

## Article

# In Loving Memory? Indecent Forgetting of the Dead in Continental Sister-Books and Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*

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**Abstract:** Medieval nuns and anchorites (recluses) were spiritually and economically bound to pray for the dead, no matter their feelings towards the departed, who frequently appear to them in visions. This article charts medieval enclosed women's attempts to intervene in this economy by forgetting souls. Staging a generative conversation between medieval women's writings and Marcella Althaus-Reid's (1952–2009) 'indecent theology' (queer liberation theology), this essay scrutinizes medieval female-authored texts for indecent forgetting (socially and economically disruptive forgetting). It juxtaposes a Middle English visionary text, *A Revelation of Love* by anchorite Julian of Norwich (1342/1343–c. 1416), with the mid-fourteenth-century Middle High German sister-book (compilation of nuns' lives) of the Dominican convent of St Katharinen in Diessenhofen (in present-day Switzerland) and the early sixteenth-century Middle Dutch sister-book of Diepenveen (in the present-day Netherlands), originating from a *Devotio Moderna* convent of Augustinian canonesses regular. Heeding Althaus-Reid's call, it dissects how forgetting unsettles systems of sanctioned spiritual and economic exchanges. I first examine how the sister-books forget certain souls and define their own terms for their participation in this system. I then turn to how Julian enlists all believers for her intercessory duties but also misplaces souls. Throughout, this article considers how these texts prise open space for medieval women within indecent theology. Ultimately, it illustrates how medieval women's negotiations of their economic conditions supply a fertile ground for considering larger concerns of defiance, community, and the charity that binds together the living and the dead.



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## 1. Introduction

The twentieth-century poet Elizabeth Bishop declared in 'One Art' that 'The art of losing isn't hard to master' (Bishop 2008). This article charts such an art of losing or forgetting in texts by medieval nuns and a female anchorite (a religious person who has devoted their life to a walled-in existence alone in a cell abutting a church). It examines how the medieval art of memory (*memoria*) supplied an art of commemoration (also termed *memoria*) of souls in Purgatory, which permitted these women not only to remember the deceased but also to forget them. This discussion thus maps how medieval religious texts composed by women mislay or exclude individuals and memories.

I posit that in medieval German and Dutch sister-books (collections of nuns' biographies) and the visionary text *A Revelation of Love* by anchorite Julian of Norwich (1342/1343–c. 1416), forgetting intervenes in the economy of commemoration of the dead.<sup>1</sup> These texts harness the art of memory to commemorate souls in Purgatory but also forget souls, diverging in who is forgotten by whom. (Combining a hospital waiting room and a naughty step consisting of fiery torments, Purgatory is a space of purgation of sins not forgiven, through whose torments souls must pass in order to ascend to heaven.) Liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid (1952–2009) acts as interlocutor of these texts' fraught

negotiations of the economy of suffrages (prayers and other religious actions thought to help souls in Purgatory).

After introducing the gendered economy of memory and commemoration, this discussion first charts how the sister-books present all souls in Purgatory at risk of being forgotten. The texts accomplish this by setting select sisters apart as *memoria* experts and by deliberate forgetting. I then turn to Julian, who locates similar expertise in God, while making forgetting by God (and, by extension, her community of implied readers) dependent on the individual's conscious choice to be forgotten. Her misplacing of souls may nonetheless signal a barely articulated hope that even these individuals may be remembered by God.

Throughout, these nuns and Julian enter into a transformative conversation with Althaus-Reid (2000, 2004). Althaus-Reid coined the term 'indecent theology' to delineate her queering of liberation theology (Exodus-informed, often praxis-centered theology identifying salvation with liberation from socio-economic oppression). For Althaus-Reid, 'indecent theology' excavates religious and economic injustice and unravels 'a heterosexual construction of reality, which organises not only categories of approved social and divine interactions but of economic ones too' (Althaus-Reid 2000, p. 2). Indecent theology unveils the fissures in the boundaries separating social, spiritual, and economic decency from social, spiritual, and economic impropriety (Althaus-Reid 2000; Stegeman et al. 2018). This encounter between medieval texts and modern theory and theology reveals how by forgetting souls, these medieval women loosen such boundaries of the economy of remembering the dead. It also uncovers how they unsettle the moral-economic matrix of prayers for these souls in Purgatory.<sup>2</sup> The present discussion refers to such disruptive forgetting as 'indecent forgetting'.

