

The Julian Lecture 2011

# **From Soldier of Christ to Motherhood of God**

**Julian Rewrites the Language of the Anchorhold**



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## [2] **From Soldier of Christ to Motherhood of God: Julian Rewrites the Language of the Anchorhold**

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I wish to start this lecture today, not with Julian, but with another extraordinary woman, Gertrude Bell, who, writing to her father from the desert at Kureifeh on Wednesday, May 15 1900, attempts to articulate the extraordinary silence she had experienced there: "Shall I tell you my chief impression?", she asks him. "The silence. It is like the silence of mountain tops, but more intense, for there you know the sound of wind and far away water and falling ice and stones; there is a sort of echo of sound there, you know it, Father. But, here, nothing."<sup>1</sup> In this extract, Bell experiences the silence and solitude of the desert in terms of an empty nothingness, a non-space waiting to be filled, a place-in-waiting where, liminal to the rest of the world, the human being actually has a chance of becoming or of being reborn into a new kind of selfhood. Many years later, Bell would embellish this description, identifying the desert as some kind of original homeland, a place where silence and solitude separate the human off from the world, providing a veil behind which a different type of *being* is possible. As Bell continues in her letter:

*Already I have dropped back into the desert as if it were my own place; silence and solitude fall round you like an impenetrable veil.*<sup>2</sup>

Such imagery of silence, solitude, homecoming and veiling used by Bell to relay her experiences of this empty, but remarkably transformative landscape, has long been associated with what is deemed to be culturally feminine. Indeed, Bell both experiences and personifies the desert landscape as feminine, so as to bring about a

type of intimate <sup>[3]</sup>union between herself as a woman and that expanse in which she finds herself suddenly alone. For the medievalist, Bell's response cannot help but summon up images of the medieval anchorite - and Julian of Norwich in particular - who responds in similar ways to her own solitude, her own 'desert' longings and ultimate homecoming within her Norwich anchorhold. Indeed, for late-medieval anchorites such as Julian, the anchoritic cell was their figurative desert, their own empty space within which they could encounter the same type of silence, solitude and veiling as experienced so profoundly by Gertrude Bell. Nevertheless, it is clear from the extant evidence that female anchorites understood the desert of the anchorhold in very different terms from their male counterparts.

The conception of the desert as a feminine space is frequently echoed in early writings by and about the first anchorites. John Cassian, for example, himself a one-time anchorite writing in the fifth century, on occasion envisages the desert expanse as a womb, an apparently barren space which is nevertheless rendered spiritually fertile because of the anchorite's penetrative interaction with it. For example, the desert constitutes a 'more expansive vastness' which the anchorite should seek out 'with insatiable desire' and within which he is 'seized with heavenly ecstasies',<sup>3</sup> 'ecstasies which will eventually produce 'the fruits of the solitary life'.<sup>4</sup> If, as Lorraine Dowler has asserted in more recent times, 'landscape not only reflects certain moral codes but performs as a medium to perpetuate socially constructed gender stereotyping',<sup>5</sup> then Cassian's configuration clearly genders the desert as feminine, whilst the allusions to the anchorite's ecstasy and fruitfulness allow him to retain metaphorically one of the prevalent cultural markers of the type <sup>[4]</sup>of masculinity he has had to relinquish, that is to say a

dominant heterosexual role as active pursuer of women and the producer of offspring.

