

## On Reading Julian of Norwich<sup>1</sup>

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*This essay focuses on Julian's intended audience, claiming that it is more limited than one might at first assume. This leads to a discussion of Julian's use of paradox, her abrupt changes in modes of discourse, and the conclusion that unless her work is read according to the Augustinian rubric of love, it will be misunderstood.*

Readers will recall that Julian of Norwich was an anchorite in the English city of Norwich in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> century. During her enclosure, she wrote two texts about visions she experienced in 1373, at the age of thirty, while lying on what she (and others) thought was her deathbed. Julian's first, generally called the Short Text, is thought by many to have been written soon after her visions occurred. The text called the Long Text, written twenty years after the visionary experience, refines and augments the Short Text.<sup>2</sup> Both texts, but especially the Long Text, showcase Julian's remarkably inquisitive, poetic, and analytic spirit, and contain doctrines—such as the “grand deed” that God will perform at the end of time to “make all things well”—that have proved provocative and fruitful to academic and religious readers (often these groups coincide) of the past century.

Consequently, Julian, virtually unknown until the beginning of the twentieth century, has experienced a great surge in popularity in recent years. Moreover, Julian's sympathetic nature, her theolog-

1 Thanks to Charlotte Gross for reading and commenting on this essay as well as continuing to challenge me to think more closely and carefully about Julian's work. Thanks also to Gina Bellassai Mills, Robert Erle Barham, and the anonymous readers at *Quidditas* for their helpful and insightful commentary.

2 All quotations from the Short and the Long Text are from Watson and Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*.

ical concerns, and her obvious intellectual powers have found correspondence and admiration in many religious and academic circles, and her unique historical position as the first known English woman writer has been of particular interest to literary critics. As a result, the importance of her work has been elevated, and the work itself also has been appropriated often by certain groups; for many, Julian has become “one of us;” for others, a fit antagonist to Church authorities; and in both groups, the historical framework of her *Showings* has been somewhat neglected.

One could reasonably object that she claims to write “a revelation of love” that should be applied “generally,” and, more, that her intellect, which we witness in active engagement with perennially difficult theological problems, is a match for any theologian’s. In what follows, I attempt to deal with these objections, though not by attempting to refute them outright by claiming that Julian meant something quite different from what she said, nor that she is inferior to any male theological writer, but rather by seeing whether her terminology, her expectations regarding audience, and her place in intellectual history need some qualification. More specifically, I am interested in understanding what bearing Julian’s historically-conditioned Christian community and traditional Christian ideas of truth and interpretation should have on our reading of the *Showings*. My purpose in all this is to counteract those mis-readings just mentioned and to show that a proper reading of Julian involves understanding her ultimate goal for writing—the manifestation of God’s love.

We can begin to understand Julian’s historical community by first of all considering late medieval Norwich, which was, after London, one of the most (if not *the* most) populated and wealthy cities in England. The city had a cathedral which housed a Benedictine priory<sup>3</sup> and “one of the finest libraries in England;”<sup>4</sup> several

3 Colledge and Walsh, eds., *A Book of Showings*, 39. Though *Showings* refers to both the Short and Long Texts, I use it here and throughout to refer to the Long Text, the focus of most critical commentary.

4 Tanner, *Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, 35.

religious houses, and probably over forty parish churches, including St. Julian's, where "Julian" herself resided.<sup>5</sup> And though she was bodily confined to a cell, Julian was not necessarily as isolated as one might think; for one, she had at least two serving maids, as we learn from the 1415 will of John Plumpton, a citizen of Norwich (who leaves each maid twelve pence).<sup>6</sup>

These maids probably came into contact with Julian by providing her with food and other necessities by means of one of three windows typically built into an anchoritic cell. The other two windows offered her further interaction: one may have faced the altar and allowed Julian to observe services, and another opened outward, perhaps toward the road.<sup>7</sup> It was through this third window that Julian was able to communicate with any visitors and thereby inject herself into the broader community of Norwich. But assuming that Julian was literate (and she almost certainly was), there also existed for her the broader community of past and present Christian writers.<sup>8</sup> Although parish churches apparently had little beyond "service-books and a few standard works of Canon Law,"<sup>9</sup> a parish-specific scarcity of books does not mean that Julian was not able to gain access to them by other means. If nothing else, she may have received works aurally, as did Margery Kempe by the generosity of her spiritual director. But it is probable that she may have owned a few books herself or been allowed to borrow some from, say, her priest or other professional religious in Norwich.

