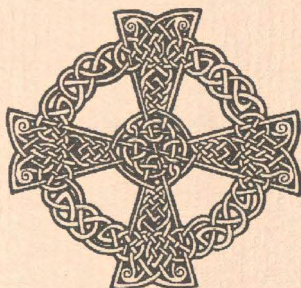


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WHAT *DID* THE POETS SEE?
A THEOLOGICAL AND
PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION

by

JOHN MORGAN-GUY



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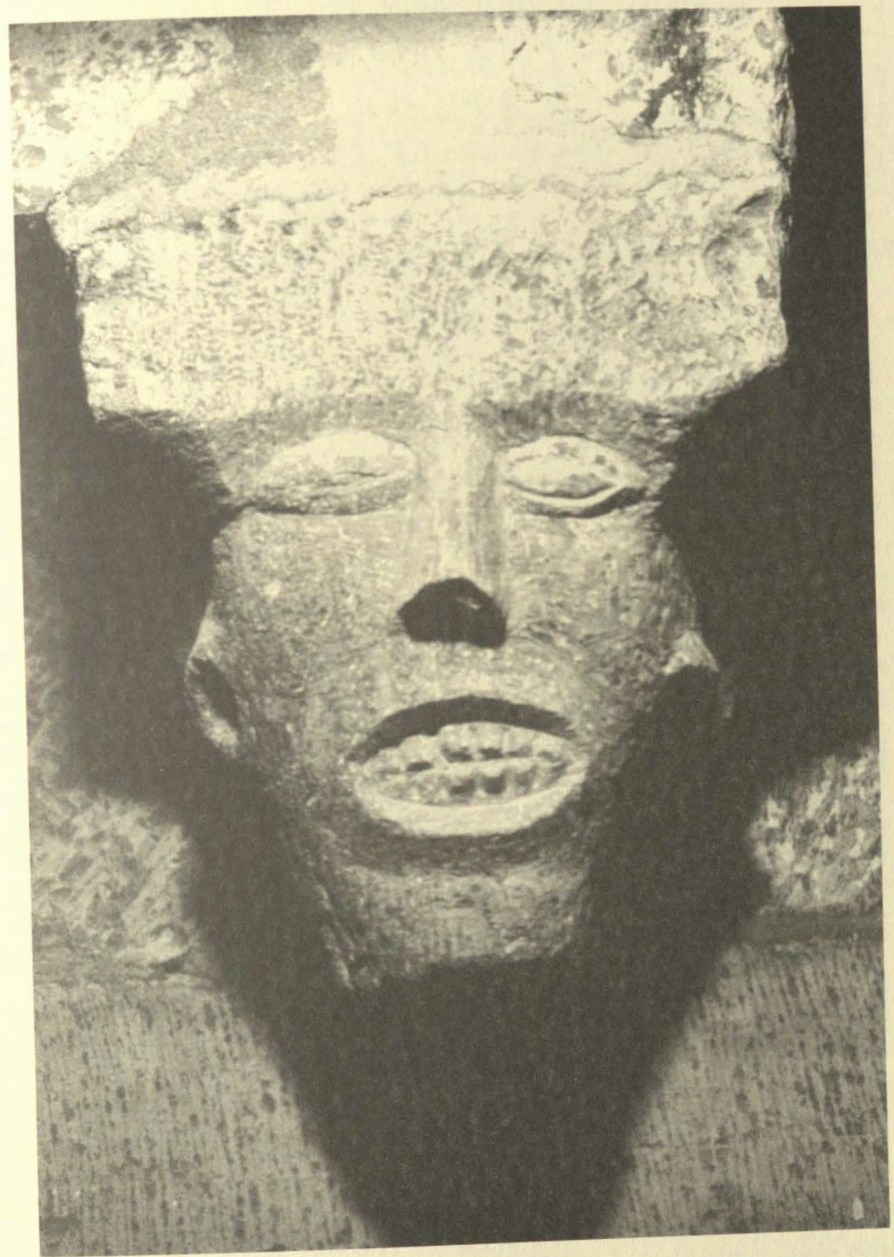
As is well known, the principal task of research fellows in the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies is to prepare substantial volumes on some central themes in the literature and history of Wales. But this vigorous activity also produces shorter pieces of research which are directly or indirectly associated with those themes. The aim of this series, therefore, is to encourage research fellows in the Centre to publish some of the fruits of their labours in the form of lectures or essays. Our hope is that these research papers will draw attention to interesting and relevant problems and also persuade the reader to reconsider old interpretations.

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Head from the twelfth-century church
of St Michael, Castlemartin, Pembrokeshire
(Photograph: Patricia Aithie)

What *did* the poets see? A theological and philosophical reflection*

'The Bible', according to Professor Beryl Smalley, 'was the most studied book of the middle ages ... both the language and the content of Scripture permeate medieval thought.'¹ This is the 'world of the text' which is the focus of this paper. The task of entering into this world is by no means as simple as it might appear. What, for example, do we understand by 'the Bible'? By 'language' and 'content'? By 'thought'? Indeed, by the process of 'permeation'? The answers that might be given to these questions at the beginning of the third millennium are almost certainly answers that our medieval ancestors in Wales would not have given. At best, one might suggest, they would be puzzled and disturbed by them; at worst, our answers would be incomprehensible. Fundamentally, this is because, for them, the 'world of the text' was the real world; for us it is not. For us, reality has another definition.

Before proceeding any further it is necessary to gain an understanding of two words that occur and recur in this paper, namely, 'bible' and 'text'. As generally understood today, 'the Bible' is taken to refer to a collection of Jewish and early Christian scriptures, which is regarded as uniquely authoritative for the life and teaching of the church. They comprise 'a canon of written literature, and [Christians] confess this canon to be the required basis by which to judge all other forms of faith and practice'.² But in the context of the argument of this paper, this definition will not suffice. It must be extended to include at least what is now commonly referred to as 'Early Christian Apocrypha'.³ Although such texts were not included among those Christian writings finally accepted by the church as its scriptures in the fourth century, nonetheless some of 'these books had been extensively used as authoritative foundation documents for at least two centuries prior to that time'⁴ and were to remain at the very least highly influential in Christian discourse for a thousand years thereafter. Arguably, they can be said to have gained and retained a status of 'popular canonicity'.