Similarly, the German Benedictine monk, Grimlaicus of Metz, writing a rule for male anchorites in the tenth century, envisaged the desert as a bottomless ocean or lake, a womb-like expanse which presents a threat to the male recluse who has therefore to dominate it, again by a discursive reassertion of his own cultural masculinity. The solitary is, for example, like a 'man standing over a deep lake';<sup>6</sup> the anchoritic life 'is as though someone were crossing over a river on a very narrow bridge'.<sup>7</sup> For Grimlaicus, the male anchorite and the space he occupies are threatened and buffeted by the vast waters of the earth, images which also have long had strong cultural associations with the feminine, a feminine, moreover, which is both powerful and voracious and which must therefore be kept in check. Like a woman, both desert and ocean were deemed unpredictable, negatively charged, constantly shifting and changing in format, appearance and in the threat they posed to male notions of stability.<sup>8</sup> However, in more recent times the negative connotations of such gendered imagery have been challenged by philosophers such as Luce Irigaray, who presents female changeability in a much more affirming light. For Irigaray, a woman's bodily ability to ebb and flow forms 'an indefinite flood [that] allows her continually <sup>[5]</sup>to become something else'.<sup>9</sup> For this writer, a changeable female morphology is both productive of new ways of thinking and being something which resonates clearly with the type of perpetual new 'becoming' which Gertrude Bell recognised as part of the vast desert spaces she experienced. It follows that, read affirmatively rather than negatively, a woman's biology and cultural attitudes towards it, rendered her inherently more suited to the anchoritic or the mystical life, both of which were deemed also to be the site of perpetual new becomings. Indeed, as Irigaray argues of female mysticism, it is 'the only place in

the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly.<sup>10</sup> Thus, for a man wishing to experience the same thing, enter the same space as the female mystic, according to Irigaray he must give himself up and follow her lead entirely, discard what Irigaray terms his own 'phallic' metaphors of penetration and domination of his environment and engage instead with the language of an enclosed and enclosing female body and the alternative metaphors *it* generates.

This, however, is something which John Cassian and Grimlaicus of Metz fail entirely to do. Whilst for them the desert certainly constitutes a kind of homecoming, it is also the site of a permanent threat to male anchoritic spirituality and must therefore be penetrated, dominated, overcome, become fruitful by the anchorite's interaction with it. In addition, both authors also configure the male anchorite in definitively militaristic terms. For example, the recluse's primary role is to fight perpetually against temptation by means of a personalised combat with evil. Moreover, such temptation is often personified as a sexually seductive woman, the dangerous womb-landscape of the desert fearfully embodied, as it were. Fully in keeping with the exhortation of St Paul in Ephesians 6: 11-17, 'Put you on the armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil', the male anchorite must become the ultimate *miles Christi*,<sup>[6]</sup> the soldier of Christ who will perpetually fight off temptation, just as his worldly counterparts repel their mortal enemies within the world. For Cassian, the desert anchorite should therefore conduct himself 'like those who are accustomed to handling weapons of war' and, in similar vein, Grimlaicus exhorts *his* anchorites to 'fight against the devil', enter the 'battle line' and engage in 'single combat'.<sup>11</sup> Even the late fourteenth-century English guidance text for male anchorites. *Speculum Inclusorum* [Mirror of Recluses], probably a Carthusian work and roughly contemporaneous

with Julian's own, is everywhere emphatic that its male audience should consider themselves 'soldiers of Christ' or 'gentle knights of Jesus Christ' who are fully armed against the hordes of Satan, actively taking on sin with their swords and engaging in one- to-one armed combat with temptation and evil.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst I am not arguing that such imagery is singular to male anchoritic texts - on the contrary, such militaristic imagery forms a common topos in coenobitic writing far more widely- nevertheless it certainly takes on an increased urgency, hyperbole even, in texts for male anchorites, serving as a primary identity machine. Far from merely providing a metaphor for their anchoritic role (although it certainly does that too), such a powerfully militaristic configuration allows the male anchorite to retain a sense of elite masculinity which would otherwise be in danger of being consumed within the deeply feminine, womb-like space of the desert- or the anchorhold as its medieval equivalent. Such hermeneutics of military combat are, of course, startlingly absent in the writing of Julian of Norwich, corroborating, perhaps, Irigaray's argument that the female mystic is one who has broken free of male ways of thinking and self-expression and who has moved into another more feminine linguistic realm behind the veil of a deeply personal mystical encounter.

