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## God's Gluttons: Middle English Devotional Texts, Interiority, and Indulgence

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*This article offers an analysis of the complex and contradictory nature of lay religious texts produced in England at the turn of the fifteenth century. These works are interesting because they include statements of both encouragement to and anxiety about lay Christians who pursue more singular forms of devotion. I focus on one text in particular, A Ladder of Foure Ronges by the Which Men Mowe Wele Clyme to Heven, a monastic treatise on contemplation translated into Middle English and adapted for a lay audience in the late fourteenth century, as a touchstone to consider these conflicting positions.*

His craving for alcohol was the equivalent on a low level of the spiritual thirst for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God.

— Carl Jung, in a letter written in 1961 to Bill W.,  
co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Jung, *Letters*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Adler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 624. I am indebted to John M. Bowers's "'Dronkenesse is Ful of Stryvyng': Alcoholism and Ritual Violence in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*" (*ELH* 57 [1990]: 757–84), for bringing this letter to my attention.

IN a review of a biography of the Beatles, Jane and Michael Stern highlight one particular incident from what biographer Bob Spitz characterizes as the band's "course of reckless hedonism": John Lennon arranged to buy a lifetime supply of LSD and, under the influence of the drug, he, Paul, George, and Ringo "all went to the Aegean Sea to purchase a cluster of islands where they planned to build four houses connected by tunnels, with the land between the homes filled with meditation posts, painting and recording studios, a go-cart track, and a landing strip."<sup>2</sup> This anecdote is interesting for many reasons, but it is the Beatles' indulgence in LSD and the vision of private satisfaction that they conjured while they were under its influence that I wish to emphasize. They envisioned islands of private enjoyment characterized not just by the provisions made for favorite pastimes—go-carts and meditation dens—but by the absence of a larger community and the constraints and responsibilities that come with living in one. This island paradise would afford the Beatles intense personal pleasure, including the continued use of LSD and liberation from the pressures of society; that was the whole point.

Even if we know better than to believe the old and disproved assumptions about the primitive nature or nonexistence of medieval interiority, it is difficult to imagine that a fantasy so private, even selfish, and similarly characterized by chemical indulgence and uninhibited personal satisfaction could be articulated in the Middle Ages, let alone in a devotional text, by far the most popular and plentiful kind of text in medieval England. We would likely expect such a text to condone pious self-discipline over personal pleasure, and if it were to address at all what we would recognize today as chemical indulgence, we would expect it would be treated as gluttony, a deadly sin to be assiduously avoided. It is thus surprising to find in the late fourteenth-century devotional text *A Ladder of Foure Ronges by the Which Men Mowe Wele Clyme to Heven* an extended metaphor that quite permissively and fondly characterizes spiritual contemplation as drunkenness:

So doth God Almystry to his loveris in contemplanon as a tauerner that good wyne hath to selle dooth to good drynkeris þat wolle drynke wele of his wyne & largely spende. Wele he knowith what they be there he seeth hem in the strete. Pryvely he wendyth and rowndith hem in the eere & seyth to them that he hath a clarete, and þat alle fine for ther owyn mouth. He tolyth hem to howse &

<sup>2</sup> Stern and Stern, "You Know You Should Be Glad," review of *The Beatles: The Biography*, by Bob Spitz, *The New York Times Book Review* (November 2005): 23.

3euyth hem a taast. Sone whanne they haue tastyd therof and that they thynke the drynke good & gretly to ther plesauns, than they drynke dayly & nyztly, and the more they drynke, the more they may. Suche lykyng they haue of that drynke that of none other wyne they thynke, but oonly for to drynke þeir fylle and to haue of this drynke alle their wylle. And so they spende that they haue, and syth they spende or lene to wedde surcotte or hode & alle that they may, for to drynke with lykyng whiles that them it good thynkith. (113)<sup>3</sup>

This depiction of the apex of contemplative ecstasy is an interpolation in *The Ladder of Foure Ronges*, a text that is otherwise largely a translation of *Scala Claustralium*, a twelfth-century treatise on contemplation written for a monastic audience by Guigo II, prior of the Grande Chartreuse.<sup>4</sup> As George R. Keiser has observed, the anonymous writer responsible for *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* “made serious modifications to his source in order to create a work accessible to a wider audience than the exclusively monastic one intended by Guigo.”<sup>5</sup> I will discuss *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* and its description of the heights of contemplation in particular in greater detail later; for now, I would simply like to note that this passage bears more than a little resemblance to the Beatles’ fantasy island vision in terms of intemperance, personal pleasure, and escapism. To be sure, while *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* uses drunkenness as a metaphor, the Beatles’ indulgence was quite literal, and a bartender pouring without a spout hardly measures up, in terms of scope and grandeur, to tunnels with a go-cart course. But *The Ladder of Foure Ronges*’ metaphor and the Beatles’ drug-induced plan have notable similarities: both imply the expectation that their participants will forgo social obligations and ties, embrace isolation, and direct their energies and material resources into very specific and limited endeavors. The goal of the Beatles’ vision was undoubtedly self-gratification.

<sup>3</sup> *A Ladder of Foure Ronges by the Which Men Mowe Wele Clyme to Heven*, appendix B, to *Deonise Hid Diuinite*, Early English Text Society, o.s., 231, ed. Phyllis Hodgson (London: Oxford University Press, 1955). *A Ladder of Foure Ronges* survives in three manuscripts, all from the fifteenth century: Cambridge MS fols. vi. 33, Bodley MS Douce 322, and British Library MS Harley 1706. Hereafter, *A Ladder of Foure Ronges* will be cited parenthetically by page number and will be from this edition. Other primary texts will also be cited parenthetically by page or line number and, the first time they appear, in the footnotes by edition.

<sup>4</sup> Keiser, “‘Noght how lang man lifs; bot how wele’: The Laity and the Ladder of Perfection,” in *De Cella in Seculum: Religious and Secular Life and Devotion in Late Medieval England*, ed. Michael G. Sargent (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1989), 147. Keiser explains that *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* was translated not directly from Guigo’s text but from a simplified Latin redaction of it that survives in at least a dozen English manuscripts.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

While we may expect *The Ladder of Foure Ronges'* metaphor for spiritual contemplation to serve devotional purposes—and God is surely central to it—it is questionable whether the metaphor is primarily about self-gratification or devotion to God.

I draw this comparison between the Beatles' islands and the remarkable passage above to suggest something of how far depictions of interiority in devotional texts had come in the more than two centuries since the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, when Innocent III issued his twenty-first canon requiring all Christians who had reached the age of reason to confess privately to a priest at least once a year. Innocent's decree initiated an institution-wide effort to integrate religious beliefs into the interior lives of all Christians and to help them cultivate a stronger connection to the church through more personal forms of piety and devotion. This article will appraise the late medieval results of Lateran IV and the efforts made, in the centuries that followed it, to cultivate in Christians interior piety and devotional practices. In the first section, I will explore the complex religious environment of late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century England and the contradictory nature of religious texts produced in it, which include statements both encouraging and expressing anxiety about lay Christians choosing more singular forms of devotion. Then, in the second section, considering the passage above from *A Ladder of Foure Ronges* as a touchstone for these conflicting positions, I will argue that Innocent's decree and the wealth of religious texts it inspired ultimately did more to liberate Christians to envisage intensely personal relationships with God than it did to inculcate institutionally acceptable forms of piety and devotion in them.

## I

Religious texts written in response to the Fourth Lateran Council to educate Christians so that they were able to make good confessions—a practice that afforded the church more power to intervene in the everyday lives of its faithful than it had before—paradoxically also provided Christians with opportunities to pursue more independent devotional practices. John Pecham, archbishop of Canterbury, deserves much of the credit for promoting the education of the English laity; at the Council of Lambeth in 1281 he provided, in elementary Latin, an outline of Christian belief that parish priests were to use to instruct their congregations at least four times a year; this outline is best known by its opening words, "Ignorantia sacerdotum," the ignorance of priests being

one problem that Pecham saw hindering the laity's religious knowledge. Pecham's syllabus became a standard of religious instruction in England. In 1357, John Thorseby, archbishop of York, published an injunction urging lay education that included a lesson plan very similar to Pecham's for priests to administer to the laity, but it was recorded in his register in both Latin and English. Though the English text, identified in several manuscripts as Jon Gaytryge's sermon and often referred to in modern scholarship as the *Lay Folks' Catechism*, was most likely intended for use as a pedagogical sermon by parish priests, it circulated among the laity as well. By the time that English lay people owned their own copies of this text in the mid- to late-fourteenth century, there were other similar instructional texts also available to them, including Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne* and Michel of Northgate's *Ayenbite of Inwoyt*. Valerie Edden observes that manuals such as these, designed to prepare the laity to make confessions, attended to "the process of cultivating an inner life."<sup>6</sup> Leonard E. Boyle similarly notes that the "change of relationship between priest and penitent" effected by Lateran IV brought "the teaching of theologians and others on interiority" to "every level of Christian life."<sup>7</sup> Texts designed to educate the laity thus demonstrated—even insisted—that one's inner life had a place in religion; these works were complemented, from the mid-fourteenth century through the start of the fifteenth century especially, by texts that helped their audiences define and develop their inner religious lives.

