

The Order of the Texts in the Bodley 34 Manuscript:
The Function of Repetition and Recall in a Manuscript Addressed to Nuns

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Scholars have recently begun to focus increased attention on the relationship among texts contained within a single manuscript. These studies have been beneficial for the information they shed on the role of the manuscript compiler and on his awareness of the needs of a particular audience.¹ Through the careful selection and ordering of texts within a manuscript, a compiler could create a coherent lesson for a specific audience. In this paper I would like to show how one compiler, that of the Bodley 34 (B) manuscript, did just that.

The Bodley 34 manuscript is a thirteenth-century collection of alliterative prose works in Middle English. It contains three saints' lives (of Sts. Katherine of Alexandria, Margaret of Antioch, and Juliana of Nicomedia) and two homilies (*Hali Meidhad* and *Sawles Warde*) and is known collectively as the "Katherine Group."² The author or authors of the individual works are not known, but the works are the product of a literary center that flourished in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Southwest England. The Bodley 34 manuscript was assembled shortly after the composition of the works and was compiled for the edification of the nuns at Wigmore Abbey in Herefordshire, England.³

It seems clear that B was designed to be an exhortation to the Wigmore nuns to preserve their virginity. While this may not seem to be a necessary lesson for a conventual audience, it should be kept in mind that many women at this time did not enter nunneries by choice.

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Especially for upper-class families, the problem of insufficiently dowered daughters was a real one since marriage beneath one's station was frowned upon. Lack of a dowry and a desire to establish good business relations with the local cloister were frequent motives behind depositing daughters, who often did not have a spiritual advocacy, in convents. James Gage summed up the situation when he said:

The general lack of scholarly activity, the fact that the convent was often a convenient repository for surplus women of the upper class, the early age at which girls were sometimes enclosed, and the indications of misconduct in medieval English nunneries suggest that a relatively steady number of their population were not wholly reconciled to monastic life.⁴

Thus a manuscript like the Bodley 34, which presented the preservation of maidenhood as a desirable and worthy goal would not seem superfluous given this audience.

In putting together a manuscript which would present a coherent lesson or *sententia*, the compiler had two distinct jobs ahead of him. Since the manuscript would be read aloud to the nuns over a period of several days, the compiler had to (1) select the texts that would reinforce his *sententia* without being overly redundant and then (2) order the texts so that the manuscript could withstand the extended recitation period without fear that the nuns would lose the thread of the argument. In achieving these goals in the Bodley 34, the compiler relied heavily on the standard rhetorical practices of repetition and textual recall.

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In order to understand the purpose of repetition, it is necessary to look briefly at the principles which lay behind it. One of the best places to examine those principles is in the rhetorical manuals that give instruction in the rules of composition. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, a famous medieval rhetorician, set forth his basic principles in three simple rules: (1) the purpose of writing is to impart a lesson, (2) this lesson, the *sententia*, is to be mentioned at the beginning and the end of the work, and (3) by amplification, the *sententia* should be repeated throughout the work.⁵ Although it seems that Geoffrey is being rather excessive with his stress on repeating the lesson ad nauseum, it should be

mentioned at this point that Geoffrey was not simply providing rules for written compositions he was also making provisions for the work's oral recitation. The device of repetition is well-suited to an age whose literary achievements were presented orally. As all teachers know, repetition is a tool of didacticism, and in an oral presentation it is all the more necessary to employ repetition to insure the audience's absorption of the lesson.

But clearly one cannot simply repeat the same lesson over and over without fear of boring the audience. Geoffrey, who was well aware of this problem, advises the use of the rhetorical device known as *expositio* in which the author repeats something already said but in a different way. To quote Geoffrey:

If you choose an amplified form, proceed first of all by this step: although the meaning is one, let it *not* come content with one set of apparel. Let it vary its robes and assume different raiment. Let it take up again in other words what has

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already been said.... Let one and the same thing be concealed under multiple forms be varied and yet the same.⁶

Thus in an age which clearly enjoyed hearing the same lessons over again,⁷ the adage "be varied and yet the same" could make this impulse more palatable. For the compiler of B, the adage seems to have been a founding principle because, as we shall see, the works selected for the manuscript clearly differ in plot and presentation while their message remains constant. The compiler of B successfully picked works that would reinforce his chosen *sententia* while at the same time keep the audience's attention through a variety of styles.