So, potentially at least, Julian had the religious, literate element of Norwich as an audience, and even though some estimate

5 Tanner, *Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, 35.

6 Colledge and Walsh, eds., *A Book of Showings*, 34.

7 Cannon, "Enclosure," 109-123.

8 The extent of this community largely depends on Julian's knowledge of Latin.

9 Tanner, *Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, 35.

literacy as low as 5% at this time,<sup>10</sup> there are obviously difficulties in coming to any solid conclusions about the actual rates, including the fact that the 14<sup>th</sup>-century idea of literacy was often based only on an ability to read and write in Latin. Whatever the literacy rate may have been, it was rapidly increasing, especially in the vernacular. Grammar schools accessible to the middle, and sometimes lower, classes were first established in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and students there were at least exposed to Latin grammar and literature and certainly learned to read and write in English.<sup>11</sup> The French romances and Latin texts, including mystical writings, were also being translated for the first time<sup>12</sup> and, of course, the Wycliffite Bible was produced in 1380. There is, further, the popularity of Chaucer's and Langland's vernacular work(s) and the establishment of the book trade in London during the 1390s.<sup>13</sup> Probably never before was there the possibility of a text being as widely disseminated as it could have been then.

Julian's audience was, then, potentially much larger than Norwich, and she may have intended it to be so. Fourteenth-century mystics Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton almost certainly anticipated (and, indeed, found) an audience beyond their immediate area. But, as far as Julian is concerned, this is all circumstantial evidence. What do we know of Julian's own intentions concerning her audience? We can discover some of these by looking first at the changes she made from the Short to the Long Text. In the Short Text, she seems to consider her audience as fellow contemplatives.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in the Short Text, during her discussion of the vision of the "hazlenut," Julian says that "every man and woman who desires to live contem-

10 Strohm, "The Social and Literary Scene in England," 5.

11 Coleman, *Medieval Readers and Writers*, 24.

12 Coleman, *Medieval Readers and Writers*, 41.

13 Robert G. Babcock (professor of Classics, UNC-Chapel Hill), in discussion with the author, January 2011.

14 Windeatt, "Julian of Norwich and Her Audience," 6.

platively needs to have some understanding of this [revelation];”<sup>15</sup> in the Long Text, Julian generalizes the application: “We need to have understanding of this.”<sup>16</sup> Again, in the Short Text, she writes, “in this I learned that every contemplative soul that is inclined to behold and seek God will see [Mary] and pass [beyond her], by contemplation, to God;”<sup>17</sup> whereas she reduces this in the Long Text to “by which I learned that our soul will not ever have rest until it comes to him.”<sup>18</sup> Throughout the Long Text, we see this desire on Julian’s part to address her “evyn [fellow] Christen” rather than just other contemplatives. In XIII, she is amused by the ultimate impotence of the devil and wishes for her “fellow Christians” to laugh along with her; elsewhere, she declares that she is filled with compassion for “all [her] fellow Christians;”<sup>19</sup> in VIII.22-24, she says that her love is aroused toward her “fellow Christians, that they might see and know the same things that I saw, for I wish it to be a comfort to them. For all of this vision was intended generally.”<sup>20</sup> These are just a few of several examples of Julian calling “all” to participate in her visions. We could therefore reasonably claim that Julian’s intended and potential audience was by no means limited to her fellow contemplatives or even to the city of Norwich. Rather, her work seems to be intended for any “fellow Christian” literate in English.<sup>21</sup>

15 “Of this nedes ilke man and woman to hafe knowynge that desires to lyeve contemplatyfelye” (IV.38)

16 “Of this nedeth us to have knowinge, . . .” (V.20).

17 “And in this was I lerede that ilke saule contemplatife to whilke es giffen to luke and seke god shalle se hire and passe unto God by contemplation” (XIII.23-24).

