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Contrite Hearts: Lay Clergie in Late Medieval England

by

Sara Fredman

A dissertation presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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It occurs to me that community has turned out to be a vital thread of this dissertation: one voice joining many in Eleanor Hull's *Commentary*, Margery Kempe calming and restoring those in spiritual pain around her. Community expands opportunity and my personal community has

enabled this work as much as the academy. Countless “arguments for the sake of heaven” with my oldest friends, Dov and Jake Sebrow, have taught me the importance of listening to others and supporting my own claims. Childhood conversations with my father, Osher Sebrow, provided a crucial foundation in critical inquiry and contributed to my own penchant for challenging authority. Another father, Shlomo Fredman, is nothing if not “well intentioned” and his generosity has enhanced my life here in St. Louis.

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Sara Fredman
Washington University, May 2017

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

by

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This project reads two texts composed by women in the shadow of Arundel's Constitutions – The Book of Margery Kempe and Eleanor Hull's Commentary on the Seven Penitential Psalms – as two forms of response to the late fourteenth-century critique of clergy best exemplified by William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Langland's poem describes the failures of institutional clergy, particularly that of their responsibility to evoke contrition in lay penitents. The poem deftly questions "Clergie," revealing a multiplicity of meanings and the inability of the myriad forms of clerical authority to serve the "lewed." The poem ends with the allegorical figure of Contrition lying "drowned in a dream," abandoned by the clerical figures charged with nurturing him. The Book of Margery Kempe and Hull's Commentary both subvert existing paradigms for women's writing in Middle Ages and they produce different forms of vernacular voice with a shared aim, that of modeling contrition for their audiences. They both appropriate various clerical functions – Hull takes on the educational and exegetical functions of "clergie" while Margery Kempe offers an alternative model of pastoral care and liturgical intercession.

Both step into the void created by insufficient pastoral care and challenge any simple distinction between “lewed” and “clergie” in late medieval England.

Introduction

Also Crist seith of the Jewis that crieden Osanna to him in the temple that, though thei weren stille, stoonis schulen crie, and bi stoonis he undurstondith hethen men that worshipiden stoonis for here goddis. And we English men ben comen of hethen men, therfore we ben undurstonden bi these stonis, that shulden crie holi writ. And as Jewis, interpretide knoueleching, signifiien clerkis that shulden knoueleche to God bi repentaunce of synnes and bi vois of Goddis heriyng, so oure lewid men, suyng the cornerston Crist, moun be signified bi stoonis that ben harde and abidinge in the foundement. For, though covetouse clerkis ben wode by symonie, eresie and manie othere synnes, and dispisen and stoppen holi writ as myche as thei moun, yit the lewid puple crieth aftir holi writ to kunne it and kepe it with greet cost and peril of here lif.¹

This excerpt from Chapter 15 of the prologue to the Wycliffite Bible helps build the case for scriptural translation into English by contrasting a corrupt clergy with “lewid puple” crying out for Holy Writ. The self-identified “symple creature” who has undertaken the translation uses Bede’s exegesis on Luke 19:40, in which he identifies with the gentiles the stones that Christ said would herald his arrival at the Temple. To do so, the author of the prologue treats Bede’s gloss as if it were the literal sense, using it as a starting point for further interpretation. The “hethen men” signified by the “stonis” are actually meant to represent “oure lewid men,” the lay people who wish to read the Bible “with greet cost and peril of here lif.” Even more surprising, in order to contrast these pious laymen with “covetouse clerkis,” the author of the prologue must change the literal text of the Bible, conflating the disciples who “praise God with a loud voice” with the Pharisees who tell Christ to silence them. In this way a clergy contemptuous of Scripture and entangled in sin are likened to the Jews who rejected Christ, while lay people clamoring for the word of God take on the role of the gentiles who accepted Christ despite their lack of advanced learning. Additionally, the Prologue injects a bit of

¹ Anne Hudson, Ed. *English Wycliffite Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 67.

nationalist polemic into the gloss, specifying that it is “we Engliche men” who come from those “hethen men” and are therefore understood to be the stones that cry for the Holy Writ signified in the verse by Christ. In this passage, Christ himself becomes “the letter,” representing the spiritual sense of Holy Writ, and the clergy is expatriated against its will; “Engliche men” are those who cry out for Christ/Scripture while clerks are understood to play the role of the Jews, the other.

Strange exegetical moves aside, it is far from surprising that the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible would promote lay people as the rightful inheritors of the word of God over a clergy that has sold its birthright for pottage. What is notable, however, is the inclusion of similar allegoresis in Eleanor Hull’s *Commentary on the Seven Penitential Psalms*. Hull makes no mention of clerics – in fact, her entire text is curiously free of references to institutional clergy – but her gloss on Psalm 31 sets up a contrast between Jews and Gentiles in order to construct a community of the blessed. Her introduction to Psalm 31 places the psalm at the heart of the Jewish-Christian drama, contrasting a “goode fader” with “a synful moder, that ys the wrecchyd synagogue” and reiterating the role of the Jews in the crucifixion.² The thousands and hundreds who “weryn convertyd” to Christ at the hour of his crucifixion are posited as the subject of the first line of the psalm, *Beati quorum remisse sunt iniquitates*.³ She then uses Psalm 17:45 to contrast the soon-to-be converted gentiles with the Jews who remained stubborn in their false faith:

And not-withstondyng the sone of God comendyd ful gretly thys puple of whiche we crystyn puple be comyn, and of hem he seyth by the mouthe of David, ‘The peple that I knew not han servyd me and in the heryng of ther erylis they have obeyed me. And therfor they schul be forgevyn and they schul be of tho blessyd *quorum tecta sunt peccata*,

² Eleanor Hull, *The Seven Psalms: A Commentary on the Penitential Psalms*. Ed. Alexandra Barratt. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 25/20-23.

³ Hull 26/62-64.

and ther-for verreyly blessyd when ther wykkydnes schal be forgeven hem and ther synnys hydde.’⁴

Like the Wycliffite Prologue, Hull traces the genealogy of English Christians to the gentiles who converted to Christianity at the crucifixion as opposed to the Jews who comprised Christianity’s earliest members and evangelists. Identifying those gentiles as the source from which “we crystyn puple be comyn” allows Hull to create a distinction between two communities, one with institutional privilege and one without. She uses Psalm 17:45 and its promotion of “the peple that I knew not” to suggest that privileged knowledge pales in comparison with the eager pursuit of service to God. Unlike the author of the Prologue, however, she makes no specific mention of clergy or laypeople. Hull’s *Commentary* uses traditional psalm exegesis to evoke contrition in her readers and thereby empower individual Christians to participate in an inclusive and egalitarian penitential community. It is only in this larger context that her distinction between Jews and Christians can be seen as promoting a revised form of penitential authority that blurs the distinction between lay people and the clergy.

I want to suggest the difference in approaches taken by the Wycliffite Prologue and Hull’s *Commentary* as a key example of the relationship between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when it comes to vernacular composition.⁵ This dissertation traces continuities across

⁴ Hull 26-27/70-78.

⁵ See the debate among scholars regarding the impact of Archbishop Arundel’s Constitutions on vernacular composition and Bible translation. H.A. Kelly’s recent book, *The Middle English Bible: A Reassessment* asks us to reconsider the almost universally accepted view that the Constitutions “legislated against the Middle English Bible” (82). For debate about the impact of the Constitutions on vernacular literature, see *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*, Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh, Eds (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), particularly David Lawton’s argument in favor of “indeterminacy” as a category for reading fifteenth century texts. He argues that the Constitutions were neither “*failed* censorship,” as Kathryn Kerby-Fulton sees them (*Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England*, 16) nor, as Nicholas Watson would have it, “one of the most draconian pieces of censorship in English history” (“Censorship and Cultural Change in

the 1409 divide by reading two fifteenth-century women-authored texts – Hull’s *Commentary* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* – against *Piers Plowman*, a poem Watson takes as a terminal point for reformist anticlericalism in medieval England. Reading these three seemingly incongruent texts together – one a poem, the second a biblical commentary, and the third an autobiography or “autohagiography” – reveals their shared interests and their divergent approaches. All three take advantage of two concurrent and related phenomena: the lack of alignment between clerics and clerical knowledge and the increased blurring of the distinction between layperson and cleric. The devotional questions and the challenges to clerical authority posed by *Piers* do not disappear at the turn of the fifteenth century but instead change shape and, perhaps, direction. Rather than lodging complaints against the clergy for its dereliction of duty to lay people, as *Piers* does, Hull and Kempe construct alternative models of clericalism meant to fill in the gaps in pastoral and penitential authority.

Fourth Lateran and Lay Learning

The challenge to clerical authority that we find in *Piers*, as well as the alternative clericalism of Hull’s *Commentary* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, have their origins in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Fourth Lateran made annual confession a compulsory minimum, thereby committing the Church “to educating its own clergy and, through them, the laity—both men and women.”⁶ Of the three elements of the sacrament of penance – contrition, confession, and satisfaction – the first two require informed action on the part of the penitent. Contrition in

Late Medieval England” 826) and one that disrupted vernacular religious culture “for well over a hundred years” (859). I follow Lawton’s lead in asserting that the Constitutions help persuade vernacular writers to encode any reformist messages in unimpeachably orthodox voices.

⁶ Alexandra Barratt, “Works of Religious Instruction” in *Middle English Prose: A Critical Guide to Major Authors and Genres*. Ed. A.S.G Edwards (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984) 413.

particular requires the penitent to identify the sins he or she has committed, understand why they are wrong, and feel sorrow for having done them.⁷ The Church recognized that in order for lay people to engage successfully in full penance (at least) once a year, they would have to understand, at a minimum, the sins they committed and how to confess them. A priest would likewise need to be able “to distinguish between what was serious and what trivial, to impose the appropriate penances, and to apply the best remedies for his parishioners’ spiritual ailments.”⁸ Additionally, they bore the responsibility for bringing those penitents who may not understand the gravity of their sins to true contrition.⁹

Lay education in England in particular evolved over the course of the thirteenth century, culminating in the Lambeth Council of 1281. Canon 9 of the Council, known as *Ignorantia Sacerdotum*, “required parish clergy to preach at least four times per year on the articles of the faith, the ten commandments, the two evangelical precepts, the works of mercy, the seven deadly sins, the seven virtues, and the seven sacraments.”¹⁰ This requirement led to the proliferation of teaching aids for clerics in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Those works were mostly written in Latin but over time some – e.g. the migration of Archbishop Thoresby’s syllabus into the vernacular *The Lay Folks’ Catechism* – were translated into English for lay people. This close relationship between educational materials written for priests and those directed toward laypeople meant that there was not always a significant difference between lay and clerical

⁷ See Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 250-300 for a discussion of the medieval theological debate regarding the roles of contrition, confession, and the priest’s absolution in successful penance.

⁸ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 54.

⁹ Tentler 23-24.

¹⁰ Nicole Rice, *Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 11.

education. Sarah Wood points out that the instruction of Haukyn by Conscience and Patience in *Piers* seems “to draw on a newly ‘vernacularized’ penitential discourse, in which the penitent may appropriate for direct use materials previously accessible only to ‘Clergy.’”¹¹ The ignorance of the clergy may have been the starting point for the manuals for priests, but those texts soon became part of a body of literature to which lay people turned to figure out how to “do-well,” particularly in the area of penance.

The impact of this educational program, which produces materials for clerics and laypeople alike, cannot be overstated. In requiring everyone to know *something*, the Church begins to walk a fine line between the spiritual danger facing an undereducated laity and the institutional danger posed by introducing the *clergie* that Wendy Scase identifies as clerical learning¹² to those traditionally excluded from it. This requirement of universal education opens a portal that leads to reformist movements and, eventually, the Reformation but it begins as a perfectly orthodox endeavor meant to facilitate ritual competence. Scase sees *Piers* as depicting the cultural challenge that ensues once lay people are given access to texts and concepts previously restricted to the clergy: the fracture between “that ‘clergie’ from which priests are drawn” and “that ‘clergie’ which is reading and writing.”¹³ Once lay people are given access to the former, there is “a loosening of the clerical monopoly on ‘clergie,’”¹⁴ which imperils an ecclesiastical hierarchy dependent on a knowledge differential between layperson and cleric. Moreover, the texts to which lay people were gaining access often provided motivation for the

¹¹ Sarah Wood, *Conscience and the Composition of Piers Plowman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 67.

¹² Wendy Scase, *Piers Plowman and the New Anticlericalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 40-41.

¹³ Scase 40.

¹⁴ Scase 41.

appropriation of functions previously restricted to the clergy. Fiona Somerset, noting that pastoral materials meant for priests and their parishioners often contained criticism of clerical failings, writes:

It is a short step from allowing that criticism of clerical insufficiencies concerns the laity, and providing them directly with pastoral materials in the vernacular that acknowledge that fact, to employing this rhetoric of clerical critique to justify writing vernacular tracts capable of conveying far more ‘clergie’ than the minimum the laity are strictly said to require.¹⁵

Texts meant to instruct laypeople in the “essentials of faith”¹⁶ therefore had the potential to provide both the capability and the motivation to pursue more specialized knowledge as well as greater degrees of penitential self-management.

Confession, Liturgy, and Interiority

Penance in general and confession in particular constitute both the source of this crisis of *clergie* and its primary battleground. A mainstay of the anticlericalism found in *Piers* is the failure of the clergy to provide adequate pastoral care, of which serving as confessor is a significant part. The prologue describes priests who “sholden shryven hire parissshens, / Prechen and praye for hem, and the povere fede” but instead abandon their posts to seek material gain in London, during Lent and at other times;¹⁷ Ymagynatyf bemoans the plight of lay people subject to an “unkonnyng” parson or parish priest.¹⁸ In such an environment, lay people lacking in the *clergie* that is clerical learning are left out to dry while those who possess it may begin to take

¹⁵ Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 14.

¹⁶ Somerset 13.

¹⁷ William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, Ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: J.M. Dent, 1995) P.81-98.

¹⁸ *Piers Plowman* XII.183.

control of their own spiritual affairs in the absence of outside authority. This spiritual self-management is built into the process as imagined by Fourth Lateran. Nicole Rice points out the importance of self-correction to those requirements, which both made necessary regular lay-clerical interaction and authorized lay people to take ownership over their own spiritual status, “mandating a form of self-discipline, in cooperation with clerical authority, that would become fundamental to late medieval religious mentalities.”¹⁹ Done right, the process of penance involved a partnership between cleric and layperson in provoking self-reflection and self-improvement in the latter. In this way, Fourth Lateran, which required all Christians to be taught to seek salvation, leads to the questing and questioning of the *Piers* narrator; the poem witnesses both the cultural pull of that search for a better self and the failure of the clergy adequately to assist in it. Eleanor Hull’s *Commentary* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* provide their readers with a means of sidestepping traditional clerical mediation in their pursuit of contrition for sin and spiritual perfection.

In thinking about the impact of vernacular composition on lay piety and the ever-narrowing gap between the clergy and the laity, it is important to keep in mind the role of the liturgy. Before vernacular texts of religious instruction became widely available, Rice writes, “lay people had begun to engage textually with religious disciplines by using books of hours, Latin prayer books adapted from monastic and clerical liturgical practice.”²⁰ Those Books of Hours, Eamon Duffy tells us, “enabled lay people to associate themselves with the prayer of the clergy and religious.”²¹ They contained prayers, including the Penitential Psalms, which lay

¹⁹ Rice 2. See also Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) 165.

²⁰ Rice 12.

²¹ Duffy 231.

people would encounter in public worship at church and recite on their own in private. This inhabiting in personal worship of what was at other times a clerical voice was endorsed by the Church and further contributes to a blurring of the line between cleric and layperson, as well as that between public and private devotion. Duffy offers the example of Mary of Burgundy's Book of Hours, in which Mary is depicted at prayer alone in a private room while also experiencing a vision – indicated by a window – in which she kneels before the Virgin and Child in a public church. “The boundaries between private and public, individual and corporate,” Duffy writes, “are here permeable.”²² The portrait depicts the ability of the liturgy to cultivate interiority while bridging solitary and communal devotion. That aspect of the liturgy is one that both Hull and Kempe exploit in different ways, as I show more fully in the chapters dealing with their texts.

Hull in particular treats the Psalms as both institutional and personal. The sanctioned use of the Psalms in private by late medieval penitents as a means of evoking contrition makes her translation of scripture into English, as well as her status as a woman composing what is a text that at times seems to share a purpose with penitential manuals, seem far less radical than they perhaps are. The unique ability of the Psalms to evoke the contrition required for penance and thereby “cacheth away synne”²³ is referenced by Ymagynatyf in Passus XII and cast as the privilege of those who know *clergie*. This was not limited to clerks but applied to anyone who could understand the Psalms enough to be made to feel contrite by reciting them. Clare Costley King'oo writes that, “late medieval parishioners were allowed a surprising degree of spiritual self-management in penitential matters” and, since most only confessed once a year at Lent, they “often turned privately to the Penitential Psalms in the meantime as a way to deal with their

²² Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers 1240-1570* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 54.

²³ *Piers Plowman* XII.177.

everyday transgressions.”²⁴ In both translating and explicating the Penitential Psalms, Hull’s *Commentary* might be understood to participate in the transmission of a form of *clergie* that could evoke contrition in the absence of a priest and enable lay people to assert greater authority over their own penance.

This impact of liturgical practice on lay piety may have been more profound for women. Hull’s *Commentary* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* are both heavily invested in liturgical performance and this dissertation is keenly interested in the intersection of liturgy, gender, and clerical authority. Katherine Zieman writes that liturgical performance provided women with access to clerical discourse: “as the only definitively clerical practice in which women were regularly allowed and expected to engage, it could provide access, however limited, to institutional authority.”²⁵ The participation of laypeople of both genders in church liturgy allows for their incursion into the area of clerical voice, but it additionally licensed women to disregard Paul’s injunction against their speaking in church.²⁶ Praying in church, therefore, gives women access not only to the *clergie* inherent in the liturgy itself but also, potentially, to the *clergie* that is the public, ecclesiastical speaking voice or the teaching voice. “Liturgical performance,” Zieman writes, “enabled women to inhabit an entire range of subject positions, none of which were generally available to them otherwise.”²⁷ Hull and Kempe each harness various aspects of the orthodox liturgy in reconceiving their own voices and the voices of others. Their texts offer

²⁴ Clare Costley King’oo, *Miserere Mei: The Penitential Psalms in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012) 17.

²⁵ Katherine Zieman, “Playing *Doctor*: St. Birgitta, Ritual Reading, and Ecclesiastical Authority” in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, Ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005) 307.

²⁶ Zieman 309.

²⁷ Zieman 327.

examples of the ways in which public liturgy informs a different kind of performance: the formation of a hybrid voice combining that of penitent and penitential authority.

Authority and the Spectrum of Orthodoxy

If “the nature of vernacular literary culture is an intricate negotiation between respect for authority and rebellion against it,”²⁸ then challenging authority does not necessitate abandoning it entirely. As Emily Steiner reminds us, “authority is never properly one thing,”²⁹ and all three texts explored in this dissertation rebel against some forms of religious authority while appropriating and perpetuating others. The fracture of *clergie* into disparate functions and bodies of knowledge means that the institutional authority of the Church ceases to be a unified concept, if it ever was one. If *clergie* represents the authority of the Church, *Piers* attempts to break down that authority into its component parts. Is the authority of the Church located exclusively in the persons of *clergie*? If so, in which of the many varieties of clerics depicted by the poem? Or is it rather vested in the knowledge required of (but not always acquired by) the clergy? Perhaps it lies only in the sacramental function, particularly the Eucharist. These are the questions *Piers* asks by way of its narrator’s quest, and his search for Do-Well often does the work of illuminating the gap between the various forms of clerical authority. Textual authority is, for example, opposed to embodied authority in the poem’s use of scripture to call out the bad behavior of clerics. In this way, *Piers* works to further destabilize institutional authority; it despairs of reform but never quite figures out how to replace the status quo. Both Hull’s *Commentary* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* take advantage of the destabilization depicted in

²⁸ David Lawton, *Voice in Later Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 5.

²⁹ Emily Steiner, “Authority,” in *Middle English*, Ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 142.

and furthered by *Piers*, especially the chasm between *clergie* and the *clergie* —that is, scripture and clerics. Both texts follow *Piers* in leveraging textual authority against embodied authority, albeit in less confrontational ways. Eleanor Hull makes use of the textual authority of the Psalms in a way that might allow her readers to sidestep the institutional authority of the Church, or at least understand the *clergie* necessary to evoke contrition in themselves without clerical interrogation. Margery Kempe cites textual authorities – the Psalms and Paul, for example – against clerics invoking their authority in order to shut down her voice. But both texts also construct new models of authority meant to open up a wider range of options for Christians who wish to engage in penance.

All three of these texts operate within the framework of orthodox Christianity rather than outside of it. The narrator in *Piers*, while identifying the failure of clerics to serve the penitential needs of those Christians without access to *clergie*, stops just short of suggesting that the solution lies outside of the Church. Eleanor Hull's *Commentary* draws on highly orthodox *clergie* in order to present a model of penitential authority that could well run parallel to traditional, clerically-mediated penance, a non-hierarchical avenue for achieving the same aims: contrite hearts and penitential voices. *The Book of Margery Kempe* does not feel the need to dispense with hierarchy and is in fact quite invested in the penitent-confessor relationship, but presents first Christ and then Margery herself as alternative mediatory figures. Both texts take advantage of the gaps between accepted forms of *clergie* depicted in *Piers* in order to reimagine authoritative penitential voice. That their authors would have considered themselves to be unequivocally orthodox should compel us to broaden our understanding of the spectrum of orthodoxy in the fifteenth century after the Constitutions.

Why Women?

This dissertation has two women-authored texts as its focus in part because of its interest in the shifting landscape of clerical authority in late medieval England. The wider availability of clerical learning and the parceling out of clerical functions in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries provide new avenues by which lay people – women as well as men – with the ability to participate in *clergie* can experiment with various forms of authority. At the same time, lay women are unlike lay men in that no matter how much access they may have to “clergie,” they are still constrained, foreclosed from the kind of embodied clerical authority represented by priests themselves. While medieval women could choose to not be “lay” (e.g. choose a religious life of claustration), they could never be priests.

Perhaps for this reason, women were often at the center of debates about vernacular reading, particularly translation of Latin into English. Richard Ullerston’s summary of the arguments against translation identifies women as main beneficiaries of the hierarchical subversion that was sure to result from vernacular *clergie*:

Translation into the mother tongue will allow any old woman (*vetula*) to usurp the office of teacher, which is forbidden to them (since all heresies, according to Jerome, come from women); it will bring about a world in which the laity prefers to teach than to learn, in which women (*mulierculae*) talk philosophy and dare to instruct men – in which a country bumpkin (*rusticus*) will presume to teach. Translation will deprive good priests of their prestige. If everything is translated, the learning, the liturgy, and all the sacraments will be abhorred; clerics and theology itself will be seen as useless by the laity; the clergy will wither; and an infinity of heresies will erupt. Even the laity will not benefit, since their devotion is actually improved by their lack of understanding of the psalms and prayers they say.³⁰

In this summary, “women” are synonymous with “the laity” and opposed to “clerics and theology.” “The clergy” is closely tied to the Latin Bible, its prestige and its usefulness

³⁰ Watson 843.

seemingly reliant on the inability of the laity to understand scripture and other clerical texts. Its argument seems to equate the priesthood with the ability to recite and understand Latin, rather than any other specialized skill set. Importantly, according to this understanding of the arguments against translation, an English Bible would not eliminate the existence of, or the need for, teachers. The responsibility of *clergie* to spread theological and salvational knowledge would survive but be reassigned to those previously barred from that function. The fear of a vernacular Bible, in this account, is really a desire to maintain the existing hierarchy, in which men instruct women, clergy teaches the laity.

While this argument against biblical translation is misogynist and offensive to the modern ear, there is truth to the implication that broadening access to knowledge imperils hierarchy.³¹ Bernard McGinn writes that vernacular theology levels the playing field, putting men and women “on the same footing” and leading, thereby, to a reexamination of gender roles and “new theological possibilities.”³² In centering my argument on two women-authored texts, I consider the possibility that it takes the new voices enabled by vernacular theology, “lewed clergie” as Vincent Gillespie terms it, to imagine those new theological paradigms. All three texts that I read in this dissertation can be considered “lewed clergie” in the sense that they all, to varying degrees, participate in the translation of Latin texts into the vernacular, making *clergie* accessible

³¹ For a more modern example of this phenomenon, see the current debate within Orthodox Judaism over female ordination. Four decades of opening up text study – both the Bible and the Talmud – to young women in centrist Orthodox high schools has led to a conflict over the capacity of women to serve as clergy. Many of those women now possess the same body of knowledge as the men who receive rabbinic ordination; some hold positions in which they perform many of the functions previously limited to ordained rabbis, including teaching, delivering sermons, and engaging in pastoral care. In these cases, it becomes more difficult to accept the withholding of the title of “clergy” and to arrive at an agreed-upon understanding of what that title even means.

³² Bernard McGinn, “Introduction” in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics* (New York: Continuum, 1994) 7.

to a wider audience. But they are also quite literally “lewed clergie” in that each in its own way showcases a hybrid form of identity, mixing lay and clerical features. But where the hybrid identities put forth by *Piers* fail to provide solutions to the penitential problems raised throughout the poem, the women-authored texts that are the primary subject of this study imagine and enact hybrid forms that provide alternative avenues to productive penance and, thereby, salvation.

In my first chapter I read *Piers Plowman* as a key text in establishing the fracture of a unified *clergie* into various clerical functions – clerical knowledge, clerical status, pastoral care, preaching, ritual responsibility – that may only be accessed via multiple sources. This fracture compels and enables the poem to imagine a hybrid lay-clerical identity, as well as to establish why such hybridity may be necessary. I focus on Passus XII-XIV, a portion of the poem in which the narrator turns inward, encountering different parts of his soul³³ and in which, as Sarah Wood notes, a form of penance takes place “without direct clerical supervision.”³⁴ This inward turn is important in a text that has confession as one of its main concerns, reflecting the impact of the Church-mandated self-analysis resulting from Fourth Lateran. In spite of this attention to interiority, however, the poem continually focuses on the various ways in which penance can be thwarted, especially by an absentee or otherwise inept clergy. I read the Ymagynatyf section in particular as raising more questions about *clergie* than it answers. In instructing the narrator, Ymagynatyf attempts to defend the clergy through a series of analogies meant to bolster its authority. Instead, his defense and idealization of clerical authority only demonstrate the ways in which that authority has been fragmented and parceled out. Ymagynatyf’s unintentional critique of *clergie* is reflected in the narrator’s encounter with Haukyn in Passus XIII and XIV. I read the

³³ James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-Text* (London: Longman, 1990) 141.

³⁴ Wood 51.

Hawkyn section of the poem as a response to the defense of sacramental hierarchy and the penitential privilege of the clergy put forth by Ymagynatyf, arguing that the indeterminacy of the poem's characterization of him is meant to represent the confusion surrounding the concept of *clergie* and the blurring of lay-clerical identity.

With its description of a fractured *clergie* alongside a veneration of a lay plowman, the poem puts forth an alternative vision of pastoral theology, one that reverses the accepted pedagogical trajectory:

Saving belief needs to be understood to move, not downward from priest to plowman, catechesis to understanding – the approach taken up to this point in the poem, by Reason and Holy Church – but upwards from an authentic source within the Christian community, the object of pastoral theology's educative programme.³⁵

But, of course, the poem ends with Contrition lying “adreynt and dremeth” and Conscience taking off in search of the elusive Piers. If Piers is meant to serve as an “authentic source” of saving belief – to revive Contrition and resolve the penitential and devotional crises enumerated by the poem – it is far from clear by its end that he will succeed. Instead, it is two fifteenth-century texts that fully realize the potential that Watson sees in *Piers*. The dislocation of clerical roles from the sort of central figure depicted in *Piers* enables the work of Eleanor Hull and Margery Kempe. Because the various clerical functions – including but not limited to exegesis, preaching, sacramental authority, and pastoral care – have become unstuck from one another and from the notion of a singular *clergie*, Hull and Kempe are free to choose those that suit their aims without requiring the kind of social person to which *clergie* was previously restricted. In this way they benefit from the fracturing of *clergie* and further contribute to the blurring of lay and clerical identities to which *Piers* testifies. Both take the crisis of wanhope with which *Piers* ends

³⁵ Nicholas Watson, “*Piers Plowman*, Pastoral Theology, and Spiritual Perfectionism: Hawkyn's Cloak and Patience's *Pater Noster*” in *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 21 (2007) 94.

as their starting points, each offering a different model of penitential mediation that relies on the blurring of the line separating layperson from cleric.

In my second and third chapters I turn to Eleanor Hull's *Commentary on the Seven Penitential Psalms*, an understudied work of vernacular theology. Ostensibly a translation from an unidentified French source, the *Commentary* is, as Alexandra Barratt has noted, "one of the most sustained pieces of Scriptural exegesis in Middle English."³⁶ It draws on traditional sources, relying heavily on Augustine and other patristic writers, and its content makes clear that Hull herself was both learned and Latinate. Hull's gender makes the learned character of her text noteworthy but what is most surprising about the *Commentary* is its participation in many of the penitential questions and challenges documented by *Piers*. As I've noted, Hull's text is enabled by the multiple meanings of *clergie* detailed in the poem. She not only engages in the *clergie* of biblical exegesis but takes as her subject the Penitential Psalms, precisely the *clergie* that Ymagynatyf contends allows for the sidestepping of clerical penitential authority.

The inclusion of the Penitential Psalms in the "lay curriculum," the corpus of texts the laity was required to know after Fourth Lateran, makes Hull's translation of scripture into the vernacular less likely to have attracted the unwanted gaze of the censors in the post-Constitutions context in which she writes. But their ability to evoke contrition also makes them a text with the potential to flatten the penitential hierarchy; and Hull leverages traditional *clergie* – patristic exegesis not likely to raise censorial eyebrows – in the service of making the voice of contrition provided by the Psalms more available to her readers. Chapter 2 of this dissertation begins the work of examining the function of voice in *The Commentary*. The chapter compares Hull's text

³⁶ Alexandra Barratt, "Dame Eleanor Hull: A Fifteenth Century Translator" in *The Medieval Translator: The Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages*, Ed. Roger Ellis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989) 95.

to Psalm commentaries written by St. Augustine and Richard Rolle in order to illuminate the relationship between *The Commentary* and the *clergie* that is exegesis, as well as the *clergie* that is the voice of the exegete. The bulk of the chapter looks specifically at Psalm 6 as glossed by Augustine, Rolle, and Hull in order to demonstrate the ways in which Hull leverages orthodox exegesis to imagine a different kind of penitential voice, thereby revising Psalmic exemplarity from an exemplarity of conduct to an exemplarity of voice.

In Chapter 3 I read a wider selection of Hull's *Commentary* against the traditional exegesis upon which it is based. That exegesis is largely concerned with the multiplicity of voices contained in the Psalms – God's, Christ's, and David's – and takes care to identify whose voice is behind key verses. However, in contrast to Augustine, who only assigns one voice to a given verse, Hull overpopulates several of the psalm verses glossed in her commentary. In thus depicting psalm recitation as simultaneously undertaken by a variety of individuals – often including Christ, David, and contemporary penitents – Hull constructs a network of voices spread across time. These multi-temporal cries of contrition create a sense of an eternal present, always offering the opportunity to join with preexisting and continuous voices in penitential prayer. The Psalms' status as "voice" additionally allows the text to function as raw material for the construction of an alternative vision of the body that produces that voice, and in Hull's *Commentary* that body is a communal one. In turning individual psalm recitation into a communal, multi-temporal event, Hull reimagines Christian community as a non-hierarchical space, a congregation of individuals voicing contrition. It also contributes to the construction of a penitential text that is unlike the various manuals and guides born of Fourth Lateran's mandates. In place of *Piers'* critique of priests who fail in their instruction and guidance of lay penitents, Hull takes advantage of the intersection of exegesis and liturgy that is the foundation of any

psalm commentary to create a new form of pastoral instruction. She steps into the educational role of the *clergie* but does so in a way that reconceives exemplarity as a modeling of penitential voice rather than a mandating of conduct.

In my final chapter I look at the way *The Book of Margery Kempe* uses voices – Christ’s voice and the voices of her fellow Christians, in addition to Margery’s own – to construct a hybrid lay-clerical identity based in female experience. I argue for the impact of Margery’s failed childbirth confession on her approach to penitential mediation, her visionary experience serving to replace inadequate human confessors with Christ himself. Over the course of the narrative, *The Book* offers various depictions of Margery herself as a mediatory figure, infusing the various roles of *clergie* – liturgical, confessional, and pedagogical – with her own voice. As scholars have shown, Margery’s *Book* responds to late medieval vernacular texts aimed at women, particularly those containing saints’ lives and narratives of other exemplary figures. I focus specifically on *The Book*’s depictions of maternity in arguing that it offers a model of spiritual motherhood that confers authority and blurs the line between layperson and cleric. Margery’s status as a mother, an under-attended aspect of *The Book*, is used throughout her text to represent the challenges to female devotion in particular and lay devotion in general. Margery’s maternity is presented as the source of the spiritual authority *The Book* claims for her and it allows her to reattach the metaphorical motherhood found in devotional texts to actual, biological mothers. Margery’s *Book* is, therefore, where voice, specifically female voice, is brought back in line with female bodies. In doing so it also fuses the affective piety associated with female devotion with various forms of male-dominated *clergie*. By the end of *The Book*, Margery’s weeping voice –

what Eleanor Hull might term “the voyse of terys”³⁷ – becomes a liturgical voice representing the creation of yet another space that is neither entirely lay nor entirely clerical, an innovative and experiential *clergie*.

³⁷ Eleanor Hull, *The Seven Psalms: A Commentary on the Penitential Psalms*, Ed. Alexandra Barratt (Oxford, 1995) 21.

Chapter One

“Drowned in a Dream”: Contrition and the Blurring of Clerical Identity in *Piers Plowman*

Passus XII of *Piers Plowman*¹ presents an encounter between the narrator and the allegorical figure Ymagynatyf,² in which Ymagynatyf offers a broad defense of *clergie* and attempts to instill respect for clerical status. In doing so, as Wendy Scase notes, Ymagynatyf exploits all of the various meanings of *clergie* – “literacy, learning, the clergy, the ‘benefit of the clergy’” – such that “it is never clear which ‘clergie’ is being defended.”³ His continual punning on the word *clergie* is meant to underscore “the fracture between the clergy and ‘clergie,’” as Scase puts it, the rift between clerics and clerical knowledge. But in taking advantage of the connotative agility of the word, Ymagynatyf raises questions that suggest a cultural transformation beyond the binary Scase delineates. His defense of *clergie* references an entire spectrum of clerical functions – clerical knowledge, clerical status, pastoral care, preaching, ritual responsibility, among others – but alludes to their disjunction from one another. Even as he attempts to highlight the indispensability of *clergie* to lay penance and salvation, Ymagynatyf describes a penitential landscape in which the dislocation of myriad clerical features from a single source threatens the successful fulfillment of those functions. Meant to reinforce the

¹ All references are to William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, Ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: J.M. Dent, 1995) unless otherwise noted and will be given parenthetically in this chapter.

² See Ralph Hanna, “Langland’s Ymaginatif: Images and the Limits of Poetry” in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2002) 81n1 for a survey of recent scholarship on Ymagynatyf. Since the publication of Hanna’s essay, Michelle Karnes has written an essay on Ymagynatyf and Aristotelian theories of cognition, to which this chapter periodically responds.

