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A Picture of Christendom: The Creation of an Interpretive Community in Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*

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In order to avoid suspicion, opposition, and even inquisition, visionaries of the late Middle Ages did well to deny their capacities as either readers or writers. In *A Revelation of Love*, Julian of Norwich nullifies her role in uncovering the meaning of the divine 'text' she receives by demonstrating that the interpretation, and the processes by which it was achieved, are the responsibility of an interpretive community. The legitimacy of the interpretation is established by the authority of this community which, as a union between God, Church, and Christian souls, is a picture of Christendom itself.

The possible applications of reader-response criticism to medieval texts, the shared vocabulary and concerns, and the ways in which 'at significant points medieval thought … anticipated contemporary critical issues' have been subjects of scholarly studies since the early Eighties.[1] Medieval concerns about hermeneutics, the location of meaning, the essential role of the reader's attitude and response, and methods of reading practice all have strong affiliations with reader-response criticism's focus on questions about the role of the reader and the reading process in the formulation of meaning. In the Middle Ages, these questions were surely nowhere more controversial than in the area of visionary experience. In many cases, visionaries were both 'readers' of the texts (visual, aural, interactive) they received and then writers of accounts designed to convey the vision to other readers. Both roles – reader and writer – opened

1 Robert E. Wright, 'The "boke performyd": Affective Technique and Reader Response in the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich', *Christianity & Literature,* 36.4 (1987), 13–32 (p. 13). For other studies exploring the connections between reader-response criticism and medieval texts see David Lyle Jeffrey, 'John Wyclif and the Hermeneutics of Reader Response', *Interpretation,* 39 (1985), 272–87; *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers,* eds Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); and Laurelle LeVert, 'Crucfye hem, Crucifye hem: The Subject and Affective Response in Stories of the Passion', *Essays in Medieval Studies,* 14 (1997), 73–90.

the visionary up to a whole host of problems and complications that were rooted in questions about where meaning inheres (in text or reader), and the nature of interpretive activities (what we might call 'interpretive strategies'[2]). This article uses the example of Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love* to demonstrate one visionary's approach to dealing with the questions that are at the heart of both medieval visionary theology and reader-response criticism.

Unlike those reader-response critics who argue that meaning is not independently located in texts, medieval visionaries were, or tried to be, text-centred; that is they 'read' their vision with the assumption that its meaning, the authorial intention, was embedded in the text. While modern theory sees no ethical problem in locating meaning in the reader herself or in an interaction between text and reader, medieval visionary culture had a major problem with both positions. Stanley Fish's contention that meaning is in the 'active and activating consciousness of the reader'[3] or Wolfgang Iser's relocation of meaning in the creative interaction between reader and text would have condemned the visionary outright. Such authorship or 'co-authorship' was exactly what visionaries were likely to be suspected of and what they all took great efforts to avoid. As the work of Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, Bernard McGinn, and Barbara Newman has made clear, the visionary's main task, in both of her roles as reader and writer, was to efface herself.[4] The least suspect visions, as far as the Church was concerned, were those which came like 'a bolt from the blue, unprovoked and even undesired' and the least suspect visionaries were those whose ignorance and weakness made them the cleanest channels for God's word, ensuring that there would be no contamination from the thoughts or ideas of the visionary.[5] Those whose spiritual training and preparation had in fact readied them for visionary experience, that is, those who made every effort to become 'informed readers' in order to be 'more reliable reporter[s] of their reading experience' did best to deny their abilities

2 Defined by Stanley Fish as a 'set of directions' or 'assumptions' or the 'disposition to perform … acts' that shape reading (*Is There a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 168–70).

3 *Is There a Text?*, p. 44.

4 *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. Petroff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350)* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); Newman, 'What Did It Mean to Say "I Saw"? The Clash Between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture', *Speculum,* 80 (2005), 1–43.

