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Title: Seeing is Receiving: The Three Marian Visions of Julian of Norwich and the Ascription of Heavenly Power

Abstract

This paper examines a somewhat neglected aspect of Julian of Norwich's "Revelations of Divine Love"; namely her three Marian visions. I begin by situating them in the "affective tradition" and show their possible connections with Middle English Marian Lyrics and the N-Town Plays. I then take each of the three visions in turn: Mary as Maiden, Mother, and Queen, the most blessed of all creatures. By comparing and contrasting descriptions of each of them as recorded in the Short and Long Texts I argue that the more Julian "saw" the more she "became" the object of her contemplation and believed that Heavenly Powers had been ascribed to her, with the purpose of encouraging her readers to imitate them in their faithful discipleship.

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Recent scholarship concerning the medieval Church has considered the ‘lived experience’ of lay people in the parish,¹ the women ‘written out of history’,² preaching manuals,³ and mystical experiences. The *‘Revelations of Divine Love’* has been extensively mined for clues to all four, and while interpretations of Julian’s visionary encounters with Jesus have become something of an industry, her three encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary, recorded in both the Short and Long Texts have received comparatively little attention. Therefore, in what follows I try to shed some new light on them. I do so by first giving an overview of Julian’s Mariology in its fourteenth century ecclesial and social context and then by considering the role they played in encouraging faithful discipleship among her ‘even Christiens’ (‘fellow Christians’).

It is important to remind ourselves of what Julian’s three visions were. The first introduces Mary as a young adolescent at the Annunciation.⁴ The second shows a mature Mary standing at the foot of the cross,⁵ and in her third and final Marion vision Jesus gives Julian a glimpse of Mary’s nobility, ruling over all created matter and the Church.⁶ In sum, we have Mary as Maiden, Mother and Queen.

I begin with some of the scholarship concerning medieval Mariology in general before moving towards a direct analysis of Julian’s accounts of these encounters with the Blessed Virgin Mary. Eamon Duffy⁷ has argued that the patterns of Marion devotion in pre-

¹ Nicholas Orme, *Going to Church in Medieval England*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022.

² Janina Ramirez, *Femina – a new history of the Middle Ages, through the women written out of it*, London: W. H. Allen, Penguin Random House, 2022.

³ Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ – A Reading Text*, (ed) Michael G Sargent, University of Exeter Press: Exeter, 2004. Tristan Thomas William Sharp, *William of Pagula’s Speculum religiosorum and its Background – Law, Pastoral Care and Religious Formation for Monks c1215 -c1350*. PhD thesis. Centre for Medieval Studies University of Toronto. 2013 published as an open access PDF at www.tspace.library.utoronto.ca/1807/68991/3/Sharp_Tristan_TW_201309_PhD_thesis.pdf. Last accessed October 2023.

⁴ Short Text Section 4/ Long Text Chapter 4. Unless otherwise stated all quotations from the Short Text are from Anna Maria Reynolds (ed) *The Shorter Version of Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*, The Inner Life Series, London: Longmans, 1958. Quotations from the Long Text are from the 2017 Warrack Edition of *Revelations of Divine Love*, modernised by Yolande Clarke with an Introduction by A.N. Wilson (London: SPCK).

⁵ Short Text Section 10/Long Text Chapter 18.

⁶ Short Text Section 13/ Long Text Chapter v25.

⁷ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars – Traditional Religion in England c1480 - c 1580*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992, 256.

