Medieval Corporeality and the Eucharistic Body in Julian of Norwich’s *A Revelation of Love*

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The "corporeal turn" has been manifest in medieval and early modern criticism since the late 1980s. Special critical interest has been shown for nonhegemonic corporeality in all its forms: the monstrous, the marginal, the grotesque, and the female body. Here, as in other fields, contemporary interest in the body has tended to be closely associated with, if not shorthand for, questions concerning gender, sex, and sexuality. The medieval association between flesh and femininity has perpetuated itself in medieval studies: "body" very frequently means "female body." This tendency—following Mikhail Bakhtin’s socially upending grotesque body and Julia Kristeva’s account of abjection—is closely accompanied by particular interest in the place of the degraded or disgust-inducing operations and substances of the body, which can even be seen to amount to a "scatological turn" in medieval studies.

The corporeal turn has made itself felt in scholarship on Julian of Norwich in attempts to reach "behind" Julian’s text, and indeed her theology, to access a "real" or properly physical body. This can mean a body as close as possible to that of the historical woman herself, that is, Julian’s own otherwise undisclosed or abjected physicality. So, for example, Elizabeth Robertson identifies some echo of Julian’s own menstrual blood in the drops she sees trickle down Christ’s head from the crown of thorns. Sarah Miller’s admirable account of Julian’s vision understands the use of Passion and maternal imagery in her theology as a “redemption” of the female body from some contemporary condemnatory and "monstrous" associations of porosity, breach, and fluid release. In less gendered readings, Julian’s corporeality is understood precisely as a conscious antithesis of the *contemptus mundi* tradition; in this view, the spiritual degradation of the body is situated as the antithesis of Julian’s triumphant embodiedness. A paradigmatic case in point is the treatment by Nicholas Watson and Sarah McNamer of Julian’s
metaphor of the body as a “fair purse” in chapter 6 of the long version of her vision, *A Revelation of Love*. I argue in this essay that privileging the allegedly occluded margins of what is taken to be the accepted medieval corporeality too easily leads to a falsely contrarian sensitivity, which sometimes mistakenly materializes Julian’s thought, and often finds in her text forms of bodiliness that are not in fact there. So Miller in her account of Julian’s use of birth imagery extrapolates physical details of slippery passage and buckets of fluid where Julian explicitly emphasizes a notion of containment.

Julian certainly has a “softer” account of the devotional place of the body than that of her European counterparts: after her initial sickness in some sense fails to reach the affective unity with the body of Christ she initially longs for, there is strikingly little mention of or emphasis on corporeal ascetism. And yet Julian can speak of the “swilge stinking mire” of the flesh; she also retains a strong sense of the medieval Christian paradox of the body: site of sin and site of sin’s redemption. As Caroline Walker Bynum has demonstrated, in the Middle Ages the apparent denigration of the body as witnessed to in ascetic practice is in fact ambiguous, an apparent abuse which also privileges the flesh. Bynum has emphasized the paradox present throughout the medieval tradition in which fallen flesh is nonetheless *imago Dei*, spouse of the soul, potentially eternal. This sense even appears, as Jocelyn Wogan-Browne has shown, in certain passages of the *Ancrene Wisse*, a text often cited for its reviling of the flesh. To give one example of popular practice, in late medieval England it was a devotional act to bend down and kiss the earth to which the body is (allegedly, negatively) assimilated, both as a sign of corporeal humility and in remembrance of the Incarnation.

The readings of the fair purse passage in *A Revelation of Love* that I will contest privilege the material and physiological body in the way I have suggested. Alexandra Barratt, for example, prioritizes the (gendered) physiological and medical aspects; similarly, Liz Herbert McAvoy’s account draws on medical sources to describe the interplay of male and female body imagery. Although commentators do usually situate Julian’s emphasis on the body within a theological context—indeed many consider the fair purse passage an index of the reach of her embodied theology—I suggest that the desire to find a startlingly corporeal, de-abjected, even “un-medieval” body in her writings has led to misinterpretation of the fair purse passage and its place in Julian’s theology. Indeed, the fair purse passage is especially valuable as an interpretative test case for pursuing the physiological body in *A Revelation of Love*.

I am alleging that there is a danger of failing to see the semiotics
for the somatics, and of seeking a material and even secular body rather than the body Julian knows and is most interested in. This is the sensualité, or state of the ensouled body, to which Christ humbles himself and within which he dwells, the shared corporeality that lives, eats, and partakes of the Eucharist. In looking all the way “down,” readers may have missed the text’s own account of both the simplicity and the sublimity of the body. However, the reading that I will present here of the fair purse passage is certainly not intended to deemphasize the importance of the corporeal to Julian. I concur with Sarah Miller that in Julian’s Revelation the phenomenological and the semiotic are inextricably intertwined. Julian is rightly celebrated for her elevation of the goodness of created and redeemed materiality: substance and sensuality.

In this essay I also claim that Julian’s corporeality is crucially bound up with its role as tabernacle for the body of Christ. Julian scholarship has hitherto suggested that the fourteenth-century anchorite-theologian does not exhibit a significant eucharistic devotion. Miller’s recent account of Julian’s corporeal piety contrasts her with thirteenth- and fourteenth-century European mystics in this respect:

Although Julian recognizes the nourishing function of Christ’s body, she does not mention the Eucharist, or the ingestion of Christ under any species. This is a striking exclusion. . . . In Julian’s visions and meditations, Christ’s body is legible space rather than food.13

My reading of the fair purse passage, however, argues that it constitutes a significant counter-example: a reference to ingestion early in Julian’s Revelation where that process is understood as a realization of incarnational and eucharistic truths.

