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Analysis of Angling Literature Reveals— Dame Juliana Berners Never “Fished with an Angle,” and Sir Isaac Walton Was a Plagiarizing, “Incomplete Angler”

Treatyse on Fysshnge Wyth an Angle, published by Wynken de Worde as part of the second edition of *The Book of St. Albans*, appears on serious lists of classic literature. The author is listed most frequently as Dame Juliana Berners. The Treatise is indeed deserving of its reputation as an excellent early example of fifteenth-century sporting literature. However, it is not deserving of its lay reputation as the earliest example of literature on the subject, nor, as it turns out, is the good dame the author. This paper presents positive proof that both of these statements are true.

Dame, or Lady, Juliana Berners was the Prioress (second in rank only to the Abbess) of Sopwel Abbey, a nunnery, through the grounds of which flowed the River Ver. She was a person of uncommon erudition for her time. Her name was spelled “Barnes” in 1486 and “Bernes” in 1496. There is every reason to believe that she was a sportswoman and did write the original *Book of St. Albans* which dealt with hawking, hunting and heraldry.

This first hunting book is replete with expressions such as “now listen to your Dame” which certainly indicate that she was the person intended to be perceived as author of the work. The *Booke of Huntynge* ends with the statement: “Explicit dame Julyans Bernes doctryne,” this being the only time her name occurs anywhere in either book.

In 1653, *The Compleat Angler*, by Isaac Walton was published. the fifth edition of which was called *The Universal Angler* and included Charles Cotton’s “Instructions on how to angle for a trout or grayling in a clear stream.” Walton’s book is uncontested as the most popular angling book in history, but it was almost totally stolen from previous works, almost none of which Walton formally recognized. It cannot be argued that he tested much of what he wrote; he just copied it. He describes, for example, a fish called a “Balaena” or “Whirlpool,” as being more than two acres in size. Several other notable angling books written during the seventeenth century are discussed and compared here. In large part because of Walton’s perceived charisma, his books far over-shadowed much better contemporary books on the subject.

The inevitable conclusion to be drawn from this two-part case study has to be: if you want to go down in history as a “grandfather” or “grandmother” of something, you must steal the best of that around you, put it out in a more popular form than that in which

it has appeared before, and do unto others as you would have them do unto you-if you are a potential literary critic.



“Lord, give me strength.”