

... þu er
gode defamyd. And i þe crede it þy telle. þ þu þe dole had done sal be i
to ealstunge lyfo. And þu þe ylle had done sal go to ealstunge fyre.
May sayd þis leddo folde god wil not dæpne þu þe he bygt þe dæpne.
And it semys as it doer for þu þe saynt paulo sayd. Wey wulfomde hower
saluoos figi þe is god deil þe al men be safed. Bot þe wulfomde i þe i



þe þe doer þe dole. þe is he deil þe be safe
if do do þe i w is to aye saluacou god deil þe do
helpe oþer selfe to oþer soule heke. þe þe a gode deil.
for de oþer a gode deil may no man be safed
for oþer þe he may do. þe if a ma de a fracond
deil þe agayns god. þe if god dæpne þe for
pat þe. he doo þe no dæpne. bot þe doer
þe rightwisnes. as hade doer þe sayd. w to þe
þe dæpne is done. þe if a man be dæpne
for þe þe is no dæpne done þe. for þe
þe he had. þe doer þe dæpne þe
mon i þe sayd. Wey ab uas reat þe i þe
more. þe þe þe þe þe þe þe þe þe þe þe
deil. þe he myght de þe alþe
gode. or to yll. he set before man lyfe þe
þe deil so he deil þe þe þe þe þe þe
þe gode þe take þe yll. þe if he be dæpne
þe to dæpne. for þe þe þe þe þe
is agayns gods rightwisnes þe þe
þe þe þe þe þe. And m
þe god deil not þe þe þe. bot if þe
þe þe to þe. Of þe same ma
þe dæpne þe al mon de þe safed. w
þe deil dæpne no þe þe þe

Karáth Tamás:

“Altum Sapere”

*The Risks of the Authority and Responsibility of Knowledge
in Late Medieval English “Extramural” Literary Texts*

Conclusions of the PhD Dissertation

2008

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Cover illustration: MS British Library, Additional 37049, f. 96.

SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation has examined extramural reflections on academic perceptions of knowledge, authority and wisdom in 15th-century England. The assessments of the intellectual climate of England in this period maintain the image of a culture of censorship, distrust towards the unauthorised and academic fears of changes. But as Kathryn Kerby-Fulton demonstrated in *Books under Suspicion*, the study of censorship issues and of revelatory writings reveals “a more pluralist culture than perhaps we have realized, and a more pluralist view of unorthodoxy.”¹ Similar notions can be applied to 15th-century perceptions of knowledge and the individual risks of reconsidering the nature and purpose of intellectual inquiries.

The contribution of my research to Kerby-Fulton’s important observations has been the discussion of the multiple layers of interpretations that underlie the discourse on knowledge in extramural literary works, which, in spite of their uniformity of argument (by their insistence on recalling the taboo on higher intellectual activity), attest to more or less explicit attempts at recasting the frames of the authorised and legitimate intellectual activities, imposed upon society by external authoritative standards. The analysis of the selected works in a cross-referential context pointed out that the face value of the argument based on the Pauline warning to the Romans (Rom. 11:20), the central theme in all the selected works under my scope, did not serve to indicate the authors’ ascribing themselves to the exegetical tradition attached to this biblical passage. The authoritative interpretation of “Noli altum sapere” provided rather elements of a discourse which, in many respects, intended to overwrite the implications of reading St. Paul’s message as a prohibition of intellectual inquiries.

The Introduction referred to the central role of Rom. 11:20 in shaping medieval perceptions, both academic and extramural, of the limits or freedom of intellectual quests. As Carlo Ginzburg’s inspiring article concluded, moral considerations in defining the boundaries between the human and the transcendental gradually merged with intellectual ones, resulting in the extension of the originally interior and instinctive fears of the *archana Dei* onto the intellectual (and rational) spheres of human activities. In spite of the unwillingness of the authorities, shaping the intellectual outlook of the period – after the Wycliffite alternatives of biblical/textual interpretation and some isolated academic tentatives to counter the Lollard

¹ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 396.

challenge – to remove the numbing limits and stereotypical spells cast on the acquisition of knowledge through rational inquiries, a surprising number of late 15th-century (non-academic and vernacular) texts revisit Rom. 11:20 with the less evident aim of reconciling its implications for authorial self-limitation with the new ways of self-authorisation they pursue.

