CLOSE READINGS

Encounters with Medieval Women: Anchoress

Irina Dumitrescu and Mary Wellesley

In the second episode in their series, Irina Dumitrescu and Mary Wellesley look at the work of mystic and anchoress Julian of Norwich, who wrote the first book in English that we can be sure was authored by a woman.

Living in Her Own Grave

Mary Wellesley

TRANSCRIPT

Irina: Hello. You're listening to the LRB podcast, and welcome to the second episode in a series of Close Readings podcasts, looking at the lives and voices of women in medieval literature. My name is Irina Dumitrescu, a contributor to the paper, and I'm joined for this series by Mary Wellesley, also a contributor to the LRB, whose book Hidden Hands, The Lives of Manuscripts and Their Makers discusses among other things the subject of today's episode. Hello, Mary. In today's episode, we're climbing inside a tiny cell to examine the first work in English that we can be certain was authored by a woman. The Revelations of Julian of Norwich, the 14th-century anchoress and mystic have now achieved canonical status, but she was once almost forgotten, dismissed as a purveyor of ‘senseless tittle-tattle’. Today Julian's reputation is solid as the author of a rhetorically sophisticated work of theology. She inspired both T.S Eliot and William Butler Yeats, has appeared in popular fiction and contemporary theatre and remains a font of spiritual solace for many. Mary, tell us what happened in May 1373.

Mary: Well, in May 1373 Julian of Norwich, who was a woman, was lying in bed, believing she was about to die. She was thirty and a half years old and she'd been ill for six nights. And on the fourth night she received the last rites because it seemed she was about to die, but she somehow, by her own account, lingered on for another three days. And on the seventh day she became dead to sensation from the waist down, and she describes how she wished to sit up to give her heart more freedom to be at God's disposition. And at that point a curate came and he brought a crucifix, which he held in front of her to offer her comfort at this terrifying moment. And at that point the entire room grew dim, and everything around this crucifix was this vision of hallucinogenic terror. There were fiends everywhere, and the crucifix itself appeared to glow as though it were illuminated. And the upper part of her body began to die, and her head lolled to one side. And then she experienced 15 revelations. All pain left her body, and she recovered and lived for over forty years after that point.

Irina: So how do we know all of this?

Mary: These events are described in two texts. That's the key thing to say about Julian, is that she leaves us two different versions of this important work, the Revelations of Divine Love – and incidentally, that's

a modern editorial title. It's slightly unclear how she would like us to title her work, if she intended us to give it a title at all. The Short Text, as it's known, is this condensed, quite frightening sometimes, searingly immediate account of those revelations and the events of that night and the days leading up to it. And she appears to have written it – although scholars debate this – but she appears to have written it quite soon after the events of May 1373. And it may have formed part of an application for enclosure, because Julian was an anchoress. We can come on to what that means in a moment. So at some point after 1373, it seems, she became enclosed as an anchoress. And in her enclosure over several decades she meditated on the meaning of these experiences and produced a much longer text, which we call the Long Text. It's about three times longer. And really the Long Text represents the transition from Julian as a mystic to a theologian. And it's really marked by its rhetorical sophistication, although it doesn't have the immediacy that the Short Text has.

Irina: I think so too. The Short Text has these really vivid images following one upon the other, whereas the Long Text is a little more repetitive, a little more pedagogic. You do have a sense of her working things out very slowly and carefully.

Mary: I think that's quite a diplomatic way of saying you perhaps don't like the Long Text as much, Irina?

Irina: It's fine, but it's not quite as lively as the Short Text. I think the Long Text takes a little more concentration, and you can get a sense of how much she had to concentrate to produce it. And it's very methodical too. She takes every idea and really breaks it down carefully bit by bit to explain it.

Mary: Yes, that's really striking. She'll describe a particular, often very highly visual scene, and then she'll take it apart as though she's unpicking every element. And then she expounds on the theological significance. For example, she has this vision of Christ wearing a blue robe, with brown skin. And she talks about the significance of the blue robe and the skin, and those colours, those single details become really important points for theological discussion.

Irina: Do you think in the end there's a sense in which she's more of a teacher in the second text?

Mary: Yes, for sure. Although that's a very interesting question, because in the Short Text she does discuss whether she has the authority to be a teacher, and it's something that's markedly absent from the Long Text. And there are a number of disparities between the two texts which are really telling, I think.

