

“Flourish like a Garden”:
Pain, Purgatory and Salvation in the Writing
of Medieval Religious Women

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Of the roote of Contricioun spryngeth a stalke
that bereth branches and leues of Confessioun,
and fruyt of Satisfacioun.¹

IN THE fifteenth-century female-authored text entitled *A Revelation of Purgatory*, its author, a Winchester recluse, describes a series of dream visions of a now-dead friend of hers named Margaret.² Margaret is a former nun, most likely of the nearby convent of Nunnaminster, who reveals to her friend in graphic detail the multifarious pains of Purgatory and her own torturous route towards the golden gates of Paradise. Her reason for appearing to the visionary is not only to seek her help to alleviate her pains, but also to mobilize a group of influential churchmen, part of the visionary’s own spiritual community, to say prayers on her behalf.³ Along with the souls of myriad other men and women, both religious and lay, Margaret suffers the most unspeakable torments for her former sins of pride, worldliness, and failure to undertake a promised

1. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Parson’s Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press), lines 118–11: 289.

2. *A Revelation of Purgatory by an Unknown Fifteenth-Century Woman Visionary*, ed. Marta Powell Harley. *Studies in Women and Religion* 18 (Lewiston, ME: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985).

3. For an account of the historically verifiable context to this text, see Harley’s introduction to her edition, especially pp. 22–40. Also particularly useful is the essay by Mary C. Erler, “‘A Revelation of Purgatory’ (1422): Reform and the Politics of Female Visions,” *Viator* 38, no. 1 (2007): 321–45, doi: 10.1484/J.VIATOR.2.302087.

pilgrimage to the shrine of the Virgin at nearby Southwick.⁴ However, since the recluse has already undertaken this pilgrimage on her friend's behalf—much to the Virgin's approval—in many ways, author and Virgin collaborate woman-to-woman in order to effect Margaret's ultimate delivery to the gates of the walled Paradise.⁵

Originating in a Winchester anchorhold in 1422, the complete version of this text is extant in two manuscripts, both so-called "miscellanies" containing works such as Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, assorted writings of Richard Rolle, particularly those aimed at the anchorite Margaret Kirkby, versions of Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, some medical texts, and a whole series of romance tales in prose and verse.⁶ Fragments of it also appear in a third, much smaller miscellany that also contains Love's *Mirror* and part of the romance tale *The Three Kings of Cologne*.⁷ *A Revelation* was written at a time in the early fifteenth century when writing by or about women from the Continent was beginning to make an impact in England in Middle English

4. Southwick priory, a house of Augustinian canons, was well known during the period for its shrine to the Virgin and appears to have been a renowned pilgrimage site during the fifteenth century. Henry VI married Margaret of Anjou there in 1445, and in 1510 Henry VIII stopped at Southwick to offer 6s 8p to the Virgin's shrine. See *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of Henry VIII 1509-1547* (London: HMSO, 1864), ii. 144d.

5. Harley, *Revelation*, 84. The documented incidences of female anchorites leaving their cells for such purposes are few. However, Ann K. Warren documents some of those who spent periods of time away from their cells (including this woman) in *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 158n53, 204, and 211n61. Likewise, Erler identifies the author of this as the same female anchorite who left her cell to visit her patron, Richard Beauchamp, in London in 1421 ("Revelation of Purgatory," 325). See also Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons*, 204.

6. The text is to be found in Longleat MS 29, ff. 155r-65v; Lincoln Cathedral Library MS 91, ff. 251r-258r; and Bodleian MS Eng. th. c. 58, ff. 10r-12v, the latter being merely fragmentary.

7. For a description of all three manuscripts and their contents, see Harley, *Revelation*, 41-58.

translation—works by or about Birgitta of Sweden (d. 1373), Catherine of Siena (d. 1380), Marie d’Oignies (d. 1213), Christina Mirabilis (d. 1224), Mechtild of Hackeborn (d. 1298), to name but a few—and the author is roughly contemporaneous with those two other fifteenth-century English women writers, Julian of Norwich (d. after 1416) and Margery Kempe (d. ca. 1440). The text, therefore, should be read in the context of a whole series of female-authored texts that concern themselves in no small measure with issues of purgation and spiritual transcendence, texts, moreover, that often draw concertedly (and sometimes unashamedly) upon what we might term a feminine hermeneutics and poetics in order to relay what are frequently very individualistic visions of the purgatorial process. However, unlike the writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, *A Revelation* seems rapidly to have escaped its initial audience of senior churchmen and spilled out into compilations aimed at the devout laity who, as Takami Matsuda has demonstrated, had developed what he calls “a pragmatic interest in . . . this system of postmortem penalties and for intercession on behalf of the souls in Purgatory.”⁸ In his analysis, Matsuda joins earlier scholars such as Jacques Le Goff and R. W. Southern in reading the doctrine of Purgatory and the texts it generated as part of a concertedly male genealogy, begun in the Old Testament and reaching its apotheosis in Dante, a tradition in which salvation is achieved in no uncertain terms through intense, graphically depicted punishment and its textual exegesis, produced not only as record and warning, but also to police and control.

While perfectly valid, this perspective does, however, fail to take into account that of Barbara Newman, who, in her 1995 book, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, argues convincingly for this masculinist genealogy as having “[left] half the story untold.”⁹ Moreover, as Newman goes on to argue, a surprising and hitherto neglected offshoot

8. Takami Matsuda, *Death and Purgatory in Middle English Didactic Poetry* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 2.

9. Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995). See especially chap. 4, “On the Threshold of the Dead: Purgatory, Hell and Religious Women,” 108-36.

of the interest in purgatorial piety is the witness of a significant group of visionary women who, in Newman's words "crossed the threshold into the beyond, but returned with a daring challenge to eternal hell."¹⁰ In this essay, therefore, I wish to continue Newman's investigation by focusing on the tradition as it manifested itself within the writing of a range of medieval women but also probing the implications of some of the alternative hermeneutics they tend to deploy in their writing. In particular, I will examine the ways in which their use of the poetics of the *hortus conclusus* provides another type of "daring challenge" to the masculinist discourse of punishment and heroic rescue that so imbricates those traditional notions of "salvation" that dominated the medieval religious imaginary.

The Garden of Origins and the Necrophilic Imaginary

In her work promoting a feminist philosophy of religion, Grace Jantzen has identified many of the masculinist metaphors apparently fundamental to the Christian imaginary, including heroic and self-sacrificial rescue from earthbound bodiliness, punishment of the female-associated flesh, and transcendence of the soul through suffering, all of which, for Jantzen, has ultimately led to "obsession with domination, mastery, and escape."¹¹ As Jantzen also argues:

[T]he crisis, the impending catastrophe from which one is saved, is precisely damnation to hell: this is where the rhetoric of salvation gets its grip, especially in the popular imagination. And once it is also accepted that "outside the Church there is no salvation," then not only is the authority of the Church absolute, but the metaphor of salvation as a theological model has obtained hegemonic status.¹²

10. *Ibid.*, 109.

11. Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 157.

12. *Ibid.*, 167.

Such “obsession” Jantzen terms the “necrophilic imaginary.” In its reciprocal relationship with the wider symbolic and social order, this imaginary seeks to deny and obliterate the foundational—and feminine—creativity of both maternity and natality, harnessing it instead in relentless pursuit of its own hegemonic status and producing in its wake a misogyny essential for maintaining the patriarchal status quo. In other words, the obsession with death, as built into Christian theology, denies the fundamentality of the natal and maternal to human existence—to the extent of having to produce a man—Adam—as the first mother and a *virgo intacta*—Mary—as the ideal mother.¹³ Within such an imaginary, the “real” mother, Eve, has to be harnessed to her own imperfect and fallen body through her initiation of original sin, live out her life in reproductive pain, and pass her legacy on to all future generations. Worldly natality and maternity, therefore, as deeply corporal, feminine, and earthbound, will always be suspect, dangerous, and symbolic of exile: in the words of the foundational narrative, Genesis:

And to Adam [God] said: Because thou hast hearkened to the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat, cursed is the earth in thy work; with labour and toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life.¹⁴

In punishment, therefore, for the abuse of Eden and for the man’s transgressing to the side of the woman, the pleasure garden in which

13. Genesis 2:22-23 famously reads: “[T]he Lord God built the rib which he took from Adam into a woman: and brought her to Adam. And Adam said: ‘This now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man.’” In some medieval iconographic depictions, Adam is represented literally as birthing Eve from the “wound” in his side, with obvious reference to Christ’s “birthing” of Ecclesia through his wounded side during the crucifixion. These two typological representations are sometimes brought together; see, for example, two of the roundels of the mid thirteenth-century *Bible moralisée* found in the Codex Vindobonensis (Vienna Codex) 2254, housed in the Austrian National Library (fig. 1).

14. Genesis 2:17.

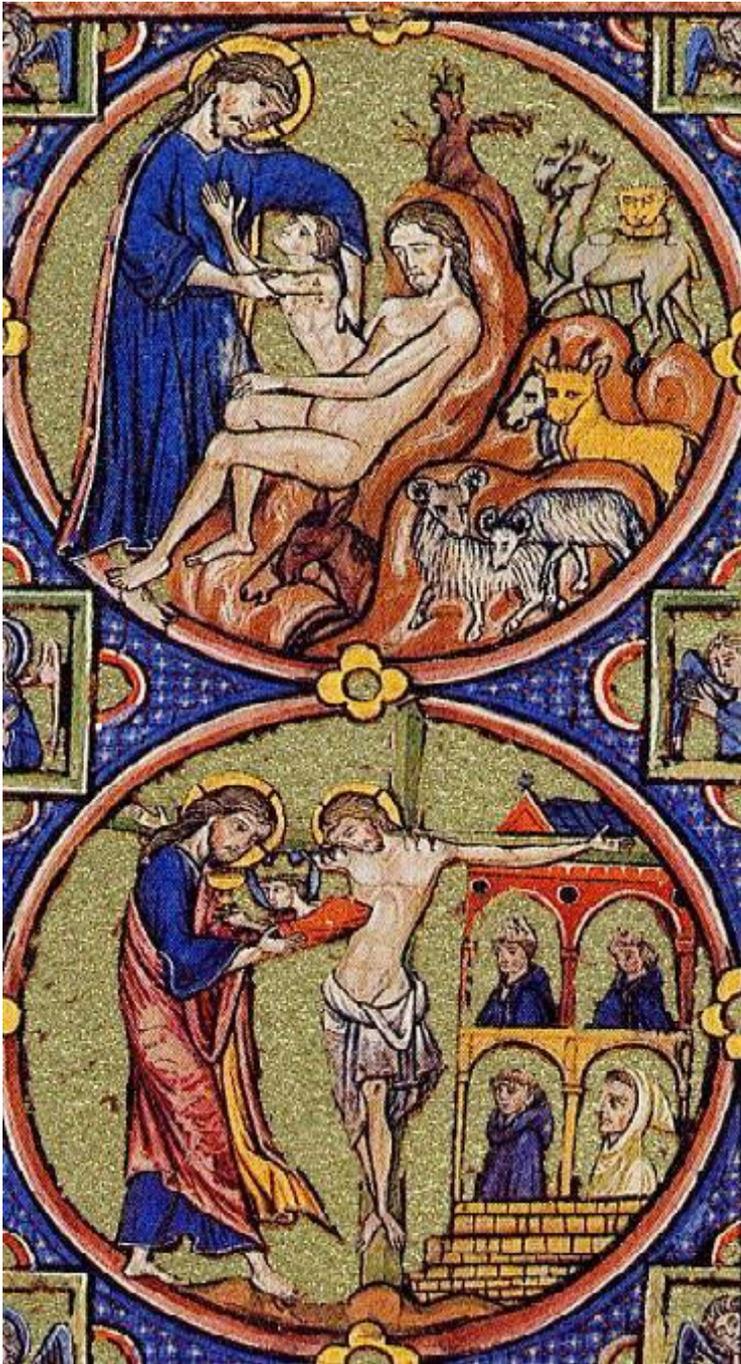


Fig. 1: ÖNB/Vienna Codex 2534 (c. 1225), f. 2v, "Genesis," *Bible moralisée*. By kind permission of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

Adam and Eve first flourished becomes forever out of bounds. Again according to Genesis:

[T]he Lord God sent him out of the paradise of pleasure, to till the earth from which he was taken. And he cast out Adam; and placed before the paradise of pleasure Cherubims, and a flaming sword, turning every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.¹⁵

Writing about the fundamental role played by this expulsion from Eden within the grand narrative of western intellectual thought, Hélène Cixous points out: “[T]he mystery of the stroke of the law is . . . staged here, absolute, verbal, invisible, negative.” Moreover, for Cixous, “This is where the series of ‘you-shall-not-enter’ begins.”¹⁶ Read in these terms, then, it is unsurprising that much of the necrophilic Christian imaginary is not only characterized by the striven-for atonement for Eve’s original sin by the infliction of physical pain, but, as I wish to argue here, it is also haunted by intense longing for a return to the lost maternal, represented by the phantasm of the vacated garden: the “place” of origins where the “tree of life” flourishes. Indeed, such a haunting by the loss of the garden is nowhere more poignantly represented than in the little known medieval Cornish drama *Gwreans an Bys* (Creation of the World), which forms the focus of Daisy Black’s essay in this issue. Here, on his dying father’s request, Seth returns to Eden for the oil of mercy, only to be stopped by an angel at the gates, through which he views the serpent hanging dry and lifeless from the branches of the Tree of Life.

