

**‘...The fend set him in my throte’: Sexuality  
and the Fiendish Encounter in Julian of  
Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love***

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One of the most dramatic of Julian’s self-representations in her *Revelations of Divine Love* focuses on a time when she is lying paralysed by illness in 1373.<sup>1</sup> Enclosed within her chamber and apparently on the point of death, she experiences a series of mystical visions of the bleeding and crucified Christ which continue for three days and three nights. Having survived the crisis, however, and sceptical about the veracity of these visions, she is assaulted by the devil on two occasions during this period of abjection. Her account of the first diabolic visitation in her initial Short Text is both terse and economical:

And in my slepe, atte the begynnyng, me thought the fende sette hym in my throte and walde haf strangelede me, botte he myght nought . . . and onane a lytelle smoke come in atte the dore with a grete hete and a fowle stynke.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, her documentation of the second assault is only a little more expansive:

[T]he fende com agayne with his heete and with his stynke & made me fulle besye. The stynke was so vile and so paynfulle, and the bodely heete also dredfulle & traualyous; & also I harde a bodely iangelynge & a speche, as it hadde bene of two bodyes, and bathe to my

thynkyng e iangled at anes as 3if thay had haldene a  
parliamente with grete besynes.<sup>3</sup>

Julian's initial response to these attacks is to attribute them to her own scepticism about her recent mystical encounter with Christ. Indeed, the appearance of the fiend confirms for Julian that she truly 'hadde raued þat daye'.<sup>4</sup> This reaction is only curtailed by the 'sadde & meruelande' face of her priest who takes her vision of the bleeding crucifix very seriously, and his receptive response leaves Julian 'ryght gretly aschamed' at her lack of self-belief and trust in God. It is in such a position of physical and moral endangerment that Julian becomes subject to the two assaults by the fiend.

Ostensibly, of course, these episodes of diabolic onslaught are recognisable in their apparent adherence to the *topos* of diabolic assault so prevalent in the writings about or by medieval women, the *Vitae* of Christina of Markyate, Saint Margaret, or Christina Mirabilis, for example.<sup>5</sup> Diabolic assault in the narratives concerning these female precursors to Julian tends to function as a signifier of intense suffering and thus prioritises the superlative *imitatio Christi* of the protagonist.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the author of *Ancrene Wisse* which was written specifically for women, makes it clear to his audience that such attacks by the fiend are to be expected by holy women,<sup>7</sup> even suggesting that visionary experiences are more likely to be of diabolic origin rather than divine:

Na sihde þ[at] 3e seoð ne i swefne ne waken ne telle 3e  
but dweole, for nis hit bute his gile.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Julian's texts, however, I would argue that the importance to the thematic integrity of her writing as a whole of these diabolic episodes is much greater than has hitherto been appreciated. Far from merely adhering to a familiar *topos*, Julian's accounts of her own assault by the fiend serve a multiplicity of complex purposes in her writing and, just like her Motherhood of God narratives for which she is most renowned, they become more

radical and subversive over the lengthy period of time which evolved between the encounters themselves, her initial record of them in the Short Text, and her final Long Text version (which was most probably written when she had entered the anchorhold as a mature woman in her fifties).<sup>9</sup>

## I

Amongst all the multifarious commentaries and studies of Julian of Norwich to date, almost none has focussed on these episodes of diabolic assault in any detail. Indeed, most commentators have dealt with them only in the context of Julian's early mystical insight that through Christ's Passion 'ys the feende ouercomyn'.<sup>10</sup> I would assert however that the key to the full import of these episodes lies in the author's use of a subtle but insistent discursive hermeneutic which is dependent upon a redemptive and transcendent female sexuality for its expression. Indeed, the *topos* of diabolic assault here forms part of a recurrent pattern of imagery connected with female and/or feminised sexuality which is prevalent everywhere in Julian's writing<sup>11</sup> and which in the episodes under scrutiny, provides an effective 'counter-discourse'<sup>12</sup> to facilitate an interrogation of the foregrounded masculinity of the devil and traditional depictions of a punitive, masculine deity. Thus, these troubling episodes of diabolic invasion are far more central to Julian's radical insight into the nature of divine love than generally recognised; indeed, I will argue that they can be seen as shoring up her wholly unique perception of a feminised and maternal God of love who is immanent in all things.<sup>13</sup>

