

Christic Love and Motherly Sorrow: The Mariology of Julian of Norwich

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In her Short Text and Long Text, Julian of Norwich presents three lengthy visions of the Virgin Mary. Despite this, Julian seems conspicuously absent or at least perfunctorily treated in modern scholarship about English Mariology. Such scholarship, however, has emphasised the particular Marian devotion of late medieval East Anglia as in keeping with a similar trend across Western Europe.⁴⁹ For instance, Gail McMurray Gibson notes that '[i]n late medieval England, images of the Virgin Mary were rarely out of sight or mind; this was especially true in East Anglia, where to the very eve of the English Reformation, the roads and streets and bridges of Suffolk and Norfolk thronged with men and women who were not only Mary's worshippers, but her pilgrims'.⁵⁰ Indeed, a few miles from Norwich lay Walsingham: the most important pilgrimage site in medieval England, in part due to its supposed possession of a vial of the Virgin's breast milk.⁵¹ In terms of East Anglian literature, scholars locate the manuscript of the N-Town Plays in this region of England.⁵² Remarkably, this Mystery cycle includes a sequence of plays about Mary's life. Likewise, even a cursory reading of the *Book of Margery Kempe* reveals Kempe's identification with and powerful devotion to the Virgin. Although it is harder to locate these texts specifically in East Anglia, Karen Saupe's *Middle English Marian Lyrics* notes the rising popularity of the Virgin from the twelfth century onwards and collects the rich tradition that translates this heightened devotion into lyrical form.⁵³

Almost universally, scholars associate medieval Marian worship with compassion and affectivity. Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt views the Virgin as 'the paradigm for this vicarious sharing in Jesus's suffering'.⁵⁴ By emphasising

⁴⁹ On Medieval Europe's Marian devotion, see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400- c.1580* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), 256.

⁵⁰ Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 139.

⁵¹ Carole Hill, *Women and Religion in Late Medieval Norwich* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 1-2.

⁵² Douglas Sugano (ed.), *The N-Town Plays* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 2-3.

⁵³ Karen Saupe (ed.), *Middle English Marian Lyrics* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997).

⁵⁴ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 38.

Mary's suffering at the Crucifixion, people can meditate on the Passion and the humanity of Christ. Saupe, moreover, locates a similar affective tradition in the emergence of the *planctus Mariae* during the fourteenth century.⁵⁵ These are complaint lyrics that find a poetic plangency in the Virgin's maternal sorrow during the Crucifixion. Scholars have read these poems both as 'hysterical' cries that misunderstand 'Christ's work in the redemption'⁵⁶ and as lyrics that 'had the potential to effect ethical thinking and behaviour'.⁵⁷ Despite the seeming irreconcilability of these interpretations of the *planctus Mariae*, either as a distraction from Christic Redemption or as a constructive theological tool, both readings denote a similar conception of fourteenth-century Marian devotion. The *planctus* urges the believer to engage with Mary's intense maternal sorrow and connect with the humanity of Christ. The influence of this mode of Marian affectivity is evident, for instance, in Chapter Eighty-one of Margery Kempe's *Book*. In this chapter, Kempe witnesses a distraught Mary after the Crucifixion, whom she comforts.⁵⁸

Conversely, Julian of Norwich's Mary remains serene even at the Crucifixion itself, an absence of expressivity characteristic of Julian's overall distance from outward displays of grief. Unlike Kempe's constant accounts of crying and weeping, Julian mentions tears only once in her texts. She notes that 'we may never stinte of morning ne of weping. This weping meneth not all in poring out of teeres by oure bodely eye, but also to more gostely understanding' (347-49).⁵⁹ For Julian, perennial but inward weeping is a form of contrition from the weight of mortal flesh and the darkness of sin. She shies away from the outpouring of emotion found in Kempe and the *planctus Mariae*, in favour of an inner or *gostely* lamentation. Indeed, the limited critical interest in Julian's portrayal of the Virgin Mary may be a consequence of her detachment from the "affective" maternal sorrow associated with Marian devotion. As I will show, Julian rewrites this affective tradition, a transformation particularly evident in differences between her Short Text and Long Text. The Short Text shows an interest in Mary's maternal sorrow, which mostly dissipates in the Long Text. In order to analyse the differences between the two texts, I rely on the framework Barry Windeatt presents in his essay 'Julian's Second Thoughts'. For Windeatt, the Short Text is the 'narrative self-account of an experience', whereas the Long Text is an 'exploratory continuum of meditative commentary'.⁶⁰ In other words, the Short Text recounts Julian's deathbed vision, which she then contemplates and explains in the

