THE POET AND HIS AUDIENCE: THE CHURCH

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING EFFECTS OF THEOLOGY ON THE MIDDLE English lyric is on the poet's concept of his relationship with his audience. This effect is shown by the poet's constant use of the word and concept "us" in the poems studied above. This "us" unites the poet to his listener in a common endeavor:

Maiden, moder makeles,
of milche ful ibunden,
bid for hus im þat þe ches
at wam þu grace funde,
þat he forgiue hus senne and wrake,
and clene of euri gelt us make,
and eune blis,
wan hure time is
to steruen,
hus giue, for þine sake
him so her for to seruen
þat he us to him take.

Milsful moder, maiden clene,
mak þi milce up-on hus sene,
and brinc hus þurw þi suete bene
to þe blis þat faillet nout.
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Glade us marie, to Ioye ibrout,—
Muche wrchipe crist hau þe i-worut—
in heuene brit in þi paleis;
Per þat frut of þire wombe
Be i-yefin us forto fonden
in Ioye þat is endeles.

The use of “us” is the result of the fact that the poet defines himself and his audience as medieval theology defines the relationship of man to man within the Church. The “us” as we have seen the context of the poems define it is established by the poet and his listener’s own relationship to the events of sacred history, in a way analogous to the origin of Mary’s names. The “us” signifies those who have been created by God and redeemed by Christ, set in relationship to Him in present time through the grace and sacraments of the Church. Just as Mary is identified by the coming of Christ in sacred history, as Mother and Maid, Queen of Heaven and Mother of Mercy, so through his context in sacred history each man shares a common identity: as Adam fell, we fell; as Christ took man’s nature, so He joined Himself to us; as He died, so we must die to the world; and as He was resurrected, so we must be reborn in Him. The center of man’s definition is the present, in his state of sorrow mingled with joy, and in virtue of the past, through Christ he will enter eternal joy. It is this identity of man in relationship to Christ as it is defined by theology that binds the poet to the audience he addresses, so that the poet is himself included in the “us” which is expressed in the petition of the poems and by which both the poet and his audience are bound to the very heart of the poem’s subject.

It is this “us” for whose love “Godes sone . . . wile man bicomen” and who will “þur þi swete chiltinge . . . hut of pine” be brought (Gabriel, fram evene-king). It is this “us” for whom Christ says to Mary “hi þole þis ded” (Stond wel, moder, vnder rode), “þole o rode, and deien/ to helen man þat was forlorn” (Pe milde Lomb isprad o rode). And it is this “us” for whom Mary is given her special honor as Queen of Heaven:

Why was I crowne and made a quene?
Why was I called of mercy the welle?
Why shuld an erþy woman bene
So hygh in heuen a-boue aungelle?
For þe, mankynde, þe truþe I telle.
CONCLUSION

In the Middle English religious lyrics we have studied, the first person plural pronoun has rarely been used in the nominative case. As in the poems man is related to the events of sacred history, he becomes the object of the acts of Christ, through Whom, by Whom, and in Whom man is. The basic relationship of man to God defined by these lyrics is that of God, the source of power, to man, the object of the power. Sacred history expresses what God has done for man, and the man who defines himself in relation to God will open himself to be reformed by God. This relationship to events of sacred history is what defines the subjective element in the lyrics. Man is fundamentally oriented by Christian theology to what is beyond himself.

Through sacred history man understands his desires. Through the perspective of sacred history sorrow and joy take on eternal dimensions and are defined in relationship to the soul’s union or separation from God. As we saw in Part II, the deepest sorrow for the Christian soul is experienced because of separation from God by sin and because of his compassion for the suffering caused to God Himself by man’s sin. As we saw in Part III with the poems on Mary’s joys, the fullest joy is experienced as a result of union with God. This is because God Himself is the source of all joy. The relative power of sorrow and joy in a man’s life is defined only by the sequence of events of sacred history, which through Christ, if man is willing, ultimately transforms all sorrow to joy.

This essentially optimistic view of the meaning of life is a result of the two events which opposed sorrow and joy and in which joy triumphed, the death and the resurrection of Christ. Christ’s death contains the ultimate sorrow. He transforms this sorrow which is the result of all man’s sorrow, by His resurrection, to ultimate joy. In each poem the state of joy and sorrow is formulated in relation to man’s experience in the present and in the light of Christ’s redemptive act. Man sees his life in the present, defined by Christ’s death and resurrection, as yet unfulfilled, and he struggles to apply the merits of Christ’s suffering to transform his own present sorrow into everlasting joy. Thus in the present he lives both sorrowing and rejoicing. Full and eternal joy will be defined only by the fulfilling of history by the last judgment of man and the fixing of his eternal separation or union with God.

