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Medieval Merriment and Its Reflections in the Religious Writings in Middle English

Mary Natalie Logan

Loyola University Chicago

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MEDIEVAL MERRIMENT AND ITS REFLECTIONS
IN THE RELIGIOUS WRITINGS
IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

By
Mother Mary Natalie Logan

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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VITA

Mother Mary Natalie is a Religious of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus who has for some years been engaged in teaching in various schools of the Society.

She received the Bachelor of Arts Degree from Loyola University, August, 1943.

During the past three years, her time has been devoted to graduate study in English.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General and specific aims of the thesis</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of merriment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdependence of religion and merriment</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrayal of daily life of the laity in the religious writings in Middle English</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of further points to be developed</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. ORIGIN OF THE SPIRIT OF MERRIMENT</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Saxon tribes on the Continent</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of merriment in Anglo-Saxon temperament</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influences at work after their arrival in Britain</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival of the Normans</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First indications of merriment</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. FLOWERING OF THE SPIRIT OF MERRIMENT AMONG THE LAITY</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vernacular literature best suited to express spirit of medieval England</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The serf</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minstrels and pedlars</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nobility</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebration of a holyday</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other manifestations of merriment</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. MERRIMENT AMONG THOSE DEDICATED TO THE SERVICE</td>
<td>PAGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of God</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mystics</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priests and Religious</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of the neglect of religion upon the spirit of merriment</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaucer and Langland</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions drawn from the present study</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of merriment presented in the non-religious literature</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A portrait of English medieval life</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Merriment is an ever-recurring theme in medieval literature; it is heard in the songs of the troubadours, keeps step through the lanes of Italy with the wandering puppeteers, swings gaily along German highways with the minnesingers, and whispers through the cloistered gardens of Ireland, but nowhere is it more provocative than in the varied literary expression of medieval England. Here it becomes synonymous with the life of the people; no other nation has ever been more merry than "Merrie England." To plumb the depths of this spirit of merriment is the general aim of the present study.

More specifically, it aims at revealing the nature of the merriment, its sources and development from the beginning of the twelfth to the close of the fourteenth century. Such a study is

... no mere antiquarian pastime, no rummaging among dust, no quest for stiff and soulless figures. It is the opening of the door upon a life as exuberant as our own, full of richness and color, stirred by adventure and passion, with the sun shining bright in the heavens and the joy of life strong in the hearts of men.  

This "joy of life" is the most adequate figure available to define the merriment of medieval England. It is thus used in Sawlea Wardé, an allegorical homily of the early thirteenth

century, in which Mirth -- or Luv of Lyf -- describes the joys which God has promised to those who do His will. It is a joy born of the certainty that the road it treads will bring it to everlasting happiness and the realization that it is already enjoying the hundred fold. The faith of the people pervaded their every action; it was an essential part of their daily lives -- "a spontaneous religion, based on love of God and an unquestioning acceptance of His revelation." 3

This conception of merriment, however, is not the only one available. It is catalogued in the Oxford dictionary under many shades of meaning: pleasure, joy, delight, merry-making, etc. Storm Jameson, in *The Decline of Merry England*, considers none of these definitions apt. She finds them

... poor, thin transformations of a word that stands on its own two legs, and what is worse, truly inept to the example given. The first is dated 1436, and it is the "crown of merry England;" the second comes from the *Faerie Queene*; it runs, "Saint George of merry England, the signe of victoress." Pleasant? Delightful? Are these the qualifications aimed at by Spenser when he wrote that warrior sentiment? Surely not. The word here represents a state or condition, the exact meaning of which cannot be enclosed in a single word. If an equivalent must be found, perhaps "high-hearted" might do. 4


"High-hearted" may, indeed, apply to the England of Spenser's day, but to poets of an earlier century, merriment that was high-hearted was forced, insincere, and full of pride. John Mirk, whose Festial stamps him as one well-versed in the spirit of merriment so characteristic of his countrymen, taught his flock to be joyous at all times but occasionally to consider their day of judgment in order that they may be more merry in this life, and have everlasting bliss in heaven. But he hastens to add:

... he pat wyll scape pe dome pat he wyll come to at pe second comyng, he most lay downe al maner of pryde and heyne of hert [Italics not in original] and knowne hymselfe pat he ys not but a wryche and slyme of erp, and soo hold mekennes yn hys hert.

"High-hearted" is, therefore, scarcely an appropriate term for the present purposes. It carries with it the implication of an affected joyousness which is not quite innocent and which is likely to turn to ashes at the touch. This rather artificial type of merriment lived side by side with a spontaneous gaiety springing from innocence of heart and the simple joy of being alive -- the true merriment of medieval England. Both types of merriment will be considered in this study, although the emphasis will be laid upon the latter as being more completely characteristic of the period.

5 John Mirk's Festial, ll. 3-7.
The desire to undertake this work was born of the belief that the faith of medieval England was so profound as to render its religious expression both spontaneous and casual, engendering the spirit of merriment which has come to be regarded as a characteristic trait of the people. One might, indeed, make so bold as to state that they were merry because they were religious. This statement, audacious as it appears, finds abundant support in a study of the Middle English verse-romances which certainly can lay no immediate claim to religious origin or intention; yet they form one of the most valuable proofs of the sincerity of the Catholic Faith of pre-Reformation England. The value of this relationship and the inadvisability of attempting to make a thorough study of the entire body of literature in Middle English being abundantly evident, the analysis of the nature of merriment in medieval England will be confined to a detailed examination of its reflections in the religious writings of the period.

This analysis will attempt to portray the daily life of the people, both secular and religious, as it is mirrored for us in the religious writings. Naturally, the foibles and human weaknesses were as apparent to the clergy of England during the Middle Ages as they are to our own pastors today. In their efforts to point out and correct the errors of their

6 Mother Mary Norbert, op. cit., p. 7.
flock, they naturally used the homely examples which they found ready at hand to illustrate their teachings. Thus, the sermons, whether in verse or in prose, show not only the authentic record of the lives of the people, but the spirit which animated those lives and the influences at work upon them.

If the homiletic writings portray the external lives of the people, the lyrics afford a means of penetration into their souls. They are, for the most part, the work of the mystics, notably Richard Rolle and his followers. But mysticism was not confined to mystics; it ennobled the lives of many an ordinary man and woman and enriched multitudes who knew no earthly wealth. To these, and to all who love God, the lyric poetry is addressed; the light it throws upon the workings of the medieval mind gives it added value.

Both the religious-didactic and purely lyric writings lead through the first inception of merriment in the twelfth century when it was barely perceptible in the extreme simplicity which prevailed, on through its growth and gradual development in the centuries which followed. They even suggest the lack of merriment in preceding ages by their reflection of its development. There is no evidence, whatever, of its existence among the Angles and Saxons during their continental wanderings, but the era following their conquest of

Britain witnesses an occasional glimmering of it at rare intervals until the coming of the Normans gave the necessary impetus to its outward expression.

It is noteworthy that the spirit which was to be the dominating note in the lives of the people should have had its rise in the lower classes. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, after the complete subjection of England by William the Conqueror in 1070, the common people were left in comparative peace. Their fathers and grandfathers had struggled mightily against Danish aggression, but the Danes had by this time become as English as the descendants of the Anglo-Saxon tribes; both groups lived together now, their ancient gods almost entirely forgotten in the full acceptance of the Catholic Faith. The inhabitants of southern England, in particular, had suffered intensely during the four years of the conquest, but after the year 1070, there was very little bloodshed among the middle and lower classes. Their cultivation of the soil and the care of their cattle or flocks occupied the time in which they were not celebrating some Church festival.

The nobility, on the other hand, were still beset with every kind of difficulty; skirmishes with the Welsh and

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difficulties with the Norman French, threats of civil war in the risings of the barons (1075-1085), sufferings caused by the selfishness and cruelty of more than one sovereign, and much more continuing well on into the twelfth century. 

By 1150, however, so entirely had the Faith taken hold of the people that it became the common meeting ground of rich and poor, nobles and serfs. The habit of life which evolved from this universal practice of the Catholic religion has been dubbed "a gigantic game" which was ultimately to degenerate into farce. But the day of its degeneration was not to dawn until the end of the fifteenth century; for the present; so closely knit were the relations between Church and State that even the secular laws constantly reiterated that "crimes were sins and that secular penal law had a religious as well as a punitive purpose." 

G. C. Homans, whose work in many respects reveals an unfavorable attitude toward Catholicism, yet has this to say in its defense:

A religion of ritual, like that of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, gives rise to well regulated conduct in at least two ways. It gives man's feelings of helplessness and those linked with the

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9 Gardiner, op. cit., pp. 57-90.


changing seasons adequate and orderly social expression. And it helps insure that the routines are tied to the festival calendar.... The year of work and play remained a single and customary cycle for centuries.  

This is undoubtedly true, but the point that Homans seems to have overlooked is that their time of play was identical with the feasts of the Church and it was to the Church they turned for their recreation. The Catholic Church, then, was an influential power in developing the spirit of merriment in England.

A second influence, already mentioned, was the abundance of opportunity for earning a livelihood. Unemployment was an unheard-of thing, but, neither, on the other hand, was there any slavery. Men were, for the most part, content in the place to which Providence had assigned them; they aimed at doing their best in their own sphere without so much as a glance of envy toward those of a different class of society.

Lest it be thought that such a point of view be somewhat Utopian, it must be admitted that there was a good deal of cruelty prevalent in every walk of life. Even little children occasionally amused themselves by tying up a cock to a post in order to torment it with sticks and stones. The habit of mutilating a man who had been found guilty of some

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crime or other is revolting to the modern mind; yet it was widely practiced in medieval England. This cruelty, however, was offset by such intense religious feeling and even saintliness that a true cross-section of society -- at which, indeed, it is difficult to arrive -- would reveal "the same human thoughts, goodness, charity, and faults as we know them today. Society was as vibrant then as it is now, and probably more so." 13

This study, then, does not presume to deny the existence of coarseness and brutality; it admits rather that this is what might have been expected of a nation so recently little more than barbarian, and it attempts to prove that, in spite of such tendencies, the predominant spirit tended in the opposite direction -- toward a joy born of contentment and the anticipation of an eternal happiness of heaven.

One of the most apt expressions of this spirit in medieval literature is found in the answer of the nightingale to the owl in the old religious allegory:

Thou askest me, Owl, whether I can do anything but sing during the summertide, and bring bliss far and wide. Why askest thou of my gifts? Better is my one than all of thine. Better is one song from my mouth than all of thy kind could ever do.

And listen, I will tell thee wherefore: dost thou know for what man was born? For the bliss of the kingdom of heaven; there ever is song and mirth without ceasing. Thither tendeth every man that can do any good. Hence it is that men sing in the holy church, and clerks make songs; so that man may think by the song of the place whither he shall be ere long; so that he may not forget joy, but think thereof, and attain it, and may perceive, in the voice of the church how merry is the heavenly bliss. Clerks, monks, and canons rise at midnight and sing of the light of heaven, and priests sing in the country when the light of day springs. And I help them as I may; I sing with them night and day, and through me they are all the gladder, and the reader for song. I admonish men for their good, that they be blithe in their mood, and bid them that they may seek the song that is eternal.