³ Wendy Scase, *Piers Plowman and the New Anticlericalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 41.

ecclesiastical hierarchy, Ymagynatyf's address of the narrator raises more questions about the role and function of the clergy than it answers.

The *Vis Imaginativa*

It is important to note that, academically defined, Ymagynatyf would have had a very specific meaning. His name is derived from the *vis imaginativa*, one of the "inner senses" which were thought to "mediate between the outward senses and the fully rational power of reason."⁴ In medieval psychology, the *vis imaginativa* itself was understood to hold "the power of making pictures, ideas and abstractions from the data of experience."⁵ Alastair Minnis writes that what he calls the *virtus imaginativa* has the capacity to form "images of things not perceived by the senses"⁶ and that, "without the imagination no human reasoning could take place nor could the memory employ images of the past."⁷ That *Piers Plowman*'s Ymagynatyf teaches doctrine by means of *exempla*, Minnis suggests, is appropriate "in view of the way in which *exempla* were supposed to stimulate the imagination."⁸ In more recent work, Michelle Karnes points out the abundance of metaphors and puns in Ymagynatyf's speech and his capacity for making "unexpected and sometimes unsound connections."⁹ She argues that this method of connecting "spiritual matters to natural ones," is all part of the figure's greater goal of harmonizing

⁴ Nicolette Zeeman, *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 79.

⁵ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C-text* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994) 234n.

⁶ Alastair Minnis, "Langland's Ymaginatuf and late-medieval theories of imagination," in *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook* 3 Ed. E.S. Shaffer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 73.

⁷ Minnis 74.

⁸ Minnis 84.

⁹ Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation & Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 179. See also E. Ruth Harvey, *The Inward Wits: Psychological Theory in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London: Warburg Institute, 1975).

“revelation and natural knowledge.”¹⁰ She argues that Ymagynatyf “performs crucial cognitive work, work that is informed by imagination’s role in Aristotelian theories of cognition.”¹¹ For Karnes, the imagination’s particular skill set allows for Ymagynatyf’s proficiency in associating two key bodies of knowledge: “kynde knowynge,” natural knowledge derived from the senses, and “clergie,” acquired knowledge imparted by revelation and “expressed primarily in the Bible.”¹² Ymagynatyf helps the narrator transform sensory data into spiritual truth and, in demonstrating how to reconcile these two different forms of knowledge, Ymagynatyf also teaches him “to make better use of his imagination.”¹³ Thanks to this lesson, Karnes argues, the narrator is eventually successful in “harmonizing experience and doctrine,” a success manifest in his “immersion into biblical knowledge” later in the poem.¹⁴

But unlike other allegorical figures – “Scripture,” for example – that represent the same body of knowledge no matter what, the permutations of “imagination” are endless. No two imaginations are exactly alike and, if the *vis imaginativa* is in some sense the power of conceiving of oneself, we might imagine Passus XII to be intimately connected to the narrator’s sense of self. It is noteworthy, then, that Ymagynatyf’s entrance into the world of the poem stages a momentary inversion of its central penitential quest. The narrator has spent the better part of eleven passus seeking answers from various allegorical figures but at XI.411 the as yet unidentified Ymagynatyf is the one asking the question: “What is Dowel?” This is the narrator encountering his own theological questioning but what follows in this passus and the next is a

¹⁰ Karnes 201-202.

¹¹ Karnes 179.

¹² Karnes 181.

¹³ Karnes 188.

¹⁴ Karnes 182.

confrontation with his place in the Christian penitential economy in the form of Ymagynatyf's descriptions of *clergie*. When the narrator offers a confident response – “To se moche and suffre more, certes, is Dowel” (XI.412) – Ymagynatyf not only disregards his answer but also reprimands him for his earlier outburst with Reason. Had the narrator simply remained silent, Ymagynatyf admonishes him, “Thow sholdest have knowen that Clergie can, and conceyved moore thourgh Reson” (XI.414). This “fakeout,” with the poem gesturing toward a reversal of the established pedagogical hierarchy and then immediately rejecting that reversal, sets the tone for the rest of the encounter between the narrator and Ymagynatyf, in which Ymagynatyf offers a staunchly hierarchical view of the relationship between layperson and cleric.

“Clerkes kepe the keys”: *Clergie* as Gatekeeper

Ymagynatyf's initial reprimand offers the tantalizing possibility of the transfer of clerical knowledge but it is a transfer predicated on lay silence. His rebuke also presents *clergie* as an all or nothing proposition, with Ymagynatyf telling the narrator that his outburst has jeopardized his access to Clergy altogether: “Clergie thi compaignye ne kepeth noght to suwe” (XI.422). Ymagynatyf's suggestion that *Clergie* might choose to withhold itself from those who seek it offers a preview of Passus XII, in which he attempts to impose a boundary between laypeople and the clergy. Ymagynatyf's efforts to inculcate respect for *clergie* throughout Passus XII reveal a stake in the impermeability of that boundary; his reliance on problematic analogies¹⁵ that become increasingly elitist and exclusionary highlights the tension between the knowledge

¹⁵ David Aers also notes the problematic nature of Ymagynatyf's defense of Clergy, describing his “theologizing” as “bizarrely idiosyncratic and blandly unaware of the anomalies it generates.” Aers focuses on Ymagynatyf's differing approaches to the stories of the robber crucified with Christ in Luke and the salvation of Trajan, while I will be focusing on difficulties generated by the analogies he makes in specifically propping up the clergy. David Aers, *Salvation and Sin* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2009) 127.

required for salvation and the exclusive access to that knowledge enjoyed by clerics, casting doubt on their ability to fulfill the very functions those analogies are meant to illuminate.

Ymagynatyf's suggestion that *Clergie* might well abandon the narrator constitutes the first instance of punning on *clergie*; it cleverly conflates the allegorical figure of *Clergie* with both the *clergie* that is clerical knowledge and the *clergie* that is representative of a group of people responsible for parceling that knowledge out to those who need it to successfully wend their way through the penitential process.

The beginning of Passus XII uses Psalm 22:4 to reject another attempt by the narrator to engage in clerical activity. After encouraging him to do penance, Ymagynatyf offers a strong critique of his poetic pursuits:

And David in the Sauter seith, of swiche that loveth Jesus,
'*Virga tua et baculus tuus, ipsa me consolata sunt:*
Although thou strike me with thi staf, with stikke or with yerde,
It is but murthe as for me to amende my soule.'
And thou medlest thee with makynge – and myghtest go seye thi Sauter,
And bidde for hem that yyveth thee breed; for ther ar bokes ynowe
To telle men what Dowel is, Dobet and Dobest bothe
And prechours to preve what it is, of many a peire freres

(XII.12-19)

In these lines, effective penance is portrayed as incompatible with personal poetic inspiration; recite David's poetry, Ymagynatyf tells the narrator, don't write your own. The narrator's poetic "makynge" takes up valuable time that should be used to pray. Ymagynatyf further asserts that, in addition to reciting the Psalms, the narrator should "bidde for hem that yyveth thee breed"; rather than playing at *clergie* himself, he should devote himself to praying for the parish priest who dispenses the Eucharist. The second half of this critique, however, makes clear that this is not simply about personal devotion and penance. In his assertion that "there ar bokes ynowe / To

telle men what Dowel is, Dobet and Dobest bothe,” Ymagynatyf reveals the content of the narrator’s poetry to be doctrinal. His disapproval is therefore based not only in the devotional – with poetic invention edging out personal recitation of the Psalms – but in the pedagogical, the narrator crossing the boundary separating the “prechoures” from those to whom they preach.

Ymagynatyf’s censorious contrast of the narrator’s “makyng” with the Psalter and sermons suggests that the narrator’s aim is not simply diversionary but rather devotional and catechetical. This subtle association of that poetry with the “lewed clergie” that Vincent Gillespie identifies as a feature of the fourteenth century¹⁶ might also be confirmed by the narrator’s halfhearted response to Ymagynatyf’s disapproval, which is usually read as a defense of poetry as “play.”¹⁷ He cites Cato as an example of a “clerk” who “conforted” his son by writing poetry and cites the practice of “holy men” who “outherwhile / Pleyden, the parfiter to ben, in [places manye]” (XII.23-24). But these lines could also be read as a defense of poetry as “comfort”¹⁸ in addition to “amusement.”¹⁹ Ymagynatyf’s earlier use of Psalm 22:4 – *Virga tua et baculus tuus, ipsa me consolata sunt* – has already tied some manner of comfort or consolation to penance. In his gloss, just a few lines later, on the episode of the woman taken in adultery from John,²⁰ he expounds on the role of the clergy in effecting that penitential comfort: “clergie is conforte to

¹⁶ Vincent Gillespie, “Vernacular Theology” in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 403.

¹⁷ James Simpson, for example, sees in this response a defense of poetry as “play,” one he deems “conventional” but “fairly spineless.” James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-Text* (London: Longman, 1990) 138. Wendy Scase writes that the narrator’s reply indicates that “for him, ‘making’ is simply an amusement, not part of his clerical activity” (169).

¹⁸ “Comforten.” Def. 4. *Middle English Dictionary*. University of Michigan, n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2016. <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED8533>>.

¹⁹ “Comforten.” Def. 6. *Middle English Dictionary*. University of Michigan, n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2016. <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED8533>>.

²⁰ John 8:3-11.

creatures that repenten” (XII.83). He reminds the narrator that under the “Olde Lawe” the woman would have been stoned to death for her transgression. Instead, he says, “Christ of his curteisie thourgh clergie hir saved” (XII.73-77). *Clergie* here is the exegesis necessary to replace Mosaic law with Christian salvation;²¹ this kind of clerical learning “conforted the womman” and offers the same comfort to all subsequent sinners (XII.81-83).

A Problematic Defense of *Clergie*

Ymagynatyf’s application of this analogy, however, relies upon shifting definitions of *clergie*. His use of *clergie* to refer to an exegetical function that allows one thing to mean another in his discussion of John 8:3-11 impacts the penitential conclusions he draws from it in the lines that follow. When he concludes that, because Christ used *clergie* to comfort the woman taken in adultery, “Clergie is confort to creatures that repenten” (XII.83), we take the subject of that line to refer to the exegesis itself, or perhaps clerical learning more broadly, rather than a group of people with a specific clerical status. But when, in line 85, he goes on to state that “Goddess body myghte nought ben of breed withouten clergie” (XII.85), we must pivot since it is *clergie* as person, specifically the priest performing the Mass, who performs the Eucharistic function to which that line refers.

In reminding the narrator that “Goddess body myghte nought ben of breed withouten clergie” (XII.85), Ymagynatyf redefines what we thought he meant by *clergie* just two lines earlier, suggesting that the comfort provided by *clergie* is accessible beyond its exegetical form, through the ritual authority vested in priests. This is a reference to the indispensability of the priest to the Eucharistic ritual; the conversion of bread into the body of Christ depends on the

²¹ Zeeman 254.

priest's utterance of the words *Hoc est corpus meum*. Whatever "comfort" Christ provided to the woman taken in adultery is, in Ymagynatyf's telling, also accessible via the Eucharistic transubstantiation that promises salvation to all who partake. The following lines, however, qualify that assurance of salvation in a crucial way and in doing so also question the availability of the "comfort" assumed to be present in the sacramental function of the clergy.

In this first problematic analogy, based on John 8:3-11, Ymagynatyf compares the "caractes" Christ wrote on the ground while being confronted by the Jews to "Goddes body": "As Cristes caracte confortede and bothe coupable shewed / The womman that the Jewes broughte, that Jhesus thought to save...Right so Goddes body, bretheren, be it worthili taken / Dampneth us ate the daye of dome as dide the caracte dede the Jewes" (XII.88-91). This articulation of the requirement that the Eucharist be "worthili taken" for it to effect salvation echoes *The Lay folk's catechism*: "For he that takes it worthili, takes his salvation, / And who-so unworthili, takes his dampnation."²² This conception of communion is fully orthodox and was meant to shift the onus from the priest to the penitent, who must make sure he or she has engaged fully in the penitential process. But the construction of the lines has the effect of reconsidering the impact of the interlocking penitential roles of the clergy; if priests are responsible for the transformation of "bread" into "Goddes body," and "Goddes body" is performing the same function as Christ in John, as Ymagynatyf's analogy suggests that it is, then priests still have a critical role to play in effecting the success of communion. In a poem concerned with the pedagogical failings of the clergy, these lines move us to consider the priest's role in preparing penitents to take communion "worthili" and thus to see salvation in this context as dependent not

²² Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 100; *The Lay Folks' Catechism* 66.

only on the priest's ritual role but on his confessional role as well. By the 14th century, "communion was taught as an annual duty, which could be taken perhaps thrice a year on the major feasts of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, but only after due penance and preparation."²³ For Ymagynatyf, "confort" is coterminous with both salvation and worthy reception of the Eucharist, which necessarily means that it is also linked with penance and the mandate of Fourth Lateran, the transfer of knowledge from cleric to layperson necessary for that penance to be efficacious. Ymagynatyf's shifting between various clerical functions – exegetical, ritualistic, and penitential – in his gloss on John 8:3-11 highlights the ways in which those roles are interconnected and indispensable to successful lay penance.

Ymagynatyf's reliance on the multiple meanings of *clergie* persists throughout Passus XII. When, at line 92, Ymagynatyf counsels the narrator to love *clergie* on account of its close relationship with "kynde wit," there is once again a lack of clarity: is the narrator meant to love the group of people or the body of learning represented by that word? The paralleling of "clergie" and "kynde wit" suggests that it is the latter. The two are described as "kyn" to each other and "neighe cosynes" of Christ (XII.93), both capable of serving as mirrors "to amenden owre defaultes / And lederes for lewed men and for lettred bothe" (XII.95-96). This representation of *clergie* implies that it is within reach for those familiar with "kynde wit," a mode of learning accessible to a wide range of individuals.

At line 98, however, Ymagynatyf stops talking about *clergie* and begins discussing "clerkes." He shifts from knowledge ("Forthi lakke thow nevere logik, lawe ne his customes") to those who represent that knowledge ("Ne countreplede clerkes – I conseille thee for evere"). He then offers an explanation of how the former acquire the latter: "For as a man may noight se that

²³ Rubin 148. See also Duffy 60 for infrequency of lay communion.

myseseth hise eighen, / Na moore can no clerk but if he caughte it first thorough bokes” (XII.99-100). The attribution of clerical status to knowledge gained from books suggests that it is entirely tied up in the *clergie* that is clerical knowledge. However, in first analogizing *clergie* to sight, Ymagynatyf complicates his own notion of what makes a “clerk,” positing that it is less a result of knowledge gleaned from books than it is a function of God’s grace. He reinforces this idea in the following two lines, where he argues that though men may have written some of the books considered *clergie*, the doctrinal content of those books comes directly from God and the Holy Spirit: “Although men made bokes, God was the maister, / And Seint Spirit the samplarie, and seide what men sholde write” (XII.101-102). Like Ymagynatyf’s redefinition of *clergie* in glossing John 8:3-11, this analogy complicates an otherwise straightforward understanding of the term. While he first implies that anyone can be a clerk if he (or she?) can only read, that expansive conception is walked back in favor of a more mysterious and far less egalitarian view of clerical knowledge. In this way, Ymagynatyf operates just as Karnes argues he does, shifting the narrator’s conception of the “clerk” from experience (knowledge attained through books) to revelation (God has to gift it to you). In directly linking the content of clerical learning to the Heavenly Spirit, we might find yet another response to the narrator’s “makyng”: the narrator should be under no illusions that his writing can accomplish the same purpose as that directed by God. Together, these lines have the effect of drawing a sharp line between those who have the benefit of this divinely granted access to *clergie* and those who do not.

Ymagynatyf’s use of sight as a metaphor for *clergie* takes an even more complex turn when he applies it directly to the transfer of clerical knowledge to laypeople:

And right as sighte serveth a man to se the heighe strete,
 Right so lereth lettrure lewed men to reson
 And as a blynd man in bataille bereth wepne to fight,

And hath noon hap with his ax his enemye to hitte,
Na moore kan a kynde witted man, but clerkes hym teche,
Come, for al his kynde wit, to Cristendom and be saved

(XII.104-108)

This is a more explicitly problematic instantiation of the metaphor since what is at stake is lay salvation. The incongruity of comparing something that can ostensibly be taught (Christian doctrine) to something that cannot (the ability to see, especially in situations involving an axe and one's enemies) ultimately undermines that which Ymagynatyf is trying to prove: the ability of *clergie* to help lay people attain salvation.

Ymagynatyf's description of the role of *clergie* becomes increasingly elitist as the passus progresses, calling into doubt the willingness and ability of the clergy to transfer critical salvational knowledge to the laity. In Ymagynatyf's telling, clerks are the gatekeepers of Christian knowledge and lay salvation is in part dependent on their ability and willingness to open the gates. He describes Christendom and the salvation attained therewith as "the cofre of Cristes tresor, and clerkes kepe the keys / to unloken it at her likyng, and to the lewed peple / Yyve mercy for hire mysdedes, if men it wole aske / Buxomliche and benigneche" (XII.109-112). Here priests are not just the beneficiaries of divinely granted knowledge but are, in their ability to grant mercy to their lay parishioners, exercising God's own power of forgiveness.

This articulation of the clerical capacity to grant forgiveness subtly calls attention to its potential for abuse. While God may have the power to restore sight to a blind man, or to know whether a penitent is truly "buxom" or "benigne" instead of simply appearing to be so, priests have no such abilities. Miri Rubin identifies a similar problem in the requirement of worthy reception of the Eucharist, one that "could rarely be tested by external signs, which made it

difficult to enforce.”²⁴ As in Ymagynatyf’s earlier discussion of “Goddes body...worthili taken,” his gesture here toward the assumed ability of the priest to evaluate interiority, to know what is ultimately unknowable, serves to undermine his defense of the clergy. Furthermore, in describing the relationship between layperson and cleric in these terms, Ymagynatyf offers a glimpse into a potentially troubling power dynamic: lay people need priests to “unlock” the “cofre of Cristes tresor” and grant mercy, but for that to happen they also need to know how to truly ask for mercy. Contrition will become more central later in the passus, but these lines offer a preview of its place in the poem’s penitential critique. Successful penance requires deeply felt regret for sin but regret for sin is predicated upon knowledge of what constitutes sin in the first place. Ymagynatyf’s attempt to inculcate respect for clerics by invoking their penitential capacities may therefore unwittingly call attention to inadequacies in the pastoral education that is the necessary precondition to contrition.

The remainder of Ymagynatyf’s attempt to instill a respect for *clergie* skews even further toward the trenchantly hierarchical and metaphorically questionable. Drawing on the Hebrew Bible a second time, he compares contemporary clerics and those designated as priests by the “Olde Lawe.” Describing the special relationship of the priestly caste to the sacred Ark, he relates that “Hadde nevere lewed man leve to leggen honde on that cheste, / But he were preest or preestes sone, patriark or prophete” (XII.114-115). Underscoring the danger inherent in breaching that hierarchy, Ymagynatyf notes that there were “manye mo other men” who were not Levites and who nevertheless touched the *Archa Dei* who then “loren hir lif” (XII.118-120). These priests, and the clerics with whom Imagynatyf equates them, command respect by virtue

²⁴ Rubin 148.

of their status alone rather than “whatso thei don hemselve” (XII.122), who they are or how they do their job.²⁵

As with Ymagynatyf’s earlier metaphor of the blind man wielding an axe, the analogy of the *Archa Dei* doesn’t quite work. Unlike his depiction of contemporary clerics who hold the keys to “the cofre of Cristes tresor” and may “unloken it at hir likynge” to disseminate it to laypeople, the difference between priest and layman when it comes to the *Archa Dei* is non-negotiable. The seeming incompatibility of the components of this metaphor may betray the reality of the transmission of the clerical knowledge necessary to salvation: like the *Archa Dei*, the “tresor” that is clerical knowledge too often remains locked away and cordoned off from the lay people who require it for salvation. Ymagynatyf’s anchoring of his appeal to authority in the “Olde Lawe” should also raise some red flags, coming as it does just a few lines after dismissing the Hebrew Bible as “the lawe of Jewes” (XII.73). Moreover, the juxtaposition of the woman taken in adultery narrative – with its insistence that no one is without sin – and the analogy of the *Archa Dei* – with which Ymagynatyf argues for the acceptance of clerical authority in spite of clerical error – is undoubtedly meant to serve the poem’s particular strain of anticlericalism. In a poem that repeatedly testifies to the existence of clerics who don’t fulfill their proper function, Ymagynatyf’s defense of clergy, here reduced to respect for the office, as it were, must necessarily fall flat.²⁶

All of this, we learn from line 156, is meant to chasten the narrator after he has contradicted *Clergie* “with crabbede wordes,” arguing, in Ymagynatyf’s telling, “How that lewed

²⁵ “And it was also increasingly necessary to claim that the mass had effect *ex opere operato*, as a ritual which was effective independently from the priest’s character and virtue” (Rubin 50).

²⁶ Ymagynatyf’s comparison between clerks and priests of the “Olde Lawe” also presages Tyndale’s gloss on Exodus 28, in which he writes that the Pope has become “a priest of the old law.” *Tyndale’s Old Testament*, Ed. David Daniell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 126.

men lightloker than lettrede were saved, / Than clerkes or kynde witted men of Cristene peple” (XII.157-158). In response to that claim, Ymagynatyf offers yet another analogy in which he compares two equally strong men thrown into the Thames, one of whom can swim and one who cannot. He then asks the narrator which man feels more threatened. When the narrator volunteers that it is the one who has not learned to swim who would feel more endangered, Ymagynatyf responds “Right so...reson it sheweth / That he that knoweth clergie kan sonner arise / Out of synne and be saaf, though he synne ofte, / If hym liketh and lest, than any lewed, leelly” (XII.170-173). Here again the terminology is important and confusing. In these lines, Ymagynatyf argues about those who “knoweth clergie,” rather than “clerks,” and thus reopens the category to incursion from those who have *clergie* but aren’t *clergie*, including those who have benefited from clerical instruction. Similarly, in the lines that follow, Ymagynatyf shifts once again from the invocation of *clergie* to the specificity of “clerk”: “For if the clerk be konnyng, he knoweth what is synne, / And how contricion without confession conforteth the soule” (XII.174-175). Importantly, these lines qualify the word “clerk,” revealing that not all those who fall into that category are “konnyng” and enjoy privileged access to penitential comfort. This assertion that certain clerics, and those who have been successfully instructed by them, have a leg up on the uninstructed laity when it comes to salvation supports Ymagynatyf’s earlier argument for the importance of clerical knowledge. Unlike his previous analogies, this one actually works. However, taken in the context of the rest of the passus, it also undermines Ymagynatyf’s larger project of reinforcing clerical authority because it not only separates those who “knoweth clergie” from “clerks,” but also suggests that there are whole categories of people still flailing in the Thames: what the narrator – and the poem as a whole – desperately wants to

know is whether the one who can swim, cleric *or* lay, might pull his fellow “unkonnyngē” man to safety.

With the analogy of the two swimmers, we return to two critical themes of this section of the poem: contrition and comfort. Ymagynatyf’s explanation of the cleric’s salvational superiority relies on a clerical privilege denied to lay people, the knowledge that “contricion withoute confession conforteth the soule” (XII.175). Ymagynatyf describes how the first verse of Psalm 31 specifically “conforteth ech a clerk and kevereth hym fro wanhope,” but leaves the layman waiting for the confession due him at Lent (XII.178-180). This passage posits the existence of a kind of penitential backdoor accessible through the voice of the Psalms: the recitation of Ps 31:1, or perhaps even hearing or reading it silently, works to evoke contrition, which has the power to “cacheth away synne” (XII.177).²⁷ But it also suggests that a key function of the penitential process is to provide comfort. The power of the confessional is located not only in the external forgiveness of sins that occurs once the priest declares *ego te absolvo* but in the internal comfort rendered by the process leading up to that moment. Those without *clergie* are at a disadvantage both because they require a priest in order to confess and because they lack the knowledge that they need to examine themselves for sin in order to ask for mercy “buxomlich and benigneliche” (XII.112).

Ymagynatyf has spent the better part of Passus XII building up the centrality and indispensability of the clergy only to potentially undermine it with his admission that the instruction – and therefore salvation – of those without clerical knowledge is entrusted to “person

²⁷ Scase notes the anti-sacerdotal nature of the poem’s focus on contrition and suggests that the removal of a number of these references to contrition in the C-text “may indicate a response to doctrinal implications” (39). The Passus XII passage with which this argument is concerned, however, remains in the C-Text.

or parisshe preest” who may himself be “unkonnyng” (XII.183), the blind leading the blind. The stakes of such clerical incompetence are made even more clear in Ymagynatyf’s allusion to the “neck verse,” the ability of clerical learning to literally commute a death sentence: if a criminal could read a passage in a Latin Bible, he would be spared because as a cleric he would be accountable to the Church rather than the State.²⁸ In referencing the ‘neck-verse,’ Ymagynatyf allows the wall he has spent the rest of the passus constructing between lay and cleric to suffer a hairline crack that threatens to take the whole thing down. If *clergie*—clerical learning of any kind and in any denomination, down to a single verse of one Psalm—makes a person a cleric, then the narrator, who competently deploys multiple Latin verses in his poetry, would surely be included among the clerical ranks. This concession more obviously states that which Ymagynatyf’s continual punning on the word *clergie* has insinuated throughout the passus, the idea of *clergie* as a unified concept is illusory. What was once a singular, institutional path to *clergie* has diverged into multiple routes, opening up new approaches to its various components – clerical knowledge, clerical status, pastoral care, preaching, ritual responsibility – that are now available to be appropriated piecemeal. Ymagynatyf’s problematic analogies have implied that *clergie* is both a lifeboat and knowing how to swim; one either needs to have clerical knowledge oneself or have access to someone who does. But his defense of clerics has exposed a critical failure of the penitential economy, that there are Christians with neither the ability to swim nor the lifeboat. It has also suggested that clerical status in the late 14th century might function more like the priestly caste in the Hebrew Bible, separate from laypeople by virtue of title rather than knowledge or performance of duty.

²⁸ William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen Shepherd, Eds. (New York: Norton, 2006) 195n4.

As readers, we are never sure to what degree the narrator's position reflects that of the poet and Passus XII in particular exploits that lack of clarity. If we begin with the assumption that the narrator stands in for the poet, and that Ymagynatyf represents the narrator's ability to make critical connections, we expect Ymagynatyf's defense of *clergie* to succeed. But, as Emily Steiner has pointed out, Ymagynatyf "conspicuously fails to get the poem 'on the right track'" and this section of the poem fails to offer the kind of resolution we expect from allegorical dream visions.²⁹ There is no resolution because the passus is, in the end, meant to depict a failure of the imagination and it points to the distance between the narrator and the poet. Ymagynatyf, as the *vis imaginativa*, is tasked with generating ideas from experience but he is ultimately unable to make the connection that matters in the poem: between the current state of *clergie* and the salvation of lay people.

Ymagynatyf's failure to recuperate Clergy for the poem is evidenced by the rupture that occurs in Passus XIII. The passus opens with Conscience attempting to "comfort" the narrator, a consolatory method that takes the form of an invitation to dine with *Clergie*. At this point, *Clergie* is still a draw for the narrator, who tells us that, because Conscience mentioned that *Clergie* would be there, "I com wel the rather" (XIII.24). The guests at this meal are Conscience, *Clergie*, a "Maistre," Patience and Will. The "maistre," a Doctor of Divinity, feasts on "mete of moore cost, mortrews and potages" (XIII.41) and is later described as drinking wine "so faste" (XIII.61). Patience and Will, however, are seated together at a side table and dine on Psalms. That those psalms are to be understood as penitential is evident by the first course: Scripture sets a sour loaf on the table and exhorts Will and Patience, "*Agite penitenciam*," the "do penance" of Matthew 3:2. This alignment of Clergy with the indulgent friar, and the fact that the two are set

²⁹ Emily Steiner, *Reading Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 105.

apart from the practice of penance, suggests that the “confort” the narrator seeks will not be found in the institutional clergy. This is confirmed by Conscience’s decision to throw in his lot with Patience. When *Clergie* attempts to entice Conscience to stay by exclaiming “I shal brynge yow a Bible, a book of the olde lawe, / And lere yow if yow like, the leeste point to knowe, / That Pacience the pilgrym parfitly knewe nevere” (XIII.186-188), the “Olde Lawe” is once again used as a stand-in for an approach that no longer works. Patience the pilgrim, sustained by the penitential verses of the Psalms, offers Conscience the possibility of something that *Clergie* can’t provide and Conscience responds, “Me were levere, by Oure Lord, and I lyve sholde, / Have pacience parfitliche than half thi pak of bokes!” (XIII.201-202). Ymagynatyf’s defense of Clergy therefore builds to this rupture between a *Clergie* aligned with the *clergie* that is clerical knowledge and the penitentially-focused Conscience and Patience, which in turns foreshadows the break with Unity at the poem’s conclusion, making clear that any attempt to paper over the fissures in the penitential economy will be unsuccessful.

Haukyn’s Indeterminacy

Against this backdrop, the poem introduces the perplexing figure of Haukyn. While the Ymagynatyf section of the poem attempts to delineate the boundaries between laypeople and clerics, the Haukyn section confounds those boundaries in a variety of ways. Reading the latter against the former reveals the poem’s depiction of Haukyn to be a subtle response to Ymagynatyf’s notions of sacramental hierarchy and penitential privilege. In arguing for the resonances between the poem’s descriptions of Haukyn and Ymagynatyf’s earlier descriptions of the unique and indispensable role of the clergy, I challenge the critical view of Haukyn as a layman. Instead, I suggest that the indeterminacy of his characterization recognized by so many

critics is rooted in the coexistence of seemingly irreconcilable lay and clerical features.

Ymagynatyf's outlining of clerical province and privilege, deployed in the service of clarifying the boundary between cleric and layperson, are therefore recalled and reconstituted in the messiness of the Haukyn figure.

As a personification, Haukyn defies easy explanation. A literal and descriptive mess, his coat is infamously besmirched with all varieties of sins and vices and his self-description is a hodgepodge of various, sometimes contradictory and mostly unsavory characteristics. He announces himself as "a mynstrall," but then admits that he can "neither taboure ne trompe ne telle no gestes" (XIII.231); he is "a wafrer" but receives no material recompense for the bread he distributes, only "a benyson" (XIII.236). Critics have noted the poem's inconsistency when it comes to Haukyn. Nevill Coghill includes him in the group of figures he labels "shadowy phantoms."³⁰ John Alford notes that modern criticism has seen Haukyn "as a composite figure,"³¹ his various shades representing, as R.W. Chambers writes, "the whole body of sinning, penitent laity."³² Stella Maguire argues similarly, asserting that "Haukyn is *not* a typical, representative human being; he is the personification of a whole manner of life."³³ Nicholas Watson writes that "Hawkyne, like Patience" has an association with the ideal layman Piers."³⁴ To

³⁰ Nevill K. Coghill, "The Character of Piers Plowman," *Medium Aevum* ii (1933) 118.

³¹ John Alford, "Haukyn's Coat: Some Observations on *Piers Plowman* B. XIV. 22-27," *Medium Aevum* 43 (1974) 133. Seemingly oblivious to the notion of allegory, Britton Harwood argues that Haukyn "is not coherently composed, even in B. How is it that an English wafer-seller provides food for the Pope and his horse? What would he do with a prebend or a parsonage in return?" Britton J. Harwood, *Piers Plowman and the Problem of Belief* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 21-22.

³² R.W. Chambers, *Man's Unconquerable Mind* (London: Low & Brydone, 1939) 152.

³³ Stella Maguire, "Haukyn, *Active Vita*, in *Piers Plowman*," *The Review of English Studies* 25.98 (1949) 104.

³⁴ Nicholas Watson, "*Piers Plowman*, Pastoral Theology, and Spiritual Perfectionism: Hawkyne's Cloak and Patience's *Pater Noster*" in *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 21 (2007) 110.

these critics, the strange amalgamation that is Haukyn derives from the variegation of lay, active life.

There is, of course, plenty of evidence to suggest that Haukyn is meant to be a layperson. For starters, he's illiterate; complaining of a lack of "provendre" or "personage" from the Pope, he declares that, "Hadde Ich a clerik that couthe write I wolde caste hym a bille" (XIII.248). The physical nature of his profession also contributes to assumptions regarding his status. Haukyn relates, "For er I have breed of mele, ofte moot I swete, / And er the commune have come ynough, many a cold morwenyng; / So, er my wafres ben ywroght, muche wo I tholye" (XIII.261-263). This description of physically challenging work does not square with the dominant perception of the clerical vocation.

But the aspect of Haukyn that perhaps most insistently indicates his lay status for critics has been the vast accounting of his sins and personal shortcomings provided throughout Passus XIII and XIV. The descriptions of Haukyn's pecuniary sins in particular make it hard to think of the figure as clerical:

Moore to good than to God the gome his love caste,
And ymagynede how he it myghte have
With false mesures and met, and with fals witesse
Lened for love of the wed and looth to do truthe;
And awaited thourgh wittes wyes to bigile;
And menged his marchaundise and made a good moustre:
The worste withinne was – a greet wit I lete it!
And if my neghebore hadde an hyne, or any beest ellis,
Moore profitable than myn, manye sleightes I made
How I myghte have it – al my wit I caste,
And but I it hadde by oother wey, at the laste I stale it,
Or pryveliche his purs shook, unpikede his lokes.

XIII.357-368

This portrayal of Haukyn as a man who chooses goods over God, whose sole focus is on attaining wealth, and whose modus operandi is falsehood makes it hard to think of him as anything but a business-oriented layman. However, this association of Haukyn with the laity, while clearly not without basis in the text, has perhaps obscured an understanding of his purpose within the poem. Stella Maguire argues for Haukyn as “one of the most subtle of the allegorical figures created by the poet”³⁵ and I contend that that subtlety extends beyond the inclusion of a hodgepodge of lay characteristics. Instead, the “shadowy” nature of Haukyn’s characterization derives from a very specific indeterminacy: the clerical features subtly embedded among the more overt evidence for his lay status.

That we are not to take Haukyn at face value is signaled by the narrator’s initial encounter with him. The narrator relates that Conscience and Patience “mette with a mynstral as me tho thoughte” (XIII.222). His assertion that Haukyn *seemed* to him to be a minstrel should inflect how we read the figure’s initial self-description, in which he identifies himself as a “mynstrall” and “wafre.” Critics have naturally understood “mynstrall” to refer to a musician or storyteller³⁶ and have been puzzled by this particular minstrel who, by his own admission, is incapable of playing music or telling stories, joking or juggling. The term “wafre,” usually understood by critics as one who sells bread, is similarly challenging; the “provendre” and “personage” Haukyn seems to be expecting from the Pope bear overtly clerical connotations. Looking beyond these primary definitions of “mynstrall” and “wafre” provides intriguing, though no less challenging, possibilities. As I will discuss a bit later, the poem has an interest in redefining the term “minstrel” but in this case it may be that an alternative but accepted

³⁵ Maguire 104.

³⁶ “Minstral.” Def. 1. *Middle English Dictionary*. University of Michigan, n.d. Web. 12 Dec. 2016. <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED27860>>.

definition – “mynstrall” as “servant” or a “functionary”³⁷ – is operative. The term “wafre” conjures up a particular kind of bread: the Eucharistic wafer central to late medieval Christian ritual; Ymagynatyf’s exhortation of the narrator to pray “for hem that yyveth thee breed” has prepared us to identify the ritualistic connotations of “breed” in the poem. Together these alternative meanings offer the alternative view of Haukyn as a sacramental servant.