The definition of Mary’s joy and sorrow in the poems we have studied provides the clearest example of this. We have seen sacred history’s transforming of sorrow to joy to be the organizing principle of “Als i lay vp-on a nith,” “Pe milde Lomb,” and “Stond wel, moder, vnder rode,” and of the poems on the joys of Mary. Ultimately each of these poems revealed its
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orientation in the present mixed state of man as we saw man's desire formulated in the petitions of the poems. The petitions were formulated in virtue of the events which contain the promise of joy and which are defined by Christ Who is the transforming power. In the poems we have studied, Mary has been the means of defining the fullest human dimensions of sorrow and joy, the means of expressing the sorrow and joy of both her Son and herself, and of man. In virtue of her final joy which is the fruit of the redemption, she is both the sign of man's joy and his advocate for joy.

This definition of the soul's desires by theology affects the Middle English poet's purpose in composing his poem: the Middle English poet does not desire only to speak to his listener, but to refashion him. The poem must not only be suited to reach the audience to whom he speaks, but through his poem the poet tries as well to form his audience to the One to Whom they speak together. We saw, for example, in "Pe milde Lomb" and "Stond wel, moder, vnder rode" how the poet sought to move his listener to live so intensely what Christ and Mary suffered that the intensity of the response would have the power to bring his audience to joy. This purpose was seen most clearly in the lyrics which personify Christ and Mary, such as the two above and the shorter two lyrics of Mary's sorrow, her appeal to the Jews and her appeal to her Son. Here, through having the listener identify with the feelings of Christ and Mary (defined in both their theological and human dimensions), the poet sought to move the listener by compassion to change his life.

In the poems we have studied on the events of sacred history the point of view has been "I" only in the two lyrics and in the dialogues which personify Mary and Christ. However, in the many lyrics which are composed from the point of view of the first person singular and which we have not considered, the purpose of the poet is the same: the speaker seeks always to redefine himself in relationship to Christ Who is within yet beyond him. This can be seen, for example, in the lyrics of penitence, or the religious love lyrics, or the lyrics of the school of Richard Rolle which seek explicitly to reform the mind and affections by the passion of Christ.

Yet in four of the poems we have studied, the "I" pronoun has appeared where it was not used in the personification of Mary or Christ and where it referred to a person distinct from the "us" we have seen to be the object of the actions of Christ. In these instances it was used to identify the poet or speaker in his relationship as poet to the audience or to Mary. Just as the "us" in the poems receives its definition in relation to the events of the redemp-
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tion, so this “I” receives its definition specifically in relation to the purpose of the poem in which it appears.  
This use of “I” occurs in a line from each of the “maiden makeles” poems: “Of on ic wille singen þat is makeles” and “I syng of a myden þat is makeles.” In each case the “I” refers to the singer of the poem. The purpose of the poem is to praise the singularity of the virgin mother, and the poet identifies himself with all poets so that he can set his praise of Mary up against all the poets’ praises of other women and prove her matchlessness.

Als i lay vp-on a nith
Alone in my longing,
Me þouthe i sau a wonder sith,
A maiden child rokking.

Serteynly, þis sithte i say,
pis song i herde singge,
Als i lay þis ʒolis-day
Alone in my longingge.

In these frame quatrains of “Als i lay vp-on a nith,” the “I” refers to the seer of the vision, and the poet uses the “I” to add a testimony of truth. In the first quatrain “I” acts as a witness who, “alone” and in “longging,” can be identified with anyone who might hear the poem. In the last quatrain the speaker is used to set the song in present time, “þis ʒolis-day,” the fact of Christmas giving proof that the event seen in the vision has occurred.

Finally, in “Leuedy, for þare blisse” the two stanza invocation to Mary and to Christ at the end of the poem contains the clause, “Ich þe bidde as i con.” Here the “I” refers again to the poet, who offers a prayer to Mary for his audience. By means of his poem he has established the limits of man’s vision of joy in order to pray for the light of heaven. In the same way, by means of the identity he gives himself in the petition he establishes the limits of his knowledge of prayer in order to secure Mary’s sympathy and aid. His limitation represents that of all mankind for whom he prays.