

"I NE SEY NOȝT IS IN DESPYT OF WOMEN":
ANTIFEMINISM IN ROBERT DE GRETHAM'S *MIRROR*
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Robert de Gretham's *Mirror*¹ is a collection of sixty sermons for Sundays and feast-days throughout the liturgical year. Composed in Anglo-Norman verse (c.1250-1300 CE), and translated into Middle English prose a century later², the text was originally written for and dedicated to "Aline," a lady of high status whose literary tastes ran more toward "romaunces & gestes"³ than to prayer books. To remedy the situation, Gretham wrote the *Mirror*, proposing that his spiritual charge read it rather than waste her time with such follies and trifles as stories about Guy of Warwick or Tristan. As Gretham argues in the Prologue, although popular literature may be entertaining, it is a human production and thus not only devoid of wisdom but containing great lies. Because truth resides not in tales of worldly vanity, lust, and aspiration, but in scripture and other holy works, Gretham urges his reader to draw forth the *Mirror* instead of some secular tale when she has a desire to read.

Aline—recently identified as Lady Elena of Quency⁴—was evidently the original target reader; however, Gretham clearly had a broader audience in mind as he wrote. Throughout the sermons,

Gretham uses the masculine plural: in Anglo-Norman, "barons" and "seignurs"; in Middle English "lordynges." Perhaps in keeping with Gretham's interest in wider appeal, the Middle English manuscripts omit the reference to Aline and render the Anglo-Norman octosyllabic couplets into a prose format better suited to delivery from the pulpit. As K.V. Sinclair has argued, it is likely that Gretham was connected to an Augustinian fraternity in Northamptonshire, where the sermons were translated into English, rather widely disseminated, and quite probably preached in public venues.⁵ Sermon content is not affected by whether the reader/listener is one individual or many, for rather than dealing with complex doctrinal issues, Gretham's homilies focus primarily upon the matter of how one can be a good Christian in the world, regardless of one's rank or status. Christians of all social classes are urged to do good deeds, to give alms, to love others as the Savior loves them, to reject vice in all forms, to go to Mass regularly, to confess their sins before the priest, and to think on heaven rather than on the transitory delights of this world.

Given the care with which Gretham underscores the idea that all believers are members of the

body of Christ, equally responsible for defending and promoting the one true faith, we might hope to see this attention to equitable treatment extended to *all* Christians, women included. Indeed, an authorial intrusion in Sermon 31 suggests that Gretham is aware of the potential for antifeminist sentiment in his sermons, and he attempts to preclude criticism on that score:

3if eny membre þat is lyf inne
 takeþ azeins his heued & nis noȝt
 buxom to þe heued, al þe body is
 þe lasse worth. Riȝt also it is of
 þe womman þat wile maystryen
 hir housbonde. Whan sche
 makeþ vnderneþen þat schulde
 ben abouen, Goddes ordynaunce
 sche fordopþ. Whan sche makeþ
 abouen þat is maad vnderlout,
 vnto God sche doth gret wrong.
 I ne sey noȝt þis in despyt of
 wommen; for sche ne may noȝt
 comen to Crist 3if þat sche de-
 foule so her housbonde. For þat
 is a grete defoulynge whan wom-
 man is more mayster þan þe man
 [If any living part of the body
 rebels against its head and is not
 obedient to the head, the entire
 body is dishonored. So also it is
 of the woman who will seek to
 have mastery over her husband.
 When she causes to be under-
 neath what should be above, she
 destroys God's ordinance. When
 she causes to be above that which
 is made to be subservient, to God
 she does great wrong. I don't say
 this in scorn of women; for she
 may not come to Christ if she
 so defouls her husband. For that

is a great defouling when woman
 is more the master than the man].⁶

Gretham's self-conscious, concilia-
 tory "I don't say this in scorn of
 women" notwithstanding, it is clear
 from context that any social or spiri-
 tual leveling-out can only go so far.
 Like his more blatantly misogynistic
 contemporaries, Gretham views
 the female "members" of the body
 of Christ as constituting a trouble-
 some, special class. Women, always
 on the brink of rebellion, must be
 held in check and reminded that
 they cannot "come to Christ" at all
 if they do not behave as patriarchy
 has deemed appropriate.