5 Newman, 'What Did It Mean?', p. 4.

and present themselves as 'unlearned'.[6] The process of *discretio spirituum* was designed to test both visions and visionaries to ensure the vision had one author and one author only: God himself.

Julian of Norwich experienced a vision composed of sixteen 'shewinges' in 1373 when she was thirty.[7] Julian asserts her credentials as the recipient of a genuine vision by describing herself as a 'simple creature unlettered' (p. 125); female and uneducated, Julian's status (or lack thereof) makes her a likely site for an authentic experience with an exclusively divine source. The fact that Julian's showings come spontaneously while she is incapacitated on her deathbed, far from lucid thought, sets them in good stead in the eyes of the Church, and of herself. Julian's first written account of the sixteen showings (entitled *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* by its most recent editors) describes what she saw and heard as well as her immediate responses; it presents the vision as a 'sequence of events' and an experience in which Julian is a 'participant'.[8] The account sticks closely to the historical moment of the vision and records autobiographical details. Julian is keen, however, that she should not become the centre of attention, counselling her readers to forget her presence and focus instead on God, and stressing her own insignificance.[9] In her second written account, *A Revelation of Love*, Julian's concern to deflect interest in herself as an individual extends to the omission of much of the autobiographical information from *A Vision*. However, the addition of an extensive interpretive commentary that incorporates details about Julian's processes of interpretation means that, despite the removal of these details, Julian's presence in *A Revelation* remains a very tangible reality. It is the

6 For Fish's description of the 'informed reader' see *Is There a Text?*, pp. 48–49. Newman's article demonstrates that, within religious communities, specific practices were designed to 'cultivate' visions and supply would-be visionaries with the 'appropriate qualifications'. The intellectual and spiritual abilities such preparation implied, however, threatened the view of visionary experience as a 'spontaneous, wholly unpredictable incursion of the divine into the world', a view held by the ecclesiastical hierarchy ('What Did It Mean?', p. 5).

7 *The Writings of Julian of Norwich,* eds Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2005), p. 123. All subsequent references to *A Revelation* are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

8 Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, 'Introduction', in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, pp. 1–59 (p. 1).

9 'A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman', in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, pp. 61–119 (pp. 73, 75).

addition of this commentary that changes the text from 'vision' (as the scribe to Julian's earlier version introduces her text) to 'booke' (as the later version is described by its scribe), but for Julian the interpretive commentary and the twenty years of rumination that has created it, are intimately connected to the original experience, an intrinsic part of an entire divine 'revelation' that goes beyond the content of the sixteen showings (p. 277). From the perspective of other readers, however, the complex, 'inventive', and 'speculative' nature of Julian's 'booke' transforms Julian from 'participant' in a divine event to 'theologian', 'interpreter', and even 'cocreator' of the revelation she received: all three roles that were potentially hazardous for the medieval visionary.[10] In order to eschew these roles and assert the divine authorship of both the sixteen showings and the interpretive commentary that expounds it, Julian must minimize the role of the reader in the creation of meaning. Julian does this, I argue, by replacing the reader (both in, and of, *A Revelation*) with a community which then becomes responsible for the vision's interpretation. Crucially, as I will demonstrate, this community is shown to unite God, Holy Church, and Christian souls behind common interpretive strategies and a shared understanding of the essential meaning of the vision described in *A Revelation*. The presence of this 'interpretive community' not only shifts attention away from Julian as reader and interpreter but also asserts the orthodoxy of the vision and circumscribes future readings of *A Revelation* thereby protecting the text from erroneous readings.

A Revelation is the 'record of a mind in process';[11] as Petroff states, Julian wants her readers 'to learn not just the content of her revelation … but also her method of reading and interpreting as well'.[12] Indeed, if we see Julian as the 'reader' of the text of the sixteen showings, the account of her experience of discovering its meaning offers a helpful log of those 'interpretive' activities that Stanley Fish argued should be at the centre of the literary critic's attention:

10 Denise Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings: From Vision to Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1994, p. 5; Watson and Jenkins, 'Introduction', pp. 2–3.

