# ‘For he is very curtes’: Courtesy as Phenomenology, Allegory and Ideal in Julian of Norwich

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Julian of Norwich is surely one of the most gracious of mystics. In our service of God, she says, ‘the most worshippe to him of onything that we may don’ is what we ‘leven gladly and meryly, for his love’ (chap. 81, p. 98).[1] This glad joyfulness pervades her thought and makes her theology, centred on God’s great love for us, particularly attractive. In this paper I argue that Julian’s understanding of God’s love, and of our joyful human response, is structured and conveyed to her readers largely through her appropriation and adaptation of the traditions of courtesy. I examine her understanding of courtesy as it appears in the relations between God and His human lovers.

Courtesy springs to life in the encounter between two persons. Even in its most diluted modern form, courtesy is a balance of power: a delicate dance between individual and social rights and duties, a dance of rules and freedoms, involving the rites of revelation and reserve, of offering and reception. This courtesy in the meeting of two people is a useful paradigm for all our meetings with otherness in its various forms: other cultures, other experiences, and ultimately, *The Other* itself, the Deity. In the act of understanding an other, Richard Bell posits, ‘it is our *presentness to each other* that is most important’; we *go up to* each other (14). The shared conventions of courtesy enable the acts of approach and welcoming that allow the meeting subjects to enter each other’s presence. In a mystical

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experience this meeting occurs across so extreme a divide that conventional mechanisms of intelligibility all but break down, yet Julian powerfully uses the conventions of courtesy to convey to her readers something of her experience and her resulting understanding of human life and nature.

This experience Julian of Norwich records in her famous text, commonly known as the *Revelations of Divine Love*. Julian, one of the best known and most loved of the medieval English mystics, was an anchoress in Norwich who received a series of sixteen visions while she was seriously ill in 1373. Her record of these visions is extant in two versions: a shorter book written immediately after her experience, and a longer version incorporating twenty years of meditation and contemplation of the visions. In this paper I focus on the longer text, using Marion Glasscoe's edition, which draws mostly on Sloane MS 2499 in the British Library.

Julian's book is written in a direct conversational style, combining passages of intricate philosophy, careful rhetorical defence and impassioned lyrical poetry. She cannot describe God, who is transcendent, so she describes the phenomena she experiences in her mystical encounter with Him – her visions, feelings and reflections. Her aim is to make available to us her intense experiences, to awaken us to awareness of God's loving courtesy and our identity in this love. Courtesy is a central concept in the text: it is used over and over again to describe God's love, His actions, and His relations with human beings. It is the framework Julian uses to understand her experiences. In her attempt to do this she draws on several courtly traditions – including courtly love/romance literature and the *comitatus* ethic, but adapts them to her own understanding of God and His love. Courtesy also underlies the allegory she uses to help us understand her ideas. This allegory – the only one she uses (Glasscoe xiii) – is the vision of the lord and servant described in the lengthy fifty-first chapter of the *Revelations*. It is central to her experience, and to her meditations for the twenty years after it (ch. 51, p. 56).

The allegorical image depicts a master, dressed in a full, flowing robe, seated on a chair with his servant standing before him. At first, Julian does not say who these figures represent, concentrating instead on evoking the relations between them. Her first point is that within both master and servant is a 'ground of love' (ch. 51, p. 57), which motivates all their actions. Second, they both pay each other constant, quiet attention. The master 'lookyth upon his servant ful lovely and swetely' and the servant 'standyth by . . . redy to don his lords will' (ch. 51, p. 54). Thus the relationship between them is grounded in love, and begins with attention. They depend on each other and delight in each other, and this delight and dependence shows in the constant, quiet attention in which each keeps the other.

