

VINCENT GILLESPIE

Vincent Anthony Gillespie

11 February 1954 – 13 March 2025

elected Fellow of the British Academy 2013

by

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Summary. Vincent Gillespie was a distinguished scholar of medieval English religious writing, especially in its pastoral uses and its contemplative traditions. He pursued the codicological study of such works in their manuscript formats, including a catalogue of a Birgittine library. He combined that with the literary study of their rhetorical forms, as well as study of Chaucer's poetics and his intellectual background. Gillespie was also a distinguished teacher and was renowned for his cultivation of the academic community, in Oxford, the UK and beyond. In that work with people, he embodied many virtues expressed in the texts he studied.

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Valerio

Liyf contemplatif is fair and medefulle and therefore thou schalte ai have it in thi mynde and in thy desire. But thou schalt have in usynge liyf actif, for it is so needful and so speedfulle. . . . Leve of lighteli thi devocioun, whethir it be in praier or in meditacioun, and goo doo thi dette and thi service to thyne evene-Cristene as redili as oure Lord himsilf badde thee doo so. And suffre mekeli for his love withouten grucching (if thou may doo) bothe withoute disese and trobelynge of thin herte bicause of medelynge of siche bisynesse.

This was the advice of the 14th-century contemplative, Walter Hilton, in his *Epistle on the Mixed Life*.¹ He was a northerner of a practical bent who, while devout and learned, nonetheless served as administrator and as canon, with duties of pastoral care. He wrote these words to a man who dreamed of leaving the active life for monastic retreat. Hilton urged him instead to a third path, the ‘medelid’ life. This did not mean *meddling*; we might better gloss it as *middled* or *mixed*, mixing contemplation of the divine into action, and serving God in the middle of the muddle of the world. This is the ‘medelid’ life, Hilton wrote, of clergy, who ‘have cure’ or, to translate, who *have care* in teaching, guiding and leading others:

have cure and sovereynte over othere men for to teche and for to rule hem, bothe here bodies and principali heer soules, in fulfillynge of the deedes of merci, bodili and goostli. Unto thise men it longeth sumtyme [to] usen the werkes of merci in actif lif, in help and sustenaunce of hemsilf and of here suggettis, and of othere also; and sumtyme for to leven al manere bisynesse outeward and yeve hem unto preieres and meditations, redynge of hooli writ, and to othere goostli occupacions, aftir that thei feele hemsilf disposed.²

Hilton drew a proleptic picture of Vincent Gillespie as a scholar and colleague. He was a great expositor of the contemplatives such as Hilton. And beyond his own research and contemplative life, he served in the meddled or mixed life of teaching and leading in academia. He made the ‘needful and so speedfulle’ business into a ‘medefulle’ one, full of reward.

Gillespie wrote of the ‘humane tolerance’ of Hilton’s *Epistle on the Mixed Life*,³ and from editing the *Registrum* or catalogue of the books of the brethren of Syon, he was able to reconstruct two copies of it held there, among the few books in English, one

¹ Walter Hilton, *Epistle on the Mixed Life*, in Barry Windeatt (ed.), *English Mystics of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 108–30 at 119.

² Hilton, *Epistle*, 113–14.

³ Vincent Gillespie, ‘Idols and Images: Pastoral Adaptations of *The Scale of Perfection*’, first published in 1990 and reprinted and updated in his *Looking in Holy Books: Essays on Late Medieval Religious Writing in England* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 49–78 at 51. Future references to this essay collection are abbreviated as *Looking*.

perhaps a twin of a book circulating among pious laymen in London's governing elite.⁴ At other times, again the conjunction of active and contemplative lives caught Gillespie's eye: on 20 June 2003 in the British Library, he transcribed a short prose work on four things needful to win the bliss of heaven: to 'here the worde of god', to 'understonde' it, to 'worke thereafter' and to 'continuie in good werkis'.⁵ These points could sum up his own combination of carefully hearing the words of religious writing—listening being how he described his ruminative reading of Julian of Norwich—and of good works to the end.

I

Gillespie's scholarly work and working ethos seemed always deeply informed by his generous faith. He grew up in the roman catholic tradition in Liverpool; his brother became a priest. His background was working-class, his father a driver for the post-office. He later had to pay for his father's first car, because he, as a student, had a bank account, and his father still did not.⁶ Like many talented young people in mid-century Britain, he benefited from the educational chances of the post-war welfare state. After the eleven-plus examination, he went to a direct-grant grammar school, St Edward's College, Liverpool, where the Christian Brothers set the ethos. A younger contemporary there, Professor John Kerrigan FBA, reports that they 'lived in a residence next to the school and were seen around the place in their cassocks teaching and maintaining discipline in the time-honoured way with the leather strap'.⁷ The school had impressive academic results for its students from a mixture of social backgrounds, and a large number of students went to universities, including Oxford, and many were inspired by impressive English teachers, Ray Thomas and 'Jock' Stewart, who taught not by rote but by debate: 'This was an Oxford tutorial in the making', Kerrigan recalls.⁸ (Other alumni who became academics in English studies include Dennis Kay and Michael O'Neill.) Among his other passions was music. As a teenager, he played double bass in the Merseyside Youth Orchestra (now the Liverpool Philharmonic Youth Orchestra), where he overlapped with (the future Sir) Simon Rattle, the distinguished conductor, who later

⁴ Vincent Gillespie, 'Walter Hilton at Syon Abbey', in James Hogg (ed.), *'Stand up to Godwards': Essays in Mystical and Monastic Theology in Honour of the Reverend John Clark on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Analecta Cartusiana, 204; Salzburg, 2002), pp. 9–61 at 43–5.

⁵ Vincent Gillespie, notes on London, British Library, MS Harley 4102, f. 73r, in a folder of Gillespie's notes on manuscripts, kindly provided to me by Margaret Gillespie.

⁶ With thanks to Margaret Gillespie for these details.

⁷ John Kerrigan, personal communication, 6 November 2025.

⁸ John Kerrigan, personal communication, 6 November 2025.

spent a year studying English at Gillespie's then college, St Anne's, where he became an Honorary Fellow.⁹ His knowledge of music remained lifelong and was, in a different sense of the word, catholic, embracing, for instance, the two great Leonards, Bernstein and Cohen.¹⁰

Gillespie applied to Keble College, Oxford, where English was then taught by Stephen Wall and Malcolm Parkes FBA. Gillespie recounted his admissions interview and some undergraduate experiences, from 1972 to 1975, in his vivid memoir of Parkes, a masterpiece of potted biography of a quirky and ingenious medievalist.¹¹ A friend, Martin Jackson, recalls that Gillespie had been 'dazzled by all that Oxford had to offer' and once summed up his education as 'expensive to provide, but priceless to receive'.¹² He told many anecdotes of his time: stretching his meagre funds from week to week; making ends meet by being paid to play in a skiffle band; more classical music; meeting W.H. Auden, then professor of poetry, at a tea-party for keen students; performing Shakespeare, with Parkes as bit-part.