The Overwritten Garden of the Song of Songs

The Edenic *bortus conclusus* thus constitutes a fundamental part of the necrophilic medieval religious imaginary, its feminine origins forming a spectral presence via its appropriated discourses of fecundity, maternity, and natality; as such, it accrues multiple layers of complex and interrelated significations during the course of the Middle Ages. As a

15. Genesis 2:23-24.

16. Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 151.

lost and forbidden realm, walled-in and now guarded by sword-bearing seraphim, the Garden of Eden everywhere returns as ghostly revenant within literary and religious texts, gaining currency, too, from its association with the lost, distorted, or overwritten erotics of desire everywhere apparent in the biblical Psalms or the Song of Songs, for example. Within the Song, the “bride” at its heart is both fecund and sexual equal of her lover, the “bridegroom,” who famously asserts: “My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up,” to which the bride eagerly responds: “Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat the fruit of his apple trees.” (4:12 and 5:1). According to Jantzen, the poetics of Eden and the fruitful garden of the lovers in the Song of Songs read as primary evidence of a dominant biblical hermeneutic of fecundity and “flourishing,” feminine in its natal and maternal implications but ultimately appropriated and overwritten by the necrophilic impulses of generations of both Jewish and Christian male exegetes.¹⁷ The Song, in particular, was subject to this process, its origins as secular love poem being ultimately subsumed into what E. Ann Matter terms “the forest of allegory” that constituted both Jewish and Christian readings of it.¹⁸ Thus, within the Christian imaginary, its heady poetics of sexuality, flourishing, and growth ceded to those of a self-sacrificial hero-husband-Christ giving birth, like Adam to Eve, to Mary-Mother-Ecclesia, through his wounded side.¹⁹

One of the most renowned exegeses of the Song during the later Middle Ages was that of the Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), who, in a series of sermons on the poem, recast it with great enthusiasm and some originality.²⁰ While clearly entranced by the images

17. For a still important study on the Song in western tradition, see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of my Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

18. *Ibid.*, 52.

19. Again, see fig. 1.

20. Bernard wrote two works of exegesis of the Song: *Brevis Commentario in Cantica*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J-P. Migne (Paris, 1844-45), 184: 407-36; and *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum* (the better known of his treatments), in *Sancti Bernardi Opera Omnia*, ed. J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, and H. M. Rochais, 2 vols. (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957-58). All

of flourishing, generation, and fecundity that saturate the poem, he consistently overwrites them with an inherited allegorical poetics that maneuver them neatly back into the thrall of the masculine necrophilic. For example, in sermon 85, taking as his text the extract from Song 3:1 in which the “bride” expresses her longing (“In my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loveth”), Bernard’s first reading of this is cast in terms of a homosocial and pugilistic militarism:

Fuge ad illum qui adversatur, per quem talis fias, cui jam adverte-
tur, ut blandiatur qui minabatur, et sit ad immutandum efficacior
infusa gratia, quam intensa ira.

(Flee to him who is your adversary, that through him you may no longer be his adversary, but that he who threatens you may caress you and may transform you by his outpoured grace more effectually than by his outraged anger.)²¹

Later in the sermon, however, he recasts the bride as the human soul yearning for God, articulating that yearning in terms of a heterosexual desire that overshadows even the love of a mother for her children:

Et quidem laeta in prole mater: sed in amplexibus sponsa laetior.
Cara pignora filorum: sed oscula plus delectant. Bonum est salvare
multos: excedere autem, et cum Verbo esse, multo jucundius.

(A mother is happy in her child; a bride is even happier in her
bridegroom’s embrace. The children are dear, they are the pledge
of his love, but his kisses give her greater pleasure. It is good to
save many souls, but there is far more pleasure in going aside to be
with the Word.)²²

references will be taken from this latter edition, with the modern English translations taken from Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, 4 vols, Cistercian Fathers Series (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1976), online at: <http://www.pathsoflove.com/bernard/songofsongs/contents.html>. Matter considers Bernard’s contribution to medieval understandings of the *Song* in *Voice of my Beloved*, 123-33.

21. Bernard, *Sermo* 85:1.

22. *Ibid.*, 85:13.

Elsewhere, too, as mentioned by Yoshikawa in the previous essay, Bernard leads the way in reading the ecclesial bride of the Song in terms of the Virgin Mary whose fruitful womb nourished the unborn Christ—the Word—and who, as obedient *sponsa Christi* and sealed-up *mater Christi*, received suitable reward in heaven by being crowned by her son as its queen. Commenting in Sermon 45 on the response of the bridegroom in Song 4:1 (“How beautiful art thou, my love, how beautiful art thou! Thy eyes are doves’ eyes”), Bernard explains it in terms of God’s love for the Virgin, prefiguring, too, the emerging epistemology of *fin’ amor* that would soon come to dominate both secular and devotional literary contexts from the twelfth century onwards: “et ideo concupivit Rex decorum ejus, quia humilitatem innocentiae sociavit” (“the king desired her loveliness because she joined humility to innocence”).²³ In this way, Bernard continues a tradition (what Matter identifies as a literary “genre”)²⁴ in which the flourishing of maternity and natality are subsumed into the hierarchies of the male symbolic order while still appearing to retain their cultural currency.

The appropriation of maternity within Christianity’s grand narrative is something that has concerned Julia Kristeva who, in her essay on the rise and power of the Virgin Mary within the western tradition, has astutely observed in this same context: “[B]oth [Mary and the Courtly Lady] embodied an absolute authority the more attractive because it appeared removed from paternal sternness.”²⁵ Continuing in this same vein, Kristeva argues that the rise of Mary merely constituted a way for the male imaginary to “overcome[s] the unthinkable of death by postulating maternal love in its place—in the place and the stead of death and thought.”²⁶ Here, as Kristeva demonstrates, the wheel turns full circle, with purer, nonthreatening forms of both maternity and natality being constructed to fill the void produced by the “lost garden.” This,

23. Bernard, *Sermo* 45:2. For an account of the rise of *fin’ amor* and the courtly lady, see James A. Shultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

24. Matter, *Voice of my Beloved*, 7–8.

25. Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 160–86, here at 170.

