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A NOTE ON THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE ' KATHERINE GROUP.'

Owing to the lack of external evidence it is impossible to give a name or an identity to the author of one or of all the texts comprising the " Katherine Group." Einenkel indeed, in the introduction to his edition of *St. Katherine* (E.E.T.S. 1884, pp. xix, ff.) claims to have proved that the " Katherine Group " is the work of three different authors; " St. Katherine " being written by one, " St. Marherete " and " St. Juliana " by another, and " Hali Meiðhad " by a third, the texts having been written in that order. But, as Hall observes, this proof rests largely on the untenable assumption that a Middle English author, whatever the length of his literary career, or the changes in his environment or the nature of his subject, by reason of his strong ' individuality ' did not vary in vocabulary, phrases, or terms of expression. Hence if certain words occur fairly frequently in one writing and seldom or not at all in another, if the percentage of the foreign element is not similar, if the synonyms for abstract notions are not the same, then the compositions must be the work of different authors.

Obviously proof of this kind really proves nothing, since it leaves too much dependent on the chance choice of a word by the author. Spenser uses words and phrases not otherwise found after Chaucer, but it does not follow that Chaucer is the real author of " The Shepherd's Calendar." In other words allowance must be made for the possible influence upon the author of any work read by him during the time which has elapsed between the composition of any two of his works. Nor can the use of different synonyms be held to prove anything, since the exact sense which any particular word conveyed to the author cannot be known to us. Thus the author may use a certain word in one place but, in what appears to be an exactly

corresponding place, he may use a different word—the difference between the two contexts being obvious enough to him, but not to us. Moreover, if we are to judge by differences in the proportion of foreign loan-words, then the Cotton and the Bodley MSS. of “Sawles Warde” must have been written by different authors since the proportion of Scandinavian loan-words is greater in the Cotton than in the Bodley manuscript. In other words the influence of the scribes on the use of individual words is left entirely out of account. The scribe was interested in the matter, not the manner, of the texts which he copied, consequently when he came upon a rare or archaic word he had no hesitation in substituting for it one which would be more easily understood by his readers. Examples without number will occur to anyone who has compared the two versions of “The Owl and the Nightingale” and of Lazamon’s “Brut.” The various texts which comprise the “Katherine Group” may have been written by different authors, but it cannot be admitted that Einkenkel has proved this, since the whole effect of his proof is to negative the possibility that the author has, at any time, been brought into contact with any new influence.

Hall, on the other hand, seems to regard all the texts of the “Katherine Group” as having been written by one author, and that the same author also wrote the “Ancrene Wisse.” His proof consists in the unity “of style which pervades the whole group in orderly and natural development, the unity of subject, that is the praise of virginity and its superior virtue over other states of life, the occurrence of a considerable number of characteristic words, phrases, and constructions, found seldom or never outside this group” (*Early Middle English*, ii, 505). But these, however much they may suggest a unity of authorship, merely prove that the author of any one of the works, knew and had read the other texts of the “Katherine Group,” not necessarily that he wrote them. This is also the answer to the similarities between the “Ancrene Wisse” and “Sawles Warde” which are pointed out by Hall; the fact that the

main idea of the allegory in "Sawles Warde" is used also in the "Ancrene Wisse" (cf. *Ancren Riwle*, pp. 172, 271), the parallelism between the two divisions of Hell (A.W. f. 40; Sawles Warde, lines 82ff), and finally the passage in "Sawles Warde," lines 268-278, in glorification of "pet feire ferreden of uirgines in heouene" (*St. Katherine*, 2509) which is an addition of the author striking the dominant note of all the texts in the group. But all these merely prove that the author of one had read the others, and cannot prove that all the works are by the same author. It must also be remembered that in the Middle Ages plagiarism, far from being a crime, was usually treated as a virtue. Moreover, since the "Katherine Group" and the "Ancrene Wisse" seem to have been written originally in the same dialect and at about the same time, then the words, phrases, or constructions found seldom or never outside this group would be peculiar to that dialect at that time, and so it is not surprising that they should be used by two or more different authors writing in that dialect at about the same time.

Nevertheless though each of the arguments in favour of a single authorship may be answered, the cumulative effect of the evidence is to make it appear probable that a single author is responsible for the whole group, though there is not and cannot be any definite proof on this point. Any argument against a single authorship on the point that some of the pieces are better written and more interesting than others, however much it may convince, can prove nothing. Such an argument is, in effect, merely a statement that the author of a well-written and interesting work cannot write a dry and disjointed tale. It is also now generally admitted that the argument against a single author, based on the difference in spirit between the "Ancrene Wisse" and "Hali Meiðhad" depends, as Prof. Tolkien points out "on a forgetfulness of the very nature of an anchoress' life and the spirit that approved it, and on a misunderstanding of the teaching and spirit of the 'Katherine Group,' an exaggeration of the 'humanity' of the author of the 'Ancrene Wisse' the practical adviser, and the inhumanity

of the author of the "Katherine Group" the furnisher of edifying reading."¹

So, though the community of authorship between the "Ancrene Wisse" and the "Katherine Group" seems probable enough, it must necessarily remain an assumption since there is no evidence which obliges us to believe in a common author. Nor are we able to give a name to the author of any of the texts of the group. Hall indeed (*E.M.E.* ii, 375), proposes St. Gilbert of Sempringham as the author, but since he died in about 1189—about fifteen years before the writing of any of these texts—this identification is naturally impossible. Nor is it at all probable, as he suggests, that this literature is best understood as a product of the Gilbertine movement. Hall's suggestion rises naturally from his localization of the group in the East Midland area. In matter connection between the two may appear probable enough, but it seems fairly certain that these texts were originally written in the far west of the country (see Prof. Tolkien, *op. cit.*) whilst the Gilbertine movement seems to have been almost entirely restricted to the Eastern Counties and Yorkshire. Consequently, on the whole, it is improbable that there is any connection between the two.

In the absence of any further evidence attempts to supply a name for the author of any or of all the texts of the "Katherine Group" are doomed to failure. When we consider the number of Middle English writers who must have died without leaving a shred of surviving evidence for their existence, it becomes obvious that the most ingenious guess can be little more than a possibility. In any case since the question of authorship is a purely sentimental one, its answer can be of little assistance in our interpretation of the texts, and in the absence of definite evidence any attempt to solve it must be merely a waste of time.

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¹ *Essays and Studies of the English Association*, vol. xiv, 116, n. 2.