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The anchoress and the self-proclaimed prophet: Medieval female writers in ecclesiastical society

The medieval mystic who embodied an intersection between the divine and earthly realms challenged not only the authority of the clergy but also the dogmas of the church. Medieval mystics became mediators between God and humanity, an intermediate position only attributed to the community's priest (Gen 14.18). According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* a mystic was "any person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into God, or who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths which are beyond the intellect" (Mystic). Though this definition opens the mystical realm to all genders, two of the most prominent English mystics were Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, both illiterate women who desired to preserve their mystical experiences textually. Though these women used scribes to chronicle their mystical revelations, both authors, nevertheless, successfully asserted their authority in the ecclesiastical and literary realms. Even though Julian and Margery surmounted similar adversities in creating their visions, both women revealed their greater authority in the ecclesiastical and literary community differently. Julian established her authority while still maintaining an analytical persona and the "quietness and full submission" valued by Christian fathers (I Tim 2.11). However, Margery asserted her dominance by openly subverting scriptural censure of women (I Tim. 2.12–14). From the images that both women use, to their method of disseminating their mystic visions, to even the manner by which each woman structures her work, the reader can discern Margery's more intrepid claims to pious authority. Though Margery's overwhelming emotional displays may have caused consternation among her community, her establishment of religious piety displayed such temerity that her text exerted even greater female religious authority than that of her mentor and predecessor, Julian of Norwich.

By examining Julian's imagery, a student of Julian's text can uncover her clear yet cautious claims to a greater connection with God.

Julian vividly describes her two central visions, the passion of Christ and Christ as mother, and illuminates the veracity and sanctity of her experience. Julian's thorough attention to Christ's withering, drying, and disintegrating body mimics the medieval Christian's worship of Christ's dismembered body (Bynum 5). Julian follows this traditional medieval worship by graphically describing the drying, sagging, and decaying of each limb of Christ:

For I understood that the great grievous harshness of the nails had caused the wounds to gape open on account of the tenderness of the sweet hands and sweet feet. The body sagged . . . because of the piercing and scraping of his head and the binding of the crown all baked with dry blood. (451)

Julian uses the above image to establish the plausibility of her mystical visions and articulates her authority by illustrating her closeness to the highly worshiped "sweet hands and sweet feet" of Christ. Julian especially affords great detail to the wounds and limbs of Christ, a fact which connects her to the tradition of ecstatic images of Christ's blood prevalent in medieval mystical expression. She establishes the medieval belief that "blood is ecstasy" to assert her greater religious authority (Bynum 25). Julian had witnessed the Passion of Christ; she had seen the drying of his blood; she had seen the disintegrating of his body; she had experienced ecstasy. Because Julian claims in her text not only to envision the Passion, but also to partake in the event as one of Christ's mourners, she asserts her unmediated link with the divine while still relying on images highly valued by the church community as her evidence.

Julian continues to work strategically within the confines of the church by formulating her second image of Christ as mother:

Thus he sustains us within him in love and labor, up to the full term when he would suffer the sharpest thorns and most grievous pains that ever were or shall be, and he died at the last. And when he had finished, and had borne us to bliss, yet none of this would sate his marvelous love. (455)

Though the image of Christ as mother may seem contradictory to the traditional paternal role ascribed to Jesus, Julian's maternal imagery follows a clerical tradition set forth by Anselm of Canterbury in his "Letter to St. Paul." Anselm addresses Paul and Christ as his "spiritual mother" and includes Matthew's image of Christ as a protective mother

hen gathering her chicks under her wings to further illustrate Christ's role as mother (Bhattacharji 530). Julian's depiction of Christ's motherhood further highlights Christ's protective and life-giving roles. Her image of Christ as a laboring mother parallels Christ's suffering on the cross: both experience great pain to provide physical and spiritual life.

By limiting her most graphic imagery to that of Christ's suffering and Christ as mother, Julian strategically asserts her religious authority by affirming her intimate experience with these divine mysteries through her visions, yet she does not contradict the traditional style of worship within the church. Her imagery follows a style of what Carl Jung terms "extraversion" in which the author "sets the subject below the object, whereby the object receives the predominant value" (qtd. in Stone 30). Julian uses images in which Christ is always superior to herself, yet her exclusive ability to experience and envision Christ's suffering and labor establishes Julian's higher order in the earthly religious hierarchy. Therefore, she maintains her human weakness in comparison to Christ yet asserts her new role as a female ecclesiastical authority. Julian strategically institutes her authority within the clerical hierarchy by expressing her visions using images that maintain her subordinate status to the Lord yet show her greater closeness to his divinity.

