Julian of Norwich (1342–c.1416) is the foremost representative of the female visionary tradition in England. She is also one of the few medieval writers to have a large modern readership outside the academic community. Consequently, some of the reasons for her current fame are based on misunderstandings of her medieval context. She is sometimes thought ground-breaking where she is conventional (as in her discussion of the motherhood of Christ), and extreme where she is in some ways restrained (as in her depiction of Christ’s crucified body). Conversely, some of her true originality has been overlooked, as this chapter will argue.

Julian’s text, variously titled Showings (Colledge and Walsh 1978), A Revelation of Love (Glasscoe 1993) or, more commonly, Revelations of Divine Love,\(^1\) has come down to us in two versions, the Short Text (Beer 1978; Windeatt 1994) and the Long Text. We have no concrete evidence as to when the texts were written, or in what order. Within the field of Middle English studies, as distinct from that of theology (where Julian’s writings also currently attract much attention), the task of establishing a critical text and situating it accurately in its cultural and historical context is obviously of paramount importance. Most recent scholarship has therefore focused on these issues, producing, for instance, widely different theories as to dating. Furthermore, we have almost no biographical information concerning Julian herself, and have to deduce some kind of life story for her on the basis of the extremely guarded comments in
Julian as a Mystical Writer

Julian can be set within the movement of medieval women visionaries, which was at its height on the Continent at this time. She can also be set more specifically within the group of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century medieval writers generally referred to as the English Mystics, primarily Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing. In particular, she can be usefully compared and contrasted with the fifteenth-century Margery Kempe, our other major representative of the female visionary tradition in England. The current trend for redating Julian's texts to the early fifteenth century, when Margery was also being exhorted to write down her experiences, as she tells us, makes this comparison between the two women particularly fruitful.

In an English context, Julian immediately stands out. Her distinctiveness is pinpointed by the colophon at the end of the Long Text (in London, British Library MS Sloane 1), which cautions the reader against taking bits of her text in isolation, on the grounds that it is ‘hey divintye and hey wisdam’ (Glasscoe 1993: 135). What is meant by this phrase? When we look at Julian's three male predecessors, we can describe their work by the modern term 'ascetic theology', meaning that they outline a path or method — an ascesis — whereby one can draw closer to God. As for Margery, her narrative describes her personal conversion and development as a mystic, and her Book has been called 'the first autobiography in English'.

In Julian we find none of this. While there is the vivid and compelling account of the near-fatal illness during which she received her sequence of sixteen 'shewynges' (Colledge and Walsh 1978: 281) on 8 May 1373, she does not outline either her personal spiritual journey or a method to be applied by others. Instead, she has an urgent, dense, tightly argued package of insights to share with us concerning the nature of God in Himself: theology in the strictest sense of the word. Indeed, this can be called in modern terminology 'mystical theology', in the sense that it involves knowledge of God that can only be known by faith, and is not immediately obvious to the fallen, limited human mind. Julian herself keeps using phrases such as ‘full mystely’, ‘mysty example’, ‘hyd’, ‘an high mervelous prevyte hyd in god’ (513, 519, 407). It is perhaps in this sense that she is writing ‘hey divintye’.

Indeed, her phrases recall the ‘hid divinity’ of the apophatic tradition exemplified in The Cloud of Unknowing, which has a very similar colophon warning the reader not to read the text selectively. In the apophatic tradition, the inability of the human mind to conceptualize God with any adequacy is constantly reiterated, and the mind enters instead into a realm of imageless silence. Julian’s complex style perhaps embodies a similar struggle to go beyond our normal concepts and patterns of thought, as we see in one of her most baffling statements: ‘I saw god in a poynte ... by which sight I saw that he is in althyng’ (336). In this statement, ‘poynte’ is manifestly 'non-figural and non-referential' (Gillespie and Ross 1992: 72). Her efforts to explicate the ‘mysty’ dimension build up into a ‘meta-narrative’ (Baker 1994: 140) which both accompanies and interrupts the actual physical visions.

