

Ian Johnson and Allan F. Westphall (eds.), *The Pseudo-Bonaventuran Lives of Christ: Exploring the Middle English Tradition* (Brepols, 2013) ISBN 978-2-503-54276-8; x + 509 pages; EUR 120.

This volume concerns the corpus of Middle English devotional works deriving from the (probably) early fourteenth-century Latin meditational text on the life of Christ, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (MVC). Of Franciscan origin – or at the very least bearing strong witness to Franciscan affiliation – the MVC was throughout the Middle Ages misattributed to Bonaventure, whose borrowed authority helped to ensure its longevity. Widely disseminated throughout Europe, its impact on late medieval devotional practice was incalculable, not least in England where vernacular translations and adaptations abounded. Especially significant among these was Nicholas Love's early fifteenth-century version, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, which was famously endorsed (c. 1410) by Archbishop Thomas Arundel in his campaign against Lollardy.

*The Pseudo-Bonaventuran Lives of Christ* is another hefty volume in the burgeoning Brepols Medieval Church Studies series that has already given us several important essay collections on late medieval devotional issues in England, including most recently Kantik Ghosh and Vincent Gillespie's *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England* (2011). As in that book, the focus here is chiefly on orthodoxy and on the richness and variety of devotional practice that the very term orthodoxy has sometimes obscured. The volume derives, in fact, from the Queen's Belfast-St Andrews University 'Geographies of Orthodoxy' research project, which culminated in a 2010 conference at Queen's entitled 'Mapping the English Pseudo-Bonaventuran Lives of Christ, c.1350-1550'. The project has also given rise to two further Brepols volumes that complement the one under review here: Ian Johnson's monograph *The Middle English Life of Christ: Academic Discourse, Translation and Vernacular Theology* (2013), and Ryan Perry and Steven Kelly's forthcoming collection *Diuerse Imaginaciouns of Cristes Life: Devotional Culture in Late Medieval England and Beyond*.

Following a fairly brief introduction, Johnson and Westphall's volume is divided into three sections: 'History and Ideology', 'Manuscript Culture', and 'Textual Relations'. The last two are much bulkier than the first, and the emphasis of the book is primarily codicological and textual, though a number of the essays do address some of the broader conceptual issues raised in important recent studies of affective reading in the meditative tradition, including those by Jennifer Bryan, Nicole Rice, Sarah McNamer, and Michelle Karnes. Overall, it must be said, the structure and organization of the volume is slightly perplexing, and one or two of the essays seem to be only tangentially connected to the main theme.

The first section comprises just two articles, where one might have hoped for a more substantial discussion of the historical and ideological backdrop to this large and complex subject. Mishtooni Bose's essay on the far from straightforward relationship between orthodox and dissenting versions of *imitatio Christi* is nevertheless a trenchant and nuanced piece which takes issue with David Aers's somewhat

polarized characterization of these matters in his and Lynn Staley's 1996 book, *The Powers of the Holy*. The first essay, however, is Rob Lutton's piece on the late medieval controversy surrounding contemporary enthusiasm for devotion to the Name of Jesus. Fascinating though this is – not least in relation to Nicholas Love's apparently ambivalent attitude to the Name of Jesus as evidenced by the *Mirror* – it seems a relatively narrow topic with which to open the book.

Lutton's is in fact one of four essays concerned mainly with Love's *Mirror*, but rather strangely these are scattered throughout the book's three sections rather than given a section of their own. Studies by Ryan Perry, David J. Falls, and Ian Johnson offer salutary correctives to a number of received ideas about Love's popular and important text. Johnson's is another essay with a narrow focus, demonstrating that Love's Proheme to the *Mirror* does not merely allude to Augustine's *De agone christiano*, as was previously thought, but instead makes extensive use of it. This rather specific issue is in fact a part of his larger project – outlined more fully in his monograph, already cited – to show that 'vernacular theology', the term introduced by Nicholas Watson in 1995 and now ubiquitous in discussions of the period, is seriously misunderstood if it is regarded as being always in simple opposition to Latinate, clerical learning. Falls argues that we need to pay much more attention to the Carthusian milieu in which Love's work originated: some of the stylistic revisions of the MVC that Michelle Karnes has recently attributed to Love's theological conservatism may, Falls suggests, be better accounted for by the fact that he was adapting a Franciscan text for a specific readership of Carthusian novices at the Mount Grace Charterhouse where he was prior. It was only at a later stage, when Arundel gave it his imprimatur, that an adapted version of the *Mirror* began to be more widely circulated among a lay readership. Perry's focus is on the way Love's text may have actually been used in practice. Invoking Michel de Certeau's model of the reader as a nomadic poacher – a model whose relevance to the Pseudo-Bonaventuran corpus he judiciously weighs up – Perry looks for manuscript and other evidence for the various ways the *Mirror* may have been accessed by 'spiritually ambitious' lay readers, either as a whole or (as foreseen by Love himself) in parts. He argues further that the text should not be seen 'only, or perhaps even primarily, as a meditative text in the affective mould', but as one which is also a 'work of *pastoralia*', 'an introductory step to would-be practitioners of the mixed life', and which offered a lay version of Carthusian devotional practice comparable to the kind of DIY lay monasticism offered by books of hours.