Male anxieties concerning this veiled, feminine space are much more explicitly revealed in those male-authored guidance texts directed [7]specifically at *female* anchorites, however. Underpinning all of these works was the assumption that women were always already fallen beings, embodying Eve's legacy as weaker, frailer, changeable, more bodily, more permeable, and thus in need of greater policing, in spite of - or perhaps because of their call to the anchoritic life. The most widely circulated of such texts was the early thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* [Guide for anchoresses] written in the west Midlands

initially for three anchoritic women but very soon amended and adapted by the author for a much wider group of female anchorites. By Julian's day, this text had been copied, adapted, rewritten and excerpted for a range of different audiences, both religious and lay, male and female, and Julian was almost certainly familiar with some version of it. Whilst nowhere in this text is the female anchorite depicted as a military campaigner, what does pervade it is a depiction of anchoritic femininity as haunted by an ontological female monstrosity brought about by cultural beliefs in a woman's predisposition for sin.

Therefore, unlike the external enemy with whom the male anchorite has to contend, the woman's conflict is endlessly played out within her own potentially monstrous body itself. In Part Four of *Ancrene Wisse*, for example, which deals with the danger posed to the female anchorite by the seven deadly sins, her anchorhold is transformed into a post-Edenic wilderness occupied by myriad wild beasts. Nor is this wilderness the ascetic desert of Cassian and the first anchorites who were encouraged to become soldiers of Christ within it: for the lone woman the desert is a dangerous interspace, a place of prowling anthropomorphised sins with voracious appetites intent on entering and consuming her in an act of monstrous miscegenation. As the author reminds her:

*The 'wilderness' is the solitary life of the anchoress's cell. [...] There are many evil beasts in this wilderness: the lion of pride, the serpent of poisonous envy, the unicorn of wrath, the bear of mortal sloth, the fox of avarice, the sow of gluttony, the scorpion with its tail of stinging lechery, that is, lust.*<sup>13</sup>

Here, the anchorite's wilderness is both her cell *and* her own body, and the monstrous, prowling animals are the devil in his different



guises <sup>[8]</sup>who will make her, as the author goes on to suggest, the 'devil's whore', if she does not seal up her body against him.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in his discussion of the dangers of 'stinging lechery', the author collapses monster and anchoress into one another, inscribing upon the resultant hybrid the face of a woman:

*The scorpion is a kind of snake which has a face, so it is said, rather like a woman, and is a snake behind. It attracts and beguiles with its head, and stings with its tail. This is lechery; this is the devil's beast.*<sup>15</sup>

The specific characteristics attributed to this creature are wholly negative and clearly allied to cultural notions of the feminine: 'giggling laughter'; 'wanton glances'; 'seductive gestures'; 'provocative words'; 'talk about love'; and 'indecent fondling', are attributed to it, all of which take the reader directly back to fundamental fears regarding the ways in which women and their bodies have the capacity to undermine male religious culture. For this reason, unlike the male anchorite, the female anchorite is exhorted to seal up the doorways of her own body and her cell because of the threat posed to the desired integrity of both, thus collapsing body and cell entirely into one another:

*The embrasures of the castle are her house windows. She should not look out of them in case she gets the devil's bolts right in the eyes when she least expects it, since he is constantly attacking. She should keep her eyes inside, because if she is blinded first, she is easily knocked down [...] Her eyes might easily be called 'harm windows' since they have done a great deal of harm to many anchoresses [...] Now, for this reason all the openings of all your windows should be closed in the future, just as they have been in the past, so no men can*

*see in.*<sup>16</sup>

Here, there is little distinction made between the anchoress and her cell: her eyes are its windows, her body its walls, and both are always in danger of being penetrated and overcome. Thus the cultural investment in the female anchorite made at this particular moment begins to reveal <sup>[9]</sup>itself in very different terms from that of her male counterpart, in whose texts the militaristic anchorite as miles Christi is able to fight off such a threat of bodily penetration with his phallic sword or spear, rather than having to hide away from it.

