dead to the world." Katrin asks for a moment alone, which the Mistress grants grudgingly.

"Don't let my earlier unkind words trouble you. I spoke in the heat of temper. Please forgive me."

“They were true. Now, I am not even called to bring new life into the world but to escort it out. They might as well take me with them.”

Katrin sits next to her. “I want you to deliver my baby.”

“Your baby? But . . .”

“I have changed my mind. My path is clear to me now for the first time!”

Margriet just shakes her head. “I can’t go through it again: the life, the loss. It is too much and I am too old.”

“It will be different this time, just us. Please. I cannot do it without you. I need you.”

Margriet seems to straighten. “Why yes. What was I thinking? Of course I will help you.”

“You really will?” Katrin embraces her impulsively. “And you will talk to the Mistress for me?”

“I will not let you down. I will take care of you in every way,” Margriet says. Mistress raps at the door. “I must go.”

“Then I will go with you.”

The dead boy lies on a large bed, a white sheet pulled around his chin. The female servant who ushered them in leaves them with a tray of bread and beer.

“He looks like an angel,” Katrin says. Golden curls fall over his smooth hairless cheeks. “He must be no more than fourteen.”

“I lost a son at that age,” Margriet says. “Right before he became a man. He wanted to be a priest.”

“I’m sorry,” says Katrin. “That must have been terrible.”

“Yes, well,” Margriet removes her knitting from a bag. “I suppose it was, though I barely had time to mourn. After he died, I still had three children, my husband, and my house, to take care of.” She becomes quiet, concentrating with furrowed eyes on her knitting, and will not meet Katrin’s eyes, which phrase the beginning of another question.

Katrin falls asleep before Margriet, head propped up by the back of the chair. The candle is burning low, the wax forming a molten pool at its base. The boy’s face looks yellow, waxy and unreal. His forehead is cool to the touch. Margriet feels her own skin, which seems almost hot in comparison. Her heart is beating; his is not. His limbs are stiff, as if frozen. Only that morning they were moving. She lifts his eyelids.

“Look at me,” she says. She tries to turn his body towards her, but it is heavy, despite its youthful proportions. Bending over him, she stares into his eyes, but they are unfocused and seem to be watching something far beyond her. “Look at me,” she repeats. “Wake up!” She climbs on top of him and shakes him, overturning a candle in the process.

The commotion wakes Katrin. “What’s going on?” she shouts. Margriet remains prostrate across the body. Katrin quickly extinguishes the flame before it scorches a hole in the bed. The room is now dark, and Katrin waits for her eyes to adjust.

“What happened?” Katrin asks.

“My son left me,” she cries. “God took him away from me.”

Katrin murmurs to her in a soothing voice, and attempts to pull her off the body.

“No!” Margriet says. “I will not leave him. They made me leave him before. They took him away from me, my baby boy.”

This time, though, she allows herself to be pulled away from the bed and into Katrin's arms. Katrin rocks her until she quiets. Dawn slides underneath the curtains, brightening the room with soft light. "I will never forgive God," Margriet says quietly.

"You don't have to."

Margriet wipes her eyes. "You're not going to condemn me for blasphemy? Everyone always says that God has a divine plan, that we are not allowed question it."

"I don't see why not. We are the ones who have to live it – it is ours to mourn, ours to decide, ours to fight."

"You're the only one who's ever admitted that to me before," Margriet says. "Thank you."

The room has completely filled with light. The boy's body is relaxed now, his mouth almost softening into a smile. The maid enters and thanks them for their visit. "It was a great comfort to the mother," she says. When Margriet does not rise, the maid looks at her questioningly.

Katrin pulls her up. "It's time for us to go."

Margriet's eyes focus, as she takes her surroundings into account. The maid has opened the deep red curtains. The smell of freshly baked bread rises from the street. Margriet nods and spends a moment leaning over the boy. She kisses him, and they leave.

Back at the Beguinage, the bells are ringing, their clear sounds cutting through the crisp morning air. Father Philippe is crossing through the garden to church to prepare for morning mass. Katrin and Margriet intercept him in the center of the courtyard. He nods

to both of them, looking quickly back at his feet. "I would like to speak to you," Katrin says.

"I am just on my way to mass."

"I won't be long. It is important." Once he sees that he has no choice, Margriet leaves them alone, squeezing Katrin's hand before she goes. The pair continues to walk through the garden, past the fully blossomed rose bushes in red, pink and white.

"I believe you are aware of my previous line of work," she says. He blushes. "I am not here to discuss it. I came here to free myself of that place and to live a good, independent life." She pauses for emphasis. "What I must tell you is that I am pregnant."

He is so startled that he stops walking. "But you're not married!"

"It has been known to happen." Whenever she looks him straight in the eye, he turns away. "I wish to raise the baby here at the Beguinage."

