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The Boke of Comforte Agaynste All Trybulacyons

An Introductory Study¹

This paper explores the textual history, readership, and the literary and spiritual context of *The Boke of Comforte Agaynste All Trybulacyons*, printed in London around 1505. The *Boke* is the English version of the *Livret des consolacions* printed some years earlier in Paris. I propose that the *Boke* and its French antecedent are the direct descendants of a Latin compilation printed on the Continent, including the works of Jacobus Gruytradius, Petrus Blesensis, and Isidore of Seville. I also aim to point out the *Boke*'s stylistic properties and its place in the tradition of English prose. Both this work and its contemporaries (i.e., early printed material from the 16th century) can contribute greatly to our understanding of early Tudor English literature, spirituality, and book culture.

“[A] wondir olde boke of lytil quantiti the whiche as to the syghte semed as of none reputacion. . .”²

1 Introduction

After Wynkyn de Worde had inherited William Caxton's workshop in Westminster, he soon found that its location was not favourable with respect to business. It was well for Caxton to settle at Westminster, near to his courtly patrons, but for de Worde, whose target clientele consisted chiefly of commoners, Flete Street was a much more advantageous location.³ There he set up his workshop and started his

1. My research on *The Boke of Comforte Agaynste Trybulacyons* has been carefully supervised by Prof. Benedek Péter Tóta; a great part of this article owes its being to his support and guidance. My thanks are also due to Prof. Michael Pincombe at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne for his help. I am also indebted to Dr. Alexandra Gillespie (University of Toronto) and to Fr. Germain Marc'hadour for their comments.

2. *The Seuen poyntes of Trewe Loue and Euerlasting Wisdom*, G1^r.

3. N. F. Blake, *Caxton and his World* (London: Deutsch, 1969), p. 81.

career during which he brought to his readers over 800 books, mostly of a practical and popular nature. As Henry Plomer writes, “he gave the public what would either move it to tears or laughter, cure its ailments both of mind and body, show it how to fish, to hawk, or to cook, or teach it how to speak Latin correctly.”⁴

It was in Flete Street, at the sign of the Sun, that the *Boke of Comforte Agaynste All Tribulacyons* was printed around 1505. This book is one of the least known products of early English printing. It features in two footnote references in the Yale edition of Thomas More’s *Dialogue of Comfort* as part of the devotional tradition of More’s work,⁵ Dr. Alexandra Gillespie mentions it in three of her articles,⁶ and Douglas Gray devotes a few passages to it in his study of 16th century consolatory books.⁷ Apart from these sources, I have been unable to find any mention of it. Listed as nr.3295, it is identified in the *STC*⁸ as the English version of the *Livret des consolacions* (printed in Paris c. 1497). Another edition was printed by Richard Pynson at about the same time (*STC* 3296). There are four surviving copies of the book, three by de Worde and one by Pynson.⁹

4. Henry Plomer, *Wynkyn de Worde and his Contemporaries from the Death of Caxton to 1535* (London: Grafton & Co., 1925), p. 8.

5. Thomas More, “A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulations,” in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 12, ed. Louis L. Martz and Frank Manley (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976), p. cxviii.n.2 and 3. All parenthesized references are to this edition, further referred to as *CW*.

6. Alexandra Gillespie, “Caxton and After,” in *A Companion to Middle English Prose*, ed. A. S. G. Edwards (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 307–325.; “Poets, Printers, and early English Sammelbande,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 67:2 (2004) 189–214; “These pruerbes yet do last: Lydgate, the Fifth Earl of Northumberland, and Tudor Miscellanies in Manuscript and Print,” *Yearbook of English Studies* 33 (2003) 215–32.

7. Douglas Gray, “Books of Comfort,” in *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of G. H. Russell*, ed. G. Kratzmann and J. Simpson (Dover: D. S. Brewer, 1986), 209–20. My attention was directed to Douglas Gray’s article by Professor Alexandra Barratt of the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, whose generous assistance I gratefully acknowledge.

8. *A Short-Title Catalogue of books printed in England, Scotland and Ireland and of English books printed abroad 1475–1640*, first compiled by A. W. Pollard & G. R. Redgrave, revised and enlarged by W. A. Jackson & F. S. Ferguson, completed by K. F. Pantzer (London: Bibliographical Society, 1986). Further abbreviated as *STC* in parenthesized references.

9. See H. S. Bennett’s Checklist in his *English Books and Readers*, Vol.2. The copies of Wynkyn de Worde are located in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, Cambridge University Library and the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Pynson’s copy is held by Durham University Library.

At first sight, *The Boke of Comforte* seems to be one of those “fatherles bokes” Richard Whitforde was so cautious about.¹⁰ The title itself does not promise much novelty, “comfort” and “tribulation” being fairly common catchwords in early Tudor books of devotion. No prologue of recommendation, no versed epilogue is added, as opposed to the more privileged translations of Lady Margaret or Robert Copland. As printed by Wynkyn¹¹ it comes in a neat octavo format, complete with woodcuts scattered over the pages; some follow the printer’s device as *addenda*. Pynson’s copy is not much different save for some points in spelling and his choice of woodcut illustrations: he prefers whole panels where Wynkyn uses small images.

The book is made up of three independent treatises: an elevated dialogue between the “blessyd Jhesus” and the “poore synner” (A2^r–D2^r) is followed by a treatise on the Seven Deadly Sins, their “braunches and doughters,” the Five Wits of Nature and the Twelve Articles of Faith (D3^r–F4^v). A short exhortation by the unnamed “auctour” is inserted between the two texts (D2^v–D4^r). The third piece is a dialogue between “Man” and “Reason,” containing some harsh medicine against tribulation in the form of “Reason’s” snubbing admonitions. It is ascribed to the “ryght venerable doctour Isodore” (F4^v–H8^r).

