

# Ethical poetry, poetic theology : a crisis of medieval authority

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## Ethical Poetry, Poetic Theology: A Crisis of Medieval Authority?

Alastair Minnis

A comprehensive history of medieval concepts of “the author” and textual authority must resist the urge to segregate “secular” and “sacred” literary theory. For their relationship was enduring and reciprocal. Crucial theoretical issues were developed within Biblical exegesis before passing into secular poetics. Conversely, discourses characteristic of secular poetics (frequently classified under ethics) often had a considerable impact on Biblical exegesis. Within a system of textual classification formalized in the thirteenth century, the poetic, affective and imaginative nature of certain forms of Biblical writing were recognized and justified. But this raised a troubling question: was theology moving too close to poetics, the “queen of the sciences” being reduced to the level of an unreliable servant? Furthermore, despite affirmation of the solidity of the “literal sense” of Scripture, from which logical argument could safely be drawn, theology could hardly derive support from the certainties of syllogistic demonstration – particularly since the Bible’s rich array of literary devices threatened to ally it with rhetoric and poetics, the lowest forms of logic. Theology’s difficulty was poetry’s gain, however, as when innovative trecento writers like Petrarch and Boccaccio exploited the connections between Biblical style and poetic fiction to claim greater prestige for secular literature.

In May 2005, the medieval volume of the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* was published, edited by Ian Johnson and myself. The general brief for this history was to produce an account of western literary criticism which would deal with both literary theory and critical practice. Such fields of knowledge as history of ideas, linguistics, philosophy and theology were deemed related but not essential, to be drawn upon when

necessary but not forming part of the central core of the enterprise. This remit had one highly regrettable consequence for the medieval volume: the almost total exclusion of Biblical exegesis. Given the limited amount of space allowed to cover some thousand years of “secular” textual commentary and controversy, and the vast amount of exposition of scriptural authors which has also survived from that period, this decision – purely a practical one – was inevitable. But much was lost in the process – as I hope to show, by describing certain interconnections of the secular and the sacred within late-medieval *auctor*-theory.

Ideological attempts to exclude Biblical exegesis from the history of medieval literary criticism – and several have been attempted in recent times – must be resisted, for various reasons. In the first instance, it should be noted that many crucial theoretical issues enjoyed full development, or indeed achieved initial definition, within medieval discussion of Biblical authorship and authority, whence they passed into secular poetics. Far from theological thinking being essentially antithetical to literary criticism (as sometimes has been assumed or claimed), on many occasions it served as a major stimulus to it. The converse was also true. Interpretative techniques and terminology characteristic of secular poetics and theory of figurative language often had a considerable impact on Biblical exegesis.

But that trend brought with it major anxieties – problems concerning the assimilation and reconciliation of diverse sources of authority, at the very least, and at worst, a crisis of authority. Put simply, the crucial issue may be explained as follows. Poetic, figurative and imaginative styles of writing were the stock-in-trade of the (classical) poets – and the *poetae* were, at worst, branded as liars, and at best believed to have contributed to the sphere of ethical knowledge and practice. *Ethice subponitur*, “this [text] pertains to ethics,” is a cliché of the medieval *accessus* or prefatory introductions to a wide range of authors, ranging from the vatic Virgil to the subversive *praeceptor amoris*, Ovid (Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* 23-27). Even worse, poetics (with “imaginative representation” as its epistemologically problematic purpose) was deemed to be the lowest part of logic (Minnis and Scott 279-84). So, then, was *theologia*, the queen of the sciences,<sup>1</sup> at risk of being demeaned by association with these inferior, subordinate sources of information? The great Franciscan schoolman St Bonaventure (c. 1217-74) wrote a treatise entitled *De reductione artium ad theologiam*, wherein it is argued that the arts (by which he means the liberal arts together with the mechanical arts) all return to

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<sup>1</sup> Here, and throughout this paper, I use “science” to translate the Latin term *scientia*, meaning simply a body of knowledge – in contrast with the main contemporary use of the term as designating experimental science.

theology, as their ultimate source; that is to say, “all knowledge is led back to the deepest wisdom of the Scriptures which is elaborated in the form of theology” (*On the Reduction* 1). But in Bonaventure’s time the question could be asked, was theology in danger of being reduced, drawn back, to one of her subject disciplines?