"A baby here? An unwed mother? This would never be acceptable. Imagine the reputation we'd acquire! You must leave, or send the baby away once you have," he scratches his ear, "delivered."

"No! I would never give up my baby. If you will not let me keep the baby here, I will leave. You would be condemning both of us to a life of prostitution."

He looks troubled and sits down on the nearest bench. "I don't know what God would want me to do."

She sits next to him. "God gave me this child. He wants me to keep it."

"But you're a *sinner*." He nearly whispers the last word.

"We're all sinners," she says.

“God forgives those who ask for it, who give up their worldly desires and dedicate their lives to Him.”

“Like you?” she asks, sliding an index finger into her mouth. She flicks her tongue across the finger – like a snake. When she pulls it out, a thin line of spittle stretches, glistening, from lip to nail.

“Yes, I have turned my life over to God. I have taken the vows.”

“Those are just words,” she scoffs. “You are a man like all the other men.” She grabs the stiffened lump between his legs. “I know what you want. You are no different.” Grabbing him through the fabric, she jerks him up and down with hard, fast yanks. “You try to pretend you’re otherwise, disguised by your robes and armed with the Bible. But I know the truth about you.” He grips the edge of the bench, lifting his pelvis towards her, sweat dripping into his eyes, panting, and watches her with wide eyes until he closes them and comes.

“How easily you break your vows. I know your secret now, so you’d better keep mine.” She wipes her hand against his cassock before leaving him to sit among the dew-laden roses.

It is late at night when Katrin goes to visit Anna. Only at this hour does Katrin ever feel the presence of a supernatural evil: she imagines white feathery things haunting the corners of the room. Anna is not asleep either. When Katrin enters, Anna is kneeling upon the stone floor, clothed in a threadbare chemise.

Katrin sits on the bed. Anna acknowledges her only after she has finished praying. “What are you doing?” Katrin asks.

“Praying.” Anna sits back on her heels and rubs her arms.

“But it is late and cold.”

“That does not matter to God.”

“Well it should matter to you.”

“It doesn’t. My pain pleases Him; it makes Him love me more.”

“Who told you this?” Katrin takes a blanket off bed and wraps it around Anna’s narrow shoulders.

Anna shrugs. “It is what I have always believed.” She adds, “Father Philippe believes me.”

“Father Philippe? What does he know about God’s love? He only cares about his reputation.”

“It must be wrong to talk about him like that. He is a man of God.”

“Philippe knows no more about God than either of us. Tell me one thing: is it right to be in pain?”

“I don’t know,” Anna says.

“Yes you do.”

“No I don’t.” She crawls into bed, and Katrin lies down next to her, pulling the blanket over them both. Anna shivers violently, her teeth chattering so hard that she bites her lip. Immediately, blood springs to the surface. Anna starts to cry. “I don’t feel well. Everything hurts. I am weak and tired. I can’t do this anymore.”

Katrin kisses her, a gentle, lingering kiss. She licks the blood from Anna’s lip, tasting it with her tongue, sucking until the flow has stopped. Anna is still through this caress. When it is over, she sighs and moves closer to Katrin.

They lie face to as Katrin strokes Anna's hair, which is wispy and fine. The touch sends pleasant shivers along Anna's arms. Katrin brushes aside Anna's hair to kiss the hidden place behind her ear. Anna tentatively strokes the valley between Katrin's breasts. Katrin's body is so different from hers, with bones protected by soft flesh and breasts like ripe fruit. Her own body, by contrast, is angular, unyielding and defensive in the sharp edges of its bones. Yet their bodies are similar in that both form the same sloping curve as they lie on their sides.

They begin to move their bodies together in circular rhythm, generating so much heat that Anna – always chilled to the core – feels as though she is being unthawed from the inside out. The friction of their pelvises brushing against each other catches Anna in such a way that she gasps, laughs, wants to giggle and scream. It is like a fire between her legs, like the smell of baking bread, licking sugar, dunking her head in a basin of freezing water, like running up a hill. She is dizzy and her mouth is dry. Every part of her skin is alive and tingling. Throwing her head against the pillow, she embraces Katrin. "What was that?" she asks.

"That," says Katrin, "is the best part of being a woman." Kissing Anna's forehead, she adjusts the blankets around them. Bodies fitted together, fingers interlaced, they sleep through the night.

Katrin's time has almost come when light, buoyant spring gives way to heavy, humid summer. The air smells of sweat and rain. The three women are working in the vegetable garden. Margriet plucks a ripe, full plumb from the low-hanging tree. Anna steals an apricot from the overflowing basket, taking a bite of the soft pink flesh.

