

# ‘Idleness Breeds Disgust for the Cell’: Circumscribing Sloth, *Acedia* and Health in Anchoritic Literature

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## Abstract

In medieval England, devout individuals—women in particular—self-isolated professionally, living confined to little rooms attached to parish churches. Although discomfort constituted the heart of this vocation, guides written for these anchorites also envisage enclosure as bringing risks to physical and mental health. These risks map onto *acedia* and sloth, two overlapping sins against which these texts caution. I argue that the anchoritic cell as metaphor and matter mediates the anchoritic endeavour of generating *acedia* and sloth and overcoming them. Twinning a literary approach with a feedback model from cognitive behavioural therapy, my discussion juxtaposes two texts addressing female anchorites, the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse*, and *The Form of Living* by Richard Rolle (1300–1349) with two texts by female anchorites, *A Revelation of Purgatory* by an anonymous fifteenth-century anchorite and *A Revelation of Love* by Julian of Norwich (ca. 1343–ca. 1416). It probes whether, in these texts, the cell shifts the dynamics of the feedback loop from self-reinforcing to self-stabilizing or maintains these self-reinforcing dynamics. This discussion concludes by examining the stakes involved in the texts’ commitment to the cell’s ascetic materiality. Charting parallels to the home during COVID-19 lockdowns and historicizing the gendered physical and mental effects of (self-)isolation in narrow spaces, this analysis of medieval enclosure resonates with modern concerns about how confined spaces materialize power.

Keywords: *Ancrene Wisse*; Julian of Norwich; anchorites; *acedia*; lockdown

Modern lockdowns find an unexpected parallel across time in medieval professional self-isolators called anchorites: the term anchorite derives from Greek ‘ἀναχωρέω’, ‘to withdraw’ (Lampe 1961: s.v. *Ἀναχωρ-Εω*). In medieval England and on the Continent, these male or female religious devoted their lives to a walled-in existence. Living alone (in most cases)

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in a cell abutting a parish church or other sacred space,<sup>1</sup> these devout individuals—women in particular—spent their lives confined to little rooms in the name of their faith. Whereas modern lockdown was only a temporary predicament, this medieval voluntary isolation was a life-long commitment. The discomfort that this enclosure entailed constituted the heart of anchoritic existence, analogous to lockdown forming a key strategy to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> However, it brought risks to mental and physical health, just as lockdown is known to have affected mental health globally (Abbott 2021; Office of National Statistics 2020). Guides for anchorites believe these recluses particularly at risk of physical exhaustion, listlessness, despair, and a loathing of one's surroundings, states which will sound familiar to any reader who has self-isolated in the past years. The conditions to which these anchorites are vulnerable also map onto *acedia* (spiritual torpor or lethargy) and sloth, two overlapping sins or passions, against which these texts warn. This correspondence results in slippage between health conditions associated with the anchoritic life and sins which anchorites should resist. As matter and metaphor, the physical space of the cell scaffolds 'anchoritic rhetoric' (McAvoy 2008). Both the materiality of the cell and the significances bestowed upon that physical space inform how the anchorhold persuades its inhabitant and others to respond to it. Matter and meaning shape the cell's effect. Given that interplay, how does the cell contain these sins, in all senses of the word 'contain'?

My discussion pairs a literary approach with a methodology inspired by mind-body feedback models used in cognitive behavioural therapy (Troscianko 2017). It posits a feedback loop in the anchoritic endeavour of generating *acedia* and sloth and overcoming it (see Figure 1). That is, attempts to remedy the physical and mental effects read as *acedia* or sloth actually increase these effects. I argue that the cell as matter and metaphor mediates this feedback loop. I pair two texts addressing female anchorites, the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse*, and *The Form of Living* by Richard Rolle (1300–1349) with two texts by female anchorites, *A Revelation of Purgatory* by an anonymous fifteenth-century anchorite and *A Revelation of Love* by Julian of Norwich (ca. 1343–after 1416). My discussion probes

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<sup>1</sup> Some recluses lived in clusters of separate cells, however (Hughes-Edwards 2012: 13; Warren 1985: 33).

<sup>2</sup> Perk (2020b) also explores parallels between anchoritism and self-isolation and how anchoritic writing can speak to the pandemic moment.

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how each text charges the effects of enclosure on mental and physical health with moral significance. After introducing the anchoritic context, and associated complaints and sins, I investigate how the cell as matter and metaphor keeps the dynamics of the feedback loop between enclosure and *acedia* and sloth positive (self-reinforcing) or changes it to negative (self-stabilizing). The *Wisse* and *A Revelation of Purgatory* accomplish the former; *The Form of Living* and *A Revelation of Love* achieve the latter. Since this discussion resonates with contemporary ethical concerns about how confined spaces physically support oppressive power structures, I examine parallels to the home during COVID-19 lockdowns throughout. Finally, I delineate the stakes involved in the texts' commitment to the cell's ascetic material qualities.

