The Penitential Wilderness and the Holy Land:
Robert Thornton reads *Sir Isumbras* and Northern *Octavian* devotionally

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Abstract

Late medieval Christian devotion to the Holy Land is said to be marked by a "penance-inflected crusade rhetoric," in Suzanne M. Yeager's words, the idea that the faithful could recover Jerusalem through penance, both in the forms of personal spiritual cleansing and the social reform. I will argue that the popular topos of the wilderness facilitates such a virtual reclaiming of the Holy Land, taking, as a case study, the context of one of the two surviving manuscripts compiled by the fifteenth-century Yorkshire gentleman, Robert Thornton (c.1397–c.1465), Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91. The manuscript's distinctive versions of the two Middle English romances, *Sir Isumbras* and Northern *Octavian*, reveal that not only overtly devotional writings but also romance texts could have offered Thornton a mental stage, where he would have pursued his own spiritual enlightenment, by imagining the protagonists' penitential journey in a blighted land adjacent, or leading, to Jerusalem.

The fall of Acre in 1291, so Christopher Tyerman posits, triggered an efflorescence of what he calls "recovery literature,"—"books, pamphlets and memoranda concerned with the crusade, the restoration of Jerusalem and the advance of the Turks."[1] Taking Tyerman as his starting point, Robert Rouse proposes that a number of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Middle English romances function as "recovery literature" by inviting their audiences to conjure up "fantasies of the victorious restitution of Eastern lands to Christian control."[2] The practice of recovering Jerusalem did, of course, neither start with the fall of Acre nor was it limited to political pamphlets, memoranda, and vernacular romances. Jerusalem was reproduced in numerous ways throughout the Middle Ages since travel to the Holy Land was often neither possible nor fitting for many laypeople as well as enclosed religious. Monastic movements, for instance, from the eleventh century onwards, sought to replace the earthly Jerusalem not just with a physical monastery but with the spiritual practices within it; here, Jerusalem was invoked in both monastic architecture and rules.[3] Likewise, Jerusalem liturgies developed firstly as a way to seek God for help in fighting crusades and later as an occasion for priests to ask for spiritual reform from their congregation.[4] Additionally, the Holy Sepulchre was replicated across Europe in church architecture, including in Easter Sepulchre shrines and round churches; such reproduced Holy Sepulchres allowed the viewer to remember and

[1] Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (London, 2006), p. 827.

[2] Robert Rouse, "Romance and Crusade in Late Medieval England," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the Crusades*, ed. Anthony Bale (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 217–31 (p. 218).

[3] The enclosed monastic space was regarded as one of the most secure places for a Christian to proceed to the celestial Jerusalem. See Suzanne M. Yeager, "The Earthly and Heavenly Jerusalem," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the Crusades*, pp. 121–35 (pp. 128–29).

[4] According to Cecilia M. Gaposchkin, liturgical prayers, masses, and alms were sought both in Outremer and at home to support the crusades. It was thought that the sinful states of all Christians had invited God's wrath, which had resulted in Christendom's loss of the earthly Jerusalem. Through equating the city to the human soul, both the victory of the crusade and personal salvation were pursued by communal repentance at liturgical celebrations. See Cecilia M. Gaposchkin, *Invisible Weapons: Liturgy and the Making of Crusade Ideology* (Ithaca, NY, 2017).

internalise the events of sacred history.[5]

What characterises Christian devotion to the Holy Land in the late medieval period, especially from the fall of Acre onwards, is an increasing obsession with sin. The preoccupation with penance that duly followed simultaneously influenced how one might spiritually recover Jerusalem. The considerable loss of life, relics, and territory during the Third Crusade (1187–1192) was regarded as a divine punishment brought upon contemporary sinful Christians. As a result, a "penance-inflected crusade rhetoric," in Suzanne M. Yeager's words, developed under ecclesiastical guidance,[6] based ultimately on biblical conceptions of the heavenly Jerusalem alongside the earthly one.[7] This rhetoric, in conjunction with the allegorical interpretation of the earthly city as a Christian soul, allowed the faithful to reclaim the Holy Land through penance, both in the forms of personal spiritual cleansing and of the social reform of Christian communities. While Suzanne Conklin Akbari argues that this spiritual recovering of Jerusalem, "the pilgrimage of the soul," in her words, became increasingly prominent by the time of the Reformation,[8] both forms of pilgrimage, spiritual and bodily alike, were regarded as beneficial throughout the later medieval period.[9] Indulgences were thus granted to both crusaders and pilgrims who strove to regain or visit Jerusalem either physically or spiritually. In both cases, travel to the Holy Land was regarded as a penitential act and could contribute to the return of the individual crusader/pilgrim and of all of Christendom to God's good grace. If an individual sinner virtually made a penitential journey to approach salvation, i.e., the heavenly Jerusalem, such spiritual cleansing through penance could, it was understood, eventually make the whole Christian community worthy of the city again.[10] Furthermore, popular affective devotion to the humanity of Christ worked to bring a devotee particularly close to holy places. In an affective virtual pilgrimage, key sites which witnessed the events of sacred history were traced through the practitioner's *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio Mariae*.[11] Such Christocentric devotion was widespread among the laity by the fifteenth century so that some devout pilgrims claimed to have travelled to the real, physical Holy Land in their visions.[12] The Holy Land which witnessed Christ's

[5] Bianca Kühnel, "Virtual Pilgrimages to Real Places: The Holy Landscapes," in *Imagining Jerusalem in the Medieval West*, ed. Lucy Donkin et al., Proceedings of the British Academy, 175 (Oxford, 2012), pp. 243–64. According to Kühnel, there were two types of the so-called Calvary, i.e., the reproduction of the sites of Christ's passion, burial, and resurrection: one is integrated into church architecture in the forms of Easter Sepulchre and round churches while the other is life-sized reproductions of events of sacred history. For instance, medieval Bologna had an artificial mound and a valley in imitation of the Mount of Olives and the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

[6] Suzanne M. Yeager, *Jerusalem in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 8.

[7] The roots of the "Earthly and Heavenly binary" are found in the notion that life in this world is a period of exile or captivity, in which one waits to enter the heavenly homeland, *patria*. This idea is expressed both in the Old and New Testaments. Medieval Christians believed that the heavenly Jerusalem would replace the earthly parallel at the Last Judgement, as shown in Revelation 21–22. See Yeager, "The Earthly and Heavenly Jerusalem," pp. 122–25 (p. 122).

[8] It should be emphasised that this figurative spiritual pilgrimage itself was recommended throughout the Middle Ages as Augustine and his disciple, Orosius, urged their readers to do it. See Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450* (Ithaca, NY, 2012), pp. 19, 119, 284.

[9] There were many contemporary criticisms against the literal travels to shrines which consecrated relics and saints. The negative views towards the real pilgrimage were no doubt shared among the readers of Middle English narratives, including the popular romance, Chaucerian writings, and William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Those who were hostile to the practice of the bodily pilgrimage often, instead, recommended "the pilgrimage of the soul," which is also defined by Dee Dyas as "life pilgrimage," which consists of "a detachment from worldly values, a commitment to moral obedience and a heartfelt desire to reach the heavenly homeland." See Dee Dyas, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature, 700–1500* (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 3–4.

[10] Both crusade and pilgrimage were indirectly profitable to the entire Christian community as such penitential acts augmented the treasury of merits, which was distributed to members of the Church by the pope, the steward of the earthly Christian community. See Robert W. Shaffern, "The Medieval Theology of Indulgences," in *Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits*, ed. R. N. Swanson (Leiden, 2006), pp. 11–36.

