Universally taught before writing, and thus many people who could not write would nonetheless have been able to read. Such basic reading skills, though possibly widespread, have left almost no trace in the historical record—how could they, since the people in question could not write? Despite this difficulty, Hackel succeeds in finding a wide variety of references to rudimentary reading in the period—in prefaces addressed to readers, in descriptions of teaching children to read, and even as metaphors in lyric poetry. Hackel’s discussion of rudimentary writing skills is similarly nuanced, pointing out that those who could not master the fairly difficult skill of writing with pen and ink on paper could nonetheless have written on walls or carved letters in wooden furniture. Moreover, Hackel demonstrates that even those who could not read nonetheless bought books—because they wanted to have a sacred text near them, because someone else would read to them, or merely (in one documented case) motivated by a pure desire for acquisition. Thus even the illiterate have their place in the history of early modern reading.

As Chaucer’s Parson begins his “tale”—in essence a spoken handbook on penance—he commends penitence as “the goode wey”: a path that “may not fayle to man ne to woman that thurgh synne hath mysgoon fro the righte wey of Jerusalem celestial.”

as a vehicle for penitence may also be found in a widely disseminated early-fifteenth-century sermon collection compiled by John Felton. Penitence, Felton teaches, was the "via" the apostles and saints took as they "walked to paradise," and it is the road we all must follow "if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven." The fifteenth-century penitential lyric I shall discuss here also makes use of the idea of a path in order to teach about the process of penitence; in particular, it provides guidance on two critical steps that must follow John Felton's usage, the highway of penitence is implicitly straight. By contrast, the way to paradise, the kingdom of heaven, the celestial Jerusalem, or a stop along the way, is a place where the penitent encounters turning-against the wrong path coupled with a turning-toward the right one: a resolute spurning of sin together with a hearty embrace of virtue. Second, it exhorts a turning-against-in order to review its errors and understand them thoroughly.


4 The author of "Revertere" translates revertere as "turn agen" (26), a definition with precisely the double valence I am describing. Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Literature, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). As such, "Revertere" can also be translated as "return again," a notion of returning to the place one entered, the place that is the work's final destination.

5 "Revertere" is indexed by Carleton Fairchild Brown and Rosse Hope Robbins as number 1454 in Index of Middle English Verse (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943, hereafter IMEV). It survives in three manuscript copies; the most complete of these is in a mid-fifteenth-century devotional and didactic miscellany, London, Lambeth Palace MS 853. For a description of this manuscript, see Montague Rhodes James, A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Lambeth Palace: The Medieval Manuscripts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932); for lists of its contents, see Frederick J. Furnivall, Hymns to the Virgin and Christ, The Parliament of Devils, and Other Religious Poems, Chiefly from the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lambeth MS. no. 853, Early English Text Society 24 (London: Trübner, 1867), xv–xvi and O. S. Pickering, Manuscripts in Lambeth Palace Library, including those formerly in Sion College Library, Index of Middle English Prose Handlist 13 (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999). The Lambeth witness to the poem has also been edited by Furnivall in Hymns to the Virgin and Christ (91–94). "Revertere" also appears in Cambridge, Trinity College MS O.9.38, a mid-fifteenth-century commonplace book described by A. G. Rigg in A Glastonbury Miscellany of the Fifteenth Century: A Descriptive Index of Trinity College, Cambridge, MS. O.9.38 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 1–9. Rigg also provides the beginning and concluding lines of this witness of the poem and discusses it in relation to the other two copies (51–52). A much abbreviated version of the poem, including only stanzas 1–3 and 11, appears in Richard Hill's commonplace book, Oxford, Balliol College Library MS 354, a codex of the early sixteenth century. The manuscript and its contents are described in detail by Roman Dybowski in Songs, Carols, and other Miscellaneous Poems, from the Balliol MS. 354, Richard Hill's commonplace Book, Early English Text Society Extra Series 101 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908). xiii, who also edits its version of "Revertere" (80–81). The edition of "Revertere" that follows this essay is based on Lambeth 853 and includes variants from Trinity O.9.38; all quotations from the poem refer to this edition.

Sources, ed. J. H. Baxter and Charles Johnson (London: Oxford University Press, 1934) lists thirteenth-century sources in which revertere has the sense "to send back, turn back, reverse" and a 1386 source in which it has the sense "to overthrow, be upset."

