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RESISTING IDENTIFICATION:  
EUCCHARISTIC THEOLOGY IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

by

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A dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School-New Brunswick  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Literatures in English

Written under the direction of

Larry Scanlon

And approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

May, 2009

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Resisting Identification:

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For later medieval England, the Eucharist lay at the center of orthodox piety and was fundamental to heated debates surrounding the relationship between lay believer, ecclesiastical authority, and the divine. This dissertation argues that the Eucharist also inspired a range of Middle English literary texts, texts which use poetic strategies in order to engage their assumed lay audience in key theological debates. Previous literary scholarship on the Eucharist has tended either to focus on the heretical writings of the Lollards or to depict lay eucharistic piety as a wholly affective experience centered on the believer's personal and emotional identification with Christ's crucified body. Both these approaches oversimplify the complexity and diversity of orthodox Middle English writings. In contrast, my study examines writers who press the social, political, and theological implications of the Eucharist while remaining within the boundaries of orthodoxy. Drawing primarily on literature written between 1300, when eucharistic doctrines began to be rigidly codified, and 1409, when Archbishop Arundel's *Constitutions* effectively banned vernacular theology, I show that Middle English texts often conceive of encounters with the Eucharist as moments in which believers are

unable to identify with Christ. I focus on four texts that interrogate the fraught relationship between the lay believer, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and Christ's eucharistic body: Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*, *Pearl*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*. These texts use the Eucharist's apparent failure in order to generate theology that not only challenges readers to question their own relationship to the divine, but also affirms orthodox doctrine. I argue that, by insisting on the Eucharist as a mediated experience which reveals one's difference from the divine, Middle English texts affirm the necessity of the mediator between God and humanity: the institutional Church.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a pleasure to thank the many people who have contributed time, energy, and encouragement to this project and my career as a graduate student. My first debt is to Garrett P.J. Epp, who introduced me to the joys of medieval literature and encouraged me to pursue a career in academia. I have had the pleasure of working with a supportive and rigorous dissertation committee. I would like to thank Christine Chism and Stacy Klein, both of whom offered thoughtful critiques of this dissertation and have been sources of encouragement throughout my time at Rutgers. Claire Waters offered thorough and insightful feedback as my outside reader. My greatest debt is to my amazing dissertation director, Larry Scanlon, who has challenged and supported me at every step along the way; his guidance and insight have been invaluable.

I would like to express my gratitude for the institutional and financial support I have received during my time at Rutgers. A doctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada helped me immensely by allowing me to focus exclusively on my research. The Rutgers English Department's Mellon Summer Dissertation Fellowship gave me the opportunity to work on my writing as part of a collegial group; the feedback of Marianne DeKoven and my graduate student colleagues was both helpful and refreshingly encouraging. The Mellon Summer Research Grant allowed me to enrich my studies by conducting research in the British Library's Manuscripts reading room. I would also like to thank the Graduate School for providing fellowship funding during my first and fifth years of graduate study.

Many people and groups have helped me to find my own place in the world of academia. The Anglo-Saxon Studies Colloquium provided me with my first opportunities to share my research outside of Rutgers. The Medieval and Renaissance Colloquium in the Rutgers English department has been a constant source of support and inspiration; in particular, Chapter Two was strengthened considerably through the comments I received during a Colloquium workshop. I would like to thank the friends and graduate students who have helped me to think in new ways and kept me (mostly) sane throughout the dissertation writing process, especially Darryl Ellison, Angela Florschuetz, Aaron Hostetter, Mary Kate Hurley, Meghan Lau, Colleen Rosenfeld, Steve Syrek, Wendy Tiemer, and Scott Trudell.

Finally, I would like to thank those people who have supported me in decidedly non-academic ways. My dance instructor Sandra Catena and my fellow dancers have reminded me that there is another world outside of academia and outside of my own head. My father has helped to shape me into the person and scholar I am today. The Traquair and Christophersen families have been tremendously supportive; I am particularly grateful to Carol whose phone calls provided me with much-needed distraction from my work. My mother, brother, and sister (The Garrison Three) have been constant sources of unconditional love and support; I could not imagine having done this without them. My husband Jesse's love and unflagging belief in me continue to astonish me; he deserves more thanks than I can ever give him.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Mediated Piety: Eucharistic Theology and Lay Devotion in Robert Mannyng's <i>Handlyng Synne</i>	14
Chapter 2: Liturgy and Loss: <i>Pearl</i> and the Ritual Reform of the Aristocratic Subject	59
Chapter 3: Failed Signification: Corpus Christi and Corpus Mysticum in <i>Piers Plowman</i>	108
Chapter 4: Signs of Separation: Eucharistic Language in Julian of Norwich's <i>A Revelation of Love</i>	151
Bibliography	194
Curriculum Vitae	214

## Introduction

In Book Seven of his *Confessions*, Augustine describes his transformative relationship to God in a way that later medieval theologians would often cite as a description of the effect of the Eucharist on the soul of the individual believer:

I found myself far from you ‘in the region of dissimilarity’, and heard as it were your voice from on high: ‘I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me.’<sup>1</sup>

When interpreted as an early statement of eucharistic doctrine, Augustine’s words directly link the Eucharist to identification: to eat the Eucharist is to know God more fully and ultimately to become more like God himself. Since the Eucharist ostensibly offered believers direct contact or union with Christ through the acts of eating and viewing the consecrated host, identification was an essential aspect of the Eucharist for scholastic theologians and lay believers alike. Throughout the Middle Ages, the precise nature of the believer’s identification with Christ’s body was a central concern of eucharistic theology.

This dissertation investigates the complex ways in which Middle English texts define the relationship between Christ’s body and the individual believer through literary engagements in eucharistic theology. By placing Middle English religious writings in conversation with Latin theology, I reveal a vernacular tradition uniquely concerned with

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<sup>1</sup> Et inveni longe me esse a te in regione dissimilitudinis, tanquam audirem vocem tuam de excelso: “cibus sum grandium: cresce et manducabis me. Nec tu me in te mutabis sicut cibum carnis tuae, sed tu mutaberis in me.” Latin text from: Augustine, *Confessions*, 3 vols, ed. James J. O’Donnell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), VII.10.16. Translation from Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), VII.10.16.



challenging the ideal of emotional union with Christ in the Eucharist. Previous English literary scholarship on the Eucharist has focused primarily on the heretical writings of Wyclif and the Lollards.<sup>2</sup> As a result, scholars have often assumed that, because the Eucharist was a touchstone for orthodoxy and lay at the center of highly volatile theological debates, vernacular engagements with eucharistic theology avoid controversy by remaining fundamentally affective and unoriginal. Such an assessment radically oversimplifies the complexity and diversity found within orthodox Middle English writings. In contrast to affective models of eucharistic devotion, Middle English texts often conceive of believers' encounters with the Eucharist as moments in which believers realize that they cannot identify with Christ. In fact, the four fourteenth-century texts that serve as the focal points of this study—Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*, the anonymous *Pearl*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*—argue that the Eucharist is central to Christian devotion precisely because of the union with Christ it does not fully provide. These texts reject a purely affective model of eucharistic devotion, but they do not pose a threat to orthodox doctrine. Rather, by insisting on the Eucharist as a mediated experience which reveals

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<sup>2</sup> The body of scholarship on the Lollards is vast. A few of the texts that discuss the Lollards' views on the Eucharist include: David Aers, *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), especially 53-98; Margaret Aston, "Wyclif and the Vernacular," in *From Ockham to Wyclif*, ed. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks, Studies in Church History, Subsidia 5 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 281-330; J.I. Catto, "John Wyclif and the Cult of the Eucharist," in *The Bible in the Medieval World: Essays in Memory of Beryl Smalley*, ed. Katherine Walsh and Diana Wood, Studies in Church History, Subsidia 4 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 269-86; Dallas G. Denery, II, "From Sacred Mystery to Divine Deception: Robert Holkot, John Wyclif and the Transformation of Fourteenth-Century Eucharistic Discourse," *Journal of Religious History* 29 (2005): 129-144; Ian Christopher Levy, *John Wyclif: Scriptural Logic, Real Presence, and the Parameters of Orthodoxy* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2003); Fiona Somerset, "Here, There, and Everywhere? Wycliffite Conceptions of the Eucharist and Chaucer's 'Other' Lollard Joke," in *Lollards and their Influence in Late Medieval England*, ed. Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 127-38.

one's difference from the divine, these texts affirm the necessity of the mediator between God and humanity: the institutional Church.

Although historians have written extensively on the Eucharist in late medieval culture, there is surprisingly little literary scholarship on this central cultural symbol.<sup>3</sup> In part, this lack of critical examination stems from scholars' acceptance of Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* as a representative description of all late medieval eucharistic piety. In this landmark book, she argues that female mystics typically had an affective relationship to the consecrated host which focused on emotional identification with the suffering body of Christ. Bynum places this eucharistic piety in relation to scholastic theology, saying:

The sense of *imitatio* as *becoming* or *being* (not merely feeling or understanding) lay in the background of eucharistic devotion. The eucharist was an especially appropriate vehicle for the effort to become Christ because the eucharist *is* Christ. The doctrine of transubstantiation was crucial. One *became* Christ in *eating* Christ's crucified body.<sup>4</sup>

For Bynum, the scholastic doctrine of transubstantiation is central to female mystics' devotion primarily because it enables an affective identification with Christ that transcends argument; these mystics respond to eucharistic doctrine primarily emotionally rather than intellectually. Although Bynum's account may hold true for many of the continental female mystics, it is a mistake to generalize such modes of ecstatic eucharistic devotion to the medieval laity at large. Unfortunately, scholars often describe affective

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<sup>3</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400 – c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Bynum, 256-57.

eucharistic identification as if it were universal. For example, Eamon Duffy describes the late medieval English lay experience of the Mass as a direct encounter with the crucified Christ when he suggests that “As kneeling congregations raised their eyes to see the Host held high above the priest’s head at the sacring, they were transported to Calvary itself.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Ann Astell’s recent *Eating Beauty*, which is to my knowledge the only book-length literary examination of the Eucharist, argues that “to see the consecrated Host for what it was—Christ—was to see it with the eyes of faith; to hear, to smell, to taste, and ultimately to touch Christ and to be touched by Him.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars misrepresent the complexity of medieval orthodoxy in general and Middle English writings in particular when they present this type of affective piety as if it were the only way in which lay people and writers of the vernacular could think about eucharistic devotion.

In contrast, this dissertation regards vernacular treatments of the Eucharist as both poetically and theologically complex; it thus builds on the rapidly growing body of literary scholarship on late medieval vernacular theology. Over the past fifteen years, following the lead of Nicholas Watson, many literary scholars have begun to rethink the nature of Middle English religious writings by reclassifying many texts as ‘vernacular theology’ rather than ‘devotional literature’ in order to highlight the intellectual seriousness of such vernacular texts.<sup>7</sup> In particular, recent work by Vincent Gillespie and Nicholas Watson has persuasively argued that late medieval orthodox writings are much

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<sup>5</sup> Eamon Duffy, 91.

<sup>6</sup> Ann W. Astell, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>7</sup> 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): 822-64. *English Language Notes* recently published a special issue in which many notable scholars of Middle English literature, including Elizabeth Robertson, Daniel Donoghue, Linda Georgianna, Kate Crassons, C. David Benson, Katherine C. Little, Lynn Staley, James Simpson, and Nicholas Watson, examine the effect of this term on the field. See: Bruce Holsinger, ed., *English Language Notes* 44.1 (2006): 77-137.

more theologically diverse and politically engaged than previously imagined.<sup>8</sup> However, in spite of scholarship's recent turn toward religion, literary scholars have been especially reluctant to regard orthodox vernacular texts as engaged in eucharistic theology. Scholars often assume that texts which present an orthodox view of the Eucharist are not particularly interested in or intellectually engaged with theology,<sup>9</sup> but, in fact, many Middle English texts—ranging from Passion meditations to penitential manuals to mystical writings—engage with contemporary theological discussions of the Eucharist.<sup>10</sup> Even though such texts do not threaten the official doctrines of the institutional Church, they are often deeply invested in eucharistic theology. For many vernacular texts and their projected lay audiences, the nature of Christ's presence in the host is not a purely academic debate about the relationship between substance and accidents. What is at stake is nothing less than the individual believer's ability to access the divine and the extent to which the institutional Church is essential to that access. These texts' eucharistic

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<sup>8</sup> Vincent Gillespie, "Vernacular Theology," in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 401-20; Nicholas Watson, "The Middle English Mystics," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 539-65; Nicholas Watson, "Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 145-87.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Robert Adams deems Langland's discussion of the Eucharist to be uninteresting precisely because it is orthodox, and numerous scholars dismiss the invitation to the Eucharist at the end of *Pearl* because they deem its assertion of orthodoxy to be too simplistic. Robert Adams, "Langland's Theology," in *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 87-114. On *Pearl*, see for example: John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 53; David Aers, "The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 54-73.

<sup>10</sup> Aside from the four texts on which this dissertation concentrates, some of these texts include: the York and Chester plays for Corpus Christi; "How to Hear Mass," in *The Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. F.J. Furnivall, EETS o.s. 117 (London: Kegan Paul, 1901), 493-511; John Lydgate, "A Procession of Corpus Christi," in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, EETS e.s. 107 (London: Oxford University Press, 1911), 35-43; *Meditations on the Supper of our Lord, and the Hours of the Passion*, ed. J. Meadows Cowper, EETS o.s. 60 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1875); William of Shoreham, "De Septem Sacramentis," in *The Poems of William of Shoreham*, ed. M. Konrath, EETS e.s. 86 (London: Kegan Paul, 1902), 1-78.

theology deserves closer examination as part of the history of vernacular theology in late medieval England.

Recent books by Sarah Beckwith and David Aers have begun to challenge the unspoken assumption that orthodox vernacular texts have little of interest to say about the Eucharist; however, both Beckwith and Aers focus on texts which they contend ultimately challenge Church authority. They claim theological importance for the texts they study on the grounds that these texts threaten orthodox doctrine or the institutional Church. In *Signifying God*, Beckwith praises the York Corpus Christi plays for the way in which they move away from sacramental orthodoxy while ostensibly supporting the Eucharist. She argues that the plays “fundamentally revise their understanding of sacramental culture: the sacrament is no longer the little wafer consumed by the celebrant. It is...the social world of York.”<sup>11</sup> By celebrating the York plays’ destabilization of priestly sacramental authority, Beckwith dismisses the many orthodox texts which celebrate the consecrated host as a sacred object in the hands of the priest; for Beckwith, such eucharistic theology is “bastardized.”<sup>12</sup> In *Sanctifying Signs*, David Aers suggests that any diversity within orthodox writings on the Eucharist is a sign of orthodoxy’s weakness and failure. In explaining why *Piers Plowman*’s discussion of the Eucharist could be considered orthodox, Aers comments that “Orthodoxy could not ever take control of its own resources and the conversations it incessantly generated, even when apparently seeking to close those conversations.”<sup>13</sup> Even when he judges texts to be orthodox, he imagines their complexity as posing a threat to orthodoxy itself. For

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<sup>11</sup> Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 55.

<sup>12</sup> Beckwith, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Aers, *Sanctifying Signs*, ix.

Beckwith and Aers, orthodoxy is a restrictive force which severely limits theological innovation. I read the diverse vernacular discussions of the Eucharist in a radically different way by suggesting that the diversity of such writings reveals late medieval orthodoxy's capacity to include a variety of theological thought.

Thus, when Middle English texts suggest that the Eucharist does not provide a moment of full identification with Christ, they support orthodox eucharistic doctrine and the institutional Church itself. By highlighting the union with Christ that the Eucharist does not fully provide, these texts reveal the importance and inescapability of mediation and distance between Christ and the individual; in that mediation and distance lies the role of the Church. Throughout this dissertation, I use the term 'identification' to include both the recognition of the self in the other and the self's attempts to become the other. Although I have drawn the term from psychoanalytic discourse, I do not use it in an exclusively psychoanalytic sense. For example, as I argue in my chapter on *Piers Plowman*, Langland asks his readers to recognize the way in which the human Christian community is and is not identical to the mystical body of Christ. The attempted identification in this text is not, as in Freudian definitions, fundamentally emotional or an attempt to help the individual ego recover from loss. Attempts to identify with Christ can range from emotional attempts to become one with Christ to intellectual assessments of the similarities between Christ and the human community. However, in all the texts I examine, these attempts at identification are similar in that they all end with the recognition of human lack. The writers use this lack in order to show the necessity of the Church and its sacraments to Christians' struggle for union with God even as they recognize that full union is not possible during earthly life. Paradoxically, Middle English

texts often regard the Eucharist's failure to fulfill its promise of union with Christ as support for its necessity: it is through contemplating, worshipping, and receiving the Eucharist that one can come to the fullest understanding of the lack that defines one's relationship to God.

This dissertation focuses on literature written from the beginning of the fourteenth century until 1409, a time period which marks a crucial transition in the history of the Eucharist in England. Prior to the fourteenth century, orthodox theologians had more diverse views on the nature of the Real Presence in the consecrated host, but, partly as a result of the Church's attempt to more clearly define the sacraments in the face of the Cathar heresy, by the beginning of the fourteenth century acceptance of transubstantiation became required for orthodoxy throughout the western Church. For England in particular, the fourteenth century is significant within the history of eucharistic theology because this century saw the rise and official condemnation of the Lollard heresy, a heresy which was partly defined by its rejection of transubstantiation. As a result, over the course of the century, eucharistic theology became a subject central to both religious and political discourse in England. In 1409, in response to the Lollard threat, Archbishop Arundel published his *Constitutions*, a document which forbade arguments over matters of faith outside of universities, banned vernacular translations of biblical quotations, and limited lay education to the most basic elements of doctrine. Eucharistic theology, since it was a frequent subject of Lollard polemic, would have been a particularly dangerous topic for vernacular writing. Although many of the themes I discuss in this dissertation continue to pervade vernacular writing after 1409, the political stakes of such writing are dramatically different and there is, at least in theory, a much sharper distinction between

devotional literature and theology. While I sometimes make reference to texts slightly outside this time period, the years between 1300 and 1409 are the focus of this dissertation because they represent a period in which the limits of orthodoxy within eucharistic theology were fairly well-defined, but it was still possible to explore that theology relatively openly in the vernacular.<sup>14</sup>

The first two chapters concentrate on Middle English texts which describe the Eucharist as essential to the personal spiritual reform of the laity. Robert Mannyng's early fourteenth-century penitential manual, *Handlyng Synne*, the focus of the first chapter, draws on both scholastic theology and popular piety to construct a model of lay eucharistic devotion which centers on mediation. In order to explore the relationship between scholastic and vernacular ideas in Mannyng's text, this chapter examines the history of scholastic definitions of the Real Presence and shows that, by the fourteenth century, many scholastics regarded Christ's presence in the Eucharist as something that must be perceived through mediation, whether that mediation is the appearance of the host or the Church doctrines that tell Christians what they ought to think when they see the host elevated at Mass. This focus on mediation lies in sharp contrast to some popular modes of lay eucharistic piety which celebrated bloody sacrificial imagery and the idea of direct contact with Christ's body. Mannyng's own vernacular contributions to eucharistic theology—including his reverence for the material elements of the consecrated host—strive to bridge the distance between scholastic theology and such lay beliefs. Mannyng particularly integrates the two models through his use of four eucharistic exempla,

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that the subject of my fourth chapter, Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*, may have been completed as late as 1415. I believe that it fits within the frame of this dissertation because, even if her text was completed that late, the writing of it was a life-long project which was certainly begun decades earlier.



narratives which feature individual encounters with the suffering, sacrificial body of Christ. In all four tales, Mannyng shows that sin thwarts identification with Christ, even when one directly encounters his body; however, this failed identification ought to lead believers to greater piety because it directs them to the rituals of the Church, especially the sacrament of penance. In *Handlyng Synne*, the mediated presence of the Eucharist is essential to the Christian faith because it helps believers to recognize the sin that keeps them from fully knowing God.

In contrast to *Handlyng Synne*, which imagines a broad audience of the unlearned laity, the anonymous dream vision *Pearl* develops a model of eucharistic piety aimed particularly at the aristocracy. Drawing on the distinctly individual and inward-focused liturgical practices of the late fourteenth-century aristocracy, my second chapter argues that all four works of the *Pearl*-poet—*Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—present the Mass as a ritual way for the aristocratic subject to secure a stable Christian identity through practicing emotional control. Of the four poems, *Pearl* provides the fullest exploration of the relationship between liturgy and Christian interiority, proposing in its closing stanza that turning toward Christ in the Eucharist is the ultimate solution to personal grief and longing. Throughout the poem, the dreamer becomes increasingly frustrated because he cannot identify with either his lost beloved or with Christ, primarily because he can only perceive them through textual mediation: the continually shifting pearl metaphor and the Lamb as an allegorical sign of Christ. The poem's emphasis on figurative language highlights the dreamer's own need to submit to external logic and to acknowledge his irreducible distance from the divine. The Eucharist, which appears as a piece of bread that looks nothing like the physical body of Christ,

teaches the aristocratic subject to be satisfied with simultaneous absence and presence, and to recognize what it is that he truly lacks: Christ.

With the final two chapters, my focus shifts from individual reform to the reform of the Christian community, a community whose knowledge of the divine, since it is gained through language rather than direct encounter, must always be allegorical rather than literal. The third chapter examines the relationship between allegory and eucharistic theology in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Focusing on the poem's penultimate passus, which begins and ends with moments in which members of the Christian community fail to receive the Eucharist, I argue that Langland engages in contemporary theological discussions about the nature of Christ's presence in the host by examining the Eucharist as a sign. Through a brief history of scholastic and vernacular theology, I show that orthodox theologians consistently regarded the Eucharist as a type of allegorical sign, a sign that signifies something outside and beyond itself: the Eucharist signifies the Christian community, the mystical body of Christ, and it both signifies and contains Christ's physical body. The Christian community's failure to receive the Eucharist in this poem is both a result and an indication of the earthly Christian community's failure to be the unified and just mystical body of Christ. For Langland, the role of the Christian community is to enact the mystical body signified by the host; proper eucharistic reception requires believers to recognize their own role in the Eucharist's signification.

My final chapter investigates how Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love* uses eucharistic language—images of blood, feeding, and union—in order to reflect on the power of signs to bring about union between Christ and his earthly Church. Julian explores the Eucharist in relation to signs and language, as well as the way in which signs

structure the relationship between humanity and the divine. Through close analysis of Julian's parable of the lord and the servant, I argue that Julian understands the relationship between God and believer through reference to signs, both in the sense that it is only through language that believers can come to know God and in the sense that this relationship is analogous to that between literal and allegorical levels of a text. Although, according to Julian's model of the soul, God and humans are already to some extent united in the mind and body of Christ, humans ought to perceive themselves as separate from the divine in order to increase their desire for union with Christ at the end of time. The Eucharist is an allegorical sign which invites readers to imagine the collapse of signifier into signified even as its very existence as a sign indicates their separateness. Julian depicts the Eucharist as essential to human devotion precisely because it is a sign of a union with God that is not yet realized but for which the human community ought to continually long. The institutional Church is thus a necessary part of Julian's model of human devotion because it provides the sacraments and therefore invites the Christian community as a whole to thirst for fulfillment in Christ.

Throughout the later Middle Ages, scholastic theologians and writers of Middle English alike were engaged in debates about the precise nature and effect of Christ's eucharistic presence. At first, these debates may seem to focus on purely intellectual distinctions, but what is at stake is the individual believer's access to God. The possibility that any believer could have a direct encounter with Christ brings into question the many layers of mediation that medieval religious practice erected between the laity and Christ: from the altar screens to the appearance of the bread to the priest's reception of the host on behalf of the community. This dissertation explores how vernacular literary texts

negotiated this inaccessibility of Christ's body in the Eucharist with the laity's desire for their own salvation and redemption. In Middle English texts, the distance and inaccessibility of Christ and the inability of Christians to identify with him become a source of theological inspiration that both encourages lay readers to think seriously about their own salvation and their own relationship to Christ, and affirms the indispensable nature of the institutional Church as a mediator between Christ and humanity.

## I.

## Mediated Piety:

Eucharistic Theology and Lay Devotion in Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*

*Handlyng Synne*, Robert Mannyng of Brunne's early fourteenth-century penitential manual, continues to be a poem better known than read. Although frequently excerpted in undergraduate anthologies, the poem has attracted very little scholarship, and most of that is descriptive rather than analytic and interpretive.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, most scholars have missed the complexity of its engagement with theology, precisely because they have accepted D.W. Robertson, Jr.'s demonstration of its dependence on theological convention.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have implicitly acknowledged *Handlyng Synne*'s textual complexity but have limited their discussions to Mannyng's seven 'original' exempla, the exempla that do not appear in Mannyng's source, the thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman *Manuel des Pechiez*.<sup>3</sup> Joyce Coleman has recently recovered an important devotional and ecclesiological context for the poem. On the basis of its interest in the Eucharist, she argues Mannyng, a Gilbertine canon, used it as an attempt to garner donations for his

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<sup>1</sup> Fritz Kemmler, 'Exempla' in *Context: A Historical and Critical Study of Robert Mannyng of Brunne's 'Handlyng Synne'* (Tübingen: Narr, 1984); Derek Pearsall, *Old English and Middle English Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1977), 108; R.A. Shoaf, "'Mutatio Amoris': 'Penitentia' and the Form of the Book of the Duchess," *Genre* 14 (1981): 163-189. One notable exception to this trend is Mark Miller's excellent article which seriously addresses both Mannyng's poetic art and his exploration of the psychological implications of penitential theology: Mark Miller, "Displaced Souls, Idle Talk, Spectacular Scenes: Handlyng Synne and the Perspective of Agency," *Speculum* 71 (1996): 606-632.

<sup>2</sup> Robertson argues that Mannyng's principles of selection and system of organization "resulted from adherence to a well established convention which had been developed to implement certain definite aims of the medieval Church." D.W. Robertson, Jr., "The Cultural Tradition of Handlyng Synne," *Speculum* 22 (1947): 162-185, at 162. See also: D.W. Robertson, Jr., "Certain Theological Conventions in Mannyng's Treatment of the Commandments," *Modern Language Notes* 61 (1946): 505-514.

<sup>3</sup> Scholarship that focuses on the original exempla includes: John M. Ganim, "The Devil's Writing Lesson," in *Oral Poetics in Middle English Poetry*, ed. Mark C. Amodio with Sarah Gray Miller (New York: Garland, 1994), 109-23; Carl Lindahl, "The Re-Oralized Legends of Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*," *Contemporary Legend* 2 (1999): 34-62.

order.<sup>4</sup> Coleman's account should encourage us to examine that interest itself in more detail. This chapter will argue that Mannyng presents a provocative and complex understanding of lay eucharistic piety by engaging with both scholastic and vernacular discourses on the nature of Christ's presence in the host. Throughout *Handlyng Synne*'s doctrine and exempla, he presents the eucharistic sacrifice as the solution to all sorts of predicaments—from mining accidents to purgatory—and argues that this sacrifice is essential to lay devotion and salvation. For Mannyng, the fleeting union with Christ which the Eucharist offers believers simultaneously demands they seek a deeper devotion through recognition of their own distance from the divine. I offer my argument in four stages. First, I discuss Mannyng's decision to write theology in the vernacular for a lay audience. Next, I explore in turn *Handlyng Synne*'s relationship to scholastic and vernacular discourses surrounding the Eucharist. Finally, I examine in some detail four exempla which Mannyng uses to draw his lay readers into contemporary theological debates about the relationship between the believer and Christ's body in the consecrated host.

### **Mannyng's Use of the Vernacular**

By choosing to translate the *Manuel* into the vernacular, Mannyng imagines an uneducated lay audience that is distinct from the audiences of French and Latin texts by virtue of its thirst for narrative entertainment. As recent scholarship on vernacular theory has shown, a medieval English author's decision to write in the vernacular is not just an indicator of that author's desire to communicate across the range of professions and social classes; many medieval writers argued that English had a particular symbolic value

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<sup>4</sup> Joyce Coleman, "Handling Pilgrims: Robert Mannyng and the Gilbertine Cult," *Philological Quarterly* 81 (2002): 311-326.

and unique method of creating meaning.<sup>5</sup> For Mannyng, English is not only the language of the people but also the language of narrative. Mannyng begins *Handlyng Synne* by presenting lay piety as a problem, a problem in which vernacular narrative plays an important role. His prologue laments that the laity are unknowingly falling into sin for two distinct reasons: doctrinal texts are not widely available in the vernacular and lay people prefer entertaining tales to sermons. He therefore ambitiously sets out to remedy the situation:

For lewed men y vndyr toke  
 On englyssh tonge to make Pis boke,  
 For many beyn of swyche manere  
 Pat talys & rymys wyle bleþly here  
 Yn gamys, yn festys, & at þe ale (43-47).<sup>6</sup>

By interspersing penitential doctrine with entertaining exempla, he hopes that his text will compete with popular forms of entertainment. Instead of insisting that his lay readers must entirely renounce their old habits, such as storytelling, *Handlyng Synne* asks them to integrate greater piety into the practices in which they already engage. Although Mannyng aims to entertain, he does not use the literary form of the exemplum in order to simplify his doctrine. On the contrary: the exemplum demands that readers recognize themselves in the narratives' characters. Mannyng uses this generic feature in order to make his complex discussions of theology personally relevant to his lay readers. This

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<sup>5</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, Ruth Evans, eds, *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). On the relationship between Middle English and Anglo-Norman, see: Nicholas Watson and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "The French of England: the *Compileison*, *Ancrene Wisse*, and the idea of Anglo-Norman," *Journal of Romance Studies* 4 (2004): 35-58.

<sup>6</sup> All quotations of *Handlyng Synne* are taken from: Robert Mannyng of Brunne, *Handlyng Synne*, ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghamton, New York: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1983).

textual strategy allows us to place *Handlyng Synne* in what Ralph Hanna has recently identified as an early fourteenth-century tradition of vernacular texts that conceive of their audience as “responsible religious agents.”<sup>7</sup>

*Handlyng Synne* participates in an already vigorous vernacular discourse on the Eucharist, a discourse whose range and vigour modern scholars tend to underestimate. While we recognise that late medieval religion was a cultural system centred on the Eucharist,<sup>8</sup> literary scholars often ignore orthodox lay understandings of eucharistic theology in favour of examining late medieval heresy. Many medievalists date the serious discussion of eucharistic theology in the vernacular to the last third of the fourteenth century with the rise of Wyclif and the Lollard movement. Margaret Aston even goes so far as to state that, prior to the end of the fourteenth century, the discussion of the doctrine of the Eucharist in the vernacular was “as impossible as it had seemed undesirable.”<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, from the late thirteenth century until Archbishop Arundel’s 1409 Constitutions made discussing theology in the vernacular illegal, there was a surge in the production of vernacular theological texts in England. This abundance of vernacular texts—ranging from guides to the Mass to lyrics to meditations on the Passion—included many which, like *Handlyng Synne*, discussed the Eucharist.<sup>10</sup> Some of the texts that we know definitively to have been produced before the emergence of the

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<sup>7</sup> Ralph Hanna, *London Literature, 1300-1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 212.

<sup>8</sup> Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Aston, “Wyclif and the Vernacular” in *From Ockham to Wyclif*, ed. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks, *Studies in Church History*, Subsidia 5, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) 281-330, at 303.

<sup>10</sup> Guides to the mass include: *The Lay Folks Mass Book*, ed. Thomas Frederick Simmons, EETS o.s. 71, orig. pub. 1879, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); “How to Hear Mass,” in *The Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. F.J. Furnivall, EETS o.s. 117 (London: Kegan Paul, 1901), 493-511. For lyrics, see: Russell Hope Robbins, “Levitation Prayers in Middle English Verse,” *Modern Philology* 39 (1942): 131-146. Passion meditations include: *The Southern Passion*, ed. Beatrice Daw Brown, EETS o.s. 169 (London: Oxford University Press, 1927); *Meditations on the Supper of our Lord, and the Hours of the Passion*, ed. J. Meadows Cowper, EETS o.s. 60 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1875).



Lollards include: *The Southern Passion* (~1275-1285), the *Lay Folks Mass Book* (late thirteenth century), William of Shoreham's "De Septem Sacramentis" (early fourteenth century), and *Meditations on the Supper of our Lord* (~1315-1330).<sup>11</sup> Rather than assume that vernacular writings intended for the laity were merely simplified versions of clerical ideas already expressed in Latin, I aim to show how Mannyng re-evaluates eucharistic theology in a way that is made possible by his use of the vernacular for his envisioned lay audience.<sup>12</sup>

By choosing to write in the vernacular, Mannyng imagines an English community of the saved that includes both learned clerics and the unlearned laity. It is likely that Mannyng's life in the Gilbertine order encouraged him to envision this sort of community. To the best of our knowledge, Robert Mannyng of Brunne only produced two written works, both of which are highly ambitious vernacular projects: the 12,638-line *Handlyng Synne* begun in 1303 and *The Chronicle*, a 24,304-line history of England completed in 1338. From the information Mannyng provides in his prologues, we know that he was a Cambridge-educated Gilbertine canon when he began writing *Handlyng Synne*.<sup>13</sup> The Gilbertine order, founded in the early twelfth century, was the only entirely English order. The founder, St. Gilbert, actively supported Thomas Becket, the popular

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<sup>11</sup> William of Shoreham, "De Septem Sacramentis," in *The Poems of William of Shoreham*, ed. M. Konrath, EETS e.s. 86 (London: Kegan Paul, 1902), 1-78.

<sup>12</sup> I am drawing on Nicholas Watson's work on what he terms "vernacular theology." My use of this idea differs slightly from Watson's. While I am primarily interested in the way in which the lay status of Mannyng's projected audience influences his theology, Watson explores the way in which the status of the vernacular itself encouraged theological thinking about universality. See: Nicholas Watson, "Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 145-187.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Crosby, "Robert Mannyng of Brunne: A New Biography," *PMLA* 57 (1942): 15-28. Michael Stephenson has recently suggested that Mannyng may have not been a Gilbertine canon but instead a "roving confessor" for the nuns of the order. Given the structure of the Gilbertine order, it seems unlikely that a roving confessor would have been as educated as Mannyng or that such a confessor would have been able to produce the volume of writing that Mannyng did. See: Michael Stephenson, "Further Biographical Notes on Robert Mannyng of Brunne," *Notes and Queries* 45 (1998): 284-285.

English martyr-saint, and developed a lasting partnership between his order and the monarchy through his personal relationship with Henry II.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the Gilbertine Order had strong ties to the English nation and the English language. The interdependence of clerical and lay, Latin and English, was central to the day-to-day operation of Gilbertine communities. They had a double house structure composed of nuns, canons, lay brethren, and lay sisters, with the lay brothers and sisters providing the canons and nuns with a ready labour force. The vernacular was central to life in Gilbertine communities since the Gilbertine Rule insisted that lay sisters and brothers speak only in English, and acknowledged that some nuns were completely illiterate.<sup>15</sup> Although the canons would have all been literate—in the sense of being able to read Latin—almost all communications between the canons and the nuns or the canons and the laity would have been in English. Mannyng did not have to look outside his Sempringham home in order to envision a community in which devout laity and the use of the vernacular were vitally important to the entire Christian community's success.

Mannyng writes in the vernacular specifically for the laity because he recognises that there are not enough texts available to them; he wants to enrich lay piety and make lay salvation possible. In contrast to many other writers of religious works, Mannyng composes both his texts “not for þe lerid bot for þe lewed.”<sup>16</sup> Many scholars have suggested various immediate audiences for *Handlyng Synne*: the Gilbertine novices, the lay brothers, pilgrims, preachers, wealthy patrons, the lower classes, or parish

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<sup>14</sup> Brian Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order, c.1130-1300* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 40, 61, 312.

<sup>15</sup> Golding, 119-120.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Mannyng of Brunne, *The Chronicle*, ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghamton, New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1996), 91.

congregations.<sup>17</sup> Although we will probably never know for certain, it is clear that he imagines a broad readership, a readership that only understands English and that engages in secular distractions, such as going to taverns and attending jousts. He directs particular exempla to people who would likely not have been in holy orders, such as parents and wives. Given the lack of exempla aimed solely at exhorting proper behaviour for priests and canons, it is highly unlikely that Mannyng's primary audience was would-be Gilbertine canons unless his goal was to provide them with material for preaching to the laity. It is therefore clear from Mannyng's discussions of secular affairs and lay modes of worship that the 'lewed' readership he imagines was primarily the laity. Unlike many medieval theologians who thought one of the laity's primary functions was to compose the large numbers of damned souls in hell,<sup>18</sup> Mannyng writes in English because he regards lay salvation as important and their theological education as vital to that salvation.

### **Accessibility of Christ in Eucharistic Theology**

When Mannyng began writing *Handlyng Synne*, there was already a long tradition of writings for the laity that saw a strong connection between the vernacular and the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist. Canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), *omnis utriusque sexus*, best known for its requirement that all members of the faithful confess at least once a year, also required yearly reception of the Eucharist. This connection is hardly surprising, inasmuch as receiving the Eucharist in a state of sin was itself a mortal sin. In order to help the laity prepare for this yearly confession and

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<sup>17</sup> Coleman, "Handling Pilgrims"; Crosby; Kate Greenspan, "Lessons for the Priest, Lessons for the People: Robert Mannyng of Brunne's Audiences for *Handlyng Synne*," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 21 (2005) 109-121; Lindahl; Idelle Sullens, "Introduction," *The Chronicle* (Binghamton, New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1996), 1-89, at 17.

<sup>18</sup> Watson, 149.

reception, and to assist parish priests in hearing these confessions, there was a surge in religious materials available in the vernacular, especially penitential manuals.<sup>19</sup> *Handlyng Synne* falls squarely into this tradition of literature developed in response to the Fourth Lateran Council's decree, a tradition which regarded penance and the Eucharist as interdependent.

The Eucharist is central to *Handlyng Synne*; the section devoted to the Eucharist is roughly one thousand lines of the twelve thousand line poem. One of the most significant changes Mannyng made when translating the *Manuel des Pechiez* was to double the length of the section on the sacraments, with the majority of the additions occurring in the section on the Eucharist.<sup>20</sup> Mannyng's text has discrete sections—the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, sacrilege, the Seven Sacraments, and confession—but Mannyng's discussion of the Mass's power permeates the other sections of the poem as well. In one exemplum, included under the section on sacrilege, a deacon sees the Holy Spirit descend onto the altar in the form of a dove during the consecration (8820). In the section on covetousness, an exemplum condemns executors whose chief fault is neglecting to have Masses said for the dead man's soul (1179-80). Many exempla encourage the laity to purchase and participate in Masses for their loved ones because the Eucharist has the power to free slaves, rescue buried miners, send souls to heaven, and release prisoners. Mannyng examines how the transformation of the host into the body

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the effect of the Fourth Lateran Council on vernacular religious literature, see: Leonard E. Boyle, O.P., "The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology" in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 30-43.

<sup>20</sup> Mannyng increases the length of this section from roughly 869 lines to 1809 lines. He increases the length of the sub-section on the Eucharist from roughly 415 lines to 919 lines. These observations are based on my own examination of the two manuscripts of the *Manuel* which are generally thought to most closely resemble the text from which Mannyng translated: British Library MS Harley 273 and British Library MS Harley 4657. E.J. Arnould also notes Mannyng's expansion of the section on the sacraments. See: *Le Manuel des Péchés: Étude de Littérature Religieuse Anglo-Normande* (Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1940), 298.

and blood of Christ particularly benefits the laity through its assurance of the immediate presence of the divine.

