

Dame Emma Raughton and the Visions of Our Lady of North Street

Transcript of a talk given at All Saints North Street, York

Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us....There be of them that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported. And some there be which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been; and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them. But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten.

ECCLESIASTICUS xliv.

To write the biography of Dame Emma Raughton, anchoress of All Saints North Street, visionary and clairvoyant, is frankly impossible. We know nothing of her personal history, she left no writings from which we might gain some clue about her dialect or her intellect, we know nothing of her social class, or whether she was a virgin or a widow. Her biography for our purposes contains many more negatives than positives.

Dame Julian of Norwich (1342 – c.1415), the most famous of English anchoresses, and a near contemporary of Dame Emma, is similarly elusive. She was not from Norwich, but only lived there during her enclosure, and we do not know where she came from (though it has been suggested that she was a Yorkshire woman, perhaps from the East Riding); she was not called Julian, but adopted the name from St Julian's church where her anchorhold was attached; she was probably not a nun, she may have been a widow. Andrew Louth¹ remarks that "It is worth emphasizing how completely Julian hid herself from the interest of her age...Few of her contemporaries seem to have valued her writings, they survive almost by chance."

Medieval people very often tantalize us in this way. They force us to approach them through our imaginations rather than through bald and incontrovertible facts. They invite us to impose a pattern on the fragments they have left us, using all the knowledge and understanding we can muster of the times in which they lived.

Here, in All Saints, we are surrounded by images of ordinary medieval people. They are here in the Corporal Acts of Mercy, and the Nine Orders of Angels windows: people you would have met on North Street, in Micklegate, at the market at Pavement, crossing Ouse Bridge, peeking out at us across five centuries, with their loaves of bread, baskets of fish and fancy hats. The poor, the well to do, the criminal classes and the clergy all appear in the painted glass of this church. They seem very familiar, so that we almost feel that we know their faces from the streets of the present day city. So sitting here in All Saints, perhaps we have a better chance of catching a glimpse of Dame Emma and her world, of illuminating the few odd facts we do know about her, and of building up a picture of her life, her visions, and their significance for us today.

Emma was an anchoress attached to All Saints church in the first half of the fifteenth century – anchoress from the Greek *anachoretēs* meaning "one who lives apart". We know from the historical sources (which I will talk more about later) that she was here

¹ *The Wilderness of God* (2003).

in 1421. And we know that she was still here in 1436 because she is mentioned by name in a will.² Anchorites were not expected to support themselves, and, although there is evidence of them living by the work of their hands, trading was discouraged. Usually, before being enclosed, the anchorite would have to make arrangements for people, perhaps from the parish, to provide her with sustenance. The bishop was careful not to license anyone unless he was satisfied that such arrangements were secure and permanent. Emma would have lived in an anchorage or anchorhold attached to the church and its position is obvious from the two medieval squints still visible today. The reconstructed anchorhold (built c.1910) is in roughly the same position as its medieval counterpart, but Emma's cell would probably have been larger: the two squints indicate a two storey building. The present sacristy doorway is medieval, and was moved to its present position when the sacristy was built in Victorian times, and archaeological evidence indicates that the doorway was not external, and so perhaps it was the door into the anchorhold, or into a servant's antechamber.

We have some insight into the daily lives of medieval anchorites through the surviving works of anchoritic literature - books such as *De Institutione Inclusarum* written by Aelred of Rievaulx (c.1160 but translated into English in the fourteenth century), and *Ancrene Wisse* (sometimes also called *Ancrene Riwle* - the title means 'Guide for Anchoresses') which was a text of enormous popularity and importance, as witnessed by the fact that there are nineteen copies extant, written in English, French and Latin.

