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"*I Herd an Harping on a Hille*": Its Text and Context

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That the literary context of a poem may have some bearing upon the poem is a commonplace of our age; that the context of a poem in a medieval manuscript may have some relevance to the poem is not commonplace at all. Too often expediency has appeared to be the principle by which manuscripts were ordered, and frequently the most diverse sorts of materials were juxtaposed. Yet I would argue that expediency, although common, is not the sole principle of manuscript organization, and that the *Norton Reader* approach does not always obtain in the compilation of manuscripts. Just as, in the present age, the context of a given work may provide an added dimension to that work, in rare instances, the context of a medieval manuscript may provide the necessary insight that makes it accessible to a modern audience. Such seems to be the case with "I Herd an Harping on a Hille" which appears uniquely in MS Don. c. 13 as one of a group of seven metrical pieces in the concluding folios of a fourteenth-century collection of Wycliffite sermons. That it is no accident that "I Herd an Harping on a Hille" is included in a collection of Wycliffite writings, and that the poem has a strong thematic kinship with fourteenth-century reform and Wycliffite teachings forms the basis for the reading of the poem.

Separated from its context, "I Herd an Harping" is a puzzling poem. It was first printed by Beatrice Daw Brown in *The Bodleian Quarterly Record*(1932-34),1 whereshe observed its anomalous nature. Because of its setting, Brown grouped it with the "pious *chanson d'adventure*" even though it appeared to be an unconventional example of the type. She observed that the organizational pattern of the poem,

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that of the poet by chance overhearing a hortatory discourse, was an artifice common to other lyrics. However, she noted that the "device of the harper, and the graphic description of his emotion, appear to be original."2 Her commentary raised an important question: why did the poet use the device of the harper and by so doing remove himself from that which was to follow when the subject of the discourse was the Passion?

By itself, the poem does not provide any answers. "I Herd an Harping on a Hille" is a frame poem that opens and closes with a narrator who, while he rests under the boughs of a linden tree, hears a sermon sung by a harper. In its opening lines the narrator focuses upon the wisdom of the harper before he considers the specifics of the sermon on the Passion which the harper sings.

As a means of establishing and fixing the essence of his exposition on the Passion, the Harper uses the letters M, X, C, and I as mnemonics. Why mnemonics should be a part of a poem whose subject is the Passion, an idea thematically central to a whole corpus of medieval English lyric poetry, is a problem. Also perplexing is the reason for the elaborate development of the capability of the Harper. Without the manuscript context of the poem, "I Herd an Harping" would remain a tantalizingly charming, if somewhat obscure, poem on the Passion and there the matter would end, for there would be little means of wresting any other meaning from the words of the poem. However, the context of the "Harping" poem its immediate context and the Wycliffite sermons that constitute the greater portion of the manuscript suggests a line of inquiry that is consonant with the content of the poem in both its figurative and literal renderings.

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What, then, is the specific context of the "Harping" poem? Most immediately, it is preceded by "Als þat a Grete Clerk Shewis in His Boke" and it is followed by "Habide Gode Men and Hald ʒou Stil." The latter is a short poem on the Passion that appears in variant form in the Rawlinson MSS A.D. 1756 and is printed in Brown's *Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century*. The thematic similarity between "Habide Gode Men" and the "Harping" poem is obvious since both poems have the Passion as their central theme; however, it is the work that most immediately precedes the "Harping" poem that has suggested a possible line for exploration.

"Als þat a Grete Clerk Shewis in His Boke" is of particular interest inasmuch as it functions as a bridge between the Wycliffite sermons which constitute the major portion of the manuscript and the lyrics. At the conclusion of "Als þat a Grete Clerk" are the words: "Explicit sermo Gartrig," which identifies the poem as the rude English verse translation by John de Gaytrik of Archbishop John Thoresby's "Instruction," more commonly known today as the *Lay Folks' Catechism*.

Archbishop Thoresby, one of the early proponents of spiritual reform in fourteenth-century England, in his concern for the spiritual welfare of both the clergy and the laity to whom they ministered, issued a *Catechism* expounding upon the fundamentals of faith and practice of the church: the Seven Sacraments, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Ten Commandments, the Seven Spiritual Works of Mercy, and so forth. This *Catechism* appeared both in the simplest of Latin and in English so that even the most unlettered clergy would have no difficulty in transmitting its contents to the laity.

