

Rendering the Word:
Vernacular Accounts of the Parables in Late Medieval England

Mary Raschko

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Approved by:

Joseph Wittig

Fiona Somerset

E. Donald Kennedy

Patrick O'Neill

Peter Kaufman

Abstract

Mary Raschko: *Rendering the Word: Vernacular Accounts of the Parables in Late Medieval England*
(Under the direction of Joseph Wittig and Fiona Somerset)

This study examines Middle English translations of particularly ambiguous, yet culturally relevant biblical narratives: the parables of the Wedding Feast, the Laborers in the Vineyard, the Good Samaritan, and the Prodigal Son. Crossing conventional boundaries of genre and ideology, it features renditions of parables in a wide variety of contexts, ranging from the Wycliffite Bible to lives of Christ, homilies, and poetic literary works. To focus the diverse interpretations found in these materials, each chapter highlights one prominent Middle English poem or devotional work and discusses other vernacular accounts in relation to the more familiar text. Chapter one features the Parable of the Wedding Feast in *Cleanness* and emphasizes the difference between the poet's parabolic writing and moral exempla, while chapter two examines the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in *Pearl* and shows how the explication therein differs dramatically from those in Middle English sermons. Chapter three places the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Langland's *Piers Plowman* in conversation with other Middle English, rather than Latin, interpretations of the story, and chapter four considers the characterization of penance in the Parable of the Prodigal Son in devotional works like *Book to a Mother*. Collectively, the four parables show the complex relationship between narrative and religious edification and provide evidence of dynamic engagement with vernacular scripture in late medieval England.

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Introduction

Judging from the rhetoric of conservative medieval clerics, and even from the predominant scholarly discussions of biblical literature in late medieval England, one might expect a study of gospel parables in Middle English to have limited scope and significance. Parables do not belong to the body of simple biblical texts that clerics recommended conveying to the laity; likewise, the association of vernacular scripture with John Wyclif and his followers may have rendered it dangerous and consequently restricted its circulation. Whether out of interest in medieval precursors to the Reformation or inattention to under-studied and often unpublished Middle English devotional and exegetical texts, discussion of vernacular scripture is largely restricted to discussion of Lollardy and its opponents, most often as exemplified in the Wycliffite Bible and conscientiously “orthodox” texts like Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*. This study looks beyond the rhetoric of medieval debates about translation of the bible and beyond the traditional ideological and generic boundaries that shape modern discussion of vernacular translation. Setting aside conventional expectations of which texts the laity would read and which authors would translate more complex biblical passages, it features Middle English translation of and commentary on particularly ambiguous, yet culturally relevant biblical narratives: the parables of the Wedding Feast, the Laborers in the Vineyard, the Good Samaritan, and the Prodigal Son.

Our current conceptions of lay engagement with scripture in late medieval England are heavily influenced by the voices of conservative clerics, who discouraged

vernacular translation in Latin treatises, outlawed unapproved translation in ecclesiastical legislation, and passed over difficult passages of the gospels in meditative devotional texts on the life of Christ. Scholars frequently cite the polemical treatises of Oxford friars William Butler and Thomas Palmer to describe clerical opposition to vernacular translation at the turn of the fifteenth century.¹ In a treatise written in 1401, Butler argues that to prevent the spread of heresy the laity should only read scripture with supervision and advocates restricting scripture to Latin as a means of ensuring that readers will receive clerical guidance. He endorses a hierarchical model of learning in which those of higher intellectual abilities, i.e., clerics, convey appropriate levels of biblical knowledge to the less learned laity. Butler ultimately concludes that the laity should read neither the plain text of scripture nor vernacular scripture with glosses “because of the subtlety of the learned artistry of this sacred scripture.”² Writing a few years later, Palmer similarly contends that the laity should learn scripture only from clerics, who can teach them proper interpretations.³ Yet he also questions the very capacity of the English language to adequately convey the content of scripture and cites 2 Corinthians 3:6 (the letter kills but the spirit gives life), as evidence that lay access to the literal text of scripture would beget false belief.⁴ In their arguments against vernacular translation,

¹ See, for example, Mary Dove, *The First English Bible: The Text and Context of the Wycliffite Versions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6-21; Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 86-111; and Nicholas Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, The Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409.” *Speculum* 70, no. 4 (October 1995): 822-864.

² Qtd. in Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 98. For the Latin, see Margaret Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 414.

³ On the dating of Palmer’s treatise between 1401 and 1407, see Anne Hudson, “The Debate on Bible Translation, Oxford 1401,” in *Lollards and their Books* (London: Hambledon Press, 1985), 67-69.

⁴ Following his quotation of 2 Cor. 3:6, Palmer asks “Quomodo, igitur, simplices illiterati, vel sola grammatica instructi, illos pullos trium sensuum ignorantes, non errarent habentes magistrum, scilicet

both Butler and Palmer project a condescending view of potential lay readers. Butler distinguishes between spiritual milk and meat and recommends only the former for the laity. Exemplified by miracles, spiritual milk can be digested with minimal effort.⁵ Palmer cites Matthew 7:6 to support his position that scripture should remain in Latin, claiming that translation of scripture into the vernacular was equivalent to casting pearls before swine.⁶

Although Butler and Palmer articulate extreme positions,⁷ modern scholars can find codification of their opposition to translation in ecclesiastical legislation that prohibited the dissemination and ownership of Middle English bibles. In the 1409 *Constitutions*, Archbishop Arundel established a set of rules pertaining to preachers, biblical texts, and the activity of the universities in an effort to combat the spread of heretical views promoted by followers of Wyclif. Article seven formalized the church's opposition to the Wycliffite Bible and other unauthorized vernacular translations of scripture. It declares:

Also it is a dangerous thing, as blessed Jerome testifies, to translate the text of sacred scripture from one language into another, because in the very translations the same sense is not easily retained in all, in as much as the same blessed Jerome, although he was inspired, confesses himself to have erred often in this. Therefore, we resolve and ordain that no one hereafter by his own authority translate that text of sacred scripture into the English tongue or any other, by way of a book, a short book, or a tract, nor that anyone read such a book, short book, or tract, now recently composed in the time of the aforementioned John Wyclif, or

litteralem sensum, tamen de pullis non curantes?" Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible*, 424. For a discussion of this passage in relation to issues of pedagogy, see Rita Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 104.

⁵ Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible*, 416.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 429. Henry Knighton, a chronicler and Augustinian canon, also refers to Matthew 7:6 in a statement condemning the Wycliffite Bible. See Dove, *The First Lollard Bible*, 6.

⁷ See Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 98.

subsequently, or being composed hereafter, in part or in whole, publicly or secretly, under punishment of very great excommunication, until the translation itself is approved through the bishop of the place, or if the case require, through the provincial council. Let he who does contrary be punished in a similar manner to supporters of heresy and error.⁸

The practical implications of the seventh *Constitution* are the focus of considerable debate, particularly because some scholars have argued that their reach extended well beyond direct biblical translation. Anne Hudson first called attention to the potential for the phrase “per viam libri, libelli, aut tractatus” (by way of a book, a short book, or a tract) to ban partial translations of scripture or mere quotations, in addition to more comprehensive translations made by the Wycliffites.⁹ In an influential 1995 *Speculum* article, Nicholas Watson further explored this potential and argued that the *Constitutions* “need to be regarded as the linchpin of a broader attempt to limit religious discussion and writing.”¹⁰ He characterized the legislation as “one of the most draconian pieces of censorship in English history” and suggested that it transformed Peckham’s syllabus of the minimum knowledge necessary for the laity to a maximum, effectively restricting them to light doctrine and simplistic meditation.¹¹ The presumed effects of the legislation were so widespread that medieval authors ceased trying to create vernacular theology and

⁸ The translation is my own. The Latin text reads: “Periculosa quoque res est, testante beato Jeronymo, textum sacrae scripturae de uno in aliud idioma transferre, eo quod in ipsis translationibus non de facili idem in omnibus sensus retinetur, prout idem beatus Jeronymus, etsi inspiratus fuisset, se in hoc saepius fatetur errasse; Stauimus igitur et ordinamus, ut nemo deinceps aliquem textum sacrae scripturae auctoritate sua in linguam Anglicanam, vel aliam transferat, per viam libri, libelli, aut tractatus, nec legatur aliquis huiusmodi liber, libellus, aut tractatus iam noviter tempore dicti Iohannis Wycliff, sive citra, compositus, aut in posterum componendus, in parte vel in toto, publice, vel occulte, sub maioris 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.” David Wilkins, ed. *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*. Vol. 3. (London: Sumptibus R. Gosling, 1737), 317.

⁹ Anne Hudson, “Lollardy: The English Heresy?” in *Lollards and Their Books* (London: Hambledon, 1985), 148.

¹⁰ Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change,” 824

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 828.

responded instead with “silent compliance,” explaining a perceived decline in the quantity, scope, and originality of vernacular religious writing in the fifteenth century.¹²

Although Watson has subsequently modified his claims, acknowledging that there may be considerable continuity among texts that predate and follow the *Constitutions*, his original argument exerts considerable influence.¹³ In *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, James Simpson describes Watson’s article as forming a consensus regarding the effects of the *Constitutions*, which he describes as having “legislated for a discursive shift in vernacular theological writing, by prohibiting the complex and theological reception of biblical matter by vernacular writers, and by instituting new ground rules, whereby only bodily, imaginative responses to Scripture were permitted.”¹⁴ While Michael Sargent moderates Watson’s argument in his recent edition of Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, he still argues that vernacular theology “profoundly changed” after the *Constitutions* and contributed to a polarization in the fifteenth century between Wycliffite writings and biblical texts like Love’s *Mirror*.¹⁵

In addition to polemical treatises against translation and ecclesiastical legislation formalizing that opposition, the heavily mediated presentation of the gospels in the *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* further suggests that lay audiences engaged with scripture in a very limited way. Love’s *Mirror* is a translation and adaptation of Pseudo-Bonaventure’s *Meditationes Vitae Christi* that presents episodes from the life of

¹² Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change,” 831-832.

¹³ Nicholas Watson, “Cultural Changes,” *English Language Notes* 44, no. 1 (2006): 127-137.

¹⁴ James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, *The Oxford English Literary History* 2. 1350-1547 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 477.

¹⁵ Michael Sargent, ed., “Introduction,” in *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005), 76.

Christ arranged according to the seven days of the week. Surviving in 64 manuscripts, it ranks among the most popular books of late medieval England. Although Love conveys the story of the gospels to a lay audience, he describes his contents as “more pleyne” than the writings of the four evangelists and includes “diuerse ymaginacions of cristes life” that are not found in scripture. Love frequently “passes over” difficult passages of scripture in his text and removes the citation of exegetical authorities from his source in his attempt to edify “symple creatures þe whiche as childryn hauen nede to be fedde with mylke of lyzte doctryne & not with sadde mete of grete clargye & of hye contemplacion.”¹⁶ As one of the few texts that received formal approval from Arundel, the *Mirror* responded to the growing demand for vernacular scripture and devotional texts in late medieval England, while carefully maintaining a division between lay and clerical knowledge.¹⁷

In isolation, this evidence suggests a compelling narrative, in which clerical opposition to translation of scripture led to institutional and self-censorship of theologically complex texts, along with the development of treatises that facilitated a simplistic model of lay devotion. Yet these viewpoints present a very limited perspective of lay engagement with biblical texts in the late Middle Ages. Frequently gravitating to the controversial and the polemical, scholars devote insufficient attention to the diverse writers promoting translation and the varied scriptural texts that survive from late

¹⁶ Sargent, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, 10/14-16. Throughout his text, Love explains that “we passen ouer” passages he claims would be tedious, many of which pertain to the ministry of Christ. See Sargent, “Introduction,” in *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, 43.

¹⁷ Nicholas Watson argues that Love treats as permanent a state of the soul other writers, like Rolle and Hilton, consider only a beginning. For Love, a process of growing from meditation on Christ’s passion to higher contemplation of His divinity would be appropriate only for clerics. See Watson, “Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God.” *New Medieval Literatures 1* (1997): 97-98.

medieval England. A Latin treatise by Richard Ullerston, also written at Oxford around 1401, shows that clerics could promote vernacular scripture without implicating themselves as heterodox thinkers.¹⁸ Ullerston defends the English language as capable of accurately rendering scripture and cites vernacular sermons as evidence that it already does so. Moreover, he argues that access to scripture would benefit the laity without disturbing the clerical hierarchy, as scripture frequently commends humility and remaining within one's proper social station.¹⁹ In the vernacular, Wycliffites defended translation of scripture in polemical treatises and a variety of prologues, including the General Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible and three prologues appended to some copies of the gospel harmony *Oon of Foure*.²⁰ More mainstream authors writing in the vernacular promoted translation as well. In the *Dialogus Inter Dominum et Clericum*, prefaced to his translation of the *Polychronicon*, John Trevisa defends translation of scripture into English on the basis of historical precedent, citing a long tradition of English biblical texts, and the current, necessary practice of translating scripture in homilies.²¹ The dialogue format, which authors like Ullerston and Trevisa employed, shows that

¹⁸ See Fiona Somerset, "Professionalizing Translation at the Turn of the Fifteenth Century: Ullerston's *Determinacio*, Arundel's *Constitutiones*," in *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Post-Medieval Vernacularity*, ed. Fiona Somerset and Nicholas Watson, 145-57 (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Somerset, "Professionalizing Translation," 149-50. Ghosh discusses Ullerston's treatise at length, but he argues that it fails to address "the fundamental issue of the relationship of *auctoritas* and interpretation." This judgment reflects an insistence that Wycliffites and their opponents frame the debate and devalues alternative or less ideological approaches to discussion of scripture. See Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 92.

²⁰ The General Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible and the third prologue associated with *Oon of Foure* are published in Forshall and Madden's edition of the Wycliffite Bible. See J. Forshall and F. Madden, eds., *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal Books, in the Earliest English Versions, made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers*, (Oxford, 1850. Rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1982), 1:xiv-xv and 1-60.

²¹ See Ronald Waldron, ed. "Trevisa's Original Prefaces on Translation: A Critical Edition," in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. Edward Donald Kennedy, Ronald Waldron, and Joseph S. Wittig, 285-300 (Wolfeboro, NH: D.S. Brewer, 1988), 292-93.

scriptural translation garnered controversy and met with opposition, but it also demonstrates diversity of opinion and open discussion of the merits of translation.

Despite formal prohibition of the translation and dissemination of Middle English scripture in the *Constitutions*, scholars increasingly suggest that the legislation did not lead to widespread censorship of biblical texts. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, for example, calls this time period “an age of *failed* censorship,” calling attention to open ownership of the Wycliffite Bible, the translation of female mystical writings into English, and the continued copying of *Piers Plowman* throughout the fifteenth century. She emphasizes the difficulty of both authorial and authoritarian control of text in a manuscript culture.²² Others have challenged the idea that Arundel sought widespread censorship through the *Constitutions*. Fiona Somerset argues that Arundel sought to better control the clerics under his jurisdiction, not lay reading habits.²³ Furthermore, Ian Forrest questions the consensus that possession of books was central to detection of heresy. He suggests that the importance of books may be inflated by scholars’ dependence on written sources and cites Watson’s influential article as an example of this trend.²⁴

The surviving manuscript record suggests that biblical translation flourished in the late Middle Ages, despite some clerics’ opposition to vernacular scripture and Arundel’s official prohibition of the Wycliffite Bible. The Wycliffite Bible survives in over 250 manuscripts – far more than any other vernacular text. Ownership by men such as Henry VI and Henry VII indicates that interest in this form of vernacular scripture was not

²² See Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 17.

²³ Fiona Somerset, “Professionalizing Translation,” 146-47.

²⁴ See Ian Forrest, *The Detection of Heresy in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 183-84.

confined to heretical readers, and Hudson suggests that the manuscripts were likely produced by orthodox scribes.²⁵ Biblical translations and paraphrases contemporary with the Wycliffite Bible are common as well. The gospel harmony *Oon of Foure* survives in fifteen fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts, and the life of Christ known as the *Southern Passion* survives in thirteen manuscripts from the same period. Both the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle and the conscientiously “orthodox” *Festial* by John Mirk survive in over thirty manuscripts as well. Consultation of catalogues of Middle English biblical writings, whether *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English* or James Morey’s more recent volume focused on non-Wycliffite translation, shows that Middle English scripture survives in large numbers and diverse forms.²⁶ Contrary to the suggestion that Wycliffites transgressed modes of orthodox devotion by presenting scripture in English, Ralph Hanna claims that “biblicism, whether by allusion, paraphrase, or citation, has always been central to English literary production” and argues that the vernacular bible played an important role in England since the tenth century.²⁷ He characterizes Wycliffites as participating in and ultimately coming to define an already prominent form of English religious writing.²⁸

Regarding vernacular scripture as a prominent and dynamic form of Middle English religious literature, I explore translations of gospel parables to investigate how

²⁵ Anne Hudson, “Lollard Book Production,” in *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375-1475*, ed. Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 131-132.

²⁶ See Laurence Muir, “Translations and Paraphrases of the Bible, and Commentaries,” in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, vol. 2, ed. J. Burke Severs (Hamden, CT: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1970), and James H. Morey, *Book & Verse: A Guide to Middle English Biblical Literature* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

²⁷ Ralph Hanna, *London Literature 1300-1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 313. For the idea that translation of scripture into the vernacular was an important part of Wycliffism being deemed heretical, see Anne Hudson, “The English Heresy?” in *Lollards and their Books* (Hambleton Press, 1985).

²⁸ Hanna, *London Literature*, 309-311.

writers interpreted these complex narratives for an increasingly lay audience.²⁹ Simply by employing stories, rather than directly articulating devotional instruction, authors invite an audience to imaginatively and intellectually interpret these teachings, as even the most detailed narratives or seemingly simple stories open interpretive gaps and raise unanswered questions.³⁰ Parables, in particular, exacerbate the interpretive difficulties narratives raise, as these stories are characterized by paradox and reversal of audience expectation. Although they employ familiar settings and engage relevant social and theological issues, parables render the familiar unfamiliar and offer ambiguities instead of pragmatic moral lessons.

Within the gospels, the Greek term “parabole” refers to different types of figurative language, not necessarily narrative, that range from short riddles or proverbs to extensive allegorical stories about the kingdom of heaven.³¹ Yet for medieval and modern exegetes alike, the term parable normally refers to the roughly forty narratives in the three synoptic gospels that Jesus employs to teach his disciples or rebuke his opponents.³² The authors of the General Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible name parables, along with allegory and “derk lycnesse,” as one of the types of figurative speech readers will encounter in scripture.³³ Likewise stressing the figurative nature of parables, the

²⁹ I regard translations with and without additional commentary as interpretations of the parables. On the role of interpretation in translation, see Douglas Kelly, “The *Fides Interpres*: Aid or Impediment to Medieval Translation and *Translatio*?” in *Translation Theory and Practice in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeanette Beer (Kalamazoo, MI: the Medieval Institute, 1997), 55-57.

³⁰ Patrick O’Neill, *Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1994), 19.

³¹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1972), 20.

³² For a list, see Stephen L. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 5-6.

author of the *Northern Homily Cycle* explains the parable genre in the following manner, before narrating the Parable of the Prodigal Son: “And sum thinges said he [Christ] mistily / And mened mekil more þarby, / Als in fabils and liknes sere.”³⁴ While medieval commentators regarded parables as figurative, allegorical speech, they did not interpret them as allegories that projected a single moral or theological lesson. When modern scholars approach medieval renditions of parables as moral exempla with a simple didactic function, they bring a set of expectations to the text that reflect neither medieval interpretations of parables nor modern theoretical work on the genre.³⁵ This study seeks to bring a more sophisticated conception of parables to the analysis of these Middle English texts by taking into account both the complex interpretations medieval exegetes offered, which include allegorical and more literal readings of the stories, and prominent modern scholarship on formal characteristics of the parable genre.

Modern scholarship on gospel parables can help explain why parables demand intellectual engagement on the part of the reader and then give rise to diverse, sometimes even contradictory interpretations. I will highlight three formal qualities in particular that modern scholars identify as characteristic of the parabolic genre, to which Middle English accounts of the parables attest as well. The first is the genre’s engagement with everyday life. Charles Hedrick describes parables as “ordinary stories, brief fictions realistically portraying aspects of first century Palestinian life” and regards them as a tool

³³ J. Forshall and F. Madden, eds., *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal Books, in the Earliest English Versions, made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1850. Rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1982), 1:44.

³⁴ Saara Nevanlinna, ed., *The Northern Homily Cycle* vol. 2 *From Septuagesima to the Fifth Sunday after Trinity* (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1973), 54.

³⁵ On scholars approaching parables as moral exempla, see chapter 1.

for making sense of human existence.³⁶ Similarly, John Dominic Crossan observes that at least at a literal level, parables tell stories that are “absolutely possible or even factual within the normalcy of life.”³⁷ Parables feature common settings of mundane or ritual activity: a number of stories feature agricultural activity and harvest in particular, while others pertain to financial investment, familial relations, or hospitality.³⁸ Middle English translations of the parables show that least some medieval authors regarded realistic portrayal of everyday life as a defining feature of parables. The *Cleanness* poet, for example, rewrites the Parable of the Wedding Feast so that the particular foods offered and decorum demonstrated at the feast correspond to late-medieval court life. Likewise, the author of the *South English Ministry and Passion* adds text to the Parable of the Prodigal Son to explain the two son’s different rights to inheritance and suggests the younger son intended to work as a merchant when he departed for a distant land. Just as gospel parables originally highlighted first century Jewish life, many Middle English renditions of parables reflect life in late medieval England.

Despite these everyday settings and plots, another characteristic feature of parables is subversion of social norms. The stories address common situations, like festivity, harvest, and sibling rivalry, yet they frequently feature or condone unconventional behavior within these familiar circumstances: the poor enjoy a bountiful feast from which the rich are excluded, those who worked only a short time are paid as much as those who worked all day, and the wasteful rather than the dutiful son receives

³⁶ Hedrick, Charles. *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 3, 5.

³⁷ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables In Parables: the Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 15.

³⁸ For an example of each, see the Parable of the Sower (Mt. 13:3-8), the Parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:14-30), the Parable of the Two Sons (Mt. 21:28-32) and the Parable of Dives and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31).

the fattened calf. Crossan describes this element of parables as “single or double reversals of the audience’s most profound expectations” and considers these inversions central to the paradoxicality of parables – a characteristic I will discuss shortly.³⁹ Medieval texts suggest that authors understood the subversive potential of parables, even if they sometimes rewrote or interpreted the stories in ways that better conformed to social convention. The author of the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, for example, reduces the Parable of the Great Supper to a story of social subversion: “heize men of þe cuntree” reject the invitation, and the host brings the poor and sick in their place.⁴⁰ Even where subversion may be difficult for a medieval audience to understand, some authors gloss parables so that their readers understand the original social implications of the stories. The author of *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, for example, explains that Samaritans were traditionally enemies of the Jews so that his readers can appreciate the transgression of social boundaries featured in the story of the Good Samaritan. While Crossan focuses on the significance of reversal as a formal element of parables, William Herzog suggests that this same quality should direct our attention to the stories’ socio-political implications. He describes parables as “social analysis,” in addition to expressions of theology, and argues that by highlighting injustice and transgression of norms the parables “explored how human beings could respond to break the spiral of violence and cycle of poverty

³⁹ John Dominic Crossan, “Parable, Allegory, and Paradox,” In *Semiotics and Parables*, ed. Daniel Patte (Pittsburgh, PA: Pickwick Press, 1976), 256.

⁴⁰ Margery Goates, ed., *The Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, EETS o.s. 157 (London, 1922), 62.

created by exploitation and oppression.”⁴¹ In addition to revealing aspects of the divine, parables provoke discussion of how humans can manifest radical divine love themselves.

While parables are relevant to both familiar social situations and central theological issues, the tensions built within the stories lead to varied and conflicting interpretations of the moral and theological lessons they project. Crossan describes paradoxicality as the most defining feature of parables. Paradox is present in the form of maxim or plot reversal, such as the declaration and demonstration of “the last shall be first” in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, but this quality is more pervasive than just one central inversion. Crossan suggests that parables’ “entire pragmatics, semantics, and syntactics” are paradoxical and relates this to what he describes as the paradoxicality of Jesus’ message, which “both generates and undermines successive interpretations and applications just as it both generates and undermines moral imperatives, ecclesiastical structures, and political programs.”⁴² Instead of resolving tension and mediating oppositions, parables build conflict and ambiguity, engaging readers intellectually and asking an audience to confront the often uncomfortable disjunction between the human and the divine. Medieval texts both manifest and resist the paradox characteristic of parables: the *Pearl* poet exacerbates the tension between divine and human justice in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard without making it more palatable for his audience, just as he heightens the juxtaposition of God’s mercy and God’s punishment in *Cleanness*. More often, however, authors resolve paradox so that the parables do not challenge the conventional practice of Christianity: the rich may

⁴¹ William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 3.

⁴² John Dominic Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 23.

number among the poor and the sick, working within one's station will yield heavenly reward, and the sinful, like the prodigal son, receive forgiveness after proper penance.

Given the prominence of Passion narratives in the late Middle Ages and the opinion that more obscure passages of scripture were inappropriate for the laity, few scholars explore the role of parables and other potentially subversive elements of Jesus' ministry in vernacular biblical texts.⁴³ In the *Powers of the Holy*, David Aers objects to the tendency to equate the suffering man of sorrows with Christ's humanity and highlights alternative versions of Christ's humanity in the writings of the Wycliffites and Langland that do not separate the ministry of Jesus from the events of the crucifixion. He argues that their depictions promoted social engagement and challenged ecclesiastic, economic, and political institutions in a manner invoking what the modern theologian David Tracy has called "the dangerous and subversive memory of Jesus."⁴⁴ While parables provide powerful examples of this subversive potential, translation of these stories does not necessarily indicate an interest in their social implications or the challenges they pose for conventional religious praxis. This study shows that interest in this particular aspect of Christ's ministry was more widespread than Aers' argument suggests and that among a body of diverse texts, some authors undermined the subversive potential of the stories, rewriting parables so that they do not challenge conventional social and religious practices.

⁴³ The obvious exception is literary scholars analyzing parables in works like *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, but scholars overwhelmingly turn to Latin exegesis to help explain their meaning.

⁴⁴ David Aers, "The Humanity of Christ: Representations in Wycliffite Texts and *Piers Plowman*," in *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture*, ed. David Aers and Lynn Staley (University Park: Penn State Univ. Press, 1996), 49,75.

Demonstrating the widespread interest in parables, this study features a range of texts from diverse genres and varying ideological perspectives. With its close translation of the Vulgate, the Wycliffite Bible provides the point of comparison for all other Middle English versions of the parables featured in each chapter. Beginning in the 1370s, followers of Wyclif engaged in a meticulous process of translation that, according to the General Prologue, included accessing ancient bibles, consulting the glosses of medieval Latin bibles, and discussing grammatical difficulties with “elde gramariens and elde dyuynis” before attempting to translate according to the “sentence” of the Latin text.⁴⁵ Critics typically refer to an Earlier Version and a Later Version of the text; the earliest versions were translated very literally from the Latin text and later versions allowed for more English idiom.⁴⁶ I refer to the Wycliffite Bible as a source of comparison not simply because it is a comprehensive vernacular translation but also because of the quality of the text itself. In her recent study of Wycliffite Bible manuscripts, Mary Dove concludes that the Wycliffite Bible contains fewer errors than the average late-medieval Latin bibles from France and England and describes it as “clearly superior” to the Latin text in the first edition of the *Glossa Ordinaria*.⁴⁷

Along with the Wycliffite Bible, I frequently refer to the Wycliffite *Glossed Gospels*, which catalogue prominent strands of patristic and medieval exegesis in the

⁴⁵ Dove suggests the early 1370s as a date for the planning stages of the project. See *The First English Bible*, 80. On the method of translation, see the General Prologue in Forshall and Madden, eds., *The Holy Bible*, 1:57-58.

⁴⁶ Only 36 of over 250 surviving manuscripts are wholly in the Early Version. Mary Dove suggests that the Early Version was never intended to be a translation in its own right and represents one stage in the process of translation. According to her theory, those in charge of the project lost control of its development, and the Early Version continued to be revised independently from the completion of the Later Version. Dove, *The First English Bible*, 139.

⁴⁷ Dove, *The First English Bible*, 188.

vernacular.⁴⁸ Like the Wycliffite translation of the bible, the *Glossed Gospels* reflect little interest in polemic.⁴⁹ Rather than argue for lay access to scripture or employ scripture in support of characteristically Wycliffite theological views, they simply make scripture and related exegetical scholarship available to a wider audience. Deriving primarily from the *Catena Aurea*, with supplements from authors like Robert Grosseteste, John of Abbeville, Richard FitzRalph, and William Peraldus, the *Glossed Gospels* show continuity between exegesis in Latin and Middle English.⁵⁰ They also demonstrate the complexity and diversity of interpretations associated with the parables, as the compilers offer multiple allegorical explanations of individual elements of a story from a number of patristic and medieval commentators.⁵¹

Many of the traditional commentaries featured in the *Glossed Gospels* appear in Middle English homilies as well. Each of the parables featured in this study was the gospel reading for one of the Sunday liturgies, according to the Sarum use followed by most diocese in England; correspondingly, sermon collections are the most prevalent source of vernacular translation of and commentary on the stories.⁵² I examine relevant

⁴⁸ The *Glossed Gospels* use an intermediary version of the Wycliffite Bible as their base text. See Dove, *The First English Bible*, 142.

⁴⁹ There is no polemic in the *Glossed Gospel* commentaries on the four parables featured in this study. The “Long Luke” version of the *Glossed Gospels* contains polemical additions identifying the current pope as the antichrist and criticizing friars. See Cambridge, University Library MS Kk.ii.9 fol. 207v.

⁵⁰ Henry Hargreaves, “The Wycliffite *Glossed Gospels* as Source: Further Evidence,” *Traditio* 48 (1993): 247.

⁵¹ The multiple meanings proposed do not normally correspond to a strict four-fold system of exegesis.

⁵² The Parables of the Wedding Feast (Mt. 22:1-14) and the Great Supper (Lk. 14:15-24) were the readings for the twentieth Sunday after the Trinity and the second Sunday after the Trinity respectively. The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16) was read on Septuagesima Sunday, while the Parable of the Good Samaritan was read on the thirteenth Sunday after the Trinity. Finally, the Parable of the Prodigal Son was read on the Sabbath of the second week in Lent. On the use of the Sarum missal, see H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 22.

sermons in the two largest collections of sermons surviving from the late Middle Ages: the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle and John Mirk's *Festial*. While both collections date from the late fourteenth century and both survive in over thirty manuscripts, their contents differ considerably, given the contrasting ideologies of their authors.⁵³ In addition to examining commentary in well-known edited collections of Middle English sermons, like Gloria Cigman's *Lollard Sermons*, Woodburn O. Ross' *Middle English Sermons*, and the Middle English translation of Robert de Gretham's *Mirror*, I also feature commentary from unpublished collections, such as the sermons of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 806 and Bodleian Library MS e Museo 180. The study therefore contributes to study of Middle English sermons by bringing together homilies of different ideological affiliations and highlighting the contents of sermons frequently neglected because they are not available in modern editions.

Whereas the *Glossed Gospels* and homilies primarily translate their Vulgate source and then interpret the stories in added commentary, in other genres of biblical writing, authors shape the meanings of the parables through their particular paraphrases and adaptations of the gospel texts. Although scholars typically focus on Passion narratives in lives of Christ, these texts frequently feature parables in their accounts of Christ's ministry. Lives of Christ take different forms, as authors variously approached the task of presenting episodes from the gospels in a continuous narrative. The authors of the gospel harmony *Oon of Foure* retained all of the text from the four gospels and only created new meaning through rearrangement of that material. The author of the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony* similarly aimed for comprehensiveness, as he included nearly all events

⁵³ Spencer does not think that Mirk or the Wycliffite homilists wrote to rebut one another, but she describes the type of preaching in each as an "antidote" to the other's style. See *English Preaching*, 277-78.

from the four gospels, but he abbreviates his source texts considerably to make a relatively concise *vita*. Others, like the *Southern Passion* and the *South English Ministry and Passion*, contain only select episodes from the four gospels that epitomize the public ministry of Christ in between their two primary focuses: Incarnation and Passion. Devotional treatises that feature large amounts of scriptural translation and paraphrase similarly rewrite gospel parables, creating particular meanings through additions, omissions, and unique word choice, which authors often follow with homiletic-style commentary. Texts such as *Pe Lyfe of Soule* and *Book to a Mother* stand out among devotional treatises for the great volume of scriptural paraphrase and translation the authors include in support of instruction regarding subjects such as penance, love of neighbor, or proper use of one's material wealth.

The most inventive renderings of gospel parables appear in a small number of well-known Middle English poems, namely *Cleanness*, *Pearl*, and *Piers Plowman*, in which authors employ the stories at key moments in their larger narratives. The Parable of the Wedding Feast is the first biblical narrative among a series of four that make up the poem *Cleanness*, and the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is central to a debate about salvation in *Pearl*. In *Piers Plowman*, the Parable of the Good Samaritan directly precedes the Passion and harrowing of hell as the events of the parable take place on the Samaritan's, or Christ's, journey to Jerusalem. Poets shape the gospel parables to fit the particular purposes of their poems, create resonances with contemporary life, and in the case of *Piers Plowman*, integrate traditional exegesis into the action of the parable. Too often, scholars regard this tradition of biblical poetics as separate from the tradition of vernacular scripture in devotional commentaries, lives of Christ, and homilies. This

study treats these particularly dynamic renderings of parables as one part of a larger practice of vernacular translation and explores how the ideas projected within these poems compare to other interpretations accessible to a lay audience.

Given the breadth of sources included in this study, the probable audience of these vernacular texts covers a wide range of readers. In the case of the poems *Pearl* and *Cleanness*, which survive in only one manuscript in a dialect of the Northwest Midlands, the audience may be a fairly small, courtly circle or a limited group of middle class readers with an interest in courtly life.⁵⁴ *Piers Plowman* circulated more widely, however, surviving in over 50 copies, and certainly reached middle class, lay readers.⁵⁵ While more academic works like the *Glossed Gospels* may have served a largely clerical audience, as they likely provided raw materials for Wycliffite devotional tracts and homilies,⁵⁶ most sermons, devotional treatises, and lives of Christ featured in the study would have reached a lay audience as well. H. Leith Spencer has suggested that surviving sermon collections were likely used for lay reading, in addition to preaching, as

⁵⁴ Lynn Staley suggests that the poet may have been associated with the circle of John of Gaunt and argues that the poems address issues pertinent to London. See Staley, "The Man in Foul Clothes," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002): 2-6. Anderson, in contrast, stresses that there is no evidence the *Pearl* poet was associated with any court or patron and suggests that the ordinary appearance of the manuscript and religious contents point to an educated middle class audience interested in courtly values. See J. J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the Gawain-Poems* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 3.

⁵⁵ On the manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*, see George Kane, "The Text," in *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, edited by John A. Alford (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 175-200, and C. David Benson and Lynne S. Blanchfield, eds., *The Manuscripts of "Piers Plowman": the B-version* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005).

⁵⁶ Henry Hargreaves has proposed that the *Glossed Gospels* may be a "keystone" that fills a gap between Wycliffite biblical translation and composition of Wycliffite religious tracts and has explored connections between the *Glossed Gospels* and a collection of Lollard Sermons. Henry Hargreaves, "Popularising Biblical Scholarship: the Role of the Wycliffite *Glossed Gospels*," in *The Bible and Medieval Culture*, edited by W. Lourdaux and D. Verhelst (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1979), 172 and Hargreaves, "The Wycliffite *Glossed Gospels* as Source: Further Evidence." *Traditio* 48 (1993): 247-51. On the potential use of the *Glossed Gospels* in the composition of the devotional treatise *Pore Caitif*, see Teresa M. Brady, "Lollard Sources of 'the Pore Caitif'," *Traditio* 44 (1988): 390-418.

she describes the experiences of listening to the sermons in the liturgy and reading sermons for private devotion as complementary activities engaged in by more than just members of the nobility.⁵⁷ Ralph Hanna similarly posits a lay audience for the collection of sermons in the Middle English version of Robert de Gretham's *Mirror* and the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, which survive in the same manuscript (Pepys 2498). Ralph Hanna places the manuscript in London and suggests it served an audience of multi-lingual, upper-class readers, similar to the audience of the romances in the Auchinleck manuscript.⁵⁸ Finally, works like *Book to a Mother*, *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, and *Wimbledon's Sermon* appear in religious miscellanies, sometimes referred to as "common profit" books, that were often financed by and then passed down among lay readers.⁵⁹ While many of these works of vernacular scripture targeted or eventually reached a lay audience, manuscript evidence does not indicate a strict division between clerics reading Latin texts and the laity reading Middle English; rather, as Hanna suggests, many vernacular religious texts attracted a diverse audience, with texts produced in monasteries reaching lay readers and texts with an originally lay audience reaching monasteries as well.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Spencer, *English Preaching*, 38-40.

⁵⁸ Ralph Hanna, *London Literature 1300-1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 153-54.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 210 and London, British Library MS Arundel 286. On collections of religious texts for lay readers, see Vincent Gillespie, "Vernacular Books of Religion," in *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375-1475*, ed. Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall, 317-344 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Wendy Scase, "Reginald Pecock, John Carpenter and John Colop's 'Common-Profit' Books: Aspects of Book Ownership and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century London," *Medium Aevum* 61, no. 2 (1992): 261-274; and Jill Havens, "A Narrative of Faith: Middle English Devotional Anthologies and Religious Practice," *Journal of the Early Book Society* 7 (2004): 67-84.

⁶⁰ Hanna, *London Literature*, 162.

Each of the chapters that follow focuses on a given parable as it appears across a variety of genres, bringing exegetical, homiletic, devotional and poetic literature into conversation with each other. As a means of focusing often divergent interpretations, each chapter highlights one prominent Middle English poetic or devotional work and discusses other vernacular accounts in relation to the more familiar text. Given the broad range of sources containing each of the parables, I concentrate on particular types of scriptural translation in each chapter to feature a range of genres throughout the work as a whole. The discussion of *Cleanness* in chapter one particularly highlights exegesis in the *Glossed Gospels*, while my exploration of *Pearl* focuses on that poem's relation to Middle English sermons. The chapter on *Piers Plowman* refers extensively to a prominent life of Christ, and the final chapter on *Book to a Mother* concentrates on devotional writing. In all cases, I bring Wycliffite and more mainstream writings into conversation with each other to explore commonalities among interpretations, along with differences that reflect contrasting ideologies.

The opening chapter focuses on the Parable of the Wedding Feast in *Cleanness* and emphasizes the difference between parables and moral exempla. While most scholars interpret the *Cleanness* parable as a simple story that illustrates a single moral lesson (God punishes the unclean), I demonstrate the way in which the *Cleanness* poet heightens rather than resolves the story's tensions. To reveal where the poet reinforces or departs from other interpretations circulating in late medieval England, I extensively refer to commentaries catalogued in the *Glossed Gospels*, followed by other vernacular texts integrating the same interpretations. This nexus of contemporary interpretation shows that the *Cleanness* poet wrote in a particularly parabolic manner that embraced

multivalence and sharpened paradox. The result is a seemingly contradictory story combining radically democratic love, as the host reaches out to the poor and marginalized, with harsh judgment of those who fail to fulfill exacting standards of decorum.

In chapter two, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard provides a fitting complement to the Wedding Feast, as both stories allegorically depict judgment and conclude with the same aphorism that “many are called but few are chosen.” Yet while the Wedding Feast in *Cleanness* ends with an image of exclusivity, the Vineyard parable in *Pearl* highlights the gratuitous gift of salvation through grace. In *Pearl*, the parable appears as a key feature of a debate about salvation, in which the dreamer objects to the notion that God could give more to those who work less. While many scholars characterize the *Pearl* maiden’s discourse as homiletic, comparison with Middle English sermons on the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard shows that the maiden’s narrative and explication differ dramatically from their homiletic counterparts. Specifically, the *Pearl* maiden emphasizes the sufficiency of grace and the inability of human action to make one acceptable to God. Middle English homilists, in contrast, overwhelmingly interpret the parable as evidence that heavenly reward corresponds to deeds performed in the world and use the parable to promote a particular socioeconomic model. Whereas the homilists adapt the narrative to fit worldly notions of justice, the *Pearl* maiden preserves the central paradox of the parable and forces her audience to confront the uncomfortable disjunction between the human and the divine.

The parables in the second half of the dissertation pertain to human expressions of merciful love, beginning with a study of the Good Samaritan parable that focuses on the

rendition in *Piers Plowman*. Langland's dramatic adaptation of the parable fuses the Samaritan figure with Christ, incorporating traditional allegorical readings into the action of the story. In contrast to Latin interpretations that equate the Samaritan's healing of the wounded traveler with Christ's redemption of humankind, a number of vernacular interpretations stress the literal level of the story in which charity expressed by a stranger answers the question, "And who is my neighbor?" Although agreeing on this central question, vernacular authors define the obligations of neighborly love in dramatically different ways: the author of *Pe Lyfe of Soule* regards the parable as an injunction to love one's enemy, while the author of the *South English Ministry and Passion* interprets the parable as instruction to love those who show you mercy. In contrast to scholarship identifying Latin precedents for Langland's innovations, this chapter investigates Langland's engagement with the moral interpretations of the Good Samaritan parable prevalent in Middle English lives of Christ and instruction for Christian living.

The final chapter examines the Parable of the Prodigal Son story in the devotional work *Book to a Mother* – a late fourteenth-century devotional work receiving increasing critical attention in discussions of vernacular theology. Although the Prodigal Son story features forgiveness granted in response to the repentant son's contrition and return home, the author of *Book to a Mother* glosses the story so that it better illustrates the sacrament of penance. Vernacular authors depict the forgiveness of the prodigal son in contrasting ways: the authors of the *Mirour of Mans Saluacioun* and the *South English Ministry and Passion* emphasize the father's readiness to mercifully receive his son, while two Middle English homilies add to the parable so that the son models proper confession. *Book to a Mother* provides the most extreme example of an author adapting

the parable so that it corresponds to the church's description of proper penance, yet the interpretation is not an attempt to protect clerical authority through rigid adherence to "orthodox" religious praxis. The reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which describes the son engaging in a three-fold process of penance and continuing in good living after his return home, is a part of an ambitious spiritual life that the author recommends for his lay audience, whereby they become exemplars of Christ by digesting the gospel story and integrating its lessons into their daily living.

Collectively, the four parables featured in this study open up questions regarding the relationship between narrative and edification: some authors adapted the stories in an attempt to promote specific devotional practices, theological ideas, or cultural norms, while others embraced the parables' multivalent, sometimes conflicting narratives that necessarily destabilize authoritative teachings. They also highlight the potential for fiction to foster dissent, both in the world beyond the text, as an audience potentially adopts values from the stories in opposition to social norms, and at the level of textual reception, as audiences reject ideas within the stories as illogical and therefore untrue. All of this characterizes Middle English scripture, in a pre-Reformation, manuscript culture, not as static or carefully controlled text but as a collection of dynamic narratives with the potential to powerfully shape and be shaped by its readers.

Chapter 1

“Fele arn to called”: The Parable of the Wedding Feast in *Cleanness*

Whatkyn folk so þer fare, fechez hem hider.
Be þay fers, be þay feble, forlote3 none,
Be þay hol, be þay halt, be þay on-yzed,
And þaz þay ben boþe blynde and balterande cruppelez,
Pat my hous may holly by halkez by fylled. (*Cleanness*, 100-104)¹

The Parable of the Wedding Feast in the Middle English poem *Cleanness* is an amalgamation and extension of two related parables: Matthew’s Wedding Feast (Mt. 22:1-14) and Luke’s Great Supper (Lk. 14:15-24). Along with fusing two similar yet distinct stories, the poet brings together two dominant yet contrasting ideas of God. God is the welcoming host who reaches out to all members of society (strong and weak, healthy and sick), including those on the margins whom the poet vividly describes as the one-eyed, the blind, and stumbling cripples. God is also the severe judge who removes the undeserving from the joyful feast: despite gathering people from all walks of life, he expels a guest for attending the feast in an inappropriate garment. The second depiction of God is more consistent with the remainder of the poem, which features a series of Old Testament stories that typologically depict judgment: Noah and the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Belshazzar’s Feast.² Nevertheless, the poet enhances the

¹ All *Cleanness* quotations are from J. J. Anderson, ed., *Cleanness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).

² On the poet’s method of rewriting Old Testament narratives and the poem’s similarity to other Middle English adaptations of scripture, see Michael Twomey, “Falling Giants and Floating Lead: Scholastic History in the Middle English *Cleanness*,” in *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger, 141-65 (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002).

elements of the parables of the Wedding Feast and Great Supper that demonstrate God's generosity and hospitality, so that the *Cleanness* parable projects a dynamic tension between divine love and divine punishment.

Instead of exploring the ambiguity and paradox the poet fosters within the parable, scholars often try to resolve the story's tensions so that it better conforms to a particular conception of the parable genre. The common description of *Cleanness* as a homiletic poem contributes to the impression that the parable is fundamentally didactic and should teach its audience about virtue.³ Conceiving of the parable as an exemplum that illustrates a simple moral lesson, critics of *Cleanness* frequently search for a singular meaning in the poet's rendition of the Parable of the Wedding Feast that will neatly support the larger themes of the poem.⁴ Unsurprisingly, the expectation that a parable should convey a simple message can lead to frustration with the complexity of the poet's narrative and result in reductive interpretations that neglect the elements of the story that do not correspond to the expected moralization.⁵ The examination of the *Cleanness* parable that follows will reveal that the poet exploits the Wedding Feast's potential not as

³ On structural parallels between *Cleanness* and contemporary homilies, see Monica Brzezinski, "Conscience and Covenant: the Sermon Structure of *Cleanness*," *Journal of English and German Philology* 89, no. 2 (1990): 166-180.

⁴ The idea that parables projected only one ethical or theological theme was prominent in the first half of the twentieth century, but more recently, biblical scholars have disagreed with this characterization of the genre. The most influential works arguing that parables have a single meaning are C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet & Co, 1935) and Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1972). Jeremias' work was originally published in 1955.

⁵ Both A.C. Spearing and J.J. Anderson refer to the wedding feast as an "exemplum" and identify its message as God's intolerance of uncleanness. W.A. Davenport similarly conceives of parables as essentially exemplary and argues that the poet's adaptation, which combines passages from Matthew and Luke, interrupts this function. He argues that Luke's parable's meaning differs from the meaning of Matthew's; therefore, Davenport contends the poet "imports a lack of logic into the tale." See A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 44-45; J.J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the Gawain-Poems* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) 85; and W.A. Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain Poet* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 80-81.

an exemplary story but as a narrative at once familiar and disarming.⁶ He enhances the banquet scene with vivid details and conventions from contemporary medieval culture, grounding his new story in the world of his audience.⁷ Yet he continually adapts the story in ways that subvert the expectations of the reader. What we find in the *Cleanness* parable is unexpected revision of the stories' most memorable events, which renders the narrative more strange and heightens its paradox.

In the analysis of the parable that follows, I focus on elements of the *Cleanness* story that are particularly "parabolic," making the context more familiar to the audience and then contradicting their expectations. For each element, I refer to the relevant nexus of contemporary interpretations to emphasize both the rich layers of meaning associated with the parable and the implications of the poet's revisions. To fill out this interpretive context, I refer to the Wycliffite *Glossed Gospels* extensively and then demonstrate the wider currency of those interpretations in other Middle English texts.⁸ As a compilation of traditional patristic and medieval commentary in Middle English, the *Glossed Gospels* show continuity between inherited Latin exegesis and burgeoning exegetical work in the vernacular. Consequently, they provide a helpful guide for identifying where the poet deviates from interpretive norms, eschewing common moralizations that import a logic to the story and heightening disjunction and paradox.

