Sentenced to Hard Labor: Vernacular Transformations
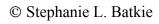in the Late Fourteenth Century

by

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To my parents

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Abstract

This project re-characterizes the development of vernacular readership in late fourteenth century England. It offers a fresh heuristic for recognizing vernacular works that ostensibly limit their potential audiences through the use of recondite, Latinate, and otherwise hermetic discourses while, at the same time, making the labored interpretation performed by those readers the center of its textual purpose. It focuses on two poems, William Langland's *Piers Plowman* and John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, as examples of texts that are neither open nor easy—on the contrary, they are deliberately difficult. Through them it examines the relationship between vernacular difficulty, laborious reading, and readerly transformation in the context of late medieval devotional culture. Each chapter pairs one aspect of the text with an external, Latinate discourse in order to explore the ways in which the author adapts and re-calibrates it for the purposes of establishing a new form of vernacular reading. The first non-introductory chapter argues that the use of visual allegory in Langland only makes sense if we understand the poem as a transparent and dismissive gesture towards uses of textual images as tools for meditation and thought. The second chapter shows how Langland turns toward an exegetic mode of reading based in Augustinian hermeneutics, a form that relies on a never-ending and continually productive struggle over interpretation and understanding. Turning to Gower, the third chapter discusses the presentation of alchemy in the poem as an idealized form of interpretive labor that is simultaneously offered as a model for reading and rejected as a physical and textual practice. The final chapter examines the problem of producing accurate and effective language through vernacular confessional discourse in the *Confessio*. Each transmuted discourse contributes to the "hermeneutic narrative," or the interpretive path readers generate as they work their way through the texts. The dissertation shows that the historical importance of these poems lies in their open commitment to the construction of this hermeneutic narrative, while their critical usefulness lies in their ability to highlight similar questions in other contemporary texts.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Imagining Readership

> *You have learnt something. That always feels at first as if you had lost something.*
>   *(George Bernard Shaw, Major Barbara)[1]*

A vernacular text does not necessarily mean an easy text. The Middle English legend of St. Erkenwald tells the story of a miraculous corpse discovered during a series of excavations around St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The workers digging into the foundations of the building uncover a splendid marble tomb, richly arrayed, with "gargeles garnysht a-boute" and "menskefully planede." The borders of the tomb are embellished with bright golden letters that mysteriously cannot be read by the workmen or by the clerks who are immediately summoned to the site, and the unnamed but perfectly preserved body is dressed in gold and fine cloth with a golden crown upon his head, leading the people to identify him with an ancient pagan king. But, try as they might, they can find no record of him in any chronicle or city record. Out of options, they turn to the bishop, Erkenwald, who has just returned to the city from a country visit. Erkenwald is granted, after a night of prayer, the assurance that the identity of the body would become clear; in the morning, he celebrates mass and goes to the corpse, which

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[1] George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion and Major Barbara* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1992), 123.

begins to speak. It is revealed that the body is not that of a king, but a pagan judge who was so known for his reason and love of truth that, upon his death, the people dressed him in rich clothes and crowned him with a circlet of gold. The body continues, however, by saying that he remained the unhappiest soul in the afterlife because as a pagan he was passed over during Christ's harrowing of hell and was subsequently condemned to eternal damnation. At the telling of the tale, Erkenwald feels such pity he laments that if the body were only still alive he could perform a baptism in order to save a just man from the hellfires. At the prayer, God grants the judge a moment of life whereupon Erkenwald's tears baptize the unhappy soul, which immediately ascends to heaven as his previously pristine corpse crumbles into dust.

The story has a complicated relationship with history, blending the hagiographical agenda of a saint's life with a commitment either to religious orthodoxy or heretical anti-monarchical sentiment, depending on which critic is performing the reading.[2] The importance of the political and theological concerns notwithstanding, the poem also raises fascinating questions about language and identity in the face of larger cultural frameworks. More specifically, it raises questions about unexpected (and therefore troubling) illegibility as an impetus for extraordinary social action. The nameless corpse is difficult not because it is found in an elaborate tomb deep beneath a church, or that the body itself is in pristine condition, but because it is, in fact, nameless. Everything about the astonishing discovery invites interpretation, from the construction of the tomb to the clothes and jewels adorning the corpse, and yet there are no answers to be had. The

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[2] See T. McAlindon, "Haigiography into Art: A Study of *St. Erkenwald*," *Studies in Philology* 67, no. 4 (1970), 472-95; Ruth Nissé, ""a Coroun Ful Riche": The Rule of History in *St. Erkenwald*," *English Literary History* 65, no. 2 (1998), 277-95; Jennifer L. Sisk, "The Uneasy Orthodoxy of *St. Erkenwald*," *English Literary History* 74 (2007), 89-115; Gordon Whatley, "Heathens and Saints: *St. Erkenwald* in Its Legendary Context," *Speculum* 61, no. 2 (1986), 330-63.

illegible, golden letters that presumably attest to the judge's identity and history not only fail to communicate the truth of the find to the perplexed Londoners, they broadcast the body as something that ought to be read and understood. The language is not Latin but some unknown form of the vernacular, since if it were Latin, presumably clerks who immediately gather around the tomb would be able to read it. This makes the find even more troubling in its illegibility. The mysterious writing gives apparent, visible status to the body as much as the sumptuous garments and the intricate marble carvings tell of his importance, but it cannot be accessed by even the learned priests of the cathedral; the miraculous events that follow the discovery are, moreover, a direct result of this absence of information.

In the tale, the past has risen up to confront the present, and it is its illegibility that generates social and religious action. When readers are confronted with the inability to decipher, read, or interpret information, the meaning behind the formal elements of text, object, or image becomes detached from those elements inasmuch as they have no meaning (or no clear meaning) for an audience. Erkenwald must turn to supernatural intervention in order to re-supply the corpse with identity and meaning that is otherwise concealed (even as it is visually present) by the writing on the tomb. Thus, the meaning of the body, and subsequently the meaning of the miracle, becomes filtered through ecclesiastical channels and the virtue and piety of one exalted bishop rather than through the nature and presentation of text. In the meantime, the people of London have mobilized to scour through chronicles and records for clues, to gather and to view the site, to petition the Church for answers, and to reconstruct a social history that will satisfactorily explain the presence of an ancient, uncorrupted corpse in the very

foundations of one of the city's most important churches. The truth of the body's

meaning shifts from an inscription laid down by those who reverently entombed him to

the busy Christian theology in which he is excavated. The urgent need to discover hidden

meaning and re-insert it into known frameworks drives the action of the tale, and, once

this is accomplished, the pagan truth of the tomb disintegrates like the vacated corpse as

the soul, now imbued with miraculous salvation, ascends to heaven. It is a story about

writing the present through a re-writing of the past made empty by its own illegibility.

The problems raised by the Erkenwald story speak directly to the question of the

status of vernacular language in the period. It presents a picture of vernacular language

that is mysteriously illegible, and, by virtue of its inability to easily transmit information,

the difficult language generates productive labor on a personal and social level. This

formulation strays far outside the ways in which modern critics have described the

vernacular of the later middle ages; rather than presenting non-Latinate language as

speaking directly to the common people, *St. Erkenwald* shows us a vernacular that is

effective because it is inaccessible. Without the need for supernatural intervention, there

would have been no incredible speaking corpse, no miraculous baptism, and no poem.

In some ways, this dissertation is a similar effort to read what is not there. Only

rather than looking to write meaning onto unreadable text, I attempt to uncover how

authors use difficulty and illegibility to shape what we, as modern critics, can never see—

their envisioned, imagined historical audiences. Just as the golden, meaningless words in

the Erkenwald legend bring the community together in its effort to unlock the truth

behind the body of the pagan judge, so too do other medieval texts use demanding and

often mystifying language to lead their readers in new directions. The purpose of this

project is to re-characterize the development of vernacular readership in late fourteenth century England. More specifically, it aims to offer a fresh heuristic for recognizing vernacular works that ostensibly limit their potential audiences through the use of recondite, Latinate, and otherwise hermetic discourses. Be it the introduction of a particularly obscure area of learning, complicated linguistic patterning, or a detailed reliance on theological particulars, these texts are difficult. They intrude upon familiar textual classifications of "learned" and "popular" by overtly mixing genres, oscillating between the approachable, manageable, and accessible vernacular mode as defined by current scholarship and obscure, erudite, and specialized knowledge more commonly found in Latin monastic manuscripts. What are we to do with such a mélange of authorial modes? We cannot assume that writers see themselves either as composing exclusively for audiences with similar familiarity of obscure branches of knowledge, or as merely establishing textual authority in front of an ignorant populace. Instead, I propose that we ought to read iterations of difficult discourses—discourses that require readers either to draw on erudite knowledge or to participate in Latinate learning—as calculated constructs that are not only at home in their vernacular setting but that also index a wide-reaching shift in the relationship between the vernacular reader and the vernacular text.

There is an unresolved contradiction at the heart of our modern concept of the historical vernacular. The word vernacular names a form of language that is intelligible to a wide number of people, language that does not require translation and that communicates information clearly to its audience.[3] There is an enabling, even

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[3] There is, of course, another aspect to the vernacular which doesn't get discussed nearly as much in contemporary studies: the vernacular, unlike the idea of Latin, is accessible to a broad audience as long as

transcendent, impulse in such a definition. And yet, in historical contexts, no word announces a retreat from the transformative effects of reading more emphatically than the word vernacular. To modern scholars, the word connotes at best a text that is accessible to all, and at worst a dangerous simplification of complicated material redolent with the loss of authority and value. The democratic ideal latent in our idea of the vernacular can find no room for transformative reading because the vernacular is thought to be concerned only with ease of understanding, not with generative studious effort. For medieval studies, this paradox concealed in our notion of the vernacular is attested to by the dependence upon frameworks of translation to lend authority to texts (as in *translatio studii*) and, simultaneously, the celebration of the immediate power and effectiveness of the common language (as in movements for biblical translation).

The works I examine, Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, both rely heavily upon a process of readerly re-orientation, using confusion and the anxiety of incomprehension to motivate change. Authors in the late fourteenth century begin to expect this adaptability and industry from their readership, as is evidenced by the forms of challenging discourses appearing in widely-read vernacular works. These works designedly subject readers to material they cannot process with ease, thereby obliging audiences to alter not only how they perceive their own language, or how they understand themselves as readers, but also to substantially change themselves through the process of difficult reading. The texts therefore become catalysts for change through authors' manipulation of readerly activity. And what is more, the

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they happen to speak that particular variant of that particular language. Naturally the Latin of the Middle Ages is not the Latin of the classical period, and was seen as inferior because of it, but it still held the unrivaled position of a *lingua franca* in the period. While the vernacular can claim to reach across class lines in ways that Latin supposedly cannot, it is not nearly as geographically or temporally stable.

work performed by readers of these texts, anticipated as it is by the authors, becomes a concentrated version of a much larger development in the evolution of the status of vernacular language in the period. In part because they are not unique in this regard, the historical importance of these poems lies in their open commitment to asking questions about the nature of readerly involvement and readerly empowerment, while their critical usefulness lies in their ability to highlight similar questions in other contemporary texts.

In discussing the status of vernacular Middle English texts, many contemporary critics currently rely on a hermeneutic of translation to describe the ways authors formulate textual authority.[4] Attention focuses on forging links between Latinate traditions and medieval writing practices – thereby mandating that vernacular language must primarily be verified though its indebtedness to past tradition. "Learned" authors are those employing Ciceronian rhetorical technique, or following Aristotelian modes of discourse. Correspondingly, the more "classical" the textual investment, the more socially or intellectually exalted the intended reader. Rita Copeland's acclaimed study, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, displays, and in many ways, defines this approach.[5] Translation becomes the means to assert a logic of inheritance—logic that enables Middle English authors to construct vernacular language as a viable location for intellectual thought worthy of literary consideration.

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[4] See the editors' excellent essay, "The Notion of Vernacular Theory" in Ruth Evans et al., eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Pres, 1999), 314-30.

[5] Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press, 1991). In this excellent resource, Copeland also demonstrates that translation in the period is more than simply a transferal of information from one language to another, but an act of interpretation and often rhetorical negotiation in its own right. Nevertheless, it still assumes the primacy of Latin to engender authority in lesser vernacular texts.

The other prevailing argument for the use of the vernacular is that, unlike the abstract classical languages, it embodies directness, openness, and ease of transmission. This attribute is frequently held up by modern critics as one of the great resources of the common, spoken word. And their medieval counterparts seem to agree. John of Trevisa famously argues for accessibility to biblical material in *The Dialogue Between a Knight and a Clerk*. Similarly, in Chapter 12 of the prologue to the Wycliffite vernacular Bible, the author claims, "symple men moun sumdel undirstonde the text of Holy Writ and edefie mych himself and other men."[6] The beginning of the Northern Homily Cycle concurs: "Forthi will I of my povert / Schau sum thing that Ik haf in hert, / On Ingelis tong that alle may / Understand quat I will say." (61-64)[7] These authors, and many more, claim the space of the vernacular for open transmission of knowledge so that men may better themselves through contact with their texts.

These two traits, classical inheritance and accessibility, argue for translation as an attractive heuristic for medieval vernacular literary theory. It enables critics to create a contextual framework that indexes authorial positioning, readerly attitudes, and textual sources. Dependence on this system, however, excises from consideration a number of Middle English texts that do not match this pre-formed mold of translation theory. The vernacular in a text like *Piers Plowman* is neither dependent on classical antecedents nor open and accessible to even the most prepared reader. Nevertheless, Langland's thorny passages are famous in their difficulty and one cannot surmise that modern readers' struggles are antithetical to those of the fourteenth century. Furthermore, while the text is

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[6] Anne Hudson, *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto: Published by the University of Toronto Press in association with the Medieval Academy of America, 1997).
[7] John Small, ed., *English Metrical Homilies from Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century* (Edinbourgh: W. Paterson, 1862), 3

itself macaronic, it is clearly not originating from either classical or exegetical traditions. Without question, the language in *Piers*, and indeed in many other contemporary texts, does not mesh with the critical system currently in place.

Moreover, just as we cannot presuppose that difficulties appear in texts solely as opportunities for authors to assert their authority over their readers, we also cannot pass such moments off as circulating exclusively amidst an elite or hyper-educated readership; intentionally or no, knowledge traditionally confined to learned environments begins disseminating out into lay and popular audiences. What is more, it is primarily texts with ambitions for broad social change that make use of erudite discourse as an integral part of their optimistic aims. This is not to say that the discourses are in place to select which readers are elevated enough to enact the desired reforms; instead, they serve the express purpose of altering their readers according to the ideology they propound, thereby effecting the changes themselves. Gower's encyclopedic tendencies are well documented, for example, but they always appear as a tool for urging his readers not simply to absorb the information but to use it to change themselves and, by extension, the degraded condition of the world. Rather than tap selected readers to enforce the meaning behind the text, the text activates its own meaning by transforming the man or woman who encounters it.

The key to this transformation comes in the process of reading itself. Coming up against one of these textual roadblocks, or moments of textual difficulty, audiences are forced into a heretofore unfamiliar mode of interpretation in order to make sense of what they find in front of them. They must work at the text in a new way, and work hard. The introduction of vernacular erudition in this period evidences a widespread shift in how

authors approached their readers and, furthermore, how readers understood their own process of reading. Whereas previously, laborious study was not commonly the province of the vernacular, or even of a non-monastic or unlearned individual, a growing number of texts in the later Middle Ages demanded not only that each reader take it upon themselves to linger over studious reading, but also that it is through the struggle with the difficulties they encountered that such reading became successful. These writings spoke to their audiences not through generating an affective response, spiritual revelation, or even by educating. These texts accomplished their goal by putting their readers to work.

Laborious reading occurs when readers are forced to pause in order to process what they have just encountered, be it due to the difficulty of a particular passage's meaning, unfamiliar terminology, confusion as to what the text is asking them to do, or a myriad of other triggers. Unlike works intended to communicate information with little impediment, these texts intentionally slow things down. Time is the essential element; as soon as a reader must stop to consider what he has read, the text can no longer exist as a transparent entity. When our readerly anticipation is interrupted, by necessity we must alter our *Vorverständnis*, our "fore-understanding" of what linguistically is about to happen. Frank Kermode defines it thus:

> Even at the level of the sentence we have some ability to understand a statement before we have heard it all, or at any rate to follow it with a decent provisional sense of its outcome; and we can do this only because we bring to our interpretation of the sentence a pre-understanding of its totality.[8]

For Kermode, the job of the reader is to uncover puzzles under the slick veneer of a clean and easy text—a text that confirms the reader's *Vorverständnis*. Once accomplished, the

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[8] Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 71.

interpretation opens up into not one, but an infinite number of interpretations, all spiraling off from the originary textual moment.

Kermode's discussion of interpretive labor focuses on contemporary readings of the Gospel of Mark, his primary interest being to demonstrate how this text, benign and clear at first blush, does in fact have deep-seated tensions and complexities under its polished surface. The use of deconstruction and his participation in what Ricœur famously terms a "hermeneutics of suspicion"[9] are clearly useful for texts that strive for artistic completeness and organic unity – the desiderata of the preceding generation of literary critics and theorists. Kermode's goal, and indeed the goal of most modern reading practices, is to "rough up" the text so as to provide traction for interpretive work. Thus, Kermode's work with Mark provides a useful counterpoint for the historical readers of challenging medieval texts – the very readers I aim to describe through this research. My interest lies in texts that resist deconstructive efforts for the simple reason that they elide the need to uncover difficulties. Instead of a polished surface, the text is murky and dark. Rather than transparency that must be scrutinized for footholds, the reader finds a dense maze in need of a right path. This difficulty can either be, as in the case of *Piers Plowman*, immediately apparent in the structural and linguistic complexity of a text or, as in the case for the *Confessio Amantis*, in the deceptive openness of Gower's vernacular that turns readers' eyes to the text of their own inner lives. Precisely because they do not

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[9] Ricour defines his conception of hermeneutics as such: "Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience." Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 27. In a similar vein, Anthony Thisleton clarifies the process: "The first addresses the task of 'doing away with idols,' namely, becoming critically aware of when we project our own wishes and constructs into texts, so that they no longer address us from beyond ourselves as "other." The second concerns the need to listen in openness to symbol and to narrative and thereby to allow creative events to occur "in front of" the text, and to have their effect on us." Anthony Thisleton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 26.

fulfill expectations, these poems offer an immediate opportunity for self-revision guided by the parameters of the challenge the reader encounters. For example, if we read a scriptural parable in which an unusual course of action is endorsed, we must search out the reasons that this course of action is preferred over what we would have assumed to be the virtuous choice. If a character's internal thought process differs from what we would imagine, we must make room for his or her decisions within our own thinking. If a text is written in complicated and elaborate language, we must alter our linguistic expectations and slow our reading to accommodate it, thereby changing our conception of how a particular language functions and the ways in which it might perform. Similarly, if a text encourages readerly labor but offers language that resists such labor, readers must find another way to adapt their reading practices. In this way, texts offering initially illegible discourses change their readers because they are required to puzzle out what they find, thereby altering their "fore-understanding" at the instant they make contact with the difficult text.

In the following pages, I will argue that this contrary take on vernacular discourse, far from an accidental development, is a deliberate authorial decision that can be traced across multiple genres and that has not only significant historical antecedents but also critical cultural and political ramifications. My goal is not to offer readings of the texts as evidence for a particular pre-determined style of reading or readership, drawn either from modern literary theory or from medieval descriptions of vernacular reading found outside of the texts, but rather to uncover the modes of reading the authors instill in their characters and intend to encourage in their audiences. In some sense, what I propose is seeing readership as an historical element that does not emerge first and

foremost from historical contexts—by which I mean that the reading envisioned by the texts is less committed to constructing vernacular reading based on the prevailing attitudes of the time, or in response to a particular historical event or series of events, but rather from the specific ethical agendas held by the texts. Of course, the readership that emerges from the authorial guidance is historical and, in my reading, historicized, but even so the ethical focus of these poems has a strong ahistorical bent. Both Langland and Gower focus on the need for social change and, in Langland's case, on the corruption of the clergy he finds so despicable. Yet if it is a religious or political grievance that prompts the authors to take up the pen, their aim is not to remedy the problem by allegorizing it in verse, but to use their literary efforts to develop an ethical audience. The readers they look to create are therefore ones for whom the reading of and labor over the text will transform them to the point that they will not be the people they were when they started—at the end they will be able to effect the larger social changes which make up the foundations of the works' aspirations.

This approach makes two critical assumptions about didactic medieval texts (and indeed about texts in general): the first is that the authors of works with a clear indication of educating their readers will anticipate responses from those readers as an important aspect of their formal and meaning-based agendas; the second is that authors of such works intentionally lead their readers in predetermined directions depending on what they want to teach them. Reduced down to the plainest level, these become the dreaded affective and intentional fallacies. Rather than attempting to avoid these fraught critical concepts with artificial evasion of words like "readers" or "the author's intention," I have embraced them as obvious elements of literature that has a clear rhetorical concern for its

readers and their educational process. My methodology clearly draws on reader-response criticism and reception theory of critics like Iser, Fish, Mailloux, and Jauss, but it does so as a consequence, not a purpose of the project. I see these poems as daring experiments with vernacular readers and vernacular readership, and I have found that the ways the authors approach their audience as a collection of individuals, and individuals who are charged with finding their own meaning in the text, are far too prevalent to be simply an afterthought or an imposed modern analysis of an historical text.

For each chapter, I have selected one aspect of the text and paired it with an external, Latinate discourse in order to explore the ways in which the author adapts and re-calibrates it for the purposes of establishing a new form of vernacular reading. The benefit of this structure is to keep the readings of the poems grounded in historical modes of reading and interpretation while simultaneously interrogating how the uses of Middle English are evolving in the period. The ways in which Latin knowledge is used in the poems distances rather than aligns them with other texts that also engage with similar discourses. The poems do not use Latin learning to translate information into a more easily absorbed language; they use them to change how readers approach the text. Nor are they merely used to bolster the authority of the authors by displaying knowledge— quite the opposite in fact. We shall see that the effect of using learned discourses is to remove *auctoritas* from the authors and place it in the hands of the texts' readers.

Each text, *Piers Plowman* and the *Confessio Amantis*, concerns itself with characters that read and interpret alongside the actual, historical audience; I have chosen these two poems deliberately from among their late-medieval vernacular counterparts because they so explicitly build their narrative around the problems and processes of

reading and interpretation. In Langland's poem, Will is consistently searching out meaning from the various guide figures he encounters, and Amans for Gower is repeatedly performing interpretive work for each series of stories from his confessional pedagogue. Because each author places educational interpretation at the heart of his characters' action, the poems are unique opportunities to investigate how, if, and when external readers match up with the types of analysis performed within the contexts of the text. My goal is to demonstrate how these intersections between internal and external readers develop new modes of reading. By forcing audiences to examine their own labor as they read, moments of diagetic interpretation open up spaces for readers to engage the textual problems each poem foregrounds. Moments of misreading, misinterpretation, and difficult, esoteric discourses thus become the mechanisms for readerly development.

Throughout the project, I continually refer to "external readers" and "audience" as a contrast to the "internal" and "diegetic" reading (and misreading) that occurs in the poetry. This dichotomy is not based on the interaction between characters and the actual historical readers who pick up or listen to readings from the physical manuscripts of the poems, but rather between the characters within the poems and the extra-narrative readers imagined by the authors of the poems. The distinction is an important one; the ways in which historical readers use these works, as can be seen through material, textual evidence, is not always the same as the readings I have suggested here. Scribal intervention, marginalia, rubrication—all these elements can provide fascinating and important insights into the reception and use of literature, and these pieces of literature in particular.[10] My interest, however, lies with the readers the texts and their authors

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[10] For just one excellent example of how material criticism can change Langland scholarship in particular, see Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Denise Louise Despres, *Iconography and the Professional Reader: The*

anticipate and speak to directly through their manipulation of the formal elements of their

texts and the ways in which careful narrative construction opens the work for readerly

intervention. In doing so, I am hewing closely to Wolfgang Iser's "implied reader," with

one small caveat.   Whereas Iser describes the activity of imagined readers as discovery

through text, in this project I will focus on the attempted creation of readers by an author.

Iser writes,

> The reader discovers the meaning of the text, taking negation as his
> starting point; he discovers a new reality through a fiction which, at least
> in part, is different from the world he himself is used to; and he discovers
> the deficiencies inherent in prevalent norms and in his own restricted
> behavior.[11]

The readerly activity I discuss reflects this process of discovering meaning through

interpretation, but the careful negotiation of authorial control is what enables this model

to emerge in the period.

When rhetorical theory is placed in proximity with reader-response criticism, it

generates a model of authorial concern over readerly interpretation that is very much at

home in the texts of the later Middle Ages. Nan Johnson reminds us that,

> Traditional rhetorical theory assumes that response to language is
> predisposed by the particular structure of the comprehending mind, the
> emotional, psychological, and sociological dimensions of personality and
> character, and by the listener/reader's identification with the interests
> foregrounded in the discourse.[12]

As such, in classical rhetoric as in its medieval counterparts the subjectivity of readers'

impressions becomes a serious authorial consideration in terms of persuasion and

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Politics of Book Production in the Douce Piers Plowman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,
1999). A broader but realated study can also be found in Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Maidie Hilmo, *The
Medieval Professional Reader at Work: Evidence from Manuscripts of Chaucer, Langland, Kempe, and
Gower* (Victoria, B.C., Canada: English Literary Studies University of Victoria, 2001).
[11] Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*
(Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), xiii.
[12] Nan Johnson, "Reader-Response and the *Pathos* Principle," *Rhetoric Review* 6, no. 2 (1988): 155.

comprehension. Augustine shows studied attention to readers' responses to language in his instructions for clarifying sermons in *De doctrina christiana*, and in the *Poetria nova* Geoffrey of Vinsauf advises authors, "...do not have regard to your own powers, but rather his with whom you speak. Give a weight to your words that is suited to his shoulders, and speak words proper to your matter..."[13] Both Gower and Langland attend to the ways in which their readers progress through their narratives, and they continually work at asking their readers to work against the text in order, paradoxically, to ingrain the text within themselves.

<div align="center">***</div>

In my opening chapter, "The Allegorical Langland and the Limits of Interpretation," I argue that the use of visual allegory in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, expressed consistently in figurative characters like Holy Church and Imaginatif and in descriptons of the dreamscape Will finds himself in, only makes sense if we understand Langland's poem as a transparent and dismissive gesture towards uses of textual images as tools for meditation and thought. Will's interactions with these characters and scenes are strained and frequently unproductive, yielding little information and generous amounts of confusion. I contend that the form of learning they represent through their formal generic attributes is not simply ineffective, but possibly dangerous for Will, who persists in approaching them the wrong way. The visual discourse that Langland's poem mouths is that found in formal Latin allegories like Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, and ideally the language should invite allegoresis that clarifies the theological concepts presented in the poem. Practically, however, the characters embodying the allegory are

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[13] Geoffrey Vinsauf, "The New Poetics," in *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*, ed. James Jerome Murphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 74.

unintelligible to those around them. More specifically, they are illegible. The result is a

deconstruction of textual authority inasmuch as the author, working through the text, is

no longer the source of understanding. Usually, we would expect a Latinate discourse,

like that found in earlier academic allegories, as a source of performed authority. On the

contrary, in *Piers Plowman* it is transformed into an example of empty and problematic

language. This, then, is the difficulty Langland asks his readers to tackle—instead of

responding to recognized authority, readers must construct meaning on their own and, in

doing so, determine a new relationship between themselves, the author, and the text, that

accounts for a newly de-centered textuality.

　　While my first chapter on Langland seeks to show what kind of reading his poem

rejects, the second, "The Exegetic Langland and the Rewards of Readerly Labor,"

uncovers the kind of reading it strives for. I show how Langland gradually turns readers

away from internally problematic visual allegory and toward the exegetic mode found

most commonly in Augustinian hermeneutics, a form of reading that relies on a never-

ending and continually productive struggle over interpretation and understanding. In this

chapter, Langland's textual examples of diagetic misreadings come to the fore; they are

the moments where readers can step back and examine their own interpretive instincts,

analyze how they correspond with the failed readings visible in the poem, and work to

come to a new understanding of the meaning of a passage based on the corrections erring

characters receive. By introducing false readings, Langland provides narrative resistance

for readers to work against and allows for an individualized model of readership unlike

any other in the period. This is also the place where the maracronic character of the

poem comes into play, as readers are repeatedly presented with Latin passages that pose

obvious linguistic difficulties of their own. The relationship between the Middle English and the Latin in Langland's poem becomes a source of interpretive tension as it becomes a place where new genres of reading, like riddling or exegesis, are imported and manipulated by the author to change how the audience approaches the text.

My next chapter, ""Of the parfite medicine": *Merita Perpetuata* in Gower's Vernacular Alchemy," moves from Langland's enacted notion of exegetical, laborious readership and turns to a specific example of idealized, interpretive labor from Book 4 of the *Confessio Amantis*: the surprising celebration of alchemy as a producer of Christian virtue. As a practice and a discourse, alchemy purifies, transforms, elevates, and multiplies—Gower uses this transformational power as an "*exemplum de diligencia predecessorum*" in the poem even as he discards the cryptic and often impenetrable language associated with alchemical practices. Latin alchemical texts use their linguistic difficulty to generate active interpretation in readers, but Gower substitutes his plain style as an alternative to enigmatic codes and riddles. The result, a new kind of vernacular alchemy, produces *merita perpetuata* out of abstract, interpretive labor. This new reading of Gower's interest in alchemy as idealized textual praxis shows how the poet's style furthers his attempt to create a new kind of vernacular reading, namely, one that transforms and perfects readers through their own interpretive efforts.

My last chapter, ""For word is wynd": The Limits of Confession in the *Confessio Amantis*," moves from one small example (alchemy) to the larger frame of the poem and the vernacular difficulty generated by the use of Latinate genres as esoteric formality gives way to the problem of accurate and effective language in vernacular confessional discourse. Gower makes no secret that he expects his poem to generate labor in his

characters and his readers alike. Amans is to work at understanding sin through Genius'

exempla just as readers are to work at reconciling their devotional and social

understanding with Gower's poetic project. Once again, as in Langland, the labor

required is that of affective interpretation, but while Langland offers the promise of

salvation through learning and contemplation, with thoughtful interpretation of language

producing virtuous understanding, Gower reverses the formula. His poem offers

salvation through active confession. In order to perform effective confession, the sinner

must become a producer of language—more specifically, the sinner must produce the

specific sacramental language of confession that can come only after understanding of sin

has been attained. This chapter argues that Gower's use of the exemplary form comes

directly out of contemporary confessional manuals and shows how he transforms the

genre from a purely pastoral medium into an inward construction of an individual reader.

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In the end, my intention is to shift the discourse surrounding the vernacular away

from that of *translatio* and toward that of *transmutatio*, consequentially moving the

framework of critical attention away from authorial self-assertion and toward intended

readerly labor. The language in my two focus texts, *Piers Plowman* and the *Confessio

Amantis*, work against the traditionally valued openness Middle English supposedly

possesses. Instead, from the very beginning they impede readerly progression. Be it in

Gower's exemplary form or Langland's paratactic allegory,[14] each text presents its own

interpretive problems. Both demand a laborious interaction with the divine that will lead

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[14] I take this terminology from Casey Finch's work on the poetry of the Pearl Poet. See the introduction to Casey Finch et al., *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

the reader through a series of errors, missteps, and internal conflicts in order to fundamentally change their devotional mettle.

By altering the way we look at the energy behind these texts, energy that comes from the reader's interaction with language that specifically presents itself as a didactic catalyst, we will be able to uncover a new conception of vernacular readership in the late medieval period. Currently, we assume socially mandated readership based on the subject matter and complexities of a given text and imagine readers selecting texts based on an already-solidified notion of societal standing. I believe this does not allow for one of the fundamental qualities of texts using difficult language – specifically, that through the act of reading they seek to alter an audience. If we can see texts as *anticipating* readers who are *expecting* transformation, we can begin to redefine not only these particular texts, but add new, essential dimensions to notions of the fourteenth century vernacular as well as to historical reading practices. What is more, we can begin to revitalize our understanding of the status of vernacular language in the period. No longer a lesser cousin to classical learning, a demoted version of language designed for the simple reading of simple people, we can see it instead as a challenging source of laborious engagement for a much wider, more self-aware set of audiences.

Chapter 2

The Allegorical Langland and the Limits of Interpretation

I was afered of hire face þeiȝ she fair weere
And seide, 'mercy, madame, what may þis bymeene?'
(1.10-11)[1]

When we talk about learning in *Piers Plowman*, we face an almost inescapable temptation to ground analysis of the poem through Will's experience and movement. There is a long tradition of excellent scholarship devoted to uncovering Will's progression, both internal and external, as he moves through the varied dreamscapes of Langland's massive poem.[2] It is, after all, a story about searching and even if, as Anne Middleton points out, the question of "What happens?" in the poem does not always seem to be the same as "What is the poem about?", there is nevertheless the feeling that Will's journey is progressing in a meaningful direction.[3] This direction may not always be a forward one, but it is progress just the same.

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[1] All quotations from the poem taken from *Piers Plowman: The B Version,* ed. by George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, rev. edn (London, 1988).

[2] For two complimentary but very distinct approaches to the idea of progression in Will, see Joseph S. Wittig, "'Piers Plowman' B, Passus IX-XII: Elements in the Design of the Inward Journey," *Traditio* 28 (1972), 211-80 and Nicolette Zeeman, *Piers Plowman and the Discourse of Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[3] Anne Middleton, "The Audience and Public of 'Piers Plowman'," in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background: Seven Essays*, ed. David Lawton (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1982), 91.

The struggle for understanding and development, however, is never the province of Will alone; Langland's medieval readers are faced with the same problems the poem presents to its characters, and the question of how to learn through texts and language is as real for them as it is for Will or anyone else he meets.[4] At the end of Passus V, a group of eager, would-be pilgrims turn to the newly-introduced Piers for instructions on how to travel to the tower of St. Truth. Piers replies with a description of the route, talking his way through a series of descriptive images of the landmarks they will find along the way; the crowd, however, either cannot seem to understand his proposal, or finds the path too difficult. Nervous and unsure, they shy away from the journey and opt instead to stay where they are and work at plowing the famous half-acre. The failure of Piers' explanation, his textual map, is surprising as the path described is not a complicated one—an allegorical representation of the Ten Commandments and Christian virtues and vices inscribed onto an imaginary landscape—and yet Langland's readers are left to wonder just what went wrong. The episode presents a problem that will persist throughout the remainder of the poem: what are readers to do when characters within the poem look at a scene or hear an explanation, and fail to understand it correctly? The map allegory in Passus V is far from cryptic, but the internal response to it re-casts it as something complicated and difficult. Langland uses these moments of misreading to shape his imagined, historical readers and takes an Augustinian position towards the problem; he incorporates error and ambiguity of text and interpretation into his method of

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[4] Gillian Rudd has a similar reading: "For, just as we readers bring to bear on the poem 'a grid of interpretation' which is formed by a combination of our culture, education and individual circumstances, so, in *Piers Plowman*, we are brought to act as witnesses to a similar process enacted in Wil's journey through the text. For Wil is an interpreter of the events in the poem as well as an enactor of them. He can thus be regarded as a figure of a reader who brings to the events he witnesses his own 'grid of interpretation'" Gillian Rudd, *Managing Language in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1994), 42.

instruction. In order for his external readers to find success, on some level readers inside the poem must fail.

Diagetic misreadings, or mistakes like the crowd's rejection of Piers' map, distance readers from the text by questioning the hermeneutic processes characters use throughout the poem. The text is structured around interpretive difficulty so as to reward study and concentrated readerly labor.[5] Will's struggle to understand and react appropriately to the various allegorical characters and encounters throughout his pilgrimage in turn initiates a similar struggle in Langland's historical readers—they must develop strategies for resolving Will's errors even as they undertake their own journey through the poem. James Simpson's work on reading in the poem clarifies Langland's idea of right reading by describing it as a process "whereby the reader and text interact, and whereby the reader's own desires and contemporary experience contribute substantially to the reading arrived at."[6] Successful reading, he argues, is one that has an effect on the reader, not one that adheres to a pre-determined meaning. Simpson's argument is one for seeing Will as an interpreter of texts, whose acts of reading occur as moments of desire for understanding, for revelation, for transformation. As we see Will move between scholastic models of reading and monastic models, he learns as anyone does—through his mistakes. And, as I will argue, readers (erring along with him) are able to travel a similar path through a similar method.

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[5] Zeeman gives an extremely productive analysis of the labor of reading and study, both as an interpretive activity and as a personified figure in *Piers Plowman* (Studie), in the context of Augustinian theology. She writes, "The encounter with Studie is a dynamic exploration of the central role played in the pursuit of understanding by desire, suffering and experience. These issues are both explicated and dramatically enacted on Wil, the seeker. However, this encounter also situates the pursuit of understanding within larger experiences of desire and suffering which in *Piers Plowman* characterize the spiritual life as a whole: it implies that Wil's pursuit is paradigmatic of the pursuit of the poem itself." Nicolette Zeeman, "'Studying' in the Middle Ages--and in *Piers Plowman*," *New Medieval Literatures* 3 (1999): 201.

[6] James Simpson, "Desire and the Scriptural Text: Will as Reader in *Piers Plowman*," in *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*, ed. Rita Copeland (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 232.

The mistakes Will makes fall into two very broad categories: those dealing with the visual elements of the poem, and those with the textual. The first form of allegory, that which uses visual cues, as in descriptions of people, guide-figure, places, and scenes, occupies a unique place in the structure of the poem. It functions both as a pedagogical element (Will is clearly supposed to learn from what he sees just as much as from what he hears) and also as the fabric through which the dream-vision can exist. What Will sees is in a sense what readers "see" through the eyes of their imaginations; as they absorb the text the scenes and episodes are present in their minds' eyes in the same way that they are present to Will's (or, perhaps more accurately, to Will's sleeping mind). The dreamscape and its population therefore are able to be independent of Will's travels inasmuch as they are external stimuli that precede his presence in the dream, but for readers the textual images are necessarily filtered through the dreamers' narration and are therefore moderated and subjective. Because of this hybrid nature, the visual elements of Langland's allegory become a place where readers are sometimes forcibly separated from the poem through Will's misreading (or perhaps more appropriately, his mis-viewing) of a figure or scene. The visual, as we shall see, draws attention to Will's errors (and those of other internal characters) in order to allow the external audience to re-read the same scene, freed from the dreamer's problematic impressions. Paradoxically, however, even as the visual works to separate readers from the text, it also prepares them for a form of textual exegesis that internalizes understanding of the poem, collapsing the space between word and audience. Readers are asked to take the description given by the poem, absorbed initially through Will's gaze, and re-cast it for themselves according to the corrections Will receives. In this way, Langland uses moments of seeing and visual

interpretation as opportunities to teach both the theological and ethical lessons inherent in

the allegory, but also as a preparation for a new kind of vernacular reading built on

individual interpretation and internalization of poetry that, while it incorporates previous

reading models, has a new agenda entirely.

Reading Difficulty

Langland's visual strategy works in the poem partly because Will's faults are so

understandable. His frustrations and confusions are believable and, as a result, are

productive. When corrections come, they are addressed not only to the dreaming Will

but also to readers who might well make similar missteps, encouraging them to examine

the error and to learn from it in the same way the character must. In doing so, they turn

their reading eyes from the page and into the text of their own experience in a way that

becomes more and more common in the later Middle Ages. Jennifer Bryan identifies this

devotional labor primarily with Augustine's influence on the period:

> This Augustinian model of interiority, as it made its way into Middle
> English devotional texts, imagines the inner life as a scene of much greater
> unpleasantness and uncertainty…Here the heart is not an enclosed bower
> but a field, or an orchard, where readers learn to toil mightily and busily at
> cultivating virtues out of stony soil, and where they are required to be
> endlessly conscious of their likeness and unlikeness to the divine image.[7]

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[7] The link between textual examination and the reader's individual introspection comes directly from
Augustine's Incarnational theology. Medieval writers take up the idea that Christ is always present in the
Christian heart, and the job of the reader is to search for him in the "hidden landscape of the self." Texts
can only encourage readers to seek, not produce knowledge on their own. Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward:
Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 65. For more on Augustine's understanding of Christ as the Word, see Marcia
L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge*, Revised ed. (Lincoln:
University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

In Augustine's writings, the search for grace demands an intimate examination of the self. Langland's poem makes room for readers to analyze their own reactions to the text through Will's errors. If Will is expecting one answer to a question and receives another, or if he responds to a sermon in a way that meets with disapproval, this offers a moment for readers to interject their own attempts at interpretation that depart from that offered by the text alone.

In order to engage this Augustinian labor over the interior, stony field of the soul,[8] Langland uses a new kind of vernacular poetics that relies not on the familiar ideal of *translatio studii*, but on hermeneutic and discursive difficulty. The form of the poem is designed to lead readers into an interpretation that changes their devotional biographies as well as impels them toward virtuous action. Again, this notion of an interpretive narrative comes directly from Augustinian hermeneutics. Bryan reminds us that,

> For Augustine, reading initiates the project of self-knowledge, serving as the indispensable means of turning inward into the mind. As the text turns the reader toward the inner self, it also displays a vision of the standard that the self has not met.[9]

Langland is counting on this process of textual self-meeting that, in *Piers Plowman*, comes directly out of the difficulty of the poem. The macaronic structure, the allegorical, sermonizing characters, Will's inability to read his surroundings, and most of all, the text's shifting and untraceable narrative structure all work to challenge readers into

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[8] In Book 10 of the Confessions, Augustine writes, "*Ego certe, domine, laboro hic et laboro in me ipso: factus sum mihi terra difficultatis, et sudoris nimii.*" (10.16) (This much is certain, Lord, that I am laboring over it, laboring over myself, and I have become for myself a land hard to till and of heavy sweat.) Augustine, *Confessionum*, ed. Lucas Verheijen, O.S.A., vol. 27, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* (Turnholt: Brepols, 1981), 167. All translations from Augustine are taken from Maria Boulding's renderings in the invaluable series, Augustine, "The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century," ed. John E Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York: New City Press).

[9] Bryan, *Looking Inward*, 78. See also Chapter 1 of Brian Stock, *After Augustine: The Meditative Reader and the Text* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). For a fuller discussion of *Piers Plowman* as inward journey, see Steven F. Kruger, "Mirrors and the Trajectory of Vision in Piers Plowman," *Speculum* 66, no. 1 (1991), 74-95.

examining their own hermeneutic narrative even as they attend to that of the poetic. The basis of this readerly struggle comes from the same impulse Will has when speaking to the guide-figures in the poem, the desire to understand and to assemble disparate pieces of information into one uniform picture.[10] Looking for a solution to the poem's fragmentary discursive structure, Elizabeth Kirk muses that "Perhaps the ideal commentator on *Piers Plowman* would bring to the poem total, simultaneous awareness of the timeless structure that is Christian theology" in order to make sense of "the spiraling character of the poem, in which the same issues and problems recur and are repeatedly reexamined."[11] In fact, the exact opposite is true. What the poem requires is not a static, omniscient reader, but one who will continually struggle with the problem of encapsulating knowledge of the divine in a usable form.[12]

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[10] In regards to the medieval love of scholastic categorization of information, Hans Robert Jauss places readers in the Middle Ages against their later counterparts: "In contradistinction to a Romantic expectation, medieval man was less a wanderer and dreamer than a codifier and system builder, always intent upon finding a place for each thing, and for each thing the right place, and not satisfied until even phenomena like love or war were codified to the last detail." There are clear incongruities when one tries to apply this theory to *Piers*, a poem about a wandering dreamer who never seems to make sense of anything and where nothing ends up in a tidy allegorical catalogue. This is not to say that such accustomed patterns are not hard at work in Langland's poem, but their presence is less a stable constant for the reader to rely on than a hazy and insubstantial impression of order to work toward. Hans Robert Jauss, "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature," *New Literary History* 10, no. 2: Medieval Literature and Contemporary Theory (1979): 191-92. For a similar impulse to systematize and resolve difference in medieval readings of classical authors, Ovid being the most obvious example, see Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, 64.

[11] Elizabeth D. Kirk, *The Dream Thought of Piers Plowman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 11-12. Kirk also claims that divine truth can never be contained in human actions or terms as the mortal condition is so tumultuous, transitory, and inconsistent that spiritual meaning will always resist it. However, in *Piers Plowman*, one cannot help but feel that the author revels in the problematic movement of his human characters, even going so far as to imbue such characteristics in his allegorical figures. This is, after all, the stuff of good poetry.

[12] As James Simpson finds the reading practices portrayed by Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudiens*, "…we as readers are invited to participate in the construction of meaning, and to participate ourselves, therefore, in the processes of learning represented in the poems. The ultimate aim…is not so much to represent the formation of the soul, but to enact that formation in the reader." James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's Anticlaudianus and John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge [UK]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14.

Such a struggle is possible because the poem locates its complexity in changing hermeneutic models rather than in layered representations of character.[13] In part, we can see this complexity in the layered presentation of reading and interpretation in the poem I have already described: reading happens on the narrative level, when characters like Will are asked to interpret information, and on the historical level, when medieval readers picked up the manuscript. Deborah McGrady, in her study on the development of vernacular reading through Guillaume de Machaut's *Voir dit*, terms characters that read within the poem as "inscribed readers" and the readers the text anticipates as "inventive readers."[14] She chooses "inventive" as the handle for the historical readers imagined by the text because, "Exhibiting little concern for the integrity of the master text, they dismantle and recycle words, forms, and ideas to create new works. Through this process of appropriation, they assume the status of authors in their own right."[15] The relationship between these two types of reading in Machaut's work is not, as may be expected, the same as in Langland's, but McGrady's terminology is useful inasmuch as it allows us to examine how inscribed readers in *Piers Plowman* function not only to open space for

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[13] The latter, character-based aesthetic, most familiar to modern readers of medieval texts from the Chaucerian tradition of poetic narrative, tends to cast textual problems in its depictions and deployments of individuals, either allegorical or historical. The resulting hermeneutic allows for a cohesive, if often elaborate, subject that is rehearsed through the periodic interplay of the poem's spoken voices. Anne Middleton clarifies this regarding Chaucer's use of character: "The social and literary values that found expression in the mode I call 'public poetry' are presented in Chaucerian fiction only, as it were, in indirect discourse, assigned in various ways to several characters in the Canterbury fiction – and thereby greatly qualified." Anne Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," *Speculum* 53, no. 1 (1978), 94.

[14] This division is explained in the introduction to Deborah McGrady, *Controlling Readers: Guillaume De Machaut and His Late Medieval Audience* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006). In her work, she also includes a third type of reader, that of the "intermediary reader;" namely, the scribes, illuminators, bookbinders, and other craftsmen who read copies of a work in order to reproduce it, thereby including the developments of the new philology into her method. My study will constrain itself to inscribed and inventive readers only, as the complexities of the manuscript tradition of *Piers Plowman*, though fruitful and fascinating, are beyond the scope of this chapter. See also Anne Middleton's famous distinction between "audience" and "public" in Middleton, "The Audience and Public of 'Piers Plowman'."; Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II."

[15] McGrady, *Controlling Readers*, 149.

inventive readers, but in fact to create them. The idea of the inventive reader, pulled both

from modern reception theory and from medieval texts circulating in the twelfth through

the fourteenth centuries,[16] emulates the Latinate reading found in Augustine while casting

it as a distinctly vernacular element.

Running alongside vernacular reading models that stress providing information

easily and openly to a wide number of readers is the development of models that mimic

more learned and controlled forms of reading.[17] Private reading, that is, reading alone to

oneself, becomes more and more common throughout the medieval period and emerges

across a wide array of genres, from devotional texts to courtly romances. Authors

encourage readers to bring books into private spaces of reflection through the ways in

which reading is presented in their works. In response, texts like the *Didascalicon*

emerge to offer guidelines to the growing audience of solitary, individual readers. Hugh

of St. Victor presents a form of reading based strongly on the monastic practices, but

which also incorporates the structure of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*, thereby opening

the usefulness of his model to secular as well as sacred texts. Readers are urged to read

not only for information, but more importantly as a means to open the mind to

meditation, preparing the way for more involved, more advanced scriptural reading in the

future. Once readers have enough practice with secular material, they can begin the

process of moving from *lectio*, to *meditatio*, and then from *oratio*, to *operatio*, and finally

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[16] McGrady uses an idea of reader-response culled from Jauss, Iser, and Fish and plays it against the shift in developing lay readership in texts like the *Didascalicon*, which uses a monastic, contemplative model, and the scholastic *Metalogicon*. For her sources for reception theory, see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980); Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1972), 279-99; Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982).
[17] For clear descriptions of the clear and open form of vernacular reading, particularly in terms of equating the vernacular with the literal sense, see the first two chapters of Rita Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

to *contemplatio*. The active reading that "binds readers and Scripture" together comes to fruition as readers move beyond the text and towards the *ruminatio* and *contemplatio* that will bring them closer to God.[18] The text specifically looks to train individual readers so as to enable them to successfully engage with texts in solitude.

By contrast, the counterpoint to Hugh's work comes in John of Salisbury's scholastic *Metalogicon*. Rather than concerning itself with the individual reader, the *Metalogicon* relies on the relationship between the master and the pupil. Reading is split not into steps on the ladder to contemplation, but into *praelectio* and *lectio*. The master, from his position of authority, provides the *praelectio* as he explains and expounds on the chosen text; the student, now armed with the appropriate message, in turn sets about reading (*lectio*) through the lens of his master's interpretation. This second step is private in the same way that Hugh's imagined readers are private, alone with their books and their thoughts, but it can only happen in the wake of previously performed (and shared) authoritative interpretation. This pattern leads easily into the scholastic forms of the *questio* and the *disputatio* wherein students are tested in their ability to give convincing arguments based on what they have learned. Magisterial control ensured that the *lectio* and *meditato* that comes from private reading is productive and accurate.

When we turn to Langland's text some 200 years later, we can see aspects of both models appearing through the interactions between the inscribed and inventive readers. The inscribed readers in their narrative capacity are usually reading for or with one of the guide-figures and therefore would seem to participate in a backwards version of John's teacher/student model. Rather than hearing the "correct" reading and then attempting to reproduce it, the inscribed readers offer a mistaken reading and are taught through the

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[18] McGrady, *Controlling Readers*, 25.

guide's adjustment. This is precisely what we see when Will meets a figure like Anima in Passus XV. When Will eagerly reports to Anima his desire to know "Alle þe sciences vnder sonne and alle þe sotile craftes" (XV.48) of human knowledge, he is rebuked for the sin of vain and prideful curiosity, a damning offense, in immediate and no uncertain terms. Anima's reaction to Will's sudden enthusiasm comes as something of a surprise—he is, after all, supposed to be learning about the road to salvation—and not just for Will but also for the readers struggling with him through the difficult and labyrinthine poem. That Will is not the most capable of readers is clear from the outset, yet this does not mean that his struggle to make sense of his surroundings and the instruction he receives (or his problematic ambition to learn all there is to know) is simply a character flaw. Rather, the meeting with Anima asks the fundamental question of how virtuous learning can take place when it is ultimately bound by human language and, therefore, by human sin and error. Will comes to a situation requiring his interpretation in order to proceed, his attempt is unintentionally sinful, and Anima replies with a correction not only of Will's error but also with a new reading of the question of appropriate forms of understanding and knowledge. The exchange between Will and Anima is inscribed within a scholastic master/pupil relationship. The external, inventive readers, on the other hand, would seem necessarily to be practicing Hugh's model of individual reading inasmuch as the readers envisioned by the text are encouraged, as Anima encourages Will, to move beyond simply looking for information and into the kind of reading that produces both works in the world and union with God through contemplation. They are not doing so in tandem with a magisterial reader preceding them and offering guidance in

the form of a master/student relationship, but are asked to privately tackle the problems the poem presents.

The interaction between the inscribed and inventive readers demonstrates how Langland's poem both resists and appropriates each model of reading, the monastic of the *Didascalicon* and the scholastic of the *Monologicon*. The text is geared for solitary reading, but there is a way that the mechanisms of scholastic study are found in the construction of readers. Rather than the master providing the *praelectio* and the authoritative commentary on the text, the text embeds the *praelectio* in the narrative not through models of right reading, but of misreading. *Lectio,* as private study in the scholastic system, comes after the model given by the master; in Langland's text, the inventive readers need to get to *lectio* on their own. Langland uses his inscribed readers' mistakes to urge his historical readers to become inventive by what Wolfgang Iser terms "defamiliarizaton." The familiar, comfortable aspects of texts cannot truly teach readers anything because "communication would be unnecessary if that which is to be communicated were not to some extent unfamiliar."[19] The unfamiliar text, rather than something that is absorbed is something that must be worked over—it is difficult. The pattern of error and correction in *Piers Plowman* generates difficulty because the would-be inventive readers are constantly asked to revise their interpretations and expectations; the text and its anticipated readers are "defamiliarized" from each other.

It is in this defamiliar space that the text's imagined external readers can become inventive readers. The inscribed misreadings have a double function. On the one hand,

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[19] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 229. See also Frank Kermode's understanding of how texts create *Vorverständnis* (fore-knowledge or expectation) in readers, only to change it through the process of reading. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*, 71.

they draw the external readers' gaze to their own reading practices as reflections of that performed by characters within the poem, and they focus readers' efforts and attentions on the process of interpretation. On the other, misreadings allow room for readers to construct new interpretations that move beyond either what the inscribed characters offer or the guide-figures preach. Langland's poetics continually experiment with the literary apparatuses of meaning making and, in so doing, challenge the limits (and even purposes) of vernacular reading. In this chapter, I will look at examples of Langland's visual allegory as an appropriation of monastic *pictura* that at once mimics the classical use of *enargia*, or "painting in the mind", even as it resists the function of the trope and the readings it produces. Visual allegory offers a fruitful point of entry into the complexities of the interactions between the inscribed and the developing inventive readers because as a narrative element (the poem's characters physically see the allegorical figures or objects) it magnifies the tension between appearance and meaning, between language and interpretation, and between text and reader. Moreover, the interpretive questions raised by moments of visual allegory extend beyond the scope of interpretive practices and speak directly to the ethical problems the poem continually grapples with. As we shall see, the inventive readers imagined by Langland's text work at themselves even as they work at their reading, and the ties between ethical action and interpretive labor are discovered and paradoxically renewed through Will's various visual missteps.

Obscuring the Picture

The beginning of Passus XV and the encounter with Anima is undoubtedly one of

the clearest examples of Will's failure to react appropriately to a didactic situation. Immediately upon meeting Anima, Will becomes so enraptured with the possibilities for self-improvement stretching out before him that he suddenly proclaims his unbounded desire to penetrate all earthly modes of learning: "Alle þe sciences vnder sonne and alle þe sotile craftes / I wolde I knewe and kouþe kyndely in myn herte" (XV.48-49). Anima's harsh response, a sharp chastisement of Will's hasty and sinful intemperance, is startling in its vehemence:

> 'Thanne artow inparfit', quod he, 'and oon of prides knyȝtes.
> For swich a lust and likyng Lucifer fel from heuene:
> *Ponam pedem meum in aquilone & similis ero altissimo.*
> It were ayeins kynde', quod he, 'and alle kynnes reson
> That any creature should konne al except crist oone…'
> (XV.50-54)

At this moment, Will's cry for inborn understanding, for *kynde knowyng*, fails to distinguish between the prideful, vain, and ineffective modes of knowledge that are hallmarks of ecclesiastical corruption and the affective, charitable awareness of scripture born out of humility and a yearning for God. The passage conflates the notions of *kynde* as innate and internal (Will's definition) and *kynde* as natural and appropriate (Anima's definition) in order to show just what is wrong with Will's fervor for learning.[20] His wish to ingest all possible forms of knowledge seems laudable at first blush, especially given the similarities between his notion of learning expressed here and the reading practices extolled elsewhere in the poem – principally, the monastic ideal of internalizing texts to

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[20] There is a great deal of excellent scholarship on the intricacies of *kynde knowing* in the poem. In my characterization of the difference between Amina's understanding of the idea and Will's, I follow Mary Clemente Davlin's reading in Mary Clemente Davlin, "Kynde Knowying as a Major Theme in Piers Plowman B," *The Review of English Studies, New Series* 22, no. 85 (1971), 5., and Zeeman, *Piers Plowman and the Discourse of Desire*, 9.

the extent that the knowledge becomes a bodily essence, a *kyndly* thing.[21] Yet the reader

too must feel a similar impulse to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible. The

instinctive desire to comprehend all things at once is assuredly something readers of a

dense and difficult poem like *Piers Plowman* can sympathize with. Thus, the episode

draws readers in through Will's understandable enthusiasm for knowledge even as

Anima's correction places hermeneutical distance between the audience and the text.

The shifting relationship between readers of the poem and the visual scenes

encountered by the characters is one of the key sources of hermeneutic tension Langland

uses to engage self-reflective labor. As Gillian Rudd elegantly states, "The difficulty

[Langland] portrays in *Piers Plowman* is that of finding any secure form of guidance, or

even speech, in a world where possibilities of wrong interpretation abound."[22] Readers

encounter Will struggling with a pictorial scene or figure and watch as he works to sort

out the implications of what he has seen or heard. In this way, Langland provides an

example of visual interpretation from within the object of the text that will be layered into

the understanding readers pull from the poem. This example is unfortunately not always

a positive one as Will frequently creates false meanings; and yet, these mistakes are

elements as necessary for the poem as are the guide figures or the sermons they give.[23]

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[21] For arguments about *kynde knowing* in the poem, see Davlin, "Kynde Knowying as a Major Theme in Piers Plowman B."; Britton J. Harwood, "Langland's 'Kynde Knowing' and the Quest for Christ," *Modern Philology* 80 (1983), 242-55. A fuller description of monastic reading practice in relation to devotional methods can be found in Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 3rd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982); Jean Leclercq, *Otia Monastica; Études Sur Le Vocabulaire De La Contemplation Au Moyen Age*, *Studia Anselmiana Philosophica Theologica; Fasc. 51* (Romae: Orbis Catholicus Herder, 1963). For a focus on Langland's use of monastic reading in *Piers Plowman*, see Morton W. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1962).

