Willing to Know God
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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Barr, Jessica.
Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages.
The Ohio State University Press, 2010.
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DIVINE VISIONS abound in medieval literature. Dante ascend to Paradise, innumerable saints and holy women hold intimate converse with representatives of the divine, Margery Kempe lies in dalliance with Christ, and Langland’s Will observes the Harrowing of Hell in the course of his struggle to come to a “kynde knowing” of God. The widespread appearance of the vision in the literature of the later Middle Ages suggests that visions, if not actually common occurrences, were at least widely accepted as catalysts to spiritual development: the vision is often portrayed as having the capacity to effect a profound transformation in its recipient.

A vivid illustration of the transformative potential of the vision can be found in the late fourteenth-century Showings of Julian of Norwich. Julian writes that, although she already believed in Christ and the teachings of the Church, when she was young she “desirede a bodilye sight” of the Passion, wishing to have more “felinge in the passion of Criste” than she already had. Her desire for a “bodily sight”—a vision—is based on the assumption that such an experience would have a powerful effect on her faith and strengthen her devotion to God. Indeed, the visions that she then receives in her sickness fundamentally change her understanding of the divine; even her first vision, of the blood trickling down from under Jesus’ crown of thorns, awakens her to a new profundity of devotion and the assurance that “this was strengh enoughe to me—ye, unto alle creatures lyevande that shulde be safe—againes alle the feendes of helle and againes gostelye enmies.” Julian’s Showings indicates the powerful spiritual and affective

2. Ibid., 69.
impact that a vision could have, as it transforms her understanding of the
godhead and propels her into a deeper devotional experience. She has been
given a wholly new outlook on the divine and, consequently, the entirety of
creation.

Some imaginative dream vision texts, such as *Piers Plowman*, similarly
project a sense of the vision as a transformative force. But *Piers* shows a
rather different side of the transformative power of the vision. Instead of
documenting the dramatic effects of a visionary experience upon its recipi-
ent, it shows a dreamer in anxious pursuit of an experience that could have
the power of Julian’s visions. That this pursuit takes place primarily in
dreams suggests that not all visions have the ability to immediately trans-
form the visionary, as it is unclear whether each of Will’s dreams effects a
real revolution in his consciousness or in his understanding of the divine.\(^3\)
Nonetheless, Will’s restless quest indicates that he believes in the poss-
ibility of a profoundly transformative experience—something that could
move him beyond the superficial knowledge of Christ that he possesses
and into the “kynde knowing” that he craves. And finally, it is the vision of
the Harrowing of Hell in Passus 18 that most successfully triggers Will’s
awakening to a knowledge of Christ, prompting him to act for the first time
in the waking world. It is after this vision that he goes to church with his
wife and daughter.\(^4\) Yet *Piers* ends on an ambiguous note, with Will fall-
ing asleep again and witnessing the besieging of Unity Holychurch by the
seven sins.\(^5\) Langland’s narrative thus questions the efficacy of the vision
even as it affirms it. The vision has the power to transform the dreamer and
grant him new knowledge, but that power is threatened by—among other
things—the dreamer’s spiritual and intellectual limitations.

Julian’s *Showings* and Langland’s poem thus present two faces of the
same issue: the vision’s ability to impart transformative knowledge to its
recipient. In light of this common concern, it is reasonable to assume that
their authors shared at least a broad understanding of the utility of the vision
in transforming the visionary or dreamer. Of course, there remains a sig-
nificant difference between these works. Julian’s text purports to describe
ture events; Langland’s does not. This difference may, in part, explain the
major differences in how they represent the vision’s power. In this book, I

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\(^3\) For a comparison of the validity of dreams and of waking visions in late medieval
England, see Gwenfair Walters Adams, *Visions in Late Medieval England: Lay Spirituality

\(^4\) References are to the B text. Will’s decision to go to church occurs at B.XVIII.427–33
2001]).

\(^5\) See B.XX.74–380.
will argue that it is only through an analysis of this difference—and therefore, necessarily, of both “literary” and “authentic” vision texts—that we can begin fully to grasp the idea of the vision that was current in the Middle Ages.

