Faithful Handmaids to Scripture: Hermeneutics, Translation, and Devotional Practice in Late Medieval English Religious Writing

Barbara G. Harding
University of Colorado at Boulder, hardingb@colorado.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/engl_gradetds

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, Medieval Studies Commons, and the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Harding, Barbara G., "Faithful Handmaids to Scripture: Hermeneutics, Translation, and Devotional Practice in Late Medieval English Religious Writing" (2013). English Graduate Theses & Dissertations. 34.
https://scholar.colorado.edu/engl_gradetds/34

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by English at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Graduate Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
FAITHFUL HANDMAIDS TO SCRIPTURE:
HERMENEUTICS, TRANSLATION, AND DEVOTIONAL PRACTICE
IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH RELIGIOUS WRITING

by

B. G. HARDING

B.A., University of Colorado at Boulder, 1992
M.A., University of Colorado at Boulder, 1998

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English

2013
This thesis entitled:

Faithful Handmaids to Scripture: Hermeneutics, Translation, and Devotional Practice in Late Medieval English Religious Writing
written by B. G. Harding
has been approved for the Department of English

_________________________________________________
Dr. Katherine Eggert, Committee Chair

__________________________________________________
Dr. William Kuskin, Committee Co-chair

Date______________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Abstract

Harding, B. G. (Ph.D., English)

Faithful Handmaids to Scripture: Hermeneutics, Translation, and Devotional Practice in Late Medieval English Religious Writing

Thesis directed by Associated Professor Katherine Eggert and Associate Professor William Kuskin

This dissertation studies four works within the context of the contested rise of vernacular theology in late medieval England: the anonymous Marian debate lyric Dispute between Mary and the Cross; the Life of St. Margaret by the Augustinian friar Osbern Bokenham; and two plays from the Nativity group in the Chester cycle plays, the Shepherds play and the Purification of the Virgin Mary play. These texts are united in their intention to make religious material in the vernacular available to a wider audience. Reliant as they are on Latinate literary and cultural traditions, these works participate in the process by which academic and ecclesiastical topics and concerns percolate into the vernacular cultural imagination. But, as this dissertation contends, these orthodox works also articulate distinctive theological ideas and notions of clerical reform that arise in the “theological encounters” between figures of the laity and the clerical elite dramatized within these texts. These generically diverse texts share three key premises. First, they express a fundamental conviction in the possibilities for lay participation in the economy of
salvation. Second, they demonstrate that doctrinal understanding alone is not enough; rather, they suggest that theology must be performed in order to be understood. Finally, as transmitters of vernacular theology, these texts exhibit a self-reflexive concern with their own rhetorical and interpretive performances. This dissertation, thus, is concerned with how these four vernacular works promote themselves as theologically legitimate and spiritually efficacious—as “faithful handmaids” to Scripture. In their foregrounding of issues related to the politics of vernacularity, these texts engage with and intervene in the late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century debates surrounding the translation of Scripture and religious matter into the vernacular. These include questions about lay access and lay self-determination; concerns over interpretive privilege (who could interpret and who could best interpret); and controversies over the resourcefulness and limitations of the vernacular as a tool for salvation. In its attention to four non-canonical texts, this dissertation participates in the current rethinking of vernacular religious writing in late medieval England.
Acknowledgments

A project of this magnitude and duration accrues many debts. First, I owe many thanks to my teachers, whose passion for medieval literature was irrepressible and contagious, beginning with Ed Nolan who introduced me to Chaucer and Middle English. Doug Burger served as my guide on my journey all the way from undergraduate through the Ph.D. process. It was my good fortune and privilege to study medieval literature with Elizabeth Robertson and Bruce Holsinger. My mentor and friend Beth continues to be an inspiration; I am grateful especially for her virtual presence and very real encouragement in our Skype sessions this past year. She read and made perceptive comments on each of my chapters. Many thanks go to Bruce in whose graduate seminar, “Literature of Dissent,” my dissertation project had its roots. His encouragement and critical engagement with my ideas helped develop this project in its early stages.

I am deeply grateful to my advisor Katherine Eggert for her patient guidance and steady influence throughout the writing phase of my doctorate. Without her endless encouragement and support, I would not have completed this dissertation. Her meticulous reading and astute comments were invaluable throughout this process.

I am grateful to William Kuskin for his insightful comments, his support, and our stimulating discussions. I also wish to express my gratitude to my committee members Katie
Little, Anne Lester, and Doug Burger for their invaluable ideas, insights, and suggestions. My dissertation is the better for their participation.

My dissertation research was supported through the generous funding of the English Department; in particular, I am grateful for the Elizabeth Cogwill Wiegers Fellowship which allowed me to pursue my academic study. Thanks also to the wonderful office staff in the English Department. Cynthia Ocken was a wealth of information and always greeted me with a smile.

My greatest debts are to my family and friends for their love, support, and extreme generosity. Fellow medievalist Dawn Colley, running and virtual writing partner, kept me company on the trails and at my desk. Teresa Nugent, colleague, academic coach, running partner, and most importantly valued friend: I will be forever in her debt for her time, dedication, and boundless support. I can only imagine the joy my achievement would have given my mother, Dotty Harding, who gave me the great gift of an abiding love for life. Finally, to my husband, Doug Brandmier (and our grey tabby Cosmo, of course), I express my deepest gratitude for being my touchstone.
Table of Contents

Chapter

Introduction: Hermeneutics, Translation and Devotional Practice 1

I. “Ladi! Loue Doþ þe to Alegge!”: Devotional, Hermeneutical, and Literary Practice in *The Disputation Between Mary And The Cross* 21

II. “Thorgh a Cristal Bryht and Pure”: Osbern Bokenham’s *Life of St. Margaret* as Textual Reliquary 73

III. “Slant Translation” and the Politics of the Vernacular in the Chester Cycle’s *Shepherds Play* 123

IV. “Churching” the Text: Bodily, Spiritual, and Scriptural Integrity in the Chester *Purification of the Virgin Mary* Play 166

Conclusion: In Dialogue 219

Bibliography 225
Introduction

Hermeneutics, Translation, and Devotional Practice

This dissertation studies four works within the context of the contested rise of vernacular theology in late medieval England: the anonymous Marian debate lyric *Dispute between Mary and the Cross*, the *Life of St. Margaret* by the Augustinian friar Osbern Bokenham, and two plays from the Nativity group in the Chester cycle plays, the *Shepherds* play and the *Purification of the Virgin Mary* play. Authored by orthodox clerics, these theological works are united in their intention to make religious material in the vernacular available to a wider audience. Reliant as they are on Latinate literary and cultural traditions, these works participate in the process by which academic and ecclesiastical topics and concerns percolate into the vernacular cultural imagination. But, as I contend, these orthodox works also articulate distinctive theological ideas and notions of clerical reform that arise in the “theological encounters” between figures of the laity and the clerical elite dramatized within these texts.

These generically diverse texts share three key premises. First, they express a fundamental conviction in the possibilities for lay participation in the economy of salvation. Second, the texts offer evidence of a hermeneutic that relies less on an intellectual (or academic) mode of understanding than one predicated along experiential lines and grounded in devotional practice. These texts demonstrate that doctrinal understanding alone is not enough; rather, they suggest that theology must be performed in order to be understood. Finally, as transmitters of
vernacular theology, these texts exhibit a self-reflexive concern with their own rhetorical and interpretive performances. This dissertation, thus, is concerned with how these four vernacular works promote themselves as theologically legitimate and spiritually efficacious—as “faithful handmaids” to Scripture.

As a number of scholars have observed, until very recently, the types of genres represented in this study have been largely absent from scholarship that focuses on the role vernacular theology plays in the reappraisal of fifteenth-century writing. This dissertation participates in the effort to correct this omission and recognize the significant part that these genres played in the emergence of vernacular theology during this period. Written during a period of religious turmoil, these works straddle both sides of what Nicholas Watson has termed the “linchpin of a broader attempt to limit religious discussion and writing in the vernacular,” the promulgation of Archbishop Arundel’s Constitutions in 1409. Arundel’s Constitutions sought systematically to stem the rise of the Lollard heresy. The debate over Bible translation, which long predated the Lollard movement and its call for Scripture in the vernacular, became highly charged in the years following the condemnations of Wyclif and the spread of Lollardy. Although these questions had already come to the fore prior to Lollardy, they were quickly swept up within that movement, politicizing the decision to write in English.

Vernacular theological works, by virtue of their function as transmitters of Latinate clerical knowledge in its various forms—spiritual guidance, theological instruction, catechetical aid, or incitement to devotion and/or reform of self—to a broader range of spiritual practitioners, are necessarily caught up in the politics of the period. As Nicole Rice reminds us, “the question of how to define points of contact between lay and clerical knowledge in an expansively orthodox vein was a critical one for teaching texts of the period, one that became increasingly
urgent as the Wycliffite movement coalesced.” In their foregrounding of issues related to the politics of vernacularity, these texts engage with and intervene in the late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century debates surrounding the translation of Scripture and religious matter into the vernacular. Academic and ecclesiastical concerns about the status of the vernacular and the implications for using it centered on discussions not only about the appropriateness of the vernacular as a vehicle for the abstract conceptions of divine truth, but also about the capacity for understanding the complexities of God’s Word in the audiences for whom these vernacular works were intended. In addition, questions about interpretive privilege—who could interpret and who could best interpret—as well as concerns about the legitimacy of hermeneutical models emerged with the dissemination of the influential theologian John Wyclif’s ideas about biblical exegesis into the larger public realm. These texts thus self-consciously explore the resourcefulness as well as the limits of the vernacular as a tool for salvation.

“Vernacular Theology” and the Critical Conversation

Nicholas Watson’s influential thinking about the incipient production of a “vernacular theology,” developed in a series of essays in the 1990s, has important implications for the way I view the intersection of lay piety and devotional practice, on the one hand, and vernacular literary production, on the other, in my chosen texts. In his essay “Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England,” Watson contends that the religious texts he defines as “vernacular theology” not only are infused with Latinate institutional thinking, but also “generate their own systems” of thought. Watson argues that the theme of universal salvation he discerns in the works of authors including William Langland and Julian of Norwich “somehow belongs to the vernacular in late medieval England.” Watson
elaborates an idea of the vernacular whose commonality and nonhierarchic nature embody the notion of universality that emerges in these works. He argues that “the universality of divine forgiveness” offered by these writers may be “in part a theological analogue of the universality which was coming to be attributed to vernacular language itself.” This radical notion suggests that writing in the vernacular, with its more inherently inclusive nature, causes these writers to countenance and ultimately to disseminate alternative doctrinal truths. It is precisely this inherently reforming aspect of the vernacular that generates an ecclesiastical anxiety about the theological byproducts of these authors’ vernacular literary projects. I take Watson’s claim as my starting point. Moving beyond Watson’s conception of the vernacular language itself as the generator of vernacular doctrine, this study looks to the theological encounters between clerical and lay figures, dramatized within these texts, as the site in which new theologies emerge.

First coined by A. I. Doyle in 1953, the term “vernacular theology” was revived in Bernard McGinn’s 1990s accounts of contemplative European writing, which he particularly associated with the theological writing of the medieval mystics. Shortly thereafter, Watson’s adoption of the term to describe a particular moment in the narrative of late medieval English religious writing in his seminal essay “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,” published in 1995, confirmed its reentry into literary critical scholarship. “Vernacular theology” has been described as a generic “catchall”; the theologies generated by the texts “diffuse and ambiguous”; and the writings “experimental” in nature. Some scholars find a particular freedom in the capaciousness of the phrase, allowing for the comparison of a number of unlike texts, by virtue of the fact that they are, in Watson’s words, “connected, part of a single field or arena of discourse” because “writing about religion in the vernacular is a political act.”
Still others argue that one must proceed with caution when deploying the collocation lest one slip into an “essentialism” which “represents culture, personal experience and authenticity as a reflex of linguistic vernacularity.”\textsuperscript{13} Whether one agrees with Watson’s recent reassessment of the term’s continued viability, it has become part of the current critical conversation in English literary criticism and remains a paradigm with which one must contend.\textsuperscript{14} I, for one, believe the term is useful for the ballast it continues to provide vernacular theological writing that might otherwise be considered both “apolitical” and “non-intellectual,” and hence not relevant to the ongoing critical conversations, an issue Watson sought to redress at the time in which he was writing. To that end, I will be using the term specifically to consider the ways in which the four generically diverse texts in this study contribute to the developing notion of “vernacular theology” or, perhaps more to the point, “vernacular theologies.”

Watson concludes in “Censorship” that the production of vernacular religious texts sharply declined in the years following the 1409 Constitutions promulgated by Archbishop Thomas Arundel. Further, he argues that the Constitutions made a dramatic impact on the “scope and originality” of vernacular theological works compared with those of the late fourteenth-century literary innovators (the Pearl poet, William Langland, Julian of Norwich, and Richard Rolle, for example).\textsuperscript{15} While scholars remain divided over the degree to which the Constitutions affected literary output, modifications to Watson’s view have taken a number of paths. The first focuses on academic writings pertaining to the debates over Bible translation into the vernacular in the latter part of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Fiona Somerset addresses the charge of “exclusionary censorship” in her reconsideration of the writings of Richard Ullerston, one of the participants in the Oxford translation debates of 1401–c.1407, alongside Arundel’s Constitutions.\textsuperscript{16} Somerset concludes that “Arundel is far less
interested in controlling lay access to clerical knowledge than in seeking better control within his authoritative group.”

Vincent Gillespie looks to Ullerston’s writing as evidence of an undercurrent at Oxford that remained engaged with the issues of vernacular and institutional reform even after 1409. In his research on Henry Chichele, successor to Archbishop Arundel in 1414, Gillespie contends that “in the end John Wyclif had more impact on the language and attitudes of the English Church in the fifteenth century than [did] his arch-enemy Thomas Arundel.” In a recent essay on “vernacular theology,” Gillespie observes that much work remains to be done on the “socio-political tension between continued clerical agency and growing lay self-determination” in the continued mapping of the field of vernacular theology.

This dissertation, in part, answers that call in its exploration of religious writing by orthodox clerics whose works reveal a self-conscious awareness of their identity as vernacular theology. However, instead of examining theological treatises, catechetical manuals, or spiritual guides, this dissertation focuses on literary devotional works and cycle drama that dramatize fictive interactions between the laity and clergy. These works offer an imaginative forum in which to explore this complicated dynamic.

Another scholarly direction focuses on religious works originally excluded from Watson’s purview. Although he allows that “in principle, the term ‘vernacular theology’ covers a very wide range of texts, from the catechetical to the speculative, and from the most scrupulously orthodox Passion meditation to the most outspoken Lollard polemic,” Watson’s argument depends on the exclusion of several generic categories, including Lollard texts (his interest lies in tracing the effects of the legislation against Lollardy on “mainstream religious texts: devotional, pastoral, and ‘mystical’ writing”); sermons and the drama (he focuses on texts for private reading, not public performance); “most narrative texts, especially saints’ lives”
(though he does include lives of Christ which he terms a special case); anonymous didactic works; and “any proper consideration of the role of French in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English culture.” In this vein of scholarship, Kantik Ghosh, for example, situates the Lollard heresy against the complex discursive background of the academic institution, including the writings of Wyclif and those who would engage with him decades after Wyclif’s death. His consideration of the Lollard sermon cycle, which reveals a vernacular theology “in development and action,” reflects an approach that seeks out sermons and other Lollard writings—Dives and Pauper or the Lanterne of Light, for example—to demonstrate a vital vernacular theology.

James Simpson’s recent book Reform and Cultural Revolution documents the “profusion” of saints’ lives written in the fifteenth century. His discussion of the sophisticated work these devotional texts perform argues against the “imputation of naïveté” that such devotional works often elicit. Simpson’s research suggests that saints’ lives must be taken into consideration in order to properly gauge the cultural context of vernacular theological production in the fifteenth century. In a reflection on Watson’s “Censorship” essay, Katherine C. Little also points to hagiography as an area of textual production that escaped notice under the Constitutions. Further, she argues that the genre was particularly well-suited to the new landscape: “it could respond well to a post-Lollard world, not only the new requirements of orthodoxy but some of the challenges to traditional lay instruction raised by the Wycliffites themselves.” As Little suggests, saints’ lives offer a model of exemplarity that fit in well with Wycliffite pedagogical concerns. In her recent focus on Trinitarian doctrine in fifteenth-century saints’ lives, including John Capgrave’s Life of St. Katherine and several lives by Osbern Bokenham, Karen Winstead concludes that while such theological instruction serves as evidence that the Constitutions did not have a lasting influence on Middle English religious writing during
this period, the authors’ varying treatments point, “paradoxically and perversely,” to “an unanticipated, long-range influence.”

My reading of Bokenham’s *Life of St. Margaret* as a considered response, in part, to the Wycliffite movement’s antipathy to the cult of saints’ worship, and a reclamation of the genre as exemplifying a poetics of *virtus*, deemed worthy reading for lay and non-lay alike, adds to this growing area of scholarship.

Saints’ lives suffer a double exclusion in Watson’s stated rationale for his primary focus on “original” rather than translated works. However, as the scholarship of Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Vincent Gillespie, and Jennifer Brown makes clear, translated works are just as significant as “original” work in the reassessment of vernacular religious writing in this period. Continental devotional and religious writing, “sources of both theological freedom and of theological danger,” promulgated radical theologies and practices as they entered into the English vernacular.

Kerby-Fulton’s research on censorship and tolerance of revelatory writing reveals this “influx of brilliant, adventurous Continental works” and makes the case for their influence on vernacular religious writing and devotional practice in late medieval England. A case in point is the fifteenth-century Middle English translation of Maguerite Porete’s *Mirouer des simples ames* (c. 1296–1306) which Kerby-Fulton reads alongside Julian of Norwich’s writing. Not least, these works engendered debate about the role of women in the church “on the basis of revelatory authority.”

Likewise, Brown explores the impact of the Middle English vernacular translations of three lives of beguine saints, including that of Marie d’Oignies, one of the texts that contributed to Margery Kempe’s devotional education.

Like saints’ lives, vernacular drama flourished during the fifteenth century, also exempt from legislation under the Constitutions. For Kate Crassons, vernacular drama not only “challenges Watson’s view of fifteenth-century theological writing as the fourteenth century’s
‘derivative successor’” but also provides a means to explore “religious issues in a non-academic mode that distinctively understands theology as a lived practice and experience.” 32 Crassons’s latter comment underlines the ways in which I read not only the Chester plays, but each of the works in this dissertation as promoting an experientially-based understanding of theology as integral to doctrinal understanding. I also draw on Sarah Beckwith’s scholarship on the York Corpus Christi plays. She contends that the plays are “sophisticated, textured, complex, and reflexive” and that they demonstrate the implicit links between the theater and the sacramental rituals of the church. 33 One of her main premises is that the plays perform theological work. Similarly, Ruth Nisse explicitly describes fifteenth-century drama as contributing to the reappraisal of English theological writing during this period, drawing attention to the intense engagement of the plays with the politics of interpretation particularly as they relate to the issues of biblical exegesis and Scriptural translation into the vernacular. 34 Taking her cue from scholars, like Somerset, who play down the effect of the Constitutions on non-Lollard and non-academic vernacular religious writing, Nisse conceptualizes medieval drama as an example of “a new style of English theology” that emerges “within the frame of orthodox religious celebration, yet outside the clerical educational institutions that Arundel’s legislation most urgently sought to police.” 35 Because of the very nature of the drama and the liminal space it occupies as Nisse conceives of it, the cycle plays offer a locus in which to explore the contested status of vernacular religious writing in this politically and religiously fraught period. I see my work on the Chester cycle as dovetailing with these scholars’ understanding of the drama as further contributing to the field of vernacular theology in late medieval England.

Arguably all four of my texts fall within Watson’s cordoned-off territory, making for an interesting test case: two plays, a saint’s life, and the anonymous didactic Disputation (typically,
scholars view the poem as a didactic text, although my reading revises that assessment). Additionally, the works I look at are non-canonical texts and, except for the Chester cycle plays, and more recently Bokenham’s Legendys, have garnered little attention. Significantly, they provide evidence of continued vernacular theological production and engagement with the debate over the dissemination of religious writing in English despite Arundel’s Constitutions.

By concentrating on the issue of vernacular theology in relation to incorporated devotional practice, this dissertation also adds to scholarship on the place of affective piety in late medieval culture. This dissertation develops another framework for understanding the link between affective devotion and the laity to argue that these texts reclaim the affective mode as an integral and experiential means to knowledge. The theologies of the text suggest that an intellectual understanding of doctrine alone is not enough. My chapter on the Disputation between Mary and the Cross draws upon Sarah MacNamer’s work on affective meditation and the invention of medieval compassion. McNamer proposes a new narrative for the rise of affective piety in the late Middle Ages, naming women as agents in the co-creation of vernacular theological texts.36 Bokenham’s dramatized representation of the commissioning of a life of Mary Magdalene by Isabel Bourchier, the Countess of Eu, memorialized within the Magdalene “Prolocutory” provides further “real-life” evidence of the co-creative relationship between the clergy and the laity.37 But to the degree that lay intervention occurs in each of these texts, the clerical authors of these vernacular theologies represent a discursive parallel to the relationship McNamer traces between male clerical authors and aristocratic and religious women.

The chronological ordering of the works in this dissertation allows for engaging with and complicating the historical narrative of vernacular religious writing in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They offer an alternative means by which to investigate a similar set of
issues pertaining to vernacularity in religious texts that both precede and come after the enactment of Arundel’s Constitutions. With their interest in issues related to the writing of religious material in the vernacular, the texts offer another means of eavesdropping on the cultural conversations that arguably had been forced underground.\(^3\) The anonymous Marian debate lyric *Disputation between Mary and the Cross* survives in the Vernon and Simeon manuscripts (c. 1400); a much-abridged version of the poem is preserved in the fifteenth century Royal manuscript.\(^4\) The Augustinian friar Osbern Bokenham begins his translation of the *Life of St. Margaret*, the first in a collection of thirteen lives of female saints and virgin martyrs commonly referred to as the *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, in 1443.\(^5\) The *Record of Early English Drama* comprising the archives for the Chester cycle plays yield a performance history that spans more than one hundred fifty years. The first references to the ongoing and historical nature of the Chester cycle play occur in a number of fifteenth-century guild documents. A Latin memorandum dated 20 April 1422 preserves the first recorded mention of the pageant plays, identified as the “Play of the Corpus Christi” at this early date.\(^6\) The last sighting of the Chester Corpus Christi plays, performed on Corpus Christi day in a set location, occurs in the Cheshire and Chester Archives in 1491.\(^7\) Scholars speculate that sometime between 1519 and 1531 that wholesale revision and expansion of the cycle took place; during this time, the plays were moved to Whitsun week and performed processionally over the course of three days.\(^8\) The final performance of the Chester Whitsun plays in their entirety took place in 1575.\(^9\) To compound matters, the five extant manuscripts containing the complete Chester cycle of twenty-four plays were copied between 1591 and 1607.\(^10\) Only two manuscripts containing fragments of plays may date from the late fifteenth-century. Finally, the plays as we have them bear evidence of having undergone at least two levels of revision. This complicated manuscript history serves as
evidence that the interest in the politics of vernacularity, particularly in the production of vernacular theological works proved resonant for clerical authors well into the sixteenth century.

Chapter Descriptions

The opening chapter of *Faithful Handmaids*, “‘Ladi, loue do} þe to alegge’: Devotional, Hermeneutical, and Vernacular Literary Practice in *The Disputation between Mary and the Cross,*” focuses on the politics of interpretation in a late fourteenth-century Marian debate lyric. In this poem, Christ’s suffering body hangs suspended on the Cross while the two disputants, the Virgin Mary and the personified Cross, debate the necessity of Christ’s death for humanity’s salvation. In the context of the larger cultural debates about lay access to Scripture and religious matter in the vernacular, Mary’s and the Cross’s dispute may be read as a jurisdictional struggle over interpretive privilege. The poem explores the ethical, soteriological, and literary consequences to the contest over interpretive control. Who determines meaning? Who can and who ought to represent the life and Passion of Christ? These questions would take on greater meaning after the enactment of Arundel’s Constitutions. Although this poem was written just prior to the Constitutions, it engages definitively with issues that would come to the fore in the ensuing decades.

Most scholars read this poem as a doctrinal exercise in which the authoritarian Cross uses the occasion of the Crucifixion to impart redemption doctrine to Mary, and in turn the poem’s audience. However, this view fails to consider the significance of Mary’s perspective as the mother of Christ as well as her graphically affective account, both of which inscribe an emphasis on Christ’s human nature. In contrast, I argue that the poem effects a reappraisal and sanctioning of the affective mode, embodied in the figure of the Virgin Mary, as an experiential means of
understanding doctrine. This reclamation is evidenced as well in the spiritual growth of the Cross from dispassionate figure of stoic support to compassionate legal advocate by the end of the poem. Furthermore, I contend that the poem tempers the Cross’s doctrinal stance that the Crucifixion was not only necessary but sufficient for humanity’s salvation. The poem advances an understanding of the Redemption as a truly participatory model of atonement, founded on both Christ’s Incarnation and death on the Cross, a unification of his human and divine natures. Further, it advocates for the necessity of an additional step to regain “hevene halle,” enjoined upon Cross, reader, and humanity as a whole—the requirement of “Loue,” equated to compassionate action within the poem. Finally, I consider the way that the pedagogy of compassionate action modeled through the figure of Mary serves to authorize the poet’s own vernacular mission: to represent and enact Christ’s dual nature. In its incarnation as both doctrinal vehicle and affective primer, the poem claims to function as a legitimate intervention within the economy of salvation.

Chapter two, “Osbern Bokenham’s Life of St. Margaret as Textual Reliquary: ‘Thorgh a cristal bryht and pure,’” turns to the fifteenth-century collection of thirteen verse lives of female saints and virgin martyrs, commonly known as the Legendys of Hooly Wummen. In the Prologue to the Life of St. Margaret and elsewhere in the collection, Bokenham expresses his multiple anxieties about his vernacular hagiographical undertaking. His literary concerns stem from his professed poetic inadequacy compared with his English literary forebears, Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate, whom he declines to follow. Scholars have read his rejection of the courtly tradition as evidence either of a Bloomian “anxiety of influence” or of Bokenham’s Yorkist political allegiance. I read Bokenham’s rhetorical strategy rather as part of a larger devotional agenda centered on the translation and dissemination of vernacular hagiography, a text-based poetics of
virtus (that arises out of his own devotional practice). Translation practice is devotional practice in the imagined spiritual economy of Bokenham’s Legendys of Hooly Wummen. Represented as a labor-intensive and embodied practice, the work of translation is sanctioned and authorized through the identification Bokenham forges between saint and text, between the physical transfer of the saint’s remains and the discursive transfer of her life, and between pilgrimage and translation itself. Through conflation of saint and text, Bokenham not only succeeds in establishing his text as an extension of the saint’s virtus in order to stir devotion, but also definitively links himself to a tradition of writers who share a similar desire. I trace the ways in which Bokenham’s textual allusions to St. Jerome, Horace, St. Ambrose, and Lydgate (whom he revises) help to further refine his promotion of vernacular hagiography as a poetics of virtus, a poetics he deems more spiritually than rhetorically correct.

The next two chapters turn to consider two plays from the Nativity group in the Chester cycle drama, a genre that escaped the censure and censorship brought about through the enactment of Arundel’s Constitutions. Chapter three, “‘Slant Translation’ and the Politics of the Vernacular in the Chester Cycle’s Shepherds Play,” argues that this play offers a critique of a clerical profession in crisis. The play stages two encounters with liturgical ritual: a proto-Eucharistic banquet fully in the hands of the Shepherd-priests with limited access to lay parishioners like their apprentice, and the collective “expounding” of the Angel’s Latin hymn and the substitution of the Shepherds’ vernacular song. Given the more than one hundred fifty-year performance history of the plays, I situate these encounters within a number of cultural discussions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: the rampant changes taking place within the liturgy, largely resulting from new conceptions about the Eucharist but also coincident with the rise of new musical forms; Lollard and pre-Reformation concerns about priestly mediation and
the clerical monopoly of the spiritual goods of salvation; and, finally, questions about the appropriateness of the vernacular as a vehicle for Holy Writ as well as the attendant issues surrounding lay access to vernacular religious texts.

The vernacular theology embodied forth by this play argues for a salvational model centered on an experience of the divine through access to God’s Word rather than through the sacerdotally mediated Eucharistic rite with its emphasis on viewing Christ’s body in the form of the host. In the substitution of their own vernacular song for the “authorized” Latin hymn, the Shepherds and their previously disenfranchised apprentice initiate a community defined by its use of English as opposed to Latin, not, however, for any inherent quality of the language, but merely by virtue of the access it provides. In its elaboration of the parallels between the theater and the church, the play claims the status of “faithful handmaid” to Scripture for itself, in its translation of biblical events into a public, dramatic idiom, capable of enacting a desire on the part of the audience to amend itself.

Chapter four, “‘Churching’ the Text: Bodily, Spiritual, and Scriptural Integrity in the Chester Purification of the Virgin Mary Play,” brings together two areas of mutual concern to ecclesiastical and civic authorities united by a similar concern for integrity: vernacular theological texts and women’s bodies. I situate this play within the debates over biblical hermeneutics and translation practices carried out between Wyclif and those who would remain in dialogue with his writing and thought decades after his death in 1384. The Purification play reflects fourteenth- and fifteenth-century concerns over the integrity of Holy Scripture in the scene in which Simeon, the holy figure who officiates at Mary’s purification rite and the presentation of Christ, alters Isaiah’s prophecy of the virgin birth by substituting the phrase “a good woman” for the word “virgin.” These concerns ranged from the very material problems
inherent to manuscript culture, such as damage to the codex or scribal error, to more philological concerns, including the accessibility of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew manuscripts as well as the competency of the translator. This initial focus on the problems with language and texts, however, gives way to a more problematic concern with interpreters and translators in Mary’s purification ritual.

_Purification_, like the _Disputation between Mary and the Cross_, juxtaposes two hermeneutical models through two figures in the play representative of the clerical elite and the laity: a skeptical hermeneutics practiced by the priestly Simeon and a “faithful” interpretive model practiced by Mary’s spouse Joseph. The emphasis on integrity and fidelity in the play pertains to both texts and women’s bodies. A rhetoric of defilement permeates both the debates over proper biblical exegesis and the discussions about the “churching” ritual required of women after childbirth. However, as Joseph makes clear through his interpretive intervention into the purification ritual, the problem becomes less about physical purity than spiritual fidelity. Joseph’s offering of “virgin waxe” and his interpellative gloss shift the discursive construction of virginity away from its dependence on the physical integrity of the hymen to a spiritual chasteness. This act not only rewrites the significance of the purification ritual itself, but also has important implications for those who the play argues will make the most faithful interpreters of God’s Word. In its theological dimension, the play aligns itself with Wyclif’s thinking about biblical exegesis: those who live faithfully, according to God’s laws, are granted spiritual insight into Holy Scripture. In terms of its status as a vernacular theology, the play works to validate its own authority as a faithful handmaid to Holy Scripture through its message that what is ultimately of importance is not the amendment of scriptural texts, but rather the “amendment of mankynde” through Scripture.
The title of the dissertation *Faithful Handmaids* derives from John Wyclif’s figural description of the correct relationship that should inhere between divine Scripture and human exegetical commentary in his theological work on the true nature of Scripture, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (1377–78): “Exposition is certainly not Holy Scripture though, but rather her herald or handmaid. She does not refute her Lady, but borrows her Lady’s very own words so that she might then reverently explain and disclose her intentions.” While Wyclif refers specifically in this passage to biblical commentary and exposition, the analogy proves apt for vernacular theological texts written in the aftermath of Wycliffism. These texts produce *theologies* that are handmaids to Scripture in that they help transfer God’s Word into the realm of the human world. Each of these texts, either explicitly or implicitly, holds out the promise of accessibility to scriptural knowledge or portrays itself as a handmaid to scripture as an authorized alternative to mediation and ritual.
1 For specific responses, see below in the “Vernacular Theology and the Critical Conversation” section of this Introduction.

2 Nicholas Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,” Speculum 70 (1995): 824. The Constitutions were drafted in 1407, a mere six years after the passing of the statute that punished heresy with burning, De heretico comburendo, 1401. For a more measured reading of the effect of the Constitutions on vernacular literary production, see Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Books under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 397–401.

3 Kerby-Fulton’s research on the transmission and reception of revelatory theology in late medieval England (1329–1437) complicates this narrative by situating Wycliffite reform within a broader history of dissent, one that not only precedes, but also parallels Wycliffism. See Kerby-Fulton, Books under Suspicion.

4 Nicole Rice, Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 50.


6 Watson, “Visions,” 146.


8 Watson, “Visions,” 146.


14 See the scholarly reassessments by Elizabeth Robertson, Daniel Donoghue, Linda Georgianna, Kate Crassons, C. David Benson, Katherine C. Little, Lynn Staley, James Simpson, and Watson’s response in English Language Notes 44, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 75–138.

15 Watson, “Censorship,” 832.

Somerset, “Professionalizing Translation,” 146–47.


See, for example, the collection of essays that originated in a conference held six hundred years after Arundel’s Constitutions were enacted: *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*, eds. Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2011).

Watson, “Censorship,” 825, 823–24, n. 5.


Little, “‘Bokes Ynowe,’” 112.


Kerby-Fulton, *Books under Suspicion*, 298–301. As Kerby-Fulton notes, the only extant copy of Julian of Norwich’s *Short Text* shares space with the Middle English translation of Porete’s *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, attesting to a linked interest.


Kate Crassons, “Performance Anxiety and Watson’s Vernacular Theology,” *English Language Notes* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 95.


For the argument that the Constitutions foreclosed the possibility for open debate such as had taken place in Oxford, 1401–c.1407, see Watson, “Censorship,” 840 ff.


Records of Early English Drama: Cheshire including Chester, eds. Elizabeth Baldwin, Lawrence M. Clopper, and David Mills (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 47-8.


Chapter One

“Ladi! Loue Do[e to Alegge!”: Devotional, Hermeneutical, and Literary Practice in The Disputation between Mary and the Cross

The Disputation Between Mary and the Cross, a Marian debate lyric surviving in three fifteenth-century manuscripts, dramatizes the interaction between the Virgin Mary and the personified Cross of the Crucifixion as a legal dispute over the necessity and theological meaning of Christ’s Passion. The hermeneutical rendering of Christ’s body on the Cross opens up to vernacular scrutiny the ongoing debate over the representation of Christ in vernacular religious works, a debate that was about to take on greater urgency in the latter part of the fourteenth century into the fifteenth century with the rise of the Lollard movement. The poem engages the jurisdictional question: who determines how Christ will be remembered and represented? Situated within the larger cultural debates about lay access to Scripture, the dispute between Mary and the Cross may be read as a jurisdictional struggle over interpretive privilege. The poem, therefore, dramatizes the potential ethical, soteriological, and literary ramifications that result from the exegetical functions Mary and the Cross perform.

Most scholars have understood the poem as a didactic vehicle in which the authoritarian figure of the Cross imparts Redemption doctrine to Mary, represented as limited in her knowledge of the soteriological significance of the Crucifixion. If we recognize the intellectual Cross and the doctrinally naïve Mary as analogues of clerical and lay figures, this model accords
well with the traditional image of the clergy as the dispensers of religious knowledge. As a vernacular theological work, then, the poem participates in the dissemination of doctrinal and institutional knowledge to a broader audience. However, as I will argue, and as the anonymously authored *Disputation* aptly demonstrates, the interchanges between Mary and the Cross dramatize the permeable boundary of exchange between their two positions in terms of language, doctrine, and rhetorical strategies. Thus, the poem re-imagines a different model of lay-clergial relations in which the flow of ideas and cultural transfers that take place between the two domains operate in both directions. Furthermore, the poem articulates a theory of vernacular theology as arising out of the dialogic encounter between Mary and the Cross.

Though scholars acknowledge the chiastic form of the poem, mirrored in the change that occurs in Mary from the opening lines to the ritualized kiss of peace at the end—from her limited, earthbound perspective as the mother of Christ to her position as the mother of all humankind—they have failed thus far to consider the transformation the Cross itself undergoes, or the implications of that change. In this chapter, I contend that the Cross moves from a position of stoic passivity in which he is “loked bi the lawe” to the role of compassionate legal advocate for Christ, a testament to his interaction with Mary. The poem argues through Mary’s continued resistance to the Cross’s doctrinal explanations that without the ability to imaginatively experience Christ’s suffering, one cannot fully grasp the meaning and significance of Christ’s redemptive act. Mary’s testimony, based on her perspective as the mother of Christ, serves to remind the Cross, and thereby the audience, that spiritually abstract Church teachings have an experiential and emotional basis. The interchanges between Mary and the Cross—which result in the spiritual growth of the Cross every bit as much as the intellectual development of Mary—reveal that the poem serves as an emotional primer as much as a doctrinal vehicle.
As I demonstrate in this chapter, the legal bearing of the poem is significant to my argument for a number of interrelated reasons. First, that poets and theologians found legal analogies a fruitful means for conveying difficult doctrinal matter and the mysteries of the faith is a matter of literary record. The Disputation poet draws upon a vigorous vernacular literary tradition in its exploration of redemption doctrine through a juridical frame. For example, in arguably one of the most potent images in the poem, the Cross draws upon the Middle English Charter of Christ poems in its revisioning of Christ’s suffering body as a legal “pardoun” (179), whose rubricated letters are inscribed with the blood from Christ’s own wounds. The poem’s legal conceit, however, exceeds the Cross’s didactic explanations of redemption doctrine to frame the entirety of the dialogue between Mary and the Cross as taking place within a juridical setting. Thus, the Disputation poet treats the judgment by Pontius Pilate and Christ’s sentencing as an injustice in and of itself, a legal and theological crux lacking resolution and a doctrinal matter requiring further arbitration. Second, in elaborating the legal conceit, the poet also legitimates the interrelated focus of the poem, the pedagogy of compassionate action it models through the figure of Mary. Mary’s counterpleas against the institutional figure of the dispassionate Cross, with its dependence on legal documents and procedure, posits the development of an “alternative juridical domain,” possessing equal importance and value. The poem advances an understanding of salvation as a truly participatory model of atonement, one that, while depending on the sacrifice Christ suffered on the Cross, exacts an additional step to regain “heuene halle,” enjoined upon the Cross, reader, and humanity as a whole—the requirement of “Loue,” equated to compassionate action within the poem. Finally, the judicial conceit serves to ground the vernacular poetic venture, lending a legitimating forensic force to the poet’s claim that the poem is a pedagogical and performative tool for salvation. The narrator
closes the poem with an image of Christ as a warrior-knight wearing the armor of human nature, thus linking the oppositional doctrinal stances of Mary and the Cross at the poem’s outset. In so doing, he inserts himself into the lineage of poets and theologians who understood the Redemption through an elaborate legal conceit, a conception that posits devotional textual production as a type of lawful restitution in its own right.

Judicial Framing: Mary as Advocate

Like the Disputation, the Anglo-Norman sister-poem, “Coment Nostre Dame e la Croiz,” thought to derive from the same Latin source poem as the Vernon, Simeon, and Royal Middle English versions of Disputation, inscribes a similar juridical cast to the Cross and Mary’s exchange. Though the legal aspect of the Disputation poem has received little attention, Peter Yeager alludes to the legal environment and Mary’s role as legal counsel in his description of the as yet unedited Anglo-Norman poem. Commenting on the heightened dramatic interactions compared to the Latin source poem, he observes that Mary “evokes the impression that the dispute is taking place in a law court when she excuses her lack of success in the debate because of her lack of skill in legal pleading and claims that had she been more knowledgeable she would have won.”

While Mary, in the Middle English poem, nowhere explicitly refers to herself as an actual arbiter in a court of law or to her skill in legal pleading, there are compelling reasons for reading the poem as an example of a “vernacular legality.” Beginning with Mary’s opening speech in which she testifies to her son’s innocence and ending with the disputants’ legal “acorde” (486), the poem is replete with the language of jurisprudence. Further contributing to the legal atmosphere of the poem, the Cross introduces two legal documents into the poem: the metaphor of the crucified body of Christ as a charter of “Pardoun”; and the “pleynyng” (465), or
bill of complaint, that the Cross states he will put up in Parliament at the poem’s conclusion. Not least, after the Cross has spoken for the final time, a narratorial voice pronounces the legal “acorde” that concludes the dispute with the traditional kiss of peace: “þe queen a-cordet wiþ þe cros / . . . / þe queen ȝaf the Cros a cos” (478, 480).

Prior to the writings of Anselm of Canterbury, as Rachel Fulton has observed, the image of Mary beneath the cross in early medieval devotional texts was largely a figure of Stoicism: the Virgin was “an impassive, comparatively distant figure, who might have wept at the foot of the Cross, but did not; a queen susceptible to petition but herself (apparently) inexperienced in pain; a refuge for sinners but herself beyond suffering.” Anselm ushered in an affective transformation with a focus directed primarily to Mary’s grief beneath the Cross. This transformation spoke not only to “changes in the representation of emotion” but also to “changes in the normative response to such representations—from indifference, revulsion, or disgust, as it were, to awe, pity, and compassion.” In the late thirteenth-century Marian laments and later manifestations, the amplification of the Virgin’s first-person voice came to the fore in a display of inconsolable grief. The Virgin of the Disputation poem represents yet another development in the planctus Mariae tradition in the profound sense of injustice Mary articulates against the Cross, commingled with her grief.

While most Marian laments cast Mary only in the part of sorrowing mother, a number of poems, like Disputation, expand the metaphor of Mary as humankind’s “advocate” into a poetic conceit, thereby literalizing the intercessory capacity Mary plays on behalf of humankind. For example, Chaucer’s short poem “An ABC,” an adaptation of a Marian prayer in Guillaume de Deguileville’s Anglo-Norman La pelerinaie de la vie humaine, reveals a similarly legalistic construction of the redemptive force associated with Christ’s “greevous penaunce” and Mary’s
“sorwe” at the foot of the cross. The speaker of the poem addresses Mary, “Almighty and al merciable queene,” in an alphabetical series of pleas to intercede on his behalf with God, the Father. The speaker explicitly addresses Mary at one point as his “advocat,” with both of its forces in play, as both intercessor and as professional pleader in the courts of law. In the “V” stanza of the poem which begins, “Virgine, that art so noble of apparaile,” Chaucer drives home the idea of Mary as a judicial figure of mercy against the prosecuting devil who made to “convict” him of his sinful behavior in an earlier stanza: “Ladi, unto that court thou me ajourne / That cleped is thi bench, O freshe flour, / Ther as that merci evere shal sojourne” (158-60). Similarly, the fourteenth-century Middle English lyric “Quia Amore Langueo” casts Mary in the role of advocate with the power to void humankind’s sins: “I longe for loue of man my brother, / I am hys vokete to voyde hys vyce; / I am hys moder” (9-11). This position, however, quickly gives way to a dizzying array of social roles. Mary appeals to the human race, whom she conceives of relationally as unrequited lover, neighbor, “brother,” “hosprynge,” and in the final stanza, both “sone” and potential husband to her “wyfe.”

Though these poets draw on the legal language and imagery that legalistic thinking about the redemption engendered, neither develops the motif as more than a thematic device. The Disputation poet, on the other hand, elaborates the conceit in such a way as to create a legal context through which to approach the doctrinal questions about the necessity and meaning of the Crucifixion to humanity’s salvation. Likewise, the motif serves to legitimate the alternative juridical domain being posited through Mary as outspoken yet compassionate intercessor on Christ’s behalf.

The words Mary uses to describe the legal actions taken against her son are part of a sustained argument that create the impression that the dispute takes place within a legal context.
In her opening speech, Mary charges the Cross with the illegal seizure, sentencing, and punishment of Christ; she castigates the Cross for the wrongful proceedings which have resulted in Christ’s being sentenced to death by crucifixion as if he were a common thief. Challenging the “Iugement” which has sentenced Jesus to death by crucifixion, Mary claims that the real crime is the corruption of justice:

\[ \text{þorúþ ìugement þou art en-ìoynet} \]

To bere fools ful of sinne.

Mi sone from þe schulde beon ensoynet,

And neuere his blod vppon þe rinne. (36-9)

The word “en-ìoynet” bears the sense of the legal injunction imposed on the Cross to bear wrongdoers as well as the sense of the Cross and the guilty party being joined together literally in the execution of punishment. In the shorter Royal *Dispute* poem, the variant “soyned” stands in for the rhyme word “ensoyet” found in the Simeon and Vernon poems: “ȝit scholde my sone fro þee be soyned” (59). Derived from the legal term “soignen” or “essoin,” to be “essoined,” according to one definition, was to be officially excused from making an appearance in court. The word also denotes absolution, in both its legal and ecclesiastical senses: to be acquitted of a criminal charge or absolved of sin. Mary’s legal terminology reveals the deeply entwined nature of English law and the doctrinal rendering of Redemption. Puns on words linking Christ’s trial and punishment at the hands of Pontius Pilate with the metaphysical trial that awaits the Christian penitent on Judgment Day permeate the poem.

