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“The Swet, Gracious Handes of Oure Moder”: Divine and Earthly Mothering in St. Birgitta of Sweden, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe

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“*The Swet, Gracious Handes of Oure Moder*”: Divine and Earthly Mothering in St. Birgitta of Sweden, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe

In 1413, a devout laywoman, called Margery Kempe, visited a well-known anchoress in Norwich to ask for spiritual advice¹. That anchoress was Julian “of Norwich”; and during that visit they may have fangirled to each other about saint Birgitta of Sweden, the 14th-century visionary whose revelations, collected in a work called the *Liber Celestis*, were widely known in England and to Margery and perhaps to Julian too: the *Liber* was read out to Margery², by 1407 “at the latest, and probably a good deal earlier Bridget's writings... were no doubt being read in Julian's immediate milieu,”³ and an anonymous middle-English translation dates from 1410-1420⁴. Though Birgitta (1303-1373) was a noblewoman powerfully engaging with political intrigues at European courts and church politics⁵, Julian (c. 1343 to after 1416) an anchoress⁶, Margery (1373 to after 1439) a merchant's daughter and businesswoman from Lynn⁷, these women had much in common as well: both Birgitta and Margery were mothers (Birgitta had eight children, Margery fourteen) and they both made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and all three of them produced at least one book. In their works one can find a saliently present motif of earthly and divine motherhood, or as Liz Herbert McAvoy calls it, the “motherhood matrix”⁸.

I would like to argue that Birgitta and Margery derive authority as visionaries and writers by imitating Mary's maternal bodily acts, such as her pregnancy, her swaddling of the Christ child, and her breastfeeding, a physical expression of what Rosemary Hale calls “*imitatio Mariae*”⁹.

Regarding Birgitta have several scholars, such as Claire Sahlin¹⁰, pointed out that she derives her prophetic authority from her identification with Mary. I would like to add that Birgitta makes herself resemble Mary during by having Mary inscribe her own sensations and acts on Birgitta's body. Birgitta for instance experiences a mystical pregnancy, found in the 6th book of her *Revelations*.

Nocte natalis Domini ...sensit in corde motum sensibilem admirabilem, quasi si in corde esset puer viuus et voluens se et reuoluens...Itaque iterum eodem die in summa missa apparuit mater Dei et dixit sponse: "Filia, miraris de motu, quem sentis in corde tuo. Scias, quod non est illusio sed ostensio quedam similitudinis dulcedinis mee et misericordie michi facte... Nam

¹ Barry Windeatt, ed. *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2004) I:18 lines 1335-1381. (p. 119-23); Anthony Bale, trans. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 2015).

² *Book* I:17.

³ Nicholas Watson, ‘The Composition of Julian of Norwich's Revelation of Love’, *Speculum*, 68.3 (1993), 637–83 (p. 682)

⁴ Roger Ellis, “Introduction”, *The Liber Celestis of Birgitta of Sweden*, ix-xvi (ix)

⁵ Bridget Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), p. 1.

⁶ Rubric to *Vision*, p. 63; *Revelation* 86:24-5 [p. 381]; Liz Herbert McAvoy, ‘Introduction: “God Forbade That I Am a Techere” : Who, or What, Was Julian?’’, in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. by Liz Herbert McAvoy (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), pp. 1–16.

⁷ Anthony Bale, ‘Introduction’, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. ix – xxxiii (p.xvii-xx).

⁸ Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 64–95.

⁹ Rosemary Hale, ‘Imitatio Mariae: Motherhood Motifs in Devotional Memoirs’, *Mystics Quarterly*, 16.4 (1990), 193–203 (p. 200).

¹⁰ Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, Studies in Medieval Mysticism, 3 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2001), p. 80, 82.

quando ego consensi angelo nuncianti michi conceptionem filii Dei, statim sensi in me mirabile quoddam et viuudum. Et cum nasceretur ex me, indicibili exultacione et mirabili festinancia clauso meo virginali vtero prodiebat....

“Ideo, filia, non timeas illusionem sed gratulare, quia motus iste, quem tuesentis, signum aduentus filii mei est in cor tuum. ... Deus et ego in cordibus hominum senes et frigidi a caritate eorum indicare volumus amicis nostris et mundo per te voluntatem nostram. Motus vero iste cordis tui perseuerabit tecum et augebitur iuxta capacitatem cordis tui.”

