Robert Mannyng of Bourne’s ‘Handlyng Synne’ and South Lincolnshire Society

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It is still not the usual custom for historians in England to regard works of literature as primary source material for their researches into the past. All too often the piece of imaginative writing remains the exclusive preserve of the language or literary scholar, while the historian concentrates his attention on apparently more ‘objective’ documentation. The medieval period is one which has traditionally offered most scope for an integration of ‘historical’ and ‘literary’ evidence by critics, but usually this has amounted to little more than the practice of repeatedly quoting from contemporary authors in order to support general propositions about society or its institutions. We might as illustration cite the examples of three books generally regarded as important to, and respected by, the student of medieval England: G. C. Homans’ English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century; J. R. H. Moorman’s Church Life in England in the Thirteenth Century; and H. S. Bennett’s Life on the English Manor. 1

Each of these volumes reflects both the strengths and the weaknesses of this method of inquiry. On the positive side, the authors undertake an exploration which begins to integrate the ‘historical’ documentation describing what men did with the ‘literary’ evidence of what they thought. As a result, we are beginning to see medieval England in more than two dimensions, actually in the round and comprising a surface topography of historical places and events which are the outward manifestation of an underlying contemporary mentality. The student of society is coming to realise that ‘ideas and attitudes’ are crucial determinants of ‘action’ and the form this eventually takes. In other words, it is now clearly not enough for the historian merely to describe a chain of events. Similarly, the literary scholar who takes no account of the circumstances of a work’s composition is failing to grasp the fundamental significance of his subject.

The integration of literary and historical evidence, however, has usually been attempted in the past in a way which now seems to us rather suspect. Firstly, it is — as our experience of news reporting would confirm — quite easy to lift a remark from its context (literary or otherwise) and, if not actually distort its original meaning in the process at least imbue it with a significance that was certainly never intended by the author. Secondly, there is so much literary evidence from which the medieval historian might judiciously choose his quotations that almost any reasonable proposition he cares to make could be supported by contemporary writers. In addition, the critic of literature is justified in complaining of the use of texts in this way, pillaged as they are for quotable remarks. Over the years, there have emerged certain ‘favourite’ medieval texts which have almost unfailingly supplied appropriate contemporary attitudes in support of historians’ arguments about English society: Piers Plowman, The Canterbury Tales and Handlyng Synne being three of the most popular sources. Each has been plundered by historian treasure-hunters, even though — in the case of the latter — relatively little scholarly attention has been directed at the work as a whole. ‘So little is understood about the work from which you have extracted your evidence’, we hear the anguished critic cry! Handlyng Synne, however, is a poem which should be of the most considerable interest to the student of Lincolnshire society, and it is surprising that so little is known about it either within or outside the county. But its real importance derives from the fact that the circumstances of its composition are now established, and we may use it as a means of approaching the south Lincolnshire society around the turn of the fourteenth century within which and for whom the poem was written. It will afford the historian-critic direct access and new insights into local affairs at the time it was being composed.

In this short essay I should like to unveil the poem in this new light, and try to indicate the sort of information about medieval south Lincolnshire which can be teased from it. A study of the poem as a whole will be a most rewarding exploration of what the inhabitants of the area were thinking at the time, of contemporary events, and of the prevailing social and economic conditions there. I shall begin by describing the circumstances of its composition, its general overall character and some of the insights it provides into the life and attitudes in south Lincolnshire at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Handlyng Synne is a unique poem in more than one respect. The wealth of interesting detail about medieval life which it contains is only half the story. What is even more unusual about it is the amount of detail we have concerning its composition. It is rare for us to know anything at all of the ‘background’ to a medieval text; frequently we do not even know the author’s name, let alone the date and place of composition and for whom it was produced. The author of Handlyng Synne declares all of this to us at the opening of his poem:

To alle crystyn men vndir sunne,
And to gode men of Brunne(8),
And spechi, alle be name,
pe felaspehe of Sympringhame(8),
Roberd of Brunne greete 3ow
In al godenesse þat may to prow.
Of Brunnewake ym Kesteune,
Syxe myle be syde Sympringham euene,
Y dwelled yn þe pryore
Fyfere 3ere yn cumpayne,
In þe tyme of gode dane lôn
Of Camelon(8), þat þow ys gone:
In hys tyme was þere ten 3ere,
And knewe and herd of hys maneres;
Seyyn with dane lôn of Clyntone(8),
Fyue wynytr wyþ hym gan y wone;
Dane Felyp was maister þat tyme(8),
þat þow y bryn þys englysh ryne.
þe 3ere of grace fyl ban to be
A bousynd & þre hundred & þre.
In þat tyme turnede þis bryn
On englys is tunge out of frankys,
Of a boke as þe fonde ysne;
Men cleype þe boke ‘handyng synne’.
In freshe þer a clerk hyt se,
He cleype hyt ‘manuel de pecches’.