The verse translation by Gaytrik was probably done at Thoresby's request as a means of making the

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Catechism easier to memorize, and there were numerous verbal markers that charted the learner's way through the material that was to be committed to memory: for instance, "sex thinges" to learn, seven points of belief, seven points of Christ's manhood, ten commandments. Each point was not only noted, it was expounded upon, and most points had their appropriate memory markers: "ane," "anothir," the "secund thyng of the sex to knawe," "the tend and the last," and the whole was in English so that all could more easily learn what was necessary for salvation.

In the introductory stanzas to the *Lay Folks' Catechism*, which outlined the rationale for the *Catechism*, Thoresby observed that God had granted reason to both angels and men so that, by means of knowledge, they might serve him. Because of their innocence, Adam and Eve had had this knowledge, but their descendants did not and could only obtain it by being taught. The blame for the fact that many people were ignorant of this knowledge might have rested with the "prelates, parsons, vikers, and prestes" who were obligated to teach the people but who had sometimes failed in this aspect of their duties. Thoresby issued his *Catechism* with the admonition that all clergy teach and preach "openly on Inglis opon sononndaires."[3] While preaching in English was not unknown, that it should be done so often was a novel idea. By such means, Thoresby moved to correct those clergy whose piety was not always apparent and who were held in low estimation by the laity for their lack of learning and their excesses.

While Thoresby's doctrine was hardly new, since it was an extension of Archbishop Peckham's position of 76 years previous, it did reflect the idea of reform that was the countermotion of that period to abuses by the clergy. Thoresby's ideas for reform,

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though somewhat radical, were not heretical, and he certainly was no Lollard. His *Lay Folks' Catechism* had the approval of the Council or Convocation of the clergy of the Diocese and Province of York,[4] and both the English and Latin versions were issued in 1357.

So how does the *Lay Folks' Catechism* function as an intermediary between Wycliffite sermons and a poem that appears to express Wycliffite (or Lollard)[5] sympathy? It does so because the *Lay Folks' Catechism* was expanded and adapted by the Wycliffites to suit their own purposes.

It seems probable that John Wyclif, himself a priest of York, had access to the *Catechism*, for there soon appeared a Wycliffite Adaptation with interpolations from Wyclif's own works. Henry E. Nolloth, in his, introduction to the EETS edition of the *Lay Folks Catechism*, presented a strong case for Wyclif as the author. Whether or not this was actually the case is not the province of this discussion, because the version that appears in MS Don. c. 13 is a transcription of Thoresby's original work and not the expanded Wycliffite version. Nevertheless, the presuppositions upon which Thoresby's original work was initiated were consistent with Wyclif's own beliefs and the beliefs of his followers: the common man was capable of learning what was necessary for his salvation if he were taught in English, and to that end, he should have available to him various simple statements of those beliefs as well as clergy who could explicate those beliefs in a tongue he could comprehend.

It is significant that the *Lay Folks' Catechism* which maintained the convictions that were subsequently to be so integral to the Wycliffite doctrine should be the link between the Wycliffite sermons and the lyrics that follow. But the

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commonality of themes between the *Catechism* and the "Harping" poem is not the sole point of similarity between the two works. Both the *Catechism* and the poem use memory aids as a means of assisting listeners to learn, and both support teaching and preaching in the vernacular. The *Catechism* explicitly advocates such teaching, and the "Harping" poem depicts someone doing just that.

Although the focus of "I Herd an Harping" is on the Passion, the poet approaches his subject obliquely. While the crucifixion scene itself is clearly at the heart of the poem, it is just as clear that the audience is led to view this event in a specific manner through the particular view of the harper.

As the poem opens, the narrator describes a harper singing a woeful complaint about Christ's Passion. But why should the poet use the fictive voice of a harper to communicate a sermon on the Passion instead of speaking in his own voice? Part of the answer might lie in what it is that a harper does. A harper is clearly one who sings or chants, and here the connection to Wycliffites or Lollards quickly emerges. Herbert B. Workman, in *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*, defines the original meaning of the term Lollard as "a wandering 'praise-God,' 'canter,'" with the derivation of the word coming from the Old Dutch "*lollen*" or "*lullen*", which means to sing.6 For the medieval audience, a harper singing or chanting as he expounded upon the Passion might well have presented an immediately recognizable image of a Lollard. Such an identification may explain why the poet of "I Herd an Harping" simultaneously presents himself and suppresses himself by shifting focus away from himself to the voice of the Harper as the source of the ideas that are to follow.