Irina: One of the things that makes Julian so interesting, and maybe in a sense unique, is that her work seems to be in her own voice. There isn't, as we have with other female authors or female voices in the

Middle Ages, a male scribe or a male author passing on and also shaping the story for the mystical woman. Can you tell us a little bit about how we have these texts? Are there scribal interventions? Were there men reworking her visions for the consumption of others, or do we think that this is pretty much her voice and her structure as she would have wanted it?

Mary: Well, that's an incredibly vexatious issue. I think the first point to deal with is the question of the intervention of a spiritual director or a male figure who's a kind of mediator in the text. So that is something that we do find particularly with continental visionary women writers, Adelheid Langman, Mechthild of Magdeburg. And that's markedly absent from Julian's text, which I think is perhaps a mark of her self-assurance. Also a notable thing about Julian is that although her work is suffused with biblical learning there is almost no direct biblical quotation. Which is very interesting because it's as though she feels she doesn't need the buttressing of biblical quotation, or perhaps that reflects the way in which she received her biblical learning. And we can talk about that a bit later. But to the point about the transmission of these texts and whether there have been scribal interventions, it is a really complicated textual situation. So with the Short Text, it survives in a single medieval manuscript put together by a Carthusian scribe probably some time in the middle of the 15th century. Julian died at some point after 1413, we don't know when, but she was in her seventies by then, so probably some time quite soon after that. That's the last time she appears in the documentary record. And the manuscript dates from a little bit after that, so it's not a holograph, i.e. the author's own copy. We don't know how many removes it is from Julian's original text. And then with the Long Text, it doesn't survive in any medieval copies. There is an extract from it in a manuscript that dates from about 1500. But other than that, all the copies – of which there are several – are all post-Reformation copies, and many of them, interestingly, appear to have been copied by exiled Benedictine nuns on the Continent. So it's a striking feature of Julian that this very important text by a female writer was largely preserved by the energies of female scribes in the post-Reformation period.

Irina: That's a nice beginning of the tradition and the legacy in the modern period, in a sense. What do we know about her? Or do we know anything about her?

Mary: Ah, one of the great questions! If I'm potentially trying to persuade you of the value of Julian if you're a tiny bit sceptical, Irina, I confess I'm very, very interested in her biography. It's very difficult to make out. There are precious few references in her text to anything about her, and those that we can glean generally come from the Short Text. And by the time of the Long Text she's removed any reference, for example, to her own gender, and all the personal details have been stripped out, so that it becomes a work of much deeper theological learning and much less about the personal visionary experience.

So we have these few references in the Short Text, and then we have a handful of documents. We have some wills that leave bequests to her. And then we have this wonderful account from the book of Margery Kempe, which we're going to be talking about in a later episode, where she describes going to

seek the spiritual counsel of Julian. So I think the most important thing to say about Julian was that she was an anchoress.

Irina: Can you give us a picture of what kind of life this meant for her?

Mary: Yes. So an anchoress – that's the female form, the male form is anchorite, it comes from the Greek anachorein which means to retreat or withdraw – was a person who permanently enclosed themselves inside a cell to live a life of prayer and contemplation. They would have lived inside a cell attached to a church, often on the north side of the church, where in England the north wind was most biting and it was the coldest and where there was the least direct sunlight. It was a life of extreme austerity. The cell would most likely have had three windows. One little window called the squint which looked onto the altar of the church, through which the anchoress or anchorite could receive the Eucharist, and they could also hear the sounds of the liturgy being celebrated within the church. And then there would be most likely two other windows, one that led onto a servant's parlour through which they could receive food and a servant could take away waste, and then another one that looked onto the churchyard or the street through which they could dispense spiritual counsel. And when we have this account of Margery Kempe going to visit Julian, that's what we most likely should be imagining. The liturgy of the enclosure ritual is a piece of macabre high drama. In places it's almost indistinguishable from a funeral service. At the point of enclosure the anchorite or anchoress would process with the congregation through the churchyard to the door of the cell. And then several liturgical directions describe an anchoress needing to climb inside a ready-dug grave within the cell. At which point they were sprinkled with holy water, and the door of the cell would then be bolted. And at that point they were then spiritually dead to the world. The Ancrene Wisse, which is a much earlier text from the 13th century, but one that describes the life of three particular anchoresses describes how the windows, apart from the squint that looked onto the church, should be covered with a thick black curtain, so this was a life of an incredible kind of sensory deprivation. And we have to therefore imagine that the squint that led onto the church was a kind of conduit of sensation through which they could hear and see and smell. And their whole world would have really revolved around the sensations emanating from the church.