26. *Ibid.*, 176.

in turn, posits a maternal love that has to be kept well within acceptable paradigms, that is to say wholly removed from the taint of matriarchal dominance constructed on *actual* flesh-and-blood bodies. Indeed, like the maternal in Bernard's configuration, it must be a love that places the bridegroom above all things—even to the detriment of the mother's own children, necessitating Mary's child's becoming also her spouse. Again, in the words of Kristeva:

Every God, even including the God of the Word, relies on a mother Goddess. Christianity is perhaps also the last of the religions to have displayed in broad daylight the bipolar structure of belief: on the one hand, the difficult experience of the Word—a passion; on the other, the reassuring wrapping in the proverbial mirage of the mother—a love.²⁷

Thus, within the developing cult of Mary that Bernard's preoccupation prefigures, the enclosed and locked "garden" of Mary's womb became one of her most defining trademarks, reflecting perfectly the words of the Song 4:12 ("My sister, my spouse is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up"), and offering to a necrophilic imaginary, via that womb's most fruitful product, Christ, the hope of reclaiming the lost earthly paradise and, ultimately the heavenly city of Jerusalem.

The Realm of Necrophilic Purgation

Within this context, it becomes particularly significant that, alongside Mary's rise to cultic status from the twelfth century onwards, the doctrine of purgatory, presented by its male exegetes as a place of violent, aggressive, and unmitigated suffering of atonement, was also inexorably gaining momentum, eventually receiving ratification at the second Council of Lyon in 1274.²⁸ The role of such necrophilic cleansing of

27. Ibid.

28. On the rise of the cult of the Virgin Mary, see Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (St Ives: Allen Lane, 2009; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2010). Also useful are Marina Warner, *Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Vintage, 1983); and Teresa P. Reed, *Shadows of Mary: Reading the Virgin Mary in*

sins *post mortem* had been popularized initially by the widely read treatment of Gregory the Great (d. 604) in his *Dialogues*. In Book 4 of that work, Gregory documents the experiences of people swept up into the punishments of the next world, drawing on the biblical precedent of the destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah in Genesis 19:24 to do so:

[Q]uia enim amore illicito corruptibilis carnis arserant, simul incendio et foetore perierunt quatinus in poena sui cognoscerent quia aeternae morti foetoris sui se dilectatione tradidissent.

(Because they were consumed with carnal lust, they perished in fire and fumes; their punishment would make them realize that they had handed themselves over to eternal death by reveling in their own baseness.)²⁹

Elsewhere, Gregory explains how this works in practice, offering a number of eye-witness accounts of the afterlife from revenants to whom he or others have spoken. For example, on one occasion he tells how a man of high rank known to him named Stephen recounted how in hell he had seen former sinners swept into “niger adque caligosus foetoris intolerabilis nebulam exhalans fluuius decurrebat” (a river whose dark waters were covered by a mist of vapors that gave off unbearable stench.)³⁰ In this river, too, was a former acquaintance of Stephen’s “deorsum positum in locis teterrimis magno ferri pondere regulatum ac daepressum” (lying prone in the foul mire loaded down with heavy iron chains.)³¹

Such tales were taken up with enthusiasm by subsequent generations of commentators, with the agonizing punishment of dead souls

Medieval Texts (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003).

29. Gregory the Great, *Gregorii Magni Dialogi*, Libri IV, ed. Umberto Maricca. *Fonti per la storia d'Italia* 57 (Roma: Istituto Storico Italiano, 1924), 4.39, p. 291. The modern English translation is taken from *Saint Gregory the Great: Dialogues*, trans. Odo John Zimmerman O.S.B., *The Fathers of the Church* 39 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 4.39, p. 243. References to the translation parenthetical by page number.

30. Gregory, *Dialogues*, 4.37, p. 287 (239).

31. *Ibid.*, p. 288 (239).

becoming increasingly visceral, imaginative, and macabre. The growing popularity of such a concept was testified to in the English tradition, for example, by writers such as Bede (d. 735) in his account of Drythelm's vision of purgatory in the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*,³² and, later, in the widely read and translated *De Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, which documents the visit to purgatory of a man named Owain and attributed to the monk William of Saltrey in the twelfth century.³³ What is significant about all of these treatments, however, is that, amid the carnage and the mayhem of a system of punishment that needed to continually destroy in order to effect renewal, only to have that renewal destroyed once more in a seemingly endless cycle, the overwritten garden, with flourishing as its *raison d'être*, consistently haunts these texts at their margins; always in vision, it always remains tantalizingly out of reach, whether across a narrow bridge or else behind impenetrable walls. So, in the *Dialogues* of Gregory, Stephen's account of purgatory documents how:

Transacto autem ponte, amoena errant prata, adque virentia odoriferis herbarum floribus exornata, in quibus albatorum hominum conventicula esse videbantur; tantusque in loco eodem odor suavitatis inerat, ut ipsa suavitatis flagrantia illic deambulantes habitantesque satiarit.

32. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, 5.12. The Latin Library: <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/bede.html>, accessed 26.03.14. For the modern English translation, see Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 253-58.

33. William of Saltry, *De Purgatorio Sancti Patricii* in *The Espurgatoire Saint Patriz of Marie de France, with a Text of the Latin Original*, ed. Atkinson T. Jenkins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903), 235-327. The Anglo-Norman translation of the text by Marie de France follows the original Latin quite faithfully. The Middle English version that I make use of here, cited by line number in in-text parenthesis, dates from the fourteenth century but also follows the Latin original closely. See *Sir Owain*, ed. Edward E. Foster, in *Three Purgatory Poems* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), online at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/sofrm.htm>, accessed 2.04.14.

(Over the river was a bridge. It led to pleasant meadows beyond, covered by green grass and dotted with richly scented flowers. These meadows seemed to be the gathering places for people dressed in white robes. The fragrant odors pervading the region were a delight for all who lived there.)³⁴

Similarly, in Bede's account of Drythelm's vision, beyond a high wall bounding purgatory, Drythelm recalls:

Erantque in hoc campo innumera hominum albatorum conuenticula, sedesque plurimae agminum laetantium. . . . In cuius amoenitatem loci cum nos intraturos sperarem, repente ductor substitit; nec mora, gressum retorquens ipsa me, qua uenimus, uia reduxit.

