The Vision Is Not Enough

ACTIVE KNOWING IN JULIAN OF NORWICH

The long text version of the Showings of the English anchorite Julian of Norwich contains a lengthy parable that is absent from the earlier Short Text. The parable tells of a majestic lord who sends his servant, clad in tattered clothes, off on an errand, but the servant’s enthusiasm to perform his lord’s will causes him to fall into a ditch. There, the servant “groneth and moneth and walloweth and writheth,” unaware that his lord is gazing lovingly upon him from above. His ignorance of the lord’s gaze is “the most mischefe” of his plight, “[f]or he culde not turne his face to loke uppe on his loving lorde, which was to him full nere, in whom is full comfort” (LT 51.13–17).

Julian observes that the servant has no “defaute” (51.29); in fact, the lord acknowledges that he has fallen only through “his good will” (51.31) in desiring to perform his master’s wishes and vows to transform his suffering into bliss: “and so ferforth that his falling and alle his wo that he hath

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1. Julian (1342–ca. 1416) wrote two versions of the text that documents the visions she received in an illness at the age of thirty. The first version is often referred to as the Short Text; the second, often called the Long Text, was written about twenty years later and is a significantly expanded version of the first. Together, these texts are typically referred to as the Showings (as I call them here) or the Revelations of Love. In Watson and Jenkins’ edition of Julian’s works, which I use in this chapter, the “Short Text” is given the title “A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman” and the Long is “A Revelation of Love”; each of these titles comes from the texts’ introductory passages: “Here es a vision, shewed be the goodenes of God to a devoute woman” introduces the rubric at the start of the earlier text, and “This is a revelation of love that Jhesu Christ, our endles blisse, made in sixteen shewinges” is the first sentence of the later text (Juliann of Norwich, The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and a Revelation of Love, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins [University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006], ST [Pol.] 1 and LT 1.1–2, respectively). For the sake of simplicity, I will use the terms “Short” and “Long” to identify them.

2. All citations from the Showings refer to Watson and Jenkins’ edition. Whether they come from the Short or the Long Text will be indicated by citing them as ST or LT, followed by chapter and line numbers.
taken thereby shalle be turned into hye, overpassing wurshippe and endlesse blesse” (LT 51.49–51).

The Parable of the Lord and the Servant dramatically rearticulates Adam’s fall, giving Julian a new understanding of human sin and suggesting a model of humanity in which the spiritual and the corporeal are capable of reintegration and redemption. The servant represents Adam, Julian learns, whose original fall is the cause of humanity’s need to work, here described as the search for a treasure that is of great value to the lord. Contrary to traditional representations of Adam and Eve’s labor, this work is presented in positive terms: while it is “the grettest labour and the hard-est traveyle that is,” when the treasure is found, “he shulde take [it] . . . and bere it full wurshiply before the lorde” (LT 51.163–4, 169–70). The reason for the servant’s fall is unusual, as well; it occurs because of his great love for the lord and his desire to accomplish his will “in gret hast” (LT 51.11). Eve is entirely absent from the vision, a fact that removes the feminine as the cause of Adam’s fall and creates a neat parallel between the first and second interpretations of the vision—the servant is both Adam and Christ. Following the wishes of the Father, Christ similarly “fell” from heaven into humanity through Mary’s womb. Christ’s fall is explicitly linked with Adam’s through the double signification of the allegory, as Julian explains: “When Adam felle, Godes sonne fell” (51.185–6). The parable encapsulates the core of Christian salvation history as well as its prefiguration in the Old Testament.

Three aspects of Julian’s parable are important to an understanding of her visionary knowing. First, Eve’s absence from the story of the fall shifts the responsibility for humankind’s sinful state away from the female body. Gender is absent from the parable, and effacing the link between female corporeality and sin has profound implications for the production of a female-authored text that presents original theological insights. Second, the reconfiguration of sin suggested by the parable is essential to Julian’s belief in the possibility of a redeemed, complete human subject. This subject is free from the gendered associations between body and mind that are so prevalent in medieval discourse. And third, the twenty-year delay between Julian’s initial writing of her visions (the Short Text) and the Long Text, where she records the parable for the first time, demonstrates the importance of her intellectual understanding to the creation of her work. The gap between the writing of the two versions and the reasons that she gives for excluding the parable from the first indicate the centrality of Julian’s interpretive processes to the acquisition of transcendent knowledge.³ Julian’s

³. Despite the prominent role that Julian plays in the interpretation of her visions, the
model of visionary knowing, then, depends not only upon her affective visionary experience but upon cognitive work in the form of interpretation and reflection, as well—two means of knowing that have frequently been seen as antithetical. All too often, critical scholarship on Julian has fallen on one or the other side of this dichotomy, arguing either that the Showings is a work of intellectual theology or that Julian’s theology is a theology of the body, centered upon physical experience and vivid images of blood, wombs, and the suffering body of Christ. Ironically, critical scholarship that espouses this dichotomy threatens to re-inscribe the gendered mind (male)/body (female) distinction that hindered women’s participation in public discourse in the Middle Ages. In fact, however, Julian’s text shuttles back and forth between these two modes, depending upon a constant return to each. Both reasoning and revelation are necessary for her to obtain her knowledge; ratio and intellectus are both implicated in her epistemology.

Julian’s Showings illustrates a need to use a variety of tools in visionary knowing. Rather than depending solely upon the experiential knowledge that comes with an acutely physical, affective encounter with the divine, Julian takes her affective experiences and develops their meanings through sustained cognitive work. Deploying both intellectus and ratio as interdependent means of uncovering the meaning of her visions, she nonetheless conserves the importance of the physical experience that lies at their origin. Yet the Showings is intended as a text for all Christians, a devotional work to be read or heard and meditated upon by those who have not received such visions themselves. Without downplaying the importance of her affective experience, then, Julian’s emphasis upon meditation, lectio divina, and interpretation as paths to knowledge suggests a universal approach to God. Personal, embodied visions of Christ are not necessary for one to know what Julian has learned. By shifting the emphasis of her later text to the

details of her life are obscure. Born in 1343, Julian experienced her visions in May of 1373, when she was thirty years old. We do not know anything about her life prior to her visionary experience; what is known is that she was an anchorite, attached to the church of St. Julian in Norwich, later in her life. At what point she became an anchorite—whether before her visions, immediately after, or later—is unknown. Likewise, we cannot be sure of her real name (it is possible that she adopted the name “Julian” after the church to which she was attached), or whether she took orders prior to her visionary experience: Benedicta Ward has argued that Julian was a widowed mother, questioning the once-common assumption that she spent her early life as a nun (Benedicta Ward, “Julian the Solitary,” in Julian Reconsidered, ed. Kenneth Leech and Benedicta Ward, 2nd ed. [Oxford: SLG Press, 1992] 11–29). We know, based on the introduction to the Short Text of her Showings, that she was still alive in 1413 (ST 1.Prol.), although we do not know when she died, and Margery Kempe describes a visit that she paid to the anchorite in the course of her wanderings (Margery Kempe, The Book of Margery Kempe, eds. Stanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS vol. 212 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940] 42–47).
mental faculties that are possessed by all of her “even Christians” and stripping these faculties of their gendered implications, the anchorite indicates a path to knowing that anyone, male or female, can follow, with or without the singular visions granted her by God.