⁶ On modern scholars' descriptions of parables, see pages 11-14 of the introduction. In particular, the writings of Charles Hedrick, who describes parables as stories grounded in everyday life, and John Dominic Crossan, who emphasizes the paradoxical character of parables, resonate with the *Cleanness* poet's treatment of the story.

⁷ On the poet's efforts to increase the parable's realism, see Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, 45.

⁸ The *Glossed Gospels* were written in long and short versions for most gospels, although commentaries on Matthew survive in three different lengths and a "Long Mark" is no longer extant. On the different manuscripts and their respective contents, see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 248-58. On the sources used in their compilation, see Henry Hargreaves, "Popularising Biblical Scholarship: the Role of the Wycliffite *Glossed Gospels*," in *The Bible and Medieval Culture*, ed. W. Lourdaux and D. Verhelst, 171-89 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1979).

Rather than consider the poet's adaptations according to the order of events in the story, I will discuss the parable and its interpretive context in a manner that highlights the contrasting depictions of God within the story.⁹ The first portion of this chapter will therefore concern whom the host invites to the feast and the hospitality he offers, while the second will address how guests become excluded from the feast and the punishment these offenses incur. These contrasting elements of invitation and exclusion, hospitality and punishment, recur at various times throughout the parable: the host issues a series of invitations, and both those who initially reject the host's invitation and the guest without a proper garment number among the excluded. This interweaving of themes makes paradox a persistent dynamic of the story that builds up to the greatest moment of tension in which the host expels the unprepared guest.

While all commentators participate in the re-writing of the parable by explaining allegorical meanings and attempting to answer questions the narrative raises, the *Cleanness* poet more explicitly assumes a dual role as both reader and writer of scripture.¹⁰ Rather than sculpt the story's meaning through commentary, he essentially writes a new parable.¹¹ In combining Luke's Great Supper and Matthew's Wedding Feast, the poet diverges from other vernacular writers who translate the gospels or pieces thereof into Middle English, all of whom treat the two parables as separate entities. In

⁹ Most discussions of the depiction of God in *Cleanness* focus on the Old Testament narratives and the degree to which the poet portrays God anthropomorphically. For a summary of these debates and a response to those who conclude that the God of *Cleanness* is too human, see Lawrence M. Clopper, "The God of the *Gawain*-Poet," *Modern Philology* 94, no. 1 (1996): 4-8.

¹⁰ On the reinvention of a text through exegetical commentary, see Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), 76-80.

¹¹ Since biblical scholars have identified the Wedding Feast in Matthew as a fusion of two stories, T. D. Kelly and John Irwin argue that the poet continues Christ's ministry by continuing this process of fusion with the Great Supper and the Wedding Feast. T.D. Kelly and John T. Irwin, "The Meaning of *Cleanness*: Parable as Effective Sign," *Mediaevalia* 35 (1973): 255-56.

sermons related to certain liturgical readings, this distinction is unsurprising.¹² Yet the two surviving Middle English gospel harmonies, *Oon of Foure* and the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, retain two stories separated by a substantial amount of text. Likewise, other lives of Christ and devotional texts including one or both of the parables, such as the *Southern Passion* and *Book to a Mother*, do not fuse the storylines or interpretations.

The two parables have a number of similarities, especially in the first half of the Wedding Feast story, since Matthew likely adapted the Great Supper story to create his own parable.¹³ Consequently, the stories begin similarly: both tell of a host who sends out his servants to summon the invited guests to his feast. In these first lines, the primary distinctions between the parables pertain to individual descriptors: supper versus feast, host versus king, and a standard meal instead of a wedding feast. In both stories, the invited guests refuse to attend. In Luke, the guests excuse themselves to attend to other obligations: one bought a town, another bought five yoke of oxen, and a third has a new wife. In Matthew, the invited guests do not make excuses but simply depart, one to a town and another to his merchandise. In a dramatic turn of events in Matthew's version, a final group kills the servants who came to summon them to the feast. In retribution, the king sends his army to kill those men and burn their city. After the invitation is rejected, the host in each evangelist's account orders his servants to go out into the streets to summon a different group of people: both good and evil in Matthew and the poor, feeble,

¹² According to the Sarum use, the Parable of the Great Supper is the liturgical reading for the second Sunday after the Trinity, while the Parable of the Wedding Feast is the reading for the twentieth Sunday after the Trinity.

¹³ Modern biblical scholars theorize that Matthew fused the Great Supper parable with another story regarding the wedding garment and then allegorized the whole as a representation of the kingdom of God. The Great Supper is a part of the hypothetical Q source, which contains the material shared by Matthew and Luke but not included in Mark. In addition to the stories in Matthew and Luke, the Gospel of Thomas contains a story of guests refusing an invitation to a feast. As in Matthew and Luke, the host then invites a different group of people. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 64.

blind, and lame in Luke. Whereas Luke's parable ends with a final order to fill the void places at the table, Matthew's parable goes on to narrate the exclusion of an inappropriately dressed guest from the feast. The king enters the feast, apprehends someone without a wedding garment, and orders his servants to bind the man's hands and feet and cast him into outer darkness. Despite the expulsion of only one guest, Matthew's text ends with the statement that many are called, but few are chosen.

After attributing the parable to Matthew, who "melez in his masse of þat man ryche, þat made þe mukel mangerye to marie his here dere" (51-52), the *Cleanness* poet synthesizes the two stories in the following way. Having prepared a feast for the marriage of his heir, a rich man sends his messengers to gather the invited guests. When they hear the summons, all invited excuse themselves with the reasons recited in Luke's Great Supper: one had bought a town, a second wished to test his new oxen, and a third must attend to his new wife. The lord reacts with anger when he learns of their refusal and subsequently orders his servants to go out into the streets to invite all manner of people they find. Even when these guests come to the feast, more room remains. Therefore, the lord orders his servants to go out once more and gather whatever people they find, again integrating Luke's story by expanding the invitation specifically to the poor, feeble, blind, and lame. When the hall is full, even the humblest guests enjoy the rich feast. The lord enters the hall to interact with his guests, at which point he observes that a guest came in clothing unsuited to a holiday. He reproaches the man and inquires why he came in foul garments, but the guest, not knowing how to respond, remains silent. Finally, the lord orders his "tormenttoure3" to fether the man, put him in the stocks, and take him to his dungeon where there is grieving and gnashing of teeth.

Extensive invitation: “Lape3 hem alle luflyly to lenge at my fest”

Both the number of times the host invites guests and the wide-reaching scope of his efforts to fill his hall make invitation a defining feature of the related parables. In Matthew’s parable, the king sends his servants to summon his guests two times before the initial guests reject his invitation,¹⁴ and thereafter, he sends his servants out for a third time to gather all whom they could find.¹⁵ In Luke’s story, the host sends his servants only once before the initial guests refuse to come,¹⁶ but he issues two subsequent invitations, first to those found in the streets of the city and second to those in more rural locations, in an effort to fill his hall.¹⁷ In *Cleanness*, the poet adopts Luke’s approach of sending servants once to summon those who do not accept the invitation and two more times to fill the hall with people from all walks of life, but he adopts and expands upon elements from both Matthew and Luke’s parables to vividly describe the range of people who eventually come to the feast.

In Matthew’s parable, the scope of the host’s invitation contributes to a characterization of the feast as the site of judgment – an event to which all are eventually

¹⁴ Mt. 22:3-4: “And he sente hise seruauntis for to clepe men that weren bode to the weddyngis, and thei wolden not come. Eftsoone he sente othere seruauntis, and seide, Seie 3e to the men that ben bode to the feeste, Lo! Y haue maad redi my meete, my bolis and my volatilis ben slayn, and alle thingis ben redy; come 3e to the weddyngis.” All Middle English biblical quotations come from J. Forshall and F. Madden, eds., *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal Books, in the Earliest English Versions, made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1850. Rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1982).

¹⁵ Mt. 22:9: “Therefore go see to the outgoyngis of weyes, and whom euere 3e shulen fynde, clepe to the weddyngis.”

¹⁶ Lk. 14:17: “And he sente his seruaunt in the our of souper, to seye to men bedun to feeste, that thei schulden come, for now alle thingis ben redi.”

¹⁷ Lk. 14:21-23: “Go out soone in to grete stretis and smal streetis of the citee, and brynge in hidur pore men, and feble, and blynde, and crokid. And the seruaunt seith, Lord, it is don, as thou hast comaundid, and 3it place is. And the lord seith to the seruaunt, Go thou into weyes and heggis, and constreyne for to entre, that myn hous be fillid.”

called. Following the refusal of the initial invitation, the king orders his servants “go 3e to the endis of weies, and whom euere 3e fynden, clepe 3e to the weddyngis” (Mt. 22:9). Having extended the search both geographically and socially, the servants return with all they found both “good and yuele” (Mt. 22:10). Middle English exegesis primarily focuses on one or two aspects of this summons: the ways traversed by guests and the population of the feast with both “good and yuele.” The *Glossed Gospels* describe the “weies” on which the servants find the new guests in terms of vocations and virtues, both of which correspond to routes of pilgrimage leading to or from God: “As Crist is comyn and general weye þat lediþ to liyf and alle profetis and postlis ben weyes þat leden to Crist, so þe deuel is general and comyn wey þat lediþ to deep.”¹⁸ Identifying worldly vocations with the paths of the devil, the commentator warns against “professioun of filosofie and professiouns of kny3thode and wordly dignites, and professioun of pleyes” and describes them collectively as the “general way of perdicion.”¹⁹ In addition to censuring occupations focused on worldly prosperity, the author names particular sins as paths that lead to the devil as well: “As chastite and oþere vertues ben wey þat leden to Crist, so lecherie, coueytise, and oþer synnes ben wey þat lediþ to þe deuel.”²⁰ Based on this commentary, the king’s instruction to gather people from the “endis of weies” means that lay and religious, the virtuous and those in deadly sin, should come to the feast.

The homilist of the Middle English *Mirror* similarly explains “weies” as a metaphor for one’s path through life and interprets the text as an injunction to live

¹⁸ Quotations from the *Glossed Gospels* on Matthew come from London, British Library MS Add. 28026. See fol. 133^r col. A, ll. 25-28.

¹⁹ Add. 28026 fol. 133^r col. A, ll. 23-34.

²⁰ Add. 28026 fol. 133^r col. A, ll. 37-39.

virtuously and reform old ways: “Men may vnderstonde þis ende of þis weye by þe endinge of þis world. & þe weye bitokneþ al oure lyf. Ffor as longe as we ben in þis world we ben as in a weye, for we ben euermore goande...in þis weye iche man oþer womman goþ in gode oþer in yuel.”²¹ He alludes to an Augustinian conception of life as a pilgrimage to a permanent dwelling place, when he describes earthly life as a place where “we mot gon & traueilen for to haue certyen wonynge stede” and urges an audience to repentance so that it does not become too late for them to journey to their permanent home.²² Accordingly, the king’s invitation is a calling home, encouraging the virtuous to continue their present path and calling sinners to essentially reverse direction on their life path through repentance.

Regardless of whether sinners repent, commentary in the *Glossed Gospels* implies that they are summoned to the feast to be accountable for their actions. Likening the invitation to a call to judgment, the author writes that “goode men schullen be clepud leest þei perischen, and yuel men schullen be clepud þat þei ben not excusable.”²³ This idea of good and evil people coming to the feast for different purposes casts the feast as the site of judgment rather than heavenly bliss itself. In this interpretation, the *Glossed Gospels* depict the feast as the place at which God will separate good from evil, who

²¹ See Kathleen Marie Blumreich, ed., *The Middle English “Mirror”: An Edition Based on Bodleian Library, MS Holkham misc. 40* (Tempe, AZ: Brepols, 2002), 412.

²² Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 412-413. The idea of finding a permanent dwelling invokes Augustine’s description of life as a pilgrimage to a permanent home, during which Christians use worldly goods, but do not enjoy them for their own sake, and are tested and corrected by misfortunes. See St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. and ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 41. On the metaphor of life as a pilgrimage in other Patristic writings, see Dee Dyas, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature, 700-1500* (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2001), 27-32.

²³ Add. 28026 fol. 133^r column A, ll. 42-44.

lived mingled together in the church on earth. Citing Gregory the Great, the commentator states:

For boþe goode and yuele comyn togidere in þis chirche to feiþ, but in þe ende þei ben depertid. Goode aloone ben nowere, no but in heuene. Yuele alone ben now³were no but in helle. But as þis liyf is seet bytwixte heuene and erþe, so it resseyueþ comynly cytesyns of boþe pertis...in þis chirche yuele men mowun not be withoute goode, neþer goode withoute yuele.²⁴

Since the feast becomes populated with both good and evil in Matthew's version of the parable, it represents the place in which God will separate the two groups into their permanent dwelling places in heaven and hell. Consequently, the expulsion of the guest at the end of the Wedding Feast shows the first instance in a process of judgment.

The homilist of the relevant sermon in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle similarly relates the call to both good and evil to the comingling of the saved and damned in the church on earth, but his explication more overtly supports a Wycliffite ecclesiology. Adapting a metaphor used by Augustine and popular among Wycliffites, the author likens the invitation that gathers good and evil to fishing nets that catch two manner of fish:²⁵

And so, as Petre in his fyrste fyschyng took two maner of fysches -- summe dwellyden in þe net, and somme broke þe net and wenten away, -- so here in þis chirche ben somme ordeynede to blisse and somme to peyne, al 3if þey liuen iustly for a tyme. And so men seyn comunly þat þer ben here two manerys of chirches: holy chirche or chirche of God, þat on no maner may be dampnyd; and þe chirche of þe feend, þat for a tyme is good and lasteþ not, and þis was neuere holy chirche ne part þerof.²⁶

²⁴ Add. 28026 fol. 133^v col. B, ll. 8-26.

²⁵ Augustine's interpretation derives from the parable of the dragnet in Matthew 13, which describes the kingdom of heaven as a net cast into the sea. Augustine describes both parties as remaining comingled in the nets until they reach the shore, where "the evil are to be divided from the good." Augustine, *City of God*, 831.

²⁶ Anne Hudson, ed., *English Wycliffite Sermons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 1:303/ 62-69.

Unlike the passage in the *Glossed Gospels*, in which the term “church” only refers to a mixed congregation on earth, the Wycliffite homily also describes two separate churches to which the good and evil belong: the congregation of the saved and the congregation of the damned.²⁷ Suggesting a correspondence between the church to which one is ordained and virtue, the homilist describes separation as something that begins within the nets themselves, as he distinguishes the types of fish by who stays in the net and who breaks away. Those who do not last in virtue have broken away and were never part of the true church. By going to the end of ways, the servants of the Wedding Feast parable ensure that even those who have gone astray through sin will face judgment and be sent to their permanent dwelling-place.²⁸ Although the final invitation in Matthew’s parable is inclusive in nature, it is far from an invitation to universal salvation.

The *Cleanness* poet integrates Matthew’s notion of inviting all whom the servants can find but diverges from the interpretations described above by suggesting that this diverse group will collectively partake of the joys of the feast. Similar to the king’s instruction to go to the end of ways, the host in *Cleanness* instructs his servants to stop wayfarers on the main streets all around town:

‘Penne got3 forth, my gome3, to þe grete streete3,
 And forsette3 [waylay] on vche a syde þe cete aboute
 Þe wayferande freke3, on fote and on hors,
 Boþe burne3 and burde3, þe better and þe wers,
 Laþe3 [urge] hem alle luflyly to lenge at my fest,
 And brynge3 hem blyþly to bor3e as baroune3 þay were,

²⁷ The homilist’s ecclesiology is similar to that in the Wycliffite treatise the *Lanterne of List*, which describes three churches: the collective group of chosen people predestined for salvation, the material church on earth in the form of buildings, and the congregations of the saved and the damned mingled together within the material church. See L.M. Swinburn ed., *The Lanterne of List*, EETS o.s. 151 (London: K. Paul, 1917).

²⁸ The homilist explicates “eendys of weyes” in the following manner: “And now in þese laste dayes God bad his seruauntis clepe men, boþe goode and euele, into þe chyrche þat weren owte of þe rizte weye and wente by weyes of errour þat weren harde for to wende.” Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 302/59-61.

So þat my palays platful be py3t al aboute;
Pise oþer wrechez iwysse worþy no3t wern.
Den þay cayred and com þat þe cost waked,
Bro3ten bachlere3 hem wyth þat þay by bonke3 metten,
Swyere3 þat swyftly swyed on blonke3,
And also fele vpon fote, of fre and of bonde. (77-88)

The poet describes those gathered in a series of opposites to emphasize that all types are welcomed: those traveling on foot or on horse, men or women (burne3 and burde3), the virtuous and the sinful. Yet the manner of invitation which the host recommends implies that he gathers them to offer hospitality, not to hold them accountable for their sins. The servants should “luflyly” urge them to be present at the feast and should “blyþly” bring them to the hall, honoring them as they would barons. The tone of the invitation belies the judgment and harsh punishment that will eventually take place at the feast.

The poet’s expansion of the invitation to include a wider cross-section of society reflects the influence of Luke’s Great Supper as well. While the final invitation in Matthew’s parable ensures that no one escapes judgment, the last two invitations in the Parable of the Great Supper suggest that those who suffer on earth will enjoy the bliss of heaven. After the initial guests decline their invitation, Luke’s host similarly requests that his servants search broadly, going out “in to the grete stretis and smal stretis of the citee” (Lk. 14:21). Whereas the king in Matthew’s parable instructs his servants to bring whomever they find, the host in Luke’s story names more specifically the type of people he wishes to attend. He summons the same people that Jesus instructs a Pharisee to invite to his feasts several lines before the parable: the servants should go out and find “pore men, and feble, blynde, and crokid” (Lk. 14:21). In his instruction to the Pharisee, Jesus characterizes the invitation to the poor, feeble, blind, and lame as a substitution for conventional guests, such as friends, brethren, and rich men. Instead of those people who

are likely to issue an invitation in return, Jesus advocates welcoming those who are unable to repay this generosity.²⁹ The idea of substitution is even more prominent in the Great Supper parable than in the instructions to the Pharisee. After insisting on filling his house first with the marginalized, the host asserts that none of those who were originally called will taste his feast.³⁰

The invitation to those on the margins of society, in combination with the host's insistence on continued exclusion of the original guests, subverts conventional social relations and suggests that the poor will enjoy privileges not extended to those of means. In the abbreviated rendition of the Parable of the Great Supper featured in the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, the author reduces the story to two epitomizing events that capture this subversive dynamic: people of means, who were first invited to the feast, refuse the invitation; subsequently, the host welcomes the poor and sick in their place.³¹ Not only the events the author includes, but also the particular language he employs foreground this reversal of fortunes. In an addition unique to the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, the author describes the initial guests as "heize men of þe cuntree," emphasizing the material contrast between those who did and did not attend the feast. *The Glossed Gospels* similarly reflect the subversive potential of the parable, as statements indicating the

²⁹ Lk. 14:12-14: "Forsoth he seide also to him that hadde bedun him to the feeste, Whanne thou makist a mete, ether souper, nyle thou clepe thi frendis, nether thi britheren, nethir cosyngs, nethir neizeboris, nether riche men; lest perauenture and thei bidde thee azen to feeste, and zeldinge azen be maad to thee. But whanne thou makist a feeste, clepe pore men, feble men, crokid, and blynde, and thou schalt be blessid; for thei han not, wher of to zelde to thee, forsoth it schal be zoldun to thee in the risyng azen of iuste men."

³⁰ Lk. 14:24: "Forsothe I seie to zou, for noone of tho men that ben clepid, schal taaste my souper."

³¹ "And þan seide Jesus a tale of a man þat made a gret feste, & whan it was al redy, þan forsoken al þe folk hym, & nolden nouzth comen þerto: somme for þat he wolde sesen his toun, summe for þat he wolde prouen his oxen, summe for þat he hadde taken wyf. And þe heize men of þe cuntree forsoken it, & maden hem wroþ, and seiden þat non of hem schulden ete wiþ hym. And he dude þan clepe þe pouer and þe seek in her stedes, and filled ful his hous, and fested hem." Margery Goates, ed., *The Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, EETS o.s. 157 (London, 1922), 62.

danger this poses for those of means appear throughout the commentary on the invitation to the poor, feeble, blind, and lame: “And so God chesip hem whiche þe world dispisiþ,” “For proude men dispisen to come, pore men ben chosun,” and “God ches þe sike þingis of þe world to counfounde þe stronge þingis.”³² Yet the *Glossed Gospels* also reflect discomfort with the privilege this affords the poor and sick, as these statements are always followed by explanations that show the faults of the poor and sick or include those of means among their ranks.³³

Far from championing the cause of the poor and marginalized, Middle English interpretations of the Great Supper parable systematically challenge the social inversion featured within the story. One way in which commentators deflected attention from the special preference the host expresses for the poor is to focus on the reaction of the guests. The *Glossed Gospels* describe the poor and afflicted not as preferred by God but more responsive to his call. Because they have no delight in this world, the poor, sick, blind, and lame “heren hastiliere þe voys of God.”³⁴ While this explanation depicts the attendance of the poor as a consequence of circumstance rather than virtue, the *Glossed Gospels* illustrate such responsiveness in a manner that reflects negatively upon the poor. As evidence that those in need more readily respond to God’s call, the *Glossed Gospels* cite the example of the prodigal son, who hungered for Christ because of his need for

³² *Glossed Gospel* quotations pertaining to the Great Supper come from “Long Luke” in Cambridge, University Library Kk.ii.9. See fols. 171^v col. B ll. 45-50, 171^f col. A ll. 15-17.

³³ Indicating their relative importance in the commentary on the Great Supper parable, two of the three statements that emphasize social inversion are eliminated in the shorter versions of the *Glossed Gospels* on Luke, while explanations of the pride and sin of the poor and sick remain. For the “short Luke” version of the *Glossed Gospels*, see Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 143 and Bodley 243.

³⁴ CUL Kk.ii.9 fol. 172^f col. A, ll. 28-32. The Middle English *Mirror* offers a similar interpretation, commenting that when the poor, sick, and feeble hear God’s call, “for her mysays þat þei han, þei turnen hem þe sunner to God, & þe sunnere comen to Goddes soper þoru3 þe grete pyne þat þei han.” See Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 278.

material goods.³⁵ The Parable of the Prodigal Son shows physical need leading to repentance, but the story depicts poverty unsympathetically. His misery resulted from his own fault, as he wasted his wealth and created his state of need through extravagant living. In an indirect sense, the prodigal son chose poverty, and in his return home, he repents that choice.

Rather than portray poverty as virtuous, commentators frequently emphasize the sinfulness of the poor and sick invited to the Great Supper. In an early fifteenth-century collection of sermons, extant in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 806, the homilist describes physical disabilities as a kind of penance and comments that “ȝif þey gladly suffre þus for here synnes and goddis loue suche schulen soupe wiþ Criste in heuen.”³⁶ Commentary in the *Glossed Gospels* goes further, naming the specific sins symbolized by the four conditions of those invited: the strong poor are proud, the feeble lament their own suffering, the blind lack the “list of witt,” and the lame lack good deeds.³⁷ While this articulation of the sins associated with the poor, feeble, blind, and lame expands that party beyond those who physically suffer, the commentator’s main point is that these people favored in the parable are not virtuous. The author asserts that “as þei weren synneris which clepid nolde come, so also þei ben synneris whiche ben clepid and

³⁵ “Þe ilke sone þat leste his fadir and wastide his substaunse lyuyng in leccherie hadde not come azen to hymself if he hadde not hungrid for Cristus. Þat he hadde nede to erþely þingis he bigan to þenke what he lost.” CUL kk. ii. 9, fol. 172^r, col. A, ll. 19-26.

³⁶ See Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 806, fol. 79^r, ll. 37-39.

³⁷ “Þei ben seide feble whiche bi her dom sike anentis hem self. For þei ben pore and as strong whiche sett in pouert ben proude. Þei ben blynde whiche hau no list of witt. Þei ben crokid whiche hau not rizt goyngis in worchyngis.” CUL kk. ii. 9, fol. 172^r col. A, ll.1-6.

comen.”³⁸ The distinction lies between proud sinners and meek sinners, but neither the first invited nor those who eventually populate the feast are particularly holy.

In addition to showing that the poor are not more deserving than the rich, commentators demonstrate how people of means share in the invitation to the banquet issued to the poor and sick. The most blatant means of mitigating the social inversion at the heart of the parable is the expansion of the four categories to include people with money and good health. The most obvious means of expansion is to add Matthew’s phrase “in spirit” to the category of the poor, as illustrated by the homilist of Bodley 806. He explicates the invitation to the poor with reference to the Beatitudes, asserting that “God blessip alle þoo þat ben wilful poore and namely pore in spirite,” which he follows with Latin quotation of Matthew 5:3: *Beati pauperes spiritu quia ipsorum est regnum celorum*.³⁹ By naming the “wilful poore,” the homilist explicitly identifies the voluntary poor with those mentioned in Luke’s gospel, but he suggests people can join the ranks of the voluntary poor without giving up their possessions. The homilist defines poverty as a spiritual disposition instead of a material condition.⁴⁰

The homilist of the relevant text in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle similarly integrates Matthew’s concept of the “poor in spirit” to expand the scope of the host’s invitation, but he does not stop at the category of the poor. He applies “in spirit” to all four categories so that the poor feeble, blind, and lame encompass virtually all people,

³⁸ CUL kk. ii. 9, fol. 172^r col. A, ll. 9-15.

³⁹ Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 806, fol. 79^v ll. 30-32.

⁴⁰ Reference to the *Glossed Gospels* commentary on Luke’s Beatitudes shows that exegetes commonly combined the two similar sets of blessings. Commentary on Luke 6:20 begins with the assertion that Matthew calls the “poor in spirit” blessed, and the author explicates that statement before explaining the meaning of “blessid be 3e pore men” in Luke. Subsequently, the commentary specific to Luke repeatedly asserts that not all poor people are blessed. CUL kk. ii. 9, fol. 54^v col. B, l. 45- fol. 55^r col. A, l. 5.

perhaps with the exception of the voluntary poor.⁴¹ Reflecting on the breadth of this invitation, he asks:

And hyt semeth þat þese and none opure schal come to heuene: for who schal come to heuene but 3if he be pore in spirith? who schal come to heuene but if he be feble in spirit and nede to haue mercy? who schal come to heuene but 3if he be listned of his blyndnesse? and who schal come to heuene but he þat haltyth now hyze in vertues and now lowe in synnes? – certys none but þe lord of þis feste.⁴²

The application of “in spirit” does not function in a uniform way across all four conditions. Whereas Matthew’s “poor in spirit” is typically thought to denote humility, a virtue, the homilist’s addition of the phrase “in spirit” to each of the physical disabilities implies a spiritual shortcoming.⁴³ The feeble in spirit need mercy, and the lame waver between virtue and sin. This emphasis on imperfection and acknowledgement that only God could come to the feast without sin resembles the associations made between physical suffering and sin in the *Glossed Gospels*. Whereas the *Glossed Gospels* call attention to sin to discount the special status of the poor, the Wycliffite homilist allegorizes physical maladies to include spiritual maladies so that those who are neither poor nor disabled may include themselves among the favored.

Rather than expand the term poor beyond material poverty, the homilist of the Middle English *Mirror* insists that room remains at the feast for those with worldly

⁴¹ The homilist describes those whom the host invites as not four but “þre maner of men: pore feble men, pore blynde men and pore lame men – þese þre ben Godes prisouners þat boþe God and man helpen wiþ alms.” See Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 230/68-70. The elimination of the able-bodied poor from the list of those invited to the feast reflects the use of Luke 14:12-13 in anti-mendicant writings by Wyclif and his followers, in which reference to the poor feeble, poor blind, and poor lame creates a contrasts between the evangelical poor indicated in Luke’s gospel and the begging friars. See Margaret Aston, “‘Caim’s Castles’: Poverty, Politics, and Disendowment,” in *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion, 1350-1600* (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), 124 and David Aers, “John Wyclif: Poverty and the Poor,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 17 (2005): 55-72.

⁴² Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 230/70-76.

⁴³ The *Glossa Ordinaria* on Matthew 5:3 repeatedly equates poverty of spirit with humility. See Karlfried Froehlich and Margaret T. Gibson, *Biblia Latina Cum Glossa Ordinaria: Facsimile Reprint of the Editio Princeps Adolph Rusch of Strassburg 148081* (Brepols: Turnhout, 1992), 4:17.

prosperity as long as they demonstrate proper use of such wealth. Preaching a message of moderation somewhat disconnected from the parable, the homilist asserts in his concluding lines that “a man may wel haue þe goodes of þis world, þei3 he ne sette noȝt al his herte þervpon, & vsen þe worldliche þinges to Goddes worschipe.”⁴⁴ The *Mirror* homilist’s interpretation depends upon downplaying the reversal element of the parable. In a thirteen-page homily, explication of the invitation to the poor and sick receives one paragraph that takes up less than a half-page. Rather than occupy a privileged position, the poor play a minor role in a parable warning the rich not to love their goods more than they love God. The *Mirror* homilist’s explication of the parable serves the interests of his wealthy lay audience, focusing on proper use of goods in the world and, as I will discuss in some detail later, holy living within one’s marriage. He ameliorates the subversive potential of the parable by discouraging his audience from acting in the manner of the initial guests: if those of means never deny the host’s invitation, they need not worry about the poor and sick taking their place.

While vernacular commentators consistently downplay the privileged position of the poor and disabled in the Great Supper parable, the *Cleanness* poet emphasizes the host’s invitation to those on the margins of society. After the host issues an inclusive invitation to all “wayferande frekez,” space still remains and the servants go out once more to ensure that all seats are filled. In this second sending, the poet explicitly integrates Luke’s emphasis on the sick and disabled:

Whatkyn folk so þer fare, fechez hem hider.
 Be þay fers, be þay feble, forlote3 none,
 Be þay hol, be þay halt, be þay on-yzed,
 And þaz þay ben boþe blynde and balterande cruppez,
 Pat my hous may holly by halkez by fylled.’ (100-104)

⁴⁴ Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 278-279.

Again urging inclusivity through a series of contrasts, servants should seek the fierce and the feeble, the healthy and the lame. Like the Middle English homilists, the poet widens the invitation beyond the poor and sick, but he does so while still highlighting the host's generosity to the poor. The poet expands the list of maladies that may afflict potential guests to establish that no condition that might normally remove someone from social engagement should prevent attendance at the feast: "be þay onyzed, / and þaz þay ben boþe blynde and balterande cruppelez, / Pat my hous may holly by halkez by fylled" (102-104). By specifying the one-eyed and stumbling cripples, the poet creates a vivid image of physical afflictions and places a special emphasis on the inclusion of the disabled. With the incorporation of such detail, the poet builds the contradiction between invitation and exclusion at the literal level of the story: given that some of these guests would not be able to see the state of their garment, it seems more absurd that the host would expel a guest on account of his appearance. He also creates a contrast between the comprehensive approach to gathering guests in Matthew, so that no one escapes judgment, and the Lucan host's radical charity, in which the host demonstrates Jesus' injunction to share his banquet with those who may not repay him.

In addition to whom the host invites, the places where he seeks guests creates tension between the elements of hospitality and exclusion within the parable. Both Matthew's king and Luke's host instruct the servants to go to remote streets to find new guests. When space still remains in the Great Supper parable, the host then orders his servants to "go out in to weies and heggis, and constreine men to entre, that myn hous be fulfillid" (14:23). Just as commentators give spiritual significance to the "ende of weies" in Matthew, hedges house certain types of people. The *Glossed Gospels* offer three

different explications of the directive to search for people in hedges, all of which emphasize the breadth of the host's invitation. Following Gregory the Great, the author first defines those in hedges as heathens who populate the feast because the number of Jewish people who believed in Christ was insufficient to fill it. According to Ambrose, people in hedges also signify those "not occupied by any coueytisis of present þingis" and merit invitation to the feast on that account. Contrasting this positive assessment, commentary attributed to Augustine defines those in hedges as heretics, who wish to separate themselves from others and follow their own will rather than God's.⁴⁵

The *Cleanness* poet does not offer any allegorical interpretations of these locations, but he describes the host's order to search for guests in hedges in a manner that emphasizes these guests' distance from courtly society. The *Cleanness* host urges his servants to search "ferre out in þe felde, and fechez mo geste3; / Waytez gorste3 and greue3, if ani gome3 lygge3" (98-99). The poet adds the location of fields, indicating the presence of agricultural laborers and the rural poor at the feast as well. He then names hedges twice, with the order to search thorny shrubs and thickets, and suggests that people may lie hidden within them. The summoning of guests from the midst of their work and from places of rest remote from the comforts of conventional homes creates discord between the host's approach to populating the feast and the standards of decorum later enforced at the banquet. Those coming directly from the fields and found lying in thickets are unlikely to dress properly for a wedding feast.

⁴⁵ CUL kk. ii. 9, fols. 172^r col. B, l. 19 – 172^v col. A, l. 14. The homilist of the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle similarly explains that hedges indicate separation, but in this case, those isolating themselves are not heretics but priests "þat maken hem a privat religioun as an hegge and oþer men þat suen hem in þe brode weye to helleward." Connecting this commentary with Lollard polemic, the homilist suggest powerful men will constrain religious to follow God's will "for drede of takinge of her goodis." Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 231/89-95.

Festive hospitality: “And 3et þe symplest in þat sale wat3 serued to þe fulle”

The hospitality demonstrated at the *Cleanness* feast suggests that the host will extend his gifts to all present at this unconventionally diverse gathering, regardless of rank or appearance. Whereas Matthew’s narrative quickly follows the invitation with the episode of the king and the offending guest, the *Cleanness* poet dwells on the nature of the banquet, stressing its importance independent of the wedding garment incident. The first description of the banquet appears in the opening lines of the parable, when the host describes the readiness of the feast to entice his guests to come. Matthew’s gospel reads:

Lo! Y haue maad redi my meete, my bolis and my volatilis ben slayn, and alle thingis ben redy; come 3e to the weddyngis. (Mt 22:4)

Middle English commentaries frequently associate the food of the feast with scripture or particular people within scripture, so that the passage occasioned commentary on sources of spiritual nourishment. Following Chrysostom, the *Glossed Gospels* first equate “bolis and fatte beestis” (a gloss of *volatilis*) with the prophets and other saints who died as martyrs. Continuing this line of interpretation, the author enumerates the common qualities between the animals slaughtered for the feast and the scriptural figures they symbolize: bulls signify patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament who “turmenteden her enmyes by horn of bodyly vertu,” while *altilia*, whether translated as fatted beasts or winged birds, represent New Testament saints who “takyngge grace of inward fatnesse” resist earthly desires and rise above them on the wings of contemplation.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Add. 28026, fol. 132^r col. B, ll. 46-51. These interpretations attributed to Gregory the Great circulated in mainstream and Wycliffite sermons as well, as both the Middle English translation of Robert de Gretham’s *Mirror* and the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle equate “bolis and volatilis” with saints of the Old and New Testaments as well. See Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 409 and Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 302/41-47.

As figures from the Old and New Testament, the foods nourish guests in ways that are textual and sacramental. As *lectio divina*, the food of scripture fulfills every human need and offers the specific type of nourishment appropriate to each individual: “What euer þyng is souzt to helpe now al is fillid in scriptures. He þat is vnkunnyng in scriptures schal fynde þere þat þat he oweþ to lerne...No þyng failiþ in þis feeste þat is nedeful to helpe of mankynde.”⁴⁷ Contrary to those clerics who regarded scripture as the domain of the learned, this commentary depicts scripture as open to and beneficial for all; in relation to the parable, it suggests the democratic nature of the feast, as the food enriches all manner of people, regardless of their education, spiritual state, or vocation. Giving the food sacramental significance, the *Glossed Gospels* also associate the meal with the sacrifice of martyrdom, first through the death of the prophets and ultimately through Christ’s passion. Like scripture, these deaths provide spiritual nourishment, partially through the prophets and fully through Christ: “þe deef of profetis susteynede in part mennis helþe, napeles it myzte not fully saue al þe world. Þefore at þe laste a lomb is offrid, wiche by his innocence wypede away þe gilt of al þe world.”⁴⁸ The invocation of Christ as the sacrificial lamb associates the feast of the parable with both the last supper, in which Jesus equated the food and drink of the feast with his body and blood, and the Eucharist that commemorates the last supper and reenacts Christ’s sacrifice. Participation in the feast is participation in Christ’s Redemption.

⁴⁷ The *Glossed Gospels* cite Chrysostom as the source of this interpretation. See Add. 28026 fol. 132^r col. B ll. 4-26.

⁴⁸ Add. 28026 fol. 132^r col. A ll. 34-38. The *Glossed Gospels* are not unique in connecting the Crucifixion and the meal. Although the *Mirror* homilist only mentions it briefly, he follows the statement that all things are ready with the comment that “þe lombe Jesu is slayn, 3oure mete & 3oure helþe.” See Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 409.

Despite the prominence of these allegories, the *Cleanness* poet describes the food of the feast in a manner that downplays spiritual interpretations and highlights the sumptuousness of the feast. Whereas the above commentary centers on pairs like the Old and New Testament or the prophets and Christ, the poet expands the menu of the feast beyond the two traditional items of bulls and fatted beasts (or birds) found in Matthew's gospel:

...my boles and my bores arn bayted and slayne,
And my fedde foulez fatted with sclazt
My polyle þat is penne-fed, and partrykes bope,
Wyth schelde3 of wylde swyn, swane3, and crone3,
Al is ropeled and rosted ry3t to þe sete;
Come3 cof to my corte, er hit colde worþe. (55-60)

The inclusion of boars, swans, and cranes in addition to bulls and fatted birds discourages common allegorical interpretations and shifts attention to the literal level of the story. By specifying preparation techniques, such as pen-feeding and roasting poultry, the poet focuses on the extravagance and desirability of the feast under contemporary standards rather than its theological significance.⁴⁹ The attention to the particular details of the feast increases the realism of the parable, so that like the parables Jesus told in the context of the gospels, the story seems at once accessible and disarming to its fourteenth-century courtly audience. At the same time, the details call attention to the feast as a site of hospitality, in which the host offers rich provisions to those marginalized people named in the subsequent invitations. In *Cleanness*, the feast matters not simply as a metaphor for judgment or heavenly bliss but as a worldly example of a host sharing his prosperity with the less fortunate.

⁴⁹ Anderson explains that having "bayted" bulls and boars refers to chasing them with dogs so that the exercise may increase the flavor of the meat and dates the practice to the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. See *Cleanness*, 63 n. 55.

Later in the parable, when the guests have arrived, the poet expands on his source to describe the festive appearance and jovial atmosphere of the wedding feast. These additions both depict the feast in a manner that corresponds to contemporary courtly culture and show the host's intention of honoring all his guests. The poet repeatedly comments on the appearance of those in attendance, anticipating the condemnation of the one guest that will follow, but the differentiation in appearance he describes in the midst of the feast corresponds to social rank, not virtue. Conforming to the convention of seating the noblest guests in the highest seats, the poet specifies that "Ay þe best byfore and bryztest atyred, / þe derrest at þe hyze dese, þat dubbed wer fayrest, / And syþen on lenþe bilough ledez inough" (114-116). Since those of high rank dress most festively, the poet implies that guests attended the feast in garments of varying quality, as one might expect given the nature of the host's invitations. Similarly, the poet contrasts well-bred men with simple men, suggesting that their different appearances result from a difference in station, not virtue: "Clene men in companynye forknowen wern lyte, / And zet þe symplest in þat sale wat3 serued to þe fulle, / Boþe with menske and with mete and mynstrasy noble" (119-21).⁵⁰ The poet asserts that both noble and simple men enjoyed the same lavish food and entertainment; even amidst this differentiation of rank and appearance, all are all equally welcomed and equal beneficiaries of the host's gifts.

Rather than a site of judgment, the poet depicts the feast first and foremost as a site of communal celebration. In addition to highlighting the accessibility of the feast to all members of society, the poet emphasizes the joyous nature of the celebration, commenting that the guests became glad with good drink and made themselves at ease with their neighbors (123-24). Even when the host enters the feast, the *Cleanness* poet

⁵⁰ Anderson glosses "clene" as well-bred or fair and "forknowen" as neglected. See *Cleanness*, 69.

highlights his festive hospitality. Whereas in Matthew's account, the king enters and then immediately apprehends and punishes the unclean guest, the *Cleanness* poet portrays the king celebrating with his guests before the issue of the garment arises:

Forsothe the kyng entride, that he shulde see men sittyng at mete; and he seez there a man nat clothid with brijd clothis. (Mt. 22:11)

Now in myddez þe mete þe mayster hym biþoʒt
þat he wolde se be semble þat samned was þere,
And rehayte rekenly þe riche and þe pouer,
And cherisch hem alle with his cher, and chaufen her joye.
þen he bowez fro his bour into þe brode halle
And to þe best on þe bench, and bede hym be myry,
Solased hem with semblaunt and syled fyrre,
Tron fro table to table and talkede ay myrþe. (125-132)

Continuing the emphasis on diverse social classes and their equal share in the gifts of the banquet, the host encourages both rich and poor and greets all with cheer. Again following social convention, the host greets those of highest station first and then proceeds to those at all other tables, speaking to them pleasantly.⁵¹ In addition to grounding the story in contemporary social behavior, this expansion of Matthew's parable also shows the host's benevolence. His entry in the *Cleanness* parable invites associations with Eucharist rather than judgment, as the host enters not to inspect but to commune with those assembled.

Exclusion from the feast: “þise oþer wrecheʒ iwysse worþy noʒt wern”

Despite the poets' emphasis on the breadth of the host's invitation and the hospitality he extends to his guests, the *Cleanness* parable also features frequent

⁵¹ On the agreement of these descriptions of festivity and decorum with contemporary social convention, see Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, 8 and Jonathan Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1985), 88.

reminders that some are excluded from the celebration. Both the original guests' rejection of their invitation and the unclean guest's expulsion challenge the inclusive generosity of the host demonstrated in the episodes highlighted above. While the original guests elect not to attend the feast, the poet's portrayal of their excuses suggests that Christians commonly reject the feast through conventional, everyday behavior. In other words, although the host issues his invitation widely, accepting the invitation is not necessarily easy. The poet follows Luke's version of the guests' refusal, in which they cite material and social obligations as reasons they cannot attend, instead of Matthew's, in which the invited guests kill those who summoned them to the feast. Consequently, the poet depicts this self-exclusion from the feast as a fairly ordinary occurrence in which guests reject their invitation in more subtle, mundane ways than acts of violence:

And alle bigunnen togidir to excusen hem. The firste seide, Y haue bouzt a toun, and Y haue nede to go out, and se it; Y preye thee, haue me excusid. And the tother seide, Y haue bouzt fyue zockis of oxun, and Y go to preue hem; Y preye thee, haue me excusid. And an othir seide, Y haue weddid a wijf; and therfor Y may not come. (Lk. 14:18-20)⁵²

When þay knewen his cal þat þider com schulde,
 Alle excused hem by þe skyly he scape by most.
 On hade bozt hym a borz, he sayde by his trawþe:
 'Now turne I þeder als tyd þe toun to byholde.'
 Anoper nayed also and nurned þis cawse:
 'I haf zerned and zat zokkez of oxen,
 And for my hyzez hem bozt; to bowe haf I mester,
 To see hem pulle in þe plow aproche me byhouez.'
 'And I haf wedded a wyf,' so wer hym þe þryd;
 'Excuse me at þe court, I may not com þere.'
 Pus þay droz hem adrez with daunger vchone,
 Pat non passed to þe place þaz he prayed were. (*Cleanness* 61-72)

With all three excuses, the guests prioritize occupational and familial obligations over celebration, behaving according to conventional mores that place work before leisure.

⁵² Matthew's account briefly mentions two of the three excuses enumerated in Luke: "But thei dispisiden, and wenten forth, oon in to his toun, another to his marchaundise" (Mt. 22:5).

Given the ordinary nature of these excuses, exegetes commonly associate them with ways of living in the world that could affect one's invitation to the heavenly banquet. In fact, the bulk of the interpretive commentary on Luke's Parable of the Great Supper pertains to these three excuses, which most Latin exegesis associated with pride, the five senses, and lust of the flesh respectively, collectively defined as preoccupation with goods of the world.⁵³ By replacing the killing episode from Matthew with the excuses from Luke, the poet focuses not on God's punishment of sin but rather on the nature of sin itself, identifying common ways in which humans reject God in their daily lives.

When integrating the excuses from Luke, the poet invokes a large and diverse exegetical tradition focused on one's manner of living rather than final judgment.⁵⁴ Since exegesis on Luke's parable focuses chiefly on these three excuses, I explain their associations at some length to illustrate predominant interpretations and reveal how commentators used this portion of the parable to promote pious living. According to the *Glossed Gospels*, the first excuse pertains to both pride and wealth. With regard to the statement that "Y haue bouzt a toun," the *Glossed Gospels* first recite an Augustinian interpretation that associates the excuse with pride stemming from worldly lordship: "Lordschip is markid, þerfore pride is chastisid. For whi, to haue a toun holde and welde to make men þerinne suget to hym likiþ to be lord, an yuel vice."⁵⁵ This first excuse in the parable corresponds to the first vice in salvation history, as Adam originally sinned

⁵³ See Stephen L. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1987), 162-63.

⁵⁴ Kelly and Irwin similarly observe that the addition of elements from the Parable of the Great Supper introduces ideas regarding moral responsibility and merit into the story. See "The Meaning of *Cleanness*," 256.

⁵⁵ CUL MS Kk.ii.9, fol. 170^r col. B, ll. 1-6.

through disobedience to his Lord.⁵⁶ Instead of wielding earthly power, Augustine advocates submission to heavenly authority by which “we mowe be sikir.”⁵⁷ A similar interpretation associating the first excuse with pride over one’s position in the world appears in the sermon for the second Sunday after the Trinity in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle. The homilist explains that: “þis bitokeneþ proude men, þat for worldly lordship wenden out fro þe weye of God, and occupien her wittes about worldely heynesse.”⁵⁸ With the statement that proud men “wenden out fro þe weye of God,” the homilist shifts the metaphor from a single invitation to be accepted or rejected to a life journey either progressing toward or away from the heavenly feast. Those concerned with worldly ambition and social privilege continually reject God’s summons.

In addition to lordship, the *Glossed Gospels* associate the town excuse with pride over wealth. Citing Gregory the Great and Bede, the author states that a town signifies either earthly wealth (*substaunce*) or property (*catel*); therefore, he concludes that the first excuse signifies those who look only to physical rather than spiritual goods for their sustenance.⁵⁹ The homilist of the Middle English *Mirror* similarly follows Gregory the Great by interpreting the “town” excuse as devotion to worldly goods, suggesting even more explicitly than the Wycliffite homilist that rejection of the feast happens continually: “Þe toun bitokneþ þes worldliche goodes. & ichone þat gadreþ faste tresoure, he excuseþ hym gretliche from Iesus soper þat he ne may nozt come þider. & þe more þat

⁵⁶ Late medieval penitential manuals and other commentaries on the Seven Deadly Sins conventionally listed the sin of pride first. See, for example, Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *Robert of Brunne’s Handlyng Synne and its French Original*, EETS o.s. 119 (London, 1975), 105/2992-93.

⁵⁷ CUL Kk.ii.9 Fol. 170^r, col. B, ll. 12-17.

⁵⁸ Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 229/44-46.

⁵⁹ “Erþely substaunce eþer catel is signyfiyd bi a toun þefore he goþ oute to se a toun whiche þenkiþ vtmere þingis aloone fore sustaunse.” See CUL Kk.ii.9 fol. 170^r, col. B, ll. 18-21.

he excuseþ hym wiþ worldliche goodes, þe ferþere he wiþdrawiþ hym from Goddes soper.”⁶⁰ Although individuals journey away from the feast of heaven through their covetousness, acceptance of the invitation does not require rejection of material goods. Instead, the homilist explains that damnation results from inordinate desire for material things: “þei entren depe in þe erþe þat *to mychel* louen þe goodes of þis world.”⁶¹ Consequently, the parable teaches an audience to live in moderation and not let preoccupation with worldly prosperity prevent them from enjoying heavenly bliss.

