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**Unknowing the Middle Ages:  
How Middle English Poetics Rewrote Literary History**

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**Unknowing the Middle Ages:  
How Middle English Poetics Rewrote Literary History**

by

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## **Dedication**

To my amazing family, and especially my mom and dad. I would have never made it to grad school—let alone to Texas—without your belief in me. I'm endlessly grateful for the examples you two have set.

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**Unknowing the Middle Ages:  
How Middle English Poetics Rewrote Literary History**

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Supervisors: Geraldine Heng and Daniel Birkholz

The concept of the unknown captivated medieval theologians, mystics, lovers, and travelers for centuries, and yet literary scholars too readily reduce this topos to a romance trope. “Unknowing the Middle Ages” reconsiders the grounds of late-medieval literary discourse by showing how canonical Middle English literary texts eschew the historical knowledges that informed them and, instead, affirm impossibility as a productive site for a literary poetics. My dissertation identifies what I call a “poetics of unknowing” as an important component of a budding late-medieval literary discourse that offers a way to discuss not only what can be known, but also that which exceeds exegetical, geographic, historical, and sensory comprehension. “Unknowing the Middle Ages” makes its argument through four chapters, each of which focuses on a narrative tradition extending at least five hundred years. Each chapter follows a figure—Herod the Great, Prester John, the Pearl, and Criseyde— from the texts that established their axiological significance to their appearances in Middle English texts, which attempt to unknow these figures. In their Middle English narratives these figures negotiate between an inherited religious ethics and an intellectual context compelled increasingly by that

which eludes comprehension. In each case, material concerns regarding the unknowable infiltrate the formal composition of the text itself, and resonate at the level of a literary ethics. The “poetics of unknowing” that inhabit these texts reveal an epistemology less encumbered by the practical demands of clarity to which other modes of medieval writing are beholden, and also—perhaps of interest to scholars of modern literature and contemporary theory—refute the critical tendency to view the epistemological valorization of the unknown as a distinctly modern phenomenon.

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## Introduction: On “Unknowing the Middle Ages”

*I resolved long ago not to seek knowledge, as others do, but to seek its contrary, which is unknowing [non-savoir]. I no longer anticipated the moment when I would be rewarded for my effort, when I would know at last, but rather the moment when I would no longer know, when my initial anticipation would dissolve into NOTHING. This is perhaps a mysticism in the sense that my craving not to know one day ceased to be distinguishable from the experience that monks called mystical—but I had neither presupposition nor a God... Only unknowing is sovereign.*

-Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vol. III: Sovereignty*

*Poetry alone, which denies and destroys the limitations of things, can return us to this absence of limitations—in short, the world is given to us when the image which we have within us is sacred, because all that is sacred is poetic and all that is poetic is sacred.*

-Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*

This dissertation reconsiders four prominent figures of medieval literary history—Herod the Great, Criseyde, the Pearl, and Prester John— and focuses on how medieval theorizations of the limits of knowledge have been funneled through literary practice. “Unknowing the Middle Ages” proposes that the topos of the unknown in late-medieval English literature offers more than some mystery to be revealed; instead it winds through the very poetic fabric of canonical Middle English texts.

Given this project’s explicit engagement with the literature and thought of the English Middle Ages, it may seem strange to begin with the gnomic maxims of a twentieth-century French anti-philosopher. However, my analysis of the concept of unknowing is two-fold, at once medieval and post-medieval. I begin with these statements from Bataille because they help frame this project’s investment in and

departure from twentieth-century conversations on the work of unknowing as well as to show how medieval unknowing informs and is informed by literary practice.

Among twentieth century thinkers, Georges Bataille, a medievalist by training, engages most specifically with a theoretical concept and practice of un-knowing. Although he never formally defines the term, Bataille's unknowing owes much to his consideration of a relationship between the thought structures of the Middle Ages and his larger, economic (non-) system of thought.<sup>1</sup> As he confesses above, the work of unknowing is at once a distinctly twentieth-century project and a medieval one. It is a kind of secular mysticism in which an inverted notion of sovereignty replaces the apophatic divinity of medieval negative theology.

In order to grasp something of Bataille's investment in unknowing, it is instructive to turn first to *La somme athéologique* (1943-45), whose title signals an engagement with the medieval and post-medieval legacy of Thomas Aquinas (and his *Summa Theologica*).<sup>2</sup> As Bruce Holsinger has shown, Bataille's aphoristic and non-systematic *Somme* shares a relationship with the high Scholastic *Summa* more complex and nuanced than one of mere inversion (Holsinger calls Bataille a "para-Thomist").<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bataille's term is "nonsavoir," which is also translated as "non-knowledge," as in the English title of a later work, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*. The idea of "unknowing" or "nonknowledge" permeates Bataille's works, but its meaning is never explicitly articulated in any of his works.

<sup>2</sup> *La somme athéologique* is the title of a collection of three works written over that period: *Inner Experience*, *Guilty*, and *On Nietzsche*.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Bataille's medievalism, see "Para-Thomism: Bataille at Rheims" in Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005).

Rather than dismiss medieval theology *tout court* as relic of a bygone ideology, Bataille posits a form of mysticism (“inner experience”) enveloped by larger questions of knowledge and ignorance, knowing and unknowing, figures whose fundamental *inseparability* permeate his entire (anti-) philosophical project. Bataille refuses to conform to the dialectical logic of Aquinas’ Scholasticism, however. While Bataille’s *Somme* highlights the fondness he shares with Aquinas regarding “contraries,” he posits that their engagement, rather than refining the economy of knowledge, yields no synthesis. For Bataille, opposing forces remain knotted together. Their elusive (if not impossible) points of contact suggest that philosophy can never faithfully systematize analytical thought into the service of any single episteme. Rather than continue a philosophical project aimed at synthesis, Bataille turns the reader’s focus to the resistance of assimilation, a realm that he designates as the experience of excess.

Bataille understands this turn to excess as a political and ethical decision to retreat from knowledge, which demands utility, and towards the heterogeneous space he calls “unknowing,” in which desire is suspended. Bataille turns to unknowing because as he sees it, the structure of knowledge, an existential guarantee, bears little more than an economy of assimilation. The “para-Thomist” Bataille posits unknowing as knowledge’s “contrary” [*contraire*], neither the inverse of knowledge nor its undoing, but the condition of epistemological and ontological suspension. Only within this pseudo-mystical state can one experience possibility at its most radical, a guarantee that promises nothing. Here (and only here), one is free, subject to the demands of no economy. Thus, for Bataille, the grounds of sovereignty must come from outside of knowledge.

But what of medieval unknowing? The foremost resonance for medieval unknowing likely stems from the discourse of mysticism, from “perhaps” to which Bataille alludes, but from which he ultimately separates his work. Indeed, pseudo-mystical discourse was highly popular at the time during which Bataille completed *The Accursed Share*, a historical period Michel de Certeau identifies as something of a renaissance.<sup>4</sup> But studies of the “medievalism” of twentieth-century theory have already successfully recuperated the centrality of mysticism to twentieth-century epistemologies.<sup>5</sup> Rather than return once more to the fertile grounds of medieval mysticism, I trace another resonance of unknowing as it forms and is formed by the practice of poiesis.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the term unknowing to refer a narrative moment that recognizes some external demand (historical, theological, philosophical), but refuses to answer such a demand in a conspicuous way. This act of willed suspension drives my investigation of literary discourse in the late Middle Ages as a way of knowing that can be formally distinguished from the work of theology or history. By investigating texts that share an interest in revising large-scale historical narratives, I maintain

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<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau and Marianne Brammer, “Mysticism,” *Diacritics* 22.2 (1992): 11-25, 12.

<sup>5</sup> If Holsinger returns Bataille’s thought to the Middle Ages, Alexander Irwin and Amy Hollywood urge the centrality of mysticism to Bataille’s politics and to his private anguish, respectively Alexander Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the Politics of the Sacred* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002); Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexuality, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002). I too have published on the twentieth century epistemological thought and its dependence on a medieval tradition of (especially female) mysticism. See “Being Beheld: Julian of Norwich’s Mystical Surreal and the Violence of Vision,” in *Beholding Violence in the Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, eds. Erin F. Labbie and Allie Terry-Fritsch, 105-23 (London: Ashgate, 2012).



unknowing as a reading ethic that underwrites a late-medieval movement toward understanding the literary as a sovereign discourse. I offer “unknowing” as a literary trope that replaces a revelatory poetics with one grounded in a refusal of mastery that sustains narratives, encourages repetition and revision, and exposes the violence that epistemological certainty risks imposing on the practice of faith.

In order to frame the possible connections between unknowing, literature, and sovereignty in the late Middle Ages, I turn back, once again, to Bataille. As it turns out, Bataille never fully relinquishes the theological vocabulary from which he attempts to separate his theory of unknowing, but merely transfers it onto the realm of poetics. Poetry is sacred, according to Bataille, a point insisted even more fervently in the writings of his frequent interlocutor Maurice Blanchot, because it does not demand, require, or produce knowledge.<sup>6</sup> What better way to un-know one’s surroundings than through the act of writing, through poetics, an experience that returns us to a world without limits, asks Bataille. As the second epigraph indicates, the apparent elimination of theology from the unknowing is less a removal than a displacement. It is literature (poetry specifically) that provides the liberatory and destructive energy necessary to return the thinking subject to the realm of the excessive, the realm of unknowing. The poetic is sacred, in part, because it can never be fully known.

Bataille does not explicitly ally the sovereignty of unknowing with the sanctity of poetics, and yet he grounds both within the structural logic of suspension. Unknowing,

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<sup>6</sup> On Blanchot, unknowing, and poetics, see especially, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982).

like poetry, empties discourse of both limitation and destination, and yet both flirt with the mystical, which lends unknowing its oblivion and poetry its sanctity. Neither Bataille nor Blanchot speak of a “poetics of unknowing,” because both reject the culture of faith that, as I will argue, renders poetry’s deferral of meaning truly radical. As is clear from the first epigraph, non-savoir requires one to relinquish *even* faith. In a more secular vocabulary, what separates unknowing from mysticism stems from the practical rigor of unknowing. Bataille’s unknowing enacts an existential suspension completely devoid of demand, the difference between a staged “trust fall” and the spontaneous decision to let oneself plunge. What I hope to contribute in my turn to the medieval is a sense of the radical nature of Middle English narrative. For Bataille, unknowing persists because there is no structural demand for it to answer; thus, the poetic can provide a model of such sovereignty because such literary knowing is able to suspend the demands for resolution that are put toward it. For late-medieval texts written under the aegis of a Christian epistemology, such a demand can hardly be avoided. This, then, is what medieval, literary forms of unknowing have to offer, as distinct from modern, theoretical forms: a model of literary knowing that receives, but ultimately distinguishes itself from, epistemological demand.

The purpose of this dissertation is to bring these terms together, poetics and unknowing, through a consideration of Middle English narrative. As opposed to Bataille, who offers unknowing as a practice theorized for a historical moment devoid of faith and yet overflowing with anguish, “Unknowing the Middle Ages” shows how late-medieval Middle English literature suspends the questions it inherits from the historical past, from

*within* a culture of faith. Through a consideration of four figures featured prominently in medieval narratives, I show how, by suspending the demands of knowledge to which these figures were subjected, Middle English literary narratives conceive of a truly radical faith that rests on no structural guarantees, unlike analogous narratives concerned explicitly with history or theology.

In this introduction, I seek to establish the medieval grounds for such a poetics of unknowing as well as a larger, diachronic understanding of how the category of literary writing has functioned for those interested in an anti-philosophy of unknowing. On the global level, I attempt to give shape and purpose to a nebulous, yet transhistorical discourse of unknowing. I challenge those critics who attempt to historicize the valorization of the unknown as a distinctly Modern(ist) project and show how this practice is immanent to literary discourse. I do so by looking at medieval literature, within which the topos of the unknown does not mark a failure to make meaning, but helps ground a poetics that extends beyond the limits that the unknown prescribes for historical or theological discourse.

On the local level of medieval studies, this dissertation shows how, rather than ascribe to post-medieval strategies of understanding the unknown, a study of medieval unknowing can return to the literary texts themselves, the poetics of which often provide their own theoretical construct of how the unknown functions within literary discourse. Taken together, “Unknowing the Middle Ages” reconsiders the grounds of late-medieval literary discourse by showing how Middle English literary texts eschew the historical knowledges that informed them and, instead, affirm impossibility as a productive site for

a literary poetics. By reading literary figures alongside the historical, theological, geographic, and scientific-mathematical contexts contemporaneous with their late-medieval appearances, “Unknowing the Middle Ages” offers innovative readings of English cycle drama, the Middle English *Pearl*, Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the legend of Prester John. My dissertation identifies what I call a “poetics of unknowing” as an important component of a budding late-medieval literary discourse that offers a way to discuss that which exceeds exegetical, geographic, historical, and sensory comprehension. In each case, *contra* their historical or theological legacies, each figure becomes unknown through a poetics that expels them from their knowledge economies they helped build but, within this epistemological exile, suspends the question of their death. A medieval poetics of unknowing leaves its figures encrypted, but not yet buried.<sup>7</sup>

### **Unknowing: From the *via negativa* to “Non-Classical Thought”**

The word “unknowing” comes directly from Middle English (*unknawying*) a term derived, appropriately enough, from Christian devotional work. Variations of the Middle English *unknawying*, usually denoting a state of ignorance, appear here and there in theological texts, but the term receives its most thoughtful consideration in the fourteenth-century devotional manual, *The Cloud of Unknowing*.<sup>8</sup> Composed within the

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<sup>7</sup> Here I allude to Abraham and Torok’s theory of “cryptonymy,” as explicated in *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> The OED attests that *unknawying* first occurs in *The Prik of Conscience* (c. 1340), a devotional text, usually ascribed to the English hermit Richard Rolle, that is popularly known to have produced more manuscripts (130) than any other Middle English poem.

temporal heart of this present study, *The Cloud of Unknowing* transforms unknowing from one of several words signaling spiritual unawareness into the paradoxical grounds of an apophatic methodology of mystical enlightenment. *The Cloud of Unknowing* offers a method of Christian devotion rooted in two basic propositions: first, that penetrating into the unknown has a theological function and, second, that one can obtain a closeness with God without explicitly knowing God. Put simply, *The Cloud* turns the theological abstraction of the *via negativa* into practical spiritual advice.

Popularized in the Middle Ages through the fifth-century writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, negative theology, the *via negativa*, elucidates a system of skepticism without skepticism. Popular among mystical communities and considered doctrinally sound in the Middle Ages (Aquinas cites Pseudo-Dionysius over 1700 times), negative theology rests on the assumption that if God exceeds human's ability to conceive of Him, the only path toward understanding God involves a meditation on what He is not. One can never approach an understanding of God if thinking in positive terms since God is not perceptible in human terms. As the *Cloud*-author writes, "But now thou askest me and seiest: 'How schal I think on Himself, and what is Hee?' And to this I cannot answer thee bot thus: 'I wote never'" (6/1).<sup>9</sup> According to Pseudo-Dionysius, to approach God one must think of Him in terms of "dissimilar similarities," words or concepts that appear to have nothing to do with God's benevolence or divinity and therefore fit him more appropriately (because they prevent us from reducing a discourse on God to simplistically

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<sup>9</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, EETS 218 (London: Oxford UP, 1934).

positive ideals). These dissimilarities, slowly but surely, negate assumptions of what God must be, and according to followers of the *via negativa*, indirectly propel one closer God.

According to the logic of the *Cloud*, however, this approach already presumes too much: one cannot access God through language, but only through love. If one wants to cultivate a relationship with God, one needs un-know oneself into epistemological obscurity, which is the realm of the divine. One must relinquish all sensory pretense towards understanding and strive upward towards this “cloud,” a spiritual darkness signifying “a lacking of knowing” (23/14).<sup>10</sup> Once there, only love can pierce God’s cloud of unknowing, but, in order to love, one must suppress desires beneath a cloud of forgetting. A reduced formulation of the *Cloud*’s devotional program would read thus: one must relinquish all material and sensory desire in order to empty oneself fully of all pretense towards knowledge: only then may one feel God’s love and fill the epistemological void with faith and, ultimately, a “oneheed” with God.

*The Cloud of Unknowing* demonstrates aptly how Bataille draws on and departs from the Middle Ages in his conception of unknowing. In the *Cloud*, as in apophatic theology, the unknown remains a sanctified space because it is the realm in which God dwells. However—and here is where Bataille’s “perhaps” enters—mystical unknowing rests ultimately on a demand: that God reveal himself to Christians through His love. Whereas unknowing excites Bataille as a site where the dialectic breaks down, this medieval version of unknowing, this “cloud... which cannot be seen, which is nothing”

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<sup>10</sup> The image of the cloud is taken from Exodus 20:21 and had invited exegetical expansion by the late Middle Ages, most notably by Philo and Gregory of Nyssa.

nonetheless “unites all opposition.”<sup>11</sup> It would be too much to suggest that the *Cloud of Unknowing* offers a “poetics of unknowing” since its goal rests ultimately in the cultivation of knowledge. Moreover, as Bataille and Derrida, among others, have shown, it is impossible to really conceive of unknowing in strictly theological discourse because such discourse depends necessarily on a founding certainty (the existence and agency of God) whereas the power of unknowing lies precisely in its suspension of epistemological questions. Although a careful reader can perceive the beginnings of an epistemological transition in how the *Cloud*, one of the earliest English prose texts, instrumentalizes the unknown, it is necessary to turn to literature, whose logics of deferral, doubleness, and belated arrival provide a space through which the problems of historical certainty might be re-written as open questions and into a poetics of unknowing.

The epistemological demands of Christian mysticism announce Bataille’s departure from the medieval, but, as I will argue, mysticism is not the only framework circulating for models of medieval unknowing. The relationship between unknowing and the work of literature, however, has been studied thus far only in relation to the advent of literary Modernism as it separates itself from positivist accounts of the epistemology of literature. Given Modernism’s break with Enlightenment narratives of progress (experienced most acutely through the horrors of the Great War) and its intellectual focus on expanding knowledge by demolishing inherited epistemological paradigms (literary realism, Euclidean geometry, Newtonian physics), this notion of “unknowing” refers less

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<sup>11</sup> Nike Kocijaneic Pokorn, “The Language and Discourse of *The Cloud of Unknowing*,” *Literature & Theology* 11.4 (1997): 408-21, 414.

to a theoretical construct and more as a *modus operandi*. To their credit, writers who mobilize a theoretical framework of ‘unknowing’ to understand twentieth-century thought tend to carefully historicize it. Invariably, those who employ the term champion its contemporaneity, its modernity—a twentieth-century response to a twentieth-century problem. Where its theorists succeed contextually, they struggle with regard to clarity.

For Philip Weinstein, unknowing is *the* “work of Modernist fiction,” a skeptical phantom-realism that infiltrates the thematic structures of some of the period’s most accomplished literary technicians.<sup>12</sup> In his monograph devoted to Modernist literary subjectivity, Weinstein employs the term unknowing to designate a purposeful (and “strenuous”) “leap of faith” into alternative psychological and ethical attitudes towards fiction that unsettles traditional accounts about how a literary subject functions in space and time. Focusing on the work of Kafka, Proust, and Faulkner, Weinstein seeks to provide a sense of how literary Modernism answers the demands of reality by showing how these demands are, at bottom, unanswerable, and must be un-recognized or unknown in order to be responsibly addressed. Modernist novelists accomplish this primarily by experimenting with temporality (memory, trauma, meditation) and literary subjectivity (ambiguity, inaccessibility, irony), all of which coalesce, for Weinstein, under the rubric of unknowing. This Modernist project of unknowing sets the stage for the radical openness “beyond knowing” that characterizes Postmodernity. Rather than view the Modernist project as a masculinized and elitist attempt to secure control over

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<sup>12</sup> Philip Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2005).



and/or re-write the master narratives of culture and epistemology, Weinstein locates its true literary intervention in its presentation of a world beyond understanding.<sup>13</sup>

This is not to say that literary historians have unilaterally ignored pre-Enlightenment narratives of unknowing in discussions of its literary import. In a monograph dedicated to the themes of “absence, unknowing, and emptiness” in literature, Timothy Walsh finds an antecedent to modern discourses of negation through *The Cloud of Unknowing*.<sup>14</sup> Throughout his book, Walsh discusses a range of creative pursuits, from sculpture to music, in order to demonstrate how absence and unknowing are structurally necessary to aesthetic texts and how as themes, absence and unknowing encourage readers to explore the limits of human existence. Although Walsh does not treat medieval literature, he extracts from the *Cloud* a doctrine of “something” that lies beyond the

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that Weinstein’s unknowing is something that can be easily defined. Sometimes he performs the ambiguity of the texts he treats, reveling in such formulations as “knowing as unknowing’s most cunning guise” (76). Weinstein does historicize the discourse of unknowing, situating its emergence as a reaction against Enlightenment values and as a response to Freudian psychoanalysis. In the first chapter, Weinstein posits a Western genealogy of “coming to know” in which he grounds the realist novel in a series of intellectual developments that constellate Europe’s period of Enlightenment: Bacon’s observable world, the Cartesian “knowing” subject, Newton’s systematized physics, Locke’s liberalism, and Kant’s universalized ethical imperatives. While Weinstein makes no explicit claim regarding the historical singularity of Modernism’s dis-inheritance of the authoritative accounts of a past more secure of itself than the present, he nonetheless sets the Modernist project against “a premodernist commitment to knowing.” Not only does Weinstein appear to present a binary understanding of Western intellectual history hinging on Modernism’s advent, he fails to consider the West’s epistemological investments prior to the Enlightenment, and dismisses the relevance of the Middle Ages to his discussion in one parenthetical for a self-evident lack of subjectivity (25). It is as if, prior to Modernism, Western writers lacked access to the destabilizing tools that might un-know an inherited philosophical truth.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Walsh, *The Dark Matter of Words: Absence, Unknowing, and Emptiness in Literature* (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1998), 160-67.

“nothing” of unknowing. Whereas Weinstein dismisses the Middle Ages for its un-self-conscious ontology, Walsh cites medieval theology to establish the important function of the unknown in non-literary settings (a methodological move echoed also in the scientism of the book’s title, *The Dark Matter of Words*). Walsh appears to invoke astrophysics and medieval theology to buttress an implicit contention about the transhistorical verity of literary unknowing and the structural power of absence, which like “dark matter,” has always “been there” even if it has remained undiscovered up until the twentieth century.

Weinstein, on the other hand, clearly resists the argument that unknowing can be understood as a transhistorically consistent theme in literature. In order to assert a clean break between pre-Modern and Modern literature, Weinstein turns also to scientific discourse. Specifically, Weinstein identifies Freud as the agent of an epistemological cut that destabilizes any notion of a “subject of knowledge.” For Weinstein, Freud is not only an “architect of modernist thinking” (3), his theories have inaugurated a new tradition, a “poetics of the afflicted soul” (83). The cut between pre-modern and modern, if one exists at all, certainly required something more than Freud’s observations about the fundamental irrationality of human desire. At the same time, it is worthwhile to consider what contributions Freud did make to the discourse of unknowing.

Freud’s primary intervention into a philosophy of unknowing involves claims about a subject no longer in control of her desire, but driven *un-consciously* by it. Freud’s project, as initially formulated, responded to a scientific interest in the unknown association between neuroses (understood as a purely physiological phenomena) and the more difficult to perceive logic of psychological structures. Among the effects of

psychoanalysis on twentieth-century epistemological thought, two jump out for the effects on this Modernist preoccupation with unknowing. On the one hand, Freud insists on the unknowability of human desire and contends that people deliberately misread the world around them in order to integrate their experiences into some such fantasy they wish, unwittingly, to uphold. Rather than turn melancholic over the passing of self-possession, Freud also offers new models that mediate the relationship between the human and the unknown. Thanks to the logic of repression, that which is unknown must eventually unravel into some kind of knowledge, whether we recognize it or not.

Questions of his true novelty notwithstanding, Freud's development of an unconscious did propose for the first time a scientific remedy for what had hitherto been recognized as an epistemological problem. In designating the unconscious as place, Freud localized unknowing to a place and system of logic that, however metaphysical, was marked by what one *does know* or at least *can know* about the human psyche. After all, for Freud, knowledge does not merely help us understand the law of human psychology, this knowledge *is* the law. More than circumscribing the unknowable to a register outside of human psychic potential, Freud integrated that which was inherently and necessarily unknown/inaccessible into a coherent system of knowledge, positioning the unknown as an essential cog within the machinery of human subjectivity. In other words, Freud's unconscious was as much a product of the Enlightenment ideology of "coming to know" as it was a departure from that system of belief. Freud may have replaced the "subject of knowledge" with a "subject of the unconscious," but he also prescribed a method through which the individual may experience self-possession. Even if psychoanalysis failed to

return the analysand to his desire, the blame was never placed on the human capacity for knowledge in the first place. Once the unknown became itself systematized, it could be studied, discovered, and revealed. The implications, as are well known, were quickly applied ideationally to discourses far removed from the scientific.<sup>15</sup>

In perhaps the most disciplinarily inclusive understanding of twentieth-century unknowing, Arkady Plotnitsky advances the scientism claimed by the previous writers and situates the work of unknowing at the epicenter of the debate over the “two cultures.” In *The Knowable and the Unknowable*, Plotnitsky sketches a theory of “nonclassical thought,” an epistemological paradigm of non-teleological discourse organized around the recognition that an object can remain unknowable and yet still produce measurable effects on that discourse.<sup>16</sup> For Plotnitsky, the unknowable is a very specific concept, “that which is placed beyond the limit of any analysis, knowledge, or conception while... having shaping effects on what can be known” (xiii). Plotnitsky fixes in on quantum mechanics as the discovery that helped make possible an epistemological shift that refocuses intellectual attention away from trying to unveil the unknowns and focuses

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<sup>15</sup> The Surrealists, as an early example, were quick to realize the potential bridge the unconscious could build between the realm of the knowable and the realm of being. Automatic writing, as outlined by André Breton, was predicated not only on the desire but the belief that what is unknown to the self can be revealed through a studied process of self-annihilating repetition of thought. Unlike stream-of-consciousness, which works only to reveal what one is thinking, automatic writing, as formulated by Breton, was made possible by a powerful belief in a concept (and little more than that for Breton) that the unknown had been contained and need just be accessed, conjured, or drawn out.

<sup>16</sup> Arkady Plotnitsky, *The Knowable and the Unknowable: Modern Science, Nonclassical Thought, and the ‘Two Cultures’* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002).

instead on how scientists might orient scientific knowledge around the unknowable.<sup>17</sup> Plotnitsky's major intervention, however, is in the way he attends to the foundational similarities shared in the epistemologies of theoretical physics and of post-structuralism, both of which he understands as "making the unknowable an irreducible part of knowledge" (xiii). In other words, nonclassical thought suggests that quantum mechanics has ushered in a new relationship with knowledge in which our intellectual advancement depends on our ability to constantly discover "new horizons of the unknown" (21).

This is not to say that Plotnitsky's account is a romanticization of the unknown. On the contrary, Plotnitsky insists on the interdependence of classical and nonclassical thought. For example, one scientific outcome made possible within a nonclassical framework is physicist Niels Bohr's "complementarity," which holds that the measurements of quantum objects differ according to the perspective of observation and method of measurement. While scientists may not know *why* light is both a wave and a particle (efficacy), they do know that it must, at some level, exist as both, just not at the same time (effects). While his law would not have been possible within the traditional framework of classical thought, Bohr insisted that the effects of his law, paradoxically, must be explained in terms of classical physics. Nonclassical thought does not guarantee the permanent inaccessibility of anything: to acquiesce to the impossibility of understanding light would be a kind of knowledge in itself, after all. For Plotnitsky, this

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<sup>17</sup> For Plotnitsky, nonclassical thought entails the recognition of two kinds of epistemological discontinuity. First, there must be a rupture between the knowable effects produced by an object and the unknowable power/purpose of those effects. Second, there must also be a fissure between the objects of a given theory and the "un-objects" existing outside of that theory that can potentially act upon the former.

notion finds its most appropriate theoretical analogue in none other than Bataille's theory of unknowing [*nonsavoir*], which, with Bohr, forms a larger "complimentary epistemology." According to Bataille, whom Plotnitsky claimed was profoundly influenced by quantum physics, one can never speak of un-knowledge, but only of its effects. These are the kinds of conceptual analogies Plotnitsky seeks throughout *The Knowable and the Unknowable*. While his subsequent chapters treat Derrida and Lacan rather than Bataille (who, after this first mention, becomes another name on a list), Bataille's *non-savoir* remains for the work a kind of bridge between the epistemological foci of physics and post-structuralism.

The significance of Plotnitsky's work resides in his ability to show how the so-called "two cultures" of sciences and humanities share foundational premises and work on similar problems. For this project in particular, it is also significant that Plotnitsky understands the unknown to be the means of this confluence. Yet, however indebted to the quantum shift post-structural thought accounts of unknowing might be, Plotnitsky tells only one side of the story. The intellectual debts of post-structural unknowing are numerous and owe to a legacy that extends much further back than the arrival of quantum theory. One of these legacies, as Bataille has already pointed out, returns us to the religious culture of the Middle Ages, a topic whose investments might at first appear completely incompatible with the scientific concerns post-structuralism also shares.

I am certainly not the first to point out the influence of medieval thought on the intellectual development of post-structuralism, many practitioners of which were trained

as medievalists.<sup>18</sup> In terms of the discourse of unknowing, however, one strain of medieval thought has been particularly influential: that of negative or apophatic theology. For many twentieth-century artists, scientists and philosophers, the admission of even a hint of theological influence threatened to discredit their work (one thinks of Sigmund Freud's infamous split with Carl Jung).<sup>19</sup> However, others, including Levinas, Derrida, and Lacan, among others, engage seriously with theological arguments—Derrida's engagement with negative theology has even prompted an entire edited volume on the subject.<sup>20</sup> The relationship between Derrida's deconstruction and the apophatic mysticism of the *via negativa* is not unlike that between post-structuralism and nonclassical thought. In fact, it might be said that each pair bears a relationship of complementarity.

Regardless of their ultimate overlap, Deconstruction and negative theology both involve a kind of unknowing. In the more secular terms of Plotnitsky's two modes of thinking, the *via negativa* (and its differences with nonclassical thought) might be understood thus: while apophatic theology may note the manifest effects of God's existence, it claims no access to their efficacy; therefore one must avail oneself entirely of the classical model of thinking (positivism or cataphatic theology), to unknow it, because its assumptions will only get in the way of any future progress in the nonclassical

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<sup>18</sup> See Holsinger's aforementioned *Premodern Condition* and Erin Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Freud wrote to friend Romain Rolland that he feared Jung was "something of a mystic" and therefore not suitable for serious scientific inquiry. Qtd. in Michel de Certeau and Marsanne Brammer, "12.

<sup>20</sup> See *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. H. Coward and T. Foshay (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

system. Nonclassical thought, on the other hand, still relies on classical thought for the purposes of understanding the efficacy of an effect. Whereas nonclassical thought makes no assumptions about the unknown, it retains faith in the possibility for an explanatory apparatus; negative theology assumes the existence of an unknown relationship between things but concedes the impossibility of explaining it. Negative theology and nonclassical thought are thus fundamentally incompatible, though both remain essential to post-structural epistemology. However, neither offers an answer to unknowing's efficacy: what is, in the end, the purpose of either approach: to know more or to know less?

These discourses, though incompatible, maintain a complementary relationship insofar as each relies dialectically on the other to hold in abeyance the radical possibility of absolute knowledge or un-knowledge. A deconstructive practice un-haunted by the specter of negative theology risks un-reasoning itself into the highly dogmatic conclusion that unknowing guarantees the impossibility of any and all knowledge. Negative theology posits a rhetorically useful, ultimately positive counterweight to the nihilist absolutism that post-structuralism risks since it leaves open the possibility that a realm of unknowing can provide a means of coming to knowledge, however incrementally or asymptotically. Of course, the guarantee of knowledge that might extend from the *via negativa* reinscribes a positivism that this discourse was developed, in part, to subtend. Likewise, negative theology must avoid submitting to an epistemology that describes a knowable universe divorced from an unknowable instrumentality to which use that knowledge is put. In other words, deconstruction and negative theology each suggest conclusions that,



if accepted, would undermine a founding assumption shared by their epistemological approaches, that of unknowing as *suspension*. As Bataille was keen to point out, unknowing must guarantee absolutely nothing. It is the very ex-cessive nature of unknowing that grounds it as the realm of a sovereign poetics.

### **From a Poetics of Revelation to a Poetics of Unknowing**

The discussion of more contemporary uses of the term unknowing provides a foundation for the reasons writers invest in a discourse oriented away from knowledge. While for the twentieth century unknowing reinvested literature with a potential to access modes of understanding unavailable to a rationalist, teleological approach to knowledge, the stakes of medieval unknowing are necessarily grounded in a theological conversation about the relationship between faith and belief. Rather than accede to Weinstein's notion of a "premodernist commitment to knowing," I discuss a medieval poetics of unknowing as an important literary response to a widespread political and theological demand to instrumentalize narrative into the service of what I call a poetics of revelation. If medieval ways of knowing can be most easily separated into *ratio* (active, rational deduction) and *intellectus* (intuitive, associated with divine knowledge), I am concerned primarily with how history and narrative delineate the ethics of the latter. While the impetus to unknow in late-medieval England may, at times, draw on existential and/or phenomenological themes found also in the twentieth century, my focus here is to show how unknowing becomes a formal device within a text that models how literary accounts

of faith and belief may be incompatible with the intellectualism that pervades literary culture through the thirteenth century.

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The lines between history and literature in the Middle Ages are, of course, effectively blurred. In order to make the past memorable and meaningful, medieval chronicles often idealized the past, fleshing out important events with fantastic detail and situating kings or kingdoms within logic of imperial succession, or *translatio imperii*. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written in the first third of the twelfth century, provides what is perhaps the most well-known narrative account of *translatio imperii*. The *Historia* makes productive use of the overlap shared by *historia* (account, story, history) and *fabula* (play, story, fable) with such success as to revolutionize contemporary views of English history, while also planting the seeds of romance. As Geraldine Heng writes, "King Arthur materializes at the vanishing point of historical narration."<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey, who memorably claims that he is merely translating an ancient book, combines political and ecclesiastical interests in order to *create* an English past through a narrative driven by memorable characters (Brutus, Vortigern, Arthur, Merlin) who steer the course of history and give it meaning (it is no coincidence that chronicles recalling British history became known as *brut*).

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<sup>21</sup> See "The Genesis of Medieval Romance," in Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 17-62, 33.

As has been well-rehearsed, these fictional elements, or *fabula*, represent neither a roadblock to nor an opposition to historical truth. Instead, the flourishes of artistic merit in chronicles serve to illustrate an already-known truth that might otherwise go unrepresented, if it were not repackaged as a coherent (and entertaining) narrative. In other words, stories like the Matter of Britain utilize narrative in order to give shape to an otherwise abstract epistemological premise: that sacred and secular history are one and that the rulers of Britain stand in metonymically at the head of the West's great new empire. Whether received as believable or fantastic, figures like Arthur and Brutus allowed readers to most effectively *know* the past, and do so through the power of narrative. To actively create the past from the vantage of the present raises the stakes of historical knowledge from a set of facts about the past, some recoverable and some unknowable, to a transhistorical knowledge that connects past, present, and future by narrativizing the connections between these temporalities.

Biblical exegesis, the other primary means of knowing the past, worked on a similar logic to connect past, present, and future. A properly exegetical understanding of Scripture required a scholar to interpret a pre-Christian Old Testament event as prefiguring the ascendancy of a Christian present. Augustine, for example, sets in motion an exegetics that requires pre-Christian history to exist alternately for itself and for later biblical history—reading the Old Testament as vacillation between the *lex* or *promissio*, which emphasized a literal reading, and the symbolic *figura*, which focused on how these

passages forecasted a knowledge of a Christian present and future.<sup>22</sup> By focusing on levels of interpretation that include history, allegory, and tropology, exegetes such as Hugh, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, and Peter Comester situated the pre-Christian (usually Old Testament) past as an active force capable of forging a dialogue with contemporary events as well as those prophesied to come.

While the romancing of the chronicle tradition illustrates the way that writers built a narrative thread that linked recorded events into manufactured historical knowledge, the exegetical unfolding of the biblical text points to the way in which theologians inscribed the present and future into an otherwise closed narrative about the past. Given these two frameworks for interpreting the past, the actions of individuals and the outcomes of singular events came to form the primary means through which the Middle Ages understood history. Yet, as exegesis shows us, those looking to understand the past often privileged the transhistorical meaning or significance of an event/individual over its/their outcome/actions (the *lex* of the history). In order for it to matter, the historical event, whose details are often inaccessible to the present, required additional description on the one hand, or, in the case of Old Testament events, a more explicit link to an established Christian truth. In other words, writers and theologians had to recreate history in order to situate it within the dominant logics of their understanding of how the world worked (Christian eschatology; *translatio imperii*).

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<sup>22</sup> See Book 3 of Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958). For more on the evolution of medieval exegesis, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 2: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. E.M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000).

The chapters of this dissertation explore whether the four pseudo-historical figures I treat can provide something other than a confirmation of a previously established truth. In doing so, I hope to show how literature sets limits on the knowable and suggests that there are advantages to understanding our relationship to the past as permanently unknowable. But why the fourteenth century, in particular? As I will now discuss, the thirteenth century helped codify a demand for revelation through which the purpose or efficacy of an event or figure must be integrated into a larger epistemological system. The poetics of unknowing I discuss in this dissertation thus form a movement against such a demand.

So what do I mean when I refer to the texts I treat as “literary” narratives? First, to be clear, I do not offer in this dissertation an understanding a transhistorical, essentialist concept of literature, nor do I even wish to participate in the debate over whether the category of literature merits a relativistic or essentialist designation. The only writer I have mentioned so far that does anything close to that is Maurice Blanchot, and his concerns lie more with what literature does than what it is. Like the medieval “quarrel of the universals” the debate over the historical status of the literary has invited spirited debate for centuries, oscillating between the Realist position of a stable literary essence and a Nominalist critique of literature’s particularity in accordance with broader humanities trends. For instance, many of the most robust definitions of the literary, such as those theorized by Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky, rose out of the broader trends of formalism and structuralism. On the other hand, the second half of the twentieth century abounds with critiques of literary essentialism, influenced surely by the larger

concerns of post-modernism and, more specifically, post-structuralism. With the advent of cognitive approaches to studying literature—again an invocation of “two cultures” compatibility—cognitive science appears to have swung the pendulum back to the side of the existence of a stable literary essence.<sup>23</sup>

The subsequent discussion of the medieval literary rests on the following propositions. First, literary scholars have associated twentieth-century literature with the work of “unknowing,” but have done so without defining literature or unknowing. Second, there exist Middle English literary texts that transform not-knowing (whether through unwillingness or inability) not into an endpoint but into an entrance into understanding a text and its alternate relationship to a specific historical past. Moreover, I suggest that attending to the unknowability of these figures actually maintains their transhistorical significance, rather than undermining it. Now, when I refer to the “literary,” I simply mean a narrative that creates an imagined world whose inhabitants possess the ability to act independently of any historical demands placed upon them *or* whose actions require an explanation of motive. To put it more simply, I ally the literary with poiesis, an act of making that transforms the world. In associating literature with unknowing, I am explicating what I understand to be a consequence of poiesis: that this transformation of the world affords an understanding of epistemology that does not require the unknown to reveal itself. In the literary narrative, history functions not as

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<sup>23</sup> For an excellent overview of the debates over (and stakes of) defining literature and the literary, including a discussion of how cognitive science has affected these debates, see Vladimir Alexandrov, “Literature, Literariness, and the Brain,” *Comparative Literature* 59.2 (2007): 97-118.

knowledge, but as a kind of belated materiality. To be clear, I am not suggesting that all literature involves unknowing, nor am I discounting the possibility of an essentialist link between medieval and post-medieval literariness. Rather, for the purposes of this dissertation, I propose that one way to distinguish late-medieval literary writing from other modes of discourse is its valorization of what cannot be known.

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In order to separate what I understand as a poetics of revelation from one of unknowing, I return to a text foundational to the creation of a mode of medieval discourse understood as literary. The epistemological program and attendant popularity of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* might be better understood when considered in its twelfth-century historical context. The twelfth-century, often credited as an intellectual high point for the Middle Ages, can be equally characterized by the numerous epistemological crises it faced.<sup>24</sup> The crusading movements that began in the late eleventh century understood the recapture of the Holy Land as the first step in establishing a united *societas Christiana*, and though the First Crusade (1096-99) achieved its goal, the optimism it heralded was short-lived. Crusading was a form of pilgrimage, holy war, and *imitatio Christi*, all of which afforded to Latin Christians the confidence that they were God's chosen people. Although it was not yet readily apparent whether Islam represented a "divine scourge" or whether Muhammad was the heresiarch meant to usher in the

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<sup>24</sup> For an excellent overview of twelfth-century intellectual culture, see M.D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester Little (Toronto: MARTS, 1997).

Apocalypse, it was certain that Islam's military impact was linked to its significance in the narrative of Christian history.

From the late twelfth century onward, Muslims held Jerusalem, the ideological and geographical navel of the world, and had even recaptured the first Crusader state ever established, Edessa. In addition to losing Jerusalem and its surrounding territories, the crusading project turned inward to factionalize Christendom itself. Crusaders slaughtered Jews living in their own lands, slaughtered other Christians living outside their lands, and even mounted a "crusade" against Christians in Southern France.<sup>25</sup> The goals of crusading as a means of unifying Christendom came into tension with a contemporary drive within the Church to root out heresy by dividing it. Those deviant systems termed heresy might be understood as the underpinning logics between faith and reason not yet revealed (or thought to be obscured) by the cultural-epistemological system of Catholicism. Latin Christians found themselves trying to carve out a definitive *societas Christiana*, in part because Europe had begun to look dangerously heterogeneous.

Gregorian reform, the rise of new monastic orders, and the most significant spread of heresy in the last five hundred years challenged the sovereignty (as well as the singularity) of the Church and outlined the need for the Catholicism to (re-)organize

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<sup>25</sup> For a first-hand account on the slaughter of Jews on the way to the First Crusade, see Solomon bar Samson's account of "The Crusaders in Mainz, May 27, 1096," reprinted in Jacob Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315-1791* (New York: JPS, 1938), 115-20. On the Fourth Crusade and its violence toward Eastern Christians, see Donald Queller and Thomas Madden, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople* (Philadelphia: U of Penn P, 1997). For more on the persecution of Cathars and the so-called Albigensian Crusade, see Joseph Strayer, *The Albigensian Crusades* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992).



itself.<sup>26</sup> And so it did. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 remains one of the most significant events of the Middle Ages not only for its influence on Christian doctrine, or for its ability to return political power to the Church, but also for its effects on Western epistemology. The systematic attempt of an assertive pope—one “less than God but more than man”—to exercise power over the body of Latin Christendom produced consequences that reverberated well into the Early Modern period.

The Fourth Lateran Council re-asserted the centrality of the Church in the West by positioning itself as the central hub through which even the most intimate knowledges must circulate. Taken together, Innocent III’s pronouncements concretized a longstanding association between discipline and wisdom into a decree that knowledge comes from attendance to boundaries, to *rules* already regimented. The call for yearly confession helped strengthen ties to more rural areas where congregations adhered less strictly to doctrine, but this was also a reform within the Church as well. Along with a ban on new monastic orders, Innocent worked to distinguish a Catholic inside from an equally homogeneous outside, including a reaffirmation of all previous denunciations of *heresies* as well as the reduction of all theological deviance into the conceptual singularity, *heresy*. The sustained persecution of heresy was, in effect, an exploration of the limits of the

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<sup>26</sup> R.I. Moore discusses the new threats to western Europe in the twelfth-century and their responses in his two works, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1988) and *The Origins of European Dissent* (London: Allen Lane Publishing, 1977). Curiously, neither book says much about the impact of Islam on twelfth-century Christians’ conceptions of heresy, which will become a primary theme for John Tolan and the work of more recent historians.

Christian body with aims to establish recognizable boundaries for a wholly Christian subjectivity, a cohesive *societas Christiana*.

The plan to mark the othered bodies (Jews, Muslims) within Europe's borders, and to declare a Fifth Crusade on those outside its limits, approximated a panoptical surveillance over the medieval West. Even the ban on ordeals signified a departure from providential justice towards the Church's circumscription, as Body of Christ, of *veritas*. Previously, God was relied upon to enforce and sanctify the transmission of truth; thereafter, transparency, uniformity and consistency were to rule the realm of knowledge. The dictums of Lateran IV coalesced to disclose one common demand: that the unknown might reveal itself so that it could be categorized within a new system of orthodoxy.

In the wake of an institutional desire to clarify *and* guard the distinction between inside and outside, intellectual approaches towards things unknown shifted to accommodate Fourth Lateran's desire for schematization and reflexivity. The council also helped usher in a thirteenth-century Scholasticism, which, through the logic of the dialectic, united known and unknown into a synthesis that helped refine, piece by piece, all theological knowledge. Bolstered by a university statute (also 1215) that *required* students to study Aristotle's logic, theology acquired the status of a science. Buoyed by the institutionalization of Scholastic thought and a systematic program of surveillance by the Church, epistemology and religious ethics began to coalesce across textual communities. Devotional manuals, for instance, experienced an unprecedented surge in

popularity during the thirteenth century.<sup>27</sup> The need for private instruction on how faith was properly cultivated and maintained testifies to the demand that these institutional practices, ecclesiastical and Scholastic, created among individual Christians.

The literary legacy of Lateran IV was no less significant and also reflected an interest in modes of disclosure revealed in line with a specific disciplinary practice. As disciplinary handbooks of Christian truth surged in popularity, so too did poetic manuals, which outlined the rules and decorum for artifice. Even so, secular narratives often struggled to justify themselves without recourse to extra-romantic intellectual or political pursuits. The advent of (French) romance was thought to offer a mode through which stories about the past could focus on entertainment rather than didactic value—essentially freeing fiction from its necessary subjection to historical knowledge. Romance separated itself from chronicle by adhering to comparatively equivocal logics of deferral and interlacement, but was also subjected to thirteenth-century demands for clarity. The Grail-object, for example, so crucial to the ambiguous charms of Chrétien's *Perceval*, became a Eucharistic symbol by the century's second decade.<sup>28</sup> At the narrative level, the relationship between what the speaker *knows* about his story and the justification, in terms of poetic authority, that the narrative seems to require echoed the larger cultural

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<sup>27</sup> See Leonard Boyle, "The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology," in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas Heffernan, 30-43 (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1985).

<sup>28</sup> We can see Robert's pre-LIV Grail as complemented by Lateran IV. See E. Jane Burns, *Arthurian Fictions: Re-Reading the Vulgate Cycle* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1985); Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963); and, most specifically, Suzanne Wilson, "From Enigma to Explanation: Rereading Old French Grail Stories in Light of the Fourth Lateran Council," PhD Thesis, Washington University in St. Louis, 1989.

problem with *auctoritas* as the very condition of knowing. As E. Jane Burns notes, writing of Arthurian romance, “[i]nvention is thus based on the rewriting and reworking of previous texts. The task of the author is not to respect the autonomy of his source but to tamper actively with its contents.”<sup>29</sup> How then is knowledge to be discovered when one can only know what has already been revealed? To know in the present tense (or to narrate) is a dangerous practice as well as a highly regulated one, as evidenced by the contemporary discourses on heresy.

This is not to say that all literary art of the thirteenth century adopted the epistemological programs of the church and university; however, a sense of urgency for knowledge was certainly prevalent. During the thirteenth century, the dream vision, a genre appropriately reliant on revelation and on the authority of non-material agents, vied with romance in terms of popularity and became the preeminent vessel for literary-philosophical explication. Kathryn Lynch situates this period as the apogee of the “high medieval dream vision,” which Lynch names, along with romance, the “genre of the age” for a period that coincided with “the natural order of knowing,” defined as a progression from imagination, reason, and memory towards truth.<sup>30</sup> Dream visions arouse the possibility of transcendence, the fantasy of a “secret cnawyng” revealed spontaneously to reader/dreamer as opposed to having been earned through the epistemological disciplining of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. Even though dream visions, like the devotional

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<sup>29</sup> Burns, *Arthurian Fictions*, 26.

<sup>30</sup> See Kathryn Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988). Lynch explains how philosophical paradigms in the Middle Ages shift to accommodate new empirical data (11).

*Cloud*, tend to ultimately privilege knowledge, they operate within a framework of ignorance, pointing to a tension between knowledge and un-knowing that will begin to unravel in the fourteenth century.

In addition to the more self-consciously literary genres of romance and dream vision, the travel narrative also adapted to a thirteenth-century Christian culture of disclosure. By the mid-thirteenth century, historical knowledge about the doings in the East had finally begun to replace the fantasmatic projections of monsters, riches, and distant Christian outposts that had dominated travel literature through the twelfth century. East bound travelers came back to the Latin west with first-hand intelligence about the Mongols who, just a century before, were miscast as a prophesied band of Christian military allies. Travel also affected the relationship between Christians and Muslims. Instead of casting Islam as the producer of a heretical antichrist, authors began to argue instead that *because* Islam and Christianity are so similar in doctrine, the conversion of Muslims to Christianity should be easy. Missionaries also sought out Mongols who, now better understood, were perceived as blank slates theologically. Already in 1245, Innocent IV had sent Franciscan John of Plano Carpini to the East to deliver letters to the Mongol khan, inviting the khan to embrace Christianity. The transition in travel writing from splendor and wonder to mercantile and missionary utility answers the Fourth Lateran Council's call to delineate ideological boundaries and helped set the European imperialist program for the coming centuries.

In each of these cases—devotional treatise, romance, dream vision, travel narrative—writers used narrative to guard the distinctions between authority and

invention, which resulted in a teleological poetics focused on revelation. The equation in which order guarantees knowledge underwrote Lateran IV's scheme of a united Christendom, but this schema left little room for speculation and, more importantly, even less room for faith. The invention upon which so much of the literary narrative depends was replaced rather systematically by typology, metaphor, and metonymy—as much figures of medieval history as they were literary commonplaces. These devices create schemes for knowing that establish both the meaning of the past and an event's bearing on the present and future. The stories that circulated around important historical figures become *illustrations* of knowledge, even if their details had to be invented. The unknown was either integrated into a more knowable framework, or, in the case of prophecy or a truly nebulous historical event, subjected to faith in the teleology of revelation, whereby the event's meaning would be made known—it was only a matter of time.

Here I return to the *Cloud of Unknowing* because of its position in between the discourses of revelation and the counter-discourse of unknowing that I trace in this dissertation. As is now evident, the *Cloud's* system of devotion is rooted in a practice of un-knowing, understood as a faith-driven repression of worldly materiality in order to propel oneself closer towards a spiritual understanding of God's love. As has also been noted, what appears to be the *Cloud's* founding negation actually turns out to be its primary affirmation insofar as the goal of unknowing is to, in fact, arrive at the truest knowledge conceived within a Christian system. This arrival at revelation, coupled with the *Cloud's* stratified program for getting there, indicates how the fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing* resembles the devotional practices outlined in the popular

thirteenth-century manuals. The key difference, of course, is that the vast majority of devotional manuals view the unknown as that which exists outside of the Christian order (or outside of the concerns of the individual's contemplations) whereas, for the *Cloud*, the unknown grounds the very system of knowledge to which all Christians should aspire.

### **Towards a Poetics of Unknowing**

The thirteenth-century concerns over heresy, identity, and discipline point to a larger cultural tension between knowing and the unknown. While the mechanisms of confession, revelation, and resolution that underwrote contemporary ecclesiastical and Scholastic practices impacted discourses both secular and religious, this demand for certainty was not without its complications. The complex transformation of Eucharist from bread to flesh invited much speculation and debate, but was ultimately reduced to a matter of faith over knowledge. Later, the Lollard movement will cite as one its major concerns the actual potential for transformation of substance into Body, forming the central question for the Church to identify and persecute the Lollard heretics. For the Catholic Church, as evidenced by the Fourth Lateran Council and the documented sermons that caution against putting forth *too much* effort in attempting to *understand* the Sacrament, it was better, after all, to not know. Following the so-called Condemnation of 1277, which banned texts of Aristotle among others, a wave of thinkers, including Duns Scotus, Thomas Bradwardine, and William of Ockham begin to reject the logic of Thomism in favor of the revelatory power of the Word. The Nominalism of Ockham, specifically, offered a way out of the Scholastic epistemological demand that order must

be understood as a kind of knowledge in itself—the kind of logic that underwrote the majority of the Church’s plans to eliminate heresy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Turning to the methods of the “speculative visionary works of the early and late fourteenth century,” Nicholas Watson has argued for a turn toward a study of imagination for historians.<sup>31</sup> Like Watson, I borrow also from the vocabulary of mystical theology, but rather than history and the imagination, I turn to literature and the unknown. While nominalist philosophy marked a departure from these demands for revelation that did influence literary discourse, literary responses to the poetics of revelation did not depend on Nominalism to separate themselves from these demands.<sup>32</sup> By focusing on fourteenth-century Middle English texts, my project traces what I see as an important shift away from the teleological clarity of a revelatory poetics. I turn to the medieval literary not just for its use of ambiguity but for the way the fourteenth-century Middle English texts remediate problematic certainties inherited by history and theology by valorizing of what comes to be permanently unknowable. To be clear, this epistemological suspension is neither a technique of enlightenment nor a celebration of impossibility, but rather the condition of knowledge itself. The engagement with the Christian past foundational to the re-writings I treat underscores an abiding tension between what can be known about the past and the faith with which the Christian reader accepts the authoritative interpretation of the historical events that constitute that past.