As a second-year undergraduate he met his future wife, Peggy. A fellow student from Liverpool noted the relatively few women to meet in the imbalanced Oxford of the 1970s. But he knew a woman from near Rickmansworth and so invited her and her friends to a party. Here Vincent and Peggy met, and a little later became a couple. Peggy went to university in Liverpool, while Vincent studied in Oxford, with long and expensive train journeys required at first. But then began a relationship that lasted fifty years.¹³ Eventually came two sons, Thomas and Edward, and grandchildren, of whom he was greatly proud.

From his BA, Vincent graduated with a First and launched into a DPhil supervised by Douglas Gray FBA, who had already taught him for an undergraduate special paper on romance—not a genre that Gillespie much concerned himself with later. By his own account, Gray's direction was gently inspiring but light-touch, as was typical of doctoral supervision in the 20th century.¹⁴ It is evident from Gillespie's published recollections

⁹ Sholto Byrnes, 'Simon Rattle: Marching to a revolutionary beat', *The Independent*, 4 August 2006, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/simon-rattle-marching-to-a-revolutionary-beat-410417.html> [consulted 30 July 2026].

¹⁰ Reported in contributions by Raphaela Rohrhofer and Annie Sutherland to 'A Tribute to Vincent Gillespie', *The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 52 (2026), 131–4 at 133, 134–7 at 134, both also shared at a seminar in memory of Gillespie at the Faculty of English, Oxford, 28 October 2025.

¹¹ Vincent Gillespie, 'Malcolm Beckwith Parkes, 1930–2013', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 17 (2018), 71–87.

¹² Martin Jackson, 'In Memoriam: Professor Vincent Gillespie (1954–2025)', on the website of *St Anne's College*, <https://www.st-annes.ox.ac.uk/in-memoriam-professor-vincent-gillespie-1954-2025/>, published 17 March 2025 [consulted 30 July 2026]. I am grateful to Mr Jackson for sending me a copy of his text.

¹³ With thanks to Margaret Gillespie for these details.

¹⁴ Vincent Gillespie, Helen Barr, Jane Bliss & Janet M. Wilson, 'Douglas Gray, 1930–2017', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 22 (2025), 213–32 at 229–30.

and was ever felt from his conversation that Parkes was something of an unofficial supervisor and certainly a constant inspiration. Parkes was part of the constellation of medievalists who glittered in the gloom of Duke Humfrey's (N.R. Ker FBA, R.W. Hunt FBA, Beryl Smalley FBA and more). Parkes hosted visitors from afar—Gillespie remembered as an undergraduate an overlength tutorial stopped only by the arrival of Leonard Boyle, prefect of the Vatican Library. And other keen students were working with Parkes in the 1970s, such as the manuscript scholars Jeremy Griffiths and P. (Pam) R. Robinson and literary scholars A. (Alastair) J. Minnis and Ian Johnson. Around this time, Parkes himself published seminal papers on *compilatio* and *ordinatio* and on Chaucer's manuscripts. As Ralph Hanna has noted, in a valuable overview of Gillespie's work, two important strands of his interests emerged clearly from this network combining literary and palaeographical concerns.¹⁵ (This intellectual inheritance in his research is explored below.)

He submitted his doctorate in 1981 and was examined by Derek Pearsall and Anne Hudson FBA—who, he recalled, typically grilled him on details of his Latin. In 1977, his doctorate still underway, Gillespie had been appointed to a lectureship at the University of Reading, itself then host to excellent medievalists, as were many of the great 'redbrick' universities, until administrators dismantled their academic edifices brick by brick. Then in autumn 1979, St Anne's College in Oxford, recently co-educational, advertised a tutorial fellowship in English. Gillespie liked to recount how his trousers had split open on the train, and he had stitched them back together in a public toilet before the interview and the then-standard (and gladly no longer so) formal dinner, at which the Fellows could size him up.¹⁶ He was appointed and took up the post in spring 1980. In 2004, his achievements in research were ever-growing and his skills in leadership evident. The Tolkien Professorship in English Literature and Language, that is, in late medieval English studies, fell empty, when Paul Strohm moved to Columbia. Gillespie was appointed, successor but one to his own doctoral supervisor, the inaugural Tolkien Professor, Douglas Gray, and with that post moved to become a Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 2013.

He had 'cure ... for to teche', as Hilton put it, over four decades and a half in these posts. His years at St Anne's College and Lady Margaret Hall were sometimes, in both his telling and others', legendary times. At St Anne's, as a college tutor does, he covered everything from the hymn of the cowherd Caedmon, prodded into speech by abbess

¹⁵ Ralph Hanna, 'Vincent Gillespie', in Laura Ashe & Ralph Hanna (eds), *Medieval and Early Modern Religious Cultures: Essays Honouring Vincent Gillespie on his Fifty-Sixth Birthday* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2019), pp. 261–5 at 262–3. Future references to this collection are abbreviated as *Essays Honouring*.

¹⁶ This story is also told in the obituary by Jackson (n. 12 above). B.A. Windeatt, 'Assumptions: The Virgin's Ends in Medieval English Culture', in *Essays Honouring*, pp. 101–23 at 101, recounts the dinner and meeting Gillespie at this interview.

St Hilda in the 7th century, to the silences of Harold Pinter's surly characters in the 20th. (This led to a surprising side-line, publishing on Pinter.) St Anne's had a set of dedicated and characterful undergraduate tutors, such as Patricia Ingham and Ann Pasternak Slater, and had more students of English than others in Oxford, including many illustrious alumnae and alumni, with whom Gillespie maintained fond links. One former student, Adam Jones, recalls his tutorial with Gillespie interrupted by a telephone call from the alumna, journalist and novelist Zoë Heller, ringing from New York.¹⁷ Former students write with affection of his own daunting knowledge, astonishingly wide in range, balanced by his ability to coax them to speak and to find the emotional connection with writing from long ago.¹⁸

Then and especially as Tolkien Professor at Lady Margaret Hall he accrued a retinue of Master's students and enough doctoral students to swell a new monastic foundation—over three dozen, about the number that Syon started with.¹⁹ Among the first were Nicholas Watson, newly arrived from Cambridge for a Master's degree, and Denis Renevey, Vincent's second doctoral student, followed by many more now distinguished in medieval literary studies. Former students attest to lifelong returns and friendship, when visiting Oxford or crossing paths at conference, to exchange ideas about shared passions.²⁰ When they wished, Vincent was adept at edging former students into positions like an ecclesiastical chess-player in Chichele's church.