For Mannyng, the Eucharist and the laity have a paradoxical relationship; the Eucharist promises direct contact with the body of Christ, but the laity must be cautious to approach it precisely because of the direct contact it provides. In his prologue, Mannyng presents sin as something tangible, something that each believer literally handles “wyþ honde” (83). According to Mannyng, regardless of one’s best intentions, one sins every day. The good Christian must not deny his sinful nature but instead learn to handle his sins properly through penance. For the laity, the Eucharist, in contrast to penance, was a sacrament that was completely untouchable. Since lay people typically only received the host once a year at Easter, the Eucharist was often an entirely visual experience. By the Carolingian period, the church began anointing priests’ hands at ordinations and only the priest’s specially anointed hands ever touched the host.<sup>21</sup> When a lay person did receive the host, he had to receive it directly in his mouth because his hands were not worthy. Mannyng highlights this inaccessibility in his introduction to his section on the Eucharist. Mannyng prays, “For3yue me to day, lord, my synne,/ Pat y Þys wrþy sacrament mowe begynne,/ And wrshypfully þer of to speke/ Pat we neure þe beleue breke” (9903-06). This trepidation does not appear in the introductions to any of the other sections of *Handlyng Synne*. Mannyng suggests that it is dangerous to approach the Eucharist, even if only through speech. Although the Eucharist ostensibly brings Christ’s body into close contact with the faithful by bringing it down to earth in the form

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<sup>21</sup> Nathan Mitchell, *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass* (New York: Pueblo, 1982), 66-128. See also: Ronald Knox, “Finding the Law: Developments in Canon Law during the Gregorian Reform,” *Studi Gregoriani* 9 (1972): 419-466.

of bread, the Eucharist does not ultimately make Christ's presence into something that the laity could ever approach without fear, let alone dare to handle.

In order to explore how Mannyng negotiates the relationship between the laity and Christ's presence in the Eucharist, it is essential to first examine the historical and theological framework from which his thinking about the Eucharist arose: pre-fourteenth-century theological definitions of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Christ's accessibility in the host was a major source of debate in scholastic theology. The Eucharist was a highly volatile subject throughout the Middle Ages, but virtually every theologian who engaged in debates about the Eucharist acknowledged the centrality of the sacrament to Christian worship and Christian life. From the eleventh to the early fourteenth century, the belief that Christ was truly present in the Eucharist was required for orthodoxy; the recognition of Christ's 'Real Presence' in the host was not up for debate.<sup>22</sup> However, what became a focus of debate was what exactly constituted a 'real' presence: What did it mean to say that Christ was present in a piece of bread when it was impossible to taste, touch, smell, or see him?

Theologians regarded the precise definition of Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist as highly important because the very definition of the relationship between humanity and the divine was at stake. If Christ was physically present in the host, then there was the distinct possibility that humans had the power to harm Christ's body by eating it. If Christ was only spiritually present in the host then it was possible that Christ lied when he said "this is my body" during the Last Supper. Theologians struggled to find

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<sup>22</sup>Ultimately, even John Wyclif accepted the idea of 'Real Presence'; however, he argued that it was a real spiritual presence rather than a physical one.

ways to describe Christ's presence that made him accessible without being vulnerable, and omnipotent without being unapproachable.

In the Middle Ages, there were two basic approaches to the theology of the Eucharist based on the writings of two church fathers: what modern scholars often identify as the Augustinian approach and the Ambrosian approach.<sup>23</sup> Augustine and Ambrose themselves did not suggest that their viewpoints were contradictory in any way, and medieval theologians likewise did not argue that the works of Ambrose and Augustine were anything other than complementary. However, those medieval theologians who tended to argue for a more spiritual understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist drew predominately from Augustine and those who argued for a more literal physical understanding drew mostly from the work of Ambrose. In the end, the views that won out and became seen as orthodox by the beginning of the fourteenth century were those views most heavily influenced by Ambrose.

Augustine of Hippo viewed Christ as really present in the Eucharist through the presence of the Christian community. The faith community becomes the mystical body of Christ through its faith and charity; the reality of the sacrament is Christ's mystical body, the faithful. He argues that "the faithful know the body of Christ if they should not neglect to be the body of Christ."<sup>24</sup> In fact, Augustine warned against understanding the

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<sup>23</sup> Ian Christopher Levy, *John Wyclif: Scriptural Logic, Real Presence, and the Parameters of Orthodoxy* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003), 123-126; Gary Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist in the Early Scholastic Period: A Study of the Salvific Function of the Sacrament According to the Theologians c. 1080- c. 1220* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 18-43; James F. McCue, "The Doctrine of Transubstantiation from Berengar through Trent: The Point at Issue," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 385-430.

<sup>24</sup> "Norunt fideles corpus Christi, si corpus Christi esse non negligent." Augustine, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, vol. 36 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1954), 266. Tractate 26.13. Translation is from: Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, trans. John W. Rettig, The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation, vol. 79, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 271.

Eucharist in any way that could be construed as cannibalism. In his explication of Psalm 98, Augustine argues that Christ's meaning in the institution of the Eucharist was fundamentally spiritual: "Understand spiritually what I have said. You are not to eat this body which you see, nor to drink that blood which they who will crucify me will pour forth. I have commended to you a certain sacrament; spiritually understood, it will give life. Although it is necessary that it be visibly celebrated, it must be spiritually understood."<sup>25</sup> Augustine never wrote a tract solely on the Eucharist, but his discussions of the Eucharist in various other works enabled later theologians to argue authoritatively that the Eucharist should be understood primarily in a spiritual and communal sense.

In contrast, Ambrose of Milan saw the Eucharist less as a celebration of the faith of the Christian community and more as an object mediating the presence of Christ. In *On the Sacraments* and *On the Mysteries*, Ambrose addresses a group of newly initiated Christians and explains the sacrament in strikingly literal terms. For Ambrose, the same body that was born of Mary and crucified is physically present in the consecrated host; his presence is just beyond the realm of human sensation. He argues that Christ is physically present in the host and the only reason believers cannot sense the presence of flesh and blood is that God knows it would horrify them.<sup>26</sup> This argument—that God shields his followers from sensing the true nature of the act of cannibalism in which they engage—became enormously influential in the Middle Ages. Although Augustine saw

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<sup>25</sup> "Spiritualiter intellegite quod locutus sum; non hoc corpus quod uidetis, manducaturi estis, et bibituri illum sanguinem, quem fusuri sunt qui me crucifigent. Sacramentum aliquod uobis commendaui; spiritualiter intellectum uiuificabit uos. Etsi necesse est illud uisibiliter celebrari, oportet tamen inuisibiliter intellegi." Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, LI-C, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, vol. 39, (Turnholt: Brepols, 1956), 1386. Psalm 98.9. Translation is my own.

<sup>26</sup> Ambrose, "De Sacramentis" in *Sancti Ambrosii Opera*, Pars Septima, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. 73 (Vindobonae: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1955), 13-85.



the presence of Christ realised through the actions of the faithful, Ambrose saw Christ's Real Presence as something from which the faithful needed to be shielded.

The first major victory for the Ambrosian understanding of the eucharistic presence came in the eleventh century during the Berengarian controversy. Berengar of Tours was a theologian trained in Chartres who strongly believed in the use of reason in theology. By 1047, he began to publish his eucharistic doctrine, a doctrine that began to be condemned as early as 1049.<sup>27</sup> Berengar argued that, since Christ is not deceptive, bread must be present in the host after the consecration.<sup>28</sup> Making an appeal to metaphor with reference to Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, Berengar argued that the host is a visible sign (*sacramentum*) of Christ's presence (*res sacramenti*) and not the presence itself. The Eucharist establishes a real but spiritual communion between the believer and the body of Christ. Berengar's opponents, most notably Lanfranc of Bec, drew on Ambrose's writings and were unwilling to accept such a radical split between *sacramentum* and *res sacramenti*. In 1059, at the Easter Council of Rome, Berengar's writings were burnt and he was forced to sign a confession that affirmed that "the bread and wine which are placed on the altar are, after consecration, not only a sacrament, but are the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. And they are sensibly, not only in a sacrament, but in truth, handled and broken in the hands of the priest, and crushed by the teeth of the faithful."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Levy, 137-38.

<sup>28</sup> On Berengar's eucharistic doctrine, see: Levy, 137-154; Macy, *Theologies of the Eucharist*, 44-72; Mitchell, 129-198; Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 16-20.

<sup>29</sup> "panem et uinum, que in altari ponuntur, post consecrationem non solum sacramentum, sed etiam uerum corpus et sanguinem Domini nostri Iesu Christi esse, et sensualiter, non solum sacramento, sed in ueritate, manibus sacerdotum tractari, frangi, et fidelium dentibus atteri." Original and translation are taken from: Levy, 139.

Berengar's oath was widely accepted as a statement of orthodoxy, but the literal and cannibalistic nature of it suggested the disturbing possibility that believers have the power to literally tear Christ apart during the Mass. The oath implies that Christ is a vulnerable, weak God, powerless against the actions of his subjects, and undermines the long-accepted argument that Christ is impassible—unchanging and indestructible—in the host. Unwilling to accept this description of Christ's body as completely accessible and vulnerable to every believer, many theologians scrambled to find ways to both affirm the orthodoxy of Berengar's oath and confirm the impassibility of Christ's body in the Eucharist.<sup>30</sup> The result of the controversy was that no orthodox theologian of the Middle Ages would seriously challenge Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist, but theologians struggled with the challenge of understanding how Christ could be really present in the host and still not be subject to the control of the faithful.<sup>31</sup>

At the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the church took a major step toward narrowing the definition of Christ's eucharistic presence and affirmed the necessity of priestly mediation to an experience of that presence. The Council's first canon, *Firmiter*, used the term "transubstantiation" to describe the change which the bread undergoes during the consecration, a change which it argued could only be effected by a duly ordained priest. At the time, 'transubstantiation' had been in use for about seventy years but there was no agreement on the precise meaning of the term; it could encompass a whole range of explanations for the nature of eucharistic transformation.<sup>32</sup> Indeed Pope

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<sup>30</sup> Gary Macy, "The Theological Fate of Berengar's Oath of 1059: Interpreting a Blunder Become Tradition," *Treasures from the Storeroom: Medieval Religion and the Eucharist* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1999), 36-58. Originally published in *Interpreting Tradition: The Art of Theological Reflection*, ed. Jane Kopas (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), 27-38.

<sup>31</sup> Macy, *Theologies of the Eucharist*, 69.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Goering, "The Invention of Transubstantiation," *Traditio* 46 (1991): 147-70; Gary Macy, "The 'Dogma of Transubstantiation' in the Middle Ages" in *Treasures from the Storeroom: Medieval Religion*

Innocent III, in his own writings on the Eucharist, never posited the precise nature of eucharistic transformation as a matter of faith.<sup>33</sup> Instead, he had called the Council partly in response to the Cathar and Waldensian heresies, heresies that contested the power structure of the church and the efficacy of the sacraments. As such, the Council never set out to define the precise nature of the eucharistic presence but only to affirm that there was some sort of eucharistic presence in the first place. What was important to the Council was asserting that believers could not experience that presence without the mediation of church authority.

When he wrote the *Summa Theologiae* in the later thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas defined the transformation of the host into the body of Christ in a way that was to become the orthodox understanding of the Eucharist for centuries. He used the term ‘transubstantiation’ in a very specific way to describe the transmutation of the host into Christ, and proclaimed that all other definitions of the eucharistic transformation were heterodox. Aquinas based his definition of transubstantiation on Aristotelian metaphysics. In Aristotelian philosophy, everything is made up of substance and accidents. A ‘substance’ is the essence of a thing, that which makes it what it is. A ‘substance’, like a person’s soul, is distinct from its sensible qualities; it is not something that can be tasted or touched. In contrast, an ‘accident’ is an attribute which, while very much still part of a thing, remains nonessential to its definition as the particular thing that it is. For example, if we take reason to be a defining characteristic of humanity, then reason is part of a person’s ‘substance.’ The fact that a particular person is tall, while a

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*and the Eucharist* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1999), 81-120. Originally published in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994): 11-41.

<sup>33</sup> Levy, 172-175.

defining characteristic of that particular human being, is not essential to her status as ‘human’; her height is therefore an ‘accident’.

Aquinas recognised that Aristotle saw substance and accidents as dependent and inseparable, but Aquinas argued that divine power was able to separate the two through the miracle of transubstantiation. According to Aquinas, the process of eucharistic conversion is properly called ‘transubstantiation’ and he used the documents of the Fourth Lateran Council as evidence for the support of his particular definition.<sup>34</sup> During this process, the accidents of the bread and wine stay the same, but their substance is transformed into the body and blood of Christ and none of the substance of the bread and wine remains. He argues that “there is no other way in which the body of Christ can begin to be in this sacrament except through the substance of the bread being changed into it.”<sup>35</sup> Only transubstantiation can account for Christ’s presence, and therefore the process of substantial conversion is essential to a belief in Christ’s Real Presence. At the time that Aquinas proposed this model of conversion, there were two rival models: annihilation and consubstantiation. The annihilation model suggested that the substance of the bread was destroyed and then replaced by the substance of Christ. Consubstantiation was the belief that the substance of Christ coexisted with the substance of the bread. Prior to the work of Aquinas, all three models could be classified as ‘transubstantiation.’ Aquinas considered consubstantiation and annihilation both heretical and impossible. After Aquinas, the parameters of orthodox eucharistic belief began to get much narrower and more rigid.

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<sup>34</sup> Levy, 182-90.

<sup>35</sup> “relinquitur quod non possit aliter corpus Christi incipere esse de novo in hoc sacramento nisi per conversionem substantiae panis in ipsum.” Latin text and English translation are taken from: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars edition (New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1964), v. 58, 62-63 (3a.75, 2). All citations of the *ST* are from volumes 58 and 59.

Aquinas' understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist is distinctly Ambrosian in the sense that it focuses on the Eucharist as an object that is consecrated rather than a communal event to be celebrated. However, Aquinas does not conceive of the Eucharist in a graphic, physical sense. Instead, his use of Aristotle's definition of 'substance' allows him to conceive of Christ's presence as both a physical reality and something that is completely beyond the senses. Drawing on both Augustine and a reinterpretation of Berengar's oath, Aquinas argues that the faithful do not physically chew Christ's body; they chew only the accidents underneath which Christ is really present.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Christ remains impassible. Aquinas argues that, when believers claim to see a child or a piece of bloody flesh in place of the host, such visions are not reality but merely representations of the truth. He claims that one can only see Christ's natural form in heaven and, therefore, God forms such visions in the eye of the beholder and they do not take place in the sacrament itself.<sup>37</sup> God does not intend for humans to have an unmediated view of the body of Christ; such a connection with God can only take place in the afterlife. Aquinas contends that sacraments correspond to faith and faith, by nature, has to do with unseen realities.<sup>38</sup> Christ is really, physically, substantially present in the Eucharist but one can only sense that presence through the intellect and through faith.

After Aquinas, theologians began to argue that the only correct way to understand the eucharistic presence was through the mediation of church authority. At the turn of the fourteenth century, the Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus presented a view on the Eucharist that challenged the role of human reason in theology by suggesting that,

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<sup>36</sup> *ST* 3a.77, 7.

<sup>37</sup> *ST* 3a.76, 8.

<sup>38</sup> *ST* 3a.75, 1.

although transubstantiation was illogical, it must be the true explanation of the eucharistic transformation because the church had decreed it to be so. Scotus contradicted Aquinas and argued that transubstantiation was not the only possible explanation for the eucharistic presence. In fact, transubstantiation was not even particularly logical. According to Scotus, consubstantiation was the simplest and most scripturally sound explanation. Failing that, even annihilation was less complicated and therefore more logical. But Scotus ultimately decided that transubstantiation was the only orthodox belief with regard to the eucharistic presence because he interpreted the *Firmiter* canon of the Fourth Lateran Council as endorsing Aquinas' definition of transubstantiation as the only possible explanation of the Real Presence.<sup>39</sup> To explain why the church would accept transubstantiation as dogma when the words of scripture could be satisfied in a simpler and apparently truer way, Scotus argues: "I reply that Scripture is expounded by the same Spirit by which it was created; and so we must suppose that the Catholic Church has expounded these matters by the same Spirit by which the faith is handed on to us, taught, that is, by the Spirit of truth, and has chosen *this* understanding of things because this is the true understanding."<sup>40</sup> For Scotus, the doctrine of transubstantiation became more a question of the authority of the post-apostolic church than of an understanding of the Eucharist. Essentially, he conceded that the dogma had no purpose and no support other than the authority of the church. Aquinas' theology emphasised that all human knowledge begins with sense perception, but Scotus found that he could only agree with Aquinas' explanation of the eucharistic presence by suspending his own knowledge in

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<sup>39</sup> David Burr, *Eucharistic Presence and Conversion in Late Thirteenth-Century Franciscan Thought* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1984), 76-98; Levy, 191-198; McCue, 403-07.

<sup>40</sup> "dico, quod eo spiritu expositae sunt Scripturae, quo conditae. Et ita supponendum est, quo Ecclesia Catholica eo Spiritu exposuit, quo tradita est nobis fides, Spiritu scilicet veritatis docta, et idea hunc intellectum eligit, quia verus est." Latin text and translation are from: McCue, 406-407.

favour of church authority. After Scotus, it became common for theologians to appeal to Lateran IV as the ultimate authority on the mode of eucharistic change.<sup>41</sup>

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the mode of Christ's presence in the Eucharist became a touchstone for orthodoxy not because alternate beliefs indicated a misunderstanding of the nature of God but because they indicated an unwillingness to submit to the will of the church. Even for the scholastics, mediation became an intrinsic part of the experience of the Eucharist because nothing an individual possessed—from physical sense to the intellect—could help one understand Christ's presence. For Scotus and those that followed him, an understanding of the Eucharist necessitated a recognition that the Eucharist was actually beyond any individual's understanding; the only true understanding came from the authority of the church.

### **Transubstantiation and the Laity**

As the theologians' definitions of the Eucharist became more Ambrosian, the structure of the Mass itself shifted away from Augustine's understanding of the Eucharist as a celebration of the entire Christian community. Over the course of the Middle Ages, the laity became estranged from the action of the Mass. During the liturgy, they prayed silently and had no spoken responses to make. Greater attention to the Real Presence ultimately led to the withdrawal of the cup from the laity, largely out of fears of spillage. In addition, lay reception of the host typically occurred only once a year at Easter, because, from a clerical perspective, limiting the number of times that lay people received the Eucharist both shielded the laity from further sin and protected the host from any contamination. The canon of the Mass was often inaudible to the laity and in a language they did not understand. It was not even a particularly clear visual experience

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<sup>41</sup> Macy, "Transubstantiation;" McCue, 411-12.

since screens obscured the altar. For the laity, the Mass was typically an experience of various barriers between Christ's body and oneself, not the least of which was a doctrine of transubstantiation which told believers that their physical senses were not to be believed.

The barriers that clerics erected between the laity and the consecrated host seem to have heightened the lay desire to see Christ in the host and increased the importance of Christ's physical presence to lay devotion. Alongside the theologians' development of complex theology of the Real Presence, the laity developed an increasingly fervent cult of the Eucharist that reached its height in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the first decade of the thirteenth century, in order to prevent the laity from engaging in idolatry by adoring an unconsecrated host, church officials decreed that the host ought to be hidden until just after the consecration, when it should be elevated to be seen and worshipped by the congregation.<sup>42</sup> Since they received the host so infrequently, the elevation quickly became the height of the Mass for many lay people. By the thirteenth century, we find stories of people attending Mass only to see the moment of elevation.<sup>43</sup> Seeing the host was understood as a form of reception, a form that did not involve the risk of mortal sin. Narratives which insisted on the literal presence came to substitute for hands-on participation in the liturgy. In sermon collections and legends, miracle tales abounded that assured believers that Christ's body was literally physically present in the consecrated host and that they were therefore in direct contact with Christ when they saw

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<sup>42</sup> V.L. Kennedy, "The Moment of Consecration and the Elevation of the Host," *Medieval Studies* 6 (1944): 121-50.

<sup>43</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 55.



it.<sup>44</sup> The cult of the Eucharist emphasised the Mass as a direct physical encounter with Christ.

In his description of the host, Mannyng is careful to endorse both Aquinas's definition of transubstantiation and this lay emphasis on Christ's physical presence. In his introduction to the section on the Eucharist, Mannyng explains the eucharistic transformation in the newly orthodox terms of transubstantiation: to consecrate is to "chaunge þe lyknes/Yn to a nouþer þyng þat es:/ þe lyknes of brede & wyne,/ Yn flesshe & blod to turne hyt ynne" (9977-80). Demonstrating his understanding of the distinction between substantial and accidental change, Mannyng carefully points out that "Hyt semeþ brede as by syght,/ And as brede sauer haþ ryght./ Noþer þy syghte no þy felyng/Hast þou on no certeyn þyng" (9995-98). Mannyng stays within the bounds of scholastic orthodoxy by affirming the imperceptibility of Christ's presence in the host.

However, Mannyng also emphasizes that reception of the Eucharist is a tangible experience when he describes the physical properties of the host itself (10089-10164).<sup>45</sup> He suggests that, since a person who receives the host ought to be free from sin, believers ought to imitate the physical properties of the host rather than directly imitating Christ's sacrifice. Readers ought to become like the altar bread; he names seven properties of the host that signify the ways in which Christians should stand against the Seven Deadly Sins. For example, Christians ought not to be prideful because "þou wost weyl þat þe vbble/ Ys but a lytyl þyng to se./ So shul we be lytyl yn wyl,/ Lytyl & meke wyþ outen

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<sup>44</sup> For a comprehensive study of the various types of eucharistic miracles and the texts in which they appear, see: Peter Browe, *Die Eucharistischen Wunder des Mittelalters* (Breslau: Verlag Müller & Seiffert, 1938).

<sup>45</sup> An analogous passage also occurs in the *Manuel*, with slightly different descriptions and ordering. Although the content of Mannyng's explication of the properties of the host is not markedly different from that which appears in the *Manuel*, the historical context—particularly the new emphasis on the orthodoxy of transubstantiation—significantly alters the implications of the passage.

yl” (10091-94). Likewise, since the host is white, Christians should not fall into the blackness of lechery (10143-46). Mannyng’s explanation urges Christians to imitate the physical properties of the bread itself, rather than the person whom the bread signifies. At first glance, this explanation of the significance of the properties of the host might seem to confuse substance and accidents by aligning the physical accidents of the bread with Christian virtues.

On the contrary, Mannyng expands transubstantiation to include not only the transformation of bread but also the transformation of believers themselves into the body of Christ. Mannyng explains that Christ is not present in hosts made of sour dough because sourness signifies envy and “Parfore makþ he noun herbergerye/ Þere he fyndes byfore enuye” (10113-14). Christ will not dwell in bread that represents envy through its sourness, just as he will not be present in an envious person. Recipients of the host must commit to being like the host so that they too might experience substantial conversion. Through reception of the Eucharist, Christ transforms the believer’s substance into his own while leaving the believer’s accidents intact. Mannyng’s exposition of the host’s physical nature broadens his focus from the Real Presence in the host to include the mystical body of Christ, the whole community of believers.

By focusing on the physical attributes of the host—while recognizing that they are not indications of Christ’s presence—Mannyng endorses host devotion as a vital albeit indirect method of worshipping Christ. Mannyng’s description of the Eucharist as a method of devotion to Christ is unusual precisely because he foregrounds host devotion as a mediated experience. He does not claim that seeing the host is identical to seeing Christ face to face. However, Mannyng still regards the Eucharist as essential to

salvation. The mediation that the bread's accidents and the rituals of the church provide helps to increase the believer's faith and commitment to a life of Christian charity. Even though the ostensible purpose of the Eucharist is the conversion of the soul and communion with Christ, Mannyng insists that that purpose must be achieved through mediation. The intangibility of Christ's presence in the bread is not a detriment to the faith but is actually an essential part of it.

### **Sacrifice and the Cult of the Eucharist**

Vernacular descriptions of the Eucharist typically favoured direct modes of devotion, preferring to promise believers a direct visual encounter with Christ through the rhetoric of sacrifice. As is well-known, the later Middle Ages witnessed a new focus on Christ's Passion. The Franciscans in particular encouraged lay affective devotion through writings and teachings that suggested that people could bypass complex theology and Latin learning through personal identification with the wounded, suffering Christ. For the Franciscans, the pain and suffering of Christ was a devotional tool perfectly suited to the laity's desire to understand and personally engage in the Christian faith. Late medieval Passion devotion and eucharistic devotion were virtually indistinguishable because both focused so intently on imagining Christ's suffering body.<sup>46</sup> For example, the thirteenth-century *Lay Folks Mass Book* tells its readers to imagine Christ's crucifixion during the consecration and instructs them to behold the moment of elevation "for þat is he þat iudas salde,/ and sithen was scourged & don on rode,/ and for mankynde þere shad his blode."<sup>47</sup> Likewise, in an early fourteenth-century poem, William of Shoreham urges his

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<sup>46</sup> R.N. Swanson, "Passion and Practice: the Social and Ecclesiastical Implications of Passion Devotion in the Late Middle Ages" in *The Broken Body: Passion Devotion in Late-Medieval Culture*, ed. A.A. MacDonald et al. (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998), 1-30.

<sup>47</sup> *Lay Folks Mass Book*, B.407-409.

readers to believe that, in the host, “Þat hys swete ihesu cryst/ Ine flesche and eke ine bloude,/ Þat Þolede pyne and passyoun,/ And diaÞ opone Þe roude.”<sup>48</sup> Such texts invite worshippers to imagine the sight of the Eucharist as a personal vision of Calvary. In this way, the celebration of the Eucharist was an individual psychological event because worshippers strove to identify with Christ on an intense emotional level.

During the thirteenth century, lay fervour for the Eucharist increased and, with it, the emphasis on the Eucharist as sacrificial. It was relatively common for texts intended for the laity to imagine the Eucharist as a literal blood sacrifice, featuring visual images that became increasingly graphic over the course of the Middle Ages.<sup>49</sup> Devotional literature often invited its readers to imagine the host as a particularly gory, bleeding Christ in order that they might more fully understand the Eucharist. Across Europe, miracle tales and sermon exempla abounded in which hosts bled or turned into fingers and such tales frequently encouraged worshippers to pity Christ by portraying him as a suffering, helpless infant, rather than a willing adult victim.<sup>50</sup>

The interest in sacrifice is much more pronounced and literal-minded in writings for the laity than it is in the works of medieval theologians. Theologians tended to view Christ’s sacrifice on the cross as unique and the Eucharist as a sacrifice in a commemorative and representative sense. Along with Aquinas, most theologians claimed that the “Eucharist is at once a sacrifice and a sacrament.”<sup>51</sup> However, they rarely

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<sup>48</sup> William of Shoreham, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Rubin, 302-310.

<sup>50</sup> Examples of such widely-circulated tales and exempla can be found in such texts as Arnulf of Liège’s fourteenth-century *Alphabetum Narrationum* and Caesarius of Heisterbach’s thirteenth-century *Dialogus Miraculorum*. Miri Rubin provides a comprehensive examination of collections of eucharistic miracle tales and exempla. See: Rubin, 108-129.

<sup>51</sup> “hoc sacramentum simul est sacrificium et sacramentum.” *ST* 3a.79, 5.

elaborated on its sacrificial nature.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, many sermon exempla implied that the Eucharist was an actual repetition of Christ's sacrifice. For example, in a late-fourteenth/early-fifteenth-century sermon on the Eucharist, John Mirk relates two bloody exempla: one in which the host begins to bleed profusely and one in which it turns into a chunk of flesh.<sup>53</sup> Although he never says that Christ is mutilated on the altar, his narratives persuade his audience by suggesting exactly that. Such tales imply that priests re-perform Christ's slaughter at every Mass and sacrifice Christ in much the same way that Old Testament priests sacrificed animals. Most medieval theologians did not accept that bloody visions at the consecration were visions of reality,<sup>54</sup> but it was tales of such bloody visions that fuelled much of the popular desire for the Eucharist.

Although there was no official doctrine that explicitly claimed that the Mass was a literal blood sacrifice, the church encouraged the laity to hold such a view by urging them to buy Masses. It depicted the offering of Masses as a good work which worked like a repeatable blood sacrifice in the sense that its repetition automatically exerted an influence on God. The practice of paying priests to offer Masses as sacrifices in satisfaction for sins was one of the most significant ways in which the laity could participate in the Mass. Indeed, the lay desire to offer the Mass as a sacrifice is fundamental to the way in which we understand religious practices of the Middle Ages. As John Bossy argues, "The devotion, theology, liturgy, architecture, finances, social

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<sup>52</sup>Francis Clark, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1960), 225; P.J. Fitzpatrick, "On Eucharistic Sacrifice in the Middle Ages" in *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology*, ed. S.W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 129-156; Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, trans. Francis A. Brunner, vol. 1 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1951), 181-82.

<sup>53</sup> John Mirk, "De Solemnitate Corporis Cristi," in *Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies*, ed. Theodor Erbe, EETS e.s. 96 (London: Kegan Paul, 1905), 168-175.

<sup>54</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, "Seeing and Seeing Beyond: The Mass of St. Gregory in the Fifteenth Century," *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton: Department of Art and Archaeology, 2006), 208-240.

structure and institutions of late medieval Christianity are inconceivable without the assumption that the friends and relations of the souls in purgatory had an absolute obligation to procure their release, above all by having masses said for them.”<sup>55</sup> The Mass as sacrifice was integral to lay medieval piety and lay understandings of that sacrifice typically hinged upon a visual, affective identification with the mutilated body of Christ.

*Handlyng Synne* embraces the popular conception of the Mass as sacrificial.

Mannyng explains that, during the Mass, “Þe sone ys offred to fader in heuene/ For þo soules þat þe prest wyl neuene” (10505-6). To emphasize its sacrificial nature, he begins his section on the Eucharist with a description of the Last Supper. Assuming his readers know the story, Mannyng glosses over the narrative to highlight what he considers essential: the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper is indistinguishable from the pain Christ suffers on the cross. Instead of explaining that Christ gave his body to his disciples in the form of bread, Mannyng marks the event as cannibalistic by describing how “He 3af hys body hem to fede” (9915). When Mannyng uses the phrase “ful vyle deþ & pynyng wo,” he describes both Christ’s experience on the cross and how Christ feels when he gives his disciples his flesh to eat (9920). It is the Eucharist’s status as a bloody and painful sacrifice that assures its continual efficacy. Mannyng explains that every single Mass aids the salvation of souls in purgatory “for no þyng may hem so moche auayle/ Of here peyne and here trauayle/ As þe sacrament of þe autere/ Ne makþ hem of peyne so clere” (10321-10324). The second half of the section on the Eucharist focuses on the Mass’s sacrificial efficacy, supported by four successive exempla all illustrating the same teaching: saying Masses for a person, whether living or dead, has a tangible effect on that person’s well-being and salvation. As in many vernacular

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<sup>55</sup> John Bossy, “The Mass as a Social Institution, 1200-1700,” *Past and Present* 100 (1983): 29-61.

discussions of the Eucharist, *Handlyng Synne* unites the Eucharist with the Passion in order to show the sacrament's inherently sacrificial nature.

### **Mannyng's Eucharistic Exempla**

According to Mannyng, the sacrifice of the Mass has many benefits but it does not provide the individual believer with direct contact with the divine. In his four exempla that portray encounters with the suffering body of Christ—two that depict him as an adult and two that depict him as a mutilated infant—Mannyng contests the possibility of personal union with the sacrificial body of Christ. Only one of these exempla directly supports a doctrine on the Eucharist but all four are eucharistic. All four narratives and their surrounding commentary develop arguments about identification with Christ, the desire to incorporate Christ's identity into one's own; all four directly deal with the individual believer's relationship to Christ's body, a relationship most frequently associated with the Eucharist. Only one of these four exempla is original to Mannyng.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless he makes all of them distinctly his own through a particular focus on the process of identification, accomplished mainly by marked increases in both the amount of direct discourse and narrative detail. At the same time even here he draws on the exemplum's intrinsic generic resources. As recent scholarship has recognized, exempla are rarely if ever passive vehicles of church doctrine. On the contrary, as the scholarship of Elizabeth Allen, Mark Miller, Susan Phillips, Catherine Sanok, and Larry Scanlon shows, exemplary narratives often exceed the general rule they purport to exemplify and highlight the psychologically contingent nature of moral choices. That makes individual

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<sup>56</sup> The "Bloody Child" exemplum does not appear in the *Manuel*, but does have a few analogues. See: Frederic C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1969), 386, no. 5103 (misnumbered as no. 5013).

subjectivity central to the exemplum's narrative function.<sup>57</sup> In these four exempla, Mannyng turns this generic function against itself. He presents encounters with the presence of Christ as fundamentally alienating because the individual believer can never fully identify with Christ.

Mannyng's theological point is straightforward: sin keeps believers from recognising themselves in the image of God. The exemplum is an ideal form for discussing the limits of identification because, rather than simply illustrate moral principles, exemplary narratives persuade by demanding audience identification. As Larry Scanlon argues, "the exemplum expects the members of its audience to be convinced by its *sententia* precisely because it expects them to put themselves in the position of its protagonist's moral success, or avoid his or her moral failure."<sup>58</sup> In Mannyng's four exempla, there are two levels of identification at work. Firstly, the narrative invites readers to recognise themselves in the main characters' sinful behaviour and to empathise with their difficulties. Perhaps more importantly, however, these exempla depict Christians who attempt to make that same identificatory connection with Christ. They want to label Christ as a part of themselves, just as they would incorporate him into their bodies through eating the consecrated host. In these four exempla, such attempts at identification are never complete in and of themselves. Encounters with Christ remind the sinner and the reader of their own sins and their own need for reform

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<sup>57</sup>Although their approaches and arguments often differ considerably, all of these scholars emphasize the role of the audience and individual psychology in making meaning. See: Elizabeth Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truth in Later Middle English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Miller; Susan E. Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 13-63; Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>58</sup>Scanlon, 35.



rather than leading them to an ecstatic union with Christ. These four exempla challenge existing models of lay piety by contesting the idea that direct visual encounters with the crucified Christ can provide affective union with him.

In the exemplum of the forgiving knight, Mannyng argues that direct, visual encounters with Christ are central to an understanding of popular devotion. In this narrative, included in the section on wrath, two knights are at war because the older one has killed the younger one's father. On Good Friday, after having been trapped in his castle for a year, the older knight decides to go to church to ask for God's mercy. When the younger knight sees the older knight leave his castle, he intends to kill the older knight, but the older knight begs for mercy in the name of him that "suffrede deÞ on Þe rode tre/ Þys day to saue boÞe me and þe/ and for3af hem þat hys blode spylte" (3845-47). Their shared recognition of Christ's Passion provides them both with reason enough to demonstrate Christian forgiveness. The younger knight kisses the older knight and they go to church together. When the younger knight kneels down to kiss the crucifix, the image of the crucified Christ leans down and kisses the knight instead. The miracle leads to widespread changes in both lay and clerical behaviour: "eury man Þer of gan telle,/ Prestes yn prechyng Þer of gun spelle,/ So þat eury man yn þe cuntre/ Leuede weyl þe more yn charyte" (3897-3900). The visual encounter with Christ is what spurs the bystanders into greater belief and more Christian lives.

For Mannyng, unlike the wondering churchgoers, the miraculous element of the story is secondary to the personal transformation that the younger knight undergoes as a result of reading Christ's actions figurally. Mannyng introduces the narrative by describing the relationship between Christ and the individual believer as one of

fundamental similarity; the most significant difference between the two is sin. He explains that “God louyþ eury creature/ þat he furmede to hys fygure./ But þe synne þat ys wrought,/ þat louede he neure noght” (3779-82). In the context of the exemplum, his use of the word ‘fygure’ is provocative. In addition to conveying that man is formed in the physical likeness of God, the term ‘fygure’ suggests that God endows each creature with figural significance, and that sin thwarts a person’s ability to signify God. This claim thus offers an important variation on the mode of exegesis made famous by Erich Auerbach, wherein a believer hears about a particular event in Christ’s life and then considers how to act in a given situation based on Christ’s actions.<sup>59</sup> Reading Christ as a figure for one’s own life was simultaneously a fulfilment of Christ’s teaching in the present day and referred back to the historical life of Christ. As Mannyng suggests, when one sins, one’s actions no longer have this same sort of figural significance because sin has severed the love relationship between God and the self. Once the older knight invokes Christ’s crucifixion, the younger knight reflects on Christ’s forgiving actions and decides to directly imitate that loving forgiveness by kissing the older knight. The younger knight encounters Christ in the crucifix because he read his own actions figurally.

The exemplum’s central moral action is the younger knight’s decision to imitate and identify with Christ rather than his earthly father. In the beginning of the tale, the knights’ wrath makes them indistinguishable. In other exempla, Mannyng sometimes names his characters but he deliberately confuses these knights’ identities by leaving them unnamed. His frequent use of the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘hys’ forces his readers to work

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<sup>59</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11- 76.

hard at distinguishing one knight's actions from the other. When the younger knight kisses the older one, he shifts his identification and imitation to Christ and away from a human knightly community based on wrath. From this point on, the exemplum ceases to confuse the two knights but instead blurs the distinction between the younger knight and Christ. The knight explicitly identifies his own action of mercy as an imitation of Christ's love and points the attention of everyone in the tale toward Christ's image in the crucifix. However, when the crucifix kisses the knight, it imitates the knight's own action even as it signifies Christ on the cross. After the crucifix kisses the knight, Mannyng remarks "Y trowe yn hys herte were moche blys" (3892), but he never makes it clear whether Christ or the knight is the antecedent of "hys." Over the course of the exemplum, Christ and the knight become figures who signify each other. The forgiving knight makes a radical shift from pursuing vengeance in the name of his earthly father to imitating Christ's forgiveness. In doing so, he recovers the 'fygure' of Christ within himself.

In this exemplum, the ordinary churchgoers miss this complex model of identity transformation because they overemphasise the importance of the miraculous encounter with the image of Christ. For them, the miraculous takes precedence over the knight's conversion of heart and the knowledge of Christ's sacrifice. Although they had all been reflecting on Christ's Passion and all witnessed two warring parties achieve peace on account of Christ's sacrifice, these things do not affect their actions. Witnessing the suffering body of Christ in action, however, affects the way they talk and changes the way they interact with their broader social world. The faith community is only able to fully understand the significance of the crucifixion when they see the crucifix in motion and then "Pey saye hyt alle & weyl hyt wyste" (3886). The image of the bleeding Christ

had to be very immediate in order to be effective at inspiring their charity and forgiveness.