Margery Kempe's visions of Christ contrast with Julian's visions of objective adoration. Margery, though Julian of Norwich's contemporary, refuses to follow Julian's style of discreetly asserting her new position in the ecclesiastical realm. While Julian maintains her subordinate status during her vivid description of her visions, Margery uses imagery that subverts the ideal subordination established by Julian and offers herself as Christ's intimate partner. Instead of depicting Christ's dying body, Margery crafts a post-marital image in which she shares Christ's celestial wedding bed. Christ concludes that he must consummate their marital union, thus creating a semi-erotic scene:

Therefore I need to be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you greatly desire to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband. . . . Therefore you may boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you will. For I ask no more of you than that your heart should love me—who loves you—for my love is always ready for you. (501)

Margery places herself in Christ's wedding bed to illustrate her greater union with his divinity and the greater sanctity she achieves with their union. As her husband, Christ not only offers his body to Margery but also his greater divine understanding. In an initial reading of the bedroom image, Margery may appear to embody the subordinate stance as practiced by Julian of Norwich whereby Christ receives central importance in the scene: he adopts a paternal role and uses "may" to establish his superiority. The use of "may" implies that Christ is granting Margery permission to enter his wedding bed. However, the passage alternatively illuminates Margery's sense of religious authority and her dominance in the vision. In this passage, Christ assumes a servant's role, imploring Margery to consummate their vows with intimate relations: "I need to be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you." Christ's actions within this scene continue to buttress Margery's dominance as he offers his body and celestial love to Margery and only to Margery. He beckons her to "take me in the arms of your soul . . ." and establishes the singularity of his intimate love for Margery by concluding: "for my love is always ready for you." Margery asserts her supremacy in the religious hierarchy by establishing herself as Christ's wife and thus receiving a more intimate connection with his divine love.

Though Margery does not directly cite Corinthians Chapter 7, which explicates the relationship between husband and wife, the image she creates urges her audience to acknowledge the sanctity she obtains from her matrimony with Christ's manhood. The scriptural reference states:

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.

(I Corinthians 7. 3–4, NIV)

The scriptural verse establishes a symbiotic relationship between husband and wife. Each member of the union sacrifices his or her body to the other, thus symbolizing the more magnanimous gift of the self. The husband and wife share body and soul, sanctity and sin, which culminates in the equality obtained in the wedding bed. Margery uses the equality of man and woman in the marriage bed as established

by scripture to place herself beside Christ as the central figure of the scene. Margery challenges the traditional hierarchy of piety that placed virgins at the apex and wives at the bottom (Matt. 19:21). The erotic atmosphere of Margery's bedroom image, therefore, not only reinforces her religious authority by graphically displaying her intimate interaction with Christ, but also challenges the traditional path to religiosity through innocent virginity.

Contrary to the erotic atmosphere Margery constructs, Julian maintains a virginal stance not only in her writing but also in her position within the community. Julian's more acquiescent method of establishing authority is further sustained by her position as an anchoress. Because of her reputation for sanctity and wisdom, the community saw Julian's visions as her rightful reward: she had severed her ties with the lay community and had, consequently, been blessed with sacred visions that further integrated her with the divine (Thiébaux 444). Her status as an anchoress endowed Julian with the religious authority she desired and furnished not only her visions but also her own being with greater credibility among her peers (Warren 53). Julian strategically incorporates her previously established position within the ecclesiastical community with her mystical visions to show that she does not desire to carve a new niche for herself within the religious community but wishes to progress gradually to higher levels of divine authority. Julian illustrates her yearning for a gradual ascension up the ladder to greater piety by stating: "I believed solemnly . . . all the pains of Christ as Holy Church shows and teaches. . . . I desired a bodily sight, wherein I might have more knowledge of the bodily pains of our Lord" (446). Once Julian experiences her visions of Christ's suffering, the walls of her cell provide her a safe haven to assert her new-found authority in the religious community as the Lord's direct confidante without deviating from the Christian church's theology. Julian expresses her authority as a well-respected anchoress (Thiébaux 444), an advantage that Margery lacks.