[22] Rudd, *Managing Language*, 11.

[23] Erring dream figures are, of course, common in literature of all periods, not just the medieval and not just in Langland. We can see similar constructs in Boethius's self-characterization in the *Consolatio Philosophiae*, the Redcrosse Knight in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (though not himself a dreamer *per se*),

When Will veers off track, it is nevertheless because he is working to come to terms with the information with which he is presented—the same viewing process that the poem asks of its historical readers. These moments become opportunities for readers to draft new meanings from the visual allegory that are not dependent upon either Will's conclusions or Will's bodily experiences.

Langland's allegory furthers this interpretive work by either playing up the otherness of the text, thereby increasing the distance between readers and text, or by promising a glimpse of a coherent, recognizable theological system, drawing readers into the poem's textual logic. Mary Carruthers identifies the first option with the rhetorical technique of *obscuritas,* enigmatic textual language that encourages contemplative study, and the second with *pictura*, the sort of explanatory textual images found in sermons of the period.[24] Both involve a separation between text and readers, but *pictura* emerges as a category of visual allegory that is intended to aid readers' understanding on a more immediate level, that of *praelectio* rather than *meditatio*. The rhetorical division delineates two different relationships between the interpreter and the object of interpretation: *pictura* seeks to offer organized information that will guide readers in their efforts, much as the allegorical figures like Holy Church or Anima try to do for Will, whereas *obscuritas* clouds the bond between sign and meaning, leaving readers to work for reconciliation.[25]

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and even Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*/*Through the Looking Glass* – these are all characters who, like Will, attempt (sometimes successfully) to make sense of complicated allegorical narratives.

[24] Mary Carruthers, "Allegory without the Teeth: Some Reflections on Figural Language in *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 19 (2005): 29-30.

[25] For *obscuritas*, the desire for the object of the text moves readers to labor over their interpretations and is simultaneously the source of aesthetic pleasure. In a Freudian reading of this process, Robert Gregory defines this as an Augustinian mentality: "This aesthetic is Augustinian in the sense that it resembles his pilgrimage/quest through the Bible; since the book means *caritas* as its universal, the reader's task is to show how every verse means *caritas* even when the verse does not say that at all…So, in the *Canterbury*

Langland's layering of diegetic reading and external reading can effectively change one rhetorical trope, the visual *pictura*, for another, textual *obscuritas*, as we will see in the figure of Anima. The shift takes place between Will's reading and the external readers': when Will meets a personified example of *pictura*, the encounter for the audience is almost always modified through his responses to that figure. As a result, the information contained within the illustrative or figural signs must be combined with Will's reading (or misreading) of them and the reply (or correction) that follows. For example, in Passus XV, Will re-enters the dream and is immediately greeted by an allegorical figure, eventually identified as Anima, but who initially appears as a collection of ambiguous signs that must be deciphered. Carruthers argues that Anima exists here as *pictura*, an image that is the "depiction of scholastic *distinctio*, with all its various aspects clearly schematized as in a map or diagram," a picture of "clarity and order."[26] This may be true, as Anima eventually emerges as a trustworthy guide for Will and the reader, but Langland here works hard to muddy the waters. From the moment Anima enters the dream, the deep-seated visual ambiguity of the character places Will and the reader in the same predicament. Will falls asleep and "as it sorcerie were" encounters a mysterious "sotil þyng" without a tongue and without teeth; at this point, the reader is stranded in the same interpretive void as Will—neither has any information about the figure, either visual or textual, and neither can tell if he will have a threatening or a helpful influence over the narrative. All that is known of Anima is his gender and

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Tales, the pilgrimage is not that of the characters, for they are fixed in their desires; instead, the reader is a pilgrim-interpreter: can he make all these voices speak doctrine or will he falter?" Robert Gregory, "Reading as Narcissism: *Le Roman De La Rose*," *SubStance* 12.2, no. 39 (1983): 38.

[26] Carruthers, "Allegory without the Teeth," 34. Carruthers eventually concludes in her article that Anima is an example of *pictura* and not *obscuritas*, reading him as an example of clarifying sermon-speak rather than a key to meditative study. I disagree because of his placement here at the intersection between diegetic and external reading. Anima may attempt to offer Will *pictura*, but he embodies *obscuritas*.

his powerful ambiguity. From his immediate speech, issuing out of a mouth with none of the normal faculties for producing language, to the initial description of "sotil," nothing about Anima satisfies the curiosity; instead, his very lack of legibility heightens the need to categorize and identify him. He is a tantalizing blank, a void that must be classified and analyzed before the narrative can move forward. And to make matters worse, when Will is finally able to ask him for the most basic of pieces of information, his name, the response is a bewildering multitude of options to select from: Anima, Animus, Mens, Memoria, Racio (Reson), Sensus, Conscience, Amor, and Spiritus. And so, not only is Will (and external readers along with him) presented with a speaking allegorical figure for whom language should be impossible, he also gets an overabundance of impracticable words and images that fail to provide a secure and reliable definition of the being's authority and theological implications.

The danger of *pictura* is its pledge for a neatly codified doctrine that, while appealing, cannot conform to the practiced Christianity the poem strives for. At this moment, Will and Langland's readers have a conjoined desire for the object of the text, and because of this, Anima's immediate rejection of Will's dangerous curiosity transforms the allegory. Inasmuch as Will's eagerness for learning is initiated by the tantalizing *pictura* of Anima, it is the delight in organized information the trope promises that becomes problematic. When Anima rejects the rhetorical foundation of his own allegorical identity, he shifts into a disturbing, enigmatic textual reflection (*obscuritas*) of what should be a clarifying visual object. This shift is the crux of the confrontation in the passus, and it leaves readers to puzzle out and define Will's error of desire to the extent that they can separate themselves from the understandable sentiment he embodies.

The problem that Anima raises with his sharp rebuke and with his ambiguous figural body is that of *curiositas*, a sin that Augustine links with those of lust and pride.[27] In the *Confessions*, curiosity and the desire for inappropriate and ineffective knowledge removes man from God by occluding the true relationship between the human and the divine. By way of example, Augustine describes the ability of some learned men to predict solar and lunar eclipses. But instead of celebrating the triumph of the intellect over a mysterious and frightening phenomenon, he warns against the pride that inevitably follows:

> *Et mirantur haec homines et stupent qui nesciunt ea, et exsultant atque extolluntur qui sciunt; et per impiam superbiam recedentes et deficientes a lumine tuo, tanto ante solis defectum futurum praeuident, et in praesentia suum non uident. Non enim religiose quaerunt unde habeant ingenium quo ista quaerunt. Et inuenientes quia tu fecisti eos, non ipsi dant tibi se ut serues quod fecisti…*[28]

Will makes the same mistake. His search for understanding has crossed over into vain curiosity that will only enrich his own self-satisfaction and erroneous sense of accomplishment rather than bringing him closer to God. Like the scholars who take pleasure in amazing their stupefied neighbors through astrological predictions, Will is

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[27] This comes from Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, in his commentary on Ps. 8:8-9. "*Haec autem tria genera uitiorum, id est uoluptas carnis, et superbia, et curiositas, omnia peccata concludunt.*" (These three types of vices, that is, indulgence of the flesh, pride and inquisitiveness, embrace all sins.) Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos, 1-50*, ed. D. Eligius Dekkers, O.S.B. and Johannes Fraipont, vol. 38, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* (Turnholt: Brepols, 1956), 56. For more on the sin of curiosity in Augustine, see Peter Harrison, "Curiosity, Forbidden Knowledge, and the Reformation of Natural Philosophy in Early Modern England," *Isis* 92, no. 2 (2001), 256-90; Richard Newhauser, "Augustinian *Vitam Curiositatis and Its Reception*," in *Saint Augustine and His Influence in the Middle Ages*, ed. E.B. King and J.T. Schaefer, *Sewanee Medieval Colloquium* (Sewanee, TN: The Press of the University of the South, 1988); P. G. Walsh, "The Rights and Wrongs of Curiosity (Plutarch to Augustine)," *Greece & Rome, Second Series* 35, no. 1 (1988), 73-85.

[28] [People think this wonderful: those who are ignorant of such matters are dumbfounded, while the experts strut and make merry. In their impious pride they draw away from you and lose your light, because these scholars who foresee a future eclipse of the sun long beforehand fail to see their own in the present, for want of inquiring in a religious spirit from whom they have received the very intelligence which enables them to inquire into these phenomena. If they discover that you have made them, they do not give themselves over to you...] Augustine, *Confessionum*, 5.3.4.

more interested in the sense of power and control he believes will come with the ability to "konne þe cause" of all Anima's names. Taken as an example of *pictura*, the promise of ordered, categorized knowledge, Anima leads Will into sin, but taken as an example of *obscuritas*, the initiator of *meditatio*, Anima instructs external readers in how to learn through texts.

This is not to say that *pictura* cannot be a bridge to meditation, because it can, and it can do so with power and efficacy. Carruthers describes the use of *pictura* as a fundamental element in monastic meditative practices; the image becomes a "composition of images, either actualized in a visual medium or described in words for the eye of the mind."[29] More to the point, *picturae* function as memory prompts, intended to stimulate either recollection of past experiences or *inventio* for new ideas.[30] She describes the ways in which images (*picturae*) were commonly used in medieval bestiaries, not as simple ornaments or even as another form of representing a specific animal, but as places for readers to attach maxims or ethical qualities to the unique features of the creature. The image, therefore, becomes both a repository and a generator/reminder of various virtues and vices, morals and stories. A similar effect is found when the image is a textual one, as in the case for the type of personification allegory we see in Prudentius' *Psychomachia.* In this case, the figures with their specific attributes and their violent actions intentionally create striking images for readers in order to prompt the kind of mental "seeing" the poem invites: "*vincendi praesens ratio est, si*

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[29] Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 203.
[30] Carruthers reminds us that "Isidore of Seville defines a picture as "an image expressing the semblance [speciem] of some thing" which, when seen again, will recall to mind some matter that one wants to remember. The "good" of a picture, its underlying aesthetic principle, is thus understood in terms of its role in cognitive function: a picture is for remembering, and its value is dependent on how it serves this function." Ibid., 200.

comminus ipsas / Virtutum facies et conluctantia contra / viribus infestis liceat portenta notare" (18-20).[31] The figures readers encounter must, in order to be effective, be an example of the rhetorical technique of *enargia*, what Carruthers defines as "painting in the mind."[32] The vividness of their presentation leads to their manifestation as images in readers' minds, which in turn function as *picturae*, available for recall and invention after the poem ends.

Monastic meditation uses images like those in Prudentius or in illuminated manuscripts to provide a storehouse of material through which to create chains of associated thoughts, almost like what we might expect out of a free-association session in psychotherapy. But unlike the psychiatrist's technique, which relies on the subconscious to make connections the subject might not already be aware of, monastic associative chains are carefully constructed as a cognitive exercise of *inventio*. The images from familiar Biblical stories, or explanatory ethical works like the *Psychomachia*, become empty vessels upon which to "gather" other material. For example, the image of Prudentius' Pride in her bright red cloak, elaborately knotted at her throat, might lead a thirteenth-century monk to reflect on the recent papal degrees restricting clothing for those in orders, and therefore on the quality of obedience to the Rule.[33] Alternatively, the

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[31] [The way of victory is before our eyes if we may mark at close quarters the very features of the Virtues, and the monsters that close with them in deadly struggle.] Prudentius, *Prudentius: Volume 1*, trans. H. J. Thomson, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 281.

[32] Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*, 130.

[33]
> *carbasea ex umeris summo collecta coibat*
> *palla sinu teretem nectens a pectore nodum.*
> *a cervice fluense tenui velamine limbus*
> *concipit infestas textis trugentibus auras.*
>   (186-189)

[A cambric mantle hanging from [Pride's] shoulders was gathered high on her breast and made a rounded knot on her bosom, and from her neck there flowed a filmy streamer that billowed as it caught the opposing breeze.] Prudentius, *Prudentius: Volume 1*, 293. For more on the various decrees on monastic habits, see Laura Fulkerson Hodges, *Chaucer and Clothing: Clerical and Academic Costume in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Woodbridge [UK]: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 114-18.

knot might bring to mind the cloak in Psalm 108 that David asks the Lord to cast over his persecutors: "Let them that detract me be clothed with shame, and let them be covered with their confusion as with a double cloak." (Ps 108:29)[34] The shame of the judges could then lead to a meditation on Judas' shame for his part in the Passion, which in turn could lead to the evils of money, and so on and so forth. The actual development of the chain matters very little, but the way in which the image is used as a tool for generating meditation, and for connecting to other images or scenes, is the essence of *pictura*.

Langland, it would seem, offers an endless supply of meditational images to add to readers' caches, and Will would seem to provide the perfect opportunity to put them into narrative and interpretive action. And yet, the shift from what initially appears as *pictura* into *obscuritas* happens again and again throughout the poem as Will (and readers) encounter characters and images. The technique allows Langland to manipulate readers' expectations of the text as well as to dramatically change the relationship between textual image and meaning—it enables and focuses readers' attentions on generating their own meaning rather than on organizing knowledge into a recallable form. The effect of Anima's visual presentation, paired with his textual rebuke, is to separate readers from the text, but also to place them in a position where they must construct their own readings of the scene. Moreover, the meaning produced becomes an effect of readers' internalization of the problems a *pictura/obscurias* episode raises. Anima's transformation from a clarifying visual representation of an abstract idea into an obscure textual problem allows the sin of intellectual curiosity to become a problem for readers to address in themselves, not just in Will. Because the poem removes them from the scene, they are pulled out of Will's visual and auditory perspective; once the

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[34] All Biblical quotations taken from the Douay-Rheims version or the Vulgate.

experiential impression proves problematic, the episode becomes a textual moment to be absorbed and studied, allowing the audience to develop into inventive readers rather than passive viewers.

Acting upon Allegory

The most pressing question raised by Langland's visual allegory, and indeed allegory as a whole, is the difficulty of translating it from a pictorial or textual representation of an abstract concept into a lived and performed example of affective understanding.[35] Will must experience his devotion and the change of his will rather than simply know that something must be done. The readerly labor involved with this kind of understanding must come first and foremost out of the language of the poem.[36] The role of visual allegory and its shift from *pictura* into *obscuritas* allows for readers, who do not have the opportunity for first-hand, sensory experience of traveling through Will's dreamscape, to engage transformative (and lived) understanding for themselves— furthermore, it displays that the inscribed experiences within the poem are not always the most effective tools for progress. These critical allegorical moments that depend almost

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[35] By affective understanding here I mean something very close to *kynde knowing*. Mary Clemente Davlin has most famously isolated the question of *kynde knowing* as central to the poem; she finds that "Will, having come to a dead end in searching for wisdom through theory, recovers his initial desire to know God as love and begins to search for him through love and suffering." Davlin, "Kynde Knowying as a Major Theme in Piers Plowman B," 2. See also Harwood, "Langland's 'Kynde Knowing' and the Quest for Christ."; A. V. C. Schmidt, "'Elementary' Images in the Samaritan Episode of *Piers Plowman*," *Essays in Criticism* 56, no. 4 (2006), 303-23; James Simpson, "From Reason to Affective Knowledge: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in *Piers Plowman*," *Medium Aevum* 55, no. 1 (1986), 1-23.

[36] Such readings of language-driven reader response in the poem are common in current Langland studies. For examples that most closely follow my own reading, see Rudd, *Managing Language*; A. V. C. Schmidt, *The Clerkly Maker: Langland's Poetic Art* (Cambridge; Wolfeboro, N.H.: D.S. Brewer, 1987); Schmidt, "'Elementary' Images in the Samaritan Episode of *Piers Plowman*."; Simpson, "Desire and the Scriptural Text: Will as Reader in *Piers Plowman*."; Simpson, "From Reason to Affective Knowledge: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in *Piers Plowman*."; Zeeman, *Piers Plowman and the Discourse of Desire*; Zeeman, "'Studying' in the Middle Ages."

entirely on interpretation of a visual scene emphasize the very problem of finding

affective understanding in abstraction.

In the same way that Will's misinterpretation of Anima's enigmatic figure

broaches the problem of prideful knowledge, other moments of visual allegory in the

poem address this fundamental problem of abstracted and enacted understanding.

Successful reading of visual allegory in Langland must blend the two; too much emphasis

on either side of the equation (active knowledge or purely theoretical knowledge) results

either in correction or failure.[37] Visual allegory in the poem draws out the division

between active and abstract through the ways in which characters respond to what they

"see," and, as in the Anima passage, readers' gazes follow alongside the inscribed readers

in the poem, absorbing and making judgments about the resulting narrative action. In

each case, what initially appears as *pictura* is transformed into *obscuritas*, leading

developing inventive readers to internalize the particular interpretive problem that the

allegorical shift brings into focus.

We can see the first of these, the problem of favoring an overly emphatic active,

applied vision over universal truth, from the very beginning of the poem. The moment he

enters his dream, we discover that Will has a serious problem with recognizing what he

sees. As a character in a poem with what are clearly didactic foundations, he is

repeatedly talked at by instructors of various kinds. But before he can even begin to set

about reflecting on their teaching, he must struggle to uncover who they are and,

occasionally, where the discussion is taking place. The latter of these, the problem of

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[37] In some ways, this blending of active and contemplative/abstract calls to mind the middle or mixed life
that is so commonly used to describe the goal of the poem. There are, however, critical differences
between the kind of hybrid thinking allegory engages and the blending of the *vitae*. Most importantly, the
mapping of contemplative onto "abstract" or "theoretical" knowledge proves problematic, since allegory,
and specifically visual allegory like *pictura*, can be active or contemplative.

place recognition, comes at readers from the first lines of the poem. With the abrupt

transition between the waking world and the clearly allegorical dreamscape, readers are

startled both by the obvious need to assign meaning to the *pictura* of the two towers and

the field of folk in the Prologue, as well as by Will's stubborn refusal to even

acknowledge such an instinct.[38] After a brief sketch of the landscape laid out before him,

our narrator promptly ignores the larger features in favor of the details of the scene.

Unmediated and unguided, Will quickly sifts through the crowd of people and, having

recorded them down to the smallest detail, places them without hesitation into a

negotiable Christian schematic. Moving in a haphazard path through the crowd, to the

treatise on kingship, to the adaptation of Horace's famous parliament of rats and mice,

the narrating gaze wanders just as Will wandered through his original, waking

countryside. It is only with the introduction of a guide, Lady Holy Church, that the path

of vision and the process of recognition decelerate into orderly, methodical manner. Her

interpretive control returns the perspective back to the periphery of the scene for a re-

examination of the landscape as a whole. Only once she takes hold of the reins can the

expansive allegorical meaning be explained for both Will and for Langland's audience.

Like a good allegorical reader, Will's eye is drawn to action rather than to figures

themselves. He focuses on the activity of the field, the plowing, the winning, the

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[38] Carruthers finds that the use of descriptive language stabilizes the natural setting and assumes that the "reassuringly common and definite physical presence of the waking world makes more emphatic the indefinite nature of the dream world." Mary J. Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 27. This sets aside the fact that, thanks to the narrator's conspicuous flight from reality, very little impression of natural place can come from the text. Instead of looking at the land in the opening we are looking at Will and, as a result, the "waking world" has precious little physical presence before trickling away into obscurity. Additionally, the landscape of the dream vision is far from indefinite and, though ambiguous, it is more visually insistent than any portrayal yet encountered in the poem.

wasting, the praying, the begging, the eating, the money-making, and so on, to the point

that the occupations overtake the figures performing them:

> Some putten hem to plouȝ, pleiden ful selde,
> In settynge and sowynge swonden ful harde;
> Wonnen þat þise wastours with glotonye destruyeþ.
> ...And somme chosen hem to chaffare; þei cheueden þe better,
> As it semeþ to oure siȝt þat swiche men þryueþ.
> And somme murþes to make as Mynstralles konne,
> And geten gold with hire glee giltless, I leeue.
>
> <div align="right">(Pro.20-23, 31-34)</div>

The picture offered to the reader comes through Will's eyes, and Will's eyes register

action. The result is that we get a very full description of how the field appears to Will,

but without many visual descriptions or adjectives of any kind. What does a "wastour"

look like? In some respects, it doesn't matter. What matters for Will is what he does—

he wastes. Morton Bloomfield defines the importance of allegory, and specifically

personification allegory, as falling on the action rather than the *figura*: "The really

characteristic part of personification allegory in terms of aesthetic effect lies not in what

nouns the writer chooses but in what predicates he attaches to his subjects."[39] So, for a

character like Holy Church, the transformation of an abstraction into a figure is less

telling than what that figure proceeds to do, or to wear, or to say. Similarly, Robert

Worth Frank writes of personified characters that, "Their names—Thought, Wit,

Nature—express their one and only meaning. What the reader must sometimes do is to

find the second meaning for the patter of relationship and activity in which the

personifications are placed."[40] Whether or not this is true in the case of *Piers Plowman* is

more problematic, as we shall see. For Will, however, looking at the field of folk

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[39] Morton W. Bloomfield, "A Grammatical Approach to Personification Allegory," *Modern Philology* 60, no. 3 (1963): 165.

[40] Robert Worth Frank, Jr., "The Art of Reading Medieval Personfication-Allegory," *English Literary History* 20, no. 4 (1953): 245.

produces just this kind of interpretation. In focusing his gaze on the action he focuses his reading on the track of personification, of reading the people he sees as representative of their respective stations in life, signified by their means of activity and of being in the world.

By doing so, Will is already honing in on the question he will later ask Holy Church, namely, how to save his soul while remaining part of the compromising world. The people he sees in the field are active because they must find ways in which to live, to feed and clothe themselves even if such actions open the doors to temptation and sin. Will, facing the same problems outside of the dream, naturally fixes on their activities because he is looking for ways to sort those activities into virtuous and sinful, and thereby locate his own actions along a similar social spectrum. But in doing so, his overly active, frenetic eye jumps from person to person, taking in information on an individual, figure-based level without noticing the larger, seemingly static framework they are moving within. The error Will makes, and what Holy Church will eventually correct, is one of perspective; Holy Church will re-focus Will's gaze and his interpretive framework on a more delicate understanding of the relationship between figure and action, representation and meaning, than the one with (and through) which he enters the dream-vision.

Strangely, it is the proximity of a fully fleshed-out personification, the embodiment of Will's initial instinct about the crowd on the field, that shifts the scope of his gaze. When Holy Church descends from the castle and stands before him, Will takes one look at her and abruptly panics: he says "I was afered of hire face þeiȝ she fair were" and, in a quick feint, asks "mercy, madame, what may þis bymeene?" (1.10-11) Unlike

the group of working folk he was so comfortable surveying before, Holy Church appears

directly before the dreamer without the comfortable remove of distance through which

Will can look and make his judgments. For as focused on the individual as he was, the

immediate presence of one unnerves him and changes his perspective from that of an

observer to that of a petitioner. His question, "What does this mean?" opens a space for

Holy Church to change the dimensions of the dreamscape, but more importantly, it

changes Will's role in the poem. No longer an authoritative reader of texts, he is now a

reader who needs magisterial support in order even to look at his surroundings.

The "þis" Will asks after is unspecified, but Holy Church's resulting reading of

the tower and the dungeon is anything but vague. Instead of Will's wandering gaze that

hops from person to person, Holy Church's sermon is controlled and methodical. She

begins with the tower, "truþe is þerInne," and describes Truth as the "fader of feiþ" who

"yaf you fyue wittes." Its mate is, of course, the "castel of care," home of the "Fader of

falshede" who led Adam and Eve into evil. At first blush, her description is satisfyingly

stable and symmetric, each tower balances the other in exactly the ways they ought, hell

and heaven, God and Satan, Creation and the Fall. This stability is one of the hallmarks

of *pictura*: the image itself is placid and waits for rational and structurally-based meaning

to be placed upon it. But, as Jill Mann points out, in allegory, architectural or geological

features (like towers and hills) can frequently seem flat and unprofitable precisely

because they don't move—they don't fulfill Bloomfield's grammatical requirement that

places aesthetic power in the predicate rather than the noun.[41] In some ways, Will's

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[41] "In recent times, writers on allegory such as Rosemond Tuve or Morton Bloomfield have insisted that the complexity and originality of allegory lie in narrative action rather than in the figures or objects which appear in that action—in other words, that its metaphorical strength lies not in the noun but the verb. The allegorical building seems to resist this line of approach, to exemplify in classic form the static and

haphazard roving over the field and his crooked chain of association is more satisfying

than Holy Church's overly-tidy sermonizing. Ideally, if Will were to recognize the

topographical features he surveyed and was able to apply the same associative energy he

did for the occupants of the field, then the poem would have presented readers with an

example of successfully used meditative *pictura*. The two towers are perfectly positioned

to receive the dreamer's (and readers') impressions, but the moment is lost the minute

Will becomes lost among the day-to-day bustle of the crowd.   Holy Church picks them

up again, but her *pictura*-driven analysis resists the associative power that meditational

practice entails.[42]

Holy Church's reading of the dreamscape shows the problem with seeing the

towers and the field as *pictura*. Langland's buildings are not like the temple constructed

by the Virtues at the end of the *Psychomachia* where the structure is the aspiration and

safe haven after a chaotic, frenzied battle. It also differs from a text like Grosseteste's

Chasteau d'Amour, where the attributes of the building become labeled with aspects of

Mary's persona, the turrets becoming the four cardinal virtues, the well is a well of grace,

and so on. Jill Mann reads both of these examples as a delicate negotiation of openings

and closings, focusing on descriptions of gates and doors, and uses the allegory to find

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tautological nature of allegory as older and less sympathetic critics conceived it." Jill Mann, "Allegorical Buildings in Medieval Literature," *Medium Aevum* 63 (1994): 191.

[42] Stanley Kahrl has a similar description of Will's reading of the field of folk. Kahrl differentiates between explanatory allegory, akin to that found in popular sermons, and expansive allegory, the mode used most often in advanced spiritual and mystical tracts circulating among the clerical ranks. To abduct his model and apply it to *Piers Plowman*, Will's preliminary focus on the personified figures is what Kahrl calls "traditional exempla, the tales marked by realism and economy in the telling and presented as 'true' examples of a general statement." He would find these to not demand allegorical interpretation and to submit to a reading that fails to expand the possibilities of symbolic representation. Rather than carrying on to explore further implications of visual embodiment they remain cemented in their stifling visual skins. With the help of a guide, however, Will can begin to manipulate these lesser, more simplistic signs and hesitantly expand their ability to enunciate spiritual abstractions. Stanley J. Kahrl, "Allegory in Practice: A Study of Narrative Styles in Medieval Exempla," *Modern Philology* 63, no. 2 (1965): 110.

action and motion even in a static structure. Langland's scene resists this kind of reading

because, according to Mann's reading,

> ...in *Piers Plowman* movement is morally suspect. The opening vision of
> the poem shows the tower of Truth and the 'dongeon' of Wrong facing
> each other in immovable opposition on either side of the fair field of folk,
> which is by contrast characterized by the swirling movement that reveals
> its moral instability.[43]

As a result, she concludes that, in the poem "To be virtuous is to keep still, to plough

one's half-acre, to remain content with the four walls of one's monastic cell."[44] This

view, like that of Holy Church, looks at the topography as a lens through which we can

see the larger cosmic order standing above the crowd on the field; in this reading, the

scene becomes a representation of an unmoving, unmovable universal constant. And if

there is one thing the poem teaches, it is that nothing, not even the face of God, is

constant.[45] *Picturae* rely on constancy and stability to generate their cognitive power,

and the towers and the field seem to embody this stability, ready to be recalled by readers

at a moment's notice. But what keeps them permanently in play and continually shifting

is the readers' vantage point, standing outside either that of the dreamer or that of his

allegorical instructress.

Up to this point, readers and Will have been rather separate, differentiated from

one another by the incongruity of their visual assumptions. For Langland's audience, the

moment the two towers come into focus they demand interpretation and suggest the need

for transformation into allegorical figuration, as *pictura* is designed to do. Carruthers

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[43] Mann, "Allegorical Buildings in Medieval Literature," 200.

[44] Ibid.

[45] For a truly excellent examination of the figuration of God in the poem, see Chapter 6, "Imagining the
Place and Presence of God" in Mary Clemente Davlin, *The Place of God in Piers Plowman and Medieval
Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

finds this to be an integral part of Langland's conception of the interpretive urgency that will always be latent in the allegorical genre:

> As Langland uses it, allegory is a cognitive mode, a means of discovering invisible and ineffable truth through the images and analogies of visible things. His understanding of the nature of allegory derives from the view that all visible things, including language, are signs which point to something beyond themselves. A sign conveys knowledge; it is a cognitive form, the *sacramentum visible invisibilis formae*.[46]

Initially, readers have no way of knowing what interpretive background the tower and the dungeon on their representative hills are speaking to, but they positively cry out for investigation. A sign, as Augustine says, is "a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses."[47] Will, as we have seen, does not step up to the challenge. His gaze is that of a passive, though interested, observer who stubbornly records but does not yet scrutinize in the way the overtly symbolic images request. Instead of a detailed and synchronic explanation of the meaning we know "must" lie behind the constructed edifices (the very first lines of Passus I, "What þe Mountaigne bymeneþ and þe merke dale/ And þe feld ful of folk I shal you faire shewe" confirm suspicions of an allegorical significance behind the vision), Will's eye moves quickly by and instead latches on to the mobile and more individualized figures in the field. As detailed as the descriptions of the figures in the field are, the narrator does not extend his discerning gaze onto the landscape around him until his guide directs him there. Only after Holy Church points again to the tower and singles it out in the landscape does Will focus on its meaning and feel desire for what lies hidden, and thereby unseen, inside its walls.

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[46] Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman*, 11.

[47] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 34.

The complex interplay between Will's reading, Holy Church's reading, and the mute signification of the topographical scene does for readers the one thing that *pictura* should not: it creates obscurity and ambiguity. Will's misreading and subsequent correction (and his presentation of the correction after the fact) opens space for readers to insert their own reading of the scene. More than that, it makes readerly intervention inevitable. When a character says, as Will does, "This is a long lesson...and litel am I þe wiser" (X.377), or receives correction from an allegorized guide figure like Holy Church, it is more than a poetic ploy to allow another theological explanation or to extend the plot. The constant pattern of error/misunderstanding and adjustment/teaching creates room for readers to distance themselves from the *narratio* of the text and, in doing so, form individual *enarrationes* that are necessarily led by but are distinct from the action and diagetic interpretations of the poem.

The technique is a form of Iser's defamiliarization and it relies on readers' instincts while in the process of reading a literary text to fit the various pieces into a sensible pattern, to make the text consistent with itself. He argues,

> The efficacy of a literary text is brought about by the apparent evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar. What at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads to our own rejection of them, thus tending to prepare us for a re-orientation. And it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences.[48]

This is precisely what happens when readers encounter one of Will's many mistakes, like his wandering eye over the field of folk, or his impolitic and vain curiosity before Anima. In the case of the towers and the field, because the *enargia* of the scene comes to readers as a representation of Will's impressions, the poetic description re-creates the scene

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[48] Iser, "The Reading Process," 295.

according to the principles that have cognitive resonance for Will, hence, the focus on the

movement of the crowd. Likewise, in meeting Anima, readers initially are brought into

Will's desire for understanding before learning about the dangers of *curiositas*. In both

these examples, the focus on the crowd and the impulse to know the source of Anima's

names, readers necessarily build their experience of the poem through Will's experience

in the dream. Furthermore, Langland encourages this association because Will's

mistakes appear perfectly reasonable at first blush; at the beginning of Passus I, there is

nothing to tell readers that Will is looking at the wrong thing. The transformational work

of the poem comes only after the correction (inevitably) happens and the earlier reading

is thrown into doubt.

James Resseguie describes a similar pattern in his argument about how the

synoptic gospels use defamiliarization to educate readers through the use of parable:

> The familiar norms are stripped of their current validity; but the process
> occurs in such a way that the reader is entangled and actively involved in
> the process of defamiliarization. To encourage reader involvement: (1)
> the gospel writer arouses sympathy in a reader for a character who
> displays a deficient norm. The more sympathetically the character is
> portrayed, the greater the degree of identification by the reader with the
> character. (2) The deficiency of the character's perspective is exposed
> through Jesus' rhetoric of negation. This creates distance between the
> reader and the character. (3) As a result, a gap occurs between the
> sympathetic identification with the character on the one hand, and
> negation of the character's behavior on the other. The tension created
> causes the reader to examine the underlying motives of the norms that are
> negated and to reassess his own norms.[49]

Each of these steps are mirrored in Langland's presentation of Will's misreadings and his

corrections. Will is a sympathetic narrator because the mistakes he makes are ones that

are not only understandable, they seem difficult to avoid. Therefore, when corrections

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[49] James L. Resseguie, "Reader-Response Criticism and the Synoptic Gospels," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 2 (1984): 312.

come they force readers to reassess their willingness to continue to align themselves with

the dreamer's experiences. In the end, of course, the narrative structure of the poem leads

readers into the same dilemma again and again, with authoritative guide-figures

emending not only Will's assumptions, but theirs as well. And, again and again, gaps

open in the text where readers are asked to revise their understanding not only of the

poem, but of their own reading practices. The conversation with Holy Church offers the

perfect example. Like Anima's rebuke, Holy Church's reading of dreamscape changes

how readers approach poetic encounters, visual and character-based alike. This is the

first time Will is re-focused, and it won't be the last. But each time it happens, each time

a character missteps, Langland offers his readers an opportunity to distance themselves

from the poem and to re-read based on the new information offered by the guides. This

re-reading is obviously something Will cannot perform—he must continue moving

forward. But readers outside the poem are encouraged by the errors and corrections to

examine the contexts of their own reading and to shift them accordingly.[50]

Through the careful management of readers' relationship with the text, mediated

through Will's erring gaze, Langland is able to shift what should be a clear example of

pictura (in Holy Church's corrective sermon about the towers and the field) for

obscuritas (in readers' understanding of her response to Will's mistake). Most

classically-grounded rhetorical texts unhesitatingly condemn the figure of *obscuritas* as

one of the stylistic vices to avoid at all costs and in all its forms. Texts can become

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[50] Like Nicolette Zeeman, I believe that Will's errors "offer a powerful, if unexpected, route for spiritual progress, which Langland plays out in narrative terms and analyses with remarkable experience." However, where her argument focuses on how these moments show "the proper place and limitations of teaching and understanding," I see them as opportunities to separate readers' experiences in the poem from Will's. They afford a place where we do not have to follow the narrative of the poem but, instead, can create something new. Zeeman, "'Studying' in the Middle Ages," 21.

obscure through use of erudite vocabulary, overly brief explanations, unclear syntax, or

use of many other uncommon languages—none of which aid readers in understanding

and following the author's argument.[51] In *De Civitate Dei*, on the other hand, Augustine

takes a different view:

> There is something to be gained from the obscurity of the inspirited
> discourses of Scripture. The differing interpretations produce many truths
> and bring them to the light of knowledge; and the meaning of an obscure
> passage may be established either by the plain evidence of the facts, or by
> other passages of less difficulty. Sometimes the variety of suggestions
> leads to the discovery of the meaning of the writer; sometimes this
> meaning remains obscure, but the discussion of the difficulties is the
> occasion for the statement of some other truths.[52]

The usefulness of *obscuritas* for Langland is similar to what Augustine describes as the

function of difficult scriptural passages, not of the word of God filtered through human

language, but as a prompt for varying truthful interpretations. Augustine describes the

work scriptural *obscuritas* initiates and it is this quality of difficult, labor-inducing

discourse that Langland taps in *Piers Plowman*. The tenor of the *enarratio* coming from

the poem has a different resonance from that of patristic commentaries, but the poem

makes use of its obscure visual cues in the same way: not as clarifying keys to hang and

organize memories on, but as catalysts for inventive interpretation and readerly effort.[53]

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[51] An early commentator on Geoffrey of Vainsauf's *Poetria nova* summarizes his feelings on clarity and *obscuritas*: "And since obscurity usually results from grand subjects, he warns...that obscurity should be avoided, and he shows in many ways that words should not obscure the matter, but rather make it clearer. And this is the proper responsibility of words, that they explain the idea." Marjorie Curry Woods, ed., *An Early Commentary on the Poetria Nova of Geffrey of Vinsauf* (New York: Garland, 1985), 88-89. For an excellent survey of the various ways in which classical and medieval texts address *obscuritas*, see Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Theories of Obscurity in the Latin Tradition," *Mediaevalia: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 19 (1996), 101-70.

[52] Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, ed. David Knowles, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 450.

[53] For an insightful example of a reading demonstrating the value of *obscuritas* in medieval stylistics, see Kevin R. Dungey, "Faith in the Darkness: Allegorical Theory and Aldhelm's Obscurity," in *Allegoresis: The Craft of Allegory in Medieval Literature*, ed. Stephen J. Russell (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988).

Mapping Error

Readerly intervention happens during Holy Church's explanation about the initial topography of the poem to move Will's gaze from an active, societal scope to larger universal truths, simultaneously changing the genre of the visual allegory from moralizing on the different spheres of the human struggle to a broad view of apocalyptic justice. The problem is Will's poor choice of favoring transient human activity and missing, literally, the larger picture. The opposite problem, however, is just as serious. Apart from being able to widen one's field of vision past the quotidian issues of worldly living, the readerly eye must also be able to translate those larger abstract truths into applied practice. It is not enough to strike the correct balance between activity and abstraction in reading if it does not result in the ability to take action in the world.

At the end of Passus V, Piers presents the mystical map that carves a path to Truth's fortified tower. The uncomplicated path is woven out of biblical commandments and moral guidelines that should be familiar to every Christian reader. Truth's castle lies at one end, the pilgrims at the other, and the median area is peopled with what should be familiar landmarks. The safe path passes through Meekness and Conscience before entering the land proper, creating a liminal preparatory ground so "that Crist wite the soothe" about the hopeful travelers. Once the threshold has been breeched, the landscape is rendered as a plot composed of transformed Christian mandates, most of which are taken directly from biblical commandment. Piers notes a brook, "Beth-buxom-of-speche", a ford "Youre-faders-honoureth", then an ambiguous feature labeled "Swere-boght-but-if-it-be-for-nede-and-nameliche-on-ydel-the-name-of-God-almighty." The

pilgrims are advised to avoid the croft, "Coviete-noght-mennes-catel-ne-hire-wyves-ne-noon-of-hire-servaunts-that-noyen-hem-myghte," to pass hastily by the two stumps, "Stele-noght" and "Sle-noght," and to "blenche at a bergh, 'Bere-no-false-witnesse'." Finally, the last landmark, again questionable in form, before the castle is "Seye-sooth-so-it-be-to-doone-in-no-manere-ellis-nought-for-no-mannes-biddyng" (V.563-584). The entirety of the picture is one of intentionally decipherable signs that lend themselves to effortless recollection. In short, it is very much like another example of *pictura*; it should not be a mysterious, confused space but instead a comfortable, navigable terrain.

This, however, is not the case. Oddly, the group balks at Piers' verbal map and resists the self-directed possibility it suggests. They cry, "This were a wikkede wey but whoso hadde a gyde / That [myghte] folwen us ech a foot" (VI.1-2) instead of setting forth, armed with the knowledge required for a successful journey. Self-doubting and uncertain, the group finds Piers' wide-angled, imaginative view of space threatening and closed; it is an impassable place to the inscribed gaze of the poem when it should be clear and open. This incongruity, apart from shutting down an immediate and problem-free journey directly to Truth, also requires that the poem take a different path. Since the allegorized, cartographic space cannot be used except by Piers, the pilgrims forfeit their proposed journey and set themselves to work in the half-acre as an alternate route. As a result, because they are unable to walk the figurative, spiritual, and straightforward map, poetic progression detours into the mazy path that constitutes the rest of the poem.

So why does Piers' mystical mapping fail? Or, perhaps more importantly, why does it fail for the internal readers and not for the external? For, arguably, a reader coming to this passage is unlikely to suffer the anxiety and veritable panic over the map

allegory that the assembled crowd professes. In fact, I would argue that readers ought not

feel this way at all over the prospect of following the Ten Commandments as a

reasonable and familiar path to salvation.[54] And while it is true that living by these

strictures can be a daunting proposition for even the most sincere Christian, medieval or

otherwise, an allegorical presentation that uses the recognizable mandates as landmarks

intended for guidance and aid should be nothing if not comforting. The map even

eclipses the need to decipher the topographic attributes by ascribing them with lengthy,

sentence-like names.[55] Yet, for the inhabitants of the poem, the description is stubbornly

and inexplicably illegible. At this moment in the poem, Langland once more deliberately

separates his readers from the text, or rather, from the inner workings of the text, by

presenting them with a divergent reaction to a hermeneutic problem. Although they

themselves might find the map legible, their poetic counterparts in the would-be pilgrims

clearly do not. Thus, readers are left not with an allegorical meaning to uncover but a

more specific narrative question. That is, what mistake has Piers' audience made in their

attempt at reading his explanation of the path to salvation, and why have they made it?

In spite of the internal confusion, this is another moment that clarifies the textual

logic of the poem. Readers are confronted with an interpretation performed by a group of

potential readers that sharply contrasts with their own. Once this happens, they are

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[54] For the diminished importance of the Ten Commandments in the medieval period over the Early Modern, and their relative lack of currency compared to the Seven Deadly Sins, see John Bossy, "Moral Arithmetic: Seven Sins into Ten Commandments," in *Consience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Edmund Leites (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Bossy argues for the Commandments being associated pre-1600 with Old Testament Law and therefore something to be aware of, but of less urgency than the Sins. The article does not, however, give sufficient credit to the penitential handbooks that frequently give as much weight to the Commandments as to the Sins or to their presence in biblical commentaries of the period; while it may certainly be true that the Commandments gained prominence in pastoral teaching after the Reformation, there is sufficient textual evidence to suggest that they would have been familiar to most readers of *Piers*.

[55] This is not to say that the bizarre naming of topographical elements is expected or precedented. For more on Langland's embedded phrasing as a metrical and poetical element, see Macklin Smith, "Langland's Unruly Caesura," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 22 (2008): 85-89.

forced to examine the reasons for the difference. And, in doing so, they can begin to attend to the reading processes they bring with them to the text. Suddenly, it is not enough to read for recognition of allegorical figures and moral messages. Instead, recognition of readerly practice becomes the foremost concern not only for the characters populating the poetic landscape, but also for the readers of the text itself. The self-awareness keyed by the interpretive dissonance in this passage, or more specifically by the divergence between diegetic and exegetic reading of the map, thus alters the interaction between the text and a possible audience by refocusing the readers' eyes onto their own activity as readers. The poem consequently becomes a mechanism by which the audience is compelled to examine and interrogate the processes they use for drawing meaning out of the text.

The difficulty of this moment is compounded by the familiarity of the type of allegory the map offers to its medieval readers. It is a form of *enargia*—more specifically, it is an example of *topothesia*, the description of an imaginary place. The would-be pilgrims do not actually survey the path Piers proposes; he describes it to them in language intended to invoke a sense of place in the absence of its physical presence. In this case, he presents the crowd with a word-map that simulates through *enargia* the actual journey he himself has already taken. In this way, because the map is not drawn, but explained, Piers' audience become consumers of a text—they become readers. The use of vivid imagery should cause them to form a version of the image in their minds to a pedagogical or ethical effect. In this, the crowd begins to look very much like a group of readers trying to use a text to show them the way to a virtuous life and successful devotional practice—they begin to look, so to speak, like Langland's own audience. The

nervousness of the potential pilgrims as they are confronted by an apparently difficult allegorical text leads them to make a decision about their interpretive strategy. They balk and try something else. As one of the few examples in the poem of a group of vernacular readers, then, the group doesn't suggest an optimistic impression to the external historical readers. What the map allegory creates, then, is an opportunity for a vernacular audience to respond to a text which asks them to move from interpretation of an allegorical vision to worldly action, in this case a pilgrimage that signifies the successful Christian life, and also the moment where external narrators, looking at the reflection of themselves in the crowd, must respond to their rejection of the scheme.

Again, as with the towers and the field in Passus I, we have a piece of visual allegory that initially appears to be clarifying and simplifying but becomes difficult and obscure, in part because it speaks to the very nature of Langland's imagination of a vernacular audience, and in part because it asks that audience to do something very difficult. The problem presented by the map is more than the difficulties of pilgrimage, or even the unwillingness of the would-be pilgrims to undertake the potential dangers of the journey. The issue is the use of specialized allegorical discourse as an impetus for active, worldly application. How is a vernacular reading audience to transform their experience of reading in the poem to an ethically and devotionally successful life outside of the poem? From the outset, Langland's careful positioning of his personae and his readers, the author's implicit lack of confidence in the interpretive powers of his characters, and the persistent creation and rejection of visually macrocosmic allegory speak to the author's perception of his audience. In his essay, "Alliterative Poetry," Ralph Hanna describes Langland's form as strengthening a non-clerical reading populace

and locates the poet's rhetorical structure and an empowering social demonstration of vernacular articulation. For Hanna, Langland is a poet of translation who is deciphering Latin doctrine into a new tradition of linguistic mediation. The vernacular becomes a way for the non-clerical populace to exert their influence over devotional practice from an interpretively and socially sophisticated position. From here, he may assert that simply because an audience requires or addresses itself to vernacular texts does not exclude them from an interpretively and socially sophisticated position.[56] Yet, the social power of the vernacular is always balanced, in Langland, by the continued reliance on allegorical and organizational modes that are moored to Latinate institutions of thought. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton finds that the essence of poetic progression in the poem is inherently conservative, formal, and monastic:

> More important to his mode of composition is the older symbolic, associative mode of the monastic tradition rather than the newer logical mode of the schools, as the fluid quality of his allegory betrays…It is an unusual, and characteristically independent blend of progressively reformist monastic and pastoral positions – theologically orthodox and spiritually imaginative, a combination the subtleties of which were increasingly open to misinterpretation after 1381.[57]

Two qualities here, that of fluid poetry and the combination of orthodoxy and ingenuity, pull together various threads of abstract epistemological transmission that Langland combines in his allegory, topographical and otherwise. Investment with the vernacular and an ability to work within its problems and opportunities necessarily structure a considerable part of the poem's figurative identity. Similarly, the way in which the

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[56] "…such persons identify themselves every bit as strongly as clerics do with the life of the intellect. Moreover, they can even perceive themselves as superior to clerics. The prose translations – so far as early evidence indicates – appealed to those in courtly circles, perhaps especially those in the central court at Westminster. Unlike the usual audience of Latin texts, such individuals can appropriate learned materials in the interest of social power – and social effect." Ralph Hanna, "Alliterative Poetry," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 500.

[57] Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, "Piers Plowman," Ibid., 530.

allegory interweaves within itself, tracing a non-linear path based on connective symbolism rather than logical progression, solidifies the traditional, monastic patterns of cognition.[58]

The experience of the poem for the reader becomes, therefore, an exercise in working social efficacy and "vernacular theology"[59] around Latinate/monastic precedents of reading and cognition. Problems consistently arise, as we have seen, when the poem presents a piece of allegory that bypasses comfortable vernacular modes to alight in a hybrid space that blends Latinate discourse, like that of monastic meditative texts, with the concrete powers of vernacular *enargia*. The initial hilly vista in the Prologue and Passus I demonstrate the difficulties in expanding a gaze, awake or asleep, past concrete details and into static universal truths. Though the individuals on the field encapsulate their private messages, larger implications cannot be fixed within Will's unaided eye. The difficulty in moving between the concrete and the abstract is something Will struggles with through the entirety of his journey; at first he sways too far in one direction, then in the other. The inability to smoothly transition between abstract thought and practical application is not bound to Will alone, of course, for this is exactly what we see with Piers' map allegory, only rather than moving from the concrete to the abstract, the map asks the listening crowd to move from allegory to action. Priscilla Martin finds this problem to be a common one in medieval devotional allegory:

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[58] For more on medieval thought patterns, see Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*; Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture.*
[59] see Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," *Speculum* 70, no. 4 (1995), 822-64.

> The writer of religious allegory stands in a complex relationship to the material world: he tacitly admits that he needs it to embody concept, to move, persuade, attract, repel, explain; but his major practice is to replace the fallen world with a more spiritual and coherent one.[60]

The map Piers offers contains a particularly potent blend of the mystical and the concrete. It is at once a path to truth in the allegorical sense of suggesting a way of devotional practice, drawing on the long tradition of mystical mapping as found in Victorine tradition, where objects become landscapes through which the mystic "travels" to revelation.[61] On the other hand, it also suggests an actual route through a landscape through which the pilgrims are to travel.

On a formal level, however, the map Piers presents looks very different from those of pilgrim accounts of the period; no matter the narrative purpose of the description, it is not at all like visual or textual representations of the Holy Land. Mary Campbell finds the rhetorical power of such maps to be not navigation through a foreign terrain, but rather a unification of place with history:

> Considering the relative sizes of figure and landscape in most medieval painting and calendar illustration, it is an easy guess that the medieval travel writer will be more concerned with the divine and human than with the natural or ecological. Places are almost always "places where" someone once did or said something; geography tends to be history; description then comes in the form of narration.[62]

In the map to Truth Langland offers in Passus V, there is little history to be found. Instead, the landmarks of stones and rivers are place where the pilgrims, not historical, biblical figures or past pilgrims, will do or not do something. This particular map

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[60] Priscilla Martin, *Piers Plowman: The Field and the Tower* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 84.

[61] See Evelyn Edson, *Mapping Time and Space: How Medieval Mapmakers Viewed Their World* (London: British Library, 1997), 147 et passim; Hugh of St. Victor, *De Archa Noe; Libellus De Formatione Arche*, ed. Patrice Sicard, vol. 176-176A, *Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001).

[62] Mary B. Campbell, "The Object of One's Gaze: Landscape, Writing, and Early Medieval Pilgrimage," in *Discovering New Worlds: Essays on Medieval Exploration and Imagination*, ed. Scott D. Westrem (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1991), 6.

concerns itself not with the past, but with the future. And even through Piers has already traveled this same route, his experiences are not what the crowd needs to engage with—they need to cultivate and manage their own experience on a symbolic and narrative level. Unlike the "armchair pilgrims" who might have used accounts of pilgrimage, the crowd cannot use this map at all, not to physically travel and not to hear about Piers' journey in order to "share its spiritual benefits."[63]

What the map does resemble is monastic meditative texts. Like accounts of the use of *pictura* to generate contemplative, associative chains of thought, physical space also became a common tool for memory-work as well as instruction. Dallas Denery writes of an anonymous text, the *Libellus de instructione et consolatione novitiorum*, which assigns virtues to the various pieces of the buildings among which new novices found themselves. In it, readers are taken on a textual tour of the site and are asked to assign certain behaviors or attitudes to specific locations, like the rectory or the chapel. "The Dominican priory, in other words, is broken into discrete places and settings. The novice's spiritual formation and comportment is explained in terms of how he should respond to those places."[64] Moreover, this formation becomes tied to the architectural elements the novice will live within to the effect that the text overlays the very fabric of the physical world with contemplative labor.[65] The allegorical nature of Piers' map

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[63] This is Natalia Lozovsky's description of how pilgrim accounts function as literary texts. She stresses the ability of the text to surpass or supplant actually physical experience: "The mental image of the world, used for contemplation, was the product of intellectual rather than empirical activity. It could be received in a vision, or drawn from maps, or derived from books. No personal experience was required in order to achieve this image." Natalia Lozovsky, *The Earth Is Our Book: Geographical Knowledge in the Latin West Ca. 400-1000* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 40.

[64] Dallas G. Denery, *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World: Optics, Theology, and Religious Life* (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge Unversity Press, 2005), 32.

[65] This technique has clear ties to the memory-palaces and the use of the "building" of memories and thoughts using strong architectural metaphors. See Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric,*

blends the figurative with the physical in the same way that the *Libellus* does for the novices inasmuch as it presents the would-be pilgrims with a narrative journey to the castle of St. Truth even as it offers readers the *pictura*-driven path to salvation through the avoidance of sin. The physical features of the text move continually between acting as locations for meditation on issues of doctrine/behavior and becoming real-life reminders for the active application of those issues. The allegorical inversion in Langland's poem, with the corporeal life of the map existing for the diagetic readers and the spiritual meaning for the external, might bring the use of the text in line with what we expect from a pilgrimage account, but the form comes directly from monastic meditative practices.

As previously discussed, this arrangement falls flat in rather spectacular fashion. Unlike their guide, the assembly cannot manage to apply the knowledge Piers provides them to set either a spiritual or physical course before their feet.[66] In part, the allegorical, cartographic genre Piers relies on to guide them requires rather than incites contemplative reading—for the crowd, it is *obscuritas* not *pictura*. The map is designed, after all, to

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and the Making of Images, 400-1200; Francis Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[66] Things do improve farther on down the road. Later, in Passus X when Study gives Will another map to Clergy, the format is precisely the same:

> 'Aske þe heighe wey', quod she, 'hennes to Suffre-
> Boþe-wele-and-wo if þat þow wolt lerne;
> And ryd forþ by richesse, ac rest þow noȝt þerInne,
> For if þow couple þee wiþ him to clergie comest þow neuere;
> And also þe longe launde þat lecherie hatte,
> Leue hym on þi left half a large myle or moore
> Til þow come to a court, kepe-wel-þi-tongue-
> Fro-lesynges-and-liþer-speche-and-likerouse-drynkes.
> Thanne shaltow se Sobretee and Sympletee-pf-speche,
> That ech wight be in wille his wit þee to shewe.
> So shaltow come to Clergie þat kan manye wittes.'
> (X.162-172)

This time, Will goes without a murmur and successfully reaches the house of Clergy and his wife, Scripture, to ask after Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. Though journeying to another pedagogical venue is not quite as arduous as finding salvation, Will still manages to navigate both the terrain and Study's map "wiþout moore letting" (X.225) – a marked improvement over field folk's previous attempt.

move them away from the maze of the field and send them toward a perfection of their

earthly lives. Carruthers reads this as a failed moment in the poem and finds the

confusion of the folk from the field to be indicative of an allegorical mode gone awry.

She claims that it marks a shift from the strict personification allegory of the parade of

repentant and not-so-repentant sins. She writes:

> Thus, the very allegorical structure which Piers has chosen is flawed; it
> leads to a misapprehension of Truth rather than providing a reliable sign of
> it. It is, however, a type of allegory entirely in keeping with the
> personification allegory of the earlier part of the *Visio*, and I believe that it
> is intended to emphasize the inadequacy of those structures as truthful
> epistemological signs. They are not accordant, "rect" signs, but
> discordant, "indirect," and distorting.[67]

From here, she expounds on a new type of "figural allegory" taking precedence. The

flaw here is that the labor of the reader immediately melds with the abilities of the crowd

on the field in her analysis. Simply because Piers' audience, itself an allegorized body,

cannot access the map does not mean that Langland includes it simply to demonstrate

inoperable language. Successful reading of the map is possible, even if not for the

vernacular readers within the poem. The map can only come into focus, can be resolved,

through the remainder of the poem. In this way, it functions precisely in the way that

Augustine says *obscuritas* ought:

> ...we should turn to those obscure things which must be opened up and
> explained so that we may take examples from those things that are
> manifest to illuminate those things which are obscure, bringing principles
> which are certain to bear on our doubts concerning those things which are
> uncertain.[68]

As the poem progresses, according to the Augustinian method, the obscurity of one

passage can be made clear through an intertextual reading. Things that are not clear in

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[67] Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman*, p 64.
[68] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 42-43.

their first iteration can be illuminated by later passages—again, not a technique available to the crowd who turn to the half-acre, but very much a necessity for Langland's external audience.

The defamiliarization of readers' assumptions about the function of allegorical language through the crowd's response to the map collapses the space between the text and its audience by generating the "meaning" of the crowd's rejection of the pilgrimage only within the audience's experience of that rejection. As Iser argues,

> Thus there disappears the subject-object division that otherwise is a prerequisite for all knowledge and all observation, and the removal of this division puts reading in an apparently unique position as regards the possible absorption of new experiences.[69]

It is this shift from the object of knowledge as distant from readers, something to be acquired, to knowledge and understanding as something to be discovered through the labor of reading and individual interpretation that Langland looks to impart into the vernacular. As many have argued before, the ever-elusive *kynde knowing* Will searches for is central to the force of the poem, but it is the *kynde knowing* of readers not of the inscribed characters that is, in the end, more important for Langland's vernacular poetic project.

Beyond the Visual/The Textual Gaze

In order for Langland's visual allegory to become internalized in his readers in a manner that approximates Augustine's conceptual vision or Langland's own *kynde knowing*, the schematizing power of *pictura* must give way for *obscuritas*. This critical

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[69] Iser, "The Reading Process," 297.

shift from installing readers in the text to installing the text in readers is why the

vernacular in the famously difficult poem doesn't act in the way we have come to expect

it to in the period. Rather than the openness and transparent truthfulness that is attempted

in texts following a translation tradition, like that of the Wycliffite movement, or the

rhetorical value placed on clarity and ease of understanding found in the *Ars poetica*,[70]

the vernacular we find in *Piers Plowman* does not ground literary authority in its ability

to transplant information from one true meaning of the text into readers' minds, but rather

in its ability to change the way its readers understand themselves in relation to abstract,

doctrinally-based mandates. Salvation within the poem, as without, is not something

with one path or one meaning; therefore, language that transmits singular, authoritative

truth as easily and quickly as possible is inherently antithetical to Langland's vernacular

devotional agenda.[71]

The polyvalent meaning of the text is embedded in the use of punning and word-

play, as many others have noted in the past, but also in the way visual allegory

continually refuses to act as a receptacle for a singular, unified understanding.[72] The

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[70] See Ziolkowski, "Theories of Obscurity in the Latin Tradition."