Reformation East Anglia followed closely those in Europe especially in the Low Countries. He gives priority to mainland Europe but in view of the presence of Our Lady's shrine at Walsingham,⁸ fourth only to Jerusalem, Rome and Compostela, and containing a file of her breast milk, of international importance as a place of devotion and pilgrimage, we might wonder whether the priority lies in East Anglia, not Mainland Europe with Marian devotion having closely followed the patterns and norms set at Walsingham since Anglo-Saxon times. The work of Gail McMurray Gibson can be understood as supporting this view in her reminder that 'in late medieval England, images of the Virgin Mary were rarely out of sight or mind; this was especially true in East Anglia where, to the very eve of the Reformation, the roads and bridges of Suffolk and Norfolk thronged with men and women who were not only Mary's worshippers but her pilgrims.'⁹

In terms of East Anglian literature, scholars have located the manuscript of the '*N-town plays*' which contains a sequence on the Blessed Virgin Mary, to this region of England.¹⁰ Karen Saupe¹¹ has noted the rise in popularity of Mary from the twelfth century onwards especially as expressed in lyrical form. Similarly, *The Book of Margery Kempe*¹² shows her identification with and devotion to Mary. It is, I think, not only the source of her compassion and affectivity but also an indirect and vicarious sharing in the suffering of Christ. By entering into Mary's suffering at seeing Jesus crucified, Margery and others could more easily contemplate the crucifixion than by the direct sight of it, as in Julian. Saupe¹³ has located this affective tradition, of which Margery was part, in the *planctus Mariae* during the fourteenth century. These lyrics are interesting since they appear to misunderstand Christ's redemptive work¹⁴ and yet affect ethical thinking and behaviour.¹⁵

⁸ Carol Hill, *Women and Religion in Late Medieval Norwich*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2010, 1-2.

⁹ Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion – East Anglian Drama and Society in the Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 139.

¹⁰ Douglas Sugano (ed) *The N-Town Plays*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007, 2-3.

¹¹ Karen Saupe, *Middle English Marian Lyrics*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997.

¹² Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Translated and with an Introduction by Anthony Bale. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

¹³ Saupe, *Middle English Marian Lyrics*, 23-25.

¹⁴ Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, 259.

¹⁵ Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2010, 150.

It is difficult to see how these interpretations, either as an unnecessary distraction from redemption or as a constructive theological tool, might be reconciled, and yet both readings reveal key aspects of Marian devotion in fourteenth century England. The *planctus Mariae* seeks to encourage and persuade Christians to embrace Mary's maternal sorrow and thereby see Christ's humanity more clearly. How this worked in practice is plain to see. Margery devotes the entirety of Chapter Eighty-one of her *Book* to it. Here Margery sees Mary's continuing grief *after* the crucifixion – and comforts her.¹⁶

Julian's Mary is not like that. She remains calm and serene even while the crucifixion is taking place. It is a mark of her holiness. It is not that Julian's Mary cannot grieve, it is that she distances herself from outward displays of it. She grieves inwardly, spiritually, in her soul. Unlike Margery's many accounts of physical holy tears and wailing, Julian mentions tears only once: 'we may never stinte of morning or of weping. This weping meneth not all in poring out of teeres by our bodily eye, but also to more gostely understanding.'¹⁷

For Julian then, constant inward weeping is a necessary form of contrition for sin, suffering, and evils of every kind, but she is uncomfortable with the perennial physical outpourings of emotion that we see in Margery and the *planctus Mariae*. She prefers an inward, spiritual, 'gostely' lamentation. This may be one reason why scholars have so often neglected Julian's Marian encounters. They are simply not dramatic enough to capture the imagination. They are too detached from the "affective" sorrow traditionally associated with medieval Marian devotion.

Julian transforms the affective tradition even between the Short and the Long texts. In the record of her Marian visions in the Short Text she retains a great deal of interest in Mary's sorrows, but by the time she came to write the Long Text this has almost disappeared and is replaced by the mutual love between Mary and Jesus.

¹⁶ Barry Windeatt (ed) *The Book of Margery Kempe – An Annotated Edition*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004, 351-357.

¹⁷ Quotations from Julian of Norwich are from Jacqueline Jenkins & Nicholas Watson, *The writings of Julian of Norwich: a vision showed to a devout woman and a revelation of love*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006, 347-349.

