Bridging Centuries: The Medieval Mysticism of Julian of Norwich in Contemporary Narrative

Emma Wood

In May 1373, a thirty-year-old woman in East Anglia fell gravely ill. Lying on what was believed to be her deathbed, amidst a period of plague and political tumult, she seemed destined to join the many lives lost during the High Middle Ages. While meditating on a crucifix held before her, however, she experienced a series of sixteen divine visions and—miraculously—recovered.

Despite being the first recorded woman to write in English, Julian of Norwich, who lived between 1342/1343 and 1416, did not leave behind a well-documented life.[1] As an anchoress, Julian chose to live over thirty years in one walled-off cell attached to St. Julian's church. Her legacy relies on the survival of her written accounts of her religious visions, *Revelations of Divine Love*, which exist in two versions: the Short Text and the Long Text, with the former believed to be documented more immediately after her visions and the latter believed to be compiled after years of rumination in her anchoritic dwelling.[2] This absence of a documented life is accompanied by the continued presence of *Revelations* over the last 600 years to inspire questions for contemporary examination.[3] Julian of Norwich's embodied humility positioned her with spiritual authority, and contemporary reimaginings of her life—while inspired by her writings—may extend this authority to resemble contemporary notions of agency. In doing so,

[1] She died sometime after 1416, living to at least 74, though it is unknown specifically when or how she passes.
[2] Janina Ramirez, *Julian of Norwich: A Very Brief History* (SPCK Publishing, 2016), 4.
[3] *Revelations of Divine Love* can also be called *Showings*, as is the case for the translation used in this paper.

contemporary imaginings, like Claire Gilbert's 2023 historical fiction novel *I, Julian*, reconfigure Julian's humility, embodiment, and enclosure as conscious acts of empowerment.

This paper will first explore how Julian of Norwich's rhetorical strategies of humility in *Revelations* reflect the gendered religious expression and embodiment of the High Middle Ages. This foundation will establish canonical self-representations of Julian with which to compare a contemporary historical fiction reimagining of Julian's life as found in *I, Julian* (2023). Ultimately, I argue that *I, Julian* parallels historical interpretations of Julian's depictions of humility and embodiment, but concurrently reinterprets these elements so as to align with contemporary conceptions of agentive, feminist authorship.

Julian cemented her legacy through the documentation of her visions. Overarching themes within *Revelations* include pain and suffering, Jesus as mother, love, faith, and hope. Popularly cited passages from *Revelations* often invoke these themes. One such passage describes her vision of God presenting all of creation as the size of a hazelnut. Instead of being distressed, Julian reflects, "It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God."[4] Inspired by her visions, Julian looked beyond the contexts from which she wrote—political turmoil, public executions, plague, rifts in church authority—professing an interpretation of devotion focused solely on God's love for humanity and humanity's love for God and for one another:

> For God is in man, and so in man is all. And he who thus generally loves all his fellow Christians loves all, and he who loves thus is safe. And thus will I love, and thus do I love, and thus I am safe […] and the more that I love in this way whilst I am here, the more I am like the joy that I shall have in heaven without end.[5]

[4] Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge, James Walsh (Paulist Press, 1978), 183.
[5] *Showings*, 134.

As such, many of Julian's words were used—and continue to be used—as testaments to the hope that, as she most famously wrote, "All shall be well."[6]

Julian's work maintains resonance 600 years later. *I, Julian* charts an imagined first-person account of Julian's life before, during, and after her revelations. Writers and scholars continue to be inspired by Julian's story—or perhaps the mystery surrounding it—to the point of imagining her perspective on the circumstances of her life in the High Middle Ages.

While little is known about Julian, impactful historical events surrounding her life can help piece together the context from which she wrote. The High Middle Ages (1000–1300 CE) preceding Julian's life were accompanied by immense cultural shifts across England, including new and contradictory ideas about church authority. Church authority began to expand and solidify due to Gregorian Reform efforts to reinforce the papacy's supremacy and minimize secular influence over church matters, notably by emphasizing the supreme power of the Eucharist and placing it under clerical control. Shortly following the Gregorian Reform, however, the *vita apostolica* religious revival began to argue for a return to simplicity in Christian practice and for a mode of worship that turned away from the hierarchies, wealth, and power of the church.[7]

Carolyn Walker Bynum links the *vita apostolica* revival to an expansion of sanctioned religious life, arguing that it "created so many new nonmonastic or quasi-monastic models for a specialized religious life that male monasticism never recovered from the challenge."[8] Ernest W. McDonnell similarly highlights the movement's emphasis on direct experience, inner reflection,

[6] *Showings*, 149.
[7] Ernest W. McDonnell, "The Vita Apostolica: Diversity or Dissent," *Church History* 24, no. 1 (1955): 15–31.
[8] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (University of California Press, 1982), 10.