Katrin is kneeling, working her fingers through the earth to free a carrot, which she eventually does, holding it triumphantly for the others to see. It is so small and bumpy that they laugh. Katrin falls onto her back, sweat dripping from her brow onto lips. Her belly forms a small mountain against the sky. Though Father Philippe, devoid of all other power, had insisted that at least Katrin not confide in the other Beguines for fear of inciting gossip prematurely, her condition is obvious. Philippe still seems to believe that the shame of bearing an illegitimate child will ultimately force her to flee or to abandon the child. With no such intention, Katrin watches the poplar trees whisper above her and inhales the musty scent of the nearby canal. “This,” she sighs, “is my idea of heaven.”

Anna notices a figure running across the field towards them. Lit from behind, it is a dark blot against the sun, but clearly in a masculine form: large, square and lumbering. He reaches them, sweating profusely, his eyes red. What looks like a new scar lines his cheek.

Anna gasps, “That is him,” and hides her head against Margriet’s back.

“I found you,” he hisses at Anna, spitting as he speaks, and staggers towards the group. “You thought you could hide, didn’t you? You thought you were smarter than me?”

“Now, mister,” Margriet says, “you have no business with us here. You just turn around and leave right now.”

“No business? This girl here is mine. She belongs to me and, when I marry her off, I’m going to get something in return. So stand away, you old fool.” He strikes

Margriet with the back of his hand. Not expecting the blow, she falls to the ground. No longer protected, Anna stands before him with her chin down.

“I’m not leaving,” Anna says quietly.

“Don’t you dare argue with me, you little bitch. You never gave me nothing but trouble before – with all your Jesus talk, so you’re not going to give me any now. You were such a freak, you’re lucky that I want you.” He reaches for Anna but she sidesteps him, causing him to lurch forward into Katrin, whom he notices for the first time. “What are you doing here, you slut? You’ve gotten so fat I didn’t recognize you.”

“I came to get me and my baby away from you.”

“Well you’re coming with me too. They’ve been looking all over for you at the brothel – I’ll get the reward for bringing you back. Bet they didn’t expect you’d come here, pretending to be a holy woman. I’m the only one who knows who you really are.” He grabs her arm but she jerks away, stumbling back and overturning the basket of peaches. They roll onto the ground and split open, their pink flesh exposed and bleeding.

“I’ve changed,” Katrin says softly. “That’s not my life anymore.”

“A whore never changes. You’re nothing if you’re not a whore. You know you need me.”

“We don’t need you,” Anna interjects, stepping in front of Katrin. Margriet stands at her side.

“I wasn’t talking to you, you little wench.”

“Go away,” Anna says, pointing a rake at his neck.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Katrin grabs a shovel. “Go away. We’ve had enough with you.”

The other Beguines have made their way across the field. At Margriet's nod, they surround him. The fruit splatters beneath their feet, its tough skins grinding into the earth. He stumbles amongst the tight circle that they have woven about him. Though he continues to shout obscenities, their grip on his arms is strong. The Beguines drag him across the field and expel him through the gates onto the street. The trio stays behind. Though the fruit on the ground has been ruptured, the trees are still heavy with more to pick.

Pope Innocent IV, servant of the servants of God, to Philippe, protector of women, who faithfully serves the Lord at Bruges, greetings and apostolic blessings.

We are much interested to hear of your work at the Beguinage, and your clear concern for these women's welfare and chastity. May God bless you and your ministry that you may continue to shield these poor and unlearned women from the temptations of the Devil's fruit and guide them towards a clearer vision of the Lord. Be not fooled, however, by their supposed chastity and humility. When given too much independence, they will soon succumb to their lesser natures, driven by flesh and all of its impure drives.

We are disturbed by rumors that have reached us of certain laxity of morals among the women in your flock. Keep them sequestered from the outside world and closely monitor their doings, so that they may not stray from the path of the Lord. In light of our concerns, we are sending an inquisitor in order to evaluate and report on the state of your Beguinage. May the almighty Lord be with you.

The last fruit has fallen from the branches and lies rotting on the ground when Katrin's time comes. The plump, green leaves cling to the branches as if they know that their death is imminent. She visits the canal alone early that morning, walking heavily on swollen feet, balance upset by the weight in her womb. Upon reaching the water, she removes her shoes, allowing bare toes to sink into the earth. She traces circles with fingertips on the surface of the water, creating ripples that expand outward. *Minnewater* she repeats to herself. Why had she never thought about its name before? *Minne* - Love, a woman's love in all its mysteries and complexities, as fluid, deep, reflective, glistening, pure and life-containing as the water itself.

She becomes aware of moistness seeping around her, and a sharp cramp in the belly jerks her out of contemplation. Noticing two figures entering the gates at the Beguinage, she waves frantically. Margriet and Anna, returning from a night of sitting with the dead, rush towards her. Dazed, Katrin tells them, "Something happened. I'm all wet." Another contraction seizes her.

"Your time is coming," Margriet says. "We must get you back." Katrin reaches her hands out towards the water as they pull her away.