As professor he presided with genius and geniality over the near liturgical cycle of graduate seminars, book launches and colloquia in the large community of medievalists across the Faculty of English. He loved it when the seminar room was overfull, despite health-and-safety, and the atmosphere overexcited. He always knew more than the speaker, but he also knew what to say to show their words in the best light. He would begin his comment with a courteous 'Of course, we know . . .', as he gently implied that the speaker already knew what they probably did not. It was the medieval fraternal art of

¹⁷ Adam Jones, personal communication, 27 October 2025.

¹⁸ E.g., Robin Allender, 'A Hawk in a Hall', on his blog *Doubting Castle*, <https://robinallender.substack.com/p/a-hawk-in-a-hall>, published 31 July 2025 [consulted 30 July 2026]; Raphaela Rohrhofer, 'In Memoriam Vincent Gillespie – A Heartfelt Farewell', memorial for the University of St Andrews (where Gillespie was an Honorary Professor), circulated by personal communication, 31 March 2025.

¹⁹ Vincent Gillespie with Ian Doyle (eds), *Syon Abbey, with the Libraries of the Carthusians* (Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues, 9; London: British Library, 2001), xxxi: thirty-six clergy and three lay brethren, despite plans for more.

²⁰ Reported in contributions by Denis Renevey and Nicholas Watson to 'A Tribute to Vincent Gillespie', *The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 52 (2026), 127–31 at 129, 137–40 at 138, both also shared at a seminar in memory of Gillespie at the Faculty of English, Oxford, 28 October 2025, and from a recorded video reminiscence recorded for a seminar on the occasion of Gillespie's retirement on 21 June 2021 by Bronte Adams AM, Gillespie's first doctoral student, latterly chair of the Australian Press Council, <https://presscouncil.org.au/members/dr-bronte-adams-am-chair-australian-press-council-gaiced> [consulted 30 July 2026].

correctio or correction, both firm ‘cure’ and fatherly ‘care’. And despite being the most senior in the seminar room, he worked the room, pouring the Faculty’s standard-issue white wine (Ghost Ridge, the *appellation préférée*, grimly warmed by the central heating), as a way to talk to everybody in turn. He was playfully self-deprecating and, for all his reverence for what good institutions could do, and despite his faith, he had an irreverent sense of humour. His terrible ‘Christmas hats’ for the end-of-term seminars in December—a reindeer, a turkey—were the stuff of student legend. Raphaëla Rohrhofer recalls him preaching in his college chapel at Lady Margaret Hall, when he compared the catholic church to women’s undergarments, ‘for uplift, comfort and support’.²¹

In all his teaching he had, like Hilton’s householder, care for the students as people—*cura animarum*. I recall it most poignantly in spring 2019, when a Master’s student suffered a terrible disease and passed away during the course. Vincent was practical in helping this young person, who was determined to remain active in our academic community until her untimely death; and later he offered Boethian consolation to the other grieving classmates, all of us in tears at this young person’s funeral. More happily, I was lucky enough to listen to, and learn from, his last undergraduate class in the year before his retirement. Between lockdowns in October 2020, he persuaded the Bodleian to unlock the biggest medieval English book, the treasured ‘Vernon’ manuscript (MS Eng. poet. a. 1). It weighs as much as a badger, he told us, as he hauled it open. (I wondered how he knew that.) Touchingly, he reminisced on his own student times, poring over it under the tutelage of Malcolm Parkes, and he nudged these new acolytes to appreciate its awesomeness. It was a book to be read aloud, he said, to teach a religious household, and in that moment he continued the medieval reader’s teaching.

He could also ‘rule’, as Walter Hilton pressed, or ‘lead’, as administrators call it. He himself took Hilton’s advice to live a mixed life and, like Hilton, he taught others to practise their care for people through busy-ness. Despite the hard work it entailed, he evidently relished building teams of people and the protocols and institutions to cherish them. I always imagined that his study of the 14th- and 15th-century church in England—the establishment of Syon, the steadying of the ship under Archbishop Chichele—informed his passion for building things that might last. He sensed the good work that could be done by the institutions of education, culture and religion which had nurtured him, if only their values were protected from the self-serving or careless. As a result, he had a great sense of academic duties and never shirked from shouldering roles.

This led him to take up duties far beyond his academic parish. For many years he enjoyed travelling as external examiner and committee member, not least to the University of the West Indies (1986–91), as well as in less sun-kissed places across England, Scotland and Ireland. He served on innumerable national committees (the

²¹ Rohrhofer, ‘A Tribute’, 133.

Council for College and University English, 1994–2007; the Quality Assurance Agency for English, 1997, 1999). He was series editor for Exeter Medieval Texts, overseeing its safe evacuation to Liverpool University Press, and among his longest commitments were one decade as Secretary of the Early English Text Society and another as its Honorary Director, in which offices he secured that ancient society's running for the future.²² He hosted a number of influential conferences in Oxford, such as *Editing Medieval Texts* (May 2010), under the aegis of the Early English Text Society, as well as *After Arundel* (April 2009) and *After Chichele* (June 2017). *After Arundel* was a response to a provocative paper by his former student, Nicholas Watson, and its proceedings have had a huge influence on the study of 15th-century writing.²³

In his colleges, he was a devoted Fellow and at St Anne's served as Dean in the early 1980s and as Vice-Principal in the early 2000s. He was involved in projects of refurbishment and extensions, including the extension of the library.²⁴ He spoke with particular pride of work on that college's project for a new conference centre, the Ruth Deech Building, in which he was proud in later years to host those many conferences such as *After Arundel*. He was reportedly a force of nature in meetings of each College's Governing Body (that is, the Fellows in their capacity as trustees), able to deflect a blow to good practice or raise a sceptical eyebrow to incompetence.²⁵ I have seen him forceful in arguing a case in committees. He also, though, shrewdly knew how to stand aside 'when you know the room is against you', though this too could be a tactic.

Across Oxford, he served on innumerable committees in the Faculty of English, Division of Humanities and University. As well as a stint as Chair of the Faculty Board, one of his largest tasks was co-ordinating the 2013 submission for the Research Excellence Framework. This task alone, I sensed, he found uncongenial, due to the unrealistic expectations of the administrators and the way that the process was often anti-intellectual in its demands and measurements. He found his many appointment panels more congenial. He delighted in academic news and, like Chaucer's friar, he knew the tenure-track in every town and could be witty, mischievously so, on this. (One appointee elsewhere, with little research to show, had 'risen without trace'; another who noisily trumpeted their excellence was, like a famous department store, 'never knowingly under-sold'.) He spoke with care about the importance of choosing colleagues who would

²² I thank Margaret Gillespie for a copy of Vincent Gillespie's CV which clarified various details and dates in this and subsequent paragraphs.

