

Julian of Norwich

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Throughout her text, *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress*, the early English author and mystic Julian of Norwich takes accounts of and explores sixteen religious visions bestowed upon her on May 13th of 1373. Interestingly, these visions diverge from the canon of Christianity, as Julian depicts Christ as both an establisher of motherhood, above, and a figure of motherhood Himself, “The mother may give her child sucken her milk, but our precious mother Jesu, he may feed us with himself” (Julian 88). It is through this interpretation or envisioning of Christ as mother figure that Julian of Norwich establishes for women legitimacy, both social and religious, within the confines of Christianity.

Before analyzing Julian's text, her text must first be established within the understanding of gender, gender roles, and gender relations within the Christianity in which Julian wrote her "showings." As medieval scholar Sherry Lindquist writes, "One thing that the modern world certainly has in common with the medieval one is the function of gender as a structure of inequality. In the Middle Ages, notions of sexual difference determined where you could go; what you wore; whom you spoke to; what you could say; [...] and countless other aspects of individual lives" (Lindquist 114). Julian would certainly be aware of these inequalities, as some of them are defined in the Bible itself, from the First Epistle of Peter's "For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands" (1 Peter 3:1-7) to the Epistle of Titus' "Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God" (Titus 2:4-5), and even the creation story of Genesis placing Eve as "a helper suitable

for [Man]” (Genesis 2:18) and imbuing woman with an inborn role of servitude: “To the woman He said, ‘I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children; yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you’” (Genesis 3:16). Even Julian’s own, Christ Himself, is positioned as above women in the Bible: “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:3).

Throughout the text of the Bible, and throughout Christian preaching and proselytization, the role of male, of masculine, of protector and first servant, first choice of God is reiterated countless times. Lindquist continues: “And yet gender was not, of course, an exclusive determinant of identity; other factors such as wealth, power, birth, ethnicity, race, sexuality, profession and creed could inflect or disrupt expected gender roles. [...] Such conflicts often had to be publicly resolved or at least negotiated, retheorized, clarified as exceptions, or, alternatively, safely obfuscated” (Lindquist 114). Julian, as anchoress, undoubtedly operated with an understanding of the social positioning against her, both in religious text and in role as “safely obfuscated” visioness within the church, and yet still positions Christ as feminine, as mother within her Showings, claiming the feminine akin to a divine withheld from imagery otherwise associated with Christ or the Church.

Though this argument focuses on Julian's interpretation of Christ as mother figure, it is first imperative to acknowledge the positioning of Julian's vision of the Virgin Mary within the text. Julian writes that Christ "brought our Lady Saint Mary to my understanding" (83) early within the book itself, chapter four, first describing her as "ghostly in bodily likeness, a simple maiden and a meek, young of age, a little waxen above a child" (83). Julian posits that this is “as she was when she conceived,” but this image of Mary as both mortal and fragile informs the

concept of womanhood as simple and meek in its highest import. Julian goes on to reflect, “She beheld her God, that is her maker, marvelling with great reverence that he would be born of her that was a simple creature of his making” (83), linking inextricably the image of Christ with the image of Mary, as well as the divinity within Mary's act of motherhood. It is there that arises the central friction within Julian’s work: that of a feminine God. As religious scholar Aline Kalbian points out, “A Catholic sexual ethic begins with the premise that male and female are essential and stable genders. On this view, gender is determined exclusively on the basis of biological sexual characteristics. Gender assignment grounds identity; thus, living and performing one's identity is always a gendered performance” (Kalbian 60). Julian does acknowledge this friction, noting “that she is more than all that God made beneath her in worthiness and in fullhead” (83), but still positions Mary’s divinity below Christ’s, “For above her is nothing that is made but the blessed manhood of Christ” (83). The paradox of the relationship between Mary and Christ, both creator and yet offspring of one another, informs the paradox of what becomes modern femininity, the positioning as necessary but lesser than that of the masculine.

Consequently, it is paramount to acknowledge the character that Julian’s visions paint of Christ. Julian declares Christ to be “our clothing that for love wrappeth us and windeth us,” stating that he “hangeth about us for tender love that he may never leave us” (83). The language here of clothing and dressing, considered women's work at the time of writing, intentionally draws within the depiction of Christ an understanding of softer elements, abutting the feminine divine established within Julian’s vision of Mary. Consider the context within which Julian wrote her showings: Lindquist, in examining a similar text to Julian's Book of Showings, the Rothschild Canticles, find it a "book [...] tailored to a female devotional culture that was likely overseen by male church authorities as part of the *cura monialium* “(Lindquist 118). Julian, in

embracing Christ as figure akin to women, subverts this theme, rejecting a trend Lindquist identifies as “images [that] allow the female viewer to imagine herself as a protagonist working her way through stages of spiritual development that culminate in an ecstatic mystical romance between herself as bride and Christ as bridegroom.” (Lindquist 118). As anthropologist Maya Mayblin writes, “Devotees [in early Christianity] engage intimately with the divine because they are able to assimilate attributes of sacred bodies” (Mayblin 273). The reader sees in Julian's positioning of Christ as feminine, as analog and mimesis of his mother, the Virgin Mary, an inversion of this concept, extending the Passion of Christ into the feminine, so that this divinity, uplifted, could be held in communion with the corporeal feminine. As Mayblin continues, “This process of passionate assimilation makes intimacy with the divine possible” (Mayblin 273). By extending Christ into the subservient, Julian lifts him into concert with the feminine which created him, creating a multiplicity of divinity within the image of Christ as ultimate mother.

