Linguistic Strategies on the Edge of Heterodoxy: Liminal Encoding in Julian of Norwich and Marguerite Porete

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This article explores commonalities between Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* and Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls* by examining how the language of the two texts is employed in their descriptions of apprehending divinity. The exploration investigates some of the verbal textures of the texts to see where and how Julian's and Marguerite's ideas complement each other with regard to apprehending divinity, how liminality seems to play a role in progress towards apprehending divinity, and how *Revelations* and *The Mirror* might be part of a wider dialogue that transcends time, space, culture and geography.

Both the church and the princes of Europe attempted to regulate women's revelatory discourse and the outbreaks of diverse spiritual movements that began 'sweeping through … communities in western Christendom' in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[1] Marguerite Porete (d. 1 June 1310) was subject to detraction and persecution; even after her death her reputation was affected by severe criticism by Flemish mystic and scholar Jan van Ruysbroek (c. 1290–1381), regarding her work *The Mirror of Simple Souls* in which she espouses the radical and counter-cultural idea (amongst others) that one could have an experience with divinity that was independent of the Catholic Church's role as an intermediary—a notion that defied ecclesiastical

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[1] K. Emery, Jnr, 'Foreword', *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, by M. Porete, trans. E. Colledge, J. C. Marler and J. Grant (South Bend, IND, 1991), pp. viii, xlvi. This translation, with its editorial matter, will be referred to as EMG. French and Latin texts from '*Le mirouer des simples ames*' and '*Specvlvm simplicvm animarvm*', ed. Romana Guarnieri and Paul Verdyn, Corpus Christianorum: Continuato Mediaevalis 69 (Turnhout, 1986), to be referred to as RG.

authority. For her audacious stand of refusing to withdraw her speculative ideas about the divine, Marguerite was put on trial at the Council of Vienne where she was accused of heresy and then burned at the stake in 1310, a victim of the Inquisition like some before her and some after her.

Marguerite enjoyed little to no clerical or authoritative support.[2] A beghard, Guiard de Cressonessart, initially supported Marguerite but was forced to recant and was then given a life sentence. By contrast, other visionaries and mystics were privileged enough to enjoy authoritative support: Catherine of Sienna (25 March 1347–29 April 1380) had Raymond of Capua as her spiritual advisor. German mystic Hildegard of Bingen (1098–17 September 1179) worked under the Abbot Kuno and the prior and confessor Volma. The noble and wealthy convent at Helfta that produced famous mystics and visionaries such as former beguine Mechtild von Magdeburg (1270–1282) and Gertrude the Great (1256–c. 1302) were ensconced in safety in part due to the privilege of wealth and in part due to the *cura* of Dominican and Franciscan monks, even though the women were most likely erudite in their own capacities. Some of these nuns even communicated with and influenced popes and monarchs. Julian of Norwich (from 1343 to after 1416), despite being subject to the same risk as Marguerite, was fortunate to have lived out her life as a solitary English anchorite and her *Revelations of Divine Love*, it seems, posed little to no threat to the Church since Julian 'appears to echo scripture [having taken] it truths to heart'.[3] As visionary writers, however, both women skirted heterodoxy, especially in the matter of collapsing boundaries between divinity and humanity, good and evil and virtue and sin.

It is safe to say that medieval women like Marguerite and Julian were active participants in written transmissions regarding divinity whether in a lay or clerical capacity, and were often at risk of accusation of heterodoxy, given the dogmatic theological and patriarchal society they lived in. Margery Kempe's attempts to communicate her visions and the displays of her tears of compunction are known to have

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[2] See Colledge, Marler and Grant (introd.), *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, xlvii.

[3] B. Windeatt (introd.), *Julian of Norwich; Revelations of Divine Love* (Oxford, 2016), p. xv. This edition to be referred to as BW.

provoked 'rebuke from churchmen throughout her life'.[4] It could even be argued that the female spirituality and religious hysteria that characterised the late middle ages might be a spontaneous nervous reaction to a 'persecutor society'.[5] In reporting on their perspectives of divinity Marguerite and Julian risked execution for heresy, which is exactly why and how Marguerite's life ended. In order to bypass this risk some medieval scribes and especially women had to communicate their visions of *unio mystica* via literary subterfuge. Sarah Law helpfully explains the linguistic implications of literary subterfuge: 'language, in this position, is one of subversion, which opens up the indefinable space of the *mystérique*'. She notes that this process has its roots in apophasis, the consideration of God in terms of negation, in contrast to cataphatic theology, explaining that 'Linguistic aspects of this theory include paradox and wordplay, [and] the ludic dismantling of certainty'.[6] Accordingly, it can be argued that what Marguerite and Julian postulate in *The Mirror* and *Revelations* dismantles certainties, borders on heresy and communicates their visions of *unio mystica* in a way that defies language, using encoding techniques that condition much medieval mystical writing.

This article is based on a sympathetic reading of both texts. It is a reading that investigates the strategy of encoding as a means for both women to evade condemnation and as a means for them to articulate the in-between (liminal) world they encounter in their mystical visions.