(In this meadow there were innumerable bands of men in white robes and many companies of happy people sat around. . . . When I began to hope that we should enter this delightful place, my guide suddenly stood still; and turning round immediately, he led me back by the way we had come.)³⁵

The haunting by, and tantalizing loss of, the glimpsed Edenic garden is a theme also embraced in the popular *De purgatorio Sancti Patricii* and its cognates mentioned above. In one Middle English manifestation, for example, the spectral presence of the place of flourishing on the margins of the punitive is even more pronounced. As the knight Owain is delivered from his own hideous purgatorial torments, he crosses a narrow bridge leading into a garden fully reminiscent of Eden, but also cognizant of the garden of the Song of Songs:

Fair were her erbers with floures,
Rose and lili, divers colours,
Primrol and paruink,
Mint, fetherfoy, and eglentere,

34. Gregory, *Dialogues* 4.37, p. 287 (239).

35. Bede, *Historia*, 5.12 (253-58).

Colombin and mo ther were
Than ani man mai bithenke.
(lines 877-82)

Thereupon, Owain is reminded that, because he is a flesh-and-blood witness, a living interloper and a son of Adam, his time there is necessary restricted and transient, although he is filled with desire never to have to leave that realm of homecoming:

Him thought wele with that foules song
He might wele live theramong
Til the worldes ende.
Ther he seighe that tre of liif
Wharthurth that Adam and his wiif
To Helle gun wende.
(lines 871-76)

Here, Owain laments his own exile, reminded by his vision of the tree of life that this homecoming is always just out of reach, an exile intensified by his role as representative of sinful humanity. As Owain's purgatorial guide makes clear:

“The child that was yborn tonight,
Er the soule be hider ydight,
The pain schal overflé.
Strong and hevi is it than,
Here to com the old man,
That long in sinne hath be.”
(lines 997-1002)

Here, issues of necrophilic punishment and atonement are clearly an old man's problem; whereas the embodied natality of the baby “yborn tonight” allows for its speedy return to its origins in the garden of the earthly paradise—and without impediment—the man, Owain, remains earthbound and haunted by the garden's as yet unreachable possibilities.

The lost garden, therefore, is never far away within the male-authored

purgatorial text, haunting its hermeneutic margins and providing fleeting imaginary access to a homecoming within which flourishing rather than self-sacrificial salvation prevails. In Kristevan terms, such haunting offers a glimpse of the lost semiotic of the *chora*, a space before and beyond separation from the mother, before and beyond entry into the male symbolic order.³⁶ For Luce Irigaray too, in her work tracing the exile inherent to western logic, this haunting is “the mystery [that] remains and calls to him . . . of the loss of his power, in particular of his power to fecundate.”³⁷ For Irigaray, man’s multiple losses have, therefore, to be compensated for in his construction of an all-encompassing imaginary in which punishment, salvation, and a returning “home” to a male God in the garden constitute the ultimate goal.

Women and the Model of Flourishing

With this in mind, the treatment of these themes in female-authored purgatorial writings are frequently startlingly different in tone and content. Here we find what Jantzen has identified as “the model of flourishing” adopted and often rendered mainstream in the writing of women from the twelfth century onwards, a model that is less one of haunting and more one of rootedness. Indeed, Jantzen’s calls for contemporary theologians to unpick the dominant necrophilia within the Christian imaginary by engaging with a theology of flourishing would do well to consider those medieval women whose writings do *just that*. For the remainder of this essay, therefore, I will turn to the model prevalent in medieval women’s writings on purgatory and, in particular, the rather different functions of the *hortus conclusus*, in which flourishing takes center stage, rather than haunting its margins.

Perhaps the most renowned use of the discourse of flourishing is to be found in the writing of Hildegard of Bingen (d.1179), whose central

36. Julia Kristeva provides an overview of the *chora* in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 25-30.

37. Luce Irigaray, *In the Beginning, She Was* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 94.

concept of *viriditas* [greenness] permeates her prolific body of writing.³⁸ For Hildegard, a contemporary of Bernard of Clairvaux, the central principle of divinity was that of fresh growth and energetic fecundity flowing from the godhead into mankind, a conception that leads her to minimize the issue of original sin in her discussion of Eden as the original *hortus conclusus* and produce a much more literal reading of it. For example, in Book 2 of her visionary text *Scivias*, Hildegard claims, “Evam innocentem . . . omnem multitudinem humani generis in suo omen gestans” (Eve with her innocent spirit, taken from the innocent Adam and pregnant with the whole multitude of mankind in her body, [was] shining in the foreordination of God).³⁹ Additionally, in spite of the betrayal of the Fall, Hildegard tells us that, upon the expulsion of Adam and Eve: “lucidissimus splendor eadem regionem circumdedit; quoniam illis ob transgressionem suam locum amoenitatis exeuntibus . . . eum ita sua claritate munivit, ne amodo ulla contrarietate tangeretur” (a very bright splendor filled the same region [which is] strengthened with God’s own brightness in order that it might not be touched by any opposition again).⁴⁰ As a result, for Hildegard:

38. For a detailed discussion of Hildegard’s writing and spirituality, see Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987; repr. 1989). See also Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998).

39. All references to Hildegard’s *Scivias* will be taken from *Hildegardis Scivias*, ed. Adelgundis Führkötter, Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis 43/43a (Turnhout: Brepols, 1978), cited by part, vision, and chapter. The translations are taken from Bruce Hozeski, *Hildegard von Bingen’s Mystical Visions* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1986; repr. 1995), except where indicated. The page numbers to Hozeski’s translation will appear in parentheses after the reference to the Latin edition. For this quotation see *Scivias* 1.2.10. The modern English translation of this quotation appears in Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, contradicting significantly the translation by Hozeski in *Mystical Visions*, 18, that reads as if it is Adam who is pregnant. Hildegard’s accompanying image of Eve as a cloud of stars being born from Adam’s side has evidently suggested this reading of the Latin to Hozeski.

40. *Scivias* 1.2:26 (19).

[P]aradisus est locus amoenitatis, qui floret, in viriditate florum, et herbarum, et deliciis omnium aromatum, repletus optimis odoribus, dotatusque in gaudio beatarum animarum, dans fertillissimam fecunditatem aridae terrae, qui fortissimam vim terrae tribuit, velut anoma omen vires praebet, quoniam paradisus in umbra et in perditione peccatorum non obscuratur.

([P]aradise is a place of pleasantness, which blooms with the greenness of flowers and herbs and is full of delightful aromas. It is filled with the best aromas—that is richly endowed with the joy of blessed souls. It gives a very strong sap to the dry earth because it has given its very strong strength to the earth, just as the soul holds out strength to the body. That paradise is not darkened with shade—that is, with the destruction of sins.)⁴¹

Here, the *viriditas* and “brightness” of a flourishing fecundity, associated primarily with Eve as “pregnant with the whole multitude of mankind,” is a process that, for Hildegard, “ostendens etiam quod transgressio illa quae in eo facta fuerat quandoque clementer et misericorditer abolenda esset” (shows that the sinning which had taken place there at some time or other, should be destroyed both mildly and mercifully),⁴² reinstating growth and endless renewal in place of punishment and hard-line justice. Moreover, the purgatorial arena of punishment and hard-line paternalistic justice is, for Hildegard, entirely overshadowed—as opposed to overshadowed—by the flourishing of the maternal garden. The garden is thus a place that welcomes the sinful who “tandem absolutionem vinculorum suorum, sentiunt ad requiem ereptae pervenientes” (will be released from their chains, coming and creeping finally to their resting place).⁴³

