

PRAYING WITHOUT IMAGES

Some Medieval Advice

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The Manere of Good Lyvyng

IN THE BODLEIAN LIBRARY in Oxford there is a unique fifteenth-century Middle English manuscript entitled *The Manere of Good Lyvyng*.¹ It is a close, but not slavish, translation of a much earlier text in Latin, the twelfth century *Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem* ('A book for a sister on the way of living well') which, during the Middle Ages and afterwards, was attributed to St Bernard, the Abbot of Clairvaux.²

For a long time, it was believed that St Bernard had written the *Liber* for his sister Humbelina, who had experienced a spiritual conversion in about 1122 and entered the monastery at Jully around 1124. The attribution to St Bernard, and the text's usefulness as an aid for the spiritual life, may explain the large number of copies made during the Middle Ages, though few have survived. In the seventeenth century, Jean Mabillon rejected the attribution to the Abbot of Clairvaux and today, as is the case with many texts from the Middle Ages once thought to be the work of a well-known medieval author, the *Liber* remains anonymous. Nevertheless the *Liber* is a product of St Bernard's own time. Brian Patrick McGuire remarks: 'to my mind the work belongs to the kind of advice for religious women that became popular in the twelfth

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¹ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud misc. 517. Note that in this article, except for a few lines from Chaucer, all quotations from Middle English have been translated into modern English.

² For the only modern Latin edition of the text, see *Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem*, edited by Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologia latina*, 184 (Paris: D'Ambroise, 1859), cols 1199–1306. Henceforth referred to as PL 184.

century'.³ Although his identity is unknown, evidence from the text implies that the author of the *Liber* belonged to a religious order and that he was a highly trained cleric.

The *Liber* is part of a long tradition of male advice to female religious, which goes back to, among others, Ambrose, Augustine, Caesarius and Jerome. It is a religious treatise of 73 chapters which mostly deal with vices and virtues (Envy, Pride, Faith, Mercy and so on), and with matters necessary to achieve perfection in the contemplative life. It is not a rule, since it is made clear that the recipient already has one to which she must be obedient, but provides religious exhortations for its audience. It is essentially a didactic work and one which may remind the reader of a collection of sermons. Most chapters of the text begin with a biblical quotation and end with the voice of the preacher and a final 'amen'. The *Liber* offers spiritual guidance for the inner life and, although very different in nature from Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love* or the *Flowing Light of the Divinity* by Mechtild of Magdeburg (a thirteenth-century German beguine), it may be considered a contemplative text, in that it implicitly encourages the reader to formulate her own meditation and contemplation. This is mostly achieved by alluding to the mystical union (*unio*) between God and the soul and by a significant number of quotations from the Song of Songs.

The Manner of Good Living is the title chosen by the translator for this Middle English version of the *Liber*. Indeed the vernacular text begins:

A devout treatise of holy Saint Bernard which he sent to his own sister, translated from the Latin into English and entitled the Manner of Good Living which contains the sum of every virtue needed for Christ's religion and for a holy life.

Devotional texts often use the phrase 'manner of good living' to refer to the religious life; and similarly texts which discuss the 'manner of living' also often focus on *good* living. Since anyone embarking on the religious life has to begin by turning towards 'good living', it is only to be expected that the phrase is frequently found in devotional works. Walter Hilton (c.1343–1396) alludes to 'good living' at the very beginning of Book 1 of *The Scale of Perfection*, for example. A number of other writers, such as Julian of Norwich (1342–after 1416) and Nicholas Love (d. 1423/4),

³ Brian Patrick McGuire, 'A Benedictine-Cistercian Source? The Book Birgitta Kept on Her Person', *Birgittiana*, 16 (2003), 81–104, here 86.



St Bridget giving her rule to her order

prior of the Carthusian charterhouse of Mount Grace), adopt the phrase as well. The many texts using the phrases ‘manner of living’ and/or ‘good living’ show that they respond to concerns shared by many religious communities of their time.

Aspects of the *Manner*, including the one that we are about to consider, intimate that this work was not aimed at ‘beginners in the spiritual life’ but rather at those looking for a guide to contemplation, through which they might ‘gain access to a personal encounter with God himself’.⁴ For a number of reasons, including the fact that St Bridget of Sweden owned a copy of the text which she continuously carried with her, it is likely that the *Manner* was intended for the Bridgettine Sisters of Syon Abbey. As has long been recognised, Bridgettine brethren and nuns were certainly not ‘ignorant men and women ... of limited understanding’ but, on the contrary, highly educated.⁵ It has been commented that ‘a number of nuns at the house ... seem to have had little difficulty in reading and appreciating Latin theology’.⁶ They would

⁴ Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995), 39–40.