"Revertere" is indexed by Carleton Fairchild Brown and Rosse Hope Robbins as number 1454 in Index of Middle English Verse (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943, hereafter IMEV). It survives in three manuscript copies; the most complete of these is in a mid-fifteenth-century devotional and didactic miscellany, London, Lambeth Palace MS 853. For a description of this manuscript, see Montague Rhodes James, A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Lambeth Palace: The Medieval Manuscripts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932); for lists of its contents, see Frederick J. Furnivall, Hymns to the Virgin and Christ, The Parliament of Devils, and Other Religious Poems, Chiefly from the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lambeth MS. no. 853, Early English Text Society 24 (London: Trübner, 1867), xv–xvi and O. S. Pickering, Manuscripts in Lambeth Palace Library, including those formerly in Sion College Library, Index of Middle English Prose Handlist 13 (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999). The Lambeth witness to the poem has also been edited by Furnivall in Hymns to the Virgin and Christ (91–94). "Revertere" also appears in Cambridge, Trinity College MS O.9.38, a mid-fifteenth-century commonplace book described by A. G. Rigg in A Glastonbury Miscellany of the Fifteenth Century: A Descriptive Index of Trinity College, Cambridge, MS. O.9.38 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 1–9. Rigg also provides the beginning and concluding lines of this witness of the poem and discusses it in relation to the other two copies (51–52). A much abbreviated version of the poem, including only stanzas 1–3 and 11, appears in Richard Hill's commonplace book, Oxford, Balliol College Library MS 354, a codex of the early sixteenth century. The manuscript and its contents are described in detail by Roman Dybowski in Songs, Carols, and other Miscellaneous Poems, from the Balliol MS. 354, Richard Hill's commonplace Book, Early English Text Society Extra Series 101 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908). xiii, who also edits its version of "Revertere" (80–81). The edition of "Revertere" that follows this essay is based on Lambeth 853 and includes variants from Trinity O.9.38; all quotations from the poem refer to this edition.

also proceeds along a twisting path in which each turning-away is linked to a turning-back. This figurative association between self-study and the practice of reading a glossed text works to commend the degree of literacy required to negotiate such a page layout as an asset to one’s performance of penitence; at the same time, it exposes penitential practice as one that subjects a person’s deeds to the same kind of institutionally invested interpretation that glossing and marginal commentary brings to bear on a text. Finally, in a register apart from its exploration of penitence as reading, “Revertere” also teaches a subtle lesson about the discipline the text and gloss format imposes on readers of real books with real paper or parchment pages.

In order to explicate the several turning paths that are represented in the poem “Revertere,” I shall myself adhere in what follows to the multivalent admonition inscribed on the wondrous briar bush the poem features: in my first “turn” to the poem, I shall situate it within the tradition of penitential lyrics, focusing in particular on its promotion of self-study; this analysis will make way for a return that considers the poem’s portrayal of penitential self-examination as a technique that is analogous to reading a text and gloss. A final re-reading of the poem will discuss its teachings on the disciplinary effects of real marginal commentaries on real readers. In each of these “turns” to the poem, its wondrous and vexing briar bush will point the way.

Revertere: Turn Back!

Instruction in the “way” of penitence in “Revertere” begins with a depiction of a concrete excursion: in the poem’s opening lines, the speaker recounts an experience that began as a pleasurable summer outing:

In a noon tijd of asomers day.
pe sunne school ful myrie pat tide.
I took myn hauk al for to play.
mi spaynel remynyg bi my side. (1-4)

The speaker soon sees a pheasant take flight; his spaniel pursues it enthusiastically as the speaker sends his hawk aloft. It was, the speaker recalls, “a deinteuose sijt” (8), and he ran after pheasant, spaniel, and hawk “with a ful glad chere” (10). Quickly, however, everything changes: the speaker’s summer frolic is abruptly interrupted when a briar bush catches at his leg. As he recounts, “I spurned ful soone on my way. / mi leg was hent al with a brere” (11-12). The briar, he goes on to say, “dide me grijf” (13), and turning towards it, he makes the surprising discovery that each of its leaves is inscribed with a word, the word revertere: “soone it made me to turne age. / ffor he bare written...

6 For “deinteuose,” the Middle English Dictionary (in Middle English Compendium, ed. Francis McSparran, <http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/mec/>), hereafter MED) has “Delightful, elegant, beautiful; (b) luxurious; (c) delicious, epicurean.”
Like a handful of other Middle English penitential lyrics, then, "Revertere" begins with a playful chanson d'aventure opening but quickly reveals its monitory mission.10

Adding emphasis to the poem's penitential message, each of its eight-line stanzas ends with the refrain revertere, as does its prayerful finale: "perfore praye we to heuen king. / Euerly man in his degree. / To graunte them þe blis euerlastinge. / þat þis word weel kan seie revertere" (117–20). In this respect, "Revertere" is a typical Middle English refrain poem, using its refrain to teach, as Susanna Greer Fein has put it, "a pithy aphorism for virtuous daily life" — though the word revertere would seem to accomplish this somewhat more cryptically than most.11 The very brevity of the poem's refrain, however, suggests that it may have had a familiar resonance for medieval readers; for this reason, a short discussion of the possible sources of that familiarity will heighten our appreciation of the poem's intertextual relations, which appreciation will be pertinent, in turn, to my discussion below of the poem's reflection of glossed texts.

Pricke is dated to around 1350 and survives in more than a hundred manuscripts. It may be argued that any guide to confessio circulating during the late Middle Ages also had the cultivation of self-knowledge as its implicit goal; for a discussion of this concern in Mannyng's Handlyng Synne, see D. W. Robertson, "The Cultural Tradition of Handlyng Synne," Speculum 22 (1947): 166–67 (162–85). For an overview of confessional guides for laypeople, see Marjorie Curry Woods and Rita Copeland, "Classroom and Confession" in The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 390–406 (376–406).