[On Christmas night ...she felt a wonderful sensible movement in her heart like that of a living child turning and turning around....At high mass on the same day, God’s Mother appeared to the bride and said: “Daughter, you are marveling at the movement you feel in your heart. Be assured that it is no illusion but shows a similarity to my own delight and to the mercy done to me. ...As soon as I gave my consent to the angel who announced to me the conception of God’s Son, I immediately felt something wonderful and alive in me. When he was born from me, he came forth from my untouched virginal womb with an indescribable feeling of exultation and a wonderful swiftness...Therefore, my daughter, do not fear that it is an illusion. Instead be thankful that this movement that you feel is a sign of the coming of my Son into your heart....now that God and I have grown old in human hearts and their charity is cold toward us, we want to indicate our intentions to our friends and to the world through you. This movement in your heart will continue in you and grow according to the capacity of your heart.”] ¹¹

The vision happening on Christmas Eve of course links it to Christ’s birth, while The Virgin Mother explicitly stresses how Birgitta’s sensation of a living child moving inside her heart are identical to her sensations during both the conception of Christ and his birth. Birgitta’s influential vision of the nativity featured that same painless and joyful delivery (VII 21, 22). Mary’s description of the function of the mystical pregnancy suggests that it is not only God but also Mary who sends the “wonderful sensible movement” as God does: Mary sends Birgitta sensations identical to those she experienced so that Birgitta will prophecy.

Margery also engages in “imitatio Mariae,” as for instance Anthony Bale points out¹²; I would like to add that Margery does so to such a large extent that she seems to want to compete with Mary and outdo by means of maternal bodily acts, such as feeding and swaddling the newborn. Like Birgitta, Margery has a vision of the nativity:

And than went the creatur forth wyth owyr Lady to Bedlem and purchasyd hir herborwe every nyght wyth gret reverens, and owyr Lady was receyved wyth glad cher. Also sche beggyd owyr Lady fayr whyte clothys and kerchys for to swathyn in hir sone whan he wer born, and, whan Jhesu was born sche ordeyned beddyng for owyr Lady to lyg in wyth hir blyssed sone. And sythen sche beggyd mete for owyr Lady and hir blyssyd chyld. Aftyward sche swathyd hym wyth byttyr teerys of compassyon, havyng mend of the scharp deth that he schuld suffyr for the lofe of synful men, seyng to hym, “Lord, I schal fare fayr wyth yow; I schal not byndyn yow soor. I pray yow beth not dysplesyd wyth me.”

[And then the creature went on with our Lady to Bethlehem and organized her accommodations every night with great reverence, and our Lady was received most warmly.

¹¹ *Revelaciones*, VI ed. by Birger Bergh, Samlingar Utgivna Av Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet: Ser. 2, Latinska Skrifter, 7:6 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1991), VI: LXXXVIII lines 1-8 (pp. 247-246); *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Volume 3: Liber Caelestis, Books VI-VII*, ed. by Denis Searby and Bridget Morris (Oxford University Press, 2012) (p. 155). (Own translation).

¹² Anthony Bale, ‘Explanatory Notes’, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 230–69 (p. 266).

Also she begged for our Lady fine white cloths and kerchiefs in which to swaddle her son when He was born; and when Jesus was born, she organized bedding for our Lady to lie in with her blessed son. And afterwards she begged food for our Lady and her blessed child. Afterwards, with bitter tears of compassion, she swaddled Him, mindful of the harsh death He would go on to suffer for the love of sinful people, saying to Him, “Lord, I shall treat you tenderly; I shall not bind you tightly. I beg you not to be displeased with me.”¹³

Liam Peter Temple¹⁴ and Mary Dzon compares this nativity scene with the one in Birgitta’s visions, which Margery may have known in Middle-English. I would like to argue for the same comparison, but stress how when contrasting these two scenes, in Margery’s nativity she competes with Mary by means of bodily maternal actions. In Birgitta’s nativity scene, though featuring several new elements, the visionary does not take part in the actions at all; she is nothing but a gaze:

And þe child, wepand and tremeland for colde and hardness of þe pament, streked him to seke refresheinge. His moder tuke him in hir armes, and streined him to hir breste, and with hir cheke and hire breste scho warmed him with grete ioy and lykyng...Sho...tuke him and laide him firste in one linen clothe, and sithen in one wolle, and band his bodi, his armes and legges with one band; than sho band two linen littill clothis, that sho broght with hir, aboute his heued...And the mother was nowthir chaungid in howe, ne sho had no seknes no febilnes of hir strengthe...and than she rose up, and Joseph helped hir to laid the child in the crib, and knelid doune thai bothe and wirshipped him.¹⁵

