

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



MEDIEVAL ENGLISH MYSTICISM

*Edited by Samuel Fanous
and Vincent Gillespie*

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MEDIEVAL ENGLISH MYSTICISM

The widespread view that 'mystical' activity in the Middle Ages was a rarefied enterprise of a privileged spiritual elite has led to the isolation of the medieval 'mystics' into a separate, narrowly defined category. Taking the opposite view, this book shows how individual mystical experiences, such as those recorded by Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, are rooted in, nourished, and framed by the richly distinctive spiritual contexts of their period. Arranged by sections corresponding to historical developments, it explores the primary vernacular texts, their authors, and the contexts that formed the expression and exploration of mystical experiences in medieval England. This is an excellent, comprehensive introduction to medieval English mystical texts, their authors, readers, and communities. Featuring a guide to further reading and a chronology, the *Companion* offers an accessible overview for students of literature, history, and theology.

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A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book.

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PREFACE

Mysticism is innately mysterious. As an experience, it claims to have encountered mystery. As a theology, it attempts to analyse that mysterious encounter. As a text, it struggles to articulate mysterious experiences that resist and elude understanding and expression. A Middle English version of Jan van Ruusbroec asserts that mysticism in all its dimensions is always poised on the brink of paradox:

It maye not be lefte ne ȝit takyn; to wante it is intolerable, to folowe it impossible. It may not be schewed open ne ȝit hid in silence. It excedyd alle resoun and witt, and it is abofe alle creatures, and þefore it may on no wyse be touched. Neuerþelesse, beholdynge ourselfe we feele the spirit of God dryfe vs and put vs into þat inpatient taryngne; bot beholdynge above ourselfe we persayve the spirit of God of oureselfe drawynge vs, and turning vs to nouȝt in hymselfe.¹

Mystical texts seek to understand or impressionistically describe moments of intense experience (or the transcendence of experience), and do so using an extraordinary array of rhetorical, poetic, and linguistic strategies and subversions. In modern times, the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas has perhaps most memorably expressed the delicate indirections and paradoxical imprecisions fundamental to the symbiosis between the restless yearning of contemplation and the ineffability of mystical experience:

Godhead
is the colonisation by mind
of untenanted space. It is its own
light, a statement beyond language
of conceptual truth.[. . .]

Resting in the intervals
of my breathing, I pick up the signals
relayed to me from a periphery I comprehend.²

This book seeks to explore the texts and contexts that formed the expression and exploration of such experiences in medieval England. Because the terms *mystic*, *mystical*, and *mysticism* have a very limited currency in medieval religious writing, either in Latin or in the various European vernaculars, most of the essays here distinguish between the alleged experience of some transcendental Other (what is loosely often called a 'mystical' experience) which by its very nature is beyond earthly comprehension or articulation, and the lives, longings, and textual explorations of those seeking after or seeking to understand and articulate such apparent experiences. Whether such 'experiences' were actually products of supernatural intervention, acts of grace from an ineffable Godhead, or the highly enculturated outcome of a fertile and visually hyperstimulated subconsciousness (or a mixture of the two) is not necessary for us to assess or appraise. But the spiritual contexts that gave rise to them and the texts that resulted from them are a richly distinctive and challenging part of medieval religious culture. The lives, longings, and textual explorations that were engendered by the perception of such experiences are better described as taking place within the *contemplative life*, their spiritual aspirations yearning towards states of *contemplation* (in which mystical experience might, it was hoped, occur) and their struggles to articulate these complex and interrelated states resulting in *contemplative texts*.

Contemplation might usefully be thought of as a state (perhaps transient, only occasionally achieved, and often fleeting) or a way of life (vowed, professed, or aspired to) of preparing and readying the soul to receive whatever sight, sound, word, or revelation might appear to be offered in a mystical experience. The contemplative usually seeks to place the self in a state of heightened attentiveness and receptiveness (often described as yearning or longing), while at the same time yielding any desire to control, dictate, manage, or generate whatever it is that may (and just as often may not) manifest itself. Hence contemplative writing places great stress on obedience and humility, not (or not just) to generate servile submissiveness but to stress the radical loss of will and control that is a prerequisite of most contemplative states, and is linked to the theological concept of *kenosis* or self-emptying. Much contemplative writing explores these spiritual preparations and their aftermath and consequences. The 'experiences' themselves are often absent presences, traced by their effects and impacts rather than transcribed and analysed through reason and logic.