In what may prove to be an instance of scatological fascination trumping critical acuity, the analogy of the fair purse from chapter 6 of Julian’s Revelation of Love has been consistently interpreted, including in the most recent editions and critical work, as referring to bodily excretion. This passage has been celebrated as “one of Julian’s most clearly ‘grotesque’ images,” and applauded for epitomizing her immanent theology of God’s thorough, down-reaching presence and the corresponding height of our own incarnation: even through its digestive functions the body is telling of its divine origins.15 While affirming the thoroughly corporeal nature of Julian’s theology, it is my argument that other readings of this elusive pas-
sage have been too swiftly curtailed. The crux has not been well-served by a slender tradition of dissent that has opposed an eschatological to the scatological account in a manner that unconvincingly polarizes the possibilities of Julian’s text. Otherwise, alternative scholarship has considered another messy production, birth, to be what Julian has in mind—the purse as womb. Reinvestigating the evidence, I propose an entirely new reading that emphasizes a nourishment/Eucharist nexus and situates the significance of the passage in Julian’s theology as a whole.

Before braving the intestinal twists and turns of the argument proper, here is the passage in question:

¶ for to the goodnes of god is the highest praier, and it cometh downe to us to the lowest party of our need. It quickened our sowle and maketh it leve and make it to waxe in grace and in vertu. It is nerest in kynde and redyest in grace. ¶ ffor it is the same grace that the soule sekyth and evyr shalle tylle we knowe oure god verely that hath us all in hym selfe beclosyde. ¶ A man goyth uppe right, and the soule of his body is sparyde as a purse full feyer. And whan it is tyme of his nescessery, it is openyde and sparyde ayen fulle honestly. ¶ And that it is he, that doyth this it is schewed ther wher he seyth, he comyth downe to us, to the lowest parte of oure nede. For he hath no dispite of that he made. Ne he hath no disdaine to serve us at the simplest office that to oure body longeth in kinde, for love of the soule that he made to his awne likenesse. ¶ For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skinne, and the bones in the flesh and the harte in the bowke so ar we, soule and body cladde and enclosydde in the goodness of god.

The purse analogy above must be understood as the extension of Julian’s immediately preceding thoughts on the question of mediation: intellectual insights which have developed from the hazelnut “showing” as a sight, a revelation of “hamly loving.” The vision of the knob or “nut” of matter in Julian’s hand as in that of God communicates to Julian the enormity and yet the radically direct immediacy of divine care, over against the relative smallness of creation and its quantitative, contingent, material status. Julian derives from this the simple and definitive message of the “goodnes of God.” The hand so closely and directly holding “all that is made,” with no intermediary, leads her to warn in the ensuing chapter against artificially erect-
ing the ladders of “meny meanes” or paths in mediatory prayer that project nonexistent distance by heaping up cumulatively inadequate supplications directed to and through intercessory figures and foci: the Virgin, the saints, or the Passion in the body, blood, wounds, and cross. However Julian is far from articulating a total “rejection of ‘meanes’” as the notes of Watson and Jenkins’s edition would have it. This is what, in markedly similar language, the more apophatic tradition of the author of the Cloud of Unknowing and, at times, Walter Hilton recommends.20 The contrast in Julian’s thought is made all the stronger by certain phrases she shares with these apophatic, earth- and body-abandoning accounts of prayer, but while Hilton and the Cloud-author move into a language of ascent, Julian turns toward the affirmation of incarnational descent: stripping back mediations and means to arrive at the body. Nonetheless, for Julian such “means” or forms of mediation remain “ordained” by God, and of course they would have been part of her daily devotional practice. The relativization of means is the point of departure, paradoxically, for the articulation of her hyperincarnational, hypermediatory theology. As chapter 6 as a whole makes very clear, Julian subjugates all the “meny meanes” to Christ, and Christ-in-us, through the “chiefe and principal meane” of shared human nature, the “blessed kinde that he toke of the maiden.” Forms of mediation are humbled before the reality of the divine proximity. The Incarnation means that, in some sense, the human is closer to God than she is to herself, body and soul. Julian suggests that without this realization we are indeed prone to lift up, or artificially erect outside ourselves, the holy that has already come down to us. She emphasizes the “godness” of corporeal nature and the proximity of the divine to humanity, within and without, above but also nearer than “made” means or mediations which only distance the self from its godself.

Julian takes the body as a theological model here and throughout her meditations because for her that the Word was made flesh means also that the flesh is made word. The “blessed kinde” of our own bodies is given to us as a book, radically disclosive of divine truth: the body’s science, for Julian, is theology not biology. Certainly no critic has been wrong to emphasize the corporeality of Julian’s theology. However the very fact that she views the body as a revelation in itself means that no statement she makes about the body is simple, but rather, like a piece of scripture, the body lends itself to myriad exegeses of the one theological truth.

The interpretation of the fair purse passage has tended to turn on the two, or perhaps three, homonyms that can be spelled soule. One is the received sense of the animating and eternal part, or the spiritual faculty in
man and woman. Anna Maria Reynolds differs from the general consensus, and her reading has been backed recently by Christina Maria Cervone; she applies a conventional sense to all instances of *soule* in the passage. Hence the opening of the purse in which the soul is enclosed, or “sparede,” would be an account of the birth that is death, the passing to eternal life. It would represent the taking up of the soul by God at the stage of individual judgment, as with the little homunculus figure of the soul familiar in the iconography of the Dormition of the Virgin, and in a way described similarly in Julian’s chapter 64. While this is not my own reading, it remains a plausible interpretation, perhaps especially given the circumstance of Julian’s visions as experienced on her own sickbed. This would also follow well from the preceding lines with their reference to the soul’s “quickening,” the whole passage then describing the process of “oning,” or increasing unity, that stretches from our creation to our reception in God, “till we know our God verely.”