In this article, I attempt to demonstrate the value of this book of early Tudor piety, at the same time as providing some information on its provenance. Recent studies have enabled me to give it a more definite identity than that of a “fatherles boke.” The “fathers” of this book include monks from the 4th to the 14th century, doctors of the church, and nameless French and English translators. Apart from mere philological facts, the book calls for attention in many other respects. It is a remarkable specimen of popular consolatory literature, and an example of how medieval manuscript material came to a new life and identity through printing. It is also a repository of 16th century English spirituality. Its complicated genealogy makes it a repository of many centuries’ religious thought, while printing, the spread of literacy and devotional reading make it an efficient transmitter of medieval lore. In my introduction of the *Boke* I shall concentrate on these points of interest.

10. *Dyuers holy instructions* (STC 25420) A2^r.

11. All quotations from or references to the book, unless otherwise indicated, are based on the UMI microfilm copy of Wynkyn de Worde’s edition. All italics and emphases are mine.

2 Manuscripts, Printed Treatises, and the Book

A consolatory treatise written in Latin and translated into French and English, the antecedent of the *Boke* is a French incunabulum entitled *Le Livret des Consolacions Contre Toutes Tribulacions*, printed by Guy Marchant in Paris c. 1497, a copy of which is now located at the Pierpont Morgan Library.¹²

I would suggest that the Latin original of this French book is an incunabulum printed many times by different printers in the Low Countries and France, and extant in numerous copies today. (I have examined the one printed by Nicholaus Leeu at Antwerp in 1488, now held in the Bodleian Library.)¹³ It contains three treatises, the first and last of which are identical with the respective chapters of the *Boke of Comforte*.

The first is a dialogue entitled *Colloquium peccatoris et crucifixi Jhesu Christe*. (A1^r–A6^v), written by Jacobus de Gruytrode or Gruytrodius, Carthusian prior of Liège, a close friend of Denys the Carthusian.¹⁴ The second is a short treatise entitled *De beatitudine claustrali* (B1^r–B2^r), attributed to Petrus Blesensis.¹⁵ This is omitted

12. F. R. Goff, *Incunabula in American Libraries: A Third Census of Fifteenth Century Books Recorded in North American Collections* (New York: The Bibliographical Society of America, 1964), L–256.

13. Hence referred to by its shelfmark, Bod. Auct.7.Q

14. On Gruytrode, see Koen Seynaeve, “Jacobus Van Gruytrode,” in *Historia et Spiritualitas Cartusiensis Colloquii Quarti Internationalis Acta, 16–19 Sept. 1982*, ed. Jan de Grauwe (Destelbergen, 1983), 313–36. Useful material is also to be found in K. Emery, *Dionysius Cartusiensis Opera Selecta*, in *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis*, Vols. CXXI and CXXI/A (Turnholt: Brepols, 1991). On Gruytrode, see Vol. CXXI/A, p. 447; on the authorship of the *Colloquium peccatoris et crucifixi*, see pp. 540–565. Emery gives an elaborate description and manuscript evidence on Gruytrode’s dialogues, often attributed to Denys due to their correspondence and cooperation. One of Denys’ writings is a very similar one to Gruytrodius’ *Colloquium*: it circulated in monasteries under the title *Colloquium Jhesu cum puero*. Syon Abbey had a copy of this, alongside with Gruytrodius’ *Lavacrum Conscientiae*. See Mary Bateson ed., *Catalogue of the Library of Syon Monastery* (Cambridge, 1898), p. 106, nr. 40.

15. Other editions of the same book ascribe it to Engelbertus Cultrificis. See *Incunabula Printed in the Low Countries: A Census*, ed. G. van Thienen & J. Goldfinch (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf Publishers, 1999), vol. 36, nr. 1295, 1297, 1298. (Abbreviated as IPLC in the following pages.) The title is often simply *Tractatulus de vita religiosa*, see *Catalogue des Livres Imprimés au Quinzième Siècle des Bibliothèques de Belgique*, par M.-L. Polain (Bruxelles: Société des Bibliophiles & Iconophiles de Belgique, 1932), 1122, 1123, 1124. (Abbreviated as *CLIB* in the following pages.)

from the French and English editions to make room for a treatise on the Seven Deadly Sins which is definitely more “profytable” to lay readers. The third item is the abridged version of Isidore of Seville’s *Synonima de lamentatione animae peccatricis*, bearing the title *Dyalogus siue synonima ysidori de homine et ratione*. (B2^v–C4^v) The colophon makes reference to the first and second items only: “Expliciunt synonima Ysidori de homine & ratione cum Colloquio peccatoris & crucifixi. Impressa per me Nicholaum leeu. Anno domini MCCCC.lxxxviiij. xvj kalendas junii.”

The *Colloquium peccatoris et crucifixi Jhesu Christi* and other dialogues Gruytrodius wrote to the same pattern were hugely popular in their time. The *Colloquium* resembles Henry Suso’s *Horologium Sapientiae* and the *Imitatio Christi*, both written in the genre of internal conversation or dialogue with Christ, and show a more affective than intellectual attitude to the suffering Saviour. Gruytrodius favoured the compilatory method of late medieval Carthusian authors. His works were, according to Emery, “often made up of extracts from many authors that he has personally ‘collected’ by means of constant copying; these he presents to readers in a disposition to which he gives a personal signature.”¹⁶ Gruytrodius’ ingenuity lies in the form he gave to his compilation: the dialogue form smoothes away all traces of collation, gathering both borrowed and new material in a united structure.¹⁷

The *Colloquium* was also printed as an independent item, notably by Guy Marchant in 1497.¹⁸ Another edition was printed by Marchant for Jean Petit (*CLIB* nr. 1121). A Dutch and a Spanish version survive¹⁹ beside three English translations, one of which is the first part of the *Boke*. The two later ones shall be shortly discussed soon.