²³ Vincent Gillespie & Kantik Ghosh (eds), *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011). See also the proceedings of the conference on editing, Vincent Gillespie & Anne Hudson (eds), *Probable Truth: Editing Medieval Texts from Britain in the Twenty-First Century* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

²⁴ Jackson, 'In Memoriam'.

²⁵ Jackson, 'In Memoriam'.

contribute both intellectually and practically to the Faculty and to the health of the subject nationally. He was enthusiastic about candidates with intellectual integrity—indeed, about all scholars who did things their own way: this was a *sine qua non*. He also sought people who would not be ‘just a show-pony’. Those strictures could sum up himself. Appointments, he knew, could influence an institution for a long time.

Related was his astounding effort in fundraising for graduate scholarships and academic posts to bring in people and support them. He negotiated large endowments to the Faculty of English in Oxford—around nine million pounds all told. His long friendship with the family of his fellow graduate student, the brilliant and quixotic Jeremy Griffiths (1955–97), who had died tragically young, led to the endowment of a Master’s scholarship and eventually a fully endowed professorship in Griffiths’s memory.²⁶ He helped the late Anne Hudson to endow doctoral scholarships.²⁷ And he worked with the Griffiths family again and the Tolkien family to re-endow his own chair, the Tolkien Professorship, for his successors. The energy, personal warmth (being ‘relational’, a psychologist would say) and long-term tenacity are things that academics could learn from him, if they worked harder to support their fields.

At the Faculty of English, he was a constant presence in his office, his door open, polyphony pouring out from his computer—especially Thomas Tallis, a figure of interesting confessional affiliations. He modelled how personal presence—present-ness but also personal gravitas—makes academia work. His high standards could make him a demanding colleague. ‘Let’s get things moving on that’, he’d say, and his disappointment was evident, if one failed to fulfil. But he was also a great mentor to colleagues, across subjects and specialisms. One of his preferred modes of operating was the encouraging or the persuasive lunch: a trip to somewhere elegant in north Oxford, Gee’s or the Cherwell Boathouse, a slightly naughty glass of Picpoul de Pinet—always that wine—and then the warm reassurance, and also the question how you would stand on such-and-such policy decision, or the flattering hint that ‘you would be perfect’ for this or that promotion or duty, or reminder that something needed attention.²⁸ A 15th-century bishop, welcoming officials to his table, for wine and politique, could not have done it better.

He recognised that academia—like the monastic communities he studied—thrives through informal friendship and formal office-holding; that the garden needs tending;

²⁶ Vincent Gillespie, ‘Jeremy Griffiths’, in A.S.G. Edwards, Vincent Gillespie & Ralph Hanna (eds), *The English Medieval Book: Essays in Memory of Jeremy Griffiths* (London: British Library, 2000), pp. 1–7, related Griffiths’s work and their friendship.

²⁷ Faculty of English, University of Oxford, ‘Professor Anne Hudson’s legacy to fund graduate scholarships’, <https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/article/professor-anne-hudsons-legacy-to-fund-graduate-scholarships> [consulted 30 July 2026].

²⁸ Several colleagues, who should remain nameless, have reported these persuasive lunches.

and that an eye must be cast on the world without, if the mind is to be free to contemplate within.

II

Contemplate he did. At a colloquium in Gillespie's memory, a colleague Mishtooni Bose put it perfectly: 'For a person whose life had so much Martha-energy, so much of the active life, Vincent also indefatigably attended to the Mary-things too.'²⁹ For fifty years he was reading and researching widely, from manuscripts to modern drama, pursuing his passions. Even his 'publishing strategy' can seem Mary-ish, diffident and otherworldly, not of the kind that some mentors would encourage: not being strategic was itself a strategy of selflessness—the virtue so important to Christian contemplatives.³⁰ (One might compare Julian of Norwich whose work survives in fugitive states, mostly preserved by later devotees, unlike the ambitious Margery Kempe, buttonholing scribes.) Rather than worry about self-promotion or pretensions of 'placing' his work in the best 'venues', he wrote of what he loved, for editors whom he hoped to help, and in places helpful to people who loved what he loved. Many of his publications were services to friends. One of his newly graduated doctoral students, Samuel Fanous, was astonished to be asked to co-edit with him *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, a valuable introduction into academic publishing.³¹ And much of his work emerged in surprising places. (He told me in 2017 that he had only then, after four decades, published his first article submitted speculatively to a journal.)

Even in writing, he had a commitment to both the living and the dead, as in a religious community: this was the duty of honouring past scholars—not least in his common and characteristic advice for graduate students that they duly cite the work of former generations. This was his constant advice in seminars, and Raphaela Rohrhofer recalls it in doctoral supervisions: 'Having come from humble beginnings himself, he insisted that humility was the highest academic virtue. He urged his students not only to engage with contemporary scholarship but also to look back at least 150 years and to stand on the shoulders of giants. In doing so, he became one of them.'³² Gillespie articulated this similarly in a preface to his collected essays, and this is perhaps the only note of bitterness

²⁹ Mishtooni Bose, reminiscence written for a seminar in memory of Gillespie at the Faculty of English, Oxford, 28 October 2025, shared by personal communication.

³⁰ At a colloquium in memory of Gillespie *Venit, Vidit, Vincent*, at St Anne's College, Oxford, 24–5 July 2026, this was a widely shared observation.

³¹ Samuel Fanous, contribution to 'A Tribute to Vincent Gillespie', *The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 52 (2026), 123–5 at 124.

³² Rohrhofer, 'A Tribute', 131.

he struck in writing: a concern that in the rush to promote oneself, the respect for and service to a longer intellectual tradition is lost.³³ His essays are notable for their polyphony. English, Latin, French, Italian, in translation Arabic, all feature, from across a medieval millennium and its classical and Christian sources. There are also citings of more recent poets—most often poets—who lurk to offer telling expressions, encapsulations, a fresh way of saying something. Eliot or Auden or R.S. Thomas: they bridge the traditions of poetics and faith up to the present.³⁴

And then there is his own tonal play, unafraid of the crisp short sentence or the long analytical one or the jostling up of the two, each speaking its mind, like the crowd in *The House of Fame*. It is standard to note, too, his taste for punning titles—more of his irreverence: ‘Mystic’s Foot’, ‘Strange Images of Death’, ‘Postcards from the Edge’, ‘Never Look a Gift Horace in the Mouth’, ‘Dial M for Mystic’, ‘The Mole in the Vineyard’, ‘Chapter and Worse’, ‘[S]he Do the Police in Different Voices’, ‘Cooking the Books’, ‘Venus in Sackcloth’, with mischievous allusions to cinema or modern literature. Not for him three alliterating academic abstractions. Serious thinking can be playful, as he would later find Julian of Norwich’s writing to be (discussed below). He wrote once that he had ‘never found writing easy or comfortable’, and this is a surprise, for it is often delightful to read and, in the deep Tudor sense, ‘comfortable’ to the reader.³⁵

Through the patchwork of writings, though, strong threads stand out: ideas of poetry in the Middle Ages, especially for Chaucer and Skelton; the pastoral and instructional works of the post-Pecham English church; and the English contemplatives, notably Julian of Norwich.