(lines 57-82)
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(i) Bourne.
(ii) Sempingham.
(iii) John of Camelton, or Hamilton, was prior of Sempingham, c. 1298-1312.
(iv) John of Clinton, prior c. 1312-
(v) Philip de Burton, Master of the Gilbertine Order, 1298-1332.

The author's name was Robert of Bourne (from elsewhere we learn that his surname was 'Mannynge'), and at the time of Handlyng Synne's composition he was resident at the Gilbertine priory of Sempingham, situated just to the west of the modern B177 between Bourne and Horbling. Thanks to the labours of Ruth Crosby some details of his biography may be briefly recounted. Mannynge was born at Bourne in 1283, or possibly earlier, and between about 1298 and 1302 probably studied in Cambridge at St. Edmund's Hall which may have been the house previously occupied by the Friars of Penitence but granted to the Gilbertines in 1290 specifically for their students in that city. From 1302 until at least 1317 he was a canon at Sempingham priory, which was the head monastery of the Gilbertine Order, under John of Camelton and later John of Clinton. His precise role there is not known, but it is possible that he was responsible for the education of the novices. In 1303, he began Handlyng Synne, as he tells us, and he apparently did not complete it until 1317 when he added the finishing touches including the lines previously quoted. His movements up to about 1327 are mysterious, though he may have been in Lincoln that year as the recipient of ten shillings and a goblet (ciphum) from the will of Avice de Crossey. Precisely when he left Sempingham is not known, but from about 1327 he was working on his other extant poem, the Story of England, a chronicle history based on Peter of Langtoft and Wace, at the request of Robert of Milton, probably prior of Sixhills, where Mannynge spent the remaining years of his life. He finished the composition of this on 15 May 1338.

From the evidence in Handlyng Synne it appears that Mannynge began work on his poem in 1303 and completed it around 1317. Whether this long period of time was spent revising earlier drafts or is an accurate indication of how long it took him to write the poem from beginning to end cannot now be known with certainty. The latter alternative, however, may be the most likely since Handlyng Synne consists of no less than 12,630 lines of poetry which presumably took no little time to compose. It clearly took him a period of years to complete his work for we are told that by the time he reached line 7,984 he was recalling something which took place during the reign of Edward I, a direct hint that he was writing this after 1307 when the monarch died:

Of swych one, y shal 3ow telle,
pat te fende bare to helle;
ys chaunce fyl, pat ys so hard,
Yn betyme of gode Edward,
Edward, syre Henryes sone,
And te tale ys welye to mone.

(lines 7981-6)

6 Henry III.

If he had completed this much by (say) 1308 (excluding his prologue), then at a constant rate of working he could have finished the whole poem by about 1312. Nevertheless, it is quite probable that it took him even longer, and the indications are that he rounded it off finally by 'appending' his opening remarks as late as 1317.

The other important piece of information with which Mannynge supplies us in this passage is that his poem was actually a translation of an Anglo-Norman work called 'manuel de pecches', and it is a stroke of paramount good fortune that a very large number of manuscripts of this (more or less complete) still survive. Sufficient study has been made by scholars of the Manuel des Peches to enable us to say with considerable confidence what changes — and most significantly what additions — Mannynge made to his source text. We must presume that he made these changes deliberately rather than accidentally or merely capriciously, and that they bore some personal or specific local relevance to the author, his audience and the cultural and socio-economic region in which they lived. It is quite clear that Handlyng Synne was addressed directly to the uneducated inhabitants, who were most probably the majority of the population, of the area:

For lweode men y vndyr-toke
On englysh tunge to make pys boke...

(lines 43-4)

that the poem was actually read out to them by the author himself:

3 me men pat are now ynpresent,
pat have herd me rede pys sacrament...

(lines 10799-10800)

and that the new material which he added was of some topical, mutual interest.

