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Gender Roles and Eroticism in Christian Mysticism and Kabbalah

A Critical Analysis of Julian and Norwich and Yona Wallach

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Julian of Norwich and Yona Wallach, two Abrahamic mystics embedded in different faiths, in different time periods, and different geographical locations faced one similar issue; as deeply religious women who felt a strong connection with God, they had to figure out how to reconcile their faith with their gender in an androcentric world. Though they accomplished this reconciliation in different ways, the similarities between Wallach and Julian of Norwich are plentiful.

Yona Wallach was born on June 10, 1944, in Palestine. She was born into a highly political Jewish family, with father Michael Wallach (1912-1948) and mother Esther Gofman Wallach (1910-1985). Together, with other Zionist comrades, her parents helped to found the town now known as Kefar Ono. Wallach's father was killed in Israel's War of Independence in 1948 when she was only four years old, and consequently she was raised in a single-parent household (Cohen). As a child and teenager Yona was very smart and very rebellious. She was accepted to, and attended, Tikhon Hadash, one of Tel Aviv's most prestigious high schools. In tenth grade, however, she was expelled from said school for failing every one of her classes. She never finished high school and never attended university, but, at age 17, she did briefly attend the Avni Institute, a school renowned for fine art in Tel Aviv. She never graduated (Cohen).

Wallach was known as a free spirit, someone who was attracted to the Bohemian scene in Tel Aviv and constantly pushed the boundaries in her personal life and her work (Cohen). She was active in the Tel Aviv Poets Circle in the 1960s, which emerged around the journals *Akhsbav* and *Siman Qri'a*, both of which she wrote for with relative regularity ("Israel, Yona Wallach"). Wallach wrote a total of four books in her short life, and was widely popular (at least until the publishing of her most controversial piece, *Tefilin*). In 1978, Wallach won the Israeli Prime Minister's Literary Prize for her poetry, and in 1982 there was a record released with some of her work set to music ("Israel, Yona Wallach"). While she did garner much prestige professionally, she also "experienced some

years of personal chaos and intense involvement with promiscuous sex, hard drugs, and madness.” She was committed to mental institutions twice in her life, once in the mid-1960s, and once in the early 1970s, though there is not much information available as to why (Cohen). Yona Wallach never married and never left Israel (Dan, pg. 264); on September 26, 1985, just three years after the publishing of her aforementioned piece, *Tefilin*, she passed away from breast cancer at the age of 41. In her life and poetry, Wallach “unceasingly attack(ed) all cultural boundaries which, as she believe(d), guilefully conceal a dazzling spiritual reality locked inside human consciousness,” making her one of Kabbalah’s more modern mystics (Cohen).

Julian of Norwich was a Christian mystic who lived in Norwich, England in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. She was born in 1342, and likely died around 1416. Very little is known to us today about the life of Julian of Norwich.; that which we do know is almost exclusively taken from her work, *The Revelations of Divine Love*, which is widely regarded as one of the great Christian classics (“About Julian of Norwich”). We do not even know Julian’s actual name-- the name “Julian” is taken from the Church (St. Julian’s Church in Norwich) where she lived as an anchoress for most of her life (“Saint Julian”). That being said, we do almost certainly know two things about this mysterious figure. Julian of Norwich was likely the first woman to write a book in English that has survived to this day, and she was known as a spiritual leader in her time (“About Julian of Norwich”). Her contemporaries would come to the window in her anchorhold and seek her advice with some regularity.

Contextually, Julian lived in a terrifying time. The citizens of Norwich suffered from plague, poverty, and famine, all of which Julian would have witnessed on a daily basis. The Black Death had its first outbreak when Julian was six years old, killing fifty percent of the population by the time she turned seven. It returned in 1361, 1374, and thereafter with alarming regularity during her lifetime

(James). The Hundred Years' War began in 1337, just five years before her birth, as did the Papal Schism ("Saint Julian of Norwich"). She lived in a time of Catholicism, before the Reformation, but a Catholicism that was greatly divided. In 1381 there was a great Peasant Revolt caused in part by famine and cattle disease. Though she witnessed all of these horrors, Julian maintained a belief in a God whose compassionate love is always given to us and maintained her faith through a life of uninterrupted extreme asceticism.