Margery must not only assert her authority but also construct a new position within the Christian community for wife and mother. Because Margery experiences her visions as a married woman following her first child's birth, she cannot assert her direct intimacy with the Lord as a wise and pious anchoress or as a spiritually pure virgin. As a result, Margery promulgates her new-found authority by a method that is as radical as her new position as the Lord's mediator between humanity

and the divine. Rather than enclosing herself within a cell and metaphorically grounding her authority as she grounds her body, Margery chooses to partake in pilgrimages to spread God's word and share her "gift of tears" (Glenn 540). By assuming this prophetic role and fashioning herself as what Ellen M. Ross terms "the Jeremiah of medieval England," Margery risks accusations of heresy in order to assert her intimate connection with the Lord (531). Ross illustrates Margery's prophet-like status by juxtaposing her capture and immurement of her followers with Pharaoh's capture of Moses in Exodus (541). Ross further buttresses Margery's position as medieval prophet and religious authority by referring to the Gospels that highlight a prophet's rejection from his or her own community (542). On multiple occasions, Margery's fellow travelers ridicule and threaten her in response to her overt assertions of her new-found religiosity. Margery's public lamentations and her conspicuous raiment of white cloth that Cheryl Glenn asserts "could indicate either chaste living or salvation without time in Purgatory" incensed those accompanying Margery (549). One frenzied townswoman curses Margery and proclaims: "I could bring faggots to burn you with. It's a pity you are still alive" (Kempfe 495). The hatred demonstrated by this townswoman illustrates the public disparagement that arises from Margery's self-construction as a prophet. The altercation also illustrates that Margery sacrificed her public acceptance to disseminate the Word of the Lord.

By indirectly constructing herself as a medieval prophet, Margery formulated her authority in the ecclesiastical community. Margery chose not to follow the anchoritic or monastic traditions and endured greater disparagement and suffering for God. In light of her public rejection, Margery saw herself as more valued in the eyes of God because she suffered for him as he suffered for humanity (Mitchell 1). R. W. Chambers comments on Margery's wandering prophecy as he states that Margery may have had a more placid experience if she lived in a cell whereby the townspeople could consult or eschew Margery as they pleased (qtd. in Glenn 548). However, critics agree that only by assuming the prophetic role could Margery "present herself and be recognized as a religious woman, one singled out above all other humans, to be saved at once" (548). By carefully comparing both texts, the audiences of these authors can detect that Margery chose a radical illustration of ecclesiastical authority, while Julian more subtly claims her greater piety.

In addition to the images ingrained within her text as well as her strategic method of describing her visions within the safety of her anchoress status, Julian constructed her text in a manner that finalized her religious authority while still remaining within the realms of the ecclesiastical society. Though Julian's illiteracy made it necessary for her to construct her text through the stylus of the scribe, she still actively participated in the text's composition and crafted her revelations in a manner that exhibited her authorial control and religious authority. In her essay "The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe," Lynn Staley Johnson studies Julian's rhetorical techniques that simultaneously crystallize her authority in the ecclesiastical and literary communities while placing herself in a secondary position to God. Staley Johnson states that Julian's multiple revisions to *Revelations of Love* and her exact attention to the dates and details of her visions show that Julian was a "highly self-conscious author," and demonstrated her yearning to assert her authority in the literary and ecclesiastical realms (829). As Staley Johnson further explains, this exacting quality of Julian's work suggests her careful consideration of her text's public reception (829). As Julian actively revises her text, she transforms her *Revelations* from an unreserved response to her Christocentric visions to an analytical description of each revelation. With this analytical tone Julian successfully removes herself from the text and "thus suggests, not that we should read her book because she is a holy woman, but that her book might be used as a guide to the holy" (Staley Johnson 833). Julian's text describes the greater wisdom obtained from her visions of Christ that can be shared with her audience. Julian uses the rhetorical technique of exacting composition to construct herself not as prophet or saint, but as author. She then relies on her literary authority to assert her religious wisdom.