Thus, the selection of the corpus of texts for my analysis was bound to very simple and objective criteria: I have decided to analyse the context of Rom. 11:20 - the way in which it is embedded in the overall structure and argument of the compositions, its role in the authors' or texts' reflections on the acquisition of knowledge and on perceptions of implied boundaries of intellectual inquiries – in 15th-century extramural works which literally quote this biblical passage, or apply some form of a paraphrase to indicate their connection to the same field of considerations. Besides the Middle English translations and glosses of the Pauline letters, as listed in the Introduction, which necessarily had to cope with the problem of translating, and consequently interpreting the phrase of “Noli altum sapere,” the works involved in the “case studies” of this dissertation represent a seemingly uncoherent group of texts belonging to different genres and forms. They, however, represent three large fields of literary activity: mystical writings, theatre and (non-academic) polemical literature.

Chapter 1 presented the corpus, anticipating some problems of textual transmission, composition, and background circumstances as well as the controversial critical assessments related to the main aspect of the dissertation. It has been pointed out already at this early stage that the main pillars of the corpus, the Middle English rendering of Suso's *Horologium Sapientiae*, *The Moral Play of Wisdom*, the pageant of Christ and Doctors from the *N-Town Cycle* and the texts representing the stages of the development of the “Pecock controversy,” outline a wide context of related literary works, with many overlaps between them, whose involvement in the discussion was inevitable. Thus, the interpretation of the Pauline taboo in Suso's *Horologium* and its English translations was connected with a survey of academic *topoi* in the English mystical tradition before the arrival of Suso in England.

In Chapter 3, the analysis of scene 1 of *The Moral Play of Wisdom* has been considered as an ultimate extension of late medieval reflections on Suso and the intellectual taboos evoked by “Noli altum sapere” onto the sphere of visual and staged representations. As Ruth Nisse's recent book has drawn our attention to the power with which 15th-century theatre and civic stagecraft shaped alternative (political and communal) interpretations of the Bible and visionary texts, in general, it may not be surprising to find a mystery pageant in my

corpus.² Yet, in many ways, the N-Town pageant of Christ and the Doctors is unique in its treatment of the episode of Christ's Infancy and its discussion of the nature and mission of human and divine knowledge in the context of academic self-exposure, also staged in the same play. The comparison of this pageant to the equivalent plays of other cycles intended to prove my distinguished approach to the N-Town episode. Finally, the group of texts, defined as witnesses of the stages of a controversy, crystallising around Bishop Reginald Pecock in the mid-15th century, established the largest field of cross-references, intertexts and parallels, primarily by virtue of the polemical background of the texts included. The issues raised in this extensive analysis of the controversy, in texts like Nicholas Love's translation of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, Thomas Netter of Walden's *Doctrinale Antiquitatum Fidei Ecclesiae Catholicae*, Thomas Gascoigne's *Liber Veritatum*, or the extant works of Reginald Pecock, recalled many problematics from the previous chapters (Lollardy and its interpretative alternatives, author and authority, the role of Rom. 11:20 alienated from its exegetical context, and the perceptions of limits in intellectual quests).

The individual, but at several points interrelated, analyses of the literary corpus show that the authors, even if cautious to distance themselves from the exegetical taboos associated with Rom. 11:20, do not share any more the acceptance of this message as valid for the creation of their own authorial or instructional positions. What is, however, at stake is whether the literary evocation of academia, an image borrowed to justify authorial self-empowerment and to represent legitimate intellectual quests, still respects the self-defined borders of the institutional world of learning.. New demands at redrawing or removing the boundaries between the acknowledged scholarly and the unacknowledged intellectual worlds appear even stronger where the authors themselves stand in a transitory zone between the two communities (as seen in the cases of Richard Rolle or Henry Suso). Furthermore, in the Pecock controversy, the discussion of Pecock's thoughts on doctrinal and pastoral issues is impeded because of his opponent, Thomas Gascoigne's reluctance to grant him the attributes and criteria which would enable Pecock to participate in an academic debate.