This attention appears throughout the text as the 'beholding' that Julian insists we must concentrate on God. Kerrie Hide discusses the precise meaning of the verb 'to behold'. It does not imply, she claims, 'a way of comprehension that categorizes, analyzes and divides, but rather . . . a seeing with the 'eye of understanding' that leads to spiritual sights beyond words and images. . . . "Beholding" leads to a deep interior knowing that unites and makes one' (48). From the central image of the lord and servant the idea of this loving attention fans out through the text, particularly drawing on aspects of the courtly love tradition. Here Julian casts herself as a lady, with God as her lover. Very early in the text she says she desires to be one of God's 'trew lovers' (*Revelations*, ch. 2, p. 2), and compares herself to Mary Magdalene, who is a common focus of medieval devotional/erotic art. This chivalric aspect of Julian's conception of courtesy has been much discussed. Jay Ruud explores the influence of courtly romance in the *Revelations*; Julian, she suggests, takes the God-as-lover image, very common in the affective piety movement of the later Middle Ages, and expands it into a sort of knight or romance hero figure. Julian describes in Jesus the cluster of moral and social virtues or qualities desirable in a medieval man, including physical beauty, power, authority, courage, strength, action,

honour, peace, compassion, pity and the ability to comfort. Like a true romance hero, God even considers it His duty to do great deeds for the love of His lady; these are the battle against sin and the devil that is Christ's passion. Julian in turn responds like a courtly lady – she cannot bear to be divided from her lover (*Revelations*, ch. 72), she has pity on him because of his suffering, and she uses traditional imagery from courtly love poetry: suffering love-longing like being in prison, and the beloved healing the wound of love-sickness.

However, Julian does not find the basic tableau of the knight and his lady rich enough to communicate her radiant experience of God. She extends it in various ways. First, she extrapolates from it a logical conclusion, stressing (in striking opposition to all too many earthly lovers) God's utter trustworthiness. As Ruud points out, although He uses many of the clichés of courtly love discourse, He means them completely. Only He is completeness, and so only He is fully masculine in being able to satisfy His lady fully (*Revelations*, ch. 23). Second, Julian inverts the usual point of view of courtly romance, and makes God, the romance hero, the object of desire. Julian, the romance heroine, becomes the subject and the representative of all humans, claims Ruud. Third, she lays stress on the courtesy of courtly love, making it the summation of of the list of God's manly perfections, a quality that both springs from love and makes Him worthy of love.[2] This courtly love includes the tender intimacy of a husband's love and the exquisite mannerliness of a knight's adoration. In our union with 'our very trew spouse' God, says Julian, we are both 'his lovid wif and his fair maiden' (ch. 58, p. 70).

Beverly Lanzetta points out that courtesy does away with the power play implicit in the courtly relationship. It makes Julian's conception of the prayer-relationship not simply that of 'subject and object, of lord and damsel, but the fiery passion of lovers who share in the fullness of each other's joys and sorrows'. Thus, Julian's use of the romance tradition moves the interaction between God and us to an intensely personal level. Rather than

a remote adoration, her understanding of our relations with God stresses intimacy and familiarity. She teaches that the intimacy brought by prayer is not transient or intermittent, but 'an essential quality of being that demand[s] an equal ethical response. Reality [is] no longer [to be] viewed from the perspective of the individualistic self, but . . . grasped, and borne, from intimacy itself' (Lanzetta 8). For this almost organic unity, Julian uses another famous image, that of God as our mother: he feeds us with himself, as does a mother, and enfolds us in himself as a foetus is enfolded in its mother's womb (*Revelations*, chapters 60–61). This image of maternal love is linked directly to the image of a courtly relationship in chapter 60, where Jesus our mother, feeding us with Himself, is also described as courteous (ch. 60, p. 73). Thus courtesy contains the intensity, the selflessness, the intimacy of maternal love. Like a mother for her child, a courtly lover desires to participate in her beloved's joy, 'to share in and bring healing to [his] sorrows' (Lanzetta 9).

Compassion is very important in Julian's conception of courtesy: compassion in the fullest sense of that term. She often puns on the word, stressing our sharing in Christ's Passion. Compassion for Julian is rooted in the Incarnation, in God's taking on of human nature, so that he has fully participated in human experience. This shows an important element of God's love – its profound kindness. He is unfailingly sensitive to our human condition, our frailty. At all times, she says, God looks at us 'with pite and not with blame' (*Revelations*, ch. 82, p. 99). Therefore the Incarnation (from our point of view) is an act of mercy, whereby God chooses a vehicle suited to our mortal, blinded eyes. The Fall made us unworthy to be God's dwelling-place, 'not at al seemly to servyn of that noble office'. When through Christ's Passion we are raised to 'noble fayrhede' again, we can find union with God. In the mean time, He waits courteously in a guise we can accept (ch. 51, p. 57). God gives us a human lover, Jesus, on whom to focus and through whom to understand the fulness of our human nature.

