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The Gawain-Poet and the Fourteenth-Century English Anticlerical Tradition

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RESEARCH IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN CULTURE

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WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

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Fourteenth-Century English Anticlerical Tradition

by
Ethan Campbell

Research in Medieval and Early Modern Culture
MEDIEVAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo

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**Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
are available from the Library of Congress.**

ISBN 9781580443074
eISBN 9781580443081

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Preface and Acknowledgments

SHORTLY AFTER OUR COLLEGE graduation, my sister and I received a memorable gift from our father: a handwritten journal in which he responded to various questions about his life and told stories about his childhood in rural Nebraska, many of which we had never heard before. To the question of when and where he had been baptized, he wrote:

I was baptized when I was 18 years old, after I graduated from high school. The baptism service was held at the Calamus River, on the ranch operated by Guy and Mary Boller. The minister was Rev. L—... The last time I knew, the Rev. L— was in prison for sexual assault. I'm not sure—maybe my baptism doesn't count!

This minister, it turned out, was a pedophile who had victimized young girls in the church for many years before being caught. My father's feelings of betrayal were clearly still fresh decades later, as a man he'd once viewed as a spiritual mentor had secretly lived a double life as a sexual predator. But what most caught my eye in his description was its half-serious theological question at the end. Is it possible, my father seemed to be asking, that a baptism performed by such a man might not "count"? In other words, can a pastor or priest who performs religious rituals as part of his office commit a sin so grave that those rituals become invalid? To phrase the question more broadly, does the effectiveness of a sacrament rely upon the virtues of the man performing it, or can the power of the office or the institution overcome the failures of the man?

What seems especially striking in my father's case is that the institution in question was the Church of the Nazarene, a relatively "low-church" evangelical Protestant denomination with roots in the Wesleyan holiness movements of the nineteenth century. Worship services in this denomination do not follow a set liturgical format, and members tend not to hold a "strong" view of the sacraments, viewing baptism, for example, as primarily

a public commitment ceremony undertaken by adults and Communion as a commemorative celebration. My father was planting his tongue at least partly in his cheek, therefore, when speculating that any kind of action, no matter how criminal or immoral, might invalidate what he viewed as a purely symbolic ritual.

All the same, the fact that an evangelical Protestant could consider, if only in jest, the possibility that a sacrament might not “count” if the one performing it were guilty of a grave enough crime provides valuable insight into the distress many contemporary Roman Catholics felt in the wake of their church’s sexual abuse scandals in the early 2000s, as dramatized in the Academy Award-winning film *Spotlight*. These were betrayals and disillusionments on a much grander scale, but also of a somewhat different kind, since Catholics, in keeping with official church teaching, tend to have a much stronger view of the sacraments performed by their priests, particularly the Eucharist. A Catholic priest’s fall from grace, in other words, means more to his parishioners than simply the loss of a once trusted spiritual mentor, but represents a failure that could threaten the practices that sit at the very heart of their faith.

Yet even the sacramental experience of contemporary Catholics is only a shadow of the reverence medieval Christians paid to their church’s sacraments, especially the Eucharist. In the early ninth century, the monastic theologians Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramnus argued that the bread and wine at the altar transformed into Christ’s literal body and blood at the moment a priest spoke the words of consecration—the bread and wine ceased to exist, and their underlying substance became flesh and blood, though they still retained the sensory properties (“accidents”) of bread and wine. After a few hundred years of theological debate on the subject, the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, convened by Pope Innocent III, codified the term “transubstantiation” to describe this miraculous phenomenon.¹ By the end of the fourteenth century, the practice of observing the miracle of bread and wine become Christ’s body and blood in the hands of a priest had become, as the historian Eamon Duffy puts it, “the high point of lay experience of the Mass.”² Actually partaking of the elements, as opposed to simply watching the priest elevate them over the congregation, was an even more momentous occasion for most medieval churchgoers, as it typically occurred only once a year and involved first undergoing the sacrament of penance, a three-step process of confession to a priest followed by prescribed works of penitential satisfaction, and finally absolution. Any revelation that the priests who performed these miraculous tasks had

engaged in activities medieval Christians believed to be mortal sins could not fail to be profoundly unsettling.

And yet the priesthood of the Western Christian church by the late Middle Ages, according to contemporaneous accounts from a huge range of writers, had become an outrageously corrupt institution. As the opening chapters of this book illustrate, all categories of clerics in late fourteenth-century England—parish priests, monks, friars, bishops, and archbishops, as well as lay officers of the church—were subject to vicious critiques from both parishioners and fellow churchmen, the latter often the most strident. Just a glance at the works of English literature from this period most often encountered by modern-day readers—the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland—reveals a fictional landscape teeming with lazy, gluttonous, greedy, lustful, even murderous clerics and church officials.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, to take the most famous example, depicts a Pardoner who offers absolution for sins in exchange for fees and attempts to sell fake religious relics to his fellow pilgrims, a Friar who performs hasty marriages for young women he has impregnated, a fat Monk who prefers hunting and grooming his horse to praying, and a drunken Summoner, grotesquely disfigured by a disease caused by his lechery and, in his vocation as an officer of the ecclesiastical court, exceedingly craven and corrupt. The only exemplary figure among Chaucer's rogue's gallery of church officials is the Parson, a parish priest, yet even he at one point is accused by another character of heresy.

Langland's critique, though less well-known to twenty-first-century readers, casts an even wider net, as he attacks every type of cleric with equal relish, from absentee benefice-holders who refuse to take up posts they have been assigned, to friars who angle for dishonest donations, to priests who are too lazy and dim-witted to care about the corruption before their eyes, represented by a lurid feast in which a friar devours mounds of sumptuous food while the allegorical character Clergie looks on. Parish priests are uneducated, Langland complains, whereas friars are overeducated, making the simple tenets of religion complex and leading youth astray; all of them, priests and members of religious orders alike, should be forcibly dispossessed of all worldly goods, to purge their venomous greed from the church. Even popes are in danger of hell, he asserts, as they encourage the practices of simony and pluralism among their flock. John Wyclif, perhaps the most well-known anticlerical critic of the fourteenth century besides Chaucer, took an even more extreme position—the contemporary papacy

was the Antichrist, and the majority of clerks, priests, monks, and friars were servants of the devil.

This explosive combination of factors—doctrinal practices which elevated the priesthood to heights of divinely sanctioned authority, combined with an acute awareness of the institution's corruption—led both Wyclif and his followers in the heretical movement known as Lollardy, along with many other English writers in the fourteenth century, to consider the same question my father posed, though in a much more serious fashion. If a priest is sinful, they asked, if in fact he is an ally not of God but of Satan, are the sacraments he consecrates rendered somehow less effective, even invalid? Do they no longer count?

The church's official answer to this question was a resounding no. Such logic, according to medieval theologians, was a form of heresy—specifically, the heresy of Donatism, dating back to the time of St. Augustine, when a group of fourth-century schismatics refused to recognize baptisms performed by priests who had collaborated with the Roman Empire in its persecution of Christians. For the medieval “Donatists” (unrelated in any way to the earlier group), the sacrament most pointedly at issue was the Eucharist. The church had long held, along with the Apostle Paul, that to partake of the consecrated bread and wine while in a state of mortal sin was to call God's judgment down upon oneself (1 Corinthians 11:29), but what if the one consecrating and serving the elements had mortally sinned? Might the consecration fail, or become tainted?