When we set Julian within the Continental visionary tradition, this explicatory dimension is not, at first glance, quite so unique. When we look at her great contemporary, Catherine of Siena (1347–80), we find a woman speaking with similar complexity about God’s view of mankind. As in Julian, a lot of the complexity arises from a strong emphasis on God as the Trinity. We have evidence that Catherine’s text was known in England from the 1390s, as was the Liber Celestis of Bridget of Sweden (Watson 1993: 653–5). In this latter work, both Jesus and Mary grant visions to Bridget about events that had no other witness, such as the conception of Christ in Mary’s womb. The authority granted to these visions, at least by the laity, is suggested by Margery Kempe, to whom Christ asserts that ‘it is trewe euery word that is wretyn in Brides [Bridget’s] boke’. Here, then, are two Continental women confidently asserting that they are giving us knowledge directly received from God.

Julian puts herself in a more subtle and difficult position. In both Catherine’s and Bridget’s writings, it is Christ himself or God the Father who speaks at length, offering interpretations of the visions, and these words are received in the same ecstatic trance in which the visual dimension of the revelation is received. Julian, however, distinguishes scrupulously throughout her work between the actual ‘bodily’ (physical) vision and what she understood by it: ‘by this I saw’, ‘I vnderstood’, ‘as to my sight’ (Watson 1992: 87). The careful separating out of her own voice from that of Christ, and her presentation of her insights not as direct revelation but as the fruit of years of personal reflection —
'the inward lernyng that I have vnderstodyn therein sithen' (519–20) — perhaps also support the impression that she is producing ‘hey divinitye’.

More specifically, her reflection centres on the life of God, that is, on the internal love and working of the three persons of the Trinity. Julian’s constant and distinctive emphasis on the Trinity lends enormous complexity to her work. Although the information that she has to share with her ‘even–Christians’ concerns God’s attitudes towards human beings, these attitudes always originate in the relationships between the three persons of the Godhead. In contrast, Margery Kempe emphasizes her passionate engagement with the humanity of Christ, from which she much later passes on to the Godhead.\footnote{8}

The popular response to Julian has tended to overlook her Trinitarian emphasis. This is because Julian strives to find human, earthly, domestic images for the insights she has to communicate, so successfully that it is the images that command attention at first reading: Christ’s body is so drained of blood that it is like a sagging cloth; God’s love enwraps us as closely as our clothing; God the Father, in his azure robe, would rather sit down on the barren earth than anywhere else, if he cannot be enthroned in the city of our hearts (362, 299, 523–6). However, as we now proceed to examine Julian’s own engagement with the humanity of Christ, we will keep her Trinitarian emphasis in mind: ‘for wher Jhesu appireth the blessed trinitie is vnderstand, as to my sight’ (297), an assertion she makes at the very moment the visions start, launching both narrative and meta-narrative simultaneously (\textit{Watson} 1992: 87–8).

**Julian’s Visions of the Crucified Christ**

As the Long Text is the more elaborate recension of Julian’s work, being roughly six times as long as the Short Text, it is the version on which the following discussion will concentrate. Julian’s text opens with a brief but absorbing personal narrative in which she tells us that she requested of God a near–fatal illness, which would befall her at the age of thirty, and which would enable her to lead the rest of her life more closely focused on God — what we might now call a ‘disclosure’ experience, in which an extreme situation awakens us to a perspective on life that we might not otherwise have.

Having made the request, Julian forgot about it, which might simply be realistically human, or could imply that she was being careful not to seek out extraordinary experiences in the apparently rather cautious and conservative religious climate in England (\textit{Watson} 1993: 645–57). At thirty-and–a-half, she duly fell ill. Her parish priest, summoned to her deathbed, holds up a crucifix before her face; as she watches it, blood begins to pour down from under the crown of thorns. The intensity of the vision emerges in the similes with which she struggles to convey the cascading blood: it is as plentiful as raindrops falling off the eaves of a house; each drop spreads out like the scales of a herring; if it had been real it would have soaked the bed (311–12, 343). Julian’s visions of the crucified Christ unfold from this point. She sees his body, already flayed by the scourging, slowly dry out from loss of blood and moisture as it hangs on the cross, turning blue, and then brown. Eventually she beholds the actual moment of death. Paradoxically, it turns out to be a moment of utter joy for Christ and complete well–being for Julian.

