

## The Dynamics of 'Schir Heorte' in the *Ancrene Wisse*

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In the *Ancrene Wisse*, 'purte of heorte'<sup>1</sup> ('cleanness of heart'<sup>2</sup>) is envisaged as a universal principle that all anchoresses should follow. It is held as a basic concern of religion: '*quantum ad puritatem cordis, circa quam uersatur tota religio*' (Preface, 38-39). As a command from God, the keeping of a pure heart, a 'schir heorte' (VII.24), is an unchanging principle that demands the same fixity of its followers, 'for-þi ha is eauer an wiðute changunge, | ant alle ahen hire in an eauer to halden' (Preface, 46-47). The *puritas cordis* envisaged by the author is, in many ways, a feature of traditional monastic asceticism, the pure heart being distilled away from the world in solitude. Yet the pure heart in *Ancrene* is hardly as static as the author's introduction and the Cassian tradition might suggest. The heart of the anchoress is not like the purity of water, necessarily untouched by affliction and contact. Its purity is established amidst a series of ingressions and egressions that bring it into contact with the world around it. It is a volatile space of memory and desire, a natural bridge between the anchoress and the world she supposedly leaves behind. In a text where affliction and salvation are indelibly linked, the heart's purity develops within a process that necessarily evades boundary. The heart must recognise affliction from both within and without to understand salvation. It must break itself in compunction to atone for sins and realise love in its most outward expression. The heart of the anchoress does not stand still. Rather, 'attraction' and 'expulsion',<sup>3</sup> as Albertus Magnus would later write, become its necessary anatomical and devotional motions.

It is worth noting the primary derivations of *puritas cordis* as an ideal found in solitude, before reviewing the ways *Ancrene* reinvigorates this notion. Cassian, writing in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, perceived the term as a monastic condition, the pure of heart being those limiting their contact with the world and observing strict rules of conduct. In *Institutes* he praises the anchorites of the Diolces desert for their commitment to renunciation. Leaving the world behind them, they 'penetrate the deep recesses of the desert', barely surviving from land unfit

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<sup>1</sup> *Ancrene Wisse Vol.1* ed. Bella Millet (Oxford, 2005) Preface, 40. All further references made to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> *The Ancrene Riwele* trans. M.B. Salu (London, 1955) p.2.

<sup>3</sup> *On Animals* trans. Kenneth F. Kitchell Jr. (London, 1999) l.iv.574.

'for any cultivation'.<sup>4</sup> In this state of physical scarcity and the absence of worldly distraction, the pure heart can be located. St Benedict, a later follower of Cassian, would combine this desire for isolation with a fear of circulation both within and outside of monastic confines. A Brother or Sister returning from a journey should be purged of their encounters and the inclination to share them with the rest of the enclosure:

Pat day þat sho cumis hame, sal sho recaie þe benicun at ilke ure  
Of þat þai haue misdou with siht, ouþir with iois, ouþir with speche,  
ouþir ani iuil dedis. Þai shal noht telle til þe toþir alle þat þai haue  
sene vte & herd [...].<sup>5</sup>

Purity of heart is not only configured as distance between inner and outer worlds, but a distance created between sensuous and higher intellection. Both *Ancrene* and *The Rule of St Benet* follow Cassian by envisaging the heart with metaphorical senses.<sup>6</sup> In *The Rule*, the novice is required to listen intently to the commandments of the 'mastir', laying them near to 'þe eere of the herte'<sup>7</sup>, whilst the anchoress's heart is perceived with 'ehnen' (IV.1369) and 'nease' (IV.561). In states of silence and solitude, the heart can hear God's words:

'Ich chulle leade þe', he seið to his leofmon, 'into anli stude, ant ter  
Ich chulle luueliche speoke to þin heorte, for me is lað pre-  
asse.' (III.685-7).

