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Textual Salvation 2.0: Literacy, Vernacular Theology, and the Place of *facere quod in se est* in Late-Medieval England

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I

That area of human activity, which is commonly designated as ‘reading’, has already been explored extensively in a number of disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.¹⁾ The amount of scholarly attention reading has received is scarcely surprising, considering that since time immemorial, humanity has attempted to achieve a wide array of objectives through reading. Pleasure and comfort are probably the most popular experiences that readers of the past and present, as well as East and West, have sought. Readers have also felt urged to attain knowledge, both rational and revelatory; continue with emotional education, even after they have grown up; and engage in solitary yet deep, free, and fanciful introspection by interacting with texts they read or heard read to them. With so much academic effort already spent on investigating all kinds of aspects relating to our audio-visual experience of black stains on vellum, parchment, stone tablet, papyrus, or indeed computer screens, tablets and smart phones, it almost seems as if there is nothing more to be explored about reading.²⁾

However, the Western Middle Ages still present uncharted territory that

awaits exploration, offering us glimpses into the private and public effects that the activity of reading may have had on people during that time. What makes the medieval reader's experiences distinct is that they were primarily religious, inexplicably bound up as they were in prayer, meditation, and contemplation, i.e. mental exercises that they believed would lead ultimately to communication with the divine. Needless to say, reading was also a means of entertainment, and medieval people enjoyed reading entertaining narratives such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Arthurian romances, and a variety of comical, bawdy tales. However, as numerous mystical texts and religious texts attest, medieval readers, especially those with a devotional mindset, were also encouraged to strive for opportunities, however brief, to enter into blissful and ecstatic dialogue with God, so that they could feel spiritually united with Him. Therefore, reading devotional texts, such as *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (1410), Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* (1380s), or various saints' lives, enabled these readers to transcend the mundane sphere of their lives, and catch glimpses, however fleeting, of heavenly bliss, when they saw Christ talking to them in intimate affection, or blood gushing out of His wound, still fresh and warm.

But here a few questions naturally arise: what was the nature of the heaven, which they were exhorted to envision during their reading practices, promised in these texts? How easy, or difficult, might it have been for them to imagine themselves being blessed with heavenly vision or divine grace? In an age when more and more people were becoming literate, was the gate to heaven open to every person who was capable of reading? Or were encounters with God and divine grace unevenly distributed, depending, say, on one's social class or linguistic competence? These are all big questions, but in this paper, I will be considering how one late-medieval English

devotional text, namely, *The Prickyng of Love* (c. 1380), might have allowed contemporary vernacular readers to experience divine grace and salvation. In doing so, I will be conducting a comparison between the Middle English text in question and its Latin source text, the *Stimulus Amoris* (c. 1300), in order to consider whether there are any differences in the ways the original and the translated texts conceptualize hopes of salvation for their respective readers.

II

Among the vast corpus of medieval devotional writings are those texts that enjoin medieval readers, both clerical and lay, to meditate and contemplate on God's love and suffering, and, after they are aroused by uncontrollable feelings of sympathy and love, to be spiritually united with Him. A number of texts that belong to this genre, aptly called 'manuals of contemplation' in modern scholarship, more often than not promise readers that God will grant grace to those who 'do what is in them' – in other words, if they do their best. Notable examples include the above-mentioned, late-medieval devotional text, *The Prickyng of Love*, translated into English in the late fourteenth century from the Latin original, *Stimulus Amoris*, composed around 1300 by the Franciscan James of Milan; and *A Ladder of Foure Ronges*, a fifteenth-century Middle English translation of the instructions on meditation, *Scala Claustralium*, written in the twelfth century by the Carthusian monk, Guigo II.³⁾ At first sight, there seems to be little in this claim that is extravagant, but the idea that one can attain to divine grace if one does their best was, as we shall see below, a theologically fraught one throughout the Middle Ages, and it comes to assume a new meaning when brought out of its place of origin, i.e. Latin scholasticism, into the world of vernacular readership.