His intellect was the clear mirror
he looked in and saw the machinery of God
assemble itself? It was one that reflected

the emptiness that was where God
 should have been. The mind's tools had
 no power convincingly to put him
 together. Looking into that mirror was a journey
 through hill mist where, the higher
 one ascends, the poorer the visibility
 becomes. It could have led to despair
 but for the consciousness of a presence
 behind him, whose breath clouding
 that looking-glass proved that it was alive.
 To learn to distrust the distrust
 Of feeling – this then was the next step
 for the seeker? [...]³

The medieval period was no less alert to the paradoxes and tensions of such spiritual longing. The thirteenth-century Franciscan Bonaventure expresses well the fundamentally affective tenor of Christian aspiration to contemplative life, and its counterintuitive need to 'distrust the distrust of feeling':

If you want to know how these things may come about, ask grace, not learning; desire, not understanding; the groaning of prayer, not diligence in reading; the Bridegroom, not the teacher; God, not man; darkness, not clarity; not light, but the fire that wholly inflames and carries one into God.⁴

Most of the texts discussed in this book are exploring and explaining these thresholds of 'mystical experience' (in preparing for it beforehand and in coming to terms with it afterwards) rather than that experience itself (whatever its cause or nature).

While texts about contemplation and mystical experience certainly circulated in England before the Conquest, the first text produced in England which introduces a radically new form of affective spirituality, Goscelin of St-Bertin's *Liber confortatorius* (*Book of Comfort*), dates from c. 1080. From the proliferation of Anselmian spirituality in the twelfth century, contemplative and mystical texts were produced, translated, copied, and circulated in an unbroken continuum until the dissolution of the monasteries and the Henrician reforms of the 1540s. This book explores these texts against the backdrop of changing attitudes to contemplation and mystical experience.

There is a widespread view that 'mystical' activity in the Middle Ages was a rarefied enterprise of a privileged spiritual elite. A consequence of this is that medieval mystical texts have too often been studied in a cultural and even literary vacuum. But the 'religious turn' in medieval studies over the

last fifteen years has been dramatic. The study of 'vernacular theology' is a fast expanding area, and as its horizons of expectation have widened, the attractive if previously somewhat remote archipelago known as 'the Middle English mystics' (the works of Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, Walter Hilton, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and, at a push, Margery Kempe) has been revealed to be connected to the mainland of medieval religious writing and culture at multiple points. It is no longer intellectually defensible or culturally desirable to treat this cluster of texts seeking to describe mystical experience aside from the broad sweep of other texts that discuss, describe, and direct catechetical, devotional and contemplative theory and praxis in the period.

While 'the mystics' are widely studied, there is no modern, comprehensive single-volume work which delivers a sustained discussion of medieval English contemplative and mystical texts, authors, readers, and communities across the entire period. The aim of this *Companion*, therefore, is to provide readers who encounter the Middle English mystics with a broad interpretative guide to accompany their reading of primary texts. More importantly and centrally, this book regards mystical texts as a manifestation of contemplative activity practised by individuals or in communities, at particular moments in history, and as part of a wide spectrum of contemporary religious writing and practice. In other words, in this *Companion* medieval accounts of mystical experience and guidance on contemplative activity are firmly rooted in the society, culture, and intellectual environment in which they and their authors and readers were produced, and by which they were inevitably coloured and conditioned.

This *Companion* explores the impact on the medieval social imagination of popular and learned perceptions and preconceptions of the contemplative experience. The love of learning and the desire for God was never confined to the clerical cadres or specialist contemplatives. Mystical and para-mystical activity was far more widespread among every stratum of society and should be perceived as one of a range of experiences in the spectrum of ordinary daily life. An underlying contemplative outlook influenced literary tastes and conditioned social and private behaviour. The growing lay appetite to participate in 'religioun of the herte' is one of the recurrent motifs of this story. Social, political, theological, and linguistic change all contribute to these developments, as do developments in the pragmatic literacy of lay people. The spread (or perhaps simply the fuller articulation and recognition) of contemplative aspiration and mystical experience among lay merchants and gentry is one of the great cultural shifts of the later Middle Ages in England. But its roots lie in the affective spirituality and in the para-monastic practices of hermits and anchorites in the twelfth and thirteenth century.

