

Julian of Norwich: From Medieval Catholic anchoress to Tourist Attraction

Carole M. Cusack

Introduction

Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-c. 1416) was an anchoress, enclosed at St Julian's church in Norwich in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. At the age of thirty, living at home, she became gravely ill after praying for an illness to bring her face to face with death, possibly related to survivor guilt, as she had been six in 1348 when the Black Death, the plague known in fourteenth century England as the 'Great Mortality', "struck Norwich and killed, it is thought, some 50,000 persons."¹ The plague recurred several times after the initial outbreak from 1347-1351, in which approximately one third of the European population died.² In 1369 it reappeared in Norwich, killing many more. On 8 May 1373 Julian received the last rites. The curate in attendance showed her a crucifix and she had sixteen visions ('showings') of Jesus in the subsequent hours. She had recovered by 13 May, and shortly after wrote the *Short Text* of her visions.³ She then retreated to St Julian's church in Norwich, from which place the name by which she is known was acquired. It has been speculated that her family died in the plague leaving her a childless widow; that she was a spinster in her natal home; or that she was a nun before becoming an anchoress. While enclosed, she meditated on the meaning of the visions and produced over two decades the *Long Text* (which is approximately 63,000 words compared to the *Short Text* which is

Carole M. Cusack is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney. This article was originally a paper titled 'The Multiple Silences of Julian of Norwich', given at the Sacred Silence in Literature and the Arts Conference, Australian Catholic University (Sydney), 4-5 October 2019.

¹ Renee Neu Watkins, 'Two Women Visionaries and Death: Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich', *Numen*, vol. 30, fasc. 2 (193), p. 177.

² Joseph Patrick Byrne, *The Black Death* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2004), pp. 1-14.

³ Sandra J. McEntire, 'Introduction', in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1998), p. xii.

11,000 words). It was likely commenced around 1393, and probably did not reach its completed form before 1410.⁴

Many absences, silences, and mysteries envelop Julian. Little can be definitely known about her life; her personal name is unknown, her birthdate is generally agreed upon, but the date of her death is uncertain (she was alive in 1416, and perhaps later). A more significant silence concerns the reception of Julian as a mystic and writer. Manuscripts survived in England and the Continent, but the readership of both versions of her text was restricted till the English edition of Grace Warrack (1855-1932), which appeared in 1901.⁵ Julian's visions focused on ideas of sin, salvation, and punishment, and gained popularity due to the optimistic words she attributed to Christ: "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

Since 1900 Julian has been well-received by Anglican and Catholic Christians, due in part to her radical theology of the maternity of God and the universality of salvation. The visions she witnessed silenced Julian's inner fears of sin and damnation and enabled her to live a life of total devotion to Christ. Her theology and its relation to orthodox Catholic theology is another area of interest to scholars. Julian employed a trope common to medieval female authors, disclaiming authority or wisdom, yet she was well-educated and her theological ideas were intelligent and informed. Another problematic issue concerns assumptions that some twenty-first century people have about Julian. Margery Kempe's *Life* states that she visited Julian to ask for spiritual advice around 1414; her testimony indicates that Julian, while living a contemplative life, was nevertheless not a silent recluse, a medieval shut-in, but an engaged and valued member of the Catholic community of Norwich, and a giver of spiritual counsel to pilgrims from farther afield. Modern ideas about anchoresses often evoke repressive Catholic institutions and the walling-up of rebellious women, both tropes from Gothic novels.⁶ This article explores three of these paradoxical receptions of the life and work of Julian of Norwich: the history of the readership of her manuscripts; the reception of her theology; and the twentieth and twenty-first century refiguring of a medieval anchoress as a

⁴ B. A. Windeatt, 'Julian of Norwich and Her Audience', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, vol. 28, no. 109 (1977), pp. 1-17.

⁵ Sheila Upjohn, *In Search of Julian of Norwich* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1989), pp. 8-9.

⁶ Victoria Nelson, 'Faux Catholic: Gothic Subgenre from Monk Lewis to Dan Brown', *boundary*, vol. 2 (2007), pp. 87-107.

spiritual guide for modern people, who may not be Catholic or even Christian, and a tourist attraction for the city of Norwich.



Figure 1. St Julian's Church in Norwich.
Lithograph by James Sillett (1828).⁷



Figure 2. Spire of Norwich Cathedral, viewed from the cloisters.