⁵⁵ Saupe, *Middle English Marian Lyrics*, 23-25.

⁵⁶ Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 259.

⁵⁷ Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 150.

⁵⁸ Barry Windeatt (ed.), *The Book of Margery Kempe: Annotated Edition* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer), 351-57.

⁵⁹ All citations from Julian of Norwich's works are from Jacqueline Jenkins and Nicholas Watson (eds.), *The Writings of Julian of Norwich* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), cited parenthetically according to page number.

⁶⁰ Barry Windeatt, 'Julian's Second Thoughts: The Long Text Tradition', in Liz Herbert McAvoy (ed.), *A Companion to Julian of Norwich* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 102.

Long Text. Applying this framework to the Marian visions, I contend that while the Short Text aligns itself with a traditional affective Mariology – that is, the Mariology Julian experienced in East Anglia – the Long Text presents a different understanding of the role of the Virgin in the Christian faith. It orthodoxly posits Mary as an intercessor between humanity and divinity, but also de-emphasises Mary’s simple humanity and motherliness.

Throughout her two texts, Julian presents three distinct visions of the Virgin Mary. The first vision (Section Four in the Short Text and Chapter Four in the Long Text) introduces a young Mary at the Annunciation. The second vision (Section Ten in the Short Text and Chapter Eighteen in the Long Text) depicts Mary standing at the foot of the cross during the Passion. In the third and final vision (Section Thirteen in the Short Text and Chapter Twenty-five in the Long Text), Christ shows Julian a high and noble Mary who exists above all other creatures in Heaven. Each of Julian’s three visions respectively align with what Saupe calls the three dominant ‘devotional and artistic depictions of Mary...Maiden, Mother, and Queen’.⁶¹

Besides a few minor variations in diction, the first vision is almost identical in the Short Text and the Long Text. A slight dissimilarity between the two, however, begins to show how the purpose of each text differs. The Short Text reads: ‘In this sight I *sawe* sothefastlye that she is mare than alle that God made benethe hir in worthiness and fulhede’ [emphasis added] (70). In contrast, the Long Text exchanges the verb *sawe* for *understand* (137). This change is compatible with the way Windeatt views the relationship between both versions. In the Short Text, Julian narrates what she saw in her visions, whereas in the Long Text she explains and thus understands said visions. The fact that, other than the verbs, the passage remains the same seems to imply that Julian saw and understood the same thing. The broader context of the Long Text, however, indicates how Julian’s thoughts develop between the writing of each text.

At the beginning of the first Marian vision in both texts, Julian describes the childlike Mary as ‘a simple maiden and a meeke, yong of age, a little waxen above a child, in the stature as she was when she was conceivede’ (137). While both texts are nearly identical, the adjective *simple* recalls an earlier passage found solely in the Long Text: ‘This revelation was shewed to a simple creature unlettered, living in deadly flesh’ (125). Scholars have interpreted this controversial line, among other readings, as a defence against claims of Lollardy, a “modesty topos” or a truthful account of Julian’s illiteracy.⁶² All of these readings require *simple* to mean lowly or ignorant, which the *Middle English Dictionary* accepts as definitions. The MED,

⁶¹ Saupe, *Middle English Marian Lyrics*, 6.