[11] Kathryn M. Rudy, *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Covent: Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 35–38.

[12] For example, Bridget of Sweden and Margery Kempe, who visited the physical Jerusalem as pilgrims, had the visions of Christ's Passion there. Their visions were based on devotional writings, liturgical dramas, and sermons, on which they had often relied to meditate upon Christ's life before travelling to the actual sites. See Ora Limor, "Jerusalem," in *Europe: A Literary History, 1348–1418*, ed. David Wallace (Oxford, 2016), pp. 217–43 (pp. 231–22);

life, death, and resurrection, was, in other words, sought for and recovered through both real and virtual penitential journeying.

In this paper, I will argue that in such a virtual reclaiming of the Holy Land by the fifteenth-century English reader, the popular topos of a penitential wilderness often plays a fundamental role. As a case study, I will examine the context of one of the two surviving manuscripts compiled by the fifteenth-century Yorkshire gentleman, Robert Thornton (c.1397–c.1465), Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91.[13] The texts I discuss are the manuscript's distinctive versions of *Sir Isumbras* and so-called Northern *Octavian*. Although Thornton copied many more overtly devotional writings, such as Passion narratives, lyric prayers, and a substantial body of the English work of the mystic and hermit Richard Rolle (1305/10–1349), my interest is in his romances. This is because, as will become clear, these romance texts conjure up precisely the kind of penitential wilderness that devotional texts, elsewhere in his manuscript, repeatedly invited Thornton to imagine. My exploration of the narrative geography of these romances will clarify how readily a symbolic, allegorical dimension slips into the ostensibly secular, real-world spaces of romance, in order, I suggest, to prompt and, in turn, to facilitate readers' devotional performance. In what follows, I will first introduce Robert Thornton and his particular interest in penance, in the context of the lively social networks of late medieval Yorkshire, where lay and religious readers shared devotional texts and practices. I then examine, briefly, Thornton's admiration for Richard Rolle, since the Rollean model of eremitism was regarded, among literate late medieval Yorkshire men and women, to embody the ideal of devotional reading as well as of an affective longing for Christ. Here, I focus on the metaphorical wilderness in Rolle's *Oleum effusum nomen tuum* (the Middle English translation of the beginning of Rolle's *Super Canticum Canticorum*), as the concept of the wilderness in it is tightly bound up with Rolle's ideas of penance and the promise of salvation through the humanity of Christ. Finally, I turn to the narrative geography of *Sir Isumbras* and to that of the first third of Northern *Octavian*, to explore how the topos of the wilderness contributes to a conflation of the narrative geography of the Holy Land with allegorical landscapes. As I will argue, the wilderness which these romances offer Thornton functions as a mental stage, a jumping-off point. Thornton would have been able to pursue his own spiritual enlightenment from it, by imagining for himself the protagonists' penitential journey in a blighted land adjacent, or leading, to Jerusalem.

Robert Thornton and late medieval Yorkshire religiosity

Robert Thornton was a fifteenth-century Yorkshire gentleman, famous principally for having compiled, across two manuscripts, the second-largest surviving collection of Middle English romances. These manuscripts are Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91 (the so-called Lincoln Thornton MS) and London, British Library, Additional MS 31042 (the so-called London Thornton MS). Although Thornton's two vast manuscripts are often singled out as one of the most important repositories of Middle English romances, they are also jammed packed with many other kinds of texts, including Passion narratives (such as the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Privity of the Passion* and the *Northern Passion*), devotional lyrics, religious guidebooks, catechetical works, prayers, and quasi-liturgical writings. Religious guidebooks, including the *Mirror of Saint Edmund*, the *Abbey of the*

Jesse Njus, "Margery Kempe and the Spectatorship of Medieval Drama," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 38 (2013): 123–51.

[13] Robert Thornton, the fifteenth-century gentleman, is a suitable example of the readership of the so-called English popular romances. While the romance itself generally proposes cultural, social, and religious principles and ideologies which were traditionally associated with aristocracy, some of the so-called "popular romances" were often sought by those who wished to "mark them[selves] off as part of the aristocracy," according to Michael Johnston. The two romances discussed here, *Octavian* and *Sir Isumbras*, are classified into what Johnston calls the "gentry romance," which appeals and responds to the gentry's socio-economic concerns. See Michael Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2014), p. 9.

Holy Ghost, and Walter Hilton's *Epistle of the Mixed Life*, are noteworthy among the manuscript's contents, for they suggest that Thornton sought to live a mixed life, across lay and religious boundaries. While the *Mirror of Saint Edmund* was originally written for an enclosed religious, the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost* encourages lay readers to build an allegorical nunnery in their conscience in order to help them emulate religious practice and to introduce some aspects of monastic discipline into their active lives. Similarly, Hilton, in the *Epistle of the Mixed Life*, advises the addressee, a lay lord who has both religious leanings and secular responsibilities, to carefully separate his duties in his active life from his private spiritual pursuits. Thornton likely understood himself to be just like Hilton's addressee, for he seems to have copied his two manuscripts, especially the writings related to Christ's life and Passion, in response to Hilton's advice which foregrounds meditation on Christ's humanity as the safest recourse for a layman's spiritual pursuits.[14] Thornton, we know, was, for much of the fifteenth century, lord of the manor at East Newton, in the wapentake of Ryedale, in the North Riding of Yorkshire. Evidence suggests that he engaged energetically in both family and communal devotion at Stonegrave Minster, his parish church, as well as in the family chapel of his manor house.[15] Thornton, no doubt, given the contents of his manuscripts, would also have made the time for private, meditative reading amid his busy worldly responsibilities. Thornton's private spiritual pursuits were not, however, necessarily solitary. Rather, Thornton seems to have had at least one clerical advisor, who would have provided him with a number of his religious texts alongside spiritual guidance.[16] The content of the manuscripts which Thornton compiled attests to his keen spiritual ambition to lead a mixed life in collaboration with his spiritual advisor(s).

Many of the texts found in Thornton's manuscripts testify to a wide, lively network of textual circulation, among the landed gentry and possibly too a civic elite (i.e., among both rural and urban communities) and members of religious houses, in his locality. As Rosalind Field posits, romances could readily have been sourced from a member of one of the local aristocratic families, like Thornton's friends and neighbours, the Pickerings of Oswaldkirk.[17] Thornton's collection of religious and devotional writings points to a wider book-lending network in which material produced for female religious was likewise shared by the secular clergy as well as lay women and men. As George R. Keiser argues, the Benedictine Priory of Nun Monkton possibly provided Thornton with key religious writings, for Richard Pickering's sister was a nun there.[18] Indeed, we know that elsewhere it was quite common for monastic discipline and religious writings to be shared among female religious and local gentlewomen, and subsequently to be disseminated to the wider lay society.[19] Since female religious houses in Yorkshire were generally poor, from their foundation to their surrender, they were inevitably more dependent on—and so more in communication

[14] George R. Keiser, "Robert Thornton: Gentleman, Reader and Scribe," in *Robert Thornton and His Books: Essays on the Lincoln and London Thornton Manuscripts*, ed. Susanna Fein and Michael Johnston (Woodbridge,2014), pp. 67–108 (p. 103). Also see Nicole R. Rice, *Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature* (Cambridge, 2009).