Just as Cassian claimed that the heart would see clearly the mysteries of scriptures in the absence of carnal vices, the heart's senses are opposed to the fallibility of their corporeal counterparts. To allow clear contemplation, the pure heart had to be sealed from the world thereby avoiding, according to Cassian, the 'dullness' and 'impurity' that plagued the hearts of those 'unable to take in the light of truth'.<sup>8</sup>

At first sight, *Ancrene* seems to accord to the teachings of Cassian. Distanced from the world around her, and bound in timeless repetitions of devotional stances, the anchoress's heart is deemed pure by containment and isolation. It is tempting to view the pure heart as a static entity, defined by its extraction from the world and its associated desires. Jager points to a tradition of saints' writing which depicted the pure heart as an exemplary object, often inscribed and extractable from the body after death, 'a physical organ [...] some-

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<sup>4</sup> *Institutes* trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York, 2000) V.xxxvi.1.

<sup>5</sup> 'Northern Prose Version' in *Three Middle English Versions of the Rule of St Benet*, ed. Ernst A.Kock (first publ. London 1902, repr. New York 1972), ch.LXVII, p.45.

<sup>6</sup> See also Albertus Magnus *On Animals*: 'two appendages visible on the heart [...] somewhat like ears' (I.iv.580-1).

<sup>7</sup> 'Northern Prose Version' p.1.

<sup>8</sup> *Institutes* V.xxxiv.

times opened, read and interpreted like a book'.<sup>9</sup> Yet the heart of the anchoress deviates in interesting ways from the model fetishised in a legend like Clare of Montefalco 'whose spiritual sisters [...] threw themselves upon her body, tore out her heart, and found incised upon it the insignia of the Passion'.<sup>10</sup> Despite her author's penchant for *sententiae* and exempla, his narrative desire to reveal the 'heart' of his matter, the anchoress's heart retains an obscurity and volatility at odds with such extractions.

There are too many fissures in the fabric of *Ancrene* that prevent 'schir heorte' (VII.23) from being perceived as an entity isolated from society and untouched by sensual affliction. Despite creating a distance between the exterior world and the inner purity of the anchoress, we are constantly made aware of the magnetism that draws the heart outwards and the world inwards. A recurring image of part II is the leaping heart that slips away so easily from the body-cell structure. The author's use of David exemplifies this complexity:

Me, surquide sire, ne herest tu þet Davið, Godes ahne deorling, bi hwam he seolf seide, *Inveni uirum secundum cor meum* ('Ich habbe ifunden', quoð he, 'mon efter min heorte') – þes, þe Godd seolf seide bi þis deorewurðe sahe king ant prophete icuret of alle, þes, þurh an ehe wurp to a wummon as ha wesch hire- lette ut his heorte ant for3et him seoluen, swa þet he dude þreo utnume heued ant deadliche sunnen [...] (II.107-113).

David's heart is pulled outwards, 'þurh an ehe wurp' and into the 'put' (II.125) of the female form that attracted his looks. His sight is envisaged as 'extramissive'.<sup>11</sup> It takes the heart with it so the lightest look becomes assimilated to the 'liht lupe' (II.9) of both the heart and the individual into the world of sin. Looking outwards, even momentarily, dislocates reason and memory as David 'for3et him seoluen' (II.112). Despite his status as a watchful and holy man, he attests St Gregory's maxim that 'na þing ne etflið mon sonre þen his ahne heorte' (II.10-11). The heart is here 'a ful wilde beast' (II.9) akin to the animal among body parts that Aristotle had once envisaged: 'The heart is straight away manifestly in motion, as if it were an animal'.<sup>12</sup> There is, however, another dynamic to the author's example. If David loses his heart by looking, we are made aware of the open point that drew the heart from his body: Bathsheba uncovers herself before David's eyes. There is no mention of any lustful looks that

<sup>9</sup> Eric Jager, 'The Book of the Heart', *Speculum*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (Jan 1996) p.15.

<sup>10</sup> C. Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley, 1997) p.211 quoted in Jager p.15.

