PRAYING WITH IMAGES

Some Medieval Advice

Anne Mouron

IN A PREVIOUS ARTICLE, I considered *The Manere of Good Lyvyng*, a fifteenth-century translation of the *Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem* ('A book for a sister on the way of living well') which in the past was widely attributed to St Bernard of Clairvaux.[1] This text, which gathers together 'some small lessons of religious conversation taken out of the writings of my forefathers'[2] and is aimed at a female audience, is remarkable for the absence of images, verbal or visual, which have so often been seen as characteristic of medieval texts written by or for women. *The Desert of Religion* is another fifteenth-century devotional text which has been 'taken from many books' (l. 922) but is in many ways a very different work.[3] It is a Middle English poem, not a prose text; it is a relatively brief work of only 943 lines; and in all likelihood is a text originally aimed at monks, not female religious. Its greatest difference from *The Manere of Good Lyvyng*, though, is the presence of illustrations on each and every folio of the poem.

The Desert of Religion

Unlike *The Manere of Good Lyvyng*, which is extant in one manuscript only, *The Desert of Religion* survives in three fifteenth-century manuscripts from the north of England, now in the British Library: MS Add. 37049,

I would like to thank Ronald Richenburg for his many stylistic suggestions. This article is best read in conjunction with the British Library online resource: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_37049, fols. 46^{r}–66^{v}.

[1] Anne Mouron, 'Praying without Images: Some Medieval Advice', *The Way*, 51/4 (October 2012), 91–101. And see *The Manere of Good Lyvyng: A Middle English Translation of Pseudo-Bernard's* Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem, edited by Anne Mouron (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

[2] *Manere of Good Lyvyng*, 41.

[3] The present author is preparing an edition of *The Desert of Religion* (based on BL MS Add. 37049) for the *Early English Text Society*. Henceforth, unless otherwise specified, references are made to this forthcoming edition. All translations from the Middle English are mine, and subsequent references are given in the text.

MS Stowe 39 and MS Cotton Faustina B vi, part ii, all of which contain illustrations.[4] Its title, *The Desert of Religion*, was given to the text by its first editor, Walter Hübner, in 1911.[5] This is entirely appropriate, for the concept of the desert (or wilderness) lies at the core of the poem, and is frequently repeated throughout, as the beginning of the text demonstrates:

> 'Lo, then, would I wander far off, and remain in the wilderness.' David, that was always a prophet, we hear him say thus in the Psalter: 'Fleeing, I fled from more and less, and dwelt in hard *wilderness*'. This *wilderness* well betokens the hard penance that men who flee from the world (that is the flesh) and grow in spiritual *wilderness* should feel, as religious men do who flee the flesh and follow their soul …. He went to dwell into the *desert*, as it is written in the Gospel: 'Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the *wilderness* to be tempted'. For the *desert* of religion is called a field of temptation. Religion that good men should hold may be called a *desert* by good reason. (ll. 1–24; my emphasis)

The poem, written in rhyming couplets, describes itself as a 'little treatise of … vices and vertues' (ll. 926–927) and is divided into 22 short sections which focus on the typical didactic concepts found in devotional manuals of the period: the seven virtues, the seven deadly sins, the creed, the ten commandments and so on. The ninth section of the poem, for example, deals with the seven deeds of mercy:

> Two are to feed the hungry and thirsty who need it with food and drink. The third is, always when there is need, to clothe those that are naked and without clothes; the fourth, as men understand, is to visit men lying in God's fetters; the fifth is to give shelter to the destitute and to poor pilgrims that walk far and wide; the sixth is, as it is found in books, to visit prisoners in chains; and the seventh is to bury the dead. (ll. 411–423)

But *The Desert of Religion* also emphasizes monastic preoccupations such as humility, pride, *accidia* (a species of sloth) and the sins of the tongue, all of which are given particular prominence in the poem.