[15] As Keiser reveals, the Thorntons had been allowed to celebrate masses and other services at the chapel erected at East Newton since 1398, when Robert Thornton's father was the lord of the manor. See George R. Keiser, "More Light on the Life and Milieu of Robert Thornton," *Studies in Bibliography* 36 (1983): 111–19 (pp. 111–12).

[16] Rob Lutton, "'…But Have You Read This?': Dialogicity in Robert Thornton's Holy Name Devotions," *English* 67. 257 (2018): 119–40 (p. 123).

[17] Rosalind Field and Dav Smith, "Afterword: Robert Thornton Country," in *Robert Thornton and His Books*, pp. 257–72 (pp. 261–62).

[18] Thornton was not only personally close enough to be one of the executors of Richard Pickering's will but he was also regarded as a valued enough friend to deserve the sharing books. Keiser finds that Thornton borrowed his copy of the *Liber de Diversis Medicinis* from someone of the Pickerings or their parish priest. If their connection with Nun Monkton enabled Richard or others to obtain religious texts, there is no reason to think that he did not pass them on to Thornton. See Keiser, "More Light," pp. 114–19; George R. Keiser, "Robert Thornton's *Liber de Diversis Medicinis*: Text, Vocabulary, and Scribal Confusion," in *Rethinking Middle English: Linguistic and Literary Approaches*, ed. Nikolaus Ritt and Herbert Schendel (Frankfurt, 2005), pp. 30–41. Also see Julie Orlemanski, "Thornton's Remedies and the Practices of Medical Reading," in *Robert Thornton and His Books*, pp. 235–56 (pp. 236–41).

[19] It should be emphasised that religious writings were not only disseminated by female religious houses to their local lay readers, but they were also often bequeathed to nunneries by nuns' close female friends and family

with—their local lay communities.[20] Books and devotional practices were regularly shared among enclosed female religious and the laity, as the result of this close mutual reliance, which included the nuns' highly valued intercessory prayers, their role in educating children, and the practice of nunneries providing space for lay burials.[21] Since some of the devotional writings contained in the Lincoln Thornton MS clearly address a female readership,[22] Thornton arguably participated in a devotional culture which was sustained by the active circulation of texts among well-to-do Yorkshire lay men and women, but also between the laity and, particularly, female religious.

Among the devotional practices that flourished in late medieval Yorkshire, "devotional performances," or "performative reading," in Jessica Brantley's words, are especially relevant to my examination of how Thornton experienced the texts he copied.[23] Brantley, in her analysis of the Carthusian miscellany, London, British Library, Additional MS 37049, proposes the idea of "imagetexts," what she describes as a collaborative relationship between text and image in the process in which readers decode the meanings of each text. According to Brantley, the Carthusian readers of Additional MS 37049 were so trained in devotional, meditative reading, that they could envision from the imagetexts the particular space in which the narrative unfolds and they could perform the textually required roles, such as that of a participant in an eremitic life in the desert or as an attendee of liturgical celebrations. Equally, Boyda Johnstone, investigating the interaction between the text and illustrations of the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost* in London, British Library, MS Stowe 39, which is thought to have been compiled for a Benedictine nunnery, draws an analogy between its reader's engagement with the manuscript and an audience's experiences of theatre.[24] According to Johnstone, a mentally-created convent, produced through reading/viewing the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, offered a kind of a stage on which readers/viewers were easily able to re-enact the religious life according to their own preferences. Brantley's and Johnstone's studies suggest that pious readers in late medieval Yorkshire, including laypeople, were often trained to construct religiously laden spaces like a desert and an abbey in their minds, and, indeed, both manuscripts which Brantley and Johnstone examine may well have circulated in the textual networks which connected the religious and the laity in the north of England, including Yorkshire. Additional MS 37049 was likely composed in a Yorkshire or Lincolnshire Carthusian monastery, possibly Axholme, Mount Grace or Kingston-upon-Hull, and its dialect is Northern.[25] MS Stowe 39 was also compiled in West or North Yorkshire.[26] Although both Additional MS 37049 and MS Stowe 39

members, as well as by local clerics. For the literary culture shaped through mutual communication and conversation between nuns and devout gentlewomen in late medieval England, see Felicity Riddy, "Women Talking about the Things of God: A Late Medieval Sub-Cult," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150–1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 104–27; Mary Carpenter Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2002). For a textual and more general interaction between the lay society and female religious houses in late medieval England, see Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England: Female Monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich, 1350–1540* (Woodbridge, 1998); Carole Hill, *Women and Religion in Late Medieval Norwich* (London, 2010).

[20] Janet Elizabeth Burton, *The Yorkshire Nunneries in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, Borthwick Papers 56 (York, 1979).

[21] Claire Cross points out that the Yorkshire laity missed the local nunneries partly because of their role in children's education. See "Yorkshire Nunneries in the Early Tudor Period," in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, ed. James G. Clark (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 145–54; and Claire Cross, "Monastic Learning and Libraries in Sixteenth-Century Yorkshire," *Studies in Church History* 8 (1991): 255–69. Michael Carter also reveals how much northern nuns' holiness and power in offering intercession were revered by their local societies. See Michael Carter, *The Art and Architecture of the Cistercians in Northern England, C.1300–1540*, Medieval Monastic Studies v. 3. (Turnhout, 2019), pp. 203–50.

[22] Keiser, "More Light," pp. 114–19.

[23] Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago, IL, 2007).

[24] Boyda Johnstone, "Reading Images, Drawing Texts: Performing *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost* in British Library Stowe 39," in *Editing, Performance, Texts: New Practices in Medieval and Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Jacqueline Jenkins and Julie Sanders (New York, 2014), pp. 27–48.

[25] "Add. MS 37049," in *British Library, the Digitised Manuscript*, <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_37049> [accessed 6 September 2020]

[26] *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* [*LALME*], ed. Angus Mclntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin, vol.1(Aberdeen, 1986), p. 116; Peter Kidd, "Codicological Clues to the Patronage of Stowe MS. 39: A Fifteenth-Century Illustrated Nun's Book in Middle English," *Electronic British Library Journal* (2009): 1–12 (p. 9).

seem to have been intended mainly for the use of religious houses (a Carthusian charterhouse and a Benedictine nunnery, respectively), they could also, readily, have been consulted by lay readers.[27] While it is unlikely that Thornton was as devotionally trained as his contemporary female religious, the geographical proximity of these manuscripts' places of origin to Thornton's locality suggests his belonging to a devotional culture not too far removed from that of the readers of these manuscripts. In other words, it is not too far-fetched to think that Thornton was also familiar with their mode of performative, devotional reading.

