DAVID GALLOWAY

'The Seven Deadly Sins':
some verses from an Archdeacon's Visitation Book (1533-51)

In February 1978 a little piece of literature came to light in the Norfolk Record Office, Norwich, in a volume where, perhaps, one would not have expected to find it—a Norwich Archdeaconry Visitation Book covering the years 1533-51. The book, which contains about four hundred leaves, each measuring approximately 220mm by 310mm is unfoliated and unbound apart from some remnants of vellum which still cling to its back and spine.

Archdeacons' Visitation Books were prepared for annual and half-yearly visitations of the archdeacons. This one contains sixty lines of verse, twenty-five of them written on the verso of one leaf and over the entries, in Latin, for the parishes of Belaugh, Haveringland and Hindolveston in the deanery of Sparham, and the other thirty-five on the recto of the next leaf which was blank. The verses appear to be in the hand of the scribe who made the entries, and the visitation took place on, or shortly after, 6 April 1548.

The stanzas of the poem form a parade of the Seven Deadly Sins, in which the headings 'wrath' and 'Invye' are reversed. Possibly they were extracted from a moral play; possibly they form a playlet, complete in itself, which might have been presented as a form of entertainment for the visiting archdeacon. They do bear a striking resemblance, however, to 'A Fifteenth Century Didactic Poem in the British Museum Add. MS. 29729' which 'reflects a typical late medieval preoccupation with contemptus mundi ... The didactic conventionality of the theme is reinforced by imagery drawing on homiletic tradition emphasizing the horror of death'.

Each of the seven sins, in the Norwich verses, has a stanza of seven lines; in the eighth stanza, apparently, the seven speak in unison. The mystical harmony of the
number seven is, however, disturbed by a verse of four lines after the third sin, 'Invye' (that is, 'wroth'), which may be a misplaced prologue or, even, part of another poem altogether, although perhaps a student of numerology could justify its inclusion where it is. The prologue rhymes aabb; the other stanzas are intended to rhyme ababcc, but it would take a supreme effort of aural gymnastics to make Wrath's 'resemblable' (line 9) rhyme with his 'grevaunce' (line 11).

The quality of the verse of the Norwich poem is erratic and sometimes its syntax seems to be shaky, but the more one reads it, the more one realizes that it does have a certain sonorous grandeur and that its author shows some skill in the linking of his images. Poetically, it is far superior to its counterpart in the British Library.

My transcription follows the REED Guidelines for Transcription. Spelling, punctuation and capitalization are as in the MS. Abbreviations are expanded, with the letters supplied in italics. Cancellations are in square brackets [ ]; interlineations above the line are in half brackets ' '; damaged or obliterated letters are in diamond brackets ( ). I have not transcribed the visitation entries on f 132v because they have nothing to do with the poem.

Shelf mark: ANW 1/1

f 132v

Pryde

O mortall man blynde in pompe & pryde
in vayn glory abbusinge / thou dost dysgyse
hey in thy mynde so fyxed it doth abyde
consider howe Lucyfer an angell was of pryce
& for that syn from the hevonly paradyse
fell downe into hell & bryninge in the flammynge hete
Remember the 'o' man thou art but wormes mete

wroth

O mortall man corrupt with myserable Invye
by serpentyn malace & as Caym in resemblable
that slewe Abell his brether howe can thou denye
& so commytt homycyde to his grete grevaunce
to god that was displeased / & cryed vengaunce
for his sacryfice to deth / cruelly dyd hym beate
Remember the o man thou art but wormes mete /

Invye

O mortall man frettinge with onpacyent Ire
from justice declyninge & dullyd in thy reson

10
as a tyrant perturbate a spark of ethna fyer
that bren hym self not consumyng in season
like the Wilde Bore fomyng that ete beys or peson
devoueryng beastes innocent as shepe Lambe or gete
Remember the o man thou art but wormes mete

O Lorde of all / god eternall / for grace I call /
that I neuer fall in syn mortall / that when we shall
from this worlde passe / god sende vs grace / of our trespass
to haue releace & to purchace in heuon a place

Covetous
O mortall man in Covytous never sacyate
thy god is thy thresor / syluer or golde
geton by ravenynge to meynetyng thyne estate
by extorcon or oppresson the pore yonge & olde
Semblabl to Judas that his master solde
most wykkyd merchaunt that in hell doth swee
Remember the o man yu art but wormes mete

Slowth
O mortall man thou slogge in all vertuous deeds
compynd to the asse that kepe but on pace
oblyvyous of thy god / omyttyng that Nedes
Loth to penaunce of godes seruyce thou hast not compase
voyde of all merytes & barren of all grace
for in devocon with death / man thou plete
Remember the o man thu art but wormes mete