Because Gretham's at-
 titude toward women is ultimately
 in keeping with that expressed in
 devotional literature of the period,
 it is not surprising that throughout
 the *Mirror* women are depicted as
 daughters of Eve, rather than as
 daughters of God. Their only hope
 for salvation rests in their concerted,
 persistent efforts to emulate the Vir-
 gin Mary. Significantly, the longest
 sermon in the collection is number
 54, titled "In Commemoration of
 Our Lady"; there, Gretham spells
 out precisely what sort of behavior a
 woman must embrace and what sort
 she must reject if she is to follow the
 Marian way and thus attain heaven.
 Like the Virgin, a woman must be
 discreet, pensive, silent, and eager
 to do good works; she must cast
 away all vanities; she must not be
 forward or aggressive, gay, proud,
 wicked, covetous, or flighty. But

above all, a woman must be pure, free of lechery. And if she is too spiritually weak to remain a virgin, she must marry, engaging in the sex act *only* for the purpose of procreation, and assuming during intercourse her lawful place beneath the man.

In exegetical terms, the traditional counterpart to Mary is Eve, and as we might expect, Gretham exploits the contrasts typically drawn between them. Essentially separating women into two distinct camps—madonnas or whores—Gretham depicts women as either pious “ladies,” or as sinful temptresses intent on the corruption of men’s bodies and souls. Again, Sermon 54 neatly sums up this Ave/Eva dichotomy:

Þoru3 Eue was destrued lyf,
 & brou3t a3ein þoru3 Marie.
 For þat Eue leued the serpent,
 we were alle sett in turment;
 & þoru3 Marie þat leued the
 aungel, we were brou3t a3ein to
 blisse. Eue3af Adam the fruyt
 þoru3 whiche we were distruyed;
 & Marie 3af vs þe fruyt þat
 saued vs alle yn þe croys for
 ri3t þo letteres þat ben in Eua,
 ri3t þo iche ben in aue; & by þe
 turnynge of þo letteres mowen
 3e wel wyte þat al oure sorwe is
 turned to blisse. Ffor þis word
 Eua destroyed al. And þis word
 aue brou3t al a3ein. Þoru3 two
 silables was al lorn, & þoru3 þo
 lettres turned a3einward was al
 þe world brou3t a3ein into good

state þe moder of þe deþ forðide al,
 & al was maad a3ein þoru3 cristen
 moder [Through Eve life was de-
 stroyed, and restored through Mary.
 Because Eve believed the serpent,
 we were all put in torment; and
 through Mary who believed the an-
 gel, we were brought again to bliss.
 Eve gave Adam the fruit through
 which we were destroyed; and Mary
 gave us the fruit that saved us all in
 the cross for just those letters that
 are in Eva, just those also are in ave;
 and by the turning of those letters
 may you well know that our sorrow
 is turned to bliss. For this word Eva
 destroyed all. And this word ave
 restored all again. Through two
 syllables was all lost, and through
 those letters turned around was all
 the world brought again into a good
 state. The mother of death destroyed
 all, and all was created again
 through the Christian mother].⁷

According to the Church Fathers, because of Eve’s sin, woman could only be viewed as having a destructive influence upon humankind; because of Eve, no woman could thenceforth be trusted, no woman could be left on her own to make the proper choice between good and evil. Naturally prone to immoral action, especially of the prideful and lascivious sort, woman came to be viewed as a stumbling block along man’s path to redemption and spiritual perfection. Among ascetics, the Ave/Eva split further resulted in a veneration of virginity and a suspicion—if not

outright fear—of female sexuality.

While Gretham doesn't go quite so far in his antifeminism as some homilists and exegetes, he does sound an idea articulated by Aquinas (d. 1274) that woman is a misbegotten man. Asserting that in God's eyes the soul is actually male, Gretham argues that however imperfect woman is here on earth, she yet has the opportunity for salvation and eternal masculine perfection through Christ's blood. Gretham even calls Mary a "man" because she remained untainted by Eve's sin.⁸ Like no other mortal female, Mary conceived as a virgin, gave birth as a virgin, and remained a virgin throughout her marriage to Joseph. Not surprisingly, there is no suggestion that Mary menstruated, nor that her labor was anything but joyful and painless.

While the Ave side of this madonna/whore division is most obviously delineated in the text honoring the Virgin, the Eva side is most clearly demonstrated in the exempla. Drawn almost exclusively from the *Vitae Patrum*, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Gregory's *Homiliae*, and the *Miracles de la Vierge*, these didactic tales serve to drive home the moral lesson expounded in the sermons directly preceding them. Of the *Mirror's* seventeen exempla, only five deal with women at all, but in each of these, the inferior sex is shown to be precisely that: inferior to man in every way, particularly regarding morality. This holds true

even in the narrative featuring St. Cecilia in Sermon 9 where, apparently, sainthood itself is insufficient to the task of controlling spiteful impulses.