The *Synonima* of St. Isidore appeared likewise both independently and in compilation. A single copy was produced by Guy Marchant in 1494. This treatise was widely read throughout the Middle Ages. Written at a turbulent period of history and spirituality when “an intense need was felt for outward penance” and “men were

16. Emery, p. 454.

17. It may be of interest that another work ascribed to Gruytrodius¹⁷, entitled *Speculum Aureum animae peccatricis* reached English readers by the same route. Written in Latin, it was first translated by Jean Miélot, a clerk at the Burgundian court. Another translation survives in four incunabula editions (*Emery*, 452n20 & n21), any of which could be the original upon which Lady Margaret Beaufort’s translation, the *Myrrour of Golde for the Synful Soule* is based. This translation was printed several times both by Wynkyn de Worde and Pynson.

18. *Bibliothèque Nationale Catalogue des Incunables*, (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1985), I-85. (Further abbreviated as BNCL.)

19. Seynaeve, p. 324n3.

vitally conscious of their condition as sinners,”²⁰ the *Synonima* carried on the spirit of fervent penitence into the sixteenth century. Its message transmits the teaching of St. Gregory the Great with a focus on compunction of heart, sincerity and brevity in speech and prayer, and the reading of the Scripture.²¹ Its practical wisdom, crisp *sententiae* that will stick in the memory of reader, writer and preacher, made it an easy and useful reading for generations.²²

I have not been able to identify the author of the middle chapter, the treatise on the Seven Deadly Sins and other elements of faith. Such texts belonged to the most commonplace and ubiquitous genres of popular devotional literature. A slightly ironic sentence from the *Seuen poyntes of Trewe Loue and Euerlasting Wisdom*²³ gives a succinct illustration of the situation:

There ben also so mani bokes and tretees of vices and of vertues and of dyuerse doctrines that thys short lyfe shall rather haue an ende of eury man thenne he maye other studye hem or rede hem. (A6^r)

Yet this tract is similar to Isidore’s dialogue in its frequent use of proverbial sayings. Two such sentences, from the section on Gluttony, will serve as an amusing example. The author is, at times, rather hard upon his readers:

for as to eate one tyme of the day it is a lyfe angelyke and for to ate tho tymes of the day it is a lyfe humayne. But for to eate thre or foure tymes it is a lyfe brutall. (E3^v)

Even by the standards of contemporary asceticism, such advice given to a layman seems to me somewhat beyond the point of achievability. In fact, this sentence owes its origin to one of the Desert Fathers of the 4th century.²⁴ However, the author

20. Jean Leclercq et al., *The Spirituality of the Middle Ages* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), pp. 60–1.

21. Leclercq, p. 64.

22. Syon Abbey held a copy of it entitled *Dialogus ysidori de spirituali consolacione*, overtly stating the work’s consolatory nature. (Bateson, p. 164 nr. 42)

23. Printed by William Caxton as part of the *Boke of Dyuerse Ghoostly Matters*, STC 3305

24. “Apophtegmes des Pères” tr. par L. Regnault et les moines des Solesmes, in *Les Sentences des Pères du désert* (Solesmes, 1966–85), Eth 14, 1. Quoted in Lucien Regnault, *La vie quotidienne des pères du désert en Égypte au IV^e siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1990), p. 79. The term “angelic life” was the common designation of the monastic form of life, primarily on the basis of Mt 22.29–30 and Mk 12.18–27. See, for example, Vincent L. Wimbush and R. Valantasis, *Asceticism* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1995), pp. 134–135.

of the treatise on the Seven Deadly Sins may have been quite unaware of this – what he did perhaps was simply look into a collection of devout sayings and admonitions of his time, making use of whatever seemed to fit the purpose. That he sometimes made a not very adequate choice can be seen from the example from the remedies against Gluttony:

For as he the whiche is boden unto souper spareth hym at dyner for too
make good chere at souper / in lyke wyse sholde we spare us from drynke &
from mete in this presente lyfe and we sholde be sober for to reioyse us &
for to fede in the glorye eternall. (E4^v)

Although the parallel between earthly repast and the holy supper is clear, it does seem peculiar to stir devout readers to abstinence by an example of repletion.

There is no reference to the English translator in the book. Pynson adds a commonplace request to the reader in the colophon:

Pray for hym the whych hath translated this present boke out of Frenche
into Englysshe and it caused to be Enprynted for the helthe of soules to the
ende that he myght be partener of the goode dedys the whyche of them shal
procede. (H6^v)

This sounds as if the book had been printed to the translator's personal request. If the attribution to Andrew Chertsey in the Pierpont Morgan Library Catalogue is correct,²⁵ this is not improbable, since Chertsey both translated and supported the printing of several other devotional books of French origin (such as the *Floure of the Commaundements of God*, printed by de Worde in 1510 and 1524).²⁶ However, the absence of his name from the printed text is even more peculiar in this case.

We may see from this that the *Boke of Comforte* grew out of a loose binding together of treatises into an independent title. In this respect, it is representative of a more advanced state of the art of printing: whereas the printer of the Latin incunabulum made these treatises one book by merely making them adjacent, imitating

25. I am indebted to Mr. John Bidwell, Astor Curator of printed books and bindings at the Pierpont Morgan Library who kindly described the Morgan Library's copy of the *Boke of Comforte* and the *Livret des Consolacions* for me.

26. See J. Boffey's article on Chertsey in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/5225>. Again, my thanks are due to Mr. Bidwell for drawing my attention to this.

manuscript miscellanea,²⁷ the printers of the French and English books of comfort were more creative in their editorial work by adding a title and some paragraphs of reflection from an “auctour” to connect the treatises. Marchant and de Worde appear to be editors, printers and publishers at a task which Nicholaus Leeu and his colleagues attended to as mere craftsmen. They published a book, whereas Leeu only issued manuscripts in printed form.