Part 1: The Reception of Julian's Manuscripts

Margery Kempe (c. 1373-c. 1438), a later contemporary and fellow mystic who authored a spiritual autobiography, mentions that she visited 'Dame Julian' in 1414 for counsel. She says that they spent "many days ... in holy dalliance, communing in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ." Margery testifies to Julian's reputation as a spiritual advisor, saying she was "expert [in discernment concerning revelations] and ... knew how to give good counsel."⁸ Yet Margery makes no mention of Julian being an author, from which it can be concluded that she was unaware of a book by the famed anchoress. Margery, who was probably illiterate and dictated her text to a priest in 1436, admired Julian and may have welcomed her as a fellow woman writer and as a role model for her own mystical journey, given the negative reaction she had received from contemporaries who had dismissed

⁷ All images reproduced under Wikimedia Commons.

⁸ Clare M. Bradford, 'Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe', *Theology Today*, vol. 35, no. 2 (1978), p. 156.

Margery as hysterical, neurotic, and self-centred, a response which greeted the rediscovery of her autobiography in 1934 after it was lost for centuries.⁹ Margery (née Burnham) of King's Lynn was likely born in the year of Julian's near-fatal illness and visionary experience; she was around forty at the time of their encounter, by which time she had given birth to fourteen children and persuaded her husband John Kempe to agree to a celibate relationship, so she could take solace in piety, becoming a pilgrim and seeking mystical experiences.¹⁰

In Christopher Abbott's important study of Julian, he suggests that there are several reasons why she was not known as a writer during her lifetime. He suggests that Julian:

might well have had cause to feel cagey about her own writing, which is ... speculative and idiosyncratic; it is also, needless to say, the work of a woman and a non-cleric. Or perhaps her spiritual mentor was cagey about it and advised against its circulation. There may have been concerns about its theological content, or about how Julian herself might suffer on account of it.¹¹

Whatever attitude Julian had to people knowing about her writings, it is indubitable that she wrote the *Short Text* swiftly after her visionary experiences, possibly so as to recall the showings accurately, and devoted enormous efforts to working up the *Long Text*, which contains greater detail and also complex and sophisticated theological thinking, over twenty years. The audience of her texts after her death was of necessity limited; very few manuscripts exist, and none that are contemporary with the author herself. There is one fifteenth century copy of the *Short Text* that survives (manuscript BL MS Additional 37790, made after 1435), which contains other mystical works by authors including Richard Rolle, Jan van Ruysbroeck and Marguerite Porete (though she is not named), and was compiled in a Carthusian context.¹² A drastically excerpted version of the

⁹ Nancy Bradley Warren, 'Feminist Approaches to Middle English Religious Writing: The Case of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich', *Literature Compass*, vol. 4, no. 5 (2007), pp. 1381-1383.

¹⁰ Anthony Bale, 'Introduction', in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. and trans. Anthony Bale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. xi, xiv.

¹¹ Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), p. 1.

¹² Sarah Salih and Denise N. Baker, 'Introduction', in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy: Medieval Mysticism and Post-Medieval Reception*, eds Sarah Salih and Denise N. Baker (Houndmills, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2009), p. 3.

Long Text was produced around 1500 CE in a compilation (Westminster Cathedral Treasury MS 4) that also contained excerpts from Walter Hilton's (d. 1396) *The Scale of Perfection* (of which there are forty-three surviving full-text manuscripts).¹³ This comparison of the manuscript tradition of a male cleric such as Walter Hilton and Julian shows the outsider status of women as writers on theology in late medieval England.¹⁴

The full *Long Text* was in the possession of the Benedictine nuns of the convent of Our Lady of Consolation in Cambrai, Flanders before 1637. This institution was founded by Helen More, the Catholic martyr Thomas More's great-great-granddaughter. Augustine Baker, the nuns' spiritual director, prepared a text from the writings of Dame Margaret Gascoigne who died in 1637. This text quoted two distinct passages from the *Long Text*, and Baker referenced Julian directly in his account of Gascoigne's holy passing.¹⁵ Copies were made c. 1650 by these nuns at either Cambrai or Paris: the older, MS Bibliothèque Nationale Fonds anglaise 40, is more complete than the other, British Library MS Sloane 2499, which is linguistically closer to Julian's Middle English dialect. Alexandra Barratt says the latter "is written in a hand resembling that of Anne Clementine Cary, a Paris Benedictine nun who died in 1671" and "is more of an 'edition' and less of a 'translation' than the Paris Manuscript."¹⁶ The first printed edition, by Serenus de Cressy, an English Benedictine convert to Catholicism, appeared in 1670. A third manuscript was made in the eighteenth century (British Library MS Sloane 3705), which modernises MS Sloane 2499 and mixes in some readings from the Paris Manuscript or the print edition of it.

