

COMMUNION OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD:  
VALUING PURGATORY IN A *REVELATION OF  
PURGATORY TO ANE HOLY WOMAN* (1422)

by

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## **Abstract**

*Revelation of Purgatory to Ane Holy Woman* (1422) is one of only five extant fifteenth-century visions of Purgatory written in England. The text addresses the anxiety prevalent in the late Middle Ages that the dead in Purgatory are often forgotten by the living. The text confirms the importance of the invisible ties that bind all Christians together and prescribes rituals that the living can perform for the dead to speed their passage through Purgatory. The text is, in many ways, typical of medieval visions of purgatory. However, *Revelation* also has a distinctly parochial flavour, naming specific priests from the Winchester and Westminster areas. There is also an indication that the text is calling for the reform of the nunnery to which it is addressed. Despite this, *Revelation* is positioned as an orthodox text within Catholic eschatological doctrine.

For Charles

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## Introduction

The emergence during the thirteenth-century of Purgatory as part of Christian eschatology had a profound effect on late medieval piety. Before then, the problematic issue of the Christian soul's destination after death had been a stark choice between Heaven and Hell. For those whose soul was too blemished to enter the former upon death, there was no hope of redemption. Penance was – and needed to be – suitably harsh to ensure access to Heaven in the life hereafter. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council recognised that renouncing the world was not the only path to salvation. The acceptance that even the laity could enter Heaven was predicated upon the existence of Purgatory, where the soul could be purified after death (Swanson, 1995, p.36). Whilst the unrepentant Christian could still go to Hell, for those who were neither saints nor sinners Purgatory offered a place where sins not fully obviated in this life could be cleansed from the soul *post mortem* with entry into the Earthly Paradise, followed by Heaven, guaranteed.

However much the laity and religious alike may have welcomed this easing of the border restrictions into Heaven, the nascence of Purgatory proved problematic. Almost 200 years elapsed from the first Conciliar recognition of the need for Purgatory to the declaration of its existence as an article of faith at the Council of Florence in 1437 (Swanson, 1995, p.38). The philosophical and theological complexities that led to this protracted acceptance of Purgatory as Church doctrine were irrelevant to most Christians in late medieval society, who were instead busily adopting practices they believed increased their chances of salvation. Whilst many might have prematurely accepted Purgatory and all it guaranteed, the Church's unwillingness to clarify what the purgatorial experience entailed was a cause for anxiety. For

the Church, the focus was on the purposes of Purgatory, rather than the Christian soul's experience after death.<sup>1</sup>

The Church did, however, prescribe ritualistic ceremonies to help the passage of souls through the purgatorial process. The public rites in the burial service were contained in a Requiem Mass, whilst the Office of the Dead – a ritual designed to free loved ones from the pains of Purgatory – was intoned by clergy and lay alike as and when required. The minimum that Christians could usually expect from the Church was the Requiem Mass, although additional payment would secure further suffrages for the repose of the deceased's soul. Only ordained priests could celebrate the masses, whilst all Christians could perform any residual rites on behalf of the dead, including prayers, alms giving, charitable works and completing penance left unfulfilled by the deceased.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the Mass, these allowed the supplicant some level of control over the form and content of the material. The performance of the rites by those in the Church Temporal on behalf of those in the Church Militant forms the invisible bond known as the Communion of the Living and the Dead.

The enactment of these rituals, although to be performed in a spirit of *caritas* by the living, was based on reciprocity. The souls in Purgatory could neither help themselves nor the living, but the Church held that any good works performed on behalf of the dead would benefit the supplicant, who would receive their rewards by a shortened time in Purgatory when their time came.

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, the Church refused to provide a landscape of Purgatory, or discuss the timeframe for souls being purged. Whilst this is an important aspect of purgatorial literature of this period, it is not of relevance to the matters discussed in this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> This only applies to souls believed to be in Purgatory as those in Hell cannot benefit from intercessions. In the medieval period, however, a form of eschatological intestacy arose, whereby the benefit of any good work for a soul in Hell could be passed on to the next of kin (Duffy, 1992, p.354). This is also referred to in *Revelation*, 164-167.

It is in this context that visionary literature such as *A Revelation of Purgatory to Ane Holy Woman* (1422) (*Revelation*) should be placed. It is one of only five extant fifteenth-century purgatorial visions originating from England, the others being *Vision of William of Stranton* (1400/9) (*Stranton*); *Vision of Edmund Leversedge* (1465) (*Leversedge*); *The Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham* (c.1483) (*The Monk of Eynsham*) (a late Middle English translation of the twelfth-century *Visio monachi de Eynsham*); and *Vision in a Trance of John Newton* (1492) (*Newton*). At present, there are approximately 70 known Western European visions of the Other World dating from 700 to 1500 (Easting, 1997, p.185). Why there are so few English visions remaining from fifteenth-century England compared to earlier centuries and other countries does not appear to have been the subject of academic discussion.

Despite these visions having the same subject matter, there are significant differences between the five texts caused in part by variations in date, geography and gender of the visionaries. Two clear differences between *Revelation* and the other fifteenth-century texts are the gender of the visionary and its lack of a Latinate source. Conversely, there is a degree of conformity in relation to the genre. In a rather sketchy way, *Revelation* outlines the purgatorial landscape and provides supernatural knowledge of the most efficacious rituals to be said on behalf of the dead.

What makes *Revelation* particularly distinctive, however, is that the text is more liturgically focused than most Other World visions and its purpose therefore more aligned with confessional literature. There is also an argument to be made that *Revelation* was written in part as a reforming text for the community of nuns to whom it is addressed. Their failure to

abide by the rules of their Order: to fully complete their penance on earth and perform their obligations on behalf of their sister in Purgatory, are an implicit but integral part of *Revelation*. That the text is aimed at a specific community, time and locality does militate against it being written for a wider audience. *Revelation* was not a widely consumed text in the fifteenth-century and is not well known now, so a synopsis is provided below.

### **The text**

*Revelation* opens with a short Introit (1-7) by an unnamed narrator who implores the “brether and sustres, al þat redder this tretis” (4), to attend to the tale of a woman who was “trauellet” in her dreams by a spirit of Purgatory and who conveys this to her confessor in the form of a letter.<sup>3</sup>

Upon retiring to bed on the Feast of St Laurence, 1422, the anonymous visionary falls asleep and is immediately shown the three fires of Purgatory. Her attention is drawn to the great fire and all those in it who are suffering. In this fire, she sees Margaret, whom the visionary “knew” (42) in her life to have been a nun in a religious house. Without a guide for help, the visionary is bewildered and frightened by the sight she encounters. She wakes and raises her “lytel mayd child” (51) to recite together the Penitential Psalms, Litany and the *Agnus dei*. On falling asleep, she is again ravished into Purgatory. There is an initial confrontation between the two, when the visionary is concerned that Margaret is a spirit of Hell intent on harming her. However, Margaret identifies herself as a spirit of Purgatory and requests the visionary’s

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<sup>3</sup> As with most women of this time it is highly likely that, if the visionary did exist, a scribe wrote it down on her behalf. Although never mentioned overtly in the text, Harley believes that l.15 proves that a priest is acting as the visionary’s amanuensis (Harley, 1985, p.28). She accepts that if this were the case, we shall never know to what extent the vision has been altered (Harley, 1985, p.29). Erler proposes that the scribe is the one from St Mary’s Abbey, Winchester (Erler, 2007, p.328). For a discussion of proposed localities for composition, see pp.7-8 of this thesis.

help in expediting her release. The nun gives specific instructions as to the number and type of masses, prayers and hymns to be performed by named priests on her behalf. Margaret also provides an explanation of what the visionary witnesses in Purgatory and guidance for the living on how to avoid similar torments to the ones she suffers.

During the next day, the visionary delivers the nun's instructions to the priests. When the visionary falls asleep the second night, she watches as Margaret and others are tormented by devils in the great fire of Purgatory. The tortures are based on the Seven Deadly Sins, with each person being punished for the sins they were most guilty of during their lifetime. Christians from all walks of life are tormented together in the great fire, although the visionary believes that lecherous priests suffer the most.

On the third night, the visionary falls asleep again and sees the nun entering the second and third fires, which are purgative as opposed to the retributive nature of the great fire. When Margaret emerges from the third fire she is white and clean, as her soul has been purged of its sins. A lady clad in gold with a crown and sceptre approaches, together with her son. The young man weighs Margaret's soul, at which point Satan appears with the Worm of Conscience. Satan attempts to prevent the nun's release from Purgatory by weighing the scales down, saying that whilst alive she did not perform her oath to go on pilgrimage. The lady rebukes Satan, saying that the visionary has performed it on Margaret's behalf and, together with the priests who have performed the masses, will be well rewarded for her act of charity when her time comes in Purgatory.

The closing image is of Margaret being led across a bridge to the Earthly Paradise to be married to Christ. The vision ends when the woman wakes and breaks off her commentary, asking that God should bring all Christians to his kingdom. The abrupt statement “no more fadyr at this time” (898) effectively concludes both the letter and the text.

### **Editions**

The vision is short at 899 lines and survives in only three manuscripts, all dating from the fifteenth-century. This matches the internal references in the text that indicate it was composed in or just after 1422. The vision is found in its complete form in Longleat MS. 29, fols. 155r-165v and Lincoln Cathedral MS. 91 (the Thornton Manuscript), fols. 250v-258r, whilst the text in Bodleian MS. Eng. th. c. 58 (B), fols. 10r-12v survives in fragmentary form. Of the three manuscripts only the Bodleian text is in the dialect of the assumed place of composition, being the diocese of Winchester (although as we shall see below, some scholars believe that the text was written in Westminster).

Despite surviving in two of the best-known miscellanies of the fifteenth-century, Longleat MS. 29 and Lincoln Cathedral MS. 91, the text has rarely been printed or received separate attention from scholars.<sup>4</sup> It was first published in 1895, incomplete and without commentary, as part of Lincoln Cathedral MS. 91 by Horstman. In 1927, Hope Emily Allen transcribed the passage from Longleat MS. 29 that describes the punishments suffered by the priests (Easting, 1997b, p.374), whilst Barratt has printed four extracts from the text (Barratt, 1992, pp.163-176).

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<sup>4</sup> That is not to say that it has not appeared in editions of these manuscripts, just it has not received separate attention and appears to have been “lost” amongst other well-known writers’ works.

It was not until 1985 that a single complete text of *Revelation* became available with the publication of Marta Powell Harley's edition, commentary and translation of Longleat MS. 29. Spearing subsequently transcribed Lincoln MS. 91 in 2002, (Erler, 2007, p.323), but Harley's hope that the appearance of an edited text would lead to more academic study has been largely ignored. What attention the text has received has often been inaccurate or critical of the egregious imagery of the torments endured in Purgatory.

In 1910 Geraldine E Hodgson erroneously ascribed *Revelation* to Richard Rolle, presumably because it was in Horstman's text of the same name and follows on from the mystic's writing in Lincoln Cathedral MS. 91. Both Hodgson and Clay refer to it as a "curious" piece (Hodgson, 1910, p.xvii; Clay, 1914, p.154). Morton Bloomfield, in his seminal text on the Seven Deadly Sins, opines that the text is "an extremely vivid Other World vision" (Bloomfield, 1952, p.221). Keiser, however, likens the images of purgatorial torments to "a kind of barbecue pit for burning away sins" (Keiser, 1983, p.117), whilst another academic comments on "[the] horrifying undercurrent of grotesque, almost pornographic violence" (Barratt, 1994, p.163).