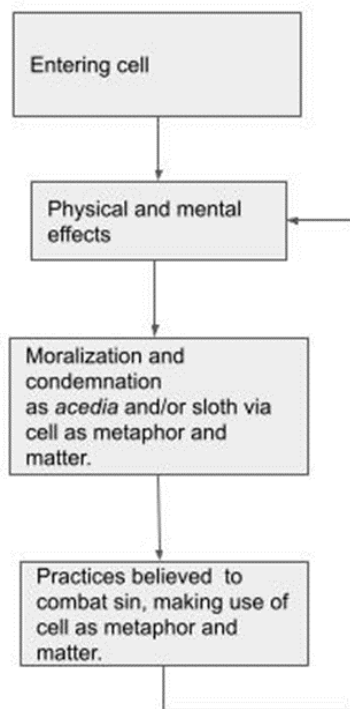


Figure 1. *Acedia* and sloth feedback loop

As a medical humanities enquiry, this discussion historicizes the effect of enclosed, isolated spaces on mental and physical health. Medical humanities concern themselves with ‘the complex mind-body entanglements that constitute our human lives’, and approaches wellbeing holistically (McAvoy 2017b). This discussion posits that anchoritic writing participates in the feedback loop between provoking *acedia* and sloth and combatting these conditions. I expand Monika Otter’s parenthetical comment in a footnote to her edition of the *Liber Confortatorius*, an epistolary work by Benedictine monk Goscelin of St Bertin (ca. 1035–1107), about these dynamics among the early Christian desert solitaries (2004: 80, n. 1). I follow Ayoush Lazikani (2017) in understanding these dynamics as persisting among anchorites in the high and late Middle Ages. The anchoritic texts under discussion contribute to and draw on this feedback pathway. In anchoritic writing, the cell as matter and as metaphor affects this feedback loop, with the cell changing the dynamics of the loop. The cell can make the dynamics of the loop reinforce itself more, that is, make it positive to a higher degree. It can also change the dynamics from reinforcing to self-stabilizing, that is, shift the dynamics from positive to negative. This feedback pathway and the interaction with the cell works as thus. After enclosure, living in the cell correlates with particular mental and physical complaints. Since these complaints map onto *acedia* and sloth, and are experienced in the anchorhold, these infirmities are understood as *acedia* or sloth. This diagnosis sparks condemnation and moralization of the mental and physical symptoms, which provoke the anchorites to combat this sin through ascetic practices. These practices harness the ascetic qualities of the cell. One potential source of the sin transforms into its cure and instrument of atonement. However, in this atonement, through the materiality of the cell, these practices generate the same physical and mental symptoms. In this fashion, the cure and the means of atonement provoke the very sickness and vice they remedy or alleviate.

#### *An anchoritic vice*

Anchorites were independent religious, under obedience to the bishop rather than to an abess. Guides for anchorites direct them to commit their life to praying various forms of the Divine Office, meditation, and spiritual counsel. Cate Gunn and Liz Herbert McAvoy observe: ‘while being set apart, the anchorite also occupied a pivotal role at the heart of the local

community: as role-model, confidante, intercessor and spiritual healer' (2017: 5). Female anchorites on the British Isles and the Continent outnumbered male ones for several centuries, with, for instance, a ratio of four female anchorites to one male anchorite in thirteenth-century Britain (Warren 1985: 19).<sup>3</sup> These women were often laywomen from various social strata (Warren 1985: 27, 28; Hughes-Edwards 2010: 141, 142). Although anchoritic guides envision an uncomfortable, cramped living space,<sup>4</sup> archaeological evidence and historical records suggest that actual cells varied in size from 2.43 square metres (8 square feet), the size of a smallish lift, to 64 square metres (696 square feet), the size of a spacious apartment (Jones 2019: 42, 43; Warren 1985: 32). The *Wisse* recommends three windows, one facing inwards, into the church, one 'house window', through which the servant could hand things to the anchorite, and one 'parlour window', through which the anchorite could offer counsel to her community (Millett 2009: pt. 2.15, 29). The rite of enclosure literally or metaphorically blocked up the door (Hughes-Edwards 2010: 143). Cells frequently abutted their churches' north face (Gilchrist 1995: 187–190), the shadow side, due to which the cell may have been damp and cold.<sup>5</sup> Given these harsh circumstances, the interplay between gender and anchoritic rhetoric reveals itself tellingly in a claim by *Dives and Pauper*, an early fifteenth-century prose dialogue expounding the Ten Commandments. According to this text, female anchorites were less likely to abandon their vocation than male anchorites (Barnum 1980: 92). Female anchorites, thus, were assumed better to endure the discomfort of the anchoritic experience.<sup>6</sup>

In light of the anchoritic life being a predominantly female vocation, this discussion contributes to endeavours to theorize this intersection of space, gender, and the interplay between human agency and object agency, and to debates revolving around the gendered importance of asceticism to medieval spirituality. Michelle Sauer has demonstrated how anchoritic

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<sup>3</sup> This essay adheres to scholarly consensus in preferring 'anchorite' over the Early Modern term ' anchoress' (cf. McAvoy 2010: 11, 12; Jones 2005: 9).

<sup>4</sup> Naturally, this cramped existence would not differ significantly from the experience of unenclosed laypeople, unless they came from a privileged background.

<sup>5</sup> Many medieval habitations may have been similar in this respect.