For his part, Wyclif approached this question hesitantly and inconsistently throughout his career—the introductory chapter of this book will explore this complexity in more detail. Nevertheless, Donatism appeared among the list of twenty-four heretical and heterodox opinions compiled by the council of church officials who condemned Wyclif's teaching at the Blackfriars council of 1382, a determination which ultimately forced the Oxford philosopher into retirement. His Lollard followers explicitly denied the Donatist label—for example, in articles 34–35 of their *Thirty-Seven Conclusions*, presented to the English Parliament in 1395—but at the same time they were often less careful in their language about the sacraments, suggesting at times that sinful priests could lose their ability to baptize, absolve, or consecrate eucharistic elements efficaciously. Even in the *Thirty-Seven Conclusions*, in the midst of denying Donatism, they wrote, “Netheles a synnere mai be so moche vndisposid bi his owne malice or othir vnablenessse, that the Lord vouchith not saaf to worche with him in sacramentis,” a state of affairs that “harmith

gretli himsilf, dispisith God orribli, and sterith God to huge veniaunce [vengeance].”³

For the Lollards and their persecutors alike, however, this unorthodox opinion paled in comparison to the more radical heresy that would come to define the movement from the late fourteenth century forward—their rejection of transubstantiation altogether. For inquisitors in this period, the Eucharist served, in the words of scholar J. Patrick Hornbeck, “as what modern political strategists might call a ‘wedge issue’—that is, a theological litmus-test that sharply distinguished the orthodox from the heterodox.”⁴ Donatism and other forms of heterodoxy never stood on their own in lists of charges drawn up against accused Lollards, but were always accompanied by what the church perceived to be the greater error, doubts about the ability of *any* priest to perform the miracle of the altar.

In this, the later Lollards followed the lead of their predecessor Wyclif, whose treatise *De Eucharistia* (“On the Eucharist,” ca. 1379) rejected the prevailing philosophical explanations for transubstantiation, without articulating a clear alternative.⁵ The first three of the ten “Conclusions” declared heretical by the Blackfriars council were drawn directly from *De Eucharistia*, and the Lollards also drew from this tract in their *Thirty-Seven Conclusions*, arguing that the sacramental elements after consecration are both “verri breed ... and the verri bodi of Crist togidere,” a position known as “consubstantiation.” Any philosophies claiming otherwise, they said, even those sanctioned by the pope, were the “nouelties of antecrist.”⁶ Thus the central question around the sacrament, for many anticlerical critics at the turn of the fifteenth century, became less about whether the consecrated Eucharist “counted” when a priest was sinful than about what that consecration meant in the first place.

This book examines the ways in which one contemporary of Chaucer, Langland, and Wyclif approached these problems of clerical corruption and the theological questions they raised, particularly as they applied to the administration of sacraments. The *Gawain*-poet, anonymous author of the Middle English poems *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, was for the most part less explicit in his critiques of the late fourteenth-century priesthood but no less strident, preferring to address themes of sin and corruption among spiritual leaders not primarily through direct critique but through an imaginative consideration of biblical characters with priest-like attributes.

He could engage in direct critique as well, however, as the opening passage of the biblical poem *Cleanness* demonstrates, excoriating the

priests of his own day who are “honest” on the outside but “inwith alle fylthez,” and whose handling of the Eucharist as a result drives God to great “greme,” or wrath.⁷ As a close contextual reading of these poems alongside contemporaneous works in the anticlerical tradition makes clear, the *Gawain*-poet shared many of the same concerns as Wyclif and the Lollards, and a similar sense of their urgency and possible solutions. Just as clearly, however, he also celebrated the sacraments of baptism, penance, and the Eucharist throughout his works as rituals essential to the Christian life.

The ultimate goal of this book is to enhance our understanding of the *Gawain*-poet’s theology, rhetoric, and most importantly his poetics, by reading his four works alongside those of his anticlerical contemporaries. Before this project can get underway, however, we must briefly address the question of authorship. The *Gawain*-poet’s identity is unknown, and his poems appear in only one extant manuscript, British Library Cotton A.x. There is no direct evidence, internal or external, to suggest that the four poems were composed in the order in which they appear in the manuscript, nor even any conclusive evidence that they were written by the same person. However, the overwhelming critical consensus for the past 130 years, since the poems were first edited in the late nineteenth century, has been to proceed as if they were the product of a single author, typically called the *Gawain*-poet or *Pearl*-poet.⁸

This project will proceed with the same single-author assumption, but with full awareness that it *is* an assumption, one which will likely never be proven true or false with certainty. However, a lack of conclusive evidence is not the same as *no* evidence. As later chapters will demonstrate, the two poems at the center of the manuscript, *Cleanness* and *Patience*, share remarkable affinities, not just in their poetic meter (alliterative long lines), genre (biblical elaboration), and textual references (both poems expound upon the Beatitudes and quote Psalm 93:7–10), but in their thematic concerns. *Cleanness* begins with a polemical attack on the contemporary priesthood, then expands upon several stories of God’s wrath from the Old Testament; *Patience* in effect picks up where its predecessor in the manuscript leaves off, with a single extended exemplum of a priest-like figure, the prophet Jonah, who preaches God’s wrath to a remarkably receptive audience.

In any case, the question of shared authorship is less important to the aims of this project than the question of how these imaginative works may have drawn from and interacted with their anticlerical contemporar-

ies in a variety of genres. The introductory chapter reads closely the opening lines of the poem *Cleanness*, which contain the poet's most explicit references to the priests who inspire God's wrath, as well as a significant but for the most part critically overlooked depiction of a defiled sacrament—the eucharistic elements which are sullied by figuratively dirty hands. The second chapter outlines the history of anticlericalism in late fourteenth-century England, using Wyclif's and the Lollards' broad corpus of anticlerical polemic as a guide to the tradition's central concerns, but looking broadly as well at their early influences and non-Wycliffite contemporaries.

After this overview of the anticlerical tradition, we will focus on *Cleanness* and *Patience* individually, to analyze their positions on those issues of central concern, then extend the reading into *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where references to the priesthood dwell further on the margins but are nevertheless deeply significant for a clear understanding of these more popular and frequently studied works. All four close readings will offer a new perspective on the *Gawain*-poet's works as we use a particular contextual lens to view the poems, one to which the poet himself gives warrant in the opening lines of what may well be his earliest work.

Attending to the poet's critiques of the Christian priesthood, especially where they are embedded subtly within priest-like characters, for example from the Old Testament, can lead to a fresh understanding of many unusual or unexplained moments in the texts, such as the organization of *Cleanness*'s exempla as well as its extraordinary imagery of God's wrath over seemingly minor offenses; the poet's praise of involuntary poverty at the start of *Patience* and his departures from the biblical book of Jonah, including a vivid sermon which does not appear in the source material; and the Green Knight's sudden decision to absolve Sir Gawain in priest-like fashion, moments after the narrator has compared him to the devil. Using *Cleanness*'s opening critique as a starting point and the poet's anticlerical contemporaries as a guide, my hope is that these readings can help us to imagine better how these complex and often difficult poems may have functioned within their literary, religious, and social contexts.

I have many people to thank for help in research and writing. For general inspiration, I want to thank three professors in particular: Traugott Lawler at Yale University, Nancy Black at Brooklyn College, and Steve Kruger at the CUNY Graduate Center. In Professor Lawler's seminar on the *Gawain*-poet my senior year as an undergraduate, I felt for

the first time that I was part of a genuine community of scholars—in this case, a community of just five students and one teacher, sitting around a table slowly reading Middle English poetry aloud and puzzling through it together. His commitment both to serious scholarship and to the lives of his students continues to provide a model for the kind of teacher I want to be. Several years later, Professor Black's graduate seminar on the Arthurian tradition rekindled an interest in the *Gawain*-poet which had lain dormant, and her enthusiastic teaching reminded me again what I love so much about medieval poetry.