1. Un-Gendering Knowledge: Affect and Intellect

In chapter 1, I briefly discussed which mental powers were believed to be involved in knowing in the Middle Ages. As I noted, intellectus and ratio are the powers that many medieval thinkers saw as being most important in the acquisition of knowledge. Designating the sudden apprehension of truth in a single “movement,” intellectus enables us to understand things in flashes of insight, perceiving as self-evident what may be clouded and obscure to the ratio. Ratio, on the other hand, approximates what we term the reason. To know something through ratiocination is to understand it through logical argument. When, in the preceding chapter, Gertrude’s flashes of insight into the divine are described by the verb intellego, she is exercising her intellectus. All humans are possessed of both intellectus and ratio. Nonetheless the intellectus, by virtue of its association with angelic knowing, is “higher” than the ratio. That Gertrude arrives at much of her knowledge by means of the intellectus rather than the ratio locates her means of understanding in the higher sphere; she can see the truth without having to progress through the cumbersome and earth-bound process of rational argumentation. But ratio and intellectus, though distinct, come from the same inner power. While understanding (intelleggere) is angelic, unqualified, and immediate, reasoning is human, sequential, and “in motion.”4 It allows one to advance from step to step towards truths that the intellectus might perceive instantaneously and without the deliberation required in the rational progression through argument.

Julian’s use of both ratio and intellectus signifies a move away from the gendered associations adhering to these faculties and their related means of knowing. Ratio, in particular, was considered to be a predominantly masculine capacity in the Middle Ages. The erasure of gender from the story of the fall in the Parable of the Lord and the Servant therefore has significant implications for the depiction of cognitive activity in Julian’s text. As any student of gender in the Middle Ages knows, women were often portrayed as intrinsically incapable of rational cognitive work, an attitude concisely

summarized by Philo of Alexandria, who writes that “mind corresponds to man, the senses to woman.” This sentiment was repeated by Augustine and Ambrose and restated, in one form or another, for the following thousand years. The notion that women were aligned with physicality, sexuality, and the carnal body, while men and masculinity were associated with reason, rationality, and the soul exemplifies medieval attitudes towards the role of sex and the mind/body distinction. For a woman producing a text that documents her own interpretive and rational processes, the inhibiting effects of this attitude would not have been easy to ignore. Julian’s parable suggests a way of negotiating these potentially restrictive societal attitudes. By erasing gender from the story of the fall and making it a drama between God and Adam alone, Julian implies that the responsibility for sin and death—humankind’s fallible, physical nature—can be found in both men and women. And if this is so, spirit and mind must inhere in women as well as men.

Julian’s model of visionary knowing supersedes gendered approaches to knowledge by embracing both affective experience, which instills knowledge via the intellectus, and the ratio, which she uses when she reflects upon and interprets her visions. The overall structure of the Showings, as it develops from the Short Text to its later incarnation in the Long, reflects the importance of a continual process of enquiry into the meaning of her visionary experiences. This process foregrounds her rational interpretation and analysis and is especially evident in the inclusion of the Parable of the Lord and the Servant. At the same time, however, Julian resists prioritizing rationality above sensory and affective experience, instead validating “feminine” approaches to knowledge, as well, and proposing an approach to visionary knowing that incorporates affective understanding along with reason into the acquisition of knowledge. Julian’s knowledge and authority


8. Although a part of my project is to disavow affective knowledge as essentially or nec-
arise out of both the “feminine” sensual and affective path to knowledge, which hinges upon the use of the *intellectus*, and the rational and interpretive understanding prominent throughout the *Showings*.

Affective understanding is inarguably important to Julian’s visionary experience, as her visions are explicitly presented as the result of a wish to engage in compassionate identification with Christ. Such identification, she believes, will lead her to a fuller understanding of his passion and of divine grace. In her youth, she writes, she had three desires: first, to experience Christ’s passion in her spirit, as a witness; second, to undergo a bodily sickness that would bring her to the point of death; and third, to receive three “wounds”: the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion, and the wound of longing for God (ST 1.1–3, 41–42; LT 2.1–4, 34–36). She emphasizes that she only desires the first two gifts if they are in accordance with God’s will (ST 1.32–33) and that her wish to see Christ’s passion does not mean that she lacks faith in church doctrine:

> Notwithstandinge that I leved sadelye alle the peynes of Criste as halye kyrke shewes and teches, and also the paintinges of crucifixes that er made be the grace of God affere the techinge of haly kyrke to the liknes of Cristes passion, als farfurther as manes witte maye reche—noughtwithstandinge alle this trewe beleve, I desyrede a bodilye sight, wharein I might have more knawinge of bodelye paines of oure lorde oure savioure, and of the compassion of oure ladye, and of alle his trewe loverse. . . . (ST 1.9–15)

Her desire is not to generate faith or to be converted as such, for she already believes in the church’s teachings. Maria Lichtmann remarks that Julian’s wish for a vision is grounded in a conviction that bodily experience will result in a deepened understanding: “Julian seeks to move . . . from faith to experience, from mere belief to vision, and from a doctrinal, second-hand knowledge to her own inner authority. And the passage from an intellectual, non-integral faith to a thoroughly grounded experience is through bodiliness.”

Lichtmann argues that Julian’s theology depends upon the body as a vehicle for divine union with God, and that she “sees her body as the *locus* for spiritual enlightenment.” Julian’s wishes reflect the body’s

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10. Ibid., 13.
role in divine union, implying that first-hand, bodily experience will result in a more thorough knowledge of Christ’s incarnation. She forms these desires because she wishes to know Christ’s passion—not, importantly, because she wishes to believe in it, as she already has “trewe beleve.” Julian does not necessarily want to know more; she wants to know better. Affective, compassionate experience is the route to the deepened knowledge that she craves.

In the visions that Julian receives, affective experience conveys knowledge in a way that suggests the infusion of divine revelation through the intellectus. Her physical suffering is interwoven with visions of Christ’s passion, indicating the extent to which experience, coupled with a spirit of devotion, can open the visionary to a greater understanding of the incarnation. Her visions occur during an illness in which her body is paralyzed from the waist downwards and she is thought to be dead or dying. “After this the overe partye of my bodye begane to die, as to my felinge. . . . Than wende I sotheley to hafe bene atte the pointe of dede,” she writes (ST 2.33–36). In the extremity of her illness, her pain leaves her suddenly and she recalls her third wish, to have “felinge of his [Christ’s] blessede passion. . . . For I wolde that his paines ware my paines, with compassion and afterwarde langinge to God” (ST 3.3–4). The suffering brought about by her sickness, apparently in fulfillment of her second wish, initiates the devotional “wounding” desired in the third. This wounding is the compassionate suffering and identification that form the crux of her affective knowledge. Compassionate experience, brought about through the pain of her own illness—which mimetically becomes Christ’s pain—is intrinsically linked to a deepened understanding and awareness of Christ’s passion. The interdependence of her illness and her unitive experience is summarized by Denise Baker, who argues that Julian’s visions help her “to achieve an identification . . . [through] both a physical imitatio Christi through the pain of bodily sickness and a psychological participation in his suffering.”