In the Victorian era Julian's text began to reach a wider readership than the English Catholics that were its earliest reception community. The Anglican minister George Hargreave Parker of Bethnal Green, London, who believed Julian was Anglican in spirit rather than Catholic, published a modernised version of Cressy's edition in 1843. In 1877 Henry Collins, a convert to Catholicism, edited a modernised version of MS Sloane 2499,

¹³ McEntire, 'Introduction', p. xii; Alexandra Barratt, 'Julian of Norwich and her Children Today: Editions, Translations, and Versions of Her Revelations', in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy*, p. 13.

¹⁴ Michael G. Sargent, 'Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*: The London Manuscript Group Reconsidered', *Medium Ævum*, vol. 52, no. 2 (1983), p. 189.

¹⁵ Salih and Baker, 'Introduction', p. 5.

¹⁶ Barratt, 'Julian of Norwich and her Children Today', p. 14.

using the title *Revelations of Divine Love* for the first time.¹⁷ The influential version published by Grace Warrack in 1901 was a transcription of the Sloane text with effort made to keep the meaning of the original text, and limited and thoughtful substitution of some modern terms for outmoded or obscure language. The *Short Text* was discovered in 1910, almost five hundred years after Julian's death, and was edited and published by an Anglican minister, Dundas Harford, two years later. From that time, popular volumes with extracts from Julian's writings, and full translations (such as the first Penguin edition by Clifton Wolters, yet another Anglican minister, in 1966) appeared regularly. The current Penguin edition, containing versions of both the *Short Text* and the *Long Text*, is translated by Elizabeth Spearing with 'Notes' and an 'Introduction' by A. C. Spearing.¹⁸

Part 2: Julian's Theology and the Female Author

Julian of Norwich is usually described as a mystic, because of her visionary experience and the life of contemplation she chose subsequent to it, which enabled an immersion in her 'showings' (though not to the complete exclusion of the outside world of her city, Norwich). Mysticism is generally distinguished from 'religious experience' in that, while many people may have had a religious experience, a mystic engages in contemplative spirituality constantly, and has ongoing experiences of the divine.¹⁹ For the monotheist religions, mysticism can pose theological problems because there is a radical division between the Creator (God) and the creature (humanity and all of the creation). When the mystic seeks union with God, this is often viewed as impossible (humans cannot become God). Others have argued that God permeates his creation and that through grace he can raise up the faithful Christian. The fact that Jesus participated in humanity in order to make possible salvation from sin is also cited as a reason why mystical piety is an intrinsic part of Christian spirituality.²⁰ Mystical piety was important trend in later medieval Christianity, which indicated dissatisfaction with the institutional church (like the mendicant orders, lay piety movements such as

¹⁷ Barratt, 'Julian of Norwich and her Children Today', p. 16.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Spearing (trans.) and A. C. Spearing (Introduction and Notes), *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998).

¹⁹ F. C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975 [1963]), pp. 15-17.

²⁰ David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (London: Burns and Oates, 1964 [1961]), pp. 5-6.

the Brethren of the Common Life, and heretical movements such as the Waldensians and the Lollards).



Figure 3. Stained glass window depicting Julian of Norwich and her cat.



Figure 4. Statue of Julian of Norwich by David Holgate, Norwich Cathedral.

The imitation of Christ was core to late medieval mysticism: for the majority of mystics this meant emulating his Passion and death. Francis of Assisi had received the stigmata in 1224 (the definitive first account of this experience); stigmata are the special wounds of the crucifixion that were external signs of God's favour. This fixation on the body of Christ led to increased devotion to the Eucharist, as in Catholic doctrine the host was believed to be transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus in the mass.²¹ Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380-1471) was a strong proponent of this type of mystical identification with Christ. He was born in Germany and became a canon at Windesheim in 1392, while still a teenager. Windesheim was a house of the Brethren of the Common Life, a group founded by Gerhard Groote (1340-1384) in Deventer in the Netherlands. Thomas à Kempis wrote *The Imitation of Christ*, one of the later Middle Ages' most influential manuals of spiritual discipline, in the first quarter of the fifteenth century

²¹ Mike Dash, 'The Mystery of the Five Wounds', *Smithsonian Magazine* (18 November 2011), at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-mystery-of-the-five-wounds-361799/>, accessed 01/12/2020.