One of the few commentators to have recognised the sexual connotations to Julian's encounter with the fiend is Jay Ruud, although his primary argument is characterised by a conventionally masculinist approach to these episodes,<sup>14</sup> working on the premise, for example, that 'the majority of (Julian's) imagery surrounding God is masculine'.<sup>15</sup> This statement, of course, minimises from the outset the complex and skilful layering of gendered imagery and palimpsestic representation of both male and female characteristics

which Julian employs in her attempts to define the indefinable Godhead.<sup>16</sup> Similarly Ruud analyses the episodes in question in terms of a contest between the male Christ as 'courtly lover' and the masculine figure of the fiend; for Ruud both Christ and the fiend are locked into what he refers to as 'direct masculine competition' for Julian's soul.<sup>17</sup> Thus he identifies these episodes as being the traditional site of a masculine struggle-to-the-death to win possession of the impotent female.<sup>18</sup> Such an androcentric analysis leaves us with an image of a fiendish encounter which renders the female as conventional victim and the male, whether a negative or a positive version, as the inevitable victor. On closer examination of the text, however, I would assert that Julian's employment of this devilish encounter in her writing is far more subtle than Ruud's reading would suggest, and is in fact wholly in keeping with her celebratory treatment of female specificity which we witness elsewhere in her texts – in the Passion narratives, in the Motherhood of God passages, and even in the parable of the Lord and Servant, for example.

## II

Julian's descriptions of her assaults by the fiend vary considerably between the Short and Long Texts, and I consider that it is within these discrepancies that the key to their importance within Julian's overall visionary insight lies. For his own analysis Ruud has concentrated upon the overtly venial devil of the Long Text, but for the purposes of my own interpretation it is the less graphic and more concise Short Text representation which is of initial interest. Julian has already learned in her fifth revelation 'be worde formede in (her) vndyrstandynge'<sup>19</sup> that 'the passyon of hym (Christ) is ouercomynge of the fende',<sup>20</sup> as we have seen, but whereas her intellectual acceptance of this concept is one thing, dealing with the physical presence of the fiend is wholly another. Julian's account of the fiend's initial visit in the Short Text is muted and almost dismissive, as I have suggested: 'me thought the fende sette hym in my throte and walde hafe strangelede me, botte he myght

nought'.<sup>21</sup> Here, Julian seems to be using the incident, not as an affective mnemonic,<sup>22</sup> nor as explicatory device<sup>23</sup> as in similar accounts by other authors, but as a mystical reinforcement of Christ's reassurance to her that 'the feende is ouercomyn'.<sup>24</sup> This interpretation is further substantiated by the lack of any emotive literary devices in her description of this visit in the Short Text. Briefly, Julian alludes to 'smoke' and 'a fowle stynke' in her chamber, details to which those in attendance in the chamber are not privy.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, her Short Text account of the devil's second assault on her is just as restrained and unexploited in spite of a slight increase in affective vocabulary: 'The stynke was so vile and so paynfulle, and the bodely heete also dredfulle & trauaylous'.<sup>26</sup> Although she also adds sound to this account, commenting on the 'iangelynge' and 'speche [...] as zif thay had haldene a parliamente with grete besynes', Julian herself still remains at centre stage, and her characteristically assertive use of the repetitive subject position 'I' serves to dissipate any agency which the fiend might have in the narrative. What is particularly important in this early version is Julian's assertion of how she manages to evade the (negligible) influence of the fiend by turning to the comfort of orthodox, rather than mystical ritual:

my tunge I occupied with spech of cristes passion & rehersynge of the faith of hali kyrke, and my herte I festende on god, with alle the triste and alle the myght that was in me.<sup>27</sup>

As David F. Tinsely has already pointed out in an essay examining Julian's diabolology,<sup>28</sup> Julian's initial reaction to the appearance of the fiend in this Short Text account would appear to adhere to the 'satisfaction theory' of Anselm of Canterbury.<sup>29</sup> According to Anselm, the devil, as a result of the Fall, was granted only limited agency to tempt and seduce mankind, and by adhering to orthodox Church doctrine, it was possible for the individual to overcome his attempts at seduction.<sup>30</sup> Yet, the significant discrepancies between

Julian's economical and truncated version in the Short Text and the far more expansive Long Text account of these incidents suggest that for twenty years or more Julian was clearly attempting to avoid the full implications of her own early narrative. Indeed, in her initial documentation of these incidents, what emerges is an attempt to distract both herself and her audience by evading confrontation with her own material and by resorting to self-counsel on the matter:

And I triste besely in god & comforthede my sawlle  
with bodely speche as I schulde hafe done to another  
person than myselfe that hadde so bene travaylede.<sup>31</sup>

Julian's salvation at this point, both physically and textually, comes about through her ventriloquising the orthodox line on the devil and literally talking herself out of the more sinister and problematic connotations of the encounter. These more sinister and problematic connotations are, of course, the problematically sexualised experience which we find emerging in the later Long Text version – something which Julian seems to have been at great pains to suppress in this earlier text.