Sickness and compassionate suffering merge in Julian’s visions: focusing on the crucifix brought before her during the reception of the Last Rites, she sees the figure of Jesus begin to bleed from under his crown of thorns (ST 3.10ff). The actual experience of the vision, born out of bodily suffering and generative of compassion, is the affective, physical ground of her visionary knowing.

As her youthful desires suggest, Julian sees compassionate suffering as a means of identifying with Christ’s passion and ultimately gaining a greater understanding of theological truth. Her text plays out this dynamic.

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12. Baker argues that Julian’s experiences and the sequence in which she undergoes them reflect a more or less standard “program” of affective spirituality and meditation on Christ’s wounds that was popularized in England by the Franciscan movement (*Julian*, 23–32).
Julian’s compassion for Christ, which is activated through her vision of his suffering body, gives her a greater awareness of the depth of sacrifice represented by the incarnation and crucifixion. This increased awareness is evident in revelation 1, when Julian sees the blood from the crown of thorns pouring over Jesus’ face:

...I saw the red bloud trekile downe from under the garlande, hote and freshely, plentuously and lively, right as it was in the time that the garland of thornes was pressed on his blessed head. Right so, both God and man, the same that sufferd for me. I conceived truly and mightly that it was himselfe that shewed it me, without any meane. (LT 4.1–5)

The structure of this passage reveals the prominence of the intellectus in her visionary knowing. Following upon the visual description, Julian “truly and mightly” grasps the reality underlying the vision. Her conviction that Christ “himself” is showing it to her and that in him are wed divinity and humanity comes directly out of her visual experience of his suffering. Further, she sees that she herself is implicated in the passion narrative, viscerally appreciating that her salvation is entailed by the crucifixion of Jesus. Affective experience triggers understanding, bringing Julian into a close relationship with the divine and giving her a deeper, felt knowledge of the incarnation.

Beyond simply gaining an appreciation for the reality of the crucifixion, Julian’s sensory and affective experience of Christ’s suffering and death initiates further insights. Immediately following the passage quoted above, for example, Julian describes how, “in the same shewing, sodeinly the trinity fulfilled my hart most of joy.” Through this sudden influx of happiness she “understode [that] it shall be [thus] in heaven without end, to all that shall come ther.” The joy of heaven immediately follows the pain of Christ’s bleeding, as the drama of suffering and redemption is enacted in Julian’s affect, reinforcing the unity of the human Christ and the divine Trinity: “the trinity is our endlesse joy and our blisse, by our lord Jesu Christ and in our lord Jesu Christ. . . . For wher Jhesu appireth the blessed trinity is understand, as to my sight” (LT 4.6–12). In these cases the vision leads to an infusion of knowledge through the intellectus by enabling Julian to viscerally identify with the events of Christ’s death. Lichtmann terms Julian’s emphasis upon the suffering humanity of Christ a “full-blown theology of sensualitye.”

will have no basis for knowing Christ at all.” Bringing Christ’s experience into her body instills in Julian a comprehensive, lived understanding of his passion, granting her a depth of theological knowledge presumably inaccessible to the reason.

While the experience of Christ’s suffering grants Julian an understanding that implies the infusion of knowledge through the *intellectus*, however, many of the revelations described in the Long Text are actually understood through the exercise of her *ratio*. Julian’s need for a long period of inward reflection guided by divine instruction in order to comprehend her visions presents a model of cogitation as a valid, even necessary, tool in the acquisition of visionary knowledge. Far from being inspired with a ready understanding of what she witnesses in her visions, often Julian must actively work to interpret her revelations in order for their meanings to become clear. The cognitive work in which she engages includes interpreting the symbolic content of her visions and meditating upon and developing that content. These activities, as largely rational processes, indicate Julian’s active mental engagement in the comprehension and elucidation of her experience.

The differences between the two versions of the *Showings* most clearly expose the importance of the *ratio* to Julian’s visionary knowing. She first recorded her visions in what is known as the Short Text of the *Showings*, and, while the exact date of this text’s composition is unknown, we do know that she composed the second version—the significantly expanded Long Text—about twenty years later (LT 51.73). In brief, the Short Text highlights the affective experience of the visions, while the additions included in the Long Text feature her interpretive and cognitive work. The degree to which reflection and interpretation were essential to Julian’s understanding is suggested, first, in the fact that she found it necessary to rewrite her text at all, and, second, in the types of changes that she makes in the second version of the *Showings*. The Long Text amplifies many of the explanations of her revelations and adds visual details and even whole episodes. The Parable of the Lord and the Servant, for example, is absent from the Short Text but forms a major part of Julian’s soteriology in the Long. Julian omits the parable from the Short Text because, she says, she did not properly under-

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15. Until recently, it was held that Julian wrote the Short Text in 1373, immediately following her visions. However, Nicholas Watson has argued that the Short Text was actually written significantly later, perhaps as late as 1388 or shortly before that year (Nicholas Watson, “The Composition of Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*,” *Speculum* 68.3 [1993]: 642). While we cannot say for certain when the text was composed, it is possible that Julian reflected upon her visions for some time prior to initially writing them down.
stand it when she first recorded her revelations. It was only after twenty years of meditation and “teching inwardly” that she came to recognize its significance (LT 51.73–4). The existence of the Long Text thus testifies to the role of reflection and interpretation in Julian’s visionary knowing.

In other respects, too, the Long Text exhibits a broader perspective upon the visionary experience than would have been possible in the Short Text, when the experience was still relatively new and her concomitant insights had not yet been fully explored.\textsuperscript{16} This is superficially reflected in the addition of a table of contents at the beginning of the Long Text and the more frequent cross-referencing between the numbered revelations;\textsuperscript{17} in addition, Julian’s memory, imagination, and descriptive abilities assume a more prominent role in the later redaction, resulting in the more vivid descriptions of Christ’s sufferings in the Long Text.\textsuperscript{18} Finally, the greater thematic unity of the visions, in which issues such as the purpose of sin and the prevalence of divine love are repeatedly stressed, suggests that the twenty years between the composition of the Short and the Long Texts were spent in active reflection upon her revelations.

By documenting her interpretive process, the Long Text vividly illustrates the cognitive processes that Julian engaged in as she developed a full understanding of the visions, thereby demonstrating the necessity of supplementing affective visionary experience with reflection and interpretation. The Long Text elaborates a complicated soteriology that seeks to explain the purpose of sin and the implications of the incarnation. In her later text, Julian repeatedly questions God in scenes that are absent from or shorter in the Short Text and actively works out the interpretive difficulties of her visions. The process of amplification and the intellectual development of her visions’ content can be seen, for example, in a comparison between the two versions of the third revelation. Both accounts of this revelation begin in roughly the same way, with Julian seeing that God “doth alle that is done,” but wondering, “What is sinne?” For I saw truly that God doth alle

\textsuperscript{16} Christopher Abbott describes Julian’s expansion of the visions into the Long Text as “mak[ing] public theological sense of her private visionary experience” (Christopher Abbott, \textit{Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology} [Rochester: D. S. Brewer, 1997] 7). He attributes the development of a more theologically complex account in the Long Text to a split between Julian’s participating and remembering selves. In the Long Text, he writes, “Julian evokes her own passage through a process of spiritual education. The presentation of such a process is predicated on a disjunction between the remembered and the remembering self, the latter understood to have a certain spiritual understanding which enables it to discern patterns of meaning, a grace of interpretation which the remembered self did not have, or not equally” (10–11).