⁵ Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, edited by M. G. Sargent (Exeter: Exeter UP, 2004), 10, lines 6–7.

⁶ David N. Bell, *What Nuns Read*, *Cistercian Studies*, 158 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), A19, 61–62.

have been at ease with the detailed scriptural references and the many quotations, especially from the Song of Songs, which,

... urge ... upon the soul the love of the heavenly and the divine under the figure of the bride and the bridegroom, teaching us that we must attain fellowship with God by the paths of loving affection and love.⁷

Bernard of Clairvaux's emphasis on the Bridegroom as Christ and on the Bride as the soul in his influential *Sermons on the Song of Songs* resulted in many subsequent devotional texts regarding the Song of Songs as the biblical book expressing the union between the soul and Christ. This is certainly true of the *Manner*, where if the addressee is 'the spouse of Christ' (*sponsa Christi*), Christ is referred to as 'your spouse' (*sponsus tuus*), whether or not these addresses occur in the text as part of a quotation from the Song of Songs. In the *Manner of Good Living*, the sister is invited to 'listen to the voice of your spouse, Jesus Christ, speaking to you'.⁸

Praying without Images

It is in the use of images and spiritual practices that the *Manner* differs from many other late medieval devotional texts, where the reader is taught to meditate on the life of Mary or on Christ's passion by visually re-enacting these events in his or her imagination. In *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, the medieval translator Nicholas Love tells us that the text was originally written 'in Latin for a religious woman', and he explicitly says:

If you wish to truly experience and feel the fruit of this book, you must in your soul make yourself present with all your thought and all your intention to those things that are here written and said to or done by Our Lord Jesus. And you must do that constantly and with pleasure, as if you heard them with your bodily ears or saw them with your own eyes, at the time putting away and leaving aside all other occupations and business.⁹

⁷ Origen, *The Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs*, in *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works*, translated by Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist, 1979), 217–44, here 232.

⁸ MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 33^v (PL 184, col. 1218A).

⁹ Love, *Mirror of the Blessed Life*, 12, ll. 40–42; 13, ll. 1–4.

In other words, the reader is meant to be a witness to events which occur in his or her presence, or even a participant, which Margery Kempe (1373–after 1439), for example, followed to the letter. In her meditation on the Virgin Mary, she,

... went forth with our Lady to Bethlehem and procured lodgings for her every night with great reverence, and our Lady was received with good cheer. She also begged for our Lady pieces of fair white cloth and kerchiefs to swaddle her son in when he was born; and when Jesus was born she arranged bedding for our Lady to lie on with her blessed son.¹⁰

The *Ancrone Wisse*, a vernacular work written in the thirteenth century in England specifically for three anchoresses, does not ask its readers to go to the same extremes, but it nevertheless provides them with many images from daily life. Elizabeth Robertson, commenting on this characteristic of such texts, writes

... in the end, a man writing for women, and responding to his tradition's construction of them emphasizes the concrete, personal and contemporary, rather than the abstract and historical.¹¹

In such circumstances, one might expect to find in the *Manner of Good Living*—another text aimed at religious women—regular images from daily life to enable the reader to use her inner sight to read as if '[you] saw them with your own eyes'. But the *Manner* very seldom does so, nor does it advise the reader to meditate on the lives of the Virgin Mary or of Christ. Indeed, biographical references to both are almost non-existent in the *Manner*. There is only one detailed reference to the sufferings Christ endured on the Cross:

Dearly beloved Sister, *learn* from the suffering of Christ. *Remember* Christ, and you will not magnify your own injuries for he, suffering for us, left us an example. Though beaten with rods, scourged, mocked and scorned, nailed and crowned with thorns, condemned to death on a cross, he held his peace throughout.¹²

¹⁰ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, translated by B. A. Windeatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 53.

¹¹ Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville: U. of Tennessee P, 1990), 57.

¹² MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 105^r (PL 184, col. 1263A), my emphasis.



Unlike descriptions of the passion in *De institutione inclusarum* ('On a Rule for Anchoresses'), by Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167), which Aelred wrote for his sister, and in Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*, the physical and visual details are quite restrained: blood and Christ's wounds are not even mentioned. Similarly, there are no participants or witnesses to the scene, and no encouragement for the reader to feel emotionally involved and empathize with Christ. The emphasis is on 'learn[ing]' and 'remember[ing]', not on seeing or even on hearing. This is simply a lesson on how to 'suffer patiently adversity'.¹³

When one considers the *Manner* in its entirety, moreover, one would be hard-pressed to find many images of everyday life.¹⁴ In contrast, in the *Ancrone Wisse*'s discussion of silence, for instance, farmyard imagery is used to great effect:

You, my beloved sisters, follow our Lady, and not the cackling Eve—because an anchoress, whatever she is, however much she knows, should keep quiet. She does not have the nature of a hen. The hen, when she has laid, can only cackle—and what happens on account of it? The crow comes right away and steals her eggs from her, and eats what should bring forth living birds. In just the same way, the devil-crow carries off and swallows all the good which cackling anchoresses have given birth to.¹⁵

The *Manner of Good Living* also examines silence but in quite a different mode:

The prophet Isaiah says, 'the beauty of all virtue is silence and an assurance forever'. David, the prophet, also in his prayer beseeched God, saying: 'Put a guard, good Lord, over my mouth and keep watch over the door of my lips'. Keeping silence with great diligence, the holy fathers studied and worked to know and to see how sweet Almighty God is and, setting aside all duties belonging to the active life, they clove to the contemplative life 'Many words are not without sin.' [Proverbs 10: 19] A chattering virgin is a fool, a wise virgin will have few words.¹⁶

¹³ This is the title of the chapter from which this quotation has been excerpted.

¹⁴ Very occasionally images are taken from the field of physical labour, such as the nurture of a young tender tree, the work of the cordwainer, and the laying of tiles.

¹⁵ See *Ancrone Wisse*, in *Anchoritic Spirituality*, translated by Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson (New York: Paulist, 1991), 41–207, here 73.

¹⁶ For the whole passage see MS Laud misc. 517, fols 92^r–93^r (PL 184, cols. 1254C–1255B).

While the *Ancrene Wisse* uses familiar everyday images, the *Manner* instead here quotes David and Isaiah, in other words scriptural authorities, and refers the reader to the example of the holy fathers. The allusion to wise and foolish virgins (which recurs on several occasions in the text) may also remind the reader of the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins.¹⁷ Thus in the *Manner* the reader is taught to reflect and turn to her mind, rather than to her imagination or her experience of everyday life.

However, this preference for the intellectual rather than the visual does not signify that the *Manner* completely rejects images, as the following quotation well illustrates:

My dear sister, listen to the voice of your spouse, Jesus Christ, speaking to you: 'arise, my love, and come to me, my love, for now the winter and the rain have gone. Flowers appear on the earth, it is the time of young shoots, the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land.' [Song of Songs 2: 10–12] By that is meant that the voice of the apostles and preachers is heard in the Church. The turtle-dove, which is a very chaste bird, accustomed to building its nest and dwelling in high mountains and trees, symbolises the apostles and other doctors who might say with the scriptures, 'our conversation is in heaven' [Philippians 3: 20].¹⁸

It is impossible to ignore the luxuriance and 'reverdie' (spring regeneration) of these lines, but they are not taken from an observation of nature but from the scriptures, the Song of Songs, which at this point in the text counterbalances the earlier representation, in the same chapter, of this present life 'full of misery and wretchedness'.¹⁹ But if not interpreted in the right way, these lines from the Song of Songs could lead the reader into temptation. Indeed, these are also the verses quoted by January, the infatuated old husband of Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale' as a prelude to a sexual encounter:

'Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free!
The turtles voys is herd, my dowve sweete;
The wynter is goon with alle his reynes weete.
Come forth now, with thyne even columbyn!' ²⁰

¹⁷ See Matthew 25: 1–12.

¹⁸ MS Laud misc. 517, fols 33^v–34^r (PL 184, cols 1218A–B).

¹⁹ MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 33^r (PL 184, col. 1217D).

²⁰ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: OUP, 1990), 'The Merchant's Tale', 165, ll. 2138–41 ['Rise up, my wife, my love, my lady free! / The turtle's voice is heard, my dove, my pet. / Winter is gone with all its rain and wet; / Come out with me, bright-eyes, my

No such interpretation is possible in the *Manner of Good Living*, as the text clearly excludes any literal understanding of the Song of Songs by referring to 'your spouse, Jesus Christ' as the author and not to Solomon. The gloss added by the *Manner's* author further directs the reader's interpretation away from the physical and natural images included in the biblical verses. There is no 'non-allegorical' Latin tradition of the Song of Songs in the Middle Ages; and, likewise, the images in the *Manner* are allegorical and are there to make a moral point rather than to persuade through a lively style.

It is perhaps striking that in Song of Songs 2:10–12, as quoted in the *Manner*, the reader is not told to 'see' but to 'listen to the voice of your spouse', which the text then interprets as the 'voice of the apostles and preachers ... and other doctors'. Elsewhere in the *Manner* the act of seeing is often apprehended as something evil, at best dangerous. In Chapter 23, for example, the reader is warned against the 'lewd sight of the eye':²¹

Do not think in any way different: many by the sight of their eyes have fallen into peril of body and soul. I exhort you, therefore, to make a covenant with your eyesight, that you do not see that thing which you should not. Beware, lest 'death enter into your soul by your eyesight' [Jeremiah 9:21].²²

The example of David and Bathsheba, to which the *Manner* alludes, shows how the eye may lead to lechery and murder.

