

## The Middle English Verse of Boston Public Library MS 124

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*Abstract: This short edition makes available for the first time three Middle English verse prayers to Christ from the Mohun Hours, a fourteenth-century Book of Hours held by the Boston Public Library (MS 124). Late medieval Books of Hours have received substantial recent critical attention as expressions of devotional literacy practiced mainly by secular, aristocratic women. These Books of Hours can be unique in their decorations and their compilations of prayers and texts beyond the core of the Office of the Little Hours of the Virgin; the women who owned, commissioned, used, and added to these books are thus responsible for the preservation of a huge number of devotional texts. The three Middle English prayers are introduced and contextualized, then presented in both Middle English and modern English translation.*

The Middle English poems presented here have never before appeared in print, and have previously been accessible only through direct consultation of the manuscript, a beautiful fourteenth-century Book of Hours in the Boston Public Library Rare Books department. The manuscript was originally made for Eleanor de Mohun on the occasion of her marriage (c.1330). These three texts are verse-prayers to Christ for intercession and mercy; they are indicative of the literary and spiritual practices of secular, aristocratic women in the late Middle Ages.

Medieval female literacy has been the subject of much scholarly interest in the past 20 years. Feminist historians and historians of religion have discovered that female literacy in the vernacular (and, to a lesser extent, in Latin) was widespread among the upper classes in much of medieval western Europe. This female literacy is directly enmeshed in religious practice: women learned to read so that they could engage in their religious devotions at church and in private homes and chapels. These upper-class women also used their literacy skills in household and estate management and in teaching their children how to read: our Modern English word *primer*, a book of basic reading instruction, derives from the religious service of *prime*, a part of the Divine Office included in Books of Hours.

The past 20 years have thus seen an enormous amount of research exploring medieval women's reading practices, book ownership, and literary patronage; all three of these categories are almost exclusively religious. David Bell's 1995 *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* provided an indispensable reference to determine which women had access to which books, while books like Jocelyn Wogan-Browne's *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c.1150-1300* have addressed the ways that literacy enabled women to shape their religious devotions to suit their needs and desires.<sup>1</sup> Explorations of female literacy have stretched as far back

as the Anglo-Saxon period (Brown, Dockray-Miller) and span the entire medieval period (Wogan-Browne, Erler). This work can and should inform inquiries into women's literary and devotional practices in later periods; as Judith Bennett has recently shown, scholars of the modern era ignore the medieval at their own peril.

Medieval Books of Hours have received substantial recent critical attention as an expression of this devotional literacy practiced mainly by secular, aristocratic women. These *Horae* presented a series of prayers and devotions known as the "Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary," a contracted form of the divine office that could be recited privately or in a small group (Wieck). Supplementary contents of the book, beyond the prescribed offices, were often tailored to individual readers, and the manuscript decoration was limited only by the skill of the patronized artist and the financial resources of the patron. As such, a number of women's books of hours have been analyzed as personalized testaments to their owners' devotional and secular interests (Smith, Gee). Roger Wieck has pointed out that "Medieval people personalized their prayer books the way modern people accessorize their cars (and for some of the same reasons)" (455). Many *Horae*, then, are unique in their decorations and their compilations of prayers and texts beyond the core of the Little Hours offices; the literate women who owned, commissioned, used, and added to them are thus responsible for the preservation of a huge number of devotional texts.

One such unique manuscript is the Mohun Hours, Boston Public Library MS 124, made in England in the early fourteenth century. It was ably if briefly described by the BPL's Zoltan Haraszti in 1955, when the library acquired the manuscript, although he did not identify the original patron. Using the heraldry in some of the decoration, Michael A. Michael determined in 1982 that the book was made to celebrate the marriage of Eleanor de Mohun to Ralf de Wilington c.1330. The female figure on folio 1 is probably Eleanor herself. Eleanor de Mohun had female relatives who are known to have owned books (Gee 22); it is more than likely that the book was an heirloom passed through the female line to Mohun and Wilington women. These women, like most aristocrats in fourteenth-century England, were trilingual; they read and recited devotional texts in Latin, French, and Middle English, although the users of the Mohun Hours were probably most comfortable with Anglo-Norman French, the language of the majority of the vernacular texts.<sup>2</sup>

The first 106 leaves contain the Office of the Virgin, the Seven Penitential Psalms and the Gradual Psalms, the Litany, prayers to the Virgin in French and Latin, and the Office and Commendation of the Dead (Haraszti 73). The last seventeen leaves of the manuscript contain numerous non-liturgical texts, added in different hands and at different times; most of these are in Latin and Anglo-

Norman French, but three are in Middle English.<sup>3</sup> Each of the Middle English texts is unique to the Mohun Hours, and each asks Christ for intercession and mercy.

