The Dissertation Committee for Jayita Sinha Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

"An Ant Swallowed the Sun": Women Mystics in Medieval Maharashtra and Medieval England

Committee:

Alison Frazier, Supervisor

Rupert Snell, Co-Supervisor

Elizabeth Richmond-Garza

Martha Selby

Cynthia Talbot

Hannah Wojciehowski

“An Ant Swallowed the Sun”: Women Mystics in Medieval Maharashtra and Medieval England

by

Jayita Sinha M.A.

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Dedication

To R.M., who knows everything

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"An Ant Swallowed the Sun": Women Mystics in Medieval Maharashtra and Medieval England

Jayita Sinha, Ph.D

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Supervisors: Alison Frazier and Rupert Snell

This project examines mystical discourse in medieval India and medieval England as a site for the construction of new images of women and the feminine. I study the poems of three women mystics from western India, Muktabai (c. 1279-1297), Janabai (c. 1270-1350) and Bahinabai (c. 1628-1700) in conjunction with the prose accounts of the two most celebrated women mystics of late medieval England, Julian of Norwich (c. 1343-after 1413) and Margery Kempe (c. 1373-after 1438). My principal areas of inquiry are: self-authorizing strategies, conceptions of divinity, and the treatment of the domestic.

I find that the three Hindu mystics deploy a single figure, the guru, as their primary source of spiritual authority. In contrast, the self-authorization of Julian and Margery is more diffuse, for the two mystics record testimony from a variety of sources, including Christ himself, to prove their spiritual credentials. The texts under scrutiny offer variously gendered models of the divine; three of the five mystics show preference for a feminized god. Julian and Bahinabai invest their deities with physical and mental attributes that were labelled feminine, such as feeding and nurturing. However, both women accept God's sexed body as fundamentally male. Janabai is the most innovative of the mystics in her gendering of the divine; her deity Vitthal's sexed body can be either

male or female, although (s)he typically undertakes chores that were the province of women. Janabai is not the only mystic to attempt a reconciliation of the domestic and the spiritual. As narrated in the *Booke*, Christ expresses willingness to help Margery with her baby, although the text is silent about whether this offer was accepted or not. In addition, Margery undertakes domestic tasks for God and his family, thus investing them with a new dignity.

My study demonstrates that as the mystics address questions of women's relationship with the divine, they go beyond binary frameworks, positing fluid boundaries between male and female, body and spirit, and mundane and spiritual. Thus, these texts can be harnessed to engage creatively with the model of inclusive feminine spirituality expounded by feminist thinker Luce Irigaray, particularly in *Between East and West* (2002).

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Introduction: Answering Why and How

This project examines mystical discourse in medieval India and medieval England as a site for the construction of new images of women and the feminine. I study the poems of three women mystics from western India, Muktabai (c. 1279-1297), Janabai (c. 1270-1350) and Bahinabai (c. 1628-1700) in conjunction with the prose accounts of the two most celebrated women mystics of late medieval England, Julian of Norwich (c. 1343-after 1413) and Margery Kempe (c. 1373-after 1438). I find that as the mystics address questions of women's relationship with the divine, they go beyond binary frameworks, positing fluid boundaries between male and female, body and spirit, and mundane and spiritual. Thus, these texts can be harnessed to engage creatively with the model of inclusive feminine spirituality expounded by feminist thinker Luce Irigaray.

The chief areas of inquiry in my comparative study are: strategies for self-authorization, formulations of the divine, and the treatment of women's everyday realities. Authorizing gestures are fundamental to mystical discourse; as Michel De Certeau (1986) has observed, "the truth value of the discourse does not depend on the truth value of its propositions, but on the fact of its being in the very place at which the Speaker speaks (the Spirit, '*el que habla*')" (92). The mystic must demonstrate that his speech emerges from the Word of God for it to be accepted as authentic. The utterances of women mystics were especially prone to suspicion; in medieval Europe it was was a truism that women were more carnal and therefore more liable to sin, while Hindu women were barred from spiritual discipline by Brahminical law books. Despite this devaluation of their gender, how did the women mystics establish their credentials? Did their strategies for self-legitimization differ significantly from those of their male counterparts?

My investigation of the conceptualizations of the divine responds to feminist concerns about the crippling effects of a masculine deity. As Irigaray (1993), a long supporter of sexual difference, has asserted, the lack of a god made in their own image adversely affects women, for not only are they "forced to comply with models that do not match them," they are also denied the opportunity to "move forward into love, art, thought, toward their ideal and divine fulfillment" ("Divine Women" 64). A feminine god, a sensible transcendental will provide every woman with a new horizon that will empower her to "accomplish her female subjectivity" ("Divine Women" 64). However, this ideal will not mirror that of the masculine God, for Irigaray (1993) is emphatic that women should not be sundered from their divine: "Why do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a realization—here and now—in and through the body?" (*Ethics* 148). Drawing on Hindu, particularly yogic, frameworks, Irigaray (2002) insists that the divine can be experienced through the corporeal: "It seems to me that Schopenhauer could have learned from the traditions of India that the divine is not situated in an inaccessible transcendence. It is what I become, what I create. I become and I create (the) god(s) between immanence and transcendence" (43).[1] Irigaray's rejection of a masculine deity who is ineluctably Other, alien to the material world and human fleshliness, prompted my study of the diverse models of the divine offered by the female mystics. How do

[1] According to Irigaray (2002), one of the reasons for the rupture between transcendence and immanence is "the release of each man and each woman from concern for realizing each day the passage from the microcosm to the macrocosm, from the mortal to the immortal, from tearing apart to unity" (44). The inculcation of yogic principles can generate a world view in which the lines between human and divine, the spiritual and the bodily, are not as sharply drawn. The cultivation of breathing in particular fosters respect for the female body in that breath is life: "[Spiritual and religious practices that do not privilege breathing] become dogmatic by forgetting the gift that comes from the living world—in particular the vegetal world—and from human bodies—in particular female bodies" (51).

these women gender the divine? What relationships do they posit between God and the human world?

Another theme I pursue in my comparative study is the treatment of the domestic. How did the women mystics approach the socially sanctioned roles of wife and mother? Did these feminine roles impede their spiritual pursuits, or could they leverage them for spiritual gain? In both medieval India and medieval England, domestic chores were typically the province of women. In the works of the women mystics, are the tasks of cooking and cleaning positioned as antithetical to spiritual pursuits? Does God ever prepare meals and sweep floors, or does he disdain to undertake these tasks? Such an inquiry facilitates new interpretations, not only of the divine, but of women's work, which has been habitually denigrated. As feminist theologian Nicola Slee (1990) contends, "To discover the presence of God within the confines of the mundane and domestic is radically and explosively to transform these realities" (42).

I: Why Varkari and English Mystics?

Multiple considerations have influenced my choice of mystical traditions for my cross-cultural inquiry. My decision to put the Varkari and the English traditions of female sanctity in conversation was initially prompted by the abundance of the literature that is available, which permits a wide-ranging comparison of the mystics. Four collections of poems are attributed to Muktabai, reputedly the first of the Varkari women saints. Over a hundred poems of Janabai have been compiled, and the last of the principal women saints in western India, Bahinabai left a large corpus of poems in addition to an autobiographical account in verse. Likewise, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe produced voluminous accounts of their mystical experiences.

Julian composed two versions of Christ's revelations to her and Margery collaborated with a cleric to produce an autobiography that covers nearly five decades of her life.

Moreover, the lack of balance in the secondary literature that each tradition has generated was a possible advantage, enabling me to further critical understanding of both traditions. There are few scholarly studies of the Varkari saints in English, and even the secondary literature in Marathi is limited in quantity, perhaps because it was not until the 70s that the female mystics came to be studied independently of their male mentors and gurus. Thus, the compositions of the Varkari women saints are largely unexplored territory, in contrast to Julian and Margery's works, which have been examined extensively, and some may argue, even exhaustively. The plethora of critical lenses that have been used to read Julian's *Revelations* and Margery's *Booke* would potentially provide hermeneutic tools for my analysis of the Varkari women saints, a task for which there are few models. At the same time, I anticipated that the debt would be mutual; closer scrutiny of the themes and images employed by the Varkari women in their poetry would give me a novel point of entry into my English sources, perhaps enabling me to make an original contribution to an area that had already been well mined for insights by literary scholars, historians and feminists alike.

Furthermore, the lives of the three Varkari exemplars, along with Julian and Margery, display great heterogeneity with regard to their marital situations and class/caste identities. Muktabai was born into a family that was originally Brahmin, but her parents had been excommunicated from caste society. Hagiographical accounts and Muktabai's poems indicate that she remained unmarried and defied society by assuming the role of guru, traditionally reserved for men. Her older contemporary Janabai was a low-caste woman who worked as a

domestic servant in the house of the celebrated Varkari saint Namdev. Like Muktabai, she did not marry. In contrast, Bahinabai was one of the few women saints in medieval India to marry and have children. Born into an orthodox Brahmin family, she did not leave her husband in order to realize her spiritual ambitions, despite his early persecution of her.

Julian of Norwich may have married and may even have had children, but in all probability she was a widow when she was enclosed. As a woman with a living husband, Margery did not have easy access to the convent and the anchorhold and became an independent spiritual figure. She was born into a prosperous mercantile family; the mercantile ethic leaves its stamp on her worldly as well as her spiritual behaviors. Furthermore, Margery gave birth to no less than fourteen children; some of the most powerful passages of her narrative describe how she reconciles her maternal duties with her saintly duties. As we see, all the five women, even when they are aligned with the same sect, are not homogenous with respect to marital status and class identity. Consequently, my research has a broader scope and is not limited to women of one particular social stratum or to women who can be more comfortably classified as protofeminists in their rejection of marriage and motherhood.

II: Precedents for Interreligious Comparison

My attempt to put an Indian school of mystics in dialogue with their Western counterparts does not constitute a novel enterprise, although there are few book-length studies devoted solely to female figures. In his study of the social and political developments in western India in the seventeenth century, the judge and social reformer M. G. Ranade (1842-1901) expressed a widespread view by asserting the similarity of the saints of western India to the European reformers of the sixteenth century: “There is a curious parallel between the history of

the Reformation movement in Western Europe and the struggle represented by the lives and teachings and writings of these saints and prophets who flourished about the same time in Maharashtra" (149). Basing his comparison on the stories and legends of the saints, Indian and European, rather than on their writings, Ranade cannot comment on similarities and differences in doctrinal matters.

The Indian philosopher and saint R. D. Ranade shows greater awareness of the philosophical subtleties in the works of the saints he briefly compares in the preface to his magisterial *Mysticism in India* (1933). For instance, Ranade maintains that the teaching of the seventeenth-century Ramdas regarding the compatibility of a strenuous life of external activity with the spiritual life "is beautifully paralleled in the teaching of Ruysbroeck, who tells us that 'the most inward man must live his life in these two ways, namely, in work and in rest'" (xvii). The comparison of female mystics is even more brief, although Ranade insists that Varkari saints such as Muktabai and Janabai are well worthy of comparison with figures like Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena (xvi). He notes simply that the female saints of Maharashtra are less inclined to use sexual metaphors than their European counterparts and that they are "more subjective in their temperament, while those of the West are more or less activistic" (xvi). Ranade does not talk at length about the female Varkari mystics in his preface or even elsewhere in his survey of mysticism in western India. Like other scholars of his time, he treats women figures such as Muktabai and Janabai as appendages to their male gurus who are entitled to a brief note rather than a lengthy exegesis.

While Ranade's comments on the philosophical nuances of the texts under comparison may be insightful and penetrating, his analysis is driven by an agenda. He is keen to prove that

all mystics, despite differences in verbal expression, subscribe to an identical notion of an all-pervasive divinity. The similarities that he demonstrates will enable him to prove that mystical visions illustrate an objective truth and that mystics are credible repositories of supernal wisdom. While Ranade did not expressly declare his loyalty to the school of perennial philosophy, he can be aligned to the perennialists in his insistence on a common pattern underlying all mystical experience. As Robert Forman (1999) notes, the perennialists, who included such distinguished figures as Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) and Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), affirmed that "all religious experiences are similar and, further, that those experiences represent a direct contact with a (variously defined) absolute principle" (31). One noteworthy example of a cross-cultural comparison that uses an explicitly perennialist lens is Rudolf Otto's *Mysticism East and West* (1932), which compares the works of the Indian monistic philosopher and mystic Shankara and the medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart. As Forman observes, Otto egregiously simplifies the complex philosophies of both thinkers and ignores key concepts in their writings in order to further his perennialist project (32). Such exercises in comparison have "denuded the individual mystics and mystical traditions of their specific teachings" (Forman 32). The Perennialists have been indicted for multiple reasons, of which two are primary: their assumption that experience is independent of socio-linguistic structures and their flagrant misinterpretation of sources in order to prove their theses (Forman 30-31). Ranade's comparative effort can also be impeached on similar grounds: in his keenness to note similarities and thus prove the value of mystical insight, he glosses over the doctrinal or philosophical differences that exist in the texts under enquiry.

A more recent cross-cultural study that deserves mention is John Ramsaran's *English and Hindi Religious Poetry* (1973). In this work Ramsaran compares the medieval poet-saints from

North India with the metaphysical poets as well as Milton primarily in regard to their rhetorical strategies. Thus, he compares the mystical union as evoked by the Indian mystic Kabir with Thomas Traherne and Henry Vaughan's descriptions of their unitary experiences. Although Ramsaran does not dedicate any of his chapters solely to women saints, he provides a detailed study of the poems of the north Indian princess Mirabai, comparing her passionate love for God with that expressed by Richard Crashaw and George Herbert.

As the popularity of women saints grew in the 70s and they began to be studied in their own right, we find that they become the subject of essay and book-length comparative studies with greater frequency. For instance, S. S. Kabbina (1971) compares Mirabai with the fiery south Indian mystic Akka Mahadevi and in his well-known essay "On Women Saints," first published in 1982, poet and scholar A. K. Ramanujan examines the lives of women saints across India in an attempt to produce a typology of female Indian saints.

In recent years, Indian women saints have been recruited in increasing numbers for the purposes of interreligious comparison, perhaps due in part to the burgeoning of feminist theology and the subsequent interest in feminine models of the divine. Holly Hillgardner's 2014 dissertation examines "practices of longing" in Mirabai and Hadewijch, while Aparajit Chattopadhyay's 2014 doctoral thesis compares the poetry of Mirabai with that of Saint Theresa. One of the most noteworthy examples of cross-cultural analysis in recent years, Michelle Voss Roberts's *Dualities: A Theology of Difference* (2010) puts the fourteenth-century Kashmiri mystic Lalleswari in dialogue with the thirteenth-century European visionary Mechthild of Magdeburg. In her reading of the works of the two women, Roberts finds that "the prevalence of fluidity in their relational visions calls us away from separative models of the self and towards

selfhood in relation" (138). Moreover, she speculates that each mystic's preference for images of air and water can be traced to her own bodily experiences: "Mechthild and Lalleswari's metaphors of fluidity are rooted in bodily experience and therefore can speak to one another" (15).

Although Roberts's comparison of Lalleswari and Mechthild is in the service of feminist theology, her careful elucidation of the intellectual and spiritual traditions to which the two women were heir has been a model for my own project. Roberts does not dwell on the socio-historical contexts of the two mystics, but her investigation of the philosophical and theological systems that frame their works is exhaustive. As a result, she does not blur the distinctions between ideas that may be superficially similar but have emerged from distinct religious contexts. Like Roberts, I have made every effort to contextualize the key ideas in the compositions of the five mystics I study, but at the same time I have also clarified the historical milieus the women inhabited.

Above all, I am sensitive to the literary resonances of the works of the mystics, which aligns my comparative effort with that of Ramsaran as well. I examine the imagery employed along with rhetorical devices like irony and contradiction, in addition to the literary genres in which the women cast their insights. Consequently, my comparison is more multilayered than that of Roberts, and encompasses modes of literary expression, religious concepts, and historical background.

III: Methodology

My approach to the works of the Varkari and English mystics has been shaped by Rita Sherma's notion of a "hermeneutics of intersubjectivity" (2011), a method that allows for

rigorous critical engagement at the same time that it encourages cultural interchange. Sherma defines this mode of hermeneutics as "the effort of the human mind to fully understand, process, internalize, and be transformed by that which it encounters" (13). The openness to the Other that marks the culmination of Sherma's proposed method follows from the recognition that texts and cultures that embody the Other must be scrupulously contextualized to facilitate understanding. The awareness of "particular historical, geographical, and societal contexts" (2) will enable us to integrate "our deepest understanding of the self-perception of the Other into our conceptual portrait of the Other" (5).

In my study of Varkari and English mystics, divided from me by a temporal as well as an ideological gulf, I pay close attention to the socio-historical formations that shaped their spiritual practices and their articulations of the mystical encounter. Julian's visions of a bleeding Christ, Margery's frenzied crying and Bahinabai's account of a talking calf are certainly incongruous in a determinedly secular environment. I do not question the veracity of the mystics, but elucidate the social and cultural contexts which enabled these spiritual experiences. In accordance with Sherma's prescriptions, I thus integrate the self-perception of the women I study into my analysis instead of exposing their intellectual or moral "inadequacies" in the light of the values that we hold dear today.

As I clarify my method in a comparative project, I must also take cognizance of the charges that have been levelled against comparison as an intellectual tool. Once hailed as the scientific method *par excellence*, comparison has been denounced in recent years for its complicity in the colonialist project:

> Comparison … is seen as a homogenizing process rooted in the encyclopedic ambitions and evolutionary models of nineteenth-century thought—an approach that distorts the uniqueness of the objects being compared, reduces them to variants on a common standard, and relies on a downgrading of certain cultures in relation to others. (Felski and Friedman 1)

In my own comparative enterprise, I have sought to counter the most damning charges against comparison though my emphasis on historical contextualization and my adoption of the hermeneutics of intersubjectivity. While I cannot undertake a sustained defense of comparative endeavors here, my elaboration of the socio-historical formations in which the mystics were positioned as well as the intellectual contexts which shaped their works enables me to acknowledge the unique specificity of all the texts under examination. Moreover, I use Sherma's hermeneutic to orient myself in relation to both the traditions I analyze; the self-perceptions of the Varkari as well as the English mystics are incorporated into my study, and consequently, checks are created for any tendency I may have to hierarchize the two cultures.

It is important that I clarify the terminology I employ in this interreligious study, for it is largely derived from Western Christianity. I use both "mystic" and "saint" as descriptive labels for the women I examine, although they are affiliated with two distinct religious traditions. In his seminal work *The Mystic Fable* (1982), Certeau charts the history of the word "mystic," and demonstrates that it was only in the sixteenth century that it came to acquire the constellation of meanings that we associate with it today. In the early Middle Ages, "corpus mysticum" was the commonly used expression for the eucharist, but in the second half of the twelfth century, it was used instead to designate the Church. Certeau explains that in the wake of the Third Lateran

Council (1179), which was convened to introduce clerical reform, "the Church body gathered strength, became clericalized, opaque" (86). Consequently, "mystical" was imbued with the meaning of secret and inaccessible. In the sixteenth century, "mystic" took on the meaning "spiritual" as well, and in the seventeenth century the word occurs frequently in religious works and treatises on law and medicine, where it serves to "qualify any object, real or ideal, the existence or signification of which eludes direct knowledge" (97). In the seventeenth century, a "mystical science" or a "mystic theology" came into being, taking its inspiration from the works of Dionysius the Areopagite and incorporating the writings of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, among others.

Despite the Christian origins of the word, "mystic" was adopted by Indian thinkers to denote a certain type of religious figure. Philosopher R. D. Ranade was one of the first Indian thinkers to undertake this lexical transplantation, defining mysticism as "that attitude of mind which involves a direct, immediate, first-hand intuitive apprehension of God" (xiii). As a result of his unmediated experience of the divine, the mystic achieves singular insight into the nature of reality. Moreover, mysticism "teaches a full-fledged morality in the individual, and a life of absolute good to the society" (xl). This morally perfected individual who has acquired knowledge of reality through direct experience is the Indian mystic as understood by Ranade.

Karel Werner (1989) is more self-reflexive in his use of "mystic" as a descriptive category and observes that mysticism "has been used in the context of the Indian spiritual tradition both by European and Indian authors, often without any attempt to define it" (20). In his explanation of mysticism, Werner accepts the three stages of the mystical journey as delineated by Western theologians (via purgativa, via illuminative, and via unitiva) as a valid framework for

interpreting Indian mysticism as well. He characterizes the mystical goal as "the realization of the ultimate reality which requires detachment from the immediate relative reality" (29). Likewise I too recognize that mysticism addresses ontological concerns and that some variety of unitive experience represents the culmination of mystical endeavor. In my definition, mysticism refers to any experience which is felt as immediate and establishes intimate contact with ultimate reality, whether this reality is conceived of theistically, or whether it is understood as the impersonal source of being or even as void.[2] This broad formulation of mysticism, which is aligned with that proposed by Werner, accommodates all five women under study irrespective of their religious affiliations.

Like mystic, the word saint too has a complex history and is anchored in the Christian tradition. However, it is important not to elide the diverse models of sanctity that exist within Christianity itself. In his typology of Christian saints, André Vauchez (1981) identifies various categories of saints in the medieval Western world. For instance, "popular saints" largely comprised men and women, usually of modest origins, who had met with a violent end. Local saints, in contrast, were mainly drawn from the ranks of the elite, and their stories received extensive documentation. In the non-Mediterranean West, one of the most common figures to become the object of a local cult was the leader, religious or secular, who suffered for a cause while in Italy, asceticism was an important marker of sanctity. In addition, women saints

[2] In my conception of mysticism, I do not intervene in the debate over the immediacy of mystical experience. Constructivist interpreters of religion like Steven Katz and Wayne Proudfoot maintain that mystical experience is always mediated by the beliefs of the subject as well as the spiritual discipline he follows. One of the first to articulate this position, Katz (1978) is insistent that "the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experiences" (26). Thus, mystical experience is determined by the subject's religious beliefs, and reveals more about the mystic himself than it does about God or reality. All mystics, however, report this experience as unmediated, and I therefore emphasize that for any experience to be categorized as mystical, the subject himself must experience it as immediate.

increased in importance between the twelfth and the mid-fifteenth centuries; as Vauchez states, "after 1305, two out of three of the lay persons whose sainthood was recognized by the Church were women" (269).

Surprisingly, the canonization process, Christianity's authoritative recognition of sanctity, has its origins as late as the early years of the twelfth century, when a procedure was established in Rome and Latium to demonstrate the sanctity of the deceased. For the faithful, however, canonization was not the only means to ratify holiness, and the difference between the canonized *sancti* and the uncanonized *beati*, figures revered by local communities, was frequently ignored in practice.

How did the popular mind conceive of sanctity? According to Vauchez, for the vast majority of laypersons, sanctity was markedly corporeal, "an energy (virtus) which expressed itself through a body" (427). The incorruptibility of the saint's corpse and the fragrance it emitted were tangible manifestations of the virtus which defined sainthood. The clergy accepted these physiological markers of sainthood, but also insisted on the importance of the saint's inner life. As Richard Kieckhefer (1984) observes, the saint as defined by the Church had three important dimensions: a saint leads a life of "heroic virtue" (3), has gone to heaven, and is the subject of a cult that is sanctioned by the Church.

What model(s) of holiness did the Indian tradition uphold? To what degree can we trace resemblances between the exemplar of sanctity as conceived in medieval Hinduism, and the saint grounded in the Christian tradition? In the compositions of the saints of western India, the word

that is used most often for models of holiness is *sant*.[3] Despite verbal echoes of the English "saint," the Marathi sant has an entirely different etymology; it has been traced to the Sanskrit *sat*, a richly polyphonous word whose meanings include "truth" and "consciousness." *Sant* may refer to the knower of truth, or to one who inhabits the highest level of consciousness. Thus, the very word indicates that the Varkari exemplar of holiness has knowledge of ontological truths. It is the *sant*'s awareness of the eternal verities that makes him a repository of moral virtues, and authorizes him to impart spiritual instruction. The title of *sant* was not formally bestowed through a juridical process, but was informally adopted by followers as a token of respect. It is also important to note that the *sants* belonged to all ranks of society; Namdev was a tailor, and Janabai his female domestic; Eknath was a Brahmin, while Chokhamela belonged to the most marginalized section of society, that of the untouchables.

As we see, the relationship between the Indian *sant* and the English saint cannot be described as one of equivalence. However, there have been attempts to reconfigure the category of saint so that it can be legitimately used to describe exemplars of holiness in non-Christian contexts as well. In his cross-cultural study, John Coleman (1987) identifies five functions that are universally shared by these figures of sanctity, albeit these may be ordered differently in each religious community. Thus, "saint" can be revised to denote those individuals in any society who assume the roles identified by Coleman, which are those of exemplary model, teacher, wonder worker, intercessor, and "possessor of a special and revelatory relation to the holy" (214). It is Coleman's conceptualization of the saint that I draw upon in this study. The five women I

[3] The word *sant* is not used exclusively for the figures associated with the Varkari movement, but has also been used to designate members of a distinct group that dates back to the fifteenth century, and was active in Punjab, Rajasthan and the Hindi speaking areas. However, the Varkari sect appears to have coined the word.

examine qualify as saints insofar as all of them attempt the functions listed by Coleman, whether in their writings or in their lives.

IV: Chapter Summaries

My chapters are organized around mystics rather than around themes. To have each chapter center around a theme such as maternity or self-authorization might result in inadequate contextualization and consequently, an eliding of distinctions. In adhering to a theme-based schema, the ideas may have been wrenched loose from their socio-historical contexts, an approach I was keen to avoid. Instead, in each chapter I first introduce each saint, providing salient details about her life that are available to us through hagiographical narratives or her own works. It is only after situating the mystic in relation to contemporary social and religious developments that I begin my discussion of the themes and rhetorical strategies I intend to compare.

In my opening chapter, I provide a review of the principal scholarship that is available on both traditions. I note that the works of the English mystics have been theorized far more extensively than those of their Indian counterparts. However, both sets of critics tend to accept the historicity of their subjects. Although I too read the concerned texts as sources of women's spirituality, I acknowledge that the historical existence of all five mystics cannot be conclusively proved.

In the second chapter I begin my first comparison, which features Muktabai and Julian of Norwich. The writings of the two mystics are unusual for medieval women authors in their privileging of the ratiocinative. Furthermore, both treat extensively of spiritual maternity. My comparison demonstrates that Muktabai deliberately underscores her achievements as an

individual in order to legitimize her unorthodox role of female guru. An anchoress, Julian had embraced an authorized mode of feminine sanctity and is far less ambiguous in her representation of her communal affiliations; she consistently draws attention away from her achievements as an individual and insists on her close ties with fellow Christians and the Church. In addition to strategies of self-authorization, I also discuss the nature of the divine as articulated by the two women. Muktabai's deity is more abstract than Julian's Christ, and the iconography of the Hindu deity she reveres is not elaborately described in her poems. In contrast to Julian, Muktabai does not privilege visual apprehension of the divine over other sensory modes. In this chapter, I also point to the diverse ends for which the two mystics employ the trope of maternity. Muktabai performs the role of mother to her disciple and thus authorizes her appropriation of the role of guru. Julian's exposition of the maternal divine is not intended to serve a private end, but is a calculated effort to counter the devaluation of women and the feminine in contemporary clerical discourse.

In the third chapter, I compare the poems of Janabai with the *Booke* of Margery Kempe arguing that both women are aligned with one another with respect to their personal situations as well as the spiritual praxes they uphold. Neither woman claimed freedom from the domestic sphere or its attendant duties. Janabai's poems suggest that she worked as a servant all her life, while Margery, who was married with fourteen children, could not renounce household duties while her husband was alive. In addition, both Janabai and Margery favor an emotional approach to God rather than one based on intellectual apprehension. In this chapter I find that both women leverage their immersion in domestic activity to their advantage in that they reconfigure domestic duty as spiritually edifying activity and thus insist on the infiltration of the domestic by

the spiritual. More forcefully than either Muktabai or Julian, Janabai and Margery Kempe recuperate domestic tasks, either performing them for God, or having God attempt them himself. In addition, I also demonstrate that Janabai invokes God as female friend, thus refusing to limit herself to a hierarchical relationship with the divine. In her dialogic narrative, Margery may respect the ontological boundaries between human and divine, but her relationship with Christ is unorthodox insofar as she repeatedly argues with him and demands evidence from him. I read her argumentative persona as a dramatization of her vulnerability as a married woman.

In the fourth chapter I compare two pioneering self-referential accounts: Margery's *Booke*, which is widely considered the first autobiography in English, with the *Ātmacaritra* of Bahinabai (c. 1628-1700), which is the first autobiography in the Marathi language. My emphasis in this chapter is on the fashioning of a feminine self in relation to the social roles of wife and mother. I also examine the nature and the variety of the communities in which this self is embedded. I find that both Margery and Bahinabai are acutely aware of the inadequacy of their respective traditions in providing for a married woman with spiritual aspirations. Thus, Margery underscores the fact that while her husband is alive, her dominant social identity is that of wife, irrespective of her spiritual achievements. Bahinabai demonstrates how women are coerced into accepting the ideal of the devoted wife or *pativratā*. Both mystics strive to reconcile their wifely duties with their spiritual duties, and even though they achieve success, they do not suggest that all married women can adopt them as models.

In my concluding chapter I review my study of the construction of gender in mystical texts from medieval India and medieval England. I emphasize that these works contest hegemonic discourses of femininity and I assert that the five mystics were strong women who

achieved the stupendous feat of "swallowing the sun." Finally, I explain how these texts can be deployed to further the project of feminine spirituality as conceptualized by Irigaray.

Note on Transliteration

In this document I have followed the standard system for transcribing *Devanāgarī* words. I do not use diacritical marks for names of individuals and sects, but I provide them for titles of texts, whether in Marathi or Sanskrit. The latter are used infrequently, whereas the saints and the sect they belonged to are mentioned on practically every page. To use diacritics in every instance would make the text clunky and unreadable. However, I retain diacritics for philosophical and literary terms in Marathi and Sanskrit, such as *ovī* and *māyā*. In cases where the Sanskrit form of a word differs from the Marathi, I privilege the latter. Thus, I use *avatār* instead of *avatāra* and *svarūp* instead of *svarūpa*.

Chapter 1: Critical Landscape

Today, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe rank with Richard Rolle and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* as the most widely studied of the medieval English mystics. However, the popularity of Julian and Margery in scholarly circles is of comparatively recent origin; academic interest in medieval women's writing burgeoned only after the 1970s.[4] Likewise, scholarly works on Varkari women saints proliferated after the 1970s, and were often motivated by a need to identify indigenous models of female resistance. Critical studies of the Varkari mystics, whether in Marathi or English, are concerned chiefly with the religious contributions of their subjects and rarely question their historicity. However, my review of the scholarship in both fields indicates that the historical existence of Julian and Margery is also assumed in most works on the English mystical tradition.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of the secondary literature on Julian and Margery, which far exceeds scholarship on the Varkari women. Although the categories I have devised may seem somewhat arbitrary, I have adopted them in an effort to give shape and coherence to the vast amount of material that is available on the two English mystics. After examining the main critical trends with regard to Julian and Margery, I assess the scholarship on Varkari women saints. Finally, I point to the convergences as well as the divergences in the critical approaches to the women affiliated with the two spiritual traditions.

[4] Marea Mitchell (2005) states that "for many years it had been argued that the proper objects of study for feminist literary scholarship were the immediate past and the present, the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century" (6). It is only in the "last twenty years" (7) that feminist thinkers have turned their attention to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

I.a Women as Writers

Julian has been acknowledged as the "the first known woman writer in English" by scholars such as Barbara Newman (222). She produced two versions of her mystical experience, the Short Text (ST) and the Long Text (LT) of the *Revelations*. For most critics, Julian is emphatically not a fiction and her historicity has not been disputed. Multiple sources have been drawn upon to support the widespread belief in Julian as a historical figure. In the *Booke*,[5] which records the life and spiritual journey of Margery Kempe, the protagonist describes a conversation on spiritual matters she had with Julian when she visited Norwich, thus indicating that the latter was a real individual who had acquired a reputation for sanctity during her lifetime. While the claims of the *Booke* to historical testimony are contentious, we have more tangible proof of Julian's existence in the form of four wills dating to the late fourteenth and the early fifteenth centuries, which "variously provide evidence of an anchoress named Julian at Norwich and at St Julian's Church in Conisford, Norwich, between 1393/4 and at least 1416, although Julian was probably an anchoress well before 1394" (Windeatt, "A Companion" 67).[6]

In addition, Julian's accounts of her mystical experiences, the *Revelations*, are regularly mined for biographical information about her. The mystic's experience as a woman has been a subject of particular interest, debates often focusing on the issue of whether she herself married and had children prior to becoming an anchoress. Another aspect of Julian's life that has piqued curiosity is her education: Was she proficient in Latin? Was she able to write down her visions, or did she have to seek the help of a scribe? Newman (2003) maintains that in all probability,

5 The *Booke* refers to Julian as "Dame Jelyan" and also states that she was "an ankres" (*The Book of Margery Kempe.* Ed. Barry Windeatt. Essex: Pearson Education, 2000. 119).

6 For more on the wills, see Colledge and Walsh, "Introduction." *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*. Vol. 1. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978. 33-38.

Julian was well-educated and did not need an amanuensis; lacking a clerical promoter, it is no surprise that her writings remained obscure during the late Middle Ages (224). With regard to Julian's marital status, most critics are in agreement with Benedicta Ward's thesis (1988) that she was a young widow living in her own house at the time of her visionary experience, and entered the anchorhold as a laywoman and not as a nun.

Although speculations about Julian's experience of motherhood might not seem germane to scholarly appraisals of her work, they point to the aspect of the *Revelations* that has aroused most interest in the academic world: the exposition of the motherhood of God. The notion of God as mother is absent in the ST, but constitutes an important part of Julian's argument in the LT of the *Revelations*. In the LT, Julian associates God's maternity especially with Christ, and states that like a human mother, Christ yearns for the love of all his children, and wants them to hasten to him in their time of need. Ward, and likewise Newman, are inclined to believe that Julian had been a mother herself; Newman explicitly identifies the mystic's experience of "childbearing" as one of the possible strands that constitute "her theology of divine motherhood" (225).

In *Jesus as Mother* (1982), Caroline Bynum refrains from speculating on Julian's personal experience of motherhood. Her object is to chart the history of the maternal God in the Christian world, and identify the models for Julian's maternal Christ. In common with her predecessors, including Anselm, Julian invokes three stereotypes of maternity: "the female is generative . . . and sacrificial in her generation; the female is loving and tender," and the "female is nurturing" (131). In her study Bynum observes that although the ideal of God as mother was largely ignored in the early Middle Ages, the writings of Bede being one of the few exceptions,

the social and political developments of the eleventh century led to a resurgence of this notion of the divine. The increasing emphasis on the humanity of Christ and the attempt to counter the Cathar belief in the corporeal as evil led to the growing maternalization of the image of God. Moreover, the popularity of the worship of Mary and the women saints from the twelfth century onwards also contributed to a renewed interest in this vision of God. Significantly, the concept of God as mother in the twelfth century received extensive literary treatment, not in the writings of women, but in those of male religious, particularly the Cistercians. In the works composed by the latter, the superior was often cast into the role of mother to the junior monks.[7]

As a result of her elucidation of the religious influences on Julian, Bynum provides a fair assessment of her achievements, neither exaggerating nor underplaying them. Although Julian did not pioneer the concept of God as mother, Bynum notes that "the theme of God's motherhood is a minor one in all writers of the high Middle Ages except Julian of Norwich" (168). Inevitably, this brings us back to the question of the influence of Julian's gender: is her womanhood the primary reason why God as mother features so prominently in the *Revelations*? Felicity Riddy's answer (1993) to this question is direct and unequivocal. In her well known essay "'Women Talking about the Things of God': A Late Medieval Sub-Culture," Riddy suggests that Julian's feminization of God can be interpreted as a reflection of her pride in her sex: "This confidence in her own gender manifests itself in her feminization of God" (116). According to Riddy, Julian's confidence "presumably derives from her experience of women's collective lives, of being her mother's daughter, and from the sense of intellectual and emotional

[7] According to Bynum, this was a device intended to allay anxiety about authority figures; comparing the Abbot to a loving mother served to make his actions more acceptable insofar as they stemmed from love and not hostility.

relationship with other women that is revealed in the passing on of books or in the shared talk that men habitually ridicule" (116).

Riddy argues that nuns and devout gentlewomen in late medieval England "shared a literary culture" and seeks to demonstrate that Julian's writings represent "a surviving voice from within it and a subjectivity shaped by it" (111). Noting that in many wills that survive from the period we have tangible proof that women bequeathed books to one another, Riddy contends that nuns and pious gentlewomen constituted a textual community, which she characterizes as "a community in which women heard and remembered English texts read aloud, in which they listened to English sermons, but above all in which they were accustomed… to 'talking about the things of God'" (113). Riddy demonstrates that Julian draws on "religious lore rather than learning" and that her visions seem to be rooted in a "vernacular discourse of religious sensibility" (112), facts which suggest that Julian was affiliated with this female community. Thus, Riddy provides a historically informed argument in support of Julian's pride in her femininity.

Several scholars in addition to Riddy have identified aspects of Julian's works that can be categorized as protofeminist. Like Riddy, Elizabeth Robertson's interpretation (1993) of the *Revelations* is grounded in a close reading of the texts. Moreover, Robertson minimizes the dangers of presentism by emphasizing that Julian responded to the negative stereotypes of women that prevailed in her own time and place, rather than anticipating the concerns of present-day women. According to Robertson, the abundance of blood in Julian's mystic visions has its origins in the medieval theorization of the female body. Robertson points out that the medical views on women that were current in Julian's time were derived from Hippocrates, Aristotle, and

Galen, and held that women were "physiologically cold, wet and incomplete" (142) On account of the association of women with blood and milk, they required dryness and heat for their physical well-being. As Robertson observes, Christ bleeds profusely in Julian's revelations. Furthermore, Julian even suggests that there is a "blurring of boundaries between Christ's blood and her own" (156), thus emphasizing the intimacy of her relationship with him. According to Robertson, "the prevalence of images of blood, heat, and tears in works written for and by women suggests the writers' familiarity with medical ideology about women" (158). While one may interpret this emphasis on blood and other bodily fluids as a concession to contemporary scientific views of women, it is also possible to argue that Julian's works offer an example of the "hyperbolizing of gendered signs" (159) that ultimately serve to render them unstable. Robertson accepts the latter view, and maintains that Julian's writings are empowering for her sex.

Denise Nowakowski Baker (1994) also pays particular attention to Julian's position on the corporeal. She contends that the mystic's treatment of the two divisions of the soul, substance, and sensuality, clearly bears the impress of her gender. Baker is careful not to study Julian in isolation, but traces the relationship between her views on the body, and those expressed by her predecessors, Augustine and Walter Hilton. As Baker explains, the notion of the divisions of the self is not Julian's own, and was first expounded by St. Augustine. In the *De trinitate*, Augustine made a distinction between the higher and the lower reason; "the former, engaged in the contemplation of eternal things, can achieve wisdom," while the latter, "oriented toward action in the temporal world, can achieve only knowledge" (125). It is important to note that Augustine assigns gender to the two parts of the soul, with the higher reason being designated masculine and the lower reason described as feminine. Thus, in his writings

Augustine subscribed to the view that "woman is identical to man in spirit, but on account of her body, she is a metaphor for the lower reason" (126). While it is debatable whether Julian had direct access to the works of St. Augustine, she may have encountered the aforementioned binary of the higher and the lower reason in the writings of Walter Hilton, who identified sensuality and reason as the two aspects of the soul. As Baker observes, Hilton also "divides the reason into two parts, the higher or male and the lower or female" (128). However, Julian does not merely borrow the notion from her illustrious predecessors, but adapts it and makes it her own. In the *Revelations*, the two components of man's being are not gendered; neither is masculine or feminine, nor does Julian argue that one predominates in women, and the other in men. Moreover, Julian values sensuality, which corresponds to the lower reason, for she perceives it as "the locus of Christ's presence within the individual" (129). Through her respect for the lower reason, Julian accords a new dignity to "the bodily and the feminine" (130). With regard to Julian's conception of the two constituents of the human soul, Baker also observes that for male thinkers like Augustine, sanctification consisted in "suppressing the feminine or bodily aspect of the self," while Julian "envisions holiness as the wholeness of the soul, the sensuality reunited with the substance" (130).

While Baker analyzes the subtleties of Julian's theology, Jessica Barr (2010) examines the very processes of her mystical knowing through the lens of gender. Barr maintains that Julian's inclusiveness is patent in the "model of visionary knowing" (98) she espouses in the *Revelations*, particularly in the LT, where affective visionary experience co-exists with "cognitive work in the form of interpretation and reflection" (98). Moreover, Julian does not exclude the physical experience that was the original source of her visionary knowledge. Barr

explains that the two principal cognitive faculties according to medieval thinkers were the "intellectus" and the "ratio"; the former was understood by the medieval world to denote "flashes of insight" (99) while "ratio" referred to the reason. The faculty of reason dominates the LT, where Julian expounds the spiritual significance of the showings that have been vouchsafed to her. For Julian's contemporaries, the intellectus was ranked higher than the rational capacity, but it is important to note that the ratio was believed to be predominantly masculine. Julian, however, employs and recognizes the importance of both and thus attempts to "strip these faculties of their gendered implications" (99). Like Riddy and Robertson, Barr also achieves a synthesis of close reading and historical contextualization in her gender-based interpretation of the *Revelations*.

For most contemporary readers of Margery Kempe's *Booke*, the author's historical existence is beyond doubt, although there is scant evidence independent of the *Booke* itself that testifies to it. Scholars such as Sarah Beckwith (1993) and Carolyn Dinshaw (2003), have sought to piece together the life story of Margery Kempe, drawing on the information provided in the *Booke*. Beckwith, for example, states that Margery's father John Brunham was a distinguished citizen of Bishop's Lynn, becoming mayor five times, in 1370, 1377, 1378, 1385, and 1391 (94). She also argues that in 1438 Margery became a member of the guild of the Trinity in Lynn (97). In reconstructing Margery's story, Beckwith makes use of historical records that mention that in 1438, a Margery Kempe was admitted into the guild of the Trinity at Lynn. Although we cannot conclusively prove that the Margery Kempe whose name is found in the guild records is the same as the protagonist of the *Booke*, most medievalists accept that the two are identical.

Lynn Staley (1994) accepts Margery's historicity, but she recommends that the *Booke* be examined as a work of fiction, and not as an autobiographical or historical document. Staley argues that although the *Booke* may masquerade as a rather naïve record of the recollections of an illiterate woman mystic, it should be read as a sophisticated work of art: "we need to apply to Kempe the complicated series of questions about narrative that we apply to other major authors of the late medieval period" (2). Contending that Kempe's literary achievements have been dismissed because of her gender, Staley believes that "by assuming an absolute equation between the *Book*'s author and its subject" (3), critics have failed to acknowledge the sophisticated literary techniques deployed by Kempe the author. For Staley, it is important to distinguish between Margery the protagonist and Kempe the author, and she likens the distinction she proposes to that which is drawn by literary critics between "Will, the layabout, and Langland, the author, or between the pilgrim Geoffrey and the poet Chaucer" (3). Noting that in some of Chaucer's works, the scribe functions as a trope, Staley argues that Margery too makes strategic use of the scribe. As Staley points out, the inclusion of the scribe in the text itself "provided authors with figures through which they could project authorial personas, indicate what we would call generic categories, express a sense of community, or guide a reader's responses to a text" (12). As a woman author who had to work within a tradition "whereby the female text…was mediated and thus verified by a male author or scribe" (20), it is not surprising that the scribe occupies a prominent place in the narrative schema of the *Booke*. According to Staley, his primary function is to attest to the holiness of Margery's life. Moreover, as narrator, he also ensures that Margery constitutes the foreground of the text, and thus "helps to deflect attention away from the *Book'*s troubling picture of contemporary society" (81).

It is largely as a result of Staley's efforts that the artistry of the *Booke* has received recognition. Staley's thesis is not acceptable in its entirety, for the radical disjunction she proposes between Margery the protagonist and Kempe the author in a work that explicitly presents itself as autobiographical is not tenable. However, my own reading of the *Booke* is facilitated in large measure by Staley's insistence on the work as a literary product. I argue that Margery collaborates with her scribe to produce an account of her spiritual life that underscores the difficulties she faced as a married woman; the narrative is carefully fashioned to achieve this end.

In contrast to studies of Julian, the issue of authenticity is contentious in the scholarly response to the *Booke*. Margery's relationship with her scribe has been widely studied; based on the clues in the *Booke*, is it reasonable to claim that the work faithfully records Margery's story? In an essay that appeared in 1978, Anthony Goodman made an attempt to determine which sections of the *Booke* had been authored by Margery herself, and which had been contributed by the scribe. According to Goodman, aspects of the work "that are more attributable to an illiterate laywoman" (348) are evidently Margery's handiwork; she is responsible for the fact that the work is "frequently abrupt in expression, awkward in sequence and homely in imagery" (348). Thus, Goodman argues that Margery's voice is clearly discernible in the text.

For Kimberley Benedict (2004), any attempt to dissociate Margery's literary efforts from those of her scribe serve little purpose, for Margery and her scribe offer an example of collaborative writing in the Middle Ages, a period in which writing was commonly thought of as a communal activity, with several participants who included "past thinkers, craftspersons who assembled the texts [and] readers who elaborated it through annotations" (xi). As Benedict notes,

it was common for women to collaborate for a variety of reasons, the most important being the fact that they did not often possess advanced writing skills and moreover, required priestly sanction for their spiritual claims. However, the incompetent scribe frequently features in texts attributed to women, a trope that Benedict interprets as a critique, albeit indirect, of ecclesiastical mediation. In the *Booke*, Margery is most critical, not of the first scribe whose handwriting cannot be deciphered, but of the clerical scribe, whom she represents as "alternately incapable and unwilling" (55). According to Benedict, the priest cannot succeed when he attempts to work on his own; it is only when he co-operates with Margery that the hurdles disappear. Thus, the device of the scribe, whether based on historical truth or not, serves to demonstrate Margery's holiness and authorizes her to offer spiritual advice to her putative readers. Although Benedict argues that Margery's contributions cannot be distinguished from those of the priest, she also observes that the trope of the incompetent priest is more common in texts ascribed to women. Thus, we must acknowledge the possibility that Margery was able to control the textualization of her experiences and was the dominant partner in the literary collaboration.

Like the *Revelations*, the *Booke* has also been scoured for its position on gender. In particular, Margery's corporeal mysticism and her relationship with the clergy have generated comment. Wendy Harding (1993) contends that the *Booke* questions the orderly, ratiocinative world constructed by the clerics by affirming a new brand of spirituality. Margery's strident cries and her incessant tears are not to be dismissed as the frenzied behavior of a woman who cannot write, for these fervent expressions of piety represent an attempt to "signify a mystic experience whose intensity can't be written, but must be inscribed by living flesh" (173-4). According to

Harding, the "carnal and affective form of devotion" Margery espouses is a marked departure from "the hierarchical, ordered, masculine spirituality of the pulpit" (174).

Similarly, Beckwith (1993) also asserts that Margery seeks to counter clerical authority, noting that the *Booke* "begins with a refusal of the mediating counsel of the clergy" (76). Even Margery's tears generate intense hostility, not because such vociferous crying is socially unacceptable for a woman, but because "her tears are a veritable treasury of merit, thus making her a rival of the clergy" (85). Furthermore, Margery is directed by Christ to move from prayer to meditation, the latter permitting a greater degree of "self-sufficiency and self-authorization" (87). Thus, even Christ collaborates in her attempts to upstage the clergy.

I.b Situating Texts

On the whole, scholars are balanced in their assessment of the two mystics, expressing admiration for their contributions even as they acknowledge that their experiences are shaped by their specific milieus. Denise Baker, for instance, comments on the relationship between Julian's visions and representations of the Passion in late medieval art, and concludes that "undoubtedly Julian was familiar with the conventions of depicting the crucified Christ in affective spirituality" (40). However, Baker is quick to point out that although contemporary art certainly influenced Julian's bodily showings, her visions were also shaped by her practice of meditation and thus demonstrate originality. For instance, Julian does not narrate the story of Christ's suffering in its entirety, but chooses to represent only particular moments. In addition, she "concentrates on the pains that he endured and makes no mention of his tormentors" (48). Her showings do not depict the figures "who play such a large role either as torturers or as compassionate witnesses in the serial Passion narratives and much of the devotional art of the

late medieval period" (48-49). Thus, the originality of Julian's visions, despite their resemblance to visual representations of the Passion, cannot be denied.

In her study of the influences on the *Revelations*, Riddy is emphatic that Julian is heir to the legacy of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* and other texts that sought to promote devotion to the suffering Christ: "Her visions seem to have their origin in vernacular texts and images formed by the tradition of Cistercian and Franciscan piety, of Aelred's *De institutione inclusarum* and, especially, of the many fourteenth-century English derivatives of the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*, which was originally written for a nun" (112). Noting that Julian does not cite authorities in her writings or incorporate Latin quotations from the Bible, Riddy interprets this refusal of learning as the creation of a feminine space, in which "the reader of Julian's text, female or male, is invited … to become 'simple' like her" (112).

Julian's accessibility is also the subject of Liz Herbert McAvoy's study (2005). McAvoy contends that the mystic frequently draws upon "the language of the marketplace in order to contemporize and make accessible the complex issues that she is trying to articulate" (104-105). McAvoy notes that Julian's writings frequently invoke the material world; for example, "the burnished terracotta roof-tiles during an East Anglian downpour" and "the kitchen measure of an opened hazelnut shell" (104) feature in the *Revelations*, despite their mundane quality. According to McAvoy, "Julian's vocabulary tends to place them [these objects] within the context of an increasingly commercial society" (104). Julian draws on the language of purchase and debt, and depicts the relationship between Christ and humanity as one that is transactional; for instance, she avers that Christ has "bawte us" (104) from the torments of hell, and has him reassure her thus: "If thou art payde, I am payde" (104). However, it is impossible to determine

conclusively whether Julian deliberately adopted the language of mercantile exchange, or whether commercial idioms had already percolated into the religious discourse of the time.

David Aers (1996) studies Julian's deployment of images in the *Revelations* to speculate on her intentions in producing the accounts. Aers insists that the *Revelations* is not affiliated with works in the affective genre insofar as Julian does not seek to encourage emotional identification with the crucified Christ. Closely examining the images that she provides to describe the bleeding Christ, such as raindrops and herring scales, Aers contends that her aim in doing so is to place the reader "in a rather detached, speculative relationship to images which have been designed to emphasize their constructedness, their rhetorical composition" (86). In contrast to writers like Nicholas Love, Julian does not fetishize suffering and attempts to direct attention away from the tortured, bleeding body of Christ. It is also noteworthy that on several occasions, Julian is denied a bodily showing, and must instead content herself with a "ghostly sight" of her desired object. For instance, she expresses a wish to see the Virgin Mary in her bodily likeness, but is granted only "a goostly syght" (93) of her. Thus, Julian does not privilege the corporeal to the same degree as writers like Love. Her relative detachment from the sensual is also evident in the very language she employs: "Julian sustains a language that is a vernacular version of a scholastic discourse, a reasoning inquiry with carefully articulated questions and answers deploying pointedly abstract terms" (83-4). For Aers, the intellectual tone of Julian's writing clearly sets it apart from the religious works produced by her contemporaries.