But the shift in the interpretation of Rom. 11:20 and the related concerns about the nature and mission of human knowledge was not a linear and straightforward process towards the demolition of an earlier intellectual and academic paradigm. The centrality of the theme, derived from Paul's Epistle to the Romans, underlines the sensitivity of the extramural worlds to academic, or institutionally authoritative, dictates in matters of devotion and intellect. As

² Ruth Nisse, *Defining Acts: Drama and the Politics of Interpretation in Late Medieval England*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), passim.

we could see, the mystical visions responding to contemporary academic realities (Suso, Rolle, even the *Cloud*-author) created the ideal antipode to institutional teaching, applying the very imagery of schools. The notion of academia is, thus, by far not an imported and alien experience for these authors.

The dichotomy of academy and the extramural world, however, seemed to be very difficult to maintain consistently in the discussions. As we could see in the analysis of Thomas Netter of Walden's or Nicholas Love's authoritative and modellary works, experiencing with less tolerated (Wycliffite) strategies of textual interpretation took place also with institutional, moreover authoritative, support. The English author-translator of Suso's *Horologium Sapientiae* is also ambiguous in his rendering of Suso's daring revelatory text: he applies contradictory devices in order to temper, and thus delimit, the original freedom experienced in the school of love; at the same time, he seems to experience with the limits of authority on both sides of the implied boundaries. Finally, he does not empower himself to have an own voice as he does not empower the human experience, acquiring wisdom, with the freedom he seems to attribute to it. While the warning against advancing too high remains valid for the whole concept of his translation, the translator (and spiritual guide in the text) recreates the academic vision of authority and of the acquisition of knowledge in the microcosm of his spiritual instruction.

The return from more audacious conclusions to more tempered views was also illustrated in the pageant of Christ and the Doctors of the *N-Town Cycle* and the temptation scene of *The Moral Play of Wisdom*. The pageant's opening criticism of a lukewarm, rigid and self-conceited academic world, finally, integrates illumination and the intuitive way of acquisitions of truth with institutional learning. The science of the doctors is disintegrated because of the lack of an all-pervasive interpretative frame which is offered by Christ through His "rational epiphany," communicating the divine mysteries in words. The play advocates intellectual activity accompanied by a deep spiritual understanding of the Christian faith, but it does not favour either the purely rational theorizations and arguments or the exclusively emotional and spiritual approach to knowledge.

In the morality, the playwright's flirtation with the Wycliffite idea of associating the Fall with the corrupt logic that characterises human syllogistic thinking (and Lucifer's school) is counterbalanced by Christ's school, modelled upon Suso's vision in the *Horologium*. The play establishes an emphatic association of scientific logic with the type of school Lucifer represents. The two school systems crystallising out of the dramatic clash between Wisdom and Lucifer are contrasted on the basis of two features: illumination versus Lucifer's

discursive argumentation. Secondly, the schools differ in their teleological perspectives: in Lucifer's case everything is knowable, but he denies that knowable things would yield any personal fruit for one's own salvation. In Christ's school, learning is preparation for an encounter with the divine being (or truth), and is best defined as a personal experience of one's own spiritual progress. The systematically recurring analogy of institutional teaching and learning throughout the play emphasises that learning is not to be exiled from any spiritual quests after wisdom; at the same time, the playwright also phrases his criticism of an educational system that loses sight of the soteriological end of knowledge.

