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The Development and Significance of the International Anchoritic Society

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Abstract

The International Anchoritic Society (IAS) celebrated its twentieth year in 2023. Despite its name, the IAS studies all forms of medieval religious reclusion, not just the titular anchorites, and not just within the Christian tradition. Starting in 1998, independently organized sessions at Kalamazoo gradually coalesced into a formal organization, recognized officially in 2003, that has always been inclusive and supportive of forward-thinking scholarship, with many members representing the queer community and medievalists of color.

The International Anchoritic Society (IAS) was founded in 2003, now over twenty years ago, in order to draw attention to the role of anchorites in medieval religion.¹ The society emerged in response to the sense that medieval religious women—and their texts—had been marginalized and that it was time to make them central to medieval studies. Anchorites existed quite literally on the fringes of medieval society, yet they were a central part of medieval Christian devotion. That theological importance diminished with the Protestant Reformation and changing ideas about personal devotion; withdrawal and contemplation were no longer encouraged as a priority for saving souls in many regions. Though the vocation has persisted and is still practiced by a few even today, its zenith spanned the Patristic and medieval periods. Similarly, while anchoritic texts were a central part of English vernacular devotional material, those texts also fell to the wayside. And while reclusion was a significant part of early Christianity, most people today have not heard of anchorites, though the general public is always fascinated by them when I give public lectures. It is at least in part this self-same fascination that makes the International Anchoritic Society a necessary part of the medieval studies landscape.

The major anchoritic Rule, the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* (*Guide for anchoresses*) occupied a central position in English philology for many years, primarily as a tool of language study. James Morton (1853) produced the first modern edition of this work, basing it on London, British Library, Cotton Nero, A.xiv. Calling it “semi-Saxon,” Morton’s edition provoked interest in the language even as it set in relative stone some of the errors that plague medieval anchoritic studies to this day (e.g., the name *Ancrene Rimle*) (xviii). In response, the Early English Text Society planned a series of editions of the various versions of *Ancrene Wisse* found in different manuscripts, with the possible hope of someday collating them all. So far, ten have been published (the version with London, British Library Cotton MS Titus D.XVIII also contains the Lanhydrock Fragment from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. th.c.70), with the latest being Bella Millett’s in 2005 & 2008 (Sauer 2003). The EETS editions are not the only ones; there are others, including one in the TEAMS series.

The other well-known anchoritic text was Julian of Norwich’s *Shewings* (AKA *Revelations of Divine Love*), an account of visions Julian experienced on her sick bed around the age of thirty-three. These were collected into an initial text, now known as the short text, and enhanced by her reflections and theological exposition in what is now known as her Long Text. Julian herself also became well-known for a different reason. In this case, as a “home grown saint,” so to speak, Julian is honored in the Anglican Church, the Episcopal Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America with a feast day on May 8. Though not canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, she is revered as a spiritually gifted individual, and even cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican 2003). Her work has become the basis of numerous daily devotionals tracing as far back as the English Reformation. Especially popular are her aphorisms such as “All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” (Julian of Norwich 2006, 209; LT 13.27.9–11). Over the years, both popular and academic theology alike have dedicated many hours to studying Julian and her mystic revelations.

Until the late twentieth-century, there was very little scholarship on the literary aspects of anchoritic texts and on the anchoritic vocation as a historical and material reality. There were a few exceptions to this rule. The most obvious was E. J. Dobson (1976), *The Origins of ‘Ancrene Wisse’*,

¹ Thank you to Susannah Chewning and Liz McAvoy for discussing personal recollections as well as those long-ago conversations during which we planned the path on which we find ourselves now.