The terms that I have just used to describe these two types of vision text—“literary” and “authentic”—are, of course, problematic. Indeed, the notion of there being two types of vision text at all is problematic, as several scholars have recently demonstrated. Among these scholars is Lynn Staley, who argues that The Book of Margery Kempe, a fifteenth-century account of the life of a lay mystic that documents both her private visionary experiences and her struggles against a skeptical world, is more appropriately studied as an imaginative work than as a historical chronicle of a medieval mystic’s actual experience. Pointing out that the tendency to equate the author of the Book with its protagonist limits the interpretive possibilities of the text and is largely a function of the author’s gender, Staley argues that the Book may actually be a work of fiction. Whether or not one agrees with Staley’s conclusion, her analysis of Kempe’s book underscores the literary, constructed nature of even those mystical and vision texts that purport to record authentic experiences. It takes little imagination to realize that visionaries could reorder their experiences for the sake of their retelling, highlight or downplay certain episodes, and alter details in the reconstruction of what they perceived in their visions; furthermore, vision texts and hagiographies themselves have been shown to be carefully constructed narratives whose authors make highly strategic decisions in order to sustain the impression of their subjects’ sanctity.

7. Ibid., esp. 171.
8. This is the argument advanced by Else Marie Wiberg Pederson in her article on the theology of Beatrice of Nazareth. Emphasizing the mediated nature of a visionary experience’s translation into textual form, she writes, “Instead of viewing the visions and auditions of medieval women, transmitted in their vitae, as some expression of direct experience opposed to a speculative, and higher, form of mysticism represented by men, one should see them as literary texts written by authors recognized as such. . . . [T]hey are not unmediated experiences. How can a text ever be that?” (Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, “Can God Speak in the Vernacular? On Beatrice of Nazareth’s Flemish Exposition of the Love for God,” in The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Duncan Robertson, and Nancy Bradley Warren [New York: Palgrave, 2002] 186). For more wide-ranging studies of hagiographic rhetoric, see Thomas J. Heffernan, Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Rosalynn Voaden, God’s Words, Women’s Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Woman Visionaries (Woodbridge, UK: York Medieval Press, 1999). I treat this subject more fully in my discussion of The Book of Margery Kempe in chapter 8.
Staley’s argument is focused on one side of the equation: the ways in which a purportedly authentic vision text resonates with fictional texts, such as *Piers Plowman*, that critique their contemporary social worlds. But the porosity of the boundaries between presumably authentic and presumably fictional vision texts is even more complex. Arguing that the boundaries between “authentic” and “literary” visions—if indeed these boundaries exist—are far more difficult to define than most scholars have recognized, Barbara Newman demonstrates that many vision texts cannot be said to fall clearly into one or the other generic category. Vision texts of both kinds make claims to theological as well as experiential authenticity while also employing literary and even fictionalizing conventions. Mechthild of Magdeburg is perhaps the paradigmatic example of a “visionary” who overtly employs literary strategies to construct her text, creating, for instance, elaborate allegorical dialogues between the soul and Lady Love to express the soul’s relationship with God. On the other hand, Christine de Pisan’s apparently fictional *Book of the City of Ladies* employs rhetorical strategies suggestive of “authentic” visions. While Newman recognizes that “many, perhaps most, texts fall clearly on one side or the other of the line” demarcating fiction from fact, there are a large number of such “in-between” cases. Even in seemingly clear-cut instances, however, “authentic” and “fictional” fail as accurate descriptors of these texts. In Newman’s words, “‘authentic’ visions, no matter how real the experience they record, necessarily become constructed visions when they come down to us as texts, while ‘fictional’ visions . . . may convey impassioned and articulate belief by means of allegorical personae.”

And yet, it seems like a mistake—or at least an overstatement—to claim that there are no generic distinctions between Julian’s *Showings* and *Piers Plowman*. Although the categories of authenticity and literariness do not work consistently as ways of distinguishing these texts, they can be useful; after all, Mechthild’s *Flowing Light* is a “literary” work of poetry, drama, and allegory, but we nonetheless understand it to have a basis in lived experience that *The House of Fame* does not. Superficially, we do seem to have, if not two different genres, at least two ends of a spectrum of experiential basis. The paradigmatic type of the mystical vision text typically claims to be authorized—or even “authored”—by God himself and relates visions that illuminate doctrinal points, provide evidence of God’s grace, or designate an individual as specially chosen by God. Dream vision poets, on the