Finally, Reginald Pecock's trouble with the authorities and representatives of academia could also be taken as an emblematic illustration of, and conclusion to, my investigation on 15th-century reconsiderations of the taboos of knowledge along Rom. 11:20. While the Bishop of Chichester applied risky strategies of self-authorisation and vernacular composition in order to encounter Lollard heterodoxy, his achievement was labelled by Archbishop Bourchier as an attempt at transgressing the Pauline taboos. In his letter, the Archbishop judged those who were keen on reading the Bishop's books with the ancient ecclesiastical *topos* condemning intellectual pride in terms of a dismissal of those who were "plus sapere conantes quam oportet," echoing St. Paul's warning to the Romans in Rom. 11:20 and its closely related passage in Rom. 12:3. Thus the Archbishop imposed the interpretation of the long medieval exegetical tradition of Saint Paul's message as a taboo on intellectual activities, and placed it in the centre of the Pecock controversy. He sealed a long simmering intellectual effort, indicated by the texts analysed in my dissertation, with vain speculation, and clearly reminded the followers of his opponent of the dangers of any initiatives which ignore that the taboos do not affect the "high," but the "horizontal," i.e. the consensus of preponderant views within academia over where to draw its own borders towards the outside.

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

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1.1.2. *The Play of Wisdom*

- 1.2. The Pageant of Christ and the Doctors in the *N-Town Plays*
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MAGYAR NYELVŰ ÖSSZEFOGLALÁS (HUNGARIAN SUMMARY)

APPENDIX A: THE ICONOGRAPHY OF ACADEMIA IN MS BL, ADD. 37049

APPENDIX B: TEXTS FROM MS BL ADD. 37049 HITHERTO UNPUBLISHED

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THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE INDIVIDUAL ANALYSES

SUSO'S *HOROLOGIUM SAPIENTIAE* AND ITS MIDDLE ENGLISH RENDERINGS

Suso's personal criticism of contemporary institutional learning – embedded in form of an allegorical vision of the various ways of teaching in his work about his spiritual journey – is read, by the English renderings, as an alternative to the "clergialie" way of teaching, applicable to the context of devotional instruction and spiritual guidance. While the version in MS Douce 114 follows, in general traits, what Lovatt described as the tempering of Suso in the English renderings, the author-translator balances between creating a text of authority and acknowledged source of knowledge and his individual strategies to recreate the context of academic authority and authorship in the micromilieu of his devotional instruction:

- ❖ The author-translator abandons the dichotomy of "clergialie" (i.e. academic, unsavory and unprofitable knowledge) vs. redemptive truth (mostly illuminative, spiritual). He proposes that the "clergialie" method is only a different mode of discussing the same issues he does with his own "simple kunnyng."
- ❖ This is also suggested by the methods of translation revealed by the author-translator: he rearranges the original material, and conforms its content to his reader's need. While he approaches Suso's work with an openness to "clergialie teremes," he closes the same field for his reader.

- ❖ The translator's interventions in Suso's text (eradicating the gender oscillation of Wisdom, and restructuring the dialogue so that the disciple resumes the dilemmas of knowledge and boundaries in the school of Love as well) attest to the fact that he did not accommodate it to the actual context of the translation, i.e. a spiritual guide instructing a woman, but rather imposed the academic pattern on this avowedly unacademic situation.
- ❖ The text, ultimately, remains, an uncertain and timid experiment with dismantling and redrawing the boundaries of the inquirer's freedom: the disciple (and the author-translator) insist on self-imposed boundaries in the acquisition of knowledge.

THE MORAL PLAY OF WISDOM

Suso's *Horologium* provides the basis for the dialogue between Wisdom and Anima in scene 1 of the morality. The play's indebtedness to Suso, however, is not only manifest in the literal evocation of the *Horologium*, but also in the creation of a textual variant in scene 2. While the school of Lucifer (following the school of Wisdom) draws literally on Wisdom's lesson, and reiterates the main conclusions of scene 1, his carefully and didactically constructed course of argumentation perverts the unacademic notion of wisdom (in scene 1) into corrupt science. The dialogue between Lucifer and Mind reveals:

- ❖ a concern about the difference of the natural (unlearned) practice of a science and its theory,
- ❖ an inquiry into the prelapsarian state of human mind as opposed to the state of logic,
- ❖ a sincere doubt in the inevitability of the Fall.

