



Review of Dee Dyas's, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature, 700–1500*. D.S. Brewer: Cambridge 2001.

All you readers of *Peregrinations* will want to read this book from cover to cover and I promise you will come away from it with a confident grasp of the variety of the forms and figures of pilgrimage. The title suggests an encyclopedic survey of Medieval Literature, and the fact is that the reader will follow a course through a very large domain. Dyas may not have read everything, but her writing demonstrates her knowledge of the more than twelve hundred books listed in the Bibliography. There are a myriad of footnotes.



And the thoughtfulness of the book saves us from clumsy and distracting fumbling with its handling of the notes. We want them all, but their numerosity would have been maddening even collected at the ends of chapters. Appearing at the bottom of the page, they become a kind of *sotto voce* murmur that the reader can attend to as need and inclination prompts. The threads of association embodied in the notes locates the reader in the center of a vast web of relevant information. Praise the lord high publisher.

Her purpose is really double—her sources provide the substance she uses to develop the complex of the variously figured sense and meaning of “pilgrimage” and her orderly mapping of that domain of meaning provides her with a conceptual framework to “read” well known texts in novel and revealing ways. Below I will outline the ordering of the book in just enough detail to give you a general idea of what the book contributes to our collective knowledge. But first I want to describe how reading her book has affected my past and my future as a reader and teacher of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

The prompt is her chapter devoted to the the *Wanderer* and the *Seafarer*. I have always assumed that it was legitimate to read these poems as imbedded in the Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition. But as an definite imagination what that might mean was only vaguely conceived. Without really being conscious of it, the idea of those two poems reflecting some person's actual sense of exile and loneliness that somehow got itself articulated in the poetic language of the Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition has always seemed unimaginable if not simply absurd. Was it really possible for a "literate" Anglo-Saxon warrior to wander around Anglo-Saxon England and dream himself into a kind of Caedmonian oral improvisation? And where would he find an audience with a recording scribe who would create a written text that would find its way into the Exeter Book? Or don't we really need two such persons with profoundly similar experiences? I don't believe anyone has ever suggested that both poems were created by one person, but isn't one more likely than two unique persons so alike in their sense of self-identity? If I had brought my assumptions to consciousness, I would have wondered "How I could think such a thing?" But I wasn't thinking of any kind of actual poet and audience, I was thinking of the Anglo-Saxon poems I had read and was teaching to undergraduates. They loved "The Battle of Maldon" and all the charming gore of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse heroic legend. Still, I would like to think I have also been unconsciously nagged by the idea that their firm fictional surface could be read as metaphorical figures, that is, fictional representations of mental and spiritual actions. But I could not imagine a context which could support the implicit sense of rhetorical situation, projected self- reflection, and performative speech act.

Dyas does not speculate about production and transmission. Instead she firmly sets the poems in a conceptual and rhetorical context that is monastic rather than secular and is speculative and reflective rather social and personal.

Both poems, therefore can be seen to tap into the essential understanding of earth as exile, life as pilgrimage, and heaven as mankind's true home. Viewed against the rich complexity of the pilgrimage motif, however, the chief difference in the orientation and purpose of the two poems becomes clear: the *Wanderer* is an involuntary exile whose story offers a perspective on life to those enduring the enforced vicissitudes of human experience, whereas the *Seafarer* provides encouragement for those who have already chosen God's path of self-sacrifice, but are finding the going tough.

There is a charming ending to this story. Dyas' book appeared in 2001 and so she anticipates Robert E. Bjork's "*Sundor æt Rune: The Voluntary Exile of The Wanderer* (in *Old English Literature*, edited by R. M. Liuzza, Yale UP., 2002). His essay covers the ground so thoroughly that Dyas treats briefly that I do not mean to suggest that he owed her a note of recognition, but I want to give one to Bjork. At the end of his essay he cites my 1974 essay on these poems (W.F. Klein, "Purpose and the 'Poetics' of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*" in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. 218). I wrote: "The ultimate power of human vision is located in a final context of failure . . . the principle of action in [the wanderer] has been brought to contemplative stasis." Bjork adds, "Obviously, I disagree." (p. 327). The context invoked at the end of the poem is exile as a stage in the comprehensive narrative of the pilgrimage of life whose end is the heavenly kingdom of God. By the tenth century, the idea of the pilgrimage of life had been well developed in the Christian culture centered in monastic tradition.