His work on ideas of poetry is perhaps less prominent within his own repertoire and reputation, and less prominent in the crowded marketplace of comment and criticism on Chaucer in particular. As long ago as the early 1990s he was planning a monograph on Chaucer’s *The House of Fame*, his treatise on poetry. He never completed that—and one is tempted to interpret that as itself a playful Chaucerian homage to this unfinished poem about the fragility of literary history. But the poem evidently haunted him and he referred to it constantly.³⁶ This is fitting, as it is Chaucer’s rumination on literary inheritance and literary fame. Chaucer imagines a community, stretching from the past to the future, with

³³ Vincent Gillespie, ‘Preface’, in his *Looking*, pp. vii–xi at x.

³⁴ For these poets, see Vincent Gillespie, ‘Seek, Suffer, and Trust: “Ese” and “Disese” in Julian of Norwich’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 39 (2017), 129–58 at 158 (Eliot); Vincent Gillespie, ‘Authorship’, in Marion Turner (ed.), *A Handbook of Middle English Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), pp. 137–54 at 152 (Auden); Vincent Gillespie, ‘Preface’, in Samuel Fanous & Vincent Gillespie (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. ix–xiv at ix (Thomas).

³⁵ Gillespie, ‘’, in his *Looking*, p. vii.

³⁶ He discussed it extensively in his essay ‘Authorship’ (n. 34 above). Mishtooni Bose reports his plans for this book in conversation in the early 1990s.

writing as an act of communal service. Perhaps it chimed with Gillespie's vivid vision of the lived experience of learning and how it connects people. As well as shorter pieces on Chaucer's and Skelton's ideas of poetic vocation, he published a major account of ideas of poetry as studied from classical sources in late medieval Europe. His chapter on this in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* is book-length, a monograph in disguise. It remains the essential overview of the study of classical poetry from the *accessus ad auctores* and early schoolroom, through Horace's influence on interests in 'the audience's imaginative faculty',³⁷ to Dante, Mussato and their contemporaries, and ending with, of course, Chaucer's *The House of Fame*. It is a comprehensive symphony, but the prevailing theme is an interest in the effects of the text in the reader's time—a point brought out beautifully in Gillespie's espying the word *unde* or 'whence', so central to glossing and commentary: from there to here.³⁸ In a follow-up essay, '*Ethice Subponitur?* The Imaginative Syllogism and the Idea of the Poetic', he pursues these intellectual traditions further through the influence of Arabic philosophy. From these excavations, he uncovers the ideas which the thinkers of Chaucer's time inherited about what poetry could do. They resisted any simple sense that it could inculcate ideas, as rhetoric might; instead they felt, Gillespie shows, that poetry might move and stir to feel responses more deeply and *thereby* to ask what might be the right way to live: 'more about internal self-calibration than about external social policing', as he puts it.³⁹ It is judicious as an historical account of ideas in the period; it is also telling as a record of Gillespie's own sense that studying literature offers a transformative experience to the complete person, rather than any utilitarian gains.

Gillespie's research began, however, with a quite different tradition of verse: verse very much composed for use, in the pastoral work of the church. His doctoral thesis concerned the literary form of poems and other religious instruction for the laity. Ralph Hanna has given (as mentioned) the best account of this early research and its growth from the combination of both literary interests in the form, function and effect of poetry, as in work on Chaucer, and a study of manuscripts—the influence of Gray and of Parkes.⁴⁰ The combination of concerns is evident in Gillespie's first publication from this research, with the doctorate still not complete: '*Doctrina and Predicacio*', which was about the importance of teaching, and teaching through poetry, as part of the *cura animarum* of the

³⁷ Vincent Gillespie, 'From the twelfth century to c. 1450', in Alastair Minnis & Ian Johnson (eds), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume II, The Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 145–236 at 167.

³⁸ Gillespie, 'From the twelfth century to c. 1450', p. 152.

³⁹ Vincent Gillespie, '*Ethice Subponitur?* The Imaginative Syllogism and the Idea of the Poetic', in Philip Knox, Jonathon Morton & Daniel Reeve (eds), *Medieval Thought Experiments: Poetry, Hypothesis, and Experience in the European Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), pp. 297–327 at 321.

⁴⁰ Hanna, 'Vincent Gillespie' (n. 15 above).

14th-century Church.⁴¹ His interest in the mixed life of the churchmen who served the world emerged early in this and other essays.⁴²

That first piece has much about religious verse, on which Gray was the pre-eminent scholar; it has much also on the circulation of manuscripts of pastoral texts, their layout and its intellectual *ordinatio*. He discusses rubrics and tables and titles with the close formal attention one might bring to metre and imagery. This is Parkesian, in the vein of the teacher's recent '*Compilatio and Ordinatio*', that title echoed in Gillespie's '*Doctrina and Predicacio*'.⁴³ What is unique is to bring this analytical care to bear on such practical works as these poems of lay instruction. Sources for church history and book history here become objects of literary criticism. Some of these texts, notably *Speculum Christiani*, he noted in a postscript in 2011, had not been much studied since his early work: far from the crowded field of Chaucer studies, this was frontier criticism.⁴⁴

This early research built on wide and deep foundations in manuscript sources. One folder of manuscript notes—some dated and some datable from accompanying invoices for photography and microfilms—attests to the long hours in libraries in the late 1970s to about 1984, with a further burst of manuscript searching in 2003. He is in Trinity Hall and Trinity College and the University Library in Cambridge, off to Lambeth Palace and the British Library, or taking a quick collation of quires in Manchester. There are frequently added cross-references to 'Doyle', presumably A.I. Doyle FBA's invaluable PhD thesis, used to map these materials, and notes from other then-junior scholars, part of the sociability of work on manuscripts. (The palaeographers Doyle and Ralph Hanna were interlocutors and friends throughout Gillespie's life.) He most often takes down rubrics and transcribes short, interesting texts (some in ink, one hopes done from microfilm). Several works of religious verse and prose which Gillespie was commenting on in his early publications still had to be cited direct from manuscripts, as they had not yet been edited—again frontier criticism.⁴⁵

He also in his notes records often the layout or form of the words on the page—red paraphs, underlining, tables of contents. The interests of his early essays emerge from

⁴¹ Vincent Gillespie, '*Doctrina and Predicacio*: The Design and Function of some Pastoral Manuals', first published in 1980, reprinted and updated in his *Looking*, pp. 3–20.