Johnson and Westphall's book also contains substantial essays by two especially distinguished scholars in the field: Michael Sargent, editor of the critical edition of Love's *Mirror* (2005), and Vincent Gillespie, whose numerous articles on late medieval devotional and bibliographic culture have been consistently enlightening. Both have interesting things to say here, but in neither case does their contribution directly address the topic of Middle English lives of Christ. In 'Fatherless Books', Gillespie treats with characteristic acumen and wit the general issue of deliberate misattribution: the circulation in fifteenth-century England of potentially

controversial texts under the assumed credentials of ideologically 'safe' authors, Richard Rolle pre-eminent among them. The MVC circulated widely under Bonaventure's name, of course, but it is not even mentioned by Gillespie. Sargent's essay is also somewhat tangential, his own credentials as Love's modern editor notwithstanding. In 'Organic and Cybernetic Metaphors for Manuscript Relations' he gives us a valuable, learned, and entertainingly illustrated overview of the history of stemmatics and cladistics, together with a conspectus of his own views – formed over forty years as a textual critic of Middle English texts – on both 'the new philology' and the digital future of the critical edition. He discusses a number of important cases in the history of editing medieval texts, including the Kane-Donaldson edition of *Piers Plowman* and the online Canterbury Tales Project. It's a wonderful piece, drawing also on his own recent experience as editor of Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*. (Anyone seeking an explanation of the length of time it has taken to produce a critical edition of Hilton's text will be well rewarded here.) However, the justification for the essay taking up 68 pages in this particular volume seems doubtful at best.

Among the remaining studies, the most conceptually adventurous and interesting is Allan Westphall's subtle investigation of the concept of spiritual 'sikernesse' in *The Prickyng of Love*, a text which Westphall is prepared to attribute to Walter Hilton. The *Prickyng* is not a version of the MVC, but a translation of another Franciscan text that was sometimes attributed to Bonaventure, the *Stimulus Amoris*. Though it is not a narrative life of Christ, Westphall makes a good case for its relevance to this volume. Following in the wake of Kathryn Kerby-Fulton's work on the cautiously tolerant reception of continental spirituality in late medieval England, Westphall reads the text as 'a treatise on the hermeneutics of Passion meditation' and therefore as a kind of how-to 'companion text [...] to the linear lives of Christ'. He sees the text's preoccupation with 'sikernesse' – which might be glossed as something like 'cautious confidence' as well as 'spiritual safety' – as crucial for understanding its ideological positioning and its concern to guard against the 'potentially deviant ... impulses' precipitated by spiritual ambition.

The other contributions can be more briefly summarized: John J. Thompson considers the place of the MVC-derived *Privoty of the Passion* in Robert Thornton's manuscript miscellanies; Amanda Moss examines a London manuscript containing *The Rule of the Life of Our Lady*, a translation of MVC chapter three; while William Marx discusses the *Liber Aureus and Gospel of Nicodemus*, an overlooked text in which a partial translation of the MVC is spliced together with translated extracts from the Latin apocryphal gospel. The other essays deal with texts that are not actually derived directly from the MVC and might therefore have been better grouped with Westphall's contribution in a separate section: Catherine Innes-Parker offers an intriguing analysis of the little-known Middle English translation of the *Lignum Vitae*, a Latin 'life of Christ' that really was by Bonaventure, though very different from the MVC; and Mary Raschko writes about the Middle English Gospel harmony *Oon of Foure*, a translation from the Latin harmony *Unum ex Quattuor* and a text which, she argues, falls somewhere between meditative life of Christ and Wycliffite scriptural

translation. Finally, as an adjunct to her recent monograph on book production at Syon Abbey in the early sixteenth-century, Alexandra da Costa contributes a fascinating essay on John Fewterer's *Mirror or Glass of Christ's Passion* (1534), a translation not of the MVC, but of Ulrich Pinder's MVC-influenced Latin text *Speculum Passionis Christi* (first printed in 1507). However, since this is the only essay to address material from the sixteenth century, and very much in the context of Reformation controversies, it seems odd not to find it at the end of the volume.

*The Pseudo-Bonaventuran Lives of Christ* certainly provides a wealth of new scholarship that greatly enhances our understanding of this complex corpus of texts. It therefore seems churlish to cavil. Nevertheless, the rationale for the contents and structure of the book as a whole – explained only very cursorily in the introduction – does sometimes seem a strange one and the final impression is that the book falls slightly short of being the coherent and definitive guide to the subject that it might otherwise have been.

Phil Robins  
TRINITY HALL, CAMBRIDGE