In the Long Text account of the same experiences we discover a considerably more threatening and potent adversary than the vague and ill-defined figure of the Short Text. Indeed, the insubstantial nature of the Short Text depiction is at odds with conventional representations of the devil which since Late Antiquity through to the fourteenth century had become increasingly alarming.<sup>32</sup> The popular perception of the devil at the time when Julian was writing attributed to him both bestial and anthropomorphic characteristics which combined to create an embodiment of evil that reflected a corrupt and degenerate humanity. There is little doubt that Julian, writing at the end of the fourteenth century and early fifteenth, would have been fully familiar with such representations. For example in *Ancrene Wisse*, a text with which Julian may well have been familiar, the devil is

depicted as a 'drake', 'dogge of helle',<sup>33</sup> 'neddre', 'beore & asse',<sup>34</sup> 'wed dogge',<sup>35</sup> 'fule cur dogge'.<sup>36</sup> However, he is also depicted as sporting a beard when the assailed anchoress is exhorted to 'spite hem amid te beard',<sup>37</sup> and elsewhere his corrupt sexuality is emphasised in an image highly reminiscent of Julian's Long Text description in which the devil 'leið his tutel dun to his eare & tuteleð him al þ[at] he wule'.<sup>38</sup> At no point in the Short Text, however, is the fiend anthropomorphised or bestialised in any explicit way. In spite of the fact that Julian tells us of his attempt to strangle her 'in my slepe',<sup>39</sup> with all the implications contained within that unsolicited male touch upon the inert female body, her devil in this account is surprisingly formless and asexual. Instead, he is depicted as a quasi-conceptual, quasi-personified vision of evil not-quite-embodied, which is at odds with the fact that in medieval ideology evil was considered to be a concrete reality rather than an abstract, conceptualised phenomenon. As Michael Camille has asserted, evil existed within material bodies and these were the bodies of devils.<sup>40</sup> If we accept this analysis, then the fiend's lack of a morphology in Julian's Short Text becomes the location of an intriguing lacuna which has hitherto remained unrecognised; it would seem that Julian is resisting attributing to the devil a body in order to circumvent the inherently sexual nature of his touch upon her body, and instead she imbues the figure with the more abstract, less tangible attributes of noise ('bodely iangelynge'), a quasi-diaphanous smoke ('a lytelle smoke')<sup>41</sup> and obnoxious smell ('fowle stynke').<sup>42</sup> This is further corroborated, however, by the subtext of these seemingly innocuous and underplayed descriptions. As Tinsley has also pointed out, according to Gregory the Great's analysis of demonic smells, such stench tended to be associated with those 'stained by the sins of the flesh through the pleasures of thought',<sup>43</sup> which leads him to conclude that Julian's most deadly inner enemy 'is the deadly sin of lust'.<sup>44</sup> The association between lechery and diabolical smells is further corroborated by the author of *Ancrene Wisse* who tells his anchoresses of lechers:

Þe lecchur i þe deofles curt bifuled him selouen fulliche  
 & his feolahes alle stinked of þ[at] fulðe & paieð wel  
 his lauerd wið þ[at] stinkinde breað betere þen he  
 schulde wið eani swote rechles.<sup>45</sup>

Whereas to attribute the sin of lechery to Julian is merely a hypothetical exercise, it is highly likely that Julian's readers would have associated the stink of the fiend with lasciviousness and the 'delights of the flesh'; even more so in view of the fact that Julian documents the episodes specifically as having taken place within the confines of her own bedroom, in direct contrast to the locations of anchorhold or prison which were more conventional locations for such encounters.<sup>46</sup> In view of this evidence then, the suppression in the Short Text of her own material would suggest that Julian is indeed trying to evade offering a full account of these episodes because of their troubling and sordid sexual overtones, just as she admits in the Long Text to having evaded documenting the parable of the Lord and Servant because of a failure to understand *its* implications.<sup>47</sup> Thus we see Julian at this point avoiding a confrontation with her own material because of its disturbing sexual content and ultimately retreating into the religious orthodoxy of church ritual to dissipate its threat.

### III

By the time she came to revise and expand the Short Text some fifteen years after her initial visionary experiences, however, Julian appears to have shed her ambivalence towards the sexually-threatening fiend and, by implication, towards her own sexuality. Thus, in the equivalent narratives in the Long Text she demonstrates an acceptance of all of the sordid overtones to the fiend's presence and of his assault upon her and indeed, is now maximising on their hermeneutic possibilities. This time her description of the fiend is so fully realised that its animation rivals that of her immensely powerful descriptions of Christ's suffering



and bodily dis-figurement which dominate the early sections of her texts, appearing, in fact, to present itself as a demonic parody of the central motif of her Passion narrative. Most significantly in this context, Julian represents the fiend as appearing in the likeness of a young man, a representation which diverges radically from traditional representations of the devil, as we have seen, and which greatly adds to disarming and alarming effects of his appearance:

[T]he fend set him in my throte, puttand forth a visage ful nere my face like a yong man; and it was longe and wonder lene; I saw never none such.<sup>48</sup>

Decontextualised, this description adheres far more closely to conventional images of Christ as the suffering the Man of Sorrows, for example, whose youth and beauty add to the poignancy of his destiny and provide exceptionally powerful stimulation to the desired affective response to the Passion. It is also highly reminiscent of Margery Kempe's description of her first encounter with Christ who appears to her 'in lykenesse of a man [...] syttyng upon hir beddys syde'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Julian's graphic depiction of the devil's advances can be read as a hideous parody of the emotionally and physically satisfying relationship which Margery Kempe develops with *her* divine young lover, or indeed, of the mutual passion displayed between Julian and Christ during her earlier mystical encounter with him:

How might any payne be more to me than to se him that is al my life, al my blisse and al my ioy suffren? Here felt I sothfastly that I lovyd Criste so mech above myselfe that there was no payne that might be suffrid lede to that sorow that I had to se him in payne.<sup>50</sup>

Later, Christ will verbally reciprocate this profession:

Lo how that I lovid the . . . My derling, behold and se  
thy lord, thy God, that is thy maker and thyn endles ioy.  
Se what likyng and bliss I have in thy salvation, and for  
my love enjoy now with me.<sup>51</sup>

In fact, this parodic element to Julian's fully-developed description of her encounter with the fiend in the Long Text provides us with a key to the narrative strategy which she is employing. It is a strategy which becomes increasingly clear as she proceeds to further sexualise her encounter with the fiend, in the same way as traditional affective treatments of the young and physically beautiful Christ contain strong undercurrents of sexual energy, particularly in female-authored texts:<sup>52</sup>

The color was rede like the tilestone what it is new  
brent, with blak spots therein like blak steknes fouler  
than the tilestone. His here was rode as rust, evisid  
aforn, with syde lokks hongyng on the thounys. He  
grynnid on me with a shrewd semelant, shewing white  
teeth. [...] Body ne hands had he none shaply, but with  
pawes he held me in the throte.<sup>53</sup>

The reference to his hair, his teeth, his body and his 'pawes' which substitute for hands, has the effect of anthropomorphising this fiend in a way which Julian wholly avoided doing in the original Short Text, as we have seen. The redness of Julian's devil is also an interesting divergence from traditional representations of the devil, who was nearly always depicted as black.<sup>54</sup> For example, in the Middle English *Life* of St. Margaret, the devil is depicted as 'muche deale blackre þen eauer eani blamon, se grislich, se ladlich, þet ne mahte hit na mon relieh e areachen.'<sup>55</sup> In his study of Christian iconography, Louis Reau has suggested that this traditional representation of the devil as black was to reflect the black emptiness of hell<sup>56</sup> but he also asserts '*le rouge* [...] (*lui*)

*convien(t) aussy*', and points out that this colour was associated with blood and the flames of hell.<sup>57</sup> It would also appear that in associating the devil's red colouring with that of 'tilestone', Julian further emphasises the fiend's hellish connections. Often forged from red sandstone, the tilestone relied upon the heat of the fire for its solidity and its characteristic colour of red, flecked with black 'steknes'. In effect, it was from the realm of the earth, was fashioned with fire, and took on the appearance of its location. So the physicality of Julian's fiend reflects its own origins and essential nature. Not only that, of course, but much more importantly, the redness of its hue also provides a direct parody of the face of the bleeding Christ of Julian's earlier vision when:

I saw how halfe the face, begyning at the ere, overrede  
with drie blode til it beclosid to the mid face, and after  
that, the tuther halfe beclosyd on the same wise.<sup>58</sup>

Now we begin to realise that, whilst ostensibly describing an encounter with the fiend, this narrative necessarily contains the sub-text of Christ's redeeming Passion. Julian is, in effect, telling two stories at the same time.

The 'blak spots' and 'blak steknes' would also appear to be an invention of Julian's own imaginative powers and similarly imbued with connotations of corrupt sexuality. Ruud provides the more obvious reading of this description as being an allusion to the physical ravages of bubonic plague which had devastated the population of much of Europe in the fourteenth century. It might well be, however, that Julian is drawing on the allusion made by the *Ancrene Wisse* author to fleeting yet corrupt thoughts which 'ha bispottið hire (the anchoress) wið hare blake speckes'. These spots, he tells us, can quickly develop into wounds which 'deopeð in toward te sawle efter þ[at] te lust geað & te delit þrin forðre & forðre.'<sup>59</sup> Both the *Ancrene Wisse* description and that of Julian, however, seem more likely to be depicting a face ravaged by leprosy, a common complaint which was consistently associated

with sexual dissoluteness and loose living, and was believed to be a punishment for general moral depravity.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Margery Kempe documents how her son was shunned by his associates and his employer because ‘hys face wex ful of whelys & blobberys as it had ben a lepyr’, following his engagement with the ‘synne of letchery’.<sup>61</sup> Julian’s fiend’s physical countenance would also seem to adhere closely to the standard fourteenth-century medical description of leprosy, founded on the personal experience of its author, Gilbert Anglicus.<sup>62</sup> Gilbert examines the various stages of the disease, documenting, amongst other symptoms, a dusky redness of the face, scabs, nodules and boils, lumps on the face and earlobes, thickened lips, hands and feet. Another contemporary expert on the disease, Guy de Chauliac,<sup>63</sup> asserts that one of the unequivocal signs of the illness was a horrible satyr-like appearance; indeed, he even draws upon the etymological link between the satyr and Satan:

spredyng of þe browes, and writhing of the nose þirles,  
stynkyng of brethe and of al þe persone [...] and  
horrible in þe manner of a beste þat highte satoun [...]  
satiris forsoþe or satoun is a beste of horrible lokyng.<sup>64</sup>