\textsuperscript{17} For examples of this cross-referencing, see, e.g., LT 10.53, 34.19, 35.15, 52.30–1, 57.45, 77.26.

\textsuperscript{18} Baker, \textit{Julian}, 55.
thing, be it never so litile” (LT 11.4–5).\(^{19}\) After this introduction, however, the Short Text contains only a few sentences of explanation, while the Long Text expands for several pages upon the significance of sin’s absence from the vision. In the Short Text, Julian remarks on her puzzlement when “it semed to [her] that sinne is nought,” concluding, “And I walde no lenger mervelle of this, botte behalde oure lorde, whate he wolde shewe me. And in another time God shewed me whate sine es nakedlye be the selfe, as I shalle telle afterwarde” (ST 8.17–19). In this account, Julian defers the explanation of sin to a later part of the text. In the Long Text, by contrast, although she does, again, defer her full explanation of sin until later (returning to it in revelation 13), she nonetheless lays out her understanding of sin as “no dede,” adding that the perception of an act as good or evil comes from humankind’s limited comprehension, not from God (LT 11.14–41). While the Short Text is primarily concerned with the documentation of the vision, the Long Text expands upon the theological insight that it provided her.

Julian’s analysis of the Parable of the Lord and the Servant most fully reveals the centrality of reflection and interpretation to her visionary process. She does not include the parable in the Short Text, she notes, because she could not “take therein full understanding to m y ees in that time” (LT 51.56): her understanding of the parable was incomplete.\(^{20}\) Along with comprehension came the ability to record and describe her revelation. In a fundamental sense, Julian’s vision of the parable was not complete until she had accomplished the cognitive work necessary to understand it; only then could it be written. In fact, Julian’s process of comprehension is inscribed into the account of the vision. After relating the parable, she describes her initial ignorance of its meaning and the manner in which she came to understand it:

And thus in that time [when she received the vision] I stode mekille in unknowinge.\(^{21}\) For the fulle understanding of this mervelouse example was

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20. One could also surmise that she was apprehensive about including what Brad Peters calls a “powerful critique of her culture’s accepted teachings about sin” (Brad Peters, “A Genre Approach to Julian of Norwich’s Epistemology,” in Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays, ed. Sandra J. McEntire [New York: Garland Publishing, 1998] 141). The parable suggests that Adam’s fall into sin was not accomplished through any fault of his, but through love alone. In her comments surrounding the parable’s account in the Long Text, however, Julian claims that she did not wish to record a vision whose meaning she did not understand.
21. Baker’s edition of the text gives “thre knowynges” instead of “unknowing” (Julian of Norwich, The Showings of Julian of Norwich, ed. Denise N. Baker [New York: Norton, 2005], LT 51, p. 72. Watson and Jenkins’ notes on this passage point out that the Paris manuscript, on which Baker’s edition is based, does indeed read “thre knowynges”; they hypo-
not geven me in that time, in which misty example the privites of the revelation be yet mekille hid. . . . For twenty yere after the time of the shew-ing, save thre monethes, I had teching inwarde, as I shall sey: “It longeth to the to 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.” (LT 51.58–61, 73–76)

Julian was inwardly guided to observe with utmost attention the details of her vision, which were to lead to a fuller understanding of its meaning and significance. She thus returns to the vision in her mind, “seeing inwardly, with avisement, all the pointes and the propertes that were shewed in the same time, as ferforth as my wit and my understanding wolde serve” (LT 51.76–8). Careful meditation upon the details of the vision enables Julian to perceive the allegorical meanings concealed within them; thus, for example, she pays attention to the way that the lord sits, the servant’s position with respect to him, the clothes that they both wear, and so forth. Every attribute of the allegorical personages becomes significant in her interpretive practice. The fact that she includes her reflections upon such details in the account of her vision underscores the central role that contemplation plays in the unfolding of her revelations.

Implicit in Julian’s account of her interpretive process is the fact that such interpretation is required to understand the vision—to such an extent that it becomes, in a sense, a part of the visionary experience itself. The vision cannot be understood without allegorical exegesis; close attention to the details of the vision enables Julian to perceive the meanings underlying them. On the Lord’s response to the servant’s fall, for instance, she writes that “The rewth and the pity of the fader was of the falling of Adam, which is his most loved creature. The joy and the blisse was of the falling of his deerwurthy son, which is even with the fader” (LT 51.114–6). Initially, however, she is not aware of the necessity of performing such exegetical work. Her ignorance of the vision’s meaning prior to beginning this work implies that she does not know how to approach its signification, or, indeed, what interpretive practice it requires. Again, it is only with the divine instruction to carefully consider every characteristic and detail of the parable that she begins her interpretive process. Yet this process is inextricable from the meaning of the vision itself. Julian states that the vision has three aspects: “The furst is the beginning of teching that I understode
therin in the same time. The secunde is the inwarde lerning that I have understonde therein sithen. The third is alle the hole revelation, fro the beginning to the ende. . . .” Her initial understanding, her later allegorical understanding, and the vision itself are all “propertes” of the revelation. But these properties cannot be separated from one another; they are, she specifies, “so oned . . . that I can not nor may deperte them” (LT 51.64–8). Thus the interpretation of the parable, along with its original significance to her and the sequence of the vision itself, is an essential part of the revelatory experience as a whole. The visionary experience, in other words, does not end with the vision. It is only through sustained cognitive work that its meaning becomes apparent.

As is indicated by Julian’s references to “inwarde lerning” and “teching inwardly,” the process by which she comes to understand the parable is figured as an internal one. The impetus for this internal process is apparently divine, but the process itself depends upon Julian’s paying close attention to, and reflecting upon, the details of the vision. She is instructed to “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” (51.74–76). She then rehearses mentally “all the pointes and the propertes that were shewed” in the vision (51.77) in order to understand their meaning. The comprehension of the parable that she derives from this process depends in large measure upon her own mental activity. Inspired by God and under his direction, Julian examines each point of the vision until she comes to recognize its allegorical significance.