Viriditas is a concept that Hildegard uses in many other contexts too, particularly in her depiction of feminine power.⁴⁴ Mary, for example,

41. Ibid., 1.2. 28 (19–20).

42. Ibid., 1.2.26 (19).

43. Ibid., 1.2.7 (16–17).

44. For an account of her use of ‘greening’ in the context of her medical works, see Victoria Sweet, “Hildegard of Bingen and the Greening of Medieval Medicine”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 73.3 (1999): 381–403.

is “viridissima virga” (the greenest virgin/spray), in whom everything blossoms and through whom all will be brought “in veriditate plena” (to full greenness) when the time is right.⁴⁵ Drawing heavily on the Song of Songs, her references to spiritual motherhood, nursing, and child-birth everywhere abound, but, as Newman has rightly pointed out, her treatment of these themes differs greatly from that of Bernard of Clairvaux, who often tended to idealize, sentimentalize—fetishize, even—the images of natality and breast-feeding developed from the Song. On the contrary, Hildegard deploys *viriditas* and the hermeneutics of flourishing with which it is fundamentally associated in terms of what Newman calls “the vehemence and cosmic force of Ecclesia’s preaching,” as well as in terms of tenderness and mercy.⁴⁶ Indeed, Hildegard sees herself as ventriloquist for the power of natality as imbricated within mother church; and, as Newman also points out, as visionary, she is also herself *materna viriditas*, full of a “maternal vigor”⁴⁷ ventriloquizing the Word of God, which “supra montes clamavit, ut colles et ligna se declinant ac mamillas illius sugerent” (rings out above the mountains that the hills and the woods might bow to suck her breasts).⁴⁸

It is in her direct critique of contemporary clerics, however, that Hildegard most effectively uses this discourse and register, castigating them for their refusal to use their *own* breasts to nurse God’s children and berating them for their self-seeking and self-reflective identification as *milites Christi* swept up in the combative politics of the day.⁴⁹ For

45. “O viridissima virga,” edited from *Symphonia armonia celestium revelationum* by Newman and reproduced in the appendix to *Sister of Wisdom*, 277.

46. Newman, *From Virile Woman*, 233.

47. Hildegard, Epistola 34, ed. J. B. Pitra, *Analecta sacra spicilegio solesmensi*. vol. 8: *Hildegardis Opera*, (Paris, 1882), 520.

48. *Hildegard von Bingen: Lieder [Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum]*, ed. Pudentiana Barth, M-I. Ritscher, and Joseph Schmidt-Görg (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1969), 75, 159, and 294. This is quoted in translation by Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 233.

49. “Nam et ubera, ad nutriendum parvulos meos, eis data sunt, quae ipsis recto et congruenti tempore non praebent, unde sicut peregrini filii fame multi defecerunt, quoniam recta doctrina non reficiuntur.” Hildegard, Epistola 48, *PL* 197, 249b.

Hildegard, the flourishing, nurturing *viriditas* of God is also a quality poured into Ecclesia but, instead of being emulated by his servants in the Church, it is being overwritten by their internal rivalries, power structures, and negligence. Again ventriloquizing the Word as *materna viriditas*, she castigates them for the practice of dedicating child oblates to God before they have reached the age of reason, drawing on hermeneutics of flourishing and fecundity in order to do so:

Viridem agrum in potestate mea habui; nunquid, o homo, dedi tibi illum, et eum germinare faceres quemcunque fructum tu ipse velles. Et si in illum semen semines, an potes illum in fructum producere? Non. Nam tu nec rorem das, nec pluviam producis, nec humiditatem in viriditate tribuis, nec calorem in ardore solis educis; per quae omnia competens fructus producendus est. . . . Et quomodo audebas delicatum et sanctificatum mihi in baptismo tam temere tangere ut absque voluntate sua.

(I hold the green land in my power. I never gave that power to you, did I, O person, so that you might make it grow whatever fruit you pick? And if you sow seed in that land, you are not able, are you, to bring that seed forth into fruitfulness? No. For you do not bring forth the dew, nor send forth the rain, nor allot the moisture in the greenness of the land. You do not give the warmth of the burning sun which, working with the moisture, brings forth the fruitfulness of the land. . . . So, how do you dare to send one who has been dedicated and sanctified to the religious life without the consent of his or her will?)⁵⁰

In effect, here Hildegard is protesting at the colonizing and ultimate defacing of natality and flourishing by those who should be its very protectors, pointing towards an early feminist awareness of the type of overwriting by a necrophilic imaginary that has proved to be of such concern to Jantzen, Kristeva, and Irigaray in our own day.

A theology of flourishing, as Yoshikawa also suggests her contribution to this issue, is also very much to the forefront of another

50. *Scivias*, 2.5.45-46 (121).

female-authored mystical text: The *Liber specialis gratiae*, written by the German visionary, Mechtild of Hackeborn (d. ca. 1299) at the convent of Helfta in Germany during the thirteenth century.⁵¹ Like Hildegard, Mechtild had entered the religious life at a very young age, remaining enclosed at Helfta until her death in or around 1299, and, also like Hildegard, she shows both confidence and authority in her writing, with very little consideration of the constraints of sex or gender shown by other women writers of the period. The *Liber*, which recounts many years of exceptionally vivid visionary encounters with God, the Virgin, saints, angels, and the afterlife, was recorded secretly in Latin by Mechtild's sister nuns, comprising seven books in its entirety. Very soon after being written down, however, it was reduced to five books, and it is this truncated version that made its way to England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, being translated into Middle English and circulated widely at some time during the early decades of the fifteenth century. The current absence of a printed critical edition of the Middle English text is all the more extraordinary in light of the fact that Mechtild's *Booke* clearly chimed with—possibly even had an influence upon—literary expressions of fifteenth-century female religiosity in England, such as *A Revelation of Purgatory*, with which I began this essay and that I discuss further below.⁵²

The Booke of Gostlye Grace is extant in two versions, both of which

51. Curiously, there is still no readily accessible recent edition of the Latin text, although Barbara Newman is currently preparing a modern English translation for Paulist Press. The Middle English translation that I make use of here dates from the fifteenth century and has been edited only on microfiche: see *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn*, ed. Theresa A. Halligan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1979). However, I have recently embarked upon a critical edition with Anne Mouron and Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa. For a summary of the Latin and Middle English versions of this text, along with an account of its production and circulation, see Halligan (ed.), *Booke*, Introduction, 1-59. All references will be to this microfiche edition.