The philosophical framework Julian uses distinguishes in this nature two main parts, namely 'substance' and 'sensuality'. Our substance is our essential nature, our core of reality; this is our capacity for spiritual experience, for unity with God. Our sensuality is our more ephemeral mortal existence, our ability to experience this world physically. Both are united in God, both are beautiful and good by virtue of the Incarnation (Glasscoe xv).

A third term intimately associated with these two is 'kind', an adjective which, as Glasscoe points out, has a variety of meanings according to context in Julian's book, subtly combining its two most common meanings, 'natural' (of nature, of the natural order of things) and 'compassionate' (xv). This double meaning reveals something fundamental to Julian's theology, namely that kindness, the root of courtesy, is natural to our humanity. When she says, 'Our kindly will is to have God and the gode will of God is to have us' (ch. 6, p.7), the double meaning intimates the naturalness of our reception of God, but also the inherently courteous nature of this welcome. Talking of our nature, Julian says, 'In our Father almighty we have our keeping and our bliss, and our kindly substance that is by our making without beginning' (ch. 14). Our substance, our essence, is kindly, and it is here that we were made to be united with God, and we desire to be so united. We are 'kyndly ordeyned' to bliss (ch. 42, p. 45); all fails us until we realise and accept that God is our ground. Julian has a clear understanding that to reach fulfilment we just have to follow our deepest desires, be attentive to our nature.

This understanding of our courteous nature underlies Julian's exploration of sin. She defines it as *nouzt;* only in God do we exist, so sin, which separates us from God, makes us nothing and is in essence nothingness. This depends on the principle of courtesy – only in relation to others do we exist. Thus 'a kind soule hath non helle but synne' (ch. 40, p. 42), for separation from God goes against our nature, our 'kind'. Sin is horrible because it is contrary to kind (ch. 63, p. 77). The suffering it causes arises not from punishment, but from love; Jesus' passion was his sorrow at our hurt, and our sharing in this passion is our sorrow at hurting the God who

loves us so (Lanzetta 12). Also, although in mortal life sin can make us suffer, it cannot change God's fundamental intention for us, which is total union with Him in love. Grace functions to make us as like to Him 'in condition as we arn in kynd' (ch. 41, p. 43), 'condition' seemingly referring to our actual existential being in the world, our condition of holiness – or wholeness (ch. 43, p. 45). The gracious peace and freedom that characterise courtesy, that 'glad and mery' life (ch. 81, p. 98) we mentioned above, come thus from the combined effect of our acceptance of our nature in God and his grace fulfilling this nature. Freedom for Julian is authenticity.

We take our authentic nature from God, in whose image we are made. Again Julian draws on the double richness of 'kind', this time to describe God. Her phrase, his 'owne kynd godhede' (p. 69), acquires a delicately flowering complex of meanings, implying that his godhead is both kind and of his nature, that kindness is characteristic of his essence (Glasscoe xv). It is because we share in this 'kind godhede' that we can receive mercy and grace (ch. 57, p. 69). This is our distinctive humanity, because although all beings take their kind from God, flow from Him to do His will, only in human beings, says Julian, has He put 'all the hole in fulhede, in virtue, in fiarhede and in goodhede, in rialtie and nobley, in al manner of solemnite of pretioushede and worshipp' (ch. 62, p. 76).

The vocabulary Julian uses to describe the characteristics we share with God is that of courtesy, reminiscent of her description of the lord in chapter 51. The last term, 'worshipp', points us to another important aspect of courtesy in Julian's understanding of it. For this aspect she draws on another courtly tradition, one older and deeper than the courtly love ideal. This is the Germanic *comitatus* ethic. In God, says Julian, are three properties, namely fatherhood, motherhood and 'lordhede' (p. 58). This last property belongs to the Holy Spirit, and, as Julian describes it, is remarkably like the *comitatus* bond between lord and man.