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<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Watson, “The Phantasmal Past: Time, History, and the Recombinative Imagination,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 32 (2010): 1-37.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Hugo Kepier et al., eds., *Nominalism and Literary Discourse: New Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997).



This dissertation will re-consider four archetypal figures of Christian history whom scholarship has traditionally treated as representing the medieval limits of knowing. I am concerned with how literary narratives can affect historical figures and their archetypal status as illustrations of knowledge *outside* of literary texts. This entrance into the literary, I argue, shifts their relationship to knowledge and belief as traditionally posited. By examining Herod, Prester John, Pearl, and Criseyde as characters I hope to show how they actually avoid answering the questions of knowledge to which they are so routinely subjected. The authors of the texts in which these figures appear as characters (mystery plays, Anglo-Norman romance, the Middle English *Pearl*, and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*) reroute these figures from an otherwise abstract, over-determined path, allowing the characters to exceed the typological significance to which they have been historically pinned. To see a raging, impotent Herod embody contemporary enemies of Christianity, to turn the politically significant Prester John into a romance character, to test the difficulty of belief through a dialogue with a Pearl, and to interrogate the ethical boundaries of rewriting the past through a character who must remain unknowable challenges the traditional meanings ascribed to these figures.

Chapter one focuses on the figure of Herod the Great in early English drama. The Middle English cycle plays, not unlike the devotional manuals so admired in the thirteenth-century, enact a vernacular theological practice that prescribes a balance between faith and knowledge. The plays negotiate a tension between knowing and not-knowing in part by dramatizing the dueling temporalities of biblical typology, through moments in which the audience participates in both a biblical past and English present.

The success of this dramatic maneuver depends, of course, on a pageant's ability to include playgoers in the world it builds, to raise the stakes of their attention. I argue that it is Herod the Great, himself the very embodiment of 'knowing too much' who functions as the gatekeeper between these worlds.

The medieval Herod loomed so large in the Christian imagination that, at least by the late Middle Ages, the three biblical characters named Herod—Herod the Great (Matthew 2), Herod Antipas (Acts up to 4:27), and Herod Agrippa (Acts 12)— were collapsed into one figure, often referred to simply as King Herod. While he remains a peripheral character in continental religious drama, the English mystery cycles amplify his significance to the degree that he becomes the character most anticipated, consistently played, and often studied. Each cycle presents a unique vision of the tyrant, and yet two uniquely English characteristics reoccur, each of which helps frame Herod's ability to collapse the biblical world (and time) into which he was cast into a contemporary, English present. First, Herod demonstrates an anachronistic understanding of Christ's significance that he could not possibly know; Herod becomes *the* foil of Christ (often parroting Christ's rhetoric). Second, his burlesque physicality, manifest in his characteristic raging, refocuses attention from the narrative onto Herod's body, the immediacy of which helps bring the audience *into* the biblical world. While consistently portrayed as *knowing*, Herod tests the will of his audience who are instructed to oppose all that which Herod represents.

Herod's interactions with the audience only reinforce the degree to which he is cast as negative exemplar of one who favors material knowledge over faith. Across they

cycles I examine (Chester, York, Towneley, N-Town, and Coventry) the English dramatists assure Herod's ultimate failures in the face of Christian power positioning him at the head of an impotent genealogy of non-Christian tyrants. Rather than viewing these theatrical performances as departures from a traditionally figural understanding of Herod, I argue that the plays *illustrate* the prophetic symbolism of the narrative of Christian salvation as exegetically understood. Herod points to a double standard— that the dynamics of revelation upon which the Church depends depend on keeping some things unknown. Herod, Christianity's anti-hero, remains a necessary irritant to the system that requires him to threaten, however impotently, the dynamics of eschatology. As I show, Herod's performances turn typology from a diachronic structure of belief into a narrative that empowers the individual to shape their destiny through unknowing.

In chapter two, I turn from biblical history to the foundational narrative of English secular history, the Matter of Troy. Rather than treat how England un-knew its own history by instead forging a genealogical relationship with the classical past, I concentrate on a later invention to the Troy-England tradition, the figure of Criseyde. Although little more than a structural detail to enhance the Troy/Troilus analogy, Criseyde became, in the minds of medieval readers, a historical figure whose actions foretold the untrustworthy dispositions of actual women and who helped render the dynamics of *translatio imperii* more fluid by giving Troilus a reason to fall. Through an analysis of Criseyde's literary appearances, I read the way that romance negotiates its allegiances with an authoritative past that is itself the product of literary invention. Nowhere are the complexities of navigating romance's relationship with time and knowledge more

apparent than in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, where the narrator consistently foregrounds the difficulty in making room for the multiplicity of his own narrative against the presumably monolithic historiography on Troy.

From the opening lines of the poem, the narrator situates himself not as creator of meaning, but as the medium, or "sorwful instrument," through which an already-determined "sorwful tale" can reach an audience of lovers in the present. The narrator reiterates this desire to maintain fidelity to an already-written Trojan past in the opening lines of the subsequent books, although he begins to also emphasize the points at which his sources do not report the details of a specific scene, that they differ, or that he wants to deviate from them. These narratological strategies coalesce in the narrator's conception of Criseyde who, due the immensity of critical attention she has received from readers medieval and post-medieval (and despite being one of few non-historical characters in the poem), becomes the most known and the most unknowable character in the romance, if not all of Chaucer's work. As the daughter of Calchas, a "gret devyn" and the first locus of authority in the text ("lord of greet auctoritee"), Criseyde is from the beginning situated within the dialectics of knowing against which the narrator so conspicuously labors. Throughout the narrative, Criseyde frequently stands in for the narrator's larger concerns about knowing and re-telling, leading to moments in which the narrator confronts, through her, what exceeds his ability to know as a storyteller. The narrator and Criseyde, taken together, reveal how unknowing can serve as a structural necessity when re-telling a narrative so presumably well known.

In chapter three, I turn to a dream vision that fits neither Kathryn Lynch's rubric for the "high medieval dream vision" nor the demands for clarity to which other thirteenth-century literary narratives worked toward. The Middle English elegy *Pearl*, written in the late-fourteenth century, challenges the epistemological demands of its genre by insisting that even within the scene of dream revelation, divine knowledge remains suspended in the impossible-to-reach realm separating material from divine worlds. As a poem, *Pearl* tests the very boundaries the maiden cautions against, raising a paradox: how do you instruct about the immaterial knowledges that escape human cognition from the material world? Yet the poem, as a literary object, brings the dreamer (and reader) into understanding its message precisely by telling them what they cannot understand, building the immaterial into the very metaphor (pearl) of the material condition of knowing. In this chapter, I turn to the rich symbolic history of the pearl, an object that has, in both Christian and non-Christian contexts, signaled the union of divine and material forces. Through an analysis of the *Pearl*-poet's formal engagement with contemporary mathematical discourse about proportionality and divinity, I show how *Pearl*'s pearl becomes a signifier of epistemological suspension that the poet supplements with a precise, but imperfect network of mathematical ratios. If Herod and Prester John, shorn of the limitations of historical personage, are re-imagined as literary figures in order to *become* textual agents of Christian history, the ethereal maiden of *Pearl*, a figure native to the medieval dream-narrative tradition, shows how the putatively literary symbol can intervene in the historical understanding of a subject's relationship to the Word and the aporias of reading practice.

As has been noted by several critics, *Pearl's* insistence on the symbolic richness of its object renders the poem's signifying economy literally into a string of pearls. Yet where critics tend to associate this flattening of the signifier as symptomatic of the difficult work of mourning, I will show that, in its medieval context, the dreamer's desire centers more on an epistemological question (of not-being-able-to-know) than on an actual hope or desire to recover a loss. *Pearl* complicates this traditional Christian symbol by rendering its perfection tangible, but also by tracing its legibility across an impossible geometry, self-contained as it is endlessly expansive. By tracking the different significations of the pearl, the poem's relationship with knowledge, and the function of the maiden, I will show how the pearl comes to signify (in all of its paradox and impossibility) the very condition of knowing.

The final chapter addresses the political stakes of this literary discourse of unknowing through a reading of one of the most lasting legends in European history, the legend of Prester John. Although a twelfth-century invention, the figure of Prester John maintained a mystique, and an unknowability, well through the thirteenth century's investment in debunking Eastern splendor. In fact, many of the tropes of wonder that were suppressed by more naturalistic travel accounts survive through the *Letter of Prester John*. The legend of Prester John and his magnificent kingdom has captivated scholarly and lay audiences from the twelfth-century through the twenty-first partly, as I argue, because Prester John's integration into literary narratives, which helped postpone the death of earthly wonders and a promise of a global Christendom. In this chapter, I contextualize the early development of the legend within a larger narrative of global

Christian expansion. In this wider historical context, Prester John reads as cognate to a longstanding attempt to instill an imperial logic of Christian expansion from the dawn of the Crusades to the imperialism of later centuries.<sup>33</sup>

Just as literature helps invent historical truths, so too can the putative historicity of Prester John ground generic transformations of the legend that help re-contextualize his unknowability by providing him with a reflexively literary identity. A literary Prester John helps sustain the legend in three ways: making Prester John more familiar by continuing to integrate the priest-king into the genealogies of notable medieval literary figures; giving cause for John's migration to lands both real and imagined; and, finally, lending an aesthetic depth to John's elusiveness. Moving forward, the biggest problem underwriting the verisimilitude of the *Letter*—John's unknowability— becomes not a hindrance to the perpetuation of belief, but rather the foundation of a poetics around which the legend will endure.

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The trope of unknowing produces a point at which theological, imaginative, epistemological, and temporal registers converge into a non-classical view of history that renders the unknowable “an irreducible part of knowledge,” rather than as the antechamber to revelation. When translated into literary contexts, these figures overlap at questions of representation, exceeding the logics of the texts that they inhabit, expressed

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<sup>33</sup> I refer not to Benedict Anderson's “transnational Christianity” but to an amoebic, self-splitting, imperial Christian drive, unified only in theory, called into existence by an increasing attempt to unify Latin Europe through the project of Crusading. For Anderson's account, see *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 2006).

through the difficulty their readers have had putting them—and the epistemological conundrums they embody—to rest.

What unites these four figures, other than their significant narrative histories, is the way that their fourteenth-century rewritings maintain a focus on their respective deaths. The cycle plays complicate an already strange medieval tradition of Herod's death (figured as suicide, murder, or genital rot) by asserting that Herod's anti-Christian villainy will perpetuate itself through a genealogy of impotent tyrants that will forever haunt, but never quite threaten the narrative of Christian eschatology. For generations of readers, one of Chaucer's most frustrating narrative ambiguities in *Troilus and Criseyde* arises from the uneven handling of the downfall of its title characters. Chaucer follows Troilus to his death, but suspends the question of Criseyde's punishment (and death), which created a demand for closure that not only inspired Robert Henryson's "uther quaire," *The Testament of Cresseid*, but also prompted early editors to append Henryson's punishment of Criseyde onto early editions of Chaucer's poem. *Pearl's* dreamer's desperate attempt to establish a material connection to his lost daughter testifies to his inability to admit with finality the irrevocability of his loss. And finally, the afterlife of the Prester John legend, which should have ended when his prophesied arrival turned into disastrous military defeat, indicates the degree to which the suspension of its death remained necessary to the vitality of a possibly global Christian future.

In other words, the practice of unknowing enacts a symbolic death by which embodied knowledges become disentangled from the desires that underwrote them. This symbolic death occurs when these figures are removed from the economies through



which their meaning was generated. And yet, rewritten into literary narratives, these figures suffer no real death; in fact, they appear to live on. The suspension that literary unknowing enacts can be understood as an ontological in-betweenness, no longer a site through which knowledge is generated and yet *still here*, haunting the logics that stripped these figures of their singularity in the first place. Like Bataille's realm of *nonsavoir*, the space between two deaths resonates as an existence ostensibly evacuated of desire and, by extension, absent of *telos*. And yet, as I hope to show in this dissertation, the practice of unknowing the Middle Ages shows us the fiction at the heart of unknowing, that a practice absent of desire, if one exists, is already itself a poetics.

## Chapter One

### The Once and Future Herod<sup>1</sup>

The character of Herod the Great creates a strange bifurcation in the narrative of Christianity as understood in the Middle Ages. Although a character of the New Testament, Herod resides at the juncture of Old and New Testament logics: original enemy of the young Christ, but one whose ruling tactics explicitly recall those of Pharaoh. His death in some traditions even coincides the birth of Christ.<sup>2</sup> While Herod the Great received little biblical attention, his exegetical significance was made apparent from even the earliest patristic commentaries.<sup>3</sup> Christian writers in the Middle Ages portrayed Herod the Great as an exemplar of pride whose characteristic rage betrayed a fundamental madness—the result of a blind insistence on material accomplishment.<sup>4</sup> Herod not only provided a bridge between Old and New Testaments, he also figured in the politics of Christian eschatology, and demonstrated the superiority of spiritual over

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter have been published in Christopher Taylor, “The Once and Future Herod: Vernacular Typology and the Unfolding of Middle English Cycle Drama,” *New Medieval Literatures* 15 (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Grant suggests that some medieval traditions claim Herod in the very year of Jesus’ birth. Modern scholars fix the death of Herod the Great died in 4 BCE, the same year that Roman Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, writing in the first century, reports. See *Herod the Great* (New York: American Heritage Press), 16.

<sup>3</sup> The early Latin Church Fathers generally viewed the biblical episode of “Massacre of the Innocents” (Matthew 2. 16-18) as producing the first Christian martyrs. On Herod’s early exegetical significance, see M. J. Mans, “The Early Latin Church Fathers on Herod and the Infanticide,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 53 (1997): 92-102.

<sup>4</sup> Penelope Doob focuses on the exemplarity of Herod’s madness in “The Mad Sinner: Herod and the Pagan Kings,” in *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974), 195-233.

temporal manifestations of power.<sup>5</sup> The figure of Herod loomed so large in the Christian imagination that late-medieval narratives often collapsed the three biblical characters named Herod—Herod the Great (Matthew 2), Herod Antipas (Acts up to 4. 27), and Herod Agrippa (Acts 12)—into a singular King Herod.<sup>6</sup>

Authoritative information on the life of Herod was limited to a handful of Bible verses (with some development by Josephus<sup>7</sup>). Consequently, most early portraits of Herod focus on his exemplarity rather than address his psychological makeup or the historicity of his actions. From late-antiquity through the twelfth century Herod tended to represent the moral insanity produced by a hubristic appetite for earthly power.<sup>8</sup> By the late Middle Ages, vernacular writers began to more inventively extrapolate on the scant

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<sup>5</sup> In twelfth-century Latin liturgical plays Herod became a political tool used to comment on and intervene in the contemporary tensions between Pope and Emperor. See John Marlin, “The Investiture Contest and the Rise of Herod Plays in the Twelfth Century,” *Early Drama, Art, and Music Review* 23 (2000): 1-18.

<sup>6</sup> S. S. Hussey discusses the popular conflation among the multiple Herods in “How Many Herods in the Middle English Drama?” *Neophilologus* 48 (1964): 252-59.

<sup>7</sup> Josephus’ *Bellum judaicum* and *Antiquitates judaicae*, both of which predate the Gospel of Matthew, were considered reliable sources on Herod’s life throughout the Middle Ages. Most medieval traditions regarding Herod’s death rely at least indirectly on Josephus. I refer to book and chapter numbers from: *The Jewish War*, ed. and trans. by H. St. John Thackeray, rev. ed. (London: William Heinemann, 1927; repr. 1997) and *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. by Ralph Marcus (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> Herod received little attention in Latin patristic works prior to the fourth century but became a popular homiletic point of reference about madness in Prudentius, Augustine, Chrysostom, Isidore, and Bede. See Mans, “The Early Latin Church Fathers,” 92-102. Twelfth-century Latin liturgical drama helped establish the iconic “raging” Herod. The “Feast of Fools” celebrations, popular throughout Europe, helped inspire the comic aspects that become standard in the English characterization of Herod. For more on Herod’s development, see Kathleen Ashley, “The Politics of Playing Herod in Beaune,” *European Medieval Drama* 9 (2005): 153-65, 155 and Martin Stevens, “Herod as Carnival King in the Medieval Biblical Drama,” *Mediaevalia* 18 (1994): 43-66.

source material.<sup>9</sup> Among these more popular renderings, Herod receives the most expanded treatment in the pageants of the English mystery cycles, where a comparatively unique balance of bumbling physicality and tyrannical madness marks him as medieval cycle drama's most anticipated, consistently played, and often studied character.<sup>10</sup>

Within the extant English cycles (Chester, York, Towneley, Coventry, N-Town)<sup>11</sup> Herod retains his traditional significance as originary Christian enemy, but also consistently engages the present and becomes a negative exemplar of a corrupt English noble. In this first chapter, I examine the ways that dramatists of these five cycles negotiate between an inherited exegetical tradition on the one hand, and contemporary

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<sup>9</sup> Herod is featured in several non-biblical medieval texts, including Peter Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* (c. 1175), Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* (c. 1260), the *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300), Higden's *Polychronicon* (c. 1342), the *Historia Trium Regum* (c. 1370), John Mirk's *Festial* (late-14th), the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* (late-14<sup>th</sup>/early-15<sup>th</sup>), Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* (1430s), "The Ballad of St. Stephen and Herod" (15<sup>th</sup>) and the *Life of Saint Anne* (mid-late 15<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>10</sup> The continental plays tend to characterize Herod as chivalric whereas the English plays feature a "raging" Herod. On the continental Herod, see Miriam Anne Skey, "Herod the Great in Medieval European Drama," *Comparative Drama* 13 (1979): 330-364.

<sup>11</sup> I understand the challenges of writing about the plays as if they were knowable entities whose late-medieval performances we can easily trace. For instance, although we know that the York cycle was active throughout the fifteenth century, scholars cannot be sure about the degree to which revisions were made year to year (the sole manuscript dates between 1463 and 1477). Likewise, the Chester cycle was performed at least from 1422 but the oldest manuscript dates from 1521. The date of the single extant manuscript of the Towneley plays ranges from 1422 to 1530. The Coventry plays, first performed in 1392, survive in a copy of a manuscript that has since been lost. Perhaps most frustratingly, the N-Town play, whose manuscript dates from the mid-fifteenth century, was recorded by a scribe who arranged the plays chronologically, leaving the original arrangement to the critic's imagination. While I will close read passages from the texts that we have received, my understanding of Herod relies far more on an intertextual analysis of the cycles (as received) and the sources they betray.

political-religious concern on the other, in order to portray a realistically dangerous, and yet perpetually inept Herod. And while each cycle presents a unique vision of the tyrant, my goal is to stress two characteristics that these depictions of Herod share: his epistemological arrogance and his burlesque physicality. In each of the cycles, Herod lusts after knowledge and proves to know too much, although the cycles also indicate that his is the wrong kind of knowledge. Herod's physicality—crystallized in the famous Coventry stage direction, "Here Erode ragis in the pagond and in the street also"—underscores his ability to break through the play's temporal constraints of a biblical past in order to remind playgoers and readers of his continued relevance in the present.<sup>12</sup>

Given how much is still not known about the cycles, studies of early drama tend to isolate a specific cycle or pageants.<sup>13</sup> My attempt to seek continuity across the English cycles guides me to choose Herod as my text. I focus on how the plays utilize Herod as epistemological bridge to interrogate the relationship between typology and the limits of

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<sup>12</sup> This stage direction from the Coventry Shearmen and Taylor's pageant (l. 729 s.d.) has been analyzed for its implications in how the plays were staged and what technically constituted the acting area. See, for example, Meg Twycross, "The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, eds. Richard Beadle and Alan Fletcher, 26-74 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), esp. 46-8.

<sup>13</sup> Along with the difficulties in dating and preparing texts contemporaneous with their performances, scholars continue to debate how and where the plays were staged, how they relate to the Church, and how they were paid for. As John McGavin quips, "it has taken a lot of dedicated scholarly work and much medieval-style enactment over the last fifty years to make the civic religious drama of the Middle Ages look as complicated as it does today." See "Performing Communities: Civic Religious Drama," in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. Elaine Treharne and Greg Walker, 200-18 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 210. See also the exemplary work of Alexandra F. Johnston and David Mills. For the most exhaustive documentation of the logistical specificities required to stage the plays, refer to the Records of Early English Drama (REED), much of which has been digitized and is available online.

knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Biddick contends, “the layout of the [late twelfth-century] glossed Bible rationalizes textual organization and thus renders typology, once an argument about reference [to another event], now also a representation.”<sup>15</sup> Following the work of Biddick, I submit that the typology’s representational potential reaches its apex with the English dramatic Herod.

As I illustrate, Herod’s performances across cycles become a shorthand for an entire legion of fruitless attempts to alter the unfolding of Christian eschatology. An obsession with Herod’s impotence, shared by medieval writers and modern scholars, all but guarantees one of two possibilities: either he will fail to transmit the real threat he poses or the potential usurpers he engenders will inherit his characteristic impotence in the face of real power. Herod’s villainy become metonymic in the sense that he comes to represent a larger Christian truth—the futility of resisting Christian eschatology. Likewise, their vernacular insistence on revision renders the traditionally neat parallelism of typology something sloppy and indefinite.

Thus, in addition to telling the story of the English dramatic Herod, this chapter urges an expanded understanding of medieval typological thought, and through it, a reconsideration of the literary stakes of English cycle drama. I structure my discussion

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<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the role of typology in the English mystery plays, see Walter Myers, “Typology and the Audience of the English Cycle Plays,” in *Typology and English Medieval Literature*, ed. H.T. Keenan, 261-74 (New York: AMS Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> See Kathleen Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary* (Philadelphia: U Penn Press, 2003), 14. Biddick’s theological use typology refers to the supercessionary understanding of Old Testament events as belonging (*via* allegory) to the epistemological paradigm of the New Testament. Biddick deploys the term typology to denote a supersessionary narrative in which “Christians subsumed the Hebrew bible into an ‘Old Testament’ and conceive of this Old Testament as a text anterior to their New Testament.”

according to three facets of Herod's representation: his unique typological function within the pageants, his ability to exist simultaneously within the past and present of the pageants, and, lastly, the textual obsession with his potency (or lack thereof). In each section, I emphasize the plays' frequent recourse to associate the process of knowing with arrogance and not-knowing with faith. These practices underscore Herod's representative role as Christian villain whose epistemological hubris augurs a similar fate for anyone pretending to knowledge outside of the realm of Christian faith. As I hope to show, these pageants, far from eliciting a naive confabulation of historical and cultural identity, provide a representation of how the tensions between inherited exegetical practices and their use value for understanding the narrative of Christian history depend necessarily on unknowing.

### **“For Mahound's Blood!” : From Saraceny to Susa**

An exploration of Herod's typological significance is itself fraught with tension. The separation of the biblical hermeneutic understanding of typology from its linguistic homonym is a good place to begin, instructive as it is. In the tradition of Christian exegesis, typology refers to a relationship between biblical happenings in which an Old Testament historical event prefigures another later historical event (usually New Testament), and whereby the former event's full significance is grasped only in the fulfillment of that second event.<sup>16</sup> Although the Pauline definition of typology, employed

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<sup>16</sup> More specifically, typology (*figura*) refers to the capacity for a figure or event to possess meaning not only to his/her time or place but also future events, however

by Biddick among others, restricts the two-part understanding of history to the discrete temporal categories of Old and New Testament, I would like to adopt a broader understanding, as traced by philologist Friedrich Ohly.<sup>17</sup> Ohly investigates the ways in which medieval deployments of typology accommodate events outside of the Old/New Testament binary, and refer more broadly to a harmony that embraces the simultaneity of pasts and present, one in which “the difference between the two is eliminated by the unity of their both being directed towards Christ” (p. 33). Like Auerbach, Ohly understands the second event always as a kind of fulfillment, but Ohly also suggests that this fulfillment might alter the stakes of that original event, while still preserving the memory impressed by the that first event. I will try to be clear in my usage.

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unrelated they may seem. This first, prefigural sense is always rooted in a concrete historical context in order to announce something that is also both historical and real. Erich Auerbach traces the etymology of the term *figura* from “plastic form” to “simulacrum” and “form” (Lucretius), to form of rhetorical discourse (Cicero and Quintilian), to *imago* of the future (Tertullian), to tool for the ethical interpretation of history (Origen), to prefiguration (Augustine), to, most generally, deep or allegorical meaning. See “Figura” (1938), republished in *Scenes From the Drama of European Literature*, ed. P. Valesio and trans. Ralph Manheim, 11-74 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> See Ohly, “Typology as a Form of Historical Thought,” in *Sensus Spiritualis: Studies in Medieval Significance and the Philology of Culture*, trans. by Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Ohly argues that typology, as a “hermeneutic principle for understanding the past and the present—with the unified synoptic view that points to both of them—makes a great claim upon the new era by demanding that it not only keep pace with the whole of the old era, including antiquity, as it does with renaissances, but that it change it, by intensification into a new era, and also raise it, at the height of a return, in such a way as to make the old era remain unforgotten even in the moment that it is being surpassed” (65).



Discussions of typology in the cycle plays have thus far omitted Herod from their analyses.<sup>18</sup> Although Herod may appear to have a typological forebear in Pharaoh, he appears to lack the clear New Testament fulfillment possessed by more traditional pairings.<sup>19</sup> The lack of criticism on Herod's typological status in the plays is not surprising given the disagreements over the relative stability of an English dramatic Herod across the cycle plays. Although Herod's characteristic rage, foregrounded in all English stagings, suggests a common point of origin for the playwrights' dramatic creations, Carolyn Coulson-Grigsby laments the critical "tendency towards character homogenization" that downplays the local conditions and dramatic choices that help shape unique versions of the tyrant in each cycle.<sup>20</sup> Surely the differences in characterization must be accounted for; yet among those scholars who prefer to emphasize the variety of Herods there still exists a propensity to classify Herod's character within a discrete set of pre-determined characterological types. This critical move runs the risk of constructing dichotomies—between comic and tragic, local tyrant

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<sup>18</sup> These readings tend to emphasize the more conventional anti-type events of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, Noah's flood, Moses' burning bush, and Abel's sacrificial lamb. See Rosemary Woolf, "The Effect of Typology on the English Medieval Plays of Abraham and Isaac," *Speculum* 32 (1957): 805-25; Arnold Williams, "Typology and the Cycle Plays: Some Criteria," *Speculum* 43 (1968): 677-84; Pamela Sheingorn, "Typology and the Teaching of Medieval Drama," in *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama*, ed. R.K. Emmerson, 90-100 (New York: MLA Press, 1990); and the aforementioned Walter Myers, "Typology and the Audience of the English Cycle Plays."

<sup>19</sup> In these cases, Abraham and Abel's sacrifices suggests God/Christ's sacrifice, the ark resting on the mountain of Ararat prefigures Christ's resurrection, and Moses' burning bush is fulfilled by Mary's virginity.

<sup>20</sup> Coulson-Grigsby targets especially the work of Miriam Dahl Burno and Penelope Doob in her criticism. See Coulson-Grigsby, "Enacting Herod the Great's Diseased Spirit," *Early Drama, Art, and Music Review* 23 (2001): 110-126, 110-11.

and exotic potentate, ignorant pagan and self-aware pseudo-Christian— that the plays themselves resist. Indeed, the most salient commonality among these portrayals of Herod is the way that he provokes terror and ridicule from the audience in nearly equal parts.

Another major line of Herod scholarship on the English dramatic Herod relies on an excavation of possible source texts, attempting to resurrect a piecemeal Herod who is little more than the sum of his source parts. The endgame of this exercise leaves little to savor: either the development of Herod as a stock dramatic character merely clarifies allusions found in the more canonical writings of Chaucer and Shakespeare<sup>21</sup> or the strange paradoxes inherent to his character are naturalized, and thus satisfactory reconciled, by the accidents of local tradition. To assume a linear or evolutionary view of the dramatic Herod does a disservice to the complexity of the plays themselves and the interesting connections between them. Rather than naturalizing his playing as indebted solely to local concerns, insisting on a singularly understood villain, or restricting analysis to distinct character types, I propose an understanding of Herod as an inherently flexible character, one who allowed playwright and audience to explore tensions between Herod as human character and Herod as exegetical *figura*.

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Parker, “The Reputation of Herod”; Pamela King, “He pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye?” *LSIE*, 32 (2001): 211-227; Anne Marie D’Arcy, “‘Cursed folk of Herodes al new’: Supercessionist Typology and Chaucer’s Prioress,” in *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. E. Treharne, 117-36 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002); Peter Beidler “Dramatic Intertextuality in the *Miller’s Tale*: Chaucer’s Use of Characters from Medieval Drama as Foils for John, Alisoun, Nicholas, and Absolon,” *Chaucer Yearbook* 3 (1996): 1-19; Jonathan Gil Harris, “‘Look not big, nor stamp, nor stare’: Acting up in *The Taming of the Shrew* and Coventry Herod Plays,” *Comparative Drama* 34 (2001): 365-98; Chris Hassel Jr., “‘No Boasting like a fool?’ Macbeth and Herod,” *Studies in Philology* 98 (2001): 205-24.

The title of S.S. Hussey's oft-cited article captures an important confusion regarding the study of the preeminent biblical villain in the cycle plays: "How many Herods in the Middle English Drama?" In the Bible, there is a distinction made between Herod the Great (Matthew 2), his grandson, Herod Agrippa (Acts 12), and Agrippa's uncle, Herod Antipas (Matthew 14:1-11; Luke 23:6-12).<sup>22</sup> Each of the five major cycles (Chester, York, Towneley, Coventry, N-Town) contain two to three plays that prominently feature Herod: the coming of the Magi to Herod, the Killing of the Innocents, and Christ's trial before Herod.<sup>23</sup> As Hussey discusses, whilst the Herod of the Magi and the Killing of the Innocents episodes (Matthew 2:1-9 and 16-18, respectively) differed from the Herod (Antipas) who actually met Christ (Acts 4:27), the differences in characterization within the plays were often elided in order to portray a single, raging

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<sup>22</sup> Herod the Great, king of Judea, is the figure associated with the Massacre of the Innocents. His son, Herod Antipas, was the Tetrarch of Galilee (and so called in Acts) and is the Herod responsible for calling for John the Baptist's head and was also thought to receive Christ during his trial. Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, was responsible for beheading James and sending Peter to prison.

<sup>23</sup> For the Chester, York, Towneley, and N-Town pageants, I will refer to individual plays by number, denoting the order that they appear in that cycle (as printed in the authoritative EETS editions). See *The Chester Mystery Cycle, Vol. 1: Text*, ed. R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974); *The York Plays, Vol. 1: Text*, ed. Richard Beadle (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009); *The Towneley Plays, Vol. 1: Text*, ed. Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994); *The N-Town Play, Vol. 1: Text*, ed. Stephen Spector (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991). For Coventry, I will refer to the name of the play itself, as printed by the Medieval Institute, the most recent edition. See *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. Pamela K. King and Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000). In terms of the plays of the cycles, a character called Herod appears in Chester (8, 10, 16), York (16, 19, 31), Towneley (14, 16), N-Town (18, 20, 29), and Coventry ('Nativity Play,' 'The Death of Herod,' 'Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors').

villain.<sup>24</sup> The inclusion of an on-stage death of Herod in the N-Town and Chester cycles also brings the third Herod (Agrippa) into the fold, whose gruesome death was subject to many a biblical commentary.<sup>25</sup> Although the playwright in the Chester ‘Slaughter of the Innocents’ (10) describes Herod’s “legges rotten and... armes” (l. 421), recalling directly the tradition of a rotting Herod Agrippa (who was eventually eaten by worms), the death described in the play is actually that of Herod the Great. The three Herods are not conflated at all times within the cycles, but the dramatic advantages of collapsing the negative characteristics of three figures into one are worth exploring.

Other than his characteristic rage and sometimes-humorous inability to realize his ambitions, Herod’s non-Christian religious allegiances are the most recognizable component of his character. The most common of Herod’s proclaimed affinities, found in all cycles, is with the figure “Mahound” or “Mahowne.” Whether by oath (“Be Mahound”), as genealogical relative (“cosyn Mahound”), or as guarantor of his title (“by grace of Mahowne”), the playwrights in each cycle forge a relationship between Herod and one of the most recognizable enemies of Christendom, mythical or actual.<sup>26</sup> Though little more than a caricature of the historical Muhammad, Mahound—from the Old

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<sup>24</sup> Staines explains that the apparent confusion on behalf of the playwrights was due to a realistic lack of specificity in the Bible, which opened up his character to individual interpretations (“To Out-Herod Herod,” 209).

<sup>25</sup> See Acts 12:20-25. The account of Herod Agrippa’s death in Acts as being eaten alive by worms is consonant with that of the historian Josephus as well, albeit much more sympathetically in the latter. As might be expected, the significance of this cause of death was heavily remarked upon in exegetical study.

<sup>26</sup> The above lines come from N-Town no. 18 (l. 92), Towneley no. 16 (l. 78), and Towneley no. 16 (l. 15), respectively.

French “Mahon”—had long proved a useful placeholder for writers of medieval romance, amalgamating the spiritual heritages of villainous characters across time and space into one convenient, pseudo-pagan genealogy.<sup>27</sup>

As the plays establish a single genealogy for the titans of non-Christian villainy, the pageants themselves maintain a sense of Herod as fundamentally out of place. The Towneley “*Magnus Herodes*” (no. 16) begins with a speech by Herod’s messenger (Nuncius) who proclaims Herod’s sovereign and fearsome qualities in a speech that lasts some 115 lines. After demanding silence from the audience Nuncius employs the inexpressability topos to approximate Herod’s unknowable significance:

His renowne  
Can no tong tell,  
From heuen vnto hell;  
Of hym can none spell  
Bot his cosyn Mahowne.  
(ll. 74-78)

Nuncius maintains the ineffable breadth of Herod’s geographic jurisdiction and simultaneously inserts him into an imaginative and putatively non-historical genealogy of romance xenophobia. Although Mahound traditionally functioned to mark non-European geographies as homogeneous and inherently threatening spaces that demanded redemption under the aegis of history, the cycle plays collapse that spatio-temporal alterity onto the English present. The lateral relationship between Herod and Mahound

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<sup>27</sup> The figure of Mahoun derives from French romance, where he often comprises one part of a trio of pagan gods that also includes Termagant and Apollo. For more on the use of Mahoun in the English cycle plays, see Michael Paull, “The Figure of Mahomet in the Towneley Cycle,” *Comparative Drama* 6 (1972): 187-204. For more on understanding Islam in western medieval Europe, see the work of John Tolan, especially *Saracens: Islam in the European Imagination* (New York: Columbia Press, 2002).

written into the Towneley and N-Town cycles suggests that the two figures are peers; their genealogical bond cements Christian alterity as born of a single and knowable strain, rather than the random and therefore chaotic accidents of human will.

Herod's villainy knows no geographic border; nor does it recognize temporal boundary. In addition to Mahound, Herod aligns himself with the Roman gods, traditional pagan gods, Jews, Satan/Lucifer, and Antichrist. Each cycle relies on multiple associations to secure an understanding of Herod as not only non-Christian, but persuasively *anti-Christian*— even if these affiliations produce contradiction. In the York “Trial Before Herod” (no. 31), Herod prays to “ser Satan oure sire,/ And Lucifer moste luffely of lyre” (ll. 51-52), whereas at the end of the Chester “Massacre” (no. 10) a dying Herod speaks of Satan as “my foe/ [coming] to fetch me to hell” (ll. 428-29). In the Magi pageant of the York Cycle (no. 16), Herod calls on “Jubiter and Jouis, Martis and Mercurij” (l. 2), and also proclaims Mahound as his true God (l. 157) while nonetheless professing himself the legitimate “juge of all Jury [Jewry]” (ll. 182-83).<sup>28</sup>

V.A. Kolve views the practice of characterizing Herod in such a thoroughly anti-Christian manner as “undoubtedly the result of nothing more than a wish to write vivid, colloquial dialogue,” and, to be sure, Herod was hardly the first figure to boast a partly-invented spiritual legacy. Yet Herod's religious attachments also appear to have the effect of strategically maximizing his distance from the Christian faith at all times. Coupled

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<sup>28</sup> As John Tolan has noted, the line between Saracen and pagan remain blurred well into the late Middle Ages, and the former was commonly considered to practice polytheism. See “Saracens as Pagans” in *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 105-34.

with the consistent characterization of Herod's "renowne" as unknowable, these allegiances suggests a figure who absorbs an entire history of anti-Christian deviance.<sup>29</sup>

Herod's relationship with Christ reinforces the notion of his metonymic status. In the York "Trial Before Herod" (no. 31), Herod compares himself favorably to Christ as a ruler, concluding that "He [Christ] knowes noyot the course of a kyng" (l. 192). Yet, as the audience is well aware, Christ *does* know: the dramatic irony effected by Christ's clueless enemy, who insistently poses as *knowing*, marks Herod as representative of all infelicitous knowledges. The negative consequences of Herod's actions stand in stark contrast with the superiority he attempts to exhibit when speaking to the audience—they cannot even fathom how much he knows.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Herod's arrogance not only exemplifies the pitfalls of a life without Christ, but also calls attention to the more opaque dangers of unwarranted epistemological certainty.

This arrogance, insofar as it demonstrates that Herod understands what he is up against, becomes one of the more fascinating aspects of Herod's character. In the N-Town Magi pageant (no. 18) Herod predictably reports his relation to Mahound, but couches his boasts in familiar, but chronologically inaccessible Gospel rhetoric: "I dynge with my dowtynes the devyl down to helle, / For both of hevyn and of herth I am kyng,

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<sup>29</sup> Kolve, *The Play of Corpus Christi*, 104.

<sup>30</sup> Herod's self-assurance in the plays complicates Jody Enders' argument about pagan figures and the epistemology of torture in the plays. While Enders' torturers know not the "Christian truth that is expounded through the death of their victims," Herod betrays an understanding of Christian exegetics in several Magi plays. For Enders' influential treatise on the intersections of drama, torture, and Christian epistemology see "The Dramatic Violence of Invention," in *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999), 25-62, esp. 44-46.

sertayn!” (ll. 7-8). Perhaps because it gives Christ a legitimate antagonist, the practice of depicting Herod with a premature awareness of Christian history becomes common across cycles. In lines 82-94 of the same Magi pageant Herod reveals prescient knowledge of Jesus’ birth and then announces his plan to kill the young children of Bethlehem *even though* this knowledge should not be made available to him until the Slaughter episode that occurs two pageants later (no. 20). While Stephen Spector, the editor of the EETS N-Town play, calls this an error, given the forethought Herod possesses in other plays, the purpose of a Herod who foresees an ascendant Christianity is worth reconsidering.

A similarly anticipatory logic pervades the Chester Magi pageant (no. 8). Here Herod once again parrots Christ’s rhetoric, referring to himself as “kinge of kinges” (l. 168) and promises to “drive the devils all bydeene” (l. 174).<sup>31</sup> This pageant also divulges Herod’s familiarity with Scripture, despite the fact that he “is noe Jewe borne nor of that progenye” (l. 278). Although he has his doctors gather prophecy, Herod possesses knowledge of the Old Testament: he denounces “that olde Villard” Jacob (l. 284), the “sleepie sluggard” Daniel (l. 305), and the “Shepard with his Sling” David (l. 354). As David Mills points out, Herod necessarily comprehends the prophecies of Christ’s coming “and so possesses the necessary Scriptural information, but he refuses to believe it.”<sup>32</sup> To

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<sup>31</sup> These two lines have biblical analogues in Revelation 17. 14, Revelation 19. 16, and Luke 12. 15, respectively.

<sup>32</sup> David Mills, “Some Possible Implications of Herod’s Speech: Chester Plays VIII 153-204,” *Neophilologische Mitteilungen: Bulletin de la Société néophilologique de Helsinki* 74 (1973): 131-43, 140.



reveal such intimate knowledge of the very system he is set to destroy casts Herod as all the more villainous for knowing the stakes of his actions.

When Herod's death is performed at the conclusion of the same N-Town play (20), Herod's multiplicity again takes center stage. The playing of this extended scene in which Death, as messenger of God, delivers a lengthy, moralizing monologue (ll. 246-284) would not appear to invite any confusion regarding the shared identity of this Herod and the Herod (Antipas) of "The Trial of Christ Before Pilate and Herod" (29), and yet the playwright still manages to produce this very conflation. In line 6 of the Slaughter of the Innocents (20), long before his death, Herod the Great, traditionally located in Jerusalem, appears instead in Galilee—the realm of his son Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee. Whilst this error appears to conflate the two Herods mistakenly, it can also be read as an element of foreshadowing to the trial of Christ before Pilate and Herod (29) and as a way to connect the two Herods despite the on-stage death of the former. If the two Herods are indeed connected, this dramatic choice creates another moment in which Herod's foreknowledge of Jesus' messianic significance is revealed. Perhaps this is due to Herod's own messianic pretensions in the play.

As Herod prefigures attempts to usurp the eschatological power of Christianity, he remains uncannily aware of both the gravity and impossibility of such a task. Herod, after all, appears anxious in the Chester Magi play (8) about the alliance of the Jewish faith and the rule of a Jewish kingdom:

I read you take those wordes agayne  
For fear of velanye.  
There is none soe great that me dare gayne,

To take my realm and to attayne  
My power.

(ll. 162-166)

His anxiety over a theology he intuitively understands helps explain why Herod's death in the Slaughter can be attributed, according to the Demon character, to his heresy or false beliefs, rather than the traditional reason, his madness: "I am comment to fetch this lord you froe, in woe ever to dwell... and all false beleevers I burne and lowe" (ll. 436-437; 439). Indeed, the ability for a playwright to connect Herod to the entire history of Christian alterity without obscuring the coherence of the narrative appears to have a stronger effect than making good dialogue.

Insofar as Herod's failure is predetermined, the cycles situate non-Christian knowledge as necessarily incomplete. Herod's Christian audience knows better than to claim to *understand* these performances of eschatology when the payoff for belief can be spelled out so clearly. David Staines and Roscoe Parker have documented how the plays parallel contemporary sermons, but these dramatic decisions also validate the program of willed unknowing (as both a forgetting and a refusal of mastery) advocated by contemporary contemplative manuals such as the *Cloud of Unknowing*.<sup>33</sup> Just as the *Cloud* urges against active thought in favor of epistemological submission, cautioning that Christians too often fundamentally misperceive the very notion of knowledge, so too do the Herod pageants reaffirm an almost Boethian understanding of agency in which epistemological submission becomes a tool for the management of belief. In

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, the sermon "De innocentibus" in John Mirk's *Festial*, vol. 1, ed. T. Erbe (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1905), 35-8.

performance, on the razor's edge of typology, biblical past and political present coalesce, revealing themselves to be equally rehearsed.

**“Here Erode ragis in the pagond and in the street also”**

Herod's perceived grasp on the futures of such disjointed temporalities draws on a paradox inherent to the structure of the plays. As Kolve emphasizes, the Corpus Christi dramas perform the sequence of world history in seven ages, and, in doing so, explore how the current, sixth age maps onto that arrangement.<sup>34</sup> Yet this is not to say that these plays should be understood as discrete episodes one need merely *read*. Writing about the York Cycle, Beadle observes “topographical evidence indicates that the stations were occasionally within sight and usually within earshot of the one preceding and the one after,” from which he asserts the presence of “a sense of simultaneity in the presentation.”<sup>35</sup> This simultaneity allows the audience themselves to bound themselves within in an embodied Christian eschatology. The effect, John Marlin explains, helped emphasize “the interconnectedness of historical events with both the historical present and the absolute present inhabited by the divine.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, despite their

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<sup>34</sup> Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, 101-123.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Beadle, “The Chester Cycle,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. by R. Beadle and A. Fletcher, 99-124 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 114.

<sup>36</sup> Marlin, “The Investiture Contest,” 2. While Miri Rubin insists that the performances varied from year-to-year and place-to-place in both the quality of their execution and in the number of mistakes, the visual arrangement itself likely produced a captivating unfolding of Christian history regardless of the nuances of individual performances. For a better picture of the logistical concerns of Corpus Christi drama, see Rubin's “The Living

frequently populist aims, the mystery cycles do in fact provide a highly complex and exegetically sound representation of a typologically inflected Christian eschatology.

While Kolve argues that the present served “mainly as a time for amendment and preparation,” Herod’s performances establish how the past can inform, and possibly redeem, the present.<sup>37</sup> Exploring the political valence of the cycle plays, scholars tend to stress the ways in which characters of individual plays or cycles criticize contemporary English personages or social groups. Rosemary Woolf, building on the work of G.R. Owst, reads the delight the soldiers share in the murders of children in the Chester and Towneley Innocents plays as a satirical stab at the contemporary military life, lampooning, for example, the notion of the “carpet-knight.”<sup>38</sup> Because the flexibility afforded to the English Herod inspired such a diverse set of historical and imaginative resonances, the plays were able to concatenate a view of supreme anti-Christian villainy outside of time with one attuned to contemporary political matters. Herod becomes an especially good medium through which to satirize specific rulers or to stereotype the English nobility more generally. Most famously, the Wakefield Master’s characterization of Herod in the Towneley “*Magnus Herodes*” (no. 16) is said to recall the Duke of

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Feast: Sermons, Fraternities, Processions, and Drama,” in *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, 213-78 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, 102.

<sup>38</sup> Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 205-7 and G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961).

Suffolk.<sup>39</sup> Still, lest an overtly English locale undermine the verisimilitude of the play's action, the Towneley Herod guarantees his sovereignty in places both exotic and local (ll. 46-49).

Herod's form of speech— not only *what* he says but also *how* he delivers it— also illuminates the importance of the present in the plays. In the Chester Magi pageant (no. 8), the English-speaking Magi switch to French only when introduced to Herod (ll. 153-160). Considering that the Magi are the putative foreigners in this arrangement, the direction of this code-switching is somewhat surprising. Herod replies once in French before transitioning to English, punctuating a bizarre moment that secures both a courtly and an English resonance for the pageant. Herod's code-switching pervades other cycles: he is trilingual in both York's "Christ Before Herod" (no. 31) and Towneley's "*Oblacia Magorum*" (no. 14).<sup>40</sup> In the York pageant, Herod's use of Latin (ll. 243, 245, and 260-263) and broken French (l. 239) might recall the (sometimes clumsy) trilingualism of England's own rulers. Herod's bungled execution of common Latin and French phrases in the Towneley Magi pageant— i.e. "ditizance doutance" [*dit sans doutance*: said without a doubt] (l. 247)— takes a more overt stab at the faux-sophistication of the English nobility. The last line of the pageant in which Herod claims to have no more "Fraunch" confirms the dilettantism of his courtly pretensions. For the audience, this

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<sup>39</sup> J. Whetley wrote in the *Paston Letters*: "Ther was never no man that playd Herrod in Corpus Crysty play better and more agreeable to hys pageaunt than he dud." Stevens and Cawley note the reference in Vol. 2 of the EETS *Towneley Plays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 521. For the letter in its original context see *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. R. Beadle and C. Richmond (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), ii. 426.

<sup>40</sup> Herod is also the only trilingual character in each of these cycles.

“French” moment secures an eminently English resonance for the play. Stripped of epistemological hubris, Herod might be closer to the audience than initially imagined.

Herod’s clumsy ruling practices combined with an occasional reminder of the English local he inhabits creates the impression that that the playwrights used Herod in part to parody local tyrants and other contemporary rulers through a comic violence that rendered acute political threats farcical and predetermined to fail. Herod’s performances have been regarded as satirizing not only individuals, but institutional practices as well. James Simpson finds that the cycle plays often re-contextualize Scriptural events in order to “act out dramas of interrogation and punishment that address critical prohibitions in fifteenth-century English society.”<sup>41</sup> Simpson discerns a spirit of “inclusive theology” in the York and Towneley Cycles that he carefully avoids equating with Lollard sympathy.<sup>42</sup> Simpson reads Herod’s demand for silence in the York “Christ Before Herod” (no. 31; ll. 1-7) as at once a comic public service announcement and a poignant reminder of contemporary strictures on religious expression, including an allusion to English Archbishop Thomas Arundel’s 1409 ban on vernacular translations of Scripture.

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<sup>41</sup> See Simpson, “The Dramatic,” in *The Oxford English Literary History, Vol. 2, 1350-1547: Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 502-57 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), esp. 506.

<sup>42</sup> At least one Lollard tract, “a treatise of miraculis pleying,” railed against clerical participation in mystery plays. For the text, see Anne Hudson, ed. *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 97-104. The debate over the effect of Lollard theology on the mystery plays remains ongoing among specialists. Although Wycliffe’s doctrines secured a popular audience around the same time that the cycles became established civic routines, the majority of the cycle plays (for which we have evidence) were played in the north of England, where Lollardy was slower to take hold. Certainly, Lollard sympathizers would likely find the sacramentalism at the heart of the cycle plays problematic, and it is unclear just how much the playwrights themselves took Lollard views into account.

Simpson's citation of the famous 1409 ban provokes a larger question about the place of these cycle plays in the context of fifteenth-century vernacular theology in England. The publication of *After Arundel* (2011) has thoroughly dismantled the once-dominant notion that Arundel's program of orthodoxy in England held in check the exploration and advancement of fifteenth-century theological thought, and that, subsequently, religious writings written in the vernacular slowed.<sup>43</sup> The theological complexity of cycle drama, while not quite speculative, provides excellent support of *After Arundel's* counter-narrative, including, for example, the deployment of a kind of vernacular typology in the case of Herod. However, *After Arundel*, in its expansive thirty essays and six-hundred-plus pages, contains not a single essay on the version of vernacular theology to which the largest number of people in the English fifteenth century were likely exposed. Whether understood as the locus for the production of vernacular theology or as a site through which scholars might trace its changes, the cycle plays help complicate the picture of the very nature of orthodox thought. After all, what was so harrowing about Herod was his insistence that he knows better, an epistemological arrogance associated with (depending on one's perspective) vehement reformers, such as Wycliffites, but also orthodox lackeys.

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<sup>43</sup> Instead, *After Arundel* re-orientes the narrative of vernacular religious history in England away from Thomas Arundel, who becomes, for the volume, an emblem of the historiographic desire to view fifteenth-century vernacular Christian history as haunted by a fear of dissent post-Arundel and/or as marking a point after which English theological writings remained remarkably and consistently orthodox. See *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. by V. Gillespie and K. Ghosh (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

Thus, although Simpson's analysis astutely singles out a telling political resonance embedded in Herod's bombast, it is equally important to recognize that Herod is also used in the plays unironically as a negative exemplar of the *dangers* of thinking for oneself. Herod's sense of omnipotence and his own "inclusive theology" are, after all, the very bad habits that lead to his death in the N-Town and Chester cycles. This is the same Herod who, in this York play, swears by Mahounde (l. 9), prays to Satan (ll. 51-54), and compares his might favorably to that of Jesus (l. 13). Simpson's sensitivity to the satirical overtones of York may indeed suggest that the pageants contain instances of "sharply critical reflection on royal and episcopal mechanisms in the prosecution and management of 'sedition' and 'heresy'" (506). Nonetheless, in the larger picture, Herod also reinforces some of those very same mechanisms insofar as he serves as negative exemplar of the epistemological pride that stems from thinking for oneself.

As shown above, an effective typological casting of Herod does not rely purely on its Scriptural fidelity to achieve its full didactic value; however, despite the plays' occasional criticism of political-religious institutions the playing of Herod was, in fact, aligned with reading and interpretive practices sanctioned by the Church's most influential theologians. For whilst Augustine sets in motion an exegesis that requires pre-Christian history to exist *alternately* for its own present and future (reading the Old Testament as vacillation between a literal *lex* or *promissio* foregrounding presence and the symbolic *figura* that requires interpretation and a nod to futurity), it is through exegetes such as Hugh of St. Victor, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, and Peter Comestor



that the pre-Christian (usually Old Testament) begins to signify a *simultaneous* dialogue with past and future.