They settle Katrin into a bed at the infirmary. In the hours before she must start to push, she relaxes between contractions and listens to Margriet's stories about previous births. Anna helps her drink posset made with birthing herbs, after first testing the hot water with her finger. Together they sing folk songs about knights, princesses and magic spells.

After slipping oiled fingertips inside of Katrin to check the position of the baby, Margriet announces that it is time to push. The tone of the room soon changes. Blood

vessels pop on Katrin's face. Anna becomes pale at each contraction, her white fingers gripping the bedpost.

"Is this normal? Is she going to be alright?" she asks Margriet.

Smiling, Margriet forces her to sit. "She's doing perfectly. Don't worry. I have done this many times before." At Katrin's next scream, however, Anna jumps to her feet.

"I can't do this. My mother," she gasps. "My mother screamed like that before she died. Make it stop!"

"That will not happen here," Margriet says in a steady voice. "I know the cries of birth better than you do. These are the healthy cries of a woman whose body is strong enough to do what it was meant for. You are witnessing a miracle."

"A miracle?"

"Of course it's a miracle. This is the moment when a woman becomes God." She leans toward them co-conspiratorially. "Men think they are so much better, but their bodies will never give life."

Anna nods somewhat dubiously. Margriet kisses her clammy cheek before directing the attention to Katrin, who cries, "Mother, where are you?" as her entire body is seized in a convulsion.

Margriet hushes her. "I'm right here. Anna will sit by you and help you to breathe." Anna, still biting her bloodless lip, sits on the bed. They all breathe together, picking up where the other has left off, urging each other on. They establish a rhythm to the breath: the inhales nourish, the exhales cleanse.

Margriet sits between Katrin's legs, measuring the dilation by the length of her hand. A warm breeze comes off the water and through an open window, caressing the exposed skin. "Here it comes," she calls. "You're going to have to work hard now."

Katrin grunts and pants, releasing guttural, primordial sounds, as if the earth itself has cracked open.

"Help her!" Anna screams. "Do something!"

"Come look at this," Margriet says. Anna tentatively peeks between Katrin's knees.

"What is that?" she gasps. A pale bluish form emerges from the blood soaked, pink mouth that stretches wide like lips.

"That is the head." With a few more heaves, the entire body appears on a wave of blood and liquid.

"Oh it's here," Anna says. Katrin collapses and Anna catches her head. "You are alive!" she exclaims.

"Am I?" Katrin asks, smiling tiredly. The baby's first cry resounds through the air. "I feel as if I had just been reborn."

After cutting it free of its mother's body, Margriet cradles the child. For a moment, it looks up at her with knowing, wise eyes. Margriet experiences a flash of recognition. "You came back to me," she says. "I knew you would."

Anna takes the baby and sprinkles water over its face, wiping the blood away with a towel. She proceeds to clean the rest of the infant's body, before giving it to Katrin. The baby nestles into Katrin, filling her arms with its warmth. She whispers, "You're finally here. I've been waiting for so long."

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She gives her breast to the baby, who suckles with such force that Katrin yelps, then laughs. As the three women watch the tiny lips rhythmically suck, the bells from the Beguinage ring to signal the evening. The chimes have faded and the only sound is that of the baby's gulps when the sun sets. The pink fingers of its rays reach across the water, almost close enough to touch the women, or even to take them away.

Afterword:

A Visionary Femininity

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The lay religious women's movement of the Beguines – specifically in the Low Countries in the mid-thirteenth century - allowed women a space in which to exist at least partially independently from the pervasive male-dominated clerical and secular worlds. This historical episode, era and location are the background for the linguistic space of “Minnewater” in which the central characters navigate and put pressure on the masculine boundaries created for them. Each character has been uniquely affected by contemporary misogynistic discourse, which claims that the female body is so contaminated by its sexuality that it inhibits access to divinity. The women initially express anxiety caused by this discourse, as well as individual desire, through visionary relationships with Jesus. As each struggles with the trauma of her past, they collectively join to find a way to be female in a context that has abused, regulated, and restricted them. This change occurs as they establish physical relationships with one another, acceptance of their bodies and connection to a female spiritual figure. They ultimately access spirituality not through denying their bodies as the Church demands but through incorporating sexuality and physicality into a unique religious experience. Even though they manage to construct a place for themselves at the Beguinage, the male voice – specifically that of the priest and the Pope - continually edits, regulates and dictates their experience and visions. The story ends as the ever-present male authority looms over the joyous, generative space they have created.