Steve Kruger, my dissertation director, is responsible for introducing me to most of the works of literature I consider in this book. I encountered Langland and the Lollards for the first time, along with several other works I now consider required reading for any medievalist, such as John Mandeville's *Travels* and *The Siege of Jerusalem*, in his course on racial and religious difference in Middle English literature. I took this course early in my teaching career, and it has informed my classroom approach to a wide variety of literary works I have taught since, from Chaucer to Shakespeare and even Dickens. An independent study of Wycliffism and Lollardy under his direction in my last year of coursework covered nearly every text—poem, sermon, treatise, and satire—mentioned in my summary of the English anticlerical tradition in chapters 1 and 2. Thank you also to Michael Sargent and Rich McCoy, my dissertation readers, who provided invaluable comments, questions, and suggestions.

Shannon Cunningham and the other editors at Medieval Institute Publications are doing a tremendous service for the field of medieval studies, as they achieve the impossible—producing high-quality scholarship in an author-friendly way, on an expedited schedule, with marketing that makes everyone look good.

Fiona Somerset at the University of Connecticut was the best peer reviewer I could have asked for, as she provided detailed notes and suggestions that helped this project survive the transition from dissertation to book. It was a great pleasure to work with a scholar whose many books and articles in the field of Lollardy and fourteenth-century spirituality have inspired my own research for many years.

My deepest appreciation extends to The King's College, New York City, and especially to its former provost, Peter Wood, who believed that the college should fully fund the PhD studies of a young man teaching its composition classes and literature surveys. Many years later, as King's has launched a popular new English major, I hope we can say the investment

has paid off. My faculty assistants, Meredith Breech and Evelyn Stetzer, kept me organized during a busy time, and also helped check biblical references and Latin translations.

I also want to thank the CUNY Graduate Student Research Grant program, which funded my travel to the British Library in London for manuscript research in the early stages of this project. Thanks also to the British Library and its incredibly supportive staff, and to Jay Barksdale at the Wertheim Study of the New York Public Library, for assisting with research and providing a quiet space to read and write.

Finally, I couldn't have completed this project without the love and support of my wife, Alice, and my two children, Jonah and Maddie, who make everything worth it.

NOTES

¹ See Stephen E. Lahey's full summary of this history in *John Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104–7.

² Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400–c.1580*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 96.

³ The English version of *The Thirty-Seven Conclusions of the Lollards* was edited by Josiah Forshall under the title *Remonstrance Against Romish Corruptions in the Church* (London: Longman, 1851), and also became known as *Ecclesiae Regimen*. H. F. B. Compston edited a Latin version in *The English Historical Review* 26.104 (Oct 1911), 738–49, printing the Latin and English in parallel columns, and giving it the title *The Thirty-Seven Conclusions of the Lollards*. The quotations here come from Forshall, ed., *Remonstrance*, 116, 122. See chapter 1 for a more complete look at the complexities of this passage.

⁴ J. Patrick Hornbeck, with Mishtooni Bose and Fiona Somerset, *A Companion to Lollardy* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016), 121.

⁵ John Wyclif, *De Eucharistia*, ed. Johann Loserth and F. D. Matthew (London: Trübner, 1892). Lahey offers a helpful summary and analysis of this tract in *John Wyclif*, 121–31. Fiona Somerset, in *Feeling Like Saints: Lollard Writings after Wyclif* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), writes that Lollard claims about the Eucharist “vary within as well as beyond lollardy” (5), and that Wyclif’s “thinking on the eucharist developed over time, and his positive statements on the topic are rarer and less straightforward than his negative ones” (280).

⁶ Forshall, ed., *Remonstrance*, 42–43.

⁷ Quotations from the four MS Cotton Nero A.x poems come from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1978; 5th ed., 2007), with a few alterations. Andrew and Waldron retain the manuscript’s use of the thorn (þ), which I have

changed in every case to a “th.” They make several editorial changes to the manuscript which I have also followed, such as capitalizing all nouns and pronouns which refer directly to God and changing the yogh (ȝ) to “z” when it occurs at the ends of words. All other uses of the yogh, even in places where the modern “gh” could be substituted, are left intact. I have followed these general guidelines as they relate to thorns, yoghs, and capitalization in all of the other Middle English texts quoted in this study as well. For the Cotton Nero A.x poems, I also consulted Israel Gollancz, ed., *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience and Sir Gawain: Reproduced in Facsimile from the Unique Ms. Cotton Nero A.x in the British Museum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923); J. J. Anderson, ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience* (London: Everyman, 1976, 1996); a color scan of the manuscript available on CD-ROM at the British Library’s Manuscript Room; and Murray McGillivray, ed., *London, British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x. (art.3): A Digital Facsimile and Commented Transcription* (University of Calgary: Cotton Nero A.x. Project, 2012), available online at <http://gawain.ucalgary.ca>.

Quotations from the *Gawain*-poet and other works of poetry will be referenced with in-text parenthetical citations. Editions which will be quoted extensively in the following chapters include Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry Benson (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (the B-text), ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London: Everyman, 1995); and John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 3 vols., ed. Russell Peck (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000, 2003, 2004).

⁸ For a summary history of the authorship debates concerning the poems in Cotton Nero A.x, see Malcolm Andrew, “Theories of Authorship,” in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 23–33. Also see chapter 4, note 1.

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Sullied Sacrament

AT THE CONCLUSION OF *Pearl*, the first poem in the British Library Cotton A.x manuscript which also contains *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a man who has just awakened from a vision of his beloved daughter and Christ in heaven consoles himself by remembering that Christ dwells on earth as well. He resolves to commit the burial mound and its buried pearl to God and reminds himself of the Eucharist:

And sythen to God I hit bytaȝte [committed],
In Krystez dere blessing and myn,
That in the forme of bred and wyn
The preste vus schewez vch a daye. (1208–10)

In this moment of loss—not only of his daughter who has died, but also of the heavenly vision that has just ended—the Dreamer reminds himself that his parish priest can “show” Christ to the congregation on a daily basis, in the form of the consecrated, transubstantiated bread and wine of the sacrament. Though the poem comes to an end just two lines later, the reader is left to imagine that the next step in the Dreamer’s recovery from grief will be to attend Mass and view the physical body of Christ, elevated by a priest as part of the Communion ritual.

From the alliterative rhyming tetrameter stanzas of the elegaic *Pearl*, the manuscript moves into the unrhymed alliterative long-line homiletic poem known as *Cleanness*. And from a scene of comfort from Christ’s body in the Eucharist, the poet moves to a scene of outrage and terror, as he imagines a hypocritical priest who is “inwith alle fylthez,” defiling Christ’s “aune body” with figuratively dirty hands, and driving God to wrath.

As noted in the preface, there is no evidence to suggest that these two poems were composed in the order in which they appear in the manuscript, nor even any conclusive evidence that they were written by

the same person, though the present study will proceed as if they were. Nevertheless, the decision by the compiler of this unusual manuscript to place these two poems together has resulted in the poet's two most significant references to the Eucharist—in fact, the *only* direct references to the sacrament of the altar in the entire manuscript—appearing virtually back-to-back. In printed editions of the poems, they appear on successive pages, while in the manuscript they are separated by a single page with drawings of Noah's Ark and Belshazzar's Feast. Immediately after *Pearl's* Dreamer describes the eucharistic elements his priest "schewez," the *Cleanness* narrator in the next poem offers a harsh rebuke to the men who "prestez arn called" (8), and warns that their sinfulness could sully the very Mass the Dreamer has just viewed.

Almost no contemporary critic of the *Gawain* poems has remarked on this unique and unusual transition, from a comforting faith in the priest's ability to show God's body to the congregation to a painful anxiety that the same ritual, performed in sin, might contaminate that body—and perhaps with it, though this conclusion is left unstated, the congregation itself. Piotr Spyra, in a 2014 study which views the Cotton Nero A.x poems as connected through various complex numerological patterns, notes the back-to-back references and reads them as part of a larger chiasmic structure, with the Eucharist in both cases providing "a link between heaven and earth."¹ Robert Blanch and Julian Wasserman also note the similarities, but focus their attention primarily on the repeated imagery of human and divine hands throughout the four poems.² What neither Spyra nor Blanch and Wasserman emphasize in their readings, however, is the widely differing contexts of the two sacramental references, the first hopeful and comforting in grief, the second enraged and horrified.