Nicholas Watson (2003) undertakes a close analysis of Julian's theology and demonstrates that the originality of the *Revelations* consists in its departure from the theological texts that were popular in late medieval Europe. Medieval theologians, argues Watson,

"distinguished between the divine and human natures of Christ, and took the difference between aspects of the Trinity (might, wisdom, and love) very seriously" (213). In contrast, Julian largely ignores these distinctions. Moreover, English sermons of Julian's time were rife with warnings about God's anger with his degenerate creation; even popular works like the *Prick of Conscience* "set out to frighten readers into virtue by evoking the event [Judgment Day] in all its terror" (214). Julian's God, however, is always full of love, no matter how great mankind's offences might be. Thus, Watson tries to demonstrate that Julian's conception of the Divine is distinctive, and sets her apart from contemporary theologians.

The mystical experiences detailed in the *Booke* are examined by Lochrie, who maintains that Margery was clearly aware of the writings of Richard Rolle, and his taxonomy of the sensory experiences arising from mystical awareness. For instance, Margery refers to the "fire of love," a theme that was associated particularly with Rolle, the author of the *Incendium Amoris*. Furthermore, the heavenly scents and sounds that Margery describes also recall Rolle's experiences. In her reading of the text, Lochrie draws our attention to the Latinity of the *Booke*, arguing that "the priest who read to her [Margery] probably read from Latin texts of Hilton, Rolle, and Bridget even if he then translated or paraphrased his readings" (114). According to Lochrie, the effect of Rolle's *Incendium Amoris* is the most pronounced, and traces of the Latin text survive "not only in her [Margery's] images and mystical concepts but in her mystical idioms" (115). Although Margery does not privilege the Latinity of her work, these elements appeal "to a readership that is literate in Latin and that relies on Latinity as a hermeneutic" (120).

Lochrie's study of the *Booke* is pioneering in its deployment of critical frameworks derived from Certeau's authoritative theorization of Western mysticism. Drawing on Certeau's

analysis of speech as it operates in mystic works, Lochrie explains that "the mystic text often recognizes its failure to 'utter God' at the same time that it asserts its location in God's speech" (69). Significantly, "the mystic text must constantly renew its claim in divine utterance" (83) on account of the fact that it repudiates all claims to institutional authority. It is imperative for the mystic to authorize his discourse "as the same as, yet distinct, from the utterance proclaimed by the Church" (98). According to Lochrie, the *Booke* too, like all mystic texts, provides an authorizing gesture; Margery attempts to authenticate her utterance by "presenting a series of showings of the speech-acts in her soul" (102). However, the *Booke* is distinct from other mystical texts produced at the same time, like Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection* and *The Cloud of Unknowing,* for it is not formally cast as a treatise. Margery's work is not explicitly intended as a "guide to meditation or contemplation" (203); according to Lochrie, even if she writes to instruct, "she does so in the form of dialogue and narrative" (203).

Although critics are unanimous that Julian's originality as a theologian sets her apart from her continental counterparts, Margery's uniqueness is widely seen as limited to the English religious landscape. Alexandra Barratt (2003) argues that the *Booke* is unusual for a work produced by an English author; with her penchant for visions, Margery defies the prescriptions for Englishwomen of her time. For instance, the fifteenth-century *Book for a Simple and Devout Woman* warns readers against "cultivating visions and other paranormal mystic experiences" (241). In contrast, Margery experiences visions in abundance, which Barratt interprets as proof of continental influence upon her. Barratt also points out that the location of Lynn, Margery's native town, as well as her extensive travels lend credibility to her thesis: during the Middle Ages Lynn was an important port "with close ties to the Baltic, Scandinavia, and Flanders"

(252). Moreover, the *Booke* mentions that Margery visited Germany and Italy, even meeting the maid of St. Bridget when she was in Rome.

Barry Windeatt (2011) also argues in favor of continental influence on the *Booke*, noting that a number of lives of continental women were in circulation in England in the fifteenth century, including that of Marie of Oignies, the saint who cried copiously. He also identifies the impact of St. Birgitta's life and writings on the *Booke*, arguing that although the social status of the Swedish saint was grander than "Margery's relatively modest middle-class station in life," "the pattern of St. Birgitta's life—her career as prophet and visionary, her transition from wife and mother to a Bride of Christ, her pilgrimages, the sustainedly visionary experience of her life … her dictation of her revelations and prophecies—could lend endorsement to Margery's own experience" (200). Furthermore, there is also a possibility that Margery was influenced by the works of Catherine of Siena and Mechthild of Hackeborn, for these too were available in England in the early fifteenth century.

I.c Literary Assessments

Literary appraisals of both Julian and Margery wrestle with the question of the generic classifications of their works. As yet, there is no scholarly consensus as to whether the *Revelations* and the *Booke* qualify as autobiographies, primarily because there is no standard definition of autobiography for critics to draw upon. Christopher Abbott (1999) is emphatic that the *Revelations* eludes conventional generic categories, for the work is not "a book of spiritual instruction in the formal, didactic manner of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and other works ascribed to the *Cloud*-author, or of Hilton's systematic treatment of the spiritual life, *The Scale of Perfection*" (4). Abbott also points out that the *Revelations* is not modeled upon *Ancrene Wisse*

insofar as it "is not a rule of life" (4). Although Abbott is reluctant to classify the work as an "autobiography," he affirms that it is closely aligned to the genre. In his opinion, the "intrinsic autobiographicality" of the *Revelations* consists in the "assumption of an achieved perspective on past experience which facilitates both the reconstruction of that experience in the form of a more or less coherent narrative, and the drawing of shareable religious conclusions from it" (37). The elements of "formal autobiographicality" in the text can be identified in its use of the personal anecdote; according to Abbott, the *Revelations* incorporates the anecdote as "a major rhetorical stratagem, not denying it or relegating it to the margins, but formalizing it, giving it a certain prestige within the text as a whole" (37). Thus, Abbott asserts that it is fruitful to read the *Revelations* as an autobiographical work.

As in the case of the *Revelations*, the generic affiliation of Margery's *Booke* has been a subject of critical debate, and is addressed in Windeatt's essay, "'I Use but Comownycacyon and Good Wordys': Teaching and *The Book of Margery Kempe"* (2005). Observing that the *Booke* does not provide guidance on methods of contemplation, Windeatt asserts that it offers "itself as the personal testimony of a witness to contemplation, although scarcely a very easily imitable one" (117). Despite its attempt to narrate Margery's story, however, the *Booke* can be described as an autobiography only with reservations, for it does not conform entirely to modern prescriptions for the genre. For instance, chronology in the narrative is vague; there is little interest in representing the subject's life comprehensively and "only certain kinds of experience in adult life are recorded" (117). Frequently, events are not important in themselves, but because they hint at a greater purpose, *i.e*., they function as "signs and tokens of larger import" (117). Rejecting the label "autobiography" for the *Booke*, Windeatt suggests that the work is more

fittingly described as an example of "autohagiography," *i.e*., a saint's life that is composed by the aspiring saint herself. Elaborating on the elements that would constitute a work in this genre, Windeatt states that "such a text might draw on the hagiographical narratives of female saints, documenting an impressive sequence of vindicating proofs and miracles that endorse the subject's special sanctity, and so pre-empting what might be assembled posthumously in hopes of canonization" (118-119).

I.d Text as Social Document

Several critics have approached the *Booke* as a valuable historical document that yields information about many aspects of women's experience in late medieval England. Implicit in these analyses is the assumption that the *Booke* faithfully records Margery's account of her life and was not doctored by her male collaborator. In his reading of the *Booke*, David Aers (1988) emphasizes how Margery's mystical experience is shaped by her subject position as a female member of the mercantile class. Noting that "late medieval England contained … many communities governed by men whose wealth came from trade, industry, and renting out of property in town and country" (75), Aers asserts that the elite members of these communities were "driven by the desire for economic success and security, for political power and social recognition" (75). As a woman born in a prosperous merchant family, it is not surprising that Margery herself subscribes to the desire for "more," although in her case the drive to accumulate wealth is replaced by the drive to gain "more pardon, more absolution, more indulgences" (79). Moreover, Margery invokes "market models" (78) to comprehend the web of relationships that bind God and humankind, providing yet another instance of the power her class and community have over her.

In addition to illustrating the bourgeois worldview in late medieval England, Aers argues that Margery's narrative offers rare insight into the impact the medieval Church's teachings on sex had on "people's versions of themselves and human sexuality" (92). Discussing the Church's strictures against sexual pleasure during the late Middle Ages, Aers observes that the clergy sought to instill "fear and disgust at human sexuality" (91), declaring that "even if one only acted sexually within the clerical prescriptions for meritorious intercourse" (91-92), there was a strong danger of committing venial sin. Margery was acutely aware of this devaluation of human sexuality, and the rejection of marital sex is an important element of her conversion. She casts herself into the role of St. Cecilia, with Christ replacing the angel in the legend and assuring her protection from the sexual overtures of her husband. Thus, Aers asserts that Margery's story provides a firsthand account of the possible psychological effects of the medieval clergy's denigration of human sexuality. However, as I have previously stated, Aers's analysis rests on the assumption that Margery was a historical individual, and that the *Booke* preserves her voice.

Jacqueline Jenkins (2004) approaches the *Booke* as an important source of information about women's access to textual culture in the late Middle Ages. She clarifies that "reading" as a term cannot be confined to visual contact with a book, but also encompasses aural contact with a text. Jenkins argues that the *Booke* suggests that "reading-through-hearing … is by no means an intellectually passive act" (117). As she notes, in a long speech of appreciation for her spiritual endeavors, Christ tells Margery that he is pleased with her irrespective of whether she "redist er herist redyng" (117). According to Jenkins, the passage suggests "a correspondence between praying aloud and reading on one's own as well as between contemplating inwardly and hearing texts read" (118). Thus, the *Booke* indicates the meanings that the two possibilities of reading

and hearing texts read may have had for readers in late medieval England. Jenkins also observes that if aural contact with a text was considered a more contemplative act than reading a book privately, then we have yet another explanation for why Margery is so avid to have books read out to her. Although it is likely that as a woman from an elite merchant family Margery herself would have been able to read, having spiritual works read out to her may have helped reinforce her status as a contemplative. Thus, Jenkins seeks to demonstrate that books play a crucial role in Margery's attempt at self-fashioning.

For Catherine Sanok (2007), Julian's account of her visions and Margery's story offer insight into the medieval understanding of exemplarity, particularly as it was practiced by women. In her study of the frequently prescribed *imitatio* of female saints, Sanok notes that when female readers were exhorted to model their behavior on that of their saintly predecessors, this spiritual imperative frequently generated an awareness of one's own historical situation. Women seeking to emulate the saints took cognizance of historical discontinuities and sought to adapt their models to suit contemporary social and political conditions, a truth that is well-illustrated by Julian's story. As Julian herself notes, she asked God for three gifts in imitation of the legend of St Cecilia. However, Julian did not cast herself as virgin-martyr despite her choice of model; instead, she transformed martyrdom into "the inward violence of spiritual desire, which seeks to overcome, rather than create, difference" (5). In contrast, Margery "insist[ed] on the reproducibility of ancient feminine sanctity" (116) with an intransigence that aroused a great deal of hostility from her contemporaries. Margery's story suggests that a literal imitation of the female saints was not always possible or even necessary.

Sanok's study is unusual in its juxtaposition of the *Revelations* and the *Booke* with Osbern Bokenham's hagiographical compendium. In yoking together these texts, Sanok reminds us that the *Revelations* and the *Booke* evade easy categorization and that we must recognize affiliations across genres if we are to fully comprehend them. Accordingly, I draw upon medieval conduct books and their assessment of laughter to elucidate Julian's deployment of laughter.

I.e Manuscript History

As I have mentioned, Julian produced two accounts of her mystical experience, popularly known as the Short Text (ST) and the Long Text (LT). Critics like Staley (1996) examine the relationship between the ST and the LT. Is the LT primarily an elaboration of ideas that are already present in the ST, or does it contain new insights into Julian's visions? Does Julian adopt a new persona in the LT? According to Staley (1996), the ST is a more personal text, as it seeks to evoke the visions Julian experienced without attempting to interpret them (121). Staley argues that the ST is not didactic; Julian does not intend to instruct, but recounts her visions so that others may participate in them with her (121). Staley also contends that in the ST, Julian's visionary experience is the source of her authority, while in the LT, "it rests upon her ability to interpret and explain her experience" (139).

In his analysis of the relationship between the short and the long versions of Julian's *Revelations*, Windeatt (2004) is sensitive to stylistic differences as well as differences in content. He contends that "by comparison with L. [longer version], the shewings in S [shorter version] are quite sparely narrated, closer to speech than L and possibly dictated; they are introduced with little preface or context, and unlocated in time" (70-71). Windeatt also asserts that "some of

Julian's more striking visual insights do not figure in S, including some details of her Passion shewings, but her vividly visualizing powers of description apparently reflect the serene and assured outcome of intervening meditation rather than closeness to the immediate experience" (71). Windeatt maintains that the LT is intended for a wider audience than the ST, insofar as many phrases in the short version that indicate it was directed towards a readership of contemplatives are omitted from the long version. Moreover, Windeatt also observes that the LT is a more closely integrated work than its precursor: "some connections across the text between shewings are starting to be made in S, but by the stage of L the meditations are interlinked by precise cross-references facilitated by citation of shewing or chapter numbers" (72-3).

We observe that both Staley and Windeatt do not consider the possibility that Julian may not have wielded complete control over the textualization of her experience if she worked with a scribe. Both critics assume that Julian was the final authority in the composition of the *Revelations* and that any differences we may find are reflective of her changing motivations and personality.

The existence of the ST and the LT has spawned numerous studies of manuscript history as scholars have sought to identify Julian's rationale for producing two accounts of her visions. One of the most recent attempts to trace the manuscript history of the short and long versions of the *Revelations* is that of Sarah Salih and Denise Baker (2009). They point out that Julian's ST, which was probably composed between 1373 and 1388, survives in a single manuscript, MS Add. 37790, now held by the British Library. It was compiled in the mid-fifteenth century, but was copied from an exemplar made when Julian was still alive. It is important to note that MS Add. 37790 is an anthology of vernacular works of contemplative literature, and includes

translations of texts by Richard Rolle and Jan van Ruysbroeck. According to Salih and Baker, this manuscript is of Carthusian origin (3).

The dating of the LT has been a subject of intense debate, with Edmund Colledge and James Walsh contending that Julian began revising the first version of her revelations after 1388 and concluding in 1393, while Watson (1993) maintains that Julian could not have begun revising her text before 1393, and may have composed the LT as late as the early fifteenth century. Although the complete LT exists in several manuscripts, all of them were produced well after Julian's lifetime. However, excerpts from the LT appeared in "a manuscript from the first half of the fifteenth century, which was, in turn, copied in London, Westminster Cathedral Treasury MS 4 around 1500" (Salih and Baker 4).

The earliest extant manuscripts of the LT in its entirety were produced by English Catholic nuns around 1650 "either at Cambrai or its daughter house in Paris" (Salih and Baker 5). Salih and Baker note that the earliest of these manuscripts is probably Paris, MS Bibliothèque Nationale Fonds anglais 40. The second manuscript, London, British Library, MS Sloane 2499, "was copied from a different exemplar from Paris because its language is closer to Julian's own East Anglian dialect" (5). Moreover, the Paris manuscript is more comprehensive than Sloane, which appears to have omitted lines. Salih and Baker observe that for most editors of the *Revelations*, "the Paris manuscript better represents both Julian's style and her ideas" (6).

The textual history of Margery's *Booke* is less intricate, insofar as the complete work is available only in a single manuscript (British Library Additional MS 61823). This manuscript was discovered and identified as late as 1934, but was copied not long after Margery dictated her book. This manuscript copy belonged to the Carthusian monastery of Mount Grace in Yorkshire,

and was in its possession since the late fifteenth century. However, even prior to the discovery of the only extant manuscript of the *Booke,* Margery was not entirely unknown to scholars because several extracts from the text had been published by an early English printer, Wynkyn de Worde, in 1501. In her study of de Worde's text, Sue Ellen Holbrook (1987) comments that in this "edition," Margery's voice has been largely expunged: "the extractor has searched for passages that commend the patient, invisible toleration of scorn… and has left behind all that is radical, enthusiastic, feminist, particular, potentially heretical and historical" (35). Thus, it is not surprising that Henry Pepwell, who anthologized de Worde's version of the *Booke* in 1521, described Margery as "a deuoute ancres" (Lochrie 223).

I.f Reception History

The collection of essays edited by Salih and Baker (2009) attempts to trace the reception history of the *Revelations*, emphasizing modern readings of the work, primarily because Julian's texts did not circulate widely prior to the twentieth century. Salih and Baker argue that the *Revelations* were apparently "known only to a small group, and many questions about the process of their transmission remain unanswered" (2). In their introduction, Salih and Baker examine the problems that scholars face in trying to identify the medieval audience of the work and discuss the history of the available manuscripts in an effort to find answers themselves. They conclude that the earliest readers of the ST were "probably a small group of professed male religious who were, like Julian herself, solitaries" (3). With regard to the LT, Salih and Baker observe that the "earliest surviving manuscripts of the complete Long Text were produced in the mid-seventeenth century by English Catholic nuns exiled on the continent during the Reformation" (4). However, these too do not seem to have circulated widely.

Reception studies of the *Booke* outnumber those of the *Revelations*, perhaps because the only surviving manuscript of Margery's narrative has been annotated by as many as four individuals. These marginal comments provide important clues with regard to what Lochrie describes as "the fragments and traces" (205) of the early interpretations of the *Booke*. Lochrie examines the annotations in *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, contending that when studied in conjunction with early printed editions of Margery's narrative, they indicate "a wide readership" for the *Booke*, "one which crossed lay/monastic lines" (206).

As my survey demonstrates, the *Revelations* and the *Booke* have been well-contextualized; issues pertaining to gender and class have been carefully investigated, and the works are recognized as literary artifacts as well as historical documents. However, it is noteworthy that most of the critics accept the historicity of Julian and Margery, and also assert that women's voices are available in these texts, even when male scribes assist in their production.

II.a Women as Writers

Until the 1970s, women saints from Maharashtra were relegated to second place, dismissed as mere adjuncts of their male gurus and spiritual mentors. This approach is evident in R. D. Ranade's authoritative survey of mysticism in Maharashtra, first published in 1933. In his account, Ranade expresses admiration for the female mystics, including Muktabai and Janabai, but he does not devote entire chapters to them. In fact, each woman is only granted a brief commentary, appended to the chapter that is dedicated to her guru. Thus, the female mystics are not considered important in their own right.

Feminist critics, starting in the 70s and the 80s, vigorously attacked this dismissive attitude towards women saints. Seeking indigenous examples of women of power, scholars like Indumati Shevde and Suhasini Irlekar re-evaluated the works attributed to Muktabai, Janabai and other women mystics of the medieval era. In her feminist analyses of the poems of the women saints, Irlekar assumes that the historicity of the saints is beyond dispute. Moreover, she draws on their sacred biographies to interpret their poems. In particular, she is indebted to the eighteenth-century hagiographer Mahipati (1715-1790), whose magnum opus *Bhaktavijay* is the standard hagiographical narrative in Marathi. However, Irlekar also makes use of popular legends that were transmitted orally, and cannot be traced to any written source. In her study of Muktabai's poems, Irlekar asserts (1979) that the saint was the only sister of three spiritual luminaries, and moreover, the youngest member of this unusual family. Consequently, "it appears that she became aware of her personality at a very young age. The plentiful love she receives from her family is also always apparent" (81). In her exegesis of select poems by Janabai (1981), Irlekar draws on hagiographical accounts, particularly the *Bhaktavijay*, to argue that many of the poems were written in response to specific events in the saint's life.

As author of the volume *Women Poet-Saints* (1989) in a book series titled "Steps towards Female Emancipation in Maharashtra," Shevde examines the works of Maharashtrian women mystics across traditions. Thus, she incorporates women belonging to all the three major sects of medieval Maharashtra, namely, Mahanubhav, Varkari and Ramdasi. In her discussion of Muktabai's life and mission, Shevde draws largely on hagiographical narratives, although she acknowledges their partiality for the fantastic: "The traditional biographers consistently combine the real with the fictional, and the two have blended so thoroughly that it is difficult to determine

the historical value of these accounts" (50). Despite her reservations, Shevde's biographies of the women she studies are derived from hagiographical accounts; she may question their veracity, but she makes use of them nonetheless.

Shevde analyzes the poems primarily for the attitude they express towards gender. She contends that Muktabai's poems do not conform to expectations for women's writing because the saint herself had lived on the margins of society and was therefore improperly socialized. Her ignorance of social rules for women led Muktabai to compose verse that cannot be readily identified as women's poetry. In contrast, Shevde admires Janabai's spectacular achievement in achieving sainthood despite her many social disadvantages: "Janabai's journey was a very long one… it began on low-lying ground and ended at the highest mountain peak" (117). Shevde certainly undertakes close readings of the poems, but they are directed to the explicit goal of charting the beginnings of the feminist movement in Maharashtra.

One of the first attempts to acquaint an Anglophone audience with the women saints of Maharashtra was Ruth Vanita's essay "Three Women Saints of Maharashtra" (1989). Published in the feminist magazine *Manushi*, Vanita's essay examines the degree to which figures like Muktabai, Janabai and Bahinabai were able to surmount the oppressive norms for women that prevailed in medieval western India. Vanita's brief biographies of the three women are based on hagiographic accounts, and she explicitly refers to Mahipati's narrative (55). Although she does not use the label "feminist," Vanita's analysis of the poems and the lives of the three saints indicates that they rejected patriarchal prescriptions for women: Muktabai's outstanding spiritual accomplishments brought her wide recognition; Janabai had Vitthal participate in women's

chores and thus managed to elevate them, and Bahinabai's poems suggest that all women, irrespective of their marital status, can attain salvation.

The belief in the historicity of these saints, although there are no written records or testimonies of their existence that can be dated to the early medieval period, is not limited to Indian scholars. Western scholars too are not averse to recognizing them as historical figures and drawing on hagiographies to trace the contours of their lives. In her essay "Women Saints in Medieval Maharashtra" (2000) Eleanor Zelliot argues that the domestic situation of women mystics like Muktabai and Bahinabai sets them apart from their counterparts in North and South India:

> Most women saint-poets in other areas left husbands or never married and found that their devotion could flower only if they had no household responsibilities. In contrast, the women saint-singers of Maharashtra, with one exception, found ways to be close to the god of the Marathi *bhakti* [devotional] movement, Vitthal or Vithoba, while remaining close to brothers, husbands, and sons. (192)

In her study, which encompasses the celebrated figures of Muktabai, Janabai and Bahinabai in addition to the lesser-known Soyrabai and Nirmala, Zelliot draws on hagiographies like the *Bhaktavijay* to sketch the lives of the saints.

Although scholarship on women mystics in Maharashtra tends to accept hagiographical accounts, recent studies of male saints from the region offer alternative approaches to medieval figures and their legacies. In *Religion and Public Memory* (2008), Christian Novetzke defines his scholarly agenda as the study of "how a religious figure of fourteenth-century India has been remembered over seven centuries, through multiple media, including performance, writing, and

film" (xi). Asserting that a definitive account of Namdev's life cannot be assembled, Novetzke maintains that Indian saints are positioned between the realms of history and memory, "pulled from the past by scholars who adjudicate fact and corroborating data and summoned by devotees who remember the [saint] for the emotional and cultural value of poetry and life stories" (72). The stories that constitute a saint's life are grounded in specific socio-historic contexts, as Novetzke demonstrates through his analysis of the *Bhaktavijay*. Commenting on Mahipati's selection of episodes featuring Namdev, Novetzke notes that the hagiographer from Maharashtra "is in discursive conversation with [the saint's] significant north Indian legacy" (66). Mahipati takes cognizance of Namdev's reception in North Indian traditions even as he identifies the Maharashtrian essence of the saint. This negotiation is patent in his incorporation of a tale representing Namdev as a votary of the formless divine, although the Marathi tradition remembers the saint as a passionate devotee of the anthropomorphic Vishnu. Novetzke's work suggests that an analysis of the multiple versions of a saint's life and the historical truths they reflect is a more fruitful enterprise than trying to piece together the saint's biography.

Most of the stories that constitute the "biographies" of the Marathi women saints I study are also derived from Mahipati's account. Mahipati does not try to prove his credentials as a historian; he is a hagiographer whose strength lies in his devotion to the saints. However, his purpose is not merely to inspire devotion to the saints; he also seeks to anchor them in the religious landscape of Maharashtra. As Novetzke has demonstrated, Mahipati establishes Namdev as a Maharashtrian saint, a religious figure with deep roots in the Marathi-speaking region. The hagiographer thus helps to set up Maharashtra as a distinct cultural and religious zone.

Even as I acknowledge Mahipati's agenda, it does not conclusively prove that the saints mentioned in his works did not exist. Many narratives by Mahipati are based on the poems or *abhaṅg*s that bear the signature of the saints; therefore, my primary concern is the evaluation of these sources rather than the narratives produced by Mahipati. Unfortunately, it is not possible to conclusively date the poems because there are no manuscripts that date from the early medieval era when the saints purportedly lived. The oldest written source of poems ascribed to any medieval Maharashtrian saint, male or female, is a manuscript that has been dated to 1581 A.D. and contains Namdev's autobiographical work *Tīrthāvaḷī*. The vast majority of the poems that find a place in the collected poems of Muktabai and Janabai appear in notebooks that were produced in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Likewise, the sole manuscript containing Bahinabai's works was copied as late as the colonial era.

Furthermore, linguistic forms do not constitute a sure way of sifting the authentic poems from those composed by later figures, for the poems were transmitted primarily through the performance tradition of the *kīrtan*. The *kīrtan* is a cultural form that incorporates song, dance and philosophical exposition. In popular belief, it is closely associated with the saint Namdev; he is revered not only as a preeminent performer of *kīrtan*, but also as its founder. In his history of the form Novetzke comments,

> By the thirteenth century, *kīrtan* certainly indicated a ritual religious performance art, and by the sixteenth century—and probably sooner—*kīrtan* in Marathi came to indicate a multifarious practice, interweaving narratives, songs, stories, lectures, anecdotes, current events, ethics, or politics. (82)

Thus, the poems that employ grammatical forms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may well have been modernized by the performers of *kīrtan* to appeal to contemporary audiences. As a result, it is difficult, if not impossible, to accurately determine which of the poems can be traced to the historical Muktabai or the historical Janabai.

The poems that constitute Muktabai's corpus are distinct from the Janabai corpus in their themes and images, as I will demonstrate in this dissertation. The two collections of poems do not uphold the same ideals for women, nor do they converge in their approach to women's everyday concerns. In contrast to the poems that have been ascribed to Janabai, the poems in Muktabai's corpus eschew domestic images. Furthermore, they do not invoke a feminine deity. I read these differences as the result of the very different religious personalities whose poems and lives constitute the core of these traditions, even if they do not limit them. Consequently, I have chosen to treat of these poems as the creations of two individuals.

II.b Situating Texts

In contrast to the historicity of Muktabai and Janabai, their philosophical position and that of their sect has received extensive scrutiny. Scholars have recognized that the Varkari sect is distinctive in its beliefs and cannot be subsumed within the better-known religious movements of medieval India, such as Gaudiya Vaishnavism of Bengal. One of the earliest, and most comprehensive, studies of the Varkari sect is Guy Deleury's *Cult of Vithoba* (1960). Deleury points to the liberal tendencies of the sect, stating that "there is no centralized organization, no hierarchy, no general councils, no credo, no sacraments" (4). The Varkari tradition is distinguished for the simplicity of its doctrine as well as its catholicity, as Charlotte Vaudeville (1987) has demonstrated. The chosen deity of the Varkari sect is Vitthal or Vithoba, whose

principal shrine is located in the town of Pandharpur. However, the saints of this tradition accept both the God with attributes and the formless Godhead as valid conceptions of the divine. As Vaudeville observes, the Varkari saints "do not hesitate to worship the 'body' of the Lord manifested in Pandharpur, in which they recognize a manifestation of the One, the eternal Godhead" ("Sant Mat" 28).

The Krishna who features in the works of Varkari saints is also distinctive and sets the sect apart from others that are dedicated to the deity. Vaudeville has noted ("Shaiva-Vaishnava") that Vithoba, the god worshipped by the Varkari sect as a *svarūp* or form of Krishna, is not vested with the same attributes as the conventional Krishna:

> Though also regarded as a young boy, Vitthal, unlike Krishna, is rather innocent. The erotic element in the Krishna-Gopal legend, especially his dalliance with the milk-maids, is totally absent. Instead, the fundamental sentiment attributed to Vitthal is that of compassion, an infinite love and tenderness for his *bhakta*s [devotees] that can only be compared to the love of a mother for her children. 224

In contrast, Gaudiya Vaishnavism privileges Krishna in his role of amorous companion of the milk-maids (*gopī*s). In fact, the most highly regarded spiritual technique of Gaudiya Vaishnavism is the *mañjarī sādhanā*, whereby the devotee can participate imaginatively in Krishna's love play with his most beloved *gopī* Radha by assuming the role of a *mañjarī*, or handmaiden of Radha. According to David Haberman (1988), "the desired end [of this spiritual discipline] is a religious voyeurism, said to produce infinite bliss" (108).

Having rejected Krishna's amatory adventures, the poets of the Varkari tradition do not resort to erotic metaphors as they evoke their encounters with the divine: "bridal symbolism is

nearly unknown in Maharashtrian *bhakti* [devotional traditions]" (Vaudeville, "Sant Mat" 29). In their refusal of erotic imagery, the poems of the female Varkari saints differ markedly from those of women mystics like Andal (9th cent.) and Akka Mahadevi (12th cent.), who identified primarily as the spouse or lover of their chosen deities.

Another unusual feature of the Varkari tradition is the domestic orientation of its saints, particularly its women saints. As Zelliot has stated, women mystics belonging to other traditions in India either did not marry or left their husbands and families in order to further their spiritual goals. Akka Mahadevi of the Virashaiva sect left her husband so that she could pursue her God, while Andal, a Tamil devotee of Vishnu, chose not to marry. Not all the Varkari women saints married, but the vast majority of them did not renounce familial ties, "remaining close to brothers, husbands, and sons" (192). For instance, Muktabai was single all of her short life, but she lived with her brothers, whom she also recognized as her spiritual mentors. Janabai was one of the few women affiliated with the Varkari tradition who was single and also cut off from her biological family. However, some hagiographic accounts, as I will discuss in Chapter 3, suggest that Janabai's isolation was not freely chosen but was forced upon her due to the extreme poverty of her parents.

Scholars working on Varkari women saints have not attempted a comprehensive study of the various manuscripts in which their poems are scattered. Perhaps such a study is deemed redundant, for the poems have circulated orally for centuries. Moreover, the absence of written sources from the centuries during which Muktabai and Janabai lived has made it impossible to trace the early reception history of their works. In contrast, scholars of the English mystical tradition have access to manuscripts that were produced in the centuries immediately

following the mystics, if not during their very lifetimes. Furthermore, the extant manuscripts are not unmanageably large in number. Consequently, scholars have been able to investigate the manuscript history and the reception history of the *Revelations* and the *Booke*. However, we find that both sets of critics tend to affirm the historicity of their subjects, although neither can produce evidence that is incontrovertible. For the majority of scholars, whether they probe into South Asian texts or interrogate works in the English mystical tradition, the historical existence of the women mystics is an article of faith.

Chapter 2: Feeding On Cooked Diamonds: Analyzing Guru, God, and Mother in the Writings of Muktabai and Julian of Norwich

Jnandev drank to his fill the water of pearls;
Nivrittinath caught in his hands the shade of the clouds;
Sopan decorated himself with the garland of fragrance;
Muktabai fed herself on cooked diamonds… (trans. in Ranade 46).[8]

In its early years the Varkari sect was given shape by a family of spiritual giants: three brothers, Nivritti, Jnaneshvar, and Sopan, and their only sister, Muktabai (c.1279-1297). In this chapter I place Muktabai in conversation with Julian of Norwich (c. 1343-after 1413) on account of the similarities in their lives and in the themes that dominate their mystical outpourings. Marriage did not interfere with the spiritual life of either woman. Tradition asserts that Muktabai remained single all her life, and while Julian may have been a widow at the time of her visions, she became an anchoress not long after, her choice of vocation putting an end to any plans for matrimony. In addition, both women made important literary contributions to the vernacular; Muktabai's compositions constitute some of the earliest writings by a woman in the Marathi language that are available to us today, and Julian has been celebrated as "the first known woman writer in English" (Newman, *God* 222). It is also significant that the trope of maternity plays an integral role in the works of both mystics; Muktabai composed a series of cradle songs in which she plays mother to her chief disciple, and Julian is well known for having expounded a theology of the maternal. Finally, the writings of the two mystics demonstrate a strong tendency

[8] मोतियाचे पाणी रांजण भरिला । पोट भरुनी प्याला ज्ञानदेव ॥
अभ्राची साउली धरोनिया हातीं । गेलासे एकांती निवृत्तिदेव ॥
पुष्पाचा परिमळ वेगळा काढिला । तो हार लेइला सोपानदेव ॥
हिऱ्याच्या घुगऱ्या जेवण जेवली । पोट भरुनी घाली मुक्ताबाई ॥

towards the abstract and the ratiocinative, which distinguishes their works from those produced by most of their female contemporaries.

This chapter is divided into seven sections. I begin with a summary of the biographical details that are available to us about the two mystics under study. In the case of Muktabai, these are derived from hagiographical accounts, both written and oral, while the details of Julian's life have been deduced primarily from her works. In the second section of the chapter, I briefly examine the socio-cultural conditions that prevailed in medieval Maharashtra and medieval England respectively. In the four remaining sections of this chapter, I turn to the writings of the women themselves. Thus, my third section emphasizes the construction of the self in the writings of the two women and the relationship that is delineated between the literary persona of the mystic and the communities to which she belongs. In the section that follows, I present the views expressed by the two women with regard to the nature of the divine. In the fifth section, I analyze the self-authorizing strategies deployed by the mystics, while the sixth section is a study of the trope of the maternal as it features in the works of the two women. In my conclusion I demonstrate that the comparison emphasizes Julian's communitarian mysticism as well as her artistry. It also furthers our understanding of Indian mystical poetry insofar as it underscores the divide between form and content in Muktabai's corpus.

I.a Muktabai: Tracing the Contours of a Life

Many of the stories about Muktabai that are current today can be traced to the *Bhaktavijay* of Mahipati (1715-1790), which narrates the lives of saints belonging mainly to

Maharashtra and North India.[9] Drawing inspiration from the hagiographical narratives of authors like Nabhadas,[10] Mahipati derived his material from written sources as well as the oral tradition, and claims to have used trustworthy accounts, insisting that he "expanded facts just as a tree is the expansion of a seed" (Abbott, "Intro." xxxi). In Mahipati's narrative, Muktabai and her brothers were born in Alandi, a village near Pune, to a Brahmin couple, Vitthalpant and Rakhumabai. Even as children, however, they had to endure a great deal of social persecution because their father had defied social rules in returning to his wife and becoming a householder even after he had formally become a renunciate. According to Mahipati, all four children born to Vithoba were divine incarnations or *avatār*s, and he emphatically states that Nivritti was an *avatār* of Shiva, Vishnu was born as Jnaneshvar, and the third brother, Sopan, was an *avatār* of Brahma. While the three brothers represented the deities who constitute the Hindu trinity and are responsible for creation, preservation and destruction, Muktabai was an incarnation of *ādīmāyā,* the primal force of the universe.

Drawing on Varkari sources, R. D. Ranade (1933) speculates that Nivrittinath was born in AD 1273 and died in AD 1297; Jnaneshvar was born in AD 1275 and passed away in AD 1296; Sopan, who was born in AD 1277 also died in AD 1296, while Muktabai, the youngest, was born in AD 1279 and passed away in AD 1297 (32). All four were spiritual prodigies: Nivritti was initiated even as a boy into the yogic Nath tradition by one Gahininath, and he

9 I have used Abott and Godbole's translation of the *Bhaktavijay*, publication details of which I provide in my bibliography.

10 Nabhadas composed his magnum opus, the *Bhaktamāl*, in the Braj Bhāśa dialect of Hindi towards the end of the sixteenth century.

assumed the role of a guru[11] towards his siblings. Their lives, however, were marked by vicissitudes; according to legend, Vitthalpant and Rakhumabai drowned themselves in the hope that if they performed expiation for their "sin," their children would be spared. Their penance, however, did little to mollify society, and the children continued to be treated as outcastes. The siblings finally won some recognition from Brahminical society when Jnaneshvar performed a miracle at Paithan, the bastion of orthodoxy, and thus gave proof of his spiritual stature.

In Mahipati's version of Muktabai's life, she is not merely an appendage to her brothers, but unusually for a woman, a spiritual teacher in her own right, a fact that is illustrated when she plays an important role in humbling the great devotee Namdev. This episode begins when Gora, the potter-saint, decides to honor all the Varkari saints, and invites them to his house. Jnaneshvar requests him to "test" the assembled saints and separate the baked from the unbaked as he would his pots. Gora obliges; using his potter's paddle, he taps the heads of the saints present there. All the saints submit except Namdev, who believes that he is the supreme devotee of Vitthal, and is outraged that he should be "tested" in this undignified manner. When he protests, Muktabai humiliates him, affirming that Gora is indeed skilled in the art of distinguishing the unbaked from the baked. Smarting under the insult, Namdev rushes to Vitthal, who directs him to his guru, and thus perfects his spiritual knowledge.

Muktabai's spiritual greatness is proved yet again in her encounter with the yogi Changdev. The latter had become proud of the miracles he could perform, but realized the futility of his accomplishments when he met the divine siblings and saw them effortlessly perform even greater feats. When Changdev visits their house to pay obeisance to them, he

[11] The role of a guru, as I explain later in this chapter, was a weighty one. Not a mere spiritual guide, he was revered for his ability to transmit spiritual knowledge to his disciples.

learns that Muktabai is taking a bath, and in accordance with the rules of propriety wishes to leave at once. However, Muktabai addresses him, and tells him that if he had had the benefit of instruction from a guru, he would not have perceived her as a woman, but as yet another vessel of the divine Spirit. Changdev had been unable to transcend the corporeal, and the guru's grace alone could help him achieve this state. Thus, Muktabai's words impel Changdev further on the spiritual path.

In addition to the stories about Muktabai's life that we find in Mahipati's compendium, there were other legends in circulation about the saint, in which she assumes even greater agency and is publicly recognized as a guru. Some of these stories have been incorporated by Marathi academician Ketaki Modak (2005) in her brief biography of the saint. Modak is inclined to accept the legend that Muktabai was spiritually precocious, and even as a young girl instructed her brother Jnaneshvar, who shut himself away after he was racked by doubts about his mission. The verses that Muktabai addressed to Jnaneshvar during this crisis, imploring him to open the doors that shut him in physically and mentally, are known as the *Tāṭīche Abhaṅg*, literally "verses of the door."

Furthermore, in the version of Muktabai's life that is assembled by Modak, the saint is presented as the guru of Changdev, in contrast to Mahipati's account, where he accepts Jnaneshvar as his spiritual guide. In Modak's narrative, the three brothers entrust Changdev to Muktabai, who places her hand on his head, and grants him the ultimate spiritual prize, that of *samādhī* or complete absorption in the divine. Thus, the saint formally takes on the role of guru and is the first woman of the Varkari sect to do so. This tradition of Muktabai as guru is supported by the poems composed by Changdev, in which he repeatedly asserts his debt to her

and extols her for her great spiritual wisdom. Thus, I contend that Muktabai is one of the first female gurus for whom we have literary evidence, a fact that has been ignored by literary scholars and historians alike. For instance, Rebecca Manring (2004) recognizes the sixteenth-century Sita Devi as "one of the earliest female gurus in South Asia for whom we have literary evidence" (53), although Muktabai preceded her by several centuries.

In initiating Changdev, Muktabai took a bold step: the female guru was an anomaly, as this role was reserved for men. As she charts the history of the female guru in Hinduism, Karen Pechilis (2004) observes that a variety of texts that date as early as the sixth century include "stories of wives who are gurus, devotional poetry authored by women and treatises on the Goddess" (15), and thus initiate new paradigms of women's leadership in the religious sphere. Citing the story of Chudala from the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* and Hemalekha from the *Tripurā Rahasya*, both of whom were princesses who instructed their husbands in the knowledge of the self, Pechilis contends that while these early women indisputably take on the role of guru, they do so only in the domestic arena. The medieval texts acknowledge only one universal feminine guru, the Goddess herself (23), who is the subject of the *Devī Gītā*, a work that may have been composed between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries. In this text the Goddess is unequivocally represented as "a gracious and knowledgeable teacher" (24). However, there were few human precedents for Muktabai when she chose to give instruction to Changdev.

It is also imperative to address the implications of Muktabai's refusal of marriage, widely regarded as a social duty for women. Commenting on the moral valences of celibacy in Indic religions, Geoffrey Samuel (2008) states that "in practice there is a strong strain of thought that implies that ascetic celibacy is essentially a male business" (182-183). Marriage being normative

for women, we must recognize that Muktabai's renunciation of marriage was a gesture of defiance that would have further troubled her relations with the orthodoxy.[12]

I.b Julian: Tracing a Life

In contrast to our primary sources for the life of Muktabai, Julian's life does not appear to have survived in any hagiographic narratives. The English mystic's story, as it has been sketched by literary scholars, is grounded in her own writings as well as in the testimony provided by four wills that date to the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. In addition, Julian finds mention in the *Booke* of Margery Kempe; chapter eighteen records a meeting between Margery and Julian and the spiritual advice and encouragement that the latter provided.

While the evidence of the wills is not conclusive insofar as we cannot prove that the Julian who is mentioned in the documents is the Julian who authored the *Revelations*, it is at least plausible that both refer to the same individual. Most critics are in agreement that Julian was born around 1343, because she mentions that at the time of the visions she received on 13 May, 1373, she was thirty and a half years old. The preface to the ST mentions that in the year 1413 Julian was still alive, so it is possible that she may have died as late as the 1420s. The four wills that are available lend support to Julian's dates as inferred from the *Revelations*. In his will dated 20 March, 1393/4, a Roger Reed bequeathed a sum of two shillings to "Julian anakorite."[13] In his

[12] Most scholars, including Modak and Ruth Vanita (1989) accept the broad outlines of the life of Muktabai as sketched in hagiographic accounts. Like them, I too accept that she was Jnaneshvar's sister, that she became a guru, and that she died young. However, Catharina Kiehnle (1997) contends that there were possibly three women with the name Muktabai, whose stories were conflated over the centuries (*Songs* 5). One of these women was the pupil of Gorakhnath, the most well-known leader of the yogic Nath tradition, and finds mention in Changdev's *Tattvasār* and Visoba Khecar's *Ṣaṭsthal*. Another Mukta composed verse to instruct the yogi Changdev and acknowledges Nivrittinath as her guru. Yet another Mukta practiced austerities and was known to Chakradhar, the thirteenth-century leader of the Mahanubhav sect.

[13] All quotations from the wills are from Colledge and Walsh, eds, *A Book of Showings,* Vol. 1, pp. 33-34.

will, which was proved in 1404, Thomas Emund made a bequest of one shilling to "Juliane anchorite apud St. Juliane in Norwice." John Plumpton made his will in 1415, and bequeathed forty pence to "le ankeres in ecclesia sancti Juliani de Conesford in Norwice." The last will that mentions Julian the anchoress is that of Isabel Ufford, which was drawn up in 1416, and makes reference to "Julian recluz a Norwich." Thus, it is not implausible that Julian may have died around 1420 or even later.

With regard to Julian's status as an anchoress, Benedicta Ward (1988) has persuasively argued that when she experienced the revelations Julian was a laywoman, and became an anchoress only later. Like the hermit, the anchoress or the anchorite was a type of social recluse, the only difference being that while the hermit was seen as "potentially mobile," the anchorite was considered "bound to one geographical position for the term of her natural life" (Hughes-Edwards 133). Accepted and practiced since Anglo-Saxon times, anchoritic spirituality reached the zenith of its popularity in England in the fourteenth century. It is also significant that this vocation consistently held greater appeal for women than for men and the number of women who chose enclosure always exceeded those of the men (Hughes-Edwards 140). Julian enjoyed a privileged position in medieval English society in that anchorites were widely respected for their spiritual insight and were frequently consulted by the laity: "English anchoritism was accorded considerable spiritual authority and respect" (Hughes-Edwards 152).

In her study of Julian's life Ward has also speculated that Julian was a young widow at the time of her visions, and may even have had children, a position which has received the support of Newman (*God* 223-224). Furthermore, most critics posit upper-class origins for Julian, as historical records testify that anchorites in late medieval England were largely drawn

from the ranks of the "urban gentry or lesser aristocracy" (McAvoy, "Julian of Norwich and Her Audience" 103). Alexandra Barratt argues that the high level of learning that Julian demonstrates in her writings also testifies to her upper-class origins (qtd. in McAvoy, "Julian of Norwich and Her Audience" 103). Thus, we see that Julian's story, as it is presented today, is primarily an academic construct, assembled from the hints in the *Revelations* as well as the testimony of external sources.

II.a Muktabai: Social and Religious Background

Although Modak compiles a vast array of poems that bear Muktabai's signature, not all of them have been accepted by literary scholars or historians as authentic compositions of the saint. Therefore, my emphasis will be on the forty-two poems included in the standard compendium of verses by the Varkari saints, the *Sakalasantagāthā,* which all Marathi scholars have accepted as the compositions of the historical Muktabai. In addition, I briefly examine three well-known compilations that bear Muktabai's name and are treated of extensively in Modak's recent study of the saint: the popular collection of poems called *Tāṭīche Abhaṅg* ("verses of the door*"*) in which Muktabai provides lessons on the nature of sainthood to a depressed Jnaneshvar; the Changdev-Muktai *saṃvād* ("dialogue") in which she resolves her disciple Changdev's doubts and instructs him on the nature of reality, and finally the *Jñānabodh*, a dialogue with her older brother and guru, Nivrittinath.[14]

[14] I use Modak's edition (2005) for all of Muktabai's poems, with the exception of the *Jñānabodh*, for hers is the most recent and the most exhaustive. For the forty-two *abhaṅg*s, see Modak, 180-209.The *Tāṭīche Abhaṅg* have not been unanimously accepted as authentic, but in the popular imagination, they are inextricably associated with Muktabai. For the *abhaṅg*s themselves, see Modak, 144-150. The Changdev dialogue is well-known and scholars like Irlekar (1980) are inclined to accept these poems as those of Muktabai. For the poems see Modak, 213-218. The *Jñānbodh* is a text that was discovered only recently, and there are practically no studies of it in English as yet. I have incorporated it into my discussion because the text is unusual in the roles it grants Muktabai and her guru

Muktabai, along with her brothers Nivritti, Jnaneshvar, and Sopan, belonged to the Varkari *panth* or *sampradāy* ("sect," "tradition") of western India. The word "varkari" is a compound of two words, *vārī* and *karī*; *vārī* denotes the pilgrimage to Pandharpur, and *karī* literally means "one who does." A Varkari, therefore, is one who undertakes the pilgrimage to Pandharpur. For members of the Varkari *sampradāy*, the pilgrimage to Pandharpur is an indispensable part of their spiritual regimen, and is undertaken twice yearly. The chief deity of the sect is Vitthal, or Vitthoba, and Pandharpur has been the center of his cult since at least the twelfth century. As Kiehnle (1997) observes, the two oldest inscriptions in the temple indicate that "a number of devotees from various castes built the first shrine in 1189, and that it was enlarged under the patronage of King Ramcandra Yadav between 1273 and 1277" (*Conservative* 6). The Varkari sect became popular in western India because it was inclusive in its outlook since its very inception, and accepted members from all castes, even untouchables. In addition, the sect made few demands on its followers; as Guy Deleury (1960) asserts, "there is no centralized organization, no hierarchy, no general councils, no credo, no sacraments" (4). Even today, there are only a few rules to be observed: the Varkari is enjoined to perform his social duties diligently, visit Pandharpur at designated times, and fast on the days traditionally dedicated to Vishnu.

The Varkari *panth* was not the only sect to have emerged in medieval western India; the Mahanubhav sect had its origins in the second half of the thirteenth century, and became a powerful force in Maharashtra's cultural life under the leadership of Chakradhar. Proclaiming

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Nivritti. My translations from this work are based upon the edition by Suresh Joshi (1975), for he does not omit Nivritti's *abhaṅg*s, as Modak does.

Krishna as their chief deity,[15] the Mahanubhavs rejected the authority of the *Veda*s, denounced the caste system, and affirmed the equality of men and women. In an attempt to disseminate their radical teachings to the masses, the early leaders of the sect forbade the use of Sanskrit, and had texts composed in Marathi. As Kiehnle notes, with its message of equality, the sect "started as an anti-structure or communitas" (*Conservative* 4). However, the Mahanubhavs did not flourish after the death of Chakradhar, and in the late medieval era the sect became relegated to the margins of Maharashtra's religious life, in contrast to the Varkari movement, which continued to thrive.

While the Mahanubhavs worshipped the five Krishnas, the Varkari saints fervently expressed their devotion to the deity Vitthal, also considered a form or *svarūp* of Krishna. At the time of the early Varkari saints, several devotional movements held sway in the region that is today designated as Maharashtra. In the thirteenth century, for example, Narahari Tirtha, the disciple of the *dvaita*[16] leader Madhvacharya, sent out preachers in Karnataka and neighbouring regions to sing and propagate the teachings of the new cult, which was based on devotion to Vishnu. In addition to movements dedicated to Vishnu and his many forms, cults devoted to Shiva also existed in southern Maharashtra; for instance, the Virashaivite movement spearheaded by Basava had adherents here as well (Kiehnle, *Songs* 17-18).

Indisputably, the Vitthal cult played the dominant role in shaping the poems of the early Varkari saints. However, these poems also draw upon the teachings of the Nath *panth*, a religious

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15 Technically, the sect was devoted to five Krishnas, the first of whom corresponded to the Krishna of popular myth. The last three Krishnas referred to three important religious leaders of the sect. See Vaudeville, "The Shaiva-Vaishnava Synthesis," 220-221.

16 A dualist system of religious thought.

tradition that was believed to have been founded by the primal guru Shiva himself.[17] In her discussion of the Nath school, Catharina Kiehnle (1997) defines it as "the lineage that starts with Shiva, Matsyendra, Gorakhnath, and then went on in Maharashtra with Gahininath and Nivrittinath" (*Songs* 6). According to Kiehnle, the earliest historical figure to be identified as a Nath was Matsyendra, the supposed guru of the well-known Gorakhnath. The latter's contributions to the religious culture of medieval India are many, according to R. C. Dhere (2001); Gorakhnath "systematized the practices of yoga" (91) and provided a spiritual emphasis to the predominantly physical exercises of haṭha yoga, thus directing the attention of yogis away from the accumulation of occult powers to the nobler goal of attaining Reality. The Nath sect was well known for its liberal outlook; its members were recruited from all castes of society. Furthermore, the leaders of the panth rejected empty ritualism and a blind obedience to the decrees of the *Veda*s.