Irina: But there's a little bit of a paradox there, because I'm thinking of Mary of Egypt, for example, who lived the ascetic eremitic life out in the desert. To be out in the desert was really to be alone. But the anchorhold was an urban enclosure. You were alone and dead to the world, right in the middle of all of the action, which is a little bit proven by Margery visiting her and being able to have a conversation with her. And the fact that Julian is well-known enough to have a reputation in her time as an authority, as someone who can give advice on whether visions are true or not, given by God or given by the devil.

So how do we think of Julian in Norwich?

Mary: Yes, absolutely. I think you've hit on a key feature of the anchoritic life, which is that being attached to a church meant you were at the centre of community life. And so it was a form of seclusion, but as you say, a paradoxical one. Certainly in London there were anchorholds at almost all of the gates to the old city, and in Winchester there were anchorholds on the routes of important liturgical processions. So when we have a look at the geography of Norwich and we see Julian's cell, she was really in the middle of a bustling, very prosperous town. East Anglia in this period was very rich as a result of the wool trade. And she was really only a few – as we would say – blocks from the river Wensum, where there would have been busy industrial quays, goods being offloaded and placed onto boats. And so, as you say, it was not this life of splendid isolation. She was living in a busy place. And this was also a place of intense religiosity. At the time the four mendicant orders were present in Norwich, there was an Austin Friary opposite the lane from her cell, so this was a place of urban bustle and the bustle of religiosity.

Irina: It seems to me that the modern parallel might be the ivory tower of a university, which is right in the centre of a busy city, apart from the city but also necessarily part of it and connected to it in some way.

Mary: I think your students might object to the characterisation of yourself climbing inside your own grave!

Irina: Well, that brings me to my next question, which is what kind of life might she have led before the anchorhold? She seems not to have been an anchorite when she has her first vision, she talks about her mother being by her side, for example. Can we make some guesses about the kind of life that she might have led before she devoted herself in this way to a primarily spiritual existence?

Mary: Yes. This is a very difficult question. The debate has raged about whether...there was a longstanding view that perhaps she was a nun, maybe at the Benedictine Foundation of Carrow, which held what's called the 'advowson', the right to appoint the rector of St. Julian's Conisford, which was the church to which she was attached. But there just isn't any hard documentary evidence for that, so it's really conjectural. The description of the Short Text, as you say, describes her mother being at her bedside. She doesn't explicitly say that it's her spiritual mother and my feeling is that it's her biological mother, not her spiritual mother. And in the Short Text there's a description of a boy coming with the curate, so all of those details suggest that she wasn't enclosed, and she also probably wasn't part of a monastic order at that point. I think a very compelling suggestion is that the Short Text was composed as part of an application for enclosure, because if you wanted to become an anchoress you had to apply to your local bishop to prove that you were of sound morals and suitable to the contemplative life. And also that you had the financial means to become enclosed, because of course you were entirely dependent on servants who would bring you food and keep you alive. And some scholars have suggested that there is a kind of what we might call a 'poetics of courtesy' in the text, and the way that Julian characterises Christ, some scholars have suggested that maybe she was from the aristocracy or

the gentry because of the way she imagines him. Although the Ancrene Wisse, this instructional text which I mentioned earlier, which was written in the 13th century, but it was written for three sisters who – the text is very clear – were all of noble birth, so it was not uncommon for women who chose this life to come from the aristocracy or the gentry. And to some degree, that makes a little bit more sense of it because those were the social classes most inclined to be forced to marry somebody they wouldn't want to marry and to be expected to produce children, which was of course an inherently dangerous thing to do. But these are all conjectures, really. We have precious little evidence about Julian. Irina: Would her elite background be a reason for her to even have the self-confidence or self-assurance to become an author in her time?