[And the child, weeping and trembling because of the coldness and the hardness of the floor, stretched himself out to seek comfort. His mother took him in her arms, and clasped him tightly to her breast, and with her cheeks and breast she warmed him with great joy and delight...She took him and first laid him on a linen cloth, and then on a woollen one, and wrapped his body, arms and legs with one wrapping; then she bound two little linen cloths, which she had brought with her, about her head...And the mother was neither changed in colour, nor did she have any sickness or feebleness...and then she rose, and Joseph helped her put the child in the manger, and they both knelt down and worshiped him.]

Whereas in Birgitta’s narrative Mary brings and prepares the swaddling clothes, in the *Book of Margery Kempe* it is Margery who makes both makes the swaddling clothes available and swaddles Christ in them; whereas in Birgitta’s text Mary can only arrange a cold, hard floor (“pament”), and in both the bible and Birgitta’s visions a stable and a manger, Margery provides both Virgin and Child with accommodation where they are warmly received and nice bedding. Instead of letting Mary breastfeed the child, Margery arranges food for both of them. In the *Book* the Virgin neither feeds her child nor wraps him in swaddling clothes; everything needs to be done by mother Margery. Furthermore, as Mary Dzon writes, the “the strips of fabric she uses makes her think of Christ’s burial garments”; the reference to Christ’s cruel death, a link also created by the reference to the swaddling clothes, which in Birgitta’s writings, medieval iconography and sermons often form a visual parallel of Christ’s burial

¹³ Ed. Windeatt I:6 578-589 [p. 77, 78]; Bale p. 22.

¹⁴ Liam Peter Temple, ‘Returning The English “Mystics” To Their Medieval Milieu: Julian Of Norwich, Margery Kempe And Bridget Of Sweden’, *Women’s Writing*, 2015, 1–18 (p.9); Mary Dzon, ‘Birgitta of Sweden and Christ’s Clothing’, in *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha Es et O!*, ed. by Theresa M Kenney and Mary Dzon (Toronto: Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp. 117–44 (p.130).It was only after completing the first draft of this paper that I discovered Temple’s and Dzon’s comparison.

¹⁵ *Liber VII*:xxii 26-3, [p. 486.]

wrappings¹⁶, makes Margery resemble Mary twice: she is both the loving young Virgin Mother, swaddling her baby boy and the grieving *Mater Dolorosa* wrapping her dead son's body in burial cloths. Being more motherly than Mary allows Margery to get so close to Christ, that in one vision he describes Himself dancing with Mary on the one hand and Margery on the other¹⁷: Margery makes herself an equal of the Mother of God and her words therefore as equal in authority to Mary's.

However, this bodily imitation of Mary by both Birgitta and Margery comes at a price: their maternal bodies can never be a perfect match of that of the Virgin Mother, inevitably lacking its virginity, something both Birgitta and Margery expressed anxiety about. Consequently, maternal bodily acts and children, being made of maternal matter, are always at risk of provoking the wrath of the Heavenly Father and becoming so corrupted by sin as to become demonic. Birgitta for instance is told by Christ that sinful souls are fed on the devil's breastmilk, and she has a gruesome vision of three women in hell:

Et post hec apparuerunt tres mulieres, scilicet mater et filia et neptis... Pectus vero apertum erat plenum vermibus longis et paruis, quorum quilibet huc et illuc... Vnus quoque serpens longus et magnus traxit se per inferiora stomachi ad superiora, qui coniungens caput et caudam ... Tunc autem ista mater mortua alloquebatur filliam viuam dicens "Audi, lacerta et venenosa filia mea! ... Ideo nunc venter meus, in quo iacuisti, totus a vermibus est corrosus."

[There appeared then three women: mother, daughter, and granddaughter... The [dead mother's] open chest was full of worms, long ones and short ones, twisting hither and thither, ... A big long snake had worked its way through her lower to her upper intestines ... Then this dead mother addressed her living daughter in these words: "Hear me, my tormented and poisonous daughter... My belly where you lay once is now being all chewed out by worms.]"¹⁸

The mother, who has raised her daughter to live a proud and godless life, is punished by undergoing a parody of breastfeeding and pregnancy: instead of feeding a child, her breasts are food for worms, and worms and snakes dwell in her womb instead of a child. The mother calls her daughter poisonous, which suggests she is like those snakes. Mary may have breastfed the Christ child, but according to Birgitta a mother who fails to teach her child to fear God is breastfeeding a monster.