⁴² E.g., also, on pastoral care in Carthusian books, see Vincent Gillespie, '*Cura pastoralis in deserto*', first published in 1987, reprinted and updated in his *Looking*, pp. 21–47.

⁴³ On this work, see Gillespie, 'Parkes', 81–2, and Daniel Wakelin, 'Parkes: *Hands, Movements and Minds before our Eyes*', in Colleen Curran & David Rundle (eds), *The Oxford Palaeographers* (Oxford: SSMLL, 2027), forthcoming.

⁴⁴ Gillespie, '*Doctrina and Predicacio*', p. 19.

⁴⁵ E.g., citations of *The Doctrine of the Heart* and *Speculum vitae* in Vincent Gillespie, '*Lukyng in Haly Bukes: Lectio in some Late Medieval Spiritual Miscellanies*', first published in 1984, reprinted and updated in his *Looking*, pp. 113–44 at 120–1, 126–7, 130, with postscript notes on their respective new editions.

this codicological mode of criticism, which Ralph Hanna highlighted.⁴⁶ His role as a pioneer in this blend of literary criticism and codicology is not always fully appreciated. His centrality to this tradition is evident, though, in his contributing the chapter on the ‘Vernacular Books of Religion’, for a landmark collection of essays on *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375–1475*, edited by his friend Jeremy Griffiths and former examiner, Derek Pearsall. He took over when Anne Hudson preferred to focus her chapter solely on Wycliffite books.⁴⁷ Gillespie’s work fitted well with the return to manuscripts in literary history in the 1980s which this volume exemplified: ‘books as *books*’, not merely as sources of texts to edit, under the influence of Pearsall’s ‘York school’. This work with manuscripts preceded and pre-empted the self-promoting ‘New Philology’ announced in 1990 and the wider ‘material turn’ in the humanities.⁴⁸ Gillespie’s essay was foundational in methods, setting a model in its attention to ‘booklet’ construction’ to explain how books do or don’t track taste and thought, and in its attention to layouts and *ordinatio*. Along with the work of Julia Boffey, this and Gillespie’s other early publications also set in train the obsession with miscellanies in Middle English manuscript studies—not always acknowledging it as their bibliographical and conceptual guide.⁴⁹ From here springs much later work on what would now be called ‘material texts’.

That essay was foundational in its topic too, bringing to climax much of his early work: how people took the learning of the cloister into the lay world, not least in the pragmatic acceptance of the vernacular.⁵⁰ He begins with K.B. McFarlane’s pithy telling: ‘the literate laity were taking the clergy’s words out of their mouths’. He had quoted the same line in his earliest publication, and the citations frame this focus of his research: on the way the Church enabled the laity to live Hilton’s mixed life, of devotion amid action.⁵¹

⁴⁶ See n. 15 above.

⁴⁷ Vincent Gillespie, ‘Vernacular books of religion’, first published in 1989, reprinted and updated in his *Looking*, pp. 145–73. The final note (172, n. 76) mentions the handover from Hudson, expanded on by Hanna, ‘Vincent Gillespie’, 263.

⁴⁸ Quoting Derek Pearsall’s ‘Introduction’, in Jeremy Griffiths & Derek Pearsall (eds), *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375–1475* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 1–10 at 1. Contrast the special issue on ‘The New Philology’ in *Speculum*, 65:1 (1990).

⁴⁹ For these focuses, see Gillespie, ‘Vernacular books’, e.g., 149, 159–62, 164–71. The trend for studying miscellanies emerges from Gillespie’s chapter and its obvious complement, Julia Boffey’s chapter, co-written with John J. Thompson, which precedes it in the 1989 volume, on predominantly secular books (but including, e.g., Walter Hilton’s work): ‘Anthologies and miscellanies: production and choice of texts’, in Jeremy Griffiths & Derek Pearsall (eds), *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375–1475* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 279–316. Hanna, ‘Vincent Gillespie’, 263, noted Gillespie’s rueful sense that founding texts sometimes suffer Oedipal forgetting.

⁵⁰ Gillespie, ‘Vernacular books’, 146–8.

⁵¹ Gillespie, ‘Vernacular Books’, 145, a quotation also cited in his ‘*Doctrina and Predicacio*’, 7. It comes from K.B. McFarlane, *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 204.

Gillespie's study of book history led later, by contrast, to a focus on books within religious houses, but especially in one, again, with a notably worldly feel to it. His weightiest publication indeed—literally, at nearly 900 pages—is the edition of a massive catalogue of a religious house's library, the *Registrum*, for Syon Abbey. It is part of a longstanding project for the British Academy, inaugurated by Richard Sharpe FBA, to edit all the extant catalogues from medieval Britain. This project is weighty in significance, too.⁵² Such editorial and bibliographical scholarship, executed with exacting precision and daunting breadth, produces a foundational work of reference on which all other scholarship must stand. Gillespie's edition and annotation trace the movement of hundreds of volumes in a library over a century and the intellectual history they reveal. His lengthy introduction, and other essays emerging in parallel, track the history of the library, as far as possible—mysteries remain—and the brethren's use, sometimes almost by chance, of the new technology of print and the new *studia humanitatis*.⁵³ (The influence of so-called humanism was a theme in Gillespie's early work on Skelton too; he was more interested in this topic than is perhaps recognised.) In this story, the hero is evidently the *custos librarum* from 1482, Thomas Betson, for whom 'above all' Gillespie's 'admiration and affection' could 'remain undimmed'.⁵⁴ Betson feels like a forebear and figure for Gillespie himself as an assiduous scholar of book history, even down to noting the quiring, and recording the community and its studies, and as administrator of a grand institution of learning, as Gillespie shows it was—the mixed life even within the cloister.⁵⁵

The third and final strand of Gillespie's work turned away from the place of religion in the world, and the material forms of religious teaching in books, to the more purely contemplative life, and specifically to the tradition of writers often known as the English mystics. This topic too had been present from the outset of his research, in a paper on Richard Rolle given as a graduate student,⁵⁶ but his focus on the 'contemplatives' and their 'vernacular theology' (terms he preferred) became stronger from the late 1980s to

⁵² The overarching Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues project is explained on <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/academy-research-projects-corpus-british-medieval-library-catalogues/> [consulted 30 July 2026].