Up to this point, Julian’s visions look as if they can be set within a fairly conventional tradition. Late medieval devotion strongly emphasized the use of the visual imagination (\textit{Baker} 1994: 40–62) and provided handbooks, such as the\footnote{9} \textit{Meditationes vitae Christi}, translated into English early in the fifteenth century by the Carthusian Nicholas Love,\footnote{10} to help the individual meditator picture the scenes of Christ’s life in detail. Such handbooks encouraged the visualizing of each scene in chronological order, with particularly detailed attention being paid to the successive scenes of Christ’s Passion. The effect of this pattern of devotion can be seen, for example, in the \textit{Book of Margery Kempe}: Margery’s first ‘contemplation’ focuses on the childhood of the Virgin Mary, then progresses to the birth of Christ, while the bulk of her \textit{Book} shows us her repeated visualizing of the various stages of Christ’s Passion. Margery’s model, Bridget of Sweden, also beholds many different scenes of Christ’s life. Thus, these texts present themselves as a sequence of discrete visions or topics.

Julian, in carefully dividing and numbering her material into sixteen visions, as she does in Chapter 1 of the Long Text, seems to be following the same pattern. However, we already see her unusualness emerging: her ‘sequence’ of visions actually consists of one prolonged beholding of Christ on the cross. The narrative element, to the extent that it can be isolated at all, ends with the moment of Christ’s death in the eighth revelation, at the end of Chapter 21 — about a quarter of the way through the whole work; a second brief narrative section introduces the last vision, in Chapters 66 to 70 (632–53). Throughout, Julian struggles to show us how everything she understood from the visions was part of one comprehensive whole, a point she emphasizes in her summary of the first revelation:

\begin{quote}

The first is of his precious crowning of thornes; and ther in was conteined and specified the blessed trinitie with the incarnation and vnithing betweene god and man’s sowle, with manie fayer schewynges and techynges of endelesse wisdom and loue, in which all the shewynges that foloweth be grvndide and ioyned.

\end{quote}
In contrast, the list of chapters which precedes Chapter 1, and which appears to be the work of a later scribe, omits this assertion of unity, perhaps implying a more traditionally sequential approach to the text.\textsuperscript{11}

The second aspect of Julian's unusualness which emerges at this point lies in her particular description of the Crucified. Most visions of the time describe Christ's heavy shedding of blood. Julian seems initially to be following the same tradition, as her similes above show. However, other emphases creep in. She stresses the acute dehydration of the body, dried out not only by loss of blood and moisture but also by a cold sharp wind, culminating in Christ's words, 'I thirst' (358–60). Christ looks as though he is taking a week to die, resulting in Julian's striking description of his body slowly changing colour, from blue, to brown, to black, sagging downwards from the nails. Julian seems to be aware that her depiction is unusual: she defends the colour brown by referring to the 'Vernicle', the handkerchief of St Veronica who, according to legend, had wiped the sweat from Christ's face as he carried his cross. On this cloth, Julian reminds her audience, Christ's face is brown, black and downcast (328).

It is possible that Julian is here drawing on an older but parallel verbal tradition in the Middle Ages, in which the pallor, rigidity and dryness of the dying Christ are emphasized. This older tradition is embodied in the vernacular medieval Passion lyrics, many of which derive from some lines in the early medieval \textit{Liber meditationum}, attributed in the later Middle Ages to St Augustine. These lines, beginning ‘Candet nudatum pectus’ (His bare breast glistens), emphasize the pallor of the dying Christ, and in particular use words like \textit{arent}, ‘dry out’, and \textit{rigent}, ‘grow rigid’, to describe what is happening to his limbs and sinews. Such details are echoed in Middle English lyrics in lines such as 'His leichende lyppes bycomen pale and hys bodi al dreie' and 'Mi blod is sched, my fles is falle, / Me thristet sore, for drink I calle'.\textsuperscript{12} We see here not only the dryness, as the blood leaches from the body, but also the sagging ('falle') and the thirst. Julian might thus be drawing on materials which come from popular culture, like the tradition of the Vernicle and the imagery of the lyrics — an important consideration in evaluating her degree of literacy or otherwise. If so, she nevertheless reuses them in a way that gives us a strong impression of her independence and originality.