Living adjacent to a church dedicated to St. Cecilia, a rich man decides to enlarge his house, thereby tearing down part of the altar. Shortly afterward, he dies and is condemned at the judgment for the sacrilege. St. Cecilia, recognizing the man as one who has wronged her, makes an "yuel semblaunt & come to hymward & manaste hym gretliche & as sche zede be hym sche toke hym bi þe arm & pincede hym þerby [evil expression and came toward him and menaced him greatly and as she went by him, she took him by the arm and pinched him thereby]."⁹ As the sergeant is preparing to take the damned soul to torment, a company of saints rally to the man's defense. St. Projectus directly intervenes on the man's behalf and the soul, returned to its body, is sent back to earth. Alive once more, the man rebuilds the altar at St. Cecilia's church and atones for many other wrongs. Gretham adds that "þe pincinge þat Seint Cecilia hadde pincede hym greued hym alwey [the pinching that Saint Cecilia had given him grieved him always]."¹⁰

Although this tale may strike modern readers as somewhat humorous, a darker moral surfaces. Cecilia, unlike the rest of the holy saints in heaven, reacts viciously toward the damned soul; instead of taking pity upon the sinner, she

delights in adding to his torment, behaving more like a stereotypically scorned woman than one of the blessed. And of course, it takes a masculine voice to reason through the problem. The rich man, in life, had honored St. Projectus by giving alms in his name; the implication is that veneration of a male saint naturally supercedes any offense against a female saint. Moreover, considering St. Cecilia's catty behavior, it would seem that even in heaven, woman will instinctively act out her baser emotions, preferring vengeance over mercy.

In two later tales, woman is placed in the role of seductress who instigates the near-downfall of otherwise virtuous men who have dedicated their lives to God. Sermon 13 concludes with the story of a monk who, tempted to engage in 'lechery,' goes to Egypt; there he 'loves' the daughter of a pagan priest. Having asked the Egyptian priest for his consent to the relationship, the monk is told that he may not have the girl unless he first forsakes "his God & his cristendom & his ordre of monk."¹¹ The monk agrees to these terms, but no sooner has he done so than a dove flies out of his mouth and wends up into heaven. When the priest tells his own pagan god what has transpired, the fiend instructs him to renege, saying: "Ðou ne shalt noȝt 3eue hym þi douȝter; for þeiȝ he haue forsaken his God, his God nyl nouȝt forsaken hym þat he ne wole ȝit haue mercy on hym

[You shall not give him your daughter; although he has forsaken his God, his God will not forsake him to the point that He won't yet have mercy on him]."¹² Once the monk hears this, he comes to his senses, begs God's forgiveness, and goes to live with a holy hermit, there to do penance. Three weeks later, the monk receives a sign that he has been absolved of his sin: the dove descends from heaven and flies back into the monk's mouth. There is, of course, no mention of what happens to the daughter. She is a pagan and therefore one of the devil's limbs rather than one of Christ's; but more importantly, she is perceived as an *object* to be bought or sold by men. Once the monk has realized his error in desiring her, in desiring female sexuality, the girl simply disappears from the narrative.

Similarly, in Sermon 44, woman again figures as a dangerous sexual enticement. Here, Gretham tells the story of a hermit who lives far off in the wilderness. So holy is this man that God favors him by providing daily his food and drink. In time, however, the hermit starts to take these divine gifts for granted. Believing that he deserves what God has given him, the hermit falls into sloth; little by little, he grows negligent and slower to say his prayers and psalms. Eventually, the hermit begins to have idle, lecherous thoughts, at one point imagining that "a womman com to hym & he toke hir in his armes & dide

his kynde wiþ hir [a woman came to him and he took her in his arms and had intercourse with her]."¹³ Assailed by these desires, which Gretham describes as wounding the hermit as if by arrows or darts, the holy man leaves his cave and journeys to the city in search of a sexual partner. But before he can reach his destination, he comes upon the little cell of a good brother who, seeing the hermit's distress, promises to teach him how to resist the fiend and "caste away þe fole þou₃tes & holde forþ þe ri₃t weye in God [cast away foul thoughts and hold forth the right way in God]."¹⁴ Like the monk in the previous tale, this man is filled with remorse and prays for forgiveness. After a long period of weeping, wearing a hair shirt and lying in ashes, the hermit is visited by an angel who tells him, "Þi penaunce God haþ resceyued. Loke þat þou be no more desceyued [God has accepted your penance. Look that you be deceived no more]"¹⁵ In this tale, then, the hermit, tempted by lust, loses his faith and almost deserts God. Almost, that is, until another ascetic reminds him that to fall prey to carnal desire is to fall prey to the devil; and in this case, the archfiend literally has a feminine shape. Thus, evil is equated with woman's sexuality. Only by removing himself completely from female society can man escape hell.