In the figure in chapter 51 the lord is of high social stature, as symbolised by his clothes, which are 'wide and syde and ful seemly as fallyth to a lord'

(p. 56). He requires his servant's service, yet has towards him a sense of responsibility; as Julian's lord says, 'Fallith it not to me to gevyn a geft that be beter to hym and more worshipfull than his hole shulde have ben?' (p. 55). This gift, the servant's reward, comes in the form of praise, 'worshipful resting and nobleth' (p. 55). The lord's renown, his 'worship', stems from the servant's deeds and cannot be complete without them – though He is himself completeness (p. 58). Similarly, the servant's only wish and pride is to do the will of his lord, so as to bring him glory. This recalls the complex meanings of the Anglo-Saxon compound *wine-drihten,* enclosing both bosom friend and authoritarian leader. A similar idea is seen in Julian's ephithet for Jesus, our 'heyest sovereyn freind' (ch. 76, p. 92). This reciprocal relationship of loyalty, service and reward is the courtly bond between a lord and his retainer.

The ethic of *comitatus* depends on the economy of praise and blame, where reputation is the highest and most valued good. In Julian's *Revelations* this economy can be traced also. God, for example, is called the 'most worthy being' (ch. 1, p. 1). Also, the word 'worship', like 'kind', develops a richly corrugated meaning incorporating both the sense of 'adoration offered to a divinity' and 'honourable reputation', depending on the context in which it is used. Julian's famous prayer in chapter 4 is a good example. It reads, 'God, of thy goodnesse, give me thyselfe; for thou art enow to me and I may nothing aske that is less that may be full worshippe to thee' (p. 6). Asking a lesser gift is both unworthy worship, in the sense of adoration, and unworthy of His worship, in the sense of reputation. Again, in her introductory chapter Julian describes the sixth showing as 'the worshippfull thankeing of our lord God in which he rewardeth his blissed servants in hevyn' (p. 1); God cannot worship us, since He is the divinity, so here the term implies that it is honourable of God to thank us for our service and our suffering, because this thanking shows His generosity – after all, He is Creator and we are creatures. He is a *comitatus* lord rewarding His 'blissed servants' with renown. This courteous relationship of mutual praise is the high point of

human life; elsewhere Julian says Jesus became human 'for love and worshippe of man' (ch. 10, p. 12); the Incarnation, the central moment of history for her, validates us in our substance and our sensuality, and raises us to a position of honour.

Thus for Julian the characteristic of humanity is our ability to be courteous, and our courteous lord delights to teach us to know this, as a knight trains his squire or a noble mother her child, or a lover delights to praise his mistress. As Julian says, 'He will we wettyn that the noblest thing that eve[r] he made is ma[n]kynd' (ch. 53, p. 64).

Thus we image God in our courtesy. Julian finally explains the figures in her central allegory: Jesus is the servant, the Father is the lord and the Holy Spirit is the love between them; thus God as the Trinity is the courtly relationship, and human beings, made in His image, and existing in and for Him, take part in this relationship too.

This is a paradox in Julian's understanding; her mystical apprehension of God at once grasps his transcendental greatness, his splendour, which is so far removed from our smallness that she repeatedly has to confess that she is without words to describe it, and also our likeness to him, which makes intimate union with him possible. She explores this paradox using the paired terms, courtesy and homeliness. All through the *Revelations* Julian plays on the paradoxical complementarity of these terms, especially in the nature of God. God's enfolding love is 'homely' in the Germanic sense, meaning 'belonging to a home or household, becoming as one of a household. It characterises home as a place where one receives kind treatment', and is related to the word 'humble'. It thus includes the notion of hospitality (Hind 49–50). Julian directly links homeliness and courtesy in chapter 7: 'And of all the sight it was most comfort to me that our God and lord, that is so reverent and dredefull, is so homley and curtes' (p. 8). She then explains this paradox: it is God's condescending to us, His being homely with us, that shows his true courtesy. The awareness of the power gap, that One so much greater than us descends to welcome us, gives the courtesy its sweetness.