The works of the early Varkari saints, including Nivritti, Jnaneshvar and Muktabai, frequently refer to yogic practices associated with the Nath tradition. The influence of the school is conspicuous in Muktabai's poetry, where the mystical encounter is frequently evoked in Nath terminology. The Nath teachers taught a series of yogic techniques that would bring the aspirant face to face with his real Self. Like the philosophers of Advaita Vedanta, teachers of the Nath school also held that the ultimate reality is composed of perfect existence-consciousness-bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*), and utterly transcends the realms of speech and thought. However, in contrast to thinkers like Shankara, the Naths did not reject the tangible world of name and form as

[17] The earliest reference to the Naths in Marathi literature occurs in the thirteenth-century biography of Chakradhar the Mahanubhav leader, a work known as the *Līḷācaritra*. According to the *Caritra,* Chakradhar described *nāthvāṇī,* or the teachings of the Naths, as pure (Kiehnle, *Songs* 8).

illusion (*māyā*), but affirmed that it is the manifestation of *śakti*, "the infinite and eternal dynamic power" (Banerjea 63) of *śiva*, the "Nameless Formless Self-luminous Non-dual one" (62). The two cannot be separated: "*Śiva* may be spoken of as *Śakti* in the transcendent plane, and *Śakti* as *Śiva* in the phenomenal plane" (Banerjea 63).

As Amy Hollywood (2002) has asserted, spiritual transcendence can be achieved "only through the body" (278), a truth that the Nath yogis were careful to recognize. Nath thinkers like Gorakhnath wrote extensively on the esoteric aspects of the body; when the body's secrets are mastered, so is the cosmos itself, for the same powers are constitutive of both. The Naths conceived of the human body as the finest specimen of all living bodies, for it is "an epitome of the Cosmic Body of *Śiva-Śakti*" (Banerjea 137). Through his manipulation of the body and the forces that are latent in it, the yogi can "realise the whole universe within himself and identify himself with the whole universe" (Banerjea 137).

It was during the thirteenth century, when the Mahanubhav and Varkari movements spread rapidly, that Marathi acquired the status of a literary language. For most literary scholars, including S. G. Tulpule (1979), the early biographies of the Mahanubhav leaders are among the first texts composed in the Marathi language. The *Līḷācaritra*, which traces the development of Chakradhar from a feckless youth to a wandering ascetic and finally a full-fledged guru, was composed of the reminiscences of Chakradhar himself, which were taken down and compiled by Mhaibhat.

While the *Līḷācaritra* was written in prose, as were other biographies of Mahanubhav leaders, the sect also produced poetic works, the most well-known of which was the *Dhavaḷa*s, or "wedding songs" composed by Mahadamba, the first known female poet in Marathi. These were

composed at the request of Govindaprabhu, a Mahanubhav leader, and describe the marriage of Krishna and Rukmini. According to Tulpule, the *Dhavaḷa*s employ "a loose, unrhyming metre" and "are divided into two parts containing 83 and 65 songs respectively" (322). The first section is believed to have been composed in 1285, and the second section was completed shortly after, apparently with help from Mhaibhat, author of the *Līḷācaritra*. Thus, even before Muktabai began composing her mystic songs, there was precedent for women's writing in Marathi. Mahadamba was not persecuted for her literary gifts, but was encouraged by the leaders of her sect. However, it must also be noted that she composed verse at the instance of her male superiors, who thus sanctioned her literary endeavors. As Mahadamba's example illustrates, female literary production had to be carefully supervised by authoritative male figures before it could be accommodated in the Mahanubhav canon.

II.b Julian: Social and Religious Background

Like her Indian counterpart, Julian lived during a period of great religious ferment. John Wycliff, reputed founder of Lollardy, was condemned in 1382, although it was not until well into the fifteenth century that the distinctions between the tenets affirmed by the Lollards and orthodox Church doctrine crystallized. Wycliff, who started to lecture at Oxford in the 1370s, claimed that Scripture was the supreme guide not only in matters of faith and ethics, but also with regard to subjects like logic and philosophy. More controversial were Wycliff's views on ecclesiastical property; in the *De ecclesia*, published in 1379, he exhorted the clergy to renounce wealth and model their behavior on Christ, the apostles, and the primitive Church (Rex 37). Furthermore, Wycliff repudiated the doctrine of transubstantiation, whereby "the 'substance' of bread was inwardly transformed into the real body of Christ despite retaining all the 'accidents'

(appearances and physical qualities) of bread" (Rex 43). However, Wycliff's position on the Eucharist remained ambiguous, for he could not utterly deny the truth of Christ's own assertion that the wafer was his body.[18]

While the Lollards are inevitably associated with Wycliff in the popular imagination, it is only in recent years that attempts have been made to identify what constitutes Lollardy. Andrew Larsen (2003) proposes that a Lollard may be described as "someone in the period after 1377 who shares a significant number of beliefs associated with John Wycliff and his identifiable followers" (69). The beliefs that Larsen conjectures were upheld by most Lollards include: unorthodox views on baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist; the rejection of pilgrimages, veneration of the saints and the veneration of images, and the rejection of tithes or similar dues to the clergy (70). Contrary to popular belief, historians today dispute the notion that Lollardy had an especial appeal for women as it granted them avenues for self-expression that were denied by the Catholic Church. Although accounts of Lollard women inculcating Lollard values in their children have been preserved, and references to widows who were influential within the community also exist, it is well known that in late medieval society, women were entrusted with the task of imparting religious instruction to their children. Likewise, widows were permitted greater freedom than wives by the Catholic Church. Rebutting other popular myths about Lollardy, Richard Rex (2002) observes that most Lollards did not possess books, and while records indicate that the leaders of the community owned books, these were used to teach doctrine. Lollard preachers had made their presence felt in most of England's twenty largest towns by 1400 (Rex 64). Essex presented the first instance of Lollardy from East Anglia in 1400,

[18] For a comprehensive account of Wycliffite doctrine and its impact on the religious as well as the literary scene in late medieval England, see Fiona Somerset et al, eds, *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England*, 2003.

while the first case of Lollardy in Norwich diocese was reported in 1405 (Rex 67). According to Rex, textual sources indicate that Lollards were burnt in East Anglia until the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Lollardy was not the only noteworthy development in the landscape of medieval spirituality; the practices of affective meditation, seeking to foster a compassionate identification with Christ, became widespread after the twelfth century. The most popular manual of affective spirituality was the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi* (14th cent.), translated into Middle English in the early fifteenth century by Nicholas Love as *Myrrour of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*. As Denise Baker (1994) states, affective spirituality provided "a three-stage program for spiritual growth progressing from compassion to contrition to contemplation" (25). Recommended particularly for the laity, affective meditation required meditation on Christ's humanity, i.e., intense imaginative participation in the scenes from his life, particularly the Passion. As Caroline Bynum (1987) has demonstrated, meditation on the Passion was especially appealing to women, and love for the suffering Christ was frequently expressed in eucharistic devotion (258). This love was also manifested by women mystics through bodily signs such as inordinate tears, stigmata, and levitation. Consequently, affective spirituality made available to Julian and other women of her time a method for utilizing the body as a spiritual tool. We have already noted that the devotional trends popular in Muktabai's time gave her access to an anthropomorphized deity, and the yogic disciplines she drew upon channelled the body and its latent powers into the spiritual quest. Likewise, the religious movements of Julian's time and place enabled devotion to the humanity of Christ and demonstrated the utility of the body for the experience and expression of mystical truths.

As a result of the new spiritual trends, fourteenth century England was marked by vigorous literary production, particularly in the vernacular. According to Nicholas Watson (1995), "in terms not only of quantity but of innovation the period 1340-1410 has as much right to be considered a 'golden age' of religious as it is of secular writing: the age of Rolle, the *Cloud* author, Julian of Norwich, Langland, the Wycliffite Bible, and much else" ("Censorship" 823). In the first half of the fourteenth century, religious works in English were composed for a select audience, in contrast to works in Latin, which were intended for a wide clerical readership. As Watson (1999) explains, the early English texts "were written for professional religious, often nuns or anchoresses, many of whom were personally known to the writers, and to write in English was thus to write for a smaller imagined audience than was addressed in the language of universal (clerical) access, Latin" ("Middle English" 837). It was only after the 1350s that writing in English meant addressing an audience that was "indeterminate and socially mixed" ("Middle English" 838). In the wake of the Lollard controversy, two mutually contradictory positions on vernacular theology were articulated: one held that the circulation of English religious texts needed to be carefully controlled as they were comprehensible to everyone, while the evangelical view was that scripture must be made available to all. However, from the 1380s onwards, most orthodox readers were likely to view religious works written in the vernacular with suspicion (Watson "Composition" 665).

Julian's account of her visions exists in two versions, the Short Text (ST), which is descriptive in emphasis, and the Long Text (LT),[19] where the mystic offers detailed commentary

[19] All quotations from the ST in Middle English are from Vol. 1 of Colledge and Walsh, eds, *A Book of Showings*. For quotations from the LT I use Vol. 2 of Colledge and Walsh, eds, *A Book of Showings.* The numbers in parentheses are page numbers. The modern English translations I provide are based on Elizabeth Spearing's modern

on the showings and expounds a theology that is based on them. Remarkably, the LT is not a mere amplification of the themes and narratives already present in the ST, but also contains new material; Julian's exposition of Christ's motherhood, for which she is celebrated today, is to be found only in the LT, as is her complex parable of the lord and the servant. However, the ST is a more personal document than the LT, for it makes repeated references to Julian's gender and paints a detailed picture of the bodily illness that preceded her visions.

According to Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (1978), Julian composed both versions of her *Revelations* in the fourteenth century itself; the ST was probably written not long after Julian's visionary experience in 1373, while it is likely that the LT was composed around 1393. As Watson (1993) observes, the scholarly consensus appears to be that Julian's literary efforts were concluded before 1400 ("Composition" 640).[20]

Julian's literary achievements are singular because she is the first known woman writer in English. Fourteenth century England produced a wide range of innovative mystical texts, including *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *Incendium Amoris*, but none of these works had been authored by a woman. Not only did Julian lack models for her writing, she also had to fight pervasive distrust owing to her gender; Jane Chance (2007) contends that any literary attempt by

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English version of the *Revelations*, publication details of which I have provided in my bibliography. However, I must clarify that my translations are more literal than those of Spearing.

20 In an influential essay, Watson (1993) argues against this hypothesis and posits that the ST was written ten to fifteen years later than is commonly believed, while the LT may have been composed as late as the second decade of the fifteenth century. If Watson's views are correct, the LT was composed in the shadow of the Constitutions issued by Archbishop Arundel in 1409 to inhibit the growth of works of vernacular theology. The draconian Constitutions forbade the study of all texts that had not been approved unanimously by a panel of twelve theologians instituted by the archbishop. In addition, it was decreed that preachers were to confine themselves only to approved topics and that there were to be no debates on matters of faith outside the universities. Article seven prohibited the written translation of any Biblical text into English, or even the possession of a copy, without diocesan permission, of any such translation made after Wycliff's time.

a woman in the Middle Ages was a remarkable achievement in view of the fact that "for women to represent themselves, to have agency, was regarded so pejoratively that it was perceived as a type of insanity" (6). Women writers were not well-regarded, as A. C. Spearing (1998) observes: "medieval culture offered strong resistance to writing and teaching by women, a resistance justified by statements of Saint Paul such as 'Let women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted them to speak, but to be subject' (I Corinthians 14: 34)" (xvii). We must also take note of the innovation in Julian's themes; while a tradition of women's visionary writing was already established on the continent by the fourteenth century, mainstream English spiritual tradition did not encourage visions: "*Ancrene Wisse*, Rolle's *Form of Living*, and the first book of Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* all caution readers against any visions they may have" (Watson, "Composition" 647). Notwithstanding these warnings, Julian managed to produce "the first major English example of a female vision for two centuries" (Watson, "Composition" 646). Clearly, Julian's literary achievements were multifold.

III.a Muktabai: A Singular Self

The saints of the Varkari movement used verse to disseminate their teachings, in contrast to their Mahanubhav counterparts, who relied mainly on prose. While all the biographies of the Mahanubhavs are in prose, the *Jnāneśvarī* employs a meter that is known as the *ovī.* The etymology of the word *ovī* is uncertain, but Rajvade has proposed that the word is derived from the verb *"ovṇem,"* which means "to string together" (Kiehnle, *Songs* 41). The *ovī* first finds mention in a text composed by the South Indian king Someshwar, who lived during the eleventh or the twelfth century. In his work *Abhilaṣitārthacintāmaṇi,* he states that the *ovī* is a popular

mode of composition, and that women favored the meter: "Among the people of Maharashtra the *ovī* is sung by women while pounding grain" (Kiehnle, *Songs* 41).

In her account of the *ovī* and its development, Charlotte Vaudeville (1969) notes that the *ovī* is used even in modern Maharashtra for women's songs, and identifies two types of what she calls "the popular *ovī*" (*kaṇṭhastha ovī*): in the first type "the number of *akṣara* (syllables) in the first three *caraṇ* [feet] is either 6 or 7; in addition, there are only two internal rhymes (B, C) instead of three (A, B, C)" (14). The second type of the popular *ovī* "consists of only three *caraṇ* (instead of 4), each comprising eight *akṣara*" (14). Vaudeville argues further that both varieties of the popular *ovī* are "imperfect," insofar as an *ovī* with three rhymes alone qualifies as "perfect." In contrast to the popular *ovī,* the literary *ovī* (*granthik ovī*), employed in some texts of the Varkari movement, including the *Jnāneśvarī*, is invariably perfect, for "it has four *caraṇ* and three rhymes." (15). According to Vaudeville, the literary *ovī*, in contrast to its popular counterpart, was not intended to be sung, or chanted to the accompaniment of the clapping of hands, and she states that it functioned as a "narrative or descriptive meter" (15).

H. D. Velankar contends that the popular *ovī*, in its many manifestations, existed only among the masses, until it was taken up by Namdev, the Varkari saint who is believed to be the contemporary of Jnaneshvar, although there is no historical evidence providing the dates of his birth and death. Namdev composed religious verses in the popular *ovī*, and "sang them to the accompaniment of a pair of cymbals and a lute while instructing the masses in their Vaishnav creed" (qtd. in Vaudeville 16). Velankar claims that since there are no written records of such *ovīs* composed by Mahanubhav thinkers, the Varkari saints must be given the credit of first adapting the popular *ovī* for religious purposes.

The verses thus composed by the Varkari saints are known as *abhaṅg*s, a term which literally means "that which is unbroken or eternal." The relationship between the *ovī* and the *abhaṅg* is contentious, but Velankar maintains that the *abhaṅg* is "nothing but the original *ovī* of the common masses… the new name being probably invented for distinguishing between this and the other form of the *Ovī* which is assumed in the hands of the Marathi poets, who turned it to the service of a literary nature" (qtd. in Vaudeville 16). Kiehnle argues that in most *abhaṅg*s "the pattern is 6-6-6-4, with deviations of plus or minus 1 syllable" (*Conservative* 35), but it is important to note that in the years of Jnaneshvar, the *abhaṅg* was still a fledgling poetic genre, and the number of syllables in each line was fluid. It was not until the sixteenth century that there were strict rules governing the number of syllables in each line of an *abhaṅg*. *Abhaṅg*s usually consisted of 4-6 stanzas, and like the popular *ovī*, were sung to a certain beat. However, an *abhaṅg* invariably has a signature line indicating the name of the author, whereas popular *ovī*s do not provide the author's name.

In her assessment of the *abhaṅg*s that bear Muktabai's signature, Shevde (1989) has complained that the poetic persona adopted by the mystic is difficult of access, and consequently, there is an unbridgeable gulf between her and her audience (68).[21] Indisputably, Muktabai's poetic "I" almost inevitably ventriloquizes a guru dispensing advice; she rarely assumes the persona of a spiritual novice or an aspirant. The speaking voice is usually magisterial, controlled, and self-possessed, as befits a guru, and hence Muktabai is not easy of approach for most readers.

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[21] As I have already stated, all quotations from Muktabai's poems, with the exception of the *Jñānabodh*, are from Modak's edition; for the *Jñānbodh* I use Joshi's edition. In both cases, the numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers. All translations are mine.

It has also been argued by scholars like Irlekar (1980) and Vijaya Ramaswamy (1997) that Muktabai's *abhaṅg*s are "uninspiring" (Ramaswamy 218) from the literary point of view. Indeed, they are frequently characterized by a narrow focus on the religious point the poet wishes to make; she is patently unwilling to embellish them through the adoption of the literary devices of the metaphor or the simile, commonly found in the poems of Jnaneshvar and other saints, male and female, of the Varkari community. The pared down quality of her verse, which frequently affirms abstract spiritual truths but refuses images that might help domesticate them, has also rendered Muktabai remote and distant. Furthermore, she fashions a persona that is largely gender-neutral by avoiding reference to activities that were traditionally feminine, such as cleaning the home or using the handmill. The speaker of her verses does not allude to the real-life concerns of women in Muktabai's time, such as the social and religious disabilities under which they labored.

While Shevde and others have complained of Muktabai's lack of accessibility, they ignore her difficult situation as a female guru. I agree that Muktabai refuses an easy camaraderie with her readers and that the persona she adopts repeatedly underlines the magnitude of her spiritual achievements. However, this poetic strategy is not a sign of incompetence or arrogance but was chosen in order to justify her unorthodox role of guru. Muktabai seeks to provide evidence of her spiritual accomplishments, which is why she favors the hortatory mode over a candid admission of her own spiritual struggles. In the following poem, for example, she exhorts her audience, presumably speaking from a position of experience:

> In the past you were free, O creature,
> But your sinful desires destroyed you.
> Recall your past and then begin

To chant the name of Hari, the essence of all mantras. (182)[22]

Muktabai dispenses spiritual advice, but she does not give utterance to her own spiritual difficulties. This lacuna helps to invest her with superhuman status and prepares the audience to accept her as a spiritual authority.

Muktabai also draws upon the multiple meanings of her proper name in order to buttress her spiritual authority. Her name Mukta can mean both "pearl" as well as "the liberated one," and it is noteworthy that the pearl features in several yogic poems attributed to Jnaneshvar, where the dissolution into the divine is described visually as an experience characterized by oceans or heavens that are full of pearls (Kiehnle, *Songs* 167). In her word play Muktabai draws upon both meanings of her name; in the closing *ovī* of the first *abhaṅg* (180), for example, she asserts that "Mukta has become free (*mukta*) through her contemplation of Vitthal."[23] According to Kiehnle, this rhetorical technique can be usefully studied in the context of Sanskrit poetics, for she notes that one of the literary devices recommended by Mammaṭa is the *abhaṅgaśleṣa*, "a pun in which one term means two (or more) different things just by itself, without there being the necessity to 'break up' the word by applying *sandhi* rules or assuming different word bases" (*Songs* 37). As Kiehnle states, many examples of *abhaṅgaśleṣa* can be found in the compositions of the medieval saint-poets. The Virashaivite poet Basava, for instance, used *Kuḍaḷasangamadeva*, "lord of the meeting rivers" as his signature, and the name represents his chosen deity as well as his guru. Among the many *abhaṅg*s of Jnaneshvar, one of the most

[22] आधी तू मुक्तचि होतासिरे प्राणिया।
परि वासने पापिणिया नाडिलासी॥
आधीचे आठव मग घेई परी।
हरिनाम जिव्हारी मंत्रसार ॥

[23] मुक्ताई चिंतने मुक्त पै जाली ।

commonly used signatures is "*bāpa rakhumādevīvara Viṭṭhala*," which designates "the father, the husband of Goddess Rakhumai, Vitthal." Simultaneously, the phrase may also be a reference to Jnaneshvar's parents, Vitthalpant and Rukmini.

Muktabai is the only Varkari poet, in addition to her brother Jnaneshvar, to engage in word play on her proper name. This literary move may have been partly facilitated by the wide semantic field of the word "*mukta*." However, this predilection for her name also serves an extra-literary end in that it reinforces Muktabai's own spiritual status as the "liberated one." Her audience is reminded, however subtly, that she is entitled to impart spiritual instruction.

Indisputably, most of the poems in the *Gāthā* as well as other collections refrain from commenting on women's concerns, *i.e.*, tasks typically associated with women or the social and religious perceptions of them. However, in the concluding poem of the *Gāthā* Muktabai overtly rejects a gendered identity, suggesting that her spiritual accomplishments have empowered her to transcend her gender. Her sexed body may be designated female, but as a spiritual adept she is no longer subject to the weaknesses of womankind.

The final poem in the *Gāthā* belongs to a genre described in Marathi as *kūṭ* ("enigma"). Poems of this category evoke esoteric spiritual experience not through logical exposition, but by employing images that defy reason and thus force the reader or listener to recognize its limitations. Such verses are not unique to the Varkari tradition; the practice of using "dark, ambiguous language" (Ramanujan 49) to veil spiritual experience has a long history in India. A. K. Ramanujan (1973) refers to such verse as "*sandhyābhāṣa*" ("twilight language") and observes that "riddles and enigmas were used even in Vedic times" (49). He states that

> in the heterodox and esoteric cults, such systems of cryptography were intended to conceal the secret doctrine from the uninitiated and the outsider. But riddle and paradox are also meant to shatter the ordinary language of ordinary experiences, baffling the rational intelligence to look through the glass darkly till it begins to see. (49)

An outstanding example of the use of *sandhyābhāṣa*, the concluding poem in the *Gāthā* (208-209) is replete with symbols that render it opaque to the reader who is ignorant of yogic practices:

> An ant flew up into the sky and swallowed the sun.
> A miracle happened: a barren woman had a child.
> A scorpion went to hell.
> The thousand-hooded serpent bowed reverently.
> A fly gave birth to a kite.
> At the sight of this, Mukta laughed.[24]

Drawing on the commentary by L. B. Shaligram, Modak paraphrases the poem as a veiled account of the union of the individual with the divine, which is the ultimate goal of every yogi (209). When the individual soul realized its inseparable oneness with God, the light of the divine illumined it. This knowledge was born from the womb of *māyā*, understood in classical Vedanta as the primal ignorance that causes us to mistake the unreal for the real. In the poem *māyā* is likened to a barren woman for she does not truly exist and cannot therefore reproduce. The ego of such a yogi, described as a scorpion, was defeated and driven to hell. The *kuṇḍalinī*, or serpent power,[25] was awakened on account of his self-realization and rose to the crown of the head. Even

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[24] मुंगी उडाली आकाशी । तिणे गिळिले सूर्याशी ॥
थोर नवलाव जाला । वांझे पुत्र प्रसवला ॥
विंचु पाताळाशी जाय । शेष माथा वंदी पाय ॥
माशी व्याली घार झाली । देखोन मुक्ताई हांसली ॥

[25] According to Nath doctrine, when the dynamic power of Shiva becomes localized in a human body, it is known as the *kuṇḍalinī*, which is traditionally depicted as a serpent with her head pointing downwards. The aim of the Nath

the sense organs of the yogi, which had formerly been battening on filth like the fly, became purified and ennobled. When Muktabai saw that the impossible had become possible, she laughed joyously.

Muktabai's laughter, as recorded in this *abhaṅg*, is charged with a significance that can be unraveled only in the context of ancient Indian theories of the humorous and of laughter. Varkari poet-saints are not usually given to laughter; they cry, they beg and plead, they silently savor the bliss of God, but they rarely permit themselves a laugh. In their reluctance to laugh, Varkari saints are in alignment with the orthodox Indian conception of laughter and its purpose.

Taking their cue from Bharata, purported author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the first Indian treatise on drama and art, Sanskrit rhetoricians and dramaturgists commonly recognized no less than six kinds of laughter. As Lee Siegel (1987) has stated, the first category, *smita*, referred to "the slight, restrained smile in which the teeth are not visible, but in which the eyes are opened wide with delight and the cheeks are slightly raised" (46); the second kind of laughter, *hasita*, designated "the full but silent smile in which the teeth show, the eyes seem to grin, and the cheeks are full with pleasure" (46). The last four categories of laughter reflect increasing degrees of boisterousness, and it is important to note that in Sanskrit drama they were reserved primarily for common characters; only the *smita* and the *hasita* were deemed appropriate for "refined people in life and noble characters in literature and drama" (46). Thus, "the only noble laughter in the Indian normative context is silent, the smile wherein the expansive energy of delight is

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yogis was to rouse this power, and direct it to the crown of the head, for the yogi "who masters the upward and downward movement of *kuṇḍalinī* (bringing about dissolution and creation respectively) … resembles or is even equal to the Lord of the universe" (Kiehnle, *Songs* 101).

contained" (46). Not surprisingly, Bharata described the comic sentiment as "primarily the prerogative of women and low-class people" (46).

Although the Indian tradition affirms that uproarious laughter is not characteristic of ascetics and others of noble character, it has also acknowledged alternative modes of expressing sanctity. For example, in the *Jābāla Upaniṣad*, the sage Yajnavalkya refers to *paramahaṃsas*, holy men "wearing no distinguishing marks, with conduct beyond the ken (of worldly people) and who behaved as though bereft of their senses though (perfectly) sane" (trans. in Ramanathan). Drawing on legends and scriptural examples, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, the nineteenth-century mystic, stated that a man who has experienced God may demonstrate his holiness in several different ways: "Sometimes he behaves like a child, a child five years old—guileless, generous, without vanity, unattached to anything…. Sometimes he behaves like a ghoul: he doesn't differentiate between things clean and things unclean. And sometimes, like an inert thing, staring vacantly: he cannot do any work; he cannot strive for anything" (qtd. in Siegel 269). Thus, some Hindu traditions do not reject social deviance or eccentricity in a man believed to be holy.

The Varkari saints, however, were well-known for their respect of social convention; they did not overtly reject the caste system, despite their proclamation of spiritual equality. In addition, many of them were householders, and maintained that asceticism was not essential for spiritual progress. Thus, they did not seek to persuade their followers to renounce utterly the outward forms of social living. Being affiliated to a spiritual tradition that did not encourage unorthodox behavior, Muktabai's laughter certainly merits closer examination. In Sanskrit plays, women, along with low-born characters, were allowed raucous laughter. Is Muktabai's laughter

representative of the few occasions when she affirms a feminine subjectivity? The last line of the poem, with its assertion that "Mukta laughed," clearly inscribes the laughter as feminine. However, the nakedness of the female speaker's response is framed as the product of yogic realization; not an outburst of mere feminine frivolity, it is appropriate and even edifying insofar as it can guide others to the truth. In performing a socially authorized script of femininity, but unequivocally tracing it to a moment of spiritual jouissance, Muktabai suggests that she has transcended the limitations of gender. Her external form may mark her as feminine, but her spiritual life has liberated her from the weaknesses of womankind.

Although Muktabai persistently affirms her individuality, she follows Varkari saints like Jnaneshvar in espousing a non-dual (*advaita*) philosophy that believes in the oneness of all existence. According to this view God is identical with the cosmos and the differences and hierarchies in the mundane world are essentially false because all living beings are one with each other and with the universe. However, the exact affiliation of the philosophical position upheld by Jnaneshvar, Muktabai and the other Varkari saints is a matter of contention, as Ranade (1933) insists that their views cannot be subsumed under Shankara's monism *(kevalādvaita*). According to Ranade, the Varkari saints belong to a distinct school of thought that he designates *sphūrtivāda*, which recognizes the world as a sport of the Self. Ranade traces the origins of *sphūrtivāda* to Jnaneshvar, and claims that "it forms his original contribution to philosophic thought" (158). According to Ranade, Jnaneshvar "regards the world as not in any way different from the Absolute, but as a manifestation of Him, a sport of the one supreme intelligent *Ātman*" (158). In his famous work *Amṛtānubhava*, in which Jnaneshvar describes his own spiritual experiences, he claims that "though Brahman itself becomes the visible world, and being itself its

seer, enjoys it, its unity is not in the least disturbed by it, as the unity of the original face is not disturbed though it is reflected in a mirror" (trans. in Ranade 158-159). In contrast to Shankara's school of Advaita, which affirms that there is a distinction between the world and the Self, *sphūrtivāda,* contends Ranade, posits an unbreakable unity between the two, insofar as one is the emanation of the other.

While Muktabai does not perform this unity in relation to her audience, she repeatedly draws on this philosophical paradigm to frame her mystical experiences. For instance, in one of her *abhaṅg*s she describes the moment of spiritual realization as follows: "she attained immortality when she realized that the formless One / has assumed form and become the world" (197).[26] Muktabai asserts that there is a seamless continuity between God and the world, for the latter is a projection of the divine and is real insofar as it derives from God. Elsewhere she argues that for those who are enlightened the world itself becomes a *Vaikuṇṭha*, traditionally believed to be Vishnu's abode: "both desire and lack of desire turned to the Self. / Then the world itself appeared as *Vaikuṇṭha*" (206).[27] Muktabai's spiritual endeavors have culminated in an awareness of the all-pervasive nature of the Divine, as a result of which the ordinary world of flux that is subject to imperfection and disharmony is transformed into the perfect, luminous realm governed by Vishnu. If the world is reinterpreted as the abode of the Divine, no human being is an Other to be conquered or subdued.

[26] मुक्ताई संजीवन तत्वता निर्गुण ।
आकार सगुण प्रपंचीचा ॥
[27] सकाम निष्काम वृत्तीचा निजफेर ।
वैकुंठाकार दाखविले ॥

In the collection of verses comprising the *Tāṭīche Abhaṅg*, Muktabai is more explicit about the relationship between the saint and society. The *Tāṭīche Abhaṅg* is a brief collection of nineteen *abhaṅg*s in which Muktabai offers spiritual instruction to a disconsolate Jnaneshvar, who had shut himself up in his room. Little is known about the manuscript sources of these *abhaṅg*s, but Modak notes that they were first published in a collection of saints' poems edited by Bahirat and Rahirkar (211).

Organic metaphors are prominent in the *Tāṭīche Abhaṅg*, as Muktabai exhorts her brother to forgive his fellow-men for their hostility and recalcitrance. In an attempt to pacify him she poses the following rhetorical question: "Does anyone punish his hand when it accidentally strikes his body?" (212).[28] The saint and all living beings are imaged as parts of the cosmic body, and any injuries are the result of ignorance and therefore merit forgiveness. Again, ignorance is imputed to society and held responsible for its offences when Muktabai claims that "even if one bites one's own tongue, one does not knock out one's teeth in punishment" (212).[29] The association of a saint with the tongue and society with teeth indicates that the two are inextricably interlinked and must work in tandem if any task is to achieve fruition; after all, both are prerequisities for clear speech. Thus, even more emphatically than in the *Gāthā*, Muktabai asserts that the saint and society are linked; no one who has scaled the heights of spiritual realization can exist as an isolated individual. Meditative practice culminates in an experience of the Self, which reorients the saint or the yogi towards the everyday world.

[28] हात आपला आपणा लागे । त्याचा करु नये राग ॥

[29] जीभ दातांनी चाविली । कोणे बत्तिशी तोडिली ॥

III.b Julian: Dissolving the Individual

My analysis of the mystical "I" that is fashioned by Julian is not based exclusively on the ST or the LT, but encompasses both; I read the ST as a work that is more autobiographical in nature than the LT, and also more closely affiliated with the tradition of affective meditation, while the LT is more authoritative and broader in scope on account of the range and depth of its theological insights.[30]

In the ST, the Julian who is presented to the readers is individuated and clearly anchored in a social milieu, for the work provides an account of the precise circumstances in which she received her visions. Julian explains that she had asked God for three gifts: an intense experience of the Passion, physical illness, and the three wounds of contrition, compassion, and sincere longing for God. These gifts, which have as their goal a more vivid experience of the Passion, clearly derive from the practices of late medieval affective piety. Affective meditation was popular, for it was sanctioned by religious authorities like Walter Hilton as a safe approach to God for laypersons. Julian too seems to have believed in its efficacy.

Julian's choice of religious models as well as the role of illness in her mystical experience position her in female communities, whether those of readers or mystics. Her request for three wounds as described in the ST was inspired by the story of St. Cecilia, an important object of feminine devotion in medieval England. As Felicity Riddy (1993) has pointed out, "women readers responded to the story of St. Cecilia in a variety of ways" (105). In the twelfth

[30] I agree with Barry Windeatt (2008) that the "development in form and content between these two extant versions of Julian's text is so extensive that there may well have been intervening versions that do not survive" (101). I am also of the view that the ST is not an abridgement of the LT, but preceded it, and was probably written not long after Julian's mystical experience. For a detailed study of the differences in content and form between the two works, see Windeatt's perceptive essay "Julian's Second Thoughts: The Long Text Tradition," 101-115.

century, for example, the saint "provided a role model for Christina of Markyate, married against her will after she had taken a vow of virginity" (105), while the fifteenth-century hagiographer Osbern Bokenham presents Cecilia as an exemplar of "the mixed life of action and contemplation adumbrated by Walter Hilton" (105). Julian adapts the story to reflect her own commitment to affective piety, choosing to interpret metaphorically the three sword wounds the saint sustained in the neck.[31]

Recounting the conditions in which her mystical experience occurred with startling precision, Julian states that when she was "thryttye wyntere alde and a halfe" (207),[32] God gave her the deathly illness she had asked for, but she recovered miraculously when she seemed to be on the verge of death. This attempt to describe the circumstances of her visions imparts a tangible reality to Julian the narrator, who is not a mere locus for God's pronouncements, but an individual rooted in the everyday world. The account of Julian's illness also aligns her with other female mystics in the medieval Christian tradition: "Illness is presented in devotional narratives in a number of ways; a few are more conventional Christian modes of thought, but most seem to be associated specifically with gender and with ecstasy" (Petroff 37). Sickness often features in accounts of women saints and can function as a means to validate a saint's nobility of spirit, or serve as a "call to a different life" (37). Julian's illness is the result of her request to God, and it

[31]As Catherine Sanok (2007) has argued (3-6), Julian's reinvention of the legend permits us a glimpse into how medieval women themselves interpreted the exemplarity of hagiographic accounts. In late medieval England narratives of women saints were produced in abundance and were directed especially to female readers. Sanok demonstrates that the exhortation to imitate their saintly predecessors often led readers to reflect on their own historical location. Julian, for example, acknowledges that the imitation of the saints could not be literal, as historical conditions had changed drastically.

[32] "thirty and a half winters old" (5).

furthers her spiritual progress insofar as it enables her to identify with Christ's suffering on the Cross. Early in her narrative, Julian affirms the value of the body in the mystical quest.

According to Julian's version of her showings, even in her very intense communion with God, she is not utterly isolated from those around her, but welded into a community, thus anticipating Christ's revelation to her that all Christians are closely linked in flesh and spirit. As Julian recounts the episode in the ST, her theodicy is briefly interrupted by laughter when God tells her that with his Passion he defeats the devil, who is always thwarted in his wish to possess the souls of the elect. God scorns the wickedness of the devil and wants Julian and her ilk to do likewise. At this revelation, the mystic laughs "myghttelye" (228), and consequently those around her participate in her laughter, although they are ignorant of what has occasioned it. While Christ refrains from laughing himself, the laughter of Julian and her companions, which affiliates her with a human community even as she engages in intimate conversation with God, is pleasing to him.

Laughter has long been a subject of investigation in the Christian tradition; patristic thinkers, including Jerome, St. Augustine, and John Chrysostom, were largely disparaging of the phenomenon as it was considered symptomatic of worldliness and even pride. Clement of Alexandria went so far as to claim that "because Jesus was never known to laugh, it should be avoided" (Perfetti 4). However, even in patristic thought, the most severe censure was reserved for women's laughter. While laughter had to be avoided even by men desirous of salvation, women were inherently more susceptible to sin, and hence needed to be controlled more stringently. Clement of Alexandria, for example, plainly stated that "to children and women especially laughter is the cause of slipping into scandal" (Trokhimenko 254). Authors of

medieval conduct books, such as the thirteenth-century Vincent De Beauvais, commonly repeat this interdiction against women's laughter. Laughter posed a greater threat to female virtue because of the conflation of the two female orifices, the mouth and the vagina, in popular discourse. Consequently, "the opening of one orifice is commonly interpreted as a symbolic opening of the other" (Trokhimenko 256).

Julian laughs in response to the devil's discomfiture, and her laughter is clearly identified as a human trait; Christ rejoices in it, but does not indulge in it himself. Moreover, the ST leaves us in no doubt that this is feminine laughter, because Julian has identified her gender in the preceding chapter itself. Julian laughs unreservedly despite her status as an anchoress and engages in behavior that was particularly represehensible for women, but she is also categorical that her laughter springs from spiritual insight and not "feminine" carnality. If read in isolation, Julian's laughter appears to function similarly to that of Muktabai: it signals a disavowal of her femininity, and indicates that while she may be biologically female, she has transcended the weaknesses of her gender. However, when we interpret this episode in relation to Julian's larger argument, it takes on a different hue. As I will elaborate later, Julian chooses not to gender human sensuality feminine when she discusses the bipartite human self, thus undermining the clerical association of women with fleshliness. When read in the light of this fact, Julian's laughter counters misogynist perceptions instead of assenting to them. In her account, the popular link between the two female "mouths" is severed; instead, feminine laughter is yoked to spiritual insight and also functions as the means to forge a community. By defending women's laughter, Julian registers protest, however obliquely, against the policing of feminine behaviors.

In the LT, Julian dispenses with most of the autobiographical information she had provided in the ST, for in the longer text, her lack of individuality itself testifies to her utter submission to Christ. As Julian contends in her theological exposition in the LT, all Christians are joined to God in both their sensual and essential beings; therefore, it follows that they are intimately connected, if not united, with one another on the corporeal and the spiritual planes. In adopting the persona of Every Christian and deflecting attention away from her individuality, Julian signals that she has truly accepted and is acting upon Christ's revelations to her.

In the long version of her experiences, Julian excises any mention of gender when referring to herself as the "wrech" (320)[33] who received the visions, in contrast to her self-portrait in the ST, where she issued an apologia explaining why she was a candidate for divine Grace despite being disqualified by her gender. Evidently, the Julian who emerges from the narrative voice of the LT is less defensive and more assured, confident that she has the authority to interpret her revelations. However, she is also careful to acknowledge her dependence on God and does not represent herself as one whose spiritual progress is complete: "For till I am substantially vntyed to him I may never haue full reste ne verie blisse" (300).[34] This imperfection constitutes the human condition, according to Julian, for "we may haue knowyng of oure selfe in this lyfe by contynuant helpe and vertu of oure hygh kind … But we may nevyr fulle know oure selfe in to the last poynt" (490-1).[35]

This lack of completeness also marks Julian's own assessment of herself as an author, for she maintains that she has not succeeded in fully expounding the spiritual insights she was

[33] "wretch"

[34] "until I become one with him in substance, I can never have complete rest or true happiness" (5).

[35] "we may have knowledge of ourselves in this life through the continuing help and strength of our higher nature,… but we can never know ourselves completely" (107).

granted: “This boke is begonne by goddys / gyfte and his grace, but it is nott yett performyd, as to my syght” (731).[36] Julian’s protestations are not a mere performance of the modesty *topos*, but are indeed sincere, as her rhetorical strategies indicate. Elizabeth Robertson (2008) argues that Julian’s technique of repeatedly returning to the same subject can be aptly characterized as “dilation” (146). Her use of dilation helps to create a sense that she can never fully comprehend the import of her visions. For instance, in her commentary on the parable of the lord and servant in chapter 51, Julian revisits the image numerous times, “to look at it from different angles, considering placement of the figures, then the colors, then the clothing” (Robertson 146). Her multiple efforts to grasp it suggest that she cannot exhaust the meanings that are latent in it.

Despite the subtlety of the ideas that she must try to understand and then verbalize, Julian makes every effort to make herself intelligible to her readers. Even as she discusses extremely abstract ideas, Julian adroitly uses simile and metaphor to domesticate them and make them available. Her images are primarily homely in nature and anchored in the mundane world, which helps give an unstudied air to her writings. For instance, in the LT the drops of blood that descend from Christ’s head are compared with objects that inhabit the everyday world: “the plentuoushede is lyke to the droppes of water that falle of the evesyng of an howse after a grete shower of reyne… And for the roundnesse they were lyke to the scale of heryng in the spredyng of the forhede” (312).[37] Similarly, when commenting in the LT on the suffering that is the fate of all those who will be saved, Julian states: “Holy chyrch shalle be shakyd in sorow, and

[36] “This book was begun by God’s gift and his grace, but it seems to me that it is not yet completed” (179).
[37] “the beauty and vividness of the blood are like nothing but itself. It is as plentiful as the drops of water which fall from the eaves after a heavy shower of rain…. As for the roundness of the drops, they were like herring scales as they spread on the forehead” (51).

anguyssch and trybulacion in this worlde as men shakyth a cloth in the wynde" (408).[38] The repeated recourse to the activities and objects of the ordinary world ensures that Julian's mystical persona does not exist in a rarefied realm, but participates fully in the lives of her fellow Christians.

IV.a Muktabai: The Multimodal Divine

In her poems in the *Gāthā,* Muktabai does not demonstrate any philosophical originality, choosing to take up the same concerns as her celebrated brother Jnaneshvar and even treating of them in similar ways. The relationship between the anthropomorphic deity and the formless Godhead is an important theme in the *abhaṅg*s of Jnaneshvar, as well as in his longer works like the *Amṛtānubhava*. In a well-known verse from the latter, Jnaneshvar argues that worship of the God with attributes is compatible with a belief in the all-pervading, formless deity:

> The temple, the idol, and the priests—
> All are carved out of the same stone mountain.
> Why, then, should there not be
> Devotional worship? (trans. in Abhayananda 209)

Muktabai endorses a similar position, and states that "the bed of the formless rests on the frame of form, / and Hari reclines on it" (201).[39] God, in this vision of reality, transcends both form and formlessness, for they are ultimately the products of the human intellect, which by its very nature is finite and cannot comprehend the Infinite. Similarly, in the third *abhaṅg* (181) Muktabai affirms that "through contemplation, the light within oneself shines forth,"[40] and states that this

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38 "God's servants, Holy Church, will be shaken in sorrows and anguish and tribulation in this world, as men shake a cloth in the wind" (80).

39 निर्गुणाची सेज सगुणाची बाज ।
तेथे केशीराज पहुडले ॥

40 दीपे दीप पूर्ण एका तत्वे ।

light was manifested as Vitthal in the house of Pundalik, his first devotee. The formless being assumes the form of Vitthal; thus worshipping the latter is fitting. However, Muktabai avoids dwelling on the legends associated with the deity or on his physical attributes. Her approach to Vitthal can be construed as abstract, for his physical form rarely elicits an impassioned response from her.

The *abhaṅg*s in the *Gāthā* illustrate yet another feature that is common to the verses composed by Muktabai and Jnaneshvar: the simultaneous presence of the teachings of the Nath sect and the practices of the Vitthal cult. Muktabai's corpus includes numerous verses extolling the easy path of devotion to Vitthal, where she insists on the efficacy of chanting his name. In the opening poem, for instance, she declares that "she has seen him whose Name sets one free."[41] Like the followers of the Vitthal cult, Muktabai is unequivocal that chanting the Name is one of the most important means to liberation. In the seventh *abhaṅg* (184) too, the dominant tone is *Vaiṣṇava*,[42] and Muktabai even refers to Ganika, a prostitute who turned to God, and featured prominently in *Vaiṣṇava* lore.[43] The saint claims that the name which has rescued her from the snares of the world is the common *Vaiṣṇava* mantra "hariramkrishna" and that she unceasingly drinks of its nectar. Thus, we see that the Muktabai of the *Gāthā* accepts the *Vaiṣṇava* cult of Vitthal, even though she conceives of Vitthal in less concrete ways than her contemporaries like Jnaneshvar or Namdev.

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[41] मुक्त जीव सदा होति पै नामपाठे ।
तेचि रुप विटे देखिले आम्ही ॥

[42] Literally, "pertaining to the deity Vishnu," in this context the term denotes the practices and beliefs of cults devoted to Vishnu or Vitthal.

[43] According to legend, Ganika attained salvation because she taught her pet parrot to chant the divine Name unceasingly.

In a number of her poems, Muktabai also alludes to Nath doctrines, like the *kuṇḍalini* and the *cakra*s,[44] thereby demonstrating her catholicity with regard to spiritual practice. Nath philosophy also underpins Muktabai's insistence on the power of the Name. As I have already mentioned, she consistently recommends the aural method of reciting the Name as imparted by a guru and contemplating it mentally for spiritual gains. This privileging of a spiritual regimen that is predominantly aural can be partly traced to Nath theories regarding the origin of the universe as expounded in the *Siddha-Siddhānta-paddhati*, a work ascribed to Gorakhnath. According to this text, the physical universe is composed of five "great elements" or "*Mahā-bhūta*s," of which the first, and most subtle, is *ākāśa*, frequently translated as "ether." As Akshaya Banerjea (1962) observes, "in all Indian systems of philosophy *Śabda* (sound) is regarded as the essential quality (*guṇa*)" (102) of *ākāśa*. This does not mean that *ākāśa* itself is audible, but that it is the repository of "all particularised sounds" (103). Since it is the property of the least gross of the five elements, sound ranks higher than other sensory modes, including sight.

In her poems Muktabai also reports numerous sensuous experiences of the divine that place her on the Nath trajectory of mystical experience. Visual, aural, and even gustatory experiences of the divine abound in Nath writings. For instance, in the yogic verses of Jnaneshvar, the aspirant's journey is often marked by visions of light; the speaker of one *abhaṅg* asserts, "In [my] vision I saw the unmanifest shining, cast as a form of luster" (Kiehnle, *Songs* 168). In addition, many yogic songs laud the sweetness of spiritual realization, and this sweetness need not always be metaphorical in nature. According to Kiehnle, some yogic texts

[44]The Naths asserted that the human body is traversed by nine *cakra*s, or nexuses of energy, each of which represents a different plane of spiritual experience. They are located in the central *suṣumna-nāḍi*, the most sensitive nerve passing through the spinal chord. The most important *cakra*, according to Gorakhnath, is located in the crown of the head (*brahmārandhra*).

indicate that the adept tastes a special fluid, usually sweet, known as *amṛta*, which has its origins in the microcosmic "moon" located in the crown of the head (*Songs* 137).

The Nath frame of reference helps explain why Muktabai sometimes evokes the Self as light, and on other occasions, identifies it with the uninterrupted hearing of the Nath mantra *soham.* She indicates that the yogi who has achieved the goal obtains what we may describe as a bi-focal vision, whereby the Self is seen as light radiating from within oneself as well as every single object, sentient and insentient, that exists in the universe. Muktabai also suggests that the experience of Brahman is not limited to sight or sound, but incorporates touch and taste; the experience of the Self is multimodal in nature, and thus intimately dependent on the body. She emphatically states that "it is full inside and out and is a source of wonder to the senses; / the Self manifests in oneself as our self" (196-197).[45] For example, Muktabai compares the experience of the Self with the sensations of heat and cold: "it is felt as cool during the day, and fiercely hot during the night" (201).[46] Vision and hearing may be the dominant senses in Muktabai's poems, but they are by no means the sole portals to the divine.

IV.b Julian: Seeing Christ

In the ST, Julian's access to Christ is markedly visual; she even claims that God "showed" her, rather than uttered, the locutions that she has tried to reproduce in her account: "for the bodely sight, I haffe sayde as I sawe, als trewlye as I cann. And for the wordes fourmed,

[45] अंतर बाह्य निके सर्व इंद्रियांचे चोज।
निजी निजबीज एकतत्व ॥

[46] दिवसा शीतळ निशियेसी बरळ ।

I hafe sayde thamm ryght as oure lorde schewed me thame" (272-3).[47] While Julian emphasizes that her visions are received through physical as well as spiritual sight, and must be interpreted in both modes, they frequently have their genesis in an act of visual perception.[48]

Julian's first recorded experience of the divine in the ST is indisputably visual; she asserts that in response to her prayer she saw a vision of the blood tricking from under Christ's crown of thorns, and describes it vividly: "I sawe the rede blode trekylle downe fro vndyr the garlande, alle hate, freschlye, plentefully and lyvelye" (210).[49] This account of Christ's plentiful and warm red blood is intensely sensual, and a much closer, more living intimation of God's fleshliness than anything we find in the compositions of Muktabai. Evidently, the extraordinarily detailed descriptions that Julian provides of the tortured body of Christ were written under the influence of affective piety. In her accounts of the dying Christ, Julian's scrupulous attention to detail is designed to evoke her visions for her readers with as much exactitude as possible: "I sawe that swete face as yt ware drye and bludyelesse with pale dyinge, sithenn mare dede, pale, langourrande, and then turnede more dede to the blewe, and sithene mare blewe, as the flesche

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[47] "I have described what I saw with bodily sight as truly as I can; and I have said the words exactly as our Lord showed them to me" (36).

[48] It is to be noted that Julian aims at precision when describing her visions, and almost undertakes a taxonomy of them, carefully distinguishing a bodily sight from "a gastelye sight" (ST 212), one that she "sees" in her understanding from one that is verbal in nature, i.e., "worde formede in myne vudyrstandynge" (ST 224). Julian's keen desire to clarify how God communed with her must be read in the light of contemporary anxiety about the nature of mystical visions. Newman (2005) observes that in the fourteenth century there was increasing lay participation in the cultivation of visions, a practice which had hitherto been confined to the cloister. As a result of this spiritual democratization, there was growing unease about the acceptability of scripted visions, with some clerics arguing that they encouraged presumption in the devotee, or could render the latter an easy prey to the deceptions of Satan (Newman, "Medieval Visionary Culture" 34). As a woman with visionary claims, Julian's position was especially precarious, and it is not surprising that she is anxious to provide an exact description of the visions she received.

[49] "And I suddenly saw the red blood trickling down from under the crown of thorns, all hot, freshly, plentifully and vividly" (6).

turnede mare deepe dede" (233).[50] Julian's visual experience of the divine is so important to her that she attempts to induce it in her readers as well through her vivid descriptions.

The emphasis on the visual is even more pronounced in the LT, where Julian narrates a parable, that of the lord and the servant, which was shown to her both bodily as well as spiritually: "that one perty was shewed gostly in bodely lycknesse. That other perty was shewed more gostly without bodely lycknes" (514).[51] This story of a servant who is faithful to his lord, but falls into a slough in his eagerness to execute his master's orders, was understood by Julian nearly twenty years after she first saw it. In her exposition, the servant is both Christ and Adam, and the story is a narrative of the Fall as well as of the incarnation of Christ. As Julian will demonstrate, every single visual detail in the story is pregnant with meaning, and needs to be glossed spiritually. Thus, Julian notes that the lord, who represents God the father, was seated in a wilderness, which signifies the barrenness of man's soul after Adam's fall, while the blue colour of God's clothing in the parable is symbolic of his steadfastness. The servant's physical proximity to his master suggests that he is simultaneously the Son and Adam, the latter also representing all humanity.

Even the spiritual goal to be attained during one's lifetime as defined by Julian in the LT consists in contemplating the divine and is defined in visual terms: "we can do no more but beholde hym, and enjoye with an hygh mighty desyer to be alle onyd in to hym" (480).[52] Sight may be intended here as a metaphor for insight or understanding, but it is noteworthy that Julian

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50 'I saw that dear face as if it were dry and bloodless with the pallor of death; and then it went more deathly, ashen and exhausted, and still nearer to death it went blue, then darker blue, as the flesh became more dead" (15).

51 "on the one hand it was shown spiritually in bodily likeness, on the other it was shown more spiritually with no bodily likeness" (115).

52 "we can do no more but behold him and rejoice, longing mightily to be completely united with him" (104).

chooses it over other sensory modes. Likewise, in the spiritual trajectory she traces, the chosen are privileged to "behold" God endlessly after death: "the creature that is made shall see and endlesly beholde god whych is the maker" (447-8).[53] This statement suggests that a subtle distinction always persists between man and the divine, regardless of how closely united they may be. In order that the human being might endlessly contemplate or "gaze on" God, the latter must exist as a separate entity who can be an object of vision, whether physical or spiritual. Thus, complete oneness between the human and the divine is precluded.