Liminality, the khora and Structural Forces Pre-conditioning Liminality in the Lives of Marguerite and Julian

It is important to illustrate the link between liminality and the *khora* because it is my understanding that there is a gradation in mystical union: from divinity itself to the *khora*, to liminality, to secular life and in reverse. The *khora* is pre-linguistic and liminality is ambiguous, and the two are related via an *exitus reditus* process which generates

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[4] Stephen Harper, 'So Euyl to Rewlyn: Madness and Authority in "The Book of Margery Kempe"', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 98 (1997): 53–61 (p. 53).

[5] Patrick Wright, 'Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* and the Subject of Annihilation', *Mystics Quarterly* 35 (2009): 63–98 (p. 63).

[6] Sarah Law, 'In a Hazelnut: Julian of Norwich in Contemporary Women's Poetry', *Literature and Theology* 25 (2011): 92–108 (p. 94).

ambiguity and hence encoding. It is necessary then, first to clarify what is meant by liminality and what is meant by the *khora*, because the relationship between the two states is by its nature dialectic. This dialectic process conditions the linguistic strategy (encoding) employed by Marguerite and Julian.

According to Arnold van Gennep, who introduced the concept of liminality in his anthropological work, *The Rites of Passage* (1909), liminality involves structured movement. According to Van Gennep it is a rite of passage, a journey, in which the itinerant undergoes and experiences affective and even physical and intellectual changes in a 'transition[al]' space between the known and unknown.[7] In 1967 Victor Turner clarified the term further in *The Forest of Symbols*, claiming that the structured movement brings about a shifting and rearranging of ideas and that the changes that the itinerant undergoes are 'inter-structural'.[8] Caroline Walker Bynum adds a female perspective: all women are constantly liminal and their liminality does not only occur strictly within structural progression. This can be taken to mean that for women, rites of passage, or the journey, is an amorphous movement which is in and of itself a re-organisational experience.[9] I would connect these views with an observation by C. S. Lewis to the effect that reason can move beyond itself and in so doing become capable of grasping a metaphysical intelligence that is free of determinism.[10]

Combining these four voices suggests that ideas are indeterminate in a liminal space: liminality accommodates and holds in tension opposing ideas, thus creating a force field in which the meaning of opposing ideas becomes suspended. The ideas now become constructs because the value (meaning) brought in from outside of the liminal space has been neutralized. New meaning is created when there is an interpersonal play between the juxtaposing ideas in the

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[7] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage [Les Rites de Passage (1909)], trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee* (1960; repr. London and New York, 2004), p. 11.

[8] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY, 1967), pp. 93, 98, 99, 101, 109.

[9] C. W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1992), pp. 31, 32.

[10] C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 88–89.

inter-structural force field (liminal space). Such play is catalysed by an *exitus* from, and/or *reditus* to, the *khora* via the liminal space. Both the *exitus* and *reditus* each in its own capacity are relative to either one of the juxtaposing constructs in the liminal space. A construct catalysed by an *exitus* or *reditus* then comes into being but only carries meaning in relation to its juxtaposed construct. Differently put, a construct in the liminal space catalysed by the *exitus reditus* operation calls that construct's opposite into being and in so doing meaning is constructed. This can be illustrated as follows:
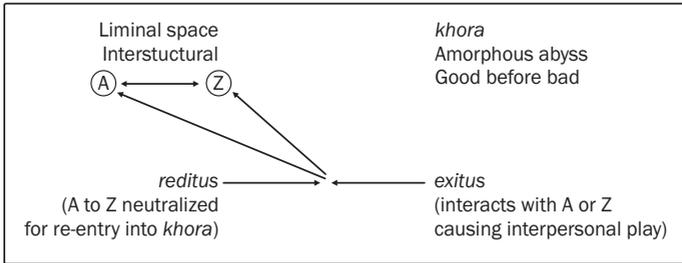
The illustration could be said to show how the

> *chôra* anticipates the arrival of [the] grand artisan [*reditus/ exitus*]— *chôra* is, so to speak, always already there. It is at once all receiving, a receptacle, and something that harbours, shelters, nurtures, and gives birth. It is infinitely malleable like gold, and it is the matrix for all things. As all things shake, it winnows like a basket, separating out the chaff from the grain.[11]

The *khora* is first described by Plato as *ekmageion*, 'a natural matrix for all things'.[12] This empty place is paired with the good, its polar opposite. *Khora* differs from the good in that it is not a fullness of presence and light but a dark bottomless abyss; still, together they underlie a

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[11] Anthony Vidler, 'chôra', in Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton, NJ, 2017).

[12] Plato, *Timaeus*, 50c, in *Plato: Timaeus and Critias*, trans. A. E. Taylor (1929; rpt London, 2013). R. Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London/New York, 2003), p. 193, translates *khora* as 'a placeless place from which everything that is derives'; see also John Manoussakis, 'Khora: The Hermeneutics of Hyphenation', *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 58 (2002): 93–100 (p. 94).

procreative gap,[13] meaning that beings, or even constructs, are only actualized in relational terms. That is, without dark there is no light and vice versa. Each calls the other into being. In fact, a formulation by J. Hite suggests that darkness is a pre-condition for light. It is interesting how in this definition of the *khora* good and bad are paired, that is, good and bad are simultaneously present but neither carries any meaning on its own except in relation to the other. In other words, it seems that in the *khora* there is a symbiotic relationship between contrasting subjects and that it is only in relation to each other that the potential for (re)creation exists. That is, the space and place where no language, in the sense of oral and written communication, yet exists. It is the pre-birth space of the language that is yet to be, in attempts to express the ineffable. This pre-birth space is what Jaques Derrida describes as a space/place of