Mary: That's an interesting question. When we look at other visionary texts written by women in this period, there is a real anxiety about women's mystical experiences. For example the Speculum Inclusorum, which is a 15th-century text cautions that an anchoress may think she's experiencing a vision, but she's in fact encountering Satan. And if we think about figures like Margery Kempe, who we'll be looking at in a later episode, who was subjected to all kinds of ecclesiastical trials, or a century earlier Marguerite Porete, who was burned at the stake for refusing to denounce her book The Mirror of Simple Souls, these are examples of women who really suffered for producing the texts that they did. I suppose the question is what was Julian's level of learning before she entered the anchorhold? Was she educated before? And of course if she was from the aristocracy she had a better chance of having been educated. We just don't know.

Irina: How does she get around the injunction that women should not be teachers? Because after all she is in a sense teaching, even in her Short Text.

Mary: Well, she's very anxious in both texts to make it clear that she is espousing orthodox ideas. So there's a moment when she says, I believe in all things that Holy Church believes, preaches and teaches. But in the Short Text there's a really striking passage which doesn't appear in the Long Text, where she defends her right to write as a woman. She says – this is from Barry Windeatt's translation:

But God forbid that you should say or take it that I am a teacher, for I do not mean that, nor did I ever mean that, for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail. But I know very well that what I am saying I have received through revelation from Him who is the Supreme teacher, but in truth, love moves me to tell you about it, for I want God to be known and my fellow Christians to be helped, as I would wish to be myself to the greater hating of sin and loving of God.

Irina: What strikes me about this passage is that she's very humble. And yet when we read medieval literature, we have to be a little bit suspicious of these very humble statements, these abnegations of authority, because first of all, as a woman, she's not supposed to have the authority at all. And then it's also just a little bit of a rhetorical trope. Or do you think she means it?

Mary: I think that the fact that this passage doesn't appear in the Long Text indicates that the Short Text was written as part of her application for enclosure and that she was very aware that the text could be seen as potentially heretical, and that it is something of a device in the Short Text. But it's notably absent from the Long Text. I think what's really striking about the Long Text is the level of self-assurance that it shows. But you're right, clearly this is something of a humility topos. So there's a moment when she says that she was a 'simple creature that could no letter', which means that she knew no letter. But what this actually means is unclear, because there's a moment later on in the text when she says, I have teaching with me as it were the beginning of an ABC. So she's saying it's as easy as the ABC, which implies that she at least knew the alphabet, and almost certainly she was literate. So what she means by saying that she knew no letter is unclear. Did she simply mean she wasn't Latinate, or is it just a pose? It's very difficult to say, but I think in general the Long Text in particular is a very self-assured piece of rhetorical writing that sits on solid theological foundations, despite how unusual the theology o f the text is.

Irina: This strikes me, because with all of the changes that have transpired since Julian was alive, there are still issues around women being authors, although we have many, many women writers now and women intellectuals, and yet women's authorship is always perceived a little bit differently from male authorship. And you see the strategy she has of claiming to be a little less than she is is a bit timeless in a sense. We see that with Mary of Egypt, I think, we'll see with Margery Kempe and with the Wife of Bath, there is a sense that a successful defensive strategy is to say I'm not necessarily putting forward my own message, I'm simply passing on a message from God. And that is what allows me to do it. The teaching I have is directly from God and I do this out of love for my fellow men in order to help them, but it's not from me, from my expression or from my voice or from my message.

Mary: I agree. I think that is a timeless quality to the text. And I suppose I'm wondering, when you re-read the text – because I think it was the first time you'd re-read it since graduate school – what else did you feel had a timeless quality about it?

Irina: What struck me about it is how much fear and anxiety is present in her visions, and the extent to which she's concerned with painting a picture of a God who will take that away, who will allow human suffering. And this is of course the eternal question, what do we do with human suffering? How can we have a utterly loving God who gives everyone grace and who is just, and still have sin and suffering and pain and trouble in our lives? And one of her answers is to say, well, God allows the suffering, but he's always going to keep you safely, surely. He'll always keep you safe. And that struck me that it's a very maternal image, especially in the Long Text, that she has of God. There's a sense of being protected, of being enfolded, of being loved in a way that's much more important than the doctrine of sin. It's not so important to her to tell people to stop sinning and reform their lives. Her goal seems to want ultimately to make people less afraid of what will come after, and perhaps a little less worried about the troubles of their own lives.

Mary: Yes, absolutely. I think for Julian sin is part of God's plan. And there's something really striking about the way she, unlike some writers of the period who seem incredibly anxious about the inherently fallen nature of the human body, Julian is insistent on the fact that God took human form in the person of Christ, that by taking this base human body, that indicates that the base human body is not as base as we might imagine it to be, as other contemporary writers might formulate it.