One of the clearest ways in which the women express their self-identification is through their visions of Jesus. In the first scene, Anna, Margriet, and Katrin relate to a figure of Jesus on the cross via the three classic female roles of daughter, mother and

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lover/wife, respectively. Margery Kempe, who lived from around 1373-1440 and left her husband in later life to pursue religious devotion, envisions God as saying to her:

Therefore I prove that you are a very daughter to me and a mother also . . . and a spouse . . . When you study to please me, then are you a true daughter. When you weep and mourn for my pain and my passion, then are you a true mother to have compassion of her child . . . And, when you sorrow because you are so long from the bliss of heaven, then are you a true spouse and a wife, for it is fitting for a wife to be with her husband and to have no very joy until she comes to his presence. (Kempe 24)

Before her religious conversion, Margery spent her entire life primarily defined as first a daughter, then a wife and finally a mother. It makes sense then that, even after she has rejected these roles in her material life, she plays them out spiritually. Each role is defined by its purpose and relation to the man: a daughter pleases the father, a mother cares for the son and a wife strives to be united with and wholly dependent upon the husband. Though Margery and the fictional characters of “Minnewater” reject flesh and blood men, their self-conception still revolves around a man: Jesus. They are confined to roles that are allotted to them as women yet use these roles as launching points into individualized, personal relationships with Jesus.

Anna, Margriet and Katrin complicate traditional gender roles by envisioning Jesus as a mother or a female lover, feminizing his body and characteristics. Male and female religious writers in the late Middle Ages increasingly emphasized Jesus’ femininity as well. Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth century mystic and prolific writer, has a complicated take on Jesus’ femininity, categorizing some aspects of God’s personality as masculine and others as feminine. Nowhere is Jesus actually a woman; instead he exhibits typically feminine qualities. Julian discusses Jesus’ motherhood:

We imagine that our mothers bear us only to pain and to death; but our own mother Jesus who is all love, blessed may he be, bears us to joy and

endless life. Thus he sustains us within himself through love; and he suffered for the utmost time so as to endure the sharpest torments and the most grievous pains that ever were or ever shall be . . . The mother may give her child her milk to suck, but our beloved mother Jesus feeds us with himself. (Julian 65-66)

To explain Jesus' feminine side, Julian relies on the traditional notions of motherhood that the mother is generative, sacrificial, loving and nurturing.¹ She highlights the suffering inherent to motherhood, perhaps reflecting the very real danger of childbirth in the Middle Ages.

Though Julian illuminates certain realities about what it meant to be a woman at that time, she is far from presenting a full picture of womanhood. Instead, she and other writers use the *concept* of femininity to interpret and develop Jesus' character.

Furthermore, not only is Jesus not an actual woman, but he is better than any woman since he suffers and labors for the entire world – not just for one child - and delivers his children into eternal life instead of to death. In some ways, the literary tradition of Jesus as mother glosses over the experience of real women and diminishes their importance; it also reflects the trend of growing emphasis on emotional piety. As Bynum explains:

Seeing Christ or God or the Holy Spirit as female is thus part of a later medieval devotional tradition that is characterized by increasing preference for analogies taken from human relationships, a growing sense of God as loving and accessible, a general tendency toward fulsome language, and a more accepting reaction to all natural things, including the physical human body. (Bynum, Jesus as Mother 131)

¹ Bynum summarizes the basic conceptions about motherhood in the Middle Ages: “We find three basic stereotypes of the female or the mother: the female is generative (the foetus is made of her very matter) and sacrificial in her generation (birth pangs); the female is loving and tender (a mother cannot help loving her own child); the female is nurturing (she feeds the child with her own bodily fluid)” (Bynum, Jesus as Mother 131).

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Such a trend at least allowed for femininity to enter a conception of the divine. In this way, Jesus' femininity gives the characters of "Minnewater" a direct way to relate to the divine.

This is particularly important since the characters exist within a culture and religion in which male superiority is divinely ordained, and the woman is not only inferior but corrupted by her body. According to the creation myth, "Men . . . were made in God's image and for 'the glory of God'; women were made in man's image and for 'the glory of man'" (Laskaya 37). Anne Laskaya also offers a helpful overview of the way in which women were viewed in the late Middle Ages:

First and foremost, the dominant cultural discourse surrounding femininity encouraged the perception of women as physical objects, as bodies. They were identified with the flesh, with nature, and the 'concupiscential part' of humanity. The written discourse surrounding 'the feminine' in the Middle Ages stressed woman as body and frequently found her sexuality powerfully frightening and often repulsive. (33)

The only way for a woman to be spiritual is to deny her body and its appetites:

"[virginity] was the one way women could atone for, and transcend, the legacy of Eve with all of its abhorrent faults" (37). The women in "Minnewater" struggle with how to experience the full range of their bodily and emotional sensations – from pain to pleasure – in such a regulatory, oppressive context. They initially express the inexpressible through their visions of Jesus. As they untangle themselves from the grip of the chauvinistic culture, however, they begin to find a way to reconcile all the aspects of their femaleness.

