

CONTEXTUALISING MIDDLE ENGLISH LITURGICAL COMMENTARIES

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ABSTRACT

Important discussions of Middle English miscellanies, with special reference to works of religious instruction, include, for instance, work by Margaret Connolly (2003, 2011) and Ralph Hanna (e.g., 1996, 2007, 2010). But much detailed work remains to be done, from various disciplinary perspectives, to respond to the challenge set inter alia by Thorlac Turville-Petre forty years ago, viz., to set such works “much more securely and illuminatingly within [their] local context” (1983, 141). In this paper, part of an ongoing programme of research into the ‘cultural mapping’ of Middle English writings on the liturgy (see e.g., Jasper and Smith 2019, 2023; Smith 2021), a range of verse and prose texts are placed in their codicological contexts. It will be demonstrated how the forms of these texts correlate closely with the socio-cultural functions of the manuscripts in which they survive.

KEYWORDS: Middle English, liturgy, manuscript, codicology, orality and literacy.

CONTEXTUALIZACIÓN DE COMENTARIOS LITÚRGICOS EN INGLÉS MEDIO

RESUMEN

Discusiones importantes sobre misceláneas en inglés medio, con especial referencia a obras de instrucción religiosa, incluyen, por ejemplo, los trabajos de Margaret Connolly (2003, 2011) y Ralph Hanna (a saber, 1996, 2007, 2010). No obstante, queda aún mucho trabajo en profundidad por llevar a cabo, desde varias perspectivas de disciplinas, para dar respuesta al desafío planteado por, entre otros, Thorlac Turville-Petre hace cuarenta años, concretamente para establecer tales obras “mucho más firme y esclarecedoramente dentro de [su] contexto local” (1983, 141). En este artículo, parte de una investigación en curso sobre ‘*cultural mapping*’ de escritos sobre la liturgia en inglés medio (véase Jasper y Smith 2019, 2023; Smith 2021), una variedad de textos en verso y prosa se sitúan en sus contextos codicológicos. Se demostrará cómo las formas de estos textos se relacionan estrechamente con las funciones socioculturales de los manuscritos en los que sobreviven.

PALABRAS CLAVE: inglés medio, liturgia, manuscrito, codicología, oralidad y alfabetización.

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1. CONTEXTS

Research on the geographical and codicological distribution of Middle English vernacular texts¹ has demonstrated that by far the most widely circulated texts in late medieval England were broadly religious in content, often to be found within manuscript miscellanies. Examples range from well-known works from the Middle English literary ‘canon,’ such as William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, a large number of religious lyrics and Richard Rolle’s writings, to texts that are less attractive to present-day readers: the *Speculum vitae*, *The Northern Homily Cycle*, *The Prick of Conscience*, *The South English Legendary* (saints’ lives) and the very substantial corpus of materials (sermons, tracts, bible translations) associated with Lollardy.

The prevalence of such material reflects the cultural setting of the period, which saw an efflorescence of vernacular religious writing that complemented the traditionally (if not of course exclusively) Latinate literary culture of the earlier medieval period. It represented a response to “the enhanced prestige of English, the interests of an increasingly literate laity in more advanced matters of theology than the rudiments of Christian behaviour, and dissatisfaction with the Church, expressed by orthodox and heterodox alike” (Spencer 1993, 14). Such a development aligned with what has been called the “imaginative intensity” (Duffy 2005, 593) of late medieval Catholic devotion.

At the heart of this “imaginative intensity” was one liturgical event in late medieval worship: the mass. As Claire Cross and Paul Barnwell have stated, “[t]he Mass exercised a defining influence upon the life of the late middle ages, affecting clergy and laity alike” (2005, 13). The doctrine of transubstantiation—adopted by the fourth Lateran Council of 1215—meant that the bread and wine, transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ, were treated within increasing reverence: “The potency of the Host was such that it was popularly believed that no-one would fall ill or die on the day that he saw it; this encouraged people to try and attend a Mass every day” (Cross and Barnwell 2005, 14). One of Margery Kempe’s experiences captures something of how the sacrament was perceived (cited from Meech 1940, 47):

On a day as þis creatur was heryng hir Messe, a 3ong man and a good prest heldyng up þe Sacrament in his handys ouyr hys hed, þe Sacrament schok & flekeryd to & fro as a dowe flekeryth wyth hir wengys. &, whan he held up þe chelys wyth þe precyows Sacrament, þe chalys mevyd to & fro as it xuld a fallyn owt of hys handys.