Julian’s image of Mary cascades into her image of Christ, creating a mosaic of the two within the Mother Christ of Julian's visions. A protecting figure in strength but a comforting figure in demeanor, Julian's Mother Christ challenges the conceit of divinity as masculine and womanhood, through motherhood, as weakness, positing rather this most Holy and yet most intimate Christ as true and truth, in tandem and in whole with the feminine aspects of care and caring with which Julian envisions Him. Julian writes of Christ that “he is our mother of mercy in our sensual taking” (87), stressing to the reader that this element of Christ is defining to his divinity, before continuing, “As I understood, in the meaning of our Lord [...] that we be brought again by the motherhood of mercy and grace into our kindly stead, where that we were in, made by the motherhood of kind love, which kind love never leaveth us” (87). Julian again imports the

concept of motherhood in concert with her developing understanding of divine purpose, that of Christ's "kind love."

Julian continues by making explicit the inference earlier in the text, stating, "Our kind mother, our gracious mother (for he would all wholly become our mother in all thing)" (87) in reference to Christ, posing that "he and the office of motherhood" (87) serve in tandem as part in Christ's divine purpose of salvation. Here, Julian repeatedly emphasizes not the metaphorical, but the practical ways in which motherhood serves salvation, stating that "the mother's service is nearest, readiest, and surest [...] This office ne might nor could never none doon to the full but he alone" (87), before accentuating that Christ's role as Mother is ultimately above these offices, writing, "But our very Mother Jesu, he alone beareth us to joy and to endless living" (87), boldly comparing Christ's labors to, well, labor, or childbearing, going so far as to draw parallels between his eventual death and ascent into heaven and childbirth: "And [he] died at the last. And when he had done, and *so borne us to bliss*, yet might not all this make aseeth to his marvelous love" (87, emphasis added). Though Biblical language and translation is rife with bearing and borne removed from motherhood and womanhood, it is again imperative to acknowledge the positioning of this language, within the same chapter and same paragraph as the language of birth in which Julian celebrates the feminine divine.

This is where things get interesting. Julian continues her examination of the Mother Christ figure by comparing the Eucharist to suckling, writing that "the mother may give her child sucken her milk, but our precious mother Jesu, he may feed us with himself" (88). She even states that "our tender mother Jesu, he may homely lead us into his blessed breast by his sweet open side" in comparison to "the mother lay[ing] her child to her breast" (88), paralleling the ultimate of Christ's salvation with the realistic of motherhood, continually commingling the

image of either in order to uplift the both. This comparison is radical, invoking the divine and fated piercing of Christ's side, a mystical event pursued throughout history in perpetuity via the Holy Grail and Spear of Destiny, with the common, baser, vulgar, and culturally disparaged act of motherhood. (Not just status of motherhood, mind, but deliberate and understood act.) This is not the only time in the text where Julian makes this comparison, late in chapter 85 juxtaposing "The blessed wounds of our savior be open and enjoy to heal us" (89) with yet another image of Christ as caretaker: "The sweet gracious hands of our mother be ready and diligent about us; for he in all this working useth the very office of a kind nurse that hath not else to do but to entend⁶ the salvation of her child" (89). This parallel and composition of Christ as Mother figure runs throughout the text, a lifeblood moving forth Julian's visions as much as her religious philosophizing.

Ultimately, Julian examines the language of motherhood itself, finding that "this fair lovely word 'Mother,' it is so sweet and kind in itself that it may not verily be said of none ne to none *but of him and to him*" (88, emphasis added). That is to say that mother, as concept, relies so much on Christ as the "very mother of life and of all" that "the property of motherhood [...] it is God" (88). Again, Julian defines Christ's divinity as something inextricable from the role of mother, hailing motherhood then as something not lesser, as positioned in the Church, but something above: "Thus he is our mother in kind by the working of grace in the lower part for love of the higher" (88). The workings of motherhood, or rather the labors, are of the selfsame source as Christ's labors and Christ's love, presenting motherhood and femininity as on the same respect as Christ himself.

Though uneducated, Julian of Norwich, through deliberate comparisons, juxtapositions, and parallels, with a sincere envisioning of Christ as Mother, masterfully commands through text

the respect of motherhood, and thereby femininity, by eliciting in it the image of the Mother Christ. By presenting the Virgin Mary in concert with the image of Christ as sufferer, Julian commingles in the reader the images of either divine character, rather conflating or equalling the two in total in order to examine and acknowledge the necessity of and the divinity within the act (again, deliberate) of motherhood.

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