though the main purpose of Dobson's study was to determine who the author might have been rather than to investigate the spirituality or even the mystic potential. Despite provoking later feminist and gendered readings, Dobson's study managed to take a text about women's religious vocation and turn it into a study about the man (supposedly) behind it. *The Solitary Self: Individuality in the 'Ancrene Wisse'* by Linda Georgianna (1981) was one of the first books to tackle the text as a literary work and was a harbinger of the feminist work to be done. Elizabeth Robertson (2007) recalled her own troubles in this regard. While her dissertation on the thirteenth-century Middle English "AB texts," (*Ancrene Wisse*, *Hali Maidenhood* [a tract on virginity], *Sawles Warde* [an allegorical piece about sin and the soul], and three hagiographies) was approved, early articles drawn from her work were rejected due to their feminist focus: "although the argument was sound, the fact that these texts were written for women held no interest for scholars" (Robertson 2007, 68). Furthermore, Robertson's first book (1990), *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience*, which was based on her dissertation, languished in obscurity for a while because "it took a revolution in literary theory before medievalists took an interest in the book's focus on women" (Robertson 2007, 69). Robertson's claims that Middle English studies were especially resistant to feminist literary approaches due to the prevalence of Chaucer studies is not without merit. Over the years, I interviewed for multiple jobs for which I came in second place because I did not write my dissertation on Chaucer (Sauer 2004, Sauer 2005, Sauer 2008). But even then, feminism had made some inroads into Chaucerian criticism; what had not expanded yet were the Middle English canon and the definition of text.

In some ways, medieval anchoritic studies were lucky that the standard feminist recovery work was not necessary, since at the very least, *Ancrene Wisse* itself was a well-documented text with many editions. Even *The Wooing of Our Lord* had an EETS edition (W. Meredith Thompson [1958]), and the *Book of Margery Kempe* had been discovered and received some attention. Robertson (2007) notes that Karma Lochrie's book *Margery Kempe and the Translations of the Flesh* "was one of the earliest books to consider the role medieval understandings of the body and the flesh play in Margery Kempe's self-construction." (72). It was also one of the first widely read medieval feminist books to step away from Chaucer and examine medieval religious literature specifically for women in literary terms. Kempe is also oddly related to anchoritic studies since "Pepwell enclosed Margery Kempe making her 'Margerie kemp anresse'" (Chappell, 2013, xix). Moreover, books like Lochrie's and Robertson's demonstrated a noticeable lack: "Although scholars were willing to focus attention on women as underrepresented and understudied figures in literary, historical, and linguistic scholarship, there was little apparent investment in using feminist critique as an opportunity to rethink the very structures of criticism that shaped (and continue to shape) the field" (Norris, Trilling, and Stephenson 2020, 1). Investigations of medieval religious texts left room for such feminist studies to flourish. Anchoritic texts allowed for investigations of texts already known, but also room for recovery of others from the fringes. An excellent example of this, and a text that inspired many of the investigations of the early IAS years, was the Paulist Press translation by Nicholas Watson and Anne Savage (1991), *Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, which included translations of all the texts of the Wooing Group, all the hagiographies in the Katherine Group, *Holy Maidenhood*, and *Sawles Warde*. For the first time, all these works were easily available and accessible in a single volume and translated into modern English.

I have, so far, talked only about Christian reclusion. It is true that the IAS was started by scholars who focus primarily on Christianity, and even more specifically on the English tradition. However,

even in the early years, IAS sessions welcomed comparative approaches and global traditions. In fact, our original discussions made it clear that the IAS welcomes studies of medieval reclusion as a whole, not just the titular anchorites. Members have studied hermits and stylites, for example, alongside anchorites. Even monks and nuns come under the purview if isolation and withdrawal is a focus of their devotion. Broadening the scope to include other styles of reclusion also involved religious traditions beyond Christianity. Reclusion, withdrawal, and contemplation are part of many religious traditions found around the globe. For instance, Sufism, which is a form of Islamic mysticism, developed as early as the tenth century, and the early practitioners relied on solitude and lived contemplative lives (Ridgeon 2015). Buddhist ascetics living in mountain huts, caves, or even free in the wilderness are common figures in medieval Japanese and Chinese texts (Tokue 1985, 152–53). *Sannyasa* is a stage of the Hindu system where the individual rejects all material pursuits and lives a solitary ascetic life. An individual in Sannyasa is known as a *sannyasi* (male) or *sannyasini* (female) (Prabhu 2020). Therefore, as medieval studies become more global, anchoritic studies are well-positioned to make global connections. In fact, about ten or so years after the founding of our society, comparative tradition papers began popping up in conference sessions, and they are now anticipated.

