

The Paradox of Evil: a Study of Elevation Through Oppression

April Anson

Abstract

For medieval mystical women, the ability to maintain two opposite concepts simultaneously is seemingly requisite for spiritual development. Women understood their nature as both inferior and worthy, wholly evil while righteous; spiritual quest for God necessitated an internalization and embodiment of paradox. In a close study of Julian of Norwich and Marguerite Porete, the female manifestation of contradiction can be seen to allow for an exceptional identification and unification with the ultimate paradox of divine-in-human Christ. In short, by virtue of gender, she can approach union with divinity. In a reading that integrates critics such as David Aers, Carolyn Bynum Walker and Nicholas Watson with Cleanth Brooks, the mystics' internalization and use of paradox to achieve inclusion places the medieval mystic in a poetic role. Not through rejection, but through embrace of her "evil" nature, the female mystic is seen to unify both herself to Christ and all to God. In this, one can trace use of the paradox as a figure of speech in the writing of Julian of Norwich and Marguerite Porete, linking their writing with their perception of their complicated role in the Church and in mystic discourse.

Key Words: Paradox, Julian of Norwich, Marguerite Porete, mystic discourse.

1. Medieval Gender

For medieval mystical women, the ability to maintain two opposite concepts simultaneously seems to be requisite for spiritual development. Not only were women asked to comprehend humanity's otherness from God, as women, they were assumed subservient to men and, paradoxically, as able to receive redemption as their male counterparts; women understood their nature as both inferior and worthy, lesser than and equal to. Thus, women's spiritual quest for God necessitated an internalization of paradox. Ultimately, their experiential spirituality dictated not just an acceptance of these paradoxes, but an ownership over them, inverting established notions of spiritual conventions. As paradox pairs two opposites together to render a

greater truth, it is inclusive by nature, bringing two supposed inconsistencies into unity. In Medieval mysticism, the female mystic embodies paradox, just as the divine-in-human Christ. Therefore, mystical women's internalization of and submission to contradictory notions allows them greater identification with Christ. In short, by virtue of her gender she can approach unification with divinity, a poetic wedding unavailable to rational discourse. Women's use of paradox to invert conventional edicts to *include* places the medieval mystic a poetic role, as according to Jane Ferrante, 'only in lyric poetry and mystical writings... does woman remain a force for good'.¹ The poetry of paradox is the primary tool of the mystics as they seek to unify both themselves to Christ and all to God. By viewing these women's writing as poetry, the text becomes metaphor and readers are no longer excluded by doctrine, dogma, or dictate.

2. The Mystics' Role

This study will focus on two women known for the most radical reversal in traditional theology: the belief in the female nature of God. Quite fittingly, Julian of Norwich and Marguerite Porete represent opposite sides of mysticism's scope. Julian, from English conservatism was, and is, widely embraced.² In contrast, Marguerite Porete, from the more visionary spirituality of medieval Continental women was burned at the stake for heresy.³ However, Julian and Marguerite's similarities extend far beyond their feminization of God to the core of binary ideas they transpose. Since dualism was inherent in Christian doctrine, Muriel Whitaker states that 'women in medieval Christendom bore a double burden: the inferiority of having been created from Adam's rib and the guilt of having, through disobedience, lost Paradise and condemned the race to pain, sin and death'.⁴ This guilt was only a *portion* of the two-fold nature of religious thought. According to Carolyn Walker Bynum, the world was split into 'intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgment/mercy, and order/disorder'.⁵

These divisions produced 'massive inequalities within the same class, and within the same social group'.⁶ In the subordinate role, Luce Irigaray states that there is 'only one "path," the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation'.⁷ Regarding this, Bynum states: 'Women saw the humanity-physicality that linked them with Christ as in continuity with, rather than reversal from, their ordinary experience of physical and social vulnerability...Thus women reached God not by reversing what they were, but by sinking more fully into it'.⁸ In her introduction to *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, Jane Chance states that by establishing their own authority and rejecting conventions, women make themselves texts.⁹

This is not a dramatic shift in ideology, however. Medieval worship and interpretation was grounded in a type of readership; religious followers were adept at exegesis through glosses and illuminated manuscripts as well as a host of everyday signs. Moreover, John 1:1 states, 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'.¹⁰ The nature of religious pursuit was grounded in a conversation of literacy. For Christian women in particular, it is pertinent that the Genesis story tells of Adam *naming* Eve; Eve's identity emanates from a linguistic act. Because of this, Jane Chance states that the 'ontological status of woman is, then, analogous to a form of poetic discourse'.¹¹ Indeed, it is the paradox of a woman's body that aligns the mystic with Christ; Christ's debased human form is *mimicked* in God's revelation of himself in so weak a creature as woman.¹² Woman as both inferior and worthy, corporeal and spiritual, mirrored Christ as, ultimately, the divine-in-human Christ is the apogee of paradox. *Christianity* can be seen as a 'superhuman paradox whereby two opposite passions may blaze beside each other'.¹³