III

By comparison with Handlyng Synne, the corresponding portion of the Manuel des Peches only consists of about eight and a half thousand lines, which is some indication of the extent to which Mannynge expanded his source. The Manuel was written around 1260 by an unknown author. Originally it seems to have been composed as a work of instruction aimed chiefly at clerics on the subject of 'confession'. It contained guidelines to the recognition of 'sin' in the individual's daily life through sections dealing with 'The Ten Commandments' and 'The Seven Deadly Sins', specific indications of infringements against the sanctity of the Church and its institutions by way of passages about 'Sacrilege' and 'The Seven Sacraments', and finally systematic advice on the method of 'Confession' and the resulting benefits to the penitent. Essentially, therefore, it was a reference book for the priest on how to instruct his parishioners regarding the confession of their sins, and how he should hear them. As such, the work was inspired by a concern which had been growing in England since the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215-16 that regular confession should be encouraged in practice among the laity. It is possible to trace this conviction through the writings of a series of thirteenth century English bishops, from Walter de Cantilupe, bishop of Worcester, in his Constitutions of 1240, to Peter Quivy, bishop of Exeter, after his synod in 1287.

Another similar occurrence of the idea takes the form of a decree in the Constitutions of Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln (1235-53), which was composed around the late 1240's. It has been argued that the content as well as the form of this decree actually served as a model for the theme and structure of the Manuel des Peches, which implicitly connects the poem with the diocese of Lincoln if not with Grosseteste himself.

Doubt has been cast upon the theory that the bishop was the author of the poem, though there are other reasons for remaining open minded about this attribution of it to Grosseteste or at least to someone working directly under his influence. In the first place, at least two later medieval scribes believed that the bishop himself was responsible for it, for they recorded his name at the head of their manuscripts of Handlyng Synne. Secondly, the history of the Manuel suggests that it was circulating mainly in the counties of the north-east Midlands, including
Lincolnshire. Over time, its content and structure fundamentally changed as other writers either added extra sections or revised the work they found. One such later 'revisor' was William of Waddington, who was not, as had long been supposed, the original author of the poem. Most villages of that and similar names, from one of which he presumably hailed, are situated in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, including one only six or seven kilometres south of Lincoln. It is a reasonable probability, therefore, that the *Manuel de Pesches* did actually originate in Lincolnshire, and also from the pen of a Lincolnshire writer, if not from that great medieval personality Grosseteste's own.

But while it is true to say that instruction about confession was a major preoccupation among the clergy after 1215, this 'movement' had lost much of its fervour by the third quarter of the thirteenth century. More and more writers turned from the production of religious works written in Latin and presumably for the educated classes, to the vernacularisation of earlier writings by which these became accessible to a much wider audience among both the ecclesiastical and secular communities. Apparently for the first time religious writers were beginning to realise that theological principles and the correct practice of the offices attaching to the Christian faith needed to be understood by priest and parishioners alike in order that these took deep root in village social life. *Handlyng Synne* was a product of this change of mentality. Not only was it an anglicisation of an important thirteenth century work for consumption by the uneducated laity, Mannyng also re-oriented the style and content of his poem more to the tastes of his relatively unsophisticated audience. Where the *Manuel* had been didactic and restrained, the English poem was deliberately conversational and frequently jocular. Mannyng was always striving for a degree of affinity with his listeners; his tone overall is distinctly avuncular even though at different times he dons the cloak of Christian homilist, social commentator, teacher and raconteur. He also employed material reminiscent of folk culture in his poem, particularly in the stories which he used to illustrate his theological and expository passages. He inherited the tradition of using *exempla* through the *Manuel de Pesches*, a practice which had blossomed in the thirteenth century largely inspired by the mendicant orders who effectively incorporated these tales into sermons and other Christian writings. By the last quarter of the century, a large number of 'sermon manuals' were being produced as works of reference from which the preacher might draw material appropriate to his teaching. It has already been shown that Mannyng was familiar with at least two of these, the *Speculum Lalorum* (c. 1279-92), and the *North-English Homily Collection*. It is quite clear that he was deliberately tuning *Handlyng Synne* into the popular consciousness:

> For many ben of swych manere, 
> bat talyes and rymys wyl blyply here; 
> Yn gamys, & festys, & at be ale; 
> Loue men to lestene troteuall.

(lines 45-8)

In fact, most of Mannyng's additions to the *Manuel* take the form of illustrative material including *exempla*. As well as inserting a large number of extra explanations or clarificatory passages, he also introduced twelve entirely new *exempla* into his poem. And whereas the author of the *Manuel* conspicuously relied upon written sources for his *exempla* (only three in the whole work do not have literary analogues), eight of Mannyng's twelve originals are unique to his poem and were probably derived from a non-literary preaching tradition.