For Margery, maternal bodily acts such as pregnancy and giving birth cause one to be vulnerable to falling into sin and being attacked by devils:

And anoon, for dreed sche had of dampnacyon on the to syde and hys scharp reprevyng on that other syde, this creatur went owt of hir mende and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd wyth spyritys half yer eight wekys and odde days. And in this tyme sche sey, as hir thowt, develys opyn her mowthys al inflaumyd wyth brennyng lowys of fyr as thei schuld a swalwyd hyr in, sumtyme rampyng at hyr, sumtyme thretyng her, sumtym pullung hyr and halyng hir bothe nygth and day duryng the forseyd tyme. And also the develys ... bodyn hir sche schuld forsake hir Crystendam, hir feyth, and denyin hir God, hys modyr, ... Sche slawndred hir husbond, hir frendys and her owyn self; sche spak many a reprevows worde and many a schrewyd worde; sche knew no vertu ne goodnesse

[Then afterwards [after childbirth and confession] this creature went out of her mind and was bewilderingly vexed and troubled by spirits for half a year, eight weeks, and odd days. And at this time she saw, so she thought, devils opening their mouths all inflamed with burning flames

¹⁶ Dzon, p. 125-128.

¹⁷ Bale, p. 51.

¹⁸ Ed. Birgher Berg VI:52 lines 28, 32, 34, 36, 43, p. 184; Trans. Searby and Morris, p. 107-108.

of fire, as though they might have swallowed her in, sometimes pawing at her, sometimes threatening her, sometimes pulling her and dragging her around, both night and day during the aforesaid time. And the devils ...told her that she should forsake her Christianity, her faith, and deny her God, His mother,...And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends, and her own self; she spoke many a malicious word and many a wicked word; she knew neither virtue nor goodness.]¹⁹

Her first childbirth causes her to fear she will die, and her confession leads her to experience about eight months of demons physically attacking her and causing her to slander and deny God. Liz Herbert McAvoy points out that this lasts “almost the same length as a full-term pregnancy²⁰”. I would therefore like to suggest that Margery’s experience can therefore be read as a parody of pregnancy and giving birth: After nine months of being constantly connected to her unborn child, Margery suffers from being in very close physical proximity to demons for almost the same length of time, and after bringing forth life she tries to bring forth death by attempting suicide and self harm.

Like the maternal body, the child born of its matter could also become corrupted: in Margery’s *Book*, when her son ignores her warnings and threats, the bodily sin of lechery becomes visible as pustules on her son’s body:

Sche seyde,.... “kepe thi body klene at the lest fro womanys feleschep tyl thu take a wyfe aftyr the lawe of the Chirche. And, yyf thu do not, I pray God chastise the and ponysch the therfor”...[H]e fel into the synne of letchery. Sone aftyr hys colowr chawngyd, hys face wex ful of whelys and bloberys as it had ben a lepyr. Than he cam hom ageyn into Lynne to hys maistyr wyth which he had ben dwellyng befor tyme. Hys maistyr put hym owt of hys servyse for no defawte he fond wyth hym, but peraventur supposyng he had ben a lazer as it schewyd be hys visage.

[She said, ‘...keep your body clean from women’s company until you take a wife according to the Church’s law. And if you don’t, I pray that God may chastise you and punish you for it.’ ...[H]e fell into the sin of lechery. Soon afterwards his complexion changed, his face filled with spots and pustules as if he were a leper. Then he came back home to Lynn to his master with whom he had been dwelling beforehand. His master put him out of his job, not for any fault he found with him but supposing that he were perhaps a leper, as suggested by his face.]²¹

Her son and acquaintances think that the disfigurement is the result of Margery praying to God that he “chastises and punishes” her son, which suggests not only that the son has provoked the wrath of father God, but also that within this nuclear family it is mother Margery who has the Father punish her son.

This acting as the mother in a nuclear family system, appeasing or inciting the Father, hints at another aspect of their imitating Mary, namely the countermeasures against the corruption just discussed, such as interceding for their children. This can be seen for instance in Birgitta’s vision of the judgment of her son’s Karl’s soul, found in the seventh book of her visions and adiscussed also by Clarissa Atkinson²² among others: in this vision not only Mary’s care but also Birgitta’s tears, prayers and good works prevent the devil from recounting or even remembering Karl’s sins as a result of which Christ allows him into heaven.

