

Marginalia

The Journal of the Medieval Reading Group



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Editor's Foreword

Megan Galbreth, *St John's College, Cambridge*

Marginalia's 2012 Yearbook presents the best essays written by the previous year's MPhil students. The Cambridge MPhil in Medieval and Renaissance Literature requires each student to write two essays and a more extensive dissertation, as well as participating in seminars and studying palaeography and codicology. Each year, the convenors of the course select the two essays representing the best student work of that year for publication in *Marginalia*. This year's contributors are Sophie Sawicka-Sykes and Rhian Woodend.

Sawicka-Sykes' essay, entitled 'The Anxieties of Ecclesiastes in *Piers Plowman*, with Special Reference to Passus X (B-Text),' explores the role of Ecclesiastes as a model for Langland's portrayal of epistemological difficulty in Passus X. She shows that this Biblical text, despite its attribution to Solomon, the embodiment of wisdom, portrays a mind troubled by the same doubt and despair that face Will in his quest for Dowel in Passus X. Both texts question the purpose of the created order and of human knowledge, and both pose their questions through the competing voices of multiple *personae*; the crucial difference, Sawicka-Sykes argues, is that Langland offers faith and its companion, love, as a solution to Will's intellectual deadlock. True knowledge of Dowel is revealed to consist not in the abstract comprehension of an idea, but in an ongoing process of suffering love, in which doubts play a constructive role.

In her essay on 'The Dynamics of "Schir Heorte" in the *Ancrene Wisse*,' Woodend investigates the anchoritic value of 'schir heorte,' an ideal of purity. In contrast to the Desert Fathers tradition which emphasised complete detachment from the world, Woodend finds that *Ancrene Wisse* presents purity of heart as the outcome of constant interaction with, and redirection of, worldly values. The anchoress, she argues, is meant to use her desires, not extinguish them; sexual desires, for instance, must be redirected into a desire for divine union so they can bear spiritual fruit, whereas rejecting them entirely would lead to a spiritual barrenness no more desirable than its sexual counterpart. Woodend thus demonstrates that the anchoress's 'schir heorte' is never cold or hardened, but always open and desiring in an ongoing process of purification. This concept of process is a theme shared by this issue's two essays: both shed light on the ways in which medieval culture conceptualised spiritual values such as 'wisdom' and 'purity' not as static, abstract ideals, but as processes unfolding in time, through dynamic interactions between God, the self, and the created order. This issue concludes with reviews of recent scholarship on 'Christian Materiality,' translation, and the history of Syon Abbey.