The Cross’s responses to Mary’s allegations continue to foster the impression of the juridical aspect of their interaction. Though the Cross’s rhetoric is primarily that of the institutional Church, the opening line in its second speech—“Ladi!, loye do þe to alegge!”
(140)—explicitly speaks to the charges Mary brings forward in their legal sense, “to cite in
defence against or in support of a charge; to bring forward as a legal ground or plea.”
The Cross adduces a causal relationship among gender, emotion, and speaking out as they manifest in
Mary’s suit against the Cross. The alliteration of the line serves to link the three words—Ladi, loue, alegge—drawing them into the same sphere and creating an alliterative shorthand for the
moral undercurrent of the poem.

Regendering the Cross

In the legal dispute between Mary and the Cross, most scholars concur with the
assessment that the Cross occupies the superior position of the two disputants. They base their
reading, in part, on the form of the poem and the sequence of the debate. The cruciate form of
the Disputation between Mary and the Cross, mirrored both structurally and thematically in the
poem, plays a central role in a number of recent scholarly studies. Susanna Greer Fein observes
that the “poetic debate is itself symmetrically shaped like the Cross.” In addition to the
symmetrical opening and closing stanzas, and the three sets of balanced speeches alternating
between Mary and the Cross, Fein notes that the revelation of the Cross—“I was chose a Relik
chois, / þe signe of Ihesu cristes crois, / þer dar no deuel abyde” (254-6)—occurs at the center of
the poem. Though Fein regards the shift in Mary’s pathos, “wholly inverted in the last
stanza,” as further evidence of the poem’s chiastic structure, she stops short of acknowledging
any change in the positionality of the Cross over the course of the poem. Yeager, who also
comments on the “profound symmetry” of the poem, categorizes Disputation as an example of a
“vertical debate,” in which the participants occupy differing planes of enlightenment and
authority. For both Yeager and Fein, the Cross occupies the position of superiority in the poem
as the doctrinal authority on the meaning and necessity of the redemption. Yeager rests his conclusion on the structure of the debate’s resolution: “In all but Deguillleville’s version [of the Mary and the Cross literary type], the Cross always speaks last, and the structure of the argument indicates that the Cross’s position is superior.” Yeager qualifies this statement to a degree, acknowledging that though Mary “is not ‘converted’ from a false position to a true one, as in some vertical debates,” she must be initiated into the knowledge of the divine plan of salvation, which the Cross possesses. Still, he argues that the poem displays a “hierarchical synthesis” in which the Cross’s position is “qualitatively higher” than Mary’s.

Although Sarah McNamer rightly views the Disputation poem as embodying “one of the most strident articulations of maternal thinking” in the Marian lament genre, she concludes that it falls subject to the same mechanisms of containment she finds operating in the majority of Marian laments. Like Fein and Yeager, McNamer views the kiss Mary gives the Cross at the end of the poem as “a striking gesture of submission,” a surrendering to the ultimately superior position inhabited by the Cross. To interpret the accord at the end of the poem as a symptom of Mary’s capitulation, however, is to deny the true significance of the poem’s formal chiastic structure. If Mary indeed moves from her more limited, earthbound perspective as the mother of Christ to her position at the end of the poem as “queen” and the mother of all humanity, from a love at once more “immanent and particularized” to “the more abstract and generalized love of all mankind” articulated by the Cross, I argue that the Cross undergoes a comparable shift in perspective.

Though Mary draws on the legal lexicon of the court, her language and the attitudes it embodies bespeak a meaning derived from her experience as the mother of Christ. She reads Christ’s body on the Cross in light of his human aspect, and as the embodiment of “trou̸̸̶̺̼̹̥̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹̹
“loue,” and “Vertu.” She refers repeatedly to Christ in the possessive, and uses images from the natural world to describe her son: “Mi fayre fruit,” “my flour,” “my brid,” “Mi white Rose Red” (3, 65, 66, 68). Her use of the possessive establishes the perspective from which she speaks: hers is an imagery associated with reproduction and motherhood. The poem opposes her voice of maternal compassion to the stoic passivity of the Cross as part of its construction of an alternate juridical domain.

In her first plaint against the Cross, Mary characterizes the Cross as an instrument of public torture, naming it in quick succession a “pillori” (twice), a “galwes,” and a “|eoues tre” (6, 15, 23, 46). She imbues the Cross with a malevolent agency; the Rood is not the blameless cross upon which Christ was nailed: “Tre, thou dost no trouthe / On a pillori my Fruit to pinne!” (9-10). In its rebuttal of Mary’s charges, the Cross attempts to justify its role in the death of Christ through a claim to passivity. The Cross transforms Mary’s “pillori” into a “piler,” the necessary and foundational support to the figurative imagery of Christ’s body as “brugge” [bridge], symbolic of Christ as the “|ofast weye” to heaven, a fact it reiterates throughout the first half of the poem: “I was piler and bar a brugge”; “I was piler and stod ful stille” (146, 272). Not only does the Cross succeed in neutralizing Mary’s indictment of the role it plays by altering a few letters, but it valorizes the role of silent support as the superior of their two positions. As witnessed in this interaction, the alternating dialogue between the two disputants reveals a model of exchange in the poem in which imagery, doctrinal ideas, and rhetorical strategies flow in both directions, and by which the cross-pollination of the two disputants’ positions is effected. Similar transformations occur in the re-gendering of the Cross and the modification of redemption doctrine over the course of the poem.
In a poem clearly invested in establishing an ethos of compassion, grounded in the affective, gendered position of the maternal, the gender of the Cross takes on added significance. In the Anglo-Norman poem, the Virgin Mary refers to the Cross as “La Crois,” or “Dame Crois,” from the outset. This may be a consequence of the female gender of the word “croix” in French, but it may also be a remnant of the tradition that viewed the Crucifixion as a type of second birth for both Christ and his Virgin mother, a motif that will figure in the Cross’s subsequent adoption of the maternal role in its final speech of the *Disputation* poem. However, because the Cross refers to itself as a variety of inanimate objects relative to Christ, a “stipre,” a “piler,” a “bord,” etc., before finally claiming a maternal role for itself, I employ the gender-neutral pronoun when referring to the Cross to preserve the shift I trace in the Rood over the course of the poem.

Mary’s initial characterization of the Cross as an inanimate, genderless object begins to shift when she interprets the Cross’s role in the Crucifixion through the lens of her own experience as the mother of Christ: “Tre vnkynde, þou schalt be kud [known]; / Mi sone step-Moder, I þe calle” (62-3). She opposes herself as caring, maternal figure to the Cross, deemed both unkind and unnatural in her punning play on “unkynde.” In contrast to the milk Mary provides her child (“Wiþ my brestes, my brid I fed”), the Cross serves up “Eysel [vinegar] and Galle” (66, 67). Of Christ’s “ffèet and fayre hondes” Mary tells the Cross that she “custe hem ofte” (70-1), whereas the Cross and Christ are joined “with feole nayles” (42). She “leid hem softe” and “wiþ cradel bond [cloth]” she bound him, providing a safe resting place (72, 76). The Cross, on the other hand, “holdest hem hije on lofte, / Bounden in bledyng bondes . . . Naked a- þe wylde wynde” (73-4; 78). Mary interprets the suffering her Son endures on the Cross as the “unkynde” ministrations emptied of a mother’s compassion. This move is significant because Mary’s perspective, along with her interpretive and rhetorical abilities, expands through
her consideration of the Other as an extension of herself and her role as mother. A similar moment occurs late in the poem, in the scene that leads to Mary’s own enlarged vision of her role as both the father and the mother of Christ, a transcendent experience that once again derives from the contemplation of the particularly human experience of the love that exists between parent and child. At the same time, in naming her adversary “Stepmoder,” Mary initiates the means by which the Cross’s transformation is effected in the poem.

If Mary adduces the maternal relationship and the humanity of Christ in her appeal to the Cross, the Cross relies upon metaphysical imagery in its effort to refute Mary’s charges of a lack of compassion. In response to Mary’s invocation of Christ as an infant born of her “wombe . . . vn-fuyled” (13), the Cross appropriates the language of childbirth and emphasizes its own role as the “bearer” of Christ in each of its metaphors: “[i] brihte palmes nou I bere”; “I was piler and bar a brugge”; “I was bat cheef chargeour, / I bar flesch for folkes feste / . . . On me lay [e lomb of loue” (103, 146, 157-8, 162). While the Cross initially acknowledges that the “brihte palmes” it bears “Blomed vp” in Mary’s “bour” (108), the adverb “nou” establishes that the Cross “now” supplants Mary in her previous role, deemed complete and, thus, no longer necessary. Aurally, the word “nou” also effects an erasure of the Virgin’s earlier bearing in its sense of bearing Christ “anew” or “afresh.” Moreover, the Cross’s representations imply that its bearing of Christ is superior as it leads humankind to salvation. The bridge is the “so]fast weye” to heaven, as is the lamb served on the charger, symbolic of the Eucharistic host.

In its analogy of the grapevine, the Cross makes it clear that, whereas Mary bore the “Blosme” [blossom], the Cross bears the “Fruit.” The more mature bearing of the “Fruit” supersedes Mary and the Incarnation, thereby displacing the emphasis on Christ’s life and humanity, rather, with a focus on His sacrifice. In the Anglo-Norman translation of de Greve’s
Latin poem, Dame Crois similarly employs the image of the grapevine to persuade Mary of the necessity of her (Dame Crois’s) position in the atonement of humankind, though significantly without displacing Mary’s role in the process of Redemption: “Ought the vine to start a quarrel with the stake on which the grape is sustained? Therefore I say to the true Maiden: You are the vine ever new, your son the grape well-known, and I am the stake which holds him.” Dame Crois’s imagery is inclusive of the Virgin and fundamentally establishes her role as both a necessity and, moreover, the preeminent one. The Virgin Mary represents the “true” life source without which the grape would be neither viable nor worthy of being pressed into humankind’s “leof licour” (Disputation 139), both life-giving and dearly bought. In Disputation, on the other hand, the Cross’s imagery fails to acknowledge either Mary or the importance of the Incarnation to salvation. Each of the Cross’s characterizations of his enjoined relationship with Christ work to displace Mary as the bearer of Christ and thus her significance in the redemption process.

Charter of Christ Imagery

Among the many dense, proliferating representations through which the Cross reads itself and Christ, legal instruments figure centrally in the Cross’s dissemination of doctrinal matter. If the displacement of Mary as the true bearer of Christ reduces the importance both of Christ’s human nature and of the significance of the Incarnation, the Cross’s use of legal documents in his further effort to indoctrinate Mary articulates a belief not only that Christ’s death on the Cross is the moment in which Redemption is made possible, but also that the Passion alone is sufficient to win salvation for “Alle his leoue freondes” (122). In one of the principal images of the poem, the Cross likens Christ’s bleeding body to a written charter of “pardoun”:

For pardoun scheweþ be a shrine:
Wiþ nayl and brede, on bord is smite

Rede lettres write be lyne,

Bluwe, Blake, among men pite.

Vr lord I likne to Þis signe:

His bodi vppon a bord was bite;

In Briht[e] blod, his bodi gan schyne:

Hou wo him was, may no mon wite,

Red vp on þe Roode.

Vr pardoun, brede from top too to,

Writen hit was wip wonder wo,

With Rede woundes and strokes blo.

Vre Book was bounden in bloode. (179-191)

The stanza begins with the image of a material “pardoun” nailed to a board, the words written line by line in red, blue, and black ink. The Cross’s revelation—“Vr lord I likne to Þis signe”—comes only after the document is clearly envisaged in the mind’s eye. The Cross elaborates the analogy: Christ’s flesh serves as parchment, his blood as ink, and the bruising “strokes” as the blue letters of the words of “Vr pardoun.” In the Cross’s representation of Christ’s body as a pardon, the Disputation poet alludes to a particular late medieval composite of the literary and the legal, commonly referred to as the Charter of Christ poems.  

John Alford sees this literary type as representative of a late development of the use of legal allegory to convey models of salvation in theological and literary works. In order to understand the complexity and significance of the Cross’s and Mary’s debate over the necessity of the Crucifixion to redemption doctrine, I now turn to consider the historical development and significance of the legal
understanding of the Redemption. The question this history brings up is the one that occupies Mary and the Cross: is it the Incarnation of Christ or his Passion that saves humankind? And, more importantly, of what significance is this to humanity’s salvation?

The influential studies of John Alford and Rosemary Woolf, among others, delineate the legal treatment of the Redemption in literary and theological works. Woolf notes that the tradition of employing legal terminology to explicate the doctrine of the Redemption probably began with St. Paul and “seems first to have been applied to historical events by St. Ambrose, who described the committing of the Virgin and St. John to one another as a part of Christ’s testamentum. Christ’s promise to his disciples, ‘Pacem relinquo vobis,’ also suggested by its form a testamentary disposition.”28 Alford cites Robert Grosseteste’s thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman Chateau d’Amour as one of the earliest vernacular works to treat the Fall through an extended legal allegory. Grosseteste allegorizes Adam’s sin and consequent exile from Eden in feudal terms. Through a double default, Adam loses possession of his estate and along with it his free status. As Alford explains it, “having put himself in bondage to the Devil, he has lost not only his heritage but also the legal means for recovering it.”29 It is through this understanding of the Fall that the Incarnation comes to be understood as a legal necessity: “[Adam’s] only chance lay in the intervention of a third party, of someone who was free, neither a descendant of Adam nor a servant of the Devil through sin. Only God in the form of man could meet these conditions.”30

With Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo, the allegory undergoes a significant shift in valence. Earlier theologians viewed Christ’s death as an economic transaction, wherein Christ was required to make restitution to Satan. Anselm, however, reconceives of Christ’s death as performing a satisfaction to God on behalf of humankind. As the title of his work—Cur Deus
suggests, Anselm reframes the issue in terms of Christ’s dual nature. In Anselm’s view, Christ’s death is no longer a transaction enacted between God and the Devil, but rather a negotiation between God and humanity, mediated through Christ. As Alford trenchantly observes, the release of humanity from bondage, no matter how it is conceptualized or accomplished, however, “is merely the precondition upon which man is able to make his claim.” Anselm’s answer is that humankind owes honor to God. How humanity gains access to heaven, then, represents the next development in the legal treatment of the Redemption. Alford looks to the Middle English Charter of Christ poems as an example of the literary treatment of this final development, “a literary type built upon the formulas of legal documents such as charters, wills, and deeds.”

In both the Long and Short Charters of Christ, Christ reads aloud from the “Charter” that serves as his last will and testament, and which is inscribed upon his body. As Alford summarizes the legal formula, “the Charter of Christ purports to be a grant of heaven’s bliss to man in return for the rent of love to God and neighbor.”

Mary Spalding’s extensive research on the extant Charter of Christ poems attests to the number of poems, in addition to the Long and Short Charters of Christ, that exploit the figure of a legal document to represent Christ’s Passion. Though these poems share many of the same elements, a brief examination of the redemption doctrine they espouse will reveal that they do so to different effect. The Long and Short Charters of Christ experienced extensive copying from the time of the form’s mid-fourteenth inception up to the beginning of the sixteenth-century. Some forty-five manuscripts survive, with one copy of the Long Charter of Christ preserved in the same quire of the Vernon MS as the Disputation poem and separated by only one other item, the Pistyl of Susanne. In his explanation of the “jifte” of the “heritage” he will bequeath to his
legal heirs, Christ locates the time from which this gift comes into being as the moment of his Incarnation:

And whon þat ȝifte I ȝiven þe scholde,
I dude as þe lawe wolde:
To a Mayden I meked me,
ffor no chalange schulde be;
wel dernely I kepte þe and me
Til I my tyme wolde se,
ffourti wokes and fourti dawes,
To folfulle þe olde lawes. (13-20)

Christ’s use of the word “whon” signals the importance of the point he makes here. When it was time to make the gift of redemption to his people, Christ “meked” himself to take on human flesh within Mary, in order that “no chalange schulde be.” This “chalange” refers to the Devil’s rights theory of redemption in which Christ’s incarnation was seen to be a necessary means by which to outwit Satan.\textsuperscript{35} Mary’s acceptance is proffered as a necessary component of the agreement: “Heo receyued me for þe” (22). Christ’s rhyming pronouns, “heo,” “me,” and “þe,” clearly delineate the redemptive interdependency of Mary, Christ, and humankind. Christ’s equation nearly accords Mary co-redemptrix status, acknowledging the remarkable part she performed in the plan. He is explicit about what the Incarnation signifies: “þorw my monhede and my grace,
/ þus com sesyng furst on place” (23-4). Christ’s words equate the gestation period of forty weeks and forty days to the original “sesyng,” which he will later confirm in documentary form on the Cross. Moreover, Christ characterizes this original “sesyng” as being dearly bought: the “harde” temptation of Christ by the Devils (“wel þei wuste I was a mon; / But synne in me
founde þei non”) ensures “þat ilke sesyng schulde be deore abouȝt” (34). He describes the costliness of the seals and sealing wax, which confirms the testamentary document using the same terms: “þe selyng-wax was deore abouȝte, / At myn herte rote hit was souȝt, / And tempred al wiþ vermiloun / Of my rede blod þat ran doun” (143-6). In employing the same words he uses to describe his suffering on the Cross, “deore abouȝt,” to describe his earlier suffering experienced in human form during his temptation by Satan in the desert, he explicitly links the Incarnation (figured not only as the moment of Incarnation, but rather as inclusive of his thirty-three year Incarnation) to the Passion of Christ in terms of sacrifice, and in effect makes them equivalent aspects of a single event.

The confirmation of the original act of seisin, taking up residence in Mary’s womb, takes place at the Crucifixion, figured as the drawing up of a legal document as Christ’s suffering unfolds. Christ states that he will “make a chartre of feffement” that will be “more siker þe to make / Aȝeyn þi foos” (42; 39-40). In this sense, the Incarnation should be understood as the event that enacts Redemption, and the Crucifixion as the document that attests to it. The “chartre of feffement” is added security, the written proof that men and women will require when the Devils come with “heore sergeauns with maystrie” and “with wo and serwe” seek to “distruye” them just as they previously threatened Christ. Figured allegorically, this written proof can be used to deter the Devils’ torment and ensure a protected estate.

Christ reiterates this doctrine at the midpoint of the Long Charter. After the Latin tag that identifies Christ’s body as a testamentary document, “Sciant presentes & futuri” [Know all, present and future, that I], he affirms the two-part aspect of his role in the redemption:

      with mi ffadres wille and loue

      Made a sesyng whon I was born,
To þe, Monkynde, þat was forlorn.

wip my cha[r]tre here present

I make nou a confirmament:

þat I haue graunted and ȝiuen

To þe, Monkynde, with me to liuen

In my Rewme of heuene-blis,

To haue and to holden wiþ-outen mis (104-112)

Christ’s death confirms what he has earlier willed; the parchment and blood “confirmament” ratifies this “sesying” upon his death.36 Though Christ’s death provides a written instrument through which humanity can claim their inheritance, the promise of salvation has its inception in Christ’s assumption of human form. This is of significance because, as outlined above, it rewrites Christ’s sacrifice, previously conceived of as an economic transaction between the Devil and God, as performing a satisfaction to God on behalf of humankind. In return, humanity is obliged to pay a type of “rent” to God. Christ outlines the “condicion” upon which humanity’s claim to heaven’s bliss depends. He will not ask for “homage ne for feute” [fealty] (118), that which Anselm construed as being owed to God. Instead, he asks for the “foure-leued gras” (120) as the payment of “Rente” (127): schrift, repentance, abstinence from sinning, and fear of God.37 As a type of final confirmation, Christ leaves an “endenture” that humanity “schuldest siker be / In preostes hondes,” the flesh and blood Eucharistic host.

Like the Disputation poem, the legal document in the Carta Celestis Hereditatis is not the testamentary will or deed of enfeoffment that appears in many of this genre, but a charter of “pardoun.” One of the texts in the fourteenth-century compilation Pore Caitif, the Carta Celestis is less an evocation of the typical Charter of Christ poems than a hermeneutical primer.38
However, like the Long Charter, the Carta Celestis makes clear that the pardon is a promise extended from God as a first step “bi which we moun cleyme oure eritage” (101). Christ’s death makes possible the salvation of humanity, but men and women must “liven ri3tli,” modeled on Christ in his human incarnation. Furthermore, like the Long Charter of Christ, the Carta Celestis explicitly emphasizes the significance of Mary’s role in the process. The treatise points out that the charter is “selid wiþ þe blood of þe lomb crist þat is cristis flessche taken of the clennest dropes of blood in þe swettest virgine marie” (101/33-4). The blood that Christ sheds on the Cross is made possible only through the Incarnation in his Virgin mother. The blood that the Cross in the Disputation poem argues is sufficient is shown quite clearly in the Carta Celestis to have originated in Mary, without whom Christ’s sacrifice could not have been accomplished. The means to keeping the charter in “þe cofre of þin herte” is through “good liuynge & deuote loue lastingli to þin ende” (102/21-2).

Finally, Chaucer’s “An ABC” poem also confirms the significance of the Incarnation to salvation. Like the Cross in the Disputation poem, Chaucer aligns the crucified body of Christ with a legal writ in his “An ABC” poem: “He vouched sauf, tel him, as was his wille, / Bicome a man, to haveoure alliaunce / And with his precious blood he wrot the bille / Upon the crois as general acquitaunce / To every penitent in ful creaunce” [belief] (57-61). In medieval legal parlance, an “acquitaunce” provided documentary evidence that some type of transaction had taken place. It was supremely important to have such a document in possession, as Alford observes: “To be able to show a sealed release or acquittance was crucial; otherwise the law regarded a person to be still in debt.” Though a debtor would have fulfilled his obligation, without a material witness, he would still be considered to be in arrears. In his description of the bill, Chaucer explains the two-part process by which the general acquaintance of humanity’s debt
was effected. First, Jesus willfully deigns to “bcome a man, to have oure alliaunce.” Secondly, in his suffering upon the Cross, Christ’s skin serves as the documentary evidence of his earlier settling of accounts through his dual alliance: of divine and human nature, on the one hand, and between the God-man and humankind, on the other.

The inclusion and importance of Christ’s human Incarnation to the Redemption doctrine advanced in these three examples, the Long Charter of Christ, the Carta Celestis Hereditatis, and Chaucer’s “An ABC” poem, demonstrate the primary difference between Mary’s and the Cross’s points of view in the Disputation poem. Of course, in each of these examples, the Incarnation alone is not sufficient to humanity’s atonement; Christ’s death, figured as the confirming legal document, represents the necessary second step. Although most theologians understood the crucifixion to be the fundamental means of recovering humanity’s lost heritage, Alford observes that theologically “its necessity has never been self-evident.” The Cross’s initial explanations of Redemption doctrine fail to take into account Mary’s role as the mother of Christ, let alone draw any meaningful connections between Christ’s Incarnation and the Redemption of humankind. In light of the medieval construction of the Redemption outlined above, the Cross also neglects to expound upon the obligation required on the part of humankind. In his doctrinal explanation to Mary, the Cross reveals a fundamental belief in the sufficiency of the Crucifixion to Redemption: “Til þe lomb of loue dyed and ros, / In helle pyne monkynde was teyde” (263-4), a precept he reiterates for most of the poem. I contend, however, that the poem tempers the Cross’s doctrinal stance, first through Mary’s sustained moral outrage and resistance to the Cross’s explanations, and second in the change effected in the Cross over the course of the poem. The poem advances an understanding of the Redemption as a truly participatory model of atonement, founded on both Christ’s Incarnation and death on the Cross.
Further, it advocates for the necessity of an additional step to regain “hevene halle,” enjoined upon Cross, reader, and humanity as a whole—the requirement of “Loue,” equated to compassionate action within the poem.

The two stanzas that follow upon the Cross’s depiction of Christ as “Vr pardoun” and “Vre Book” further spell out the documentary conceit, providing a glossed explication of Christ’s death displaced onto the image of a “Book.” The Cross conveys the salvific significance of this document, stating that “no mon,” not even a saint, could be pardoned from his or her mortal sentence, no matter what prayers he or she offered up to God.

His Bodi was Book, 'be Cros was brede,

Whon Crist for vs 'eron was cleynt.

No mon gat pardoun wiþ no bede

Weor he neuere so sely a seynt

Til Book on bord was sprad. (196-200)

As in the previous stanzas, the focus on the conjoined nature of Christ and the Cross remains a constant: Christ’s “pardoun” on the Cross’ “shrine,” “Cake” on “bord,” “Book” on “brede,” etc. Not one of the Cross’s images takes into account the Virgin Mary. Nor do any of the images reflect in any real way on Christ’s human or embodied aspect. Its language differs dramatically from Mary’s graphic descriptions. In its explication of Christ as a charter, the Cross elides any mention of the agents of Christ’s torture. Although the Cross alludes to the wounds and mentions the blood, “In Briht[e] blod, his bodi gan schyne,” it is not the blood associated with pain and suffering that Mary sees: “His veynes to-bursten wiþ Þi breid” [torment] (29). The Cross’s “strokes blo” lack any reference to the instrument that makes the marks, whereas Mary’s words describe in detail the wound to Christ’s heart: “A Broche [spear] porw-out his brest [is] born, /
His holi herte ha\[336\] wounde" (47-8). These documentary descriptions from the Cross displace Christ and his suffering. Despite the image of Christ as a “Book,” open for all to read, the extent of his suffering remains unknown. The Cross’s statement that Christ is “Red vp on \[336\] Roode”, signifies both that Christ is “red” with blood and capable of being “read,” interpreted. Though the Cross puns on the readability of Christ, however, the Cross is forced to acknowledge finally that Christ’s suffering remains both unknowable and unspeakable: “Hou wo him was, may no mon wite” (186).

The Cross contends that there was no possibility for Redemption until the moment of Christ’s crucifixion. Christ’s shedding of blood on the Cross was the pivotal moment: “No mon gat pardoun . . . Til Book on bord was sprad” (198, 200). The other singular piece to the Cross’s professed doctrine of salvation is that no other requirement is imposed on humanity. The Cross thinks of blood in terms of ink and a written record—a document that records and signifies that a transaction has taken place. The Crucifixion from the Cross’s perspective is a legal promise, made by God to humankind:

\[336\]e Cros was brede, pardoun to bringe.

Pardoun in Book is billed:

What is pardoun vppon to minne?

Hit is for\[336\]iveness of dedly sinne:

Whon blod was writen on cristes kinne,

Pardoun was fulfilled. (212-7)

Salvation from the Cross’s perspective requires God’s contract to be put in writing and signed in blood, an event which, technically, could occur only at the time of the Crucifixion, given the absence of pain, blood, and suffering at the Incarnation. The Cross insists upon this doctrinal
truth throughout the dispute. The Cross conceives of Christ’s blood as having settled the case in a legally binding way: “So cristes blod haþ pleted” (282). Christ’s body is the documentary evidence that was prophesized in Holy writ and for which humankind and the Cross have been waiting: “Whon blod was writen on cristes kinne, / Pardoun was fulfilled.”

Mary’s response, on the other hand, resists reading Christ’s suffering body figuratively and calls into question the role of documentary evidence. In opposition to the “Iewes ston-hard in sinnes merk,” Mary, quoting Paul, states that Jesus is “Softer þen watur vndur serk, / Meode or Milk [i]-medled boþe” (222, 224-5). In the lines that follow, Mary paraphrases the text, explicating it literally, though amplifying it poetically:

\[ þe Iewes weoren harde stones: \]
\[ Softur þen watur or eny licour, \]
\[ Or dewȝ at liþ on þe lilie flour, \]
\[ Was cristes bodi, in blod colour (230-3) \]

Mary literalizes Paul’s figurative image of the Jews’ stone-heartedness, casting them rather as “harde stones.” In her reading of Christ’s body as liquid, fluid, and seminal, Mary resists the Cross’s visual metaphor of Christ as a “pardoun” or open “Book.” Figured as water, Christ’s body cannot retain the marks that inscribe his skin as text to be read. Mary thinks of Christ’s blood as blood and not as the ink that forms the words in the Charter of Pardon, Christ’s literal flesh. She also conceives of blood in terms of bloodlines—lineage—evidenced in her reference to Mount Zion and the line of David in the prophetic lines calling for the Virgin birth.43

Mary’s reference to the blood that breaks up Heaven’s gate revises the Cross’s earlier insistence that human salvation is effected through the blood shed on the Cross. Her account occurs very near the center of the poem, which argues for its centrality to her legal stance. In her
understanding of Old Testament scripture, which she alludes to in her account of the prophets who call for Christ’s birth, Mary counters the Cross’s explanation of the blood required to win heaven’s bliss. Mary counters the Cross’s contention that humankind’s redeeming could not occur until Christ died on the Cross. Rather, Mary posits the Incarnation as the commencing of humankind’s Redemption, citing the calls of the prophets for the Messiah as evidence. What Mary adds to the Cross’s explication of redemption doctrine is the signal importance of His humanity:

    lord! send us þi lomb
    Out of þe wildernesses ston,
    To fende vs from þe lyon cromp
    Of mylde mount of Syon;
    Be-com mon In a Maydens womb,
    Made a bodi wiþ blessed bon,
    In a Maidens blod þi bodi flomb. (232-8)

Mary’s account stresses the corporeality of the miraculous birth. Christ becomes a “mon” and is made a “bodi wiþ blessed bon.” That body’s “blessed bon” puns on Christ as the merciful reward God bestows upon the faithful at the same time that it points to the physicality of Christ’s body. God’s boon and Christ’s bones are integrally related in Mary’s wordplay; one cannot occur without the other. Rhyme links the “wildernesses ston,” “mount of Syon,” and Christ’s “blessed bon” and creates a nexus between the call for the end of exile, Mary’s exalted lineage, and God’s incarnated answer. This nexus implies that Redemption takes place at the moment of Christ’s Incarnation, locating it within “a Maydens womb” and “in a Maidens blod.” In a
“Maidens blod” Christ’s “bodi” radiantly shone (“flomb”). The flourishing of Christ in Mary’s womb is what combats the lion’s “cromp.”

Mary links the Hebraic exile and humanity’s Redemption in the lines immediately following this image of the Incarnation through the imagery of blood and birth:

At Barreres weore debate:

þorwȝ stones In þe wilderness,

Men mêtete better ha crepet, I-wis,

þen bored in-to heuene blis,

Til blod brac vp þe ȝate. (239-243)

The wilderness within the Old Testament may refer literally to the forty years of exile experienced by the Hebrews, but in its prophetic tenor, it looks forward to the New Testament salvation of the human race." Mary likens the impossibility of humankind’s entering through heaven’s gate to the impassibility of men creeping through stones in the wilderness. Not until “blod brac vp þe ȝate” can humanity enter into “heuene blis.” Susanna Fein reads this provocative passage as an image of the birthing process: “The details of a bloodied passage and a broken gate portray this second birth through a gendered imagery of both childbirth and sexual intercourse." She identifies this passage as a “visual image of Christian resurrection” whose underlying doctrine is reasserted by the Cross in the stanzas following Mary’s narration. But do Mary’s words refer to a second birth or to Christ’s Incarnation? Certainly the blood to which Mary refers is the blood of the previous lines, the Maiden’s blood in which Christ’s body “flomb,” the blood that signifies Christ’s manhood rather than his divine nature. Because Christ’s birth was miraculous and occurred without blood, the image of his birth is of necessity deflected onto Nature.
In the lines that follow, the Cross appropriates and rewrites Mary’s imagery of the bloodied gates in his rebuttal of the sufficiency of the Incarnation to humankind’s salvation. He tells Mary that prophets prayed, not for Christ’s birth as she would have it, but, rather, for his death: “Heuene ȝates weore closed clos, / Til þe lomb of loue dyede; / þis is write in tixt and glos; / After Cristes deþ prophetes preide” (259-62). Whether Mary is doctrinally correct here is not the issue. Rather, her insistence on the importance of the Incarnation to Redemption points to a crucial piece missing from the Cross’s doctrinal explanation, a piece that insists on viewing Christ in his human aspect, a reminder of what humanity owes him for his sacrifice.

“What noldestou not of mournyng minne?”

What are Mary’s chief complaints against the Cross? Though Mary rails against defilement, violence, and the injustice of the Crucifixion, perhaps the most significant charge Mary makes against the Cross is its utter lack of compassion, resulting in its extreme passivity and acceptance. Mary’s continued resistance argues that without the ability to imaginatively feel, one cannot fully grasp the meaning and significance of the Redemption. If, according to Brian Stock, “debating the Eucharist . . . forced medieval people to forge new tools with which to think,” Rachel Fulton contends that “praying to the Virgin and her crucified Son forced medieval Christians to forge new tools with which to feel.” Fulton argues that “praying to the Virgin, herself imagined as crucified with Christ, schooled religiously sensitive women and men in the potentialities of emotion, specifically love, for transcending the physical, experiential distance between individual bodies—above all, bodies in pain.” The Disputation poem offers itself up as just such a tool, a text that will guide the Cross itself, as well as the reader, through the stony impasse to feeling.
In the *Disputation* poem, Mary’s emotional pressure causes her to speak out against the cross (“Ladi! loue do] be to alege!”). In her first speech, the Virgin’s emotions threaten to overwhelm and paralyze her: “In mournyng I may melte!” and “In Bales I am bounde” (18, 44). While the word “melte” connotes a loss of identity that mourning threatens, it also signifies grief’s transformative power. After recalling her maternal nurturance, kissing and lulling her child to sleep, Mary’s earlier outcries shift in valence: “Of mournynge I may mynne” (83). The *Disputation* poet uses the word “mynne” in *MED* sense 1 (a), “to remember or think about, call to mind, recall”; as in the Cross’s use of the word “minne” in his explication of the word “pardoun.” But the word also denotes sense 3 (a) “to record or report; say, tell, enumerate.” Mary’s stance within the poem enjoins upon the reader the necessity not only to imagine and reflect on Christ’s life and pain, but the ethical imperative to act. A number of Passion poems written for the express purpose of meditation on aspects of the life of Christ set out explicitly the ways in which they were to be put to use. The three principal stages comprising devotional meditation express a similar trajectory for the penitent practitioner:

[S]ensible recollection provides the focus for the meditation by vividly creating a scene of a gospel event in the imagination. Emotional reflection is the meditator’s nondiscursive or initial response to the scene: the willful soul, confronted with Christ’s mercy and compassion, becomes aware of its own sinful nature that prevents the return of this love. Self-awareness naturally leads to moral application, or a resolution to reform. The typical meditation ends with a plea for guidance, a colloquy, or an expression of love. Sensible recollection, followed by emotional reflection, ought to end, if performed devoutly, in moral application or a resolution to reform one’s errant behaviors and thoughts.
While the ethical action that results from such meditation is the reform of self, *Disputation* takes the final “expression of love” to a more material end—the imperative to act through speaking out. The poem instantiates the need for remembering and the equally important need for expression through the figure of Mary. On three separate occasions, she condemns the Cross for its stoicism and his silence. She cries out, “Cros! whi noldestou not crake,” “Cros! whi weore |ou not agast?” But her most telling demand of the Cross follows her recounting of the moment of Christ’s death and the effects it had on the natural world: “Cros! whon Crist on |e was cliht, Whi noldestou not of mournyng minne?” (380; 384, 402-3). Mary deems the Cross’s passive, stoic reaction to the Crucifixion unnatural and criticizes it for being able to withstand what nothing else in Nature could: “|e dai turned to nihtes donne; |e Merke Mone gan Mournyng make; |e lyht out leop of |e sonne, / The temple walles gan chivere and schake, / Veiles in the temple atwo thei sponne” (375-7). Instead, the Cross stands “stif as eny mast” (385), a phrase that evokes the image of the Church as ship, at a time when all of Nature is turned upside down. “Whi noldestou not of mournyng minne?” are the final words Mary speaks in the poem. Her question marks the height of her emotional state and the critical point of the poem. She chastises the Cross for not needing to express his “mournyng,” unlike the three Jews and herself. This “minning,” which has at its core the dual trajectory of recalling and recounting, has the ability to heal both self and others. Unlike the detractors of Christ, the Cross does not need to be converted; he is already ranked among the followers of Christ. The Cross does, however, need to be converted to an understanding of Christ linked to his human aspect, a feat accomplished in this poem obliquely, through the pain of others, an experience that generates a concomitant need to provide testimony of that experience. The poem suggests that it is not enough to intellectually comprehend doctrine; rather, the Cross must (as much as an inanimate
object can) experience Christ’s suffering in an embodied way, like the Jews and like Mary, through the senses and emotions.

Certainly, one of the functions of the Marian laments is to elicit an emotional response in the reader. Earlier such lyrics appear to be aware more of their affective than their aesthetic function. The theme of the hard-hearted follows in the tradition of the Latin _Quis dabit_ poems and the vernacular poem _pe Lamentacioun pat was bytwene ure lady and seynt Bernard_, commonly attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux. In the _Lamentacioun_, Bernard importunes Mary for details of Christ’s suffering in order to melt his hardened heart: “Min herte [is hard &] nul not to-breke, / I seo not hit wole melte fore / . . . Hit nil not of myn eȝen reke / To wepe, as my wille wore” (155-6; 159-60).49 Bernard expresses the value he attaches to the affective identification with Christ’s sorrow and the salvific imperative for doing so: “To heren of him me is ful lef, / I ne may hit nouȝt for-go” (131-2). Unlike Christ, Bernard puts his own needs before hers, yet another example of his cold and obdurate heart. Mary tells Bernard that “He [Jesus] seiȝ me stonde in serwe & gref, /Wiþ wepyng and wiþ muche care / Mi serwe dude him more gref / þen alle þe peynes he suffrede þare” (309-11). Mary’s grief points past herself to highlight Christ’s compassion for his mother despite his own pain and suffering. Similarly, in the Marian lyric “Sodenly afraide, half waking, half slepyng,” the Virgin Mary promises in the final line of each stanza that those who are too hard-hearted will learn how to soften their hearts by imagining her dolor: “Who cannot wepe come lerne at me.”50 When the narrator approaches Mary in the poem and tells her he is unable to weep because he is so hard-hearted, she rebukes him: “Lo, nature shall move thee, thou must be converted; / Thyne owne Fader this nyght is deed” (15). This poem shares the _Disputation_ poem’s sense of urgency: “Now breke, hert, I thee pray / . . . / What wight may me behold and wepe nat” (21, 23).
The poet of the *Disputation* poem draws upon these lyrics in his construction of the counterpoint between Mary and the Cross. In each of her plaints, Mary returns to the injustice and explicitly visceral suffering of Christ on the Cross. The narrator’s introduction of Mary’s third and final speech against the Cross—“ȝit seide þe Meke Marie”—signals, even at this late stage of the poem, her continued resistance to the Cross’s characterization of his benign role in Christ’s death. The poet’s use of the word “ȝit” registers Mary’s refusal to acknowledge the truth of what the Cross is intent to convey and, at the same time, suggests that she has yet more in her persuasive arsenal. His use of the word “meke” points not only to the irony of Mary’s persistence, but also the significance of her position. If this meek maiden feels this strongly, then should not the Cross, and by congruity, the reader, feel the same? If even a meek maid is willing to lambaste a figure in a position of authority, does this not somehow sanction the questioning of one in power who requires reforming?

Transformative Power of the Affective Mode

In their final speeches both Mary and the Cross reveal a change in perspectives from which they view Christ and his suffering on the Cross. What accounts for these shifts? The poem suggests that compassion alone can effect such change. What the Cross has been unable to achieve through the explication of doctrine is accomplished through an identification with the emotions others feel and express.

In their testimonial acts, Mary and the Jews graphically rewrite the Cross’s earlier imagery of Christ’s blood as ink *as blood* and the red letters of the document as the infliction of the soldiers’ violent acts, the signs of real inflicted pain. Mary’s aggrieved testimony and the eyewitness accounts of the Jews at Calvary inscribe graphic descriptions of Christ on the Cross,
such that Christ’s suffering is brought to life in the mind’s eye. These eyewitness accounts immediately precede and lead to Mary’s own transcendent moment in the poem. In her final attempt to persuade the Cross, Mary repeats the graphic stories she hears from the three Jews “coomen from Caluari / ãat dayãat Ihesu ãoled ded” (298-9). The experience each shares enacts a transformative effect in both tellers and auditors, effects that are imprinted on or experienced in the body as well as the mind:

Alle þei seiden þei weore sori;
ffor-dolled in a dronknyng dred;
þei tolden hem alle wherfore and whi
Heore hertes were colde as lumpyng led. (300-3)

Having witnessed the torture of Christ, the three are one in their sorrowful condition. The alliteration and the single-syllable, heavily consonanted words drum the images into the mind’s eye. The affective content grows progressively with each new account, a poetic feat that recapitulates the development of the vernacular lament during the late Middle Ages. The first Jew’s account is but four lines long, simply rendered and emotionally controlled:

‘Whon crist was knit with corde on a stok,
His bodi bledde ãeien that blok;
þorw feet and hondes nayles gan knok,
þen gan myn herte to colde.’ (305-8)

The violence in this tale, like the Cross’s depictions, lacks agency; the nails enter through Christ’s hands and feet of their own accord. The bleeding body is depicted simply. The emotional response is recorded in the teller’s body. The second ups the ante significantly,
eclipsing the narrative of the first: “‘Nay, not ṣat! / ṣat dude serwe in-to myn herte schete’”

(309-10) but, rather, this:

‘. . . whon ḣe Roode ros, & doun was squat,

 ḣe nayles renten him hones and feete;

 Ḅorw-out his helm, ḣe harde hat,

 ḣe ḣornes, in-to his flesch gan crepe;

 His loyntes vn-joynet, I tok good gat.’ (311-5)

The second Jew is done in by the rending of Christ’s flesh when the Cross is lifted up and violently set down; he observes the clots of blood clinging to Christ’s hair, the flesh hanging off the bones, the dry and “drinkeles” tongue, the “lippes to-clouen and chyned” (320, 321). The litany of graphic details is disrupted by his visceral reaction: “‘خوف I water and teeres leete, / To care I was enclyned’” (316-7). The graphic rendering reflects the amplification of affective elements in the further development of the lament genre. Finally, the third Jew claims that worse than all of Christ’s pain is the pain Mary suffers when she looks upon her anguished Son: “‘A swerd swapped hire Ḅorw ḣe brest; / Out of ḣe cros ḣe knyf com Ḅo; / Ḅis siht sauh I my-selue’” (328-30). For him, although the moment in which all Christ’s flesh falls away is awful, it is far worse to experience it obliquely through Mary. The effect is amplified. The sword the Jew “sees” is the metaphorical sword of pain prophesied by Simeon during the presentation of Jesus in the temple, interpreted by biblical commentators as a reference to the pain Mary would suffer at the time of Christ’s crucifixion: “Yea a sword shall pearce thorow thy owne soule also” (Luke 2:35).

The bodily and emotional co-suffering the Jews experience and are compelled to share is that which will fulfill Christ’s thirst—nothing less. The stories escalate in affective effect. It is
this the poem enjoins the reader to feel and, moreover, to relate. The act of copying, imprinting another’s pain on one’s own heart, inscribes affectively and creates a way in, a path through which to make connection to the divine and to one’s fellow humans. It is a kind of muscle memory, a memory imprinted in the body, that writes grief through weeping eyes and “ffordolled” wit. The retelling of the suffering of Christ and the witnesses functions in the way the communal Eucharist is broken, ingested, and meditated upon. The tales of suffering are sacramental in nature and effect a communal bond. This type of narrative account contests the Cross’s bald statement made earlier that the extent of Christ’s suffering remains a cipher, essentially unknowable and unspeakable: “Hou wo him was, may no mon wite” (186). Ironically, the Cross’s statement comes in the midst of the doctrinal explanation of Christ as an open “Book.” This is the poet’s dilemma.