10 For a short discussion of the chanson d'aventure opening as a framing device in penitential lyrics, see Douglas Gray, Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 172–73. "The Bird with Four Feathers" (IMEV 561), a poem that appears just two leaves past "Revertere" in Trinity College MS O.9.38 (ff. 24–25), is an especially successful example of this variety of penitential lyric; for an in-depth discussion and edition of the poem, see Susanna Greer Fein's Moral Love Songs and Laments (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), 255–268. In Lambeth Palace MS 853, "Revertere" and the two poems it was originally sandwiched between — before the manuscript's quires became disordered in rebinding — formed a trio of poems that open with the kind of first-person recollection that is characteristic of the chanson d'aventure: these include "As y gan wander in my walkinge" (pp. 58–61, IMEV 349, ed. Furnivall in Hymns to the Virgin and Christ, 83–85) and "As a forest as y gan" (pp. 66–74, IMEV 560, ed. Furnivall in Hymns, 95–100). Similarly, in Balliol 354, "Revertere" precedes a poem on the duties of prelates that begins "As I gan wander in on evynynge" (IMEV 350, ed. Dyboski in Songs, Carols, 81–82). Use of the term chanson d'aventure for first-person lyrics that narrate the events of a short outing originates with E. K. Chambers in "Some Aspects of Mediæval Lyric" in Early English Lyrics Amorous, Divine, Moral & Trivial, ed. E. K. Chambers and F. Sidgwick (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1926), 266–67 (259–96). The fullest discussion of the genre is Helen Estabrook Sandison's in The "Chanson D'Aventure" in Middle English, Bryn Mawr College Monographs XII (Bryn Mawr, 1913).


A. G. Rigg has put forward Isaiah 44.22 — "revertere ad me quoniam redemi te" [return to me, for I have redeemed thee] — as the source of the poem's refrain while Richard Leighton Greene has suggested Song of Songs 6.12, "Revertere, revertere, O Shulamite" [Return, return, O Shulamite].12 Given the Bernardine influence on late-medieval piety, another possible source for our poem's refrain is Bernard's Sententiae, which includes a commentary on this passage in the Song of Songs, which admonishes readers to turn away from pride, empty glory and useless frivolities.13 None of these candidates, however, relates in an especially clear way to the poem's penitential theme, nor would they seem to enjoy the kind of currency held by other Latin refrains in Middle English refrain poems, which, as Fein has shown, are drawn from the liturgy. For instance, both "Pety Job" (IMEV 1854) and "The Bird with Four Feathers" (IMEV 561) have the refrain "parce michi Domine" from the Office of the Dead, and a poem with the refrain "timor mortis conturbat me" (IMEV 3743) draws from it as well.14 In a similar vein, a penitential lyric that begins "Conuertimini ad me in toto corde vestro" (IMEV 3451) uses a Middle English translation of this line as its refrain; as Rossell Hope Robbins explains, this passage from the Book of Joel (2.12) was featured in the liturgy and in sermons for Ash Wednesday.15

Given this identifiable tradition, it would seem most wise to look to the liturgy as a source for the refrain revertere, and a form of the word does appear there in a context quite appropriate to the theme of our poem: in the mass for Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent — high season for penitence. At the point in the mass when the priest distributes the ashes among the congregation, he is to say, "Memento quia cinis es et in cinerem reverteris" [Remember that you are ash, and to ash you shall return].16 Although the refrain of our poem does not constitute a direct quotation of this admonition, the imperative revertere is certainly a strong implication of the future tense reverteris in this instance and for this reason it seems a plausible candidate as the source for our refrain. Whether or not the Ash Wednesday service was what our poet had in mind when he composed "Revertere," the importance of the service both in the church year

12 A Glastonbury Miscellany, 52; Greene qtd. in the same, 52. All biblical quotations in Latin are quoted from Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969); English is quoted from The Holy Bible; Translated from the Latin Vulgate and Diligently Compared with Other Editions in Divers Languages (Douay, A.D. 1609: Rheims A.D. 1582) (New York: Beiziger, 1914).


and for the practice of penitence coupled with the reminders of the inevitability of human demise in the poem itself strongly suggest that a medieval reader of the refrain *revertere* would have associated it with this ritual utterance. Adding to the possibility of lay readers’ familiarity with it, this stark description of the arc of human life is just the kind of piece that makes its way into spaces otherwise left blank in medieval manuscripts, and it does, in fact, appear in red ink in London, Lambeth Palace manuscript 853, one of the manuscripts that preserves “Revertere.”

Whatever the refrain’s precise origins, the change the word *revertere* works on the poem’s speaker certainly accords with the mood of austerity the Ash Wednesday service initiates in the church year. In this way, as the poem returns in its fifth stanza to the first-person mode, the speaker recalls that the word *revertere* taxed him severely and took away all the pleasure of his outing: “Pis word made me to studie sore. / 7 binam me al my list” (33–34). As the stanza continues, the thorny briar bush and its prickly imperative becomes assimilated to the metaphors of penitential discourse, in which the sorrowful awareness of one’s flaws that was understood to be essential to true contrition is ubiquitously figured as a painful goad. Accordingly, having studied the briar bush’s admonition, the speaker looks back over his recent past and realizes that he is “ful fer y flt / al from god in maistie” (37–38), whereupon he resolves to make *revertere* his byword in life from now on: “fforsope þere schal þo þing me leet. / þ þe y ne wole synge seyng þeþ reuertere” (39–40).