and outward signs of repentance.[9] These developments carved out space for personal expressions of devotion and religious testimony. Bynum also identifies a growing tension in the 12th century "between withdrawal from and service of the world," a tension that would resonate in Julian's later life as she combined spiritual introspection with physical seclusion.[10]

Julian was born in the early 1340s, slightly before the peak of the Black Death and amidst the leadership controversies of the Avignon Papacy (1309–1377 CE), in which conflicts between the French monarchy and the papacy led to disputes over papal authority between Avignon and Rome.[11] The Black Death claimed millions of lives and disproportionately impacted religious authorities, particularly those who visited the sick and delivered the last rites.[12] Consequently, those who "replaced" these priests may or may not have been up to the initial standards in terms of piety and reliability.[13] As church authority expanded, its prestige began to erode. The Avignon Papacy and eventual Great Western Schism further fractured the institution.[14]

Amid these crises, there was a rise in vernacular translations and the beginnings of access to religious materials. In England, John Wycliffe (unknown—1384 CE), for example, merged the *vita apostolica* ideal with individualism, publishing the first English Bible translation in 1381.[15] Wycliffe's Bible translation provided direct access to scripture without church mediation, challenging traditional structures and inspiring the formation of his controversial followers, the Lollards (initially called Wycliffites). Julian may have similarly known about the risks of writing

[9] McDonnell, "The Vita Apostolica," 17.
[10] Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 13.
[11] Ramirez, *Julian of Norwich*, 24.
[12] Danièle Cybulskie, "Priests and the Black Death," *Medievalists.net*, February 2, 2015, www.medievalists.net/2015/02/priests-black-death/.
[13] Cybulskie, "Priests and the Black Death."
[14] Heather Para, "The Plague, the Papacy, and Power: The Effect of the Black Plague on the Avignon Papacy," *Medievalists.net*, 20 June 2016, www.medievalists.net/2016/06/plague-papacy-and-power-the-effect-of-the-black-plague-on-the-avignon-papacy/.
[15] McDonnell, "The Vita Apostolica," 17.

in English, particularly regarding writing about direct access to the divine without clerical authority. A. C. Spearing comments on Julian's choice to write in English as it relates to gender and humility,

> She seems to have thoroughly internalized her culture's downgrading of her sex, but from it, consciously or unconsciously, she fashions a textual self that serves her purpose admirably. She avoids the outward trappings of learning—the use of Latin, of technical terminology, of citations of authority—in order to share her own meekness with her readers and with a God whose power is exercised through womanly meekness and motherly forgiveness.[16]

Humility—or *humilitas*—is a central rhetorical theme in the gendered dimensions of *Revelations*. For example, Julian references herself as an unlearned, simple creature. This is unlikely to be true, as Julian was literate in writing English and her rhetoric mirrors other theological texts of her day, implying that she was well read.[17] Edmund Collage and James Walsh, editors of the Paulist Press edition of Julian's *Showings*, write,

> Though in several places she protests that she is ignorant […] this is nothing but a well-known, often-employed rhetorical device. In adapting the rhetoricians' figures and modes of thought to the needs of English prose, Julian was herself a pioneer. In other matters, however, she shows herself the inheritor of centuries-old traditions.[18]

The reason why Julian would have been literate is unknown, as very little is known about educational structures for girls at the time.[19] The two most likely reasons a woman would be learned at this time were if she were a householder or a part of a religious order. Julian writes that when she received her visions, she was in a bedroom with her mother and a priest.[20] Some interpret Julian's mastery of writing as evidence of her having entered a religious order. Others interpret her presence in a bedroom with her mother to indicate she was a householder. As a

---

[16] A. C. Spearing, ed., *Revelations of Divine Love* (Penguin Classics, 1999), vii-xxxiii.
[17] Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, Introduction to *Showings*, 17-119. Trans. and ed. by Edmund Colledge, James Walsh (Paulist Press, 1978), 20.
[18] *Showings*, 20.
[19] *Showings*, 20.
[20] *Showings*, 179.

householder, too, it is possible that Julian could have been married prior to her visions, though it is impossible to know. In *Revelations*, Julian employs *humilitas* as she questions herself as the chosen recipient of her visions. By addressing self-doubt, *Revelations* ostensibly discouraged male critics from additionally questioning Julian's sanctity. For example, she writes, "But God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not and never was my intention; for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail."[21] This choice in rhetoric may simply reflect a medieval woman socialized to express her gender in a specific way. It could also reflect Julian's attempt to focus the attention solely on what God communicated to her, and less on herself.