Two sister-books and one visionary text by late medieval women from the Continent and the British Isles in hand will allow us to approach such indecent forgetting. Sister-books compile *vitae* (biographies inflected by saints' legends) of women from a particular religious community, written by women from a particular community.<sup>3</sup> Sister-books aim to supply blueprints for communal life as well as exemplars for individual emulation of particular spiritual virtues (Scheepsma 2004, p. 146; Mertens 2002). They also furnish the convent with an origin narrative (Garber 2003, p. 62). One of the virtues held up for emulation is that of expertly offering suffrages. Possibly composed in the early 1400s (Ayanna 2017, p. 28), the Middle High German sister-book from the convent St Katharinental in Diessenhofen (between Constance and Zurich, in present-day Switzerland) depicts Dominican nuns' lives set in the fourteenth century. The early sixteenth-century Middle Dutch sister-book from the convent of St Mary and St Agnes at Diepenveen (present-day Netherlands), a *Devotio Moderna* convent (Scheepsma 2002, 2004) recounts the lives of fifteenth-century Augustinian regular canonesses and lay-sisters. (The *Devotio Moderna* was a spiritual reform movement of both professed religious and semi-religious that flourished between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries in the Low Countries and bordering regions, including northern Germany.) A bold Middle English work of speculative theology and the earliest known English text by a woman, *A Revelation of Love* by Julian of Norwich expounds a single series of puzzling, unconventional visions that Julian experienced at age 30.5, when she is mortally ill. It has come down to us in an earlier, shorter, late fourteenth-century version (the Short Text) and a later, longer, early fifteenth-century incarnation (the Long Text). *A Revelation of Love* aims to enfold its readers in its unpacking of the visionary experience and strategically show them Julian's working as her theology evolves. It locates them, as Lynn Staley notes, 'in a position to "overhear" a dialogue [between Julian's increasingly independent theological understanding and her belief in traditional doctrine] as pronounced as it is unresolved' (Staley 1996, p. 141). Her understanding of Purgatory is one of these possible divergences from the teachings of the Church. Whereas the other religious under discussion were enclosed in community, Julian was an anchorite, living a solitary life enclosed in a cell. Her text does envision a community of readers and co-believers, however, whom Julian calls her 'evenchristen', fellow Christians. This article 'centralizes' the texts (Strohm 2000, p. xiv): it presupposes that the texts operate under the

assumptions of the economy of intercession but also traces how they patch over this tissue of transactions.

Juxtaposing texts in three different medieval vernaculars reveals the diversity of ways in which women living in community and women living a solitary life worry away at this fabric. Barbara Newman's consideration of medieval holy women's engagement with Purgatory particularly associates questions about damnation with semi-religious women and other women not living in cloistered communities (Newman 1995, p. 135). Dyan Elliott calls into question any actual subversion of the mechanisms of cosmic justice, and argues for many (but not all) mystics reinforcing rather than undoing these systems (Elliott 2009, pp. 77, 78). However, when we scrutinize commemoration of the dead as *memoria*, these texts by a solitary religious and religious living in community instead weaponize that system to reconceive who performs which role within that system. They exploit the machinery of purgation to bolster their communities and theology. Anchorites and nuns trouble Purgatory alike.

This essay's conversation between these texts and Althaus-Reid, moreover, adds to our understanding of these texts by revealing the stakes of indecent forgetting, that is, what medieval women stand to lose or gain in their indecent forgetting. These texts risk the continued existence of their communities for the sake of that very preservation. They risk unmaking community to remake it. Through their indecent forgetting, sister-books shore up maintenance of their enclosed community of sisters, and with that the continuation of suffrages. They also encourage bequests and other donations, thus also contributing to the maintenance of the community. They reinforce the transaction (the feedback loop, as it were) between donations and prayer. Julian's indecent forgetting, too, upholds community in the sense that the conversation constructed by the text preserves Julian's union with her co-religionists. Such a reading expands earlier scholarship on suffrages as transactional, with medieval holy women's intercessory investment yielding a return consisting of the souls of the departed offering up prayers for these women when they, in turn, must pass through Purgatory (Le Goff 1984, p. 319; Swanson 2009). In short, this conversation enriches our understanding of the *do ut des* economy of medieval suffrages in these texts, and the fracture points in this economy. It also highlights how Earth, Purgatory, and heaven entangle in this economy by bringing out how ostensibly supernatural events in religious texts are woven into what Nicholas Watson has described as 'a mercantile late religious culture imbued with the financial imagery of recompense and satisfaction' (Watson 2005, p. 421). It expands our understanding of how visions, apparitions, and meditations perform economic work. We discover how these medieval ghosts labor. Furthermore, if following Paul Strohm's delineation of theory as 'any standpoint from which we might challenge a text's self-understanding' (Strohm 2000, p. xiv), this encounter unravels the texts' self-presentation as imprinting devout virtues (which includes a desire for prayer) through remembering and conversing. Instead, this meeting between modern theory and medieval texts demonstrates that forgetting and what is not shown or told are equally, if not more, vital to these religious narratives' rhetorical and affective projects. Such a position expands earlier work on memory and forgetting as mutually dependent in *memoria* (Carruthers 1998). In this manner, this essay reconfigures earlier understandings of medieval religious texts by scrutinizing how forgetting and silence undergird remembering and writing.