This second wave of texts introduced audiences to more contemplative devotional practices that they could pursue largely on their own, with minimal direction or no direction at all from their parish priests, confessors, or other church representatives. They outlined habits of piety that, for a lay population recently indoctrinated with knowledge of their faith emphasizing their inner lives, represented new exercises of interiority. It was, however, the application of these exercises to the laity, not the exercises themselves, that was new. Many of these texts were based on or at least indebted to texts originally written for monastic use and adjusted by Middle English writers or translators to

<sup>6</sup> Edden, "The Devotional Life of the Laity in the Middle Ages," in *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, ed. Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden, and Roger Ellis (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), 42.

<sup>7</sup> Boyle, "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), 36.

serve lay interests. Still, the new, if recycled, Middle English texts represent a significant development; with them, as Hilary M. Carey explains, “for the first time, devout laypeople were instructed in the art of contemplation.”<sup>8</sup> As texts outlining and encouraging contemplative devotional practices became more numerous and available, the “contemplative ideal,” which, as Colin Fewer explains, was “originally intended as a description of the highest aim of the pastoral life,” was no longer considered so elite a standard but rather “a central metaphor for the inner life of the individual.”<sup>9</sup>

Numerous Middle English texts encouraged lay audiences to devotional practices decidedly contemplative in nature. The anonymous *Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, extant in manuscripts dating to the late 1300s and printed by Wynkyn de Worde three times before the end of the fifteenth century, confidently asserts that one need not be a vowed religious to live out a religious vocation. The text aims to help lay Christians who are unable to take religious vows because of “pouerte, or for drede of thaire kyn, or for band of Maryage” establish devotional practices beyond those required of the laity by the church (51).<sup>10</sup> It invites its audience to imagine an internal, allegorical abbey in “a place . . . called ‘conscience’” constructed and peopled by allegorical characters: Meekness and Poverty prepare the foundation for the monastery, Obedience and Mercy “rayse þe walles one heghte, and make þam stalworthe,” Charity is abbess and Dread the doorkeeper (51–56). Similarly, the fifteenth-century treatise *The Doctrine of the Hert* characterizes the heart as an allegorical house and uses household chores—primarily cooking and cleaning—as metaphors for devotional practices.<sup>11</sup> In his late fourteenth-century “Epistle on the Mixed Life,” Walter Hilton explains how lay Christians can “meedele the werkes of actif liyf with goostli werkes of life contemplative,” sometimes performing works of charity “unto thi even-Cristene,” sometimes occupying themselves “in praiers, and in hooli thoughtis, and in contemplacioun” (112–13).<sup>12</sup> In his early

<sup>8</sup> Carey, “Devout Literate Laypeople and the Pursuit of the Mixed Life in Later Medieval England,” *Journal of Religious History* 14 (1987): 361.

<sup>9</sup> Fewer, “The ‘Figure’ of the Market: The N-Town Cycle and East Anglian Lay Piety,” *Philological Quarterly* 77 (1998): 125.

<sup>10</sup> *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, in *Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse*, Early English Text Series, o.s., 26, ed. George G. Perry (1867; repr., Millwood, NY: Kraus, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> *The Doctrine of the Hert: A Critical Edition*, ed. Christiania Whitehead, Denis Renevey, and Anne Mouron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Hilton, “Epistle on the Mixed Life,” in *English Mystics of the Middle Ages*, ed. Barry Windeatt (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

fifteenth-century *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, Nicholas Love encourages the lay audience for which he writes to devote the utmost attention to the book's narrative: "with all þi þought & alle þin entent, in þat manere make þe in þi soule present to þoo þinges þat bene here written seyð or done of oure lord Jesu, & þat bisily, likyngly & abydyngly, as þei þou herdest hem with þi bodily eres, or sey þaim with þin eyen done puttyng away for þe tyme & leuyng alle oþer occupacions & bisynesses" (12–13).<sup>13</sup> Love goes so far as to suggest a contemplative reading schedule for his audience (13).<sup>14</sup>

Some scholars have argued that texts encouraging the laity to more interior patterns of devotion, though they did bring the exclusive monastic practice of contemplation to the laity, did not completely democratize it insofar as such devotional habits were out of the reach of all but the most privileged laity. Christopher Harper-Bill, for instance, holds that the "small minority" of lay Christians capable of "deep and personal religious experience" were "from the upper levels of society, and their deep and personal religious experience surely served to divorce them from popular belief and rites."<sup>15</sup> Carey argues a similar point, holding that the devotional life "of a good and pious knight or lord was always substantially different from that thought appropriate for a commoner."<sup>16</sup> Conclusions like these seem suspect for several reasons, not the least of which is the paucity of evidence regarding Middle English religious texts' contemporary audiences, both noble and, in particular, common. My own research and study of these texts, the stories they relate, and the circumstances under which they were produced, suggest that their writers were not seeking or speaking to only an elite laity, and others have argued similar positions. Observing that the quality of extant devotional manuscripts ranges "from de luxe vellum manuscripts, richly illuminated, right through to cheap paper volumes," Edden has suggested that it was not just the higher ranks

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Love's "Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ": A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686, ed. Michael G. Sargent (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992). Love's text is an adapted translation of the fourteenth-century Latin text *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, likely written by the Franciscan Johannes de Caulibus, for use by a Poor Clare nun. As I will discuss later, however, Love tailored his translation to be suitable for a lay audience seeking appropriate devotional reading material. See Sargent, introduction to *Nicholas Love's "Mirror,"* xxx–xliv.

<sup>14</sup> The reading schedule is an addition of Love; it is not present in the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*.

<sup>15</sup> Harper-Bill, *The Pre-Reformation Church in England, 1400–1530*, rev. ed. (New York: Longman, 1996), 85–86.

<sup>16</sup> Carey, "Devout Literate Laypeople," 362.



of the laity who aspired to the contemplative ideal.<sup>17</sup> Nor was it necessarily just the literate; texts encouraging the laity to adopt contemplative practices were likely read aloud to audiences that included illiterate lay people. Keiser has identified two texts in particular that seem to hail an audience less privileged, not just materially but also in terms of education. *A Ladder of Foure Ronges*, discussing the importance of meekness in attaining “lesson,” the first rung of the spiritual ladder that the text describes, presents two examples designed to illustrate that this step relies less on intellect than on God’s grace:

Thoue mayst se if þou wylte beholde a simple olde pore woman that is pore of witte, that neyther sothly can sey the Pater Noster ne the Crede, such liking wille haue in so litel a while, so in sely moornyng the hert al tomeltyth, þat withoute terys & moornyngys may she not praye. Who, wenyst thou, techith hir thus to praye? Not witte of this worlde, but grace from above. Howe a pore sely man þat so dul of witt is, that lyveth by his swynke, thouze he shulde lese his hedde he cowde not bryng to an ende a reson, to this lore & to this wysedom as perfistly may wynne therto as the wisest in a londe, whatsoeuere he be; and he doo that in hym is, whatsoeuere he be. (110)

Keiser explains that while these examples do present an argument for meekness, they may serve another purpose: “While undercutting the intellectual arrogance, real or potential, of a more learned reader, they would also encourage the unlearned into whose hands the treatise might have come—parish priests without a full university education, nuns, or pious laity—to continue with the spiritual exercises set forth in the treatise.”<sup>18</sup> Keiser has similarly suggested that the late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century text *De Holy Boke Gratia Dei*, which provides instruction and advice regarding contemplation suited to lay limitations and experience, was designed to speak to impoverished, rural-dwelling Christians.<sup>19</sup> The text encourages audiences to rise in the morning “at þe belle ryngynge, if þou may it here. And if na kirke be þare þou duellis, þe cokk be thi belle; if þer be nowthir cokk ne belle, Goddes lufe þane wakkene the” and to “wend þou to þe kyrk or chapell or oratory, if þou to any may wynne. If þou noght els may dow, þi chambre mak þi kirk” (61 and 66).<sup>20</sup> Far from addressing privileged, elite laity, the text provides not only options that allow audiences to pursue devotional prac-

<sup>17</sup> Edden, “The Devotional Life of the Laity,” 42.

