

Nicole D. Smith. Ed. *A Christian Mannes Bileeve Edited from Washington, Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections, MS 4*. Middle English Texts, vol. 60 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2021). Pp. liv + 63 + 4 plates. ISBN 978-3-8253-4811-3. €40.

Alexandra Barratt and Susan Powell. Eds. *The Fifteen Oes and Other Prayers Edited from the Text Published by William Caxton (1491)*. Middle English Texts, vol. 61 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2021). Pp. xxxvi + 54 + 1 figure. ISBN 978-3-8253-4851-9. €44.

These two slim volumes are welcome additions to the Middle English Text series. Both editions are of religious vernacular prose texts: *The Fifteen Oes and Other Prayers*, a collection of fifteen prayers addressed to Jesus (each beginning ‘O Ihesu’, after which the collection is named) edited here with the prayers (in Latin and English) which Caxton printed alongside them; and *A Christian Mannes Bileeve*, a commentary on the Apostles’ Creed which incorporates unique lyrics in Latin and Middle English, published here for the first time. Taking these volumes together, a reader is struck by a number of shared features: both texts (as edited here) were clearly influenced by the tradition of affective piety and as such are highly emotive, visual, and meditative in nature; both have important connections with women readers, owners, and patrons; and while *The Fifteen Oes* focus exclusively on Christ’s passion and wounds, *A Christian Mannes Bileeve* shares this emphasis on Christ’s suffering. Scholars and students with an interest in religious and aristocratic women’s devotional practices, the history of emotions, and the public and private religious landscape of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries will find these texts illuminating and absorbing.

A Christian Mannes Bileeve (CMB) is a sophisticated commentary on each of the twelve articles of the Apostles’ Creed. Nicole Smith dates

the text to the first half of the fourteenth century. Her edition comprises an informative Introduction divided into subsections on the text itself, the manuscripts and provenance, language and localisation (which includes Smith's linguistic profiles for two manuscripts not mapped in *LALME*), a useful history of the Creed in medieval England, the structure of CMB, its date and context, the lyrics uniquely incorporated into the commentary on Article IV, and justification on the base manuscript used for her edition (for which Smith provides the siglum Lc). In using this manuscript, Smith's stated aim is to 'present a text of CMB that best represents the earliest form of the work that can be deduced from the surviving textual evidence' (p. li). Based on the accuracy of Latin transcriptions (in terms of grammar and orthography) from the apparent sources, Smith argues that Lc is the earliest manuscript: it also differs from the other three surviving manuscripts in that it appears to be the most northerly, and seemingly copied over several generations (p. xlvi). Interestingly, three of the four manuscripts were owned by aristocratic women or female religious communities. After the text itself text itself (787 lines), an Apparatus follows recording substantive variant readings against the other three manuscript (for which there are many), a generous Commentary, Glossary, and Bibliography. Images of each of the four surviving manuscripts in the Introduction is a nice addition.

As outlined in Smith's Introduction, the Apostles' Creed was an 'integral part of the lives of clergy and laity in its use in the Divine Offices' (p. xxxvii) and was one of the core texts Christians were advised to memorise in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), along with the Pater Noster and Ave Maria (p. xxxviii). In CMB, each article is first written in Latin and then paraphrased in English, after which a vernacular prose commentary follows. The themes of penance and the nature of man are particularly prominent throughout the commentaries. The commentaries vary in length from 60 words to 6,211, and draw on a

rich meld of works by the Church Fathers, Scripture, poetry, and exempla. The commentary for Article IV, which focuses on Christ's passion, is the longest, making up over half of the whole text. In her Introduction, Smith provides helpful analyses of each commentary: she pays special attention to Article IV, noting that the commentary draws on 'a range of texts produced in the years of early Christianity through the fourteenth century, including but not limited to works by Origen, Augustine, John of Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Isidore of Seville, Herbert of Losinga, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Robert Holcot' (p. xli). This commentary also includes three unique lyrics: in a discreet section of her Introduction, Smith illuminates how these lyrics function in a prose context to direct readers in a personal, meditative journey towards love of God. Smith's edition will enable and encourage further scholarly study of the textual reception both of the Creed and the CMB's 'literary contribution to the homiletic and theological expositions' of this text in the fourteenth century (p. xxxix).