## 2. Purchasing Memory

The art and economy of remembering furnished an antidote to forgetting the souls in Purgatory. Medieval culture conceived of memory as a generative faculty. It was believed to gather up what was remembered into new compositions in the form of new discourses or virtuous lives (Carruthers 1998, 2008; Bollmann 2015). *Memoria* also provided the art of composing thoughts (Carruthers 1998, pp. 4, 5). These compositions encompassed thoughts of and prayers for souls in Purgatory, which was a key obligation for professed religious (Drieshen 2017; Goudriaan 2020; Sauer 2017), often conceived of as collectively specializing in intercessory prayer (Van Moolenbroek 2008). Whether consisting of (para)liturgical

discourses such as the Office of the Dead or other intercessory prayers, commemoration was both analogized to economic transactions and involved such exchanges. The living owe God and souls prayer, with God as the third agent in this triadic economy. The departed are in debt to God, and the living provide ‘surrogate payment of such a debt’ (Duffy 2022, p. 353). That is, they stand in for the departed spiritually just as they might stand in economically for the departed when paying their material debts.

Actual transactions in the form of bequests (donations of money or goods bequeathed in wills) in exchange for prayer literalized this imagery. Nuns and anchorites offered up the commodity of prayer for their departed benefactors, and therefore were economically bound to remember the dead. The testator or any kind of benefactor would bestow material or financial support upon the religious community or individual, who would offer suffrages for the soul of the benefactor. For instance, *Devotio Moderna* communities were sought out by the laity for their memorial arrangements (consisting of bequests, chantries, intercessory prayers, and the like), who favored observant, recently founded convents (Mol 1995, pp. 200–3). The Diepenveen sister-book frequently diverges from its narrative to praise the memory of generous donors and detail their donations (of liturgical objects, for example), presumably to cue prayers. The Diepenveen convent’s statutes prescribe commemorating the dead daily, at the hour of prime (c. 5 am) (R. Th. M. van Dijk 1986, p. 401). The statutes also codify the recital of the Office of the Dead for the souls of departed sisters, at least after their death and likely on other occasions (R. Th. M. van Dijk 1986, pp. 51, 92, 76). Thirteenth-century Dominican convents in the southern parts of the German-speaking lands, too, attracted many benefactors from both burgess stock and lower nobility (Lindgren 2008), pointing to similar transactions. Souls in Purgatory, then, were never far from the sisters’ minds. Their memory participated in these exchanges of prayer and material support.

Texts associated with anchorites also promoted anchorites as ‘powerhouses of intercessory prayer’ (Drieshen 2017, p. 86) and attracted bequests. Four wills mentioning Julian as a legatee signal that she participated in this economic system (Watson and Jenkins 2006a, pp. 431–35). These bequests may convey a tacit request for Julian’s prayer (p. 431). The *Ancrene Wisse*, a thirteenth-century Middle English guide for anchoresses prescribes daily reciting of the *Placebo* (Vespers of the Office of the Dead), *Dirige* (Matins of the Office of the Dead), other prayers and psalms from this Office, as well as extended versions of *Dirige* on the anniversary of friends’ passing (Millett 2005, pt. 1.5). Matter and discourse, *memoria* as memory and *memoria* as commemoration, all knit the believer into a social tissue of economic transactions, intertwined with liturgy weaving together heaven and Earth (Goudriaan 2020, p. 124).

Gender inflected this economy. Confessors and other clerical authority figures deemed prayers for souls in Purgatory particularly suitable for female religious and semi-religious (Newman 1995, p. 111). Holy women’s liminal position between world and afterlife underpinned their capacity to intercede (Drieshen 2017; Elliott 2009, p. 77). Their perceived greater biological permeability as women did so as well; this porosity was also believed to be the cause of their receptivity to visions (Elliott 2010, p. 23). Nuns and anchorites, then, were spiritually, financially, and discursively bound to remember the souls in Purgatory to the best of their capacities.

While generically different, visionary accounts and sister-books bolstered this economy by traditionally recounting sights of Purgatory and apparitions. Visionary texts in which the visionary mentally pilgrimages to the afterlife often recount the torments of Purgatory and hell in didactically gruesome detail (see e.g., McAvoy 2017). Apparitions punctuate sister-books. Souls materialize frequently, either in anguish and afflicted by the torments of Purgatory, or, conversely, relieved to ascend to heaven (Van Moolenbroek 2008).<sup>4</sup> These apparitions act as terrifying reminders to perform the required intercessory labor or as testimonies to its success, respectively. In the case of the latter, it serves as visionary receipts of sorts, guaranteeing the holy women’s purchase on and of heaven. Such visionary



journeys and apparitions converge in their social importance: both clamor for religious to perform their intercessory labor and advertise these efforts (Drieshen 2017).

I now turn to how German Dominican nuns and Dutch *Devotio Moderna* nuns intervene in the afterlife by placing all souls at risk of being passively or actively forgotten by these communities. In this manner, they redefine the terms on which they participate in the prayer market.