This brings us to the second word requiring explication, namely 'text'. For too long there has been an equation between 'text' and 'chirograph', that is, the definition has been narrowed to include only

* This paper is based on a lecture given at a forum organized by the Centre on 'Y Canu Crefyddol a'i Gefndir' (Religious Verse and its Background) on 19 May 2001.

that which is written. Again, in the context of Christian *didache*, this definition will not suffice. As Cartlidge and Elliott have pointed out: 'The pictorial art of the church has had such an influence on its theology and piety that it would not be inappropriate to insist that this art formed a Bible of its own, a sacred scripture which was handed down *in parallel* [my italics] to the written Bible, the Lives of the Saints and the liturgies.'⁵

The phrase 'in parallel' is extremely important here. Cartlidge and Elliott are right to emphasize: 'The old iconographical dictum that texts are the influence which led to specific cycles of images and discrete images is undergoing considerable change ... The old consensus tended to look to texts first⁶ and to announce that a particular text influenced the atelier or painter in such a manner that the primacy of the text was maintained. The developing consensus is that oral traditions, texts (rhetorical arts) and the pictorial arts all interact so that *all* the arts demonstrate the church's "thinking out loud" in both rhetorical and pictorial images.'⁷

It is, indeed, both possible and likely that in some instances the 'pictorial text' preceded and influenced the chirograph. In the church of St Ambrose, Milan, there survives a fragment of a third-century Roman sarcophagus lid with a particular image of the nativity of Christ. The first written account to encapsulate that image which survives is contained in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, by general consent a document which dates from the eighth or ninth centuries, that is, some five hundred years later. The tradition which gave rise to the image is therefore very early; but it is first witnessed in pictorial and not chirographic art.⁸

So the 'world of the text' is the world of a bible more broadly defined than twenty-first century understanding would generally allow, and of a 'text' by no means confined to the written word. Once again Cartlidge and Elliott help our understanding here: 'There exists in the church what one could call a Whole Gospel. It is part of the faith in which the church believes and of the faith by which the church believes. It consists not only of the biblical (and the so-called Old Testament Apocrypha) texts but also of the nearly two millennia of commentaries, liturgies, sermons, church disciplines, the church's arts and ... the Christian apocrypha and the pictorial arts which parallel this apocrypha'.⁹ It is their firm belief that 'the iconic versions of the Christian apocrypha have played a strong role in the make-up of this Whole Gospel'.¹⁰ The 'real' world of the Bible, the 'world of the text' only makes sense if it is seen in this way, as the world of the Whole Gospel.

Let us now turn to the question of reality. In 1974 the philosopher and theologian Hans Frei published a work he entitled *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. That title was most carefully chosen, for an eclipse is the interception of the light of a luminous body by the intervention of another body between it and the eye. We now live, Frei would argue, in an intellectual eclipse. Between our understanding and the understanding of reality which characterized our medieval forebears something has intervened. The planet which has come between us, to continue the metaphor, is the world of Modernity and the Enlightenment. The eclipse, however, is not total. But to enter into the medieval world view, to 'access' it, means that we have to get behind this intruding world of Modernity and the Enlightenment. Unless we make that effort much of what the medieval world was saying will remain inaccessible to us. We run the risk of providing answers to those questions which I posed, specifically, what is reality?, and those answers are likely to be the wrong ones.

How, then, did the medieval thinker conceive of, and give coherence to, reality in terms of the world? To his mind, the real world was contained within the biblical narrative as we have defined it. There was one reality, a single temporal sequence, one cumulative story. The single temporal sequence was not simply linear progression punctuated by events or occurrences. It contained figuration – earlier stories or occurrences were figures of later ones. Thus, for example, Old Testament persons, events and prophecies were both literal – they *were* within the temporal sequence – but also typological. They were fulfilled in the New Testament. The variety of biblical books was thus turned into a single, unitary canon.¹¹ There was, therefore, a recognizable paradigm of canonicity. And within it and upon it was predicated 'reality', the reality of the economy of salvation.

Since this world of the canonical text is indeed the one and only real world, it must therefore contain the experience of any present age and reader.¹² As Hans Frei puts it, 'not only was it possible for man, it was also his *duty* [my italics] to fit himself into that world in which he was in any case a member'.¹³ What therefore we might term 'extra-biblical' thought and experience were incorporated into the one real world – entered *into* the world of the text, came within the paradigm of canonicity. Medieval man sees himself as part of the narrative and, because he does so, his own thoughts, actions, passions, the shape of his own life *and* that of his community, society and era contribute both literally and typologically to the cumulative story.

Furthermore, his literal and typological place within this landscape of reality is *prescriptive*, that is, the duty to fit himself into

this world means that his thoughts and actions are in their turn exemplary. As with all others in this world of the text where forces of good and evil are almost tangible, he may be numbered with the saints or fall from grace. How he lives his life and dies his death is determinative, as determinative for him as it was for Adam and Eve, for the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs *with whom, alongside whom he stands*. There is a concept of simultaneity here which transcends the spacial and the temporal, and which has profound implications for understanding and interpreting the visual in our medieval culture.

Let us explore this understanding of the text as world-absorbing a little further. I have used the phrase the 'paradigm of canonicity'. That which was, is, and is to come is all within this paradigm, a unitary canon of the biblical narrative. But, as I have already emphasized, extra-biblical thought and expression is also 'absorbed' into this world. We have seen that we cannot restrict the paradigm of canonicity to the canonical biblical texts alone. Visual images may be inspired by and drawn from the whole 'world of the text' or may themselves be examples of the church 'thinking out loud'. Let us consider two familiar images which illustrate the point, namely St Anne teaching the Virgin Mary to read, and the ox and the ass present at the nativity of Jesus.