Irina: There's such a generous attitude towards imperfection in her texts, and that's where Julian resonates most with me. And there's this wonderful little passage where she talks about the human body and how it eats, and it has a little pocket for waste, and so even in defecation human beings show the brilliance and wisdom of God's plan. How clever of God to make a body that will eat and also defecate! And I think that's just glorious. And if I think about her, especially later in an anchorhold, really having to deal with those realities in a very immediate way, there's a strange kind of peace to that, accepting the whole package.

Mary: Yes, I think we should say that a key feature of Julian's theology is how almost radically hopeful it is. Her most famous line ‘all shall be well and all shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well’ encapsulates the generosity of her theology. And as you say, the text’s repeated insistence on love. And there's a lovely moment when she talks about how God's love wraps around us and encloses us and embraces us. She uses the middle English verb 'halsen' which literally means ‘wrapping’, and it's a very comforting image. It's like we're nesting in the love of God.

Irina: But what strikes me is that she is a little bit at odds with the church there. And she has this clever way of dealing with it where she will sometimes say, I did not see this, I was not given a vision of this. So she talks about not being given a vision of purgatory or of hell. She believes in them because Holy Church teaches those things, but God does not give her a vision of them. And I wonder, do you think that's as radical as it seems to me? Because to my reading that's a way of really pushing against those doctrines. She's trying to say, look, God is not that concerned with sin. And she says over and over again, God does not blame us for sin, even though sin is bad. We're not really blamed for it. That goes a little bit against the doctrine of purgatory and hell, it's a bit of a problem. And she says, well, I certainly believe it's true, but I didn't get a vision of it, and I wondered how these two things could co-exist. And then God assured me that he's all-powerful and could solve the problem. It's a logical problem which I don't have to solve because God can solve it.

Mary: Yes. I think that because we have these two texts with Julian we can see her process of revision, and we can also see that she is a writer who understands calculated omission. And this really is a very calculated omission, the fact that she doesn't mention purgatory, and she has these very specific visions of the Passion. I think the point about purgatory is really, really interesting because there are precious few texts that we can securely attribute to anchorites or anchoresses from this period. There is one that

dates to 1422 which some scholars think was the work of an anchoress, and it's called A Revelation of Purgatory. And it really reads like a low budget horror film. It describes this particular sinner called Margaret who was a nun, and she is subjected to these horrendous tortures. She has her lips cut off. She has snakes set on her. She's pierced with hooks. I think she's boiled in a barrel at some point. And her pet cat and dog also join with her and it says that they eat out her entrails, but it says that they join with her in her pain. So it seems as though the pet cat and dog find it very difficult, they're being forced to inflict these tortures on their beloved owner. It could not be more different from Julian's text of gentle enveloping love.

Irina: Well, it's maybe worth saying that there was a tradition in Western European literature of visions of purgatory, where people are subjected to these horrific tortures. And the takeaway often is, if purgatory is this bad, imagine how terrible hell will be! We can't even describe that part for you. And these are popular texts. They often travel together in manuscripts with romances and saints' lives. So I think many people would have a mental image of what purgatory might look like. That's not actually difficult to picture. When she says I was not given a vision of it there's something quite forceful about that, to say I did not see purgatory, I did not see hell. I was given the vision of the love part. But that doesn't mean she doesn't see pain. She focuses very much on Christ's suffering during the Passion. And it's an incredibly visual set of descriptions. I wonder if we could talk a little bit about her visions of Christ's suffering, of the blood on his face, and maybe where we think she might have got these pictures from.

Mary: Well, they are very visual descriptions. And certainly I think it's probably appropriate to imagine that Julian had spent a lot of time visually meditating on devotional images. It's also an important thing to say that the art historian Michael Camille said that medieval people encountered images much less than we do today. He said that most likely we encounter in one day as many images as a medieval person might encounter in their lifetime. And so if you think about the scarcity of images, a particular image could become incredibly powerful to the medieval viewer, especially if you were meditating on it for the purpose of devotion. And I think that's perhaps what we should discern beneath Julian's descriptions. But although they're very visual, she's very interested in the quality of Christ's blood, in wetness and dryness. She talks about this dry, hard wind buffeting Christ, his pale flesh. So we have a sense of the texture and feeling of these moments, as well as these very strong visual images. I talked earlier about her focus on particular colours.