### 3. Forgetful Sisters

The sister-book of St Katharinental passively forgets souls by making successful commemoration hinge upon specialist individual remembering. In the St Katharinental *vita* of Sister Mechtilt die Huserin (d. 1300–1350), souls crowd around this nun's bed as she daily prays the Office of the Dead. Invisible to Mechtilt, but visible to a sister passing by, they raise their hands in a gesture of supplication. They 'nigen' (incline their bodies) after she has recited the words 'requiescant in pace', which concludes the Office of the Dead. They then vanish, presumably ascending to heaven (Meyer 1995, p. 135).

To the nuns reading or hearing about this uncanny encounter, its liturgical echoes would have implied that souls are required to acknowledge Mechtilt's expertise in *memoria* for her suffrages to be effective. Mechtilt's words resonate with the profession sequence *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, which lauds the Holy Spirit as 'in labore requies' ('the rest in the nun's toil') (Gregorian Institute of Canada 2019, 'Latin noted missal: Votive masses', pp. 199–200). This vocabulary of labor codes Mechtilt's prayer as 'memory work' on behalf of the souls (Carruthers 1998, p. 62). It also casts her suffrages as essential to her vocation, which in turn suggests many years of such concerted efforts, marking Mechtilt as uniquely experienced in this art of *memoria*. The souls' physical movement, moreover, literalizes one of the final collects in the Office of the Dead, which requests that God incline an ear to these prayers (Gregorian Institute of Canada 2019, 'Latin noted breviary: In commemoratione defunctorum', p. 1602, 'Sarum manuale: Commendatio animarum', p. 221; Van Wijk 1940, p. 194). The souls enact a prayer that any reader would have believed Mechtilt to be reading that very moment. The souls conform their ghostly bodies to Mechthilt's expertly remembering body, again suggesting a recognition of her superior mnemonic experience. Accordingly, successful suffrages require religious woman's commemorative expertise as well as the souls' acknowledgment of this expertise are required for her intercession to be successful. By implication, this *vita* places souls unfamiliar with the convent's communal life of worship or lacking access to a religious community with such specialists at risk of being forgotten. The text passively forgets souls. Such a reading is corroborated by Mechtilt's and the souls' passivity as the object of another sister's vision, since the souls and Mechtilt are unable to perceive one another. (Amiri Ayanna, too, notes such contingency, observing that the Katharinental sisters' graces require the witness of another sister (Ayanna 2017)). That is, such souls might not be able to access the sought-after commodity of intercessory prayer. The text stems the flow of prayer.

Here, the sister-book defies and reinforces medieval commemorative tradition, in which the helpless souls in Purgatory depend on the goodwill of the living (Swanson 2009, p. 360). It ascribes ghostly agency to these souls, but their living specialist's labor or lack thereof impacts their purgatorial torments to an even higher degree.

The Diepenveen sister-book, in contrast, actively forgets souls through *memoria*. The *vita* of Sister Daya or Daye Dierkens (d. 1491), a canoness regular who would later become prioress, signals such forgetting. One of the sisters who had accompanied Daya during her sojourn at Hilwartshausen (Lower Saxony) dies after their return to Diepenveen (Essinchghes 1524, fol. 405r). Her first apparition shows her in great misery (fol. 405v). Trembling, she appears to beg for forgiveness and accuses Daya of negligence in her obligation of intercessory prayer. Daya performs 'ene sonderlinghe offeringhe' ('a particular exercise'), presumably an intercessory exercise. The soul appears a second time, much improved in appearance and mood (fol. 405v). Finally, following another exercise, the soul materializes for the third time in the likeness of a sumptuously arrayed queen. Express-

ing her gratitude to Daya, the ghost bows and genuflect, and is seen no more (fol. 406r). Recounting these events to her fellow sisters, Daya plays down her contribution. She dismisses the entire sequence of events as mere hallucination by declaring it sprang from her ‘crancke hoveit’ (‘addled brain’) (fol. 406r). Not fooled by this faux humility, the narrator lauds the power of Daya’s suffrages (fol. 406r). Again, to sisters reading, the soul’s earlier demeanor literalizes the attitude of contrition and the misery that the Psalms in the Office of the Dead implicitly ascribe to the souls in Purgatory (Van Wijk 1940, pp. 155–95). Her subsequent queen-like appearance harks back to the crown promised by the profession rite (R. Th. M. van Dijk 1986, pp. 387–88). Like in the Middle High German sister-book, the soul recollects the shared liturgy, and her fellow sisters recollect the soul.