(roughly contemporary with Julian's *Long Text*). It was circulated anonymously.²² In this text Thomas asserts the necessity of the imitation of Christ, to render the self small and insignificant: "Christ urges us to mould our lives and characters in the image of his, if we wish to be truly enlightened and freed from all blindness of heart ... If you want to learn something that will really help ... 'Aim at being unknown and thought of no account'."²³

Julian's theology is mystical, and she fits historically into the same milieu as Thomas à Kempis, Richard Rolle, and Walter Hilton. However, as she was female and lacked the privileged conditions of maleness and formal theological education (she was literate in English but not Latin), she rhetorically diminished her potential authority as an author, though both her texts demonstrate that she is highly aware of her authorial role.²⁴ This trope of dismissing claims to authority and being shielded by male clergy who acted as either confessors or scribes is employed by a large number of medieval women writers, including authors of mystical treatises.²⁵ In Chapter 6 of the *Short Text*, Julian exclaims:

But God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not what I mean, nor did I ever mean it; for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail. But I know well that I have received what I say from him who is the supreme teacher.²⁶

Julian was mortally ill at the time she received her visions, and the subject of death and eternal damnation in Hell was uppermost in her mind. She asks Christ why sin exists and receives comforting answers from him: he says that

²² V. Scully, 'Thomas à Kempis', *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), at <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14661a.htm>, accessed 01/12/2020.

²³ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, ed. and trans. Betty I. Knott (London: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1977 [1963]), pp. 37, 39.

²⁴ Lynn Staley Johnson notes that "The *Long Text* is the work of a writer, not a seer. It represents experience mediated by time, literary craft, intelligence and study. I do not deny that Julian was and saw herself as a visionary, but the long text testifies to her growing understanding of her role as a writer," p. 833. Lynn Staley Johnson, 'The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe', *Speculum*, vol. 66, no. 4 (1991), pp. 820-838.

²⁵ Catherine M. Mooney (ed.), *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) contains chapters on Elisabeth of Schönau, Hildegard von Bingen, Clare of Assisi, Beatrice of Nazareth, Christina von Stommeln, Elsbeth Stagel, Catherine of Siena, and Dorothea of Montau, and the various male clerics who curated and controlled their literary compositions.

²⁶ Spearing and Spearing, *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, pp. 10-11.

human souls “are improved by sin if it is followed by contrition.”²⁷ Julian probes further, concerned that the absence of contrition will lead to the soul being eternally damned. In Chapter 15 of the *Short Text*, Christ offers reassurance, saying: “I will make all things well, I shall make all things well, I may make all things well and I can make all things well; and you shall see for yourself that all things shall be well.”²⁸

Julian’s theology is distinctive for a number of reasons. She explores the idea of Christ as mother, which is not unique to her (it appears, for example, in Anselm of Canterbury’s *Prayer to St Paul*, which was sent to Countess Mathilda of Tuscany in the late eleventh century),²⁹ but she develops the maternal image of the Saviour in such a way that giving birth to a child and bringing about salvation become parallel and equatable processes. This idea does not appear in the *Short Text* but is part of Chapter 52 of the *Long Text* and adumbrated in Chapters 57 to Chapter 61. The climax of her exposition of this idea is as follows:

But often when our falling and our wretched sin is shown to us, we are so terrified and so very ashamed that we hardly know where to put ourselves. But then our kind Mother does not want us to run from him, there is nothing he wants less. But he wants us to behave like a child; for when it is hurt or frightened it runs to its mother for help as fast as it can; and he wants us to do the same, like a humble child, saying ‘My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my dearest Mother, take pity on me. I have made myself dirty and unlike you and I neither may nor can remedy this without your special help and grace’.