While the second excuse regarding the five yoke of oxen seems ripe for commentary on labor, most commentaries on the Great Supper do not engage the literal associations of the second excuse. Instead, following Latin exegesis, they create allegories centered on the number five, the nature of the yoke, and the specific activity of testing the oxen to describe how preoccupation with the outside world, especially the sins of others, hinders the internal spiritual development necessary to attend to the feast.⁶² *The Glossed Gospels* equate the five oxen with the five senses, explaining that oxen appropriately symbolize the senses because both oxen that plow a field and the five senses seek goods from the earth.⁶³ The *Mirror* homilist, who similarly associates the five oxen with the five senses, gives a slightly different justification more focused on the

⁶⁰ Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 270.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 270. Emphasis added.

⁶² The homilist of the relevant sermon in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle noticeably strays from tradition by associating the oxen excuse with economic prosperity. He writes that the five yokes signify “plente of worldely goodis; for traveil and foure profitis þat comen of oxen” and suggests that the evangelist used the word “yoke” because through such occupation worldly men bind themselves to the devil. See Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 229/50-55.

⁶³ “þei ben seide 3ockis of oxun for erþely þingis ben souzt bi þes wittis of fleysch for oxun eeren lond.” See CUL Kk.ii.9, fol. 170^r col. B, ll. 46-50.

individual will: “þes fyue plow neet bitokeneþ þe fyue wittis þat laden men of þis world.”⁶⁴ Just as oxen drive their plow, the five senses compel humans to certain actions.

Commentators condemn not the five senses themselves, or “reasonable likyng of þes fyue wittis,” but the curiosity that stems from them, figuratively represented by the guest’s desire to test his oxen.⁶⁵ According to the *Glossed Gospels*, curiosity directs attention outward and discourages introspection, obscuring awareness of one’s own sin. In a section attributed to Gregory the Great, the author explains that “þe vice of curioust is greuouse for þe while it lediþ a mannis mynde to seke wiþoute forþ þe lif of his neyzbore euere it hidþ his owne innest þingis to itself, þat it knowynge oþere mennis þingis knowe not it self.”⁶⁶ Thus, the oxen excuse symbolizes a preoccupation with the actions of others that distracts from examination of conscience.⁶⁷ The *Mirror* homilist similarly describes how curiosity causes people to forget their own sins as they judge others. Once again characterizing a guest’s excuse as regression on a spiritual journey, the *Mirror* homilist warns that “þe more þat þei setten her hertes on suche þinges [judging others], þe ferþere þei gon from God. & þei3 he here Goddes messanger, he nil nozt repenten hym for to come to Goddes soper.”⁶⁸ According to this interpretation, people approach God’s feast not through perfect living but through authentic examination of conscience that leads to contrition for sin. The parable therefore encourages

⁶⁴ Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror* 272.

⁶⁵ CUL Kk.ii.9, fol. 170^v col. A, ll. 9-10.

⁶⁶ CUL Kk.ii.9, fol. 170^v col. A, ll. 33-40.

⁶⁷ According to the *Mirror* homilist, curiosity can also lead to imitation of sins observed. Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 272.

⁶⁸ Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 273.

contemplation of one's own spiritual state to both hear and heed the invitation through repentance.

With regard to the third excuse, “Y haue weddid a wijf,” commentators condemn desires of the flesh, while also discussing how marriage itself can prevent people from coming to the feast. Following Augustine, the *Glossed Gospels* first associate the third excuse with lechery, defined not simply as sexual lust but any indulgence in desires of the flesh.⁶⁹ This interpretation characterizes those symbolized by the third guest as epicureans, who wish to simply eat, drink, and be merry: “Sum men seien it is not wel to a man no but to hym þat haþ delices of fleysche. Þes it ben þat seien, as Poul markip, ‘ete we and drynke we for tomorowe we shul die.’”⁷⁰ The man excusing himself on account of his wife exacts maximum pleasure in this life while paying no attention to the afterlife. As a result, the *Glossed Gospels* warn, such people may die from starvation of the soul.

A subsequent interpretation from Gregory the Great, paraphrased in both the *Glossed Gospels* and the *Mirror*, reflects anxiety about associating the wife, and thereby the institution of marriage, with sins of the flesh.⁷¹ Following Gregory, the *Glossed Gospels* explain why something virtuous, like marriage, would signify something sinful, clarifying that “lust of fleysch is signyfiyd bi þe wif for þou3 matrymony is good and ordeined bi goddis ordenaunse to gendren children, neþeles sum men desiren not herby

⁶⁹ The Wycliffite homilist concisely describes this excuse in the same basic manner: “þis þridde bitokenep men þat ben overcomen wiþ fleishly synne, as glotonye and lecherie.” Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 229/56-57.

⁷⁰ CUL Kk.ii.9, fol. 170^v col. B, ll. 18-22.

⁷¹ One interpretation in the *Glossed Gospels*, attributed to Ambrose, regards the third excuse as an indication that virginity is a more honorable state of living than marriage. See CUL Kk.ii.9 fol. 171^r col. A, ll. 8-16.

plente of children but desires of lustis. And þefore a þing vniust may couenably be signyfyed bi iust þing.”⁷² Neither marriage nor sexual intercourse in their own right constitute rejection of God’s invitation, but rather enjoyment of sexual desire, even within the context of marriage. In a more comprehensive manner than the *Glossed Gospels*, the *Mirror* homilist enumerates the ways in which sexual relations between husband and wife can be lecherous, including sexual activity outside the bounds of reason or on holy days on which the church instructs Christians not to engage in such behavior.⁷³ Consequently, in relation to the third excuse, the homilist provides his audience with a fairly detailed guide to proper sexual conduct.

In addition to the sin of lechery, the *Mirror* homilist expands his commentary on the third excuse to address a greater range of behaviors within marriage by which one may reject the invitation to the feast. By its sheer size, the marriage commentary constitutes a primary concern of the *Mirror* homily, as the author devotes nearly one-third of his sermon to defining not simply proper sexual relations but also correct gender roles within a marriage. The homilist defines marriage in terms of a hierarchy whereby God is the head of Jesus, Jesus the head of man, and man the head of woman. By attempting to exercise sovereignty over her husband, a woman violates (fordoþ) the ordinances of God. While the homilist encourages husbands and wives to love each other, the manner in which they do so differs by gender. Men must maintain their position as the head, “for whan man bicometh seruaunt to þe womman, & loueth hir &

⁷² CUL Kk.ii.9, fol. 170^v col. B, ll. 33-42.

⁷³ “For often he may do synne bi his wyf but 3if he kepe hym þe better whan he doþ it wiþouten skile [discretion], oþer in such tyme as he schulde nozt do it, whan he doþ eny tyme þat myster wiþouten hope of bizetyng of children.” Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 274. Clarifying the particular times at which couples should not engage in intercourse, the homilist later refers to a law in Leviticus 12:2-5 instructing couples to refrain from sex for forty days after a male child and sixty days after a female child. Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 275.

dredeþ hir, he ne may nozt come to Goddis soper.”⁷⁴ Women, on the other hand, come to God by worshipping their husbands. The *Mirror* homilist’s commentary on marriage shows that the three excuses can symbolize much more than the sins of pride, greed, and lust. They provide commentators with an opportunity to variously define virtuous living and proscribe undesirable behaviors in ways that can have social as well as moral implications.

Despite this tradition of associating the three excuses with diverse ways of accepting or rejecting God’s invitation to heavenly bliss, the *Cleanness* poet never directly explicates the excuses offered by the three guests.⁷⁵ While the excuses may remind a reader of this exegetical tradition, likely familiar through sermons, the poet presents only the situation conveyed by the literal text: the guests cannot come because one attends to the town he governs, another tests his yoke of oxen, and the third rushes home to his new wife. Without reference to the allegorical tradition, the host’s reaction to the guest’s refusal seems more extreme. Although each guest gave a legitimate reason for not attending, placing occupational or familial obligations over celebration, the host describes the guests’ refusal as “for her owne sorze,” and decries their offense as blameworthy (75-76). He therefore implies that the guests place too much value on

⁷⁴ Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 276.

⁷⁵ Although the poet does not directly refer to these interpretations, the allegorical tradition invoked by the three excuses may increase connections between the parable and the rest of the poem. Lynn Staley has suggested that the Old Testament stories that follow the Wedding Feast in *Cleanness* expand upon the allegorical meanings invoked by the three excuses. Corresponding to the three excuses in an inverse order, the story of Noah relates to the excuse of having married a wife, looking back at the destroyed cities in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah corresponds to the curiosity decried in relation to the oxen excuse, and the story of Belshazzar’s Feast illustrates the consequences of worldly ambition symbolized by the guest who purchased a town. See Staley, *The Voice of the Gawain Poet* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 98-99.

worldly obligations without articulating the range of behaviors through which one may commit that offense and without directly equating such action with sin.

Rather than intricately define the nature of the guests' offense, the *Cleanness* poet emphasizes the dire consequences of their decision. Integrating the idea of substitution from the end of Luke's parable, the host in the *Cleanness* parable continues to insist on these guests' exclusion from the feast throughout the story.⁷⁶ After the first instruction that the servants should gather whomever they find on the outer streets of town, the host asserts that "þise oþer wrechez iwysse worþy nozt wern" (84). Again, when the servants inform the host that room still remains, he invites those on the margins of society in part to ensure that no seats remain for the original guests if they regret their initial refusal:

For certez þyse ilk renke3 þat me renayed habbe,
And denounced me nozt now at þis tyme,
Schul neuer sitte in my sale my soper to fele,
Ne suppe on sope of my seve, þaz þay swelt [perish] schulde. (105-108)

While those invited second eat and drink as much as they desire, those invited first will starve before they taste the host's food. Having once rejected the host's offer of hospitality, the guests' exclusion from the feast is permanent. The host's insistence on their exclusion portrays him as even more unforgiving than when he expels the unclean guest from the feast: despite the ordinary nature of the first guests' offense, the consequences of their decisions are severe and permanent.

While the host shows the capability for severity in his insistence that the original guests not be admitted to the feast, the expulsion of the unclean guest still marks a dramatic change in his behavior. In the stanza directly before the expulsion, the poet describes the host bidding guests to be merry and talking of mirth at the various tables,

⁷⁶ The Parable of the Great Supper ends with the statement that "Forsothe I seie to 3ou, for noone of tho men that ben clepid, schal taaste my souper" (Lk. 14:25).

but with the apprehension of one in an inappropriate garment, all gestures of hospitality cease. In Matthew's parable, the contrast is less severe as we learn that the host rebukes the inappropriately dressed guest immediately after learning that he enters the feast:

Forsothe the kyng entride, that he shulde see men sittynge at mete and he seeþ there a man nat clothid with brijd clothis. And he seith to hym, Frend, hou entridist thou hidir, nat hauynge brijd clothe? And he was doumbe. (Mt. 22:11-12)

The king comes with the purpose of seeing, perhaps even inspecting, and progresses quickly to judgment, in contrast to the *Cleanness* host who first joins and fosters festivity.

The *Glossed Gospels* offer three complementary explanations for the guest's offense.

First, paraphrasing Jerome, the author associates bridal clothes with "þe lordis heestes and werkes þat ben fillid of þe lawe and of þe gospel."⁷⁷ Any clothing other than bridal clothing the author describes as foul clothes that mar the cleanness of the feast.⁷⁸

Chrysostom similarly criticizes the man for coming in an unclean garment because he thereby "defouleþ þe glorie of weddynges." Whereas bridal clothes represent the faith of Christ and righteousness, the befouled garment reflects the dark works of those who disparage Christendom.⁷⁹ Finally, the *Glossed Gospels* describe the garment as charity, defined as love of God and neighbor, which the commentator characterizes as either absent or present, not unclean.⁸⁰ The *Mirror* homilist similarly equates the improper

⁷⁷ Add. 28026 fol. 133^v col. A, ll. 7-9.

⁷⁸ In the fourth sermon in Ross' *Middle English Sermons* collection, the homilist similarly warns his audience not to go to the feast without "þe leveree of clenness of þat weddynges." See Woodburn O. Ross, ed., *Middle English Sermons, Edited from British Museum MS Royal 18 B. xxiii*, EETS o.s. 209 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 18/20.

⁷⁹ "Bride cloþ is very feiþ of Ihesu Crist and his ryȝtfulnesse. If ony man is foundun in weddigges with foul cloþ, he defouleþ þe glorie of weddynges. So he þat haþ derk werkes and lyueþ among Cristen men as oon of hem doþ dispit to Cristendom." Add. 28026, fol. 133^v col. A, ll. 25-31.

⁸⁰ Add. 28026, fol. 133^v col. A, ll. 46-47.

clothing with the lack of charity. Without it, the guest exposes his sinfulness to the host, as the homilist explains “for charite is þe cloþinge þat hileþ alle filþes & hydeþ hem.”⁸¹ As a bridal garment, charity heals and covers the imperfections of sinful humans and makes them worthy of God’s presence.

The representation of this scene in *Cleanness* reflects the interpretations attributed to Jerome and Chrysostom that describe not simply the absence of bridal clothes but the soiled nature of the garment the guest wears:

Bot as he ferked ouer þe flor he fande with his y3e
Hit wat3, not for a halyday honestly arayed,
A þral þryzt in þe þrong, vnþryuandely [poorly] cloþed,
Ne no festiual frok, bot fyled with werkke3.
Pe gome wat3 vngarnyst with god men to dele
And gremed þerwith þe grete lorde, and greue hym he þost. (133-138)

The *Cleanness* poet uniquely integrates this interpretation regarding uncleanness into the story, as no other Middle English translations describe the garment as soiled in the actual text of the parable. In doing so, however, the poet invokes not simply the moral implications of uncleanness, which he will elaborate in a short commentary following the parable, but also the literal sense of a garment soiled from work.⁸² The guest offends the host because he does not observe the distinction between garments for holiday celebrations and those worn while performing labor.

The host rebukes the guest in such a way that hospitality appears to be the secondary concern of a feast ultimately orchestrated for judgment. With the veneer of courtesy, the host addresses the guest as “friend,” inquiring “‘Say me, frende,’ quop þe freke with a felle [grim] chere, / ‘Hov wan þou into þis won in wede3 so fowle?’” (139-

⁸¹ Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 413.

⁸² Anderson glosses “werkke3” in this line first as “labors” and then as “evil deeds, sins.” See *Cleanness*, 66 n. 136.

40). The *Glossed Gospels* contain only one short comment on the host addressing the guest as friend, which insists that the guest has done nothing to deserve the host's friendship: "Frend and not frend. Frend by feiþ, but not frend by worchyngē."⁸³ The homilist of Ross' *Middle English Sermons* collection similarly distinguishes between true friendship and the employment of the term friend by the host; since true friendship is based on virtuous living, an audience should not anticipate that the host will show mercy because he addresses the guest as friend.⁸⁴ Even more so than in Matthew's parable, the employment of the term friend in *Cleanness* calls attention to the tension between the hospitality demonstrated by the host in the preceding lines of the parable and the fastidious standards he enforces when expelling the unclean guest. Without expressing affection or a merciful demeanor, it reminds a reader of the sharp change in the host's disposition. The subsequent question of how the guest came in so foul a garment calls attention to the disjunction between the host's previous and present behavior as well. Given the unconventional locations in which the host sought his guests, the answer to the question "hov wan þou into þis won in wedez so fowle?" seems obvious: the garments likely became soiled and ripped when the guest was working in a field or laying a thicket.

Despite the unlikelihood that all those whom the host summoned would have clothing reserved for holidays, the host nevertheless reproaches his guest for coming in

⁸³ Add. 28026 fol. 133^v col. B, ll. 10-11.

⁸⁴ Instead, he rephrases the host's question as "All-be-itt þat þou arte man, zitt parauntur þou arte not cristened, zitt parauntur þou leuste not as Criste biddeste þe. How commes þou þan amonge is mene? Þou canste not sey but by stalthe." Ross, *Middle English Sermons*, 16/22-26.

the same condition in which he was found. He condemns this lack of formality as a poor manner to praise his host:⁸⁵

Pe abyȝ þat þou hatȝ vpon, no halyday hit menskeȝ:
Pou, burne, for no brydale art busked in wedeȝ.
How watȝ þou hardy þis hous for þyn vnhap to neȝe
In on so ratted a robe and rent at þe sydeȝ?
Pow art a gome vngoderly in þat gown febele;
Pou praysed me and my place ful pouer and ful nede,
Pat watȝ so prest to aproche my presens hereinne.
Hopeȝ þou I be a harlot, þi erigaut [garment] to prayse?’ (139-148)

Although he invites people on the margins of society, the host expects all guests to respond to his generosity with proper decorum that acknowledges the honor extended to guests in their invitation. The haste attributed to the guest “prest to aproche” implies a lack of preparation for the honor the host invited him to receive. In his reproach, the host indicates that invitation itself does not render a person fit to receive earthly, or spiritual, gifts. Invitation simply signals that the host stands ready to welcome any who come in a manner fit to enjoy the feast.

The poet articulates the allegorical significance of this preparation or fitness in the short explication that follows the parable in *Cleanness*. Emphasizing that guests should honor the host in exchange for the gifts he proffers, he warns of the adverse consequences of attempting to attend the feast in an unclean state:

Bot war þe wel, if þou wylt, þy wedeȝ ben clene,
And honest for þe halyday, lest þou harme lache,
For aproch þou to þat prynce of parage noble,
He hates helle no more þen hem þat ar sowle [filthy]. (165-168)

Like those commentators who describe the invitation to both good and evil as an effort to hold all accountable at judgment, this explication suggests that the host sought guests

⁸⁵ Nicholls connects this charge to contemporary conduct guides and locates the offense in part in the guest’s haste and failure to state his intention. Nicholls justifies the expulsion on this literal level for his social offenses. See *The Matter of Courtesy*, 92-93.

widely in order to punish the unclean. If the host hates those who are filthy as much as he hates hell, it seems unlikely that the host would wish people from fields and hedges to share in his meal and revelry, regardless of whether these denote physical locations or the figurative homes of heathens and heretics. Distancing his interpretation from literal associations with manual labor, the poet now characterizes the offending guest's clothing as constituted, rather than soiled, by work:

Wich arn þenne þy wedez þou wrappez þe inne,
þat schal schewe hem so schene, schrowde of þe best?
Hit arn þy werkez wyterly þat þou wrozt hauez,
And lyned with þe lykyng þat lyze in þyn hert. (169-172)

Unlike a simple interpretation of the garment as charity, which corresponds better to statements about the presence or lack of proper garment, the clean or unclean garment signifies either virtuous or sinful works and the corresponding disposition that incites those actions. The explication correspondingly characterizes the parable as a warning that wearing unclean garments may forfeit heavenly bliss, as the poet cautions against a long list of sins, ranging from greed and dishonest dealings (croked dedez) to depriving widows of their dowries, spreading false rumors, and treason (177-188). While all such sins may cause one to “mysse þe myrþe þat much is to prayse” (189), the poet describes God's judgment as most swift and severe for those who committed sins of the flesh (197-202).⁸⁶ Such sins cause God to “forzet alle his fre þewez [ways]”, exemplified by the

⁸⁶ Jane Lecklider suggests that the sins the poet lists would be particularly associated with priests and argues that the poet may directly target priests with the parable. Lynn Staley makes a similar argument, suggesting that the criticism of priests may be directed specifically at the canons of St. Paul's Cathedral. See Lecklider, *Cleanness: Structure and Meaning* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 48-56 and Staley, “The Man in Foul Clothes,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002): 9-13. If the *Cleanness* parable especially censures priests, it is not unique among Middle English renditions of the Parable of the Wedding Feast. The author of the *Southern Passion* characterizes the statement that “many are called but few are chosen” as directed at the priesthood, whom he describes as lacking in virtue: “As a bisschop clupeþ to godes bord monye as ze seop / And makeþ ham persouns and preostes ak ffewe þerto worþi beop.” See Beatrice Daw

host's far-reaching invitation and festive hospitality, and grow mad with wrathful vengeance.⁸⁷ If we regard these lines as a definitive characterization of the parable within the poem, the story shows how sexual transgression inspires an otherwise loving, merciful God to exact harsh punishment against this vilest form of sin.

Reforming punishment: “Stik hym stifly in stoke3...to teche hym be quoynt”

In light of the analysis above, one may be tempted to read the expulsion of the unclean guest as a corrective to the characterization of God found earlier in the parable: the feast shows the bliss of heaven, but God will mercilessly exclude the unworthy from that banquet. Yet the depiction of punishment within the *Cleanness* parable itself is not as severe as in Matthew's story, nor as indicative of divine retribution as the Old Testament episodes that follow in the poem. In Matthew's Parable of the Wedding Feast, the king inflicts severe punishment on those who transgress him at two different times: at the end of the parable in response to the guest without a wedding garment and earlier in the story when those he initially invited refuse his offer and kill the servants who summoned them. To avenge those murders, the king “loste [killed] the man quellers, and brente her citee” (Mt. 22:7). The collective body of Middle English translations and commentary on the Parable of the Wedding Feast reflect the poignancy of the killing episode and the special attention paid to it, suggesting that the omission of this episode from *Cleanness* would surprise the poem's readers. Although none of the Middle English

Brown, ed., *The Southern Passion: Edited from Pepysian MS. 2344 in the Library of Magdalene College, Cambridge*, EETS o.s. 169 (London, 1927), 12/341-42.

⁸⁷ “As for fylpe of þe flesch þat foles han vsed; / For, as I fynde, þer he forzet alle his fre þewe3, / And wex wod to þe wrache for wrath at his hert.” See *Cleanness*, lines 202-204.

translations differ substantially in content, every one differs in terms of vocabulary and word order, even among texts that normally show considerable agreement such as translations from the *Wycliffite Bible* and *Oon of Foure*.⁸⁸ Such variation suggests particular attention to proper rendering of the difficult passage. Further indicating the importance of the passage, both the author of the *Southern Passion* and the author of the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony* treat it as the defining element of the parable. With the exception of two lines on the concluding moralization, the only commentary on the parable in the *Southern Passion* pertains to the killing episode, which the author interjects into the text immediately following that event.⁸⁹ In the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, the second of only two sentences summarizing the parable describes the killing of the servants: “And siþen tolde hem Jesus þe þridde tale of a kyng þat helde his sones fest. And þo þat he hadde boden to þe fest, chidden and slowþen his seruauþt3 whan hij comen after hem.”⁹⁰ While the author of the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony* likely relied on the reader to fill in the rest of the story, the event from the parable he considered most memorable was not the offense of wearing an improper garment, which critics of

⁸⁸ P.M. Smith argues that *Oon of Foure* represents an intermediate stage of translation between the early and late versions of the Wycliffite Bible. See “An Edition of Parts I-V of the Wycliffite Translation of Clement of Llanthony’s Latin Gospel Harmony *Unum Ex Quattor* known as *Oon of Foure*” (PhD thesis, University of Southampton, 1985), clxi-clxii.

⁸⁹ The *Southern Passion* author inserts twenty-six lines of commentary on the parable following the statement that “þe hynen þat were to ham ysend hi ham nome wiþ wowe / And helde ham in great pyne and wiþ shame ham slowe.” He explains the guests’ slaying of the servants with reference to the Parable of the Wicked Servants. This story also includes the killing of servants sent by a figure representing God (in this case the husbandman), in addition to the killing of the husbandman’s son. Eliding these servants and the ones in the Wedding Feast, the author describes God’s vengeance as the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans: “And hare lord ham brouzte to grounde þe rizt þat hi sholde knowe; / Ffor he by-nom hare lond and hare ffolk myd rizte dome / Þo Tytus and Vaspasianus þe cite of Ierusalem nome.” See *The Southern Passion* 11-12/313-318. *The Glossed Gospels* similarly describe Titus and Vespasian as the instruments of God’s vengeance, figured by the king in the Wedding Feast parable. See Add. 28026 fol. 132^v col. B, ll. 12-17. The author of the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle more generically describes the king’s vengeance as the destruction of Jerusalem. See Anne Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 1:302/51-55.

⁹⁰ Goates, *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, 79/26-29.

Cleanness widely describe as the story's essence, but rather violent refusal of the king's invitation.

This omission of a defining element of the Parable of the Wedding Feast is especially puzzling given the killing episode's similarity to the Old Testament stories featured in *Cleanness*. Throughout most of the poem, readers encounter not a gentle, merciful God, but a morally exacting God who violently punishes humans for their impurity through massive flood and the annihilation of two cities. A vengeful king, who likewise destroys the city of those who transgress him, complements the depiction of God throughout *Cleanness*. While scholars have suggested that the poet eliminated the episode to streamline the message of the story, defined in relation to the expulsion of the unclean guest, this narrowing of the storyline heightens the tension within the poet's new parable.⁹¹ Elimination of the killing episode allows the poet to depict God as primarily generous and welcoming up to the scene of expulsion from the feast, thereby intensifying the contrast between hospitality and rebuke.

Omission of the killing episode is not the only instance of the poet adapting Matthew's parable in a manner seemingly inconsistent with the depiction of God throughout the rest of the poem: when the host expels the unclean man from the feast, the *Cleanness* poet characterizes the punishment the host inflicts as less severe than in Matthew's gospel. After identifying the man without a wedding garment, Matthew's host orders his servants to bind the man's hands and feet and throw him into outer darkness. The parable ends with language overtly referring to punishment in hell, as Jesus characterizes outer darkness as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth – language he

⁹¹ See, for example, J.J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination*, 94.

uses elsewhere in the gospels to contrast the kingdom of heaven.⁹² The *Glossed Gospels* explicitly identify outer darkness with “nyzt of euerlastynge dampnacioun” where teeth that ate greedily on earth now gnash and covetous eyes weep.⁹³ The *Mirror* homilist likewise defines outer darkness as perpetual damnation and further explains weeping and gnashing of teeth to depict sufferings in hell. Weeping indicates that there is great burning in hell, needing to be cooled by tears. Gnashing is a sign of the great cold in hell that makes teeth chatter.⁹⁴ Both the *Glossed Gospels* and *Book to a Mother* associate inner darkness, defined in the former as “blyndnesse of soule,” with the expulsion to outer darkness. The author of *Book to a Mother* equates charity with the “list of mannes soule with þe whiche loue a man seþ gostly God in hope” and writes that this internal light reveals where one belongs after judgment. Those without the light of charity live in the world “in þe iner derkenesse of soule, þefore God wol comaunde his angels to þrowe hem into þe outter derkenesse of helle.”⁹⁵ Apprehending the darkness of his soul in the tattered state of his garment, the king can see that the guest lacks the light of charity that enables beatific vision. His dark soul will therefore meet the darkness of damnation.

⁹² See Mt. 22:13 and compare. Mt. 8:11-12: “And Y seie to 3ou, that many schulen come fro the eest and the west, and schulen reste with Abraham and Ysaac and Jacob in the kyngdom of heuenes; but the sones of the rewme schulen be cast out in to vtmer derknessis; there schal be wepyng, and grynting of teeth.”

⁹³ While most interpretations connect outer darkness with hell, one of several interpretations in the *Glossed Gospels* describes the darkness as an internal condition pertaining to wrong belief. Citing Chrysostom, the author describes varying degrees of darkness according to varying degrees of false belief in heathens, Jews, and heretics. Add. 28026 fol. 134^r col. A, ll. 32-43.

⁹⁴ Blumreich, *Middle English Mirror*, 415.

⁹⁵ Adrian James McCarthy, ed., *Book to a Mother: An Edition with Commentary*, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 92 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1981), 21. The *Glossed Gospels* similarly contrast inner and outer darkness with reference to this part of the parable. In a section attributed to Gregory the Great, it states “Ynnere derknesse is blyndnesse of soule. Outward derknesse is nyzt of euerlastynge dampnacioun.” Add. 28026 fol. 133^v col. B, ll. 36-37.

In contrast to these interpretations that associate expulsion from the feast with damnation in hell, the *Cleanness* poet adapts the language of punishment to keep the parable grounded in the world. The host does not send the guest to outer darkness, but rather places him first in stocks and then in his dungeon:

Stik hym stifly in stoke3, and steke3 hym þerafter
Depe in my doungeoun þer does euer dwelle3,
Greuing and gretyng and gryspyng harde
Of teþe tenfully togeder, to teche hym be quoynt. (157-60)

As with the description of the food at the feast and the social convention adhered to in seating, the form of punishment inflicted on the guest conforms to practices in the contemporary world of the poet's readers. Although the dungeon is also a place of grieving and gnashing of teeth, unlike the ambiguous "outer darkness," it is a tangible location within the world. With the addition of the words "to teche hym be quoynt [well-dressed]," the poet suggests that the purpose of the guest's imprisonment is not simply punishment, but reform.⁹⁶ The idea that the guest will learn to change himself through this punishment corresponds to a process of penance or perhaps purgatory, if one insists on an otherworldly association for the dungeon, but not with the finality of hell. This implicit suggestion of penance receives further development later in the poem, where the poet explicitly points to penance as a means of cleansing oneself and thereby becoming worthy to see God. Before the story of Nebuchadnezzar, the poet describes penance as evidence of God's mercy. Just like polishing a pearl, humans can "schyne þur3 schryfte, þa3 þou haf schome serued, / And pure þe with penaunce tyl þou a perle

⁹⁶ Anderson also glosses "quoynt" as "polite or wise."

worþe” (1115-16).⁹⁷ As in the parable, the poem as a whole presents a more complex depiction of God than the three dominant narratives convey. Among these types of judgment, the poet inserts commentary that describes not only Christ’s love of the pure of heart, but also Christ’s welcome reception and healing of the unclean.⁹⁸

The tension between welcoming hospitality and exclusion from the feast not only appears in the text of the parable but also arises poignantly in the poet’s brief explication. While the bulk of the poet’s commentary describes the necessity of wearing clean garments and warns against soiling these garments through a wide variety of sins, the poet begins his explication with a statement affirming the openness of the feast. In lines that paraphrase both the introductory and concluding portions of Matthew’s frame, the poet explains “Thus comparisune3 Kryst þe kyndom of heuen / To þis frelych feste þat fele arn to called” (161-2). The poet does not include Matthew’s final aphorism, “For many ben clepid, but fewe ben chosun,” in the text of his parable and only refers to the moralization with this recitation of its first half: “fele arn to called.” Noticeably omitting the statement that few are chosen, he suggests that the image that best describes the kingdom of heaven is the open banquet populated by the full range of society, not the exclusive gathering that follows a winnowing out of the unworthy. Although the poet admonishes his audience to wear clean garments reflecting good works and a clean heart,

⁹⁷ While penance provides a means of redemption, it does not lessen the demand to live cleanly. Because the cleaned vessel becomes more precious to God, the poet warns that God’s wrath will be greater if the penitent sins again. Just as in the parable, God’s mercy does not preclude the possibility of vengeance. See *Cleanness*, lines 1133-1144.

⁹⁸ Just before the description of penance, the poet lists all the different types of diseased and disabled (i.e., unclean) people Jesus mercifully healed: “3et comen lodly to þat lede, as lazares monye, / Summe lepre, summe lome, and lomerande blynde, / Poysened and parlatyk and pyned in fyres, / Drye folk and ydropike, and dede at þe laste.” See *Cleanness*, lines 1093-96.

he never asserts that this is possible only for the few. God offers his love universally in the hopes that it will be enjoyed widely.

In both the immediate commentary that follows the parable and the rest of the poem the poet foregrounds God's hatred of uncleanness and willingness to harshly punish the impure. Yet by enhancing those elements of the parable that show the host's hospitality and concluding with the sentiment that "fele arn to called," the poet ensures that neither the parable nor the poem projects a simple message about sin and judgment. While the body of vernacular commentary highlighted above demonstrates a persistent effort to attribute a logic to the host's illogical behavior, the *Cleanness* poet rewrites the parable in a manner that perplexes rather than pacifies his readers. In terms of setting, the poet grounds the parable in medieval courtly culture so that the story would resonate with contemporary life. Yet in his particular depiction of events, the poet persistently defamiliarizes the parable. He cites Matthew and then proceeds to integrate elements of Luke's story. He draws attention to the wild, unkempt locations from which the host sought guests and nonetheless expels a guest on account of unclean garments. His host expels the guest to a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth but still leaves open the possibility for reform. This deliberate contradiction of expectations prompts a reader to consider the parable anew and observe what the story itself conveys rather than what the interpretive tradition suggests that it means.

The new parable holds two varying depictions of God in tandem: God is morally exacting and formidable with his punishments, but God is also fundamentally generous and invites everyone to share in his love. Just as the poem features stories from both the Old and New Testaments, the parable represents God in a manner typical of both biblical

traditions. We are accustomed to authors resolving the discrepancy between the merciful God of the gospels and the often angry God of the Pentateuch with the Incarnation. Christ redeems the sins of Adam and forms a new law. Whereas this model reconciles conflict, *Cleanness* depicts ongoing tension between the nature of God in the Old and New Testaments.⁹⁹ Within the parable itself, with its dual dominant themes of inclusion and exclusion, and in the greater macrocosm of the poem, the poet highlights the perplexing coexistence of God's mercy and God's judgment. As a genre marked by paradox, the parable provides an ideal medium for the poet to express these conflicting qualities that he will not attempt to fully reconcile.

⁹⁹ For a more extended consideration of the relationship of the Old and New Testament in the poem, see Theresa Tinkle, "The Heart's Eye: Beatific Vision in *Purity*," *Studies in Philology* 85, no. 4 (1988): 451-470.

Chapter 2

Teaching an Unreasonable Tale: The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

“Me þynk þy tale vnresounable;
Goddez ryzt is redy and euermore rert,
Oþer Holy Wryt is bot a fable.” (590-592)¹

When the *Pearl* maiden concludes her rendition of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the dreamer frustratedly denounces it as an “vnresounable” tale. The system of reward illustrated within it challenges not just his understanding of his daughter’s rightful place in heaven but the veracity of scripture, as it makes holy writ “bot a fable.” While some scholars point to this moment as an indication of the dreamer’s limited understanding, the lines indicate much more than simple obstinacy.² The dreamer reacts in just the manner that the parable encourages, and his denouncement of it responds to the central paradox characteristic of the parable genre.

¹ All *Pearl* quotations are from E.V. Gordon, ed., *Pearl* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

² Sandra Pierson Prior describes the dreamer as representative of the *Pearl* poet’s overall view of humanity as “a pretty sorry lot: weak and foolish creatures, who, even when they know, when they have been told, and they have read, and they have seen the truth of Christianity, do not give up their mortal longings and misunderstandings.” Lynn Staley says the dreamer needs to learn to think allegorically and from a heavenly, instead of worldly, perspective. See Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Pearl Poet Revisited* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan, 1994), 44, and Lynn Staley, *The Voice of the Gawain Poet* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 167, 169. Others see the dreamer not as ignorant, but the mouthpiece of contrasting and even competing theological ideas. Jim Rhodes describes *Pearl* as a Bhaktinian dialogue, in which both sides, the dreamer and the maiden, have equal authority. David Aers describes the dreamer’s views as heterodox, as he displays “the kind of individualistic and rebellious assertiveness with which ecclesiastic authorities associated Lollardy and its effects on lay Christianity.” See Jim Rhodes, “The Dreamer Redeemed: Exile and the Kingdom in the Middle English *Pearl*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 16 (1994): 120, and David Aers, “The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*,” *Speculum* 68, no.1 (1993): 65.

With respect to parables, scripture is indeed “bot a fable,” in so far as Jesus presents his teachings through “a fictitious or imaginative narrative.”³ Yet the dreamer’s employment of the term to challenge the maiden’s teaching suggests that “fable” also connotes falsehood or deception in this context.⁴ The problem the dreamer encounters lies not just in fictional narrative, but the particular genre of parable characterized by subversion and paradox. The dreamer favors straightforward text from which one may logically deduce moral or theological precepts. He contrasts the description of merit in Psalm 61:12, a “verce ouerte” with a “poynt determynable,” with the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard to prove that God rewards all according to their merit (593-94).⁵ By contrasting Psalm 61 with the Vineyard parable, the dreamer both challenges the depiction of justice in the story and questions the efficacy of using subversive, ambiguous narrative for religious edification.

While the dreamer prefers the Psalm with its “poynt determynable,” his articulation of the central paradox in the Vineyard parable shows a sophisticated understanding of the story’s implications:

Now he þat stod þe long day stable,
 And þou to payment com hym byfore,
 Penne þe lasse in werke to take more able,
 And euer þe lenger þe lasse, þe more. (597-600)

³ Middle English Dictionary (MED) “fable” definition 1a.

⁴ MED “fable” definition 2a: “A false statement intended to deceive; a fiction, untruth, falsehood, lie; also, falsehood, lying, or deception.”

⁵ Ps. 61:12 reads “the power of God is, and to thee, Lord, mercy; for thou shalt zelde to eche man aftir his werkis.” All Middle English biblical quotations come from J. Forshall and F. Madden, eds., *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal Books, in the Earliest English Versions, made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1850. Rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1982).

The dreamer cannot accept that the maiden, who worked so briefly in the world and does not even know her Pater Noster or Creed, should reap more reward than those who spent a lifetime trying to be good Christians. The idea of working more for less reward transgresses worldly notions of justice and, perhaps more fundamentally, it creates a sense of futility regarding one's own labor. In *Pearl*, the parable does not simply imply that those who die younger reap an equal reward; the maiden will also suggest that the longer people labor in the world, the more unworthy of heaven they become.⁶ The story shows that the daughter experiences bliss, but it leaves bleak hopes for those like the dreamer who remain behind. The dreamer's recapitulation of the parable's central problem indicates that he grasps what the *Pearl* maiden has said; he therefore objects not out of misunderstanding but out of refusal to accept this narrative as authoritative. Scripture, according to the dreamer, should provide clear instruction, yet this story presents only paradox (that a just God works through injustice) and illuminates no clear way forward for those who remain in the world.

The dreamer and maiden's disagreement over the legitimacy of the parable dramatizes a problem that likely faced preachers in late medieval England as they attempted to explicate a story that would potentially engender the disdain of their audience. A number of scholars have shown similarities between the *Pearl* maiden's discourse and sermons, both throughout the course of the whole poem and in the employment of this narrative in particular as a means of teaching the dreamer. Jane Chance has argued that the poem is "in part an example of the preaching art" structured around the moral, allegorical, and anagogical spiritual senses of interpretation,⁷ while J.J.

⁶ See pages 115-116 below.

Anderson has charted a progression of descending complexity from allegorical, to scholastic, to homiletic modes of instruction throughout the poem, all of which he associates with preaching. Within the explication of the parable in particular, Anderson identifies the movement from addressing humanity in general to addressing the individual dreamer as a preaching technique and calls the dreamer “the target of a sermon.”⁸ Yet comparison with Middle English homilies will show that in its particular content, the *Pearl* maiden’s discourse differs fundamentally from sermons on the same subject. Her rendition of the parable, with its vivid detail and increased focus on the act of labor, prompts reflection on contemporary conditions of work in the world. Yet her interpretation is exclusively allegorical, explicating theological issues pertaining to salvation of the innocent and forcing the dreamer to confront discrepancies between his logic and God’s. In so far as the maiden explains the theological legitimacy of her place in heaven, as opposed to the dreamer’s spiritual development in the world, and leaves the central tension of the story intact, the maiden’s discourse is distinctly unlike a Middle English sermon.

As one of the so-called “Parables of the Kingdom,” the story of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Mt. 20.1-16) endows an ordinary situation, harvest, with extraordinary significance. In this parable, the kingdom is like a vineyard owner who goes out in the morning to find workers and makes a covenant with them for one denarius, or penny in

⁷ Jane Chance, “Allegory and Structure in *Pearl*: The Four Senses of the *Ars Praedicandi* and Fourteenth-Century Homiletic Poetry,” in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1991), 31-60.

⁸ J. J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the Gawain-poems* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 31, 35. Even those who doubt the efficacy of the maiden’s speech sometimes refer to the maiden’s discourse as homiletic. For example, when David Aers describes the maiden’s failure to change the dreamer’s will, he compares her instruction to a homily, arguing that “No homily, however forceful, can bend the will of another.” See Aers, “The Self Mourning,” 64.

Middle English versions, for a day's work in the vineyard. Again at the third, sixth, and ninth hours, he does the same. At the eleventh hour, the vineyard owner finds men still standing in the marketplace, and despite the late hour, he sends them to the vineyard as well. In the evening, the owner instructs his steward to pay all workers the same wage, beginning with those who came last. The laborers who came first protest that those who worked only a short time should not receive the same amount as they who labored through the heat of the day. In response, the owner instructs them to take what is theirs and leave, insisting he did no harm to them. The parable then ends with two aphorisms: the last shall be first and the first last, for many are called but few are chosen. As an illustration of God's kingdom, the parable highlights the disjunction between the human and the divine: it juxtaposes God's mercy with conventional notions of just reward, defined by rendering each his due, and suggests inversion of the worldly social order with the idea that the last shall be first.

Two main allegorical traditions, stemming from Origen's commentary on Matthew, persisted throughout the Middle Ages; the first aligns the times of day with the ages of the world and the second with the ages of a human life. According to the first interpretation, the five times that the vineyard owner goes out to find workers correspond to five ages of the world: the first from the time of Adam to Noah, the second from Noah to Abraham, the third from Abraham to Moses, the fourth from Moses to Christ, and the fifth from Christ to the present.⁹ With some variation, the ages of the world allegory appears in most Latin commentaries, including Augustine and Gregory the Great, and can be found in most Middle English explications of the parable. The interpretation

⁹ For an outline of this interpretation and explanation of its different variations throughout the Middle Ages, see Stephen L. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1987), 138-39.

ameliorates the central problem of the parable by rendering it irrelevant to the present audience. Since the ages of the world model characterizes all contemporary Christians as recipients of the final call, they all equally benefit from God's generosity. It is the Jews who may complain about not reaping just reward. According to the ages of man allegory, God calls Christians repeatedly throughout their lives, including childhood, adolescence, and old age. Therefore, the parable projects hope that even those who only turned to God at the end of their lives may still enter heavenly bliss.¹⁰

While these allegories avoid controversy, the parable poignantly relates to and often emerges in theological debates over justification by grace and the efficacy of works. Augustine, for example, refers to the parable repeatedly in his writings against the Pelagians as a means of showing the gratuitousness of grace. He refers to the parable at length, for example, to show that God may bestow grace on one person without doing any injustice to another: "one is honoured freely in such wise as that another is not defrauded of what is due to him."¹¹ Similarly, Aquinas refers to the parable at the conclusion of his article on whether foreknowledge of merit causes predestination. Referring to the workers' complaint and the vineyard owner's response thereto, he states that both grace and punishment are demonstrations of God's goodness, such that: "He who grants by grace can give freely as he wills, be it more be it less, without prejudice to justice, provided he deprives no one of what is owing."¹² Both defend the action of the

¹⁰Wailes, *Medieval Allegories*, 142.

¹¹ Augustine, "Against Two Letters of the Pelagians," in *A Select Library of the The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 5, *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, rev. trans. Benjamin B. Warfield (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, rptd. 1980), 397. Augustine also discusses the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in "On Forgiveness of Sins, and Baptism" and "On the Gift of Perseverance," both of which are responses to the Pelagians. See *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings* 57 and 531.

vineyard owner and show the dependence of salvation on God's will as opposed to human actions.

While an Augustinian view of salvation remained prominent throughout the Middle Ages, controversy arose among theologians in fourteenth-century England over the role of human free will in salvation. Both Ockham and Holcot, for example, claimed that human actions could positively dispose one to receive God's grace.¹³ Although neither argued that humans could earn salvation, Bradwardine responded to such views as a revival of Pelagianism, and in *De causa Dei*, he attacked soteriologies that allowed a positive role for human free will.¹⁴ Given this context, one might expect that commentaries on the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard would engage with such debates and reaffirm the primary role of grace in salvation. Instead, Middle English interpretations of the parable take a more extreme view of the efficacy of human works than do the salvation theologies Bradwardine characterized as Pelagian. Despite the different opinions among fourteenth-century theologians pertaining to salvation theology, scholastic soteriologies still maintained the necessity of grace.¹⁵ Middle English commentaries on the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard confirm a phenomenon that Patrick Hornbeck has recently demonstrated in his study of Wycliffite views of salvation:

¹² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Prima Pars*, vol. 5 ed. Thomas Gilby (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 129.

¹³ Both Ockham and Holcot maintained that human preparation does not fully merit salvation but only constitutes a half-merit or *meritum de congruo*. The infusion of grace remains necessary for salvation. God rewards such preparation with grace because of a pact he entered with humankind. Because God entered this pact freely, human actions do not cause salvation. See Ian Christopher Levy, "Grace and Freedom in the Soteriology of John Wyclif," *Traditio* 60 (2005): 300-302, and James L. Halverson, *Peter Aureol on Predestination: A Challenge to Late Medieval Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 128-129.

¹⁴ Halverson, *Peter Aureol on Predestination*, 129-131.

¹⁵ See A.E. McGrath, "The Anti-Pelagian Structure of 'Nominalist' Doctrines of Justification," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 57, no. 1 (1981): 115.

mainstream, vernacular religious texts commonly expressed the belief that human works could influence salvation.¹⁶

Homilists, in particular, explicated the parable in a manner that exhorted pious living, aiming to effect not a change in theological understanding but a change in lifestyle that cultivates virtue and eschews vice.¹⁷ As the gospel reading for Septuagesima Sunday, the parable's liturgical context called for a focus on amending sinful behavior.¹⁸ Septuagesima Sunday marked the beginning of the seventy days before Easter,¹⁹ and the penitential disciplines associated with the Lenten period encouraged spiritual work, such as fasting, prayer, and performing works of mercy.²⁰ The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard makes this task challenging in so far as it suggests that those who exert comparatively little effort, either on the literal level of physical labor or interpreted allegorically as spiritual labor, receive the same reward in heaven as those who labor throughout their lives. While the *Pearl* poet forces the reader to confront this discrepancy between divine and human logic without making it more palatable, homilists looked for a way to reconcile the teachings of the parable with conventional religious and

¹⁶ Patrick Hornbeck, "The Development of Heresy: Doctrinal Variation in English 'Lollard' Dissent, 1381-1521" (PhD thesis, Oxford University, 2007), 65.

¹⁷ On the duty of preachers to instruct in morals and move an audience to repentance, see Siegfried Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections from Later Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 336-37.

¹⁸ Most English sermon collections followed the Sarum Use. See Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 22.

¹⁹ Although Septuagesima Sunday is 64 days before Easter, medieval clerics described Septuagesima as marking a 70 day period, which was associated with both the 70 years of the Babylonian captivity and the seven thousand years from the beginning of the world to the ascension. See Edward H. Weatherly, *Speculum Sacerdotale*, EETS o.s. 200 (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 48, 51.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

social practices. In this effort, a number of vernacular homilists counterintuitively interpreted the parable as an illustration of how good works merit reward.

In Middle English homilies, both inherited Latin interpretations and those interpretive strands particular to vernacular commentary ameliorate the central paradox of the parable. Perhaps the most blatant example of this tendency is the explanation of the workers' "grucching" that ultimately derives from Gregory the Great. Of the sermons that directly address the first laborers' complaint, most insist that the sentiment voiced by the workers cannot have expressed envy or the desire to receive more than others. Such emotion would be incompatible with the workers receiving the reward of heavenly bliss. As the Septuagesima sermon in Gloria Cigman's *Lollard Sermons* collection explains, "Seynt Gregorius seip þat þis grucchyng is not ellis but a wonderful merueilyng in mannes soule or mannes þouzt of þe grete mercy, bounte, and grace of oure Lord, þat rewardeþ eche man iliche, boþe firste and laste, þe peni of euerlastyng blisse."²¹ In other words, the complaint signifies the opposite sentiment of that expressed through the literal story; the workers do not begrudge but admire the owners' method of payment. If the story itself elicits sympathy with the first workers, the sermon audience learns that their desire for greater reward can prohibit heavenly bliss.