In this interpretation I am heavily influenced by Barry Windeatt's essay '*Julian's Second Thoughts*'.¹⁸ For him the Short Text constitutes a 'narrative self-account of an experience' whereas the Long Text is an 'exploratory continuum of meditative commentary'.¹⁹ That is, the Short Text simply records Julian's deathbed vision whereas the Long Text comments on and explains it. If this is the case, and I think it is, then the Short Text can be said to be firmly embedded in the affective tradition whereas the Long Text gives us a wholly new approach to the role of Mary in relation to Christian living and discipleship; here Mary is a maternal advocate, pleading on behalf of all people for the gift of the abiding presence of Divine Love with them and for them. While this is entirely orthodox it does, perhaps, somewhat detract from Mary's humanity and emotion.

There is hardly any difference in the first vision between the Short and Long Texts, but the differences that there are subtle and important. The Short Texts says: '*In this sight I sawe sothefastlye that she is mare than alle God made benethe her in worthiness and fulhede*',²⁰ which clearly anticipates the third vision of Mary as Queen of Heaven. However, in the Long Text she substitutes 'sawe' with 'understand' which is exactly in line with what Windeatt says is the relationship between the Short and Long Texts. This change should not concern us long, for Julian is saying that she 'saw' and 'understood' the same thing, even though, of course, the Long Text might indicate a change of emphasis that Julian wished to place upon it over time.

I turn now to an examination of each of Julian's Marian Visions in turn.

The first vision: Mary as Maiden

In the first vision Julian describes a child-like Mary: 'a simple maiden and meke, yong of age, a little waxen above a child in the sture (= stature) she was when she conceived.' The word 'simple' here is interesting because it tells us a great deal about how Julian related to Mary affectively. Famously Julian describes herself as a 'simple' and 'unlettered' creature.

¹⁸ Barry Windeatt, *Julian's Second Thoughts; The Long Text Tradition*, in Liz Herbert McAvoy (ed) *A Companion to Julian of Norwich* Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2008.

¹⁹ Barry Windeatt, *Julian's Second Thoughts*, 102.

²⁰ 70. I have added the emphasis.

Whether this is a devise to avoid being suspected of Lollard tendencies or to avoid being caught by the prohibition on women teaching the faith,²¹ or both, the fact remains that Julian and Mary relate to each other in their simplicity. Simplicity is akin to humility, and for Julian humility is a heavenly power, as will be discussed below.

By repeatedly applying the adjective 'simple' to both herself and Mary, Julian begins to identify with Mary and the power of Mary's divine election. The more Julian identifies with Mary the more she is embraced and equipped through divine power. This process of *imitatio* comes to a climax in a passage found only in the Long Text. Writing in the third person Julian says: 'This gretenes and this noblesse of [Mary's] beholding of God fulfilled hir in reverent dred. And with this she [Julian] sawe herself so little and so lowe, so simple and so poor in regard to her God that this reverent dred fulfilled her [Mary/Julian] with meknes.'

The littleness which Mary and Julian share enables them to contemplate the greatness of God. Julian is clear that only through an awareness of their littleness can her 'even Christiens' access God's greatness. This level of affectivity and identification of Julian with Mary is present in the broader medieval context of this first vision as well, because Mary's receiving the Word to be made flesh in the Annunciation was often offered as a subject for contemplation. One example is Nicholas Love's account of the Annunciation in his *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*.²²

After explaining the importance of simplicity, Julian describes a vision of Christ's bleeding head and exclaims: 'Low, what might this nobil Lorde do more wurshippe and joy to me than to show me that I am so litille, this marvelous homelyhede?' Again, only an awareness of her littleness enables her to see the 'marvelous homelyhede' [familiarity?] of Christ. She describes herself in ways associated with Mary and in doing so embodies Mary's humility and is able to see and understand the humility of Christ. Julian's accessing of Christ's humility through that of Mary is emphasised a few lines later when Julian speculates on heavenly

²¹ See *inter alia* Gorgia Ronan Crampton (ed) *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994, 3-4; Lynn Staley, *Julian of Norwich and the Late Fourteenth Century Crisis of Authority* in David Aers and Lynn Staley (ed) *The Powers of the Holy*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University press, 1996, 109-112; and Nicholas Watson, *The Composition of Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love in Speculum – A Journal of Medieval Studies*, 68.3, 1993, 637-683, 673-674.

²² Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, Text 28.

power in general and the properties of God in particular: 'he that is highest and mightiest, noblest and wurthiest is lowest and meekest, humblest and curtyest. And truly and sothly this marvellous joy shalle he shew us alle, when we shalle see him.'

Until now Julian has distinguished the littleness she shares with Mary with the power of God, but now she uses paradox to describe God who is at once high and mighty and lowly and meek. That is, only by fully entering Mary's humility can she see that of Christ in becoming fully a person, fully God. This paradox is, of course, entirely consistent with the kenotic passage in Philippians Chapter 2 in which God's willingness to take on the form of a servant is deemed the ultimate act of humility. Augustine of Hippo saw this working in the preamble to the Gospel of John. In his commentary on it he asks: 'Why, man, are you so full of pride? God became humble for you. Perhaps it would shame you to imitate a humble human being -but at least imitate a humble God.'²³

For Augustine the focus of the incarnation is the *humilem Deum* (=humility of God) but for Julian the humility of Mary is key to the understanding this doctrine which lies at the immoveable core of all Christian theology: the Incarnation. Whereas Augustine seems to grasp its implications directly, Julian is able to do so only in a mediated sense through the humility of Mary. In the Short Text, for example, she emphasises the physical smallness of Mary which, in the Long Text is used to teach two lessons: first, that Mary's humility is to be imitated and second, that the incarnation is nothing but an act of grace.

This is entirely consistent with the idea of Mary as mediatrix and intercessor throughout the ages. Rachel Fulton reminds us that 'the supplicant prays to Mary to come to his or her aid, begging for assistance despite his or her sins, so that he or she might gain entrance, through Mary's intercession, to the heavenly kingdom.'²⁴

Mary links human beings with the divine in much the same way as she enfolded humanity and divinity in her womb. The Short text's visual description of the girl-like Mary gives way to a far more complex understanding of Mary's role in the incarnation and as intercessor. Julian's focus on Mary as maiden in this first Marian vision celebrates Mary's purity

²³ *Patriologica Latina*. 35. col 1604. My approximate translation.

²⁴ Rachel Fulton, *From Judgement to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary 800-1200*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 218.

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and beauty of both body and soul and, above all, explains her unalloyed worthiness to participate in God's redemptive plan.

The Second Vision; Mary as Grieving Mother.

Julian's second Marian vision is one of compassion:

Herein I sawe in partye the compassion of oure ladye, Saint Marye. For Criste and sheware so unede in love that the gretenesse of hir love was the cause of the mekilled of her paine. For so mekilled as so loved him mare than alle the othere, her paine passed alle othere.

This opening of the vision again places Mary in the affective tradition. She is compassionate and full of grace but these by no means protect her from unimaginable pain and grief. There is nothing in this Short Text account of Mary's presence at the crucifixion that does not concern the emotions which flow from the pain of bereavement, grief and loss.

The Long Text account, however, immediately adds:

For in this I sawe a substance of kinde love, continued by grace, that his creatures have to him, which kinde love was most fulsomely shewed in his swete mother and overpassing.....For ever so higher, the mightier, the swetter that the love is, the mare sorrow it is to the lover so se that bodye in paine that he loved.

'Kinde love' has many meanings, which range from kind and affectionate to a natural, human, even intuitive form of knowledge. It is always affective rather than abstract. Here Julian's 'kinde love' evokes God's love for all creation, a love which is germane and present in all things 'seen and unseen' and without exception. As such 'kinde love' has heavenly dimensions.

Julian describes Mary's "kinde love" as being higher and mightier, terms which in the first Marian vision she applied only to God. This newly exalted, semi-divine Mary now anticipates what Julian will have to say about Mary's Assumption into heaven and Mary's reign as Queen of Heaven in the third Marian vision. Julian is already inviting her readers to go beyond the disturbing emotions arising from the Passion, or at least to set them firmly in the context of God's redemptive plan.