This again, is an image to which Julian’s fiend would seem to adhere and one which, in Guy’s description of the leprous extremities as exhibiting ‘bolnyng of þe flesche, specially of þe ioyntz’,<sup>65</sup> may well have been informing the description of Julian’s fiend’s ‘pawes’. Julian’s use of this imagery not only serves to re-bestialise the anthropomorphised devil, but also, because of its associations with the figure of the sexually hedonistic Pan from Classical Antiquity, emphasises the concept of a corrupt masculine sexuality and hints at a bestial body beneath the graphically described face. Again, according to Reau, *la première caractéristique des démons est la nudité*.<sup>66</sup> At no time does Julian refer to the clothing (or lack of it) of her devil, but the implication within its overtly depicted sexuality and animal-like ‘pawes’ would

seem to adhere to this suggestion of threatening nudity. Similarly, the redness of face and body would also add to the impression of hyperbolic and parodic angry passion, enabling us yet again within this graphic narrative to read the subtext of the tormented and bloody Christ, stripped naked, his body covered in dark lacerations which Julian witnesses during her encounter with *his* Passion: 'The swete body was brown and blak, al turnyd oute of faire lively colour of hymselfe onto drye deyeng.'<sup>67</sup> Later she adds to this description: '(his body was) al bakyn with drye blode, with the swete heire clyngand and the drye flesh, to the thornys , and the thornys to the flesh deyand.'<sup>68</sup> In popular manuscript representations of Christ as the Man of Sorrows,<sup>69</sup> Christ is frequently depicted as bruised and bleeding with all visible parts of his naked body covered in evenly placed spots which contrast significantly with the obvious and traditional blood-flow from his five major wounds. Although Christ's lacerations (presumably caused by his flagellation prior to crucifixion) tend to be depicted in red in this type of representation, nevertheless there is a striking resemblance between these Christic wounds and the pattern of blemishes on the face of Julian's fiend.<sup>70</sup> Earlier too, Julian has stressed the changing hues of the dying Christ's face, concentrating at times on its bloody redness, as we have seen, but also at other times focussing specifically on its 'brownehede and blakehede'<sup>71</sup> which is 'as cloderyd blode whan it is drey'. Likewise, the face is 'more browne than the body'<sup>72</sup> and all of these graphic depictions of dark lacerations and congealed blood invoke direct comparison with Julian's depiction of the devil with his 'blak spots [...] like blak steknes'. The main effect of such a palimpsest of descriptive possibility is that it serves to throw into relief the transcending beauty of Christ in spite of and *because of* his injuries, as opposed to the destructive corruption of the venial and contaminated fiend. The entire episode of diabolic assault, as recounted by Julian, can thus be read as constituting an obscene parody of the soul's union with God, or the Bride of Christ's long-awaited union with her celestial bridegroom which has been invoked in the visions of the

Passion which Julian has experienced. In effect, what we are witnessing in this narrative of the diabolic is an attempted rape upon a woman's prostrate and paralysed body which threatens to render her the devil's whore, a role against which the *Ancrene Wisse* author has also previously warned his anchoresses from inadvertently adopting because of their 'natural' female ontology of sinfulness and passivity ('Makie deofles hore of hire is reowðe ouer rowðe [...] for slawðe').<sup>73</sup> So close does Julian's perpetrator come to success in his efforts to possess her that Julian can feel his breath upon her face and his phallic side-locks hanging down to further obscure her vision.<sup>74</sup>

Ruud has pointed out that these curious hirsute appendages are reminiscent of the hairstyle associated with the medieval image of the 'demonic' Jew who was often conflated with the devil in medieval consciousness.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, in the fourteenth century, Jews appeared alongside lepers as the most popular scapegoat for human depravity. Ruud's assertion here, however, is that Julian uses the image of Jewishness to suggest the fiend's *lack* of masculinity and his ultimate impotency (based upon the commonly-held myth that Jewish men were considered to menstruate),<sup>76</sup> which is illustrated finally in his inability to possess Julian. Whilst I do not take issue with his recognition of the Jew within Julian's depiction of the fiend, I would suggest that Julian is foregrounding an intense expression of undesirable *masculinity* in this episode in order to offer her readers a critique of its negative associations, rather than offering her readers an example of a *feminised* fiend. This reading is further corroborated by the fact that this curious hairstyle of the fiend which hangs down either side of his temples is, in fact, a direct parody of Christ's own blood-soaked hair which Julian has earlier described as clinging to 'the thornys'. In the case of Christ, of course, she is referring to the crown of thorns on his head which lifts the skin from his scalp ('al rasyd and losyd abov from the bone with the thornys').<sup>77</sup> It is highly likely that her use of the quasi-homophones 'thornys' and 'thounys' in the context of Christ and the fiend respectively is wholly deliberate, particularly in view of