The fact that Thornton copied the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, the *Mirror of Saint Edmund*, and the *Northern Passion*, in conjunction with *John Gaytryge's Sermon* (or the *Lay Folk's Catechism*), further suggests the likelihood of his familiarity with such devotional performance. The main purpose of performative, devotional reading was to heighten the reader's concentration on the text at hand as well as to elicit religiously desirable feelings such as compunction, contrition, and compassion.[28] Mentally conceptualised spaces, including those of an abbey, a desert, and the holy sites that witness Christ's life, serve particularly well for this purpose. They enabled readers to easily follow the instructions offered by the text. The mentally created landscapes, moreover, are often claimed (by the texts themselves) as places for readers to cleanse their souls from sins, to feel compassion and contrition, and to do penance. For example, the narrator of the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost* emphasises that an allegorical abbey should be built beside a river of specifically penitential tears, such as the tearful river shed by Mary Magdalene, who, with contrition for her former way of life, flees into a desert.[29] The Lincoln Thornton MS's *Mirror of Saint Edmund* contains a short section which instructs how to conduct a Passion meditation. The devout reader's imitation of Christ (and often also of the Virgin) is effected by envisioning Christ's life from birth to death and resurrection. This active engagement in the meditation of Christ's life is presented as an efficacious way to stir compassion and the repentance of sins.[30] The idea that a meditative reading of the Passion was spiritually profitable is equally suggested by the *explicit* of the London Thornton MS's *Northern Passion*. Its narrator assures that "alle þat hase herde this passioune / Sall haue a thowsande ȝeris to pardone" (all who heard this passion / shall have a thousand years of pardon).[31] The devotional, performative envisioning of events in the Gospel narratives was, no doubt, understood by Thornton as meritorious for the remission of sins.

These texts thus suggest that Thornton's enactment of the requirements of devotional practice clearly resonated with his concerns with the way of doing penance properly. According to Phillipa Hardman, Thornton likely felt a need for penance, an essential component of "devotions and meditation in preparation for a good death."[32] Hardman's claim derives from the *incipit* added by Thornton to *John Gaytryge's Sermon*: "Here begynnes A sermon þat Dan Iohn Gaytryge made þe / whilke teches how scrifte es to be made & whareof and in scrifte / how many thyngeȝ solde be consederide" (Here begins a sermon which was delivered by John Gaytryge, which instructs how and why a confession should be made, as well as what things should be examined in a confession).[33] Middle English prologues often inform readers how the subsequent writings should

[27] Johnstone points out that some men's names are observable on the margin of folio 22r of MS Stowe 39, which suggests the circulation of the manuscript beyond the walls of a Benedictine nunnery, including among laymen. See Johnstone, "Reading Images, Drawing Texts," p. 34. Likewise, Brantley does not reject the possibility of a wide circulation of Additional MS 37049. See Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, p. 13.

[28] Allan Westphall, "The Passion in English: *Meditations on the Life of Christ* in Michigan State University Library MS 1," *Neophilologus* 97 (2013): 199–214 (p. 200).

[29] "The Abbey of the Holy Ghost," in *Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse*, ed. George G. Perry (London, 1867; repr. 1898), pp. 51–62.

[30] "The Mirror of S. Edmund," in *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole, an English Father of the Church, and His Followers*, ed. Carl Horstmann (London, 1895), pp. 219–40.

[31] Frances A. Foster ed., *The Northern Passion*, EETS, o.s., 145 (London, 1913; repr.1971), p. 248.

[32] Phillipa Hardman, "Domestic Learning and Teaching Investigating Evidence for the Role of 'Household Miscellanies' in Late-Medieval England," in *Women and Writing, c.1340–c.1650: The Domestication of Print Culture*, ed. Anne Lawrence-Mathers and Phillipa Hardman (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 15–33 (pp. 22–24).

[33] Susanna Fein, "The Contents of Robert Thornton's Manuscripts," in *Robert Thornton and His Books*, pp. 13–66

be read, by suggesting, among other things, their genres or dominant themes.[34] Thornton's scribal gesture here thus reveals his special interest in "scrifte" (confession to a priest). The allegorical abbey in the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost* and the meditative enactments of Christ's life in the Holy Land would have been entwined with Thornton's desire to do proper penance. The mental spaces, which were created through the reading of these texts, would have served as a support for Thornton to perform his spiritual exercises.

Richard Rolle and eremitism as a model for contemplation and penance

If Thornton understood penance and meditation as ways to approach spiritual perfection (and subsequently, salvation), the teachings of Richard Rolle and the topos of the wilderness no doubt attracted his attention. Of course, the topos of the *locus horribilis* (the wild, horrible place), which abounds with wild beasts, thorns, and nettles, but which is fitting for penance and contemplation had already, by the fifteenth century, a long history. As John Howe explains, Scripture itself offers numerous examples of wildernesses, including Deuteronomy's account of Moses "in a desert land, in a place of horror, and of vast wilderness" (32.10); the ruined landscapes of Edom, where thorns and nettles grew up (Isaiah, 34.13–13); and Christ's forty-day withdrawal into a wilderness (Mark 1.13).[35] The figures of the desert fathers, who sought a sacred, solitary life of penance and contemplation in a wilderness, were also well known throughout the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, Rolle, the hermit of Hampole, embodied the eremitism of a late medieval English, in particular, Yorkshire thinking, as is clearly shown in the illustrations of some northern manuscripts which offer portraits of Rolle praying in his solitary hermitage.[36] Thornton's interest in Rolle and his eremitic ideal is well attested in his manuscripts, for Thornton copied a short but dense collection of works ascribed to the hermit in the Lincoln Thornton MS (on folios 192v–96v). In addition, Rolle was, of course, a local celebrity. Rolle was born in Thornton le Dale, near Pickering, in Thornton's immediate neighbourhood; and Thornton would likely have known the anecdote of Rolle's withdrawal into a hermitage in clothing borrowed from his sister.[37] As Elizabeth Freeman points out, late medieval Yorkshire, "a popular breeding ground for local cults," cultivated an admiration for Rolle in expectation of his canonisation, while the Cistercian Priory of Hampole became a pilgrimage site for admirers of Rolle from the late fourteenth century.[38] Thornton could hardly have remained unaware of the increasing veneration of Rolle, a local candidate for sainthood. In fact, the *incipit* to a prayer, which Thornton ascribed to Rolle, describes him as "Richerd hermet [. . .] þat es beried at hampulle" (Richard the hermit [. . .] who is buried at Hampole).[39] Thornton's

(p. 41).

[34] Andrew Galloway, "Middle English Prologues," in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. David F. Johnson and Elaine M. Treharne (Oxford, 2005), pp. 288–305.

[35] John Howe, "Creating Symbolic Landscapes: Medieval Development of Sacred Space," in *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*, ed. John Howe and Michael Wolfe (Gainesville, FL, 2002), pp. 208–23 (pp. 212–14).

[36] As Brantley points out, both Additional MS 37049 and MS Stowe 39 provide portraits of Rolle in a hermitage while the picture of Rolle, sitting in a solitary wood, appears as the illustration of the *Desert of Religion* in London, British Library MS Cotton Faustina B.VI. See Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, pp. 137–48. Bryan suggests the connection between Rolle and the northern wilderness. See Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008), pp. 15–19, 42–48.

[37] This anecdote was recorded in the *Officium* (the Latin Office for Rolle and the story of his life), which was prepared in expectation of the hermit's canonisation by someone related to the Priory of Hampole. Thornton could easily have heard this anecdote although the Lincoln Thornton MS does not record it.

[38] The Priory of Hampole (located between Wakefield and Doncaster in the West Riding of Yorkshire) was celebrated as the place where Rolle's body, writings, and the memory of his miracles were preserved. However, Freeman simultaneously highlights a lack of evidence for the generally accepted idea that Rolle wrote the *Form of Living* for Margaret Kirkby, who is assumed to have been a former nun of the priory and anchoress of East Layton, Richmond. See Elizabeth Freeman, "The Priory of Hampole and Its Literary Culture: English Religious Women and Books in the Age of Richard Rolle," *Parergon* 29 (2012): 1–25 (pp. 13, 15–16).

