

THE GROUP III MANUSCRIPTS OF THE *PRICKE OF CONSCIENCE*:
THE SOURCE OF THE SOUTHERN RECENSION?

S.A. Waters, *Howard University, Washington, D.C.*

Introduction

The *Pricke of Conscience* is a poem in rhyming four stress couplets composed in northern England sometime around the middle of the fourteenth century. It was usually attributed to Richard Rolle until the early part of this century when it was demonstrated fairly conclusively on stylistic grounds that Rolle cannot have been its author (Allen, 1927). The existence of a heavily revised version of the *Pricke of Conscience* has long been recognized, but it was not until the late nineteenth century that it became identified with a specific group of manuscripts (Andreae, 1888). These manuscripts are also characterized by dialect: they were all written in dialects of the Midlands or of the South and there were none in Northern English, which is presumed to be the dialect of the original composition. The question of the link between the eighteen recension manuscripts and the other one hundred main version manuscripts has been touched upon in an unpublished study which suggests that the recension is most closely related to a group of fourteen main versions or Northern, manuscripts called Group III (McIntosh, unpub.). This article discusses the manuscripts of Group III with a view toward determining which of these are most likely to have given rise to the Southern Recension.

The salient feature of the Southern Recension manuscripts is their wide variation both within the recension and with other groups of *Pricke of Conscience* manuscripts. The manuscripts differ in several distinct ways. In the rhymed body of the English text, the alterations have been accomplished (1) by the omission of whole passages, of couplets, and of single lines; (2) by the addition of single lines and couplets; (3) by the transposition of lines; and (4) by the reworking of single lines and of longer passages often resulting in a reduction of the total number of lines and a change of end rhyme(s). The recension has also been altered in another, more obvious way by the introduction

of a substantial number of non-rhymed English and Latin rubrics.

The results of this examination suggest a method of investigating the manuscripts which would yield information covering a larger portion of text than the test passage method while avoiding its many complications and providing items of great utility for the grouping of manuscripts. In the first instance, knowledge of the presence or absence of certain major classes of items would be likely to be more helpful for the sorting of large groups into subgroups than a detailed knowledge of minute variations within each individual line.

The Groups III Manuscripts

The grouping of eighteen Southern Recension manuscripts and fourteen Group III manuscripts on which this study is based is the result of computerized analysis, as yet unpublished, of all of the known *Pricke of Conscience* manuscripts (McIntosh, unpub.). It is based on two sample passages, ll. 644-697 and 4207-4209, of the only complete printed version of the main text (Morris, 1863). Beyond merely reconfirming the basic soundness of the work of early investigators and correcting the errors of some later writers, McIntosh's study goes on to suggest that as the main tree develops and acquires new characteristic features of omission, addition, and reworking of single lines and passages, a link can be established between a group of manuscripts of the main tree and those of the recension. My own work with the fourteen manuscripts of Group III has narrowed the range of possible connections to half the original number. Each of the fourteen main version manuscripts of Group III identified by McIntosh are listed in Table 1, followed by its Brown and Robbins number given in parenthesis.

All of the previous classifications of the recension manuscripts have relied on collations of test passages. Previous studies (Bülbring, 1888, 1897; D'Evelyn, 1930) have used the same three test passages taken from the beginning, middle and end of the poem whenever the state of the surviving texts made this possible. Their test passage in the middle of the poem occurs in Book V. The second of the two passages in McIntosh's study, although different from the middle passage mentioned above, also occurs in Book V. It seemed wise, therefore, to select Book V as the basis of this study because there is ample material from all of the earlier studies of the recension and main version texts with which to compare results. An additional reason for selecting Book V, which is in the middle of the poem, is that several of the manuscripts are defective either at the beginning or end of the whole work.

