

The long work of transcription

The writer of *Ancrene* ends his work admitting he would rather go on pilgrimage to Rome than begin the book again. We can appreciate his reluctance, for composition could have taken years. Subsequent scribes of *Ancrene* similarly devoted possibly a year, maybe more of their lives to copying this one work, depending on the scribe's other duties, and the availability of light, parchment, ink and transcription exemplars. Certainly the transcription of *Ancrene* represented a major commitment of time. Sometime in the 1220s, cramped and with eyes strained, the scribe finally finishes. In his hand is one book of 117 pages, measuring 21.5 cm by 14.8 cm. The writing is neat and plain, elaborate lettering minimal, no illustration. This is his gift to a group of women living as recluses nearby. Large enough to enable reading aloud by one woman to her fellow recluses, small and light enough to be held in her hands and pored over alone, this is Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS. 402. A later scribe makes a copy so tiny – 10 cm by 6.7 cm – it must have been made for solitary reading (the Caius manuscript). Later manuscripts attest to the changing nature of the audience: the elaborate, fourteenth-century Vernon manuscript weighs 48 lbs and was destined for the lectern; a fifteenth-century version of *Ancrene* changes the forms of address for a monastic or clerical audience. Modern print culture both mass produces for an anonymous audience, and replicates a 'work' that remains essentially unchanged by publication. In medieval scribal culture, however, one can almost say that there are as many versions of a 'work' as there are manuscripts of it – a radical idea when dealing with a work such as *Piers Plowman*.

hair and swung him upwards and threw him down again straight to the ground, and set her right foot on his rough neck . . . With this, she stamped hard with her foot on the demon at every sentence.

(Millett and Wogan-Browne, pp. 62–5 [A])

This is a favourite scene in lives of St Margaret. So real is the devil's presence that the anchoress lashes out at him physically, spitting, thrashing him, swinging the cross around her to fight him as St George fought the dragon. The fouler the temptation, the fouler her language, and if she cannot get rid of the devil's presence, she may resort to flagellation (4.1358–417, pp. 300–5). The violence of her actions against a bodiless reality strikes us as strange, even deranged behaviour, but in a life withdrawn from sensory stimulation and human contact, the immaterial world seems more real than the physical.

These most private aspects of the anchoress's life remain undiscussed, but the writer's pained delicacy suggests that some women indeed knew what it was to wrestle with desires for which they did not even have a name, stopping their tongues in the confessional with incomprehension added to shame. The solitary life brought every kind of temptation, brought the anchoress up against her darkest side.

Against these dark thoughts, the anchoress is urged to dwell on more positive images of sanctity, licensed fantasies in which she plays a role that gratifies without spiritual endangerment, such as that offered by St Margaret (4.795–6, p. 261).

þet milde meiden Margarete grap þet
grisliche þing, þet hire ne agras
nawiht, ant heteueste toc him bi þet
eateliche top ant hef him up ant duste
him dunriht to þer eorðe, ant sette
hire riht fot on his ruhe swire . . . Wið
þis, þa þudde ha o þe þurs feste wið
hire fot wið euchan of þeose word.

The gentle maiden Margaret seized
that frightful creature, who
frightened her not at all, and
grasped him firmly by his hideous

The inner temptations are the most deadly; if the anchoress feels no temptation, then she is most endangered. The seven deadly sins (pride, avarice, gluttony, lust, wrath, sloth, envy), so popular in medieval sermons (not to mention appearances in the Auchinleck manuscript, Gower's poetry, Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* and *Piers Plowman*), figure large in the writer's exposition. All wrongdoing can be subsumed under one of the seven deadlies (4.392–5, p. 232). His analysis is astute: did she lick her eyebrows to shape them? Pride. Did she damage a book she borrowed? Neglect, a form of sloth. Did she skim a little from her tithing? Avarice. There is no sin that does not originate in the seven deadly sins, and thus the writer's call to her is to recognise and identify herself in these pages, to name her wrongdoing. Realising the hopelessness of trying to name every tiny sin, he urges her to study the pages carefully, pausing longest where the analysis is most dense (4.253–5, pp. 222–3). These few pages contain a lifetime of self-examination, a never-ending probing of intention and testing of sincerity.