With this noble resolution, the poem’s first-person narrative comes to an end; the thorny briar bush has effected a bodily turning-away while its pointed inscription has prompted a mental turning-back, a self-examination that allows the speaker to recognize the spiritual dangers that lurked along the path he had been treading. The next six stanzas of the poem expand upon that self-reflexive turn; here the poem’s speaker, as if now sobered by his brush with the briar bush, goes back over the details of his jaunt in an exegetic rather than narrative mode, viewing his outing in the light of numerous preoccupations of penitential writings: the various and sundry follies of youth, the inexorable approach of old age and death, and the categories of sin — in this case, venial and “deedli” (78). As I shall argue in the next section of this essay, a close look at the pattern of the speaker’s movement among these topics calls to mind the switchbacking path of reading and re-reading supported by the text and gloss *mise-en-page*.

**Revertere: Return!**

A study of the middle stanzas of “Revertere” as an illustration of penitential self-study as a process analogous to reading a glossed text must begin with a return to our narrator’s account of his run-in with that troublesome briar bush, for certain details of that narrative invite a perception of this marvelously textual weed as a figurative gloss and in this way anticipate the particulars of the speaker’s subsequent “reading” of his recent past. Before taking that second look, however, we may note that in my discussion of the poem’s portrayal of its speaker’s change of heart, the briar bush has already functioned in the manner of a gloss or marginal commentary, for just as these forms of textual apparatus work — in theory, at least — to guide a reader to an institutionally sanctioned interpretation of a text, the briar bush and its helpful inscriptions pointed the poem’s speaker towards a new and more propitious understanding of his noon-time antics. With that elucidating function of the briar-bush in mind, we may revisit the poem’s opening stanzas and see that the text-laden briar bush functions as a gloss in a more concrete sense as well, for now we may recognize it as part of a “book” that enjoyed special prominence throughout the European Middle Ages: the Book of Nature.

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17 Squandered youth and the shortness of life are favorite topics in Middle English penitential texts; for examples, see Gray, *Themes and Images*, 173–75.

18 I note that marginal commentary functions to direct an institutionally approved reading of a text “in theory, at least,” since, as several scholars have remarked, the very presence of an interpretive apparatus suggests the possibility of multiple interpretations. In this way, as Christopher Baswell has put it, “[m]arginal voicings ... at once construct authority and undermine it” (“Talking Back to the Text: Marginal Voices in Medieval Secular Literature” in *The Uses of Manuscripts in Literary Studies: Essays in Memory of Judson Boyce Allen*, ed. Charlotte Cook Morse, Penelope Reed Doob, and Margerie Curry Woods [Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992], 130 [121–60]). Martin Irvine makes a similar point in “‘Bothe text and gloss’: Manuscript Form, the Textuality of Commentary, and Chaucer’s Dream Poems” in *Uses of Manuscripts*, ed. Morse et al., 85–86 (81–119).

19 Two of the most well-known attestations of this trope include Augustine’s elaboration of the firmament as scripture in Book 13, chapter 15 of the *Confessions* (in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, ed. Whitney J. Oates [New York: Random House, 1948], vol. 1, 236–37), and Alanus de Insulis’s poem beginning “Omnis mundi creatura, / Quasi liber, et pictura / Nobis est, et speculum” [Every created thing is to us like a book or picture or mirror] (J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* 210, 579a–580c). For discussion of this metaphor in relation to the medieval “idea of the book,” see Jesse M. Gelrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language
In keeping with that medieval commonplace, which figured all creation as a book authored by God, the briar bush first gets its point across as a briar bush proper rather than as a Latin text, for even in the act of catching sight of its inscribed leaves, the poem’s speaker follows their mandate: “his bre re forsore dide me grijf. / and soone it made me to turne a3e” (13–14), where “a3e” denotes “back” or “in the opposite direction” (MED s.v. “aye”). Considered in view of the painfully arresting message encoded in this “passage” of the Book of Nature, the superscription revertere may be understood as a text that serves to interpret a difficult — dare I say, thorny — text and in this way functions in the manner of an interlinear gloss or marginal commentary. In effect, the inscription on the briar bush’s leaves translates what is in this case the botanical idiom of the Book of Nature into a human idiom and, significantly, into Latin, the preeminent language of books made by humans during the Middle Ages.

The speaker’s reference to the briar bush’s text as a “lessour” (24) adds specificity to the gloss at hand, situating it within the covers of a school book, and framing the ensuing discussion of the speaker’s summer sport as a disciplinary reading initiated by a particularly pointed marginal annotation, one that he approaches, as he reports, “wiþ sýnynge sare” (23). A further evocation both of school rooms and school books may be noted in the poem’s repeated approbation of learning either to sing or to say the word revertere, for as Carleton F. Brown has explained, medieval schooling was designed to prepare pupils to participate in the liturgy, which required training in both reading and singing. While these allusions to schoolroom life may appear somewhat familiar at first glance, their significance stands out more clearly in the light of Marjorie Curry Woods’ and Rita Copeland’s recent discussion of the close ties, especially in the late Middle Ages, between confessional and grammatical education. In her part of this discussion, Copeland adduces an especially striking example of the ground shared by these two areas of culture in a manuscript produced around 1434–35 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Additional 2830) preserving the texts that schoolmaster John Drury of Becceles made use of in his teaching. The compilation includes a Middle English treatise on confession, De Modo Confitendi, written by Becceles himself together with numerous additional texts of use in the Latin grammar curriculum.