Further evidence of Haukyn as priest can be found in the similarities between his portrayal in Passus XIII/XIV and that of Sloth in Passus V, and the merging of elements of the two in the C-text. In Passus V, Sloth’s penitential shortcomings are described in similar terms to Haukyn’s. When Repentance exhorts him to wake up and be shriven, he responds: “I have maad avowes fourty, and foryete hem on morwe / I parfournede nevere penaunce as the preest me highte, / Ne right sory for my synnes [sithenes] was I nevre” (V.398-400). But he also boasts “I have be preest and person passynge thritty winter / Yet I kan neyther solve ne synge ne seintes lyves rede” (V.416-417). Sloth is *Clergie* but his facility with *clergie* is lacking; he is better at finding a hare in a field than he is at explaining the *Beatus vir* or *Beatus omnes* to his parishioners (V.418-419). He is, as David Lawton writes, “a goliard, a renegade priest.”³⁸ That

³⁷ “Minstral.” Def. 2. *Middle English Dictionary*. University of Michigan, n.d. Web. 12 Dec. 2016. <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED27860>>.

³⁸ David Lawton, “The Unity of Middle English Alliterative Poetry” *Speculum* 58.1 (Jan. 1983) 78.

³⁹ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C-text*, Ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994) VII.70-117.

⁴⁰ Maguire 102.

⁴¹ Traugott Lawler, “The Secular Clergy in Piers Plowman,” in *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 16 (2002): 85-129.

³⁸ David Lawton, “The Unity of Middle English Alliterative Poetry” *Speculum* 58.1 (Jan. 1983) 78.

⁴² Míceál Vaughan, “Response to ‘The Secular Clergy in Piers Plowman,’” in *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 16 (2002): 118-129.

⁴³ Scase 169.

⁴⁴ Anne Middleton identifies a similar mix of laypeople and clerics in the probable audience of the poem: “Whether laymen or ecclesiastics, their customary activities involve them in counsel, policy, education,

the C-text relocates a portion of B.XIII to the depiction of Sloth³⁹ highlights the thematic similarities between Haukyn and Sloth.

The initial descriptions of Haukyn are in fact meant to play off of the demarcations of clerical identity undertaken by Ymagynatyf. Haukyn's initial self-description of "wafre" to the Pope subtly associates him with the Eucharistic and confessional authority outlined in Passus XII. Of course, if Haukyn is meant to be a priest, Passus XIII casts him as the kind of "unkonnyng" priest whose existence Ymagynatyf concedes at the end of his defense of Clergy in Passus XII. Reading this portion of the poem against the backdrop of the Ymagynatyf section, however, allows us to reprocess some of the evidence supporting Haukyn as a layperson as instead evidence for Haukyn as *clergie* without *clergie*. For example, when he complains that he would need a literate clerk to write to the Pope it confirms Ymagynatyf's acknowledgment of the *cecus ducit cecum*. Haukyn lacks the ability to write, but if he had someone who could write for him, he would ask the Pope for a pardon that, as Maguire points out, would be a 'practical' one, a simple cure for men's physical infirmities."⁴⁰ Because he is *clergie* without *clergie*, Haukyn is also an allegorical figure incapable of thinking allegorically. Rather than saying two different things at the same time, as allegory necessarily does, Haukyn's speech is univocal.

Ymagynatyf's role in Passus XII is in part to allow the narrator to contend with the challenge of his own place in the penitential economy as *clergie* without *clergie*, a bearer of clerical knowledge without an acknowledged clerical category from which to operate. In that way, Passus XII offers a personal narrative alongside a societal one. In contrast, Haukyn is *clergie*

³⁹ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C-text*, Ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994) VII.70-117.

⁴⁰ Maguire 102.

without the *clergie* that would enable him to perform the exegesis necessary to move beyond a surface reading of himself.

The reader, on the other hand, can make connections between Haukyn and prior moments in the poem that speak to his allegorical significance. Throughout Passus XIII, Haukyn's character is further impugned in ways that echo the poem's various descriptions of incompetent clerics, particularly those found in the prologue. The prologue is largely dedicated to describing the disjunctions between exterior and interior, various figures dressing up as something that they're not, or communicating falsely. This begins, of course, with the narrator recounting in the second line of the poem: "I shoop me into shroudes as I a sheep were; / In habite as an heremite unholy of werkes" (Prologue: 2-3). Pilgrims and palmers tell many wise tales but "to ech a tale that thei tolde hire tonge was tempred to lye" (P.51). Friars gloss the Bible in such a way that make them look good (P.60) and pardoners preach as though they are priests (P.68). Finally, parish priests who are supposed to be serving as confessors for their parishioners instead chase material gain in London (P.83-96); they perform their Masses and matins "undevoutliche" (P.98). So when Haukyn is then described by the narrator as "Ootherwise than he hath with herte or syghte schewynge / Hym wilnyng that alle men wende he were that he is nought" (XIII.279-280), such a designation is necessarily encoded with clerical connotations.

The lines that follow that pronouncement more explicitly link this disjunction between inside and outside to clerical status. Haukyn believes himself to be:

...so singuler by hymself as to sighte of the peple
Was noon swich as hymself, ne noon so pope holy;
Yhabited as an heremyte, an ordre by hymselfe—
Religion saunz rule and resonable obedience;
Lakkyng lettrede men and lewed men bothe;

(XIII.283-287).

His indeterminacy is here specifically associated with religious who defy pre-existing classifications and categories. His chosen manner of religious life reflects the fissure unintentionally demonstrated by Ymagynatyf. From the buffet of clerical attributes he chooses those which are outwardly signified, donning the hermit's habit and wishing "that men wende his wit were the beste, / Or for his crafty konnyng or of clerkes the wisest" (XIII.292-293). The narrator's description of Haukyn veers toward the comical in its assertion that, just as he wishes to be thought of as clever, he also wishes to be known as "strengest on stede, or styvest under girdel" (XIII.294). But over the course of this third person description, the narrator makes clear that Haukyn has a vested interest in the kind of false self-presentation attributed to various clerical figures in the prologue. It is as if, after having Ymagynatyf deliver a speech delineating all of the ways in which priests are different from laypeople and are to be unquestioningly respected by them, the poem gives us an actual priest who resists easy classification as either lay or clerical, a "wafre" in need of "confort." In fact, Haukyn might be thought of as the photographic negative of the idealized version of *clergie* presented by Ymagynatyf: he has a clerical vocation but none of the knowledge with which to properly practice it; he is responsible for the salvation of others without the ability to thoroughly examine himself.

Coming to a definitive identification of Haukyn as either lay or cleric is meant to be impossible; his indeterminacy is intentional and meant to raise questions about the lines that divide those two identities. The coexistence of subtle clerical features alongside his self-description as *activa vita* and the colorful account of his worldly concerns reflect the lexical confusion induced by Ymagynatyf's use of the word *clergie*. That proliferation of meanings attached to *clergie* remains a challenge for modern critics of the poem. Ymagynatyf's attempts to

demarcate between a monolithic *clergie* and that which is “not *clergie*,” or “*lewed*,” is mirrored by Traugott Lawler’s efforts to define a clear boundary between secular and religious clergy in the poem based on the terms used to describe them.⁴¹ In his response to Lawler, Míceál Vaughan takes issue with Lawler’s application of the term “clerk” to secular clergy, which Lawler tends to equate with parish priests, and points to the diversity within the category of secular clergy itself, noting that “It is, after all, neither by sacramental ordination nor by making monastic or fraternal vows that one achieves learning...All priests may be called ‘clerks,’ but not all clerks are priests. So we will remain skeptical about the degree to which the terms ‘clergy’ and ‘clerk’ can be narrowly equated with secular priests/parish priests.”⁴² The difficulty of affixing the word *clergie* to a particular group of people with a specific set of skills and responsibilities frustrates 21st century critics much as it does 14th century allegorical figures.

In fact, the category of secular clergy itself – anyone ordained in clerical orders who wasn’t a cloistered monk – encompassed a broad spectrum of clerical identities and serves to complicate Ymagynatyf’s vision of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Scase writes of “those who followed the clerical vocation of preaching, but supported themselves by manual labour.”⁴³ There were others who, by virtue of their university education, were ordained in minor orders but pursued careers as “scriveners and civil servants;” Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice argue that this group comprised an early and important audience for *Piers Plowman*⁴⁴ and do not fit “into

⁴¹ Traugott Lawler, “The Secular Clergy in *Piers Plowman*,” in *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 16 (2002): 85-129.

⁴² Míceál Vaughan, “Response to ‘The Secular Clergy in *Piers Plowman*,’” in *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 16 (2002): 118-129.

⁴³ Scase 169.

⁴⁴ Anne Middleton identifies a similar mix of laypeople and clerics in the probable audience of the poem: “Whether laymen or ecclesiastics, their customary activities involve them in counsel, policy, education, administration, pastoral care.” Anne Middleton, “The Audience and Public of ‘*Piers Plowman*’” in *Middle*

the easy categories of ‘clergy’ and ‘laity.’”⁴⁵ They cite the example of Thomas Usk, who “is referred to in the medieval records as ‘clericus’, though he is unlikely to have taken more than minor orders.”⁴⁶ Applicable here is the second pun embedded in Haukyn’s description of himself: “wafre” as “wayfarer.” Karnes writes that, “*Piers Plowman* concerns itself with the spiritual life not of enclosed religious but of wayfarers living in the world. When Will offers to give up his poetry-making for an understanding of Dowel, he determines to find it through the active, earthly life.”⁴⁷ Like Ymagynatyf and Lawler, Karnes relies on a binary, but it is between “religious,” cloistered monks and nuns, and everyone else; the “active, earthly life” involves not only the laity but the secular clergy in all its iterations. As *activa vita*, Haukyn could fit into the category of “wafre” as either a cleric or a layman.⁴⁸

English Alliterative Poetry, Ed. David Lawton (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982) 104. Simon Horobin writes that some manuscript evidence “suggests an audience comprising members of the parish clergy tasked with preaching and the administration of pastoral care.” Simon Horobin, “Manuscripts and Readers of *Piers Plowman*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Piers Plowman*, ed. Andrew Cole and Andrew Galloway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 191. Conjectures as to the intended audience of *Piers Plowman* reflect the association of the poem with the work of parish priests, as well as what those priests might have had in common with a certain type of layperson. Minnis argues that “*Piers Plowman* was probably intended for an audience of parish priests and literate laymen, people with limited education and limited knowledge of Latin works. Langland chose his material to suit their needs and capacities; he made his Dreamer in their image” (91). Lawler asks, “might not secular priests be the primary intended audience, or to use Anne Middleton’s distinction, the primary public?” (116).

⁴⁵ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, “Langlandian Reading Circles and the Civil Service in London and Dublin, 1380-1427” in *New Medieval Literatures I* (1997): 64. See also P.H. Cullum, “Learning to Be a Man, Learning to Be a Priest,” in *Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad*, Ed. Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) 142.

⁴⁶ Kerby-Fulton and Justice 75.

⁴⁷ Karnes 184.

⁴⁸ As Father Dunning points out, the terms “Action” and “Contemplation” were initially used primarily in literature directed toward religious. T.P. Dunning, “Action and Contemplation in *Piers Plowman*” in *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches* (Methuen, 1069) 214.

Haukyn and the Narrator: Indeterminate Voices

The imprecise characterization of Haukyn the “wafre” is complemented by the “blurriness” of the voices contributing to it. The poem uses two different voices in Passus XIII, a first person confession of sin and a third person evaluation of the sinner, what we might call the “priest’s eye-view.” Over the course the second half of Passus XIII, the point of view shifts a number of times between those voices. At first, the poem is clear in acknowledging such shifts, such as the one that takes place at lines 313-316; there we have both an interjection by Conscience separating Haukyn’s speech and the narrator’s and, at line 316, a clear indication that Haukyn has resumed speaking. The final section of the passus, however, dispenses with the signaling conventions that unequivocally mark the first person voice as belonging to Haukyn. In a poem that knows how to denote a change in perspective, the absence of clear signaling here is noteworthy. It indicates the stake this section of the poem has in blurring the boundaries that separate layperson from cleric, penitent from confessor.

This blurring first occurs at lines 326-330 where the narrative switches from third person (“And that he wiste bi Wille, [to Watte tellen it], / And that Watte wiste, Wille wiste it after, / And made of frendes foes thorough a fals tonge” (XIII. 326-328)) to first (“Or with myght of mouth or thorough mannes strengthe / Avenged me fele tymes, other frete myselve withinne / As a shepsteres shere, yshrewed men and cursed hem” (329-331)) without any interjection by the narrator. Of course, it makes sense that this sudden, unannounced first person would belong to Haukyn rather than the narrator, but the lack of clear demarcation between the narrator and Haukyn lends credence to Scase’s identification of Haukyn as “the Dreamer’s surrogate”⁴⁹ and

⁴⁹ Scase 168.

Steiner's description of him as "an unflattering projection of the dreamer."⁵⁰ It might therefore prompt us to identify Haukyn as occupying the same ecclesiastical status as the narrator, a cleric in minor orders;⁵¹ Haukyn's invocation of his wife and children at the beginning of Passus XIV offers further support for this idea.⁵² This kind of doubling would further indicate the poem's interest in exploring the various iterations of *clergie* and its multiplicity at the end of the 14th century.

The narrator and Haukyn never converse directly, opening this section up to questions regarding their relationship to one another. Are we meant to understand that Haukyn is yet another lens through which the narrator attempts to grapple with his status as sinner? Perhaps. But for this study, a more compelling reading of the mix of the first and third person is one that accounts for the fluidity between the point of view of the penitent represented by the first person and the clerical point of view represented by the third person. For example, in the passage, cited earlier, in which Haukyn is described as dishonest in business dealings, Langland once again engineers an unannounced shift in speaker:

Moore to good than to God the gome his love caste,
And ymagynede how he it myghte have
With false mesures and met, and with fals witsnesse
Lened for love of the wed and looth to do truthe;
And awaited thorough wittes wyes to bigile;
And menged his marchaundise and made a good moustre:
The worste withinne was – a greet wit I lete it!
And if my neghebore hadde an hyne, or any beest ellis,
Moore profitable than myn, manye sleightes I made
How I myghte have it – al my wit I caste,
And but I it hadde by oother wey, at the laste I stale it,

⁵⁰ Steiner 108.

⁵¹ Karnes' description of the narrator's "need for a wayfarer's guide to salvation" offers yet another intersection between the two (184).

⁵² At XVIII.428 the narrator references his wife Kytte and daughter Calote.

Or pryveliche his purs shook, unpikede his lokes.

XIII.357-368

The first half of the passage, lines 357-362, are delivered in the narrator's voice but it could just as easily be understood to be the point of view of a priest, evaluating the misdeeds of the sinner come before him to confess. The remainder of the lines cited above, and the twenty that follow it, offer the more recognizable first person confession that a priest might hear from a layperson. Where Ymagynatyf repeatedly demonstrates the distance between laypeople and the clergy responsible for their salvation, this part of the passus pushes the two perspectives right up against each other, without any demarcation between them.

Clerical Voice and Contrition

The passus concludes with yet another voice, a homiletic monologue on wanhope and sloth, which further muddies the sharp distinctions for which Ymagynatyf argues. The sermon is triggered by the need to define the concept of "wanhope," and begins at line 410, in which what we assume to be the narrator's voice asks "Ac whiche ben the braunches that bryngen a man to sleuthe?" (XIII.410). Wanhope is portrayed as resulting from an absence of penance and is a state that is beyond the "sleightes" of the clergy to repair. The narrator further implies that those who keep the company of "fool-sages, flatereris and lieres" (XIII.423) fall into wanhope and are unable to be saved. The narrator then attempts a reorientation of the word "minstrel," setting up an opposition between "kynges ministrals" (XIII.437) and "Goddess ministrals" (XIII.440).

What, exactly, is meant by "Goddess ministrals" becomes clear as the passus reaches peak sermon voice beginning at line 441, where the narrator intones:

Forthi I rede yow riche, [th]at reveles whan ye maketh,

For to solace youre soules, swich minstrales to have—
The povere for a fool sage sitting at th[i] table,
And a lered man to lere thee what Oure Lord suffred
For to save thi soule from Sathan thyn enemy,
And fithle thee, withoute flatteryng, of Good Friday the storye,
And a blynd man for a bourdeour, or a bedrede womman
To crie a largesse tofore Oure Lord, your good loos to shewe.

(XIII.442-449)

Addressing rich men directly, this homiletic voice advises them to have at their table this group of three “minstrales”: a poor man, a learned man, and either a blind man or a bedridden woman (XIII.443-448). A man who surrounds himself with a group of this kind over the course of his life will have “gret confort” in his “deeth-deyinge” (XIII.451); they “solaceth the soule” until one has achieved “welhope” (XIII.453-454). These alternative minstrels are contrasted with the “flatereris and fools” who “entice men thurgh hir tales to synne and harlotrie” (XIII.430-431).

E.T. Donaldson has demonstrated the poem’s interest in differentiating between good minstrels and bad, and he even connects the phrase “Goddess minstrales” to the Franciscan friars.⁵³ Though he admits that this phrase is “borrowed remotely” from St. Francis, his linking of “minstrels” and “clergie” deserves further attention in the context of Haukyn’s indeterminacy. Donaldson is puzzled by the B text’s presentation of Haukyn as a minstrel⁵⁴ but suggests that, given the poet’s preoccupation with minstrels, “in Hawkin the poet put something of himself, and that Hawkin’s minstrelsy is an oblique instance of his tendency to associate himself with that profession.”⁵⁵ It becomes easier to connect these dots if we accept the possibility of Haukyn as priest, as well as the clerical connotations of “minstrales.” If Haukyn is the allegorical

⁵³ E. Talbot Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet* (Archon Books, 1966) 147.

⁵⁴ Donaldson 140

⁵⁵ Donaldson 151. Donaldson conflates the poet and the narrator or “dreamer,” as many critics have. Scase compares the poem’s contrast between “professional” minstrels and “non-professional” minstrels to the distinction between “professional” and “non-professional” writers/clerics (169).

representation of the indeterminacy of *clergie*, the difficulty of pinning down exactly what that word represents, this “sermon” begins to imagine an alternative to it. Coming after the “confessional” in which the voices of priest and penitent are blurred, it reveals “welhope” to be seemingly independent of both *clergie* and institutional penance; the comfort that was so critical to Ymagynatyf’s conception of clerical duty and prerogative is here provided by a diverse and ostensibly non-clerical group. The “lered man” could be a cleric but need not be and in any case, his job is to tell the story of the crucifixion, rather than administer any of the sacraments. From the evidence the poem provides, the narrator would fit this category. More importantly, the role that the “lered man” plays in the production of wellhope is equal to those of the other two members of this trinity, the poor person and the blind man/bedridden woman. This acknowledgment of the capacity of non-clerics to impel individual Christians to penance is the closest the poem gets to an endorsement of some form of lay, alternative clericalism in place of institutional clergy.

Ymagynatyf hinges his defense of the clergy, and the impermeable boundary that separates it from the laity, on its sacramental authority, both eucharistic (“For Goddes body myghte nought ben of breed withouten clergie”) and penitential (Na moore kan a kynde witted man, but clerkes hym teche / Come, for al his kynde wit, to Cristendom and be saved). In its highlighting of a “wafre” who cannot manage his own sins let alone the sins of others, Passus XIII challenges Ymagynatyf’s sourcing of clerical authority in its ability to administer the Eucharist. Similarly, the penitential exercise undertaken in Passus XIV constitutes a different kind of assault on Ymagynatyf’s staunchly hierarchical worldview. There, Haukyn is transformed from unrepentant sinner to contrite penitent. He moves from point A to point B thanks to the kind of penitential questioning and doctrinal education called for by penitential

manuals and understood to be a necessary component of successful confession and absolution. That this process occurs with nary an identified priest in sight might be understood as a response to the problems of pastoral education raised in Passus XII.

The beginning of Passus XIV offers a far softer version of Haukyn. Rather than the single-minded orientation toward sin depicted in some of the descriptions of Passus XIII, we learn that Haukyn is no stranger to institutional penance. He describes how his coat “hath be laved in Lente and out of Lente bothe” (XIV.5), implying that he has engaged in the mechanics of penance beyond the bare minimum prescribed by Fourth Lateran. He adds that, stricken by sickness and loss of property, and “looth forto agulte / God or any good [gome], by aught that I wiste,” he was “shryven of the preest, that [for my synnes gaf me] / To penaunce, pacience, and povere men to fede, / Al for coveitise of my Cristendom in clenness to kepen it” (XIV.7-11). Even with all of this penitential activity, Haukyn laments, he cannot keep his coat clean “an houre / That I ne soiled it with sighte or som ydel speche, / Or thorough werk or thorough word or wille of myn herte” (XIV.12-14). When Conscience interjects that he will teach Haukyn “of Contricion to make / That shal clawe thi cote of alle kynnes filthe,” (XIV.16-17), we should read it as proposing an alternative to the institutional and cyclical forms of penance just described by Haukyn. The juxtaposition of Haukyn’s attestation that he has engaged in the mechanics of ecclesiastically mediated penance and Conscience’s description of a method that is sure to render his garment pristine implies that the penitential processes of the institutional Church are inadequate, and that what the figures of Conscience and Patience propose is an alternative. Importantly, Patience gives Haukyn “A pece of the *Paternoster*” (XIV.50), enacting just the sort of educational process in which the clergy is supposed to engage with the laity.

In Patience’s lesson we are once again confronted with the power of contrition:

Forthi mesure we us wel and make oure feith oure sheltrum;
And thorough feith cometh contricion, conscience woot wel,
Which dryveth away dedly synne and dooth it to be venial.
And though a man myghte noghte speke, contricion myghte hym save,
And brynge his soule to blisse, by so that feith bere witnessse
That whiles he lyvede he bilevede in the loore of Holy Chirche

(XIV.81-86)

This is another echo of Ymagynatyf's address to the narrator in Passus XII. Both reference the first verse of Psalm 31 but Ymagynatyf casts its penitential power as a clerical privilege, yet another thing that separates the clergy from the laity. Patience makes no mention of any prerequisite for accessing the penitential efficacy of the Psalm, asserting only that it downgrades deadly sins to venial. The poem's re-deployment of Ps 31:1 after first using it to enact a boundary between lay and cleric is yet another piece of supporting evidence that the Haukyn section is meant to respond to Ymagynatyf's dichotomous worldview. Additionally, the move in Passus XIV toward presenting contrition as something that can be taught to anyone, even an unrepentant sinner like Haukyn, is another small step the poem takes in imagining a way forward within a hierarchical and splintered penitential system.

This promise of contrition as penitential failsafe, however, ultimately goes unrealized. In its final description of Haukyn, the poem records how he:

Wepte water with hise eighen, and weyled the tyme
That evere he dide dede that deere God displeased—
Swouned and sobbed and siked ful ofte
That evere he hadde lond or lordshipe, lasse other moore,
Or maistrie over any man mo than of hymselfe.

(XIV.324-328)

In their tag team education of Haukyn, Conscience and Patience have brought him to the truly contrite state he was unable to attain by himself or through the ministrations of his priest. We

might assume that having reached this state, Haukyn would be prepared to ask for mercy “buxomliche and benigneche.” But instead of serving as a mechanism by which to move forward in the penitential process, Haukyn’s contrition is a dead end. If there is “confort” in contrition, as Ymagynatyf asserted, the poem withholds it when we most expect to witness it.⁵⁶ It is against his emotional display of contrition – crying mercy, weeping and wailing – that the narrator once again awakens from his dream. Tears are meant to be a gateway but Haukyn’s tears lead nowhere.

Piers Plowman is a testament to both the centrality of penance to Christian life and to the multitude of ways in which it can be thwarted. The poem asserts that the foundation of successful penance is the partnership between cleric and penitent and bears witness to the failures of both the Church and laypeople in keeping up their ends of the deal. The poem explicitly ties this stymying of penance in late medieval England to the intersection of the personal and the public that is the confessional. The aspirational implication of the Haukyn section is that if one is competently confronted with one’s sins and their salvational consequences, contrition will soon follow. The poem’s portrayal of Haukyn and its flirtation with mixed lay-clerical identity lays the groundwork for the radical reconceiving of penitential mediation by the two texts, written by laywomen, that are the main focus of this dissertation. When Conscience and Patience break with Clergy in Passus XIII, it opens up the possibility of a search for penitential truth beyond the confines of traditional ecclesiastical institutions. What is in *Piers Plowman* a closing note – “the corruption of Contrition”⁵⁷ and the resulting failure of

⁵⁶ Importantly, Haukyn’s lament of his land and lordship here turns him into the Church itself, mourning the spiritual implications of the Donation of Constantine. Allegorically, then, there is no comfort here because the Church will not relinquish its wealth, as Wyclif and others urge it to.

⁵⁷ Lawton 77.

penance – Eleanor Hull and Margery Kempe take as their starting points. The poem’s final description of Contrition makes clear that he has fallen into wanhope, a state that it has tied to Sloth and Haukyn, two figures who boast a mix of lay and clerical features. That Contrition’s wanhope is a result of the ministrations of Sir *penetrans-domos*, a friar who boasts elements of *clergie* but directs them toward the undermining of penance rather than its fulfillment, underscores the stakes of the proliferation of clerical features. The unstated impetus for the projects of both Hull and Kempe is this crisis of wanhope: the penitential necessity of a lay-clerical partnership combined with the reality of the frequent failure of that partnership. The fragmentation of *clergie* depicted in *Piers* enables their texts; because *Piers* offers a collage of the various clerical functions, Hull and Kempe are free to choose those that suit their own penitential needs and the needs of their audience. In the absence of effective clerical teaching models, *Piers* opens the door to the possibility of a clericalism beyond *clergie*; Hull and Kempe walk through that door, providing two different models of lay-clericalism.

Chapter Two

“The Voice of Terys”: Eleanor Hull’s Exemplary Contrition

As I’ve argued in chapter 1, *Piers Plowman* is centrally concerned with the troubled transmission of that *clergie* necessary for successful penance. The poem depicts the dislocation of various clerical features from *clergie* as an institution and the impact of the resulting pastoral dysfunction on lay people. But while it stages a break with *Clergie* in Passus XIII, *Piers* does not put forth an alternative model of pastoral care. Part II of this study, which includes chapters 2 and 3, will explore Eleanor Hull’s *Commentary on the Penitential Psalms* as one response to the educational and confessional crisis illustrated by *Piers*. A vernacular work of scriptural exegesis written by a woman, Hull’s *Commentary* performs many of the interpretive and educational functions of *clergie*. Where *Piers*’s Sloth is a parson who can’t clarify the meaning of the psalms to his parishioners and Patience demurs when Haukyn asks him to deliver his lesson in English, Eleanor Hull seems to ably take on both of those tasks. She uses traditional exegesis to explicate the meaning of the psalms and convey their importance for penitential practice. But she also uses those tools inherited from patristic and medieval commentators to reimagine Davidic exemplarity, manipulating a number of preexisting exegetical traditions to carve out a space for an imitative penitential experience separate from the famous sin of the historical David. For Hull, imitating David means joining with him in penitential devotion and her text draws upon various iterations of *clergie* in order to make his voice available to her audience. She disseminates clerical knowledge to those who need it with the aim of evoking the contrition necessary for effective penance. It is not clear whether Hull wrote for a clerical audience or a lay one, but what is certain is that her commentary does not bar either of those groups from participating in the penitential model it puts forth. In doing so, she picks up where *Piers Plowman* leaves off,

leveraging *clergie* to construct a penitential voice that is inclusive regardless of gender or religious status.

The enactment of Archbishop Arundel's Constitutions between the composition of *Piers Plowman* and that of Eleanor Hull's *Commentary* must be part of any argument that seeks to put the two in conversation. The Constitutions, issued to combat Lollardy, policed vernacular voice by prohibiting unlicensed preaching, the preaching or teaching of Wycliffite ideas, and, most germane to Hull's project, the translation of scripture into English. Enforcement of the Constitutions may have been more lax when it came to ownership of such translations by the professional religious and the wealthier laity, as Nicholas Watson suggests,¹ but the act of translating itself must have been fraught no matter the source. When we talk about the *Commentary* as *clergie*, it is remarkable not just because it attempts that which eludes key figures in *Piers*, but because it does so in a changed socio-political atmosphere, in which to be learned and lay was to be vulnerable to charges of heresy. Hull's translation of Scripture into English, her facility with the high clericalism of patristic exegesis, and the unconcealed pedagogical project of her *Commentary* all contribute to a text that challenges our notions of vernacular theology in the fifteenth century. It is a text that, from a purely technical standpoint, defies the authority of both church and state. But it is not an activist text, searching for new forms of devotion or alternative social structures, as *Piers Plowman* often does. Instead, it commands and deploys the arsenal of traditional *clergie* in the service of a vision of devotion already reformed, hierarchy already disarmed.

¹ Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late Medieval England," *Speculum* 70.4 (October 1995) 831. See also H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 37.

Hull's *Commentary as Clergie*

What is astounding about Hull's *Commentary* is not simply its status as a work of *clergie* translated by a woman but its sophistication, its sheer learning. Alexandra Barratt, who edited the text, notes that it "is one of the most sustained pieces of Scriptural exegesis in Middle English."² It is erudite, and traditionally so, drawing on standard sources; "almost all the texts mentioned appear regularly in monastic libraries."³ Hull's Latin must have been good, since, as Barratt notes, her Latin quotations, scriptural and otherwise, "are always carefully integrated into the grammatical structure of the Middle English."⁴ If we take seriously Richard Fox's attribution of the text to Hull's translation of a French original,⁵ Barratt concludes, "Eleanor must have known Latin as well as French or she could never have produced an English version which made sense."⁶ Given the centrality of penance in late medieval Christianity, her chosen subject is not surprising; penance was the subject of an inordinate amount of literary production for lay people in the late medieval period. But the transmission of a penitential text of this sort *by* a layperson, especially by a lay woman, presents a fascinating combination that begs further study. What we have in Hull's commentary is a work that, were it not before us, might be considered a kind of textual unicorn: an intensely scholastic treatment of a subject and text at the heart of lay devotion, produced by a woman.

² Barratt, Alexandra. "Dame Eleanor Hull: A Fifteenth Century Translator." *The Medieval Translator: The Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Roger Ellis. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989). 95.

³ Barratt 95.

⁴ Barratt 94.

⁵ The purported French source for Hull's text has not been identified.

⁶ Barratt 95.

As a work of biblical exegesis, the *Commentary* links Hull to the most elite of clerical functions. But it is also a work of “vernacular theology,” unabashed in its intention to serve as an instructive text. In expounding Psalm 142, Hull writes that the “symple seyyng of the wordys” of the seven psalms are not sufficient for absolution but rather her audience must “folow the doctryne that they teche you of gode, and that ye for-sake al evel that put you ferre from your hele.”⁷ If penitents take heed of that doctrine, she continues, the seven psalms “schal be messengers towardys the holy goost, that he schal efface by hys vij geftys of grace the vij vycys of your feblesse” (184/14-16). In what is perhaps a prophylactic disavowal of her own mediatory role, Hull grants the pedagogical and intercessory roles usually associated with *clergie* to the psalms themselves. She makes a similar move in connection with the pedagogical-liturgical role of the clergy when, in ascribing the voice of Psalm 142 to Christ, she writes: “Here hou he techyth ous to prey, that we sey with hym and in hym humbly, *In veritate tua etc*” (185/63-64). Later in her commentary on that same psalm, she gives God the Father a similarly catechetical role, including a first person prayer asking him to “make me to know and to parforme the weye of myn hele *qui docet mites vias tuas*, that techist the wey to them that humbly requere the” (196/466-468). In this way, the *Commentary* appropriates the pastoral duties of the clergy while at the same time shifting them away from its writer-translator; the Psalms, God, Christ and David impart these penitential lessons, not a laywoman. But it is important to note that while Hull attempts to place a buffer between her work in transmitting the lessons of the penitential psalms and the pedagogical work that results, she also largely excises the kind of institutional *clergie*

⁷ *The Seven Psalms: A Commentary on the Penitential Psalms Translated by Dame Eleanor Hull*, ed. by Alexandra Barratt, EETS, O. S. 307 (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1995) 184/ln 11-14. Subsequent citations from this text in chapters 2 and 3 will consist of page and line numbers in parenthetical form.

charged with pastoral care from the *Commentary*. She cites patristic writers and other exegetical sources but she uses the word “prest” only twice, both times in reference to the temple priests of the “old lawe.” In a text devoted to the penitential psalms, she mentions confession only three times, none of which include a nod to the clergy. Of course, the entire *Commentary* is devoted to the concept of confession – the Penitential Psalms provide a critical confessional voice – but, as I’ll discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, it describes a penitential economy curiously free of recognizable institutional mediation.

The *Commentary* on *Clergie*

It is not only the omission of institutional clergy from the *Commentary* but the presence of encoded clerical critique that places it among those texts that David Lawton argues offer examples of mixed voice.⁸ That mixed voice here takes the form of an appropriation – and therefore endorsement – of the exegetical, pedagogical, and liturgical roles of the clergy, while at the same time disengaging them from their institutional context. Hull gets closest to a critique of an ineffective institutional clergy in her treatment of Jonah. In her glossing of Psalm 31:10, *Multa flagella peccatoris sperantem autem in Domino misericordia circumdabit*, “Many are the scourges of the sinner, but mercy shall encompass him that hopeth in the Lord,” Hull offers a version of the Jonah story that, unlike most other medieval treatments of the Book of Jonah, does not depict Jonah as a type of Christ.⁹ On the contrary, her description of Jonah’s time in the whale omits entirely the three-day timeframe that exegetes use to link him to Christ. Instead, as

⁸ David Lawton, “Voice After Arundel,” in *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*, Vincent Gillespie and Kanuk Ghosh, Eds. (Turnhout, 2012) 151.

⁹ The Gawain-Poet’s *Patience* is another notable exception and a reading of its version of the Jonah story alongside Hull’s could be fruitful.

we might expect in a text with penance as its subject, Hull dwells on the power of the tearful contrition that Jonah imagines the Ninevites will experience upon hearing his message:

As sone as Jonas herd thys he was tormentyd with dyvers wyllys what he schold do and seyde, ‘Alas, what schal I do? I know,’ he seyde, ‘God so merciful, so mylde and of so grete abydyng that hit grevyth hym ful gretly to do dures. He ys wrotthe and manassyth sore the synful, but gretly he covetyth to here ther repentance with terys. I wote not what I schal do of thys cruel message beryng, for yf tho of Nynyve repent hem and seke hys mercy in wepyng, y wote wel that a-noon he wil change hys sentence. For aftyr that ther byttyr terys have requeryd his mercy ther may no wyl be movyd in hym of cruel justyce. I wote wel that he wyl have mercy of thes synful and I schal be fro hens forward holde a false prophete. And ther-for hyt ys bettyr that y withe-drawe me for-to bere thys message then by his custome of mercy be hold a lyere.

(54/1140-1152)

Jonah recognizes the value that God places on “repentance with terys” and acknowledges the certainty that God will respond with mercy to those who seek it with “wepyng.” He runs away because he does not want to be perceived as a false prophet: if, in announcing God’s destructive plans, he successfully evokes contrition in the Ninevites and they repent, his initial prophecy will be rendered false.