The difference between Leeu’s incunabulum and the *Boke of Comferte* is even more significant in terms of the language. It cannot be said with certainty that it was only the literate urban laity (merchants, well-off craftsmen, lawyers and any who could afford buying books to nurture their personal devotion)²⁸ or the parish priest preparing his sermon, who were in need of a vernacular book of comfort. Even better educated people and priests could profit from having these texts in their mother tongue, and indeed, numerous vernacular devotional books printed by Wynkyn are either written or translated by brothers of Syon Abbey, bishops, or Carthusian monks. Yet those groups of society we could tentatively call the middle class could hardly have benefited to the same degree from a Latin book. It was the possibility of catering for the needs of pious laypeople that touched a cord in printers’ mercantile spirituality. Printers even overdid their jobs by creating as well as satiating a reading public.²⁹

An interesting addition to the *Boke of Comferte*’s textual evolution is the ‘after-life’ of its chapters. Isidore’s wisdom continued to be popular in editions like *The Gathered Counsaillies of saynct Isodorie to informe man, howe he shuld flee vices and folowe vertues*, printed in 1534. A collection of wise sayings, it may be regarded as a breviary of “Reason.”

27. Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (New York: CUP, 1993), p. 14. I have found that the *Colloquium* and Petrus Blesensis’ treatise were put right after each other in a volume of printed and manuscript material, once in the possession of Durham Cathedral and now held in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas. I have consulted a microfilm of this collection at Durham University Library. If this arrangement of the two texts was a convention, then Marchant and de Worde were clearly bolder editors than Leeu who did not attempt to break away from it.

28. On the social distribution of reading in early Tudor England, see for example H. S. Bennett, *English Books and Readers 1475 to 1557* (Cambridge: CUP, 1952). On the development of reading habits from the late 13th century to the early 1500s see H. M. Carey, “Devout Literate Laypeople and the Pursuit of the Mixed Life in Medieval England,” *Journal of Religious History* 14 (1987) 361–81.

29. Helen White, *Tudor Books of Private Devotion* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1959), p. 169

Gruytrode's *Colloquium* was also printed some thirty years later by John Redman with the title *The Dialogue or comunicacion betwene our sauour Jhesu Chryste and a sinner* (STC 14548). The text is presented to the "Jentyll and loueyng readers that in the merytes of Christes passyon delyteth" (A2^r), and in this sentence the dialogue's two main focuses, spiritual love and meditation on Christ's passion, are summarized. The translation does not come near the *Boke of Comforte's* version of the *Colloquium*: it is shorter and plainer, without the earlier text's refined style, rhythm and shades of rhetoric.

The next English version of the *Colloquium* was published as late as 1638. It is included in Richard Brathwait's *Spiritual Spicerie*, bearing the title *A Divine Dialogue; or a comfortable Conference betwixt our Saviour and a Sinner: with the Life of Gruytrodius, the Author*. Brathwait appears to have been working from the *Divini Amoris Pharetra*, a book containing, besides Gruytrode's *Colloquium*, the work of another Carthusian, Johannes Justus Lanspergius. This book was printed in Cologne by Peter Horst in 1590, and includes the short biographies of both Gruytrode and Lanspergius.³⁰ The biographies of the *Spiritual Spicerie* seem to be word by word renderings of this original. The only difference is one that speaks of the considerable lapse of time between Wynkyn's and Brathwait's England. Brathwait inserts the following apology on behalf of the Catholic author:

Iacobus Gruytrodius, a German, a man singularly versed in divine and humane Learning: And opposite in constancy of opinion, and consonance of doctrine, to those surreptitious Errours of the Time; . . . having his pen ever vers'd in Works of devotion and piety: never in arguments of division or controversy.³¹

The book features prominent medieval authors: passages by Bonaventure, Augustine, Suso, and even Thomas Aquinas are included. Nevertheless, although the author clearly favours the moving and elevated mood of Catholic piety to Protestant texts, and even inserts a confession-narrative of his own life, this preference is not extended to doctrinal matters. There is nothing in the book to suggest that Brathwait had Catholic inclinations beyond his stylistic preferences. He also defends himself

30. I am grateful to Mr Alistair MacGregor from Ushaw College for bringing this work into my attention and allowing me to consult it.

31. The original reads: *Iacobus Gruytrodius Germanus, vir in diuinis & humania literis apprime versatus, ut adolescentiam liberalibus studiis honeste transegit, sic statem reliquam, in Carthusianorum ordine, Domino consecravit & feliciter impendit. Claruit anno MCCCCLXXII (Divini Amoris Pharetra, p. 1).*

against “a rigid Precisian, objecting, that flowers from Romish Authors extracted, became lesse wholesome and divinely redolent” (226).

It is beyond the limits of the present paper to investigate how a Carthusian work like the *Colloquium* made its way into England after the dissolution of the monasteries and the Elizabethan Settlement. Let it suffice that its enduring popularity is another support to Louis L. Martz’s argument of a continuous meditative tradition in English prose, reaching well into the 17th century,³² a comforting consummation of More’s wish that laypeople would read “suche englysshe bookes as moste may norysse and encrease deuocyon” instead of controversy³³ and – quoting Chambers’s words – “yet one more protest against the current division into Medieval and Modern.”³⁴

3 “[K]now what thou arte”: A Mirror to the Reader “in fourme of a dyalogue”

Before discussing the book itself in detail, a few words regarding its genre may be useful. Comfort-literature is divided into two main lines by the editors of More’s *Dialogue*: a popular-devotional and a philosophical one, with treatises like the *Boke* in the former and works like the *Consolation of Philosophy* in the latter, and More somewhere in between the two categories. The editors assert that “the only real resemblance between *A Dialogue of Comfort* and other works in the comfort tradition is its shared doctrinal content, its use of Christian themes and traditions, and the fervor of its faith.”³⁵

It is unclear whether More has ever read the *Boke of Comferte*, and the similarity between the two titles as well as the three languages in which the two works are said to have appeared may be only a coincidence. It is also possible that More was building this literary design around his *Dialogue*, imitating the *Boke* and similar works, on purpose. At any rate, More’s definitions of “tribulation” and “comfort” may be helpful in defining the two main categories of the genre. Uncle Antony defines “tribulation” as “some kynd of grefe eyther payne of the body or hevynes of the

32. L. L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation. A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.)