The other task facing the compiler of B was to order the texts in such a way that the subtle differences between the works would be retained in the listeners' minds at the end of the extended period of recitation. To facilitate that, the compiler of B placed the homily *Sawles Warde* at the end of the manuscript, knowing, as we shall see, that this work would recall for the nuns the lessons of the other four works in the manuscript. Thus, through the careful process of selecting and ordering his texts, the compiler of B created a coherent manuscript which repeatedly promoted the virtues of virginity without either losing the interest of the audience through redundancy or losing the thread of the argument by too much variation of theme.

I would like to turn now to a more in-depth examination of the process of selecting and ordering the texts which the compiler of the Bodley 34 used. The saints' lives (Katherine, Margaret, and Juliana) appear first in the manuscript to provide the audience with the ideal. They present historical figures who accomplish amazing feats. The virgins are not

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"everywoman" figures; they are extraordinary individuals who remain distant to the reader. They can be called upon for help, but their lives cannot be experienced vicariously by the audience. The lives themselves differ in the degree to which they emphasize the theme of virginity. Katherine, who is committed to maidenhood, is persecuted because she will not worship pagan gods. Although it seems that Emperor Maximian wants to defile her (he says, "tu schalt, efter þ cwen, eauer þe oþer beon in halle ant i bure"⁸), her virginity is never really at stake. In *Seinte Marherete þe Meiden ant Martyr*, the threat to virginity is more direct. The emperor Olibrius,, upon seeing Margaret, desires to possess her sexually, either as wife or as concubine. Finally, with St. Juliana, the entire plot of the work revolves around the issue of virginity: we are immediately told of Emperor Eleusius' plan to marry Juliana, who is willing to commit herself to him and thus sacrifice her virginity if he is converted. Issues of marriage and maidenhood predominate in this work with Juliana confessing that she is already espoused to Christ. In all three saints' lives, the importance of virginity is assumed. It functions as a premise, and no justification is made for the extreme measures taken to preserve it. The maidens are extraordinary in their unwavering commitment to God and virginity and in their conviction that the pleasures of earthly life are meaningless in the face of true heavenly bliss. They are willing to suffer in order to obtain salvation.

With the first homily in the manuscript, *Hali Meiðhad*, the emphasis turns away from an explication of the lives of extraordinary individuals to focus on experience common to all women. Virginity is no longer assumed to be a desired goal; its advantages have to be forcefully argued through the rhetorical

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technique of *oppositio*. Scene after scene is presented of the horrors of wedded life, followed by descriptions of the

blissful rewards in heaven received by those women who preserve their virginity. For all its concentration on the hardships of earthly existence, it never assumes that all people perceive life to be devoid of pleasure. Instead, it recognizes that not everyone shares the same convictions or is capable of equally rigid discipline. In contrast to the uncompromising attitudes inherent in the saints' lives, this homily offers options to the reader. Different life-styles are portrayed, with the benefits to be reaped from each one calculated on a gradational scale. The virgin's reward is a hundredfold, a widow will receive only sixty percent of that, and a wife a mere thirty percent.⁹ The tract, although obviously biased in favor of virginity, recognizes that it is not for everyone. Its presentation also differs from the preceding hagiographies; elevated style gives way to a coarser, more proverbial work whose argument rarely rises above the level of materialistic bargaining.