Alexandra Barratt and Susan Powell's edition of *The Fifteen Oes and Other Prayers* is another important contribution to the study of religious vernacular prose. As noted, the *Fifteen Oes* were fifteen prayers of varying length addressed to Jesus, focusing on his Passion and his wounds. Barratt and Powell contend that they originated in England, emerging in the second half of the fourteenth century (p. xvi) from a monastic background, given the text's incorporation of Scripture, liturgy, and pseudo-Bernadine texts (p. xviii). Some copies include an initial rubric which reveals the 'prayers' visionary origins and their special properties' (x). These 'special properties' likely contributed to their popularity: reciting them daily for a year, along with the Pater Noster and Ave Maria, would equal the number of wounds Christ received (5475); moreover, such recitation would even earn the speaker an indulgence (for instance, fifteen relatives released from purgatory). Barratt and Powell

note that although this aspect of the prayers was ‘regularly condemned by the Church’, they remained hugely popular (p. xi): they stress throughout the Introduction that Caxton’s version does not print this rubric ‘nor list of privileges nor promised indulgences’ (p. xvi). Also included in this edition are the Latin and English prayers printed alongside the *Fifteen Oes* (translations of the Latin prayers are included in the Commentary).

This edition should excite readers for a number of reasons: Caxton’s edition was commissioned by two royal women, Lady Margaret Beaufort and Elizabeth of York (Henry VII’s mother and wife respectively), and so offers insight into female lay devotion and their relationship with Caxton; enormously popular throughout Europe from the fifteenth century, the *Fifteen Oes* seem to have first appeared in English manuscripts (or manuscripts produced for an English audience) in Latin and latterly in English; and although their authorship is no longer attributed to St Birgitta of Sweden, Barratt and Powell deftly demonstrate the prayers’ connections with Syon Abbey (England’s only Birgittine house). As with CMB, the prayers are powerfully visual and emotional, well demonstrated by the opening of the Fifteenth Oe:

O blessed Ihesu, verai and true plenteuous vyne: haue mynde of thy passion & habundaunt shedyng of blode that thou sheddest most plenteuously, as yf it had be threst out of a rype cluster of grapes, whan they pressed thy blessid body as a ripe cluster vpon the pressour of the crosse (ll. 143–46)

Barratt and Powell reveal this web of intersecting ideas and interests in a succinct Introduction divided into five sections: The Fifteen Oes, The Latin Oes, The Oes in English, The Context of Caxton’s *Fifteen Oes*, and their Editorial Procedure. Across these five sections, they trace the origins, authorship, sources, and textual history of these prayers. This is followed by the text (pp. 1–16), a short Apparatus, a Commentary (which

includes translations of the Latin prayers), two Appendices (a hypothetical reconstruction of the Latin *Oes*, untranslated, and the index to Wynkyn de Worde's edition); a Glossary of common liturgical terms and a general Glossary; and lastly, an Index and Bibliography. In their discussion of the translation of the Latin *Oes* to English, Barratt and Powell outline instances where the Latin syntax has at times confused the translator, resulting in some mistranslation in the Middle English (xxii): for this reason readers would be wise to compare the English with the Latin reconstruction printed in Appendix 1.

Given the length, the visual and emotional intensity of these prayers, and the useful critical apparatus of this edition, the *Fifteen Oes* would make excellent texts to use in the classroom when teaching about late medieval lay devotion, religious prose, affective piety, the history of emotions, or anti-Semitism in the later Middle Ages (the editors note the English translation 'adds two more hostile references' about the Jews to the three already present in the Latin *Oes* [p. xxiii]). Scholars interested in the relationship between manuscript and print, and the tradition of gifting manuscripts, will also find this edition useful.

In sum, both volumes reviewed here will no doubt be of great interest and use to scholars of late medieval vernacular prose, and should also generate interest in those not yet acquainted with this fertile ground for research.

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