And the doctrine of purgatory, adopted at the second council of Lyon in 1274, encouraged the belief that intercessory Masses had the power to release individual souls from posthumous purgation of sins; funding for ‘soul Masses,’

¹ Notably *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English (LALME)*, for which see <http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/elalme/elalme.html>), or the *Manuscripts of the West Midlands Project*, for which see <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/mwm/>, both last consulted 25 July 2022. An important collection of essays is Connolly and Mooney (2008).

often celebrated by dedicated chantry priests, therefore became a pressing concern. Although practices certainly varied depending on locality, there is evidence from numerous sources that worship, notably the Mass, was ongoing on a near-continual basis in parish churches:

During the day time, churches were almost continuously used by the parish priest, by the stipendiary ministers who served its chantries, and by the laity; most had several Masses daily, and incidental services on many days. In addition, the nave of the church could be the setting for much social activity, including funeral wakes and anniversary feasts and ‘church ales’ to raise money for the church. In these very different ways, parish religion with its very particular festivals and other observances both conferred a unique sense of identity upon each parish and at the same time helped to integrate it into the wider community of the locality and of Christian Europe (Cross and Barwell 2005, 16).

Such a situation fed a considerable demand for devotional aids, expressed in the vernacular, and these aids are the focus of the current article, part of a long-term research project on the history of English religious expression.

2. MIDDLE ENGLISH WORKS ON THE MASS IN THEIR CODICOLOGICAL CONTEXTS

It is within the contexts just described—a growing demand for works of devotion and liturgical exposition, involving both laity and clergy, and relating to a special reverence for the Mass—that the Middle English “service and service-related works,” identified by Robert Raymo (1986, 2349-2369) in his authoritative catalogue, can be located. Raymo lists no fewer than fourteen separate surviving works designed to offer paratextual commentary on the Mass:

- (1) *The Lay Folks’ Mass Book (LFMB)*: a poem surviving in nine copies, frequently radically modified for distinct purposes. *The Lay Folks’ Mass Book* offered, for a congregation/readership whose discourse was in the vernacular, a comprehensive paratext for the Mass, flagging both words and actions. The standard ‘modern’ edition of the poem remains that carried out by the Anglican priest Thomas Frederick Simmons in 1879, who is responsible for the title. Simmons’s edition provides versions of the text from four manuscripts with readings from two others; the latter two were subsequently edited in full a few years later (see Gerould 1904; Bülbring 1905). Other copies have been identified since, and the current complete list, according both to the *New Index of Middle English Verse* (= NIMEV, i.e., Boffey and Edwards 2005) and the online *Digital Index of Middle English Verse*





- (= *DIMEV*),² is as follows. In all cases the poem is simply one item in miscellaneous compilations. The first six sigla given below are those assigned by Simmons: A = Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.3.11; B = London, British Library, MS Royal 17.B.xvii; C = Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 155; D = Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg 5.31; E = Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 84/166 (Part II); F = Cambridge, Newnham College, MS 900.4 (olim Yates Thompson); G = Cambridge, University Library, MS Ii.4.9; H = Liverpool, University Library, MS F.4.9; I = London, British Library, MS Additional 36523.
- (2) *Ara Dei*: a long prose compilation from various sources, including many Latin passages, surviving in one manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Additional C.87. Ian Doyle (1958, 227) considered this book to have an Essex provenance, with links to the Vere family and Barking Abbey; according to Raymo, "it was clearly addressed to an educated, probably lay audience" (1986, 2350).
- (3) *The Manner and Mede of the Mass*: a cluster of stanzas alleged to be "a free paraphrase" of *The Lay Folks' Mass Book* (Raymo 1986, 2351; see also Simmons 1879, 128-147). The work survives in the well-known Vernon Manuscript, now Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS English poet. A.1. Raymo also identifies two other "similar treatises," viz., Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Additional A.268 and London, British Library, MS Royal 17.C.xvii; to these examples may be added a third witness for the same text: New Haven, Yale University, MS Beinecke Library 317 (olim Phillipps 1052), which also contains text (9) below.³ Raymo also notes a further near-related "compendius tretyse" in Shrewsbury School MS 3.
- (4) *De meritis misse*, by the Shropshire friar-poet John Audelay (fl. 1417-1426) is an abbreviation of (3): *LALME* places the language of one of the manuscripts—Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 302—in Staffordshire and the other—London, British Library, MS Harley 3954—in Norfolk. The Douce manuscript contains only Audelay's poetry, whereas the Harleian copy of *De meritis misse* sits alongside a variety of other religious verse, including a copy of Langland's *Piers Plowman* and a copy of *Mandeville's Travels*.
- (5) *Merita misse*, once (it seems no longer) ascribed to John Lydgate, consists of "203 lines in short couplets with some lacunae" (Raymo 1986, 2353). It survives in one manuscript: London, British Library, MS Cotton Titus A.xxvi, a composite compilation from the middle of the fifteenth century

² See <https://www.dimev.net/record.php?recID=5537>, last consulted 25 July 2022; see also <https://www.dimev.net/record.php?recID=2205>, last consulted 25 July 2022.

³ According to *DIMEV*; see <https://www.dimev.net/record.php?recID=5128#wit-5128-3>, last consulted 25 July 2022. For the Beinecke manuscript, see <https://pre1600ms.beinecke.library.yale.edu/docs/pre1600.ms317.htm>; see also the digital facsimile at <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2013989>. Both items were last consulted 25 July 2022.

that has bound with it an Italian treatise on shipbuilding and a collection of French songs.