Julian’s questioning of those aspects of her text that seem to her unreasonable implicitly associates her analysis of the parable with the ratio. Of the servant’s ragged kirtle, for instance, she thinks, “This is now an unsemely clothing for the servant that is so heuly loved to stond in before so wurshipful a lord” (LT 51.145–46). In light of the servant’s importance to the lord, she finds his clothing unsuitable and is struck by the apparent discrepancy in the vision. Yet later this very discrepancy reveals the greater truth underlying the image: the tattered clothing of the servant represents Adam’s fall and, consequently, the humanity of Christ. “By the pore clothing as a laborer, stonding nere the left side, is understonde the manhode and Adam, with alle the mischefe and feblinesse that foloweth. For in alle this, oure good lorde shewed his owne son and Adam but one man” (LT 51.193–5). The perception of the discrepancy is dependent upon a process of rational deduction: it is unreasonable for a beloved servant to wear indecent clothing; thus, the fact that he is wearing rags indicates that there is a deeper meaning underlying his appearance—a meaning that is one of the cornerstones of Julian’s theology.
Despite the apparently orthodox assumption that women’s physicality made them largely incapable of rational intellection, then, cognitive work is essential to the understanding of at least some of Julian’s revelations, and the value of affective and sensory experience to her visionary knowing does not undercut the importance of such work. For this reason, I do not fully agree with Lichtmann when she argues that Julian “does not identify the person with the strictly rational dimension” and that her text presents “[f]eminine awareness as an alternative way of understanding and engaging reality, as an epistemology . . . [in] her constant recourse to the depth and concreteness of experience.” Although Lichtmann’s emphasis on the affective and the bodily is apt, her interpretation of Julian’s epistemology reiterates the body-mind dichotomy that the Showings undercuts. While it is true that Julian’s text does return, again and again, to the concrete facts of her experience, her epistemology involves far more than the repetition of that experience. Her understanding of transcendent reality develops out of her experience alongside meditation, reflection, and the interrogation of that experience. The Parable of the Lord and the Servant most clearly illustrates this fact, as Julian’s subsequent interpretation of her vision, during which she pays minute attention to its details, brings her to an understanding of its meaning that was totally inaccessible to her during the experience of the original showing. That arguably her most significant and controversial theological ideas come out of the parable further supports the importance of intellectual enquiry and reflection to Julian’s visionary practice.

II. “And yet I merveyled”:
Reason’s Inadequacy and the Limits of Revelation

Evident in the parable is the interdependence of the ratio and the intellectus. Repeatedly, Julian is seen to grasp a truth that had been obscure to her in a flash of insight that nonetheless comes out of the reasoning process described above. The knowledge apprehended by the intellectus seems to arise simultaneously out of her observations, ratio, and divine inspiration. For example, before the realization of the unity of Christ and Adam in the figure of the servant, Julian chronicles a point of uncertainty about the vision:

And yet I merveyled fro whens the servant came. For I saw in the lord that he hath within himselfe endlesse life and all manner of goodnes, save the

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22. Lichtmann, “‘God,’” 266.
tresure that was in the erth [and that the servant would henceforth strive
to uncover for his lord]. . . . And I understode not alle what this exampli-
ment, and therfore I marveyled from wens the servant came. (LT 51.172–4,
177–8)

Her uncertainty, however, gives way to a sudden flash of insight:

In the servant is comprehended the seconde person of the trinite, and in the
servant is comprehended Adam: that is to sey, all men. And therfore whan
I sey “the sonne,” it meneth the godhed . . . and whan I sey “the servant,” it
meneth Cristes manhode, which is rightful Adam. (LT 51.179–82)

There is no intervening text between these two passages; from uncertainty
and “marveling” Julian shifts into an authoritative voice, expounding in
definite, unwavering terms what had hitherto been incomprehensible to
her. These passages comprise a striking example of a process that occurs
frequently in Julian’s text when she sees or hears something and, from this,
understands a previously obscure truth. Understanding functions in Julian
as intellegere functions in Gertrude, but with the difference that the Show-
ings also stresses a preliminary process of rational deduction and exegesis.
Julian’s work of reasoning through the allegory of her vision has prepared
her for the flash of insight characteristic of revelation. In the case of the
parable, neither intellectus nor ratio is sufficient on its own: both faculties
must be engaged for Julian to understand her vision in its entirety.

The shift from ratio to intellectus indicates the limits of reason, the
point where the truth must simply be apprehended. Julian’s puzzling over
the meaning of the servant’s distance from his lord or the state of his cloth-
ing can lead her no further than she has already come; these details point
to paradoxes and inconsistencies within the rational structure of the vision.
The insight of the intellectus, presumably reached with the guidance and
aid of the divine, thus exceeds the limits of rational understanding. The
impossibility of fully understanding God without exceeding these limits is
consonant with Julian’s reflections upon reason’s inadequacy to behold the
dive in all things. Explaining the cause of humankind’s inability to rest
continuously in the “beholding” of God, she writes, “the use of oure reson
is now so blinde, so lowe, and so simple, that we can not know the high,
marvelous wisdom, the might, and the goodnes of the blisseful trinite”
(LT 32.11–13).²³ Divine wisdom simply surpasses the knowable reaches

²³. The idea of the intellectus as a continual beholding, or resting, is also found in Aqui-
nas (ST I: 79.8) and Dante (Paradiso XXIX.70–81).
of human reasoning. Without *intellectus*, this wisdom is unattainable, and *ratio* alone cannot lead us to the apprehension of divine truth. But the necessity of the *intellectus* does not diminish the role of the *ratio*. Without the use of her *ratio*, Julian would not have been suitably prepared for her final insights; nor would she be capable of understanding them.

Julian’s failure to comprehend—or even describe—the parable prior to undergoing a long period of rational and inspired contemplation underscores the interdependence of these two modes of knowing. This interdependence resonates with an important characteristic of Gertrude’s text: divine revelation alone is not always sufficient for understanding. Julian’s knowledge is generated in part through cognitive work of her own. That God authorized and initiated this work does not invalidate her intellectual agency; on the contrary, it validates its importance in her understanding of the revelations. Knowing, in Julian’s text, is achieved partly through direct divine instruction and partly through her own interpretive, exegetical abilities, as the foregrounding of her analytic process demonstrates. Remarkable for its requirement that Julian interpret her vision as a part of the process of achieving her revelation, the Parable of the Lord and the Servant strongly suggests that cognitive work is a legitimate and, at times, necessary means of comprehending divinely revealed truths. By only being included in the *Showings* after Julian has had the opportunity to meditate at length on its meaning, the parable demonstrates the importance of her own mental activity to the account of her visions: clearly, it is not enough simply to record what she saw.

The foregrounding of Julian herself as the witness to her visions, moreover, highlights the importance of her rational and cognitive faculties even in the moments where she receives knowledge through revelatory insight. Repeatedly in the *Showings*, she frames seeing and knowing as almost a part of the same action, implicating the development of knowledge within the visionary experience. At the beginning of revelation 3, for instance, she writes, “I beheld with avisement, seeing and knowing in that sight that he doth alle that is done” (LT 11.2–3). This blending of perceptual and cognitive actions reflects the process that Julian undergoes in explaining and, indeed, understanding her visions, as her accounts often combine descriptions of the visions with her thoughts about them. For example, a dialogue with Christ is followed by a vision of a three-tiered heaven:

In this feling, my understanding was lefte uppe into heven, and ther I saw thre hevens. Of which sight I was gretly merveyled, and thought: “I see thre hevens, and alle of the blissed manhed of Criste. And none is more, none is lesse, none is higher, none is lower, but even like in blisse.” (LT 22.6–9)
The vision itself is not enough: Julian’s observations lead her to the conclusions necessary for her to understand the showing. Julian’s text incorporates the sudden illumination of the *intellectus* with the knowledge attained through the exegetical interpretation of her visions.