All subsequent editors and the overwhelming majority of critics have pursued an interpretation of the “simplest office” of the body that God “hath no disdaine to serve” as describing some kind of toilet business: the body’s purse encloses food, and opens and closes again when needful. This draws on one of what appear to be two words spelled *soule* in Middle English usage, both of which have an alimentary sense. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh’s 1978 edition of *A Revelation* was the earliest to query the received sense of *soule*. Without glossing the full import of the passage, these editors derive the alimentary sense of *soule* or *sowl* from Old English *sufol*. This they define as cooked or digested meat, obliquely suggesting, then, God’s guardianship of the waste functions of Julian’s body. Brant Pelphrey in 1982 appears to be the first critic to pursue this as a key testimony to Julian’s extraordinary elevation of the body and its functions. However, in 1997 Nicholas Watson appears to have corrected the Colledge/Walsh etymology of *soule*, deriving it rather from Old French *saulee*, which would give it a more general sense of that which sates, one’s fill, a current if not especially common word in what record we have of Middle English, as indeed is the Old English-derived *sowl*, *pace* the critics who have alleged this second word’s obscurity. Hence in Watson and Jenkins’s edition, *soule* is glossed as “food or meal” more generally, but the edition still leans heavily toward an interpretation of the passage that focuses specifically on excretion. However, the sense of *soule* as digested food is in fact not borne out by either derivation according to the associated dictionary entries: *OED* *sowl*, n., and *MED* *sîuel*, n. (2); *OED* *saulee*, n., and *MED* *saule*, n. (a). Use of the dictionaries sug-
gests that the Old English-derived *soule* is part of a binomial pair “bread and soule” for which it can also, alone, be read metonymically for sustenance as a whole. In fact both words occur with the same Latin gloss: *edulium*, edibles or foodstuffs. The Old French-derived word is so glossed in the marginalia of a B-text of *Piers Plowman* (ca. 1400), in Bodleian MS Laud Misc. 581, and the Old English-derived word is so glossed in a Latin-English *Nominale* from Lord Londesborough’s library (ca. 1500). In *Piers Plowman* the general sense of sustenance is clearly meant when Anima speaks of the fruit that grows on the tree of Charity: “To haue my fille of þat fruit [I would] forsake alle other saulee.” That in some manuscripts *saulee* is spelled *soule* suggests how these words could be confused by medieval scribes.

As to the purse, Watson argues that the passage deliberately reworks the dualizing body-horror of penitential pastoral literature that identifies the body as a *vas stercorum*, “a bag full of shit,” as he unflinchingly remarks. Watson and Jenkins in their edition consider the purse to refer specifically to the body in its waste functions, emphasizing the rectum-like drawstring, and more specifically to the bowel. McAvoy’s work on Julian’s nondualist, nonabject account of the body also assumes that digestive elimination is the primary sense of the passage, but at the same time she joins Sarah McNamer and Maria Lichtmann in exploring Julian’s possible validation of a particularly female body, pointing to the ambiguity of the cavity which could also be understood as a womb-like enclosure. In pursuit of this, McAvoy in fact notes the rarity of the association of purse with anus or digestive organ.

Katie Walter finds convincing evidence in the Galenic tradition, which considered the “mouth-stomach” continuum of upright man to be uniquely continent, and imagined it as purse-like: narrow-necked, and wide-bottomed. If the purse may well be a reference to the mouth and stomach, not the bowel, or simply the body as a receptive enclosure, and if the *soule* is more sustenance than sludge, the excremental interpretation now turns on defining “his nescessery” as excretion (“And whan it is tyme of his [the purse’s] nescessery, it is openyde and sparyde ayen fulle honestly”). Bemusingly, for all the discussion about digestion, there is no evidence in Middle English usage for understanding “the necessarye” in this passage as referring to anything defecatory. It is true that in later medieval monastic Latin *officium necessarium*, *necessaria naturae*, and *domus necessaria* can refer to necessary bodily functions, and to the latrine, and it might well be argued that Julian could read Latin; nevertheless, equivalent usages are not attested elsewhere in Middle English. The euphemistic phraseology of “doing the necessary” is found in English no earlier than the seventeenth century, when
terms such as necessary-house, necessary-vault, necessary-stool, and so forth proliferated. One would have thought this to be precisely the kind of obliquity that recent body-positive critics would disavow, not discover. It is also notable that the material taken to support a scatological reading of the passage is only removed from the two manuscripts of A Revelation of Love that date to the period when the term necessary had come into euphemistic usage: London, British Library, MS Sloane 2499, a seventeenth-century copy, and MS Sloane 3705, an eighteenth-century modernization.

In fact, the terminology of “the necessary,” as the MED does attest, is used primarily for that which is needful for basic survival, and frequently and specifically for food: food as it enters the body. In the Book to a Mother (ca. 1400), the lesson on the Beatitudes directs that it is “necessaries” that are to be given to the neighbour in need. In the late fifteenth-century Middle English translation of the Revelations of Saint Bridget of Sweden, we find mention of “sych necessares as entryth into þe body, as mete or drynke.” In Richard Rolle’s Form of Living, those living the vita activa must be self-sufficient and “fynd þam þaire necessaries,” while those living the contemplative life are counseled to avoid an over-zealous ascetism, not “to withalde necessaries fra þi body.” Closest of all perhaps to Julian’s sense, Rolle’s translation of the Psalms of around 1340 includes this verse: “Forsake not god for dred of hungire; he hight til his lufers thaire necessaris” [he gives all that is needful to those who love him]. While all these usages are in the plural, and our example from Julian is singular, this could be explained as a simple nominalization of the adjective necessary, “what is needful.” In the rules for the Godstow nunnery just outside Oxford, for example, we have a singular usage close to Julian’s: “Pei shall repe yerly in heruyst by thre days, & they shall haue necessari of metis.” The only attested sense in the MED that might relate in any way to defecation is as part of the phrase “voiden neccessarye” in a fifteenth-century example from John Capgrave’s Life of Saint Norbert. Here, although what is needed is being evacuated, the sense of “necessary” in the passage remains one of nutritive sustenance.

