

The Ageing anchoress

by Rogan Wolf



Anchoress

“Al shal be wel, and al maner of thyng shal be wel...Sin is behovely”

Dame Julian of Norwich, anchoress, 14th century.

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Anchorites were a phenomenon of the fourteenth century, not just in England but across Christian Europe. Women joined the movement as well as men, and were called anchoresses. The most famous person to adopt the anchorite life was called Dame Julian of Norwich. That life involved being walled up in a cell in order to devote yourself entirely to God and to prayer.

In a sense this was an individualist version of monasticism, though not the isolated life of a hermit. The anchoress in her cell was less self-sufficient than the nun in her convent, and relied totally on the wider lay community to supply her needs. The cell tended to be built against the local church, with a window into the church, to allow the anchoress to participate in the routine of church services ; and there was another window facing into the village square, to allow for food to be passed in and the slop bucket to be passed out.

That second window was also useful for keeping an eye on town activities, for holding conversation and for offering advice. Dame Julian was recognised as someone who gave “good counsel.”

I believe the walls of the anchorite’s cell offer an image for contemporary old age.

The Ageing anchoress Looks to the Future

In divine company night and day
the anchoress could not be lonely.

Did those dark walls
restrict her ? No, she soared.

But touched her own body from time to time,
guiltily acknowledging pleasure.

This does not matter, she reminded herself.
A life withdrawn

from slack and
vacuous companionship

means more alive
in all senses

alone with the Ultimate.
Time is better spent in silence

than in jabber and preen.

The walls pressed in.

She remembered her losses. She grieved.

She fingered the cruelty of her entombment

the dank stone. Here

at this last station

I shall meet my Redeemer.

He will sweep me up

into His bosom.

I shall doubtless swoon.

The Ageing anchoress' Window

I abhor my window, muttered the anchoress.
I cannot range the earth as my neighbours do.
Instead I'm caged with the terror of the Word
and my ageing sears me each slow hour.
Since I cannot shift my ground
let it at least be private to me
and not open court to any passing voyeur.

The villagers were alarmed, some resentful.
They went to the priest. Why does the anchoress
stick out her tongue at us from her window ?
Each day we feed her and clear her slops.
We expect a return more palatable
than the face of a gargoyle making mock !

The Ageing anchoress at Exercise

The anchoress paced her cell -
first cross-wise, all the diameters

around the clock, her floor ;
then the circumference,

beating her sheer flint wall,
first clock-wise, then anti -

an ageing anchoress at prayer
patrolling the face of her silent days.

The Ageing anchoress declares her love

Oh, my Redeemer, my sweet sparrow,
how much more

blood is left in you
yet to spill? I kneel upon my shadow

in the stink of ages
of human waste,

covering my face in your blood. You
drench me, Lord. Only God

could carry so much blood
in Him, for torture

until Time's end.
Oh my soft sparrow, mashed,

let my hands
cup you in worship.

I hold you. Forgive me.
Forgive all.

Our sin, you said,
is behovely.

The Last Days

Now she was old,
that body in which she'd gloriéd
turned torture chamber and public shame.

She took to leaning from the window
of her cell, desperate to counsel,
to connect.

She looked like a claw.
The villagers hurried past.
Her days emptied like lungs.