



English Literature @ Portsmouth

Julian, first published woman writer in English

by **Md. Mahmudul Hasan** on [November 7, 2019](#) in **News**



On 12-14 September 2019, the University of East Anglia (UEA) organised “Doris Lessing at 100: The Writer’s Quest”. The programme brochure I received stated that the conference would take place at its Julian Study Centre (JSC).

Upon arrival, I saw the building next to the JSC was named after the radical philosopher Thomas Paine (1737-1809) and home to the UEA Business School. Paine was born in Thetford in Norfolk; and UEA is on the outskirts of the county’s main city, Norwich. I studied Paine during my PhD research at the University of Portsmouth and sought to examine the extent to which he influenced the Enlightenment feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97).

But who was Julian?

Curiosity drew me to St. Julian’s Church in Norwich. The actual name of the woman who we today identify as Julian is still unknown. She was an anchoress who lived a reclusive life in this church and thus came to be named so.

Even though she considered herself a “symple creature vnlettyrde”, Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) is widely regarded as the first woman of letters to have published a book in the English language. She wrote the shorter version of her *XVI Revelations of Divine Love* (1395) right after having “mystic visions” on 8 May 1373 night. Twenty years later, she produced the fuller edition of the text.

Even though Julian is not widely discussed, her influence on literary successors is remarkable. Two lines in T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton" (1936) – "Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance and there is only the dance" (ll.20-21) – are a clear allusion to Julian's statement: "I saw God in a point by which vision I understood that He is in all things." Robert Browning's belief "God's in his heaven – / All's right with the world!" echoes Julian's devotional optimism: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." She is known to have influenced many other writers of the past and present.

Julian's message of hope and trust in God's "compassionate love" proved useful during her lifetime when the people of Norwich suffered from plague, poverty and famine. As a spiritual guide, she "counselled a lot of people in pain". Interestingly, she compared God's grace for humans to a mother's love and care for children, stating: "To the property of motherhood belongs nature, love, wisdom, and knowing – and this is God."

The history of Norwich abounds with many other literary figures. The birth of the first known woman to write a book in English in the city was in all likelihood an important reason why, in 2012, UNESCO declared it England's first "City of Literature."

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