> origin that is thought to be simple, intact, normal, or, standard, self-identical . . . of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident . . . conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation.[14]

In other words, the essence of Derrida's *khora* seems to be that it is a preternatural space/place, and as such it could be considered as a divine state in that the *khora* is incorrupt inception. It is the origin of origination. Relying on this Derrida-derived definition of the *khora* as the originating space, it seems the *khora* is the place towards which Marguerite and Julian are drawn in their search for meaningful engagement with God. Plato himself describes the *khora* in these terms:

> [T]hat which is to receive all kinds in itself must be bare of all forms . . . This, then, is why we are not to call the mother and receptacle of creation visible and sensible generally earth, nor air, nor water . . . but if we say it is a somewhat invisible and formless, all-receptive and partaking of the intelligible in

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[13] J. Hite, 'Reflections on Khora', 15 February 2012, available at: https://jeanhite.wordpress.com/2012/02/15/reflections-on-khora/ (accessed 27/11/ 2018).

[14] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.,* trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL, 1988), p. 93.

a manner most puzzling and hard to grasp, we shall not be wrong.[15]

From this additional description of the *khora* it can be seen that the *khora* is thought to be without character, is the origin of everything, is boundless, does not distinguish between characters and is invisible and formless.

Yet another definition of the *khora*, a psychoanalytical one by Julia Kristeva, refers to a space of early psychological movement toward differentiation and self-identity, yet a space in which elements are without identity and without reason. This breaking away from the maternal in the space of *khora* is a paradoxical movement, with and against the *khora*—a sense of simultaneous dependency and pushing away.[16] The result is that '*khora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where . . . unity succumbs before the process of charges and stages that produce him'.[17] That is, the *khora* is a space/place that is simple, intact and self-identical (Derrida); it is a space/place of derivation where contradictions are paired, with positive always preceding negative (Plato and Derrida), so that the *khora* is the place of all creation whether visible or invisible (Plato and Derrida); it is itself characterless because it births all character and receives all character—and in doing so unity succumbs before the process of emanations (Plato, Derrida and Kristeva). Finally, it is a place where creation/emanation is negated in relation to the divine love that births it, thus giving rise to an *exitus* and *reditus* process.

Given the above characterizations of the *khora*, it seems to me that the *khora* is of the divine and liminality is of temporality. The similar yet distinct qualities of liminality and the *khora* have important implications: the *khora* is where mystical union occurs, whereas liminality is a necessary transitional space/place where the mystic is compelled to shift from human perceptions to nuanced comprehension of the divine, prior to *unio mystica*. Thus it seems to me that the relationship between liminality and the *khora*, and their functions and operations, conditions not only the visions that are revealed to

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[15] Plato, *Timaeus*, 50e–51b; see Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters, 194.*

[16] Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters,* 195.

[17] Ibid., p. 196.

the mystic but also the cryptic language that they use to articulate the visions. Since liminality is characterized by holding juxtapositions in tension and thus suspending meaning, and the *khora* hyphenates in terms of juxtapositions, the very language and expressions that the mystic relies upon become encoded. This encoding occurs through ambiguity, paradox, juxtapositioning and word play.

In the case of Julian and Marguerite, liminality is already present in their personal circumstances and in their visionary mentality. As such it informs the content and language of their writings: the visionary is herself traversing two worlds. First, there is her contemplative life and then there is her participation (albeit it in some cases marginal) in mainstream life. Second, the visionary's austere lifestyle and religious rituals transport her consciousness from the ordinary (daily life) to the extraordinary (spiritual world). Marguerite as a beguine (possibly) and Julian as an anchoress are able to perceive the corporeal, on the one hand, and, through their religious rituals, enjoy a heightened perception of the non-corporeal world. The mystic's ability to perceive the corporeal and the non-corporeal world, this dual perception, in turn enhances the body/soul dynamic. As such, the mystic is presented with pre-existing juxtapositions. In order to make sense of her world she must reconcile these structural and mental juxtapositions with divine help. This help is mediated by dialogue between the visionary and the divine. The divine and the assistance it provides, that is, the substance of the communication between the visionary and the divine, is itself ineffable and demands that the visionary invent new ways of using language. Thus the seemingly unconscious desire to reconcile the two worlds that the visionary traverses, and the need to translate into a coherent language the obscure "information" coming from the divine into the secular world, conditions the narratives. The narratives become necessarily dialectical.

The reconciliation of the juxtapositions comes to be expressed in liminal terms. For example, Julian asks, 'What is synne? . . . and I was sekir that he doith no synne. And here I saw sothly that synne is no dede, for in al this was not synne shewid' (Revelation 3 Chapter 11 of the long version, BW 47). Marguerite says, '*Et peché est nient*' (RG 38) ('And sin is nothing', CMG 23). Despite these alarming statements both women go to great lengths in their texts to explain that sin is actually the absence of good—an Augustinian bent—and not a violation of moral law. The women are speaking ambiguously.