Aspects of contemplative theory and practice came to be reflected in much of the spectrum of religious writing, as lay readers and writers took advantage of monastic contemplative texts newly available in their vernaculars. The dissemination of the idea of contemplation outside the cloister is evidenced not only by the large number of surviving texts but also by the large number of works which, while not theologically classified as contemplative, nevertheless clearly show the influence of the contemplative tradition. The influence of this on private reading and lay meditation in church, for example, can be traced in lyrics and other devotional writings. So, while maintaining a primary focus on the major contemplative authors, this *Companion* also therefore engages with a wide range of related medieval devotional texts. Recognizing the trans-generic nature of mystical expression, the chapters also draw on various genres, including lyrics, treatises, meditations, *regulae*, pastoral compilations (*Book of Virtues and Vices*), poetry, and drama. Throughout, our aspiration has been to situate contemplative and mystical theory and practice in the broad context of the religious life of the period.

The primary emphasis is on vernacular texts written in England. However, medieval readers made little if any distinction between native texts produced in English and foreign translated texts. Translated texts, of which Nicholas Love's early fifteenth-century translation of the *Meditationes vitae Christi* (*Meditations on the Life of Christ*) is perhaps the best known, circulated widely and had a large impact on the contemplative culture of England. Consequently, texts translated into English in the Middle Ages will be given equal footing with original compositions. Medieval religious texts, in whatever language, are part of a supra-national, supra-linguistic confederation of cultural and spiritual values embodied in and policed by the institutional church. Post-Conquest England was a tri-lingual culture, with significant transfers of cultural capital between Latin, Anglo-Norman, and Middle English over the centuries that followed. Religious texts moved from Latin into French and English, from French into Latin and English, and from English into Latin and French. These moves speak more of the pragmatic literacies of different target audiences than of the status or cultural worth of the different languages. So, Anglo-Norman texts circulating in England in the high Middle Ages form an essential part of the spectrum of religious writing considered here, and Latin works of theology formed and developed the intellectual environment in which vernacular contemplative and mystical texts were produced. The book hopes to address all the major cultural and intellectual strands that had a significant impact on the contemplative culture of medieval England.

The *Companion* is framed into five main sections corresponding to five major periods defined organically by historical developments (c. 1080–1215, 1215–1349, 1349–1412, 1412–34, 1534–50s). Each of these periods is characterized by unique cultural and socio-religious concerns which directly influenced the circumstances surrounding authorial activity, distinctly shaping the nature, content, and reception of the contemplative texts produced or read in that era. The context for understanding the texts produced in each era is therefore addressed by a chapter describing the main political, cultural, and religious developments which influenced and impacted on contemplative activity and the production and circulation of contemplative works. These chapters provide an historical and cultural meta-narrative. In each section, they are followed by chapters on the contemplative and mystical texts themselves, offering ways of approaching the texts as well as discussions of the textual communities and environments which produced, read, and transmitted them.

Vincent Gillespie

NOTES

- 1 *The Treatise of Perfection of the Sons of God* (Ruusbroec) in Amherst (London, British Library MS Additional 37790), cap. 11, in Joyce Bazire and Eric Colledge (eds.), *The Chastising of God's Children; and the Treatise of the Perfection of the Sons of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), p. xxx.
- 2 From 'Night Sky', in R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems: 1945–1990* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000).
- 3 From 'Perhaps', in R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems*.
- 4 Bonaventure, *The Mind's Road to God* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), VII, 6.

CHRONOLOGY*

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| c. 500 | Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a Neoplatonic Monophysite whose writings were hugely influential on medieval contemplative theory, and were partly translated by the author of <i>The Cloud of Unknowing</i> |
| 961-984 | Edith of Wilton, princess and nun |
| 1007-72 | Peter Damian, hermit, Cardinal, church reformer, Doctor of the Church |
| c. 1032-1101 | Bruno, founder in 1084 at La Grande Chartreuse of the Carthusian Order; the order was notable for its eremitical asceticism and contemplative aspiration. The order is prominent in the production, transmission, and reception of English contemplative writing |
| c. 1033-1109 | Anselm of Aosta, Benedictine prior of Bec, and later archbishop of Canterbury (1093-1109); author of philosophical and theological texts, and contemplative works, including <i>Prayers and Meditations</i> |
| c. 1035-c. 1107 | Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, author of <i>Life of Edith</i> , and <i>Book of Comfort</i> , both associated with Wilton nunnery |
| c. 1060-1128 | Eadmer, Benedictine monk, historian, and theologian, whose <i>Life of Aelred of Rievaulx</i> fostered the reputation of his spirituality |
| 1066 | Death of Harold; accession of William I |

* For further information on the Latin writings of British authors mentioned here, see Richard Sharpe, *A Handlist of the Latin Writers of Great Britain and Ireland before 1540*, Publications of the Journal of Medieval Latin, 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997).