Of course, such observations can be attributed in part to the minimal perceptual capacities that would seem to be necessary for one to receive a vision in the first place; a hopelessly obtuse visionary, incapable of perceiving even the equality of the three heavens before her, would be of little use to anyone. But Julian’s inclusion of herself as observer highlights the importance of the observing faculty. She could have written, simply, that she saw three heavens, of which no one was more nor less, higher nor lower, than the others; instead, however, she focuses on her reactions, her “marveling” and reflecting upon what she sees. In this way, her understanding is stressed almost as much as the vision itself. This is far from the “typical” visionary that Stephen Russell describes, who “generally disappears from his own text . . . the vision has nothing special to do with him—there is ideally no ‘him’ for the vision to have to do with—but a special communication to the world from God that merely uses this person as a medium.”

Julian is a medium for God’s message, but a medium that changes, adapts, and in part creates the message as it passes through her. By reflecting upon what she sees and then describing the results of that reflection, she emerges as something akin to a co-author of the *Showings* (and of the showings), striving to re-create for her readers both the passive (visual) and active (cognitive) aspects of the experience that she has undergone. This role is also a far cry from that suggested by the idea of woman as aligned with the physical body, incapable of working competently in matters of the intellect.

In Julian’s treatment of her sex, in fact, the Long Text suggests that the interval between the production of the short and long versions of the *Showings* gave her a greater degree of confidence in her intellectual abilities. The effacement of gender from the parable of Adam’s fall implies

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24. J. Stephen Russell, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1988) 48. See also Karen Scott’s discussion of Raymond of Capua’s representation of Catherine of Siena, which indicates the propensity of at least some medieval writers to figure visionary women as passive vessels filled by God. Scott writes: “Raymond’s repeated depiction of Catherine as a ‘dead’ body and as an empty vessel filled entirely with divine grace was meant to convince his audience that she was indeed a saint. To that end it was more important for him [Raymond of Capua] to show her [Catherine of Siena] in moments worthy of ‘admiration’ than of ‘imitation’” (Karen Scott, “Mystical Death, Bodily Death: Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua on the Mystic’s Encounter with God,” in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999] 143). Raymond’s practice clearly has significant implications both for the visionary’s agency and the possibility that others might emulate her.
this development as well, corresponding to her disregard for the gendered implications of the intellectual and rational faculties. In the Short Text, Julian’s brief apology for writing as a woman implicitly undermines whatever cognitive contribution she may have made to her text. She writes,

Botte God forbede that ye shulde saye or take it so that I am a techere. For I meene nought so, no I mente nevere so. For I am a woman, lewed, febille, and freylle. Botte I wate wele, this that I saye I hafe it of the shewinge of him that es soverayne techare. . . . Botte for I am a woman shulde I therfore leve that I shulde nought telle yowe the goodenes of God, sine that I sawe in that same time that it is his wille that it be knawen? And that shalle ye welle see in the same matere that folowes after, if itte be welle and trewlye taken. Thane shalle ye sone forgette me that am a wreche, and dose so that I lette yowe nought, and behalde Jhesu that is techare of alle. (ST 6.35–45)

Julian’s apology is an acceptance of her society’s view that under normal circumstances women should not take it upon themselves to instruct others. Although she expresses the conviction that she should “tell . . . the goodenes of god” despite her sex, she explicitly states that she is not to be taken as a “teacher.” Notably, this passage is absent from the later Long Text. In fact, there is in the Long Text no mention of her sex at all. There are several possible reasons for this omission. It could be that, by the time she wrote the Long Text, Julian had enough support from the Church and her community that she did not feel the need to protect herself from the charge of behaving in a manner inappropriate to her sex. It is also possible that the years of divinely sanctioned meditation and cognitive work increased her confidence in her role to the point where she felt certain enough of her message that she chose not to bother with such prefaces. Whatever the reason, the effect of this omission is that the author of the Long Text seems aware of the central role that her powers of interpretation play in the explanation and comprehension of her transcendent knowledge and does not denigrate those powers by apologizing for writing as a woman.

A similar change in Julian’s self-presentation is evident in the Short and Long Text descriptions of the three ways that she received her visions and of her role in transcribing them. Late in the Long Text, she explains that her showings came to her in three different guises:

Alle this blessed teching of oure lorde God was shewde by thre partes: that is to sey, by bodely sight, and by worde formed in mine understanding, and by gostely sighte. For the bodely sighte, I have saide as I sawe, as truly as I can. And for the words, I have saide them right as oure lorde shewde them
me. And for the gostely sight. . . . I am stered to sey more, and God wille
gave me grace. (LT 73.1–6)

The “more” that she is “stered to sey” is her elaboration upon various theo-
logical points that were illuminated for her in the course of her revelations.
The differences between this passage and the corresponding one in the
Short Text indicate a dramatic shift from the Short to the Long Text in terms
of where Julian locates the agency that enables her readers to comprehend
her experiences. The corresponding explanation comes much earlier in the
Short Text, shortly before the account of revelation 3. She writes,

Alle this blissede techinge of oure lorde God was shewed to me in thre
parties: that is, be bodiyle sight, and be worde formede in mine understand-
inge, and be gastelye sight. Botte the gastelye sight I maye nought ne can
nought shewe it unto yowe als oponlye and als fullye as I wolde. Botte I
truste in oure lorde God allemighty that he shalle, of his goodnes and for
youre love, make yowe to take it mare gastelye and mare swetly than I can
or maye telle it yowe. And so motte it be, for we are alle one in love. (ST
7.1–7)

In the Long Text, Julian stresses her role in describing the three different
types of vision, noting that some were easier to relate than others and that,
in order to recount the ghostly sights, she must rely to some extent upon
God’s grace. She even concedes that she “may nevyr fulle telle” these par-
ticular visions. Nonetheless, the focus is upon her role in producing the text
of her visions and in leading her readers to as full an understanding of them
as she can. In the Short Text, on the other hand, God is responsible for the
reader’s understanding her ghostly sights. In this earlier version, she says
merely that she cannot reveal what she understood in these visions as fully
as she would like and surrenders herself—and the reader—to God’s will,
hoping that he will illuminate devout readers regarding the substance of
these revelations. In the twenty years between the composition of the Short
and the Long Texts, Julian seems to have realized that her role in elaborat-
ing upon the visions is greater than she originally assumed. Her new role,
moreover, foregrounds her interpretive ability, as she strives to translate the
ephemeral quality of her ghostly visions into comprehensible, communi-
cable language.

