AN ALLEGORY OF THE MONASTIC LIFE

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Abstract

This article sets out to provide an edition of a previously unpublished allegorical text on the monastic life (London, BL MS Add. 46919) which is based on the structuring metaphor of the (seven) buildings of the monastic enclosure. The doctrinal content is conventional, but no precise source has so far been identified for the present text which remains unique in insular French.

The notion of the building as a structuring metaphor was a common device in Rhétoriqueur poetry and ostentatious decoration a common vehicle of allegory from classical times. A much more sober adaptation to the moral constituents of the spiritual life is the important treatise of Hugh of Fouilloy, De claustro animae. Just as Gerhard Bauer discovered that this work did not really explain in any detail the fourteenth-century German Herzkloster, such is the case with the Anglo-Norman prose treatise printed below, which though modest in scope, is an interesting part of the general phenomenon investigated by Bauer. Although up till now unedited, it is found in a manuscript which has long been the focus of critical attention, namely MS London, B.L. Add. 46919, the commonplace book of the Franciscan William Herebert from Hereford, which offers a fascinating miscellany of texts in three languages. Compiled in Herefordshire c.1340, the manuscript contains over 55 items, predominantly in French. Meyer’s description of the treatise found on ff.62r–65v as a ‘traité ascétique’ is not entirely helpful, since it reveals nothing of the structuring metaphor at the basis of the work. The treatise begins with a general admonition to those in religion to put their spiritual house in order. What follows reflects the teaching of standard religious manuals such as the Mirour de Seinte Eglise. The cloister of the heart should be made free from the seven mortal sins and founded in Faith, erected in Hope, roofed with Truth and covered with Charity (the addition of Truth to the theological virtues, I Cor. 13,13, is noteworthy). The cloister should have four walls corresponding to the points of the compass and representing the cardinal virtues (Sap. 8,7): East = Justice (‘Justise, ceo est dreiture’, which enjoins love, fear and service of God); West = Prudence (‘Prudence, ceo est adire queintise’);
South = Temperance (‘Temperaunce’); North = Fortitudo (‘Force’, the power of humility against Pride, of charity against Envy, of devotion and goodwill against Sloth, of desire for heavenly things against worldly Greed, cheerfulness against Anger, of sobriety against Gluttony, of chastity against Lechery, of determination against apathy-Tristitia).  

In the cloister of the heart the ‘prior’ is God, the ‘subprior’ is reason. In the abbey and cloister there is a convent comprising all those properties which the individual soul renders obedient to God. This convent contains an oratory – love of God – which bears the red colour of martyrdom, the yellow colour of the confessors and the white of chastity representing the holy virgins already departed. The dormitory is the place of holy contemplation where the individual may receive the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, to the body (the ‘fruits of the Holy Spirit’, Gal. 5,22–3) and to the spirit (Is. 11,1–3). The chapter-house involves fear of God, contrition for sins, confession and penance. In the refectory is taken the nourishment of Holy Scripture, and the laver (lavatorium) represents sorrow and tears of contrition. The infirmary is the repository of compassion. 

In the edition which follows I have capitalized for convenience the names of virtues and vices and epithets applied to God.

MS London, B.L. 46919 ff.62r–65v

[A] chescun homme ou femme ke est en religiun saluz en Jesu Crist. Tut eez vous guerpi le siecle e portez le habit de religiun, poi vaut vostre afere si vous ne eyez vertuz ke acordent a vostre estat, kar le habit ne fet pas homme de religiun, mes fet bone vie e bone vertuz. E un homme ke porte seculer habit, s’il est ben ordiné vers Deu e vers sun prome e vers sei memes e seit de bones murs e vertuz, il avera plus merite ke cely ke est desordiné en religiun e de dure manere.  

[f.62v] Pur ceo covent ke si homme de religiun se mustre deors, ke teil ou meillur seit dedens, e sicum il veit deordenement de vesture, e de meisuns e de autre choses, il se deit afforcer estudier coment il puisse tut aver dedens en sa alme espirialment par bone vertuz.  

[P]rimes veét ke vous eez un encloistre ke seit fet de bone vertuz, kar sicum vous veez10 ke l’encloistre est fet de fust e de pere, ausi l’encloistre a l’alme deit estre feit de bone vertuz. Cest encloistre devez fere en la place de vostre quer e ceste place deit estre nette e pleine issi ke n’i eit nule montaine de Orgul, ne nule purture de ordure de Envie, ne nule aspre espine de Ire, ne nule voidesce ne valee de Peresce, ne nule soillure [de Avarice], ne puur de Glutonie ne de Lecherie. Quaunt la place de vostre quer est si pleine e si pure e si nette, donc getez le funde-