Enclosure in Flesh and Stone: Intermediaries and Access to God in Revelations of Divine Love

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Enclosure in Flesh and Stone: Intermediaries and Access to God in Revelations of Divine Love

Emily Danuser
ENCLOSURE IN FLESH AND STONE: INTERMEDIARIES AND ACCESS TO GOD IN *REVELATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE*

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that in *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich uses the topic of enclosure (both in flesh and stone) as a means to delineate her arguments regarding the role of intermediaries and the way they can facilitate access to God while opening opportunities for dialogue within the broader public. Through a close-reading and historical contextualization of her writing on the topic of enclosure, I demonstrate that even some of Julian’s more controversial doctrinal claims can be reconciled if one understands the levels and role she assigned to intermediaries.
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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I argue that in Revelations of Divine Love, Julian of Norwich uses the topic of enclosure (both in flesh and stone) as a means to delineate her arguments regarding the role of intermediaries and the way they can facilitate access to God while opening opportunities for dialogue within the broader public. There are a variety of barriers that would limit access to God and discourse. These inhibitors might have included social standing (based on a class system), gender prejudices, or religious regulations. The issue of enclosure in Julian’s writing is multifaceted. However, I will be considering two specific aspects of the topic: first, humanity’s enclosure in flesh (the body) and secondly, Julian’s enclosure in her fourteenth century anchorhold (in stone). As I will discuss, Julian’s choice to become enclosed within her cell gave her greater influence and access to communicate with her public. Enclosure, by default, creates a mediating barrier between two distinct parties. Julian’s views on mediation are not always clear or straightforward. She spends considerable time developing her argument regarding the importance (and even helpful nature) of enclosure (i.e., mediation) in relation to Mary (136), Christ (49), flesh (49), and the other members of the Trinity (130). These various forms of enclosure, along with the way that Julian herself chose to be enclosed within her own anchorhold, are presented as ways to directly engage in communion\(^1\) with God and the larger public. Instead of presenting a barrier to fellowship, mediation can facilitate dialogue between parties. In this text, I acknowledge the interrelatedness of an intermediary and mediation while maintaining that there are distinct characteristics in each. I specifically identify an intermediary as a noun. It is an individual, institution, or “thing” (i.e., a body) that then in turn either facilitates

\(^1\) In this work, I exclusively use the term “communion” to encompass meanings such as fellowship, friendship, and reciprocal discourse. I will never use the term “communion” to refer to the Eucharist or Mass.
successful mediation between parties or inhibits access and communication. Mediation, on the other hand can both describe the action taking place (an intermediary mediates a discussion) or a process of communication between two parties. Julian calls these intermediaries, “a means to help us” (48). If an intermediary does not successfully aid two parties in the act of mediation, then they are not a “helpful” intermediary and should be discarded for an alternative option. The body is the chief intermediary in Julian’s writing (49). The church, sacraments, saints, visions, and many other things can be intermediaries that facilitate mediation between God and people or between community members. One cannot entirely get rid of all intermediaries, but Julian does insist that her visions were received without intermediary (45). There was not a third party involved in her revelation. God spoke to her directly. She claimed that her body and spirit received the visions from God, but the church, a priest, or the eucharist was not involved.

The theme of direct communication between Julian and God continues throughout Revelations. Statements such as “our Lord showed me” (52) or “God himself will teach” (57) and “God showed all this” (59) are liberally interspersed throughout Julian’s writing. In turn, Julian addressed her audience directly (both in her writing and through the window of her anchorhold). Statements such as “us” (7) and “we” (38) occur frequently in her writing. There are also passages where she directly turns to her audience and addresses the “you” (53) she anticipated would read her work. Additionally, Julian was one of the only female mystics to directly record her own writing without the mediation of a scribe. She chose to write in English instead of Latin, another form of unmediated communication. This focus on unmediated engagement and Julian’s emphasis on enclosure as a form of mediation that produces more open channels of dialogue (a seemingly positive result) appear to be at odds. Was she in favor of
mediation, or was she looking to eliminate all barriers to direct communication with God and humanity?

Through a close reading on the topic of enclosure and historical contextualization of Julian’s writing, (particularly the long text), I will demonstrate that this juxtaposition between the need for mediation and yet a minimization of the role of certain intermediaries is not a contradiction. Rather, the relationship between the two is an argument that Julian unfolds after a twenty-year contemplation (Beer 132). In this thesis, I analyze various purposes of mediation and the roles of intermediaries that Julian identifies within her writing. The paradox of her focus on mediation with her apparent desire to emphasize the unmediated nature of her communication is never more apparent than in her writing on the church. Julian claims that she was not drawn away from the church’s doctrine (86-87), yet she often espouses beliefs that call key Catholic teachings into question. Scholars have struggled to reconcile the woman who wrote that God “does not blame me for sinning” (80), that she experienced peace without a confessor (152), and that “shame will be turned into glory and greater joy” (96) with the one who insisted she had not been drawn away from her faith in the church. This small sampling pulled from a larger range of non-normative doctrines would seemingly support the argument that Julian did not believe an intermediary was necessary to experience full communion with God. However, she never wavers from her declarations of faith in the church. Indeed, some of her most insistent and repetitious assertions of her faith come after a passage that could be construed to mean that purgatory and hell don’t exist (87). It almost seems that the more controversial the doctrine being espoused by Julian, the more persistently she professes her faith. How does one reconcile this focus on enclosure (i.e., which creates a barrier necessitating mediation), what appears to be a
minimization of the role of intermediaries, and yet her staunch support of the (arguably) chief intermediary of the medieval period?