This dialectic narrative is characterised by ambiguity and it is in the ambiguity that the encoding happens and in which the idea resides that liminality is a feature of the mystical approach to the divine. The ambiguity then is what must be investigated to see how liminality shrouds the mystical experience.

Encoding in the Dialogues of *Revelations* and *The Mirror*

The *OED* defines *encoding* as a transitive verb which means to 'translate or cipher into code'. The Merriam Webster dictionary extends the *OED* definition and defines encoding to indicate converting, symbolically, a body of information from one system of communication into another. In the digital world, encoding means placing a sequence of characters such as letters, numbers, punctuation, and certain other symbols into a specialized format, so as to transmit, and store, information efficiently. How this is transferred into literature and, specifically, into the work of Marguerite and Julian can be explained as follows: the information that Julian and Marguerite need to communicate is an encounter with (in the case of Julian) and a theory of divinity (in both cases). However, because the vision of *unio mystica* itself defies expression in words, and because language, and specifically the vernacular, seems to have been the most accessible means of communication available to Marguerite and Julian, each woman is compelled to convert the mystical experience into a specialized form of language: realized dialogue.[18] In the dialogues the experience of, and the communication of, *unio mystica* is transposed from that which is unutterable into what seems to amount to ideas. That is, extended rhetorical devices that are based in imagery, ambiguity, metaphors and allegories all function as a means to communicate *unio mystica*. Clement Olivier has usefully analysed this process:

> If objects give us an inkling of God, then drawing near to God we can receive the full revelation of their *logoi*, their spiritual naturesa, their infinite meanings. The Logos is the divine subject of all *logoi* of all the subsistent "words" that support the world. The *logikos* man, personal image of the Logos, is called to become their human subject. The meeting is fully brought about in the God-Man who enables us to fathom the spiritual essences of objects, not in order to possess [them] but in order

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[18] Cf. Bernard McGinn's explanation of 'unrealised dialogues', below.

> to offer them to the Logos after having "given them their names" marked them with our own creative spirit. The world then becomes a momentous dialogue between the Logos and the *logikos* man.[19]

This extract is helpful in understanding the communication between the divine and man: it suggests that Marguerite and Julian are the *logikos* (personal image of God the Logos) and that *The Mirror* and *Revelations* are the 'objects that give us an inkling of God': the texts' dialogues are the *logoi*, the "words" that are in, of, and about divine communication. Hence, the *logoi* (words/dialogues/texts that are *The Mirror* and *Revelations*) of the *logikos* (Marguerite and Julian) are on offer to the Logos/God. The dialogues/*logoi* of divine communication are in relationship with other each other and other religious, mystical and philosophical texts in the liminal space in what Bernard McGinn calls 'unrealised dialogues'[20]—at least until such time that links are made between the texts which bring the texts into conversation, thus realizing the dialogues, as is the case being made for the links between Marguerite's *Mirror* and Julian's *Revelations*. When links are established between the texts the 'world becomes a momentous dialogue between the Logos and the *logikos* man' because the ideas inherent in the texts are reminiscent of each other. If we entertain 'the Victorine awareness of the sacramental presence of God in nature, community, the human person, and the cosmos . . . [even in] things',[21] we can suggest that God's sacramental presence is in the texts ('things') that are dialogues that are in, of and about, divine communication, and the texts are themselves in conversation with each other. Given this understanding, it becomes easier to see why and how *The Mirror* and *Revelations* employ the specialized language of dialogue.

In *Revelations* it seems that Julian is actually in dialogue with God; that she is speaking with God. Julian asks questions and receives answers. For example, in Revelation 9 Chapter 22 of the long text the dialogue between Julian and God reads:

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[19] Clément Olivier, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New York, 2013), p. 224.

[20] Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York, 1991), p. 343.

[21] Steven Chase, *Contemplation and Compassion: The Victorine Tradition* (London, 2003), p. 32.

> Than seide our good Lord Jesus Christe, asking, 'Art thou wele
> payd that I suffrid for thee?' I sayd, 'Ya good Lord, gramercy.
> Ya good Lord, blissid mot thou be!' Than seyd Jesus, our kind
> Lorde, 'If thou art payde, I am payde. It is a joy, a blis, an
> endless lekyng to me that ever suffrid I passion for the; and if I
> myht suffer more, I wold suffre more' (BW 64)

At other times Julian ponders an issue 'with eye of [her] understondyng
and thowte' (BW 35) and is answered via 'the bodyily sight . . . and the
gostly sight' (BW 41). Furthermore, it seems that there were witnesses,
an audience, as it were, to Julian's conversation with God. The short
and long versions of Revelation 8 record, 'Than sayde I to the folke
that were with me, "Itt es todaye domesday with me"' (BW 42). In
Revelation 5 Chapter 13 of the long text there is more indication that
there were witnesses to Julian's dialogue with God: 'For this sigte I
lauhyd migtily, and that made hem to lauhyn that were about me,
and ther lauhyng was a likeing to me' (BW 51). This observation
is significant because what Julian says and how she says it in these
examples creates the sense that the audience, whether it is the one
reading *Revelations* or those in Julian's physical presence, is privy to the
communication that occurs between Julian and God. It also creates the
sense that the communication between Julian and God is transmitted
to the audience(s) via Julian in what seems to be, in modern terms,
"real time": that is to say, as the conversation is happening. *Revelations*
then, it could be said, in both versions, is a document that reports a
dialogue that is under way. Perhaps even a distinction between then
and now is required, which means that there are in fact six different
presences: God, Julian, a speaker, Julian's audience, Julian the writer
and Julian's readership. The liminal experience is thus dispersed among
six participants. The document seems to invite its audience to share
in the experience of the narrator (Julian). Moreover, in her dialogue
with God Julian communicates what she is told and is experiencing
to the audience present in her company and to the reader/hearer of
the text. The effect of this is that the audience seems to get drawn into
the conversation, into the meta-level[22] at which the mystical dialogue