> Taleys shal pou fynde peryyne, 
> And chauncys pat tap happed for synne; 
> Meruelys, some as y fonde wytryn, 
> And oper pat haue be sayn & wetyn; 
> None ben pare-y, more ne lesse, 
> But pat fonde wytrye, or had wytnesse.

(lines 131-6)

Conversely, he expands his source text least in theological passages, even 'streamlining' his version towards the end so that his concluding Christian teachings are not obscured by unnecessary digressions. Viewed as a whole, *Handlyng Synne* carries its audience from the secular world of sin to redemption in the eyes of God through confession, and undoubtedly benefits from the supplementary material which Mannyng adds in the first two-thirds and his pruning of the *Manuel* at the end. His attention to the structure of his work makes it much more entertaining, while at the same time his theme unfolds in a way which is not unlike that of the later miracle play cycles.

IV

The twelve new *exempla* as a group provide the clearest evidence that Robert Mannyng was deliberately shaping his poem for a regional audience. Five of them, in fact, were specifically localised in eastern England while not one in the *Manuel de Pesches* directs our attention to any particular region of the country. We hear about the two Kesteven men who decided to defraud a man's heir by appropriating his inheritance for themselves and who were finally punished for their scheming as a result of the son's prayers. Nothing else in the tale suggests that Mannyng was relating an actual occurrence in Kesteven; the story is vague enough to have been entirely fictional, but his precise identification of it with the area in which Sempringham priory was situated testifies to his concern that his audience should find it credible and take warning from it.

The same reasons are likely to have prompted him to introduce the other four new *exempla* into *Handlyng Synne*. He tells us of the Norfolk bondman who reproached a knight for allowing his beasts to stray into the churchyard, breaking the churchyard walls in the process. This apparently occurred 'yn a toune', and by not specifying the precise place Mannyng avoids the embarrassment of being challenged about the event's authenticity, while at the same time seeming to emphasise that it did really happen. The knight is criticised for the negligence of his herdsman as well as for his own haughty attitude to the bondman's challenge:

> pe lordes answere was sum what yle, 
> And pat falleb euyl to a man gentyle; 
> 'wely were hyt do ry 3t for pe nones 
> To wurschyp swych cherles bones; 
> What wurschyp shuld men make 
> Aboute swych cherles bodyes blake?'

(lines 8687-92)

But in the end the bondsman, repairs the walls and promises not to allow his beasts to pasture there again. Less substantial and interesting stories concern the Sudbury (Suffolk) man who reappeared to his wife after his death to make her enquire a friar to sing masses for his soul; and that of the parson in Cambridgeshire whose only interest in life was money. The fifth *exemplium* is a reminiscence about Robert Grosseteste and his love of music, a popular belief deriving from the bishop's own scholastic writings on the subject.

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These new exempla provide important initial indications about the south Lincolnshire mentality and the contemporary preoccupations of the population. Firstly, they give us a strong sense of the local perception of ‘space’. It has already been argued elsewhere that Mannya’s dialect — the language of his poem — is closer to the forms of southern speech than northern. Study has also been made of the language contained in the early fourteenth century lay subsidy records: these were assessments of tax payable at first as a percentage (a tenth or a fifteenth) of the individual’s personal movable wealth, but later as a collective payment for the whole village. The evidence of these lists for the six northern counties of England and Lincolnshire strongly suggests that the boundary between southern and northern speech in the east of the country was actually the river Witham. It appears that Lindsey was characterised by a quite different dialect from that spoken in Kesteven and Holland in the fourteenth century. The localisation of Mannya’s new exempla would further seem that south Lincolnshire felt a cultural, as well as dialectal, affinity with southern rather than northern England. In spite of references to places in the south as far away as Sudbury and Cambridgeshire, nowhere north of the Humber is mentioned in the entire poem even though the national preoccupation with the Scots at this time might have provoked at least one topical comment. Even when Mannya mentions northern Lincolnshire in Handlyng Synne he presents it as a separate kingdom half a millennium in the distant past. 