Videbatur eciam coram iudice quedam anima astare in magno tomore et pauore et nuda sicut

¹⁹ Ed. Windeatt, I:1 lines197-212 [p. 54); Trans. Bale, p. 3,4.

²⁰ McAvoy, *Authority*, p. 36.

²¹ Ed. Windeatt II:1 lines 7451-7465:1 [p. 386]; trans. Bale, 201,202)

²² Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Oldest Vocation : Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 177–178.

infans tunc natus Respondit dyabolus: “Me oportet peccata sua narrare.” Et statim volens incipere in eadem hora clamare cepit ... “non solum oblitus est textus et abolitus, verum eciam materia tota combusta est, in qua omnia fuerunt scripta.”... Respondit angelus: “Hoc fecerunt lacrimae et longi labores multaque oraciones matris sue”... [Tunc dyabolus] dixit “Ve michi, quia tota memoria mea michi ablata est! Iam enim non recolo, in quibus iste miles meam secutus est voluntatem... O, quam maledicta est illa scrofa seu porca mater eius, que tam prolixum habuit ventrem, quod tanta aqua in ipsam infusa fuit, quod omnia ventris eius spacia impleta fuerunt humorinus lacrimarum!”

[A soul was seen to stand before the judge in great fear and trembling, naked like a newborn babe... The devil replied: “I shall now enumerate his sins.” He wanted to start at once, but at that very moment began to cry “Not only is the text erased and destroyed, but all the material in which everything was written has been consumed!... The angel replied: “The tears and long work and many prayers of his mother accomplished this... [the devil] cried out... “Woe is me, for my whole memory has been taken away from me! I no longer remember in what respects this knight followed my will... O, curse that sow, that pig, his mother, who had such a big belly! For there was so much water in her that her whole belly was full of fluids for tears!”]”²³

Atkinson reads this vision as “it took two mothers to keep this sinner out of the devil’s clutches”²⁴ but it also suggests that Birgitta’s actions affect eternal judgement as much as Mary’s. Margery likewise intercedes with God for her child, the son already mentioned earlier. Margery claims that she does not forget “the fruit of her womb”:

He cam to hys modyr, tellyng hir of hys mys-governawns, promittynge he schulde ben obedient to God and to hir... He preyid hys modyr of hir blissyng, and specialy he preyd hir to prey for hym that our Lord of hys hy mercy wolde forgevyn hym that he had trespasyd and takyn away that gret sekenes for which men fleddyn hys company and hys felaschep as for a lepyr. For he supposyd be hir preyerys our Lord sent hym that ponischynge, and therfor he trustyd be hir preyerys to be deliveryd therof yyf sche wolde of hir charité preyn for hym... Whan sche cam to hir meditacyon, not forgetyng the frute of hir wombe, [sche] askyd forgevenes of hys synne and relesyng of the sekenes that our Lord had govyn hym yyf it wer hys plesawns and profite to hys sowle. So longe sche preyid that he was clene delyveryd of the sekenes and levyd many yerys aftyr.

[So in the end... he came to his mother, telling her about his misconduct, and promising to be obedient to God and to her... he asked his mother for her blessing, and especially he asked her to pray for him that our Lord, in His high mercy, would forgive him for having trespassed and would take away that severe illness because of which people fled his company and his friendship as if from a leper. For he supposed that through her prayers our Lord sent him that punishment, and therefore he trusted that through her prayers he would be released from it, if she would, of her charity, pray for him... When she came to her meditation, not forgetting the fruit of her womb, she asked for forgiveness for his sin and for release from the sickness that our Lord had given him, if it were His will, and a profit to his soul. She prayed for so long that he was completely released from the illness and lived for many years after.]²⁵

As Bale points out, “the frute of hir wombe” suggests that Margery is imitative of Mary because this phrase is associated with Gabriel’s address to the Virgin, and with the Ave Maria.

²³ *Revelaciones*, VII ed. by Birger Bergh, Samlingar Utgivna Av Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet: Ser. 2, Latinska Skrifter, 7:7 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967), ch. 13, lines 12, 35, 36, 38, 70, 72 p. 153, 154, 156, 161; Trans. Searby and Morris, p. 228-232.

²⁴ Atkinson, p. 178.