Ancrene Wisse is a guide to the contemplative life, written for a group of women in the thirteenth century, but much used by anchoresses of Emma's time. The text includes an 'Outer' rule, which contains much rather homely advice. On food: "You shall not eat meat or fat [but] eat as many vegetables as you like; accustom yourself to little drink. Do not on any day fast on bread and water unless you have permission." On clothing: "It does not matter whether your clothes are black or white so long as they are plain, warm and well-made. No-one must wear linen next to the skin (unless it is made of tow or coarse flax). You must sleep in a gown belted at the waist, but loosely enough to allow the thickness of your hand between." On hairdressing: "You shall have your hair cut four times a year." And, perhaps the most commonly quoted line from the guide, on pets: "Unless need compels you ...you must not keep any animal except a cat."³

But although the *Ancrene Wisse* is a guide for anchoresses, women who have decided to seek God through the solitary life, and by withdrawing themselves from the world, it does not counsel the women to despise the world outside the anchorhold. Women like Emma Raughton, sought the desert of anchoritism, in the middle of a busy city. Linda Georgianna⁴, *Ancrene Wisse* scholar, explains the paradox: "Thus the anchoress, unlike the early desert fathers who could all but dismiss the real world, must participate in the world even as she seeks to flee it."

² Ann K Warren *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (1985).

³ Tr. M.B.Salu *The Ancrene Riwle* (1955)

⁴ Linda Georgianna *The Solitary Self* (1981).

In the longer part of the text, the author of *Ancrene Wisse* lays out and explores the 'Inner' rule, which involves the development of 'inner sight'. Linda Georgianna explains it like this: "not negation...but a specialized way of seeing that makes her constantly aware of the potential sinfulness of the world and at the same time able to transform her inescapable desire for contact with the world into a humanly satisfying love of Christ that is spiritual but sensual...The *Wisse* author thinks sacramentally. The world is not an incidental obstruction that men must bypass to arrive at spiritual knowledge. Rather, according to many twelfth century theologians, the material world is the mirror of God's love. [This] same sacramental sense gives the *Ancrene Wisse* author a new respect for and confidence in the minute details of creation to teach or mirror spiritual things."⁵

Now imagine Emma Raughton, choosing to be enclosed at All Saints, sometime before 1421, during a period of unprecedented building and activity inside and outside the church. As our parish web site tells us: "In the first half of the fourteenth century, as the urban elite of the city began to build their large houses in the parish, the east end was sumptuously rebuilt. The present east windows with Geometric and Curvilinear tracery of the Decorated period of Gothic architecture were installed and the side aisles were extended east to be level with the east wall of the chancel." It seems likely that decoration of the choir and side aisles would have happened during this period as well. Masons, glass painters, joiners, woodcarvers, would have been an almost permanent and disruptive fixture inside the church, perhaps getting in the way as masses were said at the newly dedicated chantry altar. Outside the church North Street would have been a building site, with materials being unloaded from wagons and barges, workmen shouting, dogs barking, the air interestingly fragrant from the tidal River Ouse and the nearby tanneries and dye works. Emma Raughton's daily life would have been filled with distractions and disturbance, and plentiful opportunity to follow the path prescribed by the author of *Ancrene Wisse*, of transforming her sensory experience into love.

Anchorites were nothing unusual in 15th century York; at least seven anchorholds were occupied and wills frequently make bequests to all.⁶ Research shows that besides Emma Raughton at All Saints, there were anchorites at the churches of: St Cuthbert, All Saints Fishergate, St Helen Fishergate, St John the Baptist Hungate, St Martin's chapel Layerthorpe Bridge (in St Saviour parish), St Margaret, Walmgate, and at the convent of St Clement. Emma received five grants in wills between 1430 and 1436.

It seems probable that Emma was part of the social and spiritual circle of York anchorites, which may have been connected to a priest at the church of St Saviour – Adam Wygan. He was priest at St Saviour for about forty years, from the 1390s until his death in 1433 when he left money for six anchorites, including Emma Raughton, in his will. Prominent laymen connected with his parish, such as Richard Russell, Mayor of the Staple at Calais, also left money to the anchorites of York.

The religious guilds also included anchorites among their members. Margaret Heslington the anchoress of St Margaret, Walmgate (d.1439) was a member

⁵ Georgianna *The Solitary Self* (1981)p. 66.