Just as the idea of God as human seems irrational, so the use of what Cleanth Brooks terms a 'hard, bright, [and] witty' tool as paradox in an emotional rather than intellectual form, is equally illogical.¹⁴ Paradox has been conventionally linked with the pragmatic and analytical, however, Brooks maintains 'the truth with which the poet utters can be approached *only in terms of paradox*'.¹⁵ Brooks states paradox works to inform a poem, deriving power from internal conflicts. Much like female mystics of the Middle Ages, poetry's use of paradox disrupts, but through this disorder, creates accord; the 'poetry of paradox' or the 'poetry of inclusion' provides a reminder of the facets of reality with which logic cannot cope.¹⁶ It follows that the mystics' *embodiment* of opposites, an illogical shift, affords them a 'form of poetic discourse' - her body is used to create the poetry of paradox *in-Christ*, the poetry of inclusion.¹⁷

This imaginative fusion requires the mystic to participate in the visionary experience, at once within her self and outside herself;¹⁸ she must envision Christ *through* her, as she becomes mirror for his divinity. Yet, this mirroring is only through the paradoxical emptying of self. As Irigaray reveals, the mystic must say, 'I have become your image in this nothingness that I am, and you gaze upon mine in your absence of being... A living mirror, thus, am I. We are both singular and plural, one and ones'.¹⁹ This living mirror discloses, according to Henri Lefebvre, the relationship between self and soul, consciousness and body, because it transforms self into a sign of what self is.²⁰ The mystic becomes a signifier for Christ; her body is his divinity. To achieve this unity through contradiction, Julian of Norwich and Marguerite Porete utilize paradoxes of the body, specifically within the bodies of God, the Church, and the Individual as mirror for the divine.

3. Julian of Norwich

In Julian can be seen the cautious spirituality of England. However, even the cautious Julian worked to upend some of the most orthodox beliefs of her time. In her essay ““God fulfilled my bodye”” Maria Lichtman states, ‘Julian’s notions of the union of opposites in God and the non-dualist vision of the self have a non-rational bodily origin, reflecting a female capacity, the capacity of the womb, to hold otherness and opposition within itself’.²¹ Julian’s most obvious utilization of paradox lies in her feminization of God. She writes, ‘This fair, lovely word “mother,” it is so sweet and so tender in itself that it cannot truly be said of any but of him’.²² In fact, Julian devotes many chapters to the motherly nature of God; She says,

I understood three ways of seeing motherhood in God: the first is that he is ground of our natural creation, the second is the taking on of our nature (and there the motherhood of grace begins), the third is the motherhood of works.²³

Conceptualizing a female God, Julian must entertain a fusion of traditional opposites, the *motherhood* is called *he*; Rachel Jacoff states that the power of the female God was precisely because it countered the image of a powerful and judging father.²⁴ The *power* of the portrayal is achieved through paradox.

Julian was deeply aware of the inherent incompatibilities between her visions and the orthodox hierarchy. Her observations contrast the ‘kind and lovely judgment’ of God with the ‘lower judgment’ of the Holy Church.²⁵ The polarity between God’s stable judgment and the wavering judgment of man upended established notions of the Church body. In Julian’s well known parable of a Lord and a Servant, the servant is ‘blissfully rewarded for ever, more than he would have been if he had not fallen’.²⁶ The paradox of receiving spiritual honor because of a fallen nature directly opposed what the Church conceived of as *systematic* means to God.²⁷ Further, Julian portrays sin as powerless. She sees sin as ‘diametrically opposed’ to God, yet says ‘to God, two opposites could never exist in one place’.²⁸ If sin is the antipode of God, and two opposites cannot exist to God, sin must not exist. Thus, Julian resolves early on, ‘sin is nothing’.²⁹ In both her subversion of the Holy Church’s judgment and view of sin, Julian utilizes paradox to invert authority. She finds in the ‘coexistence of opposites’³⁰ a freedom that applies to every person, no matter where in orthodox order, as Julian says, ‘no man can separate himself from another’.³¹ Through her exploration of paradoxical imagery and theology, she is able to say ‘in him we are enclosed and he in us’.³² Here man becomes a created form, a mirror, of God’s uncreated nature. Seeing her feminine nature as a mirror of divinity, Julian’s transformed body is the medium through which she comes to know God.³³

Thus, as Jane Chance states, ‘in reconciling opposites, she moves away from the separatist insistence of the patriarchal tradition’.³⁴ Julian

resolves, 'for in man is God, and so in man is all'.³⁵ The result is the dissolution of the binaries she avails, repositioning herself (and everyone) along side Christ.