10. Ibid., 26.
11. Ibid., 33.
other hand, do not usually employ the same kinds of authorizing strategies as visionary authors and their amanuenses. Instead, dream poems often hearken back to classical models—essentially literary models—as a means of establishing authority rather than laying claim to direct, divine inspiration. At first glance, too, the purpose and subject matter of the dream vision distinguish it from the revelatory vision. Dream visions do not address exclusively Christian subjects, but may instead concern themselves with such topics as love sickness (Le Roman de la rose, La Fontaine amoureuse), an individual’s death (The Book of the Duchess), and questions of ethical behavior (Wynne and Wastoure). Dream visions frequently employ allegory and do not always express a declared concern with eschatological, salvific, or doctrinal matters, whereas visionary literature is usually at least partly theological. But of course, some dream visions—such as Piers Plowman, the Divina Commedia, and Pearl—do explore religious issues and seek to make valid theological claims via the construct of the vision, and some mystical texts—such as The Flowing Light of the Godhead and Henry Suso’s Life of the Servant—employ the literary technique of allegory to describe their authors’ experiences. Subject matter and claims to the authenticity of the text’s message cannot be used to distinguish these works.

We may, however, fruitfully compare the relationships between these texts’ narrators and their authors. Most mystical vision texts feature narrators who are idealized representations of the visionary subject; even narratorial self-effacement reflects such an idealization, as humility was an important part of the evidence used to assess the sanctity of the visionary. But the narrators of the dream vision poems that I will discuss in the second half of this book seem to be counter-idealized. The dreaming Jeweler of Pearl, while not precisely a bad person, is not, in his inability to focus his attention upon the image of Christ, an embodiment of holiness; Langland’s Will is stubborn, quarrelsome, and surprisingly sleepy; and The House of Fame’s Geoffrey is fearful and a trifle ignorant. This difference from mystical vision texts is important, as it establishes a distance between the author of the text and its contents. While this assuredly is not the only or even a consistent distinction between dream vision poems that are more or less

12. Voaden notes that, while “writers in the early Church tend to look to the fruits of spiritual revelation” to determine the vision’s validity, “the scholastics were more concerned with the virtue of the visionary.” This shift had important implications for women visionaries “and is reflected in the emphasis in the discourse [of discretio spirituum, or the discernment of spirits—the process used to test the validity of a vision] on meekness and submission” (God’s Words, 49).

13. The term is Newman’s; see God and the Goddesses, 14 for a discussion of this quality in Piers Plowman.
clearly works of fiction and accounts of mystical visions that might be presumed to have a basis in lived experience, it does offer us a rough means of conceptually distinguishing between the two kinds of text—a way that, as I discuss in chapter 8, still leaves *The Book of Margery Kempe* in a state of tantalizing ambiguity.

Where, then, ought we to draw the boundaries between vision texts that are to some degree taken to be true, and those that are not? And how are we to distinguish between these types of text—as in a comparison between Julian’s *Showings* and Chaucer’s *Fame*, where a distinction seems largely indisputable—when no terminological or categorical distinction truly holds up to scrutiny? In an important sense, the need to make these distinctions reflects a limited understanding of medieval vision texts in general. This book argues for the necessity of reading both presumably “fictional” and “nonfictional” vision texts in relation to one another as parts of a larger dialogue in which they both shared. On the other hand, in order to make this argument, I will need at times to refer to these works within their conventionally held generic categories. Adhering to at least a superficial distinction between “authentic” and “literary” vision text allows us to examine the ideas underlying the use of the vision in late medieval literature. I have, in the course of writing this book, weighed and rejected a number of lexical possibilities for making this distinction. Although none has proven entirely satisfactory, for the sake of clarity and efficacy I will simply use the term “visionary” literature (or text) to designate accounts of visions that were presumably experienced by their narrators and “dream vision poems” to designate those that were not. When I have used the terms “authentic,” “mystical,” or “literary,” it is merely to avoid confusion and is not intended as an assertion of strong categorical distinctions.