- 1065–1170 Godric of Finchale, English hermit, whose *Life* was written c. 1160 by Reginald of Durham. Some very early vernacular devotional lyrics (with music) are attributed to him
- d. 1078 John of Fécamp, Italian Benedictine author of *On Divine Contemplation and the Love of Christ*, and other works including *Prayers* and meditations (often attributed to Augustine); very widely circulated, and hugely influential in emergence of affective spirituality
- c. 1080–1154 Wulfric of Haselbury, hermit; his life was written by John of Forde
- 1087 Death of William I; accession of William II
- 1090–1153 Bernard of Clairvaux, early member of the new Cistercian order (a form of reformed Benedictinism established at Cîteaux in 1098); founding prior of the new monastery at Clairvaux (1115); exponent of affective contemplation, and author of a hugely important and influential *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, completed by others after his death
- c. 1096–c. 1160 Christina of Markyate, hermit and prioress; associated with the major Benedictine house at St Albans (she probably owned and used the *St Albans Psalter*), her *Life* is an important early witness to the visionary experiences of a English holy woman
- 1100 Death of William II; accession of Henry I
- 1109 Guigo (d. 1173), O Carth, elected prior of La Grande Chartreuse, the first Carthusian foundation, author of *Ladder of Monks*
- 1109–66 Aelred, Cistercian abbot of Rievaulx, author of *The Mirror of Charity*, *On Spiritual Friendship*, *When Jesus was Twelve*, *Pastoral Prayer*, *On the Soul*, and other works of ascetic and contemplative guidance, including *Instructions for Enclosed Women*
- 1126–64 Elizabeth of Schönau, German contemplative, whose life was sent back to England by the Cistercian Roger

- of Forde (*fl.* c. 1182), and was later part of an important fifteenth-century repertoire of translated lives of holy women from Liège (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 114)
- 1128 first English Cistercian foundation at Waverley (Surrey); Rievaulx founded in 1131
- 1135 Death of Henry I; accession of Stephen
- d. 1141 Hugh of St Victor, author of *On Contemplation and its Varieties*, and many other influential works of theological, contemplative, and catechetical analysis
- 1145 William of Saint-Thierry, O Cist, *Letter to the Brothers of Mont-Dieu*, often called *The Golden Epistle*; frequently attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux; praises the Carthusian way of life
- c. 1150–1214 John, Cistercian abbot of Forde, author of *Life of Wulfric of Haselbury*; continuator of Bernard's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*
- 1154 Death of Stephen; accession of Henry II
- fl.* 1163–1200 Clemence of Barking, author of *Life of St Catherine*
- c. 1165 Nun of Barking (? Clemence of Barking), Anglo-Norman *Life of King Edward the Confessor*
- c. 1170–1253 Robert Grosseteste, Oxford theologian, and reforming bishop of Lincoln (1235–53)
- d. 1173 Richard of St Victor, Parisian mystical theologian and author of *On the Trinity*, *Benjamin Major*, also known as *The Mystical Ark*, the *Book of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Four Degrees of Violent Love*, and many other contemplative and theological works; influential on Richard Rolle, among other English writers
- c. 1174–1221 Dominic, founder in 1220 of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans)
- 1179 Third Lateran Council