Julian also works through her theological questions and concerns in the main ‘sermon’ of her *Revelations*, ‘The Lord and the Servant’, which is in Chapter 51 of the *Long Text*. In this tale the Lord sends the Servant to do an errand, but the Servant gets injured and can neither do the task nor return to the Lord. The Lord is not condemnatory, but looks lovingly on the Servant, whom Julian first identifies with Adam, but later sees is all men.

She thus equates the Fall of Adam and the Incarnation of Christ through this realisation of the identity of all humans: “When Adam fell, God’s son fell; because of the true union made in Heaven, God’s son could

²⁷ Watkins, ‘Two Women Visionaries and Death’, p. 178.

²⁸ Spearing and Spearing, *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, p. 23.

²⁹ See Joan M. Nuth, ‘Two Medieval Soteriologies: Anselm of Canterbury and Julian of Norwich’, *Theological Studies*, vol. 53, issue 4 (1992), pp. 611-645 for further resemblances between the thought of these two writers, and the possibility that Julian was aware of Anselm’s theology of salvation.

not leave Adam, for by Adam I understand all men.”³⁰ This radical rethinking of sin and atonement restores Julian’s confidence in salvation, and grants her joy in faith, and understanding of Christ’s salvific role, whereas before she had grieved and mourned the existence of sin. Dan Graves insightfully states that Julian “comes to such a sense of the awfulness of sin that she reckons the pains of hell are to be chosen in preference to it. Indeed, to one who recognizes the horror of sin, sin itself is hell.”³¹ In the avoidance of sin, asceticism is necessary, but this is not to be seen as privation or suffering, but as joyful service, confident in the love and mercy of Christ. In the *Revelations* Julian was careful to emphasise her loyalty to the teachings of the church, and Abbott argues that “there is no evidence that she intends her writings to be taken as an overt doctrinal or political challenge to the medieval church.”³²

Part 3: Julian and the Post-Christian Era

Yet medieval mystics’ claims of direct communication with God *were* a challenge to the Catholic church, which mandated institutional mediation of the relationship between the faithful and the divine. Julian’s reputation among non-Catholics after Serenus de Cressy’s edition was besmirched; Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester and the most prominent theologian of Restoration England, described the *Long Text* as “the blasphemous and senseless tittle tattle of [a] Hysterical Gossip” in his polemical work *A Discourse Concerning the Idolatry Practised in the Church of Rome* (1671).³³ From the nineteenth century onward this hostility evaporated; Julian was interpreted as a proto-Anglican by-passing the institutional church in her intimate relationship with Christ and experience of his love and mercy. The Catholic Emancipation Act was passed in 1829 and resulted in a revival of Catholic devotional practices in the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, such as pilgrimage to shrines such as Walsingham in Norfolk, where the Virgin Mary was venerated, and Canterbury Cathedral, the burial place of the martyred archbishop Thomas

³⁰ Spearing and Spearing, *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, p. 121.

³¹ Dan Graves, ‘All Shall Be Well’, *In Context: The Stories Behind Memorable Sayings In Church History* (2020), at <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/incontext/article/julian/>, accessed 01/12/2020.

³² Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology*, p. 44.

³³ Jennifer Summit, ‘From Anchorhold to Closet: Julian of Norwich in 1670 and the Immanence of the Past’, in *Julian of Norwich’s Legacy*, p. 37.

Becket.³⁴ Norwich was bombed during World War II, and an important development in the modern reception of Julian was the rebuilding of the Anglican church of St Julian and the Julian Cell in 1952, and the construction of a Visitor Centre, as these buildings are now “a kind of pilgrimage destination, receiving visitors from around the world.”³⁵

Warrack’s edition of the *Revelations of Divine Love* was a popular success and Julian became known to a generation of writers and artists who quoted her theological maxims, including the deeply Christian T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) and the Theosophist W. B. Yeats (1865-1939). In the second half of the twentieth century a range of novelists featured Julian as a character, for example, Anya Seton’s historical fiction *Katherine* (1954), about Katherine Swynford, the third wife of John of Gaunt; Mary E. Little’s children’s book *Julian’s Cat: An Imaginary History of a Cat of Destiny* (1999); and “the extremely unexpected self-published Gothic lesbian work, *Mother Julian and the Gentle Vampire* by Jack Pantaleo (1999).”³⁶