<sup>18</sup> Keiser, “‘Noght how lang man lifs,’” 150.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>20</sup> *Richard Rolle and De Holy Boke Gratia Dei: An Edition with Commentary*, ed. Mary Luke Arntz (Salzburg: University of Salzburg Press, 1981).

tices despite lack of material means but also assurance that such devotional practices are nonetheless authentic and meaningful.

Not all writers of Middle English religious texts were completely eager to encourage lay audiences to engage in contemplative practice, however. Jennifer E. Bryan explains that the “spreading penchant for private devotion was not universally approved; indeed, it caused anxiety even in some of those most responsible for its cultivation.”<sup>21</sup> Walter Hilton may have provided instructions for pursuing the mixed life in his “Epistle,” but even as he does, he seems more than a little wary of lay contemplation:

Thou schalt not uttirli folwen this desire for to leven occupacioun and bisynesse of the world (which aren nedefull to usen in rulyng of thisilf and of alle othere that aren undir thi keypnge) and yeve thee hooli to goostli occupaciouns of preiers and meditaciouns, as it were a frere, or a monk, or another man that were not bounden to the world bi children and servauntes as thou art. For it falleth not to thee, and yif thou do soo thou kepest not the ordre of charite. (112)

Hilton warns that contemplation can easily be a “reklees” practice for lay people and that it is not for everyone; an “unlettered” Christian, he says, would do better instead to “doo many goode deedes outwarde to his evene-Cristene [to] kendele the fier of love with hem” (116 and 121). Indeed, it is questionable if Hilton even considered his advice about the mixed life appropriate for a general lay audience. His text originally addressed a single recipient, “Dere broþir in Crist,” an anonymous lay man who apparently yearned not to enter a religious order but to increase his private devotional practices and was hampered by worldly obligations. Hilton urges this man to curtail his desire for contemplation and to make attending to his secular responsibilities with diligence his primary concern. It is only in manuscripts in which the text was adapted for a wider audience that its salutation is broadened to “Broþir and suster” or “Breþerne and systeme” (1). Besides the salutation, the content of the text does not change significantly, but one potential effect of widening the audience in this way is to transform advice intended to curtail one person’s contemplative zeal into instructions for mixing active and contemplative practices for numerous lay people who might not have previously considered such an option, an outcome at which Hilton likely would have cringed. The anonymous author of *The Cloud*

<sup>21</sup> Bryan, “Hoccleve, the Virgin, and the Politics of Complaint,” *PMLA* 117 (2002): 1174. I am indebted to Bryan’s article especially for her examples of texts displaying uneasiness with lay contemplative practice. My own examples here are expanded versions of hers.

of *Unknowing* opens his prologue with an anxious plea to any and all who have possession of the text—owner, borrower, or messenger—that “neȝer þou rede it, ne write it, ne speke it, ne ȝit suffer it be red, wretyn, or spokyn, of any or to any, bot ȝif it be of soche one or to soche one þat haȝ (bi þi supposing) in a trewe wille & by an hole entent, purposed him to be a parfite folower of Criste, not only in actyue leuyng, bot in þe souereinnest pointe of contemplatife leuyng” (1–2).<sup>22</sup> He vigorously insists several times that the active and contemplative lives are the only options available to Christians, implicitly invalidating a “mixed life” like that which Hilton describes, and warns that, left to amateurs, contemplative practice dangerously manipulates body and spirit “aȝens the cours of kynde” (96). Keiser has demonstrated that William Caxton—though no religious writer, certainly someone in a position to affect what texts the English laity read—considered the inward focus of contemplative practice potentially damaging to lay Christians and their communities because it neglected the “common weal” in favor of “singular profit.”<sup>23</sup> In the prologue to *Blanchardyn and Eglantine*, which Caxton, in 1489, translated from the French for Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, he goes so far as to suggest that it is as morally fortifying to read secular stories as it is to read contemplative texts:

in my Iugement it is as requesyte other whyle to rede in Auncyent hystories of noble fayttes & valaiunt actes of armes & warre which haue ben achyueued in old tyme of many noble princes lordes & knyghtes as wel for to see & knowe their walyauntnes for to stande in the special grace & loue of their ladyes And in lykewyse for gentyl yonge ladyes & damoysellys for to lerne to be stedfaste & constaunt in their parte to theym that they ones haue promised and agreed to suche as haue putte their lyues ofte in Ioepardye for to playse theym to stand in grace. As it is to occupye theym and studye ouer moche in bokes of contemplacion. (105)<sup>24</sup>

To be sure, not all religious texts spoke out against the adoption of contemplative practices by lay Christians; as we have seen, many texts en-

<sup>22</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling*, Early English Text Society, o.s., 218, ed. Phyllis Hodgson (London: Oxford University Press, 1944). The *Cloud* author addresses his advice to a single individual, but the text often seems to speak to a wider audience.

<sup>23</sup> Keiser, “The Mystics and the Early English Printers: The Economics of Devotionalism,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1987*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), 18. Keiser explains that the demand for vernacular contemplative texts eventually prevailed over Caxton’s reluctance to print them.

<sup>24</sup> *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, ed. W. J. B. Crotch (1928; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1956).

couraged it. But these three examples demonstrate an undeniable uneasiness with the inward trend of lay devotional practice, and, further, they share a particular anxiety that indulgence in interior devotional practices is dangerous not just to the individual but also to the society of which he or she is a part. Bryan and Keiser have more thoroughly documented and discussed the anxieties that Hilton, the *Cloud* author, and Caxton demonstrate; what I wish to do here is draw a connection between these anxieties and the church's concerns over Lollardy, particularly the extent to which the institutional response to the heresy relates to these anxieties about lay devotions that are not Lollard but nevertheless stray from conservative orthodox lay practices.<sup>25</sup>

Hilton, the *Cloud* author, and Caxton likely did not have Lollards in mind as an audience—or at least not a primary audience—when they articulated their anxieties about the dangers of the singular devotional practice of contemplation. However, Lollardy raised concerns for the church similar to the ones that these writers express in the quotations above. Lollard beliefs were informed by the teachings of Oxford theologian John Wycliffe, whose opinions regarding (among other issues) the doctrine of transubstantiation, the ability of priests to forgive sins, and clerical corruption created controversy in the late fourteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Wycliffe's most influential and dangerous idea, however, was that the Bible should be translated so that all Christians could read and interpret it on their own and take part in theological discussions.<sup>27</sup> By the fifteenth century, Lollardy represented much more radical versions of Wycliffe's ideas. Modern scholars seeking to define the beliefs and practices of the Lollard movement agree that Lollards owned and studied English Bibles, promoted literacy among their ranks, and held that any good Christian could preach.<sup>28</sup> From the Lollard perspective, the insti-

<sup>25</sup> Bryan, "Hoccleve, the Virgin, and the Politics of Complaint," 1172–87; and Keiser, "The Mystics and the Early English Printers," 9–26.

<sup>26</sup> Nicole R. Rice, "Spiritual Ambition and the Translation of the Cloister: *The Abbey and Charter of the Holy Ghost*," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 33 (2002): 223.

<sup>27</sup> Steven Justice, "Lollardy," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 665–66.

<sup>28</sup> My generalized definition here, though not inaccurate, obscures not just the diversity of belief and practice that marked Lollardy at any given historical moment but also the historical development of Lollard beliefs and practices. Rita Copeland discusses the importance of diachronic study of the Lollards in the introduction to her study, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5–8). It is also worth noting here that many people who were identified as Lollards had no real connection to the movement, though they may have been heretics. For a discussion of medieval English heretics misidentified as Lollards, see Andrew E. Larsen, "Are All Lollards Lollards?" in *Lollards and Their Influ-*

tutional church was nonessential; Christians needed no intermediary to facilitate their relationship with God. The heresy's radically singular focus endangered the church's role as Christians' intermediary to the divine and thus also endangered the "social boundaries between cleric and layperson," as Rice explains.<sup>29</sup> Disregard for such a significant social distinction carried the more general threat of "potential social disorder," according to Marleen Cré.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps even more than the anxieties that the church shared with Hilton, the *Cloud* author, and Caxton, the measures its representatives took to address the dangers of Lollardy reveal that heretics and orthodox lay people pursuing contemplative practices posed, if not exactly the same problem, at least problems similar enough to be addressed with the same action. Katherine C. Little has noted the similarities between, on the one hand, the increasing lay interest, in the late Middle Ages, in devotional materials and practices that had previously been used exclusively by religious and, on the other hand, the "potentially disruptive call for lay (and vernacular) education that characterizes the Wycliffite heresy."<sup>31</sup> Because of this similarity, Little argues, the Lollards "may be understood as an extreme example of the more extreme questionings and appropriations of this period."<sup>32</sup> Consequently, although Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, took numerous steps to stem the spread of Lollardy with his 1409 Constitutions, these same measures also stood to affect the practices of orthodox lay Christians increasingly interested in expanding their devotional habits. Arundel's

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*ence in Late Medieval England*, ed. Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2003), 59–72. Richard Rex explains that the term "Lollard" was applied in medieval England to "not simply Wycliffite heretics, but skeptics, anticlericals, rioters, rebels, felons, eccentrics, lunatics, and outsiders of all kinds" (introduction to *The Lollards* [New York: Palgrave, 2002], xiii).