An eminent critic, writing on The Owl and the Nightingale, expresses the opinion that "vernacular literature gives the most complete and fitting expression to the spirit of the age." This is particularly true of medieval England; its advantages were apparent to many who, zealous for the spread of the Faith and the instruction of those whose religious knowledge was deficient, determined to speak in English the truths which they wished to impart. Robert Mannyng, a monk of Brunne, in the introduction to his work, Handlyng Synne, tells us:


Off brut yat barone bold of hond
First conqueroure of Ingland.
Off kyng artour yat was so riche
Non in his town was him liche
Off wondris yat to knightys felle
And autours dide men herd telle
As Gawayn and Gay & oper able
Forto kepe pe rond table;
...
Off stotis of divers pinges
Off prynces Prelatis & of kingis
Mane songes & divers ryme
In Inglishe frenche & latyn
To rede & here mane ere prest
Of pinges yat hem likely best. 19

John Mirk's Festival, too, was written for the dual purpose of entertainment and edification. Like the other religious writers mentioned, to whom Mirk was bound by the unity of aim when separated by space and time, he wrote in the vernacular in order that his countrymen whose education was, at best, meager, might have the delight of literature together with their religious instruction. The remarkable part of the arrangement, however, was that these religious works were expected to be, and actually were, read at feasts, in taverns, or after an evening of games. That they did hold the attention of their listeners with as much tenacity as a romance testifies to the extraordinary faith of these men, and bears witness to their natural affinity with mysticism, "the wine that maketh martyrs merry." 20

of a nation's development incorporates into itself the substance of past ages. Each age shapes that substance according to the pressure of circumstances and environment. The Englishmen who first stepped upon the shores of Britain, after having lived for generations upon the continent, were men "born of the past, yet plastic to the present, and ever changing towards the future." 2 The continental life of the Anglo-Saxon was essentially migratory and chaotic. His was the life of a warrior in a state of continual unrest. A seafarer to the core, he was so unsettled on land as to become almost entirely nomadic. When pressed by necessity, he turned to agriculture, but his passion for warfare "threw all his other tendencies into the shade." 3 What entertainment was his consisted mainly in sitting near the fire in the great hall where the chief held court. As the cup went round, the scoop would strike the harp and sing the songs of sea voyages to men who had themselves known the terrors of imminent shipwreck. 4 The Saxon's love of poetry was, perhaps, the only tendency never completely overshadowed by the warrior spirit within him. Through poetry,


all knowledge was imparted, all truth and wisdom expressed. The scop was not only a wise and truthful singer, but teacher, historian, and warrior as well. The poet, then, becomes the most reliable source of information for the qualities of the Anglo-Saxon temperament.

Beowulf, that "justly celebrated masterpiece of English poetry," presents its action upon a background incomparably bleak: the storm on the ocean in mid-winter, the blood-stained waters of the lake, the funeral ship covered with ice, the dreary moors, the mist and darkness -- all are fit surroundings for "the lonely, wretched stalkers of mystery" in their joyless abode. Yet, for all that, Beowulf is an unconscious, poetic treatise on the customs and habits of the race -- a race of men who count their years by winters, and who permit so little color to enter their lives that its rare flashes serve only to accentuate the bleakness of their surroundings.

In such a gloomy atmosphere, there is little room for merriment or humor. Klaeber points out that the Saxon of the Beowulf is, apparently, always in earnest and notably intense,

5 L. F. Anderson, The Anglo-Saxon Scop, University of Toronto Philological Series, 1, 1903, pp. 21 ff.


7 Loc. cit.

capable of high courage, loyalty, and liberality. His military ideals are still clearly recognizable, notwithstanding the Christian elements at work in the poem. The Saxon warrior must keep in mind:

...the prime requirement of valor, the striving for fame and the upholding of one's honor, a stern sense of duty, the obligation of blood revenge, and above all, the cardinal virtue of loyalty which ennobles the committatus' relation and manifests itself in unflinching devotion and self-sacrifice on the part of the retainer and in kindness, generosity, and protection on the part of the king. The poem is a veritable treasure-house of Germania. 

The Beowulf is, however, undoubtedly idealized. The Saxon was not all courage, loyalty, and generosity. His huge frame was frequently shaken by passion, and, in the hour of battle, his blue eyes flashed fiercely. He was by turns "impetuous, melancholy, cruel, passionate, and fitful," with dreams of conquest and a contempt for civilization, yet "with an eagerness to share in its nobler elements." In the long, winter months, he was prone to spend whole days before his fire, either in complete idleness or in some game of chance. The dice often became a passion with him, so that when everything of real or personal estate had been lost, he staked his own

9 Klaeber, op. cit., p. lxii.

10 Gummere, op. cit., pp. 58 ff.
liberty; then, if he lost again, he "went voluntarily into servitude, even under a weaker man." 11 Enforced idleness, to a man of martial instincts, is always demoralizing, particularly when fighting is considered more important than anything else in life and when it is carried on as a series of personal encounters in which every stroke is remembered. 12

Such, then, was the Anglo-Saxon in the epoch which has been called "the Heroic Age" -- a man of gigantic stature, capable of the highest natural virtue, yet occasionally groveling in the depths of vice, sincere yet amenable to flattery, a lover of poetry yet devoid of all sense of humor. 13 This was the race which both Caesar and Tacitus had known; its characteristics were still essentially the same when its warriors invaded the coasts of Britain. It was not long before these men who, on the continent, had seldom known a fixed abode, had settled themselves permanently in their new home. To all appearances, nothing was changed but their surroundings: they continued to speak the Teutonic tongue and persisted in their worship of pagan deities. Even their

11 Gummere, op. cit., p. 125.


domestic habits, in so far as the new land would permit, remained the same. They bought and sold their slaves, cooked their simple meals, hunted and fished or tilled the land by day, and told amazing tales of their heroes by night, just as they had done before coming to their island home. Even the scops, those solemn, joyless minstrels, plied their trade as formerly, telling the tales of battles on distant shores, to the tune of martial strains plucked from their harps. 14

Yet, in spite of the apparent immutability, a subtle influence was at work. It was an influence compounded of many elements: the civilization of Rome imposed upon the loyalties of the Teutonic system, and the teachings of Christianity being preponderant. Chambers sees these elements

... combining in different ways in the historical record of Bede, in Beowulf, in the Old English poetry dealing with definitely Christian topics. The elements are, as yet, not perfectly fused: from their combination the civilization and ethics of modern Europe were to grow, in the fulness of time. ... Christian gentleness working upon the passions of the Heroic age, produced at once a type which is the rough outline of what later becomes the medieval ideal of the knight, or the modern ideal of the gentleman. 15

The fusion was, as a matter of fact, not at all a simple process. Roman Christianity and native Teutonic ways proved in many ways difficult to blend. They did blend, however, so completely that it is apparent some third element must have been at work. Coulton has suggested that Celtic influence was much stronger than has been generally believed and that intermarriage between Anglo-Saxon and Celt became more and more widespread during the seventh and eighth centuries. 16 This suggestion has been accepted by many authorities. Indeed, it has been pointed out that Celtic influence was probably at work even in the sixth century -- which may be the explanation of the Saxon's readiness to accept Christianity at the hands of Augustine and his missionaries. They had held aloof when the opportunity for Christian baptism had presented itself on the continent. 17 They had wrought havoc among the Christian churches and monasteries which they had found lying in the path of their invasion in Britain. 18 It almost appears that they required the fertility of their new land to bring to life that hidden capacity for religious worship which was to


bloom so luxuriantly under the tutelage of the Church of Rome.

The acceptance of Christianity was not the only indication of growth. They who had once considered agriculture a demeaning occupation, to be resorted to only when other sources of food failed, became, in Britain, by the middle of the seventh century, "as outright farmers as were ever seen." 19 Hunting and fishing were by no means completely abandoned but had, by the beginning of the ninth century, come to be regarded as holiday sport, or as recreation when the day's tasks on the farm were completed. No longer were hours wasted in idleness by the fireside; there was plenty of occupation even for leisure moments. Many indoor games were played, and the women and younger men even enjoyed a kind of dancing not unlike the games played by children today. Their outdoor recreations, however, were far more numerous. They had an abundance of time at their disposal; those attached to the royal household worked only a few hours of each day; the artisan had to work less than the modern workman to gain his living, and all were excused from work altogether during the numerous holidays of the year. "That they were all -- monarch, noble, artisan, and peasant -- fond of play is shown by the frequent use of the word plega. They even applied it to fighting and battle which in the language of poets were plega-gares (play of darts), sefæ-plega (play of

19 Gummere, op. cit., p. 40.
This application is significant, too, of the solemn nature of the Anglo-Saxon which extended even to his play. But however solemnly he regarded life in general, he yet had a passion for entertainment -- an extreme fondness for trapping, hawking, dancing, and tame animals, music, minstrels, in short, all manner of entertainment. The love of hunting, in particular, is noticeable in all classes but especially among the royalty, for, as Wright tells us:

... Even the most austere and pious, as well as the most warlike, of the Anglo-Saxon monarchs were passionately attached to the pleasures of the chase. According to the writer who has assumed the name of Asser, the great Alfred was so attached to this amusement, that he condescended to teach his "falconers, hawkers, and dog-keepers" himself. 21

The very spirit which vivified the nation was in the process of change; by the middle of the tenth century, the native had become a very different person from his ancestors. Long intermarriage with the Celt and long devotion to agriculture had helped him to forget his past seafaring habits, and to develop an attitude quite foreign to that which had formerly characterized him. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that England, in the tenth century, was anything like its medieval self, or that all the ancient Teutonic practices had been abandoned. The old martial spirit is very much in evidence in

20 Wright, op. cit., pp. 63, 64.
21 Ibid., p. 67.
Anglo-Saxon poetry. Widsith, the "far traveller", sings of the necessity for "unceasing war against the folk of Attila." But Widsith also marks the dawn of a new spirit. The "far traveller" has ceased speaking and the poet comments upon the calling of the soop:

... Thus wandering, they who shape songs for men
Pass over many lands, and tell their need,
And speak their thanks, and ever, south or north,
Meet someone skilled in songs and free in gifts,
Who would be raised among his friends to fame,
And do brave deeds — till light and life are gone;
He who has thus wrought himself praise shall have
A settled glory underneath the stars. (lines 128-135).

The commingling of pagan and Christian elements is very marked in this poem. Research has unearthed many other instances of the co-existence of Christianity and paganism in a single work. Wright tells the tale of the wealthy Christian noble who built a church in honor of Our Lady but, to please his wife, caused shrines to be erected within the edifice, for the worship of pagan deities. The same authority speaks of


the existence of an Anglo-Saxon church, recently excavated [ca. 1830] in which the tile pavement is a curious combination of pagan and Christian emblems. 25 It is interesting to note how reluctantly the old customs were relinquished and how tolerant the Church was in permitting such practices to die out gradually as they eventually did. If the tenacity with which these men clung to ancient customs and the persistence of martial solemnity through much of their literature appears to the modern mind rather puerile, it must be remembered that the age under consideration is "the childhood of our own age -- the explanation of its manhood." 26

The signs of a changing spirit, however, become more and more perceptible as we continue through the Old English literature. The Battle of Brunanburh is full of passages of "artistic realism unknown to earlier works." 27 The Seafarer describes scenes of nature in phrases of beautiful harmony, yet with a touch of pathos which stamps it as distinctly Christian:

Bearwas blöstmum nimað, byrig feæ gres, wongas wlitigað, woruld ðonetæ: ealle þa gemontieormes fûsne sefan to side, þam þe swa þoncæ, on flodwegas feorr gewitan. ... Simle ðreora sum þinga gehwylce

25 Wright, History of Domestic Manners, p. 91.
The riddles, probably a development of the more ancient "kenning" were the work of authors who frequently write with vigor and liveliness and "with a zest which shows that they enjoy the freedom of the literary genre as well as the pleasure of baffling the guesser." 29 Some of the descriptions are remarkably fine. Although the traditional vocabulary of the earlier poetry is occasionally employed, there is no trace of pre-Christian folk-lore and the pessimistic moralizing of Anglo-Saxon tradition is refreshingly absent.