In the opening lines of *Cleanness*, the poet first says that God is "wonder wroth ... Wyth the freke that in fylthe folzes hym after" (5–6)—extremely angry with the man who follows Him while living in a state of filth. He then reveals, within the same sentence, the principal example—and the only contemporary example, in a poem that will address its theme primarily through biblical stories—of the type of man who would drive God to such extremes of wrath. This complex passage is worth quoting in its entirety, with its most unusual or difficult phrases explained further below:

Thay [the priests] teen vnto His temmple and temen to
 Hymselfen,
 Reken with reuerence thay rychen His auter,
 Thay hondel ther His aune body and vsen hit bothe.

If thay in clannes be clos thay cleche gret mede;
 Bot if thay conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont,
 As be honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylthez,
 Then ar thay synful hemself, and sulpen altogether
 Bothe God and His gere, and Hym to greme cachen.
 (9–16)

If the priests who belong to God, and who prepare (“rychen”) His altar for service, handle His body in the Eucharist, and partake (“vsen”) of it are righteous (“reken”) as they do so, and if their hearts are enclosed with cleanness, they will receive (“cleche”) great rewards. But if they are honest and pure only on the outside (“utwyth”) while inwardly being “alle fylthez,” the consequences are grave, resulting in God’s wrath (“greme”).

As the reader will discover as the poem progresses, the extremes of God’s wrath are indeed quite harsh. The poem includes stories of God destroying cities (Sodom and Gomorrah), empires (Babylon under the reign of Belshazzar), and the entire world (with a flood in the time of Noah, and with fire on Judgment Day). Not all of these stories will feature explicitly priestly characters, but the poet introduces the theme of God’s all-consuming anger with this most direct image of unclean priests, as if these “renkes of relygioun” (7) in the poet’s own time are not only an audience for his didactic lesson on spiritual cleanness and filth, but literally the instigators for God’s biblical judgments on humanity.

This opening warning also depicts priests performing what many fourteenth-century Christians considered their most important duty—administering the sacrament, blessing the eucharistic bread and wine and thereby converting the elements into Christ’s “aune body” and blood. But the image here is tainted, in a way calculated to disturb a pious late-medieval reader. Through the filth of their hands that “hondel” God’s body, sinful priests “sulpen” (15), sully or defile, His “gere,” the elements and vessels used in the Communion ritual.

If the poet were to conclude his polemic with this image of dirty hands and sullied altar equipment, the lines would represent little more than a commonplace of fourteenth-century anticlerical satire and critique, in which sinful priests, particularly those who engage in sexual sins, are depicted with filthy hands, with the implied or explicit suggestion that those same hands will touch the body and blood of Christ, or at least the vessels that contain them. For example, one fourteenth-century Franciscan preacher complains in a sermon:

Those priests who should be most spotless upon the breast of God have now become most foul in the Devil's service. For with those hands with which at night they handle the prostitute's flesh, with those same hands, I say, in the daytime they handle the Flesh of Salvation.³

With a similar sense of outrage in a different literary genre, John Gower, a contemporary of the *Gawain*-poet, writes in his Latin poem *Vox Clamantis* (rendered here in prose translation):

The priest is anointed with an unction on his head and hands ... In receiving his yoke, he makes the vow of chastity from that time forth, so that as a purer man, he may make his actions pure. ... Alas! That a wicked hand, defiled by the pudenda of women, should touch God's sacred objects on the altar! Christ abhors the deed [of] one who will handle the Lord's body, yet be basely attracted by a harlot. Alas! Those who should be servants of Christ are now agents of the Devil.⁴

Gower does not prescribe a penalty or describe any consequences for this abhorrent action. Even when he is clear about the harsh punishments reserved for those who touch sacred objects with defiled hands, he does not specify exactly what happens to the objects themselves: "If anyone feels he is weak in respect to the vices, the law commands that he should not consecrate bread to God. ... one who approaches the altar when he is defiled shall deserve the stroke of death."⁵ Gower's imprecision here is deliberate, and cautious. The claim that unworthy administration or reception of the eucharistic host is a grave sin had a firm biblical basis, in the Apostle Paul's warning to the Corinthians—as the Wycliffite Later Version (LV) of the Bible translates it, "For he that etith and drinkith vnworthili, etith and drinkith doom to hym" (1 Corinthians 11:29).⁶ But the claim that the elements themselves suffer damage or diminishment, as if after consecration they might become something less than the perfect body and blood of Christ, was considered by the church to be a heretical position—one which will be explored in more detail below, and one which Gower is clearly eager to avoid.

Anna Baldwin identifies a similarly cautious polemicist in Friar Laurent, whose thirteenth-century *Somme le Roi* was translated into English in the fourteenth century as *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, a work whose passages on the Eucharist she connects to the opening of *Cleanness*. She notes that "Friar Laurent couples his praise of cleanness, as the poet

does, with a warning to the unclean priest derived from I Cor. 11:29.” However, like Gower in the passage above and many other “orthodox” writers of the period, Laurent takes great care to avoid heresy, and “makes it clearer than the poet does that the sacrament itself remains undefiled.”⁷

The opening lines of *Cleanness*, in contrast, display no such caution. The poet makes clear in line 16 that it is not just the “gere,” the implements of eucharistic ritual, that are defiled, but God *himself*—the sinful priests “sulpen altogeder / *Bothe God and His gere*” (15–16; italics mine). The priests who commit this shocking, seemingly impossible act of defiling God are those who “conterfete crafte and cortayse wont” (13)—in other words, they lack virtue and only pretend to a counterfeited form of wisdom (“crafte”). They are also hypocritical, seemingly virtuous on the outside but “inwith alle fylthez” (14). These, and possibly other unspecified sins, according to the poet, actually sully Christ’s body in some way through the priests’ hands, which “hondel” it, and trigger God’s wrath. The sacramental elements are apparently still intact and transubstantiation has occurred—God’s “aune body” is present in the first place to be defiled—but they have, in an unexplained manner and “altogeder,” been compromised.

The “gere” of the Christian altar are not the only holy objects that suffer defilement in the poem *Cleanness*—in his recounting of Belshazzar’s feast from the book of Daniel, the poet describes the vessels of Solomon’s Temple being sullied by Belshazzar and his concubines at their irreverent feast, and he introduces the scene with a statement about the enormity of God’s wrath when the “dishes” belonging to Him are dirtied:

His wrath is achaufed [kindled]
 For that that ones watz His schulde efte be vnclene,
 Tha3 hit be bot a bassyn, a bolle other a scole [cup],
 A dysche other a dobler [plate], that Dry3tyn onez
 serued.
 To defowle hit euer ypon folde fast He forbedes
 So is He scoymus of [repulsed by] scatthe [sin] that
 scylfyl is euer. (1143–48)

The difference here, however, is that God Himself appears not to be personally sullied—He is merely angry about the misuse of His objects. The crux of lines 15–16, in which priests “sulpen altogeder” Christ’s body, problematizes an interpretation of the entire poem, not just because the image suggests a heretical position, but because it is also inconsistent with

the appearance of Christ's body later in the poem. In an interlude between the two major exempla of Sodom and Gomorrah and Belshazzar's feast, the poet depicts both Christ's birth, in which the filth of the stable and manger seems unable to touch him (1069–88), and his healing ministry, in which lepers, the blind and lame, burn victims, and others are made clean by his touch:

For whatso He towched also tyd tourned to hele,
Wel clanner then any crafte cowthe devyse.
So hende watz His hondelyng vche ordure [filth] hit
schonied [shunned] (1099–1101)

Every bit of filth flees at the touch of Christ's hands. The repetition of the words "crafte" and "hondel" seem deliberately to recall the opening lines, where Christ's body was also present but in that case threatened. The actions of Christ's body and the filth that surrounds it have been precisely reversed—rather than a body, and hands, susceptible to defilement by filth, we find a clean body and hands capable of removing filth from the bodies around them. Either something is amiss with the opening passage, perhaps an error in scribal transmission, or the poet is deliberately shifting his and our perspective, perhaps in acknowledgement of the theologically problematic nature of the opening passage.