- (6) *How to Sing Mass*: “Ten lines of irregular length in couplets” (Raymo 1986, 2353), in London, British Library, MS Harley 3810, another composite fifteenth-century manuscript of religious texts (thus the contents may be fortuitous); *LALME* places the language of the manuscript in Warwickshire.
- (7) *The Sacrifice of the Mass* is a poem of thirteen rhyme-royal stanzas, in Oxford, Balliol College, MS 354. The Balliol manuscript is the commonplace book of the London-based merchant Richard Hill (fl. 1508-1536), which contains carols, selections from Lydgate and Gower, “practical treatises (on breaking horses and grafting trees), recipes (for brewing, making ink, killing rats, and so on), puzzles and card tricks, and two books on courtesy (one of which doubles as an English-French conversation manual)” (Shrank 2004, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ODNB).
- (8) *Parts of the Mass* consists of two eight-line stanzas, found in Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg 4.32: another remarkable religious miscellany, whose contents range from the names of the Instruments of the Passion, in French, arranged in the manner of a chessboard as an *imago pietatis* (allowing for spiritual reflexion), to versified forms of the Creed, Ave and Pater.
- (9) *Virtues of the Mass* (*Virtutes missarum*) is a work mentioned by Simmons, who provided extracts in his edition of *LFMB*: “A collection of pieces in verse and prose enumerating [...] the extraordinary temporal benefits to be gained from attendance at Mass. They are of no literary merit and tastelessly exploit the simple piety of the laity” (Raymo 1986, 2354). Several versions are known, including one that survives in New Haven, Yale University, MS Beinecke Library 317 (see [3] above) and in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson Poet 32. Raymo’s summary of the Rawlinson/Beinecke version, of some thirty-one quatrains and two concluding stanzas each of six lines, offers a flavour of these texts: “Hearing Mass brings 30 rewards: that day you shall not go hungry; you shall be forgiven your idle words; you shall not suffer sudden death; you shall not age [...] you shall have 40 days of pardon if you kneel and give a kiss at the Verbum Caro [...] Therefore, Lollards and heretics, put aside your errors and follow the love of Holy Church [...]” (1986, 2354-2355).
- (10) *Bidding Prayers*: Raymo records numerous examples, both in manuscript and early prints, including in Caxton’s *Quattuor sermones* (1483) (Raymo 1986, 2355, 2558-2559). The language of one prose example, in York, Minster Chapter Library, MS XVI M 4 (the ‘York Manual’), is located by *LALME* to the city of York (Simmons 1879, 61-80).
- (11) *Levation Prayers* are “salutations and praises of Christ in the Eucharist combined with pleas for forgiveness of sins and against sudden death and supplications for salvation” (Raymo 1986, 2355). They are, again according to Raymo (1986, 2559-25561), very frequently recorded in Middle English writings, either independently or within other texts; they are often classified by modern scholars, rather anachronistically, as ‘lyrics.’ Versions survive, for instance,



in the Vernon Manuscript; they are also included within texts such as the *Ara Dei* (= [2] above) and Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests* (a work also found in London, British Library, MS Royal 17.C.xvii; see [3] above).

- (12) *Meditatjons for Goostely Exercise in the Time of the Masse* offers an allegorical interpretation of the Mass. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Wood empt. 17 begins as follows: "The preste going to Masse signifythe & representyd þe Sauyours off þe world our moost swett Redemer Cryst Iesu." The Wood manuscript is a small sixteenth-century book, attributing the *Meditatjons* to 'B. Langforde,' a priest who may be the scribe rather than the author (see Aston 1984, 123; see also Rinkevich 2018). Such allegorical interpretations, as Matthew Rinkevich has argued (2018, 42, 46), "convert the liturgical experience into a literary one. They suggest that divine worship is an act of reading and provide the glosses necessary for comprehension. [...] Langforde offers readers this litany of allegoresis, and through it, he invites them to begin reading the Mass allegorically. The church service becomes a polysemous text, and it compels churchgoers to become its readers and interpreters."
- (13) *A Good Contemplacion for a Preste or He Go to Masse* survives in two manuscript miscellanies: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C.894 and London, British Library, MS Royal 17.C.xviii. The language of the Rawlinson manuscript has been localised to Middlesex in *LALME*. The work, a translation of a work ascribed to St Bonaventure, is directed to the celebrant: "Before a priest says Mass, let him be aware of the fact that he will receive God and man" (Raymo 1986, 2352).
- (14) *Praeparatio Eucharistiae*: a short prose treatise instructing the communicant on the proper way to prepare for partaking of Eucharist. The language of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 1286—the sole witness for the text—is localised by *LALME* to Northamptonshire.