Her real independence emerges at the point of Christ's death, where the movement of her contemplation of his crucified body does not at all issue in the message that we might expect. In the religious lyrics, a dialogue between Christ and the meditator often accompanies the visual description, and culminates in a somewhat bargaining plea from Christ: ‘zef thei weren kende to loven me outh, / Of al my peine me ne routh’ (If men were disposed to love me out of all my suffering, I would not love).\textsuperscript{13} For Julian, in contrast, the culminating point of the Crucifixion, the moment of death, issues in the following exchange:

\textit{Arte thou well apayd that I sufferyd for thee? I seyde: ze, good lord, gramercy; ye, good lorde, blessyd moet þow be. Then seyde Jhesu our good lord: If thou arte apayde, I am apayde. It is a joy, a blysse, an endlesse lykyng to me that evyr I sufferd passion for the; and ye I might suffer more, I wolde suffer more.}  

\textit{(382)}

Julian returns repeatedly to the core statement here: if I could suffer more, I would suffer more (385, 387), and clarifies this further: ‘He seyde nott: yf it were nedfulle to suffer more, but if I might [could] suffer more’ (387–8). She even repeats this phrase in her much later section on the motherhood of Christ (596). Thus one could argue that this perception of the free, willing outpouring of Christ's love to its limit, expecting no return other than the satisfaction of the recipient (392), is fundamental to Julian's whole thought.

In contrast, the dominant imagery for Christ's love at this time depicted Christ as lover–knight, wooing his lady, of which we can find a particularly sustained and well–worked–out example in the \textit{Ancrene Wisse}.\textsuperscript{14} While the imagery served to stress the desirability and beauty of each human soul in the eyes of God, it also made the response of the soul, its movement godward, of central importance. In the \textit{Ancrene Wisse}, indeed, the lady is threatened with hell if she does not respond to her divine wooer. In contrast, Julian is emphasizing the movement of God towards man, purely for the sake of man's own well–being.

\textbf{All shall be well’ and the Parable of the Lord and the Servant}

Julian's 'narrative' of the visual dimension of her visions constantly gives way to the 'meta–narrative' of her spiritual understanding of the visions, and this more spiritual discussion eventually takes over the text altogether. The strictly visual episodes in the narrative of Christ's dying actually occupy only a few paragraphs, at the beginning of Chapters 4 (294–8), 10 (324–35), 12 (342–5), 16 (357–9) and 17 (360–5). Their vividness perhaps obscures how abstract are
the vast majority of the things that Julian has to say, as her mind wrestled intensely with what she was seeing over the thirty hours or so in which she received the visions. The most striking insight afforded us into her intense mental wrestling occurs in her ‘parable of the Lord and the Servant’, which came to Julian in response to her anguished questioning on sin and judgement.

In fact, Julian's text has been termed ‘a theological enquiry’ because in some ways her text is structured by her questions: ‘What may this be?’ ‘What is synne?’ ‘How may this be?’ (300, 336, 511). The initial response she receives, in the passage best known among Julian's popular readership, comes in Chapter 27: ‘Synne is behouely, but alle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thyngalle shalle be wele’ (405). The Middle English of this sentence does not yield its subtleties easily to modern attempts to translate it. ‘Behouely’, or ‘behowabil’ in MS Sloane 1 (Glasscoe 1993: 28), seems to have overtones of ‘essential, deeply in–built part of the whole process’, as we find in the related verb used in the later Wycliffite version of the Bible: ‘Whethir it bihoft not Crist to suffer these thingis, and so to entre into his glorie?’ (Luke 24: 26). In this case it is the Crucifixion which is essential and unavoidable, a concept which the Authorized Version renders as ‘ought’: ‘Ought not Christ to have suffered ...?’