The word "sulpen" in line 15 appears as "sulped" in the manuscript, an apparent scribal error which renders the word as a past-participle verb and passive-voice modifier that ascribes the defilement not to God himself but to the priests. A modern English translation of the unedited line 15 would read, "They [the priests] are sinful themselves, and altogether defiled." This reading makes sense if the line is viewed in isolation, but it renders the next line, "Bothe God and His gere," nonsensical, a dangling clause with no apparent subject or verb in the surrounding lines. To make sense in its original form, the clause requires either adding a word or extending the reach of the verb "ar" in line 15, as J. J. Anderson does in the footnote to these lines in his 1976 edition: "then they (themselves) are sinful, and both God and His vessels are utterly defiled."⁸ Anderson adds the second "are" for the sake of clarity, but Brian Stone's 1988 translation of *Cleanness*, which also follows the manuscript's "sulped," silently corrects the grammatical problem by introducing a wholly new word: "They are sinful themselves and sullied altogether, / Hating God and his good rites, goading him to anger." Stone's footnote for these lines makes no mention of the added verb "hating," which alters their meaning.⁹ Malcolm

Andrew and Ronald Waldron's classic 1978 edition of the poems changes "sulped" to the present-tense active "sulpen," so that it governs the phrase "God and His gere," and most translators and critics commenting on these lines have followed their recommendation. In a footnote, they explain the emendation in the manuscript as an illustration of "a scribal tendency to complete the sense of a line."¹⁰ Marie Borroff's 2011 translation splits the difference between the two possible verb forms by simply translating the word twice—the priests "are sinful themselves and besmirched altogether, / Sully God's sacred gear, and incite Him to wrath." In providing two possible readings, however, Borroff does more than employ both the passive "besmirched" and active "sully"; she also elides the most startling aspect of the passage, to which the word draws attention. In her rendition, only "God's sacred gear" is sullied, not God Himself. Or at least that is what her translation suggests on its own—however, in a footnote on the passage, she notes, "Since, according to Christian doctrine, the bread and the wine become the body and blood of Christ, the officiating priest is literally handling the divine body. God thus feels the kind of revulsion that would be felt by a human being in intimate contact with the dirty hands of an unwelcome lover."¹¹ Borroff's reminder that the divine body is present in this scene is crucial, but the reminder is also present in the original text, and if her footnoted reading of these lines (as opposed to her translation) is correct, then God does more than feel revulsion in an emotional sense—His "aune body" is physically defiled.

Given that the passage ventures into the territory of controversy about the Christian sacraments, in an era when such controversy was growing increasingly dangerous, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest another possibility here, that a careful scribe of the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century may have sought to correct not just the sense of the line, but what he believed to be a misstatement. Whatever the scribe's intentions in making the alteration, the poet's original intention for the line is lost to us as a result. One thing seems clear, however—he is concerned enough about the issue of priestly corruption that he is willing to go beyond merely repeating a commonplace of fourteenth-century anticlerical polemic, but attempts to phrase his objections as forcefully as possible, to the point of potentially skirting a line at the outer edges of orthodoxy which had landed others of his contemporaries in trouble with the church.

What exactly were those edges, and why did crossing over them entail punishment for some? First, it is critical to note that the poet does *not* state explicitly that the eucharistic elements consecrated by "unclean"

priests are necessarily less efficacious or less valuable than those consecrated by “clean” priests. But the poet’s assertion that either the priest or God’s body itself, depending on how lines 15–16 are emended, is “sulpen altogether”—defiled wholly, completely—certainly implies that one of the two has been rendered unfit for service. And the belief that sinful priests, even priests who had committed deadly sin and were destined for damnation, were incapable of administering efficacious sacraments was a heresy labeled by church authorities as Donatism, one which dated back to the time of St. Augustine of Hippo.

The Donatists of the fourth century refused to acknowledge the authority of priests and bishops who had collaborated with the anti-Christian persecutions of Roman emperor Diocletian, for example by handing over sacred texts for burning. During the Christian emperor Constantine’s reign, these priests resumed their positions within restored churches, but the Donatists insisted that the compromised priests had lost their authority to administer the sacraments, in particular baptism. The writings of Bishop Donatus, from whom the movement took its name, are now lost, preserved only as quotations and paraphrases within Augustine’s polemic against him. In numerous letters and treatises—including a series of seven books on baptism entitled *De baptismo contra Donatistas* (ca. 400) and a popular song, “Psalmus contra partem Donati” (ca. 395)—Augustine declared Donatism a heresy and argued that a priest’s authority inheres within the office itself, not within the sinfulness or righteousness of the individual man.¹²

To call any medieval heretic or heresy “Donatist” is to mislabel it in a historical sense, but the medieval church freely employed the label as a theological descriptor. The so-called “Donatists” of the fourteenth century were as far removed from the heretics of the ancient world as they are from our own, but to the officials charged with uncovering and rooting out the heresy, its historical roots were less important than its place in the history of theological ideas. In his encyclopedic study of late-medieval heresies, Gordon Leff points out that Donatism was simply an old name for a new movement, which church authorities employed in order to argue that the movement’s ideas were unoriginal, and to link them to a past history of heresies already stamped out. Leff describes the “medieval style” of official condemnation as one which “brands many of the propositions with the name of an existing heresy, such as Pelagian, Donatist or Manichaean; these references tend to be largely formal and do not of themselves offer evidence for the source of the outlook.”¹³

Malcolm Lambert defines the medieval version of Donatism as any claim that “the masses of unworthy clergy were invalid,”¹⁴ a definition which, though focused on the Eucharist alone, allows a wide variety of otherwise unrelated theological ideas to gather under a broad title. By the early fifteenth century, according to Lambert, the “evidence of inquiries ... shows that this was a relatively frequent heresy” in England, or at least a frequent accusation, one most often applied to John Wyclif and the Lollards as one item in a list of charges.¹⁵

Traces of Wyclif’s supposed Donatism can be found scattered throughout his scholastic works. For example, in *De Eucharistia*, Wyclif claims that one Mass may be despised and rejected by God, while another is accepted. He appeals to the logic that a Mass performed by a good priest must be better than one performed by a bad priest, who does not truly exemplify the union of Christ with the church.¹⁶ Wyclif does not assert that bad priests have *no* ability to consecrate the host or to effect the miracle of transubstantiation, but that righteous priests perform the sacrament *better*. In *De Apostasia* (ca. 1379), Wyclif expresses the view that the Pope and Cardinals may “sin mortally, and fall away from God,” and that those who do lack the spiritual essence (*modus essendi spiritualis*) to administer sacraments.¹⁷ In an article that asks the question “Was John Wyclif’s Theology of the Eucharist Donatistic?” Ian Christopher Levy, while declining to answer definitively, asserts that in this section of *De Apostasia*, Wyclif “enters into the territory of Donatism.”¹⁸