18 “Wherin I was lerned that oure soule shalle never have reste tille it come into him, . . .” (XXVI.2-3). Both of these examples are provided by Windeatt, *Julian of Norwich and Her Audience*.

19 “alle my evencristen” (XXVIII.3).

20 “In alle this I was mekille sterede in cherite to mine evencristen, that they might alle see and know the same that I sawe, for I wolde that it were comfort to them. For alle this sight was shewde generale.”

21 And there’s the possibility of her work being translated into another language, as Hilton, for example, was translated into French.

“Fellow Christian,” “all,” and “generally” are, admittedly, pretty broad categories, but are they as broad as we are initially tempted to think? Does Julian try to limit her audience in any way? I think so. First, I think it is important to understand that although Julian desires ostensibly a large, heterogeneous audience, she nevertheless exerts great control over the interpretation of her text. For, as Nicholas Watson points out, it is impossible to disentangle Julian’s revelations from her interpretation of them. She “sees” her insights into her revelations often in the same way that she sees the revelations themselves.<sup>22</sup> Obviously, this means that the interpretation of the visions is as divinely inspired as the visions themselves, and that as a result, the reader is not free to come to his or her own interpretation of them, even if they are shown “generally.”<sup>23</sup>

Julian limits interpretation more overtly by constantly reminding the reader that her work is subordinated to “Holy Church.” In the first place, she says, it is by the teaching of the Church that she desires to have an experience of Christ’s passion;<sup>24</sup> moreover, in everything she believes “as Holy Church believes, preaches, and teaches. For the faith of Holy Church . . . stood continually in my sight, willing and intending never to receive anything that might be contrary to that faith;”<sup>25</sup> Christ himself tells her that he is “that which Holy Church preaches and teaches,”<sup>26</sup> and in spite of the seeming dissonance created by the juxtaposition of her visions and Church teaching, she claims that she “was not drawn away by that from any point of the faith that Holy Church teaches [one] to believe.”<sup>27</sup>

22 Watson, “The Trinitarian Hermeneutic.”

23 Lewis, “Directing Reader Response.”

24 II.66.

25 “But in all thing I beleve as holy church precheth and techeth. For the faith of holy church, which I had beforehand understonde—and, as I hope, by the grace of God willefully kept in use and custome—stode continually in my sighte, willing and meaning never to receive onything that might be contrary therto” (IX.18-21).

26 XXVI.6-7.

27 “. . . yet I was not drawn therby from any point of the faith that holy church techeth me to beleve” (XXXIII.13).

The textual history of Julian's work is also worth considering. The only two extant manuscripts of the Long Text are both 17<sup>th</sup>-century products. One likely originated in a religious community in northern France, and the other was owned by a private citizen in Rouen, and may have originated in the conventual library of Cambrai or Paris. The Short Text survives in one 15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript, is of English origin, and ended up in the library of an English Catholic family.<sup>28</sup>

This paucity of manuscripts and, until recently, a virtually non-existent audience indicate that Julian's actual, immediate audience was very small and monastic. Whether Julian ever intended this is, of course, another question. What is more apparent, however, is that Julian's first readers most likely tried to control access to her works. I make this claim based not only on the limited dissemination of the full-text manuscripts mentioned above but also on the evidence of another 15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript that contains an edited version of the Long Text. This edited version, one part of the Westminster text, which also includes two (English) commentaries on the psalms and an extract from Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*,<sup>29</sup> was evidently intended for a "mixed" audience—that is, those who, according to Hilton's advice, "mix the works of an active life with the spiritual works of a contemplative life."<sup>30</sup> In it, Julian's text has been edited so that most of her theological speculation—and in particular, her unorthodox desire to have a "bodily sight" of Mary—is removed.