⁵³ On these themes in turn, see Gillespie (ed.), *Syon*, pp. xxxvi–lxi. Among his elaborations on the history of the library is 'Dial M for Mystic: Mystical Texts in the Library of Syon Abbey and the Spirituality of the Syon Brethren', in Marian Glasscoe (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England, VI* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), pp. 241–68, which covers far more than the contemplatives of the memorable title.

⁵⁴ Gillespie (ed.), *Syon*, p. x.

⁵⁵ Gillespie (ed.), *Syon*, pp. xlv–l.

⁵⁶ Vincent Gillespie, 'Mystic's Foot: Rolle and Affectivity', first published in 1982, reprinted and updated in his *Looking*, pp. 243–76.

the 2010s.⁵⁷ Indeed, his work on manuscripts of pastoral instruction became less common, and he offered a sort of palinodic nuance to the story he had told. In one of his last, longest and (to my mind) best publications, he returned to book history for a magisterial survey of Carthusian book production, but he concluded by citing McFarlane's phrase once more—'the literate laity were taking the clergy's words out of their mouths'—only to caveat that this order, by contrast, were mostly producing books for themselves and were wary of casting pearls before laymen. Even works redolent in tone of Hilton's *Epistle on the Mixed Life* were directed at enclosed brethren.⁵⁸ Whereas, he had noted in 1999, the Birgittines of Syon were not especially known as contemplatives and had some pastoral duties,⁵⁹ it is typical of Gillespie's later work to focus less on institutions and instruction than on contemplation.

Some of this work was not, however, research as always understood: foraging in manuscript libraries for data, say, as in his work on books of religion. It was more a question of searching and seeking. This is most evident in his later work on Julian of Norwich, the writer with whom he seemed to have the deepest engagement, one that went beyond the usual scholarly passion for one's project—beyond, say, his admiration for Betson. He taught students about the work of Julian recurrently, for instance, in an optional Master's course in Oxford in the 2010s, six weeks devoted to her two texts, and he read and reread her words himself with devout intensity. In particular, from 1988 to 1994, he undertook a series of dialogues with the Anglican solitary, Sister Martha Reeves, who published under the name Maggie Ross (1941–2026).⁶⁰ They later described their process in all its unconventional unfolding. She had approached him after a lecture to ask for guidance in reading Julian's work; he had already been devising ideas about the writings of the contemplatives and their self-undoing, in a few earlier essays, but sought a new way forward. So they worked through Julian's texts together. They described their report as 'not a conventional account either of studying or of teaching Julian of Norwich', for, as they say, 'the study of any mystical text ... asks readers to salt their critical faculties

⁵⁷ For his terminological preferences, see Gillespie, 'Preface', in Fanous & Gillespie (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, pp. x, xii. I thank Raphaela Rohrhofer for reminding me of this preference.

⁵⁸ Vincent Gillespie, 'Preaching to the Choir: Another Look at English Carthusian Transmission of Vernacular Spiritual Writings', in Julian Luxford (ed.), *The Capital's Charterhouses and the Record of English Carthusianism* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2023), pp. 152–204 at 204. Gillespie sent me a draft in November 2018 but it was not published until 2023. At the time of writing (July 2026), one other publication listed as forthcoming in the bibliography of his publications in the 2019 *Festschrift* has yet to appear: see 'Vincent Gillespie: a Bibliography', in *Essays Honouring*, pp. 267–73 at 273.

⁵⁹ Gillespie (ed.), *Syon*, p. lxi; Gillespie, 'Dial M', 185, 193.

⁶⁰ She died in Oxford on 11 June 2026: see the obituary 'Maggie Ross, Sister Martha Reeves', *Church Times*, 17 July 2026, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2026/17-july/gazette/obituaries/obituary-maggie-ross-sister-martha-reeves> [consulted 30 July 2026], which mentions her collaboration with Vincent.

as with fire'.⁶¹ As they put it, this was not 'research' as a product ("outcomes" or "deliverables") which administrators might measure, but was an immeasurable process of learning.⁶²

Nonetheless, the process was that essential protocol in literary studies: close reading. They made a large print-out of the text, and then, as Vincent reports:

When we began a new chapter, we would read the whole thing aloud, slowly and deliberately, always in Middle English to savor the taste and texture of the words. This gentle falling of the word upon the ear was very important. Often it would begin to reveal to us both the narrative architecture and the key lexemes standing at the synapses of Julian's thinking. Then, after an interval, sometimes brief, sometimes longer, one of us would venture a remark about the first thing in the passage that came into our mind. It was, as often as not, the first thing that was coming into the other's mind. The text seemed to forge a lot of simultaneity of thought. But often one of us would have a sort of 'bolt from the blue' insight. Sometimes these insights would leave us shaken and we'd quit until the following week to allow us time to reflect on them, mull over the implications, and do some research on what we thought we had found. Whenever one of us said, 'I can't do any more,' we would stop immediately. Our sessions ranged from 45 minutes to several hours. ...

We did not always agree on what the text was showing us, or the language we wanted to use for it, but we did agree that we would suspend any real head-butting, not only for the sake of the work but also because we learned by experience that our disagreement would often be resolved by what the text would show us later on. ... Most of all we learned to be comfortable with long silences, while the tape ran and the process of unknowing opened us up to whatever the text would show us that day.⁶³

The process sounds astonishing. While their sessions began in private, sometimes students were invited to listen, and these encounters are reported to have made a powerful impression.⁶⁴ I was not present, but I have seen Vincent's print-out of Julian's work, in the primitive typography typical of early computers, with his annotations. The print-out is of Julian's long text as found in London, British Library, MS Sloane 2499, a 17th-century copy which better preserves the Middle English than the next best, Paris,

⁶¹ Vincent Gillespie & Maggie Ross, "'With Mekeness Aske Perseverantly ...': On Reading Julian of Norwich", *Mystics Quarterly*, 30 (2004), 125–40 at 125.

⁶² Gillespie & Ross, "'With Mekeness'", 129. That said, there was a resulting collaborative publication on one of their central understandings of Julian's work: Vincent Gillespie & Maggie Ross, 'The Apophatic Image: The Poetics of Effacement in Julian of Norwich', first published in 1992, reprinted and updated in his *Looking*, pp. 277–305.

⁶³ Gillespie & Ross, "'With Mekeness'", 128–9.

⁶⁴ So reported Denis Renevey, contribution to 'A Tribute to Vincent Gillespie', *The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 52 (2026), 127–31 at 129, shared at a seminar in memory of Gillespie at the Faculty of English, Oxford, 28 October 2025 (n. 20 above).