I am arguing, therefore, that Julian’s “nescessery” most likely refers to one’s portion, needful provision of sustenance, or daily bread, and that the time of “his nescessery” here means the time of eating or receiving food, not of getting rid of it. This fits well with Watson’s conclusion that “soule” is on balance likely to be a word associated with a sense of fill or satiety. Crucially, Julian’s use of “nescessery” is not only suitable for the food of an

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abstinent anchoress, but this usage is also appropriate to her theology. While “nede” is opposed to “wilful lyking” in Walter Hilton’s careful treatment of the dangers of gluttony, the notion of necessity has a different cast in the anchoress’s thought. Julian’s “nescessery” is a near synonym for her famous “behovely”—both words redolent of sufficiency and fittingness, which point to the emphasis in her theology on due proportion that Denys Turner has related to the conveniens theme in Thomas Aquinas. For other mystics corporeal needs are properly necessities, but for Julian they are also suitabilities. There is a coherence and an ordered beauty to the adequacy and correspondence of human physiology and sustenance.

Taking the nutritive interpretation of “nescessary” in the purse analogy, the passage as a whole speaks of the supreme degree of God’s self-giving, which extends down to humanity’s needs of life and nourishment. This “lowest perte” of human need then refers not to excretion, but rather to the dependence on material sustenance that characterizes earth-bound “sensualite”: the state of the ensouled body which Julian does in fact sometimes associate with the “lower perte” of her relatively fluid dichotomy of the human hypostasis. After all, Julian, elsewhere in A Revelation, demonstrates that her sophisticated somatic theology does incorporate a more commonplace abject understanding of the supremely, even distressingly, earthy flesh envisioned as a “swilge stinking mire.” That eating could be considered an aspect of bodily abjection is clear from the attention given by Rolle, Hilton, and others to food consumption. The simplest way to make sense of the purse analogy is to understand it as Julian’s assurance that God’s hand is evident even in the most basic capacity of the body to eat and be sustained. This is God the nursing mother, who later in the text “fedeth us and fordreth [fosters] us, right as the hye, sovereyne kindnesse of moderhed wille, and as the kindly nede of childhded asketh.”

A further reason to find the defecation reading deficient is that it provides no convincing explanation for why Julian might specify, when introducing her meditation, that “a man goyth uppe right.” Watson and Jenkins comment here that the verticality of man “stresses the difference between humankind and four-legged animals, just as the most animal of human functions is about to be invoked”; but no reason is given for why Julian wishes to make this stark contrast at this point. Man’s vertical orientation was indeed thought to mirror the divine order, his head or rational part lifted toward the heavens, the rest of the body oriented toward the earth. Aquinas describes man as walking upright because the five senses located in the features of his countenance operate for physical and spiritual or intellectual sustenance: “For
the senses are given to humankind not only for the purpose of procuring the
necessaries of life . . . but also to procure knowledge.”47 It is man’s top end
which is so receptive to the knowledge of God just as the purse in its location
receives and gives forth its contents by opening. The purse analogy is then
made more perfect precisely by the uprightness of man. Katie Walter’s impor-
tant work reading this passage in light of physiological contexts draws atten-
tion to the tradition of emphasizing and celebrating the continence of the
narrow-necked and deep-bottomed mouth-stomach as an enclosed and con-
taining space, as opposed to the incontinent horizontal animal passage way
with its unrestricted flow. This supports a reading of the purse as stomach,
and indeed Walter suggestively stresses nutrition and digestion over excre-
tion.48 As the last lines of the “fair purse” passage unfold, the image of the
body as protective and enclosing is, for Julian, also a sign of how humankind
is made, optime dispositus, in the image of God:

For he hath no dispite of that he made. Ne he hath no disdaine to
serve us at thesimplest office that to oure body longeth in kinde,
for love of the soule that he made to his awne likenesse. ¶ For as
the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skinne, and the
bones in the flesh and the harte in the bowke [trunk] so ar we,
soule and body cladde and enclosydde in the goodness of god.

It is this theological understanding that accounts for the proximity of ideas
of vertical stature and the enclosing purse.

However, the purse passage intimates that its focus on sustenance
concerns no ordinary feeding, but one that is also suitable for the glorified
body. Placed in its full context, the descending goodness of God is ascribed
wonderful and life-giving properties for the whole self, both the lower and
higher “perte”: “It quickened our sowle and maketh it leve [alive] and make
it to waxe in grace and in vertu. It is nerest in kynde [nature] and redyest
in grace.” The language is very similar indeed to that used later in A Rev-
elation of the maternal Christ, who renders the “moders service” which “is
nerest, rediest, and sekerest [surest]: nerest, for it is most of kinde [as it most
pertains to nature].”49 That image is, ultimately, a eucharistic one. Christ’s
loving descent for our need, his pregnancy with and parturition of our souls,
and his birth pangs at the Crucifixion lead up to a direct parallel between
mother’s milk and the “blessed sacrament.” The body from which man is
born, by which life is quickened within, as this passage suggests becomes
the body that feeds mankind; Christ’s mother-nature first makes and then
nourishes the human being. Christ’s offering up of his body is as natural to his goodness, and to human need, as a mother offering the breast. This continues Julian’s meditation on the fittingness, the suitability and naturalness, of the means by which salvation is achieved. Here the human body, holding within it its God-given sustenance, receives—and in its reception perfectly reflects and images—the very nature of divine love in its most basic function of taking in food. The idea of a descending gift of God that is both supremely connatural to mankind and yet supremely a gift of the divine goodness must, in a fourteenth-century Christological devotional text, surely also suggest the Eucharist.