Sawles Warde is the climactic and key work of the group. It neither distances itself from the reader like the saints' lives nor does it debase itself in proverbial expression like *Hali Meidhad*; instead it attracts its audience through a dramatic rendition of an intricate allegory. Scholars have noted that this homily is in some ways a precursor to the morality play in its dramatization of a struggle between Wit and Will and the parallel psychomachia between virtues and vices¹⁰. It presents an allegory of a house (the body) whose master, Wit (intelligence), and mistress, Will (lust), are in conflict with one another and thus leave the treasure of the house (the soul) in a precarious state. Four of God's daughters (the cardinal

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virtues Prudence, Spiritual Strength, Righteousness, and Moderation) are employed by Wit to guard the entrance to the house (literally, to guard the maidenhead), and Will has corresponding helpers (vices) who wish to ravish the house. The work ends with a statement of its lesson: "[One must] witen Godes treosor þet is his ahne sawle i þe hus of þe bodi from þe þeof of helle."¹¹ The message is still the same here as it is in the other four works, but it puts the issue of virginity in its proper perspective, seeing it as just one aspect of true cleanliness, the purity of the soul. In this way *Sawles Warde* transcends the other works and addresses the theological implications of virginity that might have been otherwise neglected. It combines the most effective devices of the other genres the earthy appeal of the homily and the elevated style of the hagiographies into a dramatic allegory imparting a spiritual lesson, which unlike the saints' lives is capable of being attained by the average person and unlike *Hali Meidhad* avoids lowering itself to the level of a polemical treatise against lust.

But it is not merely due to the thematic evidence and stylistic presentation that it appears that the compiler of B consciously picked and ordered the works in his manuscript. Scholars have often noted the similarity of words, symbols, and phrases that are repeated throughout the five works.¹² Yet there appears to be a unity to the works which is of a more intricate nature than simple verbal reminiscence. I would like to suggest that it seems likely that the compiler realized that by placing *Sawles Warde* at the end of the manuscript, the other four works in the manuscript would be recalled in the audience's minds as they heard the lessons imparted by each of the four daughters of God. In other words,

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these cardinal virtues (Prudence, Spiritual Strength, Righteousness, and Moderation) can be seen as symbols of the quality that predominates in each of the preceding works.

For example, Prudence is described as being wise, having the knowledge to distinguish between good and evil, and being able to overcome the Devil not through strength but through awareness of his wiles. These qualities call to mind the subject of the first work of the manuscript, Katherine, who is portrayed throughout that work as a wise and prudent woman who uses her knowledge as a weapon against the pagans. Her wisdom is so great that she is able to convert fifty heathen scholars. Katherine's prudence is heightened by the *oppositio* presented in the characterization of the emperor. Throughout the story he is seen as mad, ignorant, and unreasonable. Prudence does not mean knowledge or learning in and of itself. The *Life of St. Katherine* emphasizes the difference between scholastic ability, personified by the pagan scholars, and true prudence, or spiritual wisdom, personified by Katherine.

It seems fairly obvious that the qualities that the cardinal virtue of Spiritual Strength represents are found in the character of wit, who is the focus of the second work in the manuscript. In *Sawles Warde*, Spiritual Strength is seen fighting evil. She preaches the necessity of making a stand against the devil, resisting him instead of fleeing from him.

Likewise, *Seinte Marherete: þe Meiden ant Martyr* unfolds scene after scene of dramatic combat between Margaret and the forces of evil. There is no attempt on her part to flee from these trials or merely to endure them; instead, she actively engages in struggles with the devil in the shapes of a dragon and of an Ethiopian. with the help of God and her constancy of belief

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she is able to overcome all her adversaries. Her introductory epithet appropriately sums up her abilities: "þe eadie meiden, Margarete bi nome, feht wið þe feond ant wiðhis eorðliche limen, ouercom ant acaste ham." [13](#)

In *Sawles Warde* Righteousness, the third daughter of God, patiently sits in judgment, waiting to give punishment or reward according to what one's deeds on earth merit. She admonishes all to avoid venerating transitory life on earth and encourages concentration on the heavenly kingdom. Juliana, the subject of the third work of the manuscript, clearly represents a corresponding figure of equity. Throughout the work Juliana is forced to undergo constant testing, much more so than Katherine or Margaret. She does not physically, like Margaret, or intellectually, like Katherine, struggle against her enemies. Instead, she *endures* all her tribulations patiently and warns her tormentors of the judgment that will fall on them. She righteously preaches before her death: "þis lif 3e schulen leoten, ant nuten 3e neauer hwenne, ant reopen ripe of þat sed þat 3e her seowen, þat is underne 3eld of wa, oðer of wunne, efter ower werkes." [14](#) *þe Liflade of St. Juliana* is the only hagiography of these three which recounts the fate of the virgins' tormentors. Eleusius, the emperor, wanted to defile her lifeless body but was shipwrecked in the attempt and torn to pieces by wild animals, the fate which Juliana ironically had been promised by her pagan father at the beginning of the work.