Possibly, Julian was aware of her social station and the religious authority that would accompany receiving and recording her divine visions. It may follow that Julian incorporated her awareness of how her text could have threatened religious authority into her self-doubt. Julian's humility could thus be interpreted as an act in defense of her visions. Liz Herbert McAvoy suggests that Julian's awareness may have even extended into an understanding of "performing" humility as a means of gaining agency—as defined by the confines of medieval society—through her work. McAvoy writes on Julian and one of her contemporaries, fellow mystic Margery Kempe,

> It is clear that both Julian and Margery are aware that, whether associated with the traditional space of the domestic or living within the regimented space of the religious, it is an imperative to at least retain an *appearance* of adhering to its imposed physical and intellectual boundaries and conform to its rules.[22]

[21] *Showings*, 135.
[22] Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe,* Studies in Medieval Mysticism, vol. 5, (D.S. Brewer, 2004), 8.

Notably, revisions of the Short Text remove some explicit references to Julian's gender and to other women, which may further indicate this conscious self-protection.[23] Julian's awareness of her vulnerable social station, as possibly indicated by *Revelations*' humility, is important, as it insulates how the act of writing itself was largely considered transgressive for women at this time. As McAvoy explains,

> The very act of writing, be it performed within the confines of the private chamber, anchorhold, or monastery, constituted a type of public speech-act direct as a real or imagined audience which necessarily moved the writer from the realm of the private to the public.[24]

Living in liminality, outside of the prescribed roles of wife or nun, Julian created a space to safely make this move from the private to the public while retaining the appearance of traditional adherence that McAvoy describes. She remained connected to the church while being separated from the world—and, by extension, from public or political scrutiny. By balancing theological assertions with *humilitas*—both an expression of piety and a potential form of protection—Julian carved out a compelling, if constrained, position as a medieval female mystic. Existing precariously between the private (as an anchoress) and the public (as a writer), Julian incorporated another traditional, and potentially subversive, expression of female piety in her writings: embodiment.

The Middle Ages brought significant shifts in European religious practice, as embodied devotion—especially women's inward access to the divine—posed a challenge to male church authority. Women's mystical experiences were frequently validated through bodily suffering, as visions and intense physical experiences offered a form of spiritual authority that bypassed traditional academic or clerical routes. Visionary women were thus cast as both models of piety

[23] Rebecca June, *Reassessing Gender in the Course of Julian's Short Text* (ScholarWorks at WMU 2013), https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1925&context=mff.
[24] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body,* 6.

and threats to ecclesial power. Julian even prayed for physical sickness to better understand the sufferings of Christ. In the opening passage of *Revelations*, she records this:

> [B]efore [1373] the creature had desired three graces by the gift of God. The first was recollection of the Passion. The second was bodily sickness. The third was to have, of God's gift, three wounds […] I wished that sickness to be so severe that it might seem mortal, so that I might in it receive all the rites which Holy Church has to give me, whilst I myself should think I was dying, and everyone who saw me would think the same; for I wanted no comfort from any human, earthly life in that sickness; because I hoped that this would be to my reward when I should die, because I desired soon to be with my God and my Creator.[25]

At thirty and a half, she experienced a life-threatening illness and subsequently received her series of sixteen visions. Like Christ, she had experienced immense bodily suffering in her early thirties and thus fulfilled her desires to have "more knowledge of our saviour's bodily pains."[26] While on her presumed death bed, she meditated on a crucifix and wished

> that [Christ's] pains might be my pains, with compassion which would lead to longing for God. I desired to suffer with him, living in my mortal body, as God would give me grace…And at this, suddenly I saw the red blood running down from under the crown…At the same time as I saw this sight of the head bleeding, our good Lord showed a spiritual sight of his familiar love.[27]

Julian thus was granted her wish of greater understanding of Christ's pain, as she simultaneously watched the crucifixion and saw blood flowing from the crucifix being held before her. Additionally, she is given a spiritual sight of love while she suffers and witnesses Christ's suffering.

McAvoy comments on the significance of Julian's expressions of embodiment through suffering: "Illness is represented as a self-initiated and transformative experience which sets in motion the process which ultimately leads to writing."[28] In this case, not only is Julian's

[25] *Showings*, 177-178.
[26] *Showings*, 178.
[27] *Showings*, 181-183.
[28] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body,* 10.

suffering indicative of her exceptional piety, but it is also the catalyst of her visions and her subsequent recording of her revelations in vernacular English. Concurrently, her receipt of her visions demonstrates Julian's authority in crafting her own narrative. Her embodiment and visions asserted her spiritual authority, while her humility and position as an anchoress protected her from persecution. With this background established, I will next analyze passages from *I, Julian* to investigate how Julian's unique position operates in Claire Gilbert's imagining of Julian's inner narration. In doing so, I aim to highlight Gilbert's incorporation of contemporary conceptions of agency vis-à-vis empowerment as embellishments ascribed to Julian's plausible life events.