The above list gives a fair impression of the range of codicological contexts in which such works survive. In only three cases—(2), (12) and (14)—are the texts concerned the sole items in the manuscript. The remainder may most simply be described as miscellanies, and indeed even (2) is arguably a quasi-miscellany, being a compilation of passages from various works.

Now, miscellanies have attracted a great deal of attention in recent critical research. Many scholars have noted that the correlation of individual text and individual codex is the exception rather than the rule in the production of books during the late medieval period across Europe. Some of this company may have been the outcome of what Ralph Hanna has called "exemplar poverty" (Hanna 1996),⁴ or

⁴ Hanna's paper is included in an important collection edited by Stephen Nichols and Siegfried Wenzel (1996). See also more recent and similarly important collections edited by Margaret Connolly and Raluca Radulescu (2015), and by Sabrina Corbellini, Giovanna Murano and Giacomo Signore (2018).



through the various interests of a particular reader. This latter seems to be the case with the commonplace book of Richard Hill that contains text (7) above. Hill (d. circa 1536) was a London merchant with close connexions to the great continental cloth-markets of Antwerp and Bruges, and his book, compiled over many years, reflected the broad interests of a much-travelled man. Hill evidently enjoyed practical information: thus, the manuscript contains recipes for brewing, making ink, killing rats and so on, and treatises on horse-breaking and grafting trees. However, his book also demonstrated an engagement with court-culture (thus the poems flagged above, sections on puzzles and card tricks, and works on courtesy including one that also functioned as an English-French conversation manual), and with history and current affairs. In addition, the manuscript contains a group of religious works including in addition to *The Sacrifice of the Mass* a set of graces, a paraphrase of the ten commandments and a formula of questions to be asked of a confessor.

Such a mixture may seem random, but it is intriguing to note how Hill's texts, in miniature, reflect the broad interests of another London merchant with international connexions: England's first printer/publisher, William Caxton (d. 1492), whose output⁵ is indicative of the tastes of his clientele. On the one hand—and probably better-known to present-day students—are vernacular works of the kind that aspirational courtiers such as John Paston II would have enjoyed: Chaucer's *Anelida and Arcite*, *Canterbury Tales*, *House of Fame* (and Lydgate's homage to the same, *The Temple of Glass*), *Parliament of Fowls* and *Troilus and Criseyde*; Gower's *Confessio amantis*; translations from French courtly writings, such as *Blanchardin and Eglantine*, *Charles the Great*, *The Four Sons of Aymon*, *History of Troy*, the *Eneydos* and *The Knight of the Tower*; and famously Malory's Arthurian cycle, reframed as *Le morte Darthur*. To this group might be added works of manners and heraldry, such as the *Book of Courtesy*—a manuscript version of which Hill also included in his commonplace book⁶—the *Book of Good Manners*, *Feats of Arms*, *The Booke of the Ordre of Chivalry* and legendary histories such as the *Chronicles of England* (a version of the *Prose Brut*, widely-circulated in manuscript-format), John Trevisa's translation of Ranulph Higden's *Polychronicon* and indeed *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, which formed part of John Paston's library.

But by far the bulk of Caxton's publications was religious in content: two different versions of the *Ars moriendi* (*The Craft for to Deye for the Helthe of Mannes Soule*, 1491, and *The Art and Crafte to Knowe Well to Dye*, 1490), *The Court of Sapience* (1480), three editions of *The Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres* (1477, 1479 and 1489), the *Fifteen Oes* (prayers in English and Latin, 1491), the English translation of the *Horologium Sapientiae* (1491) and the Latin, Lydgate's *Life of Our Lady* (1484) and his translation of Deguileville's *Pilgrimage of the Soul* (1483), John Mirk's sermon-cycle *The Festial* and the associated *Quattuor sermones* (1483, 1491), and Nicholas Love's *The Myrroure of the Blessyd Lyf of Ihesu Cryste* (a gospel harmony, 1486, 1490).

⁵ These items are handily listed in the bibliography to Blake (1969, 224-239).

⁶ See the edition by Frederick J. Furnivall (1868).