<sup>29</sup> Rice, "Spiritual Ambition," 223.

<sup>30</sup> Cré, "Authority and the Compiler in Westminster Cathedral Treasury MS 4: Writing a Text in Someone Else's Words," in *Authority and Community in the Middle Ages*, ed. Donald Mowbray, Rhiannon Purdie, and Ian P. Wei (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 159.

<sup>31</sup> Little, *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 12. Little and most current scholars use "Wycliffite" and "Lollard" interchangeably, though this practice has the potential to conceal significant distinctions between the two terms. See the introduction to *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England* (9n1) and Anne Hudson's introduction to *The Pre-mature Reformation* (2–4).

<sup>32</sup> Little, *Confession and Resistance*, 12. Little is articulating a more pointed version of W. A. Pantin's observation that "the fourteenth century is above all things an age of continual controversy, of which the familiar Wycliffite controversy is but a culmination" (Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* [1955; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980], 1).

Constitutions outlawed unlicensed preaching; limited sermon content; took steps to restrict and control one of the intellectual centers of English Christianity, the University of Oxford; and ordered an investigation of Wycliffe's works.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps most significantly, however, Arundel restricted the reading and writing of vernacular religious texts in a particularly crippling way:

nemo deinceps aliquem textum sacrae scripturae auctoritate sua in linguam Anglicanam vel aliam transferat, per viam libri, libelli, aut tractatus, nec legatur aliquis hujusmodi liber, libellus, aut tractatus jam noviter tempore dicti Johannis Wycliff, sive citra, compositus, aut inposterum componendus, in parte vel in toto, publice, vel occulte, sub majoris excommunicationis poena, quousque per loci dioecesanum, seu, si res exegerit, per concilium provinciale ipsa translatio fuerit approbata; qui contra fecerit, ut fautor haeresis et erroris similiter puniatur. (3:317)<sup>34</sup>

[Nobody [may] hereafter translate any text of sacred scripture into the English language or any other language by his own authority, by way of book, pamphlet, or tract, nor may anyone read any such book, pamphlet or tract now newly composed in the time of the said John Wycliffe, or since, or to be composed hereafter, in part or in whole, publicly or in private, under pain of greater excommunication, unless the said translation be approved by the ordinary of the place, or if the matter should require it, by the provincial council; whoever acts against this [ruling] will be punished as a promoter of heresy and error.]<sup>35</sup>

Hilton, the *Cloud* author, and Caxton attempted to control an increasingly introspective laity through their written instruction and warnings; Arundel set down rules regulating the writing and reading of religious texts in English. And while Arundel's focus on biblical translation suggests that he is targeting the Lollards' use of English Bibles, his order is not specific to Lollard texts, nor does it exclude orthodox texts. It does not restrict just heretical Christians; rather, it suggests that there is a limit to what religious knowledge and practices all lay Christians should be able to learn about on their own in texts. Steven Jus-

<sup>33</sup> Nicholas Watson discusses Arundel's Constitutions and their effects in great detail, in "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.

<sup>34</sup> *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, vol. 3, ed. David Wilkins (London, 1737).

<sup>35</sup> The translation is from Rice, "Spiritual Ambition and the Translation of the Cloister," 223. It is worth noting that this pronouncement does not restrict the reading of religious texts composed in or translated into English before the time of Wycliffe, nor does it disallow the use of French translations of the Bible that were often owned and used by the royalty and nobility, who would have had some guidance in their devotional reading from their confessors or household clerics.

tice has explained that the English church “realized that the real threat was less Wycliffe’s teaching than its implicit premise, that everyone deserved to know it,” suggesting that heresy was one problem, but another was the notion that not just Lollards but all Christians could and should have unrestricted access to religious ideas.<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Watson has argued that Arundel’s efforts against Lollardy were far more wide-ranging in effect and must be understood as “the lynchpin of a broader attempt to limit religious discussion and writing in the vernacular.”<sup>37</sup> My reading of Arundel’s restrictions on vernacular religious writing against the concerns articulated by the vernacular religious writers that I quote above is in accord with Watson’s argument that it was not just the radically singular devotional practices of Lollards that threatened the English church around the turn of the fifteenth century. Vernacular religious texts were also enabling Christians to pursue increasingly independent, interior forms of piety that endangered both the church as an institution and the social order that relied upon a significant separation between lay and religious Christians.

Arundel’s efforts to prevent the spread of Lollardy by limiting the scope and number of vernacular religious texts undoubtedly also hindered the dissemination of religious ideas and devotional practices that, though technically orthodox, held the potential to compromise institutional prerogatives. Watson recognizes Arundel’s response to Lollardy as “one of the most draconian pieces of censorship in English history, going far beyond its ostensible aim of destroying the Lollard heresy and effectively attempting to curtail all sorts of theological thinking and writing in the vernacular,” and argues that Arundel’s Constitutions significantly hampered vernacular religious writing.<sup>38</sup> Both Derek Pearsall and Rita Copeland have made arguments similar to and in support of Watson’s, but even scholars who are unwilling to subscribe to Watson’s argument wholeheartedly will not dismiss it completely.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, his point is difficult to discount given the exhaustive list of Middle English religious works that Watson appends to his article, a list that records over forty texts written between 1300 and 1410 and under twenty between

<sup>36</sup> Justice, “Lollardy,” 666.

<sup>37</sup> Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change,” 824.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 826 and 834–45.

<sup>39</sup> See Pearsall, “The Apotheosis of John Lydgate,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35 (2005): 37; and Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent*, 123. For scholarship less enthusiastic in its support of Watson’s position, see, for instance, Cré, “Authority and the Compiler,” 159; Renevey, “Household Chores in *The Doctrine of the Hert*,” 184; and F. N. M. Diekstra, introduction to *Book for a Simple and Devout Woman*, ed. Diekstra (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998), 53–54.

1410 (the year Arundel's Constitutions were published) and 1500.<sup>40</sup> Love's *Mirror*, a text approved by Arundel and thus an example of what the archbishop considered acceptable lay devotional reading material, suggests just how uneasy the church was about lay contemplative practice. Love's *Mirror* was largely a translation from the fourteenth-century Latin text *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, written for use by a Poor Clare nun, but Love made numerous changes as he translated to render the text suitable for a lay audience.<sup>41</sup> He by no means discourages his audiences from contemplation, but he is quite directive about what contemplative practices are appropriate for the laity. In passages not translated from *Meditationes Vitae Christi* but rather original to the *Mirror*, Love advises that it is "more spedefull & more sykere" for the laity to dedicate themselves to "contemplacion of þe monhede of cryste" than it is for them to pursue "hyze contemplacion of þe godhed"; he later discourages the laity's abandonment of the *pater noster* and pursuit of "singulere deuocion in oþer priuate praieres" (10 and 86). Also suggesting the mutuality of concern that I have been attempting to evidence here, Love truncates the discussion of active and contemplative lives present in his Latin source and directs readers interested in contemplation to consult Hilton's "Epistle" which, as we have seen, is tentative, to say the least, in its endorsement of lay contemplative practice.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps the clearest indication that the institutional response to Lollardy spoke also to the singular contemplative practices that raised the concerns of Hilton, the *Cloud* author, and Caxton is Arundel's use of earlier church legislation regarding the laity's religious knowledge. In the first article of his Constitutions, Arundel places a restriction on what parish priests can teach their congregations:

illa sola simpliciter praedicent, una cum precibus consuetis, quae in constitutione provinciali a bonae memoriae Johanne, praedecessore nostro, bene et sancte in suppletionem ignorantiae sacerdotum edita, quae incipit, "Ignorantia sacerdotum," continentur expresse. (3:315)

[they will simply preach, together with the customary prayers, only those things which are clearly contained in the provincial decree of our predecessor John of good memory, which was published appropriately and venerably to mitigate the ignorance of priests and which begins "The ignorance of priests."]<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Watson, Appendix to "Censorship and Cultural Change," 859–64.