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[22] The *OED* gives the prefix to mean, 'denoting change, transformation, permutation
or substitution' and qualifies the use of 'meta' to show that a noun prefixed with 'meta'
works '[to] beyond, above, [and] at a higher level [of]' the noun that it prefixes', initial
meaning: 'Prefixed to the name of a subject or discipline [meta] denot[es] another
which deals with ulterior issues in the same field, or which raises questions about the

takes place, so that the dialogue has many features. First, it has a multi-dimensional character. Second, the dialogue is one that presents itself in what feels like an intensely intimate setting, which reinforces the idea of an indwelling God. Third, the dialogue seems to be accessible to a select audience. Fourth, there is the sense that there is a rapport between Julian and God and, by extension, the audience.

In Marguerite's case, *The Mirror* is actually written in dialogue form. Although the emphasis is on a listening audience, allowance is made for readers. The verse explicit starts with, 'You who would read the book'[23] and later in the text The Soul appeals for acceptance, 'if the hearers who will read this book do not demur'.[24] Furthermore, Marguerite's disembodied omniscient voice inhabits the speech of around thirty itinerants, entering and exiting the dialogue (which is analogous to the *exitus reditus* operation). Love, Marguerite's *alter ego* and symbolic of God's voice, and The Soul, symbolic of every(wo)man, are in conversation with each other. Moreover, at times *The Mirror* directly addresses its audience, when it refers the audience to the glosses of the book for those who seek a better understanding of the text. It does so again when Love, in Chapter 98, addresses 'You, ladies . . .'. Yet, in that chapter, Love is in conversation with only one character, namely, Reason. In addition, there is the constant interrogation of Love by Reason which disturbingly mimics what can be imagined was the interrogation of those undergoing trials at the Inquisition. What all this amounts to is that there is much talking going on in *The Mirror,* as is the case in *Revelations.* Like *Revelations*, *The Mirror*, it could be said, is a document reporting a speech, reporting a dialogue; the effect of which is to draw the audience into the conversation. *The Mirror*'s dialogues are also multi-dimensional, presenting themselves in an intensely intimate setting that reinforces the idea of an indwelling God, who seems to be accessible to a select audience—which creates the sense that there is a rapport between Marguerite and God, and by extension the audience.

The fact that there is so much conversation is significant, because it gives rise to an awareness of further unrealized conversation. The

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nature of the original discipline and its methods, procedures, and assumptions.'

[23] In French, '*Vous qui ence livre liront*' (RG 8).

[24] CMG 57; in French, '*se es auditeurs ne demoure, qui ce livre liront*' (RG 120).

unrealized conversations are those between mystical texts, medieval women themselves, theologians and all manner of orthodox and heterodox religions and they are in addition to the dialogues realized or present in the texts. These dialogues, it could be said, occur in an undefined space/place that Jungian psychologists might call the collective unconscious. This space between the texts, Jung's collective unconscious, is the "network" space. Further to this, the conversations are significant because they are evidence of meta-dialogue which makes the texts self-referential. This means that *The Mirror* and *Revelations* are documents that report or divulge to the audience (present/hearing/reading) the communication/dialogue between God and the mystic/visionary. In this sense then the documents are records of reported speech. Those reported speeches are Julian's and Marguerite's interviews of God, who re-interviews Julian and Marguerite. The interviews and re-interviews repeat themselves. As such, the dialogues collapse into each other in a seemingly endless cycle of self-reference. The mirroring dialogues function as coded language: mirror images are identical but reflect in reverse. Hence the idea of seemingly opposite ideas carrying the same meaning, that is, juxtapositioning dissolves into a oneness. The dialogues thus coded invite constant rehearsal because the text will not yield its meaning. Thus the unrealized dialogues and seemingly self-referential—mirror image—discussions are the means by which liminality is encoded in the language of the two texts.

The encoding occurs within the texts' enriched dialogues. Marguerite and Julian are not alone in using figurative language to capture the amorphous quality of visions of *unio mystica*. The German-Swiss mystic Henry Suso (14th century) also seemed to feel compelled to contemplate mystical union via a concentration on 'verbal and artistic imagery';[25] 'images and text constantly [provided him] with an indispensable material pathway towards God'.[26] Thus, he absorbed the figurative modes of language into his writings, which aroused criticism, mainly due to his Eckhartian bent. So, like Suso, Marguerite and Julian drew on the contemplation of contemporary

[25] Jeffery F. Hamburger, 'The Use of Images in the Pastoral Care of Nuns: The Case of Heinrich Suso and the Domincans', *The Art Bulletin* 71 (1989): 20–46.