Some scholars have proposed that these seemingly discordant statements exist because Julian was merely trying to avoid being branded a Lollard. They view her claims of faith as placating. Researchers such as Innes-Parker have argued for a more directly subversive reading of Julian’s writing (11). Others fall on the opposite side of the spectrum and believe that Julian was a staunch and undivided supporter of the church (Garrison 106). Fulloon has argued that Julian’s seemingly contradictory writing was an attempt to make the church more palatable to a community that was suffering under the shadow of the plague (473). Sirko contends that Julian was not trying to abolish church authority in confession but was proposing alternative ways to communicate with God (163). She writes,

Julian points to the difference between divine and human judgment to suggest the possibility for sinners to achieve freedom from anxiety and despair perpetuated by the Church’s emphasis on God’s wrathful judgment…[S]he envisions her system as a complement to the Church’s penitential system, not as a replacement. (180)

While these arguments are useful in an attempt to reconcile apparent contradictions in Julian’s writing, I do not believe they take advantage of the justification that Julian herself puts forward as she articulates the appropriate role that intermediaries should play within an individual’s life. Understanding Julian’s arguments regarding the purpose and role of mediation gives one insight into the world she envisioned when she wrote that “all manner of things shall be well” (83). This public that Julian hoped for was one in which everyone could access God and engage in discourse with one another both because mediation (i.e., enclosure) existed, but also because intermediaries were in their proper role.
ENCLOSED IN FLESH

The first enclosure I have chosen to discuss is that of the body, which I define as enclosure within flesh. The body, as part of Julian scholarship, has been studied extensively. It has been contextualized within medieval society that often considered women to be associated with “matter” or the “physical part of human nature” (Bynum, “Feast” 14). Men, in contrast, were viewed as the “spiritual or rational” (14). Applying this logic, books such as the Ancene Wisse (a handbook published to articulate the appropriate behavior of anchoresses), that call the flesh “nothing but mud and foul earth” can be seen as implicitly denigrating towards women (Greenway-Clerke 72). Yet despite these binaries of physical/spiritual often associated with gender in medieval culture, bodies were also present in religious sacraments such as the Eucharist. Christ’s body was both male and the most important source of religious imagery available to Catholics of that period. Additionally, bodies were displayed in the form of relics, and dying bodies would have been a daily part of Julian’s world as Norwich survived multiple bouts with the plague. Some have even speculated that Julian lost a child to that disease (Fullam 59). Still, I am not particularly interested in the body as it has been broadly studied within Julian scholarship. Rather, I am specifically focused on the way that bodies, (i.e., individuals enclosed in flesh) exist, as both a mediator and facilitator of revelation from God. The body, as will be further discussed, is a mediator that allows individuals to participate in dialogue between two parties and take on flesh just as Christ did while he was on earth. The body is an enabler of revelation, as demonstrated in Julian’s insistence that many of her visions were received bodily (Norwich 55). God did not view her body as a barrier to receiving the visions. Rather, her enclosure in flesh was something God himself viewed as valuable. Julian explains that she did
not ask for “bodily sight or showing of God” (45). However, that is what she claimed to receive along with additional spiritual revelations. In this scenario, God was the one who chose her body as an avenue to reveal his will and plans to the broader public.

One encounters arguments regarding the body almost immediately upon opening Julian’s writing. She notes that she asked God for “bodily sickness” (3). She also wanted to know more about Christ’s “bodily suffering” (3). These requests were fulfilled through her own near-death experience that precipitated her visions, and then subsequently through the showings and her encounters with Christ. Julian’s sixteen revelations that she claimed to receive when she was ill and expected to die span topics of prayer, sin, joy, the Trinity and even hazelnuts. However, few passages on the body are as vivid as Julian’s account of her vision regarding Christ’s passion and death. By recording the visceral details of the showing, she aligns herself with the tradition of other mystics in the Middle Ages such as Kempe, Mechthild, and Catherine of Siena (to name a few) who participated in this tradition of recording their startling visions of the crucifixion (Miller). Jesus’ blood is “red…hot and fresh and very plentiful” according to Julian (Norwich 45). Her visions of that man’s decomposition almost seem to belong in a horror novel instead of a book focused on God’s love for his children. His face was “covered in dry blood” (55) his body was “distorted because of the nails and its own weight” (65) and his flesh was “slashed through…like a sagging cloth” (66). This is merely a sampling of her descriptions.