Gloton
O mortall man & fowle fylthye grete gloton
by excess inordynate defylinge thy Nature
fomyng incentive & of Sower corrupton
in dronkshipp wellowyng the gore pytt suer
of stygyall stynke / ther thou shat induere
thy cankerde rust so doth frete
Remember the o man thou art but wormes mete
Lecherye

O mortall man infamyd with vyle Lecherye
too sowles in on bodye / infecke with pestilence
sodom & gomor with other cyties wredchyd ly
[fell dowen vnto hell in ther concupicence]
as hell hownes they sanke in ther concupicence
concyve ther pleasure in sulphure with displisaunce
Nowe bathinge ther carren ther bones do frete
Remember &c

Seven

O mortall man drownyd in these synns [vij] sevon
wether with ye thou flye the sines be so dammable
expulsd thou art from the blysse of heuon
from the glory of the godhede that is so delectable
repent & dispayer not his mercy is Comprehensable
to contryte hertes that for ther mysse will grete
then Remember &c

TEXTUAL NOTES

6  brynge] Possibly 'bryminge', which could suggest brimstone and sulphur (cf line 52).
20  gete] goat. It is possible that the reading should be 'nete', which may suggest something more innocent than 'gete'.
24  sende] The scribe appears to have written 'solde' first.
24-5  god sende vs ... in heuon a place] At the bottom of the page the scribe has written two lines: 'god sende vs grace / of our traspace to haue releace / and to purcheace in heuon a place/'. The words from 'grace' to 'releace' are smudged, but not illegible in the original ms.
27  thresor] Possibly 'thirsor'.
38  plete] Up to the mid-sixteenth century, 'plete' was a common spelling for 'plead', which, I think, is the sense here. Possibly, however, 'plete' could mean 'plait', 'bind' or 'entwine'.
42  incentyff] 'incitement', 'provocation'.
43  wellowyste] 'wallowist'. Cf John Fisher's Treatise on Fruytfull Sayinges Found in the Seven Penitential Psalms: 'the fylthy voluptuousnes of the body, wherin the synner / waltereth and wrappeth hymselfe lyke as a sowe walloweth in the stynkyng gore pytte or in the puddell' (EETS, es 27, pp 17-18). Possibly 'well o wyste', ie, 'well thou knowest'.
44  shat] Presumably 'shalt'.
45, 53 frete] 'fret', meaning to 'wear away', 'chafe', 'gnaw', 'corrode'.
56  wilte] wilte
NOTES

1 I should like to thank Miss Jean Kennedy, county archivist, and the staff of the Norfolk Record Office whose active co-operation and interest have helped me so much during the past seven years. In particular, I should like to thank Mr Paul Rutledge, senior assistant archivist, who, with his eye for the significance of things, drew my attention to 'The Seven Deadly Sins', and who helped me to make some sense of a few difficult readings. I am greatly indebted, also, to Dr Cameron Louis, editorial assistant with Records of Early English Drama, who, prudently, caused me to suppress some of my own 'poetic' readings in favour of his paleographic ones. It was he who told me of 'A Fifteenth Century Didactic Poem in British Museum Add. MS. 29729,' which resembles the Norwich one and, during the past few months, he has made many other valuable suggestions.

2 For a brief survey of the various types of records of visitations, see Dorothy M. Owen, The Records of the Established Church in England (British Records Association, 1970), 30-5.

3 By my count the folios are 132v and 133.


Research in progress

AUDREY W. DOUGLAS

Cumbria county has three record offices: Carlisle, which houses city of Carlisle and former Cumberland county church documents; Kendal, which holds its own materials and those of the former Westmorland; and Barrow, a new deposit for the Furness area, until 1972 part of Lancashire but now incorporated in Cumbria. My research so far has been based at Kendal. I visited Carlisle in October 1978 for a brief review of possible materials, some of which were later temporarily transferred to Kendal for further use.

Cumbria does not hold many materials of potential interest to REED for the period before 1642. A preliminary search suggests that the chief sources of interest are the Chamberlains' Accounts for Kendal and for Carlisle, which between them cover the period 1582-1642. Although both towns had considerable guild activity, original materials for the REED period are sadly lacking. Similarly, among parish records, churchwardens' accounts prior to 1642 are very few, and Carlisle in fact holds none. In the category of manorial, estate and household records, of materials so far examined the Curwen accounts have yielded the most relevant material. I hope, however, to supplement this particular type of private household activity