Obviously I agree with Bjork, and appreciate what Dyas makes clear. In 1974 I needed a

comprehensive and richly-detailed idea of the monastic poetic tradition, one that not only explained the meaning of words and images, but also the play of self in reflection. And thirty years later I still do, and so to the future fruit of Dyas' book

I am interested in making sense of the Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book. What is intriguing about them is the subtlety and complexity of their "poetic," their "forms" and "voices." They display a wide range of both and certainly involve a highly self-conscious play of wit as well as varieties of impersonation and ventriloquism. The overall complexity of the effect is comparable to the figures Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer play in their poetry. On the face of it such perceptions of any Anglo-Saxon poetry would appear to be absurdly anachronistic readings of these ambiguous and puzzling texts. In Dyas' close reading of the *Seafarer* she points to a number of places where the poet seems to be using ideas and phrases borrowed or influenced by the Psalms. She uses them as sources and models of forms and "voices" displayed in the poem. Discussing speculation about the genre of the poem, she notes the traditional "elegy" and two others, *planctus* and *meditatio*. And then adds:

Yet, although they may have contributed to the content of the poem, none of these forms entirely solves the problems of structure and tone outlined above. There is another possible source, curiously neglected in *Seafarer* scholarship which would at once supply a model for the pattern of experience described in the poem and demonstrate how such varied emotions could be consistent with the life of one living as a spiritual pilgrim in the world. The source is the Book of Psalms, that most familiar and pervasive of influences in the life of the medieval Christian, used constantly in worship and almost certainly memorized in part or as a whole by anyone possessed of the degree of Christian instruction demonstrated in this poem. (p. 114)

For a novel perspective on the Riddles of the Exeter Book, I don't expect anything remotely like the close influence she finds in specific details of the *Seafarer*. I would like to have a more general sense of how close familiarity with the Psalms might influence the monastic "poetic." In her notes she refers to a SUNY publication edited by Nancy Van Deusen, *The Place of the Psalms in the Intellectual Culture of the Middle Ages*, 1999. This book is available on line at netlibrary.com. Consulting it led me to Grover Zinn's "Introduction" and the following:

Whatever the literary/religious origins of the Psalms, for medieval men and women, the Psalms were divinely inspired songs written by King David. The Psalms not only reflected the joy and sadness of David's own life, with its oscillations between conquest, sickness, betrayal, divine intervention, despair, infidelity, joy, and steadfastness; the Psalms were also seen as a true compendium of Christian theology, words of praise for the Triune God, a sure guide for an upright life, and a vast collection of poetic texts that could become one's own personal words of prayer in all seasons and conditions of pilgrimage through this life.

I vaguely knew that the Psalms that I had read and heard read all my life were the songs of King David, but the idea did not mean anything. Maybe even less than that. I certainly did not think of their eccentricity, inconsistency their self-pity and petulant resentment as manifestations of an

identifiable self. I am still skeptical about my friends who believe they have a perception of the selfhood we name St. Peter and St. Paul. But Zinn's words made me wonder and a couple of days later I started reading one of the four copies in Ohio of *King Alfred's Old English Prose Translations of the First Fifty Psalms*. It is immediately obvious that these are not translations done with the kind of anxious scruple Aelfric indicated about his Biblical translations, but paraphrases by Alfred of what Alfred thought to be the drift of David's songs and he summarizes that drift in the brief interpretations and introductions he provides for them. This a person reading poems for intimate personal poetic use. Dee Dyas gives us the sources for the authority of that practice. She quotes Augustine's *Ennarationes in Psalmos (Discourse on Psalm 30)* :

If the Psalm prays, you pray; if it laments, you lament; if it rejoices, you rejoice; and if it hopes, you hope; if it fears, you fear. For all things written here are our mirror.

And she suggests that Bede is thinking of Augustine when he writes:

If any oppressive sorrow has come upon you, either by injury brought on by others . . . or by an overwhelming domestic loss, or if you grieve for any reason at all . . . pray with psalms to the Lord lest the sadness of the world which is death swallow you up.