An affective surplus generated through Mary’s recounting of the Jews’ conversion stories creates a transitory space in which she experiences a transcendental double vision. As she tells the Cross, the accounts of the Jews move the Virgin to seek out her son: “Sin Iewes made so muchel mon / To seon my brid bounden in brere; / In sad serwyng moste I gon, / To seon blodi my chyldes chere” (335-8). From the recognition of what awaits her, Mary’s focus turns inward in the lines that follow. Her next thought stems from the sudden awareness of the singular position she occupies as the mother of Christ:

ffadres & Modres bat walken in won,
Schul loue heore children beo skiles clere;
þeose two loues weore in me al on,
ffor fader and moder I was here;
þeose two loues in me weore dalt;
These lines spoken by Mary are astounding in their implication. They fall exactly midway in Mary’s third and final speech, following directly upon the three conversion accounts of the Jews and just prior to her evocation of the earthly and celestial reactions to Christ’s death on the cross. If only for a moment, Christ’s mother experiences a glimmer of the paradoxical double vision exalted by the poem in her position as both the “ffader” and “Moder” of God, the author of Christ’s fleshly existence and his compassionate-hearted mother. In this moment of transcendence, the pronouns indicate that Mary contemplates her double role from within the gendered position of the Father: “I was fader of his flesch.” In contrast, she speaks in the third person about the compassionate, maternal side, as if from this perspective, unable to access it, standing apart, dispassionately commenting: “His Moder hedde an herte nesch.” In linking Christ’s fleshly material aspect with the Father, Mary reverses the Aristotelian understanding of reproduction that dominated much of the medieval period. Aristotle’s reproductive theories posited that women contributed the fleshly matter and men the form and spirit. Christ’s dual nature was similarly conceived of as the gendered union of divine and human aspects, the male spirit and female body, respectively. Mary links the traditionally dominant, male position with that of matter and her female side with the emotional content and spiritual sensibility, “an herte nesch,” a forgiving, receptive, compassionate heart. The “herte” was thought to be the seat of emotions and the spiritual center in medieval Christian theology.

Mary employs a familial metaphor to explore the paradoxical position she inhabits. Even in this moment of transcendence, Mary’s compass is that of the social and relational. Moreover, it is a relationship defined through love. As evidenced in her statement that fathers and mothers
love their children “beo skiles clere,” or in their distinct ways, that love is revealed to be
gendered. She characterizes the two loves as “[b]e hattore loue, [b]e caldore care” (361). Just as
she is dealt two loves, she states that “in me weore tacched sorwes two” (348). It is as if she
must bear both sorrows since sorrow “in [b]e fader mihte non abyde.” (349). The Virgin’s
characterization of the Father position, associated with a joyful transcendence, could be read as
displaying a lack of responsibility, causing her to do double duty in the emotional, earthly realm.
The Father knows no sorrow, “ffor e was euere in reste and Ro, / Ioyned in his Ioyes wyde”
(350-1). Though the Virgin’s awareness widens for a brief moment as she contemplates the
“Fadres and modres that walken in won” and their loving relation to their children, she returns to
her weeping and sorrow, unable or unwilling to sustain her dual perspective when she sees that
her “derlyng dide (died)” (353). As in the story she recounts of the Jews who witness her
standing at the foot of the Cross, Mary reveals an awareness of the discursive life that precedes
her: “I serwed sore, as Clerkes telle; / Mi pyne was not departed” (359-60). It is as if the literary
tradition binds her to her affective role. More importantly, though both loves are dealt to her,
given the choice, the Virgin chooses to inhabit the maternal office in which sorrow
predominates. This certain return to her mourning argues for a pedagogy of participation over a
pedagogy of transcendence.

   The regendering of the Cross, initiated in Mary’s interpellative hailing, “Mi sone step-
Moder, I thee calle” comes full circle near the end of the poem. In one of several pedagogical
points in the poem, the Cross interprets Christ’s Passion as having effected a personal baptism, a
sacramental experience within the poem that leads to a significant shift in understanding. This is
a complex moment in the poem because the Cross, in attempting to convey the doctrinal
necessity of the Crucifixion, uses the doctrine of baptism as a metaphor, and then, in turn, uses a
metaphor of double birth in order to explicate baptism. In this imagery, Mary and the Cross, the birth of a womb and the birth in a baptismal font, and the Incarnation and the Crucifixion layer one upon the other. Citing Nicodemus, the Cross states: “‘ffurst of a wombe þer reuþe remus [begins]; / Siþþe in a font þer synne awey is schorn;’ / I was cros to monnes quemus [benefit], / I bar þe fruit þow bar bi-forn / ffor þi beryng Al one” (447-51). Through an appropriation and amplification of the literal experiences Mary undergoes as the Virgin mother of Christ, the Cross and the language it uses undergo a type of baptism or second birth. The Cross, like the obdurate reader, undergoes a humanizing act of the imagination in its adoption of Mary’s birth imagery. The figures of speech employed by the Cross as a means of understanding Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection (and those other mysteries of the faith) are infused with a literality that not only refreshes, but, like baptism itself, secures them from a type of rhetorical death. Like humankind, language itself is redeemed in the poem. The poem advocates through the image of the twofold baptismal birth imagery the need for first remembering Christ’s passion, then speaking out about it, a second act that confirms the first in much the way the Cross articulates the two-part doctrine of redemption through the double-birth imagery. Both are encapsulated in Mary’s use of the word “minne.”

Though the Virgin Mary’s lamentations are often enacted in a public space, Sarah McNamer sees a tendency in the lyric genre toward a reinscription of grieving within a particularly feminine space, the locus of which “is resolutely presented as private, domestic space” (169): “What the lyric as a whole seeks to do then is to draw all mothers into a circle of shared grief for the loss of the Virgin’s child—a ‘sisterhood in pain’ that places men on the margins, excluded from this image of maternal solidarity by virtue of experiences they are presumed to lack.” Unlike the lyrics McNamer works with, the Disputation poem works to
effect an incorporation of the authoritarian and ostensibly male Cross within the circle of grief. 

In reading the Cross as re-gendered both through Mary’s projection of a maternal relationship onto it and the Cross’ later internalization of the maternal experience of bearing and caring for Christ, the Rood is integrated within a circle of mothers, a feminized position in which affective compassionate action becomes a distinct possibility.

The legal reconciliation of the poem takes place only after the Cross reconceives of their roles as dual mothers. Mary’s earlier impassioned and frustrated series of questions directed to the Cross, culminating in her most significant charge—“Cros! whon Crist on þe was clyht, /Whi noldestou not of mournyng minne?”—have been met finally with a response that moves Mary, now deemed the “qween,” to accord with the Cross. In the end, the Cross acknowledges Mary’s role in the doctrine of redemption: “I bar þe fruit þow bar bi-forn /ffor þi beryng Al one.” This Cross now sounds very much like Dame Crois in the Anglo-Norman poem, who gave Mary pride of place. Just before the two reach accord, the Cross more fully unites the two in its imagery of the “tree”: “Mayden, Meoke and Mylde, / God haþ taken in þe his fleschly trene; / I bar þi Fruit, leoþi and lene” (473-5). The Cross’s figuration of the “fleschly trene” neatly projects onto Mary the image of a tree branch, as if they now were of a piece as co-bearers of Christ. It almost certainly alludes to the Tree of Jesse, the ancestral tree of Christ, invoked earlier in Mary’s reference to Mount Zion.53 Finally, in its sense as the “train,” the trailing part of a cloak or gown, it looks forward to the fleshly weeds Christ will don in the final image of the poem.

These statements incorporating Mary within Redemption doctrine were missing from the Cross’s earlier doctrinal explanations in which the Crucifixion alone figured. The narrator confirms this shift in the Cross’s representation of their dual role in his comments at the end of the poem: “þe qween and þe Cros acorde. / þe qween bar forst, the cros afturward” (486-7). The
Cross’s representations of itself in relation to Christ shift over the course of the poem from a self-acknowledged supporting role to that of active agent. The Cross’s images of stoic support at the beginning of the dispute (pillar and grapevine “stipre” to Christ as bridge and grape) give way to images in which the Cross serves as an instrument of Christ. He is the “scheld” that protects against “schame” (251). He is the “staf” Christ wields against the enemies of his flock. In the final speech, the Cross, like Christ in his assumption of human nature at the Incarnation, takes on human guise in the imagery of itself and Mary as co-mothers to Christ and all humankind. Finally, at the poem’s end, the Cross concedes Mary’s earlier protests against his passivity. No longer passive, the Cross announces its intention to take on Christ’s detractors through official legal channels.

Compelled to moral action, the Cross tells Mary in its final speech that it will file a bill of complaint: “At þe parlement, shul putten vp pleynyng, / Hou Maydenes fruit on me gan sterue” (465-6). The Cross conceptualizes the role it intends to play after the Crucifixion as a type of legal advocate—one who will take action through proper legal channels requiring documentary procedures. According to the MED, to “putten up,” in its legal sense, is “to present (a bill, claim, complaint); bring a charge of (injury, grievance).” Similarly, the word “pleyning” in juridical terms refers to a type of litigation or lawsuit, the “plaint.” The idea that the Cross will now act in a legal capacity on behalf of Christ relieves Mary of her role as advocate at the start of the poem. The Cross’s initiation of a “pleyning” converts Mary’s “partial” petition, in which Christ’s suffering was viewed on an individual level, to a “common” petition, one in which the Cross will act against those who continue to aggrieve Christ through a similar lack of compassion: “Hit is riht þe Roode helpe to a-rene / Wrecches þat wraþþe þi chylde” (476-7). A second force to the word “pleyning” ought to be considered as well for a rather different type of
public document and effect, for the word signifies, more generally, a literary lament or complaint made against someone or something. The Cross’s description of the bill of complaint combines the two, a record of the legal suit the Cross will bring against the detractors of Christ and, at the same time, a record of Christ’s suffering in that his “pleyning” will include a transcription of “hou Maydenes fruit on me gan sterve.” The plaint which the Cross will put up will serve to both recall and speak out, two functions Mary performs and advocates for throughout the poem. It operates as a figure of the poem itself.

At the end of the poem, the Cross tells Mary in no uncertain terms: “Hit is riht the Roode helpe to arene / Wrecches that wraththe thi Chylde” (480-1). The Cross has moved from staunch passivity to righteous agency, from one who was “loked bi the lawe,” to one who will use the law to bring Christ’s detractors before the court to answer criminal charges. The shift from passive supporter to active agent finds its parallel in the Cross’s representation of itself and Christ. The Cross now refers to itself as the “Roode” and the “Roode tre,” the literal Crucifix, rather than as one of its earlier self-characterizations as “stipre,” “plater,” or “bord.” The Cross adopts Mary’s language now in its references to Christ, acknowledging her maternal role in his possessives. Christ is no longer the “rosted” lamb, the “brugge,” or “vre Book,” but rather “Maydenes fruit” and “thi chylde.” At this point in the poem, the Cross contemplates the Crucifixion in a less mediated manner, seeing the Son of God in his human, materially embodied guise. Significantly, the words the Cross uses to describe Christ in the bill of plaint now convey an embodied sense of Christ rather than the metaphysical imagery emptied of affect and emotional content used earlier in the poem. Here, the instruments of torture earlier sublimated as pen-less strokes have been literalized in the image of the soldiers’ spears. The “Pardon” that earlier was nailed to the Cross—Christ’s material body—has now been replaced with an actual
legal document inscribed with the suffering that Christ endured on the Cross. In the penultimate stanza of the Cross’ last speech, after his own baptism in Christ’s blood, the Cross of the Disputation poem ventriloquizes the question Jesus will ask on Doomsday: “Trewely, vppon þe Roode tre, / Mon, I dyede for þe; / Mon, what hastou don for me / To beon my frendly feere?” (461-4). This recognition, on the part of the Cross, of the part humans play in their own redemption is a newly added tenet to his doctrine, that which he adopted through contact with Mary. Further, it recapitulates the opening lines of the Long Charter of Christ poem spoken by Jesus: “Mon and wommon, I wol þe telle / What loue I haue I-don to þe; / Loke what þou hast don to me!” (1-4). In alluding to the Long Charter, the Disputation poet further authorizes the nuanced doctrine now espoused by the Cross, particularly, as he accomplishes it through the guise of Christ’s humanly voiced words.

After the Cross’ final speech in which he speaks about the actions he is now moved to take on behalf of Mary and Christ, the narrator describes the legal reconciliation:

þe queen a-cordet wiþ þe cros,
And aȝeyn him spak no more speche.
þe queen ȝaf þe Cros a cos;
þe ladi of loue, loue gan seche (478-81)

The narrator’s use of the word “a-cordet” to describe Mary’s and the Cross’s reconciliation confirms the legal conclusion to the poem. The word “accord” signified that a settlement or compromise had been reached in a legal dispute, and that a satisfaction had been “agreed upon between the party injuring and the party injured; which, when performed, is a bar of all actions upon this account.” The end of the poem signals a mixed type of accord, one that relies on earlier displays of reconciliation with the characteristic “kiss of peace,” a ritual that preceded
documentary witnesses, but that persisted in rites of legal restitution.\textsuperscript{57} The choice to conclude the dispute with an incorporated rite of reconciliation over the Cross’s preferred mode of documentary witness provides further evidence that the poem is critical of the Cross’s earlier position. Mary’s ritual “cos” also recalls the kissing of the “pax,” the small tablet kissed by the priest at the end of the Lord’s prayer and before the sacrament of the Eucharist in the liturgy of the Roman rite. In one of the earliest comments on the practice, Tertullian describes it as a \textit{signaculum orationis}, according it the function of a seal. Just as a seal confirms the grantor’s presence of a document and enacts the power implicit in it, the kiss of peace functions to seal the Lord’s prayer and confirms the forgiveness of trespass.\textsuperscript{58} In concluding Mary’s and the Cross’s disputation with the kiss of peace, which, in turn, marks an end to the poem, the poet authorizes his own “plaint” as a type of legal transcript and discursive witness to the proceedings.

However, though the poem constructs an alternative juridical domain through the figure of the Virgin, the Cross’s final speech and the narrator’s concluding stanzas threaten to eclipse Mary’s voice at the end of the poem. While it is true that Mary has a positive effect on the Cross, compelling it toward compassionate moral action, she is not the one, ultimately, who leaves a written record; that task is left to be fulfilled by the authoritative figure of the Cross, and by the narrating cleric. Cast in the objectified role of embodied, maternal compassion until raised temporarily to a transcendent consciousness in which her two loves must be balanced, Mary retreats into silence at the end of the poem. The last words Mary speaks, however, epitomizing the emotional climax of the poem, are powerful and damming: “Cros! whon Crist on \textasciitilde{e} was cliht, / Whi noldestou not of mournyng minne?” Despite the conciliatory kiss of peace, these words resonate long after the poem has ended.

Vernacular Texts as Lawful Restitution
In his exposition at the poem’s end, the narrator turns from the reconciliation between Mary and the Cross to consider once again the figure of Christ. The narrator introduces a new motif that transforms Christ from a suffering *imago pietatis* (Man of Sorrows) to a Savior-knight figure, the image of the ducal knight on horseback: “On a stokky stede He Rod, we rede, In red array; ffrom deueles drede, [at Duyk vs lede, At Domesday” (506-7). This theme now serves to revise the earlier depictions of Christ on the Cross—his human suffering rendered affectively by Mary and the doctrinal significance rendered in metaphysical conceits by the Cross. The imagery is dense with puns. “He Rod, we rede” certainly alludes to the several literary traditions which make use of the figure of the heroic Knight, including the doctrine of Devil’s rights and feudal allegories of Redemption. But it also equates Christ with the “Rood” and humankind with Christ’s loyal retainers wearing the same blood-red livery. While the imagery the poet introduces of Christ as ducal Knight makes use of the doctrine of Devil’s rights, in which Christ is figured as a heroic Savior-knight as opposed to a passive suffering god, it rewrites the conceit at the same time. For here, Christ comes to do battle with the Devil armed not in his divine aspect, but as one clothed in the “fflesshly wede” of human nature: “In fflesshly wede, God gan Him hede [clothe himself], Of Mylde May, / Was bore to blede, As Cristes Crede So[ply wol say” (504-5). The poet’s words portray the role of Mary, figured as a “mylde” maiden, as far more than a virgin vessel: she contributes her own flesh and blood to Christ’s livery.

The arming of Christ in the “warrior-knight” conceit (to be distinguished from the lover-knight conceit borrowed from the romance tradition as articulated by Woolf) is figured variously, and while often depicted in great detail, is only rarely described as it is here, in terms of Christ’s donning human flesh. As Woolf has observed in her extensive study of the passion lyric, allegorical treatments of Christ as knight included the often minutely detailed depictions of
Christ’s arming in terms of the virtues, or more often in terms of Christ’s own wounds or the instruments of his suffering. For instance, in the lyric beginning “Fadur and sone and holi gost,” the imagery of his arming is articulated by Christ himself as components borrowed from those surrounding him at the time of the Crucifixion:

At þe y mot myn armes borwe,
Mi sheld shal be þe swerd of sorwe,
marie þat stong to þe herte;
þe holi cros my baner biforn,
myn helm þi garlond of sharpe þorn,
Mi swerd þi scourges smerte.

Mi plates shullen þi nailes be,
myn acotoun þat spere tre,
þat stong þi swete syde.
Now y am armed þus wel,
nel y him fle nevere a del,
tyde what bi-tyde! (11-22)\(^6\)

In this anonymous fourteenth-century lyric, Christ’s shield is the compassion he feels as he watches his mother suffer under the sting of the metaphysical sword of sorrow; his banner is the Cross; his helmet is the crown of thorns; his sword (that with which he will wound) is the punishment and pain exacted on him by his human detractors; his armored plates are the nails; and his “acotoun,” the jacket worn beneath the chain-mail coat, is the spear that rends his side. Robert Grosseteste’s Anglo-Norman allegory of the Redemption, *Le Chateau d’Amour*, casts
Christ as the knight Wisdom who offers to stand in for the vassal who committed an offense against his father, the king. In both Grosseteste’s poem and the Middle English version, *The Castle of Love*, a poem preserved in the same section of the Vernon as the *Disputation* poem, the devil sees Christ in “monnes weeden,” but the poem does not equate this specifically with the time of Christ’s arming. In the *Disputation* poem, however, the arming of Christ in this final image does not take place on the Cross or on Judgment Day as occurs in many of these poems, but is accomplished at the time of the Incarnation. Despite Woolf’s extensive treatment of the passion lyrics, she cites only one instance in which Christ’s arming takes place at the time of the Incarnation, as it does here in the *Disputation* poem, an Anglo-Norman poem by Nicholas Bozon.⁶²

In depicting Christ’s arming as taking place at the time of the Incarnation, the narrator confirms the significance of Mary’s earlier insistence on the importance of Christ’s human nature. However, the theme of Christ’s accoutring himself also shifts devotional practice beyond the affective piety associated with Mary and the intellectual practice associated with the Cross to offer a new type of *imitatio Christi* in which one garbs oneself in the livery of Christ. Rather, the poem advocates a devotional model in which the pity one feels for Christ is transmuted into a fidelity to and love of Christ. The innovation of the poet’s rhetorical practice results in a new mode of devotional practice, which, in turn, serves to authorize the poet’s vernacular literary practice.

At the end of the poem, in what may be a preemptive move to disarm any possible detractors against his poetic invention, the narrator attests to the essential fictiveness of his discursive depiction of “Maries wo” (492). He is equally concerned to point out that Mary’s accusatory dialogue was invented as well: “Oure ladi leide on him no lak” (505). The narrator
also works to dispel any illusion that the invention of the speaking Cross is true: “Þe Cros is a cold Creatour, / And euere ȝit haþ ben def and dom . . . / I preue hit on Apocrafum, / ffor witnesse was neuer foundet / þat neuere cristes cros spak” (4495-6, 498-9). Though the *Disputation* poet expresses concern over his affective rhetorical strategies, he sanctions them in several ways. First, he cites a pedagogical aim: “Þe Clerk þat fourmed þis figour, / Of Maries wo” did so “to wite som” (491-2). Most scholars have taken this purpose to refer to the poem solely as a conveyance of doctrinal matter. However, it is clear from the change the Cross undergoes that the invention of Mary’s suffering serves to move the most hard-hearted within the poem. If the apprehension of Christ’s suffering body on the Cross is not enough, then the poem suggests that the oblique angle of another’s suffering, specifically a mother’s suffering, will melt the obdurate heart. Secondly, the poet invokes a performative function, linked explicitly to the imperative to speak out embodied in the figure of Mary. He rationalizes his inventions: “[N]euere cristes cros spak; / Oure ladi leide on him no lak; / Bot to pulte þe deuel abak, / We speke hou crist was woundet” (500-3). In order to defeat the devil and ensure the winning of salvation, it is imperative to speak out poetically or otherwise, authorizing his own vernacular project. Finally, the narrator conflates his poetic use of rhetorical flowers with the flower as a signifier for Christ—“þeiþ þis tale beo florisshed with faire flour” (497). The Cross uses the same verb, “florischeþ,” to describe both the aesthetic and ameliorative effects of Christ’s blood: “þi fruit me florischeþ in blod colour” (106). Christ’s blood possesses the sacramental power in its baptismal effect to impart immortal life-sustaining action. The poet’s use of the same word to describe his poetic techniques analogously links his poem’s manuscript page or, alternatively, the poem itself, with the Cross and Christ. The rhetorical flowers that adorn his poem are
conceptualized as decorative (yet functional) effects depending on how one reads them, literally or figuratively. In that the poem takes as its content the Passion of Christ, it ensures the longevity, and perhaps the immortality, of the work. The poet authorizes his vernacular theological project and constructs the *Disputation* as an alternate form of devotional practice, one that combines the best of both the Cross and Mary, and that argues for a dialectically shaped truth and path to salvation. The poem models the power of disputation to effect change, not just as a pedagogical tool, but as a performative intervention, as both a literary and salvational practice possessing the force of law.


5 The three extant Middle English versions of the *Disputation between Mary and the Cross* poem are thought to derive from the Latin poem, “O crux de te volo conqueri,” written by Philip de Greve, Chancellor of the University of Paris from c. 1218 to c. 1237. For the Latin poem, see F. Holthausen, “Der mittelenglische Disput zwischen Maria und dem Kreuze,” *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literatur* 105 (1900): 22–29. See also Yeager, “The Dispute,” 53–69. The Latin poem consists of two speeches, the first four of ten nine-line stanzas spoken by Mary, the final six stanzas by the Cross. In the Middle English *Disputation* poems surviving in the Vernon and Simeon manuscripts, three alternating exchanges between Mary and the Cross make up most of the 40 stanza poem. The Middle English version in MS Royal 18 A.x is comprised of 28 stanzas with two unique stanzas framing the dispute. For information on the poem, see *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500*, vol. 3, ed. Albert E. Hartung (New Haven, CT: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1972), 684–85. Two other vernacular versions, Anglo-Norman and Middle Dutch, remain unedited.

6 Yeager, “The Dispute,” 54. Yeager concludes that, despite some parallels, the “conception of the characters” in the Anglo-Norman poem “are so different that one prefers to consider this an independent version” (55). He does not remark on the similarities between the A-N and the ME poems. He focuses rather on the arborial representations of Mary and the Cross in several of the debate poems.
7 Holsinger, “English Jurisdictions,” 157. Holsinger defines a “vernacular legality” as “the self-conscious use of a medieval vernacular in order to explore a specialized realm of authoritative legal knowledge and practice whose documentary and discursive apparatus is confined primarily to Latin.”
13 Dispute between Mary and the Cross, in Legends of the Holy Rood, 199.
14 The Middle English Dictionary cites the Royal Dispute poem (1450) as one of the earliest vernacular texts to use this word. See John Alford, “Literature and Law,” for a discussion of legal terminology in Grosseteste and an explanation of this concept as it applies to Adam’s plight.
16 Fein, Moral Love Songs, 89.
17 Fein, Moral Love Songs, 89.
18 Fein, Moral Love Songs, 88.
19 Yeager, “The Dispute,” 53–69; 63–64. Thomas L. Reed, Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 174. Given the tendency toward irresolution of much medieval debate poetry, Reed finds the poem to be “refreshingly horizontal,” and concludes that the disputants “are not merely equal but are actually symbolically identical” in that they are presented as “matched stems of Jesse’s rod.”
20 Yeager, “The Dispute,” 63.
21 Yeager, “The Dispute,” 63–64.
22 McNamer, Affective Meditation, 167.
23 McNamer, Affective Meditation, 167.
24 On the tradition of viewing the Crucifixion as enacting a type of second birth in which Mary experiences the pains of childbirth absent from Christ’s birth, see Amy Neff, “The Pain of Compassio: Mary’s Labor at the Foot of the Cross,” The Art Bulletin 80, no. 2 (1998): 255 ff. Christ’s death on the Cross had come to be conceptualized as a type of second birth because of Jesus’s words to the apostles in John 16:21. Jesus likens the sorrow the apostles will feel during his absence to the sorrow a woman feels during childbirth, a feeling that will be turned to joy once she is delivered of her child: “A woman, when she is in labour, hath sorrow, because her hour is come; but when she hath brought forth the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world.” All scriptural citations refer to the Douay-Rheims edition unless otherwise noted.
25 MED, s.v. “neue” (adv.) 2. (a).
26 “Deit la vyngne mover querele / Du baston dunt grape est soustenue / Pur ceo le dy a vray pucele / Vous estes veigne adees novele / Ton fiz la grape ben conue / E jeo li bastonus ke li ad tenue.” Translation by Yeager, “The Dispute,” 61.
27 For a comprehensive introduction to the Charters of Christ literary type, previously unprinted texts of the Short and Long Charters of Christ, and a number of additional miscellaneous charters, see Mary Spalding, The Middle English Charters of Christ, Bryn Mawr College Monograph 15 (Bryn Mawr: Bryn Mawr College, 1914). See also Emily Steiner, Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Richard Firth Green, Crisis of Truth, 260–63; and John Alford, “Literature and Law,” 945 ff.
28 Woolf, English Religious Lyric, 211.
33 For a description of the Vernon Long Charter of Christ poem, see Spalding, Charters of Christ, xiv–xv. See also Steiner, Documentary, 50–53.
34 Steiner, Documentary Culture, 194 ff.
36 Alford, PP: A Glossary, s.v. “confermen”: “To ratify, approve or confirm, usually in the form of a deed, charter, or some other written instrument” (33).
37 The four leaves of the plant are: “so[p]fast schrifte,” “synne herte-smerte,” “I wol no more do so,” and “drede god euermo” (121–24).
38 The treatise, found in Cambridge University MS. Ff. 6.34, titled “A good trety of a notable chartour of pardoun of oure lorde Ihesu crist &c.,” is printed in Spalding, Charters of Christ, 99–102. The Pore Caitif is comprised of works by Richard Rolle, the Ancrene Wisse, and other selections culled from devotional and pastoral works.
40 Alford, Piers Plowman, 8.
41 Alford “Literature and Law,” 944.
42 MED, s.v. “pleten” (v) I. (d) to adjudicate (a case), settle legally; also fig. See also a similar usage in John Lydgate’s The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man: “My won dys I geue . . . To plete for hem . . . I make ther vocat of my blood . . . thogh ther cause be nat good” (4846). F. J. Furnivall and K. B. Lockcock, eds. (1899–1904; London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. for the Early English Text Society, 1973)
43 Mary’s reference to the “Mount of Syon” may allude to the city of Zion prophesied in Isaiah 66:7–8, scriptural verses often interpreted as a reference to the coming of Christ: [7] “Before she was in labour, she brought forth; before her time came to be delivered, she brought forth a man child. [8] Who hath ever heard such a thing? and who hath seen the like to this? shall the earth bring forth in one day? or shall a nation be brought forth at once, because Sion hath been in labour, and hath brought forth her children?”
For a discussion of the significance of the number forty within the poem (number of years of exile, gestation period of Christ, and number of stanzas in the poem), see Fein, *Moral Love Songs*, 144, n. 237.


In the Latin Vulgate, see Isaiah 11:1: “et egredietur virga de radice lesse et flos de radice eius ascendet” (And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root). The tradition of aligning Christ with a flower may stem from the identification of Mary with the rod of Jesse. Yeager treats the motif of Mary and the Cross as twin bearers of Christ in a group of poems that link the two through tree imagery. Yeager, “The Dispute,” 59 ff. Reed also comments on Mary and the Cross as “matched stems of Jesse’s rod.” Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry*, 174. In *Festivals of the Church*, another alliterative, thirteen-line stanzaic poem, presumed by some to be composed by the Disputation poet, Mary identifies herself as the rod of Jesse from which Christ, the primrose, will grow:

Oute of þe rote of lentill lesse,
And schulde floure with florisschyng,
With primeroses greet plente;
Into the croppe schulde come a kyng,
Þat is a lord of power and pyte,
My swete sone I see.
I am þe yerde, þou art þe flour,
My brid is borne by beest in boure,
My primerose my paramour,
With love I luue þee. (75–84)

In the A-text of *Piers Plowman* (preserved in both the Vernon and Simeon MSS, along with the *Disputation*), William Langland uses a similar construction to establish the legal recourse of which Pees will avail himself after Wrong has aggrieved him: “ἀνανεὶς ὀνόματι και ἀρνηθομεῖν & πολυνθομοῖν” (Passus 4/34). William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The A Version: Will’s Visions of Piers Plowman and Do-well*, ed. George Kane (1960; London: The Athlone Press, 1988).


The figure of Christ on the Cross rendered as a knight arrayed in armor is, however, an image which will occur in a later incarnation of another Vernon manuscript text, William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, the A-text.


Chapter Two

“Thorgh a Cristal Bryht and Pure”:
Osbern Bokenham’s *Life Of St. Margaret* as Textual Reliquary

The legends of saints are among the generic categories Nicholas Watson excludes in his well-known appraisal of fifteenth-century vernacular theological writing. A number of scholars have begun to expand the parameters of Watson’s more narrow focus, looking to saints’ lives, in particular, for the rich theological work they perform. My reading of Bokenham’s *Life of St. Margaret* as a considered response, in part, to the Wycliffite movement’s antipathy to the cult of saints’ worship, and as a reclamation of the genre as exemplifying a poetics of *virtus*, deemed worthy reading for lay and non-lay alike, adds to this growing scholarship.

Like the anonymous author of the *Disputation Between Mary and the Cross*, who expresses concern over the poem’s apocryphal matter and affective rhetorical strategies, Bokenham reveals a number of literary and spiritual concerns about his own vernacular hagiographical poetics in a collection of saints’ lives that has come to be known as the *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*. Bokenham translated this grouping of thirteen lives of female saints and virgin martyrs into Middle English verse between 1443 and 1447 at Clare Priory in East Anglia. His concerns range from an expressed “rhetorical” inferiority to the English poetic triumvirate, Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate, to fear over how his work may be received in the intellectual and religio-political climate of Cambridge.
While a number of scholars read Bokenham’s disavowal of the rhetorical tradition figured in the Lancastrian poets Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate as a type of Bloomian “anxiety of influence,” others more recently view his critique of their courtly poetics rather as implicit evidence of Bokenham’s Yorkist political sympathies. For example, Sheila Delaney reads Bokenham’s collection of lives as simultaneously imitating and critiquing Chaucer’s *Legends of Good Women*. She argues that Bokenham “rehabilitates” Chaucer’s orientation toward classical culture (“the poetics of the classicizing courtier”), setting up in its stead an Augustinian poetics of moral simplicity. Similarly, Alice Spencer, another scholar who understands Bokenham’s “use of the plain style . . . as his solution to the Bloomian ‘anxiety of influence’ conundrum,” argues that Bokenham “seeks to reclaim and redeem the public voice of English poetry, which he presents as having been corrupted and fragmented by his poetic forebears.”

Paul Price suggests that Bokenham’s desire to dissociate his own verse from the three English poets “may represent a stern rejoinder to the religious and aesthetic transgressions of his age.” He reads the changes Bokenham makes to the *Life of St. Katherine* not only as a possible response to “pressing social concerns . . . about female religiosity in fifteenth-century East Anglia,” but as support for his own intellectually modest poetics. Bokenham’s primary focus on women throughout the *Legendys* (his largely female East Anglian patrons and his spiritual patron saints) notwithstanding, Carroll Hilles argues that his text is “designed less to promote the interests of women than to appropriate women’s religious culture for a strategic political interest: the claims of Richard of York.” I contend, however, that the ubiquitous nature of these particular female saints’ lives—sought after and commissioned by pious aristocratic women, as Bokenham himself tells his audience in *The Life of Mary Magdalene*; thought of as proper reading material for a cloistered group of nuns; and absorbed into the Abbotsford Manuscript, with its more than one
hundred eighty verse and prose lives, also translated by Bokenham, though there aligned according to the liturgical calendar—surely necessitates a rethinking of the Augustinian friar’s stated intentions in the *Prologue* to the * Legendary*.10 Understood as part of a much larger vernacular hagiographical project, Bokenham’s pietistic impulse, tied as it is to the literary, must be considered to be at least as important with respect to his poetics as his allegiance to any political agenda. Thus, this study adds to and further develops the work of scholars who have begun to situate Bokenham’s vernacular poetics within the contentious religious environment in which he was writing.

If, as I argued in the previous chapter, the author of the *Disputation Between Mary and the Cross* authorizes his affective, vernacular poetics through a reclamation of the affective mode, embodied in the maternal compassion of the Virgin Mary, Bokenham authorizes his vernacular hagiography through the conflation of translated text with the embodied *virtus*, or power, of Margaret herself, and his own role as translator of her life with those who physically “translate” her body. This physical transfer of the saint’s body serves as an extended meditation on the theory and practice of vernacular translation itself. For Bokenham, translation *is* devotional practice. The two are analogous: both activities act to preserve and disseminate the performative reach of the saint attached to her physical and discursive remains. Figured metaphorically as a type of meritorious pilgrimage, translation is a labor-intensive and physical practice. I situate Bokenham’s rhetorical strategy within the Wycliffite understanding of pilgrimage as a spiritual analogy.

The chapter then turns to consider the means by which Bokenham’s textual allusions help to further refine his promotion of vernacular hagiography as a poetics of *virtus*. By inserting himself within a particular literary tradition—linked not to rhetoricians *per se* but to a sainted
theologian and philosopher, St. Jerome, and in the *Mappula Angliae* to Horace and to Jerome once again—Bokenham promotes the idea that he is more concerned with a soteriologically correct poetics than a rhetorically correct poetics.

Predecessor Texts and Authorization

In the “Prologue” to the *Life of St. Anne*, the second of the lives in the *Legendary*, Bokenham establishes his lack of education in the art of poetry in the very language of classical allusion he states he lacks. He apologizes for the rudeness of his language:

```plaintext
. . . I lowly beseche
Alle that schul thys story rede
That they loke aftyr no coryous speche,
For tullyus wolde me neuer non teche,
Ner in parnase wher apollo doth dwelle
I neuer slept, ne neuer dede seche
In ethna flowrs, wher, as claudian doþe telle,
Proserpina was rapt; nor of þe sugird welle
In elicona, my rudnesse to leche,
I neuer dede taste, to me so felle
Wher euer the muses, & þe cruel wreche
Of orpheus, whiche hys wyf dede seche
In helle, of me wolde neuer take hede,
Nor of his armonye oo poynþ me teche
In musical proporcyon rymes to lede. (1450-1464)
```
In lines replete, rather humorously and more than a bit ironically, with allusions to a mix of Roman and Greek mythology, Bokenham deplores the fact that Marcus Tullius Cicero “wolde me neuer non [curious speech] teche.” The Muses were ever cruel to him; Orpheus would never “take hede” nor “of his armony oo poyn me teche / in musical proporcyon rymes to lede.” He inscribes doubt about his rhetorical and poetic skills, here specifically identified as involving rhyming, harmony, musical proportion, and curious speech. In the prologue to the Life of St. Agnes, Bokenham similarly makes a request that whosoever reads his translation, “despyse” it not “thow it be but rude” (4045). Again, despite his vow to eschew the colors of rhetoric, Bokenham employs classical imagery, invoking the “dysdeyn” of Pallas Athena. Though he “yet hir preyid wyth vmble reuerence / That she summe fauour wold sheu” to him, Athena matter-of-factly tells him, “Thou commyst to late, for gadyrd up be / The most fresh flourys by personys thre” (4051-2, 4054-5). He presents himself as coming too late to the poetic meadow; already late in his dotage, he arrives after the others have gathered up the freshest flowers.11 Because she “drof me a-wey so sturdyly,” Bokenham states he “wyl neuyr more wyth hyr debate, / Nere presume to commyn Tullius medwe ny” (4060-2). It is for this reason, Bokenham assures us, that he will “spekyn & wryten . . . pleylyn / Aftyr þe language of Suthfolk speche” (4063-4).

Bokenham’s so-called “rhetorical” inferiority has been the subject of much scholarship. Whether Bokenham’s poetic stance makes a virtue of necessity as David Lawton has wryly observed, or, as Sheila Delaney has argued, whether it inscribes a certain degree of rhetorical proficiency only to critique it, Bokenham’s claim to “rhetorical” poverty is in keeping with the characteristic “pose of dullness” that so many fifteenth-century authors inhabit in their works.12 Lawton’s catalogue of the claimed rhetorical lack of authors from Chaucer to Lydgate and Benedict Burgh to Stephen Hawes reads like a humility primer for Bokenham: they claim that
they are “‘lewed,’ ‘rude,’ lacking in ‘cunnyng,’ innocent of rhetoric and social savoir-faire, bankrupt in pocket or brain, too young or too old, feeble, foolish and fallen—in a word dull.” If Lawton admits that the expression of dullness “on the immediate social level, is almost always disingenuous,” he concedes that it is also more revelatory of a type of “sociopolitical intervention.” If these expressions of dullness, according to Lawton, “are all forms of social anxiety,” then surely Bokenham’s anxiety is indicative of larger concerns than living under the shadow of the great rhetoricians. In sidestepping the canon of English poets, Bokenham’s allegiance to the esteemed Saints Jerome and Ambrose might be approached more profitably as a considered religio-political response to the vernacular theological landscape in the years following upon the Lollard movement and the resulting enactment of Arundel’s Constitutions.

In the *Prologue* to the *Legendys*, Bokenham sets out the differences between himself and his English literary forebears. Bokenham informs his reader here and throughout the collection that his intent is to “pleynly declaryth hyr legende” (81). Despite his protestations of rhetorical poverty, Bokenham sets out the “what” and the “why” of his “bok” in an elaborate Aristotelian prologue. Under the formal cause in which the ordering of material is laid out, Bokenham explains that

```
The forme of procedyng artificyal
is in no wyse ner poetycal
After the scole of the crafty clerk
Galfryd of ynglond in his new werk,
Entytlyd thus, as I can aspye,
Galfridus anglicus, in hys newe poetrye,
Enbelshyd wyth colours of rethoryk
```
So plenteuously, that fully it lyk
In May was neuere no medewe sene
Motleyd wyth flours on hys verdue grene. (83-92)

In the *Poetria Nova*, the “new werk” to which Bokenham makes reference, Geoffrey of Vinsauf distinguishes between the “natural” and “artificial” ordering of textual material. The “natural” ordering presents the material in a chronological manner, whereas the “artificial” manipulates the order in which the narrative unfolds:

The material’s order may follow two possible courses: at one time it advances along the pathway of art, at another it travels the smooth road of nature. Nature’s smooth road points the way when “things” and “words” follow the same sequence, and the order of discourse does not depart from the order of occurrence. The poem travels the pathway of art if a more effective order presents first what was later in time, and defers the appearance of what was actually earlier . . . Deft artistry inverts things in such a way that it does not pervert them; in transposing, it disposes the material to better effect.¹³

Geoffrey deems the “artificial” manner of ordering the material the superior and more sophisticated of the two, being “more elegant than natural order, and in excellence far ahead, even though it puts last things first.”¹⁴ When Bokenham states that “the forme of proceodyng artifical / Is in no wyse ner poetical / After the scole of the crafty clerk” he is establishing the manner in which he intends to lay out the structure. He will declare it “aftyr the story” beginning with the “byrthe, the fostryng, and how she cam / Fyrst to the feyth and sythe to martyrdam, / As ny as my wyt it kan deuyse / Aftyr the legende; & sythe what wyse / Be whom. & how oftyn she translated was / And where now she restyth, & in what plas” (100-106), in its chronological
unfolding. Although the MED cites the very line from Bokenham as using the word “artificyal” in accordance with sense 1 (c) “according to an ‘art’ or science, scientific,” Bokenham appears, rather, to choose deliberately the path of nature versus the “artificyal” path, that path “devised or made by man, artificial (as opposed to natural, divine, or scriptural)” (MED sense 1 (a)). Bokenham subverts Vinsauf’s preference for human-manipulated artistry, and opposes to it his source’s, or perhaps God’s, chronology. Despite the proto-nationalist pride he displays in his assessment of his countryman’s “affluence” in rhetoric, which he states surpasses Rome’s Tullius (Cicero) or even Greece’s Demosthenes, Bokenham ultimately refuses to follow in Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s footsteps. He tells the reader that as he never pondered on (or found amusement) in Geoffrey’s rhetorical treatise, he refuses it now: “But for-as-meche as I neuere dede muse / In thylk crafty werk, I it now refuse” (95-6). Bokenham’s repetition of the word “crafti” in reference to Vinsauf and his work calls into question MED sense 2 (b) “skillfully done or made; intelligent, learned, subtle,” ascribing to the “crafty clerk” and the “crafti werk” MED sense 4: “cunning, sly, tricky, deceitful.” Though he rejects Vinsauf’s advice, Bokenham displays his familiarity with the Poetria Nova treatise, which may argue that it is less an issue of ability than part of his strategy in retooling the legend to fit its new context.

In the vita section of St. Margaret, Bokenham again professes a lack of poetic ability. As part of another humility statement, Bokenham refrains from delineating Margaret’s features, claiming a lack of eloquence and cunning:

If the crafth of descrypceyounn
I cowde as weel both forge and fyle
As cowd Boyce [Boece] in hys phisycal consolaceyounn,
Or as Homer, Ouye, or ellys Virgyle,
Or Galfryd of ynglond, I wolde compyle
A clere descrypcyounn ful expressely
Of alle hyr feturys evyne by & by.
But sekyr I lakke bothe eloquens
And kunnyng swych maters to dilate,
For I dwellyd neuere wyth the fresh rethoryens,
Gower, Chauncers, ner wyth lytgate (407-417)

Bokenham’s description of poetic skill by way of the words “forge and fyle” undercuts once again a “rhetorical” approach to the matter. He would compile a “clere descrypcyounn ful expressely,” he states, were he able. He lumps together Vinsauf and the triumvirate with the pagan poets in this instance. In words that recall the promise of the saint’s whole foot in the Prologue, Bokenham tells us in only the most general and impressionistic of terms, that in all that country “Was nowher so fayr a creature; / For shap & colour and eche feture / Were conproporcyond in swych equalyte / That she myht be merour of al bewte” (403-6). Though he cites poetic lack, he focuses instead on the virtues with which she is “inward endewyd,” “feyth, hope and cheryte” (424, 425). However, not four stanzas later, as part of Olibrius’s consciousness, we are presented with Margaret’s physical description, a traditional blazon from the top down—though it remains chaste in Bokenham’s handling, for Olibrius “lokyd no ferthere than in hyr face, / Where of natural yiftys plente was I-now” (456-7), as he is quick to point out:

And whan he sey hyr forheed lely-whyht
Hyr bent browys blake, & hyr grey eyne,
Hyr chyry chekys, hyr nose streyt & ryht
Hyr lyppys rody, hyr chyn, wych as pleyne
Bokenham demonstrates within the text the moral difference he claims for his own rhetorically poor poetics as opposed to those rhetorically affluent practitioners like the pagan emperor Olibrius.

Though Bokenham displays a rhetorical proficiency in the elaborate exposition of the Aristotelian prologue introducing his text, he simultaneously expresses grave concerns about his poetic competence and the reception of his work. In the first of several instances, he worries that his “werk” will be “put in blame,” “hatyd,” or worse, “throwyn” in the “angle of oblyuyoun” were it to be associated with “the vnwurthynesse / Bothe of hys persone & eek hys name” (34-40).¹⁵ Fearing that his intended audience will reject his text based on its connection to him, he states that he would rather the text stand on its own, uncontaminated by “hate of hym and eek despyht” (37). Later in the Prologue, Bokenham’s fear crystallizes around the intended Cambridge audience. Anxious that his text will engender criticism or even “envye” were the work to become known as his, Bokenham instructs Thomas Burgh, the “sone and fadyr” who requested the vernacular translation of the Life of Saint Margaret, not to disclose his name.¹⁶ It is difficult to know how to read Bokenham’s statements, and indeed they have generated multiple interpretations over the years. As his concerns take up a good part of the accessus, it appears that they are deeply troubling to Bokenham. On the other hand, when he implores Burgh not to disclose his name to the Cambridge audience, he reveals a sense of humor in his suggestion that Burgh tell anyone who inquires that he acquired the translated life through a horse trader.