It is possible that the visceral and frequently formulaic descriptions of purgatorial torments have discouraged academic attention. This unwillingness does not appear to stem from the subject of Purgatory itself or the methods of punishment *per se*, as other visions such as *Liversedge*, *The Monk of Eynsham* and *St Patrick's Purgatory* have all been the subject of more academic analysis than *Revelation*.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this is because all these texts provide more interesting views on the purgatorial experience. *The Monk of Eynsham*, for example, betrays

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<sup>5</sup> For *The Monk of Eynsham* and *St Patrick's Purgatory*, see Easting in particular. For *Liversedge*, see Nijenhuis and Scase. However, these texts have still received less attention than popular late fourteenth-/early fifteenth-century writers such as Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich and Richard Rolle.

its twelfth-century roots by promoting the existence of Purgatory (Easting, 1997a, p.202), whilst *Leversedge* is convinced of its existence but presents an eccentric vision of the purgatorial landscape, being comprised of valleys and hills. By contrast, *Revelation* frequently uses derivative material and stock characters that add little to the debate of fifteenth-century views of Purgatory.

It is unsurprising, then, that when research has been undertaken on *Revelation*, it has not focussed on the specifics of the text. Instead, the three main areas discussed are the place of composition; the identity of the named historical characters; and the status of the anonymous female visionary.

Opinion as to the provenance of the text is divided between Winchester and Westminster. This is understandable, given that the six priests named by Margaret have all been identified as historical persons, four of whom worked in the Winchester area during this period and two at Westminster. In his discussion of Longleat MS. 29, Doyle concludes the text is of “metropolitan origin”, believing it derived from Westminster or “some other metropolitan contemplative community. But the precise provenance must be admitted to be uncertain.” (Easting, 1997b, p.377). Keiser agrees that *Revelation* is from a “metropolitan nunnery” (Easting, 1997b, p.383), although he is more confident than Doyle in his assertion that Westminster is the place of composition (Keiser, 1987, p.147).

Harley argues for Winchester, on the grounds that the request for masses is sent to the recluse of Westminster (Harley, 1985, p.30) as opposed to the visionary being asked to personally “bidde” the Winchester priests (Harley, 1985, p.32-33). After discussing the Benedictine

houses in the Winchester area, she locates the nunnery she believes both Margaret and the visionary belonged to as St Mary's (formerly Nunnaminster) (Harley, 1985, p.38). Of the limited academic study on the provenance of the text, the presumption now appears to be in favour of Winchester as the location of both the vision and the composition of the text (Erlor, 2007, p.323).

One of the most curious aspects of *Revelation* is the naming of six priests who are to celebrate masses on behalf of Margaret. Reviewing the evidence from other scholars, such as Ogilvie-Thomson's 1980 doctoral thesis, Harley outlines the historical records relating to the priests (Harley, 1985, p.30-37).<sup>6</sup> However, it is left to Erlor to draw political inferences from their identities (see below and Erlor, 2007). Some attempts have been made to identify Margaret from the information at St Mary's Winchester, with both Harley and Ogilvie-Thomson naming four nuns who were in the community on or about the time of the vision (Harley, 1985, p.39; Erlor, 2007, p.323).

In contrast to the interest shown in the historical identities of the priests and Margaret, there is no such speculation about the named identity of the anonymous visionary. Instead the focus has been on identifying her status and relationship to Margaret and the community. Doyle, using extracts obtained from Allen, states that "The rubrics and ecstatic piety evident throughout the original text and additions are typical of cloistered religious" (Easting, 1997b, p.377). Keiser again agrees with Doyle as does Harley, who argues that internal references to the "lytel mayd childe" and the fact that Margaret "knewes" the visionary, twice calling her by name, proves that the visionary was a nun. However, Harley does reject the suggestion that

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly, *Leveredge* provides details of historical persons who were at his bedside when he was suffering with the plague (*Leveredge*, ll.64-70).

the visionary is a cloistered religious on the grounds of the visits she makes to the priests and the pilgrimage she undertakes (Harley, 1985, pp.27).

The presence of the maid child has a different meaning for Erler, who disputes that this is proof she is a nun, even from an enclosed order. She concludes that if the visionary were a religious woman of a house such as St Mary's, she would not be allowed to travel as freely as she does in *Revelation*. Erler argues instead that "it seems likely that the Winchester anchoress whom Warwick consulted twice in 1421 was the author of "A *Revelation of Purgatory*" in 1422" (Erler, 2007, p.325). That the woman might be a member of the laity affiliated to a nunnery in the manner of Margery Kempe is discussed, but rejected by Harley (Harley, 1985, p.27). Barratt, however, does believe the visionary to be either a "non-institutionalised devout woman" like Margery, or a widow who had taken vows (Barratt, 1994, p.163).

What is not addressed, however, is whether the visionary's identity remains anonymous in *Revelation* for a specific reason, or the possibility that the visionary is a literary construct to serve the purposes of the text. These issues will be addressed in this thesis although it is worth considering at this stage why, if the community knew the six priests and probably Margaret, the identity of the visionary is not similarly disclosed.

The two most recent articles on *Revelation* have moved away from focussing solely on the status of the visionary. Instead, issues such as the gender of politics and teaching within the text in the context of the history and politics of the day are raised. Sylviana Federico's article argues that the vision is recorded in the form of a letter to a confessor (who would be male)

and then introduced to the audience by an authoritative voice because the purpose of the vision is to educate (Federico, 1995, p.61). She sees the letter form and Introit as layers of official and self imposed censorship because of the dangers of women assuming the role of educator. Her analysis focuses on the tension between the women who transgress the hierarchy by demonstrating greater knowledge than the male priests. The text is a necessary means of transmitting knowledge, but the female visionary “must also transgress the social code of proper behaviour for women and speak from a position of authority” (Federico, 1995, p.61).

In her 2007 article, Erler locates the text as being shaped by the politics of Henry V and his supporters. She also links the text to the movement for the reform of the religious orders at that time (Erler, 2007, p.322). Erler argues that the criticism of the religious orders would have been permissible in the text because it is transmitted to its intended audience through conservative orthodox priests who are identified with Henry V’s attempts to reform the religious orders. As the message within the text was deemed acceptable by a priest in the employment of conservative bishop Henry Beaufort “it demonstrates the latitude allowed to criticism when filtered through the unimpeachably orthodox screen of the bishop’s staff” (Erler, 2007, p.390).

Erler also links *Revelation* to the continental visions and particularly Deguileville’s *Pylgremage of the Sowle*, viewing the text as part of a growing audience in England for the works of visionaries (Erler, 2007, p.339). She concludes that the value of the text is in providing evidence of the reading material of a woman who was probably “a visionary anchorite with a substantial contemporary reputation and elevated connection...” (Erler, 2007,

p.338). The text is therefore an important indicator of how a woman could be linked to the movement for reform within the Church whilst also needing protection from the risk (specific to the female gender) associated with criticism of the Church. The apparent level of education of the female visionary and her links to powerful reformers in *Revelation* and related historical evidence “may go some way towards broadening our definition of the English female tradition” (Erler, 2007, p.345).

What is clear from both Federico and Erler’s articles is that the historical existence of the female visionary is presumed, whilst the possibility that it is a literary construct perhaps written by a male priest, is not. Harley speaks for a number of scholars when she refers to *Revelation* as “an authentic personal expression of early fifteenth-century popular belief” (Harley, 1985, p.40). Both Federico and Erler regard the visionary as a female who needs to be protected by the Church hierarchy, whether in the education of others or in stating the case for reform. Whilst both articles raise interesting arguments, in seeking to locate the gendered visionary within the politics and religious instruction of the time, the text is in danger of becoming known only for its potentially transgressive “female voice”. Although this is a valid line of enquiry, the foundational work of analysing the text within its religious and historical context has been left incomplete. As a consequence, substantial parts of the text have been omitted from discussions and this in turn may present an imbalanced and incomplete view of *Revelation*.

The purpose of this thesis is to go some way towards redressing this balance, by providing an analysis of the text within its theological context. For purposes of ease rather than conviction, it will be assumed that the text was written primarily for a religious house of nuns in

Winchester. The nunnery referred to may be the Benedictine house of St Mary's as suggested, although this is not crucial to the analysis. For the same reason, the identification of the priests, nun or visionary will not be discussed in any detail. Even if the female visionary were a historical person, the vision is not credible as a real experience because of temporal inconsistencies, such as completing a 30-mile pilgrimage in one day without making prior arrangements. The importance lies more in the significance of the actions than the veracity of them.

The opening chapter of this thesis considers the waking state of the woman prior to the first full night of her vision. Although this passage constitutes less than 60 lines in length, it demonstrates liturgical influences that shape the whole text. The vision commences on the feast night of St Laurence, an important saint in the Liturgical Calendar. St Laurence is a multivocal symbol and introduces many of the themes that run throughout the vision. The text is further structured by the Canonical Hours in the form of the rituals performed immediately prior to the Office of the Dead. Whilst the visionary's "voice" expresses her fear at being taken into this Other World, the Liturgy leads the narrative and the audience into the realms of Purgatory.

In Chapter 2, the three contiguous fires that form the Purgatory of Righteousness provide a catechical structure for the visionary to witness the process of Margaret's transformation. In common with many purgatorial visions, the woman watches the dead being punished in line with the Seven Deadly Sins they committed whilst alive. Many of the torments are derived, *inter alia*, from the literature, sermons and *exempla* at the time. What makes this section valuable, though, is the focus on penance and its relationship to Purgatory.

The third and final chapter discusses a fundamental belief in the Catholic Church: the Communion of the Living and the Dead. This relationship informs the text throughout. In waking time, the visionary fulfils Margaret's instructions and, in her dream state, witnesses the efficacy of the rituals performed and the successful passage of Margaret's soul through the fires. However much their actions are motivated by *caritas*, the priests and visionary would expect a reward in what is a spiritual transaction. What the supplicants receive, however, does not appear to be in line with our knowledge of late medieval piety.

All references are from Harley's edition of Longleat MS. 29. Whilst this might not be in the original dialect, it provides a complete and workable version of the text. Much of the evidence used in this thesis to analyse the text is derived from religious, historical and literary sources. It is difficult, however, to apply general religious and historical sources to a specific community at a particular period in history. Of equal difficulty is applying analysis that is parochial in nature, but not to the particular area under discussion. The same issues apply to the use of literary sources. Although there is evidence that the author of *Revelation* has utilised other texts in the production of this vision, it cannot be conclusively proven that this is due to direct knowledge (with the possible exception of one example from the *Gast of Gy*) of the texts.

## CHAPTER 1

### Liturgical Time

The initial waking period of the visionary is brief, comprising 56 lines in the text and three hours on the night of St Laurence's feast. However, together with the Introit, this section introduces the themes of penance and community that are developed in the purgatorial vision. The voice of the visionary makes the narrative appear simple and realistic. Yet underlying this "so eucl ferd" (19) woman's vision, which primarily occurs outside of the boundaries of earthly time, is the structure of the Liturgy. Before that device can be brought into play, however, the veracity of the visionary's dream needs to be confirmed to the audience by way of the Introit.

