

XIII.—AN INSCRIPTION AT HEXHAM

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In *An Essay towards a History of Hexham* (1823) A. B. Wright printed an inscription which he found "over the door of a house" in Gilesgate:

C.D.	1683	I.D.
Reason doth wonder, but Faith he tell can,		
That a Maid was a Mother, and God was a Man.		
Let Reason look down, and Faith see the wonder,		
For Faith sees above, and Reason sees under.		
Reason doth wonder, what by scripture is meant,		
Which saith that Christ's Body is our Sacrament;		
That our bread is his body and our drink is his blood,		
Which cannot by Reason be well understood;		
For Faith sees above, and Reason below,		
For Faith can see more than Reason doth know. ¹		

This seems to be an expanded version of a quatrain printed by Carleton Brown as No. 119 of *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century* which is attributed by a couple of medieval chroniclers to Bishop Reginald Pecock. In the account given by an *English Chronicle of the Reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI*² the bishop ends his famous recantation of 1457 by confessing that he has presumed "of myne natural wytte" and preferred "my iugement and naturalle resoun before the Newe and the Olde Testament, and the auctoryte and determinacoun of oure moder hooly churche" and concludes "I here openly assent, that my seyde bookes . . . be deput vn to the fyre, and openly

¹ p. 245. The lines are also given by A. B. Hinds, *A History of Northumberland*, III, p. 308.

² ed. J. S. Davies, Camden Society lxiv (1856), p. 77.

brende in ensample and terroure of alle other". The chronicler then gives his version of the quatrain with the remark "Thys made the sayde Pockock, as it was seyde". The lines are also given, in a similar context, in the extract from Gascoigne's *Theological Dictionary* printed as an appendix to the Rolls Series edition of Pecoock's *Repressor*.

The quatrain is found as a separate poem in at least ten medieval manuscripts.³ A typical example is MS Sloane 3534, where the lines, accompanied by a Latin version and attributed to Pecoock, are given as:

Witte hath wondir that resoun ne telle kan,
How maidene is modir, and God is man.
Leve thy resoun and bileve in þe wondir,
For feith is aboven and reson is vnder.⁴

Of these manuscript copies, that in MS. Harley 541 is particularly relevant to the Hexham inscription. Here the process of expansion seems already to have begun, and, interestingly enough, the extra line in this version contains a reference to "oure noble sacrament".

Wyte hath wonder how reson telle can
That mayd is mother and God is man,
Oure noble sacrament, yn thre thinges on.
In this leewe reson, beleve thou the wondre—
There feith is lord, reson gothe undre!⁴

It is not surprising that the mystery of the Eucharist should have been added to that of the Nativity. The medieval religious imagination is notoriously fond of "figures" and "types" and their fulfilments. Some French artists of the thirteenth century show, in their Nativity scenes, the figure of the Christ child lying, not in a cradle, but on an *altar*.⁵

³ Listed by Carleton Brown and R. H. Robbins, *Index of Middle English Verse*, No. 4181.

⁴ Carleton Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, p. 186.

⁵ E. Mâle, *L'art religieux du XIIIe siècle en France*, pp. 188-9. Mâle aptly quotes a remark from a version of the *Glossa Ordinaria* on the verse in Luke, chapter 2: *ponitur in praesepio, id est corpus Christi super altare*.

Furthermore, the doctrine of the Eucharist as an *anamnesis*, a "re-calling" of the whole sacrifice of Christ, from its inception to its completion, necessarily implied the association and the inter-relationship of the two mysteries.

The paradox of the "real presence" is frequently elaborated in English devotional poems of the later Middle Ages:

Cf. In sy3t and in felyng, þou semest bred,
 In byleue, flesch, blod, and bon;
 In sy3t and felyng, þou semest ded,
 In byleue, lyf, to speke and gon;
 In sy3t and felyng, noþer hond ne hed,
 In byleue, boþe god and man;
 In sy3t and felyng, in litil sted,
 In byleue, grettere þyng nes nan.⁶

or the carol

Mirabile misterium
 In forme of bred ys Godes Son . . .

Though yt seme whit, yt ys rede;
 Yt ys flesshe, yt semeth bred;
 Yt ys God in his manhed,
 As he hong vpon a tre . . .⁷

and the two mysteries—Eucharist and Nativity—are sometimes juxtaposed and related in the manner of medieval wit poetry:

On Cristes day, I vnderstond,
 An ere of whet of a mayd spronge,
 Thirti wynter in erth to stond,
 To make vs bred all to his pay . . .⁸

OR

In virgyne Mary this brede was bake
 Whenne Criste of her manhoode did take . . .⁹

⁶ *EETS.OS* 124, p. 107.

⁷ R. L. Greene, *Early English Carols*, No. 319.

⁸ *ib.* No. 321.

⁹ *ib.* No. 318.

or

The hye & holy sacrament in verrey forme of bred
Is God and man, flesshe & blode, he that was quyck & ded.
Did reason this dede? nay, nay, reason is ferre begylde.
Mervell not, Joseph . . .¹⁰

A rather garbled version of the medieval quatrain is also found in MS. Eng. poet. b. 5 in the Bodleian Library, a collection of Recusant poems and earlier pieces, written in 1651-7:¹¹

Witt Doth wonder,
how tell man can,
A maide, A wife,
And God, A man

Leave of thy witt
admire the wonder
for God is Above
And reason vnder.¹²

Poor though this text is, it is invaluable evidence for the survival of the fifteenth-century lines into the seventeenth century.

¹⁰ Carleton Brown, *op. cit.*, No. 117.

¹¹ v. *Bod. Lib. Record*, III, p. 50.

¹² p. 5 of the MS.