We know that the Riddles appeared in the context of monastic culture, most obviously figured in the person of Aldhelm. But it is also obvious that the riddles display a variety of tones, voices, and forms not rooted in their Latin background. An important thematic center in the Riddles is the process of creation, and the most common fiction in them is giving the individual things of creation distinctive voices engaged in dramatic play with the reader. So I need to have some sense of how the monks read the Psalms. And we have a very obvious and very specific place to go to study exactly that. George Brown (*The Place of the Psalms*, chapter 1, p 3) marvels at the fact that there are nine paraphrases and glosses of the Gospels and 14 of the Psalms. These glossed Psalters offer a very special opportunity to study the sense of specific words, metaphors and turns of phrase. I will spend my summer studying the Psalters with Anglo-Saxon glosses and return to the Riddles and Riddle scholarship in the fall charged with the anticipation of revelations.

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And so we come to the question of what the book as a whole contributes to our knowledge of Medieval English Literature. Divided, as Gaul is reported to have been, into three major sections, Dyas presents an informative and interesting history of the conception of "pilgrimage" first as a general metaphor for the journey of spiritual life and then in a variety of different forms as the metaphor was extended by theological reflection in the early Christian church and complicated by the rise of practical interest in holy places, particularly Jerusalem, and in places made holy by lives of the saints. The first section, "The Origins and Early Development of Christian Pilgrimage, includes discussion of the idea of pilgrimage in the Bible and then three major sources of innovation and elaboration of that idea by the early church, in

the writings of Jerome and Augustine in particular, by the rise of the idea of “Holy Places” and the development cult veneration of Saints lives and relics. Chapter 1. “Pilgrimage in the Bible” presents a narrative form of the “Pilgrimage of Life” that ends with *Revelation*. Dyas concludes this chapter with a statement that anticipates in brief the sense of the rest of the book:

The City, as envisaged by the Apostle, offered peace, comfort and healing in the presence of God, an appropriate goal for weary, foot sore pilgrims, scarred by the trials and temptations of a world in which they could no longer feel at home. It was a picture that gripped the minds of Christian writers during the succeeding centuries. The promise and allure of the heavenly homeland is apparent in patristic sermons, treatises and letters and is woven into a surprising number of Old English poems and prose texts. Middle English artists and writers were equally gripped by the splendours of the heavenly city and the prospect of eternal security. The message of the New Testament helped to shape a world view which set earthly exile against heavenly citizenship, temporary suffering against eternal joy. The decision to live as a penitent, obedient pilgrim on earth would be amply recompensed in the heavenly Jerusalem. That is why an evocation of the joys of the heavenly city makes such an appropriate ending to the *Parson's Tale*, a text which advocates such a life of moral pilgrimage.

As you may have sensed in reading this passage, there are indeed footnotes which refer reader forward to the two following major divisions of the book: Part II: “The Exile and the Heavenly Home in Old English Literature” and Part III: “‘*Parfit Pilgrimage*’ or Merely ‘*Wandering by the Weye*’? Literal and Metaphorical Pilgrimage in Middle English Literature.” These notes take us forward through chapter 10, “The Canterbury Tales.” Dyas’ concluding note about Chaucer is a strong affirmation of the centrality of the Parson’s vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem but “neither ‘mystical’ nor ‘visionary;’ yet the final lines suggest something of the warmth of devotion associated with the contemplative life” (p.198)

Chaucer presents the Parson himself as a role model for an integrated life of teaching and service, ‘riche of hooly thought and werk,’ who practices what he preaches and whose ‘busynesse’ is to ‘drawen folk to hevене by fairnesse’ (*General Prologue*, 519-20. Here we have the same kind of commitment to the pilgrimage of life as that exemplified by Piers Plowman. Unlike Langland, however, Chaucer does not reject place pilgrimage out of hand. Instead, he places it in the larger context of earthly life, marred by transient relationships, trials and uncertainties, yet also holding out the prospect of the eternal security of heaven. (p. 199)

The standard of an “integrated” vision of living in the world but living in light of the life’s true ending in communion with God and the rest of creation is, of course, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. It is hardly escapable to imagine that when Chaucer began *The Canterbury Tales*, he imagined a world of stories that were indeed integrated in a common vision that would have the moral clarity of “The Parson’s Tale.” But the failure of that project is dramatically evident in the break down of the project as a whole and the poignancy of the Chaucer’s retraction.