However, an insidious mnemonic maneuver is at play in the vocabulary of ambiguity, fashioning indecent forgetting. Haunting Daya in a dream, the ghost reveals herself in ‘wonderlicker ghedanten’ (‘wondrous guise’), and ‘schen of’ (‘appeared as if’) she had cried, ‘of’ (‘as if’) she were pleading for forgiveness (405v). Daya’s depreciating remarks about her mind reinforce this ontological ambiguity. According to medieval *memoria*, this discourse of skepticism rather than charity renders the scenes less memorable, compelling readers actively to forget the soul of the departed sister.<sup>5</sup> The description of a religious seemingly having cried resists the visualization that *memoria* demands. Furthermore, she lacks a name to distinguish her from Daya’s other companion. Effective mnemonic elements, however, require an evenly spaced arrangement (*solemnis*) that visibly separates (*rarus*) them from one another (Carruthers 1998, pp. 13, 55). Blurred by semblance, the soul fails to display these qualities necessary for memorability. Despite Daya’s exercises, the text leaves readers incapable of remembering this departed sister. Excluded from the convent through exclusion from collective memory, this soul falls through the cracks. The text actively forgets her.

This forgetting connotes a distrust of individual, rather than collective, visions. Redeemed by a uniquely gifted sister, the soul ought to be forgotten for the sake of the community. Not only do Daya’s exercise and the apparition interplay, ‘sonderlinghe’ carries overtones of singularity in *Devotio Moderna* piety. Daya’s performance of helplessness and the narrator’s intervention likewise caution against any attempt to set the visionary apart. Critics have argued that *Devotio Moderna* misgivings of apparitions were milder than its strict capitulary prohibitions on reading and copying revelations and accounts of mystical experiences (Van Moolenbroek 2008, p. 282; Mertens 2002, pp. 89–92). The latter response was sparked by the mystical writings of Alijt Bake, an informal convent reformer and *Devotio Moderna* prioress (Scheepsmas 2004, p. 174). However, I would contend that a fear of singularity in the sense of self-fashioning through a turning away from the community galvanizes both attitudes.

If reading both texts through Althaus-Reid’s theology, both sister-books engage in indecent forgetting. Both the Middle High German sister-book’s passive forgetting and the Middle Dutch sister-book’s active forgetting intervene in the economy of suffrages for souls in Purgatory. The nuns from St Katharinental and the sisters from Diepenveen are all woven into the ‘the soul market’ (Althaus-Reid 2000, p. 171) as workers. The codes of patriarchy determine this market. Such codes leave the women indebted to perform suffrages. They owe an irresolvable debt to the souls of the departed, ever increasing in number, yet do not themselves profit from these prayers as much as these souls do. Nevertheless, they intervene by setting their own terms for their participation, determining the direction of these spiritual goods, and the conditions of the exchange. Their enmeshment in the prescribed exchanges anticipates Althaus-Reid’s claims about theology ‘distribut[ing] the spiritual goods of redemption [ . . . ] or even eternal life amongst [ . . . ] the spiritual clientele’ (Althaus-Reid 2000, pp. 166–67). It specifically accords with Althaus-Reid’s exposition of Grace Wamue’s account of a Kenyan widow enslaved by her father-in-law and ostracized by her church (Althaus-Reid 2000, pp. 189–91). The obligation to pray for all constitutes ‘a form of [economic] violence [ . . . ] sanctioned by society and even by the church’ (Althaus-Reid 2000, p. 191). Furthermore, like the

Kenyan widow, they fashion ‘an overflow of goods’ out of the convent through their prayer (Althaus-Reid 2000, p. 191). The sister-books’ resistance to remembering negotiates the economy of prayers for the souls of the departed. It predicates these transactions on the nuns’ collective favor and recognition of the sisters’ memorial effort. This collective disruption prefigures Althaus-Reid’s call for ‘homosolidarity’ as an ‘indecent’ disruption of this economic fabric (Althaus-Reid 2000, p. 191). It also aligns with Althaus-Reid’s proposed radical ‘breakthrough of decentralisation’ as a ‘praxis in people’s everyday life’ (Althaus-Reid 2000, p. 191). Accordingly, the nuns jointly claim power in a grassroots initiative. They redirect control over prayer to the communities and direct it away from the chapters to which these convents belonged as well as from the male communities whose spiritual charge these female communities were. (The Diepenveen convent was supervised by the monastery of Windesheim (Dlabáčová et al. 2018) and the St Katharinental convent by the Dominicans at Konstanz (Meyer 1995, p. 21).) They thus wish to profit as much from the souls as the souls from them, and insist on an indecent, queer reciprocity.

Resistance and containment interlock in the sister-books’ indecent forgetting. The nuns fashion a different system of spiritual–economic exchanges. Despite this, this new configuration excludes some women, causing them to be forgotten by women reading or women within the text. Other women, conversely, are held up as inimitably fruitful in their suffrages. This paradigm, therefore, operates within the same patriarchal ‘grammar’ that pits women against one another as sources of spiritual commodities govern this new paradigm. In this way, the sister-books illustrate how homosolidarity may resist such an economic discursive web, but also how that very web crafts this homosolidarity. Judith Butler has theorized such enmeshment for several decades, reminding us that gender-inflected agency and subordination, that is, empowerment and disempowerment, spring from the same discursive practices (Butler 1990). Nevertheless, for Butler, subject agency might be sited in intersubjectivity (Magnus 2006). The sister-books distribute prayer and power differently from medieval commemorative culture, but that distribution continues to advantage some women over others. They remain unequal repositories of prayers and receptacles of souls.