<sup>41</sup> See Sargent, introduction to *Nicholas Love's "Mirror"*, xxx–xliv.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 124; according to Sargent, this change is the "largest single suppression of material from the *Meditationes*" (xxxiv).

<sup>43</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.



The John of good memory to whom Arundel refers is John Pecham, who preceded him as the archbishop of Canterbury from 1279–92; the decree that Arundel cites is the program for religious instruction of the laity that Pecham instituted in his Lambeth Constitutions. As I noted earlier, Pecham's syllabus was designed, in response to the Fourth Lateran Council, to improve the general religious knowledge of the laity so that they possessed the basic knowledge of their faith necessary to make good confessions. The syllabus was as such a beginning point for the laity—a primer.

Arundel invokes Pecham's syllabus in his Constitutions for a very different reason, as Watson explains: "Pecham's *minimum* necessary for the laity to know if they are to be saved has been redefined as the *maximum* they may hear, read, or even discuss. This revisionist version of the Syllabus shows how much seemed, to Arundel in 1409, to have changed since 1281."<sup>44</sup> The laity's lack of knowledge does not appear to strike Arundel as a problem; their possession of too much knowledge does. Arundel uses Pecham's syllabus against Pecham's own intentions; where Pecham's interest was in increasing the laity's religious knowledge, Arundel attempts to restrict it. By setting the limits of general lay knowledge of the faith at the minimum requirements of Pecham's syllabus, he of course implicitly forbids the spread of heretical knowledge. But another consequence of setting this limitation—and perhaps a more direct one—is the suppression of orthodox Christians' pursuit of anything except the most basic religious knowledge and devotional practices. It is indeed arguable that, because they were more inquisitive about and interested in religious ideas, orthodox Christians eager to cultivate their spiritual lives were more likely to become heretics than their less enthusiastic counterparts. Even without taking this step, however, they were potentially dangerous to the church and to the social order that supported it. Arundel's efforts to address the problem of Lollardy in a manner that restricted orthodox and heterodox Christians alike suggests that he recognized that Lollardy was not the only problem that needed to be addressed by the church at the start of the fifteenth century. Further, his reverse application of Pecham's syllabus suggests that the measures inspired by Lateran IV to educate the laity had, from an institutional perspective, worked too well—that lay people were so educated in religious ideas and practices that they stood as a threat to the institutional church. These Christians, for whom the

<sup>44</sup> Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change," 828.

church and its representatives had increasingly provided opportunities to cultivate their spiritual lives since the thirteenth century, had become by the turn of the fifteenth century the source of no small amount of anxiety and concern from an institutional perspective.

## II

The same qualities that made lay religious knowledge and singular spiritual practices troubling to Hilton, the *Cloud* author, Caxton, and Arundel gave them great potential to prove very personally rewarding to individual Christians. These practices and knowledge provided them the tools to cultivate highly developed interior spiritual lives and to establish a private relationship with God, neither of which emphasized or even required the presence of the church as a mediator to the divine or even as a community of believers. Christians interested in developing this more interior connection to God need not (and likely did not) abandon institutional religious practices, but their individual devotional practices offered a very different and arguably more personally satisfying experience. Because such personal religious practices prioritized singular satisfaction and disregarded the institutional—and very social—elements of Christian belief, the metaphor in *A Ladder of Foure Ronges* likening contemplation to drunkenness is not surprising. The pursuit of personal pleasure to the extent that social responsibilities and even relationships are neglected was often connected with drunkenness through the deadly sin gluttony, of which it was represented as one variety.

In medieval texts, gluttony is always characterized as indulgence in food and drink to the extent that it produces intense delight of one kind at the expense of debilitation or damage of another kind. In his syllabus, Pecham defines gluttony as eating or drinking “pro gule deliciis excitandis” (for the purposes of exciting pleasure of the throat) to the extent that it “cor aggravat et impedit sensum interiorem aut exteriorem” (afflicts the heart and cripples the interior and exterior senses) (2.2.904).<sup>45</sup> The fourteenth-century *Book of Vices and Virtues* dramatizes this struggle between gluttonous pleasure and the health of the body with a conversation involving the throat, tongue, and stomach: “Þe stomake criþ and seiþ, ‘A, dame þrote, þou sleest me! I am so ful þat I breste!’ but þan

<sup>45</sup> “Council of the Province of Canterbury at Lambeth,” in *Councils and Synods with Other Documents Relating to the English Church*, vol. 2, part 2, ed. F. M. Powicke and C. R. Cheney (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

answereþ þe glotouns tonge and seiþ, 'Þeiȝ þou breste, þis good mosel schal be ete'" (53).<sup>46</sup> In his sermon, Gaytryge defines gluttony as the partaking of "delicouse metes and drynkes, / For to fill the likyngs and lustes of the flesh, / Otheir than we may godely lede our lyve with" (91–92).<sup>47</sup> It is most often texts less explicitly geared to instruct (though often pedagogical in their own ways) that sharpen the characterization of gluttony as pleasurable in one respect and destructive in another into a condemnation of both drunkenness in particular and, more generally, of the pursuit of personal pleasure at the expense of social and religious responsibilities. In book six of *Confessio Amantis*, John Gower describes the glutton's delight in and singular devotion to drink:

The cuppe is al that evere him pleseth,  
And also that him most deseseth;  
It is the cuppe whom he serveth,  
Which alle care fro him kerveth.

(lines 63–66)<sup>48</sup>

In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the *Pardoner's Tale*, though told by the most reprehensible pilgrim, nonetheless catalogs the social ills caused by drunkenness.<sup>49</sup> In the fifth *passus* of William Langland's *Vision of Piers Plowman*, Gloton, the personification of gluttony, is waylaid on his way to confession by a brewster offering him "good ale," and he drinks his fill rather than continuing on his way, then makes a scene in the ale house and has to be carried home (77–82).<sup>50</sup> Given the extent to which self-gratification at all expense is emphasized in these examples, it is not surprising that *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* would use drunkenness as a metaphor for contemplation, a singular and intensely personally sat-

<sup>46</sup> *Book of Vices and Virtues*, Early English Text Society, o.s., 217, ed. W. Nelson Francis (London: Oxford University Press, 1942).

<sup>47</sup> *The Lay Folks' Catechism*, Early English Text Society, o.s., 118, ed. Thomas Frederick Simmons and Henry Edward Nolloth (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1901).

<sup>48</sup> *The English Works of John Gower*, vol. 2, Early English Text Society, e.s., 82, ed. G. C. Macaulay (1901; repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 169.

<sup>49</sup> *The Pardoner's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), see especially 196–98, lines 463–588.

<sup>50</sup> Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, 2nd ed., ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London: J. M. Dent, 1995). It is also worth noting here that Langland's narrator, Will, sarcastically refers to a corrupt friar whom he observes dining as "Goddess gloton" (209). I only realized the similarity of my title to Will's description after completing this article, but its derisive use in Langland's text underscores the uniqueness of *The Ladder of Foure Ronges's* positive application of gluttony.

isfying practice. However, considering the negative moral slant of the examples above as well as the concerns circulating regarding lay contemplation, it is curious that the metaphor is used to cast contemplation in a positive light rather than to discourage or denounce its practice among the laity.

To be sure, *The Ladder of Four Ronges* was not the first Christian text to liken spiritual bliss to drunkenness. Hugh Magennis has shown how both Augustine and Gregory the Great employ the metaphor.<sup>51</sup> In a sermon on the Song of Songs, Bernard of Clairvaux interprets the verse “Comedite, amici, et bibite, et inebriamini carissimi” (Beloved friends, eat, drink, and be drunk) as a series of metaphors for humanity’s differing experiences of God on earth and in the afterlife with the glorious event of Christ’s second coming being celebrated with inebriation: “Comedite ante mortem, bibite post mortem, inebriamini post resurrectionem” (Eat before death, drink after death, and be drunk after the resurrection) (Song 5.1).<sup>52</sup> In his homily on the gospel story of the wedding feast at Cana, Bede uses drunkenness as a metaphor for sublime comprehension of biblical texts—comprehension that utilizes the “spiritalium sensum cuius noua flagrantia debriaris” (spiritual sense, by whose new fragrance you are intoxicated) (lines 181–82).<sup>53</sup> When drunkenness was distanced from the negative connotations attached to it through the deadly sin gluttony, it provided numerous Christian writers with a particularly dynamic analogy for spiritual joy.