Julian's interest in vision as a means of access to God as well as her employment of vision as a trope are rooted in the medieval ranking of the senses, whereby sight was "given pride of place as the most elevated mode of perception, able to seek out, receive and engage with the light of God" (Gillespie 8). According to James McEvoy, who sums up medieval views of light, thinkers of the time commonly held that "in the visible world, light is the first, subtlest, and most active of material elements, and hence closest to immaterial nature" (qtd. in Gillespie 12). Moreover, "the essence of light lies in spiritual being rather than corporeal" (qtd. in Gillespie 12). Thus, it is only fitting for Julian to invoke the sensory mode that is most closely associated with the element of light in her verbalization of the mystical encounter.

In the ST Julian's Christ is characterized primarily by two qualities, love and courtesy. Her extended comparison of Christ to a medieval lord makes her conception of him more intelligible to her contemporaries. Thus, Christ's behavior towards humankind parallels that of a gracious lord towards his servant: "oure good lorde, that is so reverent and dredfule, is so homely and so curteyse…It is the most wurschypp that a solempne kyng or a gret lord may do to a pore

[53] "the creature that is made shall see and endlessly contemplate God, who is the maker" (104).

seruante, yf he wylle be homely with hym" (313).[54] In keeping with his courteous nature, God thanks Julian, his humble servant, for her suffering: "I thanke the of thy servyce and of thy trauayle" (ST 229).[55] Moreover, every soul who faithfully serves God is the recipient of Christ's gratitude in heaven: "this thanke is so hyȝe and so wyrschipfulle that hym thynke it fylles hym" (ST 230).[56] The courtesy of Julian's God is also demonstrated in his patience; on one occasion, the mystic is so overcome by the joy of contemplating God, that she neglects to pay attention to his words, but she is not reproved for this lapse: "oure lorde fulle curtayslye abayde to I walde entende" (ST 253).[57]

Julian's God cannot be subsumed within the apophatic model, although she claims even in the ST that the sight of the wounded Christ was supplemented by "the godhead" that she saw in her "vndyrstandynge" (211).[58] Despite the occasional reference to a deity who transcends human conceptual structures, Julian's emphasis is on the God with attributes, particularly love. In the ST and in the LT Julian repeatedly emphasizes that love is God's primary motivation, and that he is best grasped through love. As an expression of his unbounded love for humanity, Christ asserts: "it is a ioye and a blysse and ane endless lykynge to me that euer y suffyrde passyonn for the, for ȝyf I might suffyr mare, I walde suffyr" (ST 239).[59] Furthermore, Julian explicitly states that she has received her insights from God and wants to make them known to her fellow Christians in the hope that their dissemination will encourage "mare hatynge of synne

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[54] "our God and Lord, who is so holy and awe-inspiring, is also so homely and courteous….a majestic king or a great lord can show most respect for a poor servant if he treats him in a familiar way" (51).

[55] "I thank you for your service and your travail" (13).

[56] "the gratitude is so exalted and so glorious that it would seem to fill the soul" (14).

[57] "our Lord very courteously waited till I paid attention" (25).

[58] "the Godhead that I saw in my mind" (7).

[59] "It is a joy and a delight and an endless happiness to me that I ever endured suffering for you, for if I could suffer more, I would suffer" (18).

and lovynge of god" (ST 222).[60] Julian is unequivocal that God must be loved by all Christians because he is love; thus, her primary affiliation is with the cataphatic school.

In the LT, Julian asserts that God's love has no compass and includes both the body and the spirit. She confidently states: "for as þe body is cladd in the cloth, and the flessch in the skynne, and the bonys in þe flessch, and the harte in the bowke, so ar we, soule and body, cladde and enclosydde in the goodnes of god" (307).[61] Julian aptly uses a corporeal simile to prove that we are enclosed by God's goodness in the flesh as well as in the spirit, for he does not relinquish any part of our being.[62] Julian asserts that it is on account of his great love that God has made provision for our bodily needs: "he hath no disdeyne to serue vs at the sympylest office that to oure body longyth in kynde, for loue of the soule that he made to his awne lycknesse" (307).[63] In her refusal to exclude the body from God's loving care, Julian accepts the human self as a composite of body and soul, flesh and spirit.

In the ST itself, Julian initiates her theodicy, and in her attempt to justify the ways of God to men, she provides a re-reading of the relationship between the spirit and the flesh, positing that the presence of the divine extends to bodily existence as well. Julian contends that since "god dothe alle thynge, be itt nevere so litille" (226),[64] sin is naught, for God cannot sin. Sin has

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60 "so that sin shall be more hated and God more loved" (11).

61 "as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the chest, so are we, soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God" (49).

62 Julian was not entirely original in her concession to the body; from the early fourteenth century onwards, the corporeal received more favorable views. As Caroline Bynum (1995) maintains, "mystical and theological writing in the years around 1300 spoke repeatedly of body as a bride, whose absence in heaven distracted or 'retarded' soul from full joy in God" (10-11). The supremacy of the soul was not challenged, but its need for a bodily vessel came to be emphasized.

63 "nor does he disdain to serve us in the simplest task that belongs by nature to our bodies, through love of the soul which he has made in his own likeness" (6).

64 "God does everything, no matter how small" (12)

no real existence, i.e, "it has na manere of substannce, na partye of beynge" (245).[65] However, human beings must suffer the consequences of sin, albeit it is conducive to our good: "it purges vs and makes vs to knawe oureselfe and aske mercye; for the passionn of oure lorde is comforth to vs agaynes alle this" (245).[66] In her theodicy as expounded in the ST, Julian also lends support to the theory of the bipartite human soul articulated by St. Augustine to explain how humankind can be redeemed: "as þer is a bestely wille in the nethere party that may wille na goode, so is thare a goodely wille in the ouer partye that maye wille nane eville, botte euer goode" (254-5).[67] Significantly, Augustine genders the two divisions of the soul; the "higher reason" is masculine, while woman "is a metaphor for the lower reason" (Baker 126). Julian, however, chooses not to assign gender to her divisions of the soul in both the ST and the LT, and does not overtly rank them. She maintains that in choosing to be born as a human being, Christ has redeemed man's fleshly being, and knit together sensuality and substance, the sensory being and the essential being, respectively: "That wurschypfull cytte þat oure lorde Jhesu syttyth in, it is oure sensualyte, in whych he is enclosyd; and oure kyndly substance is beclosyd in Jhesu" (LT 572).[68] God judges man in terms of his natural essence which is ever perfect and has its abode in him; man, however, bases his judgment on the "changeable sensualyte" (LT 486).[69]

Not only does Julian refuses to associate the sensual being with the feminine, she also excludes Eve from her parable of the Fall, which only features God and Adam/Christ as his

65 "it has no sort of substance nor portion of being" (21).

66 "it purges us and makes us know ourselves and pray for mercy, for the Passion of our Lord is comfort to us against all this" (21).

67 "For just as there is an animal will in our lower nature which can have no good impulses, there is a godly will in our higher nature which… can will no evil, but only good" (26).

68 "the noble city in which our Lord Jesus sits is our sensory being, in which he is enclosed; and our essential being is enclosed in Jesus" (133-4).

69 "changeable sensory being" (106).

faithful servant. As Jessica Barr (2010) has argued, the absence of Eve is significant because it "shifts the responsibility for humankind's sinful state away from the female body" (97). In denying the association between female flesh and sin, Julian levels the spiritual differences between men and women that had been steadfastly asserted and sedulously propagated by the Church.

V.a Muktabai: The Guru as Authority[70]

In his study of mystical authorization, Certeau (1986) identifies the ideological space inhabited by the mystic utterance in the Christian tradition: "it is at the same time *beside* the authorized institution, but outside it and *in* what authorizes that institution, i.e, the Word of God" (*Heterologies* 92). Certeau's assertion can be adapted to non-Christian contexts as well: mystic discourse typically disclaims institutional origins, and therefore requires an authenticating gesture. Like other Varkari figures, and indeed, most Hindu mystics, Muktabai relies primarily on the guru to authenticate her experiences and to secure a spiritual lineage. The guru's centrality derives from the fact that his knowledge of spiritual truths is not merely theoretical, but is grounded in personal experience of the divine. In fact, the *Jnāneśvarī* even conflates guru and God: "If it pleases God, even pebbles, put into boiled water, may turn out to be well-prepared rice. When the Guru has accepted the disciple, the whole Samsara [world] becomes full of joy" (trans. in Ranade 51). In receiving spiritual instruction from her guru, Muktabai receives it from God himself.

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70 When I discuss the authorizing tropes deployed by the mystics, I do not impugn their sincerity. I mean only that the mystics must make use, to a greater or a lesser degree, of the templates already provided by their religious traditions in order to make their experience intelligible and therefore potentially useful to other members of the community.

In several poems in the *Gāthā*, Muktabai alludes to her guru, Nivritti, and his role in her spiritual progress; for example, she affirms, "having become one with consciousness, Mukta realized that the cosmos pulsates with it. / It was Nivritti who showed her the sign from beginning to end" (203).[71] Muktabai asserts that any spiritual knowledge she may have acquired is the result of her guru's grace, thereby testifying to its authenticity: "her guru explained how it created the universe; / then she was able to recognize the supreme principle" (200).[72] Despite the obeisance that she pays to her guru, however, Muktabai does not acknowledge the full complexity of their relationship, for she does not mention that Nivritti was her brother. He is important only as her spiritual mentor.

Muktabai does not satisfactorily address the issue in the *Tāṭīche Abhaṅg* either. These poems constitute an anomaly insofar as they present the younger sister of Jnaneshvar, who was merely a child when she reputedly composed them, imparting spiritual truths to her more spiritually advanced brother. According to Shevde, the uniqueness of these poems lies in the fact that here Muktabai "does preach, but her role is not primarily that of a teacher .... Here we are presented with Muktabai in a new guise, that of a loving sister" (71). However, the reference to the familial relationship with Jnaneshvar occurs only in the last verse, as justification for her daring in preaching to him: "Who is to teach whom? One must seek the essence. / Your darling Muktabai surrenders to you" (213).[73] The emotional appeal here is a last resort, intended only to

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71 मुक्ताई चैतन्य अवघे चिद्घन ।
आदि अंतु खूण निवृत्तीची ॥

72 विस्तारुनी रुप सांगितले तत्त्वी ।
कैसेनि परतत्त्वी वोळखी जाली ॥

73 कोणी कोणा शिकवावे । सार साधूनिया घ्यावे ॥
लडिवाळ मुक्ताबाई । जीव मुदल ठायीचें ठायी ॥

convince her brother to overlook her temerity and consider her arguments nevertheless. Muktabai does not invoke the relationship for its own sake, but to explain her conduct.

In most collections of poetry that bear Muktabai's signature, she consistently glosses over the familial relationship she shares with Nivritti, her guru, and Jnaneshvar, who appears to have been a spiritual mentor. However, even her brothers are reluctant to admit to the biological ties they share in their writings. We can posit two reasons for this lacuna, both of which help buttress the speaker's spiritual authority. With reference to Muktabai, it may be argued that after having accepted her brothers as her spiritual guides, their biological relationship is no longer relevant; their spiritual function is so weighty that any other relationship becomes secondary. Thus, the fact that Muktabai often neglects to mention that Nivritti and Jnaneshvar are her brothers indicates the ardor and the sincerity of her spiritual quest, which is such that family ties have lost their hold over her. We may also argue that Muktabai self-consciously obscures her familial connections with Nivritti and Jnaneshvar in a strategic move to consolidate her spiritual authority, which derives primarily from affiliation with a recognized guru who boasted an old and distinguished spiritual lineage. If Muktabai were to emphasize familial over spiritual ties, it would detract from her own claims to spiritual pedigree. Thus, the impersonal quality of her verse may have been deliberately intended to inspire trust in her spiritual authority.

The importance of the guru to Muktabai's mystical authority is clearly illustrated by the *Jnāñbodh*, a dialogue between Nivritti and Muktabai, in which the latter expounds her views on the Absolute, the origin of creation, and the nature of *māyā*. The text is divided into three parts; the first comprises questions addressed to Muktabai by Nivrrittinath and is the longest, consisting of 124 *abhaṅg*s. The second part, in which Muktabai seeks to answer her guru's questions, has

54 *abhaṅg*s, while the third part consists of 20 *abhaṅg*s, and records a dialogue between the two mystics.

The relationship between Mukta and her guru as delineated in the *Jñānbodh* is highly unconventional insofar as the guru professes his ignorance and requests his disciple to resolve his doubts. In the very opening *abhaṅg*, Nivrittinath addresses Muktabai thus:

> Having lit a lamp, I sit in its light.
> Words cannot encompass the joy of finding one's self.
> Through its light I probed my mind, and sought my own treasure.
> The wealth of which one knows neither height nor depth, can be obtained by listening intently to the guru.
> Where is one to find a guru of such caliber, Muktabai, my friend, mother and sister?
> Nivritti asks, O Mother, who will impart to us the secret of eternal happiness? (1)[74]

Nivritti claims that through his spiritual endeavors, represented by the lamp, he enjoys the bliss of the self, which engulfs him like light. In his address to Muktabai their biological relationship finds mention, with Nivritti categorically describing her as his sister. However, in this text too, it functions as a means to an end, partially justifying Nivritti's appeal to Muktabai for answers to his spiritual queries. Muktabai's negotiation of authority is particularly complex in this work, where the traditional touchstone of spiritual authenticity, the guru, himself pleads ignorance. If Nivritti needs to be tutored by his disciple in spiritual matters, guru and disciple share a very unusual relationship indeed. Furthermore, in a tradition where veneration of the guru was an important religious practice, any acknowledgement of inadequacies in the guru was unacceptable. As represented in the text, Muktabai herself is acutely aware of this incongruity:

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[74] लाउनीया दीप बैसलो उजेडी । सवसुख गोडी काय बोलो ॥
तयाचिया प्रकाशे शोधीयले मन । माझे मज धन सापडले ॥
जया धनाची नेणु खोली आणी उंची । सत्य गुरुमुखी करूनी घ्यावे ॥
ऐसा बोलण्याचा गुरु मिळेल कोण । सखी मायबहीण मुक्ताबाई ॥

As if you do not know the answers to the questions you ask! What can I contribute ...
You are my guru, and now I am become yours.
Questions and replies happen spontaneously.
I was your disciple, and now you are mine.
A deep emotion binds us together.
Says Muktabai, you have sown the seed, and the servant can reap the harvest with ease (61).[75]

In her reply Muktabai takes recourse to an array of strategies to uphold the authority of her guru. She begins by claiming that Nivritti is merely feigning ignorance, although she concedes that she has become his guru. Muktabai then attempts to undermine this statement with the claim that even if she does possess spiritual knowledge, it is Nivritti who has laid its foundations; it is he who has "sown the seed," from which she can "reap an easy harvest." Ironically, Muktabai even requests her guru's blessing before she answers his queries. She supplicates him thus: "O guru, the very embodiment of auspiciousness, bless me with your sight (*darśan*). / Let my replies spring forth" (64).[76] The guru is proclaimed as the true source of the work, and its value is guaranteed.

The analogies Muktabai uses in her verses are also designed to defuse the tension between the orthodox conception of the guru and Nivritti's own unassuming persona. She infantilizes herself in her address to her guru:

How can a child give his father advice?
He knows nothing about the world.
Can a little girl teach her mother how to run a household?
Isn't the very suggestion strange? (63).[77]

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[75] जे पुसीले ते की तुम्हा नाही ठावे । काय आम्ही द्यावे करूनी नवे ॥ …
तुम्ही आम्हा गुरु आम्ही तुम्हा गुरु । उत्तरा प्रतिउत्तरू सहज होय ॥
आम्ही तुम्हा शिष्य तुम्ही आम्हा शिष्य । परस्परे आसे भाव येक ॥
म्हणे मुक्ताबाई तुम्ही केली लावण । सेवकाते उगवण सहजची आले ॥

[76] गुरु मंगळमुर्ती द्यावा दर्शनलाभ । माझा ज्ञानबोध पुढे न्यावा ॥

[77] पुत्राने पीत्याते काय मती द्यावी । मा स्फुर्ती चालावी बाळकाची ॥

The analogies she chooses mitigate her offence, for they do not draw upon serious infractions of social order, but refer to reversals of status that are almost comic in nature. As a result, Muktabai's instructions to her guru can be construed as laughable or irrelevant rather than disrespectful and transgressive.

V.b Julian: Negotiating with Holy Mother Church

As Janette Dillon (1996) states,"nearly all the revelations of Continental holy women were written down for them by their confessors, and many confessors, besides acting as scribes for the revelations, also wrote *vitae* or letters testifying to the women's holiness and took an active part in promoting their canonisation" (125). Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373), for example, had her *Revelations* in Swedish translated into Latin by her confessor, and she then worked with him to edit the Latin text. The *Vita* of Dorothy of Montau (1347-1394), a married woman who became an anchoress after she was widowed, was written by her confessor John of Marienwerder, who also recorded many of her visions in separate works.[78] Clarifying the duties of the confessor to his female charge, Dillon notes that he was to "test and to testify" (Dillon 123). The confessor was entrusted with the important task of applying the principles of *discretio spirituum* or the "discernment of spirits" to the visions of the holy woman in order to confirm whether they were of divine provenance or not. Thus, the female mystic received institutional recognition through her confessor's endorsement of her visions.

कन्येने मातेते काय सांगावा संसार । हा उफराटा विचार दिसत आहे ॥

[78] For an illuminating essay on John of Marienwerder's relationship with Dorothy and his attempt to assert his own authority as cleric against the informal power that Dorothy wielded as a holy woman, see John Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power,* 193-210.

Julian does not explicitly invoke her confessor, but undertakes her own spiritual authentication by evaluating her insights and demonstrating that they do not violate ecclesiastical teachings. In the ST, Julian's autobiographical asides are one of her chief strategies for self-authorization, for they underline her supposed lack of learning and therefore demonstrate that she was a pure conduit for divine grace. As Anna Lewis (2009) observes:

> the least suspect visions, as far as the Church was concerned, were those which came like "a bolt from the blue, unprovoked and even undesired" and the least suspect visionaries were those whose ignorance and weakness made them the cleanest channels for God's word, ensuring that there would be no contamination from the thoughts or ideas of the visionary. (76)

In the ST, Julian initiates her self-authenticating project by enumerating her faults: "I praye ȝowe alle for goddys sake, and cownsayles ȝowe … that ȝe leve the behaldynge of the wrechid wor(m)e, / synfulle creature, that it was schewyd vnto" (219).[79] As a humble believer fully aware of her sins, Julian was an appropriate recipient of God's revelations and a true locus of divine speech.

The Julian of the ST makes no attempt to gloss over her gender: "I am a womann, leued, febille and freylle" (222).[80] Liz McAvoy (2004) has argued that Julian's literary persona identifies with a larger community than that of female visionary, for she seeks to expose contemporary constructs of femininity, and is thus speaking on behalf of all of her sex. McAvoy contends: "By making use of exactly the type of terminology used to repress women but in a

79 "I beg you all for God's sake, and I counsel you… to ignore the wretched worm, the sinful creature to whom this vision was shown" (9).

80 "I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail" (10-11).

context of proactivity, the hollowness of the hegemony is revealed for what it is—an ideological construct which can be proved erroneous and misinformed" (16). However, I read Julian's admission of womanly frailty primarily as a bid for authenticity as a visionary, for it was predominantly women who featured in this category of sainthood.

Authorization for Julian's visions is also provided by the pronouncements of other individuals, chiefly Christ himself. When she begins to doubt her showings and ascribes them to delirium, he addresses her "with owtynn voyce and with owtenn openyng of lyppes" (269),[81] and assures her that all her visions were genuine, instructing her to believe them and draw comfort from them. Moreover, descriptions of Christ's bleeding body also reinforce Julian's authority, particularly in the ST, where she is vocal about her gender. Julian's verbal portraits of Christ are awash with blood; this profusion of blood genders Christ female, for medieval thinkers typically conceived of the female body as "an unsealed body which was characterized by blood-loss, lactation and weeping" (McAvoy 80). In the *Revelations*, Christ's blood is represented as the equivalent of "a specifically female blood-loss, whether ruptured hymen, menstrual flow, or blood-loss associated with childbirth" (McAvoy 80). The association of the blood with the feminine is explicit in the ST, where Julian reflects that if the blood had been physical, "itt schulde hafe made the bedde alle on blode *and* hafe passed o*n*n abowte" (227).[82] As McAvoy points out, the blood flow is thus "subtly feminized by means of its association with the sickroom and the suffering body of the woman onlooker, Julian" (80). Julian's use of the

[81] "without any voice or opening of his lips" (33)

[82] "the whole bed would have been blood-soaked and even the floor around" (12).

gendered body empowers her insofar as Christ himself manifests bodily traits that would be construed as feminine.

Julian clarifies that the spiritual lessons she has been taught through the visions are intended for all her fellow Christians, thus pre-empting possible charges of self-aggrandizement: "alle that I sawe of my selfe, I meene in the persone of alle myne evynn cristene" (219).[83] She claims that she wants the benefits of her mystical states to accrue to everyone: "yt (ys) comonn and generale as we ar alle ane, and I am sekere I sawe it for the profytte of many oder" (220).[84] Julian's intended audience comprises all Christians, particularly because her theology is accommodating of sinners in its insistence that all Christians have access to God insofar as he is lodged in the essential being of all men and women. While Julian is careful to avoid antinomianism by warning her audience against sin, she also believes that sin, and the suffering it brings in its wake, are ordained by God, and lead to a higher good. Furthermore, even in the ST the mystic invokes individual saints, including David, Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene, as examples of those who have attained spiritual glory despite their sins.

In the LT, Julian is even bolder, for she hints that God's love encompasses not only those who will be saved and Christians who have not lived by the tenets of the faith, but also heathens. Her contention that God's love is universal makes some aspects of the Church's teachings incomprehensible to her. She reflects: "one point of oure feyth is that many creatures shall be dampnyd, as angelis that felle ouȝt of hevyn for pride, whych be now fendys, and meny in erth that / dyeth out of the feyth of holy chyrch, that is to sey tho that be hethyn, and also many that

83 "All that I saw concerning myself, I mean to be applied to all my fellow Christians" (9).

84 "For it is universal and addressed to all because we are all one, and I am sure I saw it for the profit of many others" (10).

hath receyvyd cristondom and lyvyth vncristen lyfe and so dyeth ouȝte of cheryte" (425).[85] Julian notes that the Church teaches her to believe that all these categories of people shall be condemned everlastingly to hell. She does not try to find a logical solution to reconcile these contradictory positions, but affirms that God will not reveal all his secrets to mankind. Julian is reluctant to openly admit the possibility of universal salvation, as it was not sanctioned by the contemporary Church, but she also does not deny it outright.

On other occasions, Julian actively seeks to reconcile Christ and Church, either by qualifying her more radical insights, or by garnering evidence to prove that they do not undermine clerical teachings. We see an early example of this strategy in chapter six of the LT, where Julian begins by extolling prayer that is addressed directly to God: "Then saw I verily that it is more worshipp to god and more verie delite that we feaithfully praie to him selfe of his goodnes, and cleue ther to by his grace, with true vnderstanding and stedfast beleue, then if we made the meanes that hart maie thinke" (304).[86] However, as A. C. Spearing observes (183), Julian qualifies this audacious statement about the value of direct prayer by acknowledging the importance of prayers that are directed to Mary and the saints: "and we praie him for his sweete mothers loue / that bare him, and all the helpe that we haue of her, it is of his goodness" (305).[87] Likewise, Julian affirms that "all the helpe that we haue of speciall sainctes and of all the blessed companie of heauen, the dere worthie loue and the holie endles frinshipe that we haue of them, it

85 "one point of our faith is that many shall be damned—like the angels who fell out of heaven from pride, who are now fiends, and men on earth who die outside the faith of Holy Church, that is, those who are heathens, and also any man who has received Christianity and lives an unchristian life" (86).

86" then I saw that it really honours God more, and gives more joy, if we ask him to answer our prayers through his own goodness, and cling to it by his grace, with true understanding and steadfast belief, than if we approach him through all the intermediaries that heart can devise" (48).

87 "and we pray to him by the love of the sweet Mother who bore him, and all the help we have from her is from his goodness" (48-9).

is of his goodness" (305).[88] Julian concludes that God has ordained many aids to help mankind and "it pleaseth him that we seke him and / worshippe him by meanes, vnderstanding and knowing that he is the goodnes of all" (305-6).[89] Julian ultimately concedes the value of intermediaries, but at the same time she does not explicitly extend the term to include the clergy as well.

Regarding her position vis-à-vis institutional authority as articulated in the ST, Julian is emphatic that her revelations do not contradict the "trewe techynge of halye kyrke" (223)[90] and claims that "in alle thynge I lyeve as haly kyrke techis" (223).[91] She is careful to state that despite the wisdom of the revelations, she is still in need of clerical instruction: "I saye nought that me nedes na mare techynge, for oure lorde with the schewynge of this hase lefte me to haly kyrke, and I am … nedy and synfulle and freele, and wilfully submyttes me to the techynge of haly kyrke with alle myne euencrystenn in to the ende of my lyfe" (244).[92] Thus, Julian repeatedly affirms that Christ has spoken to her directly, but she avoids charges of antinomianism by accepting the authority of the Church, and insists that it cannot be superseded even by one who has been privileged to commune with God himself.

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88 "all the help that is given to us by special saints and by all the blessed company of heaven, the precious love and unending friendship that we receive from them, we receive from his goodness" (49).

89 "it pleases him that we should seek and worship him in these intermediate ways while understanding and knowing that he is the goodness of all" (49).

90 "the true teaching of Holy Church" (11).

91 "in all things I believe what Holy Church teaches" (11).

92 "I am not saying that I do not need any more teaching, for our Lord… has left me to Holy Church; and I am … needy and sinful and frail, and willingly submit myself to the teachings of Holy Church with all my fellow-Christians to the end of my life" (21).

VI.a Muktabai: Motherhood as Power

The next collection of verses attributed to Muktabai that I shall examine is a dialogue between the mystic and her disciple, the haṭhayogi Changdev. Like most works attributed to Muktabai, it is not distinguished for its philosophical originality, and affirms Advaita doctrine as expounded by her brother Jnaneshvar. However, one of the most noteworthy features of Muktabai's dialogue with Changdev is the relationship that she delineates between herself and the supposedly aged yogi: she persistently represents herself as one who has nourished Changdev and assumes a maternal role with regard to him. Her use of the trope of maternity to convey philosophical truths is not novel, but I argue that Muktabai is unique in deploying motherhood to authorize her status as guru.

In the collection of *abhaṅg*s ascribed to Jnandev, there are five poems that are cast into the mold of the cradle song or lullaby, known in Marathi as *pāḷṇā*. In two *abhaṅg*s, it is the individual soul (*jīva*), unaware of its real nature, that is depicted as a child, while in two others, it is the formless Absolute that is paradoxically invoked as a baby. More unusual, however, is Jnaneshvar's last *pāḷṇā* song, in which the child is not symbolic of either the anthropomorphic God, or the transcendent Brahman, but represents the poet himself:

> See the cradle which hangs where there is neither Void nor Non-Void.
> There lies an infant that has neither name or caste.
> It has no mother to rock it to sleep.
> Vitthal, lord of Rakhumai, does not have a cradle. There I lie, as a little child. (613)[93]

[93] शून्य नाही निरशून्य नाही । तेथे पाळणा पाही लावियेला ॥
जातिवीण बाळ उपजले पाही । तेथे परिये देते माय तेही नाही ॥
बाप रखुमादेविवरु विठ्ठली पाळणा नाही । तेथे मी बाळ पाही पहुडलो ॥

The saint envisages himself lying in a non-existent cradle, i.e., having surrendered completely to Vitthal, who is formless in his essence.

Another genre that appears to have been popular in Jnaneshvar's time is known as *madālasā*, cradle-songs addressed to her sons by the legendary queen Madalasa, a sage who tried to impart Advaitic truths to her children even when they were young. There are several poems cast into this mold among Jnaneshvar's poetic repertoire, in which the speaker assumes the persona of Madalasa, and exhorts her "child" to "rest in his Inner Joy and his Inner Self" (573).[94] It is likely that some of these songs may have inspired Muktabai's composition of her cradle-songs. However, there are crucial differences between the *madālasā* poems and lullabies composed by Jnaneshvar and Muktabai's cradle-songs; Jnaneshvar does not consistently speak in his own voice, unlike Muktabai. Furthermore, the latter's infant is carefully tended to and loved, while Jnaneshvar's child is not always the recipient of maternal nurturing.

In her *pāḷṇā*-compositions, Muktabai leaves us in no doubt that she has taken on the functions of mother, and to a historical individual no less: "Mukta gave life to Changya. / She taught him how to reach the Formless One who is his real home" (214).[95] In another poem, she asserts that "Changdev is in quest of the Source. / Muktabai has nourished him" (215).[96] The cradle-songs are charged with concepts derived from Nath and yogic sources:

> An indestructible cradle has been woven of the Transcendent; in it sprawls the King of Yogis!
> *Māyā* says, Sleep little one, sleep!
> Sleep Changya, the Formless One!
> I purify the six *cakra*s with the mantra of *Soham*, I am He.

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[94] जे जो जे जो निजानंदे आत्माराम प्रसिद्ध ।

[95] मुक्ताई जीवन चांगया दिधले । निर्गुणी साधिले घर कैसे ॥

[96] वटेश्वर चांगा मुळी लागला । पोसणा घेतला मुक्ताईने ॥

As I instruct you, I forget myself.
May you lose yourself in such a sleep, my son.
Mukta initiates Khechar[97] into a mantra. (215)[98]

In this poem, which opens with the irony that "the King of Yogis," Changdev, is sprawling in a cradle like an infant, there are two female figures who are competing to put him to sleep, two "mothers" who claim him as their child. The first is the false mother or *māyā*, who wants the child to be lulled into the stupor of the benighted man. Muktabai, in contrast to the insidious *māyā*, wants her son to lose awareness of his phenomenal existence, and recognize the Self as the only reality. Mukta triumphs over *māyā* by initiating her child, and thereby ensuring that he will progress further on the spiritual journey.

Significantly, in his use of the cradle-song, Jnaneshvar does not grant a prominent role to the maternal function, asserting instead that the child has neither mother nor father. His infant is predominantly motherless, in contrast to Muktabai's Changdev, who is cared for tenderly by the saint, his "mother." In Muktabai's songs, she either addresses the yogi directly as her son, or implores him to sleep, thus assuming a maternal role towards him. For the Varkari tradition the guru was considered to be equal of God. Not only did the Varkaris divinize this figure, they also invested him with maternal attributes. Thus, Jnaneshvar repeatedly refers to the guru as "a true mother" when he pays obeisance to Nivrittinath in the twelfth chapter of the *Jñāneśvarī* (Ranade 49).

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[97] Another name for Changdev, which literally means "one whose body is not confined to earth."

[98] अविनाश पाळणा अव्यक्ते विणिला। तेथे पहुडला योगिराज ॥
जो जो जो जो म्हणतसे माया। साकारातीत निजरे चांगया ॥
सोहं सोहं षटचक्री न्यासे। तुज परिये देता मीच न दिसे ॥
ऐशी निद्रा तुज लागोरे पुत्रा। मुक्ताई खेचरा उपदेशी मंत्रा ॥

Based on the conception of the guru that prevailed in Varkari circles, it is plausible to argue that Muktabai's lullabies directed to her "son" Changdev simply build on a well-established trope. As his spiritual mother, she soothes him into the highest state of awareness. However, it is significant that it is only Muktabai, and not her male counterparts, who represents herself as infantilizing her disciple and singing him to sleep in his cradle. Does the saint's unique treatment of cradle-songs have to do with her gender? It is important to note that her relationship with Changdev was unconventional insofar as Muktabai, the guru, was female, while her disciple was male. By employing the socially sanctified role of mother to define her relationship to her disciple, Muktabai secures legitimacy for her unconventional position. In her lullabies, motherhood is empowering in that it authorizes her unorthodox role of guru to a respected male figure.[99]

VI.b Julian: Maternalizing Christ, Empowering Women

Julian maps the relationship that exists between God and his creation through the use of several familial analogies: "god enjoyeth that he is our fader, and god enjoyeth that he is our moder, and god enjoyeth that he is our very spouse, and our soule his lovyd wife" (546).[100] The bond can also be fraternal in nature: "Crist enjoyeth þat he is our broder" (546).[101] Despite the varied kinship roles which Julian allots to God, it is without doubt the notion of God-as-parent, particularly the maternal God, that engages her most closely in the LT. In contrast to her Indian

99 Even today, female gurus in the Hindu tradition often invoke motherhood to justify their appropriation of a masculine role. As Karen Pechilis (2011) observes in her recent study of contemporary women gurus, "most of the female gurus active in the twentieth century and today have had the appellation "Ma" (Mother) in their titles, including Gauri Ma, Anandamayi Ma, Ma Jaya… and Ganga Ma' (105-106).

100 "God rejoices that he is our father, and God rejoices that he is our mother, and God rejoices that he is our true spouse, and our soul is his much-loved bride" (125).

101 "Christ rejoices that he is our brother" (125).

counterpart, Julian does not employ the trope of Christ-as-mother as a self-authorizing tool in the LT, for she withholds knowledge of her gender in this version of her showings. At the same time, the evidence of both the ST and the LT suggests that Julian's exposition of the maternal God was not a happy accident, but a strategy designed to foster a more positive assessment of women and the feminine. She makes a deliberate effort to counter the negative views of the feminine that circulated in the clerical and social discourses of her time.

Julian offers a systematic explanation of Christ's maternity as it operates in the human world and identifies three ways in which this maternity is performed. Christ's first task as mother was to forge the bond between the soul and our physical or sensory being at the time of creation. His motherhood is also manifest in his assumption of human flesh; in doing so, Christ atoned for Adam's sin and redeemed humankind. As Julian states, "thus is Jhesu oure very moder in kind of oure furst makyng, and he is oure very moder in grace by taking of oure kynde made" (592).[102] Finally, Christ-as-mother brings the chosen, or perhaps all human beings, to a realization of their intimate relationship with the divine.

In Julian's treatment of the subject, the exaltation of God-as-mother creates new respect for the sensual, and provides divine sanction for the composite nature of the human being. Moreover, it also suggests the oneness of all human flesh, which is inhabited by Christ himself; human beings, or Christians, are doubly conjoined in flesh and spirit. Thus, Julian's mode of invoking Christ reiterates the closeness, or even oneness, of all Christians both bodily and spiritually.

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102 "so Jesus is our true mother by nature, at our first creation, and he is our true mother in grace by taking on our created nature" (140).

In medieval Europe, the maternal God came to prominence as late as the twelfth century, when he was invoked by Cistercian figures like Bernard of Clairvaux.[103] However, Julian is the first medieval figure to provide a comprehensive account of Christ's maternal responsibilities, which suggests that her maternalization of the deity is not perfunctory or cursory, as might appear in the works of some of her predecessors. It was important to her and integral to her theology. In the works of Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, "the maternal image is almost without exception elaborated not as giving birth or even as conceiving or sheltering in a womb but as nurturing, particularly suckling" (Bynum 115). Likewise, Guerric abbot of Igny (c. 1157), a Cistercian who was second only to Bernard in his use of maternal images for God and authority figures within his order, incorporated images of pregnancy and of the womb. However, even in his writings, the "most extensive images are images of breasts and milk" (Bynum 122). Consequently, Bynum contends that in most works by twelfth-century Cistercians "breasts and nurturing are more frequent images than conceiving or giving birth. And where birth and the womb are dominant metaphors, the mother is described as one who conceives and carries the child in her womb, not as one who ejects the child into the world" (150). God-as-mother is nurturing and comforting, but also a stern figure in the visions of thirteenth-century women mystics like Gertrude of Helfta (Bynum 208). Mechtild of Hackeborn recognizes a wide range of maternal duties, but she ascribes the same roles to fathers as well: "Fathers feed and console, as do mothers: mothers teach, as do fathers" (Bynum 226).

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[103] Bynum has demonstrated that in Cistercian texts, maternal images are used not only for God, but also in the context of male authority figures like abbots and bishops in order to temper their authority with the maternal qualities of love and nurture. For more on the Cistercian usage of maternity, see Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 110-169.

In contrast, Julian's maternal Christ is exclusively associated with a very broad spectrum of activity, for he gives birth in travail and feeds his children to prepare them for eternal life. He even chastises and disciplines his children when necessary: "The moder may suffer þe chylde to fall some tyme and be dyssesed on dyuerse manner, for the one profyte, but she may nevyr suffer that ony manner of perell come to her chylde for loue" (604).[104]

Julian's extended treatment of the maternal divine in the LT, together with her studied ignorance of Eve and her decoupling of the sensual being from its gendered associations suggests that she was sensitive to the clerical devaluation of women. In denying the link between women and sensuality, Julian contests the belief that women are inherently evil because of their close association with the flesh. Moreover, she claims a secure space for the feminine in the religious imaginary; her well-planned and carefully executed maternalization of Christ makes available a divine whose complex relationship to the human world is articulated through experiences that were unique to women.

VII Conclusion

A comparison of Muktabai's authenticating strategies with those employed by Julian underscores the importance of a single figure, the guru, to the former's mystical project. Muktabai's conformity to the philosophical systems expounded by her brothers is clearly secondary to obeisance to the guru as an authorizing gesture in her poetry. In fact, she continues to invoke the guru even when she is explicitly called upon to dismantle his authority, as in the *Jñānabodh*. The centrality of the guru to her mystical authority even demands that she subordinate her biological relationship to the spiritual bond between them. In doing so, however,

104 "The mother may allow the child to fall sometimes and to be hurt for its own benefit, but her love does not allow the child ever to be in any real danger" (143).

Muktabai is not unique, for even her brothers ignore their biological relationship to each other, and avoid reference to their mundane lives. This reticence is dictated by the conventions of the Varkari sect, which recognized spiritual lineage as the only legitimate source of spiritual authority.

Muktabai's repeated invocation of an individual to prove her spiritual credentials draws attention to Julian's reliance on doctrine in her attempt at self-authorization. In contrast to Dorothy of Montau, the continental saint who also became enclosed, Julian does not collaborate with her confessor. The roles of the guru and the confessor with regard to female mystics in the Varkari and Christian traditions respectively are comparable insofar as both served as guarantors of spiritual authority. The guru provided his disciple with a distinguished spiritual lineage and therefore a long-established doctrinal system. The disciple was not required to profess knowledge of these doctrines herself; assertions of loyalty to her guru implied a commitment to his beliefs as well. In the Christian context, the approval of the confessor signified ecclesiastical certification of the mystic's visions. As the representative of Holy Mother Church, the confessor was entitled to obedience from his female charge; her submission to him was proof of her submission to the Church. However, to characterize this relationship merely as one of control and obedience would be unjust; in many cases, it was also marked by a great degree of affection on both sides. For example, Jacques de Vitry (c. 1160/70-1240) was known to have carried "Marie d'Oignies's finger around with him in a reliquary after her death" while Margaret of Ypres (d. 1237) was "inconsolable during the absence of her confessor, Siger of Lille" (Dillon 127). Likewise, the disciple was enjoined to obey his guru, but there was often an intense emotional attachment between the two, so much so that the Varkari saints routinely describe

their gurus as their mothers. However, the guru's role extended far beyond that of the confessor, for he could transmit his spiritual experience directly to his disciple, thereby equalling or even superseding God. The confessor, on the other hand, derived his authority from the Church and thus ultimately from God, but he was not identified with God. He could give counsel and prescribe remedies for sin, but the female mystic received her inspiration directly from God; it was not mediated by her confessor.

If Julian had modelled herself upon European counterparts like Dorothy of Montau, her confessor would have played a more visible role in her literary endeavors, if not as her amanuenesis, then as a collaborator. Julian, however, chooses to mount her own defense by repeatedly affirming her loyalty to the Church. While she carefully records the areas of conflict between the insights granted to her by Christ and the teachings upheld by the Church, she avoids affirming a position in direct opposition to the latter. Julian tries to reconcile the two views where feasible, and carefully documents the lessons she can deduce from her visions, but she refrains from openly voicing dissent. Unlike Muktabai, Julian is self-reflexive about her spiritual insights and determines the degree to which she can pursue them without danger.

An examination of the individuated persona that we find in Muktabai's poems accentuates the communal orientation of Julian's mystical experience. The Varkari saint underscores her singular spiritual achievements, and assumes a persona that is magisterial and self-assured, not that of a spiritual novice but a spiritual master. Muktabai even plays on her name to insist on her unique status as the "liberated one." In contrast, Julian is strongly committed to the idea of community, so much so that she does not represent herself as isolated even when she is in intense communion with Christ. We are told that during her visionary

experience, she was shown a devil bedeviled by his constant defeat at the hands of Christ, and this sight delighted her so much that she laughed unrestrainedly. Those around her laughed too, although they were ignorant of the reason for her laughter. The fact that Julian is welded into a community even in the thick of her visionary experience demands that we avoid interpreting her as a unique individual.

Despite the fact that the philosophy Muktabai espouses is more unequivocally monist than the philosophy underpinning Julian's revelations, the former does not try to play out or to perform this oneness. The marked divide between form and content in Muktabai's poems underlines Julian's virtuosity in integrating form and content in the *Revelations*. Muktabai's position on the nature of the divine and his relationship with the world derives from *sphūrtivāda* philosophy as elucidated by Jnaneshvar, who interprets the world positively as the play of the formless, omnipotent spirit, and does not dismiss it as an illusion wrought by ignorance. Human beings and all things in the world, whether sentient or not, are identical with the divine and must be loved and celebrated as such. Accordingly, Muktabai rejects the world as it is experienced daily by the benighted man, but affirms that it becomes the arena of God's play for the spiritual adept, who alone perceives its true nature.

Despite her evident support for a monistic formulation of God and the world, the speaker of Muktabai's verses reiterates the uniqueness of her spiritual accomplishments on multiple occasions. I do not read this disjunction between form and content as an artistic failure, for I trace it to Muktabai's constraints as a woman who had publicly encroached upon masculine territory.

While Julian's position on the relationship between God and the world is not monistic, it cannot be straightforwardly categorized as dualistic either insofar as she does not depict the two as mutually exclusive.[105] She does not suggest that there is no possibility of a rapprochement between God and humanity, but the two do not become one, not even when human beings posthumously achieve perfection in loving God. According to Julian, the zenith of human achievement is to contemplate God uninterruptedly after death, to "behold" him unceasingly, which implies that the two are distinct beings. However, she also insists that our bodies and souls are enclosed in God and that God dwells in them, statements which indicate a mutual interpenetration of human and divine. Therefore, the relationship between God and humankind that is expressed in the *Revelations* can be best described as one of whole and part; God dwells in man, but man cannot contain and limit him.

Although Julian does not affirm a strictly monistic position, she is keen to deflect attention away from herself as an individual, whether by insisting that the visions were granted to her on behalf of all Christians or by bridging the distance between herself and her readers. In both versions of her showings, Julian asserts that that the visions were vouchsafed to her only insofar as she was representative of her fellow Christians, not because her spiritual achievements were singular. To bolster her claims to being Every Christian, Julian excises autobiographical detail from the longer version of the showings, thus encouraging her readers to inhabit her narrative persona.

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105 Val Plumwood (1993) succinctly describes dualism as "the construction of a devalued and sharply demarcated sphere of otherness" (41). She also identifies "radical exclusion" or "hyperseparation" as one of the characteristic features of dualist thinking (49). Plumwood explains the term as follows: "because the other is to be treated as not merely different but inferior, part of a lower, different order of being, differentiation from it demands not merely distinctness, but radical exclusion, not merely separation but hyperseparation" (49).

Julian's insistence on her communal affiliations is in consonance with the insights she has been granted by Christ, for the latter insists on the close conjunction of Christians in the spirit and in the flesh. Her communal memberships reflect the intimate ties that bind Christians to each other and to God. Thus, by devising strategies to minimize her individuality, Julian finds appropriate literary expression for the ideas she wishes to convey. In other words, she successfully welds together form and content.

Both Muktabai and Julian recognize motherhood as a means of empowerment, but their differing uses of the maternity trope also bolsters our awareness of Julian's communitarian outlook. Muktabai draws on motherhood to empower herself, while Julian's deployment of motherhood empowers all women by countering clerical misogyny. In her poems the only feminine role Muktabai overtly resorts to, that of mother, legitimizes her transgressive role of female guru to a respected male figure. Indisputably, she has precedents for her choice of a motherly persona; her brother Jnaneshvar himself composed spiritual lullabies, while the Varkari sect conceived of the role and duties of the guru as maternal in nature. However, Muktabai does not deploy maternity merely to make a philosophical point about the greatness of the guru, but also to secure approval for her transgressive position of female guru. In her attempt to justify her public role, she conflates her spiritual authority with maternal authority. The adoption of the socially exalted role of mother empowers her to assume a role that was a male prerogative.

Unlike Muktabai, who reinscribes the philosophical script of her brother Jnaneshvar, Julian reinterprets the dominant theologies of her time to make them more accommodating of women and their concerns. Julian's use of the maternity trope does not serve a private end, as it does in the case of her Indian counterpart. Christ's feminine traits in the LT are not designed to

bolster Julian's authority as a female locus of divine speech because she glosses over her gender in this work. Her exposition of the maternal God domesticates the divine for all women and provides them with a deity who participates in their unique experiences. Julian's originality as a thinker is also proved by the fact that she challenges Augustinian dogma through her inclusive vision of the human self as constituted of both spirit and flesh, which she refers to as substance and sensuality, respectively. Augustine maintained that every human being was composed of a higher self and a lower self, and privileged the higher self, identified with reason, over the lower self. Julian declines to rank the two selves, and conceives of both as recipients of God's tender care.

Even as we applaud Julian for her originality as a thinker and the daring nature of some of her themes, we must acknowledge her privileges as an anchoress. Her creativity as a theologian was at least partially enabled by her public acceptance of an authorized mode of feminine sanctity that also commanded great respect among the populace. In contrast, Muktabai's public life was transgressive of feminine norms; this flagrant lack of conformity possibly circumscribed the intellectual and religious possibilities that she could pursue.

Julian's privileging of the visual also sets her apart from her Indian counterpart; the emphasis on sight in the *Revelations* underlines by contrast Muktabai's lack of interest in visual access to the divine. Most of Julian's divine encounters originate in, or are precipitated by, an act of sight. Seeing also functions as a trope: the consummation of divine love is the ability to "gaze" uninterruptedly at God. Muktabai, however, has reservations about the spiritual value of sight, as we see in her reluctance to provide descriptions of her deity's iconographic attributes.

Moreover, the auditory takes clear precedence over the visual in the spiritual practice she recommends, that of meditating on the Divine Name.

Julian's conceptualization of Christ shows a marked preference for the physical and the tangible, which reinforces the elusive nature of Muktabai's Vitthal. As a result of her loving attention to the fleshliness of Christ, Julian's deity is much more concrete than the divine who emerges from Muktabai's poetry. Christ's body bleeds profusely and the blood drops descend like raindrops off a house's eaves; the skin of his face shrivels and turns blue and then brown. The searingly vivid details of his physical suffering anthropomorphize Julian's Christ to a much greater degree than Muktabai's Vitthal. In addition to his bodily traits, Julian's Christ is accessible because of his insistence on love as the means to approach and grasp him; Christ is love, and this quality makes it possible even for the unlettered and the simple to apprehend him.

In contrast, Muktabai's divine is hard to pin down, frequently lacking form and hence gender. Unlike other Varkari saints, Muktabai chooses not to dwell on Vitthal's iconographic attributes, instead preferring to invoke him as the formless, intangible Godhead. She follows Jnaneshvar and other Varkari figures in asserting that the difference between the anthropomorphized deity and the impersonal Godhead is not absolute, and shows little interest in reinterpreting this relationship or in reconceiving the form and gender of the anthropomorphic Vitthal. Consequently, the divine who emerges from Muktabai's poems is as hard of approach as the mystic herself.

Chapter 3: Domesticating the Divine: The *Abhaṅg*s of Janabai and Margery Kempe's *Booke*

In the preface to her study of Janabai (c.1270-c.1350), Marathi critic Indumati Shevde (1989) states that interpreting Janabai's verse after studying the works of Muktabai is "like turning from the dazzle of a flash of lightning to the mellow glow of a lamp. This lamp, however, is not any lamp; it is one of a kind" (93). Janabai's *abhaṅg*s integrate the spiritual and the domestic more comprehensively than those of her female contemporaries or successors in the Varkari tradition. In this chapter I compare Janabai's verses with the autobiographical account of the English mystic Margery Kempe (c.1373-after 1438). Both women used domesticity to empower themselves as mystics; in their works the domestic is closely enmeshed with the spiritual in that God intervenes in their mundane lives, and domestic and spiritual duties often converge. As a result of this sacralization of the everyday, the autobiographical tendency is more pronounced in the poems of Janabai than those of Muktabai, another feature which encourages the comparison of the former's writings with Margery's *Booke*.

This chapter is divided into six sections. In the first, I briefly discuss the life of Janabai as it is available to us through hagiographic accounts and her poetry. Drawing upon the information provided in the *Booke*, I also introduce Margery Kempe as a historical figure. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I privilege close readings of the works produced by the two women. The second section emphasizes the self-authorizing strategies used by the two women. Unlike Muktabai, Janabai collaborates with a scribe, Vitthal himself, who attests to her achievements. Margery's sources of authorization are more diffuse, although she too works with an amanuensis. In the third section, I trace the communal affiliations identified by the two women

and I demonstrate that Margery is assertive of her individuality despite her numerous spiritual alliances. In the section that follows I study the relationship to the divine as delineated by Janabai as well as Margery. I demonstrate that Janabai invokes the deity as her female friend, while Margery favors the masculine Christ. In the fifth section of the chapter, I analyze the views of the two women on the relationship between the divine and the mundane; Janabai's deity Vitthal participates even more intensely in the everyday world than Margery's Christ. In my conclusion I pay particular attention to how the two mystics address themes that were of particular concern to women, namely the gendering of the divine, and the relationship between the domestic and the spiritual. Janabai's many variations on Vitthal's gender and his immersion in household tasks throw into relief Margery's reluctance to feminize Christ.

I.a Janabai: Recovering a Life

The existence of Janabai, like that of Muktabai, is supported by her *abhaṅg*s,[106] and stories about her life that have emerged from the Varkari tradition itself. Mahipati's eighteenth-century account,[107] which is one of the most well-known versions of the saint's life, incorporates numerous autobiographical *abhaṅg*s of Janabai to tell her story. In contrast, Mahipati's narrative of Muktabai scarcely refers to her poetry, most of which is impersonal and does not comment on the circumstances of her worldly existence.

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[106] Janabai has been more fortunate than Muktabai insofar as attempts have been made to investigate the manuscript history of her poems, one of the most noteworthy being that of D.B. Bhingarkar (1989). He discovered five notebooks, or *bāḍa*s in the archives at Aundh, in the Satara district of Maharashtra, that contain poems by Janabai. Bhingarkar notes that a *bāḍa* that dates to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and is part of the holdings of the Rajwade Research Centre at Dhule also has poems by Janabai. The Samartha Vagdevata Mandir at Dhule, as well as the Saraswati Mahal Library at Tanjore also house *bāḍa*s that record poems by Janabai. While Bhingarkar does not attempt to trace the textual antecedents of every poem of Janabai's that finds a place in the standard compendium, the *Sakalasantagāthā*, he identifies the chief repositories of the written sources of her *abhaṅg*s.

[107] For Mahipati's life of Janabai, see pages 338-357 of the *Bhaktavijay*.