The last two chapters of Dyas’ book present two different perspectives on the kinds of

pilgrimage she has discussed in the first ten chapters. Chapter 11 is titled "Inner Journeys." In it she considers "the paradox of inner journeying or 'interior' pilgrimage in which progress can only be made by staying still." (p. 205) The natural home of this kind of pilgrimage is the monastic tradition and its connections with hermit exile, anchoritism, meditation, and mysticism. I presume the body of texts we need to study to gain a wide understanding of how the idea of pilgrimage works in the context of figuring the landscape of the individual soul is enormous. Dyas chooses to discuss five texts. Three of them are, for me at least, natural choices: the *Ancreme Wisse*, the *Book of Margery Kempe* and the Gawain poet's *Pearl*. The other two were first time meetings for me: *þe Pilgrimage of þe Lyfe of þe Manhode*, (an anonymous fifteenth century translation of de Deguileville's *Le Pelerinage de la vie humaine*) and Walter Hilton, the author of *The Scale of Perfection* and some other writings that, according to the online Catholic Encyclopedia were popular in the fifteenth century and are still respected in the Catholic monastic tradition. A summary narrative of the story of the soul's progress up "the scale of perfection" indicates the metaphorical austerity of the landscape through which the journey traverses. The following is from the Catholic Encyclopedia article:

First printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1494. This work may be described as a guide-book for the journey to the spiritual Jerusalem, which is "contemplation in perfect love of God." The soul is reformed to the image and likeness of God, first in faith only, and then in faith and in feeling. Speeded by humility and love, it passes through the mystical dark night, which "is nought else but a forbearing and a withdrawing of the thought and of the soul from earthly things by great desire and yearning for to love and see and feel Jesus and spiritual things." By the gift of love all the vices are destroyed, and the soul at length becomes a perfect lover of Jesus, "fully united to Him with softness of love". His presence is the life of the soul, even as the soul is the life of the body. Purified to know His secret voice, its spiritual eyes are opened to see His workings in all things and to behold His blessed nature. Hilton's mystical system is, in the main, a simplification of that of Richard of St. Victor, and, like Richard, he humbly disclaims any personal experience of the Divine familiarity which he describes, declaring that he has not the grace of contemplation himself "in feeling and in working, as I have it in talking." The book is distinguished by beauty of thought and simplicity of expression; it is illustrated by homely, but effective imagery, and in spite of its high spirituality it is full of practical guidance. "A soul," it concludes "that is pure, stirred up by grace to use this working, may see more of such spiritual matter in an hour than can be writ in a great book." It was translated into Latin, as "Speculum Contemplationis," or "Bacculum Contemplationis," by Thomas Fysslawe, a Carmelite.

I think the major reason for Dyas discussing Hilton, and doing so in connection with Bonaventure and Richard Rolle is simply as another illustration of her interest in the transformations and variations one can find of her "theme" of pilgrimage. But the interest does not take us very far into the unique and creative. How far from Dante and Chaucer are we here? It is a sizeable, but measurable distance.

Dyas' reflections on the two texts that have a strong claim to literary individuality point toward the limits of the thematic study of texts. Inevitably the perception of the texts is focused

on the way the text illustrates the general idea of the theme and the aspects of the text that prompt other kinds of interest are set aside. The *Book of Margery Kempe* bristles with signs of Margery Kempe and her story as a very special woman in a very distinct and interesting historical moment. For Dyas, “Margery . . . refused to be bound by the conventional wisdom which, in effect, restricted Christians to enjoying at most two out of the three chief modes of pilgrimage; instead she sought to experience a highly unusual combination of interior, moral and place pilgrimage.” (p. 222) Dyas finds support for her sense of what Margery was doing by citing a current scholar defining a specific principle of feminine spirituality. She quotes Sandra J. McEntire (Ed. *Margery Kemp: A Book of Essays*, New York, 1992)

The pattern of female spirituality . . . does not divide a woman from herself but integrates her very self, including everything that enters her sphere. She strives not so much for perfection as completion. For woman’s spiritual journey, union includes all that is homely and earthly as well as the mystic and visionary. It includes her essential nature and the contradictions which have been imposed upon her by her society and culture. (p. 223)

She then adds: “Whether her attitude was due to her gender, temperament, lack of theological understanding or overflowing devotion, Margery’s whole tempestuous career was shaped by her desire to simultaneously visit holy places, grow in obedience to God *and* anticipate the joys of heaven through intimate personal encounters with God.”