When Anna, the youngest, envisions Jesus as her mother, she expresses her need for a mother. In emphasizing the pain of motherhood, she reveals anxiety around her body, its nourishment and its sexuality. After staring at the cross for a long time:

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Her vision blurs before her eyes, and all that she can distinguish is the dark red blood spilling from the wound in his side. Opening her mouth slightly, she tastes the blood on her tongue, sweet and warm as milk. Jesus' arms encircle, cradle and rock her. "My child," he says, "drink of me." (Griswold 1)

Jesus fills the void left by her mother's death, yet his motherhood is tinged with pain and sacrifice, as it is in Anna's mind after watching her mother die in childbirth. Furthermore, Anna has only experienced her own body as painful, uncomfortable and dangerous (for example, through her stepfather's abuse), which is why she connects to Jesus through his pain and uses pain to express desire. When she reenacts his Passion later in the story, she experiences masochistic sexual pleasure in the guise of religious ecstasy. According to Rudolph Bell, many female saints, mystics and writers in the Middle Ages engaged in such self-injurious activities. Catherine of Siena, for example, barely ate from the age of sixteen onwards, flagellated herself multiple times per day, wore hair shirts and deprived herself of sleep, among other more gruesome practices (Bell 43). He argues that she adopted these practices in part to escape marriage forced on her by her parents.² For Catherine as for Anna, pain is a mode of access to divinity, fulfillment, and often eroticism.

Anna is deeply anxious about becoming a woman and the sexuality accompanying this transition. By engaging in extreme self-starvation, Anna keeps her body from growing and probably from menstruating as well. In so doing, Anna displays many symptoms of anorexia. Bell discusses the similarities between modern and "holy" anorexia:

Whether anorexia is holy or nervous depends on the culture in which the young woman strives to gain control of her life. In both instances anorexia begins as the girl fastens onto a highly valued societal goal (bodily health,

² See Bell's chapter "I, Catherine" for a more complete discussion.

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thinness, self-control in the twentieth century/ spiritual health, fasting, and self-denial in medieval Christendom). (20)

This obsession with a societal goal eventually becomes unhealthy and self-destructive, though the anorectic sees it as an empowering choice. Bell explains, “[The holy anorexic] rejects the passive, dependent Catholic religion of mediation through priests and intercession by saints, and so herself becomes a saint” (19). Anna bypasses church authority by developing a direct, personal relationship with Christ through her visions. She controls access to her body by restricting food intake and making herself sexually undesirable, starving herself into a pre-pubescent body. After all, the culture she inhabits supports the idea that the only way for a woman to become closer to God, to be “as good as” a man, is for her to deny the physical appetite that supposedly characterizes her as a woman. For this reason, Anna does not allow herself to experience nourishment or sexual pleasure physically and limits her appetite and ecstasy to the spiritual realm. Since it is acceptable for Anna to yearn for Jesus, he becomes the substitute for the food she does not eat and for the mother that she has lost.

Margriet, whose defining life role is that of a mother, apprehends Jesus’ childlike pain. She describes Jesus:

His eyes hold a helpless, uncomprehending pain that reminds her of the countless sick children she has nursed. They do not understand why they suffer, do not yet know that God is unjust. Any mother would die rather than let her child be hurt, so how could a benevolent God sacrifice his only son? She lifts Jesus off the cross, washes away his blood and holds him until he falls asleep and forgets all his troubles. (Griswold 1)

Plagued by guilt over her son’s death, Margriet wants to rescue Jesus who was, in some way, forsaken by his father. Her mothering of Jesus is an attempt at self-redemption. Yet, as she was powerless to rescue her son, she is powerless to rescue Jesus. Though she

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knows that she is supposed to trust God's ultimate judgment, Margriet harbors deep resentment against God and his ways. She is conflicted between feeling powerful in her role as a mother and midwife, and also confined to this role by the larger society. Margriet becomes defensive when Katrin questions her life's choices: "I need no reward. I did what I was meant to do. It was my duty to God and to my husband" (12). While Katrin considers abortion, Margriet never had a choice in doing what God and everyone else expected of her. She tells Katrin: "You think you have a choice, but you don't. Your body is a vessel to carry and deliver. Once it is tired and dried up, you no longer have purpose in the world" (13). Katrin represents an opportunity for Margriet to be a mother again but in a new way this time: to express her love of midwifery and to start a family outside – or at least on the fringe of – a patriarchal domestic structure.