[26] Steven Rozenski, Jr., 'The Visual, the Textual, and the Auditory in Henry Suso's *Vita* or *Life of the Servant*', *Mystics Quarterly* 34 (2008): 1–34 (p. 36).

imagery such as the Passion, simultaneously conforming to orthodoxy and, though their adaptations of the Passion, threatening to destabilize contemporary and mainstream interpretations and understanding. Verbal imagery and figurative modes of language via dialogue evidently became a means of communicating visions of *unio mystica*. Ambiguity is embedded in the figurative mode and it is this quality that enforces the consideration that the texts have a liminal quality. Having said all of the above, it is to be understood that the content of the *unio mystica*, the experience of travelling spiritually towards mystical union is tied up in and expressed in the liminal tenets of the texts. Deciphering the liminal tenets of the text, in essence deciphering the liminal features of the language and concepts in *The Mirror* and *Revelations*, reveals some of the particulars of *unio mystica*.

Paradox, Juxtaposition and Ambiguity

As a literary device ambiguity occurs intermittently throughout both texts in the form of paradox: that is, Julian and Marguerite present ideas that at first seem incongruous but on closer inspection are revealed to be harmonious. What is significant in the use of this literary technique is that the words/ideas/concepts that are juxtaposed cancel each other by virtue of being non-reconciliatory. What is left is an emptiness into which reconciliation is forced. This forced reconciliatory space characterizes liminality in that it resolves the opposing forces. For example, in Revelation 3 Julian says that 'For a man beholdith some dedes wele done and some dedes evil, but our Lord beholdeth hem not so' (BW 47). The antonyms bad and good cancel each other by the very nature of their meaning, but Julian's statement implies that bad can be good and good can be bad, according to divinity. In other words, the void that is left due to the cancellation of the antonyms is filled by the arbitrator that is divinity, in that divinity is ever present in all things. This divine ubiquity forces reconciliation between the concepts, making the case for liminality.

A strategy of ambiguity that invokes liminality can be found elsewhere in *Revelations*. In Revelation 7 Julian discusses the benefits of 'wele and wo' (BW 28). We read that 'it es nedefulle to ylke man . . . sumtyme to be in comforthe, and sumtyme to fayle' (BW 54). In other words, souls benefit from suffering and failure; suffering and failure are inevitable. Here, profit and loss are held in tension and it is suggested that good can be found in both. Revelation 10 speaks

about Christ's heart being split in two for the sake of love. The image at work in this Revelation is the pierced and bleeding wound in Christ's side, evoking the idea of physical pain and torture, the sense of which is overturned to joy when the gaping wound is shown to have the ability to encompass all of mankind. Christ's body is the site of tension and (potentially) reconciliation. The suggestion is that death is good because it calls birth into being and vice versa. Here death and birth are reconciled. Revelation 10's birth and death imagery—in that Christ's wound causes his death but is also shown to give rise to all of humanity—seems to echo Revelation 7's 'wele and wo'. Revelation 13 discusses the constitution of mankind: according to Julian there are 'twa partyes' (BW 30), an overt one, which is mankind's salvation, and a covert one, which also redeems mankind. In the same Revelation it is written that there are 'two manner of privityes' (BW 82), that is two mysteries, of which one, according to Revelation 13, is that sin is absence. The other mystery is an unrecognizable one, mostly because of mankind's ignorance but also because of the Lord's desire that it remain a mystery.

In these examples from Revelation 13, Julian seems to be suggesting what appears to be a harmonious co-existence between transparency and concealment, or knowledge and ignorance. She does so again in Chapter 36 when she speaks of 'this dede and the tother aforseid': two deeds, that is, one in Chapter 32 and another in Chapter 35, both of which are referred to in vague terms, hidden from, yet simultaneously available to, humanity. In Chapter 35 of the same Revelation Julian reconciles bad with good, as she does in Revelation 3 when she says, 'Al that our Lord doeth is rythful, and alle that he suffrith is worshipful; and in these ii is comprehended good and ille' (BW 83). Revelation 14 discusses two seemingly contradictory aspects of prayer. Julian says there that prayer is built on request and trust, yet it is impossible to grasp that that which has been requested has been granted. Here Julian is saying that everything humankind requests via prayer has already been granted, but humankind in its ignorance is incapable of grasping it. Here Julian reconciles availability and inaccessibility. Still, in Revelation 14, Julian writes about humanity's tribulations as a 'contrariouste which is now in us' (BW 49), which would dissolve upon humanity's recognition of its inner divinity. Furthermore, the 'ii contraries' (BW 50) that Julian recognises between herself and the angels dissolve when she realises that divinity does not distinguish

between human and divine beings. The ambiguity here is that whilst there are differences between divine beings and humans they are also of the same kind, alike, indeed, homogeneous. Thus Julian reconciles moral purity (divinity) and corruption (humanity) due to their seeming interconnectedness.

This interconnectedness is compounded in the parable of the servant and the master. Julian spells it out—she writes explicitly, 'I have techyng with me, as it were the begynnyng of an ABC' (BW 110). We deduce that she is attempting to imprint on the audience the interconnectedness between divinity and humanity through the parable of the servant and master: 'His [the servant's] stertyng was the Godhede, and the rennyg was the manhede' (BW 110). That is, Julian reconciles divinity and humanity by embodying both in the servant. The servant's actions distinguish master from servant but it is more that both master and servant are embodied in the servant; in which the case for interrelatedness lies.