Nicholas Watson states 'Julian, like [Marguerite] Porete, accepts the social models that define proper female activity, but does so in a way that fundamentally shifts (and in some respects even inverts)'.³⁶ Paradoxical language and the resulting accord in Julian's work can be seen as equally potent in Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Although Julian was and is widely accepted while Porete condemned for heresy, both women's embodiment and employment of paradox unite not only themselves and others to God, it unites the reader to their poetic message, reading it as open, inclusive metaphors instead of literal dictates.

4. Marguerite Porete

In her *Mirror*, Marguerite Porete resolves the dialectic between God's presence and absence in the soul by unsaying the male 'He-God'.³⁷ For Porete, gender was a 'fulcrum for overturning ecclesiastical hierarchy both in its internal and external forms'.³⁸ The utilization of the female pronoun for divine is the first instance of Porete's inversions. Porete states 'God is Love' and writes 'Love holds me so completely in her domain'.³⁹ The Soul is also represented as feminine when she says, 'Here the Soul begins her song'.⁴⁰ Thus, the merging of the female soul into the female God is *strictly* a feminine amalgam; Porete reinforces this by stating, 'Divine Love tells me that she has entered within me'.⁴¹ In addition to the feminization of God, Michael Sells argues that Marguerite subverts the traditional composition of the trinity for one that consists of *Dame Amour*, FarNear, and the Annihilated Soul.⁴² *Dame Amour* is a third of the feminine God Marguerite speaks of; the second is her idea of the FarNear, a paradoxical explication of God's being. She says, 'His Farness is the more Near'.⁴³ The annihilated soul, the third in the new trinity, is the last paradoxical remaking of the traditional trinity. Like Julian, Marguerite finds a living unity with God incongruously through the annihilation of self. She says 'Soul is nothing, for she sees nothingness by means of the abundance of divine understanding, which makes her nothing and places in her nothingness'.⁴⁴ This annihilation is extolled specifically when the Soul states:

Lover, you have grasped me in your love, to give me your great treasure, that is, the gift of your own self, which is divine goodness. The heart cannot express this, but willing pure nothingness purifies [the heart].⁴⁵

This captivity, inaction, nothingness, is the *active* purification of the heart. Marguerite laments 'those who are governed by Reason and Fear, Desire, Work and Will, and who know not the grand nobility of being ordered by nothingness'.⁴⁶ Not only does Love reject virtues such as Reason and Work,

she also paradoxically finds shape in nothingness. Marguerite imagines a kind of mutual absorption where these two absolute opposites – God and the soul – may ultimately unite. The destruction of self, paradoxically, possesses the power to unify.

Not only was her feminization of God in opposition to established mores, her insistence on the individual's direct access to God challenged the Holy Church's control of authorization. Marguerite sees divine Love as reflected through her when she says, 'Love causes [the book] to be written'.⁴⁷ She rejects the notion of an established church, favoring one comprised of Free Souls. She stresses that the Freed Soul can have constant vision of the divine nature, opposing the Church's long held belief in 'only transient moments of illumination'.⁴⁸ For Marguerite, the Church was no longer the sole means to salvation.⁴⁹ Lichtmann writes, Marguerite's '*Mirror* catches reflections not only of the interior life of the soul, but, through inversion, of the kind of church and society in which "simple souls" could flourish'.⁵⁰ In recreating God through feminine terms, refashioning the trinity and removing intermediaries, Marguerite undercuts the institutionally endorsed channels to truth; her destabilizing power occurs through the paradoxes she harnesses in service of her unifying message.