33. Thomas More, *The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*, CW 8/I:37/28–29.

34. R. W. Chambers, *The Place of St. Thomas More in English Literature and History* (London: Longmans, 1937.), p. 24.

35. CW 12, pp. cxviii–cxx.

mynd,”³⁶ stating that every tribulation is caused by man’s fault, brought about either as a consequence or a punishment of trespasses, or a “preseruyng” from sin.³⁷ “Comfort” is identified with the “medisyn”³⁸ given by God alone. These definitions are valid for the *Boke of Comforte* as well: “tribulation” sometimes refers to temptations (the remedies for which are given in the second part), sometimes to remorse and despair (against which the “blessyd Jesus” gives ample consolation), or supposed injustice suffered in everyday life (refuted by Reason in Isidore’s dialogue). As Alexandra Barratt writes in her introduction to the *Book of Tribulation*, a Middle English specimen of the genre, a broad interpretation of the term “tribulation” was one guarantee for the success of a consolatory book: all readers, suffering from whatever pain or conflict in the soul, could find the consolation applicable to their own specific situation.³⁹

The other thing which made these books popular is one readers of today would find more of a disadvantage. Some passages, especially in the third part, may seem to be more oppressive than consolatory. However, these had a practical value to contemporary readers. To quote Barratt again, “human beings do not find suffering itself intolerable; what they cannot bear is the fear that suffering is meaningless and has no purpose.”⁴⁰

The dialogue form provides a natural and involving context to the author for communicating his message. In the *Boke of Comforte* it is employed to such an extent as to enable the reader to ‘read himself’ into the conversation: the “poore synner” and “Man” practically mirror the contemporary lay reader with his questions and worries, and the ways he gives voice to them.

The generic definition in the third chapter’s *incipit* is a telling one: “a ryght consolatory contemplacyon in fourme of a dyaloge” (F4^v). The dialogue between the “poore synner” and the “blessyd Jhesus” is introduced with a similar phrase: “a deuoute contemplacyon and oreyson” (A2^r). The term “contemplation” meant much to its readers – an audience nourished on such classics as Hilton’s or Love’s works that were circulating in manuscripts among the laity of London⁴¹ well before Wynkyn

36. *CW* 12:10/6–7.

37. *CW* 12:21/2–11.

38. *CW* 12:11/29.

39. Alexandra Barratt, “Introduction,” in *The Book of Tribulation* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1983), 7–37, p. 31.

40. Barratt, p. 31.

41. See the colophon of MS Harley 993: “And so be it delivered and committid from persone to persone, man or womman, as longe as the book endureth,” cited in R. W. Chambers,

printed them. “Contemplation” and “oration” were closely associated, bringing the meditative mind into personal conversation with God. An immediate experience of His reality, however, should start with the contemplative’s self-knowledge. It is only through a humble view of the self that one can reach the vision of the humble Son of God, however hard this may be. Contemplating God in his work of redemption, again, results in another kind of self-denial: the solitary becomes a labourer for the salvation of his fellow creatures.⁴²

Both dialogues observe this pattern, yet the “poore synner” and “Man” start their studies in the hard field of self-knowledge from different stances. Their first lines display this difference between the characters’ initial self-image well.

The poore synner begynneth in saynge deuoutly

O My ryght benygne ryght pyteful & ryght mercyful lorde & redemptour
 Jhesu cryst sone of the ryght sacryd vyrgyn mary sauour of al the worlde. I
 pore synner requyre thee ryght humbly that yt may plese thee to gyue me
 grace and wylte pardon me that I so myserable a synner in suche wyse
 sholde presume as to approche unto the. . . (A2^r)

And so he goes on, in the same verbose, timid mood, hiding his request in the folds of his rhetoric. He is apparently in fear of the divine majesty of “the swete sauour Jhesus hangynge on the crosse,” who, however, presently gives proof of his human temper by asking him back: “What arte thou.”(A2^r) Upon which, the “poore synner” repeats the gist of his former words:

I am a poore myserable synner fallen in to the fylthes myseryes and in fely-
 cytees of synne in peryll and daunger to be dampned eternally if the dethe
 take me in my synnes. (A2^{r-v})

A similarly brief absolution is promptly given, very much in the phrasing of the gospel:

“The Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More,” in *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More, knight, sometymes Lord high Chancellor of England, written in the tyme of Queene Marie by Nicholas Harpsfield*, ed. E. V. Hitchcock, EETS or. ser 186 (London: OUP, 1932), xlv-clxxiv, p. cviii.

42. René Tixier, “‘this louely blinde werk’: Contemplation in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Related Treatises,” in W. F. Pollard & R. Boening (ed.), *Mysticism and Spirituality in Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 107–37, pp. 110–115.

Leue leue this drede . . . thou wylte do true penaunce for thy synnes that thou hast commytted and from this day forwarde flee theym and kepe the well that thou fall not in them agayne. (A3^v)

This scene is followed by a meditative conversation on the subject of Christ's suffering, the cause of such ready forgiveness of sins. During the dialogue, the "poore synner" has ample occasion to reflect upon his own self in the mirror of Christ's manhood and perfect love for sinners like him. At times, he is carried away by the fervour of divine love, in the wake of Richard Rolle and Dame Julian of Norwich:

Embrace my herte with thy fyre of charyte and make thou it for to be softe & to melte as the waxe dothe before the fyre and as the snowe doth by the hete and feruour of the sonne. (A6^r)

But his voice is more often low-keyed, his nervous conscience remains tense, his self-image determined by compunction. The contemplated mysteries of the passion - all the while visible to him in its full reality, in the form of Jesus hanging on the cross - remind him of his unworthiness, acknowledged in exclamations like this:

I Poore unhappy replenysshed w carnalyte what shal I do that am arested in al dylectacyons pleasaunces and vaytees worldly and am a slepe in them the whiche sholde folowe the. (C1^r)

The most consolatory part of the dialogue serves to mend his anxious self-image. A turn in the meditation on the "blessyd Jhesus" atonement asserts the "poore synner's" dignity in theological terms:

it putte before thyn eyen th ryght hye pryce of thy redempcyon to the ende that thou mayste knowe the dygnyte and noblesse of the soule & soo esteme not thy soule to be a lyttle thyng . . . all the goodes of the worlde yf they were all of fyne golde yet shoulde they not be comparable unto one soule alonly reasonable. (C4^r)

"Man," the oppressed pupil of "Reason" is a very different character. He opens the conversation with a flood of complaints, a variation on Job's lamentations without Job's righteousness. Since this speech, though beautiful in its rhetoric, is much too long to quote at full length, I will only cite the most interesting passages.