Ever since late antiquity, the question of salvation was one of the most important theological issues that preoccupied the Catholic Church. Generations of theologians fiercely debated whether humans can be saved through their own efforts, or, whether, since their nature was irremediably harmed by Adam's Fall, salvation is achieved solely through divine grace. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) became one of the driving forces that made this debate a central issue of medieval Christian theology by arguing that since the nature of humanity is hopelessly and irrevocably tainted with original sin, the salvation of the human soul is totally predicated upon the all-healing power of Christ's Passion and the grace of God. When he approached the issue of salvation from this God-centred perspective, he was making his own case in contradistinction to Pelagius (c. 360–418), a monk from Britain who insisted that humans could be saved through their own efforts to live as morally respectable and ascetic a life as humanly possible. It was far from Augustine's intention to completely deny the possibility for humanity to do anything that might secure salvation, and in earlier writings he did indeed allow some room for human effort. But his position as a defender of Catholicism in the dispute-riven, late-antique Mediterranean world pushed him towards adopting an unrelenting line of argument when confronted by theological controversy, whose unfavourable outcome might have thrown the Catholic world into turmoil. That Augustine emerged triumphant from this debate, however, left a long-lasting mark on the role that human effort plays in gaining salvation.⁴⁾

Even though Augustine's interpretation of salvation subsequently became dominant in the medieval Catholic world, the theological debate on the relationship between human agency and divine grace was kindled intermittently throughout the Middle Ages, with varying degrees of stress on either human contribution or divine omnipotence. It was around the late

fourteenth century, however, that the debate started to take a new turn, when a number of theologians, commonly called *moderni* (i.e. ‘modern’ scholars), stressed the effectiveness of human effort in gaining salvation.⁵⁾ They did not, however, place focus on human contribution to the divine salvation scheme at the expense of God’s grace; rather, these scholars employed an image with theological implications that fall somewhere between the two extremes to avoid being censured as ‘Pelagian’. Here, let us have a look at one example of such an argument, put forward by the fourteenth-century Dominican Robert Holcot (c. 1290–1349):

*Praeterea Apocalypsis. 3. Ego sto ad ostium et pulso. Si quis aperuerit mihi, intrabo ad eum et cenabo cum eo. Sed iste ergo disponit se faciendo id quod in eo est aperit sibi, ergo intrat necessario. Confirmatur, quia isto aperiente sibi aut intrat aut non intrat. Si non intrat, ergo frustra pulsatur, quod impium est dicere. Si intrat, ergo dat gratiam. Praeterea, Anselmus de casu diaboli capitulo 3 dicit, quod illa est causa quare Deus diabolo non dedit gratiam et perseuerantiam quia ipse noluit accipere. Unde non ideo non accepit diabolus perseuerantiam quia Deus non dedit, sed ideo Deus non dedit quia ipse non accepit. Quia quicumque se parat ut accipiat, necessario recipit.*⁶⁾

What should be noted here is the way Holcot theorizes about how the human soul accepts divine grace by creatively expounding on Revelation 3.20: ‘He [who] prepares himself by doing that which is in him opens himself, and therefore God enters [into him] necessarily’. Here, Holcot imagines the human soul being given a choice about whether or not it should open its door to God who comes to knock; the salvation process could never be initiated without God, but Holcot also creates space for human endeavour by

admitting that God infuses the soul with grace as long as ‘he does what is in him’. The phrase ‘do what is in them’ (*faciendo id quod in eo est*) is a Latin axiom that was established in the twelfth century, and it was employed by a number of theologians who discussed the relationship between human free will and divine grace.⁷⁾ The introduction of ‘the heart choosing to open itself to divine grace’ to the discourse on salvation is quite a cunning move that deftly balances the two opposing standpoints on the spectrum of divine grace and human agency, with neither completely denied or effacing the other.

As noted earlier, the Latin phrase ‘*faciendo id quod in eo est*’, or, more fully, ‘*facientibus quod in se est, deus non denegat gratiam*’ (to those who do what is in them, God does not deny grace) was used by late-medieval theologians to discuss the extent to which human agency is involved in attaining to divine grace and salvation, and Holcot is here expressing where he stands in the grace controversy in language that is explicitly un-Augustinian in the eyes of his peers. This theological manoeuvre that aims for a middle ground, however, was not without critics, for the opponents would pounce upon any kind of argument that smacked of ‘Pelagianism’. To gain a better view of the contemporary theological climate, we might as well set against Holcot’s view a contemporary polemic against ‘Pelagians’, voiced by another fourteenth-century theologian, Thomas Bradwardine (c. 1300–1349), who was also Archbishop of Canterbury for a very brief period (1349):

Dicunt enim Deum semper praeuenire pulsando et excitando ad gratiam, fidem, et ad bona similia, et hominem subsequi aperiendo, et consentiendo, et hoc ex propriis viribus per seipsum, iuxta illud Apoc. 3.: ‘Ecce sto ad ostium, et pulso: Si quis audierit vocem meam, et

aperuerit mihi ianuam, introibo ad illum, et oenabo cum illo, et ipse mecum.’ Hi autem faciunt Deum suae gratiae publicum venditorem, hominesque emptores. Dicunt enim eum sicut mercatorem pauperculum clamare, et pulsare ad ianuas, et ad ostia singulorum; aperienti vero pro sua apertione gratiam suam dare, quod tamen verius commutare, seu vendere diceretur.⁸⁾

