25 Handmaid (*Ancilla*)

A handmaid is found to be double, evil and good. The evil in fact is triple: The first looking down through pride of heart; another speaking evil through malice of the mouth; the third sleeping through negligence of work.

¶ The first handmaid is Agar, about whom “Sarah said to Abram,” Gen. 16[:5], “I gave my handmaid into your bosom, and she perceiving herself to be with child, despises me.” This handmaid signifies the soul which being proud for a knowledge of virtues or graces, belittles others, like the Pharisee, Luke 12[:38]. Therefore, she was sent away from the society of the true Abraham, Gen. 21[:10]: “Cast out this bondwoman, for he shall not be heir.” As everybody knows Eve had two lords, her husband and God. Through her pride she made one to be thrown out of paradise and the other to be hung on the cross. Concerning such handmaids spoke Job 19[:15]: “My maidservants have counted me a stranger.”

¶ The second is Sara, daughter of Raguel, about whom Tob. 3[:7]: “Sara daughter of Raguel received a reproach from one of her father’s servant maids.” This signifies the slanderous tongue. This is the handmaid who summoned Peter to deny Christ, John 18[:17]. This one is worse than a hog,[[1]](#endnote-1) for the sow puts her mouth in a stinking place, just like one spreading an odor, but the evil tongue turns a good odor into a stinking one by detracting, lying, James 3, as if throughout the whole.

Concerning the third handmaid sleeping, it is said in 3 Kings 3[:20]: “She took my child from my side, while I your handmaid was asleep.” This handmaid signifies the reason against the custody of the soul which is designated in [2] Kings 4[:5], where the handmaid “Isboseth the doorkeeper of the house, who was cleansing wheat, was fallen asleep,” that is, reason which ought to keep the good from evil, to discern true from false, to select the good, to turn away evil. This one slept when she did nothing, and then the enemies entered, that is, sins with a consenting will and killed the spirit, Rom. 6[:23]: “For the wages of sin is death.”

On the contrary, the good handmaiden is found in three forms: One is humble in heart; another is wise in the mouth; the third is diligent in work.

The first is Esther, who is interpreted as hidden, signified the humble soul, Esth. 14[:16]: “You know, Lord, that I abominate the sign of my pride and glory.” It is very commendable when some great person is humble, but blameworthy when a poor man is proud, which certainly happens when a man considers himself and his state alone.

¶ The example of Walter the Foolish who on the feast of Christmas had put on new clothing, as if not recognizing himself, he sought himself, inquiring everywhere, Where is Walter? Such a handmaiden cannot be supported when she was “heir to her mistress,” Prov. 30[:23].

The second handmaiden is Abigail, who is interpreted the exaltation of my father, and signifies the learned tongue, 1 Kings 25[:24]: “Let your handmaid speak, I beseech you, in your ears.” And it follows there how she placated David and was made his wife. This is like the wise one at the end. Wherefore the verse:

¶ Whatever you do, meditate first on the end of the work.[[2]](#endnote-2)

¶ The third handmaiden is Judith who designates strength in work. She conquered Holofernes and liberated her people, Judith 11[:14]: “I thy handmaid worship God” occupied in the service of another. It is not thus easily transferred to another, just as being at ease and idle. Wherefore, Gregory,[[3]](#endnote-3) and Jerome in an *Epistola*,[[4]](#endnote-4) always do something good lest the devil find you idle, Judith 13[:20]: “The Lord has not suffered me his handmaid to be defiled.” God will judge you there. Therefore, look to the tree where it would fall before it falls,[[5]](#endnote-5) because afterwards “The Lord” will permit your “handmaid” to be defiled.

¶ [31] Open, see below, [c. 31: To Open (*Aperire*)].[[6]](#endnote-6)

1. Cf. *Bestiary: Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford M.S. 764* trans. Richard Barber (Woodbridge: Boyudell Press, 1999), (p. 84): The sow (‘sus’ in Latin) is so called because it ploughs up (subigat) its food; that is, it roots for food in the earth it has disturbed. The pig (porcus) is a filthy beast (spurcus); it sucks up filth, wallows in mud, and smears itself with slime. Horace calls the sow ‘the lover of mud’. Sows signify sinners, the unclean and hereticsw: it is prescribed in Jewish law that the flesh of beasts with cloven hooves which do not chew the cud shall not be eaten by the faithful. ... [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi*, Ende # 240, ed. Samuel Singer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1996), p. 471: Quicquid agas, operis semper finem mediteris. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gregory, *Moralia* 16.53.66 (PL 75:1152): Omnis enim qui nec bona nec mala operatur, nudus est et otiosus; qui autem mala agit, nudus incedit, quia sine velamine boni operis per iter pravitatis [Col.1152C] pergit. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jerome, *Epistola* 125.11 (PL 22.1078): Facito aliquid operis, ut te semper diabolus inveniat occupatum.

   Cf. Augustine, *Sermo* 17 (PL 40.1264): omnem otiositatem expellite, semper aliquid boni facite. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo* 85 (PL 183.702): Videat quo casura sit antequam cadat; quia postquam ceciderit, non adjiciet ut resurgat, sed nec ut se vertat. Quo vero casura sit arbor, si scire volueris, ramos ejus attende. Unde major est copia ramorum et ponderosior, inde casuram ne dubites, si tamen fuerit tunc excisa. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Aperire* is the next chapter in the earlier version of Higden’s *Distinctiones*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)