Alas my soule is full of bytternes & of heuynes my spyrite is chased & brennyng / my hert hathe no reste / dysease hardly possesseth me I am set aboute with al ylles . . . for oueral where that I go / pouerte & myserye me

oppresseth & persecuteth in al partyes . . . I haue not mysdone to persone ne contraryed another nor hurted neuerthelesse euery man me chaseth unto the ende & gyueth me blame & dyshonour & in the place of helth I am not comforted of persone . . . the iuste ben put in blame and oppressed by fals wytnesses and uniuste Jugementes. (F4^v–F5^r)

His plaintive outcries are uttered with the full passion and relish of self-pity. Utterly disconsolate, his complaints roll on dressed in the phraseology of the psalms and Job:

Of whome may I demaunde counseyll and ayde whan all the worlde in leuyng charyte forsaketh me & oppresseth & fleeth from me whan I meke me & holde me styll without answer unto myne enemyes yet they be not contente. . . . I haue lost al my godes and am constreyned to begge openlye. there is none that hath pyte on me. I am abhominable unto euery creature. My body is meruaylously tormented and tyrannysed of cruel tyrauntes I am torne of a thousande maner of paynes. . . . O I miserable wherfore was I euer borne of my moder. O dethe whiche I desyre & abyde / wherfore comest thou not to gyue an ende to my trybulacyon & mysery. there is no consolacyon for me / for my dolour is infynyte. (F5^{r-v})

“Man,” in his own eyes, is the innocent victim of undeserved affliction. It is “Reason’s” task to make him aware of the fact that he is “himself the cause of his own harm,”⁴³ by some well-directed admonitions:

Thynke not that thou suffrest this alone & that none hath aduersyte but thou . . . it is impossyble that thou beyng a man sholde be without tastynge the bytternesse of thys worlde. For doloure and heuynesse be commune to al people. . . . knowe & confesse thy synne reknowlege thyne offenses and saye in thys wyse I haue not ben punysshed as I haue deserued. . . . knowe that murmure in trybulacyon prouoketh so moche more the Ire of god agaynste the. . . . Thou arte a detractour a rancour. . . . Consyder the greuoussnesse & inormyte of thy synnes. At the leest whan thou arte beten knowe thy defautes. (F5^v–G1^r)

Ultimately, “Man” is overtaken by the truth of his words:

43. *CW* 12:25/5–6

I unhappy and miserable knowe not what I suffer for my demerytes. . . .
 And I understande not that the Justyce of god correcketh myn iniustyce. O
 reason thou hast shewed it me well thou hast it full wel declared unto me I
 knowe it nowe by the clerely I se that that is euydently & manyfestly. (G1^r)

His complaints are diverted into their proper channel of compunction and penitence:

I am not suffycient for to thynke agayne the nombre Innumerable of my
 cursed synnes. . . . O my teres where be ye / you kepe you in / where be ye
 the fountayne of wepynges / water me with waylynge sprynkel myn eyen
 with teres. . . . There is no offence more greuouse than myn. I haue so moche
 offended that in regarde of me there is no man a synner and I excede al
 other. . . . I fere the greate Jugemente of god / the derke Journey / the ryght
 harde Journey full of bytternes. . . . O my god haue pyte on me byfore that I
 dye / byfore that dethe take me / byfore that hell deuour me. (G3^{r-v})

Self-pity dies hard: now he is sorry for himself rather than for his sins, more afraid of the consequences of, than regretful for the offence he gave to God. However, even such an imperfect form of compunction is enough to win Reason's sympathy. He now starts comforting "Man" with an almost uninterrupted torrent of good counsel. His sayings take the form of biblical proverbs, compassing the topics of neighbourly charity, good works, the Seven Deadly Sins and the cardinal virtues, discipline in speech and in mundane matters. An especially fortunate passage is worth quoting, in which "Reason" warns against backbiting:

Bacbyte not the synner but haue compassyon on hym and the defaute that
 thou seest in thy neyghbour fere and doubte leest that it be in thyselve. It is
 a meruaylous greuouse synne of detraccyon. And therefore Justely euery crea-
 ture it repreueth and blameth and it is compared unto a hounde. For as the
 maner is of a dogge or of a hounde for to byte & for to bay. In lyke wyse is it
 of the detractour to byte & to rente / whan thou wylte backbyte another
 fyrst beholde thyne owne synnes & yf thou consyder thyselve wel & yf thou
 know it wel. (H1^r)

These words are as crude as the woodcuts decorating the book. But just as the gross figures of the crucifixion did not appear repulsive to readers, such chastising might have been as comfortable as the gentle consolation of the "blessyd Jhesus." There is some even stronger medicament in the treatise on the Seven Deadly Sins. A

considerable part of this chapter is on the various “braunches” of *Pride*, the result of erroneous self-knowledge. The “auctour” offers the considering of this as a cure:

when we be borne and al the tyme of our lyfe we be a vessel full of ordure
dunge and fylth and there springeth nought of all our membres but mys-
schefe and stynke. (D5^r)

Surely no one would think of exalting himself above his fellow-creatures after taking this last bit seriously. Yet such a conception of the corruptible human body is very much in context with a poetic adoration of Christ’s human form and suffering in the first chapter, a brief analysis of which is presented below.