The first prayer equates the turbulent water of the River Jordan with the turbulent soul of the reader/audience of the text (I will use female pronouns to refer to that reader, since we know that the book was initially owned by a woman; however, men could certainly have read or listened to these texts). The narrator asks that Christ calm her soul in the same way that he calmed the river before his baptism. Interestingly enough, three other very different versions of this prayer are extant; in each of these instances, however, the prayer is presented as a charm to stop excessive bleeding from any sort of wound or hemorrhage, so that the petitioner asks Christ to stop the flow of blood in the same way that he calmed the river (Briggs 454; Heinrich 122; Wright 315). The specifically medical purpose of these other versions is highlighted by the "prescription" of a certain number of recitations of various prayers to end the text--five *pater nosters*, 3 *ave marias*, etc. In the Mohun Hours, in contrast, the practical or medical purpose of the text is absent so that the prayer is completely spiritual rather than physical in its requests.

In only six short lines, the second prayer encompasses the entire life of Christ and connects it to the petitioner's request for salvation. References to the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection provide opportunity for the reader or listener to meditate upon the paradox of Christ's human and divine existence (see Beckwith for an analysis of lay devotion and attention to the body of Christ). Meditation upon that paradox is extended and personalized in the last two lines, which request salvation for both her earthly life and her immortal soul.

The on-page layout of the third prayer requires the reader's active engagement with the text by presenting the text in a highly unusual format (see fig.1). The rhyme scheme AAB CCB DDB seems to divide the text into three tercets, but the poem is presented in such a way that directional lines force the reader to work both horizontally and vertically on the page, so that her eyes need to go both down and across to get to the "amen" that ends the text. The AA, CC, and DD rhymes look like couplets in one column, while the B B B lines provide another

column; the directional lines indicate the order of the verse and challenge the reader to make sense of the petition for Christ's assistance both in life (to live cleanly) and in death (to dwell with angels). The scribe may have chosen or copied this unusual layout in order to require extra intellectual and spiritual effort from the reader, who would have to approach the verse as something of a puzzle, if not a very difficult one. The intricacy of the layout indicates that the reader, rather than any possible listeners, would have received the greatest devotional impact from the text.

Dean dates the Anglo-Norman verse at the end of the manuscript to the end of the fourteenth century, approximately two generations after Eleanor de Mohun received the book to commemorate her wedding; the Middle English texts are contemporary with the later Anglo-Norman texts. It was likely one of Eleanor de Mohun's descendants who copied these prayers into this Book of Hours so that she could include them in her devotional practices. The presence of the three Middle English texts in the manuscript indicates that versions of these prayers must have circulated, probably orally, among devout secular women before being transcribed in this Book of Hours for future use and contemplation. Their inclusion here is testimony to the relationship between women's literacy and a variety of textual survival.

### Three Prayers to Christ from the Mohun Hours

Editorial procedure: I have silently expanded abbreviations and presented the text in poetic lines, usually as indicated by pointing (also retained). Titles are editorial. In the manuscript, the first two prayers are written as prose in the two columns on f.113v. For the very interesting manuscript presentation of Prayer Three on f.115v, see figure 1. The "C" that begins each of the first two prayers is missing; the blank space for a decorated initial was never filled. The translations are literal rather than poetic in order to be most helpful to a reader unfamiliar with Middle English. Capital letters and punctuation in the translation follow Modern English convention.