According to tradition, Janabai's social status was even more precarious than that of Muktabai, for she was a low-caste woman who worked as a servant at the house of the Varkari she considered her guru, Namdev. While Muktabai's family originally belonged to the Brahmin caste, popular narratives assert that Janabai was of low caste and worked as a domestic servant. However, Christian Novetzke (2008) argues that the widespread belief in Janabai's life of servitude may stem from a misinterpretation of *abhaṅg*s that refer to her as a *dāsī*, a word that suggests "her dependence on Namdev as a spiritual teacher, but not necessarily implying the further connection of domestic labor" (69). In Mahipati's account of Janabai's life, the saint is indisputably a servant, and this life of dependence was actively sought by her.[108]

While the story of Janabai as narrated by Mahipati represents Namdev as her protector insofar as he grants her shelter in his house, popular legends that have survived orally suggest that Janabai makes Pandharpur her home out of compulsion and not choice. According to the account that has been assembled by D. B. Bhingarkar (1989), Janabai was born to a poor couple, Karund and Dama by name, who had besought Vitthal for an heir. The deity appeared to Dama in a dream and instructed him to hand over the child after her birth to Damasheti, the father of Namdev, for Janabai's spiritual destiny was closely bound up with that of Namdev. In Shevde's version of Janabai's story, however, the saint becomes affiliated with Namdev's family for economic and not spiritual reasons: born to a family that was desperately poor, Janabai lost her mother not long after she was born. Her father, who was unable to provide for her, handed her over to Namdev's father Damaji, who made her a servant in his house. In any case, all the

[108] In this version, Janabai exercises agency even as a little girl when visiting the temple at Pandharpur, for she refuses to leave with her parents, claiming that Pandharpur is her real home. Namdev, who sees the seven year old girl sitting outside the temple, brings her home, where he tells his family that Janabai is the reincarnation of Kubja, a maid who had been devoted to Krishna.

legends underline Janabai's early association with Namdev, whether for spiritual or economic reasons.

All narratives of Janabai's life affirm her single-minded devotion to Namdev as her guru, and insist that she faithfully served him and his family, even if she was not always treated as an equal because of her lowly origins and her position as a servant in the household. Mahipati, for example, records a story in which Namdev's mother is about to strike Janabai, which suggests that her life was one of hardship despite the intensity of her devotion. While there were low-caste women affiliated with the Varkari movement, they were usually related to male saints; Soyrabai and Nirmala, for example, were Chokhamela's wife and sister respectively. In contrast, Janabai had no familial connections with any male Varkari saint, which made her more vulnerable.

A substantial portion of Mahipati's life of Janabai is concerned with the quasi-maternal relationship between the saint and Vitthal. In the *Bhaktavijay*, the saint serves Vitthal with food when he dines with Namdev and his family after having repaired the roof of their hut, which had been blown away by a storm. The god sits down to eat without Janabai, who is aggrieved by this neglect of her. Vitthal divines her sorrow, and refuses to finish his food. At night, when Namdev is asleep, the deity slips into Janabai's room, and finishes the remains of his food with the maid by his side, "thus demonstrating his disregard for caste commensality" (Novetzke 70). From this moment on, Vitthal begins to participate actively in Janabai's daily chores, and in particular, helps her when she is using the handmill. Gonabai, Namdev's mother, is suspicious, and fears that Janabai has hired a woman to help her grind, despite the poverty of the household. In anger, she aims a blow at Jani's head, but it is the god who is struck. The latter describes himself in the feminine as "Vithai," and it is only later that Gonabai discovers that Vitthal himself is Jana's

helpmeet. Moreover, in Mahipati's narrative, as in Janabai's own poems, Vitthal serves as her amanuensis. Jnaneshvar is amused by the God's act of writing down the poems of a low-born woman, but Vitthal defends himself, asserting that Jani's *abhaṅg*s are of great interest to him because "they are full of love" (352).

I.b Margery Kempe: A Life in the *Booke*

Based on the clues provided by Margery's narrative, Barry Windeatt states that she was probably born around 1373 and died sometime after 1438.[109] In the *Booke* she identifies herself as the daughter of John Brunham, a wealthy burgess of Bishop's Lynn. She was married to John Kempe, the son of a successful merchant from Lynn, also named John Kempe. Extant Lynn archives indicate that a John Brunham was indeed Mayor of Lynn five times between 1370 and 1391, and on six occasions was one of the town's two Members of Parliament. The records also refer to a merchant, John Kempe, as well as his son.[110] Additional historical sources also bolster the *Booke*'s claims to recounting the life story of a real individual: "In 1438 there is record of one Margery Kempe being admitted to that same Trinity Guild of which her father had been an alderman, and a further and last mention of her in Guild records for 1439" (Windeatt, "Intro." 3).

Based on the account in the *Booke*, Margery, who was born in an elite merchant family, was twenty or more when she was married to John Kempe. Her first childbirth resulted in a severe mental illness of which she was healed when Christ appeared to her in a vision. Subsequent to her first intimation of her divine vocation, she spent three or four years running a brewing business, and then she made a brief attempt at milling. After the failure of the latter,

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[109] See Windeatt, "Introduction," *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 2000.

[110] Transcriptions of materials from the Lynn archives that pertain to John Brunham as well as John Kempe the merchant and his son are provided in Appendices II and III of Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 359-368.

however, her conversion became complete. Around the years 1409-1410 she sought to terminate sexual relations with her husband, but her prayers were granted only after three or four years.

It is likely that some of the most important events in Margery's life, including her release from marital debt, occurred in the year 1413. In addition, she also visited the anchorite Julian of Norwich and spoke to Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury. 1413 was also the year when she left Lynn for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In 1414 Margery had her experience of union with Christ on Mount Calvary, and on her way back to England she paid a visit to Assisi and Rome. It was at Rome that Margery was married to the Godhead in the Apostles' Church.

In 1417 Margery left England for Santiago de Compostela. On her return, she was subjected to religious persecution in a number of cities, including Leicester, York, and Beverley. However, she managed to successfully demonstrate her orthodoxy at her spiritual trials, and was permitted to return to Lynn. Her husband probably died around 1431, and Margery made a visit to the continent not long after, visiting holy sites like Aachen. According to the *Booke*, the priest began work on Book 1 of Margery's story in 1436, and Book II in 1438.

For most of her life, Margery's spiritual life was curtailed by her status as a married woman. It resulted in limited possibilities for spiritual self-expression and public ambiguity towards her spiritual aspirations. While Margery's husband was alive, the convent and the anchorhold were foreclosed to her; as Sarah Salih (2001) observes, the *Booke* lacks "any suggestion that entry to a convent or anchorhold was ever an option for Margery" (167).[111] Under these circumstances, she could only secure a chaste marriage, although this too granted

[111] Eileen Power (1922) argues that a married woman in medieval England could join a nunnery if she had her husband's permission: "it was necessary for a wife to obtain her husband's permission before she could take the veil" (40). Presumably, Margery was not granted permission to do so by her husband John.

her a very limited degree of freedom. Moreover, Margery's home town of Lynn was skeptical of her spiritual achievements, for "it was anomalous, not to say scandalous, that she experienced her calling to become a bride of God when she had a living husband and had recently borne a child" (Mueller 60). [112]

II.a Janabai: Service to Guru and Service of Scribe

As in the case of other Varkari figures like Muktabai, Janabai's protestations of devotion to her guru are her primary means of self-authorization.[113] However, her strategies for expressing loyalty to the guru are not identical to those devised by Muktabai. Where the latter plays on the meanings of her proper name to emphasize her exalted status as "the liberated one," Janabai often couples her own name with her guru's as "Namya's Jani" to underline the dissolution of her individuality. She has no existence apart from Namdev, and this truth is given verbal expression in her new nomenclature of "Namdev's Jani."[114]

Moreover, in Janabai's poems the concept of reincarnation is repeatedly invoked to demonstrate that the saint's devotion to her guru has no temporal limits. Janabai enumerates her past lives and those of Namdev to assert that both of them have played important roles in the

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[112] Of course there may have been other reasons why Margery generated such hostility, but I contend that her position as wife was one of the most significant. According to Richard Kieckhefer (1984), a cult may not have developed around Margery because of her ambiguous relationship with the clergy: "she had a quick tongue which she was able to use against churchmen as well as laity… Some might call this prophetic criticism, yet it leads to recognition as a saint only if uttered from a safe and well-defined position within the Church" (189). In his assessment of Margery, Aviad Kleinberg (1992) argues that written sources like the *Booke* cannot satisfactorily capture the power of her performance of sanctity; after all, "it was not just what the candidates said and did, but also how they did it that determined their communities' reaction to them" (152). In addition to the disadvantages attendant on her subject position as a married woman, Margery may not have been a charismatic performer of sainthood.

[113] All *abhaṅg*s of Janabai are from the *Sakalasantagāthā,* ed. R.C. Dhere, 1983. The numbers in parentheses are the *abhaṅg* numbers that are used in the *Gāthā*. All translations from the Marathi are mine.

[114] The sixteenth-century Varkari saint Eknath also combined his guru Janardan Swami's name with his own in the signature line of his *abhaṅg*s, often referring to himself as "Eka Janardan."

legends of Rama and Krishna, and other well-known incarnations of Vishnu. Her unbroken association with her guru empowers Janabai in that her willing subjection to him over many lives considerably multiplies her spiritual merit. Janabai recounts her past lives as follows:

> Listen to the story of Namdev's former births. During the time of Hiranyakashipu, he was the devotee Prahlad. I was his most senior maid, Padmini.
> During his second birth he was Angad, Ram's great devotee. As Manthara, I was disliked by Bharat.
> In the *Dvāpar Yuga*, Namdev was born as Uddhav to serve Krishna. I was Kubja, and God saved me.
> In the *Kali Yuga*, Namdev meditates on Vitthal. The servant Jani was born to serve him.
> (297)[115]

Janabai's current life is one of physical abjection to Namdev as her guru, and she insists that her express purpose in taking birth in the present degenerate age (*kali yuga*) is to minister to Namdev's needs rather than to achieve anything on her own account. Moreover, in each birth that Janabai describes, the relationship between her and Namdev is always hierarchical, whether constituted on the basis of economic status or spiritual achievement; they never exist as equals. In the first birth Janabai mentions, Namdev was Prahlad, a great devotee and a prince, while Janabai was merely a maid. In the second life that is evoked, the inequality between Namdev and Janabai is as much spiritual as it is economic: Angad was a prince and a devotee of Rama, while Manthara was a maid in the palace at Ayodhya who had maliciously unleashed a chain of events that led to Rama being deprived of the throne that was rightfully his. In the third life Janabai recounts, the difference between the protagonists is chiefly one of rank: Kubja was a hunchback maid, while Uddhav was a cousin and a social equal of Krishna. These differences in status and

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[115] ऐका हो नामयाचा जन्म मूळसंचित । हिरण्यकश्यप कुळी नामा प्रह्लाद । पद्मिणी नाम माझे श्रेष्ठ दासीचे पद ।।
दुसरा जन्म याचा अंगद रामभक्त । मंथरा नाम माझे भरते मारिली लात ।।
द्वापारी कृष्णसेवा उद्धव जन्मला । कुबज्या नाम माझे देवे उद्धार केला ।।
कलीत नामदेव विठ्ठल चिंतनी । त्याचीच सेवेलागी दासी जन्मली जनी ।।

achievement have crystallized in the present life, when Janabai is Namdev's social inferior and also lacks his spiritual achievements. However, she recognizes her lowly social position in the current life as a spiritual asset in that it enables her to physically serve her guru.

As we examine Janabai's account of her previous lives, we find that gender, like class status, remains a constant. Namdev is always born male, while Janabai inevitably assumes female roles. The latter's consistency in taking on female personae can be read as an argument for women's subordinate position in spiritual matters, i.e., that they are not suitable candidates for the exalted role of guru. However, Janabai's choice of personae can also be construed as proof that gender is no handicap when devotional matters are concerned. All her previous female births have culminated in the present one, where she is a disciple of the great Namdev and is making steady progress in her spiritual endeavors. Janabai's recourse to reincarnation is not empowering for her alone but for all women to the extent that it demonstrates that they too can attain the highest spiritual prize, even if the public honors of guruhood are denied to them.

Moreover, Janabai's mapping of her past lives affirms the all-embracing nature of her guru, who accepts not only women and the low-born, but also the wicked and the sinful. As I have already stated, in the account of her second birth, Janabai appropriates the role of Manthara, a woman who was infamous for her manipulative behavior and ill-will towards Rama. Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* gives no indication that Manthara ever regretted her devious behavior, and Hindu mythology does not commemorate her as sinner-turned-saint. However, Janabai pointedly claims Manthara as an alter-ego to assert that Namdev's love is inclusive and accommodates all living beings. He has permitted even a woman synonymous with deceit, like Manthara, to associate with him.

In addition to her guru, Janabai also derives support from her scribe, who is Vitthal himself. Vitthal listens keenly to Janabai's poems, and even goes so far as to record them on paper, as stated in a famous *abhaṅg*, where Janabai lists the various amanuenses of the Varkari poet-saints who were her contemporaries:

> Cidananda Baba wrote down the very words uttered by Jnandev.
> Nivritti's verses were recorded by Sopan, and Mukta's words were written down by Jnandev....
> Anant Bhatt was Chokhamela's scribe, and Pandurang [Vitthal] Jani's. (276)[116]

In her listing of the scribes of the various Varkari saints, Janabai also articulates her own position on the duties of the scribe. In the opening line, we are told that Jnandev's amanuensis Cidananda Baba made no modifications to the words of the poet and simply transcribed them, which suggests that the scribe is not co-equal with the author, but subordinate. However, the role of the scribe as envisaged by Janabai needs to be examined further, for she indicates that even those saints who were learned and could write, chose not to put their own verses to paper. Thus, Jnandev did not write down his own poems, but those of Muktabai and Nivritti's poems were written down by Sopan. Janabai's *abhaṅg* suggests that in the Varkari tradition, the scribe functions as an authorizing device for all saints, irrespective of their caste or gender, insofar as he attests to the saint's indifference to fame and the perpetuation of his legacy. The *abhaṅg*s of the saints arose spontaneously from their spiritual experience and hence could not be altered by the scribe, but the presence of the latter also conferred value on the *abhaṅg*s, for it proved the saint's unconcern with the transmission of his legacy. Consequently, the collaboration between

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[116] ज्ञानेश्वर अभंग बोलिले ज्या शब्दां । चिदानंद बाबा लिही त्यांस ।।
निव्रित्तीचे बोल लिहिले सोपाने । मुक्ताईची वचने ज्ञानदेवे ।।
... चोखामेळ्याचा अनंतभट्ट अभ्यंग । म्हणोनी नामयाचे जनीचा पांडुरंग ।।

saint and scribe is mutually beneficial: the scribe gains merit from having rendered service to a saint, while the saint's spiritual credentials are enhanced.

According to the information Janabai provides, she is the only saint privileged enough to have Vitthal as her scribe, thus asserting that she is most beloved of him. Her relationship with her divine amanuensis suggests that Vitthal accepts her as a spiritual equal despite his divinity and acknowledges the authenticity of the spiritual experiences recorded in her verses. The usually taciturn deity speaks vigorously in defense of his task as Janabai's scribe, claiming that it does not belittle him in any way:

> I have written down Jani's very words. You saints have heard her songs.
> O Jnandev, you already know all this. Then how has this task been belittling to me? …
> Jani's words are the effusion of her inner joy. When she utters them, their power is doubled.
> Using goodness (*sattva*) as my paper, I write of the Infinite in ink made of the Eternal as I sit beside Jani. (148)[117]

Vitthal is categorical that Janabai's verses are entirely her own and that his role as scribe is limited to faithfully writing down her words. Her poems cannot be improved upon as they spring from her "inner joy" *i.e.*, they are the unmediated products of her mystical experience. It is a great privilege for Vitthal to hear Janabai utter them herself, for then their value is enhanced beyond measure. Thus, the deity does not hesitate to acknowledge that Janabai is his equal, and that the task of her scribe is ennobling even for him.

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[117] जनीने बोलिले तैसेंच लिहिले । साद्य परिसिले तुम्ही संती ॥
अहो ज्ञानदेवा असावे तुम्हा ठावे । येणे काय लहाणीव आणिली आम्हां ॥
. . . जनीचे हो बोल स्वानंदाचे डोल । स्वात्ममुखी बोल दुणावती ॥
शुद्ध सत्त्व कागद नित्य करी शाई । अखंडित लिही जनीपाशी ॥

Women: The Spiritual Sex

In the poems that are ascribed to Janabai, we observe that she appears to have had more than one saintly mentor. In addition to the devotion she professes for her guru Namdev, the saint also expresses deep reverence for Jnaneshvar, the founder of the Varkari sect. In Janabai's poetic corpus, Jnaneshvar is a figure of fluid gender; she overrides his masculinity by addressing him as a woman and rechristening him Jnanabai as she implores him/her to come to her aid:

> My beloved friend, Jnanabai, my doe.
> You are the mother of this little fawn, you are the cow to the calves who are your devotees.
> Why do you delay so? Without you, I feel weak.
> I have sat down to grind. Rush to me, says Jani. (62)[118]

When gendered female, Jnaneshvar/Jnanabai does not display the learning that made Jnaneshvar famous; it is his love for God and devotees that Janabai commemorates here and not his great erudition. In feminizing Jnaneshvar when emphasizing the intensity of his love, Janabai appears to imply that love is the special province of women.

Having gendered the emotion of love feminine, Janabai illustrates its power, demonstrating how it can level the differences between divine and human, unlettered and erudite, and men and women. In an *abhaṅg* which reports Jnaneshvar's comments on the deity's fondness for Janabai, we are told:

> Jnandev replied, "This miracle cannot be adequately described.
> Shiva sings His glories, and even the yogis cannot easily attain Him.
> Brahma and the other Gods stand at His door and sing His praise.
> Yet He pounds grain with Jani, having recognized her love. (125)[119]

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[118] अहो सखीये साजनी । ज्ञानाबाई वो हरणी ॥
मज पाडसाची माय । भक्ति वत्साची ते गाय ॥
कां गा उशीर लाविला । तुजविण शिण झाला ॥
अहो बैसले दळणी । धांव घाली म्हणे जनी ॥

Women are indeed exalted beings, if this emotion with its far-reaching consequences is their preserve. The gender hierarchy is now reversed, and it is the women for whom Janabai claims superior status.

Not surprisingly, Janabai represents Jnaneshvar as masculine in poems where she foregrounds his erudition. In the following *abhaṅg*, for instance, Janabai yearns for the "Ocean of Knowledge" to be born to her in a future life:

> Ocean of knowledge, my friend Jnaneshvar!
> After you die, may you be born to me.
> Jnandeva, my friend, make my faith in you unflinching!
> Jani, your maid birth after birth, worships you. (273)[120]

In this poem, Janabai emphasizes the learning and the intellectual powers for which Jnaneshvar was famous by addressing him as an "Ocean of Knowledge." She declines to feminize him, using his name in the masculine form and identifying him as her male friend, or *sakhā*, thereby suggesting that when his erudition is his supreme achievement, he can only be figured as male. Janabai earnestly requests Jnaneshvar to be born to her, requesting him to take a new birth for her sake, although it was a truism in the Varkari sect that saints are released from the cycle of birth and death. Janabai's prayer suggests that when she engages with a Jnaneshvar who is resolutely male, she can be most free with him if she takes on the role of his mother. It is only as

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[119] उत्तर दिले ज्ञानदेवे । नवल केवढे सांगावे ॥
शिव वंदी पायवणी । नये योगियांचे ध्यानी ॥
द्वारी उभे ब्रह्मादिक । गुण गाती सकळिक ॥
जनीसवे दळी देव । तिचा देखोनिया भाव ॥

[120] ज्ञानाचा सागर । सखा माझा ज्ञानेश्वर ॥
मरोनिया जावे । बा माझ्या पोटा यावे ॥
ऐसे करी माझ्या भावा । सख्या माझ्या ज्ञानदेवा ॥
जावे वोवाळुनी । जन्मोजन्मी दासी जनी ॥

his mother that she can be his equal, or perhaps even his superior; the assumption of any other feminine role, whether wife, sister or daughter, would establish a hierarchy in which she would be subordinate to the male Jnaneshvar.

Janabai again invokes the trope of maternity when she asks the saints to give her children who will be devoted to Vitthal:

> O saints, give me a son who will be devoted to the Lord of Pandharpur.
> May the *Gītā* always be on his lips, and may he read the *Jnāneśvarī* with love.
> May he always prostrate himself at the feet of the saints.
> May I have a daughter who is as pure as the Ganga, and who will love you eternally.
> O saints, who are the servant Jani's treasure-house, please grant me these boons. (164)[121]

This supplication to the saints is highly unusual, for it represents a marked deviation from standard hagiographies of Janabai, which are unanimous that she never married, or expressed any overt desire to marry. Moreover, in this *abhaṅg*, she does not cast herself as mother to a saint or to her disciples, but instead asks for biological children who will be dedicated to Vitthal. In my view, Janabai assumes the persona of an ordinary woman, articulating her wishes and aspirations, in order to suggest that a compromise could be effected between the demands of married life and those of the spiritual quest, even where women were concerned. All the Varkari saints were unanimous that the concurrent pursuit of worldly and spiritual goals was possible. However, there was no attempt to demonstrate how the two could be reconciled in the case of women, for whom marriage was a far more pressing social duty than for men.[122] Janabai

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[121] ऐसा पुत्र देई संता । तरी त्या आवडी पंढरिनाथा ।।
गीता नित्य नेमे । वाची ज्ञानेश्वरी प्रेमे ।।
संतांच्या चरणा । करी मस्तक ठेंगणा ।।
कन्या व्हावी भागीरथी । तुझे प्रेम जिचे चित्ती ।।
ऐसे करी संतजना । दासी जनीच्या निधाना ।।

[122] Most medieval women saints seemed to think such a reconciliation was impossible; almost all the women saints who were married, like Akka Mahadevi (12th cent.) and Mirabai (16th cent.), left their husbands.

suggests that even a married woman may achieve worldly and spiritual fulfillment through her children. It was only conventional for a married woman to pray for children, as in Janabai's *abhaṅg*, but this worldly desire will also achieve a spiritual end, if the children she seeks are devout and will serve God and the saints. Such a solution, with its emphasis on women as child-bearers, may not be congenial to us today, but Janabai's attempt even to wrest with this intractable problem deserves mention.

Perhaps Janabai herself would have recognized that this solution was only tenuous: in one of her poems she speaks in the voice of a harassed wife, who asks to be freed of marital ties so that she can pursue God. The wife makes the following vow to a local deity, Khandoba:

> O Khanderaya, I make this vow in your honor. Let my mother-in-law die, O Khanderaya.
> When she dies, my worldly ties will dissolve. Let my father-in-law die, O Khanderaya!
> When he dies, I will be full of joy. Let my sister-in-law die, O Khanderaya.
> When she dies, I will be set free. Then I can wear a bag around my neck and beg for alms.
> Jani says, Let everything die, Khanderaya, so that I can stay at your feet. (343)[123]

Through this prayer to Khandoba, Janabai acknowledges the hardships of a young wife in a patriarchal household who is in thrall not only to her husband but also to the extended family. In this poem, the speaker cannot conceive of a compromise; she asserts that it is only when her marital ties have been dissolved and she has been rid of her relatives that she can dedicate herself to the spiritual quest.

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[123] खंडेराया तुज करिते नवसू । मरू दे रे सासू खंडेराया ॥
सासू मेल्यावरी तुटेल आसरा । मरू दे सासरा खंडेराया ॥
सासरा मेलिया होईल आनंद । मरू दे नणंद खंडेराया ॥
नणंद मरता होईन मोकळी । गळा घालीन झोळी भंडाराची ॥
जनी म्हणे खंडे अवघे मरू दे । एकटी राहू दे पायापाशी ॥

Janabai implicitly argues against a tenable compromise for women when she assumes the role of a whore in one of her most defiant poems:

> The end of my sari slips to my shoulder. Unabashed, I will enter the marketplace.
> Cymbals in hand, *vīṇā*[124] on shoulder-who will dare to stop me?
> I have put my wares on display at Pandharpur; you people don't matter one bit.
> Jani says, "O Lord, I have become a whore. It is you I want." (232)[125]

The speaker notes that the end of her sari has slipped to her shoulder, *i.e.*, that it no longer covers her head, as decorum dictates. The language indicates that this has happened inadvertently, although the woman makes no attempt to remedy matters by rearranging her clothes. Evidently, she has no compunctions about making a complete break with society, even if the first act of estrangement was beyond her control. The prostitute declares that she will go to a crowded market, brazenly courting public disapproval, and will carry her musical instruments with her, uninhibitedly singing of God. None dare forbid her to do so, for she has already transgressed social boundaries, and it is widely known that she can no longer be "tamed." She chooses to put her wares, *i.e.*, her bodily charms, on display, fashioning herself as an object for the male gaze. Janabai's image of herself as a prostitute for the divine suggests that a woman cannot be governed by social rules if she wishes to devote herself to God. A concern for social propriety cannot co-exist with desire for the divine; the latter is all-consuming and dissolves the boundaries erected to separate proper from improper, and good from bad. Consequently, a

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[124] A stringed musical instrument.

[125] डोईचा पदर आला खांद्यावरी । भरल्या बाजारी जाईन मी ॥
हाती घेईन टाळ खांद्यावरी वीणा । आता मज मना कोण करी ॥
पंढरीच्या पेठे मांडियेले पाल । मनगटावर तेल घाला तुम्ही ॥
जनी म्हणे देवा मी जाले वेसवा । रिघाले केशवा घर तुझे ॥

woman who earnestly desires God will inevitably, and perhaps inadvertently, contravene social rules. She cannot serve husband and family concomitantly with God.

Although not married or a mother herself, in her *abhaṅg*s, Janabai inhabits a range of feminine subject positions, which include the disenfranchised and marginalized as well as the respectable and the privileged. She is cognizant of women as a distinct class and wrestles with the obstacles they encounter in their pursuit of the divine. Although Janabai also appears to lean towards the view that women cannot serve husband and God simultaneously, it is significant that she acknowledges and seeks a resolution to a problem which her male predecessors had failed to address adequately.

II.b Margery: Testimony from Christ, Scribe, and Clerics

In the preface, Margery achieves a balance between self-assertion and saintly humility, for she affirms that the *Booke* is the story of her life, although the ultimate agent of all her actions is Christ himself.[126] Margery's concerted attempt to justify the composition of the *Booke* must be read in light of the fact that she was neither a nun nor an anchoress; on the contrary, "her isolation, noisiness and mobility are the reverse of monastic community, silence and enclosure" (Salih, 2001 167). Margery's unorthodox position only heightened her vulnerability as a woman producing a mystical narrative at a time when Arundel's repressive constitutions against vernacular theology were in force.[127]

Moreover, Margery is also unconventional in not involving her confessor in her literary endeavors; he is not her scribe and does not collaborate with her in any way on the composition

[126] All quotations from the *Booke* are from Barry Windeatt's critical edition (2000). The numbers in parentheses are page numbers. All translations into modern English are mine, but I have drawn heavily on the annotations provided by Windeatt.

[127] For more on Arundel's draconian constitutions, see section IIb of chapter 2.

of the *Booke*. As I have explained, the female visionary's confessor was the most able candidate for the role of scribe because he was privy to her visions as well as her sins, and therefore in the best position to judge whether her claims were divinely inspired. Margery, however, does not identify her scribe as her confessor, as a result of which this authorizing device is unavailable to her. Hence Margery and the cleric who is her scribe must jointly establish the authenticity of the former's spiritual experiences.

The question of Margery's authorship of the *Booke* and the extent of her scribe's collaboration in the composition of it has not been resolved. Scholarly views on the matter encompass a wide spectrum, with Lynn Staley (1994) suggesting that the scribe may simply be a literary trope, while John Hirsh (1975) contends that the second scribe and Margery are equally authors of the work. My own position is that the scribe may well have given the narrative its final shape, but he was more Margery's amanuensis than her collaborator; the work originated in her experiences and she controlled their textualization.[128]

The preface, apparently written by the scribe alone, initiates Margery's self-authorizing project by incorporating tropes found in other saintly works to align her with clerically sanctified figures, and citing a number of authorities, including Christ himself. Margery's object in composing the work is also expressly stated; her audience is told that the *Booke* will treat of God's "wonderful werkys"[129] through the story of Margery Kempe, a "synful caytyf" (41)[130] who was radically transformed through the mercy of Christ. The *Booke* acknowledges that

[128] I derive support for my views largely from Nicholas Watson's essay "The Making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*" (2005).
[129] "wonderful deeds"
[130] "sinful wretch"

Margery is its main subject, but asserts that its purpose is to extol God and not Margery herself, who was but an undeserving recipient of divine grace.

The preface also explains that the work was the product of Margery's unquestioning obedience to Christ, for it was composed only at his instance. Although her revelations had been declared authentic by many clerics she consulted, who urged her to put them to paper, Margery did not comply until Christ himself "comawnded hyr and chargyd hir that sche schuld don wryten hyr felyngys and revelacyons" (47).[131] This work was ordained by God because it would redound to his glory: "hys goodnesse myth be knowyn to alle the world" (47).[132] Consequently, the composition of the *Booke* itself constitutes an act of piety: "thow ye wer in the chirche and wept bothyn togedyr as sore as evyr thu dedist, yet schulde ye not plesyn me mor than ye don wyth yowr writyng" (379).[133] Margery's reluctance to be author until expressly ordered by Christ, as well as the ennobling purpose of the work mitigate the audacity of her claims to authorship despite her being a woman.

The preface to the *Booke* emphatically states that the work is grounded in Margery's experiential authority: "sche dede no thing wryten but that sche knew rygth wel for very trewth" (49).[134] The audience is explicitly told that despite the marked intertextuality of the *Booke*, Margery's accounts of her experiences are not mere literary fabrications or retellings, but factual and a testament to her authenticity.

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131 "He commanded her and ordered her that she should write down her feelings and revelations."

132 "that His goodness might be known to all the world."

133 "Even if you were in the Church and wept as bitterly as you ever did, yet you would not please me more than you do with your writing."

134 "She had nothing written but what she knew to be true."

As demonstrated by his comments, the scribe is as anxious as Margery to buttress her claims to saintliness, for his own reputation is bound up with hers. Margery's anomalous social position and the apparent reluctance of her confessor to cooperate are not the only challenges her priest-scribe faces; as John Coakley (2006) has argued, the fifteenth century was increasingly suspicious of the saintly claims of women. In his analysis of the *Legenda maior*, the vita of Catherine of Siena by her confessor Raymond of Capua (1330-1399), Coakley observes that despite the devotion to Catherine professed by Raymond, "it is not his own need or longing that he purports to express in the *Legenda maior* so much as his clear headed intention to prove her sanctity against her detractors" (184-185). Raymond positions himself as eyewitness to Catherine's miracles and as recipient of her confidences (185). Similarly, in the *Booke*, the scribe's interventions are chiefly designed to offer proof of Margery's sanctity. He attempts to document the miracles for which she was responsible and to which he was a witness. For example, chapter XXIV describes the misfortune that befell the scribe because he did not give credence to Margery's words, and the narrow escape he had on a later occasion when he did ask her for advice.

However, Margery's scribe is more dependent on the female visionary than his predecessor Raymond. The scribe does not explicitly state that contact with Margery has taught him spiritual truths about himself, nor does she have any visions about him. At the same time, he seeks Margery's advice after he has had proof of her visionary powers. Most notably, when the priest is offered a book for sale (chapter XXIV), he will not do anything until he has consulted Margery about whether to buy it or not. This admission of need on the scribe's part suggests that his understanding of the relationship between him and Margery is based on what Coakley (2006)

has called the "two-sphere schema" (217), that is, the notion that "the official authority of the man and the extraordinary charismatic authority of the woman" (214) were separate but equal.

In his account of his interaction with Margery, the scribe assumes a passive role and disowns any claims to authorship, stating that the *Booke* is based exclusively on Margery's recollections, and even follows the order in which they occurred to her: "Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr,… but lych as the mater cam to the creatur in men whan it schuld be wretyn" (49).[135] He has not doctored her memories, but simply served as her instrument by transcribing them. Any inconsistencies and lacunae the reader may observe in the text strengthen the scribe's claim to have faithfully recorded the words of a holy woman: "Yf the namys of the placys be not ryth wretyn, late no man merveylyn, for sche stodyid mor abowte contemplacyon than the namys of the placys, and he that wrot hem had nevyr seyn hem, and therfor have hym excusyd" (401).[136] Despite the supposed vagueness about place names, however, the scribe is precise about the date of the composition of the work: it was begun "in the yer of owr Lord 1436, on the day aftyr Mary Maudelyn" (51).[137] The *Booke* is clearly inscribed in historical time, a fact that bolsters its claims to being the authentic account of the spiritual adventures of a historical individual.

As we have seen, both Christ and Margery's scribe give evidence in favor of Margery's sanctity, but their testimony is not sufficient. Margery also lists clerical guarantors of her saintliness, a list which includes such illustrious figures as Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, and Philip Repingdon, bishop of Lincoln. Her relationship with the clergy emerges

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135"This book was not written in order…, but just as the matter came to the mind of the creature when the book was to be written."

136"If the names of the places are not written correctly, let no man wonder, for she concentrated more on contemplation than the names of the places, and he that wrote them had never seen them, and therefore have him excused."

137"in the year of our Lord 1436, on the day after Mary Magdalene"

as one of the central themes of the *Booke*, and this relationship is marked by ambivalence. The clerics who accuse her of heresy are legion, but so are the clerics who affirm her sanctity, as Rosalynn Voaden (1999) observes: "No other medieval woman visionary marshals so many clerics to her cause as does Margery" (123). As I have mentioned previously, Margery was especially vulnerable, for she was not attached to the convent or the anchorhold, socially sanctified spaces for the realization of female spiritual aspirations. In view of the incongruity of her position, it is not surprising that Margery wants to recruit as many clerics as she possibly can to her cause.

III.a Janabai: Saintly Communities

Janabai shows little originality in the spiritual practice she advocates, meditation on the Divine Name, which was advocated by all the Varkari saints. While all names of God were considered equally potent, the Varkari sect favored the names of the most famous incarnations of Vishnu, such as Rama or Hari. Unlike Muktabai, Janabai is markedly reticent on the subject of yogic practices, which she does not seem to regard as important. Like her guru Namdev, she promotes a spiritual praxis that is easily available to all, whether healthy or frail, learned or unlettered. She comments on the accessibility of the Name in the following *abhaṅg*, confidently asserting that it can rescue all living beings:

> Listen! Having being born, make your existence meaningful.
> The Name of Vitthal will give it meaning.
> The greatness of the Name cannot be adequately described even by Shesha, the snake with a thousand tongues.
> Namdev's Jani says that the Name is the savior of the three worlds. (2)[138]

[138] जन्मा येउनिया देख । करा देहाचे सार्थक ।।
वाचे नाम विठ्ठलाचे । तेणें सार्थक देहाचे ।।

Janabai provides conventional lists of mythical figures and contemporaries who have been liberated by the Name, implicitly claiming membership in this community: "The Name is a savior beyond compare. It has freed countless beings. / It liberated Ajamila and granted salvation to Chokhamela" (8).[139] In this *abhaṅg*, Janabai juxtaposes a figure from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*,[140] Ajamil, with a Varkari saint who was her contemporary, Chokhamela.

Of the numerous poems where Janabai adumbrates devotional communities, one is noteworthy for its presaging of the relationship between Vitthal and Janabai herself:

> My Vittho is a family man. All his children crowd around him.
> Nivritti sits on his shoulder. He holds Sopan's hand.
> Jnaneshvar walks ahead of him; behind him, the beautiful Muktabai.
> Gora the potter is on his lap, and Chokha walks beside him.
> Banka is on his back, while Namdev holds on to his little finger.
> Jani says, Gopala is having a festival with his devotees. (30)[141]

One of the few poems in Janabai's corpus where Vitthal performs a masculine role, she describes all the saints who have dedicated themselves to the deity as his children, irrespective of their gender or caste status. As a mark of humility, Janabai excludes herself from this family portrait: she cannot claim parity with Namdev as one of Vitthal's children. However, the poem is

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ऐसा नामाचा महिमा । शेषा वर्णितां जाली सीमा ।।
नाम तारक त्रिभुवनि । म्हणे नामयाची जनी ।।

[139] नाम तारक हे थोर । नाम तारिले अपार ॥
अजामेळ उद्धरिला । चोखामेळा मुक्तीस नेला ॥

[140] Apparently composed in the tenth century, the *Bhāgavata Purāṅa* is a compendium of narratives pertaining to Krishna. As a manual of devotion to Krishna, it became a foundational text for Vaishnava movements all over India.

[141] विठो माझा लेंकुरवाळा । संगे लेंकुरांचा मेळा ॥
निव्रित्ति हा खांद्यावरी । सोपानाचा हात धरी ॥
पुढे चाले ज्ञानेश्वर । मागे मुक्ताई सुंदर ॥
गोरा कुंभार मांडिवरी । चोखा जीवा बरोबरी ॥
बंका कडियेवरी । नामा करांगुळी धरी ॥
जनी म्हणे गोपाळा । करी भक्तांचा सोहळा ॥

remarkable for its depiction of the sheer ease and familiarity that characterizes the relationship between Vitthal and his devotees; one of his "children" is perched on his shoulder, another clings to his back, and yet another clutches his little finger. As we will see, Janabai's encounters with the deity are also marked by an ease of manner and a quiet intimacy. The divine is thoroughly domesticated in Janabai's poetic universe.

III.b Margery Kempe: Communal Affiliations

Margery and Class

Margery's social origins leave an indelible mark on her and ground her understanding of God. In the course of her spiritual quest she is able to dissociate herself from the external trappings of the privileged community she was born into, that of the urban elite. However, she continues to invoke the values and ideals of this community in her dealings with people as well as with God. The early Margery takes great pride in her father's position and wealth. Her preoccupation with external markers of social status is emphasized in the opening chapters of the *Booke*, where we are told that she is fond of arraying herself in expensive fabrics "that it schuld be the mor staryng to mennys sight and hirself the mor ben worshepd" (57).[142] The early Margery is "a female within an urban class which fostered a strong sense of class identity and self-value" (Aers 76); clearly imbued with the "mercantile mentality of her successful father" (Aers 76), she acknowledges that she "evyr desyryd mor and mor" (58).[143] To assuage this desire for "more," Margery undertakes two business ventures. She first tries her hand at brewing, a task that was typically the province of women in the Middle Ages. When the brewery fails, Margery

142 "that it should be the more ostentatious and she should be more esteemed."
143 "ever desired more and more"

sets up a horse-mill, but is forced to give it up when the horses refuse to move, and the man who assists her believes that the event is divinely ordained.

After her final conversion Margery renounces the behaviors associated with her class, giving up sumptuous clothing and ceasing to pursue avenues for economic gain. She also expresses trenchant disapproval of households that are run lavishly; for instance, when she is invited by an admirer to extend her stay with her, Margery responds, "sche myth not acordyn wyth the aray and the governawns that sche say ther among hir mene" (322).[144] However, Margery is too deeply entrenched in the mercantile ethos to give up its values utterly, and even Christ is incorporated into it, for he is cast into the image of the men who inhabit her social milieu. As David Aers (1988) has noted, Margery's continued affinity for the mercantile ethic is demonstrated in "the categories and metaphors through which [she] thinks about and experiences some of the basic interactions between God and humanity" (78). The Christ Margery engages in dialogue with sometimes assumes the persona of "a great banker or a merchant prince" (Atkinson 60) and even has financial dealings with her. For instance, when Margery is told that all her sins have been forgiven, she decides to make Christ the executor of all the "god werkys"[145] that God will achieve through her. She bequeaths the merit of half her good deeds to Master N., and the remaining half is designated for all her friends and enemies, as well as those of Christ. Christ, who apparently favors the mercantile creed that underlies many of Margery's actions, is happy to be the executor of her spiritual merit.

[144] "she said that she would not agree with the arrangements and the conduct that she saw there among her men"
[145] "good works"

Moreover, even the loving intimacy between Christ and Margery is colored by the mores of the marketplace; the former implores Margery to love him because he loves her fervently: "Derworthy dowtyr, lofe thow me wyth al thin hert, for I love the wyth al myn hert and with al the mygth of my Godhed" (97).[146] In his directions to Margery, Christ implies that they are both participants in a bargain and she must reciprocate his whole-hearted love. He is also unequivocal that Margery will receive ample dividends from her love, for he has authorized her to intercede on behalf of sinners: "ther is no so synful man in erth levyng, yf he wyl forsake hys synne and don aftyr thi cownsel, swech grace as thu behestyst hym I wil confermyn for thi lofe" (85).[147] During her very lifetime, Margery is granted powers equivalent to those of the canonized saints, insofar as she is permitted to offer spiritual advice to sinners, and to mediate between them and God. Not surprisingly, she is unafraid to chastise clerics whom she believes have betrayed their vows. When Margery visits Archbishop Arundel, for example, she admonishes him for the impropriety of the conduct of his men: "owyr alderes Lord, almyty God, hath not yon yow yowyr benefys and gret goodys of the world to may[n]ten with hys tretowrys and hem that slen hym every day be gret othys sweryng" (111).[148] Thus, God's love enables Margery to assume a position of authority vis-à-vis not just men, but ordained men.

Christ may give Margery license to admonish the clergy, but he also appreciates her obedience to the Church: "I am wel plesyd wyth the, dowtyr, for thu stondist undyr obedyens of

[146]"Dear daughter, love me with all your heart, for I love you with all my heart, and with all the might of my Godhead."
[147]"There is no sinful man alive, but if he will forsake his sin and follow your counsel, such grace as you request for him, I will grant out of love for you."
[148]"Our Lord of All, Almighty God, has not given you your benefice and worldly wealth to support those that are traitors to Him and slay Him everyday by swearing great oaths."

Holy Cherch, and that thu wylt obey thi confessor and folwyn hys cownsel" (170-71).[149] Even as Christ expresses approval of Margery's submission to the clergy, however, she is asked to remember that he is superior to the injunctions of the Church: "I am above al Holy Cherch" (171).[150] If Christ's instructions to her contradict her confessor's orders, Margery is directed to obey Christ alone: "Ther is no clerk can spekyn ayens the lyfe whech I teche the; and yyf he do, he is not Goddys clerk, he is the develys clerk" (301).[151] She acts upon Christ's injunction when she is to see off her daughter-in-law, who is bound for a ship headed for the continent. Christ asks Margery to accompany her daughter-in-law to her final destination, but she is reluctant, as she does not have permission from her confessor. Christ brushes aside her qualms: "I bydde the gon in my name, Jhesu, for I am abovyn thy gostly fadyr" (393).[152]

The *Booke* is not the first text to record conflict or disagreement between the holy woman and her male confessor; what distinguishes Margery's account is the directness with which she acknowledges the problem and addresses it. As Janette Dillon (1996) has demonstrated, Margery's unwillingness to evade or gloss over the difficulties inherent in submitting to clerical authority while simultaneously claiming access to a higher authority make the *Booke* a highly unusual text (140). A comparison will help to illustrate the greater forthrightness of Margery's work: when Catherine of Siena's hagiographer Raymond records the saint's disobedience in not eating regularly despite being ordered to do so by her confessor, his account is carefully worded insofar as he underlines "Catherine's love of obedience" as well as "the extremity of her

[149]"I am well-pleased with you, daughter, for you are under the control of the Holy Church, and you will obey your confessor and follow his counsel."
[150]"I am above the Holy Church."
[151]"There is no clerk who can speak against the life which I teach you; and if he does, he is not God's clerk, but the devil's clerk."
[152]"I bid you go in my name, for I am above your spiritual father."

circumstances" (Dillon 140) which compelled her to disobey. The *Booke* is not as apologetic on Margery's behalf and is much less ambiguous in its preference of Christ over the Church.

Margery and Spiritual Community

In her narrative, Margery repeatedly gives evidence of her awareness of hagiographical *topoi* and her willingness to question or subvert them. This self-reflexivity is also manifest in the relationship she delineates between herself and her saintly models. After her conversion, Margery explicitly or implicitly aligns herself with a diverse community of saints who exemplify various types of sanctity, such as the maternal saint and the virgin martyr. While she acknowledges the parallels between her predecessors and herself, she is also keen to carve out a spiritual space for herself, and presents the reader with her unique spiritual achievements. In doing so, she departs from the practice of traditional spiritual biographies, where "the push to be distinctive is typically superseded by the desire to imitate spiritual precursors" (Kolentsis 230). Most hagiographers preferred to represent their saintly subject as a type rather than as a unique individual, and they had sound theological grounds for doing so. In the Middle Ages it was axiomatic that "the substance of the holy is contained fully in Christ; the saints partake wholly of this substance but contain this substance only as accident. Yet, because they all share the same substance, they are fundamentally alike, despite their accidental differences" (Heffernan 11-12). Margery, however, does not permit her individuality to be erased in favor of a typological representation. She wrests a place for herself among spiritual luminaries even as she acknowledges her debt to her predecessors.

The *Booke* traces diverse lines of influence between past and contemporary saints and Margery, and thus embeds her in a complex network of spiritual alliances. For example, the

priest who becomes Margery's amanuensis begins to believe in her sanctity after he reads the life of Marie of Oignies,[153] the woman saint who cried copiously and boisterously, for he learns that tears are an especial sign of grace and ought not to be disdained. Likewise, the priest also discerns similarities between Margery and Elizabeth of Hungary,[154] and begins to look favorably upon her spiritual mission. In tracing Margery's spiritual lineage to Marie of Oignies and Elizabeth of Hungary, the priest affirms the unimpeachable orthodoxy of her behavior and provides evidence of the magnitude of her spiritual achievements.

Margery herself avows devotion to Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373). When in Rome, she visits sites associated with Bridget: "sche was in the chawmbre that Seynt Brigypt deyd in, and herd a Dewche preste prechyn of hir therin, and of hir revelacyonys and of hir maner of levyng" (204).[155] Bridget's importance for Margery largely consists in the fact that she typified the maternal saint: "developing out of the image of the Virgin as *Mater Dolorosa*, the maternal saint provided women with a role model which was infinitely more attainable than that of virgin motherhood" (McAvoy 44). The Latin *Vita* of Bridget authored by Prior Petrus and Magister Petrus states that the saint had established a hospital for the poor in Sweden, where she tended to them with "tender compassion and the greatest of maternal charity" (qtd. in Mulder-Bakker 317). In confirmation of her motherly qualities, which manifested in bodily service and spiritual ministrations, Christ revealed to Bridget shortly before her death that henceforth she would be

[153] Marie of Oignies, one of the earliest known of the Beguines, was immortalized in the account of her confessor Jacques de Vitry, who wrote the *Vita Mariae* in 1215. By the time of her death in 1213, Marie had earned a widespread reputation for tearful penance, austerity and mystical visions.

[154] Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-1231), who was born into a royal family, was married and had children but was widowed when she was only twenty. She devoted the remaining four years of her life to tending the sick at a hospital she had established. There is mention of the treatise of a St Elizabeth in the *Booke* (296), although the reference is probably to the *Revelations* of Elizabeth of Töss, great niece of Elizabeth of Hungary (Watt 87).

[155] She was in the chamber that St. Bridget died in, and heard a German priest preach of her there, and of her revelations and her manner of living.

considered "as a nun and a mother in Vadstena" (*Revelations* 266), the site of the mother convent of her order. The saintly ideal embodied in Bridget may well have inspired the spiritual concern Margery evinces even for those who are hostile to her. For instance, the narrative states that she was at the Church in Assisi on Lammas Day "whan ther is gret pardon of plenyr remyssyon, for to purchasyn grace, mercy, and foryevenes for hirself, for alle hir frendys, for alle hir enmys, and for alle the sowlys in purgatory" (181).[156]

Margery's spiritual practices as recounted in the *Booke* situate her within a tradition of somatic mysticism that had its roots in affective piety and was closely associated with women. For instance, Margery is aligned with female predecessors like Angela of Foligno (1248-1309)[157] and Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)[158] when she expresses devotion to the eucharist and asserts her belief in the sacrament: "yyf he [the priest] sey dewly tho wordys ovyr the bred that owr Lord Jhesu Criste seyde whan he mad hys Mawnde among hys disciplys ther he sat at the soper, I believe that it is hys very flesch and hys blood and no material bred" (234-235).[159] Margery is emphatic that some of her most powerful visions occurred when she saw the host: "and most of

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[156] "When there is plenary remission of sins, to obtain grace, mercy and forgiveness for herself, for all her friends, for all her enemies and for all the souls in purgatory."

[157] Angela reported seeing in the host "a beauty which far surpasses the beauty of the sun" (147). On one occasion, Angela stated that she had seen the infant Christ in the host; we are told that "he appeared to her as someone tall and very lordly, as one holding dominion" (147). The quotations above are from Lachance's translation; the numbers in parentheses are page numbers.

[158] According to her hagiographer Raymond, Catherine's response to the eucharist was unusually intense: "commonly she perceived so delicious and penetrating an odor, when she received the sacred Host, that she was on the point of swooning away" (195). Some of Catherine's most powerful visions occur when she beholds the host: "she often perceived in the priest's hands a new born infant or a lovely youth, sometimes a furnace of fire, into which the priest seemed to enter at the moment in which he consumed the adorable Eucharist" (195). As is well known, Catherine was so devoted to the eucharist that she was unable to eat anything else. For more on eucharistic devotion in writings by and about medieval women saints like Catherine and Angela, see Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 1987.

[159] "If he [the priest] duly says the words over the bread that our Lord Jesus Christ said when he celebrated the Last Supper sitting among his disciples, I believe that it is His very flesh and blood and no material bread."

alle, whan sche sey the precyows sacrament born abowte the town with lyte and reverens, the pepil knelyng on her kneys, than had sche many holy thowtys and meditacyonys" (320-21).[160] Moreover, Margery's practice of intense meditation on the scenes from Christ's life is entirely orthodox, and closely follows the prescriptions of the standard manual, the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, which was popularly known in England through Nicholas Love's Middle English translation.

Even as Margery accepts models explicitly and implicitly, she does not hesitate to identify the distinctive features of her own experience. For instance, she vividly describes the vision she received when a priest and a young man held up the host: "the sacrament schok and flekeryd to and fro as a dowe flekeryth with hir wengys. And whan he held up the chalys with the precyows sacrament, the chalys mevyd to and fro as it schuld a fallyn owt of hys handys" (129).[161] Margery records Christ's comment to her after this experience: "My dowtyr, Bryde, say me nevyr in this wyse" (129).[162] Margery is unequivocal that she has been the recipient of a vision that was not vouchsafed to her Swedish predecessor.

In addition to situating herself with regard to women saints like Bridget, Margery implicitly compares herself with the Virgin Mary, and hints that her grief at the Passion surpasses that of the latter: "than had sche gret wondyr how owr Lady myth suffyr er dur to see hys precyows body ben scorgyd and hangyd on the crosse" (309).[163] Margery also indicates that

[160]"and most of all, it was when she saw the precious sacrament borne about the town with lights and reverence, the people kneeling, that she had many holy thoughts and meditations."
[161]"The sacrament shook and fluttered to and fro as a dove flutters with its wings. And when he held up the chalice with the precious sacrament, the chalice moved to and fro and almost fell out of his hands."
[162]"My daughter, Bridget, never saw me in this manner."
[163]"Then she wondered how Our Lady could suffer and endure to see His precious body scourged and hanged on the cross."

she may love Christ more than Mary Magdalene; noting that the Magdalene goes away joyfully after she is assured that Christ is risen, despite his harsh injunction not to touch him, Margery reflects: "that was gret merveyl to hir that Mary enjoyed, for yyf owr Lord had seyd to hir as he dede to Mary, hir thowt sche cowde nevyr a ben mery" (356).[164] Margery insists on representing herself as an individual who cannot be wholly subsumed within her saintly models and thus claims an independent place for herself in the spiritual firmament.