Here Bradwardine strongly opposes to the idea that the human heart can ‘open the door and give consent’ after God comes to ‘knock at the door of the heart’, since it debases God by presenting Him as ‘a public vendor of grace’ (*suae gratiae publicum venditorem*), and humans as ‘buyers’ (*emptores*) of His grace. The Pelagians’ view, indeed, has the blasphemous implication of God looking like a ‘poor merchant crying and knocking at the door’ (*mercatorem pauperculum clamare, et pulsare ad ianuas*).

Tracing the discursive and polemical trajectory of such a debate would itself be a highly important and rewarding enterprise,⁹⁾ but in the context of the present paper, namely the relationship between the increased literacy and the idea of salvation in the late Middle Ages, we should rather investigate to what extent the controversy in question could have affected vernacular devotional reading practices. Here, it would be helpful to have a look at a couple of vernacular devotional texts which testify to the influence that the grace controversy had on those who were reading and writing about theological issues in English.

III

Our first example comes from *The Prickyng of Love*, a meditation on Christ’s Passion translated into Middle English in the late-fourteenth century from the Latin *Stimulus Amoris*, originally written around 1300 by the

Franciscan friar, James of Milan. The Latin original *Stimulus* that James composed was gradually and continually expanded throughout the succeeding generations after its original composition, comprising of four stages of development according to one estimate.¹⁰ The *Stimulus* seems to have enjoyed immense popularity in the late Middle Ages, surviving as it does in more than 500 manuscripts across Europe; the Middle English version comes down to us in 16 manuscripts, both complete and partial.¹¹ The popularity of the Latin text across Europe can perhaps be attributed to the way it portrays Christ's Passion; gory, graphic, sensuous, and even grotesque language that it employs strongly resonated with the contemporary devotional sensitivity and practice, in which Christ's suffering was imagined and presented in affectionate, yet fervent sympathy by devout people, both clerical and lay. In one passage, the *Stimulus*-author imagines himself entering into Christ's wound at His side with his eyes open; and, since he cannot see anything because his eyes are filled with Christ's blood, he nevertheless gropes his way through the sea of His blood, eventually to reach the innermost bowels of Christ, which is His love.¹² Such a shockingly graphically corporeal description of spiritual unification with Christ is an eloquent testimony to how preoccupied medieval devotional writers were with inviting their readers to vividly experience Christ's suffering: His bleeding body is beckoning the meditating reader to relive the moment of His Passion in all its sweet, bloody details, and to melt ecstatically into His love.

The Latin *Stimulus Amoris* found vernacular voices all over Europe towards the late fourteenth century; the Middle English translation *The Prickyng of Love*, however, is much more than a faithful rendering of the Latin source text, and even a casual comparison of these two texts would reveal that the Middle English translator is constantly adding, excising,

modifying, and at times, greatly expanding on the Latin *Stimulus*. The next example is a case in point.

Si enim Dei Filius voluit tanto charitatis fervore sic vilissimos cineres sibi venire, quanto avidius deberet unusquisque ad recipiendum ipsum devotissime cor suum recipere?¹³⁾

This passage is translated as follows:

For 3if oure lord loued vs so mykel þat to owre kynde so knitted he wolde be that neuer wolde from vs twinne but 3if we make hit oure-self. So mykel more auzte ilkone of vs to open his herte ful wide vn-to so dere a frend.¹⁴⁾

It should be noted here that ‘open his herte ful wide vn-to so dere a frend’ is a major departure from ‘ad recipiendum ipsum devotissime cor suum recipere’, since the idea of ‘opening one’s heart full widely’ is not found in the original. However, the addition of ‘opening one’s heart’ is not entirely an innovative move on the translator’s part, for in another passage in the Latin *Stimulus* we find the following exhortation to ‘open your heart’:

Aperi cor tuum clavis, et lanceae, et veritas subintrabit. Non enim intrabit Sol justitiae in cor clausum.¹⁵⁾

So, in a sense, the Middle English translator is taking a cue from the Latin source text and teasing out in the vernacular what he thinks the original author would have explained. This last Latin passage is translated into English as follows:

for-wi þi herte is ful of grace, and als tite as hit is openyd grace shulde runne fro þe in-to myn herte onyd to þe and riȝt so at þe openyng of cristes herte al swetnesse of grace flowith ouȝt and droppiþ in-to alle soules þat open þe mowth of her herte þourȝe feruent desire of hym.¹⁶⁾