In Wales, a representation of Anne teaching her daughter to read appears on the painted ceiling at Llanelian-yn-Rhos (Denbighshire). As Pamela Sheingorn has shown, this is an excellent example of the church 'thinking out loud'.¹⁴ Pictorial images of this scene were widespread from the fourteenth century onwards.¹⁵ Ultimately, the story of St Anne derives from the Protoevangelium of James and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, but the image of her teaching her daughter to read is later eisegesis. As Sheingorn maintains, sometime in the eleventh century, 'concomitant with the growth of Mary's cult, the idea developed that because she was Mother of God, Mary must have been both spiritually and intellectually gifted. Byzantine sermons from the eighth to the tenth centuries described her as possessing the wisdom of Athena, and one version of the *Pseudo-Matthew* claims: "No one could be found who was better instructed than she (Mary) in wisdom and in the law of God, who was more skilled in singing the songs of David (Psalms)".¹⁶

This image of the learned and devout Mary develops as the centuries pass. In the thirteenth century Albertus Magnus taught that she had been a master in the Seven Liberal Arts,¹⁷ and the iconography changes in the same period. Mary as weaver, the emphasis of the

Golden Legend, is replaced by Mary as contemplative student, and images of the Annunciation come to depict her as turning from her devotional reading to attend to the message of the archangel. Nor does the evolution and transformation of the image stop there. As Sheingorn notes, in some representations, both pictorial and chirographic, the book on Mary's *prie dieu* is the Hebrew Bible, open at Isaiah 7.14: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son'. Thus, with the angelic message, the reader and/or viewer is drawn into the whole story of the Incarnation.¹⁸

However, the question as to how Mary learned to read remains unanswered. The obvious conclusion which can be drawn from the Protoevangelium of James, which records Mary's presentation at the age of three in the Jerusalem Temple, and her remaining there until her marriage to Joseph at the age of twelve, is that she was instructed there.¹⁹ However, by the fourteenth century, and especially in the kingdom of Edward III of England, it is no anonymous Temple pedagogue who teaches Mary, but rather her mother. Here indeed is the church 'thinking out loud', for, as Sheingorn points out, this image appears, and then becomes widely established until the time of the English Reformations,²⁰ 'in spite of a virtual, if not total absence of textual sources'.²¹ Closely, though eisegetically, related to Incarnation history, the image is primarily a devotional one. It draws the reader/viewer into a complex and multifaceted world of mystical theology, as well as throwing a great deal of light for us in the twenty-first century on areas of high medieval society and culture.

The second, and particularly familiar, image to be discussed is that of the ox and the ass present at the nativity of Jesus. The ubiquity of this image, even today in popular Christmas carols (and school nativity plays) as well as in pictorial art, leads to an assumption that it possesses New Testament warranty, but it does not.²² The first known written mention is in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, a Latin text of the eighth or ninth centuries, though, as noted earlier, in pictorial art the image appears five centuries earlier.²³ The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew was, as a result of its popularity, to be one of the principal channels by which what J. R. Porter calls 'legends of the infancy gospel tradition' became widely current in the medieval west,²⁴ but, as noted earlier, it is wise not to place too heavy a stress on chirographic art here. The pictorial image thus may well pre-date the written.

Such images are 'narrative', they are integral to the 'world of the text' and through their 'recitation' in art and a response in contemplation and devotion they serve to draw us further into the paradigm of canonicity of which they are an integral part. They do so

because they, as much as the biblical text itself, are part of our present. As Schubert Ogden pointed out, our 'modern' conception of myth is of something fictitious, illusional or false. We perceive what he called a 'negative relation' between truth and myth.²⁵ From that 'modern' understanding we have to free ourselves if we are to enter the medieval world. This leads into my next point.

We have been considering early Christian apocrypha. Let us now examine briefly so-called 'pre-Christian' or – even worse – 'pagan' survivals. There are none. It is the breaking apart of the unified concept of reality at and after the Reformations,²⁶ the 'purifying' of the world of the text, that has brought to birth this false dichotomy. We are in the twenty-first century closely wedded to ideas of pagan and Christian, of sacred and secular, which, it might be suggested, are part of the intellectual eclipse wrought by modernity.

Thomas O'Loughlin has recently laid out the medieval understanding with clarity and I make no apology for quoting him at some length:

[Medieval theologians] did not view the relation of Christians and pagans using a binary view of Christians/Pagans; true/false; good/bad; saved/damned (that is, Christianity is true, good, and leading to salvation, while paganism is false, evil and leading to damnation). This simple black-and-white theology only comes into the picture in the sixteenth century ... The relationship [was seen] as one of preparation and fulfilment based on the model of Paul's speech in Athens (Acts 17.22–31). This was combined with Paul's references to a 'natural knowledge' of God's existence and power in Romans 1 and 2. Taken together these form a view of paganism as a deviation from the truth, but which has many true elements upon which Christianity can come and build. It is a model of incompleteness and perfection.

Thus pagan society and worship is a preparation for the gospel, and indeed can know itself to be incomplete without the gospel. When the gospel comes it brings complete answers and the perfect worship. This theory ... disposed medieval Christians to record those elements of earlier religions which they perceived as definite pointers towards the 'fulfilment' of Christianity.

An incidental consequence of that Christian view is that they did not see aspects of the earlier religion which continued to exist in Christian times as 'pagan survivals' (such 'survivals' are seen only within the post-sixteenth-

century perspective where they are equivalent to impurities in Christianity) but simply as part of 'the law of nature' (that is, bits of true religion apart from the gospel) that were not abrogated, but given a perfect direction in the 'law of the Scriptures'.²⁷

These 'bits of true religion' are absorbed into the paradigmatic world of the text.

This understanding is essential if we are to make sense of those creatures from the bestiaries, the masks and faces, for example those at Castlemartin, Pembrokeshire, the grotesques, the scatological figures such as those which adorn the tower at Llywel in Breconshire, and the sheela-na-gigs, most memorably that at Llandrindod Wells.²⁸ These are familiar figures which inhabit, if they do not haunt, our churches and cathedrals. These are all part of the unified reality of the metanarrative of Christianity. Such figures, such carvings, are not to be seen and interpreted as decorative flights of fancy on the part of the artist; they are not 'pagan' survivals, evidence of a world merely overlaid by a veneer of Christianity. There is no binary fission. These things are indeed, as O'Loughlin has pointed out, 'of God' – 'bits of true religion' not abrogated, but given a perfect direction by their incorporation into the world of the text.

In the library at Chatsworth is to be found the magnificent Book of Hours that Henry Tudor, Henry VII, gave to his daughter Margaret on her marriage. The work is prefaced, as one would expect, with a liturgical calendar. Each month occupies the recto and verso of a folio. At the beginning of each month, which contains the list of feasts, fasts and commemorations to be observed, there is a vignette of that month's astrological symbol. It is a common concept. It is widespread through manuscripts such as this. Is this an example of a Christian/Pagan dichotomy? Of a 'pagan survival' into the late fifteenth century? Not at all. It is merely evidence of an understanding of a Christian metanarrative which draws all things into itself. And, as Mary Carruthers has shown, astrological symbols and the star-charts at which they hint, had a serious purpose.²⁹ *Mneme*, memory, Carruthers asserts, 'produces an art for "thinking about" and for "meditating upon" and for "gathering" ... An art of tropes and figures is an art of patterns and pattern-making, and thus an art of *mneme* or *memoria*, of cogitation, thinking'.³⁰ Star-charts, the signs of the zodiac – and the vignettes of the 'labours of the months' which so often accompany them in liturgical calendars – were all such aides-memoires mnemonics. They facilitated the process of re-membering, of finding, assembling, putting in place within that metanarrative. When our medieval poets *saw* such things, that is how they would have understood them.