This is one of the reasons her presentation of courtesy begins with attention; we have to be aware of others, of the nature they present to us, so as to avoid carelessly or foolishly misinterpreting them. Julian warns against such overfamiliarity with God, saying 'but beware that we taken not so reklesly this homleyhede, and as homley as he is, as curtes he is; for he is very curtes' (ch. 77, p. 94). In being present to God we have to know ourselves and Him, know our frailness and blindness, never forget His greatness. We must not presume on God's good manners. He respects our frailty, and waits for us to welcome Him (ch. 52, pp. 61–62); thus our freedom is respected, and the responsibility for being good mannered in return stays with us. Courtesy thus ensures intimate welcome, yet preserves the autonomy of those who are meeting.

This points us to another reason why courtesy is such a fitting allegory for Julian to explore the relationship between God and ourselves. Courtesy inherently involves ritual, the ceremonies of welcoming and valediction. In Julian's text, she sets the moment of mystical meeting in a scene of courtly good manners: 'shewith our curtes lord hymselfe to the soul', she says, 'wol merily and with glad cher, with frendful welcummyng' (ch. 40, p. 41). The glad rites of courtesy frame her experience and her account of it, culminating in the image of the courtly lord, who remains seated as befits a master, and his servant, who stands before him with bowed head, as befits a servant. Both follow the actions laid down for them by the courtly conventions they share. Courtesy thus includes the boundaries of thought and behaviour we draw for ourselves, boundaries which allow us to live graciously with each other. Courtesy is the construct that mediates the power relationships in society. It organizes for us, 'quickens to life' our experience as conscious individual beings existing among others, in the social, political and moral spheres (Steiner 147). The formal structure that courtesy gives to interaction makes Julian able to appropriate her experience and us able to understand it.

Yet courtesy includes knowing when to be silent. 'Every shewing is full of privities' (ch 51, pp. 55, 59), as Julian repeatedly warns. God knows us totally, encloses us completely, but we will never know all, though we can be one with Him. The other cannot be fully known, and personal revelation, the personal encounter with the other, has limits, because of the limits of human understanding. As individuals and as human society we must know these limits, says Julian, because therein lies peace and wholeness, honesty and responsibility (chapters 29–30). We know ourselves. This involves both acknowledgement of God's freedom, and acceptance of our own. On the one hand we must accept our courtly lord's privacy, refrain from forcing His confidence. Julian says 'it longyth to the ryal lordship of God to have his privy councell in pece' (ch. 30, p. 31). On the other hand, however, we have to know our own worth and responsibility. Though our freedom is restricted by our limited wisdom and knowledge, and though we are blinded by sin, yet we are always free to choose our own will (ch. 52, pp. 61–62). What leads to happiness, however, is 'the holy assent that we assenten to God' (p. 61). This free assent, which depends on knowledge of self and of God, and of the relationship between us, is no diminution of our dignity, but rather an acceptance of the honour and glory that is our *comitatus* relationship with God, our lord and creator. This is meekness, the acknowledgment of the primacy of God and our dependence on Him. It is real human freedom.

Julian's personal encounter with God thus yields for her an all-embracing understanding of the nature, purpose and end of human beings. Mystical experience is often accused of being 'egocentric', 'an individual venture into the realm of spiritual knowledge', into the ultimate encounter with otherness, the encounter with ultimate otherness (Sikorska 178). Yet Julian would strongly insist that these personal experiences are not separate from or irrelevant to everyday human life. Courtesy becomes for her a phenomenological framework for understanding her encounter with the divine, an allegorical image to present this encounter, and an ideal to live

out in daily life, as we try to love God, ourselves and our neighbour. Since we all live among other people, it is an experience we all share. The encounter with others, with God, shows us ourselves, and the freedom, in courtesy, which makes possible our recognition of the other (Steiner 198).

Twenty years after her initial mystical experiences Julian sums up all she has learned in the famous lines the lord speaks:

> Woldst thou wettan thi lords mening in this thing? Wete it well: love was his mening. Who shewid it the? Love. What shewid he the? Love. Wherfore shewid it he? For love. Hold the therin and thou shalt witen and knowen more in the same; but thou shalt never knowen ne witten therein other thing without end. (ch. 86, p. 102)

Secure in this courteous love, we are to live 'gladly and gaily', in 'comenyng daliance' with our soul and with God (ch. 56, p. 67).

## NOTES

1. All quotations from Julian of Norwich are cited by chapter number (or chapter number and page number) from Marion Glasscoe's edition.
2. This analysis is derived from Ruud 185–94.

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