Handlyng Synne was also a precise product of its period, and one broad indication of this is Mannya’s attitude to the Jews. Alfred Kunz noticed that he was less hostile to them than the author of the Manu, a fact which seems to localise his work in time as well as space. Their expulsion from England in 1290 — about thirty years after the composition of the Anglo-Norman poem and almost as many years before the completion of Handlyng Synne — presumably accounts for their diminution as significant targets for attack within English society. Instead, Mannya turns upon the Saracens who were still locked in opposition against Christian crusaders from Europe:

Sum tymne brer was yne a cyte,  
pat 3f an okere[i]myt funde be,  
þey helde hym vyler pan a few . . .  
Okers, and kauersyns,  
As wykked þey as sarasyns.  
(lines 2595-7; 5553-4)  
(i) usurer.  
(ii) money-lenders.

Another characteristic of these stories is their commonplace quality. Not only are they located in places with which some of his audience might have been personally familiar, the characters depicted also occupy social positions which are similar to those of the majority of Mannya’s listeners: dairy farmers, midwives, bondmen; etc. In addition, the incidents which the tales describe are ordinary enough to fall within the experience of most people. By contrast, the discovery of bishops’ coffers which do not decompose — like the one found by the monks digging outside the church — could only occur at some distance away, in this case in Wales, beyond the boundary of experienced space. The impact of Mannya’s ‘local’ tales, therefore, derives from a careful selection of them with regard to the people and events which they describe, as well as for those to whom they were addressed. He deliberately plays upon — rather than straining — his audience’s credulity; the lessons which these exempla teach are ‘true’ because they are real and relevant.

It is also important to observe that three of these five tales are centrally concerned with ‘money’: the fraudulent Kesteven executors; the ghost of the Sudbury man who was used by his former wife to extort her to have masses sung privately for him; the parson from Cambridgeshire who could not bear to die and not take his wealth with him. I have tried to show elsewhere that Mannya’s apparent preoccupation with money in Handlyng Synne reflects Sempringham priory’s own financial difficulties around the turn of the fourteenth century. Medieval men in south Lincolnshire may not have had a very clear idea about economics, but we should expect them to have responded to prevailing circumstances if only as a reflex action. There is no doubt that times were hard for both landholders and peasant farmers along the fen edge in south Lincolnshire. The climate appears to have been deteriorating from about 1290, causing waterlogging and a contraction of arable acres. For a monastic house like Sempringham, whose chief source of income was rents from tenants and a share of their agricultural production, declining yields meant relative economic hardship for its inmates. In addition, from 1301 the priory began the undertaking of a new priory church, the building of which was determined by the serious deterioration at this time of the old accommodation for the nuns and canons.

Mannya’s overriding concern in Handlyng Synne is that money should be kept circulating within society and not hoarded. He even encourages spending:

parfore þen on þe endyng,  
And spende weyl þyn owne þynge,  
bat þou fal nat yn auturce:  
Of vnkyndhe hefy cumb, bat vyce.  
(lines 6505-8)

The man who entrusts his property to his funeral executors is as much to blame as they if his heirs never receive it; such is the attitude of our author. Behind his encouragement of spending might have been the assumption that eventually the money would fall into the priory’s hands. The assumption is reasonable enough since Sempringham held most of the land in east Kesteven, and as the landlord of a large number of tenants it was entitled to a wide range of secular exactions from them. The priory, therefore, could exert a legal claim to much of its tenants’ property and might endeavour to share more by laying its hands on individuals’ wealth by persuading them to spend rather than save. It is not enough — as the Sudbury woman discovered — merely to pay for your deceased husband’s masses to be sung along with those for others in order that his soul might be delivered out of Purgatory; only private masses sung on his behalf will do the trick.

‘pe messe,’ he syde, ‘þou dedyst be do,  
A party hyt halpe þer-vn-to;  
My parte y had, of þat messe,  
As of þeyng þat comune þys;  
3þy one for me weycyte syde,  
pat ouer for me blys had neade, —  
3þy pe prest were of lyfe so gode  
pat God his preyer vndyrstode:  
Y hope þan, grace to haue,  
pat his messe my3t me saue.’

(lines 10425-34)

One of Mannya’s other new exempla in Handlyng Synne concerns a witch with a leather bag which she has invested with a magical power to suck the milk from the cows of the local farmers. As well as being one of the more interesting stories it is also one of the most significant in the whole of the poem. The bag naturally arouses much anger
among the villagers until finally the bishop is called in to investigate the matter. The witch — who turns out to be a dignified and highly co-operative malefactor — is brought before him and commanded to give a demonstration of what the bag can do. After she has done this, and the bishop’s clerk has diligently made notes of what has occurred, the bishop himself decides to attempt a repetition of the magic. He reads out her charm and performs the same actions as the witch but is nonplussed when the bag fails to respond in any way. In the end he is forced to ask her why nothing has happened, and she replies that the bishop’s scepticism about the magic has undermined the efficacy of her charm:

3e beleue nat as y do
wilde 3e beleue my wrdys as y
Hyt shuld a go, and sokun ky.