This short passage can be read as conveying Julian’s account of Christ’s sacramental, participatable nature, including a particular account of “the blessed sacrament that is precious fode of very life.” This need not work against a primary sense of the “daily bread” of the anchoress; rather, the eucharistic sense, seen as a reminder of the divine provision, is a halloving of all such bread-breaking. Parasacramental foodstuffs like the “holy bread” available for the laity were understood to participate in this sacramental giving of God’s body. Meal graces that refer to the Eucharist attest to this connection between ordinary sustenance and sacramental provision.

In Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Christ*, the meditation for Thursday, the day associated with the Last Supper not just on “Maundy Thursday” in Holy Week, unites the feeding miracles and Jesus’s “bread of life” discourse with the final meal made with the disciples. Love writes of God’s provision:

> for we haue not to ete bodily or gostly. bot he ȝife vs, & so if he suffre vs fasting. we shole faile in þe wey. For without him we mowe not helpe ourse self in any gostly nede.

The image of God *serving* in chapter 6 of *A Revelation*—“he hath no disdaine to serve us at the simplest office that to oure body longeth in kinde, for love of the soule that he hath made to his awne likenesse”—also suggests the eucharistic *leitourgia*, service. And indeed *office* can of course mean the Mass itself: the anamnesis of that meal at which the bread broken for mankind by Christ is his own body.

The descent of God at the Incarnation, continued and perfected in the self-abasement of the Passion, is interpreted in the gospels as the spiritual fulfillment of the promise of the Old Testament miracle of corporeal nourishment, the heavenly manna that descends to the Israelites in the wilder-
ness. In the “bread of heaven” discourses that follow the feeding of the five thousand in the Gospel of John, Christ repeatedly identifies himself, and is reported as identifying with, the true sustenance which comes down from heaven:

Then Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen I say to you: Moses gave you not bread from heaven, but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which cometh down from heaven and giveth life to the world.”

I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him that sent me.

I am the living bread which came down from heaven.

We might recall Julian’s comment on God’s serving his creatures: “And that it is he, that doyth this it is shewed ther wher he seyth, he comyth downe to us, to the lowest parte of oure nede.” It has been suggested by Colledge and Walsh that the text is quoting only itself, repeating the previous line, “for to the goodnes of god is the highest praier, and it cometh downe to us to the lowest party of our need.” According to this reading, the phrase “he seyth” would have to be using the Middle English indeterminate pronoun, in which “he” either means “she” says—in which case Julian would suddenly be addressing herself in the third person—or “he” implies “it” in “there where the text says.” However this would then be the only instance of he used in this way in Julian’s entire work, and it would be used moreover in a most confusing way, alongside two uses of “he” that clearly refer to God. Nor has Julian made any suggestion that the previous statement is a special revelation to her from God, as she otherwise specifies. A better hypothesis is that here Julian is first voicing, and then citing in indirect speech, the authority of the great “shewing” that is sacra scriptura: “there where he (God, Christ) says.” It is an example of what Annie Sutherland has called Julian’s “embedded” Biblicism. Colledge and Walsh, in their characteristic anxiety to cite sources and parallels, provide an unconvincing general analogy to 2 Corinthians 1:4 with its Jesus “who comforteth in all our tribulations” and a somewhat arbitrary parallel to a meditation of Mechtilde of Hackborn on Christ’s incarnation whereby he came “downe” to “owre nede and miserye.” While I concur that “he comyth downe to us, to the lowest parte of oure nede” is referring to incarnational descent, I propose that what Julian refers to here are Christ’s words, not Paul’s. In my read-
ing, this passage would then be precisely evoking Jesus’s “bread of heaven” discourse. Perhaps most crucially, Julian associates nutrition with Christ’s incarnational descent in the Parable of the Servant. The “treasure” that her Adam/Christ seeks is “a mete,” identified with the Adamic task of earning his bread by the sweat of his brow and the Christic labor whose fruit is the eucharistic bread. Nourishment, here, is the circumstance of our fall and of our redemption.

I would also argue that Julian’s use of soule in two senses in such close proximity is a conscious semiotic equivocation with relevance to this eucharistic reading. In fact a pun is made on just these homonyms in the Middle English translation of Bridget of Sweden’s Revelations. To play on the sense of a physical substance which satisfies and a divine substance which animates is surely already to suggest the “bread of life” by which Christ describes his incarnational promise and anticipates the eucharistic provision: “I am the bread of life; he that cometh to me shall not hunger, and he that believeth in me shall never thirst.” The Eucharistic elements attest to the union of the divine and the material without remainder, and here Julian’s language renders this especially apparent by the use of a word at once flesh and spirit: soule.

In the full context of Julian’s thought, her understanding of Christological and eucharistic feeding is enmeshed with her celebrated theme of the mutual indwelling of God and humanity. This maternal trope of enclosure and enclosing is very strong in this passage. Just as here the body’s containing illustrates the body’s containment, Julian later in chapter 60 images the Eucharist precisely as “withiness,” incorporation by as much as incorporation of:

The moder may ley her childe tenderly to her brest. But oure tender mother Jhesu, he may homely lede us into his blessed brest by his swet, open side, and shewe us therein perty of the godhed and the joyes of heven, with gostely sekernesse [certainty] of endless blisse.