The spirit of pessimism is also lacking in *Deor's Lament* which Gummere considers "a charming poem which worthily leads the list among the Anglo-Saxon lyrics." 30 It tells in simple, lyric language of a singer who comforts himself for the loss of his position as court minstrel. The attitude of mind here expressed, which accepts with resignation adverse circumstances, is not mere Stoicism; it is the spirit of Christianity.

Cynewulf's poem, *The Christ*, shows the growing inclination


30 Gummere, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
to regard the world as capable of affording much happiness if
men will but keep in mind the all-important truth that it is
only a temporary abode. It depicts the joy of life and the
thrill of adventure as well as the simple gaiety which was
approaching ever nearer along the path of Christianity.

This simplicity is apparent to an even greater degree
in the extant homilies of the eleventh century. It is evident
that the speaker had the undivided attention of his audience
for he uses no rhetoric nor even any stories, but addresses
his flock simply as his children. The final sentence of a
sermon delivered on the feast of the Immaculate Conception
is indicative of the spirit which animates them:

Now then, dearest men, let us believe in Our Lord,
and love Him and keep His behests; then shall be
fulfilled in us what He himself hath declared,
"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall
see God." 31

That Christianity was the potent influence at work
during these centuries is seldom questioned, but it is not so-
frequently realized what a length of time was required before
the education, knowledge, and literature of a great civiliza-
tion could be assimilated and lend itself to natural expression
in the vernacular. 32 As late as the eleventh century there
was still very little expression of the true spirit of medieval

England. The works which have been mentioned are a curious blending of the old with the new. The old traits were becoming obscure but the martial note still pervaded the literary works, notably the paraphrases of Scripture; the Anglo-Saxon sense of humor existed only in that crude form which has given to modern English the word "fun." 35 It is a type of humor which consists mainly of practical joking and the bestowing of nicknames according to physical peculiarities. It is typical of the spirit which lies midway between the old Saxon solemnity and the merriment of medieval England. It represents quite forcibly the difficulty of blending Latin culture with Anglo-Saxon ideals and of incorporating in Anglo-Saxon literature all the refinements of Latin Christianity. 34 Many more centuries might easily have been occupied in the complete assimilation of this culture had not the process been hastened by the coming of the Normans.

The conquerors who arrived on the shores of England in 1066 were also of Teutonic origin and, therefore, kin to that mixed population of Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Danes which had blended with the remnants of the British Celts. But they,


too, had been influenced by their environment; in fact, so completely had they assimilated the spirit of France that they had become more French than the French. Their spirit of adventure had been given a new impetus by romantic chivalry which, born in Provence, had traveled northward and found ready instruments of creative expression in the Norman trouvères. 35 Not only had they responded to the call of chivalry but they had been among the staunchest supporters of the Church of Rome. Their power of adaptability was remarkable and their restlessness drove them to seek further means of utilizing this power. When the opportunity of forcing an entrance into England presented itself, they lost no time in taking advantage of it. Once in England, they almost immediately adopted English customs and, in spite of the fact that practically all the Anglo-Saxon nobles were at once replaced by Normans, French influence gradually waned. It is true that French was the official language for nearly three centuries after the completion of the conquest, but it is equally true that all the literature produced in French had a decidedly English flavor long before that date.

The most noteworthy results of the conquest, however, were evident in the reaction of the English themselves. Half-Celt, half-Teuton, their native gaiety which, for centuries, 

35 Taylor, op. cit., II, 126.
had appeared only at rare intervals, now rose to the surface and the merriment for which, in future ages, they were to be so well remembered began to make its appearance. It was almost as if a child, having an innate capacity for song but never having heard vocal music, had, on hearing the sound of a beautiful voice, suddenly realized that he, too, was capable of producing such joyous melody.

Many years were to pass before the spontaneous expression of the newly-found spirit was to enter into English literature, but it was reflected in the religious writings of medieval England as early as the twelfth century. These works are mostly didactic in tone and purpose but they indicate unerringly the rising spirit of the nation.
CHAPTER III
THE FLOWERING OF THE SPIRIT OF MERRIMENT
AMONG THE LAITY

The Middle Ages dawned later in England than on the continent. As has been pointed out, the spirit of medieval France was required to bring England's genius to full maturity. This genius was already deeply religious and it is, therefore, but natural that its earliest expression is found in the religious writings. It is somewhat surprising, however, to find to what extent the spirit of merriment had developed during the years immediately following the conquest. Had there been any vehicle suited to the expression of its growth, the new spirit might have appeared more gradually in English literature. As matters stood, with the French-speaking Normans filling all the important government positions, and the learned clergy expending all their energies upon the perfection of Latin expression, it was long before anyone appeared who was willing to champion the cause of the poor, uneducated classes who were familiar only with their native tongue.


At first, French had seemed in a fair way to becoming the literary language of the nation but its idiom was foreign and incapable of giving complete expression to native emotion. Thinking men realized this lack, and, in their effort to contribute to a national literature, introduced Latin as the vehicle best suited to the needs of the age. Latin was more suitable than the French in so far as it met the requirements of the educated classes. It failed, however, to satisfy the needs of the common people -- the backbone of the nation. Failing in this, it fell far short of its aim: the establishment of a national literature.

The old Anglo-Saxon had been the perfect medium of expression for the old martial spirit which, by the middle of the twelfth century, however, was practically non-existent. Just as the spirit of England had been stirred by Norman contact so had the language responded to the mellowing influence of French and Latin. The harsh Teutonic gutturals had softened considerably; some of them had completely disappeared. The new literary expression was capable of a development which would keep pace with the growing spirits.

The earliest writings in middle English were religious; they were the work of men with a responsibility which made written instruction imperative and which, at the same time, gave them a thorough familiarity with the lives of those to
whom and for whom they wrote. Their works give the first glimpses into the life and spirit of the nation. It is these works, then, which make it possible for the modern reader to draw aside the centuries and enter into the daily lives of the people of merry England.

A voyage into the England of the Middle Ages offers all the charm of extended foreign travel. This land, whose people are so light-hearted, so child-like in their simple gaiety, so ready with laughter, offers refreshment which could scarcely have been anticipated.

The poorer classes have sufficient for their daily wants, yet not enough to warrant any anxiety, and so, having the lightest purses, they have also the lightest hearts. The typical serf lives in a frame cottage, boasting a single large room which serves as living room, bedroom, kitchen, and dining-room for the entire family. Air and sunlight are admitted by means of the doorway and through openings in the wall -- the medieval equivalent for windows -- which can be closed by barring the heavy wooden shutters. During the day, in warm

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5 Loc. cit.
weather, the door is generally left open, thus affording an eavesdropper a glimpse of familiar household routine.

The serf's life begins at dawn, when, at the ringing of the church bells, the family rises. 6 Soon, there is the sound of children's voices as each one scurries off to his morning chores: one to the turf-pile, another to the well. 7 In the meantime, the serf, himself, having partaken of a cup of ale and, perhaps, a piece of dark bread, has hurried off to assist at Mass in the village church, for he sincerely believes that there will be no blessing on his work if he has not been present at the Consecration and gazed at the elevated Body of Christ. 8 At the end of the Mass, the priest addresses his people simply, reminding them that today is a day of fast in preparation for the morrow's great feast, Lady Day -- the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven. 9 When the congregation departs, there is no loitering in the churchyard as on ordinary days. There is much work to be done in order that tomorrow may be spent fittingly in festivities becoming to the occasion.

As soon as the serf reaches his cottage, the real tasks

6 Old English Miscellany, EETS 49, p. 21.
7 Jessopp, op. cit., p. 39.
8 John Mirk's Festial, EETS 96, p. 169.
9 Ibid., p. 231.
of the day begin; the hay must be cut and a beginning made of gathering it into the barn. The children are delighted at this prospect for they enjoy nothing quite so much as tumbling one another into the haycocks; so they set to work with a will, singing at their tasks. The sun is high in the sky when the wife cups her hands to her mouth and calls to husband and children. It is just an hour before noon, and time for the first meal of the day. There is no meat, but plenty of fresh fish and coarse bread, large jugs of milk and buckets of home-brewed ale. It is simple fare enough, but these are simple folk who require very few comforts; the simplest things give them the greatest joy. When the meal is at an end, and grace has been said, there is more work for all. The children help their mother with her household tasks while the serf joins his fellow-men in work that must be done on the master's farm. Their song lightens the task at hand; so cheerfully is it done that the signal to stop work comes almost as a surprise. In spite of the fact that they have worked hard all day, and have eaten lightly, their homeward walk is joyous. It is further enlivened by the spectacle of wandering minstrels


11 John Mirk's Festival, p. 191.

arriving at the village for the festive celebrations. 13

These wandering minstrels are a gay lot; their poverty sits very lightly upon their shoulders. 14 Their clothing may be in need of repair but their merriment is always new. There are, as usual, peddlars in their train. Indeed, there is an amusing similarity in the vocations of the two groups, the one peddling his wares, the other his songs and antics. Peddlars and minstrels have always been among the most cheerful of humans, their very trade depending for its success upon their ability to preserve a cheerful countenance on all occasions. Gaiety mends the peddlars' broken wares and colors the faded ones; it blinds the eyes to obvious defects in the minstrel's entertainment. They have always been described thus: "They were merry and sharp-tongued." 15 Now, however, the minstrels merely greet the passers-by cordially with a wave of the hand; their entertainment is scheduled for tomorrow. Even the peddlars are content to let these men go by without attempting to show their wares; they are in need of refreshment and are on their way to seek aid at the door of the manor, where they

13 Newton, op. cit., pp. 262-3.


are sure to be given food and a corner in which to rest for the night. 16

The group of serfs thins out as one by one arrives at his own cottage. The children, watching for their father’s return, run to meet him and come with him to the table where a light supper awaits them. The simple meal is soon ended and the table boards put away for the night. There are several hours of daylight remaining, and a time of relaxation for the serf. As he rests outside his cottage door, he hears his wife preparing the children for bed, and smiles as he sees her playing with the youngest child.

\[ \text{Be moder plaie\textsuperscript{\textcircled{A}} mid hire \textsuperscript{\textcircled{A}}unge deorlinge, vlih\textcircled{C}} from him, and hut hire, and let hit sitten one, and leken \textsuperscript{\textcircled{C}}eerne abuten and cleopien, Dame\textsuperscript{\textcircled{C}}} and weopen one hwule; and \textsuperscript{\textcircled{C}}eeone midd isprede ermes leape\textsuperscript{\textcircled{A}} lauwinde yor\textsuperscript{\textcircled{A}} and cluppe\textsuperscript{\textcircled{A}} and cusse\textsuperscript{\textcircled{A}} and wippe\textsuperscript{\textcircled{A}} his eien. 17 \]

Soon the child is snug in his cradle, while his mother, softly singing, lulls him to sleep. 18 This ritual completed, she comes out and sits down beside her husband; together they discuss the events of tomorrow’s celebration, anticipating with the eagerness of children its simple joys. They realize