Mannyng certainly hails the churchgoers' immediate visual contact with Christ's body as a powerful sign, but he also asks his readers to question the necessity of such encounters. The animation of the crucifix is a confirmation of Christ's infinite mercy and power, and Mannyng encourages the reader to consider this animated crucifix as an instance of a real, physical encounter with the body of Christ by referring to it as the "creatour" (3874). In contrast to the churchgoers, Mannyng's readers do not encounter an affective image. The idea of Christ's suffering is present throughout this exemplum and the characters witness Christ on the cross, but Christ's pain goes unmentioned. The churchgoers in the narrative are reflecting on Christ's Passion, but the narrative itself focuses on their process of reflection, rather than encouraging readers to make their experience of reading parallel the churchgoers' act of worship. Although the members of the parish only believe that they must live more mercifully once they have seen the physical presence of Christ on the cross, Mannyng encourages his readers to see proof of Christ's sacrifice in the merciful works of others. One of this exemplum's most pointed critiques is of the predominantly lay modes of worship that value miraculous visions over learned Christian truths and the good works of other Christians.

Mannyng launches a similar critique in his story of Fr. Carpus. In this exemplum on the sin of sloth, he argues that visual encounters with Christ can be profoundly alienating. This narrative examines to what extent a devotional focus on the image of Christ's wounded body can bridge the distance between Christ and the believer. At the start of the tale, a priest named Carpus converts a Saracen to Christianity, but this

Saracen soon turns away from his newfound faith. Carpus dreams he sees the Saracen crossing an unstable bridge over hell and prays that the Saracen will fall into the pit with the devils. Carpus looks up to heaven in prayer and sees Christ on the cross with “hys woundes al bloody” (5287). Christ speaks directly to him:

“Carpus,” he seyde, “se wyþ þyn yne  
 What y suffrede for mannes pyne.  
 Man to saue y lete me slo  
 Why wst þou dampne hym to wo?  
 Why hast þou hym so moche wyþ yll  
 And for mankynde y lete me spyll?  
 Wyþ pyne and hard passyoun,  
 My blode y 3af for hys raunsoun. (5289-5296)

Christ offers his own bleeding body as proof of the Saracen’s worth. Since Christ was willing to suffer such torture for every individual’s chance at salvation, the Saracen’s soul is of great importance to God. According to Christ, in condemning the Saracen’s soul, Carpus is also devaluing Christ’s body.

Christ makes this argument primarily through the immediacy of vision, telling Carpus to look “wyþ þyn yne” on his suffering body. Carpus’ faith can no longer be a purely intellectual or theological reflection; his eyes must encounter the real physical presence of Christ’s pain. Through vision, Christ blurs the distinction between the individual and the community by suggesting that damning this one Saracen would be equivalent to damning all humankind and therefore render Christ’s sacrifice worthless. Christ’s wounds and blood are therefore a reflection of every person’s worth. In the

image of Christ's Passion, the identity of the human and divine intermingle. The wounds belong to Christ's body and to all of humanity. To have a vision of Christ's body is also to envision one's own salvation.

However, sin keeps the identities of Christ and believer from folding into each other. The exemplum makes this point by shifting the reader's identification at key moments. It first asks readers to identify with Carpus, then with Christ, and finally with both Carpus and the Saracen on the basis of their shared sin. This narrative is the final one in the section on sloth, a section which primarily condemns believers who neglect to live out their faith because of apathy and laziness. When the tale begins, readers are ready to identify with Carpus. After all, Carpus has done his Christian duty very diligently and has put a great deal of effort into educating and converting this Saracen; when the Saracen falls back into his former faith, it is easy to label his sin as sloth and condemn him, just as Carpus does. However, the tale does not make this easy judgement. It moves quickly to a detailed description of the Saracen's perilous journey over the bridge, a journey that evokes sympathy for the Saracen's position and makes Carpus' prayer seem particularly cruel. When Christ appears, he demands that readers identify with him, and recognise him as the true victim. After Carpus thanks God for this revelation, Mannyng exhorts his readers to resist sloth "For þat he loueþ vs alle so dere," creating a distinction between 'he' and 'us' based on humanity's sinful disinclination to love one's enemy. Mannyng places all his readers in the position of Carpus and the Saracen, both of whom need divine forgiveness because both gave up on believing in and actively imitating Christ.

Although affective reflections on the suffering of Christ open up the possibility to emotionally identify with him, this exemplum suggests that such reflections also reveal the sharp divide between Christ and the self, forcing the believer to recognise the ways in which he cannot fully identify with Christ. The ultimate result of Carpus' vision is that he realises he is not as Christ-like as he had once thought. Christ speaks to Carpus in highly accusatory language, asking three questions beginning with 'why.' The questions demand no response, suggesting there is no justification possible for Carpus' actions. Christ repeatedly uses the words 'y' and 'Pou' in order to create a sharp contrast between their two positions. Christ's wounds prove that he is superior to Carpus because Christ allows himself to be open to betrayal and pain while Carpus does not. When Christ describes his crucifixion, he describes it as an act of will rather than suggesting that he was passively acted upon. He exclaims that "Man to saue y lete me slo" and "for mankynde y lete me spyll" (5291; 5295). Christ allows himself to be continually open to bear the sins of others in a way that Carpus simply does not tolerate. However Christ-like Carpus had thought himself to be before his vision, Christ's ever-bleeding body forces him to recognise the vast gulf his sin has created between Christ and himself.

The exemplum's concentration on Carpus' experience as a primarily visual one encourages readers to gain a critical distance on the affective encounter with Christ's sacrificial body. Christ tells Carpus that "But y haue shewed hym so moche yn ded/ Wyþ my woundes þat Pou seest blede,/ þat y þarfore ne wlde noght/ Lese þat y so dere haue boght" (5301-4). Christ expresses his investment in humanity in particularly visual terms; his own crucifixion is a 'shewing.' Although Carpus has presumably spent much time contemplating the meaning of Christ's suffering during his duties as a priest, Christ

suggests that Carpus can only truly understand the Passion and its meaning by viewing Christ's actively bleeding wounds. Mannyng uses the visual as a way to show the self-evident nature of Christian truth and the accessibility of Christ, but his readers do not access the same immediacy of this visual register. Instead, the narrative form mediates the image of Christ's bleeding wounds for the reader. This mediation invites the reader to think critically about the purpose of the vision, rather than regard the vision as an end in itself. Ultimately, Carpus experiences a call to inner conversion not through an intense emotional connection with Christ but through reflecting on the impossibility of a total connection. Focusing on the visual register, a register that readers can only hear described and not experience, encourages readers to recognise their own distance from the bleeding body of Christ so that they too can see their own need to reform.

Both the exemplum of Fr. Carpus and the exemplum of the forgiving knight encourage reflection on the necessity of the immediacy of Christ's body to devotion. Both affirm the value of a visual encounter with Christ's body but ask readers to place that encounter within a broader context. Seeing Christ's crucified body is not an end in itself. The forgiving knight must imitate the model of Christ's suffering and Carpus must recognise his own sin. These two exempla ask their audience to think critically about the ways in which the sacrificial body of Christ demands that believers enlarge their devotional focus.

Mannyng becomes most critical of the devotional focus on the sacrificial body when his discussion of it is most eucharistic. In his discussion of the second commandment—"swere nat goddes name in ydylnes" (607)—Mannyng tells a tale that evokes horror at sacrificial imagery. The exemplum of the bloody child focuses on a rich



man who swears excessive oaths. One night, after falling ill, the rich man hears a woman moaning and:

Pat yche womman com hym before  
 Wyþ a chyld yn here armys bore.  
 Of þe chyld þat she bare yn here armys  
 Al to drawe were þe þarmys.  
 Of handys, of fete, þe flesh of drawyn,  
 Mouþ, e3ynn, & nose were al tognawyn,  
 Bak and sydys were al bloody. (699-705)

Although it becomes clear later in the tale that the child is Christ and the woman is Mary, Mannyng never names the child. Mannyng intends for his audience to initially imagine this child as just that: a child. Many medieval Christians were accustomed to eucharistic images of the mutilated Christ child on the altar, but this tale deliberately unsettles its readers by asking them to imagine a nameless, innocent infant whose body has been torn apart in almost every way imaginable. Mannyng keeps the idea of pain in the forefront of readers' minds by using the word "sore" repeatedly throughout the tale and his introduction to it. Christ's wounds are not a demonstration of his mercy and generosity as they are in the story of Fr. Carpus. Mary angrily explains to the rich man that "Al hys flessch þan þou teryst/ Whan þou falsly by hym sweryst" (725-26). In this narrative, the appearance of a familiar eucharistic image—the mutilated Christ child—is not evidence of Christ's loving and benevolent sacrifice but is instead only proof of sin.

The tale's insistence on the visual brings the reader's attention to the nature of sin and not union with Christ. Mary presents proof of the rich man's sins in particularly

visual terms when she says “Hys manhede þat he toke for þe,/ þou pynyst hyt, as þou mayst se” (716-17). Since Christ is an infant and mutilated beyond all recognition, he cannot and does not speak for himself; the only way to understand his pain is through vision. Mary asks the rich man to undertake an impossible task: to understand the immediate physical pain of a body quite distinct from his own through entirely visual means. Neither the rich man nor the reader can fully identify with the bloody child; they must instead primarily understand Christ’s pain and sacrifice through watching Mary watch Christ. When the rich man first sees Mary and the child’s mutilated body, but before Mary speaks and identifies herself, “þys womman soriful and sory,/ þys man for here wax sor agreysyn” (706-7). The narrator twice describes the rich man’s response to Mary’s emotional pain and outrage as “sor,” blurring the distinction between physical and emotional pain (707; 734). Although he cannot understand Christ’s pain through vision alone, he can understand Mary’s because he can identify with her act of viewing.

For the sinner, expressions and experiences of suffering are indirect; one experiences pain through watching another experience it or, in this case, watching one person witness another’s pain. This section on the second commandment raises the breakdown of identity boundaries as a goal of personal reform, suggesting that readers should learn that “euery man vnto oþer,/ þe pore to þe ryche ys broþer” (771-72). For holy people, like Mary and Christ, identity categories need not be rigid. Mary interprets sins against her son as offences against her, and Christ feels the same way about sins against Mary. For example, Mary does not suggest that the rich man will be damned or that Christ will condemn him. Instead, Mary threatens the rich man that, if he does not give up swearing false oaths, she will cease to pray for him. A large part of the rich man’s

anguish in this exemplum is his recognition that his sin created boundaries between himself and Christ. The text constructs distinct divisions between the rich man and Christ so that it is possible for him to see Christ's pain but not to claim any of it as his own.

The horror and Mary's response to it alienate both the reader and the rich man from Christ's physical experience. For an exemplum that centres on Christ's mutilated body, the narrative is surprisingly unconcerned with the eventual fate of the Christ child. In fact, despite all the generous descriptions of the blood and gore, the narrator never describes the child crying or the child's pain; as far as the reader is concerned, the child may as well already be dead but the narrative does not even provide that important detail. Although Mannyng prefaces this tale by saying that those who swear false oaths dismember Christ, he does not suggest that repentance will heal Christ's body. Mary herself even seems to forget about the bloody infant she is holding and gives a ten-line speech on the conditions of her own intercession. She then walks away "wyþ her chylde" (757), but the narrator does not describe the state of the child himself.

This exemplum encourages readers to recognise their own sins in the wounds of Christ. According to Mannyng, the second commandment forbids both swearing false oaths and misinterpreting theology because both are defamations of Christ's true nature. For example, he explains, "3yf þou trowst þat god was nat before/ Ar he was of þe maydyn bore...Hyt ys a3ens þys comaundement" (647-52). Since many Christians, particularly the ill-informed readers that Mannyng imagines, could easily be ignorant of complex theological concepts like Christology, many readers could see their own sins in the representation of Christ's wounds. Instead of recognising their shared dignity in Christ's divinity, Mannyng encourages readers to recognise their faults in his mutilation.

Mannyng hopes that his readers will recognise their need to remove the sin that keeps the identity categories of self and God so distinct. The identification that the rich man experiences is his recognition of his own sins in Christ's wounds.

The horrifying sight of the child's mutilated body is implicitly eucharistic, suggesting that the Eucharist itself is a repulsive, violent act. Mannyng's use of the word "tognewyn" to describe Christ's disfigurement not only suggests that Christ's body is torn apart but also that it has been literally gnawed upon. Mary accuses the rich man of cruelly forcing Christ to repeatedly undergo the suffering of the crucifixion: "Þyn oþys doun hym more greuousnesse/ þan al þe Iewys wykkydnesse./ Þey pynyde hym onys & passyd away,/ But þou pynyst hym euery day" (719-22). The tale describes the rich man tearing Christ's flesh with his mouth daily, an act uncannily similar to reception of the Eucharist. Like the conventional conflation of Passion and Eucharist, Mannyng equates the sacrifice of the crucifixion with the rending of Christ's flesh through blasphemy. When we swear false oaths, Mannyng explains, we both "Dysmembre Ihu" (668) and "vpbreyd hys pyne" that he suffered on the cross (672). He takes the crucifixion out of its historical context by accusing his readers of causing Christ's wounds. However, he also claims that his readers mock the historical wounds of Christ by explaining how "we eft pyne hym so sore" (680). Contemporary sinners both mock and cause Christ's wounds. This confusion of causation is evocative of the Eucharist because, in many sacrificial explanations of the Mass, the sacrament is both a remembrance of Christ's suffering and a re-enactment of it. There is no doubt that Mannyng regards the eucharistic sacrifice as spiritually beneficial but, in this exemplum, it is also cruel and repulsive.

In the first exemplum of the Eucharist section, Mannyng directly confronts this conflict between the horror of the sacrificial and its spiritual benefits in the Eucharist. This exemplum, whose ultimate source is a sixth-century story from the *Vitas Patrum*, is one of the oldest and most frequently repeated Eucharist exempla of the Middle Ages. In the story, an old man doubts that the Eucharist is truly the body of Christ. With the encouragement and prayer of two concerned abbots, he prays that God will reveal to him the truth and, after a week of prayer, he attends Mass. As the priest begins to consecrate the host, an angel appears with a small child, and as the priest breaks the host, the angel proceeds to cut the infant into pieces and collect its blood in a chalice. When the priest approaches the old man with chunks of the child's flesh on the paten, the old man shouts out in horror that he now believes in the Eucharist, and the chunks of flesh appear to be bread once again.

This tale deliberately represents the eucharistic sacrifice as horrific. In the sixth-century Latin version of the tale, the narrator gives the conventional Ambrosian explanation for why humans do not ordinarily see the infant Christ who is always present in the host: "God understands human nature—that it cannot enjoy bloody flesh—and therefore transforms his body into bread and his blood into wine."<sup>60</sup> The Latin text thus attempts to make the story slightly more palatable by suggesting that God fully understands that the natural reaction to the ingestion of raw human flesh is revulsion. However, Mannyng's version does not try to explain away any of the horror. For readers who have already heard the earlier exemplum of the bloody child, this image of Christ would look very similar except that the butchering of the child takes place within a

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<sup>60</sup> "Deus scit humanam naturam; quia non potest vesci carnibus crudis, et propterea transformat corpus suum in panem, et sanguinem suum in vinum." *Patrologia Latina* 73, Col. 980A. The column numbers for the full tale are: 978D-980A. Translation is my own.

liturgical setting. It is not sufficient to dismiss this tale by saying that, by the fourteenth century, such images of infanticide had become acceptable within the context of the Eucharist. This tale purposefully highlights the horrific and repellent nature of ideas of blood sacrifice even as it supports those selfsame ideas. The old man's reaction to seeing the flesh behind the appearance of bread is more a reaction of disgust than of wonder. When the priest is about to give him a chunk of the child's bloody flesh, he does not thank God for allowing him to see this miracle. Instead, he shouts "Mercy, goddes sone of heuene!" (10070). This man achieves a vision of the true nature of the Eucharist but that vision ultimately portrays the central celebration of Christianity as bloodthirsty and cruel. Mannyng introduces this tale by saying of the Eucharist that "some haue seye hyt bodyly/ To whom he shewed hys mercy" (10003-04), but the tale ultimately suggests that it is God's mercy that allows the old man to see the Eucharist as bread; lack of vision is the mercy that humans should desire.

In this narrative, Mannyng positions sight as a powerful conversion tool but encourages believers not to desire visions of Christ's sacrificial body. The tale clearly depicts the old man as a doubting Thomas figure. Like Thomas, who would not believe in the resurrection until he had seen and touched Christ's wounds, this old man is a faithful Christian who fails only in his unwillingness to believe in the miraculous transformation of Christ's body. He imitates Thomas' statement of doubt when "he seyde þat hyt was lye/ But 3yf he say hyt wyþ hys ye" (10025-26). In contrast to the biblical story of Thomas, this old man only needs to see Christ's body in the Eucharist but does not desire to touch it. In the oldest known Latin version of this tale, when the old man goes to receive the Eucharist, the host only transforms from flesh into bread once it is in his

hand.<sup>61</sup> However, partly because believers did not receive the host in their hands in the later Middle Ages, the Middle English version only requires the sight of the flesh. The old man only needs to see the priest offer him “a morsel of þe flesshe/ Wyþ al þe blod þer on al fresshe” in order to be horrified into believing in the Eucharist (10067-68). As in the story of doubting Thomas—which concludes with Christ’s statement that “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:28)—this tale urges readers to be more faithful than the doubting man. Hearing the story should be enough to convince them of the Real Presence in the Eucharist. Mannyng concludes that, although this tale emphasises vision as the vehicle for conversion, “alle ouþre beþ þe better/ þat heren þys tale or reden þys lettre” (10081-82). The vision of Christ’s flesh is important for conversion but belief without vision can be even better.

Mannyng argues that a faith that focuses primarily on visualising Christ’s sacrifice is one that risks undermining its own belief in the impassibility of God. In order to prove that the Eucharist is a literal blood sacrifice, this tale contests the idea that Christ’s body can survive the consecration. Mannyng describes how all three men perceive “Byfore þe prest þat a chyld lay quyk/ Yn feyr form of flesshe & blode” (10054-55), emphasising that the child is alive prior to the consecration. The process of the consecration, in which an angel cuts Christ into pieces, looks very much like murder; the bread is no longer the living Christ but pieces of a dead corpse. This tale implies that, during the sacrifice of the Mass, the priest commits infanticide and the congregation engages in ritual cannibalism. Rather than suggest, as scholastic theologians did, that Christ’s sacrifice of himself was perfect and for all time, the tale argues that Christians must re-enact this sacrifice again and again in order to achieve salvation. This vision of

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<sup>61</sup> *Patrologia Latina* 73, Col. 979D.

Christ's body in the Eucharist threatens to undermine the belief that Mannyng suggests it proves: the presence of an all-powerful God in the host.

Mannyng never rejects sacrificial images of Christ's body. On the contrary, he uses such images throughout *Handlyng Synne* to encourage deeper devotion in his readers. He affirms that belief in the efficacy of blood sacrifice is orthodox, but insists that it is only a starting point of faith. It is noteworthy that, in a text filled with fantastic tales, Mannyng only uses one miracle tale that involves the literal transformation of the host into flesh. Immediately after this exemplum, Mannyng shifts his audience's attention to his explication of the physical properties of the host. As his readers become more familiar with doctrines of the Eucharist, he invites them to concentrate on devotional practices that demand a more indirect approach to Christ's sacrifice. Like Ambrose, Mannyng believes that Christ's flesh is physically present in the host but it is better for believers not to see it. The horror of the sacrifice is disgusting to humans and ultimately beyond human comprehension. For Mannyng, the appearance of bread, the barrier between the believer and the body of Christ, is the ideal way to see the Eucharist.

In these four exempla, Mannyng argues that aiming for a full communion with the crucified body of Christ can be distorting and keep one from personal conversion. For Mannyng, one of the best aspects of eucharistic devotion is that it reveals to the believer his own state of sin. In all four exempla that feature encounters with the mutilated body of Christ, there is a positive spiritual outcome. The crucifix in the exemplum of the forgiving knight inspires greater charity, Fr. Carpus repents his sloth, the rich man gives up swearing false oaths, and the old man publicly declares his belief in the Eucharist. However, none of these outcomes arises from an ecstatic identification with Christ or an



entirely positive vision of him. In *Handlyng Synne*, the best faith in the Eucharist occurs when the faithful cannot fully identify with Christ, when their experience of Christ is imperfect and therefore spurs them on to their own spiritual perfection through penance and personal reform.

Throughout *Handlyng Synne*, Mannyng uses eucharistic theology in order to examine lay religious practices. He concludes that the role that the laity have been given—either through their own choice or through restrictions that the church has placed upon them—often limits their access to the divine. The very structure of the Mass constantly reminds the laity that they do not have direct access to God; they rarely receive the host, never receive the cup, and the Mass is almost incomprehensible. Perhaps most importantly, despite some believers' claims to see flesh in the consecrated host, most Christians had to settle for gazing upon a white circle of bread. By interweaving scholastic theology and popular devotional practices, Mannyng argues that the barriers between God and the self that the individual believer experiences in the Eucharist provide an indispensable spiritual experience precisely because the Eucharist fails to fulfil the promise of complete connection with the suffering of Christ. The Eucharist helps the laity to achieve salvation by encouraging them to handle the sin that keeps them from experiencing union with God.

## II.

### Liturgy and Loss:

#### *Pearl* and the Ritual Reform of the Aristocratic Subject

Some of *Pearl*'s best recent readers have ignored or resisted its final stanza. And there is no doubt that stanza poses difficulties. After 1200 lines which explore the dreamer's resistance to Christian consolation in the wake of personal grief, the poem concludes with a call to eucharistic devotion:

To pay the Prince other sete saghte,  
 Hit is ful ethe to the god Krystyin.  
 For I haf founden Hym, bothe day and naghte,  
 A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin.  
 Over this hyul this lote I laghte  
 For pyty of my perle enclyin;  
 And sythen to God I hit bytaghte  
 In Krystes dere blessing and myn,  
 That in the forme of bred and wyn  
 The preste uis schewes uch a daye.  
 He gef uis to be His homly hyne  
 And precious perles unto His pay. (1201-1212)<sup>1</sup>

Following his failed attempt to join the pearl maiden in the New Jerusalem, the awakened dreamer claims that he has learned to turn away from his lost beloved, his pearl, and

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<sup>1</sup> All citations of *Pearl* are from: *Pearl*, ed. Sarah Stanbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001).

toward God alone. In this closing stanza, he argues that liturgical devotion to Christ in the Eucharist is the solution to his problems of grief and longing. To many scholars, this claim seems disingenuous; they argue it provides an overly simplistic solution to a problem the poem has otherwise portrayed as spiritually and psychologically complex. For example, David Aers calls the ending “theologically superficial and psychologically superficial” while John Bowers labels it a “gratuitous assertion of the Real Presence.”<sup>2</sup> Even the few scholars who have shown that eucharistic allusions occur throughout the poem are reluctant to take this ending at face value.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I propose to take *Pearl*’s closing stanza seriously. Focusing in particular on the claim that the Eucharist can effect individual personal reform, I will show that the poem’s relationship to the Eucharist is much more complex and central than previous scholars have acknowledged. As *Pearl* imagines it, Mass is a ritual which demands that the worshipper accept God’s simultaneous presence and absence, a moment in which the divine is almost tangible but impossible to grasp. That conception links it to the poem’s larger interest in the relation between proper Christian devotion and individual identity formation. Instead of constantly longing for that which is outside and beyond his grasp, *Pearl* insists that the dreamer must learn to recognize what it is he truly

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<sup>2</sup> David Aers, “The Self Mourning: Reflections on Pearl,” *Speculum* 68 (1993): 54-73, at 70; John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 53. Other critics who read this final stanza as either unsatisfying or unconvincing include: J.J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the Gawain-poems* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 77; Denise Louise Despres, *Ghostly Sights: Visual Meditation in Late-Medieval Literature* (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1989); Sarah Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 32.

<sup>3</sup> The few modern critics who have written on the Eucharist in *Pearl* are decidedly apologetic in tone, seemingly unconvinced by the importance of the connections between the Mass and *Pearl*. See: John Gatta, Jr., “Transformation Symbolism and the Liturgy of the Mass in *Pearl*,” *Modern Philology* 71 (1974): 243-56; Heather Phillips, “The Eucharistic Allusions of Pearl,” *Mediaeval Studies* 47 (1985): 474-86. No doubt part of this reticence stems from a desire to distance themselves from Robert Max Garrett’s early and largely unsupported claim that the Eucharist provides the poem’s entire meaning: *The Pearl: An Interpretation* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1918).

lacks: Christ. The Eucharist becomes a ritual method for the aristocratic subject to reform himself in light of this recognition. My argument unfolds in three parts. First, I place *Pearl* in the context of fourteenth-century aristocratic practices and beliefs surrounding the Mass. Next, I discuss the other three poems of Cotton Nero A.x, with particular attention to *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in order to demonstrate the *Pearl*-poet's abiding interest in the relationship between liturgy and identity formation. Finally, I closely examine *Pearl*'s formulation of aristocratic identity reform in the context of the Mass.

### **Mass and the Fourteenth-Century Aristocracy**

*Pearl* treats the Eucharist in the context of fourteenth-century aristocratic liturgical practice, a historical context that scholars too often dismiss or ignore. In recent years, *Pearl* scholarship has increasingly turned toward socio-historicism. Several scholars have explicitly resisted discussing the poem's theology because they regard such a focus as a move away from its immediate historical moment and cultural context.<sup>4</sup> However, when such scholarship ignores the Eucharist in favor of history, it denies the fact that the Eucharist itself has a cultural history. This history is essential to the poem's theology; *Pearl*'s depiction of the individual subject's need for interior spiritual and emotional reform is dependent upon later medieval aristocratic understandings of the Mass.

Fourteenth-century aristocratic liturgical practices were often individual—both in the sense that the aristocracy's experiences of the Mass were typically internal, and in the

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<sup>4</sup> Historicist readings that explicitly resist theology include: Helen Barr, "*Pearl*—or 'The Jeweller's Tale,'" *Medium Ævum* 69 (2000): 59-79; Lynn Staley, "*Pearl* and the Contingencies of Love and Piety," in *Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honor of Derek Pearsall*, ed. David Aers (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 83-114; John Watkins, "'Sengeley in synglere': *Pearl* and Late Medieval Individualism," *Chaucer Yearbook* 2 (1995): 117-136.

sense that they used their wealth in order to mark out their individual social status within their churches.<sup>5</sup> The late medieval form of the Mass encouraged lay people to engage in increasingly personal, inward-looking modes of devotion because their participation in the Mass was usually limited to silent reflection.<sup>6</sup> Aside from the opening procession and the elevation of the host after the consecration, the laity's view of the liturgical action was either entirely or partially blocked by altar screens. Some members of the aristocracy would have been literate enough to understand the parts of the Mass spoken aloud in Latin, but the canon—the most sacred part of the Mass in which the consecration of the bread and wine takes place—was inaudible, said silently by the priest in order to avoid revealing the secrets of God.<sup>7</sup> Later medieval guides to the Mass, such as the thirteenth-century *Lay Folks Mass Book*, encouraged their lay readers to devote themselves to prayers that often had little connection to the priest's prayers and actions.<sup>8</sup> The late fourteenth-century poem, "How to Hear Mass" suggests that, during the Mass, its lay readers ought to "priueliche 3or preyers preye/ To him þat may vn-bynde,/ In saluyng of 3or synnes seuene/ To þe mihtful kyng of heuene."<sup>9</sup> Middle English devotional literature

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<sup>5</sup> I use the terms 'internal' and 'interiority' to denote the aspects of a person that exist consciously within the self but do not necessarily bear a direct relationship to physical behavior and experience. This interiority includes the elements that Caroline Walker Bynum has identified as composing medieval ideas of the self, such as thoughts, inner motivation, emotions, and psychological development. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?" in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 82-109.

<sup>6</sup> John Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy: From the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 40-41; Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development (Missarum Sollemnia)*, vol. 1, trans. Francis A. Brunner (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1950), 117.

<sup>7</sup> Harper, *Forms and Orders*, 119.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the *Lay Folks Mass Book* directs its readers, during the consecration, to pray for such things as good weather or to simply repeat the pater noster until the elevation occurs. However, the *Book* does name several of the parts of Mass and give its readers a general sense of the significance of the priest's actions. *The Lay Folks Mass Book*, ed. Thomas Frederick Simmons, EETS o.s. 71 (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> "How to Hear Mass," in *The Minor Poems of the Vernon MS*, ed. F.J. Furnivall, EETS o.s. 117 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1901), 493-511, at lines 24-27.

frequently depicts the Mass, in general, and the elevation of the host, in particular, as a highly personalized encounter between Christ and believer in which believers reflect upon their own sins and individual need for redemption.<sup>10</sup> Although Mass was ostensibly a social occasion, the fourteenth-century laity were encouraged to see the liturgy as an opportunity for inward reflection on the state of their own souls.<sup>11</sup>

This tendency toward personal devotion during the Mass is particularly characteristic of the aristocracy. Fourteenth-century aristocrats often used their wealth to set themselves apart physically from the wider parish community, thereby publicly performing their distinctly individual modes of worship. Beginning in the fourteenth century, members of the aristocracy and wealthy members of the upper gentry often carried highly ornate and expensive books of hours with them to guide their prayers during the Mass.<sup>12</sup> By the end of the fourteenth century, the public use of the book of hours during Mass became so prevalent that many historians regard it as “the characteristic instrument of noble piety.”<sup>13</sup> Such books typically encourage their readers to have an instrumental view of prayer that focuses on gaining personal benefits for

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example: John Audelay, *The Poems of John Audelay*, ed. Ella Keats Whiting, EETS o.s. 184 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 62-81; “A Prayer to the Sacrament of the Altar,” in *Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. R.T. Davies (London: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 115; Rossell Hope Robbins, “Levitation Prayers in Middle English Verse,” *Modern Philology* 39 (1942): 131-46.

<sup>11</sup> Discussing a slightly later period, Eamon Duffy notes that, with the increased use of prayer books, “devotion at Mass...became a matter of inner meditation on the Passion, using the stages of the liturgy as triggers or points of departure.” Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400- c.1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 119.

<sup>12</sup> It was not until the early fifteenth century that books of hours became more affordable and available to a wider audience. See: Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers 1240-1570* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Catto, “Religion and the English Nobility in the Later Fourteenth Century,” in *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of H.R. Trevor-Roper*, ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden (London: Duckworth, 1981), 43-55, at 49. See also: John Bossy, “Christian Life in the Later Middle Ages: Prayers,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6<sup>th</sup> series, 1 (1991): 137-148; Duffy, *Marking the Hours*.

oneself and one's family.<sup>14</sup> When prayers in books of hours describe the Eucharist, they typically concentrate on the consecrated host as offering a personal encounter between Christ and the individual worshipper, and the accompanying illuminations usually depict the host in a monstrance or otherwise divorced from its liturgical, social context.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the book of hours became an object that both marked aristocratic worshippers as socially distinct and encouraged them to turn increasingly to their own personal concerns and private devotions. Also in the fourteenth century, the aristocracy began to build private pews and private chapels for themselves within their parish churches.<sup>16</sup> Even the pax—a sacred object passed from person to person at the end of Mass as a substitute for the reception of the Eucharist—was no longer a symbol of community and equality. Not only was the pax often passed according to rank but many members of the upper classes actually had private paxes.<sup>17</sup> From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, wealthy individuals frequently donated decorations to cathedrals and parish churches—such as stained-glass windows depicting the donor in a devotional scene—a practice that individuated a communal space by simultaneously demonstrating the donor's wealth and the donor's personal relationship with the divine. Fourteenth-century windows suggest a particularly intimate relationship between donor and the divine because they typically depict the donor praying alone at the feet of the saints or Christ himself.<sup>18</sup> As the Middle

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<sup>14</sup> Bossy, "Prayers"; Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 156-59, 293, 297, 302.

<sup>16</sup> Pamela C. Graves, "Social Space in the English Medieval Parish Church," *Economy and Society* 18 (1989): 297-322; Colin Richmond, "Religion and the Fifteenth-Century English Gentleman," in *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Barrie Dobson (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), 193-203.

<sup>17</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 116. On the pax as social ritual, see: John Bossy, "The Mass as a Social Institution, 1200-1700," *Past and Present* 100 (1983): 29-61.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 191-218.

Ages progressed, more members of the aristocracy and even the gentry were building private chapels in their own homes and receiving papal approval to allow Masses to be performed there.<sup>19</sup> Between the years of 1342 and 1352 alone, Pope Clement VI granted licences for the possession of portable altars to some hundred and fifty individuals in England.<sup>20</sup> More chantries were established for personal intentions and more Masses were celebrated outside of the parish setting.<sup>21</sup> Although it is impossible to know what any given individual was thinking of or praying for during Mass, it is clear that the aristocracy was beginning to conceive of the Mass as an act of devotion that could be directed primarily toward personal growth and personal benefit. In contrast to histories of medieval selfhood which argue that medieval individual self-consciousness arose primarily out of a desire to identify oneself with a group,<sup>22</sup> aristocratic liturgical practices suggest a different picture: being a member of the aristocracy actually enabled an increased focus on the individual as a self distinct from other selves.

The fourteenth-century aristocracy used public displays of their wealth and devotion as ways of constructing their own individual spiritual lives. In general, fourteenth-century vernacular religious texts increasingly focused on the internal and subjective elements of Christian devotion, a shift in focus that many scholars attribute to

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<sup>19</sup> As Diana Webb has shown, during the fourteenth century, there was a marked increase in private domestic piety, an increase largely limited to the upper classes because wealth provided unique opportunities for a more diversified living-space and a larger number of material possessions, including books. Diana Webb, *Privacy and Solitude in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 120-133.

<sup>20</sup> Diana Webb, "Domestic Space and Devotion in the Middle Ages," in *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Andrew Spicer and Sarah Hamilton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 27-47, at 37.

<sup>21</sup> Catto, "Religion and the English Nobility."

<sup>22</sup> This argument is most famously made in: Caroline Walker Bynum, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?"



the influence of confessional discourse.<sup>23</sup> The Fourth Lateran Council's (1215) legislation of annual confession created the need for widespread lay education, education that promoted intensive self-examination.<sup>24</sup> This requirement of sacramental confession had the effect of instilling in the penitent subject a sharp distinction between internal states and external actions along with recognition of the importance of internal states to individual redemption.<sup>25</sup> In a sense, the aristocratic focus on personal devotion during Mass is therefore typical of a larger trend in lay religious experience. What makes aristocratic liturgical practices unique, however, is both aristocrats' intent focus on interior states and the way in which they publicly performed their interiorization and individualization of religious practice. In her recent study of secular court rituals, Susan Crane argues that the late medieval aristocracy typically understood identity to be constituted through external performance: "what people manifest and articulate is what counts about them, not what is hidden and unexpressed. Performance is a reliable measure of who one actually is."<sup>26</sup> Although Crane does not discuss religious practices at

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<sup>23</sup> For an overview of the increased interiorization of fourteenth-century devotional literature, see: Nicholas Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 293-313.

<sup>24</sup> For an excellent recent discussion of the nature of the Fourth Lateran Council's outreach to the laity, see: Nicholas Watson, "*Piers Plowman*, Pastoral Theology, and Spiritual Perfectionism: Hawkyn's Cloak and Patience's *Pater Noster*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 21 (2007): 83-118.

<sup>25</sup> Many scholars have discussed the relationship between interiority and confession in medieval literature. See: Andrew James Johnston, "The Secret of the Sacred: Confession and the Self in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Performances of the Sacred in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Susanne Rupp and Tobias Döring (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 45-63; Katherine C. Little, *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 367-421. The way in which the medieval practice of auricular confession produces the self is most famously articulated in: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), I. 58-59.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 176. Also useful on the relationship between identity and bodily performance in medieval texts are: J.A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Clifford Davidson, ed., *Gesture in Medieval Drama and Art* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001).

length—practices which I would argue tend to assume a sense of self that to some extent precedes social interaction—her work highlights the important role of performance in the formation of aristocratic selfhood. For the aristocracy, one's interior life, including one's emotions, thoughts, and motivation, was complex and absolutely central to the understanding of the Mass. Aristocrats seem to have felt that staging the distinctiveness of their religious devotion was an essential aspect of the practice of their Christian faith, an aspect that enabled and authorized devotion centered on individual self-examination.

Scholarship emphasizing the social unity enacted in the Mass has neglected the relation between social stratification and inward-looking liturgical practices, practices which are central to the religious views of the *Pearl*-poet. Over the past thirty years, led by the work of John Bossy and Eamon Duffy, many prominent scholars have sought to overturn the view that late medieval liturgical practices were inherently corrupt and in need of reform. In order to construct a more positive image for medieval religion, literary scholars and historians alike have argued that the medieval Mass had a strong communal element that united the laity despite their economic and social differences.<sup>27</sup> Literary scholars in particular tend to draw their evidence for this egalitarian understanding of the Mass from performance texts, especially the plays for the feast of Corpus Christi. In *Signifying God*, Sarah Beckwith argues that the York plays urge their audience to understand all the sacraments, but especially the Eucharist, as processes of social relation rather than objects of worship. For Beckwith, sacraments are defined by networks of human interaction. As appealing as this understanding of the sacraments may be, the

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<sup>27</sup> John Bossy, "Mass as a Social Institution"; Eamon Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*. Literary scholars who make such arguments often draw their evidence from Corpus Christi drama. See especially: Mervyn James, "Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town," *Past and Present* 98 (1983): 3-29. For a more recent and nuanced example, see: Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 235.

York plays' particular sacramental theology is far from representative of late medieval orthodox theology, devotional practices, or Middle English devotional literature.<sup>28</sup> As Beckwith herself admits, the official church liturgy did not promote such a social understanding of the Eucharist. Rather, she argues that the York plays are a critique of contemporary liturgical practices, practices which largely presented the Eucharist as a sacred object and therefore disregarded "the ecclesiological implications of eucharistic encounter."<sup>29</sup> Literary scholars' reliance on performance texts as their primary evidence for eucharistic beliefs and practices has thus overemphasized the egalitarian aspects of the Mass.<sup>30</sup> The late medieval aristocracy often relied on written texts, such as books of hours, as key components of their religious practice; the textual and meditative aspects of aristocratic liturgical devotion call into question the scholarly view of the Mass as fundamentally communal.<sup>31</sup>

Recent scholarship has tended to wrongly assume that, because the Mass is social, it must therefore necessarily be egalitarian. As a result of this assumption, scholars often argue that aristocratic practices surrounding the Mass cannot be considered legitimately

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<sup>28</sup> She notes that the plays are different from other devotional literature because "it is striking how in the world of devotional prose there are only two actors, Christ and the human worshiper of Christ. Though we are asked to identify with the suffering of Christ, we are never asked to look at the social agents of brutality as we are here in the York Pageant of the Crucifixion." Beckwith, *Signifying God*, 220, note 70.

<sup>29</sup> Beckwith, *Signifying God*, 89. However, Beckwith does argue that the York plays' vision of sacramentality is more legitimate than the medieval liturgy's version which she calls "bastardized" because of its lack of focus on the community. Unlike Beckwith, I am not interested in deciding which views of the Mass are truer or more legitimate. See: Beckwith, *Signifying God*, 115.

<sup>30</sup> There is great diversity in views on the Eucharist expressed in Middle English devotional literature. Some texts, like the York plays, emphasize the role of the Christian community. See, for example: *Middle English Sermons*, ed. Woodburn O. Ross, EETS o.s. 209 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 61-65; John Lydgate, "A Procession of Corpus Christi," in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, EETS e.s. 107 (London: Oxford University Press, 1911), 35-43; *Speculum Sacerdotale*, ed. Edward H. Weatherly, EETS o.s. 200 (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 117-29. Other texts, such as the *Lay Folks Mass Book*, "How to Hear Mass," and the texts listed in note 10, argue for the Eucharist as an individual encounter with the suffering Christ.