(lines 544-6)

Because the bishop does not believe in witchcraft it will not work for him, but Manning reverses this moral so that belief in Christianity becomes the story’s important lesson. It avails no one to perform the ritual if this is not founded on a firm belief in the power of what he is practising. 23

The importance of the story lies in its occurrence almost at the beginning of Handlyng Synne and its juxtaposition with another exemplum which illustrates the potency of Christian magic. Two tales, that of the witch and her bag and another of the Bloody Child were both interpolated by Manning at the outset of his poem, and together they present a dilemma which was fundamental to medieval rural society: should the individual express his religious faith in accordance with the principles of Christianity or witchcraft? Handlyng Synne opens with two contrasting statements about the ‘magic’ of each, and the audience is being asked implicitly to recognise where its spiritual allegiance lies. In the tale of the Bloody Child, Christ himself appears as an infant whose wounds are being inflicted on him indirectly by a man’s swearing. The latter is reminded of Christ’s sacrifice for mankind by this vision and he pleads for mercy, which he obtains through penance. The striking image of this bleeding child charges the tale with a sense of mystical power, and as it also follows the account of the witch and her bag there is no doubt which of the two exempla carries most conviction for Manning’s audience. The stories together add up to a clear demonstration of the potentiality of Christian belief at the poem’s outset, and the audience’s sympathies are immediately aligned with conventional religious faith in opposition to the deviant practices of witches and other heretics.

Hostility towards witchcraft reverberates throughout Handlyng Synne and its denunciation was evidently one of Robert Manning’s recurrent preoccupations. His, however, was not a unique or idiosyncratic attitude at this time. There was intense interest in Europe as a whole around the turn of the fourteenth century in deviant religious practices. At the root of the trouble was the Church’s awareness of its own vulnerability, spiritual, economic and political. Its internal crises were being exploited and exacerbated by increased demands from heads of state which sapped its strength within, while the threat of religious unorthodoxy eroded its position from without. In this climate, ‘heresy’ and ‘heretical activity became the Church’s scapegoat in its attacks to define publicly its own attitudes and re-assert the importance of its identity and role in society. On the continent, the Church’s leaders went to considerable lengths to expose and exterminate Catharism, and a surviving set of inquisition records from the Pyrenean village of Montaillou testifies both to the inquisitors’ profound

concern about irregular Christian attitudes there, and to the thorough procedures adopted to re-assert religious conformity within the community. 24

South Lincolnshire may seem rather isolated from these affairs in Europe to be affected by them, but the attitudes at the back of these ‘local’ problems were truly international. The crushing of the Knights Templars is an important example of this. We now know that King Philip IV of France was responsible for the downfall of the order, jealous of their extensive property and in financial difficulties himself as a result of involvement in costly wars. 25 With the tacit and almost continuous support of Pope Clement V he set up a full scale investigation of the Templars in France and attempted to set others in motion over the rest of Europe. Discredit was not sufficient, and heresy was invoked; probably spurious confessions of anti-Christian practices and various forms of bestiality were extracted by torture and public burnings resulted. In England, these proceedings were much more half-hearted, but the Bishop of Lincoln, John Daldenby, was appointed to hear some of the Templars’ testimonies but was most unhappy about his responsibility in the affair. 26

Two aspects of this whole unfortunate business must have been particularly disturbing to Robert Manning. In the first place, an order otherwise eminently respected and respectable was suddenly confronted with damning allegations by politically powerful individuals and — by the process of law — duly exterminated. The outcome had certainly not been anticipated before 1307, and if the allegations were true (feelings ran deep both ways once the questioning began) how had the Templars concealed their guilt for so long? If they were not guilty, by what process of moral anxiety within the government and the law had the allegations against them gained such wide currency? Either way, the Templars — though rich and financially powerful — were numerically a small order, and therefore vulnerable to the taint of heresy. Manning’s other fear might have been that the same could happen to the Gilbertines, who were also a small order with all their houses located in England and similarly vulnerable to this type of attack. These fears might have been totally unfounded except that the Templars’ property in England was mainly concentrated in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, and the nearest monastic house to Sempringham priory (about three kilometres south-west) was actually the Templar preceptory at Aslackby. The priory held land in that village, the advowson of the parish church from the reign of Henry II, and the tenants and inmates of the two houses almost certainly enjoyed many forms of social intercourse in the area.