I, Julian

I, Julian is a narrativization of Julian's life that incorporates both historically plausible and dramatically fictional elements in imagining Julian's story. *I, Julian* paints a picture of the inner workings of Julian's life, as imagined by Gilbert. The text is written in first-person, from Julian's perspective, and it is contextualized as a telling of her life to one of her male interlocuters.

Historical fiction, particularly feminist historical fiction, often seeks to recover or reimagine women's voices lost to the official record. Scholars like Vanessa R. Sasson argue that these retellings can serve as both an homage and an intervention, questioning the historical silences left around women's lives.[29] Gilbert's *I, Julian* participates in this tradition, constructing a plausible, emotionally resonant interior life for Julian.

[29] Vanessa R. Sasson, *Yasodhara: A Novel About the Buddha's Wife* (Penguin Random House, 2018).

The fictional Julian recounts her childhood, weaving in themes of her desire for freedom and for solitude, and details her many familial losses from the plague. The text follows Julian falling in love, marrying, and having a child, before her husband and daughter are lost to the third wave of the pestilence, which disproportionately impacted young men and children.[30] *I, Julian* also features an intimate perspective on Julian's revelations and synthesizes elements of historical plausibility for her entrance into the anchorhold. *I, Julian* surveys possible events of Julian's life within her cell, like engaging with skeptical members of the public and clergy, being sought out for religious counsel, and hearing news of the rising tensions for followers of Wycliffe. One historically accurate event featured in *I, Julian* is Julian's interaction with Margery Kempe, who recorded meeting Julian in her own medieval autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

Claire Gilbert is an author, lecturer, and scholar with a personal and scholarly focus on Julian of Norwich. Gilbert has continued to work on Julian after earning her PhD from King's College, London in Theology and Philosophy. When Gilbert was diagnosed with blood cancer, she penned *Miles to Go Before I Sleep: Letters on Hope, Death and Learning*, a 2021 compilation of her letters sent to loved ones amidst her treatment. In a 2022 lecture of a similar title, "Miles to Go Before I Sleep: My Journey with Julian of Norwich," Gilbert expresses her connection to Julian's theology as a source of hope throughout her experience with cancer.[31] Her desire to create a fictional biography for Julian arose after her cancer treatment:

> Julian was my spiritual companion through those grueling two and a half years. I conceived the desire, as I was emerging from the treatment, to write Julian's story as an homage to her, with the same deep honesty if I could (although it would be spiritual and

[30] Ramirez, *Julian of Norwich*, 24.
[31] "Dr. Claire Gilbert — 'Miles to Go Before I Sleep: My Journey with Julian of Norwich,'" YouTube, December 15, 2022, 1 hour, 21 min., 50 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iD4OSZ6OAk.

> psychological honesty rather than factual; since we know so little about her, I had to make the account a fictional one).[32]

In a 2023 interview, Gilbert was asked about how she made choices about potential anachronisms in writing *I, Julian*. Gilbert replied,

> Part of the call was to tell this story into this day, our day… my doctorate made the point that I was going to use [*Revelations of Divine Love*] to answer a question of our day […] It's an important contemporary question, it's a great text, so we can ask…those deep questions from our own day of these great texts, as we would of the Bible, as we would of Shakespeare.[33]

Gilbert elaborates that she "did not want the time distance to be a barrier" for contemporary readers. Simultaneously, Gilbert discussed how personally meaningful writing the text was, saying, "It's a creative act, but it's also very prayerful."[34] After writing the first-person perspective of Julian's visions, Gilbert reflected that she felt she was in a deep state of prayer, experiencing the visions as Julian once did. Gilbert's own confrontation with mortality seems to have heightened her sensitivity to Julian's themes of suffering, resilience, and divine love. This in turn shaped the emotional depth and intensity of her fictional portrayal as found in *I, Julian*.

Reader reception of *I, Julian* on online book review platforms, specifically Goodreads, indicate praise for Gilbert's depiction of Julian. One user, expressing their personal theological commitments, writes,

> Salve for my soul. Rarely has my faith felt so directly addressed in writing, so well represented in art. Several times I had to set down the book and pray – rarely does the Lord speak to me so clearly through a novel. At the same time, Julian's theology is certainly unorthodox.[35]

---

[32] Claire Gilbert, "Dr Claire Gilbert on Her Book *I, Julian*," Jesus College Cambridge, April 17, 2023. https://www.jesus.cam.ac.uk/articles/dr-claire-gilbert-her-book-i-julian.
[33] Claire Gilbert, "I, Julian: Author Talk with Claire Gilbert," *The Living Church*, November 2, 2023, audio, 48:54. https://open.spotify.com/episode/0TWAMacjn5PQlijuYLfK7c?si=afb2945b8a654dc5.
[34] "I, Julian: Author Talk with Claire Gilbert."
[35] "Ratings & Reviews for I, Julian," Goodreads, Accessed April 10, 2025. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/62093145/reviews?reviewFilters=eyJhZnRlciI6Ik1UTXpMREUzTURJd09UazRNekkxTkRZIn0%3D.