Julian of Norwich: *Revelations of Divine Love*, Analysis

Revelations of Divine Love comes to us in two versions. The first, the Short Text, was written by Julian of Norwich directly after she received fifteen visions from God on May 13, 1373, that restored her physical health and saved her life. The second, the Long Text, was written nearly twenty years later and is greatly expanded to include her meditations and commentaries on the visions (McGinn, pg. 238).

Though not clearly stated in her writing, it is clear to the critical reader that Julian of Norwich had some difficulty reconciling the gender of her Lord and Savior with her personal journey. Though God is an a-gender being, Jesus was a flesh and blood man—a notion that sometimes creates difficulty for Christian women mystics. Julian of Norwich addresses this difficulty by means of metaphor, Jesus as Mother. Here, however, it is already clear that she is using her experiences as a woman to understand the Christian God.

"It lasts and will last for ever because God loves it; and everything exists in the same way by the love of God.' In this little thing I saw three properties: the first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, and the third is that God cares for it" (McGinn, page 242).

The God she is describing here is quite similar to a mother. He creates, and then loves and cares for those creations. This is the life of a woman in the 14th century. While Julian herself likely never had children (she entered the monastic life at a young age and almost definitely never had intercourse),

this experience is a relatively universal one that helps make her almost ineffable mystical experiences more accessible to others. Each and every person in the world has a mother and therefore can understand motherly obligation and love, even if they have not experienced this feeling first-hand.

Though God has motherly qualities, Julian's main metaphor concerns Jesus and his motherly love. This metaphor springs from Julian's difficulty in understanding the application of male figures to her own spiritual journey.

“...Our great father, God almighty, who is Being, knew and loved us from before the beginning of time. And from this knowledge, in his marvelously deep love and through the eternal foreseeing counsel of the whole blessed Trinity, he wanted the second person to become our mother, our brother, our savior” (McGinn, page 243).

Here again we see the theme of love. God loves us as both our mother and our father. In this instance, the love Julian speaks of is the love of God. If God is the first segment of the Trinity to come into being, as is implied in this quote, then he creates Jesus as a motherly figure, to take on that complimentary role. Jesus is not only our savior in the eyes of Julian, as is so commonly said, but also our brother and our mother, loving humankind as only Jesus can in his physical form.

In her analysis of her visions, Julian speaks of each member of the Trinity has having unique characteristics, while subsequently blurring the line between God and Jesus. In this way she both unites and divides the Trinity. The theme of love, however, serves as a consistent unifier throughout her discussion of motherhood.

“I understood three ways of seeing motherhood in God: the first is that he is the ground of our natural creation, the second is the taking on of our nature (and there the motherhood of grace begins), the third is the motherhood of works, and in this there is, by the same grace, an enlargement of length and breadth and of height and deepens without end, and all is his own love” (McGinn, page 243).

This quote clearly conveys the way Julian uses the metaphor of motherhood as a tool for the reconciliation of her gender and faith and understanding of divine love. God's love is so deep and ineffable that metaphor is the only viable means with which to attempt to convey it. A mother's love,

while not quite so difficult to explain, is almost comparable to that love of God that Julian, as a mystic, probably felt quite deeply. This experience is impossible to explain to the average reader, but each of us has experienced motherly love; whether from our own mothers or with the birth of our children. Therefore, this comparison between motherly love and divine love serves to explain the impossible by drawing connections between something we all understand on some level, and something that none of us can ever hope to truly understand. This comparison is even more useful to her female readers-- though she likely would not have had many of these in the time in which she lived, her metaphor has become increasingly relatable to the modern female audience.

Julian goes on to describe Jesus and his love in light of womanhood in several ways. She explains the holy sacrament of the Eucharist as Jesus's need "to feed us, for a mother's dear love has made him our debtor" (McGinn, pg. 244). While a mother can provide her breast milk for her baby, Jesus can provide us only with his body, so that he does. She says "to the nature of motherhood belong tender love, wisdom, and knowledge" (McGinn, pg. 245), further paralleling the qualities of a woman with the qualities of Jesus and, therefore, reconciling her inability to relate with the divine male figures of traditional Christianity.

Yona Wallach: *Tefilin (Phylacteries)*, Analysis

In looking at and analyzing Yona Wallach's poetry, it is important to remember that these poems were originally written in Hebrew-- a language far more nuanced than English. Wallach frequently criticized and took advantage of the gendering of words in the Hebrew language, and, as these facets of her work have literally been lost in translation, we must acknowledge that any analysis of her work done in English is limited (Mills). In 1983, Linda Zisquit published *Wild Light*, a collection of Wallach's poems translated to English. It is from this publication that I draw the translation referenced in this analysis.