The intentions of Julian's earliest readers are obviously no substitute for those of Julian herself. But they seem somewhat suggestive, for both Julian and her immediate audience share similar backgrounds, contexts, and religious beliefs; that is, there is much more resemblance between Julian and a 15<sup>th</sup>-century recluse or nun

28 Colledge and Walsh, eds., *A Book of Showings*.

29 Kempster, "A Question of Audience."

30 Quoted in Kempster.

than there is between her and any modern reader. Now one could very reasonably call this claim into question—perhaps by asserting that Julian has finally found her ideal in today’s audience, who can receive her work without the unnecessary encumbrance of Church dogma. Indeed, Julian is writing at a time when the Church authorities in England have begun to make their presence known: among other displays of power, there is a push for the right to execute heretics.<sup>31</sup> So *of course* Julian is going to go through the requisite political dance-steps in order to align herself with Church authorities. Though this is probably somewhat true, insofar as Julian probably realized that theology could have political consequences, it is not entirely accurate to think that what she really wanted was to jettison received doctrine altogether, that she envisioned some ideal world in which the “higher judgment” of the *Showings* would substitute for Church teaching. Probably none of us thinks that of her.

And yet, many of Julian’s readers continue to believe that she is either disingenuous or at least ill-at-ease in the Church of her day. Thus, Denise Baker is moved to argue that Julian “rejects the anthropomorphic characterization of a punitive God,” and “interrogates the retributive premises of orthodox theodicy,”<sup>32</sup> while David Aers points out that her doctrines have heretical implications.<sup>33</sup> What these critics may overlook is a deliberate and fruitful tension between Julian’s work and Church teaching. The intentional use of such tension may strike us, the inheritors of the Reformation, as odd. We are much more likely to consider it as a sign of the coming storm. But Julian’s immediate audience was, of course, in a very different place, though many of them certainly perceived trouble in the Church and were anxious about controversies over Scripture and the Church’s authority. Julian, however, is no John Wyclif. Nor-

31 McKisack. *The Fourteenth Century*.

32 Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings*, 106.

33 Aers, “Sin, Reconciliation, and Redemption.” See also Nicholas Watson’s review of Aers (*Speculum* 86[2011]: 151-153) which agrees on many points with the present assessment.



wich is not Oxford, and the *Showings* is not the *Trialogus*. Julian's immediate audience would have easily perceived such a difference and likely have noticed (or unconsciously benefited from) the tension in her work—a kind of tension that we also see used in the Scriptures and Christian tradition.

To be more specific, I am referring to the use of paradox, by which I mean “an absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition . . . which investigation, analysis, or explanation may nevertheless prove to be well-founded or true.”<sup>34</sup> Nicholas Watson mentions that Julian likes to create “gaps” in her work that are “brimful of meaning,” and that one of these gaps is found “between her visionary experience and Christian orthodoxy.”<sup>35</sup> That is, rather than positioning her work over against Church teaching, Julian is trying to counterbalance received doctrine, to point, as paradox often does, to some higher truth. It is, after all, one of the Christian tradition's foundational beliefs that truth cannot be fully expressed or grasped in the temporal world. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12, “We see now through a glass in a dark manner.” Paradox is one of the ways in which the Bible and tradition proclaim and embrace this belief. Jesus's use of paradox is especially noteworthy: “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that shall lose his life for me shall find it;”<sup>36</sup> “So shall the last be called first and the first last;”<sup>37</sup> in the gospel of John, Jesus, who identifies himself as the disciples' “Lord and Master,” performs the servant's task of washing their feet and tells them to do the same.<sup>38</sup>

The New Testament contains the apparently contradictory idea that both faith *and* works are necessary for salvation: “For by grace you are saved through faith: and that not of yourselves, for it

34 “Paradox.” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

35 Watson, “Julian of Norwich.”

36 Matt. 10:39 (Douay-Rheims).

37 Matt. 20:16.

38 John 13.

is the gift of God. Not of works, that no man may glory<sup>39</sup> in contrast to “faith also, if it have not works, is dead in itself.”<sup>40</sup> At the beginning of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine delightedly muses on the paradox of God’s omnipresence: “. . . are You not in every place at once in the totality of Your being, while yet nothing contains You wholly?”<sup>41</sup> And again, he characterizes God as “suffering no change and changing all things . . . ever in action, ever at rest . . . angry yet unperturbed by anger.”<sup>42</sup>