In the two final exempla featuring women, we see the Eva image taken to its furthest extreme. Here,

women are quite literally whores who must be rescued by spiritually and morally superior males. Sermon 16 offers the story of a prostitute whose brother, a good man who has lived for a long while in a hermitage, comes to visit her one day. After greeting his fallen sister, the man begins to preach to her, urging her to leave "þis lyf pat is so foul & abhominable to God. Ffor many soules ben lorn þoru₃ þee, & þin is also lorn [this life that is so foul and abominable to God. For many souls are lost because of you, and your soul is also lost]."¹⁶ This and the brother's ensuing descriptions of the pains of hell persuade the whore to repent. Taking only a hood with which to cover her hair, she immediately leaves to follow her brother into the desert. Along the way, however, the brother has second thoughts about being seen in the company of a prostitute, and so he asks his sister to take another path. When later the man calls out and receives no response, he goes in search of his sister: "& whan he come to hire, he fond hire ded & hire feet al blody, for sche had folwed hym barfoot [and when he came to her, he found her dead and her feet all bloody, for she had followed him barefoot]."¹⁷ Gretham finishes the tale by assuring us that the woman was saved because "sche lefte al þat sche hadde, & 3ede so naked away & 3af no kepe to hire body, & hadde al in despyt þat sche hadde wonnen wiþ hire body... [she left all that she had, and went away

naked and had no concern for her body, and held in contempt everything that she had gained with her body...].”¹⁸ Gretham’s emphasis upon what the woman has to reject in order to be redeemed is significant. She must disdain material possessions, finery, vain concern over personal appearance, comfort, and the money that she had earned by selling sex. Especially if we read the prostitution itself as a metaphor for the economic threat posed by women during the medieval period, we see that everything itemized here is stereotypically “feminine.” Thus the point of the story is underscored: if a woman wishes to be among the saved, she must give up her nature—as that nature has been defined by patriarchy—as well as the very thing that sets her apart from men: her female sexuality.¹⁹

Finally, in Sermon 46 we find a re-telling of the Thaïs legend, the story of a beautiful, young, and much fought over prostitute who is rescued from a life of sin. Having heard of Tays and the numerous men who have sold their inheritances, slandered one another, and even committed murder to sleep with her, the holy man Paphimus dresses in secular clothing and travels to the city. Pretending to be a customer, he pays his silver and follows Tays into her chamber. Instead of going to her bed, as Tays commands him to do, Paphimus preaches to her, moving her to repentance. After she has burned all of her ill-gotten riches

in the city center, she follows Paphimus to a convent “þer þat maydens were dwellande togidere for to serue God... [where maidens were living together for the purpose of serving God...].”²⁰ Locked in a cell to pray, Tays calls out to Paphimus, asking him first where she should urinate and defecate, and second, how she should pray. He tells her, “Do it in þi celle [Do it in your cell]” and admonishes her saying, “Þou nart noȝt worþi to nempne God in þi mouþ for þe gret folye þat þou hast don, ne þin honden liften vp toward heuene, for þei ben ful of filþe [You are not worthy to call God with your mouth because of the great folly that you have committed, nor to lift your hands toward heaven, for they are full of filth].”²¹ Instead, she should lie down on the ground, and beg for mercy from her creator. Some time later, Paphimus takes pity on Tays and seeks to determine whether God has forgiven her. Pols, a disciple of Saint Anthony, has a vision of a beautiful bed attended by three fair maidens; although he believes the bed to be his master’s, a voice tells him that the bed belongs to Tays, the whore whose repentance was not in vain. Paphimus then goes to Tays’ cell and asks her to come out; she replies, however, that she would prefer to remain in prayer and weeping. When Tays tells Paphimus that she took her excrement and held it under her nose, he responds approvingly, observing that “Þat styinch haþ bynomen þee þe stinch of þe pine

of helle [That stench has taken you away from the stench of the pain of hell]."²² Once released from her cell to do God's will, Tays lives just fifteen days and then goes to heaven, to the bed that Pols had seen in his vision.