This higher and mightier love also implies that Mary's love during the Passion transcends ordinary motherly affection because it is now saturated by divinity. Surprisingly, perhaps, this broke new theological ground in the fourteenth century. After all, both Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas rejected the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, Mary's supposed semi-divinity and her freedom from original sin.²⁵ In Epistle 174 Bernard insists that Mary's merit lies in the simple humility of her humanity and nowhere else.²⁶ Distant echoes of this can still be heard in much more recent writings about lay piety and devotion in the Middle Ages. McNamer, for example, believes that the role Mary played in this was much more limited than we might think, acting only as a model for what it is to act mercifully.²⁷

I doubt whether Julian or her contemporaries would have understood such an austere and passionless picture of Mary such as McNamer's. Certainly Margery Kempe would not. Indeed, we might regard a passage found only in Julian's Long Text as an explicit rejection of all such ideas:

And every mannes sorrow, desolation and anguish he sawe and sorowed for kindness and love. For in as mekille as our ladye sorowed for his paines, as mekille sufferde he sorow for her sorowse, and moreover, as mekille as the swete manhed of him was wurthier in kinde. For as long as he was passiblle, he sufferde for us and sorowde for us. And now he is up resin and no more passablle, yet he suffereth with us, as I shalle sey after.

As Jesus suffers, Mary suffers. But more than this: as people suffer so the heavenly powers of both Jesus and Mary enter our pain and transform it into divine love. Even so, given Julian's otherwise dramatic writing about discoloured desiccated dying bodies, rivers of blood and so on, this understatement of Mary's sorrow is striking. It is perhaps all the more dramatic because of its understatement. Although Mary sorrows and suffers Julian does not record her crying or wailing or any of the other pronounced activities we find in either the *Marian Lyrics* or the *Book of Margery Kempe* or indeed in Julian's own account in the Short Text.

²⁵ Mark Shea, *The Immaculate Conception: St Thomas and St Bernard in National Catholic Register*, 12 November 2012. At www.ncregister.com/blog/the-immaculate-conception-st-thomas-and-st-bernard. Last accessed October 2023.

²⁶ Patriogia Latina 182 cols 0332D-0336C

²⁷ Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, 162.

In the Short Text we see a grieving mother, but here in the Long Text Mary becomes representative of something far greater than herself; Mary's sorrow is a shadow of God's sorrow for his broken creation and human sin. It is by God's suffering with us and for us that the compassion of redemption, according to Julian, is possible at all. Human beings cannot understand what that might be like. That is why we need Mary as mediatrix and intercessor at the foot of the cross to embrace it, embody it and in her life and example portray it to us.

The final change in this second vision is an erasure. The Short Text tells us about the actions of Julian's own mother at the time of its appearance: 'My modere, that stode emanges othere and behelde me, lifted uppe her hande before me face and lokke min eye.'

But this loving, homely detail is absent in the Long Text. It is, of course, a common place to remark on the absence of biographical details in Julian's writings and may be summed up in Lyn Staley Johnson's comment that 'despite the subtlety of the long text, it appears at once less individualistic and more authoritative than the short [...] she trims some things that make the short text a more personal work.'²⁸

To this I would add that the erasure of Julian's mother from the Long Text dilutes Marian affectivity and at a stroke dismisses motherly grief more generally. In the Short Text Julian draws a clear parallel between her mother's grief at seeing Julian so near to death and the grieving Mary. However, by the time she writes the Long Text she realises that her vision of Mary in fact transcends all motherly sorrow. Instead it reflects the divine sorrow at the core of Redemption.

The Third Vision: Queen Mary, blessed of all creatures

In both the Short and Long Texts Jesus asks Julian if she would like to see Mary as she now is, endowed with heavenly powers, and this brings about the final Marian vision: 'And with the same chere and mirthe he loked down on his right side and brought to my minde whare our lady stode in the time of his passion and saide, "Will you see hir?"'