The scale and scope of the problem are well illustrated by a type of textual classification formalized in the early thirteenth century by Bonaventure’s teacher – Alexander of Hales, an Englishman who became a doctor of theology at the university of Paris around 1220-21. Alexander is credited with a major historical “first”: he used Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* rather than the Bible as the basic text for his theology lectures, instituting a practice that was to continue for several centuries; even Martin Luther dutifully wrote a commentary on the *Sentences*. St Francis of Assisi died in 1226; some ten years later (in 1236) the innovative English schoolman joined the order he had founded. Alexander kept his chair at the University of Paris; indeed, he was succeeded by a distinguished series of his brother-Franciscans. Franciscanism had well and truly arrived at the university, made its accommodations with academe – for better or worse. The work for which Alexander is best known is his *Summa theologica*, though it must be emphasized that this was only begun by him, and continued by his confrères. We can probably credit Alexander himself with a fine formulation of the stylistic “modes” (*modi* or *formae tractandi* or *procedendi*) of sacred Scripture, wherein his Parisian training in the arts was put to excellent use, which enjoyed considerable influence through the sixteenth century and beyond. In this “Alexandran” tradition the different styles and didactic modes deployed in the various books of the Bible were itemized and described at considerable length, with the “poetic,” “affective” and “imaginative” nature of certain types of writing being recognized and justified (Minnis and Scott 200; Chenu, *La Théologie comme science*; Köpf, *Die Anfänge der theologischen Wissenschaftstheorie*).

Accounts of the various *modi* or *formae tractandi* of sacred Scripture such as the comprehensive and standard-setting one found in the *Summa Alexandri* (as henceforth I shall call it) frequently appear within treatments of the larger question, “is theology a science?” Reading these mannered, and indeed monumental, discussions nowadays, one could be forgiven for thinking that their authors are engaging in indulgent displays of intellectual prowess, posing and elaborating questions to which they already have tried and tested answers. But that would be far from the truth. The academic environment in which they were produced was neither serene nor staid. Recently-recovered works of Aristotle (mainly his treatises on natural science) were being treated with considerable suspicion as potentially subversive of key tenets of Christian belief, and

the teaching of certain doctrines was banned, or at least curtailed, in a series of condemnations issued in the years 1210, 1270, and 1277. The last of these (the result of an inquiry carried out by Stephen Tempier, Bishop of Paris, on instructions from Pope John XXI) has provoked much scholarly attention, not least because some of the 219 “erroneous” propositions may have been culled from works by that most celebrated of all schoolmen, the Dominican Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). The extent to which these injunctions actually inhibited the study of Aristotle has been questioned, and certainly Aquinas’s career suffered little if at all. What is quite clear, however, is the state of intellectual challenge and change which prevailed at the major universities of the day, particularly at the University of Paris, whose preeminence in the study of theology was unchallenged during the period Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure and Aquinas studied there. Here, then, is the context in which thirteenth-century responses to the question *utrum theologia sit scientia?* should be read – along with the concomitant descriptions of the Biblical *modi tractandi*.

The fact that sacred Scripture proceeds in a way which “is poetic or historical or parabolical” does not cause any problem of verification or undermine its “scientific” credentials, declares the *Summa Alexandri*. For holy Writ is true in terms of experience and disposition (*affectus*) rather than investigation and intellect, and certain in respect of that knowledge which is transmitted “through God’s spirit” rather than that which is transmitted merely through the “human spirit” (Minnis and Scott 217). The *modi* deployed in sacred Scripture are totally appropriate because the Bible operates through the inculcation of a pious disposition or affect (*affectus pietatis*) in men (Minnis and Scott 214). That is to say, the experience of reading or hearing Biblical texts moves human beings to behave in a pious manner, thanks to the way in which their wills have been disposed. In sharp contrast, the lesser sciences, the human branches of knowledge, are concerned only with educating the intellect. Therefore they must proceed through analysis, definition and inference – the standard methods of logic, in other words.