52. A close examination of this possible influence is beyond the scope of this present essay but will be the subject of further examination as part of a wider project on Mechtild's work.

follow closely the Latin original and, along with a good many other witnesses to the original work, have clear Syon Abbey or Sheen connections, with many more linked to the Carthusian order more widely.⁵³ Indeed, the surviving catalogue of Syon Abbey library lists three early sixteenth-century printed copies and four in manuscript form, with one of this latter group being a copy in the Middle English vernacular.⁵⁴ Additionally, the version in BL, MS Egerton 2006, was owned by Cecily, Duchess of York (d. 1495), mother of Richard III (whose name, albeit not his signature, is written in a contemporary hand on the first flyleaf).⁵⁵

It is clear, therefore, that Mechtild's book enjoyed much popularity in early fifteenth-century England, no doubt as part of the renewed appetite for works by or about Continental visionary holy women, predicated in part on the founding of Syon Abbey in 1415. Renewed concerns about Purgatory and the reciprocity between the living and the dead during this period of reform were, no doubt, also behind the *Booke's* resurgence in popularity. Mechtild's many eschatological visions, including one entire book devoted to her perception of suffering souls, would have spoken cogently to contemporary audiences concerned about their own passage through Purgatory and that of others. Mechtild, however, is far less interested than her male precursors in documenting in exhaustive detail the torments of suffering souls in her own account. What *does* concern her are the ethics and meanings attached to that suffering and how that suffering may or may not cohere with the teachings of Holy Church. For example, on one occasion, Mechtild takes issue with the Church's teaching on the souls of unbaptized children by means of a vision in which a maternal intervention is key. In this vision, the soul of a baby girl appears to her in the form of a young woman. Promised to God by her mother even before her birth, she tells of how she had died unbaptized at the age of two months. This young soul appears

53. See Halligan's discussion of the extant manuscripts in her introduction to the *Booke*, 1-14.

54. Halligan, *Booke*, 51.

55. *Ibid.*, *Booke*, 4. The other manuscript containing the Middle English translation is Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 220.

to Mechtild dressed in bright red clothing, a color, of course, more often representative of female sinfulness and frequently attributed to the clothing of Mary Magdalene. For this young soul, however, as she explicitly explains to Mechtild, “This rede clothyng betokene þat of nature,” prefiguring by some nine hundred years Irigaray’s configuration of woman’s “natural body” (as opposed to her “cultural body”) in terms of “red blood.” For Irigaray, the “red blood” of maternal inheritance has traditionally been subsumed into a representative function within a male symbolic order and thus it “has no price, as such, in the social order.”⁵⁶ On this occasion, however, the redness of nature is presented as a divine gift and symbol of flourishing because of her own mother’s devotion to her and because, as the soul pronounces, “I was luffynge my god.”⁵⁷ Not only that, but, upon this profession, Christ himself intervenes to refute the damnation of the souls of unbaptized infants, asserting instead:

Ande als a modere 3iffe sche behete a gostelye vowe of crystiante for a childe 3if itt happe þan þat the childe dye, 3itt schalle the childe be saffede be the vowe. Ry3tte so in thys case I take the hole wille of þe modere for þe dede so þat alle þe goodnessys in here desyre whiche sche willed to here childe I wille þat þay be rewardede in the childe ande þat the childe haffe the meritte for the moderes wille . . . for clerkes holdene þe contrarye opynyoun.⁵⁸

Again, a mother’s steadfast love for her child speaks directly to Christ, prioritizing the maternal and the natal over a necrophilic dogma of inflexible punishment and damnation. Indeed, such a critique of the masculinist perspective is confirmed by Christ in the same interchange when he tells Mechtild that he took the child to himself because: “here ffader wolde haffe adnulled here moders vowe and wolde haffe kepte

56. Luce Irigaray, “Women on the Market,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 799–811, 808.

57. Halligan, *Booke*, 566.

58. Halligan, *Booke*, 567. Christ’s last statement here is clearly a translator’s interpolation, since s/he also adds, “for I trowe the furste wrytere mysvunderstode.”

here styll in the world.”⁵⁹ For this soul to flourish, both in life and in death, the mother’s position on the side of “red blood” was clearly key. As Jantzen reminds us: “The metaphor of flourishing [leads] instead to an idea of the divine source and ground.”⁶⁰

It should come as no surprise, then, that Mechtild’s purgatorial visions are mollified by images of flourishing: fertile groves, tree-covered mountains, and fields of fragrant flowers encroach onto the realm of smoke and brimstone in ways that are integral to, rather than haunting the margins of the text. In one particular vision, for example, Christ appears to her in clothing of green and white, of which he explains: “by the grene coloure es betokened the fresche greenesse wharebye I floreschede euere in my lyffe.”⁶¹ Moreover, such flourishing forms part of an eschatological schema within which this feminized Christ, dressed in green and bedecked all about with flowers in the garden, placates a vengeful Father with his own “red blood”: “I am he whiche haffe sawhtelde the wrath of my fadere in hevene, and which haffe reconsylede man to God in myne blode.”⁶²

Soon afterwards Mechtild sees Christ sitting with the saints in a hilly garden availing themselves of the fruit of the tree of mercy:

[S]he sawe oure [lorde] sittynge in ane hille fulle of flowres to here semyng. . . . The mownt or the hille was hegghe abowte with wele fayre trees growynge fulle of frewte, ande vndere the trees restede sawlys of sayntys. Eche of þame hadde a tent of golde ande þay ete the frewte with grete gosteyley lykyng. . . . Þaye that folowede hym [Christ] moste ande floreshede in werkes of mercye, thay hadde þare refeccioun of the tree of mercye.⁶³

Not only do the multitudes of saints receive their reward for their own earthly flourishing but also Christ associates himself with a greenness that has the ability to pacify the necrophilic tendencies of the

59. Ibid.

60. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 161, 164.

61. Halligan, *Booke*, 119-20.

62. Halligan, *Booke*, 121.

63. Ibid., 122-23.

Father—the same greenness that Hildegard associated with the Virgin and an image that anticipates standard iconographic depictions of Mary in—and *as*—the *hortus conclusus* from the thirteenth century onwards. Thus, Mechtild lays down a challenge to traditional depictions of Purgatory as the ultimate horror zone. In her writing, the overwhelming power of the restored pleasure garden renders Purgatory a place of potential where souls can prepare to flourish and grow, shape themselves ready for a garden that is both accessible and democratic, rather than the unbeating heart of a merely punitive imaginary. The garden into which Mechtild's purgatory leads—and of which it always has a view—is ultimately the nurturing space of homecoming where a soul may be healed and may flourish.