[71] Emily Steiner argues elegantly for a similar commitment to diversity in the poem, but locates it in the legal and political spectrum. In her reading of the field of folk, she sees diversity as a boon and a problem for the poem: "In Langland's view, it is true, however much diversity constitutes a totality, it contains within itself the seeds of disunity and discord. For Langland, as for Aquinas, diversity is simultaneously the means to social unity and a symptom of disorder, a turning away from the right conduct or the common good in order to serve individual (and here, perverse and sinful) ends." Emily Steiner, "*Piers Plowman*, Diversity, and the Medieval Political Aesthetic," *Representations* 91 (2005): 13.

[72] The number of critics discussing Langland's word play is legionary. See, for example, Helen Barr, *Signes and Sothe: Language in the Piers Plowman Tradition* (Cambridge; Rochester, NY, USA: D.S. Brewer, 1994); John Chamberlin, *Medieval Arts Doctrines on Ambiguity and Their Place in Langland's Poetics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000); Mary Clemente Davlin, *A Game of Heuene: Word Play and the Meaning of Piers Plowman B* (Cambridge, England; Wolfeboro, N.H., USA: D.S. Brewer, 1989); James Paul Patrick Hala, *The Word Made Flesh: Word-Play in "Piers Plowman B" (Paronomasia, Langland; England)* (1984); Bernard Felix Huppé, "*Petrus Id Est Christus*: Word Play in *Piers Plowman*, the B-Text," *English Literary History* 17, no. 3 (1950), 163-90; A. V. C. Schmidt, "Lele Wordes and Bele Paroles: Some Aspects of Langland's Word-Play," *The Review of English Studies, New Series* 34, no. 134 (1983), 137-50.

effort involved in working through the transformations of the visual signs in the poem

removes the certainty of knowledge and the solidification of meaning offered by *pictura*

in favor of a more intimate, individual connection with the text. As I have argued,

Langland's inventive readers are separated from the text by moments of failed or

mistaken interpretation within the poem and, as a consequence, are asked to apply the

reasons for failure or the corrections offered to themselves. Such a learning process,

dependent upon the extra-textual work of the audience, denies the ability of the text to

present an encyclopedic account of theological principals as a measure of salvation. The

text cannot transform its readers into the ideal Christian community, in part because such

a thing is antithetical to Langland's pragmatic social framework, but also because

effective (and affective) change cannot come from an abstract litany of virtues and vices.

The *obscuritas* of the text asks readers to work at the meaning of the poem and, in doing

so, to work on themselves.[73]

The play between the anticipated *pictura* of the images and the *obscuritas* of their

narrative deployment in some senses mimic the classic distinction between vertical and

horizontal allegory. Most commonly applied to personification allegory, vertical allegory

indicates a system wherein personified figures do, in fact, perpetually represent the

abstractions they exemplify. A figure called Hope is, in fact, an embodiment of hope

and, as a result, everything he/she does must becomes part of the interpretation of the

idea of hope. Horizontal allegory, on the other hand, is more flexible in its approach; the

personifications are not fixed but mutable. They act as characters with their own interior

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[73] In a very broad sense, this is also Maureen Quilligan's notion of allegory developed in Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979). See especially pages 64-79. However, her focus on word-play alone is insufficient for a poet like Langland for whom figuration and personification are just as multi-faceted.

lives and thoughts. On the surface, it would seem that *pictura*, with its focus on

abstraction and hierarchical understanding would be akin to vertical allegory. The

function of *pictura*, after all, demands that the images used are stable enough to receive

the impressions readers choose to place upon them. Their identities, though they can be

used to draw connections together from a multitude of sources, are fluid inasmuch as they

become lodestones for readers' associations; to use Robert Sturgis' vocabulary, images

used as *pictura* rely on metaphor, figurative language that operates vertically. Horizontal

language, by contrast, operates by metonymy, and is "indeterminate." Whereas

"determinate," horizontal language gives readers information to process, "indeterminate"

language asks for readers to fill in gaps the text leaves open—it is obscure.[74]

   For Langland's readers, however, the situation is more complicated. Suzanne

Akbari delineates between horizontal and vertical allegory on the basis of readers'

relationship to figurative language:

> Vertical allegory points toward a hidden meaning that the reader must
> construct within his own mind, a transcendent truth that cannot be
> conveyed through literal language; horizontal allegory satisfies the reader
> here and now, exposing the double (or triple) meaning of language
> explicitly within the text as pun or euphemism. Vertical allegory aims to
> convey a transcendent truth that cannot be expressed through literal
> language, whether it concern God, creation, or the nature of identity;
> horizontal allegory celebrates the play of words and the unfixed nature of
> linguistic meaning.[75]

Given these reader-based definitions, it would seem that *pictura* is an example of

horizontal language inasmuch as it allows readers to tap into meaning immediately

through association and image/word-play, while *obscuritas*, with its demands for

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[74] Robert S. Sturgis, *Medieval Interpretation: Models of Reading and Literary Narrative, 1100-1500* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 2, 33.
[75] Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 14.

laborious, individual interpretation and denial of textual authority, would be vertical.

When the allegory is not that of personification but of visual objects or places like the

towers and field or Piers' map, however, the representations can never truly be vertical

because they do not embody a pure abstraction, like that of a vertical character called

Hope, but a narrative object that exists in relation to other places or characters. The two

towers in the Prologue and Passus I are not called "Heaven" and "Hell"; they are a

figuration of ideas that correspond to salvation or damnation, but they are horizontal in

that they act as markers in a figurative landscape. Just as the personifications like Anima,

or the seven deadly sins in Passus V are more than embodiments of abstract ideas, the

visual elements of the poem mean one thing for the inscribed characters traveling through

and around them, and another to inventive readers encountering them as allegorical

constructs.

These textual images demonstrate how, in Langland, the visual becomes linguistic

when placed into readers' hands. Episodes that use visual allegory, in moving from

pictura to *obscuritas*, lose what we might think of as their pictorial quality as textual

enarratio takes over the meaning-making function. They no longer act as meditational

images that produce associative chains of thought, they are now textual elements to tease

apart. As a result, the presence of visual allegory as a poetic element in the poem is

negated in favor of the new understanding readers develop for themselves; the *enarratio*

overlays the original image and its signification for the readers inside the poem in favor

of Langland's external readers' discovered meaning. Such visual moments, then, work

for readers not as images, as *picturae*, but as obscure moments of textual labor that

operate in the same way that a guide-figure's correction of misreading might. They are

horizontal in their resistance to unified, abstracted truths, but they are vertical in the demands they make upon their audience. By leading readers from the visual to the textual, Langland's allegory exchanges systematizing reading (of the sort Will is so keen to try in Passus XV) for a different mode that focuses on exegetical language and the meditation resulting from textual engagement rather than pictorial.

Langland rejects visual allegory in favor of textual interpretation as the best way to educate and transform his readers. We see this shift most clearly in the personified figures scattered throughout the poem; as personifications, characters like Inwit, Scripture, or Meed are, for all that they have been transformed from invisible abstractions to characters, inherently textual. According to Bloomfield, when we consider personification allegory,

> ...we are making proper nouns out of our source names, that is making them one member class nouns, and giving them an existential quality. Truth consists of a class of many truths, but the class "Lady Truth" contains only one member, the being who is the subject (or object) of the sentences in the literary work.[76]

From a grammatical standpoint, the process becomes one of making "deictic (or pointer) nouns out of non-deictic nouns. In other words, unless the animation is individualized, it is not a true animation."[77] In *Piers Plowman*, this is precisely what we see when a character like Gluttony in Passus V who confesses to his sin and is surprisingly redeemed, creating an allegorical paradox: what happens to Greed when he is no longer greedy? Similarly, Lady Meed comes from an abstraction that is disturbing, sinful, and corrupt, but in the poem she comes across as earnest, charming, and can elicit sympathy through her desire to please. Langland, unlike earlier authors of personification allegory

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[76] Bloomfield, "A Grammatical Approach to Personification Allegory," 165.
[77] Ibid.: 164.

like Prudentius, takes the individualization Bloomfield singles out and creates characters that are not just human, but are also changeable and complex to the point that they far exceed the abstractions from whence they came. Meed is at once a character in a story and a representation of a social and political force; her portrayal in the poem allows her to be both simultaneously—she is productively ambivalent for Langland's readers, forcing them to see her as an abstraction embedded in an individual, rather than a figuration of an intangible concept.[78]

Unlike Boethius' Lady Philosophy, or one of Prudentius' Virtues or Vices who encode their identity in their appearance as much as in their action or speech, Langland's personifications resist becoming visual elements by virtue of their intense ambiguity. Often, they are not even consistent in their appearance: Anima has many names, faces, and even genders, and the relationships between personifications are slippery and mutable. These figures can never be part of a vertical allegory because they are simply too human, too multifaceted; more than their names, they resist simplifying morals and easy readings. They cannot be read as *pictura* for the simple reason that they are not stable enough to hang associations upon. Instead they are framed in such a way as to stimulate readerly labor that becomes far more dependent upon their textual rather than visual presentation. In fact, there are many times in the poem when it is difficult to tell what is personification and what is not—the allegories have a tendency to dissolve into the narrative.[79] At any moment, an abstract noun may blossom into personification

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[78] See Jill Mann, *Langland and Allegory*, *The Morton W. Bloomfield Lectures on Medieval English Literature, 2* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 5-9.

[79] For example, Jill Mann cites a passage in Prologue (112-122) that, depending on editorial practices, is remarkable at either exploding the role of personified elements, or erasing it entirely. In Skeat's edition, the passage reads,

Thanne come ther a kyng · knyȝthod hym ladde,

without warning, and then be suddenly demoted again a few lines later. "Truthe" and "kynde" are particularly difficult examples, but they serve to emphasize how textually dependent and horizontal Langland's allegory is.

The same holds true, as we have seen, for the pieces of the allegory that more strongly appear to be based on the visual rather than the textual. The scene of the two towers and the map allegory are both presented as pictorial examples of allegorical poetry, but their positioning as moments of misreading change them into something else again. For Langland's external, would-be inventive readers, the moment Will is corrected, these scenes can no longer be examples of textual images; they must become texts. Even if they do not have the grammatical force of the figural personifications, the visual pictures transform into textual objects that must be read rather than seen. The

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Miȝt of the communes · made hym to regne,
And thane cam kynde wytte · and clerkes he made,
For to conseille the kyng · and the commune saue.
   The kyng and knyȝthode · and clergye bothe
Casten that the commune · shulde hem-self fynde.
   The comue contreued · of kynde witte craftes,
And for profit of alle the people · plowmen ordeygned,
To tile and trauaile · as trewe lyf asketh.
The kynge and the commune · and kynde witte the thridde
Shope lawe and lewte · eche man to knowe his owne.

By contrast, Schmidt chooses to capitalize the nouns that he finds most likely to be personifications:

   Thanne kam ther a Kyng: Knyghthod hym ladde;
Might of the communes made hym to regne.
And thane cam Kynde Wit and clerkes he made,
For to counseillen the Kyng and the Commune save.
The Kyng and Knighthod and Clergie bothe
Casten that the Commune shoulde hem [communes] fynde.
The Commune contrived of Kynde Wit craftes,
And for profit of al the peple plowmen ordeyned
To tilie and to travaille as trewe lif asketh.
The Kyng and the Commune and Kynde Wit the thridde
Shopen law and leaute—ech lif to knowe his owene.

The contrast between the two is marked and, apart from raising questions about editorial practices and the life of the poem, it highlights the difficulty for readers to draw a line between personification and simple metaphor. For example, why is "Commoune" capitalized in Schmidt and not "trewe lif"? The problem is complicated by the fact that there are times when a noun like "kynde" will appear as a clear personification, and other times as a non-personified noun. See Mann, "Allegorical Buildings in Medieval Literature," 15-17.

space they insert between the external readers and the inscribed readers/viewers in the poem changes them from textual representations of a scene to textual productions of a scene, and the difference is essential for Langland's developing audience.

In the next chapter we will see how readers are confronted with the task of approaching what is no longer seen as images but heard as texts. Moments of textual difficulty share a common genealogy with the poem's visual allegory, and yet they require an entirely different set of interpretive tools and techniques. Likewise, Langland places purely textual moments within much more specific discursive contexts of scriptural exegesis and interpretive labor. Nevertheless, even the most startling textual error can only approximate the force with which visual misreadings/mis-seeings in the poem work to change the relationship between readers and text. Episodes like Piers' map or the opening scene of the Prologue are immediate in their effect, and the interpretive problems they pose are complex and meaningful to both the process of reading and to readers' understanding of the poem. In *Piers Plowman*, allegory that uses textual images becomes the place where Langland separates his inscribed readers from his external readers so as to open a place where textual interpretation can not only find purchase, but can in fact become a necessity.

Chapter 3

The Exegetical Langland and the Rewards of Readerly Labor

Thanne seide I to myself, 'slepyng hadde I grace
To wite what dowel is, ac waking neuere'.
(XI.408-409)

If the function of visual allegory in *Piers Plowman* is to dislocate readers from

Will's first-person experience of the narrative, then Langland's intense attention to the

textual is the place for them to reclaim meaning in the poem. As seeing becomes reading,

the ways in which Langland makes use of language to key changes in interpretive modes

become powerful indicators of how the poem shapes its vernacular audience. The

difficulty and *obscuritas* of the visual elements are also at work in the formal, textual

characteristics of the poem as well as in the theological content presented to readers. The

macaronic language, the demand for close attention to detail, and the intra-textuality of

the poetic structure all create a work that challenges readers to labor over their

interpretations. With a text like *Piers Plowman*, it becomes very easy to use words like

'interpretation' or 'analysis' because this is precisely what it asks its readers to perform—

in fact, as I will argue, the poem creates vernacular readers who do just that.

The play we have seen between Will the internal reader and the inventive,

external audience over the moments of textual imagery initiates readers into a mode of

interpretation that mimics that of Latinate *enarratio*, or hermeneutical glossing; in the

broadest sense, it looks to make sense of a complicated and difficult text for the purpose

of facilitating understanding. In patristic scriptural exegesis, *enarratio* displaces the text

by addressing readers' circumstances in order to transpose the meaning of the Word onto

their historical situations. Moreover, attention to reader response is critical for the

exegete to accomplish his task: a new narrative is drawn out of the text by the

commentator that rhetorically anticipates and addresses its audience's conditions of

reading. Rita Copeland describes the transfer of textual status from text to gloss as such:

> …medieval *enarratio* can assume the character of application because it
> makes the historical situation of the interpreter a condition rather than an
> accident of interpretation….*enarratio* engages dialectically with the text,
> through critique, restatement, and refiguration "ad nostram
> consuetudinem"...[1]

In Augustinian *enarratio*, readers come to the text through their own faith and the belief

that divine truth is in some way incarnate in scriptural language. The exegete's gloss

addresses that faith and moves readers' will to search out the divine.[2] In Langland's case,

the poem is the text through which his external readers create their own gloss for

themselves in the moments where diegetic readers, like Will, misstep. But there is a

catch. Langland can provide the stimuli for readers to create an *enarratio* of his text, but

he cannot control the circumstances under which that reading takes place. Because his

text does not have the meaning-status of Scripture, he cannot rely on faith alone to lead

readers along the right path—almost all of his erring, fallen characters point to this very

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[1] Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, 61.
[2] "…the words on the sacred page would have no meaning for the reader without his anterior faith. He reads the Bible to deepen his knowledge of God. He already believes what he reads, but in order for faith to ripen into understanding, the believer depends on the intervention of Christ, teaching him from within." Colish, *The Mirror of Language*, 40.

problem. Instead, faith must become an invisible guideline that will encourage readers to continually struggle to perfect their circumstantial interpretation and understanding.[3]

The correspondence between the inventive reading the text makes possible and the Augustinian sense of *enarratio* is not perfect, but the echoes of creating a useful gloss of the text are certainly present in Langland's poem. The primary difference is, of course, that an *enarratio* is authored for the purposes of teaching someone else and, in the case of the inventive readers of *Piers Plowman*, they are creating meaning for themselves. Additionally, in is important to note that readers of the poem are not glossing as part of a hegemonic master/student relationship. Suzanne Reynolds describes this type of glossing as standing in direct opposition to a reader-response model in that she finds the form to be a barrier inserted by a *magister* between the student and the text. Glosses, for her, are

> ...the written vestiges of a reading undertaken by experts for those who are not experts, that is to say, as a reading by a teacher for his pupils. Rather than an individual, we have a generic, professional reader; the teacher or *grammaticus* who reads for others.[4]

In Langland's poem it is just the opposite. Inventive readers are clarifying a difficult text not for others but for themselves. They must become the authoritative source of interpretation because the inscribed reading performed by the questing characters in the

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[3] C. David Benson quite rightly cautions modern critics against the dangerous temptation to "detect the authentic voice of the author among the many speakers of *Piers*." My approach here in no way attempts to define what ultimate devotional message Langland tried to offer his readers. Instead, I only want to suggest that he urges them to search for their own polyvalent meaning in the text, to read with an eye to hermeneutic rather than for a single unified answer to the problem of living a Christian life. C. David Benson, "What Then Does Langland Mean? Authorial and Textual Voices in *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 15 (2001), 3.

[4] Suzanne Reynolds, *Medieval Reading: Grammer, Rhetoric and the Classical Text* (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 29.

poem is not just occasionally hard, it is purposefully and perpetually problematic.[5] The

guide figures offer their revisions, but the true question laid before the poem's audience

is how to construct meaning on one's own, in the world, that applies an individual, active

salvation.[6]

The poem's relentless focus on textual interpretation, which William Elford

Rogers describes as "the movement between mutually determining expectations and

experiences," surfaces amidst the dramatic changes in the fourteenth century for the uses

and contexts of writing in the vernacular.[7] As English began to emerge in formerly

Latinate contexts alongside the newly engaged laity, texts begin to address exactly what

could and could not be done with the vernacular and attempt to define the relationship

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[5] The poem's multi-voiced approach to religious instruction, while not uncommon in vernacular literature of the period, nonetheless offers an opportunity for readers to manage their hermeneutic efforts. Fiona Somerset's work on clerical discourses at work in laic contexts neatly draws our attention to the "determined indeterminacy" in the narrator and in the poem that is at once so frustrating and also so fascinating. In her reading, Will's shifting allegiances to learnedness and learned discourses are evidence for the poem's critique of how knowledge and knowledgeable figures interface with an affective devotional understanding, and thus the slippage between various "clergial" and "lewed" modes becomes a source of tension for the audiences within the poem and audiences without. She writes, "Enigmatic forms of speech confound the dreamer and other introjected audiences from the Prologue onward…" and argues that this phenomenon of enacting difficult or obscure discourses as affective knowledge, rather than being assisted by the text is instead made more problematic by it. Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 23, 44.

[6] In a related approach, William Elford Rogers finds the poem to be evidence of Langland's efforts to navigate a mix of literary genres in order to discover a viable poetic hermeneutic. By opening the hermeneutic circle and focusing on Langland as an author rather than searching for one unifying subject for the poem, Rogers speaks eloquently to the quest for understanding through texts and, in doing so, constructs a portrait of the poem focused on Langland's intellectual quest for knowledge. The approach allows the poem to become a conversation among systems of discourse rather than between characters and, as the Medieval Latin verb *discurrere* suggests, describes a work replete with sections and characters that run away with (and sometimes from) the topic supposedly at hand. Each genre approaches the problem of transferring knowledge to its audience in a different way. As diverse modes of speaking and thinking successively hijack the narrative, they appear through allegorical characters to which Will (or, in Rogers' reading, Langland) responds. As a result, speaking figures become testing grounds for different approaches to learning and learnedness. William Elford Rogers, *Interpretation in Piers Plowman* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002).

[7] Rogers' introduction to his study of representation and interpretation in the poem lays out a convincing methodology that relies on a textuality that continually engages readers' established contexts and expectations for the express purpose of altering them through contact with the text. See Ibid., 3-19.

among author, language, and audience.[8] During this period, the status of the vernacular

as a language capable of producing texts with authority and efficacy arises out of broad

developments taking place on the national scale; English became not only a viable option

for documents that governed social relationships[9] but also took on a quality that might

best be described as reliably representative – it was somehow more open and clear than

the Latin or Anglo-Norman of earlier periods.[10] In short, the vernacular begins to

become "textual" enough to merit questions over the relationship between language and

the meaning it represents and the ways readers extract meaning from the text.

Nowhere is this more defined an issue than in devotional contexts, particularly in

the light of the influence of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth and fourteenth

centuries. Monasteries, situated as they were as continuous bastions for histories of

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[8] As recent (and extremely useful) anthologies on medieval literary theory make clear, vernacular authors discuss these issues at great length, almost to the point of obsessive regularity: A. J. Minnis, A. Brian Scott, and David Wallace, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, C. 1100-C. 1375: The Commentary-Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Ian R. Johnson, *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

[9] The increasing number of official documents such as charters and wills that appear in English and the growth of the affective tradition in lay devotion is frequently tied to discernable shifts in the societal fabric that raise questions over the producers and consumers of texts. The acceptability for legal documents to appear in English is solidified in the later half of the fourteenth century and is frequently cited as a symptom of increasingly vocal role the common citizenry of urban centers played, particularly in light of the uprising of 1381, and the growing sense of national identity in the face of the ongoing wars with France. For in-depth studies of the uses of the vernacular in the political arena, see Nicholas Brooks, *Latin and the Vernacular Languages in Early Medieval Britain* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982); M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066-1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993); Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning*; Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[10] On the political scale, Sheila Lindenbaum makes an important distinction of the change in register the language assumes when shifted from the oral to the written sphere: "A formal complaint in English was not transgressive, like the insurgents' public pronouncements in the vernacular, or a reminder of clerical privilege, like the practice of ostentatiously translating official proclamations into English for the London crowd. It was a way of implying the truthfulness and authenticity of a social statement." Sheila Lindenbaum, "London Texts and Literate Practice," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 289. This characterization of the vernacular as "open" is extremely common in the period, from Trevisa's *Dialogue Between the Lord and the Clerk* to Rolle's translation of the Psalter.

textual production,[11] provide established tools with which to interrogate developing hermeneutic processes, but it was the university system and the influence of scholasticism that provided the primary impetus for developments of new educational models. The period saw a dramatic growth of the university system[12] with the founding of new colleges throughout the country, ostensibly designed to satisfy the increased need for secular clergy in the wake of the Black Death earlier in the century, but also intended to increase the levels of learning for existing priests.[13] In some cases, this provided opportunity for social advancement among commoners and lesser nobility and in doing so increased the contact between non-Latinate readers and academic modes of interpretation. The role of the friars in these developments cannot be overstated and it is with the mendicant orders' involvement in lay education that Langland's poem finds purchase. Genres such as the *questio disputata*,[14] the *postilla*,[15] and sermons are

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[11] See Christopher Cannon's excellent summary of the role of monasteries in the literary life of England: "…monasteries figure very large indeed in a history of writing in Britain. Their importance lies less in the way monastic life encouraged writing than in the resilient and successful institutional structures monasticism provided for preserving writing through all the slings and arrows of an often hostile fortune, and the way this writing tended to create (and then to re-create) a milieu in which British writers and writing *could* flourish…This structural immortality made them the sole custodians of a written tradition there was no other place to house in Britain until the thirteenth century; and it assured that they were central to that tradition even after the universities began to grow and serve a similar function." Christopher Cannon, "Monastic Production," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 319-20.

[12] See specifically Michael Van Cleave Alexander, *The Growth of English Education, 1348-1648: A Social and Cultural History* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990); Anna P. Baldwin, "The Historical Context," in *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); E. F. Jacob, *English University Clerks in the Later Middle Ages* (Manchester: 1946); Gordon Leff, *Paris and Oxford Universities in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries; an Institutional and Intellectual History* (New York: Wiley, 1968); Jo Ann Hoeppner Moran Cruz, *The Growth of English Schooling, 1340-1548: Learning, Literacy, and Laicization in Pre-Reformation York Diocese* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985); Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Schools: From Roman Britain to Renaissance England* (New Haven [CT]: Yale University Press, 2006).

[13] R.N. Swanson discusses the increase in numbers of priests continuing study at university in "Universities, Graduates and Benefices in Later Medieval England," *Past and Present* 106 (1985), 28-61. He specifically analyzes the shift from papal support and granting of benefices to secular patronage.

[14] Based in the rise in the study of logic as a hermeneutic and exegetic tool in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the *questio* quickly becomes a dominant mode of interrogating ideas and texts, devotional and otherwise. See Brian Lawn's treatment of this particular mode of writing and thinking, particularly concerning pseudo-scientific texts in Brian Lawn, *Rise and Decline of the Scholastic Quaestio Disputata:*

intimately connected to the friars' pedagogical program and to scholasticism specifically; and all appear prominently in Langland's poem as diegetic modes of learning offered to Will by the host of guide-figures he encounters along his way. This influx of academic discourse into the development of lay spirituality did not, however, go unnoticed among the other regular orders. As may be expected, monastic production of theological thought began to absorb elements of the Franciscan and the Dominican modes, effectively grafting developments occurring in the universities onto their own practices of commentary and *lectio divina*.

It is in this hybrid model, this blend of the scholastic and the monastic, that Langland situates readers of *Piers Plowman*. In the poem, two levels of reading models exist simultaneously: the first we find in Will's attempts to understand the dream world he finds himself in and the information he receives from the characters he meets, while the second occurs outside of the poem as readers sort through their own reactions to Will's missteps, retracing the hermeneutic circle of expectation and experience again and again to produce meaning out of the text. The first participates in scholastic and academic arguments, the second in the prayerful, transformative reading of affective monasticism. The allegory, both textual and visual, that runs throughout the poem functions, as most allegory does, on three levels. The first is to cover meaning with a shield of language to hide meaning from the unworthy, the second is to aid in memory of

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With Special Emphasis on Its Use in the Teaching of Medicine and Science (Leiden: New York: E.J. Brill, 1993).

[15] The genre of the *postilla* is "a running commentary, ordinarily composed at a school, especially the schools of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth century. Originally, it was supposed to complement the Ordinary Gloss, which compiled patristic opinions, by adding interpretations from the principal exegetes of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries." Christopher Ocker, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 12.

critical concepts, and the third (and most important) is to convey meaning that cannot be

contained in other language. Akbari describes the latter:

> That is, by avoiding the limitations inherent in literal language, allegory
> creates meaning *within* the reader, bypassing the inevitable degeneration
> of meaning as it passes through the obscuring veil of language. The
> paradox, of course, is it is this veil which makes the transmission of
> meaning—the revelation—possible.[16]

This chapter will focus on this function of allegory, demonstrating how Langland

engages with monastic exegesis in order to produce a form of understanding, of *kynde*

knowing, in his reader that surpasses more systematized and abstract modes of

scholasticized learning.

As previously discussed, Will's attempts to overcome his own inability to

recognize visual markers of allegorical personification and his failure to move from the

theoretical to the concrete strains against the generic framework of scholastic models

endemic to the fourteenth century. Langland, his characters, and indeed his readers must

instead look for options elsewhere. For Will, in order to complete his journey both

theologically and pedagogically, must now develop the ability to take what he has learned

and, in full understanding, apply it when circumstances demand. When he wakes from

his dream within a dream in Passus XI, Will voices the concern that has no doubt been

nagging at him for the past eleven passus. In frustration, he complains to the audience,

"wo was me þanne / That I in metels ne myȝte moore haue yknowen" (XI.406-407). Will

laments the disheartening way that what little he does understand only seems to stay with

him while in a dream state—once returned back to the waking world, not only does he

fail to learn anything new but he also cannot manage to hold onto the teachings received

while sleeping. The reader finds him perpetually wandering, lost, and confused, unable

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[16] Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil*, 8.

to tell where he is, much less reproduce the learning he discovered whilst asleep. And yet whatever else Will professes not to understand about the spiritual difficulties of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, at this moment Langland allows him to map for the reader the moment where his learning process flounders: that is, that critical transition between theoretical comprehension and practical understanding. When Will dreams, freed from the physical world, he has the ability to accept the teaching of the various guide figures that he meets. Once he has absorbed what he can, the next step is to move out of his liberated dream-consciousness and return to his daily life, full as it is of family, work, and all the petty details of worldly existence. The 'ac' separating sleeping and waking in line 409 of Passus XI neatly indexes the division between the dream world and the actual world that Will crosses again and again throughout the poem—two states of being that correlate to the process of learning and the process of understanding what was learned to such an extent that it becomes useful, applied information. It is not enough to learn while dreaming. The waking world is what counts in the end.

The problem of bridging the knowledge gained and the appropriate application of that knowledge is articulated here at the very threshold between learning and comprehension. Dreaming of dreaming as he is, Will moves from the fiction of sleeping to the fiction of waking, in effect rehearsing the passage he must learn to complete. The problem Langland places before his readers is precisely the same—that of translating knowledge from the dream (or the text) into non-textual life. Like Will, readers must develop tactics that will enable them to ingest the information the poem provides and manage the transition from textual education to enacted understanding. Labor is, in the end, the heart of the matter. The labor of reading, the labor of learning, and the labor of

applying knowledge—they all run together to inform Langland's vision of the path to salvation. In a poem that can seem so incredibly disperse and, at times, disconnected, the experience of the reader's work provides an essential unifying thread through the many turnings and theological reiterations.

Thinking the Word; Living the Word

Langland's use of monasticism as a rubric for industrious reading is itself abstracted from a very general understanding of practices that underpin the essence of every medieval religious order. Devotion to and the study of scripture are established as critical components of cenobitic communities from their earliest histories. To this end, specific modes of monastic reading developed that would allow brothers to use interpretation of the sacred word as an instrument to develop an inner life of contemplation and humility while they reinforced the doctrines necessary for maintaining the structure of the community. According to St. Benedict, the life of the monk is a laborious one. He writes in Chapter 48 of his Rule, "When they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are really monks."[17] However, the "labor of their hands" includes not just the necessary harvesting of crops or the maintenance of the house, but also exegetic textual work, the performance of which structures the daily lives of the monks and the spiritual lives of their chosen communities. Benedict, in his discussion of the daily manual labor of the brothers, schedules out the many times when the monks are to be at study, either in their cells or as a community.

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[17] Daniel Marcel La Corte and Douglas J. McMillan, *Regular Life: Monastic, Canonical, and Mendicant Rules*, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Published for TEAMS (the Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages) by Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), 83.

And along with an apparent concern over when reading occurs, the Rule also stipulates the appropriate supervision of monastic reading to ensure that it in conducted properly:

> Above all, one or two seniors must surely be deputed to make the rounds of the monastery while the brothers are reading. Their duty is to see that no brother is so apathetic as to waste time or engage in idle talk to the neglect of his reading, and so not only harm himself but also distract others…If anyone is so remiss and indolent that he is unwilling or unable to study or to read, he is to be given some work in order that he may not be idle.[18]

The question of authoritative control over reading practices, including punishments to be meted out for those who shirk their duties, indicates the extent to which scriptural interpretation became a barometer for the moral and spiritual health of the brothers. In this respect, the labor of reading had two primary functions within the community: first, as part of the daily structure of manual work but second, and more important, as a method of practiced spiritual development inasmuch as the performance of individual reading became part of the communal work that unified and strengthened the identity of the group.

As such, scripture and the embodiment of scripture were critical to the monks' entire way of living, from the schedule of their day to the very patterns of their thoughts. As they read, monastic audiences came to the *sacra pagina*, wreathed as it was in blocks of commentary by the fourteenth century, and modeled their interpretations on the institutionally sanctioned readings they found there.[19] Although medieval authors were careful to foreground the biblical passages in interpretive importance, it was the marginal commentaries that truly structured monastic reading. As we know, there was little

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[18] Ibid., 84-85.

[19] By the thirteenth century, exegesis had developed considerably from that of Benedict's period. Scholastic exegesis had many tools at its disposal, including the *Glossa Ordinaria*, the *Historica Scholastica*, the *Postillae*, concordances, and a Bible divided into chapters. See Ocker, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation*, 8-15.

consistency as to how much of the page was taken up by scripture and, as M.B. Parkes

describes it,

> The full text of the Psalter or Epistles was disposed in a larger, more
> formal version of twelfth-century script in conveniently sited columns, and
> the size of the columns was determined by the length of the commentary
> on that particular part of the text.[20]

From this specific and well-documented page layout, critics have extrapolated attitudes of

the medieval book-makers and readers, as Parkes himself does. He claims that the

developments in the use of the page

> [reflect] in practical and visual terms a dominant attitude to the ordering of
> studies found in the first half of the twelfth century, and expressed in
> statement like the following from the prologue to the *De sacramentis* of
> Hugh of St. Victor: '*omnis artes naturales divinae scientiae famulantur, et
> inferior sapientia recte ordinata ad superiorem conducit.*'[21]

This hierarchical notion of the text, holding the commentary as markedly inferior to the

text it is in service of, remains the dominant one from the twelfth century on. And surely

in the monastic context scriptural meaning must take precedence over the glossing of

even the most revered of patristic sources. From the standpoint of reflected exegetical

reading practices, however, the ordering of importance of text and commentary is

reversed.[22] One only has to look at an example of a glossed page and consider how

readers are actually using the material object of that page in the later Middle Ages to

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[20] M. B. Parkes, "The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book," in *Medieval Learning and Literature*, ed. J. J. G. Alexander and M. T. Gibson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 116. Also cited in Thomas C. Stillinger, *The Song of Troilus: Lyric Authority in the Medieval Book* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 24.

[21] Parkes, "The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book," 117.

[22] And, as R. H. Rouse and M. A. Rouse have argued, in discussing book production, it is the reader rather than the author who must be considered: "The physical presentation of texts in the manuscripts of the Middle Ages was determined and perpetually redefined by the changing needs of their medieval readers – much more so than by the desires of their medieval authors." R. H. Rouse and M. A Rouse, "*Ordinatio* and *Compliatio* Revisited," in *Ad Litteram: Authoritative Texts and Their Medieval Readers*, ed. Mark D. Jordan and Kent Emery Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 127.

determine that the commentary takes up much more readerly time and gives much more shape to an understanding of scripture than the biblical passage alone. The small print of the commentary engulfs scripture in such a way that it visually dominates the *mise-en-page* of the manuscript in the same way that study of the interpretations that commentaries provide must dominate the reader's own thoughts.

On the most basic level, the use of the commentary genre is designed to provide audiences with an authoritative reading of the text under consideration, and yet the frequently feeble correlation of the literal sense of the scriptural passage to the interpretations of those passages encourages a model of reading that emphasizes originality and innovation. Often, as Beryl Smalley proposes, commentary and theology converge, particularly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, so that by the fourteenth century the exegesis performed by the masters assumes a quality of divine approval.[23] The form, then, blends hegemonic authority (sanctioned as it is by the hierarchy of the Church) and didactic structure for its reader. Commentary in the *sacra pagina* does more, however, than provide endorsed scriptural interpretation; it offers a model of successful reading by displaying the product thereof. Commentators present the reader with the result of their scriptural engagement and, apart from simply absorbing the meaning that particular author chooses to highlight, readers are encouraged to do the same for themselves.

For example, in discussing biblical exposition, St. Gregory the Great writes that any explanation cannot proceed in a direct line; instead, it must cut a meandering path through the text, like that of a river carving out a new bank.

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[23] See Smalley's chapter on monastic and cathedral schools in Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: The Clarendon press, 1941).

Sacri enim tractator eloquii morem fluminis debet imitari. Fluvius quippe dum per alveum defluit, si valles concavas ex latere contingit, in eas protinus sui impetus cursum divertit; cumque illas sufficienter impleverit, repente sese in alveum refundit. Sic nimirum, sic divini verbi esse tractator debet, ut cum de qualibet re disserit, si fortasse juxta positam occasionem congruae aedificationis invenerit, quasi ad vicinam vallem linguae undas intorqueat; et cum subjunctae instructionis campum sufficienter infuderit, ad sermonis propositi alveum recurrat.[24]

On a practical level, this passage concerns a major feature of monastic reading practices as well as monastic epistemologies circulating from the late sixth century onward. For the monk, scripture exists not as a single narrative running from chapter to chapter, or even a typological dialectic bridging the space between the New and Old Testaments. Instead of seeing each chapter or book in a linear relation to another, the monk engaged with links between stories and words from across vast textual differences.[25] As a result, a possible reading of a passage might develop as follows: let us consider the story in Luke wherein the resurrected Christ appears to the disciples and they fail to recognize him. He asks one of them, Cleophas, about their discussion, saying, "*qui sunt hii sermons quos confertis ad invicem ambulantes et estis tristes?*"[26] (Luke, 24:17) The literal sense of this appears quite clear. Christ is appearing to the grieving disciples who

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[24]Gregorius I, Moralia in Job, taken from University of Michigan Humanities Text Initiative., Chadwyck-Healey Inc., and J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina Database* ([Alexandria, Va.]: Chadwyck-Healey, 1995), vol. 75. [...he that treats of sacred writ should follow the way of a river, for if a river, as it flows along its channel, meets with open valleys on its side, into these it immediately turns the course of its current, and when they are copiously supplied, presently it pours itself back into its bed. Thus unquestionably, thus should it be with everyone that treats of the Divine Word, that if, in discussing any subject, he chance to find at hand any occasion of seasonable edification, he should, as it were, force the streams of discourse toward the adjacent valley, and when he has poured forth enough upon its level of instruction, fall back into the channel of discourse which he had prepared of himself.] Translation taken from Pope Gregory I, *Morals on the Book of Job: Pt 1 of 4, Parts I & Ii/Books 1-10*, ed. E.B. Pusey (London; Oxford: J. G. & F. Rivington; J.H. Parker, 1844), i.6-7. cited in Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 19.

[25] For Gregory, the term for this is "testimony." Smalley defines it thusly: "A 'testimony' is a 'parallel passage', which [Gregory] adduces in accordance with the old rule that one passage in Scripture must be interpreted by comparison with others. The spiritual interpretation of his text suggests another text containing a word with has the same spiritual meaning as the first. This second text is then interpreted according to its spiritual meaning; this suggests another; and so on..." Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 21.

[26] [And he said to them: What are these discourses that you hold one with another as you walk, and are sad?]

do not recognize him. But a monastic reader, upon rumination of this passage, might well consider that '*ambulantes*' also appears in a verse in 2 Corinthians, 4:2, where it is written:

> *sed abdicamus occulta dedecoris non ambulantes in astutia neque*
> *adulterantes verbum Dei sed in manifestatione veritatis commendantes*
> *nosmet ipsos ad omnem conscientiam hominum coram Deo.*[27]

By mentally "traveling" to this second passage, the monk is drawn to a new understanding of this particular piece of the Gospel that incorporates the message of both passages. The notion of recognition of divine truth is foregrounded in the passage from Corinthians, and the story of Cleophas's failure to identify the truth of the risen Christ is thus juxtaposed with the necessity for proper reading and preaching of the truth of Scripture (as in discussed by Paul in 2 Corinthians) to those for whom "*velamen est positum super cor eorum*"[28] (2 Corinthians, 3:15). As a result of this amalgamated reading, the text now produces a new meaning that muses on the duty of the sincere Christian to amend for the early disciples' error. The exegetic reader uncovers the hidden meaning (*enarratio*) behind sacred scripture and, in doing so, manifests the Word of God within himself so as to make it visible to others. Thus, the role of the reading monk is likened to that of the risen Christ who moves through the land revealing divine truth to the faithful.[29]

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[27] [But we renounce the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor adulterating the word of God; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience, in the sight of God.]

[28] [the veil is placed upon their heart]

[29] As an aside, it is interesting to note that Langland also picks up the Cleophas story in Book XI of *Piers Plowman*. Here, the onus is again on recognition: "Cleophas ne knew hym noȝt þat he crist were / For his pouere apparaill and pilgrymes wedes / Til he blessede and brak þe breed þat þei eten" (XI.235-237). Langland omits the re-telling of the Passion story by the disciples and moves directly on to the pseudo-Eucharistic meal.

This practice of contemplative devotional reading laid out by St. Gregory and performed by medieval commentators creates a web of interconnected words and episodes that enlighten through the juxtaposition of various diverse passages, pulled together from all over the medieval Bible.[30] In order to develop the ability to interact with scripture in this way, a reader must work to develop an encyclopedic familiarity with the Bible so as to immediately recall sections and verses from the slightest linguistic prompt. In the monastic context, being able to 'think in scripture' is the ideal state of contemplative thought. The reading aids that were used as props to assist in reaching this level of immersion provide most of what we know of monastic life and thought. Apart from sermons, the most critical literary forms for structuring modes of monastic hermeneutics are the devotional genres of the gloss, the concordance, and scriptural commentary. Any attempt at a description of how one devoted to the contemplative life approached Holy Scripture in the medieval period must first be formed through the lens of these basic instructional and interpretive frameworks.

The last of these, biblical commentary, is by far the most autonomous in its pedagogical relationship with the reader. Be it in the margins of the *sacra pagina*, or as an untethered text, such that we find from Augustine, Bede, or countless others, these works provide scriptural interpretation upon which the reader might meditate and model

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[30] Auerbach describes this process as such: "The total content of the sacred writings was placed in an exegetic context which often removed the thing told very far from the sensory occurrence and toward its meaning. This implied the danger that the visual element of the occurrences might succumb under the dense texture of meanings…the sensory occurrence pales before the power of the figural meaning. What is perceived by the hearer or reader or even, in the plastic and graphic arts, by the spectator, is weak as a sensory impression, and all one's interest is directed toward the context of meanings." Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 48-49.

his own readings upon.[31] The most common forms of commentary were built on

association of a word from a passage to the same word in another passage, substitution of

a phrase for one of similar meaning, and amplification of a passage through explanatory

material.[32] On the other hand, the scriptural concordance is much more of a reading aid

than a demonstration of reading modes, designed to assist the reader with making the

associative connections suggested by Gregory in order that they might construct useful

interpretations of their own. Much as modern searchable text databases allow readers to

locate a single word across a collection of works, the medieval concordance provided

groups of citations for individual words as they appeared in the Bible. So, if a reader (or

a preacher, for that matter) were interested in the subject of water, he could use this guide

as a net with which to snag appropriate verses.[33] Yet, in monastic contexts, this is merely

a beginning step with which to begin the process of internalizing the books of scripture.

The goal is always for the divine word to penetrate completely the monk's understanding

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[31] Here, I am in agreement with Karlheinz Stierle in his claim that "Commentary springs from the voice of someone who is in charge of the text and who represents it to a group of listeners, disciples, students, members of a community, or nonprofessionals. In any case it means going beyond the text, exceeding it. The same voice that represents the text and bestows on it the immediacy of the spoken word crosses the boundaries of the text in order to restore an ideal situation of understanding and communication." However, it is important to note, as Stierle points out, that the reading coming out of this genre should never be deterministic. The ideal commentary instead provides a bridge between the reader and the text to facilitate understanding. Karlheinz Stierle, "Studium: Perspectives on Institutionalized Modes of Reading," *New Literary History* 22, no. 1 (1991): 118-19.

[32] For more on commentary modes, see John A. Alford, "Biblical *Imitatio* in the Writings of Richard Rolle," *English Literary History* 40, no. 1 (1973), 1-23.

[33] N.b. The early concordances are quite a bit different from the later, scholastic *Distinctiones* wherein words are alphabetically arranged for easier use. The later versions are also engineered to be tools for constructing biblical interpretation, but they forgo the assumption that large quantities of memorized scripture would be available for recall by the reader. The *Distinctiones* are essentially written representations of what the monastic reading process accomplishes through the "spontaneous play of associations, similarities, and comparisons...the spontaneous phenomenon of reminiscence." Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 73.

so that he becomes, in Spicq's piquant phrase, a "concordance vivante," able to summon to mind a network of biblical passages to assist in any interpretive situation.[34]

To 'know' the Bible, then, is not to understand it on a mere theoretical level, or with a myopic eye to the one established truth behind the veil. Such a restrictive model is incomprehensible in the monastic context. At the most fundamental level learning and knowledge in a monastic sense meant an individual and practical engagement in the creation of uncovered meanings, be they in scripture, the liturgy, or other devotional readings.[35] Intimate familiarity with scripture provides the necessary basis for the labor of interpretation. As Mary Carruthers explains in her study of monastic cognitive processes, the ability for *inventio* remains dependent upon the qualities of the *memoria*, the one providing a stable foundation for the other.[36] And indeed, scriptural interpretation is the finest example of *inventio* the medieval monk might aspire to. This radically different model, the experiential over the theoretical, comes out of what Jean Leclercq sees as the essence of monastic life: the quest not for salvation, but for perfection.[37] A monk yearns after heaven not as a reward for a life well lived, but as a critical aspect of daily human experience. Much of monastic literature centers on the overwhelming desire for closeness with God, yet more important, the search for a second

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[34]Ceslas Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au moyen age*, vol. 26, *Bibliothèque Thomiste* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1944), 223. Quoted in John A. Alford, "The Role of the Quotations in Piers Plowman," *Speculum* 52, no. 1 (1977): 83.

[35] The notion of creating meaning through scriptural interpretation applies to many aspects of the commentary tradition, with the most obvious example being typological, or figural analysis. As Auerbach describes it, "Figural interpretation 'establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, and within temporality. They are both contained in the flowing stream with is historical life, and only the comprehension, the *intellectus spiritualis*, of their interdependence is a spiritual act.'" Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, 73.

[36] See the introductory chapters of Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*.

[37] N.b. Morton Bloomfield also holds to this notion of perfection over salvation for monastic labor. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*.

Jerusalem speaks not only of the longing for Heaven but also to the attempt to live there while on earth.

Integral to this transformation of the worldly life into the heavenly life on earth is the process of contemplative reading, because in the monastic model, intimate scriptural engagement is the only tool available in the work of devotion and spiritual growth. In her work on the Corbie Psalter, Lisa Bessette reminds us that

> The psalms were an intimately known text and fundamental to monastic existence. Medieval monks learned to read from the Psalter and in the corporate chanting of the psalms in the liturgy the words of the text were drawn out, providing an occasion for deep meditation on their meaning. Through repeated encounters with the psalms on the part of the monk, the text actually *became a part of the self*, an intellectual reservoir that would be used constantly in all aspects of daily life.[38]

Leclercq comes to much the same conclusion. The act of reading and recollection is crucial for forming the monastic *Denkform*;[39] in physically performing the text through the verbal and audible character of monastic reading, monks 'ingested' scripture in order to move toward the experience of knowing the Bible *in ore cordis*,[40] or with the *palatum cordis*,[41] such that the sacred word becomes imprinted on the soul of the believer. Not only this, but by reading the text out loud, or silently mouthing it during reading, one inscribes the text into the musculature of the corporal self even as it is stamped into the spiritual. Reading, meditation and prayer unite, thereby creating what Leclercq terms "meditative prayer," which

> occupies and engages the whole person in whom the Scripture takes root, later on to bear fruit. It is this deep impregnation with the words of

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[38] From Lisa Bessette, "The Figuration of the Reader's Relationship to the Text in the Imagery of the Corbie Psalter," [unpublished paper given for the Pre-Modern Colloquium at the University of Michigan in 2006]

[39] Bloomfield uses this term in his chapter on monasticism and perfection to describe the world-perspective of a historical community. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*, 45.

[40] [with the mouth of the heart] or, via the ear – referring to hearing scripture

[41] [the palate of the heart] – referring to tasting scripture

> Scripture that explains the extremely important phenomenon of reminiscence whereby the verbal echoes so excite the memory that a mere allusion will spontaneously evoke whole quotations and, in turn, a scriptural phrase will suggest quite naturally allusions elsewhere in the scared books. Each word is like a hook, so to speak; it catches hold of one or several others which become linked together and make up the fabric of the exposé.[42]

Thus, as a monk reads scripture, the text already implanted within him answers the text before his eyes such that the ensuing dialogue produces a manifestation of the perfect divine on earth: the revealed Word of God. The reader has become a machine through which the sacred truth is continuously produced and unveiled.

Langland's Scriptural Logic

Using these notions of affective reading and the genre of the commentary tradition, Langland's text organizes a lay reader who is much more monastic and Latinate than vernacular. For a poem that supposedly participates in a culture of primarily vernacular devotion, *Piers Plowman* presents some obvious difficulties, not the least of which is the macaronic structure of many of the lines. While the use of Latin certainly fits in with Langland's figuration of readers capable of using text as a springboard for spiritual development, as in monastic contexts, vernacular readers encountering the Latin passages run up against a number of interpretive complications. Without the highly implausible assumption that Langland envisioned an audience that would be equally comfortable in both languages, or even that members would have a rudimentary command of biblical Latin, we must consider that he wrote the poem in the full knowledge that pieces of it would be illegible and that the macaronic passages would

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[42] Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 73-74.

stand out for medieval readers as much as they do in the italics of our modern editions.

Both medieval scribes and modern editors find Langland's Latin lines distinct enough to

warrant visual and structural emphasis. In his seminal resource on the quotations found

in the poem, John Alford counts 1,200 different quotations in Latin and French,[43] and in

his earlier, frequently referenced, article on the same subject, reminds us that although "in

most printed editions the quotations are indented and italicized, in the manuscripts, they

are often underlined in red."[44] The exact treatment of the status and effect of these

quotations has taken two different avenues in modern critiques of the poem. Alford

maintains that the lines are purely structural and that the English surrounding them

functions very much like a sermon, or, at best, a commentary.[45] The opposing view,

maintained by Mary Clemente Davlin, also tentatively classes the poem as commentary,

but affords the English lines primacy while seeing the Latin verses as supporting, much

in the way that in reading practices the gloss might outweigh the actual glossed text.[46] In

either case, any description of the process of reading must certainly account for and

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[43] John A. Alford, *Piers Plowman: A Guide to the Quotations* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1992), 1.

[44] Alford, "The Role of the Quotations in Piers Plowman," 80.

[45] He writes of this model, "There can be no question about where the structure lies. The quotations are primary, and the English functions mainly as an amplification of the texts, achieved by straight exposition as in a commentary and – in due consideration of the audience – by more popular means such as exhortation and *exempla*."Ibid.: 86. For more on concordances and *Piers*, see Judson Boyce Allen, "Langland's Reading and Writing: Detractor and the Pardon Passus," *Speculum* 59, no. 2 (1984), 342-62, and Thomas Hill, "The Problem of Synecdochic Flesh: *Piers Plowman* B 9.49-50," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 15 (2001), 213-18.

[46] "But can *Piers Plowman* be called a biblical commentary? Certainly not in any ordinary sense. It is not organized as a single biblical commentary like a gloss or like *quaestiones*. That is, the quotations in *Piers* do not move in order from Genesis to Revelations, nor from the beginning to the end of any biblical book. Nor does the poem have the overall organization of *distinctions*, another form of commentary consisting of alphabetical and topical gatherings of quotations. Rather, the organization of the poem as a whole seems to be that of its English text, narrative and fictional, a spiral structure with a beginning, a climax, and an end." Mary Clemente Davlin, "*Piers Plowman* as Biblical Commentary," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 20 (2003), 85.

accommodate the quotations in some way, even for audiences with little to no Latin whatsoever.

Like commentary and glossing, the relationships between the Latin passages and the surrounding English text provide a model for a reading practice that hinges on the need for recursive, even contemplative study. For vernacular readers the problem becomes one of recognition—not only what does the Latin say, or where does Langland quote it from, but more importantly, how does it speak to the surrounding English verse? There are several options. Occasionally, the English will provide a translation for the Latin, such as in Passus V:

> And al þe wikkednesse in þis world þat man myȝte werche or
> þynke
> Nis na more to þe mercy of god þan amyd þe see a gleede:
> *Omnis iniquitas quantum ad misericordiam dei est quasi scintilla*
> *in medio maris.*[47]
> > (V.281-283)

Other times, the Latin becomes something like a proper name, or almost a material object, as when the Samaritan rides on a "Capul þat highte *caro*" (XVII.110), or Will considers *Spes'* new law, "*Dilige deum & proximum tuum*"[48] (XVII.13). But more often than not, the Latin simply appears in the text, most frequently as a quotation from scripture or some other devotional source, and may either be completed or trail off with the inevitable '*etc.*'. Whether readers can switch easily from English to Latin, whether they might be familiar with certain Latin phrases from the Bible or from the Divine Office, whether they can supply the sources for each quotation and finish the incomplete

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[47] [Compared to God's mercy all wickedness is like a spark of fire in the midst of the sea.] Thought to be from Augustine's *Ennarationes in Psalmos* on Ps. 143:2. See Alford, *Piers Plowman: A Guide to the Quotations*, 47.
[48] [Thou shalt love…God…and thy neighbor. (On these two dependeth the whole law and the prophets).] (Mt 22:37, 39, 40)

passages on the fly, or whether the Latin simply stands as an obvious piece of elite

knowledge that is inaccessible without appropriate training, the macaronic structure must

inform and shape how readers approach the text. The switch in languages and the move

from narrative to quotation forces a decision out of readers, obliging them to make a

choice about how they make use of a passage that incorporates Latin knowledge.

Furthermore, encountering any given macaronic line they become aware of whatever

decision they might make, thereby drawing their attention consistently back to their own

labor of reading.[49]

There are several instances where the Latin expressly highlights its own alterity

from vernacular reading practices by shifting into a mode that requires a very different

kind of reading. For example, in Imaginatif's speech to Will, she provides him with a

Latin passage in order to describe how pagans like Trajan might be saved without the

elements of baptism and indoctrination to the Christian tradition:

> And wheiþer it worþ of truþe or noȝt, þe worþ of bileue is gret,
> And an hope hangynge þerInne to haue a mede for his truþe;
> For *Deus dicitur quasi dans eternam vitam suis, hoc est fidelibus;*
>   *Et alibi, si ambulauero in medio umbre mortis.*[50]
> The glose graunteþ vpon þat vers a greet mede to truþe.
>   (XII.291-294)

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[49] Tim William Machan, in an engaging and convincing article, attributes the use of Latin as effectively a linguistic code-switching between a familiar vernacular and an established, authoritative dialect, enabled by the decline of diglossia in the late fourteenth century. "By prominently foregrounding correlations between the domains of Latin and English at several points and by often utilizing the interplay between the languages as an occasion for stylistic nuance, Langland constructs not only structural motivations and narrative concerns, but also pragmatic opportunities from the diglossic social backdrop of the poem's composition. In these constructions, the inconsistencies of the enabling diglossia become both the subject and the material of the poem itself." Tim William Machan, "Language Contact in Piers Plowman," *Speculum* 69, no. 2 (1994), 361. He reminds us of the critical social life each language enjoyed in this period and, naturally, a reader would necessarily be participating in the contexts he points to.

[50] [For God is spoken of as giving eternal life to his own – that is to the faithful (cf. Jn 17:2); and elsewhere For though I would walk in the midst of the shadow of death (I will fear no evils). (Ps 22:4)]

Embedded in this Latin quotation, as Alford notes, is an anagram: "*Deus dicitur quasi dans eternam vitam suis*," literally transforming the line (most likely inspired by John 17:2, "…*det eis vitam aeterman*"[51]) into a conflation of the being of God with the gifts he gives his followers.[52] Without knowing that the text hides a riddle, a reader has no way of determining that this quotation is any different from the scores of other passages sprinkled throughout the poem. Because it is there, however, and because it does, as Alford explains, allow for a mode of interpretation that includes the uncovering of anagrammatic word play, an idealized process of reading must also shift to incorporate it. There is a fundamental difference between recognizing humanized allegorical figures and looking to elite, Latinate discourse for punning and riddles. And, since the anagram practice comes out of an elite textual culture where reading not only participates in but also demonstrates a type of learning that propagates itself through the initiation of a select audience, its inclusion here demonstrates the multiple levels of meaning Langland is willing to embed within his lines.

Andrew Galloway explains this type of reading in his article on riddling and the *Secretum Philosophorum*, a rhetorical treatise from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century that relies heavily on *cautelae*, or tricks, for each of the liberal arts. The purpose of such a manuscript is to educate its readers in the ways in which they ought to approach learning in order to prepare them for appropriate evaluation of each of the seven arts. Riddles focus interpretation in a narrow field, usually a text of no more than a few lines,

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[51] [that he may give eternal life to him]

[52] Alford gives the source for this as a gloss in Evrard of Béthune's *Laborintus*, a thirteenth century poem on grammar and poetics. See Edmond Faral, *Les Arts Póetiques Du Xiie Et Du Xiiie Siècle; Recherches Et Documents Sur La Technique Littéraire Du Moyen Âge* (Paris: É. Champion, 1924); William Michael Purcell, *Ars Poetriae: Rhetorical and Grammatical Invention at the Margin of Literacy* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

and allow the reader to practice seeing through the deception and falsehood of the wordplay to reach the moral truth. The anagram of the name of God in *Piers* fits very much into the vein of reading practices Galloway finds in the late-medieval riddles in that it links the discovery of a devotional message with careful, clever reading. For example, Galloway cites the riddle, "*Lune dimidium solis pariterque rotumdum, | Et pars quarta rote: nil plus deus exigit a te.*"[53] Here, as in Langland's anagram, the words are more than what they seem. To understand the verse, a reader must see the words as more than words; in this example, they must visualize the images presented in the text. Half of a moon might look like a small crescent, or the letter 'c', whereas the roundness of the sun corresponds to an 'o'. Lastly, a quarter of a wheel gives something very much resembling an 'r'. And so, the gift that God demands of his followers is nothing less than their '*cor*', or their heart.

When Langland includes the anagram in Passus XII, he allows the same reading process that Galloway envisions for the *Secretum Philosophorum*. With the correct interpretation, the reader might penetrate the mystery of the text and thereby raise himself up to participate in an elect community, but in order to do so he must already have been initiated into that same community. The reader must see the truth through the deception and veil of the *Secretum Philosophorum*'s verbal puzzles, and for Langland the same is doubly so for scriptural interpretation. On the one hand, this is an elite mode of reading in the sense that one needs to know the trick in order to reach the solution; the key must already be in hand in order to unlock the secrets of the text. More often than not for the riddle collections, such tactics are found in other, similar texts, or passed on by others

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[53] [Half of a moon and equally the round of a sun, And the fourth part of a wheel: nothing more does God demand from you.] Andrew Galloway, "The Rhetoric of Reading in Late-Medieval England: The "Oxford" Riddles, the *Secretum Philosophorum*, and the Riddles in *Piers Plowman*," *Speculum* 70, no. 1 (1995): 87.

who already know the trick. The same is true for Langland. In the case of Imaginatif's

riddle, fore-knowledge of the secrets of this particular textual enigma is required even to

recognize that a hidden message is present, to say nothing of the solution to the puzzle.