[39] Fein, "The Contents of Robert Thornton's Manuscripts," p. 36. Thornton's consistent adding of incipits naming Rolle to his collection of Rollean writings equally suggests his esteem for the hermit.

religious sensibility, which was unavoidably shaped by the devotional trends of his locality, would have encouraged him not only to associate the topos of the wilderness with "Richerd hermet" but also to understand the eremitic wilderness as a place suitable for penance and contemplation. Of course, there were limitations to the eremitic ideal. Many hermitages and anchorages were not actually located in remote, desolate lands but instead stood in populated areas. Many hermitages, for instance, were situated near bridges, and many anchorages had windows which faced onto streets, sometimes *en route* to busy urban market areas. Moreover, the Rollean model of solitary longing for Christ through love, penance, and contemplation was technically impossible for those living in religious communities no less than for the laity. Nonetheless, as Jennifer Bryan argues, solitaries, i.e., recluses and hermits, and in particular, Richard Rolle, represented "the ideal devotional reader," one who kept "a solitary self[,] collected and drawn into itself, communing only with God in its devotions."[40] The Rollean model of devotion, though inseparably tied with the eremitic ideal, was, crucially, regarded as something mentally imitable for unenclosed readers. This idea was widely shared among devout readers as a result of the proliferation of the "literature of eremiticism," including the writings of Rolle and Hilton, as well as vernacular rules like the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*.[41]

We can find in Thornton's collection of Rollean works an example of his writings which present the wilderness as something that can be internalised through the reader's penitential longing for Christ. The Middle English translation of the Latin *Oleum effusum nomen tuum* (also known as the *Encomium nominis Jesu*), the opening work of Thornton's Rollean collection, proposes a metaphorical wilderness as the place for contemplation and the discovery of Christ/salvation.[42] According to Denis Renevey, this Middle English work shows that devotion to the Holy Name was particularly associated with Rolle and was widespread in Yorkshire.[43] Thornton's selection of the Middle English *Oleum effusum nomen tuum* as the first item in his selection of Rollean works likely resulted from this local religious trend. However, it simultaneously conveys the importance of fleeing from a worldly, sinful society into a solitary, penitential life associated with a wilderness:

> I ȝede abowte be couaytyse of reches and I fande noghte Ihesu. [. . .] I satt in companyes of worldly myrthe and I fand noghte Ihesu. In all thire I soghte Ihesu bot I fand hym noghte, for he lett me wyete by his grace þat he ne es funden in þe lande of *softly lyfande*. Tharefore I turned by anothire waye, and I rane abowte be pouerte and I fande Ihesu […]. I satt by myn ane, fleande þe vanytes of þe worlde, and I fande Ihesu in *deserte* fastande, in þe monte anely prayande. I ran by payne [and] penaunce, and I fand Ihesu bownden, scourgede, gyffen galle to drynke, naylyde to þe crosse, hyngande in þe crosse and dyeand in þe crosse. Tharefore Ihesu es noghte funden in reches bot in pouerte, noghte in delytes bot in penance, noghte in wanton ioyeynge bot in bytter grettynge, noghte emange many bot in anellynes.
>
> (I went about out of greed for riches, and I did not find Jesus. [. . .] I sat in companies of worldly mirth and I did not find Jesus. In all of them, I sought Jesus, but I did not find Him; for He let me know by His grace that He is not found in *a life of luxury*. Therefore, I turned to another way, and I ran about in poverty and I found Jesus [. . .] I sat alone, fleeing the vanity of the world, and I found Jesus fasting in *a desert* and praying alone on a mountain. I ran painfully and penitentially, and found Jesus, who was bound, scourged, given gall to drink, nailed to the cross, hanging on the Cross, and dying on the Cross. Therefore, Jesus is not found in riches but in poverty, not in delights but in penance, not in extravagant joy but in bitter weeping, not among

[40] Bryan, *Looking Inward*, p. 13.

[41] Ibid., p. 16.

[42] The *Encomium nominis Jesu* circulated both on its own and as part of Rolle's *Super Canticum Canticorum*.

[43] Denis Renevey, "Northern Spirituality Travels South: Rolle's Middle English *Encomium oleum effusum nomen tuum* in Lincoln College Library, MS 91, and Dublin, Trinity College, MS 155," in *Revisiting the Medieval North of England: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Anita Auer, Denis Renevey, Camille Marshall and Tino Oudesluijs (Cardiff, 2019), pp. 13–24 (p. 14).

many but in loneliness.)[44]

If one wishes to find Jesus, so Rolle suggests, it is necessary to avoid "softly lyfande" (a life of luxury) and alone to seek for "payne" (pain, sufferings) and "penaunce." Notably, the "deserte" or "monte," to which Christ withdraws himself, here becomes a metaphorical conceptualisation of penance and contemplation. The topos of an eremitic wilderness does not signify the literal desert in Judaea but urges readers to interiorise a spiritual life of poverty, penance, and contemplation through the devotion to Jesus, the humanity of Christ. Moreover, the reader's internal eyes are invited to move seamlessly from the wilderness to the suffering Christ on the Cross. A desert and a solitary mountain are thus starting points for readers who seek to meditate on the Passion. The mentally conceptualised wilderness functioned as a support for the reader to envision and to partake in Rolle's search for Jesus. Given the likelihood that the practices of devotional reading, which I have already discussed, were shared by devout readers in Thornton's locality, the wilderness described here would have been just one such narrative space that allowed Thornton to seek salvation through the humanity of Christ.

Bearing in mind the connections between the eremitic wilderness, penance, and Christocentric devotion, I will now turn to the narrative landscapes of *Sir Isumbras* and to those of the first third of Northern *Octavian*, for these romance texts suggest that secular narrative space, just as much as overtly devotional narrative space, could have offered Thornton the mental stage, on which he could have enacted his penitential journey, leading no less to the heavenly Jerusalem and to Christ.

A virtual pilgrimage to the Holy Land through the wilderness: The conflation of secular and symbolic space in *Sir Isumbras* and Northern *Octavian*

Since Andrea Hopkins proposed that the Middle English "penitential romances" depict the quests of sinful heroes in pursuit of absolution,[45] *Sir Isumbras* has been considered as "the typical romance quest narrative [which] take[s] on the instrumental value of the penitential pilgrimage."[46] It has thus often been read as a romance oscillating between hagiography and romance or, alternatively, as a romance that expresses a longing for Jerusalem, echoing the devotional concerns of its contemporary English readers, their quests for self-betterment intricately linked to their devotion to the Holy Land.[47] On the other hand, similar devotional concerns expressed in the first third of Northern *Octavian* have rarely been discussed. Neither version of *Octavian*, i.e., Northern or Southern,

[44] "Oleum Effusum," in *Richard Rolle: Uncollected Prose and Verse with Related Northern Texts*, ed. Ralph Hanna, EETS, o.s., 329 (Oxford, 2007), pp. 2–9 (pp. 8–9). The translation is based on Hodgson, but I also made some changes. See Geraldine Emma Hodgson, ed. and trans., *Some Minor Works of Richard Rolle with the 'Privity of the Passion' by S. Bonaventura, from the Middle-English rendering of S. Bonaventura's Meditations* (London: Watkins, 1923), pp. 47–55 (p. 52). Emphasis is mine.

[45] Hopkins analyses four Middle English romances, i.e., *Guy of Warwick*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Robert of Sicily* as "penitential romances." See Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford, 1990).

[46] Rouse, "Romance and Crusade in Late Medieval England," p. 227.