Casual discussions about banding together as scholars of anchoritism began in the late 1990s at Kalamazoo, MI at the International Congress of Medieval Studies in response to panels organized by Susannah Mary Chewning about medieval Christian anchorites. Indeed, her work on the Wooing Group, a small collection of thirteenth-century Middle English prose prayers written for, and possibly by, anchoresses, was the stimulus. First, Chewning organized a series of sessions around the two most significant texts, *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian’s *Showings* at Kalamazoo. The name recognition of these main texts got them past the initial review board and onto the program. In turn, these first sessions helped gauge interest in the topic and willingness to participate. Chewning started with, “English Anchoritic Literature and Spirituality: From the *Ancrene Riwle*’ to Julian’s *Showings* B” (Medieval Institute 1998). Four scholars participated in this panel, which was a great start to the consistent study of anchorites and their texts. The following year, 1999, Chewning organized “English Anchoritic Literature: Spirituality, Poetry, and Women’s Literacy” (Medieval Institute 1999). The success of these panels led Chewning to organize a pair of sessions: a roundtable on pedagogy, “Anchoritic Literature I: Teaching Medieval Devotional Texts,” and a standard panel of papers, “Anchoritic Literature II: The Anchoritic Mystic” at the 35th Congress in 2000 (Medieval Institute 2000). I was one of the panelists in the second session, and this is where my involvement with the future IAS began. Chewning and I kept in touch via email regarding the sessions planned for the following year, 2001: “Anchoritic Literature I: Gender and the Anchoritic Community,” and “Anchoritic Literature II: Mystics and Saints: Anchoritic Devotion in Medieval Literature” (Medieval Institute 2001). Liz Herbert McAvoy presented in the first session, and among the three of us, we mused that it would be valuable to keep these conversations going, following the model of the John Gower Society (Yeager 2023). After planting the seeds for a society, Chewning and Sauer decided to test the viability and interest level at Kalamazoo the following year, while McAvoy investigated creating a larger event.

It was 2002 that proved to be a significant year for the nascent IAS: the society became formalized that fall after the successful first conference supported by the founders. That conference marked a shift in anchoritic studies; literary scholars were becoming the most important voices in studying these works. Giles Constable (2009) points out that traditionally, the “study of medieval religion was the

domain of scholars who were themselves clerics and monks” and who then subsequently also laid the foundation of the study of medieval history (355). But the late 1990s also brought both new approaches and new scholars, including many women who were scholars of literature. An important scholar of female religious literature herself, Anneke Mulder-Bakker (2005) notes that the preponderance of male scholars had resulted in a skewed sense of the vocation. Their accounts typically labeled female anchorites as overly religious women yearning for their spiritual bridegroom: “[these male scholars] were, without exception, men whose opinions were formed not only within the discipline of church history, but also by the upper-class ideals of the nineteenth century. [...] as a consequence, their somewhat narrow views on anchoritic spirituality and their interpretation of its historical sources have tended to direct all research into the subject during the past generations” (1–2). To Mulder-Bakker’s point, I would add a third branch of study—though one equally as dominated by conservative white male scholars—philology. For decades, the research on *Ancrene Wisse*, when not focused on authorial inquiry or relationships to theological practice, was dominated by language studies, including, somewhat famously, by J. R. R. Tolkien (1929, 1962) who had expressed the idea that the contents of the text were mostly inconsequential except for its unique “AB language,” a point he proved in his own edition of *Ancrene Wisse* by not including any information about the content at all. Now, though, there was a shift in both disciplinary interest as well as in methodological approach. The new anchoritic scholars were mostly literature researchers who specialized in feminist, gender, and queer theories. Thus, the development of the IAS parallels in many ways the surge in feminist and gender critiques and in examining religious texts as works of literature. As scholars such as Constable (2009) and John Van Engen (2002) point out, lay investigation of popular religion and vernacular religious texts truly “took off” from the 1970s forward, especially as the twentieth century drew to a close (Van Engen 2002, 498).

The success of the IAS, and its feminist and literary interests, was markedly apparent at Kalamazoo in May 2002. Chewing and Sauer both organized special sessions: “Anchoritic Literature I: Mysticism and the Anchoritic Community,” “Anchoritic Literature II: Anchoritic Spirituality,” and “Masculine Enclosure: Interpreting Hermits and Anchorites.” Additionally, Sauer convinced the Hagiography Society to offer two sessions on “solitude” (Medieval Institute 2002). These five sessions, which took varied approaches to reclusion, were well-received and encouraged the founders. As mentioned, most presenters, as well as the organizers, were literature scholars, not theologians, historians, or even linguists. This shift meant that anchoritic texts were coming to be seen as more canonical; they were being anthologized, taught in classrooms as literary works, and discussed in terms of critical theory.