Revertere! and the Recursive Path of Right Reading

argues that the De Modo Confitendi “concisely represents the tradition of lay confessional instruction and its assimilation to formal pedagogical programmes”; she goes on to assert that together the compilation of texts of which De Modo is a part “demonstrates not only the overlapping of pedagogical and confessional genres, but also the virtual absorption of one method into the other.”25 Given the cultural phenomenon Copeland describes, a reading of “Revertere” as a poem that reflects both penitential and classroom discipline would appear to be well justified.

The leaves over which a youth like the poem’s speaker would have been most accustomed to say or sing or sigh would have been the well-glossed pages in books used to teach Latin grammar. Before examining his self-explication as a reflection of a reader’s experience with such pages, it will be useful to review briefly their characteristic appearance. Since Virgil’s Aeneid was a venerable school text throughout the Middle Ages, a consideration of a page from a copy of the Aeneid that was used in this way will serve this purpose well. Folio 36 of Oxford, All Souls College Library MS 82 preserves the opening lines of Virgil’s Aeneid together with a generous complement of instructional commentary placed in the margins and between the lines (figure 1).26 This leaf provides examples of two major categories of textual apparatus found on the pages of works used to teach Latin grammar and composition, each of which corresponds, in turn, to an aspect of the grammatical curriculum. First, interlinear glosses — which provided synonyms or translations of the words over which they were placed — aided with a rudimentary, word-for-word comprehension of the text and thus correspond to an early stage of grammatical education.27 Instruction in more complex matters such as figures of speech, characterization, and moral exegesis, was taken up in the margins of the page. These commentaries were headed by lemmata, which consisted of the words or phrases from the main text that were to be explicated, recopied in the margins and often underlined in red or marked with a red or blue paragraph sign (§). At this juncture we may note that both the appearance and function of lemmata are remarkably well illustrated by the briar bush in our poem: its inscribed revertere, which has been extracted from an authoritative Latin text, appears in the “marginal” space of vernacular.

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27 As Martin Irvine has explained, the content of marginal and interlinear commentaries may be categorized in terms of four sub-species of the ars grammatica: lectio, enarratio, emendatio, and iudicium (“Both text and gloss,” 89).
literature where it undergoes extensive explication while its thorns function in the manner of a lemma’s underlining or paragraph sign to catch the attention of a passerby.

Returning now to our narrator’s first commentary on the lemma-like briar bush (in stanza 4, quoted above) with this typical page layout in mind, we can see that he proceeds in a fashion that suggests the underlying, imaginative presence of such a page. In this way, the narrator’s first comment consists of a translation of revertere into English, precisely the kind of information that would be found in an interlinear gloss: “Reuertere is as myche to say. / In englisch tunge as turne a3en” (25-26). Immediately following this translation, the speaker — or speaker-reader — repeats the words “turne a3en” (26), as if now finding them copied in the margin of a page as a lemma. Accordingly, the ensuing lines of the poem elaborate upon the words “turne a3en” exactly in the manner of a marginal text accompanying a lemma: “Turne a3en man Y pee pray / and pinke hertili what ð hast ben. / Of þi liuyng be pinke þee rije. / In open 7 in priuute” (27-30). If this short commentary on the word revertere sounds a lot like a reading of a “lessoun” that consists of a glossed text, the subsequent stanzas suggest that the lesson our student has learned has pointed to new fields of study.

Adhering to the admonition he has just “read” in the marginal exposition of the phrase “turne a3en,” the speaker now begins his own self-inspection by considering his actions of that very noon: that is, by reviewing the summer frolic already narrated in the lines of the poem preceding the moment of his encounter with the conveniently glossed briar bush. In the process of that review, the speaker returns to the story of his playful outing as if it were itself a glossed text — another “lessoun” for study — for his technique of self-examination also proceeds as if with the aid of a marginal and interlinear textual apparatus. The product of our narrator’s work with that lesson, as we shall see, bears little resemblance to the recollection with which the poem began: inflected by its commentary, the narrator’s personal anecdote becomes transformed into an allegorical exemplum for the instruction of others. In view of the regulatory and authorizing functions that a glossing apparatus serves, however, such a transformation is just what we should expect. As Martin Irvine has explained, the text and gloss page layout displays institutional attempts “to at once disclose and control the text” even as it constitutes texts as “objects of knowledge and cultural value to a reader.”28 The re-visioning of the speaker’s brief personal recollection that transforms it into precisely such an object of cultural value begins with his return to that summer day, this time as if considering it in the light of a marginal commentary. Accordingly, the first line of the speaker’s self-explication acts as a lemma of the first two lines of his opening narrative, for the poem’s opening lines, “In a noon tijd of asomers day / pe sunne schoon ful myrie þat tide” are here repeated almost unchanged, “This noon heto of þe someris day / whanne þe sunne moost hiȝest is” (41-42). Like a lemma from the Aeneid in All Souls College MS 82 — or indeed, like the lemma-leaves of the briar bush in this poem — the poem’s first lines have here been extracted — both from their place in the narrative and

28 Irvine, “ ‘Bothe text and gloss,’” 86.
from their implicit place at center page — to a spot where they may be subjected to further scrutiny.

