Aspects of the Glastonbury Miscellany

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Trinity College, MS O.9.38 is a literary miscellany written in English and Latin. The manuscript's unusual dimensions (300mm tall x 110mm wide) show that it was a holster book, designed to fit into a leather case fixed onto the pommel of a saddle or worn on a belt when riding. Glastonbury was one of the most prominent Benedictine monasteries in Britain at this time, and was wealthy and influential. Its origins lost in antiquity, the abbey was steeped in Arthurian associations, and rich in relics. It was rumoured to be the final resting place of the Holy Grail, which was supposedly buried in the lost grave of St Joseph of Arimathea, whom the monks of Glastonbury claimed had founded their monastery. Even more spectacularly, in 1191 excavations uncovered the graves of King Arthur and Guinevere, who were re-interred with due ceremony in a black marble tomb inside the Abbey. The Glastonbury manuscript does not, however, exploit the Arthurian associations that had made the Abbey famous, and a place of pilgrimage. Rather, it reflects the extremely varied (and at times surprisingly secular) literary tastes of a fifteenth-century monk or other associate of the Abbey. As Rigg has suggested, the collection commences with a set of accounts (item 5) and might originally have been intended as an account book throughout, but the nature of its contents very quickly changed.

The convenience of its physical dimensions was perhaps a contributing factor to the personal, eclectic nature of its contents: this one hand has copied some eighty items, which cover a wide range of subjects from practical gardening (item 18) to penitential lyrics (item 20). He seems to have had a particular interest in satire, collecting invectives on the difficulties of telling the truth (item 21), friars (items 56 and 57) and the abuse of monastic power (item 10), amongst other topics. Yet he also enjoyed humorous works, and seems to have included many pieces simply because he found them funny, including the satirical items on women and the discomforts of marriage (8, 19 and 26). His hand may be dated palaeographically to around the mid-fifteenth century, and the consistency of his vernacular orthography when confronted by texts of varying provenance suggests a practised familiarity with literate culture. There are few of the characteristically south-western traits in his orthography that one might expect of a scribe from the Glastonbury region, which suggests that he may instead have been educated in London or at Gloucester College, Oxford, which had close connections with Glastonbury Abbey.

The scribe's superior level of literacy is not only demonstrated by his orthography, but also by his proficiency in Latin; he seems to have been fascinated by the process of learning languages. Two items within the miscellany (14 and 15) derive their humour specifically from grammatical mistakes and require a considerable linguistic proficiency to be able to appreciate their jokes. Item 14, 'Satyricum in Abbates' concerns the question of whether other monks

should be permitted to drink with an abbot and a prior, and is largely taken up with a long *flyting* (a verse invective) between the prior and a canon. This flyting is written in a Latin in which grammatical rules are frequently ignored and words are often given unusual terminations. The poet employs lexis from the vernacular which is then made to look like Latin. Just as the poem's facetious arguments obscure the issues surrounding monastic asceticism, so too are everyday English or Anglo-Norman words obscured by the trappings of Latinate academia. The humorous impact of item 15, 'The Stores of the Cities', is equally dependent on an intermixture of English vocabulary and Latin grammar, and it displays a similar enjoyment of linguistic pretentiousness. It may have been composed by Walter of Wimborne, a thirteenth-century canon at nearby Wimborne Minster in Dorset, who is also responsible for another poem in the miscellany, 'De Symonia et Avaricia' (item 31). The poet is likely to have been a schoolmaster, and the vocabulary employed by this text has an obvious pedagogical application, featuring unusual classical words, new coinages (especially diminutives) and Graecisms. The source of Walter's exotic lexicon appears to have been Uguccio of Pisa's *Liber dirivationum* (1190–2), the most up-to-date reference work then available. The scribe evidently had little trouble understanding such Latin. On the other hand, he appears to have had somewhat more difficulty with the involved, humanistic syntax of the most recent item he chose to include, no. 77, Leonardo Bruni's translation of the story of Guiscardo and Ghismonda from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1436 or 1438).

One parallel to the scribe's interest in the process of learning a language is the differing treatments of hymns and hymn-learning within the miscellany. In item 32, a unique version of 'The Boy Singer of Toledo' (an analogue of Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*), the boy learns to sing the Marian antiphon 'Alma mater redemptoris' not for fear of his schoolteacher, but, it is stressed, for the love of Mary. It is the excellence of this learning that singles him out, both as a murder victim and as a vehicle for the miraculous evidence of Marian grace, through his unstoppable singing. Elsewhere within the miscellany, however, there are also hymns that have been deliberately rendered into a different idiom for satirical effect. Items 69 and 70 are hymns in which words have been altered to celebrate the death of Piers Gaveston in 1312, including Venantius Fortunatus' 'Pange lingua gloriosi'. Here, in contrast to 'The Boy Singer of Toledo', the tongue which is exhorted to sing in praise of God has been employed in enthusiastic celebration of a secular event. A tongue which learns its language badly is thus potentially both humorous and heretical, and its employment as an expression of orthodox beliefs is therefore of particular concern to the scribe.