Successful interpretation here holds a distinct air of elitism, of esoteric learnedness and,

as Galloway puts it, of being part of the 'passwords of participation in an intellectual

community for those who have already read or been shown the answers."[54] On the other

hand, there is a strong pedagogical urgency behind the riddles and behind Imaginatif's

wordplay – both are designed to teach readers something through the moral answer to the

riddle, but also through the manner in which the answer was uncovered. Furthermore,

both claim to improve readers by allowing them to discover and practice these modes of

reading, thereby elevating them into a community of readership that is presumably more

elect than the one they are starting from. There is opportunity here, even if it is only the

fiction of opportunity.

In the commentary tradition, readers must also look beyond the text to uncover

the meaning hidden behind the text. Langland makes use of the link between the reading

of poetic wordplay and the interpretation of scripture by engaging a similar level of

readerly work required by each genre. As a textual event, riddles force a reading for

possibility rather than a reading for a literal sense, but successful reading moves beyond

the immediate meanings and discover an alternate, more complete understanding that

allows the readers to see into the text through their own process of interpretation.[55]

Comprehension generates textual truth, and in so doing transfers the power from the page

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[54] Ibid., 83.

[55] For more on the use of the literal sense in the fourteenth century and the complexities of its social
formulation, see Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and
Ideas of Learning*.

to the active readers. Without the work of readers, the text becomes a mute and impotent

system, unable to produce meaning on its own. The same is true for the relation between

biblical passages and the commentary they inspire. A monastic understanding of the

sense of the text in the medieval period must incorporate meanings other than the literal,

and often expects more than one option.[56] Following this model, this is the most obvious

difference between biblical hermeneutics and most riddles in texts like the *Secretum*

Philosophorum. The commitment to polyvalence scriptural exegesis maintains has no

place in the riddles Galloway discusses; in fact, in many cases, there is actually no literal

meaning in the riddles at all, only the interpretation. Upon first reading the text is

enigmatic, without a sensible narrative at all, and it is only with the solution of the puzzle

that meaning springs into being.

Inside Langland's text, when we actually see readers engaging with text,

expansive and engaged reading that takes into account the many possible meanings

available to an audience is rewarded whereas detached, cautious readers are consistently

corrected by various guide figures. It is the same for the external readers who have the

poem in front of them. Like the characters within the narrative, outside readers are

expected to locate moments to apply their interpretation so as to open the text for their

own understanding, albeit without the helpful guidance of allegorical interlocutors.

Primarily, the sites of most opportunity are those involving wordplay and vernacular

interaction with macaronic passages, most often with scriptural quotations. In this way,

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[56] Clearly, Robertson and Huppé, among many subsequent others, have explored the implications of what we now think of as the 'classic' model of four-fold exegesis. What they do not take into account is a mutable model of the reader. Perhaps as a hermeneutic the locating of literal, allegorical, anagogical, and typological meanings has use, but to assume that every reader is meant to go through these exact levels of interpretation exhibits an astounding and obviously erroneous assumption about vernacular readers in the period. See D. W. Robertson and Bernard Felix Huppé, *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969) and, for an opposing viewpoint, Minnis, Scott, and Wallace, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, C. 1100-C. 1375,* "The Commentary-Tradition".

Langland skillfully negotiates between the poetic genre and the commentary tradition.
He uses linguistic flourishes, half translations, and allegorical tensions to pressure the
reader to make sense of the text, to engage with it as commentators do with the *sacra*
pagina. In lieu of authorial glosses, Langland must trust to readers to produce the textual
glossing for themselves as they progress through the text. Such engaged reading bridges
the gap between monastic hermeneutic modes and vernacular textuality to create a hybrid
of the two. Langland's readers must engage the English text through Latin eyes in order
to open the text to the interpretation the poetic logic demands.

Missing the Mark

Enacted interpretive labor, however, is not the end of the road for readers in and
of Langland's poem. Even though the poet allows and encourages individual reading, he
overtly maintains a textuality wherein interpretation can easily go awry and consistently
subjects internal and external readers to the anxiety that their work is, in the end,
misguided. Characters, in receiving information from a source and attempting to put that
information into practice, frequently do so in a way that misinterprets either the situation
before them or the teaching they received. The mistake made is not that whatever they
have been told is incomprehensible, but that they have a limited understanding of what it
means. Errors of this type have two manifestations: either someone is overly literal in his
application of knowledge (usually of doctrinal principles), or he chooses not to heed the
advice given out of sloth or spiritual neglect. Be it tyrannical literalism or carelessness,
hermeneutic misjudgment is far more dangerous than illegibility on the principle that a

little knowledge is far more dangerous than none at all. Most heresies are born from

faulty reasoning, after all, not out of ignorance. Anima reminds Will that,

> Sarȝens han somewhat semynge to oure bileue,
> For þei loue and bileue in o lord almighty
> And we lered and lewed bileueþ in oon god;
> Cristene and vncristene on oon god bileueþ.
>
> (XV.393-396)

From here, he urges the conversion of the Muslims and the Jews reasoning that they are

pre-disposed to Christianity as the fundamental tenet of their belief (that of worshipping

one God the Father) is the first step on the right path. Such reasoning, however, works in

the other direction as well. The proximity of heretical knowledge to truth endangers the

faithful by blurring the line between acceptable interpretation of doctrine and sacrilege.

In such perilous situations, accurate hermeneutic work is the best defense against

blasphemy and damnation.

Will, however, does not seem to have this problem. If anything, he is overly

literal and simplistic in his understanding of what he is told, particularly in regard to

scripture and doctrinal matters, an insidious error that is more difficult to spot than clear

heresy and, as a result, is potentially more dangerous. When Scripture warns Will that a

rich man, no matter his status while on earth, has no claim to heaven without the grace of

God,[57] her pupil indignantly exclaims,

> Contra!...by crist! þat kan I wiþseye,
> and preuen it by þe pistel þat Peter is nempned:
> That is baptiȝed beþ saaf, be he riche or pouere"
>
> (X.349-351)

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[57] "…þe Apostles bereþ witnesse
  That þei han Eritage in heauene, and by trewe riȝt,
  Ther riche men no riȝt may cleyme but of ruȝe and grace."
  (X.346-348)

The verse Will refers to is that in 1 Peter, 3:21: "Whereunto baptism being of the like form, now saveth you also: not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the examination of a good conscience towards God by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." All in all, this is not a bad retort. Scripture herself might be referring to a number of verses that speak of the rich man's difficulty with entering the Kingdom of Heaven, the well-known Mathew 19:24 ("And again I say to you: It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven") or as is more likely Ephesians 2:8-9 ("For my grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, for it is the gift of God; Not of works, that no man may glory"). When Will responds in kind, arguing from scripture that it is baptism that washes away the sin from the soul, not the corruptions of the flesh that garners salvation, it would seem that he is making a valid interpretive point. Unfortunately, he is mistaken. Scripture corrects him, saying that baptism is indeed all that is strictly necessary to attain entry into heaven, but this is only in extreme circumstances. She grants that for Jews and Saracens come lately to belief, like the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Mathew 20, baptism will grant them the coin of eternal life. But she then continues,

> Ac cristene men wiþout moore may noȝt come to heuene,
> For þat crist for cristene men deide, and confermed þe lawe
> That whoso wolde and wilneþ wiþ crist to arise,
> *Si cum christo surrexistis etc.*[58]
> He should louye and lene and þe lawe fulfille.
> That is, loue þi lord god leuest abouen alle,
> And after alle cristene creatures, in commune ech man ooþer.
> (X.357-362)

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[58] Colossians, 3:1-2: "*igitur si conresurrexistis Christo quae sursum sunt quaerite ubi Christus est in dextera Dei sedens: quae sursum sunt sapite non quae supra terram.*" [Therefore, if you be risen with Christ, seek the things that are above; where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God: Mind the things that are above, not the things that are upon the earth.]

Charity, then, is the final word in the quest for salvation. Will's retort, though perhaps

biblically accurate, neglects to attend to the need for "ruȝe and grace" Scripture stresses

in her initial admonition. No matter his wealth or how many works the rich man offers,

divine grace is the price for admission and it is the distribution of such grace that remains

in question. Will mistakenly assumes that the sacrament of baptism is the only

requirement for the heavenly gift, not realizing that for Christian subjects the law of

charity must be added to the water and the blessing. Salvation comes from participating

in God's love, as Scripture instructs, and every man must strive to manifest the divine

love he hopes to receive in his own actions towards others. An understanding of baptism,

itself a sacrament of love, without the inclusion of the charges it lays on the faithful, is

incomplete and overly simplistic.

This is far from the only time when Will finds a situation that conflicts with

knowledge that he believes he already has mastered. Langland moves the problem from

a doctrinal question to one of appropriate action with the allegorized episode of the

wounded man and the Good Samaritan in Passus XVII. Initially found in the Gospel of

Luke, the action of the story appears in the poem much as in the biblical passage. A man

is set upon by thieves, two men refuse help, and the Samaritan stops, binds his wounds,

and carries him to an inn where he proceeds to arrange and pay for treatment. In the

poem, the primary additions are in that the figures of the priest and the Levite from

scripture become the figurative Faith (Abraham) and Hope, and our narrator is included

as a bystander. When Faith and Hope abandon the wounded unfortunate, "naked as a

nedle" (XVII.59) and flee "as doke dooþ fram þe faucon" (XVII. 65), Will is predictably

outraged. Upon sharing his concern with the Samaritan, the proto-Christ figure chastises

him for his overly harsh criticism.[59] The wounded man is too badly injured to be healed

by Faith and Hope alone, also equivalent to the Old Testament law; he needs the stronger

medicine of the New Testament and the Passion carried by the Good Samaritan. Will has

missed the critical, figurative reading of the scene (and, by correlation, the parable) and

therefore must be corrected from within the narrative:

> 'Haue hem excused', quod he; 'hir help may litel auaille.
> May no medicine vnder mone þe man to heele brynge,
> Neiþer Feiþ ne fyn hope, so festred be hise woundes,
> Wiþouten þe blood of a barn born of a mayde.
> And he be baþed in þat blood, baptized as it were,
> And þanne plastred wiþ penaunce and passion of þat baby,
> He should stonde and steppe; ac stalworþe worþ he neuere
> Til he haue eten al þe barn and his blood ydronke.
>   (XVII.93-100)

The Samaritan's re-reading of the scene not only tells Will what judgment he ought to

have made, but also demonstrates, much as do the explanations given in marginal glosses

to scripture, how he ought to have come to that conclusion. His mistake is in his reliance

on the literal sense of what he sees – he notices only the text and ignores the riddle

whereas the Samaritan's retort involves any number of figurative discourses that can feed

into the scene. The first is that of the narrative of the figurative parable itself. The

Samaritan tells Will to excuse Faith and Hope because their aid would be ultimately

ineffective. This refers, of course, only to Langland's adjusted version of events—

characters named Hope and Faith are as allegorical concepts unlikely to be subjected to

didactic derision as are the two passersby in the biblical version of the story. The

Samaritan's reading takes this critical shift into account from the beginning whereas Will

is actually being more slavishly literal in that his interpretation references only the gospel

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[59] A similar correction occurs in Passus XI when Will berates Reason (or divine providence) for
abandoning man to earthly suffering. Both Reason and Imaginatif inform him that he is not without sin and
is therefore a recipient of God's patience. Therefore, he should not think mankind abandoned.

source rather than looking at the allegorical scene played out before him. The next discourse to make an appearance is that of medicine and healing, following the basic narrative of injury and restoration. Here, poetic language neatly blends the events of the story with the rhetoric of confession by bridging the gap between the unfortunate man's festering wounds and the plasters of penance three lines later. Suddenly the biblical story *qua* allegorical figuration is now a parable not of aiding those in need but of healing the wounds of the individual, sinful soul. Once that has been established, medical terminology quickly reverts back to scripture with the introduction of the *Vita Christi* and Christ's infant blood as a healing salve. But it is not just the baby in the manger that is required here. The Samaritan conjures a proleptic gospel narrative by moving swiftly from the birth to the death of the child by alliteratively uniting 'penaunce' and 'passion'; in Christ's infancy is already the truth of his crucifixion and the penitential role he assumes for all mankind.[60] Moreover, Langland goes as far as to make this shift grammatically ambiguous. The phrase "of þat baby" in line 98 obviously refers to "passion" but can also modify "penaunce", blending Christ's sacrifice with the process of human restitution that must always be fueled by knowledge of the greater offering that has already been made on the cross. In such a way, all of this filters back down from the projected cure for the man's wounds to the allegorical application of that cure. The sacraments of confession, baptism and the Eucharist are tapped as medicinal (if disturbingly vivid in their assumption of physically figured forms) and necessary within the story, while simultaneously carrying palpable overtones for the world outside the poem. The performed and corrective interpretation thus amends Will's faulty labor by

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[60] Laurence Clopper reads the Piers/Samaritain/Christ conflation as an example of "applied typology". See Lawrence M. Clopper, "Shifting Typologies in Langland's Theology of History," in *Typology and English Medieval Literature*, ed. Hugh T. Keenan (New York: AMS Press, 1992), 228-29.

presenting him with a model that takes account of hidden levels of meaning in order to move successfully from theoretical allegory to worldly process. The Samaritan then goes as far as to underscore the necessity for good reading by involving Will in the effort to save the wounded man. He claims that this same scene will repeat itself *ad infinitum* save for the help of "feiþ and myselue and *Spes* his felawe, / And þiself now and swiche as suwen oure werkes." (XVII.103-104) Now Will's understanding is responsible not only for healing his own person, but also that of the wounded man while additionally providing an instructive example for all others he might meet. The student has effectively and laboriously become the teacher.

This flexible form of reading that slips continually between disparate discourses comes directly out of a monastic context. As an interpreter of scriptural message, Will is expected to conjure up a textual understanding that expands from the literal sense into a synthetic explanation limited only by his own ability to integrate ideas together. The real mistake is not taking the step from an initial, overly simplistic and childish reading into a rehearsal of the commentary mode. Will cannot sit and wait for the text to present meaning to him, as he tries to do in the Samaritan episode; instead he must work at the text in order to build comprehension up out of it. This is not to say that anything goes. In monastic reading, as in *Piers*, there are always limitations on what one can say, boundaries which interpretation cannot cross. There is always an agenda for reading that necessarily conforms to hegemonic paradigms well in place before the reader ever gets close to the text. Such is the ever-present danger of heresy. Successful monastic reading cannot produce interpretation that contradicts doctrine and it is a mistake to assume that notions of individual understandings of scripture undercut the power of the established

order. In the vast majority of cases, reading did not change doctrine, and the few times such controversies arose, as in the debate over Franciscan notions of poverty in the twelfth century, are well documented. The same is true in *Piers*. Bad reading, such as Will's hasty condemnation of Hope and Faith, is all too easy and perilously simple to explain away as part of "individual reading." The omnipresent anxiety of mistaken interpretation, the constant fear of straying from the truth of the text is always there to balance the notion that understanding is built up by the reader from the foundations of the text the way masons build a building.[61] Monastic reading consists of a hermeneutic of fear and possibility where each is dialectically present at all times. Langland requires the same of his reader.

Ideally, such a model should pave the way for the affective internalization of text that is the goal of monastic reading. Because the reader is responsible for his own understanding and because of the work that went in to constructing that intimate and personalized understanding, he cannot possibly remain impervious to the revealed message. Textual revelation and contemplation is not enough—meaning must become so much a part of the reader that it unambiguously informs cognition and action alike. Unfortunately for Will, he fails in this just as he fails in synthetic interpretation. At scores of points throughout the poem, he and other characters simply do not take the advice offered to them either by biblical passages or by authoritative guides even at the most literal level. For example, in Passus XI Elde advises Will not to be seduced by

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[61] In her wonderful study on the monastic process of *inventio*, Mary Carruthers traces the extensive history of the architectural trope in Christian thought, from St. Paul to Hugh of St. Victor. "Paul uses his architectural metaphor as a trope for invention, not for storage. Likening himself to a builder, he says he has laid a foundation – a foundation which can only be Christ – upon which others are invited to build in their own way." Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*, 17.

Fortune's easy ways and to descend into a life of fleeting worldly pleasures, and yet,

predictably, Will proceeds to do precisely that. He is warned that Forture will "þee faille

at þi mooste need / And *Concupiscencia carnis* clene þee forsake" (XI.29-30), but

permits Rechelesness to sway him away from what he has already learned and into carnal

covetousness. As a result, he follows the path of worldly indulgence for 45 years until

his youth is wasted away. No longer thinking on Dowel, Dobet, or Dobest, Will ceases to

concern himself with doing good things, but instead focuses on having good things, so

sealing his fate. When Elde finally reappears and Fortune deserts him, Will must be

recuperated and corrected once again, demonstrating that the failure to apply the letter of

the Word to one's life because it is not taken to heart with enough gravity is just as

damning a mistake as relying on interpretation that is overly literal. There should be no

question of Will falling away from Elde's guidance if he understood it properly.

The same is true for more extensive iterations of this same misstep. In the first

lines of Passus XIV, Hawkin attempts to excuse himself from following divine mandate

in the form of Conscience's criticism of his clothing. She complains that his "cote of

cristendom" is continually spotted and soiled with "pride here a plot, and þere a plot of

vnbuxom speche, / of scorning and of scoffyng and of vnskilful beryng" (XIII.275-276).

Dirtied by sin as he is, she berates him, saying that he must have his garments cleaned.

He responds,

> 'I haue but oon hool hater', quod haukyn, 'I am þe lasse to blame
> Thouȝ it be soiled and selde clene: I slepe þerInne o nyȝtes;
> And also I haue an houswif, hewen and children –
> *Uxorem duxi & ideo non possum venire* –
> That wollen bymolen it many tyme maugree my chekes.'
> (XIV.1-5)

The episode is a conflation of two gospel parables – one from Luke 14 concerning a feast wherein the invited guests refused to attend and the poor were brought in instead, and one from Mathew 22 wherein many attend a wedding banquet and the guest inappropriately dressed is thrown out into terrible darkness. The Latin quotation given is from the story in Luke, and Hawkin's spotted coat is clearly from Mathew. The problem here is the same for Hawkin as it is for the reader. It seems perfectly natural that Hawkin's coat is a little smudged. After all, he is the personification of *Activa Vita* and, living in the world as he does and not in some distant and pristine tower of contemplation, he is bound to pick up a little grime here and there. What's more, he is a busy family man with a wife, children, and a job where he travels a lot. It would be difficult for any reader of any time not to sympathize with his plight.

This, however, is exactly the wrong answer and the main purpose behind Langland's inclusion of this type of misreading. Hawkin and the reader may be perfectly willing to excuse the condition of his coat, but scripture is not. Even living the active life we must be constantly on guard against the stain of sin and no excuse for not doing so is acceptable. Of course, as Conscience informs Hawkin, the process of contrition, confession, and restitution will go far in cleansing the soul, but prevention is far preferable to spiritual repairs. Eventually, after much instruction, Hawkin ceases his excuses and weeps in despair and sorrow over his sinful nature—the first step on the way to wiping the spots of error from his clothing and from his spirit. The reader must do the same. In parables, it is frequently the case where the initial reaction is the opposite of that which the story ought to produce. Hawkin provides an excellent example. The reader's initial sense of the injustice and unfairness of seemingly impossible standards in

the story must be tempered by divine guidance until he can manage to sincerely conjure the correct response upon a re-reading of the text. As with the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, each man receiving the same amount regardless of how long they worked, the reader's preliminary sense of wrongness must be replaced by acceptance of the correct emotional response declared by the text. This internal manipulation of the reader's initial reaction is paramount in the logic of parable. Readers cannot simply know that they ought to feel one way or that the story "means" one thing or another. In order to understand the text they must manage their emotional response so as to experience the correct meaning.

The labor of inner revision and managed affective reading is wholly different from the work of establishing polyvalent meaning. However, they are in effect two sides of the same coin for monastic readers and for Langland's idea of his own audience. In order to come to textual understanding, both sides must come into play, with the one informing the other. Understanding that surpasses the literal sense produces an internalized notion of the text that cannot be swept away with easy excuses, such as those offered by Hawkin. Likewise, appropriate affective responses will lead to an interpretation based on complex and self-conscious emotional shifts. Interior understanding of texts in this way is the heart of what it means to be a monastic reader and the way in which knowledge moves from something picked up and studied to something that is ingested and lived. The latter seems the obvious choice for a poem that looks to inspire readers to alter their waking and extra-textual lives to reflect the transformation they have undergone because of their interpretive work. Only when the

process of reading imprints individually-generated meaning onto the innermost fabric of

cognitive processes has the reader been successful in his efforts

From the Fingers to the Tongue

With the realization of this dual process of internalization of text and calibration

of response, the reader is now in the position not only to interpret the words on the page,

but also to move on with Will in his search to "kyndely knowe what was dowel" (XV.2).

This cry for inborn understanding, for "kynde knowyng," distinguishes between the

prideful, vain, and ineffective modes of knowledge that are hallmarks of ecclesiastical

corruption and the affective, charitable awareness of scripture born out of humility and a

yearning for God. To return to the meeting between Will and Anima in Passus XV, this

time in a textual rather than pictorial context, Anima warns Will specifically against the

former at the moment Will expresses his unbounded desire to penetrate all earthly modes

of learning: "Alle þe sciences vnder sonne and alle þe sotile craftes / I wolde I knewe and

kouþe kyndely in myn herte" (XV.48-49). To which Anima responds,

> 'Thanne artow inparfit', quod he, 'and oon of prides kny3tes.
> For swich a lust and likyng Lucifer fel from heuene:
> *Ponam pedem meum in aquilone & similis ero altissimo.*[62]
> It were ayeins kynde', quod he, 'and alle kynnes reson
> That any creature should konne al except crist oone…'
> (XV.50-54)

The passage conflates the notions of 'kynde' as innate and internal (Will's definition) and

'kynde' as natural and appropriate (Anima's definition) in order to show just what is

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[62] [I set my foot in the north and am like the most high.] This same passage from Augustine's *Ennarationes in Psalmos* also appears at I.119 during Holi Church's lecture on the fall of the angels. She also uses the story of Lucifer's pride to discuss appropriate forms of learning and seeking knowledge.

wrong with Will's fervor for learning. His desire to ingest all possible forms of knowledge seems laudable at first blush, especially given the similarities between his notion of learning expressed here and the reading practices extolled elsewhere – principally, the monastic ideal of internalizing texts to the extent that the knowledge becomes a bodily essence, a 'kyndly' thing. Anima's objection should not be taken as a blanket injunction against learning, nor his subsequent anti-fraternal comments as a criticism of all modes of instruction, but instead as a specific censure of the type of learning Will seeks. It is not that a basic desire for understanding is inherently prideful and wicked; the core motivation for Will's journey is after all to identify, understand, and execute Dowel in his waking life. The specific problem with Will's desire is that his notion of ideal, abstracted, and theoretical knowledge is not the realm of the earthly but of the divine. In wanting to experience "alle þe sotile craftes" life has to offer, he is focusing too much on the adjective 'sotile' and not enough on the noun 'crafte.' He has allowed himself to be seduced by the esotericism and election he envisions as part of learnedness without attending to the physical, tangible skills that make up earthly knowledge. Knowledge should not be an embellishment, but a practice. The instruction that Will seeks and the understanding that he envisions himself working towards are not the province of man's knowing, but rather constitute the divine knowledge held only by Christ. In reaching for such mastery, Will is committing the ultimate, though perhaps understandable, crime of hubris. And so, like Lucifer, Will's yearning proclaims his intention to declare, "*similes ero altissimo*."

When Anima scolds Will for his curiosity he does so with a Latin passage about Luciferine pride; in doing so, he initiates and illustrates *enarratio* for readers, if not for

Will, and re-emphasizes the shift from *pictura* to *obscuritas* we have already seen present

in the visual allegory of the episode. In Augustine's commentaries on *obscuritas* in

Scripture, he uses one of two exegetical modes: his explication is based either on what I

term a concordant explanation or an exemplary explanation. The quotation with which

Anima chastises Will, "*Ponam pedem meum in aquilone & similis ero altissimo*" appears

as part of both techniques in the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. John A. Alford identifies the

line from the commentaries on Ps. 1:4 and Ps. 47:2; it is an Augustinian paraphrase of

Isaiah 14:13-14: "*...in caelum conscendam super astra Dei exaltabo solium meum sedebo

in monte testamenti in lateribus aquilonis. Ascendam super altitudinem nubium ero

similis Altissimo.*"[63] In the *Enarrationes*, Augustine conflates the two verses into one

touchstone quotation and uses it in two different (but often complementary) ways: to link

the direction north with Satan through the logic of the medieval concordance/*pictura* and

to highlight the specific sin of pride in the manner of an *exemplum*. Each of these two

exegetical options, the concordant and the exemplary link, is an independent strategy for

unlocking the *obscuritas* of the Bible, the first drawing the scriptural experience together

on the level of sign and the second on the level of meaning.[64] Langland's use of this

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[63] [...I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, I will sit in the mountain of the covenant, in the sides of the north. I will ascend above the height of the clouds, I will be like the most High.] Alford, *Piers Plowman: A Guide to the Quotations*, 35. All Biblical translations taken from the Douay-Rheims version. For a discussion of Langland's switch from *sedem* to *pedem* in this passage, see A. L. Kellogg, "Langland and Two Scriptural Texts," *Traditio* 14 (1958), 385-98. The source was originally identified in Robertson and Huppé, *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition*, 44n52. Additionally, for Robert G. Risse's belief that this passage comes to Langland not through Augustine, but though Avianus' *Fables*, see "The Augustinian Paraphrase of Isaiah 14.12-14 in *Piers Plowman* and the Commentary on the *Fables* of Avianus," *Philogical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1966), 712-17.

[64] Augustine's interest in *obscuritas*, or enigma, differs from his rhetorical sources: Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintillian define the trope as a form that is essentially a small, isolated riddle and, while Donatus categorizes it as one of the seven forms of allegory in his *Ars maior*, it is not until the *De trinitate* that Augustine fully relates the rhetorical trick to a larger sense of a text-wide aesthetic. Eleanor Cook argues that the Augustinian interest in enigma is not in identifying the two halves of a simile or metaphor, but in understanding the relationship that links them, the intricacies of the "likeness" in a sentiment such as

quotation in no way indicates that he had either a direct knowledge of Augustine's larger words or that we himself was an accomplished exegete. The presence of this recognizable, abbreviated quotation in the poem, however, indicates at the very least that he had access to a concordance that included this particular passage, and the way Anima deploys the verse has strong ties to an Augustinian mode of interpreting scripture.[65] And yet, even though Anima offers the verse to Will in his stinging rebuke, it is the poem's readers who have the opportunity to make use of Augustine's Latin exegesis by performing for the poem what Augustine does for the Psalms.

Initially, the Latin line seems to call for primarily a concordant reading that focuses, as Augustine himself does, on the unpredicted association of the north with Satanic pride. Augustine's concordant use of the Isaiah passage to offer an *enarratio* of one of the Psalms relies on correspondence of language to exegetically connect two disparate scriptural passages; the two verses have a word in common, *aquilonis*, and the commentary attempts to explain the link between them on the basis of linguistic commonality, functioning in a sense like a scholastic concordance. The best example here is found in the commentary of Psalm 47, one of the two instances Alford (among others) locates as Langland's possible source for Anima's citation. The verse in question is the third of the Psalm, "*Fundatur exultatione universae terrae montes Sion latera aquilonis civitas regis magni.*"[66] The crux of the analysis rests on the resolution of *aquilonis* in its negative connotation in Isaiah with its positive use both in the Psalm and

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"*faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram*" from Genesis 1:26. Eleanor Cook, "The Figure of Enigma: Rhetoric, History, Poetry," *Rhetorica* 14, no. 4 (2001), 349-78.

[65] For a further discussion of Langland and the use of concordances, see Allen, "Langland's Reading and Writing: Detractor and the Pardon Passus."

[66] [With the joy of the whole earth is mount Sion founded, on the sides of the north, the city of the great king.]

in Job 37:21-22: "*at nunc non vident lucem subito aer cogitur in nubes et ventus transiens fugabit eas ab aquilone aurum venit et ad Deum formidolosa laudatio.*"[67]

Taken as a whole, Psalm 47 celebrates God's establishment of the earthly Church as a source of mercy and strength for all eternity, not a likely pairing with an Old Testament verse used to describe Satan's expulsion from Heaven. Only through extended commentary does Augustine make his point that Christ, as the cornerstone of the City of God, triumphs over the North by bringing the sinful men who live under the sway of the devil back onto a virtuous path; thus, Christ becomes the nexus between Sion, the southern realm of God, and the North, where men are held captive by their greed and their pride. Therefore, from the point of the devout, to look to the north is to look to Christ.[68] The systematic nature of concordant interpretation creates a decidedly conservative genre of exegesis in that the role of the commentator is to locate pre-existing linguistic links between passages to build his interpretation upon, effectively solidifying scriptural readings by using the language of the bible to generate moments that require explanation.

The same process of linguistic similarity is used again in the commentary to Psalm 88 to explain the use of the word *aquilonis*. The verse is written as: "*Tui sunt caeli et tua est terra orbem et plenitudinem eius tu fundasti aquilonem et dexteram tu*

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[67] [But now they see not the light: the air on a sudden shall be thickened into clouds, and the wind shall pass and drive them away. Cold cometh out of the north, and to God praise with fear.]

[68] "*Sed quoniam ille qui alligat fortem, aufert eius uasa, et facit uasa sua, liberati homines ab infidelitate et superstitione daemoniorum, credentes in Christum colliniati sunt illi ciuitati, occurrerunt in angulo illi parieti de circumcisione uenienti, et facta est ciuitas regis magni quae fuerant latera aquilonis.*" [But Christ binds the strong one [Lucifer], takes away his weapons, and commandeers them for his own purposes. The peoples set free from unbelief and demonic superstition, now believers in Christ, have been aligned with the city. They have come to meet the wall that juts out from the circumcised, and have joined it at the corner; accordingly those who were once companions of the north have become part of the city of the great king.] Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos, 1-50*, 540. The same process of linguistic similarity is used again in the commentary to Psalm 88 to explain the use of the word '*aquilonis*'. Here, as in Psalm 47, the substance of the two verses is less connected than the constructed connotations of the single word they share.

creasti."[69] (Ps 88: 12-13) In response, Augustine observes,

> *Et malitia quidem sua, per suae voluntatis perversitatem saevire potest*
> *mundus; numquid tamen excedit modum positum a Creatore, qui fecit*
> *omnia? Quid ergo timeo aquilonem? Quid timeo maria? Est quidem in*
> *aquilone diabolus, qui dixit, Ponam sedem meam in aquilonem, et ero*
> *similis Altissimo (Isai. XIV, 13, 14); sed humiliasti sicut vulneratum*
> *superbum. Ergo quod in illis tu fecisti, plus valet ad dominationem tuam,*
> *quam illorum voluntas ad malitiam suam.*[70]

Here, as in Psalm 47, the substance of the two verses is less connected than the

constructed connotations of the single word they share. The immediate and pervasive

link that Augustine makes between the north and Satan's impiety is not his alone; in fact,

a simple proximity search of the Patrologia Latina Database for the words "*aquilon**" and

"*diabol**" occurring within 80 characters of each other yields 248 examples from a host

of commentators from Bede, to Strabo, to Gregory. The numbers alone indicate the

strength of the association as well as the concordant practice among exegetes through the

thirteenth century, the latter forming in large part what we know of monastic interpretive

practices.

Readers might well do the same thing for *Piers Plowman*. This particular

paraphrase of Isaiah also appears during Holy Church's meeting with Will in Passus I to

describe Lucifer's arrogance and subsequent punishment:

> Lucifer wiþ legions lerned it in heuene
> And was þe louelokest of liȝt after our lord
> Til he brak buxomnesse; his blisse gan he tyne
> And fel fro þat felawshipe in a fendes liknesse
> Into a deep derk helle to dwelle þere for euere;
> And mo þousandes myd hym þan man kouþe nombre

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[69] [Thine are the heavens, and thine is the earth: the world and the fullness thereof thou hast founded: The
north and the sea thou hast created.]

[70] [The world indeed may rage through its own malice, and the perversity of its will; does it nevertheless
pass over the bound laid down by the Creator, who made all things? Why then do I fear the north wind?
Why do I fear the seas? In the north indeed is the devil, who said, "I will sit in the sides of the north; I will
be like the Most High;" but Thou hast humbled, as one wounded, the proud one. Thus what Thou hast done
in them has more force for Thy dominion, than their own will has for their wickedness.]

Lopen out wiþ Lucifer in loþliche forme
For þei leueden vpon Lucifer þat lyed in þis manere:
Ponam pedem in aquilone & similes ero altissimo.
(I. 111-119)

Concordant exegesis would lead readers to create an *enarratio* that examines the

repetition of the Augustinian quotation in light of its relation to theological and

intellectual learning. As in Passus XV, the passage from Passus I is concerned with the

limits of learning inasmuch as Holy Church provides the example of Lucifer's fall in

response to Will's desire to understand the divine mystery of the Trinity. She tells him,

"Whan alle tresors arn tried treuþe is þe beste" (I.85), and goes on to describe how God

used the truth of the Trinity to exalt the archangels, including Lucifer, in heaven. Pride

of knowledge, however, is the downfall of not just the devil, but of mankind as well and

Holy Church uses the passage from Isaiah to link the problems of spiritual knowledge

with the dangers of intellectual arrogance. While the Latin in Passus I is offered to Will

as a preemptive warning against taking divine revelation of truth too lightly—Lucifer is

taught the truth of the Trinity, but fails to remain humble in the face of divine authority—

the corresponding passage in Passus XV is a correction of Will's similarly sinful

inclinations towards prideful and meaningless learning. Two sides of the same coin,

arrogance before God and "vain inquisitiveness"[71] become for readers a clarification of

the ways learning should be pursued; the search for divine truth must be undertaken in a

spirit of humility and earnest effort, free from the easy temptations of earthly recognition.

What Will fails to recognize, but Anima insists upon, is interpretive effort guided by faith

at the deepest levels. Even if Will, bound as he is by the poem's wandering narrative,

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[71] In Book X of the Confession, Augustine describes the search for knowledge that does not lead one closer to the divine as "uana et curiosa cupiditas nomine cognitionis et scientiae palliata." ([..concupiscence of the mind, a frivolous, avid curiosity...it masquerades as a zeal for knowledge and learning.] Augustine, *Confessionum*, 184.

fails to read his meetings with Anima and Holy Church as complementary, external readers are offered the space to engage with both to form their own conclusions about the validity of their reading practices.

In some ways, this choice of concordant interpretation I have suggested hews uncomfortably close to the kind of hermeneutic work initiated by *pictura*. Both look to create stable meanings that unify the disparate pieces of the text that knit it together into a manageable entity. Because it emerges out of linguistic similarity, there are immediate checks on what readers can and cannot interrogate. Alternatively, the other exegetical option opened by Anima's use of the Latin passage is that of an exemplary reading. If concordant exegesis relies on correspondence of language, then the exemplary has its foundation in hermeneutic labor, in which interpretation comes out of the denotative sense. Since exemplary reading draws meaning out of the text, it allows for any number of associations. The *enarratio* is bound only by the rhetorical needs of the reader, and for readers of *Piers*, their hermeneutic performance is shaped by their individual inclinations.

There are three places in the *Enarrationes* where Augustine uses the Isaiah passage to develop exemplary readings. Along with Psalm 47, Alford cites Psalm 1 as the source for Anima's use of the verse. The Psalm tells of the rewards for the just man and the punishment of the wicked. For the virtuous, "*Et erit tamquam lignum quod plantatum est secus decursus aquarum quod fructum suum dabit in tempore suo et folium eius non defluet et omnia quaecumque faciet prosperabuntur*"[72] (Ps. 1:3). But for the wicked, "*Non sic impii non sic; sed tamquam pulvis quem proicit ventus a facie terrae*"[73] (Ps.1:4). It is Augustine's commentary not the Psalm itself that specifically links the

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[72] [And he shall be like a tree which is planted near the running waters, which shall bring forth its fruit, in due season. And his leaf shall not fall off: and all whatsoever he shall do shall prosper.]
[73] [Not so the wicked, not so: but like the dust, which the wind driveth from the face of the earth.]

faults of the *impii* here with the sin of pride:

> *...quia ut haec terra uisibilis exteriorem hominem nutrit et continet, ita*
> *illa terra inuisibilis interiorem hominem. A cuius terrae facie proicit*
> *uentus impium, id est superbia, quia inflat... Ab hac terra proiecit*
> *superbia eum qui dixit: Ponam sedem meam ad aquilonem, et ero similis*
> *Altissimo. Ab huius terrae facie proiecit etiam eum qui, cum consensisset*
> *et gustasset de prohibito ligno, ut esset sicut Deus, abscondit se a facie*
> *Dei.*[74]

At this point, the conflated verse from Isaiah appears and the second half, "*et ero similes*

Altissimo," clearly relates to Augustine's explication of the desiccated soul of the prideful

man. He reads the earth as a scriptural allusion to the steadfastness of God that the proud

reject. Instead of finding humility and peace, the prideful are so puffed up with their own

vainglory they are blown aimlessly about like ashes, and unlike the righteous who

become productive through the grace of God like the tree planted beside running water,

those guilty of pride have their productivity stripped from them. They are removed from

the rich earth and, as Augustine tells us, are condemned like the prideful Adam and Eve

before them. Just so, the expulsion from the Garden marks a transition from the settled,

steadfast paradise of Eden to the fruitless wandering of exile. Thus, the slothful pride of

the wicked becomes a form of inertia, the antithesis of industrious, pre-lapsarian labor.

Augustine introduces the ejection from the Garden into his interpretation of the

Psalm in order to focus his reading on the Satanic nature of sin. The passage from Isaiah

contains an exclamation from Lucifer that on the surface has little to no relation to the

Psalm. But for readers of the commentary, the proximity of the two verses forges a link

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[74] [As this visible earth nourishes and sustains human life outwardly, so that other invisible earth nourishes
and sustains our inner being. From the face of this earth the ungodly are swept away by the wind, that is,
by pride, because it puffs them up...From this earth pride cast forth him who said, *I will set my throne in the*
north, I shall be like the Most High. From the face of this earth he too was cast forth by pride who, after
agreeing to taste the forbidden fruit in order to be like God, hid himself from the face of God.] Augustine,
Enarrationes in Psalmos, 1-50, 2-3.

between the two disparate sections of Scripture through shared topics of sin and

punishment that, through interpretive work, expand out to include labor, pride, and the

Fall.[75] Both passages discuss transgression, the unnamed sins of the *impii* and Satan's

more familiar failing, and both carry with them the results of divine judgment, implicit in

Isaiah and directly described in the Psalm. The passages work together because they

allow readers to contemplate the intersection of commonalities between the two verses

and they encourage the formation of other, more disparate links, such as associating the

specific fault of pride with the otherwise ambiguous sin of Psalm 1, or considering the

unfruitful consequences of labor conducted under sinful circumstances. In this way, the

notion of a complete and spiritually satisfying *enarratio*, such as Augustine performs

here, develops out of the proximity of a common interpretive sense.

Two other places in Augustine's commentaries on the Psalms utilize this same

method of connecting one scriptural passage with another that have hitherto been ignored

by Langland scholars interested in Augustine's quotation from Isaiah. First, at Psalm

35:12 ("*Ne veniat mihi pes superbiae et manus impiorum non me commoveat*"[76])

Augustine writes:

> *Certe jam dixit, Sub umbraculo alarum tuarum sperabunt filii hominum, et*
> *inebriabuntur ab ubertate domus tuae. Cum coeperit quisque isto fonte*
> *uberius irrigari, caveat ne superbiat. Non enim deerat Adae primo*
> *homini: sed venit illi pes superbiae, et movit illum manus peccatoris, id est*
> *manus diaboli superba. Quomodo ille qui eum seduxit, dixit. Ponam*

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[75] See also the connection between the particular use of the Isaiah quotation and the specific sin of human pride in Augustine's *De Gesesi ad litteram* 11.24.31. Also, note a similar usage in Book 10.36.59 of the Confessions: "On every side he scatters popular plaudits to trap us, so that as we eagerly collect them we may be caught unawares, and abandon our delight in your truth to look for it instead in human flattery. So the affection and honor we receive comes to be something we enjoy not for your sake but in your stead, and in this way that enemy who decided to set up his throne in the far recesses of the north wins cronies to his own likeness, not to live with him in loving concord but to be tormented in his company, slaves in darkness and cold of him who imitates you in his perverse, distorted fashion." Augustine, *The Confessions*, ed. John E Rotelle, O.S.A., trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B., vol. I/1, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (New York: New City Press, 1997), 276.
[76] [Let not the foot of pride come to me, and let not the hand of the sinner move me.]

sedem meam ad Aquilonem (Isai. XIV, 13): sic illi persuasit, Gustate, et eritis sicut dii (Gen. III, 5).[77]

Here, the referent is of course the devil, but the focus on Adam's fall rather than Lucifer's begins to make the use of the quotation more flexible, an expansion of meaning that develops a more robust interpretive sense of both the Psalm and also of the conscripted verse. In a similar way, the commentary to Psalm 74 also begins to stretch the uses of Isaiah to include those sharing the devil's faults rather than simply indexing the devil alone. For the passage, "*…Tu siccasti fluvios Etham*" [78] (Ps 74:15), the commentary tells us,

> *Quid est Etham? Verbum enim hebraeum est. Quid interpretatur Etham? Fortis, robustus. Quis est iste fortis et robustus, cujus fluvios siccat Deus? Quis, nisi ille ipse draco? Nemo enim intrat in domum fortis, ut vasa illius diripiat, nisi prius alligaverit fortem (Matth. XII, 29). Ipse est fortis, de virtute sua praesumens, et Deum deserens; ipse est fortis, qui ait: Ponam sedem meam ad aquilonem, et ero similis Altissimo (Isai. XIV, 13)… Videte hominem digessisse fortitudinem suam, et remansisse infirmum, inopem, longe stantem, nec oculos ad coelum levare audentem; sed percutientem pectus suum, et dicentem: Domine, propitius esto mihi peccatori (Luc. XVIII, 13). Jam infirmus est, jam infirmitatem confitetur; non est fortis: arida terra est; rigetur fontibus et torrentibus. Illi adhuc fortes sunt, qui de virtute sua praesumunt…Arescat illa doctrina; inundentur mentes Evangelio veritatis.[79]*

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[77] [But now he said, The children of men shall put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings: they shall be satiated with the fullness of Thy House. When one hath begun to be plentifully overflowed with that Fountain, let him take heed lest he grow proud. For the same was not wanting to Adam, the first man: but the foot of pride came against him, and the hand of the sinner removed him, that is, the proud hand of the devil. As he who seduced him, said of himself, "I will sit in the sides of the north;" so he persuaded him, by saying, "Taste, and ye shall be as gods."] Much discussion has been made over Langland's switch from "*sedem*" to "*pedem*" ("*Ponam sedem meam…*" vs. "*Ponam pedem meam…*") when inserting the Isaiah passage into his poem. It seems likely that this particular Psalm, with its reference to the "*pes superbiae*" plays a part in what has previously been labled as a mis-transcription. Either Langland was working from a memory of Augustine's commentary on this particular Psalm, which is doubtful as the complete quotation from Isaiah is not used by Augustine here, or Langland's strong association between this Psalm and the paraphrase in question caused him to conflate the two verses.

[78] [You have dried up the Ethan rivers.]

[79] [What is Etham? For the word is Hebrew. What is Etham interpreted? Strong, stout. Who is this strong and stout one, whose rivers God drieth up? Who but that very dragon? For "no one enters into the house of a strong man that he may spoil his vessels, unless first he shall have bound fast the strong man." This is that strong man on his own virtue relying, and forsaking God: this is that strong man, who said, "I will set my seat by the north, and I will be like the Most High."…Observe ye that a man hath put out of the way his

In this instance, the reason for the quotation is not to conjure Satan's specific narrative

into the commentary at all, but instead takes on a more flexible role by aligning anyone

associated with prideful thoughts, the so-called "strong man," with Lucifer's boasting. In

Augustine's interpretation, the sin of pride gives way to the virtue of humility and the

spiritual quest undertaken in doubtful uncertainty replaces the arrogant, unquestioning

conviction of the damned. The interpretations for both Psalms 35 and 74 focus on the

dangerous tendency of prideful sin to interfere with man's relationship to God, be it in

regards to grace granted or devotional understanding, and subsequently caution readers

against such pitfalls by reminding them of the condemning consequences they face. The

entirety of this commentary relies on an understood link between Psalm and quotation

that is based on notional similarity.   Once the common ground is established, new

meanings evolve outward in an ever-expanding sphere of interpretation.

Exemplary reading is valuable to both Augustine and to Langland inasmuch as it

is stubbornly discursive—it renders textual meaning as a product of active reading. By

joining the passage from Isaiah with the Psalm, Augustine produces an interpretation that

addresses the *obscuritas* of the verse, even if it doesn't erase it. Rather, the commentary

displays one possible way of entering into the Psalm, using Scriptural text, which

rhetorically addresses readers in a way that concordant reading cannot do. The flexibility

of this interpretive mode is what makes it so fruitful in biblical exegesis, and it is its

flexibility that Langland picks up in Anima's encounter with Will. The error Will makes

is that he tries to fix Anima through an understanding of his various names, which then

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own strength, and remained weak, needy, standing afar off, not daring even to raise his eyes to Heaven; but
smiting his breast, and saying, "O Lord, merciful be Thou to me a sinner." Now he is weak, now he
confesseth his weakness, he is not strong: dry land he is, be he watered with fountains and torrents. They
are as yet strong who rely on their own virtue…Let there dry up that doctrine; let minds be flooded with the
Gospel of truth.]

leads him to speculate on just how much he can learn, and how quickly. The alternative proposed by the Augustinian interjection is not to explain away the *obscuritas* embodied by Anima's allegorical presence but to use it as an impetus for a different kind of rhetorical, hermeneutic labor.

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The work of actively engaged exemplary reading requires that readers take an approach to the text that foregrounds their individual and various rhetorical and historical agendas, thereby creating meaning out of the interaction between themselves and whatever source is under investigation. As a scriptural, exegetical mode, the avenues readers are able to pursue are bound by the prescriptions of institutionally defined ecclesiastical faith but are not, as in a concordant reading, dependent upon any physical characteristic of the text itself. Of course, manuscript conditions (rubrication, marginalia, colored inks, illuminations, etc.) can point readers in particular directions, but the authorial/scribal control over textual meaning is, in a sense, quite limited. For readers of Langland's poem, a commitment to exemplary reading discards the idea of the text as offering a uniform meaning and, in doing so, displaces the text in favor of their own laborious *enarratio*. This kind of interpretation finds value in an ever-changing, never-ending search through the text that will prepare the soul to grow closer to God.[80]

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[80] In a similar move, Copeland describes Augustinian reading: "This program gives the reader the power of invention. It gives reading and interpretation—the traditional province of the grammarian—a new status, as textual power shifts from authorial intention to "affective stylistics," to what the reader can do with the text. In practice it transfers responsibility for making meaning from the writer to the reader." Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, 158.

Unfortunately, this is not Will's area of strength. When he meets Anima, his

longing comes from his notion of devotional understanding, which at this moment is

based on a rational command of spiritual and doctrinal concepts that come from

integrating pieces of information into a comprehensive, unified concordance – the

essence of *pictura*. As Anima warns,

> Coueitise to konne and to knowe science
> Adam and Eue putte out of Paradis:
> *Sciencie appetites hominem immortalitatis gloriam spoliauit.*
> And riȝt as hony is yuel to defie and engleymeþ þe mawe,
> Right so þat þoruȝ reson wolde þe roote knowe
> Of god and of hise grete myȝtes, hise graces it letteþ.
> For in þe likynge liþ a pride and licames coueitise
> Ayein cristes counseil and alle clerkes techynge,
> That is *Non plus sapere quam oportet sapere.*
>
> (XV. 62-69)

The condemnation of knowledge here is confined specifically to the word *scientia*,

knowledge that is likened by the thirteenth-century Fransciscian Alexander of Hales to

seeing, and that perfects knowing in regard to truth. He distinguishes this from *sapientia,*

derived from *sapor affectionis* and akin to tasting in that it moves the affective part of the

soul in regard to goodness.[81] Each mode of understanding is related to and can be

pursued along with the other, but, in keeping with Augustinian theology, *sapientia*

represents the higher form in that it touches the experience of the heart and not just the

emotionless reason of the mind, the experience of working through *obscuritas*, scriptural

or otherwise.[82] This is in perfect keeping with Langland's unfolding of the understanding

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[81] For a fuller description of Hale's distinction between *scientia* and *sapientia*, see Simpson, "From Reason to Affective Knowledge: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in *Piers Plowman*," 5.

[82] N.b. As previously noted, Augustine uses the word *scientia* when describing vain curiosity in Book X of the Confessions. Alternatively, *saptientia* is associated in Book III with wisdom and a longing for God: "*Viluit mihi repente omnis vana spes, et immortalitatem sapientiae concupiscebam aestu cordis incredibili; et surgere coeperam ut ad te redirem.*" Augustine, *Confessionum*, 3.4.7. [All my hollow hopes suddenly seemed worthless, and with unbelievable intensity my heart burned with longing for the immortality that wisdom seemed to promise. I began to rise up, in order to return to you.]

of devotional praxis in the poem; as James Simpson observes, "The idea of God develops in the poem from that of 'Truthe', known partially to the intellect, to that of 'Kynde', which is known through the experience of the will."[83] As such, *scientia*, as a scholastic practice of abstracted rationalization and definition that removes the need for affective piety, must give way to *sapientia*, or knowledge that comes through the revelation of grace and generates an emotional, 'kyndely' devotion. In the same way, *pictura* must become *obscuritas*. Will's wish for immediate understanding appears first when he tries to distinguish between Anima's collection of names, and quickly balloons into the need for a broader command of "alle þe sotile craftes," an impulse that quite comfortably sits within the realm of *scientia* with its focus on the dual processes of distinction and classification. But what he ought to be seeking is the fulfillment of sapiential knowledge that comes through (and indeed generates) revelatory experience.

The St. Thomas episode in Passus XIX, acting as a counterpart to Will's prideful and erroneous declaration of desire, provides the ideal example of understanding through *sapientia* out of *obscuritas*. Unlike Will, Thomas is hesitant and doubtful, effectively performing Augustine's definition of the penitent Christian man in his commentary on Psalm 74:

> *Videte hominem digessisse fortitudinem suam, et remansisse infirmum, inopem, longe stantem, nec oculos ad caelum leuare audentem; sed percutientem pectus suum, et dicentem: Domine, propitius esto mihi peccatori.*[84]

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[83] Simpson, "From Reason to Affective Knowledge: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in *Piers Plowman*," 7.

[84] [You see the man who has set aside strength, and is left weak, helpless, standing far off, not daring to lift his eyes to heaven, but beating his breast and saying, *O Lord, merciful be Thou to me a sinner*.] (my translation) Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos, 51-100*, ed. D. Eligius Dekkers, O.S.B. and Johannes Fraipont, vol. 39, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* (Turnholt: Brepols, 1956), 1016.

Langland takes a parable more commonly used as a diatribe against those with weak faith and transforms it into an exemplum of spiritual seeking. Thomas is praised for his doubt and, in the eyes of the risen Christ, this uncertainty becomes a testimony to the apostle's willingness to embrace the truth on a physical as well as intellectual level:

> Crist cam In, and al closed boþe dore and yates,
> To Peter and to hise Apostles and seide *pax vobis*;
> And took Thomas by þe hand and tauȝe hym to grope
> And feele wiþ hise fyngres his flesshliche herte.
> (XIX.168-171)

The powerful image of Christ taking Thomas by the hand and teaching him to "grope/ and feele wiþ hise fyngres" displays the depth of experiential understanding that is demanded by that ultimate example of *obscuritas*, the resurrection, and that is subsequently required by Langland of his readers. Far from a detached, theoretical understanding of the gospel, Thomas' fingered reading of Christ's wounded flesh is *lectio divina* embodied. Information here is physical, messy, and affective. And because of these qualities, Thomas is able to shift between the acquisition of knowledge to the applied understanding of belief:

> Thomas touched it and wiþ his tonge seide:
> "*Dominus meus & dues meus*.
> Thow art my lord, I bileue, god lor Iesu;
> Deidest and deeþ þoledest and deme shalt vs alle,
> And now art lyuynge and lokynge and laste shalt euere."
> (XIX.172-175)

Thomas' interpretation moves from physical experience to the ability to replicate that information for others in what is effectively a commentary on his new-born understanding, moving effectively from his seeking fingers to an eloquent tongue. As a result, Thomas is blessed over all the others gathered in the room:

> Crist carpede þanne and curteisliche seide,

> "Thomas, for þow trowest þis and treweliche bileuest it
> Blessed mote þow be, and be shalt for euere."
>
> (XIX.176-178)

No longer the negative example, Thomas becomes for Langland the ideal reader, able to fuse interpretation, belief, and application of knowledge in a way that Will never accomplishes in the poem.

Because Will remains locked in concordant, *pictura*-driven *scientia*, he may never develop the ability to experience spiritual truth in a way that he might pass it on to others. As Anima instructs in her sermon on ways of knowing, "'*Beatus est*', seiþ Seint Bernard, '*qui scripturas legit / et verba vertit in opera* fulliche to his power'"[85] (XV 60-61). Without experiential knowledge that expands scriptural meaning into *lectio divina*, Will can never progress beyond his frustration. For all his searching, Will cannot duplicate Thomas' probing investigation of the enigmatic text of his dream because he sees the *pictura* and not the *obscuritas*. His reading is off-key enough to keep him from separating his expectations from his experience. Langland's readers, however, are not bound by his character's failings and as their reading practices evolve throughout the poem the text demands that their interpretations supercede the narrative in order to achieve sapiential understanding within themselves.

Thomas' embodiment of experiential knowledge and enacted *sapientia* is an all too brief ideal that readers, detached from Will's dependence on labor-less knowledge, must seize upon as a model. He is one of the few characterized *exempla* Langland offers and, true to the form, he is more an archetype than an achievable end. His appearance is without a hint of interior life of the sort we see in the confessions of the sins in Passus V, and his actions are explicitly not his own: there is no skeptical request to touch the divine

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[85] [Blessed is he who reads the scriptures and turns its words into works.]

flesh, Christ merely seizes his hand and places it inside the wound. Similarly, the transmission of heavenly truth passes through Thomas as through a window. Christ is, at this moment, the sign and the meaning collapsed together; the resurrected flesh is the representation of the divine and the divine embodied at once. It is only within this context that the power of the resurrected truth can be experienced instantaneously. As Christ says, Thomas is sanctified because of this experience, but those who come after him and believe without the benefit of the physical presence are equally blessed. Bereft of the miracle of the risen body, Langland's readers must travel down avenues of faith that will always be at best a shadowy trace of Thomas' miraculous understanding.

For all readers but Thomas, interpretation will always be flawed, prone to error. Once readers are freed from Will's mistakes, they are at perfect liberty to make entirely new ones—mistakes that are an essential part of the struggle for sapiential understanding. The readers *qua* exegetes I have described are inherently a destabilizing force over the structure of the poem; they effectively recreate the text anew through experiential labor in a way that is perpetually bound to and continually moving away from the promise of a unified, objectified meaning. As the distance between readers and Will (and consequently readers and the poem) expands, so too does the realm of possible interpretive journeys readers may undertake. This does not mean that all of these paths will be profitable. Augustine's diffuse compilation of scriptural passages in his commentaries make claims for the cohesion of scripture and the strength of doctrine, and Langland's poem offers the same tantalizing promise: that all things can be conjoined and resolved and, moreover, that the effort involved in producing what Elizabeth Kirk sees as a unified understanding of Christian theology will enable the reader to enact the ideal

devout life in a fallen world.[86] This promise, however, is a false one. For as much as the

poem teases its audience with glimpses of *pictura*, it is the perpetual, unending struggle

with *obscuritas* that brings *sapientia*. Unlike Thomas, the already-understanding

exegete, Langland's audience is continually in the process of becoming readers, always

striving to create new meanings and new interpretive narratives. In this, they are as

inparfit as Will, for just as Will fails to get one solid answer for that will save his soul,

readers of the poem will never arrive at Thomas' transcendent end. Like Will, they make

mistakes, they struggle with the complex personifications, they puzzle over the Latin

passages. And like Will, they work at their understanding. Interpretive labor that both

comes out of and works to resolve the difficulties of the poem becomes, in the end, one

of the structuring principles of the text. It is on the second part of this process, the need

to resolve the *obscuritas* of the poem back into *pictura,* that Langland relies as a

motivating force for his historical audience—a force that we as modern readers can feel

as strongly as our medieval counterparts.

The poem uses its formal structure, that of the wandering allegorical pilgrimage,

to change the stakes for vernacular reading. Will's bumbling progress through the

dreamscape, fraught as it is with missteps and misreadings, is as necessary for readers as

Piers' virtuous certainty about the road to Truth, or Christ's victorious harrowing of hell.

Furthermore, readers (even as they are detached from Will) must learn to delight in a

reading that allows and encourages misinterpretation. In Langland's poem, the imperfect

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[86] Brian Stock, in his invaluable work on later appropriations of Augustinian reading models, reminds us
that this process is uniquely a medieval one: "The ancient concern with therapies of the spoken word is
reborn as a textual experience in which spiritual healing is a byproduct of a process of interpretation…the
question of identity becomes part of an attempt to communicate thought and emotions in order to elicit an
ethical judgment in the reader. The reader in turn is conceived as 'other,' and as a result alienation attains a
legitimate status that it does not have in Plotinus or Augustine." Stock, *After Augustine*, 69.

mistakes are frequently more productive than an ideal *exemplum*, and error and misunderstanding are, paradoxically, the only possible path to perfection the poem offers its reader. This focus on individual and individualized reading becomes the foundation for any larger social effect the poem looks to create. It is a bottom-up shift for both reading practices and social reformation. The poem is full of individual readers looking to change themselves through devotional understanding; some are successful and some aren't. But if the poem is to be affective on any level, the individual or the societal, the effort must come from the *inparfit*, transformational labors of its audience members.