<sup>11</sup> Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York, 2002) p.71. The female affected by receiving the gaze also indicates the 'intromissive' qualities of sight.

<sup>12</sup> *On the Parts of Animals* trans. J. Lennox, ed. J.L. Ackrill (Oxford, 2001) III.iv.666<sup>a</sup>.20.

she may have given him, but this simple act of uncovering draws his eyes and heart toward her like 'þe beastlich mon' who falls into the 'put' (II.125) of the woman's face and body. It is worth noting the way desire is engendered in this example. The female body and its mannerisms are presented as a series of concave spaces that draw the world inwards (II.128-132). This evocation of human desire as endemic magnetism, finds its correlative in anatomical thought. Since Aristotle it had been believed that the female, by virtue of being cold and moist, inevitably attracted the heat of the male. As 'mobility was associated with heat and the ability to externalise', the heated heart of the male was engendered with certain projective qualities which were drawn into attraction with the receptivity of the female providing the 'passive material for generation'.<sup>13</sup> Relations echoed intercourse as a woman was defined by 'Aristotelian ideas of her need for completion.'<sup>14</sup>

The author of *Ancrene* can hardly deny the power of such attraction and neither does he attempt to. His advice that women cover themselves and the 'ehþur!' (II.18) of their enclosures seem rather limited defences in a world where, as the contemporary Bishop of Paris, Guillaume d'Auvergne would claim, 'ingressions and egressions'<sup>15</sup> of the body-cell boundary are natural inevitabilities. The author recognises that the heart's enclosure does not abate the desires at work within the anchoress and the world beyond her. He portrays his novice as naturally inquisitive, "'Me, leoue sire," seið sum, "ant is hit nu se ouer -uuel forte totin utwart?"' (II.45-46). Despite being contained from the world, the anchoress continues to experience desires which find a natural release beyond the enclosure, constantly threatening to break through the 'flod-3eten' (II.396) of the senses. This is seen in the author's denigration of excessive speech. The ideal solitary should be silent, damming her speech so her thoughts may rise to heaven (II.389). Yet there will be moments when the anchoress must find release: 'Hwen 3e nede moten, a lute wiht lowsidi up ower muðes flod-3eten, as me deð ed mulne, ant leoted adun sone' (II.395-396). As 'flood gates', the senses are evoked as constant intermediaries of excess. When the anchoress opens her mouth, speech flows and builds, 'from meosure into unimete, ant of a drope waxeð into a muche flod [...] for wið þe fleotinde word tofleoted þe heorte' (II.424-426). Desire, contained in such density, is envisaged as breaking the heart upon release. The anchoress's heart constantly abrades with the world,

<sup>13</sup> Heather Webb, *The Medieval Heart* (Yale, 2010) p.108.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, 'Medieval Medical Views on Women' in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature* ed. Linda Lomperis et al (Pennsylvania, 1993) p.149.

<sup>15</sup> *De Universo* I.1042 trans Webb p.60.

her desires only a slip away from internal containment to external capaciousness.

Whilst Cassian claimed that the heart should be mortified of its desires with a 'frost of abstinence', freezing 'the movements [...] and the impulses of nature,'<sup>16</sup> the heart of the anchoress is not evoked as a similarly deadened vessel, but a space dense with experience. Aristotle argued for the heart's sentient importance: 'Again, the movements of pleasures, pains, and all perception [...] originate there or proceed to it'.<sup>17</sup> The author of *Ancrene* registers this sensual nature in his depiction of the anchoress's union with Christ. Whilst we might expect a more mystical encounter, the heart's 'carnal' contemplation is here a reflection of the author's Bernadine sources:

Notice that the love of the heart is, in a certain sense carnal, because our hearts are attracted most toward the humanity of Christ and the things he did or commanded while in the flesh.<sup>18</sup>

The heart is associated with forces of attraction, here drawing the anchoress into a communion founded on shared physicality and 'humanity'. The anchoress's heart is elsewhere imagined as a 'bur' (I.243) where she embraces Christ 'ant haleð him heteueste' (I.244). This emphasis upon embrace is later sexualised as she is asked to draw upon experience from the outside world:

Rin him [Christ] wið ase muche luue as þu hauest sum mon sum-  
chearre, he is þin to don wið al þet tu wilnest. (VII.334-335).

