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Reflections on Medieval English Religious Literature

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ELEVEN APRIL 2006. GENOLIER, Switzerland. I sit at my desk in my rather spacious and cosy study in the attic, overlooking in the distance Lake Geneva, with Mont Blanc just appearing very faintly in the mist. As I prepare this contribution for the twenty-fifth Anniversary Volume for the Chair of Christian Thought, my two children play downstairs and I hear laughter or, occasionally, very brief weeping, followed by even more joyous banter. The rain has stopped since yesterday and the day is a most promising one. Next to my computer are a few books which I think should help me shape this contribution: *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*; *God and the Goddesses*; *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs*; *Fragmentation and Redemption*; *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*; *Medieval Virginites*, and *Medieval Blood*. Looking at my bookshelf to my right, more books seem to call for attention, and many more which, if not physically present, loom in my mind more or less distinctly.

11 April 1989. Oxford, a rainy day, as usual, and as I have got used to now since my arrival in October in 1988. But the weather does not preoccupy me very much at the moment, and there are no children yet to take my attention away from my reading task. The beauty and the special atmosphere of the Radcliffe Camera matters much more than the weather outside, and they certainly have an impact on my perception of

Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs. I am discovering the medieval mystical tradition and the experience of this discovery is mind-boggling (perhaps I should say soul-boggling). Next I should read William of St. Thierry, the Victorines (more especially Richard of St. Victor), and then move on to the Middle English mystics, to pause much longer on Richard Rolle. The path is smooth, and my vision and intentions very clear. Followed by further reading in the Upper Reading Room of the Bodleian Library, the thesis will happily come out as the result of this intense and life-enhancing reading.

I find myself caught somewhat by surprise with this request for a contribution to offer an assessment of my field. Although aware the term "junior" did not apply to my academic person any longer, I had not realized I had almost spent twenty-five years investigating the field. But the books mentioned above could not have crossed my eye then, and they (with many more, not to mention exceptional contributions in the forms of articles that would deserve reference as well) testify to the advance the field has made in the last twenty-five years or so. It is to general directions pointed at in those publications I would like to pay attention in this chapter, looking at how they have complicated our approach to medieval English religious literature.

There was a time when the field of medieval English religious literature was almost exclusively limited to mystical writers. Knowles' 1961 contribution, *The English Mystical Tradition*, placed in the foreground the so-called Middle English mystics: Richard Rolle, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe (there is also a chapter on the post-medieval Augustine Baker). His study assesses those writers in the way they contribute to Catholic theology and his interest lies therefore in extracting their mystical theology and placing it within the larger framework of the Christian mystical tradition. More than thirty years later, the impact of Knowles can still be felt in the contribution offered, for instance, by Marion Glasscoe. Her *English Medieval Mystics: Games of Faith*, with the obvious exception of Baker, takes up the same group of writers and offers for each a chapter that puts emphasis on both their literary and mystical achievements. Although I am not questioning Glasscoe's significant contribution, her book is somewhat misleading as to advances made in the field of medieval religious literature from the 1980s onwards. True, the book is part of a series that aims at introducing major literary and cultural topics in English literature and it attests

therefore to the vitality of mystical writings as an object of investigation to be made visible to students of English literature and general readers. The book, and several others on the mystical tradition or on specific mystical writers, makes a foray into new canonical literary texts. Extracts of Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* have appeared in the Norton Anthology, and the mystics make a chapter in the recent *Cambridge History of English Literature*. I shall come back to this contribution by Nicholas Watson later on in my chapter, but suffice to say at this point that the gap between advance in scholarship and the slow acceptance of the Middle English mystics as part of the literary canon has never appeared as colossal as today.

First, thanks in part to the impact of feminist studies, there has been a healthy shaking up of the hierarchical order within this neatly compact group of writers. Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe definitely seem to be gaining the upper hand in the classroom and in anthologies, against Rolle, Hilton and *The Cloud* author. More importantly, feminist scholarship has allowed for a different perspective on those female contributions, linking them for instance to other female contributions from the continent, assessing their specific feminine qualities, and investigating them thematically as groups of text written by or for women. More theoretical contributions, like those of Caroline Walker Bynum, Barbara Newman, Amy Hollywood, but also Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, to mention just a few, participate importantly in the rehabilitation of female mysticism and in the marking of its male mystical practice. In short, gender is now taken most seriously as shaping the mystical experience and its textual representation, with a difference.

