WILLIAM DE SHOREHAM

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Even in the village of Shoreham itself, few people realise that they possess their own pre-Chaucerian poet, William de Shoreham. If they do realise this they may find it difficult to learn much about him. *The Dictionary of National Biography* omits him altogether and the only English history of literature to give him more than a cursory reference is that of George Saintsbury (1898). However, his poems are utilised by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a source for the meaning of a few words.

The poems, which survive in the British Museum in one defective manuscript, have been published twice, first in the Percy Society series in 1849 and, secondly, by the Early English Text Society in 1902. The first is long out of print and for the second it is necessary to contact the publisher Kraus in New York. A few excerpts from his poetry appear in anthologies like Morris and Skeat's *Specimens of Early English*, vol. 11, [O.U.P.] and Carleton Brown's *Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century* [O.U.P]. But not even the hunger for Ph.D. material seems to have tempted much further work on him. Over the last century, Well's *List of Middle English Writings* can only find one American essay on the poem to the Virgin Mary and a handful of papers by German philologists interested in the niceties of fourteenth-century Kentish dialect to add to the meticulous E.E.T.S. edition, itself the work of a German scholar, Professor Konrath.

Nearly seven centuries ago, however, we must assume that his standing, at least in the Shoreham – Leeds – Chart Sutton triangle was considerable. We know he was a Kentishman from the dialect he uses, and very probably a native of Shoreham; until his appointment as Vicar of Chart Sutton he must have been a monk at the Augustinian convent at Leeds. His appointment could not have been before 1320, when Walter Reynolds, Archbishop of Canterbury (1313–27), appropriated the living of the Priory of Leeds on condition a vicar should be maintained there, and the strong probability is that William died before 1333, since that is when a later archbishop, Simon Mepham, died, and it was Simon Mepham who granted a

quadragene (an indulgence for forty days) to all those who would pray for the soul of the poet.

These scanty but useful facts derive from the lucky chance that the surviving manuscript of his poems contains four colophons, after the first, fourth, fifth and sixth poems. One of these asks for prayers for the soul of the great Robert Grosseteste (1175–1253), an act of grateful piety that suggests that the preceding poem is either a translation of a Grosseteste original, or, and this may be more likely, an attempt to popularize it by versification. Two other colophons ask for prayers for William himself and usefully supply his exact status at the time. The longest colophon asks the reader to pray for the soul of

> ' . . . *domini Willelmi de Schorham quondam vicarii de chart iuxta ledes qui composuit istam compilacionem de septem mortalibus peccatis. Et omnibus dicentibus oracionem dominicam cum salutacione angelica XL dies uence a domino Symone Archiepiscopo centuarie conceduntur.*'

Shortly after William's death, for the great Dr Furnivall is sure that our existing manuscript cannot be later than 1350, a scribe copied out all his poems. These consist of seven separate texts:

1. Seven Sacraments, with full description of the principal ceremonies and orders;
2. A rhyming version of some of the ceremonies of the sacraments;
3. Ten Commandments;
4. Seven Deadly Sins;
5. The Joys of The Virgin – a very popular subject;
6. Translation (?) of a hymn to the Virgin;
7. Dissertation on some of the mysteries of the Christian faith, specially the doctrine of original sin.

William's poems are not the first entries in the manuscript. Of the 220 vellum pages of Add. Ms. in the British Museum, the first 149 are taken up with a prose version of the psalms, some canticles and the Athanasian Creed in Latin and in English. After this, perhaps, William's poems came as a refreshing change. Alas, both the Percy Society and the E.E.T.S. editors are highly critical of the efforts of his poor copying scribe: 'ignorant . . . a text full of corruptions . . . the sense sadly obscured or even perverted into nonsense' says Professor Konrath severely. The scribe it seems was unfamiliar with the Kentish dialect, and possibly he did yawn at times over the poems; the manuscript carries contemporary emendations in another hand by somebody who did speak the Kentish dialect, but Konrath dismisses these helpful suggestions as 'mere conjectures'. Certainly the resultant text leaves no easy task for the translator and some questions must remain unanswered. Why does the last poem end so

abruptly? If the last pages have disappeared there may have been other poems as well, even secular ones, for the habit of rhyming tends to be a catching one. Nor can we be sure which, if any, are translations.

Even so, from the surviving manuscript, quite a lot can be added to our ideas of life in this area of Kent in the early fourteenth century. William was surely a devoted and able parish priest, devoted in his desire to find methods of passing on some of his own learning to his parishioners by translating it into their common tongue, and by putting his teaching into neat and often catchy verse-forms, to arouse both interest and devotion. The poems divide into two kinds. There are four didactic poems which encompass what his flock should believe (7), what they should do (3), what they should not do (4) and where to find means of grace (1). The remaining three poems are devotional and lyrical; Poem 2 centres round the passion of Christ, each 'hour' of this being marked by an apostrophe to the Virgin, sharing her sorrow. For instance, at the nailing of Christ to the cross, William adds:

O swete levedy wat thee was wo
Thothy child was on honge
Itached to the harde tre
Wyth nayles grete and longe.