Katrin relates to Jesus as a lover. While many historical women used bridal imagery to form an erotic union with Christ, Katrin has lived outside of acceptable society as a prostitute and bypasses the conventionality of the wedding with Christ.³ Like the other two women, she is drawn to Jesus' pain and, like Margriet, feels the womanly responsibility to ease his pain. Since her realm of power is sexual, while Margriet's is maternal, she pleasures Jesus in order to comfort him. Her reaction to Jesus is defined by desire:

She cannot believe that, under that leather loincloth, he looks like other men, shriveled, brown and worm-like. Instead, he must have something beautiful, soft, like a flower that has to be warmed and caressed before it opens petal by petal. She kisses his thin lips until they glow with saliva. After tracing her tongue down the rest of his body, she fills her mouth with him. He bursts, and she drinks his sweet milk. (Griswold 1-2)

³ Margery Kempe, for example, has an explicit wedding to Christ, who weds her with the traditional vow: "I take you, Margery, for my wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler, for richer, for poorer, so that you may be buxom and obedient to do what I bid you do. For, daughter, there was never a child so buxom to the mother as I shall be to you, both in well and in woe, to help you and comfort you" (Kempe, 64).

Her disgust with the male anatomy hints at her negative experiences with men through prostitution. Katrin craves a female-oriented, vaginal sexuality – as evidenced by the metaphor of a flower for female genitalia - which resurfaces in her homoerotic encounter with Anna. Like Anna, Katrin feminizes Jesus in order to attribute typically female characteristics to him: his semen, like breast milk, is nurturing. This femininity reveals her desire for a reciprocal sexual encounter in which both parties are pleased and nurtured.

These interactions with Jesus serve as launching points for each woman into a fuller understanding and acceptance of herself. Anna begins to let go of self-hatred through a sexual encounter with Katrin, which allows them both to take joy and comfort in their bodies and to nurture each other just as they had initially envisioned being nurtured by Jesus. Anna achieves an ecstasy similar to the one she felt from her vision with Jesus, yet this ecstasy is not underwritten by pain. She orgasms:

The friction of their pelvises brushing against each other catches Anna in such a way that she gasps, laughs, wants to giggle and scream. It is like a fire between her legs, like the smell of baking bread, licking sugar, dunking her head in a basin of freezing water, like running up a hill. (Griswold 25)

Anna's orgasm combines all the senses, which is significant since she usually cuts herself off from sensual pleasure, particularly by denying herself food. Allowing herself this orgasm may translate into allowing herself to eat. When Katrin tells her, "This is the best part of being a woman," she helps Anna to associate femaleness with a positive feeling (25). This incident is a basis for Anna's movement away from self-hatred and self-mutilation. For Katrin, it is a realization of the desire for Jesus that was actually a stand-in for desire for another woman and a different sexual experience.

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Margriet's turn away from the patriarchal systems that had dominated her life comes as she finds a way to make her profession empowering instead of oppressive. She becomes depressed after being rejected by Katrin: "I'm tired of doing my duty, just as I've always done" (18). When Katrin decides to keep the baby and asks Margriet to be the midwife, she offers Margriet the possibility to start a matriarchy. Katrin convinces her: "It will be different, just us this time. Please. I cannot do it without you. I need you" (19). Margriet is persuaded by the possibility that they could start a family without the imposition of men; furthermore, she feels the familiar calling to mothering. Katrin's irreverence for tradition and deviant lifestyle also gives Margriet license to express grief over her son's death and anger at God, which she never had the chance to do when her son actually died. She admits, "I will never forgive God" (21). Margriet resents the male power determining and presiding over her life. She ultimately realizes power and pride in the womb, not in a male God, during the final birth scene.

Katrin's religious epiphany occurs when she leaves the restrictive, prescriptive, masculine space of the Church for the feminine, fluid, watery realm of "Lady Love." Minnewater, the name of a canal in Bruges where the Beguinage is located, is etymologically significant in that *minne* is a feminine Dutch noun meaning love. Water is often seen as a feminine image. Beguine writers frequently used *minne* to refer to God, God's love or "the soul's ecstatic and erotic pleading with God" (Thiébaux 390). While men tended to discuss God's love in Latin, women mystics more commonly used the vernacular *minne* which enabled them to "gain access to a whole system of immediate meanings and images in the erotic vocabulary" (390). The concept of Minne allowed them to explain God's love in a way that incorporated the whole range of their

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experience, from suffering to eroticism: “The ambiguity created by the Beguines’ use of *minne* is one way for them to speak of their perception that, in the relationship between creature and creator, there are elements of horror and awe, the wrath of God, as well as fascination and love” (Murk-Jansen 56). For Beguine Beatrice of Nazareth, Minne encompasses all of her spiritual being: “She feels now in herself a divine strength in Minne, a clear purity, a ghostly sweetness, a delicious freedom, a knowing wisdom, an intimacy and symmetry with God” (Beatrice 407). Fellow Beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg stages a dialogue between her own soul and “Lady Minne,” who is like a fickle lady of courtly romances (Mechthild 394-397). By explaining God as a changeable lover, Mechthild reveals a more difficult or negative side of God that often does not get vocalized. Lady Minne is significant for the characters in “Minnewater” particularly because she is a manifestation of God’s love in female form: she becomes a kind of deity in herself.

