

ENGLISH DEVOTIONAL LITERATURE

BY

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THE short pieces of English devotional literature recently printed in the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT are examples from a class of writing not yet fully investigated either by the students of Middle English literature or by the lovers of Middle English devotion. Before the days of printing priests were obliged to write, translate or copy matter for the instruction of their penitents, where the possibilities of preaching were insufficient. Thus it comes about that the MSS of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are full of long and short pieces, often without attribution of authorship or with fictitious attribution. Anonymity was a virtue in those days—a sure refuge in time of trouble. The major works of English doctrinal, devotional and mystical literature have been or will be dealt with by Conrad Pepler, O.P. They came to be printed sooner or later, but a great number of secondary works have not yet seen the light. Of the complete ones many are of such uneven quality and of such great length that one could hardly encourage their publication in these days. Such is the *Chastising of God's Children*, a long treatise on the nature of and remedies for spiritual temptations not reprinted since Caxton's edition of 1492.¹

It has often been examined but not until recently has it transpired² that the whole of the first part, dealing in a simple way with the mystical life, is borrowed from Ruysbroeck's treatise on the Adornment of the Mystical Marriage. This amazing piece of plagiarism is followed up with extracts from a letter by one of St Bridget of Sweden's confessors, Bp Alfonse of Jaen, part of his contribution to the process of her canonisation, and with a chapter taken from that popular book the *Stimulus Amoris*, long attributed to St Bonaventure and translated during this period by Walter Hilton. So that in this treatise we have evidence of the influx of contemporary continental devotion into England at the end of the fourteenth century. The *Chastising* was written before 1400, for it was mentioned in a MS. in the possession of the prioress of Barking in 1401.

Ruysbroeck wrote his treatise after 1343 and in 1350 sent it to his friend John Tauler, who was struggling against the same heresies

¹ It is hoped to print some extracts in the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, and the E.F.T.S. will shortly edit the whole work.

² Cf. Miss H. E. Allen in her book on Rolle and elsewhere.

in the Rhineland as his friend had combated in the Netherlands. And Tauler read it and having a good memory seems unconsciously to have reproduced long passages in his famous second sermon for the first Sunday of Lent.

Before the century was out someone had brought the Ruysbroeck treatise to England, probably the Carthusians, for they were the great international exchange and mart of spiritual opinions and mystical writings. But possibly the Dominicans themselves brought John Tauler to England. However that may be the anonymous author of the *Chastising* busily got to work on the honey for his 'Religious Sister' to whom he addresses his work. Ruysbroeck was not writing specially about temptations but of the high matters of mystical progress in the soul, and the chapters on heresy are quite secondary to his purpose; but they fitted in well with the subject of the *Chastising* and it is extraordinary to see how the author popularises teaching from the *Adornment* which in itself is far beyond the scope of the English book. He does not seem to have realised Ruysbroeck's teaching of the different stages of mystical life, the three *modes* in which our Lord visits the soul—a doctrine that Hilton must have studied before writing the *Scale*. It may be found that Hilton's original contribution to fourteenth century spirituality—his planned treatise on the manner of spiritual progress—owes a great deal to Ruysbroeck.

The *Chastising* borrows its name from the passage in the *Ancren Riwle* concerning the mother's play with her child—and adapts it freely in chapters 1 and 5; but this little incident is of much older origin. St Aelred has one version of it in his treatise on the eremitical life. The thirteenth century author of the *Stimulus Amoris* has it and Hilton, translating the *Stimulus*, makes it live with fresh vitality and grace. Behind the very simple doctrine and illustration of the treatise there is thus a long tradition of medieval thought and feeling and while the author quotes Gregory and Bonaventure, Isidore and Cassian, Chrysostom and 'Thomas Aquin', only those competent in theological learning will be able to appreciate his unquoted allusions and the background of contemporary thought and controversy which condition his work. The chapters on heresy he has transferred from their setting in Flanders to his East Anglian milieu where Wycliffe and the Lollards between 1380 and 1400 caused such havoc. Hilton writing his *Scale* in the same period has bitter chapters on the same theme, and earlier when translating the *Stimulus Amoris* seems to have been deeply influenced by the dangers to the Church presented by the propagation of their doctrine.

In the last chapters of the *Chastising* there is an echo of one side

of these controversies, for the author adds a passage on the method of saying the Office and the difficulties and temptations common to those under this obligation. He tells his Religious that though they may use an English version of the Psalter and Matins of our Lady for devotion, they must not substitute the English for the Latin in the recital of that which is their duty. This indicates a reference to the controversy which was concluded by the Bishops' order of 1408 made against Wycliffe and the Lollards that unauthorised translations of the scriptures were not to be used³.

The author, not content with producing so comprehensive a work, seems also to have been responsible for translating or paraphrasing St Catherine of Siena's *Dialogo*, the *Orchard of Syon*, which de Worde printed; and the *Book of Maud*, a MS. translation of St Mechtild's *Revelations*⁴. Whether he knew William Flete's treatise 'De remediis contra tentaciones', also translated by Hilton, cannot yet be established until individual characteristics in the teachings on temptation can be sifted out from the commonplaces of so many medieval works on the subject, by means of critical editions⁵.

All this work of translation and popularisation is seen to be taking place in the last twenty years of the fourteenth century and especially in the East Midland and East Anglian counties. It occurs round the Carthusian convent of Beaulieu and the Augustinian priory of Thurgarton in Nottinghamshire, in or about Norwich and Cambridgeshire where the Dominicans and Franciscans had flourishing houses. It takes place amidst the hectic times of the Peasants' uprising, the Lollard revolts, the political wars, the summons of the Church to join in the continental 'crusade' against the anti-Pope in the Great Schism. Outward strife serves only to deepen the Church's passionate desire to forward the spiritual wellbeing of her children, and on every hand and by every means the Holy Spirit, then as now, pours out riches of divine wisdom and understanding to the perfecting of praise.

³ Deanesby Lollard Bible, p. 337 sq.

⁴ Miss Allen's opinion.

⁵ Fr. B. Hackett, O.S.A., is shortly publishing a critical text of W. Flete's treatise.