As mentioned, Julian was almost certainly familiar with *Ancrene Wisse* in one of its late-medieval recensions and I consider it highly likely that her own treatment of the predatory fiend in her own writing provides a concerted response to those antifeminist warnings issued by the *Ancrene Wisse* author in his text.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, instead of merely accepting the vulnerability and openness of her body to diabolic onslaught and fearing it, Julian in fact renders 'her' devil a figure of scorn and impotence, taking her lead from Christ and responding to the devil's 'non-threat' with laughter, rather than fear:

*I saw our lord scorn [the devil's] malice and make nothing of his impotence, and he wishes that we do the same. For at this sight, I laughed mightily and that made those who stood about me laugh, and their laughing gave me pleasure and I thought I wanted all my evencristen to see as I did. Then they should all have laughed with me.*<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, it is also likely that Julian's development of God's motherhood in the *Long Text* (to which I return below) is indebted in part to Part 7 of *Ancrene Wisse*, where the author explicitly compares Christ to a loving mother who would willingly prepare for her own

child a 'bath of blood' if she thought it would cure that child of an <sup>[10]</sup>illness.<sup>19</sup> Julian's conception of good lordship, too, which pervades both the *Short* and the *Long Text* (but which makes its presence particularly felt in the *Long Text's* parable of the Lord and Servant), was also likely influenced by *Ancrene Wisse's* configuration of Christ as a good lord, also in Part 7. Here the lord assertively woos his anchoritic Lady thus: 'Am I not the handsomest of men? Am I not the richest of kings? Am I not the noblest of ancestry? Am I not the wisest of the wise? Am I not the most courteous of men? Am I not the most generous of men? [...] Am I not the sweetest and most fragrant of all things?"<sup>20</sup> These rhetorical questions resonantly invoke Christ's famously lyrical profession to Julian in Chapter 13 of the *Short Text* and Chapter 26 of the *Long Text* which reads: 'I it am, I it am. I it am that is highest. I it am that you love. I it am that you like. I it am that you serve. I it am that you long for. I it am that you desire.' However, whereas *Ancrene Wisse's* Christ is, as Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins have pointed out, 'aggressively masculine' and 'militaristic in his lordship',<sup>21</sup> Julian's Christ is gentle and feminised in his and, one could argue, more maternal than paternal in his self-identification. Indeed, his words are far more in keeping with the insistently maternal God which Julian will explicitly invoke later in the *Long Text*, a depiction which, as I shall argue, also serves to erase the relentlessly misogynistic attitude to the female body which Julian would have inherited from texts like *Ancrene Wisse*.

The crucial question which this begs here, therefore, is how female anchorites such as Julian themselves read and interpreted such negatively-weighted guidance material. Did they simply assimilate these <sup>[11]</sup>misogynistic discourses and try to work around them, or did they read such texts selectively, 'against the grain' as it were? In view of the fact that, as we have seen, anchoritic enclosure, so popular amongst women in the later period, was designed *per se* to bring

about another way of seeing and another way of being, could it also bring about another way of seeing, being *and writing* about *a female* body as an image of God?

In her own attempt to answer such questions, Luce Irigaray has suggested that women should *always* attempt to 'read against the grain' in order to uncover what she terms a 'non-phallic' language with which to express a specifically female perspective on the world. Moreover, just like Julian, Irigaray sees this non-phallic language as imbricated by maternal femininity which, rather than seeking to repress and dominate, instead embraces and nurtures, ultimately producing as its offspring a non-threatening human cohesion through 'love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious'.<sup>22</sup> For Irigaray, this is the only language which will allow women to express adequately their own desires, rather than those prescribed for them and thus helps to counter the type of misogyny so prevalent in traditional male-authored texts, of which Ancrene Wisse is a prime example. In Irigaray's words:

*We have to discover a language which does not replace the bodily encounter [with the mother], as paternal language attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal.*<sup>23</sup>

To this end, it is highly relevant that Julian's writing actually *begins* with a concerted statement of a corporeal female desire when she announces: 'I desired three graces by the gift of God', a desire, moreover, which Julian allies to an insatiable 'feeling' rather than to rational, finite, intellectual, male-identified - and what Irigaray would term 'phallic' - thinking: 'I thought I had a great feeling for the [12]passion of Christ but yet I desired to have more'.<sup>24</sup> Here Julian echoes closely what Irigaray understands as the insatiability of the

female mystic's desire but, rather than such an excess of female desire being rendered taboo, Julian requires that it be given full rein: indeed, she repeats the statement 'I desired' more than ten times in the first chapter of the Short Text alone, making it quite clear that this is to be an account of an experience predicated on her own unbridled female desire, which she insists is both feeling-oriented *and* legitimate.