#### Introit

The authoritative voice of the short Introit (1-7) commands the "brether and sustres, al þat redder this tretis" (4) to attend to the woman's story of Purgatory. Although this anticipates that a wider audience will read this religious tract, the primary audience is to be found in a female religious community at which it is aimed. It is possible that Margaret's community is the same as those to whom the vision is directed, but this is never clarified within the text.

The pre-framing by the Introit presents the vision as a real experience. For the Catholic Church, no vision that is sought after can be from God – the truth can only be shown to those holy enough to receive it and humble enough not to want to be the recipient. The narrator therefore states that, far from seeking this vision, the woman "was trauellet in hir sleep" (6) by a spirit of Purgatory, in response to which she makes "hir compleynt" (7) to her confessor.

However, the letter is not written by the visionary to the nuns, it is directed to her “gostly fadyr” and re-directed by the Introit to the sisters of the religious house. It is unclear how this apparently private communication enters the public domain, especially as the confessor and the narrator do not appear to be the same person. At what point the letter becomes a “tretis” is not clear, although the term validates the importance of the vision. This, together with the layering of authorial narratives, presents an officially sanctioned version of both the visionary and the vision.

Despite this endorsement, the identity of the visionary remains secret, even though Margaret “seid farwelle and named my name” (220-221). This evasiveness is crucially important to the success of the text. By depersonalising the vision, the community can focus on the purpose of the message, rather than the messenger. If there are implicit criticisms of the community within the text, such as their failure to act with *caritas* towards one of their own order, naming the visionary could be divisive. The visionary’s purpose is to relate to the community, to provide an *exemplum* of the Christian life. In remaining anonymous, the woman can be placed alongside the nuns as someone who is unable to perform tasks that are the preserve of priests, but whose actions can still help souls in Purgatory. The danger of naming is that she could become oppositional instead of appositional to the community.

### **Waking Time**

The change from the authoritative narrator of the Introit to the visionary’s story marks a profound shift in the text. The confessional tone of “dredeful feerdnes” (48) of the visionary makes the recounting of the vision very real. On first reading one might conclude that this is

an oral and unmediated account of a vision. What initially makes it seem real is its apparent lack of connection with the standard format of other visions. The visionaries in *Liversedge*, *Newton* and *The Monk of Eynhsam* all follow the standard visionary topoi (described by Easting, 1997a, pp.186-7; Nijenhuis, 1990, p.84) of falling into a deadly swoon before entering Purgatory. The account of the visionary's suffering with the "plage of pestylence" (22-23) in *Liversedge* is particularly visceral:

my face of wy3t colour  
was as blak as any cole, and my tonge þat was wont to  
be red was as blake as any pyche and þrast out at my  
mouþe be lenghe of halfe a foote and more, þat þe rote  
of my seyd tonge and þe vaynes of þe seyd rotys aperid and  
lay out of my mouþe. (30-35)

By contrast, the visionaries in *Revelation* and *Stranton* enter Purgatory by way of a dream vision. Neither of the texts conforms to the other standard purgatorial vision topoi noted by Easting and Nijenhuis, that of being visited by a ghost as happens in *Gast of Gy*. However, *Stranton* is met by a guide and remains in his dream like state for the next three days. Whilst the female visionary has had guides in previous visions, in *Revelation*, she is "no3t shewed by no such spirite" (16) and therefore has to navigate Purgatory without a mediator to either explain or protect her from the experience. She also does not remain in her dream vision for the three nights of her vision, as she wakes a number of times.

This marked change from the other fifteenth-century visions shows the difference in purpose of *Revelation*. The contrast between waking and dream time means the visionary is able to perform the suffrages requested of her by Margaret and allows the audience to witness the efficacy of those actions as the nun is released from the pains of her purgatorial experience.

The lack of guide means there is a lack of mediator. Therefore, despite the visionary questioning her assertions, Margaret's claims about eschatological matters remain unmodified. The innocent questioning of the visionary in the face of someone with experience – a purgatorial spirit – lends credibility to both the vision itself and the advice that is given from the Other World.

Being different to the other fifteenth-century visions does not, however, make *Revelation* a real experience and in contrast to the mimetic quality of the visionary's words in this opening, there is the ever-present structuring device of the Liturgy. There are two distinct but inter-related Church times present in these opening lines. The first is Liturgical time, particularly the Calendar of the Christological year. The second is Canonical time, how the days and hours are divided to map out the life, death and resurrection of Christ. These timeframes form the underlying structure of the Christian life and find their written expression in the Breviary for monastic communities and, for the laity, in the Breviary's laicised form, the Book of Hours.

### **Liturgical Year – the Calendar**

Both the Breviary and the Book of Hours open with the Calendar. For the late medieval Christian, the yearly life would have been divided up according to the holy and feast days that are fundamental to the Catholic faith. The format of the two great seasons of the Christian calendar, Lent and Advent were – and still are – controlled in terms of the rituals and rites that are presided over by the Church.

Most of the fifteenth-century visions: *The Monk of Eynsham*, *Stranton* and *Newton* occur during the holiest time in the Christian Calendar, the Triduum of Holy Week, the three days

of Christ's death, entombment and resurrection. *Revelation*, however, occurs on 10 August, outside seasonal time in what is known as Ordinary Time. This time is still structured by the Church, incorporating as it does the feasts of various saints, but as it is outside the dates central to the Catholic faith there is arguably more flexibility for the text. The feast of Corpus Christi, a moveable feast that takes place at the end of May and, at its latest on 24 June (Duffy, 1992, 46) is an example of the Church adapting to lay involvement in religious feasts by way of the Corpus Christi fraternities and processions (Rubin, 1994, ch.4).

The reason for locating the vision outside the time of the Church Proper is not explained in the text, although there are a number of potential reasons. Whether or not she existed as a historical person, the female visionary might be located outside the main Church time to both marginalize and protect the "female voice" from criticism by the Church. The male visionaries that are visited during the Triduum effectively place themselves at the heart of Church matters.<sup>7</sup> However, as the purpose of *Revelation* appears to be less about the Easter message of death and resurrection than it is of penance and the Communion of the Living and the Dead, it would make sense not to place it within the confines of Easter.

The most compelling explanation, however, is less about reasons for not choosing Easter but why 10 August – the Feast of St Laurence – is specifically chosen. Within the text, St Laurence is a multivocal symbol that creates a variety of meanings for the audience. That his feast is outside of the Church Proper would be incidental rather than critical to the reason for the vision's placement within the Liturgical year.

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<sup>7</sup> Leversedge's vision, however, takes place in May. Bearing in mind his rather eccentric vision this is not wholly surprising.

Harley believes that the feast of St Laurence is chosen because of its literary antecedents. Guillaume de Deguileville's "merueylous dreame" in the *Pylgremage of the Sowle* begins on the Feast of St Laurence (Harley, 1985, p.99, n.9-10). However, Erler, whilst agreeing with Harley about the literary influence, notes that the feast was not mentioned in Deguileville's original text but appears to have been added by the fifteenth-century English translator (Erler, 2007, p.342).

The fifteenth-century translation of *Pylgremage* may have influenced the date chosen in *Revelation*. Equally, St Laurence was a popular saint in the late medieval England and remained so up to and during the Reformation. Eamon Duffy recounts the following tale of Thomas Cranmer, architect of the English Reformation, who was fighting a rearguard battle against the refusal of parishes to forsake feast days:

Cranmer complained bitterly that the whole diocese [of Kent] was "very lately abrogated". He blamed the clergy for stirring up the people and instituted a series of exemplary punishments. But he was furious to discover that Henry's own court observed St Laurence's day in 1537. While dictating a routine letter to Cromwell he took the pen from his secretary's hand and wrote himself, "but my Lord, if in the court you do keep such holydays and fasting.... When shall we persuade the people to cease from them?" (Duffy, 1992, p.396)

The saint and martyr's popularity is further attested by the 228 churches dedicated to him in England prior to the Reformation (Farmer, 1992, p.289). One of these churches belonged to Hyde Abbey in Winchester (Keene, 1985, pp.106-136), a Benedictine House near to St Mary's. It is tempting to suggest that the author of *Revelation* had ties to St Laurence in

Winchester. Unfortunately the current evidence is insufficient for this to be elevated to anything more than speculation.<sup>8</sup>

The popularity of St Laurence is not just English sentiment. Laurence's status within the universal Catholic Church is as a red-letter saint, one who is sufficiently important that in religious manuscripts his feast day is noted in red ink (Wieck, 1997, p.26). According to Jacobus de Voragine, who was writing in the thirteenth-century, St Laurence's feast is one of only two (the other being St Stephen) to have an Octave attached to it (de Voragine, 1993, p.74) and who, together with St Paul, has a feast with a repetition of antiphons. Paul gets his antiphon for his "excellent preaching"; Laurence for the "excellence of his passion" (de Voragine, 1993, p.74). In the late medieval period Laurence was the only saint (outside the apostles and St John the Baptist) to have an obligatory fast day attached to the vigil of his feast (Duffy, 1992, p. 41).

The theological importance of St Laurence affords him a place in the Litany of the Canon, the consecratory prayer that is the holiest part of the Mass. The Litany is arranged in descending order of importance of saints and St Laurence's suffrage is in the section below the Virgin and apostles, underlining his importance in the hierarchy of the Church Triumphant.

The relevance of St Laurence in the whole of the Catholic Church and late medieval English piety in particular would be enough to justify his feast date in *Revelation*. However, the wording from his Suffrage, which appeared in both the Breviary and Book of Hours provides another possible reason for his inclusion in the text:

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<sup>8</sup> Eamon Duffy encounters a similar problem with a thirteenth-century Book of Hours that he believes was created for a lay person who worshipped at St Laurence in Oxford (Duffy, 2006, p.9).

Grant to us, we beseech, O omnipotent God,  
To quench the flames of our vices, thou who  
Didst grant to blessed Laurence thy martyr  
The power to overcome the fires of his  
Torments. Through Christ our Lord, thy Son,  
Who liveth and reigneth with thee in the  
Unity of the Holy Ghost, O God, world  
Without end. Amen.<sup>9</sup>

According to the *The Golden Legend*, St Laurence was martyred by being burnt alive on a gridiron (de Voragine, 1993, pp.66-67). In the face of his tormenter, Decius, he cried “Look, wretch, you have me well done on one side, turn me over and eat!” (de Voragine, 1993, p.67).<sup>10</sup> With his courage in the face of intolerable pain being inflicted on his corporeal body, it is possible that a correlation has been drawn in the text between St Laurence and the torments faced by those in Purgatory who suffer both bodily and spiritually.<sup>11</sup> His stoicism despite a protracted and excruciating death is both an *exemplum* of how to lead the Christian life, but also of the pains that await the soul in the flames hereafter.

It has been suggested that the three fires the visionary encounters in Purgatory are reminiscent of St Bridget’s vision of St Laurence (Erler, 2007, p.336). In St Bridget’s vision, the saint tells her “I had three things: continence with respect to myself, mercy with respect to my neighbour, charity with respect to God.” (Book VI, Chapter 52). Erler does not, however, relate this in detail to the three fires that the visionary witnesses. The number three is a potent symbol in Christological religions, as it signifies the duration between death and resurrection.

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in [www.medievalist.net](http://www.medievalist.net). This suffrage to Saint Laurence is taken from a French Book of Hours in the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection in the Library of Congress (ms. 10). For other examples of suffrages to other saints in manuscripts, see Wieck, 1997, pp.109-116.