Bibliothèque nationale, MS fonds anglais 40.⁶⁵ Vincent notes important variants from the Paris manuscript, but the focus is not textual criticism but interpretation. The text is printed on lines double-spaced in depth and only on rectos, and the blank spaces are full of annotations. Some openings hold more words in Vincent's little and curly cursive than there is typeset text by Julian. Some openings have his notes in four different writing implements (say, pencil and three colours of biro), not in colour-coding different themes but in successive layers of thinking and rethinking.⁶⁶ If I have taken time to quote and describe this process at length, that's because one of its lessons is that one should take time to behold others' words and to learn from them. He and Ross later compared it to *kenosis* or emptying oneself into receptivity.⁶⁷ That said, they do allow themselves to title the paragraphs I have quoted 'The Method' and to report that method in a way that future readers might learn from. Some of his last doctoral students have explored Julian's work in a similar, meditative vein.⁶⁸ This process—reading Middle English aloud, pondering the meaning of words, querying different possibilities, a sense of play—sounds unconventional: but such careful and generous reading should be the bedrock of any act of literary study.

Vincent's marginalia on Julian's *Revelations* would repay fuller study than I have time for here. (They need to be preserved and deposited in some way which will allow others expert in Julian of Norwich's work to explore them fully.) His and Ross's dialogues and Vincent's singlehanded studies yielded an understanding of Julian's text. They called it 'the complexity of the molecular' which defies simple classification, and simple historical contextualisation.⁶⁹ Vincent saw that complexity as delightful—what he and Ross had called (above) the 'sense of play'. In another influential essay, with its own playful title, '[S]he Do the Police in Different Voices' (a line from Dickens that T.S. Eliot pondered as a title for what became *The Waste Land*), he reassures the nervous reader that what seems baffling in the *Revelations* will be revealed as word-play and play with ideas, in a non-linear and gamesome way which requires, he stresses again, a kenotic process of beholding.⁷⁰ Her play with 'linguistic moods and registers, narrative voices

⁶⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love: The Short Text and the Long Text*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Oxford: University Press, 2016), pp. lvii–lxi, lxx–lxxvii.

⁶⁶ I thank Margaret Gillespie for providing me with this annotated typescript. Typical in volume is the comment on chapter 11, pp. 37–40 (i.e., Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, ed. Windeatt, pp. 47–8).

⁶⁷ Gillespie & Ross, "'With Mekeness'", 132.

⁶⁸ E.g., Raphaëla Rohrhofer, 'The potentiality of 'nought': Julian of Norwich's understanding of the deity and the self through the apophatic matrices of love and dread' (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2021), and Hannah Lucas, *Impossible Recovery: Julian of Norwich and the Phenomenology of Well-Being* (New York NY: Columbia University Press, 2025).

⁶⁹ Gillespie & Ross, 'Apophatic', 283.

⁷⁰ Vincent Gillespie, "'[S]he Do the Police in Different Voices": Pastiche, Ventriloquism and Parody in Julian of Norwich', in Liz Herbert McAvoy (ed.), *A Companion to Julian of Norwich* (Cambridge: Brewer,

and rhetorical levels of style' is a way of dancing round the ineffable, to avoid restricting the divine love by expressing it in 'fallen language'.⁷¹ He showed how Julian's vocabulary builds cumulatively through semantic clusters and strange metaphors, as she deploys different terms to convey her experience of the ineffable, and he himself tried perhaps surprising terms to convey his experience of reading her words: 'a merry text', parody, punning, word-knots, using discourses 'promiscuously'.⁷²

For all its merriment, there was something serious in this understanding of Julian of Norwich. Nothing could be more rightly revered than the divine love around which she dances. His colleague Mishtooni Bose remarked that he saw 'learning as something *personal*—that is to say, not idiosyncratic or self-indulgent, but held in, and articulated by, the whole person'.⁷³ Others have noted that Vincent's responsiveness to Julian's and other contemplatives' work stemmed from his deeply held faith.⁷⁴ That personal connection felt strongest in one of his late writings on her: an essay on ideas of 'ese' and 'dise' in Julian's *Revelations*.⁷⁵ Again, he brings out Julian's playfulness with genre and tone, far beyond the gloomy preaching of the *ars moriendi*. But he also reflects here on Julian's speaking position as an 'object body', somebody whose visions came to her through a period of disease and who only thereby had a newly comfortable relationship with God. The point was poignant. In 2014, Vincent had his initial diagnosis with cancer and began the on-and-off treatments which would endure for a decade. He continued through the vicissitudes of treatment in his busy round of teaching and administration with inspiring energy, even in the pandemic at great personal risk, until he retired from teaching in the summer of 2021. He also continued reading and thinking about Julian of Norwich and other authors, as in his essay on Julian's 'ese' and 'dise'. The essay never mentions his own situation but the tone is heartfelt, as he traces the clarity of vision, as the last words put it, of someone 'dying and speaking to you'. He eschews what one former student, Raphaella Rohrhofer, called the risk of 'toxic positivity' in Julian's famous reflection that 'al shal be wele'.⁷⁶ He captures instead the 'existential terror' from which Julian must

2008), pp. 192–207. Similarly exploratory is Vincent Gillespie, 'The Colours of Contemplation: Less Light on Julian of Norwich', in Eddie Jones (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England, VIII* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2013), pp. 7–28.

⁷¹ Gillespie, "[S]he Do", pp. 195–6.

⁷² Quoting respectively Gillespie and Ross, "With Mekeness", 129, and Vincent Gillespie, "The Moderhede of Kynd Love": Conception, Labour, and Delivery in the Theology of Julian of Norwich', *The Mediaeval Journal*, 13 (2023), 133–51. I thank A.J. Minnis for drawing attention to Vincent's surprising use of 'promiscuously' at a colloquium in memory of Gillespie *Venit, Vidit, Vincent*, St Anne's College, Oxford, 24–5 July 2026.

⁷³ Bose, reminiscence (n. 29 above).

⁷⁴ E.g., Fanous, 'A Tribute', 125.

⁷⁵ Vincent Gillespie, 'Seek, Suffer'.

⁷⁶ Rohrhofer, 'A Tribute', 133.

receive her ‘spiritual efflorescence’, and he ends by recalling Julian’s paraphrase of God’s words—a paraphrase he rehearsed to me often in person: ‘He seid not “Thou shalt not be tempesteid, thou shalt not be travelled, thou shalt not be disesid”, but he seid: “Thou shalt not be overcome.” ... And sone after al was close and I sow no more.’⁷⁷

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⁷⁷ Vincent Gillespie, ‘Seek, Suffer’, 158. Cf. Julian, *Revelations*, ed. Windeatt, p. 141.

⁷⁸ <https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/article/professor-vincent-gillespie-fba-11-february-195413-march-2025>