11 Felicity Riddy, 'Julian of Norwich and Self-Textualization', in *Editing Women: Papers Given at the Thirty-first Annual Conference on Editorial Problems, University of Toronto, 3–4 November 1995,* ed. Ann M. Hutchison (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), pp. 101–24 (p. 104).

12 'Introduction', in *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, pp. 3–59 (p. 32).

> the making and revising of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgments, the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, the giving and withdrawing of approval, the specifying of causes, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers, the solving of puzzles.[13]

We can find nearly all of these in Julian's response to the divine text she reads. But while, for Fish, these activities are what gives a text its meaning; for Julian, the sixteen showings possess a meaning independent of the processes of interpretation, a meaning given by their divine author, to be discovered *through* interpretation. Julian's interpretive activities are therefore only strategies by which she can realize God the author's intention. In fact, Julian spends so much time dealing with the process of interpretation in *A Revelation* precisely because of her desire to refute the kind of reader-focused position now represented by someone like Fish, a position which, applied to visionaries at the time, would have been a form of accusation. For Julian, the reader – whether that descriptor applies to herself as reader of the original vision or to those who will 'read' the vision as mediated by her book – has only one role and that is to seek to discover the true meaning of the vision which is the meaning given by God.

If 'interpretive strategies' are those assumptions or dispositions that direct our 'sight' and shape our reading then Julian is very clear about the three that determine her developing understanding of the individual showings and the experience as a whole: that God is the author of the vision and establishes the parameters of its meaning, that the vision must not (indeed, cannot) conflict with the teaching of Holy Church, and that what she sees is meant not just for herself but for all her fellow Christians. In the process of writing *A Revelation*, these principles enable Julian to form three unities which she considers to be foundational to the interpretation of the vision offered there. The first is the unity between what Julian calls the different 'propertes' of the revelation, that is the original matter of the showings received from God, and Julian's subsequent meditations upon them (p. 277). The unity of the 'propertes' therefore indicates a harmony between God as author and Julian as reader and asserts the central role of divine inspiration not only in the experience of the showings but throughout the process of writing *A Revelation*. The second unity is found in the agreement between the teaching of the vision and the teaching of Holy Church, and the third is the unity between

13 Fish, *Is There a Text?*, pp. 158–59.

Julian and her 'even cristen'. Taken together, and applied to the process of interpreting the vision, these three unities enable Julian to not only form an interpretive community which is responsible for the meaning provided in the text but to offer, in this community, a picture of perfect Christian concord, the ideal Christendom. We can look at each of these unities in turn.

It seems that the formulation of *A Revelation* was profoundly shaped by two further insights granted to Julian by God long after the original vision in 1373. The second of these, occurring twenty years later, was an exploration of the parable-style story of a lord and his servant found in Chapter 51 of *A Revelation* but absent from *A Vision*. The first, occurring in 1388, offers Julian a clear and simple explanation of the meaning of the revelation. God tells Julian:

> What, woldest thou wit thy lordes mening in this thing? Wit it wele, love was his mening. Who shewid it the [thee]? Love. What shewid he the? Love. Wherfore shewed he it the? For love. Holde the therin, thou shalt wit more in the same. But thou shalt never wit therein other withouten end.
> (p. 379)

This understanding of the essential meaning of her 'text', unveiled to her by no less than the author himself, must surely have been key to Julian's interpretation of it. God tells Julian that love is the message of the entire work from its opening words ('this is a revelation of love') to its end. This remains, however, a very simple statement for explaining such a complex text and in this way can be compared to Augustine's caritas-cupiditas framework for interpreting the Bible: 'Scripture teaches nothing but charity, nor condemns anything except cupidity' and thus 'whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behaviour or to the truth of the faith [both of which pertain to charity] … must … be figurative'.[14] This exegetical principle, as Fish points out, is both a 'stipulation of what meaning there is and a set of directions for finding it';[15] it provides guidance for the Christian and alerts him that 'all figurative interpretations must promote the love of God and of one's neighbour. If they do not, the interpreter is either deceived or

14 St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* trans. and ed. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: MacMillan, 1958), p. 88.