In many ways, the author of the fifteenth-century text *A Revelation of Purgatory* lays down a similar challenge in her writing and, as suggested above, displays evidence of having been influenced by a wide range of purgatorial writings, both male- and female-authored, that precede her—and, quite possibly, by Mechtild's *Booke*.⁶⁴ As mentioned, *A Revelation* tells how its author experienced a dream-vision of Purgatory's torments over the course of three nights as endured by the soul of a dead friend named Margaret. During her torment, which in many ways is initially graphic and uncompromising, Margaret is decked out with a gown made of sharp, red-hot hooks and wears a crown of tar and pitch on her head.⁶⁵ At other times, devils pull out her lips, tongue, and heart with sharp pincers. Her punishments are soon superseded, however, by those of sinful priests who are put to hang up on gibbets by means of razors attached to their mouths; and irresponsible and sinful prelates are scalped by devils also wielding razors while burning adders are thrust through their ears.⁶⁶ No punishment is too excessive for the miscreant former churchmen because:

64. Some of those influences include Saint Birgitta's *Revelations*; *The Gast of Guy*; *St Patrick's Purgatory*; and *The Pricke of Conscience*, to name but a few. On this see Erler, "A Revelation," 335-44.

65. *A Revelation*, 66.

66. *Ibid.*, 70 and 71.

[Þay] spake þer-with of lechery and broȝt many wommen to þat sin and out of har goode lyvyngē—both nunes, wyfes, ankeresses, sengle wommen and maydenesse, and many wommen þat neuer wold haue done þat syn.⁶⁷

Here, in spite of the graphic nature of her description of these grotesque punishments, the author subtly turns the necrophilic imaginary back on itself, using it to critique the hegemony of priestly privilege and its overwriting (in this case verbal and lecherous seduction) of women whose spirituality—“goode lyvyngē”—they were supposed to be nurturing. Following Hildegard and Mechtild, therefore, the author identifies the misused or mistaken pronouncements of authoritative churchmen (in this case, their “foule, sclaudryngē words”) as having prevented the coming to fruition of the inherently “good” women in their care.⁶⁸

But this critique has another purpose in the text: having first reminded her readers of the punishments for renegeing on priestly responsibilities—especially their pastoral duties towards women—the visionary proceeds to mobilize, upon Margaret’s express instruction, six named churchmen of both local and national influence to pray for her friend’s quick release from Purgatory.⁶⁹ Whether they *actually* undertake this or not is unclear; but what *is* made certain in the text is that Margaret’s ultimate redemption is effected primarily because of the visionary’s *own* intervention, and, in particular, for having undertaken a pilgrimage to the Virgin’s shrine at Southwick on Margaret’s behalf soon after her death (Margaret having died before she could fulfill her own vow to do so).⁷⁰ As a result, Margaret is transported without warning from the realm of punitive darkness into the light of a garden, where

67. *Ibid.*, 71.

68. While there is no evidence that Hildegard’s work could have been a direct influence upon the Winchester text, Mechtild’s *Liber* was certainly in circulation in England during this period, with several of the extant manuscripts having Syon connections. The Middle English translation, however, was probably produced sometime in the mid 1430s. See n. 52 above.

69. Again, Erler, drawing on Harley, has identified all six of these men, of whom four were from Winchester. See “A Revelation,” 327–31.

70. *Revelation*, 85.

she encounters a richly attired woman accompanied by a man in white clothing:

þer came a fayr lady and a fayr yonge man with hyr as he wer of þe age of xxty wyntyre. And he bro3t wheyes in his hand, and he was clad al in white clothes. And me tho3t þe lady was clad al in white clothes of gold, and sterres of gold wer in hyr garment, and a rial croun sho had on hyr hede of gold and a septyr in hyr hand, and on þe septre end was a lytel croce.⁷¹

The “fayr lady and a fayr yonge man“ are clearly Mary and Christ, but what is extraordinary here is that it is the extravagantly dressed Mary, “þe queen of heuyn and of erth, emperice of helle and purgatory, and þe blessed modyr of God,” who takes control of Margaret’s redemption.⁷² Not only does she order Christ to vie with the devil for Margaret’s soul, but it is she who informs him of the role that the visionary has played in Margaret’s salvation by undertaking the Southwick pilgrimage (“Her is one þat hath done hit for hyr”). It is the Virgin, too, who catches Margaret as the scales in which her sins are weighed fall down on her side. Throughout this denouement, at which the author is clearly “present,” the traditional Savior of mankind steps aside from the action, taking a bit-part role as Mary joins with the visionary to effect Margaret’s final apotheosis. Having sent the devil packing, (“[F]y on þe, Sathanasse! Þou . . . shal neuer der hyr more”),⁷³ Mary then swaddles Margaret like a baby, leading her across the bridge—in effect the lost umbilicus—back to the garden of origins and into the arms of her son:

And þan þat fayr lady toke a white cloth and wrapped al about hyr and said to hyr, “Come on, doghtyr, with me, and þu shalt receyue þe oil of mercy, and þy conscience shal be made clene.” . . . And þan as fast þat fayr lady led hyr ouer a stronge brygge, and at þe end was a white chapel. An me þo3t þer came out mych multitude of people þat come agayne with fayr procession and myry sange. And þan þis fayr lady and þe procession bro3t hyr to a well and þer al hyr

71. *Ibid.*, 84.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Revelation*, 85.

body was wesshen. And sodeynly beside þe welle was a white chapel, and þe lady and þe procession broȝt Margaret þerin. . . . And me þoȝt þe fayr lady offred Margarete to hym, and sodeynly me þoȝt þer was a croun settle on hyr heed and a sepre in hyr hand.⁷⁴

At the culmination of this text then, a theology of flourishing is clearly at play, and it is a flourishing, moreover, that adheres closely to Jantzen's female-focused creative model of an impulse that is "vibrant and creative, blossoming and developing and coming to fruition."⁷⁵ Moreover, rather than simply witnessing it, the author is able to contribute to and partake in this redemptive flourishing within which the natal and maternal reassert their clear independence from a necrophilic appropriation. Joining Hildegard, Mechtild, and those other visionary women who set out to challenge the gloomy eschatology of salvation, the Winchester visionary therefore envisions an afterlife in which women are the key players and the primary means of recovering the lost garden; women who orchestrate eternity and mobilize masculinity, both earthly and divine, in their service; women who challenge the traditional imaginary of punishment, rescue, and sacrificial salvation by positing one of growth, rootedness, and flourishing in its place. As Christ confirms to Margaret as she walks towards the golden gates of paradise, "þat is þy kynde heritage þat Adam was in."⁷⁶ At the hands of these women re-visioners then, the "kynde heritage" of the *hortus conclusus*, long subsumed into the male imaginary, returns to its feminine origins, effecting a shift and ultimately a space within which the female subject may also flourish.

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74. Ibid.

75. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 160.

76. *Revelation*, 86.