Until recently, most scholars have taken for granted that “literary” and “authentic” vision texts occupy clearly discrete categories. Scholarship that focuses on medieval visions has tended to be split into two different disciplines, with visionary literature largely relegated to the field of religious studies and dream vision poems considered the province of literary scholars. In recent decades, however, the boundaries between the two genres have begun to break down, as visionary literature has come to be studied by literary scholars as well as by scholars of religion. Yet very little critical

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14. This development may be attributed in part to the rise of feminist scholarship. Because most of the literature known to be written by women in the Middle Ages falls into the category of visionary literature, considering this genre is essential to the reconstruction of women’s roles in medieval literary and social history. See, for example, Elizabeth Petroff’s introduction to her anthology of visionary literature by women, in which she discusses these works’ “literary significance” (Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Medieval Women’s Visionary*
work has examined from the same vantage point both mystical visionary literature and dream vision narratives. Few scholars have attempted to establish an explicit connection between these two literary modes, even though they both achieve their fullest flowering at roughly the same time—a number of visionary texts were produced between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries, while the thirteenth-century *Roman de la rose* seems to have rekindled interest in the literary dream vision. The fact that many dream vision poems were written during the period in which visionary literature was in its fullest blossoming suggests that the two “genres” did not develop in isolation from one another, despite the fact that they stem from different traditions. The contemporaneous predominance of both kinds of vision text provides a clue to late medieval theories of epistemology, perception, and the acquisition of transcendent knowledge, issues that are particularly apparent in several fourteenth-century English dream poems that engage actively with the difficulty of apprehending the divine.

This book argues for the necessity of reading these two kinds of vision text as manifestations of a shared set of presuppositions about the visionary


15. Recent exceptions to this general neglect include Newman’s *God and the Goddesses* and Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski’s *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Schism, 1378–1417* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). An earlier example of such a study is Denise Despres’ *Ghostly Sights: Visual Meditation in Late-Medieval Literature* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1989). Despres considers the influence of Franciscan techniques of visualization upon such works as *The Book of Margery Kempe* and *Piers Plowman*; although her work spans both visionary and dream vision literature, however, her focus is not upon drawing explicit connections between them but rather on considering an influence that was shared between both kinds of works.


17. Steven Kruger remarks that the “middle vision,” which is neither assuredly somatic nor assuredly divine and is therefore characteristic of dream vision literature that probes inner experience and questions the fruitfulness of revelation, comes to prominence only in the later Middle Ages (Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992] 130). The dream vision poems of this period include *Le Roman de la rose*, *Pearl*, and Chaucer’s dream poems, and are distinct from the “instrumental” dreams that appear in, for example, Middle High German epics. (For an analysis of the dream vision in Middle High German epics, see Steven R. Fischer, *The Dream in the Middle High German Epic* [Bern: Peter Lang, 1978]).
experience. It is my contention that a specific understanding of how visions “worked” influenced and structured medieval dream vision poetry, especially English dream poems of the fourteenth century. While we cannot know whether the authors of these dream poems were actually acquainted with specific visionary texts, it seems clear that a broad cultural understanding of the value and limitations of the vision informs their narratives, which in at least several cases openly question the vision’s ability to convey knowledge to its recipient. At the same time, an analysis of the vision’s status in dream vision literature helps to illuminate the assumptions underlying mystical visionary literature. In the following chapters, I examine the use of the vision as an epistemological tool in both kinds of vision text by focusing on visionaries’ and dreamers’ practices of visionary knowing: the combination of innate abilities and cognitive strategies that they are shown to employ in order to receive and ultimately comprehend the knowledge granted in their visions. I argue that the vision’s success depends upon the recipient’s engaging with its content both actively and passively. Visionary knowing, in other words, does not always simply “happen” through a flash of divine insight, but may instead require cognitive and volitional work on the part of the dreamer or visionary. When that work is misdirected, the vision does not succeed.