Examples of ambiguity, and ambiguity evoking liminality, can be found in Marguerite's *Mirror* too. Early on in *The Mirror* it becomes clear that there is ambiguity at work. Reason says in Chapter 13 that, 'there are several words … of two meanings' (CMG 29).[27] Furthermore, Love says in Chapter 20 that, 'one and the same word has two meanings' (CMG 40).[28] Reason, symbol of humanity and logic, bemoans 'contradictory statements' (CMG 40),[29] as does Reason's Understanding when she says in Chapter 12 that *The Mirror* is a 'contradictory book' (CMG 28).[30] If the itinerants in *The Mirror* themselves recognize ambiguity in the dialogue, it would be safe to assume that Marguerite also uses it as a literary technique. The question is: where exactly, and how? I will use an example that corresponds with the one given in the above discussion regarding Julian's ambiguity and which concerns the reconciliation of birth and death.

In Chapter 69 Marguerite writes, 'Rachel must die at Benjamin's birth, and till Rachel is dead Benjamin cannot be born' (CMG 90–

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[27] In French, '*car plusieurs doubles mots y a*' (RG 54).

[28] In French, '*une mesmes parole a deux entendemens*' (RG 78).

[29] In French, '*deux paroles contraires*' (RG 78).

[30] In French, '*en desdisant ce livre*' (RG 50).

91).[31] Just as Julian uses the Passion to illustrate how Jesus' death gives birth to humanity, Marguerite uses the story about Rachel and Benjamin, from Genesis 35: 16–18, to reconcile life and death. This construction seems to be commonplace. Nonetheless, for Richard of St Victor the contradiction lies not so much in birth and death since this is an allegory, but between reason and contemplation. 'The birth of Benjamin, represents the birth of contemplation and the inception of the consciousness of divine presence. But the birth comes at a price: the death of Rachel who represents "reason" . . . Benjamin represents two kinds of contemplation, both of which are defined in the context of the death of Rachel, the death of reason'.[32] Reason must die yet the whole discourse is still subject to reason as long as it is in words. Furthermore, the parable of the servant and master in *Revelations* corresponds to the narrative in *The Mirror* when Marguerite refers to Mary and Martha. The two sisters, like the servant and the master, embody different qualities. Martha, like the servant, rushes off busying herself with preparations for the Lord's visit. Mary, like the master, sits quietly. Marguerite implies an interrelatedness between divinity and humanity, for the two sisters are different people yet related to each other by blood. Thus, Marguerite uses the same technique Julian does to reconcile divine being (moral purity) with humanity (corruption). Interestingly, it should be noted that both stories also work to communicate the idea that truth is not always revealed in moments of calm reflection, a feature that compounds the idea of ambiguity. Instead, 'the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* mutually nourish one another.'[33] The two are complementary and work to consolidate the text's liminal tenets. A last example of ambiguity from *The Mirror* reads in Chapter 130 as, 'and if I could comprehend my wickedness, I should comprehend your goodness; one is the measure of the

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[31] In French, '*et il convient mourir Rachel en la naissance Benjamin, ne jusques ad ce que, Rachel soit morte ne peut Benjamin naister*' (RG 1296).

[32] Chase, *Contemplation and Compassion*, 90.

[33] Knauf, Christopher Malcolm, 'Being at Home in Two Worlds: Meister Eckhart on Mary and Martha and the Integration of the Active and Contemplative Life', available at: https://lifeisthismoment.com/2016/05/21/being-at-home-in-two-worlds-meister-eckhart-on-mary-and-martha-and-the-integration-of-the-active-and-contemplative-life (accessed 19/08/2018).

other' (CMG 165).[34] Thus, as is the case with Julian in Chapter 35 of Revelation 13 and in Revelation 3, Marguerite maintains the tension between bad and good.

What, then, is the significance of the ambiguity and what does it have to do with liminality? The ambiguity at once dissolves contradictions and invokes equilibrium. This space in which opposing forces seem to exist in harmony makes for an inter-structural place, marking progress towards divinity. Liminality's binary character identifies it as a domain of 'divine dichotomy'.[35] In other words, in a liminal space all determination dissolves and what remains is a seemingly pregnant yet empty space: swallowing all distinctions, it embraces the possibility of all that could exist, which in turn is catalysed by the pre-birth state of the *khora*. In order to communicate this idea it becomes necessary for Marguerite and Julian to rely on juxtaposing terms and ideas, which cancel each other, bringing us to a pregnant yet empty *khoral* space, with its affinities with divinity. By Julian's and Marguerite's reasoning, if we are to rely on the given examples, the liminal domain is a strategic place because it is where good and evil consummate, and exposure to knowledge of this consummation triggers neuro-psychological activity,[36] enforcing enlightenment. The enlightenment, which is actually computational—calculating the transition from known information to new information—is transformative because in the liminal space one sees oneself in relation to everything else, something that is succinctly captured in Julian's hazelnut contemplation and Marguerite's use of the triple imagery of mirror, book and painting to show self-reflecting images. The liminal space is also value-neutral, a place of dispassionate laws where all former knowns become decoded; that is, knowns become deciphered. For those like Julian and Marguerite who seem to have accessed this spiritual space, the experience, or knowledge of the space and its functions and qualities, seems to be apocalyptic: *apocalypse* derives from Greek and means to lift a veil or to uncover. Judging from statements in *Revelations* Chapters 48 and 56 such as 'wrath . . . comes from a lack of wisdom'

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[34] In French, '*et se je povoie comprendre ma mauvaistié, je comprendroie vostre bonté: ce en est la mesure*' (RG 376).