Smoke and Mirrors

Amidst all the moments of grievous interpretive error exhibited by Langland's characters, there is in fact hope for the reader that he might come through the fog of the text having developed the reading skills necessary to manage the transition from theoretical to applied understanding so critical for devotional study. The best evidence for this are the moments when Langland employs the same tactics misread by his characters elsewhere in the poem, but without the supporting structure of pedagogic correction. We have similar textual moments, calling out for interpretation, but instead of watching one of the characters worm his way through it, the reader is on his own. For example, at the end of Passus XVII, Will inquires after the notion of the Trinity. Langland uses several metaphors to describe the holy mystery, one of which is that of a candle:

> For to a torche or a tapur þe Trinity is likned,
> As wex and a weke were twyned togideres,

> And þanne a fir flawmyng forþ out of boþe.
>
> (XVII.206-208)

A beautiful image of oneness and threeness, with multiple opportunities for *amplificatio* into ornate spiritual descriptions of the spark of the Holy Spirit illuminating the darkness, and the wax melting into puddles of divine mercy for mankind, it stands as a stunning clarification of a difficult doctrinal concept. Then, not fifty lines later, Langland introduces another image explaining the effects of the sins of covetousness and unkindness, describing them as

> For smoke and smolder smerteþ hise eighen
> Til he be blereighed or blynd and þe borre in þe þrote;
> Cogheþ and curseþ þ crist gyue hym sorwe
> That sholde brynge in better wode or blowe it til it brende.
>
> (XVII.329-332)

The clear correlation between these two passages, with their fires and their smoke, introduces a paradox for the reader that goes unsolved in the text. What are we to do with the use of coherent figurative language to describe two concepts so wildly different in their connotations that one iteration is the picture of divine magnificence and the other the wages of sin? The proximity of the images demands an interpretive solution to the problem and Langland gives the reader no help whatsoever – he is absolutely left to his own devices, such as they are.

The key here is to acknowledge the linguistic connection between the two passages, the use of the metaphor of physical fire and its effects, and find a way to reconcile them. As in the previously discussed scriptural passages of Luke, 24:17 and 2 Corinthians, 4:2, the concordant repetition of one word, *ambulantes*, engenders interpretive work by linking the two together. The same is true for the candle of the Trinity and the smoke of sin. Readers must recognize the connection and then work to

understand the nature of the juxtaposition. It could be that the draughts of unfriendliness

that cause the candle flame to flicker in the explanation of the Trinity also cause the

unclean, smoky burning in the discussion of sin or that improper application of the spirit

on the poor, unprepared wood of the soul causes confusion and sorrow instead of the

pure, radiant light of divine intelligence. Yet for whatever explication they create, the

reader must work within the figurative language provided and seek a meaning that fits

with established doctrine.

The same synchretic tactics are at work at other, more complicated moments of

the poem, the most obvious being Anima's extended account of the Tree of Charity in

Passus XVI. Famously complex, the image is like a mirrored prism, with each facet of its

description reflecting a myriad of different meanings simultaneously. Previous

scholarship has linked the use of this image to St. Bonaventura,[87] Duns Scotus,[88] Bernard

of Clairvaux,[89] pseudo-Hugh of St. Victor, the Venerable Bede, Gregory the Great,

Bonaventura, Martin of Tours, Bruno Astensis,[90] Joachim of Fiore,[91] Hugh of St. Cher,

Rabanus Maurus and Vincent of Beauvais.[92] Such a collection bespeaks how this image,

while certainly not unique to Langland, becomes in the poem a nexus for a host of textual

references. As a common trope, the Tree allows the poet to instigate expansive reading

by its sheer currency in Christian allegory and, what is more, the reader is expected to

manage the shifting fields of possible interpretations with little to no aid from the text.

Even the questions Will asks of Piers regarding the tree are, as Ben Smith points out,

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[87] Dorothy L. Owen, "Piers Plowman: A Comparison with Some Earlier and Contemporary French Allegories" (Hodder & Stoughton, 1912), 124.
[88] Mabel Day, "Duns Scotus and *Piers Plowman*," *Review of English Studies* III (1927), 333-34.
[89] E. Talbot Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1949), 188-91.
[90] Robertson and Huppé, *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition*, 191-96.
[91] Morton W. Bloomfield, "*Piers Plowman* and the Three Grades of Chastity," *Anglia* 76 (1958), 227-53.
[92] Ben H. Smith, *Traditional Imagery of Charity in Piers Plowman* (Hague: Mouton, 1966), 58-59.

fruitless.[93] The "provocative incoherency" of the text, to use Andrew Cole's term, presents a clear opportunity for building up meaning out of confusion on the part of the reader alone.[94] Encountering it toward the end of the poem, readers have already encountered many examples and counter-examples of good and bad reading respectively. The gathered experience of the text has accumulated to the point where readers are now expected to conduct their own glossing work on the passage in order to elaborate meaning out of the layers of symbolism. They have an assortment of tools at their disposal: reading for linguistic concordance, using outside references and patristic commentary to illuminate meaning, affective understanding, narrative and allegorical interpretation, the balance between the literal sense and the figural, the logic of parable, and of course the use of basic scriptural counterparts in the Tree of Jesse, the tree of the cross, and the trees in the Garden, amongst others. Having labored in all of these forms of interpretation throughout the poem and having watched the characters do the same, readers are now faced with the challenge of application of the theoretical knowledge they have garnered through the reading experience; they must transform observational understanding into performed understanding.

At its core, the audacity of Langland's project is his attempt to fashion a text that would transform readers previously untutored in complicated hermeneutic processes into interpreters who could craft meaning out of allegorical and abstract signs. By setting readers loose in this manner, Langland's textual difficulties embrace complicated, polyvalent meaning to an extent that was previously unknown in the vernacular. Not only is the poem constructed around esoteric theology and Latinate genres, it also

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[93] Ibid., 57.

[94] Andrew W. Cole, "Trifunctionality and the Tree of Charity: Literary and Social Practice in *Piers Plowman*," *English Literary History* 62, no. 1 (1995), 2.

recognizes its own alterity and subsequently seeks to initiate its audience into new, exegetical models of reading. Far from an open text that represents meaning without mediation, Langland's English is in fact more difficult for audiences than Latin texts by virtue of its utter originality; the poem is far more insistant as to what it demands of readers that other texts of the period, and the strength of its focus on readerly labor is a direct challenge to the prevaling attitude towards vernacular language and vernacular literacy in the late 1400's. And, because of this challenge, it cannot be doubted that the poem speaks strongly to an emerging literary environment of the later Middle Ages on devotional, political, and communal levels. Suddenly, we have large groups of readers looking to the vernacular as a tool for self-development and learning and we have authors creating texts that have the ostensible goal of revolutionizing the moral character of the nation through the formation of a reading ethic. Whether or not they could ever possibly succeed is, in the end, beside the point. The possibility for textual transformation of vernacular readers and their vernacular reading communities remains an expectation to be fulfilled—an expectation that in the decades to come will change the shape of literary production and consumption in throughout the country.

Chapter 4

"Of the parfite medicine": *Merita Perpetuata* in Gower's Vernacular Alchemy

> *Exepedit in minibus labor, ut de cotidianis*
> *Actibus ac vita viuere possit homo,*
> *Set qui doctrine casa fert mente labores,*
> *Preualet et merita perpetuata parat.*
> --Confessio Amantis*, Book 4 vii.*[1]

The *Confessio Amantis* is a poem that works. In the opening lines of the poem's prologue, Gower outlines an ambitious project to recuperate a world that has degenerated at an alarming rate from a time where each estate of man, the state, the church and the commons, was in balance and "…*progenuit veterem concors dileccio pacem*" (CA Pro.ii).[2] In fact, the change is so great that

> …for now upon this tyde
> Men se the world on every syde
> In sondry wyse so diversed,
> That it wel nyh stant al reversed,
> As for to speke of tyme ago.
> The cause of whi it changeth so
> It needeth nought to speficie,
> The thing so open is at ÿe.
> (Pro.27-33)

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[1] [Labor with the hands is productive, such that in daily life and actions a man might be able to live. But he who for the sake of wisdom bears labors in the mind prevails further and obtains perpetual merit.] All quotations and Latin translations from the *Confessio Amantis* are taken from Russell A. Peck, ed., *John Gower: The Confessio Amantis*, 3 vols., *Middle English Texts* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications for The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages, 2000, 2003, 2004)

[2] […harmonious love engendered the old-time peace.]

The passage describes the devastating fracturing of the peace exemplified by ages past, to the point that the world has been literally turned upside down. And yet, even though the deterioration is plain to see and the destruction is clearly legible by men in the world, the poem itself cannot articulate the reasons behind it for its reader. In a variation on the *humilitas* topos, the text refrains from expanding on its theme not from a lack of skill on the part of its author (though Gower does employ this tactic elsewhere in the Prologue), but because the subject is so obvious and "open is at ẏe." Instead of elaborating, Gower concludes that he will replicate conditions of the past, namely the delight men took in learning, in order to resuscitate the present. His reluctance to "speficie" here has the effect of placing the ball in the reader's court: by claiming that the absent causes of the world's current situation are clear, but by deliberately eclipsing them from the reader, Gower's silence creates an interpretive hole that the reader is obliged to fill.

This move into silence beautifully characterizes Gower's poetic project and vernacular style. When discussing the nature of Gower's language, critics both contemporary and historical find words like "plain," "smooth," "easy," and of course "open" somehow inevitable. W. P. Ker describes it as "never strained, and it is never anything but gentle,"[3] whereas C.S. Lewis calls Gower "…so gentle, so fanciful, and so at peace."[4] R. F. Yeager elegantly demonstrates how the matter of Gower's poetry is intrinsically anchored in stylistics that, to the modern ear, may sound stilted and artificial. The extreme regularity of the verse emerges out of the virtuosity of Gower's vernacular pen and Yeager argues for seeing the remarkable variation of voice and tone the poet

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[3] W. P. Ker, *Essays on Medieval Literature* (London, New York: Macmillan, 1905), 107.
[4] C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 212.

accomplishes within the strictly held form.[5] These two elements, the gentleness and regularity of the verse, have a unique effect on readers' relationship to the poem. Unlike Langland, who challenges his readers by engaging interpretation that responds to a poem that is striking in its immediate and inescapable sense of difficulty, Gower's plain style has the initial effect of playing into the characterization of the vernacular as simple and easy to understand.[6]

This paradox highlights the motivating forces behind the poem's poetic structure. The challenge Gower takes up is the task of producing a text that initiates an actual, tangible transformation from chaotic imbalance to harmonious peace, which will enable not only his local reading community but also the entire world to return to an age of golden, virtuous splendor. The role of the ideal reader, consequently, is to generate meaning out of the poem through a laborious attention to the text in order to heal the wounds of sinful impurity within himself. This interplay between the author's attempt to create a transformative poem and readers' acceptance of internalizing, interpretive work allows the power of the text to be released into the world and subsequently to spread outward in a kind of contagious virtue. If an individual engages the appropriate kind of readerly labor, then the meaning he uncovers from the text and the understanding he produces within himself will begin to transform him into a virtuous subject. And if enough readers reproduce this same process of laborious transformation, then the larger and more serious communal rifts may also begin to heal.

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[5] Robert F. Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion, Publications of the John Gower Society* (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1990). See especially the first chapter, "Stylistics".

[6] For Diane Watt, Gower's vernacular encourages readers to experiment with meaning making as they read and to be fearless of misreading, even as the stylistics of the poem are designed "to communicate rather than to withhold learning, and his decision to write a major work in the vernacular is crucial to the fulfillment of that aim." Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 21.

In my previous chapter, I described vernacular poetry in the hands of an author like Langland as an exercise in importing Latinate exegetical reading into English through characters' persistent misinterpretation of difficult language. But if we swap out Langland's linguistic difficulty for Gower's plain style, and exegetic complexity for moralizing "openness," what then provides the catalyst for transformation that the poem purports to seek? This chapter and the next focus on how Gower develops an alternative to Langland's *obscuritas* by relocating authority more directly in readership—through the erasure of his own *auctoritas*—to affect his readers in ways that exceed the powers of human language. The vernacular begins to speak to and change the relationship between language and meaning in innovative and integral ways. Through its apparent clarity, it presses English devotional writers to develop new methods of generating affective responses in their expanding reading publics—often by re-imagining the parameters of the author/text/reader relationship, of the nature of meaning making, that we traditionally have found to be so solidified in the later Middle Ages.

As a poetic tool, Gower's language touches a vast number of genres circulating in the period that are beyond the purview and aim of this chapter. My intent here is not to enumerate the debt Gower owes to the pastoral tradition, Ovidian commentary, or political systems, for there are many other studies that do such work often, and they do it well. Rather, I look more immediately to the examples of transformative language present in Gower's poem that model for readers idealized forms of meaning and, moreover, that directly address the ways productive reading is generated both by the text and from the text. For although characters in the poem are constantly engaging with different forms of language, the responses we see from Genius or Amans about the

instructive *exempla* and the ways characters in the *exempla* deal with interpretive problems are limited by the same issue that Gower raises in the Prologue: when poetry refuses to engage with what "so open is at ÿe," the characters are likewise bound by the same difficulty. Moreover, the problem of the world's fragmentation extends far beyond the scope of human intervention. Man's disordered state originates with the fall and introduction of sin into the human condition; therefore, any attempt to rectify the problems described in the Prologue must first address the redemption of man's body and soul, an impossible task without some sort of divine intercession. Unsurprisingly, Gower cannot claim to offer his readers a poem that does the work of an apocalyptic Christ; his language can never approximate God's ordering power and authority. Thus, the reading figures of the poem, the producers of texts, those who engage in interpretation of any sort—all exist within the sphere of Gower's human, and therefore limited, poetry, and the text asks that readers tackle this problem through the introduction of other, more inaccessible models of language use.

This chapter will examine one such model in order to demonstrate how Gower manipulates the vernacular, and its textual authority, to create a new kind of reading community. The most powerful (and overlooked) example Gower offers for successful discourse that exercises productive authority at the highest level, and therefore provides an example of language that accomplishes what Gower cannot, is not that of scripture or the classical *auctores*, but the surprising choice of alchemy in Book 4, introduced by Genius as an *exemplum* of human labor for countering the sin of Sloth. I begin with a discussion of how alchemical commonplaces manifest themselves in Gower's larger frame narrative and offer the theoretical underpinnings of the art as an ordering principle

for the poem's cosmic attitudes. Then I turn my attention to the linguistic and discursive peculiarities of alchemical texts in order to set out a succinct definition of how the language of alchemy functions, with its bewildering legions of analogies, esoteric terminologies, and impenetrable allegories—none of which appear in Gower's otherwise very learned treatment of the science. This rejection of alchemical discourse is central to unraveling how Gower attempts to transform vernacular language while simultaneously infusing it with the transmutative powers that resonate in every aspect of alchemy.

I return to my primary argument, the transformational effects of Gower's unique poetic voice, through a closer consideration of the role of labor, both physical and contemplative, that the *Confessio* demands of its readers. Much of alchemy is concerned over the delicate balance between practice and theory, between the work occurring before the furnaces and the endless hours of study the adepts claim to have accomplished, and a significant portion of their texts wrestle with the problem of productive labor in a way that reflects Gower's own concerns. In both cases, labor is born out of an interaction with authoritative sources, but where the alchemists place their faith in the unbroken lineage of truth from the first sages to their present day adepts, Gower's poem works to displace authority away from the text and places the entirety of its faith in readers' abilities to transform themselves.

Finally, and more speculatively, I propose seeing the *Confessio Amantis* as a turning point in the history of vernacular reading inasmuch as it takes the re-positioning of meaning making that we saw in Langland and moves it more solidly into the active, social sphere. Whereas in Langland we saw active reading and journeying lead to individual, inward contemplation, in Gower we see thoughtful contemplation lead to

action in the world and the production of new language, voiced by readers themselves.

Gower cannot heal the ills of the world through poetry alone, but I will show how he uses

it as a tool to instill power of transformation into the minds and hearts of his audience.

"That which is above..."

From the beginning of the poem, the status of vernacular language and the

enormity of the task Gower sets for himself present a pair of apparently impossible

problems. For extended passages in the Prologue, Gower lingers over his description of

the disintegration of the estates of man and of the natural world as if to stress for readers

the irreparable damage that mankind has brought upon himself and, subsequently, upon

nature. Open to sin, divided in soul as well as in body, mankind's fragmented state is

mirrored in the macrocosm of the physical world that surrounds him:

> Division aboven alle
> Is thing which makth the world to falle,
> And evere hath do sith it began.
> It may ferst proeve upon a man;
> The which, for his complexioun
> Is mad upon divisioun
> Of cold, of hot, of moist, of drye,
> He mot by verry kynde dye,
> For the contraire of his astat
> Stant evermore in such debat,
> Til that o part be overcome,
> There may no final pes be nome.
> Both otherwise, if a man were
> Mad al togedre of o matiere
> Withouten interrupcioun,
> There should no corrupcioun
> Engendre upon that unité.
>   (Pro.971-87)

Gower's immediate summons of the Neoplatonic macrocosm/microcosm as an organizing principle for his cosmic system results in two complimentary (if not entirely comforting) conclusions: first, as long as the human condition remains in a state of dissolution, then nature and society must then follow suit, and second, if the substance of man could be rehabilitated then the corresponding effect would be felt throughout all aspects of the world. This elemental connection is non-negotiable in Gower's poetic universe; it allows for transformation, but the transformation needed is one that exceeds the abilities of the poetic tools at the Gower's disposal, those bound by the limitations of normal human expression. He needs another kind of language.

Division, *complexioun*, *kynde*, *matiere*, *corrupcioun*, *unité*: all are at work in the Prologue's laying out of the problem at hand, but all are more closely associated with another, perhaps even more worrisome genre. The literature of medieval alchemy is renowned for being unwelcoming and intentionally impenetrable. (In the sixteenth century, Reginald Scot lambasted those who made use of alchemical language and practices as "ranke couseners, and consuming cankers to the common wealth, and therefore to be rejected and excommunicated from the fellowship of all honest men."[7]) In fact, outside of those who claim to practice alchemy and produce texts of their own, little good is said about it. Alchemy is satirized, condemned, and generally mistrusted. It is possibly heretical. Its literature fails to describe it clearly because the practice is a shadowy, immoral sham. The texts cannot be truthful, because they cannot be *understood*. Enigmatic language was of course a familiar enough medieval phenomenon, commonly discussed in terms of biblical exegesis or in courtly riddling culture, yet few instances of alchemical enigma have been afforded interested attention from non-

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[7] Montague Summers, ed., *Reginald Scot's the Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London: 1930), 216.

practitioners except as further proof of egregious, malicious dishonesty. Medieval

alchemists have explanations enough to answer for their commitment to mystical

allegories and coded symbols, or complaints enough about those who malign their art.

But the alchemists on a general scale fail to redeem their work in the eyes of the medieval

reading public, and the result is that the practice becomes synonymous with foolish,

unproductive labor and maleficent trickery. No wonder contemporary scholars have

traditionally discussed the appearance of alchemy in literature as satire rather than as a

discourse per se.[8]

Yet, it is in this very environment of literary mistrust and suspicion that Gower

writes Book 4 of the *Confessio Amantis*, with its surprising validation of alchemy, "the

parfite medicine" (CA, IV.2624), as the highest possible form of human labor. The 168-

line passage opens with Genius' explanation of the appropriate kinds of labor for

offsetting the sin of Sloth, focusing initially on an historical catalogue of technological

and scholarly achievements. Offered at first as a list of famous names of ages past, then

as a narrower discussion of specific achievements, the lesson's intrusion into the now-

familiar exemplary structure of the poem is a "dialogic amplification" that Russell Peck

reads as a moment of clarification for Genius' role in the poem:

> Perhaps we might think of Genius in a double role: as praeceptor, who
> questions Amans, but also as an expositor, like the character Expositor in a
> medieval pageant, who can stand outside the diegesis of the plot to remark
> on broader issues, but is still part of it.[9]

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[8] For the medieval period, this line of analysis most commonly focuses on Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman's Tale, but the view of alchemy as a principally satirical theme in literature extends well into the early modern period. Alternatively, if critics do no take a particular stance on the value of alchemical practices, they generally immerse themselves only in the intricacies of the technical chemistry involved.

[9] Peck, ed., *John Gower: The Confessio Amantis*, vol. 1, 32.

At this moment there is little of the questioning teacher present. In fact, Amans doesn't respond at all to the digression. He only re-enters the conversation when Genius suggests he pay closer attention to Ovid's writing of successful love: "Mi fader, if thei migte spede / Mi love, I wolde his bokes rede," he promises, ignoring completely the previous 450 lines (4.2675-2676). While it is true that Amans doesn't reject Genius' discussion of alchemy as a valid *exemplum* for labor, neither does he embrace it as a valuable point of clarification or instruction. Historical readers are, naturally, silent on the subject, but it requires no little stretch of the imagination to suspect that they too might be rendered puzzled and mute by the strange appearance of an alchemical celebration in Gower's poem.

The alchemy passage, as Peck suggests, is a place where we might better examine Genius' speaking voice as a quasi-exegetic character, but I will argue it is also an opportunity to see Gower's poetic voice at work in his reader. On the one hand, for Genius alchemy is an *exemplum* of virtuous labor that offers a weapon against the pervasive sin of Sloth. We shall see how it offers its practitioners a mechanism for transformation that extends past their chemical experiments and reaches into the very fabric of their own souls. On the other, for Gower it becomes a model of an activated reading practice, one that demands interpretive labor over the page that mirrors that taking place in the laboratory, and a counterpoint for the equally transformative work of confession.

In order to understand Genius' one-sided lecture on alchemy in Book 4, we need to see it first as an abstract system of transformation and unification, the end of which is the miraculous creation of a material so pure that its very perfection is contagious.

Multiplication, most commonly multiplication of gold or silver, is the physical result of a successful alchemical transformation, but, for the alchemists, the creation of precious metals is the sign through which a far more monumental accomplishment is read; the creation of the Philosopher's Stone is the material, visible proof of divine perfection brought to earth through human labor and skill.   Gower says of the stone,

> It makth multiplicacioun
> Of gold, and the fixacioun
> It causeth, and of his habit
> He doth the werk to be parfit
> (4.2574-7)

Furthermore, this perfection is accomplished through chemical contact that allows "vertu" to pass from the Stone to the material to be transmuted:

> This mineral, so as I finde,
> Transformeth al the ferste kynde
> And makth hem able to conceive
> Thrugh his vertu, and to receive
> Bothe in substance and in figure
> Of gold and selver the nature.
> (4.2559-64)

The metaphor of conception is a common one in alchemical literature, though slightly at odds with alchemical theory in that it suggests that the Stone injects an element (its perfection and virtue) into the base matter whereas, in fact, the alchemists understood the Stone to draw out contaminants from the lead or copper, leaving the purer gold or silver behind.[10] Arnold of Villanova describes the Holy Grail of the alchemists as such: "That there abides in nature a certain pure matter, which, being discovered and brought by art to

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[10] Gower also allows a trace of reference to the immaculate conception here, as the divinely ordered power of the Stone reproduces its own miraculous perfection in a baser material. Religious imagery in alchemical literature is incredibly varied, with the Stone becoming the spirit of God, becoming Christ, becoming Mary, and the procedure itself is frequently described in Christological or apocalyptic terms. The plasticity of metaphor and analogy used in alchemy is one of the many objections raised against the practice, both medieval and modern. See, for example, Brian Vickers, "On the Function of Analogy in the Occult," in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, ed. Ingrid Merkel (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1988), 315-32.

perfection, converts to itself proportionally all imperfect bodies that it touches."[11] Gower

chooses to emphasize the former, allowing the "vertu" of the Stone to materialize into a

transferable, transactional component, the quintessence of its perfect purity, in order to

draw readers' eyes along the path of transformation. Virtue is a reified quality that flows

from the Stone to the base matter in the alchemical exchange, and, more importantly for

Gower, it increases in quantity with every use.

This miraculous virtue, however, can only come from the unflagging and faithful

labor of the true alchemist, one who carries the mark of divine election and a purified

soul. As H. J. Sheppard defines it,

> Alchemy is the art of liberating parts of the Cosmos from temporal
> existence and achieving perfection which, for metals is gold, and for man,
> longevity, then immortality and, finally, redemption. Material perfection
> was sought through the action of a preparation (Philosopher's Stone for
> metals; Elixir of Life for humans), while spiritual ennoblement resulted
> from some form of inner revelation or other enlightenment (Gnosis, for
> example, in Hellenistic and western practices.)[12]

In Sheppard's definition, alchemy consists of two sides of the same coin, so to speak:

what is known as esoteric, or philosophical alchemy, and exoteric, or practical alchemy.[13]

The first involves the purification and perfection of the adept himself, achieved primarily

through his own labor over the art and through divine election—we will return to this

type of alchemy shortly. The second, and more immediately pertinent to Gower's cosmic

vision, is the alchemy that is most often associated with strange-looking vessels, foul

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[11] J. Read and F. H. Sawyer, *Prelude to Chemistry: An Outline of Alchemy, Its Literature and Relationships* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), 119.

[12] H.J. Sheppard, "European Alchemy in the Context of a Universal Definition," in *Die Alchemie in Der Europäischen Kultur- Und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, ed. Christoph Meinel, *Wolfenbütteler Forschungen, Band 32* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986), 17).

[13] For what I have found to be the very best summary of alchemical theories and practices, both succinct and thoughtful, see "A *Clew* and a *Labyrinth*": Backgrounds, Definitions, and Preliminaries, Chapter 1 of Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

odors, and smoking furnaces. It is also the side of alchemy that rules the material, the physical changes that are visible to and assessable by observers and practitioners alike and, more importantly, it is the side of alchemy that looks to unite divided elements into one, perfected substance. In essence, it promises for natural metals the solution to the problem of degradation, fragmentation and division—the very qualities that Gower longs to remedy in man's sinful nature through his ambitious vernacular poem.

On the practical end of the art, any alchemical purification technique works by simply revealing what was in the base substance to begin with. The two most central statements for alchemy are these, taken from the *Tabula Smaragdina* of Hermes Trismegistus: "What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing" and "and as all things were produced by mediation of one Being, so all things were produced from this one thing by adaptation."[14] These two sentences outline the principal concepts motivating the two most central keys of the alchemical system. The first, that a mirror exists between earth and heaven such that the mortal world is simply a representation of a celestial plane. Thus, man may touch God here on earth, using this contact to better himself. In the interlocking series of microcosms, the microcosm of the earth also has a microcosm in man, who has a microcosm in earthly elements such as metals. Christian Platonism and Neo-Platonism of this sort runs through Prudentius, Boethius, and Martianus Capella, providing the alchemists with a solid, philosophical base. Creation becomes an interlocking series of rings, each spiraling in towards the next. By peering down into the next level and manipulating the world beneath him, the alchemist fashions himself as the

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[14] H. S. Redgrove, *Alchemy: Ancient and Modern, Being a Brief Account of the Alchemistic Doctrines, and Their Relations, to Mysticism on the One Hand; Together with Some Particulars Regarding the Lives and Teachings of the Most Noted Alchemists* (London: W. Rider & Son, Ltd., 1922), 40-41.

Platonic Demiurge, creating order out of chaos and animation through spirit. He renders the world anew through his work and all his labor turns towards God.

If the first precept is what validates alchemy, the second makes it possible. The idea that all matter sprung from a single source was absolutely pivotal for the theory behind the transformation of metals to exist. If everything on earth has the same base material, then it is possible to return a subject to that base and alter it into something new by a series of chemical procedures. Subsequently, it becomes feasible to produce the fabled change from lead into gold. Though all matter has the same *prima materia*, a tree does not appear to be formed from the same substance as a rock or a fish. Therefore, diverse properties of matter were thought to exert themselves in the formation of objects. Philosophers regarded the world around them and deduced the four familiar properties that existed in nature: dryness, moistness, warmth, and coldness—again, the same four characteristics that Gower describes as comprising the divided material body of post-lapsarian man. These, in turn, would amalgamate in pairs to produce the four familiar elements known to Empedocles, Plato, Aristotle, and others. A mixture of dryness and warmth would produce fire, moistness and warmth would form air, moistness and coldness would give water, and dryness and coldness, earth.

Rather than imposing foreign states upon crude materials, alchemy steps between Nature and earthly matter to escalate her teleological project. Each metal exists on a continuum from the lowliest form of iron, rising up through the ranks to reach a golden existence, the completion of its maturation. Given enough time, Nature supposedly cultivated all forms of metal as they rest deep in the earth, gradually purifying them over

the ages. The most common analogy for this process is that of human reproduction and

maturation:

> For the conduct of this operation, you must have pairing, production of
> offspring, pregnancy, birth, and rearing. For union is followed by
> conception, which initiates pregnancy, whereupon birth follows. Now the
> performance of this composition is likened to the generation of man,
> whom the great Creator most high made not after the manner in which a
> house is constructed nor as anything else which is built by the hand of
> man. For a house is built by setting one object upon another, but a man is
> not made of objects. His substance, rather, before he is formed, improves
> through successive changes until the living being is made, which then
> continues from day to day and from month to month, so that the creator
> most high at last finishes this his great handiwork at the appointed time of
> maturity. So also did the creator first make the seed of the four elements,
> and set for them a certain time in which they should be formed, after
> which they might be finished as he would suffer and ordain it.[15]

Through alchemy, it is possible to accelerate the natural metallic transformation through

a series of techniques intended to unbind and remove the lower, undesirable elements

while elevating and purifying those the alchemist wishes to reproduce. Gold (and silver to

a certain extent) were thought the highest of metals in response to their resilience to

outside influence—they cannot be consumed by flames, nor corroded by acid, and

therefore became the symbol of the perfection of earthly metals. Following the same

pattern nature intends, chemical procedures replace eons of gestation and manifest the

result with more speed and precision in the laboratory than in an organic environment. In

this way, the alchemist may exalt in his triumph, rising above Nature herself and

suspending the laws of time with his alembic and furnace. The art has surpassed nature,

delivering up a golden world through discovery and craft that otherwise would remain

insurmountably out of reach.

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[15] Morienus, *A Testament of Alchemy; being the Revelations of Morienus, Ancient Adept and Hermit of Jerusalem, to Khalid Ibn Yazid Ibn Mu'awiyya, King of the Arabs, of the Divine Secrets of the Magisterium and Accomplishment of the Alchemical Art*, ed. Lee Stavenhagen, trans. Lee Stavenhagen (Hanover, New Hampshire: The Brandeis University Press, 1974), 29-30.

Gower, in Book 4, follows this formula to the letter. When Genius offers the truth of alchemy to Amans, he says,

> For as the philosophre tolde
> Of gold and selver, thei ben holde
> Tuo principle extremites,
> To which alle othre be degres
> Of the metalls ben acordant,
> And so thurgh kinde resemblant,
> That what man couthe aweie take
> The rust, of which thei waxen blake,
> And the savour and the hardnesse,
> Thei scholden take the likenesse
> Of gold or selver parfitly.
>   (4.2487-97)

While explaining the alchemical theory of the maturation of metals to the dutiful Amans, Genius lectures that the alchemist's labor is ultimately more powerful than nature's, and that the perfection of metals comes through the removal of lesser elements in a hierarchical scale that moves from lead to gold or silver. Even the stress on resemblance and likeness, a concern throughout the *Confessio*, folds neatly into the alchemical theories that Gower clearly relies on. "Kinde resemblant," the similar nature of metals, allows transformation to occur, but the emphasis on "likenesse" later on opens the passage to one of the critical elements of alchemy's philosophical underpinnings: in the same way that the sacrament of confession brings the kernel of divinity to the surface in the person confessing, even for just a brief time, so too does the praxis of alchemy look to take the quintessence present in every form of matter and draw it out, making it visible to the eye. As such, physical qualities like color, luminosity, weight and texture become indicators of a successful transformation and, therefore, of purification and perfection.

"Likeness" to gold, in alchemy, is proof positive that the matter is (or has become) gold.[16]

Following this logic, Gower's choice of the word "savour" here is particularly apt. In

reference to the physical sensation of taste or smell, it speaks to the material likeness

needed to confirm that the transformation was successful, but taken to mean "pleasure" or

"merit," it collapses the space between the material and the metaphysical by reinforcing

the alchemical link between being and seeming.[17]

The "savour" of the Stone works on other, baser metals because of its ability to

act as a reified symbol of perfection. It becomes for Gower emblematic of productive

and valuable labor in its ability to both embody virtue and, more importantly, to multiply

it through the alchemist's diligence and effort. In this, like his description of the

alchemical process, he draws from the foundational principals of the alchemical tradition.

In *A Testament of Alchemy*, the sage Morienus writes,

> No one will be able to perform or accomplish this thing which you have so
> long sought or attain it by means of any knowledge unless it be through
> affection and gentle humility, a perfect and true love. For this is
> something God gives into the sure keeping of his elected servants...[18]

In the same vein, the monumental and well-circulated *Summa Perfectionis* warns against

the false and erroneous labor of the unelect:

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[16] The equation of the inside of a thing with the outside of a thing is a continual concern in Gnostic and
hermetic teachings of the late-classical and medieval worlds. In the Gospel of Thomas, the disciples ask
Jesus if they will enter the kingdom of heaven; he replies, "When you make the two one, and when you
make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you
make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and
when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot,
and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter the kingdom." (Lambdin translation from the
Coptic) Alchemical language carries many of these same ideas, and the two traditions become very closely
linked, especially in the later Middle Ages. For an introduction to the ties between gnosis and alchemy,
and a discussion of the use of the Gospel of Thomas, see G. Quispel, "Gnosis and Alchemy: The Tabula
Smaragdina," in *From Poimandres to Jacob Bhöme: Gnosis, Hermeticism, and the Christian Tradition*, ed.
Roelof van den Broek and Cis van Heertum (Amsterdam: Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, 2000).
[17] See entries 5, 6, and 7 in the Middle English Dictionary
[18] Morienus, *A Testement of Alchemy*, 11. This text was originally translated from the Arabic by Robert of
Chester in the twelfth century and is one of the common sources for early alchemical theory and practice.

> ...our art is reserved by the divine power, and He who is most glorious,
> sublime, and filled with all justice and goodness extends it to and
> withdraws it from whomever He wills. For He might perhaps deny you
> the art as a punishment...and push you into the bypath of error, and then
> from error into unhappiness and perpetual misery.[19]

The idealized alchemical connection between labor and a perpetually productive reward could not be clearer—the just adept, chosen by God for his wisdom and purity, will complete the work and be rewarded with material proof that can be multiplied again and again. His inner virtue becomes embodied in the Stone, which, in turn, reproduces that same virtue in everything it touches.

Although there is no narrative *exemplum* accompanying the alchemical lecture in Book 4, we can see this same logic of contagious goodness played out in the "Tale of Adrian and Bardus" in Book 5 of the *Confessio*. In the tale, Bardus, a poor woodsman, rescues Adrian, a wealthy nobleman, from a pit in response to an offer of half of Adrian's worldly goods, but not before he does the same for an ape and a serpent. Predictably, once saved, Adrian refuses to deliver payment, but the animals, unbidden, reward Bardus for his aid. The ape provides a stack of wood for Bardus to sell in the marketplace, while the serpent offers a "ston mor bright than a cristall" (5.5066). This stone goes the same way as the stack of wood, for Bardus sells it to a jeweler for gold coins, yet once he returns home he finds the gold and the stone together in his purse. Over the following

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[19] William R. Newman, *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber: a Critical Edition, Translation and Study* (Leiden; New York: E. J. Brill, 1991), 640. The author of the *Summa*, thought by thirteenth-century scholars to be a mythic adept named Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, or simply Geber, an Arabic philosopher of the eighth century, is now most commonly referred to as Pseudo-Geber in modern critical works, as the medieval provenance of the manuscript is certainly a forgery. In the medieval period, however, Geber was regarded as one of the foremost alchemical authorities, so much so that Gower includes his name among the most famous alchemists of history. There is a great deal of current debate over the true identity of the author. William R. Newman presents a well-reasoned and convincing case for the true authorship going to Paul of Taranto, a lecturer at the Franciscan monastery of Assisi. For his complete argument, see William R. Newman, "The Genesis of the *Summa Perfectionis*," *Archives internationales d'histoire des sciences* 35 (1985), 240-302; William R. Newman, "New Light on the Identity of *Geber*," *Sudhoff Archiv* 69 (1985), 76-90; Newman, *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber: a Critical Edition, Translation and Study*, 55-108.

days, the same scenario plays out again and again: he sells the stone, only to find it returned to him as before. Eventually, the tale of the miraculous stone reaches the ears of the Emperor, Justinian, who calls Bardus to court, hears the story, and reconciles the debt between Adrian and Bardus by ordering half of Adrian's worldly goods to go to the formerly poverty-stricken woodman. The larger import of the tale is both a story about the dangers of Adrian's unkindness (in its standing as a sub-species of Avarice) but also about the inevitable and natural separation of the classes—a rift that only the exercise of just law through royal administration can bridge.[20] The appearance of a miraculous stone that continually produces gold as a reward for virtuous action, however, must certainly resonate with the extended description of the alchemical Stone in the previous book. Bardus' magical stone mimics the physical capabilities of the Philosopher's Stone inasmuch as it provides the owner with material wealth, but it also becomes a marker of virtue and an instrument for social change.

The stone is a signifier of the perceived value of his labor, and its circulation not only profits Bardus but effects narrative progress as well. Bardus' labor is, as many have commented upon, not entirely without self-interest—he is motivated first and foremost by the promise of riches and the lure of a leg up on the social ladder—but in the tale's system of labor and reward it is only his action, not his mindset, that is accounted for. Justinian resolves the broken verbal contract and reinstitutes social order only because

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[20] For more on this tale and its place as a social and moral *exemplum*, see Patrick J. Gallacher, *Love, the Word, and Mercury: A Reading of John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975), 154-55; Andrew Galloway, "The Making of a Social Ethic in Late-Medieval England: From Gratitudo to "Kyndenesse"," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, no. 3 (1994), 378; Peter Nicholson, *Love and Ethics in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 88-89; Russell A. Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Carbondale: Feffer & Simons, Inc, 1978), 116-19; Peck, ed., *John Gower: The Confessio Amantis*, 10-14. For a description of the serpent's stone as a magical object, see P. J Heather, "Precious Stones in the Middle-English Verse of the Fourteenth Century, II (Con't.)," *Folklore* 42, no. 4 (1931), 371.

rumors of the stone's powers reach his royal ears, not because Bardus' good deed

circulates on its own. Even if, as Russell Peck suggests, the end of the tale serves to

"remind man of the virtue of his rationality which, when rightly assessed and justly

administered, is more potent that even the "vertu" of the serpent's stone," the right rule of

law, in all its rationality, is visible only because of the material and verbal circulation of

the symbol of Bardus' worthy work.[21] Without the stone, the *exemplum* would be a

negative one that demonstrates the hollowness of verbal contracts and, by association,

human speech and reason; with the stone, however, Gower can bring the tale to a

successful and satisfying conclusion. Virtuous labor (if not virtue itself) is reified in the

tale in order to become a socially and individually effective instrument, multiplied again

and again in Bardus' purse and magnified into an antidote to legislative and civic

disorder.[22]

Like the power of the serpent's stone, the multiplying and purifying properties of

the Philosopher's Stone circulate in the poem (and in the world) as a marker for the value

of the labor of the alchemists, hard at work in their laboratories and their furnaces. In this

economy of surplus, however, the familiar relationship between labor and product

dissolves as the representation of labor, the Stone, overtakes the work required to produce

it and transforms into a producer in its own right. Once set in motion, the productive

power of the Stone enacts the alchemist's initial virtuous labor again and again; it is both

a reward for labor and a continual reproduction of the labor itself. Unlike gold, which, as

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[21] Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, 119.

[22] There is, of course, another obvious *exemplum* with alchemical overtones that deals with a material object as a receptacle for an abstract idea. In the 'Tale of Midas', gold is a symbol of power inasmuch as it can be deployed for social, political, or military ends. The problem with Midas' "gift" (apart from its clear association with avarice) is that it eclipses the need for labor rather than displaying the rewards of it. As such, it is a foolish wish and one that the king is all too glad to be rid of. Gold, in this tale, is not a reward but a curse

Peggy Knapp rightly reminds us is an "unstable metaphor, symbolizing both perfection

and avarice in medieval Christian discourse," the Stone is always a repository for (and a

product of) virtue and a source of perfection.[23]

Once we leave Genius' exposition, however, the principles that structure alchemy

in Book 4 becomes problematic, if not entirely impossible, elsewhere in the poem. The

famous apocalyptic vision of Nebuchadnezzar and the statue of precious metals

epitomizes the allegorical blend of the logic of seeming and the Neoplatonic

macro/microcosm that we find in alchemical treatises, but the interpretation offered by

Daniel erases all possibility of human intervention. In the episode, the King relates to

Daniel a prophetic vision in which he saw a "wonder strange ymage":

> His hed with al the necke also
> Thei were of fin gold bothe two;
> His brest, his schuldres, and his armes
> Were al of selver, bot the tharmes,
> The wombe and al doun to the kne,
> Of bras thei were upon to se;
> The legges were al mad of stiel,
> So were his feet also somdeil,
> And somdiel part to him was take
> Of erthe which men pottes make;
> The fieble meynd was with the stronge,
> So mygte it wel noght stonde long.
>
> (Pro.605-616)

The image can be easily read both as a political commentary and as a display of the

division that comes as man becomes more and more distant from the mind of God.[24] A

powerful image for Gower, the statue also appears in the final book of the *Vox Clamantis*:

[23] Peggy A. Knapp, "The Work of Alchemy," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 3 (2000), 576. Knapp gives an engaged reading of the work of alchemy and the logic of reward and exchange in a Marxist context, focusing on Chaucer's 'Canon's Yeoman's Tale' and Jonson's *The Alchemist*. For a very different reading of the idea of 'multiplication' in Chaucer's tale, one principally concerned with Chaucer's alchemical word-play, see Joseph E. Grennen, "The Canon's Yeoman and the Cosmic Furnace: Language and Meaning in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*," *Criticism* 4, no. 3 (1962), 225-40.

> *Nunc caput a statua Nabugod prescinditur auri,*
> *Fictilis et ferri stant duo iamque pedes:*
> *Nobilis a mundo nunc desinit aurea proles,*
> *Pauperies ferri nascitur atque sibi.*[25]

Gower's Latin version of the story gives readers a static, inert image that has already disappeared into the past tense. It is itself a ruin. Deliberately decapitated by an unseen hand, the statue has become a monument both to what was and what is—an unchanging and desperate state that has already been dealt its final blow. The iron men that the feet represent have lost their connection to the past and, as a result, to their own potential for improvement. The English counterpoint, by contrast, appears as a complete picture of the disintegration from a forgotten golden age to the weak alloy of the present. The statue testifies not just to the current world but, more importantly, it represents the processes of political and moral deterioration. By offering more than just clay feet cut off at the knees, the English version allows readers' eyes to retrace their path back up the page and move themselves from clay, to steel, to brass, to silver, and finally, to gold.

Yet even though Gower may allow for the echo of the golden past to enter into his description of the dream, at the opening of Book I, he makes no secret that he will not be able to take the reader there on the merits of his words alone:

> I may noght strecche up to the hevene
> Min hand, ne setten al in even
> This world, which ever is in balance:
> It stant noght in my sufficance
> So grete thinges to compasse
>   (1.1-5)

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[24] For further readings of this well-known passage, see Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*, 118-21; Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, 20-22; Watt, *Amoral Gower*, 107-14.

[25] [The golden head of Nebuchadnezzar's statue has now been cut off, yet the two feet of iron and clay still stand. The noble, golden race of men has departed from the world and a poor one of iron has sprung from it.]

We may, as Derek Pearsall does, read this confession as Gower's transition from the impossible matter of the world's division to the more approachable subject of love as an abstract healing force, allowing the first part of the poem to "[provide] the basic moral frame in which the picture of "love" is to be held steady."[26] While this is certainly true, when we consider the characterization of alchemy in Book 4 as a theoretically viable solution to the Prologue's problem, it becomes difficult to cast off Nebuchadnezzar's prophetic dream as a framing device that is then discarded in favor of a more palatable subject. Rather, the dream lingers in the background and gives urgency and agency to Genius's otherwise untethered introduction of alchemy as human labor. Admittedly, both examples offer readers little hope: in the dream, an apocalypse-shaped rock hurls down from a nearby mountainside and crushes Nebuchadnezzar's statue into a powdery nothingness, while alchemy, attractive as it is, has become a lost art that is no longer capable of redeeming anything or anyone. As textual artifacts, however, both the dream (as prophetic allegory) and alchemy (as hermetic theory) are able to exist within Gower's limited language while simultaneously gesturing to a more remote, and even unattainable, discursive sphere.

The distance between the promises of alchemy and the problems of the Prologue paradoxically frees alchemy to appear as an idealized healing agent that, while being immediately inapplicable, continues to act in the poem—it offers readers a model of material and spiritual purification that elevates matter and man together. Gower seizes upon the Stone's promise of perpetually productive labor as the ideal form of "busyness" to combat the sin of Sloth, but also as a larger model for virtuous work of all kinds. More specifically, he allows the alchemical pattern of production to shape a picture of readerly

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[26] Derek Pearsall, "Gower's Narrative Art," *PMLA* 81, no. 7 (1966), 476.

labor, both in Genius' lecture in Book 4 and in his presentation of reading elsewhere in the poem. Through his careful framing of Genius' alchemical lecture, Gower transmutes the physical labor of the alchemists into textual labor that will change readers as fundamentally as distillation, calcination or fixation changes metal. Because the decay of alchemy as a functioning science prevents the Philosopher's Stone from functioning as a physical object, its effect in Gower's poem must work not on material elements but on the internal life of the readers who encounter it. In alchemical theory, the physical Philosopher's Stone is an abstracted, yet material, sign of perfection; it must be both signifier and signified at once in order to initiate transmutation of base matter.[27] The ability to be and to represent simultaneously is the source of the Stone's transformative power and is the miracle of the alchemist's art. The Stone is not only perfect, it is perfection, not only pure, but purity. Gower reminds us, however, that this miraculous collapse of the sign is no longer possible given the loss of alchemical knowledge and the disintegration of the world's order and, as such, the Stone can exist only as a textual trace. The poem therefore re-locates the transformative powers of the physical stone to its textual representation in Book 4 and, in doing so, allows alchemy to become a textualized practice that works on readers in the same way that the Stone works on copper and lead.

Gower does not, however, appropriate this quality of alchemical reading, its ability to act on its readers, without a fundamental intervention into how language is deployed by the alchemists in their manuscripts. For alchemy to have any lasting effect

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[27] For Brian Vickers, this collapse of the sign is a tendency for all "occult" practices and literatures. He writes, 'One constant feature of the occult is its tendency to turn concepts into essences, abstract into concrete, to reify and hypostatize metaphors and ideas. In Saussurian terms, the line separating signified and signifier is removed, and the two concepts fuse as one.' Vickers, "On the Function of Analogy in the Occult," 283.

in Gower's poem, we must turn away from exoteric alchemy in favor of its philosophical

counterpart, esoteric alchemy and its creation of what Stanton J. Linden calls "a way of

life for its most devout disciples: a vast religious and philosophical system aimed at the

purification and regeneration of their lives."[28] Such regeneration is still achieved through

the steadfast and patient work taking place in the laboratory. But the "practical" work

begins to fade in comparison with the "theoretical" work of understanding the alchemical

principals at work in transformation; purification of the soul becomes more associated

with contemplative textual study and esoteric (inward) searching for divine truths hidden

in the natural world. The transformative labor over the furnaces and crucibles is

transposed onto the pages of alchemical manuscripts, the understanding of which will not

only allow the practitioner to complete the "Great Work", but will also signify the

perfection of his internal self. It is the macro/microcosm relationship enacted as

perfection of metals becomes absorbed in the soul. Gower's translation of this mystical

and philosophical praxis into a vernacular, poetic alchemy dramatically shifts the

relationship between the word, theory, and practice of transformation.

Chemical Theory and Textual Practice

Alchemical language is many things, but it is rarely open, plain, or easy—those

familiar qualities that we associate with Gower's vernacular style. Petrus Bonus, an

influential fourteenth century alchemist and physician, describes alchemical texts in his

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[28] Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks*, 8.

Margarita preciosa novella as "a pathless thicket of contradictions and obscure metaphors."[29] Furthermore, he warns,

> The tropical expressions and equivocations, the allegories, and metaphors, employed by our Sages, also create a most serious obstacle in the path of the student. Hence investigation, and the practical operations which should be based upon it, are embarrassed at every step with doubt and perplexity of the most tantalizing kind. We must not wonder, therefore, that the students and professors of Alchemy are peculiarly liable to error, since it is often all but impossible to do more than guess at the meaning of the Sages. At times it would almost look as if this Art could be acquired only by the living voice of the Master, or by direct Divine inspiration.[30]

While obviously speaking from a privileged position as an established authority, Petrus nevertheless voices the one of the most prevalent criticisms leveled against the alchemists—the opacity of their texts and deliberate obfuscation of their secrets. And yet, nearly every medieval alchemist, Petrus included, continues to write with "studied obscurity of expression" even as they deplore its effects—namely, that readers are doomed to "flounder along through these great works, with only here and there a glimmering of light, which vanishes as soon as one approaches it more closely."[31]

Nothing could be further from Gower's language in the *Confessio*. The question then becomes, if Gower sees alchemical theory as a beneficial heuristic for transformation, and if (as we shall see) alchemical language is an integral part of both exoteric and esoteric alchemy, what then happens when the difficulty of alchemical texts disappears into Gower's plain style? English vernacular texts dedicated to alchemy are rare before the mid-fifteenth century, but not unheard of, and most appear to attempt to

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[29] Pietro Antonio Boni, *The New Pearl of Great Price; a Treatise Concerning the Treasure and Most Precious Stone of the Philosophers. Or the Method and Procedure of This Divine Art; with Observations Drawn from the Works of Arnoldus, Raymondus, Rhasis, Albertus, and Michael Scotus*, ed. Giano Lacinio, trans. Arthur Edward Waite (London: V. Stuart, 1963), 111.
[30] Ibid., 113.
[31] Ibid., 114.

hew as closely to their Latin counterparts as possible, imitating the analogies, terminology, and cryptic style that Petrus describes.[32] Gower's choice to laud alchemical theory over alchemical textuality indicates an alternative mode of transformation that, even as it builds off of the frame of the hermetic science, seeks to use language in a new, perhaps more effective, way.

To begin, we must understand what alchemical discourse is, and how it functions as a compliment to the material work before the furnaces. Alchemy's famous difficulty comes from two primary sources. The first immediately identifiable element, the vocabulary of the texts transforms even the most basic alchemical recipes into forbidding enigmas. By casting their formulae in specialized terminology, alchemists in the medieval and early modern periods create what appears to be a closed hermeneutic loop: only those who already know the code can make sense of what they read. And practitioners of the art seem, in fact, to revel at their own ability to mask their writings in an ever-more complicated and impenetrable vocabulary, so intoxicated by multiplicity that they endow a single element or material with sometimes literally hundreds of different appellations. This practice of poly-nomination opens alchemical texts to multiple interpretations and allows the author to embed his message amidst a flurry of outwardly nonsensical terminology. The result is a text that, to the uninitiated, reads like a babble of confused jargon.

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[32] This is not the case for other European vernaculars. Ramon Llull wrote in his own vernacular, as did other minor alchemists and major literary figures, including Dante, Jean de Meun, and others. For more on vernacular alchemy, particularly in the fifteenth century, see Peter Grund, ""Ffor to Make Azure as Albert Biddes": Medieval English Alchemical Writings in the Pseudo-Albertan Tradition," *Ambix* 53, no. 1 (2006), 21-42; Michaela Pereira, "Alchemy and the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Late Middle Ages," *Speculum* 74, no. 2 (1999). 336-356

> Take the white vapor, or virgin's milk, and the green lion, or fire, and red
> ocher, or fire, and the impurity of the dead, or earth; dissolve them and
> cause them to ascend and unite, using for each part of the green lion three
> parts of the impurity.[33]

For the skeptic, this cryptic double-talk and the mysterious allusions become an

indication of implausibility, proof that if the exalted procedure for transformation could

not be rendered in demonstrable and reproducible terms, the alchemical system was

nothing more than an elaborate, perhaps heretical, sham. For the adept, however, the

terminology and the reading it initiates is as integral an element to the practice of

philosophical alchemy as was the physical equipment found in the laboratory.[34]

Language, like copper or iron, is a material that can be transmuted into another, more

perfect form given enough time and labor.[35]

     This transmutation of enigmatic language that must precede any material

transmutation is the second aspect of alchemy's textual difficulty. More than a linguistic

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[33] Morienus, *A Testement of Alchemy*, 42-43.

[34] Furthermore, the quality of poly-nomination in some senses preserves the individual, authorial voice that most alchemists found necessary for the art. Many times authors will claim that one can only understand the process through an apprenticeship to a Master, and only when this method was unavailable should a student turn to books. However, the practice of assigning new names for the chemicals and processes in a small way reproduces the experiential authority that comes from one who has already accomplished the transformation: "each individual Sage has invented one or more names of his own, of which the appropriateness is patent only to those who are acquainted with the facts to which they refer. They are generally derived from some process or change of colour which our substance undergoes in the course of our Magistery." Boni, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, 150.

[35] The use of analogy and obscure vocabularies has lead modern critics to describe alchemical language as deliberately collapsing the sign into uselessness. Stanton Linden writes, "Too often alchemical writers attempt to prove a proposition or establish its authenticity through the use of analogy. Equally problematical, they fail to regard language as a symbolic construct according to which words are linguistic symbols for things; rather, in occult writing, word and thing are identified to the extent that manipulation of language comes to be regarded as the manipulation of reality. A clear distinction between signifier and signified has been obscured." Stanton J. Linden, ed., *The Mirror of Alchemy: Composed by the Thrice-Famous and Learned Fryer, Roger Bachon* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), xix. Brian Vickers has a similar complaint: "In the experimental tradition, analogies are used to comprehend parts of reality; in the occult tradition, reality can only be understood by being turned into analogy. In the experimental tradition, metaphors are used once only, as it were, used for specific instances. In the occult tradition, analogy becomes structured as a matrix to which is ascribed universal generalizing power: All phenomena can be comprehended in the terms of the matrix. Experimentalists use analogies only so long as they function, discarding them without compunction if they do not; occultists cling, have clung, to their analogies, which never change." Vickers, "On the Function of Analogy in the Occult," 277.

ploy to guard against the uninitiated and those looking for a quick profit, the symbolically

coded language creates a discourse that participates in the material process the alchemists

strive to perfect in their laboratories. The tangled allegories that populate the manuscripts

compound the obscurity of alchemical terminology by abandoning all efforts to give

readers a series of steps to follow to produce gold:

> ...I fell asleep another little while, and while I mounted the fourth step I
> saw, coming from the East, one who had in his hand a sword. And I saw
> another behind him, bearing a round white shining object beautiful to
> behold, of which the name was the meridian of the Sun, and as I drew near
> to the place of punishments, he that bore the sword told me 'Cut off his
> head and sacrifice his meat and his muscles by parts, to the end that his
> flesh may first be boiled according to method and that he may then
> undergo the punishment.' And so, awaking again, I said 'Well do I
> understand that these things concern the liquids of the art of the metals.'
> And again he that bore the sword said 'You have fulfilled the seven steps
> beneath.' And the other said at the same time as the casting out of the lead
> by all liquids, 'The work is completed.'[36]

Full of mysterious kings, patricidal sons, unattainable ladies, hermaphrodites, and

Christological imagery off all sorts, allegories of this type do, in fact, correspond to a

definite chemical process. In the example above, the sword-bearing figure is most likely

representative of mercury, while the figure with the shining object is the Philosopher's

Stone. The bloody instructions that follow indicate the last of seven stages needed to

separate and destroy the degraded metallic bodies from the matter to be transformed,

thereby creating gold. Unless one is already familiar with the basic principals of the

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[36] This text comes from one of the earliest western alchemical manuscripts available. It was written by Zosimos of Panopolis (fl. c. 300 A.D.) and comes from *Of Virtue, Lesson 3*. The relationship between the early Greek alchemists and the later medieval alchemists is one which is always complicated by questions about the validity of authorship—it becomes very difficult to know if authors are medieval constructs only, or if they did indeed live and write in the ancient world. Zosimos has a much stronger claim to being an actual historical figure than most, and was concerned primarily with esoteric and philosophical alchemy. Stanton J. Linden, ed., *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 53.

process, however, and has encountered similar analogies before, the gap between text and

practice seems insurmountable.

Moreover, even when authors choose not to speak in narrative allegories but in

"plainer" terms, the result is much the same:

> And every side of a rectangle generated from the same length has kinship
> to its like that it may restore a perfect fulfillment. For the sixtieth part of
> every great quantity and of fractions, taking origin from [the monad] and
> returning again to it, being contracted together, complete the natural
> monad. The symbol of every circular sphere is the centre, likewise of
> every triangle and plane and solid figure set out by lines; let this same be
> thought of.[37]

Language here must undergo a transformation in the mind of readers in the same way that

metal must be transformed—with care and diligent effort. In order to make the text speak

to either chemical practice or philosophical enlightenment, readers are expected to

contemplate the allegorical interactions described by the author, combine them with the

basic natural principals of the art, and eventually translate their mental study into

practical application.[38] Whatever the source of the difficulty, be it esoteric vocabulary or

complicated allegories/analogies, alchemical language has two primary objectives. The

first, and perhaps the most frequently cited by the alchemists, is to "shut up both terms

pitiably from fools" and to guard the secrets of the art from those considered unworthy.[39]

The second, and more important for the serious student, is a threefold process of initiation

and self-transformation in the tradition of esoteric alchemy. The obscurity of alchemical

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[37] Taken from Stephanos of Alexandria, *The Great and Sacred Art of the Making of Gold*, written in first half of the seventh century. Stephanos was a rhetorician and lecturer in Constantinople, and the highly ornate style here may be attributed to what was thought appropriate for arcane subjects. Ibid., 57.