In the light of a eucharistic interpretation, it is intriguing that in Julian’s description of the soul “sparde” within the body the spelling of this verb allows it to derive either from sparren, to shut or lock, or from sparen, to spare and to save, to preserve and protect in tabernacle fashion. So also the fair purse passage concludes with the concentric image of the body’s enclosure and enclosing:
For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skinne, 
and the bones in the flesh and the harte in the bowke so ar we, 
soule and body cladde and enclosydde in the goodness of god.

This image, like that of the fair purse, represents the body as a vessel whose 
very principles communicate theological truth. What is more, “harte” 
could, and did, frequently refer to the stomach, not the organ of circula-
tion of the blood, which was also contained within the “bowke” or trunk of 
the body. This nutritive reading, I would argue, fits more organically with 
the passage’s overall body theology. The body is a living demonstration of the 
divine principle: the skin wrapping the flesh, the flesh wrapping the bones, 
and, of course, the whole container a perfect receptacle for its sustenance, a 
sustenance that in the sacrament is divine substance. It is this very capacity 
of the body to preserve, protect, and carry which makes the human body 
an image of the way in which we are “beclosyde,” “cladde and enclosydde” 
within God’s love. Julian’s theology here does not just explore Christ’s pres-
ence in what is eaten; it explores Christ’s presence in eating itself, the very 
process of consumption. She sees God as already immanent in our motions 
toward him. God is not simply an object of human sight, knowledge, or 
consumption (those three powerfully intertwined more-than-metaphors for 
contemplation and eucharistic reception); God is already present in his crea-
tures’ seeing, knowing, and consuming.

If we can trust the Ancrene Wisse—with its long history of transmis-
sion and translation through the later Middle Ages—as some rough guide to 
practice, Julian might have viewed the Mass, and so communicated each day 
spiritually, but may have received the Host only fifteen times a year. The 
concentric circles of her sacramental thought, her understanding of Com-
munion as entering into while already mysteriously within also inevitably 
suggests the anchoress’s physical eucharistic experience. Julian enclosed her-
self within the building that represented the Church as Christ’s body, and 
she thought of the sacramental life of the Church in terms of containment 
and preservation. Already within the walls of the Church, she would have 
been drawn into ecstatic vision of the Mass through the narrow, wound-like 
squint in the wall of her cell to the space of the sanctuary enclosed within 
the nave.

Humanity’s Godlike patterning is fulfilled in the sacrament that, 
Aquinas says, is the most materially positive act of all, wherein material sub-
stance is made divine substance. This also transforms the logic and process 
of material eating as the Middle Ages understood it. It was the medieval
belief that food was quite literally assimilated by the body, became body. So for Aquinas’s teacher, Albertus Magnus, food in the body is converted by a movement from the potential to the actual in which “bread . . . becomes flesh or bone.” By contrast to this nutritive assimilation of the eaten by the eater, in the Eucharist the human eater becomes what she eats: she is, in a sense, eating and being eaten up by God. In the passage we have engaged with, Julian’s theology of mutual indwelling is revealed as an inherently eucharistic theology on this model, where incorporation and being incorporated meet. In fact Julian could perhaps be said to go beyond Aquinas in the circle she establishes, of a body “ensouled” which is then made fitting for the substance into which it is at once incorporated and incorporates. Instead of contrasting spiritual and physical food, she speaks of her “ensouled” eating body as already a eucharistic body, in God and containing God, and so perfectly apt for the substance into which it is at once incorporated and incorporates.

Finally, the “feyre purse” as an object may itself have unexplored eucharistic resonance. Although purse had a general sense of bag, perhaps indeed a leather scrip or food bag, it also had our now usual sense of a bag to contain coin or what is precious or valuable: more holy vessel than vas stercorum. The medieval purse might indeed carry humdrum bread and foodstuffs, but it might also bear the holiest of contents. Reliquaries from the earlier Middle Ages were frequently purse-shaped, recalling early missionary bursa for the transport of saintly remains. Julian might well have owned, or received charity from, an aumônière, an alms-purse—usually an elaborately beaded and embroidered item. The mention of purses as gifts in the Norwich Cathedral prior’s accounts of the later fourteenth century suggests their popularity in the city in Julian’s time. However, the fairest purse Julian would have seen in daily use through the squint set into her anchorage would have been the burse used during the Eucharist. This bag, also called a “purse,” was an embroidered, perhaps velvet, pouch of two panels and a drawstring or flap that was used to carry the corporal, the cloth on which the host and chalice were laid, to and from the altar. While Julian may indeed be recalling the body as the filth-filled leather sack of the contemptus mundi tradition, these sacred purses and their associations with holy matter should also be kept in mind.

None of the fruitful productivity of this passage in the light of Julian’s theology so convincingly works or appertains if we accept that the purse analogy is concerned with expulsion and excretion. It is my argument that Julian is offering an image of a theological, rather than biological or
even logical, body. The critical reception of this passage has certainly been right to draw attention to Julian’s hallowing of the body and its operations. But ultimately this is a powerful passage about divine immanence, and as such it is perhaps appropriate that the purse analogy cannot be fixed to any one particular human experience, but moves between them all—birth, death, eating, ridding of waste—just as Julian finds that all corporeal processes become analogous and united in the light of the Christic mystery which they all reveal. Looking for the grotesque and the abject may have led to a falsely narrow and misleading reading of this passage. Julian does indeed hallow the body fully through her understanding of how all its functions are illuminated and drawn up as “meanes,” or mediating factors, by the divine descent in the Incarnation. For her, the body, even the stomach, is a site of communion with God in Christ in its ordinary function as always already para-eucharistic. In her “showings,” Julian writes new liturgies of the glorified body’s functions as themselves sacramental, opening inward onto her God.