In keeping with the highly intertextual character of many marginal commentaries in schoolbooks — and in medieval books in general — this lemma is now interpreted in the light of other written authorities: in this case, Gregory the Great and the prophet Daniel. According to “gregorie,” as the speaker notes, the hour of noon “may be likened” (43) to youth and its follies — its “dyuern synnis in fele deger” (46). The speaker’s self-reading here makes reference to a symbolic system traditionally held to have begun with Gregory the Great’s homily on the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20.1–16), which links the ages of human life with the canonical hours of the day. In that scheme, youth is symbolized by noon, or “sext”: “Sext is youth, because, just as the sun is fixed in the center, an abundance of strength is concentrated in youth.”29 In Gregory’s homily, each of the hours and its associated age is an opportunity for conversion, a point that the poem “Revertere” elegantly promulgates in its depiction of its youthful narrator’s propitious noon-time response to his close encounter with the word revertere. In addition, since in the terms of my analysis, the poem portrays that conversion as one that is accomplished by means of the procedures employed in reading a glossed text, “Revertere” also represents that particular reading skill — a skill that is learned, in fact, during one’s youth — as a capacity that is vital to turning a frivolous young person around.

As sometimes happens in the course of this kind of marginal examination of a lemma, the text under review here is not only being explained but also allegorized.30 In the margins of a copy of the Aeneid, as Christopher Baswell has shown, Virgil’s epic may be rewritten as a moral allegory; similarly, on the glossed page that implicitly structures our narrator’s self-study, his first-person narrative is beginning to sound like a ventriloquization of none other than Youth himself. The narrator’s ensuing self-exegesis continues to follow a reader’s turning path among text, interlinear glosses, and marginal lemmata; along the way, his resemblance to Youth personified becomes evermore striking. In this way, the speaker treats the next part of his recollection — “I took my hawk al for to play” — as if it were equipped with an interlinear gloss: “30upe beriç pe hauke upon his hond” (57). As the first-person singular pronoun in his narrative is here replaced by the word “3oupe,” the allegorization of our narrator is crystal clear: in the process of his self-study, the narrator’s personal account of his excursion with his spamiliar and falcon on a summer day is becoming simply another rendition of the story of juvenus, who is iconographically represented throughout the Middle Ages as a falconer.31

The speaker’s reading of this somewhat depersonalizing gloss is quickly followed by a reading of a lemma of another lexical item in his narrative, this time the word “hauke”: “This hauke is mannis herte y undirstonde” (59). This brief interpretation is followed, in turn, by an explanation of the similarities between these two apparently different things: as the next line explains, the too-jolly heart, like a hawk, is “3ong 7of hî3 romage” (60). The speaker elaborates on this basic similarity for the rest of this stanza and all of the next (stanza 9), using a method that continues to substitute elements of the emerging allegory for words in his original narrative, as if he were moving between the lines of text and its interlinear and marginal spaces. For instance, “I sente my faukun y leet him flee” (7) from his first-person account appears now as “he puttip his hauke fro his fist / he pat schulde to god be free” (61–62), where “he” now stands for youth. Similarly, “my faukun fli3 faste to his pray” (9) appears in the speaker’s self-exegesis as “ful of corage is 3ougepe in herte / and waitynge euer in his pray” (65–66), where “3ougepe in herte” now stands for the narrator’s falcon. The speaker completes an examination of his memory of setting out with his falcon and putting it into flight with a reiteration of the metaphorical equivalency of “hauk” and “youthful heart”: “This hauk of herte in 3oupe ywys” (73). As he does so, we can almost see the movement of our speaker-reader’s eyes following a line of text that includes an interlinear gloss: first he reads the word on the line of the text — “this hauk” — and then his eyes move up to take in the gloss written over it: “herte in 3oupe.”

Having thoroughly mastered the symbolic significance both of himself and his falcon, the speaker turns next to an exposition of the sought-after “feisaunt hen.” As if he were reading its textual apparatus, he finds that it stands for “likingnes,” or sensual


30 See Baswell’s studies of the marginal commentaries in Cambridge, Peterhouse College MS 158 and London, British Library Additional MS 27304 for detailed explications of this phenomenon (Virgil in Medieval England, chapters 3 and 4 respectively).