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17 Andrew Rimble, p. 215.

that true happiness comes from contentment of heart which they guard as a rich man guards his treasure. 19 They are careful to keep their speech gentle and kindly for they have often been warned that

Wykkyd tunge makit ofte stryf
Betwyxe a good man and his wyf
Quan he rulde lede a merie lyf. 20

The mother understands the immense privilege which is hers and does all in her power to make their little home a happy one. The father depends upon her loving influence upon their children, yet, if necessary, he is ready to use his authority to enforce discipline. 21 For all their simplicity, they know that joy is never to be confused with license. They are careful, then, to guard the happiness of their home by strict adherence to the laws of God and of His Church, as well as to the social laws which bind them to the service of their lord. 22

Far from being learned, they are practically illiterate. They have, however, learned much from the priests, the lessons having been deeply impressed upon their minds by the visualization-

21 Handlyng Synne, EETS 119, l. 4849.
zation of the case in point by means of pictures and statues. Indeed, it has been truly said:

Images and payntours ben lewde menys bokys and I say boldly per ben mony thousand of pepul pat couł not ymagen in her hert how Crist was don on pe rood but as jap lerne hit be syʒt of ymages and payntours. 23

They have many simple joys: walks through the woods, stories, and games without number, in which parents take as active a part as do their children. 24

Now, as they rest at their cottage door, they are two humble peasants, representative of thousands of others whose "joy of spirit" has infected not only their own age or class, but an entire nation. 25

The peasants are not the only members of medieval English society to give expression to the affinity between contentment of heart and true joy of spirit. As the setting sun hallows the humble home of the serf, so it sheds a glory about the manor in which dwell the lord and his lady. In the early evening hours, the lady retires to her bower where, with her friends, she engages in conversation, making plans for the coming festivities, while her fingers are busy with her embroidery. 26 In the meantime, in the great hall,

24 Handlyng Synne, l. 4854.
26 Cleanness, NETS 1, l. 129.
laughter rings loud over the antics of the minstrels who are to be given hospitality here for the night. Soon, however, the merriment dies down and the household retires; the great house is quiet as if in hushed anticipation of tomorrow's feast.

Lady Day dawns bright and clear; sounds of hustle and bustle mingle with suppressed laughter as children are dressed in their finest apparel. These little ones are much the same as our modern children, just as full of roguery and impish tricks, just as hard to manage and just as lovable. The delight of wearing their best clothes to church and the anticipation of the fun to follow checks any tendency to mischief. One cannot help suspecting that the restraint will burst its bonds rather vehemently before the day is ended. 27

The lord of the manor has been up for some hours, attracted by the prospect of a "walk by a forest syde in a mern-ynge." 28 A morning walk in the woods holds great attraction for these English, particularly for the leisured class. 29 To feel the soft grass under their feet, to inhale the perfume of the flowers and trees, to listen meditatively to the song of birds gives them great delight. So this morning, when no business may be transacted because of the holyday, the lord of the

27 Handlyng Synne, II. 4850 ff.
28 Political and Other Poems, EETS 124, p. 143.
29 John Mirk's Fastial, I. 34.
manor rejoices in the opportunity of a solitary walk in the greenwood. The reflective habit of mind which he has acquired has made him not only increasingly successful in worldly affairs but also keenly interested in his own spiritual well-being and that of the members of his household. It has helped him, too, to be "dignified, sympathetic, kindly, and truthful; energetic, vigorous, and ready to encourage pleasures among his people." 30 He is, to be sure, placed in unusually favorable circumstances. Every member of his household -- every member of the village, for that matter -- is a member of the Catholic Church, thereby professing a religion which is here, in a very literal sense, a religion of ritual. This gives rise to well regulated conduct by insuring that the routines of life are closely followed in order to keep rhythm and balance in the daily lives of the people. 31 Thus happily situated, he has been able not only to assist his people materially and spiritually, but to aid, as well, in their enjoyment of the spiritual and temporal benefits. This dual role has also been instrumental in developing his own appreciation of merriment. As he retraces his steps on his homeward journey, he increases his speed, thinking of the joy he will be able to give today.


to so many of the villagers, for he has been given the honor of playing host to the parishioners after the completion of the celebrations in the church. He hums little snatches of song—wordless song, which is "pe herte michele blisse." 32 As he draws near to his home, his faithful dog races to meet him.

pe hond at eche time pet he yherp his lhord come hom he yernp to-yens him and lhapp about him and pe lhord him makep uayr ghiere and him froetep and makep him grete feste. 33

He enters, followed closely by his dog. 34 The snatches of song are forgotten now; he is again lord of the manor upon whose shoulders many responsibilities rest. He looks to see that all is in readiness for the feast and, as the church bells begin to ring, he and his lady, accompanied by the children and the entire household, make their way to the village church for the beautiful services which have been "ordeyned speealy to wurschypeoure lady." 35

They are joined on the way by groups of village folk all bent on celebrating this great feast. Everyone enters the church which is gay with lights and flowers, and all assist at the celebration of the Mass, joining at its conclusion in

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32 Lambeth Homilies, EETS 53, p. 126.
33 Avenbite of Inwyte, EETS 23, p. 155.
34 Ameren Riwe, p. 61.
35 Handlyng Synne, II. 953 ff.
"pleasant songs of praise." 36 Here there is no class-distinction, serf and peasant mingling freely with lord and knight, minstrel and pedlar. Particularly in singing hymns in praise of the Mother of God are all classes one. Love of her goodness and beauty has evoked here in England an "enthusiasm beside which all other love seems cold." 37 By this time, however, many of the young people have let their thoughts stray to the pleasant anticipation of the games and festivities which are to take place after the service has been concluded. The priest, realizing this, is careful to warn his flock that all true gaiety is such as would be pleasing in the sight of God.

36 Sawles Warde, EETS 29, p. 265.


38 "A Sermon," Reliquiae Antiquiae II, 57f.

39 Loc. cit.
laughter bursting from their lips as they pass beyond its sacred precincts. The merriment which, for the past hour or more they have been directing into the channel of religious worship now assumes its more normal tone. Were there ever such merry people anywhere as in this medieval England? Their merriment persists through all their daily occupations whether of labor or of play but its outward expression is most complete at such a time as this when the opportunity of manifesting their loving devotion to the Mother of God couples with the pure joy of a holiday when cares are thrust aside and gladness reigns. Here merrymaking and religion are inextricably interwoven. Modern scholarship has recognized in this union the "characteristic spirit of medieval England," 40 most fittingly expressed by the nightingale in The Owl and the Nightingale. This joyous songster advises all men to sing as he does since man was born for the bliss of the kingdom of heaven where "there is ever song and mirth without ceasing.... I admonish men for their good that they be merry in their mood and bid them sing here that they may sing the song that is eternal." 41

Their religion does not hamper their festivities; on the contrary, it affords them additional opportunities for

40 Ten Brink, op. cit., p. 216.

merriment. There are many feast days such as this which is being celebrated today, each having its own celebration following the Mass proper to the day. Some feasts, such as Easter, have their own miracle play, acted and sung by the clergy. Mimicry also has its place in the festive calendar, particularly on the Feast of the Epiphany when clerics taking the part of the Magi offer their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Christ Child. It is the mime which will interpret the traditional story of Our Lady's assumption into heaven today. Already, the activity has subsided somewhat as the people settle themselves in groups on the grass in the church-yard to watch the presentation of the old story. It is very briefly told, the opening act discovering the death scene of the Blessed Virgin with the Apostles kneeling around her couch overcome with grief. The subsequent scenes depicting the burial of her body and the visit of the Apostles to the tomb in which fragrant lilies are found in place of the body are acted with such reverent simplicity that the audience watches in respectful silence. 42 As the clerics leave the platform on which the scenes have been presented, all the people, led by one of the priests, burst forth in praise of

42 John Mirk's Festial, p. 231.
"her who is without spot or blemish," begging her to keep them this day from sin.

It must not be presumed, however, that any pretense is being made that everyone taking part in the festivities is entirely guiltless, temperate, and prudent in all things. Indeed, there is constant need to warn these people against the dangers of excess and the propriety of giving God the worship which is his due before beginning material celebrations. Excess, however, is always easily discernible, but it is far from being characteristic of any age or nation. This is particularly true of the period under consideration, when England had great saints and great sinners and, between these two groups, the great mass of merry, contented people.

The mime being concluded, the people walk about in laughing groups, watching the feast being spread for them near the manor. As eagerly as children, they sit down to the table, trying -- perhaps with little success -- to "let the sweetness of the food make their thoughts dwell upon God's goodness."
Their merriment loses whatever restraint it had felt at first, as the food comes on in abundance. 47 The lord and his lady mingle with the plain people, making themselves one of them, encouraging their enjoyment of the meal, 48 and eating with them. 49

... & pay bigonne to be glad dat god drink haden & ech mon with his mach mad hym at ese. 50

At the conclusion of the banquet, the music of pipes and harps calls everyone to the platform erected at the other end of the lawn where the minstrels have assembled. They, too, have feasted well and are in particularly merry mood, ready with every kind of minstrels. 51 Each minstrel is prepared to outdo himself, for to him who supplies the best entertainment the finest gift will be awarded. Most of them are in great need of a new suit of clothes — the usual reward for minstrels.

Their songs of great deeds, their tales of chivalry, as well as their amusing gyrations are well rewarded by the delight clearly written on the faces of their audience, a reward which is greatly enhanced by the anticipation of the material

47 Avenbite of Inwyt, p. 56.
48 Cleanness, ll. 125-128.
49 An Bispel, EETS 29, p. 46.
50 Cleanness, ll. 123-124.
51 Ibid., ll. 123-134.
52 F. J. Snell, op. cit., p. 302.
form it is expected to take before the end of the day... Their talents are, of course, as varied as are the tastes of the audience. One is a knife-thrower of remarkable dexterity; another is a juggler whose feats keep his spectators in breathless suspense; while a third balances a sword on the tip of his tongue and performs other deeds which are wonderful to behold.  

As the entertainment comes to an end, and the minstrels receive the coveted awards, they disperse among the people talking with them and telling tales of other towns and villages through which they have passed. The people, in the meantime, have separated themselves into groups according to the type of diversion which attracts them most at the moment. Over in a corner of the churchyard, a group of young people has begun to sing and dance a carol. Just beyond the enclosure, some boys have started a wrestling match while their older brothers enjoy a game of pitch-clout, a game very similar to the pitching of quoits which is still played in many country places today. Other men and women have sat down to discuss leisurely some story which the tales of the minstrels have recalled to mind. Down in the grove, some children have chosen one little girl as queen and they are crowning her with

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53 Ancren Riwle, p. 85.
54 Ayenbite of Inwyt, p. 207.
55 Ancren Riwle, p. 213.
a garland of flowers. Their childish laughter draws many spectators and soon they are joined in their game by a company of older folk who are not at all averse to taking part in the games of children. Meanwhile, pedlars are going in and out among the crowds, showing their wares, and "making more noise over their trifles than does a rich mercer over his costly wares," provoking laughter by their witticisms so that some people buy articles for which they have no need, merely in order to incite them to further merriment.

