Lecture 7: Margery Kempe & Julian of Norwich

Around the turn of the 14th century, a notoriously nomadic woman named Margery Kempe paid a visit to a famous recluse named Julian, an anchoress living “out of the world” in Norwich.

Two very different: active vs. contemplative
But with strong similarities: mystics/ecstatics
Both begin in a kind of sickness, or abnormality—
    Julian had prayed that she would be near death at 30
    Margery’s aversion to intercourse— self-induced?

Julian was on the point of death, but recovered
Margery never got over it; restless; later always crying.
Here is a specimen of her early nightmares, after the birth of her first child:
“She despaired of her life. . . . she sent for her ghostly father . . . in full will to be shriven. . . . [But] when she came to the point for to say that thing which she had so long concealed, her confessor was a little too hasty and gan sharply to undermin her ere that she had fully said her intent. . . . And anon for dread she had of damnation on that one side and his sharp reproving on that other side, this creature went out of her mind and was wonderly vexed and labored with spirits . . . [S]he saw, as her thought, devils open their mouths all inflamed with burning lows of fire as they should have swallowed her in,
sometime ramping at her, sometime threatening her, sometime pulling her and hauling her both night and day. . . . And also the devils cried upon her with great threatings and basde her she should forsake her Christendom, good works and all good virtues, her father, her mother, and all her friends. And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends, and her own self” (A 384: Book 1.1)

Her later visions are equally vivid, and her actions are marked by a similar passionate energy. And she still weeps as if afflicted. But there is a profound difference in the quality of these later tears that is easier to feel than to describe. Here is an example:

“Through the beholding of . . . [a] Pieta,” [an image of the crucified Christ cradled in the arms of his mother, Mary], “her mind was all wholly occupied in the Passion of our Lord Jesu Christ and in the compassion of our Lady, Saint Mary, by which she [Margery] was compelled to cry full loud and weep full sore, as though she should have died. Then came to her the lady’s priest saying, ‘Damsel, Jesu is dead long sithen.’ When her crying was ceased, she said to the priest, ‘Sir, His death is as fresh to me as He had died this same day, and so me thinketh it ought to be to you and to all Christian people’ (A393: Book 1.60).

How would you describe the differences between these two passages?
When I try to understand the spiritual growth that has taken place between these two watery episodes, I am tempted to engage in a romantic conjecture. Among the many events that passed between her earlier torment and her later, more resolute passion, was a visit to Dame Julian of Norwich, an anchoress. (A female hermit)

I imagine (on the basis of very little evidence) that Margery underwent a profound spiritual transformation when she encountered Julian of Norwich. For some reason, this experience is not included in your anthology, but it is (in my opinion) crucial for understanding Margery’s experience, and also for getting a sense of the profound effect that Julian’s charisma had on others:

Margery is “commanded by our Lord,” now “to go to an anchoress in the same city. . . . And so she did, and told her about the grace, that God had put into her soul, of compunction, contrition, sweetness and devotion, compassion with holy meditation and high contemplation, and very many holy speeches and converse that our Lord spoke to her soul, and also many wonderful revelations, which she described to the anchoress to find out if there were any deception in them, for the anchoress was expert in such things and could give good advice.” [1
Margery is looking for an authority to sanction experiences whose source is uncertain: do these ecstatic experiences come from the devil or the Holy Spirit? She needs to find out if there were any deception in them.

Julian provides that authority, and she does much more than that: she empowers Margery to become her own authority, strengthening her by clarifying the meaning of her experiences.

“The anchoress, hearing the marvelous goodness of our Lord, highly thanked God with all her heart for his visitation, advising this creature to be obedient to the will of our Lord and fulfill with all her might whatever he put into her soul, if it were not against the worship of God and the profit of her fellow Christians.”

Julian gives Margery a standard against which to measure the authenticity of her experience, a way of identifying the source of her feelings. Feeling itself is not a reliable guide to actions. But some feelings, like compassion, can be verified by their consequences, not just by the tears they produce, but by the way they effect others. If the command of the spirit were “against the worship of God, . . . then it were not the influence of a good spirit, but rather of an evil spirit.”
Margery remembers Julian’s words: “The Holy Ghost never urges a thing against charity, and if he did, he would be contrary to his own self, for he is all charity. Also he moves a soul to all chasteness, for chaste livers are called the temple of the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost makes a soul stable and steadfast in the right faith, and the right belief.”

So Margery comes away from the experience with a strengthening and clarifying theology, a way of validating her own troubling experience. And that, I believe, has been Julian’s legacy to generations of those who read and love her.

Margery always seeking meaning in the world outside, always having new ecstatic experiences; Julian had one series of visions, about which she spent the rest of her life reflecting, deepening the meaning of the original experience within herself. She never questions the source of what she sees: she knows God immediately, without question because she has validated the experience by her understanding.

She can reassure Margery because she has worked to cultivate and nourish her own experience in a way that recreates the experience in her, uniting her with the
suffering of the Christ. And that process of reflection is what transforms her: “I am not good because of the revelations, but only if I love God better.” 

When I look at these women, I can almost see Margery, a troubled spirit always on Pilgrimage. I hardly see Julian at all—despite the proliferation of images of her. I see through her to the recurring passion of her Lord and Savior.

Instead of seeing Julian I try to see what she sees.

What do you see through Julian’s eyes?

