

**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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ENGLISH METRICAL
HOMILIES.





FAC-SIMILE of MS.

(Fol. 1, col. 1.)

I b widerstād al i mi iohc
pax et ua mī la bīs pax mī
Get quēn al te se lāt dā
hōi te pax al hāul fō w yemē
Alet i his wil fō w denē

(Fol. 16, col. 1.)

¶ Alder and sun id hāngat
pax amsald god et gō
skēdāt. Wehē dēstē i
wente. A god A wihē i pōabē

(Fol. 37, col. 1.)

I n beun ou hie pan tale i scalle
A uo agnus dīne ou erpe lalle
hē talō pan uiam talūns sē
pax et nā nede alle rektū here



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English Metrical Homilies

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MANUSCRIPTS OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

WITH

An Introduction and Notes

BY

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M.DCCC.LXII



INTRODUCTION.

IF the ancient English devotional MSS. which have escaped the ravages of time, perhaps not the least interesting is a Collection of Metrical Homilies or Paraphrases on those portions of the Gospels which were read at the usual services of the Church.

This Collection is remarkable in many respects, more especially from its containing numerous legends of saints and illustrative tales, which must have rendered it a very popular book in the Middle Ages. At the same time these legends in all probability marked it out as an object of mutilation or destruction at the period of the Reformation, when so many memorials of the former religion were destroyed by the zeal of the reformers—a zeal which was especially directed against books used in the service of the Church, or in the private devotions of the people.

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

A rubric at the end of one of these MSS. preserved in the University of Cambridge, supplies the title of the Collection, which is—

“*Dominicalia Evangelia et Miracula balde bona et notabilia
in Lingua Anglicana.*”

The object of the Collection appears to have been to afford a metrical service for the Sundays and Festivals from Advent onwards throughout the year. Each sermon is appropriately illustrated by a scriptural narrative, a legend from the lives of the saints, or a popular tale analogous to the ancient French *fabliaux*, to render it more attractive to the common people, for whose benefit the Collection was composed.

The various MSS. which exist in England are carefully described in the printed catalogues of the collections where they are preserved, and the following is a list 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., . . .	D d I. 1. ¹
” ” . . .	G g V. 31. ²
Ashmolean MS., Oxford, . . .	No. 42. ³
Cottonian MS., London, . . .	Tiberius, E. VII. ⁴
Lambeth MS., ” . . .	No. 260. ⁵

The present volume is printed from an ancient MS. preserved in the Library of the Royal College of Physicians at Edinburgh. This MS. contains various fragments of ancient English devotional poetry, together with that portion of the Collection of Sermons which extends from the first Sunday in Advent to the end of the service for the Purification.


¹ Catalogue of Camb. MSS., vol. i., page 1.

² Do. do., vol. iii., page 199.

³ Catalogue of Ashmolean MSS., by Mr Black, page 63

⁴ Catalogue of the MSS. in the Cottonian Library, 1802, page 40.

⁵ Catalogue of Lambeth MSS., No. 260.



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The sermons are defective, however, in many places; but the portions wanting are supplied in the present volume by extracts from the Cambridge MS. G g V. 31., and the Ashmolean MS. No. 42.

Although the portion of this Collection of Sermons now printed forms but a part of the whole, it possesses some points of philological interest, while the age of the original MS.—being apparently of the early part of the fourteenth century—tends to show that it is probably of a much older date than any of those preserved 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 Manuscripts belonging to the University of Cambridge, when describing 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 subsequent to the year 1345. This period is inferred from certain references to persons and dates occurring in various poetical treatises 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 list of works certainly known to be his.

This conclusion principally rests on the many allusions in the illustrative legends to incidents in hermit life, and the occurrence of the following lines, which form the concluding portion of a poem, “De Compassione Beate Marie Virginis,” included in the volume D d L 1, and in the same 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 þat was of lyne
þus on Englishch he dide it wryte

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

As the Edinburgh MS., however, appears to be much older than the Cambridge MS. D d l. 1, and the other MSS. preserved in the English libraries, it is probable that the original was composed anterior to the time when Hampole flourished. This probability is strengthened by the circumstance that the various copies now extant differ very much in length, and in the order in which the sermons are arranged. It is therefore not unlikely that the collection was the work of several monkish versifiers; and this view seems borne out by the style of the composition, and the frequency with which poems on sacred subjects, in a similar kind of verse, occur in early English literature.

Although the authorship of this interesting Collection of Sermons is a matter of uncertainty, still there can be little doubt that it was composed in the North of England at a very early period, when the Anglo-Saxon was being transformed into English, and when the use of the Anglo-Norman French was not uncommon amongst the educated classes of the people.

As is stated in the Prologue, the design of the author was to make the services 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 Conquest, which introduced Anglo-Norman French as the court language of England, the common people continued to speak Anglo-Saxon, till, about the time of the thirteenth century, the intercourse between the various classes of society 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