The day is now well advanced and once again the church bells summon the faithful to participate in the spiritual celebration of the feast. It is time for the singing of Vespers and as the priests begin the chanting of the Office, the congregation joins in the hymns,

...crofto haue pe joye of heuene wep Aungels song & mery steuene. 59

This is the concluding service of the day and when, at length, it is ended, the people take their leave of one another and, in family groups, wend their way toward home. From the height

56 Handlyng Synne, II. 937-8.
57 Avenbite of Inwyty, p. 207f.
59 Life of St. Alexius, BTS 69, p. 19.
near the churchyard, one can see little knots of men and women turning down lanes toward humble cottages, calling to children, who, still irrepressible and full of energy in spite of a full day, are loath to let the holiday slip them from them. One by one, the "windows" glow with light as household fires are kindled. The quiet of the early evening is broken by the laughter of young people who appear at intervals walking in twos along the lane. Truly, these simple country folk "know not only freedom but the sweetness of life." 61

For the nobility, however, the day's festivities are not yet at an end. In the manor house, guests have gathered who must be entertained in lordly style. 62 The great table has been set up in the hall, and the guests who are seated there are being regaled bountifully, "both with menske & with mete & minstrasy noble." 63 The singing, begun by the minstrels, is taken up by the guests in turn, each song varying with the ability and life of the singer. The knight sings of his engagements in foreign wars, the young man of the beauty of his lady. 64

61 Newton, op. cit., p. 262.
62 The Pearl, 1. 917.
63 Cleanness, 1. 121.
The parish priest, however, begs to be excused from singing
and offers to tell, instead, a story which he has recently
heard.

A Jew who lived in a Christian community sent his
son to the school conducted by the priests. It was
not long before the child became enamoured of the
Blessed Virgin and was accustomed to visit her shrine
every day. One feast day, as the other boys were ap­
proaching the altar to receive Holy Communion, a
burning desire to receive It also filled the heart
of the Jewish child. Whispering a prayer to the
beautiful Lady whom he had come to love, he approached
the altar and received the Sacred Host without any­
one’s being aware of the impropriety of the act. When
he reached home, his joy was so great that, in his sim­
plcity, he related to his father what he had done.
The Jew, in great anger, pushed the child into an
oven which was in the room and which was fiercely
heated. Soon afterward, the mother came seeking her
son, and when she learned what had happened, ran to
the oven, almost overcome with grief. When she opened
the door, expecting to find the boy dead, she saw him
sitting quietly and smiling. In answer to her tear­
ful questions, he explained that the beautiful Lady
whose image was in the Christian Church had made a
cool breeze around him and so kept him from harm in
the midst of the fire. 65

It is an appropriate tale for the priest to have told on this
Feast of the Assumption, but it is only one of hundreds which
have been circulated demonstrating the clemency of the Blessed
Virgin Mary. The remarkable point in this story is that the
recipient of her benevolence is a member of the despised Jew­
ish race, which fact seems to indicate that there are no
lengths to which she will not go in order to aid her clients!

There are, however, far merrier tales forthcoming, since each guest is expected to contribute to the entertainment. Many of them sing gestes -- old, yet ever new -- accompanied by the harper, that musician so indispensable to medieval gatherings. \textsuperscript{66} In the meantime, the lord has been moving from one part of the hall to another; he has gone

... to 
be lest on pe bench & bede hym be myry, 
Solased him with semblaunt and syled fyrr; \textsuperscript{67} 
Tron fro table to table & talked ay myrpe.

The minstrels have now assumed the role of jester and, going among the guests delight them with their nonsense. Thus, the evening wears on in gaiety and laughter, in a merriment which is the spontaneous expression of a real joy and supreme contentment of heart.

The numbers in the hall dwindle gradually as one guest after another takes his leave, until, at length, only the few who are to remain for the night sit quietly by the fire, and even the minstrels are silent. It is not long before the great house is enveloped in darkness and a deep peacefulness broods over both manor and village.

There is a strange medley of contrast and similarity apparent in the two classes of people whose characteristics are so clearly outlined in the religious works under consider-

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{The Pearl}, l. 880. 
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Cleanness}, ll. 130-132.
ation. The contrast is immediately evident in the lives of both: the serf must work hard from early morning until late afternoon in order to maintain himself and his family; the lord is required to do little or no manual labor. Both lord and serf are of a reflective habit of mind. The serf, however, must accompany his meditations with active labor or confine them within the narrow limits of the brief respite between supper and the hour for retiring. For this reason, his thoughts cannot, even if they would, become very profound. This lack of depth makes his very merriment light and, in consequence, all-pervasive. His every act breathes the atmosphere of merriment; he is gay; light-hearted, and free. 68

The noble is of the leisured class. If he so wills, many hours of each day are at his disposal for solitary reflection. His favorite recreations, hawking and fishing, are taken alone. 69 Hours spent with his most intimate friends are frequently occupied with a game of chess, which can only be played successfully by a man capable of complete concentration. Yet these hours of solitude or of thoughtful silence, far from making him morbid, give him such delight that his spirits rise to heights which appear almost foolish to those


69 "Revertere" in Miscellaneous Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse, EETS 26, pp. 18, 43.
who do not understand his temperament. He is both l'allegro and il penseroso. He is the one because he is first the other; the two elements are integral to his personality.
CHAPTER IV
MERRIMENT AMONG THOSE DEDICATED TO THE
SERVICE OF GOD

The Englishman's two-fold attraction to contemplation
and merry-making did not always accord in perfect harmony.
From the middle of the thirteenth century onward, there ap-
peared a tendency to emphasize one to the neglect of the other.
Such a tendency was perfectly natural; there is always some-
one in any group who insists upon going to extremes. From the
instances quoted in the above chapter, however, it is evident
that excess was never the general rule. Further examination in-
to the romances and other vernacular literature of the period
would certainly supplement the results of this investigation.
There can be little doubt, however, that succeeding generations
did witness a beginning of the tendency to degenerate into gross-
ness. ¹ That this degeneration was due to an exaggeration of
the spirit of merriment to the neglect of contemplation is ap-
parent in all the subsequent literature of the nation. True
merriment depended upon sincerity in religious beliefs and
practices; it gradually declined as the faith of the people

was undermined. 2

The emphasis upon merriment and its divorce from religion is, however, only half the picture. A very different kind of emphasis had made its appearance much earlier. Many of the leisured class, realizing that their attraction for contemplation was the source of their joy, began to direct more and more time and energy to its pursuit. Contrary to what might have been expected, the result was not a loss of the spirit of merriment but its complete sublimation to religion. Contemplation of divine things produced a divine merriment, a type of mysticism which was peculiarly English. To quote Ten Brink:

Divine love, in the medieval sense, became a new theme in English literature before secular love poetry as it had sprung up in the valleys of Provence nearly two hundred years before could take root there. 3

Perhaps no term in the whole of the English language has been so thoroughly and so persistently misunderstood as has mysticism. It has been confused with asceticism and even with a kind of pious inertia. There has even been the underlying belief that there is something of mystery in mysticism, whereas quite the contrary is true. Mysticism is easily de-


fined; it is the attainment which is difficult. One of the best definitions that has ever been given is also the shortest: "Mysticism is the love of God." ⁴ This is the definition of Inge who explains further that it is not merely a single act of love but a steady, ardent love which pervades every thought, word, and action, as well as every moment of the day, and which is regularly fed by the fires of contemplation. The occupations in which the mystic is engaged appear to have little or no bearing upon the degree of love to which he attains. Many who have been overwhelmed with material cares and anxieties have reached the greatest heights of union. ⁵ But this is not the ordinary rule. Usually, those who have many exterior cares become engrossed in them to the loss of the spirit of recollection so that, in the usual order of things, those who give themselves more to contemplation attain to greater heights of mystical union. ⁶ It was just so in thirteenth and fourteenth-century England. There were thousands of men and women who lived very perfect lives either as religious or as parish priests and who acquired perfection through active works of charity, either spiritual or corporal, but there were com-


⁵ Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, Mysticism in English Literature, (Cambridge: University Press, 1913), pp. 5ff.

paratively few mystics. There were several reasons for this. In the first place, there was urgent need of men and women to perform the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Every hospital and school in the country was in the hands of monks or nuns, and there seemed never to be a sufficient number of priests to administer the sacraments, particularly in outlying districts. In the second place, the difficulties attendant upon a purely contemplative form of life were obvious, and many who desired to serve God in a life of perfection believed that they could do so more whole-heartedly in a monastery where a more active kind of life was prescribed by rule. A third reason probably exists in a condition which had already been pointed out, namely, the balance which usually existed between contemplation and merriment, there having been only occasional instances of extremes in either.

The mystics, then, were very much in the minority. For this reason, as is so often the case, much more is known of them than of their more numerous brethren. Many of them have left us in writing the record of their mystical experiences. These works are instinct with a religious emotion which fed upon the life of Christ. 7 This form of emotion, typically medieval in its expression, first appeared in prose. The first representative monument thus produced is the Ancren Riwle. Its author

seems to be continually smiling, not with amusement at, his spiritual children, but with joy at their dedication to the Divine Lover and at the delights which await them when they have attained to union with their Spouse. It is full of sweetness and unctuous, yet, like so many other examples of emotional expression in prose, it lacks the vitality and joyous enthusiasm of poetry, for it is only in song that emotion can "pour forth its unimpeded strength." 8 The Middle English lyrics are the complete expression of medieval emotion. They have an "intensity and freshness of religious feeling" 9 which is unique in the history of lyric expression.

One of the earliest of the English mystics was Thomas of Hales, whose tender and charming poem, Un Luve Ron, was written early in the thirteenth century. It was composed, we are told, at the request of a "maid of Christ," who had begged him to write a love song. In the poem thus inspired, he points out the fickleness of this world's love and recommends that she espouse herself to the one Lover who will continue always steadfast -- the fairest, richest, truest Love the world has ever known. He describes in simple terms of earthly love the passionate delight and joy and peace of the soul in attaining to union with her God. In spite of a certain moralizing tendency,

8 Ten Brink, op. cit., I, 231.
9 Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 115.
which every now and then asserts itself, this lyric is a "delicate example of erotic mysticism," that is, the love and attraction of the soul for God, expressed in terms of earthly love. This is divine merriment in its very simplest form.

The type set by Thomas of Hales was imitated far and wide by English mystics even through the fourteenth century. How completely erotic it was may be judged from a passage in *A Talking of the Love of God*, a beautiful lyric written by an unidentified monk of the period.

\begin{verbatim}
Perfor my Leman
my joye & my bliss
ever glad mai I ben & blissfull to wisse
pe fals murpe of his world
to leuen & Misse
and ever resten in pe to cliuppen and cussse.
\end{verbatim}

The entire poem is a series of poetic effusions with which the modern mind finds itself strangely out of sympathy, though why this should be so is not immediately apparent. It may be the constant recurrence of the theme of sensual love, mingled with a feeling that it is too erotic to be reverent. Or, perhaps, it may be due to that influence which a recent critic calls "the hard frost of Puritanism," which has dulled our powers of perception. Yet, it must be noted that the

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
poem is certainly representative of one type of mysticism which was current in the England of the Middle Ages.

Richard Rolle of Hampole presents an entirely different type. He insists upon the necessity of purification of the heart before attempting to clutch at the fruition of spiritual union. He was one of the first to realize the dangers of neglecting such purification and to teach his disciples the futility of trying to live always in the pleasant region of devout feeling. He warned them that:

... this glow becomes rapidly extinct unless it kindles a flame in the will and intellect. All mysticism which seeks its life in inactive contemplation only is a failure. God is not to be found or known by any who leave their practical energies unused.  