<sup>31</sup> On the connection between texts and the religious devotion of the upper classes, see: Lawrence Besserman, *Chaucer's Biblical Poetics* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 8-26; Webb, *Privacy and Solitude*, 119-33.

religious precisely because they are not community oriented. Colin Richmond makes this judgment explicit when he criticizes the fifteenth-century gentry's religious practices by arguing that "Such folk, in becoming isolated from their neighbours, were also insulating themselves against communal religion, possibly even religion *per se*, for how can you be religious on your own?"<sup>32</sup> David Aers aims his critique directly at the *Pearl*-poet's model of aristocratic Christian worship and laments that, in the poet's four poems, "the eucharist is assimilated to a discourse which has nothing to say about its role in cultivating union between fellow creatures in Christian communities."<sup>33</sup> While it is true that many fourteenth-century aristocratic practices were profoundly self-centered—in the sense of being primarily interested in the individual soul's relationship to God—that does not make the theological thinking associated with them merely a shallow celebration of individual wealth. On the contrary, as the works of the *Pearl*-poet show, the aristocracy's inward-looking religious practices enable complex theological thinking about the nature of the individual soul's relationship with the divine.

In all four poems of Cotton Nero A.x, the *Pearl*-poet draws on the Christian liturgy in order to argue that emotional control and the maintenance of a stable identity are Christian virtues. With his almost obsessive use of jewels, rank, courtly manners, and rich clothing as ways of expressing the nature of the divine, the poet presents his

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<sup>32</sup> Colin Richmond, "Religion and the Fifteenth-Century English Gentleman," 199. See also: Colin Richmond, "Margins and Marginality: English Devotion in the Later Middle Ages," in *England in the Fifteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1992 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Nicholas Rogers (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1994), 242-252.

<sup>33</sup> David Aers, "Christianity for Courtly Subjects: Reflections on the *Gawain*-Poet," in *A Companion to the *Gawain*-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 91-101, at 100. Nicholas Watson also criticizes the *Pearl*-poet for making his theology too suited to aristocratic tastes. However, Watson does not make this point through reference to the poet's lack of social concern. Rather, he argues that the poet's praise of aristocratic culture and modes of worship results in a watered-down and overly simplistic version of Christianity, what he terms an "aristocratized theology." Nicholas Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," 312.

theological thinking in a way that is particularly suited to aristocratic tastes.<sup>34</sup> He appeals directly to the aristocracy by seriously exploring the aristocracy's interest in liturgical devotion as a largely inward-looking experience. In all four poems, the poet's primary interest with regard to Christian devotion is the individual Christian's inner life, particularly the believer's emotional control. For the poet, good external actions are important, but properly controlled thoughts and emotions are the cornerstone of being a good Christian subject; external acts are often significant primarily because of the way in which they reflect or affect internal states. He frequently expresses his fascination with interiority in reference to liturgy. In the three most explicitly didactic texts, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*, the poet refers to moral lessons heard at Mass in order to point out methods of individual reform.<sup>35</sup> *Patience*, a text intensely focused on the prophet Jonah's inner response to God's commands, begins by referring to a Gospel reading that "I herde on a holyday, at a hy3e masse" (9). The poet goes on to retell Matthew's Beatitudes in a way that, far from emphasizing good works or issues of social justice, focuses on self-control. Most radically, he replaces 'blessed are those who suffer persecution' with those "Pat con her hert stere" (27). He thus invokes a liturgical setting in order to place his Old Testament subject in the context of controlled Christian

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<sup>34</sup> Class distinctions were very apparent to clerical authors and it was not uncommon for pastoral texts to give class-specific guidance. For one example, see Michael Haren's work on the mid-fourteenth-century *Memoriale presbitorum*: "Confession, Social Ethics and Social Discipline in the *Memoriale presbitorum*," in *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, ed. Peter Biller and A.J. Minnis (York: University of York Press, 1998), 109-22.

<sup>35</sup> See: *Pearl* 497, *Cleanness* 51, and *Patience* 9. I recognize that the poet cites the Mass partly because the Mass would have been most lay people's only direct source of scripture passages. However, his citation of the Mass also invokes a liturgical context within the poems. All citations of *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from: *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002).

interiority.<sup>36</sup> *Cleanness* is much more explicit in its exploration of liturgy; it directly links internal virtue to the Mass by beginning with an explanation of priests' need for internal purity at the consecration. Even in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the least devotional of the four poems, Gawain intersperses his struggles to maintain self-control with regular attendance at Mass. At the center of all four poems is the individual's struggles to perfect and control his interior state—the dreamer's quest to overcome grief in *Pearl*, *Cleanness*'s exhortations that readers must strive to remove the spots on their souls, Jonah's failures to acquire patience and understanding in *Patience*, and Gawain's continual dissatisfaction with what he perceives as his own moral failure at the end of *Sir Gawain*—and the poet views this struggle through the interpretive framework of Christian liturgy and ritual. The *Pearl*-poet never fully resolves the tension between internal purity and external performance of Christian identity; in his poetry, it is not ultimately clear which he regards as more important because his emphasis shifts in each of his poems. However, although the poet struggles to define this relationship, he always regards internal states and the public display of them as vital components of the good aristocratic Christian subject.

### ***Sir Gawain and Christian Interiority***

Despite the poem's attention to marvelous spectacle, many of the most important actions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* take place inside the courtly subject.<sup>37</sup> Over the course of the poem, one of the most difficult challenges which Gawain faces is his

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<sup>36</sup> I have chosen not to provide a detailed reading of *Patience* precisely because it is firmly set before the time of Christ and, although it deals with spiritual interiority, it does not extensively discuss Christian liturgy.

<sup>37</sup> Interiority has been an important focus in recent *Gawain* criticism. See especially: Andrew James Johnston, "The Secret of the Sacred"; Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations*; Derek Pearsall, "Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 351-62.

internal struggle to maintain a coherent identity that meets the often conflicting demands of chivalry and Christianity. When Bertilak's wife tries to seduce him, Gawain must negotiate between two distinct codes of conduct. First, in order to maintain his Christian virtue, Gawain must not commit adultery with his host's wife. Second, as Bertilak's wife makes explicit, by failing to have sex with her Gawain risks his chivalric reputation because "of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosed/ Is þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes" (1512-13). Instead of outright refusing her, Gawain politely resists temptation with flirtation and banter in order to maintain both his knightly identity and his Christian virtue. The poet describes the three attempted seductions as battles at which Gawain launches carefully orchestrated defenses of his identity by exercising rigid control over his inner feelings. On her third attempt, Gawain becomes distressed because Bertilak's wife is so sexually aggressive that he must "lach þer hir luf oþer lodly refuse./ He cared for his cortaysye, lest craþayn he were,/ And more for his meschef 3if he schulde make synne" (1772-74). Although Gawain outwardly appears jovial and flirtatious, he is inwardly struggling to maintain a coherent Christian chivalric identity because the church and the court demand radically different behaviors.

Initially, Gawain's participation in Christian ritual seems separate from the poem's focus on interiority because, up until his final encounter with Bertilak in the Green Chapel, Gawain's sacramental devotion seems to be largely a public performance. Before Gawain sets out to search for the Green Chapel, the poet describes Gawain's attendance at Mass as if the ritual were simply another part of his elaborate war-gear. After several lines detailing the beauty of Gawain's armor, the poet notes how "So harnayst as he watz he herknez his masse/ Offred and honoured to þe he3e auter" (592-

3). At this moment, the poem depicts Gawain's participation in Mass as a necessary performance, and one of much less interest than the plates of armor protecting his legs. Likewise, when the poet mentions Gawain hearing Mass at Hautdesert, Gawain's attendance seems perfunctory; he is performing an act that is entirely expected, ordinary, and of little interest (1310; 1556). There is little indication that the Mass is an opportunity for spiritual reflection or growth. Even the sacramental confession that Gawain makes before finally going to face the green knight looks more like a performance of duty than a result of pious examination of his soul. Although the poet praises Gawain because "he asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene/ As domezday schulde haf be di3t on þe morn" (1883-84), it is not apparent that Gawain confesses the one sin that brings guilt to him at the end of the poem: withholding the green garter from his host.<sup>38</sup> The poem initially expresses little interest in the interior aspect of Gawain's Christian devotion.

Nevertheless, Gawain's desire to hear Mass is essential to his quest. Hautdesert, the location of much of the poem's dramatic action, is only an acceptable place for Gawain to stay during the Christmas season because it contains chapels at which he can hear Mass. As Gawain continues his quest, every major challenge is punctuated by a brief mention of a liturgical or sacramental event. The liturgy is embedded within the text, surrounded and contained by tales of chivalric adventure and challenge. By frequently mentioning sacramental ritual but barely describing it, the poem suggests that, although such ritual is part of Gawain's success, it does not fit neatly into the conventional narrative framework of Arthurian adventures. The regular references to liturgy and

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<sup>38</sup> Much has been written on Gawain's seemingly imperfect confession. For an excellent overview of the debates surrounding this moment, see: Johnston, "The Secret of the Sacred."



sacrament only gain significance retrospectively through the ending's emphasis on Christian ritual.

The poem's conclusion directly associates Christian ritual with interiority itself. The poem presents the Green Chapel, the site of its climax, as increasingly Christian once it becomes a location of self-realization. Although the Green Chapel initially looks like a cave, Gawain recognizes it as an uncanny version of a Christian church, calling it an ugly "oritore" (2190), "a chapel of meschaunce" (2195), and "Þe corsededst kyrk þat euer I com inne" (2196). Through Gawain's repeated descriptions of the Green Chapel as a negative version of a church, the poem insists that the Chapel must be understood in relation to Christian liturgical space. Over the course of the scene, the Green Chapel grows increasingly similar to a Christian church because it becomes the site of Gawain's ritual confession. Once he nicks Gawain on the neck instead of decapitating him, Bertilak takes on the role of a priestly confessor; he hears Gawain's confession and reassures him that, although he lied about taking the girdle:

Þou art confessed so clene, beknownen of Þy mysses,  
 And hatz penaunce apert of þe point of myn egge,  
 I halde þe poysed of þat ply3t and pured as clene  
 As þou hadez neuer forfeled syþen þou watz first borne. (2391-94)

He claims the power of absolution for himself, implicitly marking this chapel as a site of Christian sacramental ritual because of Gawain's act of self-examination. Because Bertilak is not a priest and Gawain does not ultimately accept his absolution, the sacramental status of this confession scene is questionable, but there is no doubt that Gawain and Bertilak perform the required ritual speech acts of penance. In this sense, the

ritual itself is essentially the same as a Christian ritual in a Christian church. Christian ritual thus becomes central to the poem at the same moment that Bertilak reveals that self-awareness and self-control were essential to Gawain's survival. The poem presents this self-awareness as a product of both the religious ritual of confession in particular and liturgical space more generally.

The ending of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* leaves readers with an unresolved tension: Christian interiority is both central to chivalric identity and incommensurate with it. Upon returning to Camelot, Gawain's concern with his own sinfulness sets him apart from his courtly community. Gawain publicly reports to Arthur and his court that he wears the green garter as a reminder of his sin:

Þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek

Þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I la3t haue

Of couardise and couetyse, þat I haft ca3t þare;

Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne. (2506-09)

By announcing his faults to the entire court and wearing a visible sign of his sin, Gawain attempts to make his internal penitence a public act. The court, however, refuses to integrate this extreme penitence into Gawain's public heroic identity. Instead of reading the garter as an external sign of an internal penitential state, they laugh and signal their rejection of the idea that such a state can form a permanent part of his identity. When they decide that every member of the Round Table should also wear a version of the same green garter, it carries no penitential significance for them whatsoever; they mean it only to honor Gawain "For þat watz accorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table" (2519). After his confession in the Green Chapel, Gawain feels that he has learnt about his own

weakness and tendency toward sin. He recognizes the value of self-examination within the framework of Christian devotion, but this realization can only be partially integrated into his courtly life. Interiority itself poses a threat to chivalric culture and the poem directly associates interiority with Christianity. The green garter is an emblem of both the attempts of aristocratic culture to assimilate Christian devotion into itself and its ultimate incapacity to do so. Gawain's penitence will always be visually at the center of the court even though the reality of his sin is pushed to the periphery. The poem suggests that Christian self-reflection and self-control ought to be important parts of the aristocratic subject, but reflects that such interiority is often impossible to integrate into public courtly life.

### **Internal Purity and Courtly Acts in *Cleanness***

In *Cleanness*, the poet more explicitly takes up the relationship between internal piety and external courtly behavior, but, partly because this poem is a sermon, he dramatically simplifies his discussion. *Cleanness* presents Christian interiority and courtly life as not only reconcilable but inherently complementary. It often makes this argument for the coincidence of internal Christian devotion and outward courtly behavior through particular reference to the Mass. *Cleanness* opens with the assertion that spiritual purity is essential to Christian life and, to prove this point, the poet draws on one instance in which the need for such purity is self-evident: when a priest prepares to celebrate the Eucharist. The poet explains the necessity of priestly purity in detail:

For wonder wroth is þe Wy3 þat wro3t alle þinges

Wyth þe freke þat in fylþe fol3es Hym after—

As renkez of relygioun þat redden and syngen,

And aprochen to Hys presens, and prestez arn called;  
 Thay teen vnto His temple and temen to Hymself,

Reken with reuerence þay richen His auter,  
 þay hondel þer His aune body and vsen hit boþe.

If þay in clannes be clos þay cleche gret mede;  
 Bot if þay conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont,  
 As be honest vtwyth and inwith all fylþez,  
 þen are þay sinful himself, and sulpen altogeder  
 Boþe God and His gere, and Hym to greme cachen. (5-16)

Although the Mass generally rewards those who participate in it, a priest who touches Christ's body in the host without first ensuring his own internal purity is guilty of sacrilege and incurs God's wrath. A priest's internal impurity transforms the effects of his external public act. The Mass, as an outward performance that demands inner belief, is the ultimate example of a moment in which outer behavior and inner virtue must operate together.

Using this discussion of the Mass as a starting point, the poet equates proper priestly and aristocratic behavior on the grounds that both require external courtly displays of internal purity. The poet compares the Mass to an aristocratic feast at which God is presiding as a king in his court. According to the poet, God is distinctly courtly in appearance:

He is so clene in His courte, þe Kyng þat al weldez,  
 And honeste in His housholde, and hagherlych serued  
 With angelez enourled in alle þat is clene,

Boþe withinne and withouten in wedez ful bryȝt. (17-20)

The physical beauty and richness of God's court is clear evidence of its holiness.

Throughout the poem, proper aristocratic manners and dress are indicators of internal purity. In one of Christ's most explicitly sacramental acts—the breaking of bread—his spiritual purity is most evident in the extreme delicacy and neatness with which he tears the loaf of bread. Christ is so clean, the poet tells us,

Forþy brek He þe bred blades wythouten,

For hit ferde freloker in fete in His fayre honde,

Displayed more pryuyly when He hit part schulde,

Þenne alle þe toles of Tolowse moȝt tyȝt hit to kerue. (1105-8)

Christ displays his holiness by serving food like a proper aristocrat would. For the poet, priests and aristocrats are fundamentally similar in that, in order to please God, both must match their internal piety with 'cortaysye,' a model of virtuous behavior which ultimately finds its origin in proper court manners. Unlike *Sir Gawain*, in which the poet alludes to his characters' complex inner lives, *Cleanness* does not focus on the believer's internal state other than to suggest that spiritual purity is fundamentally internal. In *Cleanness*, the clearest indicator of one's internal state is the courtliness of one's actions.

The distinction between external and internal purity, between courtly manners and Christian piety, collapses over the course of the poem; it ultimately regards the two as inseparable. This conflation is most marked in the poem's refusal to consistently distinguish between literal and figurative filth. Near the start of the poem, the poet tells his readers that, when they come to the heavenly feast, they must wear clean and beautiful clothing. To demonstrate that clothing is only a figure for works, he explains,

“Wich arn Penne by wedez þou wrappez þe inne,  
 þat schal schewe hem so schene schrowde of þe best?  
 Hit arn by werkez, wyterly, þat þou wro3t hauez,  
 And lyued with þe lykyng þat ly3e in þyn hert. (169-72)

After this point, however, the distinction between literal dirt and the figurative filth of sin begins to disappear. When the poet describes Christ’s nativity, he dwells almost exclusively on the spotlessly clean nature of the manger. As he envisions it, “Þa3 þay pouer were,/ Watz neuer so blysfyl a bour as watz a bos þenne,/ Ne no schroudehous so schene as a schepon þare” (1074-76). In order to demonstrate the sanctity of Christ’s birth, the poet has to imagine the stable as a different location; it becomes both aristocratic and priestly as the poet compares it to a bower and a sacristy respectively. The poet prevents readers from understanding these comparisons as wholly figurative by insisting on such details as the stable’s mysterious rose scent (1079). Although this description of the manger might seem to suggest that spiritual purity transcends physical filth, it also implies that it is almost unthinkable for the two to be found together. The poem thus makes a plea for its readers to engage in greater piety by aligning such piety with the aristocratic taste for physical opulence and cleanliness.

As the poet makes clear through the negative example of Belshazzar’s feast, liturgical piety is essential to proper courtly behavior. At his feast, Belshazzar commits two interrelated sins. First, he defiles Jewish altar vessels and, second, he fails to make his feast courtly enough. The defilement of altar vessels is the first step away from proper court behavior. The poet finds it horrifying that the altar vessels would be used for anything other than religious purposes and, although the vessels are ostensibly Jewish, he

implicitly invokes the sacred vessels of the Mass by reminding readers that “in His sacrafyce summe wer anointed” (1497). Belshazzar’s feast becomes a sacrilegious parody of the Mass. However, this sacrilege is only the start of his sins. The poet explains that God is angry because “His jueles so gent with jaeles wer fouled” (1495), arguing that God believes his vessels to be of too high and noble a value to be used by those of low rank. The mixing of people of various classes and ranks is morally abhorrent; the poet explains with disgust how “Penne derfly arn dressed dukez and prynces,/ Concubines and kny3tes” (1518-19). Like the sinful priests whom the poet condemns at the start of the poem, Belshazzar sins by touching liturgical vessels when he is internally impure; his internal filth is particularly manifest in his failure to observe proper courtly protocols of behavior.

Although the Mass is not the poem’s central focus, the poet continually invokes it to illustrate the urgent need for readers to maintain the cleanliness of their souls. In the middle of the poem, he warns readers that God is particularly angry at the impurity of his own followers because God considers Christian bodies to be holy vessels consecrated to him. Christians must therefore be wary because “His wrath is achaufed/ For Pat Pat ones watz His schulde efte be vnclene,/ Pa3 hit be bot a bassyn, a bolle oþer a scole,/ A dysche oþer a dobler, Pat Dry3tyn onez serued” (1143-46). This liturgical comparison is essential to the structure of the poem because, without it, there is no logical transition from Sodom and Gomorrah to Belshazzar’s feast. Both Belshazzar and the Sodomites sin against purity because they have made improper use of holy vessels; the difference is that the holy vessels defiled in Sodom were made of human flesh. The poet uses the liturgy as the ultimate example of an instance in which the coincidence of external courtly behavior

and internal Christian purity is absolutely essential. Thinking about the Mass enables the poem to construct a model of purity that unites aristocratic behavior and Christian interiority perfectly.

### ***Pearl* and Emotional Control**

*Pearl*, like the three poems that share its manuscript, argues that internal states have moral relevance for the aristocratic subject. Of the four poems, *Pearl* most directly and fully explores the process of individual spiritual reform. Like *Sir Gawain* and *Cleanness*, it examines aristocratic Christian identity construction but *Pearl* is unique in its explicit focus on interiority and emotional reform rather than social acts. The other three poems explore various ways in which external, social actions are results of internal states, but *Pearl* only examines external acts insofar as the dreamer allows them to affect his internal sense of identity and emotional control. The poet's choice of the dream vision genre is itself indicative of the poem's intensely inward focus. While *Sir Gawain* often refuses to discuss its protagonist's internal state, *Pearl* takes the dreamer's thoughts and emotions as its primary subject. Unlike Sir Gawain, who faces physical challenges in which he has some level of agency, the dreamer's struggles are entirely internal; he must learn to cope with the loss of his pearl, a loss over which he has absolutely no control. Rather than being concerned with how to integrate piety into courtly life, the poem explores how the aristocratic subject can transform his interior state through Christian doctrine and ritual. For the *Pearl*-poet, religious ritual is a necessary part of internal reform and *Pearl*, unlike the other three poems, makes the nature of such reform an object of intense focus. In this sense, *Pearl* most closely resembles *Patience* because both focus on the individual's internal response to the intractable will of God. However, the



two protagonists differ radically in that the dreamer has access to Christian liturgy and consolation while Jonah, as an Old Testament figure, does not. This access to Christian consolation through ritual is what allows *Pearl* to conclude on the hopeful note that the Mass is central to the reform of the interior self.

*Pearl* begins by describing the dreamer's moral failure to cope with his personal grief in a way that is consonant with Christian belief in the resurrection. His excessive and paralyzing sorrow is not a result of a lack of knowledge of Christian consolation; rather the source of this excess is his lack of emotional control. Before being overcome with sorrow and collapsing into sleep, the dreamer reflects on his pearl's burial place and tries to console himself with the thought that "For uch gresse mot grow of graynes dede,/ No whete were ells to wones wonne" (31-32). In thus imagining his pearl as a seed in the ground from which grain will grow, the dreamer depicts his pearl's death as the beginning of new life. This attempt at consolation alludes to a passage from the Gospel of John in which Christ explains the necessity of his own death by comparing human life to a grain of wheat: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). With this statement, the dreamer attempts to console himself not only with an image of rebirth derived from his physical location on the grave, but also through reference to orthodox Christian belief. However, neither is effective. Even though he knows intellectually through scripture that life does not end at physical death, he continues to regard his pearl as utterly lost. He remains entrenched in grief "Thagh kynde of Kryst me comfort kened" (55). The narrator admits that knowledge of Christ's human nature, and therefore Christ's

resurrection from the dead, ought to have consoled him, but it failed to do so.<sup>39</sup> Instead of relying on his knowledge of Christian truth, the dreamer initially depends on his emotions and regards his pearl as a lost physical object rather than a soul that transcends physical existence. He locates her presence precisely in the ground when he reflects that “Ther wonys that worthily, I wot and wene,/ My precious perle wythouten spot” and mourns “my perle that ther was penned” (47-48; 53). Despite his prior knowledge of Christian truth, he emotionally relies on physical knowledge, a knowledge that leads him to wrongly believe that his pearl is firmly located in the earth.

The dreamer fails to rule his emotional state with rationality, instead allowing emotion to dominate over reason. The narrator reflects that “A deuely dele in my hert denned/ Thagh resoun sette myselven saght” (51-52). Although reason would have been a remedy for grief, the dreamer allows his sorrow to dominate. When the pearl maiden enters the poem, she immediately rebukes the dreamer for allowing his emotions to work in opposition to his reason. She calls his overwhelming grief madness and criticizes him for not fully believing Christ’s promise of resurrection. According to her, the dreamer’s sorrow is misguided because “Thow demes noght bot doel dystresse” (337). The dreamer only uses his rational judgment in the service of perpetuating his grief. He fails to realize what he should logically know: that Christ raised his pearl from the dead. In order to demonstrate the dreamer’s lack of rationality, the pearl maiden compares him to a wild animal whose moaning serves no purpose: “Fo thogh thou daunce as any do,/ Braundysch and bray thy brathes breme,/ When thou no fyrre may to ne fro/Thou moste abyde that He

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<sup>39</sup> I use the terms ‘narrator’ and ‘dreamer’ to distinguish between the retrospective voice of the first-person narrator and the character experiencing the dream respectively. The poem often makes very little distinction between these two figures and so I use the term ‘narrator’ only when the tone is clearly retrospective.

schal deme" (345-8). Regardless of how loudly and endlessly he mourns, the dreamer is powerless to change God's decisions about life and death. According to the pearl maiden, God never forgoes reason and God ought to be a model for the dreamer's own internal state. The poem's sixth section, in which the pearl maiden repeatedly chastises the dreamer for his grief, centers on the concatenated word 'deme' because the dreamer's misconceptions about the maiden's heavenly state stem from his refusal to 'deme' correctly, in the sense of both 'to judge' and 'to rule'. The dreamer does not lack knowledge or reason; instead he refuses to use proper judgment in applying them to his own emotional state. He fails to rule himself properly.

Within the world of the poem, interior states are nearly tangible realities that the individual must control. As the dreamer wanders in the dream landscape, he allows the exterior world too much control over his internal state and becomes unable to maintain a firm distinction between inside and outside of himself. When he first perceives the place's beauty, "The dubbement dere of down and dales,/ Of wod and water and wlonke playnes,/ Bylde in me blys, abated my bales,/ Foridden my stresse, dystried my paynes" (121-4). He imagines that the beauty of the place has actively overcome his emotional state of sorrow in a way that he himself was wholly unable to do. He allows the landscape to have such an emotional effect on him that he begins to imagine his own interior life as if it too were a landscape. When he follows the river, "I bowed in blys, bredful my braynes" (126). Just as the river rises to the limits of its banks, his emotions nearly overflow from his mind. Even though he is actively walking along the river and trying to find a way across it, he conceives of himself as passive and responding involuntarily to the effects of the external world. He refuses to acknowledge his own emotional agency

and prefers to let external stimuli overwhelm him. When he first catches sight of the pearl maiden, he claims that the sight “meved my mynde ay more and more,” and, when he begins to recognize her, the “baysment gef my hert a brunt” (156-174). His heart and his mind are not active or in control; instead they are acted upon and he feels that he must endure whatever violence they are dealt from the external world. At this moment in the poem, he recognizes the nearly tangible reality of his mental and emotional life, but he fails to see that he has any control over its construction.

The poem argues that the dreamer sins by not containing his emotions within the boundaries of his body. In response to the pearl maiden’s accusations, the dreamer excuses his dramatic expressions of mourning by explaining that “My herte was al with mysse remorde/ As wallande water gos out of welle” (364-5). The dreamer compares the loss of his pearl to a gap at the opening of a well, suggesting that his emotional loss is similar to a physical loss having physical consequences. He claims that his grief was natural and uncontrollable; it was impossible to contain because the loss created a hole in his heart analogous to the opening of a well. The poem rejects the dreamer’s excuse by implying that he has a moral obligation to maintain the boundaries of his emotional state. It contrasts the dreamer’s image of his emotions as water exceeding its boundaries with another image of flowing water that occurs throughout the poem: the river that marks the separation between the dreamer and the pearl maiden. The river has its origin in the New Jerusalem and serves as a mark of separation rather than overflow. For the Lamb, the river is a way of separating what is his—the community of the saved in the New Jerusalem—from what is not. In this image of ever-flowing but highly regulated water,

the poem makes a morally-charged contrast with the dreamer's emotions which always threaten to exceed their proper boundaries.

In contrast, the pearl maiden perfectly controls the boundaries of her identity and emotions. There are many important differences between the dreamer and the pearl maiden—the most obvious being gender, age, and the maiden's resurrected state—but one of the most dramatic is their radically different levels of emotional control. Unlike the dreamer, the pearl maiden has sharp boundaries to her identity. When the dreamer first recognizes the maiden, he launches into a long description of her royal dress and appearance, with a focus on the boundaries of her body. The poem pays particular attention to the hems and borders of her garments, explaining that she wore sleeves “Dubbed with double perle and dyghte,/ Her cortel of self sute schene/ Wyth precios perles al umbepyghte” (202-4). He describes the points of her crown and the outer covering of her hair. The maiden is like a jewel whose beauty is marked by its sharply defined edges. In part, this attention to the external indicates that the dreamer has not yet engaged discursively with the maiden and so, at this point, all of his knowledge is external; it also suggests that, to some extent, she holds the status of an object for him. However, the poem achieves both effects by revealing that the body of the pearl maiden has rigid boundaries, boundaries that are not only physical but also emotional. The dreamer is overjoyed to see the maiden and moves between grief, joy, shame, and disappointment over the course of the poem, but the pearl maiden herself expresses a very small range of emotions. Indeed, the dreamer is continually frustrated because of her refusal to engage him on an emotional level; she does not even acknowledge the intimacy of their previous earthly relationship. The only positive emotional response he receives

from her occurs when she expresses pleasure that he professes to hold Christ as more important than her (400). She argues against emotional expression when she tells the dreamer that the only ultimate solution to grief is to stop external expressions of mourning altogether (349-60). For her, emotional containment is a moral imperative. As readers, we never get a sense of the pearl maiden's interior life because she is always in perfect emotional control. Although such containment is not particularly sympathetic to modern readers, the poem suggests that such control is the Christian ideal because the pearl maiden is perfect in the eyes of God.

### **Identification and the Loss at the Center of the Self**

The dreamer's grief undermines his ability to maintain a stable, contained identity, an identity that the pearl maiden has shown is essential for the Christian subject to have. The dreamer therefore attempts to overcome his grief through identification—the process of building up his own identity by claiming the pearl maiden's identity as a component of his own.<sup>40</sup> When he first speaks to her, the dreamer bewails the differences in their emotional states:

Pensyf, payred, I am forpayned,

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<sup>40</sup> My description of identification in *Pearl* bears some resemblance to psychoanalytic discussions of the relationship between loss and identification. For Freudian psychoanalysis, identification occurs when the ego incorporates aspects of a love-object into itself in order to redirect love inward onto the ego; the subject only establishes a stable identity through this process of identification which requires the ego to constitute itself with the elements of lost objects. My reading of *Pearl* differs from psychoanalysis in that, rather than propose that the ego must cover over and replace loss in service of pleasure, the poem argues that the Christian subject must acknowledge and accept the state of lack within the human self. See: Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 243-258; Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995). For an excellent discussion of the tensions between medieval religious literature and psychoanalysis, see: Louise O. Fradenburg, "'Be not far from me': Psychoanalysis, Medieval Studies and the Subject of Religion," *Exemplaria* 7 (1995): 41-54. For readings of *Pearl* that more directly deal with the similarities between psychoanalytic discussions of loss and *Pearl*, see: David Aers, "The Self Mourning"; George Edmondson, "*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object, the Shape of the Law," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 29-63; Sarah Stanbury, "The Body and the City in *Pearl*," *Representations* 48 (1994): 30-47.

And thou in a lyf of lykyng lyghte  
 In Paradys erde, of stryf unstrained.  
 What wyrde has hyder my juel vayned  
 And don me in thys del and gret daunger?  
 Fro we in twynne wern towen and twayned  
 I haf ben a joyles jueler. (246-52)

The dreamer is not just lamenting his own emotional suffering but also expressing astonishment that the pearl maiden's experience was so emotionally different from his own. In protesting this disparity, the dreamer claims that they had a prior emotional unity: they were forced apart but their natural state is together. He identifies himself as a 'jueler' for the first time at this moment, defining his identity as totally dependent on his possession of her because it is impossible to be a jeweler without a jewel. He implies that she is an essential part of his identity rather than a person with an independent subjectivity. Although the pearl maiden tells him that he ought not to grieve for her because she is not lost, he refuses to acknowledge that she understands herself as independent of him. Instead, he insists that, since she is able to enter the heavenly Jerusalem, he also must be entitled to do so. He exclaims that "I trawed my perle don out of dawes./ Now haf I fonde hyt, I schal ma feste/ And wony with hyt in schyr wodschawes" (282-84). At the moment he stakes a claim for his own right to enter paradise, he calls her 'my perle' and uses the impersonal pronoun 'hyt' to refer to her, treating her as his possession rather than a person. The dreamer's grief makes him feel incomplete and he attempts to overcome this feeling by constructing a stable, independent identity

for himself. In order to do so, he imagines the pearl maiden as merely an extension of him.

In *Pearl*, mourning poses a threat to the dreamer's individual identity precisely because mourning involves his admission that he is essentially incomplete without his pearl. The dreamer experiences the loss of his pearl as a loss to his own identity; he is initially unable to overcome his grief because he believes that, having lost her, he is missing an important part of himself. However, the dreamer's attempts to identify with her are continually thwarted. As the pearl maiden repeatedly points out, he needs to gain control over his emotions but he cannot do so by identifying with her. Instead the dreamer must acknowledge that his identity will always be lacking as long as he lacks Christ, and he can never truly have Christ until he reaches the afterlife. The poem suggests that, although the dreamer cannot overcome this lack, he can construct a more stable Christian identity for himself by recognizing his need for Christ.

As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that identification with the pearl maiden is impossible because there is a radical difference between the earthly and the heavenly, the living and the resurrected dead. When the pearl maiden describes the New Jerusalem and the Lamb, she explains that this difference is both emotional and rational: "Althagh oure corsen in clottes clynge/ And ye remen for rauthe wythouten reste,/ We thurghoutly haven cnawying" (857-59). She argues that one of the most important distinctions between those living on earth and those living in heaven is that the saved have a complete understanding of their relationship with God. Such knowledge creates a distinct emotional difference between the two states. The living are always crying out for God's pity because they cannot have full assurance and faith in their own resurrection, but the



resurrected are able to cast out such cares and live in a state of perpetual joy. In response to the pearl maiden's explanation of the joys of the afterlife, the dreamer temporarily rejects his attempts at complete identification with her. Instead of imagining the pearl buried in the dirt as an extension of himself, he identifies with the dirt itself claiming that "I am bot mokke and mul among" (905). In this image, he affirms the difference between earthly and heavenly life by imagining himself as the very definition of earthliness. The poem depicts the living as existing in a state of lack: they are in a perpetual state of emotional uncertainty because of their distance from the divine.

The dreamer repeatedly attempts to overcome this lack through identification, but he fails because he is striving to remake himself for his own fulfillment, rather than for Christ. When he sees the maidens worshipping the Lamb in the New Jerusalem, he is overwhelmed with the desire to be one of them. He is fascinated by his vision of the Lamb, but he does not identify with it; it is his attempted identification with the pearl maiden that makes him want to wade across the river. Once he sees her, his attention abruptly turns away from the Lamb in the middle of the stanza:

Then saw I ther my lyttel queen  
 That I wende had standen by me in sclade.  
 Lorde, much of mirthe was that ho made  
 Among her feres that was so quyt!  
 That sight me gart to thenk to wade  
 For luf longyng in gret delyt. (1147-52)

Although the precise referent of "that sight" is unclear—whether it refers to the entire vision of the New Jerusalem or his view of her happiness among the community of the

saved—the order of the description suggests that seeing her provides the impetus for his attempt to cross the river. At this moment, the dreamer's 'luf longyng' is more obviously sinful than the emotion that drove his grief at the start of the poem. At the beginning of the poem, the dreamer feels that the return of his pearl would rescue her from death, but by this point, the pearl maiden has already told him explicitly that she neither wants to return to him nor does she wish him to attempt to enter the New Jerusalem with her. If he were to succeed in crossing the river, he would betray the pearl maiden, violate God's laws, and contaminate the extreme purity of the New Jerusalem. Instead of recognizing these reasons for remaining on his own side of the river, the dreamer returns to imagining his emotions as the products of external forces and asserting ownership of the pearl maiden. He uses identification as a way of trying to reclaim pleasure for himself, regardless of the consequences.

Throughout the poem, the dreamer identifies with people and things that are radically unlike him instead of recognizing his own limitations and failures. When the dreamer sees the Lamb, he first imagines that he understands the Lamb's delight but is then puzzled by the wound in the Lamb's side:

Bot a wounde ful wyde and weete con wyse  
 Anende Hys hert thurgh hyde torente.  
 Of His quyte side his blod outsprent.  
 Alas, thoght I, who did that spyt?  
 Ani breste for bale aght haf forbrent  
 Er he therto hade had delyt. (1135-40)

The dreamer fails to recognize one of the Christian truths familiar to almost every medieval reader of devotional texts: Christ's wounds are the result of humanity's sins. The answer to the dreamer's question—'who did that spyt?'—is that the dreamer himself caused the wound. Because the dreamer is unwilling to see his own sinfulness and unworthiness, he imagines himself as one of the saved rather than seeing himself as he truly is: the source of the Lamb's disfigurement. When the dreamer exclaims that any person who caused such a wound ought to burn up in grief rather than experience delight, he unconsciously shows that his own response to the Lamb is completely inappropriate. He does not recognize that, although the Lamb experiences great delight despite his bloody, open wound, the dreamer himself ought to be in a state of grief and repentance. The dreamer's attempts at identification are sinful because he strives to claim others' identities as his own instead of acknowledging his own identity as an unworthy sinner.

*Pearl* contends that there are limits to individual identity and explores these limits through its use of metaphor. Metaphor is strikingly similar to identification because both are processes in which the identity of one thing is apparent only through its appropriation of the characteristics of another. Metaphor functions by likening two objects even as it assumes that the two are in most ways dissimilar. Through the metaphor of the pearl, the poem calls attention to the boundaries of identity even as it seems to collapse them. The pearl is the vehicle for several different tenors over the course of the poem, and it is often difficult to determine which tenor the poem is referring to at any given moment. At the start of the poem, the pearl is literally a lost gem but, as the poem progresses, the word 'pearl' has an increasing number of referents including a dead girl, purity, the immortal soul, the kingdom of heaven, the Eucharist, and Christ himself. The pearl's constant

shifts in meaning might to some extent signify the dreamer's spiritual progression from personal grief to divine contemplation; yet any such progression, to the extent that it occurs at all, is far from tidy. Even at the end of the poem, it is not entirely clear which meaning we are to finally attach to the word 'pearl.' The dreamer believes it is important and valuable to strive to be "precious perles unto His pay" (1212), but what precisely that involves is still an open question. However, trying to determine the final meaning of the pearl is not only futile but also beside the point. In its indeterminacy, the pearl represents precisely the failure of metaphor itself to totally appropriate meaning. Like the dreamer's failure to identify with the pearl maiden, the poem is never able to fully assimilate the pearl to a clear system of signification. The pearl's meaning must always remain just outside of the dreamer's and the reader's grasp. When the dreamer asserts that the pearl maiden is the pearl he once owned, she completely alters the terms of their discussion and argues that he never owned a pearl in the first place. She contends that "For that thou lestes was bot a rose/ That flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef;/ Now thurgh kynde of the kyste that hyt con close/ To a perle of prys hit is put in pref" (269-73). The implication of her argument is not only that the pearl maiden herself was not a pearl while alive but also that all living things on earth cannot be pearls because they are subject to the changes of nature. True pearls cannot be grasped on earth, either physically or intellectually. In the poem's first section, the poet underlines the pearl's unearthly nature by concluding each stanza with the phrase "perle withouten spot." He puns on 'spot,' a word he uses to describe both physical location and impurity. To be a pearl 'withouten spot' also means to be without any earthly location.<sup>41</sup> The poet suggests that,

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<sup>41</sup> Sylvia Tomasch has extensively explored the shifting meanings of the word 'spot' throughout the poem: "A Pearl Punnology," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 88 (1989): 1-20.

although all Christians ought to strive to be pearls, the meaning and identity of the pearl remains fundamentally inassimilable to human earthly life. Although metaphor appears to collapse the boundaries of identity, the pearl as metaphor emphasizes the limits of similarity, comparison, and identification.

