

Summary of Research
Summer Term 2023
Dr. Hannah Lucas

I am the current Newby Trust Research Fellow in English (2022-2025). I specialise in medieval literature, with a focus on a genre of religious texts also known as mystical or contemplative literature. My research brings the medieval into dialogue with modern concerns, exploring both the medieval roots of many modern ideas, and the value and applicability of historical texts in the present day.

My research this year has been split into a few different strands. First, I've been working on a monograph based on my doctoral research, which focuses on the medieval theologian Julian of Norwich, reading her *Revelations* in the context of the philosophy of health. The book is called *Impossible Recovery: Julian of Norwich and the Phenomenology of Wellbeing*, and it explores the possibility of recovering a modern theory of wellbeing from a medieval devotional text. Julian received her revelations while on her sickbed, believing she was to die. Fortunately, she survived, and the text she wrote about this experience is a deeply existential meditation on what it means to live and be well. Through a close reading of this text, I suggest that Julian's thinking predates, and intersects with, existential philosophy in the twentieth century and beyond. The book is also concerned with issues of historical recovery; how and why we can learn from the past. The manuscript is currently under review with Columbia University Press for their 'Gender, Theory, and Religion' series.

Second, I am working on a new project about the practice of medieval literary criticism, in which I argue that literary critics can learn a great deal methodologically from medieval contemplative literature. This genre of texts provide a pragmatic but optimistic perspective on reading and the lifelong process of learning. My position is that we can use these contemplative paradigms to better theorise literary criticism; to better highlight and revalue the ups and downs of research and pedagogy. I outline this position in an article I am currently developing, which theorises the Julian of Norwich's contemplative writing as a hermeneutic theory, and traces the devotional aspects of this model through the psychoanalytic work of Donald Winnicott, to suggest that we might too approach criticism as a form of devotion. So far, I've presented this work in invited talks at Cambridge and Oxford English Faculties, and at the 'Functions of Criticism' conference at CRASSH, the Cambridge Centre for Research in the Arts Social Sciences and Humanities. I aim for the project to become a second monograph.

Finally, I've been working on a third project on the crossovers between artificial intelligence and religion, focusing on the linguistics of AI text-to-image models and their connections to texts of medieval mystical theology. Specifically, I argue that negative language is used in AI models in a similar way to mystical texts, to reach into the model's discursive space just as mystical language tries to do for the reader's subconscious. The article now published open access in the interdisciplinary journal *Religions*, and I presented my findings at the International Society for Science and Religion's conference on 'Artificial and Spiritual Intelligence'.

To sum up, I've spent this year exploring contemplative literature's many facets and contemporary applications. Next year, my work will continue in this direction, including establishing a multi-disciplinary research network at CRASSH on contemplative theory and practice. The network will also stretch into some more practice-led research on contemplation, featuring artistic work as well as sessions from different religious traditions.