One of the most striking features of the *Summa Alexandri*’s defence of the *multiplex modus* of holy Scripture is its insistence that a wide range of literary devices and didactic techniques is necessary to reach out to all of those individual souls who are living lives beset with temporal contingency and regional particularity. (The underlying rhetorical valance of such theory is, I trust, quite obvious – a style must be chosen with awareness of the capacities and needs of a given listener or listeners, and the more listeners there are the more styles are needed.) People lived and live in different time-periods, and within those periods there are further differences. Some are slow in matters relating to faith, while oth-

ers rebel against good morality; some live their lives in prosperity, others in adversity. And so forth. Evidently, humankind is manifold – and therefore the Biblical mode which addresses such an audience must be manifold.

This doctrine was elaborated with great eloquence by St Bonaventure, in an account (written in the period 1254-57) which makes quite clear its implications for theory of authorship:

Among all the many kinds of wisdom which are contained in (. . .) Holy Scripture, there is one common way of proceeding: by authority. Grouped within it are the narrative, perceptive, prohibitive, exhortatory, instructive, threatening, promising, supplicating, and laudatory modes. All these modes come within the scope of that one mode, proceeding by authority, and quite rightly so.

This doctrine exists in order that we should become good and be redeemed, and this is not achieved by deliberation alone, but rather by a disposition of the will. Therefore, Holy Scripture had to be handed down to us in whatever way would dispose us best [to goodness]. Our affections (*affectus*) are moved more strongly by examples than by arguments, by promises than by logical reasonings, by devotions than by definitions. Scripture, therefore, had to avoid the mode of proceeding by definition, division, and inferring to prove the properties of some subject, as do the other sciences. It had rather to adapt its own modes to the various dispositions of men's minds which incline those minds differently. Thus, if a man is not moved to heed precepts and prohibitions, he may at least be moved by the examples narrated; if someone is not moved by these, he may be moved by the benefits which are pointed out to him; and if he is not moved by these, he may be moved by wise warnings, by promises which ring true, by terrifying threats; and thus be stirred to devotion and praise of God, and therefore receive grace which will guide him to the practice of virtuous works.

These narrative modes cannot proceed by way of certainty based on reasoning, because particular facts do not admit of formal proof. Therefore, lest Scripture should seem doubtful, and consequently should have less power to move [our *affectus*], instead of certainty based on reasoning God has provided it with certainty based on authority, which is so great that it rises high above the most acute human mind.

(*Breviloquium*, Prologue, 5 in Minnis and Scott 235-6)

These accounts in the *Summa Alexandri* and Bonaventure's *Breviloquium* seem to up-end the traditional hierarchy of knowledge, as elaborated by Islamic and Christian commentators on Aristotle's *Organon* (i.e. the corpus of logical texts), by giving affective poetics and rhetoric pride of place. The *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* were deemed the seventh and eighth parts of this collection respectively, far inferior to the *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics* which are concerned with syllogisms that proceed from true

and necessary premises (as in metaphysics; Minnis and Scott 279-81). What, then, do rhetoric and poetics offer? The former seeks to persuade and employs the enthymeme and the *exemplum*; the latter has imaginative representation as its purpose and the imaginative syllogism as its characteristic device. "Poetic logic produces a certain weak attraction which merely inclines someone to desire something or to avoid something" (Minnis and Scott 313). In other words, it offers the weakest, most problematic, form of argumentation.