So the first answer that can be given to the question posed by this paper – ‘What *did* the poets see?’ – is simply this: reality. But to understand them, and to understand the visual in our medieval culture, we have to place ourselves in their understanding of reality and not our own.

We are, perhaps, now in a position to look at the work of the medieval visual artist – something else that our poets *saw*, and which itself assisted them *to* see. The artist operated within the world of the text, within the paradigm of canonicity, and, as Wittgenstein pointed out in 1916, what he produced was a work of art that is the subject seen and depicted *sub specie aeternitatis*.³¹ This is an extraordinarily important insight. Wittgenstein understood that a subject so seen and depicted is one that, as he put it, has ‘the whole world as background’. It is possible to see it *with* space and time instead of *in* space and time. [The emphasis is his.]³² But within the metanarrative of Christianity it is possible to develop Wittgenstein’s insight still further. There are subjects which are depicted by the medieval artist which are to be seen not just as having the whole *world* as background, but the cosmos. Depictions of the Holy Trinity, for example, or of the enthroned and blessing Saviour, have a cosmic context. The Passion and crucifixion, the resurrection, have, as the apostle Paul pointed out, a soteriological significance for the whole of creation, which has been ‘groaning’ in anticipation of its coming freedom from its ‘bondage to decay’, and not just for ourselves.³³

Nor is it necessary to draw a distinction, as Wittgenstein does, between that which is seen *with* space and time as ‘background’ and seen *in* space and time. Being drawn into the world of the text, within the paradigm of canonicity, means that both can be and are true. We return here to the concept of simultaneity mentioned earlier. For example, let us take what is probably the predominant series of images deriving from the Christian narrative, those of the Passion and crucifixion of Jesus. How do we view those images? We can view them within the context of linear time, a sequence of events at a given moment in history; the Jesus who ‘suffered under Pontius Pilate’ – a credal affirmation that anchors the sequence *in* time. Here is Wittgenstein’s event *in* space and time. We can also view the Passion as an event with cosmic soteriological significance. This is to see it *sub specie aeternitatis*, *with* space and time as background. This is not to see it as detached observer or as spectator, but rather as the medieval artist, his patron and those who *saw* the work of art itself saw it. The world of the Passion and crucifixion becomes *their* world, and everything else pales into insignificance. It is at the foreground of reality, with time and space as background. To stand before the crucifix

is to stand at the foot of the cross at the crucifixion. The artist, be he painter, sculptor or poet, makes the reality immediately accessible. He paints, sculpts, writes about that which he sees. Those who in turn see, read or hear are made participants, they are comprehended within the reality. They are enabled to access what Hans Frei calls the ‘ideational meaning’, that is taken beyond the literal (the work of art or the poem itself) and into the world of the text.³⁴

In the late medieval iconography of the Passion of Jesus there is no significant difference between the artist and the dramatist. In both the surviving plays of the Corpus Christi cycles, whether they are from England, Cornwall or Wales, and the artwork, wood, stone, glass and paint, we find that ideational meaning, combined with what J. W. Robinson described as ‘impassioned emotionalism’ and ‘sensational realism’.³⁵ This late medieval iconography puts us in touch with the intense inner spirituality of that period. The *Meditationes Vitae Christi* directs that the Christian should ‘make hym-selfe present in his thoghte as if he sawe fully with his bodyly eghe all the thyngys that be-fell abowte the crosse and the glorious passione of our Lorde Ihesu’.³⁶ To illustrate how the observer could and did ‘make hym-selfe present’ I would like to use a relatively unfamiliar image taken from the Passion story, an image nonetheless which it was possible to see in Wales.

Although there are earlier examples, it is not until the fifteenth century that images of Jesus’s trial before the Sanhedrin began to include that moment described in the Synoptic Gospels when he was subjected to physical violence and abuse, being struck and spat upon. The earliest of the Gospels, that of Mark, describes it thus: ‘And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to buffet him, and to say unto him, Prophesy: and the servants did strike him with the palms of their hands.’³⁷ The Gospel of Matthew, dependent on Mark, gives this account: ‘Then did they spit in his face, and buffeted him; and others smote him with the palms of their hands, saying, Prophesy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee?’³⁸

Although the Gospel narrative is short, nonetheless the event it describes was recognized as having a profound theological and devotional significance. The mocking and buffeting of Jesus was interpreted as a ‘type’ of the crucifixion which was soon to follow. It has, as Jeffrey Helterman pointed out, none of the sublimity of Calvary, but nonetheless the crudity and the pettiness of the indignity inflicted in the spitting and buffeting accentuates the humility of Christ. ‘The buffeting was seen as an absolute example of the humility of godhead assuming manhood’, claims Helterman.³⁹ It is therefore an epitome of

the Incarnation, of that kenosis of which the apostle Paul speaks in his letter to the Philippians: '... Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.'⁴⁰ In the spitting and buffeting is found the voluntary abdication of reputation, the humility and the obedience of which the apostle speaks. 'Every species of outrage was heaped upon [Jesus], so that he became the perfection of human humility.'⁴¹ This voluntarily endured suffering elicits a response from the Christian onlooker as imager and imaginer. As the fourteenth-century English spiritual writer Richard Rolle expressed it: 'I thank thee, swete Lord Jhesu Cryst of the pynus and of the schamus that thou suffryd before the byschopus and maystres of the lawe, and of thine enemys, of buffetyes and of neckedyntes and of many other schames that thou suffred.'⁴² Luke's Gospel, following a hint in Mark's, has the mocked and abused Jesus first blindfolded.⁴³ It is this account of the mocking which inspired the carving on several of the Breton *Calvaires* from the mid-fifteenth century onwards into the seventeenth century, notably those at St Jean Trolimon – the earliest – Pleyben, Guimiliau, Plougastel, Plougouven and St Thegonnec. The imaging of the blindfolding introduces us to other significant 'layers' of the story, and the linkage between this 'static' iconography and the 'active' iconography of contemporary medieval drama.

