

Julian of Norwich

Revelations of Divine Love

In 1373 a gravely ill a woman from Norwich received a series of visions as she lay on what she believed to be her deathbed.

Or so she tells us in her book. Revelations of Divine Love' a compilation of her vision and her analysis of their theological significance which she compiled after her recovery.

This book is believed to be one of the earliest books to be written by a woman in the English language.

I became interested in Julian of Norwich whilst still at school, where I read her writings in the context of feminist theology. Julian is a radical writer for a multitude of reasons, from her engagement with the character of God, to her use of translated biblical texts

When I began my Laidlaw project in 2018, I wanted to understand why she was so radical, and how this has influenced the way in which has been read over the centuries. This Poster will consider how Revelations of Divine Love deals with the themes of love, suffering, and gender, and how her text has been received.

Love, Gender, and Suffering

A key theme I found time and again in Revelations was the theme of love. Julian is massively pre-occupied with how much love it must take for somebody to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others. In other words, at a point when she herself was suffering, she becomes fascinated by the notion of choosing to suffer in the place of somebody else. Although the imagery she uses can be extra-ordinarily visceral, her descriptions of pain and suffering are always used to highlight the scale of the sacrifice she believed God had made for her and thus the power of His love.

For Julian of Norwich this love is one which is distinctly gendered, something Vincent Gillespie has used to draw a parallel between the suffering of Jesus and the pain of childbirth. Julian of Norwich explicitly compared Jesus to the role of a mother, and the suffering Jesus experiences so Julian can be saved can be likened explicitly to pain in childbirth.

Perhaps it is for this particularly gendered depiction of a usually male God that Revelations of Divine Love has resonated so strongly with women over time. It soon became clear that women across history had played a very important part in preserving her work.

The Manuscripts

It was evident that Julian of Norwich's writing was strikingly different and possibly radical. As part of my project I wanted to explore how this had been received by her readers. I found that there are six surviving manuscripts that are even close to being contemporary to Julian's probable time of writing. It is from these manuscripts that much of our understanding of what Julian's text probably looked like in completion is drawn from, whilst the individual histories of each manuscript can suggest how her writing may have been received. The earliest copies we have of Revelations were kept in England and entered into the circulation of private families. After the reformation, many religious books were burned or disposed of and Catholics were persecuted across England. Many wealthier families found themselves practicing their faith in secret, employing private chaplains and in some cases preserving Catholic literature in their personal libraries. Due to the mystical nature of Revelations of Divine Love the text fell out of favour, as mystics were believed to be too closely associated to Catholic practices. The Amherst manuscript and the Westminster manuscript are two which have both survived relatively quietly, moving between private collections, however this is not the case across the board.

During my research, I was fortunate enough to go to Paris to study the manuscript held in the national archives there. The provenance of this manuscript suggests it was copied in Antwerp from another manuscript which has not survived by a group of Catholic dissenters who had left England and smuggled a manuscript with them. From there, it made its way into the library of the King of France, which is how it has ended up in the National archives.

In the second year of my research I focused on three of the later surviving manuscripts, which all have intriguing links to a group of exiled English nuns in Cambrai and Paris. The first, Sloane MS2499 is believed to be a copy of an earlier (and now lost) manuscript which was carried into France with the first nuns who set up the convent. The second copy is believed to be one of the texts which Serenus de Cressy, a Benedictine monk and chaplain to the Benedictine nuns in Paris, used to create the first printed edition of the text in 1670. Finally, the third manuscript I studied was a copy of the above Sloane MS2499. In each case, the manuscripts were disrupted and displaced from the Benedictine nuns during the French Revolution, when new highly rational values and a distaste for the traditional power of the Church led to the nuns in Cambrai and Paris being forced back to England. These three editions made their way into private collections which moved around Europe before each being bought as part of larger collections by the British Library. It was then, in 1901 that Grace Warrack, a Scottish translator from Edinburgh rediscovered Sloane MS2499, which had been archived under the category of Magic and Witchcraft. This mis-categorisation of Julian's work demonstrates the power her writing could be understood to have had, and the fear and stigmatisation which grew to surround mystical writing. Using this newly discovered edition, Grace Warrack published a new edition of Revelations of Divine Love, with the Sloane manuscript now being the basis of most modern editions of the text.

What is clear is that at every turn, Julian of Norwich's book and the manuscripts containing it have a tradition of women writing, reading, and preserving at the very centre.

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