The Margery Kempe of Dee Dyas and her associates is really something, a someone I am happy to have met. Dyas’ discussion of *Pearl* does not take into consideration anything suggestive of its feminine consciousness or female spirituality, but I wish she had given it a look. What Dyas reminded me about *Pearl* is the strikingly-odd relationship between the dreamer and the dead daughter who comes in vision to educate the father about the true basis of the alienation that death has brought between them and show him the way to the heavenly vision that will take away the pain of all alienation. The teacher is a female child.

Last year I was dazzled by Edward Condren’s challenging book *The Numerical Universe of the Gawain–Pearl Poet: Beyond Phi* (U. Of Florida, 2002). Condren argues, or perhaps better, displays the wonderously-complex numerical design of the manuscript in which four quite different poems are evidently by the same author. The complex design that Condren discovered creates a ground for considering the theological interplay between all four poems contained in the manuscript.

In a teasing way, I have become fond of suggesting to my students that only a woman could have written *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. There is the curious appearance of the person of Morgan le Fay in Bercilak’s house, but what I hope to prompt in my students is wonder about the story itself. The story dramatically enacts the stripping from Gawain of the costume of martial chivalry in a highly civilized and Christianized form, and in doing so, reveals that this costume, wonderful and even beautiful in its workmanship, is just a human construction that does nothing but hide the naked mortal who wears it. Being skeptical about knighthood is not uncommon in the fourteenth century, as admirers of Chaucer’s have only recently been forced to know. But there is nothing comic about the revelation. The revelation that Gawain is, at heart, after all, just another human person in need of salvation is comic and utterly forgiving. He is a perfectly nice little man. The similarity of the experience of Pearl’s benighted father is striking. But these are Sunday afternoon professorial meanderings.

Dyas' last chapter is entitled "Journeying to Jerusalem: An Overview of Literal and Metaphorical Pilgrimage in Middle English Literature." In the chapter she reviews the ground she has covered but considers it focused on the idea of Jerusalem itself, both real and visionary. I am happy to report that I am one with Dyas on her view of *Pearl*. "The supreme vision of the heavenly Jerusalem in Middle English literature comes in the exquisitely fashioned alliterative poem, *Pearl*." (p. 243). Yes.

I also am at one with Dyas on which text offers the most delightful guide to the practical concerns with traveling to the earthly city itself. On page 237 we find Dyas citing and paraphrasing "the *Itineraries* of William Wey, a Fellow of Eton College who traveled to the Holy Land in 1458 and 1462."

The pilgrim should avoid the lowest part of the ship from Venice which is "ryght evyll & smouldring hote and stinking," and instead find a place amidships in order to keep 'his brayne and stomacke in tempere'. That galleys should ever sail safely from Venice to Jaffa seems astonishing if all pilgrims followed the advice to carry not only 'a lytell cauldron', a 'freyng panne', barrels of water and wine, laxatives, restoratives and spices, a cage of chickens and a feather bed. Pilgrims should move swiftly on disembarkation at Jaffa to choose the best mule; they should also watch out for those Saracens who will 'go talkyng [with] you [and] make gode chere; but thi wolle stele from you yf they maye'. (p. 237)

But the tone is not simply comic. Very ominous is the warning about the danger of eating unfamiliar food: "They gender a bloody fluxe; and yf an Englyschmann have that sykenes hyt is a mervel and scape hit but he dye therof."

For the most part Dee Dyas keeps us pilgrim readers on the straight and narrow path that leads from the land of not-knowing to the territory of the known, but she is capable of a bit of "wandering by the way. As the mother cow said to her calf, "Don't eschew stopping now and then to eat a flower." 🌸

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