These extracts and others were attacked by Wyclif’s opponents in the years following his 1382 condemnation by the Blackfriars council at Oxford, and the Blackfriars condemnation itself included the heretical statement, supposedly held by Wyclif and his followers, that “if a bishop or a priest exists in a state of mortal sin, he can neither ordain, nor consecrate, nor baptize.”¹⁹ The statement would certainly be heretical if Wyclif had, in fact, made it, but nothing quite like it appears in his extant works. In fact, he appears to protest against the accusation in *De Ecclesia* (1378), though in a manner that might be viewed as muddying the waters of the debate: “It appears to me,” he writes, “that the damned in mortal sin might actually minister to the faithful, although damnably.”²⁰ One of Wyclif’s most well-known critics after his death, the Carmelite Thomas Netter, repeatedly identified him as a Donatist, most notably in a tract entitled *Tractatus de ministro sacramentorum* (ca. 1415), though for the most part without quoting him directly.²¹

Without a “smoking gun” of the sort the Blackfriars council and Netter surely combed Wyclif’s works to find, the question of whether Wyclif actually held to a Donatist position is a matter of debate.²² “Can Wyclif have knowingly countenanced so anti-Augustinian a position?” asks Stephen E. Lahey in his biography of Wyclif’s philosophical development. He concludes: “Wyclif did indeed deny that a cleric in a state of sin has just authority to execute his office, but he did not believe this to be Donatism.”²³

Whatever might be said about Wyclif’s uncertain and inconsistent positions on this issue, at least a few of his reform-minded followers in the Lollard movement earned the Donatist label without question. “And so that prest that lyves better synges better masse,” declares a Lollard tract from the late fourteenth century.²⁴ The Lollard treatise *Of Prelates* states the negative corollary of this claim: “a prest may be so cursed & in heresie that he makith not the sacrament.”²⁵ Another tract entitled *An Apology for Lollard Doctrines* asks rhetorically about a priest who shirks his duties and “hath only the name of prest”: “whi not a simple prest that in merit is more at God, of mor merit, gefe mor worthi sacraments?”²⁶ And a sermon from the Wycliffite sermon cycle claims that evil priests may lose “uertu to mynystre ony sacramentis.”²⁷

Added together, these scattered examples do not demonstrate any clear or consistent position on the sacramental consequences for priestly misbehavior, but they do convey well how the boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy could become blurred when strident anticlerical critique bumped up against the strength of medieval eucharistic theology. Lollard writers explicitly denied the accusation of Donatism—clearly, this was not a label anyone embraced, regardless of theology—but also continued to make tortuous arguments which lent fuel to those very accusations. For example, in the *Thirty-Seven Conclusions of the Lollards*, a public document in which Wyclif’s followers defended their beliefs to the English Parliament in 1395, articles 34–35 are devoted to dismissing accusations of “the eresie of Donatistis,” and clarifying the writers’ position on the matter of a sinful priest’s ability to consecrate the Eucharist. “It is nedeful that the preste be of clene lif and gret deuocioun, that he make the sacrament worthili to God and profitabli to hymself,” the argument begins. “And though he be of cursid lif, he mai make verrili the sacrament and to his owne harm, though profitabli to othere men that knowen not his synne.”²⁸ However, as the argument advances, the writers also make what might be viewed, at best, as careless statements, as they continue to affirm, on the basis of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11:27–29, that the sinfulness

of a priest does have *some* negative effect on the sacrament. Near the end of the thirty-fifth article, the Lollard apologists argue that God may remove any priest's ability to effect the miracle of the altar, causing the elements to remain merely bread and wine—and that to claim differently is to deny God's power over His enemies:

Netheles a synnere mai be so moche vndisposid bi his owne malice or othir vnablenesse, that the Lord vouchith not saaf to worche with him in sacramentis, nameli not nedeful to helthe, sith cristene puple mai be sauid withoute tho, bi feith and charite, and eete gostli the flesh and blood of Jhesu Crist ... And to afferme that God mai not forsake an ipocrite or othir vnfeithful man and bifore knowe to be dampnid, whanne he pretendith him to make sacramentis, yea, in forme of the chirche, is to take awei fredom fro God, and to constreine him to worche with his capital enemy at the wil of his capital enemy, and this is for to blasfeme the Lord almyghti, and maken him bonde to cursid men and deuelis in cass.²⁹

In other words, God may deny a sinful priest's ability to administer the sacrament—but this outcome, though undesirable, does not threaten any Christian's salvation or participation in the church, since the sacrament may be received spiritually ("ghostli") without the aid of a priest. God cannot be forced to effect the sacramental miracle by an evil man just because he has said the words of consecration.

This might appear to be straightforward Donatism, but the Lollard writers reject the accusation outright almost immediately afterward. They acknowledge that this claim, "that euil men moun not make sacramentis verrili" might "bringe the puple into dispeir of sacramentis ... to absteine fro sacramentis vttili, sith it mai not be knowe certeinli, what mynistris is good, and who is euil."³⁰ Such a despair would seem to be the logical, practical outcome to the theological argument the Lollards have just advanced, but they deny it, in the same terms their clerical opponents would use against them: "But this was the eresie of Donatistis, agens whiche seynt Austin trauallide ful gretli and truli."³¹ To question a priest's ability to administer efficacious sacraments as a result of his deadly sin, that is simply acknowledging an inescapable reality, given God's freedom and sovereignty; but to allow this knowledge to lead to despair or to stop receiving the sacrament as a result, *that* is Donatism. The Lollard writers thus shift the burden of heresy, moving its locus from the theological idea itself to its practical implications in the heart of an ordinary Christian communicant.

If the priest's sin is flagrant and well-known to the congregation, Lollard writers typically advise laymen simply to decline the eucharistic elements. The *Thirty-Seven Conclusions* defines these unfit priests as "opin symonientis, lechouris, or siche vicious men."³² The earlier Lollard pamphlet *Twenty-Five Points*, presented to Parliament in 1388, stresses that "a preste beyng in dedely synne may make and 3yve sacramentis to salvation of hem that worthily receyven hem, and consenten not to tho prestus synne. ... But tho preste in this case mynystris to his owne dampnacion."³³ In other words, a priest's sin does not invalidate the sacrament for anyone but himself—unless the communicants also know of his sin and partake, thus participating in it. If the priest's fault is known to the public, "tho pepul owes nout to receyve sacramentus of hym, leste consent to his synne make hem parteners in peyne, nomely of open fornicacione, open covetyse and raveyne of pore mennus lyvelode . . . and of symonye."³⁴ These Lollards thus conclude that the worthiness of the recipient, not the priest's spiritual cleanliness or filth, determines the efficacy of the sacrament. The advice of the *Thirty-Seven Conclusions*, ultimately, to anyone who has "doute of conscience, that this euil man makith not the sacrament," is to refocus attention from the elements in the eucharistic service to the eternal body of Christ in heaven: "lat him worshipec the sacrament with a stille condicioun, and in as moche as it were duli maad, and lat him reste bi verri feith and charite in the verri bodi of Crist, that hangide on the cros, and now is glorified in heuenis."³⁵

Obviously, not every member of the Lollard movement throughout its half-century of prominence spoke with a unified voice on the issue of clerical and sacramental corruption, but most were concerned with the problem, as was the *Gawain*-poet—who, as we have seen, waded boldly into the same blurred territory of eucharistic theology and practice in his eagerness to excoriate hypocritical priests. Considering the poet's clear commitment, in the closing lines of *Pearl* and opening lines of *Cleanness*, to the transubstantiation of the eucharistic elements into Christ's "aune body," a key point of contention for Wyclif and his followers, it is not plausible to suggest he was of the same party as the Lollards. But the poet certainly shared much of the radicals' anticlerical perspective, and may have held common cause with them on other controversial issues as well.