Table 1: The Fourteen Main Version Manuscripts of Group III

Group III (a)	Pennsylvania Univ. Eng. 1	(78)
	Virginia Univ. Hench 10	(87)
	BM Harley 2377	(3.8)
	Rawlinson C 35 (SC 11901)	(13)
	Douce 126 (SC 21700)	(21)
	Douce 141 (SC 21715)	(22)
	Arundel Castle MS.	(96)
Group III (b)	Bodl. e. 6 Mus. 88	(6)
	BM Arundel 140	(3.5)
	Rawlinson A 366 (SC 15460)	(20)
	Canterbury Cath. D. 13	(54)
	Rylands Engl. 51 (45387)	(61)
Group III (c)	BM Sloane 2275	(47)
	Newberry Library, Silver MS. (formerly Helmington Hall LJ. II. 1)	(76)

The Sub-groups of the Group III Manuscripts

Of the group III manuscripts, those labelled (c) in Table 1 are very closely related but are very corrupt main version texts. Although the Silver manuscript is the better, neither manuscript nor their descendants have given rise to the recension because of the large number of distinctive variants which they share which do not occur in any of the recension texts. Both omit several long passages in Book V: 11. 4393-4414, 5422-5441, 5642-5661, 5894-5917, 5970-5995 (to 1. 6007 in BM Sloane 2275), 6010-6035, and 6286-6307. Both manuscripts omit other lines independently. In addition, the following line transpositions seem to be characteristic only of Group III (c). Line 5521 is followed by 11. 5612-5677. Line 5677 is followed by 11. 5729-5829. Line 5829 is followed by 11. 5802-5813.

Those manuscripts of Group III (b) listed in Table 1, while better than those of Group III (c) in preserving the text of the poem, are of little more use for establishing the source of the Southern Recension text. This is due primarily to the extensive transpositions of the text in these manuscripts beginning at 1. 5551. Specifically, these five manuscripts display the following common errors in transposition. Line 5551 is followed by 11. 5610-5665. Line 5665 is followed by 11. 5552-5609 with further transpositional variants occurring in Bodl. e. 6 Mus. 88, BM Arundel 140, and Rawlinson A 366.

The manuscripts of Group III(a) are, therefore, most likely to have given

rise to the Southern Recension. But such an assumption about Group III (a) is subject to further qualification. Of the Group III (a) manuscripts, neither Rawlinson C35 nor Douce 126 can have given rise to the recension because of distinctive variation either at the beginning of Book V, 11. 3966-4122 as in Rawlinson, or due to extensive transpositions of the text, beginning at l. 4880 in Douce. The remaining five manuscripts of Group III (a) are thus prime candidates for further investigation as probable sources of the recension. But such an assumption also needs further qualification.

First, the recension may not have derived solely from one of the remaining Group III (a) manuscripts, though this serves as an initial hypothesis. Nor is it necessarily true that, if the recension derives from a single manuscript, that manuscript will be extant. McIntosh estimated that the chances of such a manuscript surviving may be as low as 1:50. In fact, the recension may well be the product of several traditions and, thus, cannot be matched neatly with any of the Group III (a) manuscripts. Indeed, another manuscript which may bear investigation is the National Library of Wales manuscript Pokington 20. While it is not strictly a part of Group III, it is considered anterior to Group III.

What does become apparent, however, is that the group of recension manuscripts cannot, alone, solve the problem of establishing the features peculiar to the recension tradition and what it owes to its antecedents, unless one is prepared to accept every variant of the recension group as read against Morris as evidence of independent innovation. Indeed, juxtaposed to Morris' readings, most of the readings of the recension appear as innovative and distinguishing features of the Southern Recension. In order to discover what the medieval "editor" of the recension did with his own text, it is necessary to know the condition of the text which he received.

References

- Allen, H.E. *Writings ascribed to Richard Rolle*. Monograph Series of the Modern Language Association, number 3. New York: Modern Language Association, 1927.
- Andreae, Percy. "Die Handschriften des *Pricke of Conscience* von Richard Rolle de Hampole im Britischen-Museum." Ph. D. dissertation, University of Berlin, 1888.
- Brown, C. & Robbins, R.H. *The index of Middle-English verse*. New York: The Index Society, 1943.
- Bülbring, Karl. On twenty-five manuscripts of Richard Rolle's *Pricke of Conscience*. *Transactions of the London Philological Society*. 1888-1890, 261-83.
- . Zu den Handschriften von Richard Rolle's *Pricke of Conscience*. *Englische Studien*, 1897, 23, 1-30.

- D'Evelyn, Charlotte. *An East Midland recension of the Pricke of Conscience*. *Publication of the Modern Language Association*, 1930, 45, 180-200.
- McIntosh, Angus, Buneman, Peter, & Mitchison, Neil. "The manuscripts of the *Pricke of Conscience*". Unpublished paper. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.
- Morris, Richard, Ed. *The Pricke of Conscience*. Berlin: Publications of the (London) Philological Society, 1863.