the fact that in each case the word is used in direct relation to the hair. The difference is, however, that in the case of the former it invokes love and pity because of its association with the maternalistic love of Julian's Christ, and in the case of the second it results in revulsion and fear because of its representation of an excessive and aggressive masculinity. The main effect of these etymological associations is to provide an emphatic expression of Julian's mystical perception of the undesirability of the untrammelled masculine if devoid of the feminising (and, indeed, divinising) qualities of gentleness, solicitude, and empathetic love, amongst others, as embodied by the figures of the lord in the parable and ultimately Christ, her text's ideal lover. Thus, in this singular depiction of the venial fiend are conflated a variety of representatives of masculine depravity in order to throw into relief the utterly desirable qualities of the feminised Christ.<sup>78</sup>

#### IV

Such a reading, of course, is at odds with Ruud whose masculinist interpretation forces him to perceive the fiend's failure to overcome Julian as evidence of an impotent masculinity, a 'lack' which he then proceeds to classify predictably as specifically 'feminine':<sup>79</sup>

[T]he Fiend comes up short in the competition with the masculine God by proving to be less than a man in being more like a beast. In another sense, the Fiend proves less than a man, in being more like a woman. That is, in his ultimate impotence, Julian's Fiend is portrayed as effeminate.<sup>80</sup>

Such a reading of Julian's devil as imbued with '*undesirable* feminine qualities' (my emphasis),<sup>81</sup> classified primarily as weakness and powerlessness, fails to identify the central paradox of Julian's own victory here or the subtlety with which she imposes upon her narrative a crucial subtext. It is precisely because Julian's fiend *is* lacking that the desirability of her feminised Christ

becomes paramount in her text, but it is a lack, not of *masculinity*, but of all characteristics traditionally associated with the *female* which renders her fiend so threatening and – eventually – impotent. In the same way, the fiend's functional and intensely masculine sexuality serves to throw into relief the perfection of a relationship with a feminised Christ which also incorporates the sexual female in its movement towards an expression of transcendence.

Such a subtext is further underscored by the fact that what *appears* to be an example of feminine impotency on the part of Julian herself, represented by her paralysed female body, is in reality a steadfast, determined and infinitely powerful agency because of its alliance with the force of divine love, the conduit of which is Julian's own female body, and which is endorsed ultimately in the persona of Christ himself. Julian, we must remember, prior to this diabolic assault upon her, has already laughed out loud with gleeful abandon in her realisation that Christ 'scorn(s) his (the fiend's) malice and nowten his onmigte'.<sup>82</sup> This 'onmigte', we can now recognise, is not a result of the *feminising* of the fiend, but because he is hyper-masculinised. In such a representation, therefore, Julian illustrates how aspects of what was considered to be female ontology can be redefined and redirected as the most potent adversary of evil. Moreover, she suggests that without the redemptive influence of the 'feminine', humankind would be reduced to the type of bestiality exemplified by the fiend. What Julian is in fact doing is setting up the venial, threatening and indisputably male devil to balance and throw into relief the positive and (pro)creative virtues of a divine love based on the feminine qualities of compassion, nurturance, immanence and a sanctified sexuality. Far from documenting a contest between two masculine forces for the possession of the female 'victim', then, what Julian's text actually suggests is that it is the power of the 'feminine' within humanity which ultimately counters the negative and undesirable masculinity of the fiend and all he stands for. Thus, it is a representation which is entirely in keeping with Julian's sense of textual balance and her sanguine attitude towards the body which



she has illustrated elsewhere in both texts,<sup>83</sup> and emerges in a way which is eventually entirely orthodox. In this context, Julian's Long Text account would thus appear to acknowledge the sexual element of the assaults and use it to confront the reader in a direct and somewhat uncompromising way. This has the effect of vilifying the parodic groping for possession as displayed by the venial fiend and, by implication, validating the type of sexuality implicit in Julian's passion for and union with Christ – something fully in keeping with the teachings of Aquinas who sanctioned a sexuality which was mediated through the perfect love of both the human and the divine.<sup>84</sup>

So, just as Julian's development of the motherhood imagery in her texts leads inexorably to its climactic bursting forth in the Long Text, so we can see a similar explosion of hitherto suppressed sexual energy in Julian's depiction of the devil's assaults upon her in the Long Text. I would therefore assert that the concentration of both image patterns provides us with powerful examples of a new confidence on the part of the author in the workings and impulses of the female body, and her recognition of the potential of the female to provide a multivalent hermeneutic to explicate for her 'evencristen' as inherently human and sexual beings her divine insights into the nature of God's love for them.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay forms an expanded treatment of a discussion which appears in Chapter Four of my recently published monograph on Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, for which see Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2004). I am grateful to the publisher for granting permission to reproduce some of that material here.