It takes a vision of Lady Love to convince Katrin that she can accept her pregnancy on her own terms. Margriet’s argument that God gave her this life does not move her because she is rebellious against the idea of a male authority figure. Katrin’s unwanted pregnancy – particularly since it came from an abusive client - makes her feel powerless over her body and life: “I didn’t ask for this . . . I want it to go away” (Griswold 12). At the canal she manages to consider her pregnancy outside of the two male institutions that had dominated her life – the Church and the brothel. She realizes that “the baby is hers, it is part of her and she will bear it. She feels truly pregnant for the first time” (15). Initially, she is pregnant with the burden that men imposed on her; this

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time, she is pregnant with a gift from Lady Love. She is able to accept the baby when it comes from a female source.

Katrin goes into labor at the canal after realizing the significance of Minnewater's name: "Minne- Love, a woman's love in all its mysteries and complexities, as fluid, deep, reflective, glistening, pure and life-containing as the water itself" (29). The women share the experience of birth, which connects them to a female tradition passed on through stories and midwifery. Through the birth itself, each woman fulfills, acts out or completes the role that she had initially envisioned in relation to Jesus. Anna is haunted by the traumatic memory of her mother's death: "My mother screamed like that before she died. Make it stop!" (30). Margriet helps her to realize that the female body is actually generative and unique, capable of the miracle of childbirth. When Margriet sees her dead son returning to her in the infant, her guilt over her son's death is assuaged. Furthermore, she is able to be a mother again – a role that makes her feel powerful and proud. For Katrin, this birth is a rebirth out of her previous way of life into an empowering community of women. Her body is no longer a tool for her job or an object of desire, but a life-giving force over which she has control. The presence of the canal is felt even through the last scene: "A warm breeze comes off the water and through an open window, caressing the exposed skin" (31). Lady Love is present and nurturing, guiding and encouraging the arrival of new life.

Despite the female-oriented community that emerges towards the end of the story, the Beguines are continually monitored by the male authorities, as evidenced through the correspondence between the priest and Pope. For example, after his meeting with Anna, Father Phillippe writes to the Pope:

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Jesus told her that she must feel His pain to become closer to Him . . . So she took a lash to her own skin, beating herself until she was truly full of the Lord's presence – and thus she appeared to me, this poor handmaiden of Christ, radiant with the Divine. (18)

The priest figures Anna's self-mutilation as divinely inspired and wants to use her to gain prestige for himself and the Beguinage. Anna matures and becomes happier and healthier as she learns to appreciate and nourish her body by abandoning the misogynistic discourse surrounding it. Yet the Pope and priest want to restrict a full experience of the female body, stressing that chastity of women is imperative to their holiness and must be strictly guarded. Though the priest is not able to regulate the behavior of the Beguines too strictly, particularly after Katrin intimidates and shames him sexually, the authority of the Pope looms over the piece, with the power to disband the family the women have formed. Furthermore, the male discourse is written, whereas the female's is experienced, felt or spoken. Historically, the male writing survives while the female voice is lost since it was often the male priest or confessor who wrote the *vitae* of religious women.

Male authority continues to threaten the women's autonomy through the end of the story:

As the three women watch the tiny lips rhythmically suck, the bells from the Beguinage ring to signal the evening. The chimes have faded and the only sound is that of the baby's gulps when the sun sets. The pink fingers of its rays reach across the water, almost close enough to touch the women or even to take them away. (32)

Given the impending visit of the Pope's inquisitor, the characters may not be able to survive for long in such an independent state, in which case Lady Love must transport them to another place, a place that perhaps does not yet exist. The final imagery suggests that the characters are both suspended above time – in the timeless tradition of birth and

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sunsets - and are trapped in a very specific moment and location by the bells. They have adapted to the demands of their time period by manipulating existing images and are also far beyond their time. In fact, the Beguines soon proved to be far too progressive for the era.

In 1310, the Beguine Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake for heresy and, at the 1312 Council of Vienne, the Pope issued a decree against Beguines. At the end of the story, it is evident that the skepticism and fear about too much independence for women has already begun. Later writers such as Julian and Margery strike a dangerous balance between claiming and denying their own authority. Julian protects herself by saying:

But God forbid that you should take me for a teacher. Such is not my intention and never has been. I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail, but I know what I am saying . . . Ought I to believe, simply because I am a woman, that I should not tell you of God's goodness? When I saw the vision I also saw that he wants it to be known . . . Soon you will forget me, a mere wretch; you will cease to notice me, and will behold Jesus who is teacher of all. (Julian 33)

Though she clearly resents decrees against women teaching, Julian knows what a precarious and dangerous position she has put herself in. She navigates the system and its boundaries: one moment debasing herself, the next asserting the validity of her word. She ultimately causes herself to disappear: the price she must pay for speaking is invisibility. Just as Julian recedes behind her unique visions and bold statements, the characters in "Minnewater" fade away into their vision of Lady Love.

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