He, himself, used his energies to the utmost of his power, not only in his long hours of prayer and by his endless wanderings up and down the length and breadth of England, but also in his writings. Particularly in his prose works does he seek to indicate the path by which true spiritual joy may be attained. He describes his own mystical experiences both in verse and in prose. He was a great mystic not only "because he was a great lover," but also because he had traveled the toilsome paths

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14 Horstmann, op. cit., p. iv.

of self-discipline.

His poems remind one in many ways of St. Francis of Assisi; yet, the reader is continually conscious of the fact that Rolle's lyrical outbursts are the product of a northern soil. They are more practical than the Fioretti whose spirit had been distilled directly from the love-songs of Provence and had come to maturity under the sunny skies of Italy; it could never have thrived on the English moors. ¹⁶ But Rolle's lyrics do not lose by comparison with the songs of the Poverello. They are the expression of the same love in a different tongue and in a very different atmosphere. For Richard was a typical Englishman with an intense realization of the Divine in himself as well as in others. Very early in his life he came to believe that the highest and most joyous life on earth is almost identical with the life of heaven. ¹⁷ His lyrics, informed as they are with the burning desire for more intimate union with the Beloved, are the complete expression of his life and spirit. He sings with the loving assurance of one who knows his request will be granted:

¹⁶ Comper, op. cit., p. ix.

Hail Jesus, price of my prayer,   
Lord of majesty!   
Thou art joy that lasts ay   
all delight thou art to me;  
Give me grace, as thou wilt may   
thy lover for to be.   
My longing wends never away   
til that I come til Thee. 18

Again, he insists upon purification of the heart, telling his disciples that all earthly loves must be forsaken:

Afore thee for to rest   
in Christ thy covering;  
And choose him for the best;   
he is thy wedded king.   
For joy thy heart burd brest   
to have swilk a sweeting;  
Of all I hold it worst   
to love another thing. 19

His lyrics are delightful but his advice to his disciples is often difficult. They are told to have confidence even when they can see no fruit of their labors. They are to remember that, like tapestry workers, they are to keep their eyes always on their Pattern, working always on the wrong side so that nothing is visible to their eyes but the knots and broken threads. The finished work, in all its beauty, is for the eyes of the Master —

(And here the faithful waver, the faithless fable and miss.)

18 "Jesus my Creator," Comper, op. cit., ll. 25-32.

19 "All Vanities Forsake," Ibid., ll. 177-184.
To many, this must, indeed, have been "a hard saying," particularly to the practical-minded Englishman who wants to see the results of his labors.

There were, however, a considerable number of followers who accepted Rolle's spiritual direction without question; many of them, in fact, ultimately acquired more renown than did their master. Dame Juliana of Norwich, whose *Revelations* are among the most remarkable of their type in the literature of medieval England, beside whose work Inge considers the visions of the nun, Gertrude, "a paltry record of sickly compliments and semi-erotic endearments," 20 was one of Rolle's disciples; Walter Hilton, whose *Ladder of Perfection* is known all over the Christian world, was another. It is hard to understand why Rolle should have been so eclipsed. May it, perhaps, be due to the fact that the spirit of which he is the leading exponent, the spirit of divine merriment, has been so long misunderstood? This is quite probably the chief reason, since both Hilton's work and that of Dame Juliana presented this spirit in a much modified form which was more acceptable to the conservative minds of post-Reformation England. Then, too, Rolle was a pioneer, and pioneers are often relegated to an undeserved oblivion.

Rolle's writings, however, were not only didactic but

even autobiographical. In his descriptions of his own interior life is found the delineation of the ideal at which the men and women of his school were aiming. He constantly repeats that his goal is joy, "the highest and purest joy" which is to be found in the love of Christ above all earthly loves.

... Gernyng and delite of Ihesu Criste, pat has na thych of worldes thoghtes, es wonderfully pure, haly, and faste; when all oper besynes and affececyons and thoghts are drawn away oute of his saule that he may hafe ryste in Goddes lufe, the delyte is wonderfull. It es sa heghe pat no thoghtes may reche par-te. 21

Souls who strive after this ideal are frequently rewarded by our Lord with the privilege of hearing, even in the midst of worldly business, the song of angels which is so beautiful that "it may noght be dyscryued by no bodyly lyknes, for it is ... abown all manere of ymgynacyoune and manis resen." 22 Rolle was conscious of the sounds of this heavenly symphony even at feasts -- "though then most faintly." 23 He was evidently often invited to attend the feasts at the homes of great lords, for he tells us that "the lyre of delight which he heard there did not please him and when songs were sung of the love of women, he smiled and, in his heart, converted what they said to

22 Ibid., X, p. 17.
This passage is particularly interesting as it calls attention to a point which distinguishes him from many other mystics. For him, the culminating mystical experience took the form of melody, rhythm, harmony. He is the most musical of mystics; where others see or feel Reality, he hears it. Hence, Spurgeon tells us:

His description of his soul's adventures is peculiarly beautiful; he thinks in images and symbols of music, and in his writings we find some of the most exquisite passages in the whole literature of mysticism, veritable songs of spiritual joy.

Rolle never became a priest, but wandered up and down England, the first of a long line of English lay preachers, all of whom received, just as did Rolle, more persecution than appreciation, more ridicule than acceptance.

A study of Richard Rolle is not a personal study of one man, for he is a type individualized. There must have been scores of others like him; the amount of mystical literature written prior to the opening of the fifteenth century, each work emphasizing some different strain in the great symphony of Divine Love, indicates the magnitude of its appeal.

There can be no doubt of the sincerity of such men and women; many of them suffered acutely in order to pursue their ideal. Yet they were merry because they were close to God.

24 Allen, Writings Ascribed to Richard Rolle, p. 119.
25 Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 117.
Indeed, they came nearer than most men to attaining the happiness which they sought, a happiness which is real and actually attainable -- the hundredfold in this life which God has promised to those who leave all for him.

Not all those who aspired to perfection, however, as has already been pointed out, were called to a purely contemplative life. Monastic institutions sprang up all over England in which both men and women rendered glad service to God by works of charity and prayer. The Dominicans first arrived in England in the year 1220, followed in the next year by the Franciscans and, later still, by the Cistercians. The spirit of each foundation was different, not only from that of the Benedictines and Gilbertines who were already in England, but from one another. The Dominicans emphasized the duty of preaching the Gospel, while the Cistercians led a life of extreme asceticism in which strenuous manual labor was combined with the perfection of choral prayer in the recitation of the Divine Office. Asceticism was more marked among the Cistercians than in the other orders. Of many a white friar could it have been said:

... wel joyful he was po
And al his game was in is hgorit:
For is bodi was ful of wo. 26

The Franciscans, on the other hand, practising poverty in all

26 Life of St. Edmund, EETS 87, 11. 588f.
its simplicity and ministering with utmost tenderness to the 
wants of the poor, the sick and the aged, appear to have adapt-
ed themselves more readily than the others to the existing 
spirit. Perhaps this was because they brought with them the 
legacy of St. Francis' own merriment, simplicity, and light-
heartedness. 27

The thirteenth century was the "golden age of English 
monachism," 28 an era when, in every monastery there was "good 
Pais ... and love and murpe i-nov." 29 As a matter of fact, 
until well into the fourteenth century, there was so much to 
be done in the monastery that there was little time for idle-
ness; it was a hive of industry which offered no attractions 
for drones. It offered many attractions, however, for those 
who were willing to work and loved prayer. It is Medley's 
opinion that "the life of the quietest medieval monk in the 
most secluded monastery of England must have consisted in a 
succession of interesting episodes." 30 The monks do seem to 
have enjoyed themselves. There was always a recreation period 
during the day when they were permitted to play just as hard as 
they worked, if they so desired. No games in particular are

28 Ibid., p. 160.
29 Life of St. Edward, METS 87, p. 47.
mentioned in the rules, but from statutes of individual convents and monasteries in which certain games were forbidden, it becomes evident that many games must have been permitted. There are more positive evidences, too: there was a "play chamber" in the monastery at Finchal, and a "bowling allie" at Durham. Many institutions made provisions for the monks to play ball, at certain times of the day and, of course, during certain seasons. The monk was, however, supposed to have given himself to his religious order when he made his vows and, therefore, was not permitted to indulge in any dangerous sport. All types of hunting were eventually forbidden, probably because more than one monk had been injured while indulging in this form of recreation. One monk who was thus inconvenienceed has left a record of his short-lived delight:

In a noon tyd of a somers day
  þe sunne schoon ful myrie þat tide
I took myn hawk al for to play.
Mi spaynel rennynge bi my side
A feisaunt hen seone gan y se
Myn hound put up ful fair to fliȝt
I sente my faukun, y leet him flee
It was to me a deinteouse siȝt
My faukun fliȝaste to his pray
I ran þo with a ful glad chere.
I spurned ful soone on my way,
My leg was hent al with a brere. 31

Strangely enough, the gayest part of the monastery seems

31 "Revertere!" Miscellaneous Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse, EETS 26, p. 115.
to have been the infirmary. This was due to the fact that most of the patients were there temporarily merely because they had been recently bled. The regulations given for the care of such patients are very minute. In particular, they must eat well, and hold "merry converse" with one another in order that they may not become down-hearted. 32 The same prescriptions are given for nuns. They, too, are warned that they must wisely take care of themselves when they "are indisposed ... or dispirited, or grieved about some matter ... that long after ye may labor the more vigorously in God's service for it is great folly for the sake of one or two days to lose tem." 33

Perhaps the best picture of the merriment of the monasteries can be gleaned from the spirit of the religious writings. Men and women who had been accustomed to expressing their joy of spirit in merriment could never have endured life in a monastery had all such outward expression been suppressed. The author of the Ancren Riwle tells his spiritual daughters that "true anchoresses are indeed birds of heaven that fly aloft and sit on the green boughs singing merrily." 34

If the Benedictine and Gilbertine monasteries which


33 Ancren Riwle, p. 423.

34 Ibid., p. 133.
existed in England long before the thirteenth century were havens of peace and joy to which the monks were only too glad to return when their missions of charity had been accomplished, surely those of the Franciscans and the others who came later were not less so. To all of them can certainly be applied what was said in the Moral Poem in the middle of the twelfth century:

par is alre murpe mest mid anglen songe. 35

The authors of all the works from which quotations have been taken in the preceding chapters of this study must have been men of a light-hearted, merry disposition, since there is nothing so self-revealing as that which is inadvertently revealed. An autobiographical aim was undoubtedly the farthest thing from the minds of the priest and monks who wrote these religious works. Hence, the works, themselves, presented the most reliable picture of the authors and the age in which they lived. They are all typical Englishmen, very practical and determined that the English tongue shall not be forgotten. John Lindbergh, whom Hupe believes to have been the author of the Cursor Mundi, was just such a true-born Englishman who wanted his English congregation to read as well as speak their native language. 36


"Frenchmen," he says indignantly, "do not tell their tales in English; why should we tell ours in French?" 37 The whole lengthy poem is written in a tone which admirably expresses the spirit of the nation, and there is nothing in all the contemporary literature which would indicate that he was different from any other parish priest of the time. However uninteresting the Cursor Mundi may appear to the critical mind, it was, nevertheless, highly acceptable to the men of his generation who were ready to receive it in the spirit in which it was written—a spirit of joyful simplicity which takes delight in heavenly conversation not only because the subject is just as entertaining "as the gestes of Charlemagne, the deeds of Arthur, and the romance of Gawain," but also because they may thereby be aided in their quest for the perfect bliss of heaven. 38

Richard Poore, Bishop of Salisbury, is believed to have been the author of that delightful prose work, the Ancren Riwele, which combines so perfectly the two characteristic elements of the medieval Englishman, devotional feeling and a sense of humor. He, too, is typically English. He wrote the entire

37 *Cursor Mundi*, EETS 101, 11. 246-250.

lengthy rule for his anchoresses in order that they might not be constrained to follow the rules of any foreign congregation. His work has a wide human appeal even today.