⁶² See, for instance, Georgia Ronan Crampton (ed.), *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994) 3-4, Lynn Staley, ‘Julian of Norwich and the Late Fourteenth-Century Crisis of Authority’, in David Aers and Lynn Staley (eds.), *The Powers of the Holy* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 109-112, and Nicholas Watson, ‘The Composition of Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*’, *Speculum*, 68.3 (1993), 637-83 (pp. 673-74).

however, also lists humble and meek as likely definitions. Both Mary and Julian's simplicity can thus signify the exalted quality of humility, rather than the belittling required by a "modesty topos". After all, humility, as I will explain, is also a characteristic of God Himself.

Julian does emphasise her humbleness in the Short Text, most markedly when she comments that she cannot be a teacher as she is 'a woman, lewed, febille, and freylle' (75). However, she does not use the "Marian" adjective *simple* which appears only three times in the text.⁶³ In contrast, the Long Text includes fifteen instances of *simple/symple*. More than half of these refer to either Julian (three) or Mary (five).⁶⁴ Indeed, Julian renders Mary *simple* in all of her visions, imbuing this adjective with Marian significance. By repeatedly applying the same adjective to both Mary and herself, Julian begins to identify with Mary and, in turn, exalts the Virgin's humility as an imitable trait. This process of *imitatio* continues throughout the text and is particularly evident in a passage found only in the Long Text: 'This gretnesse and this nobilnesse of [Mary's] beholding of God fulfilled her of reverent drede. And with this she sawe herselfe so litille and so lowe, so simple and so poor in regard of her God, that this reverent drede fulfilled her of meknes' (145). Julian keeps emphasising Mary's simplicity, but unlike the passage shared by both texts, here she explains, rather than just describes, the vision of young, little Mary. Her visual littleness is representative of her humility and is therefore a littleness that allows her to behold or contemplate the greatness of God; only through an awareness of our smallness can we access His greatness. Some level of *identificatio* is also present in the overall context of the vision, as Mary's receiving of the Word during the Annunciation was often heralded as a model for contemplation. Gibson, for instance, notes that texts such as Pseudo-Bonaventure's *Meditationes vitae Christi* offer up Mary at the Annunciation as an imitable devotional model.⁶⁵ Julian begins her own theological exercise by thinking about the Annunciation, perhaps placing herself within a Marian contemplative framework.

After this explanation of Mary's simplicity, Julian describes a vision of Christ's bleeding head and remarks: 'Lo, what might this noble lorde do more wurshippe and joy to me than to shew to me, that am so litille, this marvelous homelyhede?'⁶⁶ (147). Following her vision of Christ, Julian sees herself as *litille*, particularly in contrast to a *marvelous homelyhede* [familiarity] with Christ. She describes herself with diction associated with the Virgin and, in so doing, embodies Mary's humility and is able to see and understand Christ. Julian's accessing of Christ via Marian humility becomes even more marked a few lines later, when she

⁶³ The adjective *simpille* appears twice in Section 4 (69; 71) and once in Section 13 (89). All these describe Mary.

⁶⁴ Due to the availability of a digital edition, this search was conducted in Crampton, *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*.

⁶⁵ Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, 49.

⁶⁶ London, British Library, MS Sloane 2499 (Crampton, *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, 47) actually uses the word *simple* instead of *litille*.

meditates on God's nature: 'he that is highest and mightiest, nobliest and wurthiest, is lowest and meekest, hamliest and curtyest. And truly and sothly this marvelous joy shalle he shew us all, when we shall see him' (147-49). Thus far Julian had distinguished between Mary's and her littleness and the greatness of God. Now, however, she uses paradoxical language to describe Him who is simultaneously high and mighty and low and meek. Only after understanding Mary's meekness is Julian able to understand Christ's humility.