IV.a Janabai: God's Friendship

Janabai's relationship with Vitthal is predominantly characterized by a loving submission on the part of the saint, and the reciprocal affection of the deity. The dominant paradigm she uses to articulate this relationship is that of friendship (*sākhya*) followed by filial love, with Vitthal fulfilling the duties of a mother towards her. Friendship is one of the nine modes of approaching God that are accepted in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Janabai is not the first Varkari figure to address God as a friend; her predecessors like Namdev also favor this approach to the divine. However, Namdev's "friend" is gendered male to accord with the saint's own gender and is his *sakhā*, while Janabai represents Vitthal as her female friend or *sakhī*. While maternalizing the deity is not explicitly listed as a devotional praxis in the *Bhāgavata*, the Varkari saints commonly identified Vitthal as their mother.

Janabai's descriptions of her interaction with Vitthal powerfully illustrate a central axiom of the Varkari sect: devotion reverses the hierarchy of human and divine. In his *abhaṅg*s, Janabai's guru, Namdev is insistent that God needs the devotee as much as the devotee needs him. He unabashedly proclaims: "Thy devotees have sacrificed their lives for Thy sake. Thou

[164]"It was a great marvel to her that Mary rejoiced, for if our Lord had spoken to her as he did to Mary, she thought she could never be merry."

shouldst not forget that it is these devotees that have brought name to Thee" (trans. in Ranade 193-194). According to Namdev, God is celebrated primarily for the love and ardor displayed by his devotees, and he is in their debt. Moreover, he is shorn of his powers and becomes impotent when faced with genuine devotion. Thus Namdev announces that the devotee's fervent love can even compel the deity to appear before him: "The rope of my life I shall bind to Thy feet, and shall bring Thee to me at pleasure. It is best therefore that Thou shouldst see me of Thy own accord" (trans. in Ranade 193). In such a situation, God is constrained to act in accordance with the wishes of his devotee.

Janabai upholds Namdev's belief in the mutual dependence of God and his devotee, and Vitthal's vulnerability is the subject of one of her *abhaṅg*s: "God is greedy for love. He even left his abode, and stood before Pundalik…." (94).[165] Here Janabai alludes to the story of Vitthal's first devotee, Pundalik, who supposedly caused the deity to appear at Pandharpur. Clearly, God is not always master of his own destiny, for he perpetually yearns for human intimacy. The saint also suggests that God must assume form in accordance with the demands of his devotees, and it is they who determine his physical manifestations. She asserts, "I give color to your qualities," (211)[166] a cryptic statement which may be interpreted to mean that "the devotee forces God to appear in manifest form, and thus 'imparts color' to that form" (Irlekar, *Select Poems* 27). In other words, a sincere devotee like Janabai imposes physical traits on God by demanding that he appear to her, and cements his tangible manifestation through her literary depiction of it. As both devotee and poet, a figure like Janabai helps shape the popular understanding of God.

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[165] देव भावाचा लंपट । सोडुनी आला हो वैकुंठ ॥
पुंडलिकापुढे उभा । सम चरणांवरी शोभा ।।

[166] माझा रंग तुझिया गुणी ।

This tenet of Janabai finds practical application in a poem where she extols the physical form of Vitthal and upholds the spiritual significance of seeing the deity (*darśan*):

> The one whose beauty is unsurpassed stands on the brick.
> Clad in yellow, he wears *tulsī* beads around his neck and embraces his devotees.
> Anklets on his feet and ornaments on his wrists, my mother looks troubled.
> He likes to speak; come, let us go to a corner.
> This image, made of *Brahman*,[167] Jani sees with her own eyes. (24)[168]

Janabai's "seeing" is not passive; the saint shapes Vitthal's image to the same degree that his image acts upon her. The *darśan* of the god is a complex affair wherein Janabai's physical sight of Vitthal blends seamlessly into her mental conception of him: the image embraces devotees and dotes on them like a mother, and is keen to converse with them. Janabai's mental image of the deity as a loving maternal figure colors the physical image she sees and the poem presents us with a Vitthal who is a composite of the objective and the subjective. God can never be independent of his devotee, just as Vitthal's physical image can only be refracted through Janabai's loving gaze.

IV.b Margery: Loving the Male God

In contrast to Janabai's experience of Vitthal, Margery's mystical encounters often have an erotic charge and some of the most intense prose in the *Booke* identifies Christ as Margery's husband. For instance, Christ instructs Margery: "thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed and my fete as swetly as thow wylt" (196).[169] However,

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[167] The godhead

[168] अनंत लावण्याची शोभा । तो हा विटेवरी उभा ॥
पितांबर माळ गांठी । भाविकासी घाली मिठी ॥
त्याचे पाय चुरी हाते । कष्टलीस माझे माते ॥
आवडी बोले त्यासी । चला जाऊ एकांतासी ॥
ऐसा ब्रह्मीचा पुतळा । दासी जनी पाहे डोळा ॥

[169] "You may boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, head and feet as sweetly as you wish."

the relationship between them is not defined solely as sexual in nature, or imaged exclusively as conjugal love, although the heightened language used in the depiction of marital love indicates that this mode of approaching God appealed most to Margery. The word Christ uses most frequently for Margery is not wife or spouse but daughter, suggesting that her relationship with him is conceived predominantly as filial in nature. However, Christ also identifies himself as Margery's son and her spouse, while Margery embraces an equally broad spectrum of kinship roles in her interaction with Christ; she is his daughter, sister, mother, or spouse in accordance with the duty she undertakes. As Christ tells her, "Whan thow stodyst to plese me, than art thu a very dowtyr; whan thu wepyst and mornyst for my peyn and for my Passyon, than art thow a very modyr to have compassyon of hyr chyld" (101).[170] Christ also explains how Margery is both sister and spouse to him: "whan thow wepyst for other mennys synnes and for adversytes, than art thow a very syster; and whan thow sorwyst for thow art so long fro the blysse of hevyn, than art thu a very spowse and a wyfe, for it longyth to the wyfe to be wyth her husband and no very joy to han tyl sche come to hys presens" (101).[171] Finally, each conceives of the other as the sum total of all human relationships, suggesting the mutual intensity of their love.

Margery and Christ are inseparable and he accompanies her everywhere, even when she performs the most mundane of chores: "whan thow gost to chyrch, I go wyth the; whan thu syttest at thi mete, I sytte with the; whan thow gost to thi bed, I go wyth the; and whan thu gost

[170]"When you strive to please me, then you are a very daughter; when you weep and mourn for my pain and for my Passion, then you are a very mother that feels compassion for her child."

[171]"When you weep for other men's sins and for adversities, then you are a very sister; and when you sorrow because you are so far from the bliss of heaven, then you are a very spouse and a wife, for it befits a wife to be with her husband and have no joy until she is in his presence."

owt of towne, I go wyth the" (100).[172] This relationship is not dualist in that Christ establishes that he and Margery are no longer mutually exclusive beings: "I am in the, and thow in me" (85).[173] They are so closely conjoined through their mutual love that any homage to Margery is also made to Christ himself; the persecution of Margery amounts to the persecution of Christ: "thei that worshep the, thei worshep me; thei that despysyn the, thei despysen me, and I schal chastysen hem therfor" (85).[174] Christ's identification with his devotee does not support a dualist reading of their relationship, although their mutual love does not lead to a complete dissolution of identity either.

Margery's Christ is gendered masculine, but his love for her is so compelling that he occasionally offers her help with regard to domestic matters like child care. Most notably, when Margery is concerned about the arrangements for her baby, Christ assures her, "Dowtyr, drede the not, I schal ordeyn for an kepar" (131).[175] The text is silent about whether Margery accepted Christ's offer or not; we are not offered any vignettes or anecdotes of Christ rendering domestic help to Margery.

Yet, for all this fervent love, Margery's interaction with Christ is not marked by total submission to his wishes; in fact, she argues with him, and frequently questions his decisions. As Rosalynn Voaden (1999) observes, Margery "mediates not only with priests and with laypeople but also with Christ" (129). She is sometimes reluctant to obey Christ's injunctions, and tries to negotiate with him. For instance, when Christ entrusts her with a message for a monk

[172]"When you go to Church, I go with you; when you sit at your meat, I sit with you; when you go to bed, I go with you, and when you go out of town, I go with you."
[173]"I am in you and you in me."
[174]"Those that worship you worship Me; those that despise you despise Me, and I will chastise them for it."
[175] "Daughter, do not fear, I shall arrange for someone to look after the child."

who wished to know whether he would be saved or not, Margery replies: "A, gracyows Lord, this is hard for me to sey. He schal do me mech schame yyf I telle hym any lesyng" (91).[176] Margery's response is clearly problematic, for not only is she unwilling to convey the message, she even implies that Christ's information is not reliable. Her doubts can cost her dearly: on one occasion when she attributes her visions of the damned to the devil, and not to God, she is punished for her lack of faith with "many owyrs of fowle thowtys and fowle mendys of letchery and alle unclennes" (281).[177]

How can we explain Margery's frequent mistrust of Christ and her propensity to argue with him? According to Voaden, Margery's behavior is the result of incompetence, *i.e.*, her inability to decode clerical prescriptions for the female visionary, who was typically represented as a "benign absence" (139) serving as a passive channel for divine grace.[178] Margery, who repeatedly questions and negotiates with Christ, is a markedly "dissident presence" (139) rather than an absence, as was mandated by the Church.

I do not agree with Voaden that Margery's negotiations with Christ represent a failure on her part to gauge the orthodox requirements for a female visionary. Instead, I read them as a dramatic illustration of the precariousness of her position. Ever since Staley (1994) forcefully argued in favor of the *Booke*'s artistry, it has been recognized that the work cannot be dismissed as a mere series of reminiscences by an aging woman, and thus denied the scholarly attention that it deserves. In my reading, the representation of Margery's problematic interaction with Christ is deliberate, not a lapse, for it demonstrates the protagonist's vulnerability.

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[176] "Gracious Lord, this is hard for me to say. He will put me to shame if I tell him any lies."
[177] "many hours of foul thoughts and foul recollections of lechery and all uncleanness"
[178] According to Voaden, Bridget of Sweden successfully constructed herself as an exemplary female visionary. For more on Bridget as visionary see *God's Words,* 73-108.

In the narrative Margery repeatedly draws our attention to her inability to freely pursue her spiritual vocation because of her status as wife. Denied the avenues of the convent or the anchorhold, Margery is keenly aware of the peculiar difficulties she faces as a bride of Christ who is neither a virgin nor a widow. The little that she can do in these circumstances is to negotiate a chaste marriage, which she achieves only after divine intervention. Despite her efforts, her primary social identity always remains that of wife so long as her husband John is alive; although they had been living separately, she is called to nurse him when he has a fall. In view of this hostile public response to Margery's spiritual efforts, it is not surprising that she is prone to doubt herself or her visions, and repeatedly demands explanations from Christ. Thus, I trace her arguments with Christ to her vulnerability, rather than a lack of awareness.

V.a Janabai: The Mundane Divine

In Janabai's verses, her gentle intimacy with Vitthal is represented diagetically, with the speaker briefly narrating episodes that mark their mutual love. She does not offer us long and detailed accounts of the tender affection that characterizes their relationship. The following *abhaṅg* is typical of Janabai's poems of the mystical encounter, both formally and thematically:

> Dirty clothes tucked under her arm, a hungry Janabai stormed off.
> Vitthal ran behind, asking, "Why did you leave me behind?"
> "Why have you run after me? Go, go to your temple!"
> He washed clothes with all four hands. Jani says, "Well done!" (129)[179]

The poem opens with an image of the saint that is unexpected: instead of demonstrating love for the deity, Janabai has left the house in a huff, carrying the day's load of washing with her. We

[179] धुणे घेऊनि कांखेसी । जनी गेली उपवासी ॥
मागे विठ्ठल धावला । म्हणे कां टाकिले मला ॥
कां गा धांवोनि आलासी । जाय जाय राउळासी ॥
चहू हाते धुणे केले । जनी म्हणे बरे झाले ॥

are presented with an ordinary servant woman, presumably hassled by her chores. The second line, however, dispels any such illusions, for we learn that the object of Janabai's anger is Vitthal himself, who chases after her, reproaching her for leaving him behind. In her reply the saint expresses resentment that God has neglected her, and she dismisses him, asking him to return to the temple, for he seems to prefer the empty formality of temple ritual to the spontaneity and sincerity of her love. The poems ends with yet another twist, however; Vitthal now takes on a domestic role, washing clothes with all four hands, while Janabai watches, approving of his efficiency. For the sake of his devotee, God's multiple hands—tangible signs of his divinity—are employed for a manifestly human end. The closing image of Vitthal washing clothes inspires both awe and tender laughter: God will willingly undertake any chore for his devotee, even if he risks ridicule in the process.[180]

The Divine Helpmeet

Janabai uses diverse analogues to map her relationship with God, identifying him as her mother, female friend, father, and rarely, lover.[181] Her conception of the gendered deity is an extremely fluid one; sometimes, Vitthal is gendered male and addressed as the husband of the goddess Rakhumai, while in other *abhaṅg*s, he assumes a female form, and performs chores that were considered the province of women. However, there are also numerous occasions when the

[180] In my dissertation I do not discuss the performance history of the *abhaṅg*s, but I here provide a link to the classical singer Kishori Amonkar's rendition of an *abhaṅg* that is remarkably similar to the one I have just discussed:
Jani Jay Paniyasi. Youtube. N.p., 23 Jan. 2010. Web. 18 Jan. 2015.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcjGOz75ioA>.

[181] Most Varkari saints, including Janabai's guru Namdev did not privilege God-as-lover over other modes of apprehending the divine, such as God-the-mother, or God-as-friend.

deity's sexed body does not map onto his gender identity; Vitthal may be biologically male although the tasks assigned to him are predominantly feminine, and vice versa.

The following poem introduces us to Vitthal as mother and Vitthal as female friend, the two most important roles into which he is cast, irrespective of whether he is represented as biologically male or female:

> Come to me, my Vithabai. Cast your compassionate gaze upon me.
> I can think of nothing except you. I am helpless.
> All my love is showered upon you. Protect me from all evils.
> Rush to me, my (female) friend, says Namdev's Jani. (35)[182]

As we see, Vitthal's masculine names and epithets are set aside, and he is addressed by the feminine form of his name, Vithabai. (S)he is implicitly depicted as maternal through the nurturing she provides, but is also referred to as the saint's female friend. In another of Janabai's poems, Vitthal is explicitly presented as the sum total of almost all worldly relationships, which includes parents, brother, sister, and male friend: "Mother and father, brother and sister, you are also my friend, O Chakrapani, Wielder of the Discus!" (211).[183] This multiplicity of roles and the unstable nature of Vitthal's gender identity make him as elusive as he is accessible, as difficult to fathom intellectually as he is easy of access to the individual who yearns for him. Vitthal is omnipresent, and available to anyone who loves him; at the same time, he is transcendent and unapproachable by the finite human intellect.

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[182] येगे माझे विठाबाई । कृपादृष्टीने तू पाही ।।
तुजविण न सुचे काही । आता मी वो करू काही ।।
माझा भाव तुजवरी । आता रक्षी नानापरी ।।
येई सखये धाउनी । म्हणे नामयाची जनी ।।

[183] मायबाप बंधुबहिणी । तू बा सखा चक्रपाणी ।।

In Janabai's poems, Vitthal's primary role is that of her beloved female friend or *sakhī;* the deity takes on the role of helpmeet to Janabai in several *abhaṅg*s, which are justly famous for their deft evocation of the tenderness God feels for his devotee. As Ruth Vanita (2005) observes, "approaching God as same-sex friend allows for relatively greater equality and reciprocity because the hierarchies involved in heterosexually constructed gender or in a parent-child relationship do not come into play as much" (94). As Janabai's friend, no task is too lowly for Vitthal, who completely ignores orthodox prescriptions about ritual cleanliness and purity in his interaction with her. The deity, in fact, abjects himself physically by handling degrading substances like dust and dirt, and in doing so he effectively breaches the boundaries between human and divine as well as male and female.

In the following poem, for example, "the Wielder of the Discus" relinquishes his usual role to assist Janabai by wielding a broom and engaging in a task as humble as sweeping and cleaning the house:

> Jani sweeps the floor, and the Wielder of the Discus gathers the rubbish.
> He carries the basket on his head, and empties it at a distance.
> He forgets himself out of love, and performs these lowly tasks.
> Jani says to Vitthoba, "Can I ever pay off your debt?" (83)[184]

Vitthal also helps in several other tasks that were traditionally the preserve of women, including removing lice and washing hair:

> Jani's scalp was itching. Vithabai ran to help.
> With his own hands God undid her bun, and immediately killed the lice.
> He ran a comb through her hair and untangled it. Jani says, "I am now clean" (87).[185]

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[184] झाडलोट करी जनी । केर भरी चक्रपाणी ॥
पाटी घेउनिया शिरी । नेऊनिया टाकी दुरी ॥
ऐसा भक्तिसी भुलला । नीच कामे करू लागला ॥
जनी म्हणे विठोबाला । काय उतराई होऊ तुला ॥

In this *abhaṅg*, we find that Vitthal's gendered identity is not cohesive insofar as he is alternately figured as feminine and masculine. The deity is addressed as a woman, Vithabai, and the conjugation of the verb "*dhāv*" in the first line indicates that the subject performing the action is female. However, the second line refers to Vitthal as "*dev*," a word typically used in Marathi for a deity conceived as male.

The following *abhaṅg* performs a new variation on gendering Vitthal, for his sexed body is consistently male during his performance of a quintessentially feminine task:

> Jani sat down to bathe. There was no cool water to mix with the hot.
> Pot in hand, the Helper of the Helpless brings water.
> Rushing to and fro, the Wielder of the Bow fills water.
> "Enough, enough Vitthal!" Jani's heart is wrung. (223)[186]

In this *abhaṅg* we find that "the most private spaces are shared" (Vanita 96) between the deity and his devotee. Vitthal is engaged in a task exclusively reserved for women: providing cold water to another woman taking her bath. However, the form of address used for the deity is the masculine Vitthal and the epithets used to describe him are also masculine; consequently, there is a disjunction between Vitthal's sexed body and his gender identity. This gentle contact shared with a masculine deity in the context of a bath is also significant insofar as it disrupts the reader's expectations. While the episode is suggestive of Krishna's sports with the *gopī*s, his female devotees, as they were bathing in the waters of the *Yamunā*, it is completely devoid of erotic

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[185] जनी डोईने गांजली । विठाबाई धाविन्नली ॥
देव हाते बुचडा सोडी । उवा मारीतसे तांतडी ॥
केश विंचरुनी मोकळे केले । जनी म्हणे निर्मळ झाले ॥

[186] जनी बैसली न्हायाला । पाणी नाही विसणाला ॥
घागर घेउनी हातात । पाणी आणी दीनानाथ ॥
करुनिया येरझार । पाणी भरी सारंगधर ॥
पुरे पुरे रे विठ्ठला । जनिचा अंतरंग धाला ॥

charge. Janabai draws on the Krishna legend only to discard it, perhaps to emphasize that while Vitthal may be a form of Krishna, he submits to the wishes of his devotees, joyously assuming the roles into which they cast him.

The emotional appeal of the poem, which hinges on Vitthal's desire to serve his devotees, is heightened by the epithets of the deity that are used. We are told that the "Helper of the Helpless" carries water so that the servant-woman Janabai can complete her bath. As the savior of the poor, Vitthal will inevitably rush to the aid of his devotees even if they are low-born. The second epithet used for the deity in the poem is "The Wielder of the Bow"; the deployment of a title with martial overtones in a poem with a markedly domestic setting underlines the sacrifices Vitthal will make for those who love him. Janabai is so overcome by emotion that she finally has to implore Vitthal to stop.

When Janabai's deity participates in her world, he fully embraces the role into which he has been cast, especially in the handmill poems. For instance, Vitthal even sings with the saint, as a female companion would, when she is engaged in the work of grinding:

> Everyone laughed—let us see how much God loves Jani.
> They came to Namdev's house. Hari had forgotten himself out of love.
> He was turning the handmill, and singing his favorite songs.
> When his eye fell upon Jnaneshvar, he became scared.
> Jani said, "Lord of Pandharpur, go back to the temple now." (124)[187]

Interpreting Vitthal's "fear" of Jnaneshvar, Irlekar (1981) argues that "God, who has assumed form, is reluctant to express his love for his devotees to Jnaneshvar, who is a votary of the

[187] मग हांसोनि सकळी । पाहू देव कैसा बळी ॥
आले नामदेवा घरी । प्रेमे भुललासे हरी ॥
घाली जातिया वैरण । गाय आवडीचे गाण ॥
पुढे देखे ज्ञानेश्वरा । देव झालासे घाबरा ॥
जनी म्हणे पंढरिनाथा । जाय राउळासी आता ॥

formless Godhead. Janabai has skillfully delineated Vitthal's reluctance, and in passing has shed light on God's fondness for assuming a human form" (39). However, some of the deity's reluctance to be spotted by his devotees may also be ascribed to his infringement of gender boundaries; the poem repeatedly addresses him using male titles, but he is joyfully participating in women's work.

Vitthal throws himself completely into his human roles, so much so that he declines to use his powers of omnipotence and omniscience. He is not always adept at the domestic tasks that he seeks to perform for Janabai; in fact, he is often well-meaning but clumsy, eager to assist, but not always qualified to do so. For instance, in one episode, Vitthal is slightly unsure of himself as he watches Janabai preparing to collect the cowdung with which she will clean the house:

> Jani leaves to look for cowdung. He [Vitthal] stands behind her.
> Tucking in the border of his lower cloth, he walks behind Janabai.
> Having gathered the cowdung cakes, he closes the bundle.
> Jani says, "Tie the knot." He lifts the bundle onto his head, and Janabai walks behind. (130)[188]

Vitthal needs instructions from Janabai, and must protect his clothing before he can undertake the saint's chores. He comports himself like an ordinary man, unacquainted with household tasks and unsure of how to perform them.

In another poem, Vitthal is clearly inadequate to the task as he tries to help Janabai with the grinding:

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[188] जनी जाय शेणासाठी । उभा आहे तिच्या पाठी ॥
पितांबराची कांस खोवी । मागे चाले जनाबाई ॥
गौऱ्या वेंचुनी बांधिली मोट । जनी म्हणे द्यावी गांठ ॥
मोट उचलून डोईवर घेई । मागे चाले जनाबाई ॥

He brings the rice to pound and then wipes the mortar clean.
As he grinds, the Lord of Pandharpur feels weak.
He breaks out in a sweat everywhere. His lower cloth becomes soaked.
Anklets on his feet and bangles on his wrists, he sifts the grain and removes the husk.
His hands are covered with blisters, and Jani says, "Drop the pestle." (90)[189]

Despite being divine, Vitthal is not as competent as Janabai with regard to the feminine chore of pounding and grinding, which is thus vested with a dignity that is not habitually granted to women's work. When trying to assist Janabai, Vitthal feels fatigued, and his hands break out in blisters as he is not accustomed to using the mortar and pestle. In the previous poem, Vitthal was only unsure of what was expected of him, but in the *abhaṅg* I examine now, he is unable to cope with the tasks assigned to him, and suffers from their adverse physical effects. The god helps his/her "friend" only as competently or incompetently as a rich man or woman, who has not been subjected to physical labor, might.

It is noteworthy that Vitthal is frugal with words, and does not have long conversations with Janabai. He is largely silent because he does not need to speak to the saint; their relationship has the easy camaraderie of a long friendship, and they do not have to resort to speech to understand one another. However, as I have observed, Vitthal is fond of singing when he helps Janabai with her grinding, and his singing also reinforces the complete ease that characterizes the relationship between the deity and his devotee. Vitthal has discarded his majesty, and has utterly immersed himself in the humdrum world of Janabai.

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[189] साळी सडायास काढी । पुढे जाउनी उखळ झाडी ॥
कांडिता कांडिता । शीण आला पंढरिनाथा ॥
सर्व अंगी घाम आला । तेणे पितांबर भिजला ॥
पायी पैंजण हाती कडी । कोंडा पांखडूनि काढी ॥
हाता आला असे फोड । जनी म्हणे मुसळ सोड ॥

V.b Margery: Mundane Spirituality

God and Body

In her account, Margery's experience of the divine is multimodal in nature, and thus closely linked with the corporeal. She does not directly intervene in contemporary debates about the nature of the spiritual senses,[190] for she does not explicitly state whether they are distinct from the physical senses, or whether they emerge from the latter itself. However, the experiences recorded in the *Booke* manifest as bodily sensations, which suggests that Margery did not conceive of the spiritual senses and the physical senses as dichotomous. The body is granted an exalted place in Margery's theology as she undermines "the traditional distinction between external, bodily sensation and a separate set of interior, spiritual senses seen as organs of affective intentionality directed to God and the heavenly world" (McGinn 190).

The narrative asserts that Margery turned firmly to God after the failure of her businesses when she heard a melody "so swet and delectable, hir thowt, as sche had ben in paradyse" (61).[191] This overwhelming experience, which Margery unhesitatingly interprets as incontrovertible evidence of divine grace, is only the first of many. In her story she provides a multitude of such instances of grace that encompass all the senses; for example, she states that she can smell very sweet fragrances: "sumtyme sche felt swet smellys wyth hir nose; it wer

[190] The term "spiritual senses" (*sensus spiritales*) has a venerable history; it is "first attested in the Latin translation of the works of Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-c. 254)" (Gavrilyuk and Coakley 2). However, patristic authors did not elaborate on the expression, and it was only medieval thinkers who sought to explain the spiritual senses in a systematic manner. For an assessment of late medieval Christian views on the spiritual senses, see Bernard McGinn, "Late Medieval Mystics," 190-209. Drawing upon the writings of Hadewijch, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Richard Rolle, McGinn contends that there was "an impetus during these times towards presenting an integrated notion of the mystical self that saw the outer and inner aspects of sensation- feeling, desiring, perceiving and knowing- as part of a continuum of conscious and progressive reception of divine gifts" (209). For an excellent introduction to the mystical senses as they were interpreted in traditions other than Christianity, including medieval Hinduism and Buddhism, see June McDaniel, "Introduction," 1-15.

[191] "so sweet and delightful that she thought she had been in Paradise."

swettar, hir thowt, than evyr was ony swet erdly thyng that sche smellyd beforn" (192).[192] Margery has celestial visions, which prove that there are always angels keeping guard over her: "Sche sey wyth hir bodily eyne many white thyngys flying al abowte hir on every syde, as thykke in a maner as motys in the sunne;… and the brygtare that the sunne schyned, the bettyr sche myth se hem" (192-3).[193] Even more tellingly, Margery reports a fire of love that burns in her breast: "thow the wedyr wer nevyr so colde, sche felt the hete brennyng in hir brest and at hir hert, as verily as a man schuld felyn the material fyer yyf he put hys hand or hys fynger therin" (194).[194]

The rich gamut of sensual experiences that either lead Margery to Christ, or are the result of divine grace, suggest the influence of the writings of Richard Rolle, particularly the *Incendium Amoris* (c. 1340), where he identifies "*calor, dulcor,* and *canor*, fire, sweetness, and song" (Lochrie 116) as stages in the mystical journey. Rolle's "emphasis upon physical sensation as a sign of mystic union" (Staley 95) authorizes Margery to describe in minute detail the sensual experiences granted to her by Christ, and to expect that her audience will read them as evidence of her holiness.

Although Margery lays claim to a wide spectrum of divinely-inspired sensory activity, her tears and the subsequent roaring are the most well-known, and the most controversial, bodily signs of divine favor she is granted. While Margery's sensual experiences of God are accessible to her alone, her tears are publicly seen and heard, and thus constitute a more "objective" token

[192]"Sometimes, she smelt sweet scents with her nose that were sweeter than any sweet earthly thing she had smelt before."
[193]"She saw with her bodily eye many white things flying about her on all sides as thick in a way as dust particles in the sun… and the brighter the sun shone, the better she could see them."
[194]"Even when the weather was cold, she felt the heat burning in her breast and at her heart, as truly as a man would feel the material fire if he put his hand or his finger into it."

of divine favor. The use of tears as a spiritual aid has a long history in Christianity: "The Gregorian Sacramentary included a prayer for tears, and the Benedictine Rule established the relationship of tears and prayer within the very heart of Western monastic spirituality" (Atkinson 58). Closer to Margery's own time, many women mystics, including Marie of Oignies, Angela of Foligno and Dorothy of Montau, were noted for their extravagant crying. Tears were accepted in the English spiritual tradition as well, as Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* proves. Addressing the meditator, Hilton asserts that compassion for the suffering Christ is attended with fervent tears: "thou… criest with alle thy myghtes of thi bodi and of thi soule."[195]

The emotions that trigger Margery's tears are entirely in consonance with the goals of affective spirituality, which were listed by writers as diverse as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and Walter Hilton (d. 1396) as "contrition, compassion and contemplation."[196] Thus, Margery's tears give bodily expression to the intense contrition she feels for her sins and those of others: she sheds "abundawnt teerys of contricyon for hir owyn synnes and sumtyme for other mennys synnes also" (150).[197] The tears are also motivated by compassion for Christ: "sche had teerys of compassyon in the mende of owyr Lordys Passyon" (150-51).[198] Similarly, they also express her compassion for the Virgin Mary: "than was owyr Ladiis sorwe hir sorwe" (169).[199] Margery identifies several categories of people as recipients of her compassion: "sumtyme sche wept another owr for the sowlys in purgatory; another owr for hem that weryn in myschefe, in

[195] Line 909, Ch 35, Book I from *The Scale of Perfection,* ed. Thomas Bestul.

[196] Although both Bernard of Clairvaux and Hilton recognize the achievement of contrition, compassion and contemplation as the purpose of affective meditation, it is important to note that they order these qualities differently; according to Bernard, compassion precedes contrition, while Hilton asserts that the spiritual journey begins with contrition. For more on the differences between the two thinkers in their conception of affective spirituality, see Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings,* 25-33.

[197] "abundant tears of contrition for her own sins and sometimes for other men's sins also"

[198] "She had tears of compassion at the thought of our Lord's Passion."

[199] "then Our Lady's sorrow was her sorrow."

poverte, er in any disese; another owr for Jewys, Sarazinys, and alle fals heretikys" (276-77).[200] Christ affirms the spiritual potency of Margery's tears, insisting that they will succor her as well as other Christians: "thu turmentyst [the devyl] hym mor with thi wepyng than doth al the fyer in helle; thu wynnyst many sowlys fro hym wyth thi wepyng" (136).[201]

Not only is Margery's Christ willing to give bodily tokens of his favor, he also demonstrates tolerance of the flesh and its weaknesses. He decisively rejects ascetic practices, telling Margery that her willingness to let him speak through her is the greatest service she can render him and constitutes the supremely holy life: "this lyfe plesyth me mor than weryng of the haburion or of the hayr, or fastyng of bred and watyr" (195).[202] As Voaden states, "During the course of her life Margery, with divine encouragement, alters her devotional practices, often abandoning many of the visible manifestations of holiness for their internal and hence invisible, equivalents" (145). Fasting and the prescribed modes of prayer may be useful for novices, but Christ asserts that "thynkyng, wepyng, and hy contemplacyon is the best lyfe in erthe" (195).[203] As represented in the *Booke* Christ does not favor mortification of the flesh; instead of physical abjection, he recommends a program of mental abjection for Margery.[204] Thus, she is to patiently tolerate the taunts that she faces on his account, for her silent endurance of social hostility constitutes her purgatory, and will ensure that she is eligible for heaven immediately after death.

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[200]"Sometimes she wept another hour for souls in purgatory; another hour for those that were in misfortune, in poverty, or in any disease; another hour for Jews, Saracens, and all false heretics."

[201]"You torment him [the devil] more with your weeping than does all the fire in hell; you win many souls from him with your weeping."

[202]"This life pleases me more than if you were to wear the coat of mail for penance, or a hairshirt, or fast on bread and water."

[203]"Thinking, weeping and high contemplation constitute the best life on earth."

[204] Margery's rejection of extreme ascetic practices aligns her with English mystics like Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton, who favored moderation in bodily discipline. For more on their views see Sarah Salih, "Margery's Bodies: Piety, Work and Penance," 161-166.

Christ himself counsels Margery to perform acts that contravene social rules and instigate public anger, perhaps as a means of multiplying her spiritual merit. In one of the best-known instances of such counsel, Christ asks Margery to dress in white before she leaves on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. As critics like Gunnel Cleve (1986) have argued, white was traditionally the color of purity, and associated with virginity;[205] Margery, wife and mother of fourteen children, is well aware of the impropriety of her dressing in white, and feebly protests against Christ's injunction: "I drede that the pepyl wyl slaw[n]dyr me. Thei wyl sey I am an ypocrit and wondryn upon me" (103).[206] Christ reassures Margery with the statement that the more calumny she faces for his love, the more dear she is to him. In other words, the greater her mental abjection to Christ's will, the greater her spiritual progress.

The Spiritual and the Domestic

To my mind, Margery's most remarkable achievement is her synthesis of her spiritual duties with her domestic duties on the mental plane as well as in the tangible world. As she recounts her story, the domestic and the spiritual converge, not only during her meditations when she tends to Christ and Mary, but also in the everyday world when she ministers to her ailing husband. Margery's experience as matriarch stands her in good stead in her spiritual exercises, for she can picture domestic scenes pertaining to Christ with a wealth of detail and can even render service as required. For instance, when Christ asks her to meditate on his mother, the

[205] Sarah Salih (2001) maintains that white clothes did not necessarily signify virginity; in fact, "white was not commonly worn, by virgins or anyone else" (219) in medieval England. According to Salih, "in specific contexts- a virgin martyr legend, a nunnery, the semi-enclosed life of the beguine Mary of Oignies- white clothes can be used to signify virginity and holiness. If the white clothes are taken to refer to monasticism, they suggest that Margery is that contradiction in terms, 'an order unto herself'" (223). Salih contends that it is for this reason that Margery's white clothing engendered controversy, rather than a simplistic association of white with virginity.

[206] "I dread that the people will slander me. They will say that I am a hypocrite and wonder at me."

Virgin Mary, Margery sees a vision wherein she asks a pregnant St. Anne whether she can serve as her maid. St. Anne consents, and after her daughter is born, Margery bustles around, attending to the needs of the child: "sche besyde hir to take the chyld to hir and kepe it tyl it wer twelve yer of age, wyth good mete and drynke, wyth fayr whyte clothys and whyte kerchys" (75).[207] Margery also travels to Bethlehem with Mary and arranges for white kerchiefs in which to swaddle the infant Jesus when he is born. Likewise, when Mary is distraught after the death of her son, Margery is well-qualified to tend to her: "whan owr Lady was comyn hom and was leyd down on a bed, than sche mad for owr Lady a good cawdel and browt it hir to comfortyn hir" (352).[208] It is due to her experience as a mother and a wife that Margery can render help in her meditations to such exalted figures as Mary and the infant Christ. Moreover, in performing these chores for such an august audience, Margery vests them with dignity; women's work is indispensable even for God and his family, and thus gains immensely in importance. When directed towards God, mundane tasks acquire a sacral character, and even those who habitually perform them become exalted by association.

Domestic duties and spiritual duties are again conflated when Margery nurses her senile and incontinent husband. Soon after taking a formal vow of chastity, Margery discovers that she is not above suspicion, and is hence forced to live separately from her husband. However, after the latter is grievously injured in a fall, Margery is summoned to nurse him: "the pepil seyd, yyf he deyid, it was worthy that sche schulde answeryn for hys deth" (331).[209] Margery is afraid that

[207]"She busied herself in taking the child to her and looking after it until it was twelve years of age with good meat and drink, with fair white clothing and white kerchiefs."
[208]"When our Lady had come home and was laid down on a bed, then she made for our Lady a hot nourishing drink and brought it to her to comfort her."
[209]"The people said that if he died, it was fitting that she should answer for his death."

if she ministers to her husband, she will not be able to attend to her meditation, but Christ assures her that the domestic and the spiritual are not disparate and that serving her husband is a task of equal spiritual merit: "thu schalt have as meche mede for to kepyn hym and helpyn hym in hys nede as yyf thu wer in chirche to makyn thi preyerys" (331).[210] Margery explicitly states that in taking care of her husband, she believes that she is tending to Christ himself: she "servyd hym and helpyd hym, as hir thowt, as sche wolde a don Crist hymself" (332).[211] The text, however, is ambiguous about whether Margery is to identify her husband with Christ; the latter notes that Margery had often expressed a desire to serve him (331), thus implying that he and John are one. However, Christ also asserts that Margery must serve her husband out of gratitude, since he has permitted her to live chastely: "he hath mad thi body fre to me… and therfor I wil that thu be fre to helpyn hym at hys nede in my name" (332)[212] We cannot conclusively determine whether Margery is asked to see Christ and John as one, or whether she is to nurse John to repay his past kindness to her. Irrespective of her motivations, Margery wins Christ's approval and thus an increase in her spiritual merit through her dedicated service to her husband. Taking her cue from Christ, she welds together the domestic and the spiritual in the mundane world.[213]

[210]"You shall have as much reward for looking after him and helping him in his need as if you were in Church to make your prayers."

[211]"She served him and helped him, she thought, as she would have done Christ himself."

[212] "he has given up your body to me… and therefore I wish that you should help him in my name in his time of need."

[213] Although Margery does not make any mention of Catherine of Siena, it is interesting that the latter also attempted a similar exercise when she was persecuted by her family for her spiritual endeavors. According to Raymond of Capua, Catherine was able to endure the situation by conflating family members with Christ and the saints: "She imagined that her father represented our divine Savior, and that her mother took the place of the Blessed Virgin. Her brothers and other relations were the Apostles and disciples of the Lord to her" (38).

VI Conclusion

As we examine the strategies for self-authorization in Janabai and Margery, the mental, rather than physical, nature of the English mystic's spiritual labors is heightened. In the Varkari saint's *abhaṅg*s, we find that in common with other saints of the sect, the guru is the primary locus of authority. In coupling her guru's name with her own and referring to herself as "Namya's Jani," Janabai suggests that she has abnegated her will in favor of her guru's. However, mental abjection is secondary; in her role as servant, Janabai foregrounds physical abjection by describing the household chores that she performs for her guru and his family. In her life, we find that worldly duties are subsumed within spiritual duties because they are directed towards her guru.

In contrast to Janabai's valorization of the physical, Margery's abjection to Christ is primarily mental in nature. Christ warns her against extreme ascetic practices, insisting that her love for him will be manifested in disciplining the mind rather than in disciplining the body. Thus, Margery is directed to endure the taunts of the people as cheerfully as she can, for this will constitute her purgatory on earth. According to Christ, her *imitatio Christi* lies in tolerance and patience, in quietly accepting the rebukes and the scorn to which she is subjected because of her unconventional behavior.

Both Janabai and Margery lay claim to scribal assistance for purposes of self-authorization. Janabai recruits a god where Margery recruits a cleric, a key difference which reinforces the Indian saint's familiarity with her deity. As I have noted, most figures in the Varkari tradition, including those who could read and write, sought collaboration with a scribe; Janabai is unusual only in claiming a divine scribe. As sketched in the poems, the relationship

between the saint and her divine amanuensis is one of equals. Vitthal maintains that it is his privilege to hear Janabai's verses; they give him immense joy because they are grounded in her spiritual experience and are not mere literary renderings of the mystical encounter. Moreover, the deity does not hesitate to admit that he cannot improve upon Janabai's *abhaṅg*s.

Likewise, Margery's scribe is central to her mystical project. We find that in the *Booke* too, this relationship is conceived as non-hierarchical; the cleric derives his authority from his institutional affiliation, while Margery has unmediated access to Christ. The scribe inserts himself into the account on several occasions, describing his early ambivalence about Margery's claims to sanctity and also explaining how his doubts were put to rest. His own responses to Margery are intended to guide and mold those of his readers and thus pre-empt hostility to the protagonist. The scribe's repeated intrusions in the narrative are not without precedent; Raymond of Capua is also a protagonist in his vita of St. Catherine, and recounts a number of miracles he witnessed that testify to the saint's authenticity. As John Coakley has observed, there was increasing hostility to the figure of the female visionary from the late fourteenth century onwards, which necessitated Raymond's enumeration of the miracles performed by Catherine. Thus, the participation of Margery's scribe in the narrative comes as no surprise. At the same time, it is noteworthy that visionary and cleric have mutual need of each other: Margery is unable to write down her insights and have them disseminated, but the priest also seeks advice from her on at least one occasion. Thus, their relationship can be characterized as horizontal rather than vertical in nature.

The interaction between Janabai and her deity highlights the boundaries that Margery refuses to infringe in her relationship with Christ. In her poems the Varkari mystic repeatedly

demonstrates that her devotion to Vitthal has made him devoted to her, and she refuses to limit herself to a vertical relationship with the divine. Janabai is not radical in making such assertions, for Varkari figures like Namdev emphasized the levelling power of love and the deity's eagerness to serve his ardent devotee. Janabai underscores the non-hierarchal nature of her relationship with Vitthal when she figures him as her female friend who participates in her mundane chores. The representation of God as female friend was without precedent in the Varkari tradition. Maternalizing the male deity was a common practice, as was the portrayal of Vitthal as male friend or *sakhā*, but Janabai pioneers the representation of God as a female friend or *sakhī.* In classical Sanskrit literature, the heroine's interaction with her intimate woman friend creates a space for free, uninhibited communication between two individuals. Moreover, the relationship between the heroine and her friend is far more equal than that between women and their lovers or husbands. In choosing to depict Vitthal as her *sakhī*, Janabai argues for a dissolution of hierarchies between the deity and his sincere devotee; the marital bond, with its inherent bias in favor of men, is inadequate to express the *bhakta*'s relationship with the divine.

Janabai's encounters with her divine friend are objective insofar as the saints are able to see them together. The two share a quiet intimacy: Vitthal is not effusive and rarely expresses his affection verbally, but is constantly by the saint's side, assisting her as she goes about her work. He grinds with her, helps her have a bath, and even participates in such lowly chores as sweeping and washing clothes.

In Janabai's world, play-acting is serious business; for example, when Vitthal becomes a woman, he does the day's grinding with the saint, and sings to the rhythm of the handmill, as any woman would. In such situations, Vitthal is completely oblivious of his divinity, and Janabai

herself is not constrained by the deity's presence; instead, she permits him to accompany her in her humdrum chores. Vitthal's immersion in his human personae draws on the theological framework of *līlā*, a multivalent term that is ubiquitous in the discourses of Vaiṣṇavism. As Norvin Hein (1995) notes, *līlā* "is a Sanskrit noun meaning 'sport' and 'play' (13), and he explains it broadly as "the Hindu elaboration of the idea that God in his creating and governing of the world is moved not by need or necessity but by a free and joyous creativity that is integral to his own nature" (13). *Līlā* as God's spontaneous play became particularly prominent in the traditions dedicated to Vishnu and his incarnations, and thinkers affiliated with the school of Chaitanya (1486-1533) even went so far as to assert that "God acts solely for his own sport and without thought of benefiting his creatures" (Hein 15). In our reading of Janabai's poems, we can invoke the concept of *līlā* to explain the deity's intimacy with her; Vitthal sports with the saint, joyfully taking on the role she assigns to him. In fact, several poems in Janabai's oeuvre evoke an adult god who is hesitant, and looks to the saint for help. There may even be a humorous subtext to poems in which Vitthal fails at women's chores, which were traditionally deemed contemptible; the deity invites laughter when he falters at tasks that millions of women accomplish daily. The deity's "failure" in Janabai's *abhaṅg*s indicates the dissolution of any ontological difference between human and divine.

As a saint and a poet, Janabai is conscious of her agency in shaping and molding the formless divine. She is emphatic that she gives "color to his qualities" insofar as the divine is ultimately formless and intangible, but must assume a form in response to her ardor. Janabai further crystallizes this form through her poetry and disseminates it among the people. Her awareness of her creative power is manifest in her manipulation of Vitthal's gender: he may be

alternately gendered masculine and feminine in the same poem or he may be completely feminized and addressed as "Vithabai." In a few poems, the deity's sexed body is not contiguous with his gender identity. Janabai adroitly uses epithets and verb conjugations to effect these gender transformations.

Remarkably, Janabai's many variations on Vitthal's gender anticipate the modern view of gender as a performance that is predicated upon the sexed body. Her representations of the deity frequently drive a wedge between his sexed body and his gender identity, which accords with the current view that the contiguity between them is not natural, but a construct that can be dismantled and re-made. While it may be argued that gender is malleable only in the realm of the gods, Janabai aligns the divine so closely with the human that instabilities cannot be contained in one demarcated space, but spill over into the human world as well.

In stark contrast to her Indian counterpart, Margery is reluctant to reinterpret the gender identity of her deity. She clearly evinces a preference for the masculine Christ whom she identifies as her husband, father, or son. Although the masculine Christ of the *Booke* expresses willingness to participate in domestic chores and offers Margery help with child care, the text is silent about whether the offer was accepted or not, and we never actually see Christ doing women's work. On the whole, the *Booke* preserves the domestic as a feminine sphere; its boundaries are threatened, but not routinely infiltrated by the masculine.

Janabai's largely silent encounters with her deity emphasize Margery's loquacity and the abundant conversations she has with Christ. Margery argues with God, expresses doubt about some of his pronouncements and demands reassurance from him. This propensity for argument is so unorthodox in a female visionary that Voaden labels it a failure, an inability to understand the

conditions for authentic female visionary experience as adjudged by the Church. However, I read this tendency in Margery as an illustration of her vulnerability. She is keenly aware that as a visionary with a living husband, she defies clerical labels, and is hence compelled to seek reassurance from her greatest supporter. Despite God's oft-repeated professions of love, Margery is troubled by the ambiguity of her position and repeatedly tries to address it in her conversations with Christ. However, we must also remember that Margery is not intransigent in her dealings with Christ; every argument ends with her relinquishing her own will and deferring to Christ's wishes. Thus, Margery ultimately affirms the distinction between human and divine.

The juxtaposition of Janabai's *abhaṅg*s with the *Booke* contributes to our knowledge of the diverse strategies that women have adopted to bridge the gulf between the domestic and the spiritual. Margery's god gives her advice on how to achieve the integration of the mundane and the divine, while Janabai directs her deity on how to assist her in this process. The Varkari saint's poems do not belittle the domestic; on the contrary, her faithful performance of household chores is also a spiritual discipline in that it is intended for her guru Namdev and his family. Of course, her spiritual praxis is not limited to serving her guru physically; she recommends the chanting of the Divine Name as the surest means to God, and presumably engages in it herself. Nonetheless, the domestic features in her poetry even after her self-realization, for she does not give up household chores, but has God participate in them as well. Janabai even offers her god advice, so that he can assist more efficiently. Vitthal's involvement in women's work elevates tasks that were habitually dismissed and denigrated.

Like Janabai, Margery also chooses not to expunge the domestic from her narrative. Although she is reluctant to nurse her incontinent husband, Christ advises her to minister to him

as though he were Christ himself. Thus, Margery is able to perform her wifely duties and accrue spiritual merit. In addition, she repeatedly undertakes domestic tasks for Christ and his family during her meditative exercises. Thus, she is able to swaddle the infant Jesus and prepares a nourishing drink for the Virgin when she is distraught after Christ's burial. In attempting these tasks for God, Margery invests them with a dignity not usually accorded to women's work. Janabai has Vitthal perform household chores himself, however inadequately, but Margery is more reluctant to remake the deity's gender than her Indian counterpart. Despite these divergences of approach, however, both Janabai and Margery are remarkably successful in weaving the numinous into their everyday lives.

Chapter 4: Narrating the Feminine Self in Margery Kempe's *Booke* and Bahinabai's *Ātmacaritra*

Many reviewers and scholars were perplexed when the contents of the *Booke* of Margery Kempe became publicly available, first in a modernized edition by Col. Butler-Bowdon (1936), followed by a scholarly version co-edited by Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen (1940). Contrary to expectation, the work was not cast in the mold of Julian's *Revelations*, but was idiosyncratic and unique indeed. These very qualities of the *Booke* have endeared it to scholars today, and it has been approached as both historical document and literary artefact. The *Booke* is often hailed as the first autobiography in English, and Margery has been canonized for her literary achievements. The Varkari saint Bahinabai (c.1628-c.1700) also garnered public attention in the twentieth century, her poems first appearing in print in 1913.[214] Critics today celebrate her *Ātmacaritra* as the first autobiography in the Marathi language. In this chapter I compare the two autobiographies, which have emerged from distinct religious traditions and geographical locales, in an attempt to tease out the models of feminine subjectivity embedded in them.

This chapter is divided into five sections; in the first, I provide a brief history of the autobiography as it has evolved in South Asia. I clarify that the autobiography is no longer synonymous with the masculine Western subject. In my second section, I begin with a discussion of the autobiography in medieval Europe and highlight Margery's strategies for justifying her unusual narrative. In addition to testimony from her scribe and Christ, Margery makes adroit use

[214] Bahinabai was not entirely unknown before this date; even in the eighteenth century she finds mention in a song composed by her younger contemporary, Niloba. However, her name was familiar only to a small circle of Varkaris. It was after the publication of her works that she became known to a mass audience.

of narrative voice to bolster her truth claims. Then, I examine the literary precedents for Bahinabai's autobiographical account, along with her attempts at self-authorization. Bahinabai invokes the figure of the *sakhī* to enhance the credibility of her narrative as well as to align it with accepted forms of female self-expression. In the third section of this chapter, I analyze the communal affiliations mapped by the two women, with special emphasis on the relationships they delineate with non-human animals. Both Margery and Bahinabai successfully undermine the human/animal binary. In my fourth section, I examine how the women treat of their social roles, particularly those of wife and mother. Both mystics experience marriage as a severe handicap, although they manage to achieve their spiritual goals with divine aid. In the closing section of my chapter, I compare the two narratives in relation to their positions on community, marriage and motherhood. In both accounts, motherhood emerges as more congenial to spiritual aspirations than wifehood; neither mystic can offer a solution for reconciling wifely duty with spiritual duty that is tenable for all women. The juxtaposition of the two narratives suggests that medieval Christianity as well as medieval Hinduism failed to provide adequately for the needs of married women with spiritual aspirations.

I Theorizing Autobiography in South Asia

Modern criticism of autobiography in the West may be said to have its genesis in the writings of Georg Misch (1907), who defined the form as "the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*autos*)" (qtd. in Smith and Watson 2001 113).[215] Although early critics like Misch identified the autobiography as a uniquely Western

[215]Smith and Watson (2001) argue that the second wave of autobiography criticism was generated by the writings of Georges Gusdorf ("Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," 1956) and Francis R. Hart ("Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography," 1970). Taking their cue from Gusdorf and Hart, thinkers of the second wave did not

form, theorists of autobiography today seek to make the category as inclusive as possible. Its horizons have been extended to include new subjects and new media insofar as scholars have rejected the close association of the autobiography with the "Western, bourgeois, white, male self" (Gilmore 10-11) and have incorporated "more multicultural modes of self-representation" (Gilmore 11). Thus, Paul Jay (1994) examines the role of visual memory in shaping identity in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, while Hertha Wong (1994) analyzes "the autobiographical dimensions of serial naming as practiced by nineteenth-century Plains Indian males and recorded by European American authorities" (212-213).