John Mirk, a Canon Regular of St. Augustine, was a contemporary of Chaucer; hence, the age in which he lived was one of change. In his work, the real spirit of merry England appears in its purity, as yet unadulterated by the sophistication which, in a generation as yet unborn, was destined to change its very essence. The content of the Festial very closely resembles the Golden Legend of the Scottish John Barbour in its presentation of an amazing variety of tales intended to be used by the laity -- not, as is generally believed, for the priests as a guide or supplement to their sermons. This latter office was reserved for his Instructions for Parish Priests, a work which is purely didactic in character and has little interest for the present study. One example from the Festial will serve to illustrate the nature of its contents.

Seynt Nycolas ... had grete compassyon to all yat werne ym woo. For when his fadyr and his moder bope werne dede, pay laftyn hym wordely good inogh, ye wheche he spende apon hom yat were nedy. Then fell hit soo yat per was a ryche man, yat had pre doghtren, fayre women and yong; but by myschet, he was fallen yn such pouerte, yat for grete nede he ordeynet his doghtren forto becomyn woynen, and so to gete

hor lyuyng and his bope. But when Nycholas herd perof, he had gret compassyon of hem; and on a nyght, priuely at a wyndow, he cast unto pe mannys chambur a gret some of gold yn a bagge. Pen in pe mornyng, when pys mon found pys gold, he was soo glad pat no man cowpe tell; and wyth his gold anon he marie his edlyst doghtyr... 40

Of course, this happened a second and a third time and finally resulted in the poor man's discovering his benefactor. "But Nycholas charched hym forto kepe hit cownsell, whyles he lyuet." 41

This is typical of the kind of story which appealed to the medieval English mind. The Festial contains scores of such tales. It gained immense popularity, becoming one of the most frequently reproduced works in Middle English. Its record of eighteen editions in less than fifty years is unique in the annals of fourteenth and fifteenth century literature.

The Festial, moreover, is a monument to the devotion which the English people had for the Mother of God. Her name is ever on their lips; her miracles are innumerable. Shrines erected in her honor sprang up all over the country, there having been more than two hundred well-known places of pilgrimage by the middle of the fifteenth century. 42

41 John Mirk's Festial, p. 25.
42 Loc. cit.
Undoubtedly, there were quite a few extravagances and abuses attendant upon the devotion. We may nevertheless believe that the simple faith and devotion of the people was often rewarded in proportion to their honest intention of paying respect to the Mother of God. Nor is there any reason to believe that these forms of piety had on the whole a delusive effect, fostering nothing but spiritual weakness and superstition. "The purity, pity, and motherliness of Mary were always the dominant motive." 43

In spite of occasional extravagances, there can be no doubt that the homage paid to Our Lady, particularly in England during the Middle Ages, was universal. Even John Wyclif, in one of his famous sermons, said, "It seems to me impossible that we should obtain the reward of Heaven without the aid of Mary. There is no sex, age, rank, or position ... which has no need of her help." 44

Examples of this widespread devotion could be multiplied indefinitely. There is scarcely a single instance of medieval architecture remaining today which has not her image gracing its pillars or carved into its walls. Yet her name was engraved even more deeply in the hearts of the people. It is small wonder that she should have responded to such love with


44 "Sermons of John Wyclif," quoted by Herbert Thurston, op. cit., p. 463.
miracles. Many of the favors reported to have been granted through her intercession seem strangely out of keeping with her dignity as Queen of Heaven, and some of the miracles are not at all fitting according to the modern sense of propriety. But there can be no doubt of the reverence with which she was regarded by everyone in the land which came to have the enviable title of "Our Lady's Dower."

Robert Mannyng's Handlyng Synne is another religious work which is replete with references to the love of the people for Our Lady. Mannyng was a Gilbertine monk of Bramle, who wrote his work with a view to the correction of evils which were creeping in with increasing persistence toward the end of the fourteenth century. Yet he is representative of the spirit of merriment since his work is full of stories of local origin told in order to amuse and to edify his hearers. To this end, he deliberately omitted from his translation of the Manuel des Peches of William of Waddington many theological dissertations and other French encumbrances in order to appeal more directly to his English audience. He was merry with a true medieval merriment, yet he was quite capable of speaking scathingly to those who indulged in merry-making at the expense of religious reverence. 45

Many instances are available of the prevalence of the spirit of merriment among the clergy. There were even some who were not above playing tricks on their parishioners to teach them some well-deserved lesson. But rising far above every other expression of merriment, two are most prominent: the love of Our Lady and a passion for music. Both are embodied in the heart and spirit of medieval England. Their union is a concrete exemplification of the merriment in its truest sense.

Music is constantly allied with religion; even the Kyrie eleison of the Mass is called a "murie song." There is no end to the examples which could be quoted from the lives of the saints in support of the claim that music was necessary for the happiness of the people and that it would help them attain to eternal joy as well. One of the saints whom they particularly loved to quote was St. Dunstan. He was well beloved in all sections of the country but especially in the South where he had lived. His love of music had endeared him to the hearts of all. They loved to tell of his joy in playing upon the harp.

``harpe he louede swyve wel, for of harpe he coupe i-nouh A day he sat in his sola and a lay Per-on he drouh.``


47 Life of Saint Dunstan, EETs 87, 11. 117-121.

48 Ibid., 11. 125 ff.
The poem goes on to relate how, while he was playing the harp and singing to himself, the bell sounded for dinner. At once, he ceased his song and hung the harp upon the wall, when

\begin{verbatim}
Al bi hire-self heo gon harpen:
   a murie antempne ivis ...
   þe harpe song al bi-hire-self as heo
   heng bi þe walle. 49
\end{verbatim}

Another holy man, beloved all over the land, was Bishop Robert Grosseteste, of Lincoln. So great was his renown that his contemporaries did not hesitate to call him "saint." He, too, was a great lover of music and, like St. Dunstan, found great pleasure in the music of the harp. Indeed, he likened it to a meditation on the joys of heaven.

\begin{verbatim}
One asked hym onys, resun why
He hadde delyte in mynstrelsy.
He answered hym on þys manere
Why he helde þe harper so dere;
"þe vertu of þe harpe þurgh skylle & ryȝt
Wyl destroye þe fendes myȝt;
And to e croys by gode skylle
Ys þe harpe lykened weyle..." 50
\end{verbatim}

Indeed, the good bishop was far from being alone in his love of minstrelsy. Priests and monks all over England are known to have hired them for the celebration of great feasts. More than one monastery had its own minstrels, though whether they were members of the community or not we are not told.

49 Life of St. Dunstan, 11. 128ff.

50 Handlyng Synne, 11. 4752-4759.
Bishop Grosseteste had his own harper, whose room was in the next chamber, "besyde hys stody." 51

The more we read, the more we are convinced that King David would have thoroughly understood these men. He would have joined them in their merry-making, reminding them occasionally, perhaps, by his very presence, that they should remember even in their play that they were always in the sight of God. He would certainly have been at one with them in their enjoyment of music. Robert Mannyng was aware of the kinship existing between the spirit of David and that of the men of fourteenth century England. He knew that the intensity of their natures was likely to throw off all restraint imposed by religion, making their merriment deteriorate to the level of mere "goliardy" or even to the lower paths of sin, as David had once done. So, reminding them that minstrelsy is good and very pleasing to God if it is not indulged in for its own sake, he continues:

Therefor, gode men, ye shul lere,
When ye any gleman here,
To wurshep God at youre powere;
As David seyth yn the sauter:
Yn harpe, yn thabor, and symphan gle
Wurshepe God; yn troumpes and sautre;
In cordys, an organs, and bellys ryngyn:
Yn all these, wurshepe ye hevene kyng. 52

51 Handlyng Synne, l. 4748.
52 Ibid., ll. 4768-4775.
Thus, as always, in every religious writing from the Poema Morale to the work of Brunne, there is a continual refrain of joy. They counsel moderation in the external manifestation of the interior spirit while they advocate further cultivation of that spirit by the directing of all their joys to God.

It has been shown how literally this advice was followed by men and women in every walk of life: serfs, minstrels, pedlars, and wealthy nobles, as well as priests, monks, and nuns. Its extremes have been noted in the mystics whose love of God became its own expression of merriment requiring no other external manifestation. It remains now to consider those who, disregarding the advice so frequently and unstintingly given, devoted themselves to the pursuance of merriment for its own sake and thus lost all semblance of the original spirit.

Strictly speaking, such men are beyond the scope of this study, yet so often has their merry-making been mistaken for the genuine merriment of medieval England, that much misunderstanding has arisen regarding it.

This misconception of the medieval genius may have arisen from Chaucer's presentation of it in his Canterbury Tales. Yet, it must be remembered that Chaucer, himself, was a better representative of the real English spirit than many of his characters. To say that the Wife of Bath, for instance, was a typical medieval Englishwoman is certainly to overstep
the mark, yet she is the only laywoman portrayed. The prioress was certainly not representative of medieval nuns in general since, for the most part, nuns were not permitted to go on pilgrimages. The general laxity which, toward the end of the fourteenth century was undoubtedly creeping into the convents and monasteries was destructive of rather than representative of the genuine spirit of merriment. There were hundreds of monastic institutions in England in which the rule was being kept in its original simplicity until the time of their suppression during the English Reformation.

This statement is far from being a criticism of Chaucer. Such temerity would approach to foolishness. It does, however, indicate the error into which many readers of Chaucer have fallen, namely, that of misinterpreting his gently satirical presentation of men and women whose idiosyncrasies had taken them off the beaten path as being in any way typical of the people of medieval England.

The portraiture of Chaucer's men and women was almost immediately supplemented by Langland's *Piers Plowman*. He whom Christopher Dawson is pleased to call "the Catholic Englishman par excellence, at once the most English of Catholic poets and the most Catholic of English poets," 55 paints for us a picture

of an England which is "not the idealized Catholic England of
the apologist, nor the Merry England of medievalist myth." 54
Evidently Dawson, like so many other critics has taken the
last quarter of the fourteenth century in the near environs
of the great city of London as representative of all medieval
England.

Actually, William Langland was a cleric in minor orders
whose poverty, combined with an unusually keen intellect, made
him poignantly aware of the disorders which were taking place
all about him. He was living in an age of profound social and
spiritual change:--

... an age of ruin and rebirth, of apocalyptic fears
and mystical hopes. It was the age of the Great
Schism and the Black Death and the Hundred Year's
War ... but it was also an age of poets and mystics
and saints. 55

Langland saw all these tremendous changes going on about him
and, with the vision of a seer, points out the tremendous cata-
clysm toward which England is heading. Langland, however,
passed most of his life in London, where the worst aspect of
the change were apparent and where the most undesirable ele-
ments met because there was money to be made. Langland was
evidently greatly distressed; his remarkable foresight showed

54 Ibid., p. 160.

55 Ibid., pp. 160-161.
him the rocks toward which the ship of state was heading. With an immense, heroic effort, he points out all the errors of the day, and they were many. But it is beyond his purpose to investigate the hundreds of towns and villages all over England where the stream of life ran deeper and calmer, untouched by the winds of storm and stress which were whipping into wild disorder those whose lives were lived nearer the surface.