The gywes graddon com a-down
Hy reste wat y mende
For thran hatholede to be do
To deth for man kende.

And ase he henge, levedy, four ous
Aheghe oppon the helle
Isceld our wanne we deade ben
That we ne hangy in helle.

O sweet lady, what woe was yours
When thy child was hung
Fastened to the cruel tree
With nails great and long.

The Jews derided 'Come on down!'
They knew not what they did,
For thereon he was suffering
Even death to save mankind.

And as he hung, lady, for us
So high upon that hill.
So guard us when we come to die
From agony in Hell.

The Joys of the Virgin (5) and the Hymn to the Virgin (6) are lyrical, seeming to reflect a genuine warmth of devotion. As in the innumerable Marian hymns of the time, the Virgin is saluted by a long series of allegorical images: she is successively David's sling, Queen Hester, and the gate of steel to which the Prophet Ezekiel witnessed. She is Queen of Paradise, the dove of Noah, the woman in the vision of St. John of the Apocalypse. She has tamed the unicorn (this is the only non-scriptural reference) and William alludes to the legend that:

Ine the hys god bycome a chyld
Ine the his wreche bycome myld
That unicorn that was so wyld

In thee is god become a child
In thee his wrath has grown so mild
The unicorn that was so wild

Aleyd hys of a cheaste	Is subject to a maid
Thou hast y-tamed and i-styld	Thou'st made it tame and reconciled
Wyth melke of thy breste.	With breast-milk is it paid.

The poem ends with a favourite image to explain the difficult idea of the immaculate conception, that of sunlight passing through glass:

Ase the sonne taketh hyre pas	As the sun can easily pass
Wyth-oute breche thorgh-out that glas	Without a crack through glass
Thy maydenhad on-wemmed hyt was	Thy maidenhead unblemished was
For bere of thyne chylde	By bearing thy child
Nou swete levedy of solas	Now lovely lady of solace,
To our senfolle be thou mylde.	To our sins be mild.

These three devotional poems bear the imprint of an individual language and style, but their tone is so different from the remaining four didactic poems that the suggestion seems not unreasonable that one of the two groups consists of translations from lost originals. The didactic poems also have their own individuality. What frequently resonates behind these verses is a vivid impression of the questions and the problems William must have encountered from worried parishioners. Could 'spousebreche' (divorce) ever be countenanced? What happened to a child who died unbaptised? How long elapsed between Adam's sin and Christ's arrival – and why did God wait so long after the fall of Adam to send the redeemer? These troubling (and persistent) questions William does his best to answer:

And her mankende swalf and dalf	And here mankind sweated and delved
Fyght thousand wynter and a half	Five thousand winters and a half
And yet wel mo	And yet many more
Er thane the tyme of lyve come	Before the age of true life came . . .
That god so long abod the skele	That God delayed so long, the clue
Wel mey be thys that in of wele	May well be this: his loving care
To mannes mende	To make man true
For death scholde hys mystryes kepe	First death might show his awful power
And man forsopie and forsethe	Till man in suffering and despair
In deathes bende	Would death's force know.

Some of the questions he ponders sound ageless:

Ac some mey acsy war god was	Where was God, some men may ask
Tho nothyng of the worlde nas	When nothing of the world yet was
Ne grete ne smal	Neither great nor small?

And the answer is equally elusive:

Ther the worlde hys nou was he	Where the world is now, was he
And yet he hys and ever schal be	And yet he is and ever shall be
Ihole over al	Complete over all.

Much more down to earth and specific in its observation of the way people behave is William's account of the seven deadly sins. Pride he detects in many guises and in many places: his suspicion that this sin flourishes particularly in the clergy makes him very eloquent:

Prede suweth in floures	Pride sucks the flowers
Of wysdom and of wyt	Of wisdom and of wit
Amang levedys in boures	Among ladies in bowers
The foule prude syght;	Does foul pride sit;
Thegh man go gert wyd rope	Though men go girt with rope
Get prede to hym swyth . . .	Yet pride swells inside . . .
Nys non thagh som myt wene	Not a soul, think what you will,
That some prede ne taketh	That some pride does not take,
Ne none so proud ich wene	Nor none so proud, I know,
Ase he that al for-saketh.	As he that all forsakes.
For who hys that nevere set hys thought	For who is there that never set his heart
And erthe to be hygh?	On power in this world?
Who hys hit that never y-thought	And who never yearned
Of pompe that he segh?	For the pomp seen around?
Who yst that never was rebel	Who was never a rebel
Agenis hys soverayn	Against lord and master,
Who hist that be-nome schel	Takes reproof with patience
And nabbe non agayn?	And does not back-answer?
Who hyst that nevere godlich nas	Who was never tempted
Wanne chaunce at wylle come	By a chance of glory,
Who yst that wanne he preysed was	Or when praises came his way
Never at hegh hyt nome?	Did not make much of the story? . . .