Bokenham attempts to dissever the value of his “tretyhs” from his personal “vnwurthynesse” in a series of organic analogies that work, rather, to enact a conflation of his text with Margaret herself:
No man the rose awey doth throwe
Althow it growe vp-on a thorn
Who is so nyce that wil good corn
Awey caste for it growyth in chaf?
Men also drynkyn ale and lef the draf,
Albe-it that ale thorgh draf dede ren.
Gold eek as knowe weel alle wyse men,
In foul blak erthe hath hys growyng,
And yet is gold as a precyous thyng
Streyhtly be-schet in many a cophyr.
A margerye perle, aftyr the phylosophyr,
Growyth on a shelle of lytyl pryhs,
Yet is it precyous; and no man whyhs
The verteous crepaude despyse lest,
Thow a todys crowne were hys fyrst nest. (44-58)

Three of the images Bokenham employs to describe his authorial role invokes his description of the saint: the rose and the thorn, the gold within the black earth, and the “margerye” pearl in its shell. In the first analogy, “No man the rose awey doth throwe / Althow it growe vp-on a thorn” (44-5), Bokenham represents himself as the authorial-thorned stem upon which the textual rose blooms. He is that which both engenders and protects the precious blossom. Bokenham later speaks of Margaret’s Christian upbringing in a heathen environment using the identical analogy: “But ryht as of a ful sharp thorn / Growyth a rose bothe fayr & good, /So sprong
Margrete of the hethene blood” (348-50). He continues in an agricultural vein, likening his text to corn and himself to chaff, his work to ale and himself to the dregs, before shifting to the second image that secures his text to Margaret: “Gold eek as knowe weel alle wyse men, / In foul blak erthe hath hys growyng, / And yet is gold as a precyous thyng / Streyhtly be-schet in many a cophyr” (50-3). In the translation narrative, Margaret’s body is enshrined in gold, buried in the black earth, and forgotten numerous times due to the political instability of the many realms. The third and final image makes the link most explicit, linking the textual pearl with the precious gem, the “margerye perl”: “A margerye perl . . . / Growyth on a shelle of lytyl pryhs, / Yet is it precyous” (54-6). The precious textual pearl should not be cast away just because it grows upon a worthless shell. In the onomastic material of the prologue, following Jacobus de Voragine’s opening material, Bokenham expands upon and explicates the meaning of Margaret’s name: Margaret “lyknyd is to a precyous margaryte” (7). She “may to a margaryte compared be, / Wych is whyht, lytyl, and eek verteuous” which properties signify “virgynyte,” “meknesse,” and “cheryte” (250-1; 253, 254, 255). In his linking of text and saint, Bokenham implies the text is as pure as Margaret, a chaste handmaiden or bride of Christ. Bokenham sanctifies the text, imbuing it with the very virtues associated with the saint.

In a further sanctification of his text, the three images Bokenham uses to describe his treatise and St. Margaret—the rose, the gold, and the pearl—allude to St. Jerome’s Epistola 22, Ad Eustochium:

Laudo nuptias, laudo conjugium, sed quia mihi virgines generant: lego de spinis rosam, de terra urum, de concha margaritam.
I praise wedlock. I praise marriage, but it is because they give me virgins. I gather the rose from the thorns, the gold from the earth, the pearl from the shell.\textsuperscript{20}

While virginity is that which is most highly prized and deserving of the highest praise, Jerome also praises marriage, not in and of itself, but for the necessary supply of virgins it provides the church. In his adoption of Jerome’s imagery, Bokenham suggests that, like the necessary but less than ideal state of marriage which is lauded for what it yields, Bokenham, by association, will be lauded for the role he plays in procuring and providing that which is truly reverenced: the saint, her life and passion, her afterlife, and the virtus she embodies. The conflation of his text with St. Margaret herself through the very metaphors St. Jerome uses in an impassioned letter to Eustoch lauding virginity, imbues Bokenham’s life with a sanctified authority. At the same time, Bokenham’s borrowed imagery sutures himself more securely to a fellow writer of saints’ lives and a translator of scripture, further authorizing his literary endeavor by inserting himself within a venerated lineage.

Bokenham also clearly engages with John Lydgate in the Prologue to his Legendary. Lydgate, a Benedictine monk at Bury St. Edmonds monastery and a contemporary of Bokenham, “compiled” a Middle English life of St. Margaret out of “Frensshe and Latyne” for Anne Mortimer, sometime between 1415 and 1430.\textsuperscript{21} Although Bokenham recommends, in the Life of St. Anne, that his audience read “owre ladyes lyf Ihon lytgates booke” if they wish to know more about her daughter, the Virgin Mary (2007), he makes no mention of Lydgate’s The Lyfe of Seynt Margarete in his Legendary. Certainly, though, he was familiar with it, for Bokenham follows Lydgate’s lead to a large degree. First, despite his profession of rhetorical lack and desire for simplicity, Bokenham adopts the rhyme royal verse form in which Lydgate composes his saint’s life, a stanza used primarily for occasions requiring elevated expression, for the address of a
royal audience, or for elevated subject matter. Secondly, Bokenham appropriates Lydgate’s analogy of the hidden worth of the textual “mater” beneath the rude appearance of the “writyng” in his own expanded humility statement.

Lydgate begins his prologue with a standard humility statement, expressing his intent to “compile” Saint Margaret’s life despite his lack of poetic eloquence:

Though I have no rethorikes swete
Nor colour noon t’enbelisshe with my style
Yet dar I seyn, it happeth so somen while,
Under writyng rude of apparence
Mater is hid of grete intellygence.

Ful ofte falleth, in this chestys blake
Golde and perlys and stones of grete prys
Ben ylooke and into warde ytake;
And by sentence and the prudent avys
Of philosoffres, that holden were so wys,
A royal ruby in whiche ther is no lak
May closed ben in a ful pore sak. (3-14)

While Lydgate claims a lack of rhetorical skill, he is not necessarily striving for rhetorical simplicity, one of Bokenham’s repeated literary aims. Lydgate conjures up an eloquently restrained vision of the text as a simple container for the bejeweled “mater” of “grete intellygence.” In the onomastic explication of the saint’s name, Lydgate identifies Margaret as etymologically derived “after a stone ynamed ‘margarite,’ / A precyous gemme amonge these
stines alle ... For of nature perlys echone ben white, / Right vertuous of kynde, rounde and smallle” (30-35). Lydgate’s apostrophe in the prologue, in which he appeals to the saint as his muse, equates Margaret with a precious stone in his humility statement: “O gemme of gemmes” (54). Though Lydgate’s words in his humility statement refer specifically to the relationship between language and style, on the one hand, and the textual matter, on the other, the visual imagery pushes the reader toward envisioning the text as a repository. The equation of the precious “mater” hidden “under writyng rude of apparence,” the “perlys and stones of grete prys,” effects a link between the textual matter and Margaret. The invocation of the hidden gems within, the “golde and perlys and stones of grete prys” and the “royal ruby” remain in the reader’s mind, entirely eclipsing the figures of the “chestys blake” and the “ful pore sak” Lydgate evokes for his writing. His elaborate conceit, austere though it is compared with Bokenham’s more diffuse and naturalized rendering, inverts the image of the gem-studded reliquary. The “chestys blake” enclose the valuable jewels that usually encrust the phylactery display devices housing the remains of the saint.

Bokenham invokes the conceit Lydgate uses in his humility statement, expanding upon the imagery he finds as a starting point in Lydgate’s prologue. To the images of the gold and the precious pearls and stones used by Lydgate, Bokenham layers on a number of organic analogies to further connote the relationship between the worthless author and the precious text he builds up in his prologue. The analogies he adds at the beginning, the rose and thorn, the corn and chaff, the ale and lees, and the mythical crepaude toadstone and toad at the end, surround the images of the gold and the pearl at the heart of Lydgate’s conceit. Bokenham’s long list of organic metaphors breaks up the image of Lydgate’s bejeweled reliquarial text, shifting Lydgate’s original emphasis from the hidden and locked away aspects associated with his
analogy to the qualities of protection, nurturance, and interdependence. In Lydgate, the stones which “ben ylooke and into warde ytake” suggest inaccessibility and things so precious they must be guarded against threat or danger. While the imagery Bokenham uses conveys the idea that something precious can derive from something of little value, it also speaks rather to the integral relationship that inheres between the two: the rose would not be protected from being plucked were it not for the thorns; the corn is dependent upon the chaff for the nutrients and moisture from the soil, and so on. None of the precious commodities could exist without that which is considered as waste to be disposed of, thereby enforcing the absolute requirement of Bokenham’s authorial role. The imagery also suggests, in several of the analogies, the protected space in which nurturance takes place: even the “verteuous crepaude,” the gemstone that mythically was believed to grow on or within the head of a toad, is described as “hys fyrst nest.” Bokenham takes the idea of the hidden matter of the text he finds as a starting point in Lydgate’s prologue, adapts and expands upon it for his own use, and through the imagery conflates text and Margaret, making text an extension of the saint herself. Further, in his addition of the rose and thorn imagery, Bokenham effects a hidden link to Jerome, making literal Lydgate’s claim that “ful ofte falleth” “under writyng rude of apparence / Mater is hid of grete intellygence.”

Bokenham takes the reliquarial suggestion within Lydgate’s text and inscribes the description of an actual relic of St. Margaret in the prologue to the text. It is not the “chestys blake” of Lydgate’s Prologue, nor is it, like most reliquaries, covered in gems; rather, Bokenham provides no description of the reliquary container itself, whatsoever, but for its “cristal,” a window through which the devotee might catch a glimpse of the relic itself. It is in this sense that Bokenham’s translation from his Latin sources, and a translation that establishes its
difference also from Lydgate’s *The Lyfe of Seynt Margarete*, makes the saint’s life more accessible in its less latinate, down-to-earth Suffolk language.

The Text as Reliquary

Margaret serves as an originary moment for Bokenham. Introduced to her in his youth, he continues to do his devotional devoir throughout his life, visiting her shrine in the black chanon’s priory before traveling abroad, and making a pilgrimage to her resting place at Mount Flask on his way home from official business in Rome. In his Aristotelian *accessus* to Margaret’s life, though Bokenham focuses primarily on the first and final causes of the work, allotting a mere nine lines to summarize the content of the text—the life of Margaret and her inordinate love of Christ—the “matere” of Margaret intrudes again within the “entent” section of the prologue. Clearly, Bokenham is intent on conveying the final cause, “the entent / Of the auctour fynally, & what he ment” (23-4), which requires well more than double the number of lines than for any of the other causes. Within this section, Bokenham inscribes the reliquary he claims as the first of two reasons for undertaking the work of translation. A relic of St. Margaret resides in an old priory in England very near his birthplace:

And no man wundyr thow I diligence
Do to plesyn the wurthy excellence
Of thys holy maydyn, for evene by
Wher I was born, in an old pryory
Of blake chanons hyr oo foot is,
Bothe flesh and boon, I dare seyn this,
Where thorgh a cristal bryht and pure
Men may beholde eche feture
Therof, saf the greth too only
And the hele, wych in a nunry
Been, Redyng clepyd, as they there seyn. (133-143)

This evocation of Margaret is very different than the saint’s relics implied in Lydgate’s conceit. Dispensing with the metaphorical imagery in Lydgate’s prologue, Bokenham grounds his rendering of Margaret’s phylactery in the saint’s “oo foot.” Neither a “royal ruby” nor “golde and perlyes and stones of grete prys,” hidden within a black chest or a poor sack, but the “flesh and boon” of the saint herself “men may beholde.” Bokenham dispels the typical bejeweled exterior of the phylactery housing the relics of a saint here. The one feature Bokenham focuses on is the crystalline window through which to view the saint’s relic.

In her work on resurrection and martyrdom, Caroline Walker Bynum summarizes the changes that took place in the shape of relic containers over time:

Most reliquaries from the early Middle Ages were gorgeous caskets, often of gold and jewels and sometimes made in the shape of churches. Such vessels both in their form and in their material divert attention from the precise nature of the broken and decaying fragments within and symbolically associate them with Christ’s assembled body, the church. After 1150, however, what German historians call expressive or “speaking” reliquaries became popular—reliquaries (shaped like fingers, feet, ribs, heads, etc.) that indicate by their form the nature of the fragment. In the twelfth century, such containers were still sheaths of gold and jewels, which revealed fragmentation but masked decay . . . By the thirteenth
century, they began to contain windows of crystal through which shards of tibia or bits of finger could be viewed.\textsuperscript{23} The speaking reliquaries, in that their shape “came increasingly to underline the nature of the body parts contained inside,” function metonymically, transferring a wholeness to the fragmented relic.\textsuperscript{24} Bynum notes the dual trajectory of the jewel-encrusted shaped reliquary in the promise of wholeness of the resurrected saintly body and the masking of decay, on the one hand, and the enshrinement of fragmentation, on the other: “[T]he arm, rib, and head reliquaries of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries deny putrefaction by covering the bits they contain in gold and crystal sheathing while simultaneously displaying in their shapes and transparency the body’s partition.”\textsuperscript{25}

Bokenham’s description of Margaret’s relic similarly inscribes what Bynum calls the dual trajectory of the reliquary. From the promise of the legend of a whole saint the reader is suddenly confronted with a phylactery enshrining only Margaret’s “oo foot.” Like Lydgate’s black chest, the black hue of the chanons lingers on, potentially contaminating Margaret’s disembodied foot, inscribing the very putrefaction that the reliquary seeks to mask. In the next line the reader learns that the saint’s foot is comprised of “bothe flesh and boon,” evidence of both the sanctity of the saint and the relic’s enduring power to ward off decay. Over the course of the following three lines, the mind’s eye is allowed to imaginatively dwell on “eche feture / Therof” in the relic’s resting place. Bokenham’s reiteration of promised wholeness, the possibility to “beho[l]den eche feture / Therof,” finds aural resonance in the “whole” sound of the word “beho[l]den” as well as his description of Margaret as “holy maydyn.” The word conveys both the potential accessibility of the relic as well as the proper attitude of devotional contemplation with which one ought approach it. The deferred placement of the word “therof” at
the beginning of the following line delays the revelation of the true condition of the foot that one might glimpse through the reliquary’s “cristal” window. At the same time, it mimics the word’s synechdochal emphasis, signaling the relationship not only of each part of the foot to the larger whole, but also of the foot to the saint’s entire body. Dividing the phrase up in this manner replicates the practice of bodily partition in the cult of saints’ worship witnessed in the lines that follow. It is indeed not possible to view “eche feture” of Margaret’s foot, for the line that follows modifies that whole mental image when the reader learns that she can view “eche feture / Therof, saf the greth too only.” The addition of the word “only” attempts to mitigate the loss the reader feels when she learns that the great toe is missing. But following upon this concession comes the realization that the heel is missing also. With each additional line, the foot is subjected to one loss after another, until Bokenham’s poetic embodiment of the relic reveals that there are, perhaps, four small toes and a bit of the ball of the foot remaining. However, the dispersal of the saint’s bones signifies the means by which the saint’s power is generative, radiating out, both geographically and over time. For, as Bokenham reminds the audience, one could find Margaret’s heel and big toe in a nunnery in Redyng. Like the “speaking” reliquaries that both memorialize fragmentation and mask decay, Bokenham’s text both memorializes and combats the notion of loss, holding out the promise of wholeness and the transference of the saint’s vturis to those who come into contact with her remains, be they physical or discursive.

In her research on the cultural work reliquaries perform, Cynthia Hahn focuses primarily on “arm” reliquaries, due partly to the number of arm reliquaries that survive, but also to the functional use to which this particular body-part reliquary is put in the liturgy and in cult devotional practices. If reliquaries do engage metaphorically with the objects they contain, Margaret’s foot is that which grounds the narrative and the vernacular project as well. A
reciprocity inheres between relic and reliquary, between container and contained. Of all the relics an order might possess of St. Margaret, the foot is the most iconic and powerful, for it is linked to her victory over the devil. Iconographically, the saint is often depicted as standing atop the dragon, with her foot placed on the dragon’s neck. Margaret defeats the second devil that appears to her in prison by pinning his neck to the ground with her foot: “Be his longe herys she gan hym kecche / And undyr hyr ryht foot she hym leyd” (731). The removal of the self-same foot at the demon’s request serves as a marker of her “ientynnesse” (750). Moreover, the foot is emblematic of the peripatetic mission of conversion associated with the order of the Augustinian friars to which Bokenham belongs, a fact he advertises in the opening Prologue. That Bokenham constructs his translation labor as devotional practice through the metaphor of pilgrimage is part of his larger strategy of inscribing translation within the economy of salvation.

Translation, Pilgrimage, Penance

Bokenham authorizes vernacular hagiography as a legitimate activity by constructing it as a laborious and physically demanding devotional practice that takes its toll on the body. He catalogues his bodily woes for his patron: “myn handys gynne to feynte, / My wyt to dullyn, and myn eyne bleynte [blinded] / Shuld be, ner helpe of a spectacle” (895-7). Nor are his instruments any less afflicted. He anthropomorphizes his pen as an animal whose “snowte . . . ny is waxyn vnthende [useless]” (901-2). The construction of translation as an arduous process works to further authorize his vernacular literary practice, for it more clearly differentiates and distinguishes it from leisure. In an extended analogy, Bokenham explicitly likens his labor-intensive translation to the hardships associated with going on pilgrimage:

Euene as a pilgrym so fare now y,
Bokenham styles himself quite deliberately as a pilgrim and maps his translation project onto the meritorious pilgrimages he has performed throughout his life. He is as a pilgrim performing his devotion to the saint, if not literally going on pilgrimage—though he does this as well as he tells his reader at a number of points in the Legendys—then making the discursive journey a metaphorical pilgrimage. Indeed, this literary venture benefited from a side trip Bokenham made on his return from Rome while on church business when delayed by rain. He tells his audience that he learned the story “bothe be scripture and eek be mowthe; / . . . / And al the processe I dede owt wryte / . . . / On Ynglysh, and it brout wyth me to Clare” (109; 120; 122).

Chaucer’s pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales notwithstanding, going on pilgrimage was a grueling and potentially dangerous undertaking, as Bokenham’s encounter five years earlier with a tyrant and five of his associates not far from Venice confirms. But ardent devotion, the desire to procure powerful indulgences, or a combination of the two precipitated much travel to the holy land to worship at the sepulchre of the Lord, or to the many saints’ shrines in Europe and England. As he states in the Prologue to the Life of Mary Magdalene, Bokenham delays taking
on a new commission until after completing the pilgrimage to St. James shrine at Santiago de Compostela:

My ladyis preyere I assentyd to,
Of my sympyl cunnyng aftyr þe myht,
Vp condycyoun þat she me wolde respyt
Of hir ientyllnesse tyl I acomplysyd
My pylgramage hade, wych promysyd
I to seynt Iamys wyth hert entere
Had to performe þe same yere,
þere to purchase thorgh penytence
Of myn oolde synnyss newe indulgence;
Where men contryth thorgh clere confessyoun
Mown of her synnys han plerer remyssyoun (5088-98)

The trip to Compostela would not have been taken lightly, as it entailed travel by ship as well as foot, and “could occupy the better part of a year.”

Fulton, discussing the vast number of pilgrims who made the journey to Jerusalem in 1033 AD, reminds her readers that there had to be a compelling motivation to undertake such a long, difficult, and perilous journey.

Opportunity is not in itself sufficient motivation to risk one’s life. There must also be a conviction that other potential benefits or dangers outweigh the risks—typically, in the case of pilgrimage, the anticipation of benefits to one’s spiritual or physical well-being, or dangers to one’s spiritual well-being lest the journey not be undertaken.
The reason Bokenham cites for undertaking the journey to St. James’ shrine is to win “[e yere of grace],” a full year’s indulgence for the sins accrued from the first day of January to the last day of December. The pilgrimage is penitential in nature and one that he will perform “wyth hert entere.” Eamon Duffy observes that “pilgrimages were often undertaken precisely as penance, and the element of hardship in them was of the essence.” Invoking the pilgrim in one of John Heywood’s plays, Duffy states that “it was the ‘dayly payne’ of the pilgrim which moved God to mercy”: “who sekyth sayntes for Crystes sake— / And namely suche as paynes do take / On fote to punyshe thy frayle body— / Shal therby meryte more hyely / Then any thynge done by man.”

As Bokenham makes clear, he will not purchase his year’s worth of indulgence with coin, but “thorgh penytence” performed by mouth like other men, “contryth thorgh clere confessyoun.” Approximately fifty years old at the time he is writing, Bokenham inscribes a conviction in the *Life of St. Agnes* that his time is limited. He argues strongly that contrition and amendment of one’s faults and sins is of the essence. Bokenham’s text explores the notion of pilgrimage as an analogy for vernacular translation and both translation and pilgrimage as a metaphor for a meritorious life. Like pilgrimage, vernacular translation in Bokenham’s imagined economy of salvation functions as an equivalent to the sacrament of penance. Duffy attests to the role pilgrimage played in the economy of salvation: “[L]ate medieval men and women were also well aware of the symbolic value of pilgrimage as a ritual enactment and consecration of their whole lives, helping to interpret them as a journey towards the sacred….This seems to have been the notion at work behind the late medieval burial recently discovered in Worcester Cathedral, where the corpse was laid out in his pilgrim’s gear, staff and cockle-shell by his side, his (little used) boots on his feet.” This understanding of pilgrimage as an analogy for the life
journey of the Christian soul in his quest for the celestial Jerusalem came to be one of the markers of the line between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the years of the Lollard movement. Arundel’s Constitutions made the orthodox church’s stance on the cult of saints’ devotional practices quite clear:

And chiefly concernyng the adoration of the holy crosse, the worshipping of Images, of Saintes, goyng on pylgrimage to certayne places, or the reliques of Saintes, . . . it shalbe commonly taught and preached, that the crosse and Image of the Crucifixe, and other Images of Saintes in the honour of them whom they represent, are to be worshipped with procession, bowyng of knees, offryng of francke incense, kyssinges, oblations, lightyng of candles, and pilgrimages, and with all other kynde of ceremonyes and manners that hath beene vsed in the tyme of our predecessours.33

While the ninth Constitution generally seeks to shore up the authority of the articles of the church as well as the authority of those who establish the them, it very explicitly targets the practices and teachings of the Lollards in its specific attention to those practices they refused to perform.

The number of extant Middle English and Anglo-Norman vernacular translations of the life of Saint Margaret of Antioch attests to her popularity among the laity in medieval England.34 Despite her popularity, however, Margaret met with criticism on a number of counts. The fabulous nature of Margaret’s trials and the question of authenticity led the author of the Legenda aurea to remind the audience that the version of the legend in which the dragon swallows Margaret and then bursts asunder was “apocryphal and not to be taken seriously.”35 In their attempt to mitigate such concerns, several translators alter the details in this passage as well.
as the means by which she escapes her confinement in the dragon’s mouth or belly. Margaret’s non-biblical status met with opposition from the members of the Wycliffite movement. Surviving Lollard sermon cycles provide evidence of the attitude toward post-biblical saints. Of one such cycle, Anne Hudson notes that the author(s) followed the prescribed order of the Sarum missal “with the exception of a severe reduction in the number of saints covered in the *Proprium Sanctorum*, a reduction in line with Lollard disapproval of post-biblical saints.” However, nearly any saint’s life met with disapproval, biblically sanctioned or not, on account of its extra-scriptural material. Saints’ lives fell under the umbrella of extra-scriptural narratives that were deemed questionable: “Sermons that did not ground themselves in the words of scripture, and essentially in the gospels and epistles, were of no value; the friars’ habit of using fables, poetry, or chronicles as major ingredients in their homilies, hoping thereby to win popular interest and applause, was to be deplored.” Hudson cites the testimony of Thomas Garenter who, a mere fifteen years earlier than Bokenham is writing, stated that “he held only the bible true, ‘for the legendes and lyves of saintes, I helde hem nought and the miracles wryten of hem I helde untrewye.’”

Given the attitude toward saints’ lives, it is perplexing to think that Bokenham would authorize the production of vernacular hagiography, already a questionable literary practice in the minds of most Lollards, through the metaphor of pilgrimage, one of the most railed-against devotional practices in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Many Lollards rejected the idea of the literal pilgrimage, appropriating the term rather as a metaphor for correct living as one journeyed heavenward, a trope which found literary expression in a number of texts from Guillaume Deguilleville’s *Le Pelerinage de la vie humaine* to William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. The problem with pilgrimage was that it served as the nexus for a number of practices
that developed around the adoration of the saints, with which the Lollards took issue, including
the veneration of images (idolatry), the purchasing of indulgences (a problem related to the lack
of true penitence), prayers to the saints (rather than to God or Christ), and the veneration of relics
(a problem with authenticity). Aside from these more heated issues was the problem of social
misconduct and immoral behaviors associated with pilgrimage. As John Bowers observes, “Far
from universally accepted, the practices were condemned as a waste of money as well as the
occasion for drunkenness and lechery, and these condemnations became fiercely voiced by the
lay and clerical dissidents increasingly identified as Lollards.” In one Latin sermon, the
Lollard author differentiates between meritorious (physical or spiritual) and blameworthy
pilgrimage. “Meritorious physical pilgrimage consists in visiting the poor, infirm, and
imprisoned and relieving them, and in attending church and hearing the word of the God . . .
False is the imagination of those who think that pilgrimage must mean the visiting of images and
the bones of saints; such practices are not to be found in scripture, for when Christ, his moth-
or disciples went to the temple they did so to hear or to preach the word of God.” The concerns
range from lack of Scriptural warrant to the idea that pilgrimage displaces the real work of
charity one might do at home. Attending church and listening to Scripture is repeatedly
emphasized. Another frequent complaint revolves around the issue of misspent money: “True
pilgrimage does not ignore other obligations, and uses its own goods; contemporary pilgrimage
is carried out on borrowed money. True pilgrims put their faith in God and his saints, not in
images or the errors of false tales; they give their money to the poor.” In his effort to reclaim
the word “pilgrimage,” the preacher pairs it with the words “meritorious,” “true,” and “spiritual,”
attempting to wrest it from its more popular associations.
A similar construction of pilgrimage as “meritorious” can be found in the contemporaneous *The Mary Play*. When Mary and Joseph go off to visit Elizabeth after Mary learns of Elizabeth’s pregnancy from Gabriel, she tells Joseph that the journey will be hard, but it needs to be performed as would a pilgrimage:

\[\text{Goth, husbond, } \text{how it be to } \text{30w peyne.}\]
\[\text{This journy I pray } \text{30w let us go fast,}\]
\[\text{..........................}\]
\[\text{Pylgrymagys and helpyngys wolde be go in hast;}\]
\[\text{e more } \text{e body is peynyd, } \text{e more is } \text{e mede.}\]
\[\text{Say } \text{3e 30ur devocyonys and I xal myn i-cast.}\]
\[\text{Now in } \text{jis journy, God mote us spede! (1424-31).}\]

In the Middle English translation of the *Rosarium Theologiae*, a florilegium with Lollard affinities, the entry for “Pilgrimage” describes pilgrimage as “double”: “that is to sey gode and yuell” (80/1). Like the Latin sermon which categorizes meritorious pilgrimage as both physical and spiritual, “Gode pilgremage” is further divided into “bodily” and “gostilye”: “Bodily pilgremage is a peyneful passyng in þe worlde for to do werkes of charite, and it ow to be done for a riȝtwisse and a profitable cause in gret abstinence” (80/1-5). It instructs the way in which bodily pilgrimage ought to be accomplished, and cites scriptural precedents for each: “it ow to be done wiþ gret hastyng & deuoute”; “it owe to be deuoute in praying and þinkyng”; “it ow to be discrete and war or wise”; “it ow to be merciful” (80/10, 15, 18, 21). “Gostily pilgremage,” on the other hand, “is goying to God be course or rennyng of luffe in þe waye of commandementis” (81/1-2).
Bokenham appears to be drawing upon these decidedly more Lollard conceptions of meritorious pilgrimage in his construction of hagiographical translation as a meritorious practice. I am not arguing that Bokenham would have conceived of himself as anything other than orthodox, but rather that in constructing translation as a laborious devotional practice on the order of meritorious pilgrimage, that he was inscribing translation as a charitable activity which would accrue a measure of grace within his imagined economy of salvation.

Intertwined with the matter of poetic skill is a larger and more pressing spiritual concern about whether the time allocated to the translating of saints’ lives makes the best use of his time, particularly, he states, in light of his advanced age and inevitable death. For though Bokenham constructs the translation of saints’ lives into the vernacular as a devotional practice having salvific power in the Life of St. Margaret, in the presumably later-written prologue to the Life of St. Anne, Bokenham’s speculations about the role of translation present it as a potential deterrent to penitential behavior. Bokenham recontextualizes the problem of poetic excellence, shifting the issue of “cunnyng” from that of rhetorical knowledge rather to that of self-knowledge. This realization of his fleeting life causes Bokenham to reconsider his English makyng for an altogether different reason:

Wherfore me thinkyt, & sothe it ys,
Best were for me to leue makynge
Of englysh, & suche as ys amys
To reformyn in my lyuynge.
For that ys a ryght souereyn cunynge. (1417-1421)

The work to be performed has less to do with poetry and translation and more to do with penance. This more “souereyn cunynge” possesses the power to win an immortality far
superior to that associated with any earthly literary acclaim. Bokenham opposes to the “cunnynge and eloquens” of the rhetoricians a “right souereyn cunnynge” that is of the utmost importance and far outweighs his earlier concern over lack of poetic and rhetorical skills. He implies that those who practice a “rhetorical” poetics, or a poetics based on rhetorical artifice, are more concerned with worldly fame than heavenly bliss, or perhaps that this may depend upon one’s stage in life. Bokenham specifies the means by which potentially anyone might come to bliss. If he “knowen hys trespasce / Wyth ful purpos of amendynge,” there is no doubt: “He may not fayle . . . to gon to blys.” And yet, Bokenham in a type of sleight of hand decides to turn his faculties rather to his texts which he means “to reforme & to redresse”:

For treuly I make a protestacyon
To seynt anne & to hyr dowter marye,
That yf eythyr errour in myn opynyon
Geyn good maners, or heresy
A-geyn the feyth I cowde aspye
Wythe alle diligence & besynesse
Alle my wyttes I wolde applye
It to reforme & to redresse. (1441-1448)

Bokenham uses the same language to discuss reform of oneself and reform of one’s textual errors. Does writing and reforming texts lead to self-knowledge and amendment? He seems to make the argument that vernacular translation of the lives of saints is a valid substitute for the kind of editing of one’s own conscience and life he recommends for all those seeking salvific bliss. Bokenham “trust[s]” the sovereign goodness of Jesus and Mary that “they wyl accepten myn entencyon.” He convinces himself that what he is doing is morally correct and as important.
as, or perhaps a necessary part of, redressing his own faults. If one of the key points to the existence of the treatise is *caritas*, it may be that Bokenham intends to perform charity through writing, a type of meritorious pilgrimage. Rather than spend time reforming himself, seeking out his conscience and righting his own wrongs, he will spend the time writing saints lives and reforming them of any errors.

**Translators of Saints**

In the “translation” narrative that follows the life of St. Margaret, Bokenham aligns himself with “Austyn,” the dedicated Augustinian abbot who, after St. Margaret’s church in Antioch burns to the ground, is compelled to move the bodies of Saints Margaret and Euprepye to Italy. In his effort to enlist help with the move, Augustine reveals the “entent” for his undertaking:

\[
\text{Felawys . . . treuly myn entent}
\]

\[
\text{Meuyd is evene of pure devocyoun,}
\]

\[
\text{Owt of this place wych is her brent,}
\]

\[
\text{And browt as ye see to gret desolacyoun,}
\]

\[
\text{Of summe relykys to make a translacyoun}
\]

\[
\ldots\text{ an in Pavye hem do shryne. (1030-6)}
\]

Bokenham describes Augustine’s “translacyoun” task in similar terms as his own stated “entent” in the *Prologue*. The workers give their full approval “wyth ryht glad cher / Fully they approuyd al his entent / And seyden, whan-ever in this mater / He wolde procede, they shuld assent” (1037-40). This alignment of intention with “pure devocyoun” and the others’ assent further authorizes Bokenham’s own intention to translate St. Margaret’s life. The number of people it
takes to move the saint from Antioch to Italy speaks to the collaboration required to accomplish the task but also to the fellowship generated through the connection to the saint. Bokenham’s translation of Margaret’s afterlife preserves a great many of the names of the individual actors that are brought together in the undertakings described within the text: Vbald, Austyn, Lucas, Robert, Bonyface, etc. All is done “dylygently and wyth deuocyoun” and with a great deal of “labour.”

In the Prologue to the *Life of St. Agnes*, Bokenham links his authorial pretensions with those of St. Ambrose and strengthens the implicit connections he makes between discursive and physical translation of the saint in the *Life of Saint Margaret*. The impetus that Bokenham cites for Ambrose’s “blyssyd labour” is similar to his own stated intentions for translating Margaret’s life, thus linking authoritatively their literary endeavors:

\begin{verbatim}
Gramercy, seynt Ambrose, holy doctour,
Wych to seynt Anneys haddyst swych afeccyoun
Dat pu woldyst takyn Dis blyssyd labour
Hyr lyf to wrytyn for uirgynys instruccyoun,
Wych in an angle Jou founde of oblyuyoun
Pryuylye hyd, & haddyst pyte
That it by neglygence shuld lost haue be. (4724-8)
\end{verbatim}

Bokenham represents Ambrose’s labor as arising from his great “afeccyoun,” the same motives that inspire Bokenham himself to translate Margaret’s life. Not only does Bokenham link Ambrose’s laborious and charitable task to those who physically transfer St. Margaret’s and the other saints’ bodies, but he also clearly links his own task to Ambrose through a similar construction of the significance of Ambrose’s labor. The words Bokenham uses to thank
Ambrose for saving St. Agnes’ life from the “angle” of “oblyuyoun” make the implied link between Bokenham’s translation labor with those who physically transfer the body of the saint explicit in the figure of St. Ambrose. Bokenham’s phrasing effectively links the two kinds of translation, the physical transfer of the relics and the discursive transfer of the saint’s life. Like the remains of St. Margaret which lie hidden deep within the earth and covered over with brambles and bushes, St. Agnes’ discursive life is unearthed from the “angle” of “oblyuyoun,” the very words Bokenham uses in the opening Prologue to describe the possible fate of his own text were its author’s name to be revealed: “And so, for hate of hym and eek despyht, / Perauenture fewe shuld haue delyht / It to redyn, and for this chesoun / Throwyn it in the angle of oblyuyoun” (37-40).

Bokenham twice interrupts his “translation” tale to signal his elision of the many miracles that take place over the course of Margaret’s body’s journey. The first time takes place during the days following the dedication ritual of the newly translated saints to Tuscany, but he cites haste, the priority of other things, and a desire to “eschewyn prolixyte”: “god wrowt / Manye grete miraclys, as I wrytyn haf see. / Albe-it for hast that I reherce hem nowt, / Or for to other thyngys I wold spede me, / And also to eschewyn prolixyte” (1176-81). The second time occurs after yet another transference of the saints’ bodies and the founding and consecration of a church, but he begs off writing them all down, citing “the gret ocupacyoun” it would take: “If they were wrytyn, it contune more / Wold than al the remnaunth before” (1385-6). The only miracles that Bokenham retains within the narrative are those related directly to the physical transference of Margaret’s remains. Truly, Bokenham’s focus is elsewhere. Bokenham concentrates rather on the complex narrative of the multiple “translations” of St. Margaret’s remains. In a similar manner, Bokenham’s lives, by playing down the miracles, work to effect an identification with
the saints, rather than a distancing, and an emphasis on embodying the saints’ virtue rather than their miraculous powers. The saints are models of virtuous living, not iconic idols to be revered.45

Suffolk Dialect and Community

Bokenham provides further evidence of his motivations for writing vernacular hagiography in the introduction to the *Mappula Angliae*. In the early 1440s, Bokenham translated an abridged version of Ralph Higden’s *Polychronicon*, an early-fourteenth-century Latin history of the world. The resulting Middle English prose text, the *Mappula Angliae*, contains only those chapters dealing with the culture, history, and geography of England.46 In the introduction, Bokenham tells his readers that he translated this text specifically as an aid to the readers of his English saints’ lives “for edificacioun and comfort of alle tho þe whiche shuld redene or here” his book. The epilogue, entitled “A short epiloge excusatorie of the Translatours rudenes,” is interesting for what it relays about Bokenham’s decision to write in his regional “modur-tounge.” It follows directly upon the chapter on the language and peoples of Britain. Bokenham, in typical fifteenth-century fashion, beseeches his readers to support him though his treatise

be not so convenyently nor so eloquently expressid & spokyn yn englyssh tounge as þe excellence of þe auctours latyn stile requirithe. For, certeynly, þe natyff rudnesse of my modur-tounge hathe so inflectyd & cankeryd my speche & my language wt þe barbarisme of þe soyle þe wch I have be fostryd & brought forthe yn of youthe, þat y neyþer may ner can oþer þynge uttryn ne shewyne þen hit
hathe been usyd & acustomyd to, Aftir þe sentence of Oracius þe poet, seyinge on þis wyse: versus:

Quo semel est imbuta recens servabit odorem testa diu & c. —

That is to sey: syche savour as þe newe shelle takithe, when hit is elder hit kepythe. And þe wolde proverbe seithe: custome & use is a noþer nature or kynde. 47

In the “epiloge excusatorie,” though he denigrates his “moder-tounge” as rude and barbarous, ultimately Bokenham redeems his Suffolk dialect. He acknowledges a disparity between the high style of his source text Ralph Higden’s Latin chronicle and his own treatise, “not so convenyently nor so eloquently expressid” and attributes this lack to the “natyff rudnesse” of his “modur-tounge.” In the characterization of his language as inferior to Higden’s Latin, Bokenham returns to the plant imagery he uses in the prologue to St. Margaret to conceptualize the relationship inhering between author and textual product. There, the text was the rose and he was the thorn. Here Bokenham situates the textual plant within a larger context; the environment is that which causes the stunting of his speech and prevents his language from achieving its full flowering. The barbarous soil in which Bokenham has been nurtured is the mother-tounge; it has cankered and inf[l]ected his speech and language. Bokenham’s attribution of native rudeness to his own vernacular is thus not simply an act of humility, but a move to align the vernacular’s local regionalism with a natural outgrowth more associated with God and the divine plan than with art and human intervention. Bokenham redeems his use of English by attributing to it a natural origin, a type of second nature related to “custom” in the second of his adages, a local Suffolk saying. After translating Horace’s Latin into the vernacular, Bokenham supplements the adage with the “wolde proverbe”: “custome & use is a noþer nature or kynde,” suggesting not
only an equivalence between the two, but because the Suffolk saying is “kynde,” that it is
rustically superior. In the *Mappula* epilogue, Bokenham clarifies the way that writing in the
Suffolk dialect, one of the ways in which he retools Margaret’s textual reliquary for local
consumption, appears to be part of his larger moral program. This is yet another way in which
Bokenham differentiates his vernacular hagiography from that of Lydgate. Though both are
writers from the Suffolk region (Lydgate is at Bury St. Edmund, a mere ten miles northeast of
Stoke-Clare) Lydgate employs a more aureate diction.48

Chapter sixteen of the *Mappula*, the final chapter which Bokenham translates from
Higden, deals with the diverse “tungis & languagis” of the “dwellers of þis lond,” a tale that is
every bit as unstable as the continually supplanted political realms in Margaret’s “translation”
story. While this section of Bokenham’s treatise remains a fairly close translation of the original,
Bokenham’s authorial interjections signal his concord or disagreement with his source author’s
observations. For instance, in a passage leading into a discussion of the “condicions and
maners” of inhabitants of the land, Bokenham interjects the phrases “quod he” and “quod
Ranulphus,” thereby differentiating his author’s comments as signally belonging to Higden
alone. In the very next chapter, the epilogue he adds to his book, Bokenham requests of the
“reder” or “herere” of his little book that if “ony þynge be tolde or saide that may not evydently
be provyd for trouthe, þat þey bouchesaffe to perdowne me þer-of. For, lyke as I haue saide
beforn in dyueris chapituras: I of no þynge seyde þere-yyn chalenge ne desire to be holdyn
neythur auctour ne assertour, ne wylle aske no more but tobyn holden oonly the pore
compilatour & owte of latyne in to ynglyffh the rude & symple translatour” (34). On the other
hand, despite invoking the status merely of “compilatour,” Bokenham makes it clear that if there
is anything in his text that “may plesyn or delytyn hym, techyn hym or remembryn hym” that he
would be grateful if the reader or auditor would say a prayer for him “for charyte” (34). There are definite instances in the *Mappula* when Bokenham obscures the line between himself and his source author. One of those times occurs at the beginning of the chapter on languages in a history detailing the “commyxtioun” and “corrupcioun” of the “natif toungis” of the English people, a discussion that resonates with Bokenham’s vernacular task. The chronicle then turns to the way in which English became corrupted: “And þis corrupcioun of englyffhe men yn þer modre-tounge, begunne, as I seyde, wt famylyar commixtion of Danys firste & of Normannys aftir.” The phrase “as I seyde,” absent in Higden’s chapter, works in such a way that the reader might understand these words not only as a reminder, but also as a claim on the information being relayed. The passage cites two reasons for the corruption of the mother-tongue. By decree of William the Conqueror, “children in gramer-scolis ageyns e consuetude & e custom of alle oþer nacyons, here owne modre-tonge lafte forsakyne, lernyd here Donet on frenffh & to construyn yn ffrenffh and to maken here latyns on þe same wyse.” The second cause is that “lordis sonys & alle nobylle & worthy mennys children were fyrste set to lymyn & speken ffrenffh, or þan pey cowde spekyne ynglyffh, and þat alle wrytyngis and endentyngis & alle- maner plees and contrauercyes in courtis of the lawe, & alle-maner Reknyngis & countis yn hows-oold schulle be doon yn the same. And þis seeynge, Pe rurales, þat þey myghte semyn pe more worshipfulle and honorable & þe redyliere comyn to þe famyliarite of þe worthy & þe grete, leftyn hure modre-tounge & labouryd to kunne spekyne ffrenffhe; and thus by processe of tyme barbariþed thei in bothyn & spolyne neythyr good ffrenffh nor good Englyffh.” (30) Although much of this is in Higden’s text, Bokenham adds little touches—for instance, the comment that even the Latin *Donatus* is construed in French—and tonal changes.49 The passage clearly resonates with Bokenham. The corruption of the mother tongue occurs at the very
beginning—in childhood—in the schools and at home. The proper thing to do then is to steep
the child in the language rooted to regional birthplace. Bokenham constructs proper English as
something which existed prior to the accretion and commingling of other languages from the
very beginning, a historical, but ongoing process. The French incursion is only the most recent
in a continuous wave of intrusions.

The quotation Bokenham cites in the *Mappula* epilogue—“Quo semel est imbuta recens
servabit odorem testa diu & c. / That is to sey: syche savour as þe newe shelle takithe, when hit
is elder hit kepythe”—derives from Horace’s “Epistle 1.2” to Lollius Maximus, a letter that
extols the benefits of reading the classics for moral edification. Would Bokenham have been
familiar with Horace’s letter to Lollius, or would he have known the adage only from a
florilegium or another author’s work? A Middle English verse translation of a portion of
Claudian’s *De Consulatu Stilichonis*, tentatively attributed to Bokenham and recently studied for
its potential humanist tendencies, might argue for his greater knowledge of and access to the
classics than might be presumed otherwise.50 Given late medieval England’s relative lack of
acquaintance with the works of Claudian, except perhaps *De raptu Proserpinae*, A. S. G.
Edwards has observed that the choice of Claudian’s poem was “a particularly considered one,
suggesting some very specific interest in the actual content.”51 Daniel Wakelin, too, concedes
that although the author of the Middle English *De Consulatu Stilichonis* “sometimes respond[s]
to antiquity in ways similar to those of the writers of fleeting allusions,” the author displays
“fuller and deeper reading of the classics,” responding “in more complex ways and,
intriguingly,” reflecting upon his “ways of reading and responding” within the text.52 While
Edwards allows that the author may have found the translated passage in a florilegium, the
evidence he brings to bear in his article suggests otherwise. As a friar in the Augustinian order,
Bokenham may have had access to the libraries of other Austin friar houses. For example, Edwards cites the existence of “a larger collection of Claudian’s work in a manuscript in the library of the Austin friars at York in 1435, a fact which at least provides a link of the utmost tenuousness between the work and another house of the same order at Clare.” Bokenham was well traveled and undertook at least two trips to Rome, where he may have come into contact with classical source material. And it is possible that Bokenham may have been familiar with the content of Horace’s letter, if not the letter itself. Horace’s Epistle 1.2 was frequently quoted by the Church Fathers, including Jerome, Augustine, and Isidore of Seville, because Horace was among the first to discuss the moral and allegorical interpretations of Homer.