This reading was made possible by the *triplex intelligentia* mode of exegesis, popularized by Hugh of St. Victor in the twelfth century but actually only a slight emendation of the traditional fourfold method used rather loosely throughout the Middle Ages. Though this method included three modes of reading— history, allegory, and tropology—Hugh privileged the unglossed historical-literal meaning as the most important.<sup>44</sup> During the twelfth century, the Victorines, among others, began to champion a return to the historical sense, affirming the importance of literal exposition or what Aquinas later called “the whole meaning” of the inspired writer. Allegory, which for Hugh meant “when through that which is said to have been done, something else is done” applies “whether in the past or in the present or in the future” and thus emphasizes the importance of belief by combining faith with the historically rooted concept of typology.<sup>45</sup> The movement from the historical to the allegorical sense signaled the movement from the letter to the spirit and also that between the purpose of the writer and sacred significance that God has bestowed upon that writing. The last, or tropological sense, remains in the realm of the spiritual and imparts the morally edifying lesson that the Scriptural event confers upon the reader. Beginning perhaps with Augustine’s *De*

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<sup>44</sup> For more on the evolution of the medieval study of Scripture, especially as regards the increased attention to the literal sense, see Beryl Smalley’s influential *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973).

<sup>45</sup> Cited in James Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969), 27. The futural aspect of the allegorical sense is sometimes recognized as its own layer, often called the anagogical sense, which concerns mainly the eschatological meaning of Scripture.

*doctrina Christiana* and virtually unchallenged until the Reformation, Christian thinkers in the Middle Ages had understood that all Christian knowledge came from Scripture and that one could arrive at a proper understanding of Scripture only through a reading practice sensitive to the authoritative hermeneutic modes established in the glosses.<sup>46</sup> Anything less would amount to heresy.

Each cycle separates the individual plays such that one play represents one important biblical event, usually to be staged and played by one guild. Once staged, the plays become discrete performances spatially and narratologically independent of the other action. This separation distinguishes the *res gestae*, or the historical level, from the higher, spiritual levels. The fact that some towns opted out of the cycle format in favor of playing one or two of the most popular biblical events suggests that these plays could be enjoyed at this most literal level. However, the organization of the cycles into individual plays that nonetheless link spatio-temporally with the others (while still maintaining their independence) reflects the mingling of the historical and spiritual senses championed by medieval Europe's most authoritative exegetes. Although some of the characters and settings are modernized to establish familiarity with their English audience, these choices neither enforce a specific interpretation nor do they affect the plot.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For more on the hermeneutic tradition of Catholicism in the Middle Ages, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 2 vols., trans. Mark Sebanc and E.M. Macierowski. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998-2000).

<sup>47</sup> Rather, as Rubin notes, the entire production of the cycles—from number of plays to the characterization of its figures—was tailored to a town's needs. The addition, deletion, or merging of crafts were also conveyed in the changing structure of the plays (*The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, 276). This malleability did not compromise the historical-literal veracity of these events. Although de Lubac notes that the primary goal

As discussed in the previous section, the playwrights satisfy the allegorical level of reading with a Herod that signals the futility of any future resistance to the predetermined Christian eschatological narrative. Herod exists in a pre-Christian time but nonetheless encapsulates the false beliefs of successive generations of Christian doctrinal disobedience. Herod's downfall (including, at times, quite melodramatic death scenes devoid of biblical precedent), signals not a defeat of just one man, but of an entire group of non-Christians, including a religious group—Muslims—who did not yet exist. These hyper-referential cycle plays embrace the historical present as they also postpone the significance of their historical concerns, which should compel us to approach them not *only* as individual plays representing linear events, but as hypotactic narratives whose meaning cannot be gleaned without reference to the whole cycle.

The tropological level, while also evident in each of the cycles, varies somewhat in its degree of transparency. Since these plays certainly served at least partly as moral edification for the townspeople, some plays built this didacticism into the play. For example, the N-Town 'Death of Herod' (20) features a character, Mors, who explicitly conveys the moral significance of Herod's death at the end of the play:

Off kynge herowde all men beware  
That hath rejoyced in pompe and pryde  
Ffor all his boste of blysse ful bare  
He lyth now ded here on his syde.  
(ll. 246-249)

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of the historical sense is to "deliver us facts," he also notes that in its medieval sense, this desired historical sense was also attuned to the *character* of those facts, the very thing that these plays aim to present to the audience (*Medieval Exegesis*, 44-5).

Herod's death in N-Town does not occur until two plays after the Massacre, but the message is clear: one can be sure of very little else than the passing of all things temporal. Although traditional readings of Herod privilege his madness over his arrogance, by the time of the English mystery plays, Herod's madness had nearly become a comic cliché, and therefore less didactically effective than his haughty sense of omnipotence.<sup>48</sup>

Of the cycles that avoid overt moralization, the Towneley Herod plays, written and arranged by the so-called Wakefield Master, rely most heavily on the audience to deduce Herod's tropological import. Here, as with N-Town, the play uses Herod's arrogance to convey the fleetingness of temporal matters and insists on how little the Christian playgoer really knows. In the main Herod play (16), the Wakefield Master accentuates the incongruity between Herod's perception of himself and the audience's knowledge of the actual unfolding of events. The fact that Herod takes thirteen lines to painstakingly describe the breadth of his regal jurisdiction (ll. 66-78) and yet also recalls a local tyrant suggests that his word, and subsequently, his authority, are not to be believed. The most telling narrative detail regarding the message of the Herod plays comes from the Magi play (14). In soliciting a search for prophecy regarding the coming of Christ, Herod authorizes all sources except the Scriptural accounts on which both the cycle and its audience rely as *the* authoritative locus of all pertinent knowledge. Although the Herod story ends with its characters under the assumption that Herod's soldiers did

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<sup>48</sup> Herod's madness, although somewhat less threatening in the English cycles, was a major point of emphasis in the traditional exegetical readings of the Massacre of the Innocents episodes. Augustine saw in Herod's rage a lesson cautioning believers from letting fear drive them to madness. Eusebius, Bede, and, later, Peter Comestor, agree that Herod's violent behavior led directly to his disease and gruesome death.

actually murder the young Christ, the audience knows better. The Towneley Herod, the audience begins to surmise, must insist on unknowing Christian history in order to survive. Though Herod does not die in this cycle, his final words, “I can nomore Fraunch” (l. 513) suggest that, exasperated, he is losing the only grip he ever really had—the ability to bluster on about nothing in particular.

Insofar as Herod’s interactions with Scripture reinforce orthodox theological practice and also recall ignorant clerics preaching what they do not themselves understand, Herod himself provides a lesson about the dangers of reading incorrectly. As mentioned earlier, Chester’s “The Three Kings Come to Herod” (no. 8) depicts Herod’s familiarity with prophecy (ll. 233-36) and also specific prophets (ll. 261-68). Yet when his doctor confirms the legitimacy of these prophecies, Herod refuses to acquiesce to the demands of Scripture and instead commissions the Massacre (ll. 327-338). Herod spends the remainder of the pageant looking for his “grand parent” in old texts in an attempt to establish authoritatively his lineage and right to the throne. Like its York counterpart, the Towneley “Offering of the Magi” (no. 14) presents a scene in which the kings inform Herod of Scriptural passages that herald the coming of Christ. Herod ignores altogether the authority of biblical prophecy—he claims that he received the news, rather, from a little bird (l. 287-88). In further rebellion against the merits of scriptural hermeneutics, Herod gives his counselors the following task:

Syrs, I pray you inquire  
In all wrytyng,  
In Vyrgyll, in Homere,  
And all other thing  
Bot legend.

Sekys poecé-tayllys,  
Lefe pystyls and grales;  
Mes, matins noght avalys—  
All these I defende.  
(ll. 291-99)

Rebelling against the merits of scriptural hermeneutics, Herod authorizes his counselors to search for prophecy in any but biblical texts. His counselors object, but Herod insists on reading incorrectly. While Woolf is undoubtedly correct in noting that no audience member would confuse him or herself for another Herod (240), Herod does help affirm the audience's agency in assessing the status of their own salvation while also reinforcing ecclesiastical mechanisms that authorize faith as the ultimate instrument of knowledge.

Herod's failure to read correctly across cycles affirms one version of the epistemological economy of Christianity, in which a subject must sacrifice knowledge in favor of a faith in the unknown, the realm from which that believer can be redeemed. Not simply an anti-Christ, Herod inverts the Christian economy of knowledge. As a figure through which Christianity's own complicated poetics of knowing can be negatively understood, Herod shows us what *not* to do. Stubbornly assured of his omnipotence, he turns the practice of faith on its head; confident that the logic of the temporal-political extends to the eschatological-divine, he mistakes knowledge to be purely material and therefore fundamentally available. Herod's rejection of Christian forms of knowing—rooted in faith in and sacrifice to the unknowable—become the self-abdicating act through which he is undone in the plays. The plays reify the importance of faith through a faithless Herod who understands, but rejects, the eschatology that he is powerless to alter.

Blind to the fact that his reliance on non-Christian knowledges limits his ruling potential to the material world, he eliminates any possibility of defeating Christ.

If Herod's reading practices reaffirm the importance of faith, the moments where he engages the audience allow the playgoer to insert themselves into the narrative of Christian history. In the York Magi pageant (no. 16), for instance, Herod opens the pageant challenging the audience to become his subjects:

Lordis and ladis, loo, luffely me lithes,  
For I am fairer of face and fresher on folde—  
Be soth yf I saie sall—seuene and sexti sithis  
Pan gloriu8 gulle8, at gayer is an golde in price.  
How thynke ye þer tales that I talde?  
I am worthy, witty, and wyse.  
(ll. 16-22)

Herod's direct threats to the playgoers expel him from the play's historical context and insert the audience into the cycle's eschatological context. Even the prosody of these lines isolate this moment as one that stands out from the rest of the play: Beadle and King note that the opening scene is cast largely in the alliterative long line while the remainder of the pageant is composed in standard, twelve-line stanzas (65). Herod's fate has been decided, and yet this shift of poetic and dramatic registers indicates the audience's important role in the drama of Christian salvation.

In this light, the famous stage direction in the Coventry "Pageant of Shearman and Taylors," which describes Herod physically leaving the stage ("Here Erode ragis in the pagond and in the street also") might be revisited, not as proof of the popularity and expectation garnered by Herod as a character, but as an indication of the degree to which the playwrights use Herod to write the audience into the eschatological arc of the plays.

Herod's descent into the crowd arouses the possibility that the audience has become the spectacle, written into the narrative. Regardless of the verisimilitude of Herod's rage, this moment allows the audience to experience Christian history as if immanent to the scriptural event. An embodied Herod calls attention to the agency that the audiences possess regarding their own salvific narrative, in which the unknown—once understood as a potential disruption to accepted eschatology—is now reined in by faith, subjected to a logic of impotent repetition, and repurposed as the lubricant needed to inch forward the progression of Christian history.

Herod's spiritual simultaneity, played in all of the cycles, when coupled with his potential toward Christian enlightenment, confirms that his most tragic trait is that he lacks true faith. A repentant Herod can foresee Christian history is not at all incongruous with a Herod who shares a familial relation to Muhammad, a Herod who speaks in broken French, or a Herod who sees himself as a messianic figure. That a Christian audience foresees his failures immediately implicates them within an empowering exegetical system in which the pre-Christian past is governed by *cognitio*, as Hugh of St. Victor advocates, rather than a unitary attendance to the literal and present moment. Herod became an instructive figure<sup>49</sup>, and as such, cannot be bound by temporal or spatial restraints—the more of anti-Christian characteristics that he could absorb, the more poignant his failures. In the final section, I will discuss how Herod's typological and

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<sup>49</sup> The cycles (and individual plays) differ in the degree to which they cast Herod for overtly didactic purposes. The most deliberate of these instructive stagings occurs in the N-Town 'Slaughter of the Innocents,' when, after the allegorical figure of Death kills Herod, he ends the play with a soliloquy to the audience reminding them of the inevitability of their own deaths.



eschatological significance is often located, both critically and textually, in questions regarding Herod's generative potency.

### **An Impotent Genealogy? : The Once and Future Herod**

Despite the attention paid to Herod's characteristic raging, scholars have yet to achieve a consensus on what his anger signifies. Although the critical strains differ in the traditions they target, they do share one overriding concern: that Herod must fail spectacularly. What remains puzzling is the consistency with which assessments of his character, regardless of the critical point being made, describe Herod's rage specifically as "impotent."<sup>50</sup> *Is Herod's rage impotent? If so, why must it be understood as such? At the most literal level, Herod the Great cannot be considered sexually impotent, given the genealogy he extends in the Bible and in Josephus. Likewise, taking potency to indicate the ability to exert power or influence, the damage Herod does to the bloodlines in Bethlehem cannot be overlooked. What other ways, then, might readers and critics understand these charges? Perhaps more importantly, what does the preoccupation with impotence suggest about the way the medieval dramatic Herod has been read? Just as*

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<sup>50</sup> See, for a sample, Doob's "impotent fury" (*Nebuchadnezzar's Children*, 128); Campbell's "impotent old tyrant" ("Liturgy and Drama," 291); Herod's "ultimate impotence in the face of supernal power" in Marlin's reading of the Latin Herod plays ("The Investiture Contest," 14); the "impotent ranting" and "ironic impotence" in Chris Hassel Jr., "No Boasting Like a Fool?," 211-12; Herod's "political impotence" in Christina Fitzgerald's *The Drama of Masculinity and Medieval English Guild Culture* (New York, Palgrave, 2007), 121; Herod's "impotent" authority in John McGavin, "Performing Communities: Civic Religious Drama" in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. by Elaine Treharne and Greg Walker (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 210. Morse, taking a different tack, asserts that "If Herod came to symbolize dramatic crudity, he was no less potent for that" ("Truth and Convention," 66).

theologians through the thirteenth century reduced Herod to his madness, so can twenty-first-century readers perceive that the English plays and scholarship on them share a desire to condense the entire network of Herod's ambitions within one final assertion of his ultimate generative failure.

For one, such insistence on the teleological failure of the troubling desires Herod express un-knows the complex theological landscape made possible by a virile Herod. A mass slaughter becomes impotent fury, unchecked madness becomes impotent rage, and ruthless ambition becomes political impotence. By discussing the generative, political, and eschatological resonances of Herod's impotence, critics reanimate a medieval desire to understand Herod as a fearsome ruler ultimately doomed by a powerlessness to hold his kingdom, an inability to grasp Christianity, and an incapacity to produce an heir through which his ambitions might be realized.

In both the Bible and Josephus, Herod the Great produces a son and heir in Herod Antipas. In the biblical account (Matthew 14. 1-11; Luke 23. 6-12), Antipas even explicitly maintains his father's struggle against Christ and Christianity. Given the inauspicious beginnings of this family tree, the question of *why* medieval scholars and playwrights commonly collapsed the three biblical Herods into one figure merits revisiting. As long as Herod remains impotent theologians can domesticate non-orthodox practices as toothless, which maintains an uninterrupted narrative of Christian salvation. Similarly, the charge of impotence in criticism provides scholars a lowest common denominator from which to establish *a* medieval Herod.

Although several Latin Herod dramas featured a son of Herod, the same cannot be said for the English mystery cycles.<sup>51</sup> Only the York Cycle features a speaking role for a character verified internally as Herod's son. In the York Magi pageant (no. 16), Herod's son, called only Filius, aids his father in the decision to commission the Slaughter. The pageant makes no effort to explain why Filius is there or how he got there, from which readers might insinuate that his appearance was hardly remarkable. However, given Herod's proposal to eliminate an entire generation of males from Bethlehem, the contrast between his eager son, likely thinking of his own political fortunes, and an absent infant Christ, one of few males to escape, helps enhance the dramatic tension of the episode, at the very least. While the York pageant plays the filial parallel more explicitly than other versions do, York's Herod also proves the most toothless of the English versions. Whereas the other Herods fight off the prophecies received by the Magi and Herod's own advisors, the Herod of the York Magi pageant uniquely responds to the prophesied loss of his kingship with exasperation rather than anger: "Allas, than am I lorne,/ This wax ay werre and werre" (ll. 235-6). The York Massacre presents a comparatively desperate Herod, resigned to the loss of his kingdom. It is no small irony that the only play to extend Herod's family tree is also the play in which Herod's reign is the most evidently doomed.

A son of Herod does materialize in another episode of the Massacre, but as a non-speaking infant, and thus proves little more than a prop. In the Chester "Slaughter of the

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<sup>51</sup> Several of the Latin Herod plays, including Fleury and Montpellier, include Herod's son, called either Archilaus or Filius, as a significant character in the drama.

Innocents” (no. 10), after Herod approves the Massacre, one of his knights kills an infant whom any attentive audience member would recognize as too richly adorned to be the son of simple townsfolk. Shortly after the boy’s caretaker reveals the identity of the slain infant to the knight, Herod enters the scene to confirm what the audience already knows:

Hee was right sycker in silke araye,  
In gould and pyrie that was so gaye.  
They might well knowe by this daye  
He was a kinges sonne.

(ll. 409-412)

The Chester pageant appears to include baby Herod in order to highlight the contrast stressed in the York cycle with additional poignancy. In a dramatic turn of events, Herod’s knights spare the infant Christ and instead kill the king’s only heir, ending Herod’s reign doubly. Reconciled to his now-impotent future, Herod’s arms and legs begin to rot and he dies twenty lines later.

Although the death of Herod’s infant son was hardly biblical, its apocryphal popularity must have been activated by *some* desire: to position Herod’s knowledge and faithlessness as herald of the premature end to his family line makes for divine retribution indeed. The Chester playwright emphasizes the tidiness of Herod’s downfall by playing the death of father and son so closely to one another—some sixty lines apart—testifying to the swift and sure justice meted out to those who misperceive the grip of faith over blood in matters of regal legitimacy.<sup>52</sup> If questions of Herod’s potency were related to genealogical concerns, the Chester cycle visualizes just such an effectively castrated

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<sup>52</sup> As Marlin observes, Latin playwrights had historically used Herod to advocate in favor of ecclesiastical authority in contemporary conflicts over investiture and the bounds of secular power. See “The Investiture Contest and the Rise of Herod Plays.”

Herod. Curbing Herod's ability to felicitously reproduce, this scene counteracts some of the more dangerous contingencies that threaten to spawn from the shadows of the cycle's epistemological program of faith as reason.

The issue of Herod's potency, consonant with his ability to extend a genealogy of anti-Christian villainy, relates also to the varied history of his death. The most popular depiction of his demise, in which a corrupted Herod decomposes while still alive, comes from Josephus, and can also be found in the *Historia Scholastica*, *Legend Aurea*, and the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*. In these texts, as in the Chester Massacre, Herod rots to death, although in Josephus this occurs only after he murders two sons and suffers the accidental death of a third.<sup>53</sup> However, in a stark reversal of Josephus, the *Cursor Mundi*, inspired perhaps by Herman of Valenciennes' versified French Bible, arranges Herod's death at the hands of his own son: aided by members of Herod's court, Herod's son Archelaus drowns the king in a tub of boiling oil.<sup>54</sup> Traditions of a suicidal Herod proliferate also in a strand of apocrypha that includes Eusebius and Remigius of Auxerre, narratives featured in late-medieval Middle English texts including the *Life of St. Anne*<sup>55</sup> and a

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<sup>53</sup> In Josephus' account, Herod suspects disloyalty among his sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, and travels with them to Rome for a hearing in front of the Emperor, who finds the sons innocent. However, Herod's lingering, paranoid doubts begin to drive him mad. Herod holds his own trial where he finds his sons guilty and has them strangled (*Antiquities* 16. 394; *Jewish War* 1. 27). The aforementioned texts abbreviate these events and attempt to reconcile them with timeline of related events in the Bible.

<sup>54</sup> For a detailed account of this strange version of Herod's death, see Miriam Skey, "The Death of Herod in the *Cursor Mundi*," *Medium Ævum*, 57 (1988), 74-80.

<sup>55</sup> Josephus reports that in his later life, wracked with disease, Herod attempts suicide with a fruit knife, but is "saved" by his cousin, Achiabus. When in the third century Eusebius translates Josephus, he renders the suicide successful—a proper ending for a

sermon of John Mirk.<sup>56</sup> Such interest in Herod's downfall should not be surprising given his popularity as an exemplary figure throughout the Middle Ages. However, the fact that each of these traditions emphasizes Herod's failure to ensure the transmission of his genes, lineage, and narrative for another generation testifies to a longstanding association between the fate of a failed Herod and that of a triumphant Christendom.

In no tradition then is Herod sexually impotent, and yet the narrative accounts of his death indicate a cursed lineage: either he kills his sons (directly or indirectly) and then kills himself, or, murdered by his son, suffers an unnatural death related to his sinful life. Often his death relates directly to regal failures, through which some level of political impotence is implied. While the expansive tradition of Herod's death signals an undeniable interest in his genealogy, it cannot be safely concluded that castrating him helped playwrights neutralize the villainy these plays cite as descending from him. Though Herod's Filius in the York cycle proves harmless, some of the cycles feature a more powerful Herod Agrippa, the son of Herod's son Aristobulus, and grandson of Herod the Great. As remarked earlier, Herod the Great's death in the some cycles recalls the biblical description of the death of Agrippa, described in Acts 12. 20-25. In Acts, Agrippa is literally eaten alive by worms, which Josephus understood as gangrene of Herod's genitals (*Jewish War*, 1. 656). The N-Town death of Herod invokes this image of a divinely castrated king, punished for his behavior such that "wormys mete is his body" (l. 256). So even Herod's relatives—along with the N-Town Herod the Great— suffer a

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wicked king. See Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, trans. G.A. Williamson (New York: New York UP), 1966.

<sup>56</sup> Mirk, *Festial*, 194.

death symbolically located at the site of male potency. Even if his progeny are able to escape Herod's madness, they partake of the same cursed fate that plagued their forbear.

While questions about the genealogy Herod engenders often center on reproduction, the fact that the most significant challenge to his rule comes from a child of unknown paternity calls attention to the matter of regal legitimacy. Throughout his textual tradition, Herod displays his customary arrogance and jealousy, but also exudes a paranoia through which he betrays his own insecurities about the authority of his kingship. Historically, this makes sense given that, as an Idumean and pro-Roman "client king," Herod lacked a secure hold on the throne of Judea. According to biographer Michael Grant, Herod existed "in a no-man's land of cultural territory."<sup>57</sup> Not only was he widely considered a usurper of the throne, the Chester playwright insists that he "is noe Jewe borne nor of that progenye" (l. 278).<sup>58</sup> Herod certainly paid little respect to those who came before him, in any case. According to Josephus, he rifled the tombs of David and Solomon, his forebears and models for kingship, in order to secure the necessary funds to continue his own building projects (*Antiquities*, 16. 7). Eusebius modifies Josephus, claiming Herod burned the Jewish genealogies so that no one would know that he was only nominally Jewish (1. 7).<sup>59</sup> Thus, by the fourth century, Christian

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<sup>57</sup> Grant, *Herod the Great*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Josephus writes that the historical Herod was of Arab blood and, although nominally a Jew, was accepted neither by the Jewish community over which he ruled nor the Roman government under which he served.

<sup>59</sup> Moreover, as Coletti notes, Eusebius stresses Herod's lowly origins, claiming that Herod's father was the son of a "certain temple slave" who, because *his* father was to

scholars recognized King Herod as an illegitimate stranger of ignoble blood who, as the first foreign king of Judea, paid no respect to past or future kings, and whose jealousy and paranoia inspired the murders of his own family members—the only allies he might have had. The *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, expanding this medieval legend, accents Herod's paranoia with an underlying madness: here Herod burned the genealogies so that no would know that there ever existed any other king (ll. 3597-3612).

Tautological as it might be, Herod's refusal to surrender to the faith-based genealogy of Christian rule legitimates his fear, expressed in Chester (no. 10), that Christ will "bereave [his] heritage" (l. 27). Such insistent preventative thinking, combined with an oversimplification of the circumstances he attempts to escape, accomplishes a view of Herod who deceives himself, with a history-denying *mauvaise foi*, into thinking that he *knows* better. Though he possesses the Scriptural information, Herod also lacks faith, which leaves him shrouded in ignorance. Of course, these narratives also stress that Herod's impatient disposition negates any notion of permanence to which these legitimating tactics might aspire.

Still, the critical habit of referring to Herod's impotence, while pervasive and ultimately accurate, often belies the complex network of resonances circulating beneath this apparently benign appellation. Impotence, after all, also implies the punctuation of a pre-established narrative teleology. Failing to interrogate the meaning of that impotence generates the false impression that the plays unfold in a straightforward matter, and that

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poor to pay for his return, was brought up as an Idumaen after robbers carried him there from Ascalon (l. 6).



Herod's role is to somehow suspend, perhaps through his comic but ultimately useless ranting, the unfolding of God's plan. But as Kolve reminds us, the interplay of temporalities and geographies are hallmark qualities of the cycle plays: "causality and chronological sequence," he insists, are the tools of secular thought (118). Reductive as this distinction may be, how then can critics reconcile the implied teleology of Herod's impotence with the layered temporality of the cycles plays?

Zrinka Stahuljak's focus on the narrative strategy of hypotaxis as a viable metaphor to help read disruptions in traditionally filial metaphors of *translatio* provides a model for integrating these competing understandings of performed eschatology.<sup>60</sup> The plays' epistemological reliance on typology and their attention to moments that challenge the continuity of a Christian genealogy (Noah's wife's reluctance, Joseph's incredulity, Herod's impotence) complement the more acute narratological deviance (incest, rape, patricide) Stahuljak writes about. Stahuljak locates the linguistic at the center of understanding literary representations of genealogy, which provides a model in which the moments that threaten the seamless transmission of meaning across become fundamental to our understandings of *translatio*. Once imposed onto narrative, the seemingly disjointed moments of *translatio imperii*, and those of Christian eschatology, can be

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<sup>60</sup> See Stahuljak, *Bloodless Genealogies of the French Middle Ages: Translatio, Kinship, and Metaphor* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 2005). Stahuljak "propose[s] a new way of reading genealogy in its representations that addresses the question of how incest and other perversions of genealogy are integrated into a narrative as totalizing as genealogy" (10). Stahuljak views hypotaxis, a left-modifying style in which a narrative is not grammatically complete until the final phrase or clause signals, as narrative model that allows for the inscription of seemingly inassimilable wrinkles that would otherwise threaten the stable transmission of genealogy.

encoded hypotactically and read as linguistic accretions whose meaning is only gradually unveiled through metonym and metaphor.

To position a virile Herod as genealogical forbear of spiritual infelicity and epistemological hubris threaten Christian eschatology, which guarantees victory only to true believers. However, the pageants illustrate the inevitable sterility of ambitions not rooted in faith. Although his raging and arrogance command the most immediate attention, the manifest valences of Herod's "impotence" across the cycles—sexual, spiritual, political, and linguistic—ultimately establish his eschatological appeal. In each cycle, a comparison between Herod and Christ pits a history of patricide, suicide, and ruin against the fluid, if not mystical continuity of Judeo-Christian eschatology. Herod's impotence becomes the genealogical metaphor through which audience and critic understand resistance to a Christian unfolding of history as futile.

### **Reading with Herod**

Hussey suggests that the collapse of the three biblical Herods into one stage character was founded on a tension between good history and good drama (258). I would like to both challenge this suggestion and take it seriously. To take Hussey's "history" in a more medieval sense, as a kind of verisimilitude, the plays take medieval history to its limits—that is, to the *present*. In so doing, the plays construct a typological Herod that must reflect faithfully the accumulation of his historical significances as well as account

for the demands of the local (considered both spatially and temporally).<sup>61</sup> After all, despite medieval attempts to render the biblical Herod into a singular figure, he persistently resists a concrete Christian typological attribution as one instantiation of a larger eschatological pattern. While Staines maintains that “more than any other single character in medieval drama, Herod becomes a variety of persons under one name,” it is the sense with which Herod straddles traditions that lends his dramatic performances such weight (207). The English Herod did not only straddle the line between the drama and history (Hussey) or comic and tragic (Staines), but also between Old and New Testament, Roman time and Christian time, paganism and Judaism, and a biblical past and a political present.

I have traced the performances of Herod in Middle English cycle drama to show how he becomes the metonymic villain who marks the shift between an older, “impotent” historical genealogy and the ascendancy Christianity. There is clearly something anxiety-provoking about a virile Herod, and yet the real conflict regarding his potency centers on a struggle to untangle Herod’s ability to fruitfully multiply from his doomed prowess as ruler. The cycle plays partially undercut the threat he poses by simplifying his genealogy into a Herod-function, collapsing Christian alterity into one genealogical line of Christian enemies, and then, through his actions, eliminating the possibility of regeneration altogether. It is the very abundance of conflicting spiritual, political, and narrative associations that finally defines Herod in the cycles. Wedged between earthly and

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<sup>61</sup> Isidore of Seville’s definition of history might here provide a useful touchstone: “*Historia est narratio rei gestae, per quam ea, quae in praeterito fata sunt, dinoseunter*” (*Etymologiae* i.xli.i).

spiritual rule as well as historical-Roman time Christian-messianic time, Herod represents the oppression Christianity had overcome. Embodied on stage, he also evokes contemporary enemies of the Christian present, known and unknown, and suggests, through his pre-determined failures, the impotence of a non-Christian future.

Herod models the necessity of attending to local *and* universal concerns when reading the plays. To understand Herod's antagonistic relationship with Christ as only dangerous ignores the audience's position as participants in an already understood salvific history. To view Herod's absurd pomposity as a mere comic distraction from a cycle's more sober concerns misreads the figural significance of Herod's bombastic effect. As a medium through which playwrights develop a kind of vernacular typology, these representations of Herod testify to the vitality of cycle drama for the project of more clearly understanding the landscape of fifteenth-century vernacular theology in England.

Given Herod's outsider status, his role in the cycles complicates both medieval and contemporary assessments of the Christian typological supersession traditionally affixed to the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. While in some moments, the cycle plays hint at a typological foreshadowing, the moment of Christ's birth represents a movement from the aberrant, worldly, and non-transcendent genealogy of Herod to the elegantly mystical dynamics of Christ's genealogy, traced from generations of Jewish prophecy. Herod's function as epistemological hinge shows that the cycles align Jewish with Christian time and pit that unbroken genealogy against one representative of temporal force and non-belief. In the context of Lollard threats and

other concerns about orthodoxy, the plays favor a unitary understanding of the narrative of Christianity rather than one punctuated by reform and renewal.

And, indeed, although typological readings of the cycle plays have been criticized as intellectualizations of a decidedly popular narrative form, Ohly reminds us that typology was so pervasive in medieval thought that its deployment in cycle drama would hardly be considered elite or esoteric. The cycle plays complicate supercessionary typology by foregrounding the degree to which Herod *knows* the severity of his actions. The composite picture of Herod's character across pageants belongs to a larger practice of forecasting the Christian enemy as eternal, knowing, and thus outside traditional notions of history. The alignment of deviance and knowledge reaffirms faith and humility as the governing ethics of Christian epistemology.

In a Christian cosmology, there are far worse things than the unknown.

## Chapter Two

### (Un)knowing the (Un)knowable Criseyde

Early in the first book of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, an anxious Criseyde visits the Trojan prince Hector. Her father Calkas, armed with critical foreknowledge predicting the inevitable defeat of the Trojans, has defected to the Greek camp. Criseyde, meanwhile, attempts to persuade Hector that her father's treason bodes no treachery of her own. Hector, "pitous of nature," absolves Criseyde from responsibility for her father's deeds and assures her safety. Before they part ways, Hector offers a curious presentiment of his own:

"And al th'onour that men may don yow have  
As ferforth as youre fader dwelled here,  
Ye shul have, and youre body shal men save,  
As fer as I may ought enquire or here."

(I. 120-23)

While Chaucer is translating this scene from Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, the specific reference to Criseyde's body during the poem's opening is unique to the *Troilus*. At first glance, the allusion appears only to guarantee Criseyde's safety; yet, given *Troilus and Criseyde*'s hyper-sensitivity to its own narrative history, any addition Chaucer makes to the textual tradition merits critical attention. On further inspection, a careful reader may detect a resonance that exceeds the stated desire to comfort Criseyde. Indeed, Chaucer's syntax seems to provide at least two different readings of line 122. The first, more obvious, reading implies that the Trojan men will protect Criseyde, metonymically reduced to her body, from the Greeks. The repetition of "have" and use of "enquire"

makes for a somewhat cumbrous reading, suggesting as it does that all of the honor she once had she will have again (to the degree that he can influence it). This understanding remains logically consistent with Hector's larger point of assuring Criseyde's safety. However, this reading is inconsistent with Hector's later willingness to relinquish Criseyde's body when he agrees to trade her for Antenor in Book IV. Criseyde's body, once traded, does help save this particular man (Antenor), but it would be difficult to make the case that this has anything to do with Criseyde's honor. Given the lack of such an explicit promise in *Il Filostrato*,<sup>1</sup> coupled with Hector's reputation for chivalrous behavior throughout the Middle Ages,<sup>2</sup> it seems unlikely that Chaucer would expand this moment only to critique Hector's reputation (since, after all, most readers would have already known the outcome of this particular narrative). To be sure, war sometimes calls for reversals of intent; yet, at the very least, such a reading would imply that Chaucer created a dramatic irony absent in his sources and unremarked in criticism. Already the careful reader can discern something of the difficult commitments one must make when rendering poetic a putatively historical narrative, especially when that consequences of the narrative bear on nothing less than the origin story for England.

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<sup>1</sup> In Boccaccio, Hector promises that she will not be harmed and assures her of the Trojans' honor and favor, but makes no explicit promise to "save her body" (I. 13-14).

<sup>2</sup> Hector was considered one of the "Nine Worthies," a pantheon of men honored for their legendary chivalry. He was one of three pagans (along with Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great); he also shared this honor with three Jews (David, Joshua, and Judas Maccabeus) and three Christians (Arthur, Charlemagne, and Godfrey of Bouillon, the first ruler of the Kingdom of Jerusalem). The "Nine Worthies" or *Les Neuf Preux*, were popularized through Jacques de Longuyon's *Voeux du Paon*, a fourteenth-century *chanson de geste*.

A second, less conventional way to interpret this line would be to understand Criseyde's body as itself the agent of salvation, a textual and material self-sacrifice. Perhaps it is Criseyde's *body* that saves men, inasmuch as Hector can "enquere or here." In this reading, Chaucer explodes the temporal frame of a singular moment in order to comment on one of the principal extra-textual consequences of this legendary medieval narrative: the establishment of Criseyde's reputation. Much like Herod, Hector invites the audience into the narrative's dueling temporalities by calling attention to the unknowable mechanism through which a Trojan past becomes an English present: the body of Criseyde. Occupying simultaneously the roles of ancient Trojan and English chivalrous knight, Chaucer's Hector appears all too aware of the legacy engendered by Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus and, more importantly, of how that legacy has been written upon the body of Criseyde, a figure who played no part in Trojan history prior the twelfth century.

We will uphold you and you will uphold us, Hector avers. Criseyde's body will save men insofar its lessons can reach other men. But how can the body of a woman who never existed save anyone? For one, Criseyde's body will save men insofar as it is rendered legible, a text. And as the rest of the text makes clear, where there is learning and hearing, there is often also reading.<sup>3</sup> Given Criseyde's well-known reputation by the

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<sup>3</sup> The scenes of reading and writing, usually centered on Criseyde, have been addressed in several publications. See Carolyn Dinshaw, "Readers in/of *Troilus and Criseyde*," *The Yale Journal of Interpretation in the Humanities* 1.2 (1988): 81-105; Kara Doyle, "Criseyde Reading, Reading Criseyde," in *New Perspectives on Criseyde*, ed. by Cindy L. Vitto and Marcia Smith Marzec, 75-110 (Asheville, NC: Pegasus, 2004); Victoria Warren, "(Mis)Reading the 'Text' of Criseyde: Context and Identity in Chaucer's 'Troilus and Criseyde,'" *Chaucer Review* 36.1 (2001): 1-15; and Sarah Stanbury, "Women's Letters and Private Space in Chaucer," *Exemplaria* 6.2 (1994): 271-85.



time of *Troilus and Criseyde* (1380s), it is impossible to separate her historical body from her textual one: her body becomes the medium onto which her reputation is written, a process we can trace across a dozen narrative iterations of what we might call the Criseyde-function.<sup>4</sup> Criseyde, who famously becomes an emblem for feminine deceit in the Middle Ages, was invented as a way to make the masculine dynamics of translation work more fluidly.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I return to the Criseyde's literary beginnings in order to un-know Criseyde and to show how Chaucer's famously ambiguous account of the heroine buttresses an attempt to re-open the question of English history she helped settle.

Until Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* (c. 1184), the story of Troilus and Criseyde did not have a Criseyde. Dares and Dictys, whose versions of the Fall of Troy later assume the status of Chaucer's "olde bookes," contain hardly a trace of what later became a literary archetype. In Benoît's narrative, Criseyde (here called Briseis) helps transform Troilus from an inexperienced soldier ancillary to the war's central events to a central figure who embodies (and foreshadows) the fate of Troy itself. Given Troy's predetermined fate, Briseis's role must be established before she even arrives. The

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<sup>4</sup> Glenn Burger discusses the "textual body" as depicted in Chaucer. See "Doing What Comes Naturally," in *Masculinities in Chaucer*, ed. Peter Beidler, 117-30 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998), 123.

<sup>5</sup> The matter of Criseyde's reputation has been a popular topic in the last thirty years. See Gretchen Mieszkowski, "The Reputation of Criseyde, 1155-1500," *Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences Transactions* 43 (1971): 71-153; Gayle Margherita, "Criseyde's Remains: Romance and the Question of Justice," *Exemplaria* 12.2 (2000): 257-92; Roberto Antonelli, "The Birth of Criseyde-An Exemplary Triangle: 'Classical' Troilus and the Question of Love at the Anglo-Norman Court," in *The European Tragedy of the Troilus*, ed. Piero Boitani, 21-48 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), Sally Mapstone, "The Origins of Criseyde," in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*, eds. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al., 131-47 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000).

legibility of Criseyde's body marks her as both knowable and known, a situation which frames what Mieszkowski calls the "problem of Criseyde" (78). Her entrance into the narrative merely guarantees that in order for Troy to fall, and in order for England to rise, Troilus must suffer. Briseis is invented in order to become the agent of that suffering. Briseis must betray Troilus. In one fell swoop, Benoît replaces the failures of the Trojans with the missteps of two lovers.

The advent of Criseyde brilliantly displaces the Matter of Troy's central conflict from the singular military failure of the Trojans to a more universalizable lesson from which men might "enquire" and "here": the inevitability of feminine deceit. This manipulation of "history" is not unlike the playwrights who amplify the significance of Herod in the English cycle plays in order to provide a knowable genealogy for the perceived enemies of Christianity. In Briseis, Benoît creates a character who performs a crucial role in the putatively historical record of Trojan history. Once interjected into the narrative tradition she comes to signify a truth retroactively understood as innate to all *real* women—or at least the courtly ones. Thus, in the *Roman de Troie*, the fall of Troy has as much to do with Troilo's naïve belief that Briseis will return to him as it does the Trojans' naïve belief that the Greek Horse was a tribute to Athena. In effect, the 'Criseyde-function' raises the possibility that the endless translation of empire might end *if only we would listen and learn from its central lesson*. The better men know Criseyde (as deceitful), the more bodies will she save. This awareness provides male readers the opportunity to understand the fundamental instability of feminine desire, to know this unknowable thing, a lesson whose comprehension might allow them to avoid the fate of

the Trojans.

I employ the term ‘Criseyde-function’ for two reasons: to emphasize Criseyde’s medieval emergence as a narrative tool (rather than a historical personage) and as a way refer to her textual tradition (rather than a specific iteration of her character). Criseyde is no woman, but rather a body of work, as testified by a monologue tradition, present in almost all medieval accounts, during which she bemoans the manner that future generations will read her. The similitude Criseyde forges between her material body and her textual body underscores a correlation between reading and knowing that perpetuates itself not only in the narrative but in modern criticism.<sup>6</sup> Just as Chaucer’s narrator gives the text a body, so too does Chaucer’s Criseyde inherit a misogynistic tradition whose legibility depends on its material subjection into a plausibly historical Criseyde. Chaucer, Hector, and the critics all seem to share an interest in how to read Criseyde’s body, which suggests that the over-determined, over-written nature of this body might be understood as less a fault of critics and more as a legitimate effect of Chaucer’s text.

What makes Criseyde an interesting character and *Troilus and Criseyde* such a successful narrative is that both resist our best attempts at comprehension. In the past, the structuralism inherent to Lacanian psychoanalytical accounts of desire has provided critics with a methodology by which the text’s historiographical contradictions might be

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<sup>6</sup> Victoria Warren argues that Troilus’ failure to understand as a lover results from “his failure to read the text of Criseyde,” a result of his limited perspective and inability to “get outside of his own text.” See “(Mis)Reading the ‘Text’ of Criseyde,” 1. Gretchen Mieszkowski discusses this collapse of modern critical desires onto the Chaucer’s re-telling as a “a classic illustration of the interdependence of literary history and literary criticism” (“The Reputation of Criseyde,” 78).

compared with Criseyde's function in the text. According to Margherita, the concerns over Criseyde's historical function are "strategically displaced onto a culturally overcoded anxiety about sexuality" such that Criseyde begins to signify "an uncertainty about women as the symptom of all that is unstable, excessive, unknown" (264). Lest one reduce Criseyde's importance to such simple analogical thinking, Margherita goes further, and suggests that Criseyde exceeds this homology by also coming to represent the "radical undecideability" of Chaucer's text. Aranye Fradenburg too writes of the "undecideability of Chaucer's *Troilus*."<sup>7</sup> These critics use psychoanalysis to draw attention to an important feature of Chaucer's text, the way in which Criseyde resists final judgment. In my reading of *Troilus and Criseyde* I would like to move beyond "undecideability" and insist on Criseyde's unknowability, which resists the either/or logic of praise and blame, love and hate. The unknowing of Criseyde, which grounds Chaucer's revisionist account of Trojan history, indicates instead to how poetic narrative interrogates and unsettles received accounts of how history has created its present

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<sup>7</sup> Fradenburg, "'Oure owen wo to drynk': Loss, Gender and Chivalry," in *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde: Subgit to alle Poesye. Essays in Criticism*, ed. by R.A. Shoaf, 86-106 (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Text Studies, 1992), 101. Other notable critics have relied on the language of psychoanalysis to link the textual past with Criseyde's material body through its well-known discussions of the relationship between history, desire, and the unconscious. See James Paxson, "Triform Chaucer: Deconstruction, Historicism, Psychoanalysis, and Troilus and Criseyde," in *Approaches to Teaching Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde and the Shorter Poems*, eds. by Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, 127-42. New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America, 2007). See Kate Koppelman, "'The Dreams in which I'm Dying': Sublimation and Unstable Masculinities in *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Men and Masculinities in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde*, eds. Tison Pugh and Marcia Smith Marzec, 97-114 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008); Jamie Fumo, "Hating Criseyde: Last Words on a Heroine from Chaucer to Henryson," *Chaucer Review* 46 (2011): 20-38; George Edmondson, *The Neighboring Text: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Henryson* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2011).

moment.

I dwelled so long on a reading of Hector's remarks because I think they announce aptly Chaucer's departure from earlier versions of Criseyde, and mark my departure from the majority of Criseyde-related criticism. The import of Hector's remark affects the reader belatedly as she recognizes that *Troilus and Criseyde* challenges the settled fact of Criseyde's knowable body. In order to un-know Criseyde, I discuss the way that critics have tried to "know" her, attending especially to the frequent desire to see her as an exemplar of one quality or another (noting the disagreements that ensue). If anything, critics occupy not the position of analyst but of analysand, vying with one another for the best reading of what amounts to an ink blot in Chaucer's literary Rorschach test. Rather than pretend to comprehend Chaucer's "entente," I show how the *effect* of these changes inspires readings of Criseyde whose only common feature is their penchant for contradicting and invalidating the accounts of previous scholars. My purpose is to begin to understand how generations of brilliant, well-trained readers have agreed on Criseyde's narrative function as an exemplar, but have disagreed so vehemently regarding the *quidditas* of that exemplarity (paragon of infelicity or faithful lover; spineless coward or quiet hero; bane of feminism or model of empowerment).

Chaucerians have produced a nearly overwhelming number of critical accounts focused on Criseyde; my aim in this chapter is not to supplant these analyses but to connect them to two other important strands of *Troilus* criticism: those focused on the function of the narrator and on the literary form of the narrative. After exploring Criseyde's paradoxical exemplarity, I turn to readings that have emphasized the

incomprehensible nature of Chaucer's Criseyde in comparison to her previous incarnations in earlier source texts. These readings represent elements of Criseyde's unknowability as important to Chaucer's text but rarely discuss their repercussions on the larger narrative tradition. I aim to unite these understandings of Criseyde's structural resistance with discussions of *Troilus*'s enigmatic narrator and argue that the one cannot be understood without the other. As the *Troilus* moves away from a full recovery of the Trojan past (and a familiar Criseyde), the narrator's frequent recourse to a fundamentally unknowable narrative core becomes less an admission of failure than a feature essential to its telling. If Chaucer's predecessors created a knowable Criseyde through which men might appropriate feminine instability as, ironically enough, a kind of masculinized truth, Chaucer un-knows these previous accounts of Criseyde in order to lay bare the impossibility of historicizing literary narrative.

Chaucer's literary art lies in his ability to sufficiently obscure Criseyde's motives, the narrator's investment, and the historicity of the account, while keeping the reader invested in these mysteries. In choosing one of the most notorious and well-known of medieval legends, Chaucer faces the challenge of re-writing a story in which everything is both already known and incomprehensible. The narrator's attention to gaps and contingencies in his tale make transparent the need for poetic narrative to ground itself in the open-endedness of the unknowable. In other words, *Troilus and Criseyde* offers uncertainty as integral to the shape, purpose, and function of literary discourse. In order to help separate the literary from historical elements, I turn to Steven Justice and his character-driven attention to Chaucer's "history effect" as a means through which readers

can understand characters as “products,” rather than “sources” of literary discourse.<sup>8</sup> I show how the consequences of Chaucer’s “history effect” extend beyond his own narrative and ultimately articulate a version of historical re-writing that not only tolerates, but embraces the impossibility of fully knowing the past. I contend that the narrator’s relationship with Criseyde provides the most complete illustration of the narrator’s concerns with knowing and rewriting a written past that is simultaneously coherent, as having measurable effects, and open-ended, lacking details that remain inaccessible to even the most dedicated historian.

In short, Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* produces a literary ethics rooted in unknowability as an alternative to historical re-writing. If, as Steven Justice has it, the late-medieval text’s “literary status is achieved by resisting clarity,” it is not through psychoanalytic recourse to a textual unconscious that critics might recover the originary kernel of that literary status. By rendering her unfamiliar, Chaucer makes Criseyde not the symbol of an innately feminine deceit; rather, by virtue of her unknowability, Chaucer’s Criseyde personifies the necessity for literary narratives to move beyond historicity and instead embrace the fundamental impossibility of historical fidelity, a hallmark trait of the very category of literary writing.

### **The Invention of a Historical Fact**

In order to establish what Chaucer’s text seeks to *un*-know, it is necessary to first

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<sup>8</sup> Steven Justice, “Chaucer’s History Effect,” in *Answerable Style: The Idea of the Literary in Medieval England*, ed. Frank Grady and Andrew Galloway, 169-94 (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2013), 171.

recount how earlier medieval versions of the narrative created a Criseyde who grew from a textual function into a historical personage whose actions came to predict the temperament of any and all courtly women. As mentioned earlier, Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* (c. 1184) was the first to feature the Criseyde-function, but this is not to say that she was created from thin air. The development of the character Criseyde owes a good deal to two female characters from the *Iliad*. Readers can glimpse pieces of Criseyde's character in both Chryseis, daughter of a Trojan priest who, taken by the Greeks, becomes a concubine of Agamemnon, and as Briseis, a beautiful widow whom Achilles takes as a slave and whom Agamemnon insists on receiving if he must give up Chryseis. While some of these details are absent from Benoît's two acknowledged sources, Dares and Dictys, Sally Mapstone argues convincingly that Benoît would have encountered Briseis' letters to Achilles through Ovid's *Heroides*, which was commonly read in the twelfth century as a school text.<sup>9</sup> As will become crucial to the characterization of Criseyde in Boccaccio's *Filostrato* and Chaucer's *Troilus*, the Briseis of the *Heroides* explains herself in terms of writing, especially in allusions to other stories from the Classical past.<sup>10</sup> Mapstone posits an origin from which the Criseyde-function, from its very inception, becomes complicit in the writing of her own history (138). By the time of Chaucer's *Troilus*, the Criseyde-function betrays an

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<sup>9</sup> Mapstone, "The Origins of Criseyde," 135. Mapstone also suggests that Benoît would have likely encountered the *Ilias Latina*, another popular school text.

<sup>10</sup> On Criseyde and writing in Chaucer's *Troilus*, see Catherine Sanok, "Criseyde, Cassandra, and the Thebaid: Women and the Theban Subtext of Chaucer's *Troilus* and Criseyde," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 20 (1998): 41-71, and John Fleming, "Criseyde's Poem: Anxieties of the Classical Tradition," in *New Perspectives on Criseyde*, ed. Cindy Vitto and Marcia Smith Marzec, 277-98 (Asheville: Pegasus, 2004).



awareness of its exemplarity, existing both inside and outside of literary history, commenting on and perpetuating her status as archetype of feminine betrayal.

In order to resist viewing the development of the Criseyde-function as mere teleology, it will be valuable to attend to some of the idiosyncrasies found in each of its major medieval iterations. As implied explicitly by the title, choice of language, and the love plot he invents, Benoît uses Criseyde (Briseis) to transport *historia* to the world of romance.<sup>11</sup> Here Troilus is not the inexperienced-yet-fierce warrior of Dares and Dictys, but rather a sullen and lovesick young man. Briseis enters the narrative as a typically lovely romance heroine—“Plus esteit bele e bloie e blanche / Que flor de lis ne neif sor branche” [She was more lovely, blonde, and fair than the fleur-de-lis or a snow-covered branch] (5277-78). However, as Roberto Antonelli observes, Briseis is hardly a main fixture of the text, active in only 1,350 of the *Roman*’s 30,000 lines and not once in a sustained block of text (87). Since the most memorable of those lines have to do with her betrayal of Troilo, her limited appearances bestow upon her little more than the status of negative exemplar. After betraying Troilo, thus completing the action for which she was engendered, she essentially disappears from the narrative. For Mieszkowski, too, Briseis assumes the form of a narrative function, “illustrat[ing] many aspects of women, their shallowness and flirtatiousness, the pragmatism that quiets their consciences, the cruel pleasure they take in alternately encouraging and refusing men, and, most of all, their faithlessness” (79). Both Antonelli and Mieszkowski understand Briseis as a *known*

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<sup>11</sup> The *Roman de Troie* was almost always paired with *Roman de Thèbes*, *Eneas*, and/or Wace’s *Brut*, popular romances that also treat classical history.

figure who performs a specific function in Benoît's narrative.

Despite Benoît's curious addition of a female character who only confirms what had already been established, the spurious historicity of Briseis' character did little to undercut the reception of the *Roman* as authoritative. As Guido delle Colonne later insists in his remediation of the *Roman* (1287), Benoît claims to report only what he has received from Dares, the only author of the Trojan War who was able to deliver *all of the facts* (Proem 97-104).<sup>12</sup> Through the figure of Briseis, Benoît upholds Lee Patterson's claim that "in the world of romance, history is less given than made" (96). Neither Patterson nor Benoît account for what happens when a character exceeds the history for which she was invented, however. Briseis' historical fame resounds as *more* than external fact. Not only do her actions indirectly account for the Fall of Troy, they inspire a truism to be applied more broadly to the behavior of women: they give a face to the uncertainties of masculinity.

Briseis remains known *inside* the text as well. In Benoît's *Roman*, unlike later versions, most men in Troy know of the affair. To the extent that the fates of Troilus and

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<sup>12</sup> As Lee Patterson notes, Benoît's narrative was composed within the same French courtly context that produced another cornerstone of medieval mythical vernacular historiography, Wace's *Brut*, a translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the foundational text for medieval secular history. As Patterson details, the *Roman de Troie* was granted enough authority in the thirteenth century for Jean Malkaraume to include some of its passages in his versified French Bible. Jean's Bible, preserved in a late-thirteenth century manuscript (BNF, f. 903), inserts most of the *Roman de Troie* directly following the account of the death of Moses and compares the impact of these foundational sacred and secular events. This strange confluence of sacred and secular narrative attests not only to the canonicity of Benoît, but more importantly, to the historicity of his account. See Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991), 90-2.

Troy historically converge, the affair (and Briseis' function within it) provide Benoît with an opportunity to historicize the fickleness of women as the knowable moral to be drawn from the Matter of Troy:

Ja jor ne cuideront mesfaire :  
Des folies est ço la maire.  
Qui s'i atent ne qui s'i creit  
Sei meïsme vent e deceit.<sup>13</sup>  
(ll. 13453-56)

Perhaps most significantly, Briseis shows herself as aware of this exemplary status: “De mei n’iert ja fait bon escrit/ Ne chantee bone chancon” (20255-62) [About me no beautiful work will be written/ No good song will be sung].