More so than in any other exemplum in the *Mirror*, the story of Tays highlights the distinction between good and bad women. In contrast to the holy maidens at the convent who live fruitful lives in God's service, Tays is depicted as a destroyer—of patrimony, of truth, of both men's souls and her own. As one who has squandered her virginity and misused her body, before Tays can be redeemed, she must trade her opulent chamber for a tiny cell, her luxurious bed for a hard earthen floor, and her pride for humiliation. Such exchange of the physical and sinful for the spiritual and pure is commonplace enough in medieval religious literature. Gretham's focus, however, appears to be more on the condition of the "whore's" body than on the condition of the former prostitute's soul. Because Tays' sin is sexual, everything about her is filthy, including her mouth and her hands. Moreover, what she produces, what she really has to offer, is excrement. And ironically, even after death Tays is associated with the primary locus for her profession: a bed.

As the stories of the unnamed prostitute and Tays suggest, there is only one real cure for sexual license, and only one real cure for a woman's having followed her

depraved Eva nature rather than striving to be like Mary. Unlike her male counterparts in the remaining twelve exempla, a fallen woman must repent and die. In the tales featuring men—usually monks, apprentice saints, or faithful servants to a mighty temporal king—the protagonist is shown lapsing into sin, repenting, and then returning to the world as testimony to the power of God's mercy and saving grace. Several of these stories end, in fact, by noting that many unbelievers are brought to the faith because these men return to the world to share their experiences. Women, because they are weak, untrustworthy, prone to sinfulness and thus recidivists by nature, are not afforded the same opportunity. Once a woman has repudiated her former behavior, she must die: woman's innate corruption and spiritual inferiority prevent her from becoming a *living* saint.

Robert de Gretham wrote the *Mirror* for Lady Elena of Quency, promising that she would find within its pages material more profitable to her soul than "romances & gestes" could offer. True, Gretham's text provides content *different* from that in tales focused on courtly love, adventure, magic, and heroic deeds. But do Gretham's exempla featuring dead prostitutes, lascivious holy men, and vindictive saints provide something *better*, or, for that matter, less titillating? Moreover, if this "mirror" reflects an ideal social vision of the body politic united

in Christ, why is woman's image alone so terribly distorted? Indeed, if romance affords woman a place of honor, and if romance pays tribute to woman's ennobling influence on man, why wouldn't female readers prefer such fare? Perhaps it is not far-fetched to imagine Lady Elena sighing, closing the *Mirror*, and reaching for her volume of *Tristan*.

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ENDNOTES

¹References to the *Mirror* are from Kathleen M. Blumreich, ed., *The Middle English 'Mirror': An Edition Based on Bodleian Library, MS Holkham misc. 40* (ACMRS, 2002).

²The text is extant in seven Anglo-Norman manuscripts, two of which are merely fragments, and in six Middle English manuscripts. See Marion Y. H. Aitken, *Étude sur le Miroir ou les Évangiles des Domnées de Robert de Gretham suivie d'extraits inédits* (Paris, 1922), and Blumreich, xxiii-xxxvi.

³*Mirror*, p. 1.

⁴K. V. Sinclair, "The Anglo-Norman Patrons of Robert the Chaplain and Robert of Greatham," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 28 (1992): 193-208.

⁵Sinclair, "Anglo-Norman," pp. 200-205.

⁶*Mirror*, pp. 275-276.

⁷*Mirror*, pp. 444; 448

⁸*Mirror*, 455-456. Compare Christ's remark about his mother in *The*

Gospel of Thomas: "[...] I shall guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven's kingdom." *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus*, trans. Marvin Meyer (New York: Harper, 1992), p. 65.

⁹*Mirror*, p. 86.

¹⁰*Mirror*, p. 87.

¹¹*Mirror*, p. 109.

¹²*Mirror*, p. 110.

¹³*Mirror*, p. 377.

¹⁴*Mirror*, p. 378.

¹⁵*Mirror*, p. 379.

¹⁶*Mirror*, p. 143.

¹⁷*Mirror*, p. 144.

¹⁸*Mirror*, p. 145.

¹⁹Interestingly, nothing is said of the brother's sin of pride.

²⁰*Mirror*, p. 395.

²¹*Mirror*, p. 395.

²²*Mirror*, p. 396.