Hardly a ringing recommendation of the scientific credentials of rhetoric and poetry, which have, as their stock and trade, those very devices which (as the above citations have shown) were listed in the context of discussions which established theology as the queen of the sciences. Why not, then, simply denigrate the higher texts within the *Organon's* hierarchy by noting that they serve those merely human sciences which proceed by "definition, division, and inferring," and elevate the humble *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, just as Christ Himself had elevated the poor and the lowly? After all, had not Christ and the Apostles preached to people from all walks of life through language which was demotic, widely understood and common or "broad" (*grossus*), making excellent use of affective, figurative, metaphorical and indeed poetic methods, in many cases originating (or at least adopting) those *modi* which the schoolmen were identifying as the Bible's distinctive, and therefore prestigious, *formae tractandi* (Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* 136-8)? Moreover, in the very recent past St Francis of Assisi had preached in a similar fashion, and, as we have seen, some of his brothers had gone to school to provide elaborate academic defences of that same non-intellectual methodology (without, however, making direct reference to their founder in this context).

But, in the event, no theologian (to the best of my knowledge) was prepared to go that far. There was insufficient impetus to call in question a system of argumentation which had been in place for many centuries – and which, after all, could be put to good use in the deployment of Biblical material within scholastic debate. Here one may recall St. Thomas Aquinas's well-known focus on the literal sense of Scripture as the point from which argument could be drawn – and when he said "argument," of course he meant, "strictly logical argument" (Minnis and Scott 242). Behind that maneuver one may detect a desire to accommodate the matter of holy Writ to the methodology of logic, thereby avoiding any possible conflict between different sources of authority. But any such attempt to make the Bible seem more logic-friendly was inevitably disrupted by the obstinate fact that some literal senses were more friendly to logic than others. Nevertheless, both the range and the prestige of the literary sense increased remarkably. Double, triple and even

quadruple literal senses were identified (Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* 79-81). Furthermore, the “parabolic” sense was deemed a part of the literal sense – an extraordinary act of appropriation of an array of figurative language which in previous centuries had been classified within allegorical interpretation. Thus the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyre (c. 1270-1349), whose debt to St Thomas is well known, could argue that the Song of Songs features a “parabolic literal sense,” being about Christ and the Church, rather than a historical literal sense, which would produce a – quite unacceptable – reading in terms of Solomon’s love for the queen of Sheba (Dove 129-30, 145). However, one could hardly draw a strictly logical argument from *that* type of literal sense. The massive expansion which the literal sense was enjoying did not necessarily enhance its logical credentials – indeed, it could threaten to undermine them, by affirming the extent to which the Bible was permeated with those “poetical or historical or parabolical” modes which had been described so impressively in the *Summa Alexandri*.

But let me not stray too far from my central point here. Which is that there was no appetite for an assault on logic’s formidable power-base. No-one called for its position in scholastic classification and classroom procedure to be ceded to poetics, so that the scriptural *modi* might better be understood or valued more highly. Other means of understanding and valuing were found. Whether by accident or design (it is hard to tell which), in this instance medieval scholars managed to think in compartments, thereby preventing these different systems of valuation from coming into direct confrontation. Poetry and figurative language continued to be demoted within the *Organon*’s hierarchy, even as they were promoted within theologians’ accounts of the *multiplex modus* of Scripture. True, occasionally a discussion of the branches of logic will include a positive-sounding explanation of how poetic persuasion can guide a man in the right moral direction, its effectiveness being due to the fact that “everyone has most trust in his own instinctive estimations and relies particularly on his own imaginations” (Minnis and Scott 309; here I quote an anonymous schoolman who is commenting on the Averroistic version of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, a work beyond the scope of the present paper). But, on the other hand, we can also find remarks like this as already quoted above, p. 298): “poetic logic produces a certain weak attraction which merely inclines someone to desire something or to avoid something”. It might therefore be suggested that this situation inhibited the development of any poetics which bore the stamp of its lowly position within logic’s rigid hierarchy – and hence, inevitably, curbed the possible use of such theory within scriptural exegesis.