Living as he did in the midst of turmoil, Langland could not have been expected to understand that there were millions of his countrymen upon whom the storm had had no noticeable effect, at least as yet. Chaucer, on the other hand, with his greater breadth of vision and frequent association with village folk, could only point out with amused interest the eccentricities which he witnessed in those about him. He was not a preacher but an artist with all the artist's love of the unusual. Langland ignored the spirit of merriment which still prevailed to a very large extent; Chaucer took it for granted.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study has been to posit the theory that the merriment of medieval England was religious in essence and to present the evidence of the religious writings in Middle English in support of the theory. From what has been seen, it is apparent that the religious writers, themselves, believed such to be the case. However, the question may well arise whether secular writers of the period have presented a similar picture. A brief examination into the non-religious writings reveals a varied interpretation of the meaning of merriment.

The humor in the satires of the time was an extremely caustic form of merriment which scarcely evokes more than a fleeting smile of amusement today. It bristles with laudatory remarks on gluttony and lascivious living curiously combined with petitions for mercy at the hour of death, or more strangely still, with pleas that the devil will be gracious to the author's soul. The foremost satirists were the authors of the so-called goliardic poetry. This was very far from being a true imitation of the type as it originated in France and

1 L'Estrange, History of English Humour, pp. 183 ff.
Germany. Their works are, in fact, "mere expressions of the satiric and ascetic spirit and make not even the pretense of perpetuating the personality of Golias" -- a possible evidence of the inability of the English temper to accept a joke as intended without coloring it with its own national spirit. The attempt of some Englishmen to "dance to the tune which had been set them from abroad" resulted in a sort of satirical poetry which was neither English nor Catholic, although, strangely enough, most of its advocates were clerics many of whom were eventually ordained to the priesthood. 2 These goliards, as they came to be called, appear to have been in the clerical order somewhat the same class as the jongleurs and minstrels among the laity, riotous and unthrifty scholars who tended the tables of the wealthier ecclesiastics and gained their living and clothing by practising the profession of buffoons and jesters. 3 If the language of this satirical poetry seems to us rather indelicate, it must be remembered that decency is the child of refinement and "although there was less delicacy in the language and, perhaps, in the habits of medi-


3 Thomas Wright, Poems Attributed to Walter Map, pp. ix ff.

This fact is apparent in a study of the early medieval drama. The earliest plays are somewhat angular and stiff; they are entirely lacking in pathos, realism, and humor, but they also lack vulgarity. It was only when the shackles of the moral code began to be thrown off, that vulgarity with its ensuing lack of reverence began to appear on the English stage, and the merriment of the English people began to degenerate into that inferior product -- fun. 5

The indelicacy of language and habits of medieval England is apparent to an even greater degree in the only instance of the fabliau which can lay claim to English origin, Dame Sirith, an unlikely and most unattractive story of a young wife who is easily persuaded to disregard all principles of right living by the fear of being bewitched. Many other fabliaux appear in English, however, brought from other lands. These range from the perfection of form in the story of The Fox and the Wolf and that of Chauntecleer to the vulgar level of The Miller of Trumpington. The authors of the fabliaux, then, present merriment as a mere external characteristic -- the enjoyment of comedy -- with a type to suit every taste. 6

The comic poetry of the fabliaux was destined eventually to give way to the ballads, but, with the possible exception of

5 Ten Brink, History of English Literature, II, 244.
6 Ker, Medieval English Literature, pp. 173 ff.
Judas, a rhyme of the thirteenth century, there were no examples of ballads prior to the year 1400. The predecessor of the ballad is the carole, originally a ring dance, in which the story is told by a narrator, with the audience singing and dancing at the refrain. The non-religious caroles appear to have been spirited rather than merry and throw almost no light upon the character of English merriment.

Closely connected with these caroles, however, are many literary games and nonsense rhymes of many varieties, "connected with the serious art of poetry which had its own toys and trifles." 7 One example of a verse of the twelfth century on Nothing will serve to illustrate this humorous type of nonsense verse:

The song I make is of no thing
Of no one nor myself I sing
Of joyous youth nor love longing
Nor place, nor time,
I rode on horseback, slumbering,
There sprang this rhyme! 8

The romances were chiefly the literature of the court. Here, merriment is often to be understood as "merry-making" particularly in the month of May when flower garlands are woven and bestowed upon the queens of beauty, and knights and maidens play at raising flowers upon one another. But it is far more

7 L'Estrange, History of English Humor, pp. 21ff.
8 Loc. cit.
frequently the same outward expression of inward contentment as that which has been seen in the religious writings. There is, in fact, a striking similarity between the picture of medieval life presented by the English romances and that depicted in the religious writings. Dale has drawn just such an interesting sketch by harmonizing incidents from a number of Middle English romances. A single quotation may serve to illustrate this point:

After dinner, usually follows evensong in the chapel; and then the evening is spent in merry conversation and social intercourse. Perhaps there is dancing; perhaps the company proceeds:

Some to chamber and some to bower
And some to the high tower
And some in the hall stood;
And spake what hem thought good.
Men that were of that citee
Enquired of men of other countree
Of Calabre land who was king.

The traveller is always assailed on every side for the latest news of the lands through which he has passed, and is always sure of an interested and attentive audience. When his tale is told, one of the knights brings out his harp, and accompanies himself as he sings his lay; for the perfect knight is always musical. We notice the rapt attention of his audience for he is a famous harper. He is also renowned for his knowledge of all that appertains to venery; and from him all the terms of hunting come, hawking and blowing the horn, so that all are in admiration of him. At the close of the song, some of the knights sit down to play chess with the ladies; the game is always a favorite. One of them had once gone on board a Norwegian ship to buy falcons, and had stayed to play chess with the merchants; so engrossed had he been in the game that he had not noticed when the ship put out to sea, and so he had been carried to a distant shore.

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From a survey of the varied interpretations of merriment in the literature of medieval England, it becomes evident that its essence sprang from the deep faith of the people; where religion was deliberately set aside, the merriment has lost its savor. The effect of fusing religion and merriment into mysticism has also been demonstrated. Divine merriment aided Divine love. The greater the mystic's love of God, the more joyful he became; the more he sang of his delight in God, the more closely did he attain to the union which he so ardently sought. Thus, Divine love was not only the cause of the mystic's joy; it was its effect as well.

An attempt has also been made to indicate the effect of divorcing merriment from religion. Poets and historians have inadvertently assisted in demonstrating the folly of such separation. They have shown how the Reformation undermined the spirit of the previous age, forcing merriment to sign its declaration of independence and, with the same signature, its own death warrant. For the era became in the words of Spenser, an age that was

... in its prime,
A very, merry, dancing, drinking,
Laughing, quaffing, and unthinking time. 10

Thus, what would have been reproved as "goliardy" in an earlier epoch became now the informing principle of English

10 Jameson, The Decline of Merry England, p. 15.
merriment. Again and again, particularly in the writings of foreign visitors to the country, one becomes conscious of the shallowness of the joy and courtesy portrayed and of a somewhat false note in the music and song. It is almost as though these later-day Englishmen had gone on laughing and singing merely from force of habit rather than from any deep interior joy. No longer is there any attempt at prolonged reflection or contemplation; the great feasts are no longer celebrated with their one-time splendor. The people must perforce laugh and sing, rejoicing in the worldly prosperity which they now enjoy in a measure never anticipated by their grandparents.

There were still some thinking men in England, but these, unfortunately, allowed their zeal for reform to blind them to the essential interdependence of religion and merriment. So outraged were they by the shallowness of the prevailing spirit that they enacted harsh measures to remove all merriment and substitute a cold, unfeeling religion which is, if possible, even farther removed from God than irreligion. Thus it was that the cold, frosty breath of the Puritan regime completed the destruction of the flower of England's merriment. It is difficult to imagine two eras in the history of the same nation more contradictory than the medieval period which witnessed the opulence of English merriment and the Puritan era which witnessed its death. Of the two, certainly the former presents
the more pleasing picture.

Many hands have attempted to portray accurately the true picture of medieval England. Some have blurred the beauty of the scene by a naturalistic tendency to depict minute details. Some, standing upon the eminence of the twentieth century, have pointed a mocking finger at its short-comings. Still others who occupy the same eminence have idealized it, portraying the entire scene in the glowing colors of a romance. There have been a few artists, however, who have known how to eliminate irrelevancies and to present a truly realistic picture in a few bold strokes. John Ruskin has said somewhere:

The Middle Ages had their wars and agonies, but also intense delights. Their gold was dashed with blood; but ours is sprinkled with dust. Their life was inwove with white and purple; ours is one seamless stuff of brown. 11

Yet it is to be wondered whether Ruskin, himself, would have been willing to exchange his seamless, brown life for the more brilliant but less comfortable life of the Middle Ages. Comfort is not at all the same thing as happiness. Our modern way of living is very comfortable but, unfortunately, we are none the happier for it. England, in the Middle Ages, was in its youth, and joy is the mark of youth just as comfort is the

mark of the elderly. Young people, as Salzman so aptly remarks, "can enjoy the simple art of camping out while elderly folk prefer to sit at home in comfort enjoying punctually served meals, and cushioned chairs." 12 Indeed, the closer we look at medieval England, the more we shall be inclined to picture it to ourselves as young and joyous. But we must not forget the dark side of the picture.

Dirt and squalor and its inseparable companion, disease, were everywhere. It was a period when life was held very cheap; law was savage and vindictive: the criminal who escaped hanging was likely to have a hand or foot cut off or to be blinded or mutilated in other ways. 13 Yet all this disease and poverty and incredible cruelty did not quench the note of joy; the Middle Ages were full of merriment and laughter. Men did not hesitate to mingle laughter with their religion; on the contrary, as we have seen, merriment and religion were practically inseparable, "due to the reality with which men regarded their religion as closely associated with their personal lives." 14 Salzman, who has given this realistic portrayal of medieval England, puts the final artistic touch to the picture in these words:


13 Loc. cit.

14 Loc. cit.
All the poverty and discomforts of the middle ages could not extinguish its joy, which was the joy of a nation in its youth. Indeed, a childlike acquiescence in the existing state of affairs existed until the Renaissance reached England in the latter half of the fifteenth century. 15

With the fifteenth century, we leave the Englishman upon the threshold of modern life, face to face with the ideals of his future. We have seen him emerging from the darkness of his continental wanderings, healthy, vigorous, and masterful. We have watched his conversion and noted his passionate love for God and the difference Christianity made in him. 16 We have seen his spiritual development under the patronage of the Church, and the unfolding of his spirit of merriment as he mingled with Celt, Dane, and Norman. We have seen his love for God express itself in a life than which no nation's has ever been more merry. Would that that merriment might have been permitted to mature with the nation!


16 Edmund Dale, National Life and Character in the Mirror of Early English Literature, p. 535.
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(Note: Modernized versions of Middle English writings invariably have critical material incorporated in the text. They have, therefore, been listed in this bibliography in section II A: pages 92 - 100).
The thesis submitted by Mother Mary Natalie Logan has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

May 28, 1946

Assistant Dean of the Graduate School