
The phrase which inspired the title of this book, Cher alme, is found in the last text treated and translated in this book, on Purgatory: “And so you, dear soul who reads this writing [Epur ceo, vus cher alme qe ceste escrit lirez], think bravely about the seven torments and avoid them, keeping yourself clean from sin; those who do not shall come to wretchedness without end and without hope of escape, for they shall never see God or have joy” (pp. 743–744). This phrase can indeed be taken to be programmatic for a book that offers translations of “texts of Anglo-Norman piety” that all (to a greater or lesser extent) deal with the key issues of medieval piety and morality: virtue and vice, hope and fear, joy and sorrow, and heaven and hell. Although these issues may not be on the mind of the modern “soul,” the devotional French of medieval England in this collection will certainly inform and delight him too.

The volume, published by the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, is the first Occasional Publication in the French of England Translation Series (FRETS), which collects hitherto unedited and untranslated works of Anglo-Norman origin (now in libraries in Cambridge, Oxford, London, Dublin, and Paris, among others). By publishing these medieval texts for the first time, Tony Hunt c.s. not only replenish the still under-studied field of the French of England with fresh source material, but also provide medieval scholarship with new key texts on the basis of which existing interpretations of medieval doctrine and devotion may be complemented. This series will furthermore be welcomed by those contemporary (Christian) audiences having what Philip Sheldrake calls “an ever-increasing hunger for spirituality.” The book will indeed be a treat for all those interested in the “beliefs, hopes, and fears” of medieval men and women, as well as their own.

The vernacular texts in this volume are all pastoral and pious in nature. They deal with matters ranging from doctrinal and confessional instruction to private prayers and devotional practice, and their intended audiences may include literate as well as illiterate and lay as well as religious individuals. The texts are grouped into six thematic fields: the tenets of the faith (Dialogue of Father and Son; Pater noster); Marian texts (Young Mary, Thirteen joys, Assumption); the passion (Mary’s lament, The minstrels’ passion); private prayers (Harley prayers, A woman’s prayer); vices and confession (Seven deadly sins; A man’s confession, On penance, The Commandments); and virtues and rewards.
(Three vows, The beatitudes, Purgatory). These works are presented in their original language with a modern English translation, while a general introduction, written by Henrietta Leyser, places the texts and themes in their historical contexts: After William Duke of Normandy conquered England in 1066, French for several centuries remained the prestige vernacular but a significant number of newcomers learned English while many of the native-born learned Anglo-Norman; in the thirteenth century a wealth of texts written in the French of England began to appear; bishops returning from Lateran IV undertook measures to instruct the priesthood and encourage devout practice among the body of the faithful; the new religious orders contributed further to the care of souls by preaching and teaching; new pastoral texts spread the knowledge of the tenets of the faith (e.g., the Creed, the seven sacraments) while not avoiding complex theological problems (e.g., the nature of the Eucharist); and these texts expressed the need for schematization, memorization, and a deeper understanding by their frequent use of numbers, lists, and symbols.

This collection’s greatest virtue is that it makes more readily available works from the twelfth and thirteenth century. It offers vivid glimpses of medieval religious and devotional culture in a clear, accessible, and historically sound way. We can now read, for example, how the teacher Adam of Exeter addressed a female religious and her companions in need of personal devotional material (the fact that the text has been partially corrected for a male addressee thereby indicating the demand of another audience); how a short meditation on Mary’s fifteen joys (only thirteen here) becomes a moving prayer from a devout woman to her “sweetest Lady”; how a poem on the Assumption expresses a deep personal affirmation of faith in the Virgin’s purity; how a prose treatise on the sins allows glimpses of daily life (what to do when feeling bored in church …); and how in a dialogue between the Virgin and Jesus first the voice of Jesus takes over and then the narrator’s, resulting in “an emotional piece, containing a good deal of direct speech.” We learn, furthermore, such “essential” truths as the fact that “He who made body and soul (…) can very well raise up the flesh and put the soul back into the body”; that “God would not have been pleased with Saint Mary’s virginity without her humility”; and that “in the heart of man is all the dearth of the soul.” Striking in several of these texts is the constant need for definition (e.g., “Compunction seeks the reason for a malady, confession shows it, satisfaction gets rid of it”); the use of analogies (e.g., “to be saved or damned—so it is when a man is storm-tossed in the sea and is in terror of drowning”); and, most of all, the richness of emotions (love, desire, delight, sorrow, anger, horror) and images (fires, food, bees, donkeys, mirrors, eyes) that reveal to us the deepest motives and movements of the medieval mind.