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The poet momentarily postpones revealing the substance of the Harper's song to emphasize both the woeful nature of the song and the extraordinary capability of the Harper. Here again, there may be another association with the Lollards, for the narrator's insistence upon the intelligence and learning of the Harper leads naturally to his identification as one of the Lay Priests, wandering priests, or "Poor Priests" associated with the Wycliffites. K.B. McFarlane pointed out that Wyclif's earliest followers were "learned popularizers" and "university-trained members of the intellectual *elite*."7

The question as to whether or not Wyclif directly conceived an Order of Poor Priests is one difficult to settle. On the one hand, Wyclif's writings show the words "Poor Priests" with capital letters. On the other hand, such a convention was not uncommon to the time, and it would be anachronistic to read a significance into the use of capital letters. Further, while there is a traditional identification of the Lay Priests as Lollards, there is little evidence that Wyclif himself had anything to do with the barefooted, russet-robed preachers who roamed the countryside preaching to those who would listen.

McFarlane believed that the "dispatch" of missionaries around the countryside "may well have been the work of the younger [Oxford] hotheads whom [Wyclif] had left behind in the university and who would shortly be disciplined for their pains."8 These followers of Wyclif would include Nicholas Hereford, who began about 1380 to translate the Latin version of the *Bible* into English, and who was the most chauvinistic of Wyclif's followers.9 On the list of followers would have been Philip Repton, an Austin canon of the abbey of St. Mary-in-the-Fields by Leicester who was known for his enthusiastic support of the new doctrines. There also would have been

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John Aston, who was not only so forward as to add his own "errors" to those of Wyclif's, but was described as converting simple men while talking to them over a meal or while wandering the roads on foot "like a bee."10 It seems probable that the harper of the poem is just such an university-trained and dedicated preacher who was intent upon explicating one of the central mysteries of his religion.

The words of the poet certainly reinforce such an interpretation. "His witt was of a wonderful skille" and "his carpaynge" or tale or song "is ful hende," that is, skilled, or clever, as he unwinds the "bales" of his message. That the

poet chooses the metaphor of unwinding in what initially appears to be a straightforward if abrupt opening to a religious meditation upon the Passion is significant, for it fixes not only upon the complexity of the song which is to follow, but upon the capability of the harper who can act as interpreter of that message. Thus, prior to developing the content of the Harper's song, the poet directs the attention of his audience to the artistry and intelligence of the harper.

The second stanza reiterates the Harper's mastery of his craft. The logic and order of his song is as orderly as if he reads it in a row, that is, follows the logic of the line. His skill is as great as that of a clerk, which he well may be, if not a doctor of divinity. And he has "wro3t a wonderful werke." It is in this stanza, also, that the poet introduces the memory-aids for those learning the catechism he is preaching. However, the preacher leaves the explication of the mnemonics to a later stanza.

There are hints in this stanza that the Harper's considerable knowledge of his craft is used in a circumspect manner since "his witt was war in sawe." The use of "war in sawe" is interesting. "Sawe"

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obviously means "wise saying" or "truths" and comes down to the present day with the same meaning, and "war" connotes watchfulness or prudence. Against the background of the Harper's consummate skill, the poet has introduced an admonitory note without detailing why it might be necessary for any harper, skilled or unskilled, to be cautious about the manner in which he presented the Passion, the subject matter of countless lyrics.

Unless, of course, the Harper was, indeed, one of the Lollard preachers, in which case he might well be wary. Even before Wyclif's death, his followers had taken up preaching. In 1382 Repton, Hereford, and Aston, invited by the rector of Odiham to preach, had traveled so openly throughout the various towns and byways of north Hampshire teaching, that William of Wykeham, bishop of Winchester, felt compelled to issue a mandate to Odiham. By 1384, the Wycliffites had become so unpopular with the church officials that there were injunctions directed against them by the church government. In such circumstances, a Lollard harper who was even moderately intelligent would be bound to be more circumspect, or as the poet says, "war in sawe."

But the surface level of the poem carries another meaning, for obviously, the nature of the Passion itself presents subject matter too cruel and unhappy for the Harper to discuss. The poet's use of "derke" and "merke" confirm such a meaning, while, at the same time, such words maintain the figurative meaning. Thus, the essential nature, or "matter," of the song of the Harper is so gloomy and distressing that he "couth not it shawe," that is, he didn't have the will to present it.