The watershed moment occurred later that same summer of 2002 at the first academic conference dedicated solely to the study of medieval anchoritic literature. In July, McAvoy, along with her colleague, Mari Hughes-Edwards, hosted a conference at Gregynog Hall in Newtown, Wales on the theme “Anchorites: Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages” (*Mystics Quarterly* 2002) It was here the IAS was officially born, though the paperwork was completed later that fall over e-mail. Papers were delivered on topics such as masculinity and enclosure and contemplative elements in guide writing; on texts including the thirteenth-century *Rule for a Recluse* by Ælred of Rievaulx and the Old English *Guthlac A & B* in addition to the expected *Ancrene Wisse*. Foreshadowing the fledgling society’s commitment to inclusive reclusion, the program also featured

papers on Cistercians and Carmelites, on Margery Kempe, and the mid-fifteenth-century text *The feitis and the passion of oure lord Ihesu Crist*. The gathering was lively and well-attended. The organizers even invited Chris Newby, a British film director responsible for the 1993 film titled *Anchoress*, to discuss the broadening impact of anchoritic texts and influence. What would emerge from this meeting was a sense that anchoritic literature studies were not only here to stay, but also were being positioned as a significant voice in medieval literary studies. In short, this conference signaled a permanent shift in the direction of anchoritic studies.

Despite the disciplinary difference, the literary scholars still looked to two historical sources as their main inspiration for work on anchoritism. The foremother of anchoritic studies, at least for England, was Rotha Mary Clay (1914), a self-taught British antiquarian, who published the pioneering work, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*. This extensively detailed and exhaustively researched book served as the formative text throughout the twentieth century. Given Clay's lack of formal education and the paucity of women in the field, the depth and breadth of knowledge displayed in her book is significant: it contains an exhaustive list of all extant cells and possible inhabitants, and although some of the conjecture work has since been supplanted, her cell inventory and report of records are still fundamental to the field. In many ways, celebrating Clay's text is one of the IAS's contributions to feminist recovery work. Written by a woman without an education or academic career, Clay's books might have been relegated to the back of a dusty used bookstore; instead, she is remembered as a foremother of modern anchoritic studies. In fact, she continued "collecting further material on hermits and anchorites which she published in journals in 1953–5," and had intended to reissue an updated version of her book, even setting aside money for the project, but died before that could happen (Orme 2004). In 1985, Clay's book was supplemented by the groundbreaking volume, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* by Ann K. Warren (1985). The opening line of chapter one of Warren's book is revolutionary: "anchorites were common figures in medieval England" (7). With this opening, Warren dispelled any lingering notion by the patriarchal academy that studying anchoritism was a whim or a flight of fancy. She continues, "they undertook their solitary life by encamping in the heart of the community," amply demonstrating their significance spiritually, geographically, economically, and historically (7). Moreover, several scholars, especially Hope Emily Allen, had already demonstrated that *Ancrene Wisse* provided base material subsequently adapted into many late medieval devotional texts, especially those found in miscellanies meant for laypeople (Hirsch 2005; Innes-Parker 2003; Sauer 2023). Despite the naysayers, a case could be made that studying anchorites was a central part of medieval scholarship rather than a marginal interest.

Together, Clay, Warren, and Allen formed the core of anchoritic studies. A recurring trend noted in both Clay and Warren, though surprisingly not addressed at any length, was how overwhelmingly women outnumbered men in the vocation. Not until the turn of the twenty-first century did gender become the main focus of anchoritic scholarship. Chewing herself further credits the Savage and Watson translation of *Ancrene Wisse* (1991) as another driving force behind both her personal interest in studying anchorites and the burgeoning interest in the subfield: "The publication of [Savage and Watson's] *Anchoritic Spirituality* really began to change [the field ...] because it's a translation, [and it] gave so many more people access to texts that I think it really made the field itself possible. But in graduate programs before some of our articles and other research began to appear there was little if any support" (Susannah Chewing, text message to author, January 14, 2024). Accessibility has been

key to the anchoritic revolution. Not only Savage and Watson's translation, but also the sheer number of publications on anchoritic topics that have appeared since 2005 have all contributed to the growth of the field. For example, once excluded from classroom anthologies such as the Norton, anchoritic texts are now often represented, especially selections from *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich (Sauer 2017). Anchorites are even the subject of historical fiction, some books more popular than others (Chewning 2009).