Dream vision poems are an essential complement to visionary literature because they are able to show visions that fail to communicate knowledge to their dreamers. Because the authors of dream vision poetry were not constrained by the necessity of transmitting divine knowledge or presenting themselves as idealized figures of unimpeachable religious authority, they were free to depict visionaries or dreamers who did not immediately grasp the content of their visions. Dream vision poems and visionary texts can therefore expose two very different faces of the epistemological potential of the supernatural vision: while mystical visionary texts typically describe visionaries who successfully grasp the meanings of their experiences, dream vision poems can feature dreamers who do not learn from their visions, thus exploring the limits of revelation’s potential to convey knowledge. Reading these two genres together, then, tells us a great deal both about the role of the vision in the Middle Ages and about the role that the psychological faculties were thought to play in visionary knowing. Such a comparison gives us a far fuller picture of what it meant to have a vision in the Middle Ages than would a study of one literary category alone: ultimately it enables us to discern the shadowy workings of the vision itself—how it was understood and what, it was believed, had to happen for it to effectively communicate divine knowledge.
Chapter 1 lays out the terminology that I will be using throughout this book. My readings of the vision texts that follow depend upon a number of seemingly dichotomous categories: active and passive, educative and revelatory, *intellectus* (intuitive understanding) and *ratio* (reason). While the terms in each of these major pairings seem opposed, my work will argue for their interrelationship; active and passive engagement, reason and revelation must work together for the vision to be effective. Prior to demonstrating the interactions of these terms, however, I must show what the terms mean, and in the second half of chapter 1 I read three major dream visions that present an educative approach to knowledge and that illustrate the categories that inform my argument. These dreams—Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, *Le Roman de la rose*, and Dante’s *Divina Commedia*—depict dreamers who ascend to visionary knowledge in a more or less orderly, rational fashion and do not openly question the vision’s ability to convey knowledge—although the *Commedia* already shows the necessary interplay between *ratio* and *intellectus*, as the ordered ascent led by Virgil gives way to the loving revelations of Beatrice in later cantos of *Purgatorio* and in *Paradiso*. This chapter frames my later analyses by showing effective dream visions that can be compared to “authentic” visionary literature. The book’s central argument, however, is developed in chapters 2 through 8; these chapters address four visionary texts and three fourteenth-century English dream poems. For each text, I consider how knowledge is received in the vision, what preconditions the visionary or dreamer must meet for the transmission of that knowledge to be successful, and what limitations upon visionary knowing these preconditions reveal. The answers to these questions suggest a clear conceptual link between dream vision poems and visionary literature in that, in both, knowledge is seldom simply handed over to the visionary or dreamer. But whether or not the visionary appears to be spontaneously imbued with divine knowledge, there is almost always a precondition that must be met for such knowledge to be received and understood. First, the visionary or dreamer must be properly motivated by a love for God; second, the visionary or dreamer’s will must be directed by that love and, therefore, in accord with the divine will; and third, the visionary or dreamer’s cognitive faculties must be driven by his or her rightly motivated will.

The three visionaries that I discuss in chapters 2 through 4—Marguerite d’Oingt, Gertrude of Helfta, and Julian of Norwich—all exemplify these characteristics, albeit in different proportions. I selected these three visionaries, who come from different regions and traditions and span about a century and a half, in part to illustrate the recurrence and persistence of
these characteristics. But the differences between their modes of visionary
knowing are equally significant. Although all three mystics exemplify the
importance of the rightly ordered will and the necessity of employing both
intellectus and ratio, their means of apprehending and understanding the
visionary message are distinct. Marguerite d’Oingt’s climactic moment of
visionary comprehension is realized through the proper understanding of a
single word’s meaning, a meaning that is only available through a viscerally
experienced allegorical vision. Her quest for the meaning of vehemens and
its fulfillment indicate the potentially edifying role of language in visionary
knowing—but only when language refers to its proper, i.e. divine, referent.
Her ability to understand the word (and therefore the divine) is based upon
her volitional turn to God. The visionary knowing of Gertrude of Helfta,
a thirteenth-century German mystic, is similarly founded upon a volitional
union with the divine. Her knowledge, however, is ultimately revealed both
through direct visionary experience and through the divinely sanctioned
use of her own powers of reason and reflection. As the Lord tells her, “all
of the angelic spirits must submit to your pious desires . . . henceforth they
will do whatever is pleasing to you”; a vivid confirmation of Gertrude’s
God-given intellectual and volitional abilities, this utterance validates the
text and the mystic herself in a radical affirmation of cognitive agency.
Finally, Julian of Norwich’s Showings documents the process of reflect-
tion and meditation that she must undergo in order fully to understand
her visions. In the changes from the Short to the Long version of her text,
we witness Julian’s increasing integration of intellectus and ratio as she
explicitly employs rational reflection in the process of coming to know. All
three of these women, despite their differences, illustrate the ways in which
reason and understanding are integrated into the visionary experience, as
well as the powerful role that could be played by the mystic’s will.