Two Caxtonian editions survive of the great series of saints' lives *The Golden Legend*, which, Caxton tells us, caused him so many difficulties that "I feryd me in the begynnyng of the translacyon to haue contynued it / by cause of the longe tyme of the translacion/ & also in thenpryntyng of þe same";⁷ it was nevertheless, judging by the number of surviving copies and the evidence for contemporary ownership, to have been a remarkable commercial success.⁸ Less substantial works included single-sheet *Deathbed Prayers* (1484), indulgences (between 1476 and 1489) and *Images of Pity* (1487, 1490). And while still working in Bruges, Caxton also printed religious works in French, viz., *Les quatre choses derrenieres* and *Septenuaire des pseaulmes de penitence* (both 1475-1476); shortly afterwards he also printed Earl Rivers's English translation of the former work, viz., *The Cordyal, of the Four Last Things* (1479). And—in an interesting prefiguration of Hill's copying of a work on the mass—was his production of works for and to accompany the liturgy.⁹ In 1487, for instance, Caxton published a *Commemoracio lamentacionis siue compassionis Beate Marie*, a Latin service book for the assumption of Mary,¹⁰ and this work is not alone. In the same year Caxton produced a *Directorium Sacerdotum*, developed by the liturgical expert Clement Maidstone (d. 1456): a set of expositions and clarifications of the Sarum Use, which was by far the most common liturgy used in the medieval English church.¹¹ A second edition of the *Directorium* appeared in 1489. Maidstone was a monk of the great Bridgettine abbey of Syon, with which Caxton seems to have had a link (Powell 2000), and it is possible that this connexion is relevant to the printer's production of these editions.¹² Other liturgically-related, Latin publications issued by Caxton included a Psalter (1480), service books for the *Festum transfigurationis* (1491) and *Festum visitationis* (1480), and four editions of Latin *Horae* (1477, 1480, 1489 and 1490).¹³ Some of these works, such as the Latin *Directorium* and *Ordinale*, were apparently designed for the use of churchmen and priests; others, such as the small *Horae*, may have catered for the habit, referred to both in writing and occasionally in manuscript illustration, whereby the laity followed books during church services: behaviour that has even been related to the growth in the size of windows in fifteenth-century church architecture (Spencer 1993, 39). It is possible that 'B. Langforde's' *Meditatyons for Goostely Exercise in the Time of the Masse*, text (12) above, fulfilled a similar function; the manuscript is a small pamphlet, easily portable.¹⁴ It is interesting that this little booklet, like Hill's miscellany, was copied

⁷ *The Golden Legend* (1483), folio ii r.

⁸ See further Ring (2019).

⁹ See Wordsworth and Littlehales (1904).

¹⁰ Edited by E. Gordon Duff (1901).

¹¹ See Cooke and Wordsworth (1901-1902); see also Wordsworth (1894).

¹² For Syon see below.

¹³ Edited in Duff (1908).

¹⁴ The manuscript may be what is sometimes called a *portu(u)s* or *porteous*. According to *OED*, a *porteous* (cf. Anglo-Norman *porteose*) was, in the fifteenth century, a portable breviary comparable in some functions to the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*; it is perhaps significant that one of *OED*'s citations, from a will dated to 1426, is to "My Masseboke, my portus" (cf. Furnivall 1882).



at the beginning of the sixteenth century, after the arrival of printing in England; printing, after all, seems to have been an instance of technological supply responding to social demand rather than the other way round.¹⁵

It is therefore possible to situate even Hill's apparently random miscellany within a wider cultural map, as a miniature library curated for a particular set of tastes, and the same goes for several of the other miscellanies containing works on the Mass that are more focused in content. Elsewhere (Smith 2021) I have discussed, for instance, the contents of the manuscripts containing *The Lay Folks' Mass Book* (text [1] above), demonstrating how the different versions of the text were tailored to the particular codicological settings and cultural functions of each copy: functions that can be reconstructed through attention to such matters as dialect and marks of ownership, and presentational matters including choice of script, in addition to issues of textual organisation.

To illustrate the further possibilities of such analyses, we might turn to text (3), *The Manner and Mede of the Mass*, considered by Raymo to be a "free paraphrase" of *The Lay Folks' Mass Book*. The Vernon Manuscript, which contains the most accessible version of the poem, was compiled towards the end of the fourteenth century in the English West Midlands. The commissioner of the manuscript had clearly decided to make a substantial investment of time and funding; Vernon is a vast book, originally of about 450 leaves, weighing 22 kilograms, and measuring approximately 54 x 39 centimetres. A hundred or so leaves are now missing, but there are still some 370 texts surviving in the compilation. It has been estimated that, some 211 calfskins would have been required to produce the book's parchment, with all the infrastructure of preparation that such a figure implies: what Ralph Hanna has aptly called "the agricultural underpinning of medieval literary production," necessarily "predicated on extreme social exploitation" (2005, 158). A sister volume of comparable scope, the Simeon Manuscript (now London, British Library, MS Additional 22283), also survives, albeit in an even more mutilated form.¹⁶ Compendia such as the Vernon and Simeon Manuscripts can be seen as assertions or celebrations of spiritual presence, comparable to a great church building. As Ryan Perry has put it, "a magnificent [...] book [such as Vernon] might be comparable to a crucifix, relic, or a rosary; a book might become a potent and recognizable spiritual emblem" (Perry 2007, 158).

Despite recent research on the Vernon Manuscript, most notably by Derek Pearsall and Wendy Scase (e.g., Pearsall 1990; Scase 2013), there is still a degree of uncertainty about where, for whom and even why this vast collection was produced. The texts were copied by two scribes whose language has been localised to

¹⁵ It has often been pointed out that the Romans could have had printing; the use of stamps to impress clay was well-known to them, and it might appear that only a small imaginative leap would have been needed to develop such technology. The reason that imaginative leap did not happen seems to be because demand for text in Roman society could be met through the deployment of traditional scribal practice, often delivered by slaves.