<sup>6</sup> Some evidence of women escaping the anchoritic life or requesting to be de-enclosed has come down to us, however (Jones 2019: 95–99).

writing and anchoritic lived experience collapse the cell and its female occupant. The cell materially and metaphorically extends the female anchorite's body; the architecture of the cell enclosing the 'feminine space' of the inside of the cell (Sauer 2013: 547; 2004). This article considers the cell as an agent of the anchorite's well-being, and as forming an ever-emerging assemblage with the anchorite's body, as philosopher of science Manuel De Landa (inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) would perceive this interplay (2016). The current enquiry, then, illuminates what kept women enclosed and why, and textures our understanding about what objects as matter and metaphor do to humans and other animals, and how. Moreover, anchoritic guides identify ascetic discomfort as a motivating factor for committing to the anchoritic life. In seeking these afflictions, medieval anchorites participated in the somatic asceticism both medieval authors and modern critics associate with medieval women's devotion. In critical debates of the past four decades, this association has remained a point of contention. These debates are pertinent here: asceticism constitutes a forerunner of anchoritism' (Sauer 2008: 97).<sup>7</sup> *Medical humanities* offers a vantage point from which to critique the physical, gendered risks of medieval asceticism generally and anchoritism in particular, while still historicizing ascetic and anchoritic bodies.<sup>8</sup> While I do not wish to speculate about the possible physical effects of historical enclosure practices and asceticism, historical records show that anchorites did fall ill (Jones 2019: 90–109). Attempts to moralize and condemn physical and emotional complaints as sins, therefore, constitute acts of gendered violence.

Casting a larger net around a greater number of anchoritic guides reveals evidence of physical and mental complaints associated with life inside the anchorhold. If bodies are performative and discursive (Butler

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<sup>7</sup> For comprehensive overviews of the debates around gender and *asceticism*, see Amy Hollywood (2016: 93–116), Barbara Newman (2017), and Dyan Elliott (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, anchorites chose enclosure, which required great effort. The aspirant anchorite had to find sufficient financial support, undergo a probation period (if she had not been a nun before), and write a *probatio* text, a letter responding to an assessment of the aspirant anchorite's suitability (Jones 2019: 15–41; Gillespie 2008: 404).

1993), medieval bodies do not correlate with twenty-first century bodies.<sup>9</sup> A modern individual's intuitive assumption that enclosure will inevitably harm one's health, therefore, elides the complexity of anchoritic embodiment. Nevertheless, while not explicitly presenting enclosure as causing bodily or mental infirmity, the anchoritic guides do envisage their addressees as prone to certain complaints, indicating that they expect anchoritic existence to correlate with these conditions. Two closely intertwined anchoritic complaints resisting any mind-body binary are restlessness and a lack of physical and mental energy. Exhortations against 'undisciplined thoughts', or mental restlessness, punctuate the *Wisse* (Millett 2009: pt. 5.3, 129). It also lists everyday mishaps that gesture to physical restlessness, ranging from minor accidents to dishes breaking (2009: pt. 5.35, 130). The thirteenth-century guidance text *Walter's Rule*, positing a male reader,<sup>10</sup> expects lethargy in the daytime: '[t]he Enemy has a way of sending feelings of lethargy outside the proper times for sleeping' (quoted in Jones 2019: 86). Anchoritic guides also expect exhaustion of mind, body and soul. In his *Liber*, Goscelin imagines his protégé Eve of Wilton (ca.1058–ca. 1125) as 'tired and exhausted after prayers' (Otter 2004: 170). This exhaustion sometimes shades into low spirits, *tedia*, akin to modern depression (Lazikani 2017: 149). Gastrointestinal complaints constitute another risk of the anchoritic life. Eulogizing physical weakness, Aelred charges that anyone 'whose bowels are wrung, whose stomach is dried up, will find any pleasure more of a burden than a delight' (MacPherson 1972: pt. 2.21, 69). These gastrointestinal symptoms possibly relate to fasting practices.

Besides being beset by physical complaints, solitaries were particularly susceptible to the sin of *acedia*. *Acedia* constitutes a spiritual and mental apathy partially imbricating with despair, indolence, and tedium, mapping onto the lethargy discussed above. Also called 'the noonday demon' (Psalm 90.6 in the Vulgate) for the hours between which it assaults religious as a kind of afternoon slump of the soul, *acedia* posed the greatest danger of all sins to early male and female desert solitaries

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<sup>9</sup> See also comments on neuroplasticity and the incommensurability of medieval and modern cognition in my discussion on Julian's writing as formally similar to knitting (Perk 2020a: 147, 148). For a lucid critique of endeavours to diagnose medieval mystics, see Juliette Vuille (2015).

<sup>10</sup> That construction need not imply that it was not read by female anchorites, however.

(Wenzel 1967: 3–22). According to hermit preacher Evagrius Ponticus (346–399), symptoms encompass, among others, the inability to sit still, emotional exhaustion, lethargy, somnolence, a loathing of the cell, a wish to flee the cell, and idealizing other places as offering an easier life and despair at the length of life still to be lived (Wenzel 1967: 4). All of these traits conspire to tempt the religious person to leave his cell, and in doing so, abandon what Evagrius calls ‘the race-course’ of the monastic life (cited in Wenzel 1967: 5). The cure consists in remaining in one’s cell, resigning oneself to this stability of place, and resisting the temptation to flee (Wenzel 1967: 7). In other words, recluses assume it possible to achieve stability of mind and body, while both the sin and its cure weaponize the cell. Since staying in the cell correlates with *acedia*, the cure exacerbates the complaints, as the feedback diagram visualizes.