15 *Is There a Text?,* p. 170.

deceiving, and the interpretations are false'.[16] In a similar vein, God's words to Julian provide guidance for reading the visions – all will point to love – and include the warning that no alternative meaning will ever be found therein (with the inference that when a word or image seems to suggest something other than this reading, it needs to be re-read). Augustine's method influenced centuries of scriptural exegesis but the fact that the Church felt the need to provide explanatory glosses highlighting the 'spiritual meaning' hidden in the text suggests that figurative language frequently called for justificatory explanations, or glosses. Similarly, God's statement here sets parameters on an area of interpretation within which there remains much to be explored and explained.

It is this area that Julian considers herself to be traversing through her reflections, re-visions (mental replaying of aspects of the showings[17]), and meditation. That her explorations can only yield partial results (this side of eternity) is implicit in Julian's acknowledgement that her 'boke' is 'begonne' but not yet 'performed' or perfected (p. 379). She recognizes that her insights may be limited (others may see more or experience something "more ghostely and more sweetly' than she), and that her ability to express these insights certainly is (pp. 157, 207). Despite these qualifications, however, the interpretive commentary in *A Revelation* is presented as 'authorized' (and perhaps, sometimes, even authored by) the divine author of the showings.

In interpreting the vision, Julian looks to God for advice, clarifying analogies or examples, and actual interpretations. The most significant of these would seem to be the revelation that 'love' is the 'mening', but there are others. Thus, God provides Julian with an 'open example' of a King treating a servant like a friend to facilitate an 'understanding' of the nature of God's compassion for Christians (p. 147). In Chapter 25, God offers Julian 'mor understanding' of his desire that Mary be exalted through the 'exsample' of a man's desire to 'make alle other creatures to love and to like that creature that he loveth so mekille' (p. 205). In the case of the 'parable of the lord and the servant', God teaches Julian how to unpack the meaning; he instructs: 'take hede to alle the propertes and the condetions that were shewed in the example, though the thinke that it be misty and indefferent to thy sight' (p. 277). Julian spends the rest of the chapter (the longest in the book) doing exactly this and we can assume

16 D. W Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 295.

17 For examples of this process of replaying the visions see pp. 277, 329, 343.

that this divine instruction would have continued to shape her understanding of the vision as a whole. In these ways, God is clearly shown to be directing and shaping Julian's interpretations. Throughout *A Revelation*, Julian's turns of phrase as she describes the interpretive process stress that God is the source of her ongoing enlightenment: it is God, she says, who gave 'sight to my understanding', provided 'gostly understanding', and God who 'ledde forth my understanding in sight and in shewing of the revelation to the ende' (pp. 273, 277). Julian's 'understanding' is a key term here, one that carries several meanings not always clarified in the text. Julian's 'understanding' is evidently engaged in the initial experience of the showings which are, explains Julian, manifested in three ways including 'by worde formede in my understanding' (p. 157). However, as Watson and Jenkins point out, Julian's 'understanding' can also be identified as the product of her reflections and meditations on the meaning of the revelation.[18] Julian therefore frequently 'introduces more recent layers of reflection with "I understood"'[19] and inserts the phrase 'as to my understanding' into statements explaining aspects of the vision: 'And to lerne us this, as to my understanding, our good lorde shewed our lady' (p. 145); 'this shewing was geven, as to my understanding, to lerne our soule wisely to cleve to the goodnes of God' (p. 143). As Julian's understanding is consistently presented as being illuminated, led, and inspired by God, the phrase 'as to my understanding' can be seen less as a qualification than as a statement carrying some authority.