In the plays of the Wakefield Master, that which focuses upon the mocking of the blindfolded Christ, the *Coliphizacio*, explores the message inherent in the image, namely spiritual blindness. The Wakefield Master uses his drama to meditate upon the paradox that here the Incarnate Word made flesh is silent, despite the constant demand of the tormentors that he speak. The dramatist understands that it is this very silence which speaks most eloquently; it is the presence of the silent Word, suffering in humility, which is itself the message. All the words spoken are by the tormentors, and they are but nothing before the Incarnate Word. Similarly, although it is that Word in the person of Jesus which is blindfolded, it is the tormentors who are blind. They cannot 'see' the truth that is before them. They demand that Jesus 'prophesy', that is, foretell the will of God as revealed in the events of the moment. Ironically, they do not realize that the still, silent, blindfolded Jesus is doing just that, revealing by his humble submission that it is God's will that in Jerusalem he should 'suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day'.⁴⁴ It is the playwright's hope that his audience can 'hear' the message of the silent one, and 'see'

the truth about the blindfolded Christ, namely that in his silent blindness Jesus reveals not only human humility, but the awesome power of the Son of God.

The Wakefield Master does not stand alone in his exploration of this theme, though arguably his dramatic skills are among the finest. The Chester cycle of plays also includes the assault on the blindfolded Jesus,⁴⁵ as, seemingly, did the craft plays of Hereford and Worcester, though no texts survive.⁴⁶ There is also a reference to this humiliation of Jesus in the preamble of the surviving Welsh plays.⁴⁷ Although it is unlikely that many of the people of Wales, the poets among them, saw the work of the Wakefield Master, some at least would have seen the cycles performed along the borders, at Chester, Worcester or Hereford.⁴⁸ Perhaps most importantly for our purposes, among those present if not actually participant there were almost certainly artists and craftsmen whose work took them into Wales, if they were not Welsh themselves. It is worth emphasizing in this context that the performance of such plays were the prerogative of the members of the craft guilds – at Hereford, for example, the play depicting the buffeting was performed by the carpenters.⁴⁹

One further point needs to be made here. A characteristic of these dramatic representations is that the mockers are, as Rosemary Woolf has pointed out, 'sometimes ugly peasant figures, sometimes mailed soldiers'. Whichever, they are 'equally grotesque, characterised through their speech and action'.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the mocking and abuse in which they engage is strongly reminiscent of children's games of great antiquity, but which were still played in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, namely 'Hot Cockles' and 'Frog in the Middle'. In the latter one sits or squats while others dance about him, striking him as they go. If he succeeds in catching one of his tormentors, the one caught must take his place. In the former, which as *Kollabismos* would have been known to the tormentors of Jesus and to the Gospel writers, a player is blindfolded, and then struck by another player and asked to identify who struck the blow.⁵¹ Again, if the tormentor is correctly identified, he must take the place of the victim.

Almost everyone witnessing this play would have recognized the games, and have been able to identify with the 'victim' from personal experience. Thus the dramatist's intention to elicit the sympathy and understanding of his audience would have been achieved. Their response was participative. Those watching would have been moved from pity to piety by the realization that the victim was no hapless child at play, but the Son of God. Here the game is no game, and here the victim plays by not playing. He is silent and

makes no effort to identify his tormentors. He is still, and makes no effort to catch them. For in this game there can be no substitute. Jesus is the 'Lord of the Dance'.

Now we are in a position better to understand the significance of the wall-painting discovered above the lintel of a window in the nave of the small Welsh parish church of Llandeilo Tal-y-bont (Glamorgan), a church currently under reconstruction at the Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans. It represents this mocking of Christ. There are three figures, shown head and shoulders only. The central figure is depicted full face, the others, one on each side, in profile. It is a most moving depiction of the subject we have been considering, revealing the influence of the craft plays, with which it is contemporaneous. The figures at the sides are shown spitting, the spittle clearly delineated, and drops of it fall from the face of the central figure, the face of Christ.

Let us first consider the profile figures. Here are Rosemary Woolf's plebeian, nameless men. They are deliberately caricatured as such by the artist, with their bulbous noses and expressions of hatred for the figure between them. By contrast the face of Jesus wears what has been called 'a stern, almost brooding expression',⁵² an expression created by the artist through the way in which he has delineated the eyes, eyelids and eyebrows, and by the skilful use of red and black in the iris and pupil, for this figure, following the account in Matthew's Gospel, is not blindfolded. The attention of the worshipper is drawn immediately to the face, to an expression at once calm and challenging, and also, in its air of restrained sadness but not despair, fully in accord with classical and patristic convention.⁵³

The purpose of this painting is identical with that of the three-dimensional images of the same scene on the Breton *Calvaires*⁵⁴ and, like them, inspired by what one of the leading commentators on those images, the Abbé Castel, calls the 'pantomimes populaires' of the time.⁵⁵ At Llandeilo Tal-y-bont we have an example of the 'sensational realism' of which Robinson spoke, which by its very nature challenges the observer and enriches his or her spiritual communion with God. The painting is at once icon and biblical commentary, and the observer, meditating upon it, becomes a participant – he or she is in the 'foreground' of the action depicted – and is thereby drawn into the world of the text.

Such an understanding helps make sense of what are frequently referred to as 'donor portraits', those representations in illuminated manuscripts, in stained glass and in paintings of the commissioning

patron with his family or others at the foot of a representation of an event in the Christian narrative, as we find, for example, in the glass of the east window of Llangadwaladr church in Anglesey, or shown surrounded by angels and saints, as in the celebrated John Dwnn triptych now in the National Gallery.⁵⁶ Here we have the donor as participant, within what Frei calls the 'narrative web'.⁵⁷ Sir John Dwnn of Cydweli can be seen in the company of saints and angels because within the one reality of the world-absorbing text he was and is in their company. The artist understood that, the patron understood it, and so did those who *saw* it. Such an understanding was for them *unavoidable* in the true sense of that word, that is, it could not be evacuated of its true meaning and significance. They were conscious of being 'surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses' and the work of art is the *hermeneia* of the artist, that is, his exteriorizing and thus making accessible to all his own and his patron's internal world of thought, understanding and faith. The visual representation is the language in which that world of thought, understanding and faith is expressed, as is, of course, the work of the poet. Therefore, in looking at a 'donor portrait' below, say, a representation of the crucified Christ flanked by Mary and John (as at Llangadwaladr) or at Sir John Dwnn and his family surrounded by saints, we not only see and understand that the concept of simultaneity applies to them (the Llangadwaladr family at prayer *is* on Calvary at the foot of the cross; just as the worshipper at Llandeilo Tal-y-bont *is* present at the mocking of Jesus, John Dwnn *is* in the company of the saints) but we too are participants. The work of art is an icon, it is a sacramental through which we are drawn into the presence of that which is depicted. There are no barriers.