[38] Of course, here I am excluding the so-called alchemical recipes in my discussion of alchemical discourse. I do so for the express reason that the language used in these shorter texts is a) necessarily incomplete in the respect that recipes rarely (if ever) describe the process in its entirety, and is b) not part of the esoteric tradition that make up the bulk of alchemical literature. These brief texts are, as Ashmole describes them, written by "those who deal clearly only with part of the whole, who write mainly to reveal their mastery and not to teach others." Quoted in Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks*, 32.

[39] Newman, *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber: a Critical Edition, Translation and Study*, 652.

writing is constructed so as to 1) initiate studious, inward labor, 2) instill productive virtue, and 3) impart divine election and transformation. Authorized by those who have claimed success in the past, the language of alchemy is, all at once, a reproduction of the physical and mental labor of the author, a beginning point for the reader's own efforts, and a textual object with a literary life of its own.[40]

First of all, the work required by esoteric alchemical texts must, in order to be successful, blend theory and practice. That is, the language of alchemy must be manipulated and labored over with the same ardor and attention given to the physical aspects of the art and, to do so, requires a reader engaged with the text not as a passive receiver of information, but as a translator of matter. Just as the Philosopher's Stone (and subsequently, gold) is the longed-for end of exoteric alchemy, redemption and divine election is the end of esoteric alchemy. And because it is *participation* that establishes and drives transformation and election, the language of alchemy becomes the crucible through which readers perfect themselves. "Labor" is the alchemist's mantra, repeated again and again. As perhaps the most famous medieval alchemist, known to readers as Geber, writes in his monumental *Summa Perfectionis*, each reader is encouraged to "work to study in our volumes, and try very often to go over them in your mind, so that you may acquire only the true intent of our discourse" and to "seal in [your] mind the signs which

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[40] In describing the discourse of alchemy, we must be fully aware of the functionality both of the practice and, frequently, of the authors of the texts that promulgate the practice. Modes of authority in alchemical manuscripts are fascinating in their own right, and are based primarily on historical fame in the field. Hence, works will frequently be "discovered" by notable figures, like Geber or Avicenna, but will have in fact been written by authors centuries after the credited source has died. The discourse of alchemy, however, has a powerful durability that seems to disregard the actual, day-to-day practicalities of publishing and practice. It is that side of the discourse, the public story of the process, that I am interested in here.

appear in whatever decoctions, and to inquire after their causes."[41] The struggle to understand the theoretical principals behind alchemy must always inform any practical application; in turn, discoveries made through experimentation must then be incorporated into the abstract theories.[42] Geber's description of the correct way to study an alchemical text bears a striking resemblance to the sort of contemplative reading we encountered in Langland—reading that seeps down into the very bones and becomes part of the audience on a fundamental, physical level.[43] The language becomes sealed in the mind through repeated rumination in order to transform readers not just into understanding subjects, but different people entirely: initiates.

In his *Radix Mundi*, Roger Bacon writes that alchemical authors deliberately "clouded their instructions with aenigmatical and typical phrases and words, to the end that their art might not only be hidden and so continued, but *also to be had in the greater veneration*," and it is this process of coming to an awe-struck and virtuous understanding that begins the esoteric transformation.[44] The successful reader and the successful

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[41] Newman, *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber: a Critical Edition, Translation and Study*, 634, 40. The author of the *Summa*, thought by 13th century scholars to be a mythic adept named Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, or simply Geber, an Arabic philosopher of the eighth century, is now most commonly referred to as Pseudo-Geber in modern critical works, as the medieval provenance of the manuscript is certainly a forgery. There is a great deal of debate over the true identity of the author. William R. Newman presents a well-reasoned and convincing case for the true authorship going to Paul of Taranto, a lecturer at a Fransciscan monastery is Assisi. For his complete argument, see Newman, "The Genesis of the *Summa Perfectionis*."; Newman, "New Light on the Identity of *Geber*."; Newman, *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber: a Critical Edition, Translation and Study*, 55-108.

[42] This closed loop between abstraction and praxis is fundamental to alchemical reading. As Petrus Bonus writes, "Thus, you must go on, letting theory suggest practice, and correcting your practice by theory, until at length all the difficulties are resolved and your way lies plain before you." Boni, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, 135.

[43] Arthur Versluis has recently described the necessary reaction to alchemical language (as opposed to more empirical discourses) as such: "...but then there is also another kind of reading that we see in the collections of images, epigrams, poems, literary allusions, allegories, and figurative expressions that so characterize alchemical literature. Confronted with such a colloquy, what is an aspiring alchemist to do but contemplate such a work, to carry it within, to enter into it until its images and approach permeate one's consciousness and become second nature?" Arthur Versluis, *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York, 2004), 60.

[44] Linden, ed., *The Alchemy Reader*, 117. (emphasis mine)

alchemist must have courage, resolution and constancy; he must be wise and resourceful, diligent and humble.[45] The question of virtue creates a paradox: on the one hand, faithful study will enable the looked-for qualities to develop in readers; on the other, only readers who already possess these virtues will be able to make sense of the texts. The veneration of the text, the desire to unravel the hidden secrets must, like the longing for God in mystical writings, compel would-be adepts to work at themselves and strive to know the unknowable. The effort is what makes the art worthwhile. Petrus writes,

> We do not prize that which costs us nothing; it is our highest delight to
> reap some great benefit as the reward of our labor. Therefore, it would not
> be good for you if this knowledge were to come to you after reading
> one book, or after spending a few days in its investigation.[46]

In this, we may be reminded of Augustine's famous description of exegetic reading of Canticles in *De doctrina Christiana*:

> Nevertheless, in a strange way, I contemplate the saints more pleasurably
> when I envisage them as the teeth of the Church cutting off men from their
> errors and transferring them to her body after their hardness has been
> softened as if being bitten and chewed.[47]

For Augustine, the labor of constructing exegesis out of the figurative sign is more rewarding than the information more plainly presented. The alchemists make the same argument for their obscure language. Readers must exercise faith, both in their laboratory and in their study, that their labors will temper them to the extent that God will see fit to grant them the end of their art.

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[45] Even when one studies directly from an already-successful alchemist, these same qualities are necessary for success. Ashmole writes, "Furthermore, this *Learning* is not *revealed* by any *Master*, but under the most weighty *Ties* ad *Obligations* of an *Oath*; and that by long *tryal* and *experience* of a mans *fidelity, vertue, judgment, discretion, faithfulness, secresie, desires, inclinations,* and *conversations*; to sift and try whether he be *capable* and *deserving*." Quoted in Linden, *Darke Hieroglphicks*, 27.

[46] Boni, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, 131-2.

[47] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 37.

Divine intervention is, in the end, the final and most necessary component to alchemical reading. All the labor, the internalization and contemplation of texts, the search for virtue, comes to nothing without the blessing and aid of God. Over and over again authors warn that any failure is the fault of the student, not the art, and that a flaw in their character or their study results in the punishment of frustration and defeat. As Albertus Magnus writes, all success comes from God:

> Yet I have not despaired, but rather I have expended infinite labor and expense, ever going from place to place, observing, considering, as Avicenna says, "If this is so, How is it? If it is not, How is it not?" I persevered in studying, reflecting, laboring over works of this same subject until finally I found what I was seeking, not by my own knowledge, but by the grace of the Holy Spirit.[48]

In the same way, if knowledge is pursued for the wrong reasons or without a pure and humble spirit, Roger Bacon describes how God will refuse to grant the truths of the adepts:

> If you that are searchers in this science, understand these words and things which we have written, you are happy, yea, thrice happy; if you understood not what we have said, God himself has hidden the thing from you. Therefore blame not the Philosophers but your selves; for if a just and faithful mind possessed your souls, God would doubtless reveal the verity to you.[49]

There are countless other examples in the same vein throughout the corpus of medieval alchemy. The art comes from the Divine, not from Nature alone, and only the Divine elects adepts who can be trusted safeguard and further the art without hope for personal gain. Again, the difficulty of the language used in the texts is critical to this process of election; not only does it become the method through which readers might perfect themselves through virtuous, inward labor, but it is the barometer for judging if an

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[48] Albertus Magnus and Virginia Heines, *Libellus De Alchimia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1958), 2.
[49] Linden, ed., *The Alchemy Reader*, 122).

individual is worthy of the science. Nothing is more crushing than repeated failures and "most miserable and unhappy is he who refuses to see the true end of his labors, since he concludes and terminates the space of his life perpetually in error."[50]

Above all, alchemical language is deliberate in its approach both to its relationship to meaning and to its relationship to it readers. The difficulty that comes from analogy and terminology is necessary to accomplish the ends of the esoteric, philosophical side of the art: elevation to divine election and the gift of knowledge that can only be achieved through a textual engagement that transforms the soul. A plain explanation might convey the physical steps one might follow, as a recipe, to create alchemical gold, but without the necessary spiritual transformation, the purification of the adept through the diligent contemplative work of reading and study, God will not allow the miracle to take place and all the efforts of both the author and the practitioner will have been in vain. The language cannot be translated into simpler terms because alchemy is not like cooking; a clear recipe of chemicals and procedures will always be unsuccessful because it lacks the transformative effect on the reader and therefore can never be externally applied in the laboratory. Conversely, if the author creates a text that draws readers into the correct, self-purifying labor, then virtue will pass through language and produce more virtue, again and again as fire catches on tinder. As the Stone offers purification through a contagious perfection, so too does the successful alchemical text elevate readers into the grace of God. The alchemical text offers one of the most distinctive forms of medieval textuality available to us in that it structures its language around the hope of not being understood by anyone—even, presumably, by those who already know the secrets of the art. In doing so, it uses language to create a barrier

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[50] Newman, *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber: a Critical Edition, Translation and Study*, 640.

between readers and meaning for the express purpose of initiating laborious (and frustrating) study. The difficult language becomes a barrier to understanding that must be struggled with, and it is the effort of this struggle that will, in the end, transform the alchemist.[51] In the same way that fire purifies metals, alchemical language will purify its readers—not easily, but permanently.

From what Gower tells us in the Prologue, alchemical language has many things to recommend it for his poetic project; and yet, we find no trace of it in his extended and knowledgeable presentation of alchemy in Book 4. Here we have a discourse that unifies, redeems, purifies, and transforms—all qualities that speak to the devastation of the fractured world and the healing force that the voice of the Prologue yearns for. It works, in effect, as love does to mend the rifts in nature, but does so through textual transmission and readerly engagement. So why does Gower not embrace this language as the transformative catalyst it seems to be? What's love got that alchemy doesn't?

Gower does not attempt to reproduce the discourse itself in the poem principally because the labor of the alchemists, both textual and physical, no longer produces viable results. The remarkable bridge between text and practice, action and study, interior and exterior, has disintegrated along with the rest of the human condition:

> Bot now it stant al otherwise
> Thei speken fast of thilke ston,

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[51] Of course, the other primary result of difficult language is to hide the truths of the art from the unworthy or the mercenary. The effect of alchemical discourse is twofold: it winnows out the unelect even as it elevates and perfects the chosen few. Petrus assures the faithful that, "These are very good and human reasons, then, why this Art should not be revealed to everybody. Moreover, it is delivered to us in obscure terms, in order that the student may be compelled to work hard in its pursuit. We do not prize that which costs us nothing; it is our highest delight to reap some great benefit as the reward of our labor. Therefore, it would not be good for you if this knowledge were to come to you after reading one book, or after spending a few days in its investigation. But if you are worthy, if you possess energy and the spirit of perseverance, if you are ready to study diligently by day and by night, if you place yourself under the guidance of God, you will find the coveted knowledge in God's own good time." Boni, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, 131-32.

> Bot hou to make it, mou wot non,
> After the sothe experience.
>   (4.2580-2583)

The discourse no longer functions as it once did and, as a result, Gower abandons the linguistic characteristics of alchemical literature that are such an integral part of the science. This is not to say that he makes his text any less difficult than that of the alchemists', though such a claim may seem ridiculous in light of the overwhelming public opinion that his version of the vernacular is built on the valorization of ease and openness. But when placed against the tangled, labor-inducing allegories of Zosimos, Geber, or Albertus Magnus, the smoothness of Gower's poetry eliminates the one thing that we can be sure of in alchemical writings: that the study they require, frustrating and elitist as it may be, is the necessary and welcome catalyst for change. Without difficult language to work against, to labor through, Gower has removed the primary tool that enables esoteric discourse to function and, as a result, undermines the validity of alchemy as an idealized form of either transformation or human labor.

Or, to be more specific, Genius' lecture undermines the validity of alchemy as a functional art in the current world. "Bot *now* it stant al otherwise"; that is, alchemy doesn't work now as it did in the past when the adepts transmuted and transformed in the golden age, when meaning and language didn't suffer from fragmentation and disintegration. The alchemists of old did in fact experience divine truth and it is only because man has lost his proximity with God and virtue that the practice has become the province of charlatans and fools.

> I not hou such a craft schal thryve
> In the manere as it is used:
> It were betre be refused
> Than for to worchen upon weene

> In thing which stant noght as thei weene.
> *Bot noght forthi*, who that it knewe,
> The science of himself is trewe
>   (4.2592-2598, emphasis mine)

Even though it is folly to attempt the transformation now, nonetheless, there is an unattainable truth that remains. The poignant rhyme of the past tense "knewe" with "trewe" removes the principles of alchemy irrevocably beyond the reach of readers. And yet, the "is" in line 2598 offers a reassuring compromise. While men can only know the truth of alchemy in the past, the matter that served as the foundation of the art, the natural principles that led the alchemists to pursue it, remains in the present tense. Inaccessible, but true, alchemy may give fame to its founders, but ruin to modern man.

Alchemy is not alone in this fate. From the beginning of the Prologue, past knowledge is both lauded for its wisdom and lamented for its lack of cultural circulation. Writing and books "weren levere" and "Wryting was beloved evere / Of hem that weren vertuous" (Pro.37-39) Now, however, poets like Gower need to coax their readers into attention by disguising wisdom by writing "Somwhat of lust, somwhat of lore" so as not to dull the wits of their fickle audiences. (Pro. 19) Thus, it is no wonder that when the alchemists' secrets are transplanted from the past to the present, they lose their efficacy and legibility:

> Whos bokes, pleinli as thei stonde
> Upon this craft, fewe understonde;
> Bot yit to put hem in assai
> Ther ben full manye now aday,
> That knowen litel what thei meene.
> It is noght on to wite and weene;
> In forme of wordes thei it trete,
> Bot yiteht y failen of begete,
> For of to moche or of to lyte
> Ther is algate founde a wyte,
> So that thei folwe noght the lyne

>   Of the parfite medivine,
>   Which grounded is upon nature.
>   (4. 2613-2625)

The status of interpretation has fallen to the point where even texts written "pleinli"

following the basic principals of alchemy are incomprehensible. In this environment of

questionable readers and faulty interpretation, Gower abandons what he deems the

formerly-effective esoteric discourse that gave rise to the master alchemists in favor of a

new, vernacular style.

Such a departure is remarkable, especially compared with the ways in which

Gower's contemporaries fixate on the terminology of alchemy rather than on the process.

For Chaucer in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, to take the most obvious example,

impenetrable alchemical terminology creates a barrier for a reader that winnows out the

worthy from the inadequate, and many modern readers unfortunately seem to fall into this

same trap of vocabulary over matter. As critics approach Chaucer's tale, the temptation

to tease out the alchemical niceties is often too much to withstand. Nearly every piece of

current criticism regarding this fragment of the *Canterbury Tales* feels the need to take

issue with Chaucer's position on alchemical possibility, on the validity of the Canon's

skill, or the scorn and frustration of the Yeomen using the historical information available

about experimental alchemical practice.[52] As of late, however, the discussions of the

nature of Chaucer's alchemical knowledge have shifted from locating his material in

particular esoteric publications to investigations into how his interaction with the process

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[52] George R. Keiser does an admirable job tracking these various vacillations of critical opinion from the early contemporary receptions of Chaucer all the way to present contributions to the debate. For his complete explination, see George R. Keiser, "The Conclusion of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*: Readings and (Mis)Readings," *The Chaucer Review* 35, no. 1 (2000). 1-21

(however glancing or penetrating it may have been) affected his personal take on

language and poetics. In her work on the tale, Jane Hilberry writes,

> The Yeoman's list of alchemical elements, explicitly divorced from any
> practical application, any real function in the material world, is not the
> product of a mind bound to matter. The Yeoman recognizes the material
> loss that alchemy inevitably brings, but is drawn to it nonetheless by the
> appeal of alchemical language – the music that lurks in its terms, the way
> it verges on poetry, and, perhaps, the sensation of authority that its speaker
> enjoys.[53]

On the contrary, Chaucer has a distinct and worldly function in the way he employs his

technical terms, just as Gower has an explicit reason for praising alchemical

transformation. If Chaucer is thinking of his use of cryptic language, it is as a function of

formulating not his own ability to deal with difficult material, but that of his readers.

Chaucer and Gower both use alchemy to establish the rewards of good reading.

Clearly, the example that Chaucer gives in the Yeoman is the antithesis of ideal

readership. It is a clear case of a negative example that allows for the imagination of a

positive, much in the way that Lee Patterson sees the language of the tale itself working.

He takes a Derridean reading of Chaucer's appropriation of hermetic language as the

"logic of the supplement."[54] He then goes on to conclude in one of the most perceptive

descriptions of alchemical language that

> The explanation is at once confirmatory (it restates the truth again) and
> disruptive (by restating the truth in different words, it causes us to wonder
> whether there is indeed *a* truth). By insisting that the process is foreclosed
> by an arbitrary act of divine will, the Yeoman shows that what is in doubt
> is not the existence of the alchemical truth but the efficacy of explanation.
> The truth can be known, but it cannot be said.[55]

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[53] Jane Hilberry, ""and in Our Madnesse Evermore We Rave": Technical Language in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 21, no. 4 (1987), 442.
[54] Lee Patterson, "Perpetual Motion: Alchemy and the Technology of the Self," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 15 (1993), 35.
[55] Ibid.

Where the Yeoman stalls out is when he tries to appropriate the vocabulary of the

philosophers without the appropriate mode of translation in mind – he sees it as a

cookbook instead of an investigative, experiential path to truth. What is more, he realizes

his own incompatibility. Acknowledging that "Al is in veyn, and parde, muchel moore,/

To learne a lewed man this subtiltee" (l. 843-844), he informs the reader outright that he

is an unacceptable model, being a "lewed man" himself (l. 787). Furthermore, he

concretizes his problem by specifying his error: in relating the vast list of instruments,

materials, and herbs in the Canon's laboratory, the Yeoman admits, "Yet wol I tell hem

as they come to mynde,/ Though I ne kan nat sette hem in hir kynde" (l.788-789). This

question of ordering is crucial. The appeal of technical jargon notwithstanding, the

purpose of the terminology is, as Patterson observes, to say what cannot be said and,

failing that, to show what cannot be shown. No matter how much the Yeoman would like

to, the alchemical texts were designed so that an ineffective reader was immediately

railroaded by the figurative language and abstruse terminology.[56] If a reader did come

along like the Yeoman, capable only of rote memorization of terms, they would have an

entry into the vocabulary of the practice and nothing more. As it stands, the impressive

set of terms the Yeoman rattles off for the company is as far from divulging alchemical

secrets as one can get. Instead, he merely removes any truth that might be gleaned from

what little knowledge he has by objectifying the language into that of mere terminology,

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[56] In a particularly choice passage, Geber describes the unelect as, "For they are like a boy closed up in his house from birth to old age, not believing the world to extend beyond the confines of his own dwelling, or farther than the eye can see." Newman, *The Summa Perfectionis of Pseudo-Geber: a Critical Edition, Translation and Study*, 654. In a similar vein, Petrus writes of the difficulty of writing for those who have not yet seen the truth of the art: "The difficulty of our task is enhanced by the circumstance that we have to speak of our Art to the ignorant and the scornful, and are thus in the position of a painter who should attempt to explain nice shades and difference of colour to the colour-blind; or of a musician who should discourse sweet harmony to the deaf." Boni, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, 90). In this sense, the Yeoman is indeed a confined, deaf, color-blind child.

into mere jargon. He is the most un-alchemical reader imaginable. By his refusal to experimentally organize his knowledge in any way, he refuses to see the language as requiring investigation or interpretation.

This is, of course, precisely what Chaucer wants to avoid. Mark J. Bruhn sees the relation between Chaucer and his employment of hermetic language as a way of avoiding explanation for his sometime subversive content matter.[57] As evidence, he looks to the *Miller's Prologue*:

> For Goddes love, *demeth nat that I seye*
> *Of yvel entente*, but for I moot reherce
> Hir tales alle, be they better or werse,
> Of elles falsen som of my mateere.
> And therefore, whoso list is nat yheere,
> Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
> For he shal fyunde ynowe, grete and smale,
> Of storial thing that toucheth gentillnesse
> And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
> *Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys*.
> (3172-3181, Bruhn's emphasis)[58]

He reads the passage as related to the alchemy of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* in that, like the alchemists, "Chaucer falsifies his 'mateere' by deflecting responsibility from himself to his pilgrim persona, who in turn deflects it to the churlish Miller and to the reader."[59] It is to the last of this triad of scapegoats that we ought turn our attention. What Bruhn notably does not focus on in the passage is the suggestion that, should the reader be displeased with the progress of the tales, they can always "turne over the leef and chese another tale" instead of continuing with the printed order. It is precisely this potential for re-ordering that Chaucer inscribes into the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Just as Chaucer's

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[57] Mark J. Bruhn, "Art, Anxiety, and Alchemy in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 33, no. 3 (1999): 295-97.
[58] All Chaucerian quotations taken from Geoffrey Chaucer and Larry Dean Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987).
[59] Bruhn, "Art, Anxiety, and Alchemy in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*," 297.

reader has the power of narrative organization, so too does the potential alchemist with the material before him. The Yeoman's problem is, again, that he hasn't the ability to place things in their "correct" order. This in itself shows his misreading. The truth he seeks cannot be contained in the final, appropriate arrangement of terminology because what he manipulates is, after all, simply terminology. It is the process through the terms and the experimental ordering that requires perfection. The "secree of secretes" is not for the "lewed man" but for one who approaches the matter as Chaucer expects his reader to approach his collection. This is not matter one may "lightly lerne" any more than one should "lightly read" the tales. The reader must, like the alchemists, embrace the multiplicity of the task at hand and read for possibility, not for the one answer that will cause all of the pieces to wondrously fall into place.

Alchemical language in Chaucer, then, functions in the same way that it does in alchemical manuscripts: it is designed to winnow out the uninitiated and veil the truth of the art so that the serious student will, through proper application, piece together the information with attention and patience. But this focus on the Latinate terminology of the discourse and its pitfalls does not drive Gower's kindred interest in alchemical matters. The dominant voice of Gower's discussion of the science is the same as the rest of the *Confessio*, which renders even the most ostensibly erudite of alchemical terms as a litany of rhyming vocabulary. The passage revels in the lilting –cion suffixes endemic to the discourse and allows the prominence of the Latinate terminology to emphasize the steady and unified rhythm of the poetry:

> Bot what man that this werk beginne,
> He mot awaite at every tyde,
> So that nothing be left aside,
> Ferst of the distillacion,

> Forth with the congelacion,
> Solucioun, descencion,
> And kepe in his entencion
> The point of sublimacion,
> And forth with calcinacion,
> Of veray approbacion
> Do there be fixacion
> With tempered hetes of the fyr
> Til he the parfit elixir
> Of thilke philosophers ston
> Mai gete…
>
> (4.2510-24)

The clustering of technical jargon embodies the strict control of the alchemists over the

materials of their art, and the way their labors all work towards the ideals of order and

unification. And yet, for all the poetical and aural weight given to the Latin terms, this is

still not alchemical language as we would expect to find it in texts of the period. It

remains a vernacular transmutation of the discourse that capitalizes on vocabulary to

demonstrate the sonorous but empty effect of alchemical terminology. When the Yeoman

attempts a similar list in Chaucer's poem, the effect is markedly different:

> As boole armonyak, verdegrees, boras
> And sundry vessels maad of erthe and glas,
> Oure urynales and our descensories,
> Violes, crosletz, and sublymatories,
> Cucurbites and alambikes eek,
> And other swich…
>
> (CYT. 790-795)

Where the Yeoman's voice seems strained and almost out of breath with the effort of

repeating the unending list of equipment used in the Canon's laboratory, Gower's equally

esoteric language is smoothed out into a chant-like litany, calm and controlled. The

tempo of Chaucer's verse is frantic, hectic, like someone trying recite memorized

information as quickly as possible before it is forgotten and filling in the gaps with half-

hearted evasions.

> Sal gold is, and Luna silver we threpe,
> Mars iren, Mercurie quyksilver we clepe,
> Saturnus leed, and Juppiter is tyn,
> And Venus coper, by my fader kyn!
> (CYT. 826-829)

Gower's passage containing the same allocation of elements to planets is, by comparison, luxuriously unhurried:

> The gold is titled to the sonne,
> the mone of selver hath his part,
> And iren that stant upon Mart,
> The led after Satorne groweth,
> And Jupiter the bras bestoweth,
> The coper set is to Venus,
> And to his part Mercurium
> Hath the quikselver, as it falleth
> (4.2468-2475)

Gower's language, the "middle way" of his vernacular, incorporates the matter of alchemy while resisting the now-ineffective discourse that, for the alchemists, is so much a part of their art. The adaptation allows the poet to define a new form of challenging language that will blend contemplative textual interpretation with worldly action in the same way that alchemical works demand that their readers work at themselves through their reading practice. He appropriates the purifying and active process of studious reading alchemy requires and integrates it into his vernacular poetic style. Reading and study become a form of labor that produces results in the same way that the Philosopher's Stone, as a product and receptacle for virtuous labor, produces gold.

We can see this process rehearsed in one of the few *exempla* in the entire poem that uses ethical reading as a distinguishing marker of character. In the "Tale of Diogenes and Aristippus," both characters are Athens-educated and have recently returned to Carthage to pursue the ends of their learning. But whereas Diogenes

immerses himself in continued study and humble, private work, Aristippus uses his ability to manipulate knowledge and language in the service of a prince. He installs himself at court and becomes a flatterer in order to gain worldly rewards of gold and riches from the beguiled nobleman. Reading and careful study are turned into monitors of natural virtue to the extent that Aristippus' greedy fawning becomes a lens through which readers can see his discordant and unreasonable mind. He has gained enough mastery over language to use it to his own ends, but Diogenes models himself after Reason and the truth of nature, using his reading as an ethical check against the temptations of political and economic advancement:

> Bot Diogenes duelte stille
> At home and loked on his bok.
> He soughte noght the worldes crok,
> For vein honour ne for richesse,
> Bot all his hertes besinesse
> He sette to be vertuous
>
> (7.2266-71)

Flattery is an example of deceitful speech that both goes against nature and obscures the line between representation and truth (as traced by language); Diogenes, marked by his dedication to study, and therefore to reason, refuses to follow the path of flattery even through it brings with it the promise of gold and other worldly treasures. Study becomes a way of both instilling and practicing virtue, which, in turn, results in ethical action. Right reading, therefore, is reading that follows nature and elevates the internal state of the reader first, who then in turn becomes a representation of kindly order through his actions in the world. In this sense, Aristippus reads like a bad alchemist—he uses his knowledge as a strategy for self-aggrandizement and profit (the ability to speak well, for him, equals the ability to flatter and produce gold) and in doing so debases himself and

the learning he misapplies. The understanding of Diogenes' performance of study, on the other hand, of finding virtue through reading, which, in turn, makes virtue visible in the surrounding world, is esoteric alchemical reading defined.[60] "Besinesse" is transformed into "virtuous" in a near-rhyme that trumps the "richesse" Diogenes so rightly rejects.

Aristippus' false flattery stands, then, in direct opposition to Diogenes' virtue-producing reading in the tale, first in how each character approaches learning after returning to Carthage, but more importantly in how their resulting speech becomes a reflection of how study, both false and true, produces action in the world. The result of virtuous reading is the multiplication of truth: when he attempts to re-educate Aristippus though his own powers of language, Diogenes is attempting to reproduce his understanding of reason and nature in another. Like the power of the Philosopher's Stone, truthful reading begets truthful speech. Conversely, the danger of flattery, as Gower says explicitly, lies in its power to obscure truth. The flatterer undermines the connection between language and meaning by filling his target's ears with "feigned wordes" that "make him wene/ That blak is whyt and blew is grene" (7.2187-8). Under the influence of flattery, the essential kingly virtues of self-knowledge and self-governance become impossible because reason itself is subverted in the face of false language and a false reality. As Foucault so elegantly states, "The flatterer is the person who prevents you knowing yourself as you are."[61] Reading and study are not solitary and

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[60] Nicolette Zeeman has a similar reading of the medieval notion of study and labor. She argues for a place for *studie* as an ethical force in fourteenth century England through a reading of *Piers Plowman*. Her approach compliments my own here in her insistence that we see the work of reading as part of a larger social history of labor and devotion. Zeeman, "'Studying' in the Middle Ages."

[61] Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 376. For an invaluable reading of the relationship between the personal ethical responsibility of the individual as it relates to the body politic, including the importance of self-knowledge and truthfulness, see Elizabeth Porter, "Gower's Ethical

self-involved acts; rather, the tale deploys them as the impetus for direct action and result in the social and political arena, reproducing themselves to either positive or negative ends. Not only does the labor of learning transform Diogenes and Aristippus, it has the potential power to change those they interact with, prince or peer.

Apart from the warning against flattery as a temptation for both the powerful and the power-hungry, the active effects of reading and study emerge as central concerns in this particular tale that resonate throughout the rest of the poem. Alchemy in Gower is "the parfit medicine" (4.2624) in a material and spiritual sense. Materially, the bodies and spirits of metals are "cured" of their imperfections through the contagious purity embodied in the Philosopher's Stone; commensurately, human perfection, indicated by health, improved sensory perception, and even immortality, is accomplished through the same basic principle of exposing a corrupted material, the human body, to a hyper-perfect material, a potable form of the Stone known as the Elixir of Life. When ingested, the Elixir supposedly purges the gross, corporeal body and draws out the impurities that run rampant throughout, effectively returning the body to as close a pre-lapsarian state as is possible this side of the divine.[62] Spiritual redemption, on the other hand, remains solely the product of laborious study and divine election.

Microcosm and Political Macrocosm," in *Gower's Confessio Amantis*, ed. A. J. Minnis (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1983).

[62] n.b. Instead of dividing alchemical production between the Philosopher's Stone and the Elixir of Life, Gower tells of three different stones: the *lapis vegetabilis*, the *lapis animalis*, and "minerall." This unusual tripartite division is unique in alchemical literature; his explanation of the function of each stone, however, is entirely orthodox. "Minerall," or *lapis mineralis* as the Latin note calls it, is the Philosopher's Stone that has already been described—that which cleans away impurities transforms base metals into silver or gold. The vegetable stone is intended to "kepe and to preserve / The bodi for sicknesses alle" (4.2538-9) while the animal stone will strengthen the fives senses. By increasing the number of alchemical products from two to three, Gower gains not only a pleasing symmetry, but also increases the emphasis on the effects alchemy may have on the human condition—namely, that the alchemists' art provides both a remedy for illness (with the possibility of extending life) and also an enhancement of the natural faculties that enable interaction with the material world. This modification from traditional alchemical theory most likely represents a deviation from Gower's source material for this section of the poem. For a more detailed

For his readers, the difficulty of Gower's language is the very thing that makes it seem easy. If it can make alchemy, the most esoteric and inaccessible of subjects, seem smooth and legible, then it is no wonder that when discussing the seven cardinal sins, or in telling *exempla*, Gower's plain style is continually confused with an undemanding style. In the case of alchemy, because the language in the *Confessio Amantis* removes the textual incentive for the reader to wrestle with the material, the mandatory difficulty shifts into the gaps the text leaves open. As in the prologue, when Gower declines to describe the reasons behind the deterioration of the world because "The thing so open is at ȳe" (Pro.33), he admits that alchemy no longer functions but gives no direct explanation. The problem remains perennially unanswered in the poem. The escalating entropy of the world and its learning, the threat that lies behind Gower's poetic project and even Amans' desire for self-improvement, goes unexplained. But at least the goal of reversing the damage is in view; the reader must supply the wherewithal to fill up the emptied discourses at work in the poem. Gower's language substitutes the linguistic resistance found in alchemy, or even in other contemporaries like Langland, for a language that is hard to find purchase in, difficult paradoxically in its simplicity. While demonstrating the need for a hybrid language that engages the reader in contemplation in order to spur him to action, Gower seems to withhold the tools that will allow an intimate connection to develop. The poem is simply too slippery and clean. Alchemical language is easy to ruminate over because it broadcasts the need for study from the very beginning; Gower's challenge to his readers is to remove this obvious characteristic and force them to find the catalyst for change within themselves.

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discussion of Gower's sources and the particulars of his alchemical theory, see George Gillespie Fox, *The Mediaeval Sciences in the Works of John Gower* (New York: Haskell House, 1966), 114-35.

The result of alchemy's failure, and the failure of its language to be effective for modern readers, is to turn the art into an abstraction, an *exemplum par excellence*. Like Genius' other tales, it will never be a lived experience for Amans—or anyone else for that matter—but unlike the surrounding stories, alchemy is presented as a non-narrative form.[63] As opposed to the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*, Amans doesn't hear the tale of either a successful past alchemist or an unsuccessful modern fool, but an unexpected, one-sided lecture. This expositional form allows the science to become a more realistic ideal in that it exists as a universal subject, free from characters and moralized summaries, but the consequence is that, as an abstraction, it also becomes static and removed, forever unapproachable and lifeless. Because it can no longer be a part of the world, it becomes something apart that Gower can use as a heuristic for defining labor, both as a counterpoint to Sloth and as a mode of transformative reading.

Merita Perpetuata and Gower's Narrative Voices

If we follow Larry Scanlon's definition of the medieval *exemplum* as "a narrative enactment of cultural authority," then Gower's use of alchemy doesn't seem to be an *exemplum* at all.[64] Even though it appears as part of a larger story (Genius' education and confession of Amans), it in and of itself is not a narrative, and it would be difficult to call Gower's unusual literary acceptance of alchemy sympathetic with the wider cultural

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[63] Although, to be fair, Amans himself might disagree with this statement. For him, the stories of love he reads become part of his being, and, in Book 6) he describes how his ear is fed with reading and the stories temporarily satisfy his desires for love. James Simpson describes this process: "Such reading involves a collapse of 'otherness', both personal and historical, into a complete identity with the reader: heroes from the past are identified by Amans with himself." Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 255.

[64] Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

opinion of the day. Furthermore, as a distant and even defunct science, it doesn't seem to be able to be an "enactment" of anything whatsoever. (Or, at least, of anything valuable.) Thus, it should hardly be surprising that on the rare occasion when critics discuss Gower's treatment of alchemy, it is deemed a "problematic" part of the poem and is dealt with in short order.[65]

And yet we have seen that alchemy is in fact more than a strange and dismissible interjection into the otherwise orderly pattern of the poem thus far, and rather that it offers a unique opportunity to examine Gower's selective appropriation of an inaccessible example of transformation. If we ought, as I suggest, to read the poem's alchemical diversion as an *exemplum* for virtuous textual labor, we must accept a form of reading that moves through readers who, in turn, deploy the effects of that reading. Diane Watt characterizes Gower's vernacular poetics as language that encourages readers to experiment with meaning making as they read, even as the stylistics of the poem are designed "to communicate rather than to withhold learning."[66] This experimentation, without the benefit of esoteric, obscure language as an impetus to labor, is the engine that drives transformation in Gower's audience; contemplative study generates virtue and understanding, which then determine how readers interact socially and politically in the world. Moreover, apart from presenting an acceptable exemplary moral to Amans in the battle against Sloth, it also becomes a place where the three narrative voices in the poem, Genius, Gower the poet, and Gower *qua* Amans, separate into three different entities with three very different agendas at stake.

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[65] Here, I am thinking of Yeager's placement of his discussion in his "Exceptions Prove the Rule" chapter in Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion*. See also Macaulay's introduction to the second volume of John Gower, *English Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, vol. 81-82, *Early English Text Society, Extra Series* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969 (reprint)), 2:xx.
[66] Watt, *Amoral Gower*, 21.

For Genius, alchemy is placed in the larger framework of an explanation of Sloth in all its permutations and it becomes an example of abstract labor that produces material results. The sermon is part of a longer explanation of the uses and history of human labor, from the invention of poetry and music to the art of translation. Alchemy is introduced by way of commercialism and, curiously enough, through the discovery of coining:

> But thing which gifth ous mete and drinke
> And doth the laborer to swinke
> To tile lond and sette vines,
> Wherof the cornes and the wynes
> Ben sustenance to mankinde,
> In olde bokes as I finde,
> Saturnus of his oghne wit
> Hath founde ferst, and more yit
> Of chapmanhode he fond the weie,
> And ek to coigne the moneie
> Of sondri metal, as it is,
> He was the ferste man of this.
>   (4.2439-2450)

Genius traces a commercial path from agricultural production, to the exchange of the farmer's labor for metal coins, which, in turn, become a symbol both of crop produced and the work that produced it. Gold is seen as an abstraction of work, a transferable, valuable commodity.[67] This is not the first instance of Saturn being associated with metallurgy and trade. Macaulay cites Godfrey of Viterbo's twelfth century *Pantheon* as a possible source for this characterization, but the literary extension to the art of alchemy is utterly unique to the *Confessio*. The use of coining as an introduction for the longer alchemical passage emphasizes the usefulness of the art for Genius' purposes: if the difficult labor is correctly carried out, the success is immediately visible. Gold (or one of

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[67] For a Neo-Marxist reading of the use of alchemy as a commentary on social capital in Chaucer and Jonson, see Knapp, "The Work of Alchemy."

the versions of the Stone) becomes a marker for the invisible labor of the alchemist in the same way that the coins become a material representation of agricultural production. Alchemy in Genius' eyes is an art that transforms labor into product, "besinesse" into "vertu," and the invisible to the visible.

Set in the larger frame of the entire poem, however, alchemy becomes something quite different. Gower's narrative voice, found in different registers in the Prologue and in the Latin verses and marginalia scattered throughout the poem, places an entirely separate lens over alchemy's usefulness in the poem. For Gower *qua* poet, alchemy is placed within the larger discourse of confession and becomes an example of idealized reading that blends the active and the contemplative. Genius' entire lecture on human labor is directly preceded by a Latin epigram:

> *Exepedit in manibus labor, ut de cotidianis*
> *Actibus ac vita viuere possit homo,*
> *Set qui doctrine casa fert mente labores,*
> *Preualet et merita perpetuata parat.[68]*
> (4.vii)

The question of "merit," expressed as it is here, is a theorized, abstract virtue. Unlike the model characters found in the *exempla* and unlike even the moral readings Genius gives of his tales, the Latinized *merita* of the epigram is able to stand outside of any narrative structure and appear as a purely autonomous virtue. It has little dependence upon readerly interpretation or upon a contextualized framework, and the shift from English to Latin here emphasizes the move from concrete to abstract, trading the character-driven tale for the metaphysical apothegm while at the same time transforming the virtue into esoteric knowledge that only an arguably small portion of his audience might actually be

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[68] [Labor with the hands is productive, such that in daily life and actions a man might be able to live. But he who for the sake of wisdom bears labors in the mind prevails further and obtains perpetual merit.]

able to read. The form and language of the epigram, divorced as it is from the surrounding English verse, removes the contemplative, mental labor Gower urges beyond the grasp of Amans and audience, effectively denying them the rewards of perpetual merit that so exceed the quotidian, physical products of the active life.

That is, until we reach the extended section on alchemy. Through his idealized description, Gower finds in alchemy an *exemplum* of how the active work of the laboratory is fed by and, in turn, contributes to the esoteric study of texts. Practice and theory must work together. As Petrus Bonus writes,

> Theophilus says that the only way of apprehending the meaning of the Sages is by constant reference to experiment as well as reading. He who bends his back over our books (says Barsenus), and does not sit at the feet of Nature, will die on the wrong side of the frontier.[69]

Reading becomes the bridge between *manibus labor* and *mente labores* and, for a brief moment, can act as a healing force to bind up the fragmented world. The alchemists learned to read as a method of self-improvement and self-discovery in the same way that the confessional frame will ideally transform Amans and the poem's readers. Amans, admittedly, does not always provide the most exemplary of interpretive models, but the imagined alchemical reading offers one of the few successful illustrations of virtuous interpretation in the poem. If Gower's poem is to be effective, alchemy is the most compelling option for successful readerly labor available.

Finally, we come to Gower/Amans, sitting on the receiving end of the long description of a lost art. As a countermeasure against Sloth and a form of self-improvement, alchemy for Amans should offer a chance for redemption. If he can, as he does elsewhere with the narrative *exempla*, single out either Genius' bid for productive

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[69] Boni, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, 110.

labor, or Gower's focus on active contemplation and/or contemplative action, then the alchemical passage will contribute to his re-admittance into Venus' court and the purification of his soul. Out of the three figures, Amans has the most at stake, but he fails to react in any way to the passage. In fact, he ignores it entirely.

The labor of transformation that the alchemical passage has been leading to, both as a material process and an elevating reading practice, disappears into Amans' silence, giving us one of the most profound examples of misreading in the entire poem. He has missed his opportunity for self-redemption and failed to read alchemy as a model for the way in which he must address the faults of his soul in order to craft himself into a proper lover. In some sense, this should not be surprising. Amans, after all, is a figure of the will and, as James Simpson observes, is only interested in listening to what will directly effect his ability to woo his lady: "Amans, then, as desire, desires only the fulfillment of his very self; the logic of his listening to Genius for so long a time can only be that he sees, or rather hears in Genius what he wants to."[70] In this way, Amans reads exactly like a bad alchemist. Only interested in one thing, Amans rejects the more difficult textual labor described by Genius in the same way that a mercenary or foolish alchemist (like Chaucer's Yeoman) will gravitate towards the quick, chemical operations while disregarding the esoteric, inward aspects of the art. In the words of Petrus Bonus,

> Yet one who can perform the practical operations of Alchemy is not yet an
> Alchemist, just as not every one who speaks grammatically is a
> grammarian. Such persons still lack that knowledge of the causes of
> things which exalts the mind of man, and raises it to God.[71]

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[70] Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 151. This comes as part of a much longer, and extremely elegant, argument about the role of reading as a key factor in Gower's poetics of the imagination. Simpson examines the relationships between Genius, Amans, and Gower in order to show the intimate and inescapable psychological connections they share as characters and consumers of text.

[71] Boni, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, 138.

The imagination that serves Amans well in identifying with the lovers in Genius'
exempla deserts him now when it is most needed—because he focuses on personal
identification with characters, the abstractions and value of the alchemical lecture pass
ineffectually by, unheard and unheeded.

If Amans' silent misreading is bound up with his all-encompassing desire, and
Genius' call for productive labor cannot draw his attention beyond the scope of his
longing for love, then the narrative voice of the authorial Gower must urge his external
readers to fill the void. This theme, as Simpson points out, is a recurring one throughout
the poem: "Gower's is a reader-oriented aesthetic, where the reader must participate in
the construction of meaning through the activation of higher powers of the would than
those represented from within the poem."[72] Amans' silence corresponds with Gower's
vernacularization of alchemy by opening a space for readers to begin to make their own
meaning, independent of the poem's narrative force. They are not, as Amans is, driven by
a desire to simply become better lovers (or, at least, Gower seems to hope they are not),
and as a result they have the potential to activate the transformative power of textual
interpretation for themselves. The "bok for Engelonde's sake" engages readers through
absence: absence of textual difficulty, absence of examples of right reading, and absence
of workable transformations. Even the one narrative transformation we do see, that of
Amans into John Gower in Book 8, serves as an erasure of an authoritative voice rather
than a poetic elevation. Amans' process of tempering the force of his willful spirit with
the guidance of reason is not one that a reader may approximate and, unlike alchemical
transformation, does not pass beyond the confines of the poem. The virtue Amans gains
is not contagious on its own terms and the writing that we read (Amans/Gower's

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[72] Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 254.

production), with its "rude wordis and with pleyne" (8.3122) cannot, as alchemical language does, instigate productive labor. What it can do, however, is open a different kind of vernacular reading that relies on Simpson's "reader-oriented aesthetic" by leading readers to assume responsibility for their own understanding.

Unlike works that cast the author as a kind of Aristotelian efficient cause, whose textual authority creates not only the text, but also readers' responses to that text, Gower's poem, as we have seen, repeatedly and insistently displaces authority away from the poet and even away from the poem itself.[73] Instead of the poet *qua* preacher, the authorial voice he adopts in the *Vox Clamantis*, in the *Confessio* we see a poet using language that mimics, if not fully immerses itself, in a moral and philosophical tradition. In his invaluable *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, A. J. Minnis notes this change of voice. Throughout the *Vox Clamantis*, we see a speaker who, even as he professes humility,

> ...draws attention to his creativity and, in an indirect and impersonal way, claims a degree of *auctoritas*—'impersonal' because the emphasis is placed, not on Gower's personal achievement, but rather on his assumed office as prophet, preacher and transmitter of truths.[74]

Speaking as he does through the genre of dream vision, the poet confesses to his audience, "*Hec set vt auctor ego non scripsi mentra libello,/ Que tamen audiui trado*

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[73] In authorial prologues in the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries, we find what A. J. Minnis calls the "Aristotelian prologue" which divides the work into the four primary causes which organize all the elements and activities of creation. In these prologues "...the *auctor* would be discussed as the 'efficient cause' or motivating agent of the text, his materials would be discussed as the 'material cause', his literary style and structure would be considered as twin aspects of the 'formal cause', while his ultimate end or objective of writing would be considered as the 'final cause'." Furthermore, in casing the author as the efficient cause, the prologues gestured towards the close connection between themselves and that ultimate source of authority, God. A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 5. For a further discussion of causality, particularly in scriptural contexts, see Christopher Ocker's excellent study, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation*.
[74] Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 186.

legenda tibi"[75] (vii.1445-6) even as he assumes the authoritative position as the

mouthpiece for divine truth. The authorial displacement in the *Confessio* is markedly

different. Rather than the poet appearing as a transmitter of God's voice, and therefore as

a reflection of the Aristotelian efficient cause, here Gower demotes himself to a mere

compiler and commentator on the subject of love. No longer the prophetic advocate for

God on earth, he is speaking directly from himself to the fallen subjects he hopes to

rehabilitate about a subject that seems inadequate for his purpose.

In the *Confessio*, as a didactic poem, the language of vernacular poetry as a

medium for devotional education becomes central to an apparently unsolvable problem.

Redemption can occur in confession because of the sacramental nature of language

inherent in the speech-act, and because of the guidance and oversight of the power of the

confessor, who represents the authority of the divine intervening in earthly affairs. The

same holds true of the prophetic dream-vision, or the pastoral sermon. When the *auctor*

is speaking as an instrument of God, then language becomes a vehicle for personal

transformation. But because Gower relinquishes the *auctoritas* he adopts in his Latin

works, any approximation of the confessional process cannot come from his earthly (and

therefore inadequate) poetic voice. He cannot cleanse the souls of his readers any more

than he can unify the material elements that make up their bodies. To return to the

opening of Book 1, Gower sets the stakes for both the limitation of poetic language and

the height to which it aspires. He writes,

> I may noght strecche up to the heaven
> Min hand, ne setten al in evene
> This world, which ever is in balance:
> It stant noght in my sufficance

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[75] [But I have not written as an authority these verses in a book; rather, I am passing on what I heard for you to read]

<div align="center">So grete thinges to compasse.</div>
<div align="center">(1.1-5)</div>

Where human language fails to redeem creation according to God's authoritative order,

however, Gower's poetic persona transforms the problem into one of personal deficiency

and, thus, into the relationship between author, text, and audience. The passage, full as it

is of personal reference ("*I* may noght," "*Min* hand," "*my* sufficance"), effectively

removes the author as the efficient cause for the text without replacing it with a more

appealing option. Once the author is displaced, we are left with the relationship between

the text and the reader, and it is at this nexus where Gower's poetry must begin to work.

The same retraction of *auctoritas* is found in Gower's vernacular presentation of

alchemy and his rejection of alchemical language in favor of a new kind of interpretive

difficulty. Genius' lecture on alchemy can never be an effective hermetic text because it

lacks the critical authoritative, experiential provenance. Like the pastoral, the alchemical

voice must be linked directly to a higher efficient cause, most usually either direct

instruction from a past master or a successful laboratory experience aided by the grace of

God.[76] Without grounding in *auctoritas* that surpasses the individual authorial voice, the

text loses its claim to truth while the elaborate language (and reading mode that

accompanies it) becomes nothing more than an act of ventriloquism, a sham. Like

Gower's voice in the *Vox*, alchemists must speak for a power greater than themselves.

When the alchemy in the *Confessio* appears without the backing of an acceptable

efficient cause, it runs perilously close to the empty and deceitful language of Chaucer's

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[76] Over and over again in alchemical manuscripts we find authors claiming direct teaching from a master, and the quickest way to get a treatise into circulation is to place a more well-known name on the title page. This practice leads to a host of problems concerning dating and authorship of texts, as I discussed earlier. In rare cases, like Geber's *Summa Perfectionis*, an author will stress that he writes from his God-given experience only. Nevertheless, the tradition of claiming authoritative provenance becomes almost a requirement of any serious alchemical work.

Yeoman—the usefulness of the analogies disappears and all that is left is a failed, impotent discourse. Genius knows of past adepts by reputation only—therefore he cannot pass on their knowledge by personally absorbing their teachings, and he certainly claims no direct laboratorial effort of his own. What remains, then, is the experience of readers as they work through poem and it is on this that transformation must depend. Knowledge comes through the laborious internalization of textual information and through the grace of God; therefore, the act of reading Gower's poem must become the trial through which the transformation of the soul is made possible. Gower's vernacular language is the base matter that becomes elevated by readers even as they themselves are perfected.

Transformative reading of this nature moves beyond the confines of the narrative and absent *auctoritas* to create a system of redemption on a broad, macrocosmic scale. To refashion one reader is not enough to generate the fundamental societal change Gower hopes for in the Prologue, and he is unwilling to rely on the fit but few audience members who will respond to difficult discourses, like those of alchemy. Rather, the ambition of the *Confessio* is to offer a vernacular poetics that relies on its simplicity to engage a different form of textual contemplation, one wherein readers must work to distance themselves from the text in order to construct meaningful interpretations. *Auctoritas* has shifted from author to readers in a remarkable and unprecedented way. Readers must resist Genius' packaged moralizing to form meaning that speaks to them, they must look past Amans' silences, his pouts, and his myopic complaints, and most importantly, they must overtake Gower's deliberate self-effacement in the face of his daunting task. Interpretation is activated in order that the transformation of one reader becomes the

transformation of many, rendering that which is above (the larger social construct) to be like that which is below (the newly reformed individual). Moreover, by casting readers as the efficient cause the text opens itself to multiple forms of productive labor, each corresponding to the local circumstances and challenges individual readers bring to the poem. The *Confessio* traces the experimental outline of a form of the vernacular that evades definition, becoming mutable and insubstantial even as it attempts to affect readers in fundamental ways. In the end, for the text to fulfill the place of a "public poetry" and to generate *merita perpetuata* in the individual and social sphere, the plain must work, and work hard, to evolve into the productive.

Chapter 5

"For word is wynd": The Limits of Confession in the *Confessio Amantis*

> *And that I take to record*
> *Of every lond, for his partie,*
> *The commune vois which mai noght lie...*
> *(Pro. 122-124)*

In his acclaimed study, *Love and Ethics in Gower's 'Confessio Amantis'* Peter Nicholson opens his first chapter with a reading of the lines that begin Gower's Book 1:

> I may noght strecche up to the hevene
> Min hand, ne setten al in evene
> This world, which ever is in balance.
> It stant noght in my sufficance
> So grete thinges to compasse,
> Bot I mot lete it overpasse
> And treten upon othre thinges.
> (1.1-7)

Nicholson reads the passage as Gower's "abandonment of the ambitious project of moral reform in his earlier works for the seemingly more limited aim of the *Confessio*" and a telling break from the more lofty goals of the poem's Prologue. Rather than continuing on the trajectory of massive moral and social reform laid out in the *Vox Clamantis* and the *Mirour de l'Omme*, Gower informs his audience that his "new subject will be love, and for a new subject he will adopt a new style."[1] The poetic goal has telescoped

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[1] Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*, 3.

downward from the love as "social cement" or even as *caritas*, and has transformed into the supposedly more modest aim of addressing the individualized love between one man and one (rather disinterested, in Amans' case) woman.[2] This considerable shift of focus results, as Nicholson argues, in the bizzare use the poem makes of the confessional genre and the characters, Amans and Genius most immediately, who inhabit it. The poem leaves behind the didactic and admonitory tones of Gower's earlier works in favor of a form molded around discovery and exploration of the difficult space between word and deed, intention and action, and the morally known and the experientially felt. And while Nicholson's analysis elegantly demonstrates the intricacies of personalized love examined through Gower's "new style," his assumption that the scope of Gower's poetic project has diminished occludes much of the usefulness of the confessional genre for the narrative and, more importantly, for Gower's medieval readers.

Gower's modest equivocation at the beginning of Book 1 is both essential and misleading. The disintegration of worldly order described in the Prologue cannot be undone and put to rights by the poem or, as Gower is careful to disclose, by its author – the restoration of pre-lapsarian paradise is, understandably, beyond his "sufficance." The "othre thinges" he will turn to instead, however, the things that are "noght so strange" to his audience, do distill down to the topic of "love," but, more importantly, to the examination of love through the discourse of confessional language and praxis.   Gower's use of the genre of confession directly interrogates his very claims to modesty as a poet inasmuch as he deploys confession as an example not only of an incredibly difficult and disciplined textual praxis, but also as a form of language that has the power to effect the very changes Gower claims he cannot. We have seen, in the previous chapter, how

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[2] Ibid., 5.

Gower uses his transformation of the difficult discourse of alchemy to interrogate the

process of effective (and affective) reading within the context of creating *merita*

perpetuata in his readers. The *merita* from the epigram in Book 4, however, has an

earlier, vernacular cousin in Genius' exhortation for "vertue" at the end of Book 3:

> For schrifte stant of no value
> To him that wol him noght vertue
> To leve of vice the folie.
> *For word is wynd*, bot the maistrie
> Is that a man himself defende
> Of thing which is noght to comende,
> Wherof ben fewe now aday.
> (3.2765-2771, *emphasis mine*)

At this moment, Genius and Amans have concluded their investigation of *ira* and are

prepared to move on to *accidia*. The confessor asks his pupil if he is culpable of the sin

of Sloth, whereupon Amans equivocates and asks for more information, leading into

Book 4 of the poem. This exchange at the conclusion of Book 3 has less to do with the

nature of sin than with the nature of the roles of knowledge and language in confession:

Genius agrees that the various permutations of the sin in question must be elaborated

upon, not for the restitution of any particular sin, but to sow the seeds of virtue, or at least

the longing for virtue, in the Christian subject. He claims that the only efficacy in

confession lies in the interior life of the penitent.[3] If we look at the *Confessio* as a text

indebted to the penitential tradition, the sinner must incline his soul to God through the

understanding of the nature of sin that comes primarily through the method of instruction

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[3] The focus on the individual in confession rather than a communal, institutional model comes from the solidification of the practice by the 4th Lateran Council in 1215 and is a critical move in the history of the sacrament through the Reformation. See John Bossy, "The Social History of Confession in the Age of the Reformation," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th Series* 25 (1974), 21-38; Chloë Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Geneology of the 'Confessing Animal'* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). For an older, but still incredibly useful, history of confession, see Charles Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Lea Brothers & Co., 1896).

Genius offers to Amans. Spoken vernacular language in the poem becomes a mode through which understanding is offered and accepted so that the sinner may not only be rid of past sins, but also "himself defende" against temptations yet to come. When this same point in made in the Latin elegiac in Book 1, it comes to the reader through an elaborate series of metaphors involving gates, and caves, and coins, all with their corresponding scriptural associations.[4] In Book 3 when Genius makes the same argument from within the structure of vernacular confessional discourse, he distills the problem down to one single piece of figurative language: "For word is wynd." The elegant simplicity of this phrase is an example of Gower at his poetic best; the stunning economy of syllables beautifully contradicts the complexity of the line's meaning. Language is inherently inadequate to the task at hand but it is the best option available; invisible but tactile, meaningless on its own but nevertheless the representation of divinely-bestowed rationality, language, and more specifically vernacular language, can effect change in readers through its transformational and redemptive power.

Like alchemy, confession begins with degraded, contaminated material and seeks to purify it in the hope of achieving eternal life; but unlike alchemy, the work of confession is rehearsed throughout the poem as Genius guides Amans through each of the seven deadly sins. The common critical understanding of confession comes, of course, from Foucault's *History of Sexuality*:

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and

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[4] The most evident is the reference to the complex parable of the talents in Matthew, but each metaphor can certainly be tied to any number of biblical passages, depending on the reader's point of view and the interpretation he is trying to discover.

intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.[5]

Katherine C. Little quite rightly points out that, in this passage, Foucault is primarily interested in the power relationships between the confessor and the penitent, but it is the power of confessional language to order subjectivity in the person looking for redemption that we should turn our attention towards. To highlight this shift in focus, she rejects the term "subjectivity" in favor of "self-definition" when she thinks about the interaction between the genre of confession and the efficacy of the speech act within confession. In doing so, she is able to convincingly free the development of the inner life of the penitent from constructions of power between the clergy and their flock that are arguably more complex and contested than earlier scholarship might recognize.[6] However, her term in many ways misrepresents the deeply revelatory aspect of confession in the period. Little wants to use confession as a way of defining the subject in relation to the rubric that confession favored: the seven deadly sins, the ten commandments, and so on. And while it is certainly true that, through the process of performing the sacrament, the penitent is able to place the label of "sinner" upon himself along with any specifying adjectives that might go along with it, self-definition is not the goal. Instead, the person is asked to examine, explore, and investigate himself and come to a new awareness of his inner life,

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[5] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), I:61-62.