Large sections of the interpretive commentary found in *A Revelation* are, therefore, set forth as inspired by, and therefore authorized by, God. Julian diminishes her own role by stressing that it is only through receiving advice, enlightenment, and interpretive techniques from God – over a period of two decades or more – that she is able to expound the meaning of each vision in the lengthy commentaries or 'glosses' that make up so much of *A Revelation*. That God, the author of the 'text' of the original vision, will also guide and inspire its interpretation makes possible the unity of the revelation's 'propertes' described by Julian in Chapter 51:

> The furst [properte] is the beginning of teching that I understood therin in the same time [time it happened]. The secunde is the inwarde lerning that I have understonde therein sithen [since]. The third is alle the hole revelation, fro the beginning to

18 'Introduction', pp. 7, 276.

19 Watson and Jenkins, 'Introduction', p. 7.

> the ende, which oure lorde God of his goodnes bringeth oftimes frely to the sight of my understonding. And theyse thre be so oned, as to my understonding, that I can not, nor may deperte them.
> (p. 277)

Here Julian distinguishes between the original vision, the subsequent enlightenment of the Holy Spirit and the 'hole revelation', the entire experience. She clearly considers them to be distinct and yet unified. What Julian has 'understood', and what her 'understanding' continues to discover is a product of divine 'teching', 'inwarde lerning', and illumination and can therefore be seen as an extension of the author's text. The Sloane manuscript adds to the definition of the 'hole revelation' with the words 'that is to sey, of this boke', a note that clearly equates Julian's text (including all the interpretive commentary) with the revelation.

This union between the revelation's three 'propertes' is emphasized by the structure and language of *A Revelation* which tends to merge them. In imitation of many of the biblical glosses that accompanied the Bible text and were considered essential to the understanding of its spiritual sense, Julian's commentary is not distinct from the original text (the sights and sounds of the sixteen showings) but is merged with it, so that it becomes impossible to know where one begins and the other ends. Julian also blurs the boundaries between her own words and God's when she paraphrases God, using the formulas 'as if he had said' or 'so ment he' as a means of, presumably, conveying God's words more powerfully and clearly. These are textual representations of the union of God and mystic, and the union of their texts (the visionary experience authored by God and the mystic's written account of it). A belief in the unitary relationship between the 'experiential' and 'theological' aspects of the revelation reflects a synthesis which McGinn has identified as being a key aspect of the mystical tradition: 'it is not carelessness when Christian mystics do not want to make a distinction between mystical experience and the meaning or teaching about this experience; it is intentional'.[20] In the God-percipient relationship, even as she tells her reader, Julian wants to keep the focus fully on God and off herself by eliding her perspective, her understanding, and reason in favour of God's. This elision, as Petroff observes, is a feature of almost all the female mystics of the Middle Ages who, aware of how the act of writing could be viewed as an attempt to usurp

20 Quoted in *The Flowering of Mysticism*, p. 26.

male authority, considered it necessary to assimilate their own voice with the 'male voice of God' if they were to have a chance of being heard.[21] Taking this into account, even Julian's excision of all references to her gender in the final version of the text can be seen as an effort not only to remove autobiographical distractions but also, as Lynn Staley suggests, to emphasize the essentially male 'authority of the exegete'.[22]

The unity, on the page and in meaning, of Julian's commentary and the description of the visions shows a sympathy of understanding between Julian as percipient and God as author which has been made possible by God's revelation of the text's meaning. Julian's reading of the text of the visions shows her to be the ideal reader, sharing an 'identical code' with the author, appreciating all his subtleties and understanding the text in accordance with his intention.[23] It is, however, notable that Julian acquires this much sought after and normally elusive status only through mystic union with the divine author, a union that effectively makes Julian herself party to the creation of the text that is *A Revelation*.[24] Thus, to some extent, Julian's act of reading becomes an act of writing, of text-making (the writing of the 'hole revelation') but only because she has become united with the one who is responsible for 'constituting [the text's] properties, and assigning [its] intentions'.[25] Having located in herself the site of this ideal and harmonious union between reader understanding and author intention, and having expressed, in part, God's meaning, Julian goes on to incorporate Holy Church and her fellow Christians into this union through the creation of an interpretive community sharing common interpretive strategies.