That certainty that God will forgive the Ninevites if they engage in heartfelt penance has a basis in the biblical text itself; Jonah tells God, “I know that thou art a gracious and merciful God, patient and of much compassion and easy to forgive evil” (Jonah 4:2).¹⁰ But Hull combines that textual nod to God’s mercy with the extra-textual fear of appearing to be a false prophet. In doing so she offers an implicit contrast between Jonah, who weighs self-interest against fulfilling God’s command, and the noble laypeople of Nineveh, who immediately participate in the rituals of penance:

¹⁰ *The Vulgate Bible, Vol. V: The Minor Prophetic Books and Maccabees*. Douay-Rheims Translation. Ed. Angela Kinney (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

When the kyng and the senaturis, pryneys and erlys and barons herd thys manace of God they clothed hem with the heyre to ther nakyd flessche and leyde ayssches a-pon ther hedys. And the noble ladyes and the tender maydens dyspysydyn ther araye and made ther feyre vysagys foule with aysschys, with haboundance of byttyr terys.

(55/1170-1174)

Jonah has delivered his prophecy but, as in the biblical text, the penitential action is entirely initiated by the Ninevites. The women¹¹ offer the “haboundance of byttyr terys” that Jonah so feared and that Hull’s *Commentary* identifies as the key component of successful penance. The Ninevite King takes on the mantle of penitential instruction, commanding his people to “clothe hem with sakkys and for-sake ther yvel werkys and wake and pray to God mercy for ther wykkyd dedys” (55/1175-1176).

The assumption of penitential leadership by the Ninevite King has a basis in the biblical text. But Hull departs from the original narrative in presenting a Jonah who is “instructed” by his scourges and benefits from a successful penitential reeducation. While the scriptural *Jonah* ends with God’s rebuke of the prophet, giving no indication that he has been in any way reformed, Hull provides him with the dignity of penance: “When Ionas herd hys folychentent, he iugyd hym-selfe worthy hys schorgys that he had soffryd and hopyd in that mercy that so moche puple had sauyd” (56/1211-1214). Having begun her gloss on Psalm 31 by declaring that its message is “the grace of our Lord and of hys grete mercy, by whiche we ben crystyn not by our merytys but by the grace of [our] Lord goyng by-fore” (25/3-5), she gives her audience a version of the Jonah story in which the prophet recognizes that it is God’s mercy, not any privileged status, that determines who is blessed; he has recognized the folly of denying mercy to those who engage in true penance. With the interpolation of this extra-textual moment of contrition, Hull offers a

¹¹ The specific mention of noble Ninevites and women, it should be noted, are Hull’s tweaking of the biblical text.

subtle subversion of the traditional penitential landscape. Jonah's delayed repentance highlights the contrast between him and the Ninevites; the "man of God" who attempts to abdicate his pastoral responsibility is surpassed by those without institutional knowledge.¹² Hull's version of the Jonah story amplifies the subversion present in the text and calls attention to the susceptibility of the spiritual elite to corruption.

As a person in possession of the *clergie* that is clerical learning but foreclosed from occupying the social position of *clergie*, Hull occupies a gray area that is the inverse of that inhabited by Haukyn. This unique identity allows her to model a form of lay clericalism – the dissemination of *clergie* by a non-cleric – as well as to reimagine Christian community as a non-hierarchical space, a congregation of individuals voicing contrition. Central to this project is a reconceiving of the exemplarity traditionally derived from the Psalms, returning it to the realm of penitential voice rather than conduct. This chapter, the first part of my discussion of Hull's text, dwells on the liturgical and exegetical use of the Psalms that forms the background of the work done by her *Commentary*. Chapter 3 will read more extensive selections of Hull's commentary against that exegetical background, revealing the radical nature of her project and arguing that its role in modeling penitential voice creates a form of lay-clericalism, though she would not necessarily think of it as such.

¹² This same dynamic is, I argue, present in *Patience*. Nicholas Watson identifies a subversive tendency in the poet responsible for MS Cotton Nero A.x, arguing that he "sought to undo the theological system which consigned his lay readers to the status of *mediocriter boni*, and make them equal to contemplatives in the acceptability of their lives to God. More striking, he did this less by trying to change the lives of his readers than by rethinking the way in which theology perceived them, portraying the experience of the aristocratic laity as normative for all Christians." One might make a similar argument for Hull, who was a noblewoman and a member of a lay confraternity. Nicholas Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*. Ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997) 311.

Why the Psalms?

We can only speculate as to why Hull would choose for her project a commentary on the seven Penitential Psalms. There is reason to believe her choice was a practical one. Composing her text in the aftermath of Arundel's Constitutions, Hull continues the work of complicating *clergie* begun by *Piers* but is likely sheltered from the gaze of the censors by both the limited audience of her *Commentary*¹³ and the traditional nature of her subject matter. As a liturgical text in addition to a biblical one, the Psalms stand apart from other scriptural books. The recitation of the Psalms is a liturgical imperative – recited cyclically in the institutional church – and lay people certainly would have been familiar with the Latin of the Psalms in that public context. However, the Psalms were not reserved by recitation in an ecclesiastical context and in late medieval England it was expected that they would also form the backbone of the personal prayers of devout laypeople outside of formal Church services. Women in particular constituted an important audience for Psalters meant to be used in private devotion; Carol Meale notes that “many of the finest psalters and books of hours dating from the fourteenth century were produced at the instigation of women, and this tradition seems to have continued into the fifteenth century.”¹⁴ The Penitential Psalms especially were an important component of private devotion in the late medieval period, parishioners often turning to them between annual

¹³ David Lawton suggests that Hull's *Commentary* was composed in, and perhaps intended for, the nunnery at Sopwell in his essay “Psalms as Public Interiorities: Eleanor Hull's Voices” in *The Psalms and Medieval English Literature* Ed. Tamara Atkin and Francis Leneghan (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017) 316. Whether intended for a religious, lay, or mixed audience, it seems unlikely that Hull's text was meant for wide circulation.

¹⁴ Carol Meale, “Laywomen and their books in late medieval England” in *Women and Literature in Britain: 1150-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 137.

confessions “as a way to deal with their everyday transgressions.”¹⁵ Along with Hull’s reliance on traditional patristic exegesis, it is possible that the function of the Psalms as a site of “spiritual self-management” for lay people provided a bit more room to maneuver as far as censorship of vernacular translations.

But it is not only the ubiquity and accessibility of the Psalms that make it a natural choice for *clergie* coming from a non-traditional source. Constructed as “praise and oration,” the Psalter’s *modus agendi* is unique among the biblical books.¹⁶ Its single, flawed, character is only implied; his narrative arc is, according to tradition, available for us to read in other biblical books. The Psalms instead present David’s experience only partially and opaquely, and in first person poetry. The first person perspective marks the Psalms as unique within the biblical canon and it may have not only helped shield Hull’s *Commentary* from censure but also served as a smokescreen for some of the more innovative uses to which she puts traditional exegetical concepts.

Lawton cites the *Commentary* as an example of a text that uses the Psalms to offer an interiority that may act as “a cleft in the rock” during times of censorship,¹⁷ providing a voice otherwise denied by authority, religious or otherwise. Scripture written in the first person may have been especially compelling to a woman in search of a vehicle for penitential instruction. By the late medieval period, penance was heavily institutionalized, as well as closely tied to educational and polemical literature. The yearly confession made mandatory by Fourth Lateran produced the need for a massive educational operation and as a result “thirteenth-century

¹⁵ Clare Costley King’oo, *Miserere Mei: The Penitential Psalms in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012) 17.

¹⁶ A.J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (Philadelphia, 1988) 87.

¹⁷ “Voice After Arundel” 147.

England produced a substantial amount of educational literature on the subject of penance.”¹⁸

There was, however, an understanding that such literature would have to take into account the intellectual limitations of the lay audience it hoped to reach. One such digest produced for clerics, published by 13th century bishop of Coventry and Lichfield, Roger de Weseham, counsels frequent preaching to the people through generous use of examples and similitudes, which he argues are more suitable for teaching the laity than subtle reasoning or disputation.¹⁹

This approach to teaching recalls Ymagynatyf’s fondness for analogies and a clearly delineated hierarchy of clerics and laypeople.

The Psalms were not free from this educational impulse. Christian commentary on the Psalms became more heavily hortatory and oriented toward conduct throughout the Middle Ages, combining a late medieval emphasis on David's humanity with “a pronounced preacherly aspect.”²⁰ The frequency with which various allegorical figures in *Piers Plowman* reference the Psalms in their attempts to educate the narrator reflects such a change. This increasing sense that a third person voice ought to be imposed on the first person of the Psalms suggests a recognition of their ability to function on their own as a unique and potentially subversive voice, that same recognition voiced by Ymagynatyf and Patience. That third person voice, what I will be referring to as an “exemplarizing voice,” is responsible for interpreting the didactic message of a given text for its reader. The speaker becomes a “monopolizing enunciator, able to demote the others to

¹⁸ Mary Flowers Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1983) 15. Print. See also Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 54-55 for a summary of literature devoted to teach priests how to discharge their penitential responsibilities.

¹⁹ H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Middle Ages*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). 203.

²⁰ Kuczynski xv.

the status of audience and to keep them from speaking.”²¹ The exemplarizing voice, therefore, often occupies a position apart from, and superior to, that of its audience.

In contrast, the Psalmist’s first person is egalitarian. In the context of penitential education, it automatically activates the desired penitential activity in its target, rather than requiring the kind of examples and similitudes employed by late medieval preachers. If you are reading the Psalms, you are already, in several important ways, engaged in imitating David. When a penitent recites *Domine ne in furore tuo arguas me*, “O Lord, rebuke me not in thy indignation,”²² she is asking God for remission of punishment, regardless of whether she has actually understood or internalized the verse. This quality of activating penitential activity without traditional instruction is best exemplified by the difference between the narrative of 2 Samuel, which chronicles David’s sin and castigation by the prophet Nathan, and the voice of contrition offered by Psalm 50. The latter allows its reader to instantaneously turn David’s exemplarity as a penitent into the personal contrition that is the necessary precondition for successful penance.

As I’ll show, Hull’s *Commentary* amplifies the unique voice of the Psalms instead of muting it. In doing so, it takes a different approach to penitential instruction, providing an exemplarity of voice rather than behavior. If she preaches, it is in the midst of her students, not from the front of the classroom. The first person perspective of the Psalms allows for a different mode of pedagogy, and in choosing a commentary on the Penitential Psalms, Hull is perhaps

²¹ As John Lyons summarizes the argument of Bruno Gelas in “La Fiction Manipulatrice.” John Lyons, *Exemplum: The Rhetoric of Example in Early Modern France and Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 22.

²² Ps 6:2; All modern English translations of the Psalms are taken from Edgar, Swift, ed. *The Vulgate Bible, Vol. VI: The Poetical Books*. Douay-Rheims Translation. [Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library.] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

sketching a new approach to the transfer of this particular form of *clergie*. At the same time, the *Commentary* is also heavily reliant on traditional Psalm commentary. This is not a contradiction since it is Hull's facility with foundational Christian psalm exegesis that allows her to innovate. In order to fully illustrate Hull's use of traditional exegesis and her departures from it, I devote a large portion of this section to essential background on exegetical treatment of the Penitential Psalms, particularly that of St. Augustine and Richard Rolle, with some discussion of Hull's leveraging of those exegetical moves for her own educational aims. I engage in a fuller reading of Hull's *Commentary*, and her innovative use of traditional exegesis in constructing Christian community, in Chapter 3.

Exemplarity in Augustine's *Enarrationes*

Augustine's *Enarrationes* are foundational for Hull's *Commentary*; she cites them throughout and it is possible that she had the Augustinian text in front of her during the composition of her own text.²³ Augustine's *Enarrationes* use the Psalms to promote particular forms of conduct and penitential activity, but they are an early example of the subsuming of the Psalms' first person within the third person voice of the exegete. Augustine mediates between the first person of the Psalms and his audience, digesting the former in order to offer specific penitential directives to the latter. He does this, in part, by turning the Psalms into an exemplary text, but the exemplarity promoted by the *Enarrationes* is peculiar because Augustine seems intent on downplaying David's status as an exemplary figure. He rarely refers to the life and behavior of the historical David and at times seems to go out of his way *not* to mention him

²³ David Lawton, "Psalms as Public Interiorities: Eleanor Hull's Voices" in *The Psalms and Medieval English Literature*, Ed. Tamara Atkin and Francis Leneghan (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017) 306.

explicitly. David's importance is, for Augustine, almost entirely to be found in his relation to Christ; David matters because many of the Psalms attributed to him are prophetic of Christ's life and death.

With the exception of Psalm 50, most of the exemplarity employed to express various ethical imperatives results from some rather complex exegetical activity rather than a more straightforward Davidic imitation. Instead of linking David's words with an exemplary lesson directly, Augustine often filters them through other scriptural moments and figures. A useful example can be found in his sermon on Psalm 31, included in the *Enarrationes*. After presenting several examples of attitudes toward the tension between fulfilling God's will and relying on his mercy, Augustine anticipates his audience's despair: "You will ask me, 'What am I to do, then?'"²⁴ His response, "This psalm teaches us," introduces an exemplary lesson drawn from the text: "Once we have read it through and discussed it, I think that with the help of the Lord's mercy we shall see the road clearly, the road on which we may be walking already, or which we must take."²⁵ The ensuing lesson, however, stems not from the psalmist's own experience but rather from the experience of another exemplary figure, Abraham, as understood through the exegesis found in books of the Christian Bible authored by Paul and James.²⁶ Later in that sermon Augustine interprets the title of the psalm, *For David himself, for understanding*, by referencing the figure of Nathanael in the book of John, who is described as being seen by Christ while "under the fig tree."²⁷ Augustine preaches, "May Christ see us under a fig tree."²⁸ In this

²⁴ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*, 363.

²⁵ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*, 363.

²⁶ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*, 364-365.

²⁷ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*, 371.

²⁸ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*, 372.

case a verse that explicitly mentions David is interpreted via the experience and exemplarity of an entirely different biblical character. Similarly, in his interpretation of the opening verse of Psalm 129, *De profundis clamavi ad te Domine*, it is Jonah whom Augustine holds up as exemplary, not David.²⁹ In this way Augustine's exemplarizing voice comes between the immediate first-person exemplarity available in the Psalms and his audience in order to direct them, and himself, toward moral improvement.

Augustine does specifically refer to both David and his exemplarity in his sermon on Psalm 50.³⁰ That sermon as a whole seems concerned with exemplarity in a way that the *Enarrationes* on the other Penitential Psalms do not. As he begins his discourse on the psalm, Augustine encourages those in his audience to comport themselves in an exemplary fashion toward those who are absent and therefore not hearing this lesson alongside them: "Correct them with your reproofs, comfort them by talking to them, give them an example by your own good lives; and then God who has been with you will be with them as well."³¹ Augustine's main preoccupation in this sermon, though, centers on what he assumes to be a preexisting impulse to imitate David and the difficulty that such an attitude can create for those reading the *Miserere*. He spends a significant amount of time rationalizing the telling of the story of David's sin with Bathsheba in the first place, advising his audience, "I say it not to encourage you to imitation, but

²⁹ Saint Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms 121-150*. Vol. 20. Trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2000). 127.

³⁰ This uncharacteristic move reflects what Clare Costley King'oo refers to as the "tradition of intrabiblical hermeneutics" wherein Psalm 50 is linked with the story of David's sin in 2 Samuel 11. That tradition originates in the Middle East and is picked up by ancient and medieval commentators, both Jewish and Christian. King'oo, *Miserere Mei*, 33.

³¹ Saint Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*. Vol. 16. Trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2000). 410-411.

to teach you caution.”³² Here again is Augustine’s exegetical voice, placed between the text and his audience in order to direct their experience of its exemplarity.

Augustine acknowledges that it is easier to imitate David’s sin than his repentance but emphasizes that it is for the purpose of teaching appropriate avenues of penance that the story is told:

We have read about what we must shun; now let us listen to what we must imitate if we have slipped into sin, for there are many who are very willing to fall with David, but unwilling to rise again with him. The story is not put before you as an example of falling, but as an example of rising again if you have fallen. Consider it carefully, so that you do not fall. The lapse of the great should not give glee to lesser folk; rather should the fall of the great cause lesser folk to tremble.³³

He goes on to contrast two distinct ways of assimilating David’s story and imitating him, cautioning his audience: “if you take him as your holy exemplar in your sin, you do not imitate his holiness, but only his downfall. You are loving in David what David hated in himself.”³⁴ The correct reading of the story, by contrast, is as exemplary in its function as a cautionary tale. Those who read correctly are thus described: “From this fall of a strong man they take the measure of their own weakness, and because they desire to avoid actions that God condemns they restrain their eyes from wanton roving . . . They keep David's fall in mind, and see that this great man fell so that lesser men may keep their eyes away from whatever could make them fall too.”³⁵ Another aspect of David’s exemplarity is highlighted shortly thereafter: “In giving us this example scripture is warning us that no one should exalt himself or herself when things are going

³² Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 411.

³³ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 411.

³⁴ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 412.

³⁵ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 412.

well . . . His example is therefore valid for us in this sense too, that we must beware of complacency.”³⁶

Augustine cautions his audience to follow David in repentance rather than in error: “let all who have not fallen listen, to ensure they do not fall; and let all who have fallen listen, so that they may learn to get up again.”³⁷ Of those who have sinned repeatedly without confession, Augustine writes: “if any who hear this have fallen already, and study the words of this psalm with some evil thing on their consciences, they must indeed be aware of the gravity of their wounds, but not despair of our noble physician.”³⁸ To those unfortunate souls he offers an analogy concerning exemplarizing voices, noting that “it is not the prophet Nathan who has been sent to you; David himself has been sent. Listen to him crying out and cry out with him; listen to him groaning, and groan too; listen to him weeping, and add your tears to his; listen to him corrected, and share his joy.”³⁹ The exemplarity highlighted here and encouraged by Augustine is complex and perhaps a bit confusing. On the one hand, the psalm offers a prescription for penance that, if properly followed, will serve to heal the spiritual wounds inflicted by sin. But Augustine also tweaks that exemplarity in a significant way. The seeming shift in subject positions, wherein David becomes Nathan and potential penitents become David, is belied by the second half of the passage, which has David engaging in penitential activity that becomes a model for imitation. Instead of serving as the exemplarizing voice to the audience’s penitents, as the first half of the passage suggests, David ends up playing both roles – exemplarizing voice

³⁶ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 413.

³⁷ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 411.

³⁸ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 413.

³⁹ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 414.

and its target – and potential penitents are to watch from the sidelines and imitate his penitential experience after the fact.

Augustine's commentary acknowledges that by presenting David's penitential drama in the first person, without the narrative voice of 2 Samuel, Psalm 50 creates the possibility for his audience to place themselves in David's shoes. His gloss gestures toward that possibility in shifting David from the position of penitent to that of the exemplarizing voice represented by the prophet Nathan, but ultimately stops short of allowing his audience to inhabit David's voice. This moment is representative of the general tendency of the *Enarrationes* to digest the first-person experience of the psalms and present it, and any exemplary lessons derived from it, through a third-person exegetical voice. Augustine as exegete is necessary to bridge the gap between the first-person experience recorded in the psalms and the moral nugget encoded within it for his audience.

Public Interiorities in Rolle and Hull

There is a shift in attitude toward David from an early commentary like the *Enarrationes* to those of Rolle and Hull. That shift is related to the increased emphasis on David's humanity in the later Middle Ages noted by Minnis: both Rolle and Hull focus on the historical David in a way that Augustine did not.⁴⁰ They also diverge significantly from the kind of exemplarity

⁴⁰ They hew closely to Augustine's gloss on Psalm 50 where, as I've shown, he does refer to David explicitly. On that psalm, Rolle follows the *Enarrationes* in telling his audience, "This is the psalme of david when he had synned with uris wife. Thou that ere lesse haf na delite that he that was mare fell in till sag ret syn. Bot thou may drede and quake for thi selfe. David is sett in ensaumpil til men noght to fall. Bot if thai be fallen, forto rise, and to shew all maner of meknes, as david did his penaunce" (183). *The Psalter or Psalms of David and Certain Canticles, with a Translation and Exposition in English, by Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. By H.R. Bramley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884). In Hull's commentary on Psalm 50 she writes: "Here-in David geve ous gret hope for-to have remissyon and he exortyth ous to folowe hys repentance" (117).

dispensed by the third-person exegetical voice found in the *Enarrationes*, where Augustine's own voice stands between David's words and their penitential revoicing by his audience. The commentaries of Rolle and Hull take advantage of what Lawton calls the "public interiorities" created by the first person of the Psalter, "personal but inhabited arenas,"⁴¹ textual voices which exist before an individual reader encounters them but can be seamlessly revoiced by that reader as if they were his or her own. "The Psalms," Lawton argues, "are the place where Christianity does its most urgent and extensive thinking about voice and persona, both religious and literary."⁴² In privileging the public interiorities available through the psalms and making David's voice available to their readers, Rolle and Hull provide an avenue for imitation which is internal as opposed to predominantly reliant on external action. But there are significant differences between the two commentaries, and reading them alongside one another serves to highlight the ways in which Hull's work opens up the Psalms to the entire spectrum of voices, female in addition to male, lay in addition to cleric.

A case study of Psalm 6 comparing the exegesis of Augustine, Rolle, and Hull is particularly instructive of their differences. More often than not, Augustine's commentary on Psalm 6 showcases the kind of third-person exemplarizing voice described by Gelas, in which one voice monopolizes the discourse and imposes an interpretation while relegating other possible voices to the role of audience. The commentary begins with a rather technical discussion of the timing of the second coming, which is then deftly spun into an exegete-imparted moral lesson – "Nobody should arrogate to himself knowledge of that time, simply by

⁴¹ David Lawton. "Public Interiorities." *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*. Ed. Marion Turner. (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 2013). 94.

⁴² Lawton, "Voice After Arundel," 146.

counting up the years”⁴³ – situating Augustine as the clerical source of knowledge who is now transmitting that knowledge to a lay audience. The first person moments that do exist are pluralized, with Augustine placing himself in the company of his audience but still taking the form of moral exhortation. On that subject of the timing of the second coming, he writes, “Let us, therefore, accept willingly our ignorance of what the Lord has wanted us to be ignorant about.”⁴⁴ Interestingly, however, he makes clear in that same discussion the distance between his own status and that of at least some members of his audience. Referring to a more sophisticated exegetical treatment of the relation of the number four to the body, he writes, “This is something I want to avoid in the present sermon, which I want to be readily accessible to the less learned.”⁴⁵ The voice of the *Enarrationes* is often that of a scholar. It is one that makes definitive statements regarding the meaning of scripture [“This is because the period from Adam *as far as* Moses **must** be taken to mean as long as the works enjoined by the law...were obligatory;” “However, **it is clear** that the number four refers to the body;” “With each of these individually we **must** deal in our exploration not of the psalms but of the gospel”]⁴⁶ as well as pronouncements regarding what that exegesis means for penitents and sinners alike [“But in the day of judgment all those who do not have Christ as their foundation will be accused, while those who have built on this foundation in wood, hay and stubble will be corrected, that is purged, for though they will suffer loss, they will be saved as if they had passed through fire”].⁴⁷

⁴³ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 103.

⁴⁴ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 104.

⁴⁵ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 104.

⁴⁶ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 104-105. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 106.

There are moments in which Augustine allows the first-person of the Psalm to remain active alongside his voice as exegete. One such moment that becomes important for understanding the relationship of Hull's commentary to the *Enarrationes* occurs in Augustine's explanation of verses three and four of Psalm 6. On the words *sana me Domine quoniam conturbata sunt ossa mea, Et anima mea turbata est valde et tu Domine usquequo*, he writes, "This means the firm support of my soul, my strength, for this is what the bones signify. Therefore the soul is saying that its strength is troubled, when it talks about bones, for we should not believe that the soul has bones such as those we see in the body."⁴⁸ In allegorizing those verses, he shifts the focus of the psalm from the speaker's bodily experience to a more general spiritual condition. The psalm is not about a specific man's specific sin but rather depicts "a soul wrestling with its own diseases but long untreated by the doctor."⁴⁹ While, as noted earlier, Augustine's third-person exegetical voice often comes between David's first person and his audience, in this psalm he gives the soul a first person voice, but refracts that voice through a similar public interiority found elsewhere in scripture. Of this repentant soul Augustine writes, citing Zechariah: "In the act of turning itself the soul prays that God also may turn to it, as scripture says, *Turn to me and I shall turn to you, says the Lord* (Zec. 1:3)."⁵⁰ That access is short-lived, however, as the gloss returns to the third person voice of the exegete in further discussion of the soul: "the soul, in the very act of turning experiences difficulty and hardship. For our conversion, once completed, finds God ready and waiting, just as the prophet says: *We*

⁴⁸ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 106.

⁴⁹ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 106.

⁵⁰ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 106.

shall find him ready like the dawn (Hos. 6:3, LXX). This is because we lose him by turning away.”⁵¹

Similar allegoresis is found in Augustine’s gloss on verses eight and nine. In his explication of the second half of verse eight, he identifies the speaker of the words *inveteravi inter omnes inimicos meos*, “I have grown old amongst all my enemies,” as the mind (*mens*), which often “strives to press ahead toward God, it is roughly handled while on the road and loses its nerve.”⁵² “This,” he adds, “is why it often fails to fulfill its good intention, for fear of offending those with whom it lives, who love and pursue other things, which are good, but nonetheless perishable and transient.”⁵³ Augustine ends his thought on verse eight by contrasting “bodies” (*corpora*), which “are contained in particular places,” and “the mind” (*anima*), whose place “is what it loves.”⁵⁴ He then returns to the soul as speaker in his explanation of verse 9. On that verse Augustine stresses a unity of sorts, explicitly linking the soul with the Church and allowing it to voice the words of the Psalm: “So now, after such terrible difficulties, the devout soul, which can legitimately be taken as the Church, knows itself to have been heard, and goes on to say, *Depart from me, all you who work iniquity, because The Lord has heard the voice of my weeping.*”⁵⁵ These allegorizations, the transfer of the psalter’s first person from the psalmist to the mind or the soul, are later picked up and adapted by Hull.

Between the *Enarrationes* and Hull’s *Commentary*, there is Richard Rolle’s *Psalter*. I include Rolle’s *Psalter* as another point of comparison to Hull’s text since it was considered, in

⁵¹ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 107.

⁵² Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 1-32, 110.

⁵³ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 1-32, 110.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 1-32, 110.

⁵⁵ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 1-32, 110.

the words of Hope Emily Allen, “the orthodox English Psalter up to the Reformation.”⁵⁶ Rolle’s work in general was thought to be “optimal reading for women”⁵⁷ and his *Psalter* would have undoubtedly been familiar to Hull. In addition, from what we know of him, Rolle presents as a likely model of exegete as “monopolizing enunciator,” a third-person exemplarizing voice that sets itself apart from its audience. Lynn Staley writes that, “Rolle seems especially comfortable in his highly prescriptive role of adviser to a less spiritually adept, and therefore subordinate, reader.”⁵⁸ Nicholas Watson notes that Rolle was criticized for his involvement with women and, citing a section of *Melos Amoris* in which he responds to such criticism, writes that “Rolle closes the discussion by warning readers not to regard his engagement with women as something to imitate, implying that God has bestowed on him a special grace which frees him from the fear of succumbing to carnal love.” Rolle, Watson argues, saw himself as exercising “a divinely appointed apostleship to women” with “a special role to play in persuading them to the life of perfection.”⁵⁹ And indeed Rolle, like Augustine, makes use of a third-person exemplarizing voice. At the start of his commentary on Psalm 6, Rolle translates the opening verse: “Lord in thi wodnes argu me nocht: na in thi ire amend me.”⁶⁰ That translation is then used in the service of the kind of exegetical lesson imparted from clerk to lay audience that “Wodness or ire is a stiryng of mannys will, excitand to vengauce, the whilk stiryng is nevermare in god bot the

⁵⁶ Hope Emily Allen, *English Writings of Richard Rolle Hermit of Hampole*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931) 3.

⁵⁷ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, “Women Readers in Langland’s Earliest Audience” in *Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad*, Ed. Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) 124.

⁵⁸ Lynn Staley, “Julian of Norwich and the Crisis of Authority” in *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 133.

⁵⁹ Nicholas Watson. *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 225.

⁶⁰ Rolle 21.

wodnes of him standis for gret ire, that is rightwis dome when he sall be seen til ill men as wrethid and as wode.”⁶¹ Another such plainly didactic moment occurs in the gloss on verse nine, which Rolle translates as “Departis fra me all that wikes wickidnes. For the lord has hard the voice of my gretynge.”⁶² He follows that translation with the following lesson gleaned from the text: “Here he shewis that tha that duellis in thaire synn sall be departid fra all that does penance. The voice of his gretynge he kallis compunccioun of his synne.”⁶³

This move of transposing the first person of the psalms into a clerical moral pronouncement is present in Augustine and serves as an exegetical buffer between the text and its audience. But, surprisingly, Rolle often combines that approach with an extension of the Psalms’ first-person, reopening the possibility that his audience might imagine that the voice of the psalms is their own. On the second verse of the psalm, his exegesis takes the form of an extended public interiority:

Haf mercy on me in tis life. for I am seke of kynde and thurgh synne. Swa mykil that I may nocht bere thi rightwisnes: hele me lord in saule, for my banes, that is my thought, and all the strength of my will, ere druuyd in sorowyng of my synne and in penance.⁶⁴

There are a number of such moments of extended first person wherein one can imagine Rolle’s intended audience, most likely the anchoress Margaret Kirkeby⁶⁵ and perhaps a wider, imagined group of lay individuals, as well as what became a large and diverse readership,⁶⁶ being able to

⁶¹ Rolle 21.

⁶² Rolle 23.

⁶³ Rolle 23.

⁶⁴ Rolle 22.

⁶⁵ Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*, 329n11.

⁶⁶ Allen, *English Writings of Richard Rolle Hermit of Hampole* 3.

insert themselves into the voice of the psalms. Rolle's glosses on a number of verses of Psalm 6 are written entirely in the first person, without reverting to any third-person exemplarizing, theoretically providing a sustained public interiority capable of being inhabited by a penitent of either gender or any level of scholarship.

But while it is certainly possible that a female reader, or a lay male reader, would have read them in that way, many of the public interiorities available throughout Rolle's commentary on Psalm 6 end up slipping back into both gendered language and a more traditional third-person exemplarizing voice. Despite the fact that it begins with the first person, Rolle's commentary on Ps 6:3 signals a male audience in glossing David's *sana me Domine quoniam conturbata sunt ossa mea* and returns to an exegetical-narratorial voice, declaring that "his entent is that sorrow for his synn has reft him the shyernes of warldis delite and fleschly lust."⁶⁷ His gloss on verse nine is an especially pertinent example of the choice to superimpose the third-person exegetical voice on the psalm's first person. On that verse, which he translates as "Departis fra me all that wikes wickidness: for the lord has hard the voice of my gretynge," Rolle writes, "Eftire mykyll sorrow and penaunce he sais verraly that god has herd him. Swa that na sinful man fall in dispaire, that will folow his penaunce. God uptoke his prayere as offrand for god has delite in lastynge of men in goednes."⁶⁸ Contrasted with the glosses that precede it, it is clear that in this case Rolle chooses not to provide an opportunity for a more personal revoicing, instead turning the Psalmist's first-person into an example voiced by a third-person exegetical voice. Where Augustine allegorizes, shifting the speaker of the verse from David to the repentant soul, Rolle fully commits to the exemplarity of the psalmist, reassuring his audience that if they imitate the

⁶⁷ Rolle 22.

⁶⁸ Rolle 23.

penitential activities presented by the psalms there is no doubt that God will hear their prayers as he did David's.

But the gendering of that exemplarity is male and any women reading this exemplary lesson – Margaret Kirkeby, for one – must perform an internal act of editing in order to be included within it. That is not to say that such, almost certainly automatic, editing did not take place. Middle English standards allow “Man” to refer to either an individual of the male gender or the non-gender specific “person.”⁶⁹ But that doesn't mean that clerical writers always chose to use that kind of gender non-specific language. As Beth Barr has shown, some sermon manuscripts, as well as Mirk's *Festial*, “reveal clerics intentionally providing room for women within the language of their texts.”⁷⁰ That Rolle largely does not do so in a commentary ostensibly written for a woman is worthy of some attention, especially since we know from *The Form of Living* that he is capable of addressing women specifically in his vernacular writing.⁷¹

Read alongside Augustine and Rolle, Hull's commentary on Psalm 6 constitutes a particularly good example of what a more inclusive and accessible Psalmic exemplarity might look like. It is not that she entirely shuns the masculine language of Rolle's commentary; there are more than a few moments where she addresses the experience of “man” or “men.” But in her

⁶⁹ See MED definition of “man,” as well the definition of “man” found in *A Book of Middle English* by J.A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, which identifies it as an indefinite pronoun for which modern English has no real equivalent, cited in Beth Allison Barr, *The Pastoral Care of Women in Medieval England* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2008) 41-42.

⁷⁰ Barr 38.

⁷¹ Richard Rolle, *The Form of Living*, in Barry Windeatt's *English Mystics of the Middle Ages*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 41. Aside from the more direct references to its intended female audience, when that treatise talks about people in general, it often does so without needing to gender humanity as male; it opens, for example, with a deconstruction of “a synful man or woman.” Interestingly, the Lollard revision of Rolle's commentary on Ps 31:9 adds a reference to “men and wymmen of gode wille,” an attempt, perhaps, to mitigate Rolle's uniformly male gendering of his audience. Anne Hudson, Ed. *Two Revisions of Rolle's English Psalter Commentary and the Related Canticles*, vol. II. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 355.

commentary on Psalm 6, Hull carves out a positive space for the feminine, perhaps even in contrast to a recalcitrant masculinity. When she does refer to men or a male audience in Psalm 6, it is often in differentiating incorrect behavior or belief. She describes the tendency to attribute cruelty to God when prayers seemingly go unanswered in male terms: “In the same wyse hit semyth to many men that when they crye to God for any desese that they be in, that hit ys grete cruelte yf they be not herd of ther request. But here what the scrypture seyth to hem: *Non est crudelitas dilacio dei set ideo differt ut persuadeat aime in [que] mala [se] precipitavit*” (12/362-366). In response to these “men” who complain about God’s refusal to answer their prayers, Hull cites Peter Lombard, who writes that God tarries in response to these kinds of prayers “for that he wold meve and sterve the soule ofte to bethink in what grete sorrow sche is fallyn in” (12/367-368). Hull uses this Psalm as an occasion to deploy *clergie*, patristic exegesis, in response to the devotional struggles of “men.” She points out that any delay in divine response is really an occasion for the cultivation of contrition.

Of course, the term “men” is usually, and likely here, used in the sense of “humanity,” but a number of lines later it is again a male figure who serves as a negative example and is juxtaposed with a positive, salvific feminine:

I sey you truly that thys man lythe in hys bedde. But he rysyth not with hys terys as David dyde per singulas noctes . . . For ryght as a man be nyht gothe stomblyng and knowyth not what wey he schal hold but hyt be of som lyht comyng a-pon hym of the mone er of som sterre, ryght so the reson of man gothe stomblyng in-to the pytte of delyte of the nyht of his synnys wher-in he lythe and slepyth, but yf the lyht of grace from above schew hym the weye of verre repentance, as sche had done to David that wessche hys bedde with his terys every nyht. (16/523-532)

Hull here describes those “folys hertys” that see no need to cultivate contrition for their sins; they are involved in worldly delights and confident in both their youth and God’s ultimate mercy.

They are aligned with “the reson of man” which will continue to stumble unless the “lyht of grace,” gendered female, shows him the way.