An even more dominant Latin interpretation, the association of the different hours of the day with the various ages of the world, further discourages the audience's identification with the first workers. The ages of the world interpretation appears in nearly every vernacular explication of the parable, although it is never the main emphasis

²¹ Gloria Cigman, ed., *Lollard Sermons*, EETS o.s. 294 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 85. Similar interpretations are expressed in the Septuagesima sermons in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 806 (see fol. 33r, lines 27-32), London, British Library MS Harley 2276 (see fol. 47v lines 21-22) and the Septuagesima sermon of the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle. For the Wycliffite sermon, see Anne Hudson, ed., *English Wycliffite Sermons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 1:382/102-107.

of a homilist's exegesis.²² Instead, it provides an explanation for how humans come to work in the vineyard and occasionally for the urgency of that work. Because the ages of the world interpretation associates the Jewish people of the Old Testament with those hired at the earlier hours and Christians only with those hired in the final hour, it places the contemporary audience of Christians within the favored position, becoming first although they came last. The homilist of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 806, for example, recites the traditional account that associates the five different hours at which the owner sought workers with the ages between Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David and identifies the eleventh hour with the time of grace initiated by the coming of Christ. Those who come in the time of grace labor less because Christ transformed the law from the Ten Commandments to the two injunctions to love God and neighbor: "And þese come in þe time of grace, for lasse laboure þat þey doon þan þey diden in þe olde lawe. For al þis labour hangeþ in loue, and loue is þe liztest labour þat may."²³ Such an interpretation avoids the conflict inherent within the parable, as it deflects the frustration over the vineyard owner's payment away from the immediate audience and onto a people living in a remote past before Christ. The audience is like those who receive God's mercy in the form of the new law and not those who watch others receiving the same reward for less work.

²² As far as I know, the only Middle English sermon on the Laborers in the Vineyard without reference to the ages of the world allegory is the sermon that appears in both London, British Library MS Harley 2247 and British Library, Royal MS 18.B.xxv. This sermon simply enumerates six different allegorical associations for the vineyard itself, including sin, the church, the soul, the virgin Mary, Christ, and everlasting bliss. The homilist never addresses the different hours at which the owner called workers to the vineyard. The ages of the world interpretation occupies a majority of the Septuagesima sermon in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Greaves 54, but that text is incomplete with a page missing from the manuscript between the Septuagesima and Sexagesima sermons. Since the extant text occupies only the recto and verso of one folio, nearly fifty percent of the text could be missing. See fols. 34r-v.

²³ Bodley 806 fol. 32v lines 21-23.

Having described contemporary Christians as the privileged “last” workers of the parable, homilists are left with the task of explaining why Christians are still not assured of bliss and must continue to labor diligently. Lest the situation seem too favorable for the audience, the author of the *Northern Homily Cycle* explains how the final statement of the parable, “*Multi enim sunt uocati, / Pauci uero electi,*” shows that God’s mercy is not guaranteed.²⁴ Paraphrasing the Latin quotation in English, the author explains that “fune er chosen or wurthi / To folow his trace for sere foly.”²⁵ Human folly impedes worthiness, regardless of whether one is identified with the last or the first. Therefore, the homilist devotes much of his text to warning against sin, calls to repentance, and injunctions to do good works so that one may be chosen. Rather than show an abundance of grace, the parable highlights the precarious state of Christians who have heard God’s call but may fail to live rightly and thereby fail to reap God’s mercy and reward.²⁶

The necessity and the nature of work, as opposed to the sufficiency of grace, are the main themes within Middle English homilies on the Vineyard parable. Effectively, a story that Augustine and Aquinas describe as showing God’s free gift of grace becomes an illustration of how works merit reward. In nearly every Middle English sermon on the parable, statements can be found that describe a reciprocal relationship between doing

²⁴ *The Northern Homily Cycle* differs from the other sermon collections highlighted in this chapter as the author wrote in verse. *The Northern Homily Cycle* was composed earlier than the other sermons as well. It was probably written between 1296 and 1305 but circulated in a number of manuscripts copied in the early fifteenth century. See Saara Nevanlinna, ed., *The Northern Homily Cycle* vol. 1 (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1973), 3-4.

²⁵ Saara Nevanlinna, ed., *The Northern Homily Cycle* vol. 2 *From Septuagesima to the Fifth Sunday after Trinity* (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1973), 12/5837-5838.

²⁶ The author of the Septuagesima sermon in Cigman’s *Lollard Sermons* similarly insists that the story does not promise heavenly reward to all on the basis of the final aphorism: “But heere mizten summe seyn: ‘I here bi þis parable þat, boþe first and laste, alle þei hadden þe peny; and so it wolde seeme þat alle men schulden be saued.’ But þe last worde of þis gospel answereþ herto: ‘Mani men ben clepid, and fewe ben chose.’” Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 85/185-190.

good works and receiving heavenly bliss. Some homilists simply describe those in heaven as people who worked well in the vineyard, without explicitly stating that the reward results from the work performed. The Septuagesima sermon from the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle (EWS 37) states that “all pese men þat comen to heuene worche wel in þis chyrche.”²⁷ Most homilists describe a more direct connection between work and reward. In the Septuagesima sermon from Cigman’s *Lollard Sermons* collection (Lollard Sermon 8), the explication begins with the statement that the gospel “techeþ vs to wirche faste and be not idel while we been here wandrynge in þis wei” because of the payment of bliss that God has promised.²⁸ The homilist of Bodley 806 also stresses that God does not reward the idle and later identifies the necessary work as following the Ten Commandments specifically, which “eche Cristen man is charged bisily to kepe 3if he wole entre into heuene and haue þere þe blessid peny.”²⁹ The strongest statements of reciprocity between work performed in the vineyard and reward received in heaven appear in Wimbledon’s Sermon and the Septuagesima sermon in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS e Museo 180, which borrows extensively from Wimbledon’s sermon. Both cite 1 Corinthians 3:8 as evidence that every person must work according to his station in preparation for evening, or judgment day, at which time “euery man shal take reward, good oþer euyl, aftir þat he haþ trauayled here.”³⁰ Both homilists subsequently connect

²⁷ Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 378/ 6-7.

²⁸ Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 80/5-7.

²⁹ See fol. 33v lines 6-8. Spencer notes that the Septuagesima sermon is the first of a ten-sermon series in Bodley 806, stretching through Easter, that all have a commentary on one of the Ten Commandments appended to them. See Spencer, *English Preaching*, 290.

³⁰ See Ione Kemp Knight, ed., *Wimbledon’s Sermon: Redde Rationem Villicationis Tue; A Middle English Sermon of the Fourteenth Century* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1967), 68/116-117. The language of e Museo 180 differs only slightly: “Every cristen creature schall take his owne mede after that

the evening in the vineyard with the moment at which each person will have to “zilde rekenynge of þy bailie,”³¹ creating an image of God as a scrupulous accountant carefully measuring the merit of each person’s life rather than granting mercy out of abundant grace. Placed in comparison with *Pearl*, this account corroborates the dreamer’s appeal to the Psalter, that God “quyte3 vchon as hys desserte,” as opposed to the maiden’s insistence that “þe grace of God is gret inoghe.”³²

In order to depict the parable as an injunction to work, a number of homilists leave out the controversial portion of the parable in which the vineyard owner pays the last the same as the first, along with the workers’ subsequent complaint against this method of payment. In his Septuagesima homily, John Mirk does not explicate the entire parable but refers to it only briefly to show the necessity of working busily. His sermon focuses more directly on the liturgical occasion of Septuagesima Sunday. At this opening of the Lenten season, Mirk condemns the sinful behavior typical of the Christmas season and recommends three salves for spiritual healing: thinking of death, laboring busily, and chastising the body. Mirk rehearses the Vineyard parable to illustrate the necessity of the second salve, which he enjoins each person to perform within his own estate:

So most yche good seruand enforse hym forto laboure yn þe degre þat God hath sette hym yn. Men of holy chyrche schuld labour bysily prayng and studyng forto teche Godys pepull; lordys and oþer rented men schuld labour bysyly, to kepe holy chirch yn pees and rest, and all oþyr comyn pepull; the comyns schuld labour bysyly, forto gete lyflode to homselfe and to all oþir.³³

he haþe truelyd.” See fol. 245r lines 22-23. The text of 1 Cor. 3:8 reads “and ech schal take his owne mede, aftir his trauel.”

³¹ See Knight, *Wimbleton’s Sermon*, 68/120. “Redde rationem villicacionis tue” is the *thema* for Wimbleton’s sermon.

³² The first five stanzas of the maiden’s explication (section XI) end with the assertion that “þe grace of God is gret inoghe.” See page 116 below.

As evidence for this instruction, Mirk tells the story of the vineyard owner going out to hire workers at all hours of the day. By only telling the story up to the point of inviting the laborers to the vineyard, he deemphasizes reward and insists upon work simply as a means to avoid sin.

Wimbledon's Sermon differs from Mirk's in that it is not a Septuagesima sermon, but Wimbledon similarly abbreviates the parable to concentrate on the injunction to work well in the vineyard. Although the sermon opens with the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, Wimbledon employs the parable in support of a *thema* from Luke 16:2: 'silde rekenynge of þy bailie [stewardship].'³⁴ To make a story in which everyone receives equal reward, regardless of hours worked, correspond to the idea of giving an account of one's stewardship, Wimbledon abbreviates the parable to exclude both the act of payment and complaint. His narrative ends with the vineyard owner's instruction to pay each person a penny in exchange for their labor.³⁵ Thus, the parable illustrates the call to work and the promise of payment without exploring the transgression of earthly norms or the generosity expressed to those who came last. The homilist of Bodleian MS e Museo 180 employs this same abbreviated text in a Septuagesima homily, as he copies and

³³ Theodore Erbe, ed., *Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies, by Johannes Mirkus*, EETS extra series 96 (London, 1905), 65/30-36.

³⁴ The theme, Luke 16:2, corresponds to the gospel reading for the Wednesday after the first Sunday of the Trinity, but marginalia in two manuscripts (Cambridge, Sidney Sussex MS 74 and Cambridge, Trinity College MS 322) associate the sermon with Quinquagesima Sunday. Since John Mirk associates Quinquagesima Sunday with judgment day, Knight argues that Wimbledon's Sermon could fit that occasion as well. See Knight, *Wimbledon's Sermon*, 48-49.

³⁵ The parable text reads: "Lik is þe kyngdom of heuene to an housholdynge man þat wente out first on þe morwe to hire werkemen into his vine. Also aboute þe þridde, sixte, nyenþe, and eleuene houris he wente out and fond men stondynge ydel and sey to hem: Go see into my vyne and þat rizt is I wole zeue 3ow. Whanne þe day was ago, he clepid his styward and heet to zeue eche man a peny." Knight, *Wimbledon's Sermon*, 61/1-12.

occasionally expands the first 120 lines of Wimbledon's Sermon.³⁶ The homilist crafts Wimbledon's text into a Septuagesima sermon by taking his *thema* from Matthew 20:8, "Calle þe werkmen and zelde them there hyre." Like Wimbledon, the homilist encourages his audience to work virtuously to become "worþi to haue owre wagys" and describes Christ's action on judgment day as giving "mede to the werkemen of his vynezarde or þer peyne to hem þat kepe not þer ordyr after there degreis."³⁷ Both authors caution their audiences that failure to work well in the vineyard can lead to punishment in hell, so that a parable featuring the generosity of a vineyard owner becomes a story about accountability at judgment.

Vernacular homilists not only explicate the narrative as an injunction to work to merit the bliss of heaven, they commonly insist on this work occurring within a traditional social role, correlating virtue with social convention and sin with transgression of such norms. As illustrated in Mirk's homily above, authors frequently connected a threefold estates model with the Vineyard parable, so that the story promotes a particular type of work for different social groups. This essentially feudal model divides a community according to function, those who pray, those who fight, and those who labor, in a manner that reflects not the reality of late-medieval society but a conservative theory of social relations. Georges Duby notes that the model first appears in English texts in times of turbulent social change, which could help to explain the prominence of the three estates model in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century texts.³⁸ With regard to labor

³⁶ The sermons in Oxford, Bodleian Library e Museo 180 also appear in Lincoln Cathedral 50 and 51 (one manuscript now divided), Gloucester Cathedral Library 22, and Durham, UL Cosin V. iv. 3. The manuscripts were all written by the same scribe and date from the late fifteenth century. Spencer suggests that they were produced for wide circulation. See Spencer, *English Preaching*, 314.

³⁷ Bodleian Library MS e Museo 180 fols. 245^v ll. 4-5 and 246^f ll.17-20.

disputes in particular, the threefold model dispelled conflict between laborers and landowners by attributing equal spiritual value to the duties of clergy, lords, and laborers and defining social problems that disturb this balance in religious terms so that sins are understood as their causes.³⁹

The most prominent use of the estates model appears in Wimbledon's Sermon, in which the three estates, initially discussed with reference to the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, provide the division for the rest of the sermon in which Wimbledon enumerates three questions each estate will have to answer at judgment.⁴⁰ Just as there are different roles in tilling the material vine (pruning branches, railing the vines, and fertilizing), there are different offices in the church: "presthod, kny3thod, and laboreris." To priests, Wimbledon assigns the task of pruning, whereby they cut away branches destroyed by sin through preaching "wiþ þe swerd of here tonge." Railing, assigned to knights, involves a greater variety of tasks for protecting both the institutional church and the realm, including preventing theft, maintaining God's law and those who teach it, and protecting the land from foreign enemies. Finally, laborers should work in a way that recalls the physical labor in the vineyard, as "wiþ here sore swet [laborers] geten out of þe erþe bodily liflode for hem and for oþer parties."⁴¹ Wimbledon stresses the interdependence of the three tasks and thereby of the three estates, warning that "zif eny

³⁸ The model appears in texts in England as early as the late ninth-century Anglo-Saxon translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and several early eleventh-century writings by Aelfric. See Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 100-104.

³⁹ Andrew Cole, "Trifunctionality and the Tree of Charity: Literary and Social Practices in *Piers Plowman*," *ELH* 62 (1995): 7.

⁴⁰ Wimbledon's Sermon was preached at St. Paul's Cross as early as 1387 and perhaps again in 1388 and 1389. See Knight, *Wimbledon's Sermon*, 41-43.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 63/39-46.

of hem fayle it schal harme gretly or distroye þe vyne.”⁴² Whether cleric or lay person, landowner or laborer, Wimbledon endows each person’s work with equal spiritual significance, as they collectively cultivate a society reflective of God’s kingdom.

Wimbledon characterizes working within one’s station as necessary for both prosperity in this world and salvation in the next. While the parable shows all laborers receiving reward, Wimbledon uses the story in a contrary manner to depict reward as conditional upon working in one’s proper role. Having justified the necessity of work for the physical and spiritual health of the community, he defines the eschatological stakes of such labor for each individual:

And o þyng y dar wel seye: þat he þat is neiþer traueylynge in þis world on prayeris and prechyng for helpe of þe puple, as it falliþ to prestis; neiþer in fyztinge azenis tyrauntis and enemyes, as it falliþ to knyztis; neiþer trauaylinge on þe erþe, as it falliþ to laboreris – whanne þe day of his rekenyng comeþ þat is þe ende of þis lif, ryzt as he lyuede here wiþoutyn trauayle, so he shal þere lacke þe reward of þe peny, þat is þe endeles ioye of heuene.⁴³

While a number of sermons similarly warn that one must work diligently in the vineyard to receive the penny, Wimbledon suggests that in addition to idleness, transgression of traditional social roles could forfeit the penny as well. For disturbing harmonized order in the world, he warns that after death such people will find themselves “in þat place þat noon ordre is inne, but euerelastyng hourrour’ and sorwe þat is in helle.”⁴⁴ With this emphasis on potential damnation, Wimbledon could not be further from the *Pearl* maiden: the exegesis concerns the threat of hell as much as the reward of heaven and articulates how to avoid punishment instead of the mysterious nature of grace.

⁴² Knight, *Wimbledon’s Sermon*, 62/31-33.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 66/87-94.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 66/96-97.

Given the survival of Wimbledon's Sermon in nineteen manuscripts, a number of which contain Lollard texts, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Septuagesima sermons of the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle and Cigman's *Lollard Sermons* collection bear similarities to Wimbledon as well.⁴⁵ In a recent study of the transmission of Wimbledon's Sermon, Alexandra Walsham describes it as a text that "straddled the porous and unstable boundary between orthodoxy and heterodoxy," since it appears alongside sermons from Mirk's *Festial* as well as in manuscripts containing Lollard sermons and devotional treatises.⁴⁶ In a number of ways, the Septuagesima sermon from the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle differs considerably from Wimbledon's. The homilist not only explicates the entire parable, but he focuses on grace more than any of the other Middle English sermons. Like the *Pearl* maiden, the homilist emphasizes God's mercy more than human effort, insisting that no one should complain about God's justice, "for he may 3yuen of his owne more þan any man may disserue by mannys ristwisnesse, or euenehed of any chaffare."⁴⁷ He devotes considerable text to the ages of the world interpretation that depicts contemporary Christians as the last workers who receive God's mercy and refers to Gregory the Great's interpretation of the worker's complaint, insisting that they thanked

⁴⁵ For a complete list of manuscripts containing Wimbledon's Sermon, see Patrick J. Horner, "Later Middle English Sermons and Homilies," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967-), 11: 4296.

⁴⁶ Wimbledon's Sermon appears alongside Lollard devotional and polemical texts in London, British Library MS Harley 2398, MS Additional 24202, and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Eng. th. f. 39 (formerly Helmingham Hall MS LJ II 9). It appears with Wycliffite sermons in Cambridge, Sidney Sussex College MS 74, Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.14.38, and London, British Library MS Additional 37677. See Alexandra Walsham, "Inventing the Lollard Past: The Afterlife of a Medieval Sermon in Early Modern England," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 58 (2007), 638-39; Jill Havens, "Shading the Grey Area: Determining Heresy in Middle English Texts," in *Text and Controversy from Wyclif to Bale: Essays in Honour of Anne Hudson*, ed. Helen Barr and Ann M. Hutchinson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 341; and Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 424.

⁴⁷ Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 382/110-112.

God for the gracious payment.⁴⁸ Like other vernacular homilists, he devotes much of his text to the nature of the work of the vineyard, but he defines this work as a cooperative effort between humans and God, in which “God 3yueþ þe growyng, al 3if men planten and watren.”⁴⁹ The optimistic tone of this homily sharply contrasts both Wimbledon’s Sermon and Lollard Sermon 8: it neither urges sinners to repentance or reform, nor does it mention consequences for failing to do the work of the vineyard.

Nevertheless, the homilist advocates certain types of work in his explication of the Vineyard parable and describes these tasks as belonging to particular estates. Like Wimbledon, he defines the three tasks of the vineyard as fertilizing, pruning, and railing, but he assigns these roles to only the first and second estates.⁵⁰ Instead of laborers, preachers fertilize the vine’s roots. While this task does not necessarily exclude lay people, the author does not address those who perform physical labor as Wimbledon and other homilists do.⁵¹ Digging and fertilizing are entirely figurative, as preachers “deluen abowte byleue” and fertilize “wiþ fyue wordis þat seynte Powle wolde teche þe peple.”⁵² Whereas Wimbledon assigns preachers to the task of pruning, the Wycliffite homilist gives this role to powerful laymen. Instead of cutting branches of sin, laymen should prune the vines by removing cursed men from the church and by removing worldly goods

⁴⁸ Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 379/28-42, 381/75-91, and 382/102-107.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 380/51-52.

⁵⁰ Wimbledon’s Sermon was preached between 1387 and 1389 (see note 40 above), while the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle was likely composed in the 1380s. On the dating of the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle, see Spencer, *English Preaching*, 277 and 474 n. 32.

⁵¹ On lay preaching, see Simon Forde, “Lay Preaching and the Lollards of Norwich Diocese, 1428-4131,” *Leeds Studies in English* 29 (1998): 109-126.

⁵² Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 380/50-51,55-56.

from clerics.⁵³ While the laity protects the church from corruption through disendowment, the clergy keep social order. The homilist assigns the job of railing to “prelatis and oþre vykerus of God,” who perform the task by ensuring the various estates remain in the roles God ordained for them.⁵⁴ Despite the radical social change encompassed in disendowment, the homilist defines railing in a way that endorses a conservative social structure without movement among classes and tacitly encourages using sermons as a means of promoting this social model. Since the threefold estates model differs widely from the contemporary social reality, both tasks encourage dramatic, but complementary social change. If the clergy would perform their role as God ordained, powerful laymen would not need to remove corrupt members from their ranks.

The Septuagesima sermon from Cigman’s *Lollard Sermons* collection contains more direct parallels to Wimbledon’s sermon. In accordance with the description of the clergy’s duties in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle, Lollard Sermon 8 provides an illustration of priests “railing” the vineyard, as the homilist defines the work of the vineyard according to a three estates model and castigates workers for failing to perform their given roles.⁵⁵ Like Wimbledon, the Lollard homilist defines the three main tasks in the vineyard as fertilizing, railing, and pruning, and he allegorically interprets each task in

⁵³ Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 380/60-64. This difference reflects what Katherine Little describes as a focus on the institutional, rather than the individual, in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle. See Katherine C. Little, ‘Catechesis and Castigation: Sin in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle,’ *Traditio* 54 (1999): 217.

⁵⁴ Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 380-381/66-68.

⁵⁵ The Septuagesima sermon in Cigman’s collection appears in London, British Library Add. MS 41321 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS C. 751. Jeremy Griffiths dates the two hands of Add. 41321 to the middle of the first half of the fifteenth century and the hand of Rawlinson C. 751 to the beginning of the fifteenth century. See *Lollard Sermons*, xii, xxv. Cigman suggests that the sermons were likely composed twenty to thirty years before the date of the manuscripts. See “Luceat Lux Vestra: the Lollard Preacher as Truth and Light,” *Review of English Studies* 40 (1989): 482.

similar ways. Yet unlike Wimbledon, the Lollard homilist includes the whole text of the parable, including the workers' objection to the vineyard owner's equal payment. As such, the sermon provides the most powerful example of a homilist who does not simply ignore but actively ameliorates the central tension between laborer and employer, so that the story supports a traditional social model according to which laborers should patiently travail without demanding additional reward.

In sharp contrast to the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle, this homilist pays considerably more attention to the duties of laborers than to those of priests and knights. The description of priests' tasks in Lollard Sermon 8 builds upon Wimbledon's. Whereas Wimbledon describes pruning as cutting branches of sin with the sword of the tongue, the Lollard homilist enjoins priests to curb "wantunnesse or wildenesse of synne þat growep of mennes herte to fer into dede," and advocates doing so with "scharpe bitynge sentencis of Holi Writt or, if nede axiþ, wiþ censures of holi chirche."⁵⁶ The addition defies expectations for a "Lollard" sermon, as naming censure or punishment as an additional sword implies support for the very mechanisms of the institutional church that punish those accused and convicted of heresy. The sermon as a whole does not endorse the institutional church structure, however, as the homilist later advocates that the members of the church should freely elect the meekest and least worldly person as priest.⁵⁷ Similarly emphasizing the importance of holy living for priests, the homilist states that after pruning the branches of the vineyard through preaching and punishment, priests should lead people to "þe vine of riztes werkes" through the example of their own life.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 88/277-278.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 90/324-329.

The Lollard homilists' description of the task assigned to the second estate contrasts both Wimbledon's Sermon and the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle in its narrow scope and lack of specificity. Like Wimbledon, the homilist assigns knights, or "þe cheualrie," the task of railing, but he devotes the majority of the relevant text to explaining the literal means of holding up the vine instead of the political acts they symbolize. Although Wimbledon names a number of tasks signified by railing, which pertain to the maintenance of the state and the church, the Lollard homilist focuses exclusively on the threat of tyrants.⁵⁹ With the power they receive from God, the second estate should "bere vp þe vine of riztwisnesse" to protect it from briars, weeds, and worldly tyrants, "for so vnderstondeþ Crisostom bi 'busches of breris'." Again insisting that people in positions of power should be virtuous, the homilist warns that in the shade of briars, or tyrants, only venomous beasts and adders (or fiends) will rest. While tyrants collect other vicious people around them, they also harm simple people, whom the homilist compares to sheep whose wool is pulled and plundered while they rest.⁶⁰ The homilist does not explicitly advocate any lay intervention in the institutional church, as the author of the Wycliffite Sermon does, but given his suggestion that priests be elected, the second estate's duties could potentially extend to defense against ecclesiastical tyranny as well.

The homilist of Lollard Sermon 8 particularly focuses on the laboring class, both by inverting the order found in Wimbledon's text to begin with laborers and by devoting

⁵⁸ Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 88/279-81.

⁵⁹ Wimbledon addresses the threat of tyrants in his second summary of each estate's duty, which is quoted at length on page 91 above.

⁶⁰ Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 88/255-68.

considerably more text to the nature of their work.⁶¹ Like Wimbledon, the homilist assigns the task of fertilizing to the third estate, which he describes as the “lowist estaat of holi chirche, þat is: þe comyne peple.” The first interpretation of their role in the vineyard is literal: this estate labors in the earth “as in erylunge, and dungyhunge, and sowyunge, and harwyunge.”⁶² Through such physical labor, the common people act as the roots of society, bearing up and sustaining the other two parts of the church.⁶³

Wimbledon’s text similarly emphasizes the rest of society’s dependence on the third estate, as he urges laborers to travail so that the earth may yield “bodily liflode for hem and for oþer parties” and warns that without laborers, priests and knights would be forced to work as ploughmen and herdsmen or else die of starvation.⁶⁴ Society’s dependence upon the third estate heightens the urgency of their compliance with their role. Thus, the Lollard homilist instructs them to work “wipoute feyntise, or falsede, or grucchyng of hire estaat,” with the word “grucchyng” recalling the complaining workers of the parable.⁶⁵ Although the parable shows such “grucchers” receiving their reward, the homilist insists that envy or indignation puts one out of charity and would prohibit them

⁶¹ Two recent essays have explored the emphasis on labor in this particular Lollard sermon. Helen Barr examines Lollard depictions of the three estates and characterizes this sermon as valorizing labor. Shannon Gayk highlights the ‘self-consciously literary’ nature of these sermons and compares the depiction of labor within them to *Piers Plowman*. See Helen Barr, “‘Blessed are the Horny Hands of Toil’: Wycliffite Representations of the Third Estate” in *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 128-157, and Shannon Gayk, “‘As Plouzman Han Preued’: The Alliterative Work of a Set of Lollard Sermons,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 20 (2006): 43-65.

⁶² Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 86/208-209.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 86/212-214.

⁶⁴ Knight, *Wimbledon’s Sermon*, 63/46.

⁶⁵ Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 86/209-211.

from numbering among the saved.⁶⁶ The third estate must act better than the first laborers from the parable by performing physical labor without complaint.

Going beyond Wimbledon, the Lollard homilist gives a spiritual interpretation of the fertilizing task that both recommends specific acts of penance and reminds this audience of their lowly state. The homilist urges his audience to repentance, as he likens opening the earth to opening the heart through confession and fertilizing to laying on the heart the “dunge of scharpe penaunce.” By enumerating specific penitential acts such as fasting, wearing wool close to the skin, sleeping on a hard surface [hard liggyng], and “sore” disciplines, he provides the audience direct instruction in how to merit reward.⁶⁷ To avoid future sin and fertilize the roots of good works, the homilist recommends that the third estate be mindful of their corporal connection to the soil: “þou art but a sac ful of dritte, keuered vndir cloþes; and if it were turned outweis þat þat is wiþinne, he þat most makip of himself, þe world wolde sette him at nouzt.”⁶⁸ With respect to wealth and position, the third estate seems least in danger of pride, yet the homilist issues this warning to humble oneself only to the common people. Also within this section specific to the third estate, the homilist recommends they observe what filth comes out of the body, naming the eyes, nose, mouth, ears, and “priue places” to bring to mind each “issu” of the body and concludes “þis is no poynt of pride, if it be wel ipreued!”⁶⁹ Combined with the description of each laborer as “a sac ful of dritte,” the homilist implies that

⁶⁶ The homilist offers Gregory the Great’s explanation that the complaint represents marveling within the soul or thinking about God’s mercy and grace. See pages 82-83 above.

⁶⁷ Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 86/216-21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 86-87/227-229.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 87/230-34. Shannon Gayk points to this section of the Septuagesima sermon as an example of the homilist employing alliterative prose for affective purposes. See “As Plouzman Han Preued,” 57.

laborers are essentially befouled and sinful.⁷⁰ While emphasizing the importance of physical labor for a community's prosperity, the homilist degrades and admonishes laborers themselves in a way that encourages them to maintain their traditional role.⁷¹ Mildly recalling what Helen Barr has described as the "contempt branch of peasant discourse," the homilist associates laborers with filth and bodily functions, humbling those he has already described as "lowist", and urges them to perform their work without complaint.⁷²

The Lollard homilist combines Wimbledon's instruction for how to work in the vineyard with an urgent exhortation to undertake the work described. An opposing threefold schema, based on three enemies of "þe world, þe flesch, and þe fende," characterizes the estates model as an ideal failing to be realized.⁷³ Equating these enemies with three threats to the vine of Egypt named in Psalm 79, the homilist warns against passersby who pluck its fruit, the boar from the woods, and the singular wild beast.⁷⁴ Passersby are particularly responsible for the corrupt state of the clergy, as the homilist identifies them with covetous men who break God's commandments, practice simony, and place unholy men in the role of priest. The remaining two enemies embody

⁷⁰ In addition to mud or dirt, the *Middle English Dictionary* lists excrement, 'something worthless or degrading,' and 'something vile or sinful' as possible definitions for 'dritte'. See MED 'drit' n., 1a, 3a, and 3b.

⁷¹ Barr cites Lollard Sermon 8 as evidence that Lollard texts privileged the third estate, but she discusses only the first portion of the relevant passage, which characterizes this class as the root of society. See "Blessed are the Horny Hands," 136-7.

⁷² Barr, "Blessed are the Horney Hands," 131.

⁷³ As Andrew Cole has observed, the winds that threaten the Tree of Charity in *Piers Plowman* carry the same three enemies of the world, the flesh, and the fiend. See Cole, "Trifunctionality," 3-4.

⁷⁴ Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 88/283-289.

six of the seven deadly sins to which members of any estate are susceptible.⁷⁵ These threats flourish in the vineyard, while the three estates described earlier remain “so idel also in hire labour, eche in his degre, þat it [the vineyard] is al awyldid.”⁷⁶ Whereas the first workers begrudge their wage in the text of the parable, the Lollard homilist suggests that it is the vineyard owner who has a right to complain, uttering in the words of Isaiah, “I haue abide þat it schulde make grapes; forsoþe it made wylde grapes þat beþ not able to man.”⁷⁷ The homily contains no reassurances of God’s mercy (the homilist recites but quickly dismisses the favorable ages of the world interpretation) but instead characterizes the audience as a people mired in sin, utterly failing in the tasks set before them. The parable that features equal reward for unequal work is interpreted as a wholesale condemnation of the laborers in the vineyard and an injunction for the audience to work in their God-given role to merit reward.

Across the ideological spectrum, homilists essentially rewrite the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard so that it provides pragmatic spiritual instruction in support of a particular social vision. Rather than highlight a discrepancy between worldly and divine logic, homilists characterize the estates model as a divinely sanctioned structure for work in the world, according to which God will reward heavenly bliss. In so far as they address the situation of those living in the world and provide tangible instruction on how to work toward salvation, Middle English sermons sharply contrast the discourse on the Vineyard parable in *Pearl*. Rather than focus on the situation of those who continue to

⁷⁵ The boor signifies the glutton who smites with cursed words while drunk, the slothful who do not labor in their office, and the lecherous who stink with sin. The singular wild beast gnaws the vine with pride, wrath, and envy. See Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 90-92/348-410.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 92/414-415.

⁷⁷ Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 92/418-419.

labor (the situation of the dreamer), the *Pearl* maiden primarily explains the reward given to the “last,” interpreting last as those who die in childhood.⁷⁸ Specifically, the maiden describes herself as one who came last and employs the parable in an attempt to counter the dreamer’s opinion that she does not deserve the honor of being a queen of heaven. Conceiving of reward in heaven as proportional to spiritual work on earth, the dreamer complains that she who did not know such basic elements of the faith as the Pater Noster and Creed could not possibly merit the honor of being a queen of heaven (484-85). For the maiden to have this honor, he insists, “hit is to dere a date” (492). Whereas the dreamer uses the term “date” with reference to the height of her honor, the maiden plays on the word in her retort. She employs it with the meaning “limit” and narrates the parable as a means of showing the dreamer that “þer is no date of hys godnesse” (493). Like Augustine in his writings against the Pelagians, the maiden endeavors to show that God acts justly when he gratuitously awards grace.

The particular rendition of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard that the maiden recites accentuates the contrast between the ways of God and those of the world. The maiden introduces the parable to the dreamer with reference to both its biblical and liturgical contexts, stating “as Mathew mele3 in your messe / In sothfol gospel of God almy3t” (498-499). The reference to mass suggests that the story would be familiar to the immediate audience of the dreamer and the wider audience of the reader as the gospel reading for Septuagesima Sunday. By designating the liturgy as “your messe,” however,

⁷⁸ Although the idea of the “last” being those who died in childhood does not correspond with the parable’s two major strands of allegorical interpretation (the ages of man and the ages of the world), D.W. Robertson has shown that the interpretation in *Pearl* is not heterodox. He points to the exegesis of Bruno Astensis in the twelfth century that defines the eleventh hour as the hour before death. Correspondingly, the *Pearl* maiden entered the vineyard through baptism shortly before her death. See D.W. Robertson, “The ‘Heresy’ of the *Pearl*,” *Modern Language Notes* 65, no. 3 (1950): 153, 155.

the maiden reiterates the gulf that separates the dreamer from her: he experiences God mediated through the ritual and sacrament of the mass, while she dwells with God directly. Despite recognizing mass as the familiar context of the story for the dreamer, she does not tailor her rendition and explication to fit the liturgical, Lenten context of Septuagesima in which preachers like Mirk urged their audience to penance and good works. Instead, she speaks about complex theological truths from her heavenly perspective, giving precedence to justification of her place in heaven over explanation of his path to bliss.⁷⁹

In the maiden's rendition of the parable, the poet enhances the central conflict between the vineyard owner and the workers by simultaneously praising the former and inducing sympathy for the latter. As in *Cleanness*, the *Pearl* poet accentuates tensions inherent within the story, with the result that recent critics just as frequently read the parable as an illustration of fourteenth century labor politics as of an Augustinian theology of grace.⁸⁰ Positive portrayals of the vineyard owner frame the parable and encourage association of that figure with God. Such adaptation of the gospel parable begins with the first line, in which Matthew explains "The kyngdom of heuenes is lijc to an housbonde man, that wente out first bi the morewe, to hire werk men in to his vynezerd" (20:1).⁸¹ The parables of the kingdom, which begin with this simile

⁷⁹ John Gatta similarly argues that the teaching about salvation of innocents has no direct bearing on the dreamer's own life and proposes that the maiden instead uses the parable "to instruct him in the very manner of spiritual truth." See John Gatta, "Transformation Symbolism and the Liturgy of the Mass in *Pearl*," *Modern Philology* 71, no. 3 (1974): 250.

⁸⁰ For examples of the first, see Barr, "*Pearl* – or 'the Jeweler's Tale,'" *Medium Aevum* 69, no. 1 (2000): 59-79; John Bowers, "The Politics of *Pearl*," *Exemplaria* 7, no. 2 (1995): 419-441; and John Watkins, "'Sengely in Synglere': *Pearl* and Late Medieval Individualism," *Chaucer Yearbook* 2 (1995): 117-136. For the latter, see Rhodes, "The Dreamer Redeemed."

construction of “the kingdom of heaven is like...,” resist interpretations of a simple one-to-one correspondence in their basic grammar. Heaven is neither like a husbandman, nor like a vineyard. It is like a series of actions spelled out throughout the rest of the parable.⁸² The *Pearl* account simplifies this construction so that the kingdom parallels not a verb, but a noun, the husbandman: “‘My regne,’ He sayt3, ‘is lyk on hy3t / To a lorde þat hade a uyne, I wate’” (501-502). The idea that heaven is like a man and something he owns, rather than something he does, concentrates the comparison with heaven in the vineyard owner himself, enhancing his moral authority and preparing the reader to blame those who question or contradict him.

While the opening lines of the parable suggest the owner’s likeness to the ruler of heaven, his divinity becomes fully articulated in the iteration of the aphorisms at the close of the parable. At this point the maiden attributes the words to Christ, who confirms the owner’s method of payment as representative of his own: “‘Þus schal I, quop Kryste, “hit skyfte [apportion]: / Þe laste schal be þe fyrst þat stryke3, / And þe fyrst þe laste, be he neuer so swyft, / For mony ben called, þa3 fewe be myke3” (569-72).⁸³ Many Middle

⁸¹ “Simile est regnum caelorum homini patrifamilias, qui exiit primo mane conducere operarios in vineam suam.” All quotations of the Vulgate come from Alberto Colunga and Laurentio Turrado, eds., *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgata Clementinam*, 5th ed. (Madrid: Biblioteca Autores Cristianos, 1977).

⁸² The commentary in the *Glossa Ordinaria* discourages readers from making a simple one-to-one correspondence between the kingdom of heaven and the vineyard or vineyard owner, insisting that the kingdom is not simply like the man but the whole matter conducted by him: “Non homini solum: sed toti negotio ab homine gesto et in similibus similiter.” See Karlfried Froehlich and Margaret T. Gibson, *Biblia Latina Cum Glossa Ordinaria: Facsimile Reprint of the Editio Princeps Adolph Rusch of Strassburg 148081* (Brepols: Turnhout, 1992), 4:63.

⁸³ The *Pearl* poet translates the final maxim unconventionally, replacing the past participle “chosun” with the noun “myke3,” a shortened form of amike, meaning friends. Because of its context, the MED suggests it figuratively means “the elect” as well. The Latin root, *amicus*, appears in the Vulgate text of the Vineyard parable in a different position. When the vineyard owner responds to the representative of the complaining workers, he addresses him as friend: “Amice, non facio tibi iniuriam.” If the poet intended a correspondence between his use of “myke3” and the use of the same term earlier in the parable, he implies that the complaining workers number among the chosen.

English renditions of the parable do not even include the final statements that the last are first and that many are called but few chosen, possibly because of the difficulty they pose for the coherence of the story.⁸⁴ The accounts of the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, Wimbledon's Sermon, and the Septuagesima sermon in Oxford, Bodleian Library e Museo 180 all end with the statement that the husbandman instructed the steward to pay those who came late the same amount as those who worked the whole day, ending with an image of leveling, rather than inversion, and leaving out the entire incident of the workers' complaint. Among those translations that include the laborers' objection and the vineyard owner's response, Sermon 8 from Ross' collection of *Middle English Sermons* and the *Northern Homily Cycle* end with adaptations of the husbandman's question "Whether thin ize is wickid, for Y am good?"⁸⁵ Both effectively conclude the story with a juxtaposition of the goodness of the vineyard owner with the jealousy of the workers. In *Pearl*, the inclusion of the aphorisms emphasize the maiden's privileged position as both last and chosen, while their utterance by Christ make the vineyard owner's actions an expression of divine will.

Despite the frame that likens the owner to God or Christ, a more ambiguous characterization of the vineyard owner emerges in the body of the story. Unlike some Middle English translations, the *Pearl* poet does not reiterate the goodness of the owner

⁸⁴ Particularly the exclusivity of the statement that few are chosen seems incongruous with a parable in which all receive reward.

⁸⁵ The author of Middle English Sermon 8 changes the vineyard owner's question into a declaration: "Poo pou be wickid, I will be good." Woodburn O. Ross, *Middle English Sermons* EETS o.s. 209 (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 41/1. In the *Northern Homily Cycle*, the parable ends with the questions "If I be gude, what greues þe? Dose it þe scath þat I am fre?" Although absent from the story itself, the statement that "many are called but few are chosen" appears in the explication of the parable in the *Northern Homily Cycle*. It follows a description of the ages of the world and precedes an explanation of who had not heard the call to the vineyard: Saracens and others not told by priests and prophets that they should repent. The author gives the aphorism in Latin and then translates it into English in a manner that describes why few would be chosen: "Many er cald to Cristes lay, / Bote fune er chosen or wurthi / To folow his trace for sere foly." Nevanlinna, *The Northern Homily Cycle*, 12/5836-5838.

throughout the parable. In the *Northern Homily Cycle*, for example, the translation itself conveys the sense that the vineyard owner, rather than the protesting laborers, acts justly. The author prefaces their complaint with praise of the vineyard owner, calling him a good man:

And to þe gude man þan þei said,
“Al day haue we traueled fast
Byfor þam þat war hirid last.
We had þe hete of all þe day,
And eyn with vs now made er þai.”⁸⁶

Likewise, the Septuagesima sermon in Harley 2247 denotes the husbandman as “good” four out of the five times that the term “husbond” appears. Such classification automatically places the complaining workers in opposition to the “good” and endorses the vineyard owner’s rebuke. These same references to the vineyard owner within *Pearl* remain neutral so that a reader judges his merit based on actions rather than the author’s declaration of his virtue.

Although he does so indirectly, Wimbledon is the only Middle English homilist who casts doubt on the virtue of the vineyard owner. In the initial explication of the parable, Wimbledon identifies the vineyard owner as Christ, yet later in the sermon he criticizes the practices of landowners. Warning each person about the sin of greed, Wimbledon censures rich men who take the land of the poor. He condemns the contemporary practice of wealthy landowners acquiring what little land belongs to those of lesser means:

For 3if a riche man haue a feld and a pore man haue in þe myddis or in þe syde
þerof oon acre, or 3if a riche man haue al a strete saue oon hous þat sum pore

⁸⁶ Nevanlinna, *Northern Homily Cycle*, 9/5734-5738.

broþer of hys oweþ, he cessep neuere into þat he gete þat out of þe pore mannys hondis oiþer by prayere, oiþer by byggyngge, oiþer by pursuyngge.⁸⁷

Landowners greedily amass more land, bringing themselves more wealth and shrinking the number of people who belong to their class. While this criticism may seem too general to pertain to the situation of the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, Wimbledon goes on to criticize exploitation of the poor in vineyards in particular, characterizing the rich as those who pluck the grapes of those they have oppressed.⁸⁸ Wimbledon therefore implies that the goodness of the vineyard owner comes from his particular association with Christ or the particular actions of the vineyard owner in the parable, rather than his position of social authority. His status as a part of the landowning class gives readers reason to doubt, rather than assume, the virtue of his behavior.

A similar tension between the figurative representation of God as a vineyard owner and a literal vineyard owner's potential exploitation of workers appears within the text of the *Pearl* parable. Within the body of the parable, the *Pearl* poet focuses on the plight of the workers, generating sympathy for both their disadvantaged position and their travail. As a number of scholars have observed, the primary points of expansion in the *Pearl* parable relate to the physical work in the vineyard.⁸⁹ Collectively, these adaptations lend credence to the complaint of the workers who came first and believe they should receive more than those who came last. The poet's adaptations establish the urgent need for manual labor, both because of the particular time of year and society's

⁸⁷ Knight, *Wimbledon's Sermon*, 93/506-512. This account of wealthy landowners usurping the lands of the lower classes describes the same phenomenon that William Herzog identifies as a potential socio-political context for the parable in first century Palestine. See William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 88.

⁸⁸ Knight, *Wimbledon's Sermon*, 95/538-541.

⁸⁹ See John Watkins, "Pearl and Late Medieval Individualism," and Helen Barr, "Pearl – or 'the Jeweler's Tale.'"

dependence on the fruits of such work. Whereas Matthew simply states that the vineyard owner rises early to seek workers, the *Pearl* poet defines the day in question as harvest time and accentuates the urgency of the labor that day. The maiden narrates,

Of tyme of zere þe terme wat3 ty3t
To labor vyne wat3 dere þe date.
Pat date of zere wel knawe þys hyne [laborerers].
Þe lorde ful erly vp he ros
To hyre werkmen to hys vyne. (503-507)

The time of year is one anticipated by owners and laborers alike, and the poet creates an image of day laborers gathering in the morning, awaiting enlistment in employment. The invocation of harvest time is one of several elements scholars point to as evidence that the *Pearl* parable resonates with labor debates in late fourteenth-century England. John Bowers has shown that at harvest laborers were in the best position for bargaining and could demand higher wages from employers.⁹⁰ Yet the vineyard owner finds laborers each time he seeks them, and the story reflects no difficulty on the part of the vineyard owner in getting the workers to agree to his terms. The atmosphere of harvest may well invoke conflicts over laborers bargaining for higher wages, but the parable also shows particularly amenable laborers who consistently accept the owner's terms of hire.

Commentators frequently criticized the workers of the parable for their idleness,⁹¹ but the *Pearl* poet frees them of this charge. Matthew uses the term *idle* to refer to the workers twice, once with reference to the men found standing at the third hour and again when the vineyard owner inquires of those whom he found at the eleventh hour why they

⁹⁰ See Bowers, "The Politics of *Pearl*," 425.

⁹¹ Following Chrysostom, a number of vernacular commentators warn against idleness and explain the difference between states of idleness and sinfulness. In both Lollard Sermon 8 and the *Glossed Gospels*, the authors explain that whereas sinners actively commit offenses, such as theft, idle people fail to do good works. While they do not steal, they also do not give. Thus, they warn against a spiritual apathy in which simply avoiding sin is perceived to be sufficient. See Cigman, *Lollard Sermons*, 82/152-163. For the *Glossed Gospels*, see British Library MS Add 28026 fol. 113r column B lines 15-31.

stood idle all day. In the context of post-plague England, the charge of idleness would carry particular associations with labor laws, like the 1388 Statute of Laborers that mandated that all able-bodied people work. According to Christopher Given-Wilson, the definition of vagrancy expanded to such an extent in the fifteenth century that, by 1446, if non-landowners did not accept a contract for a year's work they would be classified as a vagabond.⁹² Yet changes in the *Pearl* version of the parable differentiate these laborers from those targeted by fourteenth-century labor laws and the context of the parable from a situation of a labor shortage. Attestations from the laborers whom the owner enlists throughout the day suggest a situation of unemployment, in which surplus laborers wait eagerly for work and defend themselves from the charge of idleness. Whereas at the third hour in Matthew's version the vineyard owner simply sees idle men and tells them to go into his vineyard, in *Pearl*, he engages the men in conversation, inquiring why they sit idly and reminding them of the urgency of this particular day. In response to this question, the men insist upon their desire to work: "We haf standen her syn ros þe sunne, / And no mon bydde3 vus do ry3t no3t" (519-520). Similarly, even those hired in the last hour, whom the poet describes as idle and "ful stronge" (531) explain that they stood waiting all day because no one hired them (534).⁹³ The poet features the charge of

⁹² Christopher Given-Wilson, "The Problem of Labour in the Context of English Government, c. 1350-1450" in *The Problem of Labor in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. James Bothwell, P.J.P. Goldberg and W. Mark Ormrod (York: York Medieval Press, 2000), 88-89. In a somewhat contrasting assessment, Christopher Dyer is skeptical that the actual problem of idleness was as large as the complaints against it might suggest. Instead, he thinks the fervent complaints against idleness reflect the importance of laborers given the scarcity of workers. See Christopher Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 222.

⁹³ Watkins cites the description of the men as "ydel and ful stronge" as an example of the *Pearl* poet potentially critiquing contemporary laborers, who would refuse work in order to receive higher wages from another employer. See Watkins, "Pearl and Late Medieval Individualism," 124. Although the individual phrase may recall this practice, the laborers in the story act in an opposite manner.

idleness, as in Matthew, but he makes clear that inactivity results from a situation of unemployment rather than an unwillingness to work on the part of the laborers.