¹⁶ See further the important essays in Connolly and Radulescu (2015).



Worcestershire, and there are several large religious houses in that area which might—just—have been able to support the substantial community of practice required for such an ambitious enterprise. Although probably produced in such a place, where a substantial infrastructure of technology would have been available, the book may have been commissioned for a wealthy aristocratic patron. One possible commissioner suggested by Scase is Sir William Beauchamp, a member of the powerful family that also included the earls of Warwick; the Beauchamps were part of a circle of courtiers that also included Geoffrey Chaucer. Beauchamp had originally been intended for the church, and it has been suggested that he had sympathies with Lollardy, the reformist movement associated with John Wycliffe at the end of the fourteenth century (*ODNB*; see also Scase 2013, 269-293).

However, much of Vernon's contents are wholly orthodox, including some works that would have seemed rather old-fashioned by this date, such as a late version of the Early Middle English prose guide for female anchorites known as *Ancrene Riwe*. And there is an overarching theme to its contents that is explicitly indicated on the opening page of the volume, followed by a contents list (folio i r): "Here bygynnen þe tytles off þe book þat is cald in latyn tonge salus anime. and in englyhs tonge soulehele." *Soulehele* 'soul-health' can be said to be the concern of all the surviving texts, and indeed is explicitly cited early in *The Manner and Mede of the Mass*, which appears on folios 302v-303v of the book:

3ong and olde . More and lasse
 Ful god hit is . to here A Masse
 þat Cristendam . haþ tan
 Hit was mad . for **soule hele**
 (Simmons 1879, 128, lines 5-8; my emboldening)

The Vernon Manuscript may be an egregious example of a miscellany-collection, but its difference from others is one of scale rather than kind, a point easily illustrated from other books containing versions of *The Manner and Mede of the Mass*. Thus London, British Library, MS Royal 17.C.xvii,¹⁷ located by *LALME* to Lincolnshire, contains not only *The Manner and Mede of the Mass* but also a clutch of other religious works including *The Life of St Mary Magdalene*, *The Testament of Christ*, *The Legend of the Holy Blood at Hayles*, Book IV of *The Prick of Conscience* and John Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests*. *The Testament of Christ* and the widely-circulated long poem *The Prick of Conscience* also appear in the Vernon Manuscript. The mass-poem appears at the end of the book, and is clearly seen as its culmination.

¹⁷ For a detailed account of the contents, see

[https://searcharchives.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/display.do?tabs=detailsTab&ct=display&fn=search&doc=IAMS040-002107357&indx=1&recIds=IAMS040-002107357&recIdxs=0&elementId=0&renderMode=poppedOut&displayMode=full&frbrVersion=&frbg=&&dscnt=0&scp.seps=scope%3A%28BL%29&mode=Basic&vid=IAMS_VU2&srt=rank&tab=local&vl\(freeText0\)=Royal%2017%20C%20XVII&dum=true&dstmp=1658744296000](https://searcharchives.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/display.do?tabs=detailsTab&ct=display&fn=search&doc=IAMS040-002107357&indx=1&recIds=IAMS040-002107357&recIdxs=0&elementId=0&renderMode=poppedOut&displayMode=full&frbrVersion=&frbg=&&dscnt=0&scp.seps=scope%3A%28BL%29&mode=Basic&vid=IAMS_VU2&srt=rank&tab=local&vl(freeText0)=Royal%2017%20C%20XVII&dum=true&dstmp=1658744296000), last consulted 25 July 2022.

Such miscellanies as Vernon and the Royal MS are commonplace in the surviving Middle English record, and numerous other examples could be cited. Well-known instances include John Northwood's collection in London, British Library, MS Additional 37787, associated with Bordesley Abbey in North Worcestershire, where Northwood entered as a novice in 1386; the Northwood miscellany contains some twenty English works of vernacular devotion, several in common with Vernon. Thorlac Turville-Petre (1990) has drawn attention to shared material in Vernon and in the 'Clopton manuscript,' which was split into three sections when sold by the recusant Giffard family in 1937 (now MSS Washington DC, Folger Shakespeare Library, V.b.236; Princeton, University Library, Taylor 11; and London, University Library, V.17; see further Perry 2007). And Wendy Scase has described many other analogues; for instance, Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg 1.1, a multilingual collection which dates from c. 1330, is an early instance of what Scase calls "the collective vernacular tradition" (2013, 256; see also Scase 2013, 254-255 for further examples).

Because of the work of numerous researchers over many years it is possible to reconstruct the kind of folk who engaged with these books. Some, as in the case of Northwood's miscellany, were clearly professed religious; another example, for instance, is Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 155, which contains the C-version of *LFMB*, and is inscribed on folio 2v as follows:

Liber beate Marie de Rieualle
ex procuracione domini Willelmi
Spenser. Abbatis eiusdem.