This line, familiar to readers of Chaucer’s text, sets in motion a series of what David Benson terms “contradictory” statements whereby Briseis condemns her own actions against Troilus and also affirms the need to move on, unrepentant, to the arms of Diomede.<sup>14</sup> Benson reads this moment as the origin of Chaucer’s “opaque” Criseyde, arguing that Briseis’ speech reveals the tangled nature of her desire, which conveys the impression of multiple Criseydes, “every one of which has the potential to be developed into the portrait of a different kind of women” (27). For Benoît, Briseis’ conflicted state does not betray her fundamental opacity; rather, her ambivalence grounds the establishment of an archetype, that of the fickle courtly woman: “Qui s'i atent ne qui s'i

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<sup>13</sup> “Never a day will they think to commit misdeeds/ Of all follies, [hers] is the greatest/ He who aspires to that and who believes in it / Is fooling himself.” Thanks to Michael Johnson for assistance with this translation.

<sup>14</sup> Benson, “The Opaque Text of Chaucer’s Criseyde,” in *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde: Subgit to alle Poesye. Essays in Criticism*, ed. R.A. Shoaf, 17-28 (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Text Studies, 1992).

creit/ Sei meisme vent e deceit" [Whoever relies on [women] or trusts them tricks and sells himself] (13455-56). Through such moralization, Benoît cleverly (and misogynistically) domesticates that which evades male control: he transforms Briseis' psychological complexity into a knowable emblem of feminine instability. He not only reformulates her apparent deviance from rational thought as a typical feminine vice, he then proffers it as historical inevitability. Benoît situates his heroine in a uniquely precarious epistemological position in which, paradoxically, the more dynamic her actions and complex her emotions, the more limited her narrative agency becomes.

Although Benoît's invention of the Criseyde-function provides a backdrop for a newly medieval reading of the Trojan War, his Briseis was not, in fact, the most well-known version of the archetypal fickle woman prior to Chaucer. Strangely enough, it is actually the Latin translation of Benoît's French romance that became the more successful text. Surviving in 144 manuscripts (compared to the *Roman's* 30), Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae* (c. 1220) effectively masked the narratological liberties of Benoît's romance vernacularity and became the most widely read version of the narrative in its time.<sup>15</sup>

Consonant with the its Latinity, Guido's *Historia* also strips Briseis of some of her romance conventionality. Guido's Briseis becomes even more notorious than Benoît's version, an effect realized by his decision to feature her even *less* in his

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<sup>15</sup> Benson notes that Guido's *Historia* was translated three separate times into English within a generation of Chaucer's *Troilus*. William Caxton later translated the text as well. See "True Troilus and False Cresseid: The Descent From Tragedy," in *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, ed. Piero Boitani, 153-70 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 154.

narrative. But even as Guido condenses the speech and actions of Benoît's Briseis, he amplifies her exemplarity through an increased attention to the Troilus-as-Troy motif. On the one hand, the addition of Criseyde to the Matter of Troy fulfills a specific, knowable function: she gives Troilus his Trojan horse. On the other hand, such an invention necessitates a departure from the historical "record" since Benoît is translating an already well-known Matter of Troy into vernacular romance history.<sup>16</sup> Through an intervention that is simultaneously synchronic and diachronic, Criseyde gives the Trojan War a moral depth that helps bridge the temporal gap between a classical past and a medieval present.

Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* (1335-1340) offers the next significant shift in the medieval Criseyde story. Between Guido and Boccaccio there exist several other versions of the Troilus and Criseyde legend, but only in Boccaccio's text do we see a legend transformed.<sup>17</sup> With his *Filostrato*, Boccaccio supplies two significant changes that would come to influence Chaucer's narrative. First, he shifts the narrative focus directly to an expanded version of the love affair between Troilus and Briseis (here 'Troilo' and 'Criseida'). Second, he introduces a narrative voice personally involved in the events of the affair. Here the narrative moves even closer to romance, as Boccaccio foregrounds the relationship between lovers, once a microcosmic diversion from the primary focus on the War, and displaces the historical matter almost entirely

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<sup>16</sup> On Guido's influence on Chaucer, see George Hamilton, *The Indebtedness of Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde to Guido delle Colonne's Historia Trojana* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1903).

<sup>17</sup> Other versions of the narrative include Joseph of Exeter's revision of Dares, the *Frigii Daretis Ylias* (c. 1185); Albert von Stade's *Troilus* (ca. 1260); a late-thirteenth century prose version of Benoît; along with several Italian versions of the Matter, including the *Libro della Storia di Troia*, *Binduccio dello Scelto*, *Istorieta Troiana*, and *Romanzo barberiniano*.

to the background.

Despite the personal investment of *Il Filostrato*'s narrator and the increased attention to the characters of Troilo and Criseida, Boccaccio too affirms Criseyde's status as a type.<sup>18</sup> Narrator and reader are made aware of Criseida's thoughts throughout the narrative, a comfort not shared by other characters. However, when in the opening "Proem" the narrator compares the looks and comportment of his absent lover to the famed beauty and behavior of Criseida, he confirms that his heroine is, indeed, a known figure. Rather than ingratiate Criseida to the reader, these moments in which Boccaccio recalls Criseida's beauty render her all the more deplorable because the reader, who knows how the narrative will end, witnesses her potential for good.

By extending the Troy/Troilus analogy with the addition of one more rung (Troy/Troilus/narrator), Boccaccio reintroduces potential, especially by way of Criseida, into a narrative of an otherwise-settled history. Boccaccio's Criseida exists within two competing temporalities that operate by incompatible logics. The *historical* Criseida must be written according to the telos of her infidelity; on the other hand, the beauty, words, and actions of the *literary* Criseida, along with her status as stand-in for the narrator's absent lover, induce optimism in a more positive outcome. This temporal split prefigures Chaucer's Hector's remarks which exist similarly both inside and outside of the historical framework of the narrative. For Boccaccio, the literary temporality collapses into the historical one, reducing Criseida's literary potential to a bit of drama that renders her ultimate "desertion" of Troilo something the careful

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<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that this is the same Criseyde as can be found in Benoît, Boccaccio's main source. Boccaccio's Criseida comes across as less fickle than she is cautious. In a bit of courtly posturing, for example, Criseida, arguing with herself, shows reluctance to marry a Troilo whose social standing exceeds her own (II. 75-6).

reader anticipates, but for which she must wait, a belated response to an already-historical fact. This logic of belatedness also permeates the interior structure of *Il Filostrato*, for it is Boccaccio who introduces Criseida's promise to return to Troy within ten days of her transfer to the Greek camp (IV. 155-6). This key moment situates narrator, reader, and Troilo as party to the same existential waiting game.

Through the belated logic of *Il Filostrato*, Boccaccio picks up on one of Criseyde's secondary functions: her role as an epistemological "bridge" between classical past and medieval present. Just as Troilo becomes the avatar for the narrator's (debatably autobiographical) suffering, the narrator compares his absent lover to Criseida in a positive manner—despite and because of her centuries-long reputation as the paragon of female inconstancy. In Boccaccio's text, the knowability of the historical record secures a legitimacy for the narrator's lovesickness. The narrator's overt identification with Troilo thus obliterates the historical distance between pre-Christian and Christian time: it seems that heartbreak requires no translation. While 'Criseida' retains the bulk of her inherited significance in this homology, the structural changes in the relationship between teller and tale complicate the history of her character. As George Edmondson quips, "Troilo dies so that the narrator might gain an identity" (94). But could this comparison contain a resonance even more significant than individual life and death? If the narrator connects his fate to Troilo's, and if the narrative tradition has homologized Troilo's fate to that of Troy, the *Filostrato* offers one unsuccessful fourteenth-century relationship as metonymic instantiation of *the* originary betrayal that sets in motion all of secular history. Through *Il Filostrato*, Criseyde's longstanding function as emblem of feminine deceit gives face to an emergent narrative of history as loss not, as Margherita suggests, because woman is

unknowable, but precisely because Criseida's betrayal is guaranteed.

Boccaccio's Trojan retelling indicates something of Criseyde's unique place in the history of unknowable female literary figures. It would be no exaggeration to insist that, of all of Chaucer's characters, Criseyde has inherited the most complex critical portrait. Given her history as an emblematic figure, her awareness of this reputation, and her elusive behavior in *Troilus*, it is no surprise that critics have failed to reach a consensus on the character of Criseyde. As Nikki Stiller notes in her monograph devoted to the literary resonances that Criseyde has engendered from the twelfth through the twentieth centuries, part of Criseyde's popularity as a literary figure results from how she participates in a larger theological-philosophical debate about the degree to which women exist independently of men.<sup>19</sup> Put in psychoanalytic terms, Criseyde frames the question of sexual *rapport*: does her alleged infidelity raise larger implications about the possibility of mutual knowing in sexual relationships?

The answer, unsurprisingly but necessarily, is that we cannot know. What then makes Criseyde such a unique character is not, in the end, her function as embodiment of unanswerable questions, but how writers have created positive knowledge from the "undecideability" she signifies. As Boccaccio illustrates, even when the literary act reopens a realm of potential through which Criseida might reveal her desire, the historical ambiguity she came to embody, insofar as it is a settled fact, must manifest itself unambiguously. In the *Troilus-Criseyde* narratives from Benoit through Boccaccio, Criseyde domesticates feminine potential by reducing its unknowability to a mundane and foregone conclusion that women are fickle. In what remains

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<sup>19</sup> Stiller, *The Figure of Cressida in British and American Literature: Transformation of a Literary Type* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 9.



of this chapter, I turn to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, which both enhances Criseyde's unknowability by amplifying the ambiguity of her speech and actions, but also unsettles the notion that readers can "know" Criseyde at any level.

### **Criseyde's Next Chance**

At the time of *Troilus and Criseyde*'s composition, all three of the previously discussed versions were available and in circulation. Although Chaucer's depiction of Criseyde borrows from each of these three, it is less interesting to cite where he borrows than it is to track what effects his specific choices produce in his version of Criseyde. Throughout the first book, Chaucer, by way of his narrator, attends to what can and cannot be known about Criseyde. From the first descriptive encounter of Criseyde, Chaucer establishes a relationship between her precarious social position and the text's unstable narrative epistemology:

Now hadde Calkas left, in this meschaunce  
Al unwist of this false and wikked dede  
His doughter, which that was in gret penaunce  
For of hir lyf she was ful sore in drede,  
As she that niste what was best to rede;  
For bothe a widowe was she, and allone  
Of any freend to whom she dorste hir mone.

(I. 92-98)

In the first one-hundred lines of the poem, we learn three things about Criseyde: that she is the daughter of a man whose premonitory "forknowinge" (79) rendered him a "traytor" (87), that the state of Criseyde's family's affairs has left her quite lonely, and that these circumstances have something to do with how she eventually forsakes Troilus (56). In addition to these external facts, Chaucer also introduces his narrative as mired already in

a crisis of knowing: Criseyde's father leaves her because he knew too much; Criseyde knows not how to proceed. Thus, from the very beginning of *Troilus*, knowledge is presented as problematic. Just as Chaucer forges a synonymy between knowledge and treachery through Calkas, the narrator, who "wepen as I write," laments the closed, known status of "[t]hise woful vers," planting himself within a history whose veracity he will seek to invalidate with endless rhetorical challenges (6).

If Chaucer situates the opening of the poem within a crisis of knowing, his earliest descriptions of Criseyde also form a resistance to the totalizing effects of historical comprehension. The narrator, too, betrays an early interest in complicating Criseyde's reputation, as evidenced in his prayer to protect those "that falsly ben apeired/ Thorough wikked tonges" (38-39) referring, presumably, to Criseyde. Throughout the first book, Criseyde is made more pitiable than she is in other versions of the narrative. Her status as a widow, a detail invented by Boccaccio, provides an existential depth to her loneliness in Chaucer, and it also places the beautiful courtly woman in something of an unfamiliar, uncertain category.<sup>20</sup> Her experiences in love exceed those of the typical courtly maiden—in Benoît, for example, she is a virgin—but Chaucer's Criseyde is no mere seducer of men. Although later in the narrative Criseyde herself cites her marital independence as advantageous for her future dealings with men (II. 750-6), Chaucer's early descriptions of Criseyde cast her widowhood almost exclusively in terms of her loneliness. Despite her

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<sup>20</sup> Kathryn Jacobs views Chaucer's Criseyde as "inverted" in comparison to other widow figures in medieval literature. See "Mate or Mother: Positioning Criseyde among Chaucer's Widows," in *New Perspectives on Criseyde*, eds. Cindy Vitto and Marcia Smith Marzec, 11-36 (Asheville: Pegasus, 2004).

historical reputation for beauty, none of these familiar niceties appear in the text until *after* the narrator establishes her widowhood. In the stanza directly following the one quoted above, the narrator launches into the customary superlatives:

Criseyde was this lady name a-right;  
As to my dome, in al Troyes citee  
Nas noon so fair, for passing every wight  
So aungellyk was hir natyf beautee,  
That lyk a thing immortal semed she,  
As doth an hevenish parfit creature,  
That doun were sent in scorning of nature.  
(I.99-105)

In a move that will become habitual for the narrator, the strangeness of Chaucer's description depends less on *what* is said than *where* it is said and its relationship with his sources. Here the reader encounters the customary description of her radiance only after Chaucer endeavors to make her a sympathetic figure. The lag between the narrative's literary potential and the historical backdrop against which this possibility is resolved already suggests a difference in the approaches of Boccaccio and Chaucer.

Later in the first book, in the scene where Troilus first looks upon her, Chaucer once again subordinates Criseyde's beauty to her widowhood:

Among thise other folk was Criseyda,  
In widewes habit blak; but natheles,  
Right as oure first letter is now an A,  
In beaute first so stood she, makeles.  
(I.169-72)

Chaucer's "natheles" and his insistence on her "makeles" [peerless] beauty serve to separate Criseyde's widowhood from more conventional depictions.<sup>21</sup> She is no mere

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<sup>21</sup> For more on the conventional romance widow, see Rebecca Hayward, "Between the

*type*, these lines insist, at least not as is evident in Boccaccio, where her widowhood merely directs the reader to a thinly-veiled “lusty” nature, something more akin to the Wife of Bath. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Criseyde’s widowhood helps us understand her situation not as a figure or type, but as an *individual*: it is made both exterior and interior to her being. Because it precedes even her famous beauty, the repetition of her status conveys the impression that, despite her literary renown, we may not know Criseyde as well as we had thought.

A few stanzas later, another fact of Criseyde’s domestic life is called into question: “But whether that she children hadde or noon,/ I rede it naught; therefore I late it goon” (132-33). This ostensibly benign non-detail appears to betray little more than the anxious temperament of a narrator handcuffed to his sources (a detail he mentions on at least ten separate occasions). Yet it just so happens that his “olde bookes” do, in fact, have something to say on this account. As mentioned earlier, Benoît settles the matter in by claiming that Briseis is a virgin so, barring a miracle, this would indicate that she was childless (l. 2751). Boccaccio is even more specific, stating definitively that Cressida had no children and also suggesting that she may not be capable of producing any (I.15). While Sanford Meech suggests that this moment of un-knowing previous narratives renders Chaucer’s Criseyde a comparatively acceptable woman to Troilus, a careful reader might keep an eye open to other, more insidious possibilities.

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Living and the Dead: Widows as Heroines of Medieval Romances,” in *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, eds. Cindy Carlson and Angela Weisl, 221-43 (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999).

In order to better understand Chaucer's characterization of his heroine, it is useful to untangle how the motifs of knowledge and non-knowledge figure in the *Troilus*' larger structure. Of all the moments of knowledge being withheld in the text, the love affair itself provides the narrative's most explicit advocacy of not-knowing. In Benoît and Guido, the affair is, of course, publicly known. Boccaccio supplies an added dimension of secrecy to the affair. On the surface, this resonates as a formal decision, as it brings the genre closer to romance. More importantly, it allows his narrator to suffer in silent solidarity with his avatar, Troilo. Chaucer's decision to maintain the secrecy of their affair in *Troilus and Criseyde* has been explained in terms of the narrative's generic commitments, with scholars citing Andreas Capellanus as evidence that discreetness serves as an important lubricant to the process of courtly love.<sup>22</sup>

Like Boccaccio's Troilo, Chaucer's Troilus hides his love out of an instinctive shame: "Lest it were wist on any manere side,/ His woo he gan dissimilen and hide" (I. 321-2). It appears that Chaucer merely follows his source in keeping the love affair hidden, and yet the effect of this decision on the two texts differs. Since Boccaccio's narrator allies himself with Troilo throughout, the depiction of Troilo's pain serves mainly to elicit sympathy from the reader for the narrator's analogous and otherwise private torment. If the reader becomes frustrated with Criseida, it is for the narrator's

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<sup>22</sup> Andreas Capellanus privileges secrecy throughout *The Art of Courtly Love*, from the first chapter forward. The *Art of Courtly Love* has also become an important touchstone for critics working to establish the *Troilus*' generic commitments to the workings of the gaze. See, for example, Molly Martin, "Troilus's Gaze and the Collapse of Masculinity in Romance," in *Men and Masculinities in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde*, eds. Tison Pugh and Marcia Smith Marzec, 132-47 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008).

sake; it recalls a suffering that still persists. Troilus's heartbreak, on the other hand, is a matter of the past, a settled account. The clandestine nature of the affair in Chaucer's version does not clarify an event outside of the narrative but instead appears to enhance the dramatic irony within the narrative. Just as Priam and his parliament cannot know Troilus' woe when they agree to exchange Criseyde for Antenor (IV. 148-60), neither can Troilus understand why Criseyde has not returned as he waits at the city gates (V.1135-41). But rather than provide the audience the details that his character lacks, Chaucer leaves readers ignorant to the true contents of Criseyde's heart. Although the covert structure of the love affair remains the same in both texts, Chaucer reanimates Criseyde's unknowability as more than a matter of interpersonal secrecy, but rather a structural concern of both narrator and reader.

Lest Criseyde's unknowability remain a mere external fact, Chaucer highlights narrative gaps in knowledge, whether between tale and its teller or between tale and its readers/characters. In Book II, Criseyde defies the lusty, fickle reputation she has inherited by depicting, or even embellishing Criseyde's hesitancy to love:

For I sey nought that she so sodeynly  
Yaf hym hire love, but that she gan enclyne  
To like hym first, and I have told yow whi.  
(II. 673-75)

Attempting to emphasize the steady, methodical nature of Criseyde's love for Troilus, the narrator performs the carefulness that Criseyde too inhabits. Rather than disclose her private thoughts for the reader, the narrator speaks only of the negative space behind the expectation of 'love at first sight.' For David Lawton, Criseyde herself may not know

what is going on inside of her own head.<sup>23</sup>

Shortly after the narrator's careful explication of her coming-to-love as a process, Criseyde launches into a monologue (708-763) that expands significantly on its analogue in *Il Filostrato* despite the narrator's contention that he is strictly translating his source. Chaucer's decision to more than double Boccaccio's monologue for Criseyde suggests a desire to clarify her intentions and, indeed, her speech includes nine verbs that convey the process of comprehension (namely "knowe" and "woot"). Yet, rather than elucidate her motives, the monologue amplifies Criseyde's indecision, *contra* the 'love at first sight' motif, as she debates to herself whether or not she should accept Troilus' love. This monologue defies the formal expectations for extended monologues, as the only access to her 'entente' Chaucer supplies is a confirmation that she does not know what she wants.

Troilus is, of course, markedly less subtle when it comes to his feelings. When Troilus finally proclaims his love in Book III, he announces, quite bluntly, that "Now be ye caught" (1207). A ostensibly relieved Criseyde, "al quit from every drede and tene" (1226), proceeds to reveal her feelings in apparent comfort: "Right so Criseyde, whan hir drede stente,/ Opned hir herte, and tolde him hire entente" (1238-39). Within Chaucer criticism, attempts to discern Criseyde's internal state have centered around the Chaucer's manipulation of the concept of "entente."<sup>24</sup> As this narrative progression

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<sup>23</sup> Lawton argues that the opacity of Criseyde's desire in the early stages of the narrative envelops reader, narrator, and Criseyde as well. See *Chaucer's Narrators* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), 78.

<sup>24</sup> Patterson understands the question of Criseyde's "entente" as a crucial point of access into the larger thematic works of the text. He urges the importance of comprehending this "entente" in order to transition from the comic to the tragic elements that arrive in Book 4

suggests, only belatedly can the reader glimpse Criseyde's "hertes variaunce" (Patterson calls this process an "erotic deferral"). But other than adding a bit of erotic intrigue, what purpose might the deliberate obfuscations surrounding Criseyde's "entente" serve? And, perhaps more importantly, *does* her "entente" become manifestly knowable in Book V, as Jennifer Campbell suggests?<sup>25</sup>

Provided *Troilus and Criseyde's* reputation for frustrating its critics, the poem's deliberate uncertainties and unknowing might be understood as a formal mechanism implemented in order to make Criseyde's betrayal all the more shocking. To create an atmosphere of surprise in an otherwise closed case of romantic betrayal would be one way to breathe new life into old "matere." Yet there exist a few impediments that challenge this interpretation. Chaucer was not pressed into any obligation to tell this particular story, which suggests that there was no overt problem he had to work around. Additionally, he makes clear the fate of Troilus and Criseyde from the opening lines, which run against the desire to suspend disbelief. Lastly, but most importantly, there is the matter of the narrator, who obviously shows at least some compassion for Criseyde.

Given *Troilus and Criseyde's* lack of a structure of surprise, it appears that

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(*Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 139). Patterson notes the appearances of Criseyde's "entente" in the so-called tragic books (IV.655-57; IV.1416-18; V.1003-4; V.1629-30) and laments that neither reader nor Criseyde "knows what she means" (139) until Troilus spies his own brooch on Diomedes (V.1655-66). For Jennifer Campbell, the difference as regards Criseyde's "entente" occurs between the "only partially knowable" Criseyde of the first three books and the "utterly decipherable" figure she becomes in Book V. See "Figuring Criseyde's 'Entente': Authority, Narrative, and Chaucer's Use of History," *Chaucer Review* 27 (1993): 342-58, 342. For more on the issue of "entente" and how it relates to Criseyde, see Elizabeth Archibald, "Declarations of 'Entente' in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Chaucer Review* 25.2 (1991): 190-213.

<sup>25</sup> Campbell, "Figuring Criseyde's 'Entente,'" 356.



Chaucer does not make Criseyde unknowable in order to condemn her further. At the same time, it is equally misguided to suggest that Criseyde's opacity serves to ingratiate her to the reader. Even the narrator, her biggest advocate throughout the tale, eventually must give up hope. If the narrator refuses to confirm that Criseyde gives her heart to Diomedes (V. 1050)<sup>26</sup>, he must nonetheless admit that, at some point, "both Troilus and Troie town/ Shal knotteles throughout hire herte slide" (V. 768-69). Unsurprisingly, some critics cite the poem's ending as evidence of the narrator's failure or of his masculine desire to oversimplify a complex web of love, duty, and self-preservation. However, as the narrator makes clear in the poem's opening, the ending of this story has already been written. What leeway could this narrator have had? While Chaucer's narrator might poke at his sources and un-know his heroine in an effort to interrogate the historicity of the events he retells, as a mere "instrument" he does not possess the authority to substantively alter the poem's outcome.

Rather than a boon to her reputation or indictment on her instability, the matter of Criseyde's "entente" becomes for Patterson (and later, for Justice) a narrative device used to create "a more capacious representation of subjectivity" (142). While this may be true, it still does not answer the question of her "entente," of what Criseyde actually *wants*. What makes readers believe that Criseyde, so emptied of humanity in earlier versions of the narrative, desires anything? Only in the last thirty years have critics become comfortable with the notion that Criseyde exceeds even the most careful critical

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<sup>26</sup> Even still, he equivocates in another confrontation with his "matere,": "Men seyn—I not—that she yaf hym hire herte" (V.1050).

comprehension. Rather than assigning Criseyde an emblematic character trait, these scholars focus on how she remains “opaque<sup>27</sup>,” “undecideable<sup>28</sup>,” “unquantifiable<sup>29</sup>,” or “inscrutable.”<sup>30</sup> Accurate as these accounts may be, there remains the question of what to do with this information. Before turning to a closer analysis of the narrator’s relationship with his heroine in order to explore this question, I end this section with a brief analysis of the ways critics have tried to deal with the problem of Criseyde’s “entente” without acquiescing to the notion of an un-knowable Criseyde. In doing so, I aim to move away from seeing Criseyde’s unknowability as only a frustration internal to the text and, instead, emphasize the way that Chaucer uses an unknowable Criseyde as a figure around which all knowledge in *Troilus* and Criseyde is organized.

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Over the last hundred years, readers of *Troilus and Criseyde* have disagreed on nearly every conceivable detail of Criseyde’s character.<sup>31</sup> Some readers understand

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<sup>27</sup> Benson, “The Opaque Text of Chaucer’s Criseyde.”

<sup>28</sup> For Margherita “if Criseyde is a symptom of the poem’s disavowal of history and materiality, she also marks its radical undecideability” (“Criseyde’s Remains,” 271).

<sup>29</sup> Allan Mitchell argues that “the exact ratio of freedom and fortune making up Criseyde’s mind is unquantifiable” in “Criseyde’s Chances: Or, Courtly Love and Ethics About to Come,” in *Levinas and Medieval Literature: The Difficult Reading of English and Rabbinic Texts*, eds. Ann Astell and J. A. Jackson, 185-206 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2009), 199.

<sup>30</sup> Laura Howes sums Criseyde’s character as “so veiled from us... as to be at best inscrutable and at worst morally repugnant.” See “Chaucer’s Criseyde: The Betrayer Betrayed,” in *Reading Medieval Culture*, ed. Robert Stein and Sandra Pierson Prior, 324-43 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 331.

<sup>31</sup> For the most efficient overview of Criseyde’s critical reception, see Lorraine Kochanske Stock, “‘Slydyng’ Critics: Changing Critical Constructions of Chaucer’s

Criseyde to be the paragon of femininity<sup>32</sup> while others remark her fundamentally masculine nature.<sup>33</sup> Although her (in)actions may appear cowardly<sup>34</sup> there might also exist elements of heroism in her restraint.<sup>35</sup> Criseyde's self-deliberations reveal her to be

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Criseyde in the Past Century," in *New Perspectives on Criseyde*, eds. Cindy Vitto and Marcia Smith Marzec, 11-36 (Asheville: Pegasus, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> For Sanford Meech, Chaucer's Criseyde was "so feminized in her person and so gentled in behavior that she appears the quintessence of soft womanhood." See *Design in Chaucer's Troilus* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1959), 13. However unattractive this position, Meech's assertion is supported in the first book the narrator admonishes that "Weren to wommanhod, that creature [Criseyde]/ was nevere lasse mannyssh in semyng" (I. 284). On the other hand, Matthew Corrigan argues that Criseyde's lack of nuance betrays Chaucer's ineptitude for creating a "genuine woman." See "Chaucer's Failure With Women: The Inadequacy of Criseyde," *Western Humanities Review* 23 (1969): 107-20. The 1970s also introduced readings of Criseyde as herself a feminist. See Maureen Fries, "'Slydyng of Corage': Chaucer's Criseyde as Feminist and Victim," in *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, eds. Arlyn Diamond and Lee J. Edwards, 45-59 (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1977).

<sup>33</sup> Angela Weisl notes a "female masculinity" within Criseyde that threatens to reveal the constructed nature of masculinity: "Whether Criseyde is ultimately a victim of her fears, or of patriarchal society and its traffic in women, or of romance... one thing is apparent—in choosing dishonor over death, in choosing Diomedes's protection, Criseyde, within a feminized context, plays a "mannes game" with a "mannes herte." See "'A Mannes Game': Criseyde's Masculinity in *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Men and Masculinities in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde*, eds. Tison Pugh and Marcia Smith Marzec, 115-31 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 130.

<sup>34</sup> In C.S. Lewis' famous reading of Criseyde, she suffers, somewhat masochistically, from an overwhelming fear of everything. See *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 85. This fear becomes an underlying meekness in R.A. Shoaf, "*Troilus and Criseyde*: The Falcon and the Mew," in *Typology and English Medieval Literature*, ed. H.T. Keenan, 149-68 (New York: Ams Press, 1992), 151. Edward Condren writes of Criseyde's "streak of cowardice," but acknowledges that she cannot be reduced to one characteristic. See "The Disappointments of Criseyde," in *Chaucer and the Challenges of Medievalism*, ed. Donka Minkova and Theresa Tinkle, 195-204 (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2003), 204. Gretchen Mieszkowski emphasizes these qualities not as fearfulness, but as passivity and faithlessness ("Reputation of Criseyde," 109). Alice Kaminsky catalogs the critical attention on Criseyde's fearfulness in *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde and the Critics* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1980).

<sup>35</sup> See Mary Behrman, "Heroic Criseyde," *Chaucer Review* 38.4 (2004): 314-36. Fradenburg writes that simplifications of Criseyde's "have isolated her anxieties from the

self-interested<sup>36</sup> but, because they are consistent, might also imply an underlying poise.<sup>37</sup> Her struggles to make decisions could suggest fickleness<sup>38</sup> or reveal only that she is cautious.<sup>39</sup> Although the critical accounts hardly agree on anything, these analyses affirm the way that Criseyde's character exceeds her narrative function. She is consistently read as the exemplar of *something*. Even though she may be "the most difficult of Chaucer's women to understand," generations of critics have nonetheless asserted time and again that she can indeed be known.<sup>40</sup>

The primary, most visceral, and longest standing of the Criseyde-oriented debates considers the matter of her culpability in the tragic events of the narrative and whether, as a result, Criseyde should be condemned or exhonnerated. Critics, however, rarely

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historical contexts that explain them... positing those anxieties as part of an essential character and thereby perpetuating fantasies of male rescue and feminine weakness." She in turn praises Criseyde's survival skills. See "Our owen wo to drynke," 98-99.

<sup>36</sup> Condren writes of "a calculating streak that increases over time" ("The Disappointments of Criseyde," 197). D.W. Robertson suggests that these endless deliberations mark her as "self-seeking and vain" (qtd. in Stock, "'Slydyng' Critics," 21). Jean Jost views Criseyde as self-conscious performer in "The Performative Criseyde: Self-Conscious Dramaturgy," in *New Perspectives on Criseyde*, edited by Cindy L. Vitto and Marcia Smith Marzec, 207-30 (Asheville: Pegasus, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> George Kittredge was perhaps the first critic to insist on Criseyde's underlying cleverness, "a mistress of her own actions." See *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1913), 132. For another, briefer take on Criseyde's poise, see J.J. Anderson, "Criseyde's Assured Manner," *Notes and Queries* 236 (1991): 160-1.

<sup>38</sup> J. Milton French, defending Troilus, alleges "that she is fickle, that she knows she is fickle, that she knows other people will know it, and that she knows that her deed will remain notorious in ages to come (qtd. in Stock, 17).

<sup>39</sup> McAlpine, Monica, "Criseyde's Prudence," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 199-224.

<sup>40</sup> Susannah Chewning, "Re-reading/Reteaching Chaucer's Criseyde," in *New Perspectives on Criseyde*, eds. Cindy L. Vitto, and Marcia Smith Marzec, 165-80 (Asheville, NC: Pegasus, 2004), 165.

exercise a litigious sensitivity to detail in this matter of judgment. Evaluations of this key issue tend rather more towards kneejerk binarism than hermeneutical precision. On the one hand, “of all the women in English literature, Chaucer's Criseyde is the most lavishly praised. No other English heroine has ever cast a spell like hers.”<sup>41</sup> In other accounts, Criseyde is the “dark angel” who draws out the basest desires of men.<sup>42</sup> As Jamie Fumo argues, readers pick a side: “one may hate or love her— or both— but not remain neutral, at least according to the evidence of medieval Trojan narratives.”<sup>43</sup> We must pick a side because, according to Fumo, we have all of the evidence. We *know* Criseyde (or at least we feel that we do).

How is it then that readers so easily purport to understand Criseyde's character if it is also true that what she desires cannot be known? Although the various motivations assigned to Criseyde by her readers are, as Stock indicates, “a natural function of the ambiguity of the language Chaucer selected in constructing his characterization of the enigmatic Trojan heroine,” Criseyde's ambiguity alone cannot account for the zeal of her critics (35). We think we know Criseyde because the stakes for understanding her seem higher than it does for other Chaucerian characters. The real challenge of Criseyde comes not from attempting to discern her “entente,” but in trying to untangle a paradox: how can Criseyde embody the most fundamental of the narrative's knowledges (Troilus was

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<sup>41</sup> Mieszkowski, “Chaucer's Much Loved Criseyde,” *Chaucer Review* 26.2 (1992): 109-32, 109.

<sup>42</sup> Maria Greenwood, “Women in Love, or Three Courtly Heroines in Chaucer and Malory: Elaine, Criseyde, and Guinevere,” in *A Wyf Ther Was: Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens-Fonck*, ed. Juliette Dor, 167-77 (Liège: U of Liège, 1992), 177.

<sup>43</sup> Fumo, “Hating Criseyde,” 24.

undone by Criseyde's failure to return; Troilus' downfall augured the fate of Troy) and remain fundamentally unknowable herself? Is it actually around her unknowability that critics make their pronouncements of allegiance or revulsion?

Writing nearly sixty years before Fumo, E. Talbot Donaldson muses on this problem:

Criseyde is so memorable a character because she evokes from us simultaneously the most powerful emotions of which we are capable, if the most opposed. Psychologically, we are never allowed to form any very precise or consistent image of her; indeed we are actively prevented from doing so. Yet because we know people not really with our minds but with our hearts, every sensitive reader will feel that he really knows Criseyde—and no sensible reader will ever claim that he really understands her.<sup>44</sup>

Ironically enough, for the New Critic Donaldson, the aesthetics of the text are exceeded by the sensory, affective desires of the reader: sensitive and sensible. Despite the obvious dangers of universalizing a very personal (and overwhelmingly masculine) reading experience, Donaldson offers a thoughtful hermeneutic paradox that critics sometimes forget to appreciate: while it is true that our investment in a narrative correlates positively with our perceived familiarity with its characters, it is also true that as we sharpen our reading acuity we tend to more fully comprehend the thickness of human subjectivity, destabilizing that familiarity. What is puzzling about Donaldson's insight is that he does not accede to his own argument: he really does think that he understands her.

And, as Carolyn Dinshaw has famously argued, no critic has fallen under Criseyde's spell quite like Donaldson. Criseyde, for Donaldson, is not only one of literature's most alluring heroines, she exceeds her textual function and begins to take on

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<sup>44</sup> Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: The Athlone Press, 1970), 83.

a material body: marking “Chaucer’s supreme achievement in the creation of human character,” Criseyde possesses “all of the qualities that men might hope to encounter in their first loves.”<sup>45</sup> Donaldson is far from alone in bestowing a materiality onto Criseyde’s textual body. Since Constance Saintonge’s “In Defense of Criseyde” (1954), a steady undercurrent of scholars have adopted a meta-disciplinary view of *Troilus* criticism in order to lament the tendency of some of Criseyde’s male critics to eroticize Criseyde as if she were materially knowable. For Dinshaw, this infatuation with Criseyde, combined with sometimes over-confident readings of Chaucer’s poem, unites Robertson and Donaldson as “masculine readers” who oversimplify Chaucer’s fundamentally “feminine” text through a compulsive need to control its fundamental multiplicity and settle on “a single... meaning fixed in a hierarchical structure.”<sup>46</sup> Unperturbed by the six-hundred year gap between the critics writing *on* the poem and Chaucer’s writing *of* the poem, Dinshaw offers a similar diagnosis of the *Troilus* narrator, whom she explicitly allies with the critics and whom she charges with “[turning] away from the feminine” (29). With her critique, Dinshaw importantly points out the reductive certainty desired (and performed) by many readers. By focusing solely on how the narrator behaves in Book V, she also implicates herself in the logic of her own critique by reducing a highly complex narrator to one more definitively “masculine” reader of the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>46</sup> See Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 48.

text.<sup>47</sup> In the next section, I revisit Dinshaw's claims in an analysis of the narrator, his relationship with Criseyde, and his legacy among critics.

### **'As seyth myn auctor': Criseyde's Narrator**

In Book III, the narrator interrupts Criseyde's process of falling in love in order to make his most sustained complaint about the difficulty of balancing the tasks of historical fidelity and literary entertainment:

But now, paraunter, som man wayten would  
That every word, or sonde, or look, or chere  
Of Troilus that I rehersen sholde,  
In al this whyle un-to his lady dere;  
I trowe it were a long thyng for to here-  
Or of what wight that stant in swich disjoynte,  
His wordes aile, or every look, to poynte.

For soothe, I have not herd it doon er this,  
In storye noon, ne no man here, I wene;  
And though I wolde I coude not, ywis;  
For ther was som epistle hem bitwene,  
That wold, as seyth myn auctor, wel contene  
Neigh half this book, of which him list not wryte;  
How shlde I thane a lyne of it endyte?

(III. 491-504).

Although some readers might prefer a responsible narrator who recites every detail of the events he recalls, this narrator admits a narratological absence for the twin sakes of brevity and precedent—no raconteur has ever provided the details of these crucial moments. The decision to abbreviate the scene introduces the idea that a disparity might

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<sup>47</sup> The very titles of some publications dedicated to further exploring the *Troilus* narrator tell something about the complexity of this "character." See, for example "The Narrator as Mythographic Glossator," "History of a Shady Character," "The Unlikely Narrator," and "The Comic Function of the Narrator."



exist between his two tasks. Any lack in the historical record jeopardizes the coherence of his narrative: in the case of the letters between Troilus and Criseyde, the narrator wonders, "How sholde I hanne a lyne of it endyte" (III. 504). If his "auctor" has neglected to include the text of these letters in his presumably complete history, is it still this narrator's job to provide that information? The absence awakens the reader to the constructed nature of all narrative, however historical in intent, and also creates a space for the narrator to introduce elements of his own imagination into this story. In exposing the fantasy of consistent, stable history from which narrative can be drawn, this narrator seems to insist that literary art requires creation *ex nihilo*.

Despite an occasional willingness to invent or question a historical detail, the *Troilus* narrator does not pretend to literary greatness. From the opening lines of the poem, the narrator situates himself not as creator of meaning, but as the medium, or "sorwful instrument," through which an already-determined "sorwful tale" can reach an audience of lovers in the present (I.10;14). As he begins, however, the narrator begins to recognize the impossible task of remaining mere medium: sometimes the historical well lacks ink for his "instrument," sometimes his sources disagree with one another, and sometimes, he realizes, he disagrees with them.

For most readers, the narrator's tortured interactions with his source material underwrite their estimations of his competence. Analyses of Chaucer's narrator in *Troilus and Criseyde* tend to focus on the difficult relationship between the narrator's foreknowledge of the text's ending and his ability to control his undeniable ambivalence regarding the retelling of these events. Throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*, the narrator tracks what can be known and not known about his story during short asides in which he informs the reader that his sources do not report the

details of a specific scene, that they differ, or that he wants to deviate from them. According to some critics, it is precisely this equivocation that makes the narrator a frustrating figure.<sup>48</sup> As with Criseyde's critics, those who write about the *Troilus* narrator vary in their ultimate determination of the narrator's efficacy, figuring him variously as "devious,"<sup>49</sup> "uneasy,"<sup>50</sup> "a performer,"<sup>51</sup> "flawed,"<sup>52</sup> "idiot-historian,"<sup>53</sup> or as "uncertain and fluctuating."<sup>54</sup> Regardless of their ultimate evaluation, critics tend to focus on the narrator's two abiding preoccupations: the question of what to do with textual authority and the question of what to do with Criseyde. As I show in this section, these issues dovetail by the end of the narrative in order to frame Chaucer's interrogation of what can be known about the written past. The narrator filters his refusal to fully *know* the past through his relationship with Criseyde, who, even as the presumed agent of

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<sup>48</sup> David Lawton summarizes the critical attitude of that considers the narrator's pursuits as threatening to undermine the poem itself, stating "we have characterized its narrator in terms that grossly insult Chaucer's own textual performance" (*Chaucer's Narrators*, 90).

<sup>49</sup> Ida Gordon refers to the narrator as "devious" in *The Double Sorrow of Troilus: A Study of Ambiguities in 'Troilus and Criseyde'* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 126.

See also, Richard Wawso, "The Narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde*," *ELH* 50.1 (1983): 1-25, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets, An Essay on Troilus and Criseyde* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 31.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Jordan writes that "predominantly... he is a teller of other men's tales, a jongleur, a public performer—emphatically not an "auctor" or poet." See "The Narrator in Chaucer's *Troilus*," *ELH* 25 (1958): 237-57, 238.

<sup>52</sup> Donald Rowe, *O Love, O Charite! Contraries Harmonized in Chaucer's Troilus*, (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1976), 160.

<sup>53</sup> Although he later alters his position, A.C. Spearing writes of the "idiot-historian of *Troilus and Criseyde*" as Chaucer's update of the "idiot-dreamer" of *The Book of the Duchess*. See Spearing, A.C. "Chaucer the Writer," in Maurice Hussey, A.C. Spearing, and James Winny, *An Introduction to Chaucer*, 115-32 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1965), 121

<sup>54</sup> For Lawton, the *Troilus* narrator "scrutinizes his text like a dreamer scans the *mise-en-scène* of his dream," which lends him also the dreamer's characteristic uncertainty. See *Chaucer's Narrators*, 78-9.

Troilus' destruction, remains unknowable in the text. Keeping in mind Margherita's arguments against turning Criseyde's unknowability into a trope, I would like to examine this unknowability in order to re-situate the *Troilus* narrator's attempt to forge an ethical relationship to the past. Viewed in this light, the descriptions of the *Troilus* narrator as a failed storyteller or as Dinshaw's "masculinist" reader fall short by ignoring the narrator's attempt to balance the possibility of an unknowable past (as seen through Criseyde) with the burden of having to tell the story anyways.

The *Troilus* narrator has generated such interest among its readers, in part, because he is so visible. Moreover, as Donald Rowe posits, it is to the narrator that the reader must turn to get a handle on the poem's ambiguities (153). Because the narrator admits his status as a failed lover himself (and one who expresses a desire to exonerate Criseyde), it is not surprising that Criseyde represents his largest narratological blind spot. Other readers see potential in this relationship. For Donaldson, "in order to understand Criseide properly we should first have to send the narrator to a psychoanalyst for a long series of treatments and then ask him to rewrite the poem on the basis of his own increased self-knowledge" (67). Indeed, as the daughter of Calchas, a "gret devyn" and the first locus of authority in the text ("lord of greet auctoritee"), Criseyde is from the beginning situated within the dialectics of knowing against which the narrator so conspicuously labors (1.65-66) The narrator's investment in Criseyde does not, in any way, equate to knowledge of his heroine, but instead emphasizes the gravity with which he undertakes his task. While the narrator may recognize Criseyde's "entente" as the central force organizing his narrative, he struggles to find in his sources adequate insight

into her thoughts and actions. Where David Lawton claims that this lack of recognition highlights the narrator's function as rhetorician and "artificer," it may also attest to the sheer unknowability of Criseyde, history, and the process of re-writing.

The labor the narrator expends trying to make sense of his sources and control his tale erupt into constant intrusions into the narrative. Not that this narrator is particularly unique among medieval narrators. For instance, as is the custom for many a medieval romance, the *Troilus* narrator relies frequently on the rhetorical trope *occupatio*, which alludes to an event by denying it will be mentioned—a kind of present absence. While medieval romance narrators typically employ this device to aid the romance mechanics of suspension and deferral as regards the revelation of the protagonist's desired object, the *Troilus* narrator employs *occupatio* more literally as an admission that he cannot convey the consequences of his own narratological actions. Throughout the narrative, his interactions with Criseyde lead to moments in which the narrator confronts, through her, what exceeds his ability to know as a storyteller: "Of hire delit or joie soon the leeste/  
Were impossible to my wit to seye" (III.1310-12). Rather than declare the inexpressibility of Criseyde's desire *de facto*, the narrator emphasizes that the inability is *his* ("to my wit"), a confession of personal incompetence he reiterates two lines later when offering that "I kan namore" (1314). He knows nothing more.

Criseyde does not *appear* to represent the fundamentally unknowable, however—the narrator suggests that her desires are still part of the knowable, recoverable historical record: "Nought lyst myn auctour fully to declare/  
What that she thoughte whan he seyde so" (III.575-76). Rather, Criseyde's unknowability in *Troilus* is a function of the

narrator's desire and his understanding of the past, but as the audience, readers participate in the difficulty of felicitously following an "auctour." When the narrator wants to rely on a singular textual authority, he is sometimes unable to locate the proper narrative strand: "Nought lyst myn auctour fully to declare/ What that she thoughte whan he seyde so" (III. 576-77). Conversely, when trying to extricate himself and his narrative from the rigidity of his own tale's telling, he often discloses an impotence to do so: "But sooth is, though I kan nat tellen al / As kan myn auctour, of his excellence" (III. 1324-26). The narrator wants to believe in a source, a single authority from which his entire narrative might rely, and yet, if he invests such power in his presumed "auctour," he must also acknowledge the gaps in this received vision of the Trojan past. A "double sorwe" indeed.

Although these intrusions are not uncommon to medieval narrative, they are frequent (and distracting) enough to merit more sustained attention. It seems that these interruptions serve as the narrator's performance of the difficulty of his job, the responsibility of not only establishing a unified textual ideology, but of needing to sustain it within an unending cycle of renewal. In essence, the task of the medieval narrator is a paradoxical one: to acquire authority ("auctoritas"), the narrator must create the impression of a closed text while at the same time recognizing the underlying openness that threatens to erupt and efface the illusion of a singular past. Larry Scanlon writes that the medieval concept of "auctoritas" bears great similarity to the comparatively modern notion of hegemony, inasmuch as it enacts an ideological dominance that bears on material reality and must constantly be "renewed and re-enacted" in order to be

sustained.<sup>55</sup> In *Troilus and Criseyde*, "auctoritas" is not only established, it is blamed, praised, reinforced, avoided, stretched, and contracted; yet, the narrator never seems to quite know what to *do* with it. According to some critics, it is precisely this equivocation that makes the Troilus narrator a failed and frustrating figure, given the interests of the present analysis, this uncertainty is worth pursuing.

This desire to impress his narrative with the vision of a unified past helps explain the invention of a persona, 'Lollius,' who stands in as the narrator's ostensible source for important details. Early in Book One, when writing about Troilus's initial impressions of Criseyde, the narrator identifies Lollius, as "myn auctour" (I. 394).<sup>56</sup> However, rather than establish this source in order to corroborate his own version of the events, the naming of Lollius serves to distance the narrator from his primary source and establish his own, preeminent authority:

And of [Troilus'] song naught only the sentence,  
As writ myn auctour called Lollius,  
But plainly, save our tonges difference,  
I dar wel seyn, in al, that Troilus  
Sede in his song, loo, every word right thus  
As I shal seyn; and whoso list it here,  
Loo, next this verse he ma it fynden here.  
(I. 393-99)

Whereas Lollius can offer only the "sentence" or basic understanding of Troilus's song,

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<sup>55</sup> Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power. The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 36.

<sup>56</sup> The figure "Lollius" appears also in Chaucer's *House of Fame*. Although there is still some debate, most Chaucerians place *The House of Fame* before *Troilus* in the chronology of his writings. In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer refers to Lollius as one of the poets who wrote about Troy, along with 'Omer' and 'Guydo de Columpnis' (III. 1468).

the narrator provides “every word,” providing, of course, for “our tonges difference.”<sup>57</sup> Even after reducing the numerous sources of Trojan history to one Lollius, the narrator insists that he can offer *more*. Given that *Troilus* names no other source, and that the first mention of Lollius coincides with the first mention of “auctour,” many readers of *Troilus* have assumed, reasonably, that *Troilus*’s ten other references to an “auctour” refer to that same Lollius, who is named explicitly only once more, at the end of *Troilus* (V.1653). The mentions of the narrator’s “auctour” often coincide with elements drawn from Boccaccio, whom we know Chaucer to have read.

Although Chaucerians have searched exhaustively for an actual Lollius from which Chaucer might be drawing,<sup>58</sup> the internal evidence suggests the far more likely

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<sup>57</sup> While Chaucer has been largely following Boccaccio to this point, the “Canticus Troili” that ensues is a translation of Petrarch’s “S’amor non è.”

<sup>58</sup> Several theories have been proposed in order to establish Lollius as a historical personage. Thomas Speght, the first scholar to mention the “Lollius problem” (1598), identified him with a third-century “Italian historiographer,” as outlined in Lillian Hornstein, “Petrarch’s Laelius, Chaucer’s Lollius?” *PMLA* 63.1 (1948): 64-84. In 1868, R.G. Latham inaugurated a theory, later supported by Kittredge (1917), that the name derives from a misunderstanding of a line of Horace (*Epistolae* I, II, 1-2), but could not evidence his claim with any actual manuscript variances of this line. Latham, R.G. “Chaucer.” See Latham, *The Athenaeum*, Oct. 3, 1868. In his expansion of Latham, Kittredge assumes a lost work on the Trojan War by a Lollius; other than this large assumption, his claims are reasonable. According to Kittredge, “Chaucer takes quite particular pains to convey the impression that his *Troilus*... is a faithful translation from the Latin work of Lollius, without any material additions from other sources or from his own pen” and concludes that Lollius is “Chaucer’s fiction... whom Chaucer chooses, for his artistic purposes, to credit practically everything that the *Troilus* contains.” See Kittredge, “Chaucer’s Lollius,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 27 (1917): 47-109, 54-5. H.J. Epstein identifies a poet by the name of Bassus Lollius (d. 19 AD) from whom he builds a theory of how Chaucer might have discovered this author of epigrams through his Italian sources. Indeed, Epstein reads in Chaucer “some pride in marshaling this authority” and surmises that “Lollius seems to have been his discovery.” See Epstein, “The Identity of Chaucer’s Lollius,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 3 (1942): 391-400,

notion that Lollius is an invention of Chaucer/his narrator.<sup>59</sup> Scholars have puzzled over Chaucer's decision to not acknowledge his source(s), but these decisions resonate within the narrative not as Chaucer's, but as the narrator's, and remain consistent with the latter's character. Considering the narrator's worry about historical fidelity and about a knowable past, to collapse the narrative lineage of the fall of Troy (as well as the actual poem itself) unto a singular, mythical expression of authority should not surprise the reader. It would make sense for the narrator obsessed with historical authority to prefer a fictional, obscure, and older sounding authority to the contemporary, vernacular Boccaccio. In an attempt to simplify his historical burden, this displacement of "auctoritas" from many to one source provides the narrator with a single foil, one whose authority he may question, challenge and lament, and whose historio-literary inevitabilities he later attempts to resist.

### **Chaucer and the Ethics of Re-Writing**

Critics have held stubbornly to a historical Lollius for a similar reason they have

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393. The aforementioned Hornstein chastises critics for wanting to read Lollius as a "literary hallucination," and offers a theory that Lollius is a misreading of "Laelius," a contemporary of Boccaccio and good friend of Petrarch ("Petrarch's Laelius, Chaucer's Lollius?"). R.A. Pratt comes to the rescue of Latham, as he discovers manuscript variances of the key line of Horace Latham believed to be mistaken as Lollius. See Pratt, "A Note on Chaucer's Lollius," *Modern Language Notes* 65 (1950): 183-87.

<sup>59</sup> Only in 1977 do scholars begin to question the existence of Lollius. W.G. East states flatly, "the name Lollius is a joke," a mere playful rendering of Boccaccio's name. See East, "Lollius," *English Studies* 58 (1977): 396-8, 398. See also Richard Utz, "'As Writ Myn Auctour Called Lollius': Divine and Authorial Omnipotence in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Nominalism and Literary Discourse: New Perspectives*, eds. Hugo Keiper, Christoph Bode, and Richard Utz, 123-44 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997).



insisted on a knowable Criseyde. As figures of authorial imagination who were invented to create a more fluid transition from past to present, both are endowed with such meaning (and responsibility) that it seems hard to believe that they are not real. Critics must know the real Criseyde because so many of the text's readers have maintained that *they* understand her; critics must find the real Lollius because previous theories about his identity, while compelling, have failed to account for Chaucer's visible investment in this putative historical authority. Yet just as Criseyde and Lollius reduce the complexity of the past and, thus, make it easier for us to get from Troy to England in as few steps as possible, they also distance us from a thorny question: how *does* one make narrative choices without a precedent on which to rely, or when one has too many sources, or when one is not sure, or when the attempt at personalizing a history produces contradictions? Criseyde and Lollius are objects created in order to maintain the illusion of a consistent historical record so that the present might be explained in terms of the past. Regardless of his intentions, the narrator reveals the fundamental flaws imbedded within this view of historical writing. As Rowe writes, the narrator's foreknowledge places him "in a position superior to his matter" at the beginning of Troilus, and as he becomes more invested in his tale's telling, "reacting to parts, he loses the whole" (159).