[47] After Laurel Braswell argued that *Sir Isumbras* was based on the legend of Saint Eustace, the Latin *vita*, *Sir Isumbras*, and Eustace's Middle English *vita* in the *South English Legendary* have been compared to one another to elucidate the development of the so-called Eustace-Constance-Griselda type. See Laurel Braswell, "*Sir Isumbras* and the Legend of Saint Eustace," *Mediaeval Studies* 17 (1965): 128–51; Anne B. Thompson, "Jaussian Expectation and the Production of Medieval Narrative: The Case of *Saint Eustace* and *Sir Isumbras*," *Exemplaria* 5 (1993): 387–407. Also, Wendy Matlock discusses the reception of both the *vita* and romance by the supposed bourgeois audience of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61. See Wendy Matlock, "Reading Family in the Rate Manuscript's *Saint Eustace* and *Sir Isumbras*," *Chaucer Review* 53 (2018): 350–73. For the crusading themes in *Sir Isumbras*, see Lee Manion, "The Loss of the Holy Land and *Sir Isumbras*: Literary Contributions to Fourteenth-Century Crusade Discourse," *Speculum* 85 (2010): 65–90; Leila K. Norako, "*Sir Isumbras* and the Fantasy of Crusade," *Chaucer Review* 48 (2013): 166–89.

has, to date, been examined in relation to penance. Both versions are, instead, more generally read as explorations of medieval class antagonism or of female agency, as well as being reflective of the ways in which the genres of romance and not hagiography (like *Sir Isumbras*) but fabliau intersect.[48] Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate, if we explore the narrative landscapes of *Sir Isumbras* and Northern *Octavian* together, and more particularly those versions that are preserved in the Lincoln Thornton MS, in the context of late medieval devotional practices typical of especially Yorkshire, we can see that devotion to the humanity of Christ and an emphasis on penance contribute to adding a symbolic, allegorical dimension to these romances' narrative geography. In conjunction with their Christocentric devotion, both romances share a marked interest in the wilderness, one which could well, I will suggest, have encouraged their readers to join the penitential pilgrimage of the romances' protagonists.

The idea that the landscapes of these romances can be interpreted not simply as literal spaces but also as symbolic ones has already been remarked by Emma O'Loughlin Bérat and Hopkins. Bérat, examining the episode of the Empress's exile in a wild forest, demonstrates how readily an allegorical dimension slips into the secular, literal space of *Octavian*. According to Bérat, who suggests a similarity between the exiled Roman Empress and the Woman of Revelation 12 (a common motif in Apocalypse cycles), the dangerous wood of Northern *Octavian* provides "a quasi-allegorical, quasi-literal wilderness" which witnesses the Empress's "literal adventures as a mother" as well as "her spiritual journey."[49] Late medieval English readers, who were familiar with the motif from Apocalypse narratives, would readily, she suggests, recall the figure of the Woman of Revelation 12 while reading the Empress's spiritual growth allegorically as the enhancement of secular motherhood. In a similar vein, Hopkins argues that it is possible to find in Isumbras's battles against Muslims a "symbolic dimension, that of the forces of good struggling against the forces of evil in the penitent's soul."[50] According to Hopkins, the narrative space of *Sir Isumbras* should principally be understood as literal, though enriched by symbolic, allegorical connotations. I contend, however, that Thornton would have recognized the blighted narrative spaces in *Sir Isumbras* and Northern *Octavian* as at once quasi-allegorical and quasi-literal as well as reflective of their protagonists' spiritual status. The narrative landscapes conjured up by these romance texts could well have served as the model for Thornton's own penitential search for salvation.

Let us now turn to the narrative geography of the Lincoln Thornton MS's version of *Sir Isumbras*. The "allusive combination of sparse geographic markers with the central resonance of the Holy Land" is, as it has been pointed out, the prominent feature of this romance's geographical descriptions.[51] For instance, Leila K. Norako reads the romance's abstract geography as a key element in its idealised vision of a permanent crusade and its fantasy of establishing a whole, united Christian Empire in the Holy Land. Equally, according to Lee Manion, this romance's use of Acre as a geographical marker resonated with the early fourteenth-century readers' concern with the

[48] For class consciousness in *Octavian*, see Martha Fessler Krieg, "The Contrast of Class Customs as Humour in a Middle English Romance: Clement and Florent in *Octavian*," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 9 (1984): 115–25; William Fahrenbach, "Rereading Clement in Thomas Chestre's *Octavian* and in BL Cotton Caligula A. II.," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 26 (2010): 85–99; Nicola McDonald, "The Wonder of Middle English Romance," in *Thinking Medieval Romance*, ed. Katherine C. Little and Nicola McDonald (Oxford, 2018), pp. 14–35; and John Simons, "Northern *Octavian* and the Question of Class," in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol M. Meale (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 105–11. Concerning the depictions of female characters, see Angela Florschuetz, "Women's Secrets: Childbirth, Pollution, and Purification in Northern *Octavian*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 30 (2008): 235–68. Regarding the relationship between the romance and the fabliau ethos in *Octavian*, see Glenn Wright, "The Fabliau Ethos in the French and English Octavian Romances," *Modern Philology* 102 (2005): 478–500.

[49] Emma O'Loughlin Bérat, "Romance and Revelation," in *Thinking Medieval Romance*, pp. 135–52 (p. 151).

[50] Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, p. 142. I chose Muslim over Saracen, concurring with Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh's argument that the deliberate choice of Muslim can reveal the racism and Islamophobia in primary texts. See Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh, 'The Depoliticized Saracen and Muslim Erasure,' *Literature Compass*, 16 (2019).

[51] Norako, p. 182.

failed attempts to launch a new crusade.[52] The port of Acre, through which Isumbras enters the Holy Land, was the last Christian stronghold in mainland Syria, and its fall was often painfully remembered in chronicle accounts. While it might be possible to find historical allusions in the text of *Sir Isumbras*, the romance's geography, at least that found in the Lincoln Thornton MS's version, could be read, especially, in the context of Thornton's devotion to the humanity of Christ, as the manifestation of his desire to learn a way to undertake proper penance. The Holy Land in this romance offers, I suggest, an emotional, devotional focus for Thornton, rather than functioning as a political, militaristic space bound up with the memory of unsuccessful crusading projects. The romance's narrative geography is shaped distinctively through the divine will and Christ's Passion, which is similarly evoked through the reading of Rolle's writings as well as the Passion narratives in the Thornton MSS. First of all, the goal of Isumbras's pilgrimage/crusade is presented not as the conquest of Jerusalem but as a visit to the places "thare God was qwike and dede, / That done was one the rode" (where God lived and died, / who perished on the cross, lines 130–31). The main purpose of Isumbras's journey is thus to revere the sites which witnessed Jesus's life and death; we can see devotion to the humanity of Christ here again. Equally, the Lincoln MS's version uses not Jerusalem, the ultimate destination of pilgrimages/crusades, but Bethlehem as a key geographical marker. While the Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 175 (1425–50) version of the romance, the base-text of the TEAMS's edition (which is preferred by most critics), mentions Jerusalem as one of a few geographical markers, the Lincoln text instead refers to Bethlehem, the city which was more strongly associated with affective devotion to Christ's Infancy than with the crusades.[53] Moreover, the trajectory of Isumbras's pilgrimage is described only in terms of his plight and divine will. There is no explanation as to where he lived before his penitential pilgrimage/crusade and which regions of Christendom is invaded by the sultan (who, as I will explain soon, robs Isumbras of his wife before attacking of a Christian army). Isumbras's crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, for instance, is presented not so much geographically but as an expression of the will of "Jhesu Cryste": "[t]he righte waye thane takes he [Isumbras] / To a havene of the Grekkes see, /Als Jhesu Cryste hym sende" (Isumbras then takes the direct way / to a port on the Mediterranean Sea, / as Jesus Christ sent him, lines 503–5). Isumbras's travel to the Holy Land via Acre might vaguely recall the loss of that bastion. However, this abstract narrative geography, namely the lack of geographical markers except for Acre and Bethlehem, likely resonates with Thornton's Christocentric devotions, rather than any claim to the physical city of Jerusalem.