<sup>10</sup> In reality, it is more likely that St Laurence was beheaded, as was the custom in Rome during those times (Farmer, 1992, pp.288-289).

<sup>11</sup> The physical suffering of souls in Purgatory was not a matter of Church teaching, but was very popular in the late middle ages.

The evocation of the Triduum would have influenced both *Revelation* and St Bridget and it does not necessarily follow that the number three in the latter has influenced the later text.

If St Bridget's vision of St Laurence has influenced *Revelation*, it could be in the criticism of the bishops "This bishop endures and covers up the incontinence of the clergy, liberally spends the goods of the church on the rich, and shows charity to himself and his own. (Book VI, 52). Whilst cutting off their fingers and lips, the devils in *Revelation* taunt some of the priests, saying:

"Tak 3ow this  
for 3e haue myspondet ham; and also for 3e hedes  
and prelates of Holy Chirche shold haue chastised  
syn both in 3ourself and in 3our householdes and in  
3our lymys and in 3our sugget3 vnder 3ow, and 3e  
did no3t" (413-418)

The failure of the bishops to ensure the money is spent on the poor is juxtaposed to St Laurence's link to the riches of the Church. When Decius hears that the saint was given the money of the Church to hide, he demands Laurence to bring forth the riches within three days. The saint does so, by presenting the poor, lame and blind to the Emperor and declaring "These are the riches of the Church." (de Voragine, 1993, p.65-66). It is clear that the saint understands what the bishops have failed to: the people are the wealth of the Church, not the accumulation of money or power.

During his tormenting of the saint, Decius tries to force Laurence to offer to "mawmets" (idols) (de Voragine, 1993, p.66). The saint refuses to give into pagan worship and is tortured all the more for his sanctity. This is in direct contrast to the nun, Margaret, who is followed

around by the spirits of her cat and dog who she worshipped as her “mawmettes” whilst she was alive. Although we shall come on to the issue of penance and the Seven Deadly Sins later in Chapter 2, it is worth noting that during the Sacrament of Penance, the penitent had to confess any failings to adhere to the Ten Commandments. The First Commandment is a prohibition on worshipping anything or anybody except God (*Deuteronomy*, 5,7-9). Margaret, in her sin of pride insists on keeping her own idols and is heavily punished for this in Purgatory. She has failed to be truly contrite for her idolatry and failed to live up to St Laurence in abandoning her vanity.

The choice of St Laurence’s feast date, then, is not solely based on the earlier *Pylgremage*. The symbolic quality of the saint, both in regard to Purgatory and the Christian life subtly shapes the audience’s relationship to the full vision. Complementary to it, for the waking period only, is the utilisation of the Canonical hours.

### **Canonical Hours**

The visionary goes to bed at the time of Complin (the Canonical hour associated with death) and falls asleep. Due to the permeability of the dream world, she crosses over the threshold of life and into death, although whether the spirit of Margaret has caused her to enter Purgatory is never explained in the text.

In this first brief vision, she sees three contiguous fires that form the central experience of Margaret’s passage through Purgatory. In the great fire she witnesses religious men and women suffering and within that fire she also has her first sight of Margaret. Frightened by her dream she awakes at ten o’clock and:

for drede and ferdnesse to slep agayne, I rose vp,  
and a lytel mayd child with me, and we two seiden  
be vij psallmes and þe litany. And by we had seid  
out Agnus dei, I was so heuy of slep, I my3t no3t  
mak an end, bot bade by child go to bedde, and so  
did I. (49-55)

It would appear that the woman is attempting to ward off the vision and only stops reciting because she is unable to stay awake any longer. However, the repeating of the Penitential Psalms, Litany and *Agnus dei* (“*Lamb of God*”) form the last sequence in both the Breviary and the Book of Hours before the Office of the Dead. Despite the apparent desperation to ward off the visions, it is clear to the audience that she is about to be drawn back in to Purgatory to fulfil a task on behalf of a spirit.

The Seven Psalms mentioned are the Penitential Psalms (numbers 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129 and 142 in the Vulgate) and have a long history in both the Jewish and the Christian religions (Wieck, 1997, p.91). In the middle ages the Penitential Psalms were thought to have been composed by King David after he offended God twice, once by having an adulterous relationship with Bethsheba and killing her husband; the second time by disobeying God by his pride (Wieck, 1997, p.91). By the time *Revelation* was written, they were established as psalms of atonement, pleading with God for the forgiveness for sins.

Dame Eleanor Hull writing in the 1440s comments on the most well-known of these psalms, Psalm 50. Often this psalm is known by its opening line “*Miserere Mei Deus*” (“Lord have mercy on me”) and was used in both the prelude to the Office of the Dead and as part of it as well. Hull comments that each Christian should:

“Now requere we to the almighty God that by the conseyl of his gret pyte, that he/ made ous verrey repentant as he dyd the good David, and by his gret mercy he/foryeve ous al our synnys and purge ous and clense ous of al our wikkydnys aftir/the grete benygnyte of al his mercyes (Wogan-Browne et al, 1999, p.294)

The spirit of Margaret mentions the *Miserere* on several occasions during the vision in Purgatory. The importance of this psalm is clear in *Revelation*, as it forms part of the rituals that every priest must follow to aid Margaret. The importance of Psalm 50 will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, but in the period in which the text is written it is an important part of Christian ritual:

By the middle years of the fifteenth century the Latin text of Psalm 1 was not just being recited by priests and confessors, nor even solely by the cloistered religious and a few lay enthusiasts; instead it could be appropriated, memorized and used by all devout men and women in their private meditations or in moments of crisis in their own lives. (Thompson, 1988, p.39)

In contrast to the contrite tone of the *Miserere*, the Litany is an entreaty to the saints to intercede on behalf of both the individual and the community. As the saints are already in Heaven as part of the Church Triumphant, it is thought their supplications to God are more efficacious than of those in the Church Temporal. The Litany is formulaic and quite different from personal suffrages to individual saints. However, it is a reminder that in addition to the Communion of the Living and the Dead, there is also the Communion of the Saints.

The visionary's final recitation is of the *Agnus dei*, the prayer to Christ for mercy and peace. It forms not only part of the Canonical hours but, like the Litany, is also found in the most sacred and holy part of the Mass, the Canon, which is when the consecrated bread and wine are turned into the body and blood of Christ. Instead of asking the saints to act on their behalf, the supplicant appeals directly to Christ for intervention. The Lamb is Christ and the reference

is taken from St John's Gospel when John the Baptist sees Jesus and says "... Behold the Lamb of God. Behold him who taketh away the sin of the world." (*St John*, 1.29).

It is interesting to note that the visionary uses the Latin phrase *Agnus dei* rather than its vernacular translation *Lamb of God*. The use of Latinate terms continues throughout the purgatorial section of the text, with the spirit of Margaret referring to the *Misere mei deus* and *Veni Creator* ("Come God"). It might be tempting to conclude that the use of Latin confirms the visionary as a nun. If it could be proved that the Breviary was being utilised as a structuring device, then this assertion might be true. However, despite being a book for lay people, the Book of Hours was almost invariably in Latin. One academic notes that this was the case certainly until 1400, but even after that date it is rare to find any primers in English (Wieck, 1997, p.95) When this is set in context with any number of Hours that are thought to have been in circulation during this period – Duffy puts it at 57,000 – it is very surprising that almost all of them are in Latin. This has been ascribed to the fear of being accused of the heresy of Lollardy (Duffy, 1992, p.212).

At 11pm, the visionary goes back to bed. Despite the recitation of the Penitential Psalms, Litany and *Agnus dei*, her prayers go unanswered and she is once again ravished into Purgatory upon falling asleep. The three-day cycle of the visionary's journey in Purgatory begins. Despite the apparent unwillingness of the woman to return to the vision, the undertow created by her supplications informs the audience that we are now entering the Office of the Dead.

## CHAPTER 2

### Purgatorial Time

With the exception of the Virgin Mary all humankind is born with the stain of Original Sin, which can only be removed by the Sacrament of Baptism.<sup>12</sup> For those who are sin-free apart from this stain, like St Laurence and the other saints, the removal of this congenital defect guarantees their immediate access upon death to Heaven bypassing Purgatory en route. For most mortals, however, it is not easy to remain sin-free and the danger of habitual sin is always there to trip up the unsuspecting Christian. Even with the birth of Purgatory habitual sin – the result of man’s free will to choose between right and wrong – could stand between him and eternal salvation. Therefore, it was important not only for a Christian to be baptised, but also to undertake the Sacrament of Confession. From the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) onwards, this was to be undertaken by members of the laity yearly during the season of Lent and by the late medieval period the procedures for taking the Sacrament had received much attention (Swanson, 1993, p.38).

#### **Sacrament of Confession**

The primary function of confession is to effect reconciliation between the individual Christian and God. As man has a habit of returning to the sins he has committed, Confession is repeated on a regular basis. The format of this Sacrament is a tripartite structure consisting of contrition, confession and satisfaction. The individual first has to be contrite, that is they have to regret the sins they have committed and have no desire to persist in them. The next step is to confess their sins to an ordained priest. During the medieval period, an abundance of

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<sup>12</sup> That a number of saints pre-date the inception of the Sacrament of Baptism was the subject of much discussion and debate in the Church. However, it does not form part of this thesis.

literature sprang up to help both the penitent and the priest to formulate a process by which all sins could be brought to mind and absolved.

Writing in Suffolk at about the same time as *Revelation*, John Drury of Beccles's Lenten instruction provides advice for the individual confessing as part of parochial instruction:

Furthermore, dear child, having declared the Ten Commandments, and admitted your guilt in breaking them (or at least some of them), then recollect the Seven Deadly Sins, which are destroyers of the seven principle virtues... The seven virtues that they destroy are these: humility, charity, patience, spiritual activity, chastity, generosity and abstinence." (Swanson, 1993, p. 54)

The priests would likewise have had manuals for interrogating the penitent. One typical fifteenth-century instructional manual for the clergy "consists of a systematic set of inquisitions for use by the priest in confession, structured round the Seven Deadly Sins, the Ten Commandments, and the five bodily wits" (Duffy, 1992, p.58-9).

Christ, working through the priest, can then grant absolution. However, this absolution comes at a price and the penitent must perform a penance<sup>13</sup> (or, as it is also known, satisfaction). As Swanson points out, with the introduction of Purgatory the burden on penance had lightened considerably. Before then, with the only the binary choice of Heaven and Hell more had to be done to ensure that the penitent's soul really was worthy of eternal salvation. However, even completing the full Sacrament might not be enough:

Sin carried two penalties: guilt (*culpa*), which the priest could alleviate by granting absolution, and punishment (*pena*), which was less straightforwardly expunged, but would be worked off through the penance imposed by the priest here, and hereafter in Purgatory. (Swanson, 1995, p.34)

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<sup>13</sup> In addition to penance being the third part of The Sacrament of Confession, the rite is also known, *inter alia*, as the Sacrament of Penance. The term penance, then, as a synecdochic term can cause confusion. Margaret's failure to do penance would most likely be her failure to complete satisfaction. Failure to take the Sacrament of Penance when one has committed a mortal sin would damn the immortal soul to Hell, not Purgatory.