Similarly, the modal verbs have subtly shifted in meaning down the centuries, so that ‘shalle’ is also problematic, containing strong residual overtones of its Old English meaning of ‘must’ or ‘is to’. The latter again suggests an ordained process — everything is to turn out well — a concept reinforced by Julian's enigmatic and distinctive teaching on a future ‘great deed’ that is to be done by Christ, and which will bring all things to resolution. When this deed is done, and we understand this ‘hygh mervelous prevyte hyd in god’, we shall ‘verely se the cause why he suffered synne to come, in whych sight we shalle endlessly haue joye’ (407). Understanding how sin fits into the whole picture will thus satisfy our questioning at a very deep level. The ‘grett deed’ by which ‘he shalle make alle thing wele’ (424) is amplified in Chapter 32 (422–6), and then rendered more complex in Chapter 36, where we discover that the deed is twofold: on one level it takes place at the end of time, but on another level it begins in this life (436–41). Thus Julian indicates that God's revelation of himself, and all his deeds, are not single, fc, historical events, but processes stretching into the future: ‘As I haue done I do now continually, and shall in coming of tyme’, Christ says to her (440). We are now ready for Julian's twofold exegesis of her Parable of the Lord and the Servant. The parable was, apparently, given to her at the time of the original revelation, when she was struggling to understand everything that was being shown to her. The parable has attracted much comment because it shows Julian's method at its most developed.

First of all, in Chapter 50, Julian prepares the ground by expanding more than usual on the depth and perplexity of her questioning. She believes that our sinfulness makes us perpetually blameworthy in God's eyes, and she believes this both through the Church's teaching and ‘by my owne felyng’, through her own lived experience. (Intellectual reflection and personal ‘felyng' continually act together in the Long Text.) In the visions, however, Julian sees no blame at all in God's attitude towards us. ‘Bettwene theyse two contraries my reson was grettly traveyled', she tells us, and she fears that ‘his blessed presens shulde passe fro my sight, and I to be lefte in vnknowing'. Here we are afforded a glimpse into the tension that Julian seems to have experienced at the time of the visions between her deeply absorbed gazing on Christ, and the furious activity of her own mind: ‘my longing [for an answer] endured, hym continously beholding’ (511). The tension erupts in a question: ‘how shall I be esyde?’ (512).

In the exceptionally long Chapter 51, Julian receives an answer, in the form of a visual parable. A servant stands ready before his seated lord, who gazes on him with great affection and sends him off on an errand. In his eagerness, the servant sets off at a run and falls into a pit. He is injured and helpless, and can neither get out of the pit nor turn round to see that his master is looking at him tenderly and without blame, for ‘oonly hys good wyll and his grett desyer was cause of his falling’ (516). The first level of the parable is shown ‘gostly in bodily lycknes’ (514). Then she is shown a second level, ‘more gostly withoute bodily lycknes’. On the more purely spiritual level, Julian beholds the lord's intention not only to restore the servant to full well–being, but to ‘reward' him (517) for all his pain, asking: ‘fallyth it nott to me to geve hym a zyfte that be better to hym and more wurschypfull than his owne hele [health] shalb haue bene?’ (518). At this point, says Julian, the showing of the parable vanished. She never ceased ‘marveulyng' over it, but at that time ‘culde I nott take there in fyll understanding to my ees' (519).

The two points that Julian is making here are highly unusual and daring: Adam fell purely through good will and eagerness; and in heaven mankind will be rewarded for all the suffering involved in the Fall, to such an extent that the ‘gift' will be better than if Adam had never been injured in the first place. The second point, however, is not unorthodox, reflecting the teaching of the 'Exultet', a key text of the Easter Vigil service, which was the most elaborate church service of the whole year. The Exultet celebrates the ‘happy fault', the 'necessary sin of Adam', which brought about the far greater gift of the redemption. As Julian would probably have listened to the Exultet every year of her life, perhaps its ideas had sunk deeply into her mind. On the first point, that Adam sinned not through disobedience but through over–eagerness, she remains unusual within the Western Christian tradition. Julian is herself so startled at r& her perception that human beings are not blameworthy in God's eyes that she worries about straying into heresy: 'it semyth as I shulde erre' (512).
Denise Baker sees Julian's argument here as being typical of the general movement of her thought: 'Instead of the Augustinian emphasis on causes and consequences, her writing reflects a concentration on purpose and ends' (Baker 1994: 68). Baker's view is supported by the tendency towards final resolution we have already seen in Julian's concept of the 'great deed' to be done at the end of time, so that 'alle shall be wele'. In contrast, the dominant place accorded to the writings of St Augustine, in the Western tradition, tended to look back to the Fall in order to emphasize the doctrine of original sin. Julian, however, seems not so much interested in how sin starts, as in how it is that we are nevertheless not blamed for sin. Thus her parable is probably not meant to be read 'historically', as a rewriting of Genesis, but rather metaphorically, as we shall now see in her revisiting of the parable, which she undertakes in much greater detail.