31 In this case, then, the lyric “I” is less an “Everyman,” as Gregory Roper puts it, summarizing Leo Spitzer and Judson Allen on the topic, than an Every-Youth (“The Middle English Lyric ‘I’, Penitential Poetics, and Medieval Selfhood,” Poetica 42 (for 1994): 77 (1–103). Sears provides a thorough overview of Youth as falconer in the west and also discusses several attestation of this iconographic representation in specifically English contexts in The Ages of Man, 137–40 and plates 78, 85, and 87. The poem that immediately precedes “Revertere” in Trinity O 9.38 (IMEV 4090) also features the sport of falconry but figures the “sperhawke” as a desired yet unfaithful woman, thus lending emphasis in that manuscript to the connection in “Revertere” between falconry and spiritually ruinous games of love.
pleasure: “pis feisaunt hen is likingnes” (75). And “likingnes,” the speaker then notes, as if reading a commentary that ties all the metaphorical elements of the text together, is what hawk-hearted young men are always pursuing: “and euere folowip hir þese ȝonge men” (76). The commentary on the pheasant concludes with the sweeping assertion that this bird of happiness that hawk-hearted young men follow stands for “liking,” the term used to translate “feisaunt hen” in the previous stanza: “Liking,” our narrator notes, is “modir of synnis alle. / and nornischip euyer wicked dede. / In feele myscheues sche makip to falle / of all sorowe scho doop he daunce leede” (81–84). As the narrator finishes his self-exegetical lesson, he reads the “deinteuose siȝt” of his first-person account—his falcon set free to pursue the pheasant—as a text completely transformed by the terms supplied in the course of his peculiar method of self-reading: “pis herte of ȝouȝe is hiz of port. / and wildenes makip him ofte to fle. / and ofte to falle in wicked sort” (85–87).

At this point in the poem, the speaker has completed a properly penitential reading of his own brief sporting adventure, a reading that also stands as an exemplum of the urgent necessity to turn away—to revertere—from the follies of youth. At the same time, the speaker’s self-exegetical procedure draws an implicit analogy between the process of self-inspection and the kind of recursive reading processes supported by the interlinear and marginal apparatus typical of grammar textbooks as well as more scholarly works. That analogy, as I have shown, has two closely-related implications. These I shall reprise by turning to yet another book metaphor: the Book of the Conscience. As Sylvia Huot has explained, a well-known attestation of this metaphor may be found in the Ovide moralisé; there the anonymous author exhorts readers to reexamine perpetually this crucial book: “One should read and reread one’s book, distinguishing the good from the bad, and search within oneself, and if there are any faults, correct them.” In structuring the speaker’s review of one short episode in his life in a manner that evokes the text and gloss page layout, the author of this poem repeats implicitly the Ovide moralisé’s admonition that readers not only read, but also re-read the Book of the Conscience; in so doing, he also presents that page layout as a technology that will facilitate the recursive mode of reading that the Ovide moralisé recommends. In the light of the conventional exemplum our narrator produces from his reading, however, “Revertere” also figures penitential self-study as a practice in which the Book of...
would be sure to encounter it. Placing this thorny marginal gloss back into the context of penitential self-study with which I began this essay, its piercing effect takes in the double sense of the Latin word *compunctus*, which Carruthers explores in her discussion of Peter of Celle: that is, “both the sense of piercing a surface and the emotional sense, of goading and vexing the feelings.” In its figurative depiction in the poem “Revertere,” then, the humble way-side marginal gloss exerts a compunction on readers to avoid spiritual error by eschewing pleasurable wandering: in the high-spirited days of one’s youth and especially while reading, whether the book at hand be a school book or the Book of one’s Conscience.

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**Revertere! and the Recursive Path of Right Reading**

1. p. 61

   In a noon téijd of asomers day.
   
   he sunne schoon ful myrié pat tide.
   
   I took myn hauk al for to play.
   
   mi spaynel rennyng bi my side.
   
   ¶ a feisaunt hen soone gan y se.
   
   myn hound put up ful fair to fli3t.
   
   I sente my faukun y leet him flee.
   
   It was to me a deinteuose si3t.

2. ¶my faukun fli3 faste to his pray.
   
   I ran po with a ful glad chere.
   
   I spurned ful soone on my way.
   
   mi leg was hent al with a brere.
   
   ¶bis brere forsope dide me grijf.
   
   and soone it made me to turne a3e.
   
   ffor he bare written in euery leef.
   
   ¶bis word in latyn reuertere.

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1 Edition based on London, Lambeth Palace Library MS 853; lexical and syntactical variants from Cambridge, Trinity College Library MS O.9.38. I thank the Lambeth Palace Library and the Master and Fellows, Trinity College Cambridge for permission to consult their manuscripts in order to prepare this edition. Letters in bold are red in the manuscript; paragraph marks are black. In the manuscript, the poem is written as a block of text; in this edition, I have followed the Trinity College manuscript in giving each poetic line its own physical line.

**Variants from Cambridge, Trinity College Library MS O.9.38, ff. 22–23**

- **tijd**] hete; **asomers day**] somerday
- **myn**] my
- **spaynel**] spaynellys
- **gan y**] y gan
- **hound**] howndys; **put up**] put here up; **full** omits
- **sente**] lete; **y leet him**] tylle here
- **fli3**] fle; **his**] here
- **ran po**] to renne; **a ful** right
- **I spurned ful soone on**] Soone y sporned yn
- **leg was hent**] leggys were hente
- **me grijf**] me grete grefe
- **soone**] y wys; **a3e**] a ye
- **written**] wrytynge
- **word in latyn**] latyn worde
3. I knelid 7 pullid þe brere me fro.
7 redde þis word ful hendeli.
myn herte fil doun unto my too.