Another user, specifying their nonreligious affiliation, has this praise:

> I am by no means a Religious Woman […] [Julian] dared to stand up, be seen & also heard & to leave a written legacy too about her visions, the Corruption (which still exists) in the Higher Church & to have herself eventually walled up as an Anchoress has to be admired, as even then she was not always as safe as she hoped she would be. This is an extraordinary read & I highly recommend it."[36]

This comment is particularly interesting, as it collapses elements of historical information about Julian's life with Gilbert's fictional embellishments regarding "stand[ing] up" to the church's corruption. While *Revelations* does not explicitly do so, the fictional Julian narrating *I, Julian* critiques the authority of the church.

Readers are seemingly enthralled with *I, Julian* as a "sensitive, luminous, meditative and powerful fictional portrayal of the life of Julian of Norwich - the mother, mystic, and radical," as one user writes.[37] "Mother, mystic, radical," in fact, is artistically displayed on the back cover design of *I, Julian*, stamping Gilbert's interpretation of Julian in bold lettering. The responses to *I, Julian* suggest that contemporary readers find something resonant in Julian's story—both as it is imagined and as it is historically recorded through sparse details in *Revelations*. Whether religious or secular, readers project contemporary concerns—such as institutional distrust, resilience, and empowerment—onto Julian, whose humility and endurance provide a model for navigating uncertainty with faith.

Close Reading

The following section will analyze passages of *I, Julian* in comparison with Julian of Norwich's writings in *Revelations*. Ultimately, this comparison aims to assess if Gilbert's fictional imagining utilized the few facts of Julian of Norwich's life, alongside the rhetorical

[36] "Ratings & Reviews for *I, Julian*," Goodreads.
[37] "Ratings & Reviews for *I, Julian*," Goodreads.

devices found in *Revelations*, to ascribe contemporary empowerment and political consciousness to the fictional Julian. If this is the case, it may indicate the expansiveness of Julian's work and its ability to inspire re-applications of her theology to a contemporary readership. Additionally, and more complicatedly, it may also indicate a contemporary discomfort with what possessing agency realistically meant in Julian's time. For example, being an agentive woman in the 14th century was enacted quite differently than being agentive in contemporary Western feminist conceptions attuned to oppressive systems of power.

I, Julian crafts a plausible backstory for Julian of Norwich by imagining her to have been a wife and mother who lost her family to the plague. This is historically plausible and could be a reason that Julian of Norwich chose the reclusive lifestyle of being an anchoress. This loss, too, would explicitly explain the centrality of themes of death and suffering in *Revelations*. The Black Death also largely impacted religious figures; frequent contact with plague victims caused frequent mortality, and the religious authorities who replaced their fallen peers may not have been perfectly qualified. Gilbert subtly weaves in references to this across *I, Julian*, including narrations of Julian noticing the new priest of Saint Julian's being ineffective at his work. In one such passage, Julian notes that "Father Walter makes even more mistakes than usual."[38]

Gilbert's piece also includes completely fictionalized, historically implausible elements, like Julian freeing herself from her cell to dance in the rain:

> I am out of my grave now … I can feel my binding death-shroud fall from me, and I dance! … I am not nothing and I am not everything and there is so much universe and I have seen it fragile in the palm of my hand. And my beloved brother Jesu, my loving mother God, has asked me if He could have suffered more for the pain that it suffers, has pleaded to know I am apaid. I am.[39]

[38] Claire Gilbert, *I, Julian* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2023), 224.
[39] Gilbert, *I, Julian*, 250.

This moment of physical liberation stands in stark contrast to Julian's desires for suffering and enclosure, instead possibly reflecting a contemporary valorization of physical freedom as a metaphor for spiritual release. Likewise, the final chapter of the text combines later historical events to deliver a satisfying yet dramatic conclusion:

> And in 1401, when the law makes heresy sedition and the firepit to burn Lollards is dug and the flames are lit, when the first foul stench of the burning bodies reaches my cell on the east wind, I decide to put down my pen for good. The book must leave my cell before it is discovered and stolen from me, and it must go to a place of safety … I have handed the task of its continued revealing to my readers, even though I do not think there will be readers. Not for a long time.[40]