She is eventually 'som dele esyd' (519) by three aspects of her ongoing reflection. Here we see her scrupulous distinction between the different layers of her experience: her reflection is made up of the original teaching received at the time of the visions; the 'inwarde lernyng' that she has gone through since; and the complete revelation as a whole 'whych oure lorde god of his goodness bryngyth ofymes freely to the sight of my vnderstondyng' (519–20). The fruit of her reflection emerges twenty years, save three months, later, when we get a second double-layered exegesis of the parable.

This time, the first level of interpretation reiterates that the servant is Adam, particularly in the sense of Everyman; the second level sees God the Son represented in the servant, who serves the Father by voluntarily descending into the pit to rescue Adam (533–4). The second exegesis, although presented after twenty years, is far more visually detailed than the first one, and specifies, for instance, that the lord is sitting at ease in an ample blue robe, while the servant is in a stained, worn, knee-length tunic, symbolizing the heavy work that he is to undertake (526–8). Since the servant is both Adam and the Son, and God cannot look on the Son with any blame at all, it follows that he looks on Adam in the same way (535). Through the co–inherence of the two levels of the servant image, Julian is at last able to answer her question: mankind is not blamed because it is subsumed into Christ. She expresses the idea in some typically bold language: 'When Adam felle godes sone fell; for the right onyng [union] which was made in hevyn, god dys sone might not be seperath from Adam, for by Adam I vnderstand alle men' (533).

Julian had been instructed to meditate carefully on every detail of the parable in order to find the solution to her questioning, which bears out her assertion that the whole sequence of visions is brought frequently to her mind's eye. Her dependency on the visual, and her lack of references in this difficult section of her work to any theologians who could have supported her points,17 perhaps reinforce Julian's assertion that she is 'unlettered'; it also shows us what sophisticated thought could be produced by careful and repeated reflection on a visual image, where the image becomes as multi-layered as any text.

The Motherhood of Christ

The lack of condemnation in God's attitude to man brings Julian on to an extended consideration (Chapters 58–63), of Christ as our mother, motherhood being the most appropriate image, she suggests, for the kind of love he shows us. As usual, Julian begins with a consideration of the Trinity: there are many strands to God's love for his creatures, and 'by the forseeng endlesse counsell of all the blessyd trynyte' (591) he has chosen that the Second Person should become our mother through his wisdom (585) and his mercy, whereby we are remade (586). This motherhood expresses itself on earth in several key ways: through Christ all things were made, and thus through him we have our physical substance in the first place; Christ on the Cross is like a woman dying in labour, in order to bring forth her child; he feeds us in the Eucharist with his own substance, in the same way that a mother feeds the baby at her breast with milk made from her own body; he cleans us up as a mother does, for 'the moder's service is nerest, reediest and suerest' (595).

Julian is not particularly original in this depiction of Christ. Anselm of Canterbury is one of the first medieval writers to develop the idea, in his 'Prayer to St Paul', where he addresses first Paul, and then Christ, as his spiritual mother.18 Anselm draws on the scriptural image of Christ as a hen gathering her chicks under her wings (Matthew 23: 37) but subsequent writers, such as Hildegard of Bingen and St Bernard of Clairvaux, considerably extend the imagery (Bynum 1982). In England, a male contemporary of Julian, the Monk of Farne (d.1371), also uses the imagery in a striking way. For him, Christ on the Cross is like a mother with her arms open and her head lowered to kiss her children; he even speaks of entering Christ's womb in order to be born again.19 Julian, however, gives us one of the most sustained considerations of Christ our Mother. She does not seem to be drawing directly on scriptural images, but on the sacramental idea of Christ feeding us on his substance, an emphasis that once again could have come from popular religious lyrics.20 He needs ('hym behovyth', 596) to feed us, she says, perhaps remembering the physical experience of feeding a child at the breast. Distinctive to Julian is her focus on Christ as the mother who cleans us up, wanting us to run confidently to her/him when we fall, a focus that links in with her equally distinctive view of the body. Like many spiritual writers of the time, Julian accepts that physical life is full of pain and corruption (622–4), but that does
A man goyth vppe right, and the soule [food] of his body is sparyde [closed up] as [in] a purse fulle feyer. And whan it is tyme of his nescessery, it is openyde and sparyde [closed up] ayen fulle honestly. And that it is he [God] that doyth this, it is schewed ther wher he sethy he comyth downe to vs to the lowest parte ofoure nede.