Such advice for regulating the senses, and especially that of sight, is a common feature of devotional texts. The *Ancrene Wisse* uses similar strong language against the dangers of 'sight' and also mentions the example of David and Bathsheba. In the *Manner*, however, it is not simply a matter of 'not see[ing] that thing which you should not'; it is also a matter of seeing rightly:

Saint Isidore says: 'the eye of the mind which the dust of the earth closes up cannot see high things'. As if one says: the eye of the mind which the dust of concupiscence does close cannot perfectly see and know heavenly things.²³

columbine!'; translated by Nevill Coghill, *Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 398.]

²¹ MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 71^r. 'Tela oculorum' (PL 184, col. 1241A).

²² MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 74^r (PL 184, cols 1242D–1243A).

²³ MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 150^r (PL 184, col. 1291A).



David and Bathsheba, from a medieval French manuscript

It is not ‘sight’ that the *Manner* condemns, but rather the act of seeing, now, in this present world—for it should be replaced by, or rather it should anticipate, the future spiritual sight promised after death. Indeed, the *Manner* regularly reminds its reader that if she follows its guidance she ‘may deserve to see the face of God’, she ‘should see the glorious vision of God’, and she ‘may see Him reigning in his kingdom’.²⁴

Just as the *Manner* advises its reader that ‘religious persons ... should never wander around outside but remain continually in the hidden religious life in the sight of God’,²⁵ so it urges her not to let her inner sight freely wander back to the present world and to its secular images. Instead, it directs the reader’s sight towards God, mainly through the medium of scriptural quotations. But it also goes further and tells her to ‘forget your own people and your father’s house’ and provides her with a new and spiritual family.²⁶ God is now her father and she God’s daughter,

²⁴ Respectively, MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 24^v (PL 184, col. 1212D); MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 33^v (this gloss is a Middle English addition); MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 34^r (PL 184, col. 1218B); etc., my emphasis.

²⁵ MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 158^v (PL 184, cols 1296D–1297A).

²⁶ Psalm 44: 14. Although not translated in the *Manner*, this verse is actually quoted in the *Liber*. See PL 184, col. 1214D.

I do not want that you always lie kept down under the yoke of fear, but that you rise up by love towards God, your Father, who created you as his daughter.²⁷

The widows who share her conventual life should be regarded as her mothers,

I advise you, therefore, that for the love of Christ you serve them and love them as mothers. Loved sister, you should serve them as a daughter.²⁸

The other nuns are her 'good sisters'.²⁹ Virtues are her children, 'if you love Christ ... and dread Him as you should, you have seven children. The first child is modesty, [the] second patience' and so on.³⁰ The author is her brother and, most importantly, Christ is her spouse. Emotionally too, therefore, all of the reader's affections have been redirected towards things pertaining to God.

It is interesting to note that the restricted use of images in the *Manner* bears some resemblance to the position taken by the Cistercian William of St Thierry (c.1085–c.1148):

William's complete rejection of the image extends even to mental imagery, recognising only a rudimentary level of spiritual development in which the soul that is not advanced is allowed to imagine the Passion of Christ. If one wishes to advance, one avoids all conceptions of the divine which invoke physical localization or even quality and quantity.³¹

(This does not mean, however, that the anonymous author was himself a Cistercian.) Such a work as the *Manner of Good Living* aimed, then, to draw its readers away from the carnality and clamour of this world and, by offering a guide to good living, to encourage a contemplative existence far removed from the laborious life of the world. In this intention, the *Manner of Good Living* does not differ from the *Ancrene Wisse* or from Aelred's *De institutione inclusarum*, but it espouses a slightly different

²⁷ MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 13^r (PL 184, col. 1206B).

²⁸ MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 69^v (PL 184, col. 1240B).

²⁹ MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 40^r (PL 184, cols 1221D–1222A).

³⁰ MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 70^r (PL 184, col. 1240B).

³¹ Conrad Rudolph, *The 'things of Greater Importance': Bernard of Clairvaux's Apologia and the Medieval Attitude toward Art* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania P, 1990), 117.

path, a path which perhaps demands 'great[er] study and diligence'.³² Whether this is the case because the addressee in the *Manner of Good Living* is a nun, and not an anchoress or a recluse, is impossible to say.

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³² MS Laud misc. 517, fol. 173^v (PL 184, col. 1305C).