Gender mediates this association. In medieval humoral theory, a phlegmatic humour (cold and moist) underpins a susceptibility to *acedia* and sloth (Wenzel 1967: 192; Langum 2016: 150–151) and resembles them. Colder and moister than men, women are phlegmatic by default. Criticizing women for their supposed inconstancy, Albertus Magnus charges: ‘[f]or a female complexion is moister than a male’s, but it belongs to a moist complexion to receive [impressions] easily but retain them poorly. For moisture is easily mobile’ (2008: 454). Women’s moist and cold bodies and minds, therefore, are dangerously vulnerable to outside influences, and by extension, more vulnerable to the restlessness, lethargy, and mental dissipation symptomatic of *acedia* and sloth.

Addressing high- and late-medieval enclosed women, anchoritic texts transform the spatial circumstances associated with the sin (or sickness moralized as sin) into its cure. In this manner, the association of *acedia* with solitaries persists in the later Middle Ages. The combination of idleness and the confined space of the cell particularly is seen as particularly dangerous. Cistercian abbot Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167) cautions his sister, an anchorite, in *A Rule of Life for a Recluse*: ‘Idleness [...] breeds [...] disgust for the cell’ (MacPherson 1972: pt. 1.9, 55). Anchoritic guides and penitential writing prescribe labour (in the form of praying, reading, and handicrafts) as a remedy for *acedia*. Medieval medicine and religious culture corroborate this treatment. The former understands idleness as corrupting the blood; the latter casts the sweat of physical and spiritual labour as a purgative for sloth (Rawcliffe 2013: 100;



Langum 2016: 153). Again, the sin harnesses the cell's matter and emotional valence, but the cell also constitutes its remedy.

*Acedia* and sloth overlap without being identical. By the thirteenth century, *acedia* twins two distinct vices, sorrow and indolence (Wenzel 1967: 193). In the later Middle Ages, *acedia* edges closer to sloth, which replaces it in the list of deadly sins. Such indolence is a deadly sin afflicting all believers (Wenzel 1967: 174–5). In fact, the *Wisse* is the earliest English vernacular text to refer to *acedia*, using the Middle English neologism 'accidie', which it glosses as 'slawthe' '[sloth]' and 'deadlich sar' '[terminal depression]', but also as 'deop þoht' '[obsessive thoughts]' (Millett 2005 and 2009: pt. 4.27, 39, p. 80, 86; Millett 2009: n. 4.83, 215). However, the earlier ascetic understandings of *acedia* continue to shape discussions of both sins and inform the physical complaints these sins are likened to (Langum 2016: 146). A medieval reimagining of earlier desert hermits and late-medieval lay believers, female anchorites are at risk of both *acedia* and sloth by being enclosed in a cell that is both a potential source of *acedia* and sloth and their cure.

Both sins associate themselves with symptoms aligning with the effects of enclosure. *Acedia* is frequently metaphorized as fever. Presenting it as 'particularly trying to solitaires', late fourth-century desert monk John Cassian (ca. 360–ca. 435) likens it to 'a fever which seizes [a solitary] at stated times, bringing the burning heat of its attack on the sick man at usual and regular hours' (Gibson 1894: bk. 10.1, 266). Late-medieval penitential and medicinal texts compare sloth to a range of complaints, including gout, gas, palsy and lethargy (Wenzel 1967: 108; Langum 2016: 146, 147). These descriptions tend to conflate similarity (sloth is like lethargy and vice versa) and causality (sloth brings about lethargy, or lethargy brings about sloth) (Langum 2016: 151). These symptoms map onto the complaints associated with the solitary life, inviting a diagnosis of these complaints as symptoms of *acedia* and sloth. Again, women's colder, moister bodies would have been believed to lead to greater vulnerability to these complaints. I now turn to how anchoritic literature participates in this feedback cycle, starting with two texts that keep the dynamics of the feedback loop self-reinforcing, before turning to texts that shift the dynamics to self-stabilizing.

*Reinforcing enclosure*

The *Ancrene Wisse* instrumentalizes the physical anchorhold to exacerbate *acedia* and sloth and combat them. Equating *acedia* and sloth, this Middle English guide for female anchorites, possibly authored by a Dominican, places sloth under sins of the body, likening it to sleep and prescribing reading and a variety in one's tasks as a cure (Millett 2005: pt. 4.84, 57, 105). It medicalizes sloth by reluctantly permitting bloodletting-induced lethargy but recommending imitating Christ's victory over such lethargy by his tireless labour. Cautioning against sloth by recommending meditation on Christ's salvific toil, the *Wisse* author admonishes:

look at how, in the evening of his life, he laboured on the hard cross. Others take a rest, avoid the light, hide themselves in their bedroom when they are let blood from a single vein in the arm; and he, on Mount Calvary, climbed higher still on the cross, and no one laboured as hard or as painfully as he did on that day when he bled streams of blood in five places from very broad and deep wounds [...] A very clear approach to the slow and to sleepers is his early rising from death to life. (Millett 2005: pt. 4.74, 98; 2009: pt. 4.74, 98)

The *Wisse* stages the sin in a 'chambre', a 'bedroom' or 'private chamber' (*MED* 2001 s.v. *chaumbre*), an anchoritic space. It thus charges post-bloodletting withdrawal into a corner with a sense of threat, especially in the light of the earlier analogy of sleep as sloth. Any sluggishness (whether physical or mental) in that confined space is coded as potential *acedia* or the sleep of sloth, requiring Christ's ministrations. However, the comparison between the anchorite and Christ casts the cross as an anchoritic space, and the material cell as a metaphorical cross, and by extension, into an instrument of redemption from sin. Within the context of regular bloodletting, the use of 'chambre' also images the cell as a curative blood bath that the *Wisse* will go on to visualize later, recalling bloody postpartum baths (McAvoy 2015a: 97–98). A site of asceticism and salvation, the material cell not only cleanses the anchorite from sloth and *acedia*; it also submerges the anchorite in these states, walling her in with the sins.