A similar but perhaps more significant contrast is made in Hull’s treatment of Ps 6:9. Her commentary follows Augustine in placing the words of the Psalm in the mouth of the soul, but she also takes advantage of the Latin gender of *anima* and creates a contrast between the “good man” who falls in with an evil fellowship and the disembodied female soul who seeks distance from wickedness:

For when a good man must nedys duelle and lyve with the felawchyp of evel men, as ben thes fel proude, swollyn with envyous hate, and so wrecchyd and so coveytous that they in dezyre langussyn for-to swolowyn al in-to hem-self, and al thys seyht the servant of God and sorowyht with anguysses of dezyre, but nether he may amend hem nether forsake ther felauchyp and thys he must soffre ther madness and hyde the frute of his goodnes; and hy fallyth many tyme, seyth Seynt Austyn, that the holy soule that purposyth with al her hert to sette the world at her bakke and enforcyth here for-to go to God that ys the [somme] of al goodnes, he levyth hys goode purpos for that he wyl not offend them with whome he must nedys duelle. How ofte tymys wene ye then that that sowle wylyth then and seythe in the secret of here concyence to Goddys enemys and to herse that so trowble here and lette here to go the ryght weye to God: *Discedite a me omnes qui operamini iniquitatem etc.*? ‘Part ye fro me,’ sche seyth, ‘al ye that wyrkyn wykkydnesse.’ (19-20/642-658)

Hull cites Augustine in this exposition and seems to be combining his placement of the words of verse nine in the mouth of the soul with another Augustinian explication offered in verse eight. Her rendering of this Augustinian exegesis exploits the Latin gendering of *anima* to contrast the soul and the body, thereby setting up an opposition between a male who is weak when confronted by sin against a good female soul with tragically little recourse. This flips the traditional medieval gender representation of woman as body and man as spirit,⁷² elevating the feminine soul above a corporeal shell conceived of as masculine. Hull gives that female soul,

⁷² Compare also to artistic representations depicting female virtues triumphing over a vice that was sometimes gendered male (Cooper 36).

whose only power seems to be prayer, the opportunity to voice the psalm, “*Discedite a me omnes qui operamini iniquitatem etc . . .* Part ye fro me . . . al ye that wyrkyn wykkydness” (20/657-658).

Hull further distinguishes her gloss from Augustine’s in extending the voice of the female soul. While Augustine dwells only momentarily on the voicing of the Psalm by the soul as Church, Hull turns that brief allegorical moment into an occasion for extended female prayer. In explicating the second half of verse nine as well as verse ten, *Exaudivit Dominus vocum fletus mei / Exaudivit Dominus deprecationem meam. Dominus orationem meam suscepit*, “the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping / The Lord hath heard my supplication. The Lord hath received my prayer,” Hull allows the female soul take center stage as the voice of the psalm, essentially standing in for David. Interestingly, this prayer of the soul is initially characterized as lacking vocalization. The soul translates *vocem fletus mei* as “the voyce of my terys” (20/684) as opposed to the way in which the Latin is traditionally translated – “the voice of my weeping.” Rolle, for example, translates the clause as “the voice of my gretynge,”⁷³ which the MED defines as weeping. While weeping has an auditory connotation – like “crying,” it connotes the production of some sort of noise – “tears” do not, of themselves, produce any sound. The difference is subtle, but it’s there and reinforced by Hull’s subsequent gloss on the verse, which explains the emotion involved as being in “suche haboundance that the tonge for langussyng hath no power to forme the wordys but only the anguyssse of the hert spekyth by the voyse of terys” (20-21/689-691). The soul is further described as “weylyng by thowht” (21/693) and addressing God “without sowne of word” (20/694-695).

⁷³ Rolle 23.

There is a biblical exemplar for soundless prayer and she is a woman. In the story that kicks off 1 Samuel, Eli the priest mistakes Hannah for a drunk when she prays silently for an end to her childlessness: “Now Hannah spoke in her heart, and only her lips moved, *but* her voice was not heard at all. Eli therefore thought her to be drunk.”⁷⁴ The misunderstanding is cleared up but it is Eli’s initial censure of Hannah’s voiceless prayer that results in his intercession on her behalf before God. The result is the fulfillment of Hannah’s prayers for a son. The voiceless prayer in Hull’s version of Psalm 6 is similarly efficacious but without explicit clerical mediation; or rather, the tears that result from the soundless weeping of the soul themselves serve an intermediary function, producing a feminine voice without male interference.⁷⁵ That vocalized prayer occurs only once “the hert hathe dronkyn agen the sprynge of here terys that so largely hath flowyd out, and here tonge ys unbound and losyd of the constreynt of the hert” (20/700-702). In the one hundred or so lines that Hull uses to explicate that verse and a half, the words “sche” (she) or “here” (her) appear no fewer than thirty times, a prevalence whose attribution seems beyond the mechanics of Latin translation.

Of course, as noted earlier, medieval women would have engaged in the kind of automatic and unreflected-upon editing that would allow them to apply to themselves the ethical imperatives and spiritual lessons grammatically directed at men.⁷⁶ But we do Hull’s work a

⁷⁴ 1 Kings (1 Samuel) 1:13 cited from *The Vulgate Bible, Vol. II Part A: The Historical Books*, Douay-Rheims Translation, Swift Edgar Ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁷⁵ Danielle Régner-Bohler discusses the importance of these, sometimes misunderstood, “intervals of silence” for medieval women mystics. Hull’s inclusion of soundless prayer, and the perhaps unintentional resonance with the biblical Hannah, situates that silence as but a gateway to a fully vocalized and unmediated female prayer grounded in scripture. Danielle Régner-Bohler, “Literary and Mystical Voices,” trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in *A History of Women: Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. George Duby, Michelle Perrot, and Christine Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992) 427-482.

⁷⁶ Barr notes that it is likely that phrases such as “man and woman” or “he or she” were often edited down to “man” or “he” by scribes to expedite the production of frequently reproduced pastoral texts (43).

disservice if we do not recognize the radical nature of her decision to combine Augustine's interpretation of the psalmist's words as an allegory for a spiritual contest with the public interiority offered by the first person of the psalm, the result of which is to create a space where the words of the psalm are voiced by a "sche." Where Rolle uses the public interiority offered by the first person of the psalm to reinscribe a decidedly male perspective, Hull uses it to open the psalm up to an alternative, female voice of contrition.

This model of a specifically feminine penitential experience ascribed to the soul is all the more compelling if we read it against the depictions of Anima in Passus IX and XV of *Piers Plowman*. In Passus IX, Wit describes Anima as a lady locked in a castle, desired by "a proud prikere of Fraunce" who would "wynne hire away with whiles" were it not for Kind, who "kepeth hire the better."⁷⁷ The castle in which she is enclosed is *Caro*, flesh,⁷⁸ which means that this Anima is a woman enclosed in flesh marked as masculine. Despite her gender, she is used by Wit to describe the spiritual life of "man." In Passus XV, the poem uses a more gender-fluid version of Anima⁷⁹ to offer yet another critique of an "inparfit preesthode,"⁸⁰ the "persons and preestes and prechours of Holi Chirche," who should be the "rote of the righte faith to reule the peple."⁸¹ That root is rotten, Anima argues, and "lewed men" are loath to learn from a corrupted clergy. He censures the narrator's desire to know "alle the sciences under sonne and alle the

⁷⁷ William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, Ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: J.M. Dent, 1995) IX.1-10.

⁷⁸ William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen Shepherd (New York: Norton, 2006) 131n8.

⁷⁹ For more on the gendering of the soul in *Piers Plowman*, see Elizabeth Robertson, "Souls that Matter: The Gendering of the Soul in *Piers Plowman*" in *Mindful Spirit in Late Medieval Literature* Ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 165-186.

⁸⁰ *Piers Plowman* XV.95.

⁸¹ *Piers Plowman* XV.99-100.

sotile craftes,”⁸² but seems to place the blame for such misguided educational aspirations on the friars who focus on the complexities of the Trinity at the expense of the “ten comaundements” and the “sevene synnes.”⁸³

Anima criticizes the narrator’s quest for natural knowledge with the very same verse Hull evokes in her introduction to Psalm 6: “*Non plus sapere quam oportet sapere*” (Romans 12:3), which Hull translates as “Wylle ye not...to saver more than nede ys for-to know” (4/46-48). Both would agree on the impropriety of pursuing the kind of natural knowledge the narrator desires instead of the fundamental *clergie* required for salvation. But where Anima pivots to a critique of the clerics who are failing the “lewed,” Hull steps into their role. In response to Romans 12:3, she embraces a measured pursuit of knowledge, advocating for “sobyrnesse,” a quality she defines as “a mesure that ys i-now and not to moche ner to lytyl” (4/68-69). In fact, she directly opposes this quality of “sobyrnesse” to the “slowthe” that leaves Contrition “adreynt” at the end of *Piers*. Hull uses the beginning of her commentary to make the case for exactly the kind of education that Ymagynatyf, Haukyn, and Anima assert is lacking in late 14th century England, but she forgoes their critique of the clergy responsible for lay ignorance and instead takes up the task of penitential education itself. The use of the figure of the soul in both texts offers a key contrast in aims and methods. The Anima in Passus IX of *Piers* is a voiceless woman locked away in a tower made of a man, while the Anima of Passus XV argues that the Church is only as good as its priesthood and that the priesthood is corrupt. Hull’s version not only wishes to separate herself from the “felawchyp of evel men” (19/643-644) but she also wastes no time on clerical critique, nor does she wait for clerical reform. Instead, she voices, and

⁸² *Piers Plowman* XV.48.

⁸³ *Piers Plowman* XV.74.

models, the penitential prayer that is the gateway to contrition. Where *Piers Plowman* cannot see past traditional models of lay education – the priests and friars populating the poem – Hull’s innovation is her reconceiving of exemplarity, replacing the “examples and similitudes” of parish priests with an educational model that relies heavily on the intersection of exegesis and liturgy. Her *Commentary*’s construction of a liturgical exemplarity out of traditional exegesis is the subject of Chapter 3.

Chapter 3

“Then schal we not merveye of our voyse in his persone”: Contrition, Prayer, and Community in Eleanor Hull’s *Commentary*

I ended the last chapter with Hull’s female soul voicing the contrition of Psalm 6, arguing that Hull uses a traditional Augustinian gloss on Psalm 6 to imagine a different kind of penitential voice. In this chapter I will show that she leverages a number of traditional exegetical phrases and concepts in order to present a vision of inclusive penitential community. Hull’s attempts at inclusion are not limited to categories of gender. In fact, her project is not what we might call “activist.” Despite Hull’s own clear facility with *clergie*, her text is not focused, as *The Book of Margery Kempe* is, on the promotion of a specifically female voice. Instead, the *Commentary* registers its response to the crisis of *clergie* depicted in *Piers* in its construction of a non-hierarchical and multi-vocal community of penitents. What is radical about Hull’s text is, at least in part, what is missing from it: the kind of penitential mediation both lauded and problematized by Ymagynatyf.

Hull’s commentary on Psalm 50, the psalm most explicitly portrayed as exemplary by Augustine, provides a good example of Hull’s use of the public interiorities offered by the Psalms to create a voice of contrition that is not specifically gendered. At the beginning of her commentary, Hull follows Augustine in offering a recapitulation of the story of 2 Samuel 11 in which David sins with Bathsheba. Like Augustine, she grounds the psalm in a specifically Davidic exemplarity. But after detailing the story of David’s sin and rebuke by Nathan the prophet, Hull eschews the third person exegetical voice favored by Augustine for an original first person prayer. This public interiority (103-104/140-194) continues for over 50 lines and contains

no direct reference to the specifics of David's sin. Instead it offers a personal prayer available to be inhabited by any penitent, regardless of gender or transgression.¹

Like Augustine, Hull's commentary on Psalm 50 is the one in which she focuses the most on the specifics of David's sin and his exemplarity for all sinners, leaving her with the least amount of room to open its penitential message to a broader audience. It is therefore notable that she includes an extended public interiority in this commentary on the psalm most rooted in the story of a particular historical exemplar and most susceptible to the kind of third person exemplarizing voice favored by Augustine. Where Augustine uses David to encourage his audiences to engage in liturgical penance, Hull actually provides a script. In doing so, she excises herself from that moment, allowing the text to act as exemplary without the interference of the voice of the exegete. She extends the first person of the Psalms to create an exemplarity of voice, a liturgical exemplarity in which the recitation of the Psalms might fulfill a parallel function to a clerical confessor. The discourses of Ymagynatyf and Patience point to contrition as the fulcrum upon which successful penance turns, and reveal the inadequacy of the institutional *clergie* to the task of evoking it in the laity. As it models the personal and communal voices of contrition available through the Psalms, Hull's *Commentary* uses traditional exegetical concepts to explain a thoroughly traditional text in a way that offers the possibility of a radical rethinking of Christian community.

¹ One can make a comparison with Rolle here similar to the one I made regarding Psalm 6. As in Hull's commentary on Psalm 50, Rolle's work on the psalm makes use of the first person but also indicates the centrality of David's example from the outset: "This is the psalme of david when he had synned with uris wife. Thou that ere lesse haf na delite that he that was mare fell in till sag ret syn. Bot thou may drede and quake for thi selfe. David is sett in ensaumpil til men noight to fall. Bot if thai be fallen, forto rise, and to shew all maner of meknes, as david did his penaunce" (183). But, as in his treatment of Psalm 6, Rolle's explication of Psalm 50 is foregrounded in masculinity and, unlike Hull, offers no sustained first person prayer wherein a penitent of either gender could be fully comfortable.

“Ous”: Inclusion and a Lay Voice in Hull’s Psalm 31

Of course, it would be impossible to compose a work of exegesis without the use of a third person exemplarizing voice, and Hull’s *Commentary* certainly contains the kind of sermonic pronouncements found in traditional biblical commentaries. In introducing Psalm 6, for example, Hull writes that there are certain words that her audience should understand, like “tytle” (Ye schal undyrstond and know what tytyl menyth”) and “psalme” (“And now hit ys syttyng [sic] that ye know what psalme ys to mene”²). Her language in those moments is clerical, serving to parcel out the bits of *clergie* that her audience will need to gain the understanding of the psalm necessary for successful penance.

At other times, however, Hull seems to go out of her way to diffuse that exegetical and homiletic voice of the text and elide the difference in status between exegete and audience. Her treatment of Psalm 31, for example, contains a number of attempts to bridge the gap between exegete and audience. That psalm is also an important nexus between Langland’s poem and Eleanor Hull’s commentary. Both *Ymagynatyf* and *Patience* tie Ps 31:1 to the power of contrition; *Ymagynatyf* uses the verse to explain the difference between clerks and lay people while *Patience* attests to the psalm’s power to evoke contrition without tying it to clerical privilege. The latter is an example of the steps taken by *Piers Plowman* to imagine a more egalitarian penitential landscape, but that alternative, proffered against the backdrop of educational failure, ultimately comes up short. *Patience* is portrayed as incapable of successfully rendering the entirety of his lesson into English and while he does not specifically state that the contrition-evoking power of the psalm is beyond the reach of lay people, he offers no explanation of how those without *clergie* might access it. Hull’s gloss on Psalm 31 succeeds

² Likely a transcription error and meant to be “fyttyng.”

where Patience falls short, offering a vernacular explanation of the psalm that allows its readers access to its contrition-evoking verses.

If we read Hull's gloss against those of Augustine and Rolle, we see that Hull not only translates the substance of the psalm necessary to evoke contrition into the vernacular but also relies on an exegetical approach that flattens the hierarchical relationship between exegete and audience. All three commentators – Augustine, Rolle, and Hull – see in Psalm 31, beginning as it does with *Beati quorum*, the construction of an exclusive community. For Augustine, being included among the blessed involves walking the thin line between an over-reliance on God's mercy and attempting to bypass it all together, presuming that one can simply fulfill all of the "righteous requirements of the law."³ Combining both a position of clerical authority and a tendency to include himself among his audience, Augustine acknowledges the difficulty of finding a middle ground between the two in what he poses as an inevitable question: "You will ask me, 'What I am to do, then?' This psalm teaches us. Once we have read it through and discussed it, I think that with the help of the Lord's mercy we shall see the road clearly."⁴ The difference in status between exemplarizing voice and audience implied in the question is somewhat mitigated by Augustine's commitment to a kind of democratic form of scholarship; this is not Augustine the all-knowing exegete telling his audience the answer but rather a shared endeavor in uncovering scriptural truth.

At other times, however, Augustine retreats from any notions of exegesis as a group project, acting instead as a repository of scriptural understanding and penitential process: "You must pay careful attention to what I am saying, my friends, because otherwise you will hurl

³ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 363.

⁴ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 363.

yourselves into that abyss I mentioned, assuming that you can sin with impunity.”⁵ He is similarly conscious of his position as exegete when he tells his audience: “the right of heart are those who do not resist God. Let me have your attention, beloved ones, and try to understand this rectitude of heart. I will explain it briefly, though it is a point of major importance; and I thank God that it comes at the end, so that it will stick in your minds.”⁶ Toward the end of his commentary on the psalm he admonishes his audience: “your will must be straightened to fit the will of God, not God’s will twisted out of shape to fit yours. Yours is crooked, he is the ruler.”⁷ In glossing verse nine, *Nolite fieri sicut equus et mulus quibus non est intellectus in campo et freno maxillas eorum constringe qui non adproximant ad te*, “Do not become like the horse and the mule who have no understanding; with bit and bridle bind fast their jaws who come not near unto thee,” Augustine as moralizing exegete merges with the first person of the psalm, understood to be the voice of God. He expounds: “Do you aspire to be a horse or a mule; Do you want to throw your rider? Your mouth and your jaws will be reined in with bit and bridle; yes, that mouth of yours with which you vaunt your merits but keep quiet about your sins will be reined in.”⁸ Later, on that same verse, Augustine seems to combine two approaches, delivering moral pronouncements regarding a sinner portrayed as external to a community comprised by the exegete and the audience:

We need not wonder if after the bit has been inserted the whip is also used. The sinner wanted to be like an unbroken animal, and so must be subdued with bit and whip; and let us hope that he or she can be broken in. The fear is that such persons may resist so obstinately that they deserve to be left in their unbroken state and allowed to go their own

⁵ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 371.

⁶ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 384.

⁷ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 387.

⁸ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, 383.

sweet way...May such people, when the whip catches them, be corrected and subdued, as the psalmist tells us he too was tamed.”⁹

Here the Psalmist is included in the group of sinners presented as separate from Augustine and his audience but in past tense, as one who has since been subdued “by the whip.”¹⁰ The community constructed in Augustine’s Psalm 31, therefore, changes as he goes; the constant is the third person exemplarizing undertaken by the exegete.

In contrast to Augustine’s inclusive moments in constructing his exegetical-penitential community, the in-group constructed by Rolle in his commentary on Psalm 31 is one founded in clerical authority and prescribed ritual. For Rolle, the “blessed” are those who have engaged in proper penance, defined in verse 2 as “He that has doen plenere satisfaccioun for his synn.”¹¹ Penance, for Rolle, is tied to the official penitential processes of the Church.¹² Even when he remains in the first person, providing an occasion for a revoicing by his audience, the shadow of clerically mediated penance remains. On verse three of the psalm, *Quoniam tacui inveteravunt ossa mea, dum clamarem tota die*, Rolle’s gloss interprets the Psalmist’s silence as a neglect of “shrift of mouth,”¹³ again placing the psalm in the context of institutionalized confession. On verse five, which mentions God’s forgiveness in response to verbal confession only once – *Delictum meum cognitum tibi feci et iniustitiam meam non abscondi dixi confitebor adversus me iniustitiam meam Domino et tu remisisti impietatem peccati mei* – Rolle uses some form of the word “shrift” four times. On the first half of the verse, Rolle writes, “My trespass, that I wald

⁹ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms, 1-32*, 383.

¹⁰ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms, 1-32*, 383.

¹¹ Rolle 111.

¹² The MED defines “satisfaccioun” as “Expiatory works of prayer, self-denial, and charity enjoined upon a penitent after confession.”

¹³ Rolle 112.

noght doe, that I was haldyn til I made knawn til the shrifand it. And my unrightwisnes, that I did that sould not hafe ben doen, I hid noght shrifte.”¹⁴ Unlike forgiveness, which can only come from God, “Shrift” has ecclesiastical connotations. Using it not once but twice in explaining the first half of the verse, Rolle reminds his audience of the clerical mediation required for full penance.

In glossing the second half of the verse, Rolle ties divine forgiveness to that mediation, noting that, “Gret pite of god is shewid here, that he forgifis syn at a heghtynge of shrifte”;¹⁵ even just the promise of future engagement with the ecclesiastical penitential process garners God’s mercy. This exegetical position is reflected in John Mirk’s sermon for Quinquagesima Sunday, in which, Kuczynski notes, imitation of David “is just the start of an institutionalized, sacramental process of obtaining divine forgiveness and grace”;¹⁶ in Mirk’s view, imitating David “is not ‘verray perfit Penitence’ itself but a valuable prelude to it.”¹⁷ Rolle’s references to formally mediated penance, along with his ample use of the kind of third person exemplarizing voice found in Augustine, have the effect of separating him from his audience. Nicholas Watson identifies this distance between Rolle and his audience and writes that, in serving as “‘spiritual director’ to the recipients of his epistles, he perhaps thought he was exercising an eremitic equivalent of a priestly teaching office, to complement the way many of his Latin works engage in an eremitic version of the priestly office of preaching.”¹⁸ In combining these pedagogical features of *clergie* with his identity as a hermit, Rolle is a great example of the collage-like

¹⁴ Rolle 112.

¹⁵ Rolle 112.

¹⁶ Kuczynski 57.

¹⁷ Kuczynski 58.

¹⁸ Watson 223.

quality of *clergie* upon which *Piers* perseverates, but he retains the hierarchical worldview championed by Ymagynatyf.

Hull's commentary sketches a different kind of community and a different kind of pedagogical relationship. In many ways she picks up where Augustine leaves off, adopting his use of the first person plural but using it with far more frequency in order to construct a group of which she is simply one member. The contrast between Rolle's address to an individual, or various individual psalm reciters, and Hull's more communal orientation is made clear in the opening lines of their respective commentaries. Where Rolle's commentary paints a picture of individual penance – "Here the prophit spekis in his person that does penaunce for his synn"¹⁹ – Hull writes of a plurality:

Thys spalme spekythe of the grace of our Lord and of hys grete mercy, by the whiche we ben crystyn not by our merytys but by the grace of [our] Lord goyng by-fore, [foryevyng] ous orygynal synne thorow baptem, by whiche bapteme we have conqueryd so hye and grete a dignyte and so noble lordchyp that we be made parteners of the name of Cryste the sone of God and of the glorye of hys rewme, so as the apostle seythe in one of hys epystyls: 'Ye be not only be-come the sonys of God by baptem, but ye be parteners of the name of hys sone, wher-by ye be callyd crystyn aftyr the name of Cryste, our verrey saveour, and ye schal be with hym eyrys and parteners of hys rewme'" (25/3-8)

Not only does Hull use "we" and "ous" to place herself within her audience, but her depiction of David's role in this psalm is also an inclusive one. Hull's David is not Rolle's, who "amonestis other men: thus has god doen with me,"²⁰ but rather speaks "for hymselfe and for us" (30/192-193). On the very first verse, *Beati quorum*, Hull writes that David "seythe not, to them in whom he fond no synne, for he fyndyth in ous al; but tho, he seyth, be blessyd that ther synnys ben forgevyn" (27/107-109). Both possible exemplarizing voices – Hull and David – are thus grouped with their audience, erasing any distance between teacher and student. Where

¹⁹ Rolle 111.

²⁰ Rolle 113.

Ymagynatyf culls a hierarchical binary from this psalm, distinguishing between cleric and layperson, Hull constructs a gloss that undercuts authority, both David's as Psalmist and exemplary penitent, and her own as the disseminator of the *clergie* that is the translation and exegesis of the psalm.

Hull also uses Psalm 31 to explicitly downplay her own position as exegete. In glossing Ps 31:3, she addresses her audience and writes, "Ye schold gladly here hys comandementys and, that herd, put hyt in werke, and werke hyt with sovereyn delyte and love God a-bove al thyng and humbly of al our trespas crye mercy" (31/230-234). While this reads like an homiletic directive of the sort we might find in Augustine or Rolle, it is actually a gloss on Isaiah 55:2, a verse not cited by Augustine. Importantly, this injunction is also preceded by a rather uncharacteristic extended meditation on Hull's own position as exegete:

In trust of thys promesse have I openyd my folysche mouthe, but sche is not yet fyllyd aftyr my desire. And ther-for I speke ful [lenely] and simply in the expocicion of this lettre. But I hope in the same grace, how-ever hit be that my pore wytte [is] hongry and lene in syence, that ye do and schal do the comandement of our Lord that seyth by the mouthe of hys profete: *Audite audientes me et delectabitur in [crassitudine] anime vestra*. 'Ye that heren me and my comandementys, heryht them so that ye fulfyllen hem and youre soule schal be [delytyd] in the fatnes of the plente of hys grete goodnes'" (30-31/221-230)

Whether a function of her gender or her lay status, Hull's self-deprecating approach (her "folysche mouthe," her "pore wytte") further contributes toward an erasure of her status as translator-exegete; in creating a unique exegetical voice that at times disowns its own project, she levels the uneven rhetorical playing field between commentator and reader characteristic of many forms of scriptural commentary.

It is significant that Hull's introduction to her gloss on Psalm 31 specifies baptism as the operative site of the penitential relationship between Christians and God. In contrast to Rolle,

with his dedication to “plenere satisfaccioun,”²¹ Hull posits a ritual undergone at a pre-linguistic stage – and one subject to far less clerical oversight than the highly prescribed penitential process – as dictating inclusion into her version of the penitential community.²² In Hull’s account, it is baptism by which “we have conqueryd so hye and grete a dignyte and so noble lordchyp that we be made parteners of the name of Cryste the sone of God and of the glorye of hys rewme” (25/6-8). While both baptism and penance require clerical mediation, the latter is given far more attention in the manuals and guides for clerics that proliferate in late medieval England. In his *Instructions for Parish Priests*, John Mirk devotes over 1000 lines to outlining the responsibilities involved in guiding parishioners through the penitential process and still cautions his readers “myche more thou moste wyten / thenne thou fyndest here I-wryten.”²³ This is in contrast to just 140 lines devoted to the priestly responsibilities linked to baptism. Hull’s focus on baptism may be traced to Augustine, who references the reading of Romans 4 prior to his sermon on Psalm 31, but there the ritual is never mentioned by name. Hull’s commentary makes that strictly occasional connection far more explicit and the resulting focus on baptism allows her to construct a more inclusive penitential community.²⁴

²¹ Rolle 111.

²² Baptism was also the one sacrament women were able to perform in the absence of a priest, a position that contributed to Walter Brut’s argument in favor of women’s ability to “preach and make the body of Christ.” The argument was that since they could perform that “chief sacrament,” surely they could administer others. Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984) 52.

²³ Mirk, John. *Instructions for Parish Priests*. Ed. Gillis Kristensson. (Lund: Gleerup, 1974) 108.

²⁴ This inclusivity, however, is accompanied by a preoccupation with Jews not found in Augustine or attributed to any other exegetical source. As I argued in my introduction, Hull places Psalm 31 at the heart of the Jewish-Christian drama, contrasting a “goode fader” with “a synful moder, that ys the wrecchyd synagogue” (25/20-23) and reiterating the role of the Jews in the crucifixion. The thousands and hundreds who “weryn convertyd” to Christ at the hour of his crucifixion are posited as the subject of the first line of the psalm, *Beati quorum remisse sunt iniquitates*” (26/62-64). She then uses Psalm 17:45 to contrast the soon-to-be converted gentiles with the Jews who remained stubborn in their false faith:

Psalm 31 allows Hull to construct an egalitarian community inclusive of any Christians who will “mekely praye and requite in the tempestys of our synnys as the good David dyde when he was *in [deluvio]aquarum multarum*, in the pestylencys of hys flessche wher-of the soule felte sorful torment” (44/743-746).²⁵ This nod to a Davidic imitation anchored in prayer is followed by another instance of extended first person prayer, voiced by David but inhabitable by any individual. Where, for Rolle, recitation of David’s words is simply a requisite precursor to a whole host of clerically mediated penitential activities, Hull situates personal and communal prayer as the penitential main event, accessible to anyone baptized into the Christian faith.

Multi-temporal Exemplarity in Hull

This impulse toward inclusivity, the flattening of the penitential landscape through which all Christians share in the same confessional status, has a multi-temporal dimension as well. In glossing Psalm 31, Hull imagines a conversation between David and God, in the course of which God tells the Psalmist: “but many schal be ledde by the to me, to whom thou schalt be ensample

And not-withstondyng the sone of God comendyd ful gretly thys puple of whiche we crystyn puple be comyn, and of hem he seyth by the mouthe of David, ‘The peple that I knew not han servyd me and in the heryng of ther erys they have obeyed me. And ther-for they schul be forgevyn and they schul be of tho blessyd *quorum tecta sunt peccata*, and ther-for verreyly blessyd when ther wykkydnes schal be forgiven hem and ther synnys hydde’ (26-27/70-78)

In describing those gentiles as the source “of whiche we crystyn puple be comyn,” Hull creates an even sharper distinction between her blessed community and the “other” against which it is defined; Christians, at least those of which her Anglo-Christian readership is comprised, are no longer an offshoot of Judaism but instead descended from the gentiles to whom the Psalmist’s words in Psalm 17 can be applied. As I noted, this passage in Hull is curiously similar to the beginning of Chapter 15 of the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible. The analogies drawn in that text between Jews/Gentiles and Clerks/Lay people and possible connections to late medieval vernacular theology before and after the Constitutions deserve further study.

²⁵ This soul is, incidentally, also gendered female, but the first person prayer that follows is voiced by David rather than the female soul as is the case in Psalm 6.

and forme by good lyfe and holy doctryne. For my verray speryt schal sey to them by thy mowthe that they be not to bestyal in foule pryde ner in unknowing” (47/858-861). These lines make David exemplary by heavenly design and also highlight a physicality inherent in the voicing of the psalms: the psalms are expressed by a human “mowthe” and David is posited as that exemplary bodily conduit through which the divine message reaches the audience. But they also depict David’s exemplarity not as a static model nor a mold to step into, but rather part of an imitative process that is dynamic and multi-temporal.

For Hull, the penitential imitation of David occurs simultaneously with David’s original voicing of the psalms. Earlier in her explication of Psalm 31, she speaks about the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, David among them, who were consigned to hell as they awaited the coming of Christ. She then advises her audience that Christ “dyd no thyng to hem but that he wyl do to everyche of ous, for he that *wyl aryse* **with** David and meke hym with the grete baptyst and labor with the goode Poule schal never nyhe the peynys of helle” (41/644-647; emphasis mine). In this case, not only is an equivalency established between Old Testament saints and contemporary penitents, contributing to Hull’s depiction of an egalitarian penitential community, but Davidic imitation is described as both based in physical action and undertaken simultaneously with its original. Hull uses this language of simultaneous penance across sacred history in her commentary on Psalm 37 as well: “Now sey everyche of ous **with** that good psalmystre, that felte hys sorful wondys of the arowys of vengance of God” (72/340-341; emphasis mine). Elsewhere she undertakes a similar move but makes simultaneous recitation a conditional proposition. In presenting Mary Magdalene as another exemplary penitent, Hull cites the verse in Jeremiah 3:1 which promises that God will receive any sinner who returns to him and remarks that “this soule to whom he makyth his promesse may wel sey **with** the good David:

Auditui meo dabis etc” (119/741-742; emphasis mine). Thus, rather than portraying Davidic imitation as simply a repetition or revoicing of words said in the past, Hull makes it a multi-temporal group activity. This erasure of the bounds of linear time brings to mind Aron Gurevich’s argument about the “extra-temporality” of medieval conceptions of history, in which “there is no sharp division between past and present, for the past is ever being born anew and returns to form a real part of the present.”²⁶ But it also turns psalm recitation into something of a challenge, requiring the proper alignment of penitent and Davidic model in order to engage in successful penance. It is that alignment, rather than strict imitation, that constitutes effective penitential activity.

One of the most significant ways in which Hull deviates from the *Enarrationes* is her insistence on reinserting David where he has been more or less excised by Augustine. Much of her commentary is dedicated to describing an elaborate web of penitential relationships in which the recitation of the Psalms is never just about one individual reading scripture. For Hull, an act of liturgical or scriptural recitation is not just the province of the individual penitent in the present but involves other voices – David or Christ, or both – and multiple temporalities. This is likely grounded in early Christian exegesis, which saw the Psalms as falling into the following categories: the voice of Christ, a word *to* Christ, a word *about* Christ, and a word about the Church. In applying this concept of prosopological interpretation inherited from the ancients to the Psalms, patristic writers in general and Augustine in particular “attempted to make clear who was the proper speaker in a psalm, and whether he was speaking in his own name or in the name

²⁶ A.J. Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*. Trans. G.L Campbell. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) 99.

(*ex persona / ex voce*) of someone else.”²⁷ When it is Christ himself who is understood to be speaking in a given psalm or verse, the *Enarrationes* offer several more specific categories based on the doctrine of the “whole Christ,” *totus Christus*. At times, Augustine identifies the voice of the Psalms as that of Christ alone, at others it is the voice of the Church, at still others the voicing of the psalm is attributed to “Christ as head and body inseparably.”²⁸

Hull in large part adopts this “central question” of the *Enarrationes*²⁹ – that of who is speaking at any given point – and often presents her answers as rooted in that Augustinian foundation, but they differ in critical and interesting ways from their source. For one, as we’ve seen, she casts the Augustinian relationships of voice in far more bodily terms. She repeatedly emphasizes the physical aspects of speaking and voice to a degree that turns Augustine’s Christological interpretation of the Psalms into a series of ventriloquial acts. In attributing the voicing of various psalm verses, Hull writes: “Now here what the holy goost seythe by the mowthe of David” (83/753); Christ “seythe by the mowthe of hys servant David: *Veni in altitudinem maris et tempestas dimersit me*” (43/702-703); Christ “by the mowthe of David schewyht the unfeythe and the untrowthe that he hathe found” (85/819-820). These examples seem on the one hand to posit David as little more than a body, specifically a mouthpiece, chosen as a vessel for divine speech, a position consonant with the Augustinian conception of David’s role as almost entirely Christological. But they also portray David as physically involved in the voicing of the Psalms, which revisits the idea of Davidic exemplarity in a way foreclosed by Augustine’s commentary.

²⁷ Michael Fiedrowicz, General Introduction. *Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*. Trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000) 51.

²⁸ Fiedrowicz 52.

²⁹ Maria Boulding, Trans. *Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*, Vol. 15 (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2000)150 n7.

That Hull understands the voices behind the Psalms to be ventriloquial may reflect her liturgical milieu. As Eamon Duffy has argued in writing on the Psalms, “The voice of lay prayer in the late middle ages is essentially ventriloquial. By and large, medieval people did not speak for themselves when they prayed. They articulated their hopes and fears, however deeply felt, in the borrowed words of others, which they made their own in the act of recitation.”³⁰ The idea of the words of the Psalms as shared would therefore not have been foreign to those reciting them in the fifteenth century. But Duffy's formulation posits one active voice at a given time and understands the relationship between the penitent and the psalms he or she recites as an act of borrowing, of re-voicing. Augustine gestures toward a different scheme of shared voicing, in which David and contemporary sinners share a moment of penitential activity (“it is not the prophet Nathan who has been sent to you; David himself has been sent. Listen to him crying out and cry out with him; listen to him groaning, and groan too; listen to him weeping, and add your tears to his; listen to him corrected, and share his joy”³¹). Hull's commentary may be unique in the way it “multiplies and complicates the voices”³² involved in an already multiply inhabited prayer, constructing a liturgical scheme in which every act of recitation ideally involves a synergy of voices and participants.