In the 'bower' of the heart, the anchoress learns to redirect experience and desire into union with the divine. It is worth noting that the language of desire that we perceived in David, of eyes, hearts and reflexive attraction, is also re-envisioned in this part of the text. Christ is evoked as the wooer knight in pursuit of the lady of the castle. We are told his heart has been 'ouercumen' (VII.82) just as David's escaped with desire. The precarious act of looking is here reinterpreted as a necessary show of affection:

He com him seolf on ende; schawde hire his feire neb, as þe þe wes  
of alle men feherest to bihalden; spec se swiðe swoteliche, ant  
wordes se murie | þet ha mahten deade arearen to lieu; wrahte feole  
wundres ant dude muchele meistries biuoren hire ehsihðe [...] (VII.75-79).

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<sup>16</sup> *Institutes* I.xi.

<sup>17</sup> *On the Parts of Animals* III.iv.666<sup>a</sup>.11.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Canitcorum* ed. J.Leclercq et al (Rome, 1957) I.20.118, trans. Linda Georgianna, *The Solitary Self* (Harvard, 1981) p.74.

The above develops the tale of David by legitimising the workings of sight and exposure. The knight makes a spectacle of his face and deeds, entertaining the female's eyes with 'wonders'. The pull of desire that drew David's eyes and heart into the 'pit' of the female form is redirected here as a necessary act of enlivening and animating the 'deade'. It builds upon evocations of Christ's love as a lending of heat to the female. His love is imagined as 'grickisch fur' (VII.257) kindled in the heart of the anchoress. Her love cannot be lukewarm but 'schulde leit in al o lei i luue of ure Lauerd' (IV.351). Such incendiary advances humanise divine encounter, linking it suggestively to the male projection and the female acceptance of heat that was a part of intercourse. As Robertson notes, the centrality of sexual union with Christ indicates 'the male author's concern to address the perceived needs of his female readers'.<sup>19</sup> The heat of sexual union could purge the female body of its excess moisture and diminish the coldness of her being. I would however add to Robertson by saying that such inherent desires, previously cast as the fall of man and woman, David and Bathsheba, are here reoriented to envisage union with Christ as a partly anatomical and devotional necessity. The 'schir heorte' learns not to extinguish these natural desires but rather to refocus them.

The coming of the Knight adds another dynamic to our perception of the pure heart. By juxtaposing the hard and the pure hearted, the author demonstrates the detriment that can arise from the solitary condition. The lady of the castle is impervious to the knight's advances being so 'heard iheortet þet hire luue ne mahte he neauer beo þe neorre' (VII.74). Her landscape is markedly barren, 'hire lond al destruet, ant heo al poure inwið an eorðene castel' (VII.68-69). Unlike the other women of the author's examples, she is not praised for her containment but denigrated for her lack of openness. In this sense, the metaphor builds upon the secular differentiation of *cor gentil* and *cor villan* in which the heart's nobility resided in its susceptibility to love.<sup>20</sup> In her separation from the world, the hard-hearted lady, and arguably the anchoress, becomes susceptible to a new danger. The anchoress, who thinks herself pure by being free of affliction and desire, unwittingly plays into the devil's hands: 'For-þi, leoue sustren, hwa-se nis nawt asilent, ha mei sare beon ofdred leste ha beo biwunnen' (IV.708-710). Here 'schir heorte' does not describe the hearts that are impervious to the world, but those that are receptive to experience. Isolation and lack of receptivity are bound to sloth, the sin representing inactivity, heaviness of heart and idleness. The lady of the castle, barricaded from the world around

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<sup>19</sup> Robertson p.151.