Jacques Derrida's concept of the *parergon* can perhaps help or reinforce our understanding here. When we think of a picture, we tend to think also of a frame, that is of a binary structure. The frame defines and delimits the picture. Decorative and sometimes a work of art in its own right, it is the *parergon* which keeps the picture within, and the observer without. In the medieval understanding there is no such binary fission, the delimiting *parergon* are absent or they are transgressed.⁵⁸ There are no barriers to our full participation in the reality depicted. Thus the angels who spread their wings over us in roofs such as those at Cilcain, Llangollen or Llanidloes, Mary Magdalene who shares our devotions from her wall-painting at Llantwit Major, or Catherine from hers at Llandeilo Tal-y-bont are immediately accessible to us.

The Llantwit Major Magdalene, dating as it does from the late thirteenth century and thus an early survivor in Wales, deserves further

consideration. Katherine Ludwig Jansen has shown how later medieval religious culture used the figure of Mary Magdalene.⁵⁹ The cult of the Magdalene, energetically promoted from the thirteenth century onwards by the new mendicant Orders in response to the campaign to bring preaching to the people instigated by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, was increasingly to render her the second most popular saint in western Christendom after the Virgin Mary.

In a sermon on 21 September 591 Pope Gregory the Great, in Jansen's words, 'collapsed into one individual the identities of three distinct women described in the gospels',⁶⁰ and thus Mary Magdalene not only 'inherited a sinful past',⁶¹ but acquired her emblem in pictorial art, the jar of perfumed oil. This emblem enables us to identify the Llantwit Major figure. Gregory's conflated Magdalene was to become over the centuries, and particularly through the preaching of the mendicant friars, the *exemplum perfecte penitentiae*, the example of perfect penance.⁶² As Jansen says: 'The very notion that sinners could become saints was an attractive idea to those who had lived less than holy lives. Thus it was fitting for preachers to hold up a penitent as a model to which sinners could aspire. And who more appropriate than the famous sinner Mary Magdalen?'⁶³ This, in less transitory form than a sermon, is precisely what the Llantwit Major painting does. It confronts the faithful at Mass and at other devotions with a constant reminder of the necessity of penitence, but simultaneously provides encouragement. The Magdalene is *there*, among them, and they can identify with her. The painting is not framed, and is thus not isolated. There is no artificial 'barrier' between the *apostolorum apostola* and the people of Llantwit.⁶⁴

Over and over again, in Romanesque and high medieval art and illumination, for example, figures 'step out' of their frames. In one copy of a twelfth-century life of St Edmund, now at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, an illustration of the king being led to his death shows one of his persecutors with a foot transgressing the border of the illumination, and the weapon he has raised to strike the king does the same. This is more than an artistic 'trick'. By it we are made participants in the action, and not merely spectators of it. The actors are in our foreground, as we are in theirs. We are as much in their presence as they are in ours.⁶⁵

So the second answer to the question, 'What *did* the poets see?' is not just reality but a present reality, with themselves as participants and not as detached, dispassionate observers.

I would like to devote the remainder of this paper to an exploration of the concepts of the artist as creator and translator. Comparatively few medieval works of art bear the name of the artist. There is a high degree of anonymity, and this is not an accident of history. That we should wish to know the name of painter, illuminator or sculptor would have greatly surprised them. The craft guilds in which they trained, and of which they had been made free, prided themselves on the anonymity of their work. Many forbade their members to add a signature. This illustrates an understanding of creativity that is now largely lost. The creator was not the artist, but God. The work of art was a work of worship, it was prayed into existence, through the God-given craft skills of the artist, as something *through which* God would speak. The work of visual art is as much 'speech' as any written text. This is very well exemplified in a vision of the fourteenth-century mystic, Richard Rolle, who recorded that 'whiles truly I sat in this same chapel, and in the night before supper, as I could, I sang psalms, I *beheld* [my italics] above me the *noise* [my italics] as it were of readers, or rather singers'.⁶⁶ It is possible that the inspiration of Rolle's vision were figures of angels carved or painted on the ceiling above him – the chapel in which he sat has not been identified – but the importance of his account lies in the fact that 'beheld' is a word that he could happily use in conjunction with the attribute of sound as well as of sight. The visual, the written and the oral were all 'speech'.

All were created *sub specie aeternitatis*; the craft-skill of the artist is exercised as his participation in the creativity of God and *ad majorem gloriam Dei*; the purpose of the resulting work of art, be it statue, glass, mural, icon or manuscript illumination as well as the written word, which in this era before printing was also in a real sense a work of created art, is kerygmatic, it is proclamatory, requiring our attention and response. It compels us not to speech but to silence, the silence of awe and worship. In and through that silence God speaks and we listen. We listen and, because God's word thus mediated is prescriptive, we respond.

The work of art itself can be elaborate, or it can be pared down to the bare essentials. Because we are participants in the story, absorbed into the world of the text, few 'words' are necessary. Thus, in a depiction on a fragment of stone carving at Ewenny Priory of the entry into Jerusalem by Jesus on Palm Sunday, the figure of the Christ can be 'reduced' to a head; the flagellation of Jesus shown on the pulpit at Newton Nottage distilled into three figures; and the crucified Christ represented only by a head on the cross at Bosherton. This kind of visual art is what Archbishop Rowan Williams calls 'mediated

theology'.⁶⁷ It is all that is necessary to mediate and to stimulate intensive thought about the chosen subject, and to evoke a response to its challenge and its message.

What the poet saw was the image; what he experienced in his seeing was the power and majesty of the Creator; what he heard was the Word – with a capital 'W'. In what sense, then, is the artist, as participant in the creativity of God, to be understood as a 'translator'? The question is best answered under four headings – translation as *exegesis*; translation as a *hermeneutic of access*; translation as *enarratio*, or as a vehicle for vernacular appropriation of academic discourse; and translation as *recuperation*. The categories – which, of course, are not mutually exclusive – are those which have been identified by Rita Copeland in her work on Latin written texts of the early Middle Ages,⁶⁸ but they are also exceptionally helpful in respect of the visual in culture, which is as much a part of the world of the text as the written word.