Is the Middle English translator, then, a more or less faithful interpreter and exegete of the Latin text? The answer would be in the affirmative, were it not for the following passage in the *Prickynges*, in which the reader is instructed to ‘open the mouth of thy heart’:

Open now þer-fore þou cristen man with ful feiþ þe mowth of þyn herte, and let þis blood droppe in-to þe marowȝe of þi soule. For wite þou wel þat cristes blood is ȝitt als hote and as fresh as hit was wenne he died on good friday and shal be so in holy chirche vn-to þe dai of doom, bettir criande aftir mercy of þe fadir of heuene for vs synfull wrecchis þanne þe blode of abeel.¹⁷⁾

This passage is an addition by the translator; it is also worthy of attention for its description of Christ’s blood ‘as hot and fresh as it was when he died on Good Friday’, an image which was designed to confer a sense of immediacy and urgency in the description of Christ’s Passion and was often employed in mystical writings such as Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love*.¹⁸⁾ In all these examples cited so far from the *Prickynges*, the reader is recommended that he or she should ‘open their heart’ to move forward the salvation process of divine grace, a process which would come to a halt without consent given by the human soul. The *Prickynges*-author seems to imply, as Paul says in the First Epistle to the Corinthians 3. 9, that ‘we are labourers together with God’ (King James Version) in His salvation

programme.

The active role that the human soul is allowed to play is even more stressed in the following example. Here, the stern injunction to hate oneself is further strengthened by the admonition that one should renounce everything except for God.

Tunc etiam perfecte te odis, quando non solum vis ab hominibus conculcari, sed etiam teipsum tantum abhorres, ut vix teipsum valeas tolerare, et es tibi abominabilis nimis, velles etiam a creaturis irrationabilibus, et insensibilibus impugnari: et cum aliquid propter tuam necessitatem, licet non contra Deum, delectabile tamen aut non afflictivum recipis, contra temetipsum turbaris, solum Deum quaeris, et omnia renuis extra ipsum. Ad hoc donum permaximum pervenire valebis, si confidenter et ex corde saepe petieris hoc a Deo.¹⁹⁾

The Middle English translator interprets this passage as follows:

But whenne þou despisest þi-self wilfulli so mykel þat þou vggest of þi-self and unneþes mai suffre þi-self, and þou 3ernest to be dissesid and punysshid of all resonable and vnresonable creatures for the mykelnesse of þi synne, and whenne þou takest any þynge for þi bodili nede þat is delectable or swete, þou art sumwhat peynyd and trobelid in þi-seelf, for als moche as þou woldest fele no lykyng but 3if hit were gosteli and of god, þanne hatest þou þi-self parfityly. Þis is a grete 3ifte of god. To þis grete 3ifte may þou atteyne wiþ þe grace of god 3if þou do þat in þe is and triste fulli and mekeli and lastandli with al þyn herte aske hit of god.²⁰⁾

‘þou do þat in þe is’ is of course a literal translation of ‘facere quod in se est’, the Latin axiom we encountered earlier; it highlights the significant contribution that humans can make to obtaining salvation. The translator imports one of the central theological concepts that was being hotly debated in the Latin scholastic sphere into the world of vernacular devotional readers, who were not ‘literati’ in the strictly medieval sense of the word, but here invited to participate in the discussion concerning the place of human free will.²¹⁾

The phrase ‘do what is in him’ also appears in a fifteenth-century text *A Ladder of Foure Ronges*; it contains several lengthy interpolations on the relationship between divine grace and free will, which are not found in the Latin source text, *Scala Claustralium*, composed in the twelfth century by the Carthusian, Guigo II. In one of these inserted passages, the Middle English translator writes as follows:

thouze the fre wille of man may not make grace in man, netheles he may doo that in hym is – caste oute the olde dowe, which is the olde corruptible synne þat withdrawith man from grace, and so make hym redy þat he may receyve this grace ²²⁾