The *Wisse* revisits this endeavour in its advice on actual bloodletting, which it recommends undergoing four times a year (Millett 2009: pt. 8.27, n. 105). Although the *Wisse* does not specify who performs this procedure, barbers or barber-surgeons typically let blood, as did physicians, the latter often being clerics (Montford 2004: 235; Langum 2016: 11). In either case, the practitioner transforms into an avatar of Christ, the physician or

surgeon of the soul. At first glance, compassion suffuses the *Wisse* author's recommendations:

When you have been bled, you should not do anything for those three days that taxes your strength [...] Look after yourself so carefully during your bloodletting, and take things so easily, that you can labour more vigorously in God's service for a long time afterwards; and the same applies when you feel at all ill. It is very foolish to lose ten or twelve days for the sake of one. (Millett 2005: pt. 8.27, 161; 2009: pt. 8.27, 161)

Ostensibly sympathetic, the *Wisse*'s advice is edged with anxiety. Although I concur with McAvoy that 'in her own regular acts of phlebotomy within the anchorhold, both elective and non-elective, the anchoritic woman is able to unite conceptually with that of the phlebotomist-Christ' (2015a: 96), the text nevertheless fears anchorites will be unable to toil several days after one day of the ascetic labour of bloodletting. This logic recalls the *Wisse*'s earlier account of the economy of bloodletting: the individual does not have blood drawn from an unhealthy body part, but rather from a healthy part for the benefit of the diseased part. The *Wisse* then analogizes this logic to Christ's sacrifice on the cross for the sake of humanity's fever of sin (Millett 2005: pt. 2.45, 45; 2009: pt. 2.45, 45). In keeping with this economy, one day of ill-advised labour (whether working when ill or working by having blood let) should not draw strength from ten to twelve days. These descriptions of bloodletting, then, caution that any illness or any post-treatment lethargy easily slides into sloth and *acedia*. They warn that anchorites are ever at risk of degenerating into accidious individuals who withdraw to a corner of the room and demand more time for recovery than the allotted three days. To prevent such *acedia*, the anchorite requires the salvific asceticism of the cell.

Overall, the *Wisse*'s representation of the anchorhold as both redemptive and dangerous accords with Mari Hughes-Edwards' comment that anchoritic texts present the cell as a battleground on which 'the recluse [is forced] to confront all that is worst about her own sinfulness, and the permanency of the cell removes all hope of escape' (2012: 34). Both matter and meaning confine the anchorite to this site of conflict. In this interface between matter and meaning, the *Wisse* anticipates Sarah Ahmed's queering of the distinction between the matter of the body and the matter of spaces, in which '[s]paces are not exterior to bodies' but rather 'a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body' (2006: 9). The

cell sinks and seeps into the body. In this manner, the material anchorhold makes the feedback loop reinforce itself more.

In *A Revelation of Purgatory*, an anonymous Winchester anchorite's account of her vision of purgatorial punishments, the material cell plunges slothful and *acedia*-afflicted religious into their phlegmatic bodies, thus encouraging moralization and condemnation of particular complaints as *acedia* or sloth. The gendered instability of the cell inflects the punishment for sloth in this text, which understands sloth as a sin of the body. This conception aligns with sloth becoming more embodied: in the later Middle Ages, sloth shifted from a spiritual sin to one of the flesh (Wenzel 1967: 164–188). The visionary sees her demons torture her friend Margaret, a deceased nun, and other religious as both punishment and cleansing of their sins. Despite Margaret being a nun rather than an anchorite, her torments recall physical manifestations of anchoritic sins: '[a]nd then they drew her into deep black water that seemed as cold as any ice, and much of it seemed to my sight to be frozen. And they cast her into it and pushed her up and down and said, "Take this bath for your sloth and your gluttony"' (McAvoy 2017a: 106, lines 249–252; trans. 107). The lake is fashioned in the image of the cell, a cold space with limited light. Similarly, the female anchorite's body metamorphoses into its dwellings. Adapting the 'analogy between the stagnant body and stagnant water' (Langum 2016: 153), the vision deploys the image of a large, frozen, polluted body of water to immerse the sinners into their phlegmatic humour (cold and moist). This humour both resembles sloth and underpins a susceptibility to sloth (Wenzel 1967: 192; Langum 2016: 150, 151). As the demons submerge and lift up the nun, they break the ice, invoking the impressionability of phlegmatics, and that of women in particular, with their dangerously permeable bodies. Reading these resonances together, both the cell and the woman in the cell become both figuratively and literally unstable. The devils plunge Margaret into a cold, lethargic, female body, and confine that body to the cold, dark cell, creating an assemblage of the matter of the body and that of the cell.