This paradox views the Incarnation as an act of humbleness: an interpretation traceable at least to Late Antiquity. In this view, God's willingness to take on lowly human form and suffer for the salvation of humankind was deemed the ultimate act of *humilitas*.⁶⁷ For instance, in his treatise on the Gospel of John, Augustine writes: 'Quid superbis, homo? Deus propter te humilis factus est. Puderet te fortasse imitari humilem hominem, saltem imitare humilem Deum'.⁶⁸ [Why are you prideful, man? God for you became humble. Perhaps it would shame you to imitate a humble man, but at least imitate the humble God].⁶⁹ Augustine exalts the *humilem Deum* and, in a mode of *imitatio Christi*, posits Him as an example against *superbia*. Unlike Augustine, however, Julian brings Mary into the centre of this theology of Incarnational humility. Indeed, Mary's meekness during the Annunciation helps Julian access and understand the intrinsic humbleness of the Incarnation. In the Long Text, Julian renders her Short Text vision of a physically small Mary into a lesson, first, about Mary's humility and, second, about the act of love that exists at the core of Christian theology: God's humble embodiment.

Julian's understanding of Christ through Mary is in keeping with Mary's role as intercessor in the Middle Ages. Rachel Fulton notes that, during the High Middle Ages, 'the supplicant prays to Mary to come to his or her aid, begging for assistance despite his or her sins, so that he or she might gain entrance, through Mary's intercession, to the heavenly kingdom'.⁷⁰ The Virgin's role as a mediator between human and divine continues and even flourishes in later centuries.⁷¹ Intercessory function reflects Mary's role in the greater Christological narrative. She now links humanity with the divine, just as her womb housed the coming together of humanity and divinity. The Short Text's visual description of the Virgin thus gives way to a complex understanding of Mary's role in the Incarnation and as intercessor. Summarizing the late medieval appraisal of the young Mary, Saupe writes: 'To focus on Mary as *Maiden* is to celebrate her purity, her beauty (internal and external), her

⁶⁷ See Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought: The Interpretation of Mary and Martha, the Ideal Imitation of Christ, the Orders of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 146-47.

⁶⁸ *Patrologia Latina* 35, col. 1604.

⁶⁹ Translation is my own.

⁷⁰ Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 218.

⁷¹ See Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 263 and Saupe, *Middle English Marian Lyrics*, 9.

pristine worthiness to participate in God's redemptive plan'.⁷² While the Short Text dwells on a similar external rendering of childlike or virginal purity, the Long Text transcends this vision and instead focuses on how Mary's positive internal traits mirror the humility that shapes the basis for Christianity.

In the second vision, Julian presents Mary at the Crucifixion, the traditional setting for the *planctus Mariae* and the Virgin's motherly grief. Julian's rendering of the Passion thus reflects how she transforms the fourteenth-century figure of the grieving Mary. In both texts, Julian first emphasises the Virgin's compassion: 'Herein I sawe in partye the compassion for oure ladye, Saint Marye. For Criste and sho ware so anede in love that the gretnesse of hir love was the cause of the mekillehede of hir paine. For so mekille as sho loved him mare than alle othere, her paine passed alle othere' (85). This introduction seems to place Mary in her traditional affective role. She is compassionate and, crucially, suffers enormous pain from the crucifixion of her son. The Short Text dwells on this image of grief.

The Long Text, however, immediately adds: 'For in this I saw a substance of kinde love, continued by grace, that his creatures have to him, which kinde love was most fulsomely shewde in his swete mother, and overpassing [...] For ever so higher, the mightier, the swetter that the love is, the more sorow it is to the lover to se that body in paine that he loved' (185). *Kinde* is of course a polysemous term. It can mean kind and affectionate, as well as natural and human. For instance, writing about *Piers Plowman*, Madeleine Kasten suggests that *kynde knowynge* is natural or intuitive knowledge, 'knowledge as being of an affective rather than an abstract nature'.⁷³ In turn, Julian's reference to *kinde love* evokes both God's gracious love for his creation, but also a love that is germane to and present in his creatures' affections. For Julian, this *kinde love* eventually gives rise to a love with heavenly dimensions. Julian describes Mary's love with the adjectives *higher* and *mightier*, with which, in the previous vision of Mary, she had described God. This exalted, divine Mary prefigures the Assumption and Julian's vision of Mary as Queen of Heaven. Julian thus urges the reader to think beyond the immediate sorrow of the Passion and into the greater redemptive project. This higher and mightier love, moreover, suggests that Mary's love during the Passion transcends earthly motherly affection and is imbued with divinity. While the idea of Mary as a transcendental and divine mother may seem obvious to us, medieval culture seemed to focus on and even celebrate Mary's simple humanity. For instance, in Epistle 174, the influential Bernard of Clairvaux rejects Immaculate Conception and argues that Mary's primary merit is the purity of her simple humanity.⁷⁴ In turn, McNamer sees a very human 'maternal nurturance' at the centre of Mary's compassion in late medieval devotion.⁷⁵