Julian is always clear that the vision is 'one in ... mening' with Holy Church (p. 157). As a recipient of the visions she actually refuses to 'receive onything that might be contrary' to the teaching of the Church, filtering her

21 *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, p. 27.

22 Lynn Staley, 'Julian of Norwich and the Late Fourteenth Century Crisis of Authority', in David Aers and Lynn Staley, *Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1996), pp 107–78 (p. 139).

23 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 29; Gerald Prince, 'Introduction to the Study of the Narratee', *Poetique,* 14 (1973), 177–96 (p. 180).

24 We might think of Iser here who asserts that, if an ideal reader did exist, it would be the author (*The Act of Reading*, p. 29).

25 Fish, *Is There a Text?*, p. 171.

'reading' of its text through the 'faith of holy church' which 'stode continually in my sighte' (p. 157). Julian is a model of obedience and humility, yielding to 'moder holy church, as a simpil childe oweth' and upholding the vital role of the Church in God's salvation plan (p. 371). Having witnessed all the visions, Julian asserts that all 'that oure lorde had shewed me' and the 'faith of holy church' is 'both one' (p. 335) and takes opportunities to emphasize this: it is, for example, 'know[n] in oure faith, and also it was shewde' that Christ is both God and man (p. 219); God 'shewd' that Adam's sin was the greatest wrong, just as is 'openly knowen in alle holy church' (p. 215); the vision of Christ's marred face concurs with the 'teaching and the preching of holy church' on the nature of man's creation and fall into sin (p. 159). Even when discussing areas of apparent or potential conflict – the issues of God's attitude to man's sin or eternal damnation – Julian is able to assert that A Revelation (including God's instructions and guidance, and Julian's inspired understanding) only ever shores up the faith. She openly describes her questioning of God and God's answers, asserting that these answers resolve the seeming inconsistencies, though not always fully explaining how. Indeed, Julian's favoured tactic here seems to be to assert the value of the unknown, the yet-to-be revealed, and to warn readers against being too curious.[26] While *A Revelation* is often considered by modern scholars to contain original thought and new theology, Julian is adamant that it does not command anything 'new' but rather obedience to the truth already known, as taught by the Church. Take, for example, her statement that though she did not see the Jews in her vision of the crucifixion, she was still 'strenghed and lerned generally to kepe me in the faith in every point and in all, as I had before understonde' (p. 225). This reference to 'before' reveals how the showings do not really change anything or bring any kind of transformation; they maintain the status quo with the result that the revelation and its interpretation are seen to be

26 Julian offers the parable of the lord and the servant as an answer to the apparent contradiction between the vision's and the Church's teaching on sin but does not clearly state how it resolves the problem. Similarly, in Julian's struggle to accept the vision's promise that 'alle maner of thinge shalle be wel' (p. 209) when both Scripture and Holy Church speak of eternal damnation for 'many creatures' she comes to believe that both teachings can be true through God's answer: what is 'impossible to the is not impossible to Me' (p. 223). Throughout Chapters 30–37, Julian discusses two of God's secrets and, even as she provides some tantalizing details about them, seems to be more interested in the fact of their existence than in revealing what they are.

in unity with the Church, not only because their teachings are consistent but also because the revelation affirms the authority of the Church (p. 223).