[35] N. D. Walsch, *Conversations with God* (London, 1997), pp. 89–91.

[36] Neuro-psychological activity here specifically means revisions of mindsets and not the medical and scientific meaning it carries.

(CW 262) and 'we cannot profit by our reason alone' (CW 291) and, in *The Mirror*, statements such as, 'Men of theology and scholars such as they / Will never understand this writing properly' (CGM 9) and 'Nor can man's intelligence comprehend it' (CGM 17), Julian's and Marguerite's theories force a consideration that a veil has been lifted from their eyes, revealing a reality that is alternative to what is conventionally deemed reality.

It seems as if the conventional meaning of reality is overturned and is, by *Revelations'* and *The Mirror*'s discourse, treated as virtual—meaning that [what is deemed reality] 'is so in essence or effect, but not formally or actually' (*OED*); rather, it is supposed and/or imagined—and not the real one. Similarly, William James observed that there is a sense in which 'the human self is less real than the divine self'.[37] Once having traversed the liminal space where *unio mystica* is decoded via the deliberate juxtapositions of words/ideas/concepts that are forced into reconciliation via ubiquitous divine arbitration, one reunites with the divine self that seemingly has affinities with the *khoral* space, the space that follows on from the liminal space. When tensions are balanced between juxtaposing forces in the liminal space, the concepts collapse and what is left is a void pregnant with potentiality, the *khoral* space with its affinities with divinity.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to show that the spiritual precepts of *The Mirror* and *Revelations* are encoded via ambiguity. It is in deciphering the ambiguity that the liminal aspects of the journey towards *unio mystica* are revealed. The encoding is embedded in the language of the texts. This language attempts to accomplish at least two things. First, it aims to provide some form of cover for the person (Julian and Marguerite) against the strict rules regarding the laity's and especially women's authority regarding religious discourse. This, in itself, necessitates encoding so that the women's voices are hidden in the texts' dialogues. Second, the language attempts to communicate ineffable mystical union and so it is forced into adaptation, and encoding occurs spontaneously: the attempts to reconcile the two worlds that the anchoress and the beguine traverse, that is the contemplative life of an anchoress and that of a beguine, and the details

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[37] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1901), p. 68.

inherent in the world of mystical union, condition the narratives. The resultant dialectical narrative relies on ambiguity, paradoxical statements and juxtapositioning in order to transmit its potentially heterodox ideas, and encoding occurs in the ambiguity, paradoxical statements and juxtapositioning. Various examples from both texts illustrate that *Revelations* and *The Mirror* use symbols and images from religious discourse and convert them into a specialized dialectic style so as to communicate visions of *unio mystica* efficiently. Finally, since both texts create a value neutral space (liminal space) in their use of juxtapositions, paradoxical statements and ambiguity, and their contradictions automatically cancel each other, the language of the texts exhibits features of liminality that make a case for liminality as a precondition of apprehending divinity.

Because Julian and Marguerite at various points in their texts speak ambiguously, they provide for a liminal, neither-here-nor-there perspective. Liminality further enables an unobtrusive yet audible voice to participate in socio-political and religious dialogue, but without risk to personal well-being. Just as Margery Kempe's *sensus spiritualis* reading of the Biblical passages of Genesis 1:28 and Luke 11:27–28 functioned as, and was an attempt to, 'spiritualize her own complex situation as a wife with a divine mission, through the construction of allegories of female authority which [remained] well within the parameters of orthodoxy as defined in her day',[38] so the ambiguous, hence, liminal tenets inherent in Julian's and Marguerite's texts work to guard against potential hostility and accusations of heresy. The question regarding whether or not Julian and Marguerite consciously encoded their texts can be answered as follows: the extant ambiguity in the texts is evidence that both women had an awareness of the risk to their person should their ideas be interrogated or they themselves found to be wrong and deceived by the devil. It was thought that, 'The abandonment of reason [left] the aspiring mystic open to satanic suggestion.'[39] Such an anxiety was real and yet it was commonplace for reason to be put aside before contemplation could take place. Nonetheless, engaging in ambiguity would have made it easier to repudiate allegations of heresy, even

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[38] Alastair Minnis, *Translations of Authority in Medieval English Literature: Valuing the Vernacular* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 112.

[39] Harper, 'Madness and Authority', 55.

though, alas, this tactic failed Marguerite. So it seems that at this level of understanding the encoding might have been conscious. However, the presence of ambiguity in the texts is also proof of Marguerite's and Julian's efforts at containing information which defies containment: that is, the indescribable God. At this level of understanding the encoding is unconscious because the medium of communication, that is, language, even dialogue, is an inadequate means to convey the amorphous quality of *unio mystica*. However, because language was the most accessible means to Julian and Marguerite, they had to adapt it in order to convey with as much accuracy as they could, that which is divine. In adaptation, the language became unconsciously encoded.

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