Seemingly, Gilbert aimed to transform the absence of historical knowledge on Julian of Norwich's motivations for writing by crafting the fictional Julian's awareness of her place in history. The fictional Julian is keenly aware of her contribution to posterity, and Gilbert coalesces this with a reworking of the historical timelines of laws against heresy passing, burning of the Lollards, and Julian sending away her manuscript to protect it.[41] Gilbert also ascribes to Julian an appreciation for Wycliffe's ideas ("He is not wise but some of his quarrels with holy church have merit"). [42] Gilbert raises the possibility that Julian may have been aware of the Lollards due to her anchor-hold's position attached to St. Julian's.[43] In her timeline, however, Gilbert notes:

> 1401: It is widely believed that a "Lollard Pit" was dug just outside Norwich on the far side of Bishop Bridge, a short distance from St. Julian's church, where a pub called The Lollard Pit now stands. Nicholas Watson has convinced me that the belief is unfounded; I have retained it for dramatic purposes.[44]

---

[40] Gilbert, *I, Julian*, 313.
[41] Gilbert, *I, Julian*, 327.
[42] Later in *I, Julian*, Julian narrates a critical passage regarding the Avignon Papacy: "As if to mock me, holy church has made herself a new pope in Rome even while she still has a pope in Avignon. The Lollards, whose teaching offers wisdom from which she could learn if she only had the courage to face herself, go on being spurned and spat upon and made excommunicate." Gilbert, *I, Julian*, 295.
[43] Gilbert, *I, Julian*, 264.
[44] Gilbert, *I, Julian*, 327.

Ostensibly, Gilbert combined these events into the narrative of *I, Julian* because the fictional Julian is protecting her work from the forthcoming Reformation. Historically, though, Julian is believed to have died sometime after 1416, and the Reformation would formally begin one century later.

Gilbert's imagining of the first-person perspective of Julian's sixteen visions is certainly compelling. For example, *Revelations* describes a vision of the crucifix held before Julian bleeding, followed by a vision of Christ's passion, and a vision of Mary. The Long Text describes,

> In this he brought our Lady St. Mary to my understanding. I saw her spiritually in her bodily likeness, a simple, humble maiden, young in years, grown a little taller than a child, of the stature which she had when she conceived … I understood the reverent contemplation with which she beheld her God, who is her Creator, marveling with great reverence that he was willing to be born of her who was a simple creature created by him.[45]

I, Julian describes the same scene,

> And now in the light shed by the cross I see a young woman barely out of childhood. Her eyes are fixed on me, but I do not think she sees me … I understand in my heart that this is Mary as she was when she conceived. And she is…even now…receiving God into her body … I can feel in my body the dread that she felt and I understand it better because the visions came to birth in me and they too are so much greater than I. In her conceiving of God, Mary was a poor creature of no consequence, as am I.
>
> Why does God come to such as we? I have so often wondered … Is it because we know we are nothing? Out of nothing, something is coming to birth. Seeing Mary receive the Creator of the universe into her own body breaks open my own being to receive what is to come, not just to witness but to receive into the heart of me all its strangeness and size. To be transformed as Mary is transformed by her receiving.[46]

The imagined perspective of Julian's vision includes the overwhelming emotion that likely accompanied her visions. The *I, Julian* version of this vision contains more reflection and brings the experience of the vision itself to life for readers.

---

[45] *Showings*, 182.
[46] Gilbert, *I, Julian*, 108-109.

While the scenes of Julian's visions are rich with description and emotion, the post-visions content of *I, Julian* contains the most examples of interpreting Julian's humility, embodiment, and unique positionality through a contemporary lens of feminine empowerment and political engagement. For example, the political turmoil preceding the Protestant Reformation grew increasingly dangerous as persecution of alleged heretics became more frequent. *I, Julian* ascribes political consciousness to Julian of Norwich about these events. From Julian's fictional perspective, she writes, "There is fear and then more fear in the eyes of my visitors. They know they must not go against holy church, and holy church is stricter now."[47]

Atop the political awareness Gilbert reinscribes in this example, she also inserts social consciousness from Julian regarding her station as a woman. Julian narrates:

> There have always been those who believe the text of my visions is proof I am a Wycliffite, and this now matters, increasingly so. Confessor Roger says he is hearing this said of me, that I am a heretic. They should read the words, I tell him. But hearsay is not based upon evidence. The simple existence of the text is enough to cast suspicion upon me: words from a woman who should not take it upon herself to speak of such things in English to describe a God who belongs in Latin, to the men of holy church.[48]