Irina: So all of the senses are engaged in perceiving Christ and perceiving Christ's sacrifice.

Mary: Yes, absolutely. For example, also there's a moment later on in the text when she's visited by the devil and she talks about the foul stench that the devil emits, and she also talks about the heat of the devil. So it is a rich multisensory experience, although it does really major on the visual dimension. I think another thing to say is the way that she describes these particular images is she uses a very accessible register. And I think this is an important point about her style as a writer. There's an amazing

moment when she's talking about the devil's face, and she says that the colour was red like newly-fired clay tiles, with black spots like black freckles. And it's such a brilliant description because a reader from whatever century can suddenly understand exactly what she means. What kind of redness was she talking about? Oh, well, that's clear. It's a kind of terracotta colour. Indeed when she talks about the blood running from the crucifix, which she sees in one of her visions, she talks about the drops of water that fall being like drops of water falling from the eaves of a house after a great fall of rain. And she says that the roundness of those drops was like herring scales. And again, these are wonderful, highly visual images, but also ones that we can really understand exactly what she means. The shimmering quality of those droplets and their roundness is very clear to us. And perhaps it harks back to Julian's location in this cell in the middle of a bustling medieval city. She was not far from the river where perhaps those very herrings may have been offloaded on the quays of the river. I sometimes imagine – if it isn't too romantic to be imagining this – but she lived this life of extraordinary sensory deprivation in her cell. And so when she came back to think over these images – she says in the text she spent over twenty years meditating on the meaning of her visions and revising her thoughts about them and receiving a deeper theological truth about them – we sense that in this environment of sensory deprivation those particular experiences took on a new immediacy, a new sensory force that perhaps might not even have been there in the initial instance.

Irina: What I love about the detail with the herring scales is that herring is an inexpensive fish, it's not something particularly fancy, and there's something so ordinary and homely about using that as a way to think about Christ's salvific blood on his forehead.

Mary: I agree. And that word ‘homely’ is a really important one. In fact, that's a word she uses repeatedly in the text to express that very domestic, very intimate, very familiar... she talks about God's homely love. There's another very striking passage where she has a particular vision of the universe and she sees the universe as being like a hazelnut in the palm of her hand. I'll just read the section. This is from the Barry Windeatt translation.

And in this vision, he showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut lying in the palm of my hand. And it was round as a ball, as it seemed to me. I looked at it and thought, what can this be? And the answer came to me in a general way, like this. It is all that is made. I wondered how it could last, for it seemed to me so small that it might have disintegrated suddenly into nothingness. And I was answered in my understanding. It lasts, and always will, because God loves it. And in the same way, everything has its being through the love of God.

What I really love about that is she captures simultaneously the sense of God's incredible omnipotence that the universe itself could be like a little tiny hazelnut that could be held in the palm of the hand. But it's also, again, an image that we instantly can understand. The hazelnut, as you say, was the native nut of England, it was the native nut of Northern Europe. In fact, the etymology of the word ‘walnut’, wal, is a modification of a Germanic word that just means ‘foreign’ because the walnut was this exotic

Southern European nut, but the hazelnut was the nut of Northern European tribes. And so the hazelnut is like the herring, it's an ordinary nut. There's something so wonderful about this sense of the universe being condensed into this tiny thing that could disintegrate into nothingness, but that it's held and protected by God in the palm of his hand.

Irina: And there's a simultaneous sense of humility and power about that, because on the one hand she is part of that world, she's as tiny as everything else. She is together with all of humanity in this minuscule, perishable place. But she's also given the vision to be able to see it in the palm of her hand. I'm thinking of this other passage where she sees underneath the seas. She's almost travelling like Jacques Cousteau underneath the seas! So there's a sense in which God can really take her out of her body as well, and out of her place, in a way that almost reads as science fiction today. Although I think that wouldn't be the case then. But she shares in the general humility of human beings. It's all actually to teach her to be humble. It's not to teach her to be prideful. I'm thinking also about the way that God is so loving throughout. And she emphasises this especially in the Long Text with a really marvellous passage over two sections in which she describes Jesus as being like a mother. And I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about the role that mothers have in this text. We mentioned that her mother is at her side when she's ill, she decides to include that information. But then what does she gain out of describing Jesus as a mother?