In addition to showing the laborers' readiness to work, the poet calls attention to the effort they exert. The gospel parable focuses on the gathering of workers and subsequent payment; the only mention of the toils of labor comes in the form of complaint – the workers who protest that they have “born the charge of the dai, and heete” (Mt. 20:12).⁹⁴ The *Pearl* poet describes the labor performed in the vineyard in more detail than in the gospel and more objectively, through narration in addition to the words of the laborers themselves. As the vineyard owner sends the first group of workers to the vineyard, the poet articulates the manner of work done for the harvest, along with the strain involved: “and forth þay got3 / Wryþen and worchen and don gret pyne, / Keruen and caggen and man hit [the crop] clos [secure]” (510-512). Describing the labor in the vineyard, cutting and tying the crop, not only validates the workers' claim that they struggled throughout the day but also highlights their specific skill and what they contribute to the community through harvest.⁹⁵ Together with the initial declaration that all knew the harvest day and the response to accusations of idleness that follow, the poet consistently emphasizes the laborers' willingness to work for the good of the community.

While the readiness to work and effort exerted in the vineyard positively reflect on the laborers, the wages the vineyard owner offers to pay do not depict him as generous. Considered in the contemporary labor context, the owner appears more interested in providing the legally mandated compensation, which protected the interests

⁹⁴ “Qui portavimus pondus diei, et aestus.”

⁹⁵ Rhodes similarly observes that the images of labor show the importance of what he describes as “humble, routine labor and those in the margins of society” to the vitality of community. See Rhodes, “The Dreamer Redeemed,” 135.

of landowners, than in providing a competitive wage. Following the biblical source, the vineyard owner in *Pearl* defines the workers' wage two times in two different manners. With the first group he employs, the owner comes to an agreement with the workers ("into acorde þay con declyne," l. 509)⁹⁶ that he will pay one penny for the day's labor. The specific amount of one penny could suggest the landowner complies with statutory requirements, as the wage corresponds to the wage level set by the 1351 Statute of Laborers.⁹⁷ While the landowner thus ensures he acts legally, the wage is considerably lower than what contemporary laborers received. Day laborers typically received four times that during harvest season and in some counties as much as six times that rate.⁹⁸ The workers' willingness to work for a non-competitive wage reiterates their dedication to communal good, rather than individual profit. It further suggests a surplus labor situation, unlike that in contemporary England, in which the owner did not need to offer high pay to find the workers for his vineyard. With the second group of workers, the vineyard owner names no particular wage but instead promises "what resonabele hyre be nazt runne / I yow pay in dede and þošte" (523-24).⁹⁹ Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron describe "in dede and þošte" as a legalistic formula indicating the workers will

⁹⁶ Cf. Mt. 20:2 "Forsothe the couenaunt maad with workmen" or "conventionem autem factam cum operariis."

⁹⁷ The Statute of Laborers mandated that wages remain at their 1346 level. According to examples given within the text of the statute, the wage of one penny per day corresponds to the limit mandated for those working "at the time of weeding or hay-making." Other examples given describe compensation by the bushel or acre, not the hour. See R.B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: MacMillan Press, 1970), 63-68.

⁹⁸ For the average of four cents a day, see Nora Kenyon, "Labour Conditions in Essex in the Reign of Richard II," *Economic History Review* 4 (1934): 438, 444. On some laborers in Suffolk receiving 6d per day during harvest, see Simon Penn and Christopher Dyer, "Wages and Earnings in Late Medieval England: Evidence from the Enforcement of the Labour Laws," *Economic History Review* 2nd Ser. 43, no. 3 (1990): 369.

⁹⁹ Cf. Mt. 20:4 "and that that shal be ritful, I shal zeue to þou" or "quod iustum fuerit dabo vobis." The *Pearl* poet changes rightful or just to reasonable payment, suggesting it is fitting, normal, or sufficient, but not necessarily virtuous. See MED definitions 3 and 4 for "reasonable."

be paid in full, but in a study of English labor practices, Christopher Dyer has suggested that “reasonable” could serve as code for low wages.¹⁰⁰

Depending primarily on whether they emphasize the historical context or the figurative meanings of the parable, scholars disagree on the generosity of the vineyard owner in relation to the wage. Many do not question the amount and focus instead on the symbolism of the penny. The most common association for the penny made by medieval commentators and modern scholars alike is heavenly bliss, but critics have connected the image of the penny in *Pearl* with the Eucharist or the offertory penny as well.¹⁰¹

Particularly the first two preclude objections to the amount, as each communicates a reward that is from God and therefore complete. If we interpret the wage figuratively, the vineyard owner necessarily appears generous, both in the reward he promises and his even distribution of it. Yet even Bowers, who looks for connections to fourteenth-century politics and characterizes the penny as an unfair wage, still thinks the *Pearl* parable as a whole depicts the vineyard owner as fundamentally generous and cites this generosity as evidence of the poet siding with the gentry.

Having cultivated sympathy for the plight of the workers and potentially having raised questions about fair wages, the poet nevertheless sharply favors the owner as the day comes to an end. The vivid detail near the end of the parable not only enhances the literal setting of labor performed up until sunset but also encourages a figurative interpretation in which the end of the day symbolizes judgment. Emphasis on the

¹⁰⁰ See Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 4th ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 78 and Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, 225.

¹⁰¹ The association of the penny with heavenly bliss is commonplace. It appears in the *Glossa Ordinaria* and almost every vernacular commentary included in this chapter. Among *Pearl* scholars, Robert Ackerman first associated the penny with the Eucharist. Gatta accepts this association and argues that the penny invokes the offertory penny as well. See Ackerman, “The *Pearl* Maiden and the Penny,” *Romance Philology* 18 (1964): 615-623; Gatta, “Transformation Symbolism,” 252.

impending dusk indicates the urgent need to work before the reckoning takes place. What the gospel text simply denotes as the eleventh hour,¹⁰² the poet calls “euensonge” and describes as both “þe date of day” and “on oure byfore þe sonne go doun” (529-530). Similarly, the poet paints an image of sunset instead of merely stating that the work day had ended, rendering “whanne euenyng was comun” from Matthew as “sone þe worlde bycom wel broun; / Pe sunne wat3 doun and hit wex late. / To take her hyre he made sumoun; / Pe day wat3 al apassed date ” (537-40). As Lynn Staley has shown, the detailed physical imagery of the harvest season, along with the language of “late”, “date”, and “sumoun” bring to mind impending judgment.¹⁰³

It is within this context of judgment that the tension between the interests of the laborers and the owner peaks. Exploiting the paradox inherent within the parable, the poet strengthens both the laborers’ complaint and the owner’s defense. The poet favors the owner from the beginning of the payment scene, changing the gospel story to suggest that the vineyard owner intended to act fairly. The owner arranges the laborers in a line and begins with the last so that he may avoid reproach:¹⁰⁴

... ‘Lede, pay þe meyny.
Gyf hem þe hyre þat I hem owe,
And fyrr, þat non me may reprené [reproach],
Set hem alle vpon a rawe
And gyf vchon inlyche a peny.

¹⁰² Matthew 20:6 reads: “aboute the elleuenthe our he wente out, and foond other stondyng.”

¹⁰³ Staley views the two senses of time invoked by the poet, seasons of the year and times of day, as reflective of one another. Therefore, she associates sundown with the season of harvest, when the sun moves into Libra, and notes that Libra is depicted as scales and associated with reckoning. See Lynn Staley, “The *Pearl* Dreamer and the Eleventh Hour,” in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives on the Pearl-Poet*, ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1991), 8-9.

¹⁰⁴ A.C. Spearing suggests that the arrangement in a row reflects the *Pearl* poet’s interest in spatial relations. See *The Gawain Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 101-102.

Bygyn at þe laste þat stande3 lowe,
Tyl to þe fyrste þat þou atteney.' (542-48)

The rationale implies not only that the owner believes himself to act justly but also that he expects his employees will agree with his conception of justice. For the vineyard owner, justice pertains to giving the reward promised and ensuring all receive, whereas for the workers just payment compensates each person according to the amount of work done and gives workers the ability, through continued labor, to merit greater reward.

The laborers' complaint manifests the tension between different conceptions of justice. The poet rewords the dialogue in order to stress the comparative efforts of the first and last laborers. Whereas in Matthew, the workers state once that they bore the charge of the day and the heat, in *Pearl*, the workers state that they travailed, served, and suffered, as compared to the brief strain and work of those who came late:

But the firste camen, and demeden, that thei schulden take more, but thei token ech oon bi hem silf a peny; and in the takyng grutchiden azens the hosebonde man, and seiden, These laste wrouzten oon our, and thou hast maad hem euen to vs, that han born the charge of the dai, and heete? (Mt. 20:10-12)

And þenne þe fyrst bygonne to pleny
And sayden þat þay hade trauayled sore:
'Þese bot on oure hem con streny;
Vus þynk vus o3e to take more.

'More haf we serued, vus þynk so,
Þat suffred han þe daye3 hete,
Þenn þyse þat wro3t not houre3 two,
And þou dot3 hem vus to counterfete [resemble].' (549-556)

In both Matthew and the *Pearl* parable, those who came first do not object to the later workers receiving the penny. Instead, the workers insist that if the late workers' deeds merited a penny, their labors surely merited more. By adding the complaint that the vineyard owner "dot3 hem vus to counterfete," the *Pearl* poet emphasizes that the

workers take issue with being made equal, not with the owner's generosity to the later workers as such. Their frustration results from the apparent uselessness of their longer labors.

Up through the complaint, the poet successfully generates sympathy for those hired early, aligning the audience with the interests of that party and preparing both groups for rebuke. The vineyard owner in *Pearl* rejects the laborers' complaint on two grounds, both of which contradict the economic system envisioned by the laborers in which employees would be compensated according to the amount they worked. He first denies their petition on the grounds of covenant. Whereas in the gospel, the owner simply asks one of the first laborers "whether thou hast not acordid with me for a peny?" (Mt. 20:13),¹⁰⁵ the owner in *Pearl* questions the laborer at greater length to further emphasize the concept of covenant:

And I hyred þe for a peny agrete,
Quy bygynnez þou now to þrete?
Wat3 not a pené þy couenaunt þore?
Fyrre þen couenaunde is no3t to plete;
Wy schalte þou þenne ask more? (560-64)

Because they have established a covenant, the laborers have no basis for requesting greater reward, regardless of how the vineyard owner treats those he employed later. At a literal level, the owner's response reflects a conflict between what Helen Barr calls "merchant's time," which measures work in terms of hours, as opposed to "feudal time," which measures work according to days.¹⁰⁶ Allegorically, the owner's emphasis of the

¹⁰⁵ Cf. "nonne ex denario convenisti mecum?"

¹⁰⁶ In addition to merchant time and feudal time, Barr also defines "Church time," which one borrows from God and cannot measure. Barr suggests that the original parable pertains to feudal time and Church time, while the *Pearl* poet's particular diction inserts a merchant perspective into the story. While the poet certainly emphasizes the laborers' desire to be paid according to the work they performed, this

initial contract invokes a concept of justice demonstrated by God's relationship to the Israelites in the Old Testament: fidelity to covenant.¹⁰⁷

The vineyard owner also justifies his action in terms of gift-giving, so that his payment reflects both a feudal economic model and God's granting of bliss through grace. The owner inquires to the representative of the protesting laborers, "More, weþer louyly is me my gifte, / To do wyth myn quatso me lyke?" (565-66).¹⁰⁸ Among Middle English renditions of the parable, the explicit language of gift only appears in *Pearl*. In the gospel text, the owner simply asks the laborers if he is not allowed to do what he wants: "Whether it is not leueful to me to do that that Y wole?" (Mt. 20:15).¹⁰⁹ In a number of Middle English sermons, the owner makes the same straightforward claim that he should be able to do as he wishes, implying that the owner, by virtue of his wealth and social position, has no restrictions on his behavior toward those of inferior status.¹¹⁰ Other Middle English translations give more specific justification for the owner's autonomy. The authors of *Northern Homily Cycle* and Sermon 8 in Ross' *Middle English Sermons* rephrase the idea so that it focuses on the owner's property specifically, asking

"commercial outlook" is present in the biblical parable as well since the workers suggest they should be paid differently than those who labored a shorter time. See Barr, "*Pearl* – or 'the Jeweler's Tale,'" 72.

¹⁰⁷ On defining justice in terms of fidelity instead of due reward, see A.D. Horgan, "Justice in the *Pearl*" *Review of English Studies* 32, no. 126 (1981): 174-175.

¹⁰⁸ In addition to defining gift as something given freely or generously, three of the seven entries for the word "yift" in the Middle English Dictionary pertain to something given by or for God, such as charitable contributions, spiritual gifts, or divine dispensation. See MED definitions 4, 5a, 5b, and 6.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. "aut non licet mihi quod volo facere."

¹¹⁰ Sermons that maintain the same sense as Matthew's gospel in this line include the Septuagesima sermons in London, British Library MS Harley 2247, Harley 2276, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 806, and the Septuagesima sermon from the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle. For the Wycliffite sermon, see Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 382/99-100.

“Is it not lefull to me to do with my goode what me liste?”¹¹¹ The *Pearl* poet likewise describes the owner’s freedom in relation to his property, but by using the term gift he attributes such payment to the owner’s generosity. While the idea of covenant recognizes the laborer as an active party entering into an agreement, the concept of gift renders the worker dependent on the generosity of the person who employed him; his efforts cannot independently guarantee reward. At a literal level, a gift-based payment replaces a mercantile economic model with an older feudal system. Figuratively, the language of “gift” invokes the idea of grace, so that the dispute between the laborers and the vineyard owner more explicitly represents debate over works-oriented and grace-oriented soteriologies. On this level, the parable shows that the individual cannot independently merit what God gives freely of His own will.

The maiden’s explication of the parable emphasizes this allegorical meaning, as she primarily explains the sufficiency and necessity of God’s grace. Prompted by the dreamer’s objection that those who work less cannot receive more, the maiden repeatedly insists that “þe grace of God is gret inoghe.”¹¹² Her articulation of grace contradicts human logic, requiring the dreamer to accept that reward can be different in degree but still equal. She explains that concepts like less and more are irrelevant in God’s kingdom, where people are rewarded the same [inlyche] regardless of “wheþer lyttel oþer much be hys rewarde” (601-604). Insisting upon the fundamental generosity of God, the maiden protests that “þe gentyll Cheuentayn is no chyche [cheapskate], / Queþer-so-euer he dele nesch [soft] oþer harde” (605-606). This defense of mild and harsh treatment

¹¹¹ Ross, *Middle English Sermons*, 40/38-39. The *Northern Homily Cycle* text reads “May I noight do my liking / Of þat es mine awin(g) thing?” See Nevanlinna, 9/5747-5748.

¹¹² This refrain appears as the last line of five consecutive stanzas; see lines 612, 624, 636, 648, and 660.

recalls Augustine and Aquinas' citation of the parable to show that God may reward differently and yet justly.¹¹³ Nevertheless, the maiden does not entirely deny a role for humans in their salvation. Describing the abundance of God's grace, she suggests that people may positively dispose themselves to receive it: "Hys fraunchyse is large þat euer dard [stood in awe] / To Hym þat matz in synne rescoghe; / No blysse betz fro hem reparate [withheld], / For þe grace of God is gret inoghe" (609-612).¹¹⁴ In a manner reminiscent of Ockham and Holcot, who believed humans could prepare themselves to receive grace, the maiden suggests that God will bestow grace on all who humble themselves before Him.¹¹⁵

Although she suggests that human behavior can play some role in salvation, the maiden nevertheless insists upon the necessity of grace so that her soteriology resembles those of scholastic theologians rather than vernacular preachers. Correcting the dreamer's charge that she is unworthy of her place in heaven, the maiden insists upon the unworthiness of every person living in the world:

Where wyste3 þou euer any bourne abate,
 Euer so holy in hys prayere,
 Pat he ne forfeled by sumkyn gate
 Þe mede sumtyme of heuene3 clere?
 And ay þe ofter þe alder þay were,
 Þay laften ry3t and wro3ten woghe
 Mercy and grace moste hem þen stere,

¹¹³ See page 78 above.

¹¹⁴ Critics interpret these lines in significantly different ways, primarily because of the ambiguity of the words "fraunchyse" and "dard." Gordon provides two examples: "That man's privilege is great who ever stood in awe of Him who rescues sinners" or "His (God's) generosity, which is always inscrutable (*lit.* lay hidden) is abundant to the man who rescues his soul from sin." I favor the first translation. The act of standing in awe of, or submission to, God seems more consistent with the rest of the maiden's discourse that emphasizes the role of God more than the role of humans. Additionally, the second translation contains an internal contradiction: if God's grace is inscrutable, it should be impossible to declare that the one who rescues himself from sin may receive it. See Gordon, *Pearl*, 67-68.

¹¹⁵ See page 80 note 13 above.

For þe grace of God is gret inno3e. (617-624)

Because of humans' inevitable sinfulness, which the maiden describes as not only accumulating but increasing in frequency over the course of a lifetime, a gift of grace is necessary for salvation. The exception to this situation is the life of innocents, who enter the vineyard through baptism but die before they commit any wrongs (625-634). As a member of this group, the maiden always maintained grace sufficient for her salvation.

In addition to the maiden's salvation theology, which emphasizes grace over works, the greater focus on her own spiritual state than on the dreamer's distinguishes the maiden's explication from a sermon. Scholars who conceive of the maiden's discourse as essentially consolatory or homiletic search her commentary for instruction on how the dreamer can reach the heavenly bliss the maiden herself enjoys.¹¹⁶ Yet for the maiden, communicating the fundamental difference between their two conditions, and the rightness of her honor in heaven, takes precedence over guiding the dreamer to his own salvation.¹¹⁷ Referring to the Psalter twice and the Wisdom of Solomon once, the maiden stacks examples that reiterate the dreamer's insecurity and her assurance of bliss.¹¹⁸ She teaches the dreamer that the innocent may rest with God, while the righteous may approach God only if they "take3 not her lyf in vayne, / Ne glauere3 her niezbor wyth no

¹¹⁶ Lynn Staley argues that the maiden uses the parable to illustrate the necessity of spiritual labor to earn spiritual reward and claims that the story imparts a sense of duty and hope to the dreamer. See Staley, *The Voice of the Gawain Poet*, 188. Sandra Pierson Prior states that the parable shows how God rewards workers with entrance to the kingdom of heaven. See Pierson Prior, *The Pearl Poet Revisited*, 47.

¹¹⁷ A.C. Spearing argues that the maiden uses the parable "to prove to the Dreamer that it is in accordance with God's justice that she, who performed no good works, should receive an equal reward in heaven to those who had lived longer in the world and suffered more." See Spearing, *The Gawain Poet*, 101. Similarly, Gatta describes the maiden's discourse as instruction in spiritual truth, since the salvation of innocents can have no immediate application to the dreamer's life. See Gatta, "Transformation Symbolism," 250.

¹¹⁸ Andrews and Waldron identify the references in three consecutive stanzas (lines 677, 689, and 698) with Ps. 14 (AV 15):1-3 or Ps. 23 (AV 24): 3-6, Wis. 10:10, and Ps. 142 (AV 143):2. See Andrew and Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 85-86.

gyle” (687-88). Despite briefly describing the virtue of good living, the maiden offers the dreamer no assured means of salvation, as she asserts that “non lyuyande to þe [God] is justyfyet” (700). To be righteous requires virtuous living, but righteousness itself cannot merit salvation. Even in an explanation of how the dreamer may receive God’s mercy, the maiden highlights her own privileged situation. She maintains, for example, that those who sinned after baptism may have grace “zif hym repente” (662), so long as they sorrowfully crave forgiveness and abide pain. Reason dictates, however, that God “sauez euermore þe innosent” outright (666). Essentially, the dreamer learns that he must continue to labor on a difficult path, while her journey through life was easy. This stanza, along with four others in which she contrasts their respective situations, ends with an assertion that God “sauez euermore þe innosent” outright (666). Thus, in almost a taunting manner, the maiden reiterates the difficult path facing the dreamer with the constant backdrop of her own bliss.

The final image the maiden employs to establish her special status also illustrates the seemingly impossible task facing the dreamer. She paraphrases a passage on the innocence of children from Matthew 19 – the beginning of the discourse featuring Jesus and the disciples that closes with the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. Placing the dreamer in the same position as the misunderstanding disciples, the maiden explains Jesus’ special love of the innocent:

For happe and hele þat fro Hym zede
 To touch her chylder þay fayr Hym prayed.
 His dessypelez with blame let be hem bede
 And wyth her resounez ful fele restayed.
 Jesus þenne hem swetely sayde:
 “Do way, let chylder vnto me tyzt.
 To suche is heuentryche arayed”:
 Þe innocent is ay saf by ryzt. (713-720)

In explicating this passage, the maiden gives the harshest assessment of the dreamer's situation, for Jesus explains that none will come to heaven "Bot he come þyder ryȝt as a chylde, / Oþer elles neuermore come þerinne" (723-724). After consistently reiterating their different conditions, the maiden insists that to come to heaven the dreamer must somehow become like her: "Harmlez, trwe, and vndefylde, / Wythouten mote oþer mascle of sulpande synne" (725-726). In other words, he too must be unmarred by sin and pure as a precious pearl.

The spiritual advice that the maiden offers the dreamer provides a final contrast between the maiden's discourse and Middle English sermons: whereas homilists suggested that people could merit salvation by working in their proper social role, the maiden advocates a spiritual perfection incompatible with life in the world. The instruction for how the dreamer might become like the maiden, which concludes her explication of the Vineyard parable, comes in the form of another, shorter parable: the Pearl of Great Price. Explaining the bliss enjoyed by those with child-like innocence, the maiden compares heaven with the pearl that the jeweler sought in Matthew's gospel. Her version inverts the order of the original parable, which in Matthew opens with the formula "The kyngdom of heuenes is lijk...", to begin with and thereby place greater emphasis on the pearl itself.¹¹⁹ She paraphrases the parable as "This makelleȝ perle þat boȝt is dere, / Þe joueler gef fore alle hys god, / Is lyke þe reme of heuenesse clere" (733-35). After a series of lines articulating the common qualities of the pearl and heaven (737-39), she advises the dreamer "I rede þe forsake þe worlde wode / And porchace þy perle maskelles" (743-44). The maiden finally recommends a path for the dreamer, who

¹¹⁹ Matthew's text reads "Eftsoone the kyngdom of heuenes is lijk to a marchaunt, that sechith good margaritis; but whanne he hath foundun o precious margarite, he wente, and selde alle thingis that he hadde, and bouȝte it" (Mt. 13:45-46).

up to this point has learned much about the superiority of the maiden's condition and very little about his own means to salvation: Following the example of the jeweler in the parable, the proper way for the dreamer to live in the world is to forsake it. The same instruction comes from Jesus in Matthew 19 with one key difference. When an unnamed man travelling in Judea asks Jesus, "Good maister, what of good thing shal I do, that I haue euerlastyng lyf?" (Mt. 19:16), Jesus distinguishes between two paths to salvation. Initially, he recommends that the man keep the commandments.¹²⁰ Only when the man asks to do something more does Jesus recommend selling all his goods as a means to achieve not just salvation, but perfection: "3if thou wolt be perfit, go, and selle alle thingus that thou hast, and 3eue to pore men, and thou shalt haue tresour in heuene" (Mt. 19:21).¹²¹ When the *Pearl* maiden offers the dreamer some instruction on his own path to heavenly bliss, she bypasses more basic forms of devotion that guide right living in the world and recommends that he pursue spiritual perfection.

While Middle English homilists overwhelmingly convert the story into moral instruction, transforming narrative paradox into exemplum, the *Pearl* poet maintains and enhances tensions within the story that prompt its audience to reject its message. The discrepancy may result from two different contexts for the parable text: one liturgical and one from the gospel itself. On the first Sunday of the Lenten season, homilists understandably focused their exegesis on the need for penance and the means by which Christians should increase their devotion in the seventy days before Easter. But within

¹²⁰ This is the same advice that the homilist of Bodley 806 offers for how to work well in the vineyard and thereby earn one's reward. See page 84 above.

¹²¹ The man who asked "wente away sorwful" because he had many possessions. Jesus then explains to his disciples how hard it is for the rich to enter heaven, using the famous image that it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter heaven (Mt. 19:22-24).

the gospel of Matthew, Jesus employs the parable with seemingly different aims. Although the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard begins at Matthew 20:1, it is a part of a discourse begun in Matthew 19 on who receives eternal life – a particularly “scholarly” discourse that challenges deeply rooted human notions of justice, virtue, and love.¹²² Immediately before the parable, Jesus promises great reward for those who sever familial ties (a situation of obvious relevance to the separation of the dreamer and his daughter), and earlier in the discourse he insists that none will come to heaven except in a state of child-like innocence. In between these two statements, he teaches that whoever wants to be perfect should sell all his things and declares that it is easier for a camel to enter the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. When the disciples react with bewilderment at the seeming impossibility of salvation, Jesus responds that “Anentis men this thing is impossible; but anentis God alle thingis ben possible” (Mt. 19:26). Closing the discourse with the statement that the last shall be first and the Vineyard parable, Jesus emphasizes the gulf between human expectation and the ways of God.¹²³

Both the larger context of *Pearl* and the specific commentary on the parable invoke themes that precede the parable in Matthew’s gospel, suggesting that its biblical context may be more relevant to the parable found in the poem than the liturgical context. The maiden has severed familial ties to her father and has come to heaven in a state of child-like innocence. In her explication, she advocates that the dreamer should forsake the world and insists on the paradoxical notion that the last shall be first. Throughout the

¹²² Petri Loumanen, *Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Study on the Structure of Matthew’s View of Salvation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 145, 148.

¹²³ While both the liturgy and the chapter divisions in the gospel itself separate the parable from the preceding discourse, the Middle English gospel harmony *Oon of Foure* presents the parable within the same textual unit as the material in Matthew 19. The parable begins directly after Matthew 19:30 without any division in the text and concludes this textual unit. Section 9:10 starts immediately after the parable. See, for example, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 481 fols. 63v-64r.

discourse in Matthew, Jesus does not make palatable statements that reassure his audience, nor does he mediate between the divine and the human so that the ineffable becomes plainly understood. He emphasizes disjunction between these two realms, culminating in the parable's poignant illustration of the impasse between what humans and God conceive as just. Rather than transform the parable into a story with tangible, actionable application to daily life in the world, which Middle English sermons demonstrate is the homiletic mode, the *Pearl* maiden keeps the contradiction of God and human logic intact, forcing the audience, like the disciples, to confront that discrepancy without removing any of its discomfort.

Chapter 3

**“Go þou, and do þou in lyk manere:”
Piers Plowman and the Challenge of the Good Samaritan**

...and siþþe þus I hym tolde
How þat feiþ fleiz away and *Spes* his felawe boþe
For sighte of þe sorweful segge þat robbed was with þeues.
‘Haue hem excused,’ quod he; ‘hir help may litel auaille.
May no medicine vnder mone þe man to heele brynge,
Neiþer Feiþ ne fyn hope, so festred be hise woundes,
Wiþouten þe blood of a barn born of a mayde.’ (*Piers Plowman* B 17.90-96)¹

Having watched the events of the Good Samaritan parable unfold before him, Will chases down the departing Samaritan and reminds him that Abraham/Faith and Moses/Hope failed to help the wounded man. For Will, the failure of the first two men to help another in need makes as great an impression as the charity shown by the Samaritan, and he wants to know more about the implications of their inaction. Surprisingly, the Samaritan focuses on the potential effectiveness of the men’s help, as opposed to their unwillingness, and consequently excuses Abraham and Moses because they do not have the medicine necessary to heal such wounds. The Samaritan’s excusing the first two men reveals the different ways in which he and Will interpret the parable: Will searches for the ethical implications of the literal events that unfolded before him, while the Samaritan perceives the parable allegorically.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all *Piers Plowman* quotations are from George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds., *Piers Plowman: The B Version: Will’s Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best* (London: Athlone Press, 1975).

Both the particular rendition of the Good Samaritan parable in *Piers Plowman* and its explication are highly allegorical, likening the Samaritan to Christ and thereby characterizing his deeds as a uniquely divine and efficacious expression of love. Yet the literal events of the Samaritan story and its immediate context in Luke's gospel encourage an audience to learn an ethical lesson from the story: they should go "and do pou in lyk manere" to the Samaritan who cared for the wounded man. The exchange between Will and the Samaritan in *Piers Plowman* shows the potential conflict between these two interpretations of the same story: how can a human act in like manner to the Samaritan when he manifests a degree of love unique to the divine? And why should people strive to imitate him when their help "may litel auaille?"

Most scholarship on medieval interpretations of the Parable of the Good Samaritan explores the allegorical significance of the story without confronting the challenge of the injunction to individual acts of mercy in the parable itself or how that injunction relates to the ultimate act of mercy performed by Christ on the cross.² In the case of *Piers Plowman*, scholars regard the Samaritan's interpretation as authoritative and Will's attention to the other men's inaction as a misreading of the parable.³ Throughout this chapter, I investigate the legitimacy of Will's reading of the Good Samaritan story in

² For medieval interpretations of the Good Samaritan parable, see Stephen Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1987), 209-14.

³ For a recent, compelling account of the Christological significance of the parable in *Piers Plowman*, see David Aers, "Remembering the Samaritan, Remembering *Semyuief*: Salvation and Sin in *Piers Plowman* (The C Version)" in *Salvation and Sin* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2009). Other helpful readings of the Samaritan story in *Piers Plowman* in relation to Latin exegesis include Ben H. Smith, *Traditional Imagery of Charity in "Piers Plowman"* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966); Raymond St. Jacques, "The Liturgical Associations of Langland's Samaritan," *Traditio* 25 (1969): 217-230; J.A.W. Bennett, "Langland's Samaritan," *Poetica* 12 (1981): 10-27; and Tom Hill, "The Swift Samaritan's Journey: *Piers Plowman* C XVIII-XIX," *Anglia* 120, no. 2 (2002): 184-199. One exception to this approach is David G. Hale, "The Glose Was Gloriously Written: The Textuality of Langland's Good Samaritan," *Proceedings of the PMR Conference* 14 (1989): 127-134. Hale emphasizes those aspects of the parable for which traditional exegesis does not account and notes the ways in which Langland distances the story from its scriptural context.

two ways. First, I explore Middle English renditions of the parable that emphasize its ethical implications. These texts show consensus regarding the importance of acting like the Samaritan but conflicting opinions about what that means in practice. With these in mind, I then turn to the rendition of the parable in *Piers Plowman*, along with the discussion of charity surrounding it, to investigate how Langland depicts the relationship between individual acts of mercy and the Redemption.

Unlike the parables featured in the first two chapters, the story of the Good Samaritan is not a parable of the kingdom. Rather than metaphorically describe another world, it presents an ethic for living in this world. Most renditions of the parable begin with Jesus talking to a lawyer who asks how he may attain eternal life. Jesus responds by asking the man to answer his own question, given his expertise as a lawyer: “What is writun in the lawe? hou redist thou?” (Lk.10:26). The lawyer says he should love God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love his neighbor as himself. When Jesus confirms his answer and bids him to live thereby, the lawyer further inquires “And who is my neizebore?”⁴ In reply, Jesus narrates a story about an anonymous man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, who encounters thieves that rob him, wound him, and leave him half-alive. A priest walks by the wounded man and does nothing, as does a Levite.⁵ Finally, a Samaritan walks by and takes pity on him, bandaging his wounds and treating them with wine and oil. He places the wounded man on his animal, brings him to an inn, and pays the innkeeper two denarii to care for him, promising to pay for any extra

⁴ In the gospel, this question is described as the lawyer’s attempt to justify himself: “Forsothe he willinge to iustifye him silf, seide to Jhesu, And who is my neizebore?” (Lk. 10:29) All Middle English biblical quotations come from J. Forshall and F. Madden, eds., *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal Books, in the Earliest English Versions, made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1850. Rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1982).

⁵ Middle English translations frequently refer to the Levite as a deacon.

expenses the wounded man incurs when he returns. The passage concludes with Jesus asking the lawyer which of the three men was neighbor to the wounded man. The lawyer responds “He that did mercy on him,” and Jesus tells him to go and do likewise.

While Luke’s gospel frames the story within a conversation about the commandment to love one’s neighbor, the focus of that conversation changes from the introduction to the conclusion of the parable. The lawyer originally asks who is his neighbor in an effort to discern whom the law obligates him to love. As a result, we anticipate that the neighbor should be the object of love. Yet at the conclusion of the parable, Jesus asks who was neighbor *to* the wounded man, aligning the term neighbor with the one who gave love. With the injunction to go and do likewise, Jesus shifts the conversation from one identifying who should receive mercy to one depicting a neighborly mode of behavior. The term neighbor is not merely a descriptor of another person, particularly one close to a person in geographical proximity or kinship, but also denotes a particular kind of relationship defined by an ethic of mercy.

Far from simply advising an audience to act kindly towards their neighbors, the Parable of the Good Samaritan challenges an audience to forgo social convention and love everyone, regardless of personal cost. It features an anonymous man at its center, whose lack of cultural identifications contrasts with the other figures in the story, labeled as priest, Levite, and Samaritan, and enable him to serve as an everyman figure.⁶ No relationship of kinship, friendship, or community motivates the actions of those who encounter him. The religious vocations of the first two men who pass the wounded traveler suggest that they have a particular obligation to care for the needs of others,

⁶ Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 103.

while their reaction shows their failure in this role. The Samaritan has an ethnic rather than a vocational descriptor that marks him as outside the Jewish community. Like the priest and Levite, his actions defy expectation: although Samaritans were traditionally enemies of the Jewish people, he is the only one who follows the law.⁷

These three men display radically different responses to the wounded man: total neglect or exceptional care.⁸ The uniform reaction from both the priest and Levite implies some logic to their avoidance of the wounded man, perhaps preoccupation with the business of their own journeys or fear that they too may experience harm if they remain along the road where a man was nearly killed. The Samaritan, in contrast, appears unconcerned with both these things and applies himself to caring for every need of the wounded man. He not only transports the man and finances his care, but he also acts as physician by dressing the man's wounds. His promise to pay for extra expenses upon his return shows an ongoing commitment to his act of charity. The Samaritan cares for the man to such an extent that an audience would likely struggle to imagine themselves helping another to the same degree, despite their admiration of his deed. His example shows that true love of neighbor transgresses social norms, demanding love of the stranger as well as kin and requiring that people put aside their own needs to attend to others.

A number of Middle English texts containing the Parable of the Good Samaritan explore only this ethic of love demonstrated by the literal story and draw conflicting conclusions about how to reconcile imitation of the Samaritan's radical love with life in

⁷ For Middle English texts that identify the Samaritan as an enemy of the Jewish people, see page 10 below.

⁸ Hedrick characterizes both actions as exaggerations and suggests the story could be read as burlesque or satire. See *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 116.

the world. The *Pepysian Gospel Harmony* demonstrates that even in the most concise translations of the story, authors felt compelled to clarify what Jesus taught through the example of the Samaritan. Since the author's primary aim was to create one cohesive, concise text out of the four gospels, he often streamlined his sources. For example, the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony* contains only truncated accounts of the parables of the Wedding Feast and Laborers in the Vineyard considered in chapters one and two.⁹ For the Good Samaritan, however, the author not only included a complete text of the parable but also added text to clarify the discussion of loving one's neighbor. In Luke's gospel, Jesus narrates the parable immediately after the man inquires who is his neighbor. In the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, Jesus defines the term neighbor before reciting the story that illustrates his reply: "And Jesus hym seide euerychman, & tolde hym a tale of a man þat zede from Jerusalem to Jerico."¹⁰ Again, at the close of the parable, the author clarified that the instruction to love your neighbor as yourself means to love all people in the manner of the Samaritan. Following Jesus' instruction to go and do likewise, the author added "Þat is to sigge, þat he schal done to euerych man as to his neizbor3."¹¹ For the author of the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, the story teaches that the obligation to love one's neighbor refers in no way to kinship or membership of the same community; it requires indiscriminate, unconditional love.

⁹ The narrator recites only the first half of the Wedding Feast parable, leaving out the entire episode in which the king enters the feast and expels the man in the wrong garment. For the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the author omits the laborers' complaint and the vineyard owner's response. See Margery Goates, ed., *The Pepysian Gospel Harmony*. EETS o.s. 157 (London, 1922), 79, 69.

¹⁰ Margery Goates, *The Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, 35/10-12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35/24-25.

The author of *Pe Lyfe of Soule* similarly interpreted the Samaritan parable as an injunction to love all, reflecting at length on the centrality of this message to Christian faith and the challenge it imparts. *Pe Lyfe of Soule* is a late fourteenth-century devotional text featuring a dialogue between “Sir” and “Frend,” in which the latter instructs the former how to come to his eternal home.¹² Frend first emphasizes the role of grace: he teaches Sir that the Incarnation and Crucifixion of Christ enabled his journey and insists that no one may justify himself before God.¹³ Yet Frend also maintains that no one may come to heaven unless he leaves sin and does good works, which he defines throughout the text as following the commandments.¹⁴ Frend teaches Sir that the commandments are essentially the same whether articulated as the set of ten commandments from the Old Testament or the two issued by Christ: love of God encompasses the first three of the ten commandments, while love of neighbor encompasses the final seven.¹⁵

The Good Samaritan parable appears in the midst of a discussion of the second commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. After explaining that those who love their neighbor commit none of the seven deadly sins, Frend combines a number of

¹² The text appears in three manuscripts: Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 210, San Marino, CA, Huntington Library MS Huntington 502, and London, British Library MS Arundel 286. It appears alongside works of Richard Rolle in each manuscript. Laud Misc. 210 also contains *Book to a Mother* – another devotional text with large amounts of biblical translation. The Huntington manuscript also contains Wimbledon’s Sermon. See Helen M. Moon, ed., *Pe Lyfe of Soule: An Edition with Commentary, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 75* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur Universität Salzburg, 1978).

¹³ See Moon, *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, 3.

¹⁴ “*Soth it is also þat we moten alle putten vs in þe mercy of God and not axen heuene þoru ristfulnes, iustifying oureself before God. For Dauid seiþ in þe sauter: Eueriche lyuyng man schal not ben iustified in þis sist. But naþereles, no man hop to come to heuene but if he leue synne, noþer for þe beleue þat he hap in Crist, ne for þe grete mercy of God. For as Seynt Iame seiþ: Deueles in helle beleuen and dreden. And he seiþ: Rist as a body is ded wiþouten spirizt, rist feiþ and beleue is ded wiþouten good werkes.*” Moon, *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, 7-8. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

teachings from the gospels to define the positive acts of love that lead to eternal life. He begins with the seven bodily works of mercy, which he aligns with “þe lawe and þe prophets” and defines as the actions enjoined by the injunction to do unto others as you would have them do to you.¹⁶ Just as he shows agreement between the two commandments to love and the ten commandments, Frend’s identification of the works of mercy with both the law and the golden rule presents a unified ethic of love from the Old and New Testaments.¹⁷ Like Augustine in *De doctrina christiana*, Frend defines this ethic of love as the center of all Christian teachings.¹⁸ He insists that all the ways in which Christ bids one to behave toward a neighbor either “is loue or it comeþ ou3t of loue or it norischeþ loue” and describes such love as an outward sign of discipleship: “in þis men schul knowe þat 3e ben my disciples, 3if 3e louen togedere.”¹⁹ The second commandment, illustrated within the Good Samaritan parable, is therefore portrayed as the defining feature of Christian belief that confirms for oneself and others that someone follows the way of Christ to eternal life.

Whereas the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony* simply asserts that the second commandment requires love of all people, *Pe Lyfe of Soule* emphasizes the most challenging part of that claim: love of one’s enemy. Frend explores the difficulty of following this commandment by combining the instruction to love one’s enemy from

¹⁶ Moon, *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, 41. For the golden rule, see Mt. 7:12 and Lk. 6:31.

¹⁷ Matthew equates the golden rule with the law and the prophets in 7:12: “Therfor alle thingis, what euere thingis 3e wolen that men do to 3ou, do 3e to hem, for this is the lawe and the prophetis.” The statement regarding the law and the prophets is not present in Luke.

¹⁸ St. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. and ed. R.H.P. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 27.

¹⁹ Moon, *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, 42/5-6. Cf. Jn. 13:34-35: “Y 3yue to 3ou a newe maundement, that 3e loue togidir, as Y louede 3ou, and that 3e loue togidir. In this thing alle men schulen knowe, that 3e ben my disciplis, if 3e han loue togidere.”

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount with Luke's Parable of the Good Samaritan. As a preface to the Good Samaritan parable, the author recites the whole of Matthew 5:42-48, in which Jesus corrects the idea that one should love friends and hate enemies. Together, the two passages establish the necessity of a love that defies convention:

He [Christ] seip also: It was iseyde summe tyme, þou schalt loue þi frend and hate þi enemy. But I seye 3ow, loueþ 3oure enemyes and doþ wele to hem þat han ihated 3ow. Blesseþ hem þat cursen 3ow and preyeb for hem þat purswen 3ow and þat desclaundren 3ow, þat 3e ben 3oure Fadres childeren, þat is in heuene, þat makeþ his sone risen vpon good men and vpon yuel men and reyghneb vpon riztful men and vpon vnritzful men. For if 3e loueþ onliche þilk þat louen 3ow, what mede schul 3e haue. So doon puplicanes. And if 3e gretteþ oonliche 3owre owne breþeren, what schul 3e doon more. So doon heþen men. Wherefore be 3e parfyzt as 3oure heuenly Fadre is parfyzt.²⁰

This list of antitheses countering common sense and social practice introduce the Samaritan parable not as an illustration of a self-evident ethic but as an example of love that defies human logic.

Frend presents this exceptional act of love as an ordinary aspect of Jesus' teaching. Whereas Luke portrays the conversation between the lawyer and Jesus as a single occurrence, the author of *Pe Lyfe of Soule* depicts it as common. He opens the parable with the words "And many tyme whan Crist bad a pharyse þat he schulde loue his nexte broþer as hymself, and seyde þat hit was oon of þe grettest comaundementis of Goddis lawe, þe pharise axid hym who was his broþere nexte."²¹ In addition to depicting the discussion as a frequent occurrence, the author changes the dynamic of the conversation from one in which Jesus answers questions about his knowledge and interpretation of the law to one in which he actively preaches the law of love. The

²⁰ Moon, *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, 42/10-43/2. In Matthew, the passage appears in the Sermon on the Mount as the last item in a series of six antitheses. Jesus begins each statement with "You have heard it said" and then establishes a more rigorous standard for his own law.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 43/3-7.

changes portray Jesus as enthusiastically asserting the necessity of the second commandment, as opposed to simply articulating its meaning. Furthermore, because the author removes the lawyer's initial question regarding how he may receive eternal life, the discourse no longer stems from the man's desire to attain salvation - the same desire expressed by Sir in *Pe Lyfe of Soule*. It depicts the Pharisee as an adversary, rather than a pupil, and concentrates the injunction to love simply on the rightness of such behavior without immediate regard for how it may yield reward to the one who acts in the same manner.

Following the parable, the author of *Pe Lyfe of Soule* describes the story as an illustration of love that combines the golden rule and the instruction to love one's enemy, rephrasing the commandment to love one's neighbor as "and so every cristen man schulde louen his enemy as hymselfen."²² The reader should identify with both the Samaritan and the wounded man, empathizing with the condition of the latter and then acting in the manner of the Samaritan, who treats the wounded man in the same way he would want to be treated: "In þis tale Crist techep vs to loue oure enemyes þat was iwoundid as oureseluen."²³ To relate the Samaritan parable to the idea of loving one's enemy, Frend assumes the wounded man is Jewish and understands their relationship in terms of the socio-political context of first century Palestine in which "þe samaritan and þe Iew þat was iwoundid weren enemyes."²⁴ The author of *Pe Lyfe of Soule* is not unique in this historical reading: the homilist of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 806

²² Moon, *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, 44/11-12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 44/7-8. The grammar of this sentence is ambiguous. It could indicate that one should love a wounded enemy as oneself or that one should love an enemy, who like oneself, is wounded. The second reading resembles allegorical interpretations that identify the audience with the wounded man.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 44/8-9.

similarly describes the Samaritan as a stranger to the wounded man because “Iewes werin in a manere enemyes to þe Samaritane.”²⁵ While restricting his interpretation to the literal sense of the parable, Frend defines the parable as a story about the specific challenge of loving those whom we least desire to show kindness, including those culturally defined as enemies. By fusing this text with other gospel passages on love, the author depicts the parable as a key articulation of Jesus’ subversive ethic of love.

Another Middle English rendition of the Good Samaritan parable presents the instruction to love one’s neighbor in a fundamentally opposite manner. Also addressing the literal meaning of the story, the *South English Ministry and Passion* construes the parable as evidence that people should love those who love them.²⁶ Throughout his adaptation of the parable, the author consistently resolves the tensions surrounding the Samaritan story. The framing conversation about the law is more akin to a teacher instructing a student than to an adversarial exchange in which an opponent tries to challenge Jesus’ authority. Instead of a lawyer (as in his Lucan source) or a Pharisee (as in *Pe Lyfe of Soule*), the author of the *South English Ministry and Passion* vaguely describes the inquiring man as “on.” Like the lawyer, this generic pupil wishes to know how he should lead his life to win the bliss of heaven. Yet Jesus does not ask the man how he reads the law; he straightforwardly tells the man how to come to heaven: “Loue þi God with al þi herte & with al þat þou myztst do, / And þin euencristene þat is þe

²⁵ Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 806 fol. 112^r l. 14.

²⁶ *The South English Ministry and Passion* is an approximately 3000 line poem that narrates Christ’s life from the preaching of John the Baptist to the early acts of the apostles (up through Acts 4). The poem survives in whole or part in three manuscripts: a late thirteenth-century manuscript that is the earliest known copy of the *South English Legendary* (SEL) and two SEL manuscripts from the early fifteenth century. See O.S. Pickering, ed., *The South English Ministry and Passion: Edited from St. John’s College, Cambridge, MS B.6. Middle English Texts 16* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1984).

next euene forth þiself also.”²⁷ Although conveying the same message, the simplification of this dialogue changes the context for that instruction. By referring the question back to the lawyer, Jesus demonstrates that the inquiring man already knows the answer to his own question and establishes that what he teaches is not new. It is the full commitment to the law (or fulfillment thereof) that distinguishes Jesus’ message from the Jewish law, and it is the redefinition of something familiar that makes Jesus’ interpretation thereof subversive. This illustration of how Jesus’ teachings amplify Jewish law is absent from the discussion in the *South English Ministry and Passion*. Without the particular cultural context outlined in the Luke’s gospel, the conversation becomes placid: a willing student asks for instruction, and Jesus obligingly teaches him in a straightforward manner.

Discussion of who counts as a neighbor reflects this same amiable dynamic, in which neither the inquiring man nor Jesus challenges the other. In Luke’s gospel, the lawyer asks “And who is my neizebore?” because he wishes to justify himself. In the *South English Ministry and Passion*, however, the man seems to legitimately require clarification of a grammatically ambiguous phrase: “þin euencristene þat is þe next.” Phrased in this way, the commandment to love one’s neighbor could mean that the man should love those fellow Christians who are near to him,²⁸ or the two terms “euencristene” and “next” could be synonymous, with “next” appositively describing fellow Christians. The man’s reply “ho is myn next? -- & myn euyncristen þer be so fele [many]” suggests a desire to understand the relationship of those two terms and a reluctance to assert that they are synonymous because of how demanding this would make the injunction to love. Many authors depict this desire to more narrowly define

²⁷ Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 123/1143-1144.

²⁸ In this case, “þat” would be a restrictive relative pronoun.

whom one must love as a point of tension between human and divine understandings of love, which the Samaritan parable then exacerbates. The author of the *South English Ministry and Passion* does the opposite, presenting the parable as a clarification of the commandment to love one's neighbor, which makes the law less difficult to follow.