⁶ Ann K Warren *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (1985).

of the Corpus Christi guild and this may indicate that she came from a wealthy family. And anchorites were connected to the mainstream of intellectual life as well. Margaret Heslington commissioned a translation of *Incendium Amoris* (The Fire of Love) by Richard Rolle, the Yorkshire hermit and mystic, from the Carmelite, Richard Misyn.⁷ The evidence seems to point to a sophisticated, devout milieu, with a high level of literacy and strong and extensive connections to the local community, both clergy and lay.

Emma is distinguished among this spiritual and social circle by her connection to Richard Beauchamp (1382-1439), thirteenth Earl of Warwick, and a figure of national importance. It is because Richard Beauchamp visited Emma and sought her advice that we know about her importance, and her visions of 1421.

But why should the Earl of Warwick, close friend of King Henry V, ‘the greatest knight in all England’, and English hero in the wars against the French, come to York to visit a recluse in North Street? How did Beauchamp know of Emma Raughton? Was her reputation as a visionary and prophetess well established by 1421, or was she already known to the Beauchamps who were a family with ties to a number of anchorites, including Julian of Norwich? And what is the significance of the year 1421?

1421 was a year of great national excitement and hope. King Henry V had returned home after three years in France, with his marriage to the French princess Katherine sealing the Treaty of Troyes and establishing Henry’s claim to the crown of France. Henry and his new wife embarked on a pilgrimage tour of England in February 1421, to give thanks for victory. But just over a month later, defeat at the Battle of Baugé and the death of the Duke of Clarence, meant that Henry had to return to France. By August 1422, five months later,⁸ he was dead of dysentery and his nine month old son had succeeded to the throne.

Whatever his motives, we know that Richard Beauchamp visited Emma in 1422, seemingly after the death of Henry V. She prophesied that it had been shown to her, in a vision the previous year, by Our Lady, that Henry VI should be crowned in France as well as in England, and that no-one was better fitted to be his guardian than Richard Beauchamp.⁹ Richard did become a member of the council that ruled for the child king and from 1428 to 1436 he was the Henry’s tutor. As one of Henry V’s most trusted supporters, his choice for these positions was perhaps unsurprising, but as one

⁷ Johan Bergström-Allen *Heremitam et Ordinis Carmelitarum* (2002 Oxford M.Phil thesis).

⁸ The medieval year ran from March 25th, Lady Day, the feast of the Annunciation.

⁹ “Here shewes howe kyng henry was after crowned Kyng of Fraunce at Seynt Denys besides Parys. Of the which coronacion in Fraunce and also the said Erle to have the rule of his noble persone, unto he were of the age of xvi yeres: it was the will and ordenaunce of almyghty god as our blessed lady shewed by revelacion unto Dame Emme Rawhton Recluse at all halowes in Northgate strete of York and she said that thorowe the Reame of Englund was no persone lorde ne other like to hym in habile of grace and true feithfulnesse to vertuously norisshe and governe his noble persone accordyng to his Roial astate. Also she put greet commendacion by the ordenaunce of god of his greet benefytes in tyme to come of devowt commers to the place of Gye clif otherwise called Gibclyff which in processe of tyme shal growe to a place of greet worship oon of the moost named in Englund.” *The Beauchamp Pageant XLVII no.24(c.1470)*; edited by Alexandra Sinclair (2003)

historian wryly remarks: ‘If Dame Emma’s vision was not the cause of these events, neither did it hurt his position’.¹⁰

Richard also consulted Emma on a personal matter: his concern about his wife’s difficulty in conceiving a son. She told him that it would please God if he would found a chantry in the chapel of the hermitage of Guy’s Cliff, on the western bank of the River Avon about a mile and a quarter from the town of Warwick. The foundation was to have two priests who would say mass for the souls of the king and founders. The chapel was duly founded in 1423, with a dedication to St Mary Magdalene, and is still standing today (owned and used by freemasons). Richard Beauchamp’s son was born on 22nd March 1425, a fact quoted by John Rous who sees it as validation of Emma’s prophetic gifts.