By defining and confirming purgatorial existence as belonging to the Other World, the Church had in part ceded jurisdiction, as the supernatural is God's domain (Le Goff, 1984, p.12). Even if the priest offered absolution, and full satisfaction was undertaken by the penitent in expiation of sins, it was not conclusive proof that God would concur with the penance imposed.

It is unsurprising, then, that texts such as *Revelation* sought to provide a fuller account of ways in which to discharge *pena* in this lifetime. Of the three fires the visionary sees, the great fire is the place for burning off the sins that were most likely to carry a residue of *pena* to the next world: the mortal sins.

### **Great Fire**

A mortal sin is any sin that is so great it destroys the relationship between God and man. If left unconfessed, it condemns the Christian soul to Hell. Lay instructions such as John Drury's focus primarily on the Seven Deadly Sins or Ten Commandments because breaking any of these is a mortal sin. Whilst venial (forgivable) sins also need confessing, failure to do so does not imperil one's chance of salvation.

It is an indication of the sins that Margaret has committed in her lifetime that she begins in the great fire. Margaret explains that "þe grettest fyr is þe grettest reddur of þe/ryghtwysnesse of God þat is in purgatory" (703-5). This righteousness is about retribution for sins and, although the devils inform those they torment that they are not in Hell (574-577), it often resembles

eternal damnation. Margaret and the others being tormented with her are made to suffer both bodily and spiritually to purge their remaining *pena*.<sup>14</sup>

### **Bodily Suffering**

Despite the Church's assertion that the physical body cannot be tortured in Purgatory (the body does not rise again until the Last Judgement), late medieval piety had an almost grotesque obsession with wounded and bloodied bodies. In particular, the tortured body of Christ was a focal point during this period becoming "a privileged signifier" in late medieval culture because it is the body of the Passion (Rubin, 1994, p.21).

However, Christ's body was not central solely to liturgical rituals such as the Mass. It could also be used to move the Christian from Canonical rituals to the devotional side of the faith. When the visionary sees Margaret, she has fire coming out of her mouth and her heart and wounds all about her body, as though she has been drawn with combs "And /so me þo3t sho was woundet and rent, bot specialy /at hyr hert me þo3t I saw a greuou and an/horrible wound" (60-63). Margaret later explains that the fire egressing from her mouth was because of the great oaths she took in her life and the wound at her heart were oaths that caused much trouble to Our Lord's heart. Margaret and the image of Christ are united in suffering. However, this is suffering that the nun has inflicted on Christ by her sin. Whereas Christ's wounds spilt His blood, Margaret's emit flames. Christ's blood that emanates from his wounds is redemptive; the flames from Margaret's heart are retributive. Christ has suffered to redeem man from the Original Sin of Adam, but mankind's wilfulness, shown here in Margaret, inflicts further suffering by refusing to turn away from habitual sin.

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<sup>14</sup> Much of what happens in the great fire is not official Church teaching. For example, Aquinas believed that devils could watch whilst those in Purgatory were tormented, but not inflict actual suffering (Duffy, 1992, p.345). In the great fire of *Revelation*, however, the devils are the agents of God's righteousness.

The devils that are in Purgatory torment Margaret and the other detainees from all walks of late medieval life, from enclosed monks and nuns to single men and women, by listing the Seven Deadly Sins they have transgressed. The hierarchy of sins varies from type to type, with the most habitual sin mentioned first. Margaret is punished primarily for her sin of pride, the priests for their lechery.

When tormenting the religious, the devils parody Church rituals. Before they taunt Margaret for her sin of pride, the devils dress her in a form of nun's habit:

And me þo3t I saw about hyr vij deuelles.  
And one of ham cloped hyr with a longe gown and a  
longe traile folwyng hyr, and þat was ful of  
sharp hokes with-yn. (247-250)

The nun endures physical pain, both from the suffering inflicted by the devils that rip at her skin and from being torn apart by the cat and dog she loved so much in life:

And me þo3t sho cried whan sho was so arayed  
þat me þo3t al þe world my3t haue herd hyr, and þe  
lytell hound and þe catte frette in-sondyr hyr  
leggis and hyr armes. (257-260)

Margaret's greatest sin is pride, which has destroyed her "mekenesse" (264). The cat and dog are allowed to punish her because she loved them too much whilst she was alive. This is a very different image from *Leveredge*, whose devils of pride and lechery greet him dressed as gallants in a parody of his way of life "And þe seyð orribille and innumerable [company] of/develis were non oþerwise arayd / to my apering (139-141).

The next sins that Margaret is punished for are those of wrath and envy, by which she made false oaths and indulged in backbiting and slandering as well as her failure to do penance (274-280). These are mentioned by Margaret too when advising the visionary how to avoid the Seven Deadly Sins.<sup>15</sup> The instructional manual for priests quoted earlier contains similar ideas for the sin of envy:

Have ye backbited and dispraised you even cristen or tolde evill tales of hem to a pewn [?] [sic] here good name or wolde not here noo good spoke of hem bi your wille but lette it or stopped it as much as ye might? (Duffy, 1992, p.59)

This imagery is a common concern within the late medieval period and understandably so: any close-knit community is going to suffer with divisive talk. The first three sins that Margaret is punished for, pride, envy and anger are all sins that destroy both the relationship with God, but also with other Christians.

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, Margaret is punished last for lechery. For the religious priests, however this is their primary sin together with gluttony and pride. In a particularly visceral passage, the priests are tortured in a variety of ways including being cast into a pit of fire (355-356), thrown into deep water (365) and having boiling metal poured down their throats (388-391).

As with Margaret, the devils parody Church rituals when speaking to the male religious. Each time they are tormented, the devils say “Take 3ow this” invoking the words spoken by Christ at the Last Supper and which are said during the Canon of the Mass before the consecration of

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<sup>15</sup> Although these are more correctly derived from the Ten Commandments: theft, manslaughter, slandering, backbiting and lechery (145-6). There is obviously some overlap between the Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins.

the Host. This inversion is neither a mockery of the Mass, nor the role of priests. Earlier in the text, Margaret tells the visionary to seek out six good priests to perform masses on her behalf and there is nothing in the text to presume that the audience – who would probably have known or known of these men – would have disagreed with this view. What the text is criticising at this point, and this is a stock image from the late medieval period, is the abuse of the priestly office.

Their hypocrisy is underlined by the devils carrying out a parody of tonsuring, which had been compulsory for priests since the Fourth Lateran Council (Scase, 1994, p.280). Some of the devils have “rasours in har handes, and to some of þo prestes/þay pared of har crownes” (410-411). The priests also have their fingers pared down by the devils as “ful ofte 3e receyuet 3our God ful vnworthyly and/handlet hym ful vnhonestly” (437-438). Both the tonsuring and the paring of fingers are for bringing the priesthood into disrepute. This is an important distinction. It is the actor and not the act that is sinful. Robert Swanson describes the difference between *ex opere operato*, which he calls “the correct performance of the rite”, as opposed to *ex opere operantis*, “the personal qualities of the performer” (Swanson, 1995, p.33). The unworthiness of these priests to celebrate Mass does not prevent the consecration from taking place, as the power is vested in the words not the person. Neither does the unworthiness of the celebrant taint the Host or affect in any way its validity.

As the tortures continue down the hierarchy of society, the recitation of sins become shorter so, for example, nuns are punished for kissing men by having their lips cut off (493) and wedded men and women being put into a “bittir bath” for their lechery (535). There is usually a correlation between the sins that have been committed on earth and the punishments that are

meted out by the devils in a form of spiritual *quid pro quo*. This is not something of which the Church approved and Aquinas (the Church's theological founder) certainly did not envisage such punishments. However, its appearance in *Revelation* is important as confirmation to the living that all sins, whether apparent in this life or not, will be discovered and punished in Purgatory. Bearing in mind man's proclivity to sin, this would probably provide solace and terror in equal measure.

### **Spiritual suffering**

All those punished acknowledge their failure to do penance when they were alive. Whilst being tortured, Margaret cries:

“Euery-body bewar with me and do har  
penaunce ar þay dey and leve þe lust of har wiked  
synnes” (328-330)

This is both a lament and a warning. She is being tortured physically, but far worse is the knowledge that she refused to either leave her sins or do penance for them. Likewise, the lecherous priests and their women lament that “euery Cristen man and/woman be-war by vs and forsak syn and do penaunce/ in his lyf.” (464-6). Clearly the crying out to “everybody” is intended for the audience – those who are in the great fire together with Margaret and the priests are only too aware of what they failed to do and although they cannot repair the suffering they have caused to their own souls, they can prevent others from doing the same.

Adders are placed in Margaret's hair as punishment of her failure to do her penance. Although the parallel is never drawn, it is reasonable to conclude that this is a visual correlation with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, whose temptation of Adam and Eve caused The Fall. The

adders, therefore conflate the Original Sin and habitual sin putting the latter on par with Adam's failings. The audience is being given a clear message about the seriousness of their actions, which are akin to the first betrayal of God by man.

Whatever the physical torments that Margaret's spirit suffers, she tells the visionary that by far the worst is the knowledge that she has let God down by her wilful behaviour. It is not clear whether the Worm of Conscience, which is placed in the lecherous priests' innards, is the cause of Margaret's torment. This image is found in both the *Prick of Conscience* and *Pylgremage* and represents remorse. (Harley, 1985, p.13 and pp.103-4, n.199-200; Erler, 2007, p.343). However, it was Aquinas' view that the most severe pain suffered in Purgatory is the knowledge that one is deprived of the sight of God.

All the suffering that the visionary witnesses in the great fire is caused by the failure of those in it to have either forgone the sins in their life or, having committed them, failed to do full and final penance, or made a death-bed confession. Rather intriguingly, the final type of Christian who ends up in the great fire is the one with "many shrewed opynyon" (712). Presumably this is a reference to failings in adhering to the doctrines of the Church, but it does not explicitly state whether this would include heresies such as Lollardy.

### **Middle Fire**

The visionary is invited by Margaret to return to Purgatory to see the good effect that all the masses, psalms and hymns have on the nun's soul. That the rituals have worked are evidenced by Margaret passing through the great fire into the middle fire. Margaret informs the visionary that not everyone has to go to the great fire and those who have done their penance or

committed only venial sins that have been generally pardoned will enter into the middle fire (700-703). The venial sins are those that are small enough to be forgivable in the eyes of God and although they still have to be accounted for in Purgatory, failure to confess them does not imperil the mortal soul.

The change from the great fire to the middle fire is marked. The wicked angel who tormented Margaret in the great fire becomes her guardian angel for the remaining fires. The cat and the dog are no longer following her and she no longer cries out in pain. The religious and others have been left in the great fire, still being purged of their sins. Margaret is allowed to leave, however, because of the suffrages made on her behalf by the visionary and priests.

Whereas the great fire is retributive, the middle fire is redemptive. When the devils take her and throw her into the middle fire, Margaret no longer suffers the physical and emotional pains she endured in the great fire:

and þer me þo3t he had belyes in his  
hand, and he blew fast, and me þo3t sho lay and  
fried in þe fyr as hit had bene fysshe in hote  
olye. (660-3)

The renting and tearing to her body in the great fire are replaced by the purgation by fire in the middle one. As her venial sins melt away, her colour changes from as black as lead to like the “talgh of a candle”.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Such imagery is common. See, for example, Haukyn’s stained coat in *Piers Plowman*, BXIII, 273-456 (Pearsall, [Langland], 1994, p.109).