The ex libris inscription 'Liber ... Rieualle' is clear evidence that the manuscript was at the powerful Cistercian abbey of Rievaulx, in the North Riding of Yorkshire (Ker 1964, 149); William Spenser resigned as abbot in 1448. Many monasteries owned such books alongside the substantial holdings in Latin that made up the more prestigious elements of their libraries. Other volumes are likely to have emerged—they were certainly read—in parochial settings, possibly owned by local priests whose lives and careers up to and beyond the Reformation might be exemplified, from a very different part of the country, by those of the now well-known Exmoor priest Sir Christopher Trychay of Morebath.¹⁸

However, there is substantial evidence that devotional miscellanies had a wide circulation in lay circles. Volumes owned by laypersons include 'common profit' books designed for sharing vernacular works of devotion, as represented in the fifteenth century by the London merchant John Colop's collection of mystical and Lollard texts (now Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.6.31) (see Scase 1992), or the major collection of devotional works in English assembled, as a kind of lending

¹⁸ See Duffy (2001).



library, in London's Guildhall.¹⁹ And John Paston II, in his well-known autograph 'list of books,' included the following entry (the right-hand side of the list, originally a small paper scroll, has been damaged by damp):

A reede boke þat Percyvall Robsart gaff m<...>
off the Medis of þe Masse, þe Lamentacion <...>
off Chylde Ypotis, A Preyer to þe Vernycle <...>
callyd The Abbeye off þe Holy Gooste <...>²⁰

The precise manuscript referred to as *A reede boke* has not yet been identified, but the texts listed capture something of the imaginative world to be found in most of these devotional miscellanies. *Ypotis* is a dialogue between a 'wise child' and the Emperor Hadrian on various matters of morality and belief, while *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost* was a widely circulated allegorical prose tract addressed to the laity.²¹ And *the Medis of þe Masse* seems likely to be *The Manner and Mede of the Mass*.

3. ON READERS AND LISTENERS

We know, then, a lot about the contents of these manuscripts, how they circulated and who owned them. However, an area where research is still developing is to do with what those who encountered such texts did with them, and the kind of reading to which such books were subject is illustrated by Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Additional A.268, which also contains *The Manner and Mede of the Masse*. This book is now a composite volume, once owned by the great antiquarian and editor Bishop Thomas Percy (1729-1811) but sold by his estate to the Bodleian in 1884; part C of the current manuscript contains the text in question. The language of the hand responsible for this part of the manuscript has been located to Lancashire by *LALME*. The poem is preceded by an English text known by the Latin title *Speculum huius vite*, an abridged and altered version of the Middle English *Prick of Conscience*; it is followed by "All myzty god þat all has wrozt," a sequence of invocations to the Creator. Both works are known in other manuscripts.²² Part C of A.268 is clearly conceived of as a work for prayerful engagement involving careful attention to textual detail; the *Speculum huius vite* is accompanied by a complex set of marginal annotations identifying references in the text, including Arabic numbers to indicate textual enumerations, i.e., of the ten commandments (folios 120v-121r). Such careful

¹⁹ For details of an ongoing project on this material, see <https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/whittingtonsgift/>, last accessed 25 July 2022.

²⁰ Davis (1971, 517), after London, British Library, MS 43491, folio 26r.

²¹ See Boffey (2003).

²² According to *DIMEV*, which cites the two texts as items 788 and 436 respectively; 788 appears also in Dublin, Trinity College, MS 155 and 436 in London, British Library, MSS Cotton Caligula A.ii and Egerton 2810. See <https://www.dimev.net/record.php?recID=788#wit-788-1> and <https://www.dimev.net/record.php?recID=436>, both last consulted 25 July 2022.

marking implies considerable rumination on the part of the manuscript's user or users, presumably to be followed by learning and inwardly digesting.²³

And similar attention to textual detail can be observed in another manuscript containing the poem, viz., New Haven, Yale University, MS Beinecke Library 317, a book dated to around 1500 and associated with the Bridgettines of Syon Abbey and the Charterhouse at Sheen, on the other side of the river Thames (see Miles 2021). As was flagged in the list above, the Beinecke manuscript contains two works on the mass, and indeed text (9) is the first substantial work in the book, occupying folios 1v-3v. This work—described in the library catalogue as “The thirty-four virtues of the mass,”²⁴ is accompanied by Roman numerals in the margin to identify each virtue, and is followed by a prose commentary (“Yette moreovire vnto the confirmacyoun of thise vertues aforeseid”). Similarly, *The Manner and Mede of the Mass*, which appears on folios 22r-27v, is immediately followed by a prose work “yn confirmacyioun of the medys and merytes of theym that deuoutly here their masse.” That the book was read with care is indicated by an anxious addition, by a later hand, on folio 5r:

This book to hym that lovyth god and the helth of his owen soule is bettyre than eny erthly tresoure. And so wolle he say that redyth or heryth hit. ffor with out the knowlych of the matere that is wryten in this booke/ no man may fle evyll and do wele. the which is don for love or drede. or payne or ioye. vt patebit.²⁵

This additional statement in the Beinecke manuscript is interesting in several ways. One obvious thing to note is its reference to “the helth of [the reader's] owen soule,” which echoes Vernon's *soulehele*, and suggests that the book had a comparable devotional function; but we might also note the reference to the person “that redyth or heryth hit.” ‘Cultural mapping,’ after all, is not simply a matter of geography,

²³ We might recall Cranmer's famous phraseology in the *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)*, in his Collect for the second Sunday in Advent: “Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ” (1662 version, cited in Cummings 2011, 272). We might note—as a prefiguration of the discussion in the remainder of this paper—the reference not only to reading but also to hearing. As has often been said, the *BCP*, although in some ways a marked break from the past was in others a culmination of tendencies already to be noted in late medieval textual culture; see for instance Cummings (2011, xvi).

²⁴ Expanded therefore from what seems to be the original thirty. See the catalogue entry, cited on note 3 above.

²⁵ This passage was then struck out by a later scribe and the statement added: “Beware of fals englysshe.” It is a puzzling annotation. Laura Saetveit Miles has suggested—plausibly to my mind—that “[p]erhaps this was a faithful monastic reader protecting his pre-Reformation book in a post-Reformation climate by making a somewhat perfunctory gesture of bringing it in line with Protestant protocols” (2021, 14). Miles's alternative suggestion that the note “expresses the reader's scepticism of English as an appropriate language” for the life of St Jerome, here being copied, seems to me less convincing, given the substantial amount of English covering sensitive matters such as the liturgy that has not attracted reservation.



and the texts discussed above need to be seen in terms of the social setting in which their readers—and audiences—encountered them; and it is with such matters that we might conclude this paper.

It seems certain from the careful annotation—both of which must have been developed and/or designed primarily for visual encounter—that such books were read privately. However, the expression ‘private reading’ disguises many different ways of engaging with writing. The evidence of such passages as that appended to the Beinecke manuscript is that such books were deployed for devotional reading in pious households, which could include not only the kind of private reading that the marginal apparatus suggests but also listening, either by an individual or collectively by a group. It seems that there was at this time a great variety of encounters with texts, extending from solitary perusal in silence—which seems to have been a comparatively rare thing, largely undertaken by the professionally literate such as professed religious—to more sociable, perhaps familial or household events, prefiguring the ‘social reading’ characteristic of much later periods (see, e.g., Williams 2017). We are reminded that the late medieval period saw the emergence not only of ‘literate cults’ such as that of the Holy Name,²⁶ but also of what has been referred to as a ‘literate environment,’²⁷ in which books were prototypically a resource for communal, often household reading; some would commonly listen, while others would read aloud. It is setting that would have, incidentally, had its attractions for some pious Victorian households, gathered around a *paterfamilias*.

Numerous accounts of such settings survive. We know, for instance, that devotional reading at mealtimes was a family activity encouraged in the Beauchamp circle:

Let the book be brought to the table as readily as the bread. And lest the tongue speak vain or hurtful things, let there be reading, now by one, now by another, and by your children as soon as they can read [...]. Expound something in the vernacular which may edify your wife and others.²⁸

Such behaviour was clearly possible in humbler households than Throckmorton’s or Beauchamp’s. Other examples include the career of Margery Kempe (c.1378–after 1438), who, according to the autobiography probably dictated to her son (see Sobecki 2015), listened to English works of devotion read to her by a priest. Yet others include the suspected heretic Joan Baker, who was quoted, in the early sixteenth century, as saying that “she cold here a better sermond at home in hur howse than any doctor or prist colde make at Powlis crosse or any other place”; Baker seems to be referring to a communal experience (cited in Hudson 1996,

²⁶ See Aveling (2016).

²⁷ Fox (2000), *passim*.

²⁸ Quoted by Perry (2007, 156), who states that the document in which this passage occurs was probably written for John Throckmorton, head of council for Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick (1382–1489).



132). Bishop Reginald Pecock (d. in or after 1459), who undertook a programme of vernacular composition to “counter the spread of heterodox ideas in Lollard books” (*ODNB*), saw the reading and rereading of such texts as permitting “the layman to memorize a fixed set of words which he could then repeat to others without distorting the information” (Spencer 1993, 41); Pecock himself refers—albeit as devotional practices less effective than the contemplation of images—to “the hearing of other men’s reading, or [...] hearing of his own reading,” thus “assum[ing] the *speaking* of books” (Aston 1984, 114, and references there cited; see also Swan 2010). In sum, we may have no tape-recordings from the Middle Ages, but indirectly we can re-create something of the sound-world in which their material remains originally existed.

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