Perhaps Wallach's most famous work and definitely her most controversial, *Tefilin* was published just three years before her death. In this piece, Wallach makes use of the religious rituals of Judaism in which she is culturally and spiritually embedded to express the difficulty of reconciling her gender and her faith in order to carve out a personal path to God. She challenged the norms of gender and sexuality in the society in which she lived all through the lens of a deeply religious Jew who felt a personal connection with God.

Judaism, and specifically Kabbalah, provide several obstacles to the female mystic. First, Jews believe in a God that is far less present than the God of Christianity. The Jewish God has not spoken directly to the people since the time of the prophets, so, to the Jewish mystic, He may appear inaccessible. Many Kabbalists move past this difficulty by close reading of scripture in the original Hebrew. While this is an option for the female mystic, other obstacles still present themselves. In Orthodox Judaism (and other sects), many of the rituals that are meant to provide direct access to God are reserved solely for men. This includes the wrapping of the tefilin. Finally, the female kabbalists may struggle with the identification of God as male. How is one to become one with God if your most basic anatomy and predispositions do not align? Though Kabbalah does speak of the Shekinah, providing a more direct path for some female mystics, others, like Wallach, still struggle.

In *Tefilin*, Wallach reconciles her gender with her faith through the use of eroticism and theatrical ritual and performance. There is no doubt that Wallach is pushing the boundaries in this piece-- in addition to reconciling her faith, she is using her voice as a reaction to the "limited and predominantly negative representation of women in Israeli literature, the exclusion and problematic inclusion of women writers in Hebrew literary history, and the woman's voice in repose to this exclusion" (Tsoffar). Two of Wallach's least controversial lines, though two are the most subversive,

read, “I shall put on phylacteries/ I shall pray/”. In Judaism, these phylacteries are reserved only for men. So, by taking them up, even for their intended purpose, Wallach is subverting a gender norm of Judaism. Wallach continues, “You shall put also the phylacteries for me/ Encircle them on my hand/ Play them with me/”. Here, Wallach pushes the boundaries even further by implying another individual present in this intimate moment. Usually, the putting on of phylacteries is an individual activity and an intimate moment with God and scripture. Here, however, Wallach has taken this religiously intimate moment and opened it up to include others, perhaps mirroring her desire for the inclusion of women in more ritual.

A few lines later, Wallach writes, “Do things to me/ Against my will/”. Here, she comments on how frequently women occupy the space of a sexual object, or an object in general, that is not capable of fully comprehending the power of religion as a man would. This is seen several additional times throughout the poem, with lines such as “Turn me on my stomach/ And put the phylacteries in my mouth like reins/ Ride me, I am a mare/”. Rather than read these lines as pornography, I find it clear that Wallach is commenting on the way in which women are viewed in her society. Are women not good for anything more than being a sexual object for men? Can women not participate fully and comprehend that which men do? This meaning becomes even clearer in light of the photographs taken in conjunction with the poem but not released until after her death. In these photographs, the male figure is nude while the female remains fully clothed. The male wears the tefilin and the female, Yona herself, stands or sits in the clearly more powerful position.

“Pass them over my clitoris/ tie my hips with them/ So that I shall climax quickly/”. Towards the end of the poem, Yona writes, “I shall pass them slowly over your body/ Slow, slow, slow/ Around your neck I shall pass them/ I shall encircle your neck several times by them, on one

side/ And on the other side I shall tie them to something stable/ Especially something very heavy
maybe which can turn/ I shall pull and pull/ Until your soul departs/". Dan writes,

“Here the subject is religious ritual, which in Judaism is expressed by the phylacteries that men, when praying, tie themselves with. The instrument that should be used as a means for approaching God is transformed into an instrument of torture in a sadomasochistic erotic game, which culminates in the orgasm reached by the woman and the suffocation of the male figure by the phylacteries. The instrument of prayer is thus used to reach supreme pleasure as well as death” (Dan, pg. 268).