So much for the fraught relationship between poetics and logic (or, to be more accurate, between poetics and the traditionally superior parts



of logic), and its consequences for theology. We may now move to consider the difficulties caused by the troublingly close relationship between theology and ethics. From the twelfth century onwards, it was routinely claimed (in the *accessus* and elsewhere) that poetry serves a moral end and may be classified within ethics. But the understanding of ethics underwent considerable change in the later Middle Ages, primarily due to the impact of recently rediscovered texts by Aristotle, particularly (of course) the *Nicomachean Ethics*. As Aristotle “writes in the second book of the *Ethics*, we undertake moral study not for the sake of abstract contemplation, nor to gain knowledge [in an intellectual sense], but in order that we may become good” (Minnis and Scott 249; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ii.2 [1103b, 26-28]). Thus the Augustinian Hermit Giles of Rome draws on Aristotle at the beginning of his highly popular *De regimine principum* (c. 1285), proceeding to explain that:

(. . .) the end (*fnis*) in this science [i.e. ethics]<sup>2</sup> is not to gain knowledge concerning its own matter, but [moral] activity (*opus*); it is not truth but goodness. Since subtle arguments, therefore, are more effective in illuminating the intellect, while those that are superficial and broad (*superficiales vero et grosse*) are more effective in stirring and firing the affections (*affectus*), in the speculative sciences, where the main aim is the illumination of the intellect, one must proceed by way of proof and in a subtle manner, but in moral matters (*in negotio morali*), where the goal is an upright will and that we should become good, one must proceed by way of persuasion and the use of figures (*persuasive et figuraliter*). (Minnis and Scott 249)

This Aristotelian justification of ethics serves well Giles’ purpose of introducing a treatise wherein a “broad and figurative” mode of procedure is used. But it bears an intriguing resemblance to Bonaventure’s justification of the *modus procedendi* of sacred Scripture, as quoted earlier. This is not coincidental, since Bonaventure clearly had in mind the very same passage of Aristotle’s *Ethics* that is cited explicitly by Giles of Rome in his account of the *modus procedendi* followed in the instruction of princes (and of humankind in general). All of these texts seem to share a belief in the importance of the correct disposition of the will, the intellect alone being insufficient in the promotion of virtuous behaviour.

Further evidence of Bonaventure’s debt to Aristotle is afforded by his assertion that “particular facts do not admit of formal proof,” from which the theologian infers that Scripture’s narrative modes, being concerned with particular facts, are not susceptible of such proof, it being

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<sup>2</sup> Ethics as applied here in the education of princes. Giles’ treatise also offers instruction in other branches of practical philosophy (economics or family-management and politics) as understood within medieval Aristotelianism.

impossible to gain “certainty based on reasoning” in such a case (see p. 297 above). This derives from Aristotle’s statement in book ii, chapter 2 of the *Ethics* that “things pertaining to actions (. . .) do not have anything fixed about them,” and thus are uncertain (and hence unprovable) in scientific terms. (In other words, moral issues cannot be solved by the application of syllogistic logic –to revert to the terms of the earlier part of this paper.) Indeed, Giles of Rome includes that very same passage in his introduction to *De regimine principum*, noting that “the subject-matter of morals (. . .) concerns individual matters, matters which, as is shown in the *Ethics*, book ii, are very uncertain because of the variability of their nature” (Minnis and Scott 248; cf. Aristotle, ii.2 [1104a, 1-2]). It would seem, then, that both the Bible and Aristotelian ethics have as their goal moral action, making men good, which is achieved through the correct disposition of the human will rather than the illumination of the intellect. May it be concluded, then, that the ends (and the means to those ends) of ethics and theology are the same, indeed that the Bible may be deemed an ethical book, judged to fall within the scope of morals and classified under “practical” (as opposed to “theoretical”) philosophy as defined by Aristotle? Or, in other words, that the Bible “pertains to ethics,” just like all those lesser texts which served the curricula of medieval grammar schools? Quite a lot for the queen of the sciences to swallow, surely, despite the sugar put on the pill by Aristotle’s powerful celebration of ethics.