Feminist critics have looked outside the Middle English mystics group for their investigation in the feminine. Also, and *pace* Knowles, mystical aspects have made room for other issues, like the importance played by the (female) body in the mystical experience, the representation of Christ as female, food consumption, anorexia and the feminization of the self. A vast array of texts were used for such investigation and, with regard to those new interests, the mystical qualities of the material under consideration were not necessarily the primary criterion for selection. The texts that raised interest often offered a wealth of information about author-audience relationship, or dealt with female religious behavior in particular, or were written by women themselves, or translated by women. Engagement with such issues relegated mystical aspects into the

background, so that so-called theologically sophisticated mystical texts had to live in much larger and eclectic company. Whether one contributes to feminist criticism or not, and even if some excessively theoretical feminist contributions to the field sometimes lose touch with the primary material, one cannot but applaud the immense contribution which such an approach has brought to the field, with the (re-)discovery of female-authored texts and an even greater number of them addressing a female audience in the first place. It may very well be that no other field in the vast domain of English literature owes as much to the "second sex" as the field of religious medieval literature.

The article by Nicholas Watson on "The Middle English Mystics" in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* deserves special attention here as a piece reflecting, but also inviting, a fresh look at the field of medieval English religious literature. While the chapter offers a discussion of mystical texts, it works at deconstructing this neatly invented heterogeneous category and invites a much broader corpus of religious texts, to be discussed *vis-à-vis* or within a broader scholarly context. The line of argument followed by Watson relies upon some of his previous contributions, most importantly perhaps an article which, in the light of the impact of Arundel's Constitutions of 1407, proposes "vernacular theology" as a more inclusive term for the field of religious literature. The impact of this piece, and its further development in the *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, is vividly felt within the scholarly milieu and it has led scholars to rethink their own preconceived views about mystical literature. However insightful his contributions and however inspiring they are to new generations of scholars, they are also the clear echo of advances in the field which were already on the move in the mid-eighties (see in particular the writings of Vincent Gillespie, J.R.R. Tolkien Professor of English Literature and Language at Oxford). Indeed, parallel to the feminist input, contextually based approaches to the field disentangled the mystical category by broaching a wealth of devotional and pastoral texts which, although not addressing a spiritual elite, were disseminated and reached a large popular audience in the late medieval period. The attention to such texts has for long been confined to a few specialists, but there is a move now for making such texts more readily available in affordable editions. Without omitting the intrinsic qualities of most of those texts, our understanding of medieval religious culture will greatly benefit from a focused attention on their cultural input.

A brief consideration of recent additions to *Ancrene Wisse* scholarship provides useful indications about the effect of new trends in medieval English religious scholarship. *Ancrene Wisse* scholarship of the twentieth century centered on complex issues related to the possible milieu which saw the production of this remarkable text, together with editorial questions which have now led to the forthcoming critical edition by the reputed *Ancrene Wisse* scholar Bella Millett and one of the Corpus Christi manuscripts by Robert Hasenfratz which, among its many qualities, is also affordable to students. No serious work on *Ancrene Wisse* and associated texts can dispense with those two works. Also, the recent input by Millett on *Ancrene Wisse* suggests new directions of research with a consideration of anchoritic culture within a broader context. *Ancrene Wisse* scholarship is now looking at continental expressions of anchoritic behavior and is gaining a lot from it. Anneke Mulder-Bakker, author of *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*, has forced *Ancrene Wisse* scholars to rethink anchoritic culture: to the typically British female anchoritic culture, usually opposed to the Beguines' continental communities, one now needs to add the continental tradition which Mulder-Bakker, among others, has brought to light. Via a different route, Millett herself has invited a consideration of the impact of continental pastoral practice permeated by Paris-trained bishops working in the West Midland area at the time of the composition of *Ancrene Wisse*. Further investigation in this area is currently under way and will appear in a published form in the near future. Also, even if anchoritic practice was not exclusively female, the English anchoritic material suggests a strong female involvement and hence a gender approach to those texts has usually offered significant results, allowed for a better understanding of this material, and contributed to the virginity discussion. *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs*, edited by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards, provides a good example of current developments in the field of anchoritic studies, with a mainly Gender Studies dialogue taking place between British and North-American literary scholars and continental historians and anthropologists.