Early in her commentary on Psalm 6 she describes a ventriloquial relationship in which David “spekyth in our persone and answeyryth ous by wordys that God put in his mouthe for-to chastyse them that mysdone agenst hum and seth: *Visitabo in virga iniquitatis eorum et in*

³⁰ Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers 1240-1570* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 104.

³¹ Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 414.

³² David Lawton, “The Psalms as Public Interiorities: Eleanor Hull’s History of Revoicing.” Psalm Culture and the Politics of Translation. Charterhouse Square, QMUL, London. 15-17 July 2013. Plenary paper.

verberibus peccata eorum” (12-13/380-383). David’s words do not simply exist in a text preserved from the ancient past to be summoned by a penitent in the present but rather function as a voice to be shared by a group of people over time and spiritual dimension. The exegetical understanding of the Psalms as *sound* as much as, if not more than, *text* may contribute to their utility in constructing this kind of multi-temporal scheme; “Sound,” Walter Ong writes, “situates man in the middle of actuality and in simultaneity, whereas vision situates man in front of things and in sequentiality.”³³ Unlike other medieval women writers, Hull traffics in sound rather than vision. While she includes a rehashing of sacred history early in her text,³⁴ her insistence throughout on the multi-temporality of cries of contrition – of sound – creates a sense of an eternal present, always offering the opportunity to join with preexisting and continuous voices of penitential prayer. There is of course a double ventriloquism in the lines quoted above from Psalm 6: Hull’s David speaks the words of the psalm in the “person” of contemporary penitents, but those words were in fact placed in *his* mouth by God. While for Augustine there seems to be only one answer at a time to the question of who voices a particular psalm, Hull views the Psalms as a delicate – and perhaps volatile – network of voices and “persons” spread across time, including those in the present, working in concert to achieve a particular penitential goal.

The Exegetical *Ex Persona* in Hull’s Commentary

That phrase, “in the person of,” is crucial for Hull’s construction of a psalm recitation that is multi-temporal and multiply inhabited. The word “person” is used in the Middle Ages to

³³ Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 128.

³⁴ In her gloss on Psalm 6, Hull divides sacred history into three eras: from Adam to Moses (wherein the “lawe of kynde” held sway), from Moses to Christ (“the lawe wryttyn”), and finally the time after the coming of Christ, in which the “lawe of grace” is operative (7/153). This periodization is used to explain the great gift of Christian penance and the power of crying out to God in contrition for sin.

refer to one of the three members of the trinity but “in the person of” is also a translation of the phrase *ex persona*, which appears throughout exegetical literature as a way of denoting the speaker of a particular verse. While Augustine uses the phrase infrequently in his treatment of the Penitential Psalms, Hull often uses the translated version to express Augustinian concepts regarding the voice of a particular verse, particularly as a way of further explaining Augustinian ideas of Christ as head speaking for the members of his body. On Ps 37:22, for example, Hull writes that Christ “spake for al his true membrys that in his feythe ben al in o body and he ys ther lyfe and ther hede. And ther-for he requeryht in ther persone that God for-sake hem not and that they part not from hym” (97/1295-1298). This gloss closely parallels Augustine, who explains the same verse by clarifying the relationship between the Head and its members:

Do not abandon me, O Lord my God, do not leave me alone. Let us make this prayer in him, let us make it through him, for he intercedes for us; let us say, *Do not abandon me, O Lord my God.* Yet elsewhere he had prayed, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Ps 21:2(22:1); Mt 27:46), and here he prays, *O my God, do not leave me alone.* If God does not abandon the body, is it conceivable that he abandoned its Head? Whose voice is this, then, if not that of the first human being? Christ proves that his flesh is true flesh inherited from Adam when he cries, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*³⁵

Hull uses the phrase “in ther persone” here to express the Augustinian idea that Christ spoke with a human voice, as though he was a member of the body, rather than its head.

Hull uses this notion of the Head speaking “in the person of” its members repeatedly in Psalm 37, even in explicating verses on which Augustine makes no mention of the relationship.³⁶ This is perhaps because Augustine’s sermon on Psalm 37 contains a long explanation of the relationship between that voice of the Head and its members as a way of explaining how Christ

³⁵ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 156.

³⁶ Ps 37:19, for example, is a verse on which Augustine does not explicitly mention the relationship between Head and members, but Hull nevertheless introduces it by explaining “In this verse spekyth our hede in the persone of his membrys” (94/1183-1184).

can voice those verses which reference sin or some other condition which couldn't possibly be associated with the god. This is the concept of "the whole Christ," which Augustine explains in the following manner:

When Christ speaks, he sometimes does so in the person of the Head alone, the Savior who was born of the virgin Mary; but at other times he speaks in the person of his body, provided that we have sincere faith in him, and unshakable hope, and burning charity. We are within his body, we are members of it, and we find ourselves speaking those words.³⁷

In this case, Hull takes an Augustinian frame and uses it throughout the psalm to give the sense of a ventriloquial recitation. Her terminology remains traditional and her gloss retains its grounding in orthodox exegesis, but her multiplication of this Augustinian concept gives her commentary on these psalms a unique angle.

Hull continues to draw on Augustine's understanding of the Head/Body relationship in her work on Psalm 101. On Ps 101:2, where Augustine attributes the voice of the verse to Christ on account of "the poverty of his members" and also speaks of "unity of [Christ's] body,"³⁸ Hull writes "And ther-for he ys cald medyator by-tuene ous and God the fadre. For so as he hathe take our kynd in hym, right so he spekyth for ous as for hym-selfe and he seythe elsewhere in our person, 'Lord, make safe thy servantys whos nature I have resceyvid in me . . .'" (141/58-62). In glossing the very next verse Hull uses an Augustinian discussion of the unity of Christ's head and body, as well as the unity within his body, to describe Christ praying for his members: "hys crye ys our voyse, hys request ys for our profyt and in our persone hit ys that he preyght for ous and with ous and makyth ous pray to-gedrys with hym and in hym" (143/113-115). A few lines later she reiterates this idea, gesturing to her audience: "Ye have herde hou Cryst, the sone of God and the sone of the feyre virgyne, prayd here in our voyse with the part of mankynd . . . And

³⁷ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 33-50, 150.

³⁸ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 99-120, 48.

in the nature wher-by he ys man he spekyth to God the fadre so as in our persone . . .” (144/154-158). While these glosses on the early verses of Psalm 101 are certainly based in Augustinian theology, by repeatedly combining the ideas of “voice” and “person,” Hull makes the relationship between Christ and Christian penitents far more physical, and therefore more ventriloquial, than her source. In his cultural history of ventriloquism, Steven Connor notes that ventriloquism can have both an active and a passive form, “depending on whether it is thought of as the power to speak through others or as the experience of being spoken through by others.”³⁹ Both forms are operative in Hull’s commentary, wherein the act of vocalization does not correspond with just one stable body, as it does in Duffy’s formulation, but instead often seems shared or diffused among multiple bodies.⁴⁰

Where Augustine seems to posit total unity (“One voice only, then, because only one flesh”⁴¹), and, at times, an imitation of David that occurs as a kind of call and response (“Listen to him crying out and cry out with him; listen to him groaning, and groan too; listen to him weeping, and add your tears to his; listen to him corrected, and share his joy”⁴²), Hull gestures towards multiplicity and multi-temporality. On Ps 101:10, Hull advises her audience that

³⁹ Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 14.

⁴⁰ These images of speech acts which defy a strict coherence between voice and body may challenge W.J.T. Mitchell’s distinction (for which he thanks Michael Camille) between the pre-Cartesian imagistic presentation of speech, wherein “speech tends to be represented by a scroll rather than a cloud or bubble, and it emanates from the gesturing hand of the speaker rather than the mouth” and that of comic books, in which “language appears in a speech-balloon emanating from the speaker’s mouth, or a thought cloud emerging from the thinker’s head...a ghostly emanation from an invisible interior.” In moments like these, Hull’s commentary constructs images of speech for which a gesturing hand and scroll would be inadequate. The comic book form, with its sense of voice as emerging from within, is more appropriate but still not quite suitable. W.J.T Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) 92.

⁴¹ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 99-120*, 48.

⁴² Augustine. *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 414.

“when Cryst the sone of God hathe so onyd ous to hum that he be our hede and we his body, then schal we not merveyle of our voyse in his persone, that in the unite of ous seythe: *Quia cinerem tamquam panem manducabam*” (151/446-449). There is “unite” here, a word used to describe the indivisibility of God, but there is also that differentiation of “voise” and “persone”; there is still an “ous.” Importantly, this synchrony of voice and person is not something that happens in the past, in the original voicing of the psalm, but rather occurs, at least potentially, each time an individual penitent takes it up for recitation.

In addition to Augustine’s main use of the *ex persona* relationship – that of Christ speaking in the person of the members of the Church – Hull also introduces the idea of a David who speaks “in the persone of every repentant sowle” (22/736-737) and utters the prayer “that al myn enemys mow have schame of al ther evel dedys by the example of me” (22/762-763). The idea that David speaks as or for his fellow human beings has Augustinian roots as well; in his exemplarity-focused commentary on Psalm 50, Augustine notes that in confessing his sin and acknowledging that he was conceived in iniquity, “David spoke in the person of the whole human race, and had regard to the chains that bind us all.”⁴³ Augustine’s explication of Psalm 50 is focused on the historical David to a degree not found in his work on other psalms due to an exegetical tradition tying that psalm to the biblical story of 2 Samuel 11. His move to attribute David’s words to all of humanity has less to do with constructing a specifically Davidic model for humanity to imitate and more to do with his desire to actually neutralize the impact of David as exemplar.

Rolle’s commentary can be helpful in further understanding what is unique about Hull’s use of the exegetical concept of *ex persona*. Rolle uses the translated phrase to introduce one of

⁴³ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 418.

the Penitential Psalms, indicating a moment when the Psalmist is speaking as a penitent or group of penitents. In the opening to his commentary on Psalm 31, Rolle writes: “Here the Prophet spekis in his person that does penaunce for his synn.”⁴⁴ Similarly, though not making use of the same exact phrasing, Rolle attributes Psalm 37 to “the voice of him that does penance for his syn.”⁴⁵ Rolle thus uses this exegetical tool not to describe the relationship between Christ and the Church but rather to reinstate the role of the Psalmist in the penitential economy. That reinstatement is somewhat muted, however, since Rolle declines to refer to David by name.

Taken together, then, Augustine and Rolle offer Hull a basis for both Christ and David speaking “in the person of” those engaged in penance. But Hull uses it more frequently and with greater variety than either of them. The contrast I drew between Hull’s commentary and Rolle’s in Psalm 6 is operative here as well. Rolle’s appropriation of *ex persona* focuses on an individual male penitent; Hull’s formulation of essentially the same idea – David speaking as contemporary penitent – lacks overt gendering and often focuses on an imagined congregation (*ous*) instead of the individual. Perhaps most notably, she includes David in ways in which the other two exegetes did not. In addition to frequently naming David, Hull includes an additional *ex persona* relationship absent from Augustine and Rolle, presenting a David who repeatedly speaks “in the person of” Christ. Where Augustine interprets 37:12 as “the voice of the Head” which cannot and should not be separated from its body,⁴⁶ Hull retains the idea of one individual speaking “in the person” of another but adds in a third party. Writing on the same verse and describing the

⁴⁴ Rolle 111.

⁴⁵ Rolle 138. In another interesting emendation, the Lollard revision of Rolle’s Psalter uses the exact language of “in the person of” later in the gloss on Ps 37:22: “And forthi the Prophet in the persone of alle gode men preieth that he be so kepide fro synne that God be nevere partide fro him.” Anne Hudson, ed. *Two Revisions of Rolle’s English Psalter Commentary and the Related Canticles*, vol. II. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 427.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, 159.

role of the psalms vis a vis Christ's Passion, Hull notes "and ther-for seythe David in the person of Ihesu Cryst: *Amici mei etc.* 'My frendys,' he seythe, 'and my neyhbers have neyhyd a-genst me, and stondyn agenst me;" (86/877-878).

In a sequence detailing the trials of Christ leading up to the crucifixion, Hull employs some seriously confusing syntax to describe who exactly voices Ps 37:12. Writing of those who "caste hym out of ther synagogue...and browht hym to the deth," Hull writes that "he," presumably Christ:

Hym-selfe wytnessyth the flasnes of his feynt frendys by the mouthe of David that in the persone of Ihesu Cryst makyth the compleynt of this verse folowyng of the passyon of Ihesu Cryst, that by the mowthe of David schewyht the unfeythe and the untrowthe that he hathe found in his, and seythe in this maner here after: *Amici mei et proximi mei adversum me aproinquauerunt et steterunt*

(85/814-822)

Here we return to the inescapable physicality in Hull's relationships of voice: David is the "mouth" by which the "person" of Christ can voice this psalm, adequately expressing the relationship between this particular verse and the drama of the crucifixion. But this moment also highlights the almost compulsively repetitive web that Hull weaves; we go from Christ "hym-selfe" to the mouth of David to the "persone" of Christ and back again to David's mouth.⁴⁷ This unusually physical and multiply-inhabited moment takes the question of who is speaking in a given psalm addressed by both Augustine and Rolle and answers 'all of the above,' creating from the text a rather strange image of communal psalm recitation in which everyone seems to be speaking through everyone else. Here again Connor's study of ventriloquism, particularly his concept of the "vocalic body," is useful:

⁴⁷ In contrast, as one might expect, David is almost entirely absent from Augustine's commentary on Ps 37:12. Augustine does not name David in the gloss, instead obliquely referring to "the speaker" who "has already made confession of his own secret sins, from which he desires to be cleansed" but must also pray to be spared from the sins of those around him (*Expositions* 33-50, 159).

The principle of the vocalic body is simple. Voices are produced by bodies: but can themselves produce bodies. The vocalic body is the idea—which can take the form of dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine, or hallucination—of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice.⁴⁸

The Psalms' status as "voice" allows the text to function as raw material for the construction of an alternative vision of the body that produces that voice. For Augustine, that body is variously the Psalmist, Christ, and the Church, but never all at once. Hull's commentary goes beyond its patristic foundations, as well as more contemporary exegesis, in using far more physical language to construct a multi-vocal and multi-temporal voicing of the Psalms that has the effect of constructing a body that is constantly metamorphosing but always capable of being inhabited by those involved in psalm recitation.

The Utility of a Multivocal Psalm

In reinserting David where Augustine had excised him, Hull makes central the relationship between the Psalmist and Christ, which for Augustine is just a stepping-stone to near complete Christological exegesis. But in crowding the field of who can be speaking at any given moment in the Psalms, Hull also seems to be rewriting Davidic exemplarity. Instead of presenting an exemplarity bound up with one historical episode of sin, Hull gives us a David who functions as an integral part of the penitential economy in the present. David is the link connecting the voice of Christ and the physical recitation of the Psalms by contemporary penitents; he is the physical conduit for "mouthing" divine poetry and an exemplar of the efficacy of that penitential poetic. In this way Hull complicates even more straightforward

⁴⁸ Connor 35.

exemplarity and penitential prescriptions. At the close of her commentary she offers a conflation of David and Christ linked to exemplarity:

And in this person that he toke of ous seythe David in the v^e psalme of the vij that he preyd for our febles, and seyde to God his fadre, 'Lord, here myn oreyson and my clamour come to the.' In that David schewyht that God prayd in our fourme and cryed for our nede that nevyr dyd synne, he schewyht and techyth to al man-kynd that by dette of his synne lythe in the depnes of myseryes, how he schold crye to God as the same David cryed in the [vj] psalme afty, wher in preyyng and prophesyng [he] cryed to God in this manere and seyde, 'From the depnes I have cryed to the, Lord. Lord, here my voyse.
(199/590-599)

This passage is part of Hull's interpretation of Ps 142:11, a verse which Augustine glosses only briefly, so the use of "person" here is her own. "David" is initially used as a name for Christ and, praying to "God his fadre," appears to totally disappear into Christ. But the second half of the gloss restores the individual exemplarity of David. It is again David the Psalmist whose words describe the act of Christ praying for humanity but who also serves as exemplary penitent, showing and teaching mankind how to cry out to God. In this way Hull retains David's "voyse," and specifically the physicality of his penitential experience, in a way that Augustine does not.

But what is the function of this retention of David within the penitential economy? In Hull's commentary on Psalm 31, David plays a key role in deflating the polemics which usually characterize works of exegesis and exemplarity; his function as an exemplarizing voice which speaks for itself and for others simultaneously creates a more egalitarian environment in a genre of inherent hierarchy. But there is perhaps another element as well, linked to a particular devotional practice. Hull introduces Ps 37:3 with yet another first person Davidic prayer in which he asks God to judge him with mercy and "parforme in me, my good God, that whiche thou seydst by the mouthe of Moyses, thy pryvy frend: *Ego occidam et ego vivere faciam; percusciam et ego sanabo*. This seydst thou, my mercyful lord God, 'Y schal sle and make to

lyve agen and y schal smyte and hele agen” (66/87-90). Hull’s use of “parforme” recalls Jessica Brantley’s study connecting late medieval drama with the performative aspects of private reading in the 15th century. In the late Middle Ages, Brantley writes, *perform* “moved from describing an activity that was entirely finished, or completely achieved, to one that emphasized an ongoing process,”⁴⁹ and that it is within this context that “late-medieval authors sometimes explicitly saw themselves as ‘performing’ their devotional books.”⁵⁰ Brantley also argues that “performative reading depends on imagining voices,”⁵¹ and I propose that Hull conceives of psalm recitation as just such an ongoing performance made possible by a multi-vocal text. Rather than seeing the voicing of a given psalm as a reenactment of a role previously performed by David – a performance in the present of a scene originating in the past – Hull uses exegetical notions of psalmodic multivocality to create a notion of performance across time and space.⁵²

Brantley connects ideas of performative reading to manuscript images such as that found in MS Additional 37049 wherein Christ on a wooden cross is juxtaposed with a smaller image of a Carthusian monk kneeling in prayer. She sees this image as “a true meditative image, showing no historical moment in the narrative of Christ’s Passion, but a mystical moment that exists neither in real time nor in real space.”⁵³ Hull’s psalm recitation exists in a similar temporal and spatial vacuum, within which David functions as an important link in a chain of humans at prayer; in this passage from Psalm 37, he asks that he fulfill a similar function to Moses and

⁴⁹ Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2007) 16

⁵⁰ Brantley 17.

⁵¹ Brantley 303.

⁵² Connor argues that, “the disturbing effect of ventriloquism may derive from its transcendence or disruption of seen space” (17). Hull’s use of ventriloquial relationships, perhaps thanks to its foundation in traditional exegetical practice, is more curious than disturbing, but she certainly takes advantage of the ability of those relationships to transcend “seen space” and linear time.

⁵³ Brantley 271.

prayer itself is cast as a behavior to be imitated. That prayer, functioning like the original first person text of the Psalms, automatically inducts the contemporary reciter of the psalm, or the reader of the commentary, into a liturgical chain – that “vocalic body” produced by the voice of the Psalms – providing a performative outlet for the exegetical commentary he or she has assimilated through reading the commentary. Laviece Ward notes a similar pattern in the *e Museo* 160 manuscript, in which the “Fifteen Articles of the Passion” are juxtaposed with prayers reminding the reader “of his own need for intercession.”⁵⁴ This inclusion of a first-person prayer alongside a moment in sacred history, Ward writes, is meant to prepare the reader for the final section of the manuscript which consists of the dramas *Christ’s Burial and Christ’s Resurrection*, meant to present the reader with “the final remedy of reading: a sense of personal participation in the life of Christ.”⁵⁵ Several parts of Hull’s text provide a similar effect, allowing her reader to not only understand the biblical text she is explaining but to use that scholastic understanding as a means to personal devotion as well.

In overpopulating Augustinian ideas about the voicing of the psalms and providing opportunities for her audience to step into the first person of David’s poetry, Hull makes the main exegetical and exemplary event a liturgical act that elevates the penitent above his or her own moment and adds his or her voice to a greater, and multi-temporal, vocalic body, a unified congregation of Christians engaged in prayer. In this sense Davidic exemplarity as imagined by Augustine, Rolle or any number of exegetes is overlooked by Hull in favor of another form of imitation. For Hull, imitating David requires an understanding of his words as well as a recitation

⁵⁴ Ward, Laviece Cox. “The E Museo 160 Manuscript: Writing and Reading as Remedy.” In *The Mystical Tradition and the Carthusians*, ed. James Hogg. (Salzburg: Institut Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik Universität Salzburg, 1995) 80.

⁵⁵ Ward 80.

of them while imagining that one is joining with him – and with Christ – in a liturgical moment. This combination of the exegetical and the devotional is rare, and that rarity is perhaps the reason critics don't know quite what to do with Hull's text. Shannon Gayk's reading of Hull moves between a sense of the *Commentary* as "a private act of devotion"⁵⁶ and her larger argument that Hull, like Lydgate, imagines "a lay audience that is simultaneously capable of hermeneutic sophistication and in need of clerical instruction and mediation."⁵⁷ In pointing toward a nunnery as its probable site of composition, David Lawton determines that we should no longer think of the work as directed toward an exclusively lay audience. What we might do, instead of trying to pinpoint Hull's conception of her own audience, is to note the audiences *made possible* by her fusion of the exegetical and the devotional, that is, the range of voices to which the text is open.

This requires an understanding of the liturgical as a key area of blurring between lay people and clerics. Katherine Zieman identifies the liturgical performance of women religious as "one area in which women's literate activity encroached upon the male clerical realm," their only opportunity to engage in the "sanctioned exercise of clerical authority."⁵⁸ But while it would have been necessary for women religious to be versed in the Latin text necessary for divine worship, Zieman writes, they would not have been required "to be formally educated in Latin grammar, which was maintained as the preserve of the male cleric."⁵⁹ She understands this "liturgical literacy" as "the performance of sacred Latin texts in which the relationship to

⁵⁶ Shannon Gayk, "Among Psalms to Fynde A Cleer Sentence": John Lydgate, Eleanor Hull, and the Art of Vernacular Exegesis" in *New Medieval Literatures* 10 (2008) 181.

⁵⁷ Gayk 162.

⁵⁸ Katherine Zieman, "Reading, Singing and Understanding: Constructions of the Literacy of Women Religious in Late Medieval England," *Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad*. Ed. Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) 48.

⁵⁹ Zieman 104.

grammatical understanding is ambiguous”⁶⁰ and locates women religious in the liminal zone between a laity without Latin and the institutional knowledge required of a clerical culture from which they were excluded.

Hull challenges Zieman’s categorization and her contrast between “reading and singing”;⁶¹ her project is at once liturgical and grammatical and she is concerned with both literal and spiritual meanings. She very clearly rejects the model represented in Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale, as understood by Zieman, which posits “singing explicitly characterized as illiterate as the purest form of piety.”⁶² And yet, she doesn’t embody what Zieman casts as the alternative in her reading of the Second Nun’s St. Cecilia: “a woman with the authoritative knowledge to engage in the masculinized realm of public preaching.”⁶³ There is no indication that Hull’s manuscript was meant for wide circulation and, while she possesses enough authoritative knowledge to present herself in much the same way that Augustine and Rolle do, she repeatedly declines to take on the third-person exemplarizing voice that characterizes those commentaries and so many others. From the smorgasbord of clerical features available for appropriation, she declines the role of preacher and rejects the form of pedagogy that necessitates a stark division between student and teacher, but the instruction she provides is linked with penitential prayer. Barratt writes that Hull chooses a commentary that “was written in an older tradition of biblical exegesis, which aimed to elucidate rather than to inspire devotion”⁶⁴ but in the context of the diffusion of clerical identity described in *Piers*, no such choice needs to be made. Whatever the

⁶⁰ Zieman 106.

⁶¹ Zieman, *Singing the New Song*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) 186.

⁶² Zieman, “Constructions of the Literacy of Women Religious,” 107.

⁶³ Zieman 108.

⁶⁴ Barratt 99.

form of the French original, Hull's final product fashions a liturgical model out of exegetical materials, injecting the Prioress's unlearned devotion with St. Cecilia's authoritative knowledge. Her text offers voices of contrition to be "performed" by her readers and explains the doctrine behind the words they say, fusing the confessional role of the priest with his educational responsibilities. In doing so she re-appropriates for a wider audience a grammatically-informed performance of text reserved for "men of dignitee"⁶⁵ by both the Prioress and a broader clerical culture, represented by Ymagynatyf, which saw a wide chasm between "institutional knowledge and illiterate devotion."⁶⁶ In creating a space for active and literate prayer – available for appropriation by layperson and cleric alike – Hull's commentary thus disrupts the "neatly aligned set of categories that distinguishes the male cleric, who actively enunciates the Word of God in this world, and the passive, feminized, lay person, held under his spell."⁶⁷

Gender, *Clergie*, and Voice

As Barratt notes, is difficult to make the argument that Hull is writing for a specifically female audience; her commentary retains too much of its source's androcentric language, addressing "men," for example, rather than "men and women" as a female devotional text might. "If the manuscript did not attribute this commentary to 'Dame Eleanor Hull,'" Barratt writes, "we would never suspect it had been translated by a woman" since the genre of scriptural exegesis is generally a male one in the Middle Ages, its required skills confined to theologians.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Ed. V.A. Kolve and Glending Olson, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), p. 248 ln 456.

⁶⁶ Zieman, 108.

⁶⁷ Zieman 101.

⁶⁸ Barratt100.

Since we lack access to Hull's French original it is impossible to know how much of *The Commentary*'s innovation is her own and how much is simply a result of fidelity to her source. What can be assumed, though, is that Hull's *Commentary* is the result of a woman scholar translating a text written by a man; however rare we consider Hull's work, it would be even more surprising to discover a lengthy 13th century Psalm commentary written by a woman. The result is a scholastic rarity: "a solid and traditional commentary which draws on standard monastic sources" produced by a layperson.

While Hull's *Commentary* does not have an agenda based in gender, we might nonetheless consider its existence to be the result of certain gendered social realities of late medieval religious life. If, as Lawton suggests, Hull composed her *Commentary* in the nunnery at Sopwell,⁶⁹ she would have benefited from a very specific type of medieval library. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton writes that nunneries, more so than monasteries, were home to a rich trove of vernacular texts in addition to traditional works in Latin: "with so many original works in Middle English to choose from, nuns' libraries had an advantage in many respects – as did lay women with access to libraries like those of the great charterhouses."⁷⁰ Kerby-Fulton discusses this unique quality of nuns' libraries in the context of an essay exploring early women readers of *Piers Plowman*. "Nuns' libraries," she writes, "in fact, held everything one would need to write *Piers Plowman*, from the *vitae sanctorum* to the standard compendia by writers like Peter

⁶⁹ David Lawton, "Psalms as Public Interiorities: Eleanor Hull's Voices" in *The Psalms and Medieval English Literature* Ed. Tamara Atkin and Francis Leneghan (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017) 316.

⁷⁰ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, "Women Readers in Langland's Earliest Audience" in *Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad*, Ed. Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) 125.

Comestor or Honorius of Autun to the popular pseudonymous works attributed to Augustine, Bernard and Hugh of St. Victor.”⁷¹

Such libraries are therefore unique sites of erasure of that chasm between *clergie* – and by that I mean both the caste and the forms of knowledge – and the laity to which *Piers* attests. Viewed in this way, it is perhaps unsurprising that one would contribute to the production of a text like Hull’s *Commentary*. For a woman to transmit a commentary on a set of texts traditionally taken to be the result of a sin born of specifically male privilege (a king abusing his power), to be used within the context of a penitential economy overseen exclusively by men, is itself a unique and subversive move. Hull’s text does not provide a specifically female model of pietistic participation but its erasure of overt penitential hierarchy, its positing of an ever present community of prayer, as well as its status as the product of female *clergie* offers an antidote to the stratification portrayed by *Piers* as endangering lay salvation. It is also helpful to contrast Hull’s *Commentary* with the most common mode of “writing” available to women in the Middle Ages. The visions of female mystics, characterized by Connor as “pure utterance, untouched by human mouth or ears”⁷² were funneled through a third party, generally a male spiritual director, in order to be accessed by others, lay and religious alike.⁷³ In translating a work presumably written by a male cleric, Hull is reversing this process by which every other medieval woman has given voice to her theological experience; in her commentary it is a man’s “voice” that is filtered through a woman writer. Its existence perfectly reflects the unique environment of a nunnery

⁷¹ Kerby-Fulton 126.

⁷² Connor 110.

⁷³ See, for example, Bridget of Sweden, who, in Rosalynn Voaden’s words, “constructs herself purely as a voice to articulate the word of God; she has no opinions, she is passive, she transmits the divine message without any glossing.” Rosalynn Voaden, *God’s Words, Women’s Voices* (Rochester: York Medieval Press, 1999) 95.

library, in which traditional exegesis commingled with the kind of “lewed clergie” that proliferated in the late medieval period.

The next chapter will turn to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a text grounded in visionary experience but one that shares with Hull’s *Commentary* the goal of creating voice. Margery Kempe turns her visions into voice just as Hull turns the text of the Psalms into voice. Of course, where Hull creates a community of voice into which her own is subsumed, Margery’s voice is – infamously in some quarters – singular. As I’ll show, however, the voice produced by *The Book of Margery Kempe* has its own project of shrinking the gap between lay and cleric, one that is, unlike Hull’s, specifically tied to gender.

Chapter Four

“Alle my childeryn, gostly & bodily”: Maternity, Exemplarity and Lay Clericalism in *The*

Book of Margery Kempe

The Psalms have their moment in *The Book of Margery Kempe* when, in response to being chided for her weeping, Margery, “for to excusyn hirselve leyd scriptur ageyn hem, versys of the Sawter, ‘*Qui seminant in lacrimis, et cetera, euntes ibant et flebant, et cetera*, and swech other” (2.6.235).¹ This use of scripture falls somewhere between an exegetical summoning of proof-text in support of her behavior and the kind of inhabiting of the biblical text modeled in Eleanor Hull’s commentary; by placing her affective responses within the context of the Psalter’s public interiorities – crying must be an acceptable form of piety because David invites his readers to do exactly that – Margery in effect constitutes an example of a layperson doing precisely what Hull’s text would have her do. Of course, her clerical detractors are not only unconvinced by Margery’s defense but in fact are “wel wrothar” (405). This moment, more than perhaps any other, situates Margery Kempe as Richard Rolle’s worst nightmare. Where Rolle sets the Psalms within a mediated penitential economy with carefully delineated roles for clergy and laypeople, *The Book* has the lay Margery deploy the Psalter in opposition to clerical censure, placing that devotional and liturgical centerpiece of medieval Christian practice at the very center of lay pushback against clerical authority.

That *The Book of Margery Kempe* contains an account of a laywoman who in many ways resists clerical authority is nothing new. The text itself records several accusations of Lollardy and critics point to the various moments in which the text gestures toward heretical beliefs or

¹ All references to the text of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Meech, EETS no. 212 (1940) in this chapter will be given parenthetically, by both chapter and page number in order to allow cross-referencing with other editions; chapters refer to Book 1 unless otherwise noted.

figures.² But, as others have been quick to argue, Margery eagerly participates in the clerically mediated activities and structures imposed by the orthodox Church. Far from rejecting confession, she continually seeks out confessors; so great is her faith in the efficacy of the Eucharist that she asks permission to partake in weekly communion.³

Having Rolle in mind is important in considering why Margery's orthodoxy is met with such vitriol because it is a reading of Rolle that plays an important role in what *The Book* reports as its own scribal history. A priest who becomes Margery's scribe is assured of the authenticity of her devotion after reading about several figures who engaged in the kind of affective piety that animates Margery, including "Richard Hampol, hermyte, in *Incendio Amoris* leche mater that mevyd hym to yevyn credens to the sayd creatur" (62.154). Both Hope Emily Allen and Barry Windeatt here point to Rolle's description of the mystic's rapture, predominantly composed in the third person, as a specific intertext for *The Book*. The only first person in that description occurs when Rolle emphasizes his inability to truly describe the shout of the 'vocem interiorem': *Vocem elevat interiorem, que non nisi, in amante ardentissimo (ut in via fas est) invenitur...non sufficio hunc clamorem describere...sed vobis enarrare nec potui nec potero* (He lifts up that inner voice, which only exists in those who love most fervently, to the utmost of his power...I am not equal to describing this shout...But I neither can nor will be able to tell you).⁴

² That Margery is never convicted of heresy does not deter these critics since, as John Arnold points out, heresy is always subjective, dependent upon historical and cultural context, and "always open to revision." Margery and her text had the potential to function as models of heresy or dissent regardless of the determination of any cleric in any one moment. John Arnold, "Margery's Trials: Heresy, Lollardy, and Dissent" in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004) 75-76.

³ As David Lawton has noted, "the problem is not Margery's orthodoxy, but orthodoxy from a channel to which it would normally be rationed." "Voice, Authority and Blasphemy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992) 96.

⁴ Windeatt 295n; Allen makes a similar point at 323n, dubbing the source of that marginalia "Margery's friend."

Windeatt notes that both Margery's scribe and the annotator who later wrote "nota de clamor" in the margin of the manuscript overlook the gap between Rolle's inward cry and Margery's loud weeping; Karma Lochrie has discussed the ways in which modern readers of *The Book* like Windeatt judge it inferior to the works of other English mystics like Rolle.⁵ However, reading this inclusion of Rolle as a spiritual exemplar and authorizing figure for Margery in the light cast by Hull's innovative Psalm commentary, we might consider the relationship between the two as more than a misreading or incomplete imitation. Just as Eleanor Hull makes use of the Psalter's first person in order to construct a far more inclusive devotional model, Margery Kempe seizes an affective response that Rolle declares to be inward, inaudible, and unavailable for imitation and turns it into a signature move, specifically one with external features that make it entirely replicable. That Rolle serves to authorize Margery – whose devotional practices he would have certainly disavowed – in the eyes of the man in charge of the physical transmission of her text, as well as for one of its early readers, indicates *The Book's* ability to manipulate existing devotional discourse in service of an alternative, even radical, exemplarity. If we need to expand our conception of what constitutes an exemplary text, as I have suggested we should with Hull's *Psalm Commentary*, we might see *The Book of Margery Kempe* as not only responding to exemplary literature but as offering a model for imitation that transcends the categories of spirituality and devotion available to women and blurs the line dividing layperson and cleric in the fifteenth century.

Critics have certainly seen the importance of exemplarity and exemplars in understanding Margery's piety. Much of the work done on *The Book's* relationship to exemplarity centers on

⁵ Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) 226.

Margery's accommodation of her own behavior to mirror that of other holy women, such as virgin martyrs, saints like Bridget and Elizabeth of Hungary, and Mary Magdalene.⁶ Catherine Sanok has argued for *The Book's* awareness and exposure of the gap between the exploits of the female saints presented as exemplars to late medieval women and the ethical behavior those women are exhorted to imitate by the conduct books that present them. I argue that *The Book* does highlight the shortcomings of exemplary and devotional texts, but also works to construct a strikingly different model, of female authority based in maternity. Critics have tended to consider the fact of Margery's motherhood in much the same way it is presented by *The Book*, as a potential impediment to her spiritual vocation that is resolved once she and John Kempe agree to live chastely. But the absence of any narrative centered on Margery's childrearing years should not lead us to assume that her status as a mother does not inform the exemplarity presented by her text. Instead, I would like to offer a consideration of maternity as an essential component in the creation of this new model, arguing that *The Book* presents a vision of maternity meant to contend with the degendered form of motherhood found in conduct texts written for a female audience and available to both religious and lay women. That vision sources spiritual authority in biological motherhood and forms the basis for Margery's version of lay *clergie*.