### **Mediation and Submission to Authority**

As the poem progresses, the dreamer gradually heeds the pearl maiden's advice and shifts at least some of his devotion from her to Christ. However, identification with the divine is even more difficult than identification with the pearl maiden. *Pearl* depicts an irreducible distance between the human and divine through its use of figurative language to describe Christ. In *Pearl*, the only way for humans to understand the divine during their earthly lives is through figuration; the divine can only be represented through that which it is not. When the pearl maiden initially describes the Lamb to the dreamer, she suggests that 'the Lamb' is just a figurative name for Christ, calling him "My Lombe, my Lorde, my dere juelle,/My joy, my blys, my lemman fre" (795-96). In her formulation, 'Lamb' is just one of the possible names of Christ and is therefore not a literal description of him. She furthers her depiction of Christ as Lamb by paraphrasing the prophet Isaiah: "As a schep to the slaght ther lad was He,/ And as lombe that clypper in lande hem,/ So closed He hys mouth fro uch query" (801-3). The word "as" explicitly indicates that the description of Christ as a Lamb is a simile. Because the pearl maiden insists that 'the Lamb' is a figurative way of talking about Christ, it is startling for the reader to discover that, when the dreamer sees the New Jerusalem for himself, he does not see a human Christ. Instead, the Lamb is quite literally a lamb. When the dreamer notices the wound in the Lamb's side, a wound that Christ received on the cross, the poet

describes it as located “Anende Hys hert thurgh hyde torente” (1136). The poem places alliterative emphasis on the word ‘hyde,’ highlighting that the Lamb is literally an animal. The description requires readers to focus on the literal description of the Lamb rather than disregard it in favor of its allegorical referent. Unlike the pearl, whose relationship to its various tenors is constantly shifting, the Lamb is an allegorical sign with a single stable referent. The very stability of the sign highlights the distance between signifier and signified; the reader knows that Christ is not literally a lamb even though the poem insists on that representation. At the moment the dreamer expects to see God, he encounters a sign that refuses direct perception.

Within the dream, figural truths appear as if they were literal, but the pearl maiden insists that the dreamer ought to regard them as figurative. When the pearl maiden tells the dreamer about her home in the heavenly Jerusalem, the dreamer becomes confused because “Thou telles me of Jerusalem, the ryche ryalle,/ Ther David dere was dyght on trone—/ Bot by thyse holtes hit con not hone,/ Bot in Judee hit is, that noble note” (919-22). The dreamer fails to recognize that the historical Jerusalem is a figuration of the heavenly Jerusalem because he wrongly assumes that his own experience is unmediated by signs and language. He thinks that, because he is directly experiencing it, the word ‘Jerusalem’ must refer to a literal geographic location. This misunderstanding prompts the pearl maiden to teach him a lesson in biblical figuration, a lesson that seems to serve a more immediate purpose for the poem’s readers than for the dreamer himself (937-60). The pearl maiden addresses him as if he were reading rather than experiencing the dream in order to show him that he ought to approach the dream as if it were a written text in need of interpretation.

Earthly humans can only perceive the divine through textual mediation. When the dreamer finally sees the New Jerusalem, he describes it through constant reference to a written text: the Book of Revelation. In the seventeenth section, every stanza ends with the concatenated words “the apostel John.” This constant citation of John’s voice both legitimates the dreamer’s vision as orthodox and suggests that his vision could not be authoritative without textual support. His vision makes no claims to being unmediated; he details that “As John thise stones in Writ con nemme,/ I knew the name after his tale” (997-98). The dreamer recognizes what he sees in front of his eyes through text rather than through vision. In the middle of his description, the dreamer explains that “I knew hit by his devysement” (1019), the word ‘knew’ suggesting that he recognized it through John’s description and that John’s description actually enabled him to perceive it at all. In this section, knowledge of the afterlife is not possible without textual authority. At the beginning of the eighteenth section, however, the narrator recounts that “As John hym wrytes yet more I syye,” suggesting that his description is about to go beyond John’s (1033). And, in fact, the poem does describe elements not present in the Book of Revelation, but it rarely strays far from them, continuing to reference elements of the New Jerusalem that “John the appostel in termes tyghte” (1053). It is no coincidence that, at the moments when the dreamer relies on John’s textual support the least, his reason and self-control also begin to fade. He describes these extratextual elements as such great wonders that “No fleschly hert ne might endure” and he becomes like a “dased quayle” upon seeing them (1082; 1085). The heavenly Jerusalem thwarts direct human understanding; a human becomes like an animal in witnessing it. The poem implies that

to perceive the heavenly and remain both human and rational is necessarily to perceive it through textual mediation.

In order to even partly understand the divine, the individual believer must both accept mediation and totally submit to the external logic of divine authority. Throughout the poem, the dreamer misunderstands divine authority because he assumes that it must operate in exactly the same way as earthly royal authority does. When he hears that the pearl maiden is a queen in heaven, he is astonished because he thinks she died too young to merit such a high rank. He argues that “Of countes, damysel, par ma fay,/ Wer fayr in heven to halde asstate/ Other ells a lady of lasse aray—/Bot a queen! Hit is to dere a date” (489-92). Not only does he fail to understand the logic of heavenly reward, he struggles to grasp the idea that heaven might have a separate logic of reward at all. For him, there is no other system than the English aristocratic one. Even though the pearl maiden explains heavenly logic in detail, the dreamer cannot break outside of his earthly aristocratic logic. He even worries about material concerns, asking about her castle, “Haf ye no wones in castel walle,/ Ne maner ther ye may mete and won?” (917-18). For the dreamer, courtly rank manifests itself in material objects and he is uncertain what it might mean to have a heavenly rank if it does not entail castles and manors. The hierarchical system of heaven within this poem closely mirrors that of an earthly court, but the dreamer cannot accept even small differences between the two because to do so would mean to submit to a power he does not understand.

Royal and divine power are similar insofar as they both demand that the good subject submit to laws whose logic exceeds the subject’s own perception. *Pearl*’s use of the phrase ‘princes paye’ in both the opening stanza and the closing section demonstrates



that royal and divine power both require individuals to subject their own desires to external judgment. In the very first lines of the poem, the dreamer praises his pearl on the grounds that royalty values it: “Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye/ To clanly clos in golde so clere” (1-2). The value of the pearl is most evident in the fact that it is pleasing to princes; the dreamer does not believe that his own judgment is nearly as important or convincing. By the end of the poem, the dreamer has reexamined the pearl’s value and now regards it in relation to divine rather than royal power. Nevertheless, he still suggests that it is a princely figure, a figure of courtly authority, that ultimately determines value when he hopes that Christ “gef uus to be His homly hyne/ And precious perles unto His pay” (1211-12). Whether the power is royal or divine, the good subject is one who submits to its external judgment.

### **Liturgy and Internal Reform**

Although the poem’s ending is its most explicit reference to the Eucharist, liturgical themes pervade the poem to demonstrate that this submission to divine logic is essential to Christian worship. Eucharistic imagery circulates throughout the poem in a number of ways, not the least of which is in the pearl’s resemblance to the host: both are round white objects which inspire devotion. It is in the maiden’s retelling of the vineyard parable, however, that the poem begins its exploration of the significance of liturgical practice to the individual subject. In this moment, *Pearl* argues that the Mass is an instance when earth-bound humans encounter heavenly logic and must submit to what they do not fully understand. The pearl maiden introduces the parable with the words “As Mathew meles in your Messe,” directly linking the narrative to a liturgical setting (497). When she describes each laborer receiving his penny at the end of the day, her

description is very similar to a eucharistic reception line. The lord, like a priest at Mass, orders the reeve to “set hem alle upon a rawe” so that the people might each receive a single flat disc in exchange for their labor (545). It is likely that many readers would have recognized this part of the parable as referring to eucharistic reception since several later medieval devotional texts explicitly associate this parable with the Eucharist. The fourteenth-century *Book of Vices and Virtues*, for example, states that the Eucharist “is þe peny þat he 3yueþ to his werke-men whan þey comen at euen, þat is þe ende of here lif.”<sup>42</sup> In the Mass, much like in the distribution of a penny to every worker, there is a radical equality among lay people, an equality that stands in sharp contrast to courtly rank. Although there are many ways in which lay people may seek to assert their social and economic dominance during the Mass—through location in the church, ownership of particular windows, the order of kissing the pax—every believer only receives one host and each host is of equal value. The dreamer protests the logic of the parable precisely on these grounds of equality; he does not want to accept the idea that God will treat each Christian equally regardless of rank or the number of his good works. In this parable, the poem thwarts direct correspondence between wealth and holiness. While this passage is not a rejection of all aristocratic liturgical practices—since the poem valorizes self-examination and a personal relationship with Christ in the host—it does critique the notion that wealth provides special access to God. It suggests that, despite all the aristocracy’s efforts to gain personal spiritual benefits through private Masses and private prayer, God’s favor is always beyond any individual’s understanding and control. In this

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<sup>42</sup> *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. W. Nelson Francis, EETS 217 (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 111. Parallel passages appear in *Le Somme des Vices et des Vertues* and *A3enbite of Inwyt*. For further details on the connection between the penny and host in *Pearl*, see: Robert W. Ackerman, “The Pearl-Maiden and the Penny,” *Romance Philology* 17 (1964): 615-23.

sense, the poem's version of the vineyard parable is less interested in providing a vision of the Christian community than it is in pointing out the individual's inability to control God's judgment. The liturgy of the Mass demands that believers submit to the rules of God even though such rules do not correspond to those of the socioeconomic hierarchies of medieval England.

In particular, earthly devotion to the divine involves acceptance of simultaneous absence and presence, an acceptance of heavenly logic that is crucial to a belief in the Eucharist.<sup>43</sup> Despite the pearl maiden's continual criticism of his overzealous behavior, the dreamer refuses to settle for mediation and actively strives for direct contact with the objects of his fascination and desire. When she tells him that the two of them cannot live together, the dreamer laments that he will return to his grief: "Now haf I fonte that I forlete,/ Schal I efte forgo hit er ever I fine?/ Why schal I hit bothe mysse and mete?" (327-29). He complains that he will experience even greater pain than his original grief because she will no longer be either fully lost or fully present to him. She occupies a space between absolute absence and absolute presence, and he finds this situation almost impossible to accept both conceptually and emotionally. Over the course of the poem, the dreamer struggles to accept the unbridgeable distance between himself and the object of his devotion, whether that object is the Lamb or the pearl maiden. He always desires more immediacy, and this desire culminates in his failed attempt to cross the river into

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<sup>43</sup> The paradoxical relationship between presence and absence in the Eucharist is an issue that theologians have long seen as central to an understanding of the sacrament. See, for example: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 3a.75. Modern scholars have also recognized this paradox's centrality. See: Beckwith, *Signifying God*, 88-89; Caroline Walker Bynum, "Seeing and Seeing Beyond: The Mass of St. Gregory in the Fifteenth Century," in *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton: Department of Art and Archaeology, 2006), 208-240; Catherine Pickstock, "Thomas Aquinas and the Quest for the Eucharist," in *Catholicism and Catholicity: Eucharistic Communities in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Sarah Beckwith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 47-68.

the New Jerusalem. At the end of the poem, the dreamer recognizes that his inability to control his desire is sinful and he therefore turns toward the Eucharist. The Eucharist, with its promise of Christ's presence in a piece of bread that does not in any way resemble the earthly body of Christ, is a sacrament that directly challenges the worshipper's ability to believe in the reality of simultaneous absence and presence. The consecrated host is a figure for the presence of Christ and so, just as the pearl metaphor calls attention to the difference between tenor and vehicle, it highlights the worshipper's distance from the divine at the same time as it signifies the divine's immediate presence.<sup>44</sup> The Eucharist thus demands that believers submit to external authority and acknowledge the limits of identification because the distance between figure and reality is so readily apparent. It offers the dreamer the chance to learn to be satisfied with his distance from the divine.

The description of the virgins' procession into the New Jerusalem presents the Mass as a method of worship that acknowledges divine absence even as it celebrates Christ's sacramental presence. The maidens' procession toward and worship of the Lamb is one of the poem's most explicit liturgical allusions. Solemn processions were one of the most recognizable liturgical activities in later medieval England because they were particularly frequent in the Use of Salisbury, the variant of the Roman Rite used throughout most of England.<sup>45</sup> In the Use of Salisbury, the priest and the other liturgical ministers would process around the church at the beginning of Mass and, since the altar

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<sup>44</sup> Although modern scholarship sometimes implies otherwise, many orthodox theologians affirmed the idea that the consecrated host was both a figure for Christ's presence and that presence itself. For one of the earliest and most influential discussions of this idea, see: Hugh of St. Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De Sacramentis)*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951), 304-315.

<sup>45</sup> Terence Bailey, *The Processions of Sarum and the Western Church* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1971). The Use of Salisbury is often referred to as the "Use of Sarum."

itself typically lay behind a screen, this procession was one of the most visible parts of the liturgy. The poet's use of the word "prosessyoun" to describe the maidens' entrance into the heavenly Jerusalem could not help but invoke liturgical practice (1096).

Although the procession looks liturgical, the poet explains that the maidens are not taking part in a Mass because the Mass serves a purpose for earthly spirituality which is unnecessary in heaven. He describes how, in the New Jerusalem, "Kyrk therinne was non yete—/ Chapel ne temple that ever was set./ The Almyghty was her mynster mete,/ The Lombe the sakerfyse ther to refet" (1061-64). The immediate presence of Christ obviates the need for Mass because the celebration of Mass assumes Christ's absence; if Christ is fully present, there is no need to celebrate his invisible presence in the Eucharist. Since the image of Christ as a lamb draws on sacrificial language and the poet argues that the presence of the Lamb replaces earthly sacrifice, the ever-bleeding Lamb on his throne is analogous to the consecrated host on the altar. The maidens' worship of the Lamb is not a Mass but a perfection of it because it is a completely direct way of worshipping Christ. By arguing that God himself is the Church and the Lamb himself is the sacrifice, the poem depicts the heavenly Jerusalem in the terms of the Mass even though it recognizes that those terms have been superseded.

Through its description of the differing responses of the maidens and the dreamer to the Lamb, *Pearl* argues that participation in the Mass ought to involve emotional and physical control. In their perfect worship of the Lamb, the maidens model ideal liturgical devotion, in both their physical posture and emotional response. As they approach the Lamb's throne, "Thagh thay werne fele, no pres in plyt,/ Bot mylde as maydenes seme at mas/ So drov they forth with gret delyt" (1114-16). The poem praises the maidens

because, although they are experiencing the utmost joy, they are completely emotionally contained and physically orderly. The word “seme” is highly significant to this description. It suggests that a particular set of thoughts and emotions is not essential to proper liturgical devotion. What is most important is that the worshipper exercise control over her emotions so that she can ‘seme’ mild from the outside. In contrast to the maidens, the dreamer has exactly the wrong response to Christ’s presence within this liturgical setting. First, he misunderstands the sacramental meaning of the Lamb’s wound and is horrified rather than engaged in worship or penitence. However, the dreamer’s greatest failure in liturgical behavior is his inability to contain his emotional response. The dreamer is allowed to see this celebration only until he lets his emotions overtake his physical actions, until “Delyt me drof in yye and ere” (1153). Once his emotions drive his devotion, he attempts to cross the river and is forced to awaken from his dream. The poem presents emotional containment as an ideal of liturgical behavior, an ideal which the dreamer utterly fails to achieve.

Although it is the site of the dreamer’s greatest failure, the poem argues that repeated participation in the liturgy is the only way for him to reform; the poem enacts this call to inner change through ritual in its form. The repetition of the Mass—as a religious ritual that requires the worshipper to accept simultaneous presence and absence, and to accept the limits of one’s own subjectivity—is a way of training the self into proper spiritual discipline. Repetition itself lies at the heart of *Pearl*’s formal artistry. Each stanza of the poem begins by repeating the concluding words of the previous stanza, and the poem’s last line echoes its first line; within each section, every stanza ends with a variation on the same concatenated word or phrase. The poem thus uses repetition to

create internal connections between each stanza and section and, as virtually every formal analysis of the poem remarks, the form itself strives to imitate the perfection and roundness of a pearl.<sup>46</sup> This form—with its rigid structure and symbolic use of repetition—also imitates the repetitive nature of religious ritual. By showing how each repetition alters the meaning of the repeated word, *Pearl* argues that repetition itself can be a catalyst for inner change. Repetition is both a marker and a cause of inner transformation during the seventh section, which concatenates the phrase “grounde of alle my blysse.” Over the course of this section, the repetition of this phrase draws attention to the dreamer’s shifting understanding of the true nature of bliss. At the beginning of the section, the dreamer asserts that, in life, the pearl maiden was the source of his bliss. Over the course of a few stanzas, he reinterprets the concatenated phrase to refer only to Christ whom he now considers the only true and lasting source of happiness. The repetition of key words forces the dreamer to continually reformulate those words’ meanings and highlights the way that meaning changes over the course of the section. Through its formal focus on repetition, the poem enacts what the dreamer realizes when he turns to the Eucharist at the end of the poem: regular repetition is the key to meaningful internal change.

*Pearl*’s final stanza argues that eucharistic devotion provides a way for the individual subject to practice emotional and spiritual control. Upon awaking from his dream, the dreamer recognizes that his lack of emotional control forced him out of his vision of the New Jerusalem. He allowed his desire to push him to the point of madness when he should have submitted wholly to God’s will “And yerned no more then was me

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<sup>46</sup> For an overview of the highly complex formal structure of *Pearl*, see: H.N. Duggan, “Meter, Stanza, Vocabulary, Dialect,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 221-242.

gyven,/ And halden me ther in trwe entent” (1190-91). The dreamer was unworthy of the vision because he failed to contain and control his desire. When the dreamer then proposes the worship of the Eucharist as a solution to his sinfulness, he suggests that the sacrament can help the individual believer to gain control of his inner self. Although this suggestion may initially seem simplistic, the poem argues that the process of emotional containment and accepting the state of lack within the self is ongoing and therefore always incomplete; like the Mass, it must happen “uch a daye” (1210). When the dreamer proclaims that “To pay the Prince other sete saghte,/ Hit is ful ethe to the god Krystyin” (1201-02), he is not stating that it is easy for him to please God. On the contrary, he has gone into great detail to show that he himself is not a good Christian. Eucharistic worship is a process of identity reform, a process whose goal it is to create that ‘god Krystyin’ within the self so that pleasing Christ can eventually become a task that is ‘ful ethe.’ The Mass is not the end-point of spiritual perfection; it is a ritual in which the individual learns and practices self-control.

Thus, *Pearl* invokes the Mass to further the dreamer’s individual spiritual reform. In this closing stanza, the dreamer certainly acknowledges the role of the wider Christian community when he describes the consecrated host being shown to “uus” and insists that all Christians ought to be Christ’s “homly hyne” (1210; 1211). At the same time, the poem opens this possibility only to foreclose it. Its call to eucharistic worship remains hierarchical and individualistic. The command to become a servant focuses on the individual’s subjection to Christ rather than his equality to other Christians. The implied social setting of the eucharistic encounter becomes a way for the dreamer to imagine his own individual subjection. To the extent that this stanza imagines a social community at



all, it is a community of aristocrats: Christians for whom the act of becoming a “homly hyne” would be a radical act of subjection and who are privileged enough to be able to hear Mass every day.<sup>47</sup> The implied social setting functions as a way of exalting the dreamer as an individual. Through his humility, the dreamer asserts that he has gained a particularly intimate relationship with Christ; not only is Christ his “frende ful fyin” but the dreamer also boldly and obtrusively asserts that Christ’s blessing is also “myn” (1204; 1208). Just as fourteenth-century aristocrats used the social occasion of Mass as an opportunity to perform their own interior spirituality, the dreamer uses the implied Christian community in order to display his own unique subjection to Christ in the Eucharist.

In her introduction to *Pearl*, Sarah Stanbury describes critics’ interpretive dilemma with regard to its final stanza in the following way: “Does [the dreamer] become, as he asserts, a docile subject (taking the sacrament), or does he remain a single consciousness, separate from the vision of metaphoric accumulation that he witnesses?”<sup>48</sup> Although this formulation accurately describes current scholarly approaches to this stanza, it creates an inaccurate opposition between eucharistic devotion and individual subjectivity within the poem. The dreamer’s turn toward the Eucharist is not a movement away from individual consciousness; it is a turn inward. The dreamer’s decision to worship Christ in the sacrament is a direct result of his realization that he must firmly contain his emotions and desires. As in *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the*

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<sup>47</sup> In the fourteenth century, the secular practice of hearing daily Mass was typically limited to the upper classes and, because it did not include visual cues such as processions, daily Mass was even more focused on private prayer than a Sunday Mass would have been. Even Eamon Duffy notes that “the worshipper kneeling at a weekday Mass was encouraged in a form of participation which approximated to monastic prayer, a form of intense affectivity which was essentially private and individualistic.” See: *The Stripping of the Altars*, 129.

<sup>48</sup> Sarah Stanbury, “Introduction,” in *Pearl*, ed. Sarah Stanbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 1-30, at 17.

*Green Knight*, the poet argues in *Pearl* that the good aristocratic subject enacts his Christian devotion primarily through self-control and inner reform rather than external actions. In *Pearl*, the Eucharist is integral to individual reform because it forces the believer to accept the limits of his own subjectivity. Through Christ's simultaneous absence and presence in the Mass, worshippers encounter their desire and inability to identify with Christ. The good Christian acknowledges that there will always be a loss at the center of the self during earthly life because Christ is never fully present. For the *Pearl*-poet, rigid control of one's emotional state is essential if one is to accept the profound state of lack that defines human earthly life.

### III.

#### Failed Signification:

#### Corpus Christi and Corpus Mysticum in *Piers Plowman*

In an important overview of *Piers Plowman*'s theology, Robert Adams remarks that Langland's views on the Eucharist are of little interest because "his attitude seems altogether conventional and pious; and since the Eucharist is not frequently mentioned in the poem, it seems unlikely that the subject holds much promise for extensive future research."<sup>1</sup> Few scholars have contested Adams' assessment. Indeed, until David Aers' recent treatment of the topic, to my knowledge there had not been a single scholarly article on the Eucharist in *Piers Plowman*.<sup>2</sup> Surveying the poem as a whole, Aers argues that, for Langland, the Eucharist cannot be separated from the context of its reception, the Christian community. He concludes by claiming that Langland's theology is somewhat radical in its avoidance of debates about the Real Presence. However accurate such a conclusion may be for the poem as a whole, it does not adequately reflect the complexity of the poem's penultimate passus—19 in the B-Text, 21 in the C-text, the one passus most centrally concerned with eucharistic theology. This chapter will present a detailed reading of that passus.<sup>3</sup> I want to reconsider Aers' crucial point, Langland's commitment

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Adams, "Langland's Theology," in *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 87-114, at 98.

<sup>2</sup> David Aers, "The Sacrament of the Altar in *Piers Plowman*," in *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2004), 29-51. This chapter is a revised version of an earlier article: David Aers, "The Sacrament of the Altar in *Piers Plowman* and Late Medieval England," in *Images, Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 63-80.

<sup>3</sup> Passus 19 and 20 of the B-Text are virtually identical to Passus 21 and 22 of the C-Text. I cite the B-Text throughout. All citations are from: William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Everyman, 1995).

to Christian community, in the light of another interest that has received ample scholarly attention: Langland's interest in allegory.<sup>4</sup>

The passus begins and ends with instances of failed eucharistic reception: when Will falls asleep at Easter Mass immediately prior to the consecration, and when the Christians in the Barn of Unity reject Conscience's call to receive the Eucharist. Framed by these two eucharistic moments, the middle of the passus is an investigation of the way in which signs, particularly Christ's name and the Church as a sign of Christ's presence on earth, challenge and enable the human community's access to Christ. Thus, I argue that the passus constitutes a direct engagement in orthodox discussions of the Eucharist as a sign. Langland examines the host as a sign of Christ's body, both Christ's historical body and the corporate body of all Christians. Like many medieval theologians he effects this examination through a discussion of the nature of allegorical signs. As Hugh of St. Victor and Thomas Aquinas demonstrated, the Eucharist was both reality and figure; it was a sign that both signified and contained the physical body of Christ, and signified Christ's mystical body, the community of the faithful.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Langland's treatment of allegory differs from those of the theologians in that his discussion is itself allegorical and poetic. Like most students of the topic in the past thirty years, I agree that Langland's intense focus on materiality continually causes failures or breaks in the

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<sup>4</sup> The scholarship on allegory in *Piers Plowman* is vast. Some of the most influential works include: David Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975); Mary Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973); Lavinia Griffiths, *Personification in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985); Jill Mann, *Langland and Allegory*, Morton W. Bloomfield Lectures on Medieval English Literature, II (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992); Maureen Quilligan, "Langland's Literal Allegory," *Essays in Criticism* 28 (1978): 95-111; Pamela Raabe, *Imitating God: The Allegory of Faith in Piers Plowman B* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1990); D.W. Robertson, Jr., and Bernard F. Huppé, *Piers Plowman and the Scriptural Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).

<sup>5</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De Sacramentis)*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951), 308; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars edition, vol. 59 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 3a.80, 4.

poem's allegorical structure, dramatizing the limits of both allegory and language. As Kathleen Hewett-Smith notes, Langland's use of concrete detail frustrates "the success of allegorical interpretation by forcing our attention to an historically immediate material world, to the literal level of the sign, by advertising the disparity between real and ideal, signifier and signified."<sup>6</sup> At the same time, by arguing that Langland sees the Eucharist as an instance of allegory, I aim to shift the emphasis of this and similar claims, suggesting that Langland does in fact regard the perfect reflection of a transcendent signified in the material signifier as potentially possible. The reason that such a reflection almost never occurs is not due to the inherent inadequacies of language but because of human failure and sin.<sup>7</sup> My argument has four parts. First, through a brief history of major medieval eucharistic debates and readings of two of Thomas Aquinas' hymns, I demonstrate that medieval theologians often celebrated Christ's eucharistic presence because of its complex relationship to figurative language. Next, drawing on Lydgate's "A Procession of Corpus Christi," I explore how the interpretation of the consecrated host as a sign of the corporate body of Christ became more explicitly allegorical in the later Middle Ages. I then turn to *Piers Plowman* and show that, prior to Passus 19, Langland prepares his readers to imagine the Eucharist as a sign of social justice. Finally, I closely examine

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith, "Allegory on the Half-Acre: The Demands of History," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 10 (1996): 1-22, at 1. See also: Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth*; Laurie A. Finke, "Truth's Treasure: Allegory and Meaning in *Piers Plowman*," in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 51-68; Griffiths, *Personification*; Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith, "'Nede ne hath no lawe': Poverty and the De-stabilization of Allegory in the Final Visions of *Piers Plowman*," in *William Langland's Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays*, ed. Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith (New York: Routledge, 2001), 233-53; James J. Paxson, "Inventing the Subject and the Personification of Will in *Piers Plowman*: Rhetorical, Erotic, and Ideological Origins and Limits in Langland's Allegorical Poetics," in *William Langland's Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays*, ed. Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith (New York: Routledge, 2001), 195-231; Quilligan, "Langland's Literal Allegory."

<sup>7</sup> I am building off the work of Lawrence Clopper and Pamela Raabe who both suggest that Langland does not necessarily see a great tension between figural and literal, universal and individual. See: Lawrence M. Clopper, "Langland and Allegory: A Proposition," *Yearbook in Langland Studies* 15 (2001): 35-42; Raabe, *Imitating God*.

Langland's investigation of the Eucharist and its relationship to both signs and the Christian community in Passus 19 itself.

### *Veritas and Figura*

Modern literary scholars generally tend not to recognize the degree to which later medieval orthodox eucharistic theology is dependent upon allegory—figurative language that implies a division between literal signifier and transcendent signified. Drawing on the writings of Wyclif and the Lollards, some scholars have argued that later medieval orthodox writings about the Eucharist collapse the division between sign (consecrated host) and signified (Christ's body) in the sacrament in order to affirm the truth of the doctrine of transubstantiation.<sup>8</sup> Although many late medieval texts, such as sermon exempla and mystical writings, do attempt to undermine the distinction between sign and signified, and therefore the Eucharist's nature as a sign, it is important to recognize that there are also many theological texts that insist on understanding the Eucharist in terms of the complex relationship between truth and figure that it enacts.

Throughout the Middle Ages, most orthodox theologians understood the nature of Christ's eucharistic presence through reference to figurative language. Almost every theologian, whether orthodox or heretical, recognized that the physical host was a sign that represented something other than or beyond itself; they typically used the terms *figura* (figure) and *veritas* (truth) to distinguish between the sign and signified in the sacrament. Transubstantiation, the belief that the host literally transformed into the

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<sup>8</sup> This is precisely the argument that Wyclif makes in *De Eucharistia*. See: *De Eucharistia Tractatus Maior*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Trübner & Co., 1892), 1-326. David Aers argues that all realms of orthodox discourse—from theologians to poets—"shared a commitment to closing the gaps between the sacramental sign of Christ's presence and the bodily presence it signified." David Aers, *Sanctifying Signs*, 11. See also: Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 6-9; Dallas G. Denery II, "From Sacred Mystery to Divine Deception: Robert Holkot, John Wyclif and the Transformation of Fourteenth-Century Eucharistic Discourse," *Journal of Religious History* 29 (2005): 129-144.

substance of the body of Christ during the consecration, became required for orthodoxy in the fourteenth century, but discussions of the Eucharist's allegorical nature continued both in the vernacular and in Latin. Allegorical language actually became increasingly important to definitions of the Eucharist as the doctrine of the Real Presence and the later doctrine of transubstantiation became required for orthodoxy.

Medieval theologians typically based their understanding of the Eucharist as a sign in theory which proposed a real but complex relationship between sign and signified. It is a critical commonplace that western medieval theologians often focused their thinking around a common theory of verbal signs which derived much of its authority from the Incarnation of Christ. Since Christ is both the Word made flesh and the mediator between God and humanity, it made sense to regard verbal signs as the primary means of gaining religious knowledge. Christ the Word redeemed language and it is therefore through signs that humans can come to know him. Augustine, the theologian largely responsible for formulating this theory of signs, argued that verbal signs "whether literal or figurative, truly, if partially, represent really existing things."<sup>9</sup> Even though Augustine draws a sharp distinction between sign and signified, he assumes that there is a real relationship between the two.

Verbal sign theory became a way of explaining the mystery of Christ's presence that did not diminish its sanctity. The Christian understanding of language and the Eucharist both derive from the central mystery of the Incarnation; the Word became flesh and redeemed human language, and it is through the words of the priest that the Word

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<sup>9</sup> Marcia L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge*, rev. ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 53.

again becomes flesh on the altar during the Mass.<sup>10</sup> In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine argues that figurative language is essential to scripture because “no one doubts that things are perceived more readily through similitudes and that what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure.”<sup>11</sup> According to Augustine, literal signification may be able to express fairly simple aspects of reality, but metaphorical signification and figurative language are better suited to expressing realities that are complex and difficult to understand. Figurative language gives mystery and honor to its subject both by clarifying it and suggesting the inherent difficulty of comprehending it. In this context, it is evident that medieval theologians’ insistence that the Eucharist was a sign could often be an affirmation of the Eucharist’s spiritual worth. Like a figurative sign in scripture, the Eucharist posed interpretive difficulties because its meaning was not readily apparent. However, the nature of Christ’s presence as both beyond the sign and a part of it simultaneously protected Christ’s presence from the disdain of non-believers and led to the spiritual benefit of the faithful. Throughout the Middle Ages, but particularly between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, theologians often strengthened their arguments for Christ’s presence in the host precisely by insisting that the Eucharist be understood as an instance of figurative language.

In the ninth century, during what became the first major eucharistic debates of the Middle Ages, Paschasius and Ratramnus set the precedent for future definitions of the Eucharist by arguing that defining the relationship between figure and truth was the

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<sup>10</sup> As Miri Rubin points out, the Eucharist was often directly associated with the Incarnation: *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 142-147.

<sup>11</sup> “nemo ambigit et per similitudines libentius quaeque cognosci et cum aliqua difficultate quaesita multo gratius inueniri.” Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana. De Vera Religione*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 32 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1962), II.vi, 8. Translation from: Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), 38.



central challenge of understanding Christ's presence in the host. These two monks at Corbie wrote the first theological treatises devoted specifically to a doctrinal treatment of the Eucharist and both defined the nature of Christ's presence by examining the relationship between the terms *figura* and *veritas*.<sup>12</sup> The major difference between the two treatises was that, unlike Ratramnus, Paschasius insisted on the real presence of Christ's true body and blood in the host. According to Paschasius, the figurative nature of the Eucharist pertains to the sensible elements of the sacrament—the bread and wine—while the truth pertains to Christ. In his formulation, figurative language functions as a sort of veil, masking the truth that is fully present. Paschasius argues that the Eucharist “is a figure or character which is sensed exteriorly, but the whole truth, and not a shadow, is perceived on the inside, and through this, nothing else is shown than truth and sacrament of the flesh itself.”<sup>13</sup> Paschasius recognizes that any sacrament is essentially a sign but he suggests that within the sacrament of the Eucharist is contained the signified itself. Ratramnus, on the other hand, contended that the change in the host takes place on a spiritual level and Christ is therefore only figuratively present in the host. For Ratramnus, there must always be a sharp distinction between figure and truth, sign and signified; by definition, a figure must signify a reality beyond and separate from itself.<sup>14</sup> The Eucharist therefore signifies Christ but is not Christ himself. Ratramnus' definition

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<sup>12</sup> Celia Chazelle, “Figure, Character, and the Glorified Body in the Carolingian Eucharistic Controversy,” *Traditio* 47 (1992): 1-36; Ian Christopher Levy, *John Wyclif: Scriptural Logic, Real Presence, and the Parameters of Orthodoxy* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2003), 126-137; Gary Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist in the Early Scholastic Period: A Study of the Salvific Function of the Sacrament according to the Theologians c. 1080- c. 1220* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 21-31.

<sup>13</sup> “Est autem figura uel character hoc quod exterius sentitur, sed totum ueritas et nulla adumbratio quod intrinsecus percipitur ac per hoc nihil aliud hinc inde quam ueritas et sacramentum ipsius carnis aperitur.” Paschasius Radbertus, *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini*, ed. Bede Paulus, *Corpus Christianorum*, Continuatio Mediaevalis XVI (Turnholt: Brepols, 1969), 30. Translation is my own.

<sup>14</sup> Ratramnus, *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini*, ed. J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1954), VI-VIII.

of Christ's presence in the Eucharist was simpler than Paschasius' insofar as it posited a clear separation between figure and truth, host and body. The fact that Paschasius' views on the Eucharist were the ones to become dominant over the next several centuries ensured that the relationship between figure and truth in the Eucharist remained fraught and therefore continued to incite controversy.

Paradoxically, as the doctrines of the Real Presence became more rigid and theologians insisted that there was no gap between signifier and signified in the consecrated sacrament, theologians began to use a sacramental vocabulary that defined the two as increasingly distinct. In the eleventh century, largely in response to the Berengarian controversy, theologians attempted to secure both a highly literal idea of Christ's presence and a sharp distinction between truth and figure.<sup>15</sup> In 1059, the church hierarchy officially condemned Berengar of Tours' teachings on the Eucharist at the Easter Council of Rome because he insisted on the figurative nature of the Eucharist and denied the real, substantial presence of Christ's physical body behind the accidents of the host. However, in his definition of the Eucharist, Berengar made a distinction between *sacramentum* (the material, visible, mutable, temporal elements) and *res* (the spiritual, immutable, eternal reality) that became widely accepted.<sup>16</sup> Before Berengar, the term *sacramentum* had been used in a wide sense to describe sacred things both material and spiritual, and after Berengar, the term typically referred to the consecrated material, the visible element of a sacrament; in the case of the Eucharist, the *sacramentum* was the bread and wine. Berengar had made this distinction between *sacramentum* and *res* in order to claim that the *sacramentum* is merely a sign of Christ's presence, the *res*, the

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<sup>15</sup> The Berengarian controversy is discussed more fully in chapter 1 of this dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> N.M. Haring, "Berengar's Definitions of *Sacramentum* and their Influence on Mediaeval Sacramentology," *Mediaeval Studies* 10 (1948): 109-46.

reality signified. Drawing heavily on Augustine, Berengar argued that *sacramentum* and *res* could not be identical precisely because sign and signified were inherently separate.<sup>17</sup> Although Berengar's opponents, notably Lanfranc of Bec, rejected Berengar's sharp distinction between truth and figure—since a theory of substantial change in the Eucharist demanded that the two to some extent unite—his distinction became highly influential. The clear distinction between figure and truth was important even for theologians who insisted that sign (host) and signified (body) coincided in the Eucharist.

In the twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor made a lasting contribution to eucharistic theology by redefining the term *sacramentum* in a way that collapsed figure and truth even as it emphasized the two categories as distinct. As Marcia Colish has shown, Hugh's greatest contribution to eucharistic theology is that he is the one most responsible for shifting the definition of a sacrament from a visible sign of invisible grace to a sign that contains and effects what it signifies.<sup>18</sup> The previous definition of *sacramentum* allowed for a variety of relationships between sign and signified, but Hugh's new definition depended upon the interweaving of truth and figure by suggesting that the sign has real effects. Like Lanfranc before him, Hugh rejected Berengar's sharp division between *veritas* and *figura*. In his 1130 *De Sacramentis*, Hugh argues that the Eucharist is both truth and figure simultaneously. He responds to Berengar's arguments, saying "Is the sacrament of the altar then not truth because it is a figure? Then neither is the death of Christ truth because it is a figure, and the resurrection of Christ is not truth because it is a figure."<sup>19</sup> According to Hugh, the strict separation between truth and figure

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<sup>17</sup> Levy, *John Wyclif*, 137-54.

<sup>18</sup> Marcia L. Colish, *Peter Lombard*, vol. 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 564.

<sup>19</sup> "Nunquid ideo sacramentum altaris veritas non est, quia figura est? Ergo nec mors Christi veritas est, quia figura est, et resurrectio Christi veritas non est, quia figura est." *Patrologia Latina* 176, Col.

that Berengar suggests is logically flawed because the Christian faith is rooted in events, Christ's death and resurrection, which are also truth and figure. Just as Paschasius did three centuries earlier, Hugh insists that the figural element of the Eucharist is the visible species since, through the consecration, the species appear present when, in reality, only the body of Christ is there. Hugh divides the Eucharist into three components: *sacramentum tantum* (the visible species), *sacramentum et res sacramenti* (the body and blood invisible beneath the species), and *res tantum* (spiritual grace). This language became tremendously influential. His terminology allowed orthodox theologians to argue that the Eucharist is a sign while at the same time insisting that there can be no sharp separation between sign and signified in the Eucharist.

Later medieval texts often celebrate the complex and paradoxical relationship between sign and signified that exists with regard to Christ's eucharistic presence. Such celebration is vividly illustrated in two hymns from Thomas Aquinas' office for Corpus Christi, *Pange Lingua* and *Lauda Syon*. Both hymns were in regular use on the feast of Corpus Christi throughout the later Middle Ages, and vernacular literary references suggest that both would have been at least somewhat familiar to later medieval English audiences: the Chester Last Supper play paraphrases *Lauda Syon* and *Piers Plowman* quotes *Pange Lingua*, the usual choice of hymn for the host procession on Corpus Christi.<sup>20</sup> In both hymns, Thomas Aquinas praises the way in which the sacred power of the Eucharist arises from its nature as a sign.