[4] For the provenance of MS Add. 37049, see James Hogg, 'Unpublished Texts in the Carthusian Northern Middle English Religious Miscellany British Library MS Add. 37049', in *Essays in Honour of Erwin Stürzl on His Sixtieth Birthday*, edited by James Hogg, Salzburger Studien zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 10 (Salzburg: Institut für englische Sprache und Literatur, 1980), volume 1, 241–284 (here 252–258). For MS Stowe 39 and MS Cotton Faustina B vi, see Anthony Ian Doyle, 'A Survey of the Origins and Circulation of Theological Writings in English in the 14th, 15th, and early 16th centuries', unpublished PhD. thesis, Cambridge University, 1953, volume 2, 192–193.

[5] 'The Desert of Religion', edited by Walter Hübner, *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 126 (1911), 56–74.

The Desert of Religion says that it is 'taken from many books'. The chief source is the *Speculum vitae* which, in spite of its Latin title, is a Middle English rendering of Frère Laurent's Old French *Somme le roi*, 'an international spiritual classic'.[6] Other texts include *The Prick of Conscience*, a popular didactic, devotional and encyclopaedic poem, and Richard Rolle's *Emendatio vitae*, a Latin text which offers its readers 'twelve stages or "steps" of the spiritual life, from conversion to contemplation'.[7]

Because of the formulaic, catechetical nature of its material and its great reliance on the *Speculum vitae*, *The Desert of Religion* does not offer much information on the identity of its author. The only possible reference in the text to the author-compiler is that 'a holy man sent it to his friend(s)' (l. 928), and the poem's Prologue alludes to 'men of religion' (l. 10), implying that the author-compiler and his primary audience were probably such men themselves.[8] The very first line of the poem, '*Elongaui fugiens, et mansi in solitudine*' (Psalm 54:8), seems to refer to a monastic authorship. In his life of St Stephen, the twelfth-century prior of Grandmont, Gerard Ithier, explains this verse as applying to monks:

> The Blessed Stephen was asked whether he was a canon or a monk or a hermit? … A monk is indeed said to be alone or a keeper of himself; he is alone because in spiritual solitude he prepared for himself a place to inhabit with God, so that he could in all truthfulness say: *Elongavi fugiens in solitudine et mansi* (Ps LIV).[9]

The insistence on the concept of 'desert' or 'wilderness' in *The Desert of Religion* may more specifically hint at a Carthusian authorship. Although the twelfth-century Renaissance generally emphasized a return to the life of the Desert Fathers, as Clifford Hugh Lawrence noted, 'it was the

[6] Ralph Hanna, 'The Yorkshire Circulation of *Speculum vitae*', in *Design and Distribution of Late Medieval Manuscripts in England*, edited by Margaret Connolly and Linne R. Mooney (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), 279. See *Speculum vitae: A Reading Edition*, edited by Ralph Hanna, 2 vols (Oxford: OUP, 2008), introduction, lxx. *Speculum vitae* is organized around five sets of items: the seven petitions of the *Pater noster*, the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, the seven deadly sins, the seven virtues and the seven beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount. And see Frère Laurent, *La Somme le roi*, edited by Édith Brayer and Anne-Françoise Leurquin-Labie (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 2008).

[7] See *The Prick of Conscience*, edited by James H. Morey (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2012); Richard Rolle, *Emendatio vitae, orationes ad honorem nominis Ihesu*, edited by Nicholas Watson, Toronto Medieval Latin Texts, 21 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1995), 20.

[8] The use of the first person plural pronoun at regular intervals within the work seems to indicate that the author-compiler includes himself among its religious audience.

[9] *Vita S. Stephani auctore Gerardo priore Grandimontensi septimo*, in *Patrologia Latina*, edited by Jean-Paul Migne, volume 204 (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1855), col. 1024B–C (my translation).