In keeping with many other religious texts and movements in the later medieval period, *Ancrene* measures piety in terms of affective depth and authenticity. Despite the prescription of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), requiring annual oral confession for all layfolk, the author nonetheless emphasises the 'inner' repentance of contrition rather than the 'outer' act of oral confession. Once more, we see emotion rather than doctrinal rectitude as the guarantee of authentic spirituality.

Empiricism derives all knowledge and concepts from the formative power of the senses, so it is arresting that *Ancrene* should urge sensory denial as the path to self-knowledge. In discussing the dangers of sight, the writer speaks of the subtlest danger, which is not of seeing but of being seen through the parlour window. Even if she is unaware of it, a woman who causes a man who looks at her to sin is responsible for his lapse (2.114–15, p. 103). What this amounts to is a call to the anchoress not to impress herself on anyone, to be invisible, as if by shutting out her own sensory awareness she diminishes in the sight of others. While this may seem to represent a desire not to exist, it is rather an attempt to turn all energy away from external sensation to internal. Sensory stimulation must be minimal in order for her life to remain focused inward.

The monastic ideal emphasises the community at every point, exclusion and solitude generally being considered a punishment. So the life of a recluse is an extraordinary existence; a self-imposed penance, it is a withdrawal for contemplation, for God shows himself most to those in solitude (3.391–3, p. 185). We are used today to identifying being alone with being fully oneself, yet anchoritic solitude leads to an abnegation of *singularite* – a form of pride – to a shedding of all the baggage of personality and ego-centric desire for uniqueness and specialness. The importance of the confessional from the thirteenth century onwards increasingly offers a model for introspection; we might even say that the structure of self-reflection, self-analysis and self-knowledge enabled by medieval cultural experience is essentially a Christian one.

Ancrene is written as a mirror of the soul in which the anchoress sees herself for who she really is, yet she also seeks to go beyond self-knowledge to lose self in God. Rousseau and Romantic ideals place the self anterior to society, but the anchoress eschews subjectivity and seeks a state of being prior to selfhood. As the primary bearer of cultural meaning, the medieval Church offered its adherents not simply the path of salvation, but also an ethic of being. What could compel young women to lead such a life? Perhaps some took vows in the absence of any marriage prospects, but for many, being a bride of Christ was preferable to becoming an earthly wife, an estate offering little opportunity for the depth of reflection gained by a lifetime of reading and prayer.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (1390s)

Widely considered the treasure of medieval English romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (henceforth, *Gawain*) is an elegantly structured and morally complex piece of storytelling. Existing in a unique manuscript (British Library, MS. Cotton Nero A. x), *Gawain* finishes the collection, and is preceded by *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Patience*. As such, the manuscript is perhaps the single most valuable document of fourteenth-century alliterative verse. At first blush, the poem seems to epitomise the values habitually associated with the genre: Arthurian romance; alliterative ‘Englishness’ (as opposed to the dominance of French rhyming schemes); rusticity (the dialect is associated with the north-west Midlands of England, and the setting involves Wales, Anglesey and the Wirral).

When Chaucer complains of the scarcity of rhymes in English (‘Complaint of Venus’, 80), he no doubt alludes to a popular sense of French as the ideal language of end-rhyme, with all its *-aunce* and *-esse* endings, and English as naturally suited to the internal structure of alliteration. That the two key alliterative poets – William Langland, and the unnamed *Gawain*-poet, who is believed to have authored the manuscript’s other poems – seem to come from provinces north and west of London has played an important role in the emergence of an implied opposition between Englishness, rusticity and alliterative form on the one hand, and French, court, London culture and end-rhyme on the other. With Chaucer’s only sustained use of alliterative poetry being *Sir Thopas*, whose ‘drasty rhyming is nat worth a toord’ (Chaucer, VII.930), and his Parson’s claim to be a Southerner, who knows nothing of *rum*, *ram*, *ruf*, it is easy enough to see how alliterative poetry has come to be understood as the ‘Other of Chaucerian verse’ (Hanna, p. 508 [Ci]).

The closer one looks at the whole spectrum of alliterative poetry, however, the harder it is to sustain the polarity except in the broadest way. *Richard the Redeless*, using an epithet for Richard II that resurrects the slur of Æthelræd the *Unrædig*, can hardly be called provincial; much of the alliterative poetry combined alliteration with end-rhyme; and alliterative prose further breaks down