The remainder of this essay charts similar indecent forgetting in Julian of Norwich’s writing, which strategically misplaces souls.

#### 4. Misplaced Souls

Instead of encouraging her implied readers to forget, Julian defers the responsibility of forgetting to God. In the Long Text, following her paeon to Christ’s motherhood, Julian recruits readers past and present to contemplate the mutual indwelling of God and humanity, which she figures as a ‘reciprocal pregnancy’ (Newman 2003, p. 227). She states that Christ delights in this coinherence, with Christ ‘us all werking into him [ . . . ] in which werking he wille we be his helpers’ (‘working us all into him [ . . . ] in which working he wants us to be his helpers’) (Watson and Jenkins 2006b, LT 75.47, 48; Windeatt 2015, p. 125). A formal interest in as well as thematic concern with remembering pervade this meditation. The thematic interest in labor again invokes the notion of remembering as ‘memory work’ (Carruthers 1998, p. 62). It also directly recalls the notion of commemorative practices as labor, for instance, Continental Beguines’ duty to exert themselves in prayer for the souls in Purgatory (Newman 1995, p. 112). The repetition of ‘werking’, moreover, formally resembles a doxology (a short expression of praise to the Trinity, which tends to bookend prayers). By extension, the form of the text invokes God’s expert presence in the ‘werking’ it describes. In this manner, the text sets God up as the ultimate memory artist, an expert in remembering. Moreover, humans are assistants to this specialist. Dramatizing the team effort of the ‘working’, ‘us’ functions as both a direct object and subject, dramatizing the collaboration. The iteration of ‘werking’ enacts the collaboration of this venture as well. God is an expert in mnemonic labor, and all human beings participate in his remembering. Consequently, approaching this sacramental memorial ‘working’ through Julian’s earlier meditation on Christ’s eternal pregnancy, Julian figures Christ’s toil as labor in the biological

sense as well. For Julian, Christ is in the pangs of childbirth until the end of time, birthing souls into his mind. Unlike in physical birth, the souls participate in this being born, which is a process inwards, into God's mind. Purgatory and heaven, by implication, are sites for continuous circling inwards.

Marked departures from visionary norms in the Long Text indicate that in this eternal enfolding, souls can choose to be forgotten by God. In both the Short Text and the Long Text, Julian enquires about an unspecified friend's spiritual well-being. This desire carries possible undertones of desiring a revelation about the friend's fate after death (e.g., the duration of her time in Purgatory), a visionary convention. She is told to direct her attention to God and his general benevolence towards all human beings instead (Watson and Jenkins 2006b, ST 16.12–21; LT 35.1–11). The Long Text adds an interpolation before the inquiry about the friend, in which Julian assumes that an elaborate vista of hell and Purgatory is forthcoming. As visionary tradition taught her to expect, she wishes for 'full sight of hell and of purgatory' (LT 33.1, 2). Yet her sixteen revelations do not grant her such a sight. Here, Julian defies both visionary and contemplative tradition. At pains to justify this divergence, Julian assures readers of her orthodoxy and refers back to the fifth revelation, in which God damns the devil. She explicates that this vision's relevance here is that individuals electing to remain 'of the devilles condition' up until their death (33.9) will not be remembered by God. Julian insists that 'no more mention [is] made of them' (33.10) before God and the saints than the devil is referred to. The visions in the Long Text, then, fail to show Julian either her friend's fate or Purgatory and hell.

This startling shift performs much theologically heavy lifting. Enacting arresting developments in Julian's theology, these gaps where visions should be function as textual analogs to the omission of the sinful in heaven. These silences remind us of the damned, unrepentant sinners whom God does not remember according to Julian. They figure the blank spots in God's memory where people used to be. These *lacunae* open up Julian's theology to God's unforeseen interventions, as Newman comments: '[T]he possibility of damnation remains open while the actuality is left uncertain.' (Newman 1995, p. 132). I suggest reading these absences through Julian's later declarations about salvation as a birth into God's mind and a continuous remembering by and of God. The opposite of redemption, perdition, then, turns into a being forgotten by God, and into a sinner's conscious attempt to circle away from God in one's memory. Sinners spiral outwards by forgetting and being forgotten. Such a reading accords with critics' claims that such *lacunae* are Julian's characteristic maneuver for opening up space for speculative theology within the bounds of orthodoxy (Newman 1995, p. 132; Watt 2008, p. 71). Furthermore, scholars have either read Julian as no longer subscribing to the existence of hell when writing the Long Text (Watt 2008, p. 70), attempting to stay with the tension between damnation or purgation and God's eternal love without denying either (Jantzen 2000; Watson 1997), or conceiving of hell as the logical consequence of free will and an embodiment of sin's 'regime of unreality', or even that hell is empty (Turner 2011, pp. 99, 103–9, 242–43). Julian, however, complicates all binary logic by conceiving of salvation as a remembering of and by God and damnation as an active willing oneself to forget and be forgotten by God. Demolishing the walls between heaven, hell, and Purgatory, she enfolds all souls into a spiraling into or away from God's mind. In so doing, she leaves open where any soul is at any given moment. Purgatory reveals itself as a threshold from which the soul either winds into or away from God.