Carthusians who really succeeded in translating the ideal of the desert hermits into a monastic fortress of stone'.[10] The twelfth-century Cistercian William of St Thierry bears witness to this claim at the beginning of *The Golden Epistle*, which he addressed to the Carthusians of Mont-Dieu:

> The Brethren of Mont-Dieu introduce[d] to our Western darkness and French cold the light of the East and that ancient fervor of Egypt for religious observance—the pattern of solitary life and the model of heavenly conduct.[11]

It should also be noted that the Carthusians themselves regarded their monasteries as *heremi*, or 'deserts'.[12] If it is true that the meaning of 'desert' as a religious house is not exclusively confined to the Carthusians, they are certainly the order which insists on it most.

Since the *Speculum vitae* and *The Prick of Conscience* were attributed to Richard Rolle, since one section of *The Desert of Religion* was excerpted from Rolle's *Emendatio vitae* and since the poem contains an image of Richard Rolle, some scholars have suggested that *The Desert of Religion* was the work of a 'follower of Richard Rolle'.[13] Although this is certainly a possibility, there is no way of knowing one way or the other.

If *The Desert of Religion* was simply made up of 22 sections exploring devotional subjects with conceptual lists, as the earlier quotation about the seven deeds of mercy illustrates, it would hardly be different from the numerous didactic manuals written after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. *The Desert of Religion* certainly includes these lists, but it offers its reader much more besides. Of particular interest is its presentation of conventional didactic material within an allegorical framework and with the help of two series of illustrations: tree-diagrams, and depictions of saints and hermits—illustrations which feature in all three manuscripts of the poem. In other words, and unlike *The Manere of Good Lyvyng*, *The Desert of Religion* provides its reader with an abundance of images. This may at first be surprising in a poem written for Carthusian monks,

[10] Clifford Hugh Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, 3rd edn (Harlow: Pearson, 2001), 156.
[11] William of St Thierry, *The Golden Epistle: A Letter to the Brethren at Mont Dieu*, translated by Theodore Berkeley (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1980 [1971]), 9.
[12] This is already the case in the oldest acts of the Grande Chartreuse. See *Recueil des plus anciens actes de la Grande Chartreuse (1086–1196)*, edited by Bernard Bligny (Grenoble: privately printed, 1958), 3.
[13] Peter Kidd, 'Codicological Clues to the Patronage of Stowe MS. 39: A Fifteenth-Century Illustrated Nun's Book in Middle English', *Electronic British Library Journal* (2009), 9 n. 23.

but one will note that, in its three components (text, tree-diagrams and illustrations of praying hermits), the poem embodies the three stages of the *lectio divina*: *lectio* (the text), *meditatio* (the tree-diagrams) and *oratio* (the praying hermits).

Praying with Images

Tree-Diagrams

Although *The Desert of Religion* begins with a quotation from the Psalms emphasizing the concept of wilderness and the desert, the Prologue ends with a different verbal image, that of the forest:

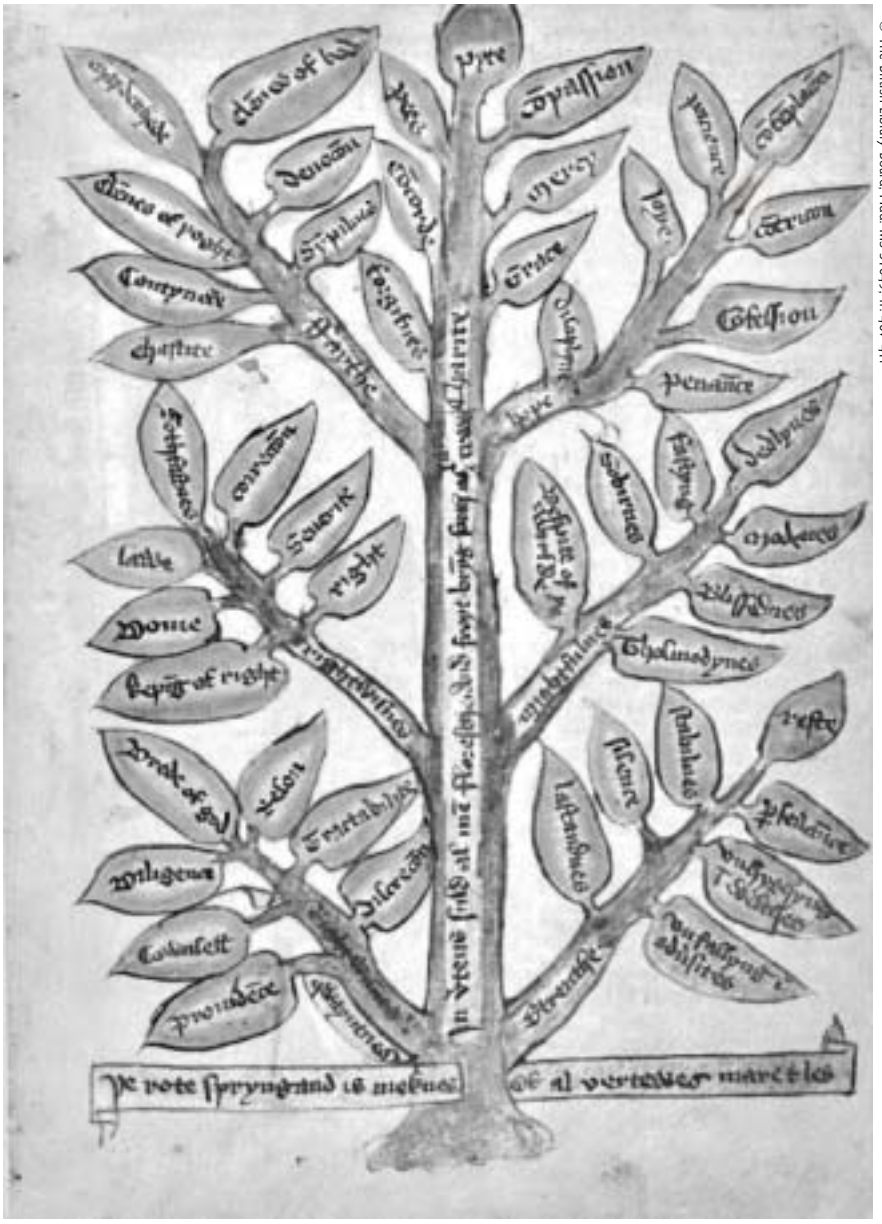
> In this spiritual forest trees grow with branches and boughs: some grow to heaven and some down to hell, some to stand and some to be felled; some grow in a spiritual enclosure, and some to be removed by digging with the turf (ll. 43–48).

It is worth observing that, from the early Middle Ages onwards, the desert and the forest came to be regarded in the same way, that is, as an area of solitude where life was hard. Jacques Le Goff, for example, mentions that, according to Columban's biographer Jonas of Bobbio (*c.* 640), the Irish saint was offered a place to live in the Vosges which he 'liked … because it was in the middle of a *forest*: "a vast *desert*, a harsh solitude, a rocky terrain"'.[14] In this view, therefore, these two *loci*, the desert and the forest, are not mutually exclusive.

In *The Desert of Religion*'s forest, twenty trees, good and bad, are depicted, including a Tree of Virtues and a Tree of Sins, a Tree of Humility and a Tree of Pride, a Tree of Abuses in Religious Places and a Tree of Abuses in the World, a Tree of the Creed, a Tree of the Seven Sacraments and of the Seven Virtues, and a Tree of the Seven Deeds of Mercy. Indeed, apart from the Prologue and Epilogue, every other section of *The Desert of Religion* begins and ends with a reference to a tree, as the following lines illustrate:

> The first tree of this beautiful forest is the tree of virtues which is always pure and firmly plants its roots in meekness. Of this tree virtues sprout forth and spring upwards and spread its leaves, and they grow both with branches and boughs. (ll. 49–54)

[14] Quoted in Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1992), 51 (my emphasis).