Julian then is seen to be the ideal reader of God's text and a humble and obedient servant of Holy Church; the first role is an expression of her unity with God, and the second of her unity with the Church. Through her understanding of her unity with her fellow Christians, Julian is able to extend these roles, and the relationship with God and Church that they imply, to her fellow Christians, her 'evencristen'. Early in her text Julian expresses her strong sense of communion with her fellow believers: 'For if I looke singulery to myselfe', she comments, 'I am right nought. But in general I am, I hope, in onehede of cherite with alle my evencristen. For in this onehede stondeth the life of alle mankind that shalle be saved' (p. 155). She also believes that God intends the text for everyone and often reminds us of this: 'and alle this lerning [teaching] and this tru comfort, it is generalle to alle mine evencristen, as it is afore saide, and so is Gods will' (p. 339); 'I saw that his mening was for the generalle man: that is to sey, alle man which is sinfulle and shall be into the last day, of which man I am a membre' (p. 369); 'alle this sight was shewde in generalle' (p. 151). In the context of the vision, Julian realizes herself to be a representative of 'alle mankinde that shall be savid', a kind of 'Everyman' (p. 155); everything she sees and experiences is to be applied to everyone. '[T]hat I say of me', she states, 'I mene in the person of alle my evencristen' (p. 153); 'by me alone is understonde alle' (p. 235). Even more pervasive than such statements is Julian's use of the communal pronoun to describe the experiences and their meanings and moral applications: the 'I' becomes a 'we'. One consequence of this is that Julian understands herself to be part of a Christian body made up of people who feel and think like she does; she takes herself – a conscientious, devout, pious, earnest woman – as an accurate representation of every Christian. This may be wishful thinking on Julian's part. Nevertheless, Julian becomes the template for reader response ('feel this', 'think this', 'consider this'), not because she considers herself a suitable role model, but because she knows herself to be one with other believers (who are also readers) and because she is party to the essential meaning of the text as revealed by its author. By eliminating anything but the barest autobiographical details (which provide context for the vision), Julian does 'universalize' her ideal reader (herself) and that reader's responses.

To take Julian at her word and understand that the 'I' in this text is a

'we' and that Julian and her fellow Christians are one, means that Julian's interpretive strategies and her inspired interpretations become, in theory at least, the interpretive strategies and inspired interpretations of every Christian; the response found within this text is ours even before we have read it. Thus, the interpretive commentary in A Revelation becomes the possession, or rather the product, of an entire community. Julian responds to that 'fear of subjectivity, of the individual interpreter's self' which shaped visionary culture by using the language of community to draw attention away from herself as independent agent.[27] Furthermore, by structuring her text around communal response, Julian is able to safeguard the parameters of interpretation established by God in his disclosure of the revelation's meaning by circumscribing the subjective responses of her readers. Each reader is brought into the 'context, the community of interpretation' which, through Julian, is safely located within the boundaries of 'love', the only place where one can read the text 'correctly'.[28] In this way, Julian works against the possibility of erroneous interpretations based on different interpretive strategies (readings not based on loyalty to the Church, for example, or readings based on fragments, rather than the whole, of the experience) and preserves the boundaries of interpretation set down by God.[29]

By incorporating every Christian into herself, Julian extends her unity with God and with Holy Church to her fellow believers. What Julian manages to create in her 'boke', then, is a picture of harmony between God, Church, and Christian souls, an ideal of Christian concord which revolves around her roles as percipient, child of the Church, and member of the body of the

27 Walter Benn Michaels, 'The Interpreter's Self: Peirce on the Cartesian "Subject"', *Georgia Review*, 31.2 (1977), 383–402 (p. 386).