In Book IV, the narrator distills his insecurities about a fully-knowable Trojan history, about translating from history to romance, and about his own emotional involvement in the lives of the characters into his concerns about portraying Criseyde. The exigencies of the poem's narrative structure have brought the narrator to the point at which he must confront the tragic component that had heretofore only shadowed the

romance. The narrator's agnostic pose regarding the unfolding of his text had previously mirrored Troilus' passivity and Criseyde's opacity, but he has delayed long enough, shrouded in the potential of unknowing his own narrative, and now he must press on:

"And now my penne, allas, with chich I write,/ Quaketh for drede of that I most endite"

(4.13-14). Although the narrator makes no explicit claim regarding the locus of this

dread, the subsequent stanza posits Criseyde his primary object of concern:

For how Criseyde Troilus forsook—  
Or at the leeste, how that she was unkynde  
Moot hennesforth ben matere of my book,  
As written folk thorough which it is in mynde,  
Allas, that they sholde evere cause fynde  
To speke hire harm! And if they on hire lye,  
Iwis, himself sholde han the vilanye  
(IV.15-20)

Without access to Criseyde's "entente" (and without any "auctour" on which to rely), the narrator, even after resolving to disclose the betrayal that he fears speaking, remains committed to complicating the inherited history of Criseyde. He refuses to concretely avow Criseyde's abandonment of Troilus, and poses the possibility that her "unkynde" actions (both unkind and unnatural) can only be understood outside of his narrative's horizon of intelligibility.

Having already divulged his attachment to Criseyde, the narrator attempts to avoid condemning her for as long as possible: someone else must be to blame for the parts of the narrative that criticize women and Criseyde. At such moments, the narrator invokes his old books, what "the storie telleth us." This strategy carries him even to Book V, where he describes Criseyde's inevitable turn to Diomedes:

I fynde ek in the stories elleswhere,  
Whan thurgh the body hurt was Diomedede  
Of Troilus, tho wepte she many a teere,  
Whan that she saugh his wyde wowndes blede;  
And that she took, to kepen hym, good hede;  
And for to helen hym of his sorwes smerte,  
Men seyn-I not-that she yaf hym hire herte.  
(V, 1044-50)

The narrator's refusal to commit to this textual comprehension of Criseyde ("Men seyn—I not") marks him both as responsible historian, dissociated from a past he cannot know, and as an incompetent storyteller, unable to follow to completion the narrative strand he began. While his 'othering' of a romance female is far from novel, the narrator's commitment to its maintenance and to unknowing Criseyde parallels his feelings about the writing process itself. All of this suggests a reading of Criseyde as something far more than the Freudian "dark continent." The unknowing of Criseyde reflects, for the narrator, both an ethical decision and a structural necessity for the integrity of the narrative as romance.

Criseyde, of course, correctly predicts her own literary fate in the poem, prophesying that future iterations of the narrative will destroy her ("wol me shende"). Having made more or less the same speech since her first narrative appearance, Criseyde, like the narrator, understands knowing as a textual act. It is not surprising, then, that Chaucer adds to Criseyde's traditional lament by including the narrator in the meta-textual discussion of Criseyde's reputation. Providing a counter-weight to Criseyde's traditionally self-pitying apology, the narrator reaffirms Criseyde's undying guilt as a purely textual matter and pleads that his readers put her body to rest:

Ne me ne list this sely womman chyde  
Forther than the storye wol devyse.  
Hire name, allas! is punysshed so wide,  
That for hire gilt it oughte ynough suffise.  
(V. 1093-96)

In discussing the narrator's "turn" in Book V from trying to defend Criseyde to acknowledging her guilt, it is important to emphasize a few things. First, however open-ended Criseyde's "entente" may be, the same cannot be said for her actions. Throughout all five books, the narrator locates moments where an absence in the historical record provides him with an opportunity to destabilize what his reader might think he or she knows about Criseyde, and thus re-infuse his putatively historical narrative with possibility once more. Yet while the narrator may unknow Criseyde by concentrating on the narrative's logical gaps and on her "entente," he cannot, in the end, fully separate her from the structural desire that required her advent in the first place. Criseyde's function and destiny were determined before she ever entered the narrative tradition.

The narrator cannot change "history," but he can employ literary techniques that, taken together with his insistent refrain of objectivity, threaten the truth claims the Matter of Troy was meant to instantiate. The narrator, it seems, is less troubled by Criseyde's guilt than he is for having to re-tell it. The narrator's final admission of Criseyde's guilt—"That al be that Criseyde was untrewre" (V.1774)—has been understood too frequently as a critical end point, an indication of a narrator too defeated to continue the difficult project of un-knowing Criseyde.<sup>60</sup> As the narrator adds two lines later, with an

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<sup>60</sup> Dinshaw reads the ending of *Troilus* as a confirmation that the originally "multiple" narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* has given into the same masculinist impulse to

ostensibly earnest defensiveness, “Ye may hir gilt in othere bokes see”: the textual record speaks for itself (V.1776). Of course the narrator has spent the last eight thousand lines proving that the authority of his source contains so many gaps that readers might rightly begin to question how reliable medieval narratives about the past really are. What critics routinely overlook in these closing moments of the poem is that Chaucer’s literary subversion of Trojan history, which requires the narrator to affirm his duty as historical “instrument” while continuing to undermine his “auctour,” has already taken hold.

Although critics regard *Troilus and Criseyde* as Chaucer’s “most historical poem,” the collapse of Chaucer’s actual sources onto a singular, fictional representative of historical fidelity, Lollius, only magnify the narrator’s deviations from the historiographic record.<sup>61</sup> Chaucer’s narrator turns out to be an inversion of Boccaccio’s in

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streamline thought as do the male critics of *Troilus*, dissolving narrative tension in order to arrive, unequivocally, where the story began: with the historical fact of Criseyde’s guilt (*Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, 28). In order to better characterize the narrator’s role in the unknowing of Criseyde it may be useful to compare the actions of *Troilus*’ “failed lover” narrator with another famous Chaucerian narrator, the “eunuch” Pardoner of the *Canterbury Tales*. Dinshaw draws an implicit comparison between these two narrators in her *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, which contains chapters on both the *Troilus* narrator and on the Pardoner, whose projects she opposes to one another. By noting the parallels between these two narrators as well as the differences, we might see the Pardoner’s “castration” is more of an interpretive means toward an argument about the status of language (and of the ethical demands of retelling) than a critical end in itself. Analyses that reduce the Pardoner to a discourse on sexuality and condense the discussion of *Troilus* narrator unto his sources may obscure the importance of these narrators’ contributions to a conversation on the difficult position of the Chaucerian narrator. In redirecting the critical narratives concerning both the Pardoner and the *Troilus* narrator toward the structural relationships they maintain with the act of narration itself, these figures can be seen not as anomalous failures, but as characters who embody the difficulties faced by medieval storytellers as well as the subsequent anxieties about auctoritas and the ethics of re-telling, Christian and secular.

<sup>61</sup> Sylvia Federico discusses *Troilus and Criseyde*’s “literary future” fueled by narrative acts she

*Il Filostrato*, and the differences between these two storytellers help outline Chaucer's departure from Boccaccio, and from the demands of history. Unlike Boccaccio's narrator, Chaucer's is no lover; where Boccaccio's narrator explicitly allies himself with Troilo, Chaucer's invests in Criseyde; and, finally, whereas the narrator folds *Filostrato*'s literary aspirations into the teleology of its historical moral, the *Troilus* narrator renders Boccaccio's "rhetoric of closure" into Chaucer's "poetics of unknowing."<sup>62</sup>

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As traced in the previous sections, the motif of unknowability in *Troilus and Criseyde* helps unite three prominent features of Chaucer's text: a narrator who constantly calls attention to the knowability of the historical record; a version of Criseyde who is often at odds with the historical reputation she has inherited; and a series of formal changes enacted by Chaucer that place him at odds with his sources. On the formal level, the combination of these features suggests that there is more to the story than has been recorded. The sense of a larger, inaccessible historical record lurking behind the uncertainty corroborates—at least indirectly—the historicity of a character who exists solely as an historiographical mechanism and an explanatory function. In this sense, these narrative eruptions might be understood better as formal features that help create the illusion or the *effect* of a historical depth from which Criseyde the subject has emerged, in fragmentary form.

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calls "not history." See "Chaucer's Utopian Troy Book: Alternatives to Historiography in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Exemplaria* 11.1 (1999): 79-106.

<sup>62</sup> James Dean employs the phrase "rhetoric of closure" to describe Boccaccio's poem in "Chaucer's *Troilus*, Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, and the Poetics of Closure," *Philological Quarterly* 64.2 (1985): 175-84, 175.

If indeed Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* "unknows" Criseyde, and if, as I have argued so far in this dissertation, one effect of this literary unknowing is to suspend questions of knowledge and/or meaning that putatively historical figures have come to inherit, how are the effects of unknowing Criseyde manifest? To answer this question, I return to the narrator's admonition at the beginning of Book V, quoted earlier, that readers not punish her "forther than the storye wol devyse" (1094). Here the narrator comments on the same extra-textual phenomenon that Criseyde herself laments throughout her narrative history: that her reputation has exceeded her narrative function. This had been the case for decades if not centuries by the time of Chaucer's poem, and this excessive quality was not lost on prior authors, just as it was not lost on Criseyde. Boccaccio, along with his predecessors, remedies the problem by reintegrating this excess into a masculine economy of history, wherein Criseyde's misdeeds are moralized into a historical truth about the fickleness of *women*, a kind of necessary irritant inherent to, but in excess of, the process of *translatio*. This moralization is, however, conspicuously absent in Chaucer's narrative. Chaucer's narrator does not instrumentalize Criseyde's guilt for any purpose, but instead asks that she be forgiven. This would strike some readers as a reasonable request, considering especially how the narrator has already destabilized the conditions by which her blame was so easily assigned. However, despite the narrator's efforts to mitigate the blame Criseyde receives, he does not achieve his goal. The narrator cannot put Criseyde's body to rest.

This excessive quality to *Troilus and Criseyde* did not go unremarked by its readers. First among these is Robert Henryson who, nearly a century after the

composition of *Troilus and Criseyde*, retrofits Chaucer's narrative with a sense of finality. In *The Testament of Cresseid* (late-fifteenth century), Henryson's narrator, inspired by a dream vision, rereads the end of Chaucer's *Troilus* before picking up "another quaire" that becomes the *Testament* itself, a narrative in which Chaucer's heroine is unequivocally judged and sentenced. Henryson's account of Cresseid's demise begins when, abandoned by Diomedes, she contracts leprosy (a clear sign of sexual impropriety) and ends shortly after when, failing to recognize Troilus when he takes pity on her, she dies alone confessing her wrongdoing once and for all. Perhaps due to its tidy punishment of its heroine, the *Testament* gained the status of *Troilus*' official-unofficial ending. In the first printed edition of Chaucer's works (1532), William Thynne included *The Testament of Cresseid* as *Troilus and Criseyde*'s "sixth book" and thus inaugurated a century of confusion in which the *Testament* was often mistaken as Chaucer's work.

What made Henryson's 600-line coda, which differs from the *Troilus* in genre, dialect, and tone, so popular? The fact that so many readers wanted to understand the *Testament* as *Troilus*'s ending suggests first and foremost a confirmation of the excess generated but left suspended by Chaucer's unknowing-knowing Criseyde. Regardless of the debates over whether Henryson was sympathetic to his heroine or not, it is apparent that he felt some need to punish Cresseid and, moreover, that a subsequent generation of readers expressed a similar desire. Chaucer's readers needed to know how Criseyde's story ends. The popularity of the *Testament* suggests that Cresseid gets what some readers felt she deserved.



If the act of unknowing Criseyde rendered her historical guilt excessive because it could not be instrumentalized towards any purpose, *The Testament of Cresseid* attempted to salvage the historical work of *Troilus and Criseyde* by inserting Criseyde into its economy of justice. The popularity of the *Testament* testifies to the discomfort some readers experienced as a result of Chaucer's unknowing of Criseyde, but we still cannot know what historical intentions Chaucer may have had in writing *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer's attention to what we do not and cannot know about Criseyde destabilizes what we *do* know about her as well as what we *need* to know in order to consider her *knowable*. That a fact-finding narrator cannot unearth trivial, but seemingly obvious, details makes these absences even more poignant.<sup>63</sup> Yet there is more to Chaucer's treatment of history in *Troilus and Criseyde* than missing stories: Chaucer's *Troilus* presents its readers with a hermeneutic paradox. On the one hand, there exists the narrator's conspicuous detours from the historical "matere," which have long been the focus of earlier Trojan narratives. On the other hand, the very choice to treat the "Matter of Troy"—what Lee Patterson has termed a foundational myth of secular medieval history—belies an equally discernable interest in the function of late-medieval historiography.<sup>64</sup> This paradox, combined with Justice's observation about Chaucer's "history effect" that gives his characters a subjective depth to which readers have no

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<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Scala discusses the formal importance of such absence in medieval narrative, especially in Chaucer's works, noting that medieval narratives are often "structured by missing stories." See Scala, *Absent Narratives: Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 8.

<sup>64</sup> Patterson notes the "special urgency" surrounding the time of the poem's composition as one possible source of Chaucer's interest in what Patterson calls "the philosophy of history" (*Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 84-5).

access, raises an important question: why *does* Chaucer engage the past so frequently in a narrative that readily admits to the impossibility of any meaningful recovery of that past? While Elizabeth Scala rightly points out that Middle English literature produces its impact *via* narrative gaps, *Troilus and Criseyde* shows how Middle English literature's recourse to re-writing also involves a deliberate un-knowing of stories that were received as history. These narratives must be repurposed and un-known in order to make space for an ethics of, literary writing.

Although Criseyde's reemergence in Henryson appears to enact a sort of "return of the repressed," it does not guarantee (or even suggest) that readers might fully understand Criseyde upon finishing this "uther quaire." Nor can critics know what element of Boccaccio's adaptation urged Chaucer to write his poem. This has not, of course, stopped critics from trying to answer these impossible questions. In discussing C.S. Lewis' famous thesis regarding Chaucer's encounter with *Il Filostrato*, George Edmondson avers that Boccaccio "disinters" Troilus from his historical grave, "his story made to repeat itself after it has already found its ending."<sup>65</sup> In connecting what eludes our understanding of a complicated relationship between history, narrative, desire, and some of the most influential Chaucerian criticism, Edmondson's use of psychoanalytic concepts provides a novel framework for discussing that which otherwise remains inaccessible to the modern scholar. This is certainly useful, yet I do not want to dispense so easily with the unknowable, for it is precisely the irresolvable nature of what remains

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<sup>65</sup> Edmondson, *The Neighboring Text: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Henryson* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2011) 102.

unknown in *Troilus and Criseyde* that undergirds Chaucer's contribution to the "philosophy of history." Adherence to the psychoanalytical model of hermeneutics has too often given critics the false impression that Criseyde's "entente" might be recoverable as long as we critics produce our best analytical work.

Insofar as Criseyde's guilt and unwieldy reputation ground a common moral that unites the Trojan past and English present, it appears that Chaucer's narrator's plea to end Criseyde's excessive torment must remain structurally unmet. After all, her proposed betrayal becomes the knowledge that structures the possibility for a felicitous translation from past to present. In this sense, Criseyde cannot be put to rest, not because she has never been anything more than a function, but because she is herself the tomb for a Trojan history that has ascended to higher realms. Insofar as these medieval writers substitute her actions for those that facilitate the Fall of Troy, Criseyde's betrayal becomes the act through which the past is buried in order to regenerate itself into the future. Her betrayal provides the necessary means by which *translatio* occurs.

But since Criseyde's guilt in *Troilus and Criseyde* guarantees nothing, suspending the question *translatio* guaranteed by earlier narratives, I would like to insist, both with and against Edmondson, that the narrator's refusal to subject Criseyde's betrayal to some greater, knowable truth positions *Troilus and Criseyde* within "the space between two deaths."<sup>66</sup> This formulation derives from Jacques Lacan's notion of a second death beyond physical death, "the point at

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<sup>66</sup> The theme of the "space between two deaths" resounds throughout Edmondson's *The Neighboring Text*. Through much of the book, Edmondson insists on Troilus' status between two deaths, but ends his chapter on *Troilus and Criseyde* by suggesting that "Able neither to add nor subtract, the narrator simply hands his enjoyment over to the socio-Symbolic Other... leaving Criseyde precisely where her words have left her: in the space between two deaths" (*The Neighboring Text*, 196).

which the very cycles of the transformations of nature are annihilated.”<sup>67</sup> This term, which has been overused within literary studies, refers to a mode of an extreme isolation seldom encountered by literary characters, a space of unknowing within which absence and presence become indistinguishable, a place where existence and non-existence are united by their shared lack of demand. Whereas Edmondson sees Troilus “disrupt the logic of the symbolic order” from within this space, I would like to insist that he is in fact powerless to do so (150). As Henryson makes clear in his *Testament*, it is Criseyde who haunts the symbolic economy from without, the leper who needs to be “eliminated from the world of the living.”<sup>68</sup>

While Criseyde’s abandonment of Troilus sends Troilus into something of a zombie-like state, he has always already been encrypted insofar as Troy has always already fallen. After all, in the logic of *translatio imperii*, it is the action of Troy’s *downfall* that signifies, not the city itself. Troilus’ death depends on Criseyde’s betrayal, which, of course, is not up for debate. Chaucer’s narrator, however, refuses to employ Criseyde’s betrayal toward a specific epistemological end. The unknowing of Criseyde not only leaves her suspended but leaves the text itself between two kinds of death. Criseyde’s famous laments in which she bemoans the reputation with which she shall be received mark her recognition of an existence that is already both fragmentary, insofar as her agency has already been taken from her, and excessive, insofar as her textual body will exceed and outlive the “historical” body that the text will leave behind. Criseyde never experiences the “second death” that would remove her from the signifying economy in the same act that mobilizes her to fulfill a function within it. So too does *Troilus and*

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<sup>67</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1997), 248.

<sup>68</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 280.

*Criseyde* avoid the event of encryption that might, as Lacan puts it, “end the cycles of transformation,” the act through which Empire might rest squarely, permanently in England. Through *Troilus and Criseyde*’s unknowing of the efficacy for which Criseyde’s betrayal is purposed, we might say then that when Chaucer “disinters” Troilus from Boccaccio’s grave, he leaves the tomb open.

## Chapter Three

### Pearl and the Arithmepoetics of Unknowing

*“But I haven’t been writing,” Ulrich said crisply.*

*“I’m glad to hear it.” Arnheim adjusted to the fact.*

*“Writing, like the pearl, is a disease.”*

*-Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities**

The third-century Syrian *Acts of Thomas*, whose influence I will trace in chapter four through the Prester John legend, contains a poetic excursion through which we might glimpse the curious history of another medieval conduit of unknowability: the pearl.

Shortly before the Apostle Thomas outlines King Gundapor’s famously ethereal palace that later serves as the blueprint for Prester John’s own residence, the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* (early third century) breaks off into a Gnostic poem of Syrian origin, often referred to as “Hymn of the Pearl.”<sup>1</sup> Within the poem, Thomas is sent to Egypt equipped with a message, written into his heart, which instructs him to wrest a pearl from a serpent. In return, his father promises that Thomas will earn the rights to the kingdom.

Thomas adheres purposefully to the message. Once he arrives in Egypt, he heads directly for the serpent. However, because he disguises himself as an Egyptian, the residents confuse him for a local. Resigned by politeness to acquiesce to their hospitality,

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<sup>1</sup> Here I follow A.F.J. Klijn’s edition of *The Acts of Thomas*, Supplements to the *Novum Testamentum* 5 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962), 120-25. At this point in the narrative of the *Acts*, the king Mazdai sends Thomas to prison where Thomas chants the hymn in response to a request by the other prisoners to pray for them. In his commentary on the hymn, Klijn remarks on the difficulty of discerning what is meant by the pearl in the poem (277-8).

Thomas becomes distracted; he forgets his task and, full of food and drink, falls into a deep sleep. Meanwhile, hearing no word from his son, Thomas' father sends a letter of reminder from his kingdom. This letter, a magical document, arrives at its slumbering recipient and coaxes the dreamer from his sleeping state by announcing its own arrival and message, urging the young prince to "Remember the pearl" (l. 45). Awakened to his task, the speaker retrieves the pearl and earns the rights to the kingdom.

As a poem about the difficult recovery of a lost pearl whose rescue requires a metaphysical intervention to break through a dreamer's state of resistance, the "Hymn of the Pearl" shares a fundamental structure with a better-known Middle English analogue.<sup>2</sup> In the fourteenth-century *Pearl*, too, a dreamer's pearl, symbolizes, upon its retrieval, the gratification of a specific desire, completing a circuit among an external demand, the disembodied medium through which the demand travels, and the recognition of a desire to answer the demand. The strangeness of these poems, however, lies less in their symbolism and more in their narrative logic, which hinges on an impossible communication between conscious and non-conscious worlds.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in the latter poem, the burden of understanding resides not with that metaphysical agent of the vision, but with the pearl itself, an object that exists not only *within* but also *between* two worlds.

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<sup>2</sup> While I do not advocate a direct relation between the two texts, it is worth noting that Ross Arthur cites fourteenth-century sermons on the Apostle Thomas as one of the influences of *Pearl*. See "The Day of Judgment is Now: A Johannine Pattern in the Middle English *Pearl*," *American Benedictine Review* 38 (1987): 227-42.

<sup>3</sup> This "betweenness" has long been recognized as a hallmark trait of the dream vision genre. Steven Kruger, writing about medieval systems of dream interpretation, references Calcidius' belief that no matter how significant, dream visions always prevent a full union between God and man. See *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 30; 41.

I compare these two poems not to posit an evolutionary teleology of their shared symbolism, but to insist that readings of the Middle English *Pearl* have not adequately accounted for the poet's innovative handling of the rich symbolism of the medieval pearl. Although it has become a critical commonplace to note how the poet's playful manipulation of the central symbol renders the poem's signifying chain a veritable string of pearls, few studies have contextualized their reading within the rich medieval tradition of the pearl.<sup>4</sup> As I will show, across medieval texts and contexts, from the Classical to the Christian, the figure of the pearl always signals a collision between material and immaterial forces, an encounter between what can be known/observed/studied and the phenomena that exceed human cognition.

After establishing a history of the medieval pearl, I show how the poet develops the theme of the impossible encounter not only in the poem's content but within its form, through which the poet attempts to articulate the impossible encounter of writing.

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore Bogdanos provides a useful model for integrating the traditional medieval symbolism of the pearl into a thematic reading of the poem, even though he views the poem's context as "the ultimate shaping force of the symbol's meaning." See *Pearl: Image of the Ineffable* (University Park: Penn State UP, 1983), 14-19. While the critical literature focused on *Pearl*'s pearl tracks its symbolic evolution in the poem or its resonances outside of the text, no study attends to the object itself to ground a reading of the poem's epistemology. William Schofield inspired the tradition of reading the poem allegorically in "The Nature and the Fabric of The Pearl," *PMLA* 19.1 (1904): 154-215. Marie Padgett Hamilton situates the poem as dream-vision allegory in "The Meaning of the Middle English Pearl," *PMLA* 70.4 (1955): 805-824. Stanton Hoffman outlines the meanings critics have attached to the pearl in "The Pearl: Notes for an Interpretation," *Modern Philology* 58.2 (1960): 73-80. A.C. Spearing proposes an understanding based on the evolving nature of Pearl's pearl in "Symbolic and Dramatic Development in Pearl," *Modern Philology* 60.1 (1962): 1-12. The biblical context of pearl symbolism is discussed in D.W. Robertson Jr., "The Pearl as Symbol," *Modern Language Notes* 65.3 (1950): 144-161, and more elaborately in Constantino Vona, "La *Margarita Pretiosa* Nella Interpretazione Di Alcuni Scrittori Ecclesiastici," *Divinitas* 1 (1957): 118-160.



Through a rigorous engagement with mathematical principles of proportionality evident among all poems of the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, *Pearl* imitates, but never achieves, the harmony that both poet and dreamer seek. In both cases, the anticipated event of union exceeds all available means of comprehension. Consequently, the pearl comes to represent something more than loss; given the interest in “crafting” shared by poet and dreamer, a jeweler, the pearl becomes the material embodiment of perfection that no act of human labor could ever achieve. It is then this excessive quality of this signifier, this pearl, that founds a poetics rooted in the impossibility of representing that which it so desperately seeks. *Pearl* crafts what I call an “arithmepoetics of unknowing”— a mathematical flattening of the signification process that, by approximating a meta-language through which perfect the poem’s drive for perfection might be approached, calls into question the very possibility of generating meaning through language. Ultimately, the poem uses mathematical, theological, and linguistic principles to draw a parallel between writing and “good works” to demonstrate its lesson: only through faith, a state of *unknowing* can individuals engender a relationship with the Divine.

In other words, the goal of the chapter is to show how the poem builds on the tradition medieval significance of the pearl in order to posit a poetics capable of representing the impossible condition of knowledge as such. *Pearl* does so by contextualizing its discourse of un-knowing within a geometrically-inflected consideration of the pearl’s genesis as a perfectly felicitous (and thereby impossible) poetic act. Seeking a relationship between the medieval pearl and the poem’s formal architecture, I show how the poet extrapolates on the intellectual history of the pearl in

order to construct a spatial representation—not unlike a cathedral— of the dreamer’s desire for divine illumination.<sup>5</sup> On the formal level, what results is a poem that attempts to establish a poetics informed by a meditation on the signifier itself (the pearl) that endeavors to unknow any event of signification (the act of union) to which it might aspire. It is in this way that the pearl becomes no mere symptom but, as Robert Musil quips in the epigraph to this chapter, the disease: the poetic act itself.

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As becomes clear, the Middle English *Pearl* is hardly a typical dream vision.<sup>6</sup> Composed in the Northwest Midlands of England in the second half of the fourteenth century, *Pearl* begins a series of four poems (*Cleanness*, *Patience*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) recorded by a single scribe in the manuscript now known as BL Cotton

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<sup>5</sup> There already exists a critical tradition, extending perhaps from Nolan’s influential *Gothic Visionary Perspective*, of scholars who link aspects of *Pearl* to a medieval visual tradition. See especially Britton Harwood’s emphasis on the visual aspects of the poem in, “*Pearl* as Diptych,” in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-poet*, eds. Robert Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian Wasserman, 63-77 (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1991) and Ann Meyer’s superb discussion of allegorical architecture in *Medieval Allegory and the Building of New Jerusalem* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Within the last thirty years especially, critics have disagreed about *Pearl*’s status within the traditional generic classification of the medieval dream vision. These disagreements suggest that, at the very least, *Pearl* is as an unorthodox example of the genre. At most, the dreamer’s resistance and seeming inability to comprehend the lesson of his vision situates the poem as a failed example of the traditional medieval genre, hinting that other factors must animate the poem’s epistemological framework. For the most nuanced treatment of *Pearl* within the traditions of mystical and dream vision, see Jessica Barr’s chapter, “Worldly Attachment and Visionary Resistance in *Pearl*,” in *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2010), 122-151. Although the dream vision has long been considered ripe generic ground for discussions of epistemological limits in medieval thought, I prefer here to focus on the figure of the pearl and its own attendant history with the unknown, for reasons I will make clear below.

Nero A.x.<sup>7</sup> *Pearl* sets biblical matter into in a French-inspired rhyming pattern of ababababbcbc, and, though structurally resembling Boccaccio's Latin eclogue *Olympia*, its metrical pattern of the alliterative long line bears the mark of English poetry's resurgent use of Old English verse patterns.<sup>8</sup> *Pearl* is divided into twenty sections, each containing five stanzas, which are composed of twelve lines. On the manuscript page, each five-stanza section takes up one stanza less than two complete pages, thereby linking folio leaves one to another. The poet provides cohesion within each section through the use of a key word that is repeated at the end (and also sometimes at the beginning) of each of its five stanzas. The poet also employs concatenation, through which he links the sections by repeating the last word of a section in the first line of the next section. As Sarah Stanbury observes, this complex interlinking creates "an echoic effect that strings stanzas together like pearls on a necklace."<sup>9</sup>

The only break in *Pearl*'s elegant and highly mathematical structure occurs in the fifteenth section, which contains an additional stanza (that is, a sixth), bringing the poem

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<sup>7</sup> There is still much disagreement regarding the dating of the poem/manuscript. Critics generally agree on a *terminus a quo* of 1348, the date that marks founding of the Order of the Garter, whose motto appears as a coda for the poem (although there is some question whether or not the coda was a later addition in a different hand). According to paleographical evidence, the *terminus ad quem* for the manuscript is c. 1400. For the most thorough account of the manuscript, see A.S.G. Edwards, "The Manuscript: British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x.," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, eds. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, 197-220 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> As Sandra Pierson Prior avers, the poet "draws on biblical texts not just for subjects and stories but for their assumptions about history and narrative and about signs and patterns and how to interpret them." See *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1996), 1.

<sup>9</sup> See Sarah Stanbury's introduction to the TEAMS edition of *Pearl*, 6.

to 1212 lines and 101 stanzas.<sup>10</sup> As has been long observed, the last line repeats the opening line and returns the reader to the original setting, the poem itself becomes circular, like a pearl. While the interactive nature of the manuscript suggests both a single authorship and a unifying thematic design, in a more fundamental way the manuscript's abiding concerns with precision, containment, and expansion are expressed through the governing symbol of its first poem. In other words, the pearl, which symbolizes its poem's desire for both meaning and enclosure, becomes an emblem of the larger structural program of the manuscript: regulated (and perhaps overdetermined) by an architectural precision, but inspired by the celestial forces that resist codification (evidenced by an obsession with proportionality), the pearl frames poem and manuscript as negotiating a tension between circumscription and illimitability.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Much has been made of the importance of numbers in *Pearl* and especially to the question of the extra stanza in section 15 that runs the poem's total to 101 stanzas. Critical attention to the numerical structure of the poem first appears in print in C.O. Chapman supplies a complicated and ultimately unpersuasive explanation for the need for an extra stanza (it allowed the total to be 99, a significant number, if we discount the last two stanzas which exist outside of the main narrative of the poem). See Chapman, "Numerical Symbolism in Dante and the *Pearl*," *Modern Language Notes* 54 (1939): 256-9. Patricia Kean suggests that the out of place stanza signals a numerological break in from a system based in 5's to one of 6's and allows the poem's 1200 lines to swell to a more significant (in terms of Revelation numerology) 1212. See Kean, "Numerical Composition in *Pearl*," *Notes & Queries* 12 (1965): 49-51. Condren is far more exhaustive than previous engagements with the significance of numbers in the poems of Cotton Nero A.x, as he moves a way from a numerological interpretation to a geometric and/or proportional understanding of the uses of these key numbers. See *The Numerical Universe of the Gawain-Pearl Poet: Beyond Phi* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 2002)

<sup>11</sup> Although *Pearl* and its companion poems appear nowhere outside of Cotton Nero A.x., literary scholars have struggled to definitively establish that the poems were composed by a single author. Although arguments disputing a clear indication of single authorship have been made fairly consistently since William Schofield's article in the first decade of the twentieth century, the most plausible arguments for a multiple

Like other critics, I hesitate to submit *Pearl* to an evolutionary understanding of the medieval vision, especially one in which, as Kathryn Lynch contends, “differences such as those between the ‘supernatural’ in a medieval world view and the ‘unconscious’ in a modern one become simply the differences of ‘terminology.’”<sup>12</sup> I think *Pearl* resists conforming to traditional critical narratives not only because the poem so forcefully controls its own poetics, but also due to its paradoxical status as a self-contained poem that nonetheless proves to be highly unstable. Hoping to unite thematic concerns with the poem’s formal geometry, I turn to poetics.

Before undertaking a reading of the major scenes of *Pearl*, I want to isolate a moment near the end of the poem to frame the more local intervention I would like to make in this chapter into the subfield of *Pearl* studies. Within the poem’s final act of dialogue the dreamer asks to be shown “Pat myry mote” [city/court] that has become the Maiden’s home (l. 936). More than a plea to glimpse something of the celestial New Jerusalem, the dreamer’s entreaty resonates as a last-ditch attempt to persuade the Maiden to make visible, and thereby recoverable, the materiality of his lost pearl. And

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authorship tend to be made on linguistic grounds. See, for example, Matsuji Tajima, “Additional Syntactical Evidence Against the Common Authorship of MS Cotton Nero A.x.,” *English Studies* 59.3 (1978): 193-98 and Yoko Iyeiri, “MS Cotton Nero A.x. poems once again: A study of contracted negative forms,” in *English Historical Linguistics and Philology in Japan*, eds. Jacek Fisiak and Akio Oizumi, 79-90 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998). While critics have located some unifying tendencies based on linguistic habits evident in each of the poems, the most persuasive evidence for a single author comes from the innovative and mathematically complex formal patterns that govern the manuscript and the interactions among and between poems. It is precisely through the use of numbers that readers glimpse the poetic and thematic designs of a poem that otherwise seems quite impenetrable.

<sup>12</sup> See *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, Literary Form* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988), 3.

yet, as the Maiden continually insists, none of what this jeweler sees is really happening: these dream experiences necessarily exceed a mortal capacity to sense and reason.

Moreover, as we have learned from the poem's first stanza, a perfect pearl possesses no such "mote" [stain/spot/blemish], which resounds as the underlying principle that makes its recovery impossible. Accordingly, the dreamer's request to be shown this "mote" of New Jerusalem is met with a paradoxical rejoinder from the Maiden, who describes the New Jerusalem as "Hys mote withouten moote," a self-cancelling turn of phrase that threatens to undo the only means of knowing left to the dreamer (l. 948).

It is only when the two understandings of "mote" cancel each other out that the reader can confidently conclude that *Pearl's* vision contains little to nothing of its genre's claims to revelation: these dream experiences hardly correlate with any knowledge that might be implemented in the material world.<sup>13</sup> When the Maiden subsequently denies the dreamer's request to access the New Jerusalem, citing his failure to meet the prerequisite condition of being "clene wythouten mote" (l. 972), the poem confirms the impossible status of the vision itself: material existence already presupposes the sin or "mote" from which one must separate in order to experience the truths the Maiden espouses. The vision, like the poem itself, merely approximates a felicitous interaction between the material world and the celestial hereafter. When the poem transitions to its promised vision of the New Jerusalem (ll. 973-1152), the dreamer is confronted with an utterly

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<sup>13</sup> Of this scene, Sylvia Tomasch writes, "Synonyms...antonyms... and traditional puns... become inextricably, humorously, and seriously intermixed when to "enter wythinne hys tor" or the "elene eloystor" the dreamer himself must first, outside of the city, be without spot: "elene wythouten mote." See "A *Pearl* Punnology," *JEGP* 88 (1989): 1-20; 10.

conventional representation that merely conforms to his previous knowledge of Revelation (ll. 985-6).<sup>14</sup>

The poet's careful attention to language at this late stage in the poem reveals that the critique of the dreamer's desire for divine knowledge resonates not only at the level of argument, but also formally, at the level of its poetics. Just as the pearl escapes material possession, so too does it exceed linguistic comprehension, a reminder that the pearl is not just a thing, but a kind of negative space. Even in its symbolic plentitude, here the pearl resonates not as some evasive knowledge from which the dreamer might benefit, but instead signals the unknowability of a meaningful contact between material and immaterial worlds. What representational tools are then left to a poet so emphatic about the inadequacies of human sense and language without having to accede to the Maiden's poetics of failure?

To begin, I think that for the most part, studies of the poem have avoided this despairing conclusion by attending to what readers *can know* from the poem about this intersection of earthly and divine worlds. For instance, the longstanding debate across decades of *Pearl* criticism— that of whether *Pearl* is better understood as elegy or as allegory— can be simplified to opposed accounts of how the poet handles the scene of contact between material and immaterial worlds. For the elegists, championing a view of the jeweler as physical man coping with the loss of a small child “Ho wat3 me nerre then

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<sup>14</sup> While Bogdanos remarks the poet's boldness in creating a dreamer who claims to see what the Apostle himself saw, I suggest that readers experience this New Jerusalem as no more “real” (i.e. materially graspable) than the Maiden herself. See Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*, 12.

aunte or nece,” this realm resonates as a space of loss, designating the Maiden’s function as primarily consolatory (l. 233).<sup>15</sup> For those who insist on an allegorical reading, the realm between worlds is generally a theological space, one whose lack of experiential record obligates the Maiden to carefully delimit its opaque doctrinal contours.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, for many, the elegy/allegory question has lost currency as a viable approach to the poem: recent criticism shows how this framework creates a false divide between what can be ultimately reduced to a genre (elegy) and a literary mode (allegory).<sup>17</sup> The more closely one reads *Pearl*, the more one realizes the impossibility of untangling *Pearl*’s personal and symbolic registers. A purely elegiac reading centered on a private loss risks conflating the dreamer-jeweler with the poet, whose voice resounds

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<sup>15</sup> The poem’s nineteenth-century editors championed an elegiac interpretation (Morris, 1864; Osgood, 1906; Gollancz, 1921), which has remained popular. P.M. Kean aptly summarizes the elegiac attitude by insisting that the maiden “represents the soul of a person who once lived, and with whom the dreamer had the special relationship of father to child, not of lover to beloved.” See *The Pearl: An Interpretation* (Routledge: New York, 1967), 130.

<sup>16</sup> Schofield inaugurates the tradition of reading *Pearl* as dream vision allegory, a critical practice that resists the poem’s ambiguity. Other critics view *Pearl* as spiritual allegory. See Hamilton, “The Meaning of the Middle English Pearl”; Ian Bishop, *The Pearl in its Setting: A Critical Study of the Structure and Meaning of the Middle English Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968); Louis Blenkner, “The Theological Structure of *Pearl*,” *Traditio* 24 (1968): 43-75; and Lawrence Clopper, “Pearl and the Consolation of Scripture.” *Viator* 23, (1992): 231-45.

<sup>17</sup> J.B. Fletcher planted the seed for reconciliation in “The Allegory of the Pearl,” *JEGP* 20 (1921): 1-21, and the theme is developed further in Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*; Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Pearl Poet Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994); and Sarah Stanbury’s introduction to *Pearl* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2001). Thomas Niemann summarizes the critical sea change admirably: “Where allegorists overread the text, forcing on it external structures and meanings it cannot sustain, the elegists persistently underread it, refusing to admit that words are connotative as well as denotative, and that it is possible to suggest more than is explicitly stated without altering or negating the statement.” See “*Pearl* and the Medieval Christian Doctrine of Salvation” (PhD Diss, University of Michigan, 1973), 36.



through the poem's highly deliberate structural markings. Likewise, strict allegorical understandings of the poem overlook the emotional intensity of the speaker's loss and, perhaps more egregiously, force closure onto what must be considered, at best, an ambiguous ending. Finally, readings focused solely on narrative plot (elegiac, allegorical, or otherwise) tend to obscure the centrality of the poem's elaborate form to its meaning.

Nonetheless, even in recent criticism ostensibly "beyond" the elegy/allegory question, scholarly understandings of that indefinite space between worlds continue to conform to the positions established in the old debate. Even the presumably self-contained critical lenses of psychoanalysis and New Historicism, so often relied on to provoke perspectival shifts in our readings of medieval texts, tend to thematize this scene of contact in familiar terms. Psychoanalytical readings of the poem, for instance, have picked up on the poem's intense meditations on loss popularized in earlier, elegiac readings. Rather than reconstructing a historical subject who might have inspired the poem<sup>18</sup>, these readings tend to focus on the play of and management of desire within a scene of loss, often in order to arrive at the workings of mourning and/or melancholia within its narrative.<sup>19</sup> New Historicist approaches have looked to English political

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<sup>18</sup> According to Aranye Fradenburg, one reason that psychoanalysis belongs in medieval studies is that "psychoanalysis, like religion, posits a subject constructed through a *history*, a narrativity, of desire" [emphasis mine]. Although I agree with Fradenburg, it seems that critics too often overlook the historical dimension in psychoanalytical analyses of medieval texts. See "'Be not far from me: Psychoanalysis, Medieval Studies, and the Subject of Religion" *Exemplaria* 7.1 (1995): 41-54; 43.

<sup>19</sup> The earliest psychoanalytical accounts of the poem are thinly-veiled appeals to a transhistorical formalism. Paul Piehler reads the Maiden through Jungian notions of the archetype, an influence also apparent in Spearing's *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (1976). See Piehler, *The Visionary Landscape: A Study in Medieval Allegory* (London: Edward

history, fourteenth-century popular theology, and English courtly practices to frame the space between dreamer and Maiden as the instructional site of discrete material or doctrinal fact.<sup>20</sup> Not all critical work on *Pearl* falls into one of these two camps, of course, but the ways that recent criticism reanimates old debates testifies to an abiding fascination with the liminal space between worlds historically associated with the pearl.

My reading of the poem seeks to relate this important thematic question to the equally vibrant criticism on the formal techniques of the poet.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, I adopt what might be called a third approach to the encounter between material and immaterial worlds, one whose advent I credit to Theodore Bogdanos in his influential book *Pearl*,

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Arnold, 1971). More recent psychoanalytic interpretations of the poem, influenced mostly by Freud and Lacan, display concern with psychoanalysis' critical flexibility for tracking affect in an event of loss. See David Aers, "The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 54-73; Sarah Stanbury, "The Body and the City in *Pearl*," *Representations* 48 (1994): 30-47; George Edmondson, "*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object, the Shape of the Law," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 29-63; Daniel T. Kline, "Resisting the Father in *Pearl*" in *Translating Desire in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. by Craig A. Berry and Heather Richardson Hayton, 1-29 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005).

<sup>20</sup>The critical desire to historicize the more shadowy details of the poem's thematic contour might be traced to John Bowers' insistence on isolating the "cultural poetics" of the poem within the milieu of Ricardian court culture. See *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000). For other accounts that attempt to reconcile these two worlds, see Helen Barr, *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 41; Michael Foster, "Textual Voices: Self-Representation and Religious Instruction in the Works of the Pearl-Poet," *Medieval and Early Modern English Studies* 20.2 (2012): 187-214; Jennifer Garrison, "Liturgy and Loss: *Pearl* and the Ritual Reform of the Aristocratic Subject," *Chaucer Review* 44.3 (2010): 294-322; Elizabeth Harper, "*Pearl* in the Context of Fourteenth-Century Gift Economies," *Chaucer Review* 44.4 (2010): 421-39; H.L. Spencer, "*Pearl*: 'God's Law' and 'Man's Law'," *Review of English Studies* 59 (2008): 317-341.

<sup>21</sup> I do not claim to be the first to unite theme and form in *Pearl*. Barbara Nolan and Edward Condren discuss the poet's quest for a Pythagorean unity. See, respectively, *The Gothic Visionary Perspective*, 172-74 and *The Numerical Universe of the Gawain-Pearl Poet: Beyond Phi* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 2002), 39-74.

*Image of the Ineffable* (1983). For Bogdanos, who discusses the poem in terms of negative theology, or for J. Allan Mitchell, whose comparatively agnostic perspective borrows from Levinasian philosophy, that hazy space between worlds resonates also as permanently unknowable and/or infinite.<sup>22</sup> This third position frames my reading of *Pearl* as a poem that expresses in both content and form the impossible condition of securing knowledge at this metaphysical junction.

But rather than an end point, I would like to take the unknowability of the pearl as my point of departure. In this approach, I echo Paul de Man's suspicion regarding the separation of autobiography and fiction when he asks whether it is possible "to remain... *within* an undecideable situation."<sup>23</sup> Following de Man, I suspect that the perceived division between material and immaterial worlds in *Pearl* (or between elegy and allegory) is not unlike that between autobiography and fiction in that the desire to inhabit the interstices of these categories masks a particularly untidy knot of poetics and the purpose for which language is enacted.

Like de Man, I will interrogate the degree to which the literary text (*Pearl*) reveals the linguistic as the fundamental register on which readers approach and address the chain of substitutions that comprise the epistemological foundation of narrative. However, I would like to separate my reading from the vocabulary both of "theory" and

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<sup>22</sup> Of those that take up the unknowability of *Pearl*, the works of Allan Mitchell and J.A. Jackson have been most formative to this chapter's thematic focus. See Mitchell, "The Middle English *Pearl*: Figuring the Unfigurable," *Chaucer Review* 35 (2000): 86-111 and Jackson, "The Infinite Desire of *Pearl*" in *Levinas and Medieval Literature*, eds. J.A. Jackson and Ann Astell, 157-84 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," *MLN* 94.5, *Comparative Literature* (1979): 919-930; 921.

medieval negative theology in order to better approach *Pearl* on its own terms—specifically, the eponymous base unit of the poem’s formal and thematic structure, the pearl itself. Just as the dreamer fails to remedy his loss, so too does the poet’s formal attempt to craft a pearl through language and mathematics performatively fall short of the harmony it seeks. In other words, unlike the “spoteless” object its dreamer attempts to recover the poem becomes but a mere approximation of a connection between material present and celestial hereafter. This arithmepoetics of the pearl will help show how, rather than merely theorizing contact between zones as unknowable, *Pearl* envisions impossibility beyond the “undecideable,” and thus contributes to an enduring critical debate regarding the points of contact between writing, language, and belief.

### **A Pearl at What Price?**

Unlike Herod and Prester John (but rather like Criseyde), the figure of the pearl claims no history as textual agent prior to its entrance into the medieval literary tradition. Nonetheless, few objects in the Middle Ages carried such a diverse and powerful set of resonances as this precious jewel. Perhaps most familiarly, the pearl serves as a conventional, if somewhat opaque, Christian symbol.<sup>24</sup> The Bible mentions the figure of the pearl nine times, most memorably in Matthew (Parable of the Pearl) and Revelation

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<sup>24</sup> Although a largely outmoded method of interpretation by the high Middle Ages, I argue that, historically, understandings of the Pearl relied on the symbolic mode of interpretation, from which *Pearl* departs. I refer to Auerbach’s version of the symbolic mode, where “the thing represented must always be something very important and holy for those concerned something affecting their whole life and thinking, and that this something is not only expressed or imitated in the sign or symbol, but considered to be itself present and contained in it” (“Figura,” 56-7).

(where it stands both for worldly riches and the opulence of the New Jerusalem).<sup>25</sup> The scriptural pearl cuts a paradoxical figure, as noted by Bogdanos: symbol of a natural (or impossible) wisdom (Matthew 7:6; Matthew 13:45-6), and also a warning against material dependency/ornament (I Timothy 2:9).<sup>26</sup> The biblical pearl signifies the condition of Christian knowing and marks the quality of this salvation as something that necessarily exceeds material understanding. The pearl as scriptural object thus functions as an abstract representation of a spiritually transformative moment.

Pliny the Elder's observations about the pearl in his *Natural History* (c. 77-79) represent the other major tradition, the natural history of the pearl. Pliny's text values the pearl above all other natural materials because it is fundamentally unique (*unio*) and also because, unlike gems, its genesis requires an interaction between both natural and *un-*natural forces, a collision between an earth-bound drop of celestial dew and an oyster, which receives the dew along the top of the sea:

Origo atque genitura conchae sunt, haut multum ostrearum conchis differentes. Has ubi genitalis anni stimularit hora, pandentes se quadam oscitatione impleri roscido conceptu tradunt, gravidas postea eniti, partumque concharum esse margaritas pro qualitate roris accepti. Si purus influxerit, candorem conspici; si vero turbidus, et fetum sordescere; eundem palere caelo minante. Conceptum ex eo quippe constare, caelique iis maiorem societatem esse quam maris: inde nubilum trahi colorem aut pro claritate matutina serenum (9.55)<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Job 28:18, Matthew 7:6, Matthew 13:45, Matthew 13:46, I Timothy 2:9, Revelation 17:4, Revelation 18:12, Revelation 18:16, Revelation 21:21.

<sup>26</sup> Though, for Augustine, the pearl symbolizes "the knowledge of the Word in its purity and self-consistency of meaning," Bogdanos notes that most Christian thinkers emphasize its function as material metaphor for an impossibly immaterial truth (*Image of the Ineffable*, 16).

<sup>27</sup> English translation: "The source and breeding-ground of pearls are shells not much differing from oyster-shells. These, we are told, when stimulated by the generative season

Through some mysterious intuition, the oyster anticipates the trajectory of the dew and upon receiving the heavenly vapor, returns to the sea, whereupon the dewdrop transforms into a pearl. The quality of the pearl then depends on the purity of the dew (9. 54). The *Natural History* thus makes explicit what the Christian tradition merely insinuates: an understanding of the pearl as conceived by a union of divine and terrestrial forces.

So too in the Middle English elegy, where the pearl resides at the unrepresentable intersection of symbolism and material knowledge. At the poem's outset, this theme is introduced through the speaker's early attempts to figure the pearl as containable, an object capable of satisfying a prince, "clanly close in golde" (l. 2). The speaker's characterizations of the pearl's dimensions, value, and uniqueness betray his desire to see the pearl as a quantifiable, knowable object. The pearl's dimensions— "So rounde, so reken in vche araye,/ So small, so smolpe her sydez were" (ll. 5-6)—foreshadow later descriptions of the dream's Maiden and draw our attention to the speaker's abiding focus on the physical appearance of the pearl. The speaker's redundant desire to establish the pearl "sengeley in synglure" [singular in uniqueness] (l. 8), suggests an effect beyond material loss. For all of the desire to establish the precise dimensions of the pearl in order

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of the year gape open as it were and are filled with dewy pregnancy, and subsequently when heavy are delivered, and the offspring of the shells are pearls that correspond to the quality of the dew received: if it was a pure inflow, their brilliance is conspicuous but if it was turbid, the produce also becomes dirty in color. Also if the sky is lowering (they say) the pearl is pale in color: for it is certain that it was conceived from the sky, and that pearls have more connexion with the sky than with the sea, and derive from it a cloudy hue, or a clear one corresponding with a brilliant morning." See the LOEB edition of *The Natural History*, Volume 3: Books 8-11, ed. and trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1940), 235.

to “sette” its value, the pathos-laden admission of its loss also admits, much to the chagrin of this prince, that this pearl eludes such enclosure. As such, the first stanza formulates a central tension in the poem between what can be known (the pearl’s “sette” value and the desire to contain it) and what remains impossible (the ability to recover, replace, or enclose that singularity).

The image of a flawless pearl the speaker longs to regain and “sette” contrasts with the language of escalation and growth introduced in the second stanza that works against first’s desire for containment. Here the pearl is still a material object, but one that escaped or “sprange” (leapt forth, shot up, spread) from the speaker (l. 13), suggesting the consubstantiality of speaker and pearl, having once been part of a single body. Given the dreamer’s distressed state and the section’s focus on intimacy, this loss resonates both as a material dispossession and also as a symbolic loss of understanding. Standing over her gravesite, the speaker focuses on the paradoxical dilemma of recovering an object whose diminutive materiality belies the monumental impact of its loss. Reminiscent of Julian of Norwich’s hazelnut, the smooth pearl could fit in his hand but, because it has no sides (*sydez*), it is also utterly endless. The pearl’s lack of a physical “spot” is lost on the narrator who believes that he can recover the pearl—it *must* be here somewhere.

From the physical spot upon which the speaker founds his loss, this pearl, “clad in clot” (clod/earth), engenders the very garden (“erbere”) the speaker enters.<sup>28</sup> The speaker

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<sup>28</sup> Barbara Nolan notes the significant parallels between the poet’s conception and use of the “erbere” and Bernard of Clairvaux’s sermon on the understanding of the threefold nature of history in terms of a garden. In Bernard’s formulation, first we have the Creation as a scene of planting and sowing, then those seeds flourish in the

reveals that the pearl, though encircled by its own perfection, possesses nonetheless an illimitable fertility: while its physical dimensions are “sette,” the pearl’s inherent liveliness would accelerate the germination of any seeds that lie near it (ll. 35-36), “For vch gress mot grow of graynez ded” (l. 33). While the speaker not only believes (*wot*) but also knows (*wene*) that he stands over the pearl’s “spot” (l. 47), he has lost access to any realm from which he could reach her. The image of a pearl “Out of orient” in the first stanza (l. 3), now emitting the exotic aroma of spices from an “erber grene,” hints at an unfamiliar landscape, more akin to Prester John’s East than a homely, known place. Yet the traces of the otherworldly run against the third stanza’s more familiar imagery of harvest and customarily English flora.<sup>29</sup> The conflicting images portray a delirious speaker caught between worlds, wandering aimlessly about an uncanny setting.

At this spot, the pearl has become a human body, a rotting corpse paradoxically bestowing life upon all around it. Beset by his loss, the dreamer recognizes precisely that which he cannot comprehend, a speaking about what escapes signification, framed as an almost meta-linguistic epistemological indeterminacy. The speaker, now too left “spoteles,” attributes the breaking-apart of worlds to the loss of the pearl. A faint song in the background hints at the elusive harmony the speaker desires, but, emotionally exhausted from the dissidence his loss has spawned, he falls asleep, mindful of the

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Reconciliation as the heavens open up and rain down Christ, and finally the Restoration brings about a brand new heaven and earth. The parallels between Bernard’s sermon and the *Pearl*’s narrative symbolism suggest the intricacy of the poet’s conceptualization as well as his familiarity with important theological ideas. See Nolan, *The Gothic Visionary Perspective*, 165.