The lack of specific details regarding Julian’s life encourages fictional portraits of her; for example, the persistent iconography including a cat refers to the manual for anchoresses, the *Ancrene Wisse*, which gives “permission for anchoresses to keep a cat.”³⁷ Plays about Julian have also been written, including: James Janda’s *Julian: A Play Based on the Life of Julian of Norwich* (1984), which features her much-loved cat, here named Isaiah; Dana Bagshaw’s *Cell Talk: A Duologue between Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (2002); and Sheila Upjohn’s *Mind out of Time: A Play on Julian of Norwich* (1992 [1979]).³⁸ These re-imaginings move Julian into the category of national treasures and heritage tourism, which also manifests in the depictions of her that have grown up in Norwich, including: the “All Shall Be Well” stained glass window (by Dennis King and Sons, 1953) in St Julian’s church; the stained glass windows of her in St Saviour’s Chapel (by

³⁴ Mary Heimann, *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³⁵ Christiana Whitehead, “‘A Great Woman in Our Future’: Julian of Norwich’s Functions in Late Twentieth Century Spirituality”, in *Julian of Norwich’s Legacy*, p. 132.

³⁶ Susannah Mary Chewning, ‘Julian of Norwich in Popular Fiction,’ in *Julian of Norwich’s Legacy*, p. 102.

³⁷ Sarah Salih, ‘Julian in Norwich: Heritage and Iconography’, in *Julian of Norwich’s Legacy*, p. 166.

³⁸ Jacqueline Jenkins, ‘Playing Julian: The Cell as Theater in Contemporary Culture’, in *Julian of Norwich’s Legacy*, p. 113.

A. K. Nicholson 1930, the first representation of Julian with a cat) and the Bauchon Chapel (by Moira Forsyth, 1964) in Norwich Cathedral; and the statue of Julian beside the west door of the Cathedral (by David Holgate 2014) which is paired with a statue of St Benedict.³⁹

In the 1960s and 1970s, Julian became simultaneously a rallying point for ecumenical Christianity and a site of contestation for feminists, such as feminist theologians within and without the churches, and feminist scholars who sought to contextualise the whole of Julian's writings, and not merely a few attractive soundbites, the context of a strain of affective piety that was brought to the attention of academic and non-academic readers by Caroline Walker Bynum's ground-breaking, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* in 1987.⁴⁰ These women mystics gloried in the bodily sufferings of Christ and of themselves, practised rigorous asceticism to gain the spiritual status of holy men by becoming unsexed, and wrote highly erotic descriptions of their relationship with Jesus the saviour.⁴¹

All these themes can be found in Julian's texts, though they are generally glossed over in popular depictions; Anthony Cuda, in a discussion of Julian's function as an inspiration for W. B. Yeats, notes "her desire for 'all manner of pains, bodily and ghostly' and her request for three 'wounds', along with the painful, tortuous visions that vividly reenact Christ's sufferings."⁴² Sarah Law has written of the lectures delivered in the Julian Centre at the Julian Festival, held on or around 8 May (her commemoration day in the Anglican calendar), and how speakers have drawn attention to radical readings of Julian of Norwich: Ursula King (2007) discussed gendered oppression and spiritual rights; Melvyn Matthews (2008) brought Julian's life into conversation with "Holocaust victim and secular Jew Etty Hillesum";⁴³ and Mary Gray (2009) who took a feminist view of Julian. In an entirely different scholarly context, Venetia Laura Delano Robertson used the lives and writings of Julian and Margery Kempe to illuminate the

³⁹ Salih, 'Julian in Norwich: Heritage and Iconography', pp. 160, 164, 166.

⁴⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1987).

⁴¹ Warren, 'Feminist Approaches to Middle English Religious Writing', pp. 1386-1387.

⁴² Anthony Cuda, 'W. B. Yeats and a Certain Mystic of the Middle Ages', in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy*, p. 61.

⁴³ Sarah Law, 'In the Centre: Spiritual and Cultural Representations of Julian of Norwich in the Julian Centre', in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy*, p. 182.

experiences of female soulbonders, fans “in an intimate relationship ... [with] a fictional character from a novel, television show, film or videogame,” an experience she argues that “shares many characteristics with centuries-old Christian experiences of theophany.”⁴⁴ Yet, apart from academic researchers, few are willing to entertain such a visceral, troubling visionary, preferring ‘Mother Julian’ and her cat in her austere, yet homely cell in bustling medieval Norwich.