Laura Saetveit Miles and Liz Herbert McAvoy have theorized the anchorhold, including Julian of Norwich's, as a Foucauldian *heterotopia* (Miles 2020: 41–78; 2008: 156; McAvoy 2008: 4; McAvoy 2015b). A heterotopia is an actual site that is an 'effectively enacted utopia' (Foucault 1986: 24). Here, *A Revelation of Purgatory* capitalizes upon the anchorhold's heterotopic capacity for 'juxtaposing in a single real place

several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault 1986: 25). The cell encompasses a space for purgatorial penance, the lake, and a site in which both the visionary religious and the deceased religious dwell. These correspondences root the sin in the unstable anchoritic body and the cell, thus recommending condemnation of the physical complaints as *acedia* and sloth. In this manner, the physical cell makes the feedback loop reinforce itself more.

Analogously, the home during lockdown supports a similarly gendered double bind. During the lockdowns of the pandemic of COVID-19, lockdown measures prescribed staying indoors for the sake of the general population and health service, constructing the home as a fortress against the pandemic (although health services such as the NHS did allow for fleeing from the house in case of danger). In this discourse, the onus of keeping the home virus-free was placed on women's shoulders in particular: one heteronormative NHS Facebook advertisement from January 2021 (withdrawn after online backlash) showed four houses, with female figures caring for a baby, teaching (female) children, and cleaning, while only one house contained a male figure, lounging with his female partner and child (Beachum 2021). As in the rhetoric of the anchorhold, the house extends its female inhabitant's body; like the home, she is expected to offer stability for others' safety. Domestic enclosure saves, but condemns female inhabitants to unceasing care. Accordingly, like the anchorhold, the physical space props up particular constructions of gender, with the home, too, becoming an instrument of salvation and damnation. The remainder of this paper examines how anchoritic literature intervenes in the tapestry of interactions between the cell's matter and meaning by shifting the dynamics of the feedback loop to self-stabilizing.

#### *Stabilizing enclosure*

In Rolle's *Form of Living*, a letter to the anchorite Margaret Kirkby, the metaphorical cell figures the boundaries that prevent ascetic practices from crossing over into *acedia*- and sloth-engendering excess. Having warned against excessive fasts and wakes as showing a lack of sense ('skyll') and discernment, Rolle cautions against any actions that result in lack of strength to pray and meditate. Believers should be capable of worshipping God for their entire lives, instead of 'wast[ing] his strength in a little, short time, and then lie moaning and groaning by the wall' (Ogilvie-Thomson 1988: 4, lines 66–69; Jones 2019: 75). This lethargy, self-pity and

incapacity to execute divinely assigned tasks connote *acedia* and sloth. Any devotional exercise might escalate into these sins. Nevertheless, Rolle recommends ascetic exercises as a 'remedy' for various sins including despair; he prescribes 'prayer, Hail Maries, fasts, wakes' (Ogilvie-Thomson 1988: 7, line 156).<sup>11</sup> A moderate amount of physical weakness is salvific. Paradoxically, the moderate amount of physical infirmity Rolle recommends prevents spiritual infirmity from spilling out.

The cell signifies these bounds. The boundaries preventing these prayers, genuflections, fasts and wakes from descending into *acedia*-causing excess consist not just of the religious individual's reason and discernment, but also of Christ's skill as a physician of the soul. In addition to 'reason' and 'judgment' (*MED* 2001 s.v. *skil*), the modern meaning of technical competence also resounds in Rolle's use of 'skyll' to denote the capacity to keep asceticism in check. This resonance points to Christ's ministrations as the physician of the soul. In a list brimming with medical vocabulary, Rolle urges Margaret never to cease meditating upon Christ: meditation 'purges from sin [...] clarifies your soul [...] ends sluggishness' (Ogilvie-Thomson 1988: 18, lines 616–617). When believers visualize Christ, Christ cleanses them from sin in a manner analogous to how a medieval physician treats the body by prescribing a purgative. Physician Christ also clears up the inner complexion and cures lethargy. For Rolle, the anchoritic life requires both the individual's continuous discretion and Christ's ministrations, which contain and enclose fasts and wakes, preventing them from becoming excessive. Christ serves as the anchorhold containing ascetic excess that might lead to *acedia*.

As a metaphor, the cell also intervenes in the connection between combatting sloth and *acedia* and provoking it by signifying and containing pre-enclosure sinfulness. Although not expressly mentioning sloth and *acedia*, Rolle opens his text with three forms of 'wrechedness', sinful conditions, leading to damnation (Ogilvie-Thomson 1988: 3, line 2). One such inclination consists of 'a lack of spiritual strength' (3, line 3). Here, Rolle analogizes a lack of spiritual strength to insufficient physical strength by attributing sinners the inability to raise their hearts towards God (3, lines 3–5) due to the weakness of their hearts. The metaphorical heart turns into a physical heart, a muscle. This deficient energy overlaps