Julian is certainly writing within such a tradition and its influence on her way of perceiving God and truth is evident on even a local level. In X.62-63, she claims that “seeking [God] is as good as beholding [him]”<sup>43</sup> and meditates upon the paradoxes of the divine-human relationship: “And thus I saw [Christ] and I sought Him, and I had Him and I lacked Him.”<sup>44</sup> And as I mentioned earlier, tension is created by Julian’s unorthodox desire to have a “bodily” vision of Mary, which Jesus himself initially appears to offer her before giving her a “gostly” vision instead. Such tension, Kempster points out, “could easily be misinterpreted by a lay audience untrained in theological debate, but for Julian it is one of the tools of the trade.”<sup>45</sup> She “embraces the tension between mystical experience and traditional orthodoxy, and a deeper theological understanding is born as a result.”<sup>46</sup> It will be seen that the fruits of this tension are dependent upon a firm commitment to and knowledge of both the “lower judgment” (as Julian puts it) of the church and the “higher judgment” of her vision.

39 Eph. 2:8.

40 James 2:17.

41 I. III .

42 I. IV.

43 “seking is as good as beholding”

44 “And thus I saw him and sought him, and I had him and wanted him” (X.14).

45 Kempster, “A Question of Audience,” 276.

46 Kempster, “A Question of Audience,” 278.

Julian, contrary to what some might think, is not a system builder; she is not interested in “interrogating” or “rejecting” traditional orthodoxy—which implies some antagonistic, history-of-ideas role—but rather with moving the affections of her audience. The *Showings* is a “revelation of love”<sup>47</sup> and is, when all is said and done, organized to effect a spiritual response from her readers. This explains, of course, why Julian’s work is so difficult to analyze: she is not striving for the coherence necessary for the establishment of a school of theology or philosophy. She is interested, ultimately, in love. Love, she says in the Short Text, is the “meaning” of her revelations. The meaning of this, of love as the hermeneutic by which to interpret the divine, originates with St. Augustine in *On Christian Doctrine*, wherein he says that the “fulfillment and end of Scripture” is the love of God and our neighbor<sup>48</sup> and love itself he defines by “the Lord’s cross.”<sup>49</sup> Julian assumes for her audience not only a Christological idea of love but also a desire to practice it through the reading of her work.

As I see it, there are a couple of conclusions that follow from all of this. First, that Julian’s intended audience is perhaps smaller than we might at first suppose. Although the external evidence is admittedly inconclusive, at the very least, it does not seem to imply that Julian desired a universal audience even in late medieval England. The internal evidence implies that Julian sought a certain kind of reader: someone who was committed to the Church’s authority, familiar with the Scriptures and Augustinian theology, accustomed to the tensions within Christian orthodoxy, and extremely conscious of personal sin—someone, in short, similar to a priest or a member of a religious order.

47 my emphasis.

48 St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.35: “Omnium igitur quae dicta sunt ex quo de rebus tractamus haec summa est, ut intellegatur legis et omnium divinarum scripturarum plenitudo et finis esse dilectio rei qua fruendum est et rei quae nobiscum ea re frui potest, . . .”

49 St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, II. 41: “. . . ut in caritate radicati et fundati possimus comprehendere cum omnibus sanctis quae sit latitudo et longitudo et altitudo et profundum, id est crucem domini.”

Second, it follows that we, as 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers of Julian, must consider her within her historical context and the Christian tradition if we are to avoid misinterpreting her. Further, according to Julian, if we want to fully understand and benefit from the *Showings*, we have to interpret it under the auspices of love. Though we as scholars are not used to reading this way, in order to understand Julian aright, we must constantly remind ourselves that her primary concern is moving the affections of her readers toward God, and that she will use any tool to hand to achieve this goal. In her famous Parable of the Lord and Servant,<sup>50</sup> for example, one sees her move blithely from the logical to the allegorical, not because of confusion, incompetence, or whatever else, but because of her desire for readers to know love in the fullest sense, with both the heart and the mind.

The reader, then, must always keep Julian's goal of divine love in mind when reading her work, knowing that in an instant, her mode of discourse will dart in another direction in order to keep its quarry in sight. In short, to approach the *Showings* with the merely acquisitive intellect is to misunderstand it. Julian, though possessing logical and analytical gifts in abundance, is more than these—just as divine love, which also encompasses reason, is necessarily more than reason.

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*Julian of Norwich*  
as depicted in the church of SS Andrew and Mary,  
Langham, Norfolk