Julian plays a major role in her visionary knowing. Her attainment of
knowledge involves the constant engagement of her intellectus and ratio,
and throughout the Showings her moments of inspired understanding are
followed by active questioning and interrogation. As Abbott argues, Julian
“does not merely bask . . . in a delicious state of mystical illumination.” When, for example, she suddenly “see[s] and know[s]” that God “doth alle that is done” (LT 11.2–3), she follows her revelation with an interrogation of the vision. Notes Abbott, “Beholding stimulates seeking, and her response to the third showing is a questioning one . . . as she thinks to herself, ‘What is synne?’” Alternating between intellectus and ratio, Julian moves ever closer to knowledge of the divine mysteries. Even the pairing of these two powers, however, is not sufficient for full understanding. The faculties of reason and intuitive apprehension are united with the sensual, bodily experience of Christ’s suffering. All of these aspects of her body and mind work together to allow the fullness of her knowledge to develop. Julian thus articulates a theory of knowing that melds the corporeal and the spiritual. This melding enables the affective visions that initiate her revelations and the cognitive processes used to comprehend those visions to merge into a single process of knowing that includes external and internal, bodily and “ghostly” experience, mirroring the union of divine and human in the figure of Christ.

III. Knowing and the Body

Fundamental to Julian’s conception of knowing is her view that the physical and the spiritual are not inherently in opposition. Rather, she sees humankind as being made up of two parts, the “higher,” which she calls the “substance,” and the “lower,” or “sensual.” The substance of the soul “never assented to sinne, ne never shall,” while the lower part is subject to the drives and desires of the flesh (LT 53.9–10). Nicholas Watson argues that this splitting of the human subject into two parts effectively shifts the blame for sin from the higher to the lower part, leaving the “substantial” soul blameless and perfect. But Julian envisions a future perfection in which the two halves of the human subject will be united in a single, fulfilled entity. “And thus,” she writes, “in our substance we be full and in oure sensualite we faile; which failing God wil restore and fulfil by werking of mercy and grace, plentuously flowing into us of his owne kinde goodhede” (LT 57.6–8). When considered alongside her understanding of sin as the fault of the inherently fallen “sensual” part of the soul, what emerges is a simultaneous validation of both aspects of humanity. This point is reinforced in the Parable of the Lord and the Servant, where Adam’s fall into

25. Abbott, 84.
sin is accomplished, paradoxically, through love and entails no lessening of God’s love for him. While the “substance” is already blameless and perfect, the “sensuality,” whose falling is inevitable and therefore effectively blameless, will be itself perfected by God, restoring humankind to an unfallen and sinless state.

Julian’s understanding of the corporeal as preordained for union with the spiritual contrasts with the suppression of the physical commonly found in contemplative mysticism. Denise Baker argues that the anchorite’s vision of wholeness “reaffirms the original integrity of self, the sacredness of sensuality as well as substance,” positing sin “as a division between the two parts of the soul as well as a temporary separation from God.”

But this is not to say that the corporeal is nothing more than an impediment to leading a devout life prior to its final perfection. By virtue of being the part of Christ that suffered for humanity’s salvation (LT 55.38–43), sensuality is naturally imbued with positive and even salvific characteristics. It is the sensual part of the soul that is “grounded in kinde, in mercy, and in grace, which ground eth us to receive giftes that leed us to endlesse life” (LT 55.18–19). It is impossible to read this passage without recalling Julian’s experiences at the beginning of the Showings, when her compassionate experience of Christ’s suffering and death, along with her illness, prepared the ground for the visions and transcendent knowledge that she henceforth dedicates much of her life to propagating for the benefit of her fellow Christians. Moreover, the fallible flesh that caused Adam to fall into the “ditch” is what enables him to work for God’s “treasure” in the soil (and, allegorically, the soul) (LT 51.163–8). Despite its shortcomings, Julian depicts corporeality as a necessary facet of the human soul’s movement towards the divine.

Rather than positing corporeality as irrevocably averse to visionary knowing, then, Julian shows the two working together, ultimately leading to a fuller understanding of Christ’s incarnation and the other theological insights that she gains through her visionary and meditative experiences. Julian’s visionary knowing relies upon a constant movement of interpretation that not only concerns the divine content of her visions but that also returns to the physical experience that prompted those visions. In the Long Text of the Showings, the constant circling back to the original bodily visions and experience of Christ’s suffering highlights the interdependence of corporeality and theological insight in Julian’s visionary knowing.

Julian’s use of the techniques of lectio divina is an emblem of the interdependence of the corporeal and the abstract, the affective and the rational, in her visionary knowing. Lectio divina is clearly important to her under-

standing of her visions; the fact that the visions are not literally “read” is unimportant. Julian returns again and again to the “text” of the visions, constantly seeking a greater comprehension of them. Re-visualizing the visions, repeating Christ’s words to herself, and expanding upon the meanings of those words leads the anchorite to an ever-deepening knowledge of their meanings. Her deepened understanding of the content of the visions can be seen in her amplifications of Christ’s message, as in the following passage:

And with this same chere of mirth and joy, our good lord loked downe on the right side, and brought to my minde where our lady stode in the time of his passion, and said: “Wilt thou see her?” And in this swete word, as if he had said: “I wot welle that thou wilt se my blessed mother, for after myselfe she is the highest joy that I might shewe the, and most liking and worshipe to me. And most she is desired to be seen of alle my blessed creatures.” (LT 25.1–6)

Expanding Christ’s locutions with the phrase “as if he said,” Julian moves beyond the superficial text of her visions to penetrate the mysteries lying within. The “as if” functions dually, attributing the new words to Christ while distinguishing them from what he actually said. Peters calls these additions “rejoinders,” noting that such phrases lead to the practice of *lectio divina*. Julian’s *lectio*, he argues, is grounded in the “dialectical principle” of her converse with Christ and “helps Julian systematically to expand the rejoinders, allowing her to explore ever more profoundly the knowledge that Christ imparts to her.”

The insight of the *intellectus*, the progression of dialogue and *ratio*, and meditation upon the effects of both are thereby wedded in Julian’s visionary knowing.

The process of *lectio* has the further effect of implicating Julian’s body into the visionary process. As I noted in the previous chapter, *lectio divina* is often described as a physical process that impresses the sacred text upon the mechanisms of the body, resulting in “a muscular memory of the words pronounced.” Furthermore, *lectio* helps the reader or speaker to internalize the text, bringing it into a kind of somatic relationship with the body. Joan Nuth elaborates upon the internalizing effect of Julian’s meditations upon the showings:

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29. Peters, 129.

In the context of prayer, Julian returns over and over again to the images and words of her revelations[,] allowing them to become part of her, through the memorization of detail that characterizes the meditatio, and through the relishing of the sudden insights given her in moments of contemplation.\footnote{Joan M. Nuth, \textit{Wisdom’s Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich} (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 38.}

To appreciate the physical implications of this practice, we must remember that Julian’s visions are, for the most part, overwhelmingly about Christ’s incarnation and his fleshliness; moreover, they were prompted by a physical illness. Returning to the visions again and again, Julian is not simply recalling the messages that she received, but the whole visionary experience. By continually circling back to the original experience of the sickness and visions, the anchorite maintains the primacy of the physical aspects of her experience as a means of meditating upon and delving into their meanings. Physicality is inextricable from the cognitive processes that are nonetheless necessary for her attainment of transcendent knowledge. For Julian, analytic reflection and interpretation, the cognitive work that gives rise to the fullest understanding of her visions, are interdependent with physicality. In the Long Text, affective and rational mysticism—\textit{intellectus} and \textit{ratio}—converge, creating a synthesis that gives rise to a fundamentally altered understanding of Christ’s incarnation and of theology.