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466a. Translation from: Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De Sacramentis)*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951), 308.

<sup>20</sup> Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 284; 246. In his discussion of the possibility of being saved through faith alone, Langland cites *Pange Lingua*, saying "As clerkes in Corpus Christi feeste syngen and redden/ That *sola fides sufficit* to save with lewed peple" (XV.387-88).

In *Pange Lingua*, Aquinas argues that the consecrated host must always to some extent be understood as a verbal sign. In the fourth verse, Aquinas highlights the paradoxical relationship between word and flesh in the sacrament: “Verbum caro, panem verum/Verbo carnem efficit” (The Word made flesh transforms true bread into flesh by a word).<sup>21</sup> In these two lines, “verbum” (word) is both subject and agent, and the synonyms “caro” and “carnis” (flesh) are both subject and object. Thus, Aquinas confuses the relationship between ‘word’ and ‘flesh’ both grammatically and logically. He stresses the verbal origin of the Incarnation alongside the verbal origin of the consecration in order to demonstrate that, in both mysteries, words and flesh are mysteriously related and mutually reinforcing. This emphasis on the verbal sign permeates the entire hymn. For example, Aquinas describes Christ’s earthly ministry with the phrase “sparso verbi semine” (the seed of his word being sown). In describing Christ’s preaching as a seed, Aquinas draws on conventional medieval imagery for allegorical interpretation: allegorical meaning is enclosed in texts like a seed within its shell.<sup>22</sup> Christ sowed his words like seeds which will eventually give life and meaning once the outer husk, Christ in his earthly life, has died. In this hymn, words are like the material accidents of the consecrated host in that they are, in some ways, meant to be ignored in order to get to the deeper inner meaning which is the reality of Christ’s flesh. However, signs are essential to the sacrament because the Eucharist’s substance is Christ the Word.

In *Lauda Syon*, Aquinas describes the host in relation to a different sort of figurative language—historical figuration—and celebrates the tension and confusion

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<sup>21</sup> Barbara R. Walters, Vincent Corrigan, and Peter T. Ricketts, eds., *The Feast of Corpus Christi* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 395. Translation is my own.

<sup>22</sup> David Aers provides a comprehensive overview of the uses and variations of this image in medieval allegoresis. See: *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory*, 52-70.

between figure and truth.<sup>23</sup> He argues that the Eucharist is the fulfillment of many prefigurations in the Old Testament, such as the sacrifice of Isaac, the Passover lamb, and manna. He explains that Christ's celebration of the Eucharist replaces the sacrifices of the old law and therefore "Vetustatem novitas umbram fugat veritas noctem lux eliminat" (New ends old, truth casts out shadow, light eliminates the night). Using conventional terms for figurative language, such as "umbra" (shadow), Aquinas suggests that the institution of the Eucharist in many ways obliterated the structure of figurative language by making the signified present. The Eucharist both fulfils and obviates the need for Old Testament ritual, and along with it destroys figuration itself. However, the hymn's celebration of the Eucharist's fulfillment of Old Testament figuration suggests that an understanding of prefiguration is essential to an understanding of the Eucharist. In this hymn, Aquinas' use of prefiguration demands that listeners always understand the Eucharist as a kind of sign. Throughout the hymn, Aquinas draws a rigid distinction between the sign and the signified. He explains that "sub diversus speciebus signis tantum et non rebus latent res eximie" (under diverse species, signs only and not things, lie extraordinary things). According to Aquinas, the material appearance of bread and wine is only a sign; the bread and wine are no longer bread and wine at all because they have undergone transubstantiation. The only thing that is truly present in the consecrated host is Christ and, in this sense, the sign and signified collapse into each other since both are present in a single object. However, the firm distinction between sign and signified is essential to this collapse; Aquinas warns his audience not to worship the physical appearance of the bread and wine since it is only a sign. In this hymn, both Old Testament prefigurations and the physical appearance of the bread and wine are referred

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<sup>23</sup> Walters et al., eds., *Feast of Corpus Christi*, 314-18. Translation is my own.

to as signs (*signi*) because both are essential to heralding the coming of Christ in the Eucharist even though that coming seems to obviate the need for the sign at all. For Aquinas, as for many medieval theologians, the power of the Eucharist as a mystery lies in the way it both maintains and confounds distinctions between figure and truth.

### ***Corpus Mysticum and Corpus Christi***

One important way in which allegorical readings of the Eucharist shifted over the course of the Middle Ages was that later medieval theologians placed far less emphasis on the host as a sign of the Christian community, the corporate body of Christ. The increased emphasis on the orthodoxy of transubstantiation meant that any such communal interpretations of the host had to become explicitly allegorical. As Henri de Lubac has shown, there were three basic categories of Christ's body in the Middle Ages: 1) the historical body of Christ, 2) Christ as present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, and 3) the corporate body of Christ as manifest in the community of the faithful.<sup>24</sup> In the earlier Middle Ages, theologians used the term 'corpus mysticum' to signify the body of Christ as it was mysteriously present in the Eucharist. However, once theologians became increasingly focused on defining the precise, literal, physical nature of Christ's presence in the host they began referring to the sacramental body as the 'corpus verum.'<sup>25</sup> Starting around 1050, the corporate body of Christ, which had been referred to as simply 'corpus Christi,' began to be referred to as 'corpus mysticum' and 'corpus Christi' referred only to the sacramental and historical bodies of Christ.<sup>26</sup> The Berengarian controversy

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<sup>24</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: L'euchariste et L'église au Moyen Age*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. (Paris: Aubier, 1949). I cite from the recent English translation: *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages* trans. Gemma Simmonds with Richard Price and Christopher Stephens, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming and Susan Frank Parsons (London: SCM Press, 2006.)

<sup>25</sup> de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 221.

<sup>26</sup> P.J. Fitzpatrick, *In Breaking of Bread: The Eucharist and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 176; de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*.

effectively fused the historical and sacramental bodies of Christ, and the idea of the corporate body gradually became more separate from the Eucharist because the ecclesial body could not be physically present in the host in the same way that Christ's historical body could. Since the community of the faithful could only be figuratively present in the consecrated host, the corporate body did not easily fit into definitions of the Eucharist which insisted on Christ's body as physically present. At the same time as the definition of 'corpus mysticum' as the community of the faithful arose, scholastic theology began to refer less and less to the host as an ecclesiological symbol.

Although they were not a central feature of all eucharistic theology in the later Middle Ages, discussions of the Eucharist as a sign of community were far from radical. Writers simply had to clearly differentiate between the literal presence of Christ's physical body and the way in which the host signifies but does not contain the corporate body of Christ. Even Thomas Aquinas, one of the theologians most responsible for formulating the doctrine of transubstantiation, regarded the Christian community as essential to the meaning of the Eucharist. He distinguishes between *corpus Christi* and *corpus mysticum* by arguing: "Now the reality of this sacrament is twofold, as we have explained, one which is signified and contained, namely Christ himself, the other which is signified yet not contained, namely Christ's mystical body which is the fellowship of the saints. Whoever, then, receives the sacrament by that very fact signifies that he is joined with Christ and incorporated in his members."<sup>27</sup> For many writers, both *corpus Christi* and *corpus mysticum* were signified in the host: the difference between the two

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<sup>27</sup> "Duplex autem est res huius sacramenti, sicut supra dictum est: una quidem quae est significata et contenta, scilicet ipse Christus; alia autem est significata et non contenta, scilicet corpus mysticum, quod est societas sanctorum. Quicumque ergo hoc sacramentum sumit, ex hoc ipso significat se esse Christo unitum, et membris ejus incorporatum." Original and translation from: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars edition, vol. 59 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 3a.80, 4.



methods of signification was that *corpus Christi* was literally present in the host while *corpus mysticum* was not. In this sense, communal readings of the Eucharist became more purely allegorical because they suggested a meaning for the host which was outside and other than the host itself. Allegorical and communal readings persisted alongside literal, physical interpretations of the host in both vernacular literature and scholastic theology throughout the later Middle Ages. As Sarah Beckwith, Mervyn James, and Miri Rubin have shown, the documents surrounding the celebration and promotion of the feast of Corpus Christi—from sermons to plays—rely on an understanding of the Christian community as enacting the body of Christ, the body that Christians also worship in the consecrated host; the host thus became a powerful sign of the community's unity.<sup>28</sup> When Langland associates the Eucharist in his poem with both ecclesiology and allegory, he is not making a radical interpretive move, but participating in a continuing discussion about the relationship between the *corpus mysticum* and *corpus Christi*.<sup>29</sup>

John Lydgate's poem, "A Procession of Corpus Christi," demonstrates that both allegory and community could be essential to a totally orthodox explanation of the host's sanctity as late as the fifteenth century. In this poem, Lydgate argues that proper reverence to the host evolves out of an understanding of signs and figures.<sup>30</sup> The poem depicts a Corpus Christi procession that includes religious figures who either prefigure or

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<sup>28</sup> Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Mervyn James, "Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town, *Past and Present* 98 (1983): 3-29; Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 213-87.

<sup>29</sup> In this respect, I am in disagreement with David Aers who suggests that Langland presents a "significantly different sacramental theology" than current theological norms precisely because of his emphasis on ecclesiology and community rather than the host as simply a sacred object. Although Langland's emphasis on ecclesiology is certainly not the dominant strain of late fourteenth-century eucharistic theology, it is by no means a radical deviation. See: Aers, "The Sacrament of the Altar," 46.

<sup>30</sup> John Lydgate, "A Procession of Corpus Christi," in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, EETS e.s. 107 (London: Oxford University Press, 1911), 35-43. All citations are by line number.

explicate the Eucharist, including, for example, Adam, Abraham, Mary, Augustine, and Aquinas. In almost every stanza, Lydgate introduces a new religious figure, a person either from scripture or church history, and demonstrates how that person's actions either prefigure or signify Christ's presence in the sacrament. He introduces this imagined procession by telling his readers that "In youre presence fette out of figure,/ Schal beo declared by many vnkouþe signe/ Gracyous misteryes grounded in scripture" (6-8). In these lines, Lydgate introduces two words to which he repeatedly returns over the course of the poem: 'fygure' and 'signe,' both of which are essential to his understanding of the Eucharist. In this first use of the word, 'fygure,' Lydgate particularly defines it as a representation or image by which the individual can come to understand the truth of the Eucharist. The signs through which he communicates this figure are his own words, words that are unworthy of the subject largely because they are vernacular. In these opening lines of the poem, Lydgate argues that he will explicate the sacrament, which is by definition a sign, by using signs to express a figure. In order to understand the consecrated host that lies at the center of the feast and the procession, Lydgate suggests that the worshipper must view the host within the scope of human history and human language, both of which are composed of signs.

Lydgate thus argues that the Eucharist and the human community are mutually reinforcing. Throughout the poem, the word 'figure' has three meanings that continually threaten to fold into one another: historical prefiguration, written words, and individual human bodies. For example, he describes Melchisedech's offering as a "fygure" of the sacrament, he explains that the Virgin Mary's name—spelt "Marye"—is "fygurde here with letters fyve," and he refers to all the people in the procession as "þeos figures" (19;

40; 217). Every person in the procession is simultaneously a historical person and a sign of Christ; Lydgate unites these elements in the word ‘figure.’ Lydgate’s particular focus on this word emphasizes the importance of human participation to the meaning of the Eucharist. According to Lydgate’s poem, proper praise of the sacrament involves calling to mind a community of the faithful that is part of history even as it transcends it. Lydgate never explicitly outlines the relationship between *corpus Christi* and *corpus mysticum*, but he implies that the latter is absolutely essential to an understanding of the holiness of the Eucharist. Viewing the nature of the consecrated host in relationship to figuration allows Lydgate to celebrate the importance of the human community to the Eucharist.

### **Eucharist as Sign in *Piers Plowman***

In *Piers Plowman*, Langland continually depicts the Eucharist as a sign in order to highlight the way in which this sacrament unites transcendent meaning and literal material reality. The two failed moments of eucharistic reception that frame Passus 19 are instances in which the material sign could have been united with its signified; the bread and Christ’s physical body could have physically united with the corporate body of the faithful through the act of eating the host. This unification does not occur because the community fails to act as the socially harmonious corporate body which the consecrated host signifies. Langland argues that proper eucharistic reception requires Christians to understand the Eucharist as a sign of both Christ’s physical and corporate bodies, and recognize their own ethical obligation to become one with that signified body.

Throughout *Piers Plowman*, Langland regards the Eucharist as an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the Christian community. In the brief treatments preceding Passus 19, he

describes the Eucharist as an allegorical sign in order to suggest that the individual spiritual benefits of the Eucharist are inseparable from social and material reality.

In Will's encounter with the Good Samaritan, the personification of love, Langland depicts the Eucharist as a sacrament which is unique in its power to stabilize Christian identity. After the Good Samaritan takes the wounded man to the inn and instructs the innkeeper to care for him, the Good Samaritan tells Will not to blame Faith and Hope for not helping the man because nothing could heal the man except "the blood of a barn born of a mayde" (XVII.94). Through this explanation, the Good Samaritan identifies the wounded man as a representative of all humankind, and argues that only Christ's sacrifice can heal the wounds of sin. He explains that, in order to be healed, the wounded man must first be baptized in the blood and then "plastred" with penance (XVII.95-96). However, "stalworthe worth he nevere/ Til he have eten al the barn and his blood ydronke" (XVII. 97-98). The Good Samaritan aligns baptism and penance with initial healing of the soul, but, through this direct reference to the physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist, argues that eucharistic reception is vital to spiritual health. In this episode, Langland depicts the Eucharist as a way of securing individual identity in the face of the constant threat of sin, a force which has the power to undermine individual Christian identity.

Although the Eucharist can stabilize an individual's identity as a Christian, Langland does not suggest that it can be thought of as merely an isolated individual encounter with God. As Holy Church outlines in the first passus, the Eucharist is a sign whose full significance is inherently social. Individual Christian identity is only legible

within the larger communal identity of the Church. In the first passus, Holy Church tells Will that social responsibility is essential to Christian spirituality because:

For though ye be trewe of youre tonge and troweliche wyne,  
 And as chaste as a child that in chirche wepeth,  
 But if ye loven leelly and lene the povere,  
 Of swich good as God yow sent goodliche parteth,  
 Ye ne have na moore merite in masse ne in hours

Than Malkyn of hire maydenhede, that no man desireth. (I.179-184)

According to Holy Church, all the mandated forms of proper Christian worship become signs without a signified when Christians do not care for the poor. Caring for the poor is essential to being a Christian and, if a person ceases to do that, he is no longer fully a Christian but only looks like one. Like Malkyn, whose virginity is not a sign of virtue for the social reason that no men desire her, Christian prayer can cease to be a sign of Christian virtue once it is divorced from social action. According to Holy Church, the Mass is like any other form of Christian worship: it only has efficacy for believers if it is understood within the broader context of the social community.

In Passus 12, Langland compares eucharistic reception to reading in order to argue that both acts ought to involve individual reflection that ultimately results in just social actions. In the midst of the passus, Ymaginatif extols the virtues of clergie, specifically learning derived from written texts, through reference to the biblical story of the woman caught in adultery. He describes Jesus drawing a line in the sand but Imagynatif omits the crucial moment in which Jesus tells the woman's accusers that only

a person without sin should cast the first stone. Instead, he emphasizes the power of Christ's act of writing:

For thorough Cristes caractes, the Jewes knewe hemselve  
 Giltier as afore God and gretter in synne  
 Than the womman that there was, and wenten away for shame  
 The clergie that there was confortod the womman.  
 Holy Kirke knoweth this—that Cristes writing saved (XII.78-82).

The power of writing enables self-recognition in the accusers in a way that speech alone could not do. In this passage, the word 'caracte' has its usual meaning of 'a written symbol or letter,' but also suggests its meaning in sacramental theology: the lasting effect of grace on the soul.<sup>31</sup> Like a sacrament, seeing Christ's line has a lasting effect on the soul, an effect discerned through the reader's just actions. Ymaginatif goes on to compare Christ's writing in the sand directly to the consecration of the Eucharist:

For Goddes body myghte noght ben of breed withouten clergie,  
 The which body is bothe boote to the rightfulle,  
 And deeth and dampnacion to hem that deyeth yvele;  
 As Cristes caracte confortede and both coupable shewed  
 The woman that the Jewes brought, that Jesus thought to save:  
*Nolite iudicare et non iudicabimini.*  
 Right so Goddes body, brethren, but it be worthily taken,  
 Dampneth us at the day of dome as dide the caracte the Jewes. (XII.85-91)<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> N.M. Haring, "Berengar's Definitions of *Sacramentum*."

<sup>32</sup> This passage does not occur in the C-text. Since, as I argue, this passage provocatively discusses the Eucharist in the context of both signs and community, I disagree with David Aers' claim that Langland may have deleted this from the C-text because the use of the Eucharist here is "opportunistic, theologically

According to Ymaginatif, the Eucharist and Christ's line in the sand are signs that have similar effects on the individual who reads or receives them. Imagynatif describes the line in the sand as damning the Jews, but readers know from the earlier passage that the line itself did not bring about the Jews' damnation. Rather, the line enabled the Jews to perceive the sinful state of their own souls; the line led them to realize that their souls were worthy of damnation. The Eucharist is similar to the line insofar as both are visual representations of verbal signs that invite their readers to reflect on the state of their own souls and the ethics of their social acts.

In Passus 13, Langland brings his discussion of the Eucharist's social nature into the context of sign theory. Through his attention to the social production and consumption of food, Langland emphasizes the interdependence of the material, social world and transcendent meaning, particularly with regard to the Eucharist. During the dinner with the learned doctor, Will becomes angry because he only receives allegorical food with names like "Agite penitenciam" (do penance) while the doctor gorges himself on an array of rich foods (XIII.48). Since Will is physically hungry, spiritual lessons do not satisfy him; they have no capacity to fill his real stomach. His hunger and anger prevent him from gaining much benefit from the doctor's teachings and the spiritual lessons he is served. This episode suggests that spiritual truths are virtually meaningless when divorced from material reality. When Will leaves the dinner and meets Haukyn, the poem's representative of the active life, Haukyn makes a similar point: he laments the disjunction between material reality and transcendent meaning in his life. He confesses that he has fallen into sin because he is so focused on the physical world that he neglects

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superficial, and certainly not pursued with any serious attention." I find his suggestion that the passage was deleted because Langland may have found the passage too threatening and divisive somewhat more convincing. See: Aers, "The Sacrament of the Altar," 43.

the divine. Although he is repentant, Haukyn continues to wrongly believe that he can separate material reality from spiritual meaning; he thinks that the solution to his sinfulness is to rid himself of materiality in order to reach spiritual transcendence. Since the Eucharist is a sacrament that derives much of its power from the union of physical food with divine reality, it is particularly significant that Langland describes Haukyn as a waferer, someone who produces bread, the material sign of the Eucharist. Haukyn's inability to recognize the interdependence of literal sign and transcendent signified thus becomes a problem of sacramental belief. He confesses that his excessive concern with material wealth keeps him from properly engaging in the Mass:

In haly daies at holy chirche, whan Ich herde masse

Hadde I nevere wille, woot God, witterly to biseche

Mercy for my mysdedes, that I ne moorned moore

For loss of good, leve me, than for likames giltes. (XIII.384-87)

At Mass, Haukyn is so focused on his bread business, a business that literally produces the host, that he cannot see beyond the material bread on the altar to Christ. Haukyn recognizes that the Eucharist ought to effect social unity among Christians but contends that worshippers' obsession with materiality prevents such unity from occurring. In order to correct this human failing, Haukyn makes the radical suggestion that no "mannes masse make pees among Cristene peple,/ Til pride be pureliche fordo, and that thorough payn defaute" (XIII.259-60). He contends that the spiritual benefits of the Mass will only come about when there is no material wealth. However, his reference to bread reveals the logical flaw in his argument. Rather than stating that Masses will be improved once worshippers experience hunger, he argues that Mass will be a better spiritual experience



without bread, the central material sign of the Mass. He fails to realize that, without bread, there could be no Mass at all. The Eucharist unites material sign with transcendent signified and it is for this very reason that Haukyn, intent on condemning materiality itself, cannot fully understand it. For Langland, the spiritual effects of the Eucharist are inseparable from material, social reality.

### **Passus 19 and the Eucharist's Social Nature**

In Passus 19, Langland argues that the Eucharist is a communal act with communal significance. At the start of the passus, Langland is deeply suspicious of modes of worshipping the Eucharist that disregard the social world. By describing Will as falling asleep in the middle of Mass, Langland highlights the tension between two models of eucharistic devotion: the Eucharist as an individual affective encounter with Christ and the Eucharist as a celebration of the Christian community. Langland never fully explains the significance of Will's sleep at this moment but there are two provocative possibilities. The first possibility is that Will's dream is a vision of Christ's Real Presence in the host. Like in sermon exempla that encourage individual affective devotion to the host through narratives of bleeding hosts or a mutilated Christ-child on the altar, Will dreams of a bloody Christ-like figure experiencing the tortures of the Passion. Instead of participating in the Mass and seeing the host elevated, Will sees that "Piers the Plowman was peynted al blody,/ And com in with a cros before the commune peple,/ And right lik in alle lymes to Oure Lord Jesu" (XIX.6-8). If read as a fairly typical eucharistic vision, Will is seeing the Real Presence hidden behind the host: Christ, with his irreducible humanity emphasized by his representation as the earthly Piers Plowman, offering himself as a sacrifice before the people. However, this eucharistic vision is atypical in the sense that

Will does not see the literal, historical body of the human Christ. He sees either Piers Plowman looking like Christ or, as Conscience will later suggest, Christ dressed as Piers Plowman. According to Will, Piers is “right lik in alle lymes” to Christ; he is not Christ himself. If this is a eucharistic vision, it is not one that transcends representation. Rather it emphasizes the truth of the host’s representation through another act of representation. A second possible interpretation of Will’s sleep during Mass is that it allegorically signifies his own lack of spiritual awareness. By not consciously participating in the Mass, Will fails to be part of the spiritual community and therefore fails to enact the corporate body of Christ that the host signifies. This interpretation of Will’s sleep as a manifestation of his sinfulness is supported by the fact that his act is sinful on the literal level: most medieval Christians would consider falling asleep at Mass a fairly serious sin. However, since Will’s dream is an exploration of the significance of the Eucharist in relation to the Church, reading Will’s slumber as a sign of moral failure is not a fully satisfying explanation either. What these two explanations have in common is that both depict this attempted eucharistic reception as a moment dependent on allegorical representation—either Christ represented as Piers, or sin represented as sleep—and both create an opposition between individual piety and communal worship. Although Langland never fully articulates the precise significance of Will falling asleep at Mass, Will’s sleep is clearly a move away from his immediate historical, physical community, and therefore undercuts his initial motivations for going to Mass; he does not celebrate the Easter Mass with his family and he sleeps through the Eucharist. Whatever spiritual truths he may encounter in his dream, he has had to sacrifice the communal aspect of worship in order to receive them. While Langland clearly believes that individual piety

can be fruitful, he is very skeptical of any spirituality that totally neglects communal worship.

In this passus, individual devotion gains its significance from its social context. The poem's celebration of Easter starting at the end of Passus 18 is a return to the social world and, with it, the Eucharist, the sacrament which celebrates the unity of the Church.<sup>33</sup> At the end of Passus 18, after witnessing the Harrowing of Hell and the reconciliation of Mercy, Truth, Justice, and Peace, Will wakes up and returns to the social world in order to celebrate Easter, the same event of which he has just been dreaming. Easter was the most important celebration of the Church's liturgical year, marking the greatest event in Christian history—Christ's Resurrection—and Langland describes this celebration as fundamentally social. Will awakens on Easter to two sounds that blend into one another: the earthly church's bells and Love's heavenly singing from his dream. Earth and heaven join together as a community united in celebration and music. The song Love sings—"Ecce quam bonum et quam iocundum"—is from the first verse of Psalm 132 which announces "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell in unity" (425a).<sup>34</sup> This song suggests that one of the primary reasons for joy at the Resurrection is the united Christian community that the Resurrection created, and Will himself recognizes the bells and the singing as calls to communal celebration. As soon as he wakes, he "called Kytte my wif and Calote my doghter:/ 'Ariseth and go reverenceth Goddes resurexion'" (XVIII.428-29). Will knows that Easter is a communal event and he

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<sup>33</sup> Most recent readers of the poem miss this final outward turn because they are committed to seeing the Vita as entirely inward. In this respect, I agree with James Simpson who argues that the final two passus "reimagine the whole of society as springing from, and contributing to this renewed Church." James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 194. See also: Malcolm Godden, *The Making of Piers Plowman* (London: Longman, 1990), 152.

<sup>34</sup> Translation is from the note in A.V.C. Schmidt's edition.

must therefore celebrate it with his family and in a church. In Passus 19, the poem turns away from the more purely psychological dialogues of Passus 8-18 and toward Easter, a community celebration that ought to culminate in eucharistic reception.

After the Easter setting with which the passus begins and ends, the central biblical event described in Passus 19 is Pentecost, an event which centers on the social manifestations of Christian spirituality. Part of the reason that Pentecost plays such a central part in this passus, marking the transition from the discussion of the names of Christ to the foundation of the Church, is that it allows Langland to explicitly place Will's individual spiritual quest within the broader context of the entire Church's search for unity with God. As Langland describes it, Pentecost is an event which unites the Christian community throughout history. Pentecost, which traditionally marks the birth of the Christian Church, was the moment at which the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples and endowed each of them with individual gifts. It is significant, both for Langland's poem and for the Christian tradition more generally, that the Spirit bestows these gifts within a communal setting and for the benefit and production of a Christian community. In *Piers Plowman*, Pentecost is not an event that is firmly historical; the need for and availability of the Holy Spirit to the Christian people is constant. After Conscience tells Will about the crucifixion and resurrection, Will experiences the original feast of Pentecost as if he himself were present at that historical moment. He dreams that he hears hundreds of others praying to the Holy Spirit with him, suggesting that there are more people present at this dream-version of Pentecost than would have been present at the historical event. Conscience demands that Will not simply witness the coming of the Holy Spirit, but actually participate in it. In their communal prayer, all the people present

sing Pentecost hymns, hymns that necessarily post-date the original event. This anachronism functions in the same way that anachronism often does within medieval devotional texts: it emphasizes the way in which spiritual events transcend history. The participation of both Will and Piers Plowman in the original Pentecost implies that the foundation of the Church and the Holy Spirit's involvement in it is not a finite historical fact, but an ongoing process. In this poem, the Church is not just an institution, but a community of believers that transcends time and space.

In his description of Pentecost, Langland subordinates individual identity to group identity even as he celebrates individual abilities and works. Grace tells Conscience that, in order to defend the Church from the Antichrist, he will “gaf ech man a grace to gye with hymselfen,/ That Ydelnesse encombre hym noght, ne Envyne ne Pride:/ *Divisiones graciary sunt*” (XIX.227-229a). Grace cites this passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians—“there are varieties of graces, but the same Spirit”—partly in order to invoke the famous metaphor that follows it: the community is the body of Christ and each individual person is a member of that body. In explaining the reason for bestowing gifts, Grace both suggests that each individual is autonomous and therefore has a responsibility to defend himself against the attacks of the Antichrist, and that each individual's gifts serve a purpose in promoting and protecting the well-being of the entire Christian community. Grace advises Piers and Conscience, “Loke that noon lakke oother, but loveth alle as bretheren” because all gifts are essential to the functioning of the greater community and all crafts, no matter how undignified, originate from a gift of Grace (XIX.256). Although Grace places particular emphasis on crafts rather than gifts and lists many professions that are more medieval than ancient, his instructions are otherwise a

very direct application of Paul's directions to the Christian community in Corinth. For Paul as for Langland, individual gifts are very significant, but primarily insofar as they contribute to the holiness of the greater Christian community: the corporate body of Christ. Individual identity and group identity are interdependent, but group identity, because it is essentially the identity of Christ, is the most important.

### **Signs of Christ**

Since, according to Langland, Christians ought to come to know and worship Christ within their own social context—and not primarily through direct, personal encounters with Christ—individuals must understand Christ through signs and language. When Passus 19 shifts from Will's eucharistic vision of Piers to Conscience's explication of the many names for Christ, the transition seems abrupt, but the two moments are thematically linked insofar as both are explorations of the accessibility of Christ through signs. The discussion of the names of Christ is an exploration of the reliability of signs as objects of devotion, an issue that is central to medieval eucharistic theology since transubstantiation simultaneously demands that believers disregard their faith in physical signs and that they direct their deepest devotion to a sign that proclaims the physical presence of Christ. Langland argues that it is essential for every Christian to understand the complex ways in which signs provide access to the divine.

Through Will and Conscience's discussion of the identity of the bloody man in Will's vision, Langland suggests that recognizing Christ through signs is one of the greatest challenges of Christian devotion. When Will sees the bloody figure carrying a cross, he becomes confused and asks Conscience "Is this Jesus the justere...that Jewes dide to dethe?/ Or it is Piers the Plowman! Who peynted hym so rede?" (XIX.10-11). For

Will, as for the reader, the identity of the bloody man is vital because it determines one's proper devotional response to the vision. If Will were to kneel down and worship this bloody figure, he might be performing proper religious devotion or he might be committing idolatry by worshipping Piers instead of Christ. Will cannot determine the relationship between physical signs and the identity they signify, and his inability to do so makes devotion very difficult. Conscience provides a solution to Will's quandary by informing him that the bloody man is Christ dressed in the colors and armor of Piers. Christ bears signs that represent Piers even though he is not Piers at all. This answer leads Will to question the stability of signs in worship, a problem he approaches by asking whether 'Jesus' or 'Christ' is the most appropriate name for the second person in the Trinity. The fact that this question directly follows a Mass-inspired vision of Christ strongly suggests that the question itself is directly relevant to the Eucharist; in both eucharistic adoration and the worship of Christ's name, the object of worship is Christ as he is perceived through a sign. When Conscience tells Will that the figure that stands before the commons is Christ even though he looks like Piers, Conscience points to the challenges that worship through representation poses for belief.

In his explanation of Christ's names, Conscience argues that verbal signs of Christ are devotional tools that have a close relationship to that which they signify but must not be mistaken for the signified itself. After Conscience identifies the bloody man as Christ, Will asks

‘Why calle ye hym Crist?’ quod I, ‘sithen Jewes called hym Jesus?

Patriarkes and prophetes prophecied before

That alle kynne creatures sholden knelen and bowen

Anoon as men nempned the name of God Jesu.

*Ergo* is no name to the name of Jesus,

Ne noon so needful to nempne by nyghte ne by daye. (XIX.15-20)

Through his question, Will attempts to establish a firm relationship between signifier and signified. According to his logic, if ‘Jesus’ is a holy and accurate name for the second person of the Trinity, there must be a real relationship between the word ‘Jesus’ and Jesus himself; therefore no other word can accurately represent Jesus. Will believes that there should be one word that is a better representation of Jesus than all others and so, when faced with Conscience’s reference to Jesus as ‘Christ,’ Will is more willing to concede that ‘Christ’ is a better name than he is to admit that multiple names could equally refer to the same divine reality (XIX.24). Conscience responds to Will’s question by asserting that both ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’ are accurate descriptions of the same person—Conscience himself often refers to Christ as ‘Jesus’ in the course of the passage—but that the difference between the names is the different aspects of Christ to which they refer. He argues that, much in the same way that one person can be knight, king, and conqueror simultaneously, various names can accurately apply to Christ. Conscience contends that ‘Christ’ corresponds to the word ‘conqueror’ which “cometh of special grace,/ And of hardynesse of herte and of hendenesse—/ To make lords of laddes, of lond thathe wynneth,/ And fre men foule thralles, that folwen noght his laws” (XIX. 30-33). The name ‘Christ,’ a name that both Will and Conscience agree that Jews do not use, signifies Jesus’ power over the Jews and demonstrates his spiritual authority over all others who do not believe in Christ. In this way, Conscience challenges Will’s perception by showing that names are arbitrary to the extent that it is possible for one person to be



accurately called many different names. However, Conscience does not therefore suggest that signs have no direct relationship to that which they signify. Like Augustine, Conscience regards signs as bearing a relationship to truth, but signs are not that truth itself.

Conscience explicates Christ's names through a retelling of the story of Christ's life and, in doing so, shows that names and appearances have the power to reveal as well as conceal true identity. For example, when the Magi come to offer Christ gifts at the Nativity, Conscience emphasizes that their gifts have figural values that are hidden beneath their external appearances. The kings offer "Reson, covered under sense," "Rightwisnesse under reed gold," and "Pitee, apperynge by mirre" (XIX.86; 88; 92). In all three cases, Conscience suggests that the gifts' true significance is internal and hidden; their physical qualities and appearance are almost entirely incidental. Conscience goes on to argue that signs, in themselves, do not provide reliable and complete access to truth by showing how Christ's name changes over time. He divides Christ's ministry into three parts, the three names that have been the objects of Will's searching since Passus 8: Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. As in the rest of the poem, the distinction between these three terms is not particularly decisive, in the sense that Will is never able to arrive at a conclusive definition of the three terms apart from specific actions. It is therefore fitting that Conscience invokes these names here in the context of his discussion of the way in which names cannot fully describe Christ. The name 'Jesus' does not provide complete knowledge of the nature of Christ, much in the same way that the word 'Dobet' can never provide Will with a specific and complete path for Christian living.

The events of Christ's life necessitate a proliferation of names, names which Christ always exceeds. Unlike personifications in the poem, such as Conscience or Mede, whose actions can strain but never exceed or change the word that signifies them, Christ continually exceeds the signs that purport to contain him. Christ is a signified who can never be fully contained by any sign, although many signs accurately describe particular aspects of him. Conscience's retelling of Christ's life in Passus 19, in contrast to the version of Christ's life in Passus 18, focuses primarily on miracles of transformation: the Incarnation, the transformation of water into wine, miraculous healings, and the Resurrection. In this narrative, the relationship between signs and substance is continually shifting. Conscience begins this narrative with the Incarnation and shows that this transformation of God into man brought about the name 'Jesus.' At the second major event in Conscience's narrative, the wedding feast at Cana at which Christ transforms water into wine, requires giving Christ another name. As Conscience tells it, this miracle is one of signification:

In his juventee this Jesus at Jewene feeste  
Turnede water into wyn, as Holy Writ telleth,  
And there bigan God of his grace to do wel.

For wyn is likned to lawe, and lif of holynesse. (XIX. 108-111)

Conscience's interpretation downplays the importance of the transformation of the physical elements of water and wine; the fact that the people at the wedding feast had run out of wine, the biblical motivation for performing the miracle, does not even merit a mention. Instead, Conscience argues that the wine is only relevant because of what it signifies apart from the physical wine itself: law and holiness. Although the physical

miracle is the transformation of water into wine, the importance of the miracle is the way in which it alters patterns of signification. From this miracle arises another of Christ's many names, "A fauntekyn ful of wit, *filius Marie*" (XIX.118). Jesus performed this miracle in from of his mother in order to show her his otherworldly nature, to ensure that she was fully aware that he "thorough Grace was gete, and of no gome ellis" (XIX.121). Conscience calls Jesus 'son of Mary' at the same moment that he reveals the extent to which Christ transcends that identity. The significance of the miracle is that it reveals that Christ is not just the son of Mary but fully the son of God.<sup>35</sup>

Langland depicts knowledge of the limits and powers of signs as a defining aspect of Christian identity and belief. In Conscience's narrative, the enemies of Christ, especially the Jews, have him put to death because the proliferation of his names was too extensive. As Christ continues to perform miracles of transformation, his followers develop more names in their attempts to more accurately describe his identity in light of his transformative power. Because of his miraculous deeds:

Forthi the contree ther Jesu cam called hym *fili David*,  
 And nempned hym of Nazareth—and no man so worthi  
 To be kaiser or kyng of the kyngdom of Juda,  
 Ne over Jewes justice, as Jesus was, hem thoughte. (XIX.136-139)

Jesus's actions bring about public changes in the way in which those around him refer to him, and it is precisely these changes in name, and the claims to power that such changes imply, that the Jewish high priests object to. It is in response to these names "wherof

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<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that Langland significantly changes the emphasis of the biblical account in order to create this parallel between physical transformation and the limits of signification. First, given that Mary experienced the virgin birth firsthand, most medieval accounts of Mary's life involve her recognition that Jesus is fully the son of God. Second, in the biblical narrative, Mary demands that Christ perform the miracle; Christ does not demand that Mary be there to witness it.

hadde Cayphas envye, and othere of the Jewes,/ And for to doon hym to dethe day and nyght thei casten” (XIX.140-41). As Conscience has explained, ‘Jesus’ was the way in which the Jews first referred to Christ and their ultimate rejection of Christ is signaled by their unwillingness to refer to him by any other name. According to Conscience, Christians are partly defined by their willingness to see beyond the one-to-one correspondence of sign and signified.

Through the doubting Thomas episode, Conscience argues that signs are the primary way in which contemporary Christians must come to understand Christ. Near the end of Passus 19’s version of Christ’s life, Conscience tells the story of doubting Thomas, the apostle who would only believe in the Resurrection once he had touched Christ’s wounds. Christ presents Thomas with physical evidence of his transformation from death into life, and Thomas acknowledges this transformation by giving Christ yet more names, crying out “*Dominus meus et Deus meus*” (XIX.173). Christ then concludes the episode by proclaiming that “blessed mote thei be, in body and in soule,/ That never shul se me in sighte as thow seest nowthe,/ And lelliche bileve al this—I love hem and blesse hem” (XIX.180-82). Although Christ approves of Thomas, he argues that he wants others to acknowledge him in the same way without requiring physical proof. While Thomas progressed from physical proof to belief in the resurrected Christ to the creation of verbal signs to describe Christ, future Christians ought to be able to believe in divine truth through those created signs alone. The truth of the words themselves ought to be enough to show that ‘Lord’ and ‘God’ are appropriate names for Christ. Although as Conscience has shown, there is no single sign that will provide complete understanding

of Christ, the collection of signs that the Church makes available to Christians through scripture and liturgy provide essential access to divine truth.

### **Communal Failure**

In his description of the foundation of the Church in the second half of Passus 19, Langland argues that Christians must understand the Eucharist as a sign—of both Christ’s historical and corporate bodies—in order to recognize their own obligation to become the harmonious body signified by the consecrated host. The community’s failure to be the signified is the focus of the conclusion of Passus 19. In contrast to Christ who always exceeds the signs that represent him, the Christian community struggles to live up to the name that ought to signify it: Unity. After his description of Pentecost, Langland narrates the foundation of the institutional Church, with Piers as a figure for the papacy and his barn, Unity, as a figure for the institution itself. Unlike the many names for Christ, the name “Unity” does not describe the Church as it is; it describes the Church as it ought to be. Langland details how Piers builds Unity from scripture, the writings of the church fathers, and the cardinal virtues. The foundation of the church is perfect and has the potential to protect believers from the assaults of the Antichrist. However, the strength of the Church depends not only on its foundational elements but also on the moral and spiritual integrity of the Christians within it. Once Pride plans to attack Piers and his barn, Conscience advises all Christians “to wende/ Hastiliche into Unitee and holde we us there,/ And praye we that a pees were in Piers bern the Plowman” (XIX.359-61). According to Conscience, the way to defend Unity from outside attacks is to embody unity itself. Christians must bring their gifts together as the corporate body of Christ if they are to defend that corporate body from attack. Conscience’s call to Unity is

somewhat circular: Conscience assumes that, by attacking Piers and the foundation of the Church, Pride attacks all Christians as if they were already united in the Church. In order to defend Unity from attack, Conscience argues that Christians must form a unified body of believers that Conscience assumes already exists. In this passus, as in much of the poem, Langland suggests that there is a gap between what the Church ought to be and the way it actually operates in the contemporary world. Conscience's call to Unity is a call for recognition of a shared identity that has yet to be performed.