Mary: Yes, let's just read a section from the Long Text. It's important to say that this section doesn't appear in the Short Text and it's one of the most unusual parts of Julian's theology. I should add that it's not without precedent. There are some similar images in some writing before Julian, but she really goes to town on this image of Christ as a mother. She says:

The mother can give her child her milk to suck, but our precious mother, Jesus, he can feed us with himself and does most courteously and most tenderly with the blessed sacrament that is the precious food of true life.

It's an extraordinary image, so loving, and also it's very nourishing, the idea of the salvific milk of the Virgin in medieval medical thought. As I understand it, it was thought that blood and breast milk were composed of the same substance. And certainly some medieval theologians talk about the salvific quality of the Virgin’s breastmilk. But here this is a very different idea, Christ as the mother himself, rather than focusing on the Virgin here.

Irina: Well, Mary, I think you've convinced me. There's a sense in which both the Short Text and the Long Text are so concerned with giving comfort, and in Julian's time – and now we have to deal with all kinds of crises – she would have lived after the beginning of the bubonic plague, but certainly would have seen other outbreaks of plague in her time.

There's a sense that she's just so much more interested in the gift of grace and forgiveness and safety that God can give people than she is in the punishing God.

Mary: Yes, there's this wonderful moment when she says 'and our saviour is our very mother in whom we are endlessly borne and never shall come out of him.' It's an extraordinary identification of the womb as a safe space.

Irina: Like an anchorhold.

Mary: Well, indeed!

Irina: What is it that you love about Julian? What brings you back to her?

Mary: Well, I think clearly Julian is very important for being the author of the first text in English that we know definitively was authored by a woman. But I think sometimes talking about these sorts of firsts is maybe a little bit unhelpful, because we tend to valorise particular texts simply because of their status as the first whatever. But I think Julian's quality as a writer transcends that. She is a brilliant rhetorician at the formal level, the texts are so beautifully structured. Particularly the way that she uses triplets often when she's writing about the Trinity, so that this Trinitarian significance is woven into the fabric of the text. She uses various different rhetorical devices. There's one called complexio, in which words are repeated at the beginning and end of a phrase, and repeated several times to convey a point. And she uses that several times.

Irina: It's also an enclosing kind of rhetorical technique. It's also an embrace.

Mary: Exactly. An embracing kind of rhetorical device. And as we've said, she has this wonderful accessibility to her register and a fluidity to her prose which makes it easy to read, even if perhaps some modern readers might find the content a little dull in places!

Irina: Where do you think she learned this? Because we talked about earlier about her humility, and how she refers to herself as 'unlettered' at one point, but at others mentions the ABCs in a quite confident way. What might we be able to say about her learning?

Mary: Well, it's very difficult to say that. Most likely she had a spiritual director, although, as we've talked about, there is no explicit reference to that person in the text giving her some kind of instruction to write as we find in other continental visionary female writers. But most likely she did have a spiritual director. There was a recluse in Norwich called Emma Stapleton about a generation after her who had a team of five friars appointed to oversee her spiritual development. So we can be pretty sure that Julian had somebody who helped her and that person may have brought her texts to read. He may have read them to her. She talks in the text about how she heard a man tell of the story of St. Cecilia. So she clearly listened to a lot of sermons as well as she would have been able to through the squint, but perhaps before the point of her enclosure. So her learning likely came from multiple different sources. But I think what's really wonderful is how much she acknowledges the difficulties of being a writer. And that's maybe one of the reasons why she appeals to me. There are moments in the text where she says how difficult it is to express this kind of complex, mystical experience in words. And she acknowledges the failings of words. And there's also a very moving moment right at the very end where she says that the book is unfinished. She says, 'this book is begun by God's gift and His grace, but it is not yet performed as to my sight', i.e. it is not yet finished. So we have this sense of her really spending many decades of her life meditating on the meanings of her visions. Barry Windeatt has talked about how it was as though she read them as though they were a treasured book. And I love that. I think most writers would say that they feel that their work is unfinished, that so often they come back to something and realise they could have framed it differently or said it differently. So she's a kind of unofficial patron saint of writers to me.

Irina: And I think we could say that the work of reading Julian of Norwich and the pleasure of reading Julian of Norwich is also unfinished. Thank you so much, Mary. Join us next time, when we will be discussing the Wife of Bath, Chaucer's memorable businesswoman, lovemaven and stealth preacher.

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ISSN 0260-9592

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