<sup>29</sup> That is, even if as Nolan points on, peonies do not bloom in August in England (*The Gothic Visionary Perspective*, 164).



“odour” (l. 58) that emanates from the spices that carry forth the spirit of the same pearl that helped grow them. Even as the pearl continues to slip away from speaker and reader, the crucial first section of *Pearl* establishes many of the poem’s lasting motifs, including the pearl’s agency and its paradoxical relationship with both harmony and impossibility. If the loss of the pearl gives the dreamer a knowledge that undoes his ability to know at all, then only through an existential confrontation with a spiritual embodiment of his loss can he un-learn and un-do the impossible economy of grief in order to be put at peace.<sup>30</sup>

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Pliny’s classical notion of the genesis of pearls endured throughout the Middle Ages and found its way into several influential medieval texts.<sup>31</sup> In an essay tracing the development of the pearl as a metaphor for writing, Friedrich Ohly insists that this tradition and the pearl’s status as poetic symbol outlived even the Middle Ages: citing the poetry of Goethe, Ohly states, “the belief that the pearl originates in a marriage of heaven and earth... is continually expressed and repeatedly celebrated in verse right down to the eighteenth century.”<sup>32</sup> However, whereas Pliny offers little on the uses of the pearl, these later writers began to unite the narrative of its conception with the question of its natural

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<sup>30</sup> This is the emotional territory upon which psychoanalytic readings of the poem ground their claims about mourning, a psychological state in which loss often exceeds linguistic representation. See Aers, “The Self Mourning.”

<sup>31</sup> These include Isidore’s *Etymologiae* (c. 630), Hrabanus Maurus’ *De Rerum Naturis* (c. 842-847), Bartholomeus Anglicus’ *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (c. 1240), Albertus Magnus’ *De Animalibus* (c. 1250), along with numerous lapidaries and bestiaries.

<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Ohly, “Dew and Pearl: A Lecture” in *Sensus Spiritualis: Studies in Medieval Significs and the Philology of Culture*, ed. Samuel Jaffe and trans. Kenneth J. Northcott, 235-51 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005), 245.

properties, which often touched on symbolism evident in the biblical tradition.

In addition to emphasizing the uniqueness of each individual pearl, writers touted the health benefits of possessing/wearing pearls. In language reminiscent of *Pearl*, John Trevisa, translating Bartholomeus Anglicus, boasts their cleansing power: “And haue vertue of comfort by all the kynde theorof... they ben bysprongen with certeyn kynde” (II. 856).<sup>33</sup> The emphasis on its potential energy parallels the pearl that “sprange” from the speaker in order to fertilize the surrounding earth (ll. 13; 25-36). Similarly, according to Caxton’s edition of the *Legend Aurea*, “The vertu of thys stone is sayd to be ayenst the effusyon of blood, ayenst passyon of the hert, and to confortacyon of the spyryte.”<sup>34</sup> While one can never fully appropriate its powers, the pearl closes wounds: it *heals*. But what of the disease? The space between the singularity of the dreamer’s pearl and the irreducible symbol the reader encounters mirrors the poem’s own thematic concerns regarding the strained communication between material and immaterial worlds.

As is evident even the first section of *Pearl*, the poet weaves the materiality of his central object so deftly through the formal and material concerns of his poem— perfection, circularity, enclosure, impossibility— that we can see how, in George Edmondson’s psychoanalytical argot, the pearl becomes the very “shape of the Law.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Bartholomeus Anglicus, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, trans. John Trevisa, ed. M.C. Seymour. 3 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

<sup>34</sup> Qtd. in C.A. Luttrell, “The Mediaeval Tradition of the Pearl Virginitie,” *Medium Ævum* 31 (1962): 194-200; 194.

<sup>35</sup> In “*Pearl: The Shadow of the Object*,” Edmondson invokes the Lacanian view of “Law,” a concept influenced by the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Freud’s

But why a pearl? Moreover, if the pearl continues to accrue meaning in the poem, delineating the prohibitions to knowledge, does it become an *empty* signifier, bound not to a tradition but to an ultimately negative understanding of Christian epistemology? Though the fluidity of the symbolism in *Pearl* suggests a complicated departure from its traditional symbolic use, that textual tradition of the pearl actually informs the symbolic expansion of *Pearl*'s pearl in several key ways. Upon closer examination, the poet's craft of fashioning the central object itself proves far more encyclopedic than inventive.

### **The Geometry of Ineffability**

Just as the flowers spring up due to their proximity to the pearl, the soul of the dreamer, once bound by loss, sprouts forth from his body: "Fro spot my spyryt Per sprang in space" (l. 61). Some ineffable quality within the pearl propels the speaker out of the paradoxes of his bodily life and into a state of *un*-knowing, where, "in auenture," he wanders this new landscape, "ne wyste in Þis worlde quere Þa 3 hit wace" [I knew not where or why] (l. 65). Whereas earlier the speaker struggled to act on what he instinctively knows, here the dreamer's movements are compelled by sights of such spectacular brilliance that they elude experiential and linguistic comparison.

Instead of the sides (*sydez*) of the pearl, the soul perceives the regions or ways (*sydez*) of this new dream landscape:

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*Totem and Taboo*. For Lacan, the Law refers to Symbolic realm, ruled by language, that imposes limits on desire.

Dubbed wern alle þo downeȝ sydeȝ  
Wyth crystal klyffeȝ so cler of kynde.  
Holtewodeȝ bryȝt aboute hem bydeȝ  
Of bolleȝ as blwe as ble of Ynde;  
(ll. 73-73)

The play on “sydez” suggests that the dream landscape too is contained by that same pearl, which, bursting forth from the dreamer himself, promises to create a condition through which he might come to terms with his loss. Without direct access to that pearl of wisdom, however, the movement within the poem is controlled by the excesses of this realm’s “dubbement” [splendor/adornment], which the dreamer fails to describe adequately in terms of vision, place, or affect (ll. 95-96; 99-100; 135-6). The action brings dreamer and reader to a limit point—the “dubbement” that eludes representation.<sup>36</sup> Until the dreamer meets the Maiden, he faces the task of depicting an environment that language could not possibly capture.

How does one write about that which exceeds representation? Significantly, the first positive identification the dreamer makes in this new world is with the pearl Maiden (ll. 157-8). The dreamer describes this initial recognition neither in terms of familiarity nor as sensory event, but in terms of knowledge. Believing that he has regained his lost pearl, the dreamer expresses relief, though he fears the inevitable return to a waking state of loss, “lest ho me eschaped Pat I Per chos” (l. 187). Even within this scene of putative recognition, the pearl continues to elude the enclosure this dreamer seeks. This section affords the first glimpse of narrative detail that literalizes the chasm separating material from celestial spheres, the stream that separates dreamer from Maiden (ll. 145-156).

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<sup>36</sup> The inexpressibility topos is evident at ll. 83-4; 91-2; 95-6; 99-100; 133-6; 157-8.

Upon identifying his lost pearl, the dreamer begins to self-identify as a jeweler, a motif that persists through the section (ll. 240-300). Here the dreamer's desire for possession accompanies any perceived responsibilities to polish and set the "spoteles" jewel.

Just as the reader begins to understand something of the endless unfurling of this pearl, the repetition of the dreamer's inability to signify his surroundings reflects attention back onto the poem itself. The poet's use of repetition, concatenating stanzas, and precise structural dimensions, predicated as they are on measurement and circumscription, suggest a clear thematic intention to recreate the scene of possession for which the poem's dreamer longs. As for the poem's content, the emphasis on the intersectionality of earthly and celestial existence also resembles the encyclopedic understanding of the genesis of a pearl, in which these realms overlap in a manner inaccessible to mortal apprehension. Rather than rely solely on language to communicate the experiential paradoxes associated with recovering an impossible loss, the poet turns to mathematics to construct the space of the poem, the cathedral of the pearl.

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As has been oft-remarked, the concatenation in-and-between stanzas, along with the way that the end of the poem folds back onto its beginning, promote a circular reading experience. Indeed, the tightly-wound, self-consuming, "sydelez" text suggests a topography—a perfect sphere<sup>37</sup>— widely considered to be the most geometrically perfect

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<sup>37</sup> For more on sphericity in the poem, see Kevin Marti, *Body, Heart, and Text in the Pearl-Poet* (Queenston, Ontario: Mellen Press, 1991). For more on the notion of "perfect" in the context for *Pearl's* perfection, see P.M. Kean, "Symbols of Perfection," in *The "Pearl": An Interpretation*, 138-61. For a sample of the critical tendency to

shape in the Middle Ages. According to Thomas Bradwardine, an influential fourteenth-century theologian and mathematician, the geometrical perfection of the sphere, “mobile and perfect,” resides at the “limit of uniformity,” the tri-dimensional manifestation of the most elemental geometrical object, the point (4.40).<sup>38</sup> It should not be surprising, given the relationship between mathematics and the divine within the Middle Ages, that this poetic attempt to recover a perfectly spherical pearl, an object impervious to the tools of human craft, should invoke the language of mathematics, a discourse in which perfection might be reached. Indeed, it would appear that the balance required to polish this poem complements the unknowable perfection that unites material and divine realms.

Yet, as the Maiden insists, a pearl cannot be simply willed into being. Upon closer inspection, the formal dynamics of the pearl produce not the enclosure the poem appears to seek, but instead outline an elusive geometry we begin to trace though a series of failed descriptive encounters. If the dreamer’s experiences truly do exceed linguistic depiction, the poem situates its reader, like the dreamer, longing for the other side of the “bonkez brade” (l. 138), increasingly aware of the impossibility of such contact.

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describe the poet’s desire to create the “pearl” as spherical or perfect, see Bogdanos, *Image of the Ineffable*, 17; Meyer, *Medieval Allegory and the Building of New Jerusalem*, 147; Stanbury, “The Body and the City,” 33; Mitchell, “Figuring the Unfigurable,” 92; Daniel T. Kline, “Resisting the Father in *Pearl*,” 23.

<sup>38</sup> Bradwardine begins his treatise on geometry with a description of the point, which he extends, one dimension at a time, into a line, surface, and body. See *Geometria Speculativa: Latin Text and English Translation*, ed. and trans. George Molland (F. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1989), 22-3. Note the importance of the “poynt” in two of Cotton Nero A.x.’s other poems. *Patience* begins and ends with the notion that patience is a “poynt.” An emphasis on “poynt” occurs at least five times in *Gawain*, from the infamous pentangle, a figure of “fyue poyntez,” to the culminating scene in which the Green Knight nicks the neck of Gawain with his blade and announces that Gawain’s penance has been paid at the “poynt of myn egge” (l. 2392).

In Edward Condren's formulation, *Pearl's* circularity is less a result of the poet's meditation on its central object and more the product of an obsession with proportionality that spans the entire manuscript. For Condren, the manuscript divides itself into two circles, an inner one, consisting of *Cleanness and Patience*, and an outer one, consisting of *Pearl and Gawain*. Condren's observations about circularity extend from his most salient observation, his ability to unearth the manuscripts reliance on *phi*, the Middle Ages' most significant ratio, known also as the "golden mean" or as "God's measure." Condren observes, for instance, that the relationship (in terms of line numbers) between the entire Cotton Nero A.x manuscript (6,086) and the combined lines in *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain*<sup>39</sup> (3,743) stands in equal proportion with the ratio of line numbers of *Pearl* and *Gawain* (3,743) to the combined length of *Purity* and *Patience* (2,343).<sup>40</sup> While this level of architectural precision may appear superfluous to a modern reader, it is consistent (perhaps maniacally so) with the late-Middle Ages' most influential manual on poetics, Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*, which insists that a composition adhere carefully to a "natural order."<sup>41</sup>

In actuality, these ratios are only *approximately* proportional (1.63 and 1.60, respectively), but they very nearly approach *phi*, which can be rounded to 1.62.<sup>42</sup> In the

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<sup>39</sup> This calculation of the lines in *Gawain* (2531) omits the Garter motto but reflects the customary editorial practice of counting the bob as its own line.

<sup>40</sup> These ratios stand approximately at 1.63 and 1.60, respectively.

<sup>41</sup> See *Poetria Nova*, rev. edition, trans. Margaret Nims (Toronto: PIMS, 2010), 21-2.

<sup>42</sup> As Condren explains, *phi* is a unique ratio because it can be expressed as both arithmetic and a harmonic proportions; in other words, it satisfies two equations:  $a + b = c$  (arithmetic) and  $a : b = b : c$  (harmonic). This "divine proportion" was known from

Middle Ages, *phi* was known as “God’s measure” because it was unchangeable, ubiquitous, and yet unrepresentable in any way other than as an approximate ratio (it could not be reduced to a fractional relationship between integers). This indivisible identity, according to Condren, “holds the manuscript together in a continuous ratio that implies a divine path to infinity and eternity” (26). In order to qualify the degree to which the poem’s structure reflects such a “divine path” one might take a closer look at *Pearl*’s craftsmanship (both structural and thematic), which can provide access to the *process* of refining/setting the poem as a pearl. However, Condren takes a different tack: in extending the longstanding critical discussion of the function of key numbers in the poems, Condren reads the poem’s form as revealing not a sphere, but the most divine of all geometric shapes, the dodecahedron.

This complex geometric figure, likely obscure to many modern readers, would have been recognized by an attentive student of the quadrivium as the fifth (and most complex) Platonic solid.<sup>43</sup> Constructed of twelve pentagonal sections—a shape native to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (and one which requires *phi* for measurement)—the regular dodecahedron possesses twenty apexes or vertices, twelve total faces, and five edges on each face. These measurements are of course consistent with the dimensions of

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Greek mathematics as an indivisible ratio observable in nature and believed to be present in every part of the universe (*The Numerical Universe*, 9). *Phi* has long been observed in the spiral growth of sea shells, the leaf distribution in many plants, and in the physiology of terrestrial and marine creatures (dolphins, penguins, butterflies, tigers, ants).

<sup>43</sup> The Platonic solids and the notion of the golden ratio are discussed in the *Timeaus* (as well as in the book’s many commentaries) in addition to Book XIII of Euclid’s *Elements*.



the poem (twenty sections of five stanzas composed of twelve lines).<sup>44</sup> The beauty of the dodecahedron lies in its simplicity, for its construction depends only on obtaining the length of one edge (one can arrive at the diagonal by multiplying this side by *phi*). In the *Timaeus*, long considered a medieval companion to Genesis, Plato distinguishes the dodecahedron as the model by which some “divine craftsman” arranged the twelvefold division of the Zodiac (55 C). The Neoplatonic Christianization of sacred geometry in the early Middle Ages secured a lasting alliance between the dodecahedron and the Christian eternal, an influence evident even in the twentieth century through Dali, who sets *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955) in a dodecahedron-shaped room.

Condren values these proportional equivalences above the geometry that houses them because proportion implies *ratio*, which, as he explains, carries medieval associations not only with relationality but also with procedure, faculty for calculation, reasonable cause, and law. Far more than mere balance, then, the careful arrangement of the manuscript imitates of a higher order in order to frame the infinite as a worthy site of contemplation itself (41). As such, Condren renders *Pearl*'s poetic process of signification transcendental, transparent, and objective. However, the pearl's position in Condren's linguistic economy remains unclear, and, thus, the question of whether the poem ultimately champions such a resolution remains unanswered.

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<sup>44</sup> Here we might begin to glimpse the intertextual importance of the pentagon, which is also responsible for Gawain's pentangle. Indeed, Condren insists that “the fundamental building block of a dodecahedron is the same Divine Section... used as the controlling proportion throughout Cotton Nero A.x.” (60).

Whether the poem becomes a sphere or dodecahedron, Condren's work provokes fascinating questions about the relationship between the poem's form and its content. Through his discoveries about the geometric harmony of Cotton Nero A.x, Condren allies himself with the camp of scholars (descending from Bogdanos) who view *Pearl's* poetics as consciously (and optimistically) imitative of the divine.<sup>45</sup> All studies interested in *Pearl's* poetics need to account for Condren's discoveries, but here I want to suggest that the question of harmony might not indicate a desire to imitate divine perfection, as Condren has it, but, recalling the medieval tradition of the pearl, provide instead an illustration of the impossibility and unknowability of such harmonious balance. By further interrogating the context in which late-medieval arguments about proportionality circulated, and by examining popular understandings of medieval literary theory, I hope to further unite *Pearl's* form with its symbolic content.

First, while the architectural framework of the poems correlates well with the overarching thematic concerns within individual poems (balance, circularity, enclosure), the figure of *phi* so crucial to their formal composition existed outside the framework of mathematical understanding in the Middle Ages (insofar as it is an infinite, non-repeating decimal—what we would now call an irrational number). For the poet (and contemporary mathematician), rather than admit to the reality of its infinite extension, *phi* must be approximated as a fraction. For fourteenth-century mathematicians, values such as *phi* or, even more commonly, the square root of two (the measure of the hypotenuse of an

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<sup>45</sup> Bogdanos reads the poem as an “incarnational symbol of God's universe” and argues that, like Dante, the *Pearl*-poet “wants his poem read as an analogue to God's Word” (*Image of the Ineffable*, 11).

isosceles triangle with legs of one) possessed divine significance precisely because they exceeded mathematical understanding and could not be represented as a proportion of integers. Rather than regard this need for approximation as indicating a flawed understanding of mathematics, religious minds discovered in these identities the limits of human striving for an inexpressible divine presence. For this reason, music, as the study of harmony, bore associations with the celestial in the Middle Ages and held a high place in the *quadrivium*. Until mathematicians began (reluctantly) to accept the notion that these irrational numbers actually belong to the set of real numbers, the idea of a mathematical entity irreducible to a relationship between integers (i.e. a fraction) suggested the existence of an alternate numerical realm *outside* or *in excess* of mathematics, an epistemological space unavailable to material understanding.<sup>46</sup>

Late-medieval mathematicians linked these irreducible quantities with Divine balance rather than potential disorder, in order to avoid having to admit to an irrational universe. Thus, Condren's *phi*, much like the pearl itself, must inhabit an unknowable space between an infinite world that exceeds signification and its inexact material manifestation, a fraction. This is all to say that if the poet employed *phi* as a method to measure the immeasurability of the pearl, he must also recognize the failure inherent to this project (measuring the perfect pearl with a self-consciously inexact mathematical identity). This notion of excess certainly permeates the poems' form in other ways, most

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<sup>46</sup> Though Euclid technically proves the existence of irrational numbers (i.e. numbers that cannot be reduced as fractions) in the tenth book of his *Elements*, the notion of irrational quantities as real numbers does not emerge until the seventeenth century. Many medieval scholars would not even be aware of Euclid's work since most universities in the fourteenth century only required mastery over the first six books of *Elements*.

obviously in the poet's use of 101 stanzas (rather than 100). Given that the entire thematic platform of *Pearl* circles back to an impossible, even paradoxically excessive unity, signifier and signified must coexist without difference in any requisite mathematical framework meant to underscore that theme.

Secondly, while the poet's use of mathematical proportion certainly contributes to *Pearl*'s formal and thematic design, so too does this poet appear to be inspired by medieval understandings of poetry as craft. If the poet did intend to shape the poem as dodecahedron, one would think that this shape would hardly need polishing, given its longstanding representational association the notion of 'eternal kingdom.' However, Condren links his argument about the poem-as-dodecahedron to the pearl by claiming that the work of the poem smoothes out the spikiness of the Platonic solid. This interpretation resounds with a medieval model of poetics as craft, evident in how, for example, the troubadour poet builds, *ex nihilo*, around the absent center of an impossible lover.<sup>47</sup> The artisanal metaphor of polish, a relatively popular trope of medieval literary

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<sup>47</sup> The opening lines of Arnaut Daniel's "En cest sonet coind'e leri" provides an exemplary instance of a self-conscious identification between poesis and craft[ing]. The poem begins:

En cest sonet coind'e leri,  
Fauc motz, e capuig e doli,  
Que serant verai e cert  
Qan n'aurai passat la lima,  
Qu'Amors marves plan'e daura  
Mon chantar, qu de liei mou  
Que Pretz manten e governa.

(ll. 1-12)

[Though this measure quaint confine me,  
And I chip out words and plane them,  
They shall yet be true and clear,

theory, seems to be a natural fit for a poem whose speaker self-identifies as a jeweler. In discussing the medieval understanding of a Christian poetics as craft-work, Alexandre Leupin writes:

[I]f Christ is the model for literature, the medieval writer can no longer conceive of his task as an *otium*, that is, as an artistic diversion (as it was in classical antiquity). To write is to work in reality, in imitation of Christ the carpenter. For Geoffrey [of Vinsauf], this brings about an infinite series of references to all the crafts of the artisan. Even the most humble serves as the emblem for the work of the writer.<sup>48</sup>

For Leupin, the Reality of the Incarnation replaces the metaphorically absent center of the troubadour lyric with the real substance of Christ. While *Pearl* appears to adhere to such a Christian poetics, the organizational center is clearly the pearl, rather than Christ. As I will discuss in the next section, the pearl's relationship with value and, subsequently, with virginity complicates the discussion of presence and absence that haunts the center of this most polished of poems.

### **The Immaterial Economy of Salvation**

Once the dreamer recognizes himself in the vision, he solicits the Maiden's permission to let him access what she knows (a comfort with which frustrated readers

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When I finally have filed them.  
Love glosses and gilds them knowing  
That my song has for its start  
One who is worth's hold and warrant.]

Taken from *Lark in the Morning: The Verses of the Troubadours*, ed. Robert Kehew (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005), 218-20. I have included Ezra Pound's English translation, also supplied in the volume.

<sup>48</sup> See Alexandre Leupin, *Fiction and Incarnation* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002), xxi.

might empathize). She, in turn, reproaches him for putting his trust in the superficial system of appearances shared by vision and language:

Pou ne woste in worlde quat on dotz mene;  
Py worde byfore Py wytte con fle.  
Pou says Pou trawes me in Þis dene  
Bycawwse Pou may with yʒen me se  
(ll. 293-96)

*I am not really what or where you think I am*, she effectively states. Is this Maiden a figment of his dream, a figure of heaven, or both? She certainly makes clear that she is no material thing. For the Maiden, sensory gratification affords no real pleasure since the “spote” of knowledge the jeweler seeks exists beyond (or outside of) what can be materially grasped. She continues, levying that it is not only foolish but also sinful to interrogate that which must remain unknown:

ʒe setten hys wordeʒ ful westernays  
Pat leueʒ noþynk botʒe hit syʒe.  
And þat is a poynt o sorquydryʒe,  
Pat vche god mon may euel byseme,  
To leue no tale be true to tryʒe  
Bot þat hys one skyl may dem.  
(ll. 306-311)

The Maiden reasons that pride/arrogance (“sorquydryʒe”) and an overvaluation of one’s senses leads one to a false sense of comprehension, “To leue no tale be true to tryʒe”: only God can populate that opaque epistemological territory (l. 312). Rather than acquiesce to Russell’s contention that the poem’s conversations about worth assure “some continuity...between heavenly and earthly values,” the Maiden maintains the radical incommensurability between the realms, *especially* as they pertain to the concept

of value, an evaluative category that the dreamer-jeweler should presumably understand. Only in death can the dreamer begin to approach the *quidditas* of his pearl (ll. 320-4) because, as the Maiden later indicates, only through the Christ's death do "We purȝoutly hauen cnawynȝ" [completely receive knowledge/understanding] (l. 859).

By section seven of the poem (ll. 360-420), the dreamer, less distracted by his environs, begins to acquiesce to the authority of the Maiden. For the next 500 lines, the relationship between dreamer and Maiden takes the form of student and master, respectively. Yet even in the realm of instruction the dreamer struggles to comprehend the Maiden's discourse. Particularly, the Maiden's baffles the dreamer in her careful exposition of Heaven as a world of difference *without* hierarchy, a concept whose incomprehensibility Russell terms "a form of verbal unknowing" (164). However paradoxical it may appear, this notion becomes crucial to the poem's philosophical message regarding the space between material and immaterial realms; thus, we might tolerate the dreamer's pronounced resistance with at least *some* sympathy, considering especially the difficulty of untangling the Catholic doctrine of hierarchy with those understandings perpetuated in courtly or visionary contexts.

How are readers to understand such a paradox as a world of difference without hierarchy? According to the dreamer, his pearl's singularity places it above all other objects, and he struggles to disentangle this logic from the Maiden's description of her heavenly place. Though this pearl is the *dreamer's* most prized possession, it would be blasphemy, according to the dreamer, for this Maiden to understand herself as *Christ's* "quen of cortaysye": this is "to dere a date" [too high a rank] (l. 492). Yet within *Pearl's*

heavenly schema, the Maiden's high rank establishes her as both uniquely blessed in the economy of Christ's love *and* utterly equivalent to all that receive it, including Mary, the true "queen of cortaysye." If Christ's love is infinite, the Maiden reasons, how can those who receive it be ranked? And yet, as recipient of that love, each individual retains uniqueness. Here, in the content of the poem, we see the interest in geometry and proportionality filter back in. Put in terms of the Maiden's language, while she is "maskelles" [pure; singular] she is certainly not "makelez" [peerless] (ll. 782-85).

Still, the dreamer resists. In an ostensible attempt to clarify her meaning, the Maiden ends her their debate with a reference to the "pearl of great price" (ll. 720-744), through which she shifts the place of the pearl once more, flattening it into the opaque representation of heavenly reward given through God's illimitable, equitable grace.<sup>49</sup> The jeweler's response to the Parable of the Pearl constitutes one of the major unsolved mysteries within the poem, especially since it occurs at the point of the divine section within what Condren argues is the proportional design of the poem. Here the dreamer responds to the Maiden's instruction with more praise, citing the impossibility of her appearance ["thy beauté com neuer of nature"] (l. 749). Then, in a passage that has inspired much critical confusion, the dreamer makes an inquiry into the Maiden's origins:

Quo formed þe þy fayre figure?

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<sup>49</sup> According to Robertson, the traditional medieval interpretation of the Biblical "pearl of great price" relies on an acknowledgment of the necessity of sacrifice: drawing on Gregory, Bede, and Rabanus, Robertson explains that "the members of the earthly church... renounce what they have in order to obtain the pearl '*aeternae felicitatis*'" ("Pearl as Symbol," 159). Although within the sacrificial act one obtains infinite reward, this understanding of the pearl lacks the existential paradox of difference without hierarchy, and therefore fails to clarify the Maiden's message for the dreamer.



Pat wro3t þy wede he watz ful wys;  
 Py beauté com neuer of nature—  
 Pymalyon paynted neuer þy vys,  
 Ne Arystotel nawþer by hys lettrure  
 Of carped þe kynde þese proprietéz;  
 Py colour passez þe flour-de-lys,  
 Pyn angel-hauyng so clene cortez.  
 Breue me, bry3t, quat kyn offys  
 Berez þe perle so maskelez?  
 (ll. 749-756)

A paleographic uncertainty in the manuscript obscures the meaning of this passage at a key point: because of the scribe's cramped handwriting and his inclusion of a phantom mark above one of the letters in the word, it is unclear whether the dreamer asks what kind ("kyn") of office ("offys") *or* what type ("kyn") of oyster ("ostryys") might bear/possess ("Bere3") a pearl such as her (l. 755).<sup>50</sup> In one sense, the difference does not seem to matter, since both understandings express the Dreamer's awe for the Maiden's wisdom and beauty. Yet the possibility of an explicit reference to an oyster (the poem's first) would indicate the poet's explicit interest in bringing together the encyclopedic tradition of the pearl and the Christian notion of the "pearl of great price." The problem becomes not only one of paleography but one symbolism. If here the dreamer speaks of an oyster, this further emphasizes the unfamiliarity of the Maiden (especially coupled with his statement that her beauty is somehow unnatural) and more explicitly allies the Maiden with Christ *qua* the perfect product of a Marian oyster.

Though most scholars, and all of the printed editions, opt for the more

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<sup>50</sup> Condren reads the superscript as an indication of the omission of the consonant 'r' and thus creating the word "oystriis." E. Talbot Donaldson has advanced this reading in his article that more thoroughly outlines this paleographic puzzle. See "Oysters, Forsooth: Two Readings in 'Pearl,'" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 73 (1972): 75-82.

conservative “offys,” the relative frequency with which medieval treatments of the pearl wed the Christian tradition to the classical understanding merits a consideration of the latter possibility. The pearl’s association with Mary and, through her, virginity, best exemplifies the synthetic product of the two main strands of the medieval pearl tradition.<sup>51</sup> As C.A. Luttrell notes, from the twelfth century, preachers Christianized the classical understanding of the pearl as symbol of purity by comparing the “pearl of great price” (Matthew 13:45-6) with the purity of the Virgin, an association recorded by Vincent of Beauvais.<sup>52</sup> In this analogy, Mary, who ascended to the temple of God, receives the words (celestial dew) of Gabriel by opening and closing her heart without break—just as she later nourishes the words and gives birth to her own pearl, Christ.<sup>53</sup>

I follow the jeweler’s response so closely because of what I think it signals about the dynamism of the pearl not only as poetic symbol, but as medium through which the act of poiesis transforms the object or signifier. This passage constitutes a key moment in which readers might begin to understand how the pearl grounds the very act of writing the poem because of the paradox it begins to reveal regarding the pearl’s theological

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<sup>51</sup> Ohly writes, “the natural myth, of the origin of the pearl in the heavens, serves over and over again for the verbal expression of mysteries such as the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, and the Annunciation of the Virgin, to name but two theological themes that maintained a lively connection with the myth of dew and pearl, especially in the 17<sup>th</sup> c.” (*Sensus Spiritualis*, 235).

<sup>52</sup> Luttrell, “The Mediaeval Tradition of the Pearl Virginity,” 195.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Hugh of St. Victor’s *De Bestiis* 2.35, about which Luttrell writes “There is indeed a parallel between the fertilizing dew of Gabriel’s announcement and that of God’s grace in *De Septem Donis* and *Speculum Morale*” (197). This association is also found in Pierre Bercheur’s *De Rerum Proprietatibus* 11.93 and in Gower’s *Mirour de l’omme* (l. 16837 ff.).

associations, which circumscribe Maiden, Mary, Jesus, poet, and dreamer.

While Luttrell limits the early Virgin-pearl association to “specialized homiletic usage,” she notes that the salutary effect of this Mary-pearl connection finds its way into popular theology by the fourteenth century, providing some precedent for *Pearl*’s appropriation of this relationship.<sup>54</sup> By the end of the fourteenth century writers employed this hybrid understanding of Mary-as-pearl as a conduit for expressing larger, super-linguistic, seemingly metaphysical phenomena like love, death, and life.<sup>55</sup> Even in an explicitly Christian context, the virginity-pearl association retains the co-presence of immaterial forces and material nourishment conveyed in the encyclopedic tradition.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> For Luttrell, “it is of some significance” that one of the readings given at Masses of Virgins and Holy Women was Matthew 13:44-52, which includes the parable of the “pearl of great price.” According to Luttrell, this connection can be observed most visibly in the *vita* of St. Margaret of Navarre (*margarita* is, of course, the Latin word for pearl). She notes that Wace’s *Vie de sainte Marguerite* was the first text to note the resemblance between the saint and the stone (“Medieval Tradition,” 196). *Pearl* refers to its central symbol as *margarita* (spelled various ways in the poem) at lines 199, 206, and 1037.

<sup>55</sup> This later association is evident in *Pearl* as well in Thomas Usk’s contemporaneous *Testament of Love*. The *Testament* combines the tradition of autobiographical consolation (i.e. Boethius) with courtly love *topoi* in order to relate Usk’s attempt to reconcile himself to his imprisoned fate and the loss of his love, Margarite, *via* a dialogue with an anthropomorphized figure of Love. Along with the explicit mention of a pearl in the end, the figure of the pearl infiltrates the poem’s structure in order to belatedly intervene in the thematic meaning of the poem: the beginning of Usk’s chapters form an acrostic that spells out “MARGARETE OF VIRTUE HAE MERCY ON THIN USK.” For Usk, the healing virtues of the pearl correspond with its larger power over the philosophies of nature, morality, and knowledge (Ohly, *Sensus Spiritualis*, 246). For more on the function of the pearl in the “Testament,” see S.K. Heninger, Jr., “The Margarite-Pearl Allegory in Thomas Usk’s *Testament of Love*,” *Speculum* 32.1 (1957): 92-98.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Brown shows how virgins, like angels were thought as “mediator[s] between the human and the divine.” See “The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, eds. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff, 437-43 (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

However, even such an overt link between Mary and the Pearl fails to give definitive precedent to line 755 with regard to the “kind” of oyster capable of producing a pearl like the Maiden. The proper answer to *this* question would not be mortal Mary, but the divine Christ. Therefore, just as Christ becomes the pearl to Mary’s oyster, so might the gift of salvation signify as the pearly product formed in the oyster of Christ’s love. The poet indicates such a familiarity with the Mary-Pearl tradition elsewhere, specifically when he describes Mary as “my lady of quom Jesu con spryng” (l. 453), a line that parallels the opening section in which the pearl similarly “sprang” from the dreamer. On the other hand, to assent to the reading of Christ as oyster/human as pearl risks collapsing two figures (Mary and Christ) who obviously perform very different theological functions, and who cannot, doctrinally, represent equally the enclosure through which the “pearl of great price” is generated. If line 755 does indeed imply Christ as oyster, it would constitute a marked departure from exegetical tradition, marking the need to reconsider the relationship between the pearl’s symbolism and the Maiden’s professed alliance between of singularity and equality.

Yet, to move to the most literal level, it is neither Christ nor Mary who gives birth to this *specific* pearl in question. For those who take the pearl to be the dead infant daughter of the speaker, this analogy situates the *dreamer* in the position of an oyster, an understanding that once again recalls the poet-jeweler conception of poiesis as an act of craft and polish. In addition to the medieval pearl-virginity link, R. Howard Bloch describes one medieval understanding of virginity as bearing also on broader

understandings of epistemology and medieval poetics.<sup>57</sup> Bloch traces the discourse of virginity from the Church Fathers through late-medieval vernacular literature, and shows it to be an “impossible” category: a virgin not only avoids sexual contact, she has never desired sexual contact nor has she been desired sexually; she not only resists soliciting the gaze of men, but she also guards against *her own* gaze upon *her own* body. Virginity represents a complete escape from desire, and as Bloch quips, “the only true virgin—is a dead virgin” (108). As such, the notion of virginity as “pure negativity” forms an interesting complement to the pearl, which might be understood (in the context of the “pearl of great price”) as an impossible fullness.

The play between these two notions, which may not be so different after all, recalls the act of unknowing as the moment at which presence and absence become indistinguishable. This duality of negativity and abundance also resonates at the medieval scene of writing, or specifically, the troubadour poetics of craft, where a poesis *ex nihilo* aims to articulate what escapes signification because it is simultaneously too overwhelming and fundamentally absent. Rather than an impediment to a clear understanding of the poem, the ambiguity of this crucial line perfectly sets up what is often considered the poem’s climax, the vision and description of a New Jerusalem that necessarily eludes knowing.

### **A Specular Jerusalem**

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<sup>57</sup> R. Howard Bloch, “The Poetics of Virginity” in *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, 93-112 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991).

Given the eponymous impetus of its source text to *reveal*, reader and dreamer might expect the vision to divulge the secrets of the New City, or at least attend to intricacies that John's text does not cover. However, the vision's faithful representation of its source text ironically *resists* its logic of revelation.<sup>58</sup> The dreamer describes his surroundings as a string of twelves, which, in Condren's reading, evinces the poet's implementation of the duodecimal system; the twelves are also, of course, prominent within Revelation as well as in astrology.<sup>59</sup> In addition to the twelve-line stanzas and 1212 total lines<sup>60</sup>, *Pearl's* dreamer remarks on New Jerusalem's twelve tiers (l. 992) with twelve steps (ll. 993, 1022) arrayed with twelve different gems (ll. 997-1020) on a foundation of twelve furlongs length and depth (ll. 1030-32). Each of the city's four sides had three gates (ll. 1033-35), the doors upon which each feature the name of one of Israel's twelve sons (ll. 1039-42). In the land surrounding the city, there exist twelve trees (l. 1078) which blossom twelve times each year (l. 1079). The pure spectacle of the scene

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<sup>58</sup> Louis Blenkner points to the density of *Pearl's* vision of New Jerusalem in terms of biblical allusion, averaging one per five lines ("Theological Structure of *Pearl*", n. 44). However, as Jenny Rebecca Rytting argues, while the poet occasionally cites Scripture in order to make points that differ from that biblical passage, he does not cite any such case in the vision of New Jerusalem. See "*Pearl* and the Translation of Scriptural Paraphrase," *The Theory and Practice of translation in the Middle Ages* 8 (2003): 281-93.

<sup>59</sup> The repeated use of the number twelve in Revelation is certainly well-remarked throughout the Middle Ages as well as in modern readings of the book. For Plato, the duodecimal system indicates the realm of Fate.

<sup>60</sup> Citing Bede's finger counting system, Condren remarks that the excesses or "remainders" of twelve found in *Pearl* (1212 lines) and *Purity* (1812 lines) signal that these poems should be read "in the key of 12" (*Numerical Universe*, 21). The latter two poems, *Cleanness* (531 lines) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2531 lines) signal the "key of 10" since 31 is the tenth prime number. Condren argues that these keys are significant because they frame the manuscript as a tension between the duodecimal system of Christian salvation and the decimal system of the Old Law.

has left the dreamer like a startled quail and he makes no claims to understand it. Nothing in the section suggests that the emphasis on twelve, so pregnant with symbolism in Revelation, carries any meaning not already present in *Pearl*'s sources.

The inclusion of symbolically important numbers in the poem commends itself to a numerological reading, as this has long been a historically viable approach to Revelation. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the repetition of key numbers (5, 6, 12, 20) occurs not only in the vision of New Jerusalem, but also within the poem's formal architecture. Numerology alone cannot account for the poem's obvious concern for structural precision. While the number twelve symbolizes perfection, it might also signal abundance, in addition to the twelve parts of man (evidenced through twelve prophets, Apostles, and tribes of Israel). The architectural use of numbers in *Pearl* is neither numerological (which requires interpretation) nor numerical (which implies aesthetic preference), but *geometrical*. As Condren so aptly demonstrates, the poet employs a numerical structure within the form of the poem in order to emphasize *harmony*. I emphasize this difference given geometry's status as a medieval natural science linked to the divine.<sup>61</sup> If I appear to overstate this connection, it is in order to differentiate the discussion of the poet's structure from a "formalist" approach to the poem.<sup>62</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Condren identifies the poet's preoccupation with the

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<sup>61</sup> See Michael Edwards' chapter "Pearl Beyond Measure: Geometry and Revelationism" in his "Geometric Theology and the Meaning of *Clannesse* in the Poems of the Pearl Manuscript" PhD Thesis, University of California-Davis, 2004, 40-103.

<sup>62</sup> As we repeatedly find in formalist studies of medieval literature, the more we apply standards that would not have been recognized by medieval poets, the more medieval literature appears inferior to modern ("Geometric Theology," 15).

“golden section” or “divine proportion” otherwise known as *phi*. This indivisible proportion, an important mathematical identity for medieval architecture, supplies cohesion and circularity to the manuscript. A number of medieval Gothic cathedrals—structures Barbara Nolan terms the “earthly models of the New Jerusalem”—implemented this value (approximated as 7:5) into their architectural scheme (45).<sup>63</sup> As it turns out, in addition to *phi*, the *Pearl* poet utilizes the 7:5 ratio in the construction of Cotton Nero A.x.<sup>64</sup> These ratios indicate more than geometric wizardry: the poet’s reliance on two excessive values to balance the manuscript effectively cancels out a numerological interpretation of either, forcing us to consider their similarity instead.

While I maintain the likelihood that the poet intends to use numbers scientifically (perhaps in Lacan’s understanding of the scientific),<sup>65</sup> I insist that the poet’s precise-but-not-precise enough formal geometry ultimately lays bare the inadequacies of human rationality as a means of epistemological access (even in its highest, mathematical

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<sup>63</sup> Condren cites St. Gall and St. Michael’s at Hildesheim, as well as cathedrals at Chartres and Amiens, as all utilizing this ratio (*The Numerical Universe*, 23).

<sup>64</sup> As Edwards explains, “Adding together the line-totals of *Pearl* and *Patience* we find that the ratio between *Pearl’s* length, 1200, and the length of both poems together, 1700 (1200 + 500), or 17:12, is as near the square root of two as need be for a medieval mathematician” (“Geometric Theology,” 237). Donna Crawford Stevick cites both ratios as also integral to the formal constructions of *Cleanness*. See “The Architectonics of *Cleanness*,” *Studies in Philology* 90.1 (1993): 29-45, esp. 34-6.

<sup>65</sup> See Jacques Lacan, “Science and Truth” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 726-45. I explore the Lacanian understanding of the scientific, especially as regards language and the practice of analysis, in the dissertation’s conclusion.



form).<sup>66</sup> For while cathedrals might employ irrational quantities to signify divine concepts, there exists within their measurements a recognized slippage between signifier and signified that a reading insisting on *Pearl's* perfect unity tries to overlook. The geometry of poem and manuscript does not just suggest the infinite in order to meditate on that concept (as might be the case with a cathedral); it also inscribes the infinite as to further establish the impossibility of any precise relation to God (as expressed by a poet and dreamer who infelicitously attempt to understand reality mathematically/logically). Just as the dreamer cannot reason his way towards an understanding of divine grace, neither can the poet create a perfect sphere through a proportional arrangement of numbers. Considering the *Zeitgeist* of anti-Thomism in the fourteenth century in which thinkers rejected logic in favor of revelation, *Pearl* seems to undercut such dichotomous thought, rejecting both approaches in favor of an understanding of an unknowing that grants the necessity of divine excess.<sup>67</sup>

As Michael Edwards notes, late-medieval mathematicians were in fact preoccupied with the inadequacy of mathematics as the faultless tool of human measurement. According to Bradwardine, for example, the existence of ubiquitous, but

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<sup>66</sup> For Edwards, the poet's use of such geometric ratios to structure his poems does in fact have meaning, and is meant to evoke the "cleanness" of geometry as a reflection of *Logos*, the Word, or Christ ("Geometric Theology," 15).

<sup>67</sup> Following the so-called Condemnations of 1277, a wave of thinkers, including Duns Scotus, Thomas Bradwardine, and William of Ockham begin to reject the logic of Thomism in favor of the revelatory power of the Word. Lynch situates the end of what she calls "the natural order of knowing," defined as a progression from imagination, reason, and memory towards truth, as occurring the thirteenth century. She then explains how philosophical paradigms in the Middle Ages shift to accommodate new empirical data. See *The High Medieval Dream Vision*, 11.

unrepresentable ratios show that geometry can be both rational *and* indeterminate, just as God's will can be free, rational, and *still* indeterminate.<sup>68</sup> In this vein, the mathematical quantities that so fascinate the *Pearl* poet, though necessarily imprecise, suggest that humans lack access to the underlying rationality of these quantities (rather than imply the probability of their fundamental irreducibility). Even if the *Pearl* poet was not actively engaged contemporary mathematical thought, he/she shares an interest with fourteenth-century mathematicians regarding the correlation between geometric harmony and Christian epistemology.<sup>69</sup> This perceived relationship, while perhaps foreign to a modern reader, harkens back thousands of years: Pythagoras' desire to formulate mathematics as a stable, self-reflexive language capable of describing the universe also becomes frustrated by irreducible quantities, whose reality the Pythagorean Brotherhood continually denied.<sup>70</sup> Though by the Middle Ages, the Christianization of the unknowable character of irrational numbers links irreducible quantities with Divine balance rather than potential disorder, neither ideology willingly grants the possibility of an irrational universe.

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<sup>68</sup> Edwards, "Geometric Theology," 71-5.

<sup>69</sup> Few critics have considered the influence Bradwardine's conservative theology of faith and grace had on the poem. For more on Bradwardine's theology and *Pearl* see Carleton Brown, "The Author of the *Pearl* Considered in the Light of his Theological Opinions," *PMLA* 39 (1904): 115-53.

<sup>70</sup> Since Pythagoras left no writings, many apocryphal tales have circulated about the man, painting him as much a mystic as mathematician. One such rumor claims that after one of Pythagoras' students (a man named Hippasus) brought to his master an understanding that the square root of two could not ever be reduced to a fraction, the master sentenced his student to death by drowning for fear of contradicting his theory of the harmony between number and nature.

To be clear, I do not mean to assess the mathematical fluency of a poet we know nothing about; rather, I would like to situate the poet's use of geometric proportions within the context of the time that he wrote. Put bluntly, the poet's attempt at an arithmepoetics that might reduce the structure of a pearl to a geometric proportion fails in the same way the dreamer misperceives the consequences of his own lesson. Although several of *Pearl's* critics offer the mathematical contemplation of infinitude as an endpoint, the poem rejects out-of-hand the notion of mathematics as a mystical technology: this poet more closely resembles a jeweler or craftsman. Within this model, the poet expresses the inexpressible through the materiality of the pearl, which becomes not only the pearl of "great price" but also the pearl "beyond measure."

### **Pearls, Pearls, Pearls**

If the medieval pearl marks the scene of contact that joins material and immaterial worlds, the image of the stream separating dreamer from Maiden at the end of section nineteen confirms the impossibility of a felicitous transmission of meaning back to the earthly existence.<sup>71</sup> Just as the familiarity of the dreamer's New Jerusalem betrays an almost exact reliance on the source he hoped to augment, so too does his final engagement with the Maiden return to sentiments expressed in their initial encounter:

Lorde, much of mirþe wa3 þat ho made  
Among her fere3 þat wat3 so quyt!

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<sup>71</sup> Edmondson frames the disconnect in terms of linguistic versus extra-linguistic worlds, explaining that the stream "underscore[s] the radical incommensurability between the mediated, language-bound world of the dreamer and the realm of the limitless *jouissance* beyond the river" ("*Pearl*: Shadow of the Object," 55).

Pat syȝt me gart to þenk to wade  
For luf-longyng in gret delyt  
(ll. 1149-1152)

Here the dreamer's determination to invalidate the very words he just received from the Maiden betray that, for him, desire exceeds comprehension. The dreamer cannot grasp that the kingdom, like the Maiden, is a mirage and so he begins to "wade" the chasm between unknowing and knowing, an act that thrusts him immediately back to earthly existence. Unable to suppress his "luf-longyng," the dreamer tests the literalized boundaries outlined by the Maiden throughout the poem.

For if the poem brings the dreamer (and reader) into any state of knowing, it is reached only belatedly, after being told precisely what cannot be comprehended intellectually: the irreducibility of God's infinite grace to any human mode of perception (sensory, linguistic, literary, or mathematical). Even within a fantasy within which the dreamer can fully trace the trajectory of his loss, the contact the he makes with immaterial reality is illusory. The dreamer must do more than Lacanian ethical command to "love his symptom": he must *unknow* this contact, submitting to faith this gap between his meager perception of the vision and the infinite equality of salvation, lest he misperceive the radical complexity of the theological paradox he was presented. Readers too must reduce all that the dreamer experiences to mere approximation.

Upon waking, the dreamer claims to belatedly understand one of the Maiden's primary lessons—that his desire for knowledge fundamentally exceeds his ability to comprehend. Reducing our inexhaustible intellectual thirst to an inherent human weakness, the speaker even has the nerve to caution the reader against epistemological

lust (ll. 1199-1200). Though the lesson is sensible, this is a strange one to hear from *this* speaker; after all, it is highly questionable whether he has even learned this lesson himself. Earlier in the stanza he professes a belief that *if only* he “3rned no more en watz me guen” (ll. 1190), God would have guided him, “To me of His mysterys I had ben dryuen” (l. 1195). Not only does his abiding belief in the knowability of God’s “mysterys” betray a misperception regarding the limits of human cognition, he also seems to offer a view of human longing in which desire can be satiated by just desiring *a little less*. What other of “His mysterys” might have the Maiden revealed to augment his understanding or to satisfy his yearning? Recalcitrant desire notwithstanding, the speaker ends the poem with a vision of faith without understanding, implying that the incomprehensible transfer of Christian truth between material and immaterial realms occurs only through a divine transformation, the sacrament of the Eucharist (1207-09). Quite fittingly, the poem’s last two lines confirm that, as daily witnesses to the transubstantive, we too, as readers, become pearls.

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By the poem’s end, we have truly come full circle: the speaker who lost a pearl has become a pearl found in Christ. Given the collapse of the poem’s animating symbol into two ostensibly opposed forces, it seems reasonable to suggest, along with Edmondson, that the poet has completely evacuated the pearl of any meaning (32). The pearl has become everything and nothing within the poem and thus impossible to pin down. And yet this is precisely the point. Lest we take impossibility as the poem’s one conclusive lesson, we must glance, belatedly, once more at the poet’s symbolic unfurling

of the pearl. Now that its signifying weight has consumed even the speaker, the pearl, so pregnant with meaning throughout the poem, has structurally enclosed the entire poem despite and because it has become the basic signifying unit within the poem's Christian economy of salvation. Whereas Edmondson returns the reader to the signifier, I would like to highlight how the poet, armed with an impossible task, employs, through the pearl, what Alexandre Leupin calls the "incarnational poetics" of Christian discourse to unknow the process of signification itself.<sup>72</sup>

Rather than unite a mourning jeweler with his lost jewel, *Pearl* articulates a system of designed failure that approximates the union of material and ethereal worlds, but maintains such contact as impossible. Through slippery wordplay, symbolic geometry, and meditation on the relation between the divine and the infinite, *Pearl* exposes the inadequacy of signs (linguistic, visual, and even mathematical) in any attempt to communicate divine knowledge. For those who insist on a more nuanced theological reading, in which *Pearl*'s manifestly theological digressions indicate a specific program of doctrinal instruction, the pearl becomes an object whose retrieval might signify the discovery of the soul, a turn to the ascetic life, or unmediated faith in God. And these readings are hardly surprising given that the pearl, understood as scriptural object, was already thought to participate in the economy of knowledge that helped collate the relationship between Kingdom of God, Word, and believer—a union of

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<sup>72</sup> Leupin describes medieval Christian poetics as a realist rhetoric that uses the model of the Christ's Incarnation to attempt to suture the gap between signified and signifier. He does not account for the poetic skepticism of a work like *Pearl*, though Leupin's brilliant analysis of Christian rhetoric certainly fits the mold of the *Pearl* poet's concerns. See *Fiction and Incarnation*.

the material and the immaterial. Yet, despite the dreamer's insistent treatment of the pearl as an object of knowledge, the Maiden guarantees the impossible status of the very information she delivers. In both form and content, *Pearl* addresses the question of how much one can know about what one does not know, and in doing so, meta-linguistically verifies unknowing as a viable approach to Christian salvation.

*Pearl's* engagement with the discursive history of its central object complicates the poem's point about the unknowability of salvation by building the immateriality that exceeds signification back into the same object (pearl) that functions also as metaphor for the way all knowledge is communicated in the poem. In other words, *Pearl's* epistemology champions the inseparability of knowing and unknowing: in order to recognize impossibility one must also *un-recognize* what *appears* to be (but is not) possible. Consequently, any attempt to isolate the pearl's symbolic import is frustrated by an endless and seemingly arbitrary transfer of meaning—a meaning that often negates its preceding significance. Thus the pearl both embodies and solves the poem's paradoxes: it is both the infinite and the same, the “more” and the “less,” Mary and Christ, foundation and “addubement,” form and content. Put another way, the pearl signifies both the condition of Christian knowing (salvation) and the fundamentally excessive intractability that makes its material possession impossible.

In order to follow the argument that the pearl encompasses everything, it must also represent the simplest of things. More fundamental than language or mathematics, it is the pearl itself that proves to be the poem's irreducible unit of meaning, the “spoteles” foundation of its arithmepoetics of unknowing. Of course, no poet can inhabit, let alone

harness, the infinite singularity of the pearl and its relationship to God's salvific economy: the mathematic balance for which the poet strives can only approximate the harmonious proportionality of the divine Word. The poet can only attempt to model the celestial poetics of infinite singularity through a metaphorical reduction of all signification to an interaction among pearls, objects understood throughout the Middle Ages as possessing the requisite qualities of uniqueness and endlessness. While language leaves readers with difference and the transcendental singularity of the number is undone by the un-representability of irrational quantities (the divine section, *phi*, the square root of two), the singularity of the pearl cannot be reduced. With the pearl, an object that exceeds human comprehension or control, the poet has a metaphor within which all meaning, however contradictory, coexists without slippage. Thus, in order to avoid the impossibility of signification its content champions, the poet employs a performatively approximate reconstruction of the pearl in order to at least partially recreate the effects of a signifying economy of salvation whose basic unit is paradoxically infinite and singular.

