

The Writings of Julian of Norwich as

by Cherie Bova

En se basant sur une analyse textuelle dans un contexte socio-culturel, l'auteure découvre dans l'ouvrage Revelations of Divine Love de Julian of Norwich des passages compromettants et subversifs.

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As she appears in her work *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich was both product of, yet unique to, her times. Her interpretation of her mystical experience was clearly circumscribed by official church teachings, by conventions about the representations of Christ, and by the Neoplatonic thought circulating during the period. However, her depiction of Jesus as the "Working Mother" of the Trinity both accommodated and extended Church teaching while at the same time it subverted the Church's conventional emphasis upon "the wrath [and retribution] of a just God" (Moore 5) in her understanding of God's "homely loving" as "our very Mother" (Julian qtd. in Molinari 157 and in Wolters 170).

Theologically, the depiction of God as Mother had occurred previously in the Old Testament, the Apocryphal Acts of St. Peter, the Acrivne Rule, the "Oratio 65" of St. Anselm (Molinari) and the work of "male Cistercian theology in the twelfth century, especially in Bernard of Clairvaux" (Labarge 135). Traditionally, however, Julian's distinctiveness resides in the manner in which she "developed this conception into a doctrine not found before in such fullness" (Molinari 17). Recently,

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Theological traditions informing the image and depiction of Jesus during the period variously pictured him as a Monk, the Logos (Word) or Cosmic Christ, the Second Adam, Christ Crucified as the suffering servant, the Wisdom of the Cross, the Bridegroom of the Soul, and a Divine and Human Model (Pelikan). Often the images

interpenetrate each other within the theological treatises of the time, and this is so for Julian's *Revelations* as well.

Julian's status as presumed virgin/celebate female mystic and anchoress (hermit) separated her from, and elevated her above, the conventional status of "woman" during the medieval period. Thus the accommodative and subversive aspects of her theology become problematic, for her right to represent it was purchased at the cost of her seeming renunciation of her own sexuality. However, even within these constraints, we do see within Julian's *Revelations* her attempt to actualize an embodied/sexual self.

In this context, we need note that while capable of attributing to God and to Jesus positive, conventionally "feminine" characteristics associated with motherhood, Julian is unwilling or unable discursively to recognize these positive qualities as her own. Instead "more than once ... [she] apologizes for her gender as if she felt it to be a disadvantage when labelling spiritual matters" (Wolters 27). While the diminution of self is typical in the experience of mystical union, as Julian implies by calling it "the strengthenyng of the creature above the selfe" (Crampton 93), historically, we recognize Julian's hesitancy as well founded.

It would have been politically expedient for Julian, as a woman, to clarify her subject position in relation to God as one of subservience and to acknowledge her own rank within hierarchical medieval society, situating her writings within its conventions. That she met these is suggested by the fact that her writings have been preserved at all. As Labarge has suggested, "it is inevitable to concentrate upon those [women] of the upper classes because they were the most visible and their activities more fully recorded" (Labarge 15). Julian's class status was determined by the degree to which she was seen to embody, in both experiential and discursive practice, the clergy's image of the "ideal woman."

The image of women

Women, generally, were "confronted with the closed ranks of a masculine society governed by a thoroughly masculine theology and by a morality made for men by men" (Labarge xi), and this society was "becoming increasingly clericalized, structured and hierarchical" (Labarge xii). As Labarge has argued:

Generally perceiving women as threats to their chastity, they fell back on the convenient stereotype of Eve's responsibility for the existence of sin in the world, since this ... provided an adequate explanation to justify women's inferior position and reinforced

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man's God-given right to rule over her. (xii)

"Woman" was thus depicted as the embodiment of all evil. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, composed during the period, confirms this depiction (Daly). Within such a context, male clerics happily "adopt[ed] ... [the] emphasis on the

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glory of virginity as women's best choice" (Labarge 29). Marriage was regarded "as a poor second choice ... as a cure for sin and the procreation of children" (Labarge 30).

Socially the "contrast between most women as fallen daughters of Eve, and the glory of the / Virgin Mary ... contributed to the profound dichotomy in the medieval outlook on women" (Labarge 29–30). Further, the dichotomization of "woman" as either humble virgin or sexual temptress legitimated violence. All classes of women were "easy prey to ... endemic physical violence" (Labarge 2), while rape committed against peasant and towns-women was extremely common and regarded as acceptable because of their status as "base creatures" (Labarge 126). Julian's status as virgin/celibate female mystic and anchoress would have protected her from obvious forms of force and harm and would have classed her as valued "anomaly."