So, if Julian was so concerned with the notion of “the body,” one should perhaps ask the question - what was a “body” to Julian? Was it nothing more than skin? In Julian’s writing, the body (or “flesh”) was an enclosure for the soul (49). She further contended that the soul was the only place she saw God dwell (174). A variety of bodies (and thus souls according to her argument) passed her anchorhold on a daily basis. Indeed, St. Julian’s Church (the location of her
enclosure and possibly the inspiration for her name) was relatively close to the port of Norwich so the “bodies” of priests, prostitutes, sailors, merchants, noblemen, beggars, and villagers would have constantly passed the window of her enclosure. Embodiment makes us physically visible to one another (and like God on some levels as will be discussed shortly). With a casual reading, it might seem that the soul (or the spiritual) is given preference over the body. However, Julian is quick to clarify that both are equally valuable. She says,

> For he does not despise what he has made, nor does he disdain to serve us in the simplest task that belongs by nature to our bodies, through love of the soul which he has made in his own likeness; for as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the chest, so are we, soul and body, clad in the goodness of God and enclosed in it. (49)

In this scenario, both the body and soul are created by God. Each is also enclosed in God’s goodness and covered by his love. In Julian’s writing, the body is not something one merely tolerates or tries to subdue. There are many examples of this attempt at bodily control in other female mystics of the time. History is not lacking in examples of mystics such as Lidwina who stopped eating almost everything except the Eucharist and asked God for bodily disfigurement so that she would not be married (Bynum, “Feast” 4-5). Angela of Foligno is perhaps one of the most pronounced cases as she claimed to be “satiated” by Christ, while also starving to death and having her members “unstrung” (Bynum, Fragmentation 184). There is actually a disorder called anorexia mirabilis that is associated with what a woman of acute religious devotion chose to eat. While food was certainly not the only way for women to control their bodies, it was a significant one.
Even those who did not join a holy order or live a set-apart lifestyle were able to exercise a measure of control over what went into their bodies, and it was also a tool they used in some social settings. Control over bodily appearance could sway marriage prospects. Control over bodily ingestion could also influence birth and the birthing room space. Yet Julian’s relationship with her body and her portrayal of the body by and large is not adversarial. Certainly, there are moments when she longs for Heaven because sin will be done away with, and bodily limitations will be over. She goes so far as to state, “I was astounded with wonder and admiration that he who is so holy and awe-inspiring was willing to be so familiar with a sinful being living in wretched flesh” (46). This “wretched flesh” has been tainted by sin. However, as one continues reading, it becomes clear that while bodies are often frail or even wretched, flesh is not inferior to the soul. Julian comes to realize that both the body and the soul are equally important because both have been consecrated by God. The incarnation, according to Scripture, was the act of Christ becoming “flesh” (*English Standard Version*, John 1:14). Jesus enclosed himself in his mother Mary and then enclosed himself in bodily form.

Since the body is an enclosure, it is by default a mediator. However, I argue that, in Julian’s writing, it is the chief and best intermediate. There are at least two reasons for this claim. First, humanity itself is set apart as a unique connection to Christ. She says, “For in his goodness, God has ordained a great many excellent means to help us, of which the chief and principal one is the blessed Humanity which he took from the Virgin” (49). Christ took on flesh, so unlike other intermediaries that Julian identifies in her writing, the body as a mediator is actually a way for humanity to be like Christ. This notion of being created in the “image” of God dates back to the beginning of Scripture (Gen. 1:26). Still, unlike some other mystics, Julian did not argue that humanity would become the *same* as God. Writers such as Porete longed to be made one with
Christ (Wright 65). In Julian’s writing, she asks that she might be, “one of them” in reference to her desire to share in Christ’s suffering as the other disciples did (Norwich 43). However, she does not lose her unique humanity. At no point in Julian’s writing does she become the same as Christ. Additionally, there is never a moment when Peter become interchangeable with John or Mary, Jesus’ mother, with Mary Magdalene. They have an affiliation with one another, brought about because of their love for Christ. They experience pain because the one they love, Jesus, is suffering. The body remains an intermediary and prevents individuals from becoming the same as one another. It facilitates communion without arguing that one must lose their individuality in order to participate in fellowship or public discourse.

The disciples’ bodies served as mediators that allowed them to physically witness each other as Christ suffered. However, there was not interchangeability that negated the uniqueness of each individual’s humanity. In Julian’s writing, being made in Christ’s image and enclosed in flesh is a way for one draw near to him even though an individual’s soul has not yet reached heaven. Even now, mankind is “Enclosed in the Father, and we are enclosed in the Son, and we are enclosed in the Holy Ghost; and the Father is enclosed in us, and the Son is enclosed in us, and the Holy Ghost is enclosed in us; almighty, all wisdom, all goodness, one God, one Lord” (130). According to Julian, God does not view embodiment as problematic because he ordained it as a means to experience life. He allows humanity to connect with his love, relationships, and the world while in our “sensory being” (130). The ultimate culmination of this enclosure is when we are “Absorbed in knowing and loving him until the time when we reach fulfilment in heaven” (50). Julian specifically notes that this vision of enclosure and the body in relation to the soul is crucial because, “For of all else, beholding and loving our Maker makes the soul see itself as most puny, and most fills it with reverent awe and true meekness, with abundance of love for its
fellow Christians” (50). The body being like Christ actually encourages individuals not to be dismayed at the state of their soul and to love their “fellow Christians.” The body, or enclosure in flesh, becomes a commonality that humanity shares. Julian ultimately argues that this enclosure is a norm that exists across all boundaries. There is no space for pride and, one could infer, no preference of social standing because, according to her, “In the sight of God, all men are one” (118).

