'Where of is mad al mankynde' : an edition of and introduction to the twenty-four poems in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 102
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1

INTRODUCTION

Where of is mad al mankynde represents a new edition of the collection of twenty-four Poems contained, among other pieces, in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 102. The scope of the first full edition (Kail, 1904) was limited, leaving room for a broader examination of context and background, as well as for an opportunity for a different treatment of the text, to suit my particular purpose. Kail's analysis of the Poems was solely devoted to a discussion of the allusions to parliamentary business and certain political events which Kail had detected in some of the poems. As to the treatment of the manuscript text itself, Kail did not formulate his editorial policy, but judging from the printed text, his sole aim was to produce a faithful 'diplomatic' transcription of the manuscript text. With the present study I intend to broaden the scope, both in the analyses of the various aspects of the Poems and in the treatment of the text itself, opening one further window upon the social scene of late-medieval England as it is presented in a collection of poems written by a knowledgeable, keenly interested contemporary observer, who found himself near the centre of power. Within these broad parameters, this edition seeks to be of interest to not just specialists in the field of Anglistics, but also beyond to meet the explicative requirements of a wider medievalist readership.

In addition to Kail's complete edition of the Poems, transcripts and comments have over the years appeared in anthologies and individual studies. Furnivall (1897) preceded Kail with an edition of poem XVI from the manuscript text, without adding comments or notes. Poems III, XII and XVI appeared in full in the anthology of late-medieval historical poems of Robbins (1959, pp. xxviii, xxix [introduction], 39–53 [text], 268–73 [notes]), who took their reading from Kail. Poem III was again published in full in Dean's anthology of political writings (1996, pp. 153–58, 176–78), transcribed anew from the manuscript and checked against the texts in Kail and Robbins. Kennedy (2000, pp. 152–55) edited poem XVI in an alliterative format as part of an essay on fourteen-line alliterative stanzas.[1]

Longer or shorter excerpts from the Poems are to be found in a number of publications dealing with specific themes. I mention the most important here. Poem XXIII is discussed and extensively quoted by McGarry (1936) in the context of a dissertation on the Eucharist in Middle English homiletic and devotional verse. Robbins (1960, p. 197) quotes from poems XIV, XVII and XXI in

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[1] See further section 3.3.1.

exemplification of his essay on Middle English poems of protest. Peck's excerpt and comments (1986, p. 125) on poem I served their purpose in a paper on 'Social Conscience and the Poets' in fourteenth-century England. Coleman (1981, pp. 95–108) draws extensively on the first five of the Poems in her discussion of complaint and estates poetry as part of the literature of social unrest. Nuttall (2007, pp. 128–30) uses poem XIII to discuss the respective tasks falling to King, Commons and the commons in general in the Lancastrian period. Largely the same poems from which Coleman and Nuttall quote, that is to say poems I to IV, XII and XIII, figure in Barr (1993, pp. 31, 32, 371–73), where she treats of Henry V's dealings with France in *The Crowned King*. Scattergood (1971), finally, quoted liberally from no fewer than thirteen out of the twenty-four Poems in illustration of his exposition of late-medieval poetry dealing with political subjects. I shall have occasion to refer to all these thematic commentaries in section 3.4, where the political, social and religious aspects of the Poems are discussed.

Bibliographical details of the Poems are to be found in the *Manual of the Writings in Middle English* (1970–2005).[2] As the Appendix shows, the *Manual* covers only eighteen of the twenty-four Poems. Admittedly, the themes of the six poems not discussed would none of them have fitted into any of the categories covered by the *Manual*,[3] but one might regard this as a shortcoming on the part of its general editors, rather than of the writer of the Poems. Appendix 3 also shows that poem I is discussed under three different headings: as dealing with contemporary conditions (*MWME* 5, chapter XIII, vol. 5), as a verse tract on self-knowledge (in chapter XX, 'Works of religious and philosophical instruction', vol. 7), and as a secular monitory piece (in chapter XXII, vol. 9). Morey (1999, pp. 168–70, 298–300) offers biographical as well as explanatory guidance in respect of the two biblical paraphrases in the Poems. Poem XXI is a paraphrase of the Nine Beatitudes, poem XXIV of the Complaint of Job. The latter is based on a prose version in the Wheatley Manuscript (45r–51r)[4]. For another biblical verse paraphrase in Digby 102 (Maidstone's *Penitential Psalms*), see the description of the manuscript in section 2.1. All twenty-four Poems are comprehensively and individually indexed in *NIMEV*, as also the other three pieces in Digby 102.