When I try to look through Julian’s eyes, one of the things I see repeatedly is an image of the crucifix, the bloody man hanging on the cross. And through that disturbing image, I also “see” the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Here’s a version of how that process works, in an image of the Trinity by Massachio:

* * * * *
Here is Julian’s story of how she came to such perceptions:
Having been virtually dead for three days and three nights, she is reborn when she “assented to set [her] eyen in the face of the crucifix” (373). Suddenly, her pain was taken from her, and she was “filled full of recollection and feeling of his blessed Passion”; and when Christ’s pains become her pains, then “suddenly I saw the red blood running down from under the gar;amd, hot and freshly, plenteously and lively right as it was stream” (373).

“And in the same showing, suddenly the Trinity fulfilled my heart most of joy, and so I understood it shall be in heaven without end to all that shall come there. For the Trinity is God, God is the Trinity. The Trinity is our maker, the Trinity is our keeper [protector], the Trinity is our everlasting lover, the Trinity is endless joy and our bliss, by our Lord Jesu Christ, and in our Lord Jesu Christ. And this was showed in the first sight and in all, for where Jesu appeareth, the blessed Trinity is understood, as to my sight” (374).

This immediate experience, and comprehension, and apprehension of all life as a tri-unity in the manifest Christ—God seen, visibly, and understood by that seeing, or “showing,” as Julian called it—shapes her whole experience of life.
Like Margery (and others, of course), Julian *sees* the Passion. It could be what we call an hallucination, but that does not matter, because what she really sees, with the eye of her mind, is “the godhead that I saw in my understanding” (374).

Everything is shown to Julian in three parts: “All this was shown in three parts [three ways of seeing, I believe, simultaneously, rather than three steps in a process], that is to say, by bodily vision and by words formed in my understanding and by spiritual vision. But I may not and cannot show the spiritual visions as plainly and fully as I should wish. But I trust in our Lord God almighty that he will, out of his goodness and for love of you, make you accept it more spiritually and more sweetly than I can or may tell it.”

That third mode of apprehension, or “spiritual vision,” is difficult to express, but perhaps it can be glimpsed in this example of how Julian sees.

“... he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing.
And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.” (374-75) 

So there we have the showing and the knowing. What follows, the spiritual seeing, is a tri-une apprehension of the thing its wholeness and abundance, and experience in which God flows into the self.

“In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the Creator and the protector and the lover. For until I am substantially united to him, I can never have perfect rest or true happiness, until, that is, I am so attached to him that there can be no created thing between my God and me” (375).

Julian’s “loving yearning” for that substantial union has become the goal of her life.

Although Julian’s trinitarian theology is profoundly orthodox, almost ultra-orthodox, her yearning carries her into a mode of thinking that escapes the boundaries of conventional theology, and the normal dichotomies of our experience are broken down.
Even sin has a necessary role to play in fulfilling Julian’s longing:

“And after this our Lord brought to my mind the longing that I had for him before, and I saw that nothing hindered me but sin, and I saw that this is true of us all in general, and it seemed to me that if there had been no sin, we should all have been pure and as like our Lord as he created us. And so in my folly before this time I often wondered why, through the great prescient wisdom of God, the beginning of sin was not prevented. For then it seemed to me that all would have been well.

“The impulse to think this was greatly to be shunned; and nevertheless I mourned and sorrowed on this account, unreasonably, lacking discretion. But Jesus, who in this vision informed me about everything needful to me, answered with these words and said: . . . (377)

Here is what the other translation says: “Sin is necessary, but all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well.”

Here is what Julian actually said: “Sin is behoveful, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well” (377).

Your editor glosses “behoveful,” as fitting. If you look it
up in the OED, you will find that the word *behoveful* means, not merely ‘necessary,’ but ‘fitting,’ ‘seemly,’ ‘appropriate,’ ‘suitable.’

And once that window into God’s all-embracing love is opened, everything becomes possible.

God the Father is also God the Mother, nurturing her children with Holy Wisdom as Mary suckled Christ: “in our making, God almighty is our loving Father, and God all wisdom is our loving Mother, with the love and the goodness of the Holy Spirit, which is all one God, one Lord” (378).

God the Father is also Christ the lover and Husband: “in the joining and the union he is our very true spouse and we his beloved wife and his fair maiden, with which wife he was never displeased; for he says, I love you and you love me, and our love will never divide in two” (378).

As she contemplates “the work of all the blessed Trinity,” she sees “these three properties: the property of the fatherhood, and the property of the motherhood, and the property of the lordship in one God” (379).
Ultimately, as a consequence of these visions and her many years of meditating and contemplating them, she comes to know their deep and all-embracing meaning: “I was taught that love is our Lord’s meaning” (379).

Earlier I said that Julian still speaks to us as she spoke to Margery Kemp, offering strength and solace. I first encountered her strange and wonderful words about the utility of sin in a poem by T.S. Eliot entitled *Little Gidding*. (Little Gidding is a secluded place in northern England where people withdrew from the world to live in prayer.) Here are some of the words that Eliot spoke in re-speaking some of Julian’s words:

You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more  
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation  
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.  
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire  
   beyond the language of the living.  
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment  
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.  (Section I)
This is the use of memory:
For liberation – not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.

Thus, love of a country
Begins as an attachment to our own field of action
And comes to find that action of little importance
Though never indifferent. History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which,

as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.
Sin is Behovely, but
All shall be well, and
All manner of thing shall be well. (Section III)
NOTES


6] Hereafter, the translations (taken from the *Longman Anthology*) differ slightly from the ones in your anthology. Go figure.