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<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

with both sloth and *acedia*, which converge in despair and lethargy. Moreover, the sinful attitude encloses sinners; their metaphorical cardiac weakness imprisons them within their sin. These enclosure echoes also resound in the opening, in which individuals are ‘bound in mortal sin’ (3, line 3) with ‘bounden’ also denoting monastic duties or vows (*MED* 2001 s.v. *bīnden*). The container of the anchorite’s body can carry sin, including sloth and *acedia*, into the cell. Consequently, the enclosed life ever entails the risk of excess, which leaves both cell and body porous and open to one another. Only continuous enclosure in Christ holds this permeability in check. However, this metaphorization of the cell also determines engagement with the material cell. Deploying Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the *habitus* to theorize Egyptian monasticism, Darlene Brooks Hedstrom contends that a monastic cell shapes the religious, with devotional practices embedding the cell in the nun or monk (2009: 760–763), a translation process Sauer charts within anchoritism (2013). If places ‘become particular spaces only when individuals become engaged with that space’, by which they achieve ‘some power over and to the place through their actions and beliefs’ (Brooks Hedstrom 2017: 67), engaging with the cell as a signifier of Christ’s body fosters awareness of his care. In this manner, the anchorhold as metaphor and matter shifts the dynamics of the feedback loop from self-reinforcing to self-stabilizing.

Equally material and figurative, the cell transforms into a universal waiting room for heaven in Julian of Norwich’s writing. In the long version of *A Revelation of Love*, a work of vernacular theology and an account of a series of visions received in 1373, Julian modulates contemporary medicalization of *acedia* and sloth, spiritualizing *acedia* into homesickness for heaven and changing the dynamics of the feedback loop. Given in response to her desire to be delivered from life on earth, a stark vision in her fifteenth, penultimate revelation dramatizes this communal *acedia*:

I saw a body lying on the earth, a body which looked dismal [*hevy*] and ugly, *without shape and form*, as if it were a *swollen, heaving mass [swylge] of stinking mire*. And suddenly out of this body sprang a very beautiful creature, a little child *perfectly shaped and formed*, swift and full of life, whiter than a lily, which quickly glided up into heaven. And *the bloatedness of the body* signifies the great wretchedness of our mortal flesh, and the smallness of the child signifies the cleanness of purity in the soul. And I thought, ‘None of this child’s beauty remains with this body, nor does any of this body’s foulness remain on this child. It is more blessed for man to be taken from suffering than for suffering to be taken from man; for if suffering be taken from us it

may come back again. Therefore it is a supreme comfort and a blessed perception for a loving soul that we shall be taken from suffering.’ (Watson and Jenkins 2006: 64.23–34; Windeatt 2015: 137, emphasis added)

The cell as matter and metaphor underpins this revelation. At first glance, this vision ostensibly accords with the anchoritic rhetoric outlined earlier, in which anchorhold and anchorite are equally phlegmatic. The building and the inhabitant spark *acedia* and sloth in one another. A large, distended mass, the body presents the impression of physical weight dragging one down associated with *acedia*, sloth, and depression (Lazikani 2017: 143). Splatted onto the soil, this blob emblemizes how an *acedia*-afflicted believer feels God to be distant or even absent. It also likewise suggests the shapeless, wall-less permeability of an acciduous cell. Drawing on the metaphorization of the stagnant human body (and by metonymy, the cell enclosing that body) as a stagnant body of water (Langum 2016: 153), she repeatedly likens this particular body to a bog. Editors Nicholas Watson and Jaqueline Jenkins gloss ‘swylge’ as denoting both ‘bog’ and ‘swelling’ (2006: 410, n. 25). The stench and tactile impression of a shapeless mass imbue the simile with a synesthetic repulsiveness, redolent of the anchoritic trope of the stench of sin pervading the anchorhold (Millett 2005: pt. 5.21, 124). However, this body does not stand for the embodiment *per se*, which would jar with the compassionate thrust of the other revelations. Rather, the cell remakes and is remade: Julian reconfigures the association with of the material cell with physical complaints and the cell as a metaphor of an acciduous, slothful body.

Instead, this body signifies the *acedia* and sloth of earthly existence. The slothful body and the reference to ‘wretchedness’ hark back to the beginning of the same chapter, which deploys the same term. Opening the chapter on a confessional note, Julian admits to wishing to depart from this life, contrasting earthly trials with heavenly bliss. She condemns this longing as springing from her sloth, wretchedness, and spiritual lethargy (Watson and Jenkins 2006: 64.1–6; Windeatt 2015: 136). However, her subsequent confession is also suggestive of *acedia*: Julian fears being unable to persist in living and is loath to perform the labour with which God has charged her (64.7; 136). The chapter then moves from Julian’s individual wretchedness in the opening meditation to universal wretchedness in the vision. This shift from personal to communal indicates that the body in its resemblance to a mire signifies the *acedia*-affected tendencies of human existence in its sin-afflicted, time-bound longing for



God. That body emblemizes the human body according to ‘the story that sin tells’ (Turner 2011: 92), that is, as experienced when we believe ourselves to be separated from God instead of seen from God’s compassionate, ever-loving perspective. In sum, to Julian, corporality as such is not ‘foul’. By extension, the somatic aspects of *acedia* that the cell provokes are not odious either, but rather to be treated with compassion.