The manuscript is mentioned in two catalogues. The one is in Macray (1883, p. 116), with full title descriptions, the other, without a description of any kind, in Madan & Craster (1922, p. 73). To the best of my knowledge, no other major catalogues mention Digby 102. The reasons which the compilers give for the omission vary: it is not dated or datable, or it (apparently) did not remain in the library to which it belongs, or the major university libraries were beyond the scope of the compiler. A

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[2] See Appendix 3.

[3] Three of them (the poems X, XVII and XIX) belong to the 'Complaint or Appeal of God to Man' tradition. Poem XVIII is a religious monitory piece, and poems XI and XXII are general devotional poems without a specific focus.

[4] See Day (1921, pp. 59–64). For other verse renderings of the complaint of Job, see Kail (pp. 120–49).

physical description of the manuscript is to be found in an edition of the C-version of *Piers Plowman* (Russell & Kane, 1997). An incomplete text of the C-version precedes the Poems in Digby 102.[5]

At the heart of the present edition is the text of the twenty-four Poems, provided with marginal glosses and footnotes, each single poem being preceded by a summary and followed by explanatory notes. It is an arrangement that follows logically from the editorial policy I have adopted, as set out and accounted for in section 2.5. Other sections are devoted to such 'technical' aspects as a description of the manuscript (section 2.1), and of the scribal hand (section 2.2). In section 2.3 the dialect in which the text was written is discussed in some detail, with the application of techniques that were not available to Kail in the early 1900s. Section 2.4 deals with the dating of the Poems, an important subject that required careful consideration, since it involved an argued questioning of Kail's conclusions on the matter. A detailed discussion in section 3.1 of the identity of the author of the Poems seemed in order as well, seeing that Kail made rather definite pronouncements also on this subject. And finally, generous room was made in section 3.1 for an analysis not only of the political, but also of the religious, moral, ethical and didactic themes raised throughout the Poems. Earlier commentators, beginning with Kail, often over-emphasized the political aspects of the Poems, which made it inevitable for me to restore the balance somewhat by also giving thought to their religious and moral content. The unbalance in the thematic appreciation of the Poems is reflected in the various labels attached to the Poems, presenting a somewhat motley picture. The concise table of contents on the leaf affixed to the back cover of Digby 102[6] dubs the Poems 'Theologicall', ignoring the frequent political issues raised in a number of the Poems. Macray (1883, col. 116) took a broader view, describing the collection as 'a series of poems chiefly religious, but also partly political.' Kail in 1904, on the other hand, wholly disregarded the religious and moral content of the majority of the Poems and termed the collection 'political' in the title of his edition, *Twenty-Six Political and Other Poems* (the two 'other' poems being taken from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 322). Robbins (1959) included three of the Digby poems in a collection of *Historical Poems,* not 'political poems', perhaps out of the same sentiment as expressed by Kane (1986, p. 83), who observed about political writers of the age that 'even the most extreme of them had no concept of politics as we understand the term.' In 1975, Robbins listed his bibliographical selection of nine Digby poems under the much broader heading 'Poems dealing with contemporary conditions'; appropriately so, since this particular selection covers not only political-historical and religious topics, but also touches upon the interrelationships between the 'social parties': king and parliament, king and court, lord and tenant, clergy and parish, judge and litigant. Dean (1996), finally, classed poem III among the *Political Writings* of his anthology. In view of the above, it seems to me that the title of this

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[5] See section 2.1 with a physical description of Digby 102.

[6] For a description and probable date, see section 2.1.

edition: *Where of is mad al mankynde* (taken from XV.1) summarizes the broad spectrum of themes in the Poems more aptly than the preciser but inevitably narrower epithets used in other studies.