<sup>20</sup> See Guinizelli in Webb p.64.

her, becomes associated with the barren and melancholic. She is described as 'poor' like the 'poure heorte' symbolised in the cub of *pusillanimity*, too cowardly to advance into the world and to act 'in hope of Godes help' (IV.352). Estrangement from the world is not only cowardly, it is here profoundly anti-generative. Her barren habitation is evocative of flawed conception. This was, after all, a process that relied upon the receptivity of both the heart and the womb, Mary being evoked as a prime example of the 'softe' heart amenable to conception and the nesting of good deeds (III.221-233). By denying this contact, the hard-hearted are linked to a perverse form of the same process, nursing the cubs or 'hwelpes' of sins in 'hire breoste' (IV.307).

The openness expected of the pure heart can seem problematic in so far as it renders the heart vulnerable to all around it. The text attempts to overcome the lacunae indicated in the heart's receptivity by reconciling notions of love and affliction. The primary evocation of the battleground as a site that only the most foolhardy of anchoresses would enter is later re-envisaged as a spiritual and bodily necessity. In medieval culture, love and affliction were close companions. Webb notes a similarity between the remedies for plague prescribed by Tommaso del Garbo and Giovanni Dondoli and those advised by Avicenna and Constantinus Africanus to remedy lovesickness.<sup>21</sup> In *Ancrene*, affliction and love hold the same purgative qualities. The incendiary nature of Christ's love is linked to the 'fire' of illness sent as temptation: 'Secnesse is a brune hat forte þolien, ah na þing ne clensed gold as hit deð þe sawle' (IV.63-64). By opening her heart to Christ, the anchoress must make herself vulnerable to ailment as a test of her capacity to love. Love, in the *Ancrene*, is achieved in congress with the world and in this congress the 'schir heorte' must partake: 'þet tu al þet tu dest, do hit oðer for luue ane of Godd, oðer for oþres god ant for his biheue' (VII.23-25). The 'schir heorte' commits itself to a path of loving others in order to love God, redirecting experience of the world towards an alternative end. The ascetic practice of distancing the world is here replaced by salvation that necessitates communion, a communion not devoid of difficulty. When the anchoress acts for others, there is always a risk that earthly needs may overtake the spiritual. So subtle are the devil's assaults that even compassion can become a vice:

Bringeð hire on to gederin ant 3eouen al earst to poure, forðre to oðer freond, aleast makien feaste ant wurðen al worldlich [...] Godd wat swuch feaste madeð sum hore. (IV.648-651).

The author recognises the risk inherent to human relations, advising the anchoress that her women be well taught 'for 3e mahen muchel beon þurh ham igodet

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<sup>21</sup> Webb p.87.

- ant iwurset' (VIII.299-300). Whilst the fear of circulation that riddled *The Rule* is still present, it is here tempered by a hope of 'reconciliation' and 'concord' (VIII.264). The anchoress must be aware of the problematic circulations that link her to the world beyond the cell. Her handmaidens cannot bring idle tales to and from the enclosure and they should not behave in ways that might incriminate both themselves and the anchoress they serve. Yet where as *The Rule* interprets such outward ventures as inevitably incriminatory, the handmaidens of the anchoress are simply advised to be guarded: 'Hare lates lokin warliche, þet nan ne mahe edwiten ham in hus ne ut of hus' (VIII.253-254). The circulations that take place between the anchoress and those around her are invariably fraught with risk, and yet the 'schir heorte' must occupy this uncertain territory, negotiating the concurrent demands of love and affliction, hope and fear.

Purity is not indigenous to the heart but achieved through processes of ongoing 'cultivation' as the author demonstrates by Moses:

[...] al þet wa ant al þet heard þet we þolieð o flesch, ant al þet god þet we eauer doð, alle swucche þinges ne beoð nawt bute as lomen to tilie wið þe heorte. (VII.13-15).