All men are one because everyone has a body. However, bodies are not all the same. They occupy different spaces, diverse backgrounds, and have unique characteristics. This lack of acknowledgment regarding the various types of bodies that exist is something I address in my conclusion. Still, even though I readily acknowledge that not all bodies are the same, they are all originally made of flesh. According to Julian, they share this commonality even with deity. In this role of an intermediary, the body is not an inhibitor of communion or revelation. Rather, it facilitates relationships instead of serving as a gatekeeper that limits or prevents access to God. Instead, being enclosed in flesh actually allows one to share a commonality with God and should lead to an “abundance of love” and communion with other Christians (50). This anticipation of an abundance of love between various individuals speaks to the broader audience or public that Julian anticipated as she wrote. True, she is specifically addressing other Christians which could certainly limit her audience, but likely not in her immediate circles.

Other than the preference given to enclosure in flesh as a mediator, the second factor that one should consider when trying to reconcile Julian’s writing on mediation with this notion of enclosure is that intermediaries are a “a means to help us” (49). They are not meant to be the primary, and definitely not the only, path to God or communion with him. Julian specifically states, “It really honours God more, and gives more joy, if we ask him to answer our prayers
through his own goodness…than if we approach him through all the intermediaries that heart can devise” (48). He is “The highest object of prayer and it reaches down to our lowest need” (49). There are many intermediaries or ways to approach God that can facilitate intimacy with that deity. The church is identified as a place to receive “preaching and teaching” (56), but it is not the ultimate intermediary between God and man. The church can be like our “mother,” (144) but it is Christ who “sustains us” (141) and is our “dearest Mother” (144). The church can be a facilitator of sacraments, but the ultimate sacrament is Christ’s body which Julian experiences without a mediator in her visions of Christ’s cross. A priest might impose penance (for the purpose of cultivating humility), but it is Christ who forgives directly apart from the interference of a third party (95-97). She specifically notes that,

He should watch over us so tenderly while we are in a state of sin; and furthermore he secretly touches our inner hearts and shows us our sin by the pure sweet light of mercy and grace…we think that God must be angry with us for our sins…then our kind Lord reveals himself, very joyfully and looking very pleased, with a friendly welcome…I am glad you have come to me…This is how sins are forgiven through mercy and grace and our souls gloriously received in joy…through the gracious working of the Holy Ghost and the power of Christ’s Passion. (97)

This advocacy of a direct connection to Christ without the interference of other earthly power structures argues that third party mediators are not necessary. They can be helpful, but when they cease to be a “means to help” they should be re-evaluated to determine if they are still an effective intermediary. Julian illustrates this process of enclosure and “helpful” mediation with Mary.
Scholars have highlighted Mary’s role as a mother and argued she serves as an advocate for humanity (Preysner 47). However, I am more interested in the way that Julian wrote her vision of Mary as the originator for her arguments on enclosure. Julian claimed, “Thus our Lady is our mother in whom we are all enclosed and we are born from her in Christ; for she who is mother of our Saviour is mother of all who will be saved in our Savior” (136). Certainly, the first enclosure in flesh, at the beginning of Scripture, pre-dates Mary. According to Biblical tradition, humans have been enclosed in flesh since the beginning of creation. However, Julian uses Mary as a starting point for her arguments because she was the one who facilitated the process of Jesus being enclosed in flesh. In a sense, Mary is the one who made it possible for the body to be exalted and to be like Christ. Without Mary, Jesus would not have been enclosed in flesh and humanity could not have been “like” Christ until they arrived in heaven. The whole argument that the body is the chief mediator (instead of an institution like the church) falls apart if Christ does not have a body. Julian draws direct connections from Mary to Christ and then Christ to humanity (46). As Rush notes, Julian’s visions of Mary are unique because they are exclusively spiritual (8). The showings of Mary were exceptional for Julian. She claims that “Our Lord gave me no special revelation except of our Lady Saint Mary” (78). This statement alone should perhaps prompt one to pay more attention to these showings. Mary is a woman. Arguably, she is the ultimate unmediated woman. According to Catholic tradition, she remained a virgin after Jesus’ birth. She was a mother, but her role in the Biblical story of redemption and the non-normative way she conceived Christ place her outside the traditional societal roles assigned to women. She conceived a child outside of wedlock, yet there was no shame associated with that fact. God directly intervened in her life and, according to Scripture, Jesus was born without the
biological influence of a physical man. Julian does admit that Jesus’ affection for Mary is “singular” and that she is “the most supreme joy that I could reveal to you” (77).