(306–7)

Julian proceeds to emphasize our human fraility, not only within her section on the motherhood of Christ (Chapters 60–2), but thereafter to the end of the book. It is perhaps surprising, in view of the label 'optimistic' that is often attached to Julian's thought, that the Long Text culminates in a run of about fifteen chapters on the inevitability of human sin, but these follow on naturally from her discourse on fraility. They get overlooked, perhaps, in the light of the peroration that concludes the Long Text. Julian brings her searching 'theological enquiry' to an end by telling us that from the time of the visions, she desired often to know 'oure lords menyng': his meaning, his intention. After fifteen years, she tells us, she receives a revelation that 'love was his menyng', and she expands these words into a beautifully crafted concluding paragraph to her whole work (732–4).

The Dating of the Short and Long Texts

The usual view of the Short Text is that it represents a first draft of Julian's book, which she would have written down fairly soon after receiving her visions in 1373 (Colledge and Walsh 1978: 19), maybe as a way of keeping them fresh in her mind. However, our modern, highly literate print culture perhaps makes us assume that we remember things by writing them down, whereas Julian emphasizes, as mentioned above, that God constantly brought the whole sequence of visions before the 'sight of [her] understanding'.

In a ground-breaking and persuasive article, Nicholas Watson argues for dating the composition of the Short Text to the 1380s. In this version of her work, Julian mentions neither the breakthrough in her understanding of the parable of the Lord and the Servant which took place 'twenty years save three months' after the visions, nor the insight that 'love was his meaning', which occurred fifteen years after the visions, in 1388. It seems likely therefore that the Short Text was written before that year.

On the other hand, the Short Text includes some paragraphs and phrases which seem to be responding to controversies which became particularly acute in the 1380s. These controversies arose from the challenge to many traditional aspects of the medieval church raised by John Wyclif and the Lollards. One of their challenges was to the use of devotional images, which they argued could not be true representations either of spiritual realities or of historical events (Watson 1993: 659–64). Julian not only scrupulously records her belief in 'the payntyngys of crucyfexes that er made be the grace of god a ftere the techyne of haly kyrke to the lyknes of Crystes passyonn, als farfurthe as man ys witte may reche' (202) but, as the quotation shows, does so in words that show an awareness of the Lollard criticisms. In addition, the Short Text shows a sensitivity about Julian's female gender which does not appear in the Long Text. This again suggests that Julian is responding to a particular controversy, that concerning the right of women to 'teach', since Lollard women were allowed to preach and comment on Scripture. 'Botte god for bede that ze schulde saye or take it so that I am a techere, for I meene nouzt soo; for I am a woman, leued [ignorant], febille and freylle', she declares. But, like Margery Kempe a few years later, who came 'in no pulpit', she insists on her right to 'telle zowe the goodenes of god' (222).

Watson goes on to argue that the Short Text is a carefully thought–out and polished work in its own right (Watson 1993: 667–72), and this would suggest that Julian took many years over its composition. In addition, he points out the 'dark' side of the Short Text — its ongoing preoccupation with doubt and sin, culminating in the four 'dreads' of the last chapter — and argues that Julian's maturation as a writer might have been a longer and more tentative process than the confident tone of the Long Text suggests.