⁷² Saupe, *Middle English Marian Lyrics*, 6.

⁷³ Madeleine Kasten, *In Search of Kynde Knowynge: Piers Plowman and the Origin of Allegory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 67.

⁷⁴ *Patrologia Latina* 182, cols. 0332D-0336C.

⁷⁵ McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, 162.

Contrary to these views, Julian associates Mary with a higher and mightier love and exalts her divinity rather than her humanity.

Mary's divine love becomes even more marked in a further passage, unique to the Long Text, which explains her *sorow*. From the outset, Mary's sorrow contrasts with the images of the wailing mother that Saupe, McNamer and Woolf locate at the core of fourteenth-century Mariology. Julian writes:

And every mannes sorow, desolation, and anguish he sawe and sorowd for kindnes and love. For in as mekille as our lady sorowde for his paines, as mekille sufferde he sorow for her sorowse, and more over, in as mekille as the swete manhed of him was wurthier in kinde. For as long as he was passible, he sufferde for us and sorowde for us. And now he is uppe resin and no more passibile, yet he suffereth with us, as I shalle sey after (191).

Standing at the foot of the cross, Mary clearly suffers for her son's pain; indeed, she suffers with her son. However, given Julian's extraordinary visual imagination – her vivid descriptions of desiccated bodies and flowing rivers of blood – the understatedness of Mary's pain is striking. Although Mary suffers and sorrows, there are no descriptions of tears or indeed of the pronounced affectivity shown in the Marian lyrics, Margery Kempe's *Book*, or indeed in Julian's own Short Text. Rather, Julian interprets Mary's sorrow as reflecting God's sorrow for His fallen creation, along with the immeasurable compassion of the Redemption: how Christ *suffereth with us* and consequently redeemed us. While in the Short Text she witnesses a sorrowing mother, by means of her Long Text meditations, she realises that that vision is representative of something greater, of the love and compassion God shows for his creation, particularly in his willingness to take on human form and undergo crucifixion. As in the first vision, Julian uses Mary as an intercessor who allows for a greater understanding of God and of his compassionate relationship to his creation.

The final change between the Short Text and the Long Text's second vision of Mary is a deletion. Only the former references Julian's own mother before the vision of the Virgin. Julian writes: 'My modere, that stode emanges othere and behelde me, lifted uppe hir hande before me face to lokke min eye' (83). Much has been written on how the Long Text does away with most of the biographical details of the Short Text. Lynn Staley Johnson contends that '[d]espite the subtlety of the long text, it appears at once less individualistic and more authoritative than the short [...] she trims some things that make the short text a more personal work'.⁷⁶ Besides this, in the context of the Long Text's dissolution of Marian affectivity, the disappearance of Julian's own mother points towards a dismissal not only of Marian grief, but also of human motherly grief more generally. In the Short Text, Julian draws a parallel between her own grieving mother at her deathbed and the grieving Mary. By the time she writes the Long Text, however, she realises that her vision of Mary

⁷⁶ Lynn Staley Johnson, 'The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe', *Speculum*, 66.4 (1991), 820-838 (p. 832).

transcends motherly sorrow in the earthly sense. It is reflective of the greater divine sorrow that exists at the heart of the Redemption.