Because Mary is identified as unique, I will not make the argument that Julian’s vision of the woman as strictly spiritual broadly translates to applications across all women. That would clearly be inaccurate. However, one can’t ignore that Julian specifically exalts a woman who is not constrained by traditional power structures or third-party intermediaries. Yes, Mary was Jesus’ mother, but she was loved and chosen before bearing Christ. Julian says that Mary, “beheld her God and Maker” (46). In Luke, one reads, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you…you have found favor with God” (2:28). Julian views Mary as exalted above other creations, but that is not how Mary perceived herself in Julian’s showings. Mary had unmediated access to God and her body was a mediator that became a literal source of deliverance, revelation, and redemption because she allowed it to be used to bear Christ. Her body was never an inhibitor of revelation or communion with God. One could certainly debate the merits of the power differentials that existed between Mary and God. However, Julian was not primarily interested in that so neither am I. Rather, Julian (and Mary in the recorded vision) view Mary’s acceptance of God’s will with joy and humility (46). According to the text, Mary had been honored (46, 77). By joyfully agreeing to carry Christ, Mary opened up her body as a place of literal enclosure for Jesus. She became the means by which he took on flesh. Eventually, she became one of the “helpful” intermediaries herself as many people continue to pray to her even today.

One could argue that Julian is a type of Mary. She beheld God, she gave birth to her visions, and entered into the trials of life with humility. She actually echoes Mary’s claim to “know the littleness of all created beings” when she is given the vision of the hazelnut one
chapter after her first vision of Mary (47). According to Julian, the enclosure in flesh was ordained of God and was the chief intermediary because it is humanity’s way of becoming like him. It makes individuals visible within the broader public and allows for communion with God and one another. The church, along with other intermediaries, can be helpful but it is not the chief way to approach God. Julian was not only enclosed in flesh, like the rest of humanity, but she was also enclosed in stone. She used the liminal space of her anchorhold to contemplate her visions, engage in discourse with God, and dialogue with the broader public.

ENCLOSED IN STONE

Just as Mary chose a double enclosure (her flesh and then the enclosure of Christ within her own body), so Julian also chose a double enclosure (her flesh and then within her anchorhold). Julian inhabited an intermediate space between the church and her community and between life and death. I argue that this literal (and yet liminal) space of enclosure actually amplified Julian’s access to discourse with her community. This enclosure in stone, which could have severely limited her voice and influence, had the opposite effect. Julian had chosen to receive the last rites and be enclosed within a cell attached to St. Julian’s church. Anchoresses went through an extensive vetting process by a church officer. It was an inherently patriarchal process. However, the church’s approval of an anchoress was also a granting of permission for a woman to step into an enclosed and sacred space. A religious leader who approved an anchoress’ request to become an enclosed woman was conferring a measure of his authority and expressing his approbation of that woman’s character. Julian brought a seemingly well-established reputation (based on her visions and her short text) and built on that authority during her time as an anchoress. Her insistence, from within the walls of her cell, that she received bodily revelation
demanded that her audience remember she was an *individual* who claimed to communicate directly with God, agonized over the veracity of the visions she had received, and engaged in communication with those around her.

She was not merely someone who was approved of by a man. She had not simply passed an examination. She was not a voice to be used as a means to an end. Rather, her insistence on bodily (i.e., enclosed) revelation actually reinforced her humanity or individuality and dated her power to a time before any male religious leaders had accepted her message. God had listened to her requests for “three wounds” (42-43). He gave her more than she asked for when he entrusted her with the sixteen revelations. As already mentioned, she claimed that he communicated with her directly. She may have needed a man’s approval to become enclosed in a societally acknowledged sacred space, but she did not need their permission to commune with God. Neither her body (a mediator) nor her gender were inhibitors to her revelations. She retained a level of bodily autonomy and reputation even though she was physically enclosed within four walls. Her authority was perhaps bolstered by the church’s approval and her location certainly seemed to benefit her status. However, her message did not originate because of man’s role as an intermediary or interference. She insisted that she experienced divine revelations regarding God’s love, within her own body (55). She claimed to have direct access to God, wrote to the public without intermediary, and addressed the way other people could also experience direct access to God (46). As already noted, she wrote with the assumption that people would read (or hear) her work.