The *Gawain*-poet was a rough contemporary of Wyclif's, but nothing within the poems or Wyclif's works suggests a personal connection between them. The poet may have heard of Wyclif, of course, may even have heard him preach in Oxford or London during his long career, from

approximately 1358 to 1384, but this can only be speculation. With a range of possible dates for the poet's work spanning roughly 1370 to 1399, it seems equally likely as not that *Cleanness* and the other poems were composed before the Blackfriars council condemned twenty-four of Wyclif's propositions in 1382. A survey of the available evidence suggests the earlier end of the date range for *Cleanness* and *Patience* in particular, making the poet's familiarity with part of Wyclif's work while composing the biblical poems a possibility, but his knowledge of its condemnation as heterodox less likely.³⁶ In any event, the *Gawain*-poet could not possibly have known, while writing, of Wyclif's eventual condemnation as a heretic by the Council of Constance in 1415, or of his posthumous burning in 1428.

The poet's possible knowledge of Wyclif himself aside, however, *Cleanness's* description of the Eucharist defiled by priestly hands finds parallels with at least two works of more explicit, more comprehensive, and in some ways more radical anticlerical polemic.

The first example comes from the *Glossed Gospels*, a massive set of early fifteenth-century Wycliffite Gospel commentaries recently edited in part by Anne Hudson. One of Hudson's edited excerpts comes from the commentary on Mark 12:38–44, Jesus's warning about wealthy "scribis" in "gay clothis," followed by the story of the widow's mite.³⁷ The passage, as expected for a Lollard production drawing on Wyclif's Latin treatises, is filled with exhortations for "monkis, prestis and othere men" (lines 16–17) to remain content with food, clothing, and other necessities of life. As a supplementary text, the commentary cites 1 Timothy 6:8: "We, hauynge liflodis [food and drink] and clothis, be apaied [satisfied] with these" (33).

But the worse danger for these well-fed and well-clothed priests and higher officials is hypocrisy, which the commentary defines as saying one thing but doing another, since this throws clerical identity into confusion and may have eternal consequences at the resurrection:

And also ben prelatys of chirchis, denes, erchebischops, and these benefices comen not to merit ether good liyf but to that deuel that goith in derknesses, that is ipocrisi and symonye. ... Also clerkis wolen be o thing and wolen be seien another thing, for thei schewen hemself kniztis in abit, clerkis in wynnyng, neuer neither in dede. For nether thei fizten as kniztis, nether thei prechen as clerkis. Of what ordre ben thei?— whan thei coueiten to be of euer either, forsaken euer either, thei schended euer either. Ech man schal rise

aȝen in his ordre: Y drede that thei schulen be ordeyned in noon
other place than where noon ordre is but euerlastynge orroure ether
hidousnesse dwellith. (70–74, 78–85)

One significant aspect of this polemic to note, an attitude we will later see the *Gawain*-poet share in his biblical poems, is that preaching is the priest's most important duty—as fighting is for the knight. The wealthy, hypocritical, and simoniacal priest loses his identity when he ceases to preach, not necessarily when he stops administering the sacraments. The sacraments are also in danger, however, from such a priest:

Hou many clerkis seen we that louen ȝiftis and suen meedis? hou
many that seruen not Crist but her bely? we rekenen not the
sacrilegies of hem that louen ȝiftis, suen meedis, sillen sacramentis
and bitraien riȝtfulnesse. (157–60)

Their “sacrileges” of these belly-serving priests are so many, they cannot be reckoned, but among these are that they “sillen sacramentis.” The verb “sillen” appears in the *MED* as an alternate spelling for “sulen”—it is not the same word as *Cleanness*'s “sulpen / sulped,” but its definition is exactly the same: “to become dirty, befouled ... defiled, polluted.”

As this passage illustrates, Wyclif's followers had few qualms about asserting that sinful priests could defile the sacraments they administered, especially for the sins of lust—the Wycliffite commentary mentions “lustis of the bodi” immediately after the passage quoted above (162)—and of hypocrisy, to “be o thing and ... be seien another thing.” This assertion was also typically one rhetorical move within a much broader program of critique, against the laziness, gluttony, and vanity of the priestly class, and an attempt to rightly order priests' duties to their flocks, with preaching and teaching at the top and sacramental administration somewhat below.

The second example of a parallel between a work of Lollard anti-clericalism and the opening lines of *Cleanness*—and indeed, several other biblical passages in the poem—comes from a tract entitled *On the Seven Deadly Sins* (ca. 1384), first edited by Thomas Arnold in 1869 for the anthology *Select English Works of John Wyclif*. Arnold originally attributed the tract to Wyclif himself, and later scholars assigned it to Nicholas Hereford, one of Wyclif's younger Oxford colleagues; these attributions have since been discredited, though the anonymous writer is unquestionably a Lollard.³⁸ He explains how each Deadly Sin afflicts the church, starting with the clergy, then the estates of knights and commoners. For

example, under the heading of the deadly sin Avarice, he rails against pluralism, absenteeism, and simony among priests. Pluralists and absentees—those who accept benefices for multiple parishes and thus cannot personally attend to all of them—harm their flocks through “negligence of this offis,” as the members of neglected parishes are left without a priest either to preach the Gospel, provide pastoral care, or administer the sacraments personally. It is the simoniacal priest, however—the one who sells his spiritual offices for money—who does the most active harm to his parishioners as he administers the sacraments:

And als long as thei dwellen in this symonye, thei don harme to
hor floc in gyvyng of sacramentis, in syngynge or preyinge, or what
ever thei do. . . . so this semes tho worste synne that is amonge men.
(151)

This polemic grows even more vivid when the writer addresses the sin of Lechery, and he draws a portrait of the sacrament defiled by a lustful priest’s filthy hands which bears a striking resemblance to the opening lines of *Cleanness*:

Lord, who wolde not despise this, that mouthe and hondes of
this prest that makes and tretis Gods body schulden be polute
with a hoore! And if he abstayne hym fro masse, and resseyve tho
sacrament, sith he resseyves hit gostly with an unclene bileve, he dos
more despit [injury] to Gods body then if he caste hit in tho lake;
for synne is more unclene to God then any bodily filth. ... And thus
these traytours don despit to God that thei schulden most serve;
and thei desseyven thus tho puple, that thei schulden serve in helpe
of soule. And more traytours ben ther none, bothe to God and to
his Chirche. (164)

Like the *Gawain*-poet, the *Seven Deadly Sins* author begins his broad discussion by focusing on priests, specifically on their mouths and hands which administer the sacraments, and he highlights the question of what “despit” a lecherous priest might do to the eucharistic host, “Gods body.” The *Middle English Dictionary* defines the phrase “don despit” as “to humiliate, insult, or injure, disparage, commit an outrage” (def. 3). This outrage or injury to the host, the tract writer says, is similar to casting the consecrated wafer into a lake, where clearly it could no longer be received. He also makes clear that whether the lecherous priests continue to administer the sacrament in this state of sin, or whether they refrain, either

way they have done a disservice to the people who rely on the sacrament's bestowal of grace, and have betrayed God Himself. Significantly, the sin which prompts this perspective on the sacrament, and inspires the tract's most vivid depiction of priestly filth, is lust, the same sin the *Gawain*-poet will use as the primary negative example in his homily on cleanness—as he depicts the people of Noah's day engaging in bestiality and intercourse with demons (lines 265–80), the men of Sodom lusting violently for other men and attempting to rape the angels who visit Lot (833–84), and the Babylonian king Belshazzar giving his mistresses the status of ladies and allowing them to defile the sacred objects of Jerusalem (1349–1520), a scene which is clearly meant to recall the defiled eucharistic “gere” of the prologue.