I disagree with Dan on both fronts (supreme pleasure and death). In the context of Wallach’s life, it is easy to write these lines off as the poetry of a mad woman. It is more difficult, however, to push past this first impression and see the intended metaphor. Here, the clitoris represents extreme ecstasy and womanhood. Wallach is suggesting that women should have equal access to God by presenting an alternative use for a religious object reserved for men to reach a comparable religious ecstasy. Furthermore, she is not literally using the phylacteries to suffocate the life out of a physical man, but using the phylacteries to subvert the role of men in religious ritual and “suffocate” their dominance.

The last four lines of *Tefilin* read, “Until I suffocate you/ Completely by the phylacteries/
Which are stretched across between the stage/ And the shocked audience.” These lines are without a doubt instrumental to understanding the meaning and context of the entire poem. The actions described before this point are *performative* (Tsoffar). The ritualistic and sexual acts described are included as theatrical ritual. Wallach’s work as a whole is focused on the reaction of the reader(s). “This reaction is just as much a part of the poem as the words themselves” (Mills). This insight not only explains the controversial and provocative language, but also interestingly parallels the relationship of God to humans in Kabbalah. God needs humans to survive, as the poem needs a reader and their reaction to actualize its full potential.

A Comparison of Wallach and Julian of Norwich

Though Julian of Norwich and Yona Wallach may seem dissimilar in every possible way, the connection between their motivation for writing cannot be ignored. Wallach was described as a “prominent feminist” throughout her life and after her passing. I would like to assert here that those same words apply to Julian of Norwich, at least in the context of her *Revelations of Divine Love*. Though it may seem like a stretch to called a woman in the 1300s a “feminist,” it is clear that Julian was looking past the gender norms of her time and pushing for an understanding of her religion that was accessible and relatable to all genders.

Wallach conveys a similar message in her poetry. She clearly weaves the swapping of traditional gender roles into her poetry, which, as a woman in the 1900s, has a very different context than the swapping of roles in *Revelations of Divine Love*. In the context of the 1960s, Wallach’s gender swapping can either be interpreted as a clearly feminist stance, or her own personal tendency and desire to identify as something other than binary (Mills).

In many ways, Wallach had more freedom in her writing than Julian of Norwich. While Julian of Norwich’s mysticism was focused on creating a more accessible form of Christianity for women, Wallach’s poetry works towards the same goal while simultaneously being concerned with how women can occupy the space of sexual objects and how this comparison can relate to her religion. Both women were revolutionary for their time. Julian of Norwich’s metaphor shook the world around her and set the stage for many more mystics to come. The blurring of the line between masculine and feminine divine power was not something commonly done in Christianity, and the publishing of this work in English was even more uncommon. Wallach’s discussion of female sexuality without metaphor and flowery language was a bold move, even for her time. Though the sexual revolution

was at its beginnings when Wallach was writing, the backlash Wallach received for her work was startling. Wallach lost many friends and much popular support after the publishing of *Tefilin*.

There are two interesting points to take away from the comparison of the writings of Julian of Norwich and of Yona Wallach. First, these two women living in such different cultural and religious contexts felt the same desire and need for accessibility that was lacking. First, Julian of Norwich struggled with the reconciliation of her gender and religion in a context that was heavily androcentric. Nearly 600 years later in a different religious tradition in a different region of the world, Wallach found the same issue. This commonality stretched between the centuries, geography, and ideology, is shocking. Finally, the ways in which these two pieces were received gives light to the cultural and ideological shifts, of lack thereof, in this time period between these two authors. Though Julian of Norwich presented a revolutionary idea in her *Revelations of Divine Love*, she was not viewed as a heretic in the eyes of the Church, and, in fact, laid the groundwork for many more mystics and devout Christian scholars to come. Conversely, Yona Wallach presented an idea that was not truly revolutionary for her time—it was not yet commonplace in religion, but she was far from the first person to present the idea that women should have equal access to God—and she was heavily persecuted because of it. The point, you might say, is that little has changed. Reading Julian of Norwich now, as a modern woman, I, at least, would have expected her to have been heavily persecuted following the publishing of *Revelations of Divine Love*. Similarly, I would not have expected any backlash to Yona Wallach's piece, especially taken in conjunction with the photos that were published posthumously. From a close reading of these two pieces in conjunction it is clearly evident that the role of women in religion has changed less throughout the centuries than a modern woman might suppose. The problems of our female Abrahamic mystics have changed relatively little, though women

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like Julian of Norwich and Yona Wallach have provided avenues through which union with God can be more readily attained by the female practitioner.

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