Yet he does sing his sad message, and, in so doing, introduces the memory aids X, M, I, and C. Each of these letters represents a participant of the

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Passion. X, the Harper says, stands for Christ, the son of God. Mary, whose cheeks were wet with tears when Christ was raised on the cross, takes the M. John, the loved one of the twelve, is represented by I, and the cross is represented by C which brought all four of them together. Using the four letters X, M, I, and C, the Harper distills the essence of what his listeners must learn for their salvation. The inseparability of their oneness is implicit even though it is to Christ, who endured the Passion, that the petitions of the Harper are directed. The absence of the representation of the authority of the church is subtle enough not to be noticed, but consonant with the Lollard ideas that close the poem.

Using an association of words that fixes the image of the bestial nature of man: "kinde," "gatis" (reminiscent of gated or penned animals), "wais to winde" (recalling the random character of animal wanderings), the poet widens the disparity between man and God (a firm Wycliffite idea), and affirms the importance of Christ. What bad fortune, the poet queries, has caused man to hazard so much by following his own inclination? With the bleak answer that only God knows the mind of man and no other man, the poet closes the poem by returning to the frame and reiterating that this is the song that he heard the Harper sing.

However, the cunning phrase that "god wate & no mo," that is, that God alone knows and no man, has resonances with one of Wyclif's "errors" as cited in the 1377 condemnatory bull from Gregory XI. Among the nineteen errors listed was one concerning dominion, which dealt with Wyclif's claim that only God could determine the state of

righteousness of a man's mind and could exercise authority. Such a statement as "God wate & no mo," which appears to be harmless on the surface, very well could have been an example of the specialized vocabulary that

was common to the Wycliffites,11 and could reflect the ideas Wyclif developed in *de Civili Dominio*, which was an assault upon the clerical and temporal powers exercised by the clergy. No man, said Wyclif, could pronounce absolution on any other man's sins since only God could know the mind of man exactly the position of the Harper.

Wyclif's insistence that priests could err meant that, on occasion, the laity could countermand the authority of the church. For example, the laity might bypass a recognizably wicked priest in the matter of the distribution to the poor of tithes, and themselves dispense the money without the intermediary hands of the priest.

Also resonant to the phrase of "god wate & no mo," is Wyclif's idea of the worldly church composed, not of those who necessarily regarded themselves as members of the church, but of those who were predestined and foreknown to be saved, not those who were destined to be damned. Only God knows which men are saved and are truly members of the church. Since men lack knowledge of who really constitutes the church, said Wyclif in the Wycliffite version of the *Lay Folks' Catechism*, it is possible that popes and prelates who are evil are "nat part of holy chirche but of [the] synagoge [of sathanas]."12 For Wyclif, to be a member in the church in this world was not necessarily synonymous with being a member of the great invisible church that encompasses both the living and the dead and which rests outside of time in the eternal present with God.

Thus, while the surface meaning of the phrase "god wate & no mo" appears to be a statement so theologically impeccably in keeping with the conventions of the time as to be unassailable, it seems that it could very well covertly express the unpopular, if not heretical, doctrines of the Wycliffites.

Words and common references change over the course of centuries, and as A. C. Spearing once pointed out, there is not always readily at hand the "intimate and immediate response" to a word or phrase that might have been commonplace to the poet's audience. Yet, by attempting to re-create that past, it may be possible to discover some new leverage that will push aside the barriers of time to show what the response might have been. The poem "I Herd an Harping on a Hille" is, in itself, a fine poem, but the meaning suggested by the manuscript context shows that the poem may be considerably more than what it appears to be. In matters of this nature, one cannot say with absolute certainty that this is so, but the pointing of evidence directs that, in this one instance, the context of a medieval poem has provided the way towards discovering what may be the real significance of the poem.

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Notes

1. Beatrice Daw Brown, "Religious Lyrics in MS. Don. c. 13," *The Bodleian Quarterly Record*, 7 (1932-34); 1-7.
2. Brown, p. 4.
3. Thomas F. Simmons and Henry E. Nolloth, eds. *The Lay Folks' Catechism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1901), p. 6.
4. Simmons and Nolloth, p. xvii.
5. The terms Lollard and WyCliffite are used interchangeably.
6. Herbert B. Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church, I* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1966), p. 327.
7. K. B. McFarlane, *The Origins of Religious Dissent in England* (New York: Collier Books, 1966), p. 19.
8. McFarlane, p. 110.
9. McFarlane quotes the St. Albans chronicler as describing Hereford as "'the most violent' of his master's followers," p. 110.
10. McFarlane, p. 111.
11. Cf. Anne Hudson, "A Lollard Sect Vocabulary?" *So Many People Longages and Tonges* (Edinburgh: Benskin & Samuels at the Middle English Dialect Project, 1981).
12. *Lay Folks Catechism*, 18 (Wycliffite version).