The "Anchorites: Wombs and Tombs" conference itself, as the first one dedicated solely to anchoritic topics, yielded a great many productive conversations between literary historians and church historians. Moreover, it was at this conference that Chewning decided to go ahead with a formal organization that would be called the Anchoritic Society and invited Sauer and McAvoy to be on the Board. After this official recognition, the Society organized sessions at Kalamazoo 2003 for the first time as an independent entity. ("International" was not added to the name until 2005.) It was also at the 38th International Congress on Medieval Studies that the first member meeting was held, officers were elected, and a constitution was crafted. From then on, the IAS became a permanent presence at Kalamazoo, and it has occasionally organized sessions at both the Modern Language Association Conference and the International Medieval Congress at Leeds.

Since that first independent conference in 2002, the IAS has striven to convene conferences every few years. In 2005, "Rhetoric of the Anchorhold" was held again at Gregynog. Back-to-back International Anchoritic Symposia took place in 2007 and 2008, with Symposium I held at Glenstal Abbey in County Limerick, Ireland (hosted by Colmán O'Clabaigh) and Symposium II held in Japan (hosted by Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa). Sauer hosted the first USA-based conference at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks in 2011 on the theme "Wilderness and Desert." This was followed by a third conference hosted by McAvoy at Gregynog in 2014 on "Medieval Anchorites in their Communities." The last conference, held at the University of East Anglia in Norwich in 2018 (hosted by Rebecca Pinner) featured the theme "Reclusion and Materiality: Devotion and Contexts." The recent global pandemic disrupted the conference schedule, but the IAS will return to the USA in April 2025, with a conference at Brandeis University (hosted by Dorothy Kim).

Importantly, the IAS has always been visibly inclusive. Our society was founded by women, including an older than average PhD student (McAvoy) and a medievalist of color (Sauer), and the member base, which remains heavily female, includes openly LGBTQIA+ individuals, medievalists of color, and scholars across the world. We also have member academics from multiple disciplines and who teach at a range of institutions, including high schools, two-year colleges, public universities, liberal arts colleges, and Ivy League universities. We encourage memberships from any academic discipline and from any faith tradition. In fact, several members are currently working on interfaith projects regarding early reclusion. Membership in the society has never cost anything. Keeping the IAS dues-free has allowed an expanded membership, including many emerging scholars and international researchers. In 2012, the IAS added a subscriber listserv that keeps everyone connected and informed of Society activities. In 2018, Sauer established the IAS Newsletter, which is published electronically once a year in the summer after Kalamazoo and distributed via the listserv. Graduate students at UND have served as issue editors and many remain involved in anchoritic studies. Currently, the IAS has several officers, including Executive Director (Chewning), President (Sauer), European President (McAvoy), Asian Representative (Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa), Vice President (Will

Rogers), Secretary (Jennifer N. Brown), and Graduate Student Representative (David Carrillo-Rangel). Meetings, once held in person at Kalamazoo, are now conducted over Zoom and are therefore more inclusive and more widely attended than ever before.

Each of the society's conferences has resulted in publications of edited collections and special issues of journals as have some individual sessions. These works have usually reflected the overall theme of the individual conference. Even non-IAS events have resulted in important work on medieval vocational withdrawal. For instance, a forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Medieval Religious Culture* on race and reclusion will be based on a roundtable at the New Visions of Julian of Norwich conference hosted by Godelinde Gertrude Perk at the University of Oxford in summer 2022. More recently, scholars have been undertaking comparative studies between European and non-European works on reclusion. One such project, *Women's Literary Cultures in the Global Middle Ages: Speaking Internationally*, edited by Kathryn Loveridge, Liz Herbert McAvoy, Sue Niebrzydowski, and Vicki Kay Price (2023), although not focused solely on anchorites, contains several comparative essays and a general focus on intersectionality. More such work is being done all the time. With its focus on feminist and gender studies, the IAS has usually been ahead of the trends in our profession, and studies of race and pre-modern intersectionality are no exception. Now in its twenty-first year, its members look forward to many more years of breaking new ground.

International Anchoritic Society website

<https://internationalanchoriticsociety.wordpress.com/>

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