To consider *Pearl's* architecture as form does not require us to force enclosure onto a poem that so resists circumscription, but instead grants a point of entry into the poet's conception of his/her craft, a glimpse that exacerbates the need to consider *Pearl's* historical and cultural context. In terms of the rich tradition of *Pearl* criticism, I hope to have contributed a reading of how the ethereal Maiden of *Pearl* exceeds the generic expectations of the "literariness" of late medieval dream-narratives in order to emphasize the dream narrative's simultaneous relationship with a scientific understanding of signification. Within the field of medieval literary studies, I have attempted to offer a



model of how the putatively literary symbol can intervene in the historical understanding of a subject's relationship to the Word and the contradictions of reading practice.

But even as our “modern sensibilities” impel us to presume a natural separation between mathematical and literary thought, the distinction was not necessarily defined so clearly in the fourteenth century. Nor is *Pearl* singular in its interests: Chaucer's poetry possesses a playfulness with geometric riddles as well. The ending of the *Summoner's Tale*, for example, culminates in an absurdist reworking of the mathematical paradox of how to divide nothing (a fart) twelve ways.<sup>73</sup> In a similar vein, Condren cites *Sir Thopas*, a tale whose half-baked formal architecture (three fitts descending from eighteen stanzas to nine to four and a half) reveals a more explicit failure of balance than that of *Pearl* (6).

In order to understand the medieval object whose perfect circularity belies its failure to realize itself in the material world, perhaps it is more appropriate then to echo the poet's own advice from *Sir Gawain: Pe forme to Pe fynisment foldez ful seldom*; that is, the beginning seldom folds onto the end completely. In this sense, Edmondson's view of the poem as “indivisible remainder” resonates as a particularly apt descriptor of *Pearl's* place within medieval literature— not because it cannot be easily integrated within the canon of Middle English literature, but because it admits a lack of unity that results also in a left-over, both unknowing and exceeding literary studies.

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<sup>73</sup> See Glending Olson, “Measuring the Immeasurable: Farting, Geometry, and Theology in the Summoner's Tale,” *The Chaucer Review* 43.4 (2009): 414-27.

## Chapter Four

### Legend, Empire, and the Nomadic Prester John<sup>1</sup>

It is the year 1222. Intelligence relayed from Bohemond IV, ruler of the crusader state of Antioch, to Jacques de Vitry, preacher and crusade propagandist, reaches crusaders anxiously waiting in Damietta. The intelligence, a report written in Arabic obtained from traveling spice merchants in Antioch, details the westward military progression of a certain King David, purportedly the great-grandson of the famed Prester John, a military leader who, rumor has it, has systematically destroyed Muslim armies in the east. Jacques has the report, later called the *Relatio de Davide*, translated immediately.<sup>2</sup> He then sends letters containing parts of the *Relatio* to Pope Honorius, King Henry III of England, Duke Leopold of Austria, and to several academics at the University of Paris. Spirits lift within and without the crusader camp, essentially renewing the hope for a Christian recovery of Jerusalem. In dire need of good news, the de facto crusade leader at Damietta, Cardinal Pelagius, links this report to a local prediction, the Arabic Prophecy of Hannan, Son of Agip. This second prophecy augurs the arrival of a certain “King of the Abissi” who conquers Mecca in order to “scatter the

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter have been published in Christopher Taylor, “Global Circulation as Christian Enclosure: Legend, Empire, and the Nomadic Prester John,” *New Medieval Literatures* 11.7 (2014): 445-59.

<sup>2</sup> On the prophecy, see Jean Richard, “The *Relatio de Davide* as a Source for Mongol History and the Legend of Prester John,” in *Prester John, the Mongols, and the Ten Lost Tribes*, eds. C.F. Buckingham and B. Hamilton (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 139-58.

bones of Mahomet.”<sup>3</sup> Pelagius sees himself as the tall man with a lean face whom the prophecy foretells would invade Egypt and capture Damietta, since Pelagius had done just that in 1219. Meanwhile, the crusaders are also restlessly awaiting the appearance of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, a figure who had promised to show up and whose imminent appearance finally seemed certain. Frederick’s arrival, like John’s, is predicted by a *third* prophecy, extracted by Cardinal Pelagius from an apocalyptic Arabic text, *The Book of Clement*, which, among other things, announced the impending dissolution of Islam, which would occur when a King from the East (presumably Prester John, or one of his descendants) and one from the West (Frederick) met in Jerusalem during a year when Easter fell on the third day of April. By happiest coincidence, that would be this very year, 1222. Buoyed by prophecy and heedless of local conditions, the crusaders at Damietta decide to invade Cairo immediately, rejecting an agreement with the Sultan Al-Kamil that would have given Jerusalem back to the crusaders in exchange for Damietta. The Nile rises, turning the invasion of Cairo into defeat. The armies of the Fifth Crusade surrender to the Sultan of Egypt, Al-Kamil, Saladin’s nephew, a few weeks later.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Bernard Hamilton, this prophecy was an update of the work of a ninth-century Persian Nestorian scholar, Hunan Ibn Ishak, and “Abissi” refers to the Abyssinians (in Ethiopia). Hamilton believes that a Coptic Christian wrote the copy of the prophecy that Pelagius obtained. More recently, Christopher Tyerman has suggested that the prophecy was written around 1220 by a nearby Egyptian Nestorian. See, respectively, Bernard Hamilton, “Continental Drift: Prester John’s Progress through the Indies,” in *Prester John, the Mongols, and the Ten Lost Tribes*, ed. C.F. Buckingham and B. Hamilton (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 243; Tyerman, *God’s War: A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2006), 642. For more on the contents of this prophecy, see Paul Pelliot, “Deux passages de ‘la prophétie de Hannan fils d’Issac,’” in *Prester John, the Mongols, and the Ten Lost Tribes*, ed. C.F. Buckingham and B. Hamilton, 113-38 (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996).

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With victory in sight at Damietta, the strange ending of the Fifth Crusade has long puzzled scholars: *how is it possible for so many people to not only believe in a Prester John figure, but to have faith that he would show up?* The tactical disasters of the Fifth Crusade help quantify the reach of belief with which medieval Christians—especially those invested in the project of crusading—were willing to grant to the notion an Eastern Christian sovereign fated to help drive out the threat of Islam once and for all. For Pope Innocent III, the divisions between and among Christians, coupled with the potential alliance between Christian and Muslim, evidenced the internal discord of Christendom. Therefore, Innocent made crusading it an all-inclusive affair, an event in which all members of Christian society participate.<sup>4</sup> This communal ideology gave the militaristic dimensions of crusading added spiritual depth, and the spiritual aspects a stronger material agency. This latter point, combined with the council’s demands for clarity and revelation, clears a space for prophecy as a viable means for making the unknown known or knowable. And as Michael Goodich discusses, Innocent’s *vitas* would have us believe that he was quite susceptible to prophecy himself.<sup>5</sup> After all, what better way to achieve clarity than through revelation?

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<sup>4</sup> This includes mandatory intercessory prayer, redemption for crusade vows, and a vision of crusade as *imitatio Christi*, rendering it a mechanism for salvation, not unlike the Eucharist itself.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Goodich, “Vision, Dream and Canonization Policy Under Pope Innocent III,” in *Pope Innocent III and his World*, ed. John C. Moore, 151-63 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

But Prester John was much more than a mere vessel for crusading hopes. According to the most authoritative rumors—many of which were propagated by a man claiming to be John himself—this eastern warrior priest-king possessed the richest kingdom on earth, replete not only with an vast store of jewels, spices, and Christian soldiers, but also home to monsters, Jews, and, even worse, Nestorian Christians (of which Prester John was reputedly one). It seems the Prester John belonged to a much larger, more complex network of desires regarding identity and politics, the known and the unknown. Yet, through the Fifth Crusade, the most important component of this medieval myth was surely John’s promise to help vanquish the enemies of the cross. Indeed, from its inception in the twelfth century, the legend of Prester John linked the impulse to explore a global landscape with a desire for this landscape to be revealed as a continuation of, rather than a departure from, the known—as *already* Christian.

Buried under such a burden of historical expectation, John seemed destined to disappoint for any number of reasons, not the least of which because he did not technically exist. In this chapter, rather than dwell on the historical demands that produced such fervent belief, I pick up where the opening anecdote left off. Strangely enough, despite never showing up to defend crusader armies and refusing to reveal himself to European travelers, an increasingly global audience refused to relinquish faith in Prester John, who remained an important cornerstone to Western conceptions of a global Christendom for six centuries. How was this possible? As I discuss in this chapter, belief in Prester John persisted for centuries because what the legend sustained had little to do with reality. Adherents to the legend attended not to material concerns but rather to

the *hope* that the varied liminal spaces around the world might ultimately reveal an expansive Christian network, a Christian enclosure of the globe, so to speak. The transmission of the legend, fueled by hundreds of manuscripts of supposedly self-authored *Letter*, establishes an expectation that the known world would inevitably succumb to the will of global Christianity, within which alterity threatens to become a productive force, once and for all.

In this chapter, I discuss how writers made productive use of John's unknowability and how these texts helped sustain the persuasive force of the legend. The legend survived, in part, because the promise it offered outweighed the fact that John remained materially unknown to all who sought him. As I hope to show, the effective preservation of Christian hope John embodied required a transposition away from the realm of history to a setting whose geographies he might less problematically negotiate: the space of literature. I argue that the literary aspects of the legend lent more than ornament to John's unknowability; these resonances served, paradoxically, to *enhance* John's historical profile. Prester John would have likely retained his supporters regardless of the believability of the legend. However, the proliferation of late-medieval Prester John narratives recasts his historical failures into a crucial component of the legend's nomadic poetics, which allowed the European imagination to imagine him *everywhere* precisely because he could neither be confirmed nor denied an existence *anywhere*.

By focusing first on the twelfth-century *Letter of Prester John* and later on the literary character of the legend, I show how, for centuries, Prester John helped writers mediate threatening encroachments onto the Christian present by giving face to (and

therefore helping to domesticate) the unknown. In the first section of this chapter, I reconsider some of the *Letter's* supposed irregularities and contest readings that reduce the legend to a chain of utopic impulses aimed at describing some vaguely defined, fantastic community. In order to contextualize my reading of the *Letter* as Crusading fantasy, I compare the *Letter's* textual project of Christian enclosure, the first Latin translation of the Qur'an (1143). While the *Letter* reveals a powerful Eastern Christian ally in order to clarify the place of the crusades in a larger eschatological schema, its focus on an ambiguous, fantastic geography sets in motion later versions of the legend rooted in the intractability of John and his kingdom.

In the second section of the chapter, I show how later versions of the legend make use of John's unknowability in order to sustain a narrative tradition. An analysis of the relationship between the historical expectations and literary flourishes reveals that these two narrative modes were not incompatible, but interdependent. An Anglo-Norman translation of the *Letter* softens the historical character of the legend while maintaining the expectations attached to John's promises. Middle English texts, such as Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and *The Three Kings of Cologne*, along with continental texts, including Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and, later, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, integrate the legend into other popular medieval narrative traditions. These narratives serve both to aestheticize John's unknowability at the same time that they work to familiarize John to a growing European audience. Moving from the realm of politics to that of poetics, the legend of Prester John demonstrates some long-term consequences of actively organizing epistemological pursuits around a romanticized notion of the unknown. By re-examining

how “John” self-fashions a malleable and yet fundamentally consistent identity across the texts he appears in, I show how the legend complicates received notions about how late-medieval narratives handled questions of authorship, temporality, geography, and theology. Insofar as it articulates a politics of Empire predicated on a purposefully delayed encounter with the reality of human difference, the legend of Prester John pushes the poetics of unknowing into a global, political arena.

### **A Purloined History**

Prester John first appears in 1145 within Otto of Friesing’s universal chronicle of Christian history based on a comparison between the heavenly kingdom of Jerusalem and the earthly kingdom of Babel.<sup>6</sup> In Book VII, Chapter 3 of the *Historia*, Otto recalls a story he obtained from a certain Bishop Hugh of Jabala. While at the court of Pope Eugenius III, Hugh overheard talk of a Nestorian Christian prince, Iohannes, hailing from the distant East of the Magi (from whom he claimed lineage). This prince had recently conquered Persia and had headed West to assist crusaders in their defense of the Holy Land, but was thwarted by a flooded Tigris River.<sup>7</sup> It remains a mystery why so credible

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<sup>6</sup> Otto, the uncle of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, wrote the *Historia de duabus civitatibus* during a time of civil unrest in Germany, following the collapse of the first crusader county, Edessa.

<sup>7</sup> If the dates are correct, Hugh was likely to have been in Rome for the specific purpose of reporting to Pope Eugenius III that Edessa had fallen to Muslim control. Raymond, Prince of Antioch, had sent Hugh to Rome in 1144 to deliver the news. Less than a year later, Eugenius issued a bull inaugurating the Second Crusade. Although the rumor spawned centuries of expectations regarding an Eastern potentate capable of uniting all of Christendom, the initial account was later revealed to refer not to utopic Christians at all, but to the Qara Khitai, a nomadic Chinese tribe descending from Manchuria.



an historian as Bishop Otto, whose writings remain a useful source for contemporary historians, would write about this strange “Iohannes” knowing so little about him, to say nothing of how this “John” became Westernized in name and intent. A Nestorian Christian—a heretic by Latin Christian standards— would seem an unlikely candidate to assist in a Latin Christian recovery of Jerusalem, let alone be *desired* for such a mission.<sup>8</sup> Given that the fall of Edessa to Seljuk Turks in 1144 helped spawn the Second Crusade one year later—a crusade that Otto himself participated in—it should come as no surprise that, at the time of Otto’s account, crusaders were looking to the divine in order to support, or at least sustain, their actions.<sup>9</sup> Nothing in Otto’s narrative suggests that Prester John provided a solution to these crusader crises, however. In fact, the text explicitly states that John and his army had been forced to turn back before reaching Jerusalem.

After its initial appearance in 1145, the legend of Prester John goes unremarked for about twenty years, at which point a letter materializes, reportedly authored by John himself.<sup>10</sup> In what has come to be known as the *Letter of Prester John*, John professes to be a devout Christian king of an immense, militarily powerful kingdom from which he

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<sup>8</sup> Although a number of hypotheses have been afforded to explain how medieval Europeans Latinized the name of the Mongol Prince, it is perhaps more important to recognize the fact that some of the Mongols *were* Christianized. Robert Silverberg suggests that that Hugh purposefully dissuaded the Pope from believing in the omnipotence of Prester John because John’s presence might render the deployment of European armies to the Holy Land less necessary. See *The Realm of Prester John* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1972), 8-10.

<sup>9</sup> According to the *Historia*, it was the fall of Edessa that finally inspired this Nestorian prince to cross the Alps.

<sup>10</sup> The conventional dating of the *Letter of Prester John* to 1165 derives from the chronicle of Alberic of Trois-Fontaines, writing 1232-52.

announces his intentions to visit the Holy Sepulcher and to aid crusaders.<sup>11</sup> While early copies were addressed to the Byzantine emperor Manuel, with whom “John” takes a hostile tone, the *Letter* likely circulated within Latin Europe rather than through the territories of the Greek Empire.<sup>12</sup> It became an immediate success. In addition to the extant hundred-plus Latin manuscripts, the *Letter* was translated into multiple vernacular languages, including French, Italian, German, English, Hebrew, Serbian, and Russian. The Western appropriation of a letter apparently written for an Eastern audience highlights the *Letter*’s status as purloined, while its vernacular popularity suggests that even as the legend spread locally, linguistic difference hardly undermined the hope for a unified Christian future. It seems, rather, the unification the *Letter* provided was, in fact, predicated on such linguistic and cultural difference.

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<sup>11</sup> For a complete English translation of the Latin letter, see Michael Uebel, *Ecstatic Transformation: On the Uses of Alterity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 155-60. For the still-authoritative critical edition of the Latin manuscripts, see Friedrich Zarncke, “Der Priester Johannes,” *Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Classe der königlich sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* 7 (1879): 872-934. Subsequent in-text quotations from the *Letter* include corresponding page numbers in Uebel and Zarncke, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> The oldest known versions of the *Letter* are all addressed to Manuel despite their being written in Latin: no Greek version has yet been found. For a detailed investigation of the historical conditions surrounding the original letter as well as an excellent study of its style and analysis, see Vsevolod Slessarev, *Prester John: The Letter and the Legend*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1959), 32-54. The only serious scholar to claim a Greek ur-text is Alexander Vasiliev in his unpublished study, available at the Byzantine Library of Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC: *Prester John: Legend and History*, (n.p., n.p.), 90.

In the *Letter*, John boasts of an Eastern Christian kingdom bordering paradise that surpasses the power and virtue of any other Christian principality.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the *Letter*, the speaker balances Occidental familiarities (Christian values, crusading promises) with traditional Eastern lore. John promises to protect all Christians through the excessive power he wields, by which the *Letter* attempts to secure his place among the idealized rulers of the Middle Ages, both real, such as Charlemagne, and imagined, such as Arthur.<sup>14</sup> Prester John's superlative wealth aligns the legend with traditional accounts of Eastern riches. His frequent avowals of faith and piety establish his kingdom as a Christian node of a vast empire that approaches, asymptotically, the very bounds of the earth: "from the farthest India, where the body of St. Thomas the Apostle rests, to the place where the sun rises" (155; 910). John not only endures alongside but rules over many well-known markers of the medieval fantastic, including the Tower of Babel, Mount Olympus, the tomb of the Old Testament prophet Daniel, the fountain of youth, and the dwelling places of the ten tribes of Israel, the Amazons, and the Brahmans. By presenting the topography of Prester John's kingdom via well-known touchstones of Western accounts of the East, the *Letter* echoes the way that medieval *mappaemundi* indicate and plot topographical relationships and also how travel narratives, according to

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<sup>13</sup> The original *Letter* does not survive and when scholars refer to it, they almost always mean Zarncke's recreation of an ur-text based on his work with the manuscripts. In addition to the recreated ur-text, Zarncke identifies five separate redactions of the *Letter*.

<sup>14</sup> The Latin *Letter of Prester John* began circulating not thirty years after the completion of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie*, the text that marks King Arthur's Latin debut. This historical coincidence should not be overlooked, especially since Geoffrey's Arthur, like Prester John, responded also to the demands of Empire. See, for example, Arthur's speech at ix.4.

Paul Zumthor, “[betray] the author’s faith in a complete world, pointing up his terror of the void, but conferring on the text a fictive veracity.”<sup>15</sup> While the imaginative riches of John’s realm confirm Western fantasies of an exotic East teeming with strange treasures, the *Letter* appropriates these expectations for Western hopes via John’s Christianity.

The *Letter* avoids the doctrinal conflicts plaguing twelfth-century Europe by uniting all forms of Christianity under John’s protective banner.<sup>16</sup> John promises to defend Christendom against all *inimicos crucis Christi* and advocates a military policy of humiliation and defeat (“*humiliare et debellare*”) rather than annihilation (155; 910). Along with providing hope for a global Christendom, Prester John helps assimilate the mysteries of the East by re-routing all networks of power and human difference through a naturalized Christian rule. John’s kingdom models a form of rule that domesticates even the most heterogeneous lands: despite the fact that seventy-two kings pay tribute to him, “John” boasts, only “a few are Christian.” (155; 910)<sup>17</sup> In addition to Muslims, pagans, and the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, the land is rife with the creatures of medieval bestiaries,

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<sup>15</sup> See Zumthor, “The Medieval Travel Narrative,” trans. Catherine Peebles. *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 809-24; 816.

<sup>16</sup> John is presumably as a Nestorian (although the *Letter* never identifies him as such), but here he is uniting himself with Catholic ideals. Otto of Friesing’s account links John to Nestorianism and Mandeville’s mid-fourteenth-century reimagining of Prester John, which uses the original epistle as a source text, too posits the king as Nestorian, which suggests that John continued to be popularly identified as Nestorian. Slessarev reads the original *Letter*’s association between John and St. Thomas (a very important figure for Nestorian Christians) as an implicit acknowledgement of Prester John’s Nestorianism (*The Letter and the Legend*, 14). Geraldine Heng reads this passage as John’s pledge to join the Crusading movement (*Empire of Magic*, 283, 446).

<sup>17</sup> According to Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*, ii.2., the world was composed of seventy-two tribes of people. The fact that John rules over seventy-two kings suggests that John is a universal ruler.

including griffins, phoenix, satyrs, dog-headed men, one-eyed men, and giants.<sup>18</sup> In order to maintain order in this heterotopia, John projects an ethos predicated on adherence to moral principles (temperance, humility) rather than confine himself to rigorous doctrinal allegiances. In doing so, the *Letter* valorizes a shared core of Christian values that closely resemble Islamic doctrines instead of obsessing over the differences that undermine the possibility of a united Christendom.

Despite all the talk of heresy in the genres that inform it, the *Letter* mentions neither the word nor the concept. All who recognize John's sovereignty are welcome in the realm; John makes alterity work under the banner of Christianity without destroying its productive potential. As avowedly humble potentate of sacral and secular power, John solves, with elegant simplicity, the ongoing Investiture struggles that were now reverberating in the conflict between Frederick Barbarossa and Pope Alexander III (1153-1177):

For we have in our court many officials who are more deserving of title and office, as far as ecclesiastical honor is concerned, and they are provide with divine service even greater than ours. In fact our steward is a primate and king, our cup-bearer an archbishop and king, our marshal a king and archimandrite, and our chief cook a king and abbot. (Uebel, 160)

Prester John's kingdom, as Bernard Hamilton points out, resembles Emperor Frederick I's vision for the West.<sup>19</sup> As if to leave any doubt of the political leverage John's

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<sup>18</sup> Much has been made in the last twenty years about the medieval monster and what it signals for English identity. See the work of Jeffrey Cohen: *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999) and the edited collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. J. Cohen (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> See "Prester John and the Three Kings of Cologne," in *Prester John, the Mongols, and the Ten Lost Tribes*, eds. C.F. Buckingham and B. Hamilton, 171-85 (Aldershot:

imagined support garnered, early copies of the *Letter* that were addressed to Barbarossa shifted the dynamic between emperor and pope enough that the latter tried to requisition the support of John himself. Pope Alexander sent a request to meet through an emissary in 1177, the same year that the Peace of Venice ended the power struggle between the two leaders and forced Frederick to recognize papal supremacy.<sup>20</sup>

Although most scholars of the legend situate the politics of the *Letter* in terms of these two models of Western power, it cannot be overlooked that John's kingdom models an inclusivity absent in either form. This inclusive stance toward Christian expansion survives the *Letter*, resurfacing in later texts mentioning John's kingdom, a topic I explore in the next section. Although scholars, including Hamilton, have tried to explain the legend as a hoax perpetuated by Frederick's inner circle that spiraled out of control, this explanation fails to account for the survival of the legend beyond the political intrigues of the twelfth century. By proposing a kingdom under which heretics, pagans,

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Variorum, 1996). Hamilton goes further, claiming that "the aim of the author of this letter is to show that Frederick's concept of church-state relations, unlike that of Alexander III, produced harmony in the Christian world, and enabled Christians to unite against the enemies of the faith" (180).

<sup>20</sup> Pope Alexander sent Master Phillip, his personal physician, as envoy to provide a reply to Prester John's *Letter* and urge John's instruction in Catholicism. We never hear back from Master Phillip. For the text of the letter, see Zarncke, *Abhandlungen*, 941-4. While Alexander's letter is typically read at face-value, it also has the effect of re-inscribing ecclesiastical power, in the form of doctrinal Catholicism, as the most important feature of any imperial project. Hamilton reads the letter as a kind of public rhetorical performance, a stance he supports by noting that Alexander made several copies of his letter. See Bernard Hamilton, "Prester John and the Three Kings of Cologne," in *Prester John, the Mongols, and the Ten Lost Tribes*, eds. C.F. Buckingham and B. Hamilton, 171-85 (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 184. Nicholas Jubber, eight hundred years later, attempts to re-trace the emissary's route and deliver Alexander's reply, despite the obvious facts standing in the way of this feat, in *The Prester Quest* (London: Doubleday, 2005).

and monsters coexist, the *Letter* offers a glimpse of a confidently universal Christendom that need not force assimilation or extermination to extend its rule. Instead, the descriptions of the monstrous in the *Letter* remind us that, like Prester John, Christianity has seen it all; therefore, it can withstand it all.

### **Acts of Enclosure**

Spatially considered, the idea of a powerful Eastern Christian kingdom provided the West with a tactical comfort: such a military intervention from the East led by Prester John inspired a strategic vision in which Muslim armies appeared to be surrounded from both West and East. The *Letter* redirects the “persecutorial impulse” of the twelfth-century West away from the fragmentation internal to Christian identity and focuses these energies on a clearly defined *external* enemy. This rhetorical move is significant not only because it obviates the notion of heresy but also because it posits Islam as something external to Christian practice. For many twelfth-century Christians, Islam was best categorized as a Christian heresy, and it was not until Islam was better understood that it was fully granted the status as a religion separate from Christianity.<sup>21</sup> John’s realm’s boundlessness suggests the illimitability of Christendom, while its vaguely eastern geography guarantees a topographical enclosure, or final limit, of this uncanny identity haunting its sacred place of origin, an ever-increasing Islamic empire.

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<sup>21</sup> John Toland discusses this twelfth-century understanding of Islam as Christological heresy in *Sons of Ishmael* (Tallahassee: U of Florida P, 2008). See especially “Peter the Venerable and the ‘Diabolical Heresy of the Saracens,’” 46-65.

Indeed, the larger thematic picture of the *Letter* closely resembles a contemporaneous textual enclosure of Islam used to delineate an unambiguous Christian identity: the first Latin translation of the Qur'an. Commissioned in 1143 by the powerful Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, the translation, called *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*, was the centerpiece of a planned codex unveiling Muslim doctrine, which could then be authoritatively critiqued.<sup>22</sup> Spatially analogous to a Christian landscape that includes an powerful eastern ally, the translation allowed Christians to enclose the message of Islam as conveyed by the Qur'an into the language of the Christian Church and to surround the Islamic message with Christian glosses, commentary, and marginal notes.<sup>23</sup>

Peter's was the first attempt to identify and translate the actual doctrine of Islam into the language of the Catholic Church. As late as the twelfth century, the Latin texts

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<sup>22</sup> In 1142 Peter the Venerable (also known as Peter of Montboissier), abbot of Cluny, traveled to Spain at the request of Emperor Alfonso VII with the ostensible goal of visiting the Cluniac monasteries of Spain. Having established a reputation for reform during his twenty-year abbacy (a crucial time in the history of Cluny), Peter had also recently emerged as a powerful international figure, shadowed in influence perhaps only by his friend (and sometimes rival) Bernard of Clairvaux. In Toledo, Peter assembled a group of scholars who would together produce a systematic Latin account of Islamic doctrine. Peter assembled a research and translation team that included an English theologian and scientist (Robert of Ketton), a French academic (Peter of Poitiers), a Mozarab Christian (Peter of Toledo), a Dalmatian astronomer (Herman of Carinthia), and an Iberian Muslim named Mohammed. For the most specific outline of Peter's itinerary, see Charles Biskho, *Spanish and Portuguese Monastic History, 600-1300* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), 344-50.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Burman analyzes the Latin translations of the Qur'an in *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560* (Philadelphia: U of Penn P, 2007). For more on the translation and *Letter* as strategies of enclosure, see Christopher Taylor, "Prester John, Christian Enclosure, and the Spatial Transmission of Islamic Alterity in the Twelfth-Century West" in *Contextualizing the Muslim Other in Medieval Christian Discourse*, ed. Jerold Frakes, 39-64 (New York: Palgrave, 2011).



concerned with the practice of Islam focused mainly on Muhammad and inserted the prophet into a highly imaginative genealogy of heretics and pagans hostile to the Christian faith.<sup>24</sup> Sensing that a military engagement with Islam had its limitations, Peter maintained, in opposition to his friend Bernard, that the elimination of the Islamic threat required Christians to understand and, finally, refute Islam's relationship to Christian doctrine.<sup>25</sup> In his estimation, the reconciliation of Islam to the Christian faith would prove a far more impressive feat than vanquishing the Muslims. Although Peter planned the codex (referred to now as the Toledan Collection MS 1162 of Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris) primarily for use at Cluny, the eventual audience for the project proved much more diverse.

At the center of the Toledan Collection was Robert of Ketton's translation of the Qur'an, entitled *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*. Framed by other texts in the manuscript that related the genealogy, deeds, beliefs, and errors of Muhammad, Robert's translation rendered a religious code that relied largely on oral transmission into a speculative object to be studied alongside Christian texts.<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that the Latin Qur'an was a completely faithful translation. Robert took many liberties with the text, not necessarily

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<sup>24</sup> See "Forging Polemical Images," in Tolan, *Saracens*, 69-170.

<sup>25</sup> Peter's letters to Bernard reveal the former's relative disapproval for crusading and his preference instead for instruction and conversion. See especially Letter 111 from Peter to Bernard in *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, Vol. 1, ed. Giles Constable, 274-99 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1967). On Peter's interaction with the Muslim faith, see James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1964).

<sup>26</sup> Burman remarks on the resemblance between the Toledan Collection and a contemporary Christian scholar's Bible, which exemplifies the extent to which the author-compiler worked to assimilate Islam into a Christian cultural paradigm (*Reading the Qur'an*, 63).

with the intention of polemic but in order to provide Western Christians with a sense of traditional Muslim exegetics. Robert's Qur'an presents its reader with two enclosures: he translates Islamic doctrine into Latin and then distills each sura into its condensed meaning.<sup>27</sup> Along with the twelfth-century preoccupation with heresy, the Latin Qur'an shows that during the twelfth century, the Church often valorized the peripheral as a more urgent theological concern than the central identity delimiting the outside from inside in the first place. The *Lex Mahumet* seeks the preservation and territorial extension of a *societas Christiana* in such a way that it comes to resemble the violent efforts of the crusading movement it was formulated to subtend.

The coding of the Muslim faith as Christian heresy established a tautological relationship between the two faiths—Islamic doctrine is known to be incorrect because it disagrees with the Christian doctrine to which it is so clearly indebted. However, despite the book's dependence on its inevitable refutation, the stylistic prestige bestowed upon the Toledan Collection legitimates the text itself as theologically significant. Both Peter and Robert regarded the translation a serious endeavor, and, in fact, Robert's translation later became a popular Scholastic text. The result was a doctrinally accurate although highly paraphrased treatise, translated "by sense, rather than the word," that nonetheless showed careful philological considerations. Linguistic and theological interests coincide in the relation between Robert's sober text and the prescriptive commentary provided in

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<sup>27</sup> Robert took the translation process seriously, which resulted in a final product that actually resembled a work of Christian theology. Burman notes that Robert wrote in an elevated register of Latin that "bespoke prestige and cultural validity," even though readers were instructed to read the Qur'an as heresy (*Reading the Qur'an*, 13, 14).

the margins.<sup>28</sup> Commentary not only guided readers through unfamiliar territory but also assured them of an interpretive “auctoritas” whose purpose was to disarm the equivocations of the reading process. Given the relation between reading correctly and living correctly in the Middle Ages, this desire for textual assurance might represent a more urgent desire for stability at a time when the Christian identity faced ideological and military danger. In the case of *Lex Mahumet*, the marginalia colored the neutral tone of Robert’s paraphrased translation with necessary polemical anti-Islamic warnings, which helped cement shared Christian values.

The decade that produced the 1143 Latin Qur’an challenged the notion of a united Latin Christendom that Pope Urban II had promised at the Council of Clermont in 1095. Indeed, Peter’s translation project reflected the uncertainties underwriting the time period in which it was produced: unstable leadership (four popes in the decade), the ascendancy of the Cistercians, the fall of Edessa (1144), the unsuccessful Second Crusade that followed (1145), and the seeds of the now infamous legend of Prester John (1145). Once borders between Islam and Christian could be properly marked, a distinctive Christian identity could be produced, and the new ideological space granted to Islam could be recaptured under the banner of a newly united Christendom. When hope gave way to experience, however, Christians began to rely increasingly on prophecy and legend to make intelligible the difficulties faced during the crusading movement and to situate war

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<sup>28</sup> As Rita Copeland has shown, manuscript marginalia bestow a final interpretive authority across space and time and sometimes overshadow the text itself. See *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translating in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

with Islam within a Christianized telos. Two resulting fantasies of enclosure—Qur’anic translation, Prester John’s legend—bolstered hopes for retaking lost Eastern strongholds (Edessa, Jerusalem) and capturing new ones (Cyprus, Acre, Jaffa), but also indicate a desire for Islam to be absorbed into the narrative of Christianity.

The strategy of enclosure might resemble a colonial impulse; however, considering that Muslims occupied the symbolic center of Christian identity (Jerusalem), these actions are framed more precisely by the logic of reconquest or return. Peter the Venerable’s linguistic enclosure of the Qur’an offered opportunities for Western readers to disassemble the logic underwriting Islamic doctrine, and thus to re-assert the theological superiority of a doctrinal Christianity. Rather than combat an unknown force on the ground, Peter favored an act of revelation to allow the text to speak for itself. Peter reasoned that making Islam more knowable could facilitate its defeat in a way that military engagement could not. On the other hand, the Prester John *Letter* and its geographical fantasy of enclosure lacked the alchemy that transformed knowledge into power so directly. Rather, hinged to the more indirect power of belief, the legend of Prester John made its readers wait; its true promise relied on John’s fated arrival. And yet, while the *Letter* appears to reveal everything except where to find Prester John, it does provide some sense of who the king might be. By linking the figure of Prester John to key figures of the European Christian imagination, the *Letter* offers an outline of the future that answers one of the legend’s fundamental questions. We may not know *where* John lives, but we can know what kind of man he is.

## Uncanny Doubles

For many of its readers, the Prester John legend creates an Eastern complement to the prowess of Western Christendom. However, the legend's preoccupation with Islamic lore and its attention to contemporary cultural events positions John as the West's Christian counterpart precisely because of his position as the uncanny double of Muslim success. As abstract locus of power for a potentially global Christian empire, John's kingdom offered a nascent *societas Christiana* a cipher through which Christians might acknowledge and contain the excess that threatened Latin Christian identity: heresy from within, Islam from without, and Mongols from afar.

In the *Letter* and the twelfth-century material that inspired it, John's associations with Islam cannot be untangled from his proximity to Edessa and his connection to the Apostle Thomas. Traditionally linked to the spread Christianity in the East, Thomas was not an especially popular apostle within the Latin Christian community.<sup>29</sup> However, this most skeptical of the Apostles became John's Christian predecessor. In addition to using his tomb as a point of orientation, John constructs his palace to replicate the spiritual palace Thomas builds for King Gundapor in the *Acts of Thomas*. The Apostle Thomas provides John with an Eastern Christian forebear that helps maintain the powerful expectation of an *already* Christian East. However, the connection between these figures exceeds even this useful homology as Thomas' placement in the legend's helps assemble

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<sup>29</sup> The Syrian *Acts of Thomas*, even when translated into Latin, did not have much of a Western readership.

a powerful network connecting West and East, past and future, known and unknown, through a logic of doubleness that extends through centuries of Prester John lore.

As Zarncke discovered, John and Thomas became something of a pair even before the legend of Prester John began to circulate through the *Letter*. In the *De adventu patriarchae Indorum ad Urbem sub Calixto papa secundo* [*De adventu*], a certain Patriarch John, hailing from India, travels to the Pope in 1122 to give an account of the vast wealth and power of Indian Christians who guard the shrine of St. Thomas, a site of many miracles.<sup>30</sup> A contemporaneous letter written by Odo of Rheims, abbot of St. Remy, addressed to a Count Thomas, attests to similar Eastern miracles associated with the shrine of St. Thomas in India.<sup>31</sup> With a base population of Christians and a reliable method of conversion through miracles, these texts depict India as a veritable factory for producing new Christians. In both texts, Patriarch John goes to Rome in order to prove his commitment to a global *societas Christiana* by advocating for the reunification of Eastern and Western churches. Collectively, Thomas and Prester John represented an exotic East that rejected Islam and could capably defend themselves against it.

Within communities of Eastern Christians, a slightly different history of St. Thomas attested similar miracles to those of *de Adventu* but placed them in a curious (and

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<sup>30</sup> Slessarev finds an analogue and predecessor of the Prester in the *de Adventu* text; see *The Letter and the Legend*, 7-14. The *de Adventu* is edited by Zarncke in the collection of Prester John related texts; see “Der Priester Johannes,” 837-46.

<sup>31</sup> The only substantial difference between the *de Adventu* and Odo’s letter is that in Odo’s version John is an archbishop, and that he came to Constantinople to request a replacement for the prince of Hulna, who had recently died; see Slessarev, *The Letter and the Legend*, 9-14. Anthropologist Manuel João Ramos provides a compelling argument about the link between John and the Thomas legends; see “What is a Fallen Angel?” in *Essays in Christian Mythology* (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 2006), 183-92.

highly relevant) locale: Edessa. A twelfth-century account of India written by the monk Elysaeus, influenced in part by the Prester John *Letter*, situates the miracles of St. Thomas on a mountain just outside of the crusader county lost around the time the Prester John legends began to circulate.<sup>32</sup> Edessa was regarded as one of the chief Christian cities at the time, both for its Christian population and for its strategic location as a Christian gateway to the East. Edessa had also been historically considered a hotbed of Nestorianism, Prester John's reputed faith, ever since the School of Edessa's support of Nestorius in the fifth century. These twelfth-century narratives establish Edessa not only as a magical place worth defending, but as a *naturally* Christian locale. While Jerusalem might be the center of the Christian world, Edessa, the first crusader state to be established (and lost), marks the first successful expansion of a Latin Christian empire.

Whatever inspired the timely conjunction that convened Edessa and Prester John's India, it seems that reported events within these locales were circulating more closely than their geographies would indicate. By planting the seeds of legend into the history of Edessa, twelfth-century writers participate in an active un-knowing of history, through which the legend might persist. Given that the Prester John legend arose, in part, out of the news that Edessa had fallen, it should not be surprising that this association persists well into the fourteenth century. Johannes Witte de Hese, whose fanciful "travels" recall those of the more famous John Mandeville, even names Edessa as the city

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<sup>32</sup> The Latin *Acts of Thomas*, which evolved into two more popular treatises, *De miraculis Beati Thomae* and the *Passio Sancti Thomae*, identifies Edessa as the final burial place of Thomas. Some traditions posit that Thomas rested simultaneously in Edessa and India. See Nicolaus Nilles, *Kalendarium manual utriusque ecclesiae orientalis et occidentalis*, vol. 1 (Oeniponte: Innsbruck, 1896), 297-98.

that houses the infamous kingdom of Prester John.<sup>33</sup> By associating the lands of Prester John directly or indirectly with Edessa, writers employ the creative power of fiction to un-know the traumatic loss of this “gateway to the East.”

Considering that Muslims and Nestorians represented two of the West’s most historically problematic and intractable “heresies” it should come as no surprise that they are also grouped together in Western Christian texts.<sup>34</sup> Principal among these connections is the strange fact that Western authors of the twelfth century inaugurated traditions, devoid of any literary precedent, claiming that the tombs of Muhammad and St. Thomas’s floated in mid-air.<sup>35</sup> In both cases, this phenomena does not betray an underlying sanctity, but rather the result of strategically placed magnets. These stories, which were Latin Christian inventions, appear to forge a connection between the Eastern

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<sup>33</sup> When de Hese first mentions Prester John, he notes that “sailing farther for fourteen days, one comes to the city of Edissa where Prester John lives,” and that this city, the capital of John’s realm, “is located in Upper India at the end of the inhabited earth.” See Scott Westrem, *Broader Horizons: A Study of Johannes Witte de Hese's Itinerarius and Medieval Travel Narratives* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 2001), 213. Westrem’s excellent edition of the *Itinerarius* includes an edited Latin edition, an English translation, and a very useful introduction.

<sup>34</sup> Tolan remarks that authors of these heresiographies “insist on the spiritual heritage of Muhammad: while the prophet himself claims affinity to Moses and Christ, the authors instead profess Muhammad’s solidarity with the great heresiarchs of old, in particular Arius and Nestorius” (*Saracens*, 138, 144).

<sup>35</sup> The *de Adventu* contains the narrative of Thomas’ floating tomb, described beautifully in Michael Uebel’s “The Pathogenesis of Medieval History,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44.1 (2002): 47-65; 55-6. Embrico of Mainz’s twelfth-century *Vita Mahumeti* inaugurated the tradition of Muhammad’s tomb being suspended in mid-air by magnets. See *La vie de Mahomet*, ed. Guy Cambier (Brussels: Latomus, 1961). Other twelfth-century portraits of Muhammad, including those in the *Chanson d’Antioche* and Gautier de Compiegne’s *De otia Machometi*, offer similar descriptions of Muhammad’s tomb, envisioned ostensibly in order to showcase the way in which Muhammad feigned piety and miracles in order to assure adherents of his sanctity.



Christians' reverence of the Apostle Thomas with Muslims' adulation of their prophet Muhammad as a way of un-knowing the difference between them. Heresy is heresy, after all, as the Fourth Lateran Council would soon make clear. If Muhammad's tomb mirrored the Christians' Jerusalem, as historian John Tolan contends, these legends provide a counter-narrative that Thomas's tomb, under Prester John's control, might augur a different fate for this most sacred Christian site.<sup>36</sup>

That these figures and faiths should be associated with the lands of Prester John is not surprising given John's reputed Nestorianism and the legend's dependence on the Thomas tradition. However, as the *Letter* makes clear, John maintains an unblemished reputation despite the proximity of his land to such deviant systems of belief. In fact, in its design and in its social practices, John's kingdom promotes abstinence and self-control. While his court dines, the amethyst columns that support the dining table guarantee that "no one sitting at the table becomes inebriated" (158; 918). Although John's bedchamber is "marvelously gilded and ornamented with all kinds of stones," the *Letter* makes clear that John's sapphire-lined bed offers more than aesthetic adornment (158; 918). As John explains, the bed was so designed "on account of the stone's virtue in chastity"—a good thing since John's kingdom contains "the most beautiful women" and

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<sup>36</sup> The stories of Muhammad's resting place, which described his tomb as a pilgrimage destination akin to Christian Jerusalem, represent an additional structural relation where Islam is figured as Christian Other, as "a sort of mirror image of the crusaders' Jerusalem, an anti-Jerusalem." See Tolan, *Saracens*, 144.

that its residents practice polygamy (158; 917).<sup>37</sup> Muhammad's numerous wives became a point of contention for Christians in their twelfth-century writings on Islam.

Muhammad was known to have had as many as twelve wives at once, an exception allowed him by the Qur'an (33:50), which restricts other men to four.

The *Letter's* response to polygamy is telling. The mechanisms of chastity in the land of Prester John rely on self-control as much as they rely on magic. The text of the *Letter* implies that while Prester John only has sex four times during the year and for strictly procreative purposes, he still has multiple wives, "and thus sanctified by us, as Bathsheba by David, each one returns to her place" (158; 918).<sup>38</sup> Although John's kingdom contains elements as the Islamic Paradise, John remains indifferent to the pressures of the material world. Abstemious in the face of temptation, John and his retinue maintain Christian moral values despite the temptations of the opulent East.

Even more explicitly, the *Letter* maintains that John's residence replicates the spiritual palace Thomas builds for King Gundafor in the *Acts of Thomas*—that is, except that John's palace is guarded by a panoptical mirror tinged with Muslim splendor.<sup>39</sup> This

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<sup>37</sup> Here I am indebted to Geraldine Heng's reading of the Prester John *Letter* in "Sex, Lies, and Paradise: The Assassins, Prester John, and the Fabulation of Civilizational Identities." *differences* 23.1 (2012): 1-31.

<sup>38</sup> The curious addition at the end, "ut Bersabee a David," offers a rare critique of John's lifestyle. That John himself sanctifies his couplings as Bathsheba was sanctified by David should recall for Western Christians the story in 2 Samuel 11 about David seducing and impregnating an already-married Bathsheba, whose child, punished by God, died a few days after being born. The text of the *Letter* suggests that John's couplings, while perhaps driven by an austere piety, resonate nonetheless as infelicitous undertakings.

<sup>39</sup> Slessarev, *The Letter and Legend*, 49-50. Slessarev attributes the magic mirror to Arabic tales of sorcery and as a well-known trope in Persian literature, extending

“mirror of very great size” rests atop a structure built on a series of geometrically stacked columns, a design that recalls the famed gardens of the legendary Old Man in the Mountain (158; 918).<sup>40</sup> The mirror protects his realm from invasion as it allows him to see any distance in any direction. In what seems more than a coincidence, this Christian panopticon is guarded by 12,000 soldiers both day and night—the same number of angels guard the top of the ladder leading into the Afterworld in stories of Muhammad’s Ascension.<sup>41</sup> The *Letter* thus provides both a parallel and a complement to one of the foundational stories guaranteeing an Islamic Paradise, even as it admits a Muslim origin at the heart of Christianity’s panoptical surveillance. Prester John’s *Letter* guarantees that however expansive Islam may become, it cannot harm a Christian kingdom protected by

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especially to the account of Eldad had-Dani. Silverberg cites the lighthouse of Alexandria as another source (*The Realm of Prester John*, 67).

<sup>40</sup> The Old Man of the Mountain, whose legend was a product of the Crusades and about whom Marco Polo wrote, was rumored to consider converting to Christianity himself. A mysterious Muslim leader, he built a luxurious paradise on earth by stacking one beautiful garden on top of another in an immense and highly geometrical manner. At the top, the Old Man and his followers reveled in the finest in food, drink, and women. There the Old Man trained his devotees, known to the West as Assassins, to kill his enemies and, in return, he promised reentrance into his palace once missions were accomplished.

<sup>41</sup> See Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq’s Birat Rasul Allah*, trans. A. Guillaume (London: Oxford UP, 1955), 184. The number 12,000 possesses significance in Christian numerology as well, most significantly as the dimensions (length, width and height) of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:16). The number also signifies the number of people set to be saved from each of the twelve tribes of Jews (Rev 7:3-8). While this number has clear significance in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition, the notion of 12,000 bodies situated at a great height recalls the Islamic use of the number more directly than it does either Christian or Jewish uses of the number. For more on the Western narrative of Muhammad’s ascension, see the thirteenth-century *Liber Scale Machometi*, available as *Le Livre d’Échelle de Mahomet*, trans. Gisèle Besson and Michèle Brossard-Jandré, (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1991).

a panoptical mirror—even a mirror purloined from Muslim cultural sources, and even if Prester John would likely have been a Nestorian heretic.

Not surprisingly, the appearance of the *Letter* led to dozens of Eastern incursions motivated, in part, by the prospect of an immense Christian kingdom. Although these travelers occasionally discovered small Christians communities (which were sometimes taken as traces of Prester John’s Eastern influence), they found neither John nor any of the splendor promised in his *Letter*. On his pilgrimage from Spain to the Holy Land, Benjamin of Tudela (c. 1165) described an encounter with powerful Eastern king, called Kofar-al-Turak, increasing Western interest in the Mongols but hardly shedding light on the Prester John legend.<sup>42</sup> In 1245, Pope Innocent IV had sent Franciscan John of Plano Carpini to deliver letters to the Mongol khan, inviting the khan to embrace Christianity. The resulting journey, the most widely known of all early Western accounts with Mongols, describes “Ethiopians” from the lands of Prester John, but here John has already lost his place at the head of Eastern politics. Prester John plays no part in William’s mission to guarantee cooperation from the Great Khan.<sup>43</sup> Later narratives, including those of Ascelin of Lombardia (1245-48)<sup>44</sup>, André de Longjumeau (1249)<sup>45</sup>,

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<sup>42</sup> *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary*, ed. and trans. Marcus Nathan Adler (New York: Philipp Feldheim, 1907). Benjamin claims to visit the famed lighthouse of Alexandria, whose reflective mirror he marveled at.

<sup>43</sup> John of Plano Carpini, “History of the Mongols,” in *Mission to Asia*, ed. Christopher Dawson, 3-72 (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980).

<sup>44</sup> In the portion of Ascelin’s narrative that survives (that which was transcribed by Vincent of Beauvais), Ascelin reports that Prester John has integrated his family into that of the Mongol royal family by betrothing Prester John’s granddaughter to Chinggis Khan. Most of Ascelin’s journey is lost, but that which remains, recorded by Simon of Saint-

Joinville's *Chronicle*<sup>46</sup>, and John Mandeville<sup>47</sup> allude to a union between these Mongols and Prester John. John of Monte Corvino (c. 1294) brought back a more reliable account of Indian Christians than had been circulating previously in the West but does not explicitly mention Prester John.<sup>48</sup> Other travelers, including William of Rubruck (c. 1253), Marco Polo (c. 1269-99), and Odoric of Pordenone (1320s) attempt to rationalize the assumptions regarding a kingdom of Prester John as fantastical extrapolations of minor Eastern truths.<sup>49</sup>

Even when these writers undercut some of the splendor of John's kingdom, they keep him alive figuratively and literally. To ally Prester John with the Mongols may seem

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Quentin, was kept alive by Vincent of Beauvais. See Gregory Guzman, "The Encyclopedist Vincent of Beauvais and His Mongol Extracts from John of Plano Carpini and Simon of Saint-Quentin" *Speculum* 49.2: 287-307. Ascelin's journey is outlined earlier in Guzman, "Simon of Saint-Quentin and the Dominican Mission to the Mongol Baiju: A Reappraisal" *Speculum* 46.2 (1971): 232-49.

<sup>45</sup> André describes a meeting with a "David," a Kerait chieftain, whom he concludes has allied with a Mongol general in order to attack Muslims in Syria. See Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 105-39.

<sup>46</sup> Joinville, using information from André Longjumeau, narrates the destruction of Prester John by the Mongols. See Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 96-111. For the English translation of Joinville see *Chronicles of the Crusades*, trans. Frank Marzials (New York: Dover, 2012), 219-30.

<sup>47</sup> Although the *Travels* borrows directly from Ascelin, the Mandeville narrator, who clearly demonstrates a desire to entertain, expands significantly on this union.

<sup>48</sup> "The Letters of John of Monte Corvino" in *Mission to Asia*, ed. Christopher Dawson, 224-38 (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980).

<sup>49</sup> "The Journey of William of Rubruck" in *Mission to Asia*, ed. Christopher Dawson, 89-223 (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980), 141. For Polo, Prester John (or Un-khan) was a powerful prince who ruled over the Tartars (Mongols), but was overthrown, in a battle Polo himself describes, by the Mongol leader "Chingis-khan." See *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, Vol. 2, 17-22. Odoric writes that "not one hundredth part is true of what is told of [Prester John] as if it were undeniable." See Odoric of Pordenone, *The Travels of Friar Odoric*, trans. Sir Henry Yule (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 150.

like a threat to the legend's persistence, but in fact these travelers were updating the legend of Prester John by integrating John into the genealogy of an Eastern people foremost in the minds of Western leaders since the mid-thirteenth century. Even as some writers describe the legend as an exaggeration, their authority is restricted by the fact that none of these travelers claimed to have met the enigmatic figure.

Copies of the original *Letter* continued to circulate. Since its advent, the efficacy of the legend depended, at least partially, on the unknowability of the Eastern geographies over which John claimed to rule. However, once increased travel began to reveal a less exotic "India" than the legend's adherents had anticipated, the legend risked becoming outmoded by the comparatively accurate historical reports of travelers returning from these lands. Even as the *Letter's* promises remained undiscovered, many refused to relinquish faith in the legend: the messianic comforts of a future delivered of Western turmoil (lack of stable leadership, fear of Muslim ascendancy) had taken hold of too many Europeans.

Those invested in the legend developed strategies to assure European audiences that John need not be known in order to exist. In order to combat the disappointing accounts of contemporary travelers, the physical location of John's kingdom was constantly (and necessarily) re-imagined in order to sustain the belief that this kingdom was alive and well, despite the failures by those who sought it. Some ten years after Marco Polo returned to the West, another Prester John letter surfaces, allegedly sent by John to the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles IV. While several thirteenth-century writers integrated the legend of Prester John into their developing understanding of the Mongols

on the Steppe, a number of fourteenth-century travelers relocated John's kingdom to Ethiopia/Abyssinia, or "Middle India."<sup>50</sup> These later writers connected this meeting with the kingdom of Prester John and reignited the theory of an Ethiopian John, an identification that would continue through Portugal's sea explorations.<sup>51</sup>

When historical knowledge about the East began to replace the fantasmatic projections that had accumulated over the previous centuries, the structure of the narrative changed, and yet Prester John remained fixed in the European imagination. During this time of increased travel, writers began to emphasize John's literary qualities with greater frequency. As detailed in the following section, these strategies were hardly incompatible; in fact, both involve un-knowing what was becoming an already

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<sup>50</sup> C.F. Buckingham details such a visit by Ethiopian Christians to Pope Clement V at Avignon in 1306. According to later texts which recount the meeting, the Ethiopian ambassadors desired their European brethren to return to the true doctrine of the Christian church. Beckingham refers specifically to the *Supplementum chronicarum* of Philippus Bergomas (1483) but also cites texts by Chasseneux (1546), Godinho (1615), and Le Mire (1619), which record the same event. See "An Ethiopian Embassy to Europe c. 1310," in *Prester John, the Mongols, and the Ten Lost Tribes*, eds. C.F. Buckingham and B. Hamilton, 197-206 (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996). Matteo Salvatore writes of Ethiopian Christian envoys who arrive in Italy in 1402. See "The Ethiopian Age of Exploration: Prester John's Discovery of Europe: 1306-1458," *Journal of World History* 21 (2010): 593-627, esp. 604-6.