[6] In the introduction of her work on the role of Wycliffite influence on medieval subject formation, Little places confession as a familiar model though which readers were able to define themselves and explores how Wycliffite doctrine disrupted and questioned the structures of language confession required. For her discussion of Foucault and other critical models about confessional language, see Katherine C. Little, *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 3-12.

whether he appreciates what he finds or not. Self-definition implies choice, whereas self-recognition implies a newly trained awareness of what the state of one's spiritual makeup is at any given moment. Only when this ability is honed and employed can the subject use the confessional rubric to find satisfaction.

I would also argue that, while the power relationships intrinsic to confession should not be our primary focus, at least the fiction of authority is necessary in order for the penitent (or, in Gower's case, the reader) to engage in the work of self-examination the sacrament requires in order to be successful. For Foucault, the speech-act and even the contrition coming out of self-discovery are not sufficient in and of themselves; there must be an authoritative "intervention" in order to validate the subject's effort. In this way, the ever-present anxiety of "getting it wrong" is alleviated. Before this point is even reached, however, the institutional system must be in place in order to spur the subject's necessary introspection. As Robert de Sorbon (1201-1274) writes in his *De confessione*,

> That holy and righteous confession may ensue, three things are necessary
> to the soul of the penitent wishing to confess his sins. The first is that he
> diligently think and examine whether he has committed any of the seven
> criminal sins, which are pride, envy, wrath, avarice, sloth, gluttony,
> lechery. The second thing which he should do afterward is, indeed, that he
> should inquire well whether the divine commandments were broken, of
> which there are ten. The third is that he ought to omit nothing; that is, that
> (since he cannot recollect and recount all the details of his sins, which
> because of his sin and negligence in confession, he carries to oblivion) he
> should recall with lamentation that he has sinned against God in all kinds
> of sins, that is, in thought, in word, and in deed, to which all sins are
> reducible.[7]

The system laid out here rests on a familiar devotional foundation of the seven cardinal sins and the Ten Commandments. But more to the point, because of the weighty charges of accuracy and completeness the sacrament lays upon its practitioners, the penitent and

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[7] Quoted in D. W. Robertson, "The Cultural Tradition of *Handlyng Synne*," *Speculum* 22, no. 2 (1947), 179.

the confessor both, the practice becomes highly systematized in order to ensure it is

properly administered and performed. In this example, the first and most important step

in confession, recognizing and pronouncing past sins before the priest, is separated into

three steps designed to create a taxonomy of the inner blemishes of any given penitent.

Such systemization combined with the institutional intervention of the priest is enough to

formalize power relations between confessor, penitent, and confessional language to the

point that any self-examination is fueled by those relations. Even if we do not see the

priest overseeing the procedure as an uncomplicated authority figure, as Little is quite

right to caution us against, enough of a framework exists around confession to generate a

fiction of stable power relationships. And it is the perceptions of these relationships on

the part of the penitent that makes confessional language effective.[8]

Gower looks to instill the same attitude towards his poetics, that of affective and

effective interpretation, that exists in confessional language. For all confession's ability

to stabilize boundaries between the estates, it also creates a bridge between lay petitioners

and the clergy, and between the vernacular of the confession itself and the Latin of the

doctrine behind it.[9] The poem uses the framework of confession, bolstered by the

authority of Venus's command, to guide Amans into a level of self-examination that he

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[8] Jerry Root describes a split in the current historical scholarship surrounding confession: on the one hand, some historians see it primarily as a moment of self-development, a "social practice that accommodates the penitent's need for consolation and facilitates a forms of self-expression" (48), on the other, it is described as an institutional practice that emphasizes the Church's control over its subjects. In fact, I argue these two sides of the coin cannot be separated; it is the institutional pressure that allows vernacular self-expression, and therefore self-discovery, to become socially valuable. Jerry Root, *'Space to Speke': Confessional Practice and the Construction of Character in the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Guillaume De Machaut, and Juan Ruiz* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990).
[9] As Robin Bower writes, "Through confession, the lay word found a place to speak within the context of liturgical language, bringing an end to the history of progressive alienation of the laity from liturgical language and culture, and opening the way to a subjective experience of spirituality and religious authenticity that is neither linguistically nor physically sealed off from the world." Robin M. Bower, "Prescriptions for Reading: The Medicinal Prologues of Gonzalo De Berceo's *Saints' Lives*," *Modern Language Notes* 118 (2003), 289.

would not otherwise have been able to accomplish. And, in so doing, the poem does the same for the vernacular reader. On the other hand, the confession we see Amans undertaking is a performance only—it can only take the form of the sacrament and never the meaning. Gower's poem presents a discourse freed from the ecclesiastical bonds that legitimize it in the first place and, now that it is untethered from the institutional framework, it becomes powerful in its own discursivity. Gower, in effect, answers Foucault by producing confessional language that, even if it begins with the fiction of institutional control, orders vernacular subjectivity without sacramental oversight. Language in the poem must forfeit its sacramental power (and the corresponding alchemical ability to transform) in order to affectively and effectively act upon its readers.

The Absent Confession in the Confessio

As a whole, the poem offers a picture of a performance of confession that, while certainly influenced by sacramental practices and penitential manuals, cannot itself act as a confessional handbook. It is designed neither to inspire penance in its readers nor to function as a pastoral guide. Even as a vernacular performance, the enterprise the reader sees in Gower's frame story is not confession per se but rather an extrapolation of the form onto a decidedly secular environment; as a result, Amans will never be able to fulfill the teleological agenda of that form. Because confession originated in monastic contexts first and then moved out into laic consciousness, the practice is deeply marked by regular ethics: participating in a heavenly life while on earth, striving to move continuously

closer to God, and cultivating devotional perfection.[10] The reconciliation of the soul with

the divine found in confession is dependent upon the monastic practice of *ruminatio,*

substituting contemplation of a sacred text for meditation on the individual soul in order

to identify the sins and generate the appropriate and healing contrition essential to the

sacrament of penance.[11] And, like monastic *ruminatio,* confession both lay and regular

brings the practitioner into greater harmony with the mind of God. Not so, however, for

Amans. His confession to Genius is predicated on Venus' demand that he be shriven

before the wounds of love cause him to die, not out of Christian piety, and the desire for

unification with a heavenly ideal exists only in the conceit of organizing the poem around

the seven cardinal sins. Amans is not looking to purify himself to attain heavenly peace;

his goal is to be a better lover and gain admittance into Venus' court.[12]

The codification of the medieval practice of confession and penance by Canon 21

of the Fourth Lateran Council required each Christian man or woman to engage in a

process of self-examination and analysis that now carried the full weight of canonical

law. Prior to this, as David Crouch writes, "the nature and frequency of lay confession is

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[10] "Confession within monasteries or regular orders, with its various forms and sacramental statuses, nourished the spread of confession among the laity. This fact, if it is that, puts the history of confession into the context of another, larger area of the history of religion and morals: the emanation, whether or not with uniformly felicitous results, of monastic ideals into lay society at large." Alexander Murray, "Confession before 1215," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th Series* 3 (1993), 80-81. For a fuller description of monastic life and ideology, see Dennis D. Martin, "Popular and Monastic Pastoral Issues in the Later Middle Ages," *Church History* 56, no. 3 (1987), 327. Also note the fourth chapter of Jean LeClercq's invaluable work, Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture.*

[11] "In the early Middle Ages, monastic reading (*ruminatio*) was identified as a form of prayer or meditation and drew metaphorically on a rich orality, associated with the Eucharist and reading aloud. But Augustine's uneasy gaze on Ambrose's devoiced or suppressed-voice reading gave way in eleventh- and twelfth-century religious discourses to a more interiorized mode of spirituality keyed to individual, quieter, often silent contemplative reading or textual study. Monks were encouraged to use written texts for private devotions." Mark Amsler, "Affective Literacy: Gestures of Reading in the Later Middle Ages," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 18 (2001), 86.

[12] Yet it is important to note that even from an allegorical perspective, substituting *cupititas* for *caritas,* Amans' confession fails to elevate him in either arena. He never accomplishes his goal of participating in Venus' selective circle of lovers and must content himself with the learning he has gained through the confessional process.

an open question for most of Europe."[13] While confession and penance were most

certainly foundations of the monastic life, the laity had a much less defined relationship

to the practice, relying on localized conventions rather than defined tenets.[14] The primary

influence of the decree *Omnis utriusque sexus*, the canon specifying the details of

sanctioned penitential practice, was the explicit casting of these previously disparate

traditions and customs into a systematized and enforced statute that included the laity

along with members of regular communities. After 1215, all members of the Church

were required to attend confession and partake in communion at least once every year,

preferably at Easter. While the intricacies of Eucharistic controversy are by no means

unimportant, it can be argued that for the average layman or woman accepting the host

during the Easter Mass, it was not necessary to unravel the theological details of

transubstantiation in order to partake successfully in the rite. Confession, however,

requires a much more complete understanding in order to effect the cleansing of the soul

necessary for salvation. For each step in the familiar triad of contrition, confession, and

restitution, the penitent is largely responsible for the accuracy and validity of his

participation. The efforts and prompting of the attending priest can provide a helpful

guide for recollecting and identifying each infraction, but it is the inner labor of the

sinner, along with his careful representation of that labor in revealing each of his sins in

speech, that lies at the heart of the practice. Failure to fully disclose a given sin, either

out of neglect or deceit, or to shirk in the performance of an assigned restitution would

result in very real eternal penalties -- a threat that must have been felt at the most

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[13] David Crouch, "The Troubled Deathbeds of Henry I's Servants: Death, Confession, and Secular Conduct I Nteh Thwelfth Century," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 34, no. 1 (2002), 25.
[14] Martin, "Popular and Monastic Pastoral Issues in the Later Middle Ages," 327.

fundamental level by the participant. On the other hand, confession also offered a unique moment of absolute certainty in lay and regular devotion in that it created a process through which a person could be absolutely confident of the state of his mortal soul. If properly performed, it eliminated fears of divine retribution in the afterlife by offering a series of comprehensible steps through which the gross imperfections marring the sinner's inner spiritual self might be sponged away. He becomes new again and clean in the eyes of the Church and of God. Medieval confession then is simultaneously a source of intense anxiety and a powerful devotional tool.

As a result, regulation of the confessional practice gave rise to an accompanying dispersal of handbooks intended to educate participants about their newly mandated duties so as to ensure successful administration and practice of the sacrament.[15] Gower uses texts like Robert of Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* and Robert of Flamborough's *Liber poenitentialis* to structure the *Confessio Amantis*, but the act of confession that composes the frame narrative of the poem does not, in fact, hew closely to the sacrament in anything but a generic way. The poem adopts the genre of confession, with its development of an inner subjective consciousness and the focus on interpretive labor, but Amans' confession itself lacks critical components of either a model confession found in a handbook or an actual confession mandated by the Church. The activity of the poem is bound into a confessional shape that Gower uses to access a form of readerly work that Amans struggles to accomplish but that the reader is expected to fulfill.

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[15] W.A. Pantin's discusses the spread of penitential literature as social as well as a religious phenomenon: "These constitutions provided, among other things, an elaborate programme of religious instruction for the laity; and this was all the more necessary because of the great social and economic phenomenon of the age, the revival of town life and the consequent rise of an educated laity." W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 189. See also Robertson, "The Cultural Tradition of *Handlyng Synne*," 169.

From the very beginning, the strain around Gower's deployment of a confessional framework, both in its depiction of the practice and in its relationship to the penitential literature that was circulating so widely in the late fourteenth century, threatens to disrupt the narrative unity of the poem. In more ways than it adheres to confession, the poem resists and distances itself from the sacrament by exposing the many ways in which the performance enacted between Genius and Amans misrepresents and approximates penitential praxis. The ritual of confession in the medieval church is, as Thomas Tentler aptly describes, a negotiation between social discipline and individual consolation. He writes,

> Throughout the history of this ritual of forgiveness four substantive elements persist, even though they receive varying emphasis from century to century. First, to be forgiven, sinners have always been required to feel sorrow at having lapsed. Second, they have consistently made some kind of explicit confession of their sins or sinfulness. Third, they have assumed, or had imposed on them, some kind of penitential exercises. And fourth, they have participated in an ecclesiastical ritual performed with the aid of priests who pronounce penitents absolved from sin or reconciled with the communion of believers.[16]

This balance between the soothing and reformation of individual sinners and the reaffirmation of their place within a social structure defined by the hegemony of the Church is an irreconcilable part of the penitential rite. Successful penance can, as Foucault argues, only happen within the constructs of an established and recognized system of self-perpetuating institutional authority and control. Tentler's four-step process of confession moves from the intimate and most inward space of the subject's self out into the sanctified presentation to and examination of the performance of confession by the priest, in all his ecclesiastical power and license. Gower, in his appropriation of this system, mimics the delicate relationship between the inner life of the

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[16] Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 3.

penitent and the external judgment of the priest, even to the extent that the poem takes up the genre of penitential manuals. He mines the development of the "technologies of the self" that confession demands of its practitioners even as he negates the elements needed to render the sacrament effective. But, in order for Amans to develop his interior eyes, the authoritative system of confession must first be stable enough to support sacramental praxis.

The confessional office is one of the most imposing and complex roles for a priest to attempt; Jacobus de Clusa warns, "I do not know of a more difficult and dangerous work than the office of hearing confessions."[17] The ideal confessor must have the appropriate knowledge of a host of sinful acts that a potential penitent might bring before him, including the essential distinctions between mortal and venial sins, he must be patient and caring in his audition, just in his judgment, humble in his recognition of his own ignorance, willing to consult higher authorities when in doubt, circumspect against faulty confessions, sympathetic and stern as necessary, and, most importantly, he must be able to instill the spirit of contrition in his penitent. Add to this a necessary familiarity with his community so as to recognize the fine distinctions a particular sin may have when involving another person besides the penitent, an understanding of the various sins particular to those holding special social status (military personnel, merchants, scholars, judges, physicians, farmers, etc.), and a delicate command of persuasive and affective language, and you have a picture of a person who, arguably, does not look like the average medieval parish priest. And so, from a purely pragmatic aspect, concessions were made. Penitential manuals prepared for priests and confessors in Latin as well as in

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[17] From his *Confessionale compendiosum at utilissimum*, quoted in Ibid., 126.

various vernaculars were intended to assist both in the understanding of sin and in the selection of appropriate performed penances. As yet, as Charles Lea wryly observes,

> The science of the confessional embraces the ethics of all human action,
> and the dull and untrained brain of the ordinary priest was more likely to
> be confused than enlightened by the refined dialectics and endless
> refinements of those who sought to give him spiritual guidance.[18]

The problem of ineffective confessors opens a host of dangers, dogmatic and practical, for the clergy administering the confession and the penitents performing it.

Confessing to a priest who lacks the appropriate judgment or knowledge was one of the four cases for reiteration—the repetition of the confession in its entirety. Incomplete confession, failure to perform assigned satisfaction, and the need for a higher ecclesiastical authority, usually based on the magnitude of a particular sin, all render the sacrament ineffective, but the need for a qualified and skilled confessor is the most vague and worrying of invalidating conditions. Even if the power of the priest in confession emanates from the ecclesiastical power of the keys, the power to loose and bind from sin, the character of the confessor is critical for producing a complete, contrite confession from the penitent. Thus, a priest cannot rely on his office alone for sanctification of the act; rather, he must strive to embody the solemnity and learned authority of the expert confessor every time he hears a penitent. Godescalc Rosemont, in his *Confessionale*, compares unlearned confessors to "physicians who dispense medicine indiscriminately and ignorantly, not knowing what illness it is for, caring only for their own profit."[19] In the same vein, handbooks intended for those preparing themselves to confess offer similar advice for entrusting one's confession only to a priest capable of hearing it. In

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[18] Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession*, vol. 2, 234.
[19] Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 98.

Handlyng Synne, Robert Mannyng of Brune devotes his seventh point of shrift to

advising his reader on choosing an appropriate "shryftfadyr":

> Þe seuenþe poynt ys a gode resoun
> Þat þy shryfte be wysly doun.
> Þat ys to seye, to a wys man
> Þat þy shryfte vndyrstonde kan,
> Nat to one þat haþ no wyt
> Of vnderstondyng of holy wryt.
> (11583-11585)[20]

Angelus de Clavasio in the fifteenth century goes even further, claiming that if one

knowingly confesses to a priest who is ignorant of his office and the intricacies of

confession that the act itself is sinful—emphasizing the urgent need for the penitent to

somehow establish the worth of his or her chosen confessor.[21]

Under these parameters, Amans' confession to Genius is immediately and

irreconcilably flawed. Genius, as he urges Amans to shrift, is primarily established

within an areligious context and quickly diverts from the discourse of Christian devotion,

sheepishly conceding that

> For it is noght my comun us
> To speke of vices and vertus,
> Bot al of love and of his lore,
> (1.267-269)

Clearly uncomfortable in his assigned role, Genius appears neither learned nor

authoritative and he directly contradicts the picture of the expert confessor that penitential

handbooks describe. His reluctance cannot be taken as a mere humility trope in the way

that we might read Gower's *qua* narrator's self-effacement earlier in the poem because,

unlike the author of a long devotional poem, within the context of the narrative it is

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[20] All Mannyng quotes taken from Robert Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1983).
[21] See Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 126.

Genius' primary responsibility as a confessor to be as trustworthy and dependable as possible.[22] Without his established authority, Amans is in real danger. To this end, Genius' inconsistencies throughout the poem have lead past critics to cite his shifting character as the poem's most serious flaw. From Macaulay, who undermines his function as a priest ("...as a devotee of Venus he is concerned only with the affairs of love[23]), to Knowlton, who demotes him even further ("Genius occupies...no such conspicuous position in the English poem as he did in the works of Alanus de Insulis and Jean de Meun"[24]), the double role of Genius' presence in the poem has long been a point of contention. Denise Baker finds Genius to be a demonstration of the "fallibility of natural inclinations" and a check on the rampant rule of either nature or of reason, reading him as a tutelary figure rather than his more common association as part of Nature herself, but even this displaces his role not just as a priest, but also as a confessor proper.[25] As a confessor, Genius admits he is straying away from his "comun us" to instruct Amans in the detailed taxonomy of the seven deadly sins that make up the framework for the exempla in the poem, but in responding to Venus' assignment he has a sacerdotal obligation to fulfill it to the best of his ability.

And, as he himself confesses outright, his abilities are sorely lacking. While he may be confident in explaining the perils and delights of love, Genius nervously but openly admits to his unfamiliarity with the intricacies of the vices. Furthermore, his

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[22] Gerald Kinnaevy makes this claim and, while the humility trope is indeed common in medieval literature, it is very much out of place in penitential discourse—at least coming from the confessor. While it is true that Genius does have encyclopedic knowledge of sins, we shall see that his inability to separate himself (and Amans) from relating all things back to love remains incredibly problematic. Gerald Kinneavy, "Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the Penitentials," *The Chaucer Review* 19, no. 2 (1984), 144-61.

[23] G. C. Macaulay, ed., *The English Works of John Gower*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Early English Text Society* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1969), xix.

[24] E. C. Knowlton, "The Allegorical Figure Genius," *Classical Philology* 15, no. 4 (1920), 384.

[25] Denise N. Baker, "The Priesthood of Genius: A Study of the Medieval Tradition," *Speculum* 51, no. 2 (1976), 288.

bondage to Venus' service has specialized his powers of explanation and explication to

the point that he worries (and rightly so) that he will be ineffective:

> For I with love am al withholde,
> So that the lasse I am to wyte,
> Thogh I ne conne bot a lyte
> Of othre thinges that ben wise:
> I am noght tawt in such a wise.
> (1.262-266)

Genius claims that he cannot be blamed for his shortcomings as a confessor because his

loyalty to Venus has kept his attention elsewhere; in performing his duty to her and to her

court, he is limited in his experience in other clerical responsibilities. His own admission

here, discomforting as it is when considering that Amans (and Venus) is staking his soul

on the validity of the proposed confession, is in and of itself not cause to abandon hope

entirely. One of the primary attributes of a qualified confessor is his humility in the face

of things he does not know—this is the very reason for the penitential handbooks that

circulated so widely in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was perfectly acceptable

for a confessor to consult a more learned colleague or an authoritative text at moments of

difficulty. And yet, even though Genius seems more than willing to cite his "olde

bookes" as sources of his *exempla* and understanding of sin, he makes clear that "For

Venus bokes of no more/ Me techen nowther text ne glose." (I.270-271) His knowledge

is not of sin, or even of virtue, but of Venus' domain; he is a creature of love, not of

salvation.

This arrangement suits Amans just fine; for better or worse, Genius' limitations as

a confessor align perfectly with Amans' desires as a penitent. The moment Genius

comes into view, Amans exults in his good fortune:

> ...Dominus,

> Min holi fader Genius;
> So as thou hast experience
> Of love, for whos reverence
> Thou schalt me schriven at this time,
> I prai thee let me noght mistime
> Mi schrifte, for I am destourbed
> In al myn heart...
>
> (1.215-222)

He quite rightly identifies his own condition, "destorbed" and "contourbed." In fact, Amans seems to know quite a bit about confession. In the first moments of his meeting with Genius, the mortally wounded Amans goes as far as to instruct Genius in the proper manner to proceed with the sacrament. He asks the uncomfortable priest to oversee his confession because he is so distraught

> "...That I ne may my wittes gete,
> So schal I moche thing forgete.
> Bot if thou wolt my schifte oppose
> Fro point to point, thane, I suppose,
> Ther schal nothing be left behind.
> Bot now my wittes ben so blinde,
> That I ne can miselven teche."
>
> (1.223-229)

The error Amans makes is not in his grasp of the priest's role in confession, it is in his misrecognition of Genius' authority. The would-be lover warms to Genius for his "experience of love," not for his abilities as a confessor and, in doing so, substitutes clerical wisdom for a courtly worldliness that, while having a foundation of virtues and vices, can only approximate the understanding demanded of qualified confessors. In a sense, Amans is falling into the argument Chaucer's unappealing Pardoner gives to his fellow pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales*: because he is himself such an egregious and open sinner, he has a better understanding of sin and is therefore far more suited to his post than a pious and righteous man. In the same way, Amans assumes that Genius'

"experience" in Venus' court will get him closer to his goal of winning his lady and gaining entrance to love's inner circle.

This clear pull between the confessional frame and the secular love narrative generates a significant amount of narrative tension as the two genres strive for primacy. This friction emerges in the poem as the logical assumptions of the confessional genre and the structure of confessional discourse resist the particular circumstances in which Amans finds himself. It is in these moments that readers are asked to recognize the narrative dissonance through Gower's language. For example, in Book 3 Amans confesses his tendency for wrath when his lady refuses his attentions, to the point where his household servants think him mad. He paces, "fulofte bitinge on my lippe" (3.119) and he bears "an angri snoute/ Ful many times in a yer" (3.128-129). The language he uses to describe his anger is passionate, personal, and urgent:

> Whan I ne may my ladi se,
> The more I am redy to wraththe,
> That for the touchinge of a laththe
> Or for the torninge of a stree
> I wode as doth the wylde se
> <div align="right">(3.82-86)</div>

But this wild and destructive state can disappear as quickly as it arises, with a single kind word from the object of his desire:

> For al the gold that is in Rome
> Ne cowthe I after that be wroth,
> Bot al myn anger overgoth;
> So glad I am of the presence
> Of hire, that I all offence
> Forgete, as though it were noght,
> So overgladed is my thought.
> <div align="right">(3.100-106)</div>

The dramatic shift is instantaneous. Amans no sooner finishes his account of the violence of his wrath than his churning sea suddenly becomes placid and ripple-free. The narrative logic of the second passage cites the lady as the only answer to Amans' anger— she alone can calm his dangerous emotional turmoil. One word, conspicuously absent in Amans' telling, soothes his "malencolious" heart and returns him to equilibrium. The lady in her capacity as embodied love is the clear cure for wrath and, in terms of Gower's blend of the confessional and the amorous, this conclusion supports the use of love as the universal healing agent that crosses secular and devotional lines.

The problem with this interpretation is, of course, that along with being the answer to all of Amans' distress, the lady is also the cause of them, vice and virtue together. Wrathfulness is not a common inclination for Amans, something he must continually struggle against as part of his sinful character, but a direct result of scorn and rebuff he feels is unwarranted.   He complains to Genius that he dreams only of meeting his lady alone and having a few simple soft words from her, but she persists in turning her attentions elsewhere. He has devoted all his energies to winning her favor, to no avail. Amans is "distempred and esmaied/ A thousand times on a day" (3.58-59), yet still he forges fruitlessly ahead. Anger is not out of place here, irrational as it is.

The lady's disturbing ability to "overgo" all this excess emotion is echoed four lines later; Amans is not, in fact, cured of intemperate and immodest (and sinful) feelings; rather, he is "overgladed" in his thoughts. A rare word in Middle English, 'overgladed' implies, again, an excess of emotion just as dangerous as Amans' rage a few lines earlier. Robert Mannyng, curiously enough, uses it as an adjective in *Handlying Synne* to scold those who use the Sabbath for pleasure rather than pious devotion:

> ꝫyf þou make karol or play,
> Þou halewyst nat þyn halyday.
> ꝫyf þou come ouergladly þar tyl
> And ꝫeuyst þar to mochyl þy wyl,
> Yn þat hast þou mykyl plyght
> For synne wyle come þurgh swylk syght.
> (985-990)

Gower does the same elsewhere in the *Confessio*, but also to indicate, as does Mannyng, a dangerous level of pleasure. In Book 1, Vainglory is "of his corage/ so overglad" (1.2712-2713), and in Book 4, Amans describes his heart as "...overglad/ Al out of reule and out of space" (4.678-679) when he sees his lady. In each of these instances, "overgladness" indicates pleasure so great that it overwhelms all else, causing the subject literally to forget himself. In Mannyng's case, the sinner who chooses to indulge himself in games and songs on holy days has forgotten the duty he owes to God; similarly, Gower's Vainglory "rememberth noght" (1.2682) of his flaws and looks only to the points of himself in which he takes pride. Using this selective self-recognition, the precise inverse to confessional self-searching, Vainglory delights in his ability to change himself for his own pleasure. For the sake of love, he will change himself

> Lich unto the camelion,
> Which upon every sondri hewe
> That he beholt he moste newe
> His colour, and thus unavised
> Ful ofte time he stant desguised.
> (1.2698-2700)

Confessional praxis, like Vainglory's shifting nature, concerns itself with self-transformation but, whereas Vainglory assumes whatever "desguise" he needs to effect self-glorification, the penitent's transformational work is guided by a system of authoritative discourse, embodied by the learned priest. "Overglad" as Amans is, and

with his myopic devotion to his disdainful lady, he comes perilously close to a form of transformation that is more in keeping with sin than with salvation.[26]

Gower places his readers in the position to separate out the logical tangle posed by Amans' confession of Vainglory, from the dual role of the lady as cause and cure, to the dangers and implications of Amans' over-emotional inner life. Because readers are not, presumably, reading the text as a step-by-step guidebook on how to win a recalcitrant lover, and their experiences in love are unlikely to perfectly match those of the poem's protagonist, their responses to Amans' responses are not bound by the amorous aspirations so integral to his dubious performance of confession. As much as Genius' shortcomings as a confessor might conform to Amans' desires as a penitent, and as much as penitential manuals recommend for confessors to tailor their questions to the needs of the particular individual before them, readers of Gower's poem are encouraged through his carefully structured language to examine the problems Amans' confession opens and, in the end, fails to resolve. Amans' willingness to change himself for love becomes a weak reflection of the kind of transformation offered by the penitential process, which is to say, he is able to adopt the mechanism of self-transformation even as he remains steadfast in his own aims and aspirations. His use of the genre quickly moves from its intended purpose to a means of accomplishing one very specific and very secular goal. Not only does the confession performed in the poem become, then, a flawed approximation of the actual process, it also becomes a lens through which we can see errors in Amans that are not included in Genius' heuristic of the seven deadly sins.

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[26] n.b. In Book 4, Amans is careful to clarify that his forgetfulness could never extend to his lady—on the contrary, she is too much in his thoughts. Unlike Vainglory, his attention is irrevocably fixed on one target and, because of her disinterest, he is all too mindful of his various flaws. The lady, however, does blind him to all else and, therefore, any self-reflection he can manage is naturally keyed to her judgment.

Readers of the poem, then, are presented with a view of confession not as a devotional practice but a tool for examining the inner life and a method for altering that life through a process of recognition, analysis, and self-management. But what is clear is that ecclesiastical confession, with its carefully maintained authoritative structure, is not what we see in the *Confessio*. The problem of Genius' status as a valid confessor and the focus of Amans' interest only in matters of love, to say nothing of his lack of apparent contrition for his past sins, negate Amans' confession as a discursive practice and as a devotional performance. Neither party holds up his end of the contract and readers are left with the form, if not the substance, of the sacrament.

The Present Confession in the Confessio

These two elements, Genius' questionable fitness as a confessor and Amans' persistent focus on winning his lady rather than his salvation, remove the performance of confessional praxis from any semblance of ecclesiastical authenticity or effectiveness. They are not, however, so narratively disruptive that they prevent the performance from being recognizable. As mismatched as his learning is, Genius is still learned, and as mistaken as he is in his motivation, Amans is still zealous for self-transformation. He is contrite, he wishes to change, and he wishes to change to be worthy of love—not divine love *per se*, but love just the same. Of course, as Derek Pearsall astutely observes, the choice of situating the poem around the commonly understood and universally applicable theme of love rather than actual confession is a subtle move on Gower's part that prepares

the way for the establishment of a unifying poetics.[27] Nonetheless, even though the

elements that cultivate virtuous love do the same for virtuous living, the use of the

confessional form as a narrative structure with markedly secular figures repackages the

penitential process as a universal exercise in reconciliation.[28] Gower's careful

maintenance of the surface of confessional rhetoric, complete with its ethical imperatives,

allows him to shift the discursive form into a provident tool for establishing vernacular

subjectivity.

The result is the transformation of confession from a display and iteration of

ecclesiastical authority to a deinstitutionalized discourse, which no longer draws its

affective power from its negotiation of the relationship between the individual penitent

and the Church, but transposes enough of the critical components of the discourse onto

the narrative for Gower to shape the work of his vernacular readers. In ecclesiastical

confession, knowledge of the self emanated from the sanctifying language of the priest as

the embodiment of sacramental authority, thereby ordering the penitent's subjectivity

through the channels of a carefully controlled and systematized discourse. Furthermore,

the performance of confession and penance transferred this ordering power of the Church

from internal control to external control as penitents both committed their past deeds into

truthful, plain speech and subsequently made restitution for them. These three primary

effects of confessional discourse, accuracy/truthfulness, self-understanding, and the move

from action to thought and back to action again, hold essential positions in Gower's

appropriation of confession, but by freeing them from their dependence upon institutional

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[27] Pearsall, "Gower's Narrative Art," 476.

[28] Dennis Foster dubs this the "confessional turn" and sees confessional language as "a mode by which people enter into the discourse of their culture, where they step beyond reiteration of the stories and into interpretation." Dennis A. Foster, *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7.

confirmation and facilitation, he recasts them. Rather than appearing in the space

between the priest/Church and the sinner, they become textual elements for readers to

deploy for themselves, by themselves. The absolute refusal to grant *auctoritas* is

stunning. For a discourse that is utterly dependent upon an authoritative presence, Gower

removes almost all possibilities of locating that authority within the poem; it isn't found

in Genius, in the Church, or even, as was discussed in the previous chapter, in the

narrator's poetic persona. The text, then, and readerly labor over the text become the

source of authentication both for the characters within the poem and for readers without.

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The windy words of English are, like the confessional frame, a blend of

contemplative and active discourse. Genius asks Amans to ruminate over the various

exempla and extrapolate from them a definition of a sin in the spirit of contrition,

confession, and prevention. The confessional framework in the poem, as in other

penitential manuals of the period, builds individual interpretation into the practice of

discovering one's own interior life – in this case through the medium of a vernacular that

must be robust enough to sustain the contemplative work confession requires as well as

flexible enough to transition into active results. The trouble with this hybrid, windy

language is that the transition from the contemplative to the active is not always visible.

As a confessional document, Gower's poem is continually conscious of the readerly work

performed by its characters and, in turn, by its audience. Interpretation, when successfully

applied, can bridge the gap between fallen soul and purified perfection. Mental labor,

however, is not always easily recognizable as the virtuous 'besinesse' of other forms of

work: it is immaterial, lacking the tangible physicality that makes manual labor

immediately recognizable and a tactile product that can be used and exchanged as well as touched. The most pressing danger of mental work is, in the end, how much it looks like idleness, as we see from Amans and Genius' exchanges throughout the poem. The process of *exempla*, interpretation, correction and explanation might well appear inactive to one looking for evidence of industrious activity, and yet, Amans' rehearsal of this process in the confessional framework of the narrative is the only consistent model offered for textual labor.[29]

The answer to this problem is, of course, that the interpretive work we see in the poem and the work that Gower urges his readers to perform on the poem is a blend of the active and the contemplative. The bridge between these two states is invisible precisely because no bridge exists; instead, like the "wynd" of Gower's vernacular, his readers must embody both at once. In the prologue, when Gower describes his intention to write a poem in the "middel weie," "somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore," (Pro.17, 19) he skirts the issue by claiming that the choice is primarily to keep his audience's attention and not bore them with the process of their own education. In this, he echoes the blend of "best sentence and moost solaas" attempted by Chaucer's pilgrims in Harry Bailly's

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[29] Contemplative labor, though the preferred mode of work in Gower, is nevertheless problematic in its application in the poem. It is important to note that there are definite limitations to Gower's privileging of readerly work, for example, when an interest in mental labor leads either to heresy (Lollardry in particular) or to other, more traditional clerkly vices like sloth or avarice. In the Prologue, Gower insists,

> It were betre dike and delve
> And stone upon the ryhte feith,
> Than knowe al that the Bible seith
> And erre as somme clerkes do.
> (Pro.352-355)

While digging and delving certainly do not trump the value of contemplative work, Gower is careful to maintain that scriptural understanding is not enough to guarantee a virtuous life. Unless the understanding leads to the active transformation of the soul, it is better to avoid temptation through other kinds of labor.

storytelling game.[30] Anne Middleton famously uses this notion of a "middle way" to read Gower's vernacular as an example of a public, bourgeois poetics that becomes a

> voice neither universal nor personal…a common voice, implicated in the ills it describes, yet capable of entertaining cosmopolitan complexities and a vision of communal harmony. Its social tone with respect to us is that of an observant and enlightened citizen among peers.[31]

In her argument, "public poetry" that developed in the Ricardian period maintains a unique relationship between the speaker and the audience that becomes itself the poetic subject. The poetry has a "common voice" in that it looks to make good on society's deficiencies by resolving a disparate and disjunctive community (that of fourteenth century England) into one with a unified awareness and understanding. To accomplish this, poets use a plain, unadorned style that resists jargon and learned language so as to speak their moral message more directly to the larger community. While this is certainly a convincing take on Gower's self-imposed selection of the middling vernacular, especially considering his concern with correcting the shattered and degraded world he describes in the Prologue, it persists in viewing the poem and its language from a external viewpoint. The eye here is looking towards defining both a historical moment as well as a representative stylistic moment, as Middleton herself makes clear. She follows in Burrow's creation of a "Ricardian period" and, in doing so, flattens out Gower's language to the point where the face of the poem becomes the whole of the poem, and his carefully controlled vernacular becomes windy in an entirely different way.

By using confession to structure the frame story of the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower demonstrates a form of interpretive labor that he looks to impart to vernacular readership, namely, an example of readerly work that is contemplative and active simultaneously.

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[30] (Prol.798) Chaucer and Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*.
[31] Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," 114.

The form of confession is an intrinsically hybrid one, requiring that practitioners involve themselves equally in contemplation of their sins and in actively performing the assigned penance; the tripartite structure of *contritio cordis* ("contrition of the heart"), *confessio oris* ("confession of the mouth"), and *satisfactio operis* ("satisfaction of deeds") moves through the contemplative, embodied in the penitent's self-examination of sins in contrition, through the blended form of the oracular confession – where the efforts of inner, contemplative work are actively transformed into spoken language, to the physical representation of enacted *satisfactio operis* in the world.

On the most basic level, critics have associated Latin writings in the medieval period with studious scholarship, or a contemplative tradition, and the vernacular with a more immediate, active relay of information.[32] There are, of course, notable exceptions, but by in large this classic classification holds fast in current critical inquiry even as it did in the Middle Ages. The clarity of meaning associated with the vernacular, what Derek Pearsall calls "the simplicity, even transparency, of the English" in Gower's poem, presents a unique challenge to readership.[33] Accustomed as we modern readers are to approaching texts with an eye for uncovering meaning coded into the formal, historical, or critical contexts, Gower's smooth style proves strangely slippery and, as a result, we are left with a picture of the vernacular as an opposing force, either positive or negative, to the erudite and difficult Latin with which it is juxtaposed. Instead of relying on this

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[32] Derek Pearsall describes the relationship as such: "…the Latin acts as the agent of that general hostility toward narrative fiction which is characteristic of medieval ecclesiastical orthodoxy. This unconstrained and transgressive potential of fiction, the power that narrative has of being 'simply there like life itself', of being something in which 'the events seem to tell themselves', must be denied. We cannot imagine a culture in which narrativity could be absent, but we have one here, in the Middle Ages, in which it could be and was 'programmatically refused' or at least converted into 'discourse'." Derek Pearsall, "Gower's Latin in the *Confessio Amantis*," in *Latin and Vernacular: Studies in Late-Medieval Texts and Manuscripts*, ed. A. J. Minnis, *York Manuscripts Conferences* (Wolfeboro, N.H.: D.S. Brewer, 1989), 22.
[33] Ibid., 16.

dichotomy, Gower plays in the space between the two languages in order to put pressure on how the vernacular works and how vernacular readers pull meaning out of the text. In this, his use of confession as an overarching frame narrative allows him to bridge the gap as the practice itself is a site for language contact and mediation. Between the Latinate, clerical world exemplified in handbooks like Alain de Lille's *Liber Poenitentialis* and the spoken vernacular of the act of private confession flows a hybrid discourse that underlies Gower's poetics. Confession is at once studied and spoken, Latin and vernacular, contemplative and active. Working out of this blended form, the poem develops as a unique composite that recasts the borders of textual labor in Middle English.[34]

We can see this played out in the inter-exempla conversations between Genius and Amans and, more importantly, in the relationship between Genius' ordering of the various parts of each sin for Amans and in Gower's ordering of these same explanations for his readers. For example, in Book 4, the taxonomy of sloth becomes an investigation into labor (as its natural antidote), but the diagetic labor of the exempla and of Amans *qua* penitent is played out in contrast to the labor of readers looking in at the narrative. The initial structure of the book is the same as the preceding two that focus on the sins of envy and wrath: Genius opens the discussion of sloth by anatomizing the sin into its various forms: *lachesce, pusillamité, forgetelnesse, negligence, ydelnesse, somnolence,* and *tristesse*. For each, Amans is given a brief description of the individual sin and

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[34] For, as Foster astutely observes, there is something deeply unsettling about the notion of the written, bookish confession; it challenges and entices a reader into rationalizing a discourse that is, in itself, irrational. If we understand rational reading as exhibiting a basic faith in the representational power of language, then the expression of the thinking self, through the analysis of texts, encounters the irrational other, the sinner, in confessional literature.[34] The penitential subject is fundamentally an unstable one who is looking to regain a unified subjectivity through the performance of the sacrament; when this is placed in a literary dialog as in Amans' conversation with Genius, there is interpretive work on two levels. Amans must learn how to recognize errors in himself just as the reader must test his own powers of interpretation as he watches the exchange play out. For a fuller situating of confession within the critical discourse, see the introduction to Foster, *Confession and Complicity in Narrative*.

either confesses to yielding to it, or denies any involvement with it. One or more exemplary stories then follow to offer Amans an opportunity to see the sin at work. By the time he reaches Book IV, Amans is becoming more and more adept at the skill of confession, both in remembering and assessing his own experience with sin and in making use of the exempla Genius narrates.[35] Whereas with previous sins Genius must gently prod his pupil for honest and reasoned answers, in Book IV Amans' responses are sure-footed and confident, needing little to no emendation; his language has become both more complex and more useful. He is thinking more and reacting less.[36] This progression offers the single best exemplum to counteract sloth's influence—Amans has busied himself in his inward journey and his language is changing accordingly.

At its heart, sloth is the sin of ignorance.[37] In the *Mirour de l'Omme*, Gower explicitly connects sloth (qua negligence) with an inability to learn:

> Ly Necligens de s'aqueintance
> Retient le vice d'Ignorance,
> Qui bien ne sciet ne bien aprent…
> Dont dist l'apostre tielement,

---

[35] Earlier in the poem, Amans frequently makes mistakes in his confessions and Genius is forced to correct him. For example, in Book 2 Genius asks Amans if he is guilty of Falssemblant, and Amans replies that he is not. (2.1931) However, with a little extra pressure, Genius asks again if Amans could ever imagine a situation where it would be possible that he was prey to Falssemblant's errors, to which Amans is forced to reply that yes, he could and yes, he had been. This is not the case by Book 4 where Amans' resposes to Genius' questions are much more accurate and elaborate. For a more complete walk-through of Amans' developing ability to think himself into situations wherein each manifestation of a particular sin might occur, see Peck's introduction to Volume 2 of his 3 volume edition of the text for the TEAMS series. Peck, ed., *John Gower: The Confessio Amantis*, 18-22.

[36] Russell A. Peck rightly reminds us that this transformation of Amans into a confessional subject is not without its problems. As he becomes more adept at the form, Amans' eager skill becomes a potential pitfall for the audience: "Amans is a good student, though perhaps for the wrong reasons. He repeatedly asks for more instruction. So great is his appetite for further inquiry into the possibilities of experience that one wonders whether it might not be the thrill of thinking about experience, rather than honest shrift, that motivates his ever-hungry interest." Ibid., 18. This same concern occurs in other areas of penitential literature. Medieval handbooks of penance frequently worry over the possible pleasure one might experience from relating past indiscretions. In order to feel true contrition, the sin must be experienced again through the speech-act of confession, but the penitent and the priest must be on constant guard against a re-vivification of the temptation that accompanies it.

[37] Britt Mize makes this same argument about sloth in "Adam, and Chacuer's Words Unto Him," *The Chaucer Review* 35, no. 4 (2001), 358.

> Celluy qui d'ignorance offent
> Dieus met en sa desconoiscance.
>
> (MO 6073-75, 6082-84)[38]

Equally as disturbing is the refusal to learn, as Gower complains in his earlier cataloguing

of clerical vices in the prologue to the *Confessio*:

> And slouthe kepeth the libraire
> Which longeth to the saintuaire;
> To studie upon the worldes lore
> Sufficeth now withoute more
>
> (Pro.321-324)

What is more, it is not only the potential for individual learning that is destroyed through

sloth, but communal and historical understanding of entire branches of knowledge:

> For thurgh the Slowthe of Negligence
> Ther was yit nevere such science
> Ne vertu, which was bodely,
> That nys destruid and lost thereby.
>
> (4. 973-976)

Prevention of sloth's threat of ignorance can only come through the sinner's self-

application, be it in diligently carrying out physical tasks, or in laboring to pursue

knowledge through study. When Amans assures Genius that he should be excused of

negligence, he insists that he cannot be guilty because he is "so trewly amerous" and

"evere curious" (4.921-922), meaning that he is eager to carry out his lady's commands

and constantly striving to imitate

> hem that conne best enforme
> To knowe and witen al the forme
> What falleth unto loves craft.
>
> (4.923-925)

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[38] [The negligent person has, as his friend, the vice of Ignorance, who neither knows well nor learns
well…whereof the apostle says that God will deny the one who offends by ignorance.] John Gower,
Mirour De L'omme (the Mirror of Mankind), trans. William Burton Wilson (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues
Press, 1992), 84-85.

Even if, as he freely admits, Amans is not successful in becoming the ideal lover, the contemplative and active labors he expends in the pursuit of his goal, he argues, are sufficient to save him from condemnation. The argument is not enough to forestall another set of exempla, "The Tale of Phaeton" and "The Tale of Icarus," but Genius accepts Amans' reasoning with a brief warning to be on guard in the future. In both of these tales and in the Latin epigram that begins the section on negligence, it is the physical that comes to the fore – Icarus and Phaeton both neglect to follow the advice they are given and suffer the bodily consequences. Likewise, the verse that introduces Genius' description deals with farmers neglecting their gardens, not scholars at study (*Dum plantare licet, cultor qui necgligit ortum,/ Si desint fructus, imputet ipse sibi.*) (4.iv). Only in the dialogue about the sin in the abstract, in the confessional framework of the poem, does the need for mental labor come into play.

In Amans' new-found facility with confessional conversation, the language used to describe sloth in its multiple forms shifts into the language used to describe textual interpretation, transforming the periods of confessional exchange into a vehicle for defining the problems and parameters of vernacular textual labor. Book 4 defines the problem with vernacular learning as the difficulty in filling out both halves of the active/contemplative hybrid form, embodied first and most formally in confessional discourse, so that individual acts of interpretation might develop into recognizable activity. The sin of sloth, in effect, is the disruption of this dialectic. The breakdown can happen on either end: either contemplation fails to produce appropriate action, or a lack of action prevents contemplation.

To take a case in point, the sin of *pusillamité* is described in Genius' introduction as cowardice:

> Touchende of Slowthe in his degré
> Ther is yit Pusillamité
> Which is to seie in this langage
> He that hath litel of corage
> And dar no mannes werk beginne.
> So mai he noght by reasoun winne;
> For who that noght dar undertake,
> Be rigt he schal no profit take.
> (4.313-320)

Description of the sin depends on translation of pusillamité into the plain English "litel of corage"; but the vernacular is supplemented with more specifically anatomizing Latin marginalia. Outside the confines of the verse, the labor the sin avoids is not just active, physical labor, but also contemplative, textual labor:

> *Hic loquitur Confessor de quadam specie Accidie, que pusillanimitas dicta est, cuius ymaginatiua formido neque virtutes aggredi neque vicia fugere audet; sicque vtriusque vite, tam actiue quam contemplatiue, premium non attingit.*[39]

The difference between the definition in English and in Latin is the added emphasis in the Latin on both aspects of possible labor, adding the contemplative to the active already present in the poem: "And dar no mannes werk beginne" becomes re-translated into "*tam actiue quam contemplatiue, premium non attingit,*" Even though the ambiguity of "mannes werk" in the poem becomes taxonomy only in the margin, and therefore beyond the reach of the two speaking characters, the Latin offers a lens through which to read the vernacular. Not exactly commentary, and not purely a reading aid, the inclusion of the marginal material here allows contemplation to resonate through the poetry. When

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[39] [Here the Confessor speaks about a certain type of Sloth which is called Cowardice, whose imaginary fear does not dare to embrace virtues or flee vices. And thus it does not attain the reward of either kind of life, the active of the contemplative.]

Genius explains that the pusillanimous man "…of ymaginacioun/ He maketh his excusacioun," the function of imagination here in the literal sense simply means that the sinner invents reasons to avoid labor. Through the addition of the marginalia, however, the word not only echoes "ymaginatiua formido" but also the mental "contemplatiue" work the English never completely articulates. The poem allows for the sort of cowardice that prevents the sinner from acting in "bothe word and dede" (4. 323), but the source of the vice is in the imagination run amok. Misplaced mental work becomes worse than inactivity, it goes further and prevents the development of virtuous physical work. Genius describes this sinner as a bell without a clapper, unable to chime, lacking the ability to enact the labor natural to it. The marginal attention to contemplation moves this image from a purely physical figure to one that resonates with deeper meaning – without the sympathetic movement of the mind, harnessed to virtuous work, no amount of action can take place and paralyzing cowardice is inevitable.

The same play between enacted labor and mental labor runs through the exempla Genius uses to show Amans the rewards for those who resist *pusillimité*. The first, the wonderfully evocative "Pygmalion and his Statue," tells the familiar story of the talented sculptor who falls in love with his own creation. Ovid's tale is one of the most moving of the book, describing in detail Pygmalion's longing for his creation and the tender devotion he illogically bestows on her, while the commentary Genius provides for Amans about the story reasserts his earlier warning that the sin prevents virtuous action. But here he goes further to associate action specifically with speaking:

> Be this ensample thou miht finde
> That word mai worche above kinde.
> Forthi, my sone, if that thou spare
> To speke, lost is al thi fare

(4.437-440)

Pygmalion's speech-act goes beyond the bounds of ordinary human/art interaction and is

subsequently rewarded by Venus who transforms the cold stone figure into the "lusti wif"

Pygmalion desires (4.424). It is a positive exempla; Genius stresses to Amans that

Pygmalion wins his prize through his courage in the face of irrational, impossible ardor.

Even so, as the poetry lingers over the description of the sculptor's amorous attentions,

detailing each and every touch, glance, and heartfelt whisper, the blind insistence

Pygmalion shows in his ludicrous fantasy could just as easily have been cause for ridicule

and censure rather than exemplary praise. He lays out food and drink for the statue every

day, entreating her to eat; he lays with her "al naked" at night; he kisses her and

continually asks for her love "As thogh sche wiste what he mente." (4.411) These same

actions in the version of the story found in the *Roman de la Rose* are a curse laid on

Pygmalion by Love, hardly cause for celebration. Juxtaposed with the equally

problematic Narcissus, Jean de Meun's sculptor is bound in a net of trickery and is only

released after a promise to Venus to abandon his previous commitment to Chastity and

pursue new service to love. In the French poem, Pygmalion's actions are foolish and

futile and the artist punished for his arrogance and misplaced loyalties, but the same

scene under Gower's pen becomes a tale of stalwart devotion, offered to a failing lover as

model to be followed. The description of Pygmalion's love is, therefore, an uneasy one,

filled with cold, disturbing images: a warm arm shocked by the chill of inanimate stone,

lips meeting unresponsive marble, prepared food that will never be eaten, and the

unsettling scene of a delirious man speaking into the ear of a fashioned idol. Images of

the golden calf aside, there is little in the story to recommend either Pygmalion's mental

health or his plan of wedded bliss. This must be compiled with an even more serious charge: unlike Jean de Meun's rendering, Gower's character is not driven to delusion by a mischievous allegorical figure, but by "pure impression/ Of his ymagination" (4.389-390). This is the same imagination that in the earlier introduction to pusillamité malfunctions to prevent action. For Pygmalion mental reasoning is similarly problematic but, because his fantasy produces not cowardice but an amorous narrative eventually rewarded by Venus, his story becomes an illustration of virtue.

If the presentation of the sin of *pusillamité* is a question of successful mental labor explored in the margins of the poem, the next type of sloth, forgetelnesse, becomes about the failure to translate contemplation to action, and it happens very much in Amans' confessional speech. When Genius asks his pupil if he is guilty of being forgetful in the course of love, Amans immediately launches into an extended explanation of his many failings in this area. He laments that, no matter how he tries, no matter the precautions he takes, when confronted by his lady he is rendered speechless.

> So ben my wittes over lad,
> That when as ever I thoughte have spoken
> It is out fro myn herte stoken
> And stonde, as who seith, doumb and def
> That al nys worth an yvy lef,
> Of that I wende wel have seid.
> (4.582-587)

Amans' explanation of this phenomenon is some 150 lines long, equal to the exempla that Genius offers as council. His primary complaint is not that he comes to his lady unprepared, but that a mysterious force steals away his power to act on his carefully planned intentions.

Amans' account of his troubles, unlike his earlier confessions in the book, is peppered through with references to reading, writing, and books, in other words, the hallmarks of the studious mind. He works hard to convince Genius that his is not the sin of negligence or ydelnesse, but that his failure stems from another source. The problem is not a lack of mental application. Before meeting his lady, he says,

> And so recorde I mi lecoun
> And wryte in my memorial
> What I to hire telle shal
> Riht al the matiere of mi tale.
>   (4.562-565)

Moreover, even when he stands before her, though his tongue is silent, his thoughts are busy:

> And thogh I stonde there a myle
> Al is forgete for the while
> And thus I stonde and thence alone
> Of thing that helpeth ofte noght.
>   (4.689-6692)

Something is interrupting the circuitry that connects Amans' mind, heart, and mouth, and unlike the other examples of sloth, it seems to have nothing to do with his effort or desire to act. The spirit is willing, so to speak, but the flesh is weak. He compares himself "Lich to the bok in which is rased/ The letter, and mai nothing be rad" (4.580-581). Frustratingly illegible, the book shifts from a figure of completed, communicable thought into one of mute helplessness; the change indicates the parameters of Amans' emotional and intellectual impotence. When it comes to performing love for his lady, he can compose music, but cannot sing it. He has a tongue to speak the words of love, but cannot use it. Remove the lady, however, and the circumstances change swiftly.

When speaking to Genius about his inability to speak his feelings, Amans is

eloquent, effusive, and lays out his argument with care and tangible emotion. He

recounts his past frustrations and includes a mini-exemplum of his own, that of Moses

and Tharbis, to describe the completeness of his forgetting.[40] In the same way, he is fully

capable of reprimanding himself for his inability to translate thought into action:

> Bot after, whanne I understonde,
> And am in other place alone,
> I make many a wofull mone
> Unto miself, and speke so:
> Ha fol, where was whin herte tho,
> Whan thou thi worthi ladi syhe?
> Were thou afered of hire yhe?
> So wel I knowe hir wommanhede,
> That in hire is no more oultrage
> Than in a child of thre yeer age.
> …Ha nyce herte, fy for schame!
> Ha, couard herte of love unlered,
> Whereof art thou so sore afered,
> That thou thi tunge soffrest frese,
> And wold thi goode wordes lese,
> Whan thou has founde time and space?
>   (4.594-615)

The monologue is held in place by the basic framework of confessional discourse in that

it both represents and reinforces the contrition necessary for the sacrament to be validated

by doctrine. The naked emotion in the repeated, exasperated "Ha," and the taunting

questions ("Were thou afeard of hire yhe?") carry the impulsive force of a flesh and

blood character's attempts at self-correction. Speech here is reasonable, rational, even

discursive. But in the end, Amans is (after all) only talking to himself; without the

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[40] The tale of Moses and Tharbis is a popular story in the chanson de geste genre, originating from the *Antiquitates Judaicae* of Josephys, a Jewish historian of the first century and appearing in a number of patristic sources including Jerome and Vincent of Beauvais. The story tells of how Tharbis offers Moses the city of Saba in return for marrying her. Moses does so, then crafts a magic ring that causes Tharbis to forget him after the wedding takes place and the city is exchanged, allowing him to leave her and return to Egypt. For a further historical explanation of the story and its uses by commentators and authors in the Middle Ages, see Mark Balfour, "Moses and the Princess: Josephus' Antiquitates Judaicae and the Chansons De Geste," *Medium Aevum* 64, no. 1 (1995), 1-16.

external authority of the priest his efforts can only circulate in the space of his own mind.

Genius warns Amans,

> A mannes thoght withoute speche
> God wot, and yit that men beseche
> His will is; for withoute bedes
> He doth His grace in fewe stedes
>   (4.715-718)

Even if Amans can rehearse the feel of confessional discourse, enough to conjure the appropriate response to his own sin, he cannot break out of the effects of that sin and can therefore never progress. The solution Genius offers, active spoken prayer and a "besi herte," are effective in that they turn Amans' eye away from himself and move him outward seeking grace and forgiveness.

The difference between *pusilamité* and *forgetelnesse* is that the first demonstrates the breakdown of mental work in contemplation and the second demonstrates the failure of contemplation to move into spoken action. Thus, sloth becomes a sin concerned not only with a lack of physical work but also with a failure to create a hybrid, middle life that incorporates both the active and the contemplative together. In this way, Gower uses Book IV to provide his audience with a testing ground for theories of language. For Gower, vernacular poetry is neither a vehicle for transmitting easy, actionable knowledge, nor a pseudo-Latin suited only for contemplation—it must be both together simultaneously. In this, he separates from the penitential tradition. Confession blends the two halves together but it does so as a progression from one to the other, and back again. Contrition is contemplative, but restitution is active; so too must the speech-act of the confession proper come out of the contemplative work of memory. Conventional discussions of the mixed life follow this same model of progression. In the writings of

Augustine and Gregory the Great, the active life leads the practitioner to ascend upwards

to the contemplative and subsequently descend back again in a devotional feedback-

loop.[41] One cannot be Martha, the active, and Mary, the inactive, at the same time.[42]

While this may hold true in actuality, when applied to language the two principles can,

and in Gower should, blend into one hybrid model of interpretation. The poem uses

confessional discourse to set the stakes of vernacular language and then shifts those

stakes to create a new poetic agenda.

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Language in the poem is like the wind, as Gower claims; while it is not a visible

force, it is nonetheless capable of producing results. Gower's vernacular is the same. If

we look at the poem from the vantage point of confessional discourse, we can see half of

the equation being fulfilled. Amans and Genius engage extensively in the contemplative

work of investigating the forms of sin and turning over the memories of sin in Amans'

failed attempts as a lover. What we don't see, what Amans never gets to, is actual

penance for those sins. The pattern of abstract, contemplative explanation, confession,

exempla, and brief analysis is repeated again and again, but there is never a formal and

calculated assignment of penance to complete the penitential process. Where the active

work of penance does occur, arguably, is in Amans' attention to the exempla themselves.

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[41] See F. J. Steele's work on the role of the vitae in patristic and medieval sources. He makes clear that, though the lives may intertwine they are, in the majority of Middle English texts, separate. "…though the Lives are considered in conjunction, they are never confused in substance. The Active Live and the Contemplative are *in se* and respectively quite distinct conceptions. It is possible, therefore, to separate the idea of the Active Life from that of the Contemplative and to discuss the former in itself and for its own sake." F. J. Steele, *Towards a Spirituality for Lay-Folk: The Active Life in Middle English Religious Literature from the Thirteenth Century to the Fifteenth* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 63.