In leaving unresolved where the souls are, Julian misplaces souls, as the evolution of her request for a revelation concerning her friend illustrates. The Long Text excises the Short Text's details concerning Julian's friend, whom ST identifies as female, referring to this 'certain person that [Julian] loved' as 'hire' (ST 16.13). LT replaces 'hire' by 'it' (LT 35.2). It effaces this individual further by substituting 'creature' for 'person' (16.13; 35.2). These elisions ominously recall the unnamings of the damned before God. Nevertheless, Julian does not remove her friend's presence entirely. Therefore, by omitting her friend's details yet retaining the request, she renders her half absent and half present. In this manner, Julian



leaves open whether this friend will be saved or damned, and how long she will be in Purgatory. She misplaces her friend's soul. By extension, the same ambiguity applies to the souls for which she expects her implied readers to pray. Since heaven and Purgatory constitute one spiral with porous boundaries, the souls could be in either. Few things haunt the mind as something misplaced, such as an object or friend one knows to be somewhere without knowing the exact location. Absence sparks keener remembering. Julian, then, raises the stakes of remembering and forgetting and of intercessory prayer.

This remembering may gesture to God likewise recollecting all souls at the end of time (for Julian's universalist potential, see [Turner 2011](#), pp. 103–9), a surprising turn of events foreshadowed in the surprising turn of her visions. This remembering and forgetting exemplify the 'bifocal character' of Julian's theology ([Turner 2011](#), p. 192). *Aporiae* punctuate her vernacular theology, in which she attempts to find her footing on the ledge of received dogma. She reminds herself of the spiritual importance of being held by the church, while also stretching out her hand beyond. Nonetheless, these silences conveying this intervention also point to Julian's anxious desire to remain within the bounds of her community of co-believers. She seeks to preserve the community even as she remakes it.

This forgetting and misplacing, furthermore, unmoor the economy of intercessory prayer by undercutting the anchoritic hierarchical ordering of bodies. An anchorite's participation in the transactional fabric of intercessory prayer hinges upon her being caught between heaven and Earth and church and parish. Her liminality undergirds her capacity for intercessory prayer ([Sauer 2017](#), p. 110). Enshrining the anchorite in her cell, the rite of enclosure spatializes and produces this distinction between the center (the cell) and the periphery (the church and beyond). This liturgical rite also fashions the anchorite's interstitial state (for the rite, see [Jones 2008](#)). Such arranging of the anchorite's body and souls resonates with Althaus-Reid's claims about theological doctrines as vehicles for regulating bodies. In particular, it invokes Althaus-Reid's position that the dogma of the 'body remain[ing] in the queue of purgatory' serves to control bodies 'by concepts of sin which never escape the boundaries of perceived embodied needs' ([Althaus-Reid 2000](#), p. 19). These needs converge in 'suppressed forces' of 'sexual chaos and death' ([Althaus-Reid 2000](#), p. 68). Julian unravels this hierarchy and in so doing disrupts the machinery of salvation. For her, salvation constitutes infinite birth into God's mind and damnation, conversely, of a constant spiraling out of God's mind. Accordingly, the center is both ever enveloping the margins and expanding out into the periphery. Furthermore, for Julian, humanity and God indwell one another. Human memory and God's memory coinhere each other as well. Following this line of logic, God and humanity constitute the center *and* margins. From an indecent theology perspective, then, Julian rearranges bodies. Misplacing them permits them to slip beyond control, while allowing the dynamo of desire and death to propel their interactions. Unable to be easily located, these bodies defy regulation, and thus, resist participation in the market of suffrages.

Julian's queering of such boundaries can interrogate Althaus-Reid's theology of creation, revelation, and the Trinity. In Julian's knots of coinherence-in-process, God and self-entangle. The knots of mutual indwelling unfold and enfold the various agents. Furthermore, to Julian, amplifying Colossians 1.16–17, the entire created universe is contained in utero in pre-incarnate Christ before creation, whose humanity predates it (LT 53. 25–29, 58. 1–3). According to this line of logic, revelation in creation and the Incarnation flow from this original revelation of God in Himself. God unfolds Himself to embrace humanity, allowing for perpetual birth into the Godhead (LT 57.42). Althaus-Reid, in contrast, posits a cisheteronormative hierarchy of power in *perichoresis* (the running-between of the Trinity), imaged as a Trinitarian cisheteronormative marriage ([Althaus-Reid 2000](#), p. 144). She also codes the Trinity as 'intrinsically male' ([Althaus-Reid 2000](#), p. 19). This gendering inflects the relation between the triune deity and creation, which, Althaus-Reid postulates, consists of acts of sexual, gendered violence, both in traditional theology and in the 'theological perversions' of indecent theology ([Althaus-Reid 2000](#), pp. 38, 48, 62, 63, 102, 103, 106, 184).