4. Reuertere is as myche to say.
In englisch tunge as turne a3en.
Turne a3en man y þee pray.
and þinke hertili what þe hast ben.
¶Of þi liuynge be þinke þee rijfe.
In open 7 in priuite.
Þat þou may come to euerlastinge lijf.
Take to þi mynde reuertere

5. þis word made me to studie sore.
7 binam me al my list.
how y hadde ledde my lijf to 30re.
I putt it freischli in to my brist.
¶hane foond y me ful fer y flet.

Revertere! and the Recursive Path of Right Reading

al from god in maieste.
fforsøpe þere schal no þing me leett.
þ' y ne wole syne reuertere

6. This noon hete of þe someris day.
whanne þe sunne mooste / hiȝest is
It may be likened in good fay.2
ffor gregorie witness þe þis.
¶ffor in þonge age men wide doon walke.
To dyuers synnis in fele degre.
þou þa þonge man make a balke.
3it take to þi mynde reuertere

7. For likinge blindþ many oon.
þat he seþ not him sîlf þy wis.
and makyþ his herte as hard as stoon.
þanne þenkiþ he not on heuen blis.
¶ffor danyel preueþ it weel riȝtfulli.
as susannis storie tellþ me.
Two preestis were deemed worþili.
ffor likinge þe knew not reuertere.

2 lines 41–43: The Trinity MS has “To noone hete of the somerday / When the son most fervent us / Yowth may be likened yn goode fay, making explicit the comparison that is somewhat garbled in Lambeth.
Revertere! and the Recursive Path of Right Reading

8. 3ouple beriþ þe hauk upon his hond.
    whanne iolite for[et[þ] age.
    This hauke is mannis herte y unðirstonde
    ffor it is sone 7 of h3 romage.
    þe puttiþ his hauke fro his fist.
    he þat schulde to god be free.
    he meltiþ and wexiþ a weel poore gift.
    Whanne / he comeþ to reuertere

9. For ful of corage is 3ougeþe in herte.
    and waitynge euere on his pray.
    he ne sparþ ryuer ne þornes smerte.
    to gete his myrþe þere he beest may
    þe þat enscherþiþ þe derknes of nyȝt
    and þe myst of þe morowtide may se.
    he schal know bi cristis myȝt.
    If 3ouple kunne synge reuertere

10. This hauk of herte in 3ouple y wys.
    Pursueþ euere þis feisaunt hen.
    þis feisaunt hen is likingenes.
    and euere folowþiþ hir þese sone þen men

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57 þe] an; upon] all on
58 whanne] ffor; forset[þ] fallyth to that
60 sone 7] thyngþ; romage] ramage
61 puttiþ] pulyth the
62 schulde to god] to god sto schall
63 wavelength full
65 For ful of corage] Full coragous; 3ougeþe in] yowhtes
66 euere] euere more; on] after
67 ryuer] no rye<7>sse; ne] nother
68 þere] where
69 þe þat enscherþiþ] ffor he louyth best
70 þe myȝt] mystys; morowtide may se] matyne
71 he schal know bi] hyt comyth by the grace of
72 kunne] can
75 þis] the
76 euere folowþiþ hir] here felewons beth

\[þis is likingæ in euery synne
venial 7 dedli wheþer it be.
with greet likingæ he wolde bigynne.
But sorewe bringe forþ reuertere.

11. Liking is modir of synnis alle.
    and norischip euery wicked dede.
    In feele myscheues sche maþiþ to falle
    of al sorowe sche doop þe daunce leede.
    þis herte of 3ouple is h3þ of port.
    and wildenes maþiþ him ofte to fle.
    and ofte to falle in wicked sort.
    þanne is it þe beste reuertere

12. But be waar of welþe or þþ be woo.
    In iolite whan þou art þ3t.
    þinke þat 3onge wolde go þe fro.
    Be þou neuer a gret of mis3t.
    þwhanne age hæþ take þee bi þe brest.
    and for feblines þou myȝt not se.
    þin herte seip þanne þat it is best.
    for to seie 7 synge reuertere

13. But in holi writt we fynde.
    If þou þi lord schulde ouȝt aske a þing.
    ffor þi longe beinge bihinde.
    aȝenseid art þou of þin askinge.

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\[3 line 85: Manuscript has "his."}
The Trope of Reading in the Fourteenth Century

BURT KIMMELMAN

Buried within our concept of what constitutes modern civilization there lies a basic presumption, one so elemental that it can go unnoticed: any "modern" human society is defined by and utterly dependent on widespread literacy. It is not going too far to maintain that, in fact, to be "civilized" means to be literate. As Walter Ong has said in his landmark book, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, "[m]ore than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness."¹ In ways different from how human beings listen they read; more significantly, literate human beings listen differently than do people who comprise orally-based societies. The modern world rests on this difference. Literacy changes how people reason. What literate people perceive — the meaning of it — is established by the visual word and their relationship to it; and the meaning of who they are, the meaning of their very humanity, has come to be determined by the fact that they are capable of interpreting abstract signifiers. The picture of homo legens, indeed, is the quintessential image of modernity. All the same, how early readers saw themselves, particularly in the archetypal act of reading, was not necessarily the same as how later readers recognize or understand themselves, or understand the scene of reading. Reading has changed subtly over time, and the change reveals what readers are as fundamentally, and technologically enhanced, human beings. How the process of reading occurred, and was viewed,

¹ Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), 78.