[42] The use of the sisters, Martha and Mary, from Luke 10:38-42 is a common way of explaining the difference between the active and contemplative lives. When Christ came to visit the two women, Martha set about working to prepare food while Mary sat and listened to Christ's teaching. When Martha complains, she is famously told, "Mary has chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her." The same division is made between Rachel and Leah, the two wives of Jacob in Genesis 29:16-35.

More specifically, the active part of confession lies in what the exempla are intended to do for Amans. If the performance and completion of *satisfactio operis* in the sacrament of penance secures forgiveness for sin and blots the stain from the sinner's soul, the place in the *Confessio* for this same process is in Amans' active understanding of the exempla. They act as his satisfaction inasmuch as they generate the transformation from inactive ignorance into active knowledge.

Unfortunately, because Amans' spoken interludes after the exempla are, for the most part, quite brief if they are present at all, we cannot know if the process has been successful—we can only know that the possibility for transformation *qua* absolution is available. While we can trace larger lines of progress, we cannot see Amans' internal transformation exemplum by exemplum in the way the structure of the poem suggests. He clearly becomes more adept at the confessional form as the books progress, and the dramatic transformation in Book 8 is the most visible of changes imaginable. Nevertheless, once he has mastered an understanding of the sin of *lachnesse*, for example, given his confession and heard Genius' exempla, we hear nothing more about Amans' interior life, either in regard to the changes in his perception of sin due to the narrative exempla or as a result of received absolution. His response is limited to a cynical longing for the opportunity for procrastination in that it would imply inattention to tasks his lady saw fit to lay before him. As it is, she pays him no mind and therefore he has no duties to neglect. At the end of his complaint, he asks Genius,

> Bot, fader, upon myn acompte,
> Which ye be sett to examine
> Of schrifte after the discipline,
> Sey what your beste conseil is.
>   (4.292-295)

To which Genius blandly responds, "Do forth thi besinesse so,/ That no Lachesce in thee be founde" (4.298-299). In essence, this is the same advice Genius gives Amans at the outset of the conversation about the first part of Sloth, and so the pattern continues for the rest of the book. The Amans we see before the exempla is virtually indistinguishable from the Amans we see after the exempla. If, then, Genius' stories stand in for the active *satisfactio* of confession, any textual labor performed by Amans is both invisible and possibly ineffective.

The lack of result from Amans' textual labor shifts the genre of the poem away from a performed confession and into the genre of penitential literature—moving away from reading the *Confessio* as representation of praxis and towards an appropriation of a textual genre. In the medieval period, confessional handbooks work one of two ways. The first and earlier model is that of a list of sins and the appropriate penance for each sin; this type of manual was intended for use by parish priests administering the sacrament as a kind of account book inasmuch as it assigns the amount of labor needed to compensate for a particular thought or deed.[43] The second is that most commonly associated in Middle English with Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*. In this form, each type of sin is presented through a series of exempla that are tailored to the particular needs of the sinner. The stories narrate circumstances where characters encounter and

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[43] We see this type of penitential literature in the Irish Canons of the seventh, eighth, and early ninth centuries, as well as in Theodore of Canterbury, Bede, and other Anglo-Saxon and continental authors. A typical entry would read something like, "If anyone by force or by any device in an evil manner breaks into another's property, he shall do penance for three years, one of these on bread and water, and give liberal alms." (Taken from The Judgment of Clement, ca. 700-750) Fasting and alms are the most common penances assigned in these manuals, with the occasional assignment of crime-specific punishment (oath-breakers are forbidden from swearing another oath in the future, for example). See Allen Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983); John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal "Libri Poenitentiales" and Selections from Related Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

fall prey to a particular vice and will subsequently remind the penitent of similar episodes in his or her own past that correspond to whichever sin is under examination. Gower's use of this secondary model allows Genius to direct Amans' interest in love towards sins that speak to his unique situation. While the majority of these manuals, like the *Liber Poenitentialis* of Robert of Flamborough or that of Alain de Lille, are intended to be used by priests to aid in their administration of the sacrament, there are examples, most obviously that of Chaucer's "Parson's Tale" and texts like Henry of Lancaster's *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines* and *Handlyng Synne*, that are clearly intended for a wider reading audience.[44] The power of these *exempla*-based texts is enormous. As Mark Miller reminds us,

> These texts are of interest not simply because of their number and evident popularity, but because of the central role they played in the relationship between the church's spiritual, ethical, and juridical authority and the everyday conduct an experience of medieval people.[45]

Furthermore, their import is not simply in educating their readers about sin, but developing in them the ability to read themselves, to rise out of their sins and their sinful state through an understanding not of their own personal history but of the penitential process. In this way, the intangible aspects of human nature, sin most evidently, submit to the ordering ability of the text's readers.

Gower's confessional frame stresses the interpretation of the various *exempla* inasmuch as it pressures the ethical weight of the stories to calibrate to a particular vice.

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[44] For the most common arguments about Chaucer's reliance on penitential manuals for his tale, see Rodney Delasanta, "Penance and Poetry in the Canterbury Tales," *PMLA* 93 (1978), 240-247; Lee Patterson, "The Parson's Tale and the Quitting of the Canterbury Tales," *Traditio* 34 (1978), 331-80; H. G. Pfander, "Some Medieval Manuals of Religious Instruction in England and Observations on Chaucer's Parson's Tale," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 35 (1936), 243-58; Siegfried Wenzel, "The Source of Chaucer's Seven Deadly Sins," *Traditio* 30 (1974), 351-78.

[45] Mark Miller, "Displaced Souls, Idle Talk, Spectacular Scenes: *Handlyng Synne* and the Perspective of Agency," *Speculum* 71, no. 3 (1996), 606.

For many of the *exempla*, the tale fits neatly into the reading Genius gives of it—his

explanation supports and confirms the content of the tale. In others, however, the

exemplum speaks to the need for readers to work for adequate interpretations to match the

sin with which they are tagged. Whereas the Tale of Midas quite easily can be used to

exemplify avarice (which is not to say that its presentation in the *Confessio* is not

complicated and complicating in its own right), an *exemplum* like the Tale of Echo in

Book 5 is more difficult to satisfy as a display of Usury.[46] The story tells of how Echo, a

"maiden full of tricherie," would persistently procure willing (or unwilling) sexual

partners to satisfy Jupiter's lustful desires. Juno, of course, is displeased at the treachery

and punishes Echo by casting her out into the world where the unlucky girl is able to only

repeat what she hears and never to speak under her own power again.[47] Separated from

the confessional frame, the tale could be moralized in any number of ways: Echo could

be punished for honoring her loyalty to Jupiter rather that to Juno, of whose court she was

a member, Jupiter could obviously be singled out as a figure for unslakable lust, or Juno

could become the suspicious wife who gives over to spying and complaining. None of

these, however, come into Genius reading of the tale as he explains it to Amans.

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[46] The reading of Echo I give here is similar to that of R. A. Shoaf's notion of determined reading,
"...reading that is both *resolute* and *prescripted*" in his article on the subject. My argument differs,
however, in that while Shoaf reads Freudian notions of desire into the Echo story, finding her to be "...not
only erotic desire but also the climax of that desire in unnameable excess," I find the notion of deceit to be
far more central. His sense of the determinism of Gower's *exempla*, however, runs very close to mine. R.
A. Shoaf, "'Tho Love Made Him an Hard Eschange' and 'with Fals Brocage Hath Take Usure': Narcissus
and Echo in the *Confesiso Amantis*," *Mediaevalia: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 16 (1993), 197-209. See
also Robert F. Yeager, "John Gower and the Exemplum Form: Tale Models in the *Confessio Amantis*,"
Mediaevalia: A Journal of Medieval Studies 8 (1982), 307-36
[47] This telling of the tale is a mark of Gower's innovation. In Ovid, the story is quite different, Echo being
punished because she is overly talkative and distracting to Juno. Macaulay describes Gower's departure:
"Here the crime is rather that she cunningly concealed in her speech what she ought to have told, and the
unishment is that she is obliged to tell everything that comes to her ears." Macaulay, ed., *The English
Works of John Gower*, note to 5.4583 ff.

Usury, he explains, is the tendency to obtain by "sleygte/ Mesure double and
double weyhte" (5.4397-8). In regards to love, usury is more specifically the ability to
multiply love (or lovers), often at the expense of others. They key, however, to the sin of
usury is spelled out in both Genius' abstract explanation and in the Latin epigram that
precedes the section. The Latin reads,

> *Plus capit vsura sibi quam debitur, et illud*
>   *Fraude colorata sepe latenter agit.*
> *Sic amor excessus quansepe suos vt auarus*
>   *Spirat, et vnius tres capit ipse loco.*[48]

The "*fraude colorata*" is what transforms simple avarice into usury, the ability to win by
"slyghte" an excess of what one desires rather than to procure it by some more honest
means. The transference of usury as a monetary problem to a problem about love,
however, is not entirely smooth, and Amans missteps almost from the beginning. Genius
asks him if he is guilty of taking more than he ought to from his lady, and Amans rather
peevishly replies that if anyone is the usurer, it is she. He complains,

> I not hou sche hire conscience
> Excuse wole of this usure;
> Be large weygte and gret mesure
> Sche hath mi love, and I have noght
> Of that shich I have diere boght,
> And with myn heart I have it paid.
>   (5.4506-4511)

Amans is taking the economic language that Genius (and the Latin epigram) uses to
expose his primary frustration with the object of his admiration. "*Vnius tres capit ipse*
loco" becomes "Be large weygte and gret mesure" and, in a move that the penitentials
warn against again and again, Amans shifts the focus away from his own confession and
onto the notion of the sin of usury in a general sense. Even worse, he accuses another of

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[48] [Usury takes for itself more than it is owed, and often does so by concealed fraud. Thus love frequently
pursues its excesses like an avaricious man, and takes one instead of three.]

committing the sin—a serious breach of confessional requirements. The language is skillful and consistent, even clever, but it leads Amans into an error that has both moral and ethical implications.

Moreover, he is incorrect. Genius is quick to point out that Amans is making a critical assumption, namely, that the heart he loses in exchange for so little of the lady's regard is actually worth more than he received. Genius informs him that this is not necessarily the case:

> Me thenketh tho wordes thou misusest.
> For be thin oghne knowlechinge
> Thou seist hou sche for o lokinge
> Thin hole hearte for thee tok
> Sche mai be such, that hir o lok
> Is worth thin herte manyfold;
> So hast thou wel thin herte sold
> (5.4538-4544)

At this moment, when he is deflecting sin onto the lady, Amans is himself guilty of usury in that he "misuses" his words to deceive Genius in order to gain more sympathy for his plight than he deserves. This error, not uncoincidentally, is the same as Echo's. She is condemned by Juno because she is one of the "Brocours of love that deceiven" and "untrewe" to love. Her "queinte wordes" prevent Juno from seeing matters clearly and allow Jupiter to sample more of love than he is meant to. Her subsequent punishment removes her ability to cover over the truth by preventing her from producing her own language, a fitting punishment for her crime.

Amans, naturally, is not so severely chastened, but the tale itself becomes his correction. But it is not a correction for usury—after the tale, Amans says that he is not guilty of profligate love—but for his momentary lapse of focus. In listening to the story, Amans must identify with Jupiter as the negative moral example, not with Echo,

evidenced by Genius' warning after the tale that, should Amans be lucky enough to win his love, "O wif schal wel to thee suffise" and not to let his eyes wander. (5.4657) Echo falls by the wayside for the simple reason that Amans is unlikely to find himself in such a situation, and the story therefore becomes less applicable to his shrift. The *exemplum*, then, has a split moral lesson, one that speaks to the confessional frame by addressing usury, the sin under discussion, but also one that speaks to confessional prerogatives by addressing Amans' personal situation directly. Moreover, Amans himself embodies both frames by adapting Genius' language of money and exchange in order to gripe about his lack of success in love, thereby eliciting the need for the correcting tale in the first place.

The process of fitting the performance of confession to the penitent even as the penitent attempts to fit himself into the confessional framework comes directly from the handbooks Gower draws from. In the thirteenth century, authors like Robert of Flamborough and Thomas of Chabham authored a new form of penitential *summa* that focused more on the education of the penitent and less on an accounting of sins and their appropriate penances.[49] This new style carried over into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, eventually generating texts like *Handlyng Synne* and *Le Manuel des Péchés*, which were clearly interested in educating a lay audience. The administering priest, however, was strongly advised in the works to resist the temptation to simply rattle off a list of sins and wait for something to catch in the penitent's mind; rather, they were encouraged to fit their inquiry to the individual, taking into account what the confessor

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[49] "L'individualisation des fautes et des peines à laquelle tendent dans la nouvelle discipline les rapports du minister et du sujet du sacrement, exige une analyse plus approfondie de l'acte commis, du complexe des circonstances objectives et subjectives dans lesquelles il se situe, et l'instruction qui se donne au confessional s'organise autour des notions de permis et défendu, secondairement d'aggravant et d'excusant." Pierre Michaud-Quantin, *Sommes De Casuistique Et Manuels De Confession Au Moyen Âge (Xii-Xvi Siècles* (Louvin: Nauwelaerts, 1962), 23.

might know of the person's circumstances and history. Genius, in Gower's poem, takes this advice to heart, as we can see in the Tale of Echo, in his attempts to meld his instruction to what Amans needs to know. In this way, the self-knowledge gained from the confessional process still appears to be filtered through ecclesiastical authority. The places of friction, like that we see in the Tale of Echo, on the other hand, open up the text for a different kind of ordering power—that of a reader whose reading is continually determined by an external framework. In this case, the framework is that of the pseudo-confession we see in the poem, but the lesson of Echo is more than how to make the story match the sin of Usury; the lesson is how to read to gain the ability to read oneself. Genius responds to Amans' faulty and petulant use of the economic language of avarice by offering a tale of harshly corrected speech. As a result, he is able to bring the conversation back around to his warning about faithfulness in love, speaking directly to Amans' individual needs.

Through the tale, readers read Amans reading himself or, perhaps more accurately, they read Genius reading Amans. This is, in the end, the goal of penitential literature. Miller says as much in his reading of *Handlyng Synne*: "Reading *Handlyng Synne* will train us in the reading of our own lives, of the ways we get sin on our hands and the ways we might begin to try to manipulate what would otherwise remain obscure and untouchable…"[50] In this, Mannyng and Gower are in perfect accord. Gower takes the self-consciously textual nature of confessional handbooks and opens it up to wider devotional and vernacular application, both in Genius' and Amans' conversations, and in the *exempla* themselves. The process of coming to self-understanding in *exempla*-based penitential handbooks is a question of moving interpretation of the text to interpretation

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[50] Miller, "*Handlyng Synne* and the Perspective of Agency," 616.

of the self, and it comes through an understanding of language that is both active and contemplative.   The discursive need for the *exempla* in Gower's poem to show Amans' his sinful nature, with readers sitting in silent audition, creates a divided agenda for Genius' stories: on the one hand, they need to fit into the sin to which they are assigned, and on the other, they must address the individual concerns of the penitent to whom they are told. As a result, Amans' self-recognition, as a creation of the *exempla*, develops as a textual byproduct that is both subjective and universal. He learns how to read himself through the broad heuristic of the seven deadly sins, but Genius' conscious tailoring of the lessons to Amans' love-sick condition focuses Amans' eye on the role of his individual experience in generating his confessional identity. Amans' confession is unique to him, but the larger formal structure of the discourse through which he learns to read himself is communal and pre-ordained.

<div style="text-align:center">*******</div>

The step between the ability to recognize the truth about oneself and the ability to tell the truth about oneself is a small one in Gower. This doesn't mean, of course, that ability always leads to action. In fact, the majority of the *exempla* in the poem link lying explicitly with the ability to knowingly deceive another, as in the case with Echo or in a story like that of Boniface in Book 2. Like Echo's, Boniface's words are "slyhe and queinte/ The whiche he cowthe wysly peinte" and he doesn't hesitate to use his rhetorical prowess to satisfy an envious desire to supplant Celestine as Pope (2.2853-4). In her book, *Amoral Gower*, Diane Watt demonstrates the complexities of "colored" or "painted" language in the *Confessio*, citing one of the Latin verses in the Prologue: "*Nuncque lateens odium vultum depingit amoris,/ Paceque sub ficta tempus ad arma*

tegit."[51] She describes how the word "peinte" refers both to the application of cosmetics or a false expression and also to elaborate, embellished language. She also notes how frequently it is paired with "queinte," as we see in the description of Boniface, who also, curiously, is said to be able to "feigneth love" and "feigneth pes"—the same problem the Latin verse in the Prologue warns of (2.2842). Deception in Gower is skilled and premeditated, with a level of practiced confidence that comes from a command over language that seems to outshine the plainer style the poet associates with truthful speech. Moreover, it easily crosses the barrier between Latin and the vernacular with little to no hesitation. The lying described in the epigram in the Prologue is the same when it appears in the vernacular *exempla* throughout the poem.

Amans develops his own ability to relate his past actions and his interior self through the confessional process, a transformation Watt reads as culminating in the revelation of his true self in Book 8. When he sees himself in the mirror Venus offers, we see his "colour fade" in a reversal of the colored language of deception other characters are accused of throughout the poem (8.2825). As such, in Watt's reading Amans is "not exempt from charges of insincerity" and is "far less successful in love than he is at feigning penitence or at coloring his confession."[52] While her analysis certainly addresses the ways in which Amans struggles with speaking the truth of himself, Watt tends to over-emphasize his transformation into the aged John Gower in that she uses it to re-establish the entirety of his speech in the poem as willfully misleading. The lack of contrition we see is troubling, for certain, but it serves not to invalidate the self-recognition Amans rehearses but simply to remove it from confessional discourse as an

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[51] [Now hidden hatred paints a loving face, and hides a time of war beneath feigned peace] Watt, *Amoral Gower*, 49.
[52] Ibid., 58.

ecclesiastical institution. Like deceptive language, truthful language of the sort that

confession demands is difficult; it must be learned, practiced, and perfected. The

Confessio takes this language and shifts it into a vernacular poetic style that uses

speaking truthfully and without ornament to bridge the distance between the fallen sinner

and the divine.

Book 7 uses truthfulness, and the speaking of truthfulness, as an index of the

interior worth and health of an individual. In this "problematic" section of the *Confessio*,

Aristotle reminds Alexander that

> He schole of Trouthe thilke grace
> With al his hole hearte embrace,
> So that his word be trewe and plein,
> Toward the world and so certain
> That in him be do double speche.
> For if men scholde trouthe seche
> And founde it noght withinne a king,
> It were an unsittende thing.
> The word is tokne of that withinne,
> Ther schal a worthi king beginne
> To kepe his tunge and to be trewe,
> So schal his pris ben evere newe.
>   (7.1729-1740)

The political argument Aristotle makes, particularly in the climate of late-fourteenth

century England, is (as many critics have argued) pointed at the monarchical upheavals of

the period, but more essentially for the purposes of the poem's vernacular poetics, it

magnifies the critical agency that truthfulness and self-governance hold in Gower.[53] As

the head of the body politic, the king embodies not only political power but also the right

rule over the self—internal and external. The idealism that Gower's strict ordering of the

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[53] On the notion of good governance in relation to kingship, especially in regards to Book 7 of the *Confessio*, see Russell A. Peck, "The Politics and Psychology of Governance in Gower: Ideas of Kingship and Real Kings," in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siån Echard (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004). The extended version of this same argument is found in Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit.* For the relationship between the ethical king and the body politic, see also Porter, "Gower's Ethical Microcosm."

social system implies supports his presentation of a "mirror for princes" in Book 7 as yet

another use of a genre, akin to confession, for universally instructive purposes. In fact,

the ties between the two forms, penitential literature and works supposedly aimed at royal

ethical instruction, emerge immediately when placed in proximity to one another—the

above passage on truth provides an excellent example. Truthful speaking (and its

converse, "double speche") is "tokne of that withinne." The state of one's inner life and,

more importantly, the controlled display of that inner life are equally instrumental to

successful execution of social roles found in both confession and in kingship. Both entail

reconciling oneself with the larger community, political or ecclesiastical, and both

demand a publicization of a private, interior persona to do so.

The *Secretum Secretorum*, one of the primary sources for Book 7, describes the

education of Alexander the Great by Aristotle in the same frame that Gower uses for his

version.[54] But the earlier text cites the need for just rule specifically as Alexander's need

to win over the newly-conquered Persian people to his kingship, not as a pedagogical

diversion. In order to restore social order, Alexander must reign well and justly, and to

do so, he must rule ethically. The text, then, deals with the need to rule oneself and to

subjugate the lesser, animalistic attributes of human nature under the control of rational

governance, the higher powers of the mind. This structure of kingly conquest quickly

moves into a cognitive metaphor of the ordered faculties of the human condition:

> Therefore, when the most high God created man and made him the noblest
> of all creatures, he ordered him, he forbade him, he punished him and he
> rewarded him, and he made his body like a city with understanding as its
> king and placed it in the more noble and higher place in man, that is his

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[54] See A. H. Gilbert, "Notes on the Influence of the *Secretum Secretorum*," *Speculum* 3 (1928), 84-93; M. A. Manzalaoui, ""Noght in the Registre of Venus": Gower's English Mirror for Princes," in *Medieval Studies for J. A. W. Bennett*, ed. P. C. Heyworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Porter, "Gower's Ethical Microcosm."

head.[55]

To win peace and order, then, Alexander the King must develop understanding and reason as the king of his inner life, regulating the microcosm of his ethical health in order to impose his will on the political macrocosm.[56]

The self-presentation of Alexander before the Persians, however, critically differs from the kind of performative accuracy demanded by confession in that the power of Alexander's persona allows for rhetorcial deception. To win the love of his people, Alexander must only appear ethical and just. We see this played out time and again in the *exempla* of the *Confessio* with tales like that of Boniface, the Tale of Demetrius and Perseus, the Tale of Nectanabus, and even in the secondary characters in the Tale of Appolonius. All successfully work with deceptive language to gain political and personal power over others. Not so for the penitent before his confessor. The aspects of confessional speech that make it effective—accuracy, completeness, humility, contrition, the intention to forsake sin in the future, and reverence—cannot be feigned if the sacrament is to be complete. An unscrupulous penitent may do so, of course, but to his detriment alone. The intervention of the priest is necessary, but it is not enough. R. F. Yaeger writes,

> with the stakes so high, accurate compliance with the form was essential…Confession was, therefore, both probative and pedagogic; the best confessor would be one whose questions were also informative about everything from formal matters to the nature of sin itself.[57]

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[55] *Secretum Secretorum Cum Glossis Et Notulis*, ed. R. Steele, *Opera Hactenus Inedita Rogeri Baconi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), 132.

[56] I am deeply indebted to Elizabeth Porter's invaluable argument in her previously cited essay on this same subject: Porter, "Gower's Ethical Microcosm."

[57] Yeager, "John Gower and the Exemplum Form," 310.

In *Handlying Sinne*, the injunction is specifically to "telle oure trespass" (11351),

enunciating linguistic representation of the committed sin, backlit by appropriate feelings

of contrition. If ignorance, neglect, or deceit sours the act of speaking, the entire process

is rendered ineffective and must begin again. Patrick Gallacher, in an excellent reading of

the procedure, notes,

> The components of speech are the external, significant sounds; the most important quality of speech is the correspondence between the significant sounds and the mind of the speaker. That is, man's speech much be truthful. This obligation, theologically considered, stems from the truth of correspondence between man's soul and the Divine Word, and the mysterious correspondence of identity between the Word and the Father. The most important effect of speech is the union of speaker and listener, which is real and stable in proportion to the truth of the speech.[58]

He goes on to discuss the importance of conversation in the act of confession and in the

rapport between Amans and Genius. The give and take in confessional speech lies in the

triangulated space between the chosen exempla, Amans' reception of them, and Genius'

resulting interpretation. In effect, Genius is correcting Amans' flawed speech by

recalibrating his reaction to the stories. This, after all, is the purpose behind nearly

everything in the poem that falls between the framing points of Book I and Book VIII.

From the beginning, Genius makes plain that

> For what a man schal axe of sein
> Touchend of schrifte, it mot be plein,
> It nedeth noght to make it queinte,
> For trowthe hise wordes wol noght peinte:
> That I wole axe of thee forthi,
> My sone, it schal be so plein,
> That thou schalt knowe and understonde
> The pointz of schrifte how that thei stonde.
>   (I.281-288)

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[58] Gallacher, *Love, the Word, and Mercury*, 2.

Genius will "enforme" Amans' confession so that his speech will be as "plein" as

possible. Negotiation of celestial judgment can only happen when the matter of the

speech matches its form, when the act of speaking is as representative as possible.

Therefore, there must be a process or a formula to follow to ensure successful

communication of meaning in language. The answer, Genius finds, lies in the

differentiation between artful speech and truthful speech. "For trowthe hise wordes wol

noght peinte." If careful artistic attention to speech cannot accomplish the salvation

confession propounds to offer, how then can one be certain of the truthfulness of his

words? Throughout the poem, Gower clearly dwells on the need for matching outsides to

insides, and the frame narrative reinforces this point. A pervasive fear runs throughout

all of the books that the reader or the viewer of an object will be deceived by its outward

appearance. This, for Gower, is the heart of disorder and the source of division in the

world, and confession is no exception. Gallacher finds that

> ...the sacrament of confession can be looked upon as an attempt to
> penetrate inwardly to the principle of a man's being by clearing away the
> dishonesties and hypocrisies standing in the way of self-knowledge and of
> achieving the virtue of truth.[59]

Instead of using art to paint meaning onto matter, effective confession takes the truth

hidden inside the act of speaking and brings it to the forefront. By stripping away all that

might be considered "queinte," a person may communicate conversationally with his

confessor and with Christ.

Effective language in confession is described again and again in the penitential

manuals of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and, while none of them mention the

concept by name, the ideal speech they advocate maps almost directly onto the classical

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[59] Ibid., 12-13.

virtue of *parrhesia*, or "free speech." There are five primary elements of *parrhesia*, forthrightness, truthfulness, sincerity, criticism, and the duty to speak, all of which are found in full force in confessional discourse.[60] In a lecture given at the University of California at Berkeley in 1983, Foucault defined *parrhesia* as

> a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain relation to himself or other people through criticism...and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty.[61]

Each of these has a clear counterpart in the penitential handbooks. Penitents must feel shame but they must, as Mannyng writes, be "Wyþ þy gode wyl and herte fre" (11360), they are advised to speak so that "opunly shal þy shryfte be" (11412), and with a sense of the peril they face if they fail to confess completely and with the appropriate emotional response. Confession returns sinners to the community of the Church and to the grace of faith; moreover, it is their moral obligation to perform the sacrament whenever possible and necessary. In a very general sense, the ability to speak truthfully in both the classical and Christian definitions demands similar efforts from speakers and also generates a specific relationship between language and meaning, namely, the appearance of trustworthy transparency. Whether or not this is actually possible is beyond the scope of

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[60] For a more complete definition, see Michael A. Peters, "Truth-Telling as an Educational Practics of the Self; Foucaul, *Parrhesia* and the Ethics of Subjectivity," *Oxford Review of Education* 29, no. 2 (2003), 212-17. It is important to note that this particular explanation of *parrhesia* draws completely from classical sources. In the Early Modern period, the "free speech" of *parrhesia* takes on a different cast: in Puttenham's collection of rhetorical techniques, *The Art of English Poesie*, *parrhesia* becomes 'Licentious' language. This characterization carries over into other works, particularly in sixteenth century commentaries on classical authors. For an excellent example of how the figure is used in these later circumstances, see Heather James, "Ovid and the Question of Politics in Early Modern England," *English Literary History* 70 (2003), 369ff.

[61] The lectures have been complied from tape-recordings and were re-edited in 1999. They are available as a collection entitled *Discourse and Truth: the problematization of Parrhesia* and can be found at: http://Foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/. Quoted in Peters, "Truth-Telling as an Educational Practice of the Self," 213.

the argument of this chapter, but the same idealized, truthful speech is recognizable in these two very separate contexts.

Reading *parrhesia* onto confession is useful for the purposes of Gower specifically in that it is described by both classical sources and modern critics using those terms that we find so comfortable when speaking of Gower's poetic voice. *Parrhesia* is language that is open, clear, plain, complete, and direct. It is, as Foucault deems, the opposite of flattery and rhetoric, two qualities that have such troubled etymologies in Gower.[62] We have seen in the previous chapter how flattery stands in direct opposition to true speaking in the Tale of Diogenes, and rhetoric/embellishment hews uncomfortably close to the "painted" or "colored" language that seems to irrevocably produce deception and falsehood in the poem. The irony is, of course, that the style of the *Confessio* eclipses the difficulty of its narrative and poetic structure. The art of Gower's verse displays a smoothness and ease of language familiar to his readers that can only come from a masterful hand, reminding us that what is plain is rarely, in Gower, what is easy.[63]

On the other hand, the places where *parrhesia* doesn't fit so neatly into the *Confessio* are, perhaps unsurprisingly, just as telling as the many ways it does. Firstly, in the classical tradition, *parrhesia* is almost solely a device of a master teaching his student and its powerful presence is cited as the counterpoint to the reverent and focused silence of the disciple. While we can certainly map this onto Genius' role as a confessor, as his tellings of the *exempla* admirably fulfill the requirements for truthful, free speech, Amans

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[62] For his larger argument on *parrhesia* in published form, see Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1981-1982*, 371-91.

[63] John Burrow's invaluable study of Gower's style outlines some of the more virtuosic elements of the *Confessio* and offers an excellent reminder of just how crafted the poem is. J. A. Burrow, "Gower's Poetic Styles," in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004). See also Chapter 1 of Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion*.

doesn't match the picture of the silent, observant student. Nor should he. Confessional

language of the sort discussed in the penitentials, the language that evokes the openness

and sincerity of *parrhesia,* is the language of the penitent, not of the confessor.

Moreover, the critical aspect of "free speaking" certainly comes from the confessor but

more appropriately from the penitent himself. The revelation of sins is a discovery and a

self-accusation, a display and a personal reprimand that is soothed by the absolution of

the attending priest. Similarly, the urgency to speak comes from the sacerdotal duty of

the confessor, but much more important is the sinner's duty to cleanse the stains of sin

from his soul in a timely and reverent fashion. The discourse and practice of confession

applies *parrhesia* to the student rather than to the teacher—a move that is quite

appropriate for a poem that deliberately blurs the lines between authority, authorship, and

character.

The second, and more serious, discrepancy between classical *parrhesia* and

medieval confessional discourse is the purpose behind self-examination each entails. As

Michael Peters puts it, "the crucial difference consists in the Greek ethical principal of

self-mastery versus that of Christian *self-renunciation.*"[64] Peters takes this distinction

from Foucault's lectures and his insistence on reading Christian confession as the

destruction of the self in order to conform to a doctrinal system. Penance, in Foucault's

analysis, is a state of being rather than a practice to perform and his description comes

from the earliest penitential practices of the organized Church. In this, his reading of the

sacrament is absolutely accurate. In the early Church, penance was a state reserved for

the most serious offenses and was a public renunciation of both the body and the

individual identity. Between the second and seventh centuries, penance meant entering

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[64] Peters, "Truth-Telling as an Educational Practice of the Self," 216.

into an order of penitents as a supplicant, usually after a ritual that involved the laying of

hands, and often shaving the head, a hair shirt, and the application of ashes to the face

and body.[65] Termed *exomologesis*, or as Tertullian translates *publicatio sui*, the practice

is distinct from later versions of private confession. Early monastic confession, or what

the early Greek fathers called *exagoreusis*, is the foundation for what we see in the

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Foucault terms this variety of confession "permanent

verbalization" of one's inner life and has strong ties to contemplation and obedience.[66]

Because of the negative theology associated with orderly life, monastic subjectivity as

revealed through confession is so entwined with the permanent sacrifice of complete

obedience that seeing self-mastery as the end of self-knowledge is antithetical to the

entire concept of regular devotion. We can see this played out in the *Institutiones* and

Collationes of John Cassian, where the monks are directed to sort through their thoughts

and separate the good from the bad in the same way that a miller would sort through

grains to remove the bad or how a moneychanger would examine coins to determine

where they came from.[67]

　　The problem with this analysis is that, by the thirteenth century, the mandate for

lay confession had radically altered the nature of confession as a social and devotional

practice, and even more so for the confession we see in the *Confessio*. The discourse of

confession, tied as it is to the systems of authority and obedience of regular life, has

shifted by the late fourteenth century, and it has shifted even farther in the poem.

Truthfulness is essential in confession, but in Gower's deinstitutionalized confessional

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[65] Taylor, *The Culture of Confession*, 17-20; Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 5.
[66] See Michel Foucault, "Christianity and Confession," in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007).
[67] These examples are cited in Ibid., 180-81.

logic, it must be learned. It begins with the ability to understand the concepts under question (in the case of confession, the sins, in the case of lovers, ethical inconsistencies or ineffective behavior), continues with the recognition of these abstracts in the self, and finally concludes with sincere and meaningful verbal articulation. The same is true, in a sense, for readers of Gower's poem. Unlike Langland's audience, which is explicitly instructed to teach others what they learn, Gower's readers must develop a facility with the technologies of the self that confession demands so that they can function ethically in the world. The unique blend of contemplative and active reading leads, through textual labor, to self-understanding which, in turn, should produce truthful representation of that understanding both in word and in deeds visible in the world. In this way, because the discourse is not supported or directed by ecclesiastical or even sacramental authority, subjectivity becomes a function of the readers' work at and with the text. Their labors generate a self-discovery as a byproduct of their mastery of the elements of the discourse without the self-renunciation institutional language requires.

The difference between the self-renunciation endemic to institutional confession and the self-mastery associated with the classical form of *parrhesia* is critical to understanding the reasons why confessional discourse is useful to Gower and how he uses it to redefine the function of the vernacular and the activity of vernacular reading. As the poem unfolds, Amans learns both how to read himself and also how better to represent himself through truthful speaking—but he does so from within the confines of the confessional form, problematic performance notwithstanding. Gower's readers, however, must do more than follow his progress or even mirror it as they learn how better to read and speak themselves. Their textual transformation is not the same as Amans',

and it is not the same as if they had simply read a penitential handbook. Their ability to see their inner selves is encouraged by but not modeled in the poem proper. Rather, they are asked to do something more than Amans can; namely, they are asked by the text to develop self-mastery without self-renunciation.

In the same way that the misreading of Langland's inscribed characters separate the imagined external readers from the text so as to enable inventive reading, so too does Gower's deinstitutionalized discourse remove readers from the contexts within which the form of the poem finds meaning in order to encourage them to shift their interpretive efforts. Unlike Langland's readers, however, Gower's audience is asked to leave the text behind and apply its form to an atextual practice—the interpretation and transformation of themselves. Their textual labors within the poem establish the form of self-understanding but it is their ability to truthfully enact their understanding outside of the poem that is transformative. Truthful speech as self-mastery allows the interior individual to becomes a socially effective force.

The Subject in Gower's Confessional Language

Self-mastery as a public, social element is found throughout the *Confesso* in Gower's notion of self-governance. For example, the conclusion of the poem, Book 8, consists primarily of the long story of Apollonius of Tyre. One of the most commented-on tales in the poem, its position and length alone would argue for its prominence, but it is the central conflict between fate and action, public and private, that make it the culmination of the major questions Gower has raised throughout the work. The story is

an old one with several possible sources, and has the largest number of Latin marginal

notes of any other in the *Confessio*. It begins with the king Antiochus who, after the

death of his wife, began an incestuous relationship with his daughter, unnamed

throughout the tale. To prevent her from marrying, he demands any suitor answer a

particularly difficult riddle—if he answer incorrectly, he is immediately put to death.

Apollonius, arriving at court, immediately asks about the riddle in order to win the lady's

hand. The king recounts the puzzle:

> "With felonie I am upbore,
> I ete and have it noght forbore
> Mi modres fleissh, whos housebonde
> Mi fader for to seche I fonde
> Which is the son eek of my wif..."
>   (8.405-409)

A Latin version appears in the margin next to the English and is similar to other incest-

based riddles of the period and, presumably, would trigger the expectation for a

metaphorical solution.[68] In this case, however, there is also a literal incestuous meaning

behind the verse. Apollonius, on hearing the problem, thinks and then answers

> "The question which thou hast spoke,
> If thou wolt that it be unloke,
> It toucheth al the priveté
> Between thin oghne child and thee,
> And stant al hol upon you two."
>   (8.423-427)

This answer is puzzling for several reasons, not the least of which is that as a reply it is

not an answer at all. Apollonius seems somehow to have discerned the taboo relationship

between king and daughter and has used it as a threat rather than solving the puzzle. His

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[68] For more on this riddle, and medieval riddling in general, see Galloway, "The Rhetoric of Reading in Late-Medieval England: The "Oxford" Riddles, the *Secretum Philosophorum*, and the Riddles in *Piers Plowman*."; P. Goolden, "Antiochus's Riddle in Gower and Shakespeare," *Review of English Studies* 6 (1955), 245-51.

language strays outside the logic of the riddle-game, but he succeeds in outmaneuvering Antiochus nonetheless.

The tale gives readers an example of effective, truthful speech in a deinstitutionalized context. The answer given by Apollonius is not the answer to the riddle inasmuch as it does not provide a solution that names the person, object, or abstraction to fulfill the parameters of Antiochus' verse. Moreover, it does not participate in the genre of riddling on a discursive or social level; rather, it skirts the question by changing the rules of the game. Apollonius matches Antiochus' private threat of execution with the public threat of exposure and, in doing so, he transgresses the expected bounds established by the genre. The auditor rather than the speaker, then, gains control over the dangerous situation by removing language from its context: the contract established by the initial acceptance of the rules of the riddle-game is altered and replaced by the younger man's clever reply. The only reason the tactic is effective (and why it enables Apollonius to escape with his life) is that he speaks truthfully. The successful non-answer sets the hero on a path where he can, as many critics have discussed, display his virtue. Importantly, however, the virtue in the tale is virtue from character, not from Apollonius' royal birth. Driven by Fortune, he is cast into the disordered world of romance but manages in the end to restore order through the discovery and display of his inner and outer nobility, eventually replacing the powers of fate with his own powers of justice and right rule as a father and as a king. The successful ending gives readers a tale of self-recognition that becomes action, which in turn becomes social order, all growing out from language that shirks its intended genre. Ethical language in this story is effective because it doesn't assume the appropriate,

expected stance but forces its speaker to reveal himself amidst the disorder of the world. Furthermore, the transgressing language allows Apollonius to exert his public persona over the confused space of the tale and, in doing so, return harmony to his personal narrative.

The Tale of Apollonius is not a perfect mirror for the process of deinstitutionalized confession that we see in the rest of the poem, but its presentation of the complicated relationships among internal self-knowledge, public and private virtue, social action, and representation through language reinforce those same concerns running through the frame narrative. In the story, the hero does not tell the truth about himself, his inner virtue reveals it to the guilty party; similarly, his truthful speech is the beginning of his journey, not the result of its completion as in confession. Apollonius' answer sends him out into the world to discover himself whereas in the penitential process truthful speech can only happen once self-recognition has already been performed. Gower uses the story to speak directly to readers as to the power of self-mastery (Amans' says quite simply that, for him, the tale is interesting but in no way applicable as a warning against sin). Far from renouncing himself, the self-exiled Apollonius is removed from his social status, leaves his kingdom behind, and relies on his inner and personal virtue (self-mastery) to act as the counter against Fortune's entanglements. The form of the tale, that of romance, is directly countered by the hero's resilience and eventual self-sufficiency—the sturdy self-knowledge he finds by the end of his travels puts an end to the fickle hand of Fate and re-establishes the social and political order by acting as a bulwark against the unpredictable turns of the genre. Apollonius' story is a place to read Gower's experiments with the limits of form in the same way that he experiments

with discourse—self-mastery wins out over romance in Book 8 as well as over institutional confession in the formal frame of the poem.

The three essential aspects of confessional discourse, hybrid reading that blends the active and the contemplative, self-recognition, and truthful speech, are all pertinent to Amans, but their true impact lies in how they shape Gower's idea of vernacular subjectivity in the *Confessio*. The poem shapes its readers through a removal of authority, both in the troubled discourse of confession and in the unreliability of its characters to perform the kind of textual labor the poem asks of its readers. It gives them confession without a learned and qualified priest, in a world populated by gods and goddesses, spoken by a character who is only interested in secular love, and who in the end fails to reach his goal. And yet for all of this, confession for Gower is not simply a convenient device for gathering a collection of tales together in a veiled political and social commentary. Confession allows the text to become a vehicle for a new kind of readerly transformation and a new kind of vernacular. The inventive readers imagined by the poem are not the same as Langland's—in fact, they are very different—but both authors use hermeneutic difficulty in order to help readers transform themselves through their experiences with the text. Whereas Langland's difficulty is immediately obvious, coming at readers through macaronic language, allegorical confusion, and the spiraling shape of the narrative, Gower's plain style asks something quite different. Gower's vernacular project is to give readers interpretive tools that develop out of the text but that then find their purchase in the world outside of the poem. The text is a proving ground, a place where reading skills are discovered and honed, but unlike *Piers Plowman*, the text

itself is not the source of transformation. Readers must learn to read themselves and to revise the text of their inner lives in order to effect social change.

Like alchemy, confession is a system that offers readers the raw materials for transformation, but its presence in the poem asks them to enact its principles without the necessary framework of authority and control. Deinstitutionalized confession allows Gower to perform the discourse for his audience, but in the absence of the priest's authorizing power readers must establish authority over their own subjectivity. The problem confession addresses in the poem is the same as that of the "wyndy wordes" of the vernacular—the efficacy of language in the absence of recognizable authority. For all of the control and plainness of Gower's style, language use in the poem continually resists and challenges the parameters set for it, to the extent that the very openness of the vernacular becomes a source of labor. When language doesn't act as expected, when characters exchange one discourse for another, these are the places where Gower initiates virtuous transformation. Even if the poem fails to gives the tools for devotional self-reading, it does give the tools necessary for ethical self-reading.

Chapter 6

Epilogue: The Hermeneutic Narrative

> *For [all than] sal we yeld acount,*
> *Quat that wisdom mai amount,*
> *That God havis given us for to spend,*
> *In god oys til our lives end.*
>   *(Northern Homily Cycle, Prologue, 45-48)[1]*

> *Alle thing that is iwist nis nat knowen by his nature proper, but by the*
> *nature of hem that comprehenden it.*
>   *(Boethius, Cons. of Phil., V, pr 6)[2]*

The task that Langland and Gower set before their readers changes the way in

which meaning is made in the medieval vernacular text. Rather than establishing

authority through classical antecedents or easy transmission of information, both authors

reject the models we have usually associated with the "vernacular literary theory" of the

period in order to create an audience that is prepared to focus not on uncovering the

authorized meaning of the text, but on the meaning of the text as it is created within

themselves. The debate between locating meaning on the surface (or literal) level of the

text or in seeing the *sensus litteralis* as a veil for a higher and more elevated truth is well

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[1] John Small, ed., *English Metrical Homilies from Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century* (Edinbourgh: W. Paterson, 1862), 3.
[2] Chaucer's translation, Chaucer and Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 466.

documented among current studies of late-medieval vernacularity.[3] For the reading models I have described in *Piers Plowman* and the *Confessio Amantis*, both levels are equally present and equally essential to a successful reading experience. It is true that the didactic agenda behind the poems is one that exceeds the literal sense, but the narrative is more than a covering for a higher order of truth; likewise, the allegorical surface of the poem is continually gesturing towards extra-textual readerly transformation that can only come through the discovery of a deeper level of meaning.

The narrative of these poems exists on two levels: the poetic narrative, by which I mean the story as it is experienced by the characters within the poem—this may also be called more simply the plot of the poem—and the hermeneutic narrative, or the interpretive path readers generate as they work their way through the texts. The development of characters as they progress through the events of the poem has a reflection in the progress readers make in their attempts at uncovering how the meaning of the poem is to be applied to their worldly lives. These texts ask readers to discover themselves anew through the lens of their interpretive labor.[4] The imagined journey of readers through the text and through the development of their interpretation is as narrative as Will's travels through his dreamscape or Amans' growing proficiency with the confessional genre.

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[3] Rita Copeland, "Medieval Theory and Criticism," in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1980); Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*; Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*; Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England*.

[4] For a much broader formulation of the narrative of identity, see Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Ricoeur's notion of personal identity is presented as opposed to a subject-oriented idea of self (*Cogito ergo sum*). Rather than placing the self in the subject position, he sees identity formation as a process of attestation, a concept which requires not subject isolation, but in fact the presence of another. "..attestation can be defined as the *assurance of being oneself acting and suffering*. This assurance remains the ultimate recourse against all suspicion; even if it is always in some sense received from another, it still remains *self*-attestation: (p. 23). See also A. P. Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

I have argued that the poetic narrative and the hermeneutic narrative are quite distinct from one another, and I have demonstrated ways in which the poetic narrative enables and sustains the hermeneutic narrative. The interpretive errors and oversights made by characters within the texts allow for the readers imagined by the author to create not only meaning for the poem, but also to generate an experience of the text that is individualized and transformative. The paths readers take through the text are encouraged though not completely controlled by the ways in which the author opens the poem for the audience—as we have seen time and again, the experiences of the characters are not those of the imagined readers. The things characters see or hear, however, and their responses to these events do, in turn, form the parameters through which the audience generates their own textual and interpretive experience. In this way, the development of the readers' understanding of the work becomes a narrative or a story in its own right—only rather than meeting the fleshly Holy Church or debating Sloth with Genius, they create individual conversations with the poem as a textual object.

If the *sensus litteralis* corresponds to the poetic narrative and the higher signified meaning to the readers' hermeneutic narrative, it would seem that both Langland and Gower are using the literal sense as a means to move their readers to an understanding of the texts' allegorical truth. A great deal of modern criticism about these authors supports placing signified meaning as the primary interest of both texts and authors, but just as these poems do not choose the contemplative wholly over the active, it would be a mistake to read the literal sense as secondary to the non-narrative truth of the text.   It is true that the hermeneutic narrative displaces the poetic narrative in individual readers' experiences of the poem, but it does so through a complex dependency on what happens

to the characters. Rather than a hierarchy of meaning, with the hermeneutic winning out over the poetic, the two are a continually developing dialectic; the experiential dialogue between characters and imagined readers is negotiated in the space between text and understanding, readers and meaning. Furthermore, neither text envisions readers who, at the turn of the final page, will have reached a point of absolute understanding of themselves and of the proper course of life laid out neatly before them. Ideally, they have rather the ability to be prepared for self-examination and are armed with an idea of the kind of devotional and social labor they must begin. The hermeneutic narrative extends beyond the margins of the text and is carried out into the world as readers re-enter their earthy, extra-textual lives; as such, the interaction between the poetic and the hermeneutic is never complete and is perpetually developing. The negotiations readers make between their expectations of the text, the actions of the characters, the meaning they extract from what they read, and how this meaning affects their future actions generates a story of labor and transformation that has, in the grade-school definition, a beginning, a middle, and the suggestion (if not assurance) of an end.

The other result of restructuring the meaning of the text as a product of reader's hermeneutic experience is that the rhetorical *auctoritas* of the text is no longer the province of either the authors or of divinely inspired truth for which they are the humble messengers. We have seen this both in Langland and in Gower, albeit in slightly different forms. Gower's renunciation of *auctoritas* comes from the ways in which his language places the necessity of labor on his readers; throughout the poem the audience is reminded again and again though the *exempla*, the dialogues between Genius and Amans, and even the Latin epigrams about the importance of labor, textual or otherwise. The

discourses used in the poem, like alchemy and confession, use language as an integral aspect of readerly labor, but Gower's famously smooth style refuses to provide the stimulus for study. The difficulty, paradoxically, lies in the deceptive openness of his vernacular voice. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Langland's difficult language is not at all difficult to find—on the contrary, he challenges the reader from the opening lines of the Prologue. Despite all of Will's bumblings, Langland's poetry presents learnedness from the scope of its subject matter to its highly self-conscious macaronic form. Even so, the entire structure of the work is aimed at worldly action, and the ambiguous (and often deemed unsatisfying) final passus emphasizes that readers, in the end, are on their own. They must decide what to make of the text and how to use it not as an isolated exercise in contemplation or as an exercise in appreciation of literary dexterity but as a guide for discovering their own path to St. Truth.

These poems are successful in creating these hermeneutic narratives because of the difference between vernacular and Latin textual cultures. The omnipresent characterization of the vernacular as more accessible and more open than its Latin counterpart creates a fiction of ease that allows readers to enter into the text without the barrier of elevated "learnedness." As such, the texts are in fact open—they are flexible in their meaning and available for the interpretation. The idea of the vernacular as accessible is key to the development of a hermeneutic narrative even when the text itself is extremely difficult because, like the inscribed misreadings, it creates space for readers to generate understanding. However, this openness and flexibility can paradoxically make the poems more difficult for their readers. Unlike Latinate models, or even the vernacular approximations/translations of Latinate models, neither *Piers* nor the

Confessio use textual apparatuses, like prologues, to guide their readers and they do not rely on the meta-narrative generic delineations to structure how they or their readers enter into the text. Several very useful modern compilations of vernacular authorial prologues and commentary from the entirety of the medieval period are now available, and each example gives some sort of framework authors provide to advise their audiences both about the subject and purpose of the work.[5] In Langland and Gower, however, the reading model is not explicitly defined; part of the work readers must do is to decide for themselves how to read.

The lack of academic or Aristotelian prologue, combined with the emphasis on individual, experiential readership, could easily be mistaken for a collapse or erasure of authorial intention altogether, but such is far from the case. The formal characteristics of these texts continually work to shape and develop inventive readers in a way that speaks loudly for authorial intention—the confessional form Gower chooses to use (and to manipulate) creates one kind of reader, even as Langland's dependence on *enarratio* and exegesis creates another. Both of these poets are consummate in their textual control, from their versification to their command of structure to their capture of recognizable and distinctive characters, but they use this control explicitly to demand authoritative and authorizing reading from their audience. The mechanism through which the social reform both of these poems reach for and that so many critics have discussed is the process of developing readers who internalize the processes of ethical interpretation both inside and outside of the text.

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[5] Evans et al., eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*; Minnis, Scott, and Wallace, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, C. 1100-C. 1375:* "The Commentary Tradition."

Because this responsibility for meaning-making lies in the hands of the audience, the texts are necessarily opened up to the question of polyvalence, and it is here that the reading models we find in *Piers Plowman* and the *Confessio Amantis* become radically different from their medieval vernacular counterparts. The individual readings produce individual meaning that can quickly move beyond the purview of authorial control. This, of course, leads into the well-known arguments against the use of the vernacular for biblical translation and devotional material: once texts can circulate among wider populations, they run the risk of exceeding authoritative oversight and heresy can begin to take hold. Moreover, the problem is magnified exponentially when the text, like that of Gower or Langland, goes as far as to exchange the power of interpretation of the author for that of the audience.

It would seem that the reading model I have argued for adopts the radical principals of movements like Lollardry by encouraging and rewarding readers who look to create understanding that exceeds any agenda of the author and that privileges individual experience over authoritative learnedness. More to the point, I have claimed that these texts work to develop such an ambition in readers if it didn't already exist. And yet, both *Piers* and the *Confessio* are firm in their rejection of unruly and "heretical" interpretation. The concerns we find in Langland and in Gower are orthodox even while tinted with satire and complaint against religious and political corruption.[6] Gower is especially vehement about warning his readers to beware of the specific dangers of Lollardry, calling it a tool of the Antichrist set to eat away at mankind's faith in Christ

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[6] Langland and *Piers* in particular had a long life among Lollard authors, although the poem itself is not sympathetic to many of the ideals of the movement. For a useful trace of ways in which the text and the figure of the plowman is adopted by Lollards, see D. A. Lawton, "Lollardry and the "Piers Plowman Tradition"," *The Modern Langauge Review* 76, no. 4 (1981), 780-93.

(5.1805-1824). Langland also cautions against those "Whoso gloseth as gylours doon" (10.192) and urges readers to hold themselves to the true meaning of scripture, no matter how difficult it is to find hidden within the veil of the Word. The explicit concern over the ill-use of texts and the dangers of "guileful" interpretation speak volumes to the potential problems the poems open with their construction of readership.[7] Even as much as the poetic narrative structures and drives the hermeneutic narrative and interpretive efforts of readers, the control the authors have is always limited. Nevertheless, the promotion of questionable (and questioning) reading in the poems establishes reform not on a broad social level but through the transformation of individual audience members to match orthodox theological ideals.

Even as this model of the hermeneutic narrative needs the vernacular to function, the clash between polyvalence and orthodoxy is still an unresolved contradiction in its use of the so-called "accessible" language. If, as Boethius suggests, the only way of knowing is subject to the inner fictions of the individual, and if, as Russell Peck describes, "Knowledge creates a world apart from what *is*, a world in the brain—a world of its own," then the phenomenological nature of the hermeneutic narrative contradicts the representational power of the text in relation to a stable, orthodox Truth.[8] The texts

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[7] This is not, of course, limited to Gower or Langland, or indeed to vernacular writing. Consider Boccacio's entreaty to his audience: "Around my book, as usual at the sight of a new work, will gather a crowd of the incompetent. The learned will also attend, and, after a careful inspection, doubtless some of them who are revered for their righteousness, and possess both fairness of mind and scholarship will, by your example, praise whatever is commendable and, in all reverence, criticize whatever is not. To such I am constrained to express my kindest and most respectful acknowledgement, and to commend the fairness of their opinion. But a far more numerous crowd will gather about in a ring, and pry curiously into the chinks of a work none too articulate, or into other possible defects. They hunger more to consume that to approve. With these is my quarrel, with these must I fight." Giovanni Boccaccio, *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, trans. Charles G. Osgood (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1956), 17-18.

[8] Russell A. Peck, "The Phenomenology of Make Believe in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Studies in Philology* 91, no. 3 (1994), 255. I employ the word "phenomenology" here in the same way that Peck does—with the clear acceptance of its anachronistic use for the medieval period. Peck explains his

themselves offer no clear solution to the question of the "truthfulness" of readers' experiences, but the dangers are clear enough. From sinful misreadings to out-and-out heresy, the experiential/phenomenological aspect of readers' understanding of the text is necessarily true, and consequentially any new self-understanding they acquire is likewise "true," but this does not mean that the conclusions they reach or the transformations they accomplish are necessarily beneficial or are ethically sound. The accumulation of readerly errors produced by characters in the texts is evidence enough that not all interpretational experiences are successful ones.

This is reading that must allow for (even as it discourages) error. It is risky, uncertain, and uncontrolled. The only thing keeping readers on track is the poetic narrative they must overwrite with their own experience and interpretive struggle. As Mark Miller writes, in this type of text, "We are always vulnerable to suddenly realizing that, despite our best efforts, we have been getting it all wrong; and all that we can do in the face of this danger is to keep trying to develop our ability to get it right."[9] The fear of "getting it all wrong" and the unsettling anxiety these two poems produce becomes the engine that drives readers to laborious efforts. The stakes could be no higher—the texts promise the ability to achieve salvation and union with God. Even if within the poetic narrative this never comes to pass, the penalty for failure for the external readers is nothing less than damnation. They must become the subject of their own reading, and

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reasoning for its centrality in his argument: "*Phenomenology*, the science of observing the mind's processes of intuiting and generalizing, is a late eighteenth century designation that is juxtaposed to *ontology*. That distinction is not unlike the juxtaposition of nominalism and realism, insofar as it is restricted to a mental science. Phenomenology is particularly useful to the medievalist as a term because of its distinction between phenomena inside and outside the brain, and its focus on intuition and appearance, these being precisely the considerations of medieval epistemology as it is commonly explored." Peck, "The Phenomenology of Make Believe in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," 253.
[9] Miller, "*Handlyng Synne* and the Perspective of Agency," 616.

their hermeneutic narrative is the one that will bear witness to their efforts in this world and the next.

Very little about these difficult texts fits into modern formulations of late-medieval vernacular textuality and culture. Their relationship to Latinate discourses and reading models is not what we find in other vernacular works, they do not approach the anxiety about authority in languages other than Latin in the way we are accustomed to seeing, and they manage readership in ways unfamiliar in both orthodox and heretical texts. They are revolutionary in that they use the poetic narrative to generate an imagined and independent hermeneutic narrative within their readers in order to transform them through the process of reading. Stephen Nichols, in his definition of the "new medievalism" writes of the remarkable aptitude for experimenting with meaning and texts in the period: "In the Middle Ages, one senses a fascination with the *potential* for representation, even more than with theories or modes of representation."[10] This representational potential is precisely what Gower and Langland use to initiate the labor of reading in their audience—they use the interpretive hang-ups in the poems to display the potential inherent in the texts. We feel comfortable, as modern critics, in embracing this phenomenon when talking about medieval vernacular texts, but not when talking about the medieval vernacular. I would suggest, by contrast, that nowhere should this more visible or more pertinent that in vernacular studies.

By seeing readers as protagonists in their own interpretive narrative and by seeing authors as initiating that narrative, we see a side of the vernacular that is an entirely new development in the late fourteenth century. This is not to say that earlier texts do not

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[10] Stephen G. Nichols, "The New Medievalism: Tradition and Discontinuity in Medieval Culture," in *The New Medievalism*, ed. Marina S. Brownleee, Kevin Brownlee, and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 1-2.

engage the reader—quite the opposite. But in the later medieval period we see authors who take a dramatically different attitude towards the author/text/reader triad from anything that had come before. Rather than appendix these efforts as a marginal side note to a more homogenous picture of vernacular culture, in all its literary, devotional, and social elements, we ought rather to find them as central to a movement that looked at meaning and representation through language with new vigor and urgency. I propose vernacular readership as a radical exercise in transformational interpretation, which belies many of our expectations and assumptions about the nature of lay audiences in medieval England...but should not claim an uncomplicated or effortless connection to the readers it looks to change there.

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