The cell scaffolds Julian’s transformation. The flashes of Annunciation iconography in the gliding *homunculus* and white lilies recall anchoritic texts presenting Mary as enclosed in an anchorhold-like space (Miles 2020: 41–77). This imagery points to rebirth through Christ’s Incarnation, his becoming matter. However, since Julian detaches both *acedia* and sloth from the body, she also detaches it from the anchoritic cell as a metaphorical and metonymic emblem of that body. Instead, in her deployment of ‘oure’ and her ascribing no gender to the body or the child (avoiding the devotional commonplace of the soul as female), she understands all her fellow believers, whether religious or lay, across time to live an *acedia*-afflicted life *and* participate in God’s holiness simultaneously. Julian encompasses all in the anchorhold, as Miles concludes: ‘[s]he has a secure room of her own, and so she can afford to open wide the door of her vision’ (Miles 2008: 131). Julian unravels the associative mesh of sloth, *acedia* and the anchorhold. She rewrites the ‘not yet’ and ‘not here’ of *acedia* and the desire to flee the cell as a holy lovesickness in which both believer and Christ participate (cf. Langum 2016: 150). She also reconfigures the cell into a heterotopia larger on the inside, spanning eternity (cf. McAvoy 2015b: 105). In this manner, the cell as matter and metaphor changes the dynamics of the feedback loop from self-reinforcing to self-stabilizing.

Julian’s and Rolle’s compassion speaks to the pandemic predicament, and invite as much compassion for other bodies as for one’s own. The pandemic saw a decline in emotional well-being and increase in anxiety across the globe (Abbott 2021; Office for National Statistics 2020). Lockdown also correlated with a marked increase in domestic abuse incidents and cries for help from victims (Refuge’s National Domestic Abuse Helpline 2021; Stripe 2020). For individuals with mental health problems, learning disorders and developmental disorders, that same space walls them in with their inner demons, locks out opportunities for assistance, and restricts access to routines. In the case of domestic abuse, the home under lockdown imprisons the victim with his or her abuser. For

Rolle and Julian, no space should endanger one's physical and mental health or scaffold excessive self-mortification; instead, they encourage ameliorative enclosure in a safe space with access to care, even if that means leaving behind the apparent haven of the home to find such an actually safe location.

### *Conclusion*

Anchoritic writing textures our understanding of the gendered effects of enclosed, isolated spaces on mental and physical health. What keeps these women enclosed is a mesh of interwoven significances enfolding the cell as idea and the cell as matter. In *A Revelation of Purgatory* and the *Wisse*, the structural integrity of the figurative and literal anchorhold is at stake. Sloth and *acedia* signal that anchorite's body and cell are permeable, both physically and metaphorically. The feedback loop contains this risk of disintegration. In all four texts, moreover, the stakes of the feedback loop extend to the anchorite's relationship with her community and to the social importance of the material anchorhold. We glimpse these stakes in how the *Wisse* fears that lethargy resulting from bloodletting may prevent the anchorite from performing her duties. Hence, Rolle cautions against ascetic excess, and Julian strives to include all believers in her cell. In anchoritic rhetoric in general, the cell embodies the anchorite and the church, and the anchorite embodies the church and the cell. The anchorhold serves as a microcosm of the church, supporting it; the anchorite's body, too, presents a microcosm of Christ's body (the church). Any physical weakness in either body or cell accordingly threatens the church as a building and a local and transtemporal community. An unbroken body of Christ and an unbroken anchoritic body require an unbroken cell, and vice versa. The well-being of the anchorite's community hinges upon her continued enclosure and her battle with sin. As the guides exhort, she stays put for the sake of others at her own expense. Analogously, the socioeconomic purpose of confined spaces such as the home during lockdown produces a similar catch-22: on the one hand, individuals are encouraged to remain at home for not just their own safety, but also for that of others, yet on the other hand, not every home keeps its inhabitants safe. Disease is within and without, necessitating continuous reflection on who gets to flourish, and where.

Anchoritic rhetoric helps adumbrate a position from which to interrogate the gendered violence that asceticism sometimes entails.

According to McAvoy, anchoritism ‘a critical practice which allows for productive critique of society, its mores [...] and its *habitus*’ (McAvoy 2010: 4). In keeping with this, anchoritism, then, also offers a critique of the materiality of existence. The texts’ presentation of the Incarnation is instrumental to this. Entering the anchorhold constitutes a Christic act of *kenosis*: it constitutes a self-emptying renunciation of the world left behind, in which the individual encloses themselves in a material container in order to die. The Incarnation, therefore, makes matter matter.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, how the text conceives of the Incarnation, Christ’s becoming matter, inflects how it understands the assemblage of body and cell, and associated illnesses associated with it. Envisaging the Incarnation as humiliating self-abnegation, an emphasis found in the *Wisse*, fosters a punitive attitude towards the body and the cell. Julian’s vision of the Incarnation as an expression of love encourages sympathy towards the body and the cell. Here, I suggest, we find a starting point for interrogating the validation of ascetic violence. The vantage point I wish to propose would consist of strategically disregarding questions of gendered, symbolic associations of the body, or cognitive responses to modern and medieval confined spaces. Instead, it would involve reconsidering our understanding of matter, and asking: what matter’s continued, unchanged existence is deemed more important than that of others in these conceptions? Is it the cell’s and the church’s matter, or that of the body they enclose? Is it the home or the body contained by that home? *Pace* Donna J. Haraway (2016: 12), it matters what matter gets to matter. Anchoritic cells may circumscribe sloth and *acedia*, but they also open up to reveal boundless compassion.

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