A slow method of composition also has implications for the Long Text. It is possible that the insight of 1388 caused Julian to start reconsidering her whole understanding of the visions, and thus to begin the process that would issue in her enormously expanded longer version. The scribal heading to the last chapter of the Long Text states, 'The good lord shewid this booke shuld be other wise performid than at the first writing' (731, n.1), and the whole book now ends with the 'Love was his meaning' passage. The Long Text cannot have been written before 1393, because of the twenty–year gap before understanding the Lord and the Servant parable, mentioned above. As with the Short Text, we need not assume that the Long Text was written immediately after the insight of 1393; indeed, Watson argues that the parable of the Lord and the Servant is so significant to its entire line of thought that Julian might have needed many years to absorb it (Watson 1993: 678). The scribe's colophon at the beginning of the Short Text gives the date...
1413, and if we assume that he was copying the Short Text because the Long Text was not yet completed, this would push the composition of the Long Text into the second decade of the fifteenth century.

We must also consider whether the Short Text might have been a later, abbreviated version of the Long Text, made, perhaps, under mounting fear of being thought heretical. In 1401 an Act allowing the burning of heretics was promulgated, and the first priest to be burned was William Sawtre in nearby King’s Lynn. Furthermore, Archbishop Thomas Arundel brought in a set of Constitutions in 1409 severely limiting the writing of theology in the vernacular.22 However, to fulfil the needs of the laity, writings were permitted which foregrounded an emotional response to Christ, rather than theological thought about him. Thus Nicholas Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ was approved by Arundel. More strikingly, The Orchard of Syon, a fifteenth-century translation of the Dialogue of Catherine of Siena, rewrites Catherine’s highly abstract Trinitarian thought as a pious meditation, encouraging its readers ‘to feel, not think, their way through the text’ (Watson 1995: 836). The Short Text’s colophon suggests that it is presenting us with this kind of work: in it ‘er fulle many comfortaylle wordes and gretly styrrande to alle thaye that desires to be Crystes looverse’ (201). Moreover, Julian’s female gender, accentuated in the Short Text, perhaps reinforces this expectation: as Lynn Staley Johnson has pointed out, the removal of gender in the Long Text changes its genre, away from emotionally ‘affective’ writing (Johnson 1991: 831).

On the other hand, the Short Text does not read like an abbreviation of a longer work. The Long Text has expansions in almost every sentence — a technique that would arise naturally if the Long Text represents the rewriting of an already existing, more embryonic work. But it is difficult to conceive of cutting the Long Text to one-sixth of its length, by an inverse method, to create the Short Text. In fact we do have a compendium of extracts from the Long Text, dating from c.1500, the ‘Westminster Manuscript’, which shows us what an ‘abbreviated’ text might look like.23 Consequently, most scholars adhere to the view that the Short Text was written first.

What all the evidence suggests is that, for various reasons, the Short Text was seen to be very acceptable in the climate of 1413, and thus is the version that gets copied in that year. It is possible that the Long Text was already in existence but, as an exceptionally sophisticated piece of vernacular theology, could not circulate freely after Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409. We know from other texts, most notably Rolle’s Incen-dium amoris, that a text could circulate simultaneously in versions of different lengths,24 and the existence of the Short Text in 1413 does not therefore rule out the existence of the Long Text at that date. The extant full-length manuscripts of the Long Text are all post-mediaeval copies, and do not give us any clues as to the date of composition.

In Julian, then, we have a writer whose thought is being examined more and more seriously, with ever-increasing appreciation for its unusualness and profundity. The depth and originality of her thought are reflected in her bold and complex language: in Julian’s hands, Middle English prose becomes a medium of great subtlety and originality.

See also: Religious Authority and Dissent, Images, Lyric, Literature of Religious Instruction, Mystical and Devotional Literature, Accounts of Lives, The Book of Margery Kempe.


2 S. B. Meech and H. E. Allen (eds), The Book of Margery Kempe, EETS os 212 (1940), p. 3. Margery was being urged to write down her experiences c.1418, twenty years before she finally dictated her book c.1438.


7 Meech and Allen (eds), Margery Kempe, p. 47.

8 Ibid., p. 86.


13 Ibid., p. 85.


17 E.g., Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, which may have influenced Walter Hilton.


21 Cf. Meech and Allen (eds), Book of Margery Kempe, p. 126.

22 For the full Latin text of the Constitutions, see: www.umilta.net/arundel.html.

23 For the Westminster text, see: www.umilta.net/westmins.html.


REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


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