Julian feels no need to postulate gendered violence in revelation. Instead, to her mind, *perichoresis* and creation consist of continuous birth from God, and into God. Julian's *perichoresis* becomes so plastic that humanity can be contained in it, while revelation demands human participation. In so doing, she seems to stand to lose her community, but actually fashions even more capacious communion with her evenchristen and the Trinity.

### 5. The Profits of Forgetting

In these texts, indecent forgetting opens up communities and reinforces them. All pray for the maintenance of these communities, but reconfigure the transactions required. In their visionary interactions with the souls of the departed, the sister-books advertise the traditional commemorative power of the sisters by foregrounding their mnemonic labor, yet redefine the conditions in which the sisters are capable of intervening in Purgatory in such a way that other souls are forgotten. The sister-books risk their communities in order to design a celestial clique of uniquely gifted sisters and souls within the convent, instead. In her revelations, Julian extends holy women's 'apostolate of the dead' (Newman 1995, p. 109) of *memoria* to all believers, but opens up the question of who is where, and what suffrages achieve. Simultaneously, she raises the stakes of this precarious endeavor, but also reconfigures the community of evenchristen to which she belongs by enfolding the living and the dead into mutual indwelling with God.

All of these texts, then, contest the strictness of Purgatory and the communities within the texts. The texts pull the outside world and the afterlife into these communities to reconfigure it on their own terms by means of visions and *memoria*. In so doing, however, the outside world also remakes these communities, for better and for worse, and impacts the ways in which these communities remember themselves and the visions of their holy women. These women's communities misplace some women within them. Convents and anchorholds both remember and forget the women that they enclose. Communities and texts, thus, transform into indecent spaces.

To conclude, these women's relational understanding of subjectivity is a key precept of their indecent theology. For Julian and the sisters, the living and the dead indwell one another and support one another's salvation. In this visionary conception of personhood, Julian and the sisters thus share Althaus-Reid's 'vision of doing theology in community, of writing as a "we"' (Althaus-Reid 2000, p. 41). Such being-with of all souls may be their most radical, unnerving contribution to indecent theology.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Editions of two texts out of the three under discussion are available in print (the St Katharinental sister-book and *A Revelation of Love*). An edition of the Diepenveen sister-book is forthcoming. All quotations from the St Katharinental sister-book are taken from Ruth Meyer's edition (Meyer 1995), and all quotations from the Diepenveen sister-book from Wybren Scheepssma's transcript of the manuscript referred to as DV, completed by scribe Griet Essinghes in 1524 (Essinchghes 1524). This transcript will form the basis of his forthcoming edition and English translation (in collaboration with David F. Johnson), to be published with Brepols in their Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts series. I am grateful to Scheepssma for his scholarly generosity in sharing this transcript. The translations from Middle High German are my own; the translations from Middle Dutch are taken from David F. Johnson's contributions to the forthcoming edition of DV. All quotations from *A Revelation of Love* are taken from Nicholas Watson and Jaqueline Jenkins's edition (Watson and Jenkins 2006b); the translation used is Windeatt (2015).
- <sup>2</sup> A round table organized by Michelle M. Sauer at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo in 2022, informed by indecent theology, also evinced the many ways in which medieval lived experience can overthrow the gendered norms of seemly economic, social, and spiritual behavior in religious life.
- <sup>3</sup> I follow Bollmann (2004, p. 184) and Van Engen (2010) in grouping the sister-books from the German-speaking lands and the Low Countries into a single textual family. Although critics also refer to this family as 'convent chronicles' or 'nuns' *vitae*, I deploy the term 'sister-book' throughout to indicate that Middle Dutch sister-books chronicle the lives of canonesses regular as well as semi-religious women (all 'sisters'). For further features, see Lewis (1996, pp. 32–57).
- <sup>4</sup> Either spiritual or bodily vision, these experiences sit uneasily within taxonomies of visions (Schmitt 1998, pp. 23–27; Van Moolenbroek 2008, p. 269).
- <sup>5</sup> This wariness also maps onto distrust in the Diepenveen sister-book of apparitions (Van Moolenbroek 2008, pp. 276–82), possibly related to such suspicion from Diepenveen leadership as well (Mertens 2002, pp. 89–92), which the text strives to negotiate with the didactic function of miracles in these texts (M. van Dijk 2005; Mertens 2002, pp. 89–92).

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