This trend of anchoresses becoming community pillars was perhaps not fully anticipated by the church. Still, as it became apparent that these women would exist as an intermediary between the church and community, steps were taken in an attempt to regulate anchoresses’
behavior. Conduct books such as the Ancrene Wisse circulated in an attempt to control these enclosed women who no longer easily fit into publicly normative roles. These women were not defined by a societal title such as a mother, daughter, or wife. Rather, they were an enclosed woman with little social responsibility, the approval of the church, and a community that was often eager to listen to their opinions. Anchoresses were not supposed to speak unnecessarily, give men advice, or listen to gossip (Bardsley 48). Their anchorholds were considered sacred, but there was a fear among male authority figures in the church that it would become a place of license and idleness. The monk, Aelred of Rievaulx warned of an anchoress’ cell becoming a “brothel” (Rievaulx). He wrote his text, purportedly, in response to a request for guidance from his sister. He seems to equate the act of (what he perceived to be) excessive discourse with that of prostitution. However, anchoress’ bodies were almost always physically inaccessible to men. A woman walled into a stone cell could not break it down to engage in sexual relations with a man. The likelihood of an anchoress’ cell to becoming a “brothel” seems limited. Yet that was his caution to a woman who asked her brother for insight and wisdom. This tone that seemed interested in dissuading women from becoming anchoresses carried over into the images of the medieval period. There are actually pictures from the medieval period of an anchoress’ cell that show the anchorhold as a very small enclosure. See fig. 1 for an example below.
The woman almost appears to be in a crypt and already dead in contrast with the Bishop who is very elegantly dressed and free. Her body is fully enclosed with little space to move. Her headdress is plain while his is majestic. Almost everything regarding her immediate enclosure is monochromatic but the outdoor scenery is colorful. One might even say the anchoress is surrounded by majesty without the ability to participate in it or access it. This picture dates to the early 1400s (so it was contemporary to Julian’s life). The distinctions between the roles of the bishop (sanctionor) and the anchoress (sanctioned) is clear. Her enclosure diminishes her embodiment (you can only see her head). Her control and agency appear to be removed. This is definitely not the reality of what Julian (and most other anchoresses) had committed to. A more realistic example is seen below in fig. 2.
Their cells typically had at least three windows. One opened to the church so that the anchoress could receive communion. The second opened to the community so that she could speak with other individuals and a third opened to allow a servant to care for her basic necessities. Anchoresses’ bodies were enclosed in a physical space, but they often became sources of spiritual guidance and wisdom in their communities. Women chose the reclusive
lifestyle of an anchoress at two to three times the rate of men (Hasenfratz). Instead of fading from their communities, this interment or figurative death often resulted in greater influence. Relationships that were unmediated by third-party oversight and discourse with a variety of bodies were frequent occurrences. Julian’s decision to exercise agency (i.e., control) over her body and become an anchoress granted her an increased level of perceived authority. There was a sense in which she purchased a space in which to live and study, but by extension also purchased the reputation of a respectable and “holy” lifestyle.

Scholars have argued about the dates of Julian’s enclosure in stone (Watson 638-639). However, one can clearly see the effect additional contemplation had upon Julian’s approach to dealing with her public. The clearest shift in tone regarding her dialogue with her community can be seen in the contrast with the way she introduces herself in the short text versus long. In the short text, she notes, “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” (10-11). In the long text, she pivots and claims, “These revelations were shown to a simple, uneducated creature in the year of our Lord” (42). The notion of her ability to talk with God being inhibited by her gender is no longer an issue. She doesn’t deny that she is unlearned (likely highlighting her inability to write in or perhaps understand Latin). However, she boldly declares that though she is not educated according to official societal standards, she is qualified to communicate with her, “fellow Christians” because she desires to explain what she received (53). Her literal enclosure in stone did not prevent her from participating in discourse and arguably, it actually emboldened her to be more direct in her claim to authority.

I am not arguing that becoming an anchoress was the equivalent of freedom nor am I contending that all anchoresses chose to be enclosed as a means to escape societal constraints.
Some appear to have genuinely wished to live in contemplation under the watchful gaze (and blessing) of the church. Yet, one should also consider that societal expectations left little recourse for women to participate in societally non-normative roles. How desperate must some have been that the reality of being walled into a cell and never allowed to leave on the pain of death sounded appealing? I am sure many women might have wished to be left alone in religious contemplation within the comfort of their own homes or even just left alone within their own homes. However, since they were often not permitted that license, women sometimes turned instead to nunneries and lives of seclusion. They chose, like Julian, to place their bodies outside societal norms and, paradoxically at times, inside physical enclosures. In this seeming contradiction, these women occasionally found a measure of bodily autonomy. I am not arguing that these non-normative spaces, nunneries in particular, were always healthy environments for women’s bodies. Rather, these locations represent some of the places women could choose to place their bodies in positions that were not part of traditional societal roles. Julian chose to exercise agency (i.e., control) over her own body by enclosing it behind a stone wall. She, like Mary, chose a double enclosure. Julian did not need to enclose herself in stone in order to experience unmediated communication with God. However, enclosing herself within her anchorhold facilitated the mediation between herself and her community as well.