## **Last fire**

If the great fire resembles hell more than Purgatory and the second fire is more purgative than retributive, then the last fire is preparing the soul to be delivered out of Purgatory. The last fire is as clear as any amber. Whilst this was often the semi-precious stone used for rosaries because of its supposed apotropaic qualities (Voltz, 1907, p.1), it is also referred to twice in Ezekiel:

And I saw, and behold a whirlwind came out of the north: and a great cloud, and a fire infolding [sic] it, and brightness was about it: and out of the midst thereof, that is, out of the midst of the fire, as it were the resemblance of amber (*Ezekiel 1:4*)

and:

And I saw, and behold a likeness as the appearance of fire: from the appearance of his loins, and downward, fire: and from his loins, and upward, as the appearance of brightness, as the appearance of amber. (*Ezekiel 8:2*)

The correlation between the fire and amber is clear in both Ezekiel's vision and the flames of the third fire in *Revelation*. At this point, the visionary is no longer witnessing the punishment of Purgatory, but the cleansing of the soul not only in preparation for the Earthly Paradise, but also for the Last Judgement. Ezekiel's Apocalypse is a foreshadowing of *The Apocalypse*, which predicts the Second Coming and the Last Judgement (*New Jerusalem Bible*, p.1176).<sup>17</sup> In the same way that the opening section of *Revelation* was being guided towards the Office of the Dead, the image of amber in the fire is guiding the audience to the Last Judgement.

When Margaret leaves the final fire she is reborn. Her clothing – the external signifier of her soul - was rent and dirty when she entered the great fire; now it is white and clean. Her body is likewise healed. Now she is clothed in white her sin is cleansed; with the body healed her

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<sup>17</sup> This is particularly clear in Ezekiel 1,5, when he sees a lion, bull, eagle and man. This is a foreshadowing of the Four Evangelists in Revelation 4.7.

relationship with God is restored. Instead of the terrifying spirit that scared the visionary at the start of the text and made her believe she was a spirit from Hell, Margaret is now ready to pass to the Earthly Paradise. Like Purgatory and Earth this too is temporal, analogous to a restored Garden of Eden.

### **Earthly Paradise**

The final destination for Margaret's soul prior to reunion with her body at the Last Judgement is the Earthly Paradise. However, before then, her soul must be weighed to see if she has been fully purged of all her sins. A fair lady and young man come to greet Margaret. The lady is:

...clad al in white clothes of gold, and  
sterres of gold wer in hyr garment, and a rial  
croun sho had on her hyede of gold and a septyr in  
hyr hand, and on þe sepre end was a lytel croce. (832-5)

The lady who appears is called the Well of Mercy, which is one of the names for the Blessed Virgin Mary. As the primary intercessor in Heaven for souls in Purgatory, her attendance at this final stage to receive the newly-cleansed soul of Margaret would be expected. The visual imagery also linked with *The Apocalypse* "And a great sign appeared in heaven: A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (*The Apocalypse*, 12.1). The Catholic Church has long held that Mary is the woman in this verse and that both are symbolic of the Holy Catholic Church (Maas, 1912). Likewise, the young man who attends the lady to weigh Margaret's soul is Archangel Michael, who defends the woman (Holy Church) from the dragon at the end of the world "And there was a great battle in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon, and the angels fought and his angels" (*The Apocalypse*, 12.7).

Therefore, the weighing of Margaret's soul can be read on a number of levels. Superficially it is the progress of her individual soul, although when Michael attempts to weigh her, Satan appears and tries to tip the balance against Margaret. For the weighing of Margaret's soul, this is an anachronistic image: Satan the Lord of Hell has no power to detain a soul that has been in Purgatory and *prima facie* saved. However, the inclusion of Satan makes sense if we once again consider Chapter 12 of *The Apocalypse* when Michael and the angels defeat the dragon "And that great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, who seduceth the whole world. And he was cast down unto the earth: and his angels were thrown down with him." (*The Apocalypse*, 12.8). The Devil's appearance, then, together with the Virgin and Michael is a reminder of the Last Judgement.

This short scene includes both the progress of the Christian's soul after individual judgement and the general judgement, which is different. The first occurs immediately upon death and once purgation is complete, the soul enters the Earthly Paradise. This is quite distinct from the Second Coming which heralds the Last Judgement, when all bodies will rise to be reunited with their souls and people divided into those who are saved and those who are damned. At the point of the Last Judgement, both Purgatory and Earth will cease to exist and only Heaven and Hell will remain for eternity.

It is clear within the context of Margaret's individual judgement that Satan cannot win. However, he brings out the Worm of Conscience, reminding her that she did not make her pilgrimage before death. The implication is that Margaret could be delayed in Purgatory if her penance is not complete. He tells the lady that Margaret "made a vow to pilgrimage and/fulfilled hit no3t" (853-4). This time, however, Margaret has nothing to fear, as the lady

admonishes Satan as she identifies the visionary as “one þat hath done hit for hyr” (856). Although the masses have helped expedite Margaret’s time in Purgatory and lessened her pains, it is the performance of the pilgrimage that secures her early release from Purgatory.

The scales having been tipped in her favour by the suffrages of others, Margaret crosses the strong “brygge” (873) where she is washed in the well of grace and anointed with the oil of mercy. The former is a re-enactment of the Sacrament of Baptism, whilst the latter resembles the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. This is a reminder to the audience of the importance of the sacraments and the Church who administers them. One is administered at the beginning of life, the other at its end. Margaret’s moral debt has been paid and she is led to the chapel to be married to Christ. When she abused her marriage vows to Christ in her earthly life as a nun, the devils could torment her. Now with her sins behind her, she is free to once again renew her vows and pass into Christ’s kingdom.

The failure to do penance has led to Margaret suffering grievous torments in Purgatory. Now, as a victor over sin, she is led to the Earthly Paradise. The image of the lady and young man is not only concerned, though, with Margaret’s individual redemption. It is also for other Christian souls looking to both individual salvation *post mortem* and final salvation at the Last Judgement, when all souls will be weighed. The text underlines the importance in that battle of staying within the remit of the Holy Church, which both defends the faith and provides the path to everlasting salvation.

## CHAPTER 3

### Communion of the Living and the Dead

Margaret's accession to the Earthly Paradise and marriage to Christ is the apogee of the vision. For the Christian audience, it is not just the culmination of the story, it also signifies what they hope is the final destination of their own soul. Only the individual can have responsibility over whether they confess their mortal sins and do penance in their lifetime. However, as the vision shows the audience, Margaret would have been deprived of the rewards of Earthly Paradise for three more years had the visionary not performed suffrages on her behalf.

Together with the need for penance, the Communion between the Living and the Dead is central to the text. Until the inception of Purgatory, there would have been no need for such intervention, as those in Heaven would not have been in need and those in Hell were beyond redemption. By the time *Revelation* was written, though, the bond existing between the living and the dead was a part of everyday Christian life.

The rituals that the visionary has to arrange or perform for the dead nun are equally helpful for the living to lessen their duration and suffering in Purgatory when their time comes. Penance, good works and alms-giving are the fundamentals of the Catholic life, whether part of the Church Temporal or Church Militant.

Whilst the visionary might have had no control about being “raushed” into Purgatory, she does have agency to perform the suffrages requested by the nun. For Margaret, the extent of her power is in summoning the visionary. The dead have no agency and Margaret is unable to change the life she lived or do what she ought to have done whilst she was alive. Therefore, she is reliant on the visionary to arrange the rituals that she so carefully prescribes on her behalf.

### **Masses**

The nun tells the visionary to visit six named priests and to request they perform various masses, psalms and hymns to be said for the repose of her soul to both expedite her time in Purgatory and ease her pains. A typical order from Margaret can be seen in her first request, which is to a good man, known to the visionary as her confessor:

“And bidde hym say a masse of  
Requiem for me, and he shal say v dayes of al þis  
psalme Miserere mei deus. And when he begynneth  
to say Miserere mei deus, say he þis vers fyue  
tymes Miserere mei and þan all out to þe end with  
castyng vp hert and eyghen to Godward, ffor be  
more deuoutly he seith hit, þe more relecet shold  
be [my] peynes and þe grettyr shold be his mede.” (97-104)

The Requiem Mass is the standard Church mass said for the dead and is usually said immediately after burial. This is one of thirteen masses the nun asks to be recited.<sup>18</sup> However, this and the other masses are to be said by the priest privately rather than in church and, as such, would be low masses. The five days of the *Miserere* are symbolic of the devotional Five Wounds of Christ that achieved a cult status in the late middle ages and were believed to help deliver souls out of Purgatory (Duffy, 1992, p.246).

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<sup>18</sup> The number thirteen is also the number of men singing the mass when Margaret crosses over the bridge to Earthly Paradise. Presumably this is because it is the aggregate of the twelve apostles and Christ (or Mary).

Of the other priests, she asks masses to be said of the Trinity, Saint Peter, Our Lady and All Saints. The rituals that Margaret demands are for people whom she later identifies as being without “power” (155). Although this word is never explained in the text, it probably refers to those who are poor. For those who have the “power” to do so, three hundred masses should be said on their behalf. In addition to this surprisingly large number, she also claims that:

And what maner of syn þat he  
had done in hys live, þer sall no maner of peyne  
in purgatory hold hym þat ne hastily he shal be  
delyuered from ham, and many other sowlys be  
delyuered for his sake. (160-164)

Therefore, in addition to expediting the deceased’s soul, in a spirit of generosity it will also help others. The inclusion of this large number of masses for the rich appears to be odds with the audience of *Revelation*. Having been sworn to poverty, the nuns would not have the power to pay for this for themselves; being females they would not be able to perform the masses. The only reasonable explanation for this number is a literary influence. The *Gast of Gy*, a fourteenth-century story of a purgatorial ghost who appears to his dead wife and has conversations with a Dominican monk, stipulates an almost identical number of the same masses to help souls as appears in *Revelation* (1875-1880). This is the only part of the text where literary influence is, if not beyond doubt, then certainly difficult to disprove.

The *Veni Creator* is to be recited alongside the *Miserere* by the priests. When the visionary questions the nun about their use, Margaret responds that the psalm is to ask God to have mercy and pity on her soul; whilst the hymn releases her from pains every time it is said on

her behalf. There is a direct correlation being drawn between the rituals played out by the priests and the impact that it will have on Margaret's soul.

The *Miserere* and *Veni* were important in late medieval piety, something that is attested to by the Lincoln Cathedral MS. 29 version of *Revelation*, in which they are written at the end of the text (Thompson, 1994, p.39). Commenting on Psalm 50 in general, Thompson argues that:

Of all the Psalms, *Miserere mei deus... secundum* offers the most imperative appeal for mercy by the penitent sinner when, faced with the prospect of divine judgement, he openly confesses his great personal guilt. Not surprisingly, therefore, it was the particular importance of this Psalm as an exemplification of penance and humility that was most consistently remarked upon by Latin commentators as part of their multi-layered expositions of the text. (Thompson, 1994, p.38)

In relation to the text of *Revelation*, Thompson makes an argument that the whole text is designed to teach the *Miserere* and *Veni Creator* to the audience (Thompson, 1994, p.39). However, *Revelation* does not include the psalm or hymn in full and only Lincoln Cathedral MS. 29 includes them at the end of the vision. However, it is true to say that both Psalm 50 and *Veni Creator* are considered essential to the text, even warding off the Seven Deadly Sins at a time when it was usually considered to be the Seven Penitential Psalms that provided such an antidote (Wieck, 1997, p.117).