The compiler has included several texts on the basis of their connection to his abbey, including item 86, a letter from Nicholas Frome (abbot 1420–56) to Richard Busard and John Ledbury, two Glastonbury monks, composed on his way to the Council of Basel in 1434. This council was, however, of particular significance for Glastonbury: Frome successfully upheld the abbey's historically dubious claim to having been founded by St Joseph of Arimathea in the face of concerted opposition, securing Glastonbury's international pre-eminence. It is, then, no coincidence that the miscellany also includes various texts connected to

St Joseph of Arimathea, following a fifteenth-century resurgence of interest in Glastonbury's projected founder. Significantly, these include item 28, a verse epitaph of St Joseph which is written in the style of a grave inscription, bolstering the abbey's assertion that Glastonbury was the site of his tomb. It should, however, be stressed that the focus of the scribe is not narrowly didactic in its exclusive privileging of the abbey's claims: other texts are linked to Glastonbury quite tangentially and seem to have been included for general local interest. Item 95 is a hymn and collect to St Uritha, the patron saint of nearby Chittlehampton in North Devon, and item 83, a Latin life of St Hilda, may well have been inserted simply because her relics were brought to Glastonbury Abbey for safety during the Viking raids.

Some sections of the manuscript appear to have been composed in booklets, for example fols 1–16, 17–28, and 29–39. Within such booklets, the scribe seems to have been at pains to create variation of tone within the volume by alternating clusters of texts of one genre with those of another. At the beginning of the manuscript, the first four entries are satirical (items 7, 8, 10 and 11), but this is then followed by ‘Gregory’s Garden’ (item 12), a religious dream-allegory, and a vision of a debate between Water and Wine (item 13), heavily dependent on Biblical parallels. Even within this group of texts of the same genre, such juxtapositions often have a pedagogical function, raising concerns about the validity of treating any text within the miscellany as an isolated unit. In 'Gregory's Garden', the penitent dreamer is in a state between sleeping and waking, traditionally thought to be the most conducive time for experiencing visions. Yet in the debate between Water and Wine it is only 'post vinum moltum' that the visionary, like St Paul, is snatched up into the third heaven. The suggestion that one could have a Pauline intellectual vision whilst inebriated is troubling in its inconsistency and encourages the reader to ponder the veracity of any information gained by means of a dream. Rather than reinforcing the formal characteristics of the dream vision genre, inner discrepancies are emphasised. We may therefore speculate that the manuscript was not simply envisaged as an anthology to be dipped into, but also as a collection to be read in a linear progression, each item in implicit contrast with its predecessors. Such a hypothesis raises the question of whether the scribe intended the volume to be circulated amongst a wider audience. Alternatively, he may simply have tired of copying out texts of a particular genre for long periods of time. After four texts concerning the friars and their critics (items 54–7), he has written a formulaic colophon: 'Explicit expliceat, ludere scriptor eat'. Such 'play' is rendered literal through an item that follows not long after, a comically defamatory description of the inhabitants of Norfolk (item 60). These variations in tone are a reminder that the collection and copying of the texts may have been as much a part of the initial appeal of compiling a miscellany as being able to re-read them afterwards.

The manuscript has been added to by six later hands, the most recent of which is likely to be that of Roger Gale, who presented the manuscript to Trinity College in 1738. Most of the additions by these other hands are slight, although a late fifteenth-century hand has inserted four short items. The most extensive annotations were made by an erudite individual in the early years of Elizabeth's

reign, whom Rigg designates hand A. Whilst making use of remaining blank space to insert further entries of his own, hand A also examined the original scribe's text very closely, adding titles, page-headings, notes and even some textual emendations. From the page layout, it is possible to deduce that hand B inserted various proverbs and a couple of extra page-headings after hand A, but before 1634, when the Oxford antiquary Brian Twyne made several long extracts from the manuscript. Yet the miscellany itself was antiquarian in its scope when compiled: many of the Latin texts were composed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, such as the biblically apocryphal items (89, 91 and 92) and several satires (e.g. 7, 8, 10, 11 and 14). Others which cannot be dated conclusively resemble earlier works in style and subject matter. For example, 'Gregory's Garden' could have been written any time from the twelfth to the mid-fifteenth century, but bears closest similarity to the 'Metamorphosis Goliae' (after 1140). Apart from the up-to-date humanism of the story of Guiscardo and Ghismonda from the *Decameron,* other contemporary items incline towards the old-fashioned. The scribe has chosen some Lydgate poetry (items 25 and 26), but rather than selecting any of the more modish, aureate pieces, has instead preferred to include traditional poems with refrains. Such poems were at the height of their popularity in the previous century, the fullest collection of such lyrics appearing in the late fourteenth-century Vernon manuscript. The scribe seems to have interested himself more with the literature of the past than with the latest poetic fashions: just as we attempt to reconstruct his motives in compiling such a varied miscellany, so he himself was part of a similar enterprise of retrospection.

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