The Tree of Virtues, *Add. MS 37049, fol. 47r*

The section ends thus:

> This is the tree of which we hear that David speaks in the Psalter: 'The righteous is like a tree that stands beside the course of water streams and he gives his fruit in the appropriate time; his leaf shall neither fade nor wither' (ll. 83–88).

As this last quotation shows, the familiar image of the tree is not taken from everyday life, but from the scriptures (Psalm 1:3). In *The Desert of Religion*, this allegorical forest or verbal image is complemented on the recto folio by a tree-diagram, which usually lists in its leaves the concepts mentioned in the text itself. Such tree-diagrams are obvious mnemonic devices and are certainly not unique to *The Desert of Religion*. They are encountered elsewhere, but mostly in Latin, rather than the vernacular.

In *The Desert of Religion*, tree-diagrams serve two functions: allowing readers to memorise essential doctrine more easily, but also enabling them to meditate on a particular subject. Indeed, readers are encouraged to develop their own reflections according to other works they may have read or heard, sermons they have listened to and images they have seen in church painted on walls or inscribed on stained-glass windows. In other words, the tree-diagram provides readers with links that their memory can access, as though clicking on a hyperlink. The third tree-diagram, for example, lists (without any acknowledgement) the twelve degrees of humility from Bernard of Clairvaux's *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, a text which attained immediate fame and may very well have been known to the poem's original readers.[15]

Moreover, if one compares the section on the seven deeds of mercy in *The Desert* with their treatment in the *Speculum vitae*—the source text for this particular section—one sees that in the *Speculum* the deeds of mercy are first named, but then each one is examined separately.[16] In *The Desert of Religion*, however, readers are only given the list. It is up to them to formulate their own meditation. This essential participation by the reader makes each and every reading of the poem unique to that reader.

[15] *The Desert of Religion*, MS Add. 37049, fol. 49^{r}. For Bernard's text, see *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, in St Bernard, *Tractatus et opuscula*, edited by Jean Leclercq and H. M. Rochais (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1963), 1–59.

[16] For the first deed of mercy, for example, see *Speculum vitae*, volume 1, 253, ll. 7563–7582.

Saints and Hermits

The Desert of Religion also includes a second series of illustrations, mostly, but not exclusively, of saints and hermits. The first tree, for example, is aptly illustrated by Paul the First Hermit, whose life has been written notably by Jerome and later by Jacobus de Voragine in *The Golden Legend*.[17] Paul the First Hermit, or Paul of Thebes, is believed to have withdrawn to the desert in the fourth century to escape persecution. In the illustration accompanying the first tree, Paul is praying in his cave and looking towards a raven which brings him bread. The whole illustration is framed by the following words:

> For forty years, I dwelled in the wilderness in a cave, where God of his great goodness granted me to have each day half a loaf of bread which he sent me by a raven. There, my clothes were more and less made out of leaves that protected me from the elements (fol. 46^{v}).

In the original, this framing-text took the form of eight lines of rhyming couplets. As these are written in the first person, the reader is obviously meant to identify with Paul and to become a hermit like him by meditating on the concepts listed in the text and tree-diagram opposite.

The allegorical framework of the forest, the tree-diagrams and the illustrations of saints and hermits: these three features of the poem provide readers with a virtual representation of themselves as hermits in the forest. In other words, in *The Desert of Religion*, the very images introduced in the poem redirect the readers' thoughts towards God in order to cut them off from the secular world. One could even go further and claim that in *The Desert of Religion* the use of images actually negates the world altogether.

The Manuscripts

I should like to conclude with a brief look at one of the individual manuscripts of *The Desert of Religion*, MS Add. 37049. The poem, text and images are spread out on the verso and recto folios for each section of the poem apart from the Prologue and Epilogue. The verso folio is

[17] See Jerome, *Vita S. Pauli primi eremitae*, in *Patrologia Latina*, edited by Jean-Paul Migne, volume 23 (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1845), cols. 17–28C; Bazyli Degórski, *Edizione critica della 'Vita Sancti Pauli primi eremitae' di Girolamo*, dissertation, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, Rome, 1987; Jacobus de Voragine, *De sancto Paulo heremita*, in *Legenda aurea*, edited by Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, 2 vols (Florence: SISMEL, 1998), volume 1, xv, 141–142.