Current developments in *Ancrene Wisse* studies show one of the ways forward for the field in general. Although the field appears more complex than it was twenty-five years ago, and invites investigations which rely on multidisciplinary approaches, it nevertheless points to an absence from recent active participation in those discussions on the part of theologians

and church historians. Exceptions of outstanding quality can be found in the works of Barbara Newman and Ann Matter, for instance, even if the first is professor of both English and religion at her current university, while the latter's more recent contributions have taken a slightly less interdisciplinary approach than her work on the Song of Songs and her gendered approaches to her studies on women and sexuality in the context of Christian history.

This chapter has made reference to two female scholars in the field of theology and church history. The field has changed to an almost unrecognizable extent in the last twenty-five years or so and traditional male church historians and theologians may find it unfathomable today: they may have to tackle issues that their own scholarly practice has not equipped them to address. Provided that a fresh look at the new discoveries which those different perspectives have untangled allows them to readjust their own set of values, their contributions to the field will allow for considerable movements forward. The impact of the liturgy in shaping the consciousness of devotional and mystical writers is a major issue in the field: an interdisciplinary effort in this area, rather than solitary ventures on the part of literary scholars, would be salutary.

There is need for a greater and broader, collaborative and interdisciplinary effort. However, it cannot develop successfully without larger availability of the primary material. If a certain number of medieval English devotional texts will find paper to be edited on, many more will not be deemed financially viable pieces. The possible way forward is the production of an electronic corpus of devotional works in the major vernacular languages of the Middle Ages. Such an effort would require the man-power and financial support of an international team. The texts produced electronically would initially be selected from good manuscript exemplars, rather than being critical editions. For some of the more popular texts, hypertext editions would be added in the long term. The impact of the continental tradition on the Middle English religious tradition suffers from readily available editions of some of the most important texts. Although an edition of the Middle English version of Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* exists, it is not easily available. Editions of the Middle English translations of Ruusbroec are equally difficult to find, and a serious study of his influence upon the Middle English mystical and devotional tradition is hampered by this fact. The thirteenth-century Latin text, *De doctrina cordis*, circulated widely in the medieval

period (more than 200 Latin extant manuscripts) and was translated into English, French, Italian, Spanish, German, and Middle Dutch. The latter example provides evidence for the pan-European dimension of the field and makes a case for the need to be able to consult different vernacular versions of devotional texts. There is need for all of us to broaden our horizons and to open the field to even larger perspectives.

From an Oxonian solitary academic adventure my life has now become one in which my paternal self has had to find its bearing in the post-modern European context in which I live. There is not much room any more for the solitary, but not always incoherent, ramblings of my Oxford days, and the only survival approach for me is now the mixed life, not so much as understood by Hilton and his disciples, but rather that of a man who, from his office upstairs, must leave his supposedly elevated thoughts to care for the more urgent needs of a toddler preoccupied by the need of diaper change (I am not here making reference to the heraldic use of the term). The life which I live, here and now, affects importantly my way of engaging with the material that I investigate. Both my academic experience over the last twenty-five years and other aspects of my life impact on the way I choose material and how I interact with it. To write how my consciousness of the field has changed in those years would honestly require the writing of an autobiography which, I fear, would not find a very attentive audience. Suffice to mention that, as a result of both academic and personal experience, I have come to the recognition of the importance of contextualizing as much as possible the devotional and mystical material that I investigate. Also, and perhaps as a result of significant changes in my own life, I have developed a growing empathy for the more down-to-earth devotional material, learning to find ways in which those texts could speak simply to the ordinary Christian and nevertheless guide them to eventually reach the pinnacle of the Christian mystical tradition. Although I would not detract anyone from a consideration of the mystical texts, I believe that the way forward is in the systematic study of this still largely unexplored corpus.

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