Theologians and canonists, as experts articulating and interpreting church decrees, "regarded consecrated virgins as an almost separate division of humankind and felt they were exempted from women's general subordination because their destiny was determined by their consecration to Christ rather than to any living man" (Labarge 30). Consecration of Christ through the church was thus one of the few sanctioned sites for female status mobility, and as such offered women a limited opportunity to transgress gender norms. Similarly, the experience of mystical union correspondingly sanctioned the expression of a personal relation with and embodied experience of Jesus which in turn legitimated its representation, and therefore permitted some self-representation for both male and female mystics of the period.

Despite sexual status, moreover, nuptial imagery predominates in most of the mystical visions and writings of the period, thus transgressing gender norms around ap-

propriate masculinity, femininity, the expression of an embodied or sensual self, and the articulation of desire. Further, for female mystics, the emphasis on total surrender to Christ and being accepted as his spouse was

quite often expressed in very physical terms, and suggests the importance that the physical reality and spiritual significance virginity assumed in their lives. (Labarge 135)

We may problematize the symbolic spiritual significance and physical reality that celibacy and embodiment had for Julian by examining the first of her "showings," or mystical visions. Therein, menarche seems to assume an important symbolic significance in her image of her mystical union with Jesus. As a vision of the crucifixion and as the symbol of her mystical union, Julian's first "showing" is both conventional and subversive: it is conventional in the sense that every mystic was to experience Jesus as the Bridegroom of the Soul and subversive in the sense that Julian employs her own body as a paradigm to detail the experience. Before examining the first "showing" in detail, however, we need first to outline what we know of Julian's experience, to then clarify how "blood" was conceptualized during the period.

Julian and blood

Little is known of Julian's life before the time of her "showings." We know that Julian was a fourteenth-century mystic in England and experienced her "showings" at the age of 30, in May of 1373, during a serious illness. During that time she made three requests of God. We know that she was probably raised in an abbey or convent, had been taught to read and write in the vernacular, and was cognizant of church teachings. There is no way, however, to determine conclusively whether or not she was in fact a virgin or to what degree virginal status held importance for her. We do know, however, that as an anchoress she would have taken a vow of chastity.

We know also that, despite the religious enthusiasm of the age, women had few avenues for its expression. "Religious women did not have clerical status, and they were held at arm's length in the hardening of the hierarchical structure of the medieval church" (Labarge xiii). Typically this meant that their participation was limited to becoming a nun, a beguine,¹ a recluse, or an anchoress. A woman who entered the religious life was "removed ... from a personal place in the social structure and kept ... from individual legal concerns" (Labarge 28). Further, dedication of one's daughter to a clerical institution was a typical

"parental response to the need to dispose suitably of an extra daughter for whom it was too expensive, or impossible, to arrange a marriage" (Labarge 29). Within this context, Julian's theological sophistication and transmitted textual legacy stands as an extraordinary achievement. Moreover, we can situate the symbolic significance of consecration to Christ as a compensatory mechanism offered to the female religious in lieu of embodied relations.

Julian's recent editors have suggested that she entered a religious house when she was young, received her visions there, and may not have become a recluse until after the completion of the longer text of the *Revelations*. This was finished only in 1393, some 20 years after the visions and her earlier short account of them. However, there have also been "brief references to her as a beguine" (Labarge 134).

Further, we know that Julian's requests of God reflect conventional concerns. Her first request was "to have a mind of the Passion of Christ," thus echoing Abelard's "posture" and advice. The second was "to have a bodily sickness at the age of thirty," for she "desired soon to be with her God." The wish was granted in the illness which initiated her "showings" and was in keeping with the asceticism required of and desired by the recluse. The third was "to have of God's gifts three wounds of contrition [stigmata]" (Molinari 13).

Julian qualified the latter request by stating that she wished it only if it be God's will, thus affirming the church's and Augustinian emphasis upon God's acting grace. I will argue, further, that Julian's desire for stigmata may be seen as stemming from her desired identification with Jesus, and her desire to confirm, and render visible and embodied, her personal consecration to Jesus, a confirmation witnessed in the experience of Francis of Assisi in her own contemporary history.

I offer this reading based upon several conventional understandings held during the period around the properties of blood and its transmission.