Conclusion

Margery Kempe’s visit to Julian in the early fifteenth century demonstrates that Julian had admirers during her lifetime and was respected as a spiritual guide. The *Long Text* of her visions was shrouded in obscurity between her death and the mid-seventeenth century, but gradually gained an audience after Cressy’s published version of 1671. In the early twentieth century the *Short Text* was found and published, and scholarship has clarified the relationship between the two, dispelling the initial idea that the *Short Text* was a summary of the *Long Text*, and confirming the *Long Text* as an adumbration of Julian’s briefer account.⁴⁵ Since 1900 Julian has well-received by Anglican, Catholic, and other Christians, due in part to her radical theology of the maternity of God, and her sure faith in the mercy and forgiveness of Christ the saviour. The best-known words from the *Revelations of Divine Love* remain “But Jesus, who in this vision informed me of all that is needed by me, answered with these words and said: ‘It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’”⁴⁶ The retreat of institutional Christianity in the west since the 1960s enabled popular understandings of Julian to be uncoupled from Roman Catholicism, despite her informal sainthood (she has not been beatified or canonised by the Vatican, though she has a feast day, 13 May, dedicated to her in the Catholic liturgical calendar), and indeed to be uncoupled from Christianity entirely.

⁴⁴ Venetia Laura Delano Robertson, ‘Salvation and Animation: Religion, Fandom and Identity in the Romantic Narratives of Mystics and Soulbonders’, in *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-Reality: From Popular Culture to Religion*, eds Carole M. Cusack and Pavol Kosnác (London and New York: Routledge 2017), p. 59.

⁴⁵ E. Gardner, ‘Juliana of Norwich’, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), at <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08557a.htm>, accessed 01/12/2020.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Graves, ‘All Shall Be Well’.

In the twenty-first century Julian of Norwich is remade in our image: a woman writer, a feminist, an ecological thinker, an oceanic 'New Age' mystic, a radical theologian of love and universal salvation, a pop culture icon, and a touristic attraction for Norwich. The obscurity of this medieval woman who for centuries after her death was little-known, is now a thing of the past, dismissed in the plethora of discourses that almost overwhelm her. Abbott remarks that "despite this chronic lack of detail about Julian's life ... [i]t is as though, far from being a more or less unknown quantity, Julian's own person is so transparent, so available ... that anybody might claim her and freely presume on her."⁴⁷

To date there have been few attempts to relate Julian's thought to philosophers and theologians outside of the Christian context, but a case could be made that the joy and peace that she reached through her intense contemplation of the passion of Christ, the power of sin, death, hell and damnation, resembles the insight of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, the Platonic dialogue which records the last conversation the philosopher had with his friends before his execution by hemlock poisoning. Facing death, Socrates drew deeply upon the wisdom of his culture and the values that he had cultivated in his life, and he reassured his companions that:

Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death. If this is true, and they have actually been looking forward to death all their lives, it would of course be absurd to be troubled when the thing comes for which they have so long been preparing and looking forward."⁴⁸

Julian of Norwich, like Socrates, was at the point of death when she had the sixteen visions of Jesus Christ, which she immersed herself in contemplation of for decades after her restoration to health and adoption of the enclosed life of an anchoress. The Catholic faith offered her spiritual sustenance and her encounter with death resulted in reassurance. Socrates died shortly after demonstrating that his philosophy sustained him in the coming ordeal; Julian lived at least four decades after her realisation of joy and peace in her faith that above all Christ was love, and that mercy would triumph over judgement. It is indubitable that the 'real' Julian is inaccessible and the text she wrote is capable of many interpretations: yet, at a fundamental level, it

⁴⁷ Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology*, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Plato, 'Phaedo', *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), 64a.

is about facing mortality and advocating love and forgiveness for all, a message that remains relevant today.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I was privileged to teach Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* (Spearing and Spearing edition) in 2016 as part of a unit called FASS 2200 Transformative Texts in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney. The students were an elite cohort, and the texts were chosen for importance and influence. I was the only (part-time) medievalist in the teaching team, and *Revelations* was the only text written by a woman (and also the only text that was explicitly religious). It was fascinating to see how the students, who often had no knowledge of Christianity, interpreted Julian in terms of ethics and values, sexuality and aesthetics, spirituality and eco-theology, and a host of other discourses.