RECONCILING A PARADOX

Understanding Julian’s arguments on enclosure combined with the notion of “helpful” intermediaries allows one to reconcile Julian’s writing on the church (and other intermediaries). I do not believe that Julian was trying to destroy the church or burn all of its tenets to the ground. Rather, I believe she wished to see the church and other intermediaries returned to their rightful
role. The church was a place meant to teach Christ (78). It facilitated sacraments that could
cultivate devotion to God (141). It served as a resource for doctrine and comfort (144). However,
it was not meant to be the controlling intermediary between God and man or between other
individuals. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 CE had advanced the notion of intermediary
confession and church control to new levels. Instead of priests being general guides, community
leaders, or teachers, their roles were redefined to center mediation as part of their key task (Sirko
167-168). That is not to say that priests never served as confessors before this ruling, but the
Council’s guidelines reinforced the power of the church, extended their influence, and introduced
the absolute necessity of third-party mediation in order to access God and his forgiveness.
Threats of excommunication, extended time in purgatory if sins were not resolved, and control of
the last rites were tangible and intangible threats that individuals had to face. The priesthood
represented God to the people, and they were the visible embodiment of the Roman Catholic
Church. Julian lived in the reality of this ruling that had taken place more than a hundred years
before her birth. Norwich was a thriving port city with strong ties to the continent. It was also
highly religious, boasting many churches and a large cathedral. It was the origin point for the N-
Town plays, and the bishop during Julian’s life was highly zealous in his persecution of Lollards
(Ramirez 29) She wasn’t advocating that the church should cease to exist (after all she
participated in its perpetuation). However, it should not have been the only source of authority.
That institution was one of many intermediaries available, but it was not the only or even the
highest intermediary in comparison to the body. According to Julian, God longed for individuals
to pray to him directly and seek him (Norwich 48). However, he allowed the use of
intermediaries as a means to draw near, especially if people were unsure of how to approach him.
This desire that Christ has for direct communion is clearly seen in Julian’s arguments regarding the servant and the lord and Christ as mother. These are arguably two of the most studied visions in Julian scholarship and are distinguishing features of Julian’s long text. Jesus can “Familiarly lead us to into his blessed breast through his sweet open side” (141). Julian contends that, “He is our natural mother through the work of grace” (142). In many cases, it would be difficult to identify a relationship between two individuals that is less mediated than a mother and child. The mother is often the life source of the child for the first weeks or months of that child’s life. In an ideal scenario, she cares for their needs, cleans their messes, and soothes their fears. There is an intimacy and care intrinsic to many relationships between mothers and children. I am not arguing that all maternal relationships were the same during this period or that all were healthy. Obviously social class had the potential to greatly influence the role a mother would play in their child’s life. Still, there was a baseline understanding of what Julian was arguing for. This level of unimpeded access that a small child would have to their mother was an assumed fact in many cases – even if distinctions would emerge as children grew older. The direct and bodily connection would have been an understandable illustration for her audience.

Arguably, more important for her arguments regarding access to God without third-party mediation is the vision of the servant. One of the reasons this story is so significant is because Julian explicitly identifies the servant as a symbol of Adam or a type of humanity (117-118). Julian states that, “In the sight of God, all men are one” (118). In the story, the servant deeply loves his master (God). Yet he falls; he sins. Instead of condemning him, God notes that,

His dear servant whom he loved so much should be truly and blissfully rewarded for ever, more than he would have been if he had not fallen; yes, and to such an extent that
his fall and the misery it caused him should be transformed into great and surpassing
glory and eternal bliss. (117)

God forgives the servant *directly*. Proposing that sin could be turned to eternal bliss seems quite
a bold claim. Julian circumnavigates some of the potential pressure to renege on this vision by
claiming that it was “mysterious” (117). She contemplated the vision for twenty years and still
claimed that she had an incomplete understanding of the revelation. This is arguably her most
controversial showing. The servant is identified as a type of Adam. However, she also specifies
that not only is this a vision of one man, but it is also a vision of, “Any man and his fall; for in
the sight of God, all men are one” (118). She eventually writes that, “Our good Lord Jesus has
taken upon himself all our guilt; and therefore our Father neither may nor will assign us any
more guilt than he does to his own son, dearly loved Christ” (122). This brazen claim that guilt
and shame would be done away with, apart from the mediating influence of the church or
worldly power structures, directly contradicted church teaching. However, it aligns with the
notion of Christ’s body being like our body and that there is ultimately no other *necessary*
mediation. Intermediaries could be helpful, but they were not the supreme authority.

The vision of the servant was a controversial showing and had not been included in her
short text (perhaps for that reason). The natural outcome of this vision is an understanding that
the mediation of a priest or higher social class was not needed. Julian positions humanity as
equal in relationship to one another before God, (a servant and child). If souls were created
equally by God, if our relation to ultimate power is the same, if humanity is all enclosed in flesh,
then Julian’s writing calls into question the need for mediation via traditional power structures.
Why would you need a priest when you can approach God directly? Why would you need an
advanced education in Latin to commune with God if he is our mother? Why would you need a
king or lord if we are all servants? Julian insists that all shall be well, but it will be so because of God’s direct engagement with individuals (and they with him) not because of intermediaries.

Julian envisioned a world in which “all manner of things shall be well” (83). That statement is her lasting legacy and is literally enshrined in the modern-day St. Julian’s church. God promised her that even though she did not understand his plan, he would fulfil his promise to make all things well in the end. He wasn’t going to accomplish his plan by improving confessional practices with priests. He wasn’t going to create better intermediaries. Rather, he was going to intervene directly. He was going to communicate with humanity apart from a third-party intermediary. He was going to enclose everyone in flesh and thus make their souls visible to one another and to himself. Julian was not chosen because she was special. She specifically rejects that notion. She claims that her message was for all (54). It could actually be argued that God chose to communicate with Julian because she was bold enough to first approach him. If, as she notes, there was nothing special about her, the requests for three wounds seem to be the only truly distinguishing factor that occurred before Julian claimed to receive these visions. Prior to church approval or enclosure as an anchoress, she asked God to intervene in her life. She asked him for the wounds, and he responded to her request. He gave her the showings so that she could share them with her public. Julian was not interested in keeping her visions enclosed. They did not stay within her mind, body, or cell.