²⁵ Ed. Windeatt lines II:1 lines 7474-7491 [p. 387]; trans. Bale 202.

Additionally, the son promises to be “obedient to God and [Margery],” suggesting once again a parent couple consisting of God and Margery.

The writings of Julian of Norwich²⁶ differ from those by Birgitta and Margery in that there are no direct references to her being a mother; in fact, there is disagreement among Julian scholars about whether she was a nun or a laywoman and mother before entering the anchorhold. Nor is there a nativity scene. Though Julian’s theology of God’s motherhood has been discussed very extensively by others, I would like to hazard making a small addition: instead of focusing on Mary and identifying with her, Julian makes Christ more motherly than Mary in two ways: first of all, Julian ascribes to Christ perform the bodily maternal actions associated with Mary; secondly, she describes humanity’s substance, that is, our being, as being made of God’s substance like a child’s body being made of its mother’s body.

Mary’s wrapping her child in swaddling clothes is transferred to Christ and humanity: Julian compares Christ’s body on the cross to a piece of cloth: “[His flesh] was broken on peces as a cloth...He was hanging uppe in the eyer, as men hang a cloth for to drye.” [It was torn in pieces like a cloth...he was hanging up in the air as people hang up a cloth to dry”]²⁷ She describes a spiritual vision, generated by her seeing Christ’s body suffer, in which she sees that Christ is “oure clething, that for love wappes and windes us, halses us and alle beclothes us” [“our clothing, that out of love wraps us and winds about us, embraces us and wholly encloses us. ”].²⁸ According to Julian, Christ’s body is humanity’s clothing; and this wrapping himself around humanity is done so tightly that Christ’s love and goodness “maye nevere leve us” [may never desert us]²⁹; it is “more nere to us without any likenes” [closer to us, beyond any comparison]³⁰: mother Christ swaddles humanity in a manner that is both more lasting and closer than any human mother’s swaddling of her child. Similarly, the laying the child to her breast that Birgitta sees Mary do gets turned into Christ hiding humanity in his side: Julian points out that mothers may lay their child *to* their breast, Christ -being more motherly- lets enter humanity *into* his breast, suggesting greater safety and in fact no separation from the mother at all:

The moder may ley her childe tenderly to her brest. But oure tender moder Jhesu, he may homely lede us into his blessed brest by his swet, open side, and showe us therein perty of the godhed and the joyes of heven.

[The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us easily into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show us there a part of the godhead and the joys of heaven, with inner certainty of endless bliss.]³¹

Furthermore, in her philosophical discussion of substance (being) and sensuality (lived experience), found only in her later text, *A Revelation of Love*, she describes substance as if it is matter, which is indeed one of its denotations, just as the child was thought to be made of the mother’s matter. She claims that the human soul is not only made by God, but made of God as

²⁶ All quotations are taken from Nicholas Watson and Jaqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and a Revelation of Love*, Brepols Medieval Women Series (University Park, 2006). The earlier text will be referred to as *Vision*, the later as *Revelation*. The translation used is *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, trans. by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1978), with additions from Watson’s and Jenkins sidenotes.

²⁷ *Revelation* 17:19-20, 32 [p. 183]; trans. Colledge and Walsh, p. 208.

²⁸ *Vision* 4: 2-4 p. 68; *Revelation* 5:1-4 p. 139; trans. Watson and Jenkins, ‘Sidenotes’, p. 68.

²⁹ *Vision* 4: 5, p. 69; *Revelation* 5:5; trans. Colledge and Walsh, p. 130.

³⁰ *Revelation* 6:37, p. 145; trans. Colledge and Walsh, p. 187

³¹ *Revelation* 60: 33-36, p. 313; trans. Colledge and Walsh, p. 298.

well, and that this is what makes a human being human. She then claims that the substance is a creature in God:

“[O]ure soule, that is made, wonneth in God in substance, by which substance, by God, we be what we be. And I sawe no difference between God and oure substance, that is to sey, that God is God and oure substance is a creature in God. For the almighty truth of the trinite is oure fader , for he made us and he kepeth us in him. And the depe wisdom of the trinite is our moder , in whom we are all enclosed.”