In the Lincoln MS's version of *Sir Isumbras*, the way to the Holy Land and the region itself are presented as a kind of a wilderness, as is fitting for the sinful hero's redemptive journey.[54] Isumbras's pilgrimage is characterised by desolate, blighted landscapes, which clearly echo the topos of the *locus horribilis*. Isumbras, a noble and brave knight, confesses his sins (prompted by a divine messenger bird) and sets off on a penitential journey with his wife and three children to remit the temporal penalty. After carving a cross into his shoulder with a knife—an exaggerated version of the crusader vow and crossing-ceremony—[55] Isumbras and his family head for the Holy Land

[52] Manion, pp. 83–84.

[53] Thornton's interest in the Christ Child is well attested by the fact that he copied three narratives of Child Jesus. We can find the *Three Kings of Cologne*, the Middle English rhyme royal translation of the Latin *Historia Trium Regum* (the Magi's legendary story, including their adoration of Christ, Saint Helena's finding of the Magi's bodies, and the bodies' ultimate travel to Cologne); the extract of the *Cursor Mundi*, which tells the events from the Virgin's conception of Christ to Christ's infancy, childhood, and ministry; and the *Childhood of Christ*, the apocryphal verse narrative of the Infancy gospels.

[54] In the latter half of the romance, the Holy Land is turned into the battleground between Isumbras's family and thousands of Muslims. Thus, the romance evokes the crusading imagery more explicitly in its latter part. For the incompatibility between Isumbras and the Christian Other, i.e., Muslims, see Stephen D. Powell, "Models of Religious Peace in the Middle English Romance *Sir Isumbras*," *Neophilologus* 85 (2001): 121–36; Norako, pp. 182–87.

[55] Manion, p. 86. Norako, p. 179. According to Norako, the practice of making a crusader vow by assuming a cross of cloth lasted into the late Middle Ages.

through bleak "holtes hore" (grey woods, line 167), which are full of beasts and thorns but devoid of anything "that come of corne" (that comes from cereal crops, line 165).[56] This journey across the forest costs Isumbras his family: all three of his children are kidnapped by beasts while a sultan, who stays at a seaside town outside the forest, forces Isumbras to sell his wife. After working as a blacksmith for seven years, Isumbras forges a suit of armour for himself and defeats the Muslim army led by the same sultan, who is subsequently killed by Isumbras. Isumbras then changes his armour for pilgrim's clothes and crosses the Mediterranean Sea. After entering the Holy Land via "Acris" (Acre, 508), he encounters an unrelenting "haythene stede" (heathen land, line 511), where alone he endures thirst, hunger, and exhaustion. Thus, the narrative landscapes of the first half of *Sir Isumbras* were dominated by a wild wood and a Holy Land under heathen rule. In these blighted lands, the knight encounters penitential torment.

This abstract geography, which is shaped by both Christocentric devotions and the topos of the wilderness, facilitates the addition of an allegorical dimension to the literal geography. Such a conflation of quasi-literal and quasi-allegorical space is most explicitly found in the episode in which Isumbras finally merits a divine visitation. An angel appears before him after his painful efforts to "serve Gode and haly kyrke" (serve God and Holy Church, line 518) and to "mende hi[s] are mysdede" (amend his former misdeeds, line 519):

> So it by-felle hym sonne onone,
> That alle a syde of a cunntre he hase thurgh gone,
> Bot mete ne drynke couthe he gete none,
> Ne house to herbere hyme inne
> Withowttene the burghe of Bedeleme,
> He layde hym downe by a welle streme,
> Fulle sore wepande for pyne.
> And als he laye, abowte mydnyghte
> Thare come an angelle faire and bryghte,
> And broghte hym brede and wyne.
> "Palmere," he sayse, "welcome thou bee,
> The kynge of hevene wele gretis the,
> Forgyffene erre synnes thyne!" (lines 521–33)
>
> (Thus it befell that in all the countries through which he travelled, he found neither food nor drink nor shelter. Outside of the city of Bethlehem, he lay down beside a freshwater spring, weeping for pain. And as he lay, at about midnight, a fair, bright angel came to him and brought him bread and wine. "Palmer," said the angel, "Welcome! The King of Heaven greets you. Your sins are forgiven!")

Isumbras suffers "pyne" (pain, torments) as he travels "alle a syde of a cunntre," i.e., all over the Holy Land under heathen rule. This unfriendly, blighted land does not offer him any food or drink or shelter until Isumbras fulfils the aim of his journey. Only after resting outside the "burgh of Bedeleme," that iconic place where "God was qwike and dede," does Isumbras recover his livelihood and gain remission for his sins. In other words, Isumbras is considered to have completed paying the penalty for his sins when he arrives at Christ's birthplace. At this point, the romance's geography acquires a distinctively allegorical dimension. Bethlehem becomes a kind of a metonym for the full atonement for sin while the desert traversed by Isumbras allegorises his painstaking process of

[56] All quotations from the Lincoln Thornton MS's version of *Sir Isumbras* are taken from James Orchard Halliwell, ed., *The Thornton Romances: The Early English Metrical Romances of "Perceval," "Isumbras," "Eglamour," and "Degrevant," Selected from Manuscripts at Lincoln and Cambridge*, Camden Society, o.s., 30 (London, 1844), pp. 88–120.

penance. A devout reader like Thornton would well have understood, in these symbolic landscapes, the message that the human soul could not attain salvation without proper penance and the help of Christ.

Another example of the conflation of literal and allegorical space in the depiction of the Holy Land is found in Northern *Octavian*, or to put it more precisely, in its heroine's discovery of the *direct* way to the Holy Land. Before exploring this episode, I want to take a brief look at how the topos of the wilderness is also exploited in the first third of Northern *Octavian*. This part of the romance is set in Rome and in a wild forest adjacent to the Empire's capital, while the focus is on the Empress. Immediately after giving birth to twins, she is expelled with her new-born sons into an "vncouthe thede" (an unknown land, line 288) in response to a false accusation of adultery. Preoccupied with her thoughts and sorrows, the Empress loses the "ryghte waye" (right way, line 309). As a consequence, she wanders for three days without food in "a wyldirnes" (line 292), where she finds only woods, "dales [. . .] depe and cleues wykke" (deep valleys and hazardous cliffs, line 308).[57] In the wood, her twins are abducted; one by an ape and the second by a griffin, which is subsequently killed by a lioness (which then nurtures the child as its own). The Empress eventually manages to find a way through the forest, arriving at a seaside town. There, she boards a ship to Jerusalem. Once there, she is offered shelter by a Christian king, who recognises her as the Empress of Rome, in his palace. The Empress's wanderings from an unknown, wild forest to Jerusalem here again uses the topos of the *locus horribilis*. She encounters dangerous beasts, barren woods, extremely harsh natural environments, all of which offer her nothing, and simultaneously, deprive her of her twin sons. However, as we shall see, this wilderness, which ultimately leads her to Jerusalem, can be regarded as just the right space for her spiritual development through contrition.