The same can be said of Chapter 6 too where Julian uses this same assertive technique in her famous admission to being 'a woman, lewd, feeble and frail'. Here she is clearly toying with cultural notions of women's inherent weakness as promoted in a myriad of texts to which she would have had access, *Ancrene Wisse* included. Yet Julian immediately qualifies this self-assessment, offering another way of seeing and being a woman by asserting her right to speak out about the mystical insights to which she has been privy, whatever cultural views on the appropriateness of this may be: 'But because I am a woman,' she adds, 'should I therefore believe that I should not tell you about the goodness of God, since I saw at that same time that it is his will that it be known.'<sup>25</sup> This entire statement is usually read as part of a traditional humility topos, entirely typical of Julian's self-effacing nature. However, I suggest that behind the benign surface of Julian's use of this topos is a far more confident and self-assertive statement concerning her utter refusal to believe that she does not have a *right* as a woman to speak out about her mystical experiences which have been received from God and experienced by and within her female body. These experiences, deemed to be a response to her statements of desire, clearly belie cultural assertions of women's inferiority and lack of spiritual or literary authority and Julian therefore challenges these apparent givens by means of a diffusing and syntactically complex rhetorical question ('Because I am a woman, should I therefore believe that I should not tell you?'). Thus,

for Julian, from the start, female desire and God's response to it are productive of a deeply experiential female authority, <sup>[13]</sup> something which certainly runs counter to what we have seen in *Ancrene Wisse*, where any female authority is shaped entirely by a male author wishing also to shape her body and its responses according to his own 'phallic' discourses.

Julian's sense of her own weakness both here and elsewhere, then, is far more than humility topos. Indeed, from the outset she is foregrounding a desiring and suffering female body in order to attempt an articulation of the electrifying mystical encounters which are clearly predicated upon it. Moreover, it is that same body which both experiences those encounters and is used by Julian to interpret them for her audience. Indeed, Julian will be compelled over the next forty years or so of her life, much of it within the womb-like anchorhold, to develop a powerfully evocative language of the feminine to articulate those experiences as they were lived and understood by her as woman. Not for Julian, therefore, is the conventional discourse of miles Christi with its spears and swords, battles and beatings; nor, indeed is she interested in a female body as the site of sin as the insistent gender politics of the day would have it be. 'It seemed to me that sin is nothing,' she says, 'for in all this, sin was not shown to me'.<sup>26</sup> Instead, in both the Short and Long Texts, Julian seeks out a language which will best reflect the femininity of her experiences and insights and, crucially, render them authoritative enough for them to be received and understood by her *evencristen*.

We see this fully at play, again in the *Short Text*, in Julian's account of the major, life-threatening illness which triggers the onset of her mystical experiences. This illness results in extreme pain and bodily paralysis which she endured, Christ-like, for three days and three

nights, taking her to the brink of death: 'on the third night I thought many times I was about to die, and so thought those who stood near me',<sup>27</sup> Here, Julian is intent not only on stressing the severity of her illness from her own perspective but also presents it from the perspective of those witnessing it alongside her ('and so thought those who stood near me'). In what aptly constitutes a type of "double-vision", Julian casts <sup>[14]</sup>herself as a type of affective spectacle whose suffering body is there to be 'read' - or even 'misread' - by her onlookers in terms of a traditional, male-authored hagiography; but she also offers the scene to us from her own, internal viewpoint to give us a privileged introit into the extraordinary female-ciphered revelations which are to follow.