Envisaging purification as 'cultivation' or 'tilunge' departs from the notions of erasure so often assumed by purification. Erasure is in fact a troubled process in *Ancrene*, as some final observations upon the place of *memoria* will show. The heart had long been associated with memory, their relation bound in the Latin 'recordari' and its cognate noun 'recordatio.'<sup>22</sup> *Ancrene* endows the heart with the same recording capacities, the author constantly urging his novices to commit his *exempla* to heart. The anchoress's memories, like her desires, must be re-directed as didactic tools so that worldly experiences, from child's play to marriage politics, provide 'an objective correlative of God's ways.'<sup>23</sup> What Georgianna fails to comment upon here, however, are the difficulties of 'forgetting' that such examples expound. As Carruthers observes, memory held an important place in meditation, to the extent that 'a monk who had completely forgotten himself by obliterating his own past would not be able to pray.'<sup>24</sup> Erasing the memory was not simply ill advised, it was conceived to be almost impossible. This was an idea contested almost a century before *Ancrene* in the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux, who attempted to divorce forgetting from the obliteration often presumed by the term. He illustrated the impracticability of such

<sup>22</sup> Mary Carruthers, *Book of Memory* (Cambridge, 1990) pp.48-49.

<sup>23</sup> Georgianna p.66.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought* (Cambridge, 1998) p.96.

obliteration through the metaphor of dyed parchment. As a tool of erasure passes over the material, it creates lacunae and tears before it does a clear surface: 'In vain should I try to scrape it away; the parchment rips before the messy letters are erased.'<sup>25</sup> Forgetting is a problem shared by both Bernard and the author of *Ancrene*. Like parchment, the surface of the anchoress's heart is never wholly amenable to erasure. The memories of past sins are ingrained as scars upon it, their outline providing the devil with an alternative to new temptations:

Ant spekeð þus þe alde sweoke toward hire heorte wordes þet ha  
 3are herde fulliche iseide, oðer sihðe þet ha seh, oðer hire ahne  
 fulðen þet ha sumhwile wrahte. (IV.1366-1368).

The devil opens the wounds of the *memoria* so as to 'bifulen' (IV.1369) the anchoress with thoughts of past sins. The pure-hearted cannot obliterate such experiences as 'forgetting' becomes little more than refocused memory. The key movement involved in finally cleansing the heart is, importantly, not one of extraction, distillation, erasure or obliteration, but a 'prichunge' (IV.1494) of the heart called compunction. This contained act of breaking ruptures the pride that occurs with insularity whilst redirecting the dissipation associated with the heart's exposure to the wider world. Within this process we are made to realise that the anchoress's purity resides in her understanding of her 'wacnesse' (IV.757). She must recognise the imperfections of her heart, the fragility of its surface and the inevitable pervasion of her desires and memories so as to arrive at a notion of purity formed from process and negotiation, as opposed to abstract separation.

The 'schir heorte' of *Ancrene* is woven from dense fabric. Its surface is a haven for desires, memories and experiences. Its weave is compiled as boundaries merge: affliction becomes an accessory of love whilst understanding is evoked as another symbolic breaking of boundary, a 'pricking' of the heart and its contents. The purity of the heart rests upon its cultivation, its ability to mediate the inner and outer life into an attractive and expulsive movement, refusing to leave one world behind for the sake of the other. The *Ancrene* creates a dynamic entity that laicises devotion by recognising the 'schir heorte' as a complex intermediary for the material and the spiritual.<sup>26</sup> For the anchoress is, if anything, human. Despite burial rites and inauguration into containment, her heart would continue beating within her, a lasting evocation of her humanity.

<sup>25</sup> *Ad Clericos* XV.28 pp.102.17-104.5 trans. Carruthers 1998 p.96.

<sup>26</sup> On 'laicisation' see Nicholas Watson, 'Ancrene Wisse, Religious Reform and the Late Middle Ages' *Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Yoko Wada (Woodbridge, 2003) pp.197-226.