As I have already shown, Robert Manning was working on Handlyng Synne up to 1317, precisely at the time of the investigations and trials of the Templars which took place between 1307 and 1314. With witchcraft and heresy so much in the air — particularly after 1307 — it would indeed be surprising if there were no reflection in the poem of the contemporary climate of opinion about it in the area. I believe, however, that Manning’s extreme sensitivity to matters of deviant religious practice and belief can be discerned in his work, even though he makes no direct statement about the Templars. In several important instances he follows the author of the Manuel des Fiches in conventionally identifying ‘witchcraft’ as ‘making sacrifices to the devil’ or ‘influencing marriages’, but what is particularly striking about Manning’s attitude is the range of beliefs and practices which can be classified under this blanket term. At first sight it appears as if he had no real idea of what witchcraft was, for he puts all manner of superstition in the same category though they might
have been accurately classified much less emotively. On the one hand, his audience are not to attempt to alter the forms of things with the devil’s aid, and on the other, it is forbidden to lay meat at infants’ beds, presumably a long-forgotten but once commonly practised superstitious custom. Fortune telling, by looking into the subject’s thumb nail, or into a crystal, is also described as ‘witchcraft’, as is the belief in ‘handsel’, which was probably some sort of omen associated with the first money taken by a trader in the morning.

It is clear that Mannynge elected not to preserve the finer distinctions between the various kinds of beliefs and practices to be found in south Lincolnshire rural society; instead, he denounced them all as ‘witchcraft’. The author of the Manuel employs three basic terms in his poem: sorcerie, enchantement and nigremance. It appears that he understood some difference between the activities described by these words — at least on the evidence of their context — and there is nothing surprising in this. He was clearly working within a long established cultural tradition which did differentiate the various categories of supernatural event. The Anglo-Saxons employed more than thirty terms in their vocabulary of the subject, including ‘witch’, ‘wizard’, ‘enchanter’, ‘seen’ and ‘diviner’, each word bearing unique connotations. Mannynge, however, translates sorcerie directly as ‘witchcraft’:

3yt ys per more of lechere
pat ys do with sorsorye,
Sorsorye pat ys wycheerch...

(lines 8141-3)

and he similarly anglicises the anglo-norman enchantement even though the same word was currently in use by English writers. Only the term ‘necromancy’ appears in both poems, presumably because the activity it describes is obviously close in its association with witchcraft and the ‘black arts’. ‘Enchantment’, by contrast, had connotations with the ‘fantastic’ world of literary ‘romance’ even in the thirteenth century, and therefore lacked the sinister overtones appropriate to Mannynge’s sentiments and necessary to his purpose of warning off his audience from anything ‘deviant’ or ‘heretical’.

From such a close scrutiny of the two poems it is clear that Mannynge is much more concerned than his literary predecessor to focus his audience’s attention on the one, all-embracing, unambiguous and socially unacceptable concept of ‘witchcraft’. He was not interested in maintaining the distinctions between ‘black’ and ‘white’ witchcraft and magic, but rather between Christian and ‘pagan’ religion. In a way, this treatment of the subject is not unlike the form which the accusations against the Templars took. Professor Norman Cohn has recently shown how certain motifs recur over long periods of time, eventually to become accepted generally as a set of traditional stereotyped allegations associated with witch hunting. Such motifs as the denial of Christ, devil-worship, obscene kisses, orgies and homosexual sodomy appeared in the relevant literature of antiquity as well as in that of the modern period; they can also be found in the records of the proceedings against the Templars. All of this suggests that in the face of suspected religious unorthodoxy public expression turned on certain familiar images, however more or less appropriate they might actually have been. Mannynge, under similar pressures as the inquisitors to convert others to his point of view, also sharpens his focus on anything unorthodox. Heresy can only be described in terms traditionally associated with witchcraft, and since any belief or practice which is non-

Christian is heretical...
be mete pat 3e laye at 3e chyldes hede
For swych shapers, were betty leued;
3yt hyst for hem bere lye,
pan ys hyst a wykked eryse...,

(lines 9667-70)
so it also follows that they are all ‘witchcraft’.