²⁸ Lynn Staley Johnson, *The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*, *Speculum* 66.4, 1991, 820-838, 832.



In the Short Text Julian gives an unequivocal ‘yes’. In the Long Text she deliberates over the three possible theological meanings which such a question might have. They are not mutually exclusive and the link between them is the overwhelming mutual love between mother and son. In her first deliberation Julian concludes that Jesus wants her to see Mary as the most blessed of all creatures. In the second and through her spiritual understanding (‘ghostly sight’), Julian is able to participate in that mutual love. In the third, Jesus asks: ‘Wilt thou se in hir how thou art loved? For thy love I made hir so high, so noble, so worthy.’

Here, as in the second vision, Mary is symbolic of the system of divine love at the heart of Redemption. That is, in Mary Julian sees God’s love for her as an individual and this, I think, gives a clue to Julian’s entire purpose in writing the Long Text. Its aim is to transform received notions of divine love from an abstract love for the whole world understood, if at all, only hereafter, to one that is individual, personal and available right here, right now. God loves Julian just as she is in this moment and in every moment and this is made present to her in the virtues and heavenly powers found in Mary. Hence Julian says:

But hereof am I not lerned to long to see her bodely presens while I am here, but the vertuse of her blessed soul – her truth, her wisdom, her cherite – wherby I may learn to know myself, sand reverently drede my God.

Julian builds on the second vision in understanding that the little ‘*bodely presens*’ that she then saw is not the end of the vision. Far from it. It is a new point from which to see herself as the person she is under God, Mary’s heavenly powers, and even God himself. It is this, I think, that provides the basis for Julian’s last mention of Mary which appears only in the Long Text and leads directly to her famous notion of God-as-Mother. It is worth quoting in full:

For in that same time that God knit him to oure body in the maiden’s wombe, he took our sensual soule. In which taking – he us all having beclosed in him – he oned it to our substance, in which oning he was perfete man. For Crist, having knit in him all man that shall be saved, is perfete man. Thus oure layde is oure modere, in whom we be all beclosed and of her borne in Crist. For she that is oure modere of our oure savioure is modere of all that ben saved in our saviour. And our salvioure is oure very modere, in whom we all be endlessly borne and never shall come out of him.

Julian describes the incarnation and the hypostatic union in domestic, everyday imagery: knitting. A knitting of the human and divine within the *maidens wombe*. This knitting creates the garment of our redemption from which not a single stitch is dropped or lost. For *all* people are *beclosed in him* just as he is *beclosed* in the *maidens wombe*. From the multiple strands of this knitting Julian concludes that since we are *beclosed* in Christ and he is *beclosed* in Mary as his mother, so Mary is our Mother too. To use another domestic image: it as if we are a turducken, the human animal stuffed within the divine, so that for all practical purposes we are one in such a way that we 'never shall come out'.

Mary's enclosing womb and motherhood allows Julian to understand the divine, motherly love of Christ. Julian eschews human motherhood and maternal grief in favour of a spiritual maternity seen in humankind's inescapable bond of love with God. It is, as it were, a perpetual pregnancy.

So now we see exactly why Julian's own mother was written out of the Long Text. It was inevitable. She had to be written out. She disappears precisely so that God in Christ can emerge as our divine mother which, in turn, transforms Mary from a figure of motherly grief into the loving embodiment of divine love and sorrow. In short, Julian transforms her own personal experience of her earthly mother into a divine, universal and endless motherly love for all people. Julian does not, then, detach herself from the theme of earthly motherhood but rather engages it into a wider, far more important enterprise – one of exalted, even salvific, motherly love.

It is precisely in avoiding dramatic outpourings of earthly motherhood in each of her three Marian visions that Julian transforms maternal love from something temporal and transient into a transcendent heavenly power. In so far as people embrace and practice the virtues found in Mary, so too do they have divine power ascribed to them by God. That ascription is the same power embodied in Mary as Maiden, Mother and Queen. It is nothing less than a revelation of divine love.