<sup>51</sup> Friar Jordanus of Séverac (c. 1320) writes of a dragon-filled kingdom of Prester John in Ethiopia; in the mid fourteenth century, *The Book of the Knowledge of All the Kingdoms, Lands, and Lordships That Are in the World* claimed that Prester John was the patriarch of Nubia and Abyssinia; Henry the Navigator's explorations of Africa were rooted in the hope of an Ethiopian Prester John; in 1482, Francisco Suriano, in his *Iter*, mentions arriving at the court of Prester John, a primitive place in which ten Italians were currently living, and paints a picture of mud huts and simple churches; Vasco da Gama's *Roteiro* mentions the desire to make contact with Prester John; in 1499, Italian poet Guiliano Dati, composes a pair of poems on PJ ("Treatise on the Supreme Prester John, Pope and Emperor of India" and "Ethiopia and Second Song of India"); in 1500, a letter from "Johannes Africanus" materializes, which details how Prester John, once mighty and powerful, is now a humble steward and laborer (guilty of pride).

unknowable Prester John. Rather than attempting to clarify the uncertainty regarding the historicity of John's kingdom, those interested in the legend began to further mystify the historical circumstances surrounding John's kingdom. In doing so, literary unknowing became a technology to enhance historical knowledge. In turn, John's elusiveness became a focal point of the legend, which, adapting to historical circumstance, adopted a kind of nomadic poetics, moving from one genre to another as his kingdom was re-imagined across the globe.

### **Literary Knowing as Historical Unknowing**

Otto of Freising, the man indirectly responsible for creating the legend of Prester John, helps bring to focus the political overtones underwriting some of the legend's most seemingly literary details. After all, Otto was also uncle to Frederick Barbarossa, the emperor who, at the time of Prester John's advent, was hell-bent on obtaining sovereignty over the Pope. Otto's account provides some of the basic "facts" about the legend, and while the *Letter* greatly expands on Otto's account, it does not very much increase its audience's knowledge of the elusive figure. Otto tells us that Prester John is a morally pure, militaristically capable Eastern (Nestorian) Christian king claiming descent from the Magi. As mentioned earlier, Otto's Prester John anecdote was likely generated from the political fallout subtending the loss of Edessa. The Crusading support Prester John voiced likely helped assuage fears that the West might require outside assistance in order to maintain the recovered sites of Christian history.



John models a form of leadership that the West lacked, but his connection to the Magi offers a direct connection to the court of Frederick I and, moreover, represents one of the legend's key moments of literary invention. In 1158, one year after Otto completed his *Historia*, Frederick Barbarossa "found" three bodies in Milan, which he had verified as those of the Magi. Prior to this moment, little was known about the three kings: through Biblical commentaries (and misunderstood geography), the Magi had become associated with the Apostle Thomas.<sup>52</sup> Just as a competent Eastern Christian priest-king helped strengthen Frederick's own position in the West, so too did a materially verifiable trace of the Magi enhance the Emperor's claim to authority. The relics of these Magi were transferred to Cologne in 1164 and Barbarossa's anti-pope canonized Charlemagne at Aachen one year later. Thus, in a period of two years, the Emperor helped create a cult of Christian kingship by creating two separate shrines to secular power.

When, during such chaos, the Prester John *Letter* appears, it is quite curious that John's existence is described in terms of his genealogical relation to the very same Magi whose Western significance was actively being codified in Germany. As with the Latin Qur'an, which Europeans knew to be heretical because it deviated from Catholic doctrine, the reputations of Magi and Prester John become symbiotically intertwined *via* rhetorical tautology. The newly discovered, public fact of the Three Kings lends

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<sup>52</sup> Beckingham, "Prester John and the Three Kings of Cologne," 175. Beckingham describes how, prior to the twelfth century, interest in the Magi was primarily restricted to the iconography of the Nativity. Little was known about these Eastern figures. Beckingham associates the idea of *three* Magi with Tertullian, who understood the Magi as typologically fulfilling a prophecy from Psalm 72. Likewise, a popular medieval commentary on Matthew's Gospel, falsely ascribed to John Chrysostom, suggested that St. Thomas had himself baptized the Magi during his Eastern evangelism.

credibility to the presence of a Prester John in the East just as John's existence draws further interest in the Magi, all of which appears to advance the political cause of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. Insofar as Prester John and the Magi bolster each other's legacies, the creation of the *Letter* might be understood as a literary act in itself, *ex nihilo*, a "by-product of the need... to provide the Three Holy Kings with suitable *Acta*."<sup>53</sup> In other words, the fiction of a Prester John helps create a historicity, or "history effect" to use Justice's term, for the revised importance of the Magi as model secular Christian kings. Once writers begin to fill out the back-story of the Magi with additional literary flourish, culminating with John of Hildesheim's *Historia Trium Regum* (c. 1378), Prester John was given a plausible lineage that helped stabilize his historical existence.<sup>54</sup> As the Magi/Prester John connection shows, the literary act can indeed reinforce, if not create, history. However, in order to adapt to the changes to Eastern geography brought about by thirteenth-century travel narratives, Prester John relocates to the realm of literature.

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One version of the *Letter* in particular helps us understand the transformation John's legend was beginning to undergo. The Anglo-Norman verse translation of the original Latin *Letter*, dated to the second half of the thirteenth-century, exists as one of the oldest vernacular translations of the letter. According to its author, the Anglo-Norman

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 180-1. In addition to his view that the *Letter* came about, in part, to enhance the story of the Magi, Beckingham identifies the *Letter*'s address to Manuel as a "literary device" to obviate the matter of how an Eastern envoy delivered the *Letter* to Frederick unnoticed (180).

<sup>54</sup> The *Historia Trium Regum* connects Prester John, St. Thomas, and the Three Magi in a single text for the first time.

*Letter* came to be when an English crusader named Gilbert le Butelier obtained a copy of the Latin text from Constantinople on his return from the Holy Land to England.

Although the text names of Gilbert's companion, William de Vere, as well as the translator himself, Roau d'Arundel, historians have yet to identify these individuals, a precise date, or even the precise *crusade* that led to the translation.<sup>55</sup> Despite this document's unique transformation of an epistolary, supposedly historical document—to which so much real hope was pinned—into something more closely resembling romance, the text has received very little critical treatment by scholars of Prester John (or otherwise) and has not yet been translated into English.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to offering early evidence of the vernacular use of the Latin *Letter*, d'Arundel's Anglo-Norman text offers the first significant expansion of the Latin material. Less a translation than a re-telling, d'Arundel's text replaces concerns regarding John's historical arrival with a desire to tell an entertaining story. Although its two manuscripts are unconnected to other vernacular translations, the Anglo-Norman letter

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<sup>55</sup> The translation survives in two manuscripts, named the Dublin and Yale, which are presented side-by-side in Martin Gosman, *La Lettre du Prêtre Jean: Les versions en ancien français et en ancien Occitan, Textes et commentaries*, (Netherlands: Groningen, 1982), 121-43.

<sup>56</sup> Slessarev, *The Letter and Legend*, 55-7. Robert Anthony Vitale's dissertation provides an English language introduction to the Anglo-Norman *Letter* as well as a glossary in its edition of the Yale manuscript. See "Edition and study of the *Letter of Prester John to the Emperor Manuel of Constantinople: The Anglo-Norman Rhymed Version*," (PhD Diss, University of Maryland, 1975). I hope to have completed my English translation of the Anglo-Norman text by 2015. My translation uses the Yale Version (MS 395 in the Beinecke Library) obtained from the earlier German edited version of the manuscript. See G. Koerting and E. Koschwitz, ed., *Zeitschrift: für französische Sprache un Litteratur* (Chemnitz und Leipzig: Verlag von Wilhelm Gronau, 1915), 100-1.

merits serious study, if only for the interesting formal deviation it represents. This version updates its source in three specific ways that suggest a legend on the move: d'Arundel opts for verse rather than prose, alters the narrative frame, and recasts the *Letter's* genre.

The shift in narrative frame provides the most fundamental difference between the Latin *Letter* and the Anglo-Norman retelling. Whereas the original *Letter* resembled an actual letter, d'Arundel's version appends a prologue and epilogue. Crucially, the prologue, identical in both manuscripts, introduces a narrator figure who forges a bit of distance between John-as-speaker and audience. While the original *Letter* secures its impact only to the degree that John's rhetoric persuades the reader, the intimacy garnered by the original's epistolary structure almost certainly helped inspire belief among its readers. D'Arundel's text, by contrast, shows little concern for believability. The inclusion of a prologue disrupts that intimacy between the text and its reader, and also, along with the movement to verse, illuminates its literary quality, urging readers to split their attention between the spectacular content and the words chosen to describe it.

Though it was hardly unheard of to treat mid-thirteenth century historical writing in verse, the author makes several self-conscious changes to the *Letter* that suggest a change in genre as well. In addition to d'Arundel's use of a framing device for the translated content, he also offers linguistic evidence for the Anglo-Norman *Letter's* shift toward a more self-consciously literary textual practice. The formal rearrangement of d'Arundel's text offers a legendary king who reads less as a historical figure than an entertaining legend; however, it is only in the text's epilogue that d'Arundel reveals his desire for this text to be read specifically as a *romance*. Throughout the Anglo-Norman

*Letter*, d'Arundel uses the word *rumanz*, an infamously vague Old French word, five times.<sup>57</sup> Several of these uses occur in the construction *en rumanz*, which likely refers to the text's vernacularity. In the epilogue, the narrator, reflecting on his tale, refers to the letter twice as *cest rumanz*. In the opening lines of the epilogue, d'Arundel writes,

Seigneurs, en cest rumanz aid it  
Apertement tuit l'escrit  
De chief en autre, cume mei est vis,  
Ke Prestre Johan ad tramis  
Al riche home dunt vus aid it.<sup>58</sup> (ll. 1093-96)

The construction “*cest rumanz*” clearly indicates a second meaning: story, tale, *romance*. The self-conscious shift from historical document to tall tale recovered on a trip to Constantinople signals a transposition to a more imaginative realm, but at what cost?

Whether or not d'Arundel opted for a verse retelling in order to distance the *Letter* from historical expectation, the 1202 lines of rhyming couplets signal at the very least a desire to put his own stamp on the legend. The fact that d'Arundel preferred to retell the story might indicate an increasing interest in the legend itself. To shift from Latin prose to vernacular verse does make the text more accessible, which, regardless of intent, provides the legend a new audience. The rhyming couplets suggest that d'Arundel's version was meant for oral delivery, which too implies increased access to the legend.

There exists a strange addition in the body of the text that undercuts the theory that d'Arundel's retelling meant to introduce this crusading legend to a new audience. While

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<sup>57</sup> *Rumanz* or *romans* can refer to the “langue courante” as well as a story (*récit*). Of the five appearances of the word *rumanz*, one occurs in the translated body of the *Letter* and the other four appear in the epilogue.

<sup>58</sup> English translation: “Lords, in this story I have told/ All of it true/ From end to end, as it seems to me, That which Prester John sent/ So that many men could hear it.”

the bulk of the Latin *Letter* focuses on introducing Prester John to an unfamiliar Western audience, d'Arundel's Prester John boasts that regardless of what his audience thinks about him, they have certainly heard of him "[p]ar la novel k'est venue" [from news that has traveled]. This addition to the text insinuates that John's fame has permeated non-Latin speaking audiences, and also suggests that the motive for the *Letter*'s circulation had out grown its original purpose to inform. Whether an exaggeration or not, John's boast gives the legend's foundational document something of a nomadic tenor.

Whatever the literary merits of the Anglo-Norman *Letter*, d'Arundel's retelling did not itself inspire a widespread shift in how medieval Europeans, let alone the English, understood the legend. However, his was not the only rendering of the legend taking place in the first half of the thirteenth century. Appropriately enough, given the legend's beginnings, it is through German provinces that Prester John cements his legacy within the English imaginary. In *Parzival*, Wolfram von Eschenbach offers the first significant literary *expansion* of the legend when he assimilates the legend of Prester John into the realm of Arthurian lore.

Written in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, Wolfram's *Parzival* offers readers the most elaborate medieval presentation of the Grail legend of the time.<sup>59</sup> Framed as something of a rejoinder to the Chrétien de Troyes's incomplete *Perceval*, Wolfram's narrative follows an enigmatic source, Kyot, through whom the reader is granted access to "heathen" Arabic material essential to the story of the Grail but absent

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<sup>59</sup> Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, trans. Cyril Edwards (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006).

in Chrétien. Much like Chaucer's *Troilus* narrator's Lollius, "Kyot" allows Wolfram to experiment with a supposedly historical tradition while retaining the medieval narrator's responsibility to *auctoritas*. Among Wolfram's inventions to the narrative is the inclusion of Feirefiz, the pagan half-brother to Parzival, an equal in knightly virtue and ability and distinguished primarily by his mottled black and white skin.<sup>60</sup> Feirefiz, who falls in love with the Grail's maiden, Repanse de Schoye, decides to accept baptism in order to be closer to his love, an act that also allows him to see the Grail. Soon after, Parzival decides to pass the Grail onto Feirefiz, who marries the Grail maiden, returns to the East to preach Christianity, and gives birth to a son, the future keeper of the Grail. That son is Prester John, whose name thereafter becomes the official title of Indian kings.<sup>61</sup>

In *Parzival*, Wolfram not only incorporates Prester John into Arthurian lore, he consequently builds John into English history. Prester John becomes a distant descendent of Parzival, himself a distant descendent of Arthur, and yet Wolfram also maintains John's uncanny, hybrid status in the minds of his readers. For one, Prester John continues to reside in a mysterious, mostly pagan East. Moreover, as the son of the mottled Feirefiz, Wolfram's Prester John is himself marked, genealogically and physically, as simultaneously European and Other. Yet while the text integrates John into the Matter of

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<sup>60</sup> Feirefiz is the son of Parzival's father, Gahmuret, and the Moorish queen Belacane. When Parzival returns to Munsalvaesche, the Grail castle, and becomes the Grail king at the end of the narrative, he discovers that his half-brother cannot see the Grail (presumably because he is not a Christian).

<sup>61</sup> Wolfram writes, "[Repanse de Schoye] gave birth... in India, to a son, who was called Johan. Prester John they called him; forever they retained that name for the kings there. Feirefiz had letters sent all over the land of India, telling them about the Christian way of life" (344-5).

England, *Parzival* makes no explicit reference to the legend of Prester John. Rather than accrete onto what is already a dense historical tradition, Wolfram connects the two worlds, un-knowing the Prester John legend in order to begin a tradition that might better amplify John's relevance to Wolfram's audience.

On a first read, the association between John and the Grail appears to be little more than an interesting, ultimately inconsequential afterthought to Wolfram's mostly meandering romance. However, Albrecht von Scharfenberg, who continues Wolfram's narrative, chooses to expand on the Prester John portion of the Grail legend in his *Younger Titurel* by including a description of Prester John's lands. Rather than a literary distraction from the historical expectations surrounding Prester John, Wolfram's *Parzival* updates the legend in a way that helps perpetuate, rather than suspend, expectations in a land of Prester John by keeping John alive in the European imagination at a time when increased Eastern travel had threatened to uproot belief.

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In addition incorporating the legend into its vision of the Grail narrative, *Parzival* contains a trace of the *Letter* that it never ties explicitly to Prester John. In the portion of *Parzival* dedicated to Gawain (Books X-XIII), Wolfram recounts how Parzival's companion, in pursuit of his love Orgeluse, visits a magical fortress, Castle Merveille, built by the magician Clinschor and indirectly associated with the Grail Castle. Upon entering, Gawain encounters the *lit merveille*, a supernatural bed that nearly kills him. When Gawain wakes from his battle with the bed, still in a daze, he encounters a large, ornate vault, upon which was mounted a device familiar to those acquainted with the



Prester John legend. When Gawain ascends the steps circling around the pillar, he discovers a round vault, wrought with precious gems. When he inspects this strange creation, it “seemed to [Gawain] that in the great pillar all countries were made known to him, and that the lands were going round and round” (248). Gawain questions his caretaker Queen Arnive, the wife of Uther Pendragon, about this marvelous device, and she explains that the magical stone:

has shone by day and every night since I first became acquainted with it, for a radius of six miles into the surrounding country. Whatever happens within that compass, in water and in the fields, can be seen in this column—it gives a true report. Be it bird or beast, stranger or forester, foreigner or familiar, they have been found therein. (249)

In a clear allusion to the magical mirror featured in the Prester John *Letter*, Wolfram has scaled back the infinite range of his precedent: Castle Merveille’s mirror’s “beam” ranges a comparatively meager six miles. However, as with John’s panopticon, Castle Merveille’s mirror did not originate in Christendom, even if nobody knows how exactly it got there. Arnive claims that “it was stolen in Tabronit from Queen Secundille” (249).<sup>62</sup>

Once again, a Western literary text depicts the mirror as a surveillance technology purloined from Eastern sources. Although the relationship between medieval West, East, and mirror has become something of a commonplace in discussions of medieval East-West relations, the twelfth-century *Letter* remains the earliest extant text depicting the mirror as a technology of Western surveillance. As the *Letter* began to circulate, writers with comparatively secular intention adopted the mirror (*speculum*) as an apt metaphor

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<sup>62</sup> Wolfram never again alludes to the mysterious land of “Tabronit,” but the queen he refers to, Secundille, rules over Tribalibot, which corresponds with Wolfram’s “India.”

for encyclopedic works.<sup>63</sup> In addition to recalling an inverted and distorted relationship between the two faiths, the mirror also gives Christians a schema for understanding Islam as a *contained* threat. Like the metaphors of enclosure modeled in the production of the Latin Qur'an and by the crusading hopes attached to Prester John, the *speculum*, along with the metaphor of reflection underwriting it, depict the Other as knowable.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Geoffrey of Vinsauf's popular rhetorical manual, the *Poetria Nova* (ca. 1210), invokes the mirror to model how one might render the foreign as familiar to clarify meaning:

Quando tuum proprium transsumis, plus sapit istud  
Quod venit ex proprio. Talis transumptio verbi  
Est tibi pro speculo: qui ate specularis in illo  
Et proprias cognoscis oves in rure alieno (796-800)

[When you transpose a word whose literal meaning is proper to man, it affords greater pleasure, since it comes from what is your own. Such a metaphor serves you as a mirror, for you see yourself in it and recognize your own sheep in another's field]<sup>65</sup>

While specularity functioned as a metaphor for containment, it also suggested boundedness. For the metaphor of the *speculum* to register as epistemologically reflective practice, the mirror must be understood as a totalizing force. The Islamo-Christian

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<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Historiale*; Albertus Magnus, *Speculum astronomiae*; Roger Bacon, *Speculum alchimiae*.

<sup>64</sup> Just as Christians wrote hagiographies of their saints, they too composed heresiographies of Muhammad, the supreme anti-saint, with a similar sense of totality. As Tolan notes, Adelphus's *Vita machometi* describes Muhammad as "the Nestorius of the Agarenes" and has him marrying the Queen of Babylon (*Saracens*, 138). Tolan remarks that "all four authors [of twelfth-century Latin biographies of Muhammad] insist on the spiritual heritage of Muhammad: while the prophet himself claims affinity to Moses and Christ, the authors instead profess Muhammad's solidarity with the great heresiarchs of old, in particular Arius and Nestorius" (*Ibid.*, 144).

<sup>65</sup> Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, revised edition, ed. Martin Camargo and trans. Margaret Nims (Toronto: PIMS, 2010), 44.

relationship produced a similar conundrum: just who is reflecting whom? What does it mean Prester John, rather than a Western Christian, possesses this tool? Even as John's mirror guarantees complete surveillance over the Islamic Other, he was himself an uncanny figure: Christian, but a ruler of (mostly) pagan lands; ally and potential hero, but one whose heterodox faith suggests the most abhorrent of heresies. Why would Western Christians seek comfort in the thought that hybridist nomad oversaw the doings of the primary enemies of the West? While the desire for Prester John indicates a drive for Latin Christians to overpower the Other by attempting to absorb it topographically, the legend's preoccupation with borders (shared with the Latin Qur'an) suggests a still-ductile Christian identity.

In his study of the *Letter of Prester John* Michael Uebel associates the legend's interest in frontiers with an attention to the "interspaces" of identity formation, a process he describes as "doubly specular."<sup>66</sup> According to Uebel, rather than cement a binary opposition between Islam and Christianity, the *Letter* reveals that the frontier separating self from other is a line that *must* be crossed. Prester John's kingdom then provides a utopic space within which the gradients between self and other become apparent. Yet, while John's hybridity certainly implies a future less reliant on a binary understanding of human difference, his mirror, which comes to influence subsequent texts more than any other of the *Letter's* details, seems to imply just such a binary opposition that John's kingdom supposedly resisted. Rather than projecting a confident Latin Christian identity or providing a utopian space that effaces human difference, the Prester John legend

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<sup>66</sup> Uebel, *Ecstatic Transformation*, 36-8.

ultimately signifies the Latin Christian reluctance to engage ideologically with Islam in a direct manner and instead posits an imagined Christian community from which the West can better control the relationship between Christian and Muslim identity. It appears that one purpose of the legend was to externalize the inassimilable excesses inherent but disavowed in such an attempt at a wholly Christian subjectivity.

Far from a simple metaphor of reflection, Prester John's mirror encapsulates a complex rhetorical position in which knowledge is made available to oneself without the ideological sacrifice of self-understanding. In this way, the mirror nicely illustrates *Parzival's* larger themes, reminiscent to those of the *Pearl*, in which mortals are presented with fantasy scenarios containing a mysterious knowledge that should not be materially knowable. As *Pearl's* dreamer struggles to understand the logic of Christian doctrine, so too does Parzival marvel in ignorance of the Grail procession that unfolds before his very eyes. Both narratives rely on a conscious historical un-knowing in order to achieve the goals described by the narrative: the dreamer must acquiesce to the impossibility of divine insight just as Parzival must un-know the advice he receives about courtesy in order to ask the "question," the opportunity for which he will cannot summon through reason, but through faith alone.

The mirror also helps illustrate a connection between *Pearl* and the legend of Prester John that shows how the metaphor of the mirror becomes a literary device. Both narratives offer readers an unknowable agent through whom impossible knowledge is made available. As with *Pearl*, *Parzival* couples a desire to be made party to the world's excess with a complementary drive to contain those excessive knowledges in a discrete,

bounded system through which appropriate action might be taken. The magical mirror functions then as a technology of *translatio*, making the unknown known. Insofar as its revelatory potential depends on inserting a cut between the viewing subject and the world around her, Prester John's mirror also becomes a narrative device that functions not only to illustrate temporal knowledge, but also to create a metonymic understanding of literary culture as such: a *techne* that creates knowledge, but belatedly, only to the degree that the historical facts underlying that knowledge can be confined to an inaccessible realm.

That this mirror re-appears in an English romance tale about the East, Chaucer's unfinished "Squire's Tale," should not then be surprising given the speculum's symbolic function for literary texts along with previous pairings of Prester John and England. In the tale, an unnamed knight sent as envoy by the King of India and Arabia brings gifts to the Tartar king, Cambyuskan [Genghis Khan], in celebration of Cambyuskan's twenty years on the throne. Along with a brass horse, golden ring, and magical sword, the knight presents Cambyuskan with a mirror, which

Hath swich a might that men may in it see  
Whan ther shal fallen any adversitee  
Unto youre regne or to oureself also,  
And openly who is youre freend or foo.  
(ll. 132-5)

The Squire's mirror clearly recalls that of Prester John, a man whom many mistook for the historical Genghis Khan, but it inverts the direction of the gaze: the speculum of "The Squire's Tale" allows the East to monitor their own behavior and compare themselves

against others from a distance.<sup>67</sup> Of the gifts, the mirror may be the most recognizable, but as John Fyler observes, all four gifts become “devices for *translatio*.”<sup>68</sup> The horse needs only one day to reach any destination; the ring deciphers communication between birds; the sword restores the bodily injuries it causes. It is the mirror, however that addresses problem of containment.

The idea of absorbing what is wholly other into the topography of the self by cordoning it off as materially discrete, which is perhaps the goal of the medieval *speculum*, provides an ironic complement to the Squire’s unfinished tale, itself a performance on the difficulty of containment. In Chaucer’s “Squire’s Tale,” the narrative accretes layer upon layer of descriptive density until it ultimately escapes its teller, trailing off before it has even begun (after 708 lines).<sup>69</sup> The tale itself is a case study in *occupatio*: the inexperienced Squire constantly loses control of the Eastern wonder he attempts to describe, and ends up writing himself ever more clumsily into an admission that the sheer marvel of his story exceeds his linguistic abilities as a teller.<sup>70</sup> The process of narration leaves the Squire belatedly nostalgic for the tongue of the “deed” Lancelot—

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<sup>67</sup> John L. Lowes is one of few scholars to note the connection between mirror and Prester John (“The Squire’s Tale and the Land of Prester John”). H.S. Jones cites the legend as a source for the “Squire’s Tale” in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, eds. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, 357-76 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1941), 357.

<sup>68</sup> Fyler “Domesticating the Exotic in the Squire’s Tale,” 3.

<sup>69</sup> On the ending of the tale, see Brian Lee, “The Question of Closure in Fragment V of ‘The Canterbury Tales’” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992): 190-200.

<sup>70</sup> For more on the motif of *occupatio* in the “Squire’s Tale,” see Alan Ambrisco, “‘It Lyth Nat in My Tonge’: *Occupatio* and Otherness in the ‘Squire’s Tale’” *The Chaucer Review* 38.3 (2004): 205-28.

the only man the Squire believes capable of describing such marvel (l. 287). As Kathryn Lynch notes “the tale neither ravel[s] into a knot nor unravels,” rendering it “even more discontinuous, more open-ended than the Easter tales that form its closest analogues.”<sup>71</sup> The mirror, like the romance form the Squire’s Tale burlesques, promises a containment that neither the Squire nor his readers can access, despite their desires for a closed understanding of the world. Once again, the figure of the mirror embodies the paradox of literary invention. Inextricably tethered, the desires to contain and grant excess reveal the Tale’s Orientalism both within and without the Tale’s apparent structure.<sup>72</sup>

Just as the “Squire’s Tale” remains uncontainable and thus unable to reflect a singularly pointed literary truth, so does Chaucer’s structure of the *Tales* as a whole resist the pressures of a unified vision in favor of multiplicity and spectrality. In this light, the Squire’s Tale indeed renders its teller an “archetypal” Chaucerian narrator, as Elizabeth Scala has it, more akin to the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* than a uniquely incompetent character.<sup>73</sup> What unites these two narrators is the sense that storytelling requires more than a mere translation of the past. As the Squire pleads,

The knotte why that every tale is toold,  
If it be tarried til that lust be coold  
Of hem that han it after herkned yore,

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<sup>71</sup> Kathryn Lynch, “East Meets West in Chaucer’s Squire and Franklin’s Tales,” in *Chaucer’s Cultural Geography*, ed. Kathryn Lynch, 76-101 (New York: Routledge, 2002), 84.

<sup>72</sup> While for Said, orientalism consists of a fascinated objectification of the other along with a desire for containment, the Prester John legend and Squire’s Tale complicate Said’s formula by juxtaposing simultaneous desires to contain *and* recognize excess. See *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>73</sup> Scala, *Absent Narratives*, xix.

The savour passeth even lenger the moore.  
(ll. 401-4)

More than anything, the literary text works with the past's unknowability to present history not as knowledge, but as a kind of belated materiality. These narratives form a knot whose enjoyment rests not in a narrative's resolution, but in its telling, and this model served to accommodate the Prester John legend for centuries to come. While Wolfram and Chaucer expand the Prester John legend's literary relevance from the realm of literature, a turn to one of Chaucer's sources for the "Squire's Tale" reveals how the putatively historical text can also help create a literary consciousness rooted in a poetics of unknowing the inconvenient details that undermine belief in the mythical king.

John Mandeville's *Travels* soften the historical rigor expected of the travel genre in its account of Prester John, just as d'Arundel offered a more epistolary account of John's kingdom in the thirteenth century that embraced the literary narrative's impetus to entertain. The Mandeville text (1357-1371), extremely well-received in the time of Chaucer's writing, generating some 300 manuscripts, despite the fact (or perhaps because) the text relied so heavily on reworking and/or synthesizing earlier legendary and travel material, including aspects of the Prester John *Letter*.<sup>74</sup> The *Travels* is not without

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<sup>74</sup> The history of the Mandeville text is complex and, for many, there is no one preferred edition. The most complete edition probably remains Malcolm Letts' edition and translation of the Egerton text. See Letts, ed. and trans., *Mandeville's Travels: Texts and Translations*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953). For ease of access, I will refer to page numbers in the Penguin edition when mentioning pertinent details of the text. See *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, rev. ed., trans. C.W.R.D Moseley (New York: Penguin, 2005). For a succinct summary of the publication history of the *Travels*, see the first footnote in Moseley, "The Metamorphoses of Sir John Mandeville," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 4 (1974): 5-25.



its own merits, however, even for the modern reader. Mandeville's account of the East, published ostensibly in furtherance of a crusade, depicts an East more natively Christian than the West. Mandeville walks his reader through Christian geographic markers, much like the *Letter*, in a manner that more closely resembles a cycle play than a travelogue.<sup>75</sup> Not only does Mandeville's East contain kernels of Christian history, those kernels manifest the Christian materiality of its geography: bananas naturally produce crosses when split open (65), birds reverence the Virgin Mary (70), abbeys naturally repel pests (71), and a tree that survived the death of Christ refuses to grow (74).

Amid such Christian naturalism, Prester John's kingdom endures. Although John's family has now allied with that of the Great Khan, the promise of a global Christendom lives on. As with the Anglo-Norman *Letter*, Mandeville recasts John as the famed figurehead of an unknowable realm through which the belief he clearly inspired may persist. Though the literary value of Mandeville's text itself has been debated, its influence on later medieval literary texts cannot be denied.

John makes literary appearances in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, among other texts. In *Orlando Furioso*, Ariosto features an Ethiopian priest-king called Senapo who rules over an immensely wealthy kingdom and controls the flow of the Nile River—the very river that dashed crusader

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<sup>75</sup> The sites include Japheth's city Joppa, the kingdom of Arabia where Magi came from, Joseph's barn, Moses' burning bush, Lot's grave, Noah's Ship, and the edge of the earthly paradise.

hopes during the Fifth Crusade.<sup>76</sup> Although Ariosto's is a highly satirical text, his inclusion of the legend shows how, even in the sixteenth century, writers were still attempting to create a plausible backstory to unite the imaginative interest in the legend with a history from which he may have emerged. Thus, despite his transformation into a metonymy of the geographic limits of romance, John retains his historical place independent of the romance landscape he also inhabits well into the eighteenth century.

Because Prester John offered believers little more than a figure through which they might concentrate their abstract hopes, the legend was able to survive, above all, through a transposition to a narrative register more capable of handling the contradictions inherent to the legend. After all, the location of John's kingdom was never about geography; a twelfth-century East merely offered a convenient location to harbor a mythical figure meant to arbitrate the known from the unknowable. Rather than adventurers uncovering a hundred-year hoax, the thirteenth-century travelers who journeyed across John's India reveal the degree to which Prester John had become miscast in the realm of historical geography. Although John remained somewhere in the East, his permanent address lay more precisely at the horizon of Christian possibility.

### **Waiting For Prester John**

As adventurers and scholars continued to seek Prester John throughout history, the spatial boundaries of Christianity continually depended on the vicissitudes of the reading practices through which they were enacted. Prester John shows up as a guarantor

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<sup>76</sup> Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, trans. Guido Waldman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 102-11.

of Eastern riches in the writings of early modern world travelers such as Prince Henry, the Infante Dom Henrique, Christopher Columbus, and Duarte Lopes. A related history of Prester John's kingdom in Ethiopia held Western attention through the European exploration of Africa from the mid-fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. John's use-value, once driven by political exigencies, became subject to economic forces. While it is true that these later forays for Prester John were undertaken for reasons more immediate than the hope of a global Christianity, the legend remained an important precisely because of the expectations faith in John engendered. In an age of increased travel, John's unknowability became essential to his historical function. Rather than fade into the annals of crusading lore, Prester John became part of the Catholic plan.

The search for Prester John along these Eastern routes, along with the Western circuits formed through the *Letter's* transmission, helped found a prophetic expectation of a global Christianity rooted in the willed projection of its eschatological unfolding. Given his uniquely nomadic signifying capability, John was able to exemplify competing identities and meanings. By way of his magic mirror, Prester John transcends boundaries of time and space, controlling the path of history *via* a magic trick that likely appealed to crusaders waiting for their leaders, real (Frederick II) or imagined (Prester John). Dissolving the false binary between imaginative and material space, the medieval version of the Prester John legend proposes a community within which all human experience is recast and subordinated to an already-determined Christian future.

For the twenty-first century scholar acculturated to an intellectual history conditioned by the radical doubt of the post-Enlightenment subject, the speculative logic

of the Hegelian dialectic, the linguistic turn of philosophy, and the establishment of language as ontological determiner, it would be too easy to assume that twenty-first-century critics can accurately locate and diagnose the errors of our medieval forebears. After all, how else can one explain the persistence of the Prester John fiction without recourse to modernity's psychiatric register, labeling such disregard for reason as paranoid and delusional? Yet it is my view that we are clearly not "over" or "beyond" Prester John; indeed, our delusions of modernity echo in the same logical structure as the legend. Although it is unsurprising that no one was ever able to find Prester John (let alone agree on his kingdom's location), the resilience of this legend despite increasing pressures to disbelieve attests to the persistence of an ardent faith in the unknown.

A literary understanding of Prester John does not signal the end of his historical relevance, but instead reveals the grip he had on the medieval Christian imagination. As Christendom's epistemological anchor positioned at the horizon of the known world, Prester John avoids the demands of revelation by solving the problem differently: he adopts Lateran IV's program of visibility, even as his kingdom remains invisible, by transforming a legend of becoming into one of the always-already.

Sober efforts to seek out the land of Prester John lasted through the eighteenth century and, despite being written out of world history textbooks (at least in the US)<sup>77</sup>, the imaginative import of the legendary figure lives on in twentieth-century adventure

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<sup>77</sup> Brooks, "A Reexamination," 174-83. Brooks argues that the importance of the Prester John legend has been written out of world history in order to forge a more modern view of the late medieval European dispossessed of the mystical and superstitious beliefs associated with the Middle Ages.

novels, comic books, and fantasy fiction. Umberto Eco's *Baudolino* (2000) is likely the most recognizable popular representation of Prester John. For a more recent, more fantastical reimagining, See Catherynne Valente, *The Habitation of the Blessed*. John Buchan's pro-colonial adventure novel *Prester John* (1910), still in print, tells of a cultural clash between a Scotsman in South Africa and a Zulu uprising connected to medieval legend of Prester John. Stranger still, Prester John began to appear in pulp novels and comics, beginning in the 1960s, most famously in twenty-three comics of the Marvel Universe.<sup>78</sup> Like Christians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries waited on John for Christian unity, we strangely wait for history to provide clarification and a resolution of this strange medieval hoax. We are still waiting for Prester John. Not only can we then affirm Geraldine Heng's assertion that "where Prester John goes, Europe is not far behind"<sup>79</sup>; given his ability to signify meaning from the place of the unknown, we might also say, in the manner of Freud's aphoristic *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*, that "where Prester John was (supposed to go), there Europe will be."

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<sup>78</sup> See, for example, *Fantastic Four*, 1966; *Avengers*, 1973; *Defenders*, 1973; *Thor*, 1992; *Avataars*, 2000; *Cable & Deadpool*, 2005; *X-Men*, 2010. In these popular comics, a Crusader named Prester John is discovered to have been kept alive by wizards after a plague decimated his kingdom, the mythical Avalon (first mentioned in Geoffrey's *Historia* and later co-opted by Arthurian lore).

<sup>79</sup> Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 287.

## **Conclusion**

### **From a Poetics of Unknowing to a Politics of the Literary**

As the political basis of the Prester John legend gave way to a poetics that sustained his import by suspending the question of his arrival, so too did this poetics come to bear political consequences. The vestigial belief in John's continually undiscovered kingdom underwrote the early phases of European imperialism by providing a model of a knowable, wealthy outpost that inspired exploration and discovery for those looking to profit from a competitive trading economy. This after-life separates Prester John from the other four figures: here the legend re-positioned unknowing to create knowledge, or, more specifically, to create a knowable world.

Even in its medieval stages Prester John's unknowability helped stabilize Western identity by providing a repository for Christian alterity that also guaranteed defense against the threat of Islamic alterity. For the twelfth-century West, this space outside signification becomes literalized as the land of Prester John, a mythical Christian king, who although heterodox in his beliefs, aims to recuperate Latin Christian identity against the threat of an ever-expanding Islam. Prester John is then established, not as the Other of Christianity, but as the Other of Islam, providing the ultimate spatial guarantee—a metalanguage from which Latin Christian space might be guaranteed within the logic of Christian eschatology. He became what Jacques Lacan might call the “Other of the Other”: his existence allowed Christians to displace the uncanny similarities shared

between themselves and Islam onto a third, intermediary figure.<sup>1</sup> Prester John's provided a space in which Latin Christians could externalize their reactions to and anxieties about Islam. This allowed Western Christians to renounce their own connection to Islam: Prester John and the mythic East are in competition with Islam, not Western Christians. As the Other of the Other, Prester John represents a way to speak about difference, an anchoring point, without having to acknowledge the inherent alterity in Christian identity.

In this way, Prester John guarantees the enclosure of an Islamic threat kept under constant surveillance, allowing Latin Christians to postpone the recognition of inhabiting the other side of a dialectical tension with Islam, which would necessarily amount to an admission of a relational subjectivity dependent on something outside of itself. If the crusades produced Islam as the other of Christianity, Prester John thus becomes the Other of the Other—a third term able to guarantee not only the relationship between Latin Christendom and Islam, but the separation between them as well.

Lacan refers to the notion of the Other of the Other as “the problem of meta-language” because it creates a secondary system of logic that insincerely forces closure

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<sup>1</sup> Twentieth-century post-structural thinkers including Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva have stressed the difficulty of depicting this relationship because of the Other's inherent unrepresentability. Resisting the idea inherited by traditional metaphysics that the Other exists purely as a product of the self, these writers share the contention that the Other exists outside of consciousness and can therefore only be represented in discourse from elsewhere: the face-to-face encounter (Levinas), the unconscious (Lacan), or the semiotic (Kristeva). Thus, for Lacan, The Other of the Other exists as a place: “It finds its place even if we cannot find it anywhere in the real, even if all we can find to occupy this place in the real is simply valid insofar as it occupies this place, but cannot give it any other guarantee than that it is in its place” (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 66).

on a concept that must remain open (language, alterity).<sup>2</sup> This concept is, of course, a fantasy. There is no sustainable epistemological framework for creating and managing meaning—identity is no less arbitrary than the linguistic categories that formulate it. To the extent that Prester John never actually appears, the legend perpetuates Lacan’s dictum that there can be no Other of the Other despite a fervent desire to move beyond the space of signification. Lacan will later assert in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* that “anything that one might think is of the order of a search for the meta in language is simply, always, a question of reading.”<sup>3</sup> Although a spatial fantasy, the legend’s primary mode of dissemination (a letter), along with its importance in the realm of prophecy (decisions during the Fifth Crusade were actually made based on the assumption of John’s arrival), do reveal the dependence on a certain (perhaps ethical) mode of reading.

Insofar as the Prester John legend turns this spatial understanding into a politics, this method might be understood, as it is by Gaston Bachelard, as, fundamentally, a strategy of reading.<sup>4</sup> As with the Other of the Other, “reading has no place,” according to Michel de Certeau, because in its willed suspension it “takes no measures against the

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<sup>2</sup> For Lacan, the Other of the Other represents a false solution to the problem of meta-language, a defensive projection for those who refuse to grant that language systems are irredeemably open. See Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> See *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007), 190.

<sup>4</sup> This mode of reading spaces is encapsulated by what he calls the “phenomenological attitude,” predicated on the ability to “induce in the reader a state of suspended reading.” See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 21.



erosion of time.”<sup>5</sup> Waiting, as the political implementation of unknowing, becomes an essential component to the evaluation of space, whether it be social, physical, or mental. Just because judgment is perpetually postponed, just because Prester John never shows up, does not mean that believers should give up on the potential for that space to guarantee a desire that it can never untangle itself from.

The manner in which the fantasy of metalanguage transforms Prester John’s poetics of unknowing into a politics of reading invites a reconsideration *Pearl’s* investment in metalanguage as a means of scientizing the literary. Pulling away from a reading of *Pearl* indebted to an apophatic understanding of the divine, we move back toward the genre of dream vision, a literary mode whose theorists and fourteenth-century practitioners began to think about in terms of scientific discourse. One major consequence of the Scholastic Aristotelianism that pervaded the medieval university in the thirteenth century was the movement to see theology as a science, an alliance that gave renewed purchase to some significant “pagan” philosophical texts, whose ideas could now combine with a rational, dialectical approach to understanding the challenging and unknowable aspects of theology. Not that this was an entirely new idea in the Middle Ages. Macrobius, whose commentary on Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio* established medieval dream categories had also been influential for structuring medieval exegetical practice. Plato’s *Timaeus*, as one of the most well known (or at least the most widely commented

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<sup>5</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (U of California P, 1984), 174.

on) of Plato's texts in the Middle Ages, collates math, science and dreams.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in Augustine's Neoplatonic worldview, numbers help us approximate a conception of the Divine Ideas existing in the mind of God.

Not surprisingly, then, as Kathryn Lynch describes, in the late-medieval West "the age's greatest minds were absorbed with task of finding the most precise and comprehensive correspondences between the orders of nature and grace preoccupied with devising an epistemology that might lead one from this, most literal, world to the next, most divine, one" (59). Several prominent philosophers, including Nicole Oresme (1320-1382), viewed the study of science and the study of dreams not as complementary pursuits, but as part of the same investigation, as can be seen in his *Tractatus de commensurabilitate vel incommensurabilitate motuum celi*. As Lynch discusses, the dream's "ability to combine the realms of spirit and matter in a single experiential phenomenon" rendered the realm of the vision a useful site of contemplation for studying the scientific limits of human knowledge (56).

Although one methodological aim of chapter three was to distance my reading of *Pearl* from the language of contemporary "theory" in order to less noisily approach a poem that *writes* its own terms *by* its own terms, I would like to now compare the *Pearl's* interest in the limits of signification with Lacan's drive to affirm science as the subject of

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<sup>6</sup> Although Plato was more or less ambivalent about the usefulness of dreams, he discussed them in the section two of the *Timaeus*, his manual, which discusses how the world came into being, in reference to the way that humans create images or representations of the world in the mind. Later in section two, Plato suggests that God utilizes numbers to shape the elements and to impose regularity onto the relationship between these elements.

psychoanalysis as a means returning to the transhistorical and ultimately political stakes of unknowing.<sup>7</sup>

The *Pearl* poet reinforces the unknowability of divine will—framed by the dreamer’s waking contention that our *desire* to know will always exceed our *ability* to know— by calling attention to his own failed formal attempts to signify and communicate felicitously through language, mathematics, or symbols. In reducing everything in the poem to the symbol of the pearl, the poet can at least approximate the radical excess inherent to the concept of salvation, a concept that necessarily reduces everything involved within its economy to a notion of infinite equality. Lacan’s instinct regarding the modern subject appears to oppose this notion entirely, as Lacan reads the *doubt* inherent in the Cartesian shift towards scientific thought as not only making space for an unconscious, but also betraying the plight of modern subject as one who desires *not* to know his/her truth.<sup>8</sup> As so with the *Pearl*, however, Lacan tests this theory in the

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<sup>7</sup> In “Science and Truth,” Lacan writes that the “only one subject is accepted as such in psychoanalysis, the one that can make it scientific” (729).

<sup>8</sup> See “The Unconscious and Repetition” in Lacan’s *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 17-41, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977). As Jason Glynos explains, “as the paradigmatic model of the modern subject, Descartes wants to know nothing about his truth... simultaneously reducing it to a knowledge... and projecting it, by means of symbolic faith, onto another Subject-Supposed-to-Know.” See Jason Glynos, “Psychoanalysis Operates upon the Subject of Science: Lacan between Science and Ethics,” in *Lacan and Science*, eds. Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis, 51-88 (London: Karnac Books, 2002), 59.

realm of literature, but to different ends: his reading of *Hamlet* establishes the modern subject's desire not to know as consonant with Hamlet's "failure to act."<sup>9</sup>

Along with a shared desire to look to both science and literature in order to establish the parameters of human subjectivity, Lacan also shares with *Pearl* an interest in the effects that language have on epistemological-ethical orientations (desiring to know/desiring not to know). Specifically, Lacan too was obsessed with the possibility that mathematical representations (what he calls the *matheme*) might more precisely demonstrate his ideas. Lacan had, after all, put himself in a difficult position as a thinker: how could he accurately communicate (or ethically *claim* to communicate) his ideas if one of his foundational premises was the insistence on an irredeemable lack that inhabits all language?<sup>10</sup>

From his second seminar through his later writings, Lacan insisted that "there is no such thing as meta-language"; that is, while he allowed for an existence outside of the letter (*contra* Derrida), he denies the possibility affixing meaning to that "Real" outside of the Symbolic register of language.<sup>11</sup> Lacan's concept of the *matheme*, devised later in his career (early 1970s) as a mathematical representation of a psychoanalytic concept, allowed him to bypass this slippage by theorizing a form of representation that Leupin

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<sup>9</sup> See Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman, 11-52 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Although he later seeks to "complete" his ideas through *mathemes*, Lacan often cites Gödel's theory of incompleteness to help ground his ideas about the inevitable slippage within the domain of language.

<sup>11</sup> This deceptively powerful claim helped ground Lacan's later contention that there is no sexual relationship (*rapport*).

calls “a writing without remainder.”<sup>12</sup> The graph of desire and the four discourses represent two of the more infamous *mathemes* in Lacan’s oeuvre.<sup>13</sup> The *matheme* served at least three purposes meant to assuage several of Lacan’s major insecurities regarding the articulation of psychoanalysis. First, it sought to clarify complex psychological relationships that were otherwise bogged down by the imprecise and contradictory nature of language. Secondly, it did so in a manner that did not contradict his position on meta-language, since the *matheme* eliminates the distinction between signifier and signified. Third, the *matheme*, understood as a self-reflexive representation of an idea, more closely aligned the discipline of psychoanalysis with the hard sciences.

But like the *Pearl*-poet, Lacan, who was a post-structuralist after all, betrays the hopelessness of this drive. As Erin Labbie explains in her book *Lacan’s Medievalism*, “Lacan’s graph of desire, his idealization of mathematics, the *matheme* as the perfect signifier, and the hard sciences, are abutted by his concomitant awareness of the impossibility of the formalism he seeks” (154).<sup>14</sup> So according to Labbie, Lacan’s view of language begins to look more similar to that of the *Pearl* poet. Labbie thereafter grounds Lacan’s realism in a discussion of knots in *Sir Gawain*, a textual object that fascinates both Lacan and the *Pearl* poet. Through her reading, Labbie argues that despite psychoanalysis being intrinsically modern, “its persistence was already embedded within

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<sup>12</sup> Leupin, *Fiction and Incarnation*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> These *mathemes* are found in the very difficult “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” and *Seminar XVII*, respectively.

<sup>14</sup> See the chapter, “The Quadrangle, the Hard Sciences, and Nonclassical Thinking” in *Lacan’s Medievalism*, 146-89 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006).

the medieval mind” (188). Her larger point, however, is the inverse of that statement: that Lacanian psychoanalysis relies on concepts that are intrinsically medieval.

In sum, the desire to reach a more accurately realist understanding of human experience by uniting science and language allies *Pearl* most with psychoanalysis. As Leupin frames it, while humanists have long attempted to bridge the gap between humanities and sciences by “making science itself a metaphor” (or by trying to inject some degree of slippage into the exact), Lacan “solved” this problem by situating science as the *subject* of the unconscious, of psychoanalysis.<sup>15</sup> Taking science to be both mathematicizable and empirically verifiable (Leupin’s reduction of Galileo’s conception), neither of these two processes can be possible without the act of signification through language. For as Leupin poses, what is a praxis without words? Even as Lacan romanticizes the *matheme* as a safer bet than linguistic description, he remains nonetheless tethered to a system of thought that must subordinate even mathematics (understood as one more discourse) to psychoanalysis. Similarly, while *Pearl* articulates the failures of mathematics (or any other language) to signify precisely, the poem submits those failures to the transformative work of faith, and thus, to a “spoteles” economy of Christianity— *contra* Lacan’s modernity *qua* Cartesian doubt. Otherwise the existence of the poem would obliterate the purpose for which it was crafted. Even as both Lacan and *Pearl* acknowledge the imprecision that inhabits

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<sup>15</sup> Leupin, *Lacan Today: Psychoanalysis, Science, Religion* (New York: Other Press, 2004).

language, so too do they nonetheless valorize its essential status—we just have to take a little more comfort in a little less knowing.

Because one understanding of the function of literature has been its ability to house the imaginative resonances of events whose material realities obscure that event's unknowable potential, we might celebrate the liberatory promise of the medieval literary text unbound by the strictures of rationality or theology. As André Breton, an early disciple of a psychoanalytic approach to the literary himself, outlines in his program of automatic writing, literature has long held the key to “the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable” (9).<sup>16</sup> And given the impetus towards revelation that spread throughout Christian discourse after the clarified literalism of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), *Pearl's* departure from the dream vision's thirteenth-century program of clarification and hierarchy and toward a literary science testing the limits of knowledge itself seems to resonate with the model of literature as liberation. Or, as Kathryn Lynch more succinctly formulates, “what philosophy can't, poetry might” (15). But this is not *Pearl's* program; this poem does not reveal so much as lay bare the bounded nature of all material claims to knowledge.

By showing the degree to which theology, mathematics, science, and literature all rely on the imperfect system of language to communicate their knowledges to the world, *Pearl* shows how poesis becomes, at bottom, the art of negotiating an ethics of unknowability. In order to communicate this lesson, *Pearl* runs into the same problems of

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<sup>16</sup> André Breton, “First Surrealist Manifesto,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1972).

meta-language that haunt Lacan's texts. Like Freud and Lacan after him, the *Pearl* poet returns the material world's most reflexive knowledges (math and science) to the extra-linguistic realm of the dream, a site of signification in which thinkers medieval and modern are able to sidestep the political consequences of such an ethics of willed stupidity. But unlike the revelatory dream visions popularized in the thirteenth century, the *Pearl*-poet does not grant the possibility of the dream itself as a meta-language.

Whereas Lacan turns to mathematical and scientific discourses in the hopes of creating a *matheme* capable of closing the gap, *Pearl* uses these discourses as additional examples of the impossibility to extend comprehension outside of the bounds of language. Though this narrative is familiar enough to most medievalists, it may seem foreign to the modern temperaments of those who insist, following the work of Arkady Plotnitsky that so-called "nonclassical thought," the valorization of the unknowable as a means of epistemological orientation, arrives only with the advent of theoretical physics and post-structural philosophy. Not only does the comparison between *Pearl* and the later work of Lacan establish the potential "modernity" of medieval literary texts, it also domesticates Lacan's turn to scientific discourse as less idiosyncratic and perhaps more political than it has sometimes been considered.

I would like to close with a few thoughts on the legacy of Fourth Lateran *via* a turn to the austerity of the *now* and the deleterious effects of the drive to clarify or reveal the function of the humanities within the contemporary university. Just as the council helped move theology towards the scientific, the related pressure to scientize the humanities through ostensibly reflexive metrics of "excellence" show us how, 800 years



later, the epistemological stakes of the apocalyptic moment are still framed in terms of discipline, or disciplinarity. Disciplines link us, prescribing an ethic of commonality as the primary means of recognition, “techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities,” in Foucault’s words.

But as Henri de Lubac reminds us, *disciplina* is also a warning. Like language, discipline interpolates us if only to alert us to its strictures-- such that it might be impossible to remove oneself from its web of symbolization. That is why, like Prester John, we might look to un-knowing as a methodological alternative to the functionalism of *disciplina*. Rather than position the unknown as a central cog within the machinery of human subjectivity, I believe that tracing narrative uses of unknowing can help unite imaginative, epistemological, and eschatological discourses into one that renders the unknowable “an irreducible part of knowledge” *because* of its permanent inaccessibility. In a world of endings, rather than an antechamber to revelation, the unknown, recognized as an uncolonizable non-place, might reorient disciplinary groupings of knowledge on the level of projects better attuned to the parameters of what *is*, in fact, possible. Perhaps as Lateran IV teaches us, lest we subject ourselves to a more untraceable standard of “excellence,” we should take comfort in the fact that some things must remain unknowable.

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