The passage in *The Ladder of Four Ronges* likening contemplation to drunkenness is without doubt indebted to texts like Bernard’s and Bede’s, but it also draws on a more particular source—though not the Latin text of which *The Ladder of Four Ronges* is largely a translation. At the point in *Scala Claustralium* that corresponds to the drunkenness metaphor of *The Ladder of Four Ronges*, Guigo employs a set of less developed metaphors:

Paulis per permittit nos gustare quam suavis est, et antequam plene sentiatur se subtrahit; et ita quasi alis expansis super nos volitans provocat nos ad volan-

<sup>51</sup> Magennis, “The Exegesis of Inebriation: Treading Carefully in Old English,” *English Language Notes* 23 (1986): 4.

<sup>52</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo Super Cantica Cantorum*, *Sermo LXXI*, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, vol. 3, ed. Jean Leclercq et al. (Rome, 1955–1977).

<sup>53</sup> Bede, *Homily 1.14* (ed. David Hurst, *Beda Venerabilis Opera: Libri II Homeliarum Evangelii*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 122 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1955], 100; trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst, *Bede the Venerable: Homilies on the Gospels. Book One: Advent to Lent*, Cistercian Studies Series 110 [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991], 141).

dum, quasi dicat: Ecce parum gustastis quam suavis sum et dulcis, sed si vultis plene satiari hac dulcedine, currite post me in odore ugentorum meorum, habete sursum corda, ubi ego sum ad dextram Dei patris. (104)<sup>54</sup>

[For a short time he [God] allows us to taste how sweet he is, and before our taste is satisfied he withdraws; and it is in this way, by flying above us with wings outspread, that he encourages us to fly, and says in effect: See now, you have had a little taste of how sweet and delightful I am, but if you wish to have your fill of this sweetness, hasten after me, drawn by my sweet-smelling perfumes, lift up your heart to where I am at the right hand of God the father.]<sup>55</sup>

The sweetness of God that Guigo describes here with his passing references to fleeting sensory experiences may have offered some general inspiration for the drunkenness metaphor in *The Ladder of Four Ranges*. Keiser notes another passage occurring earlier in *Scala Claustralium* that may have as well, an analogy similar to Bede's in which, making use of the monastic notion of reading as *ruminatio* (chewing), Guigo likens biblical texts to grapes that need to be chewed or pressed—that is, pondered and mulled over.<sup>56</sup> However, Keiser has identified what is most certainly the source for the metaphor in *Speculum Vitae*, which is a fourteenth-century English verse translation of *Somme le Roi*, a French book of vices and virtues written in the late thirteenth century.<sup>57</sup> A metaphor employing inebriation appears in *Speculum Vitae* in a discussion of the gift of wisdom that allows humanity to perceive for a brief time while in a contemplative state the sweetness of God. The sensation is compared to having “bot a lytell tast” of delicious wine that humans can only enjoy fleetingly on earth, though in heaven, they can drink their fill:

Bot when men comes in þe grete tauerne  
Pat men heres þis haly men yherne,

<sup>54</sup> Guigo II, *Scala Claustralium* 10, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *Lettre sur la vie contemplative*, Sources chrétiennes 163 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970).

<sup>55</sup> Translation in Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *The Ladder of Monks: A Letter on the Contemplative Life and Twelve Meditations*, Cistercian Studies Series 48 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1978), 77–78.

<sup>56</sup> Keiser, “‘Noght how lang man lifs,’” 151. The passage is as follows: “Ecce breve verbum sed suavi et multiplici sensu refertum ad pastum animae, quasi uvam ministravit. . . . Hoc ergo sibi plenius explicare desiderans, incipit hanc uvam masticare et frangere, eamque quasi in torculari ponit” (This is a short text of scripture, but it is of great sweetness, like a grape that is put into the mouth filled with many senses to feed the soul. . . . So, wishing to have a fuller understanding of this, the soul begins to bite and chew upon this grape, as though putting it in a wine press) (Guigo II, *Scala Claustralium* 4 [ed. Colledge and Walsh, *Lettre*, 86; trans. Colledge and Walsh, *The Ladder of Monks*, 69]).

<sup>57</sup> *Speculum Vitae: A Reading Edition*, 2 vols., Early English Text Society, o.s., 331 and 332, ed. Ralph Hanna (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Par þe tunnes er ful of blisshed drynk  
 Pat es mare swete þan herte may think.  
 Pat es þe blisse withouten ende  
 To whilk we hope þat we sal wende.  
 (489–90)<sup>58</sup>

In the afterlife in “þe grete tauerne” humanity can drink to the point of “blisselfull drunkennes”—indeed, that is part of “þe blisse of Paradyse” (489–90). Aside from *The Ladder of Foure Ronges*’ obviously similar imagery, Keiser has pointed out that at least part of its rendition of the metaphor, though composed in prose, scans as tetrameter couplets, the same meter and form as *Speculum Vitae*: “Suche lykynge they haue of that drynke / that of none other wyne they thynke.”<sup>59</sup> *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* even borrows the rhyme in these lines from *Speculum Vitae*. Keiser’s detection of the almost doubtless origin of the drunkenness metaphor of *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* is very valuable in that it allows for comparisons between *The Ladder of Foure Ronges*’ rendition of this metaphor and versions in other Middle English translations of the *Somme le Roi*. These comparisons reveal that *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* applies the drunkenness metaphor in a way even more exceptional than Keiser noted in that it not only emphasizes intense personal relationships between God and individual Christians but also encourages radically singular forms of piety.

The *Somme le Roi*, the text of which *Speculum Vitae* is a translation, is the work of Dominican friar Lorens of Orléans.<sup>60</sup> It is extant in over a hundred manuscripts; those that bear dates suggest that he completed the text in 1279.<sup>61</sup> King Philip III (Philip the Bold), whose confessor he was, solicited Lorens to write “a treatise of the moral life, in the form of a study of the vices and virtues” in the vernacular to assist the laity in preparing for the mandatory annual confession instituted by Innocent III.<sup>62</sup> The *Somme le Roi* is a complex text, with portions borrowed from many Latin texts discussing vices and virtues but also including standard prayers, a treatment of the Ten Commandments, a listing of the gifts of

<sup>58</sup> In his article, Keiser quotes from British Library MS Additional 33995, which is the copy text for Hanna’s edition of *Speculum Vitae*. For the ease of readers, I will cite from Hanna’s text.

<sup>59</sup> Keiser, “Noght how lang man lifs,” 153; cf. *Speculum Vitae*, vol. 2, ed. Hanna, 489–90.

<sup>60</sup> *La “Somme le Roi” par Frère Laurent*, ed. Édith Brayer and Anne-Françoise Leurquin-Labie (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 2008).

<sup>61</sup> Leo M. Carruthers, “Lorens of Orléans and the *Somme le Roi* or *The Book of Vices and Virtues*,” *Vox Benedictina* 5 (1988): 190–94.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

the Holy Ghost, and a treatise on dying.<sup>63</sup> Another complicating factor is the *Somme le Roi's* relationship of "frequent interaction and contamination" with *Miroir du Monde*, or rather with two separate texts (distinguished as old and new) that share that title as well as subject matter and colophon.<sup>64</sup> Several Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi* exist, and most include a version of the drunkenness metaphor present in *The Ladder of Foure Ronges*.<sup>65</sup>

When the metaphor is present in Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi*, it is used, as it is in *Speculum Vitae*, to explain the fleeting experience of the sweetness of God available through contemplation. The versions of this metaphor present in Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi* are, as one might expect, very similar to one another. Each begins by explaining that the feeling of pleasure attainable through contemplation is like having a sip of wine; it is a mere sampling of the immense pleasure that one will feel in heaven, which is characterized as a great tavern where the cask of wine that one merely tastes in contemplation is poured from liberally, until all are not just sated but drunk. The Book of Psalms is cited in support of this metaphor. The rendition of this metaphor present in the *Book of Vices and Virtues* is representative of its counterparts in other texts:

<sup>63</sup> Elaine E. Whitaker, "'Euery Man a Kyng': Authority and Novelty in Caxton's *Royal Book*," *Medieval Perspectives* 6 (1992): 58.

<sup>64</sup> W. Nelson Francis, introduction to *The Book of Vices and Virtues: A Fourteenth-Century English Translation of the "Somme le Roi" of Lorens d'Orléans*, Early English Text Society, o.s., 217, ed. W. Nelson Francis (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), xxi–xxvi.