According to the *Short Text*, one of these sickroom onlookers is Julian's own mother who mistakenly thinks her daughter has died: 'My mother who was standing with the others and looking at me, lifted up her hand to my face to close my eyes. For she believed me to be dead, or else had just died.'<sup>28</sup> This deeply moving and intimate woman-to-woman moment, is both female-focussed and deeply maternal, extending also to encompass the architecture of the sickroom itself which encloses these two suffering women like a womb. As such, it is a space utterly redolent with anchoritic associations within which Julian's greatest desires are concurrently being fulfilled and within which she is to be reborn into mystical understanding. Within this anchoritic womb, therefore, it is wholly appropriate that it should be Julian's mother who forms the bridge for her daughter to pass between the here-and-now to the realm of the mystical domain beyond. Viewing her mother's anguish from her own helpless perspective leads Julian to read it directly in terms of the anguish of the Virgin whose pain upon seeing her own son's suffering was caused by the commonality of their flesh and the unity of their love: 'Crist and she [Mary] were so united [anede] in love that

the greatness of her love was the cause of the magnitude of her pain.<sup>29</sup> Julian's use of the verb '*oned*' or '*anede*' here is typically multifaceted and its maternal associations are again clear (Christ's humanity is one with his mother's flesh), associations which serve to destabilise the hierarchical gender binary of male/female which dominates traditional discourse (and tends to privilege the masculine over the feminine). Within Julian's universe they are one and equal. In this context, too, the term '*oned*' is freighted with echoes of primary unity, that is to say one-ness with the mother, that maternal space which prefigures language and ultimately evades conscious memory. Nor is <sup>[15]</sup>this space necessarily the womb - although it is that too: instead it is a metaphysical space occupied by the child before she recognises that she is a separate being from the mother and must forever make her way alone. For the philosopher, Julia Kristeva, this space is deemed the *chora* - a pre-conscious, enclosed and sealed site of unity with the mother which underpins all human existence and, once lost, produces forever a longing for a figurative 'homecoming'. It is also the lost space somewhere behind the veil of human existence which anchoritic mysticism seeks, in some way, to recapture.<sup>30</sup>

As such, it is ideally positioned to provide an insight into how an experience of mystical unity with God, an experience ultimately inexpressible in a language derived from male philosophies and scholastic discourses, may yet be articulated in other more subtle and appropriate ways. Union with the mother, after all, like God, pre-exists a child's coming to language and is known by the body long before language attempts to articulate it. Union with the mother, therefore, forms the basis for a far more eloquent expression of an anchoritic desire which leads to mystical unity with a maternal God than do any images of soldiers, war-leaders or, indeed, sealed up and passive female bodies.



It is therefore clear that, from this early stage in the Short Text, Julian is reading her visionary insights in terms of the feminine and the female, plumbing her own experiences, both mediated and unmediated, of being a woman of the 'vulnerable flesh'. She also harvests her relationship with her own mother for a suitable hermeneutic with which to articulate her highly complex mystical insights which seem to lie outside the world of men and the phallic economy. In drawing initially on traditional models of femininity, weakness, vulnerability, <sup>[16]</sup>hagiographic suffering, and manoeuvring them in and out of spaces of enclosure, Julian reconfigures their scope. In so doing, she destabilises the hegemony of the male-authored perspective she would doubtless have inherited, and ultimately produces a 'new' language saturated with the poetics of femininity far better suited to express an intensely female-embodied experience of mystical unity.

This is also true of Julian's visceral representations of other abject bodies in her texts, both Christic and human. Moreover, like those 'dangerous' and monstrous female bodies in *Ancrene Wisse*, these bodies tend to be open, flowing, penetrated, in flux, but in Julian's hands are redeemed and salvific. Christ's body gapes, exuding rivers of blood and water that threaten to engulf Julian's bed; a visionary child's body splits wide to release the soul housed within; and, in one utterly extraordinary passage appearing only in a single witness to the *Long Text*, Julian articulates her perception of the goodness of God again in terms of the open and abject body:

*For the goodness of God [...] comes down to us, to the lowest part of our need [...]. A man goes upright and the waste of his body is emptied like a very beautiful purse. And when the necessary time comes for him, it is opened and emptied again very honestly. And that it is [God] who does this is shown*