Unlike the gospel passage, which contains a shift from discussion of whom to love to discussion of how to love, the *South English Ministry and Passion* maintains a consistent focus on the question of whom one should love as "neighbor." Consistent with this focus on the object rather than the manner of love, the author condenses the text of the parable that describes the actions of the Samaritan. Whereas Luke's rendition names the particular salves the Samaritan applied, specifies to where and by what means he transported the wounded man, and articulates his promise to return, the *South English Ministry and Passion* describes the Samaritan's actions in just two lines: "Wol goodlyche he lad hym with hym & goode medecynys hym wrou3tte, / And fond hym al þat euere was nede & to good hele hym brou3tte."²⁹ Despite the brevity of the passage, the author still conveys the unusual magnitude of the Samaritan's love, as he is said to have fulfilled the man's every need. With the repetition of the word "good" three times in two lines, the author emphatically but generically characterizes the Samaritan's actions as praiseworthy. The particular acts of mercy matter less than the fact that he acted with goodness.

Detailed understanding of the Samaritan's actions is less important in the context of the *South English Ministry and Passion* because Jesus does not enjoin his audience to imitate the Samaritan in this rendition of the parable. Instead, the author depicts the Samaritan's charitable actions as deeds that merit love. Inverting the typical literal

²⁹ Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 123/1153-1154.

reading of the story, according to which one should love anyone in need the way the Samaritan loved the wounded man, Jesus tells the man that “hoso do þe most mercy, most loue þou hym do.”³⁰ The Samaritan’s act of mercy merits mercy in return. According to this ethic, love becomes an act of reciprocity rather than something freely or unconditionally given to others in need.³¹

While less demanding than the injunctions to love everyone and to love one’s enemy, the moral imperative articulated in the *South English Ministry and Passion* still contradicts social norms. Further elaborating the obligation to love those who love you, the author suggests that this imperative trumps obligations of familial love:

Be þis gospel we seeþ here þat oure lordys wil it is,
Hoso is mylde and louyth þe wel, þou do so hym iwis,
& þat þou holde hym ny3 þin herte, & ofte[r] þou haue in mynde
þan þou do þi nexte ken, 3if he is vnkynde.³²

The criterion of proximity invoked by the term neighbor is no longer physical but spiritual, defined by frequency of thought and degree of affection. While bonds of kinship would typically determine who is closest to one’s heart, the author suggests that a kind stranger should receive more inner affection and acts of kindness than an unkind family member. Receipt of love depends entirely on giving it to others.

This ethic of love, which the author characterizes as “oure lordys wil,” parallels the behavior belittled by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.³³ Whereas the *South English*

³⁰ Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 123/1158.

³¹ This idea that a neighbor is one who shows you mercy is not unique to *The South English Ministry and Passion*. The homily for the thirteenth Sunday after the Trinity in London, British Library, MS Harley 2276 also describes the parable as evidence “þat he [the lawyer] shuld vndirstonde þat ech merciful worcher were his neizbore, but speciali goddis sone þat is cheef patroun of merci bitakyng of mankynde.” See fol. 125^v ll. 16-18.

³² Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 124/1159-1162.

Ministry and Passion depicts love as a reciprocal relationship in which the giver receives love because he gave it, Jesus depicts this type of love as having no reward: “For 3if 3e louen hem that louen 3ou, what meed shul 3ee haue?” (Mt. 5:46). Earlier in this life of Christ, the *South English Ministry and Passion* presents an account of the Sermon on the Mount in which the author includes and elaborates this question:

3if þou do for hem þat done for þe and louyst hem also
Qwat loue schalt þou han of God, for kynde makip þe it do?
But do for hem þat don þe harm & loue hem þat haten þe,
& þat is þe kynde of Goddys sone and perfyzt charite.³⁴

These lines demean exactly the sort of love the author later advocates with reference to the Good Samaritan. Although not based on kinship, loving those who love you still comes naturally to people, as it stems from “kynde.” The love that Jesus advocates defies human nature; by breaking social convention and loving an enemy, people participate in God’s nature. Setting these passages side-by-side, in the manner that they appear in *Be Lyfe of Soule*, it becomes clear that the *South English Ministry and Passion* presents two conflicting ethics of love. The contrary messages appear in two contrasting forms: in a sermon-like discourse outlining the radical nature of his social message, Jesus challenges his audience to love those it is most difficult to love; through story, Jesus teaches a more palatable lesson that people should return kindness and mercy to those who show them the same.

The contrasting interpretations of the Samaritan story in the *South English Ministry and Passion* and *Be Lyfe of Soule* show that the literal meaning of the parable is

³³ The author of *Be Lyfe of Soule* prefaces the Good Samaritan parable with this passage. See page 9 above.

³⁴ Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 96/411-414. A similar injunction to love one’s enemies appears in the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:17-39. While the *South English Ministry and Passion* author includes the “woes” from Luke’s sermon, he leaves out the injunction to love one’s enemy. See *South English Ministry*, 102-103/555-564.

neither self-evident nor uncontroversial. The parable does not directly answer the lawyer's question "And who is my neighbor?", which leads to different responses in the three works featured above: everyone, your enemy, and those who show you kindness. Despite their varied implications, they all contradict social norms by dismissing ties of kinship or community that typically define "neighbor." Most importantly in light of *Piers Plowman*, all three depict the Parable of the Good Samaritan as a story that urges action, implicitly condemning the two people who passed by the wounded man and encouraging readers to accept the uncomfortable challenge to act like the Samaritan.

Allegorical interpretations avoid the challenge of determining who is neighbor by encouraging audiences to identify with the wounded man rather than the Samaritan.³⁵ Consequently, the pertinent question for the audience is not "who is my neighbor" but "who loves me as a neighbor?" According to the most common interpretation in patristic and medieval sources, the wounded man represents Adam (or humankind) who travels from the heavenly city of Jerusalem into Jericho, which signifies the world.³⁶ Along the way, the devil wounds him with sins. The priest and the Levite who fail to heal him signify the law and the prophets, while the Samaritan represents Christ. Commentators variously explain the treatments of oil and wine with associations such as forgiveness and judgment or hope and fear. The Samaritan placing the wounded man upon his horse commonly symbolizes the Incarnation or Christ bearing humans' sins, and the innkeeper

³⁵ The most prominent interpretation was developed by Origen and adapted by later theologians, including Ambrose, Augustine, and Bede. However, the identifications of the Samaritan with Christ and the wounded man with humankind appear in the writings of Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, which pre-date Origen's account; Origen himself attributes his account to an unnamed priest. See Riemer Roukema, "The Good Samaritan in Ancient Christianity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 58 (2004): 59-62.

³⁶ Jerome associates Jericho with the moon, which like the world is characterized by mutability. Augustine and Bede both integrate this interpretation as well. See Wailes, *Medieval Allegories*, 211.

or inn itself frequently represents the church.³⁷ Finally, the Samaritan's promise to pay for expenses upon his return refers to his resurrection,³⁸ while the two denarii that should provide for the wounded man's care in the meantime are said to represent a variety of pairs within Christian teaching: Father and Son, the old and new covenant, or the commandments to love God and neighbor.³⁹ These allegorical readings of the parable deflect the challenge it poses for ordinary Christians by identifying the extraordinary deeds of the Samaritan with the extraordinary love of Christ. Rather than directly imitate the Samaritan, or Christ, commentators encourage Christians to see themselves in the figure of the wounded man and to look to Christ for healing of their sins.

These interpretations frequently appear in Middle English sermons on the Good Samaritan parable, where homilists typically address both literal and allegorical meanings of the story. For example, the homilist of Bodley 806 associates the wounded man with Adam in his original sin and each human thereafter, who travels from Jerusalem to Jericho "whenne he brekiþ þe heest of God or doip a dedly synne."⁴⁰ Likewise, in a homily from British Library MS Harley 2276, explication of the wounds suffered by the injured man occasions detailed discussion of the seven deadly sins.⁴¹ The relevant

³⁷ In a homily on the Good Samaritan, Origen identifies the inn with the church and the innkeeper with an angel of the church. In other works, he writes that the innkeeper represents Paul or the apostles and their successors. See Roukema, "The Good Samaritan," 62-64.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁹ See Wailes, *Medieval Allegories*, 210-12 and Roukema, "The Good Samaritan," 66-67.

⁴⁰ See Bodley 806 fols. 111^r l. 39-111^v l. 8. The homilist of London, British Library MS Harley 2276 identifies and expounds upon three moments at which Adam descended from Jerusalem to Jericho: when eating the forbidden fruit, when cast out of paradise, and upon descending into hell at his death. See fol. 125^v ll. 37-40. The homily for the thirteenth Sunday after the Trinity in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle identifies the wounded man with Adam and Eve. See Anne Hudson, ed., *English Wycliffite Sermons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 1:272.

⁴¹ See fols. 126^r l. 18 – 126^v l. 15.

homily in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle (EWS 13) identifies the priest with the patriarchs and the deacon with the prophets, while associating the Samaritan with Jesus, who is a stranger like the Samaritan, “as anentys his godhede.” When the Samaritan places the wounded man on his horse, the homilist writes that it signifies Jesus taking on human flesh in the Incarnation.⁴² The homilist of Bodley 806 similarly describes this act as Christ taking on human flesh, and he identifies the inn to which the Samaritan brings him as the church. The two coins the Samaritan leaves him are the Old and New Law, with which the innkeeper, or curate, may heal the wounded man’s soul.⁴³

Allegorical interpretations conventionally encourage audiences to reflect on their sinful condition and the forgiveness of sin offered in Christ and the sacraments; they divert attention from the pragmatic, ethical question of how to fulfill the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Nevertheless, Jesus’ conversation with the lawyer almost always accompanies Middle English accounts of the Samaritan parable, so that the questions of whom and how to love emerge, regardless of the story’s interpretation.⁴⁴ Homilists typically explicate the symbolic meanings of various elements of the parable, while framing the story with discussion of loving one’s neighbor. Given the tensions between moral and allegorical interpretations of the parable, homilists struggle to define a

⁴² Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 273.

⁴³ Bodley 806 fol. 112^v ll. 3-13.

⁴⁴ According to the Sarum rite, the standard gospel reading for the thirteenth Sunday after the Trinity begins at Luke 10:23, two verses before the introduction of the lawyer. In these lines, Jesus says to his disciples, “blessid ben the y3en, whiche seen tho thingis that 3e seen. Sothli I seie to 3ou, for many prophetis and kyngis wolden se tho thingis, whiche 3e seen, and thei sy3en not; and heere tho thingis, that 3e heere, and thei herden not.” The liturgical reading is not unified thematically, as it combines the conclusion of one conversation with the whole of another. The beginning of Luke 10, up until the interjection of the lawyer, pertains to the mission Jesus gave 70 of his followers to go out into the world to preach his message. The statements juxtaposing those who truly see and hear with those who do not comprehend concludes Jesus’ discourse on the nature of the disciples’ mission.

practical ethical imperative that sensibly follows from the allegorical interpretation of the Samaritan as Christ.

Some commentators do not try to neatly reconcile the moral and allegorical meanings. Instead, instruction to imitate the acts of love demonstrated by the Samaritan simply frames the explication of the story's allegory. Commenting on the lawyer's question "who is my neizbore?", the Harley 2276 homilist describes the parable as having both moral and allegorical significance: "oure lord temprid his answer to him on such maner þat he shuld vndirstonde þat ech merciful worcher were his neizbore, but speciali goddis sone þat is cheef patrour of merci bitakyng of mankynde."⁴⁵ Initially, this twofold definition of neighbor seems to unite the moral and allegorical readings of the story to justify the ethic of love articulated in the *South English Ministry and Passion*: to love your neighbor means to love the merciful. Yet the explication that follows contains no mention of neighbors or physical acts of mercy; it focuses exclusively on the allegory of human sinfulness and redemption through Christ. When the homilist explicates the final exchange between Jesus and the lawyer at the end of his sermon, he returns to the idea of neighbors acting mercifully without relating that ethic to the specific acts of the Samaritan in the story or the sacrifice of Christ. He concludes that Christ recited the parable to teach that not "kinrede [blood relation]" but mercy makes someone a neighbor, and he defends this unconventional understanding of neighbor as natural, stating that nothing "comeþ more of kynde" than to help another in one's same condition.⁴⁶ The

⁴⁵ London, British Library MS Harley 2276, fol. 125^v ll. 15-18.

⁴⁶ Specifically, the homilist states "But now whan Crist had endid þis parable and askid þe lawier, 'Which of hem þre him semed was neizbore to him þat fel in to þe þeuys?' He answerd and seide, 'He þat dide merci to him.' And here mowe we vndirstonde þat kynrede of Cristis entent makiþ not man an oþeres neizbore but merci, and such merci comeþ of kynde. For no þyng comeþ more of kynde þanne a man to helpe his felawe of his owne same kynde." See Harley 2276 fol. 127^f ll. 17-22.

example the homilist provides of showing such mercy is feeding the hungry: “And herfor seiþ þe profete Ysaie, ‘breke þi breed to þe hungryng man. And such maner helpe is vndirstonde in þese nexte wordis aftir, go and do þou on lich maner.’”⁴⁷ Not only does the homilist avoid direct articulation of how to imitate Christ’s redemptive act, he does not advocate imitation of the Samaritan in his specific act of caring for the sick or wounded. According to this homilist, the parable generally encourages works of mercy, like healing or feeding the hungry, but it remains unclear why and how the allegory of the Redemption relates to this moral imperative

Other homilists attempt to integrate the conversation about love of neighbor into their allegorical interpretations. The homilist of the Middle English *Mirror* directly applies the instruction to imitate the Samaritan to his allegorical reading of the parable, advocating that his audience suffer like Christ on the cross:

“Go þou & do þou also,” þat rist so we schul loue oure neizbore as Iesus loued us þat so mychel lowed hym for us. & we schul also lowen us for to helen oure neizebores. Crist, for to helen us & to bigge vs, suffrede for to don hym on þe rode. & we schul also for to kepen oure neizebores in hym. Crist suffred deþ for to zeue lyf. & we moten don also. We ne schul nozt doute þe deþ for to bringe oure neizebore to heuene.⁴⁸

The author recommends that his readers heal their neighbors as Christ did. Since Christ healed by suffering on the cross, so should contemporary Christians willingly suffer death for the spiritual well-being of their neighbors. Appearing at the conclusion of his homily, the author makes this suggestion almost as an afterthought without clarifying whether a Christian may imitate Christ as Samaritan through less radical action.⁴⁹ This

⁴⁷ These are the final words of the homily. See Harley 2276 fol. 127^r ll. 23-24.

⁴⁸ Kathleen Marie Blumreich, ed., *The Middle English “Mirror”: An Edition Based on Bodleian Library, MS Holkham misc. 40* (Tempe, AZ: Brepols, 2002), 360.

direct imitation of Christ, rather than direct imitation of the Samaritan, exacerbates a problem already present in the parable: if caring for a wounded man to the degree of the Samaritan seems unrealistic, sacrificial death is considerably more difficult.

Additionally, with regard to this type of imitation, the words of the Samaritan in *Piers Plowman* are particularly true: “hir help may litel auaille.” Only the martyrdom of Christ, as God incarnate, loosed others from the bonds of sin. While risking one’s life for another is certainly laudable, it will not necessarily change the other’s spiritual state.

While the *Mirror* homilist applies the injunction to imitate the Samaritan in a manner that demands extreme sacrifice from an audience (martyrdom), the homilist of the relevant sermon in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle encourages considerably more moderate action by limiting the implications of the statement “Go þou, and do þou in lyk manere.” The sermon begins and ends with discussion of love of neighbor. In the opening sentence, the homilist declares that “This gospel telluþ by a parable how eche man schulde louen his eemcristene.”⁵⁰ He explains that the term neighbor is not a designation of place or worldly friendship but a description of people of the same “kynde,” whom the homilist defines as those God “ordeyneþ” to bliss.⁵¹ While this definition of neighbor is unique to the Wycliffite homilist, he explicates the parable in a conventional allegorical manner: the Samaritan is Christ, who heals humans of sin and arranges for their care in the church until he returns. The idea of loving one’s neighbor reappears after the homilist identifies the innkeeper with prelates, whom God chose to

⁴⁹ The author does not suggest that contemporary Christians empathize with Christ’s suffering through meditation on the Passion, nor does he advocate physical acts of healing like works of mercy.

⁵⁰ Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 272/1-2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 273/40-44. While “ordeyneþ” could mean to predestine in this context, it need not mean more than to choose. See MED “ordeinen,” v. definition 4a for the latter and 6b for the former.

feed his church with the law of Christ. The homilist combines the allegorical interpretation with the imperative to love one's neighbor by advocating that the audience imitate not the Samaritan but the innkeeper. The Samaritan entrusts him with the man's care just as Christ entrusts the care of souls to prelates: "and so eche trew prelat þat helpuþ Crist to helon his chyrche is trew neybore to þe chirche and doþ in part as Crist dude."⁵² Recognizing the difficulty of emulating the Samaritan's actions, the homilist recommends doing *part* of what the Samaritan, or Christ, did and defines this participation in Christ's love as helping to heal the church. While combining the discussion of love of neighbor with an allegorical reading, the homilist significantly changes the challenge the story poses for the audience. Rather than characterize the acts of the Samaritan as the type of charity the audience should show one another, he depicts this as exceptional behavior characteristic of God, not humans. The suggestion to act as a neighbor in the manner of the innkeeper promotes a more passive role than the basic parable does: the innkeeper cares for the needy brought to him, continuing acts of mercy already begun and provided for by another.

The sermons reflect three different ways of dealing with the disjunction between the allegorical interpretation of the parable and the moral imperative to show mercy like the Samaritan. The Harley 2276 homilist ignores the disjunction. He could easily issue the same directive to perform the bodily works of mercy, like feeding the hungry, without the illustration of the Samaritan parable or the explication that the Samaritan signifies

⁵² Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 274. As in the Septuagesima sermon, the Wycliffite homilist emphasizes institutional sins more than personal sins. Rather than focus on their own sinful state, reflected in the wounded man, the homilist prompts his audience to heal the collective body of sinners that make up the church. Regarding the increased focus on the institutional rather than the individual in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle, see Katherine C. Little, "Catechesis and Castigation: Sin in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle," *Traditio* 54 (1999): 213-244.

Christ. The comments sit alongside each other without informing each other. The *Mirror* homilist takes a contrasting approach, applying the moral injunction to the allegorical reading without moderating divine action for human followers. The audience learns that the way to live one's life as Christ is to sacrifice it. Finally, eschewing the more radical demand of directly imitating Christ, the Wycliffite homilist advocates the less challenging path of emulating the innkeeper. According to this interpretation, the moral imperative pertains to a particular group, prelates, who should better fulfill the traditional role designated for them. Although the allegorical readings provide an opportunity to explain how acts of mercy by individual Christians relate to the ultimate act of mercy completed by Christ on the cross, none explicate the parable in this way.

Regardless of whether their explications focus on the moral or allegorical meanings of the story, all of the Middle English texts highlighted above regard the parable as an injunction to love one's neighbor. Consequently, they suggest two related questions that should be asked of Langland's account of the Parable of the Good Samaritan in *Piers Plowman*. First, does Langland integrate the injunction to live in "lyk manere" to the Samaritan into his highly allegorical account of the parable? If so, how does he characterize that ethic of love? Both the account of the parable itself and the Samaritan's explication emphasize fundamental differences between humans and Christ, which suggest that direct imitation of the Samaritan is not encouraged and perhaps not even possible. But given Will's quest to understand Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest and the lengthy discussion of charity that precedes the parable, Langland's rendition of the Good Samaritan story is necessarily in conversation with how Will can love well.

As in Luke's gospel, discussion of the two commandments to love God and neighbor directly precedes the Samaritan parable in *Piers Plowman*. Like the lawyer in Luke 10, Will wishes to know how to come to salvation. Instead of Christ, Will discusses the law with Abraham and Moses and contemplates the relative importance of the doctrine he has learned from each: belief in the Trinity and following the law respectively. Just as the lawyer looks to ease his path to salvation by narrowing the definition of "neighbor," Will attempts to determine which of these two provides the easier path to salvation. Because the commandment to love one's neighbor requires loving "as wel lorels [good-for-nothings] as lele," Will dismisses it as untenable and claims "so me god helpe, / Tho þat lerneþ þi lawe wol litel while vsen it" (B.17.47-49). Will concludes that the law teaches the same challenging ethic of love described in the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony* and *Pe Lyf of Soule*: he must love all manner of people. Consequently, he rejects it as impractical. Rather than correct Will's stance by means of the parable, the events and immediate explication of the Samaritan story seemingly confirm Will's conclusions, excusing inaction instead of enjoining an audience to perform radical acts of love.

The allegorical interpretations in Langland's rendition focus attention on the Incarnation and Passion of Christ far more than the moral injunction within the story. Whereas the search for Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest investigates the relationship between human action and salvation, within Passus 16 and 17 Langland articulates the necessity of Christ's Passion for human redemption. Langland integrates allegorical interpretations into the action of his story, suggesting that the Samaritan does not simply symbolize but

is Christ.⁵³ Whereas in Luke's parable, the men travel from Jerusalem to Jericho, Langland inverts the direction of travel so that the Samaritan journeys to Jerusalem. For readers familiar with traditional allegorical interpretations of the parable, which depicted the journey as a descent from the heavenly city of Jerusalem to the mutable, worldly city of Jericho,⁵⁴ Langland's reversal implies that the Samaritan does not fall into sin but progresses on a pilgrimage toward heaven. Yet Langland seems particularly interested in how the change of direction encourages the correspondence between the Samaritan and the crucified Christ of the gospels. In both *Piers Plowman* and the gospels, Christ's journey to Jerusalem culminates in the Passion; correspondingly, Langland casts the Samaritan parable as an incident that occurred on the way to the crucifixion. Langland's Samaritan rides "sittyng on a Mule" (B.17.51), as Jesus does upon his entry to Jerusalem in the gospels,⁵⁵ instead of a generic beast or a horse as in many Middle English renditions of the parable.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the Samaritan twice refers to the purpose of his

⁵³ In addition to the correspondence between the Samaritan and Christ, Langland suggests that Piers Plowman signifies Christ in later portions of the poem. Some scholars associate Piers with the humanity of Christ and the Samaritan with Christ's divinity. See, for example, Elizabeth AlKaaoud, "Caro, Caritas, and the Role of the Samaritan in *Piers Plowman*," *Proceedings of PMLA* 7 (1982): 41 and Robert Worth Frank, *Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 81.

⁵⁴ *The Glossed Gospels* cite Bede and Augustine to support this interpretation: "Ierusalem cite of pees is þat heuently Ierusalem fro whos blis he slod and cam in to þis deedly and wrecchid. And Ierico interpretid þe mone signefieþ wel þis lyif, vncerten euere bi errours and trauels of defautis. Bede here and Austyn in þe questiouns of þe gospels. Eþer Ierusalem is paradis, for bifore þat man synnede he was in þe sizt of pees, þat is paradis, where what euere he say was pees and gladnesse. Fro þennes he as maad low and wrecchid þorou synne cam doun in to Ierico, þat is in to þe world, wher alle þinges borun fallen doun. Austyn in þe bridde answere azenis Pilagio." See Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 243 fol. 53^r col. B, ll. 26-39.

⁵⁵ In Matthew 21:1-7, Mark 11:1-10, and Luke 19:28-38, the disciples procure a donkey for Jesus to ride so that his entry fulfills the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9: "Thou douster of Syon, ioye with outeforth ynow3, synge, thou douster of Jerusalem; loo! thi kyng shal come to thee, he iust, and saueour; he pore, sytinge vpon a she asse, and vpon a fole, sone of the she asse."

⁵⁶ Neither the Wycliffite Bible nor any of the Middle English renditions discussed above refers to the animal the Samaritan rides when he initially encounters the wounded man. When the Samaritan places the man on his animal to bring him to the hostel, the Wycliffite Bible and *Oon of Foure* refer to a horse and the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony* refers to a beast. *Pe Lyfe of Soule* is an exception that refers to the animal as an ass.

trip to Jerusalem as a joust – the metaphor Langland employs for the triumphant manner in which Christ conquers the devil through the crucifixion and harrowing of hell.

Within the larger narrative of *Piers Plowman*, Langland employs the Parable of the Good Samaritan as a harbinger of the Crucifixion. Both the repeated mention of the joust and the Samaritan's hurry to arrive at this event cast the Samaritan parable as an episode that looks forward, pointing beyond itself at its beginning and end. When Will first sees the Samaritan, he describes him as “ridyng ful rapely” after he “iaced away faste” from Jericho to the joust in Jerusalem (B.17.52-54).⁵⁷ The haste Langland attributes to the Samaritan emphasizes the urgency of the Samaritan's activity in Jerusalem and endows him with a larger purpose than the acts of mercy he performs for the individual wounded man. Healing is a secondary expression of love the Samaritan demonstrates in a detour from his main mission of dying to redeem human sins.

While commentators frequently wrote that healing symbolized redemption on the cross, Langland articulates the relationship between the literal events of the story and their common allegorical associations somewhat differently. Healing does not stand in for but points to crucifixion; both acts in their own right are part of Langland's larger narrative. Langland expands the gospel account of how the Samaritan treats the wounded man by adding details that show his craft as a healer: he “parceyued bi hi pou” that the man was nearly dead and let his bottles of oil and wine breath before he administered them to his patient (17.69-72).⁵⁸ Langland also illustrates the Samaritan's compassion by

⁵⁷ On patristic and medieval exegetical precedents for the Samaritan's haste, see Thomas D. Hill, “The Swift Samaritan's Journey.”

⁵⁸ Cf. Lk. 10:34: “And he comynge ny3, bond to gidere his woundis, heeldyng yn oyle and wyn. And he puttinge on his hors, ledde in to a stable, and dide the cure of him.” On the depiction of Christ as healer in this episode and elsewhere in *Piers Plowman*, see Raymond St. Jacques, “Langland's *Christus Medicus* Image,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 5 (1991): 111-127.

adding that the Samaritan laid the wounded man's head in his lap (17.73). While not attributing allegorical significance to each act of healing, as many Latin commentators do,⁵⁹ Langland creates continuity between these acts of healing and the allegory of the Redemption. After putting the wounded man on his horse, the Samaritan takes him to a grange some six or seven miles away named "*lex Christi*" (17.74). Long-term care derives from the new law of love effected by the incarnate and crucified Christ.

The final lines of Langland's parable similarly connect the Samaritan story to the narrative of human redemption. While the Samaritan's willingness to stop for the wounded man shows that no occupation overrides the duty to love those in need, the Samaritan never loses sight of his larger mission. The Samaritan's continued haste at the end of the parable shows that both healing the individual man's wounds and healing humankind through the crucifixion are essential expressions of Christian love. After bringing the wounded man to a hostel, Langland's Samaritan leaves more quickly than the Samaritan of Luke's gospel. In Luke, the Samaritan remains overnight and brings the two coins to the innkeeper the next day; Langland's Samaritan departs immediately upon entrusting the wounded man to another's care. He attributes his haste to the urgency of his original mission:

[He] Herberwed hym at an hostrie and þe hostiler called,
 'Haue, kepe þis man,' quod he, 'til I come fro þe Iustes,
 And lo, here siluer,' he seide, 'for salue to hise woundes.'
 And he took hym two pens to liflode and seide,
 'What he spendeþ moore for medicyne I make þee good hereafter,
 For I may nozt lette,' quod that Leode and lyard he bistrideþ,

⁵⁹ Ambrose, for example, associates the oil with forgiveness and the wine with judgment. See Wailes, *Medieval Allegories*, 211. Augustine describes the oil as the consolation of hope and forgiveness and the wine as an exhortation to act with a fervent spirit. Elsewhere, Augustine describes the oil and wine as the sacrament of the Eucharist. See Roland Teske, "The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37) in Augustine's Exegesis" in *Augustine: Biblical Exegete*, ed. Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 352-353.

And raped hym to ryde þe riste wey to Ierusalem. (76-82)

The promise to return implies that the Samaritan has not abandoned this vocation but prioritizes the healing of sin effected on the cross in Jerusalem. Acts of healing, which derive from the same spirit of love as the act of Redemption, may be carried on by others, but only Christ can liberate humans from the bonds of sin.

Langland's depiction of the two travelers who pass by the wounded man further emphasizes the Samaritan's unique ability to heal. Unlike the gospel, in which the priest, deacon, and Samaritan individually encounter the wounded man one after the other, all three meet the man simultaneously in *Piers Plowman*: "Bothe þe heraud [Abraham] and hope and he mette atones / Where a man was wounded and wiþ þeues taken" (B.17.55). Each witnesses the others' actions without censure. Although the men arrive at the same time, Abraham perceives the wounded man first and immediately reacts with fear: "ac he fleiz aside / And nolde nozt neghen hym by nyne londes lengþe" (B.17.60-61). Langland raises expectations for Moses, describing him as one who boasted about saving many through the commandments.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, Moses fearfully flees the man "as doke doop fram the faucon" (B.17.65). Their parallel reactions suggest their behavior is instinctive or conforms to some sort of logic. Consequently, the Samaritan's actions seem more exceptional. With a similar rapidity, the Samaritan moves toward the injured man, immediately alighting from the mule to inspect the man's wounds (17.66-67). While Langland heightens the contrast between the Samaritan and the other travelers, he is careful to attribute this discrepancy to ability rather than will. Unlike some commentators who connected the failings of the priest and deacon with the failings of an

⁶⁰ "Hope cam hippynge after, that hadde so ybosted / How he with Moyses maundement hadde many men yholpe; / Ac whan he hadde sighte of that segge, aside he gan hym drawe / Dredfully, bi this day, as doke dooth fram the faucon!" (B.17.62-65).

uncaring clergy,⁶¹ Langland depicts Abraham and Moses as intensely afraid, not negligent.

The implications of the first two travelers' inaction are more complex in Langland's parable than in typical allegorical readings that associate them with the law and the prophets. In so far as Langland identifies these travelers as Abraham and Moses, his depiction is consistent with many patristic and medieval commentaries, as they are iconic figures from the time before the law (*ante legem*) and the time under the law (*sub lege*) in the Old Testament. Along with the Samaritan, or Christ, who lived *in gratia*, the men represent all of history.⁶² Yet Abraham and Moses' understanding, and hence their symbolism, transcends the Old Testament in *Piers Plowman*. When Will meets Abraham, Abraham is seeking a "bold bachelor," whom the action of Langland's story shows to be the Samaritan/Christ figure in Passus 17. Abraham's pursuit of Christ personifies the Old Testament anticipating the New, in which it will be fulfilled. Further complicating matters, Abraham describes the one he seeks not simply as Christ but as the Trinitarian God:

Thre leodes in oon lyth, noon lenger þan ooper,
That oon muchel and myght in mesure and lengþe.
That oon doop alle doop and ech doop bi his one.
The firste haþ myzt and maiestee, makere of alle þynges;
Pater is his propre name, a persone by hymselfe.
The secounde of þat sire is Sothfastnesse *filius*,
Wardeyn of þat wit haþ; was euere wiþouten gynnyng.

⁶¹ The Good Samaritan parable invited discussion of the shortcomings of the clergy since the first two who pass by the wounded man are named a priest and a Levite in Luke's gospel. This strain of interpretation was current in the fourteenth century, as Nicholas of Lyra identified those who bypassed the wounded man as uncaring clergy and praised the Samaritan as an example of a loving preacher. In the vernacular, the homilist of Bodley 806 combined traditional allegorical interpretations of the priest and deacon with criticism of contemporary clergy, whom the homilist describes as being more concerned with profiting from offerings than caring for souls. For Nicholas of Lyra, see See Wailes, *Medieval Allegories*, 214 and Aers, "Remembering the Samaritan," 7. In Bodley 806, see fol. 111^v l. 39 – fol. 112^r l. 3.

⁶² Smith, *Traditional Imagery of Charity*, 85.

The þridde highte þe holi goost, a persone by hymselfe,
The light of al þat lif haþ a londe and a watre,
Confortour of creatures; of hym comeþ alle blisse. (16.181-190)

According to patristic commentators, Abraham's encounter with the three angels in Genesis 18 signified the revelation of the Trinity to him.⁶³ Therefore, Abraham can teach Will the nature of the Trinity, both with regard to the qualities of each person of God and the reflections of the Trinity in humankind, as represented for example by Adam, Eve, and their offspring (16.204-210). Consequently, the first one who flees from the wounded man invokes not just the faith of the patriarchs but full knowledge of the Trinitarian God; his failure implies that even this comprehensive spiritual understanding remains insufficient to help the man in need.

In addition to representing an Old Testament figure, whose spiritual knowledge transcends the natural law that governed the patriarchs, Abraham corresponds to the theological virtue of faith. The man Will encounters describes experiences that align him with Abraham,⁶⁴ but he names himself as a virtue: "I am feiþ' quod þat freke" (16.176). Abraham describes the firmness of "myn affiaunce [confidence] and my feiþ" in his belief because of God's promise of blessing and prosperity for him and his offspring.⁶⁵ Again reflecting how Abraham's spiritual understanding extends beyond the Old Testament, he also attributes his faith to God's promise to grant "mercy for oure

⁶³ Malcolm Godden, *The Making of "Piers Plowman"* (New York: Longman, 1990), 130. Abraham describes this vision in passus 16.225-230.

⁶⁴ For example, Abraham describes the sacrifice of Isaac (16.231-233).

⁶⁵ Genesis 12: 1-3 states: "The Lord forsothe seide to Abram, Go out fro thi lond, and fro thi kynreden, and fro the hows of thi fadir, and com into the lond that I shal shew to thee; and I shal make thee in to a greet folk of kynde, and I shal blis to thee, and I shal magnyfie thi name, and thow shalt be blissid; and I shal blis to thoo that blissen thee, and I shal curse to thoo that cursen thee; and in thee shal be blissyd alle cosynages of the erthe."

mysdedes as many tyme as we asken” – a promise Abraham/Faith articulates in the words of the Magnificat: “*Quam olim Abrahe promisisti et semini eius*” (16.241-242).⁶⁶

Abraham’s faith invokes more than a covenantal promise to bless Abraham’s people; it represents belief that God will show mercy, regardless of human sinfulness. According to the Samaritan, even this belief, which encompasses the power of faith as explained by the Old and New Testaments, may not salve the man’s wounds.

Similarly, the figure of Moses/Hope symbolizes more than just the Mosaic law.⁶⁷ Like Abraham, Moses is searching for a man when Will encounters him. His description of this man as “a Knyght” anticipates the depiction of the Samaritan as one who will joust in Jerusalem. While Moses does not explicitly refer to the Trinity, as Abraham does, he suggests the unity of God the Father and Christ when he describes the knight as the one who “took me a maundement vpon þe mount of Synay / To rule alle Reames wip” (17.2-3). Despite the centrality of the law in the time before Christ, Moses characterizes that law as unfulfilled in the Old Testament. When Moses explains that he bears the “writ” of the law, Langland describes its incompleteness by playing upon the term “selen.” Will wonders whether the parchment containing the written law is physically sealed and inquires whether “may men see þe lettres?” Responding to this question, Moses interprets “selen” as referring to certification:⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Paul Sheneman associates Abraham’s description of his faith with Paul’s theology of grace: not Abraham’s works but his faith in God without works makes him righteous (Romans 4:1-5). See “Grace Abounding: Justification in Passus 16 of *Piers Plowman*,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 34, no. 2 (1998): 176.

⁶⁷ The association of Moses with the second traveler, identified as a Levite in the Vulgate, appears frequently in Latin commentaries on the parable since Moses was the foremost of the tribe of Levi. See Smith, *Traditional Imagery of Charity*, 82.

⁶⁸ The first use of “selen” corresponds to definitions 3 and 4 in the Middle English dictionary, to close up or stop up, while the second pertains to definitions 1 and 2, to confirm or certify.

‘Nay’, he seide, ‘I seke hym þat haþ þe seel to kepe,
And þat is cros and cristendom and crist þeron to honge;
And whan it is enseled þerwip I woot wel þe soþe
That Luciferis lordshipe laste shal no lenger.’ (17.5-8)

He seeks the person who holds the seal (Christ), but he does not identify Christ alone as the fulfillment of the law. The seal that he seeks encompasses three things: an object, a people, and an event. The first and third, the cross and the crucifixion, logically relate to each other and the act of Redemption, but Moses suggests that “cristendom” participates in the fulfillment of the law as well. Just as the Samaritan will suggest later in his explanation of the Trinity, Moses depicts the fulfillment of the law and loosing the bonds of sin as processes in which Christians cooperate.⁶⁹

Just as Abraham’s spiritual knowledge goes beyond the Old Testament, Moses teaches Will a New Testament understanding of the law. The rock that Moses shows Will has only the words “*Dilige deum et proximum tuum*” (17.13), accompanied by the gloss “*In hijs duobus mandatis tota lex pendet et prophete*” (17.16). Rather than the Ten Commandments, Moses carries only the first two, which the lawyer refers to as the means to eternal life in Luke’s preface to the Good Samaritan parable. The gloss accompanying Moses’ law, stating that the two commandments encompass the whole law, comes from Matthew’s version of the same conversation between Jesus and the lawyer who tests him.⁷⁰ Matthew 22 differs from Luke 10 in two key ways: Jesus does not recite a parable as a part of the conversation, and the lawyer asks which commandment is the greatest,

⁶⁹ Christendom could also refer to the church as institution, which could then imply the role of the sacraments in the continued fulfillment of the law of love.

⁷⁰ Both passages allude to commands to love God and neighbor in the Old Testament (see Deut. 6:4-5 and Lev. 19:18). On the common sources for Matthew 22:34-40 and Luke 10:25-28, see John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: the Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 58.

not how he may be saved.⁷¹ Langland integrates the gloss on the law from Matthew but maintains the emphasis on salvation unique to the Lucan text. When Will asks whether the two commandments truly contain the ten, Moses replies with an explanation of the salvific power of the law:

“Is here alle þi lordes lawes?” quod I; “ye, leue me”, he [Moses] seide.
“Whoso wercheþ after þis writ, I wol vndertaken,
Shal neuere deuel hym dere ne deep in soule greue;
For, þouz I seye it myself, I haue saued with þis charme
Of men and of wommen many score þousand.” (17.18-21)

Like Jesus and the lawyer in Luke’s gospel, Moses professes that following the commandments to love God and neighbor will lead to eternal life. In Moses’ failure to help the wounded man, therefore, Langland implies the inadequacy of the very ethic of love that the parable seemingly illustrates in Luke’s gospel.

The theological virtue Langland associates with Moses clarifies why the commandment to love may be insufficient for salvation. Like Abraham/Faith, Moses names himself according to the virtue he represents: “I am *Spes*, a spie,” quod he” (17.1). While the connection between Moses and Hope is not immediately obvious,⁷² Ben Smith has shown that good works potentially bridge the two. The law enjoins humans to do good works, which Augustine and a number of later theologians describe as nourishing hope for salvation.⁷³ If Moses represents hope associated with good works specifically,

⁷¹ In response to the question of which commandment is the greatest, Jesus answers “Thou schalt loue thi Lord God, of al thin herte, and in al thi soule, and in al thi mynde. This is the firste and the moste maundement. And the secounde is lijk to this; Thou schalt loue thi neizebore as thi silf. In these twey maundementis hangith al the lawe and the profetis” (Mt. 22:37-40).

⁷² Ruth Ames argues that the association would seem logical to medieval readers because the idea that the law of Moses gave hope to sinners was a “commonplace of commentary.” See Ruth M. Ames, *The Fulfillment of the Scriptures: Abraham, Moses, and Piers* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 164.

then his failure to help the wounded man shows the failure of human acts to heal sin. Healing of sin requires not faith or works alone, both of which derive from human effort, but grace.⁷⁴ An alternative way to explain the role of Moses as hope is more optimistic about the efficacy of good works. Citing commentary by Hugh of St. Cher and a passage from Hebrews, Smith shows that the Old Law could signify hope of the New Law.⁷⁵ The description of Moses as Hope therefore suggests that the New Law, of which he possesses the text, remains unfulfilled. As his role as “a spie” implies, Moses/Hope is the forerunner of the New Law:⁷⁶ the commandments, whether written as ten injunctions or two, only articulate the need for love. Hope fails to heal because the commandments await fulfillment through the spirit of charity.⁷⁷

In his exposition immediately following the parable, the Samaritan explicitly confirms what the translation itself implies: Abraham/Faith and Moses/Hope do not heal the wounded man because they are unable. Talking to the Samaritan after he departed the inn, Will remarks not on the mercy shown to the wounded man but on the failure of Abraham and Moses to act in the same manner. Although the Samaritan witnessed the

⁷³ Smith refers to Denis the Carthusian and Hugh of St. Cher as two others who associated hope and good works. *Traditional Imagery of Charity*, 82-83.

⁷⁴ Aers cites Augustine to explain the conception of sin in the Samaritan episode: humans can injure themselves, but they cannot heal themselves. Healing sin requires grace. See “Remembering the Samaritan,” 9.

⁷⁵ Smith, *Traditional Imagery of Charity*, 83. Hebrews 7:19 states “For whi the lawe broust no thing to perfeccioun, but there is a bringing in of a betere hope, bi which we neizen to God.”

⁷⁶ The Middle English word “spie” often denotes its modern English equivalent, indicating one who secretly gathers information from another, but it can also mean forerunner, messenger, watchman, or lookout. See MED definitions 1a and 1d.

⁷⁷ Myra Stokes describes Langland’s understanding of the New Law as a fulfillment or perfection of the Old Law, not a supersession thereof. It reveals the inner disposition of love necessary to willingly follow the commandments. See *Justice and Mercy in “Piers Plowman”*: A Reading of the B Text *Visio* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 259.

same events, Will reminds him of what had just past: “and siþþe I hym tolde / How that feiþ fleiz away and *Spes* his felawe boþe / For sighte of the sorweful segge that robbed was with þeues” (B.17.90-92). Will concentrates on the failure of these two figures who, shortly before this episode, instructed Will on the nature of the Trinity and the Law and boasted about the number of people they had saved. Those whom Will looks to for spiritual guidance act out of fear and abandon the one in need. Their actions show the limits of their teachings, and Will consequently interprets the parable as a display of unkindness as much as an illustration of mercy.

The Samaritan concentrates on the potential efficacy of Abraham/Faith and Moses/Hope, as opposed to their willingness to help the one wounded by sin. Because Faith and Hope lack the means to heal the wounded man, they should be excused: “hir help may litel auaille. / May no medicyne vnder mone þe man to heele brynge, / Neiþer Feiþ ne fyn hope, so festred be hise woundes” (B.17.93-95). The Samaritan describes Faith and Hope’s inability to help as a consequence of the severity of the wounds: healing original sin requires extraordinary care. He equates the powers of Faith and Hope with worldly medicines: i.e., remedies for sin that stem from the individual will. Although Faith, Hope, and Charity make up the three theological virtues articulated in 1 Corinthians 13, the Samaritan implies that the first two virtues differ in kind from the third.⁷⁸ Charity, as personified in the Samaritan and Christ, is not of the world but of God.

The medicines that the Samaritan describes as curative for the wounded man confirm that he needs healing that comes from God rather than the efforts of humans.

⁷⁸ Paul also describes charity as superior to hope and faith: “Now forsothe dwellen feith, hope, and charite, thes thre; forsoth the mooste of thes is charite” (1 Cor. 13:13).

The Samaritan hails the salvific power of the Passion, insisting that the man cannot be healed “wipouten þe blood of a barn born of a mayde” (17.96). The complete path to recovery includes the sacrifice of Christ and continued participation in that redemption through the sacraments of the church:

And he be baped in þat blood, baptised as it were,
And þanne plastred with penaunce and passion of þat baby,
He sholde stonde and steppe; ac stalworþe worþ he neuere
Til he haue eten al þe barn and his blood ydronke. (17.97-100)⁷⁹

Just as the Samaritan enables the wounded man’s ongoing healing in the inn, Christ’s crucifixion enables the redemptive healing continually offered through the church.

Through the mediation of baptism, penance, and Eucharist, the wounded man partakes of Christ’s sacrifice and gains his full strength (becomes stalworþe). Both the blood of Christ and the sacraments of the church that nurse the wounded back to health derive from God, so that the parable shows the necessity of receiving grace. Rather than illustrate what all humans should do in order to be saved, Langland’s parable highlights an expression of love unique to Christ.

Up to this point, analysis of the parable in *Piers Plowman* reinforces scholarship that investigates precedents for Langland’s interpretation in Latin exegesis and concludes that the story illustrates the necessity of grace for human redemption. It confirms, as David Aers has recently argued, that Christ’s Redemption is central to Langland’s salvation theology. Countering scholars’ description of Langland’s theology as “semi-Pelagian,” Aers points to the Samaritan parable as a key articulation of an Augustinian theology of grace and reads it as a corrective to earlier passages so that the Samaritan

⁷⁹ Schmidt suggests that the phrase “passion of that baby” characterizes the redemption as beginning with the Incarnation. See A.V.C. Schmidt, “‘Elementary’ Images in the Samaritan Episode of *Piers Plowman*,” *Essays in Criticism* 56, no. 4 (2006): 304.

episode “supersedes any claims that assumed the ability of humans to do well enough from putatively autonomous resources to make eternal beatitude theirs.”⁸⁰ While Aers justifiably directs readers’ attention to the salvific power of the Samaritan, examination of the material surrounding the parable reveals that Langland’s presentation of the story is not simply an illustration of the necessity of grace. The Samaritan’s explication of the parable is marked by disjunctions: between the literal and allegorical levels of interpretation, between the figures on which Will and the Samaritan focus their attention, and between the emphasis on doing well in the larger poem and the need for grace conveyed by this version of the parable. Langland articulates the importance of love of neighbor in relation to the Samaritan parable, but he addresses the topic where a reader least expects it. He employs a parable about love of neighbor to demonstrate the nature of divine love, and he shows the necessity of human kindness in the ultimate figure of divine love: the Trinity.

Langland’s rendition of the parable, which emphasizes the love Christ gives to humankind, is surrounded by commentary on how humans should love God and each other. As in *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, the Good Samaritan parable in *Piers Plowman* is a part of a collection of teachings on charity. The long discourse on charity begins in Passus 15, where Will first inquires of Anima “What is charite?” (15.149). When Anima replies that charity is a free, liberal will, as of a child, Will insists he has never encountered such a thing and a lengthy discussion spreading over three passus ensues. After an initial conversation in which Anima talks about the lack of charity in the clergy, Will slips into a dream within a dream (at the mention of Piers the Plowman) and has a vision of the Tree of Charity. When he awakes from this inner dream, Will converses with Abraham

⁸⁰ Aers, “Remembering the Samaritan,” 99.

and Moses and then participates in the Samaritan parable. Following the events of the parable, the Samaritan teaches Will about the nature of the Trinity. Both Anima's discourse and the Samaritan's articulation of the Trinity address human actions, so that the frame discourages a singular focus on Christ's love in relation to the parable.

The discussion of charity in Passus 15 primarily addresses its manifestations in human behavior and dispositions. As in Langland's rendition of the parable itself, where Abraham, Moses, and the Samaritan symbolize faith, hope, and charity, the foundation for Will and Anima's discussion of charity is 1 Corinthians 13. Will first cites Paul's letter to the Corinthians as a descriptor of the kind of charity he has never witnessed: "*non inflatur, non est ambiciosa, non querit que sua sunt* -- / I seiz neuere swich a man, so me god helpe" (15.157-158).⁸¹ Will's citation of 1 Corinthians implies that his ignorance of charity results not from unfamiliarity with church doctrine but from the imperfect enactment of such love within the world. He knows what charity should be but cannot find it exemplified in his fellow humans. Showing some preliminary understanding of the lessons he will learn from the Samaritan, Will employs the text in a manner that equates Christ with charity. He quotes 1 Corinthians 13:12 to counter those clerks who teach that Christ is everywhere: "Ac I seiz hym neuere sooply but as myself in a Mirour: / *Hic in enigmate, tunc facie ad faciem*" (B.15.162-163).⁸² By replacing the concept of love with the person of Christ, Will articulates what he will progressively learn throughout the next three passus: charity, which transcends human ethics, is only perfectly embodied in Christ.

⁸¹ Line 157 quotes 1 Cor. 13:4-5, "it is not blowun, it is not coueytouse, it sekith not tho thingis that ben hise owne."