⁶ Sarah Salih provides a helpful overview of the various kinds of exemplary women seen as models for Margery's behavior in *Versions of Virginit*y (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001) chapter 5. She also discusses the similarities between the conversion scenes in the Digby saint plays and Margery's conversion narrative in "Staging Conversion: The Digby Saint Plays and *The Book of Margery Kempe*" in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih, Eds, (London: Routledge, 2005) 121-134. See Teresa Coletti's *Mary Magdalene and The Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) as well as Jessica Rosenfeld, "Envy and Exemplarity in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Exemplaria* 26.1 (Spring 2014) 105-121 for their arguments on the influence of the figure of Mary Magdalene on *The Book's* representation of Margery.

Motherhood, Exemplarity, and the Clergy

About halfway through *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery describes being tested by a “gret clerke” who comes to ask how “Crescite et multiplicamini” – the “Be fruitful and multiply” of Genesis 1 – is to be understood. Margery replies:

Ser, thes wordys ben not undirstondyn only of begetyng of chyldren bodily, but also be purchasyng of vertu, which is frute gostly, as be heryng of the wordys of God, be good exampyl geuyng, be mekenes & paciens, charite & chastite, & swech other, for pacyens is more worthy than myraclys werkyng.

(51.121)

Most critical treatment of this vignette focuses (rightly so) on the question of Margery’s Latinity and orthodoxy.⁷ But attending to the substance of her exegesis as well clarifies its connection between motherhood and exemplarity: the act of bringing children into the world and that of serving as an example for others are both equally enjoined by God.⁸ Furthermore, the “but also” of Margery’s gloss accomplishes something unique among medieval texts: it reattaches metaphorical motherhood to biological mothers.

Margery’s exegetical assertion that physical motherhood and metaphorical motherhood can be derived from the same Bible verse is more radical than we might assume. Medieval texts tend to portray motherhood either as metaphor or as a physical and emotional reality.

Motherhood as a representation – of an unparalleled union between two bodies, of the

⁷ As David Lawton notes, Margery’s understanding of this verse is in fact perfectly orthodox, relying on the spiritual sense of the verse. Lawton, “Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” 98. This sense is expounded upon by exegetes such as Gregory of Nyssa, who explains that there are two ways to “increase,” in body and in soul: He [God] told, therefore, the senseless animals to increase by the development of the body. But to us he said ‘increase’ in the inner person along ways which lead toward God. This was what Paul did, in his stretching out toward what lay ahead and forgetting what lie behind. This is godly increase.” Quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Genesis I-II* Ed. Andrew Louth (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2001) 38.

⁸ Eleanor Hull offers a similar idea in her gloss on Psalm 101, in which she discusses those apostles and martyrs who did not have biological children but rather sons of “doctryne.” She explains that “the sone of doctryne ys he that thou techyst by word and by ensample for-to seke the everlastyng lyfe” (163/897-898).

incomparable care shown by the powerful party for the vulnerable – is idealized, while women who birth children are objects of denigration.⁹ Perhaps this is why Margery Kempe’s motherhood, the fact that she bore (at least) fourteen children in and from her body, is rarely given more than passing critical treatment. Reading *The Book* in the context of *Piers Plowman* and Hull’s *Commentary*, two texts that complicate the idea of clerical authority and experiment with hybrid identity, reveals the connections it makes between motherhood and *clergie*. While *The Book* contains no narrative treatment of Margery’s childrearing years, its recounting of her second act as a mystic builds a case for the compatibility of physical maternity and spiritual care, providing a counterpoint to the degendered version of motherhood found in various medieval religious texts, particularly conduct texts written for a female audience.

A woman who was also a mother in late medieval England likely would have had more frequent interaction with her local clergy than other laypeople, much as childbearing women today deal with the medical profession well beyond the prescribed yearly checkup. Given this probable frequency, what *The Book* has to say about pastoral care becomes linked with Margery’s experience as a mother. In other words, a medieval woman who had experienced childbirth might have had as much or more cause to chafe against clerical authority as other laypeople. As Tara Williams points out, “Margery becomes a mother and spiritual figure almost simultaneously”;¹⁰ her first mystical experience occurs in the aftermath of the birth of her first

⁹ As Caroline Walker Bynum has argued, maternal imagery used to describe God, Christ and monks was based upon an idealization of the role of mother and could be quite different from how monks saw actual mothers, even their own. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 167. Monica Green has more recently attempted to recover ideas about the physical realities of medieval motherhood by reading medical writing from the conquest through the later fourteenth century. This essay, however, offers *The Book of Margery Kempe* as a rare example of a text that combines attention to lived motherhood with its metaphorical value in the area of spiritual parentage.

¹⁰ Tara Williams, “Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.” *Modern Philology* 107.4 (May 2010), 533.

child. But those two vocations are linked by a failed clerical mediation that forms the bridge between the birth of her child and the madness that culminates in Christ's first appearance. *The Book* connects motherhood to mysticism, but it also presents the onset of motherhood as a critical touch-point between layperson and cleric. One of the concerns of *The Book* is the manifold ways in which lay spirituality is or is not adequately managed by the clergy.¹¹ Motherhood as a quintessentially lay experience – an inevitable one for a significant portion of the lay population – must therefore be taken seriously as a critical aspect of the text. If Margery is, as Sarah Beckwith maintains, “simultaneously lay and devoted to the appropriation of forms of clerical practice,”¹² then it is her initiation into the unreservedly lay category of “mother” that precipitates her incursion into that space between lay and cleric.

The childbirth episode at the opening of Margery's *Book* functions as a snapshot of what must have been a frequent tableau of lay life: Margery calls for her confessor following a difficult pregnancy and delivery, fearing for her life. But her confessor “was a lytyl to hastye & gan scharply to undyrnemy n hir er than sche had fully seyde hir entent” (1.7). *The Book*'s vivid rendering of Margery's internal struggle is as potent a description of a troubled lay conscience as anything we find in *Piers Plowman*: faced with the “dreed sche had of dampnacyon on the to syde & hys scharp repreuyng on that other syde, this creatur went owt of hir mende” (1.7). As a result of inadequate pastoral care, Margery's long-concealed sin goes unconfessed¹³ and she

¹¹ This overlap with Wycliffism has led to critical debate over Margery's Lollardy. See Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 435-436 for a concise description of those accusations of heresy, from which Margery is ultimately vindicated, as well as *The Book*'s depiction of ecclesiastical anxieties.

¹² *Christ's Body* 107.

¹³ Many critics have concluded that the unconfessed sin was sexual in nature but readers of *The Book* might want to reconsider that conclusion, mirroring as it does the assumptions of fifteenth century clerics. Katherine French has labeled as “typical” the assumption in a fifteenth century confession manual “that

loses herself in spiritual and mental despair. *The Book's* description of Margery's madness emphasizes the relationship between her treatment at the hands of her confessor and the way she treats others: "Hys scharp repreuyng," we might imagine, engenders her "many a repreuows worde and many a schrewyd worde" to those around her (1.7). *The Book of Margery Kempe* provides a valuable window into late medieval lay devotion¹⁴ and also offers a glimpse of the fissures in that devotional landscape. Margery presents her mystical encounter as unique, but the incomplete lay-clerical interaction that precedes it was probably more common. Were more women in perilous childbirth met with clerical haste and criticism in place of compassion? Would a fifteenth-century woman reading this scene in Margery's "schort tretys" have nodded her head in recognition?

Critics have not been eager to blame Margery's priest for her madness. Liz Herbert McAvoy identifies the act of becoming a mother itself as the root of Margery's crisis, arguing that it is the trauma of childbirth that has "effectively separated her from her family, her friends, from her child, from herself and from God."¹⁵ Sarah Salih rejects the idea that childbirth was the source of Margery's madness, arguing that the near-death experience more broadly was responsible and that "any situation of physical danger could have produced the same set of effects."¹⁶ Salih minimizes the influence of the unsuccessful clerical interaction on Margery's mental anguish, preferring to place the onus on Margery and labeling the incident one of "failed

most of women's sins would be related to sex," and the gender discrepancy in those confessional attitudes points to the chasm between clerics and laywomen that is the subject of this chapter. Katherine French, *The Good Women of the Parish* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) 207.

¹⁴ As evidenced by the sheer number of references to it in Eamon Duffy's tome on lay religious practice, *The Stripping of the Altars*.

¹⁵ Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004) 38.

¹⁶ Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001) 178.

telling.”¹⁷ I do not wish to dismiss either the setting of the birthing chamber or the role played by the priest in providing the impetus for Margery’s madness and ensuing conversion. Instead I argue that *The Book’s* representation of this failure of clerical duty between the physical act of childbirth and Margery’s spiritual crisis is quite purposeful, and that the intersection between that exclusively female experience and inadequate pastoral care, or perhaps simply the requirement of clerical interaction in that moment,¹⁸ precipitates both her spiritual nadir and her later conversion. This connection between childbirth and clerical malfeasance then casts Margery’s conversion and ensuing mystical relationship with Christ as a subtle critique and corrective to the confessional and devotional shortcomings of the clergy.

Christ as Cleric

The Book’s use of maternal imagery, particularly in describing Margery’s incursions into clerical spaces and functions, will ultimately position her as a radical alternative to male clerics. But Christ’s mystical appearances to Margery pave the way for that alternative clerical model, emphasizing the replacement and overriding of her “earthly confessors” by Christ himself. His first appearance responds directly to the circumstances of her failed childbed confession. In a revision of Psalm 22, Christ asks “Dowtyr, why hast thow forsakyn me, and I forsoke neuyr the?” He rises in the air, “not rygth hastyli & qwykly, but fayr & esly that sche mygth wel be-

¹⁷ Salih 179.

¹⁸ In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas notes the (erroneous) lay belief that a woman who died in childbirth and lost the opportunity for purification would be refused Christian burial (39). Likewise, the thought of dying without a complete confession would have been a source of anxiety for women in an already vulnerable state. Both of these factors would highlight the perceived requirement that physically and spiritually vulnerable women interact with male power in order to gain salvation.

holdyn him” (1.8). Christ is here described as the opposite of Margery’s “hastye” confessor, his patient presence causing her to be immediately “stablyd in her wyttys & in hir reson” (1.8).

Importantly, Christ does not simply provide a momentary antidote to Margery’s injurious spiritual guide. What is meant to be her Road to Damascus moment, the single, path-altering conversion that is the hallmark of many saints’ lives, is instead a series of visions which come to resemble a long-term educational program. In a departure from conversion narratives, Margery continues to sin following her divine encounter and it is only under continuous direction from Christ that she transitions from proud sinner to penitent. This queering¹⁹ of genre – of saint’s life, of conversion narrative, of female mysticism – produces a different kind of divine-human encounter that mimics the catechetical relationship between cleric and layperson. The text suggests that Christ replaces Margery’s human confessor when he assures her that he is “the same God that have browt thi synnes to thi mend & mad the to be schreve therof” (5.17). While Margery still seeks the advice and ministrations of various clerics, *The Book* makes it clear that Christ’s spiritual counsel overrides any external clerical intervention. Christ notes that his instruction to take his “flesch” and “blod” every Sunday will have an internal effect – “I schal flowe so mych grace in the that alle the world xal meruelyn therof” – and that as a result Margery will have “grace j-now to answer euery clerke in the loue of God” (5.17). Here we are told that the internal transmission of Christ’s grace to Margery serves to construct an external voice that can hold its own against clerical pressure.

¹⁹ I use this term in the expansive sense put forth by Carolyn Dinshaw, in which “queer” is understood to be “a relation to a norm.” Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) 39. Dinshaw’s argument that “Margery can be seen as ‘queer’ in relation to religious ideals as well as to behaviors, habits, and expectations of her earthly community” would seem to me to apply to her text’s relationship to the genres cited above. Carolyn Dinshaw, “Got Medieval?” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (10.2, April 2001) 208.

The Book sets Christ's voice in opposition to, and as an improvement on, the various forms of clerical voice, particularly preaching and pedagogy. When Margery has trouble understanding a sermon, Christ reassures her: "I xal preche the & teche the my-selfe, for thi wyle & thy desyr is acceptabyl un-to me" (41.98). In response to an anchorite, previously supportive of Margery, who suggests that she has broken her vow of chastity and forbids her from wearing white clothing, Christ declares: "I wil not that thu be gouernyd be hym" (43.103). Christ makes it clear that this sentiment applies universally when he tells Margery: "Ther is no clerk in al this world that can, dowtyr, leryn the bettyr than I can do" (64.158) Interestingly, it is often those outside the formal clerical hierarchy who accept Margery and acknowledge her pedagogical relationship with Christ. Early in *The Book*, Christ tells Margery to visit an anchorite "& schew hym my preuyteys & my counselys which I schew to the, and werk aftyr hys counsel, for my spyrit xal speke in hym to the" (5.17). This language establishes Christ as the source of whatever counsel the anchorite proffers in Margery's encounters with him. Though the text positions the anchorite as a spiritual counselor, he himself affirms Christ's primacy. When Margery asks what she should do if she finds herself without the comfort of an earthly confessor, he responds: "Dowtyr, drede ye nowt, for owyr Lord schal comfort yow hys owyn self" (18.44). Christ echoes that same idea when Margery later complains about the absence of various confessors: "Dowtyr, I am mor worthy to thy sowle than euyr was the ankyr & alle tho which thu hast rehersed er alle the world may be, & I xal comfortyn the myself" (69.169). Whatever deference Margery might show to various clerics, *The Book* regards Christ as an enduring and unrivaled source of spiritual counsel and comfort for her.

Margery as Cleric

In addition to establishing his precedence over earthly confessors, Christ's pastoral education privileges, for a time, internal, meditative devotion over some of the more external displays of late medieval piety. He authorizes Margery's retreat from ecclesiastical prayer and instead praises her prayer "be thowt" (88.216). He directs Margery to replace the hair shirt she wears on her body with "an hayr in thin hert" (5.17) and privileges "thynkyng in thi mende" over "preyng wyth thi mowth" (36.90). Christ also assures her that she will have "as grete mede & as gret reward wyth me in Heuyn for this good seruyse & the good dedys that thu hast don in thi mynde & meditacyon as gyf thu haddyst don tho same dedys wyth thy bodily wittys wyth-owtyn-forth" (84.203). This preference for internal modes of worship is also tied to a pervasive theme of Margery as intercessor for both lay people and clerics. When Christ instructs Margery to leave Jerusalem, he reassures her that "as oftyn-times as thu seyst or thynkyst, 'Worshepyd be alle tho holy placys in Ierusalem that Crist suffryde bittyr peyn & passion in,' thu schalt haue the same pardon as gyf thu wert her wyth thi bodily presens bothyn to thi-self & to alle tho that thu wylt geuyn it to" (30.75). This reassurance not only equates voice or thought with bodily experience, but also presents Margery as a mediatory figure, able to disburse the pardon that she receives from Christ for paying reverence to the holy sites in Jerusalem.

The Book gives several accounts of Margery's successfully fulfilling an intercessory role. In perhaps the most extraordinary, an episode many see as attempting to build a case for her sainthood, she saves St. Margaret's from a fire when her prayers to God to "sende down sum reyn er sum wedyr" result in a falling snow that halts the flames (67.163-164). Her function as intercessor predominantly manifests in the role she plays in the more personal drama of lay salvation. At one point Margery develops a reputation for being able to tell people if they are

saved or damned (55.136); she is repeatedly asked by others to pray for them (including a clerk who had formerly accused her of heresy). She obliges these requests when, having been forgiven for her own sins by Christ, she leverages that pardon to ask “mercy for the synne of the pepil” (57.141).

The text also emphasizes Margery’s role in ministering to those close to death. While she does not fulfill the sacramental functions of a priest, *The Book* does attest to her presence at many a deathbed, noting that “the sayd creatur was desiryd of mech pepil to be wyth hem at her deying & to prey for hem, for, thow thei louyd not hir wepyng ne hir crying in her lyfe-tyme, thei de[si]ryd that sche xulde bothyn wepyn & cryin whan thei xulde deyin, & so sche dede” (72.172-173). This is one of a handful of moments throughout the text that echo Margery’s initial crisis. Eamon Duffy writes of lay anxiety about death and the various outlets through which lay people sought relief in their hour of dying.²⁰ He describes the deathbed as a communal event, with neighbors often dropping in to make sure the rituals preceding death went off smoothly.²¹ Margery here clearly participates in that lay practice, but in being specifically sought out for her unique set of “skills,” she seems to have been perceived as more than just a friendly neighbor, her presence at the deathbed a bemusing hybrid of quirky acquaintance, priest and influential saint. This lay perception of the efficacy of her piety in securing salvation offers an interesting contrast to the detrimental influence attributed to women by lay conduct books such as *Book to a Mother*, which states that the “malice and maumetrie of wommen” keeps not only the women

²⁰ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 317-318.

²¹ Duffy 323.

themselves but “alle that consenten with hem” from the kingdom of heaven.²² *The Book*’s focus on lay, and sometimes clerical, perception of Margery as an efficacious intercessor produces a unique model of a laywoman fulfilling a critical salvific role.

There are a number of moments, like her interaction with the accusing cleric, that showcase Margery subverting the ecclesiastical hierarchy and serving as mediator for clerical figures. At times she functions in the mold of the holy woman as channel to the divine: when a vicar asks Margery whether he should leave his curacy, she simply delivers the message from Christ that he should remain in his role (23.53). But often Margery’s counsel to those in holy orders is offered in the absence of a divine dictate, at one point even impacting the relationship between Margery and the man writing her text. When Margery and her scribe disagree over what to do about a young man seeking help whom she does not trust, she says: “yf ye wyld do be my counsel & aftyr that I fele, lathyth hym chesyn & helpyn hym-self as wel as he can & medyl ye not wyth hym, for he xal dysceyue yow at the last” (24.56). The fact that it is Margery who “counsels” her scribe serves to further differentiate *The Book* from other writing attributed to women in the medieval period. Where most female experience is spoken by a woman and filtered through a man who converts it to text, voice and text are conflated in Margery’s *Book* and its claim that she is in the position of counseling the man writing her text down further muddles the boundary between lay visionary and clerical scribe.

The Book portrays Margery’s voice, specifically her signature weeping, as integral to her role as intercessor for members of the clergy. Early in the narrative, she relates that, during a visit to a monastery, one of the monks who at first despises her later asks her to tell him

²² *Book to a Mother: An Edition with Commentary*, ed. by Adrian James McCarthy, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, 92 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1981) 119.

“whethyr I schal be savyd or nowt and in what synnes I have most dysplesyd God” (12.26). The monk poses his questions as a test, telling Margery that he will only believe that she is the recipient of divine visions if she can tell him his sin, but *The Book* describes their interaction in terms that evoke a mix of the confessional and liturgical roles of the clergy. After all, it is the sacramental job of the clerical confessor to explain to those who come seeking absolution how and why their actions were displeasing to God. Margery’s response, telling the monk, “yyf I may wepe for yow I hope to han grace for yow” (12.26), suggests a mediatory role, with her weeping voice supplying grace. This alignment of Margery’s voice with the liturgical role of the clergy is made more explicit later in *The Book* when Christ assures Margery that her confessor, Master Robert, will be rewarded for her past weeping “as thow he had wept hymselfe” (88.216). Hope Emily Allen’s description of Margery’s tears as “a supplementary liturgy”²³ makes the subversion of hierarchy here even more poignant. Like lay parishioners who gain merit for prayers actually voiced by the priest reciting the mass, Margery’s confessor benefits from her alternative liturgical performance, one that in this case is implicitly privileged over traditional Church worship.

We encounter another, more traditionally clerical voice in *The Book*’s recounting of Margery’s experience in York. There she goes toe to toe with the Archbishop, who tests her on “the Articles of the Feyth” and asks her to swear that she will not “techyn ne chalengyn” the people in his diocese. She refuses and is confronted with the Pauline prohibition against preaching by women, found in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. Her response takes advantage of the dislocation, described in *Piers Plowman*, of the *clergie* that is theological teaching from the institutional preaching understood to be the exclusive province of the clergy. Her denial that she

²³ Kempe 256.

is encroaching on that clerical territory relies on rhetorical hair-splitting: “I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpytt. I use but comownycacyon & good wordys, & that wil I do while I leve” (52.126). She cannot be preaching since she has not assumed the formal trappings of the clergy; anything outside of those institutional bounds is but “comownycacyon & good wordys.”²⁴ Shortly thereafter she makes use of that homiletic staple, the *exemplum*,²⁵ though it is an anticlerical *exemplum* that would be quite at home in *Piers Plowman*, dealing as it does with a priest who administers the sacraments “undevowtly” and goes to Mass “wyth-owtyn devocyon,” having “ful lityl contricyon” for his sins (52.127). She therefore defends her own right to engage in *clergie* (teaching) by distancing herself from *clergie* (preaching, especially from a pulpit), while at the same time using *clergie* (an exemplum) to critique the *clergie* (clerical hypocrisy).²⁶ This episode ends as yet another example of the success of Margery’s model of lay clericalism. Her use of a mode of teaching usually reserved for clerics goes uncensored and in fact has an unintentional pedagogical effect on a previously antagonistic clerk. He tells her that her tale has “smytyth me to the hert” (52.127)²⁷ and he not only asks for her forgiveness but also asks that she pray for him. Her “comownycacyon & good wordys” have accomplished that which Patience

²⁴ See Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* 110-112 for similar distinctions made in other fifteenth-century texts, particularly the *Speculum Christiani*, whose author, Lochrie argues, marks the basic difference between preaching and teaching as exhibiting or lacking institutional “places, times, and circumstances” (111).

²⁵ See G.R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926) 310-313 and *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933) Chapter 4.

²⁶ Genelle Gertz points out that in her trial narrative, Anne Askew, a woman convicted of heresy and burned at the stake in the sixteenth-century, employs a similar approach, denying that she has engaged in preaching (women don’t “go into the pulpett”) but engaging in homiletic rhetoric and quotation. Genelle Gertz, *Heresy Trials and English Women Writers, 1400-1670* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 62 and Chapter 3.

²⁷ In response, Margery implicitly compares herself to her hometown preacher who, she tells the contrite clerk, “seyth many tymes in the pulpit, ‘yff any man be evyl plesyd wyth my prechyng, note hym wel, for he is gylty” (52.128).

and Conscience sought to do for Haukyn, the evocation of contrition in a wayward clerk. In this one episode Margery appropriates not only the role of clerics as public preachers but also their sacramental and liturgical responsibilities, evoking contrition in those who have sinned and praying for them as official intermediaries.

I will return to the significance of liturgy to Margery's clerical model but it is important that, later in *The Book*, the "supplemental liturgy" of Margery's weeping is superseded by her writing. Christ's stated preference for internal devotion – the prayer "be thowt" that Margery shares with Hull – over hearing mass and saying matins is imparted at a time when Margery prioritizes the composition of her book over public prayer, preferring to stay "at hom in hir chamber." Christ tells Margery that he will consider her mere intention to pray as if she had said the prayers, and assures her that her writing pleases him: "thow ye wer in the chirche & wept bothyn to-gedyr as sore as euyr thus dedist, yet xulde ye not plesyn me mor than ye don wyth yowr writing, for dowtyr, be this boke many a man xal be turnyd to me and beleuyn therin" (88.216). Describing her in these evangelical terms, Christ offers a twist on the stories of the virgin saints who are among *The Book's* menagerie of exemplars. Margery too will be the impetus for the belief of others but instead of gruesome torture and supernatural death, she has a book; unlike those martyrs, whose stories are told by others, Margery controls the production of her own text and serves as counsel to her scribe, the man who commits it to parchment. Christ, therefore, not only serves as an alternative cleric for Margery but also describes her evangelical role in language that evokes the liturgical and scribal activities traditionally associated with the clergy.

Christ's characterization, in speaking to Margery, of *The Book* as "yowr writing," places her in a clerical category usually unavailable to laypeople. The late fourteenth-century devotional

treatise *Book to a Mother* offers an especially helpful contrast to this authorization of female textual composition when the author tells his mother:

And thus thou maist lerne aftir thi samplerie to write a feir trewe bok and better konne Holi Writ than ony maister of diuinite that loueth not God so wel as thou; for who loueth best God, can best Holi Writ. For bokis that men wryten ben not Holi Wryt, but as ymages ben holi, for thei bitokeneth holi Seintes; but Christ, Godis Sone, he is uerreiliche Holi Writ, and who that louith him best is best clerk²⁸

This dismissal of writing as unnecessary and inferior to love of the divine is hypocritical, coming as it does in the context of a text written by a clerk. Its author forecloses the possibility of lay devotion through writing. Margery's *Book* seems to respond almost directly to this devaluation of the physical act of textual composition; as a text written *by* a mother, and one that explicitly references biological maternity, *The Book of Margery Kempe* embodies the possibility of lay voice becoming text. In Christ's description of that writing process as something that keeps Margery from her normal course of public devotion – specified as weeping in the public setting of the church – we find an analogue to childbirth, an experience that also necessitated a separation of the postpartum woman from communal worship. That “text” for Margery would also mean flesh, with her words being transferred onto a body of skin, contributes to the comparison between birthing and writing, inviting us to consider how her experience of one informs the other.

Physical Motherhood Begets Spiritual Motherhood

If the onset of motherhood provides the impetus for Margery's reimagining of pastoral care and education, what role does her identity as a mother play in a text that barely mentions her children? McAvoy identifies Margery's “reappropriation and recontextualisation of her own

²⁸ *Book to a Mother* 39.

maternal practices as [...] self-empowerment”²⁹ but argues for that use of maternity as a response to the exemplary models of holy women such as St. Bridget and Elizabeth of Hungary. Those two women would appear to be on opposite poles of the maternal-mystical spectrum: Elizabeth regarded her own children as earthly possessions and abandoned them in order to care for those of the poor, sick and needy while Bridget’s writings are full of references to her eight children.³⁰ The near-total silence of Margery’s *Book* when it comes to her progeny sets her apart from those two exemplary women; while there is nothing in *The Book* that indicates that Margery derived pleasure from being a mother, there also isn’t much to support the argument that she found it “repressive and unacceptable.”³¹ In addition to the ways in which her experience of “flesh-bearing” may have inflected the way she conceived of the process of composing her text, there are also intimations that her experience as a biological mother informs her later role as a mystic and spiritual advisor, and that *The Book*’s maternal motifs recuperate the matter of motherhood in the face of its treatment by conduct texts with which she may have been familiar.

Motherhood as metaphor pervades anchoritic texts for women such as *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Maidenhed*, especially in various discussions of sin. *Ancrene Wisse* describes female sinners as daughters who follow their mother, Eve³² and refers to the seven deadly sins as the “seoue moder-sunnen ant of hare teames”³³ (seven mother-sins and their children).³⁴ In his instruction

²⁹ McAvoy 52.

³⁰ The *Relevations* do, it must be noted, acknowledge the impediment Bridget’s love for her children poses for her religious calling. For a discussion of this opposition of love for children and love for God, see Jeannette Nieuwland, “Motherhood and Sanctity in the Life of Saint Birgitta of Sweden” in *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*, Ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (New York: Garland, 1995) 297-329.

³¹ McEntire 58.

³² *Ancrene Wisse*, Ed. Bella Millet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 22.

³³ *Ancrene Wisse* 83.

on the confession of “strange sins,” the author advises his audience to “drah togedere al the team under the moder”³⁵ (draw all the children together under the mother sin).³⁶ But motherhood also emerges in a more positive light, such as when the text describes Christ as having “him seoluen bitweonen us ant his feader, the threatte us forte smitten, ase moder that is reowoful deth hire bitweonen hire child ant te wrathe, sturne feader hwen he hit wule beaten”³⁷ (put himself between us and his Father, who was threatening to strike us, as a compassionate mother puts herself between her child and the angry, stern father, when he is about to beat it).³⁸ But the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* also makes it clear that Christ supersedes human mothers and mothering:

Child thet hefde swuch uuel thet him bihofde beath of blod ear hit were ihealet, muchel the moder luuede hit the walde this beath him makien. This dude ure Lauerd... thet he luueth us mare then eani moder hire child, he hit seith him seoluen thurh Ysaie... 'Mei moder,' he seith, 'forgeoten hir child? Ant thah heo do, Ich ne mei the forgeoten neauer'³⁹

If a child had such a disease that it needed a bath of blood before it could be healed, any mother who made this bath for it would love it greatly. Our Lord did this for us... That he loves us more than any mother her child, he says himself through Isaiah... 'Can a mother,' he says, 'forget her child? And even though she does, I cannot ever forget you'⁴⁰

³⁴ Translations of the anchoritic texts are taken from Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, Ed. *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works, Classics of Western Spirituality* 73 (Paulist Press, 1991) 128.

³⁵ *Ancrene Wisse* 127.

³⁶ Savage and Watson 171.

³⁷ *Ancrene Wisse* 138.

³⁸ Savage and Watson 182.

³⁹ *Ancrene Wisse* 149.

⁴⁰ Savage and Watson, 193.

This suggestion that Christ surpasses human mothers because they may forget their children while he will never forget his, should remind us that the authors of *Ancrene Wisse* and the book of Isaiah are both men writing about what it means to be a mother.⁴¹

Another anchoritic text, *Hali Maidenhed*, contains further examples of the supersession of physical maternity by metaphorical motherhood. As its title suggests, *Hali Maidenhed* aims to encourage young religious women in the preservation of their virginity so it is unsurprising that it paints motherhood as awash in pain and misery:

Ga we nu forthre! Loke we hwuch wunne ariseth therafter I burtherne of bearne, hwen that streon i the awakeneth & waxeth. Hu moni earmthen anan awakeneth ther-with, that wurcheth the wa inoh, fehteth o thi selue flesch, & weorreth with fele weanen o thin ahne cunde⁴²

Let us now go on, and look at what joy arises afterwards in the carrying of a child, when the offspring in you awakens and grows, and how many miseries awaken at once along with it – which cause you much pain, fight with your own flesh, and make war on your nature with great suffering⁴³

The text embraces a kind of motherhood that dispenses with “flesh” in its description of the merits of anchoritic life:

Yef the were leof streon, nim the to him, under hwam thu schalt, I thi meidhad, te-men dehtren & sunen of gasteliche teames, the neauer deie ne mahen, ah schulen aa biuore the pleien in heouene; thet beoth the uertuz thet he streoneth in the thurh hif swete grace, as rihtwissnesse & warschipe ageines untheawes...this is meidenes team, godes sune spuse, thet schal áá libben & pleien buten ende biuoren hire in heouene⁴⁴

If you would be glad of children, give yourself to him by whom you will give birth in your maidenhood to daughters and sons, spiritual children who never die, never can, but who will always play before you in heaven: that is, the virtues he begets in you through his sweet grace, such as justice and caution against vices... These are the children of the

⁴¹ Margery, in fact, makes a point of telling her readers that she has not forgotten “the frute of hir wombe” (1m.223).

⁴² *Hali Meidenhad*, Ed. F.J. Furnivall (London: Early English Text Society, 1922) 49.

⁴³ Savage and Watson 238.

⁴⁴ *Hali Meidenhad* 56.

maiden, the spouse of God's Son, who will live and play forever and ever before her in heaven⁴⁵

These anchoritic texts, directed as they are to women choosing virginity and claustration, expend significant effort to elevate spiritual matrimony and motherhood above their physical counterparts, ultimately making the case that birthing "spiritual children" is preferable to the messy business of biological procreation. But several passages, as well as manuscript evidence, point to the applicability and availability of these texts among lay people as well,⁴⁶ which means that women who bore actual human children were reading texts denigrating what was a common and likely pivotal experience in their lives.

Book to a Mother is a particularly helpful intertext when it comes to attitudes toward motherhood since it operates under the fiction that it is addressed to the author's actual mother and is one of the few conduct texts explicitly directed toward lay people. Though it is ostensibly addressed to the priest's actual mother, and includes various details of their relationship, *Book to a Mother* elides physical maternity in favor of its spiritual analogue.⁴⁷ One of the major repetitions in the text is the priest's contrast between the "gostliche" and the "bodiliche," and his emphasis on the superiority of the former over the latter. In describing the "Louers of uoluptuosite and lustis" who "euer coueiteden schrewdliche rychesses," the priest adds that "to

⁴⁵ Savage and Watson 240.

⁴⁶ In "The Reader of the *Ancrene Wisse*" Elizabeth Robertson talks about the variety of "reader functions" present in the *Ancrene Wisse*, including the applicability of certain passages to "any woman reader, secular or religious, in almost any circumstance" (170). For the ways in which the text became accessible to lay readers, see Catherine Innes Parker, "The Legacy of *Ancrene Wisse*: Translations, Adaptations, Influences and Audience, with Special Attention to Women Readers" in *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse* Ed. Yoko Wada (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003) 145-173.

⁴⁷ As evidenced from its very opening, wherein the author writes that he desires "euerych man and womman and child to be my moder" (1).

have fleshlich children thei helden a gred gift.”⁴⁸ The negative value assigned to bodily procreation is again evident in the priest’s citation of the “bodiliche” maternity of Mary; he urges his mother to “conceyue the same Crist and bere him not onlich nine monthes but withoute ende.”⁴⁹ This is an odd passage and one that seems to imply the ability of contemporary women who choose the religious life – in the case of its addressee as a widow who has already borne bodily children – to surpass the bodily maternity of the Virgin Mary. This particular privileging of the “gostliche” over the “bodiliche,” the potential for contemporary women to serve as spiritual “mothers” to Christ has also been seen as an example of the way in which *Book to a Mother* both devalues and de genders maternity, rejecting physical, biological motherhood for a spiritual version available to anyone, regardless of gender.⁵⁰

One of the more radical aspects of Margery’s *Book*, then, is that it reverses this model championed by conduct texts like *Book to a Mother*. Margery takes the internal grace granted to her by Christ and turns it into an actual, physical book in which she features as exemplar, subtly building a case for the compatibility of physical motherhood with the kind of spiritual merit that *Hali Maidenhed* assigns only to lifelong virgins. But *The Book* goes beyond simply demonstrating that non-virgin mothers can attain the same spiritual heights as cloistered virgins to make a crucial connection between intercession and maternity. Describing the potential for Margery to serve as a spiritual intercessor, Christ references both spiritual and biological motherhood: “thu makyst euery Cristen man & woman thi childe in thi sowle for the tyme & woldist han as meche grace for hem as for thin owyn childeryn” (86.213). In what might be the

⁴⁸ *Book to a Mother* 109.

⁴⁹ *Book to a Mother* 44.

⁵⁰ Nancy Bradley Warren, “Pregnancy and Productivity: The Imagery of Female Monasticism within and beyond the Cloister Walls,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28.3 (Fall 1998) 541.

strongest affirmation of physical maternity in Middle English, Christ's words make the case for the physical, lived experience of motherhood as a prerequisite for spiritual care rather than a more painful, dimmer version of spiritual maternity, or as a metaphor meant to make a spiritual relationship with Christ more understandable to a lay audience.

In the face of anchoritic texts asking her to choose between physical children and spiritual children, Margery opts for both. In fact, one of the projects of her *Book* is to make the case that she only understands how to dispense grace for all of Christendom *because* her body has borne children, because she knows what the physical analogue to spiritual parenthood *feels like*. In this way, Margery's maternal experiences are not the barrier to spiritual participation some of her detractors might have her believe but rather the very root of her ability to serve as spiritual mediatrix to others. *The Book of Margery Kempe* therefore attempts a quite radical inversion of the dominant perception of women and maternity. That view saw mothers as "especially associated with the procreation of the physicality, the flesh, of the child"⁵¹ and thus disqualified from the higher echelons of spirituality without – and arguably even in the case of – renunciation of the role of mother. In her text, Margery turns physical motherhood into a qualification for spiritual parentage.