The ideal identity of the Christian community is one in which the Eucharist symbolizes the unity which the community embodies. Langland describes the Barn of Unity as a place built to store grain, an object that allegorically signifies both the Eucharist and the Christian community. Grain was a common medieval image for the Eucharist. Since, much like Unity's storage of grain, the medieval church's identity and authority rested on its control of the sacraments, the association of Piers' grains with the Eucharist is clear. The way in which the grains also signify the Christian community is twofold. First, theologians who regarded communal symbolism as a central part of the Eucharist, such as Alger of Liège and Hugh of St. Victor, often argued that the individual grains and grapes that compose the eucharistic species symbolize individual Christians united with each other and with Christ in the church.<sup>36</sup> Second, this passage draws heavily on the biblical parable of the wheat and the tares which describes all of humanity as wheat and weeds growing in a field.<sup>37</sup> In this parable, the farmer, the parable's representative of divine judgment, cannot readily distinguish between the wheat and the weeds in his field until they are fully grown, and so he allows both to grow together.

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<sup>36</sup> Colish, *Peter Lombard*, 561.

<sup>37</sup> Lorraine Kochanske Stock has investigated the influence of this parable on *Piers Plowman*: "Parable, Allegory, History, and *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook in Langland Studies* 5 (1991): 143-164.

When both are grown, he gathers the wheat into his barn and sets fire to the weeds. The wheat represents the saved, the weeds represent the damned, and the barn represents the kingdom of heaven. Langland is clearly drawing on this parable in his description of gathering the grains into Unity. Unity is different from the barn in the parable because it exists in the temporal world but it is like the parable's barn insofar as it is a place in which Christians are gathered together in preparation for their final judgment. In his description of Unity as the ideal Church, Langland envisions the purpose of the Church as the preservation of grain: the unification of individual Christians symbolized by the Eucharist.

Conscience regards eucharistic reception as both effecting and declaring the community's union with Christ. When Conscience calls all Christians to receive the Eucharist in Unity, he is inviting them to complete their identity as Unity, as united in the body of Christ. Once the Christians have dug a moat around Unity, they undertake the work of penance: "Some thorough bedes biddynge and some thorough pilgrimage/ And othere pryvé penaunces, and somme thorough penyes delynge" (XIX.379-80). Conscience thinks that these individual penitential acts demonstrate the moral and spiritual strength of the community as a whole and proclaims that "I care noght...though Pride come nouthe;/ The lord of lust shal be letted al this Lente" (XIX.385-86). By virtue of every individual's Lenten devotion, Conscience believes that the Christian community is unified and now needs only to receive the Eucharist in order to fully realize its strength against sin. He explains that the Eucharist is the natural conclusion to their penitence: "'Cometh,' quod Conscience, 'ye Cristene, and dyneth,/ That han labored lelly al this Lenten tyme./ Here is breed yblessed, and Goddes body therunder'" (XIX.387-89).

According to Conscience, the community ought to receive the Eucharist because it has demonstrated its Christian unity in devotion and because the Eucharist also strengthens and effects that unity. The community can only fully achieve unity when it is physically unified with Christ's body in the sacrament of the Eucharist, when the sign—the consecrated host which both represents and is Christ's body—literally becomes one with the bodies of the signified, the Christian community.

For Conscience, the Eucharist does not merely symbolize social unity; the people must literally enact social justice in order to make the Eucharist's symbolism possible. After inviting everyone in Unity to receive the Eucharist, Conscience puts a single condition on eucharistic reception:

Grace, thorough Goddes word, gaf Piers power,  
 Myght to maken it, and men to ete it after  
 In helpe of hir heele ones in a monthe,  
 Or as ofte as thei hadde need, tho that hadde ypaied  
 To Piers pardon the Plowman, *Redde quod debes.*' (XIX.390-94)

In many ways, Conscience's invitation is a fairly straightforward assertion of orthodox eucharistic theology. He affirms both the Real Presence of Christ in the host and the sacramental power of the priesthood as represented by Piers. Even the penitential condition that he places on reception is typical insofar as theologians required Christians to participate in the sacrament of penance before receiving the Eucharist annually at Easter.<sup>38</sup> What is unique about Conscience's condition is not its emphasis on penitence

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<sup>38</sup> Conscience recommends more frequent eucharistic reception than the required yearly reception, but this discrepancy is far from radical. After all, Conscience is calling for monthly communion in what he initially perceives to be a strong and ideal version of the institutional church. Theologians, such as Thomas



but its contention that the performance of penitential satisfaction—the last stage of the sacrament of penance after contrition and confession—is fundamentally social. The command “*Redde quod debes*” (give back what you owe) demands social responsibility since it emphasizes one’s debt to other people rather than simply one’s debt to God. Individual Christians must work toward unity if they are to properly receive the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity.

Conscience’s condition proposes that, within the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist, there ought to be a union of literal reality and allegorical ideal, of social justice and the idea of the harmonious corporate body of Christ. The community rejects the Eucharist precisely because it does not want this unity of material and transcendent; the individuals in Unity want to separate their daily lives from abstract spiritual truth. The first to reject Conscience’s call to the Eucharist is a brewer who recognizes that his practice of cheating his customers—by selling “bothe dregges and draf”—is forbidden by the cardinal virtue of justice (XIX.403). The brewer implicitly accepts Conscience’s alignment of eucharistic reception with justice, but is unwilling to give up his unjust business practices. Conscience responds by defending and explaining the relationship between social justice and the Eucharist. He condemns the brewer, saying “But Conscience be thi commune fode, and Cardinale Vertues,/ Leve it wel, thei ben lost, both lif and soule” (XIX.410-11). In his defense of the cardinal virtues, Conscience unites them with the Eucharist, referring to both as food. In order to be part of the mystical body signified by the Eucharist, every person must properly order his conscience around the cardinal virtues; a Christian life consists not solely of prayer but also of carefully

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Aquinas, typically agreed that more frequent reception is an ideal but is simply not possible in a world corrupted by sin. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a.80.

discerned righteous actions toward one's fellow Christians. The brewer rejects the Eucharist because he does not want to enact the social unity that the host signifies.

As the ignorant vicar, the second person to refuse the Eucharist, demonstrates, the members of the community fail to realize that their daily lives could have allegorical or spiritual significance at all. Like Haukyn, they have become so focused on material things that they can no longer see the material world's connection to transcendent meaning. The vicar rejects the Eucharist because he refuses to recognize abstract ideals beyond his literal, physical reality. In particular, he cannot see the way in which the Eucharist signifies a divine, transcendent reality beyond the Church hierarchy. He rejects Conscience's claim that the cardinal virtues are necessary to righteous living because "I knew nevere Cardynal that he ne cam fro the Pope" (XIX.417). The vicar cannot distinguish between the cardinal virtues—justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude—and cardinals, the high-ranked clergy who advise the Pope. According to the vicar, when cardinals visit an area, the local clergy take the people's food in order to serve the cardinals. In contrast to Conscience's argument that the cardinal virtues will provide the commons with access to spiritual food, the Eucharist, the vicar claims that the cardinals of the church take away the commons' food, the necessities of daily life. Although Langland is no doubt sympathetic to the vicar's complaint that the cardinals and the Pope have strayed from Christian virtues by abusing the common people, Langland does not support the vicar's rejection of the Eucharist. For Langland, the Church does not solely consist of its hierarchy; the Church is the entire Christian community. In contrast, the vicar is only capable of seeing the Church in its literal manifestation as the fourteenth-century ecclesiastical hierarchy. To some extent, the vicar recognizes literal-mindedness

as a fault when he points out that the commons “counten ful litel/ The counseil of Conscience or Cardinale Vertues/ But if thei sown, as by sighte, somewhat to wynnyng” (XIX.455-57). However, the vicar places the blame for such materialism almost entirely on the Church hierarchy’s corruption rather than on individual Christians. The vicar refuses to recognize the ideal of Unity—the vision of what the Church ought to be—and rejects the Eucharist along with the very idea of transcendent meaning. For the vicar, the Eucharist is virtually worthless because he does not value or recognize the possibility of allegorical, transcendent meaning within the fourteenth-century Church.

According to Langland, proper eucharistic reception requires that Christians recognize their own role as the signified corporate body of Christ, a body in which all members are equally important. He argues for this allegorical interpretation of the Eucharist through his negative example of the king, the only member of the Christian community who claims to meet Conscience’s condition for eucharistic reception. The king claims that he is worthy of the Eucharist through reference to the body politic of which he is metaphorically the head. According to the king, although he takes from others, he only does so within the boundaries of the law: “I am heed of lawe:/ For ye ben but members and I above alle./ And sith I am youre aller heed, I am youre aller heele,/ And Holy Chirche chief help and chieftain of the commune” (XIX.473-76). The king claims that, because he is the source of laws, he always acts in accordance with the law and is therefore just and worthy to receive the Eucharist. Instead of being humbly penitent, the king believes his earthly authority makes it virtually impossible for him to be unjust and proclaims that he “may boldely be housled” (XIX.479). The passus ends before Langland tells us whether or not this king ultimately does receive the Eucharist,

but there is good reason to suspect that this king does not fully live up to Conscience's standards. Most importantly, he ignores the metaphor of the community as the corporate body of Christ, a metaphor that the *passus* has been alluding to since its description of Pentecost, because that metaphor places Christ as the head of the body. Instead of focusing on Christ's body, the king speaks only about the body politic. The king fails to realize that his own authority is not absolute and therefore insists upon a single metaphor of the communal body and imagines that metaphor as totally authoritative.

When Conscience challenges the king's claim to the Eucharist, he demonstrates that proper eucharistic reception involves both the recognition of the host as a sign of the communal body and a commitment to literal justice within that social body. Although the king is eager to accept that the host is intimately related to an abstract idea of the social body, Conscience insists that he must also account for his daily actions toward others. In order to emphasize the importance of personal accountability, Conscience places specific conditions on the king's eucharistic reception: "that thow konne defende,/ And rule thi reaume in reson, right wel and in truthe,/ That thow [have thyn asking], as the lawe asketh: *Omnia sunt tua ad defendum set non ad deprehendendum*" (what's yours is yours to keep in trust/ Not seize according to your lust) (XIX.481-83a).<sup>39</sup> Conscience will permit the king to receive the Eucharist as long as the king is willing to be accountable for his specific social actions, rather than rely on the metaphor of the body politic as his sole justification for his worthiness. For Conscience, the king's figural justice must have a basis in material reality. Although the king comes closest to eucharistic reception, the dream ends there and, when Will wakes, no one has received the Eucharist. None of the people in Unity have been able to reconcile their own actions with Conscience's

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<sup>39</sup> Translation is from the notes in A.V.C. Schmidt's edition.

condition for eucharistic reception. This failure to secure the identity of Unity through the sacrament of unity contributes to Unity's vulnerability to the Antichrist in the poem's final passus. The community has failed to become the unified body of Christ signified by the consecrated host.

For Langland, the power of the Eucharist lies in its unification of the two halves of the allegorical sign: the material appearance of bread unites with Christ's body, and the consecrated host which signifies the Christian community becomes one with that community through eucharistic reception. He argues that the host's communal significance cannot be complete without communal participation. As he make clear in his discussion of Christ's names, it is essential for Christians to understand the nature of the signs that signify Christ. In the case of the Eucharist, Christians must recognize their own obligation to enact the social justice and equality which the host signifies. The Christians in Unity fail to receive the Eucharist because they refuse to recognize their role in the Eucharist's signification and to transform their own divided social body into the perfect reflection of the unified body of Christ.

## IV.

## Signs of Separation:

Eucharistic Language in Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*

Over the past two decades, Middle English scholarship has often presented Julian of Norwich as a subversive and sometimes radical figure. In response to Caroline Walker Bynum's landmark *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, many literary scholars have been eager to regard Julian's *A Revelation of Love*<sup>1</sup> as participating in a primarily continental tradition of female mystics who became empowered through their identification with the bleeding, suffering body of Christ, especially as that body is made manifest in the Eucharist.<sup>2</sup> In such interpretations, Julian's text becomes "a vindication of the feminine" in opposition to dominant clerical views of women.<sup>3</sup> Even scholars who do not fully subscribe to a Bynum-inspired reading of Julian often regard her as challenging the norms of the

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<sup>1</sup> Julian's long text has been published under various titles, but I use the title *A Revelation of Love* throughout both because it is the way in which she herself describes the text and because it is the title of the edition from which I cite: Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005). All in-text citations will be by chapter and line number of this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> I am quoting the title of: Arlette Zinck, "A Vindication of the Feminine in the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich" in *Sovereign Lady: Essays on Women in Middle English Literature*, ed. Muriel Whitaker (New York: Garland, 1995), 171-187. Scholarship that focuses on Julian's distinctly feminine mysticism is vast and includes: Alexandra Barratt, "'In the Lowest Part of Our Need': Julian and Medieval Gynecological Writing," in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1998) 239-256; Julia Dietrich, "Women and Authority in the Rhetorical Economy of the Late Middle Ages," in *Rhetorical Women: Roles and Representations*, ed. Hildy Miller and Lillian Bridwell-Bowles (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 21-43; M. Diane F. Krantz, *The Life and Text of Julian of Norwich: The Poetics of Enclosure* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997); Maud Burnett McNerney, "In the *Meydens Womb*: Julian of Norwich and the Poetics of Enclosure," in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996), 157-182; Elizabeth Robertson, "Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*," in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 142-167; Christopher Roman, *Domestic Mysticism in Margery Kempe and Dame Julian of Norwich: The Transformation of Christian Spirituality in the Late Middle Ages* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005); Nicholas Watson, "'Yf women be double naturelly': Remaking 'Woman' in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*," *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 1-34.

medieval Church. David Aers, for example, provides an important critique of Bynum's argument by suggesting that women mystics' identification with the abjection of Christ is not empowering but is better viewed as "a product of modes of piety designed to make their practitioners objects of control."<sup>4</sup> For Aers, Julian is subversive and redefines women's relationship to Christ precisely because she does not fit into Bynum's model of empowerment through abjection.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these gender-based analyses, several scholars, notably Denise Baker and Nicholas Watson, have argued that Julian proposes a theology of universal salvation.<sup>6</sup> Although such scholarship has provided valuable insights into the sophistication of Julian's theology, it has sometimes led scholars to the erroneous conclusion that Julian was interested in challenging Church authority.<sup>7</sup> This chapter will show that scholars' depiction of a radical Julian is one that Julian herself, as a woman who constantly praises and defers to the authority of mother Church, would have rejected.

One of the most significant challenges to such readings of Julian as unorthodox and subversive is that, even during the Long Text, a text from which she removes almost all her defensive statements, she repeatedly asserts that "in all thing I beleve as holy church precheth and techeth"(9.17-18). In order to argue for Julian's heterodoxy, Julian scholars have therefore had to treat Julian's frequent and explicit claims to orthodoxy as

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<sup>4</sup> David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Aers and Staley, *The Powers of the Holy*, 77-104.

<sup>6</sup> Denise Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings: From Vision to Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Nicholas Watson, "Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 145-87.

<sup>7</sup> Both Baker and Watson are careful to note Julian's attempts to place her theology within orthodoxy, but continue to depict her as subversive to a certain extent. See also: Sandra J. McEntire, "The Likeness of God and the Restoration of Humanity in Julian of Norwich's *Showings*," in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1998), 3-33.

disingenuous ‘screens’ for her true intentions.<sup>8</sup> In this chapter, I take Julian’s frequent assertions of her devotion to the institutional Church at face value.<sup>9</sup> Rather than concentrate on Julian’s oft-discussed relationship to the politics of gender, I analyze her treatment of one of the foundational elements of the medieval Church’s power and authority: the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.<sup>10</sup> Julian avoids implicating herself in the dangerous debates surrounding transubstantiation by rarely speaking about the Eucharist directly. However, throughout her text, she uses eucharistic language—language that describes union with Christ through the reception of his body and blood—and reflects philosophically on the power of sacred signs to bring about a union between the believer and the body of Christ. In short, Julian discusses central issues surrounding the Eucharist while strategically rarely mentioning the Eucharist itself. In contrast to many of the continental female mystics who imagine the Eucharist in a way that valorizes an unmediated union between believer and Christ, Julian focuses on the nature of signs and praises what she sees as the essential role of the institutional Church as the mediator between Christ and humanity. Although Julian’s text begins with a desire for union with Christ, she continually realizes that such a union is impossible in this life. More significantly, Julian ultimately argues that her own union with Christ is much less important than the union of Christ with the whole Christian community. Her commitment to orthodoxy is not just a blind deferral to authority; it is a carefully reasoned argument

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<sup>8</sup> The use of ‘screen’ is Lynn Staley’s. See: Aers and Staley, *The Powers of the Holy*, 107-78.

<sup>9</sup> To a certain extent, the definition of orthodoxy is always contingent. My claims for Julian’s orthodoxy depend upon two elements of her text: her own highly-educated belief that her text posed no threat to the Church’s doctrines and her frequent statements that she wanted her text to support rather than threaten the Church. Julian regarded herself as working within the boundaries of orthodoxy and I believe it is worth examining how her text does exactly that.

<sup>10</sup> A few scholars have noted Julian’s commitment to the sacraments in passing, but this commitment has yet to be fully examined. See, for example: Christopher Abbot, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 142-143; Sandra J. McEntire, “The Likeness of God,” 24; Kevin J. Magill, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic or Visionary?* (London: Routledge, 2006), 92.



that the redemption of humanity depends upon a communal relationship with the divine and the institutional Church helps to make the divine accessible to every Christian through the sacraments.

Through an analysis of Julian's treatment of signs and mediation, this chapter will show that Julian understands the Eucharist in terms of language rather than direct affective encounter. Julian depicts the sacraments, and particularly the Eucharist, as essential to human devotion precisely because they are signs of a union with God that is not yet realized but for which the human community ought to continually long. Ultimately, Julian imagines language itself as eucharistic because all signs propose the idea of a union of earthly signifier with transcendent signified that cannot fully take place until the afterlife. I begin my argument by situating Julian's text in its historical context and demonstrating the orthodoxy of her affirmation of the relationship between the sacraments and the authority of the Church. Next, I show that, far from proposing a full union with God, Julian argues that it is essential for humans to perceive difference between Christ and humanity. Drawing particularly on the parable of the lord and the servant, I then argue that Julian understands the relationship between God and humanity as analogous to allegorical language which separates the categories of literal and transcendent even as it unifies them; because of this separation, humans can only know God through signs and language. Finally, I explore how Julian's examination of signs results in her presentation of the Eucharist as a sacrament that encourages Christians to long for their own fulfillment as a community of believers united with Christ.

### **Julian's Sacramental Orthodoxy**

In her writings and her social role as an anchoress, Julian was committed both to supporting the institutional Church's authority and to aiding the devotional lives of her fellow Christians. Throughout *A Revelation*, Julian argues that her visions were never intended for her alone. Even at the moments of her most intimate encounters with Christ, Julian claims that "In alle this I was mekille stered in cherite to mine evenchristen, that they might alle see and know the same that I sawe, for I wolde that it were comfort to them" (8.22-24). For Julian, all Christians are members of the mystical body of Christ and are therefore only complete when they are all working together for the common purpose of unity in God (31.30; 75.5). During her discussion of the first revelation, she aligns her orthodoxy with her desire to be united in love with her fellow Christians. She argues that:

For sothly it was not shewde to me that God loveth me better than the lest soule that is in grace. For I am seker ther be many that never had shewing ne sight but of the comen teching of holy church that love God better than I. For if I looke singulery to myself, I am right nought. But in general I am, I hope, in onehede of cherite with alle my evencristen. (9.4-8)

According to Julian, the teachings of the Church provide access to Christ for all Christians and, if she is to value the communal nature of redemption, she must also value the Church itself. Her assertions in support of both Church and community are not merely philosophical commitments. As an anchoress in the city of Norwich, Julian was a public supporter of the institutional Church and actively involved in the spiritual well-being of the broader social community. Despite their lack of mobility, anchoresses were often public figures. The thirteenth-century anchoritic manual, *Ancrene Wisse*, warns

anchoresses not to become sources of news and gossip, and not to engage in such public, social activities as running a school; these warnings reveal that anchoresses were capable of playing active roles in their communities.<sup>11</sup> The evidence suggests that Julian was an important public figure. St. Julian's Church, the church to which Julian's anchorhold was likely connected and from which she took her name, held a central location in medieval Norwich.<sup>12</sup> And we know, from a now famous passage from the *Book of Margery Kempe*, that Julian was sought out as a spiritual advisor.<sup>13</sup>

From this public position, Julian would have been well aware that explicitly discussing the nature of the Eucharist as a sign would have been potentially dangerous to her both personally and professionally. As my overview of allegorical treatments of eucharistic theology in my third chapter demonstrates, it was common for completely orthodox theologians, such as Hugh of St. Victor and Thomas Aquinas, to treat the Eucharist as both a sign and reality; the consecrated host was Christ's body and signified Christ's body. However, by the time Julian was writing *A Revelation*, between roughly 1393 and 1415, Wyclif and the Lollards who followed him had adopted the language of signs for their own heterodox definitions of the Eucharist.<sup>14</sup> They insisted that the consecrated host was only a sign.<sup>15</sup> In his 1379 treatise, *De Eucharistia*, Wyclif contends that the consecrated host does not contain the physical presence of Christ; instead, the

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<sup>11</sup> *Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Robert Hasenfratz (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 130 (2.486-88), 408 (8.162-65).

<sup>12</sup> Norman P. Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich, 1370-1532* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), map at xii.

<sup>13</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), 53-54.

<sup>14</sup> On the dating of the text, see: Nicholas Watson, "The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 637-83.

<sup>15</sup> Almost all of the lengthy Lollard writings were composed between 1381 and 1413, and one of the most frequent subjects of these writings was the Eucharist. Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 117-119, 208.

substance of the bread remains in the host after consecration and the host merely signifies Christ.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, he argues, priests wrongly encourage the laity to engage in idolatry by telling them to worship what is, in reality, a piece of bread. When they denounced transubstantiation, the Lollards posed a direct threat to the Church's authority by denouncing priestly sacramental power, as well as denying one of the most popular and lucrative modes of lay devotion. Ecclesiastical authorities rightly recognized that the Lollards' arguments against the Eucharist threatened the entire structure of the Church and their opposition to the Lollards grew increasingly fierce:<sup>17</sup> in 1382 the Blackfriars Council officially condemned Wyclif's teachings, in 1401 Parliament passed the act, *De Heretico Comburendo*, which authorized the burning of heretics, and in 1409 Archbishop Arundel's *Constitutions* effectively banned vernacular theological writing.<sup>18</sup> From the late fourteenth century on, the vernacular discussion of eucharistic theology thus became progressively more dangerous because clerical authorities often perceived such discussions as a direct threat to the integrity of the Church. At this time, Norwich was one of the most populous English cities and held a large number of religious institutions that would have made discussion of theology and heresy very likely. Although there are few records of Lollards living in Norwich, Julian would almost certainly have been well aware of the heresy because the Norwich bishops were noted for their very active and

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<sup>16</sup> John Wyclif, *De Eucharistia Tractatus Maior*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Trübner & Co., 1892), 1-326.

<sup>17</sup> Although church authorities ultimately declared a variety of Lollard beliefs heretical, the church's virulent and violent response to the Lollards was primarily a result of their teaching on the Eucharist. See: Margaret Aston, "Wyclif and the Vernacular" in *From Ockham to Wyclif*, ed. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks, Studies in Church History, Subsidia 5 (Oxford, Blackwell, 1987), 281-330; J.I. Catto, "John Wyclif and the Cult of the Eucharist" in *The Bible in the Medieval World: Essays in Memory of Beryl Smalley*, ed. Katherine Walsh and Diana Wood, Studies in Church History, Subsidia 4 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 269-286.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of the effect of the *Constitutions* on vernacular theological writing, see: 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): 822-864.

vocal opposition to it.<sup>19</sup> Since anchoresses were generally under the jurisdiction of bishops, Julian would have known that there were real risks to actively promoting her own vernacular eucharistic theology, no matter how orthodox, particularly if that theology discussed the Eucharist as a sign.

By framing her text in the tradition of continental women's mysticism, Julian strategically avoids participating in the ecclesiastical discourses surrounding heresy and is thus able to explore the Eucharist as a sign in a non-polemical way. As Caroline Walker Bynum has shown, religious women writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries often saw the Eucharist as a point of entry into union with the divine.<sup>20</sup> The language of incorporation and an intense identification with the suffering body of Christ are markers of this tradition of regarding the Eucharist as a site of affective union with God. By the late fourteenth century, English readers seem to have shown a significant interest in these writings, and texts such as Catherine of Siena's *Orchard of Syon* and Bridget of Sweden's *Liber Celestis* started to become available in Middle English.<sup>21</sup> Since she lived in a part of England with close ties to the continent, Julian was geographically placed to take early notice of such continental mysticism.<sup>22</sup> Although it is impossible to determine which texts Julian might have had direct access to, it seems certain that Julian was at the very least aware of these women's writings. Like such continental mystics, the idea of a eucharistic union with Christ permeates Julian's text.

Throughout her descriptions of the revelations, Julian is fascinated by the power of

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<sup>19</sup> Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, 165-66.

<sup>20</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*; Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century" in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 119-150.

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Watson notes that such texts began to arrive in England by the 1390s at the latest. See: Watson, "Composition," 653. See also: Rosalynn Voaden, ed., *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Watson, "Composition," 656.

Christ's blood. Although devotion to Christ's blood is not always indicative of the Eucharist, Julian often links this blood to the act of drinking and to the rituals of the Church. In doing so, the eucharistic referent is clear. During her description of the fourth revelation, Julian explains that Christ wants Christians to take his blood "for ther is no licour that is made that liketh him so wele to geve us" (12.11-12). She describes how when Christians reach the afterlife they will endlessly be "swetly swelwing" him (43.43). Even her depiction of Jesus as mother is highly eucharistic because, in this period, one of the major grounds of comparison between Christ and mothers was that both nursing mothers and Christ feed their children from their own bodies.<sup>23</sup> Julian's emphasis on thirst and drinking as well as Christ's motherly feeding of humanity suggest that her desired union between Christ and humanity is one of mutual ingestion and bodily incorporation. In this sense, Julian strategically models her text on the writings of the continental female mystics.

However, Julian's text differs radically from such continental writings in that she does not ultimately regard the Eucharist as a way to achieve personal union with Christ. Unlike Bridget of Sweden, for example, who sees Christ during the elevation of the host, Julian never describes the Eucharist or an experience at Mass. In fact, for a text that purports to retell Julian's experience of the sixteen revelations she received from God, it is surprisingly non-narrative; her engagement with the Eucharist and the sacraments is on an abstract and theological level rather than a personal one. According to Bynum, for medieval women writers of religious literature, "The sense of *imitatio* as *becoming* or *being* (not merely feeling or understanding) lay in the background of eucharistic

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<sup>23</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing," in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 110-169, especially 153.

devotion. The eucharist was an especially appropriate vehicle for the effort to become Christ because the eucharist *is* Christ.... One *became* Christ in *eating* Christ's crucified body."<sup>24</sup> Julian does not conform to Bynum's model.<sup>25</sup> In part, this key difference stems from Julian's belief that the Church's communal salvation is more important than her individual redemption. In addition, Julian believes that complete union with Christ is impossible during one's earthly life. Instead of providing union, sacred signs such as the Eucharist signify a union that has not yet been achieved. The subject of Julian's *Revelation* is the human community's struggle for union with the divine; the Eucharist is the sign of that promised union.

Julian explores the sacraments in relation to what she sees as their central role as facilitating the relationship between Christ and the earthly Church. She examines the ways in which sacred signs do and do not provide access to the body of Christ. Although recent scholarship has tended to emphasize the way in which orthodoxy collapsed the distance between sign and signified in order to affirm the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist,<sup>26</sup> it is vital to recognize that, throughout the later Middle Ages, orthodox theologians consistently defined sacraments as signs which function like figurative language in the sense that they represent a reality beyond their physical existence. The seven sacraments effected what they figuratively represented, but that did not alter their essential nature as representations. For Thomas Aquinas, as for Julian, sacraments derive

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<sup>24</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 256-57.

<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that, although Bynum includes Julian in her discussion of female mystics, she very rarely discusses Julian individually or directly.

<sup>26</sup> For example, David Aers argues that all realms of orthodox discourse—from theologians to poets—"shared a commitment to closing the gaps between the sacramental sign of Christ's presence and the bodily presence it signified." David Aers, *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2004), 11. See also: Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 6-9; Dallas G. Denery II, "From Sacred Mystery to Divine Deception: Robert Holkot, John Wyclif and the Transformation of Fourteenth-Century Eucharistic Discourse," *Journal of Religious History* 29 (2005): 129-144.

their power from Christ's Passion and "it is through the reception of the sacraments that the power flowing from this becomes, in a certain way, conjoined to us."<sup>27</sup> In this sense, all the sacraments promise a sort of union with Christ; however, the union that the sacraments provide is not a full union. As Aquinas goes on to point out, humans need sacraments as a way to experience and understand God's grace because they are not yet in the full state of grace they will reach in heaven and they therefore perceive God through signs rather than reality.<sup>28</sup> In their earthly lives, humans need to achieve knowledge of spiritual realities deductively through physical realities. Sacraments are therefore a way of achieving an imperfect union through the imperfect nature of the human mind. Julian's interest in the limitations of sacramental union thus constitutes an engagement with a fully orthodox discussion of the role of the sacraments in the Church.

### **Difference and the Limits of Affectivity**

My claim that Julian does not believe in the possibility of personal union with Christ may seem counterintuitive because most recent scholarship has argued precisely the opposite. Scholars typically praise Julian for challenging conceptual boundaries, especially the boundary between Christ and believer.<sup>29</sup> For example, Lynn Staley argues that "Rather than establish terms that seek to contain—and inevitably delimit—the objects they signify, Julian creates a system [of language] wherein identities flow almost

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<sup>27</sup> "cujus virtus quodammodo nobis copulatur per susceptionem sacramentorum." Translation and original Latin are taken from: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 68-69 (3a. 62, 5).

<sup>28</sup> *ST* 3a.61, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Some recent examples of work that focuses on the dissolution of conceptual boundaries include: Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999); Maria R. Lichtmann, "'God fulfilled my bodye': Body, Self, and God in Julian of Norwich," in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 263-78; Magill, *Julian of Norwich*; Jon Shickler, "The Cross and the Citadel: Reconciling Apophatic and Cataphatic Traditions in the *Showings*," *Studia Mystica* 21 (2000): 95-125.



imperceptibly into one another.”<sup>30</sup> In this section, I challenge this critical conception by showing that, although Julian believes there is no real separation between God and the human soul, she repeatedly argues that the perception of difference is absolutely essential to human spirituality. For Julian, affective union is impossible during one’s earthly life; one can only understand God through language and mediation.

Julian’s text arises out of a long theological tradition which saw a close relationship between language and the human inability to fully understand God. As several scholars have pointed out, although we do not know the extent and nature of Julian’s theological training, it is apparent that she draws heavily on Augustinian theology, particularly Augustine’s understanding of the relationship between the Trinity and the individual human soul.<sup>31</sup> In *De Trinitate*, Augustine argues that knowing oneself and knowing God are interdependent endeavors. Every individual’s innermost soul contains the image of God and is a tripartite structure analogous to the Holy Trinity; the soul is capable of recognizing and loving God because it already knows God through the image of God inside itself. The Trinity and the human soul are distinct entities but, from a human perspective, it is impossible to know one without knowing the other. Therefore, one of the largest barriers to understanding the Trinity is not the mind’s inability to understand sacred mysteries but the incapacity of human language to express them. For example, Augustine points out that he only uses the word ‘persons’ (*personae*) to describe the three persons in God because there needs to be an answer to the question

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<sup>30</sup> Aers and Staley, *The Powers of the Holy*, 178.

<sup>31</sup> Denise Baker has written most extensively on the relationship between Julian and Augustine: Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings*; Denise N. Baker, “The Image of God: Contrasting Configurations in Julian of Norwich’s *Showings* and Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*,” in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1998), 35-60. See also: Nicholas Watson, “The Trinitarian Hermeneutic in Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium V*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: Brewer, 1992), 79-100.

‘three what?’ (*quid tres*).<sup>32</sup> Language is an imperfect means of expressing what is essentially inexpressible. To highlight the difficulty of attaining knowledge of the divine through language, Augustine’s most frequent scriptural reference in *De Trinitate*—cited at least 26 times—is to 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see in a mirror dimly but then we will see face to face.” For Augustine, this mirror is a central image because it not only illustrates that humans see the divine by reflecting back on the self, but also functions as a figure for language.<sup>33</sup> Language is a system of signs that distorts the truth, but it is a necessary tool in the human struggle to understand God.

For Julian, as for Augustine, the inner human soul in some sense already knows God, but it is necessary to search and struggle for that knowledge. In Julian’s text, the inner, higher part of the soul is absolutely good and united with God’s will. She explains that “in ech a soule that shall be safe is a godly wille that never assented to sinne, ne never shall” (53.9-10). Although the outer, lower part of the soul may consent to sin, it is impossible for the entire soul to be sinful because the inner soul is united with God and therefore always strives for good. Through the existence of the godly will, the soul always knows God because “thus is mannes soule made of God, and in the same pointe knite to God” (53.33). The difficulty that believers encounter in their struggle for union with God is not the inaccessibility of God since the soul and God are already united. Rather, the challenge lies in the human capacity to understand that union. As Julian’s own attempts to understand the revelations through writing demonstrate, the human soul

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<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate libri XV*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina L (Turnholt: Brepols, 1968), 262 (VII.vi.28-33).

<sup>33</sup> In fact, at one point, Augustine explicitly discusses the ways in which this mirror particularly represents allegorical language. See: *De Trinitate*, 481-82 (XV.ix.1-33).

must struggle for knowledge of God through language, a system of signs that is incapable of entirely conveying the true nature of God.

Since, according to Julian, God already dwells in the inner soul of every Christian, any sharp divisions between the human and the divine are more perceived than real. However, throughout *A Revelation*, Julian shows how humans experience these two categories as incommensurable. In contrast to many later medieval devotional texts, Julian argues that there are distinct limits to affective piety because no full emotional union with Christ is possible during earthly life. When Julian receives the revelations she quickly realizes that her desire for affective union with Christ will not be fulfilled. Despite beginning her text by describing her desire for an affective experience, Julian never achieves a perfect union with Christ in which her identity and the identity of Christ overlap. When she witnesses the moment of Christ's death, instead of experiencing Christ's pain as her own, Julian encounters a different kind of pain entirely: she sees Christ's pain without being able to share in it. At first, when she gazes upon Christ's dying body, she contends that "I felte no paine but for Cristes paines" (17.43), and believes that Christ has fulfilled her desire for affective union with him. However, she soon realizes that her pain is fundamentally different from Christ's when she explains that "my paines passed ony bodily deth" (17.46), implying that her pain is categorically different than Christ's experience of dying. When Julian sees Christ's body drying and growing limp on the cross, she does not identify that pain as something similar to her own. Instead, she compares his body to a sagging piece of cloth (17.20) and a dry piece of wood (17.29), objects that have no sensation whatsoever.

She describes her pain as categorically different from Christ's. She reflects, "'But of alle paines that leed to salvation, this is the most: to se thy love suffer. How might ony paine be more then to see him that is alle my life, alle my blisse, and alle my joy suffer?' Here I felt sothfastly that I loved Crist so much above myselfe that ther was no paine that might be suffered like to that sorrow that I had to see him in paine" (17.48-52). A fundamental aspect of Julian's pain is her recognition that she can distinguish Christ's pain from her own. At the point of Christ's greatest suffering, she must stand apart from Christ and watch him suffer. The difference between her pain and Christ's is not, as one might expect, that her pain is emotional while his is clearly physical; Julian has no difficulty viewing both experiences as equally painful. The problem for Julian, the source of the intensity of her anguish, is that their two bodies are ultimately incommensurable. According to conventional models of affective piety, Christ's Passion is supposed to be the moment in Christ's life when believers can most easily lose themselves in the identity of Christ, but it is at precisely this moment that Julian recognizes her inability to claim Christ's pain as her own.<sup>34</sup>

Julian argues that it is human nature itself that limits her experience of Christ's suffering. Once she realizes that she cannot directly identify with Christ, Julian meditates on the figure of the Virgin Mary at the foot of the cross. Unlike her experience with Christ's pain, Julian claims that it is entirely possible for her to understand the precise nature of Mary's emotional suffering. She explains the source and nature of Mary's anguish by stating that "the higher, the mightier, the swetter that the love is, the more

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<sup>34</sup> For example, the fourteenth-century *Prickynge of Love* claims that if its readers love Christ enough, they will be able to reflect on Christ's suffering and "be wounded with his woundes & ouer-helte with peynes of his passioun." *The Prickynge of Love*, ed. Harold Kane, vol. 1 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1983), 15.

sorrow it is to the lover to see that body in pain that he loved" (18.6-7). By placing this description in general terms, she implies that Mary's suffering is of a sort that is accessible to all humans. Julian regards her identification with Mary and the other disciples present at the crucifixion as almost effortless; she feels secure in articulating the depth of their emotional suffering solely on the authority of "my own feeling" (18.9). According to Julian, the reason that the pain that she, Mary, and the disciples endure is radically different from Christ's is because it is rooted in "kinde love" (18.3; 18.4). In this case, the word "kinde" particularly denotes the category of humankind and suggests that humans have a unique way of experiencing emotional pain. When Julian describes "kinde love" as the source of their sorrow, she suggests that their feelings are a direct result of their innate and distinctly human affection for Christ.

Therefore, only a partial identification with Christ is possible because Christ, as both fully human and fully divine, surpasses human nature. During her vision of the crucifixion, Julian describes how "Here saw I a great oning between Christ and us, to my understanding. For when he was in pain, we were in pain, and all creatures that might suffer pain suffered with him" (18.11-12). Although this description at first seems to suggest that all creation can experience emotional union with Christ through pain, Julian quickly reveals that the pain each creature feels is of a particular category, a category that Christ ultimately surpasses: everyone suffers "in their kind" and "for kindness" because "it longeth kindly to their property to know him for their lord" (18.14; 18.17; 18.15). Certainly every individual's pain is similar to Christ's insofar as Christ shares the individual's 'kind' by virtue of his human nature, but Julian never forgets that Christ has two natures—both God and man.