The first third of Horace’s letter extols the virtues of reading Homer. Ulysses serves as the font of wisdom, virtue, and restraint compared with Paris, Agamemnon, and Penelope’s suitors. In the second section of his letter, Horace warns Lollius that it is never too soon to give up one’s errant ways and choose to live rightly. Wanting ever more has never “Freed their owner’s sick body from fever, or his spirit / From care” (48-9). Having more will not affect bodily woes or spiritual cares; rather, the key lies within the restraint of desires. This section begins with a carpe diem theme: “Dare to be wise: begin! He who postpones the time for right-living resembles the rustic who’s waiting until the river’s passed by” (41-2). Horace ends the section with a foreshadowing of the means to right living: “Sincerum est nisi vas, quodcumque infundis acescit.” [Unless the vase is clean whatever you pour in will sour.] The quotation in Horace’s letter sums up the point he has attempted to make throughout. Horace equates the liquid or wine poured into the newly made container as the literature one is saturated with in one’s youth, and is that which constructs the nature of the container’s essential and primary odor. What gets poured in is of the essence. And Bokenham seems to be arguing that his liquor, saints’
lives inflected with a native English rusticity, while not as eloquent as the Latin style, has the power to infuse one with morals and virtues, a goal perhaps at odds, in his mind, with those who write in a more rhetorically proficient English. What Bokenham achieves through the use of Horace’s line is the linking of the literary with *virtus*. Bokenham constructs his conception of vernacular hagiographical translation in such a way as to suggest that his saints’ lives will fulfill a similar function: the legends of saints are morally correct texts fit for consumption by the young or by anyone who wishes to be reminded of the virtues with which he or she was (or ought to have been) steeped in youth.

The quotation provides an additional link back to Jerome, who uses the same adage in Epistle 10 in his effort to explain why, though he labors to write the life of St. Paul the Hermit in a simple and accessible style and language, more rhetorical flourishes will make their way into the text. This second link to Jerome bolsters our reading of Bokenham’s intention to follow in saintly footsteps with respect to style and translation methodology. As with Horace’s epistle, whether Bokenham was acquainted with Jerome’s letter, or merely a florilegium which recorded Horace’s adage and Jerome’s use of it, is again at issue. That Bokenham was not only acquainted with Jerome’s life of St. Paul, but used it as a source cannot be doubted, however, as he makes mention of it in the “Prologue” to his own *Life of St. Paul the Hermit*. Given Bokenham’s explicit intention to write simply and plainly as well as the context in which Jerome uses the adaptation of Horace’s saying, it is tempting to consider that Bokenham was familiar with the letter as well as the *Life*. In the epistle, Jerome comments on the manner in which he translates the life of Paul the Hermit for the centenarian, Paul of Concord, to whom Jerome writes: “I have taken great pains to bring my language down to the level of the simpler sort” (10.3.3). Jerome couches that statement with the very adage which Bokenham uses in the
chapter in *Mappula Angliae* in which he discusses his methodology: “But, somehow or other, though you fill it with water, the jar retains the odor which it acquired when first used” (10.3.3). Though Jerome tells Paul that he purposefully labors to write his saint’s life simply, he acknowledges that his writing is infused with the literature in which he was steeped in youth. Though he strives for a language as pure and simple as water, his writing is inflected with the classical poets. Bokenham may be alluding to Jerome’s intention to write simply despite his own early education in the classics, an intention that requires labor.

Bokenham cites two “causes” for the existence of his translation of the legend of St. Margaret. The first, he states, “is for to excyte / Mennys affeecyoun to haue delyte / Thys blyssyd virgyne to loue & serue” (127-9). The second is in answer to Thomas Burgh’s “inportune and besy preyere” for a Middle English translation of St. Margaret’s life and passion. Considering that Burgh’s request was “growndyd in pete,” for Bokenham not to grant “were ageyn cheryte / Hys desyr lengere for to denye” (193-4), for it is Bokenham’s love for Burgh “wyth herte entere” that moves him. Bokenham’s translation is a reification of affection: the capacity to feel love and desire for the saint, on the one hand, and for his younger colleague, on the other. Bokenham locates his intention and his text at the midway point between the two: the incitement to desire and the very fulfillment of that desire. In a manner of thinking, this parallels the way Bokenham inserts himself within the literary record, as a midpoint in the ongoing process of *translatio studii*.

For Bokenham, it is of a piece—vernacular literary production, the excitation to devotion, *imitatio sancti*, and devotional practice, be it pilgrimage, reading or writing of saints’ lives: all stem from a center that looks both backwards and forwards, located at the midway point between excitation and fulfillment, between past and future, but that is founded and grounded in the body
of the saint, and “be congruyte of simylytude” in Bokenham’s textual reliquary. The saint’s body founds and grounds Bokenham’s vernacular hagiographical project. Bokenham enshrines the very process of translation and the collaborative nature of the inscription of the history of people, figured as memorializing and combatting loss, a textual remnant of a tradition of translating saints’ lives that has the power to impart a benevolent protection to those who read it as well as the power to transfer the potential for virtue to those who come in contact with it. Bokenham’s text reveals the notion that it takes a provincial village to translate a life. In addition to the means by which he inserts himself into the discursive afterlife of the saint, the female body of the saint is the means by which Bokenham constructs translation as collaborative and facilitated through the many who have labored and devoted their lives to translate her, be it physically or discursively. It is a process that must be undertaken and continually renewed for different times and circumstances.

In that Bokenham grounds his text in the devotion and love that St. Margaret inspires, the saint’s body sanctifies the work but also imbues the text with a similar power, the power to sanctify and to generate an affective capacity to feel in those who come into contact with it. The saint’s body links text to textual corpus and vernacular author to all those who have played (and will play) a part in the afterlife of the saint, discursive or otherwise. Ultimately, Bokenham’s text argues for the collaborative nature of translation and the fellowship that results in a network of patronage and authorship.

Like the “cristal” reliquary, Bokenham’s vernacular text not only houses and protects the saint, but promises access to her through an embodied poetics of revelation. The image of the transparent reliquary, in this sense, may be read effectively as a _mise en abyme_ for the vernacular project as a whole. Bokenham translates Margaret’s life from both written and oral sources out
of Latin and the Italian vernacular into his own local “Suthfolk” dialect. Like the “speaking”
reliquaries that interpreted the saint’s remains for the devotional audience, Bokenham reshapes
the frame surrounding Margaret’s vita in such a way as to allow her refurbished textual reliquary
to speak simply on her behalf, as much for authorizing his own vernacular translation project as
for stirring devotion.


For Bokenham’s remarks in the Life of Mary Magdalene, see Serjeantson, Bokenham’s Legendys, 5035 ff. All quotations will refer to this edition. Until recently, MS Arundel 327 was the only witness of the many lives Bokenham had claimed to translate. In the Mappula Angliae, Bokenham states that he made a complete translation of Jacobus de Voragine’s Legenda Aurea as well as translated a number of English saints’ lives (C. Horstmann, “Mappula Angliae von Osbern Bokenham,” Englische Studien 10 (1887), 6; see also Serjeantson, Bokenham’s Legendys, xvii ff.) In 2004, however, a manuscript containing over one hundred eighty saints’ lives, including a complete translation of Jacob de Voragine’s Latin Legenda aurea, now referred to as the Abbotsford manuscript (Advocates Library, Abbotsford MS), was discovered in the Sir Walter Scott Library, and was later attributed to Bokenham on firm literary and paleographical evidence. For a description of the manuscript and its contents, see Simon Horobin, “A Manuscript Found in Abbotsford House and the Lost Legendary of Osbern Bokenham,” English Manuscript Studies, 1100–1700 14 (2007): 132–64; and Horobin, “Politics, Patronage, and Piety in the Work of Osbern Bokenham,” Speculum 82, no. 4 (Oct. 2007) 932–49. Though the Abbotsford manuscript contains nine of the thirteen saints’ lives in the Legendary, all traces of patronage have been excised (Horobin, “Politics,” 941; Horobin, “A Manuscript,” 140). Horobin speculates that the manuscript originally contained all thirteen of the lives and attributes the missing legends to lost leaves. In addition, the Abbotsford manuscript houses a number of saints’ lives not found in the Legenda aurea, including a number of English saints, among them those mentioned in the introduction to Bokenham’s Mappula Angliae: Saints Cedde, Felix, Edwarde, and Oswald (Horobin, “A Manuscript,” 132–64; see also Horobin, “Politics,” 932–49). For the reordering of the saints’ lives in the Abbotsford MS, see Horobin, “Politics,” 941.

Scholars who read an echo of Chaucer’s Legends of Good Women in these lines include Delaney, Impolitic Bodies, 56; and Alice Spencer, “Osbern Bokenham Reads the ‘Prologue’ to the Legend of Good Women: The Life of St. Margaret,” in Standing in the Shadow of the Master: Chaucerian Influences and Interpretations, ed. Kathleen A. Bishop (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 160–204.


Ordin bifurcat iter: tum limite nititur artis,
Tum sequitur stratam naturae. Linea stratae
Est ibi dux, ubi res et verba sequuntur eundem
Cursum nec sermo declinat ab ordine rerum.
Limite currit opus, si praelocet aptior ordo
Posteriora prius, vel detrahat ipsa priora

Ordo bifurcat iter: tum limite nititur artis,
Posterius; sed in hoc, nec posteriora priori,
Ordine transposito, nec posteriore priora
Dedecus incurrunt, immo sine lite licenter
Alternas sedes capiunt et more faceto
Sponte sibi cedunt: ars callida res ita vertit,
Ut non pervertat; transponit ut hoc tamen ipso
Rem melius ponat. (18/87–99)

17 Carroll Hilles also notes the association Bokenham makes between the saint and his text, and comments briefly that these images evoke “the young women’s innocence through images of goodness generated in filth or corruption . . . These metaphors demonstrate that something pure and precious can come from dirt and waste.” Hilles, “Gender and Politics,” 203.
18 Bokenham uses a similar construction in the *Life of St. Christine* to convey the miraculous occurrence of a child fostered in a heathen environment choosing to follow Christ:

But lych as oftyn off a full scharp thorn
Flouris sprygyn fayre and delycious,
And off foull erthe growythe good korn,
Gold eek and siluyre ant stonys precious,
So off these hethene folk and vicyous,
Wych in ydolatrie here lyfe dyde fyne,
A mayde both fayre and eke gracious
Was born, whos name thei clepyd Cristyne. (2115–22)

In addition to the rose and thorn, Bokenham combines the images of the corn, precious metals, and gems that all have their origin in the “foull erthe.” John Capgrave uses the same rose imagery in his life of St. Katherine. *The Life of St. Katharine of Alexandria*, ed. Carl Horstmann (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co. for the Early English Text Society, 1893), ll. 52–56. On the association of the rose imagery with the Virgin Mary, see Jacqueline Jenkins, “‘This Lyf en Enlyssh Tunge’: Translation Anxiety in Late Medieval Lives of St. Katherine,” *The Medieval Translator: Traduire au Moyen Age 8: The Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages*, edited by Rosalyn Voaden, René Tixier, Teresa Sanchez Roura, and Jenny Rebecca Rytting (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2003), 147.
Due to the treachery that takes place in Antioch, Margaret’s church is burned to the ground. The men who help Augustine unearth Margaret’s remains “anoon so depe they dede in race” (1048). After wars and great instability, the Vale Palantes falls to ruin and Margaret is moved to Ruyllyan, but this too falls subject to destruction and is described as a wilderness. Margaret’s unearthing requires much digging and labour: “Men thedyr he sent to make serchyng; / And they there labouryd in deluyng / In the cherche paument fro morwe tyl eue, / But they founde nowt” (1306–9). They return with more people and dig in a place “Where growe brymblys & many a thorn” and finally find “the bodyes of the virgyns two, / Felcyte an eek Seynt Margarete / Thre rybbys ther they foundyn also / Of Cosme & Damyan, smellyngful swete” (1320, 1324–27).


These dates are based on Anne’s childbearing years. In 1415, Anne married Edmund Mortimer, who died of the plague ten years later. Anne then married John Holland, second Duke of Exeter, and gave birth to a son in 1430 and a daughter in 1432, the same year in which she died. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, s.v. “Mortimer, Edmund (V)” (1391-1425).

For the literary history of rhyme royal, see Martin Stevens, “The Royal Stanza in Early English Literature,” Publications of the Modern Language Association 94, no.1 (1979), 62–76. Bokenham composed eight of the thirteen lives (not including the prologues) in rhyme royal, which comprises of lines in the collection. Margaret’s life displays all three of the verse forms used by Bokenham in the Legendys: rhyme couplets in the Prologue, an 8-line stanza which Chaucer used in the Monk’s Tale, rhyming ababbcbcd in the inner “Prologue” to Margaret’s life, and finally rhyme royal in the life proper and the “translacyoun” account. For more on the metre, verse-forms, and rhyme-schemes, see Serjeantson Legendys, xxvi–xxviii, and Delaney, A Legend of Holy Women: A Translation of Osbern Bokenham’s Legends of Holy Women (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), xviii. For a discussion of metre in the Abbotsford MS, see Horobin, “A Manuscript Found.”


Bynum, Resurrection, caption on plate 19 of a thirteenth-century silver arm reliquary with carbochon crystals.

Bynum, Resurrection, 209.


Bokenham proves a reliable source regarding the plenary indulgence given at Compostela, still in effect today. According to the Confraternity of Saint James website, “in the C15th few pilgrims sailed from England except in Holy Years,” those years in which the year-long plenary indulgence was conveyed. “It is widely claimed that in 1122 Pope Calixtus II gave Compostela the privilege of granting a plenary indulgence to those who visited the shrine of the Apostle in each year when the saint's day fell on a Sunday, and while there made their confession, attended Mass, gave a donation for the upkeep of the shrine, and undertook to perform good works. The papal bull of 1179 making the privilege perpetual is now thought to be a C15th forgery. The
earliest documented account of indulgences granted to jacobean pilgrims by the Papacy dates from the mid-C13th, and the earliest jubilee year identified by Constance Storrs is 1395. In any case, the gaining of the plenary indulgence became a dominant motivation for the pilgrimage (in the C15th few pilgrims sailed from England except in Holy Years). Confession and communion remained essential to the granting of the certificate of having completed the pilgrimage, first called la autentica. Originally hand-written and sealed, with slips of paper attesting confession and communion pasted on, it became in the C17th (printing reached Galicia very late) a printed document which included the confirmation of confession and communion. These two elements appear to have been dropped from the compostela in the mid-C18th, and the text as we now have it is little changed since then.” Confraternity of Saint James website, accessed October 1, 2012, http://www.csj.org.uk/compostela.htm. Bokenham does not relate the details of whether he traveled on foot or by sea.


Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 191–92.


Middle English lives of St. Margaret include the thirteenth-century prose Seinte Margarete from the Katherine Group, the South English Legendary Life of St. Margaret, the Stanzaiic Life of Margaret, the anonymous life from the Mirk’s sermon on St. Margaret in the Festival, and John Lydgate’s “Lyfe of Seynt Margarete.” See J. Burke Severs, ed. A Manual Of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500 (CT: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1970).


Sherry Reames, introduction to “Margaret of Antioch,” in Middle English Legends of Women Saints (TEAMS Middle English Texts Society, Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 2003), 111.


Hudson, Premature Reformation, 196.

Hudson, Premature Reformation, 303.

John M. Bowers, Chaucer and Langland, 175.


The Middle English Translation of the Rosarium Theologie. Christina Von Nolcken, ed. Heidelberg: Carl Winter · Universitätsverlag, 1979). References are to page and line numbers.

A number of scholars have observed the parallels Bokenham makes between himself and the Augustinian friar who physically translates Margaret’s remains, as well as the larger trope at work in the text that connects discursive translation of the saint’s life to physical “translation” of the saint’s remains. See, for instance, Simpson, Reform and Cultural Revolution, 396 ff.; Alice Spencer, “Bokenham Reads the ‘Prologue,’” 190–1; Margaret Bridges, “Uncertain

44 In Chapter 2 of Mappula, Bokenham, following his source author Ranulph Higden, tells the reader that Ysidorus, in his book of etymologies, calls England “Anglia of angulus, þe wch is a Cornere, ffor Englonde, quod he, stant in a Cornere of the worlde” (Horstmann, Mappula Angliae, 7/7–9). The phrase, representative of the tenuousness of the historical and the historical record, serves as a pun for Bokenham: St. Agnes’s life is unearthed from one angle of oblivion only to end up in another corner of the world, the Angle of England. Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this edition.

45 Horobin discerns a similar trend in Bokenham’s other saints lives belonging to the Abbotsford MS. As Horobin observes of the Life of St. Agnes, Bokenham expands upon his source text to emphasize particular qualities: “her humility, generosity, continence and abstinence, and willingness to help others” (“Politics,” 936).

46 Serjeantson, Bokenham’s Legendys, xvi. The Mappula Angliae survives uniquely in MS. Harley 4011, f. 144ff. See also C. Horstman, “Mappula Angliae,” 1–6. Higden was a monk at St. Werburg Abbey in Chester. The Polychronicon, billed as a “History of the World,” survives in more than 120 manuscripts and in several versions. After Higden’s death, the work served as the basis for several continuations of the chronicle. See John Taylor, “The Development of the Polychronicon Continuation,” The English Historical Review 76, no. 298 (Jan. 1961): 20–36. For more information about the contents of Harley 4011, see Horobin, “Politics,” 948. In addition to the chapters he translates from Higden, Bokenham adds an introduction and an epilogue entitled, “A short epiloge excusatorie of the Translatours rudenes.” Bokenham distills the final twenty-two chapters of Book 1 of the Polychronicon into fifteen chapters, combining chapters, and omitting, adding, and transposing material. The first letter of each of the chapters spells out “F OSBERNV[ }S BOKEN[H][H]AM,” a mimicry of Higden’s acrostic in the Polychronicon whose chapters spelled out Præsentum chronicam compilavit Frater Ranulphus Monarchus Cestrensis.

47 Horstmann, Mappula Angliae, 33/1–14.

48 For a consideration of Bokenham’s claim to be writing in Suffolk dialect, see Horobin, “Speaking and Writing in Suffolk Speech: the Language and Dialect of Osbern Bokenham,” in þe laurer of oure Englische Tonge, eds. Marcin Krygier and Liliana Sikorska, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009).

49 “The preeminent textbooks of late antique and medieval grammar were the Ars minor and Ars maior of Aelius Donatus (fl. 350), mainstays of curricula and commentaries for the next millenium.” Donatus was the teacher of St. Jerome. For the influence of Donatus in the schools and on medieval grammarians, see Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter, Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, A.D. 300–1475 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 62.


51 Edwards, “Claudian’s *De Consulatu Stilichonis*,” 267–68. For the humanist tendencies in the poem, see Wakelin, *Humanism*, 70 ff.

52 Wakelin, *Humanism*, 70.

53 Edwards, “Claudian’s *De Consulatu Stilichonis*,” 268, n. 4.

54 Bokenham makes reference to “the last tyme” he was in Italy in the *Prologue* (108), which implies that he was there at least one other time. It was during this trip that Bokenham, delayed by rain, visited the shrine to St. Margaret and learned her story from written and oral sources. In 1423, Bokenham was granted permission to visit Rome. Francis Roth, *History of the English Austin Friars*, vol. 2, Sources (New York: Augustinian Historical Institute, 1961) 302, document 728. Roth cites additional trips to Rome in 1434 and 1438, *English Austin Friars*, vol. 1, *History* (1966), 422. He discusses his pilgrimage to St. James’ shrine in Santiago de Compostela in Spain in the “Prologue” to the *Life of Mary Magdelene*, ll. 5090 ff.


56 In her reading of Epistle 1.2, Skalitsky concludes that “the reading of Homer is not merely the occasion of a moral sermon for the edification of Lollius. Rather it is clear that Horace believes that the very cure of the passions is effected by the reading of good literature, of which Homer is the most pre-eminent” (Skalitsky, “Good Wine,” 69–70).

57 Horobin cites the lines from St. Paul the Hermit’s legend in his discussion on the similarities in the humility statements in the Abbotsford MS and those in Arundel 327, “A Manuscript Found,” 147–48.


Chapter Three

“Slant Translation” and the Politics of the Vernacular in the Chester Cycle’s Shepherds Play

The Chester Shepherds play foregrounds issues related to the politics of interpretation and translation in its adaptation of liturgical and scriptural material into a vernacular dramatic idiom for a wider, predominantly lay audience. Vernacular cycle drama, though garnering criticism from a variety of sectors over the course of its one-hundred-fifty-year performance life, from the early fifteenth-century anti-theatrical Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge to the later sixteenth-century Protestant reformers, was not subject to the legislation of Arundel’s Constitutions.1 As a number of recent studies have affirmed, drama has been largely absent from discussions about the effects of the Constitutions on subsequent writing, and of the reappraisal of fifteenth century writing, more generally. However, recent scholarship on late medieval dramatic works reveals their unique flexibility for engaging with the very hermeneutic, political, and theological debates that fueled Arundel’s anti-Wycliffe legislation.2 In a reassessment of his seminal article on the repressive environment for English literary production after the enactment of Arundel’s Constitutions, Nicholas Watson concurs with those studies in his statement that “the drama’s vigorous and supple engagement with issues coded as Wycliffite in the context of the Lollard controversy serves as a reminder of how far from cowed was post-Arundelian vernacular religious thought, at least in certain areas.”3 This chapter contends that several factors align to
make the Chester Shepherds play particularly well-poised to reflect not only upon the status of the vernacular as a religious discourse, but also upon its own status as an instance of vernacular theology: the late medieval understanding of the annunciation to the Shepherds, the exegetical privilege accorded them in the gospel of Luke, and the scholarly tradition of viewing the Shepherds’ plays as a type of complaint literature.

If the chapter on the Disputation between Mary and the Cross poem opened up to vernacular scrutiny a divide between the laity and a clerical elite based on two fundamentally opposed hermeneutical models revealed to have significant ethical, literary, and soteriological consequences, this chapter will reveal a similar divide, though one focused more upon the politics surrounding lay access to the divine. I argue that the Chester Shepherds play offers a critical gloss of clerical privilege and a priestly monopoly on the spiritual goods of salvation, whether it be the sacerdotally mediated sacrament of the Eucharist or the Latin Word of God. The play stages two encounters with liturgical ritual: a proto-Eucharistic banquet fully in the hands of the Shepherd-priests with limited access to lay parishioners like their apprentice, and a translation scene in which the Shepherds substitute their own vernacular song for the Angel’s Latin liturgical hymn, the Gloria in excelsis Deo. I read the failure of the first of these encounters to effect a communion between the Shepherd-priests and their disenfranchised apprentice Trowle as the play’s indictment of the developments in liturgical ritual, beginning in the fourteenth century with changing notions about transubstantiation, and consider the consequences for the laity. I also consider this scene as a comment on priestly control of church doctrine and Holy Writ. The second encounter with liturgical ritual, the Angel’s Latin song announcing the birth of Christ, provides the opportunity for a participatory alternative to the earlier sacramental banquet. I situate this scene within the debates about lay access to Scripture
in the vernacular as well as the debates over the elaborate forms of polyphonic music. The Shepherds’ “expounding” of the Latin song reifies the fears of some opponents to Bible translation for the laity. While the Shepherds never do translate the Latin hymn into the vernacular, their method of “slant translation” fragments the Latin words into their component syllables, enacting a type of Eucharistic word-play. They end by substituting their own secular English song which brings them the “solace” and “fellowshippe” each expresses a desire for at the outset of the play. Finally, I argue that the play elaborates the affective and overtly theatrical parallels between sacramental ritual and vernacular cycle drama, and explores the limitations and resources of each within the imaginary economy of salvation it constructs, in order to authorize itself as a faithful handmaid to Scripture.

Part of the Nativity grouping, the Chester Shepherds play dramatizes the role the Shepherds perform in Luke 2:8-20 as the first witnesses to the birth of Christ. The play comprises both the Angel’s annunciation to the Shepherds and the Shepherds’ adoration of Christ, the two iconographic events represented in sermons, exegetical commentary, and visual culture in the late medieval period. The theological significance attached to the Shepherds’ roles hinges on a rhetoric of poverty and humility shared by Christ and the Shepherds, the foreshadowing of the motif of Christ as the Shepherd of humankind, and the Shepherds’ status as illiterati. Nicholas Love, citing a sermon on the Nativity by Bernard, makes the Lucan message a morally didactic one in his fifteenth-century Middle English translation The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: “de angeles in cristes Natiuite apperyng to de wakyng shepherdes conforten none d|ere bot de pore trauaileres, & to hem tellen de ioye of newe liȝt & not to de rich men, de hat haue hir confort here.” That God chose to reveal Christ’s birth to “de pore trauaileres,” the laboring poor, and “not to de rich men, de hat haue hir confort here” suggests a
theory of salvation in which one’s spiritual state and hope of heavenly bliss depends solely on one’s material status. Love’s marginal notations identify the three lessons to be derived from the Nativity: poverty, humility, and bodily penance. His commentary throughout stresses the sign of poverty as the marker of inner grace. For example, Love’s description of Mary’s simple array belies her inner spiritual wealth: “in his pore & symple worldly aray what costly riches & inward confort & ioy she hade may no tonge telle” (39/5-6). The Late Banns announcing the performing of the Chester Whitsun plays similarly emphasize the “sheapeardes poore of base and lowe degree” (98) in the play put on by the Painters’ guild, although as I will argue, the rhetoric of poverty gets deployed rather differently in Chester.\(^5\)

Like the other extant Shepherds’ plays, Chester’s play supplements the gospel material with a number of scenes drawn from a similar vein of popular and apocryphal material.\(^6\) The Late Banns draw attention to the extra-scriptural material that makes up much of the Shepherds play: “fewe wordes in that pageante makes meirth truly / for all that the Author had to stande vppon / was glorye to god one heigh, and peace on earth to man” (101-103).\(^7\) As the Banns patently acknowledge, few scenes within the Shepherds play make mirth “truly,” or according to scriptural truth, an observation that also serves to excuse the play’s multiple dramatic indiscretions, of issue in particular to the later reformers.\(^8\) Despite the admittedly humorous and rustic burlesque of much of the extra-scriptural material added to the extant Shepherds’ plays, there exists a rich scholarly tradition for viewing the Shepherds’ plays as a type of complaint literature. Critics of the Towneley \textit{First Shepherds} play have observed the ways in which the Shepherds’ opening complaints address contemporaneous social concerns resulting from the newly enacted policies of land enclosure.\(^9\) Ruth Nisse, agreeing with Robert Weimann’s earlier assessment of the Towneley \textit{First Shepherds} play, sees in the “collective voice” of the Wakefield
Shepherds an “undertone of revolt” in the “frank condemnation of the injustices of lords and hypocrisies of friars.”\textsuperscript{10} Even in Love’s moralized reading of the annunciation to the Shepherds above, one may detect the radical potential of the Shepherds’ material for interrogating any number of social injustices based on real or perceived inequalities, material or otherwise.

The play transfers the voice of dissent to the apprentice Trowle who becomes a figure of social complaint against the three primary Shepherds. Though professing to have their flocks’ and Trowle’s needs well in hand, these three Shepherds appear more concerned with producing their medicinal treatments and sating their own hunger than effecting any real pastoral care.\textsuperscript{11} Though the Shepherds have the outward appearance of being poor (one Shepherd makes a show of sewing a patch onto the heel of his sock), the real poverty at issue in the play is revealed to be the involuntary poverty which directly results from the Shepherd-priests’ control of the “gostely fode” that prevents Trowle access to Christ.

Proto-Eucharistic Feast and the Crisis of Authority

The desire for “fellowshippe” expressed in the opening lines of the Chester \textit{Shepherds} play and accomplished through the sharing of food dramatizes one of the sacramental forces ascribed to the Eucharistic ritual as conceived of by the ecclesiastical institution. The communal experience of ingesting Christ’s body and blood effectively sought to achieve another sort of incorporation altogether: the creation of \textit{communitas}. As Caroline Walker Bynum expresses it, “eating Christ’s body was an inclusive act, one that created community.”\textsuperscript{12} Ideally, the paschal meal was thought to bring about not only an internal sense of coherence in an alignment with Christ, but could effect a unifying and potentially equalizing action across diverse populations.
However, the play interrogates this assumption through the failure of the Shepherd’s ritualistic meal to incorporate Trowle within their communal compass.

The play establishes a fundamental concern with the creation of community from the outset. After an extended opening in which Hankyn the first Shepherd expresses a fundamental belief in his shepherding skills and his ability to heal his sheep of the numerous ailments besetting them, he pronounces the ill that he himself suffers: “But noe fellowshippe here have I / save myselfe alone” (41-2). Hankyn’s vocational self-proficiency belies his own spiritual disease which manifests in his complaint of a lack of “fellowshippe.” The placement of the conjunction “But” as the initial word of a new stanza serves to underscore Hankyn’s own suffering relative to his seemingly well-cared for sheep. It is Hankyn’s desire for community that initiates the banqueting scene.

The words the Shepherds use to discuss the meal they share draws upon the language of the Christian Mass, and builds the impression that it is sacramental in nature. When the Shepherds convene, their discussion turns immediately to the question of nourishment, a “service” which, they make clear, depends on the presence of all three Shepherds: “Had wee Tudd heere by us sett, / thenn might wee sitte and feede us. / Yea, to feede us frendly in faye, / how might wee have our service?” (55-8). Harvye’s use of the word “service” to describe their repast puts both its secular and religious connotations in play. Though it certainly denotes the literal meal they will share, the word “service” also makes reference to the Christian Mass and, in particular, the sacramental rite of the Eucharist. The latter usage makes it possible to consider Harvye’s question a short-handed reference to the paschal meal, the communal “service” which the Shepherds come together to celebrate. It is the word used in the fourth conclusion of the Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards for the “sacrament of þe bred”: “If Crystis
body be dewid [endowed] with euerelasting ioye, þe seruise of Corpus Christi imad be frere Thomas is vntrewe and peyntid ful of false miraclis” (45-7). 16 Individually the Shepherds’ statements appear innocent enough, but considered together, the effect is undeniable. In the context of their “service,” Hankyn’s earlier use of the word “fellowshippe” takes on, in addition to its secular capacity, its more spiritual sense—the communion that occurs between members of a congregation and with Christ, as used for example in the Wycliffite Bible: “That and ȝe haue felaushippe with us, and oure felauschip be with the fadir and his sone Jhesu Crist” (1 John 1:3). 17 His expressed desire for “fellowshippe” not only centers around the taking of a communal meal, but is constituted in and through the very enactment of that communal “service” (58).

Two further pieces of evidence will suffice for reading this scene as evocative of the Eucharistic feast. After Trowle refuses several times to partake of the Shepherds’ food, Tudd, in a final exasperated attempt, uses a telling expression: “Trowle, boy, for Godes tree / come eate a morsell with me” (226-7). Although used as an expletive, the phrase “Godes tree” refers explicitly to the Crucifix upon which Christ sacrificed himself for humanity’s redemption. Tudd’s reference further establishes the symbolic significance of the meal, as well as the implications for Trowle if he refuses to participate. Finally, the H manuscript records two lines absent from the Group-manuscript R that M. Lumiansky and David Mills use as their base text, lines which also point to the link being forged between the Shepherds’ feast and the sacrament of the Eucharist. In the H manuscript, these lines—“At me all men learn mon / this ‘golgotha’ grimly to grope” (200-1)—precede Trowle’s ambiguous comment, “Noe man drinke here shall / save myselfe” (192-3). 18 Mills speculates that the “golgotha” is a skull-shaped cup from which Trowle makes to drink. The Oxford English Dictionary records “golgotha” as a place of
interment, a graveyard or charnel house. But Golgotha is also the place-name associated with the site of Christ’s crucifixion, as John Trevisa observes in *On the Properties of Things*:

“Golgatha is the mounte of caluarie, þere oure lorde was ynailed to þe crosse.” The skull enacts a dual allusion: it serves as a reminder of Trowle’s own mortality as well as the immortality he will be excluded from if he remains outside the Shepherd-priests’ ken. The implication may be that Trowle is cut off from the life-giving cup from which the other Shepherds drink. The third Shepherd’s boast makes clear what is at stake: “Of this bottell nowe will I bibbe / for here is bowles of the best. / Such lickour makes men to live” (145-8). Trowle’s comment which might be interpreted literally as “no man shall drink here except myself,” but it could also mean “no earthly drink shall save me.”

Only after the Shepherds have satisfied their own appetites do they turn their consideration to their apprentice’s needs: “Fellowes, nowe our bellyes be full, / thinke wee on him that keepes our flockes / and bydd him, sonne, of our bytlockes” (149-50). Like the celebrant priests who partake of the Host before distributing the remainder amongst the parishioners, the Shepherds eat before doling out their leftovers to Trowle. The play may also be drawing from anti-fraternal discourses with its reference to the Shepherds’ “full” stomachs in its construction of the Shepherds as self-interested. As mentioned earlier, the medieval understanding of the watchful shepherds in Luke made much of the shepherds’ poverty. The mendicant orders embraced a practice of voluntary poverty that, as Kate Crassons explains, “asserted itself as a form of spiritual perfection.” Furthermore, “it was perceived as an authorizing force entitling at least the voluntary poor to material, symbolic, and spiritual rewards.” The Shepherds’ explicit comments drawing attention to the material referents of their symbolic poverty take on new meaning in light of the words of The Franciscan Rule of
1223: “As pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let [the friars] go seeking alms with confidence, and they should not be ashamed because, for our sakes, our Lord made Himself poor in this world.” Harvye’s comment that “yt is no shame for mee to shewe / how I was set for to sowe / with the fether of a crowe / a clowte upon my heele” (49-52) borrows the Rule’s assertion that the friars “should not be ashamed” in their imitation of Christ’s poverty. Given the variety and the sheer amount of provisions that emerge from the three Shepherds’ bags, Hankyn’s comment is more than ironic: “My sotchell to shake out / to sheppardes am I not ashamed” (133-4).

The Shepherds’ feasting and drinking verge on the gluttonous and serve as a counterpoint to Trowle, who sits apart without the “liverye” he is owed. Though the Shepherds offer Trowle sustenance no less than four times, each time he rejects their offer—“I defy thee!” (207)—citing his lack of access to the same food they eat or calling attention to the filthy condition of the proffered “meate.” When the first Shepherd finally offers Trowle a “loyne” on which he “may have good lugginge” (201), Trowle retorts, “No hap to your hot meat have I” (206-7). Despite Trowle’s repeated refusals, the Shepherds remain secure in the superior quality of their provender; they offer Trowle “meate” a fourth and final time: “Trowle, better thow never knewe. / Eat of this, meate for a knight” (239). All Trowle can see, however, when he looks upon the “loyne” offered him, is the “dyrte . . . soe deepe” and the “grubbes” which “creepe” on it. Trowle’s unwillingness to tug on the proffered “loyne,” in its manifestation as rotting meat, would have found sympathy with those in the audience who had begun to question aspects of the Eucharistic ritual. What Trowle sees recalls the miracle stories in which the faithful and doubters alike saw Christ present as a piece of flesh. Caroline Walker Bynum cites instances in which the female mystics and nuns quite literally described seeing the baby Jesus present in the
host. In Trowle’s case, however, what he sees is not the divine, immortal body of the transubstantiated Christ, but the carnal and mortal body in a state of decay. Further, Trowle sees only a fragmentary “loyne,” and not the entire “Lamb of God,” as He was said to manifest in the sacrament. In its literality, Trowle’s reaction resonates with the Lollard view, as expressed by Sarah Beckwith, that “to ingest [Christ’s body] in the form of the host is not to join in the body of Christ, but to defile and debase him . . . Incorporation into Christ’s body, effected by means of incorporation of it in the act of swallowing the host, is seen as an abjection, a profanation of the spirit.” Viewing the proffered “meate” in this way may account for Trowle’s perception of both the Shepherds and the food they offer as being contaminated in some manner, as his earlier remark characterizing the Shepherds as “fowle filth” (197) suggests.

If we read the divide between Trowle and the Shepherds as analogous to the divide existing between the illiterate laity and the Latinate clerical elite, Trowle’s accusation that he lacks access to the same store of food also serves as an indictment of the clerical monopoly of church doctrine and Holy Scripture. The “meate” to which Trowle believes he has “no hap” doubtless makes reference to the more theoretical church teachings which the clergy believed were too difficult for the illiterate laity to grasp. The prologue to Nicholas Love’s fifteenth-century Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ makes clear the distinction between the two types of church teachings required by “symple creatures” and “grete clargye”: “symple creatures [e whiche as childryn hauen nede to be fedde with mylke of lyȝt doctryne, & not with sadde mete of grete clargye & of h[y]e contemplacion.” Love attributes his text to Bonaventure, which has the added virtue of being “more pleyne in certeyne partyes [an is expressed in the gospell of [e foure euangelistes” (10/8-9). In this case, even the Scripture of the gospels is considered to be too complex for the illiterate laity, whom Love collectively terms “simple” and
who must be fed the soft diet required by children. Love goes further. In that a “symple soule . . . kan not ḷenke bot bodyes or bodily ḷinges” he suggests that they should contemplate the “monhede of cryste” which is more to their liking, quicker, and more secure than “hyȝe contemplacion of ḷe godhed” (10/27-8, 10/24-25). Love’s assumptions of his audience as incapable of abstract thought prescribes a course of corporeal imagery to feast upon, “somwhat accordynge vnto is affecion where wiþ he maye fede & stire his deuocion” (10/28-29).

Trowle reiterates his intention to “defy” the Shepherds, lambasting them with his words: “Fye on your loynes and your liverye, / your liverastes, livers and longes, / your sose, your sowse, your saverraye” (202-4). The references to “liverye” in this strikingly alliterative passage serve to position Trowle in a role subservient to the men who employ him. Trowle remains dependent on others in a position of authority for the sustenance on which his livelihood depends. The social cohesion, the “state of pre-political, undifferentiated human affinity” sought through the proposed repast, an analogue to the Mass, fails to be enacted. The very real differences between Trowle and the Shepherd-priests are not renegotiated and dissolved in this communal feasting scene. The Shepherds are the producers, holders, and disseminators of Trowle’s “liverye” and his “wages”; it is they who control Trowle’s access to what he asserts is rightfully his. Trowle claims that he is owed back wages that he must contest for. That contest, carried out in the ensuing wrestling scene, may be read as the struggle for the right to his merited reward, the struggle over the goods of salvation. Whether Trowle’s “gostely fode” comes in the form of the sacrament of the Eucharist or in the form of church teachings, Trowle’s refusal to partake of the Shepherds feast represents an indictment of priestly monopoly and mediation.

Trowle’s refusal to partake in the Shepherd-priests’ proto-Eucharistic feast represents an unwillingness or an inability to follow the prescribed script. Cut off from the “gostly fode” of
God’s word, Trowle fails to be incorporated into the cultic community with Christ. This scene is, in J. L. Austin’s terms, an example of an “unhappy” or “infelicitous” ritual. Austin notes that “infelicity is an ill to which all acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, all conventional acts.” In his work on “authorized language,” Pierre Bourdieu expands upon and applies J. L. Austin’s work on performative utterances to the study of the constitutive features of liturgical ritual. Recognizing that Austin ill-advisedly assumed that the authority of a performative utterance or sequence of speech acts resided in the “intrinsic properties of discourse” itself, Bourdieu relocates the power of performative utterances to “execute an action” in the social conditions in which liturgical practices arise: “By trying to understand the power of linguistic manifestations linguistically, by looking in language for the principle underlying the logic and effectiveness of the language of institution, one forgets that authority comes to language from outside …. Language at most represents this authority, manifests and symbolizes it.” What Bourdieu emphasizes here is that it is not the language (and gestures) that comprises and performs the ritual; rather, the source of the representative power in liturgical language resides in the “institutional conditions of their production and reception.” Bourdieu reminds us in this last statement that the “success of these operations of social magic” consists of two parts. Success depends not only on the authorized discourse, delegated agent, and legitimating institution, but also, and significantly, on the “recognition” of the discourse or ritual of authority as such. Trowle’s refusal to partake in the Shepherd-priest’s proto-Eucharistic feast points to a crisis in the social mechanisms which produce the complicity upon which ritual’s performativity depends. Bourdieu would say that the sacramental feast is “infelicitous” because Trowle doesn’t recognize the ritual, the Shepherds performing it, or the ecclesiastical institution itself as being “authorized.” Bourdieu posits the legitimacy of the
performers of the ritual as one of the necessary conditions which must be fulfilled for felicitous ritual to occur, and locates the power not in the individual performers themselves, but in the institution which upholds and is upheld by the ritual discourse. For ritual to function it must “first of all present itself and be perceived as legitimate, with stereotyped symbols serving precisely to show that the agent does not act in his own name and on his own authority, but in his capacity as a delegate.”  

The Shepherd-priests in Chester’s Shepherds play, acting as representatives entrusted with the delegated authority of the ecclesiastical institution, are at just such pains to establish the legitimacy of their venture from the moment the play opens.  

The opening of the Chester Shepherds’ play differs dramatically from the other Shepherds’ plays in that the world represented prior to the birth of the Christ child is not at first glance that of the typically unredeemed world. Unlike the Shepherd of the Towneley cycle’s First Shepherds’ Play, who laments the loss of his flock to disease, or the Shepherds in the Towneley Second Shepherds’ Play, who inhabit a world subject to famine and unnatural climactic events, the Chester Shepherds portray a world seemingly well in hand. Although they make reference to bad weather and the possibility of disease, they represent themselves as being entirely capable of dealing with these aberrations. The first Shepherd’s speech, in particular, invests him with a sense of authority and competence lacking in the Shepherds of the other nativity plays. He claims an utter confidence in his expertise to diagnose and heal the ills of his flock. “To save and heal” his “taytfull tuppes” is ever in his mind. He announces that “a better shepperd on no syde / noe yearthyle man maye have” (7-8). Of course, Hankyn’s qualification that no “earthly” man could want a better shepherd is ironically suspect. However, he believes himself to be entirely capable of healing the sheep “clean,” completely, “from their hurt[s]”: “Well I can and well I wot” (32, 35). This self-confident portrayal of the vigilant shepherd
persists for forty lines. The second Shepherd shares a similar faith in his abilities: “Ashamed am I not to shewe / no poynt that longeth to my crafte; / noe better—that I well knowe / in land is nowhere lafte” (128). There is no better shepherd, nor one who knows more than he about his “crafte.”

This extended opening locates the Shepherds in a long tradition in which pastoral responsibilities are figured in the very language the Shepherds use to describe their craft, a tradition which sees Christ as a physician and healer of humankind’s ills. The three Shepherds, analogues to their priestly counterparts in the Church, authorize themselves as descendants in a direct line leading back to the original Shepherd Christ. In the Chester play put on by the Glovers *The Blind Chelidonian*, Jesus articulates the theme explicitly in his address to his disciples and the play’s audience members alike: “For I am the good sheppard that putteth his life in jeoperdy / to save his flocke, which I love so tenderlye” (18-19). He links the notion of the good shepherd definitively with that of healer in the lines that follow: “Goe we therfore, brethren, . . . / to do my Fathers workes, as I am fully mynded; / to heale the sicke and restore the blynd to sight, / that the prophecye of mee may be fulfilled. /For other sheepe I have which are to me commytted. / They be not of this flock, yet will I them regard, / that there may be one flocke and one sheppard” (22-8). Jesus’s words look backward to the *Shepherds* play as if to indict the three Shepherds in their failure to create “one flocke.” Moreover, Jesus’ emphasis on performing God’s works, specifically represented here as a literal healing of the sick and restoring sight to the blind, critiques the Shepherds for the importance they assign to the production of their salves to the exclusion of their healing. The inordinate number of lines devoted to the construction of the Shepherd-priests’ identity as competent and specialized
practitioners of their craft suggests that they are as much, if not more, concerned with the production of their own image as with the production of the salves designed to heal their sheep.