The medieval visual artist takes 'the story', which may be mediated to him through a written, literary text or through another work of visual art, as what Copeland calls his 'originary authority' and he interrogates it. In this way its essential meaning is uncovered and disclosed. The artist's exegetical work is the exposition of that essential uncovered meaning. The written is given visual expression. And since all exegesis is 'active', that is, it redefines, even paraphrases, the resulting work always includes invention. It is new, fresh, and unique. Nevertheless, because it takes place within that paradigm of canonicity and reality we have discussed, every work of art points beyond itself to its originary authority. This cannot be displaced, nor can anything else be substituted for it.

Therefore, despite innumerable differences in detail – the redefinition and invention of the exegesis – the image is immediately recognizable and accessible. It transcends temporal and linguistic boundaries. Thus a representation of St Christopher bearing the Christ Child, as on the wall-painting at Llanynys, St Catherine with her wheel, in the glass at Old Radnor, or St Barbara with her tower, as in the statue at St Brides Major, is ubiquitous. Even when the exegesis of the visual artist fades, because his work has referred back to the originary authority the image remains both accessible and powerful. At Brinsop in the Welsh borderland there is a wall-painting, all the details of which have either faded or been erased. Little more than shadows remain. Yet the painting is immediately recognizable as the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. The relative size, shape and dynamic of the figures, where the artist was faithful to his originary authority,

means that his work as a translator is still accessible – and, even in its present condition, would have been to any western Christian during the Middle Ages.

This leads us into our second category, that of translation as a hermeneutic of access. I am using the word 'hermeneutic' here in the sense of a vehicle for the expression or conveying of ideas. The medieval visual artist 'opened' his originary authority, his text, in this way. He made the text lucid and available. We should bear in mind that the literary text from which he was working and from which he derived his inspiration was most likely to be a Latin one. His translation into visual representation was thus very much a hermeneutic of access; it was the medium of transference from Latinity to vernacularity. And, it can be argued, admittedly controversially, that this mode of translation 'opened' the text to a greater extent than that effected by a purely interlingual transference. A translation from written Latin into, say, written Welsh, Copeland insists,⁶⁹ does not make the text much more accessible. In the Middle Ages, it merely substituted one privileged stratum of society (the clerkly literate) with another (the non-clerkly literate), or simply expanded it. On the other hand, visual translation was a more effective vehicle. It had the potential of opening the academic text, be that text in Latin, English or Welsh, to non-hieratic and non-hierarchical use.

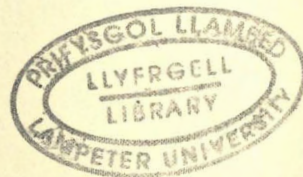
To some extent participation in the liturgy, in drama such as the plays of the various Corpus Christi cycles, and even preaching were similar hermeneia of access. All served to draw the participant further into the world of the text which was his natural home. Visual art has to be seen in this context, and not as a decorative 'optional extra'.

The third category is very closely related to the second. Translation as *enarratio*, that is, making the world of language intelligible. Copeland pointed out that in the medieval tradition, *enarratio* 'contests and remakes the primary text; it can [thus] take on a kind of originary force of its own, becoming a text to be appropriated by later exegetes ... grafted on to the primary text, and thus [changing] the conditions of reception for that text'.⁷⁰ This, I would suggest, is extremely important in our search for answers to the question 'What did the poets see?' The artist as exegete, providing a hermeneutic of access, by so being and so doing, in participating in the creative work of God, re-forms the originary text whilst remaining true to it. The foundational meaning is thereby re-presented. There is a dynamic, re-creative engagement by the artist with his originary text. The poet in his turn, engaging with the work of the artist, continues the process of participation, in both the exegesis and the originary text of the

metanarrative, and by so doing himself continues the work of translation. In its turn, his poetry can itself become part of the process of *enarratio*, to be interpreted afresh by the visual artist. Artist and poet thus live in a symbiotic relationship within the paradigm of the one reality which is the world of the text.

Finally in this context there is what Copeland calls the 'recuperative motive' of translation. This is the work of recovery, in the sense of regaining possession of, re-accessing, the originary or primary authority. This returns us to the idea of the artist as participant in the creativity of God – creativity from 'within' the world of the text. It is the text which controls the work of the artist, and not vice versa. The intelligibility of the work of art depends upon it being ultimately loyal to and understandable within this paradigm. Only thereby is the artist's exegesis valid and made accessible. It 'lives' because, the medieval artist believed, it was of God, and was the fruit of the artist's participation in the continuing and constant creativity of God. The result was a work of art that is referent (to the originary authority), but also exegetical, intelligible, kerygmatic, possessive of ideational meaning, prescriptive, and in its turn a work of reference.

All of these things, I would suggest, the poets 'saw'. The visual in the culture of medieval Wales was part of the illumination by which they were enabled to see the reality within which they, the artists, the saints, angels, the redeemed and the damned, all who lived, had lived, and were to live, have being. They lived in a reality which was *sub specie aeternitatis*; and that reality, their place within it, and the creative work they undertook, was *ad majoram gloriam Dei*. It could be nothing else, for that creative work was their participation in the creativity of God himself.