Such an anxiety may be discerned in Bonaventure’s *Breviloquium*, in the passage quoted on p. 297 above. He addresses it by emphasizing where ultimate and true authority lies, in a bold stroke referring all the narrative modes of the Bible back to its ultimate *auctor*, God. Holy Scripture has “one common way of proceeding: by authority.” And grouped within this multiple *modus* are all the specific, individual narrative modes. “All these modes come within the scope of that one mode, proceeding by authority,” Bonaventure says, and quite rightly so – the implication being that, no matter how those modes are employed by other (merely human) authors, no matter how humble they may be in other hands and in other contexts, in holy Scripture they are under divine control, at the disposal of God. And therefore their prestige – in the Bible at least – is unquestionable. Bonaventure’s solution, then, is to appeal to unique authorship, rather than seek to valorize the specific modes themselves. That way, a decorous distance is maintained between ethics and theology.

Another way of maintaining that distance was to assert that, while theology and ethics may well share certain means and ends, theology has crucially distinctive, indeed unique, features which take it far beyond ethics in particular and practical philosophy in general. That is how

Bonaventure solves the problem in one of the *quaestiones* which comprise the prologue to his *Sentences* commentary, “whether this book of theology has contemplation as its aim, or that we should become good; in other words, is it a speculative or practical science?” (Minnis and Scott 226-8). He begins by challenging this binary approach to the problem. The intellect should be considered in three ways, he argues. First, it may be considered in itself. As such, it is truly speculative and concerned only with “speculative knowledge.” Secondly, if it is considered inasmuch as “it is extended to achieve some actual task,” to have a certain activity (*opus*) performed, then it is concerned with us becoming good, “and this is practical or moral knowledge.” However, the third or “middle” way (a happy mean indeed) sees the intellect as extending itself to move the affections, thereby operating within a *conditio* (condition, situation, compact, relationship) “which lies between the purely speculative and the practical, and which embraces both. This condition is called wisdom, and it expresses both cognition and affection.” And here is where theology belongs. It has a double *raison d’être*, existing “for the purpose of contemplation and also that we may become good, but principally that we may become good.” For “become good” we should read “love God and be saved,” as is evident from what Bonaventure says next. He affirms the superiority of the science of theology over the merely human sciences (those branches of knowledge which, we may recall, are characterized and confined by their *modus procedendi* of definition, division, and inference) by the somewhat tart remark that the geometrical “knowledge that a diagonal is asymmetrical with a side does not move anyone to love.” However, the knowledge that “Christ died for us” certainly does move “a man to love” – “unless he is a hardened sinner,” of course. “Therefore,” Bonaventure continues, “it must be conceded that this science [of theology] exists in order that we should become good.” But, to state the obvious, this is “becoming good” in a sense more comprehensive, elevated and rewarding (in both this life and the next) than that presupposed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. And we have gone far beyond the categories of the *Organon*.

A particularly interesting reflex of this thinking may be found in a passage in Giles of Rome’s commentary on the Song of Songs. The end or *finis* of this particular sacred book, Giles explains, is also the end of sacred doctrine as a whole – namely, love (Minnis and Scott 246). But love is concerned with activity (*opus*). So should it therefore be called a practical science? (We may recall the way in which, in his *De regimine principum* prologue as quoted above, Giles – following Aristotle – designated activity (*opus*) as the appropriate subject of ethical instruction). That designation would hardly seem to befit the supreme science of theology. And so Giles explains that anyone who talks in that way should “correct