Paul the First Hermit, *Add. MS 37049, fol. 46v*

divided vertically into two halves, with the text on the left and the image of the hermit or saint on the right; the recto folio is taken up entirely with a tree-diagram.[18]

Although the text of the poem and the tree-diagrams change very little from one manuscript to the next, the same does not hold true for the illustrations of saints and hermits. A consideration of the first section of the poem, the first tree with Paul the First Hermit, may serve as an example. In MS Add. 37049, unlike the other two manuscripts, above the depiction of Paul the First Hermit there is an angel holding a shield with the five wounds of Christ. The illustration contains two distinct areas: the hermit in his cave and heaven above. There is an obvious interaction between the two as the angel presents the hermit (and the reader) with an image for devotion and meditation. This intervention of the heavenly realm may be the result of the hermit's solitude—throughout the poem the hermit is never represented with a fellow hermit—but at the same time, as represented in MS Add. 37049, he is never really alone. The numerous angels featuring in the upper half of the verso folio in many other sections of the poem in this manuscript show that the hermit is part of a spiritual community. If in *The Manere of Good Lyvyng* the addressee is told to 'forget [her] own people and [her] father's house'[19] and is provided with a new and spiritual family (as I noted in my earlier article),[20] in *The Desert of Religion*, readers are repeatedly advised to leave the world for the solitude of the desert, but at the same time they are also provided with a spiritual community to make up for the loss of the secular one.

Focusing on God

When one compares *The Manere of Good Lyvyng* and its lack of everyday images with *The Desert of Religion* and its numerous illustrations, one may be reminded of two texts by two of the better known Middle English mystics: the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* and Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection.* Alastair Minnis underlines the contrast between these two works, with one text strongly advising the absence of images (*Cloud*

[18] MS Cotton Faustina B vi follows the same layout. MS Stowe 39 divides the verso folio horizontally.
[19] Psalm 44:14. Although not translated in the *The Manere of Good Lyvyng*, this verse is actually quoted in the *Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem.* See *Patrologia Latina*, edited by Jean-Paul Migne, volume 184 (Paris, 1862), col. 1214D.
[20] Mouron, 'Praying without Images', 99–100.

of Unknowing) and the other one advocating their presence (Hilton's *Scale*).[21]

However, in *The Manere of Good Lyvyng* and *The Desert of Religion* the situation is perhaps best looked at in a different way. For if *The Manere of Good Lyvyng* has no visual illustrations, it has a number of verbal images taken from patristic and scriptural sources rather than from everyday life. These are images that separate readers from the world and focus their attention on God. On the other hand, *The Desert of Religion*, in all three manuscripts, offers the reader a multiplicity of images; but these are not taken from everyday life either. These images also isolate the hermit-reader from the world and, in MS Add. 37049, offer opportunities for devotion and ultimately a spiritual community to which to belong.

Possibly the question, in both *The Manere of Good Lyvyng* and *The Desert of Religion*, is not so much the presence or absence of images, verbal or material, but rather one of control. By controlling the nun's or hermit's environment, the text facilitates what *The Desert* calls the 'austerity of strict living' (l.32), for as the poem's Prologue indicates by referring to another verbal image, which goes back at least to Cassian, 'For when man enters the religious life through devotion, he is as a man who should go into the field to fight against the Fiend' (ll.12–15).

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[21] Alistair Minnis, 'Affection and Imagination in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*', *Traditio*, 39 (1983), 323–366, at 324. Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and the *Cloud* author are known as three of the Middle English mystics. The other two are Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. For an assessment of all five, see Marion Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics: Games of Faith* (London: Longman, 1993).