This same emphasis on “production” recurs in the banqueting scene where the focus is less about the eating of the food, and more on the manner in which the Shepherds produce the elaborate feast. The Shepherds, despite their professed poverty, reach into their “sotchell[s],” like magicians, conjuring up an array of never-ending foodstuffs designed to delight the eye more than the palate. Unlike the Towneley First Shepherds play in which the feast the three Shepherds partake is, arguably, an imaginary one produced from an empty bag, the Chester Shepherds’ repast is a theatrical wonder to behold. The Painters’ accounts record the comprehensive list of provisions purchased as stage props, evidence of the emphasis on material presence the play works so diligently to convey: “botter,” “Chesse,” “crabefysshes,” “bred,” “a bestes bely & calues fette,” “a Mydcalffe And anox tonge,” “a calues hed,” “xvj hagays,” and “bacon,” among other items. Similar in length (forty plus lines) to the recital of herbs and salves intoned at the opening of the play, the Shepherds pronounce their alliterative store of goods: “Here is bredd this daye was bacon, / onyons, garlycke, and leekes, / butter that bought was in Blacon, / and greene cheese that will greese well your cheekes.” The “jannock of Lancastershyre” and “puddinges” and their lines all tumble out, a secular litany of vernacular sustenance substituting for the Latin liturgy. Like the parishioners in the Mass, those watching the play become enamored with the performance and the authority invested in the priestly performers. The theatricality of the Shepherds’ ritualized production of medicinals and meats finds its analogue in the complex changes to liturgical and sacramental ritual during the plays’ performance history.
The Shepherds portray themselves as legitimate dispensers of their medicinal treatments, “ordayned” to administer their salves and esoteric lore. Although the first Shepherd, Hankyn, displays real knowledge in his detailing of the diseases that can beset sheep—“scab,” “rot,” and pseudotuberculosis “cough”—his professions of his ability to heal are couched in the future conditional: “if it were wrought,” “if the cough had them caught” (14,15). While it is possible to read his comments as evidence that his sheep are miraculously free of these common diseases, his “ifs” open up the possibility that his ability to diagnose may be at issue and that his healing powers may be similarly untested. The first Shepherd also makes much of the medicine he has “wysely wrought for everye wounde,” (18, emphasis added), which he characterizes as both powerful enough to heal the most dreaded diseases and “a whole man bri nge to grownde” (19). Again, the emphasis remains on producing rather than solving or treating the issues at hand. While Hankyn’s medicinal cures and knowledge make reference to Chester’s reputation as a sheep-producing region, his medicine foreshadows the bread of life synonymous with Christ’s body, which can be either boot or bane, depending upon the state of one’s soul. As Jesus tells the audience later in the Chester Resurrection play, “I am verey bread of liffe. / . . . / Whoe eateth that bread, man or wiffe, / shall lyve with me withowt end . . . . / And whosever eateth that bread / in synne and wicked liffe, / he receaveth his owne death— / I warne both man and wiffe.”

Hankyn states that his herbs are “saffe and sownde” (17), implying that they are so, though, only because they remain in his hands. The means to “salus” rest firmly in the hands of the Shepherd-priests. The knowledge they wield is both helpful and harmful. Correct administration of the salve requires their extensive expertise and skill; in the wrong hands, it could be lethal. Their display of knowledge is equivalent to the firm belief the Church espouses that they are the way and the means to salvation and works to foster that belief.

138
On the one hand, the emphasis on production in these scenes reifies clerical privilege in a very concrete way. Charles Zika states that the “emphasis on the host as Christ’s sacramental presence focuses on the act of producing the host and the role of those responsible for its production. In other words, the host is decisively located within the context of priestly power and the locally approved church and clergy.” The over-concern with the construction of the Shepherd-priests’ image as both the producers and purveyors of their healing medicaments and the “loyne” host witnessed a counterpart in the world external to the play. Miri Rubin details the similarly systematized enterprise involved in the design and construction of the new Eucharistic feast established by the church in the mid-thirteenth century. The development of a sacramental theology endowed the priesthood with a necessary mediatory function, making them indispensable to the people at large. As Sarah Beckwith reminds us, the Eucharist is the “only relic . . . which doctrinally endorses clerical power, and centralises it, rather than diffusing it to popular or other control.” On the other hand, the tremendous effort expended in building up a legitimating discourse by which to establish their authority indicates a crisis of sorts, dramatized in Trowle’s refusal to share in their communal meal. The overthrow of the three Shepherds by Trowle in the wrestling scene further threatens to undermine their entire enterprise. The contexts in which the plays’ performances were enmeshed reveal a priesthood undergoing similar threats.

As Sheila Lindenbaum has recently observed, “the late medieval English drama took shape in a period of intense liturgical development”:

From the early fourteenth century, the exponential growth of intercessory observances for the dead turned even modest parish churches into monasteries in miniature. Growth was accompanied by increasing complexity, as new feasts and votive observances collided with one another in the liturgical calendar. The feast
of Corpus Christi alone is said to have “unhinged the course of the Temporale,” the seasonal progression of services within the church. A more complex observance required specialized skills: ritualists to solve the problems of the calendar, colleges of priests to sing for the souls of the nobility, priests for altars funded by chantries and parish guilds, and lay clerks to supplement the music, along with troupes of singing boys.39

The complexities of the changing liturgical celebrations garnered criticism from the Wycliffites on two fronts: not only were all these developments potentially seductive, drawing the parishioner away from what was clearly of most importance to Wyclif and his followers, the study of Holy Scripture, but they also required a trained cadre of priestly practitioners to effectively sort through the liturgical handbooks. One look at the Sarum Missal reveals the intricacies of the liturgical calendar as well as the number of other textual aids required to celebrate the daily masses.40 While these innovations worked to more effectively centralize priestly power and ensure the continued dependency on the church as the mediator between humanity and the divine, they also reduced the time priests could spend studying, preaching, and tending to their parishioners. The increasingly more embellished liturgical rituals met with several criticisms from Wycliffites in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and Protestant reformers in the sixteenth centuries. The surface stylization of ritual’s production came to take on greater significance than that which it was meant to re-enact; ritual came more and more to be revered in and of itself. As in the Shepherd’s proto-Eucharistic celebration, the priests could appear more concerned with the host’s production than with its salvific effect, a mere by-product. This was the position of Wyclif, who wanted to “liberate the mass from its sacramental trappings.” He viewed the veneration of the host, which had come to represent the climax of
communion, as evidence of idolatrous behavior, “offered as substitutes, . . . clerical attempts to distance the laity from the sources of grace.”

Although Trowle’s unwillingness to participate in the communal feast may have reflected changing attitudes toward transubstantiation and the sacrament of the Eucharist, it also argues for the need for greater participation in the ritual of the church. Given these liturgical developments, one could read the evocative scene of Trowle’s refusal as an indictment of the theatrical spectacle of the sacramental ritual. Trowle may be suffering from what Ritchie Kendall terms the “loss of immediacy of sacramental experience.” Jean Ladrière, another scholar who assimilates Austin’s theory of performativity in his work on liturgical discourse, would argue that the sacramental ritual did not “take” because Trowle was not adequately prepared to receive the action of grace. Ladrière states that “liturgical language uses certain characteristic performative verbs, such as ‘to ask,’ ‘to pray,’ ‘to give thanks’…. Such verbs express illocutionary acts presupposing certain attitudes: trust, veneration, gratitude, submission, contrition, and so on …. The performative verb is not a description of the attitude which its enunciation presupposes; its function is not to indicate the existence of this attitude, but is, so to speak, the attitude itself: it makes it exist in an effective manner by virtue of the illocutionary act underlying its enunciation.” When the Shepherds divest themselves of their foodstuffs, Trowle, on another part of the “wolde,” misses the performance. One might argue that the readiness to see and to receive the food as fitting rather than contaminated is dependent upon the enactment of the ritual, one that is achieved only through fully participating. Ladrière terms liturgical language an “existential inductor” in that “the members of the liturgical community assume certain illocutionary acts and the attitudes which they presuppose.” It is in the very doing that the “correct” attitude is effected: “It is not a question of emotion, nor really of feeling,
but of that form of constitutive receptivity which makes us capable of adjusting to reality in its several manifestations: to the reality of salvation which comes to us from God by the mediation of Jesus Christ, who is announced in the texts of Scripture and is accomplished in the words of the Canon, and received in the words of the action of grace. What Ladrière refers to here is a particular quickening in the individual that comes about in the actual performing of the ritual. Ladrière emphasizes the necessity of a participatory role, not just a spectatorial one, to prepare the ground to receive the grace of God’s Word (or in Bourdieu, the complicity of the participant). The problem, then, becomes the way in which the sacramental ritual does not invite lay participation. Sarah Beckwith, among others, has documented the degree to which the Mass in the late Middle Ages “was becoming more and more of a spectacle and less and less of a communion. The emphasis was increasingly on watching Christ’s body rather than being incorporated in it.” As mediation came to be understood as an integral and necessary part of the Eucharistic ritual, the desire for lay access increased. However, changes in the understanding of Christ’s true presence within the transubstantiated host, due largely to the writings of Thomas Aquinas, resulted in more restrictions on lay participation during the Mass. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 established the standard requirement that communion be taken at least once a year, at Easter, but the sacrament came increasingly to consist only of the host itself. The chalice of wine was no longer offered due to fears that Christ’s blood would be desecrated after spilling to the floor, reserved instead for the celebrating priests alone. The parishioners’ participation in the liturgical Mass consisted of silent prayer, further reducing their experience to seeing and hearing. Margaret Aston cites the Lollard preacher William Thorpe, who complained that the people were more interested in viewing God’s body in the form of the elevated host than hearing his Word: “As I stood there in the pulpit, busying me to teach the
commandment of God, there knelled the sacring-bell; and therefore mickle people turned away hastily, and with great noise ran from towards me."49 Even that limited contact became further curtailed. Caroline Walker Bynum points to the reification of the widening gap between priest and laity in the late Middle Ages: “Elaborate screens were constructed to hide the priest and the altar. Thus, at the pivotal moment of his coming, Christ was separated and hidden from the congregation in a sanctuary that enclosed together priest and God.”50 As Beckwith concludes, Christ’s body becomes more and more appropriated to the clerical elite, “whose exclusive handling of it becomes a sacred spectacle, a spectacle indeed which very often had to be imagined.”51

The failure of the first of the rituals to incorporate Trowle into a community of the faithful suggests that the enactment of the sacrament of the Eucharist, at least in the form it had come to take, has neither the power to appease Trowle’s spiritual hunger nor any real salvific instrumentality.52 The birth of Christ, announced in the star and the Angel’s song, marks a turn in the play from a concern with Christ’s body (as it appears in the host) to a concern with God’s Word. The play, nonetheless, remains fundamentally concerned with issues of access and the theatrical aspect associated with liturgical ritual. The scene in which the Shepherds attempt to “expound” the Angel’s Latin liturgical song engages with contemporaneous debates about the need for greater lay access to church teachings as well as the appropriateness of the English vernacular for embodying theology. As in the banqueting scene, the play questions the use of the affective mode in church-sanctioned ritual and vernacular cycle drama alike. Though denied access to Christ’s sacramental presence earlier in the play, Trowle is prepared, in the performative sense, for an unmediated viewing of Christ’s body. The expounding of the Angel’s Latin song offers Trowle the means to secure the spiritual counterpart of the livery and wages he
could only hope to win through the besting of his “superiors” in the wrestling match. The fragmenting of the Latin words, like the fragmenting of the Eucharistic host, effects a communion in which the strife between the primary Shepherds and Trowle is healed. That communion is solidified in the singing of their own vernacular and secular song, and prepares the four for a direct experience with Christ.

“Expounding” the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*

The Chester *Shepherds* play is unique in that, unlike nearly every extant version of the other cycles’ nativity plays in which the Shepherds make feeble attempts to imitate the Angel’s song, the Chester Shepherds and their apprentice attempt to interpret it. From the time the star first appears overhead, the Shepherds and Trowle exhibit a profound desire to penetrate its meaning. In this second half of the play, the emphasis on “seeing” shifts from an outward concern with ritualized spectacle to an inward desire for knowledge of the divine. When the Star appears, Trowle asks that the Lord “of this light / send us some sight / why that it is sent” (346-8). Though his literal “sight fayle” him in his effort to understand, he will seek “some sight,” inwardly. The Shepherds stress their desire to “be kent” (345, 438), each praying to God to be instructed. Their desire for knowledge counters what Ritchie Kendall sees as the “spirit of devotion which happily dismisses intellectual enlightenment,” a condition which, he states, “achieves its highest expression in the shepherds’ plays . . . There the shepherds demonstrate their right motivation through an awkward mimicry of divine harmony.” To Kendall, the cycle plays canonize the blindly obedient servant, an attitude inimical to the tenets underlying the pedagogical methods of the Lollards and their call for access to Scripture in the vernacular. The
Chester Shepherds are not passive receptors as Kendall suggests, but actively attempt to pursue the meaning of both the star and the Angel’s song.

The figures of the technically illiterate Shepherds gathered together to “expound” the Latin song might recall the activities taking place in Lollard conventicles in late medieval England. Upon hearing the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, the third and eldest Shepherd’s response uses a term often reserved for biblical exegesis and translation: “What song was this, say ye / that he sang to us all three? / Expounded it shall be” (376-8). Although not excluded from use outside exegetical and Lollard circles, the word “expounded,” like the vernacular itself, connotes a Lollard resonance to some degree after the (predominantly) Lollard call for Scripture to be made available in English. The author of the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible, uses the term to explain his rationale for translating the Bible into the vernacular: “And no doute, to a symple man wiþ Goddis grace and greet trauail, men miȝten expoune myche openliere and shortliere þe Bible in English þan þe elde greete doctouris han expoundit it in Latyn, and myche sharpliere and groundliere þan manie late postillatouris eiþer expositouris han don.” The word is strewn throughout the Wycliffite Bible Prologue. Here, specifically, the authority of “þe elde greete doctouris” is appropriated to the “symple man,” like the illiterate Shepherds of the Chester play, who with “Goddis grace and greet trauail” will achieve a truer interpretation of God’s word in English than the man of Latin. 55

Though the first two lines of the *Gloria in excelsis* (*hymnus angelicus*) derive from the words of praise sung by a multitude of the heavenly army after the angel announces the arrival of Christ to the Shepherds, *gloria in altissimis Deo et in terra pax in hominibus bonae voluntatis* (Luke 2:14), the great doxology is actually an example of a *psalmi idiotici*, a non-biblical hymn composed by an unlettered individual. It seems ironic but fitting that the hymn created as a
result of the annunciation to the Shepherds upon the birth of Christ was written by a “lewed” rather than a “lered” individual. After the Angel performs the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, Tudd announces self confidently that “Expounded shall yt bee” (378). Despite the nearly eighty lines devoted to their disputation of the words of the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, the Shepherds and Trowle never actually succeed in translating the Latin words into their English counterparts. Rather, in their attempt to “expound” the Angel’s words, the Shepherds appropriate and vernacularize the Latin words through a method of what I term “slant translation.”

In recalling the Latin words of the hymn, the Shepherds first break the Latin words into their component syllables, and then into their aural equivalents in English. The “expound[ing]” begins with an attempt to remember the Latin words, but the four are in total disagreement about what they have heard. At first, their alliterative expounding of the *Gloria* yields only approximations of the Latin words that they debate. The third Shepherd, claiming eldest degree and therefore best equipped for translation, determines “hit was ‘grorus glorus’ with a ‘glee’” (381-2). Trowle challenges him: “Nay, yt was ‘glorus, glarus glorius’” (384). The four begin to fragment the Latin words into individual syllables, which further devolve into their English homonyms: Latin’s “*Gloria*” becomes “glo,” “glas,” “glye,” and “glee” (388, 391). The word “*terra*” transmutes into the vernacular “tarre,” a familiar word to them, one of the cures cited earlier for treating the ailments of their sheep. Finally, the *Gloria*’s words of praise to the Holy Trinity come to be lodged in the names of three women who, in a contemporaneous poem and play, frequent alehouses and are associated with lecherous behavior: “Wyll hee here howe hee sange ‘celsis’? / For on that sadly hee sett him; / nayther singes ‘sar’ nor soe well ‘cis,’ / ney ‘pax merye Mawd’ when shee had mett him” (408-11).
This scene constructs Latin quite definitively as a disembodied and transcendent language designed to convey abstract thought. Though the Shepherds can hear the words and high notes of the hymn all around them, they can neither perceive nor place the singer:

“Fellowes in feare, / may yee not here / this mutinge on highe? / In ‘glore’ and in ‘glere’? / Yett noe man was nere / within our sight” (358-63); “I durst not hede wher that yt was” (423). Latin is the linguistic domain associated with the divine. On the other hand, the play represents the vernacular spoken by the Shepherds as corporeal in nature. The “translated” words are materially embodied in the things of the Shepherds’ world. Tudd compares the Angel’s singing to that with which he is more familiar, the singing of women named “sar,” “cis,” and “pax merye Mawd,” whose singing falls far short of the Angel’s virtuosity. The language and words that belong in the sanctity of the church and the mouths of the priests are translated into their parodic counterpart, the site of another congregation altogether. Lumiansky and Mills identify “pax merye Mawd” as a “line of a popular and seemingly bawdy song.” The Latin word “pax” takes on the meaning “kiss” from its association with the kiss of peace and the “kissing of the pax” from its placement in the Mass, and along with it, sexual overtones. The reference to “merye Mawd” enacts a second deformation, in that the name “Mawd” is a bastardization of Mary Magdalene. The Shepherd asserts that not even “pax merye Mawd” sang so well “when shee had mett him.” Surely, the pronoun “him” refers to Christ. This allusion serves to further authorize the Shepherds as the chosen witnesses of Christ. The play suggests that just as Christ chose to reveal himself to the prostitute Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, he chooses the Shepherds, the “hethens” of the play, to bear witness to his birth, showing the line between the sacred and the secular to be non-existent. Further, it argues that access to Christ’s body and God’s Word is the rightful inheritance of all individuals, regardless of estate.
The Shepherds do not distort the word of God wittingly, but their ignorance of Latin does put them dangerously close to profaning God’s Word. The scene dramatizes the concerns some members of the ecclesiastical and academic elite had about making scripture and doctrinal material available in the vernacular. One fear is that Holy Writ will be debased in its translation from the Latin into the English vernacular. Despite the fact that English was found to be both necessary and useful in terms of teaching the laity, there was a bias on the part of many of the clerical elite with regard to the English tongue. The need for providing catechetical texts was held in tension with a belief that making vernacular religious texts available to a laity without interpretive guidance was potentially dangerous. In their attacks on Bible translation in the early 1400s, William Butler and Thomas Palmer perpetuate the belief that the inherent carnality of the English vernacular tongue prevented it from serving as the vehicle for the abstraction required to convey God’s meaning.60 Manuals circulated amongst priests to instruct the laity on the fundamental aspects of the faith reveal the affective sensibility associated with English and its speakers. These texts conceptualize the notion of the illiterate laity and the vernacular language they speak as inherently carnal, “the flesh waiting to be animated by the spirit.”61 The anti-theatrical Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge (c. 1400) expresses a similar concern that the vernacular plays themselves cannot convey the allegorical or spiritual meaning of divine scripture. As Nisse has observed in her work on medieval drama, this treatise argues that the public plays “corrupt biblical narrative into a carnal spectacle that actually threatens to reenact a history of Jewish and pagan error.”62 In the Shepherds play the playwright maintains the distinction between Latin, figured as transcendent in the Angel’s disembodied song, and English, dramatized as carnal in the mundane and bawdy talk of the Shepherds.
The playwright also, however, ratifies the Shepherds ability to interpret correctly, thereby dissolving the false dichotomy between sacred and profane, and “lered” and “lewed.” Despite the Shepherd’s ignorance of Latin, the four glean enough meaning from both the star and the slant-translated Angel’s song to get them well on their way to Bethlehem before the Angel returns to speak his message in English. The play enacts a concordance between the “translations” of the Latin and the English words the Shepherds use earlier to describe the phenomenon of the star, which initially serves to guide the Shepherds to Christ. The message contained in the Angel’s song merely confirms what they have already set out to do. The English words Hankyn uses to describe the effect the star’s gleaming light has on him are precursors to the “Latin” syllables the four later reproduce in their attempt to recall the words of the Angel’s song: “From yt wee may not flee / but aye gloe on the glee, / tyll it downe glyde” (331-3). This concordance suggests that the Middle English words, “gloe,” “glee,” and “glyde,” contain within them intimations of God’s Word, words that precede the Angel’s message. In this sense, the English words might be thought of as prophetic and prefiguring the Latin. Although the Virgin Mary speaks only once in the play (for a total of one stanza), her words serve to reinforce the divine warrant accorded the Shepherds in their role as chosen witnesses to the birth of Christ: “Sheppardes, sothlye I see / that my sonne you hyther sent, / through Godes might in majestye / that in mee light and here is lent” (508-11). Christ’s choice of the Shepherds as witnesses and the bearers of the divine message of Christ’s miraculous birth is accorded the same miraculous status as his choice of the humble Mary as virgin vessel for his divine birth. In a similar manner, the prefiguration of Christ’s birth in the Shepherds’ interpretation of the star argues that the humble English vernacular is likewise worthy to bear divinity.
The Shepherds’ ability to divine God’s Word despite their lack of Latin challenges the notion that English is an unfit vehicle for the divine Word; further, it redefines English as a legitimately equivalent alternative to Latin, for it argues through the Shepherd’s idiosyncratic method of slant translation that God’s Word is lodged within all languages. Just as doctrine teaches that every fragmentary particle of the host retained the whole of Christ’s body, each syllable appears to bear within it the full impress of God’s message, whether it be Latin or English. The words to one of the Corpus Christi liturgical hymns associated with Thomas Aquinas convey this theological doctrine: “The flesh is food, the blood is drink, and yet the whole Christ remains under each species . . . Finally, when the sacrament is broken, do not doubt, but remember: there is as much hidden in a fragment as in the whole.”

The Shepherds’ fragmenting of the Latin words into their component syllables mimics the priest’s breaking of the host in the Eucharistic ritual. The play argues that the Word of God, like the body of Christ, remains whole under each species.

While the Shepherds’ method of breaking each Latin word down into its several syllables dramatizes the potential dangers associated with their illiteracy, it most certainly also reflects and engages in the ongoing debate over innovations to liturgical practices, in particular, changes in musical forms, beginning with Wyclif and continuing well into the sixteenth century. Concomitant with the changes in the liturgy, the later Middle Ages witnessed the rise of a new kind of music, the intricate polyphonic song of the *ars nova*. “Knakkyng,” or elaborate singing, was criticized for diverting the listener from the words of scripture. The Wycliffite tract “Of Prelates” charges high-ranking ecclesiastical figures with tampering with the mass, “magnyfien” the service with the new song at the expense of the gospel: “for bi þer grete criyng of song, as deschaunt, countre note & orgene, þei ben lettid fro studynge & prechynge of þe
gospel; & here owene fyndynge vp [inventions], þat crist & apostlis spoken not of, as is þis newe song, þei clepen it goddis seruyce, & magnyfien it at þe fulle, but good lif & techynge of þe gospel þei setten at nouȝt." A similar desire to streamline the mass is shared by the Protestant reformers. Thomas Cranmer, English clergyman and reformer, undertook the revision of the liturgy into the Book of Common Prayer in the 1540s. In his dedication, Cranmer explains his method of translation and also his philosophy for the newly notated liturgy. In addition to the liturgies being “sober and distinct” and of a “solemn” note, “the song that shall be made thereunto would not be full of notes, but, as near as may be, for every syllable a note; so that it may be sung distinctly and devoutly.”

Like the Wycliffite contingent, Cranmer is concerned to strip the liturgy of its excesses.

Evidence suggests that the Angel in the play would have performed the Gloria in the manner of this “veyn nouelrie” of polyphony, in the words of one Wycliffite preacher. The Banns pointedly advertise the singing of the Gloria in their exhortation to the guild members: “you painters and glasiors decke out with all meirth / and see that Gloria in excelsis : be songe mereyle” (100). This suggests that the Angel’s Gloria is not sung somberly in plainchant as would-be reformers would have it. The Shepherds stress the fact that the Angel “had a mych better voyce then I have, / as in heaven all other have soe” (406-7) and make several references to the exceptionally high notes he sings: “all heaven might not have gonne harre, / that note on high when he up hent” (414-5) and “up as a pye hee pyped” (417). The title of the Latin song is rubricated in MS R, suggesting the special distinctiveness of the scene in which Gabriel announces Christ’s birth, and the musical notation for the incipit of the Gloria in excelsis Deo survives in MS H. Richard Rastall observes that “polyphonic music in mensural notation . . . was not the norm in the Middle Ages, but something unusual and special.” Further, as an
example of polyphonic music in mensural notation, only someone highly trained could perform it. And, in fact, the account books reveal that the Painters’ guild had recourse to hire professionals on a number of performance occasions. For instance, the account records from 1560-1 provide evidence that payment was made “to Sir John Genson for songes to the 5 boyes for singing” as well as “to the Angell.” The records from 1568 list the following expense: “spentt at Thomas Ionsons to speke with mr Chauunter for shepertes boyes iid.”

The *Gloria in excelsis Deo* offends because it is sung melismatically, with multiple notes corresponding to each syllable of text, rather than syllabically, with one note to each syllable. The elaborate melismata of the *Gloria* distort the individual syllables of the Latin words and wrench from them their naturally accented stresses. A Lollard sermon writer complains of the “aking of hedis” which comes from trying to decipher the words of elaborately noted liturgical songs. The very songs meant to sing God’s praises enact a distortion of the Latin words and sentence of the text analogous to the suffering of Christ’s body on the Cross. Those who sing God’s praises in such a manner leave themselves open to criticism for subjecting the Word of God to the same torments Christ’s torturers performed on his body, the Word made flesh. The aestheticizing of the liturgy has the potential to defile both God’s Word and Christ’s body. The Shepherds’ inability to reproduce the Latin words may have stemmed not so much from their lack of Latin as from their inability to determine the beginning and end of the word stretched beyond comprehension. Likewise, their own method of translating by fragmenting the Latin words certainly seems to provide a critical lens on the practice of polyphonic singing.

Although the Latin song is constructed as being disembodied, the Shepherds experience intense bodily reactions. The first Shepherd feels the Angel’s singing in his body, stating that “through my brest-bonne bletinge hee bored” (403). And it manifests in the body of the second
Shepherd as well: “And aye I quoked when hee so whewted; I durst not hede wher that yt was” (422-3). The Shepherds’ reaction to the song demonstrates the other criticism levied against the various forms of polyphony: the potentially diversionary aspects of the liturgical forms meant to lead the laity to Christ. Kendall notes the particularly affective power of the new forms:

For Wyclif’s followers, such church music epitomized the ill-disciplined religious exercise. Engineered to lift the soul on complex and interweaving lines, the new music ‘distract[ed] be syngere fro deuocion and lett[ed] . . . men fro consceiuynge of be sentence.’ Emotion and imagination were liberated from the business of enlivening the understanding, free now to fasten on any pleasure, no matter how transitory, no matter how base.  

Indeed, as Kendall notes, intended as inspirational pathways to God, the songs had the potential to seduce the individual to err. The Wycliffite author of “Of Feigned Contemplative Life” makes the link between singing and lechery explicit. Singing is one of the means by which the devil prevents “men” from studying and preaching the gospel: “siþ mannys wittis ben of certeyn mesure & myȝt, be more beï ben occupied aboute siche mannus song be lesse moten beï be sette aboute goddis lawe; for ñis stiriþ men to pride & iolite & lecherie & other synnys, & so vnableþ hem many gatis to vnderstonde & kepe holy writt” (191. The author assumes a certain limitation to a man’s “wittis.” If the parishioner is preoccupied by song or singing, the gateways are disabled allowing for other vices to creep in, displacing “goddis lawe.”

The Lollards were not stating anything new. Works of twelfth- and thirteenth-century writers including Aelred of Rivaulx and John of Salisbury reveal an assumption about the inherently erotic nature of polyphonic music. In his authoritative work of political philosophy the Policraticus, John of Salisbury alludes to the potential deviation from devotion such music
can effect: “The high or even the highest notes are mixed together with the low or lowest ones to such an extent that the ears are almost completely divested of their critical power . . . . Indeed, when such practices go too far, they can more easily occasion an itching of the loins than a sense of devotion in the mind.”77 The spiritual benefits that accrue with the stirring of devotion within the mind are undone as the effect of the music descends to the seat of the sexual organs. This assumed connection in medieval thought between highly elaborate singing and lecherous behavior sheds light on the Shepherd Tudd’s being put in mind of “sar” and “cis,” and “merye Mawd” when he experiences the effects of the Angel’s song. Just as the playwright dissolves the false dichotomies inhering in the assumptions about Latin and the mother tongue, the play now reveals the underlying similarities beneath the highly divergent musical forms. The assumed hierarchy between the elaborate polyphony and the simple syllabic vernacular song is undermined by both songs’ capacity to either seduce or bring about solace. In this way, the play links the Latin polyphonic song in its power to seduce, and its capacity to generate, with the carnal attributes of the vernacular.

An earlier phase of scholarship discounted the Shepherds’ translation scene as serving merely as an example of “musical burlesque.” But dismissing it out of hand as a “humorous excursion” fails to assess the significance of the differences between Chester and the other Shepherds’ plays. In his discussion of the Wakefield Master’s Second Shepherds play, Martin Stevens speculates that “the [Wakefield] play seems to present a deliberate progression from discord to harmony, suggesting that in their imitation of the Angel’s song, the shepherds learn a new tranquility of discourse with which to address the sacred.”78 Stevens assesses the overall progress of the Second Shepherds play as a “wholesale elevation of tone” and one that brings “awareness of the sacred to the profane”:
The most dissonant voices of the secular world have been stilled, and the singers of popular song have been inspired by angelic example to raise their voices in sacred harmony to celebrate the birth of Christ.\textsuperscript{79}

The Chester Shepherds’ secular voices, on the other hand, are not stilled, nor are they subsumed under the “sacred” or incorporated into the existent Latin religious culture. Chester’s Shepherds do not ventriloquize the Angel’s song, but substitute their own secular song in English, “Troly, loly, loly, loo,” for the responsorial poem \textit{Pax in terris} and the verse \textit{Transeamus usque Bethlehem} that occurs in the Shrewsbury \textit{Pastorum Officium}, the play from which earlier scholars believe the Chester play derived. The Shepherds’ song, a local and strategic adaptation of ecclesiastical ceremonial language, vies with that of the Angel. While it is true that the Angel’s song has great effect on the Shepherds (it “hele[s]” Trowle’s “hart”), their own song brings them “solace,” the “solace” each has been seeking in their various ways since the beginning of the play.

The play links the word “solace” to \textit{salvation} through its Latin homonym “\textit{sa}lus,” and through its structural placement in the text. As observed above, not much actual translation takes place in the play. However, the function of the homonym (as a kind of slant translation) takes on a more significant role as evidenced in the scene in which the Shepherds “expound” the Angel’s song, and arguably encourages the audience to make such aural links. The Latin \textit{salus} refers to health and figuratively gestures toward spiritual salvation.\textsuperscript{80} It is “\textit{salus}” the Shepherds make a great display about in the beginning of the play in their vocation as pastors of sheep in their production of salves and medicinals, and “solace” they achieve in the end. “Solace” is the word Trowle uses upon first seeing the Christ child, further reinforcing the connection between solace and salvation: “Solace nowe to see this / byldes in my brest blys” (492). In the beginning of the
play, when the Shepherds are finally gathered together in their communal feast, the second asks
Tudd, “Will we shape us to some solace?” (100) to which he answers: “Solace would best be
seene / that we shape us to our supper; / for meate and drinke, well I deeme, / to eych deede is
most dere” (101-4). A double emphasis on the word “solace” is achieved through its position at
the end and beginning of the two lines. This reference to “meat” and “drinke” as being “most
dere” certainly refers to the sacrament of the Eucharist and the degree to which it had come to
signify as the sole channel by which to achieve the redemptive power of Christ’s sacrifice.81
Trowle first uses the word “solace” in the wrestling scene before throwing the first of the three
Shepherds, when he must contest for what he cannot get otherwise. He tells them, “And this,
syrs, here to solace” (254). It is “solace” he
seeks, something he cannot achieve through their
sacramental repast. Furthermore, it is solace that causes Trowle to promise to amend the way he
lives his life: “never after to do amys, / thinge that him loth ys” (494-5).

After the Angel sings the Gloria, the word “solace” comes to be linked solely with the
imagery of singing and song. Near the end of the play, Joseph enjoins the Shepherds to go
“forth and preach this thinge, / all together and not in twynne: / that you have seene your
heavenly kinge / common all mankynde to mynne” (536-8). Much has been made of the fact
that the Shepherds at the end of the play “are ‘translated’ into shepherds of men,” and that their
preaching will be accomplished through song: “Unkynd will I never in noe case bee, / but preach
all that I can and knowe, /as Gabryell taught by his grace mee. Singing away hethen will I”
(653-6).82 The text emphasizes the import of song throughout the play. The first time we are
introduced to Trowle, he is sitting apart on a wold singing.83 At the beginning of the play, part of
Trowle’s disaffection for the Shepherds lies in their “sittinge withowt any songes.” But if
singing is the method through which Christ’s message will be evangelized, then the absence of

156
singing by the Shepherds earlier can be read as a salvational model which stresses the sacraments at the expense of preaching. This situation is remedied after the collaborative effort to interpret the meaning of the star and the Angel’s song. In the aftermath of the discussion of the *Gloria*, three of the four men make reference to singing. Inspired by the Angel’s song, the first Shepherd suggests that “Nowe pray wee to him with good intent, / and singe I wyll and me [unbrace]” (436-7). The second experiences an expansiveness that arises from his contact with the heavenly voice: “Nowe syth I have all my will, / never in this world soe well I was. / Sing wee nowe, I rede us, shryll / a mery songe us to solace” (440-3). Significantly, the lines that Trowle speaks after hearing the Angel sing as they set off to find the Messiah suggest that he teaches the song “Troly, loly, loly, loo” to the play’s audience: “Singe we nowe; lett see, / some songe will I assaye. / All men nowe singes after mee, / for musicke of mee learne yee maye.” The means to “solace” proposed by Trowle is through a vernacular song which can be sung by “all men,” and one he will gladly teach. The model proposed by Trowle is both accessible and participatory and prefigures Joseph’s injunction at the end of the play for the four to spread the message that they have “seene [their] heavonly kinge / common all mankynde to mynne” (536-8). Singing has a performative capacity to make God’s Word flesh in a way that the sacrament does not, for Trowle, at any rate.

In the substitution of their own vernacular song for the “authorized” Latin hymn, and a salvational model centered on God’s Word for one dependent on Christ’s body (in the form of the host), Trowle and the Shepherds initiate a community defined by its use of English as opposed to Latin, one that is participatory as well as all-inclusive, a community that can stand up as a legitimate alternative to that offered by the Shepherd-priests in the opening of the play. It is a community constituted in and through the very act of singing itself, so integrally related to
preaching in the play. As Paul Connerton notes, performative utterances “are as it were the place in which the community is constituted and recalls to itself the fact of its constitution.”85 In the end, though both Latin hymn and vernacular song are revealed to have healing potential, the play advocates for the importance of creating a community centered on a language that succeeds not by any inherent qualities, but rather by virtue of the very fact that it provides access to scripture, the signal quality of the cycle plays themselves. Further, in drawing affinities between church ritual and vernacular drama, the play argues for the ritualistic and performative compass of the play itself to effect a desire on the part of the members of the audience, like Trowle within the play, to amend their lives. While the author of the Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge expresses concern that vernacular drama cannot convey the allegorical significance of divine truth, Chester’s Shepherds play argues otherwise.

The end of the play sees a movement that might be characterized as being more concerned with a localized and individual response at odds with the universal and communal concerns associated with the pastoral theology figured in the opening. Although Joseph enjoins the Shepherds to go “forth and preach this thinge, / all together and not in twyne” [not separately], the four men explicitly state their individual intentions: the first Shepherd will “walke by stye and by streytt, / in wilderness to walke for aye” as a “hermitte” (671-2; 669); the second will “singinge walke homwardlye” and “preach all that I can and knowe” (652; 654); the third will “over the sea . . . / gange and goe abowt nowe / to preach this thinge in every place” (659); and Trowle “to an anker herby / . . . will in [his] prayers wach and wake” (667-8). It is a movement which, despite the univocality of the message, is to a great degree decentered and dispersed. The community that comes about through the performance and the attendance of the cycle plays, like the one which forms through the act of singing, is also temporary and
provisional. The plays represent not so much a “direct dramatic analogue to eucharistic worship,” as one scholar has argued, as offer an alternative means for achieving an intensification of communal and spiritual experience. The Shepherds play, like the community constituted in and through the act of singing, must be considered, rather, as a political intervention on the order of ritual, a ceremony of embodied practices that represents an alternative and potentially contestatory form of knowledge.

Epilogue

The Chester mystery cycle experienced a chequered performance history in the sixteenth century. Still, despite the changing religious climate in the 1500s, the cycle was performed at least five times during Elizabeth’s reign. The final performance of the Chester Whitsun plays in their entirety took place in 1575. However, the Shepherds play was performed for visiting dignitaries to Chester on at least two occasions, apart from the cycle, in 1515 and as late as 1577, after the suppression of the cycle as a whole had been accomplished. With its critique of mediated experience and the overtly theatrical production associated with ritual encounters, the Shepherds’ play would certainly have found favor with some of the Protestant element. Christopher Goodman’s critique of the play notwithstanding, there was much to recommend it, particularly, in the performance of embodied devotional practice through group singing that would become central to church services. I will consider the Chester cycle’s post-Reformation life in more detail in the chapter that follows.
Nicholas Watson attributes the exemption of the drama from legislation as due largely to two factors: that it was “an oral not a written medium of religious instruction, and was well-established in some centers before Wyclif.” Watson, “Cultural Changes,” *English Language Notes* 44, no. 1 (2006), 130. Taking into consideration Fiona Somerset’s argument that the Constitutions were more concerned with the intellectual output of the university intellectuals, Ruth Nisse observes that the theology offered up by Middle English religious dramatic texts emerges “within the frame of orthodox religious celebration, yet outside the clerical educational institutions that Arundel’s legislation most urgently sought to police.” Nisse, *Defining Acts: Drama and the Politics of Interpretation in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2005), 8.


The extant Shepherds plays of the cycle drama, including the Towneley *First Shepherds* and *Second Shepherds* plays, the Coventry *Pageant of the Shearmen and Taylors*, a nativity play that contains the Shepherds material, the N-Town Shepherds, and a fragment of the York Shepherds Play, draw from a similar vein of material when supplementing the scriptural material in Luke 2:8–20. For example, Towneley’s *First Shepherds* and Chester’s plays share a communal feast; a number of the plays contain a scene in which the Shepherds imitate or dispute the Angel’s song; Joseph doubts Mary’s virginal status in at least two of the plays; rumors of or the actual stealing of sheep occur(s); and Chester’s play features a wrestling match.

The Protestant reformers Christopher Goodman and Robert Rogerson lodged their complaints against the additions to the play which they termed “the absurdities,” including: the “unreverent speaking” and the “foolish descanting of the Shepherds upon Gloria in excelsis”; the Shepherds’ suspicions that the Angel is a “sheep-stealer”; “their vain offerings to move laughter & to maintain Superstition”; and the “lewd merry song” the Shepherds sing. Goodman, *Letterbook of Christopher Goodman* in *Records of Early English Drama: Cheshire including Chester*, eds. Elizabeth Baldwin, Lawrence M. Clopper, and David Mills (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 146–47.


Two scholars who comment on the sacramental aspect of the banquet are Margery M. Morgan “‘High Fraud’: Paradox and Double-Plot in the English Shepherds’ Plays,” *Speculum* 39 (1964), 684; and Peter Travis, *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982). Travis notes the means by which “the Chester dramatist disguises the eucharistic feast in the shepherds’ gross banquet,” referring to it as a “profane and ‘fictional’ inversion” (122).


*Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 152, n. 6. As Hudson observes, “Frere Thomas” refers to Thomas Aquinas who is traditionally associated with the feast of Corpus Christi.


For the discussion of Christ as food, particularly the shift from viewing Christ as the bread of heaven to viewing the flesh and blood of Christ as meat, see Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 48–69; for the nuns who saw the baby Jesus in the host, Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 130.


31 In the *Disputation between Mary and the Cross*, one of the metaphysical images the Cross employs in his explication of his role in the Crucifixion is that he serves as the shepherd’s staff to Christ as Shepherd: “God seith Himself He is Schepherde, / . . . The Cros I calle the Heerdes yerde [staff]” (289, 290). *Disputation between Mary and the Cross*, in *The Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript*, Part 2, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. for the Early English Text Society, 1901), 639–57.

32 Kolve makes a similar observation, but reads the Shepherds’ feast as reflective of the traditional Christmas celebrations. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, 160. Also see Morgan, “High Fraud,” 676–89.


34 *REED Cheshire including Chester*, 122–24. See other performance years for a list of similar expenses.


40 Although liturgical uses are not standardized prior to the issuance of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the *Sarum Missal* was probably the most well-known and used in late medieval England. *The Sarum Missal in English*, trans. A. H. Pearson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004).

41 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 70.


44 Ladrière, “Performativity,” 58, emphasis added.

45 Ladrière, “Performativity,” 58.


47 For a useful overview of this process, see Jennifer Garrison, “Mediated Piety: Eucharistic Theology and Lay Devotion in Robert Mannyng’s *Handlyng Synne*,” *Speculum* 85 (2010), 905–7.


51 Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, 36, emphasis added.
Consider the emphasis placed on the Word over rites and ceremonies in Henry VIII’s Proclamation of 1538: The people were commanded to “make a sharp distinction between ‘the things commanded by God’ . . . and the ‘rites and ceremonies aforesaid.’ They were to read, and the people to hear without contention and strife, the ‘very Gospel and Holy Scripture.’” Further, they should use ceremonies “without superstition” in order to put them “in remembrance of higher perfection and none otherwise.” But they were enjoined not to “repose any confidence of salvation in them.” Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400 – c. 1580 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 411–12.

In the York fragment, the Shepherds make an attempt to imitate the Angel’s song. They also sing a non-specified song on the way to Bethlehem and at the play’s end. In the Towneley First Shepherds play, the Shepherds discuss their experience of hearing the Angel’s song and his words, but do not try to reproduce it. They discuss the prophecies of Christ’s birth and cite a number of scriptural and patristic sources, and one even quotes Latin verse from Virgil, which has traditionally been interpreted as a veiled reference to Christ. In the Coventry Pageant of the Shearmen and Taylors, a nativity play whose Shepherds’ material shares elements with Chester, the recalling of the Latin lines sung by the Angel is three lines long compared with fifty-five in Chester: Pastor II. “‘Glore, gloreia in excelsis,’ that wase ther songe; / How sey ye, fellois, seyd the not thus?” (272–73). Pastor I: “Thatt ys wel seyd; now goo we hence / To worschipe” (274).

Both are acknowledged as being equally “dere.” This may serve as a comment on the practice by which the eating of the wafer had taken precedence over the drinking of the wine, at least in terms of lay participation in the ritual.

54 Kendall, The Drama of Dissent, 52.
55 Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible, Chapter 15, in Hudson, Selections from English Wycliffite Writings, 69/90–94.
57 Lumiansky and Mills, The Chester Mystery Cycle, vol. 2, Commentary and Glossary EETS s.s. 9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), 117, line note 410. In The Castle of Perseverance, the “malus angelus” tells “humanum genus” to “goo a geyn be deuelys mat / & pleye Þe a whyle wyth sare & syss” (1575–77). David Bevington, ed., The Macro Plays: The Castle of Perseverance, Wisdom, Mankind (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972). See also John Skelton, “The Tunning of Elinor Rumming,” (c.1508) http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/rp/poems/skelton2b.html. The names “sar” and “sis” again crop up: “Come who so wyll / To Elynour on the hyll, / Wyth, ‘Fyll the cup, fyll,’ / And syt there by styll, / Erly and late: / Thyther cometh Kate, / Cysly, and Sare, / With theyr legges bare, / and also theyr fete, / Hardely, full unsweete; / Wyth theyyr heles dagged, / Theyyr kyrtelles all to-jagged, / Theyr smockes all to-ragged, / Wyth titters and tatters, / Brynge dysshes and platters, / Wyth all theyr myght runnynghe / To Elynour Rummynge, / To have of her tunnynghe” (113–30).
The “pax” (osculatorium, tabula pacis), also known vernacularly as the “pax-brede” (pax-board), is the name given to the small tablet, kissed by the celebrating priest during the sacramental service of the Eucharistic. The “pax,” bearing an image of the Crucifixion, Virgin Mary, saint, or other church official, was introduced into England sometime in the thirteenth-century as a substitute for the earlier practice, the literal giving of the “kiss of peace” (osculum sanctum, osculum pacis) among members of the laity.


63 “Caro cibus, sanguis potus, / Manet tamen Christus totus / Sub utraque specie. / ...................... / Fracto demum Sacramento /Ne vacilles, sed memento / Tantum esse sub fragmento / Quantum toto tegitur.” Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast, 52.

64 Kendall, The Drama of Dissent, 28.


69 Salter, “The Banns,” (1940), 145.

70 OCE, s.v. “Gloria in excelsis.” Unlike other liturgical songs having set melodies, the Gloria is sung in a wide variety of melodies and styles, depending upon its function in the liturgy.