⁸² 1 Cor. 13:12, "Forsoth we seen now by a myrour in a derknesse, thanne forsothe face to face." In 1 Corinthians, the text contrasts the limited nature of human understanding with the immutability of love.

Anima's discourse on charity is in large part a denunciation of the clergy, whom he depicts as exemplifying self interest rather than love.⁸³ Like Will, Anima refers to 1 Corinthian 13 to define charity, in this case to explain the incompatibility of charity and greed. Paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 13:4-5, Anima first explains that charity "ne chaffareþ nozt, ne chalangeþ, ne craueþ" (15.165).⁸⁴ By eliminating the reference to pride in his source text, Anima focuses attention on those qualities that more directly relate to possessions. Instead of directly stating that "charite enuyeth not," as Paul does, Anima shows the absence of envy through two consecutive comparisons: love values a penny as much as a pound of gold and a russet work garment as much as an exotic silk vestment (15.166-168). In a list of positive statements affirming what charity is, Anima follows Paul by stating that charity suffers all things and believes all things,⁸⁵ but he adds to this list that charity "coueiteþ...noon erpely good, but heuenriche blisse" (15.175).⁸⁶ The increased emphasis on envy and greed corresponds to the particular sins Anima describes as plaguing the clergy and those who follow them. He accuses preachers of attending to the wealthy, neglecting the poor, and profiting from corrupt enterprise. They forsake no one's alms, "of vsurers, of hoores, of Auarouse chapmen," and transgress the rule of their religion by submitting to those who will give them the most money (15.85-87).⁸⁷ Anima

⁸³ The homilist of Bodley 806 similarly censures greedy clerics in his commentary on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. He associates the priest and deacon with contemporary clergy, who are more concerned with "takyng of here tytes and offrynges þan of helpe of here soules." See fols. 111v line 39 – 12r line 3.

⁸⁴ Cf. "Charite enuyeth not, it doith not wickidli, it is not blowun, it is not coueytouse, it sekith not tho thingis that ben hise owne."

⁸⁵ "Al þat men seyn, he leet it soop and in solace takeþ, / And alle manere meschiefs in myldenesse he suffreþ" (15.173-174).

⁸⁶ Cf. 1 Cor. 13: 7 "it suffriþ alle thingis, it bileueth alle thingis, it hopith alle thingis, it susteyneth alle thingis."

affirms Will's complaint that charity is hard to find in the world and shows that to be especially true among the clergy – those most expected to embody God's love.

Anima's denunciation of the clergy relates to the Samaritan parable because it attests to the difficulty of learning Christian love through example. Priests have a duty to provide a model for the laity, acting "as a good Banyer" so that those who follow may be strengthened in their knowledge of Christ's love (B.15.435-437), yet the hypocrisy of the priesthood renders exemplary living an unreliable indicator of charity. Since even those who seem to follow Christ's teachings often do so in the hopes of material gain, one cannot tell from action whether a person is charitable. Comparing the clergy to a mound of snakes covered with snow, Anima declares that "right so preestes, prechours and prelates manye, / Ye are enblaunched wiþ *bele* paroles and wiþ *bele* cloþes / Ac youre werkes and wordes þervnder aren ful wolueliche" (15.114-116). While these lines suggest that works and words may divulge what appearance obscures, Anima goes on to discount apparently virtuous behavior as a sign of charity. He warns that mendicants who "loken as lambren and semen lif holy" do not pursue spiritual perfection but beg from the rich in order to live a life of ease (15.205-208). Consequently, ordinary people cannot reliably discern where charity is present. Anima declares that charity may be known "neiper þorou3 wordes ne werkes, but þorou3 wil oone"⁸⁸ (B.15.210).⁸⁷ If speech and action are not reliable indicators of charity, a person cannot learn to love simply by

⁸⁷ The discussion of charity in Passus 15 is closely connected with the problem of Mede from passus 2-4: the clergy pursue worldly reward instead of reward that comes from heaven.

⁸⁸ Anima explains that Will cannot see charity without the help of Piers the Plowman, who takes on divine qualities in this passage. Piers has special insight into people's will because he is likened to Christ (15.199-200, 211-212).

emulating the behavior of another. Lacking an inner disposition of charity, those who follow the model of the clergy only adopt the semblance of holiness:

And so it fareþ by som folk now; þei han a fair speche,
Crowne and cristendom, þe kynges mark of heuene,
Ac þe metal, þat is mannes soule, myd synne is foule alayed.
Boþe lettred and lewed beþ alayed now wiþ synne
That no lif loueþ ooþer, ne oure lord as it semeþ. (B.15.351-355)

The consequence of such hypocrisy is inversion of the law: no one loves God or neighbor. With this emphasis on example and law, Anima's speech relates to the upcoming parable in ways more specific than just the common subject of charity. Anima teaches that example is important but insufficient, as deeds alone do not constitute charity. An observer of the Samaritan's actions should not simply act in like manner to him; to fully imitate the Samaritan, one must embody the love of Christ as well.

This idea that seemingly exemplary deeds are insufficient for the teaching of charity helps clarify Langland's rendition of the Good Samaritan parable, which encourages an audience to participate in divine love rather than directly imitate the Samaritan. Although Langland leaves out the instruction to "Go þou, and do þou in lyk manere," the idea of following the Samaritan appears repeatedly. After the events of the parable take place, Abraham, Moses, and Will all literally follow the Samaritan (17.83-86), just as Abraham and Moses did before Will encountered them. Collectively, the Samaritan describes his followers as the only ones protected against the outlaw in the woods who injured the wounded man:

For wente neuere wye in þis world þoruþ þat wildernesse
That he ne was robbed or rifled, rood he þere or yede,
Saue feiþ and myselue and *Spes* his felawe,
And þiself now and swiche as suwen oure werkes. (17.101-104)

By asserting that those who perform similar deeds may pass unharmed as well, the Samaritan suggests the importance of good deeds on the path to salvation. He implies that the parable provides an example of charitable behavior, efficacious for salvation, but he articulates that ethical injunction in an ambiguous manner. Rather than refer to charitable deeds, “oure werkes” could indicate radically different behavior: as Will pointed out only fifteen lines earlier, Faith and Hope fled from the man in need. Certainly, fearful inaction is not one of the “werkes” that ensures safe passage.

Instead of referring to a uniform deed exhibited by all, the Samaritan’s use of the phrase “oure werkes” refers to a collaborative act in which each performs a different role. “Oure” also implies that this activity is never singular, as the Samaritan’s participation is necessary for the efficacy of faith and hope’s good deeds. Emphasizing the centrality of his own role, the Samaritan attributes the safety of Faith and Hope to the fact that he accompanied them: “For he [the devil] seigh me þat am Samaritan suwen Feiþ and his felawe / On my Capul þat highte *caro* – of mankynde I took it – / He was vnhardy, þat harlot, and hidde hym *in Inferno*” (17.109-111). The Samaritan credits their safety before the devil to the fact that he rides a horse, allegorically understood as his assumption of human flesh in the Incarnation. Ironically, the adoption of a quality shared by Will, Abraham, and Moses gives the Samaritan unique protection. Divine love in human form overcomes sin.

Just as the Samaritan/Christ ensures the others’ safe passage in the events of the parable, his crucifixion enables new roles for Faith and Hope. After the Resurrection, Faith, Hope, and Love will work together as a church to bring people safely through the wilderness of the world. Faith acts as a guide, directing people on their spiritual journeys

so they may follow in the path of the Samaritan/Christ: “And þanne shal Feiþ be forster here and in þis Fryth walke / And kennen outcomen men þat knowen nozt þe contree / Which is þe wey þat I wente and wher forþ to Ierusalem” (17.115-117). Just as the Samaritan travelled an inverted journey from the one in Luke’s gospel, climbing from Jericho or the world to Jerusalem or heaven, Faith should teach people to follow the path to their spiritual home. Although the Samaritan does not advocate direct imitation of his particular act of healing, or the self sacrifice it symbolizes, one should act in the like manner to the Samaritan by going on the same journey.

Like the innkeeper in the parable, Hope will care for the sick. To those infected with sin, descending into the world instead of ascending to a spiritual home, Hope administers the law and doctrines of the church: “And alle þat feble and feynte be, þat Feiþ may nozt teche, / Hope shal lede hem forþ with loue as his lettre telleþ, / And hostele hem and heele þoru3 holy chirche bileue / Til I haue salue for alle sike” (17.119-122). In this act, Hope participates in the healing acts of the Samaritan by taking a subsidiary role, like that advocated for priests by the Wycliffite homilist.⁸⁹ Hope and Faith prepare Christians to receive the love Christ offers on his return:

...and þanne shal I turne
 And come ayein bi þis contree and conforten alle sike
 That craueþ it or coueiteþ it and criep þerafter
 For þe barn was born in Bethleem þat with his blood shal saue
 Alle þat lyuen in Feiþ and folwen his felawes techynge. (17.122-126)

The Samaritan reiterates that the blood of Christ is necessary for salvation, but he does not describe it as sufficient. Echoing Anima’s description of charity in Passus 15, the Samaritan says salvation will come to those who crave and covet heavenly bliss.⁹⁰ The

⁸⁹ See pages 142-43 above.

statement that Christ's blood heals only those who live with faith and follow the teachings of the law complicates the soteriology of grace that the parable suggests when read in isolation. Love does not replace, but completes, faith and hope: together, they compose a trinity of virtues described as "oure werkes."⁹¹ Those who follow, or rather participate with, all three come to salvation.

The depictions of the Trinity that surround the parable of the Good Samaritan confirm that charity depends upon cooperation: among the three persons of God, among humans, and between God and humans. Will first learns about the Trinity through the Tree of Charity image in Passus 16. Following Anima's speech, which primarily addresses human expressions of charity, Will complains that "3it I am in a weer what charite is to mene" (16.3). The teaching that follows takes the form of a vision, rather than a discursive critique, and expands the concept of charity to encompass divine love. In response to Will's inquiry, Anima likens charity to a tree that grows within the human heart; *liberum arbitrium* cares for it on land leased by Piers Plowman.⁹² The tree flourishes through the collaboration of the human and divine love, as Anima explains that "þoru3 god and goode men groweþ þe fruyt of Charite" (16.9). The particular elements of the tree, such as the roots, trunk, and leaves represent human virtues such as mercy, pity (*ruþe*), and faithful words, while the three poles that ensure the structural integrity of the tree symbolize the three persons of the Trinity.

⁹⁰ See page 160 above.

⁹¹ Pamela Raabe has argued that the Samaritan's descriptions of the Trinity illuminate the Trinitarian nature of the theological virtues as well. See Pamela Raabe, *Imitating God: The Allegory of Faith in "Piers Plowman B"* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 48.

⁹² At the mention of Piers Plowman, Will swoons into another dream within this dream, where he witnesses the image Anima previously described (16.18-22).

The description of each pole's function shows how divine love enables human virtue. Having slipped into an inner dream, Will learns from Piers Plowman that wicked winds of the world, symbolizing different vices, threaten to topple the tree and its fruits, if not for the protection of the three poles. "*Potentia dei patris*" fights greed, while "*sapiencia dei patris* / That is þe passion and þe power of oure prince Iesu" combats vices of the flesh (16.30-36). Frustrated by these defenses, the devil employs "vnkynde Neighebores, / Bakbiteris brewecheste, brawleris and chideris" to fetch the fruits of charity (16.42-43). The previous naming of the Father and the Son suggest that the Holy Spirit will protect against this third threat, yet Piers articulates this defense in a more complex manner that involves both God and humans. *Liberum arbitrium* wields the third plank "þoru3 grace / And help of þe holy goost," but Piers reports that free will has only moderate success and "letteþ hym [the devil] som tyme" (16.46). Piers' description of the third plank teaches Will that human love affects divine love, as free will may cooperate with the Holy Spirit or hinder it through sin.⁹³ After naming *liberum arbitrium* as lieutenant, Piers describes the danger free will poses to obscure the work of the Holy Spirit: *Videatis qui peccat in spiritum sanctum numquam remittetur etc.; Hoc / est idem qui peccat per liberum arbitrium non repugnat*" (16.48-49).⁹⁴ As the Samaritan will later explain in more detail, sins against the Holy Spirit inhibit merciful love.

The interaction between humans and the Holy Spirit dominates the Samaritan's explanations of the Trinity as well. After watching the events of the Samaritan parable

⁹³ Smith cites Saint Bonaventura in support of the idea that humans must sustain the charity that originates with God. See *Traditional Imagery of Charity*, 72.

⁹⁴ Line 48 is an adaptation of Mt. 12:32: "forsothe he that shall seye a word azeins the Holy Goost, it shal nat be forzouen to hym, nether in this world, ne in the tother," in which Langland substitutes peccat for dixerit. John Alford describes line 49 as an unidentified comment on Mt. 12:32. John A. Alford, *Piers Plowman: A Guide to the Quotations* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), 102.

and listening to the Samaritan's explication of the tale, Will still entertains the same question he posed immediately before he encountered the Samaritan: should he believe in the Trinity, as Abraham taught him, or in the law he learned from Hope? (17.127-133). The fact that Will still deliberates the relative value of each man's teaching indicates that he either ignores or rejects the Samaritan's statement that "hir help may litel auaille" and points to the difficulty of applying the allegorical interpretation to Christian praxis. Whereas the Samaritan formerly dismissed Abraham and Moses as ill-equipped to heal the wounded man, this time he describes the teachings of both as important to salvation. Will should believe as Abraham taught him and love his fellow Christians in the manner Moses instructed (17.134-138), as love of neighbor cooperates with and kindles the divine love in the Trinity.

The Samaritan articulates the nature of the Trinity with two different metaphors: a hand and a candle. The hand image validates Abraham's teachings, as it emphasizes the collaboration of the three persons of the Trinity, and the candle shows how Moses' teaching regarding love of neighbor engages with the Trinity. While it does not directly address human participation in divine love, the description of the Trinity as a hand is noteworthy for the emphasis it places on the Holy Spirit – that member of the Trinity with which free will interacts. With the image of the hand, Langland employs a familiar device to explain the Trinity, but he differs from medieval theologians in his explanation of the constituent parts. In accordance with convention, the Samaritan describes God the Father as the fist. This image symbolizes the power of creation, as "al þe myzt myd hym is in makynge of þynges" (17.172). Whereas traditional imagery associates the Holy Spirit with the fingers, the Samaritan identifies the fingers with the Son and describes the

Holy Spirit as the palm. As Frederick Biggs has argued, this change makes the Holy Spirit more central to the work of the Trinity.⁹⁵ The palm has the power to unfold the fist and extend the fingers to reach or refuse (17.178-181), implying that the Holy Spirit may disperse the might of God the Father into gentler interaction with the world through the Son. With this image, the Samaritan describes the Holy Spirit as uniquely critical to the function of the Trinity:

Were þe myddel of myn hand ymaymed or yperissed
I sholde receyue rist no3t of þat I reche myghte;
Ac þou3 my þombe and my fyngres boþe were toshullen
And þe myddel of myn hand wiþoute maleese,
In many kynnes maneres I myghte myself helpe,
Boþe meue and amende, þou3 alle my fyngres oke. (17.192-197)

With injured fingers, the hand may still accomplish much, but with an injured palm, the fingers can no longer function as they should. As a result, sins against the Holy Spirit particularly inhibit divine love. Equating the one who sins against the Holy Spirit with he who “prikeþ god as in þe pawme” (17.202), the Samaritan concludes that such a person wants to quench the grace of God (17.205).⁹⁶

In the second metaphor he employs to depict the Trinity, the Samaritan explains human participation with divine love in more detail. To depict how humans can foster or stifle grace, the Samaritan likens the Trinity to a candle constituted by the three elements of wax, wick, and flame, which represent the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit respectively. Together, these elements give off light and heat, which the Samaritan likens to how the three persons of the Trinity “fostren forþ amonges folk loue and bileue / That alle kynne

⁹⁵ Frederick M. Biggs, “For God is After an Hand”: *Piers Plowman* B.17.138-205, *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 5 (1991): 23.

⁹⁶ Further suggesting the unity of the three persons of the Trinity, the Samaritan describes sins against the Holy Spirit with an image similar to stigmata, normally associated with Christ.

cristene clenseþ of sinnes” (17.213-214). Through the analogy, the Samaritan teaches that what Will needs for salvation originates not in the individual human person but the three persons of God. Again, the Samaritan attributes to the Holy Spirit a power critical to the work of the Trinity. As the flame, the Holy Spirit warms the wick (the Son) and the wax (the Father) so that he “melteþ hire myzt into mercy” (17.230). Whereas the Samaritan concentrates on the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity in the hand analogy, he specifically focuses on forgiveness of sin with the image of the candle.

As Piers taught through the image of the Tree of Charity, the Samaritan explains that humans can help or hinder the work of the Holy Spirit. Through acts of love, humans fan the flame of the Holy Spirit, which “gloweþ but as a glede vnglade / Til þat lele loue ligge on hym and blowe” (17.226-227). As the Samaritan will articulate more overtly later, he implies that human kindness fosters God’s mercy and describes forgiveness of sin as a cooperative effort between humans and God:

So wol þe fader forgyue folk of mylde hertes
 That rufully repenten and restitution make,
 In as muche as þei mowen amenden and paien;
 And if it suffise nozt for assetz, þat in swich a wille deyep,
 Mercy for his mekenesse wol maken good þe remenaunt. (17.238-242)

Humans atone for their sins, which is necessary but not sufficient for salvation; in return, the Son and the Holy spirit together incite mercy in the Father to forgive human sinfulness. Human love and divine love, works and grace, bring about salvation.

The Samaritan most clearly articulates the need to love one’s neighbor when he describes the consequences of unkindness. Just as Christians can support the work of the Trinity through acts of love, unkindness toward one’s neighbor quenches the flame of the Holy Spirit. For all “unkynde” Christians, the Holy Spirit is “god and grace wiþouten

mercy.”⁹⁷ The Samaritan characterizes Moses’ law as fundamental to human salvation, as failing to love a neighbor renders all other efforts at repentance ineffective:

Be vnkynde to þyn euenecristene and al þat þow kanst bidde,
Delen and do penaunce day and nyght euere,
And purchace al þe pardon of Pampilon and Rome,
And Indulgences ynowe, and be ingratus to þi kynde,
The holy goost hereþ þee nozt ne helpe may þee by reson.
For vnkyndenesse quencheþ hym þat he kan nozt shyne
Ne brenne ne blase clere, forblowyng of vnkyndenesse. (B.17.254-260)⁹⁸

Far from downplaying the importance of human acts of love, the Samaritan describes the dire consequences of their absence: positive acts of penance cannot earn salvation, but malicious acts can effectively reject grace.

The particular example of unkindness the Samaritan cites reinforces the idea that Christians can follow the Samaritan through love of neighbor or reject his deeds through unkindness. Specifically, the Samaritan illustrates unkindness with the same offense committed by the robbers in the parable: unkind Christians are those who “for coueitise and enuye / Sleep a man for hise moebles wiþ mouþ or with handes” (17.277-278). The motives of greed and envy connect unkindness with the sins of the clergy and many of their lay followers, as described in Anima’s discourse on charity, while the act of slaying a man with one’s mouth widens the scope of such malice. All such people do violence to the two qualities that the Holy Spirit guards, “life and loue, þe leye [flame] of mannes

⁹⁷ John Chamberlain suggests that the writings of Peter the Chanter and Peter Lombard may have informed Langland’s analogy. Peter the Chanter describes sins against fellow Christians as sins against the holy spirit, while Peter Lombard classifies such sins against the third person of the Trinity as ones stemming from malicious rejection of God. See John Chamberlain, *Medieval Arts Doctrines on Ambiguity and Their Place in Langland’s Poetics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 63.

⁹⁸ The Samaritan reiterates this sentiment several more times in his discourse. At lines 17.274-275, he states “Thus is vnkyndenesse þe contrarie þat quencheþ, as it were, / The grace of þe holy goost, goddes owene kynde.”

body” (17.280), for which the Samaritan implies they will not be forgiven.⁹⁹ Charity, in its widest sense of divine love, incorporates justice.¹⁰⁰ Articulating an ethic of mercy similar to that in the *South English Ministry and Passion*, the Samaritan asks “How myzte he aske mercy, or any mercy hym helpe, / That wikkedliche and wilfulliche wolde mercy aniente?” (17.289-290). In the *South English Ministry and Passion*, humans learn to concentrate their love on a specific group that acts in a preferred manner. In *Piers Plowman*, the Samaritan suggests that Christ employs the same ethic: “Leue I neuere þat oure lord at þe laste ende / Wol loue þat lif þat lakkeþ charite” (B.17.296-297). Rather than extend merciful love to every person or to his enemies, Christ shows mercy only to those who act with charity themselves.

The severity of this message is tempered by the Samaritan’s insistence on humans’ ability to show mercy. In his frequent play between the terms “kynde” and “kyndenesse,” the Samaritan describes the common nature of the human and divine. With the assertion that what “kynde dooþ vnkynde fordooþ” (17.276), the Samaritan describes unkindness as both malicious and unnatural.¹⁰¹ Such acts committed against a fellow Christian, one’s own kind, “quencheþ, as it were, / The grace of þe holy goost, goddes owene kynde” (17.274-275). The essence of human and divine love that malice extinguishes is described with the same image, a flame, that emphasizes continuity between the human and the divine. Although the idea of Christ showing mercy only to the merciful seems exacting, kindness is both reasonable and natural. It comes so easily

⁹⁹ The Samaritan also refers to sins against the Holy Spirit as those that destroy “loue or lif” in 17.219-220.

¹⁰⁰ See Schmidt, “Elementary Images,” 312.

¹⁰¹ Chamberlain describes malevolence, or “unkyndenesse” as a destruction of “kynde” that goes against the nature of both the Holy Spirit and humans themselves. Through such sins, he proposes, humans “unmake” themselves. See *Medieval Arts Doctrine*, 68.

to humans that the Samaritan insists no one is so sick, sorry, or wretched that he may not “wisshen and willen / Alle manere men mercy and forzifnesse, / And louye hem lik hymself, and his lif amende (17.350-354). The type of radical charity displayed by the Samaritan belongs to the divine power of love embodied in Christ – a love others can participate in through their own nature. It consists of action, to “louye hem lik hymself,” and an inner disposition of love that wishes mercy for all people. The Samaritan’s exposition thus suggests that Christians are challenged not to imitate all of the deeds that the Samaritan performed, but to cultivate divine love within their own hearts and express their divine nature through kindness to a neighbor.

Although the Samaritan initially tells Will that “hir help may litel auaille,” this excusal of Abraham and Moses’ failure to help the wounded man is not Langland’s final word on the importance of acts of mercy, either in the larger poem or even in the employment of the Samaritan parable. The Samaritan instructs Will that neither he, nor the two men who passed by the wounded man, can heal just as Christ does. Nonetheless, this does not mean that Christians should think of themselves only as passive recipients of Christ’s healing grace: i.e., the wounded man. While the Samaritan, as Christ, uniquely heals the wounds of sin, each Christian ensures the work of the Samaritan can continue by participating in human and divine relationships of love. Following his “kynde,” Will and other Christians should travel the path of the Samaritan on a pilgrimage from worldly Jericho their spiritual home. Rather than choose between faith in the Trinity or hope in the law, the Samaritan teaches Will that each Christian should follow the collective works of Faith, Hope, and Love by believing in the Trinity and fanning the flame of the holy spirit through the loving kindness of good works.

Chapter 4

Penitential Revision: The Parable of the Prodigal Son in *Book to a Mother*

Henneforeward stude þou bisiliche in þis bok and loke wher þi lyuyng acordip wiþ Cristes liuinge, and þanke him þerof; and þer it doþ not, scrape it out wiþ sorew of herte and schrift of mouþe and satisfaccioun. (*Book to a Mother*)¹

Instead of exploring a rendition of a parable in a well-known poem, this final chapter investigates the employment of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in a devotional treatise, in which a clerical author directs a lay audience to digest holy scripture and then integrate its contents into their own lives. The author of *Book to a Mother* treats the life of Christ in the gospels as a guide to Christian living and encourages his readers to adapt their own lives so that their *vita* corresponds as closely as possible to Christ's.² Likening the process of penance to the erasure of words in a manuscript, the author envisions lay Christians acting as readers, writers, and revisers who create scriptural paraphrase through their words and their actions.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son plays a key role in this directive to revise one's life to conform to Christ, as it provides a primary model for penance in *Book to a Mother*.³ In its original gospel form, the parable appears ill-suited to illustrate the

¹ Adrian James McCarthy, ed., *Book to a Mother: An Edition with Commentary*, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 92 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1981), 38/18-22.

² *Book to a Mother* survives in four fifteenth-century manuscripts. For descriptions, see McCarthy, *Book to a Mother*, v-xxii. Scholars conventionally date the text to c. 1370, following McCarthy's suggestion, which distances the text from both Lollardy and the controversies over vernacular scripture associated with Arundel's *Constitutions*. In a 2007 paper delivered at Ohio State University, Fiona Somerset challenged McCarthy's basis for dating the text to the 1370s and suggested that the text's affinities with Lollard writing could indicate that it belongs to rather than pre-dates the body of Lollard texts.

threefold process of penance, consisting of contrition, confession, and satisfaction, that the author names as the means of clearing one's text. The prodigal son certainly feels sorry for his sins, but his father rushes to forgive him even before he confesses; if any acts of satisfaction follow his return home, we do not learn about them in the story itself. Examination of Middle English renditions of the Prodigal Son story will show that while some authors characterize the story as an illustration of God's eagerness to forgive sinners, others adapt the parable to suggest that the son did not receive forgiveness on the basis of contrition alone. *Book to a Mother* belongs to the latter group, as the author interprets the parable in a manner that supports the primary message of his text: while the author initially recounts the parable in a close translation of the gospel, he then glosses it so that the prodigal son's return home reflects not only a threefold process of penance but also a life of virtue following his reconciliation.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-22) is the final story in a series of three parables that Jesus tells to an audience composed of tax collectors and sinners, along with Pharisees who voice their disapproval of Jesus' interaction with the unrighteous. All three stories feature rejoicing at the recovery of something lost: the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son, sometimes called the Parable of the Lost Son. Although Jesus does not allegorize the Prodigal Son story, he likens the sheep and the coin in the first two parables to lost sinners. Jesus' conclusions to the Parable of the Lost Sheep could easily follow the Prodigal Son parable as well, as he declares "And Y seie to zou, so ioye schal be in

³ The author also advocates that the reader should follow the example of Mary Magdalene to learn penance. See McCarthy, *Book to a Mother*, 134-135.

heuene on o synful man doynge penaunce, more than on nynti and nyne iuste, that han no nede to penaunce” (Lk. 15:7).⁴

The parable features two sons, the younger of whom asks his father for his share of inheritance and then departs to a distant country where he wastes his goods in debauchorous living.⁵ After spending all his money, a famine arises in the distant country; in need of food, the younger son seeks out a citizen of that land, who employs him feeding his swine. While so employed, the younger son hungers to such an extent that he desires to eat what the swine consume. In the midst of his suffering, the son reflects on how many hired servants eat well in his father’s house. Consequently, he decides that he will return home and say to his father, “Fadir, I haue synned azens heuene, and bifore thee; now I am not worthi to be clepid thi sone, make me as oon of thi hyrid men” (Lk. 15:18-19).

While the son still approaches from a distance, the father runs to him and welcomes him with embraces and kisses. After the father warmly receives him, the son tells his father of his remorse in the same terms he rehearsed before coming home. Rejoicing in his return, the father orders his servants to clothe the son with his best robe, a ring, and shoes and to slaughter the fattened calf for a celebration. Later, the older son, who had been working in the fields, approaches the house and inquires of a servant what reason there is for celebration. Upon learning that the festivities honor his brother’s

⁴ All Middle English biblical quotations come from J. Forshall and F. Madden, eds., *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal Books, in the Earliest English Versions, made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1850. Rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1982).

⁵ In Luke 15:13, The Vulgate reads “ibi dissipavit substantiam suam vivendo luxuriose.” The Wycliffite Bible translates *vivendo luxuriose* as “lyuynge lecherously.” All quotations of the Vulgate come from Alberto Colunga and Laurentio Turrado, eds., *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgata Clementinam*, 5th ed. (Madrid: Biblioteca Autores Cristianos, 1977).

return, he becomes angry and refuses to go inside. The older son protests to his father that he has served him faithfully many years and yet never received so much as a goat to celebrate with his friends, but his younger brother, who wasted his living with prostitutes, receives a fattened calf. The parable concludes with the father's assurance that everything he has belongs to the older son as well, but they should rejoice because "this thi brother was deed, and lyuede a3eyn; he peryschide, and he is founden" (Lk. 15:32).

The parable can be thought of as consisting of two parts: the first an illustration of forgiveness and the second an anticipation of and response to objections to such mercy. Middle English renditions of the Prodigal Son story overwhelmingly describe the first part of the parable as evidence that God will show mercy to the repentant sinner. Focused on their audiences' need to repent, authors virtually ignore the second portion of the story in which the righteous man begrudges the gifts bestowed upon the sinful.⁶ *Book to a Mother*, *The Mirour of Mans Saluacion*, and *The Pepysian Gospel Harmony* all leave out the entire second section of the parable.⁷ Others recite that portion of the story without comment or refer to the older son only as a means of contrasting the comparatively greater joy that God has over one returned sinner than those who live

⁶ Latin commentaries often associate the older son with the Jews and the younger son with heathens. This interpretation appears in the *Glossed Gospels* and briefly in the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle, but most authors writing in the vernacular do not include it. On the Latin commentaries, see Stephen L. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1987), 238. For the *Glossed Gospels* and the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle, see Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 243, fol. 74^v col. B, ll. 31-33 and Anne Hudson, ed., *English Wycliffite Sermons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 3:106 / 129-31.

⁷ *The Mirour of Mans Saluacion* only narrates the story through the father's embrace of his returned son. See Avril Henry, ed., *The Mirour of Mans Saluacioune: A Middle English Translation of Speculum Humanae Salvationis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 95-97. *The Pepysian Gospel Harmony* only refers to the first portion of the story as well, focusing on the joy the father has on his son's return and the gifts the father bestows upon him. See Margery Goates, ed., *The Pepysian Gospel Harmony*. EETS o.s. 157 (London, 1922), 63.

righteously their whole lives.⁸ Correspondingly, all of the vernacular writers featured in this chapter agree that God rightfully offers mercy to sinners. Discrepancies arise with regard to how readily this mercy is granted.

The simple granting of forgiveness in the Parable of the Prodigal Son contrasts the complex system of penance that emerged from the reform efforts of the later medieval church. Following the requirement of annual penance for the laity issued at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, literature explaining the process of penance and assisting in the examination of conscience proliferated in both Latin and the vernacular. Some of these texts educated readers in the basic elements of the faith, upon which a confessor would examine a penitent.⁹ In the vernacular, these include works like the *Lay Folks' Catechism*, which translates Archbishop Pecham's syllabus of basic elements of the faith into Middle English, along with works like *Memorial Credencium* or *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, which offer expanded commentary on the same basic Christian teachings recited in the *Lay Folks' Catechism*.¹⁰ Other texts focus more exclusively on proscribing

⁸ For an example of the former, see *The Northern Homily Cycle*. For the latter, see the accounts from the South English Legendary, either in the *South English Ministry and Passion* or the *Long Life of Christ*. See Saara Nevanlinna, ed., *The Northern Homily Cycle* vol. 2 *From Septuagesima to the Fifth Sunday after Trinity*, Mémoires de la Société Néophilologique de Helsinki, vol. 41 (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1973), 53-59; O.S. Pickering, ed., *The South English Ministry and Passion: Edited from St. John's College, Cambridge, MS B.6*. Middle English Texts, vol. 16 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1984), 127-129; and C. Horstmann, ed., *Leben Jesu: Ein Fragment* (Münster: Druck und Verlag von Friedrich Regensberg, 1873), 33-35.

⁹ In the 1281 Lambeth Constitutions, Archbishop Pecham directed priests to instruct the laity four times a year in the basic elements of the faith, including the fourteen articles of faith, the Ten Commandments, the gospel commandments to love God and neighbor, the seven works of mercy, the seven deadly sins and their offspring, the seven principal virtues, and the seven sacraments. See F.M. Powicke and C.R. Cheney, eds., *Councils and Synods with Other Documents Relating to the English Church*, vol. 2, *A.D. 1205-1313* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 2:900-905.

¹⁰ The English translation of Pecham's syllabus in the *Lay Folks' Catechism* is attributed to Archbishop Thoresby and dates to 1357. It survives in two distinct versions, one of which is considered a Wycliffite adaptation. See Thomas Frederick Simmons and Henry Edward Nolloth, eds., *The Lay Folks' Catechism*, EETS o.s. 118 (London: 1901); J. H. L. Kengen, "Memoriale Credencium: A Late Middle English Manual

sin, as they describe the branches of the seven deadly sins in detail and help readers identify these sins in their own lives. In the case of works like *Handlyng Synne* and *Jacob's Well*, authors demonstrate the nature of sins and the necessity of penance in part through a series of exemplary stories.¹¹

The standard description of penance within these texts includes three distinct steps: contrition for one's sins, auricular confession, and restitution for sins through satisfaction. For example, the author of *Memoriale Credencium* advises that "to perfit and verrey penaunce bihouep þre þyngus þat is to saye. Sorow of hert. schryft of mouthe: and satisfaccioun of dede."¹² The author explains that steadfast sorrow of contrition should include the intention to confess one's sins, while the declaration of sins in confession should likewise be done "with sorow of hert and wille fort forsak his synnus." Finally, satisfaction consists of "bedus biddyng. fastyng: and almes dede doyng," as these combat pride, lechery, and greed respectively, which the author describes as the source of all sins.¹³ Consequently, satisfaction not only makes restitution for previous sins but also diminishes the likelihood of future sin.¹⁴ Despite the common explanation of penance as consisting of all three elements, penitential writings reflect some flexibility within this frame. The author of *Jacob's Well* qualifies his statement about the necessity of

of Theology for Lay People" (PhD thesis, Kotholieke Universiteit te Nijmegen, 1979); and W. Francis Nelson, *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, EETS o.s. 217 (London: EETS o.s. 217, 1942).

¹¹ See Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *Robert of Brunne's Handlyng Synne and it's French Original* (London: EETS o.s. 119, 1975) and Arthur Brandeis, ed., *Jacob's Well*, EETS o.s. 115 (London: Keegan Paul, 1900).

¹² Kengen, *Memoriale Credencium*, 156/11-13.

¹³ *Ibid*, 156/21-23, 157/19-21, and 170/2-7.

¹⁴ The author of the Latin preachers' handbook *Fasciculus Morum* describes satisfaction as both restitution and prevention of future sin: "satisfaction means to shut out the causes of sins and their suggestions and not to repeat sin any more but to make satisfaction for what we have committed as much as it lies in our power." See Siegfried Wenzel, ed., *Fasciculus Morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 1989), 507.

confession and satisfaction to account for sickness or imminent death: “for þi contricyoun avayleth þe nozt but schryfte & satysfaccyoun be don, 3if þou haue power, tyme, & space.” The will to complete those acts can be sufficient when the means is lacking.¹⁵ Similarly, confession to a priest is not always necessary. For example, the penitential treatise *The Clensyng of Mannes Soule* states that if one cannot find a priest in a time of need, it is still beneficial to one’s soul to confess to “a lewid man.” Likewise, if the only priest available is a heretic or schismatic, the author recommends that rather than confess “he schal sorewe in his herte for synnes...and þis suffisiþ as to sauacion and for3euenesse of synne.”¹⁶ While the three steps of contrition, confession, and satisfaction were standard, effective penance did not always take this form. Correspondingly, authors who emphasize the prodigal son’s confession or allegorically associate satisfaction with the story do so not because this is the only way in which the son could become reconciled with God but to show correspondence between depictions of repentance in the gospels and the standard system of penance that developed throughout the later Middle Ages.

In the following analysis of vernacular renditions of the Prodigal Son story, I begin with accounts of the parable that differ considerably from that in *Book to a Mother*, in so far as they emphasize the ease with which God forgives and pay little attention to the reform of the prodigal son. I then progress to homiletic works that, like *Book to a Mother*, reflect concerns about proper penance. While the first set of texts differs from *Book to a Mother* with regard to their interpretations of the parable, they more closely

¹⁵ Brandeis, *Jacob’s Well*, 173/27-174/6.

¹⁶ Walter K. Everett, ed., “A Critical Edition of the Confession Section of the Clensyng of Mannes Soule” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1974), 19/3-12. The *Fasciculus Morum* is more strict on this matter. The author states that confession may only be made to one’s parish priest specifically and only lists exceptional circumstances in which one may seek out a different priest. See Wenzel, *Fasciculus Morum*, 469.

resemble it in terms of genre. Of the Middle English works containing the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the *Mirour of Mans Saluacioun* most closely approximates the dual function of *Book to a Mother* as a spiritual guide and scriptural compendium. A Middle English translation of the Latin *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, the *Mirour of Mans Saluacioun* presents a series of events from the New Testament followed by typological explanations of each event, predominantly in the form of related Old Testament narratives, connected by brief related devotional commentary.¹⁷ After forty-two chapters following this format, the final three chapters feature prayers related to the seven canonical hours, along with the seven sorrows and joys of the Virgin Mary. The author states his intention for the work to benefit the clergy and the laity in his prologue to the Latin text: he recommends preachers use the text as a sourcebook but explains that he writes in a simple style so that the educated and uneducated may both understand.¹⁸

In a work that primarily focuses on events related to the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, the Parable of the Prodigal Son appears in the one chapter featuring Christ's active ministry and is one of only two parables the author includes for a purpose other than illustrating final judgment.¹⁹ The chapter presents Jesus' encounter with Mary Magdalene while dining at the house of Simeon (Lk. 7:37-50), along with the release of

¹⁷ The author and place of composition of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* are unknown. Although there is only one extant copy in Middle English, which Henry dates to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, the text survives in at least 394 fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts. Most of these copies are in Latin, but the text was translated into German, French, Dutch, and Czech as well. See Henry, *Mirour*, 10, 19.

¹⁸ Henry, *Mirour*, 11 and 18.

¹⁹ Of the nearly forty chapters featuring events from the life of Christ, only six feature episodes related to the period in between Christ's birth and death. The first three of these address Jesus' presentation in the temple, his entry to Egypt, and baptism by John. The next three highlight the temptation of Christ, the penitence of Mary Magdalene, and Christ's entry into Jerusalem. The four parables the author includes in the *Mirour* all serve as types of another theme, with the Parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:14-30) and the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Mt. 25:1-13) illustrating final judgment and the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37) illustrating the Incarnation.

King Manasses from captivity after he prays to God for forgiveness (2 Chr. 33:1-19), the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and King David's confession of his sins to Nathan (2 Sam. 12:13) in that order.²⁰ The story of Jesus forgiving Mary Magdalene's sins aptly demonstrates his ministry, since the author considers encouragement of repentance to be the essence of Christ's work. Before reciting any of the four stories, the author explains the centrality of penance to the gospels:

To preche and to baptize the folk Crist than beganne
Be ensauple & be doctryne shewyng the hele of mann.
This swete sovne alder-first shewed Crist in his preching:
"Dose penaunce, for the regne of heven is negh commyng."
Be penaunce taght he of heven liberale apercioune;
Tofore his commyng herd nevere man swilk a swete sermoune.
Trewe is this Lordis sermoune ouere alle accepcioune digne;
Be penaunce commes vntil heven synnere vile & maligne.²¹

The author regards Jesus' public ministry as an effort to spread the message that people should repent because the kingdom of heaven is near.²² Yet rather than warn of the potential for punishment, the author characterizes the call to penance as a declaration of the accessibility of heaven. His brief rendition of Mary Magdalene's story provides evidence of "the sothfastnesse of my tale," as he relates that penance voided the seven deadly sins within her so that she received full pardon. He concludes that her example teaches sinners not to despair because God calls all penitents to heaven.²³

²⁰ The same episode related to Mary Magdalene appears as a model of penance in *Book to a Mother*. See McCarthy, *Book to a Mother*, 134-35.

²¹ Henry, *Mirour*, 95/1609-16.

²² The author quotes part of Matthew 4:17, which describes the beginning of Christ's ministry: "Fro thennus Jhesus bygan for to preche, and say, Do 3e penaunce, forsothe the kyngdom of heuens shal come nize." For explication of the same lines in *Book to a Mother*, see McCarthy, 60.

²³ See Henry, *Mirour*, 95/1616-24.

Correspondingly, the *Mirour* rendition of the Parable of the Prodigal Son highlights God's readiness to forgive and explains how God's grace enables sinners to repent. Despite his optimism that sinners may be redeemed, the author harshly censures the behavior of the younger brother. He introduces him as a "fole-wastour" and later refers to him as a "lewed daffe [idiot]."²⁴ Omitting the general famine said to have affected the country in the gospel story, the author attributes the son's hunger entirely to his wasteful living: "Consumyng his substaunce thare lyving luxouriously. /At the last gane he to nede, and tholid swilk hongres pyne / Pat he felle til a toune and kept a bourgeys swyne."²⁵ In commentary that the author interjects in the midst of the parable, he likens the son's immoderate living to turning one's wits from virtue to vice and names the citizen to whom the son turned for help as Lucifer.²⁶ His desire and ability to repent, therefore, come not from his own virtue but from the experience of need and ultimately Christ's mercy:

Than, til himself turnyng, he thoght to do penaunce,
 Als nede makes naked man rynne the qwhippe, to fikke and daunce;
 And in this may we wele note the Salueours miseracioune,
 Pat wille synners compelle thus to contricioune.²⁷

Like a whip, need compels the son to regret his wastefulness and return to his father. The author describes physical need as one of a number of means that Christ uses to exercise

²⁴ Henry, *Mirour*, 97/1656, 1669.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 97/1658-60. Compare Luke 15:14-15, "And aftir that he hadde endid alle thingis, a strong hungir was maad in that cuntree, and he bigan to haue nede. And he wente, and cleuyde to oon of the citeseyns of that cuntree."

²⁶ This interpretation is similar to ones found in *Book to a Mother*, the *Glossed Gospels* and a sermon from the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle. For *Book to a Mother*, see page 27 below. *The Glossed Gospels* refer to the citizen as the prince of this world who earned his position through his covetousness and waywardness. The sermon names the citizen as the fiend. See Cambridge, University Library MS Kk.ii.9, fol. 179^r col. B, l. 44 and Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 3:103/59.

²⁷ Henry, *Mirour*, 97/1671-74.

his mercy. Other means are more gentle, as Christ draws some through inspiration, some through preaching, and some through “welth and softnesse benignely chyricynge.” The prodigal son experiences a more violent but nonetheless effective inducement to repentance: “sharpe scorvyng.”²⁸

Although the author introduces the Parable of the Prodigal Son as an illustration of the forgiveness that comes to those who ask for mercy and do penance, the rendition of the story itself emphasizes the prevenient grace that predisposes the sinner to return to God and the mercy offered upon that return. The audience never actually witnesses the son asking for mercy, as the author omits a number of details from his relatively short paraphrase. Most notably, both instances in which the son declares that he has sinned against God and his father are missing. After the son returns home, the only detail the author retains from his gospel source is the father’s eager embrace:

And his fadere, hym offerre seyng, ranne hym agayne
Hym for till hals and kisse, this gude man, for ouer fayne.
Thus rynnes Godde to the contrite, with his grace prevenant,
Thaym to receyue, and alle thaire trespasase releasant.²⁹

The author demonstrates little interest in teaching his audience how to properly repent but instead employs the story as motivation to do so: the parable provides evidence that God fervently wishes for and aids the conversion of even the most depraved sinners.

The rendition of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the South English Legendary, extant in both the *Long Life of Christ* and the *South English Ministry and Passion*, similarly emphasizes the depravity of the younger son’s sin and God’s readiness to

²⁸ Henry, *Mirour*, 97/1677-1680.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 97/1685-86.

forgive.³⁰ The South English Legendary is a thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives that also contains a number of *temporale* narratives that recount scriptural and apocryphal stories spanning from creation to judgment day.³¹ The narratives on Christ's ministry in particular appear to derive directly from the gospels,³² although the author loosely paraphrases his source and frequently adds brief commentary.³³ In the *South English Ministry and Passion*, the author introduces the parable as a story preached to sinful men that teaches them to "letyn here synful dede / & come to amendement without wanhope."³⁴ It features the acts of sin more than repentance for them and shows the ease with which the father, or God, welcomes a sinner home.

The South English Ministry and Passion depicts the son's vices as a combination of prodigality and lust. Whereas Luke's text generically refers to the father as "sum man," the author describes the father as a rich man, who gives his younger son enough money "into anoþer contre to fare, / To lyue þere with marchaundyse in richesse withouttyn care."³⁵ The son leaves not because of his desire for independence or greed

³⁰ *The Long Life of Christ* survives in whole or in part in ten manuscripts dating from the late thirteenth century to the fifteenth century. Seven of the ten include the lines relating the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Three of the extant copies of *The Long Life of Christ* are known as the *South English Ministry and Passion*, one portion of *The Long Life of Christ*: a late thirteenth-century manuscript that is the earliest known copy of the SEL and two others from the early fifteenth century. For a list of manuscripts, see James H. Morey, *Book and Verse: A Guide to Middle English Biblical Literature* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 235-37 and 247-49. For editions, see Horstmann, *Leben Jesu*; and Pickering, *The South English Ministry and Passion*.

³¹ For an account of the different narratives and their manuscripts, see O.S. Pickering, "The *Temporale* Narratives of the *South English Legendary*," *Anglia* 91 (1973): 425-455.

³² The *Passion* narrative in the *South English Ministry and Passion* derives from the *Southern Passion*. Pickering, "Temporale Narratives," 451.

³³ See, for example, chapter 3 pages 134-138.

³⁴ I quote from the *South English Ministry and Passion* instead of the *Long Life of Christ* because of the quality of the edition. Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 127/1255-56. The text of the *Long Life of Christ* says sinners should "come tamendement with pouzt and hope." Horstman, *Long Life of Christ*, 34/111.

for his inheritance but because of a pragmatic decision made by his father. Only the older son will inherit the land, so the rich father provides his younger son with enough money to make a livelihood elsewhere. Although the text implies that the father intended the son to live a life of relative ease, the son takes this to an extreme, as he spends his money on “strumpetys & tauernerys” to such an extent that he wastes all his riches and “becam a wrecche & beggare atte ende.”³⁶ As in the *Mirour of Mans Saluacioun*, the author makes no mention of a famine but attributes the son’s suffering entirely to his own misdeeds, in this case devoting himself entirely to the pursuit of fleshly desires.

To an even greater degree than the narrative in the *Mirour of Mans Saluacioun*, the *South English Ministry and Passion* parable highlights God’s role in the son’s forgiveness. While both authors omit the lines from the gospel in which the son rehearses his confession (Lk. 15:18), the *Mirour of Mans Saluacioun* at least refers to the son’s desire to repent.³⁷ In the *South English Ministry and Passion*, the son never expresses contrition. He contemplates returning home but fears that his father might kill him on account of his foolish behavior: “He wiste þat his fader ryche was but he durst not to hym wende; / For he hadde so folyly do he wolde hym al toschende [kill].” Despite his fear of punishment, two factors motivate the son to return home: need and the thought that parents are naturally inclined to behave kindly toward their children.³⁸ The author

³⁵ Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 128/1259-60.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 128/1262-64.

³⁷ “Than, til himself turnyng, he thoght to do penaunce.” See Henry, *Mirour*, 97/1671.

³⁸ “Neþeles he beþouzt hym of kydeded þat man haþ to his child, / & þat kynde blood it wil zeue þat he were to hym mylde. / Nede hym drof also narwe, þat he hadde nouzt to spende.” Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 128/1267-69.

describes the son's return as a calculated risk given the perceived threat of violence; the son "aunted hym" to return to his father not with shame or remorse but with fear.³⁹ When he meets his father, the younger son asks for mercy, professing "for wurþi am I nouzt / More to be clepyd þi sone, for to nouzt I am brouzt."⁴⁰ Even in this plea for forgiveness, the son never uses the term "sin," nor does he articulate his failings in spiritual terms. He describes his shortcoming as material: he took his father's money and brought himself into poverty.