*there where he says: 'He comes down to us to the lowest part of our need'. For he has no resentment for what he has made, nor does he have any distain about serving us in the simplest office that belongs to our bodily nature, for love of the soul he has made in our own likeness. For, as the body is clothed in cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and bones in the flesh, and the heart in the chest, so are we, soul (and waste) and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God.<sup>31</sup>*

In this extract Julian reveals how God, in full maternal fashion, nurtures us in our helpless abjection and necessity, that is to say, 'in the lowest part of our need', a need, of course, which unites all humans, regardless of age, sex, gender or socio-religious status. Here we, along with Julian and her *evencristen*, are configured as the helpless human <sup>[17]</sup>infant, entirely dependent upon the mother and locked in a fleeting space of pre-separation with her until the inevitable entry into the world. of language and culture brings about permanent disruption of that unity and ultimately loss and individuation. Thus, Julian's daring and exposed account of the defecating body can again be read in terms of the poetics of primary unity bubbling up through the language used to configure it. Not only is the body a purse opening to spare its waste ('soule'), even that waste becomes synonymous with the beauty of the human soul (also 'soule'). It follows, therefore, that the very waste matter voided by the body, just like the child birthed by the mother, is made, like the soul, in the image of God-our-Mother. This act of human abjection, therefore, offers the reader a further introit into the complex and female-focused mystical theology of unity with which Julian completes this extract: 'so are we, *soule* and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God', a statement, of course, which utterly transforms the threatening and destructive female body of *Ancrene Wisse*.

Such a multivalent - and often startling - poetics of femininity within Julian's writing is far more than mere linguistic strategy, however: it is integral to her conflation of female desire, maternal femininity and enclosure which she uses to rewrite the language of the anchorhold in a way which denies the dominance of the 'phallic', militaristic language of her male forbears. Instead, she produces a language which indeed goes along with the bodily encounter with the mother, rather than denying it, a language which articulates the authority of a fully embodied femininity, a site where, in Amy Hollywood's words, 'endless, ceaseless, illimitable desire might be thought and lived outside of a phallic law of [female] impotence'.<sup>32</sup> As a result, writing years later within her own anchorhold, Julian has already found the means to express her daring and fully thought through theology of a maternal God, culminating, perhaps in these words:

*[18] Our lady is our mother in whom we are all enclosed and from her we are born in Christ. For she that is mother of our saviour is mother of all who are saved in our saviour. And our saviour is our very mother in whom we are endlessly born and never shall come out of him.*<sup>33</sup>

The complex conflation in this extract of 'lady', 'mother', 'we', 'Christ', 'saviour', 'him' points towards the unity of a mystical encounter with God in which an all-gender oneness, brought about by an inscription of the maternal feminine, may be endlessly generated, defined and experienced; a oneness in which all is therefore possible; a unity which is simultaneously before, within, and beyond language and which, like Julian's God and the earthly mother, is 'the endless fulfilling of all true desires'.<sup>34</sup> For, in Julian's universe, the elision of difference is ultimately productive of a third category - all that there is: 'for all our life is in three', she tells us.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, it is 'nature', 'mercy', and "grace"; it is 'our father [...] our mother, and [...] our lord',

tripartite equations which ultimately subsume the opposing *miles Christi* and corrupt female body of Julian's precursors redemptively into 'our natural mother [...] in whom we are grounded and rooted'.<sup>36</sup> Such a remarkable disruption of traditional language, logic and imagery by Julian is thus fully productive of the type of 'non-phallic' language called for by Irigaray which I cited earlier and which, as we have seen, ultimately serves to counter the relentless antifeminism found within those anchoritic texts to which Julian would have had access. As a language which emerges from unmediated female bodily experiences, as a language which is toyed with and endlessly processed by Julian within the space of the anchorhold, it does not deny the corporeal but, quite clearly, 'goes along with it'. As such, it is ideally placed to express a 'vision showed to a devout woman'<sup>37</sup> as closely as possible and to <sup>[19]</sup>absorb and negate any intimation of the type of negatively-charged femininity which haunted male-authored anchoritic texts. Ultimately, Julian's visionary language of unity and love allow her, like Gertrude Bell with whom I began this lecture, to drop back into the desert as if it were her own place - a place where the language of the miles Christi and the monster cedes to that of a maternal, all-loving God.