72 Rastall, The Heaven Singing, 85.

73 Rastall, The Heaven Singing, 86.

74 Records of Early English Drama: Chester, ed. Lawrence M. Clopper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 81. “mr Chaunter” likely refers to the position of a Master Chanter and not to an individual’s surname.

75 Kendall, The Drama of Dissent, 28.

76 Kendall, The Drama of Dissent, 28.

77 Bruce Holsinger, Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture, Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 158. Holsinger traces the homoerotics of polyphony revealed in writings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (157 ff.).


79 Stevens, Four Middle English Mystery Cycles, 179.

80 Observe Old English “halig” from “hal” meaning hale, evolves into “holi,” implying again the link between health and salvation.
Both are acknowledged as being equally “dere.” This may serve as a comment on the practice by which the eating of the wafer had taken precedence over the drinking of the wine, at least in terms of lay participation in the ritual.

Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi, 172; see also Rastall, The Heaven Singing, 198.

The stage directions at line 164 read “Tunc cantabit, et dicat Garcius.”

The stage directions in MS H, the manuscript which contains the notation for the Gloria in excelsis state, “Tunc omnes pastores cum aliis adiuvantibus cantabunt hilare carmen,” Lumiansky and Mills (1974), 145, variant notes. It is unclear whether “cum aliis adiuvantibus” refers to others on the stage or the members of the audience, or both.


The fifteenth-century Painters’, Glaziers’, and Embroiderers’ Accounts books survive only from 1567. Mayors List 5 preserves these two independent performance dates. REED Chester, 23; 124–25. F. M. Salter cites both of these occasions, preserved in Harley 2125, and also notes that a number of Cestrian antiquarians remember it being performed on “still other occasions.” Salter, “The Banns of the Chester Plays,” Review of English Studies 15, no. 60 (1939): 456. Mayors List 5 notes that the Assumption play (included in the list of plays in Chester’s Early Banns but absent from the Later Banns) was performed with the Shepherds play in St. John’s Churchyard some time in November of 1515 (REED Chester, 23).
Chapter Four

“Churching” the Text: Bodily, Spiritual, and Scriptural Integrity in the Chester Purification of the Virgin Mary Play

As discussed in the previous chapter, vernacular cycle drama has proven to be an important genre for the study of vernacular theology. The plays offer not only a fictive locus in which to investigate the performance of vernacular theology, but also, as witnessed in the Shepherds play, an ideal forum in which to track reformist impulses. In this chapter, the discussion moves away from concerns about the status of the vernacular and the need for greater participation on the part of the laity, and turns to consider the problem of scriptural integrity and the related questions about faithful translators and hermeneutical practice, central issues to the larger cultural debates over translation of the Bible into English in late medieval England.

Chester’s Purification of the Virgin Mary play examines two areas of mutual concern to ecclesiastical and civic authorities: the regulation and containment of vernacular theological texts, on the one hand, and female bodily and spiritual integrity, on the other. The play dramatizes the way that interpretation and translation of Scripture into the vernacular enacted a similar set of concerns as did the observance of “churching,” the religious purification ritual required of women after bearing a child. The play forges a link between these two seemingly disparate sets of practices in the dramatized scrutiny of the doctrine of the Virgin birth.
As acknowledged in the previous chapter, recent scholarship on the plays recognizes the Chester cycle to be deeply invested in issues of interpretation and textual authority. From the outset, the Purification play establishes a concern over textual and scriptural integrity through the figure of Simeon, the priestly figure who receives the infant Christ at his presentation in the temple. Simeon twice attempts to “emend” the prophecy of the Virgin birth in the Book of Isaiah. Both times his efforts are reversed through divine intervention. I read Simeon’s adulteration of Holy Writ alongside the debates over biblical hermeneutic and translation practices carried on between the theologian John Wyclif and his fifteenth-century detractors. The rhetoric used in these debates draws on the language of purity and defilement to express concerns over the integrity of the divine Word, a rhetoric that finds its counterpart in contemporary medieval literature and debates over purification practices.

The chapter then turns to consider a second hermeneutical model. Through the supplemental offering he makes and his accompanying gloss, Joseph’s intervention in the Purification ritual succeeds in correcting Simeon’s interpretation of Isaiah’s prophecy, rooted in an overly literal understanding of virginity. In the offering of the “virgin waxe,” Joseph presents a testament to Mary’s purity, defined not as a fleshly chasteness, but rather as a spiritual state of grace resulting from a life lived in full devotion to Christ. Finally, I argue that through the figure of Joseph as fidus interpres, the play works to validate its own authority as “faithful handmaid” to Holy Scripture in answer to the reformers’ criticisms of the plays. What the play ultimately advocates is not an amendment of scriptural texts, but an “amendement of mankynde” through Scripture.

Despite the history of fourteenth-century authorship constructed for the Chester Mystery Cycle in the Banns announcing the plays’ performance, recent scholarship contends, in light of
the pageant’s revision and performance history, that the cycle should be viewed as a Tudor production. Following upon the previous chapter’s brief speculation on the Chester Shepherds play’s significance to Reformation liturgy, this chapter, therefore, situates the play’s hermeneutical and devotional concerns within the context of cultural debates taking place over the course of the cycle’s history— from the play’s literary inception, based in part on fourteenth-century vernacular sources, through its troubled performance history during the sixteenth century’s changing religio-political climate, and on into its antiquarian textual afterlife.

Scriptural Integrity and Textual Corruption

The Chester Purification of Mary play opens with a dramatic staging of the translating biblical exegete at work, establishing the play’s considerable concern with interpretive and translation practices. After a lengthy complaint about the number of years he has lived while awaiting the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that he would live to see the Christ child, Simeon turns to Scripture for further information. The stage directions call for Simeon to examine the book and read Isaiah’s prophecy of the birth of the Messiah aloud in the Latin: “Tunc respitiens librum legat prophetiam: ‘Ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium,’ etc.” He then translates the verse into English and disputes what he has read:

A, lord, mich is thy power;

a wonder I fynd written here.

It sayth a mayden clean and cleare

shall conceive and beare

a sonne called Emanuell.

But of this leeve I never a deale;
it is wronge written, as have I heale,

or elles wonder yt were. (25-32)

Disbelieving what he reads, Simeon “scrape[s]” the word “virgin” from the manuscript page, substitutes the phrase “a good woman,” and returns the book to the altar. An angel alights who makes a show of writing in the book (37; 39). When Simeon looks at the same passage later that day, he is astonished to find in “red letters in stowte araye / ‘a virgin’ written therein” (58-9). Nevertheless, he repeats his action once again, scraping the word “virgin” from the text, and inserts what “soother ys: that ‘a good woman’ shall iwys / conceive, and not a maye” (69-71).

Once again, the angel alights to rectify the text, this time with gilded letters:

A, hye God in Trinitee,

honored be thou aye.

For goulden letters, by my lewtye,

are written through Godes postie

syth I layd my booke from mee

and my writinge awaye,

thereas ‘a good woman’ written was

right nowe here before my face;

yet stirred I not owt of this place,

and my letter changed is.

This must be needes by Godes grace,

for an angell this written hase.

Nowe leeve I a mayd in this case
shall beare a barron of blysse. (82-95)  

The scene in which Simeon alters the Book of Isaiah rehearses issues at the very core of the debates over vernacular Bible production beginning with Wyclif and the Lollards in the late fourteenth-century and continuing on into post-Reformation England. On the one hand, this scene demonstrates the potential for error inherent in manuscript culture and the profound effects wrought through superficial transcription errors. On the other hand, the scene offers a critique of those who approach Holy Scripture through a skeptical hermeneutics.

The fourteenth century saw a gradual shift in the universities toward an academic and more philological approach toward Scripture, termed “scientia” by Ghosh and characterized by “a knowledge or at least an awareness of the importance of Greek and Hebrew, close rationalist attention to the text, a reliance on context to clarify dubious points of interpretation, an awareness of the centrality of textual criticism, an acknowledgement of the different cultural circumstances in which the Bible was written and compiled.” This more philological approach is, in part, motivated by a desire to reclaim and reconstruct a more perfect textual exemplar of sacred Scripture. Scholars from Wyclif to Erasmus cite a myriad of reasons for lack of scriptural integrity, including scribal error, questionable translation theory and praxis, and a lack of adequate knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Certainly, anxiety about textual corruption through scribal error is inherent to manuscript culture, as attested by Chaucer’s famous complaint in “Adam Scriveyn.” However, authorial intent and textual integrity take on the utmost importance when dealing with authoritative texts such as the Bible, upon which decisions about church authority and law are based.

A number of fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Oxford scholars expressed concern over issues resulting from the rising demand for Scripture in the vernacular. Fears about
scriptural integrity only increased when the Bible moved out of the hands of the ecclesiastical authorities. Even those committed to a vernacular Bible were aware of the problems of corrupt texts. In *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, Wyclif is intent on differentiating between “true” Holy Scripture and its perceptible counterpart, a text-based Scripture “dependent on the works of men, such as parchments, engravings, voices, manuscripts, or other handiworks.” As part of his argument that true Holy Scripture is indestructible, unlike these more material embodiments, he inscribes the very lack of integrity, and hence the lack of authority, at issue in the debates. If Scripture were merely some sort of material sign, he states, “then all Holy Scripture could be damaged by a leather-worker, authorized by a scribe, torn apart by a dog, and corrected by a buffoon, as if it were liable to such defilement. And so any number of people could then render every Scripture heretical, damnable, and potentially harmful, promoting no virtue or honor, and consequently possessing no authority.” Notwithstanding Wyclif’s claim that the material signs of Scripture (manuscripts) are sacred only in that they lead the faithful to true Scripture, his writings articulate the centrality of issues of authority arising from material textual concerns. Wyclif uses these consequences as proof that Scripture cannot be limited to a sensible sign: the “leather-worker” who corrupts the text by cobbling together errant passages; the scribe who, in the process of copying, must make authorial decisions; the fool who, by virtue of his lack of learning, in his “correction” contaminates the text. All these are equivalent to the destruction a dog would precipitate. If this were true, Scripture would lose its “virtue” and its “honour” would suffer.

Erasmus cites similar concerns in his written defense for the inclusion of a Greek facing page in his Latin New Testament edition: “But one thing the facts cry out, and it can be clear, as they say, even to a blind man, that often through the translator’s clumsiness or inattention the
Greek has been wrongly rendered; often the true and genuine reading has been corrupted by ignorant scribes, which we see happen every day, or altered by scribes who are half-taught and half-asleep." Erasmus’s anxiety results from the lack of language skills necessary to grapple with the original Greek texts, but, like Wyclif, he understands that even when scholarship is of the highest degree that scribal error can intervene. 

Textual corruption was a fact in the production of texts, however it occurred.

Thus, Simeon’s interpretive acts draw attention to the issues of textual corruption and authority that derive from the shift in the latter part of the fourteenth century toward what Ian Christopher Levy has termed “a persistent strain of skepticism,” a shift which yields a rationalist attention to the text. In the play, Simeon echoes these scholars’ concerns while translating Isaiah’s prophecy of the virgin birth, wondering aloud if the crux of Isaiah’s prophecy is the work of a “fonne”:

it is wronge written, as have I heale,

or elles wonder yt were.

He that wrote this was a fonne [fool]
to writte “a virgin” hereupon
that should conceive without helpe of man;
this writinge mervayles me. (31-6)

Simeon’s observations on the text at hand attest to the concern over textual corruption, whether the result of scribal or of authorial practices. In his inability to apprehend the meaning of the prophetic lines, Simeon rationalizes that there must be an error in the text. Simeon’s use of the word “fonne” to characterize one who has written errant text may allude to the use of the same
word by the anonymous author of the *Stanzaic Life*, one of the acknowledged sources for the Chester plays (and this play in particular), which would further confirm corruption of the text resulting from some type of authorial lack.\(^\text{10}\) The author’s primary focus in the prologue to the *Stanzaic Life* is to establish his text as an authoritative work based on known and accepted authorities. Six of the eight stanzas that make up the prologue are intent on delineating a methodology for creating an authorized text that his patron and other readers might “triste & fully knowe” (16). The compiler of the *Stanzaic Life* asserts that he will “reher[s]e” his “Aucteres fully” and cite them in order that “Clerkus shal not after say / þese newe fables wrote a fonne” (31-2). Simeon, on the other hand, is not a faithful translator concerned with creating an authoritative text. He, not the scribe he imagines has spawned the error in the text, is revealed to be the true “fonne.” Simeon’s altering of the text ultimately establishes his lack of faith in his book’s prophetic words, without which he cannot apprehend the text’s divine meaning. Simeon’s mistranslation ultimately serves, however, to set up the necessary validation of both Mary and the text that both represents and authenticates her purity.

John McGavin sees a “suggestion” in these lines that Simeon’s erasure “is not primarily directed towards God or Isaiah but towards the transcriber of his text... He does not say that Isaiah was a fool but that the person who wrote what is before him was a fool.….It is the correction of a faulty text, not a direct attack upon the sacred word” (99). But Simeon’s words, “he that wrote this,” might also imply an authorial presence, and not just a scribal force. Calling the writer of the text a “fonne,” a fool, suggests that a consciousness adheres to the task and that the error is due to a mistranslation of the original text, not just mindless copying. Furthermore, while it is possible to read Simeon’s first adulteration of the text as being potentially benignly motivated, his second trial of the prophetic verse must be read otherwise. The first time Simeon
scrapes the word “virgin” from the manuscript page and substitutes the words “good woman,” he does so because he believes the prophecy to be “wronge written.” Otherwise, the prophetic verse that a virgin “should conceive without helpe of man” is a “wonder” which he cannot rationally countenance. However, upon seeing that the words “a virgin” have been miraculously restored to the text and even rubricated for greater emphasis, Simeon determines to test the veracity of the miraculous writing itself:

A, lord, how may this be? Todaye
that I wrote last I fynd awaye
and of red letters in stowte araye
“a virgin” written therin.
Nay, faye, after I will assaye
whether this miracle be verey,
and scrape this word written so gaye
and write “a good woman.” (56-63)

Even though the stage directions direct Simeon to take up the book and read the newly rectified text with wonder \([\textit{admirando}]\), Simeon’s doubt about the truth of Isaiah’s prophecy extends to the miracle of the text itself. McGavin sees this as an act that further establishes Simeon’s credibility in that he subjects a sign or a miracle to a further test to ensure its validity. I read it rather as a sign that Simeon continues to think that he can judge and correct Scripture, even after the miraculous rewriting. It also says much about Simeon’s lack of faith in divine prophecy, as the line-filler “fay” ironically suggests.

As I have already indicated, Simeon’s skeptical hermeneutical practices would have been of concern to those ecclesiastical authorities who sought to control biblical vernacular
translations, as well as to the Wycliffites advocating for a Bible in a common tongue. Both sides were concerned with issues of hermeneutics, particularly as they related to vernacular preaching and translation. As Beryl Smalley observes of Hugh of St. Cher, in commenting on Luke 21:36, sounds a cautionary note to those who alter the words of Scripture:

Christ rebukes those who will not listen to his teaching, but “postillate” whatever they hear. They would quit their postills, Hugh says, if they heeded the mischief wrought by the very first postill of all. That was Eve’s postillation of God’s word, forbidding the fruit of the tree of good and evil (Gen. 2.17). The devil tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. She answered: God hath commanded us that we should not eat, and that we should not touch it, lest perhaps we die (Gen. 3.3). thus she added her postill, ‘perhaps,’ to God’s caution. . . . Postillation brought about man’s woe! Invoking Christ himself as the source for his comments, Hugh comes down hard upon those who subject Christ’s teaching to constant commentary. He likens all those who “postillate” to the original postillator, Eve. Citing Genesis, he adds the word “perhaps” to Eve’s response to the devil, thereby perpetrating the very sin of which he accuses others. Wyclif, following in this tradition, would characterize Simeon’s adulteration of Scripture as a breach of faith. In his interpretation of humanity’s fall from grace, Wyclif attributes the Fall to the “hermeneutical perversity” that results from Eve’s “wavering in the faith of scripture”:

The sly serpent questioned the reason of this piece of scripture. It would have sufficed to have alleged to him the authority of the lawgiver, since the faith of scripture is a principle closer to the First Principle than to that of the highest doctrinal science. But the woman, out of her perverse concept of scripture, did
not indeed falsify it, but doubted, saying: ‘Of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die’. And the devil, instantly, seeing that man was wavering in the faith of scripture, and monstrously adding to holy scripture from elsewhere the prohibition relating to touching the tree, as if he wished to correct or burden the divine mandate, immediately lied, and contradicting the scripture of the Lord, said: ‘Ye shall not surely die.’ And thus mankind was seduced because of forsaking the sense of scripture.  

Eve’s loss of faith causes her to “correct or burden the divine mandate” with an added injunction when she repeats God’s words to the serpent. It is through the added words to Holy Scripture that the serpent realizes that Eve is ripe for seduction. If Eve had merely cited God rather than pronounced doctrine, she would not have opened herself to error. In both Hugh’s and Wyclif’s commentaries against those who would overburden Scripture through added commentary or adducing of text, Eve bears the burden of the weak of faith. But the two also equate scriptural integrity or the lack of it with a fallen female figure and a lack of faith with a lack of continence.

Simeon’s subjection of the doctrine of the virgin birth to rational scrutiny would have found its counterpart in Wyclif’s realist philosophical concerns relating to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, which caused his detractors to accuse him of a similar failure of faith. One, Thomas Netter of Walden, writing in the early 1420s, argues that Wyclif was guilty of the very same textual perversity of which he accused others: “[Wyclif is] the worst commentator on apostolic scripture, [because] he simultaneously and repeatedly perverts the sense and corrupts the text.” As an example, Netter takes Wyclif to task for adding the word “natural” to the biblical text “Hoc est corpus & panis”: “For [Wyclif] adds ‘natural bread,’ saying ‘This is [my] body and...
natural bread.’” In uttering such “a falsehood,” Netter argues, “he has given birth to iniquity and created error.”¹⁴ Netter condemns Wyclif’s interpretative moves through a rhetorical feat in which the theologian’s interpretative act is lent a generative force: Wyclif’s statement is not only false; it gives birth to inequity and error. There is also the implication that the interpretative birth is illegitimate, for Wyclif has strayed from the faithful replication of the words of the scriptural text. Simeon, along with those who add words to Scripture to serve their interpretation, then, in the erasure and substitution of words, corruptions the text and makes it bear false witness. Moreover, Simeon’s act threatens in the most crucial way, the very heart of Christianity’s theology, for Mary’s virginal status is the linchpin upon which Christianity quite literally depends. Without Mary’s maidenhood, Christ’s birth is just like any other birth, and not the fulfillment of divine prophecy.

The Purification Ritual and the Rhetoric of Defilement

The rhetoric of textual corruption that manifests itself in both Wyclif’s and his detractors’ discussions about “interested” interpretative practices finds its counterpart in the notions underlying the purification ritual in orthodox sermon literature and in a number of extant Purification plays. This rhetoric not only undergirds the discussion about hermeneutics and scriptural integrity, it is a counterpart to the language used to talk about the churching of women.

The chapter now turns to examine contemporary views about the Purification of the Virgin Mary, in particular, and women in general. The rhetoric of purity and defilement at the center of Mary’s purification and the ritual of churching is the same rhetoric that we find at the heart of the debate over vernacular Bible translation. The Purification of the Virgin Mary, the fourth of five feast days devoted to Mary, is commemorated on February 2, forty days after the
birth of Christ, the number of days prescribed in Leviticus following upon the birth of a male child. It is often conflated with the Presentation of Christ, also celebrated on this day. In Sermon 14 of his Liber Festivalis, “De Purificacione Beate Marie et Eius Solempnitate,” John Mirk preserves details of the customary traditions associated with Candlemas Day, the popular name for this feast day commemorating the Virgin Mary’s Purification ritual: It is “comyn vse to all crysten men forto come to þe chyrche þys day, and bere a candyll yn processyon, as þagh þay ȝedyn bodyly wyth oure lady to chyrch, and aftyr offyr wyth hyr yn worschip and high reuerens of hur” (59).15 Many orthodox sermons and a number of the extant Purification plays make explicit the link between Mary’s Purification and the individual “churching” ritual each woman, after having given birth, was expected to take part in after the requisite number of days of purgation had passed, forty days for a male child, double that for a female.

Mirk’s sermon encourages the kind of imaginative devotional practice found in the Purification sections of Nicholas Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ and in the Book of Margery Kempe. In the Mirror, Nicholas Love uses the day of Mary’s Purification as an occasion to discourse on the topic of “speciale prerogatifes,” directed at the women in his audience. A marginal note in Latin, “Nota conta singulares” establishes this as one of the primary points of the sermon. However, embedded in his lesson is the message that sexual intercourse and reproduction will result in a woman’s being defiled through sin. He tells his audience that Mary submits herself to the law as if she were any other woman “defoylet þorh synne.”16 His imagined version of the historic event includes additions to the minimal description provided in the second chapter of Luke, including the order in which the participants process toward the altar while bearing lit candles and singing the “Suscepimus deus” in English. Like the cycle plays, Love adds dialogue and humanist touches of the bond between Christ and
mother to his account of the day. For contemplation, his reader is urged to join in the procession. Mirk likewise advises the women in his parish to keep “yn mynde of þys processe” when they come to be churched themselves. In this way, their own churchings align these women with the Virgin Mary; they tread the very steps she trod and perform the very same actions.

Texts like Mirk’s sermon construct the purification rite as a gendered cultural practice inflected with moral beliefs about purity and impurity. Moreover, as Love’s word “defoylet” suggests, the churching ritual is a practice constructed fundamentally through the rhetoric of defilement. As Beth Kreitzer notes, the Church did not officially approve of these constructions:

> Although churching was technically not a process of purification—Gregory the Great and other theologians had specifically stated that parturient and menstruating women were not unclean and could partake of the sacrament—it is clear that many ordinary Catholics, and even many priests, felt that some element of impurity was present in such women, including an increased vulnerability to Satan.¹⁷

Although the official church position in the late Middle Ages was that a woman need not be precluded from attending church prior to her purification rite, some local, less educated parish priests (and some like Mirk) promoted the negative and superstitious attitudes toward the ritual inhering in sermons and in popular works such as the *Legenda Aurea*. Despite official disapproval, the rationale Mirk cites for the continued practice of churching women after childbirth is that “fleschly coupull of man and woman ys vnclene yn hymselfe, þerfor lawe ordeyneth a remedy forto clanse hom” (57). Mirk constructs the rite of Purification as a remedy necessitated by the sinfulness attached to the procreative act. However, Mirk’s explanation only raises more questions. If, in fact, this is a ritual required by sexual intercourse, why are men not
required to undergo the rite as well? His explanation demonstrates that women alone were considered in need of purification.

Wherfor, ȝet yn mynde of þys processe, when a woman cometh to the chyrche-
dyrre tyll þe pryst come and cast holy watyr on hyr, and clansuþ hur, and so
takyth hyr by þe hond, and bryngyth hur to þe chyrche, ȝeuyng hur leue to come
to þe chyrch, and to goo to hur husbandys bed.

Mirk’s description of the process the woman would go through is symbolic of the notion of defilement and the necessary “clansing” that comes with sexual activity resulting in childbirth. In illustrated manuscripts depicting the purification rite, the woman was often depicted being led into the church as she held onto the extended stole of the priest, adding the additional suggestion that she was too defiled to be touched by one so sanctified.

Mirk appears not to ascribe to the belief that Mary was immaculately conceived herself. Rather, he tells his audience that Mary’s purity is achieved through the action of the Holy Ghost at the moment of her conception of Christ: “for sho was clansed so wyth þe worchyng of þe Holy Gost yn conceyvyng of hur sonne, þat þer was laft yn hir no mater of synne, ne of non othyr fulþe.”¹⁸ Her original sin and any outstanding sins that she had committed during her life are effectively erased or rewritten through the grace of God in the ghostly implanting of the Word. While it is true that Mary is generally acknowledged to be free of any kind of sin, Mirk and his counterparts reify and literalize the notion of “virginity” as corresponding specifically to a fleshly chasteness. They do this through the language used to construct Mary’s purity as well as through details about the purification ritual itself.

Several of the extant Purification plays consistently construct the churching ritual and the Virgin Mary’s purity through a negative rhetoric of defilement. For example, in the N-Town
Purification play, Joseph tells Mary, “To be purefyed have ye no need / Ne thi son to be offeryd, so God me spede; / For fyrst thu art ful clene, / Undefowlyd in thought and dede” (108-111).¹⁹ And in York’s Purification play,²⁰ the Presbyter who explicates the reason for the purification rite prescribed in Leviticus explicitly cites defilement as a condition resulting from reproductive acts:

The woman that hais borne her chylde,
She shall comme hether at the forty day
To be purfyied where she was fylde,

And the preistes prayer purchace secure
For the woman that was fylyd in God sight. (37-9, 47-8)

The Chester play, in contrast, rewrites the rhetoric of defilement associated with the purification ritual through a positive expression of purity. Significantly, the manner in which Mary’s virgin state is framed throughout the Chester play, save once, is through the positive rhetoric of “cleanness” or purity. Simeon, the angel, and Anna the prophetess all refer multiple times to Mary’s state as “virgin,” “meaden,” or “mayd.” Although Joseph does use one negative construction during his offering speech—“as cleane as this waxe nowe is, / as cleane is my wife, iwys, / of all corruption”—he shifts the discursive construction of virginity away from its literal dependency on sexual experience and, instead, characterizes her as being “cleane in thought and deede” (148-50; 128). While the absence of that kind of rhetoric is significant, in and of itself, the play proposes a second hermeneutical model that succeeds in revisioning the purification ritual as less concerned with a gender-specific rite fixated on a notion of virginity that depends
quite literally on the state of the hymen, and more concerned with a spiritual purity that could be practiced by one and all.

While there is an absence of the rhetoric of uncleanness in this play, Simeon’s scraping of the word “virgin” from the parchment might be viewed as enacting an analogous type of defilement. Mary Carruthers reminds us to discard the modern view of writing as a “static” or even “indolent” practice, and to “keep in mind the vigorous, if not actually violent, activity involved in making a mark upon such a physical surface as an animal’s skin”:

One must break it, rough it up, ‘wound’ it in some way with a sharply pointed instrument. Erasure involved roughing the physical surface up even more: medieval scribes, erasing parchment, had to use scrapers. In other words, writing was always hard physical labor, very hard as well on the surface on which it was being done.21

Similarly, Simeon’s scraping and reinscription of the biblical text, a scene which finds its analogue in the purification ritual Mary must undergo later in the play, particularly in light of the content which he is intent on purifying of its error, defiles the very text he wishes to purge of contamination. The actions he takes upon the text recall to mind the model of gendered hermeneutics articulated by Carolyn Dinshaw in *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*:

Literary activity has a gendered structure, a structure that associates acts of writing and related acts of signifying—allegorizing, interpreting, glossing, translating—with the masculine and that identifies the surfaces on which these acts are performed, or from which these acts depart, or which these acts reveal—the page, the text, the literal senses, or even the hidden meaning—with the feminine.22
In the system Dinshaw elaborates, the priest Simeon occupies the masculine role in his erasure and inscription of the manuscript page which she identifies with the feminine. In scraping the text of its surmised error, the phrase “a virgin,” and reinscribing it with the phrase “a good woman,” Simeon perpetrates an act of textual deflation. In his desire to preserve the integrity of Scripture, he nearly enacts a defilement of the Virgin Mary. In that Simeon alters Scripture not once, but twice, he not only subjects Scripture to a test, but the miracle of the rubricated text itself to a test. The rubricated text, the “red letters in stowte araye,” written by the angel the first time figures forth the truth of Holy Scripture and functions as an ironic sign of Mary’s integrity. Simeon’s book stands in as a substitute for the body of Mary, is both the ground on and the means by which her reputed status as a virgin is proved and performed. Simeon’s textual practice is a physical test of Mary’s virginity.

Likewise, in the Purification rite, Mary functions as a text to be read, subjected to the authorial gaze, and corrected. Simeon’s subjection of Mary’s virginity to a literal proof through his questioning of the doctrine of the virgin birth (albeit a textual proofing) is prefigured in the dramatic rendering of the actual virginity test carried out by one of Mary’s midwives in the cycle’s earlier-performed Annunciation and Nativity play. In that play, a similar questioning of Mary’s maidenhood takes place between the midwives called in by Joseph to aid in her delivery. When the midwives arrive, Mary welcomes them, but implies that she will not require their services: “Syr, the be welcome withowt were [doubt]. / But God will worke of his power / full sonne for mee, my lefe fere, as best is nowe and aye” (497-500). The stage directions indicate that they are silent a while. The silence is broken when Mary announces the birth of Christ and acknowledges her pain-free birth as God’s proof of her virgin state. The first midwife, Tebel, accepts wholeheartedly the miraculous birth of Christ, citing the birth “withowten teene or
travaylinge” (527) as evidence enough for her. The Lord’s power is proved through an absence of pain, the pain which all other women must endure in childbirth as the especial burden thought to be the result of Eve’s disobedience.

For all but Salome, the pain-free birth is the site on which belief depends. She disputes the logic of the virgin birth, and like Simeon’s interpretative doubt, deems it “false” (534) claiming that she “will assaye / whether shee bee cleane maye, and knowe yt if I cann” (537-9). Salome, like Thomas of India, will doubt until she can “know” the truth through the senses of touch and sight. The stage directions state that as Salome begins her inspection of Mary (to which Mary apparently obediently submits), she will cry out and say, “My handes be dried up in this place, / that feelinge none have I. / Vengeance on mee ys now light, / for I would tempte Goddes might” (542-5). Another miracle occurs at this point in the play as a star appears and an angel arrives to rectify the situation. The angel instructs Salome to “beseech this childe of grace / that hee forgive thee thy trespasse” (548-9). After Salome is made “whole” (560) she proclaims her belief: “Nowe leeve I well and sickerlye / that God is commen, man to forbye. / And thou, lord, thou art hee” (561-3). Joseph’s statement, “Nowe leeve I the angells worde is trewe, that thow arte a cleane may” (511-2), demonstrates that the angel’s words to him earlier were insufficient. His word “noww” marks this as the moment in which he truly begins to believe. However, what the play makes apparent in this scene is that it is not virginity that is being tested, but rather “believe.”

At the end of the Chester Annunciation and Nativity play, the “Expositor,” a figure who provides commentary in five of the twenty-four plays, explicitly casts Salome’s “unbeleefe” as a “fowle sinne” (721) writ large on the body (and meant to serve as a fair warning). The Expositor’s use of the word “fowle” is etymologically related to the word “defile”; here the word
that has been so integrally linked in other texts with the idea of (a loss of) virginal purity and the purification ritual itself is reconceived in the Chester cycle as related to lack of belief.

The Chester cycle’s emphasis on the constancy of belief accords well with the sermon in the Wycliffite sermon cycle intended for Purification or Candlemas Day. As in the Purification play, the emphasis in this sermon is on the fulfilling, rather than the undoing, of law, on the poverty of Christ and his elders, and—rather than the “meekeness” that is extolled in many sermons and plays associated with Mary’s purification ritual—on the constancy of belief and hope that she embodies. The author of the sermon expounds on the way in which the Virgin embodies the fourth virtue, “the hope of heuenely blisse” which he relates integrally to her firm belief: “And it was fully in hire, for, as byleue stude in hyre whanne it faylude in apostlus, so sche hopude euermore þat sche schulde come to þe blisse of heuene” (34, 35-7). Both the sermon and the play emphasize the degree to which she is imbued with belief: “it was fully in hire.”

In an earlier textual tradition, the punishment of physical disfigurement results from the sins associated with sexual incontinence. Hali Meiðhad, a thirteenth century virginity treatise, cites St. Paul on the distinct difference in punishment which results from a sin of this sort:

euch sunne þet me deð is wiðute þe bodi bute þis ane. Alle þe ofre sunnen ne beoð bute sunnen; ah þis sunne, ant ec uncumelicheð þe ant unwurðgeðþi bodi, suleð þi sawle ant makeð schuldi towart Godd, ant fuleð þi flesch ec (30.22-6) [every sin that is committed is outside the body except this one alone. All the other sins are only sins; but this is a sin, and also disfigures you and dishonours your body, defiles your soul and makes you guilty in God’s sight, and pollutes your flesh too.]23
According to St. Paul, the loss of virginity offends against God and harms both body and soul. In the *Annunciation and Nativity* play, in contrast, the quintessential punishment of disfigurement is reprised not for the temptation of the flesh, but for the temptation of God’s power through “unbelief” and a lack of faith in His Word. It is not the lack of a literal infidelity that garners vengeance, but rather a questioning of God’s truth and power. In this play, disbelief takes pride of place in the hierarchy of sinful behaviors.

For Salome, the truth of Mary’s purity is thought to exist in or on the body; hence, her trust in the virginity test. It is no coincidence that her punishment, like her lack of belief, is recorded on her body. Mary’s virginity, however, cannot be located in or on her body: it can be measured only outside, in Salome’s withered hands or in the angel’s rubricated and illuminated letters on the parchment of the text. Part of the displacement is predicated upon the often iterated need to “see” in the play as the measure of truth. Ultimately, as Kathleen Coyne Kelly reminds her readers, the proofs of a virginity measured on the body yield ambiguous results:

Virginity is constructed, consciously or unconsciously, as existing at the point at which the body and the social meet and intermingle, resulting in a kind of mixed metaphor or confusion of categories. Verifying virginity is compromised by the possibilities of performing virginity; grappling with what it means to be a virgin, one must also come to terms with the fact that virginity is, for the most part, beyond proof. The bar, the either/or of virginity, dissolves in the face of such a paradox.24

Kelly concludes that “virginity is produced and maintained in a discursive space that takes precedence over the actual physical space that it may be said to occupy. The interest of patristic writers in maintaining such a distinction between the discursive ‘body’ and the physical body is
made particularly clear in their critique of the physical examination as a way to ascertain virginity." Likewise, the Expositor figure in the *Annunciation and Nativity* play is more interested in situating Mary’s virginity in a “discursive space” than in any actual embodied space. The Expositor’s emphasis on belief operates as a gloss on the dramatic rendering of Salome’s withered hands witnessed by the audience earlier in the play and further solidifies the links to the *Purification* play. The Expositor works to shift the emphasis in the play from a literal fixation on Mary’s virginity (as a kind of marker of the miraculous) to the larger issue at hand: fidelity to God’s Word and his laws as it plays out through the conjoined issues of textual and spiritual integrity. In the *Purification* play, Simeon, like Salome, desires a visual proof of sorts, though his testing of the doctrinal truth of the virgin birth is performed upon a textual, rather than a bodily, witness.

What Joseph’s supplemental offering of “virgin waxe” during the Purification ritual presents is yet another matrix through which to conceive of the proof of Mary’s integrity, a matrix which might succeed in the disruption of a number of binaristic categories operating in the play. The wax offers a labile sort of witness and occupies a liminal space between text and body, between the literal and the metaphorical, between flesh and spirit, between passive and active, and between presence and absence.

In each of the extant plays associated with the Feast of Candlemas—the York *Purification Play*, the N-Town’s *Purification Play*, the Coventry *Weavers’ Pageant*, and the Digby *Candlemas Play*—Mary and Joseph make the traditional offering of turtledoves or pigeons prescribed in Leviticus 12:8. Uniquely in the Chester play, however, after the customary offering of the birds takes place, Joseph comes forward to make an additional offering of “virgin waxe”:
A signe I offer here alsoe
of virgin waxe, as other moo,
in tokeninge shee hase lived oo
in full devotion.
And, syr Simeon, leewe well this:
as cleane as this waxe nowe is,
as cleane is my wife, iwys,
of all corruption. (143-150)

The Stanzaic Life, the only known source of the story of Simeon’s alteration of Holy Writ, makes no mention of an additional offering of wax, nor does it accord Joseph a role in the rite’s proceedings. Although Joseph’s offering of “virgin waxe” as a sign of his wife’s “clanness” appears to be unique to the Chester play, perhaps the playwright was influenced by the two related roles assigned to Joseph in the Stanzaic Life: to both “kepe hir couenably & witnes ber al of hir dede” (761-2). As I intend to show, it is through Joseph’s act of bearing witness to the truth about Mary and holy writ that the play rewrites the link between textual and bodily/spiritual integrity.

The nature of Joseph’s offering differs functionally from the sacrificial offering of the fowls. Not intended as an appeasement to God, the “virgin waxe” functions rather as a further (and public) commentary on the utter needlessness of Mary’s submission to the purification ritual. The “virgin waxe” is a symbolic “signe,” a “tokening” that figures forth a particular truth about his wife: it is meant to perform in the interpellative sense her “cleanesse,” a life lived without blemish and in full devotion to Christ. In this sense, the offering of the wax may be understood to operate on the order of the sacramental, as, in Augustine’s words, “an outward and
visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” It also serves to perform the truth about Mary to those others participating in the ritual. Joseph’s sacramental offering confirms belief in those who already accept the scriptural truth about the virgin birth and constructs it in those, like Simeon, who are infirm in their belief.

As Joseph presents his offering, he provides an interpretation of his “signe.” In several of Chester’s plays, as I have mentioned, the figure of the Expositor serves to explicate doctrinal subtleties and establish an authoritative source for the play’s content. As Teresa Coletti notes, other figures in the plays function in a similar way: “The Expositor and the cycle’s other interpretive voices, often that of Christ himself, labor on the audience’s behalf, enabling it to understand clearly, or, in Chester’s familiar locution, ‘apertly,’ the purpose of these divine ‘dislocations of nature.’” Joseph operates in a similar capacity during the Purification ritual, fixing the meaning of the overdetermined sign through his performative utterance. Joseph’s offering refocuses the attention, at this point in the play, on the very issues with which the play opened—establishing once and for all his wife’s pure state and the attendant issue of belief. He belabors the point, adding in a direct address to Simeon, “as clean as this waxe nowe is / as cleane is my wife . . . of all corruption.” Joseph impresses the point that Simeon should “lieve wel this,” believe it fully.

Joseph’s interpretation of the wax differs dramatically from the more accepted and traditional readings of the patristic writers. One of the primary components of the ritual celebration of Mary’s purification is the procession of parishioners bearing lit candles around the church. In the liturgical celebration of the Purification of the Virgin Mary in the Sarum Missal, the “blessing of the candles” is the first of the priestly duties to be performed on that day. These same candles would be used throughout the year for any number of personal uses,
including a woman’s own churching ritual. Traditionally, the candle associated with Candlemas Day is explicated in terms of its tri-partite nature. The homily for the Purification of Mary in the *Northern Homily Cycle* explicates the candle’s wax, wick, and light as symbols of Christ’s flesh, soul, and Godhead: the light betokens “his Goddhede,” the wick “Cristes sawel,” and the wax his “fleys” (21, 24, 26). The texts of the *Legenda Aurea* lineage, including the Middle English *Gilte Legende* and the *Stanzaic Life*, offer four reasons for the processions with burning candles on Candlemas Day. While one of those follows in the Anselmian tradition of reading the wax, wick, and fire of the lit candle as a symbol for Christ, another interpretation expressly links the candle to Mary’s pure state: “the Chirche ordeyned that we shhulde bere torches and lyghtes brennyng, . . . that bi that token this blessed Virgine hadde no nede of purificacion but shined al in puretee.” Mary is so “purified, clensed and halowed” through the visitation of the Holy Ghost that her purity shines forth, free of sin of any kind.

But in the Chester play, Joseph wrests the interpretation away from those more traditional readings associated with Christ and claims the wax specifically as a “signe” of his wife’s “clean[ness].” A number of scholars register the change in meaning accomplished in Joseph’s interpretation of the virgin wax as a signifier of Mary rather than Christ, including Rosemary Woolf who notes the shift in meaning of the candle “signifying, not as more commonly the ‘*lumen ad revelationem gentium,*’ but Mary’s virginity.” What I am arguing, however, is that Joseph’s interpretive act achieves something far more significant than a refocusing of attention from Christ to Mary; Joseph’s gloss succeeds in rewriting the doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity as, rather, a doctrine of perpetual devotion. To be specific here, Joseph never interprets the wax as representative of his wife’s virginity. He is very clear in his language that Mary’s purity derives from the life “shee hase lived oo / in full devotion.” In his role as glossator of
Mary and hermeneutical commentator on God’s text, Joseph, though not a member of the ecclesiastical corps, comes to operate on the same priestly (or scholarly) level as Simeon. His offering and his ritually interpretive pronouncement show him to be firm of belief and, though merely a member of the laity, better equipped to interpret scripture than the priest Simeon himself. Furthermore, he disrupts the prescribed nature of the ritual and exerts interpretative control over the meaning attached to the purification ritual itself.

An “interpolative risk” inheres in the practices of exegesis and translation that may result in a particular overwriting of the original authorial text. In her analysis of the prologue to the Pseudo-Dionysian translation of the *De caelesti hierarchia*, Rita Copeland draws attention to the author’s awareness of this potential sleight of hand:

[T]he already supplementary act of translation cannot admit supplementation or interference from the allied process of explanation. But the need here to segregate and contain the act of exegesis in the word *expositio* suggests that exegesis would have more than merely supplementary power. It seems to represent the possibility of producing meanings independent of the text. The role of the expositor is implicitly contrasted with that of the *fidus interpres*, who respects the primary authority of the text by preserving even its obscurities; the expositor, however, asserts an independent productive authority over the text by achieving difference with it. In this case the exegete would assume the responsibility of resolving the obscurities and mysteries of the text . . . [T]he character of medieval exegesis is to constitute a kind of primary discourse itself, to displace rather than simply to supplement the text.33
In his attempt to “resolv[e] the obscurities and mysteries of the text,” Simeon occupies the role of Copeland’s expositor, and his emending of the text constitutes a fundamental displacement of the primary text. Rather than gloss the text by way of marginal note or extrascriptural commentary, Simeon substitutes his own truth for God’s divinely authored words. Joseph, in contrast, is representative of the “fidus interpres” in his respect for the “primary authority” of the scriptural truth about Mary. While it is clear that Joseph is intent on confirming the truth about Mary to Simeon, he, too, deploys the power that comes through glossing. The play does not appear to take issue with hermeneutical praxis, _per se_, but rather with the methodologies and the practitioners performing the tasks of interpretation and translation.

Joseph’s interpretive acts resemble the proper role of the scriptural exegete as articulated by Wyclif in _De Veritate_. As Ghosh observes, Wyclif recognized the dual nature of the authoritative power residing in glossing: “An emphatic recognition of the power of interpretation—‘glossing’—in determining the ‘meaning’ of authoritative texts, particularly the scriptures, and perhaps ‘perverting’ or ‘negating’ them, formed the basis of Wyclif’s programme of reform.”

While Wyclif acknowledges the necessary importance of interpretive commentary for a correct understanding of the Bible, he also cautions about the relationship between the two: “Exposition is certainly not Holy Scripture though, but rather her herald or handmaid. She does not refute her Lady, but borrows her Lady’s very own words so that she might then reverently explain and disclose her intentions.” Part of the Wycliffite reclamation of Scripture was the insistence upon a distinct separation between divine Scripture and human commentary, a redressing of the current situation. The importance of maintaining a particular hierarchy explicitly laid out for the reader between the two is paramount in the project of vernacular translation of Scripture.
The admixture of Scripture and Commentary, which is part and parcel of Nicholas Love’s project in the *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, is eschewed by one of the scribes of the Wycliffite Bible’s prologue. In one of the manuscripts of the *Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible*, the scribe records a cautionary word to those scribes who will follow and make their own copies: “Here endith the prologue on Isaye, and here bigynneth the text of Isaye. With a short glose on the derke wordis; and loke eche man, that he wryte the text hool bi itself, and the glose in the margyn, ether leve it al out.”

The author(s) of the Wycliffite sermon cycle make(s) a point of delineating the scriptural text from the other words which make up the sermon, even in the midst of a sentence. For example, in the sermon preached upon the Annunciation feast day, the author cites the scriptural verse, but indicates the added words through a difference in script; here the added words are non-italicized:

> And Marie seyde to þis aungel, ‘On what maner schal þis be, for I knowe no mon flescly?’ And this aungel answeryng seyde to hire, ‘þe Hooly Goost schal come aboue þe, and þe vertu of all hierste Lord schal make umbre unto þe (þe vertu of God makþ vmbre whanne in a low pla[ce] it lettuþ heete of synne, as it fel in owre Lady, for sche was lower in kynde þan aungelus, and sche conceyued wiþowte synne); ‘and perfore þat hooly þing þat schal be born of þe schal be clepud Godus sone, synglerly byforn oþre.’