Despite these strides, some critics have proposed the drastic step of rejecting the term "autobiography" altogether, contending that it cannot be fully dissociated from the male Western subject. In their attempt to displace "autobiography" as a generic marker, Smith and Watson (2010) offer new terms that are intended to be more inclusive. "Life writing" incorporates works that are "biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical" (4). In contrast, "life narrative" is not limited to written modes of the autobiographical, but signifies "acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital" (4). David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (2004) employ "life history" to designate writings that are biographical or autobiographical, although they exclude fiction from this category. However, it is significant that they accept both oral and written forms of narration, making a deliberate

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interpret autobiography as historical record, but as a literary artifact. The author of a self-referential work wrests meaning from his experience and tries to shape an identity for himself in the course of his narrative; identity is not a given, but a construct. In their history of autobiography studies, Smith and Watson identify a third wave that engages with the "poetics and politics of the autobiographical" (135) and addresses issues that emerge from the postmodern concern with "generic instability, regimes of truth-telling, referentiality, relationality, and embodiment" (143).

effort not to "privilege print over orality" (9). Another promising alternative is the term "ego-documents," first coined by the Dutch historian Jacob Presser in 1958 to denote "texts in whatever form and size which hide or reveal the self deliberately or accidentally" (qtd. in Lyons 249). Like "life narrative," "ego-documents" too has the advantage of incorporating both oral and written accounts of the self.

However, I choose "autobiography" as a generic label for Bahinabai's text, not only because of its undeniable popular appeal, but also because scholars like Kathryn Hansen have successfully recuperated the term for critical use in non-Western contexts.[216] I conceive of autobiography as a flexible category that embraces all forms of self-writing except fiction, and I have adopted Hansen's definition of the term:

> I intend to use the term for life narratives written by the subject herself or himself. Autobiography, unlike oral history, is a literary genre grounded in the materiality of writing. It is also clearly legible as an enunciation of the self. However, 'self,' 'writing,' and even 'life' are invariably inflected by culture, convention, place, and time. (30)

This reading of autobiography takes into account the temporal and cultural variations in the understanding of the self and thus encompasses narratives that are ancient and modern, Western and Indian. In this chapter, I use life narrative, life history and self-writing as terms that are interchangeable with autobiography in its broad sense.

[216] In her *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies* (2011), Hansen examines the life narratives of four theatrical personalities who reinvigorated the Parsi theatre of western India in the early twentieth century.

Tracing the history of autobiography in India, Hansen notes that passages in the works of the Sanskrit authors Bana, Bilhana and Dandin[217] have been recognized as autobiographical in nature. Furthermore, "the Mughal emperors introduced autobiographical writing when the *Baburnama* was translated into Persian during Akbar's reign" (27). Hansen identifies Banarasi Das's *Ardhakathānak*, composed around 1641, as the "first known Indic-language autobiography" (27).

For many early Western interpreters of autobiographies composed in Indic languages, these works were fundamentally flawed inasmuch as they did not espouse the model of the unified and sovereign self that held sway in the West in the nineteenth century. Indian society itself was not deemed conducive to the art of autobiography, for it was perceived as "a society composed of castes, religious communities, and kinship networks, in which, as a consequence, a sense of selfhood, of personal identity and agency, is muted and subsumed within larger social and cultural domains" (Arnold and Blackburn 5). Works like Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1960) helped reinforce the notion that in Indian society the collective self was ubiquitous. Thus, Indian autobiographies did not truly deserve the name, based as they were on collective identities.

However, an increasing receptivity to alternative models of selfhood, engendered primarily by feminist thinkers, resulted in a more sympathetic approach to Indian conceptions of the self and the works that enshrined them. Spurred primarily by their examination of women's autobiographies, a project which was initiated in the 1980s, feminist theorists adumbrated a model of selfhood that was supposedly unique to women's narratives. The new self that was

[217] Dandin was a poet who probably lived in the 6th or the 7th century; Bana, the author of the prose work *Kādambarī* lived in the 7th century, while Bilhana was a poet of the 11th century.

identified was not based on the model of the independent, self-determining individual that appeared to dominate autobiographies penned by men, but was interdependent and closely aligned with a community. This self, described as relational, was even traced in male life narratives by scholars like Paul Eakin (1999), and the changing dynamic between the individual and the community was now understood as a central theme of autobiography even in the Western context. This devaluation of the individuated self ensured that henceforth Indian documents of the self were also deemed worthy of critical scrutiny.

II.a Margery Kempe's *Booke*: Historical Precedents

Margery Kempe's *Booke*[218] survives in a single manuscript, British Library Additional MS 61828. According to Barry Windeatt (2000), it was written in a single hand, and probably dates to around 1450 (xvi). Although the manuscript is an early one, Windeatt contends that it was not the one originally dictated by Margery because "the longer proem tells how the amanuensis added a prefixed leaf" (xvi) which one does not find in the extant manuscript. The scribe who wrote the text of the *Booke* identifies himself as Salthows, "a surname recorded in fifteenth-century Lynn" (xvi). With regard to the language employed, A. McIntosh, M. L. Samuels and M. Benskin (1986) observe that it "is very consistent internally, and is undoubtedly of Norfolk, though it may not be from King's Lynn" (qtd. in Windeatt xvi). While Margery does not explicitly identify her readers, Nicholas Watson (2005) has argued that the *Booke* was intended primarily for a local audience: "Presupposing a reader's knowledge of local geography,

[218] All Middle English quotations from the *Booke* are from Barry Windeatt's critical edition (2000). The numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, all translations into modern English are mine, but I draw heavily on Windeatt's annotations.

history, and politics, the *Booke* might be seen as a Pentecostal gift by its author to the townsfolk who had reviled, gossiped over, used, and venerated her" (425).

The generic status of the *Booke* has been widely debated; most scholars believe that it is a self-referential account, thereby accepting that the narrator, the protagonist and the putative author are identical. Mary G. Mason (1980) was one of the first to identify the work as an autobiography; she maintains that "Margery Kempe produced (ca. 1432) what is actually the first full autobiography in English by anyone, male or female" (209). More recently Ellen Ross (1991) and Sarah Beckwith (1993) have also unequivocally described the work as the first autobiography in the English language. However, the classification of the *Booke* as an autobiography has not been universally accepted; Barry Windeatt (2005), for example, argues that such assertions must be qualified, for the *Booke* does not conform to the autobiography as it is popularly understood today. Some features of the *Booke* that make it resistant to the genre of autobiography, according to Windeatt, are its non-linear structure and its relative indifference to the facts of Margery's mundane existence, such as the fate of her fourteen children.

Evidently, Windeatt's reluctance to describe the *Booke* as an autobiography can be traced to a narrow formulation of the genre that is no longer universally accepted. Today, autobiography can accommodate heterogeneous literary forms and diverse models of the self; Misch's early theorization of the form has been superseded and its frontiers have been expanded. The category of autobiography as it has been defined by scholars like Hansen is capacious enough and elastic enough to accommodate an idiosyncratic work like the *Booke* with ease.

According to Jay Rubenstein (2005), the credit of producing the first medieval autobiography belongs to Guibert of Nogent, who wrote his *Monodiae* in the early twelfth

century. Rubenstein speculates that Guibert's writings were the direct result of his association with his mentor, Anselm of Bec, who encouraged him to reflect on the workings of the human mind.[219] The result of this theoretical interest in human character and its development was "the first western autobiography in seven centuries" (29). The intellectual life of the twelfth century and the centuries that follow demonstrate "a concern with emotion, with the complexity of personality, with interior life and motivation" (31), concerns that were to provide the philosophical foundation for Margery's *Booke*, which Rubenstein implicitly accepts as the first autobiography in English.

As he traces the literary antecedents of the *Booke*, Anthony Goodman (2002) demonstrates that it owes no small debt to autobiographical works in the affective tradition, although it draws upon several varieties of life writing. For instance, Goodman notes the abundance of external incidents in the *Booke*, and suggests a similarity to "the *apologia pro vita sua* composed by, or written in the name of, a public figure" (10).[220] However, works in this mode were scarce in medieval Europe, and it is more likely that the *Booke* is affiliated with "autobiographical genres which are more characteristically medieval, and some of which had notable female practitioners" (11). These genres sought to examine their subjects' motives and states of mind in a religious context. Confessional autobiographical fragments are a prime example of such forms of life writing. Goodman also examines the literature that was produced in the wake of the popularization of contemplative devotion, particularly after the twelfth

[219] At the same time, it is important to note that Guibert was acquainted with Augustine's *Confessions* (Rubenstein, 2002 13) and partly modelled his narrative on it. Like his predecessor, Guibert too begins with a description of his birth and family, and goes on to provide an account of his childhood and education.

[220] The fourteenth-century *Vita Karoli Quarti imperatoris ab ipso Karolo conscripta*, in which Emperor Charles IV (d. 1380) supposedly recorded episodes from his early life is an example of this genre of life writing in medieval Europe (Goodman 10).

century. He notes that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, lay elites increasingly turned to contemplative devotion, the practice of which necessitated "analysis of one's sinfulness, and progressive and affective meditation on aspects of the deity" (11). Holy women were among the first exemplars of this mode of devotion and like Julian of Norwich, even had their experiences recorded. However, the *Booke* is not modelled entirely on works like the *Revelations*, but is a "highly personal combination of the two devotional autobiographical genres—the confessional and the contemplative" (12). Margery examines her motives and attempts to lay bare the inner workings of her mind, even as she vividly describes her spiritual experiences.

The *Booke* is an autobiographical work that recounts Margery's story in the third person. Margery consistently refers to herself as "this creature," and as Felicity Riddy (2005) notes, "creature" "seems to have been a slightly formal or distancing word, without indications of gender and not even used exclusively of human beings" (441).[221] Most autobiographies adopt the first person voice for the greater intimacy it conveys between the narrating self and the protagonist. In addition, the "I" also suggests the unmediated nature of direct speech, and thus lends support to the authenticity of the account. However, autobiographies in the third person are not unknown; one of the most recent examples is J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997), in which the author refers to his younger self as "the boy." In the *Booke*, the use of the third person voice and Margery's self-description as "creature" are particularly effective because her story is not explicitly recounted for its own sake, but to fulfill a moral

[221] According to the *OED*, "creature" came to be vested with a range of meanings in late medieval writings; these meanings range from "a created thing or being" to "a human being" and even "an animal, often as distinct from a person." For example, in his *Confessio Amantis*, composed around 1393, Gower uses "creature" to designate all created beings: "He clepeth god the ferste cause..Of which that every creature Hath his beinge and his nature." In Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* (c. 1386), "creature" is used to signify animals: "There dwellede cryatur non Saue wilde bestis."

purpose: "Alle the werkys of ower Saviowr ben for ower exampyl and instruccyon, and what grace that he werkyth in any creatur is ower profyth" (41).[222] The account of Margery's life is intended to further Christ's glory, and turn others towards God. Thus, the use of the third person and the distance it suggests between the narrator and the protagonist helps deflect any charges of self-aggrandizement against Margery. Again, the use of the third person and the deployment of "creature" as a self-referential term for Margery despite its non-human associations reinforce the author's humility. Furthermore, as Mason argues, the third person narrative voice "confers some sense of objective reality on scenes that might otherwise have little enough of the realistic about them" (219), such as Margery's marriage to the Godhead. Hence, its use enhances the authenticity of the *Booke*.

At the same time, the *Booke* also makes frequent use of direct speech, and thus incorporates the first person mode in large sections of the narrative. The narrator employs the first person in passages that are intended as transcriptions of Margery's dialogues with Christ and the saints or the spirited replies she made to religious and secular authorities who questioned the orthodoxy of her beliefs. To give just one example of many, Margery's visionary encounter with the young Mary is cast in the first person, with the former declaring "I am not worthy, Lady, to do yow servyse" (76).[223] The abundant use of direct speech in the *Booke* accentuates the dramatic quality of the narrative, and also bolsters its claims to authenticity, insofar as it suggests that the narrator has recorded verbatim the words of other characters who feature in the work.

[222] "All the works of our Savior are for our example and instruction, and the grace that he works in any creature is to our advantage."
[223] "I am not worthy, Lady, to serve you."

The narrative of the *Booke* does not adhere to a linear pattern and is interrupted on multiple occasions. The scribe underlines the temporal discontinuities in the work, insisting that he wrote down Margery's memories exactly as she recounted them and made no attempt to doctor them: "Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr,… but lych as the mater cam to the creatur in mend whan it schuld be wretyn" (49).[224] It is well-known that at the conclusion of the sixteenth chapter, the reader is directed to "rede fyrst the xxi chapetre, and than this chapetre aftyr that" (112).[225] These ruptures in the narrative flow draw our attention to the *Booke*'s claims to merely record the recollections of a woman with genuine saintly inclinations, and help authorize the work. Narrative coherence is also disrupted by the scribe who incorporates his own experience with Margery into her life story despite his protestations of non-interference. Notably, in chapter XXIV the priest tries to gauge Margery's sanctity himself, asking her to predict the outcome of future events: "The prest whech wrot this boke, for to prevyn this creaturys felyngys, many tymes and dyvers tymes he askyd hir qwestyons and demawndys of thyngys that wer for to komyn" (141).[226] However, these digressions are also germane to Margery's project insofar as they present the personal testimony of a clerical witness with regard to her sanctity. Margery's scribe is not the only cleric to ratify her spiritual claims; she garners several notable clerics to her cause, including the formidable Archbishop Arundel, who "aprevyd hir maner of levyng, and was rygth glad that owyr mercyful Lord Cryst Jhesu schewyd swech grace in owyr days"

[224] "This book is not written in order…"
[225] "Read first the 21st chapter and then this chapter after that."
[226] "The priest who wrote this book, in order to test this creature's feelings, many times and diverse times he asked her questions and questioned of things that were to come."

(111).[227] Clerical authorities like Arundel authorize Margery's spiritual praxis, give her further encouragement, and publicly affirm that she is neither an agent of the devil nor is she simulating holiness.

II.b Bahinabai's *Ātmacaritra*: Historical Background

According to R. C. Dhere (1967), Bahinabai's *Ātmacaritra*[228] is the first autobiography in the Marathi language (46). He considers several other contenders, including the *Līḷācaritra* and the autobiographical verses attributed to Namdev, but rejects them chiefly because they violate what Lejeune has described as the autobiographical pact (18-24).[229] Dhere dismisses the autobiographical claims of the *Līḷācaritra* because the work purports to record the reminiscences of the thirteenth-century religious leader Chakradhar, but was authored by one of his disciples. Likewise, the composer of the verses describing Namdev's mundane and spiritual adventures is not likely to be the historical Namdev, *i.e*., the narrative "I" and the author are not identical. It is evident that in his assessment of Namdev's autobiographical poems, Dhere subscribes to early formulations of autobiography, whereby the category designated a retrospective narrative honestly recording the author's life. However, it is also noteworthy that Dhere does not hesitate to accept a poetic work as autobiography.

Bahinabai's attempt at narrating her life story in verse was enabled by her predecessors in the Varkari tradition, many of who composed *abhaṅg*s that touched upon their mundane lives, in

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[227] "Approved her manner of living, and was truly glad that our merciful Lord Jesus Christ showed such grace in our days."

[228] All quotations from the *Ātmacaritra* are from Justin Abbott's translation of the text, originally published in 1929. The numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers. I chose Abbott's translation because it is faithful to the original, but I have modernized the language used to make it more palatable to present-day readers. Abbott also provides the Marathi verses in an appendix, pp. 188-211.

[229] Lejeune argues that the author of an autobiography "makes a pact" with his readers that the author, narrator, and protagonist of his work refer to the same individual (Smith and Watson, 2010 207).

addition to describing their spiritual adventures. The founding father of the sect, Jnaneshvar, does not personally describe his worldly struggles and the supposed Brahminical persecution he had to endure, but his accounts of his spiritual experiences are plentiful. In the poetic corpus that bears Namdev's signature, we find several references to his worldly life, in addition to his spiritual journey. This trend is even stronger in the *abhaṅg*s of Janabai, Namdev's disciple, who lists the birth dates of saints like Jnaneshvar, mentions her native village, and briefly describes her parents. Her everyday life as a servant also finds its way into her poetry, largely because its rigors are shared by her deity. In contrast to her Varkari predecessors like Jnaneshvar and Muktabai, who underscore the spiritual "I," in her poetry Janabai fashions an "I" that is situated in the quotidian world and is not defined in relation to God alone. The seventeenth-century Varkari saint Tukaram, who was Bahinabai's guru, is also generous with biographical information, describing his early travails and how they impelled him towards God (Ranade 276-281). Thus, by the time Bahinabai composed her autobiography, there was already a long-established tradition of Varkari saints composing verse in the first person that shed light on their worldly circumstances. However, they can only be credited with autobiographical fragments, or episodes; none of them attempted a systematic account of their life stories, and as a result, Dhere fittingly accords Bahinabai's *Ātmacaritra* the title of the first autobiography in the Marathi language.

Although we cannot corroborate the events of the *Ātmacaritra*, Bahinabai's historicity is beyond dispute. Her descendents are alive today and they have built a temple in her honor. The only extant manuscript of the *Ātmacaritra* is in their possession. According to Shalini Javdekar (1979), this manuscript is likely to date from the early colonial era, i.e., the nineteenth century,

because of the nature of the paper used, but it may have been copied from an older version written by Bahinabai's son Vitthal, or even the saint herself. Bahinabai's corpus suggests that she was able to read and write, an unusual skill for women in the seventeenth century. In one of her *abhaṅg*s, for example, she mentions that she wished to "see" the complete *Jñāneśvarī*, and in the song he composed in praise of her, her son Vitthal asserts that "she read the *Jñāneśvarī* in her last days."[230] Thus, it is not implausible that Bahinabai may have written down her own *abhaṅg*s, and that this version was the source for the manuscript that we have today.

Unlike the *Booke* of Margery Kempe, which covers close to fifty years of the author's life, the temporal range of Bahinabai's *Ātmacaritra* is very circumscribed. The narrative begins with a brief account of her parents and her birth, and concludes when she becomes a young mother. According to the chronology of Bahinabai's life plotted by Javdekar, the autobiography approximately spans the years 1628-1649. However, it may be argued that Bahinabai's life narrative truly begins several centuries earlier, and concludes a few days prior to her death in 1700, for the only extant manuscript of her poems includes several *abhaṅg*s that describe her twelve previous births as well as others that supposedly record her instructions to her son a few days before her death. However, in the manuscript itself these *abhaṅg*s are not incorporated in the section titled *Ātmacaritra*, hence I will not treat of them here.

Before I provide my analysis of Bahinabai's story, it is important to delineate the social milieu in which she lived, for its constraints are central to the *Ātmacaritra*. Bahinabai was born into a Brahmin family in seventeenth-century western India. At the time, the dominant ideal for women of Bahinabai's class was that of the *pativratā* (literally "a woman whose vow is her

[230] For more on the manuscript history of the poems and the arguments in support of Bahinabai's literacy see Javdekar 50-57.

husband"). In her discussion of the *pativratā* as endorsed by Brahminical orthodoxy, Mandakranta Bose (2010) notes that towards the modern era, "the burden of wifely duty becomes increasingly heavier and its rewards, always in terms of reputation, and always to be gained in the next world, increasingly come to be contingent upon absolute and unquestioning service to the husband" (70). Law-givers as diverse as Manu and Yajnavalkya, in addition to religious texts like the *Padmapurāṇa*,[231] valorized the devoted wife or *pativratā*, assuring her of a secure place in heaven. Admittedly, a few texts, like the treatise of Yajnavalkya, question the propriety of a woman serving a husband who has committed a heinous crime, "but wifely submission is nevertheless a given of social and personal relations, to which women are allowed no alternative" (Bose 71).

The *pativratā* was enjoined to attend to her husband devotedly and to minister to his every need, for he was identified as her God. She was forbidden to undertake any spiritual discipline, for service to her husband was sufficient for her to secure the highest spiritual prize. The *Strīdharmapaddhati*[232] is unequivocal in this regard, asserting that women must avoid religious observances that include "recitation, austerities, going on pilgrimages, renunciation, the chanting of the mantras and the worship of deities" (Leslie 275). Bahinabai's family appears to have espoused the creed of the *pativratā* to the letter, for in some of her poems she agonizes over the fact that meditation and other aids to the spiritual life are denied to her: "[As a woman] I have no right to listen to the reading of the *Veda*s. The Brahmins have made a secret of the

[231] The dates of the treatises by Manu and Yajnavalkya are uncertain; estimates range from the 2nd century BCE to the 5th century CE or even later. Likewise the different sections of the *Padmapurāṇa* have been dated differently.
[232] This text was authored by Tryambakayajvan, an eighteenth-century pundit in the court of Thanjavur in South India. However, Tryambaka freely draws on older works in his own digest, and thus his text encapsulates the rules that Bahinabai would have been expected to follow as an upper-caste woman in the seventeenth century.

Gayatri mantra. I am told I must not pronounce the sacred word 'OM.' I must not listen to philosophical ideas. I must not speak to any one about them" (39).

The orthodoxy of Bahinabai's family also extended to matters of caste; her husband was a Brahmin who upheld the rules of Vedic ritualism, and took pride in his caste on account of the fact that Brahmins alone were authorized to undertake the taxing rituals of Vedic worship. Moreover, Bahinabai's husband did not encourage devotionalism, or *bhakti*, which was based on the belief that God was accessible through love, and to attain him one could dispense with the complex rituals of the Brahmin intermediary. *Bhakti*, as it was understood by the Varkari community to which Bahinabai's guru Tukaram belonged, encompassed all human beings irrespective of gender and caste; all living beings had the right to a spiritual praxis that would help them achieve God.

Bahinabai's narrative is cast in the *ovī* meter, which she probably employs because it was ubiquitous in Varkari literature; all the works by Varkari saints like Namdev and Tukaram were composed in *ovī*s. However, the verses of the *Ātmacaritra* lack the plenitude of metaphor and simile that makes the poetry of her guru Tukaram so compelling. Bahinabai's poetry is largely unadorned, and she makes very sparing use of images. The verses are austere, even stark; perhaps Bahinabai believed that her story was so powerful that it needed no embellishments.

Ātmacaritra: The Authority of Female Friends and Gurus

As we have seen, Bahinabai's life narrative was a pioneering work in that her predecessors had only composed autobiographical fragments or produced autobiographical moments. Not surprisingly, the very opening *abhaṅg* of the *Ātmacaritra* suggests that Bahinabai was uneasy about penning her life story, for such candid self-exposure was transgressive for

women. The first verse casts the work as an intimate conversation between female friends: "Friend, Devgav is my natal home."[233] The female narrator cannot be faulted, as she is engaging in a private conversation with her *sakhī*, an act of self-expression that was sanctioned by custom. Hence, Bahinabai's autobiography does not infringe the rules of proper womanly conduct. Moreover, the use of this trope also ensures that the veracity of the facts is asserted; the account, after all, purports to be a transcription of an intimate dialogue between a woman and her *sakhī*. In multiple genres that include the lyric and the epic, the *sakhī* is consistently represented as a faithful confidant of the heroine, and the choice of this figure as the addressee of Bahinabai's *Ātmacaritra* lends support to the truth claims of the narrative.

While the recourse to the *sakhī* may lessen Bahinabai's culpability in narrativizing her life, it simultaneously has the disquieting effect of gendering her readers female. The invocation of the *sakhī* offers two possible roles for readers of the *Ātmacaritra*, one of which is more congenial than the other. If they choose not to assume the role of Bahinabai's female addressee, the readers are eavesdroppers who are overhearing a conversation between intimate female friends. Alternatively, they can consent to be feminized by assuming the more agreeable persona of Bahinabai's female interlocutor, and respond to her account with the warm interest and affection that is always expected of the *sakhī*. Thus, the figure of the *sakhī* empowers Bahinabai to control the reception of her text: readers are manipulated into an attentive and sympathetic reading that will alert them to the subtext of the narrative.

It is significant that the *Ātmacaritra* also incorporates some of the formal devices of an oral narrative, which bolsters its claims to being a conversation between intimate friends. For

[233] देवगाव माझे माहेर साजणी।

instance, there is an occasional tendency to recapitulate past events, ostensibly to remind the listener about them and to underscore their relevance. For instance, after expatiating on the greatness of her guru Tukaram and his special relationship with Vitthal, Bahinabai sums up all the events that led to her vision of the saint: "(I have already related how) my husband had tied me up into a bundle, and beaten me, unable to endure my grief (for the calf). How also on the fourth day when I was on the point of dying, Vitthal performed a miracle" (21).[234]

Unlike Margery Kempe, who glosses over her childhood, Bahinabai explains the circumstances of her birth; this information also helps augment the truth claims of the work. Bahinabai opens her story with a description of her native village, Devgav, and is emphatic that it is an important site in the region's sacred geography: "Devgav was my own beautiful parental home. To the East of this place lies the town of Verul. At Devgav may be noticed a crowd of gods gathered together" (1-2).[235] The immense spiritual benefits to be garnered from a visit to Devgav help to affirm Bahinabai's sanctity, for she gains spiritual stature by her intimate association with it. She provides further proofs of her holiness in her account of her birth: her parents, who were childless, performed austerities before her father was told of her birth by a Brahmin in a dream. Bahinabai is also aware that her narrative unfolds in historical time, and tries to provide temporal markers for her readers. Thus, we are told that four years after her marriage her father fell out with his relatives; she is nine years of age when they make one of their last pilgrimage visits to the village of Singnapur. The temporal landmarks Bahinabai

[234] भ्रतारे टाकिले मोट बांधोनिया । न सोसी ते तया क्लेशावस्था ॥
चतुर्थ दिवशी जीव टाकियेला । विठ्ठले दाविला चमत्कारु ॥
[235] देवगाव माझे माहेर साजणी । वेरूळ तेथोनी पूर्व भागी ॥
देवांचा समूह सर्व जया ठायी । मिळालासे पाही देवगाव ॥

provides, as well as the wealth of concrete detail that is offered in the description of her place of birth and her parents lend greater veracity to her account.

Like all her Varkari predecessors male and female, Bahinabai foregrounds her devotion to her guru, for this constitutes her chief means of self-authorization. Her choice of guru was controversial in that Tukaram belonged to the low-ranking *śūdra* caste. Despite her guru's humble background, Bahinabai's relationship with him engages her so closely that Vitthal is only a secondary presence in her account. In her attempt to articulate her emotional attachment to Tukaram, Bahinabai provides a slew of images that evoke her love for him: "Just as a fish flops about when out of water, so I acted in my love for Tukoba…Just as a thirsty one loves water, so was I. Without him I was like a body without soul" (18).[236] Bahinabai's choice of images underscores the naturalness and the inevitability of her longing for her guru. She cannot be faulted for loving Tukaram because in her case it is almost a physical need; if she were to ignore it, she would lose her life.

As represented in the narrative, the harrowing trials Bahinabai must undergo on account of her devotion to her guru are both mental and physical. In the early stages of her devotion her husband is infuriated by her unseemly conduct both as a wife and as a Brahmin woman, and he brutalizes her, besides threatening to abandon her even though she is pregnant. However, Bahinabai continues to face impediments to her devotion even after her husband concedes the spiritual worth of Tukaram, for then both she and her husband are persecuted for having accepted

[236] मच्छ जैसा जळावांचोनी तडफडी । तैसीच आवडी तुकोबाची …
त्रिषितांसी जैसे आवडे जीवन । तैसा पिंड प्राणावीण तया ॥

a non-Brahmin as their guru. Consequently, Bahinabai is repeatedly compelled to demonstrate her loyalty to her guru against all odds.

In her defense of her spiritual vocation, Bahinabai also demonstrates that her experiences are not the product of a disordered imagination, but follow accepted models. Thus, her vision of Tukaram is similar to that experienced by a well-known religious preacher Jayaram Gosavi. At the very moment that Tukaram manifests before Gosavi, he also appears to Bahinabai: "To me also he gave a moment's vision of himself, and placed a morsel in my mouth" (23).[237] Thus, Bahinabai overrides objections to her spiritual aspirations by proving that her mystical experience follows a well-established pattern.

III.a The *Booke*: Beastly and Saintly Communities

In her attempt to establish a spiritual self, Margery receives assistance from multiple sources, including Christ, the saints, and diverse clerics. However, animals too make signal contributions, both at the very beginning and at the end of Margery's spiritual endeavors. The presence of animals in the *Booke* is not surprising, for animals feature prominently in literary works from the Western Middle ages, particularly in genres such as the fable and the bestiary.[238] They also appear in ecclesiastical writings, including sermons and treatises, and were a pervasive presence in the medieval imaginary. Indisputably, "the dominant medieval view of nonhuman creation, grounded on Genesis 1:28, held that humans maintained dominion over animals, considered theologically, legally, and practically as property" (Kienzle 103). At the same time,

[237] मजही दर्शन दिधले अळुमाळ । घातला कवळ मुखामाजी ॥

[238] For an overview of beast literature in medieval Europe see Ziolkowski, 1-14.

another school of thought, best represented by St. Francis of Assisi (1181/2-1226)[239] "held nonhuman creation in some esteem, and some later scholastic authors, ascribing [*sic*] to the Aristotelian and Pauline notion of the community of all creatures (Romans 8: 21), debated their presence in heaven" (Kienzle 103).[240] Margery's treatment of animals aligns her more closely with the position of figures like St. Francis because she supports a relationship of equivalence between human beings and non-human animals.

In the opening chapters of the *Booke*, we find that animals are instrumental in bringing about Margery's conversion. After her first vision of Christ, Margery cannot immediately renounce her old ways, and sets up a horse mill in pursuit of the mercantile ideal of "more." However, her attempt is thwarted when the horses refuse to draw. After the failure of her business, Margery is more sincere in her devotion to Christ, and not long after, her conversion is finally complete. The animals do not perform their allotted task of pulling the mill, but their lapse of duty compels Margery to recognize her real duty, which is devotion to God. The horses function as the agents of Christ, and push Margery from her mundane self to her spiritually-oriented self, which she accepts as her defining self. The animals are not presented as Margery's spiritual equals, but temporarily assume the role of divine instrument.

At the same time, animals are also deployed to signify the culmination of Margery's spiritual experiences, her *imitatio Christi* when she physically identifies with the suffering Christ on her visit to Mount Calvary. Margery asserts that if she saw "a man bett a childe befor hir, er

[239] For a balanced assessment of St. Francis's attitude to nature and its implications for Christian environmentalism see Roger Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, 1988.

[240] Michel Pastoreau (1999) argues that medieval Christianity was favorable to animals: "Antiquity, biblical, and Greco-Roman times neglected or scorned animals: the Christian Middle Ages placed them center stage" (qtd. in Kienzle 113).

smet an hors er another best wyth a whippe" (164)[241] she felt as though Christ himself had been beaten or wounded. Margery has attained the highest goal of affective meditation as defined by writers like Nicholas Love; she unceasingly participates in Christ's suffering during the Passion, and consequently, all beings, whether human or animal, generate thoughts of Christ. Furthermore, Margery's deployment of injured animals as signifiers of Christ may also have been shaped by her participation in the affective tradition; according to Lisa Kiser (2009), Margery's vision of Christ in the suffering horse was culturally determined insofar as several miracle plays, including the Towneley *Buffeting of Christ,* compare the suffering Christ to a horse or an ox (305-6).

Margery does not overtly assert the immanence of Christ, for she does not claim to see God in all beings, but only in those persons and non-human animals whose circumstances are analogous to those of Christ. Margery's enlarged vision is testimony of her complete identification with Christ's suffering, rather than evidence of Christ's all-pervasive nature. Irrespective of how we interpret the theological underpinnings of Margery's new vision, the narrative leaves us in no doubt that the divine/animal, human/animal binaries have begun to dissolve because all living beings are signifiers of Christ in equal measure. Moreover, by equating the human and animal response to physical pain, Margery also undermines the anthropocentric assumption that animals are only capable of reacting, while human beings are distinguished by their capacity to respond, in other words, only human beings manifest the capacity for language and deliberate thought on one's own life and the lives of others. Commenting on the human arrogation of response, Derrida (2002) states, "unable to respond, to

[241] "A man beat a child before her, or smite a horse or another beast with a whip."

respond with a response that could be precisely and rigorously distinguished from a reaction, the animal is without the right and power to 'respond' and hence without many other things that would be the property of man" (400). Margery implicitly denies the human prerogative to respond when she insists on the parity of suffering human beings and suffering animals. In addition, Margery blurs the boundaries between the living beings in her account and Christ himself when she asserts that the suffering of the one evokes the suffering of the other, implying that their experiences form part of a continuum.

After her conversion, Margery's father and husband are displaced by Christ, and it is he who constitutes the linchpin of her new identity. As I have already mentioned, Margery progressively assumes every conceivable feminine role in relation to Christ, which indicates her love for him has subsumed every other attachment she may have had. She can be Christ's mother, his sister, his daughter, and his wife, although such simultaneity of roles with regard to one person can have no correspondence in the mundane sphere. Margery's love for Christ is all-consuming and now she can define herself in relation to Christ alone; thus, she uses a web of familial relationships to gesture at her exalted spiritual state.

In her overt identification of saintly models, Margery demonstrates self-awareness about her mystical pursuits. In the preceding chapter, I have already touched upon her affinity for the maternal saint, typified in Bridget of Sweden. The saints Margery invokes exemplify diverse categories of female sanctity and include widows, virgin martyrs, and penitent prostitutes.[242]

[242] The *Booke* refers to Mary Magdalene repeatedly, and Margery even marvels at the Magdalene's placidity when the risen Christ forbids her from touching him: "yyf owr Lord had seyd to hir as he dede to Mary, hir thowt sche cowed nevyr a ben mery" (356). Liz McAvoy maintains that the allusions to the Magdalene enable Margery to "reconcile her own sexual history with a desired subjectivity as holy woman" (116). For more on her argument see *Authority and the Female Body*, 116-130.

However, we must not overlook the fact that "the mimesis of Christ is at the very center of Kempe's book" (Beckwith 76). Margery's literal identification with the figure of Christ, according to Sarah Beckwith (1993), reaches its climax when she visits Mount Calvary, where she screams and cries in the "very pose of crucifixion on Calvary" (77). For the most part, however, Margery's imitation of Christ is mental rather than physical and is manifested in "her willing assumption of suffering, and the way she functions as an object of scorn to those around her" (Beckwith 78). Like her model, Margery too is persecuted, although its source is not the Jews but fellow Christians who are either unwilling or unable to interpret her performance of female sanctity.

Another important source of inspiration for Margery, particularly in shaping her public persona, is the figure of the virgin martyr. Margery's insistence on her virginal status, along with her willingness to chastise members of the clergy for their lapses aligns her with the virgin-martyr, who was typically represented in hagiographic narratives as a woman who was unafraid to take on public roles, openly indicting powerful men for their misdemeanors. As Sarah Salih (2001) has argued, the virgin martyr who is Margery's primary inspiration is her namesake St. Margaret, followed by Katherine of Alexandria (195-198).[243] Both martyrs are present on the occasion of Margery's marriage to the Godhead, along with other saints and virgins, and we are explicitly told that St. Katherine occasionally instructs Margery: "[sumty]me Seynt Petyr,

[243] A virgin martyr, St. Margaret of Antioch was believed to have been martyred in the persecution of Diocletian. According to legend, Olybrius, governor of Antioch, sought to seduce or marry her, but she rejected his advances and declared that she was a Christian. She was tortured by the authorities and the devil, and according to some versions, was even swallowed by the devil in the form of a dragon, but it burst asunder when she crossed herself. For one of the most influential accounts of St Margaret's life in the later Middle Ages see Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend,* 368-370. St. Katherine of Alexandria supposedly lived in the fourth century and refused to marry the emperor because she was a bride of Christ. She confounded more than 50 philosophers who had been charged with convincing her of the errors of Christianity. She was tortured on the breaking wheel, and then beheaded. See Voragine, 720-727.

sumtyme Seynt Powyl, sumtym Seynt Kateryn, er what seynt in hevyn sche had devocyon to, aperyd to hir sowle" (115-116).[244] Margery adopts "the public, as well as the virginal, persona of the virgin martyr, standing trial for her religious identity and practice, preaching in public arenas, and embracing the humiliation and persecution that attend her spiritual vocation" (Sanok 122).

Margery's power of prescience, manifested in her encounters with her scribe among others, makes her a precursor of the *sante vive* or "living saints" of early modern Italy, who have been studied extensively by Gabriella Zarri (1996). The saints whose lives Zarri analyses, including well known figures like Colomba of Rieti (1467-1501), largely modelled themselves upon Catherine of Siena, who was known particularly for her "prophetic fervor and yearning for ecclesiastical renewal" (234). On account of their powers of prophecy, the "living saints" were frequently consulted by princes, "to whom they revealed state secrets and foretold future events concerning their persons" (241). Colomba, for example, advised the Baglioni and the Borgia.

The *Booke*: A Singular Self

Despite the abundance of holy exemplars in the *Booke*, Margery underlines her singularity and presents herself as unique in her spiritual accomplishments as well as her worldly situation. Thus, Christ assures her that she is one of very few women whose husbands do not impede their spiritual pursuits: "yyf thu knew how many wifys ther arn in this worlde that wolde lovyn me and servyn me ryth wel and dewly, yyf thei myght be as frely fro her husbondys as thu art fro thyn, thu woldist seyn that thu wer ryght meche beheldyn onto me" (375).[245] Christ is emphatic that the freedom Margery has been granted is extraordinary; innumerable women want

[244] "Sometimes St Peter, sometimes St Paul, sometimes St Katherine, or the saint in heaven she felt devotion for, appeared to her soul."

[245] "If you knew how many wives there are in this world that would like to love me and serve me well and dutifully if they were as free from their husbands as you are from yours, you would say that you were much beholden to me."

to be free of the demands of their husbands so that they can attain their spiritual goals, but she is the only woman on whom this favor has been bestowed. Margery enjoys a singular grace, and likewise, her achievements are singular.

As I have discussed in the preceding chapter, Margery compares her achievements with those of her spiritual predecessors, including Mary Magdalene and St. Bridget. She indicates where their experiences converge, but also does not hesitate to point out the unique features of her own experiences; in some respects Margery may even surpass her saintly models. However, she does not always make explicit assertions of her singularity; sometimes her departure from hagiographical conventions also functions to signal her uniqueness. We find an example of this strategy in the *Booke*'s treatment of the sexual temptations to which Margery was subject.

Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell (1982) contend that in contrast to male saints, women struggling with lust were all too ready to blame themselves: "women who described their own sexual problems did not often allow themselves the luxury of blaming them on the devil, perhaps being too deeply instilled with the prevalent notion that women were the lustful sex to think of shifting their responsibility to outside forces" (87). In contrast, the sexual fantasies to which Margery is occasionally susceptible are clearly effected through the agency of Christ, and she is exonerated from charges of lust. In the first of such episodes, Margery is plagued by lecherous thoughts not long after her conversion, which she attributes to God's attempts to punish her for her presumption: "Ower mercyful Lord Crist Jhesu, seyng this creaturys presumpcyon, sent hir … iii yer of greet temptacyon" (66).[246] As we see, Margery does not reproach herself for sexual desire but insists that it was Christ himself who subjected her to lust.

[246]"Our merciful Lord Jesus Christ, seeing this creature's presumption, sent her … three years of great temptation."

Her sexual travails do not end here; she endures another episode even when her spiritual career is well-advanced, although this lapse too is ultimately traced to Christ. Margery claims that on an occasion when she attributed her visions of the damned to the devil, and not to God, she was punished for her lack of faith with "many owyrs of fowle thowtys and fowle mendys of letchery and alle unclennes" (281).[247] Again, Margery denies responsibility for her moments of sexual weakness and reads the incident as a punishment devised by Christ for her greater good. We may argue that Margery's refusal to castigate herself springs from her patent lack of physical chastity, and her consequent attempt to redefine virginity as a mental condition. Since Margery's claims to virginity rest solely on her being mentally averse to sexual relations, it is only plausible that she should ascribe her moments of weakness to another source, and she accordingly makes Christ culpable. Regardless of the motives we read into Margery's denial of sexual weakness, it serves to set her apart from other women saints and to underscore her singularity.

Clearly, as represented in the *Booke*, Margery does not pose as Everywoman; the work may be intended as a testament to Christ's grace, but the self she fashions under Christ's guidance cannot be imitated by her readers. The closing prayer of the *Booke* reiterates the magnitude of her spiritual achievements, leaving readers with the image of a sanctity that is impossible for them to emulate. When the events of the *Booke* are concluded, Margery is in her hometown of Bishop's Lynn. We are told that she was admonished by her confessor, for she had left for the continent without his permission, but she managed to placate him due to divine grace. Spatially, the *Booke* comes full circle, because the narrative is terminated where it had started, the town of Lynn. Margery's return provides narrative closure insofar as it indicates the pattern

[247]"many hours of foul thoughts and foul recollections of lechery and all uncleanness"

of the remaining years of her life: she will live out the rest of her days in communion with God and also enjoy the respect of her confessor and others in the community. However, the *Booke* does not formally conclude with the mention of Margery's homecoming, but with a long prayer that she composed. The prayer is not generic, but bears the impress of an individual voice, for it encapsulates references to Margery's notorious outbursts: "As for my crying, my sobbyng, and my wepyng, Lord God almythy, as wistly as thu knowist what scornys, what schamys, what despitys, and what reprevys I have had therfor" (423).[248] Furthermore, the speaker also makes mention of "alle my childeryn, gostly and bodily" (425)[249] a reminder that Margery's motherhood cannot be confined to the mundane plane. Margery's worldly travails are also brought to mind when she pleads with God for the annihilation of her enemies "both gostly and bodily."[250] Evidently, the prayer touches upon important themes in the narrative, and is organically related to it.

In her prayer, Margery petitions Christ to bestow his mercy upon all, irrespective of class or religion and includes the Pope, the King of England, the Jews, Saracens, and all the heathens in her request. As Lynn Staley (1994) maintains, the prayer sets up Margery as a "singular figure of intercession" and she is privileged over "more obvious figures of authority and intercession" (180), such as her spiritual fathers. Thus, the final image of Margery as presented by the *Booke* is that of a supremely devout woman with a unique mission to fulfill, and we are assured that she is equal to the task.

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[248] "As for my crying, my sobbing and my weeping, Lord God almighty, as surely as you know what scorn, what shame, what contempt and what rebukes I have had on their account"
[249] "All my children spiritual and bodily"
[250] "Both spiritual and bodily."

III.b *Ātmacaritra*: Animal Friendships

Bahinabai provides ballast for her narrative through the temporal markers and geographical details in the text. However, her creation of a community in which non-human animals play seminal roles may well stretch the credulity of the modern reader. At the same time, Bahinabai is entirely orthodox when she enlists animals into the ranks of her supporters: several texts associated with the philosophical school of Advaita Vedanta, as well as works produced within the Varkari tradition itself insist on the oneness of human beings, animals, and the natural world, created and sustained as they all are by the Godhead. The Ś*vetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, for example, makes this identification of human and non-human in its characteristic poetic fashion: "Thou art the dark-blue bee; Thou art the green parrot with red eyes; Thou art the thunder-cloud, the seasons and the seas. Thou art beginningless and all-pervading. From Thee all the worlds are born" (trans. in Nikhilananda 108). Similarly, the sixteenth century Varkari saint Eknath marvels that God inhabits all bodies, no matter how lowly they may seem: "God even becomes a white hog" (trans. in Ranade 226). The animal-human divide is also bridged by the notion of reincarnation, which all the Varkari saints unequivocally affirmed: humans can be reborn as animals and conversely, human birth is attained only after having traversed the entire gamut of species, traditionally represented as eighty-four lakh in number. Furthermore, an animal features prominently in one of the most famous miracles associated with any Varkari saint, the recitation of the *Veda*s by a buffalo, engineered by Jnaneshvar to demonstrate his belief that animals are animated by the same soul as their human counterparts. Thus, Bahinabai's use of animals as characters is sanctioned by Varkari hagiography, and it securely anchors her to the community.

However, no text in the Advaitic or the Varkari tradition represents the bond between human and animal as powerfully, and as poignantly, as the *Ātmacaritra*. In the narrative animals function as catalysts of action; they enable us to assess the spiritual worth of the human protagonists, and they help the narrator understand the emotional and spiritual import of the events that have befallen her. Most importantly, the loving interaction between animals and Bahinabai as depicted in the text demonstrates the enduring nature of spiritual attachments and thus reinforces the saint's contention that even women require a spiritual praxis.

Bahinabai's bond with animals as presented in the *Ātmacaritra* is in stark contrast to the distant relationship she shares with her parents and her husband. According to the narrative, when her parents decide to give her in marriage as a child, "unexpectedly, as if directed by Fate, a near relative from Shiur turned up" (3).[251] At the same time, however, Bahinabai strikes a note of caution, indicating that her situation was not ideal: "It was his second marriage. He was thirty years of age" (3-4).[252] As the narrative will demonstrate, the incompatibility between husband and wife is not limited to matters of age; the former is a votary of Vedic ritualism and maintains that women are entitled only to worship their husbands, while Bahinabai believes that women are not disqualified from adopting a spiritual regimen.

When Bahinabai is eleven years old and staying in the city of Kolhapur with her family, their host Bahirambhat gifts them a cow and her calf.[253] Bahinabai tends to the calf, who becomes extraordinarily attached to her: "I was the only one to give it water and the only one to feed it with grass. Without me it was unhappy. When I went out to draw water, the calf would

[251] तव आकस्मात प्राक्तनासारिखा । शीऊराचा सखा एक आला ॥

[252] द्वितीय संबंधी वरुषा तिसाचा ।

[253] The gender of the calf is not identified in the narrative; it is simply *vatsa* or calf.

bawl aloud, and with its tail erect would follow me" (8-9).[254] The calf identifies so closely with Bahinabai that it even shares her spiritual interests: "As it listened to the reading of the *Purāṇa* it would sob with emotion" (9).[255] Bahinabai displaces the cow in the calf's affections, while the calf too gives her a love that is almost filial. Her husband does not appreciate her close ties with the animal, but suffers her behavior as he ascribes it to her gender: "My husband was of a fiery temper, and he did not like this, but finally his heart yielded to pity. Said he, 'Let it be. You have no child, and this calf is a plaything for your heart" (9-10).[256] Her husband endorses a biological determinism whereby Bahinabai's yearning for motherhood is natural and inevitable, and in the absence of a child, she must make do with the calf. His views work in Bahinabai's favor, and she is permitted to keep the calf with her.

The calf furthers Bahinabai's spiritual quest insofar as it is instrumental in bringing her to the notice of the man who is to be her first spiritual guide, Jayaram Gosavi. The latter is to perform *kīrtan*, and a large crowd assembles to hear him. Bahinabai attends along with her parents, brother and not surprisingly, her calf. Other members of the audience are irate: "There is not sufficient seating space for the people. Can an animal be a listener?" (11).[257] Bahinabai cries as her calf is dragged away, and Gosavi notices the commotion. When he is informed of the matter he has the calf brought in because he maintains that God is all-pervading and therefore resides even in the soul of the calf. Gosavi notices Bahinabai too and caresses both the calf and

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[254] पाणी मीच पाजी त्रिण घाली मीच । मजविण काच मनी वाहे ॥
मी जाय पाणीया ओरडे ते वत्स । गाय वाय पुच्छ सवे चाले ॥
[255] पुराणी ते फुंजे श्रवणकाळी ।
[256] भ्रतार रागीट नावडेची तया । परी त्यासी माया उपजली ॥
म्हणे असो तुज नाही मुलबाळ । हाची तुझा खेळ जाण मनी ॥
[257] स्थळ नाही बैसावया जना । पशू हे श्रवणा काय योग्य ॥

her, although this was unacceptable to the people since she was already married. Bahinabai and her calf prostrate at the feet of the Gosavi, an extraordinary occurrence that ensures that the girl is now a public figure.

The Gosavi ascribes the close bond between Bahinabai and the animals to a past association that was spiritual in nature. All three have been born with some spiritual merit, but Bahinabai's share is the greatest: "These three were unitedly engaged in the performance of religious rites during a former birth. Some hindrance prevented the completion of those rites. The cow and calf have been born as such because of their former good deeds" (15).[258] Spiritual bonds persist, in contrast to familial attachments, as is demonstrated by the fact that the cow and calf feel more deeply for Bahinabai than her husband or parents. In addition, the Gosavi's account also emphasizes that subjectivity, whether human or animal, is not shaped in a single lifetime, but cumulatively, over several births. The boundaries of the self are porous; animal and human, past and present, blend in its creation.

The ardor of the animals' love for Bahinabai is apparent when her husband punishes her for her "dereliction" of wifely duty. Enraged by Bahinabai's privileging of her guru over her husband and her choice of a low-caste guru, her husband beats her viciously. Her family members dare not protest openly: "My mother, father, and brother kept quiet, until my husband gradually restrained his rage" (13).[259] The cow and calf, however, are vocal in their support for

[258] म्हणती जयराम अनुष्ठानी तिघे । पूर्वीच्या प्रसंगे एकनिष्ठ ॥
अंतराय काही अनुष्ठानी राहिल्या । गायी या जन्मल्या पुण्यवेगे ॥
हे मुली संपूर्ण आहे अनुष्ठान । चित्त शुद्धि जाण ईस आहे ॥
[259] मायबाप बंधू बोलती न काही । भ्रतारे क्रोधही आवरिला ॥

Bahinabai: "the cow mourned aloud, and the calf also was in great distress" (13).[260] During this crisis, the animals replace the human members of Bahinabai's family in trying to speak up for her. Thus the saint presents a relational self that is closely aligned with non-human animals.

Bahinabai indicates that her husband beat her repeatedly, and her parents did not intervene on her behalf. Her true family, the cow and the calf, are more strident in their indictment of her husband's behavior. As she observes, "the cow and calf would eat no grass, nor drink water" (14)[261] as a gesture of protest. Like her English predecessor Margery Kempe, Bahinabai rejects the claim that responding is exclusively reserved for human beings while animals are granted the lesser ability of reacting; in her story, her animal companions do not merely "react" to events but give evidence of more insight and sensitivity than many of her human associates.

After the cow and calf refuse to eat, Bahinabai also abstains from food and drink. This gesture can be read in manifold ways: she asserts her kinship with the cow and calf, who have donned the mantle of her family. At the same time, it may constitute an attempt to wrest control of her own body and counter her husband's dominance over it. As Ruth Vanita (2005) comments, fasting is one of the few means of self-assertion available to Bahinabai as a woman: "Refusing to eat is a time-honored means of protest used by women in battles within the family" (300).[262] Gosavi hears of these events, and visits Bahinabai's house, where he reprimands her husband for his behavior: "Now do not distress her any more… You must possess some good

[260] नावरे मारिता गायही ओरडे । वत्स तेही रडे कासाविसी ॥

[261] तयावरी वत्स गाय दोघे जण । न खाती त्रिण जळासही ॥

[262] In the twentieth century, these "women's methods" of protest found a place in history because of the non-violent movements spearheaded by Gandhi; interestingly, "Gandhi acknowledged that he had learnt methods of non-violent protest, like fasting and refusing to speak, from his wife" (Vanita 300)

deed done in a former birth. By means of it you have become associated with her" (15).[263] According to Gosavi, the spiritual wellbeing of Bahinabai's husband derives from his wife, thus contesting the dogma that a woman who serves her husband as God is assured of salvation. Although Gosavi does not hold out renunciation as an option for Bahinabai, he unequivocally affirms that her husband is not an autonomous being who can attain his own salvation, but a spiritual dependent. In his exhortation to Bahinabai's husband, Gosavi is indisputably radical, if not revolutionary.