I hope by now that I have established a relationship between Handlyng Synne and its south Lincolnshire audience, and that a work of literature in its own right can give us unique insights into the mentality of a period. For those unfamiliar with the poem I have tried to present the circumstances of its composition, and we have begun to explore its content though much, as yet, remains to be said. On this occasion, we have restricted ourselves to a consideration of only two questions on which Handlyng Synne sheds light. The new exempla which Mannynge introduces into his poem have a distinctly cast midlands flavour, and this begins to suggest the dimensions of his audience’s conception of geographical space which is quite compatible with the easy familiarity of the people and events described in these tales. We might add to this that Mannynge feels the need to explain the meaning of ‘miner’ to his listeners, and since coal mining was under way in Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire in the thirteenth century this remark may indicate that the Trent was an effective cultural barrier to the west. London, also, was far beyond the personal experience of most people in south Lincolnshire, and is presented as a city infested with patricides and adulteresses.

But in addition to disclosing information about space, Handlyng Synne can also be very instructive about the period in which it was written, though it requires some close reading to make out the details. Mannynge’s attitude to witchcraft is quite clear, and his hostility to it seems to arise from the general mood of anxiety prevailing both in England and in Europe in the first two decades of the fourteenth century. This, in turn, was both the cause as well as the result of the proceedings against the Knights Templars. There is, of course, much more to be said on these and other questions which Handlyng Synne raises, for indeed the size and scope of the poem makes it a source of evidence about local history which is unparalleled in medieval English literature.

FOOTNOTES
1 Published Harvard, 1941; Cambridge, 1945; Cambridge, 1937.
3 Calendar of Papal Registers, 1198-1304, p.314.
6 The text of the Manuel des Péchés is printed in Furnivall’s E.E.T.S. edition of Handlyng Synne cited above. The most comprehensive critical work on the Manuel is E. J. Arnauld, Le Manuel des Péchés, Paris, 1940, and for a dating of the poem, see p.256.
nearly half of those who married and left wills between 1430 and 1480 had no sons; and 67.2 per cent had no daughters. This implies a catastrophic population decline of which contemporaries seem to have been unaware, though their references to plague and epidemics are admirably treated. Obviously something is wrong with the will-plus-computer technique. The flaw is easily uncovered. Since wills clearly fail to mention all daughters they probably leave out a good many sons too. But Dr. Gottfried’s book would be of great value even if it contained nothing but his learned demolition of the main thesis of Shrewsbury’s History of the Bubonic Plague which since 1971 has almost left us in doubt whether anyone ever died in the great pestilences.

Dr. Razzell’s work is exciting and important. It fully convinced his Ph.D. examiners at Cambridge and to suggest that he leaves any doubt behind may seem merely capacious. But a doubt remains here. His argument is that the introduction of smallpox inoculation, long before Jenner, greatly reduced the number of deaths occurring from smallpox; and so was the main cause of population growth; and this is all the more convincing in that he is able to cite medical evidence that those males who have recovered from smallpox are likely to have seriously impaired fertility, though they remain sexually normal. A reduction of serious cases of smallpox would therefore help to account for the apparent increase in the 18th century birth rate which is so puzzling. Dr. Razzell certainly demonstrates beyond all doubt that inoculation was very widely practiced, and his London statistics on p. 148 show beyond all doubt that smallpox mortality had declined from 13.7% of baptisms to 9.6% before Jenner. Among other well ordered statistics he has tables, carrying great conviction, from Boston, Lincolnshire and Boston, Massachusetts. What is lacking is any wholly convincing demonstration of the total extent of the reduction in mortality brought about before the introduction of Jennerian vaccination, on which he has some very disturbing comments. But he has not proved that inoculation was the principal cause of the declining death rates of the 18th century, though he has made it appear by far the most probable of all causes so far suggested. Full and convincing proof could only come from a historian with considerable expertise in mathematical statistics.

Not the least interesting thing in this book is the demonstration that smallpox inoculation was known to the practitioners of folk medicine (in Pembrokeshire and the Highlands) long before Lady Mary Wortley Montagu brought it from Turkey. Without any unfounded criticism of folk remedies we must add inoculation to quinine and the drugs obtained from the poppy, the flogoe, ergot and wourali (carere is the drug) to the impressive list of our borrowings from primitive medicine.

EDWARD GILLETT


These four recent books, covering various aspects of Roman Britain and its archaeology, show a great variety of approach and emphasis to the subject. Britannia and Roman Britain are both general surveys of the present state.