These earlier sermons anticipate similar ideas about scriptural integrity as well as the self-sufficiency of Scripture to fulfill the salvific needs of the laity without recourse to other intermediary, and therefore questionable texts, scripturally unwarranted liturgical rituals, or the cycle plays in their capacity as vernacular theological works. Scripture is the ground on which all else depends for the Wycliffites and for the later reformers who in a kind of rearguard move
might be viewed as trying to recover a more stripped down, and earlier, less-corrupt version of the church.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the playing of the Chester cycle met with outright interference from radical Protestant reformers such as Christopher Goodman in the sixteenth century. Goodman sought to abolish the performing of the Chester cycle or to sanitize the plays of their errors. In a letter addressed to Archbishop Grindal, dated June 1572, Goodman and fellow reformers Robert Rogerson and John Lane request that the Archbishop “may take such order with the said plays, as by your authority they may either be corrected, allowed, & authorized (if god by any such indirect means will have his gospell furthered where ordinary preaching wanteth not) or els by the same your authority utterly defaced & abolished for ever as pastimes unfitt for this time & Christian commonwealths.” The letter indicates that the primary problem with the plays after the Reformation is that they are considered an “indirect means” to God’s word in an age when the gospel alone is considered to be sufficient. Further, the authors suggest that they are unnecessary aids particularly in situations where even “ordinary preaching” has not been found wanting. The plays are “pastimes,” not necessities for salvation and further are believed to convert the virtuous to vice. The men offer Archbishop Grindal two options: Either the plays are to be deemed “unfitt” and therefore “utterly defaced & abolished for ever” or, if they are to be performed, they must be subjected to a purification of sorts, “corrected” and “authorized” by the Archbishop himself. Like the Virgin Mary in the Annunciation play and scriptural prophecy in the Purification play, the plays themselves are now to be subjected to a test to determine whether they have maintained their integrity as “faithful handmaids” to scripture or whether they be corrupt ladies in waiting.
Goodman, Robert Rogerson, and John Lane attached to their letter to the Archbishop a list of “the absurdities &c” in sixteen of the cycle’s twenty-four pageants. Of play 11, the *Purification* play, the reformers find fault with two aspects of the play:

1) Simeon to doubt of a virgin’s birth & to put out the name of a maid twice out of his book writing in place thereof a good woman

2) Ioseph offereth a taper of wax

The critics decidedly refrain from using the words “Scripture” or “Bible” in reference to the book that Simeon alters. However, while the play uses the terminology “Book” for the manuscript Simeon rectifies, that book rests upon the altar in the temple and certainly must signify Holy Scripture. Interestingly enough, given the animated debates over churching leading up to and after the Reformation (which I will discuss in a moment), Goodman and his cohort find no fault with the dramatization of the Purification ritual itself. Nor do they make mention of Joseph’s interpretation of the wax as a referent for Mary’s purity and the consequent shift away from Christ as the ultimate purifier. What is more problematic for these critics than anything pertaining to Mary’s purification is the adulteration of holy writ and the besmirching of Simeon’s character. The complaint against Joseph’s offering may be that it has no scriptural warrant, or that the use of candles is prohibited under the Edwardian Injunctions. However, as will be seen in the discussion below, the question of scriptural warrant is critical as well to the debate over the churching ritual in the sixteenth century. The earlier attention to texts and scriptural integrity is then transferred to a rite that centers on women, their bodies, and their moral and spiritual integrity. The yoking together of scriptural and spiritual integrity in the Chester *Purification* play is reflected in the centrality of the churching ritual to the debate over church reform in the sixteenth century.
Perhaps it is quibbling to point out that clergymen’s complaint is about a “taper of wax” when neither the wording in the play nor the stage directions refer to a literal candle or taper. There are several possibilities for the discrepancy: Goodman may have seen the play performed and remembered Joseph offering a candle to Simeon; Goodman’s complaint may reflect the original wording of the Purification play as preserved in the “regnall,” the source of their list of absurdities as cited in the letter to Grindal; Goodman may have read the play and assumed the “virgin waxe” to be a taper because of the association between candles, the purification of Mary, and Candlemas day. Finally, it is possible that the wording of the play was eventually altered from “taper” to “virgin waxe” to accommodate the criticisms of the reformers or the injunctions against candles.

Those scholars who attend to this scene in the play presume that the offering of “virgin waxe” Joseph presents to Simeon as “a signe” of Mary’s purity comes in the form of a candle. The liturgy, iconography associated with the Purification of the Virgin Mary in stained glass windows and illuminated manuscripts, and contemporary customs surrounding the feast of Candlemas celebrated on February 2nd are all reasons we ought to accept that the phrase “virgin waxe” refers to a candle. One stained glass window still in existence and very near Chester depicts Joseph and the figure standing behind him holding tall lit tapers. As Ronald Hutton notes, there is a “scriptural warrant” for the lighting of the candles in the Candlemas feast day celebrations: “Scriptural warrant was given to the custom by the words attributed to Simeon upon that occasion and reported in Luke 2:32, in which he recognized the young Jesus as ‘a light to lighten the Gentiles.’ The kindling of the candles could thus be taken as a commemoration and recognition of Christ’s mission, making the feast one in his honour as well as that of his mother.” Despite this warrant, however, the attitude toward candles shifts in the years leading
up to the Reformation. In Edward VI and Elizabeth’s reigns, injunctions are passed which prohibit the use of candles during liturgical rites and in devotional practices. Injunction 28 from Edward VI’s Royal Visitation of 1547 states the following: “Also, That they shall take away, utterly extinct and destroy all shrines, coverings of shrines, all tables, candlesticks, trindles or rolls of wax, pictures, paintings, and all other monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry, and superstition: so that there remain no memory of the same in walls, glass-windows or elsewhere within their churches or houses. And they shall exhort their parishioners to do the like within their several houses.”

Although liturgical uses are not standardized prior to the issuance of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the subheading and first liturgical act of the priest in the *Sarum Missal*, probably the most well-known and used in late medieval England, is the “Blessing of Candles.” In the *Book of Common Prayer*, this no longer is the case. The rite has been cleansed of much of its “popish” excrescences.

Two plays that dramatize the customs associated with the liturgical celebration of Mary’s purification, the Digby *Candlemas Play* and the N-Town *Purification* play make use of candles. The Digby play stages an elaborate procession of “virgins” and actors bearing candles around the temple setting. In the N-Town *Purification* play, a link between Mary’s purification ritual and contemporary popular practices associated with women’s churching ceremonies is forged through an explicit reference to candles. Joseph doles out candles just prior to Mary’s presentation of Christ to Simeon, saying: “Take here these candelys thre— / Mary, Symeon, and Anne— / And I shal take the fowrte to me / To offre oure child up, thanne” (163-6).

Chester’s stage directions, in contrast, make no mention of candles, the lighting of candles, or any type of procession. Chester’s *Purification* play determinedly resists any linking of Mary’s purification with the popular customs associated with the churching ritual or
Candlemas, for that matter. The wording in the Chester play in both instances related to Joseph’s offering is specific—“virgin waxe” and “waxe,” not candle or taper. Further, Joseph’s particular glossing of the “virgin waxe” as a token of Mary’s “cleanness” rewrites the traditional tri-partite interpretation of the candle associated with Christ’s triune nature. That the wax is imputed as a “signe” for Mary and not Christ may lend even more support for reading the wax as taking on the form of something other than a candle.

Indeed, the quotations cited in both the *Medieval English Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* attest to a myriad of uses for the substance “virgin wax” beyond that of a candle or taper, as do the prohibitions against other wax devotional objects listed in the injunctions. According to the *OED*, “virgin wax” is “original, fresh, new, or unused bees-wax, sometimes that produced by the first swarm of bees; in later and more general use, a purified or fine quality of wax, esp. as used in the making of candles; white wax.” Similarly, “virgin wax” is defined in the *MED* in a subcategory under the entry for “virgin”: 1e “fresh unused wax, new wax.” The definitions refer to the functions to which virgin wax would have been put: as a matrix upon which both figures and letters would be impressed and as a workable medium in which to cast a person’s likeness. For example, the first usage of the word listed in the *OED*, preserved in a fourteenth-century text, refers to its use for making a wax effigy of a royal figure: “After, he tok virgyn wax, And made a popet after þe quene.” John Trevisa’s Middle English translation *On the Properties of Things* makes reference to “virgin wax” as being well suited to receiving the impress of the stylus or the stamp: “þe more newe wex is, it is þe better to worche ... And boþe figures yprented and lettres ywrite þerinne dureþ and lasteþ þe lenger tyme And such wex is ycleped virgyne [L virginea] wexe.” Finally, wax is found in churches in forms other than candles. One of the banned items in the Injunctions, a “trindle,” was comprised of
wax and offered up at the altars. J. Vriend, one scholar who entertains the idea that the “virgine waxe” of the Chester play may come in a form other than a candle, cites the Anglo-Saxon tradition of paying “light-scot, a tax in kind or money to provide lights for the church services,” a payment which took place at Candlemas each year. Yet another source cites beeswax as a unit of trade for the payment of taxes and rents. Mary E. Fissell has documented the number of recusant women during the sixteenth century who “continued to employ girdles of the Virgin, wax amulets of the agnus dei, and other sacred objects to ensure successful childbirth.” Keith Thomas in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* also discusses the wax amulets and roundels of wax worn or carried about to protect against a number of dangers, including death in childbirth: “The most common of these amulets was the agnus dei, a small wax cake, originally made out of paschal candles and blessed by the Pope, bearing the image of the lamb and flag.” These instances of wax devotional offerings that come in a form other than a candle allow for the possibility of reading Joseph’s offering in just such a manner. Finally, we must remember that the play was put on by the Smiths, Founders, and Pewterers, all craft guilds who could have used wax as a means of casting objects.

If the wax can be read productively as something other than a candle, as a surface upon which a mark might be made, such as a wax tablet, then the image of the wax is a curious choice for a witness or a text-proof. The virgin wax which serves as a “token” of Mary’s devoutly lived life is a sign of the absence of sin: she is clean “of all corruption.” The image of the virgin wax as free of blemishes or marks is a mirror opposite of the written record of the sins dramatized and explicated in the play that follows upon the Purification play, *The Temptation of Christ and The Woman Taken in Adultery*. The second half of that play, *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, dramatizes the story in John 8:1-11 in which a woman, accused of adultery, is brought by the
Pharisees before Jesus to determine how he will judge her. When they ask whether she should be stoned according to Moses’ law, Christ kneels down to write on the ground. When they persist in their testing of him to see if they might trap him in theological “varyans,” Christ utters the famous line: “Nowe which of you everychon / is bowt synne, buske him anon /and cast at her the first stonne” (241-3). The gospel offers no explanation of the meaning of Christ’s writing on the ground. However, in the Chester play, the Expositor figure enters to “declare, as it is need— / these thinges that playd were” (283-5). He explains the writing in the “claye” as the recording of “their owne synnes that they might see…For eychon of them had grace / to see theire sinnes in that place” (302; 305-6). My comparison of the sins recorded on the earth with the unblemished virgin wax depends on reading the wax Joseph offers as a record of his wife’s purity as something other than a candle. If the offering Joseph makes is a cake of virgin wax and not a candle, this play turns its attention very ingeniously and deliberately to the issues of the embodied nature of texts and acts of translation and, likewise, the textual nature of bodies.

Textual and bodily (spiritual) integrity, so deeply conjoined in this text, appear fragile at best. The image of Mary’s virginal state as impressionable, yet eraseable wax, waiting to be inscribed, attests to the fragility of women’s bodily and spiritual integrity as well as the integrity of holy writ. Mary is figured as a discursive matrix, the waxen womb on which God writes his Word. Simeon’s alteration of Scripture, like the testimony of the midwife, has the power to overwrite any truth. But, in the image of the wax, there is also perhaps a promise of the labile malleability through which both bodily/spiritual and textual integrity might be rewritten if compromised.

In one other important way, the wax yokes together the textual and the bodily in a final potent image: that of the seal on a charter or letter close. Just as the seal ensures the veracity of the royal message, it simultaneously ensures that the document has arrived unopened. Read in
this way, the play may be seen to advocate against textuality as the bearer of truth. The author of Hali Meiðhad employs a similar figure in his address to his female charge: “Ant tu þenne, eadi meiden, þet art iloten to him wið meiðades merke, ne brec þu nawt þet seil þet seileð inc togederes” (8.29-31; And you then, blessed maiden, who are assigned to him with the mark of virginity, do not break that seal which seals you both together). In his work on documentary charters, Michael Clanchy observes that the seal “was intended to stick to the charter in perpetuity in validation of the [royal] grant.” In the documentary image of the relationship between the anchoritic maiden and Christ, the maiden is enjoined to refrain from breaking the hymeneal “seil” that affixes her to Christ, the Word and king.

Even if it must be conceded that the Purification play’s ties to Candlemas celebrations make it highly likely that the “virgin waxe” Joseph offers on behalf of Mary comes in the form of a candle, Joseph’s explicit statement that he offers “a signe” of his wife’s “full devotion” and her “clanness” link it specifically to Mary’s corporeal and spiritual state and not that of Christ. The play quite forcefully shifts the attention from the tri-partite aspect of the candle—wax, wick, and flame—to the wax itself which traditionally had been read as the flesh. The wax, whether it signifies Christ’s humanity or Mary’s cleanness figured as a perpetually devoted life, is equated with human, not divine, nature. And as such, in the spirit of Joseph’s own hermeneutical act, the wax may be read productively as signifying both embodied devotional practice and the record of that practice. As a testament to Mary’s ultimately pure state, the wax is an exemplar of the life Mary has lived, and because she is human, it is a text that anyone might copy.
Churching and Vernacular Reform

While the Chester cycle as a whole met with resistance during the years of the shifting religious climate, the Purification play itself may have come under fire for separate, but related concerns. What might partly account for this change is that the purification rite, more popularly known as the churching ritual, itself came to play a central role in the religious debates for reform.\textsuperscript{56} The debate over churching began earlier with the Lollards and escalated during the play’s performance period. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, Wyclif and, later, his followers were concerned with priestly and ecclesiastical abuse. They called for the elimination of payments and offerings such as those required at purification rituals made to the officiating priests. The attempt to rectify superstitious beliefs surrounding the nature of the churching ritual also began during this period. As mentioned earlier, although the official church position in the late Middle Ages was that a woman need not be precluded from attending church prior to her purification rite, some local, less educated parish priests may have promoted exclusion from worship before churching. That these views persisted is evidenced in a number of texts, such as the anonymous vernacular prose work Dives and Pauper, which sought to dispel superstitious beliefs adhering to the churching ritual. The question worship prior to being churched is put and answered under the discussion of the sixth commandment: “Whanne wymen be deliuered of ther children they may entre holy churche to thank ther god what tyme they wil or may the law letteth them not . . . they that clepe theym hethen wymen for the tyme y'[that] they lye in be folys: and synne in case full greuously."\textsuperscript{57} The text confirms the latter, and stresses not only the foolhardiness of advocating otherwise, but the utter sinfulness of maintaining such a position.
In the early to mid-sixteenth century, the observation of the purification ritual was subject to both civic and ecclesiastical intervention. Evidence of legislation ostensibly intended to curtail excess spending and celebration associated with churching survives in the 1541 Chester Mayoral records:

For as moche as gret excesse and superfluose costes and charges hath and doth dalye grow by reason of costly disses, meytes and drynk, brought unto women lying in childebed, and by them in lyke wise to the other recompensyth at ther churchings, whereby such a costome is begon and lyke to contynue, that such as be meane persons in substance many tymes strayne themselves to such chargis more then ther habilities may well sustayne, by occasion of which voluntary expensis the be les able to sustayne and maynteye ther nessecary charge It is ordered that from hensforth there shall be no such dishes metes and wynes used to be brought to eny woman at childebed nor at churching, nor allso that no women except the mydwyfe shall go into the house with hur that is churchid but to bring hur home to the dore and so to departe upon payne of forfytour of vi s. viii d. to be levied ageynst the person that onith the house, and iii s. iiii d. of every other person offending the said order as oft as anye of thaym shalbe found giltie in the same. Provided that the moders and systers with the systars in lawe of the women so churchid may lawfully enter and go into the house with the midwife, this order or eny thing therin conteyned notwythstanding.58

Whether this ordinance was really fiscally motivated, as the legislation states, or was a means to curb the popular celebrations attending a ritual that was viewed as both a Jewish holdover and
evidence of popish superstition, is difficult to determine. However, that the debate over churching was heating up in the Henrician period is undeniable.

Between the 1540s and the 1590s, radical Protestantism gained ground in England, and the adherents strongly object to any remnant of Catholicism or papal superstition. In a 1553 sermon preached before the Duchess of Suffolk, an important patron to the more radical Protestant element, Hugh Latimer relates the story of a woman who had given birth within a prison who “of ignorance” believed that her soul would be damned if she did not undergo purification prior to her demise:

Where mayster Bilney and I tolde her that that lawe was made vnto the Iewes, and not vnto vs, and that women lyeng in chyldbedde [...] not vnclene afore God; neither is purification vsed to that end that it should clense from sinne, but rather a [...] and [...] law made for natural honestie sake: signifieng that a woman before the time of her purification, that is to say, as long as she is a grene woman, is not mete to do such acts as other women, nor to haue [...] with her husband, for it is against natural honestie, and again the common wealth, to that ende purification is keppte and vsed, not to make a [...] or holynesse of it, as some doo.

Those who believe that “they maye not fetche neyther fyre nor any thynge in that house where there is a greene woman” profess an opinion both “erronious and wicked,” for women “be as well in the fauour of god afore they be purifised, as after.” Latimer stresses the medical and common sense reasons for the period of lying-in as opposed to a ritual fabricated to instill an uncleanness resulting from sinful behavior. He cites natural law as fundamental to the practice of churching as opposed to the falsely fabricated laws of the Catholic Church. Another theologian and Church of England clergyman, Thomas Becon, used the occasion of the
Purification of the Virgin Mary in the mid-1500s to preach against the practice of churching, citing the papal continuance of a ceremony thought to be meant only for the Jews of the Old Testament:

The very same law hath the Pope made for churchyng (as it is named) of women that haue layne in chyld bed: commandyng that after certaine dayes they should returne to the churche to be purified and halowed of their vn cleannesse. As though by a certayne lawe, they were vn cleane, & therfore vnmete to be present at any holy ceremonies, or to haue companie with the congregation. But the Pope doth this without right. For ceremoniall vn cleanness was not natural, but a ceremonie commanded by a certayne law, whervnto none wer bound but y° Iewes, neither ought other to be yoked with this lawe.59

In 1572, Church of England clergymen with close ties to Puritanism, John Fielde and Thomas Wilcox, published An Admonition to the Parliament in their effort to fight against the “Popishe abuses yet remayning in the Englishe Church, for the which Godly Ministers haue refused to subscribe.”60 Their publication unleashed the “Admonition controversy,” in which John Whitgift and Thomas Cartwright entered into the fray, weighing in on opposite sides. An Admonition was “a declaration of ecclesiastical war, and it lifted out of academe and into a more public domain the radical presbyterianism which Thomas Cartwright had been teaching in Cambridge.”61 Among the abuses, Fielde and Wilcox cite issues with the churching ritual:

Churching of women after childbirthe, smellection of Iewish purificacation: theyr other rytes & customes in theyr lying in, & comming to churche, is foolishe and superstitious, as it is vsed. Shee muste lie in wyth a white sheete vpon her bed, and come couered wyth a vaile, as ashamed of some folly. Shee must offer, but
these are matters of custome, and not in the boke: But thys Psalme (as is noted before) is childishly abused, I haue lift vp mine eyes vnto the hylls, from whence commeth my helpe. The sunne shall not burne thee by day, nor the moone by nyght.\textsuperscript{62} 

Their complaint rehearses a fairly stable platform of concerns over the churching ritual: it is redolent of Jewish law and practice; it is popishly superstitious; it is ungrounded in Scripture; it erringly links reproductive acts with shame or corruption. They take issue with the offerings the woman is required to make, for instance, the chrisom cloth, as commanded by custom and not scriptural law. Even the Scripture associated with the rite is subjected to abuse as the women mime the actions suggested by the words of the Psalm.

The same objections that had been leveled by Protestants against Catholicism were later leveled against mainline Church of England Protestantism by more radical Protestants. The religious separatist Henry Barrow, writing in the early 1590s while imprisoned for charges related to his Separatist affinities, similarly accuses the Church of England of “false worship”: “It is false because it is invented by man, is erroneous, and is imposed upon the people by the hierarchy and the Catholic tradition mediated through the Book of Common Prayer.”\textsuperscript{63} For Barrow “the least departure from God’s Word is an error; the least transgression of God’s lawe is a sinne; the reward of the least error or sinne is eternal death.”\textsuperscript{64} In asserting that “everie part of the Scripture is alike true, inspired of God, given to our direction and instruction in all things,” Barrow, like Wyclif and his followers a century and more earlier, posits the absolute authority of the Bible over and against the absolute authority of the Church. Like earlier reformers, his motivation is reform of the Church, a scraping off of all that has accreted over time whether that be the accompanying commentary and gloss of Scripture or the rituals that he deems as theatrical
as the cycle plays. Barrow’s characterization of church feast days as a type of church-sanctioned
cycle play reveals the imbricated attitude toward cycle plays and liturgical rituals viewed as
theatrical, popish, and ungrounded on Scripture:

What will you plead for your popish feastes of Christmas, Al-Hallowes, Candlemass, etc., for your dividing Christ’s life into a stage-playe, celebrating his birth upon one daye, his circumcision upon an other, his epiphanie (as you cal it) upon an other . . . But where have you learned to keepe them after your heathen and prophane maner, with garnishing your earthlie houses, decking your bodies with gaye clothes, great cheare in glottonie, excesse, ryot, idle games, dicing, daunsing, mumming, masking, wassaling.65

In his rant against the “popish feasts of Christmas, Al-Hallowes, Candlemass,” Barrows takes issue with both liturgical ritual and religious drama in his insistence that the feasts celebrated by the church are papal rather than apostolic: he follows in the footsteps of those who criticized the cycle plays as perverting Scripture by removing it from its sacred context and adding superstitious and unwarranted episodes to make it more palatable to the audience. Barrow singles out as examples of “detestable idolatrye” those “superstitious devotions towards your Ladie,” particularly the “especial worship to her annunciation, an other to her purification yeerly in your church.”66 He unleashes his vitriol, in particular, on purification, which he terms mere “tromperie.” Barrow takes issue with the ultimate purpose of the recently renamed churching ritual, implying that it is not, as the Church of England would have it, a giving of thanks for safe delivery, but rather a papist rite of purification:

The weoman’s monethlie restraint and separation from your church, her comming after that just tyme wympeled, vealed [veiled], with her gosips and neighbours
following her, her kneeling downe before and offering unto the priest, the priest's churching, praying over her, blessing her from sunne and moone, delivering her in the end to her former vocation, shewe somewhat besides giving of thankes. But if it should be admitted only a thanksgiving, we would then knowe . . . how this particular and ordinarie (though miraculous) matter, more than al other strange actes, wonderful and extraordinarie deliverances both by sea and by land, manie and great benefites of the Lord both to men and woemen, should be made a publique action of the church, and especial part of the publique worship and administration therof; and what warrant they have in Christe's Testament for this. But if they there have none, whie other perticular and private benefites may not as wel be brought into the church also, and be enjoyned by lawe, as this; and then what end would there be of these devise and what place to the publique ministrie of God's worde in the church?67

His objection is that he can find no precedent for such a ritual; if it, in fact, derived from the Jewish blood rites associated with the lamb, he states, it would look differently. Therefore, he accuses it of popish authorship. And if the rite of purification is a Jewish remnant, as are the tithes and sacrifices which he considers to be “an integral part of the Levitical priesthood,” it ought to have been removed “with the advent of Christ’s gospel in a new dispensation.”68

Barrow is critical of the “portsale [public sale] not onlie of their owne tongues, but of that gospel and ministration (which they pretend) of your sacraments, baptisme, supper, churching, marriing, buriing, etc. and that to the most prophane and ungodlie for their tithes, offerings, wage, etc.”69 Tellingly, his argument against “comminations,” “recitals of divine threatenings against sinners,” is figured as the dismemberment and repackaging of Scripture:
Partes of canonicall Scripture, indeed they are, by you miserably dismembred and bownd up together, and wickedly used and perverted to such superstition and idolatrie, being used in the place and upon the daye of popish shrift (75).

The dismemberment of Scripture, turned to wicked and perverse ends, invokes his earlier argument against the liturgical division of Christ’s life into individual stage plays. What these clergymen have in common in their disapproval of the churching ritual is that it has no scriptural warrant. It is a remnant of the old law, and except for the acknowledgment of the practice as a natural benefit to the mother who has survived a difficult and dangerous experience, as expressed in the sermon of Hugh Latimer, these more ardent reformers would rather see it banished altogether.

The Chester Mayoral records show that a “truncated production” of the Chester pageant took place in 1575, not at Whitsun week as had been most recently the custom, but at Midsummer: “The whitson playes were plaid at Midsomer, and then but some of them leaueinge others vnplaid which were thought might not be Lustified for the superstition that was in them.”

Some scholars have speculated that the Smiths’ *Purification* play may have been one of the plays cut from that year’s performance. But notwithstanding mounting resistance to the churching ritual in the pre- and post-Reformation years, the account records of the Smiths’ Guild provide evidence to the contrary. The Chester *Purification of the Virgin Mary* play survives as a bifurcated play in all six of the extant manuscripts that house the cycle. The first half dramatizes the Purification of the Virgin Mary and the Presentation of Christ as attested in the Gospel of Luke verses. The second half stages Christ’s appearance before the Doctors, an event that takes place twelve years later. The title of the first half as it appears in the *White Book of the Pentice* in the entry for 1539-40 is the “purificacioun of our Lady.” In the Early Banns, preserved in the
same manuscript as the *White Book*, the “Semely Smythis” are exhorted to prepare their carriage for “Candilmas.” In the Late Banns, all references to Mary, purification, or Candlemas Day have been excised and the Smiths’ pageant is now listed only by the content of the second half of the play, “Criste amongst the doctors in the temple.” While some have read this change of title as evidence that the Purification matter was not performed, the Smiths’ records suggest otherwise. For each year the plays were performed, the Smiths’ accounts list actor payments for all of the characters associated with both halves of the play, indicating that both the Purification matter and *Christ among the Doctors* was performed *in toto* at every performance. It may be that the amendment of the Banns was intended to skirt the issue of the “absurdities” contained within the Purification play. Goodman acknowledges this very possibility in a letter written after the 1572 performing of the plays, which he had sought to stop. He notes that even if the plays are “corrected,” there is no assurance that they will be played according to the authorized version: “And albeit they (to cloak their doings) shall alledge that many of the foresaid plays are corrected: yet we are sure that the most part remain as before, & the rest so corrected not much bettered, nor yet examined & allowed according to order.” While Goodman’s concerns with respect to the cycle plays point to the drama’s inherently labile fluidity, they are also suggestive of evidence of further strategic maneuvering. The *Christ among the Doctors* part of the Smiths’ play does not displace the Purification part even in the years of greatest resistance. In other words, the Purification play remained viable when certain other plays in the cycle did not.

After Goodman’s attempt to intervene in the cycle’s performance in 1572, the plays were not put on the following two years. Then in 1575, the Chester Assembly, composed of fifty aldermen, voted 34-12 to perform the plays at Midsummer rather than during Whitsun week, further removing the plays from any religious affiliation. It is during this final year of the
cycle’s performance that the Smiths offer the Chester Aldermen a choice between two plays they had readied, presumably as part of the effort to ensure the cycle would be performed. The mayor at the time, John Savage, who potentially had Catholic leanings, issued a statement that the cycle shall be “plaied in such orderly maner and sorte as the same haue ben Accostomed with such correction and amendement as shalbe thaught Convenient by the said Maior And all Charges of the said plaies to be supported and borne by thinhabitantes of the said Citie as haue ben heretofore vsed.” What we see in both the reformers’ letters and the statement issued by the Mayor is a contest not only for control over the performing of the plays, but also for interpretive control: what will be deemed correct interpretation, who will decide what is an appropriate vehicle for the Scriptures.

In sum, the plays, in occupying what Kantik Ghosh terms the “domain of the vernacular,” are part of the mechanism by which formerly institutional, intellectual, and other concerns move out of the university and church and into the laic sphere: “The watertight division between the worlds of academic speculation and popular observance . . . was suddenly breached; and assumptions about the relationship of ‘meaning’ and auctoritas began to be subjected to an unaccustomed vernacular scrutiny.” What the Purification play models in Joseph’s hermeneutical act is the very kind of “vernacular scrutiny” that vehicles like the cycle plays afford. As vernacular productions, these plays participate in the process by which academic topics and concerns percolate into the popular imagination. They participate, therefore, in the dissemination of ideas not only about access, but about who determines meaning and how questions about auctoritas might be decided. In the face of resistance not only to the performance of the cycle but to the purification ritual itself, the Chester Purification play works to validate its own authority as a “faithful handmaid” to Holy Scripture. It does this partly
through the hermeneutical model implied in Joseph’s supplemental offering and partly through
the newly defined purification ritual. The churching ceremony is constructed as a remedy for a
kind of “ritual contagion” in the more orthodox of the texts dealing with Mary’s Purification.
We are told in the *Purification of Mary* in the Middle English *Gilte Legende* that “the vertue and
the holinesse of her streched oute to other and was shedde so largely that she quenched in other
the inordinat mevyngges of fleshely coueitise . . . the vertue of chastite of the blessed Virgine
Marie persed thorugh hem that were vnchaste and yelde hem anone chaste as to her.”78 Mary’s
extreme “vertue of chastite” has the power to rewrite men’s lust through a kind of benign
contagion. However, the play suggests that Mary’s benign contagion has the power to overwrite
more than men’s lust or the more literal, fleshly (and gendered) conception of sin as it inheres in
the purification ritual and to encompass it in terms of a wider, more spiritual understanding. The
virgin wax as a token of Mary’s exceptional spiritual fidelity to God’s Word and Christ’s life
performs the promise that, like Salome in the *Nativity* play, all might be made whole, purified of
the sin of unbelief. Just as Mary is rewritten by the Holy Ghost through the conception of Christ,
and just as she, in turn, has the ability to “persen” through and rewrite the carnal desires in those
around her, the play constructs itself as possessing a similar ability to “persen” through and
redeem the audience.


3 Simeon’s emendation of the prophecy of the virgin birth is extant only in Chester’s Purification play and the Stanzaic Life of Christ. The compiler of the Stanzaic Life cites “a certain letter” (quadam epistola) as the source for this story; however, scholars have been thwarted in their effort to find the source. Frances A Foster, *A Stanzaic Life of Christ compiled from Higden’s Polychronicon and the Legenda Aurea* (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1926). The Stanzaic Life makes no mention of the color of the letters.


8 Tellingly, even Erasmus’s own first printed Latin edition of the New Testament was riddled with typographical errors. Moreover, faced with an incomplete Book of Revelation Erasmus relied on the Vulgate to complete the work and even translated the Vulgate into Greek to serve as the original for the facing page. Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 145.


“serpens callidus quesivit racionem huius scripture, cui suffecisset allegasse autoritatem mandantis, cum fides scripture sit principium propinquius primo principio quam principio vel maxime scieneci doctrinalis, sed mulier ex sinistro conceptu scripture non ipsam falsificavit, sed dubitavit dicens, quod de fructu ligni, quod est in medio paradisi, preceptit deus, nec comederent ne tangerent, ne forte moriantur, et statim diabolus videns hominem in fide scripture titubantem et ex alio latere ad scripturam sacram prohibicionem tactus ligni monstruose addentem, ac si mandatum domini vellet corrige vel gravare, statim mentitus est, scripture domini contradicens: nequaquam, inquid, moriemini et sic seductum est genus humanum ex degectu sensus scripture prime negative.” Wyclif, De Veritate, 1.129/27–1.130/14. English translation by Ghosh, Wycliffite Heresy, 40–41. Wyclif viewed the terminology used by the academics as further evidence that the church had fallen into error in its deviation from Scripture. As Margaret Aston notes, “To correct doctrine it was necessary to correct errors of speech.” For Wyclif that meant a return to Scripture. Aston, “Wyclif and the Vernacular,” in From Ockham to Wyclif, eds. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 300.


17 Mirk, Festial, 57.


22 Kelly, Performing Virginity, 34.

Interpellation is the process by which subjectivity is constituted in and through ideology: “I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’” Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 174. The moment in which Joseph “hails” Mary as a spiritually intact subject is certainly only the climactic moment of a lifetime of ideological production. His ritualistic pronouncement produces Mary’s integrity in that it makes a public proclamation.


The emphasis on the virgin wax taken together with Joseph’s lines would clearly strengthen the link to Mary and not Christ at a time when her role as mediatrix was being scaled back. If, on the other hand, the “virgin wax” was indeed a taper, Joseph’s interpretation still enacts a shift away from a literal reading of the purification ritual, ironic given the debates over the prescriptive practice.

Sally MacLean, “Marian Devotion,” figure 7, 244.


Sarum Missal, 345.


OED: s.v. “virgin wax” (n.). The quotation cited is from Kyng Alisaundre, l. 334.


“Trindles were probably cakes of wax, which being round were called trindles or wheels. When wax was extensively used in the churches, it was not unusual for offerings of it to be made at the altars. This having been previously taken from the hive, would be melted down and allowed to cool in vessels, the shape of which — generally circular — it would assume and retain, and so when offered would be in the form now so frequently seen in the shop window, namely circular, or not unlike a wheel or trindle, or perhaps more exactly a trundle . . . The wax so offered was passed (when needed for use in the church) into the hands of the chandlers, who formerly did not only, as now, buy wax or tallow to make up into tapers or candles for sale, but also made up the wax, etc., of other people, charging them a fixed sum per pound for so doing.” Thomas North, A Chronicle of the Church of S. Martin in Leicester, during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth: with some account of its minor altars and ancient guilds (London: Bell and Dadly, printed by R. Clark, 1866), 94.

See Vriend, The Blessed Virgin Mary, 121.

Mary E. Fissell, “The Politics of Reproduction in the English Reformation,” Representations 87 (Summer 2004): 67. “In addition to using relics in childbirth, women connected their pregnancies to . . . stories of Mary’s motherhood by means of their devotional practices. After childbirth, women made offerings to the statue of the Virgin in their local church. Those who could afford it offered more than just candles. The wax seals, imprinted with the agnus dei (the lamb of God) or other religious images used as amulets to ensure a safe delivery might later be pinned to a statue of the Virgin Mary as a thank-offering” (58).

M.T. Clanchy notes that Edward the Confessor was the first English king to apply ‘sealing-wax to ‘charters.’ Charters conveyed property in perpetuity, as distinct from the day-to-day mandates sent out as letters close. For seals to stand permanently ‘as testimony of the truth’ necessitated devising a method of preserving the wax impression on the charter, instead of destroying it as happened when a letter close was opened.” Clanchy elaborates on the “innovation” and the means by which the seal came to be looked on as necessary evidence in the king’s court. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 310.

Millett and Wogan-Browne, Medieval English Prose for Women, 8.

Clanchy, Memory to Written Record, 310.

On churching during the Reformation, see Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, 59–61.

Here endith a compendiouse treetise dyalogue. of Diues [and] paup[er]. that is to say. the riche [and] the pore fructuously tretyng vpon the x. co[m]maånmentes . . . (authorship misattributed to Henry Parker, d. 1470) [London: Printed by Richard Pynson, 1493 (5 July)], Commandment 6, chapter xx. Early English Books Online, http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A08936.0001.001.


Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, s.v. “Field, John (1544/5?–1588).”

Fielde, Popishe abuses, article 1, item 12.


Barrow, Writings of John Greenwood, 3–4.


Barrow, Writings of Henry Barrow, 72.

Barrow, Writings of Henry Barrow, 77–78.

Barrow, Writings of John Greenwood, 4.

Barrow, Writings of Henry Barrow, 79.


The two sections of the play differ in rhyme scheme and there is evidence of textual corruption in the stanzas bridging the two halves. Stanzas 1–26, dramatizing the Purification matter, and stanza 48, the concluding stanza of the play with its reference back to Simeon, are in the 8-line
Chester stanza, \( aad^4b^3aabd^3 \) or \( aad^4b^3ccc^3b^3 \). The rhyme scheme in \textit{Christ among the Doctors}, stanzas 27–47, is cross-rhyme, \( abab \), in quatrains or eight-line stanzas with some variations. On the Chester play’s debt to the York \textit{Christ before the Doctors} play, see Craig, \textit{Two Coventry Plays}, xli–xlii.

73 \textit{REED}: \textit{Cheshire}, 84.
Conclusion

In Dialogue

The vernacular religious works at the core of this dissertation share a desire to provide spiritual guidance through theological instruction, scriptural exegesis, and a variety of devotional practices. In addition to their pedagogical and devotional aims, these works also offer idealized models of behavior for their audiences’ self-reformation. These include *imitatio Mariae* in the *Disputation between Mary and the Cross* and in the *Purification* play, *imitatio sancti* in Osbern Bokenham’s collection of saints’ lives, and *imitatio Christi*, implicit throughout, though most explicit in the *Shepherds* play and *Disputation*. Although these works provide a range of imitable exemplars through which their audiences may construct their spiritual identities, perhaps the most pervasive model of imitation offered in these religious works is *imitatio clerici*. To reiterate a claim of the dissertation, the representations of the lay figures in these texts reveal a laity very much engaged with its own spirituality. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, this engagement takes the form of dialogic encounters with clerical culture in which lay figures perform a range of clerical behaviors and practices from interpretation and glossing to disputation and preaching. While one effect of this transfer of clerical authority to the lay men and women in these texts is the reshaping of lay spiritual identity and engagement, yet another is the critique of clerical culture and behaviors.
The lay actants in the texts in this study grapple with doctrine, dispute those in positions of ecclesiastical authority, intervene in church rituals, cite Scripture, and preach the Word of God. In the *Disputation between Mary and the Cross*, the Virgin Mary performs the role of *imitatio clerici* as legal advocate for Christ. In her disputation of the doctrine of Redemption preached by the Cross, Mary cites Old Testament scripture and interprets it in support of her position. The Shepherds in the Chester *Shepherds* play “expound” the Angel’s song in a long disputation of the Latin words modeled on academic pedagogical methods. Their wrestling with the Latin liturgy and their singing of their own song provides them the active participation necessary to achieve a state of grace. In Bokenham, one need only look within his saints’ lives to see the mechanism at work. In the *Life of St. Katherine*, the lay heroine assumes clerical authority when she preaches to the idolatrous crowd and converts the people through a recitation of the articles of faith. In the *Purification of the Virgin Mary* play, Joseph, though outwardly submitting to a church ritual he deems unnecessary, adapts ritual to his own end and creates his own meaning through his supplemental offering and accompanying gloss. Rather than consider these examples as appropriations of clerical authority, it yields more interesting results to think about the inverse proposition—that the authors of these texts strategically *assign* the role of *imitatio clerici* to their lay protagonists. Nicole Rice discerns a similar pattern in prose spiritual guides written in the fourteenth century, which construct lay-clergial relations in terms of *imitatio clerici*: “The clerical advisor inducts lay listener/reader, through textual means, into forms of self-reformation and teaching that reproduce the cleric’s own virtuous practices.”¹ Rice finds that the authors of manuals such as *Book to a Mother*, *The Life of Soul*, and the *Mixed Life* seek to preserve their own clerical privilege and authority at the same time that they extend “clerical understanding” to their readers.²
Significantly, however, the texts in this dissertation posit modes of lay spiritual engagement that question both the source of clerical authority and the necessity of clerical mediation. While the virtuous figures in the texts of the dissertation serve as exemplary role models for their audiences, in their clerkly performances they serve as a corrective to both fictive and actual clerics. The performance of *imitatio clerici* in these texts has less to do with the intellect or the formal education theoretically requisite for clerical status than with the Christ-like virtues and behaviors that ground and authorize these lay figures’ clerical practice. The spiritual authority that accrues to the “extraclergial” lay practitioners comes not from their assumption of clerical behaviors and practices, but rather from the exemplary lives they live. These lay figures thus call into question the authority of clerics whose legitimacy derives solely from their academic training or their position within the church. In these texts, clerical authority, whether based upon interpretive privilege or the license to preach, is predicated on the manner in which individuals live in imitation of Christ. Furthermore, these texts assert that the lay figures’ ability to read critically (Mary’s reading of the figure of Christ on the Cross in *Disputation* or Joseph’s reading of Mary and the ritual in *Purification*) and to offer their own interpretations at odds with that espoused by the authoritarian clerical figures in the texts (the Cross and Simeon, respectively), possess the potential to effect doctrinal change. The power of the laity to correct priests extends to reform of church ritual, as demonstrated in both of the Chester plays. In the Middle English Marian laments at the foot of the cross, the audience typically experiences compassion for Christ obliquely through an identification with Mary’s pain and sorrow. Although this mechanism is at work in the *Disputation between Mary and the Cross* poem, Mary’s clerical performance is in tension with the model of *imitatio Mariae* that relies on an affective identification with the Virgin. Mary’s contention that the body of Christ must be
understood as actualized through the human bonds of love, and not merely as doctrinal truth, serves to correct the sterile theology of the authoritarian Cross, and, thus, that of other like-minded theologians outside of the text. More importantly, Mary’s reading of Christ on the Cross, emerging as it does from a theology based on love of Christ, posits a model of lay spiritual authority accessible to anyone, regardless of gender, status, or educational background. Interpretive privilege is divinely authorized in the case of the illiterate Shepherds, chosen for their humility and their life of involuntary poverty. The play offers an anticlerical critique of those religious orders that, like the hypocritical Shepherd-priests at the beginning of the play, make a mere show of living a voluntary life of apostolic poverty. At the end of the play, Joseph, recently educated by the Angel as to the Virgin Birth and the part he himself plays in the history of Christ, now turns to offer this knowledge to the Shepherds and the audience alike in one of the only didactic moments in the play. Taking Joseph’s injunction to spread the news of Christ’s birth to heart, the Shepherds disperse to preach the message of Christ in their newly assumed religious roles. Their clerical ministrations revise the lax pastoral care of the Shepherd-priests at the beginning of the play. The extension of the Shepherds as a type of imitatio Christi in their evangelical movement at the end of the play serves also to underline the potential clerical authority of the audience. Similarly, the Purification play presents Joseph as the fidus interpres, grounded in his unerring faith in the truth of Holy Writ and embodied in his spiritually as well as physically pure wife. Joseph’s faith represents a corrective to Simeon’s hermeneutical skepticism and fundamental doubt of the integrity of Scripture.

As the previous chapters in the dissertation demonstrate, the interactions between the laity and clerical culture occur within what Vincent Gillespie calls “dialogic encounters (real or staged) within and across social, gender, and spiritual categories,” modeled in this case primarily
through clerical behavior and practices. His further observation that “dialogue provides a fictive locus for the performance of vernacular theological debate, and for the voicing of potentially contentious views” finds particular resonance in the texts explored in this study. These texts’ encounters between laity and clerisy may be read as both a reflection of and a response to the growth of lay self-determination during the period in which these works are being produced. In fulfilling this growing demand, these authors would have faced challenges in maneuvering between, in Rice’s words, “the requirements of orthodoxy and the impulses of reform.” In their re-imagined lay-clerical relations as well as their critique of clerical culture, the fictive religious works I address in this dissertation must be understood as a literary intervention in the renegotiation of the line between lay and clerical culture in the years following upon Arundel’s Constitutions, with their stringent policing of that line. In their representations of lay figures who accrue spiritual authority in their enactment of clerical practices, these works participate in the process of redefining lay religious practice in late medieval England. These texts enact “performative interventions” in their revisioning not only of lay-clergial relations, but also of future vernacular theological writing.

2 Rice, *Lay Piety*, xi. See also chapter two.


4 Rice, *Lay Piety*, x.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


———. *The Writings of John Greenwood 1587–90. Together with the Joint Writings of Henry*


Here endith a compendiouse treetise dyalogue. of Diues [and] paup[er]. that is to say. the riche [and] the pore fructuously treyng vpon the x. co[m]maånmentes . . . (authorship misattributed to Henry Parker, d. 1470). London: Printed by Richard Pynson, 1493 (5 July), Commandment 6, chapter xx. Early English Books Online, http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A08936.0001.001.


**Secondary Sources**


Morgan, Margery M. “‘High Fraud’: Paradox and Double-Plot in the English Shepherds’ Plays.” *Speculum* 39 (1964): 676–89.


North, Thomas. *A Chronicle of the Church of S. Martin in Leicester, during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth: with some account of its minor altars and ancient guilds.* London: Bell and Dadly, printed by R. Clark, 1866.