John Rous (c.1414-1491), an Oxford academic, historian and antiquarian, was chaplain at Guy’s Cliff from 1444 until his death in 1491. It is in Rous’s history of the Earls of Warwick *The Rous Roll* that we find some of the information about Emma and her prophecies to Richard Beauchamp.¹¹ Rous illustrates his manuscript with beautiful pen and ink drawings of the figures whom he is describing, and it seems to me significant that the drawing of Richard Beauchamp shows him in full plate armour (denoting his heroic character) and holding in his left arm the infant Henry VI, and on his right the chantry which Emma instructed him to found. John Rous, perhaps acting on his personal knowledge of the Earl, seems to be indicating in this drawing the importance which Beauchamp attached to Emma’s prophecies.

And it is in Rous’s history that we find the reference that is perhaps of greatest significance for us today. The prophecies made to Richard Beauchamp were given to Emma by Our Lady who “appeared to her seven times in one year”. We know only the content of the prophecies to Richard Beauchamp, but it seems highly likely that other people would have known of her visions and perhaps of other revelations which Emma was privileged to receive.

One other historical source makes reference to Emma Raughton and her visions. *The Pageants of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick* consists of fifty three pencil drawings showing episodes in Richard Beauchamp’s life, with accompanying text. This work was probably commissioned by Anne, Beauchamp’s fourth daughter, and the widow of Richard Neville (Warwick the Kingmaker) and was left unfinished at her death in 1493. One of the drawings shows Henry VI being crowned at Paris and relates the story of Emma’s prophecies and also refers to Emma’s suggestion that the chapel at Guy’s Cliff should become a place of pilgrimage. In a fascinating footnote to the text, a recent editor says: “The words of Emma Raughton in *The Beauchamp Pageant* are a close paraphrase of those in *The Rous Roll*. Probably they are copying from a scribe writing at a much earlier date.”¹²

¹⁰ Ann K Warren *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (1985)

¹¹“Thys lord was maister of kyng herre the syxt in hys tendre age and with the helpe of the land crownyd hym twies at Westmystre as for kyng of England and at paris for kyng of fraunce he made certen there a fore was uncerten at Gyblif a chauntre of ii prystis that God wold send hym Eyre male. He did hyt by the styrring of a lady anchoras named dam Em Rawghtone, dwelling at All Halows in the Northstrete of York; and for hyt to her apperyd Our Lady vii tymes in on yer.” John Rous *The Rous Roll* no. 50 (c.1490) ; *The Rous Roll* /, John Rous introduction by Charles Ross (Sutton 1979).

¹² Sinclair ed. *The Beauchamp Pageant* (2003)

What an enticing possibility: a lost manuscript, perhaps giving further details of Our Lady's revelations to Emma Raughton, perhaps not lost, but merely hidden, under the endpapers or in the spine of a later book!

Interest in anchoritic spirituality has been growing in recent years, in the academic community, and in the church. We are attracted by the optimistic vision of Julian of Norwich and her counterparts. The melodramatic and macabre images, propagated in hostile nineteenth century Protestant literature, of medieval anchorites walled up against their will, of severe and self destructive asceticism, has given place to an informed understanding of the anchorite's quest for a direct encounter with God, experienced in solitude, and apprehended through love.

The author of *Ancrene Wisse* sees the anchorite as giving spiritual stability and benefit to the parish church where she lives. He says "It is for this reason that an anchoress is called an anchoress, and anchored under a church like an anchor under the side of a ship, to hold it so that the waves and storms do not pitch it over. So all Holy Church, which is called a ship, shall be anchored to the anchoress, and she shall hold it secure so that the puffing and blowing of the devil, that is, temptations, do not pitch it over."

Let us pray that, through the intercession of Our Lady of North Street, our own anchoress and her visions of the Blessed Virgin may once again be an anchor for the church of All Saints.

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St Mark's Day, 25th April 2007