In a manner similar to what we find in *Sir Isumbras*, the narrative landscape of this thick wood assumes a symbolic, allegorical dimension. As I explained above, the Empress has lost her way because of her preoccupation with her own sorrow. But in her plight, she finally finds the direct way to the Holy Land soon after she makes her address to "Jhesu:"

> Scho [the Empress] sais, "Jhesu, king of alle,
> With carefulle herte to þe I calle
> That þou be my socoure.
> [. . .]
> This sorowe, lorde, þat I am jn
> Full wele I wote es for my syn:
> Welcome be alle thi sande!
> To þe werlde will I me neuir gyffe,
> Bot serue the, lorde, whills I may lyfe."
> *Into þe Holy Londe*
> *A redy waye þere scho fand*.
> And ouir an hill þe waye scho name
> And to þe Grekkes se scho came,
> And welke appon þe strande.
> And byfore hir an hauen scho seghe,
> And a cete with towris full heghe. (lines 388–90, 400–11, emphasis added.)
> (She says, "Jesus, King of all, with a heavy heart I pray that you help me! [. . .] I know well that this sorrow, Lord, which I am suffering, is because of my sin. All your will may be welcome! I will never devote myself to the world but will serve you, Lord, while I live." *She then found a direct way to the Holy Land*. She took the way over a hill and she came to the Mediterranean Sea.

[57] All the quotations from Northern *Octavian* are taken from *Octovian*, ed. Frances McSparran, EETS, o.s., 289 (London, 1986).

She walked to the beach and before her she saw a port and a city with very high towers.)

The Empress recognises her predicament to be the result of her sin, declaring her resolution to pay the debt/penalty for her sin: she shall devote herself not to the "werlde" but to God for the rest of her life. Immediately after that, a "redy waye" (a direct, unimpeded way) to the Holy Land is found. Here, the wilderness somewhere around Rome is transformed into an allegorical space which reflects the Empress's spiritual status. As her rejection of worldly concerns triggers her progress to Jerusalem, the literal geography of the romance is aligned with her spiritual enhancement. In other words, while the wild, unrelenting forest arguably symbolises the Empress's ignorance of her sin and her unpaid debts of sin, the earthly Jerusalem is virtually equated to its heavenly counterpart. Just as the earthly city becomes accessible to the Empress only after confession and penance, the heavenly Jerusalem would become attainable only after obtaining remission of the temporal penalty for one's sin as well as absolution by confession. As this overlapping of the earthly and heavenly city was a religious commonplace, Thornton would have had no difficulty in understanding this allegorical interpretation of the narrative's landscapes.

It should also be noted that the long indented quotation above is based on my own transcription of the romance from the Lincoln Thornton MS and not on Frances McSparran's standard edition. The editor of the EETS's edition of Northern *Octavian*, McSparran, moves line 405 to line 411. Thus, in her edition's reading of the episode, the Empress finds the direct way not to the Holy Land but to a coastal town, which is found outside the forest and from whence she travels by boat to the Holy Land. McSparran, considering the lines a mistake made by Thornton or his source, emends the stanza. This emendation makes sense. If the line "A redy waye þere scho fand" is moved to line 411, the twelve-line tail rhyme scheme is preserved. McSparran's ordering of the lines also accords with the other extant manuscript of Northern *Octavian*, Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.2.38. The Lincoln Thornton MS's apparently corrupted version of these lines may well come from Thornton's source text, but it is just as likely to be one of Thornton's own interventions.[58] The allegorical space which is produced by the Lincoln Thornton MS's distinctive reading of the episode is more fitting in the specific context of his manuscript and its compiler's devotional preoccupations. It resonates perfectly with Thornton's own concerns for a proper way of engaging in penance and with the close relationship between the wilderness, penance, and Christocentric devotion.

Indeed, the Empress's calling to "Jhesu" resonates with Thornton's devotion to the humanity of Christ expressed in the texts he copied into his two manuscripts, and in particular, the *Oleum effusum nomen tuum*. Thornton highlights the passage of this work, where the narrator says that "þe nam of Ihesu es helefull and nedys byhouys be lufed of all couaytande saluacyone" (the name of Jesus is salvific and needs to be loved by all who are longing for salvation).[59] As I explained above, the *Oleum effusum nomen tuum* presents the search for Jesus as almost identical to the quest for salvation while simultaneously suggesting that Jesus/salvation becomes reachable after penance and the Passion meditation. The Empress's supplication to "Jhesu" to get her away from the perilous wood could thus have been read as an example of the manifestation of Christ's salvific power. The humanity of God is evoked as an essential support for the human soul traversing the penitential wilderness in order to proceed to salvation. Jerusalem, in which the Empress is granted a peaceful shelter from a Christian ruler, would have been easily read as its heavenly counterpart, where righteous, spiritually clean Christians dwell. Thornton's local religiosity was shaped, at least

[58] For Thornton's scribal intervention in the source texts, see, for example, John Ivor Carlson, "Scribal Intentions in Medieval Romance: A Case Study of Robert Thornton," *Studies in Bibliography* 58 (2007): 49–71. Carlson proposes that Thornton often replaced "poetic features" of romances with "more prosaic expressions" in order for readers to understand the senses of each text, without unnecessary confusion (p. 62).

[59] *Oleum Effusum*, p. 9.

in part, by an admiration for Rolle and for his teaching, which emphasises affective longing for Christ as a joyful, indispensable recourse to win salvation. It would therefore not have been difficult for Thornton to appreciate the conflation of literal and allegorical space in Northern *Octavian* as well as in *Sir Isumbras*. Both romances present their protagonists' penitential journey in landscapes which are imbued with the rich devotional topos of the wilderness and Christocentrism.

Conclusion

The allegorical dimension added to the blighted landscapes of *Sir Isumbras* and the first third of Northern *Octavian* offers space which would have allowed Thornton to envision the proper way to seek for the heavenly Jerusalem. The textually created wilderness served as a stage for devotional performance, in which Thornton could have put himself in the shoes of both Isumbras and the Empress of Rome, embarking on a penitential journey *en route* to spiritual enhancement. The redemptive wanderings of these protagonists provided Thornton with examples of proper penance, while demonstrating the indispensability of Christ's salvific mercy for the human soul to merit atonement. Since pious Yorkshire readers in the fifteenth century were readily familiar with modes of performative reading, it would have been easy for Thornton, himself a keenly pious layman, with what John Thompson has called a "voracious appetite for religious and moral reading,"[60] to apply the strategy of devotional performance to his appreciation of the didactic messages in his romance texts. The narrative space conjured up by these romances acquires a distinctly allegorical dimension, which merges secular and symbolic space. In the allegorical narrative geography, the wilderness adjacent, or leading, to the Holy Land, was virtually equated to the place in which the virtuous Christian searches for—and succeeds to—the heavenly Jerusalem.

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[60] John J. Thompson, "Another Look at the Religious Texts in Lincoln, Cathedral Library, MS 91," in *Late Medieval Religious Texts and Their Transmission: Essays in Honour of A. I. Doyle* (Woodbridge, 1994), pp. 169–87 (p. 177).