[O]ur soul, which is created, dwells in God in substance, of which substance, through God, we are what we are. And I saw no difference between God and our substance, but, as it were, all God; and still my understanding accepted that our substance is in God, that is, God is God, and our substance is a creature in God.]³²

Here she depicts the “derived” being, the substance, as dwelling in the being from which it is derived. The smaller being resembles the larger being and is dependent upon it for its existence. The “kepeth” and “enclosed” following this claim likewise suggest that God is the mother of the substance, especially because according to Julian’s hermeneutic instructions, found in her meditation on Christ’s motherhood, “enclosed” should be read as a pregnancy metaphor:

And oure savioure is oure very moder, in whome we be endlessly borne and never shall come out of him. Plenteously, fully, and sweetly was this shewde, and it was spoken of in the furst, where it saide “We be all in him beclosed.”

[Our saviour is our true Mother, in whom we are endlessly born and and out of whom we shall never come. Plenteously, fully and sweetly this was shown, and it is spoken of in the first revelation, where it says that we are all in him enclosed.]³³

In this way, Julian turns the traditional idea of Christ getting his human substance and matter from his Virgin Mother around: instead, humanity (including Mary) gets its human substance and matter from Christ our Mother. She even claims that human nature was created so that Christ could take on human nature in the incarnation: ““which kind first to him was adight” (304). It is because of these two descriptions of Christ’s motherhood that leads Julian to describe as the most “kinde”, natural, mother, claiming that in all earthly childbirths and raising of children, it is actually Christ who does the giving birthing and raising:

This fair, lovely worde, “moder” is so swete and kinde in itself that it may not verely be said of none, ne to none, but of him and to him that is very mother of life and alle. For though it be so that oure bodely forthbringing be but little, lowe and simple in regard of oure gostely forthbringing, yet it is he that doth it in the creatures by whom it is done. The kinde, loving moder that woot and knoweth the neede of her childe, she kepeth it full tenderly... This werking, all that be fair and good, our lord doth it in hem by whom it is done.

[This fair lovely word ”mother” is so sweet and so kind/natural that it cannot truly be said of anyone, or to anyone, except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all.” For though it may be that our bodily delivery/bringing to birth is only little, humble and simple in comparison with our spiritual delivery/bringing to birth, yet it is he who does this in those created beings by whom it is done. The kind, loving mother who knows and sees the need of her child guards it very tenderly... This work, with everything in it that is lovely and good, our

³² *Revelation* 54:10-17 p. 297; trans. Colledge and Walsh, p. 285.

³³ *Revelation* 57:43-44 p. 305; trans. Colledge and Walsh, p. 292.

Lord does/performs it in those by whom it is done.]³⁴

This making Christ the mother behind all mothers has two interesting effects: she makes Christ give birth to himself by means of Mary's womb, as Patricia Donohue-White also points out³⁵. Julian explicitly compares Mary and Christ as mothers, describing Christ as the truer mother "Oure lady is oure moder...and oure saviour is oure very moder."³⁶ But more importantly, by making Christ the ultimate mother behind both regular mothers and the Virgin mother, she creates such a similarity between both that Mary's virgin motherhood becomes less significant: both human childbirth and Christ's birth are acts of God giving birth. According to Julian, there is no need to compete with Mary: because Christ is the ultimate mother, Mary's mothering and any other mother's acts are both, in Andrew Sprung's words "a figura of divine motherhood"³⁷.

It is therefore hardly surprising that neither interceding mothers nor angry fathers can be found in Julian: motherhood and fatherhood are both "enclosed", perichoresis-like, in God. In fact, Julian renders intercession and appeasing God's wrath entirely unnecessary by directly stating "But in God can be no wrath."³⁸ Consequently, Julian creates a very subtle form of authority, instead of as an appeasing mother, she depicts herself as a young child of the "very mother of all" and therefore as the perfect non-interfering channel for God's word, while she simultaneously fully controls the maternal bodily actions of mother Christ.

To sum things up, Margery and Birgitta Margery and Birgitta depict themselves as giving birth the Word by means of Mary's maternal bodily actions, while Julian depicts herself as making the Word eternally giving birth to her.

³⁴ Revelation 60: 39-46, 49,50 p. 315; trans. Colledge and Walsh, 298-9.

³⁵ Patricia Donohue-White, 'Reading Divine Maternity in Julian of Norwich', *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, 5.1 (2005), 19-36 (p. 27).

³⁶ Revelation 57:40,43, p. 305.

³⁷ Andrew Sprung, 'The Inverted Metaphor: Earthly Mothering as Figura of Divine Love in Julian of Norwich's Book of Showings', in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. by John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 183-99 (p. 185).

³⁸ Revelation 13:15, 16.