Ultimately, Christ's divine nature makes full understanding of him impossible. Julian describes how, at the moment of Christ's greatest suffering, "the oning of the godhed gave strength to the manhed for love to suffer more than alle men might" (20.1-3). Christ's human nature is never separate from his godly nature; his union with the Trinity is always perfect and complete. It is Christ's divine nature that gives him a greater capacity for love and this greater love in turn increases his suffering. The quantitative difference between each believer's pain and Christ's pain is therefore so large that "he sufferd more paine than all men of salvation that ever was, from the furst beginning into the last day" (20.4-5). Even when believers strive to increase their suffering in order to better understand the Passion, they do not decrease the difference between Christ's pain and their own. For example, when Christ sees Mary at the foot of the cross, "sufferde he for her sorowse, and more over" (20.19); Mary's sorrow for Christ's suffering actually increases that suffering itself. It is never possible for a human to experience the depth of Christ's suffering because, unlike Christ, humans are not fully divine.

This difference between divine and human experience is not simply a result of human sin or failure. Rather, Christ desires and deliberately creates difference between divine and human perception. When Christ announces that he has overcome the devil, Julian laughs for joy and imagines that if all her fellow Christians had heard this, they too would have laughed. In the midst of her description of this imagined chorus of laughter, she interjects with the terse, contrasting statement: "But I saw not Crist laugh" (13.23). Since Christ is joyful at other points in the text, Julian could easily have depicted Christ as laughing. At this point, the primary effect of highlighting Christ's lack of laughter is to demonstrate that Christ and humanity are often different and that that difference is not

necessarily a result of sin. Although Christ does not laugh, he wants his followers to feel joy and laughter at the overcoming of the devil. As Julian observes, “wele I wot that sight that he shewed me made me to laugh” (13.23-24). Without placing a negative value on human perception, Julian shows that human perception and divine perception are often simply different.

However, it is with regard to sin that the perspectives of humanity and Christ differ most radically. According to Julian’s theology, since an unchanging godly will resides in each person’s soul, sin arises not from willful disobedience but from overzealous actions committed out of desire for God. At one point, Julian remarks that she never saw sin during the course of her vision because sin has no being or substance unto itself (27). Although conventional Christian theology suggested that sin ought to be a source of guilt and shame, Julian’s Christ views sin in a radically different way.<sup>35</sup> He shows her that, in heaven, “sinne shalle be no shame, but wurshipe to man” (38.1). Sin will ultimately be a source of honor to all who are saved because every time a person falls into sin it provides God with another opportunity to raise the sinner up by lavishing his love, mercy, and forgiveness upon him.

Regardless of how liberating God’s perspective on sin may initially seem, Julian urges her readers not to try to share this perspective during their earthly lives. By making this distinction, Julian is able to question conventional understandings of sin at the same time as she affirms Church doctrines that emphasize guilt and repentance. According to Julian, one of the essential processes by which God shows his mercy is through the sacrament of penance, a process that requires believers to feel true contrition for their

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<sup>35</sup> Julian’s deviation from conventional understandings of the nature of sin has received much scholarly attention. See: Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings*; McEntire, “The Likeness of God;” Watson, “Visions of Inclusion.”

sins. Although God recognizes that every human soul possesses an unchanging godly will, every Christian ought to feel “with gret sorow and with gret shame that he hath so defouled the fair image of God” (39.8-9). God never sees his followers as unworthy but they ought to view themselves in this way while living on earth. In heaven, all shame shall turn to honor and joy, but it is necessary for humans to first experience shame in order to allow God to reveal the depth of his mercy. Despite Christ’s adoption of human flesh, the perspectives of human and divine must remain separate. Julian asserts that “otherwise is the beholding of God, and otherwise is the beholding of man” (52.58). Although it is important for humans to understand that God’s perspective is different, they ought not to strive to hold that divine perspective during their earthly lives. Julian argues that divine and human perception must be split in two and operate together as a “doubil werking” (52.76-77). When Julian tells her readers that God does not view their sins as marks of shame, it is to increase their trust in God and not to alleviate their need to repent their sins.

The effects of sin necessitate the maintenance of such a radical split between human and divine perception. Julian explains that, although sin is nothing, the pain that people experience as a result of their sins is very real. Arguing that two contraries cannot coexist in the same place, she notes that the “most contrarious that are is the highest blesse and the depest paine” (72.3-4). Since the highest bliss is the total union with God that all believers long for and the deepest pain is that which sinners suffer as a result of their sins, it is the consequences of sin rather than sin itself that keep believers from experiencing union with God. According to most contemporary theology on original sin, with the exceptions of Christ and the Virgin Mary, every person is a sinner and so no one



is capable of fully living within the bliss of God's love in this life. However, according to Julian, this experience of God's distance from humanity as a result of sin is an illusion. God's love and grace are always present in each person, even though they go unperceived. Julian argues: "For notwithstanding that oure lorde God wonneth now in us, and is here with us, and halseth us and becloseth us for tender love that he may never leve us, and is more nere to us than tonge may telle or harte may thinke, yet may we never stinte of morning ne of weping, nor of seeking nor of longing, till whan we se him clere in his blisseful chere" (72.19-23). It is of great comfort to know that God makes his home within every human's soul, but that knowledge should never alleviate the need to mourn one's own sinfulness because the pain that humans experience as a result of sin keeps them from fully understanding God. All souls naturally desire to know God and must therefore mourn that the pain of sin keeps them from fully seeing God in this life. In her seventy-second chapter, Julian sums up much of her discussion of sin by explaining that humans ought to strive to know three things: God, humanity's nature as given to it by God, and a humble recognition of "what oureselfe is, anemptes oure sinne and anemptes oure febilnes" (72.45-46). Julian believes that it is important for humans to strive to understand the true nature of God's generous love and to know that each person is the image of that love, but such knowledge never negates the fact that the effects of sin are very real and prevent full understanding of God.

### **Split Perception and Allegorical Interpretation**

Julian understands the relationship between God and humanity through reference to allegorical signs, both in the sense that it is only through language that believers can come to know God and in the sense that this relationship itself is analogous to the

separation of allegorical and literal meanings within an allegorical text. Through the parable of the lord and the servant, she examines the ways in which literal and allegorical meanings both coincide and threaten to pull apart from each other. The literal narrative of the parable is relatively simple: A lord sends a servant out to do his will. Out of love, the servant is so eager to obey his lord that he runs too fast and falls down in a ditch and hurts himself. Although the servant is too ashamed to look at the lord, the lord does not blame the servant for his fall but instead plans to reward him since it was only good will and love that caused the fall in the first place. However, this narrative is never just a literal one. In her introduction to the parable, Julian explains that this “sight was shewed double in the lorde, and the sight was shewed double in the servant” (51.3-4). Even before it begins, Julian divides the narrative’s significance into four parts by splitting it into discrete roles of lord and servant and endowing each role with both literal and allegorical significance. As her exploration of the parable continues, Julian highlights the divisions between the literal and the allegorical, and the servant and the lord. She demands that readers regard this parable as a lesson in reading allegorically, a process she regards as perceiving two disparate but interrelated meanings at the same time.

Thus, Julian uses allegorical interpretation—as a reading practice in which the reader perceives higher levels of meaning through the interpretation of seemingly independent literal signs—as a way of exploring the differences between human and divine perception. In Julian’s formulation, earthly life is like an allegorical text; literal reading corresponds to human perception and allegorical reading corresponds to divine perception. In this way, Julian contributes to a long tradition of Neoplatonic Christian allegoresis which regards the physical world as a book which reveals the invisible and

spiritual secrets of God beneath its surface.<sup>36</sup> Unlike many Christian thinkers, Julian does not regard literal meaning as something that ought to be discarded or transcended just as someone would discard a shell in order to reach the kernel inside;<sup>37</sup> rather, Julian longs for the unification of the literal and allegorical levels of meaning. Like the literal level of an allegorical text, human lives always possess meaning beyond their own physical reality even though humans may find it difficult or impossible to fully grasp that meaning. According to Julian, humans do not have full access to God's meaning in their earthly lives and so cannot see how the human and divine coincide, how the literal and allegorical can correspond to form a single unit. The work of human devotion in this life is interpreting signs whose full significance cannot be known and, in so doing, increasing the human desire for the fullness of knowledge that will come from union with God in the afterlife.

Allegory is perfectly suited to Julian's discussion of the accessibility of transcendent meaning because allegory functions by simultaneously inviting and blocking readerly interpretation. Within an allegorical text, the reader plays a central role in the production of meaning because the genre itself foregrounds the text's status as signifying a meaning beyond the literal.<sup>38</sup> However, allegory also highlights the way in which such interpretive work can neither be definitive nor complete. In his influential essay, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," Paul de Man argues that, because allegory makes

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<sup>36</sup> This Neoplatonic allegoresis dates back at least to Plotinus and Augustine. For discussions of the effect of this tradition on later medieval literature, see especially: David Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975); Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979). For a more recent discussion, see: Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> This tradition of regarding allegoresis as the task of separating shells from kernels is very fully discussed in: David Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory*.

<sup>38</sup> One of the works to most fully explore the role of the reader in allegory is: Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory*.

visible the distance between the literal sign and the allegorical abstraction it represents, allegory prevents the reader's emotional identification with the text. As he argues, "allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin.... [In] so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully though painfully, recognized as a non-self."<sup>39</sup> Allegory makes a radically different promise to its readers than affective devotional texts make. Instead of offering a moment of identification with the divine, allegory invites the reader to participate in the creation of the text's meaning even as it highlights the fact that representation and transcendent reality fail to perfectly coincide. Unlike de Man, Julian believes that it is theoretically possible for representation and abstraction to coincide; however, such perfect coincidence can only occur in the mind of God.

Julian herself is initially reluctant to engage in allegorical interpretation of the revelations precisely because she recognizes that to do so would implicate her in the creation of their meaning. In fact, she claims that it took her over twenty years to interpret this parable and she therefore omitted it entirely from her earlier short text. She confesses that she was initially inclined not to interpret the parable at all because she felt that it was "misty" and "indefferent" (51.75-76). The idea of engaging in extensive interpretation of it made her uncomfortable because she felt that her initial understanding of it was essentially incomplete and "culde I not take therein full understanding to my ees in that time" (51.55-56). At least part of this reluctance stems from a hesitation to claim authorship of an allegorical reading. When she first received the revelations, she interpreted the parable as a narrative of humanity's fall from grace in which the servant

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<sup>39</sup> Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187-228, at 207.

represents Adam and the lord represents God. At this allegorical level, the parable is a radical reinterpretation of the doctrine of original sin because it attributes Adam's fall from grace to his sincere love for God, rather than willful disobedience. Even Julian's most basic interpretation seemed to challenge official doctrine and therefore would have called into question her capacity to interpret the revelations at all. Julian's ultimate decision to include the parable in her long text attests to her willingness to participate in the creation of the revelations' meaning and her acceptance that such interpretation will always be incomplete. Although Julian's presentation of the parable is extensive and almost mathematically precise in its interpretation of detail, Julian does not suggest that her interpretation is final. As she points out in her concluding chapter, "This boke is begonne by Goddes gifte and his grace, but it is not yet performed" (86.1-2), suggesting that her interpretation does not complete the revelations' meaning. By including this parable in *A Revelation*, Julian argues that God wants her to engage in allegorical interpretation and, by extension, that such interpretation can be an important way for humans to understand God.

Throughout this text, allegorical interpretation necessarily involves the proliferation of meaning and the recognition that such interpretation is never finished. Once she accepts the reading of the servant as Adam, Julian discovers that the allegorical meaning of the parable expands. Although one of the ostensible purposes of a parable is to illustrate doctrine, Julian instead finds herself in a state of "unknowinge" when she begins her work of interpretation (51.59). Upon fixing the identity of the servant as Adam, she is troubled to discover that "I sawe many diverse properteys that might by no manner be derecte to singel Adam" (51.57-58). The details in the parable —expressions,

clothing, gestures, and colors—all suggest to Julian that simple interpretations will not be possible and she may never fully understand it. This realization leads her to recognize that this vision is not unique among the revelations with regard to its allegorical significance because “I sawe and understode that every shewing is full of privities” (51.61-62). Every one of her visions is full of signs, signs that point beyond their literal meaning to the secrets of God.

The difference between divine and human perception of these signs is that God understands the allegorical and literal simultaneously while humans find it difficult to see how the two fit together. When the lord sees the servant fall into the ditch, he beholds his loving servant “with a doubil chere” (51.34), the outer expression of pity and the inward joy at the knowledge that he will now be able to restore his servant into grace.

Throughout the text, the inner or allegorical meanings correspond to God’s view of the world. Like the lord of the parable, only God is able to hold this double perspective in which he understands both human and divine perception of the same event. In contrast, the servant, whom Julian eventually understands as representing all of humanity, cannot look at his lord because of his fallen state; he is limited to his own perspective. One exception to this division between human and divine perception is Julian. On account of her visions, Julian *does* briefly understand God’s perspective and it is almost beyond her comprehension. She exclaims that “methought it might melt our hartes for love and brest them on two for joy” (51.110). Even for Julian, full understanding of the true nature of the relationship between God and humanity is something that, from a human perspective, is always divided, always split into two parts. Halfway through her explication of the parable, Julian discovers that the servant not only signifies the first Adam but also the

second Adam, Christ. Through Christ's incarnation, God chose to be inextricably bound to humanity through human flesh and so, "when Adam felle, Godes sonne fell. For the rightful oning which was made in heven, Goddes sonne might not be seperath from Adam, for by Adam I understond alle man" (51.185-187). Christ is always part of humanity and so the union between human and divine has already taken place; human beings are just unable to fully recognize that union. Julian describes humanity as God's crown, "which crowne is the faders joy, the sonnes wurshippe, the holy gostes liking" (51.270-271). Humanity is as close to the Trinity as it is possible to be without being part of the Trinity itself, but humanity's fallen state prevents humans from seeing the double perspective of human and divine at once.

This split between divine and human perception is ultimately a separation within the self, between the substantial and sensual parts of the soul. In Julian's theology, the individual human soul consists of substance and sensuality. The sensuality is humanity's nature as it knows itself in the physical world and the substance contains the godly will. In this formulation, humanity does not see the link between substance and sensuality, and only God can link the two: "oure faith is a vertu that cometh of oure kinde substance into oure sensual soule by the holy gost" (54.22-23). Only God unites the two parts of the soul that correspond to the perspectives of God and humanity, the substantial and the sensual, the allegorical and the literal. Since God dwells in the substantial soul, the union of the soul with God at the end of time will also be a recognition of the soul's unity within itself.

During their earthly lives, humans are unable to understand the union of substance and sensuality that has already taken place. Through his incarnation, Christ united

substance and sensuality by uniting divinity and flesh: “theyse two perties were in Crist, the heyer and the lower, which is but one soule” (55.40-41). According to Julian, Christ exists in the human soul “in the same point that oure soule is made sensual, in the same point is the cite of God” (55.21-22). Christ dwells at the meeting point between substance and sensuality in the human soul, holding them together when human logic often wants to pull them apart. Although Julian recognizes that substance and sensuality are fundamentally inseparable, she continually speaks about them as though the soul were made up of two separate elements. For example, she argues that, through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, God saved humankind from a “doubil deth,” the death of both body and soul (55.38). Christ has already united substance and sensuality, but the very fact that Julian still speaks of them as two distinct parts reveals that it is difficult for humans to perceive them as a single unit.

Although the substantial/allegorical/divine and the sensual/literal/human are ultimately inseparable, humans can only understand the soul if it is split into these two parts. In the fifty-sixth chapter, Julian makes an argument very similar to Augustine’s explication of the Trinity when she claims that understanding God is necessary if one is to understand one’s own soul and understanding one’s own soul is necessary if one is to understand God. Although these statements suggest that knowledge of the self and knowledge of God are identical, Julian presents them as if they were two separate activities. The goal of attempts to know either God or the human soul is the same, but Julian holds these two ideas in tension even though she realizes that they ultimately bleed into each other. The complete collapse of boundaries does not aid human understanding. Rather, humans need to see distinct categories and boundaries before it is possible to



contemplate the ways in which those categories are united. Julian concludes this chapter by asserting that God “in his endlesse wisdom wolde that we were doubil” (56.50-51). Although scholars typically interpret this line to mean that God wants the human soul to have both spiritual and bodily elements, I believe that the statement is more complex. Rather than suggest that the human soul is a union of body and soul, Julian describes the soul as “doubil,” suggesting that substance and sensuality must be perceived as two discrete, distinct elements of the human soul. Perhaps most intriguingly, Julian does not argue that this human propensity to see the soul as double rather than united is somehow sinful. She argues that this double vision is precisely how God designed humans to be.

### **Signs of Christ**

For Julian, the human process of understanding God is always one of interpreting signs, whether those signs are objects, words, sacraments, or images that draw the believer toward contemplation of the divine. She presents sacred signs as gaining their spiritual power from their seeming insignificance; the fragility of the sign’s physical reality reveals the sharp contrast between the unstable nature of the earthly world and the stability of the divine reality it signifies. During the first revelation, Christ shows Julian an object—“a little thing the quantity of an haselnot” (5.7)—which is only significant insofar as it leads to the understanding of God. The object is so small and fragile that Julian is amazed that it is able to exist at all because “methought it might sodenly have fallen to nought for littlenes” (5.11). Rather than ask Christ the significance of this object, Julian understands that it is a sign that demands her own interpretation and concludes that this object signifies “all that is made” (5.10). The object’s miraculous continued existence proves that God made it, loves it, and protects it, and it is on the basis of this observation

that Julian argues that its allegorical referent is God's devotion to all of creation. After reflecting on this object as a sign, Julian realizes that all created things are also fragile, tiny objects which could easily collapse into nothingness if it were not for God's love. The object itself—whether or not it is a hazelnut—is inconsequential for Julian's purposes. What matters is that it functions as a sign, pointing to a greater meaning beyond itself.

Sacred signs are an aid to human understanding of the divine and are therefore only valuable insofar as they point beyond themselves. Julian argues that earthly attachments, such as an attachment to a hazelnut for its own sake, are ultimately unfulfilling because humans can only find true rest in God. She warns that "For this is the cause why we be not all in ease of hart and of soule: for we seeke heer rest in this thing that is so little, wher no reste is in, and we know not our God, that is al mighty, all wise, and all good" (5.21-24). The hazelnut may signify God, but Julian urges her readers not to regard signs of God as the presence of God himself. The hazelnut teaches Julian about God but she understands that "no soule is rested till it is noughted of all thinges that is made" (5.26). The soul can only rest in God once it has rid itself of all outside attachments, even attachments that signify God. Signs are worldly things that are no longer necessary once one has experienced total union with God in the afterlife.

Since God is ultimately indescribable in human language and signs are, by definition, part of a system of language, signs must inevitably fail to express the true nature of God. Before discussing the power of the hazelnut as sign, Julian constructs a metaphor that she initially regards as clear and convincing: Christ is human clothing. She explains that "He is oure clothing, that for love wrappeth us and windeth us, halseth us

and all becloseth us, hangeth about us for tender love, that he may never leewe us” (5.3-5). Initially, Christ as clothing is a comforting metaphor for Julian, implying assurance in the union of Christ with humanity. However, after her discussion of the hazelnut and the limitations of signs, Julian realizes that all metaphors are incapable of describing God. At this point, she reintroduces the metaphor as a simile: “For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skinne, and the bones in the flesh, and the harte in the bowke, so ar we, soule and body, cladde and enclosedde in the goodnes of God” (6.35-37). She moves from outer coverings of the body to inner containers within the body, increasing the sense of containment of the self by God. She ultimately suggests that no matter how internal she gets into her descriptions of the human body and its various enclosures, she will never be able to explain God through signs because God is “more nere to us without any likenes” (6.39). The shift from metaphor to simile itself suggests Julian’s increasing lack of confidence in the comparison to definitively convey divine reality. Language may aid believers in coming closer to understanding God’s love for humanity, but it ultimately fails to communicate the true nature of God because signs remain only means rather than ends in themselves. However, Julian does not suggest that attempts to understand God through signs are fruitless. Indeed, barring direct mystical experiences, signs are the only way to encounter God during one’s earthly life. Julian argues that it is necessary to worship God through signs and mediation, but believers must also understand that God’s goodness and love surpass all earthly significations.

Julian presents unmediated access to Christ as an ideal but ultimately argues that the mediation of signs is the way in which God wants humanity to come to an understanding of him. While Julian was reflecting on the meaning of the hazelnut, “the

custome of our prayer was brought to my mind: how that we use, for unknowing of love to make meny meanes” (6.3-4). At this moment, she deliberately opposes the Church’s methods of worship and proper love of God by implying that the Church’s dependence on mediation stems from its own misunderstanding of God’s true nature. After arguing that all ‘meanes’ are ultimately unworthy of God and contending that believers ought to worship God directly, she begins a long list of the various sorts of mediation that believers use in praying to God, including devotion to his flesh and blood, prayer to Mary, prayer to the saints, and devotion to the true cross. After completing this list, Julian reverses her earlier position and proclaims that “God of his goodnes hath ordained meanes to helpe us full faire and fele” (6.19). For Julian, the abstract idea of mediation is initially distasteful, but the reality of some of the most common mediators present in the prayers of the Church is not. Worshipping God through signs is worthwhile precisely because God himself has chosen them as means by which he ought to be worshipped.

Despite her initial aversion to mediation between God and the individual soul, Julian believes that the mediating effects of signs are central to even her most direct, intimate visions of Christ. In her description of the first revelation, Julian sees Christ’s bleeding head “without any meane” (4.5) and initially believes that the lack of mediation assures her of Christ’s intimate love for her. However, within a few sentences, Julian recognizes that even this experience is itself a sign that needs to be interpreted. She explains that, although her visions only show Christ, their real subject is the entire Trinity: “For wher Jhesu appireth the blessed trinity is understand, as to my sight” (4.11). The significance of Christ’s body is neither self-evident nor self-contained; it is a sign pointing beyond itself to the reality of the triune godhead. It is noteworthy that Julian

authorizes her claim that Christ's body signifies the Trinity by reference to her 'sight,' particularly since her claim is precisely for that which she does not see. Her visions give her the authority to interpret signs, not to move beyond them.

It is only through focus on individual signs that believers can begin to grow in their knowledge of the much larger reality of God. At the start of the third revelation, Julian "saw God in a pointe—that is to say, in my understanding" (11.1). In this instance, the word 'pointe' denotes a specific location in space which, like the hazelnut image from the first revelation, invites Julian to derive spiritual meaning from a discrete physical space with carefully defined boundaries. Like the hazelnut, this point ultimately signifies that God "is in al thing" (11.2). Paradoxically, it is through ascribing Christ's presence to a single place that Julian recognizes the impossibility of fixing Christ's location. This third revelation ends when Christ proclaims to Julian: "See, I am God. See, I am in all thing. See, I do all thing. See, I never lefte my hands of my works, ne never shalle without ende. See, I lede all thing to the end that I ordaine it to, fro without beginning, by the same might, wisdom, and love that I made it with" (11.42-45). Christ repeats the word 'see' several times, but Julian has not physically seen anything. Instead, she has understood the presence of Christ in all things and all times through her own intellectual understanding of God in one particular point in space. Nevertheless, Christ emphasizes Julian's vision in order to suggest the importance of that singular point to human understanding. For God, the particular point itself holds no particular significance except insofar as it represents the equal significance of all other things. For Julian, however, the point is essential because it acts as a sign. Without focusing on God in a particular point, it would be impossible for her to understand God's presence in all things. When Christ

repeats the word 'see', he emphasizes the importance of physical sight and moments of physical focus to human understanding. The word 'see' eventually fades from meaning physical sight to meaning understanding, but its repetition continually calls the reader's attention back to that particular point in space, showing that humans cannot understand the broader goodness and love of God without first seeing it through a sign: whether that sign is a hazelnut, a saintly image, or a point in space. It is necessary to localize God before one is able to understand that such localization is ultimately impossible.

### **Eucharistic Longing and the Church**

The indispensability of signs to human devotion and the human perception of difference are both foundational elements of Julian's understanding of the role of the Eucharist within the Christian community of the faithful, the Church. Julian defines the Christian community's relationship to Christ's body in profoundly eucharistic terms: the communal desire to drink Christ's blood and thereby become one with him. This imagery implicitly affirms the centrality of the sacrament of the Eucharist at the same time as it defines the relationship between Christ and his Church as one of longing for a full physical union that is not yet realized. Julian's focus on signs, especially the sacraments, as markers of difference highlights this longing that defines the relationship between Christ and believers.

Since the function of a sign is to point toward a reality beyond itself, the human need for sacred signs implies difference and distance between Christ and humanity. God wants humans to long for union with him by maintaining a posture of difference, believing in the fictitious separation between Christ and the human soul. Humans need to perceive this difference in order to maintain a desire for union with God. As Julian

herself acknowledges, this process of desire through difference is paradoxical since no sharp division between Christ and humanity truly exists. At a moment when she directly encounters Christ, she explains how “I saw him and sought him, and I had him and wanted him” (10.14). Although the image of God dwells in every soul, every Christian seeks God as if she did not already possess his presence because the perception of difference increases desire and God wants humans to ardently desire union with him.

Julian depicts the fulfillment of this desire for union as a eucharistic process of mutual bodily ingestion. At the end of time, both Christ and believers will consume each other. When the soul finally achieves full union with God, “than shall we alle come into oure lorde, oureselfe clerely knowing and God fulsomely having” (43.40-41). In this context, the word ‘having’ has a primarily bodily and sensual connotation, increasing the emphasis on the physical incorporation of Christ’s body into the body of the believer. Julian goes on to highlight the sensual aspects of this incorporation by explaining how, at the end of time, “we endlessly be alle had in God, him verily seyeng an fulsomely feling, and him gostely hering, and him delectably smelling, and him swetly swelwing” (43.41-43). The union with Christ at the end of time will be a perfect Eucharist; rather than seeing Christ’s body through the sign of bread, the human soul will consume Christ’s body while seeing him face to face.

Throughout the text, Christ’s blood acts as a particularly powerful sign of this desired eucharistic union. His blood signifies the potential for union with him, and the lack of it represents the impossibility of that union. During the first revelation, Julian describes the sight of Christ’s blood as “most comfort to me” and believes that this vision demonstrates God’s desire to give humans solace (7.25; 40). Even though she knows that

the source of the blood is Christ's dying body, she still finds this vision joyful and reassuring. In contrast, during the eighth revelation, Julian focuses intently on the drying of Christ's crucified body and finds this vision horrifying. When she describes how all "the precious blode was bled out of the swete body that might passe therfro," she focuses almost exclusively on pain (16.11-12). Her horror directly stems from the realization that Christ's body is losing the blood that she regards as so wonderful and redemptive. As Christ's body dries, Julian realizes that identification with Christ has become increasingly impossible. Christ's skin is so inexplicably dry and broken that it falls in disparate mismatching pieces that look "as a cloth and sagging downward, semin as it wolde hastily have fallen for hevines and for loosenes" (17.20-21). As the skin on Christ's head loosens, it forms a ring of flesh around the thorns so that the two become indistinguishable. Likewise, the rest of Christ's body becomes so dry and brown that it begins to match the cross itself—"like a drye bord whan it is aged" (17.29). As he dries, Christ is barely recognizable as human and there is a complete lack of emotional connection between the human and the divine. Christ's blood is important to Julian precisely because it signifies the possibility of her eventual union with him.

Julian depicts the desire for this eucharistic union and the resultant unification of literal and allegorical meaning as a thirst for Christ's blood, a thirst that both Christ and believer experience. When she sees Christ's body drying on the cross, Julian describes Christ's need for his own blood as a thirst, explaining how "I sawe in Crist a doubille thirst: on bodely, and another gostly" (17.2). It is immediately apparent that Christ's bodily, literal thirst is his physical need for moisture but, after suggesting that his thirst also possesses allegorical meaning, Julian delays a partial explanation of this spiritual



thirst for fourteen chapters and a full explanation for over fifty. This delay itself signifies what Julian eventually defines as Christ's spiritual thirst: the ongoing desire for the union between human and divine, a union in which the spiritual meanings of God will finally be fully understood. Christ's thirst is a thirst for the collapse of the allegorical sign, in which bodily and spiritual meanings fold into each other. In the middle of the text, Julian declares, "Therefore this is his thurste: love-longing to have us all togeder, hole in him to his endlesse blisse" (31.14-15). At this moment, Christ's thirst for union with humanity is no longer a 'gostly thirst' but is simply 'his thurste,' collapsing the physical, literal sign and the spiritual, allegorical one.

Christ's thirst signifies the divide between Christ and believers and the force of love by which that divide will cease to be. As long as Christ thirsts, it means that the union between Christ and humanity has not taken place. Julian explains "For the thirst of God is to have the generalle man into him, in which thirst he hath drawen his holy soules that be now in blisse. And so getting his lively membris, ever he draweth and drinketh, and yet him thirsteth and longeth" (75.3-6). Just as Christ longed for moisture on the cross, he thirsts for all souls to join together with him in heaven. His thirst did not end with his death and resurrection; since humanity is not yet united with him, Christ still thirsts in heaven and, in order to quench his thirst, he must continually be "us drawing uppe to his blisse" (31.40-41). By describing Christ as drawing his bodily 'membris' to himself, Julian depicts this thirst as a longing to have his own physical body return to him. Near the end of *A Revelation*, Julian argues that Christ "shall al besprinkil us in his precious blode" and regards this pouring out of his blood as an expression of his thirst (63.16-17). Even as Christ pours out his blood for humanity, he thirsts to have it return to

him through his followers. His followers receive his blood and, through their reception of it, long to fully unite themselves with his body. Rather than suggest that Christ's thirst will exist only until *he* is satiated, Julian says that Christ's thirst will be "lasting in him as long as we be in need" (31.40). Christ's thirst is therefore the force by which the human thirst for God is quenched. Christ will only cease to thirst when humanity's desire for union with him is fulfilled.

Ultimately, the quenching of Christ's eucharistic thirst would mean the collapse of signification, the moment at which literal and allegorical unite. Julian repeatedly uses forms of the verb 'drawen' to describe how Christ's thirst pulls souls toward him (31.40; 43.29; 75.3). Her use of this particular word is a pun that suggests both that Christ 'draws up' and 'drinks' human souls. Through using this single word to signify both a bodily and a spiritual action, Julian reveals the collapse of allegorical and literal that Christ's thirst ultimately aims to accomplish. At the end of time, all those who are saved will receive a new bliss "which plentuously shalle beflowe oute of God into us and fulfille us" (75.16-17). At the moment when Christ's thirst is finally quenched, he shall pour more of himself into his people and the effects of this bliss will fulfill the human desire for knowledge by uncovering the 'privetes' of God's meaning that were hidden during earthly life. Upon receiving this bliss, humans will understand the full meaning and causes of all God's acts and "the blisse and the fulfilling shalle be so depe and so high that, for wonder and merveyle, all creatures shalle have to God so gret reverent dred...that the pillours of heven shulle tremelle and quake" (75.22-25). When Christ's thirst ceases to exist, the saved will be completely fulfilled because they will have full knowledge of God's meaning; they will understand the significance of all God's works.

Julian reinforces the connection between the slaking of Christ's thirst and the union of literal and allegorical by recalling the image of the hazelnut from the first revelation. She describes how, upon receiving this new bliss, the saved will be "endlessly merveyling of the greatnesse of God the maker, and of the litalhede of all that is made" (75.28-29), echoing the earlier description of the hazelnut as a tiny object that represents "all that is made" (5.10). The small object, the created sign of God's all-powerful love, is an object of marvel alongside that which it signifies: God himself. In summing up her depiction of Christ's thirst, Julian argues that Christ's thirst and the thirst of all believers is for the end of signification, where there is no gap or confusion between the signifier and the signified.

Julian describes this thirst for complete signification as a distinctly communal desire, a desire in which the entire Church participates. The institutional Church is essential to the cultivation of this thirst by providing Christians with the tools of interpretation. Throughout the text, Julian is careful not to contradict official doctrine. When she fails to have a vision of hell or purgatory and God does not show her an image of sin, Julian notes that the absence of these elements of Church doctrine does not indicate their non-existence. Even when Christ tells her that 'all shall be well'—a message that seems to directly undermine the Church's teachings about damnation—Julian insists that "I was not drawen therby from ony point of the faith that holy church techeth me to believe" (33.13-14). Julian consistently defers to the Church's authority, not simply as a defensive tactic, but because she sees Church doctrine as an indispensable resource that keeps her from unwittingly falling into heresy or false beliefs. For Julian, the institutional Church is not simply an outside threat to what she regards as the inherent

truth of her vision. In order to interpret her visions, she draws on “the comen teching of holy church, of which I was befor enformed and grounded and willfully having in use and in understanding” (46.16-17). The Church is a necessary resource for all spiritual interpretation. Far from regarding her visions as posing a threat to official doctrine, she argues that the process of interpreting them reaffirmed her orthodoxy. Julian’s visions confirm the Church’s usefulness in the pursuit of salvation because “I had therin teching to love it and like it, wherby I might, with the helpe of oure lorde and his grace, encrease and rise to more heavenly knowing and hyer loving” (46.19-20). The interpretation of signs is essential to the human pursuit of union with God, and the Church provides Julian with the tools of interpretation.

The Church itself is a sign and, as such, it is a sensual, literal institution, incomplete without the spiritual substance of Christ. At one point during the revelations, Julian has difficulty reconciling the relationship between God and the Church because she perceives that, while God assigns no blame for sin, the Church teaches that each person must be ever mindful of her own sinfulness (45.10-27). Out of her initial confusion, Julian asks “that I might se in God in what manner that the dome of holy church herein techeth is tru in his sight, and howe it longeth to me sothly to know it, whereby they might both be saved, so as it ware wurshipfulle to God and right wey to me” (45.23-26). Julian struggles to uphold both views on sin and ultimately succeeds in doing so by aligning the Church’s stance with sensual and earthly perception. In response to her request for a way of reconciling her visions with Church doctrine, Julian receives “no nother answeare but a marvelous example of a lorde and of a servant” (45.26-27). The solution that the parable offers is to designate the Church the role of the servant, a figure

who, because of his limited perspective, believes that sin makes the sinner unworthy of redemption. She explicitly aligns the Church's judgment with sensuality, the lower, earthly part of the human soul (45.21-22). While the servant's viewpoint is not accurate, neither is it sinful or wrong. It is a necessary position for humanity to hold in order to experience the glory of redemption through Christ. The sensual and earthly are not sinful and are not to be discarded; it is simply necessary to recognize that the substantial and the godly take precedence over earthly things. The Church maintains a human perspective on God, a perspective that will ultimately be surpassed but never condemned. It is a sign of God's continued presence in the human world, but it is not that presence itself.

The Church plays a vital role in the human search for salvation by providing Christians with the most important sacred signs of all, the seven sacraments. Early in the text, Julian explains that Christ is delighted when people obey the Church because "he it is, holy church. He is the ground, he is the substance, he is the teaching, he is the teacher, he is the end, and he is the means wherefore every kind of soul travel" (34.13-15). At this point, her claim is somewhat general in nature: the church provides a series of signs and actions that ultimately lead to Christ. As the text continues, Julian becomes more explicit and definitive in her interpretations of the revelations and she reinterprets this statement to refer particularly to the sacraments. She argues that Christ means to tell all Christians that "All the health and the life of sacraments, all the virtue and the grace of my word, all the goodness that is ordained in holy church to me, I am" (60.30-32). The most important objects of spiritual interpretation are the Church's sacraments and the rituals that produce them.

The sacraments offer believers the opportunity to participate in acts in which the earthly and spiritual perfectly coincide. Since sacraments are signs of the sacred, they function in a way very similar to the hazelnut image from the first revelation. Through a focus on a discrete physical object or action, believers are able to begin to contemplate the divine. However, the sacraments are superior to such arbitrary signs because sacraments are the divine reality that they signify. A sacrament is therefore a moment in which the allegorical and literal, human and divine, fold into each other. For Julian, this collapse of the earthly and the spiritual is a moment in which the individual briefly experiences the union with God that has already taken place in every human soul. God gives each person virtues through her substantial soul and it is through the sacraments that “the same vertuse that we have received of oure substance, geven to us in kind of the goodness of God, the same vertuse by the werking of mercy be geven to us in grace, throw the holy gost renewed” (57.32-34). Julian describes the sacraments as providing the individual with the grace that, in some sense, he already possessed. The sacraments invite the believer to see, for a brief moment, the coincidence between human and divine that only God sees.

The Eucharist is the most important sacrament because it promises an intense physical intimacy that it does not fully provide; it therefore heightens the believer’s desire to go beyond the sign and enter into union with God. The ingestion of Christ’s body and blood in the form of a sign increases the believer’s thirst to leave the sign behind. In order to show the potential for intimate contact with Christ in the Eucharist, Julian compares a Christian receiving the Eucharist to a baby being breastfed by its mother. Through this comparison, she argues that Jesus is even more physically and

emotionally generous than a mother because, while earthly mothers only give their children milk, he “may fede us with himself, and doth full curtesly and full tenderly with the blessed sacrament that is precious fode of very life” (60.26-27). At the moment of eucharistic reception, Christ does not hold humans against his breast as a nursing mother would but is instead more intimate because “he may homely lede us into his blessed brest by his swet, open side” (60.34) By immediately following these descriptions of eucharistic intimacy with explanations of the importance of the Church and its rituals, Julian implies that the believer can only experience this intense intimacy with Christ through the mediation of another mother: the Church. The Eucharist promises physical union with God but simultaneously thwarts the full realization of that union because the Eucharist is always a mediated experience, marked by separation. Through the use of the sign of bread, the Eucharist produces a desire for Christ that cannot be fulfilled until after death.

To argue that *A Revelation of Love* uses eucharistic language is to make two distinct but interrelated claims: on the most basic level, the text’s vivid descriptions of Christ’s blood and Julian’s desire for physical union with Christ use language and imagery typically associated with the Eucharist. Perhaps more importantly however, Julian imagines language itself as eucharistic. The Eucharist, like other signs, invites the reader to imagine the collapse of signifier and signified even as its very existence indicates their separateness. In worshipping or trying to understand the Eucharist, the believer simultaneously expresses a desire for union with God and admits that that desire remains unfulfilled. For Julian, signs are imperfect ways of understanding God precisely because they fail to provide full understanding. However, understanding through

language, the process of seeing ‘double’ and recognizing that there is a spiritual meaning behind the literal one, is a necessary aspect of the human condition. In this sense, all signs are eucharistic because they invoke the idea of a union with a transcendental signified, a union that never fully takes place.

For Julian, the importance of the Eucharist lies in its function as a sign which helps believers to strive to understand the relationship between God and humanity. Unlike many of the continental female mystics, Julian does not see the Eucharist as site of potential ecstatic union, an opportunity to become one with the suffering of Christ. Unlike the Lollards and the scholastic theologians, she is not interested in discussing the precise nature of the consecrated host’s substance and accidents. Rather, Julian avoids fully participating in either of these discourses. Instead, she works within the boundaries of English orthodoxy in order to expand the ways in which the Eucharist is understood. The sacraments are not objects and actions that are important for their own sake; they are significant insofar as they are signs that encourage believers to grow ever closer to union with God. Because humans are primarily confined to the realm of the earthly, literal, and sensual, sacred signs are one of the few ways in which believers can begin to understand their relationship with Christ. According to Julian, Christians ought to value and interpret sacred signs because such signs reveal that Christians must long for the completion of meaning, even though they know that such completion is ultimately impossible in their earthly lives.



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## PUBLICATIONS

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