- ¹ Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (3rd edn., Oxford, 1983), p. xxvii.
- ² David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (London and New York, 2001), p. 8.
- ³ The 'umbrella title "The Apocryphal New Testament" is misleading and somewhat of an anachronism. The definite article implies that there is one agreed and exhaustive collection comparable to the canonical New Testament of twenty-seven books, or to the generally agreed contents of other Biblical collections, such as printed editions of the Septuagint or the Latin Vulgate. The extra-canonical Christian texts, many quite early, which may make up a published collection of "New Testament Apocrypha" are numerous, extant in many different languages, often appearing in a variety of textual forms, lacking critical or definitive editions, and from a wide geographical and chronological range.' *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xv.
- ⁶ i.e. to the chirograph.
- ⁷ Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, p. xv.
- ⁸ The sarcophagus is illustrated in *ibid.*, figure 1.3, and discussed on p. 18.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ¹¹ It is necessary to emphasize that 'fulfilment' may be found in the 'popular canon' of early Christian Apocrypha as well as in the canonical New Testament. The creative impulse behind much of the former was the making up of perceived *lacunae* in the latter.
- ¹² Behind the oral, pictorial and written 'word' lies the 'experience', encapsulated in a mental 'image', of the speaker, artist, craftsman and writer.
- ¹³ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London, 1974), p. 3. Much of the argument of this section is indebted to Frei's introduction.
- ¹⁴ Pamela Sheingorn, "'The Wise Mother": The Image of St. Anne Teaching the Virgin Mary', *Gesta*, XXXII/1 (1993), 69–80. Much of what follows here is indebted to this paper.
- ¹⁵ This popularity cannot be explained by reference to the highly popular thirteenth-century *Golden Legend*, i.e. the *Legenda Sanctorum* of Jacobus de Voragine (c.1230–98). Jacobus, whilst recounting the story of Joachim and Anne, does not mention the latter teaching her daughter to read, only that Mary was skilled at weaving, to which as a child she devoted six hours a day. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan (2 vols., Princeton, 1993), 2, p. 153.
- ¹⁶ Sheingorn, 'The Wise Mother', 69.
- ¹⁷ Wolfgang Braunfels, *Die Verkündigung* (Düsseldorf, 1949), pp xiv–xv, quoted by Sheingorn, 'The Wise Mother', 69.

- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ There are representations of this. Thirteenth-century glass in Chartres Cathedral shows Mary in a schoolroom with other pupils, and fourteenth-century glass in the Frauenkirche at Esslingen shows her as a student in the Temple beginning to learn her Psalter (the book is open at the first verse of the first psalm). Sheingorn, 'The Wise Mother', 69–70.
- ²⁰ A fine, late, example is the statue placed in Westminster Abbey by King Henry VII.
- ²¹ Sheingorn, 'The Wise Mother', 71.
- ²² Ultimately, the source of the image would seem to be Isaiah 1.3: 'The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand' (*Holy Bible, New International Version*). The prophecy could clearly be applied to Jesus as Messiah, the one who 'came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him' (John 1.11). The Septuagint gives greater force to the messianic prophecy, having 'Israel doth not know me, my people doth not consider me'. G. W. Wade, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (London, 1911), p. 3.
- ²³ See above, p. 2. The earliest extant manuscript of the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew dates from the fourteenth century, by which time the image was well established in pictorial art. J. R. Porter, *The Lost Bible Forgotten Scriptures Revealed* (London, 2001), p. 136.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 137.
- ²⁵ Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (London, 1967), p. 99.
- ²⁶ Modern scholarship sees 'the Reformation' of the 'long' sixteenth century in the plural – political, religious, Catholic, Protestant, European (and beyond), English – and Welsh. See, for example, Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993).
- ²⁷ Thomas O'Loughlin, *Saint Patrick: The Man and his Works* (London, 1999), pp. 33–4.
- ²⁸ Until recently (2001) it was in the parish church, but now it is held in the Museum.
- ²⁹ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric and the Making of Images 400–1200* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 24–7.
- ³⁰ Ibid., pp. 3–4.
- ³¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916* (Oxford, 1961), p. 83, 7.10.16.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Romans 8.21, 22 (*Holy Bible, New International Version*).
- ³⁴ Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, p. 9.
- ³⁵ J. W. Robinson, 'The late medieval cult of Jesus and the Mystery plays', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, LXXX (1965), 508.
- ³⁶ Quoted by Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400–c.1500* (New Haven and London, 1992), p. 19.

- ³⁷ Mark 14.65.
- ³⁸ Matthew 26.67–8.
- ³⁹ Jeffrey Helterman, *Symbolic Action in the Plays of the Wakefield Master* (Athens, 1981), especially pp. 141–2.
- ⁴⁰ Philippians 2.6–8.
- ⁴¹ Helterman, *Symbolic Action*, p. 142.
- ⁴² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 141.
- ⁴³ Luke 22.64, following Mark 14.65.
- ⁴⁴ Matthew 16.21.
- ⁴⁵ Maurice Hussey, *The Chester Mystery Plays* (London, 1971), pp. 96–7.
- ⁴⁶ David N. Klausner (ed.), *Records of Early English Drama: Herefordshire and Worcestershire* (Toronto, 1990).
- ⁴⁷ Gwenan Jones, *A Study of Three Welsh Religious Plays* (Bala, 1939), especially p. 153, line 10.
- ⁴⁸ The shrine of St Thomas of Hereford, for example, was a popular focus of pilgrimage from Wales.
- ⁴⁹ Klausner, *Records of Early English Drama*.
- ⁵⁰ Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (London, 1972), p. 253.
- ⁵¹ The games are fully described in Iona and Peter Opie, *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (Oxford, 1969).
- ⁵² Report on the wall paintings of Llandeilo Tal-y-bont, kindly provided by the Museum of Welsh Life.
- ⁵³ Moshe Barasch, *Gestures of Despair in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art* (New York, 1976), especially p. 138, notes 4 and 6.
- ⁵⁴ For illustrations of these see, for example, V. H. Debidour, *Croix et Calvaires de Bretagne* (Chateaulin, 1979) and *idem, Grands Calvaires de Bretagne* (Chateaulin, 1990).
- ⁵⁵ Personal communication, 3 November 1999.
- ⁵⁶ For a full discussion of this important triptych, see Lorne Campbell, *The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Schools* (London, 1998), pp. 374–91.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 24.
- ⁵⁸ Derrida's idea is touched on in Christopher Want and Andrzej Klimowski, *Introducing Kant* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 172.
- ⁵⁹ Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 2000).

- ⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 33. The women were the female sinner at the banquet of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7.35–50); Mary of Bethany (John 11.1–45 and 12.1–8) and Mary Magdalene (Mark 16.9).
- ⁶¹ Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*, p. 33.
- ⁶² This theme is particularly well explored in *ibid.*, especially in chapter 7, pp. 199–244.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- ⁶⁴ More prosaically, the existence of this thirteenth-century painting in Wales may be evidence of the activity and influence of the preaching orders within a very few decades of their first arrival in the British Isles.
- ⁶⁵ The same could be said of the twelfth-century tympanum at Llanbadarn Fawr in Radnorshire, where a foot of one of the affronted beasts transgresses the border.
- ⁶⁶ Quoted in Frances M. M. Cooper, *The Life of Richard Rolle: Together with an edition of his English Lyrics* (London, 1928), p. 92.
- ⁶⁷ David Ford, 'Where wisdom is the principal thing', *Church Times*, 4 May 2001, 14–15.
- ⁶⁸ Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge, 1991).
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

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