28 Michaels, 'The Interpreter's Self', p. 401.

29 It seems that Julian was successful in creating a consensus about the meaning of what she saw given that, for all the amount of modern scholarship written on Julian, few question the actual accuracy of her interpretation: the fact that the hazelnut represents 'all that is made', for example, or that the seabed is a picture of God being ever present with man. We rarely question the route taken in Julian's reading of the 'text' of the visions or consider that the text could have taken 'a quite different direction' (Nicholas Watson, 'The Trinitarian Hermeneutic in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*' in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays* ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), pp. 61–90 (p. 77). Wolters in his edition is a notable exception; see 'Introduction', in *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1966), pp. 11–44 (pp. 37–38).

saved. In all three of these roles, Julian's subjectivity is neutralized (through her assimilation with God, through her submission to Holy Church, and through her absorption into the body of believers) and she functions not just as representative of the community but as this community. This means that an interpretive community (in this case, including the divine author himself), rather than Julian as individual reader, becomes responsible for the production of meaning. Not only are the interpretive strategies employed throughout *A Revelation* presented as 'community property', Julian herself wishes to be seen as 'community property', with her reading shaped, enabled, and limited by the community's.[30] The presence of this interpretive community legitimizes A Revelation and its reading of the original showings, while also preserving it from alternative and erroneous readings. Fish, for whom 'perfect agreement' on the meaning of a text is an impossible ideal, argues that interpretive communities bring us close to a 'stability' in interpretation and stand in the way of 'interpretive anarchy' because interpretation is never an act carried out by an individual operating as an 'independent agent'.[31] Julian, who believes in the recoverable meaning of the text, looks to an interpretive community to perform similar functions. Julian's interpretive community creates and safeguards an interpretation that is more than stable, located within established parameters. Readers can be invited into a space to explore, and continue to decode (and so 'make') the text but only because *A Revelation* has already demonstrated the 'safe reading' practices of the ideal reader.[32]

On a final note, it is worth considering how much Julian's desire to diminish her own role as individual reader may reflect not only an astute awareness of the controversies surrounding visionary theology but also the reality of the very social spiritual context in which Julian functioned. Recent scholarship has emphasized the role of a spiritual community in Julian's life and in her text. Felicity Riddy, for example, considers that, given Julian's position in the 'ecclesiastical structure of the diocese' it is likely that she received 'official assistance' in the writing of her book; *A Revelation* should be seen as 'a collaboration between writers, scribes and what might be called "clerical

30 Fish, *Is There a Text?*, p. 14.

31 *Is There a Text?*, pp. 172, 13–14.

32 On religious writers' efforts to teach their readers 'safe reading' practices in order to prevent heterodoxy see Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England.* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), especially pp. 272–96.

facilitators" of various kinds'.[33] Barry Windeatt concurs, suggesting that the composition of the text involved a 'collaborative interchange with some of the learned spiritual directors'.[34] Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins speculate that Julian may have been part of an 'irregular community', an 'informal group of priests, monks, anchorites, and laypeople' who identified themselves as 'lovers of God', and that her text may initially have circulated among members of this group.[35] Whatever the case, that Julian was part of a community with shared interpretive strategies is further suggested by the postscript, attached to the text of *A Revelation* as found in the Sloane manuscript, generally ascribed to one of Julian's circle. In its focus on God as the author of the vision ('the revelation ... shewid by our savior Christ Jesus'), its emphasis on the revelation's agreement with the Church and Scripture, and its conviction that it was shown not just for Julian but for 'our endles comfort and solace', this final note reflects the same three convictions that shaped Julian's reading of the vision (p. 415). It also, quite remarkably, makes no mention of Julian herself, seemingly obeying her written request that we shift our attention from her to God. Finally, the postscript contains a set of requirements for would-be readers of the text which include submitting to God and to Holy Church, believing that God intended the revelation for many, and receiving the text in its entirety, not taking one thing and leaving another, but taking 'everything with other' (p. 415). A group of readers united by their fulfillment of these requirements were surely creating a real interpretive community designed, like Julian's textual one, to preserve the true, God-given, meaning of the text.

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33 'Julian of Norwich and Self-Textualization', p. 105.

34 'Julian of Norwich', in *A Companion to Middle English Prose*, ed. A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 67–81 (p. 79).

35 Watson and Jenkins, 'Introduction', p. 12.