In this passage, Julian is acknowledging the rising tides of persecution yet remaining steadfast in the piety of her *Revelations*. She demonstrates an awareness of, and disagreement with, the structures labeling her a heretic for simply writing devotionally in English as a woman. It is not historically confirmed whether Julian's work would have even been known by anyone at the time, apart from her possible male confessors who transcribed the text and wrote the introduction to the Long Text for her. It is even considered unlikely by Collage and Walsh that anyone would have known about her Revelations. Collage and Walsh argue this through the evidence of Julian

[47] Gilbert, *I, Julian*, 216.
[48] Gilbert, *I, Julian*, 265.

in Margery Kempe's *Book*, which references Julian but not Julian's writing or divine messages. According to them,

> It is very evident that she never told Margery that she had received visions or had written a book about them. Had it been otherwise, Margery, naively proud of the knowledge of spiritual literature that she, an illiterate laywoman, had been able to acquire, would hardly have failed to mention the matter.[49]

This is one place that Gilbert embellishes the historical record, as Julian receives attention and visitors regarding her revelations in *I, Julian*.

Julian is visited by counsel-seekers throughout *I, Julian*. As political unrest rises in her community she is faced with more challenging visitors, like a young man questioning her faithfulness to the church. The fictional Julian responds in her internal narration:

> How dare he call me daughter? This *boy* … he is a spiritual infant. And yet I am debased, utterly embarrassed and humiliated by this weedy man. He is pathetic … I do not know whether he had come for counsel or whether, as I thought immediately after he had gone, he was sent by the Bishop to test my faith, for holy church was growing zealous in using her new power to bring heretics to trial.[50]

Julian's outrage in this passage, in the final chapters of the text, marks a significant turning point in the narrative. The imagined internal perspective of this Julian is extremely different from the *humilitas* expressed in *Revelations*. The fictional Julian exemplifies an empowered reaction to a gendered interaction. This reaction is certainly more aligned with a contemporary understanding of female agency than a form of agency that navigated the confines of medieval society.

Perhaps most strikingly, near the end of *I, Julian*, after many declarations of loyalty to the church, Julian professes: "Holy church is no loving mother."[51] *Revelations* relates Julian to the church as a child submitting to their parent: "And now I submit myself to my mother, Holy

[49] *Showings*, 18-19.
[50] Gilbert, *I, Julian*, 234-235.
[51] Gilbert, *I, Julian*, 276.

Church, as a simple child should."[52] The wording in *I, Julian* is particularly important, as it ties to her depiction of Christ as a nurturing, loving mother as seen in many passages from *Revelations*:

> So Jesus Christ, who opposes good to evil, is our true Mother. We have our being from him, where the foundation of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love which endlessly follows. As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother.[53]

While *Revelations* depicts Jesus as the pinnacle of motherhood and motherly love, *I, Julian* juxtaposes this endless love with the claimed—and presumably falsely claimed, according to Julian—loving motherhood of the Holy Church. Gilbert's intervention applies her theological views to critique her sociopolitical context.

Gilbert's embellishments, while fictional, can be plausible perspectives for Julian of Norwich, partly due to the subversive intersections of her identity as both a private (physically) and public (in writing/administering counsel) religious woman in her community. Even so, Gilbert's characterization of Julian as agentive and politically conscious likely fits a contemporary understanding of Julian's positionality more so than a medieval one. Despite being ahistorical, imaginings like Gilbert's color in the mysteries of Julian's personal narrative in a way that grants further inspiration to contemporary readers. It is no coincidence that Julian's contemporary devotees are majority women. Gilbert takes her theological messages and pairs them with a plausible inner world that is most compatible with contemporary conceptions of empowerment.

Gilbert's artistic choice to incorporate this contemporary lens may simultaneously communicate a discomfort with how agency was realistically characterized and actualized in the Middle Ages. Julian did occupy the privileged position of being an anchoress, but her authority

[52] *Showings*, 259.
[53] *Showings*, 295.

was granted through her access to God, not by virtue of her autonomy as a woman as contemporary notions of feminist agency might expect or prefer. In ascribing this contemporary, arguably feminist, reading to Julian, Gilbert's intervention may speak more to how historical women can be altered to be palatable to contemporary readers. Martha Howell efficiently investigates female agency in this context:

> As we look for instances of female agency in late medieval and early modern Europe, we thus need to be attentive to all the complexities that surround this concept. Typically born in the contradictions that are inherent in discursive structures, female agency is more a sign of discursive instability than a signal that the gender system is being fundamentally undermined. Real change, in the sense of a lessening of gender hierarchy, can occur, however, when these disturbances arise from, or even precipitate shifts in, the larger social, political, economic, or cultural order.[54]

Julian of Norwich's life and writings do exemplify tensions in the power and discursive structures of her time. However, these contradictions potentially signal rising cultural instability more so than a contemporary Western feminist inspiration as it is seemingly reimagined in *I, Julian* and reinterpreted in reader reception.