Notes


6 See Miller, *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body*, 121–22. Yet for Julian, the infinite spiritual pregnancy means our birth of redemption is birth into an even greater divine care, which is mirrored in her account of Christ’s motherly corporeality: “And oure savioure is oure very moder, in whome we be endlesly borne and never shall come out of him.” *A Revelation of Love*, chap. 57, in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 305. Unless otherwise specified, further references to Julian’s long text of the *Revelation* are to this edition, giving chapter and page numbers.

7 I follow Miller, *Medieval Monstrosity*, 100, in opposing Julian to the examples of feminine somatic piety that Bynum draws on in *Fragmentation and Redemption and Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. However, I disagree with Miller on eucharistic piety in Julian.


13 Ibid., 100. Bynum remarks in her account of the importance of food to other religious women that it was explicitly “not a crucial image to Julian of Norwich” (*Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 186).


16 Sister Anna Maria Reynolds, author of the first critical edition of Julian’s writings, holds that the passage is about the soul’s release from the body at death. Her edition of the long text of the *Revelation*—her 1956 University of Leeds doctoral thesis—has been published as *Showing of Love: Extant Texts and Translation*, ed. Anna Maria Reynolds and Julia Bolton Holloway (Firenze: SISMEL, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2001). This interpretation has been championed again most recently by Christina Maria Cervone, “The ‘Soule’ Crux in Julian of Norwich’s *A Revelation of Love*,” *Review of English Studies* 55, no. 219 (2004): 151–56. Both Cervone and Reynolds compare the long text, chap. 64, where Julian describes the “swilge, stinking mire” of the body releasing the lovely soul.

17 Maria R. Lichtmann interprets this passage as concerned with physical birth, in “I
desyrede a bodylye syght': Julian of Norwich and the Body,” *Mystics Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1991): 12–19. If we accept such a reading, the obvious scriptural parallels have been overlooked by these critics. Consider Psalm 112:5–6, 9: “Who is as the Lord, our God, who dwelleth on high and looketh down on the low things in heaven and in earth, . . . who maketh a barren woman to dwell in a house the joyful mother of children?” Birth as a descending gift of God’s goodness can also be found in Psalm 126:3: “Behold: the inheritance of the Lord are children, the reward the fruit of the womb”; and Psalm 70:6: “By thee have I been confirmed from the womb.” And the *Te Deum* hallows the feminine organ: “Thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb.” Quotations of the Psalms are from the Douay-Rheims translation in *The Vulgate Bible, Volume 3: The Poetical Books*, ed. Swift Edgar with Angela M. Kinney, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

I have taken this account from Reynolds’s transcription of Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Anglais 40, in *Showing of Love*, 165–66. The Watson and Jenkins edition of this passage (*A Revelation of Love*, chap. 6, 142–45) is also based on the Paris manuscript, but regularizes spelling rather liberally and, in some instances, questionably: for example “correcting” tense usage to “quickeneth” and capitalizing “god.”

*A Revelation of Love*, chap. 5, 138–43, at 139. Here “quantity of an haselnot” is a homely, and sometimes medical, unit of measure rather than the edible kernel itself. See Barratt, “‘In the lowest part of our need’: Julian and Medieval Gynaecological Writing,” 246–47, and compare the still-current use of *nut* in culinary metaphor to mean a small knob of some foodstuff, especially butter. This is a particularly everyday idiom still in French, i.e., “un noix/noisette [syn. hazelnut] de beurre.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (hereafter *OED*), Oxford University Press, March 2016, s.v. *nut*, n. 1 and adj. 2, III.9, http://www.oed.com. The earliest reference dates to about 1400, but this sense is not replicated in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

The *Cloud of Unknowing* has closely comparable passages on the limitations of what the author also refers to as “menes,” and in Hilton can be found strikingly similar images of “barring” the soul to describe escaping earthly means of beholding. See *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Patrick J. Gallacher (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 62–63; *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. Thomas H. Bestul (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 58.

In chapter 64, the “swift and lifly” soul, “a fulle faire creature, a litille child,” leaps upward from the foul “swilge” of the body (*A Revelation of Love*, 325).

In the ruling consensus of interpretation whereby *soule* does not possess its conventional meaning, there is at least a hint here of what Robert Adams sees as the fallacy of the *difficilior lectio*, the view that the harder reading must be more authentic. Robert Adams, “Editing and the Limitations of the *Durior Lectio*,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 5 (1991): 7–15.


Pelphrey, *Love Was His Meaning*, 156–57: “Even our ‘lowest’ or most private functions—including the elimination of waste—manifest the love of God. . . . The sense of this passage is that God is in control of our digestion and elimination.”
Watson, “Conceptions of the Word,” 86 n. 2. See OED, s.v. saulee, n.; MED, s.v. saule, n. (a). Other than one attestation from a Piers Plowman manuscript, all the attestations in OED and MED date to the fifteenth century, mostly to the later part.


Watson, “Conceptions of the Word,” 121; A Revelation of Love, chap. 6, 142.

McAvoy, Authority and the Female Body, 139–44; McNamer, “Exploratory Image,” 22–23; Lichtmann, “‘I desyrede a bodylye syght’: Julian of Norwich and the Body,” 16.