4 “[T]he very knyght the whiche hath made the felde”: The Image of Christ

The “blessyd Jhesus” consoling the “poore synner” is introduced as the “swete sauour Jhesus hangynge on the crosse” (A2^r) – the translation of Gruytrode’s spare Latin ‘crucifixus’. The English phrase is more visual inasmuch as it evokes the setting of the dialogue: the poore synner, like a medieval mystic, is standing before the crucified Christ, contemplating His suffering person while listening to Him and asking several questions. One may think of More’s consideration in *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*: “Nor these two wordes Christus crucifixus do not so lyuely represent vs the remembraunce of his bytter passyon as doth a blessyd ymage of the crucyfyx.”⁴⁴ In this case, the words themselves (many of which are the English translator’s own contributions) make up the “blessyd ymage” contemplated by the “poore synner” and the reader alike. The image is an attractive and detailed picture of Christ, focused on His humanity, His human anguish, bodily and mental.

The first allegory of Christ bears many references to medieval English devotional imagery. After an impassioned talk on Christ’s passion and mankind’s ingratitude, the “poore synner” breaks into a eulogy:

O Blessyd sauour Jhesus . . . thou arte the very knyght the whiche hath
made the felde and foughten valyauntly and borne awaye the vycory
agaynste the greate and myghty puyssaunt and auntyent enemye of man-

44. *CW* 6: 47/15–17.

kynd the deuyll of helle and hath brought agayne the prysoners the whiche were in his prison. (A5^r)⁴⁵

This image of the Christ-knight has a long-established place in devotional allegory. The most obvious association is *Piers Plowman*:⁴⁶ but such texts as the *Ancrene Riwe* or the *Treatyse of Loue*⁴⁷ (a compilation printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1491–3, closely related to the *Riwe* and the *Chastising of God's Children*) also contain extensive allegories on Christ's battle for man's soul, painting it as a knightly tournament. The "poore synner" is also involved in this imagery: once he refers to himself as the "page and seruant" (C2^r). He is exhorted by the "blessyd Jhesus" with the figurative language of feudal obligations:

It is of necessity that those the whiche bere the token of my crosse in theyr forhedes that they bere also in theyr hertes and also that they lyue stedfastly in the law of hym of whome they bere the armes and the faythe. For he bereth in vayne the tokenes of that souerayne lorde unto whome he wyll not obeye ne be seuante. (C2^v)

He the whiche it [he passion] enprenteth in his herte is hardy and prest to fyght with the deuyll of hell . . . wenyng that he be armed with the armours of his lorde and sauour as a knyght the whyche armeth hym for to entre in to batayll / whan he is armed he is the more hardy and fereth nothyng for he hath euermore his refuge at the standarde of the lorde & prynce of whome he awayteth for to be socoured. (C4^v)

But the "token" of Christ is also used in a context reminiscent of the conventions of courtly love as well as of the *Book of Songs* (8:6):

45. Compare this with the plainer Latin wording: *Dominus es, liberans a diaboli potestate & seruitute* in Bod.Auct.7.Q, A2^r.

46. For a detailed discussion of this image in Langland's poem and its Continental sources and connections see Wilbur Gaffney, "The Allegory of the Christ-Knight in *Piers Plowman*," *PMLA* 46 (1931) 155–69. Gaffney cites numerous French examples of the image; not unusual in a chivalric age, when illustrations of knights and ladies, hunters and battles often decorated noblemen's prayer books and missals. See H. M. Carey, "Devout Literate Laypeople and the Pursuit of the Mixed Life in Late Medieval England," *Journal of Religious History* 14 (1987) 361–81.

47. All parenthesized references are to this edition: *Treatise of Loue*, ed. John H. Fisher, *EETS*, or. ser. 225 (London: OUP, 1951).

Put me nowe as a sygne or as a token aboue thyne herte to the entente that thou mayst loue me with all thyne herte and that thou leue behynde all that thou haste loued ryghte dere. (C3^v)

Another image used by the poore synner is a perfect homage to Christ's divinity: it connects the "blessyd Jhesus" person with the Holy Spirit.

Thou arte the fyre of loue and also of charyte the which arte dyscended downe in to this worlde for to rechafe and enflame those the whiche that ben sore a colde & frosen by slouth and dyuysyon of courage. (A5^{r-v})

As opposed to this, the extended simile with which the "blessyd Jhesus" illustrates his foreknowledge of his suffering draws full attention to his humanity, his human weakness:

As a pylgryme the whiche hathe to passe necessaryly a peryllous passage thynkyng nyght & daye howe he myght best escape it & auoyde the daungers the whiche he fereth to fynd in his passage / & thus hathe he no maner of rest in hymselfe neyther daye nor nyghte / unto the tyme that his pylgrymage and voyage be parfayte and ende in lyke wyse is it of me. (B1^r)

At this point, it becomes difficult to see whether it is the blessyd Jhesus or the poore synner who is in need of consolation. There is a shift of emphasis from the "blessyd Jhesus" divinity to His human fears and sorrows in the imagery, accompanied by changes in His tone when addressing the "poore synner." At times, He speaks in a voice of command:

Nowe take hede unto me & thynke well in thyne herte that that nowe I shall say to the. I wyll be byloued. I wyll that man put his trust in me. I wyll be worshipped and requyred by waylynges and profounde dolour of herte in grete haboundance of teres. (A3^r)

In contrast, He shows an almost humiliating degree of human love, a yearning to be loved and comforted by the "poore synner," like in this wooing:

By my dolorous passyon I haue shewed the quantyte of my loue and of my dyleccyon. Nowe one loue desyreth another loue in suche wyse that he the whyche louethe desyreth for to be bylouyd and there is no greater payne than for to loue & not to be louyd. For one loue doth requyre another. (C3^v)

The value of such great love and longing is enlarged by what Gray calls a “quaint piece of devotional physiology”:⁴⁸ an elaborate description of the “blessyd Jhesus” bodily nobleness, a cause of his extraordinarily great suffering.