In a miracle reminiscent of Jnaneshvar's feat of having a buffalo recite the *Vedas*, Bahinabai's calf refuses to eat and dies after reciting part of a mantra. The death of this calf, who doubles as Bahinabai's mother and her child, precipitates her spiritual progress insofar as it grants her a vision of her guru. Bahinabai had been greatly attracted to Tukaram's verses despite not having met him: "Through listening to his verses in the *kathās*, I had already become devoted to Tukoba [Tukaram]. I felt that, if I ever met Tukoba, that moment would be like heaven" (18).[264] Distraught by the loss of the calf, Bahinabai is unconscious for four days, and it is during her illness that she has a vision of a Brahmin who exhorts her to awake. The Brahmin is none other than Tukaram, who assumes a maternal role, and in his capacity to feed, is likened to a cow: "Take this nectar from my hand. When a calf puts its mouth to the cow, a stream of milk flows. This is excellent nectar, drink it" (19).[265] The bovine reference, which evokes Bahinabai's faithful cow and calf for the reader, creates an intricate network of relations in the text. Tukaram,

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[263] तुझे पदरी काही पूर्वील सुकृत । तेणे ही सांगात प्राप्त जाली ॥

[264] तुकोबाचा छंद लागला मनासी । ऐकता पदांसी कथेमाजी ॥
तुकोबाची भेटी होईल तो क्षण । वैकुंठासमान होय मज ॥

[265] घेई अमृताशी हातीचिया …
गाय केले वत्स मुखी निघे धार । अमृत हे सार सेवी हेंची ॥

who is one with his deity Vitthal, is closely aligned with Bahinabai as her guru and spiritual mother, but is also linked with her cow and calf because of his fostering role. The cow and calf in turn represent the larger community of non-human animals. Again, human and animal are indissolubly joined.[266]

The calf does not disappear from the narrative with his death: he is so dear to Bahinabai that she even incorporates him into her exegetical framework. Thus, when she tries to convey the full import of the blessings her guru has bestowed on her, she takes resort to the *śloka* that the calf miraculously recited before it died: "The greatness of such a blessing is unlimited. It is what the calf declared in substance when it repeated the latter half of the Sanskrit *śloka*." (21).[267] Bahinabai is so pained by the untimely end of the calf that Tukaram makes the following assurance to her: "I have fed this nectar also to the calf… The calf is here with me, immortal, its soul partaking joyfully of the nectar" (21).[268] According to his promise, the calf is as secure of spiritual progress as Bahinabai, for it enjoys an unbroken association with Tukaram and has also been initiated into a mantra. Bahinabai insists on the calf as her spiritual equal even in her present life.

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[266] The nectar that Tukaram provides in the vision, as the narrative clarifies, is not nourishment for the body, but for the soul. He places his hand on his disciple's head, and whispers a mantra in her ear. The mantra will direct her to God and thus make Bahinabai immortal. Tukaram gives her a book in the vision, which she identifies as the *Mantra Gītā*. The fact that Bahinabai is gifted a book by her guru bears out Javdekar's contention that she could read and write.

[267] कृपेचा महिमा आहे तो अपार । वत्स बोले सार श्लोक-अर्ध ॥

[268] या वत्साते पाजिले अमृतु…
अमर ते वत्स आहे मजपासी । चित्त अमृतासी घेत गोडी ॥

IV.a The *Booke*: Maiden, Wife, Mother

As represented in the *Booke*, Margery is able to mobilize her dominant kinship identities of daughter, wife, and mother in the service of her spiritual journey. Her account of her life begins with a description of her marriage to John Kempe and the birth of her first child. Margery's childhood does not feature in her story, despite the elaborate treatment typically accorded to childhood in late medieval hagiographic narratives: "roughly between 1200 and 1500…childhood received a special emphasis in hagiography" (Weinstein and Bell 45). Furthermore, saintly children were predominantly female (Weinstein and Bell 45-47), and childhood was especially privileged in accounts of women saints. In contrast, when Margery makes her first appearance in the *Booke* she is "xx yer of age or sumdele mor" (52)."[269] In choosing to begin her story with her marriage rather than her childhood, Margery forcefully illustrates the fact that several ideals of femininity were in circulation in the late medieval world. As Cordelia Beattie (2005) asserts,

> In a society in which the Church held up virginity as the highest ideal, but marriage and motherhood—in addition to ensuring the continuation of family lines—were integral to households which managed working practices and were agents of government, it is likely that there would have been different articulations of ideal femininity. (162)

Indisputably, virgins ranked higher than widows and wives in the clerical schema of womanhood: "virginity earned the hundredfold reward of the parable of the sower, continent widowhood the sixtyfold, and chaste marriage only the thirtyfold" (Riddy 444). However, marriage was central to the feminine ideal endorsed by the elite, who strove for matrimonial

[269] "Twenty years of age or somewhat more."

alliances that would enhance the respective families' social status and ensure "the smooth transmission of property from one generation to the next" (Goldberg 423).[270] In denying her childhood a place in her story, Margery acknowledges the feminine trajectory favored by her class, whereby marriage and motherhood were valorized as the defining events of a woman's life. In the light of this schema, Margery's childhood is of secondary interest, and she accordingly ignores this phase of her life.

In opening her account with her marriage, Margery also occludes her experience of maidenhood, a distinct phase in the female life cycle that began with the onset of puberty and terminated with "consummated marriage or its expectation" (Phillips 4). Maidenhood was the very consummation of femininity insofar as it signified bodily perfection and the Virgin Mary was frequently depicted as a maiden during her bodily ascension and her coronation (Phillips 51). In omitting her experience as a maiden from her narrative, Margery dissociates herself from female beauty and sexual allure, perhaps to bolster the claims she will later make of her chastity of mind.

Another lacuna in the narrative strikes the modern reader: Margery's mother is absent from the *Booke* and does not find mention even once. Margery's exclusion of her mother from her story heightens by contrast the importance she accords her father, John Brunham. His centrality to her self-image was almost inevitable in a society where the figure of the father and the paternal line of descent was given precedence over the maternal. The father occupied an exalted place in medieval social discourse, as Isabel Davis (2004) observes: "Fathers and ideas

[270] For a concise description of marriage conventions among the upper classes as well as the peasantry, see Goldberg (2006). Goldberg argues that for men, marriage represented "social adulthood" (422), while for women, it "probably meant more in terms of reproduction and child-rearing" (422).

of fatherhood were central to medieval systems of authority. Fathers were expected to command their households and dependents rather as a head governs the subordinate body" (40). Elaborating on the importance of the father in the medieval world, Rachel Moss (2013) asserts:

> Late medieval English society placed great weight on the practices of primogeniture, patrilineal descent and patriarchal government. The language of political and social life was saturated with the language of fatherhood, whilst laws on inheritance privileged the father-son relationship. In purely legal terms, the identity of one's father was imperative. (184).

Margery's self-image is closely bound up with her father even after her marriage and she repeatedly makes mention of John Brunham and his position. Before her conversion, she invokes her father in order to feed her own vanity and to put her husband in his place. For instance, when John Kempe chides her for her love of sumptuous clothing, Margery replies sharply that "sche was comyn of worthy kenred-hym semyd nevyr for to a weddyd hir-for hir fadyr was sumtyme meyr of the town N. and sythyn he was alderman of the hey Gylde of the Trinyte in N." (57-8).[271] After her turn to Christ, Margery makes reference to her father primarily to silence her detractors and ease her spiritual tribulations. Thus, when she is interrogated by the Mayor of Leicester on suspicion of heresy, she identifies herself as the daughter of John Brunham of Bishop's Lynn "whech hath ben meyr fyve tymes of that worshepful burwgh" (229),[272] in the hope that her father's achievements will help allay suspicions against her. John Brunham was a prosperous and politically influential denizen of a world dominated by the mercantile ethic, and

[271] "She came of worthy folk-it was never fitting for him to have married her, for her father was sometime mayor of the town N. and he was later alderman of the High Guild of the Trinity in N."
[272] "Who has been five times mayor of that worshipful borough."

post-conversion, his name serves primarily to protect Margery from the hostile community. She thus chooses to associate herself with her natal family, and leverages her connection with John Brunham to facilitate her spiritual journey.

In contrast, Margery is not eager to foreground her position as a wife, and it is only with Christ's assistance that she finally succeeds in turning it into a spiritual advantage. As a married woman, it was near impossible for Margery to exclude her husband from her self-definition; her community of Lynn persisted in identifying her as a wife well after she managed to transact her chastity and rid herself of the marital debt.[273] Margery acknowledges her husband's virtues. For instance, she praises John for not having fully embraced the mercantile values that have resulted in her father John Brunham's wealth: "sche wold not be war be onys chastysyng, ne be content wyth the goodys that God had sent hire, as hir husbond was" (58).[274] At the same time, the text makes no attempt to gloss over John Kempe's reluctance to free Margery from the marital debt, and her great anguish on this account.

Margery is acutely aware of the clerical valorization of female chastity and of the spiritual hierarchy sanctioned by the Church. It is well known that late medieval Europe was more accommodating of married women saints than in previous eras; the canonization of Margery's near contemporary, Bridget of Sweden, declared in 1391, testifies to this new

[273] It has been argued that late medieval England witnessed a re-evaluation of secular marriage, whereby desire was granted legitimacy and marriage interpreted as a means to spiritual growth (Sanok, 2013 83). This positive assessment of marriage in writings like the early fifteenth-century *Storie of Asneth* was designed to make provision for the special needs of the mercantile class. The more favorable appraisal of marriage ensured that even a merchant could "achieve spiritual validation while remaining a member of mercantile society" (Ashley 374). While others in her community may have subscribed to this new project, Margery herself does not, for she consistently rejects sexual desire as evil and interprets her service to her ailing husband as fitting punishment for her former love of his body.

[274] "She would not be warned by one chastening experience, nor was she content with the possessions God had sent her, as her husband was."

tolerance. At the same time, it is significant that both Bridget's own writings and her vita are greatly concerned with explaining away the presumed incompatibility between "sexual activity and sacred power" (Atkinson 176). Christ himself feels compelled to justify Bridget's married state in some of his revelations, while Birger Gregersson, who authored the first *Life* of the saint around 1376, is anxious to demonstrate that Bridget served as moral exemplar even to virgins: "virgins learned from her most virtuous life how to rule themselves honestly and how to preserve their virginal cleanliness strongly to the death" (26). Powerful as they were, the arguments put forth by writers like Gregersson did not wholly undermine the desirability of virginity for prospective women saints. As André Vauchez (1988) notes, after 1330, "the fact that a woman had been married did not prevent her from achieving sainthood, but the notion of conjugal chastity lost ground, whilst virginity once again became the ideal norm of Christian perfection" (384).[275]

Margery makes no secret of the unworthiness she feels because she is not a virgin, but Christ reassures her, saying that wives are also dear to him: "trow thow rygth wel that I lofe wyfes also, and specyal tho wyfys whech wolden levyn chast, yyf thei mygtyn have her wyl" (131-32).[276] Christ is firm that an awareness of motives is important when evaluating actions: "I take non hede what a man hath ben, but I take hede what he wyl ben" (132).[277] Thus, wives who wish to stay chaste are as much entitled to his love as virgins. Christ does not dispute that virginity confers greater rewards than wifehood: "the state of maydenhode be mor parfyte and

[275] Vauchez notes that "at the process of St. Catharine of Siena, the Dominican Thomas Caffarini claimed that her cause was superior to that of St. Bridget of Sweden because the latter had been married" (Fn 507, p. 384).
[276] "Rest assured that I love wives also, and especially those wives who would live chastely if they might have their will."
[277] "I pay no heed to what a man has been, but I pay heed to what he will be."

more holy than the state of wedewhode, and the state of wedewhode mor parfyte than the state of wedlake" (132).[278] At the same time, he reconfigures virginity as a mental condition, a sincere wish for chastity, even if circumstances prevent its realization.

Although virginity understood as bodily integrity is no longer available to Margery, a wife and mother, she aspires for its closest substitute, a chaste marriage. In recent years this ideal had been espoused by Bridget of Sweden, who abstained from sex with her husband Ulf Gudmarsson during the first few years of their marriage: "for two years after their marriage they lived together virginally" (Gregersson 16).[279] Bridget was fortunate to secure the consent of her husband in this spiritual enterprise; without his permission, her aspirations for a chaste marriage could never have achieved fruition. Margery vividly describes the difficulties she had to undergo before she could obtain her freedom from the marital debt. John Kempe is patently unwilling to live chastely, and relents only after Margery has prayed to Christ long and hard for her wish to be granted. He agrees to give up his sexual rights over Margery provided she fulfills the following conditions: she must lie in the same bed as him, pay off his debts and give up her Friday fasts (ch 11). Christ directs Margery to accept these conditions, and she is finally free of the marital debt. Thus, John Kempe's cooperation is a pre-requisite for Margery to further her spiritual aspirations.[280]

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[278]"The state of maidenhood is more perfect and more holy than the state of widowhood, and the state of widowhood is more perfect than the state of wedlock."

[279] Dyan Elliott (1993) points out that women were more likely than men to initiate chastity in marriage; "very often a woman's struggle for spiritual marriage appears to be no less than a fight for physical autonomy and self-definition" (5).

[280] As I have already mentioned, Margery was familiar with St. Bridget and her achievements and refers to her in the *Booke*. The parallels between the lives of St. Bridget and Margery have been summed up by Atkinson, 168-179. Another married woman saint who probably influenced Margery, although the latter makes no mention of her, is Dorothy of Montau (1347-1394). Dorothy, who gave birth to nine children, fought for a chaste marriage and achieved it after much difficulty. Like her English counterpart, she too cried prodigiously and went on pilgrimage.

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, Margery's primary identity remains that of a married woman in her native town of Bishop's Lynn, despite her intense spiritual efforts. The tenacity of her marital identity is illustrated when her husband becomes paralyzed after a fall and needs care. As his wife, Margery is expected to minister to him; their pact of chastity does not absolve her of her wifely duties. Christ reassures her that in tending to her ailing husband she is tending to him. Margery complies with Christ's order, thus achieving a brief synthesis of her worldly and her spiritual duties and satisfying the demands of both society and God.

Likewise, Margery is able to turn her role as mother into an asset by figuring her spiritual role as a kind of mothering. Her motherhood and fourteen children possess an intractable facticity in her account, but at the same time, she does not dwell on her biological family; with the exception of her oldest son, her children get only a cursory mention. Despite this narrative lacuna, Margery does not deny her motherhood, but extends it to encompass those who are recipients of her spiritual care. As Liz McAvoy (2004) maintains, Margery's religious works can be interpreted as a continuation of her domestic duties: "Margery Kempe's worldly ministry, undertaken in fulfillment of Christ's will, can be regarded as merely a development of those motherhood activities…which she would have spent most of her domestic life as a mother undertaking in any case" (41). The duties of mothers as laid down by the medieval Church included "consoling, advising, praying for enemies, and patient suffering" (McAvoy 41), all of which are integral to Margery's religious ministry. A number of Margery's admirers explicitly identify her as their mother. Thus, when in Rome, a young German priest who is moved by her saintliness comes to regard her as his mother: "this preste receyved hir ful mekely and reverently,

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For the resemblances between the lives and writings of the two women and the possibility that Margery was familiar with the achievements of Dorothy, see Wallace, 77-122 and Atkinson, 179-181.

as for hys modyr and for hys syster" (186).[281] Likewise, Thomas Marchale, an admirer from Newcastle, addresses Margery as his mother (223).

In a notable episode that occurs in Book II, Margery's responsibility as spiritual mother converges with her duties as biological mother when she interacts with her oldest son. As recounted in the *Booke*, Margery is primarily concerned for his spiritual welfare, asking him to live a moral life and not to fall prey to lust: "I charge the, at my blissyng, kepe thi body klene at the lest fro womanys feleschep tyl thu take a wife aftyr the lawe of the Chirche. And yyf thu do not, I pray God chastise the and ponysch the therfor" (386).[282] Not long after, her son is afflicted by a disease that resembles leprosy, and some members of the community even appeal to Margery on his behalf: "sum persone ... cam to hys modyr, seying sche had done ryth evyl, for thorw hir prayer God had takyn veniawns on hir owyn childe" (386).[283] Despite social censure, Margery upholds her duties as spiritual mother by refusing to supplicate Christ for her son's health until her son himself admits his moral lapses, promising obedience to her and to God. It is only then that she intercedes for him, and as a result he is healed of his disease. Following his recovery, he becomes a devoted follower of his mother, who has granted him a new birth physically and spiritually.[284] Towards the close of her narrative, Margery's prayer underlines the

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[281] "This priest received her humbly and with reverence, as though she were his mother and his sister."

[282] "I order you, at my blessing, to keep your body pure, at least from women's company, until you take a wife according to the law of the Church. And if you do not, I pray to God to chastise you and to punish you for it."

[283] "Some people… came to his mother, saying that she had acted badly, for through her prayer God had taken vengeance on her own child."

[284] Margery's spiritual mothering of her son is reminiscent of the relationship between Bridget and her son Karl. Karl's great sin was to become the lover of Joanna, the evil queen of Naples, and as "punishment" he died in 1372, just before his mother's pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Bridget was tormented by anxiety over the state of his soul, but the Virgin Mary assured her that she had saved him. In the revelation describing the dispute over Karl's soul, the angel asserts that as the result of his mother's fervent prayers, all his venial sins have been forgiven. See *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, Vol. 3, 227-233.

synthesis of biological and spiritual motherhood that she has achieved, for she implores God to be merciful to her children in both spheres, "gostly and bodily" (424).[285]

IV.b *Ātmacaritra*: Subverting Wifely Devotion

Bahinabai's cow and calf represent spiritual companionship and its enduring nature, but for the first half of the narrative, her husband functions as the spokesman of Brahminical orthodoxy that denied women any access to conventional spiritual practices, reserving them for men alone. Bahinabai begins to get a great deal of public attention after her devotion to Tukaram becomes known, and her husband is infuriated by her trespass, albeit inadvertent, into the public space. According to the narrative, his anger mounts and he accuses his wife of transgressing multiple boundaries, primarily those of wifehood and Brahminhood. He is firm that as Brahmins, they cannot receive religious instruction from a man of a lower caste: "We are Brahmins. We should spend our time in the study of the *Veda*s. What is all this! The *śūdra* Tuka!" (23-4).[286] Moreover, devotion or *bhakti* is not intended for Brahmins: "Who cares for the feelings of *bhakti!* Let us always be found in the order of the religious mendicants" (24).[287] Bahinabai has infringed her duties as wife, not only by choosing her guru over her husband, but also because she has become a public figure and is accorded the respect that is rightfully her husband's: "they will discuss with this woman the meaning of the *kathās* [religious stories], but she herself will consider me a low fellow. The people make respectful enquiries about *her* while I, who am a

[285] "spiritual and bodily"

[286] आम्ही की ब्राह्मण । वेदाचे पठण सदा करू ॥
कैचा शूद्र तुका स्वप्नीचे दर्शनी ।

[287] कैची भाव भक्ती । भिक्षुकाचे पंक्ती वसो सदा ॥

Brahmin, have become a fool!" (24)[288] Bahinabai's husband determines to leave her despite the fact that she is three months pregnant.

A close reading of the narrative demonstrates that Bahinabai's description of her husband is markedly inconsistent and riven with contradictions. I do not interpret this portrayal as a result of artistic incompetence, a charge that is all too likely to be leveled against women authors;[289] instead, I maintain that it constitutes Bahinabai's attempt to critique her husband without blatantly violating the norms of good wifely conduct. The fissures in the text reveal her unwillingness to gloss over her husband's cruelty to her, despite having to resort to the hegemonic script of wifely submission.

Early in the narrative Bahinabai takes note of her husband's glorious lineage and lavishes praise on him, asserting that "he was an intelligent *purāṇik*,[290] an excellent jewel of a man" (3). Even the credentials of his family are emphatically beyond reproach: "My husband was of the high Gautam Gotra" (3). Bahinabai also expresses gratitude for all the help he rendered her parents after they were driven out of their native village: "my husband took us along in an honored way" (5). This overt appreciation of his fine character and virtues is undermined not long after, when she explicitly identifies his faults: "My husband was … a man of very angry disposition" (13). Moreover, Bahinabai spares us no details of the beating to which she was subjected by her husband after she had been inadvertently thrust into the public eye: "[My

[288]स्त्रियेशी बोलती अनुवाद कथेचा । आम्ही इसी नीचापारी वाटो ॥
पुसतची येती इसी पहा जन । आम्ही की ब्राह्मण मूर्ख जालो ॥

[289] Lynn Staley (1994) among others has taken note of this scholarly condescension towards women writers; in her study of Margery Kempe, she comments on "our inability to confront women writers as fully enfranchised by their art" (3). Critiquing the lackadaisical responses to texts authored by women, Staley trenchantly observes: "Kempe's first chapter, which describes Margery's early crisis of faith, is often written off to postpartum depression. In contrast, how often do we ascribe the melodies of *Go Down Moses* to *bourbon*?" (3).

[290] A man who recites religious texts.

husband] seized me by the braids of my hair, and beat me to his heart's content…All this happened to me when in my eleventh year" (13). The candid description of her husband's unreasonable conduct is immediately followed by the statement that she herself was a mere girl at the time, an admission which heightens the enormity of the violence against her. Bahinabai finally reveals her true assessment of her husband. Her praise for his virtues, which is utterly belied by his subsequent conduct, was dictated by social convention rather than genuine admiration.

Ātmacaritra: Strategic Assent

Bahinabai responds to her husband's anger and the difficult fate that awaits her as an abandoned wife by dutifully mouthing the creed of the *pativratā* even as she undermines it by demonstrating that women are coerced into accepting it. The multitude of rewards that are promised to dutiful wives and more importantly, the punishments decreed for renegade wives in this world and the next are designed to smoothly assimilate women into the cult of the *pativratā*. The lengthy passage that rehearses the promised rewards and the ordained punishments cannot be dismissed as an instance of authorial verbosity; in its very prolixity it renders fully the process whereby women are indoctrinated into servile wifehood.

Disturbed by the threat of abandonment, Bahinabai reflects on the incongruities of her position and fervently claims that she will embrace the role of the faithful wife: "My duty is to serve my husband, for he is God to me" (25).[291] Her husband himself is her real guru: "My husband is my means of salvation" (25).[292] In elucidating her relationship to her husband,

[291] भ्रताराची सेवा तोचि आम्हां देव ।

[292] सदगुरू भ्रतार साधन भ्रतार ।

Bahinabai presents the reader with a series of images: "Can the body attain to beauty when its life has left it? What is the night without the brightness of the moon? … My husband is the water in which I am the fish" (26).[293] These images are intended to recall those she had deployed earlier to delineate her relationship to her guru and suggest that her guru has been superseded by her husband. Like the previous set of images, these too emphasize the naturalness of Bahinabai's attachment, although they are now pointedly directed to a different person, her husband.

This long passage, which evokes Bahinabai's mental turmoil, illustrates to her readers the constructed nature of the *pativratā*; she is not born but made. Bahinabai rehearses the dire punishments that await the erring wife: "If I do not get to eat what is left on my husband's plate, I shall carry on my head sins of the weight of the three worlds. If my heart wanders from my husband, then my abode will be in hell" (26).[294] Through her long meditation on her "true" duties and the path to salvation, Bahinabai brings to the reader's notice the punitive rhetoric that undergirds the ideology of the *pativratā*. The ideal of the devoted wife has been erected on a foundation of fear, and by underscoring the violence inherent in it, Bahinabai makes a powerful plea against this iniquitous doctrine.

At the end of her long introspection on duty Bahinabai appears to speak in the accents of the dominant order by rejecting *bhakti* and all the values she had endorsed at the start of the narrative: "I shall find peace in my husband, and the final end to my succession of births and

[293] प्राणावीण देह काय पावे शोभा। रात्रीविण प्रभा चंद्राचिये ॥
भ्रतार जीवन मी मीन तयांत ।

[294] भ्रताराचे शेष न सापडे तरी । पापें माझ्या शिरी त्रैलोक्याची ॥
चित्त हे भ्रतारावीण जरी जाये । तरी वास होय नरकी आम्हा ॥

deaths" (27).[295] In addressing a broad audience, it was almost impossible for Bahinabai to publicly disown the ideology of the *pativratā;* however, this proclamation is framed by the horrific punishments ordained for the erring wife. The narrator's choice of husband over guru is clearly informed by fear. It is not presented as one that is well-reasoned or based on due deliberation or even love.

After having summed up the terrible fate of women who do not devote themselves to their husbands, Bahinabai ventriloquizes her husband, seemingly adopting the orthodox Brahminical position he identifies with to critique *bhakti* and all it entails: "Vitthal who is mere stone, and Tukaram of whom I have simply dreamed, why should I for *these* give up a sure happiness?" (26).[296] This statement is patently ironic, because Bahinabai has previously described how Tukaram appeared to the Gosavi as well as to her, emphasizing that he is no mere figment of her imagination but an objective reality. Therefore, in mouthing her husband's views, Bahinabai is exposing their absurdity, not endorsing them.

The events that follow Bahinabai's apparent rejection of her spiritual ideal also belie the beliefs regarding the *pativratā* that she has just rehearsed. Not long after her avowal of her wifely duties, her husband is stricken ill. She dutifully serves him, but for more than a month he is subjected to excruciating pain. There is no cure in sight, and he dramatically changes his attitude to his wife's spiritual practices, believing that his illness may be the consequence of his attitude to Tukaram: "If this pain is due to my having insulted Tukaram, then O Tukaram, you

[295] माझ्या जिवाची विश्रांती । भ्रतारे समाप्ती जन्ममृत्यु ॥

[296] पाषाण विठ्ठल स्वप्नातील तुका । प्रत्यक्ष कां सुखा अंतरावे ॥

who are honored in all the universe, perform now a miracle" (27).[297] After his prayers to Tukaram, Bahinabai's husband has a vision in which a Brahmin reprimands him for his conduct: "if you wish to live, accept her [your wife]. If she has conducted herself without regard to her duties, then only you might abandon her, you idiot!" (27-28).[298] After this experience, Bahinabai's husband accepts his wife's spiritual pursuits and is miraculously cured of his illness. The Brahmin who reprimands him insists that Bahinabai's spiritual interests are not a violation of her wifely duty. In having her husband suffer instead of her, Bahinabai indicates that a spiritual praxis is compatible with wifely responsibilities and hence she was not the object of divine anger.

The husband's miraculous recovery changes his perception of Bahinabai's spirituality, and he declares that henceforth they will live in Tukaram's town. Thus, Bahinabai's faith in her guru is vindicated. The entire family, along with their cow, proceeds to Dehu, where Tukaram was living. While in Dehu Bahinabai has to contend with Mambaji Gosavi, an orthodox Brahmin who wishes to have Bahinabai and her husband as his disciples. Infuriated with their choice of Tukaram for guru, Mambaji makes angry comments that are reminiscent of Bahinabai's husband in his pre-conversion days: "How can you find satisfaction through a dream? Until you have rendered service to a *guru*, and until a *sadguru* has placed his hand on your head, how can you claim to have a true *guru*? How can a *śūdra* possess knowledge?" (31).[299] Mambaji is firm in his

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[297] जरी तुकाराम निंदिला त्यागुणे । असेल दुखणे व्यथा मज ॥
तरी चमत्कार दाखवावा सध्या । जीवी विश्ववंद्या तुकारामा ॥

[298] वाचण्याची इच्छा असलिया मानसी । तरी तू इयेसी अंगिकारी ॥
स्वधर्माविरहित वर्तेल ही जरी । तरी तिचा करी त्याग वेडया ॥

[299] काय स्वप्नी समाधान ।
नाही गुरुसेवा घडली जोवरी । हस्तक हा शिरी सद्गुरूचा ॥

defense of orthodox Brahminical values and tries to have Bahinabai and her husband excommunicated from the Brahmin community because of their recalcitrance.

At this juncture, Bahinabai's surviving animal companion becomes the agent of a dramatic reversal in her fortunes, for the discrimination against the saint and her husband ends when Tukaram's greatness is revealed by his close kinship with her cow. As presented in the narrative, love for the cow and calf is an index of spiritual worth. Mambaji ties up Bahinabai's cow in his house and beats her with a club. The cow cannot be traced, but welts appear on Tukaram's back, who suffers excruciating pain. The cow even appears to him in a dream, and he implores God to rescue her. When the cow is finally traced, the villagers observe that the marks on Tukaram's back correspond with the marks on her body, and Tukaram's greatness is publicly acknowledged. His suffering proves his oneness with all creatures, and thus confirms that he is identical with Vitthal himself. Bahinabai uses the episode to assert her own oneness with Tukaram as guru, a digression that strengthens her credentials as a Varkari: "When Tukoba was earnestly pleading for help, I also had suddenly felt pain. I had the same feeling of sorrow as he. Vitthal is my witness to this" (35).[300] Through this incident, Bahinabai implies that the self does not merely exist in active conjunction with others, but that selves interpenetrate each other. In such a union, sex, age, caste and even species become irrelevant.

Bahinabai's story concludes with an event that was considered the very staple of womanhood in late medieval India, motherhood. Images of maternity proliferate in the text: the cow and calf play mother to Bahinabai; Tukaram "feeds" her and her calf, and as spiritual guide,

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तोवरी तो गुरु केला शुद्र । तोही बळिभद्र ज्ञानहीन ॥

[300] ऐसा तुकोबाने केला फार धावा । तंव माझ्या जीवा दुख झाले ॥
मजही तैसेची क्लेश झाले फार । साक्ष हे अंतर विठ्ठलाचे। ।

even the Gosavi takes on a quasi-maternal role: "He [the Gosavi] poured upon me a look of love, of affection, such as a mother would give" (23).[301] In the final verses of her account, Bahinabai refers to the birth of her first child, a daughter she names Kashi. This celebration of the birth of a daughter is unusual, for it is the mother-son bond that is paradigmatic in the Indian tradition. For instance, "the *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa* declares that the life of a woman who has no son is useless" (2.16), and Narada, author of a digest on law dated to the sixth century, explicitly says that "women are created to bring forth sons" (Bose 71). In defiance of scriptural pronouncements, the narrator of the *Ātmacaritra* rejoices in the birth of her daughter, thus undermining the importance of sons in the patriarchal family. Moreover, Bahinabai also presses the doctrine of reincarnation into her service to authorize women as spiritual subjects in defiance of Brahminical canons. As she concludes her story, she speculates that her daughter may be a reincarnation of her calf: "The calf died at Kolhapur, but it seemed to me as though it had received its birth through my womb" (36).[302] As the narrative has already stated, the calf itself was a reincarnation of her former spiritual companion whose gender is not identified. As it features in the narrative, reincarnation breaches the boundaries of gender and even species, for male spiritual aspirants may be reborn as animals and women. Consequently, gender identity, like species identity, is merely provisional; in the light of this truth, it is absurd to impose rigid rules based on gender divisions. Consequently, women are entitled to pursue a deity other than their husbands.

[301] मजवरी दृष्टी कृपेची ओतिली। प्रेमाची गुंतली माय जैसी ॥

[302] वत्स मेले कोल्हापुरी । तेचि आले उदरी ऐसे वाटे ॥

V Conclusion

The *Booke* and the *Ātmacaritra* are outstanding examples of autobiographies which privilege the spiritual self and accordingly plot the stories of their narrators' inner lives. In their study of women's autobiographies Anne Collett and Louise D'Arcens (2010) emphasize the importance of "unsociable sociability," a term which they trace to Kant and even further back to Montaigne. In their usage unsociable sociability denotes the "negotiation of the contrary forces of belonging and separation between the woman lifewriter and the social institutions surrounding her" (5). The juxtaposition of the *Booke* with the *Ātmacaritra* elucidates the nature of the relationships that each woman establishes with the surrounding communities and institutions. In other words, unsociable sociability is shaped differently in the two narratives: our final impression of Margery is that of a singular exemplar of holiness, while Bahinabai's journey to sainthood is defined by a series of dissolutions of the boundaries that isolate the self. Bahinabai's strength lies in her proclaimed oneness with Tukaram, for it represents the culmination of her love for him and legitimizes her as a Varkari saint. Margery, in contrast, suggests that her uniqueness is incontestable proof that she was a special recipient of Christ's grace.

Margery does not disdain communal affiliations altogether; on the contrary, she is insistent that her spiritual practices as described in the *Booke* have a long pedigree, for they derive from those of former women saints. However, her achievements differ from those of her predecessors in degree, if not in kind; Margery is unequivocal that she has managed to surpass the achievements of the Magdalene and St. Bridget, among others. The Margery who emerges from the narrative is not a saintly type, but a unique individual and a uniquely blessed individual

at that. As a singular object of divine grace, she is indeed a figure whose spiritual advice must be heeded.

Bahinabai, in contrast, consistently asserts her extraordinary intimacy with her guru Tukaram, which finally leads to the collapsing of her individual identity. In the early phase of their association, Bahinabai is his spiritual child, and she seeks his advice and his grace. Accordingly, Tukaram initiates her and rescues her from her husband's brutality by effecting a miraculous transformation. Towards the close of the narrative, Bahinabai experiences Tukaram's pain in her own person as welts appear on his back. Thus, Bahinabai has dissolved in her guru; she has ceased to exist as an individual.

These differences in the operations of unsociable sociability as they feature in the two life narratives point to the differences in the mystical ideals realized or upheld by the two women. Christ asserts Margery's presence in him, and states that she too exists in him; the boundaries between human and divine are blurred, but not completely erased. Margery is not annihilated as an individual, although she is not utterly distinct from Christ either. Thus, we may speculate that her mystical project underwrites her emphasis on the individuated self. The spiritual ideal Bahinabai aspired to was defined by Varkari saints like Jnaneshvar, who insisted on a union with the Godhead that was so intense that even the duality of devotee and deity would dissolve. As the *Jnāneśvarī* describes this mystical goal: "When one mirror is placed against another, the difference between the original and the image vanishes. When one mirror is placed before another, which reflects which?" (qtd. in Ranade 137). Consequently, it is not surprising that Bahinabai affirms the porous self that is open to other individuals. Her understanding of the self

is also shaped by her belief in reincarnation, for it allows her to assert that markers of identity like gender and species are provisional rather than fixed; the self is constantly made and remade.

In her spiritual quest Bahinabai aligns herself not only with Tukaram and saints like Gosavi, but also with a cow and a calf who belong to her family. Her recruitment of non-human animals for her story was enabled by the Varkari credo of the unity of all life, as well as the tenet of reincarnation. Bahinabai's bond with the animals is an enduring one: we are told that both cow and calf had been her former spiritual companions. The animals are not mere appendages to the tale, but important characters who thrust Bahinabai on the public stage and change the course of her life. Even as animals, their love for her is undiminished, for they register protest at her husband's ill-treatment of her even when her family members are silent. They constitute her surrogate family, and she draws upon them to interpret some of the seminal events in her life, such as her spiritual initiation and her experience of motherhood. The animals also function as a test of spiritual worth; the degree of love shown to them by the human protagonists is in direct proportion to their spiritual merit. Thus, Bahinabai's husband does not approve of her love for the calf, and the townspeople are annoyed that the animal is in their midst when they are pressed for seating space. Mambaji is overtly cruel to the cow and ties her up and beats her. In contrast, Bahinabai loves the calf as though it were her own child; Tukaram physically experiences the pain of the cow, while Gosavi is sensitive to the needs of the calf and will not have it expelled from the assembly.

Likewise, the attitude to animals is also a yardstick of spiritual accomplishment in Margery's *Booke*. In the early chapters, Margery does not report especial love or compassion for the animals she encounters, particularly the horses who are hired to work her mill. However,

after her bodily experience of the Passion on Mount Calvary, she sees the suffering Christ in every child who is beaten and every animal that is whipped. The suffering of human beings and animals is represented as equal, thus suggesting the spuriousness of the claim that response is exclusively human while animals are limited to reaction and therefore manifestly inferior.

Margery does not deploy non-human animals to make a statement about divine immanence for it is only the common factor of physical chastisement that triggers the thought of Christ; every person or animal she encounters does not recall Christ to her mind. However, she unquestionably dissolves the human/animal binary by asserting the parity of the human and the animal response to suffering. Furthermore, the deployment of a suffering animal as an index of the suffering Christ also suggests that she has minimized the distance between the bestial and the divine, even if she does not efface it completely.

Although both Bahinabai and Margery employ non-human animals as an index of spiritual achievement, a comparison of their texts underscores the greater diversity of functions animals serve in the *Ātmacaritra*. Bahinabai's animal protagonists enable both spiritual and social commentary. The story of the cow and calf permits her to argue about the provisional nature of gender and the inadequacy of worshipping the husband, thus making a case for women's spiritual rights.

The juxtaposition of the two life narratives allows us to identify the exact nature of the obstacles that each woman endeavors to surmount. Margery's account and the limited opportunities she is granted for spiritual development highlight the bleakness of Bahinabai's situation. In Margery's time a woman with a living husband did not have easy access to the nunnery and the anchorhold. However, Margery can still aspire to a chaste marriage, although

she requires her husband's permission. Moreover, she is eligible to practice affective meditation, although she cannot abandon her household duties. Bahinabai's difficulties are more acute; as a Brahmin woman, she was expected to worship and serve her husband as her god rather than adopt a conventional spiritual practice. The Varkari tradition did not offer her any easy models either; all the women who had attained positions of importance in the community were either unmarried, like Muktabai, or if they were married, had husbands who had guided their entry into the sect. In contrast, Bahinabai gravitates towards the sect although her husband is violently averse to it, and she must blaze a spiritual trail for him.

At the same time, Bahinabai's spiritual tribulations are eased by her milieu's indifference to female virginity, while Margery's difficulties are compounded by her loss of virginity. The preoccupation with female virginity that we find in the *Booke* emerges as a distinctive feature of medieval Christianity, for it is not shared by the Hindu tradition to which Bahinabai belongs. At no stage in her account does Bahinabai deplore or even refer to the fact that she is no longer a virgin. Margery, in contrast, agonizes over the matter, revisiting it multiple times and demanding reassurances from Christ.

Both Margery and Bahinabai try to effect a reconciliation of their wifely duties and their spiritual duties. Margery integrates the domestic with the spiritual through a change in her own attitude, while her Indian counterpart has her husband change his attitude. Having undertaken spiritual pursuits in her previous life, Bahinabai does not experience a spiritual conversion, or add significantly to her repertoire of spiritual skills. Her devotional tendencies are manifest when she is very young, and she simply needs to cultivate them.

As I have discussed at length, Margery cannot relinquish her identity as wife as long as her husband is alive. After she secures permission from her husband John to live chastely, she lives separately from him, but is still called to nurse him when he has a fall. Christ urges Margery to attend to her husband for two reasons: by serving him as though he were Christ himself, she will gain spiritual merit, and she should show her gratitude to him for having released her from the conjugal debt. In ministering to her husband, Margery ministers to God himself and her wifely duties and her spiritual duties thus converge. There is no suggestion in the *Booke* that Christ intends all wives to serve their husbands as though they were Christ; on the contrary, he insists that Margery was fortunate in having a husband who allowed her to pursue her spiritual ambitions. Christ's advice on the question of wifely responsibilities is proffered to Margery alone and is not intended as a credo for all married women.

Bahinabai's dilemma is distinct from that faced by Margery, for her gender and caste position precluded her from spiritual pursuits altogether. Throughout her narrative, she attempts to authorize women as spiritual subjects, insisting that worship of the husband alone will not suffice. Although Bahinabai does not openly reject the ideal of the devoted wife, she demonstrates how women are coerced into it, and thus she undermines it.

In her own life, Bahinabai is able to have her cake and eat it too, simultaneously serving God and husband, due to the grace shown to her by her guru Tukaram. As recounted in the narrative, Bahinabai and her husband reach an impasse; he cannot countenance her devotion to Tukaram and the public attention this brings her, so he determines to leave her to the care of her parents. Shortly after, Bahinabai's husband is visited by a severe illness, and Tukaram alone is able to save him. He is thus convinced of Tukaram's greatness and no longer opposes

Bahinabai's devotion, turning devotee himself. The solution Bahinabai offers to her dilemma is a *guru ex machina*: the guru intercedes, and a violent, obdurate husband is miraculously transformed into a supportive and sympathetic one. Thus, Bahinabai does not have to leave her husband and family, and she is also able to dedicate herself to God. However, what lesson can we extrapolate from her life for the average woman with spiritual ambitions? Would she always get assistance from her guru in making her husband amenable to her spiritual wishes? Bahinabai's case appears to be singular; it is difficult to extract a message for the ordinary woman from her extraordinary story.

In the accounts of both mystics, motherhood is far more amenable than wifehood to the realization of their spiritual ambitions. However, a comparison of the two narratives throws into relief Bahinabai's exclusive reliance on maternity to evoke all spiritual relationships. Margery figures her own spiritual duties as a kind of mothering; her public role is an extension of her biological role and not antithetical to it. She is addressed as mother by those who recognize her saintliness, and her responsibilities as spiritual mother come to the fore when she effects a change in the behavior of her wayward son. However, her preferred approach to Christ is as his daughter or as his spouse, although she also identifies herself as his mother and his sister.

In the *Ātmacaritra* Bahinabai relies solely on maternal images to describe spiritual relationships, whether they exist between the guru and his disciple, or between spiritual companions. Bahinabai represents both her spiritual mentors as her mothers; Tukaram feeds her nectar, while Gosavi gives her a loving glance characteristic of a mother. Her relationship with her calf, her spiritual associate from a previous life, also takes on maternal form. Thus,

Bahinabai's own experience of biological motherhood, which concludes her story, does not detract from her spiritual status; it only enhances it.

Conclusion: Strong Women

This dissertation engages with mystical texts from medieval England and medieval Maharashtra as sources for alternative constructions of the feminine. I have privileged three areas of inquiry: modes of self-authentication, the formulation of the divine and the treatment of the domestic. In my study of the texts, I have elucidated the socio-religious matrices in which they are embedded. Thus, I note that late medieval England made provision for women's spiritual needs, albeit with reservations. Virgins had a privileged place in the spiritual hierarchy adumbrated by the church, but other categories of women were not excluded. Widows in particular enjoyed opportunities for spiritual development and could join convents or become enclosed. However, married women were relegated to the spiritual margins for a multitude of reasons. Not only was a married woman likely to be sexually active and therefore less deserving of spiritual rewards, she also required her husband's permission to pursue any avenue for spiritual gain, whether this involved living chastely or joining a convent. In marked contrast, the Varkari mystics inhabited a milieu which did not advocate celibacy for women; celibacy was a predominantly male virtue. Brahminical texts were unequivocal that a woman's highest duty was to serve her husband. In fact, she was not to undertake any spiritual discipline at all, for devoted service to her husband was sufficient for salvation. As described in her narrative, Bahinabai's anguish at the injustice of Brahminical injunctions is more acute than that of either Muktabai or Janabai.

In my comparison of Muktabai and Julian, I find that the former proves her spiritual credentials by asserting her loyalty to her guru, a figure who combines the human and the divine in his person. Although human to all outward appearances, the guru can impart his spiritual

experiences to others and is thus equal to God. Unlike Muktabai, Julian does not rely on an individual as much as on doctrine; in the ST and LT she maintains that her revelations do not contradict the teachings of the church. We also find differences in the depiction of the deity; Muktabai favors the intangible Godhead, but Julian invokes a concrete deity possessed of a bodily form. Moreover, Christ's grievous wounds gender his body feminine insofar as the body that flows from them is aligned with female blood loss. However, both mystics insist on divine participation in the everyday world: Muktabai's God has become the world in all its myriad forms, while Christ has his abode in the body as well as in the soul.

As I compare Janabai's poems with Margery's *Booke*, I underline the diffuse nature of Margery's self-authorization, which can be partially traced to her gender. If Margery had modelled herself upon female predecessors like St. Bridget, she would have collaborated with her confessor to produce an account of her visionary experience. In his absence, she must cite the testimony of multiple witnesses to prove her sanctity. The distinguished list of Margery's admirers includes Christ, her scribe, and well-known clerics. Like the male and female members of her sect, Janabai derives her spiritual authority primarily from her guru, but she also secures the support of her scribe, who is none other than her deity Vitthal. Janabai casts Vitthal in diverse roles, including that of her female companion who undertakes household chores with her. When the deity is with Janabai, he forgoes his divine powers, allowing the saint to guide and instruct him. Margery's Christ is also not averse to domestic tasks, but we do not actually see him perform them. However, Margery herself undertakes domestic chores for God and his family, thus investing these tasks with a new dignity.

Finally, I have examined the positions of Margery and Bahinabai in relation to the feminine roles of wife and mother. Margery has limited opportunities to further her spiritual aspirations when she transacts a chaste marriage. In contrast, Bahinabai belonged to a socio-religious milieu that did not sanction spiritual pursuits for women. Consequently, she seeks to legitimize women as spiritual subjects by insisting that service to the husband is not an adequate spiritual praxis. Both Margery and Bahinabai succeed in welding together their wifely and spiritual duties, although they concede that all married women cannot adopt them as models. Furthermore, motherhood features prominently in the *Booke* as well as in the *Ātmacaritra*; Margery figures her spiritual duties as maternal, while Bahinabai describes all spiritual relationships as maternal in nature. In addition, both mystics question the human/animal divide and deploy animals as vehicles for spiritual and even social commentary.

As I have demonstrated, the mystics subvert rigid binaries based on gender and posit fluid boundaries between body and soul as well as mundane and spiritual. Thus, we can draw upon these texts to engage creatively with the model of feminine spirituality that has been articulated by Irigaray. Irigaray has written cogently not only on the gendering of the divine, but also on God's relationship with the micro- and the macrocosm, *i.e.*, the human body and the natural world, respectively. As I have previously stated, she has proposed the fashioning of a sensible transcendental in order to displace the masculine-paternalist deity. In addition, Irigaray has unambiguously declared that the feminine deity must be accessible through the female body if she is to be truly conducive to women's aspirations. In her study of yogic traditions, *Between East and West* (2002), she affirms the importance of breath training in producing women-oriented paradigms of spirituality. Societies that neglect or ignore the breath replace life with

speech, a lapse that inexorably leads to the devaluation of the feminine and a multitude of evils that include "unhealthy urbanization, the pollution of the universe, [and] submission to money" (53). The new spirituality traced by Irigaray recognizes that "the spiritual corresponds to an evolved, transmuted, transfigured corporeal" (63). Accordingly, it will encourage human rapprochement with the natural world and facilitate a spiritualization of the body through disciplines such as breath training.

Three of the five mystics I have analyzed show preference for a feminized deity; Janabai even goes so far as to transform her god into a woman. Julian and Bahinabai invest their deities with physical and mental attributes that were gendered feminine, such as nurturing and feeding. However, the deity's sexed body is fundamentally male, in contrast to Janabai's Vitthal. Indisputably, Janabai is the most innovative of the mystics with regard to the sex and gender identities of the deity: in her poems Vitthal's sexed body may be male or female, although (s)he typically undertakes chores that were the preserve of women.

None of the mystics under scrutiny comments on the natural world, but Margery and Bahinabai offer new paradigms for mapping the relationship between humans and animals, and even animals and the divine. Margery is insistent that the suffering of an animal or a child elicits an equivalent response from her because the pain inflicted on child and animal reminds her of the pain inflicted on Christ. Thus, she blurs the boundaries between human and animal and even animal and divine. Bahinabai is emphatic that animals are not the spiritual inferiors of human beings. She has her beloved calf initiated by her guru Tukaram and ensures that it too will secure his blessings and attain salvation. She also contemplates the possibility that her newborn daughter is a reincarnation of the calf, thereby asserting that species identity is only provisional.

Finally, all the mystics under study suggest diverse modalities for welding together the spiritual and the corporeal. In the texts concerned, the body emerges as a vehicle of the divine, or is exalted as an indispensable spiritual tool. In the *Revelations,* Julian harbors no doubt that God dwells in the sensual being as well as in the substance of humanity; consequently, the body is also a recipient of divine love. All bodily activities are mediated by the divine, irrespective of whether we admit this truth or not. Margery receives tokens of Christ's grace through various sensual experiences that include wondrous visions and exceedingly melodious sounds. Her boisterous tears constitute evidence of her spiritual achievements in that they spring from her compassion for Christ's suffering as well as that of the Virgin Mary. Muktabai also attests to the existence of the spiritual senses, and evokes a Self that is multimodal in nature. Janabai describes how her intimacy with Vitthal is mediated by her bodily activity; he assists her in the domestic tasks that she performs, such as grinding, sweeping and cleaning. Thus, her body facilitates her experience of Vitthal. Bahinabai presents bodily sensitivity as the index of spiritual progress: the saint becomes physically attuned to the sufferings of other creatures. In the *Ātmacaritra* we are told that Tukaram experiences the injuries of the cow in his own person, and welts appear on his back. Likewise, Bahinabai can feel Tukaram's pain as her devotion to him gathers strength.

I cannot conclude this project without a return to the very beginning: its title, which derives from the famous poem by Muktabai. Why do I liken the women mystics of my study to the intrepid ant who swallowed the sun? I was compelled to do so by their courage in formulating bold new ideals for women. Muktabai publicly rejected the sanctioned script of femininity by taking on the duties of a guru. Like Muktabai, Janabai too violated social expectations for women by not marrying. Moreover, she was disenfranchised by her lowly caste

position. However, Janabai affirms that her gender empowers her, for women have a superior capacity for love, the quality that attracts God more than proficiency in yogic exercises or intellectual speculation. Janabai's refusal to consider her gender a handicap manifests in the range of feminine personae she assumes, which include the respectable and the marginalized, the conventional and the radical. She proclaims herself a prostitute for God, speaks in the voice of a married woman who wants children and asks to be rid of all worldly relations so that she can dedicate herself to God.

The magnitude of Julian's achievements commands respect, for they straddle the literary and the theological. The first known woman writer in the English language, Julian made signal contributions to medieval theology. In the *Revelations* she reinterprets the relationship between God and humankind and between the human soul and human sensuality. Moreover, she counters the negative images of women that circulated in medieval clerical discourse by excising Eve from her parable of the Fall and decoupling human sensuality from its gendered associations. Julian severs the link between women and the fleshly, thereby disproving the charge that women were less rational, more carnal and consequently more susceptible to sin.

In contrast to Julian, the irrepressible Margery was encumbered with a husband most of her life and therefore had limited avenues for spiritual self-expression. As a married woman, she could take no step towards spiritual fulfillment without securing her husband's permission. Moreover, the public response to her spiritual efforts remained ambiguous; the citizens of Lynn insisted that she was wife to John Kempe, rather than to Christ. Margery repeatedly draws attention to her marginalized position through her conversations with Christ and the reassurance that she never ceases to require from him. In highlighting the perils of her situation as a married

woman, Margery registers protest at medieval Christianity's failure to address the spiritual needs of married women.

Like Margery, Bahinabai was also a married woman with a spiritual vocation. However, she had to surmount even more formidable obstacles insofar as her milieu did not even recognize women as spiritual subjects; her husband and family subscribed fully to the iniquitous doctrine of the *pativratā*. Bahinabai subverts the ideal of the devoted wife by exposing the violence on which it is based. Her demand for spiritual rights for women is a searing indictment of the conservative Brahminical ethos in which she lived and moved and had her being.

Thus, each of the mystics I study implicitly or explicitly challenged the strictures against women that operated in her time and place. All the five mystics either laid claim to roles that were designated for men, or offered new readings of the divine that privileged experiences which were commonly labelled feminine. Their courage and their willingness to infringe boundaries make them worthy companions of Muktabai's audacious ant.

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