The son's lack of remorse draws attention to the unconditional love the father offers his child. As soon as the father learned of his son's return, "he ran azens hym with gret ioyze, beclippid hym and kyste."⁴¹ Omitting the particular details of the gifts the father bestowed on his son, the author states that the father clothed his son well and gathered the neighbors for a feast.⁴² Whereas the author of *Book to a Mother* will allegorize these gifts to represent penance and virtuous living, in the *South English Ministry and Passion* they simply show the son's return to material comfort. As in the gospel, the father describes his joy over his son's return as a resurrection from the dead:

But for þi zungere broþer haþ longe ded be
& now he is come to lyue, as we moun alle se,
Leue sone, for þi broþeris lyf þou make ioyze & song,
For it is þe moste ioyze þat euere cam vs among. (1285-88)

³⁹ As he approaches his father's home, the narrator states "Sore he dredde to comyn hym ny3." Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 128/1270-71.

⁴⁰ Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 128/1273-74. In the *Long Life of Christ*, the son more explicitly takes responsibility for his poverty and defines that financial loss as his offense: "zwyrþe nam ich nouzt / More to beon icleoped þi sone, for in pouerte ich me habbe ibrouzt." Horstman, *Long Life of Christ*, 34/128-29.

⁴¹ Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 128/1272.

⁴² "His fader hym lete cloþe rist wel; gret feste he made & blys / Of alle his neyzeborys hym aboutte for þat sone iwis." Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 128/1275-76.

The father's love derives not from the son's willingness to repent but simply from his being alive, confirming the son's earlier hope that the ties of kinship will inspire mercy. The author describes this familial love as symbolic of God's love for those living in deadly sin. Applying the conclusion of the Parable of the Lost Sheep to the Prodigal Son story, he concludes that "be 3ow þat his sonys ben þat lyþ in synful dede: / More ioy3e he wil make & blys qwan 3e wil to hym te [draw near], / þan with suyche many goode men þat euere han ny3 hym be."⁴³ Rather than warn against particular sins or outline the process of penance, the author of the *South English Ministry and Passion* emphasizes the fact that sinners should not despair. Even when a sinner returns simply out of physical need, God will rejoice at his homecoming.

Two homiletic renditions of the Parable of the Prodigal Son similarly emphasize God's mercy, but they more explicitly articulate what the repentant sinner must do to receive such mercy. In the *Northern Homily Cycle*, the author rewrites the parable to facilitate reading it as an allegory of estrangement from and reconciliation with God and specifically highlights how contrition and confession can remedy deadly sin. In articulating the nature of the son's offenses, the author of the *Northern Homily Cycle* uniquely focuses on how the son's departure affects the domestic situation of the family. Instead of simply stating that a man had two sons, the homilist describes the sons as "semly for to se" and underscores the cohesion of the family: "And samin so dwelled þai thre, / þe twa suns with þe fader in fere [company]."⁴⁴ In the *South English Ministry and Passion*, the author attributes the younger son's departure to a mutual decision made by

⁴³ Pickering, *South English Ministry*, 129/1290-92. Compare Lk. 15:7: "Sothly I seye to 3ou, so ioye schal be in heuene on o synful man doynge penaunce, than of nynti and nyne iuste, that han no nede of penaunce."

⁴⁴ Nevanlinna, *The Northern Homily Cycle*, 54/7274-76.

the son and his father, given the fact that the older son would inherit the land. The author of the *Northern Homily Cycle* characterizes the son's departure as a division of the unified household and attributes that departure entirely to the younger son's desire for independence. Showing the willfulness of the younger son, the author renders his speech almost exclusively in the imperative: "depart oure gudes in thre, / And luke what porcioun fals to me, / And gif me it and lat me ga, / For my will es to wende 3ow fra."⁴⁵ By articulating the younger son's desire to separate himself from his father and brother, the author implies that the son offends his father not only through his profligate behavior but also through his abandonment of the family. The father's acquiescence demonstrates both the son's stubbornness and the father's willingness to respect his decision: "[he] lete him wende at his awin will, / For he saw nowþer speche ne spell / Might mak him langer for to dwell."⁴⁶ Like God, the father allows the son to exercise free will and depart from him, even if that departure is to a life of vice with "fules þat vsed grete foly."⁴⁷

The paraphrase of the son's decision to return home further confirms that the son journeys away from God through his sin and seeks God's forgiveness upon his return. The author simplifies the son's rehearsal of his confession to eliminate any ambiguity in an allegorical reading. In contrast to the son's statement in the gospel that he has sinned before God and his father, the author of the *Northern Homily Cycle* streamlines the son's words of confession so that he only refers to sins against his father: "Fader, I haue done ogaines þi will, / And sined ogains þe greuoslly."⁴⁸ The son's contradiction of his father's

⁴⁵ Nevanlinna, *The Northern Homily Cycle*, 54/7280-83.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 54/7287-89.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 55/7305.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55/7335-56/7336.

will signifies his contradiction of God's will, just as his departure from his family signifies his departure from the Christian community. In his resolution to return, the son hopes that his father, or God, may "be my frend." Given the emphasis on family at the beginning of the parable, we may expect an appeal to the benevolence inspired by kinship, as in the *South English Ministry and Passion*. Instead, the son's reference to friendship implies that he does not expect his father to forgive him because of familial obligation or affection naturally associated with kinship. He anticipates that whatever mercy he may receive will be given freely, in the same manner that God bestows grace.⁴⁹

Just as the author of the *Northern Homily Cycle* enhances the father's identification with God, he intensifies the depiction of the younger son as a penitent by highlighting the role of contrition and confession in the father's reception of him. Whereas the son's inner confession is the primary sign of contrition in the gospel story, the author of the *Northern Homily Cycle* describes the persistence of the son's remorse. Expanding upon the statement that the son "rysinge cam to his fadir," the homilist describes him journeying home in a state of sorrow for his sins: "Vp he rase and furth he went / With wepeing and with mekill wa / Till his cuntre þat he come fra."⁵⁰ In addition to providing an outward sign of his sorrow, by which the father may observe the son's remorse immediately upon his return, tears are an important element of authentic contrition. According to *Memoriale Credencium*, for example, contrite tears cleanse a

⁴⁹ When he confesses directly to his father, the son explicitly invokes grace, imploring "Fader, I haue sined ogains þe, / Grace of forgifnes grante þou me." Ibid., 56/7358-59.

⁵⁰ Nevanlinna, *The Northern Homily Cycle*, 56/7343-45.

person in God's sight.⁵¹ Likewise, the author of *Jacob's Well* calls contrite tears a sign of salvation.⁵²

In addition to amplifying signs of the son's contrition, the author emphasizes the importance of confession by characterizing the gifts the son receives as a consequence thereof. Upon seeing his contrite son return home, the father runs to embrace him, as in the gospel: "And hastily went he him ogayne. / In his armes he toke him nere / And kissed him with ful gude chere."⁵³ The gospel text gives no indication that the father's greeting responds to the son's contrition, nor does it suggest that the son's declaration of his sin prompted the father to bestow gifts upon him. The embrace, confession, and giving of gifts are narrated successively without indication that one caused another: "And he rennyng to, felde on his necke, and kiste him. And the sone seyde to him, Fadir, I haue synned azens heuene, and bifore thee; and now I am not worthi to be clepid thi sone. Forsoth the fadir seyde to his seruautis, Soone bringe ze forth the firste stoole" (Lk. 15:20-22). The events occur in the same order in the *Northern Homily Cycle*, yet additional narration indicates the importance of confession for the son's forgiveness:

Pe sun fell till his fader fete
And for his sin ful sare gan grete;
And said als he bifore had thocht,
For he so vnwisely had wroght,
"Fader, I haue sined ogains þe,
Grace of forgifnes grante þou me,
And þi sun na-more me call,
Bot als þi seruand and þi thrall."
Pe fader þan was ful wele paide
And till his seruandes sune he said,

⁵¹ Kengen, *Memorial Credencium*, 158.

⁵² "Wepung & sorwe for his synne is signe of saluacyoun. Ysa. xxxix. 'Ecce in pace amaritudo mea amarissima est.' My byttere wepung for my synne schal saue me in endles pees." See Brandeis, *Jacob's Well*, 171-2.

⁵³ Nevanlinna, *The Northern Homily Cycle*, 56/7351-53.

“Biliue bifor me here 3e bring
Riche aray of gude clething,
And cleth my sun, þat I may se,
For he es dere welcum to me.”⁵⁴

Whereas the father falls on the son in Luke’s version, the homilist changes the positions of each person so that the son falls to his father’s feet. From this position of supplication, he both acknowledges his sin and explicitly asks for grace. With the statement that “þe fader þan was ful wele paide,” the homilist implies that the father bestowed his gifts upon his son on account of the son’s confession. While the past-participle “paide” primarily indicates that the father was pleased, satisfied, or content with the confession, it could further suggest that the son rectified a debt and brought himself into good standing with his father again through open acknowledgment of his sin.⁵⁵ These subtle suggestions that the son must identify his sins and express remorse for them to become reconciled with his father, or God, are made more explicit in the short explication that follows the parable. The homilist concludes that “If we will know oure wikkedhede /And ask mercy for oure misdede, / To resayue vs ful redy es he.”⁵⁶ Whereas the gospel text may suggest that the father, or God, stands ready to forgive as soon as the lost sinner returns home, the homilist insists that both the son’s sorrow and his articulation of his misdeeds play key roles in that process of forgiveness.

Sermon 32 in Woodburn O. Ross’ *Middle English Sermons* collection (MES 32) similarly reflects reservations over the ease with which the younger son receives

⁵⁴ Nevanlinna, *The Northern Homily Cycle*, 56/7354-67.

⁵⁵ For satisfied or content, see “paien” definition 2 in the MED. Definition 3f lists the past-participle as “paid” in the sense receiving money or discharging a debt. In his explanation of the sacrament of penance in *Handlyng Synne*, for example, Robert Mannyng calls penance a “quytaunce,” or payment for sin. Furnivall, *Handlyng Synne*, 335/10812.

⁵⁶ Nevanlinna, *The Northern Homily Cycle*, 58/7438-40. In addition to awareness, “know” could refer to acknowledgment or confession. See MED “knouen” definition 9.

forgiveness in the Prodigal Son story and highlights the role of confession in the reconciliation of father and son. In a sermon explicating the *thema* “Hic recipit peccatores,” or “He resceyveþ synneful men” from Luke 15:2, the author recites the Prodigal Son story as evidence that God forgives even those who “geve hym to riott, synne, and foolye.”⁵⁷ The homilist presents a close paraphrase of the Vulgate up to the point where the son remembers the prosperity of his father’s house and resolves to return home. He quotes the Vulgate when the son requests that his father give him his portion of their property and only adds that the father wisely granted the son’s request because he did not want to have any difficulty (daunger) with his son. In the distant country, the son spent all of his money “in þe synne of lecheri,” experienced hunger once a famine arose, and desired to eat the food of the swine which he kept. The homilist’s fidelity to his source in the first third of the story increases the impact of his additions and alterations to the subsequent portion of the parable in which the son returns to his father.⁵⁸

Once the son has come to his state of suffering, the homilist adapts the content, order, and in one instance, the form of the narrative so that the Parable of the Prodigal Son illustrates the necessity and nature of confession. In the *Northern Homily Cycle*, as in the gospel, the son demonstrates contrition for his sinful behavior when he rehearses what he will say to his father upon returning home. In MES 32, the son does not actually articulate his sins ahead of time. While still showing remorse, he describes how he will confess: “‘I will rise,’ he seid, ‘and goy to my fadur and be a-know of all my trespasse

⁵⁷ Woodburn O. Ross, ed. *Middle English Sermons, Edited from British Museum MS Royal 18 B. xxiii*, EETS o.s. 209, (London: Oxford University Press, 1940) 163, 165.

⁵⁸ The author concentrates his revisions on the middle third of the parable, as he makes only minor additions to the Vulgate in his paraphrase of the older son’s return from the fields and objection to the celebration.

and put me hooly in ys grace, preyinge hym to haue mercy on me.”⁵⁹ As in the *Northern Homily Cycle*, the homilist phrases this supplication so that it encourages identification of the son with a penitent and the father with God. By omitting the suggestion that the father treat him as a hired servant, the homilist downplays the literal, domestic situation of the parable. The repentant son will not bargain for a new position at the household but rather submit himself to his father’s will, or grace, in the hopes of receiving mercy. With regard to the projected content of his confession, the son declares that he will make known all of his trespasses, instead of simply stating that he has sinned against his father and against God. This comprehensive acknowledgement of his sins accords with common instructions on confession in penitential manuals. The author of *Memoriale Credencium*, for example, names comprehensiveness as one of the necessary qualities of confession and recommends that penitents confess each sin separately.⁶⁰ Similarly, in his twelfth and final “poynt of schryft” in *Handlyng Synne*, Robert Mannyng instructs penitent sinners that “Alle holy oweþ by shryfte be down; / No poynt þou shalt withholde, / For, alle holy, hyt oweþ to be tolde.”⁶¹ While the homilist refrains from detailed recitation of the son’s sins in his actual confession, the son’s declaration that he will wholly confess and his willingness to surrender himself entirely to the father’s will characterize the son’s behavior as a model for authentic confession.

The most dramatic changes the homilist makes to the parable affect the confession itself, as the homilist changes its timing and contents to show the importance of confession for forgiveness. In Luke’s text, the father runs to the son and embraces him as

⁵⁹ Ross, *Middle English Sermons*, 168/24-27.

⁶⁰ Kengen, *Memoriale Credencium*, 159/9-10, 163/5-6.

⁶¹ Furnivall, *Handlyng Synne*, 369/11818-20.

soon as he sees his son approaching. Correspondingly, the parable suggests that God forgives, or at least is ready to forgive, any who regret their sin and return to the Father.

In MES 32, the son confesses his offenses before he receives the father's embrace:

And when þat he com to þe place where þat is fadur was, he fell downe lowly, seþhyng and vepynge, seyinge þise wordes, "Pater, peccau in celum et coram te. Iam non sum dignus vocari filius tuus" et cetera ... He ne had fully seid þise wordes but is fadur hade pite on hym and ranne to hym and toke hym vp and kyssed hym and welcomd hym with a glad chere.⁶²

While the father eventually runs to his son and embraces him with the same good cheer as in the gospel, he does not offer mercy unconditionally; his forgiveness comes as a response to genuine contrition (seþhyng and vepynge) accompanied by proper oral confession.⁶³

In addition to changing the timing of the son's confession, the homilist extends the son's speech considerably. He first confesses with the words of the gospel, as shown above, and then confesses more extensively in a passage the homilist renders in verse:

For my synne þat I haue wrouthe
I am not worthy to be þi sonne,
For I haue synned in will and thowthe;
Per-fore I make full drery mone.
I to þe knalage my trespasse
With lowlynes of herte; þis may þou see.
There-fore, fadur, graunte me þi grace
And all my synnes forzeue þou me.⁶⁴

Both visually and aurally, the shift to verse highlights the words of confession as the most significant element of the story.⁶⁵ Within this speech, the son again models authentic

⁶² Ross, *Middle English Sermons*, 168/28-169/2-5.

⁶³ In an article highlighting the performative potential of this sermon, Erick Kelemen notes this change. He comments that it goes against traditional exegesis that explains the father's reception of the son as God's gift of grace to a repentant sinner, yet he attributes the change to the homilist's desire to create more action. See "Drama in Sermons: Quotation, Performativity, and Conversion in a Middle English Sermon on the Prodigal Son and in a *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*," *ELH* 69 (2002): 7.

⁶⁴ Ross, *Middle English Sermons*, 168/32-39.

penance for his audience. Among the “twelve poynts of shryft,” *Handlyng Synne* advises penitents to “haue mekenes” when confessing after the example of the virgin Mary, and to experience bitter sorrow after the example of Mary Magdalene at the house of Simeon.⁶⁶ The son demonstrates his sorrow with the words “þer-fore I make full drery mone” and models meekness when he states his trespasses “with lowlynes of herte.” Instead of naming his sins of covetousness and lechery, with which the audience is already familiar and of which they will receive a reminder from the older brother, the prodigal son’s speech demonstrates the proper disposition necessary for a valid confession. The homilist of MES 32 teaches that God will forgive sinners but depicts that forgiveness as contingent upon a particular kind of cooperation from the penitent. In his loose adaptation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the homilist instructs an audience how they too may effectively do penance for their sins and what they may expect from God in return.

Thus far I have highlighted vernacular accounts of the Prodigal Son story of two contrasting varieties: renditions that emphasize God’s readiness to forgive and renditions that call attention to what a penitent must do to receive such mercy. The account of the parable in *Book to a Mother* belongs to the latter category, but the author describes the repentant sinner putting forth a great deal more effort to become reconciled to God than the authors of the *Northern Homily Cycle* and MES 32 describe in their allusions to proper penance. While the two homilies call attention to contrition and confession, *Book to a Mother* stands out as the only text that connects the parable to a three-fold process of

⁶⁵ Kelemen suggests that the homilist did not compose these lines himself but remembered them from oral performances of the parable. See “Drama in Sermons,” 5-6.

⁶⁶ See Furnivall, *Handlyng Synne*, 356/11449-11482 and 359/11517-74.

penance. In addition to introducing satisfaction into the story, the author further explains how the son will live more virtuously upon his return, so that the parable contributes to his text's function as a rule for devout living.

Book to a Mother is a devotional treatise that combines an account of the basic elements of the faith with extensive paraphrase of New Testament scripture to provide a biblical guide to Christian living in the world. While the author directly addresses his mother throughout the book, he announces his intention to reach a broader audience in the initial lines of his text: "I desire euerych man and womman and child to be my moder, for Crist seyþ: he þat doþ his Fader wille is his broþer, suster and moder" (1/2-4).⁶⁷ Thus, as in contemplative devotional works such as Rolle's *Form of Living* and Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, the author addresses one particular person, while giving instruction relevant to a wider audience of lay Christians.⁶⁸ The author employs the term "book" as a flexible, multivalent metaphor. He wishes for his mother to read the physical book he composes, which teaches her about the book of Christ himself and the book of holy scripture.⁶⁹ Likewise, "book" refers to each Christian's soul and, correspondingly, the exemplar that the mother may compose herself through right living. The book the author describes as most necessary for his mother to comprehend is Christ himself: "to speke more opunliche to þe of þe bok þat I ches bifore alle opire, for þe moste nedful, most

⁶⁷ For an account of the textual clues that indicate his mother was likely a widow and a laywoman, see Nicholas Watson, "Fashioning the Puritan Gentry-Woman: Devotion and Dissent in *Book to a Mother*," in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 172.

⁶⁸ Rolle's works were not intended for a lay audience but were included in a number of compilations for lay readers after his death. Hilton begins the *Scale of Perfection* for a single religious woman but adapts that material as he progresses for a lay audience. See Nicholas Watson, "The Middle English Mystics," in *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. by David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 549, 558.

⁶⁹ The author also employs the term book to refer to the kingdom of heaven itself, the book with seven seals in Revelation, and the harp and Psalter of David. For the kingdom of heaven, the book of Revelation, and David's harp see McCarthy, *Book to a Mother* 22, 24, and 27-28 respectively.

spedful and most medful: þis bok is Crist, Godis Sone of heuene, wiþ his conuersacioun þre and þrytti wyntur” (31/1-4). Although inseparable from knowledge of Christ’s life through scripture, here the author characterizes the book as the physical life of God incarnate and the collective teachings Christ conveyed during his 33 years. This book provides the paradigm for three common varieties of devotional writings, as “he [Christ] wiþ his conuersacioun is to alle þat wollen be saued þe beste remedie and þe beste rule and þe beste mirour þat mai be to ouercome synne” (31/7-10).⁷⁰

The author fuses these three related genres of remedy, rule, and mirror within *Book to a Mother* itself, so that he imitates Christ’s life in his own composition. To provide a remedy for sin, he continually castigates vice and urges repentance by explicating figures of penance throughout scripture and highlighting the deeds of model penitents, such as Mary Magdalene and the Prodigal Son.⁷¹ In his warnings against regressing into sin and instruction for living virtuously in accordance with God’s will, the author offers his mother a rule for Christian living in the world.⁷² Finally, the author

⁷⁰ Nicholas Watson describes the three genres the author refers to as didactic writings condemning sin, rules for members of religious orders, and encyclopedic accounts of the faith or Christ’s life. See Watson, “Fashioning the Gentry,” 176-77. Contemporary examples of “remedie” therefore include the penitential texts discussed on page 5 above. In addition to rules for particular religious orders, like the Rule of St. Benedict or the Rule of St. Francis, examples of “rules” include the *Ancrene Riwe* and the Lollard text *A Schort Reule of Lif*. Examples of “mirrors” include the *Mirroure of Mans Saluacioun* discussed above or Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*.

⁷¹ On Mary Magdalene, see note 3 above. In addition to the examples of penitents, the author explicates Christ’s circumcision, the gift of myrrh, and baptism as figures of penance. See McCarthy, *Book to a Mother*, 51 and 57.

⁷² At one point, the author instructs his mother to choose Christ as her abbot and follow his counsels as her rule. Nancy Bradley Warren has argued that the author employed this idea of the cloistered soul in order to limit female agency. Nicole Rice’s response to Warren, in which she characterizes the monastic imagery as a useful metaphor for defining pious living in the world that does not detract from a clericalization of the lay reader, seems more consistent with the rest of the text. See McCarthy, *Book to a Mother*, 122-125; Nancy Bradley Warren, “Pregnancy and Productivity: The Image of Female Monasticism within and beyond the Cloister Walls,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28, no. 3 (1998): 538; and Nicole R. Rice, “Devotional Literature and Lay Spiritual Authority: *Imitatio Clerici* in *Book to A Mother*,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35, no. 2 (2005): 192-93.

creates a mirror of the life of Christ in so far as he composes this guide to penance and good living primarily from the events, and often from the very language, of the gospels and other New Testament books.⁷³ The Parable of the Prodigal Son especially contributes to the text's function as a remedy, since it provides one of the primary models of penance in the work, but the parable likewise participates in the other two genres as well. As an episode from the gospel of Luke, it makes up a part of the "mirror" of Christ's life, and unconventionally, the author's commentary casts the parable as a rule for right living in addition to an illustration of forgiveness.

The author treats the Parable of the Prodigal Son as an injunction to leave sin and an illustration of penance, as he commends the story to his mother as joyful comfort for those who want to wholly forsake their sin and a horrible sign for those who do not (100/7-10). Together, the author's condemnation of sin and particular characterization of penance urge the reader not simply to ask for forgiveness but to abandon permanently the patterns of vice that estrange one from God. The author raises the problem of superficial penance without reform in the preceding chapter, in which he censures those who commit sins of the flesh and recites Mark 5:1-13 as evidence of their possession by the devil.

Like the hogs who hurl themselves into the sea, those who are unchaste restrain themselves during the Lenten season but eagerly follow their lust soon after Easter.⁷⁴

Relating this condemnation to the events of the Prodigal Son story, the author introduces the parable as "anoþer ensample azenus fleshliche men, feders of hogges" (99/1-2). Like

⁷³ Nicholas Love explains that he decided to refer to his translation of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* as a mirror because the text contains "diuerse ymaginacions" of Christ's life but may not describe his life as fully as texts about other saints. A book relating the events of the life of God incarnate may only convey Christ's life "in a maner of liknes as þe ymage of mans face is shewed in þe mirroure." See Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. Michael G. Sargent (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005), 11/14-18.

⁷⁴ McCarthy, *Book to a Mother*, 97/13-18.

the episode from Mark that condemns sinners for following their desires into the “wawes of wateres – þat is, of wickede coueitise and fleshli lustis,” the Prodigal Son story censures those who become destitute through sin and enslave themselves to the devil.

The author’s characterization of the younger son emphasizes his distance from God’s will and the destructive nature of his sin. Whereas the vernacular authors highlighted above adapt the parable text itself to further characterize the son’s sins, the author of *Book to a Mother* follows the gospel parable in his main text and elaborates the nature of the son’s sin in additional commentary. Aside from omitting the second portion of the Prodigal Son parable, in which the older son complains about the honors the younger son receives, the author closely translates the Vulgate in much the same way as the authors of the Wycliffite Bible.⁷⁵ Correspondingly, the son is said to have “wastede al his substaunce, liuinge lecherousliche,” but a famine, in addition to his prodigality, causes him to seek the assistance of a local citizen and take a job feeding hogs (99/6-13). In his commentary, the author explains that the younger son represents all who are in deadly sin, who through those deeds “gon a pilgrimage fro Crist” (100/11).⁷⁶ One need not physically abandon one’s biological family to be like the prodigal son. Sin itself is the journey to a country distant from one’s spiritual home and one’s spiritual family of fellow Christians and Christ. Further emphasizing the son and other sinners’ estrangement from Christ, the author describes the contract the son makes to work for the

⁷⁵ While the similarities among the texts may simply result from close translation of the Vulgate, the common agreement among the Early Version of the Wycliffite Bible and the text of *Book to a Mother* merits further investigation. I would like to conduct a closer study of the affiliations between biblical translation in *Book to a Mother* and versions of the Wycliffite Bible in the future.

⁷⁶ Like the Wycliffite Bible, *Book to a Mother* describes the son’s journey as a pilgrimage: “he gaderede his goodis and wente in pilgrimage into a fer contre” (99/5-6). Cf. Lk. 15:13: “congregatis omnibus adulescentior filius peregre profectus est in regionem longinquam.”

local citizen as a covenant with the devil.⁷⁷ Having sold his soul, the younger son feeds the citizens of the devil's city, whom scripture refers to as hogs on account of their uncleanness (100/16-19).⁷⁸ By feeding the hogs, the author suggests that the son colludes in their pursuit of fleshly pleasures; when he desires to eat the "draff and dragges" that the hogs consume, the son wishes to partake in the "fleshli lustis and likinges, rychesse and worshupes" that they enjoy (100/21-22). The author's extended commentary on the son's employment feeding hogs, rather than his profligate behavior prior to his loss of resources and the famine, connects the parable with the passage from Mark 5 that precedes it and shows how he works against rather than follows God's will: After departing from his father, the son nourishes and joins the ranks of creatures possessed by the devil.

While the gospel story describes this employment feeding hogs as a consequence of famine, the author of *Book to a Mother* characterizes it as an occupation that perpetuates famine as well. The more the son pursues physical pleasures, the more he starves spiritually: "he [the son] shal neuere be fulfilled for he come home azen to Crist, his Fadir; but þe more he coueiteþ, þe more nedi he is: and so, gret hunger is in þat fer contre, of gostli mete of Crist" (100/23-25). Famine results from his location, remote from God, and his activity, since coveting material goods and following desires of the flesh only increase one's need for Christ. While the author of the *South English Ministry and Passion* suggests that Christ uses physical suffering, such as the son's state of starvation, to urge people to repent, the author of *Book to a Mother* describes the famine

⁷⁷ For other works associating the citizen with the devil, see page 9 above.

⁷⁸ "For such a man is his toun, þat hap sold himself to þe deuel, and so with his fleshli likingus fedep þulke burgeis and oper wickede spiritus, þat Holi Writ for her unclennesse clepþ hogges."

exclusively in spiritual terms. The prodigal son should consume the same substance that the author instructs the audience of *Book to a Mother* to digest: the “mete of Crist.” As he argues throughout his treatise, the author states within the parable’s explication that one person’s exemplary life can provide this food for another: “For Seint Austin seiþ: ‘3if þou liue wel, þou ert Cristis mete’” (100/26-27). By returning home, therefore, the prodigal son can not only satisfy his own hunger but also begin to nourish fellow Christians through his own good living.

Whereas the *Mirour of Mans Saluacioun* and the *South English Ministry and Passion* encourage repentance by showing God’s readiness to forgive, the author of *Book to a Mother* urges his mother to repent because of the nature of sin itself. He portrays the sins of the prodigal sons as anathema to the primary instruction of his treatise: to align one’s will with God’s will through ingestion and embodiment of the book of Christ. Since the prodigal son’s sins estrange him from God and leave him hungry for spiritual nourishment, the depiction and explanation of these vices should be sufficient to inspire his mother to repent. Consequently, he concludes his explication of the son’s sins with the appeal “þerfore, modur, turne azeyn into þeself as þulke zonger broþer dide” (101/5-7). The relative difficulty or ease of repentance is not at issue, only the distance that these sins create between a person and God and the emptiness that accompanies such estrangement.

The process of penance and continued right living that the author outlines in relation to the Parable of the Prodigal Son is laborious. While the parable shows ready forgiveness from the father, before the son even has the chance to articulate his sorrow for his misdeeds, the author of *Book to a Mother* glosses the story so that it reflects a

more complex process of penance. After reciting the basic text of the parable and explaining the nature of the son's sins, the author returns to the words the son utters when deciding to return back home: "Hou monie seruauntes haue plente of loues in my fadur hous, and I perische for hunger. I shal arise and go to my fadur" (99/14-16). He encourages his mother to emulate the son by turning within herself and saying these same words, yet he glosses the son's words in order to more specifically define how a penitent becomes reunited with God. The mother should say with the prodigal son, "'I shal arise' wip sorwe of herte and schrift of mouþe and satisfaccioun of dede, and so 'I shal go to my Fadur Crist' " (101/9-11). Even if the parable does not show the son performing any deeds to rectify his sins and depicts the father forgiving the son before he confesses, an audience should assume that the son completed the threefold process of penance and should do likewise.

Just as the author begins his commentary on the son's return with mention of the full process of penance, he also concludes his explication of the parable in a manner that emphasizes what the son must do to receive forgiveness. As in the *South English Ministry and Passion*, the author of *Book to a Mother* applies the last words of the parable of the Lost Sheep (Lk. 15:7) to the end of the Parable of the Prodigal Son: "For Crist seiþ, þer is more ioye to aungelis in heuene of one synful man þat doþ *worþiliche* penaunce, þan of nynti and nyne þat non nede haue to do penaunce" (102/15-18, italics mine).⁷⁹ The author changes the line only slightly, but the addition of "*worþiliche*" reminds an audience of the extensive guidelines associated with the process of penance that outline the proper means of completing the sacrament.

⁷⁹ Cf. Lk.15:7: "Sothly I seye to 3ou, so ioye schal be in heuene on o synful man doynge penaunce, than of nynti and nyne iuste, that han no nede of penaunce."

Explication of the father's actions similarly depicts the son's reconciliation as more complex than the basic text of the parable conveys. Mercy indeed moves the father, or God, when he sees his returned son, but this mercy takes the form of prevenient grace, not forgiveness:

Crist þi Fadur sau3 þe and was meued wiþ merci to renne azenus þe, and fel on þi necke and custe þe: þat is, stured e þe to arise out of þi synne, zeuyng e þe hope of furzeueneſſe. Þerfore sei ofte to Crist as I seide er; 3e, alwey hennesforeward, "Fadur, I haue synned in heuene and bifore þe: now I am not worþi to be clepud þi child. Make me as on of þi seruautes." (101/16-23)

The father's embrace, which stirs the son to arise from sin and gives hope of forgiveness, shows that sinners are not alone in their efforts to reform their lives; God's grace initiates and motivates their process of repentance.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, reconciliation with God requires sustained effort on the part of the sinner. In contrast to the single episode of return and celebration featured in the parable, the author encourages his mother to confess her sins and humble herself as God's servant "ofte" and "alwey hennesforeward." Repentance is a way of life if one hopes to conform one's life to the life of Christ.

While these glosses promote complete and frequent penance, the explanation of the gifts the father bestows upon his son introduces good works and additional sacraments into the Prodigal Son story. Interpreting the father's servants as "ministres of Holi Chirche," the author gives allegorical significance to the stole, robe, ring, and fattened calf to imply the son will live a continued life of virtue in the church. The stole represents innocence given at baptism, which the son's repentance may restore (101/24-26),⁸¹ while the ring symbolizes good works and keeping the commandments: "he wol

⁸⁰ Latin commentators frequently associate this action with the Incarnation. See Wailes, *Medieval Allegories*, 240.

zeue þe a ring on þin hond, þat is a trewe bileue worchinge goode workes in charite, holdinge his hestis euerelastinge wipoute ende, as a ringe haþ non ende” (102/3-6). Having no end, the ring represents good works not simply as restitution for the sins the son committed but as a life-long means of becoming closer to God. The gift of shoes aide the son on this spiritual journey, as they represent the example of the saints, which like the *Book to a Mother* itself, teaches the right path to heaven (102/4-8).⁸² Finally, the fattened calf that the father slaughters in his son’s honor signifies Christ, “þat his Fadur sende into þis world to be slawe on þe cros of þe Iewes” (102/8-9). The calf has a twofold significance as both the sacrifice that enabled the redemption of sinners and the feast of the Eucharist that enables continued communion with Christ after the crucifixion.⁸³

Collectively, the three gifts and the fattened calf depict the life of faith that the prodigal son will live after he has repented: the resurrected life of a son who “was ded, and is turned to lif” (102/14-15). Repentance restores his participation in the sacraments, reviving the innocence of his baptism and enabling him to partake of the Eucharist. In terms of daily living, the gifts imply that the younger son will become like his older brother, performing good works and following the commandments of God.

Correspondingly, the author characterizes the parable as an injunction to not only do

⁸¹ While explaining that the stole signifies baptism, the author comments on the validity of sacraments even when performed by corrupt priests: “And þou3 ministres of Cristes sacramentis failen of due manere doinge – as manye don now and fewe opere, God amende hem – I am certein Crist mai not faile of zeuinge þat stole where-euere þou be” (101/26-102/3).

⁸² “Þe schon of þi fet, þat Crist wol zeue þe, ben ensamples of seintes þat wisseþ us to heuene” (102/7-8). The allegorical significance the author gives to the three items of apparel resemble interpretations given in the *Glossed Gospels*. Bede describes the first stole as the innocence and glory lost by Adam and calls the ring a sign of faith “bi which alle biheestis ben prentid in þe hertis of men bileuyngē.” See Bodley 243 fol. 76^f col. B, ll. 17-40.

⁸³ The author refers to both, defining the feast of the slain Christ as that “whuche þou receyuest whanne þou ert worþiliche huslid” (102/10-11).

penance but also live a pious life following God's will. While other renditions show the ease with which God forgives, the author of *Book to a Mother* outlines the strenuous but necessary work that Christians must do to become like Christ. He concludes, "þerfore modur, loue þou penaunce, and kep wel hereaftir þe furste robe of innocence unfouled, holdinge þi ring euermore in þin hond, and forzet þou not þi schon: for if þou haue þes þre wel, þou ert þe more able to þe wedlac þat I spac of er, of Crist and þi soule" (103/4-6).⁸⁴ The parable teaches that sinners should return to God through contrition, confession, and satisfaction, yet in addition to this process of penance, the parable shows that the younger son and all repentant sinners need to live in the manner of the older brother, keeping the commandments so that their newly restored innocence remains unimpaired. Despite omitting the older son's objection to the celebration, defense of righteous living is nonetheless present in this rendition of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Rather than celebrate God's capacity for mercy, the author of *Book to a Mother* calls attention to how the prodigal son may journey nearer to God through pious living.

In comparison with other Middle English renditions of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the account in *Book to a Mother* is particularly demanding: it encourages adherence to the church's formulation of penance and enjoins an audience to live righteously after seeking forgiveness. Yet the interpretation is not an attempt to secure clerical authority through rigid adherence to institutional definitions of penance nor a part of a wider effort to ensure lay readers maintain "orthodox" belief. Rather, the particular reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son contributes to the author's effort to empower his mother and

⁸⁴ According to the *Glossed Gospels*, Bede also describes the ring as a pledge of the wedding between Christ and the church. See Bodley 243 fol. 76^r col. B, ll. 29-30. *Book to a Mother* features the Parable of the Wedding Feast in chapter three as an illustration of what will happen at judgment if the mother does not choose to follow Christ's will.

other lay readers to become exemplars of Christ's life. The emphasis on what the prodigal son must do, both to "worpilichi" repent and then remain close to God through righteous living, corresponds to the author's larger project of explaining how his mother may become like Christ through engaged reading and active imitation of the book of Christ.

In so far as *Book to a Mother* presents extensive paraphrase of scripture and encourages active engagement with that text, it provides readers with the spiritual "mete" for which the prodigal son hungered and empowers them to offer this nourishment to others. In the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries, conservative clerics sometimes distinguished between milk, suitable for a simple lay audience, and solid food, which should be reserved for clerics.⁸⁵ In a 1401 Oxford *determinatio* against translation of scripture, the friar William Butler describes "lac," or milk, as light doctrine that requires little chewing and digestion. He points to miracles as an example of such milk, which do not "impose work on those seeing [it], but delights them with wonderment."⁸⁶ Scripture, in contrast, is bread that requires teeth to labor in rumination.⁸⁷ In the vernacular, Nicholas Love echoes these same sentiments in his prologue to the *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*. He describes the audience of his work as "symple creatures þe whiche as childryn hauen nede to be fedde with mylke of lyzte doctryne &

⁸⁵ The topos derives from Hebrews 5:13-14: "Forsoth ech that is parcener of mylk, is withoute part of the word of ristwysnesse, forsoth he is a lital child. Forsoth of parfit men is sad mete, of hem that for the ilke custom han wittis excersysid, or trauelid, to discrecioun of good and yuel." See also 1 Corinthians 3:2 and 1 Peter 2:2.

⁸⁶ Qtd. in Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 99. For the Latin text, see Margaret Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 399-418.

⁸⁷ "Panis est perfectionis doctrina et iustitiae, quam accipere non possunt nisi sensus excitati fuerint circa spiritualia; quoniam qui audit necesse habet se tractantibus discutere et meditari, [et] de quibusdam spiritualibus dentibus molere, unde et lex ruminantia animalia munda vult esse." Deanesly, 416-417.

not with sadde mete of grete clargye & of hye contemplacioun.”⁸⁸ Accordingly, his life of Christ focuses on the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection, those events that show the “monhede of cryste” because the contemplation thereof is more advantageous [spedeful] and more secure for simple audiences than the contemplation of Christ’s divinity.⁸⁹

The author of *Book to a Mother* defies these paradigms of appropriate lay devotion with the particular content he highlights and with his expectations of what a reader should do with that text. Likely a country priest, the author commends preaching to “simple folk in litele tounes” instead of great lords in great cities.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, he imposes no limits on the degree of spiritual understanding that his potentially humble audience may develop. Beginning his text at an elementary level of instruction in the fundamentals of the faith, the author recites a number of elements from Pecham’s syllabus without comment (the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria and the Creed) and then describes the Ten Commandments, the works of mercy, and the beatitudes with commentary. Yet most of the text goes beyond basic elements of faith to provide more complex spiritual instruction. In contrast to Love’s *Mirror* and other lives of Christ that focus on the birth and passion of Christ, *Book to a Mother* primarily recounts events and teachings from Christ’s ministry, along with extensive teachings from New Testament epistles.⁹¹ Devoting only two of some two hundred pages to the Passion, the author

⁸⁸ Sargent, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, 10/14-16.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 10/23-28.

⁹⁰ McCarthy, *Book to a Mother*, 127. Watson suggests that he could be a friar as well, but Rice argues that since the author refers to presiding at marriage and baptism, he was more likely a secular priest. See Watson, “Fashioning the Gentry,” 173 and Rice, “Devotional Literature,” 193-94.

⁹¹ The author of *Book to a Mother* arranges events from Christ’s ministry according to the devotional contents of his treatise. He recites Old Testament passages where they support those themes as well.

portrays Christ as a “teacher and doer of good,” rather than a figure of passive suffering on the cross.⁹²

Whereas Butler argues that a simple lay audience does not have sufficiently developed teeth to ruminate on these texts, the author of *Book to a Mother* recommends that the reader consume the book of Christ, just as she ingests Christ in the Eucharist. His mother should chew her knowledge of Christ’s life often and digest it with burning love, “so þat alle þe uertues of þi soule and of þi bodi be turned fro fleshliche liuinge into Cristes liuinge, as bodiliche mete þat is chewed and defied norschip alle þe parties of a mannes bodi” (32/13-17). Far from fearing that the lay reader will misunderstand or pervert the meaning of scripture, the author insists that the reader cannot distort the book of Christ: “And þou schalt not turne me into þe, as þou dost bodily mete, bot þou schalt be turned into me” (27/6-7). By digesting the book of Christ, which the author equates with partaking of the Eucharist spiritually, the reader incorporates Christ’s life into her own so that she becomes a living book that tells a similar story.⁹³ Beyond simply comprehending the text, the reader who digests it is transformed by the text, so that her actions reflect the actions of Christ.

Even more unusual than the content he presents and his suggestion that lay people should ruminate on it, the author advocates that his readers actively re-write their own lives in accordance with the book of Christ. He contrasts this form of authorship with the composition of theological treatises by clerics who do not wholly love God, suggesting that his lay audience may be more authoritative: “And þus þou maist lerne aftir þi samplerie to write a feir trewe bok and better konne Holi Writ þan ony maister of diuinite

⁹² Rice, “Devotional Literature,” 191

⁹³ “And þanne þou etist gostliche Cristes flesh and his blod whereuere þou be” (32/17-19).

þat loueþ not God so wel as þou; for who loueþ best God, can best Holi Writ” (39/7-10). Following the exemplar of Christ’s life, the audience is empowered to actively write scripture in their own lives. Just as the author presents the person of Christ and the book of scripture synonymously, he defines knowledge of scripture as love of God and describes limitless possibilities for a lay audience to develop theological understanding as they lovingly contemplate scripture and integrate it into their daily lives. While still respecting the authority of virtuous clerics,⁹⁴ the author encourages lay readers to deepen their spiritual life intellectually and to become preachers of the gospel through word and deed.⁹⁵

The Parable of the Prodigal Son vitally contributes to this empowerment of a lay audience because the author describes penance as the first step to becoming an exemplar of Christ. Amidst the author’s description of how to read the book of Christ, and particularly in his injunctions for the audience to rewrite their life stories, he frequently fuses the activities of reading and writing with the process of penance. Relating the text he writes to the book with seven seals from Revelation, the author instructs his mother to weep, as John the Evangelist did, so that the book may be opened.⁹⁶ Once she expresses sorrow, the lamb of Christ “þat died for vs and boght vs with his blod to his Fader” will release the book’s seals (25/25-26/1). In addition to opening the book, sorrow over one’s sins enables one to read the basic text. The author equates the first step one takes towards literacy, learning one’s ABCs, with the act of contrition: “And þus bigynne we to lerne

⁹⁴ Rice, “Devotional Literature,” 189.

⁹⁵ “Þus, modur, preche þou, desiringe alle men to do þus. Not as prechours prechen now, biddinge men do þat þei wollen not do hemself; þefore here dede sedis growen not aftur hem for defaute of quikeninge wiþ þat goode liuinge. Not þus Crist, but first he dide and seþþen he tauzte.” McCarthy, *Book to a Mother*, 61/8-12.

⁹⁶ See Rev. 5:4.

oure a.b.c., eiper of vs seyinge: ‘Cros Crist me spede’, and hauyng lamentaciouns for oure synnes” (23/24-24/1). All Christians begin as sinners and start to comprehend the life of Christ by recognizing the sins within their own lives.

While the first step toward penance yields comprehension of the book of Christ, revision of one’s own text to correspond to Christ’s requires completion of the penitential process. As highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, the author encourages his mother to collate her life story with Christ’s exemplar. Where the two do not correspond, she should erase, or scrape clean, her text with contrition, confession, and satisfaction: “Scrape it out wiþ sorew of herte and schrift of mouþe and satisfaccioun: þat is, furst þat þou cese of synne and of purpos to do synne, and fle occasioun þerof and do goode werkes, hauyng as muche sorew as þou hast had likinge in synne. And þat þat þe lackeþ þat þou most nedis haue to holde Goddis hestis, writ in þi soule” (38/21-26). As one of the primary depictions of penance in *Book to a Mother*, the Parable of the Prodigal Son therefore illustrates the beginning stages of composition, as the son scrapes clean the pages of his manuscript. The son’s experience in a distant land, in which he works for the devil feeding those starved by sin, draws an audience’s attention to the sharp contrast between the son’s life story and Christ’s exemplar. With his return home, the son erases those acts of sin through completion of the three-fold process of penance and can rewrite his life on clean parchment in accordance with God’s will. The allegorical associations the author gives to the robe, ring, and shoes look ahead to the process of composition, as they provide the means by which the son and other Christians may write the life of Christ. Whereas penance clears the page, a reformed life of virtue writes the new text with a pen that becomes sharper the more that the writer’s will conforms to God’s will:

By penne to write wiþ schal be þi loue and þi wil ymad scharp wiþ drede of sharp peyne of helle; and þis is a kene knyf ynow to make þi penne scharp, cordinge holliche wiþ Cristes liuinge, and zif þou scaue þi penne and make hure feir and loueliche, noþing larger wilnyng in þouzt, word and dede þan God wol þat þou wilne. And it mai not be þat God faile of zeuyng enke, þat is grace, to suche a penne. (38/26-39/6)

In a cooperative effort with God, whereby grace marks the letters on the page, repentant sinners amend their lives so that they may spread the gospel to others through word and deed. As opposed to a single occasion, as in the gospel parable, the author of *Book to a Mother* implies that the process of revision signified in the Parable of the Prodigal Son must recur throughout one's life. For sinful humans to become like God incarnate, they must continually assess how their lives differ from Christ's and should humbly return home to their father often and "alwey hennesforeward," declaring that they have sinned against heaven and asking for the grace to become one of God's servants.

Without advocating that his mother withdraw from the world in pursuit of spiritual perfection,⁹⁷ the author suggests that she and other lay readers can authoritatively teach the life of Christ through their own embodiment of Christ's love. His vision of lay spirituality, and consequently his employment of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, differs considerably from the other devotional writers and homilists who urge their readers to repentance. Those who highlight God's readiness to forgive envision their readers as despairing sinners who fear the difficulty of repentance. Homilists, in contrast, anticipate that their audience will interpret the parable as a sign of the ease with which one may be redeemed and therefore teach that sinners may not

⁹⁷ Watson describes the life advocated by the author as one in which "the only viable form of religious life is one of radical holiness, in which sin is remedied only by perfect living," but passages within *Book to a Mother* acknowledge the imperfection of each Christian and encourage the mother to simply do her best. For example, the author states that his mother may not do penance as perfectly as Mary Magdalene and recommends that she "do what þou maist and wilne to do more." See Watson, "Fashioning the Gentry," 180 and McCarthy, *Book to a Mother*, 135/8-11.

expect to receive forgiveness through incomplete or inauthentic penance. The author of *Book to a Mother* uniquely suggests that detestation of sin itself should motivate a comprehensive, persistent process of penance through which the formerly prodigal son may become the dutiful son who remains close to God. The reward of such efforts, he suggests, is to stop hungering for spiritual nourishment, as the prodigal son did in a foreign land, but to perform the ultimate charitable act by becoming spiritual “mete” for others.⁹⁸ The author of *Book to a Mother* envisions his audience as readers hungry for knowledge of scripture and capable of transforming that knowledge into loving deeds reflective of Christ’s teachings. By digesting the life of Christ, e.g. learning the story of the prodigal son and incorporating its lessons into one’s own life, a lay audience may become ideal preachers whose words and deeds manifest the book of Christ to others.

⁹⁸ Explicating the significance of the first bodily act of mercy, feeding the hungry, the author gives hunger and poverty spiritual connotations, suggesting that people perform this work of mercy in diverse ways: preaching, prayer, public or private acts of penance, and martyrdom. Describing all of these acts as spiritual almsgiving, the author asserts that the greatest alms a person can give is to “to releue a man fro gostly deth – brekyng Gods hestes – to gostly lyf – holdyng Gods hestes” (5/19-21).

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