ENGLISH METRICAL HOMILIES FROM MANUSCRIPTS OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY: WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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English Metrical Homilies from Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century: With an Introduction and Notes by John Small

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JOHN SMALL

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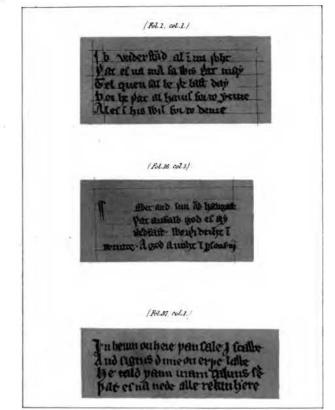
HOMILIES.



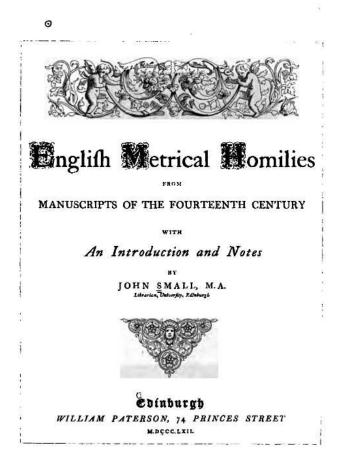


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INTRODUCTION.



F the ancient English devotional MSS, which have efcaped the ravages of time, perhaps not the leaft interefting is a Collection of Metrical Homilies or Paraphrafes on those por-ЭГ tions of the Gofpels which were read at the ufual fervices of the Church.

This Collection is remarkable in many refpects, more efpecially from its containing numerous legends of faints and illustrative tales, which must have rendered it a very popular book in the Middle Ages. At the fame time thefe legends in all probability marked it out as an object of mutilation or deftruction at the period of the Reformation, when fo many memorials of the former religion were deftroyed by the zeal of the reformers-a zeal which was efpecially directed against books used in the fervice of the Church, or in the private devotions of the people.

Fortunately, however, there are preferved in the Manufcript Collections of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the British Museum, and the Lambeth Library, London, complete copies of this feries of Homilies, which, though versified, afford a graphic view of the ftyle of popular preaching at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries.



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A rubric at the end of one of thefe MSS. preferved in the University of Cambridge, fupplies the title of the Collection, which is-

"Dominicalia Ebangelia et Miracula balde bona et notabilia in Aingua Auglicana."

The object of the Collection appears to have been to afford a metrical fervice for the Sundays and Feftivals from Advent onwards throughout the year. Each fermon is appropriately illuftrated by a foriptural narrative, a legend from the lives of the faints, or a popular tale analogous to the ancient French fabliaux, to render it more attractive to the common people, for whole benefit the Collection was compoled.

The various MSS, which exift in England are carefully defcribed in the printed catalogues of the collections where they are preferved, and the following is a lift of five copies to be found in the libraries above mentioned, none of which are earlier than the middle of the fourteenth century :--

Cambridge University MS.,	•		DdI. 1.'
	18	1	G g V. 31.3
Afhmolean MS., Oxford,	10		No. 42.1
Cottonian MS., London,			Tiberius, E. VII.4
Lambeth MS., "			No. 260.5

The prefent volume is printed from an ancient MS. preferved in the Library of the Royal College of Phyficians at Edinburgh. This MS. contains various fragments of ancient Englith devotional poetry, together with that portion of the Collection of Sermons which extends from the firft Sunday in Advent to the end of the fervice for the Purification.

Catalogue of Camb. MSS., vol. i., page 1.
Do. do., vol. iii., page 199.
Catalogue of Afhmolean MSS, by Mr Black, page 63
Catalogue of the MSS. in the Cottonian Library, 1802, page 40.
S Catalogue of Lambeth MSS., No. 260.



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The fermons are defective, however, in many places ; but the portions wanting are fupplied in the prefent volume by extracts from the Cambridge MS. GgV. 31., and the Afhmolean MS. No. 42.

Although the portion of this Collection of Sermons now printed forms but a part of the whole, it polleffes fome points of philological intereft, while the age of the original MS.—being apparently of the early part of the fourteenth century—tends to fhow that it is probably of a much older date than any of those preferved in the English libraries.

With regard to the authorship of this interesting Collection, nothing can with any certainty be affirmed. The learned compilers of the Catalogue of Manufcripts belonging to the University of Cambridge, when defcribing the volume marked D d L 1, which contains probably the oldest copy of this MS. in England, state the time at which it was written as sublequent to the year 1345. This period is inferred from certain references to perfons and dates occurring in various poetical treatifes contained in the volume, the whole of which is uniformly written throughout. They also conclude that from these references, and from peculiarities in the language, the authorship may be attributed to the famous Hermit Richard Rolle, of Hampole, near Doncaster, who died in 1348, although it has not been included in the lift of works certainly known to be his.

This conclusion principally refts on the many allufions in the illuftrative legends to incidents in hermit life, and the occurrence of the following lines, which form the concluding portion of a poem, "De Compafitone Beate Marie Virginis," included in the volume D d I. 1, and in the fame handwriting as the Metrical Sermons :—

> " This ryme mad an hermyte And dide it wryten in parchemyn Barfoot he wente in gray habyte He werid no cloth pat was of lyne pus on Englifch he dide it wryte

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He feyth he drow it of pe Latyn His mede lord ihū him quyte And feynt bernard clerk of deuyn."

As the Edinburgh MS., however, appears to be much older than the Cambridge MS. D d I. 1, and the other MSS. preferved in the English libraries, it is probable that the original was composed anterior to the time when Hampole flouristed. This probability is ftrengthened by the circumstance that the various copies now extant differ very much in length, and in the order in which the fermons are arranged. It is therefore not unlikely that the collection was the work of feveral monkish verifiers; and this view feems borne out by the ftyle of the composition, and the frequency with which poems on facted fubjects, in a fimilar kind of verfe, occur in early English literature.

Although the authorfhip of this intereffing Collection of Sermons is a matter of uncertainty, ftill there can be little doubt that it was compofed in the North of England at a very early period, when the Anglo-Saxon was being transformed into English, and when the ufe of the Anglo-Norman French was not uncommon amongst the educated claffes of the people.

As is flated in the Prologue, the defign of the author was to make the fervices of religion intelligible to the unlearned :--

" For al men can noht I wis

Understand Latin and Frankis."

It is well known that for a long time after the Norman Conquelt, which introduced Anglo-Norman French as the court language of England, the common people continued to fpeak Anglo-Saxon, till, about the time of the thirteenth century, the intercourfe between the various claffes of fociety becoming more general, an intermixture of the two languages began to take place.

In a philological point of view, the MS. now printed is very remarkable. The language in which it is written is of the most homely