Prayer One:

(C)rist that was born in bedleem  
and baptized in flum iordan ·  
the water was wood ·  
the child was good ·  
the child wyth þe ryght hand blest þe flood  
the flood styll stood ·  
so do alle myn þis day  
and al dayes thin wykked mood  
thorow the vertu of god and seint john

Prayer One:

To Christ that was born in Bethlehem,  
and baptized in the River Jordan:  
The water was wild but  
the child was good,  
so when the child blessed the flood with his  
right hand, the flood was calmed.  
This day and all days, in that way calm  
my own and your<sup>4</sup> wicked spirits  
through the virtues of God and St. John

and þe bapteme þat crist  
toke in the flum iordan  
amen

Prayer Two:

(C)rist for clenesse of þin incarnacyon  
þe merit of thi wondes blood and thi passione  
þe sikernesse of thi deth  
and thi resurexcion  
save me lord from dampnacion  
bothe of lyf and soule  
amen ·

Prayer Three

Swete Jhesu þat on þe Rode  
bou3test us wi3 þyne blode  
Lyfe wi þouten endynge  
Graunte oure Lyf clene for to lede  
And þe Jhesu love and drede  
Over alle þynge  
Lord at oure Lyves ende  
Graunte oure soule for to wende  
In to aungeles Wonynge  
Amen

and the baptism that Christ  
took in the River Jordan  
Amen.

Prayer Two:

Christ, for the purity of your incarnation,  
for the merit of your wounds' blood and your passion,  
for the pledge and meaning of your death  
and your resurrection,  
save me, Lord, from damnation,  
both of life and of soul.  
Amen.

Prayer Three

Sweet Jesus, who on the cross  
with your blood secured for us  
life without end,  
Grant that we might lead our lives purely  
and that we might love and dread you, Jesus,  
over all things.  
Lord, at our lives' end,  
grant that our soul might travel  
into the angels' dwelling.  
Amen

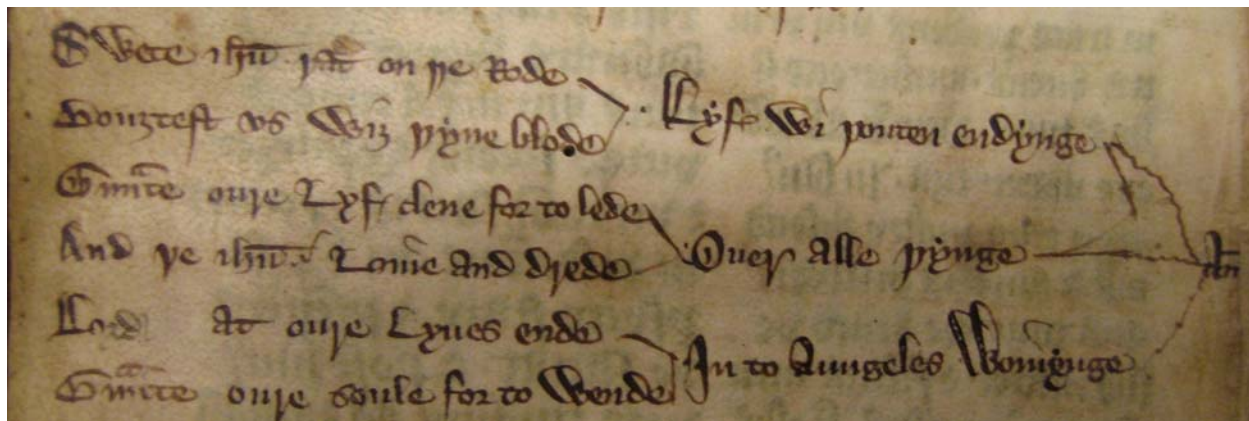


fig.1 Middle English prayer to Christ, BPL MS 124, f.115v. Published courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library (photo: Julie Pease).

## Notes

- \* I would like to thank Sean Casey of the Rare Books Department at the Boston Public Library, Paul Fideler of the Lesley College Humanities department, and Julie Pease (Lesley College class of 2008) for their invaluable assistance in the preparation of this essay.
- 1 The enormous amount of research published on medieval women's reading precludes a comprehensive bibliography, but an excellent recent essay collection with a thorough bibliography is Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, eds., *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).
- 2 The Anglo-Norman texts are 731, 754, 758, 789, 790, 922, and 932 in Ruth Dean, *Anglo-Norman Literature: A Guide to Texts and Manuscripts* (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1999).

- 3 The Middle English texts are 605.5, 624, and 3238.3 in Julia Boffey et al., eds., *A New Index of Middle English Verse* (London: British Library, 2005).
- 4 "your" refers to listeners, not to Christ. I am indebted to Ann Higgins, Sharon Krossa, and Beth Quitslund for guidance in this reading.

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