<sup>2</sup> *Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. Frances Beer (Heidelberg, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1978), p. 72. This text is known as the Short Text and all references to this text will be taken from this version. All references to the Long Text will be taken from *Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love*, ed.

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Marion Glasscoe (Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1986), unless otherwise stated.

<sup>3</sup> Short Text, pp. 74–5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72,

<sup>5</sup> David Tinsley notes this in his study of Julian's diabolology, 'Julian's Diabolology', in Sandra McEntire (ed.), *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays* (New York and London, Garland, 1998), pp. 208–37. For an account of the life of Christina of Markyate see *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, trans. C. H. Talbot (Oxford, Clarendon, 1959). For a Middle English *Life* of Saint Margaret see Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (eds.), *Medieval English Prose for Women from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1990), pp. 44–85. For the *Life* of Christina Mirabilis see J. Bollandus and G. Henschius (eds), *Acta sanctorum...editio novissima* (AASS), ed. J. Carnandet et al. (Paris and Rome, 1865), July, vol. 5, pp. 652–53 and p. 654.

<sup>6</sup> Tinsley, 'Julian's Diabolology', p. 209.

<sup>7</sup> *Ancrene Wisse*, edited from MS. Corpus Christ College, Cambridge 402 by J. R. R. Tolkien, EETS 249 (London, New York and Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1962). See in particular Part Four which focuses on fleshly and spiritual temptations, pp. 92–153.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>9</sup> Scholars are now generally in agreement that this took place in the 1390s, probably some time after 1393.

<sup>10</sup> Short Text, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> I have argued elsewhere for Julian's ability to redeem the vilified female body from the many and varied expressions of *contemptus mundi* which prevailed in the Middle Ages. See my article ' "...a purse fulle feyer": Feminising the Body in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*', in *Leeds Studies in English* (2003), pp. 99–113, in which I argue that Julian's use of female sexuality as textual hermeneutic is closely connected to her insistent God-as-Mother theme, particularly in the Long Text.

<sup>12</sup> I adopt this term from the work of Ann Clark Bartlett who has suggested in her book, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1995), that women were able to extract the more positive discourses in male-

authored texts directed at them, which ran counter to the prevalent and inherent misogyny within these works.

<sup>13</sup> Whilst I fully acknowledge that the image of God as a maternal figure was a common *topos* in mystical writings in the Middle Ages, it is generally accepted that Julian's particularly comprehensive approach is the most fully developed and radical treatment of the theme. For a full examination of the Motherhood of God *topos*, see Caroline Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> Jay Ruud, "'I wolde for thy loue dye": Julian, Romance Discourse and the Masculine,' pp. 183-205 in McEntire, *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.183.

<sup>16</sup> For a close examination of the maternal/feminine properties which Julian inscribes upon Christ, see my article, "'The moders service": Motherhood as Matrix in Julian of Norwich', *Mystics Quarterly* 24, 4 (1998): 181-97.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.197.

<sup>18</sup> For an alternative reading of the applicability of the ethics of courtly love to the female mystical discourse of sex, see Karma Lochrie, 'Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies,' pp. 180-200 in Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz (eds), *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, Medieval Cultures vol. 11, (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), especially p. 185 where Lochrie asserts: 'The terms of courtly love are simply not adaptable to the discourse of women mystics because they are gendered, and we must be careful not to subsume the violence of the sexual language in their writings to the masculine uses of the language of courtly love.' It would seem that Ruud has fallen into this trap in his essay on Julian's use of courtly discourse.

<sup>19</sup> Short Text, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Hagan makes this suggestion in her essay, 'St. Cecelia and John of Beverley,' in McEntire (ed.), *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, p. 98 and p. 106.

<sup>23</sup> Tinsely's essay explores the use that Julian makes of the convention and what this convention would have signified for her readers in 'Julian's Diabology,' pp. 209-10.

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<sup>24</sup> Short Text, p. 51.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 74–75.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> Tinsely, 'Julian's Diabology', op.cit.

<sup>29</sup> According to Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century, the devil only had certain rights over humankind because they had relinquished total obedience to God because of the fall. Anselm thus repudiated the so-called 'devil's rights' theory which saw redemption as a legal contest between God and Satan, with humanity standing on the sidelines. Instead, Anselm recognised the position of Christ's humanity as being at the centre of the eschatological debate. For a summary of Anselm's 'satisfaction theory' in the context of Julian's theology, see Denise Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings. From Vision to Book* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 17–19.

<sup>30</sup> For the influence of Anselmian thinking upon later Medieval spirituality see Thomas, H. Bestul, 'Antecedents: the Anselmian and Cistercian Contributions,' pp. 1–20 in Willam F. Pollard and Robert Boenig (eds), *Mysticism and Spirituality in Medieval England* (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> Short Text, p. 75.