The language of motherhood is present and tied to spiritual intercession throughout the *The Book*. Margery is repeatedly addressed in maternal terms, often in contexts involving the subversion of ecclesiastical hierarchy discussed earlier in the chapter. A priest, whom *The Book* tells us Margery "had receyued as for hir owyn sone," calls her "modyr" and benefits from her spiritual guidance (42.100). This priest, we are told, "was wel comforyd wyth hyr wordys, for he trustyd meche in hir felyngys and mad hir as good chir be the wey as yyf he had ben hir owyn

⁵¹ Bynum 134.

sone born of hir body” (42.101). Here spiritual comfort and authority are tied to the language of bodily maternity. As if to emphasize that this authority is closely connected with *clergie*, the text follows this interaction with an account of Margery in a fully clerical role, teaching and rebuking members of her fellowship.

Similar clerical-maternal relationships are recorded elsewhere in *The Book* as well. Thomas Marchale of Newcastle, moved to contrition and described as a “newe man” after listening to Margery’s words, calls her “modyr” (45.108), as does the young man at Shene, who, taken with her boisterous weeping, declares his intent to take holy orders:

My desir is to plesyn my Lord Ihesu Crist & so to folwyn hym as I kan & may. & I purpose me be the grace of God to takyn the abite of this holy religion, & therfor I prey yow beth not strawnge vn-to me. Schewith modirly & goodly yowr conceit vn-to me as I trust vn-to yow

(10m.246)

This conflation of biological and spiritual maternity is most present in *The Book*’s description of the relationship between Margery and her actual adult son. Maureen Fries has noted the way in which Margery’s son’s conversion parallels her own⁵² but *The Book*’s treatment of Margery’s reunion with him also offers alternative versions of many of the episodes of spiritual “mothering” that come before it: her efficacious prayer that her son be healed from illness (1m.223), his recognition that she has assisted in his recovery, and his subsequent announcement that he intends to “folwyn yowr cownsel mor than I haue don be-forn” (2m.223). *The Book*’s description of his “many pilgrimagys” implies that he too has connected “cownsel” and exemplarity; heeding his mother includes engaging in many of the same activities that she did.⁵³

⁵² Fries 218.

⁵³ Including, it seems, leaving his family in order to participate in those pilgrimages (2m.224).

Margery's relationship with her adult son reflects the exegetical connection she makes earlier in *The Book* between biological parenthood and spiritual exemplarity. Her explication of the prescription to "be fruitful and multiply" does not replace physical procreation with its spiritual equivalent as do texts like *Book to a Mother* and *Ancrene Wisse* but instead turns it into a "but also." In linking "chylidren bodily" with "good exampyl" without having the latter supersede the former, Margery uses exegesis to create the world she wants to live in, one in which those who have engaged in "bodily" procreation can follow their celibate counterparts and serve as models for imitation, and may even be especially suited to doing so. Margery's repetition of "paciens" in her exegesis is telling: reflecting both its primary meaning of "suffering" (a state with which the mother of 14 children would have been quite familiar)⁵⁴ and perhaps a wished-for corrective to the confessors – hasty and otherwise recalcitrant – responsible for lay distance from the divine.

Sowing Seeds: Margery and Other Women

The parallels between Margery and her son constitute just one example of the evidence *The Book* provides that Margery is in fact engaged in this exemplary reproduction. We are told that in Rome some religious men tell other English people that "this woman hath sowyn meche good seed in Rome sithyn sche came hydir, that is to sey, schewyd good exampyl to the pepyl, wherthorw thei louyn God mor than thei dede be-forn" (41.99); the "sowing of seeds," another

⁵⁴ David Lawton writes that Margery's crying and roaring are "the sounds of labor" and that this particular form of suffering constitutes the source of Margery's spiritual authority in her interactions with various clerics, as well as in her text's afterlife in the Mount Grace Carthusian monastery. Citing Bynum, Lawton points out that various late medieval mystics (e.g. Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich and Marguerite of Oingt) describe Christ's passion as a form of childbirth, yet another example of the dissociation of childbirth from mothers. David Lawton, "Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*" in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992) 113.

procreative metaphor, suggests Margery's status as exemplar among "the pepyl." Her appeal to other women in particular is evident in the Mayor of Leicester's declaration: "I wil wetyn why thow gost in white clothys, for I trowe thow art comyn hedyr to han a-wey owr wyuys fro us & ledyn hem wyth the" (48.116). This accusation, that Margery's ministry is targeted toward women, offers a bizarre version of *Piers' Sir Penetrans Domos*, the friar whose name evokes 2 Timothy's "they who creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, who are led away with divers desires"⁵⁵ and who is described in the poem as having "salved so owre women til somme were with childe."⁵⁶ Reading Margery against *Sir Penetrans Domos* reflects the contrasting perspectives of the two texts. *Piers Plowman* is concerned with the potential for women to be led astray by untoward clerics while *The Book of Margery Kempe* includes examples of women, particularly postpartum women, being underserved by the clergy. The childbirth narratives in particular offer a different articulation of the problem with male clerics entering the homes of women: the women aren't "simple" and they're not getting the penitential attention they need from the clergy; the problem isn't seduction but impatience.

The Book offers two accounts of suffering women whose spiritual crises mirror Margery's own. One such woman, we are told, suffered from "so many temptacyons that sche wist not how sche myth best be gouernyd" (74.177). These temptations were so great that she was unable to engage in any devotional activities:

Sche was so labowryd wyth hir gostly enmy that sche durst not blissyn hir ne do no worschep to God for dreed that the Deuyl xuld a slayn hir. And sche was labowryd wyth many fowle & horibyl thowtys, many mo than sche cowed tellyn. &, as sche seyde, sche was a mayde. Therfor the sayd creatur went to hir many tymys to comfortyn hir & preyde

⁵⁵ 2 Timothy 3:6. *The Vulgate Bible, Vol. VI: The New Testament*, Douay-Rheims Translation, Ed. Angela Kinney (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁵⁶ William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, Ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: J.M. Dent, 1995) XX.348.

for hir, also ful specialy that God xulde strength hir a-geyn hir enmye, & it is to beleuyn
that he dede so, blissyd mote he ben

(74.177)

The use here of the verb “comfort” to describe the kind of care Margery shows this woman should remind us of Ymagynatyf’s labeling of *clergie* as “conforte,” as well as his assertion that contrition likewise “conforteth the soule.”⁵⁷ Ymagynatyf and Margery alike recognize that pastoral care is as much about comfort as it is about discipline.⁵⁸ Margery, however, understands the importance of the “paciens” required to truly serve those in penitential duress; her text specifically states that she visits the ailing woman “many tymys to comfortyn hir.”

Maureen Fries identifies this passage as an echo of Margery’s own experience of temptations. She notices a similar resonance in the episode immediately following, in which Margery aids a postpartum woman who is “owt hir mende” (75.177)⁵⁹; Lynn Staley recognizes this latter parallel as well, noting that in helping the postpartum woman, Margery “seems to offer consolation to her former self.”⁶⁰ Here too we find the language of “comfort,” with the text recording that this second woman was “gretly comfortyd be hir presens” (75.178). *The Book* declares that it was not written in chronological order but rather as “coud han mend of hem whan it wer wretyn” (P.6), as Margery remembers them as she composes her text, so it is particularly telling that these episodes appear back-to-back. What they share is Margery’s ability

⁵⁷ *Piers* XII.174-175.

⁵⁸ See Thomas Tentler, who notes that the social functions of the sacrament of penance were “to discipline and console the faithful.” *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 295.

⁵⁹ Maureen Fries, “Margery Kempe.” *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*. Ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) 225.

⁶⁰ Staley 100.

to leverage her own lay experience to help others. The spiritual comfort she offers is reminiscent of, but is to be viewed as an improvement on, priestly ministrations. *The Book's* description of the woman's recovery and participation in the purification ritual as a "ryth gret myrakyl" (75.178) indicate that to the extent that Margery works miracles – and, she has already informed her audience, "pacyens is more worthy than myraclys werkyng" – those miracles are simply pastoral. In contrast to the virgin saints' lives, which are animated by supernatural miracles, including the restoration of women's bodies,⁶¹ *The Book* is in part a catalogue of Margery's involvement in the spiritual repair of women and other lay people.

In yet another intersection of motherhood and mysticism, *The Book* relates that on Candlemas Day, also known as the Feast of the Purification, Margery has a vision in which she sees the Virgin Mary offering her son to the temple priest. She is so taken with this scene that "sche myth ful euyl beryn vp hir owyn candel to the preyst, as other folke dedyn at the tyme of offering, but went waueryng on eche syde as it had ben a dronkyn woman, wepyng & sobbyng" (82.198). Margery participates in what Eamon Duffy describes as "one of the most elaborate processions of the liturgical year," and one which "every parishioner was obliged to join in, carrying a blessed candle." The celebration was immensely popular with lay people, not only on account of this widespread participation but also because of lay belief in the apotropaic power of the blessed wax.⁶²

So powerful was the role these candles played in the lay imagination that their distribution and the empowerment they were said to confer on the laity overshadowed the scriptural basis for the festival: Mary's ritual purification after childbirth and the concurrent

⁶¹ Sanok x.

⁶² Duffy 16.

presentation of Jesus to the High Priest.⁶³ There are surprisingly few references to the Virgin Mary in the Candlemas liturgy, and only one reference to her purification.⁶⁴ Gail McMurray Gibson sees the ritual's scriptural foundation as more operative in its late medieval practice than Duffy does but, quoting the *Legenda Aurea*, concedes that the emphasis was on Mary's absolute difference from all other women: "To impress her purity upon the minds of all, the Church ordered that we should carry lighted candles, as if to say: 'Most blessed Virgin, thou hast no need of purification; on the contrary, thou art all light and all purity!'"⁶⁵ In his study of medieval church drama, Karl Young comments on the absence of the impersonation of holy figures by participants in this ritual procession, noting that in most cases, even when there is a designated priest meant to represent the priest Simeon, "the Virgin Mary is either absent altogether or is represented only by a plastic figure."⁶⁶ This marked difference from other performative Church rituals, even those centered on Mary,⁶⁷ adds to the effect of the celebration of Candlemas as a showcase of the distance between Mary's maternal experience and that of the women undergoing ritual purification.⁶⁸

⁶³ Duffy 17-18.

⁶⁴ Becky Lee, "'Women ben purified of her childern': The Purification of Women After Childbirth in Medieval England," PhD Dissertation (University of Toronto, 1998) 38.

⁶⁵ Gail McMurray Gibson, "Blessing from Sun and Moon: Churching as Women's Theater," *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace, Eds (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 140.

⁶⁶ Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933) 252.

⁶⁷ Young 225-250.

⁶⁸ Windeatt and others note the prevalence of a Candlemas among women mystics and Carolyne Larrington writes that Margery's vision "was shaped without doubt by the experience of Marie d'Oignies, and very likely by Birgitta's writing" (204). But the miraculous kindling of Marie's candle (Larrington 198) and Mary's assurance to Bridget that she "neded noight to haue bene purified as othir wemmen" (Larrington 203) should highlight the critical ways in which Margery's version is different, specifically the implied privileging of the vision over the candlelit procession and the parallels drawn between Mary and contemporary women being churched.

Margery's mystical experience of Mary's purification reveals a tension between contemporary lay celebration and scripture; her vision of the scene from the Gospel of Luke limits her ability to participate in its reincarnation as fifteenth century ritual. Instead she engages in her "supplementary liturgy,"⁶⁹ a display of tears that is misunderstood by those around her: her text records that her behavior is such that "many man on hir wonderyd & merueylyd what hir eyled" (82.198). This moment resembles Hannah's prayer, misunderstood by Eli the priest in 1 Samuel. Of course, Hannah made no sound while Margery is "ful lowde" (82.198) but in both cases female prayer conflicts with what other people think prayer is supposed to look and sound like; here a lay ritual that has become distanced from its origins in female practice intersects with misunderstood female devotion.

In its focus on "the larger corporate body of parish believers"⁷⁰ and Mary's singular status above other women, the medieval celebration of Candlemas was thus in tension with the purification of women as practiced by contemporary medieval laywomen. Candlemas became a holiday with wide lay appeal, but it was based upon a scriptural event and had as its analogue the purification rite, "the only liturgical ceremony in the medieval church provided by the clergy for women only,"⁷¹ and one in which contemporary medieval women would participate every time they brought another life into the world. Margery would have experienced this ritualized re-entry into the Church fourteen times over so it is no wonder that her text follows its description of the Candlemas procession with Margery's account of her reaction to the purification of her contemporaries after childbirth. *The Book* records that "Sche had swech holy thowtys &

⁶⁹ Meech and Allen 256.

⁷⁰ Gibson 141.

⁷¹ Gibson 149.

meditacyons many tymes whan sche saw women ben purifyid of her childeryn. Sche thowt in hir sowle that sche saw owr Lady ben purifijd. Hir mende was al drawyn fro the erdly thowtys & erdly syghtys & sett al to-gedyr in gostly syghtys” (82.198). Margery links scripture to the lived experience of late medieval laywomen by highlighting the purification of the laywomen around her immediately after transposing Mary’s purification onto the de-gendered ritual meant to commemorate it. In doing so, she calls attention to the bodily maternity of the Virgin that the Candlemas celebration and various conduct texts elide, reestablishing the continuity between Mary and contemporary childbearing women.⁷²

Liturgy and Authority

There is a sense in which *The Book’s* gestures toward the fissures and silences in liturgical and devotional practice represent the lay experience as much as it does the experience of women. Mary Hayes writes that the religious culture in late medieval England saw lay people’s voiced roles during the Church service being taken over by clerks and the production of lay devotional missals stressing the importance of silence during Mass⁷³ and enjoining them to remain “still as ston,”⁷⁴ especially during the priest’s recitation of the silent canon. The missals

⁷²This connection between medieval mothers and a female saint venerated above all others may reflect the experience of the women undergoing the purification ritual. In her study of churching rituals in late medieval France, Paula Rieder argues that the unusual presence of a woman in the sanctuary would have been perceived by the woman herself as a validation of her childbearing role. Paula Rieder, “Insecure Borders: Symbols of Clerical Privilege and Gender Ambiguity in the Liturgy of Churching,” *The Material Culture of Sex, Procreation, and Marriage in Premodern Europe*. Eds. Anne L. McClanan and Karen Rosoff Encarnación (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 104. Gibson also points to the marginality of lay men during the churching ceremony, leaving only the presiding cleric between the woman being purified and the divine (149). This sense of the power of maternity, and the attendant opportunity to stand before God as an individual rather than as “helpmeet” is perhaps what so impacts Margery in her experience of the purification rituals, both communal and personal.

⁷³ Hayes 139.

⁷⁴ Hayes 157.

encourage lay people to use that liturgical silence to engage in their own silent prayers and speak “priuely to god of heauen.”⁷⁵ This call for silence from the laity at the height of the devotional service and the attempt “to inspire speech that is not produced by the mouth,”⁷⁶ speaks to the way the late medieval lay liturgical experience could be characterized by an absence of voice, or rather by the privileging of inner prayer over its vocalization.

In contrast, Margery’s *Book* is suffused with her voice, most obviously the boisterous weeping that alternately perplexes, inspires and enrages those around her. But by the end of *The Book*, that weeping voice becomes a liturgical voice representing the creation of yet another space that is neither entirely lay nor entirely clerical. Susan Boynton has argued for fluidity between the categories of “liturgy,” which for her encompasses “acts of structured communal worship” such as Mass and other ceremonies over which clergy preside, and “devotion” which she takes to refer to “more flexible practices that can be performed by an individual and do not involve clergy.”⁷⁷ Margery’s devotional practice seems to support Boynton’s contention that “an individual could experience the liturgy as a personal devotion, and prayers that were evidently for individuals to recite can be liturgically structured.”⁷⁸ Margery’s private use of communal liturgical forms is not, therefore, particularly troubling. What is radical about the liturgical performance at the close of *The Book* is Margery’s attempt to inhabit both realms – of public, clerically mediated worship and of private, lay devotion – at the same time.

⁷⁵ Hayes 159.

⁷⁶ Hayes 160.

⁷⁷ Susan Boynton, “Prayer as Liturgical Performance in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Monastic Psalters,” *Speculum* 82.4 (October 2007) 896.

⁷⁸ Boynton 897.

The Book's final section begins with narrative, detailing the way in which Margery “usyd many yerys to be-gynnyn hir preyerys,” including formal liturgical elements such as the *Veni creator spiritus* hymn. But it soon becomes an extended public interiority, the voice of the narrator-scribe falling away as *The Book* presents a longer prayer in uninterrupted first person. The prayer includes various elements, among them a request that she should only see, hear or feel things in accordance with the will of God and her desire for “a welle of teerys” (249). *The Book* again references the evangelical value of that “supplementary liturgy” in Margery’s request of Christ: “that as many men mote be turnyd be my crying & my wepyng as me han scornyd therfor er xal scornyn in-to the werdys ende & many mo yf it be yowr wille” (2.249). Her subsequent request that Christ “qwenche in me al fleschly lust” (2.249) highlights her lay status. Her conversion has not placed her in the category of other holy women who no longer feel sexual desire but has instead inaugurated a lifelong push and pull between sin and penance that would be unequivocally recognizable to her fellow lay people.

Also recognizable to lay readers would be the next portion of her prayers. In her repetition of the phrase “I cry the mercy,” they would recognize the prescribed words for penitents, who are bidden to say:

Lord, god I cry the mercy,
 And thi dere moder Saynt mary,
 And all the sayntys of heuen bryght,
 I cry mercy wyt all my myght,
 Of all the syns that I af wrought,
 In dede, in worde or sore toght,
 Wyt ilka lyme of my body,
 Wyt sore hart I haske mercy,
 And the, fader, in goddess place,
 To asoyle me of my trespace,
 And gyf me alf penance also to,
 For goddess luf thu so do⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Mirk 218.

But Margery's version goes beyond this simple, personal confession. She drastically expands the scope of the prayer, alternating between more global characters ("I cry the mercy, blisful Lord, for the Kyng of Ingland & for alle Cristen kyngys...for Iewys, Sarazinys, & all hethin pepil") and the local and personal ("for alle my frendys & for alle myn enmijs") (2.250-251). In all of these petitions she addresses Christ directly, giving no indication of the involvement of the priest said to be present "in goddess place" in Mirk's version.⁸⁰ Other forms of confession speak of a "goostly fader" who is petitioned to stand "bettwene my synne and me"⁸¹ but Margery seems to be moving those pieces around. In place of the prescribed petition to the priest in Douce MS.246, "fadre, preye for me unto God, that he haue mercy of me,"⁸² Margery in fact cries mercy "for alle my gostly faderys" (2.251), placing herself in the role of intercessor for her confessors.

The prayer therefore casts Margery as both penitent and mediator of penance. Included in her personal devotion is a sweeping plea for forgiveness that draws on the maternal language present throughout *The Book*: "I cry the mercy, Lord, for alle my childeryn, gostly & bodily, & for al the pepil in this world that thus make her synnys to me be very contricyon as it wer myn owyn synnys, & for-yeve hem as I wolde that thu foryoue me" (2.251). This acknowledgment that when others have called her "mother," they have meant it as an honorific, that they conceive of her as inhabiting a critical intercessory role and have given her a title of address to mark that role, offers yet another example of *The Book*'s extension of experiences of lived maternity to the spiritual realm. *Book to a Mother* privileges spiritual motherhood but it also acknowledges that

⁸⁰ Mirk 218.

⁸¹ *Monumenta Ritualia Ecclesiae Anglicanae* vol. III, ed. William Maskell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882) 300.

⁸² *Monumenta* 304.

mothers naturally pray for their children: “Therefore, modur, prei bisiliche that thi children mowe come with the to the blisse of heuen.”⁸³ Margery’s prayer at the end of her *Book* connects spiritual motherhood to that recognition of common maternal practice. Her identity as a mother marks her as lay but it has also taught her how to truly pray for others, a skill that also happens to make her well-suited to fulfill critical roles of religious intercession; given her experience of clerical haste in response to physical and mental incapacity at the start of *The Book*, it is telling that one of the groups for whom Margery prays is “alle that arn seke specialy” (2.251).

In contrast to the priesthood, a form of spiritual parentage sharply defined against those who are not among its ranks, Margery’s model of spiritual mother blurs the line between lay and cleric. She adopts the form of confession but adds intercessory language to its content. If, as Salih writes, “confession is a theatre in which both penitent and priest play their allotted roles,”⁸⁴ Margery turns it into a one-woman play, at once reinforcing clerical mediation and reconfiguring it by not only playing both roles but offering it as a public interiority to be voiced by others. The second half of her prayer continues in the first person but echoes a different aspect of formal liturgy. She refers to Mary Magdalene, Mary the Egyptian, St. Paul, and St. Augustine and uses them to achieve her own salvation and the salvation of others: “as thu hast schewyd ther mercy to hem, so schewe thi mercy to me and to alle that askyn the mercy of hert” (2.253). This is an echo of the *Ordo Commendationis Animae* recited at the deathbed, in which the priest invokes various scriptural and saintly figures on behalf of the departing soul.⁸⁵ Margery here adopts a

⁸³ *Book to a Mother* 71.

⁸⁴ Salih 176.

⁸⁵ *Manuale Ad Usum Percelebris Ecclesie Sariburiensis* vol. 91 ed. A. Jefferies Collins (Chichester: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1960) 117-118. This lay co-opting of clerical liturgical forms does not seem to be unique to Margery; Eamon Duffy notes that in the mid-fifteenth century Robert Thornton prayed to the trinity to “Deliver me Lord Jesus Christ from all enemies, both visible and invisible...as you freed

clerical liturgical form – a particularly critical one considering lay anxiety over the rites performed at the deathbed – for her own private devotional use. But in making her private devotions public via her text, she returns that voice to the communal sphere, making it available for others to revoice as they please.

The close of *The Book*, then, provides a resolution to its originary crisis. Not only does Margery end her text with a version of the confession that eludes her at its beginning, but she also makes full use of a hybrid liturgical form. That prayer affords others the same confessional opportunity while sidestepping inadequate confessors. In voicing the “I cry the mercy” of institutionalized penance, Margery occupies a familiar lay penitential position; she would have said those same words to the priest attending her childbed. But in using her prayer to intercede on behalf of others, including her confessors, and by incorporating language usually voiced by those intermediaries, she offers her readers a hybrid voice that blurs the lay-clerical boundary and disrupts a hierarchical structure that alternately attempts to impose silence (during mass) and demand voice (in confession). It is in offering her personal liturgy to those who might emulate her that Margery’s text is at its most generative and provocative, envisioning others who may similarly choose to blur the boundaries between public and private devotion, between cleric and layperson. Margery imagines that this liturgical voice, like the children she has birthed, will have a life beyond its relationship to her physical body; with the final words of her text she prays that God grant mercy to those who trust in her prayers “in-to the worldys ende” (2.253).

Susannah from a false accusation, and the three young men from the burning fiery furnace...and as you drew Daniel out from the lion’s den” (267). Duffy also includes a similar prayer by sixteenth-century grocer Richard Hill: “extinguish the hatred and wrath which my enemies have towards me, as you removed the wrath and hatred which Esau had against his brother Jacob...free me as you freed...Susannah from false accusation...Daniel from the lion’s den, the three young men...from the burning fiery furnace...by your holy incarnation...by your labours and afflictions...by the seven words you spoke on the cross” (267). Margery’s innovation is the communal inflection of these borrowed forms, her gesture back into the communal sphere; she prays not only for herself but also for others.

Conclusion
The Holy and the Broken

I did my best, it wasn't much
I couldn't feel so I tried to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you
And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah

Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," particularly this final stanza, captures a specific kind of Psalmic public interiority and one that is the subject of this study: the proximity of sin to praise, the inextricability of contrition and defiance. There is "chutzpah" in Cohen's declaration that breaking something important does not destroy voice but enables it. This is the chutzpah of the voice of the penitent, a voice that rejects silence and one that we find narrating *Piers Plowman*, encouraged and nurtured by Eleanor Hull's *Commentary*, and traveling from King's Lynn to Jerusalem in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The Middle English texts that I explore in this dissertation understand that to stand before God as a sinner is at once audacious and the human condition. The problem with which all three wrestle is the challenge of penitential voice and authority. Langland, Hull, and Kempe all write from a late medieval Christian perspective in which the voice of the sinner must be authorized by a voice of authority. The Psalms are a key text for such an alignment not simply because they were widely known and recited but because their authority is grounded in David's status as penitent rather than king.¹ In functioning as both penitent and penitential authority in the Psalms, David provides a model for the penitent as authority. That authoritative voice is one of the building blocks of *Piers Plowman*: Annie

¹ Kuczynski 19-20.

Sutherland writes that David's is "the most frequently cited biblical name and voice"² in the poem. In *Piers*, the textual authority of the Psalms is shown to have a complex relationship with the institutional authority represented by the clergy. While, as Ymagynatyf argues, reciting the Psalms can bring about the penitential relief ordinarily provided by institutional mediation, that ability of the Psalms is dependent upon the familiarity of the penitent with clerical knowledge. Attempts to define *clergie* in *Piers* reveal a gap between textual authority and institutional authority; the poem never quite figures out how to align the two or fully use the distance between them to respond to the penitential challenges it raises throughout. In *Piers*, the necessity of aligning contrition with authority is put forth as a problem without a clear solution: what happens, the poem asks, when the voice of authority is withheld from that of the sinner?

Piers Plowman situates penitential authority in *clergie* but repeatedly calls attention to the confusion surrounding to what and to whom that term refers. Both Hull and Kempe write into that indeterminacy and they do so by appropriating various iterations of *clergie* to imbue penitential voice with authority. Hull takes the Psalmic voice that undergirds *Piers* and so many Middle English penitential texts and turns it into a plurality: community confers penitential authority in her *Commentary*. In thus diffusing authority and dispensing with hierarchy, the *Commentary* evinces a quiet radicalism. Hull boldly appropriates one of the most elite clerical functions – exegetical commentary – but does so in the context of the one biblical text that lay people were allowed to own.³ There is nothing quiet about *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and Margery's boisterous voice signals her text's subversive potential. *The Book* remains invested in

² Annie Sutherland, *English Psalms in the Middle Ages 1300-1450*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 186.

³ Alcuin Blamires, "The Limits of Bible Study for Medieval Women" in *Women, the Book and the Godly* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995) 4.

some degree of penitential mediation, and Margery stakes her own claim to authority in a model of pastoral care meant to contend with a system that could deprive lay people, and specifically women, of penitential voice. If we think of these texts in the context of Connor's "vocalic body," which I discuss in Chapter 3, both Hull and Kempe reimagine and reconfigure the body from which authoritative penitential voice emanates. In Hull's case that voice is produced by a plural body which makes it a communal voice and a shared authority. Kempe's text affirms the relationship between penitent and confessor but audaciously asserts that authoritative penitential voice can be produced by a singular, female body just as it can by a male one.

Both texts – Hull's *Commentary* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* – are made possible by Fourth Lateran's mandate of annual confession for all and the attendant educational requirements necessary to submit to it. The abundance of late medieval penitential manuals attests to the widespread belief that lay people could remain in the static state that Hull would refer to as "sobyrnesse," knowing just enough but not more. But "sobyrnesse" is never a sustainable condition, at least not in the long term. This is a lesson that religious communities are still learning. Orthodox Jews are today wrestling with the consequences of opening up higher-level biblical and Talmudic learning to women in the 20th century, including debates over the ability of women to serve as clergy. Once some degree of education is allowed or even required for a group previously excluded from the study of religious text, it is only a matter of time before that group begins to challenge previously unquestioned hierarchies. For fifteenth-century Christian women and twenty-first century Orthodox Jewish women, the question is the same: what makes a person eligible to deal in *clergie*? Does religious authority simply require a body of knowledge or does it also demand a particular body?

Reading Eleanor Hull alongside Margery Kempe allows us to attend to the ways in which both texts seem to understand that their participation in *clergie* must include a deft negotiation of its cultural meaning. Hull advocates for “sobyrness” even as she delivers a scriptural commentary steeped in texts reserved for the most learned clergy. Margery engages in “casual, public teaching in a variety of urban settings”⁴ but never from a “pulpytt.”⁵ Reading these two texts, usually thought of as largely antithetical, together and in relation to *Piers Plowman* also highlights the way each resists easy categorization. Eleanor Hull’s *Commentary*, already inhabiting the under-populated category of female-authored exegesis, participates in a more liturgically infused and clerically resistant form of biblical commentary. The *Book of Margery Kempe*, typically grouped with the texts of other visionary women, becomes a radical reconfiguration of penitential and devotional mediation when reconsidered alongside *Piers* and Hull’s *Commentary*. These reconsiderations are curiously appropriate given that both texts are engaged in the work of revising and reimagining their own social and devotional categories.

There is one figure in *Piers Plowman* that may be especially helpful in highlighting the interest of both Hull’s *Commentary* and Kempe’s *Book* in rethinking their own cultural categories. Appearing in Passus X of the B Text, Dame Study is one of the few female allegorical figures in the poem. Her gender is noteworthy given the poem’s penchant for gendering most of the traditionally female allegorical figures (Reason, Imagination, Patience, and Charity, among others) male and considering Helen Cooper’s assertion that vernacular

⁴ Katherine Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006) 247.

⁵ *The Book of Margery Kempe* 52.126.

composition frees Langland from the strictures of linguistically imposed gender.⁶ Returning to the poem's descriptions of Study after engaging with Hull and Kempe reveals both the continuities between the three women and those ways in which the latter two play off of that which Study represents.

Importantly, Dame Study is not a nun, or even an enclosed widow, but a married woman. As Cooper reminds us, "there is more in *Piers Plowman* in praise of marriage than of virginity,"⁷ and female readers of the poem would have encountered an allegorical figure who is both a representative of knowledge and a married woman. But critics have understood Study as representing a lower level of learning, one that precedes the theological inquiry in which both Hull and Kempe participate. James Simpson identifies Study as "mistress of lower, secular disciplines"⁸ and argues that she recognizes her limitations, specifically her inability to understand or explain Theology, or the "doctrine of love."⁹ Britton Harwood describes Dame Study as preoccupied "with the voice,"¹⁰ a quality that would seem to suggest commonality with Hull and Kempe. But he also identifies her specifically with "the teaching voice"¹¹ and even more specifically with the kind of teaching voice that marks the very beginning of intellectual pursuit: "As voice, Dame Study was the initial way in which the text, whether heard in the lecture room or meditated as *sacra pagina*, existed."¹² Both Simpson and Harwood sidestep the

⁶ Helen Cooper, "Gender and Personification in *Piers Plowman*" in *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 5 (1991) 33.

⁷ Cooper 44.

⁸ James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-Text* (London: Longman, 1990) 200.

⁹ Simpson 114.

¹⁰ Britton J. Harwood, "Dame Study and the Place of Orality in *Piers Plowman*" in *ELH* 57.1 (Spring 1990) 7.

¹¹ Harwood 9.

¹² Harwood 10.

matter of Study's gender, leaving it to Louise Bishop to argue that gendering Study female is a means of indicating the way in which vernacularity and the feminine were connected, particularly in the context of the Oxford translation debates in the mid-fourteenth century. Study, she writes, "is most at home with the vernacular"¹³ and emphasizes her own "inability to understand Latinate theology."¹⁴ Bishop also links Study's gender to medieval ideas about emotion, arguing that she constitutes the poem's pushback against the connection between two concepts associated with the feminine: reading as taking place within "the sensual, interior space of the reflective heart" and "the feminine condition of tears and affect."¹⁵

If we can engage in the speculative exercise of imagining these two women reading *Piers Plowman*, it is easy to see Dame Study as the one female allegorical figure with which they could associate their work. We might, then, also think of their compositional efforts as building a better version of Dame Study. This is not to dismiss the importance of the inclusion, in *Piers*, of a female allegorical figure in a pedagogical role; the poem's depiction of *clergie* does not sideline women but rather involves them at key moments in its dissemination. Surely this would have provided encouragement, if not inspiration, to Hull and Kempe should they have come across the poem via their parish priest or local religious house. But while Dame Study does play an important role in the poem, she is not a destination. She can, in the end, only point the narrator toward *Clergie* and Ymagynatyf, acting as a waystation in his journey to other figural outposts presumably more capable of providing penitential and devotional guidance. Those destinations, however, are ultimately revealed as falsely advertised. *Clergie* is a concept the

¹³ Louise Bishop, "Dame Study and Women's Literacy," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 12 (1998) 106.

¹⁴ Bishop 107.

¹⁵ Bishop 110.

poem continually depicts as crucially flawed; Ymagynatyf's appearance in the poem in particular offers a representation of *clergie* as confused and ineffective. Dame Study thus cheerfully encourages the narrator to engage with a system incapable of delivering what she assumes it will. In this way, she exemplifies the limitations of the poem as a whole. It is not, as Masha Raskolnikov writes, that the poem questions "the necessity of female tutelary figures"¹⁶; *Piers* depicts those figures as both necessary and worthy of the narrator's respect. But it is the condition of the poem to be, as it were, stuck in place, spinning its wheels in a system that no longer delivers what it promises. While Study may constitute the fullest representation of female *clergie* in *Piers*, she can only point the way to a partnership – between the *vis imaginativa* and the institution of *clergie* – that no longer coheres. She is a necessary foremother of the kind of work done by Hull's *Commentary* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* but her approach is ultimately only a starting point from which those texts proceed to innovate.

That innovation is inextricably tied to a rethinking of categories and boundaries, a possibility *Piers Plowman* raises but to which it never fully commits. If Eleanor Hull and Margery Kempe read *Piers*, they may well have understood the questions it asks about boundaries and the possibilities it encodes for crossing, or transcending, them. In an attempt to understand the poem's gendering of Dame Study and Scripture as female, Elizabeth Kirk asks:

Why make them the wives instead of the husbands, and why present their authority as if it represented the normal order being turned topsy-turvy? Why not make Scripture and Study the husbands, unless to problematize and examine that authority, or show the incongruity between social reality and a trans-social order? Or to attempt to say something which neither term of an accepted either-or polarity can express?¹⁷

¹⁶ Masha Raskolnikov, "Promising the Female, Delivering the Male: Transformations of Gender in *Piers Plowman*" in *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 19 (2006) 94.

¹⁷ Kirk 626.

This blurring of boundaries and rejection of polarities is a by-product of the poem's clerical critique rather than a means to resolving the questions it raises. Both Hull and Kempe take advantage of the hybridity depicted in *Piers* in order to provide the destination that remains elusive in the poem, modeling vernacular penitential voice and envisioning alternative penitential authority. Reading Hull's *Commentary* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* alongside one another and against the backdrop of *Piers Plowman* makes it clear that the questions the poem asks don't disappear in the fifteenth century but instead become the impetus for the experimentation undertaken by those texts.

Had Hull and Kempe encountered Dame Study, they would have surely recognized the continuities between her role and the roles they appropriate for themselves as disseminators of *clergie*. They would have also likely recognized the irony of a woman distancing herself from theology while citing Scripture and preaching against clerical misbehavior, as well as the further irony in her quotation of Augustine's *Non plus sapere quam oportet* or, as Hull puts it when she cites the same line, "Wylle ye not...to saver more than nede ys for-to know."¹⁸ Both Hull and Kempe would have understood the necessity of this admixture of disavowing *clergie* while imparting it. They would have understood that Dame Study's identity is predicated upon crossing the very boundary she invokes as inviolable, that to be a woman participating in *clergie* is already to have a hybrid identity, one that is particularly suited to meeting the challenge of a devotional landscape in which hierarchy and stratification are failing both the *clergie* and the *lewed*.

¹⁸ *Commentary* 4/46-48.

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