his language,” i.e. he should speak in a more precise and accurate manner (Minnis and Scott 247). “A practical science is principally directed towards exterior action,” which is why the “political sciences are called practical, and *politie*, that is, goodness, is dependent on our actions.” The second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is cited once again: “according to the Philosopher, we become good because we perform good actions,” and like actions beget like *habitus* or settled moral dispositions. In marked contrast, “spiritual goodness is not dependent upon exterior actions but rather upon the condition and works of charity.” It is this latter kind of goodness to which Holy Scripture is directed, and therefore it “should not be called practical.” Rather, it should have its own special name, described as affective and concerned with love. Thus the supreme science is rescued from the threat of being reduced to practical philosophy, just because their respective ends have much in common and they share certain means to those ends. Giles has made quite clear the extent to which he believes that the science of theology differs from the *negocio morale* discussed in *De regimine principum*.

And yet, the apparent similarities between theology and ethical poetics could be exploited to great effect by innovative literary theorists of trecento Italy, including Francis Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio, as they laboured to elevate the status of poetry. “Poetry is not at all inimical to theology,” Petrarch declares. “I would almost say that theology is poetry written about God. When Christ is called, now a lion, now a lamb, and again a worm, what is that if not poetic? You will find a thousand more instances in Holy Scripture (. . .).” He goes on to argue that the Saviour’s parables in the Gospel employ discourse wherein the meaning differs from the normal sense of the words, “to which we give the more usual name of allegory,” a device regularly used by the poets (*Letters on Familiar Matters* x. 4; tr. Minnis and Scott 413). A fuller version of this argument is offered in Boccaccio’s *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, where it is emphasized that many literary devices – including pure fiction – are shared by secular and scriptural authors (see especially Minnis and Scott 422-26). All of these claims concerning stylistic confluence are made in light of an unequivocal affirmation of the unique, because divinely inspired, authorship of the Bible.

Of all the thirteenth-century theologians I have read, the one who seems to anticipate this position most fully is Roger Bacon (c. 1220-c. 1292), who claimed that Scripture and moral philosophy often relied on the same kind of poetical argument, and, to prove it, pointed to many parallels between the poetical modes used by secular writers and those found in the Bible (Gillespie 170). But Bacon was just one among many schoolmen who furthered the tradition of describing the *multiplex modus* of holy Scripture (to revert once again to the discourse of the *Summa*

*Alexandri*) in ways which highlighted its affective, imaginative, figurative and even fictive properties.

That tradition was pervasive and highly influential; Boccaccio draws on it to great effect in constructing a comprehensive relationship between poetry and theology, which powerfully serves the cause of poetry. Of course, as he freely admits in his *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, “the holy and the secular writings do not (. . .) have a common end (*fine*; cf. the Latin term *finis*) in view.” All that the poets can show us is “how we may, by behaving virtuously, achieve that end (*fine*) which they, not knowing the true God aright, believed to be the supreme salvation” (Minnis and Scott 494-5). In other words (though Boccaccio does not actually put it like this), their poetry pertains to ethics, and its end is limited by the pagans’ ignorance of revealed Christian truth. But these (very real) differences do not drive a firm wedge between poetry and theology; the lesser end of poetry is certainly not antithetical to the greater end of theology. And there is no doubt that they “share a common mode of treatment” (*modo del trattare*; cf. the technical Latin term *modus tractandi*; Minnis and Scott 495). Petrarch argued in like manner. “I would almost say that theology is poetry written about God,” he told his brother Gherardo (Minnis and Scott 413), and in his short treatise in praise of Dante he threw caution to the winds by declaring that “theology is . . . poetry” (Minnis and Scott 498). Albertino Mussato (d.1329) claimed that poetry was a divine science because it was inspired by God, while Coluccio Salutati (d. 1406) developed the theory of the *poeta theologus* (Minnis and Scott 390).