Pearl and Piers Plowman, on the other hand, depict narrators who fail
across one or more of these dimensions, and therefore cannot—or cannot
without great difficulty—achieve the full knowledge that their visions
attempt to convey. The problem with knowing in Pearl, the subject of chap-
ter 5, is the dreamer’s improperly directed will; his unwillingness to subor-
dinate his will to God’s becomes apparent in his argument with the Maiden
and his resistance to her transcendent message. This resistance, which indi-
cates an excessive reliance on his rational faculties and an attachment to
the material world, ultimately prevents him not only from fully absorb-
ing the contents of his revelation, but also from actually desiring divine

18. Gertrude d’Helfta, Œuvres spirituelles, ed. Pierre Doyere, 5 vols., Sources Chré-
translation.
Introduction

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knowledge. Conversely, as I discuss in chapter 6, Piers Plowman’s Will desires the illumination of his intellectus but seems stuck in the quarrelsome mode of rational argumentation and education. The House of Fame, which is the subject of chapter 7, differs from these other texts in that it does not depict an explicitly Christian vision. What it reveals, however, is the importance of a functionally authoritative speaker to the success of the vision and the role of the dreamer’s faculties in determining the vision’s meaning and source. I conclude with a chapter on Margery Kempe that both posits the importance of visionary knowing to Margery’s spiritual practice and engages with the issue of the boundary between “fictional” and “authentic” vision texts. Examining how the validation of Margery’s visionary knowing enables her to engage in her desired devotional praxis while also asserting her sanctity to her readers, I argue that the need for such validation reveals the uncertainty of visionary knowing in the changing landscape of late medieval English spirituality.

The core of this book is thus a comparison between the writings of four female mystics and three presumably male-authored dream poems. The gendered nature of this comparison is not accidental. Through my analysis I hope to suggest the intersections between the writings of medieval women mystics and the male-dominated discourses of poetry, theology, and philosophy. Marguerite, Gertrude, and Julian engage with many of the issues raised by authors such as Chaucer and Langland (not to mention Aquinas and Augustine, whose theories inform much of my study); implicit—and, at times, explicit—in their writings is the awareness of a broader intellectual culture. Few scholars would deny, at this point, that visionary women of the Middle Ages had an understanding of their religious and cultural contexts; their works are no longer seen as the childish aberrations that many earlier scholars characterized them as being. By placing them in dialogue with dream poems—in particular the dream poems of late fourteenth-century England, texts that at first glance seem rather distant from, especially, Marguerite and Gertrude—I explore the pervasiveness of the medieval understanding of the vision’s efficacy and

19. Consider, for example, Wolfgang Riehle’s criticism of Margery Kempe’s “crude realism which intrudes in a very embarrassing manner” and his remark that she “draws a much too forceful analogy between her mystical love and her earlier married sexuality” (Wolfgang Riehle, The Middle English Mystics, trans. Bernard Standring [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981] 38), or, from the earliest years of the twentieth century, William James’ comment that Gertrude of Helfta’s revelations are “of the most absurd and puerile sort.” Her text, James adds, is a “paltry-minded recital. In reading such a narrative . . . we feel that saintliness of character may yield almost absolutely worthless fruits if it be associated with such inferior intellectual sympathies” (William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience [New York: New American Library, 1958] 269).
the extent of the challenge posed to this understanding in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This exploration, in turn, illuminates some of the issues confronting medieval visionary women, who may have been particularly vulnerable to charges of inauthenticity and heterodoxy.

By examining dream vision and visionary literature in light of one another, then, we are able to gain a far greater understanding of how the vision was understood in the Middle Ages than we can through the study of one genre alone. The idea of the mystical vision informs dream poems, while dream poems expose the status of the vision itself. Examining these “genres” and comparing their representations of visionary knowing powerfully foregrounds the active role that the visionary or dreamer had to play in the comprehension of the vision while problematizing the generic distinctions between them. By featuring counter-idealized narrators who are limited in their volitional or intellectual abilities, dream vision poems could evade the necessity of asserting either the visionary subject’s sanctity or the divine authorship of their messages, the establishment of which is fundamental to many visionary texts’ claims to authenticity and authority. The writers of dream vision poems were thus free to explore the possibility of a visionary experience’s being unsuccessful, thereby highlighting the qualities and characteristics that were seen to be necessary for a vision to achieve its aim. By comparing these texts’ approaches to the possibility of knowing from a vision, we can learn far more about the role of the visionary or dreamer in coming to grasp the vision’s content than we could from either one in isolation. Arising out of a similar cultural understanding of the workings of the human mind, they expose different sides of the same assumptions about what was necessary for a vision to succeed.