Using the theory of "humours," conventional understanding equated blood with semen. Semen was viewed as the consequence of the blood's boiling with passion and taking on sanguine properties. Correspondingly, the quality of a person's blood was seen to be unique. For example:

Royal and noble blood was [viewed as] indeed different from the substance which pulsed in the veins of the bourgeoisie and the peasants, and [it was felt] that it should not be intermingled with that of a lower rank. (Labarge 25)

We need to note two contradictions. As I suggested earlier, medieval society, following the lengthy evolution of the church, had variously pictured Jesus as the Divine and Human Model, "the image of humanity as it originally had been intended to be" (Pelikan 74). Jesus, through his blood, death, and resurrection, "intermingled" in Man, thus cleansing the negative effects of man's sin. Not surprisingly, hierarchical, patriarchal medieval society

sought to reject the implications of Jesus in this form.

The symbolic function of blood, however, is central to Julian's conceptualization of Jesus as the Divine and Human Model of the nurturing aspect of God and Jesus. Jesus' blood is likened to the nurturing function of mother's milk: "The Mother may give her child to suck her milk, but our previous Mother Jesus, he may feed us with Himself ... with the blessed sacrament that is the precious food of very life" (Modern English version converted by author; Cramptom 124).

A further convention of the time was the belief, first suggested by Hildegard (twelfth century), and later employed by Albert the Great, that menstruation "cleansed a women's blood and humours" (Labarge 23). In Julian's first "showing," the three perspectives on blood merge as nuptial union.

She tells us, eyes fixed to the crucifix on her wall:

... suddenly I saw the red blood trickling down from under the garland hot and fresh and right plentifully, as it were in the time of His passion that the garland of thorns was pressed on His blessed head. Right so, both God and man, the same that suffered for me, I conceived truly and mightily that it was Himself showed it me.... (Modern English version converted by author, Cramptom 42)

Julian herein asserts the image of Jesus as the Divine and Human Model. She also introduces imagery of Jesus's blood as hot, fresh, and plentiful, a description which speaks to her own embodied experience of menstruation, and to the belief in the cleansing properties of menarche, which she herein associates with the healing nature of Jesus' motherhood. I make this claim based upon my analysis of her subsequent visions, in which Jesus moves from crucifixion to resurrection. Her representation of Jesus' embodied experience therein, as it pertains to the depiction of His blood, is consistent with the changes menarchic blood undergoes throughout a woman's period. This functions for Julian as a point of embodied identification with Jesus.

Julian's initial intimation of Jesus in this first "showing," and the emphasis she places upon the embodied aspects of women's experience in reworking other representations of Jesus serve as the foundation for her elaboration of a coherent theology of Jesus's motherhood. Julian's experience as a woman both accommodated and reinforced the traditional patriarchal restriction of women's roles, in relation to both culture and God, while simultaneously subverting its alienation of her own embodiment. As Showalter has argued, women under patriarchy typically exhibit

schizophrenic symptoms ... [since] schizophrenia is the perfect literary metaphor for the female condition, expressive of a women's ... dependency on the external, often masculine, definitions of self ... and

[of their] vulnerability to conflicting social messages about femininity and maturity. (213)

It was precisely for these reasons, however, that Julian, as a female mystic, was

... historically important, ... [for her] visions reflected some of the deepest spiritual currents of the life of ... [her] day and made ... [her a] respected interpreter of the ideals to which medieval secular society gave at least lip service. (Labarge 130)

¹"The term was generally applied to a wide spectrum of pious women living quasi-religious lives in a way adapted to their circumstances and location" (Labarge 115).

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CAITHLEEN BRADY

For St. Catherine (and intrepid women everywhere)

Thin wings expand and rise
on scented air
forced flight
in autumn chestnut skies.

The dream passes from
day's glow to night's desire
with a single breath.

And St. Catherine's head
leaves its Siena box
to join finger, femur, breast bone—
with a thousand, thousand confes-
sions—
to come together and
colour the dreaming once again.

Somewhere Philosophy lies
sleeping
hushed by drone and drum
of the coming millennium—
on underbelly fastened
to St. Catherine's wheel

—an old trick.

But wheel and woman
once parted, keep company.
And while wheel's groan
Philosophy's comfort sweetens
its revolutions
summon *her*
from fragmented resting
to resist the blinded forward roll
of another generation.

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