<sup>65</sup> Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi* available in published editions include the fourteenth-century *Speculum Vitae*, extant in forty manuscripts and available in Hanna's reading edition (see n. 61 above); Dan Michel of Northgate's 1340 translation, extant in one text (*Ayenbite of Inwit*, Early English Text Society, o.s., 23, ed. Pamela Gradon [1866; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1965]); the anonymous *Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. Francis, dated to the 1370s and extant in three manuscripts; a prose version of *Speculum Vitae* extant in four copies and composed anonymously at the end of the fourteenth century (*A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen*, ed. Venetia Nelson [Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1981]); the anonymous *Book for a Simple and Devout Laywoman*, (ed. Diekstra) composed around 1400 and extant in two manuscripts; and William Caxton's 1484 translation, the *Royal Book* (STC #21429). Caxton's edition is available through Early English Books Online; it is this online version that I will cite. Several other Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi* have been identified but are not available in published editions. These include an anonymous fifteenth-century manuscript, Bodleian MS Eng. Th. C.57, which bears the heading *A Discourse Upon þe Constitution* (see Phyllis Hodgson, "Ignorancia Sacerdotum: A Fifteenth-Century Discourse on the Lambeth Constitutions," *The Review of English Studies* 24 [1948]: 1–11) and two mid/late-fifteenth-century manuscripts, Oxford MS. E. Mus. 23 [3493], titled *Auenture and Grace*; and Bodleian MS 283, titled *Mirrore of the Worlde* (see Whitaker, "'Euery Man a Kyng,'" 58–66). Of translations of *Somme le Roi* available in published editions, all but *Book for a Simple and Devout Laywoman* include the drunkenness metaphor.

þe grete swetnesse þat þe contemplatif herte haþ and feleþ bi þe 3ifte of wisdom in þis dedli lif nys but a litle taste wher-by men han sauour and felen how God is swete and softe, as who-so tasteþ þe sauour of þe wyne er men drynken þer-of a ful draust; but þei schulle see & come to þat gret tauerne where þat þe tunne is made al commune, þat is in þe lif wiþ-outen ende, where þe wyne of loue, of pees, and of ioie and solas schal be zeue so largeliche to euery wist þat comeþ þider þat al þe desire of þe herte schal be fulfilled whan God schal make aliht vpon his frendes a streme of pees, as þe prophete seiþ, wher-wiþ þei schulle be alle as drunken. Of þilke drunkenesse spekeþ Dauid in þe Sauter and seiþ þus of þe ioie in paradys: "Sire, þou schalt make hem drunke of þe plentee þat is in þin house; and þou schalt make hem drynke of þis swetnesse and of þi delite." (274–75)<sup>66</sup>

Several aspects of how this metaphor itself is articulated and how it relates to other material in the text are noteworthy. Unlike *The Ladder of Foure Ronges'* version of this metaphor, the *Book of Vices and Virtues* and other Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi* characterize the experience of union with God in heaven—not in contemplation—as drunkenness. As if to emphasize this point and discourage audiences from understanding the literal pursuit of inebriation as a spiritual practice and perhaps also from too strenuously embracing contemplative practice, these texts recommend sobriety as the surest path to heaven immediately after concluding the drunkenness metaphor: "þat is þe pees and þe blessednesse þat schal be in þe world þat is wiþ hym, þe whiche to wynne and to haue alle goode cristene folk schulde lyue sobreliche in þis world, as seynt Austen seiþ, þat no wih3t drynkeþ of þat streme of pees but he be drunke of þe plente of ioie þat kepeþ sobrenesse" (275).<sup>67</sup> In particular, the capacity of drunkenness to compromise one's reason is emphasized: "sobrenesse kepeþ resoune and þe vnderstandyng of a man or womman þat is free, þat drunkenesse benyemeþ hym" (275–76).<sup>68</sup> The clear implication is that sober reason assists Chris-

<sup>66</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will use *Book of Vices and Virtues* as my primary example of how Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi* negotiate this metaphor. I will, however, provide citations for passages parallel to the ones that I quote or cite from the *Book of Vices and Virtues* in other Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi* available in published editions. The quotation above is parallel to *Speculum Vitae*, vol. 2, ed. Hanna, 489–91; *Ayenbite of Inwit*, ed. Gradon, 247–48; *A Myroure to Lewde Men and Wymmen*, ed. Nelson, 222–23; and Caxton's *Royal Book*, chapter 154. A parallel passage also exists in the *Book for a Simple and Devout Laywoman*, ed. Diekstra, 261; Diekstra also provides the parallel passage from *Somme le Roi* as it exists in MS Mazarine 870, corrected from British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra A.5.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. *Speculum Vitae*, vol. 2, ed. Hanna, 491; *Ayenbite of Inwit*, ed. Gradon, 248; *A Myroure to Lewde Men and Wymmen*, ed. Nelson, 223–24; and Caxton's *Royal Book*, chapter 154.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *Speculum Vitae*, vol. 2, ed. Hanna, 492–93; *Ayenbite of Inwit*, ed. Gradon, 248;



tians in attaining heaven and that the inability, precipitated by drunkenness, to make clear and sound judgments should be avoided. This advice recalls an earlier passage in the text that, in elaborating upon gluttony, enumerates the sins of the tavern:

þe tauerne is þe deueles scole hous, for þere studieþ his disciples, and þere lerneþ his scolers, and þere is his owne chapel, þere men and wommen redeþ and syngeþ and serueþ him, and þere he doþ his myracles as longeþ þe deuel do. In holy chirche is God ywoned to do myracles and schewe his vertues: þe blynde to seen, þe croked to gon rist, brynge wode men in-to here rist wytte, doumbe men to speke, deue men here herynge. But þe deuel doþ þe contrarie of al þis in þe tauerne. For whan a glotoun goþ to þe tauerne he goþ rist ynow, and whan he comeþ out he ne haþ no fot þat may bere hym; and whan he goþ þidre he hereþ and seeþ and spekeþ and vnderstondeþ, and whan he comeþ þannesward alle þes ben y-lost as he þat haþ no witt ne resoun ne vnderstondynge. Þes ben þe miracles þat þe deuel doþ, and zit he techeþ a lessoun of al foulnesse: þere he techeþ hem glotonye, lecherie, swere and forswere, to lye and mysseyn, to reneye God and his halewen, and euele rekenynge, gile, and many oþere manere synnes. (53–54)<sup>69</sup>

The comparison of heaven to a great tavern where all present drink themselves into a state of blissful inebriation within the context of these other, more negative representations of drunkenness does much to reinforce the metaphorical nature of that comparison and, indeed, suggests that the pursuit of a temperate and responsible life is the surest course to joyful union with God in the afterlife.

*The Ladder of Foure Ronges'* use of the drunkenness metaphor is decidedly different from the way that it is used in Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi*. First, and most significantly, in *The Ladder of Foure Ronges*, drunkenness is a metaphor not for heaven but for contemplation. While Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi* present contemplation as tantamount to getting just a drop of the wine that all will be inebriated by in the afterlife, in *The Ladder of Foure Ronges*, God lures Christians to contemplation with a taste of wine: "So doth God Almyzty to his loveris in contemplacion as a tauerner that good wyne hathe to selle dooth to good drynkeris þat wolle drynke wele of his wyne & largely spende" (113). God "tollyth hem to howse & 3evyth hem a taast"

*A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen*, ed. Nelson, 223; and Caxton's *Royal Book*, chapter 154.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *Speculum Vitae*, vol. 2, ed. Hanna, 447–48; *Ayenbite of Inwit*, ed. Gradon, 56–57; *A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen*, ed. Nelson, 210–11; and Caxton's *Royal Book*, chapter 49.

(113). Christians need not wait until the afterlife for a longer draught, however. They can simply devote themselves more assiduously to contemplation, and in this way the indulgence in wine follows immediately after the mere taste of it: "Sone whanne they haue tastyd therof and that they thynke the drynke good & gretly to ther plesauns, than they drynke dayly & nyctly, and the more they drynke, the more they may" (113). A corresponding significant difference in *A Ladder of Foure Ronges'* use of this metaphor is that it makes no mention of a great heavenly tavern; that more general and celestial origin of the stores of the wine is replaced with a single "tauerner," God himself, who seeks out drinkers in a calculated, intentional, and far less otherworldly way: "Wele he knowith what they be there he seeth hem in the strete. Pryvely he wendyth and rowndith hem in the eere & seyth to them that he hath a clarete, and þat alle fine for ther owyn mouth" (113). This is a much more singular, intimate, and exceptional relationship than is promised in the drunkenness metaphor as it is manifest in Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi*, in which wine is doled out to all liberally and equally. Thus the metaphor of drunkenness in *A Ladder of Foure Ronges*, though still, indeed, a metaphor, conveys an immediacy of experience and a promise of more personal satisfaction than do renditions of the metaphor in Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi*. Also, unlike those translations of *Somme le Roi*, which make a point to encourage sobriety, *A Ladder of Foure Ronges* makes no mention of moderation or temperance. Quite to the contrary, the text describes in detail the incautious behavior that characterizes the drinkers in the metaphor: "Suche lykyng they haue of that drynke that of none other wyne they thynke, but oonly for to drynke þeir fylle and to haue of this drynke alle their wylle. And so they spende that they haue, and syth they spende or lene to wedde surcotte or hode & alle that they may, for to drynke with lykyng whiles that them it good thynkith" (113). Rather than use this drinker's behavior as a cautionary tale to discourage audiences from excessive contemplation, the text essentially condones it by supplying a counterpoint to the depictions of the tavern as the devil's schoolhouse in Middle English translations of *Somme le Roi* with a portrait of holy drunkards who, through and by their very inebriation—or devotion to contemplative practice—perform God's work:

Thus it faryth sumtyme by Goddis loveris that from þe tyme that they hadde tastyd of this pyment, that is of the swettnesse of God, such lykyng þei founde theryn that as drunkyn men they did spende that they hadde and 3af themselves to fastyng and to wakyng & to other penauns doyng. And whan they

hadde no more to spende they leyde their weddys, as apostelys, martyrys, & maydenys zounge of zereis dyd in their tyme. Summe zafe their bodyes to brenne in fyre, summe lete her hedys of to be smytte, summe zafe her pappys corvyn from ther breestys, some zaf ther skyn drawn from the flessch, and some their bodyes wyth wylde horsys to be drawe. (113–14)

Far from encouraging temperance and responsibility, *The Ladder of Foure Ronges'* use of the drunkenness metaphor characterizes contemplation as a radically individual, singularly self-satisfying, even reckless practice—and advocates it.

To be sure, the author of *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* does seem to make a gesture toward tempering the text's remarkably permissive depiction of drunkenness, adding after the lengthy description of God as taverner and the holy drunkards that "this likyng is here zeven but for to taste," and instructing the reader, "whan God eny gostly lykyng to thy soule sendyth, thynke that God spekyth to the, & rownyth in thyn eere, & sayth: 'Haue nowe this litelle, and taste howe swete I am'" (114). Phyllis Hodgson, the text's first editor, describes the material on drunkenness included in the work as "fully appropriate in a monograph on contemplative prayer leading to an immediate experience of God."<sup>70</sup> Hodgson goes on to summarize the text's use of inebriation as a metaphor for "an experience of God" that is "fleeting on earth, lest in presumption one should think it natural right and not a gift of grace. God soon withdraws Himself again lest, through familiarity, the immature mind lose the sense of awe."<sup>71</sup> However, neither Hodgson's assessment of the metaphor nor, indeed, the text's own efforts to modulate the metaphor after the fact provides an accurate characterization of it. In its descriptions both of God doing "to his loveris in contemplacion as a taverner that good wyne hathe to selle dooth to good drynkeris" and of the saints as holy drunkards pursuing their holy work by recklessly spending their bodies for God, *The Ladder of Foure Ronges'* metaphorical use of drunkenness encourages audiences to pursue an all-consuming, intensely private, self-indulgent relationship with God.

In its appropriation and particularly radical revision of a much tamer application of this metaphor, *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* indicates something of the instability of ideas about personal piety—and in particular interior devotional practices—at the turn of the fifteenth century. The text moves far afield from the anxieties of Hilton, the *Cloud* author, and

<sup>70</sup> Hodgson, "'A Ladder of Foure Ronges': A Study of the Prose Style," 466.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 467.

Caxton—indeed, it attempts to cultivate in its audience the very devotional habits that these religious writers seemed most concerned about the laity adopting. This point is plainly and dramatically apparent if *The Ladder of Foure Ronges'* likening of Christians engaged in contemplation to drunkards who abandon their worldly goods and responsibilities to pursue drink is compared to this decidedly more staid advice from Hilton's "Epistle":

Liyf contemplatif is fair and medefulle and therefore thou schalte ai have it in thi mynde and in thy desire. But thou schalt have in usynge liyf actif, for it is so needful and so speedfulle. Therefore yif thou be putte fro reste in devocioun whan thou were levest be stille therat—ethir bi thi children or thi servauntes, or bi any of thyn evene-Cristene for here profite or ese of heertes skilfulli asked—be not anrgi with hem, ne hevvy, ne dredefulle, as yif God wolde be wroth with thee that thou levest him for any other thyng, for it is not sooth. Leve of lighteli thi devocioun, whethir it be in praier or in meditacioun, and goo doo thi dette and thi service to thyne evene-Cristene as redili as oure Lord himsilf badde thee doo so. (119)

*The Ladder of Foure Ronges* does not even allow for the possibility of such a disruption from contemplation; interior devotion not only has priority over more active pious practices, it is—as the drunkenness metaphor suggests—all-consuming.

Whether *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* had any direct textual descendants is unclear; Keiser has observed that *Pe Holy Boke Gratia Dei* borrows significantly from it, particularly in its introductory section and its discussion of grace, but when it addresses contemplation it replaces the drunkenness metaphor with the more conservative and less developed comparisons that Guigo uses in *Scala Claustralium*.<sup>72</sup> Hodgson notes that another English translation of *Scala Claustralium*, titled "The Ladder to Paradise" and attributed to Augustine, was printed in 1581, but this translation has none of the longer interpolations found in *The Ladder of Foure Ronges*.<sup>73</sup> Still, the spirit of interior devotion that *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* sought to promote was evident a century later; in the early 1500s, Carey observes, Thomas More exhorted the laity to cultivate the pious habits of "praier, good meditacion, and reading of such

<sup>72</sup> Keiser, "Pe Holy Boke Gratia Dei," 302–3; Richard Rolle and *Pe Holy Boke Gratia Dei*, ed. Arntz, 77–80.

<sup>73</sup> Hodgson, "'A Ladder of Foure Ronges': A Study of the Prose Style," 30n6. The 1581 translation, "A little pamphlet of Saint Augustine entituled The ladder of paradise" (STC # 1719.25), is available through Early English Books Online.

englishe bookes as moste may noryshe and encrease devotion."<sup>74</sup> Carey points out that More's advice "makes a number of assumptions about lay piety" at the start of the sixteenth century, two of the most significant of which are "that a layperson would normally practise meditative prayer, 'good meditacion' as he calls it, without the intimate direction of a clerical spiritual adviser" and "that he would read books describing the contemplative life."<sup>75</sup> Though the particular locution of which *The Ladder of Foure Ronges* makes use may have been too vulgar to appeal to subsequent generations of religious writers, the spirit of the text's drunkenness metaphor—the cultivation and sustaining of a significant interior relationship to God—did continue to thrive.

Certainly, this spirit of personal devotion among the laity was in large part precisely what Innocent III hoped to achieve with his twenty-first canon at the Fourth Lateran Council. However, Innocent likely could not have envisioned the sophistication with which the laity would be exhorted to pursue their interior spiritual lives, nor the ultimate outcome of the lay devotional movement his decree initiated. The efforts that religious writers made in their texts to increase the sense of personal connection that individual Christians felt to their faith ultimately revealed an incompatibility of institutional faith and interiority—revealed that in matters of faith the laity need not be reliant upon the church for direction. Moreover, in their texts, religious writers provided models of interaction between institutional faith and interiority that, often in spite of themselves and increasingly through the Middle Ages, showed individual Christians subsuming the place of the institutional church in negotiating issues of faith and interiority—negotiating their own relationships with God.

However, if we can indeed fault Innocent for underestimating the sophistication with which religious texts would address the issue of interiority, we can just as easily find fault with our own assessment of these texts. Watson makes a fair critique of modern scholarship's view of medieval vernacular religious writing: "With the exception of a small group of canonical texts (such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *Piers Plowman*, Eckhart's German sermons, or Dante's *Commedia*), this huge corpus has also been read as though it were no more than a collection of simplified versions of theological ideas whose real home continued to be Latin."<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> More, *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, quoted in Carey, "Devout Literate Laypeople," 372.

<sup>75</sup> Carey, "Devout Literate Laypeople," 372.

<sup>76</sup> Nicholas Watson, "Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarna-

*The Ladder of Foure Ronges* is one example of a text that proves something of the complexity with which Middle English religious writers addressed issues of interiority and faith, and further, implies the existence of rich and deep notions of interiority—ones that compare with those present in our own culture and perhaps even exceed them. After all, John Lennon may have claimed that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus, but even in their most ecstatic, self-indulgent visions of paradise, they did not conjure an image of God as their personal bartender.<sup>77</sup>

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tion of God," in *New Medieval Literatures*, vol. 1, ed. Wendy Scase, Rita Copeland, and David Lawton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 100.

<sup>77</sup> Thanks to Myra J. Seaman, Ellen Muehlberger, Moira Fitzgibbons, and the anonymous reader for *Studies in Philology*, whose generous and helpful comments greatly improved this article.