5. Elevation Through Oppression

In this, Marguerite assumes the role of the poet- she employs paradox to achieve singularity. Similarly, Julian utilizes the same bodily inversions to achieve the same amalgamation. The power of these women's corporeal reversals convert 'subordination into affirmation by a deliberate assumption of the cultural femininity which thwarts the claims of the dominant masculine theological discourse of her times through her incorporation of *all humanity* within the concept of the feminine'.⁵¹ It is this inclusion that stood in marked contrast to orthodoxy; in a community that thought them inferior and subordinate, Julian and Marguerite read their declaim and find a paradoxical divine elevation because of it. Specifically, just as they are paradoxes so, too, Christ represents the highest form of such inversion. In this unification through paradox, Brooks would find that Julian and Marguerite assume the role of poet, wielding paradox's inclusive power to allow them not only a path to guide all to God, but a bodily identification with Christ that is only available to those who can truly *embody* paradox as He did. In this way, Julian and Marguerite's message is as Irigaray says, 'A living mirror, thus, am I. We are both singular and plural, one and ones'.⁵² The mystics' gender empowers and precipitates a unity specifically female, and more *Christian* than the hierarchy of orthodoxy would have ever imagined. Specifically, and paradoxically, their oppression allows their elevation. In this way, these mystical women are models of poetic *pro-*creation that any reader, religious or otherwise, can find encouraging.

Notes

- ¹ Joan M. Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature from the Twelfth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 3.
- ² Nicholas Watson, 'The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*' *Speculum* 68 (1993): 653.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 637.
- ⁴ Muriel Whitaker, 'Introduction: Roles of Women in Middle English Literature,' in *Sovereign Lady: Essays on Women in Middle English Literature*, ed. Muriel Whitaker (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995) xi.
- ⁵ Carolyn Walker Bynum, ' "...And Women His Humanity": Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages' in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Carolyn Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 257.
- ⁶ David Aers, 'Class, Gender, Medieval Criticism, and *Piers Plowman*' in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature*, ed. Briton Harwood and Gillian Overing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 61.
- ⁷ Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Nurke (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1985) 76.
- ⁸ Carolyn Walker Bynum, ' "...And Women His Humanity", 274.
- ⁹ Jane Chance, ed. *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996) 12.
- ¹⁰ *The Holy Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). English New International Version.
- ¹¹ Chance, *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, 4.
- ¹² Luce Irigaray, 'La Mysterique' in *Speculum of Other Women* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) 199.
- ¹³ George DeWitt Castor, 'The Moral Paradox of Jesus' *The Biblical World* 40, no.1 (1912) 9.
- ¹⁴ Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1947) 3.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ¹⁶ William Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: a Short History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967) 618.
- ¹⁷ Chance, *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, 4.
- ¹⁸ Maria Lichtman, ' "God fulfilled my bodye": Body, Self, and God in Julian of Norwich' in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville: University of Press Florida, 1996) 264.
- ¹⁹ Irigaray, 'La Mysterique,' 197.
- ²⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 201.
- ²¹ Lichtman, ' "God fulfilled my bodye": Body, Self, and God in Julian of Norwich,' 273.
- ²² Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (London: Penguin Books, 1998) 142.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 140.
- ²⁴ Rachel Jacoff, 'God as Mother: Julian of Norwich's Theology of Love,' *Denver Quarterly* 18 (1983-4) 137.
- ²⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 79.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.
- ²⁷ Nicholas Watson, ' "Yf women be double naturally": Remaking "Women" in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Divine Love*,' *Exemplaria* 8, no. 1 (1996) 21.
- ²⁸ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 159.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ³⁰ Carmel Bendon Davis, *Mysticism and Space* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008) 234.
- ³¹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 150.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 130.
- ³³ Arlette Zinck, 'A Vindication of the Feminine,' *Sovereign Lady: Essays on Women in Middle English Literature*, ed. Muriel Whitaker (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995) 171.
- ³⁴ Chance, *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, 15.
- ³⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 10.
- ³⁶ Watson, ' "Yf women be double naturally", ' 7.
- ³⁷ Michael Sells, 'The Psuedo-Woman and the Meister' in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994) 114.
- ³⁸ Maria Lichtmann, 'Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart: *The Mirror of Simple Souls* Mirrored' in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994) 74.
- ³⁹ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993) 195.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 195.
- ⁴² Sells, 'The Psuedo-Woman and the Meister,' 141.
- ⁴³ Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 218.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁸ Robert D. Cottrell, 'Marguerite Porete's Heretical Discourse; or, Deviating from the Model Author(s),' *Modern Language Studies* 21, no. 1 (1991) 18.

⁴⁹ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 81.

⁵⁰ Lichtman, 'Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart,' 69.

⁵¹ Watson, '“Yf women be double naturally”,' 32.

⁵² Irigary, 'La Mysterique,' 197.

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April Anson, M.Ed. currently teaches and studies at the University of Trier in Trier, Germany. After completing her Master's of Arts in English at Portland State University, she hopes to continue at the doctoral level, researching in ecocriticism and medieval religious rhetoric.