

Literary Networks of the Vicars Choral and the Clerical Proletariat in Late Medieval York

When Margery Kempe visited York Minster in 1417 she was befriended by two of choral *vicarii*, John Kendale “and another preste which song be the bischopys grave.” The grave was Richard Scrope’s, executed under Henry IV, and his semi-suppressed cult still no doubt a matter of some delicacy. Kendale and his unnamed fellow here were likely not only counseling Kempe, but telling her about the Minster’s history and saint’s cults – part of the job of cathedral *vicarii*. Kendale was also an owner of *Piers Plowman*, and if we link such information about the literary interests of the *vicarii* with some of the contemporary Latin writings produced at York Minster, we get a rare view of literary circles of the clerks lower down the ladder in the Minister’s *familia*. Some of the texts that survive are more generally indicative of the Minster’s local pride in its history (both legendary and more recent), its saints, and its zeal to protect its power and privileges. Other survivals relate directly to the Scrope execution, such as poems of traumatic mourning in heavily liturgical Latin (his death was personally witnessed by many of his cathedral *familia* in 1405, as its chronicles show), and fragmentary in-house chronicles – some of it even versified, as if for memorization. Despite the censorship efforts of Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel, a range of literature sprang up from within the Minster, giving us a rare chance to look at the multilingual literary production within a normally invisible group. Comparisons will be made to surviving poetry from manuscripts connected to Norwich Cathedral Priory or London’s St. Paul’s, containing poems about the woes of chorister life or clerical isolation.

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