### **Pilgrimage**

Only ordained priests can perform masses, so the nun's request that the visionary contacts the named celebrants is wholly orthodox. By contrast, both the *Miserere* and *Veni Creator* could have been said by anybody, although there is no denying that the priesthood carried with it extra powers over and above prayers by most people. However, in a sentiment echoed by the lady at the weighing of Margaret's soul later in the text, the nun tells the visionary:

“And if þou  
had no3t gone for me to Southwich on pilgrimage in  
wirship of God and Our Lady—ffor I had avowed hit  
and I might no3t do hit and þou has done hit for  
me – and else I shold ful foule haue bene letted on  
my passage when I shold ben wyed out of my  
peynes, and þat shal þou sone see.” (819-826)

It is perhaps surprising that the priests' actions are less efficacious than the visionary's. However, this might be due to the substitution of the woman in place of the nun. Whilst the priests can perform masses for anybody, only the visionary has performed a task that Margaret was meant to do when alive.

The nun's statement is the first time in the text that the pilgrimage is mentioned. It might be linked to the penance that Margaret failed to do in her lifetime – pilgrimages were often imposed as satisfaction – but this is never rendered explicit in *Revelation*. Margaret does, however, tell the visionary that she had a particular devotion to Mary and that is why she cried out for her when she was suffering the worst torments. During her lifetime, the nun kept Our Lady's fast and informs the visionary that no-one who has done so will fail to receive the Virgin's help in Purgatory (603-5). Yet despite this devotion, Margaret – who would have had special dispensation to fulfil the pilgrimage – fails to keep her promise to Our Lady. Perhaps this is why the substitution of the visionary for Margaret is so important, restoring as it does the nun's devotion to the Virgin.

Harley identifies the shrine the visionary attends as the Shrine of Our Lady, Southwich, which was a parochial shrine run by the Augustinian friars. Unlike Canterbury, which held its Jubilee in 1420 (Townsend, 2003, p.424), the Shrine of Our Lady, Southwich, was not a

national place for pilgrimage. Neither did it have the universal appeal of an international pilgrimage site such as Santiago de Compostella in Spain. However, this does not appear to be an issue as “increasingly the “sacred geography” of England became a tighter network of small shrines, with a particular bias towards cults dedicated to the Virgin.” (Townsend, 2003, p.424-5). Neither did it need to be a long pilgrimage. Two priests visit Margery Kempe and ask her “yyf sche wolde gon too myle fro then sche dwellyd, on pilgrimage to a cherch stod in the feld,” (6736-7; see also Swanson, 2007, p.236). The visionary’s pilgrimage, whilst still local, is rather longer than Margery’s, being 15 miles from Winchester to Southwich (Erlor, 2007, p.324). When the visionary has time to perform this act is not clear from the text and the fact that she apparently travels freely around the country is not addressed either.

The combination of suffrages made on behalf of the nun releases her from both the full extent of the pains she suffers and the period of time she spends in Purgatory. However, such charity is not just a unilateral act, and the supplicants would be rewarded for helping to release her soul. There were many ways of being rewarded both financially and spiritually, as a whole spiritual economy grew up with Purgatory.

### **Rewards for the Living**

When Agnes Everingham, a resident of York, died in 1426/7 she left 4d in her will to be distributed to nine priests to celebrate mass on her behalf (Barnwell, 2005, p.66). By this period, leaving money in wills for, *inter alia*, masses, good works and alms giving was common practice. For those who could afford it, such as the Bishop of Winchester and Chancellor of England William of Wykeham (d.1404), the establishment of a chantry chapel

(and in Wykeham's case far more besides) could be used to pray for their souls on a continual basis.

Although payment for masses was common practice by this time, there is no indication in *Revelation* that the priests or the visionary have been paid for their services. When asked, the priests readily agree to the visionary's request and no indication is given of the basis upon which they render their services. Presumably the priests were known to the nuns and, as such, would have celebrated mass free for another member of the religious community. As individuals, the nuns would not have had the financial ability to reward the priests for their services. However, they would have been able to pay for masses to be said from the common property of the community. The indication is that the nuns have collectively failed to organise any masses to be said on behalf of their dead sister. The visionary's story is a reminder that *caritas* is at the heart of the Christian faith. The priests come to Margaret's aid out of apparent willingness to help a soul in Purgatory rather than as a financial transaction yet the nuns cannot do the same for one of their own order.

Indulgences, like money, are not mentioned in the text. Again, this is rather surprising given their popularity by the early fourteenth-century. Although the specific number and type of masses are declared to have special effects, it is never articulated in *Revelation* whether there would have been indulgences attached either to the celebration of masses or undertaking the pilgrimage. In the fifteenth-century, many of the churches that were indulgenced were parochial churches, although such indulgences "were usually offered on set days annually, and often reflect local devotions." (Swanson, 2007, p.51). The great advantage of indulgences is that one knows exactly how much spiritual virtue one has accrued by one's action.

Although there was declared to be an official limit of 40 days off in Purgatory for the Christian unless a longer period received papal sanction, often more extreme offers were made without official agreement, often made by Bishops and Archbishops in contravention of the official limit (Swanson, 2007, p.11).

What the priests and visionary receive for their good works is “mead”. When the priest celebrates mass, he must cast his eyes up to God:

ffor þe  
more devoutly he seith hit, þe more relectet shold  
be [my] peynes and þe grettyr shold be his mede. (102-104)

The lady confirms this to the visionary, stating they will be delivered out of their pains in Purgatory quicker for their charitable acts (868-871). This is at the very heart of the Communion of the Living and the Dead. Temporal reward is less to be favoured than the spiritual rewards *post mortem*. That the visionary only appears to know Margaret vaguely means that her rewards should be even greater (Duffy, 1992, p.374).

### **Communion and Community**

Although the visionary should receive greater rewards for her actions, it does not answer why Margaret commands the visionary to help rather than one of the nuns at her religious community.

Historians have long noted that late medieval wills often show an anxiety that the testator’s wishes will be forgotten or not executed fully. Christine Carpenter comments that it was important for the testators

...that their debts should be paid, even if, as in the case of Thomas Throgmorton, who died in 1472, it meant putting a sizeable part of their estates into cold storage for the purpose. Exhortations to the heir to see the will fulfilled are not uncommon and testators who have failed to implement the last wishes of those for whom they themselves had been executors hastened to do so as they stood in their turn on the brink of eternity. (Carpenter, 1987, 58)

However, this should not be the case here. Margaret is a nun and, as such, she would not had any possessions to leave under the terms of a will. Yet there is a real sense that Margaret has been neglected and forgotten. Referring specifically to *Revelation*, Eamon Duffy notes that the “neglected dead” could be angry and dangerous (Duffy, 1992, p.350). The irony is, that she has been forgotten by those who are professional religious, nuns whose daily life is spent contemplating God and the life of the world to come. Margaret herself regrets her failure to do penance and for her sins, but equally her sisters were morally and spiritually compelled to do more to help her out of her pains.

Margaret’s punishments in Purgatory serve a two-fold purpose for the sisters in her religious community. She is primarily a negative *exemplum*. As a nun, she should have led a life dedicated to prayer and good works. Margaret, like the whole of her religious community, should be destined immediately for heaven, or at the very least the middle or last fires of Purgatory. She should have been free from the mortal sins that the laity would be seduced by. However, the vision makes it clear that she has fallen down on all Seven Deadly Sins to a greater and lesser extent and for that she suffers in the great fire. Her apparent humility in life, in wearing her worst clothes, has not been matched internally as she has succumbed to the sin of pride. Whether she was able to hide her sinfulness from the other sisters is not recorded in the text. What is made clear, however, is that such sins will be found out in Purgatory and punished if they are not fully shriven in this life.

The message in Margaret's suffering extends beyond the personal need to avoid sin and complete penance. The nuns are warned about their own personal salvation, but equally they are implicitly criticised for their omission to perform good works on behalf of Margaret. Penance, good works and alms giving, which are at the heart of the Catholic faith are not being lived out in the lives of the nuns. At its heart, then, *Revelation* is a reminder to the audience of their duties to God and to their community. The anonymity of the visionary, in bringing such an unpalatable truth to Margaret's religious house, is not only understandable but also a necessity if the message is going to be acted upon rather than the credibility of the messenger being questioned.

## Conclusion

Within the Catholic tradition of Purgatory, *Revelation* is an orthodox text. Only those who have been baptised into the Catholic faith and received the Sacrament of Confession can enter Purgatory with admission to the Earthly Paradise guaranteed. Although there is no timescale, entrance into the Earthly Paradise would be followed by bodily resurrection for the Last Judgement. It is only then, that the righteous will ascend to Heaven and the damned descend to Hell for all eternity. Although many of the experiences described in the text do not find their place in official Church teaching, for example, the three great fires, torments by devils and the descent of the Virgin and Archangel Michael into Purgatory to judge souls, neither do they run counter to the Church's teaching either. The times when *Revelation* might appear contrary to orthodox beliefs are where the Church had not provided definitive statements (as opposed to discussions) of the purgatorial experience.

This is probably true, even when considering the most extreme claim in the text: that people with power need to have three hundred masses said on their behalf to ease their soul through Purgatory. Admittedly, the extent and type of Masses that Margaret claims to have efficacy might approach what Swanson calls "the limits of the tolerable" (Swanson, 1995, p.11), but it does not extend beyond them. This is especially true, as they appear to have taken their form from the popular *Gast of Gy* and, as such, are an indication of literary influences on the text as opposed to the promotion or acknowledgement of parochial practice.

It is unlikely the Church would have welcomed such accretions, but it usually took a pragmatic approach to such matters unless wilful heresy was committed. That the rituals and

descriptions do, in the context of the vision, expedite Margaret's transition through Purgatory is important. It not only confirms the efficacy of these rituals, but also the importance of the priests and the Church in performing these rites.

The centrality of the Church, both as the means by which souls are saved from Original Sin and subsequently by the Sacrament of Confession is an integral part of the text. The vision begins with an authoritative voice, which one presumes is a priest, whilst the visionary's letter is addressed to her confessor. The text receives official sanction because it is being promoted by these two religious men. Equally, that the vision is credited as real gives credence to their authority. Like the Communion of the Living and the Dead, authority is a reciprocal arrangement that benefits both parties. The encoding of authority at the beginning of the vision is also apparent at the end when the Virgin Mary, symbol of the Holy Catholic Church, receives Margaret into the Earthly Paradise. The symbolism in the text is clear: access to Heaven is only to be found within the confines of the Catholic faith. Those who are outside, the Jews and Saracens, are condemned to Hell (690-691; see also *Gast of Gy*, 1810-1822).

Even when apparently critical of the Church, in the anti-clerical images of the lecherous priests being tormented in the great fire, the text is clear that the punishments are for individuals abusing their office and not the office itself. This derivative and formulaic imagery is counter-balanced by the importance of the named priests in aiding Margaret's release from Purgatory. These historical persons were based in either Winchester or Westminster and all of them held positions of considerable power or status. Yet, not only do they perform the masses demanded by a spirit of Purgatory mediated by a female of unknown

status, but they do so for apparently no money or indulgences. Their reward is in the spiritual “mead” they will receive *post mortem*.