Both in the Short Text and the Long Text, Jesus asks Julian whether she would like to see Mary, generating the third and final vision of the Virgin: 'And with the same chere and mirthe he loked downe on the right side, and brought to my minde whare oure ladye stode in the time of his passion and saide: "Wille thowe see hir?"' (89). In the Short Text, Julian immediately assents. In the Long Text, before assenting, Julian interprets the question in three different ways, each of them highlighting the immense love between Mary and Jesus. In the first interpretation, Christ wishes that Julian see Mary since she is the most blessed of creatures. In the second, through this ghostly sight, Julian can participate in the love between Christ and Mary. In the third interpretation, Christ asks: 'Wilt thou se in her how thou art loved? For thy love I have made her so high, so noble, so worthy' (205). As was implied in the previous Marian vision, here Julian understands that the Virgin Mary is symbolic of the greater system of Christic love at work in the Redemption. In Mary, she can see God's love for her. Julian's triple hermeneutic act also sheds light on the Long Text's exegetical purpose: its aim is to transform a perceived vision, or question, into a greater understanding of Christology. Indeed, Julian concludes her exegesis as follows: 'But hereof am I not lerned to long to see her bodely presens while I am here, but the vertuse of her blissed soule—her truth, her wisdom, her cherite—wherby I may leern to know myself, and reverently drede my God' (205). Julian consolidates what she suggested in the Passion vision. She has learned that the little *bodely presens* that she saw is not the end of the vision, but rather a starting point to understand Mary's virtues, God, and even her own self.

This contemplation leads to Julian's final mention of Mary two chapters later in a passage present only in the Long Text. Julian revisits the idea of motherhood that she had thus far seemed to eschew. Writing herself, whether knowingly or unknowingly, into a mystical tradition that includes Hildegard and Gertrude the Great, Julian thinks of God as a mother.⁷⁷ She writes:

For in that same time that God knit him to oure body in the maidens wombe, he toke oure sensual soule. In which taking—he us all having beclosed in him—he oned it to oure substance, in which oning he was perfit man. For Crist, having knit in him all man that shall be saved, is perfete man. Thus oure lady is oure moder, in whome we be all beclosed and of her borne in Crist. For she that is moder of oure savioure is mother of all that ben saved in our saviour. And oure savioure is oure very moder, in whome we be endlesly borne and never shall come out of him (305).

Julian describes the Incarnation using quotidian imagery: a knitting of human and divine within the *maidens wombe*. This knitting, however, also comes to represent the

⁷⁷ On the medieval trope of Christ-as-mother, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

hypostatic union within the Second Person. That is, the conjoining of human and divine that permits the redemption of humankind. All humans are *beclosed in him*, like He is *beclosed* in the *maidens wombe*. From this multiple enclosing, Julian concludes that just as Mary is the mother of Christ, so is she our own mother. In turn, our own enclosure within Him renders Christ our mother. This image of Christ as mother consolidates the nature of Julian's Mariology in the Long Text. Julian is able to understand the tenets of Christology by means of Mary the intercessor. The Virgin's enclosing womb and motherhood allows Julian to understand the divine motherly love of Christ. Julian therefore forgoes maternal grief, or even human motherhood, in favour of a more spiritual notion of maternity, representative of humankind's endless and inescapable bond of love with God, which takes the form of a perennial pregnancy.

The disappearance of Julian's biological mother and the emergence of Christ as our mother in the Long Text seem to indicate Julian's desire, between the writing of the two texts, of transcending the limitations of human emotion and entering the realm of endless divine love. She transforms the Virgin Mary from a figure of motherly grief and love into a figure of Christic love and sorrow. She transforms her individual experience of motherly love into a universal and endless one. The Long Text's deletion of motherly affectivity, whether in the form of the Virgin or of Julian's own mother, appears to indicate a detachment from the theme of motherhood. Julian, however, seems to be engaging in an even greater project, one of exalted motherly love. Precisely by eschewing dramatic outpourings of maternal grief, she is able to transform motherly love from something earthly into something more transcendental. Motherly love becomes the gateway to God's love.