Conclusion

Through Julian's unique theology, *Revelations* both challenges and operates within traditional patriarchal structures of medieval Christianity. The text exemplified *humilitas* alongside embodied claims to the divine, two modes of gendered self-representation that reflect the constraints and socializations of her gendered context. Julian of Norwich's textual legacy provides profound insight into how gender, power, and spirituality intersected in the Middle

---

[54] Martha Howell, "The Problem of Women's Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe." *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, ed. Sarah Joan Moran and Amanda Pipkin, (Brill, 2019), 21–31, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvrxk3hp.7.

Ages, revealing the subtle ways women could claim authority within the confines of religious orthodoxy.

Claire Gilbert's *I, Julian* offers a reimagining of Julian's life, combining historical plausibility with speculative fictional elements to illuminate the gaps in the historical record. By attributing political awareness and feminist undertones to Julian's fictional character, Gilbert bridges the temporal divide, illustrating the enduring relevance of Julian's theological and personal legacy to contemporary readers. The fictionalized Julian not only grapples with the challenges of her era—marked by political turmoil and gendered limitations—but also embodies themes of resilience, empowerment, and spiritual conviction that resonate powerfully with contemporary audiences. Simultaneously, I posit the possibility that the historical Julian presents a case of "agency"—by authoring her own text but having to incorporate ample *humilitas* for example—as operating within the instability of her time. This medieval case may not naturally extend to contemporary feminist conceptions of agency and empowerment vis-à-vis undermining and restructuring oppressive systems of power, as reimaginings like Gilbert's might suggest.

Together, *Revelations* and *I, Julian* demonstrate the expansive potential of Julian's life and work. While *Revelations* offers a theological and historical window, Gilbert's imaginative intervention recontextualizes Julian's story, expanding its accessibility and relevance for contemporary readers by rewriting Julian of Norwich as an empowered, agentive woman keenly aware of her transgressive and revolutionary place in history. This interplay between historical text and fictional reimagining underscores the richness of Julian's legacy. Future studies of Julian of Norwich might further explore the ethical tensions of fictionalizing historical women's lives. As interest in contemporary resonances of medieval mysticism, embodiment, and

vernacular theology grows, Julian's work offers a multifaceted case study for interdisciplinary inquiry.

Bibliography

Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages.* University of California Press, 1982.

Colledge, Edmund and James Walsh. "Introduction." In *Showings*, 17-119. Translated and edited by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. Paulist Press, 1978.

"Dr Claire Gilbert on Her Book I, Julian." Image of Jesus College in the University of Cambridge Crest, April 17, 2023. https://www.jesus.cam.ac.uk/articles/dr-claire-gilbert-her-book-i-julian.

Gilbert, Claire. "Dr. Claire Gilbert — 'Miles to Go Before I Sleep: My Journey with Julian of Norwich,'" Youtube, December 15, 2022. Video, 1 hour, 21 min., 50 sec. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iD4OSZ6OAk.

Gilbert, Claire. *I, Julian.* Hodder & Stoughton, 2023.

Gilbert, Claire. The Living Church. "I, Julian: Author Talk with Claire Gilbert," November 2, 2023, podcast, 48:54. https://open.spotify.com/episode/0TWAMacjn5PQlijuYLfK7c?si=afb2945b8a654dc5.

Howell, Martha. "The Problem of Women's Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe." In *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, edited by Sarah Joan Moran and Amanda Pipkin, 217:21–31. Brill, 2019. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvrxk3hp.7.

Julian of Norwich. *Showings*. Translated by Edmund Colledge, James Walsh. Paulist Press, 1978.

June, Rebecca. "Reassessing Gender in the Course of Julian's Short Text" (ScholarWorks at WMU, 2013), https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1925&context=mff.

McAvoy, Liz Herbert. *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.* Studies in Medieval Mysticism, vol. 5 (2004).

McDonnell, Ernest W. "The Vita Apostolica: Diversity or Dissent." *Church History* 24, no. 1 (1955): 15–31. Web. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3161507.pdf.

Mooney, Catherine M. "Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity." In *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Readers*, edited by Catherine M. Mooney. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. 1-15.

Ramirez, Janina. *Julian of Norwich: A Very Brief History.* SPCK Publishing, 2016.

"Ratings & Reviews for I, Julian." Goodreads. Accessed April 10, 2025.

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/62093145/reviews?reviewFilters=eyJhZnRlciI6Ik1UTXpMREUzTURJd09UazRNekkxTkRZIn0%3D.

Sasson, Vanessa R. *Yasodhara: A Novel About the Buddha's Wife.* Penguin Random House, 2018.

Spearing, A. C., editor. *Revelations of Divine Love*. Penguin Classics, 1999, pp. vii-xxxiii.