This spiritual *quid pro quo* initially appears out of touch with the realities of early fifteenth-century religious practices, which were centred upon financial endowments and indulgences in addition to “mead”. However, this apparent anachronism can be explained by the close relationship of at least four of the priests to the religious house where Margaret lived. The use of a visionary who knows Margaret well enough to help her, but does not appear to be one of the sisters, is a credible way of avoiding the issues of payment. When money is discussed in relation to other Christians – and the term “power” is used to denote financial means – a sliding scale of masses is given. The message, that the means of the person requesting masses should be considered, with the wealthy making arrangements for a higher number of masses than the poor who will benefit from a far smaller amount, was a common view in late medieval piety. Whether the executors and beneficiaries of testators who had the wealth to make benevolent bequests were as keen on this particular version of the rich man and the eye of the needle is doubtful, but as with the correlation between sins and punishments in Purgatory, for social cohesion the need for equity between rich and poor, good and bad was desirable, whether in this world or the next.

The priests’ interventions in *Revelation* are subordinated to the pilgrimage performed by the visionary, although not because they rendered their services *gratis*. Rather, it is the visionary’s willingness to become the nun’s proxy, which proves to be a crucial point in securing her release from Purgatory. In a further contrast to the priests, the identity and status of the visionary remains anonymous. Attempts to identify the woman are frustrated by the

text, which provides conflicting evidence. She knows Margaret, yet the Introit clearly calls her a “woman”; she appears to have links with the religious house where Margaret was a nun, but she is able to travel freely; the nun calls her by her name, but that is not given in the text. Despite her links to historical characters, there is no evidence that she is a nun, an anchoress, or even a member of the laity. This appears to be quite deliberate. In withholding her identity, the visionary becomes a liminal entity, one outside of the time and space of the nunnery. Devoid of status and identity, she can witness with innocent eyes what happens in Purgatory. Her actions and witnessing of events become the purpose of the vision rather than her status in relation to the audience to whom the vision is addressed.

In remaining anonymous, the visionary is utilised as a mirror to be held up against the nunnery in general and Margaret in particular. The opening of the text makes it clear that the visionary is humble and pious. Despite having had many visions before, she does not welcome them and, as evidenced by her recital of the Seven Penitential Psalms, Litany and *Agnus dei*, does what she can to ward them off. She is frightened by these visions and of her first face-to-face encounter with Margaret, who she believes is a spirit of Hell come to hurt her. Rather than relying on herself, the visionary calls on Christ for help, as she “was so ferd I my3t nat speke” (67). Instead she repeatedly calls upon Jesus in her mind. Confirmation of the apotropaic quality of calling on Christ occurs when Margaret does not hurt the visionary but instead explains she is a purgatorial spirit in need of help.

The visionary’s innocent questioning of Margaret continues this positioning of her as a true Christian. The humility of the visionary contrasts sharply with the primary sin for which the nun is punished: the deadly sin of pride. During her lifetime, Margaret was the very opposite

of humility. She behaved in a proud manner, both in the keeping of her “mawmettes” and boasting of her achievements in addition to failing to carry out her penance. This juxtaposition between the deadly sin of pride and its cardinal virtue humility would not have been lost on the audience. Neither would the rehearsal of Margaret’s sins fall on deaf ears, highlighting as they do activities such as backbiting that destroy trust between people and communities.

The visionary is not just a mirror for Margaret, however. She is also used to contrast the perfect Christian’s behaviour with the failure of the nuns to carry out their responsibilities to one of their order. Despite only knowing the visionary, Margaret summons the woman into Purgatory instead of a nun at her former house. Though frightened of the nun, the visionary proceeds to carry out all the tasks allotted to her, including the onerous duty of performing the pilgrimage on the nun’s behalf. It is not made clear in the text whether this was the penance Margaret failed to do or whether this is an additional failing on Margaret’s behalf. Neither is it made clear how the visionary was able to perform a round journey of 30 miles to Southwich to attend the Shrine of Our Lady. Again, the text is silent on the practicalities of payments made for the pilgrimage, any offerings and whether the visionary would have been accompanied. Instead, the performing of the tasks is left in the background to the central themes of *Revelation*.

The failure by the living to perform tasks on behalf of the dead is one of the central issues raised by the text. The nuns have apparently forgotten one of their own who would not have the finances or status to have left bequests for the repose of her soul. Despite being in the service of God as a profession, they appear to have deserted any notion of *caritas*. They would have had access to the priests named by Margaret who appear to have been, if not in

the service of the nunnery, then at least had sufficient ties to be called upon to help. Equally, the nuns were presumably aware of Margaret's need to do penance and/or the pilgrimage; yet they failed her on all accounts. Unlike the wealthier members of society who left wills showing their concerns of non-performance, a nun would have had no such access for individual arrangements. Yet, as the text shows, the priests perform the tasks apparently out of *caritas* rather than financial gain, as does the visionary.

The text does not address why the visionary was chosen instead of one of the sisters and why the nuns have failed in their Christian obligations to Margaret. This is why the anonymity of the visionary is fundamental to the success of the text. If the woman could be identified as a nun, then the message loses its power. Similarly, any explicit reference to her in the text would have taken the audience's focus away from the purpose of the vision.

One explanation for the visionary's identity never being revealed is that she is a construct. All the other fifteenth-century visions are eponymously titled. Whilst three of them: *Liversedge*, *Newton* and *Stranton* are specifically named, even the status of *The Monk of Eynsham*, is denoted in the text. This is not the case in *Revelation*. If the woman is the product of a (probably) male author, then issues such as the role of the female in teaching and politics are rendered moot subjects, as would the notion of the vision as a real experience.

Perhaps talk of truth and veracity are irrelevant in late medieval writing. Whilst the actual events may not be true – and the timeframe of the visionary's tasks does stretch the limits of credibility – the message it transmits contains “the Truth”. That is the religious and spiritual truths contained in the text are more relevant than whether the event actually took place.

Presuming this to be a feasible proposition, then the use of the dream vision (as opposed to the standard visionary topoi) is of less relevance than the purpose of waking portions of the text. If, as with *Leveredge* and the others, the visionary were ill for three days she would be unable to perform the tasks set for her by Margaret. Concomitantly, the audience would not see the efficacy of the rituals carried out on the nun's behalf. That Margaret's time in Purgatory is shortened by three years and she suffers less during her stay are the fruits of the visionary's labour and proof of the beneficial operation of the system within the Communion of the Living and the Dead.

The basics of a Christian life are penance, good works and alms giving. This applies to both the living for themselves and for the dead as a result of the effect of acts or omissions of the living. Within *Revelation*, only the first two are witnessed in action. Margaret's failure to complete her penance, whether that was the pilgrimage or another action not described in the text, leads to her suffering the torments of the great fire. Conversely, it is the good works by the visionary and priests that expiate her sins and bring her to the Earthly Paradise. Unsurprisingly, alms giving is only mentioned in passing in the text, as a nun who has taken a vow of poverty is unlikely to be in the position of distributing her wealth, as all property should have been held in common by the community.

The relationship between the Church Temporal and Church Militant is one of the most defining features of late medieval Catholicism. However, these complete only two sides of the story, with the Church Triumphant forming the third point and apex of the triangle. Within the text the visionary denotes the Temporal, Margaret the Militant and St Laurence the Church Triumphant. The covert references to the Last Judgement at the end of the text serves as a

reminder to the audience that there will come a day when both temporal states of Earth and Purgatory will cease to exist and then it will only be the Church Triumphant in the form of Heaven that continues for eternity. The Communion of the Living and the Dead, then, is not only concerned with the ephemeral matter of purgatorial experience; it more importantly points to the Last Judgement when all Christians who are saved will be part of the Church in Heaven.

Whilst the idea of being all one in the Holy and Catholic Apostolic Church is central to the faith, the late medieval period particularly in England was more often than not one of parochial matters and issues. In many ways it might be said that England was comprised of a number of Holy and Catholic Apostolic Churches, all of them worshipping slightly differently from their neighbouring county or village.

Therefore, even though the message of Purgatory is in some ways a universal one, texts of this period are usually going to betray their local origins. This is particularly true of *Revelation*, which names six historical priests from specific localities, as well as the purgatorial spirit of Margaret and a text directed to a specific audience. It is difficult, however, to state whether any of the practices referred to were part of local rituals, although as argued above, the masses appear to owe their existence to literary antecedents. This highly localised text appears to undermine the concept of a universal Catholic Church and certainly any claims of a monolithic Church that systematically controlled the worship of its people is not supported by the text.

The parochial nature of *Revelation* also undermines its universality to Christian communities. Despite the Introit widening its audience to include all those who read the treatise, its content perhaps restricts its appeal. That it is found in two of the greatest fifteenth-century miscellanies is perhaps more a testament to the acquisitive nature of the scribes than it is of any broadening of the audience for *Revelation*. However, even if the text did not achieve the universal appeal of visionaries such as St Bridget, either at the time it was written or in subsequent academic study, this does not detract from the text's purpose, which was to educate and warn in equal measure.

Unfortunately, there is no further documentation to show whether this text achieved its desired outcome. Rather ironically, however, we do know what happened to one of the priests a few years after the alleged vision took place.

In 1425, the following case was heard at Piepowder Court, Winchester on “Wednesday before the feast of SS Simon and Jude 4 Henry VI (24 October 1425):

The plea is brought by John Miller and his wife, Johanna, executrix of the will of Henry Ferthyng, her late husband, against Richard Bone, cleric, who is charged with unjust detention of the goods and chattels of Henry Ferthyng. (*Winchester City Archives*, 1425)

The outcome of the case does not appear to have survived. However, it does confirm that the reform *Revelation* appears to be promoting might have needed extension to a far wider audience than just the nuns.

Mary Douglas notes that “The whole universe is harnessed to men's attempts to force one another into good citizenship” (Douglas, 1980, p.3). This text can be seen as an attempt to

force others into obeying community rules. If there is a note of criticism in *Revelation*, it is that those called to the religious life should live up to the qualities they espouse, even if that is higher than is expected of the laity. The religious are punished far more in Purgatory than the secular, not because they have committed more heinous sins (the secular adulterers suffer less), but because they are called to a higher service. At its heart this text is an uncompromising vision not of Purgatory, but of what the religious life should encompass.

Hopefully an analysis of this text proves that it deserves more academic study than it has received in the past. Whilst it is true that it lacks the sustained discourse of *The Monk of Eynsham* or the eccentricities of *Liversedge*, it is nevertheless a text that addresses issues that were prevalent in late medieval society. There are a number of areas that are ripe for further study. The relationship of the text to St Bridget's vision has never fully been established. Margery Kempe is contemporaneous with the author of *Revelation*, although living in Norfolk, and it would be interesting to see whether a comparative study helps to enlighten both or either of the texts. This is of particular interest, as Erler believes *Revelation* might have links with the reforms that were occurring at the Brigittine House of Syon, a place that Margery visited. On a more historical note, it would be useful to have more information (if the records still exist) of the diocese of Winchester at this period and the role the clergy played in everyday life. There is plenty more work to do on this text. In the past twenty three years since Harley first published her edited version of the text there has only been a handful of articles on *Revelation*. Perhaps it is time to renew her plea that this text deserves more academic attention than it has to date received.

18,020 words

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