She engaged in discourse with God, but then turned that discourse outward. Her window to the community from the church became a physical representation of her connection between God and her communication with the public. I believe she was interested in creating counterpublics in the vein of Fraser (61). The ability to establish channels of communication and communion outside the traditional boundaries of the proverbial public associated with
Habermas’ arguments is a crucial aspect of what Julian was attempting to accomplish. She was interested in engaging in dialogue that was not limited by location, gender, or other societal constraints. As already mentioned, Julian sought to communicate directly with her audience. This again reflects her focus on creating relationships that were not mediated by a third party (such as the church). As a woman, this endeavor at unmediated discourse was bold. Much has been written regarding ways in which medieval women participated in dialogue; however, their involvement was often presented in a negative way. The “hue and cry” was a feasible way for women to engage in public discourse for a number of years. In this historical event, someone (often a woman) in the community could raise the alarm for a perceived infraction (e.g., stealing). However, even this approach to discourse became a precarious endeavor. As Bardsley notes, “With the decline of hue-raising as a means of communal policing from the late fourteenth century onward, women’s legitimate opportunities to raise their voices seem to have been curtailed” (77). In correlation, as the hue and cry became a less tenable solution for women to participate in discourse, accusations of slander and gossip increased (119). Medieval society (much like today) sought to regulate who was able to speak, in what venues, and when. However, individuals like Julian, other female mystics, and communities such as the Beguines demonstrated a resilience and determination as they sought to engage in dialogue that was not limited by locations or societal norms. The church carefully crafted a world in which its power was reified and sustained through fear and threats. I argue that Julian anticipated, or at minimum hoped, for a world in which unmediated relationships and discourse between God, humanity, and the general public was normalized. If humanity was equal before God and one another, then third party intermediaries could return to their role of a “means to help us” (Norwich 49) without controlling access to broader discourse. Not only would this shift in power change the
relationship of people to God, but it had the potential to change the way the community functioned towards one another.

*Revelations of Divine Love* discusses many different intermediaries, some of which are incredibly effective in the act of mediation. However, by discussing the purpose of an intermediary as a means to improve our access to and communion with God, Julian is able to reconcile seemingly contradictory claims. The church can be a wonderful intermediary, but only if it is fulfilling its role in effectively mediating or facilitating access to God. If it (or any other intermediary) is not accomplishing its main purpose (i.e., mediation) then it will have ceased to be a helpful means. Instead of being a gatekeeper or inhibitor of communion between God and individuals or between communities, the intermediary (starting with the body and then others falling in line) should fulfil their original intent and help people draw near to God and one another. This restoration of purpose would allow her to claim faith in the church, when it was fulfilling its role as a “helpful” intermediary and teaching people about how to approach God. However, it also left open the door of rejecting the teachings and moments when it was no longer a helpful intermediary and actually sought to serve as a gatekeeper or inhibitor of fellowship between God and the broader public.

It is clear from the course of history that Julian’s vision did not come to fruition. Many bodies are still less visible. Enclosure in flesh does not guarantee equality. Slavery, hatred, prejudice, and war have continued for hundreds of years. It is easy to view Julian’s writing as too optimistic or divorced from reality. She never advocates for specific monetary policy or social recommendations. She seems to assume that her *Revelations of Divine Love* will be enough to transform the lives of her readers. Perhaps it is unfair to judge her work on the practical outcome when her writing is almost exclusively spiritual in nature. We can’t judge her efficacy based
exclusively on results, but it is important to address this discrepancy between her hope and the reality of the struggle that continues for marginalized bodies. One could argue that the failure of her vision might be less of an issue of insensitivity or wishful thinking and more related to people’s failure to truly implement her instructions. Following her arguments, it isn’t Julian’s fault that people have forgotten that within each individual enclosed in flesh is a soul created by God. Regardless, there is still a very real subaltern that remains despite Julian’s writing.

Even with these challenges, Julian’s writing is complex, especially for one who considered herself uneducated. She balanced non-normative doctrines and visions while avoiding being branded as a Lollard. She challenged core tenets of church doctrine even though it was often done allegorically. There is an astonishing measure of determination in the way she insisted her voice be heard. Did her writing sometimes lack an awareness of bodily differences? Yes. Did her focus on spiritual discourse and spiritual power structures perhaps limit her impact in a practical social setting? Very likely. Still, that she spoke and was heard at all is remarkable. She was a pioneer in the field of women’s authorship. She risked persecution and even possible execution if she was branded a heretic in her efforts to perpetuate discourse outside of traditional societal settings and channels (Fullam 63). Her writing still bears great relevance. Questions regarding mediation, agency over one’s body, equitable access to the God (i.e., power), approaches to conflict within communities, and even the definition of what constitutes a “body” …all these issues continue to be debated today. While we cannot know if Julian might have lent her voice to any of these causes, we can still see how her writing speaks to ongoing conversations. Even in death, her words continue to participate in and generate unmediated discourse (and sometimes highly mediated discourse). This ongoing communication and
dialogue between diverse parties is something that would seemingly have pleased her pioneering spirit.
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