Beyond Julian's revisions, she constructs her text in a manner that allows her to assert her authority while keeping Christ as the focus of observation. As Stone emphasizes, Julian crafts her text to illuminate Christ as the figure of central value while still asserting her dominance in the ecclesiastical and literary communities (30). Stone highlights Julian's authorial expertise by citing her extensive use of understatement and litotes which grant her what he terms "philosophical quietness" (46). By maintaining a calm and analytical tone throughout her work, Julian grants greater credence and veracity to her visions. Stone

confirms Julian's subtle assertion of authority by stating: "Julian's work is unrelievedly devout, sincere, analytical, thoughtful . . ." and "Julian's calm, quiet, and reflective detachment results in the understated, but nonetheless effective, prose style of *Revelations*" (50, 49). Julian's careful attention to the construction of her text as well as her detached style show how she asserts her religious authority by modeling herself as a religious scholar while sustaining the ideals of the church. Though Margery may have experienced visions with similar content to that of Julian's, she chooses to construct her text in a manner that directly counters Julian's reserved style.

Margery continues to assert her religious authority while defying church traditions not only by her self-construction as a prophet and her vivid imagery but also by the manner she chooses to compose her text. Though Margery's illiteracy limited her ability to physically compose her text, she tells a story with a tone that makes Margery the central character. Because Margery's work is less grammatically refined and less analytical than Julian of Norwich's, Staley Johnson asserts that "*The Book of Margery Kempe* is a book of witnesses" (833). Though critics have argued that a scribe may undermine the authority of female authors, Margery manipulates her scribe's stylus in a manner that augments her religious authority. Staley Johnson reveals that Margery creates a singular relationship with God by rhetorically crafting an intimate dialogue between herself and the Lord. This intimate atmosphere makes Margery's audience feel as if they have intruded on a private discourse (837). By illustrating her intimacy with the Lord, Margery structures herself as the central subject of her book that now becomes an ode to her greater sanctity. Margery's book not only asserts her religiosity by constructing her as a holy prophet disseminating God's word, but it does so through a unique rhetorical mode. Instead of making the Lord the central figure of her tale—as Julian does—Margery chooses to assert her religious authority through an "introverted standpoint" that "sets the self and the subjective psychological processes above the object and objective processes" (Stone 30).

Though such a subjective stance was especially controversial for women in the lay community, Margery elects to assert her religious dominance by becoming her tale's central figure. Rather than assuming the detached stance of her predecessor, who highlights the authority of the analytical author, Margery constructs her tale in a manner that highlights the importance of her experience and her voice as the speak-

er. Liz McAvoy confirms that Margery structures her tale to establish her authority as she states:

the very authority that Margery is attempting to achieve for herself in her writing . . . is achieved implicitly by its non-linear structure and its adherence to the rhythms, cadences, and idiosyncrasies of the very voice which dictates it. (170)

By infusing her work with unrefined constructions, Margery's work mimics not just the human voice, but her own voice. The voice-like quality of the text causes Margery's reader to see her as an authority figure articulating her experiences. Though the disorderly arrangement of Margery's text may undermine the book's authority in the literary and analytical realms, it bolsters Margery's sanctity and position as the Lord's direct confidante. McAvoy argues that Margery's frequent lapses remind her audience of the divinely granted piety of her female voice (168). Kempe asserts her pious authority while challenging the church's view of the wicked female voice (Ecclesiasticus 42:12–14) by presenting her voice as “a ventriloquism of the divine Word itself” (McAvoy 168). She shows that her own female voice can disseminate the divine Word of the Lord. Consequently, Margery's disorganized and voice-centered rhetorical style crystallizes her claims to religious authority with greater enterprise than Julian's reserved and detached mode of discourse.

Though Christian doctrine grants greater sanctity to the virgin than to the sexually experienced wife, Margery Kempe constructs a text that grants her the religious authority achieved by her mentor, Julian of Norwich. Julian uses imagery, physical positioning, and rhetoric honored by the church community to assert that her visions have blessed her with a greater connection to the Lord. Margery, however, uses erotic imagery and a voice-centered rhetoric to offer herself as God's sole confidante. Though Julian constructs her text in a universal manner, making her *Revelations* more of a holy guide than an autobiography, the method by which she acquires her authority only applies to a certain part of the community, the medieval anchoress. Margery's text, on the other hand, though singular in its construction, establishes the spiritual authority of her own female voice and the voice of wife and mother. Margery's autobiography emphasizes the importance of not only experiencing greater intimacy with Christ, but also actively

disseminating and sharing Christ's divinity with her community. Ultimately, in attempting to establish her special niche within the ecclesiastical community, Margery illustrates the power and religiosity of the once-condemned feminine word.



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