Certes it is for the noblesse of my body and of my nature that I haue taken and fourmed of the ryght precyous blode of my holy and sacred moder. Now it is so of as moche as the body is more noble and of the more noble blode in as moche is it the more tender for to suffre. . . . For my body was made and formed as it is sayd in the vyrgynalle wombe of my ryght sacryd moder of her ryght pure and precyous blode and haue souked of the mylke of her precyous brestes plentyfull and full of the grace celestyall in suche wyse that my body was proporcyoned & complexyoned for to lyue without synne or more longly thanne lyued. And bycause of this so stronge complexyon the dethe unto me was so horryble and so paynful and the seperacyon of my soule and also of my body so vyolent. And in as moche as my tender flesshe was all pure and all clene without synne of as moche was it the more passyble in these horryble tormentes. (B1^v–B2^v)

Given the preoccupation with the suffering Saviour and the visually oriented piety of the age, I would not call this a “quaint” piece. It is certainly orthodox in its doctrinal content, being virtually a poetic paraphrase of Thomas Aquinas’ “Treatise on the Incarnation” in the *Summa Theologica*. To the *Boke’s* readers such a paraphrase was far from unfamiliar: texts like the *Treatyse of Loue*⁴⁹ contain similar passages. Indeed, the passage in the *Treatyse* is so similar as to make one think whether it may not be textually related to Gruytrode’s dialogue, by a possible com-

48. Gray, p. 215.

49. Consider these lines in the *Treatyse*: “There is noo sorow like vnto my sorowe. And it was noo merueylle, For moche more tender is a yonge clene vyrgyne, Innocent wythout synne, than an olde wretched synner. Now was there neuer a more pure vyrgyne, ne more tender, nor soo clene as was the blessyd pure virgyn mary, the fayre moder of our lorde, Jhesu cryste, of whom he took his humanytee, of the most pure dropes of hyr vyrgynal blood wythout synne and ony substaunce of the humayne seed . . . wherof he was soo tender that there was neuer man nor none other creature that in this worlde dyde suffre soo grete sorowes and so hideous tormentes as dyde our lorde Jhesu cryst in his tender body two&thirty yere duryng, alwaye greuouse & more greuouse.” (63–4). Fisher refers to the corresponding places in the English version of the *Riwle*; for the same in the Latin version, see *The Latin Text of the Ancrene Riwle*, ed. Charlotte D’Evelyn from Merton Coll. MS. 44 and British Museum MS. Cotton Vitellius E vii., EETS or. ser., nr. 216 (London: OUP, 1944), 33–4.

mon source, the *Ancrene Riwe*, which was well known in its French and Latin versions in the Low Countries.⁵⁰

Let us remember the second chapter's strong words on the corruptible human body. For a reader so convinced of his own bodily vileness it was perfectly evident to picture Christ the victorious knight as exempt from sinful mankind's abominable nature. The Son could not have taken upon himself *quite* the same humanity the rest was composed of. Devout readers of the age were well aware of the difference between *body* and *corpus*.

It is difficult to define this colloquium as a dramatic piece or as a meditative prose work. Gray maintains that "the possibilities of the dialogue framework are not fully realized, even within the devotional limits."⁵¹ He does not specify what these possibilities are. But if the give-and-take manner of discussion and the ever-changing, varied tone count as such, they are most fully realized. As for the devotional limits, I would say that they do not as much restrict as define the scope of the conversation, giving ample sphere for poetic imagery and ingenious prose devices. One such device is the use of tenses in the passion narrative. The "blessyd Jhesus," disclosing the secrets of his redemptive work and telling the events of his passion uses the present perfect and the simple past according to a specific scheme: when he refers to his suffering as a finished event of the past, with a specific place in time and place, they are told in simple past:

For whan that the hour of it approached. I swete of grete dystresse in all my membres habundantly the swete of rede blode dystyllynge and rennynge fro my body to the grounde ... consyder the secrete of the payne and dolour the whiche crucifyed me from the wombe of my moder inwardly in my herte whiche was shewed by outwarde tokens and sensybles unto my faythfull frendes *at the houre of my dolorous deth* as it was ordeyned. (A4^v–B2^r)

When the significance and result of these events are in focus, when they are referred to as signs of divine love or causes for human gratitude, the present perfect is used:

I haue ben for you meked and *haue* for you *laboured* upon the erth. I *haue ben* tormented for you. I *haue be* spyt on for you. I *haue ben* beten and scourged for you I *haue ben* unjustly condampned to deth for you. I *haue ben* hanged shamefully and dolorously crucifyed for you. I *haue called* you

50. See Fisher's Introduction to the *Treatyse*, esp. p. xv.

51. Gray, p. 214.

my bretheren. I *haue offred* you to God my fader I *haue sent* you the holy ghost. And also unto hym I *haue opened* the celestyall paradise what sholde I more do than I *haue done* for you. to the entente that I might saue you.

(D1^v)

The translator carries out this method consistently; it is obviously a conscious literary solution. It gives the conversation the character of a liturgical drama, where Christ's sufferings are remembered as part of the biblical past and enlivened as an eternal, never-finished mystery of faith.

Gray justly says that the text "makes full use of the traditional images of devotional literature."⁵² It does indeed display the complete palette of devotion, various tinges of style and tone, reconciling patristic rigour to the affective-meditative spirituality of the early 16th century. In its plenty, it reflects the simple complexity of its readers' thinking. They knew that their souls were more precious than gold, though their bodies were but filth, and they themselves but miserable sinners. They could praise their Saviour in raving words of love and fear him as a terrible judge; they were equally receptive to poetic imagery and homespun lecturing. They were capable of a general confession of their sinfulness by calling themselves a "poore myserable synner," but they preferred referring to the manifold "braunches" of the Seven Deadly Sins when it came to self-examination, to get a more acute view of the state of their consciences.

I tried to select as much from the text's treasures as was possible: what I aimed at was to show that it is a carefully made, valuable work of art, a direct descendent of late medieval English religious prose, preserving a continuity of religious thinking and its literary expression which is immune to the artificially drawn dividers between the centuries. To students of book history and the history of religion, or indeed of literature, the *Boke of Comforte* provides ample material to work upon, and remains as "profytable" to modern scholars as it was to its first readers.

52. Gray, p. 214.