Experiencing Salvation – Analysing the Relationship between Narrative and Reader in Middle English Visions of the Afterlife

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The Middle Ages abound in narratives featuring visions of one kind or another. Whereas dream visions like those of Chaucer and mystical visions like Julian of Norwich's have received frequent attention (e.g. Spearing 1976, Barbetti 2011), Middle English visions of the afterlife have been neglected in (literary) scholarship, even though medieval studies have been subject to a 'religious turn' (cf. Barr 2010). Studies that have addressed Middle English visions of the afterlife have either used visions merely to trace the development of the Christian afterlife (e.g. Le Goff 1981, Minnis 2020) or tried to trace the connection between Latin visions and their Middle English translations or adaptations (e.g. Dinzelbacher 1981 (2017), Byrne 2016).

This paper addresses this neglect by focusing on one aspect of Middle English visions of the afterlife: the connection between (the body in) the narrative and (the body of) the reader. I will consider this special relationship by looking at different Middle English visions of the afterlife, e.g. *The Vision of Tundale*, the *Revelation of Purgatory* and *Vision in a Trance of John Newton*. My argument is twofold: First, I will argue that the focus on the visionary's 'physicality' and their experience, especially when they are suffering, facilitates a merging of narrative and physical body, through which the latter is affirmed and transformed, i.e. cleansed. Second, I want to argue that the way visions are narrated furthers physical involvement of the reader, both in the process of reading and in the process of the creation of the narrative.

By considering the medieval practice of reading and memory creation (c.f. Carruthers 2008) in conjunction with a rhetorical approach to narrative (Phelan 2017), which sees narrative as "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened", so not just as a "sequence of events" but as "an event" itself (Phelan 5), it will become clear that visions did not merely want to entertain through a gruesome and beatific story but were meant to be actively experienced (cf. von Contzen 77) in order to transform the reader's spiritual and physical nature.

This paper is part of my doctoral project "Narrating Salvation – Narrative Techniques in Middle English Visions of the Afterlife" (working title), which is supervised by Prof. Dr. Monika Fludernik (University of Freiburg) and which had been on hiatus for the last three years.

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