<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan and The Early Christian Tradition*, (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 190. See also Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (London and Scarborough, Ontario, Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 245–46 for an account of this development; and Rhodes Montague James (ed.), *James: the Apocryphal New Testament*, (Oxford, Clarendon, 1924), p. 35, p. 36 and p. 82 for the devil's association with the wolf and dog.

<sup>33</sup> *Ancrene Wisse*, p. 125.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>39</sup> Short Text, p. 72.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 122 as cited by Tinsely, 'Julian's Diabology,' p. 213.

<sup>41</sup> Short Text, p. 75.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>43</sup> Odo John Zimmerman (trans.), *Gregory the Great: Dialogues*, vol. 39 (New York, Fathers of the Church, 1959), pp.242-3, as cited by Tinsley, 'Julian's Diabology,' p. 215.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>45</sup> *Ancrene Wisse*, p. 112.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, 'Seinte Margarete', pp. 57-75 in Bella Millet and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (eds), *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>47</sup> See Long Text, p.74. 'And yet cowth I not taken therin ful vndersondyng to myn ese at that tyme.' For Julian's account of the Parable of the Lord and Servant see the Long Text, pp. 72-81.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.108.

<sup>49</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sandford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS o.s. 212 (London, New York and Toronto, 1997), p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Long Text, p. 27.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>52</sup> The best overview of this type of treatment of the crucified Christ in the writing of medieval women is Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, Zone Books, 1992).

<sup>53</sup> Long Text, pp. 108-109.

<sup>54</sup> Russell, *Perceptions of Evil*, p. 246.

<sup>55</sup> 'Seinte Margarete', pp. 44-5.

<sup>56</sup> Louis Reau, *Iconographie de l'Art Chrétien*, t. II (Paris, PUF, 1965), p. 62.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>58</sup> Long Text p. 14.

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<sup>59</sup> *Ancrene Wisse*, p. 149.

<sup>60</sup> For a detailed account of attitudes to and beliefs about leprosy in the Middle Ages, see Peter Richards, *The Medieval Leper and his Northern Heirs* (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer., 1977).

<sup>61</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 222.

<sup>62</sup> Gilbert Anglicus, *Compendium Medicinæ*, as cited in Richards, *The Medieval Leper*, p. 98.

<sup>63</sup> *The Cyrurgie of Guy de Chauliac*, ed. Margaret S. Ogden, EETS v. 265, (London, New York and Toronto, 1971).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>66</sup> Reau, *Iconographie*, p. 61.

<sup>67</sup> Long Text, p. 24.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>69</sup> See for example British Library, London, MS Add. 37049 f.23, as reproduced in Lochrie et al. (eds.), *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, p. 193.

<sup>70</sup> Catherine Jones suggests that the detailed and graphically depicted nature of Julian's visions could have been inspired by a familiarity with the school of manuscript illumination which centred on Norwich in the late fourteenth century, 'The English Mystic, Julian of Norwich,' in Katharina M. Wilson (ed.), *Medieval Women Writers* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 272.

<sup>71</sup> Long Text, p. 15.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>73</sup> *Ancrene Wisse*, p. 150.

<sup>74</sup> Long Text, p. 108.

<sup>75</sup> Ruud, 'I wolde for thy loue dye', p. 199. See also p. 204, n. 13 for the suggestion that the anti-Semitic atmosphere of Julian's society and the fact that her location in Norwich was particularly notorious for its demonising of the Jew might have made an identification between the fiend and the Jew inevitable. For an examination of the conflation of Jews and the devil in medieval thinking, see Philip Zeigler, *The Black Death* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969), p. 99.

<sup>76</sup> Léon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, Elek Books, 1965), p. 142, as cited by Ruud, 'I wolde for thy loue dye', p. 200.

<sup>77</sup> Long Text, p. 25.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>79</sup> Ruud, 'I wolde for thy loue dye', p. 199.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 198-9.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>82</sup> Long Text, p. 21.

<sup>83</sup> See in particular the intriguing passage which appears only in the Paris manuscript version of the Long Text, which reads, 'A man goyth vppe ryght, and the soule of his body is sparyde as a purse fulle feyer. And whan it is tyme of his nescessery, it is openyde and sparyde ayen fulle honestly. And that it is he that doyth this, it is schewed ther wher he seyth he comyth downe to vs to the lowest parte of oure nede.' *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, 2 vols., ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, (Toronto, Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1978), pp. 306-307. Again, I have analysed the import of this passage in detail in my article "...a purse fulle feyer", op.cit.

<sup>84</sup> In his *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas recognises the pleasures inherent in those two most insistent of human impulses, eating and sexual activity, which he recognises as does Julian, 'to oure body longyth in kynde'. In this context, Aquinas asserts the need for temperance rather than abstinence, firstly 'because they (these actions) are so profoundly natural to us', and secondly because 'they are about things highly needful for human life'. *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, vol.43, trans. Thomas Gilby, O.P., (London, B;ackfriars, and New York, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1963), p. 30.