*Liz Herbert McAvoy*



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<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks04/0400341h.html>
2. Bell, op. cit..
3. Cassian, John (1997). *The Conferences*, ed. Ramsey, Boniface, OP. New York and Mawah. XIX.v.i, p. 672.
4. Cassian, *Conferences*, XIX.iv.3, p. 672.
5. Dowler, Lorraine; Carrubia, Josephine; Szczygiel, Bonj (editors) (2005). *Gender and Landscape: Renegotiating Landscape and Space*. London; New York: Routledge. p. 1.
6. Thornton, Andrew (translator) (forthcoming). *Rule of Grimlaicus*. Kalamazoo, Michigan. Chapter 14. I am grateful to Brother Thornton for permission to use this translation prior to publication.
7. Ibid., Chapter 24.
8. For a contemporary account of the changeability of the desert landscape, see Solnit, Rebecca (2003). *What Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender and Art*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press. pp. 63-89. As Solnit asserts: "The desert is famously a place of silence. A place without language, to some extent, unnamed, unmapped, unfamiliar, corresponding to no familiar categories of experience, not truly outside representation but challenging to it' (p. 75).
9. Irigaray, Luce (1985). *Speculum of the Other Woman*, (translated by Gillian C. Gill). Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. p. 229.
10. Ibid. p. 191.
11. Cassian *Conferences*, I.v.1, p. 43; *Rule of Grimlaicus*, Ch. 1.

12. The Latin text has been edited as *Speculum Inclusorum*, ed. L. Oliger, *Lateranum* n.s. 4 (1938), pp. 1-148. The translations are my own.
13. Millett, Bella (editor) (2009). *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses*, translated by Bella Millett. Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press. pp. 74-75.
14. Ibid. p. 111.
15. Ibid. p. 79.
16. Ibid. pp. 24-5.
17. It is generally accepted that the first of Julian's written responses to her experiences of 1373, the *Short Text* (ST) was written soon after those experiences, with the *Long Text* (LT) serving as a protracted development and modification of that first exposition. The second version was likely developed and completed during more than twenty years of exegetical thinking in the anchorhold, to which Julian withdrew probably in the 1390s. All references to Julian's writing will be by text and chapter only and the translations are my own.
18. *LT*, Ch. 13.
19. If a child had such an illness that it needed a bath of blood before it could be healed, the mother who was willing to provide this bath for it would love it very much. Our Lord did this for us - who were so infected with sin, and so polluted with it, that nothing could heal or cleanse us except for his blood'. Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, p. 149.
20. Ibid. p. 149.
21. Watson, Nicholas & Jenkins, Jacqueline (eds.) (2006). *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*. Turnhout, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press. p. 206.

22. Irigaray, Luce, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother", in *The Irigaray Reader* (1991). Whitford, Margaret (editor). Oxford, UK: Wiley. pp. 35-46 (p. 43).
23. Ibid. p. 43.
24. *ST*, Ch. 1.
25. *ST*, Ch. 6.
26. *ST*, Ch. 8.
27. *ST*, Ch. 2.
28. *ST*, Ch. 10.
29. *ST*, Ch. 10.
30. Kristeva borrows the term *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus* where it is deployed to denote an 'essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation'. Kristeva uses it to designate the 'rhythmic' space which precedes language and the entry of the child into the Symbolic. It is where the primary and as yet unbroken bond with the mother is constituted. It therefore underpins, whilst is simultaneously denied by language and representation. See Kristeva, Julia (1984). *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 94.
31. *LT*, Ch. 6.
32. Hollywood, Amy (2002). *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. p. 278.
33. *LT*, Ch. 57.
34. *LT*, Ch. 59.
35. *LT*, Ch. 57.
36. *LT*, Ch. 58.
37. The introit to the *ST* begins, 'Here is a vision shown by the goodness of God to a devout woman. And her name is Julian, who is a recluse at Norwich and still alive in the year of Our Lord 1413.'