Not everyone approved of this method of dignifying poetry, however, as is made abundantly clear by the vigorous reaction of Girolamo Savonarola (d.1498), who sought to make a bonfire of such vanities. It cannot be argued, Savonarola declared, that just because poetry and theology both use metaphors, therefore poetry is nothing else than theology. Offering a more stringent version of the distinction which Thomas Aquinas had made between metaphor in poetry and metaphor in theology (Minnis and Scott 240), he asserts that it is one thing “to use metaphors because of necessity and the magnitude of the subject,” as in the Bible, and quite “another to use them for pleasure and weakness of truth,” as in pagan poetry (Hardison, *The Enduring Monument* 7). That reference to poetry’s “weakness of truth” recalls the classification of poetry as the lowest part of logic, as discussed above. Savonarola makes the extent of his denigration even more clear by claiming that, if the poet did not veil and obscure his deficient subject-matter with attractive likenesses, its weakness would be apparent to all (Minnis, “Fifteenth-Century Versions” 169-70). Savonarola also finds fault with poetry because its characteristic mode of procedure involves single, particular

things, which are subject to great variation – and hence the poet’s arguments are unreliable (Minnis, “Fifteenth-Century Versions” 168-69). Here he probably had in mind the worrisome similarities between theology and ethics, that Aristotelian practical science which deals with individual cases, is sensitive to complex human particularity, and cannot attain demonstrative certainty – all of which are distinctive features of holy Writ, according to the *Summa Alexandri* and Bonaventure’s *Breviloquium*. Apparently Savonarola wished to eliminate the possibility of any such comparison. In the process he parted company with the compelling thirteenth-century ways of addressing the issue which were illustrated above.

Here, then, was the trouble with theology, the reason why its authority as a body of knowledge was potentially in crisis. The fact that it shared certain styles and methods of literary procedure with the writings of the poets, who habitually were branded as liars, obliged generation after generation of medieval theologians to defend the epistemological and moral credentials of their subject and the “scientific” basis of its knowledge. The tradition that poetry “pertained to ethics” offered some help. But this could hardly be accepted (indeed, I know of no explicit medieval address of the matter) because it threatened to replace one problem with another. For, if the difference between poetry and theology were reduced significantly, the status of the higher science would be questioned, the spectre raised of theology being reduced to ethics, a branch of merely practical philosophy. (But what was troublesome for theology was good news for poetics. For such a reduction of difference between them was asserted and exploited for the greater glory of poetry in trecento literary theory, as argued above.) If, on the other hand, one wished to emphasize the more ratiocinative and intellectual aspects of theology, then that tended to push theology towards comparison with the higher logical sciences (which had as their characteristic *modus procedendi* the processes of definition, division, and inference). But, while this was a more elevated position within the classifying system of the *Organon* (the same system that placed poetics at the very bottom of its epistemological hierarchy), it was insufficiently elevated for the supreme science of theology, which had sources of knowledge that even the cleverest of pagan thinkers knew nothing about, the revealed and immutable truths of Christianity. Such pearls could not, should not, be cast before swine. And yet – during his earthly ministry the Son of God, Jesus Christ Himself, had preached with humble and homely parables, thereby rendering his message accessible to all, even the most lowly. In the early 1220s St Francis of Assisi had emulated that radical ministry, with great success.

Little wonder, then, that late-medieval thinkers should return, again and again, to confront the poetic qualities of scriptural style. They could appeal to the unique (because divinely inspired) authorship of the Bible, and emphasize the more comprehensive and infinitely more important end of theology (which seeks our salvation rather than mere moral goodness). But whatever they did, the problem of how the Bible should be classified in relation to the arts and sciences would not go away. Nor could it go away. For the debate was fundamentally about substance rather than style. About what separated Christianity from the Roman paganism which it replaced. Whether its core appeal was to the many or the few. If its language was fundamentally exclusive or inclusive, élitist or demotic. In sum, investigation of the fraught relationship between poetry and theology in late-medieval thought leads to engagement with the true nature of medieval Christianity as constructed in the era of the great schoolmen, how its purpose and appeal as a universal church was then understood. And here we confront an ongoing negotiation of authority, a perpetual quest for authorization.

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