Envy is dealt with more briefly, in 23 lines; his chief weapon is 'backbyty' – backbiting, scandal – and his object to destroy affection:

Wanne love hys here preye	For love is his prey
Al for to confundy	He hopes all to destroy
And wyl het to betraye	And will them betray
That wolde gode by.	Who follow the good.

Gluttony is neatly characterised under the four headings which had been laid down in the popular and didactic *Cursor Mundi* (*c.* 1300):

Ac glutonye entyceth	But gluttony entices
To lecherye her	To low desire
Ase that hy norysseth	As nourishes
Hote brandes that fere.	Dry brands the fire.
Of glotonyes foure	Of four types of gluttony
The boke speketh openlyche:	Speaks the book plain and just:
To meche fode devoury	Too much food devouring

And to lykerouslyche;
And to freche to fretene
Wanne man hijs tymeheth
And out of tyme to hetene
That none siknesse neth.

And consumed with too much lust;
To gluttonize at table
Wasting time at will
And to eat between mealtimes
When one is not ill.

In his poem on the Sacraments, William shows he has high expectations of the matrimonial state:

Her longeth nou to thys sarmon
Of spousynge for to werche,
Thet hys the tokne of the joyning of
Gode and holy cherche;
And woste
Ryght holy cherche y-cleped hys
That holy folke ine goste.

It is fitting now in this sermon
On weddings to work,
Which image the betrothal of
God and Holy Church;
And remember
Holy Church has got its name
Because good people enter.

And as ther mot atter spousyng
Be ryght asent of bothe
Of man and of ther woman eke
Yn love and naught y-lothe
Y-lyche
By-twixe God and holy folke
Love hys wel tyre and ryche.

And when the wedding day arrives
There must be no debate
Both husband and the wife-to-be
Must act in love not hate
Just like
Between great God and holy folk
Love is the richest rate.

Thanne aghte men here wyves love
Ase God doth holy cherche
And wyves naught agens men
Non unwrestnesse werche
Ac tholye
And naught onwrost opsechem hy
Ne toungue of hefede holye.

Then ought men to love their wives
As God does Holy Church,
And wives against their husbands
No wickedness should work
But bear all things
Nor question much
Nor be with tongue too ready.

William is very precise as to who may marry whom – a widow for instance is allowed to marry the godparents of her stepchildren – and this may well reflect a type of recurring problem in small, static communities. He also gives exact instruction (based on the Decretals of Gregory IV) about the marriage of lepers: was William just being careful to cover all eventualities or were there many lepers in early fourtheenth-century Kent? A 'meseles' might marry a non-leper but then they had to stay together even if the latter contracted the disease (hardly surprising, surely): the only approved condition of parting was for the 'meseles' to enter a 'spytel hous'.

He is also very clear about the ages of those to be married and the requirements here of canon law:

Of ham that scholde y-wedded be
Her the age thou myght lerne,
That knave childe fortene ger

Of them that would be wedded
Here the age you can learn,
The boy child fourteen years must have

Schel habe ane tuel thetherne;
Spousynge
At seve ger me maketh may,
Ac none ryght weddynge.

For thegh hy were by assent
Ryght opelyche y-wedded,
And ase these childre ofte beth
To-gadere ryght y-bedded,
By ryghte
Bot gef hy gyve ine tyme assent
Departed by y-myghte.

And the tyme is wane ather can
Other fleschyche y-knowe
For wanne hy habbeth thet y-do,

Ne mowe hy be to-throwe,

And just twelve the girl;
Betrothals
May at seven years be made,
But not a proper wedding.

For though they were by clear assent
In public seen to wed
And as these children often are
Together put to bed,
Yet by law
Unless they in due course agree
They can be separated.

And that time comes when either one
Can carnally encounter,
For when they have accomplished that

They cannot be put asunder.

Only in two ways can marriage be invalidated:

Ne beth no thynges bote two
That oundeth the weddynge.
That on hys wanne he weddeth
the thrall,
And weneth the frye take;
That other, wanne he weddeth
one other
Thane hys ryghte make,
By-gyled;
The lawe of god ne senteth nought
That man be so by-wyled.

There are no things but only two
That can undo the wedding.
One is when he weds a slave,

Thinking she is free;
The second, when he weds another

And not his real lady –
Beguiled!
The law of God does not allow
Man be so tricked by wiles.