CHRONOLOGY

- c. 1180-1240 Edmund of Abingdon, archbishop of Canterbury (1233-40); author of sermons, prayers and moralities, and of *The Mirror for Religious*, reworked as *The Mirror of the Church*, a hugely popular and influential amalgam of catechetic and contemplative teaching, circulating extensively in Anglo-Norman, Latin and Middle English recensions and translations, which taught contemplation of God through nature, Scripture and in God himself
- 1181-1226 Francis of Assisi, founder in 1209 of the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans)
- 1189 Death of Henry II; accession of Richard I
- d. 1193 Bartholomew of Farne, hermit and contemplative
- 1196 reported date of *The Revelation to the Monk of Eynsham*, translated into English in the early fifteenth century
- 1199 Death of Richard I; accession of John
- c. 1200 Adam the Carthusian, O Carth, *The Fourfold Exercise of the Cell*
- 1215 Fourth Lateran Council, whose decrees included *Omnis utriusque sexus*, introducing mandatory annual confession, and stimulating rapid developments in pastoral psychology and theology
- 1216 Death of John; accession of Henry III
- c. 1215-30 *Ancrene Wisse*
- c. 1217-74 Bonaventure, Franciscan theologian and contemplative theorist; author of *The Mind's Road to God*, *On the Tripartite Way*
- Early thirteenth century, *Wooing Group*
- 1221 Dominicans arrive in Oxford
- 1224 Franciscans arrive in Oxford
- c. 1225-74 Thomas Aquinas, Dominican theologian and Parisian master

- c. 1230-90 Hugh of Balma, O Carth, *The Ways of Sion Mourn*, influential Carthusian work of contemplative theory and praxis
- 1234-72 *Love Rune* composed by Franciscan friar Thomas of Hales
- d. 1246 Thomas Gallus, abbot of St Andrews, Vercelli; influential translator and commentator on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite
- Before 1250 Guillaume Peyraut (Willelmus Peraldus), OP, *The Summa of Virtues and Vices*; enormously influential codification of penitential theology and moral psychology
- c. 1260 William of Waddington, *Manuel des péchés* (*The Handbook of Sins*)
- 1272 Death of Henry III; accession of Edward I
- 1280 Laurent of Orléans, OP, *Somme le roi* (*Royal Summa*); fountainhead of a huge sequence of vernacular texts of catechetical instruction
- 1281 Lambeth Council and Provincial Decrees of Archbishop John Pecham, OFM, including *Ignorantia sacerdotum* (*On the Ignorance of Priests*), the template for future catechetical education of the laity
- ?-1282 John of Howden's *The Nightingale*, version in Latin (*Philomela*) and French (*Li Rossignos*)
- Late 1200s James of Milan, OFM, *The Goad of Love*, translated into English by Walter Hilton as *The Pricking of Love*
- 1293-1381 Jan van Ruusbroec, Dutch contemplative and mystagogue; used by compiler of the *Chastising of God's Children*
- c. 1295-1366 Heinrich Suso, OP, German contemplative and mystagogue; author of *The Hourglass or Clock of Wisdom*, later translated into English in the fifteenth century
- c. 1300-50 Johannes de Caulibus, OFM (Pseudo-Bonaventure), *Meditations on the Life of Christ*

- 1303 Robert Mannyng of Brunne, *Handlyng Synne*
- 1307 Death of Edward I; accession of Edward II
- c. 1320s William of Pagula's *The Eye of the Priest*; influential Latin handbook for parish clergy
- c. 1323 William of Pagula's *The Sum of all Sums*; influential Latin handbook of canon law and difficult cases
- c. 1300–49 Richard Rolle, hermit, and contemplative teacher; major English works produced late in 1340s
- c. 1303–73 Birgitta of Sweden, visionary and prophet
- d. 1310 Marguerite Porete, author of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, burned for heresy
- 1327 Deposition and death of Edward II; accession of Edward III
- c. 1330–84 John Wyclif, theologian and heresiarch
- 1337 beginning of the Hundred Years' War against France
- 1340–84 Gert Groote, founder of the Brethren of the Common Life, and leading figure of the Low Countries para-mystical movement *devotio moderna* (the 'modern devout')
- 1340 *Ayenbite of Inwit (The Biting of Conscience)*
- c. 1340–96 Walter Hilton, OSA, canon lawyer, solitary and later Augustinian canon; contemplative teacher
- c. 1343–c. 1416 Julian of Norwich, visionary and anchorite
- c. 1347–80 Catherine of Siena, Italian visionary, contemplative teacher
- 1348–9 Black Death arrives in England
- c. 1350s *Speculum Vitae (Mirror of Life)*, erroneously attributed to William of Nassington (d. 1359)
- c. 1355 Henry, duke of Lancaster, *Livre de seyntz medicines (The Book of Holy Medicines)*