‘doo that in hym is’ is of course a literal translation of ‘facere quod in se est’, and it highlights the willingness of medieval devotional writers to educate their vernacular readership about one of the important theological issues circulating in the Latin intellectual environment. Some of the readers who actually received such texts might not have been able to ‘read’ vernacular texts on their own, let alone those written in Latin, but the devotional texts that we looked at so far are likely to have formed ‘textual communities’,²³⁾ reading groups in which vernacular readers and audiences were provided

with opportunities to freely discuss controversial theological topics of the day. I would even venture to argue that texts such as *The Prickyng of Love* and *A Ladder of Foure Ronges* provided late-medieval English readers with opportunities to update their notions of salvation in what might be referred to as ‘salvation 2.0’. Until around the thirteenth century, contemplative experiences, in which one gained glimpses of God, were limited to professional religious figures such as priests, monks, anchorites, anchoresses and hermits (salvation 1.0). However, after the fourteenth century, these mystical, revelatory experiences gradually became accessible to lay, vernacular audiences, as has been shown by the foregoing discussion of the recurrence of the phrase ‘facere quod in se est’.²⁴⁾ The readers who read and discussed texts such as the *Prickyng* and the *Ladder* in the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were encouraged to believe in a more egalitarian and optimistic vision of salvation than held in the previous centuries, armed as they were with debates and concepts on divine grace and human free will that seeped through the seemingly impermeable, yet ultimately porous wall of Latinity and literacy. Reading these late-medieval devotional texts offers us insights into the process through which contact with the divine was becoming increasingly secularized, as devotional texts, both as containers of divine wisdom and physical objects that could actually be touched, presented salvation as visually and tangibly attainable by those who could read; even if they could not read, divine bliss was something that they could experience firsthand, aurally and orally.

Notes

- 1) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2018 International Symposium of HK Research Team of the Institute of Humanities, held in May 2018 at Yonsei University, Seoul, under the title ‘Textual Salvation 2.0: Literacy, Vernacular

Theology, and the Place of *facere quod in se est* in Late-Medieval England'. I would like to thank the participants heartily for their insightful questions and comments.

- 2) As examples of such academic effort, I will only cite the following two studies: Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (Thriplow: Icon, 2008); and Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: Flamingo, 1997).
- 3) For how salvation is envisioned in *A Ladder of Four Ranges*, see Atsushi Iguchi, 'Translating Grace: The *Scala Claustralium* and *A Ladder of Four Ranges*', *Review of English Studies*, 59 [New Series, no. 242] (2008), 659–676.
- 4) For the details of this debate, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 2nd edn (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 340–377; Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 38–54.
- 5) The literature on this topic is vast, but see the succinct discussion in William J. Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), Chapter 7 'Ockham and English Nominalism', pp. 193–218.
- 6) *Robertus Holcot super librum sapientiae* (Venice, 1509), Lec. 145, p. 127^{ra} < http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb10148926_00309.html?zoom=0.5>. The abbreviations are indicated by italics.
- 7) McGrath, pp. 107–117. See also See Heiko A. Oberman, 'Facientibus Quod in Se Est Deus Non Denegat Gratiam: Robert Holcot, O.P. and the Beginnings of Luther's Theology', in *idem*, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 84–103 (at p. 91); Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians: A Study of His "De Causa Dei" and Its Opponents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 130–135.
- 8) Thomas Bradwardine, *De causa Dei contra Pelatium et de virtute causarum*, ed. by Anna Lukàcs (Göttingen, 2013), p. 319.
- 9) For which see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*.
- 10) See Falk Eisermann, *Stimulus amoris: Inhalt, lateinische Überlieferung, deutsche Übersetzungen, Rezeption* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001), pp. 62–63.

- 11) Harold Kane, ed., *The Prickyng of Love*, 2 vols (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1983), vol. I, p. iii.
- 12) A. C. Peltier, ed., *Stimulus Amoris*, in *Opera Omnia Sancti Bonaventurae* (Paris, 1868), XII, p. 634, col. 1, ll. 32–38.
- 13) Peltier, p. 633, col. 1, ll. 14–17.
- 14) Kane, vol. I, p. 3, ll. 20–4.
- 15) Peltier, 638, col. 2, ll. 40–42.
- 16) Kane, vol. I, p. 35, ll. 15–22.
- 17) Kane, vol. I, p. 35, ll. 15–22.
- 18) Nicholas Watson, and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), p. 67.
- 19) Peltier, p. 668, col. 1, l. 45 – p. 668, col. 2, l. 8.
- 20) Kane, vol. I, p. 94, l. 20 – p. 95, l. 4
- 21) For the notion of being ‘literate’ (*litteratus*), see M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 226–254.
- 22) Phyllis Hodgson, ed., *Deonise Hid Divinite and Other Treatises on Contemplative Prayer Related to “The Cloud of Unknowing”*, EETS OS, 231 (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 103.
- 23) The phrase, needless to say, has been taken from the magisterial study of medieval literacy by Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), especially pp. 88–240.
- 24) For this process, see, for example, Heiko A. Oberman, ‘The Shape of Late Medieval Thought: The Birthpangs of the Modern Era’, in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion: Papers from the University of Michigan Conference*, ed. by Charles Trinkhaus, with Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp. 4–25.