The imagination boggles at the situation suggested by this second condition – does it reflect sharp-dealing over dowries? Surely there can not often have occurred such melodramatic post-nuptial discoveries in the neighbourhood of Chart Sutton or of Shoreham. And one cannot help feeling sorry for the 'thrall' whose legal status is so embarrassingly discovered.

Perhaps one of the more surprising aspects of village life emerges accidentally in William's lengthy account of all the liquids with which even an emergency christening may on no account be performed:

Nau ferst ich wille telle you
Wet may be the materie
Wer inne cristning may be mad
That bringeth ous so merie
To honoure.
Hit moght be do in kende water
And non other licoure.
Therfore ine wine me ne may

Now first I will tell you
What you may employ
To use in christening
That brings us with such joy
To highest rank.
It must be done in natural water
And in liquid no other.
So wine's no use for christening

Inne sithere ne inne pereye
Ne ine thing that nevere water was.
Thorgh cristning man reneye
Ne inne ale,
For, thie hight wer water ferst
Of water neth hit tale.

Nor is cider, nor is perry thick
Nor liquids that aren't water.
By christening we renounce Old Nick
Not in beer,
For though these things were water first
That's not how we see them here.

The poet explains carefully that heating water does not alter its nature, so christenings can take place even in times of frost – but on no account may 'ewe ardaunt' (fiery spirits) be used. This is of course in line with sound doctrine as promulgated by St. Thomas Aquinas. He had laid down that for baptism to be valid the water must not have lost its properties by any transmutation. However, the thought of what liquids might be mistakenly employed by careless priests or hasty midwives is suggestive, as, in this inland area, are William's instructions about sea-water:

Al-so me nay inne selte se
Cristny wel mitte beste;
And eke inne othere sealte watere
Bot me in to moche keschte Of sealte,
For gef that water his kinde lest
That cristning stant te tealte.

And you can use the salty sea
For christening – it will last;
Or any other salted water,
But keep in reason – do not cast Too much of salt,
For if that water lose its kind
The christening must halt.

Any reader who has accompanied William de Shoreham so far will have noticed his ambitious fondness for complex metrical forms. For instance, this seven-line stanza form for the lecture on christening has an x a x a b x b rhyme scheme, x standing for unrhymed endings; it also uses an adaptation of the so-called bob and wheel, i.e. a very short, ideally one-stress line, followed here by two longer, but more commonly by four rhyming ones. The best-known use of this occurs in the slightly later, northern, anonymous and superbly successful *Gawayne and the Green Knight*. To modern ears this metre, like some other of William's rather jaunty verses, is more proper for secular themes and for lyric rather than doctrinal exposition. Medieval writers and listeners, however, seem to have been untouched by such rigid preconceptions. Even the Athanasian Creed, no lighthearted reading, had been paraphrased into six-line stanzas and, on the other hand, the enchantingly bobbish *Dancers of Colbek* (*c.* 1320), also by a cleric, Robert Manning of Brunne, carries a chillingly moral tale in support of edicts against secular goings-on in churchyards.

William de Shoreham, however, is not in the same league as Robert Manning and certainly not as the *Gawayne* poet. Even

allowing for the 'ignorant' scribe, for the difficulties of catching the proper stresses and rhymes of a dialect which was not going to feed in to central modern English, William, for all his diligent experimentation with verse forms cannot be considered as 'a poet in the higher sense of the word' – a judgement passed by the Danish linguist, ten Brink, many years ago. Yet it would be ungrateful to wish that, like Chaucer's Parson, he had opted for prose. His delight in versifying is endearing; besides it does indicate how the intellectual interests of a vicar of Chart Sutton at this time extended well beyond the local parishes, that he had the opportunity to read or hear contemporary verse and the incentive to try out recent literary trends.

And perhaps the most fascinating problem connected with the poems written by this enterprising son of Shoreham over six and a half centuries ago is this: how did they reach their public? Few if any of his parishioners would have been able to read and in any case the copies would be rare; like all poems of the time they are clearly meant to be read aloud. Were they read to the captive audience provided by his congregation? Were they offered as a sermon or in addition to a sermon? Did William ride over to Shoreham to try them out there, too? Chaucer would reassure us that a ride of twenty miles would be nothing to that pilgrimage-loving age. Besides – and I am most indebted to Malcolm White for this information – there were almost certainly continuing family connections. In 1284, there was a William who was a tenant of the Church Yoke in Shoreham. The son who lived with him was called John – the dating would allow our William to be his elder brother, perhaps carrying his father's name, and the ecclesiastical connection of the tenancy is suggestive.

We shall never know whether the villagers were impressed by their clever parson's poems or whether the intention of the metrical form to aid memory was ever rewarded by the hearers, as William hoped, remembering them as they walked out to a day's work, or to a night's work on the hills above Shoreham in lambing time. One wonders how long he and his poems were remembered and whether the thrice-repeated request was honoured:

'*Oretis pro anima Willelmi de Schorham*'.