The treatment of Julian’s cognitive processes in the \textit{Showings} demonstrates her ability to interpret and explain her visions, and her interpretive and cognitive work is ultimately a part of her visionary experience. Julian’s concern with re-creating her revelations for the benefit of her “even Christians” reinforces the usefulness of her path to transcendent understanding, and that path includes reflecting upon her visions as well as the visions themselves. By describing the process by which she came to understand her visions—inscribing it into her account of them—she emphasizes the utility of this process for the reader or auditor who seeks the same knowledge that Julian has acquired. In its totality, the visionary experience is both the reception of the visions and the process of meditating upon and coming to understand them. Julian thus expresses the conviction that intellectual and cognitive processes are an essential aspect of visionary knowing. In so doing, she emerges as an active participant in the generation of her revelatory knowledge and as a striking counter-example to the image of the visionary as a passive recipient of divine knowledge.
THE SHOWINGS illustrates Julian’s ability to bring her rational and interpretive abilities to bear upon the content of her visionary experience, as she employs both affective and intellectual means of understanding the vision’s message. Her use of her rational faculties, however, is divinely sanctioned: God instructs her to meditate upon the content of her visions, and the “inward teaching” that she receives during her reflections upon the Parable of the Lord and the Servant imply that divine guidance has helped her to understand its content. Moreover, the visions themselves are precipitated by an illness—a much-desired illness—that enables her to identify affectively with Christ as she experiences his sufferings mimetically in her own body. In chapter 3, I argued that Gertrude of Helfta’s volitional union with Christ forms the basis for her visions; it is the union of her will with that of the divine that validates her intellect and enables her to arrive at an understanding of God’s mysteries through reflection and meditation. Likewise, Marguerite d’Oingt’s prayer for understanding—her acknowledgment that she needs God’s help to understand the meaning of vehemens—indicates that submitting herself to the divine is requisite for her visionary knowing. In much the same way, Julian’s physical and affective union with Christ is what permits her visionary experience to occur. In short, none of these three visionaries exercises her cognitive faculties upon divine matters out of nowhere. All of them express a union with God and receive validation of their reflection and reasoning.

These three chapters illustrate a mode of visionary knowing that was available to women in the later Middle Ages. The writings of Marguerite, Gertrude, Julian work within the same basic understanding of the vision and its ability to convey knowledge. Their diversity—of geographic origin, intent, audience, and even temporality (Julian having written rather later than Gertrude or Marguerite)—suggests a continuity in medieval conceptions of the vision despite obvious differences between particular visionary texts. These texts also indicate that the vision provided a space in which medieval women could—and, at times, had to—engage in a discourse that reflects the philosophical discourses of their time. Julian’s text perhaps best exemplifies the union of affective and intellectual visionary modes, demonstrating the congruence of bodily and rational knowing; both Gertrude and Marguerite, however, also illustrate the possibility that visions with a strong physical or affective element were not adverse to reason and meditative contemplation. The gendered assumptions about knowing, reason, and the body are complicated and even challenged by these three texts, whose very diversity suggests a deeper complexity regarding such issues in later medieval Europe.
In the next few chapters, I will change tack. Where I have hitherto read the works of three fairly different visionary women from different contexts, I will consider a much narrower range of works: three male-authored dream vision poems all written in England at the end of the fourteenth century. These three poems demonstrate a remarkable similarity in their interrogation of the vision’s viability as a source of knowledge, although each takes a different approach to this issue. What I would like to suggest is that, while a definable account of what went into visionary knowing seems to have circulated within mystical vision texts of the late Middle Ages both on the Continent and in England, something starts to happen to the vision in late medieval England. In the epilogue, I will discuss some of the possible reasons for the troubled status of the vision in these English poems. The next three works, however, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which I discuss in chapter 8, stand apart from these vision texts in the uncertain stance that they take on the vision’s efficacy. And yet the version of the vision that they critique shares many characteristics with the women’s visionary texts discussed in these last three chapters. What all of this suggests is the extent to which some medieval women—typically thought to have been excluded from dominant discourses—actively participated in a tradition of vision writing of which these English poets were aware and to which they responded in their dream poetry.

In the next two chapters, I turn to dream vision poems that depict dreamers who struggle with their visions of the divine. *Pearl*, the subject of chapter 5, features a dreamer who does not particularly want a divine vision; his interest is in the dead maiden who attempts to turn his attention from her towards God. Her success in deflecting him away from the worldly desire for reunion with her physical being and towards the beatific vision of Christ has been much debated. Reading *Pearl* as a response to the visionary tradition, however, offers some insight into the reasons for the Maiden’s merely partial success. In chapter 6 I turn to *Piers Plowman*, which depicts a dreamer named Will who actively desires an affective, intuitive knowledge of Christ, but cannot seem to achieve it. Unlike the *Pearl*-dreamer, who does not particularly want a vision of God, Will goes to great (if occasionally misguided) lengths throughout his dreams to witness and understand the divine. But despite the dreamer’s intentions, the ending of *Piers*, too, is the subject of controversy, as it is ultimately unclear whether Will ever achieves the knowledge that he seeks. What these two poems have in common is the ambiguity of their visions’ conclusions. And the basis of that ambiguity, I will argue, is the dreamers’ lack of preparation for their visionary experiences. Unlike Marguerite, Gertrude, and Julian, who all receive some kind of divine sanctioning for their quests for knowledge,
Will and the *Pearl*-dreamer are singularly unprepared. The *Pearl*-dreamer is still obsessed with the dead Maiden and actively resists seeing his vision as pertaining to the divine, while Will is—among other things—mistaken in his fundamental approach to Christ, whom (despite his protestations) he attempts to know rationally rather than by turning inwards to examine his own conscience and behavior.

Dream visions, then, have the capacity to show us visionaries who are *not* equipped to engage appropriately with their visions. Their fictionality means that their authors are free to represent hapless and misguided dreamers whose paths to visionary knowing are troubled and confused, but who nonetheless persist in their efforts to understand their visions. In their depictions of troubled dreamers, moreover, *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman* also indicate the importance of active engagement with the visionary experience. The reason that Will and the *Pearl*-dreamer run into such trouble is that they do not know the proper way to engage with their visions. Merely witnessing the vision is not enough; neither dreamer is simply imbued with knowledge. Instead, their minds actually get in the way, as when the *Pearl*-dreamer tries to rewrite the Maiden’s message in material and worldly terms and Will argues bitterly with Scripture. These texts, then, demonstrate the importance of the visionary’s active cognitive and interpretive work. When that work is misguided, they suggest, the vision can go wrong—leaving the visionary unsettled, confused, and perhaps no closer to God. These misguided dreamers demonstrate the possibility that the visionary knowing practiced by Marguerite, Gertrude, and Julian might fail.