Moderation, the fourth daughter of God in *Sawles Warde*, fears poverty and hardship above all other things. She praises a life-style in which one can live according to one's abilities. Such statements call to mind the arguments put forth in *Hali Meiðhad*, the fourth work of the manuscript. That homily praises virginity by

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emphasizing the hardships involved in married life. It asserts that the belief that married women are wealthy is just a myth, that in actuality the wedded are often in the bonds of poverty. But the tract recognizes that not all women are capable of such extreme life-styles as virginity. The work is pervaded with a spirit of moderation and compromise, urging women to perform only those tasks of which they are capable.

It thus seems evident that the compiler of the Bodley 34 consciously selected, altered, and arranged his texts in order to present a coherent manuscript to the women of Wigmores Abbey. Choosing virginity as his theme, he carefully picked works that would reinforce his *sententia* without being overly redundant. The selected works present readers with an interesting range of genres and styles, designed to capture their attention through various appeals to their intellectual, emotional, or spiritual tastes. If the extraordinary deeds of the virgins failed to inspire one to follow their example, perhaps the horrors of matrimony would provide a better incentive. Just to make sure that the reader retained the moral thrust of the hagiographies and the homily, the compiler skillfully placed *Sawles Warde* at the end of the manuscript, repeating and recalling the different aspects of purity that each work represented.

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Notes

1. See Malcolm B. Parkes, "The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book," in *Medieval Learning and Literature, Essays presented to Richard William Hunt*, ed. J. J. G. Alexander and M. T. Gibson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 115-141; Alastair J. Minnis, "Late-medieval discussions of *Compilatio* and the role of the *Compiler*," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 101 (1979), 385-421; and all the essays in *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England: The Literary Implications of Manuscript Study*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Cambridge, England: D. S. Brewer, 1983).
2. See the *Facsimile of MS. Bodley 34*, introd. N. R. Ker, EETS O.S. 247 (London: Oxford University Press, 1960); and *The Katherine Group Edited from MS. Bodley 34*, ed. S. R. T. O. d'Ardenne (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège, 1977).
3. See the review of the debate and evidence over authorship in *þe Liflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Iuliene*, ed. S. R. T. O. d'Ardenne (1936; rpt. with corrigenda as EETS O. S. 248, London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. xl-xlvi.
4. James E. Gage, "*Hali Meidhad* and Kindred Herefordshire Works," Ph. D. Dissertation, Indiana University 1978, p. 147.
5. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1967), pp. 16-23.

6. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, p. 24.
7. My favorite comment on this phenomenon is C. S. Lewis' remark that medieval people were like Tolkien's Hobbits because they enjoyed reading books which told them what they already knew. See his *Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 200.
8. *The Life of Saint Katherine*, ed. Eugen Eickenel, EETS O. S. 80 (London: N. Trubner and Co., 1884), p. 67.
9. *Hali Meidenhad*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS O. S. 18a (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), p. 32.
10. M. Schlauch, *English Medieval Literature and its Social Foundations* (Warsaw: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1956), p. 11.
11. J. A. W. Bennet and G. V. Smithers, *Early Middle English Verse and Prose* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 261.
12. See *Seinte Marherete: þe Meiden and Martyr*, ed. Frances M. Mack, EETS O. S. 193 (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. xxii; Dorothy Bethurum, "The Connection of the Katherine Group with Old English Prose," *JEGP*, 34 (1935), 553-557; and Gage, pp. 76-119.
13. Mack, p. 4.
14. *þe Liflade of St. Juliana*, ed. Oswald Cockayne, EETS O. S. 51 (London: N. Trubner and Co., 1872), p. 75.