

## JOHN LACY: A DOMINICAN CONTEMPLATIVE



It is not often recognised that members of Orders devoted to such activities as that of preaching were sometimes allowed to shut themselves up in anchorholds and to give themselves entirely to contemplation and to the work of their hands. But this was in fact the case in the later middle ages; and we find a pleasant example of it at the Dominican Priory of Newcastle-on-Tyne at the beginning of the fifteenth century in the person of Brother John Lacy.

Almost the only evidence concerning his existence and character is provided by the work of his own hands made during those long years of retirement behind his anchorite's grille. The work is a manuscript finely, and in sections profusely, illuminated, and containing quite a number of liturgical and devotional texts, such as the Hours of our Lady, the Office of the Dead, complete with plain chant, a treatise on confession, and the translation of the Epistle to Demetrias attributed falsely to St Jerome, the first part of which we print below.<sup>1</sup> As well as these English and Latin texts and an original rhymed exhortation on confession, there are numerous quotations from the Fathers scattered in the margins which reveal the penman as having been a man of learning and one devoted to the contemplative aspect of his vocation.

On the first leaf of this manuscript the following note is written in Latin: 'Pray for the soul of brother John Lacy anchorite of the Order of Preachers of Newcastle upon Tyne who gave [this volume] in the first instance to the reverend Roger Stonysdale, chaplain of St Nicholas's church at Newcastle upon Tyne, for the whole of his life, and after the death of the aforesaid Roger I will that it be given to the other priest of the said church according as the said Roger may dispose at the end of his life, and so from priest to priest in the same

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<sup>1</sup> The Manuscript is now in the possession of St John's College, Oxford (MS. 94), and it is to the librarian that we are indebted for permission to reproduce the picture of the recluse taken from the MS.

church it should remain so long as it lasts, to obtain prayers for the soul of the aforesaid John Lacy, anchorite: anno domini 1434'. This suggests the purpose brother John had in mind as he wrote the book with all the care and labour that it must have demanded. This Dominican anchorite, in fact, shows considerable satisfaction in the long and tedious piece of calligraphy that he had undertaken and completed. Here and there he asks for prayers for fra John Lacy 'the which wrote this book and limned it to his own use, and afterwards to others to excite devotion . . .' or proclaims in the margin that Lacy made and illuminated the work.

But he even goes so far as to draw an important-looking picture of himself behind his bars and praying to the crucifix at which he gazes and to which he is speaking. The image of the Crucified has been obliterated, as can be seen in the reproduction (*frontispiece*). The legend on the scroll has also been defaced, though the first words appear to be: '*Xre lacy fratris animae . . .*' He depicts himself in his Dominican habit and tonsure. The cell is two-storied, the upper window having a curtain drawn across, and the doorway at which he kneels is guarded by large bars painted blue, two vertical and three across. The cell is shown attached to what is seemingly a church or chapel. Probably these are the priory buildings; for the drawing of the remains of this priory in Brand's *History of Newcastle* shows a wall with the same norman windows at an angle to one another from which a small building has been taken down. At the foot of the picture Lacy has written the date 1420. So it seems that from the sixteenth folio on which this picture was painted until the end of the book, Br John Lacy spent in all fourteen years in completing his work of 151 folios.

Br Lacy is known to have written at least one other manuscript.<sup>2</sup> And besides this evidence of his living as a Dominican within the four walls of a contemplative cell, there are several references in wills and bequests of the time, either to the

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<sup>2</sup> In the catalogue of a library belonging to Henry Savile of Banks, Yorks, there is listed a book compiled by John Lacy, 'anchorite of the Order of Preachers at Newcastle' (British Museum Adds. 35213 no. 60). And it occurs again in other lists (British Museum MS. Harl. 1879 no. 170).

anchorhold itself attached to the Newcastle priory, or to John Lacy by name.<sup>3</sup>

It is particularly interesting to note that as a recluse he did not allow himself a purely leisurely time for prayers and spiritual exercises, though to judge from the rules for anchorites his day must have been fairly occupied in offices and devotions. Yet he must have spent a considerable time with his pen and brushes translating and copying and painting the many figures of saints, the heavy borders round the pages, and the illuminated initials, as well as the plain chant. Manual labour of some sort is an essential feature of contemplative life, and there is perhaps none more admirably suited to the relaxation of mind and body without undue distraction than that of the quill and the paintbrush. The monks, centuries before Br John Lacy, had discovered this, though it was not undertaken purely as something to do—they needed the manuscripts urgently. Whether Br John wrote with his quills just to occupy himself or because of some necessity is not clear; but he did abandon after a time the little pictures, for example, of saints, perhaps because he was not a successful artist and realised his own limitations.

As an insight into Br Lacy's character we may select two quotations he wrote in the margin. The first is on the contemplative life: 'Contemplative life is to bear constantly in mind the love of God and neighbour, but to rest from exterior action, to deepen the single desire for the Maker, so that nothing then remains to be done save to trample all cares under foot and in spirit to be on fire to see the face of the Creator himself'. And on another occasion he takes a text from St Gregory: 'Therefore the proof of love is realised in the deed. With God that man is more in his love who draws the greater number to his love.' These two quotations reveal the Dominican spirit which could countenance one of the brethren devoting himself to sitting in his cell praising God and writing with his quill. The Order is contemplative in its status and its members are to that extent to free themselves as far as possible

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<sup>3</sup> Lord Scroop in 1415 left 13s. 4d. to the Recluse at Newcastle Priory (*Foedera* IX p. 272). The Mayor, Roger Thornton, who died in 1429, left something also to the 'anker of Newcastle'. And cf. Durham Seals Nos. 648 and 649, and Welford, *History of Newcastle*.

from material cares and to give themselves to God wholeheartedly. And yet they are never to relax their intense desire to draw men to God that they too may be bathed in his love; this is the secret of the apostolate. It was not a foolish or unusual thing that Br John Lacy should box himself up in this small enclosure, but rather was it an integral part of his Dominican vocation.

The letter to Demetrius, the first section of which we print below, was copied out with care and beauty by Br John, though it is not clear whether he was responsible for the actual translation. Although he was under the impression that it was written by St Jerome and probably would have had nothing to do with it had he known the real author, the letter was written by Pelagius, who followed St Jerome and St Augustine in writing to that fortunate maiden on her dedication to the virginal life. No one should, however, lay the Epistle aside on account of the heresy of its author, for it begins here with the ninth chapter after the controversial discussion, and it contains nothing unorthodox. It was in fact regarded during the middle ages as a spiritual classic which in England became associated with Walter Hilton. It seems to have been translated in order to help anchorites like John himself and other religious and will be found to contain much of value.



## FROM THE EPISTLE OF ST JEROME TO DEMETRIADES<sup>1</sup>

fol. 127. Here beginneth the pistle of saint Jerome, the which he wrote to a maiden dematriade that had vowed chastity to our Lord Jesus Christ. And ye may understand and find in this pistle comfort and learning to all other, who that will take tent and heed to the understanding thereof, be he religious or secular, wedded man or woman or single or what the gree<sup>2</sup> he standeth in.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of St John Baptist, Oxford, MS. 94, folio 127. Not Jerome, but Pelagius; ch. ix of the original. Migne P.L. 30, col. 24, line 5.

<sup>2</sup> *gradus*, degree.

<sup>3</sup> Translator's prologue.