The playwright seems to adopt Wycliffite doubts concerning the possibility of returning to (and knowing of) the innocent (Edenic) state of mind along the path of logic (and scientific reconstruction). It remains, however, more ambivalent in associating academic argumentation with sin and corruption. Exactly the way in which (stage) images become instrumental both in the Fall and in the Redemption, the academic methods are not stigmatised. Although Lucifer's lesson may be intended as a parody of vain logical speculations, it is ultimately a criticism of a self-devastating scholarly attitude that, in spite of all its wit and persuasive power, sticks to the literal and "has no hope of Grace." (Donald Baker)

The analysis of the iconography of academia, appearing on the last folios of the MS containing fragments from Suso's *Horologium*, yielded the following conclusions:

- ❖ MS Add. 37049 recurs to images to dissolve the ambivalence of intellectual fears and intellectual freedom.
- ❖ The visual design of the MS transmits an academic claim over the MS's content. Thus, the miscellany achieves the subordination of writings, alien from the academic context, i.e. a selection of mystics without any regard to their authoritative stance, to the vigilance of academia.
- ❖ At the same time, the images empower the mystical and devotional writings with academic legitimation and see them incorporated in a newly conceived canon.

THE PAGEANT OF CHRIST AND THE DOCTORS IN THE N-TOWN CYCLE

In spite of the fact that the pageant of Christ and the Doctors in the *N-Town Cycle* does not explicitly evoke St. Paul's warning to the Romans, this play is an outstanding and unique non-academic reflection on the nature of academia, and shows a keen interest in reconciling institutional claims on teaching with "Christus solus magister." The playwright draws on literary conventions rather than personal experience to present a corrupted scholastic system, but despite the derogatory image of school (university) in the opening scene, he ultimately uses the Gospel narrative to rehabilitate and invigorate the mission and necessity of institutional teaching.

- ❖ The playwright's technique of uniting apocryphal elements (in creating the doctors' characters) with a very artificial conception of university teaching (and its curriculum) disintegrates the possible frames that could unify the intellectual activities of academia.
- ❖ Christ's "epiphany" on stage introduces the notion of wisdom in the play, and leads gradually to the surrender of "wit" to "wisdom."
- ❖ The initial disintegration of sciences and the academic institution is countered by an all-pervasive intellectual frame which is offered by Christ's "rational epiphany." The reintegration of academic interpretations with illumination takes place in language: the playwright also creates a drama out of careful definitions of intellectual vocabulary and the clashes of these concepts.

The analysis of texts related to the debate around Reginald Pecock's writings in the mid-15th century, casts light on the different perceptions of the dangers and risks of "high and low." The juxtaposition of different materials, relating the "same" narrative, also highlights the difference between academic and non-academic (and within this latter, both authoritative and non-authoritative) perspectives on the problems raised by Pecock.

- ❖ Thomas Bouchier, Archbishop of Canterbury's official version, as revealed by his warning against those who read Pecock's books inspired by vain curiosity, did not entangle itself in critical academic discussions. He forced the controversy into the frames of the exegetical debate over Rom. 11:20 and 12:3.
- ❖ The popular and monastic chronicles share the stance of the official version, which attests to the process of the interference of collective memory and contemporaneous official (authoritative) interpretations.
- ❖ Thomas Gascoigne's harsh criticism of his fellow clergyman in his theological dictionary represents an academic counter-version of the narrative of the controversy. It is the only one to launch an attack questioning the academic abilities of the bishop to undermine his claim to discuss issues related to knowledge, the dissemination of knowledge and authorities in the highest academic forum. Interestingly, this point was entirely dismissed in the course of the controversy.
- ❖ The analysis of different perceptions of Pecock's intentions also pointed out that the discourse on knowledge and its acquisition was strongly connected to the form and methods of its presentation.

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