Katie Louise Walter, “Discourses of the Human: Mouths in Later Medieval Literature” (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2007), 74–75. Walter’s sensitive reading of this passage as about digestive “continence” remains to me the most convincing and also the most compatible with my own. It is even possible that Julian stresses the containment and protection of life-giving sustenance, ordinary or extraordinary and eucharistic, in order to create a reassuring image that works against late medieval anxieties about the defecation or expulsion of the Host, and the unfitness of the human body to receive it. Some of this debate is rooted in Matt. 15:17, where Christ speaks against Jewish ritual eating practices; food comes in one end and goes out the other: only foul words, not foul food, can defile. Julian clearly sees the eucharistic promise of true nourishment as impacting all aspects of alimentation and nutrition, redeeming human eating in general, including digestion. On this anxiety, see Morrison, Excrement in the Middle Ages, 79–82.

Staley, in fact, somewhat incomprehensibly, offers a reading focused on excretion that retains the received sense of soul, and she sees the whole passage as an extended analogy between one enclosure and the other (Powers of the Holy, 119–21).


OED, s.v. necessary, adj. and n., A.3 and B.3.

MED, s.v. necessari(e), n.

Book to a Mother, ed. Adrian James McCarthy (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1981), 171.


John Capgrave, *The Life of St. Norbert*, ed. C. L. Smetana (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), 107: “He happend into þe yerd to gone / Late at eue, to voyde swech necessary / As we weth diligens into oure bely carye.”


Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011), 35–38. Turner points out that the editions of Colledge and Walsh and of Clifton Wolters both translate “behovely” as “necessary.”

*A Revelation of Love*, chap. 64, 325.


*A Revelation of Love*, chap. 63, 321.

See Clement of Alexandria: “Those, then, who run down created existence and vilify the body are wrong; not considering that the frame of man was formed erect for the contemplation of heaven, and that the organization of the senses tends to knowledge; and that the members and parts are arranged for good, not for pleasure.” *Stromata*, IV.26, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (1885–96; repr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 2:439. See also Mathetes, *Epistle to Diognetus*: “[M]an to whom alone He imparted the privilege of looking upwards to Himself, whom He formed after His own image” (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:29).


Walter, “Discourses of the Human,” 75: “Julian establishes digestion as an allegory of prayer and confession, but she is also talking about real food. Located in our mouths, prayer eats of God’s goodness which, once swallowed, makes its way through the body, quickening it and making it grow, just as food does. But so too is God’s goodness shown literally in the provision of food that restores the body.”

*A Revelation of Love*, chap. 60, 313.

Ibid.

To cite one example among many, in Cambridge, Newnham College, MS 4, a grace that follows a B-text of *Piers Plowman* and the *Lay Folk’s Mass Book* reads:

God, that his brede brake
At his maw[n]de whanne he sate
Amonge his postyllis twelue
He bles oure brede and our ayl
Þat we haw and haw schal
And be with vs him-selwe. (fol. 108v)


“Quia descendi de caelo, non ut faciam voluntatem meam, sed voluntatem ejus qui misit me” (John 6:38).

“Ego sum panis vivus, qui de caelo descendit” (John 6:51).

A Revelation of Love, chap. 6, 142; A Book of Showings, ed. Colledge and Walsh, 306–7, nn. 29, 38.


See A Book of Showings, ed. Colledge and Walsh, 306, notes to lines 29 and 38. A better reference from the Pauline corpus here is Ephesians 4:9: “Quod autem ascen-dit, quid est nisi quia et descendit primum in inferiores partes terrae?” [Now that he ascended, what is it but because he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?]. The Psalms have been underexamined in relation to this passage, since they are especially remarkable for their frequent vertical dynamic of appeal, for aid in relief from misery, often envisaged as a pit (Psalms 28, 30:4; 40:2–3, 144:5–8). Psalm 112 might be especially rich for both the Reynolds/Cervone interpretation and womb-related accounts of McNamer, Lichtmann, and McAvoy described above. It praises the goodness of God who “looketh down on the low things in heaven and in earth” and “raise[s] up the needy from the earth and lift[s] up the poor out of the dunghill,” while its final birth image associates salvation with a new, perhaps spiritual, fertility, praising the God “who maketh a barren woman to dwell in a house the joyful mother of children” (113:6–7, 9).

A Revelation of Love, chap. 51, 281.

Revelations of Saint Birgitta, ed. Cummings, 13.

“Dixit autem eis Jesus: Ego sum panis vitae: qui venit ad me, non esuriet, et qui credit in me, non sitiet umquam” (John 6:35).

A Revelation of Love, chap. 60, 313.

The basis for Sarah McNamer’s translation of sparede as “emptied” is unclear, an interpretation that inevitably greatly inflects her reading of the passage in terms of excretion (“Exploratory Image,” 21).

Julian could almost be writing explicitly against Walter Hilton here, who says, “Thanne yif thou coveite for to knowen and seen thi soule what it is, thou schalt not torne thi thought to thi bodi for to seken and feelen it, as it were hid withinne in thi fleschli herte as thyn herte is hid and hoolden withinne thi bodi” (Scale of Perfection, ed. Bestul, 205).

MED, s.v. herte, n., 1b, and bouk, n., 1.

Ancrene Wisse, ed. Millett, 1:155.

Consider, for example, Julian’s comment in A Revelation of Love, chap. 72, 347: “Oure
lorde God wonneth [dwell] now in us, and is here with us, and halseth [embraces] us and becloseth us for tender love that he may never leve us.”

69 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, qu. 73, art. 1, ad. 3, 4–6.


71 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, qu. 73, art. 3, ad. 2, 12.


74 *MED, s.v. purs(e)*, n., 3.