The tract as a whole bears general similarities to the *Gawain*-poet's work as well, in particular *Cleanness* and *Patience*—though many of these similarities are themes common to much devotional writing of this period. Most noticeably, the section on Ire discusses “patience” as the deadly sin's opposing virtue. The tract speaks of the need for Christians to exercise “virtuouse pacience” and “meke pacience” (138), preferring martyrdom to violent resistance against evil—a discussion which could fit seamlessly into the poem *Patience*, with its parodic depictions of Jonah's fear of martyrdom (lines 73–96), thirst for violence against his enemies (409–24), and ultimate lack of patience. A later reference to commoners who should be “meke and pacyent” emphasizes that patience is a virtue especially important for the poor and those who are subject to a lord's commands (147), just as *Patience* links the qualities of patience and poverty in the Beatitudes (35–48), and uses the poet's own submission to his lord as an object lesson (51–56). In the same vein, the tract encourages Christian missionaries not to fear preaching throughout the world, even to hostile rulers, a passage of advice that could apply directly to Jonah's fears before the Ninevite king. Jesus, the tract writers says, bade his disciples to “do this offis, go into al tho worlde, and preche to eche mon the gospel. He bad not wende to Jude and preche only there, ne to tho folk of Israel for thei weren of his kyn, bot preche generally bothe to state and mon” (147).

Similarly to *Cleanness*, the tract makes multiple references to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, for a variety of purposes—for instance, to illustrate that priests who waste the “gostly seed” of good preaching through their absenteeism incur God's wrath even more than the Sodomites, who wasted their “bodily seed” (144), or to provide vivid examples of the various forms of lechery (162). But more notable in con-

nection to *Cleanness* are repeated references, in the tract's discussion of nearly all the deadly sins, to "clennesse" as their alternative. God loves "clene travel" (clean work) rather than Sloth or mendicant begging (143). Priests should provide "gode ensauple by clennesse of lif" (145) rather than Ire, and instead of practicing Lechery, "schulden gostly serve in clennes" their people (163). In meditating on Gluttony, the tract writer notes the importance of keeping "a cleene soule" within the body's "house of his death" (155). And of course, as mentioned above, the priest must keep his "mouthe and hondes" free from lustful filth to avoid polluting the Eucharist (164).

Like the *Gawain*-poet, the tract writer does not question the transubstantiation of eucharistic elements—even the lustful priest "makes ... Gods body"—and for the most part, he avoids any detailed questions related to the sacraments. But the author is undoubtedly a Lollard, and the tract covers many of the themes common to the movement's polemic, as catalogued by scholars such as Anne Hudson, J. Patrick Hornbeck, and Fiona Somerset.³⁹ This particular Lollard writer, like many others, argues against the voluntary poverty of mendicants and fraternal orders in general (125–26, 130–31, 158), against the episcopal hierarchy that places bishops over parish priests (131), in favor of secular lords' "dominion" and right to reclaim church endowments (131, 146, 154), for pacifism (138–40), for the association of the pope with the Antichrist (140–41), for the importance of preaching as the chief duty of a priest (144), and against pluralism, absenteeism, and simony (151). Perhaps his most revealing complaint is against those secular lords and priests who "hyden Gods lawe, and pursuen prestis for prechyng of treuthe" (132), an apparent reference to the "poor preachers" frequently described in Lollard texts, itinerant followers of Wyclif who reportedly preached in English, and perhaps also to those who disseminated copies of the English Bible and were later persecuted under Archbishops William Courtenay and Thomas Arundel. Whether these poor preachers truly existed and in what numbers, and whether Wyclif himself was personally involved in training and sending them out, are currently matters of debate,⁴⁰ but Wyclif does present his vision of an ideal priest in works such as *De Officio Pastoralis* (ca. 1379), and the poor priests appear commonly in Lollard polemic, as the "true" priests who are persecuted by false officials within the church hierarchy. As Somerset argues in her analysis of a treatise entitled *The Fyve Wyttes*, one of the most characteristic features of Lollard texts from this period is that they invite readers "to form their own judgments about who among

them are the truest followers of Christ,” and insist that “readers should make up their own minds about the legitimacy of the preachers they hear,” whether that means embracing true priests who are accused of heresy or condemning those who act hypocritically.⁴¹

To draw parallels between *The Seven Deadly Sins* and *Cleanness* is not to suggest any biographical connection or direct influence between their authors, but a thematic comparison of the two works illuminates the shared concerns of Lollards and other anticlerical critics who may not have had any knowledge of the movement, and also the type of danger the *Gawain*-poet was skirting with his anticlerical polemic and description of sacramental defilement. The church’s pursuit and persecution of Lollards such as those who wrote the *Glossed Gospels* and *The Seven Deadly Sins* was dogged, and driven largely by the concerns of eucharistic theology. Former disciples of Wyclif who were leaders in the movement after 1382—Philip Repingdon, Nicholas Hereford, Richard Flemming, and others—were alternately threatened and bribed, and either willingly or unwillingly recanted their heretical beliefs and became persecutors of Lollardy themselves.⁴² Lollard would-be reformers in the early fifteenth century, such as Sir John Oldcastle in England and Jan Hus in Bohemia, who combined theological critique with political revolt, were burned at the stake for heresy. The accusation of any heresy connected with the sacraments was serious business in the 1380s, the likely period of *Cleanness*’s composition, and grew only more so with each passing year.

As with the attempt to determine a distinctively “Lollard” set of beliefs among texts from a wide range of authors, determining the precise contours of the *Gawain*-poet’s theology can be a frustrating endeavor, especially when scribal emendations enter the picture, and even more especially since he does not propose to offer a complete system of sacramental doctrine in the first place. He is not writing a theological treatise in *Cleanness*, but rather a series of vernacular paraphrases of biblical stories, constructed as a sermon for a general audience. However, the thematic connections between his work and the broad corpus of Wycliffite and Lollard texts provide a dramatic illustration of the types of associations a fourteenth-century reader might have made when viewing the poems’ relatively orthodox anticlerical critique, especially in the tense years following Wyclif’s condemnation.

This introductory chapter has focused exclusively on Wyclif and the Lollards, despite the absence of direct evidence that the *Gawain*-poet was aware of their movement, because they are key figures in a broad anti-

clerical tradition in which the *Gawain*-poet was also a participant. As the proceeding chapters will illustrate, other participants in this tradition in fourteenth-century England included high-ranking church officials such as Irish archbishop Richard FitzRalph, who was tasked with overseeing bishops and priests and alarmed by their ignorance and ill-preparedness for a spiritual vocation; monks and friars who engaged in inter-clerical disputes with secular parish priests, and the seculars who resentfully competed with the religious orders for donations; and poets such as John Gower, William Langland, and Geoffrey Chaucer, who often took a satirical approach to the issue of clerical corruption. The *Gawain*-poet and the Lollards both composed their works within this same textual environment, though it may have prompted them toward differing theological and political positions.

The phrase “textual environment” has been used without comment by so many scholars of the Middle Ages that it hardly needs attribution, but the definition most germane to this study comes from Paul Strohm in *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (1992). Strohm’s chapter “The Textual Environment of ‘Lak of Stedfastnesse’” addresses the issue of non-traditional and unsanctioned forms of fealty and oath-taking, to which Chaucer’s poem refers. Strohm writes, “The whole body of contemporaneous texts on this subject together with related ceremonials and performances, constituted an ‘environment’ or field conducive to the production and interpretation of yet more texts and more related actions.”⁴³ Scholars of the *Gawain*-poet have used the same term to situate these poems within a variety of contemporaneous contexts and controversial issues, for example sacramental theology or the court and Cheshire connections of King Richard II.⁴⁴

The textual environment of fourteenth-century English anticlericalism includes any critique, polemic, argument, or satire, whether theological or practical, against any form or hierarchical level of the clergy, including parish priests, unbeneficed priests, and members of monastic and fraternal orders—anyone with authority from the church to administer sacraments and perform other pastoral duties such as preaching and ministering to the poor. Antipapalism could also be considered a form of anticlericalism, and was a prominent form of protest in the fourteenth century in part because of the Western Schism in the papacy (1378–1417), but it seems a special case, given that almost none of the anticlerical writers in England had direct contact with any pope, in contrast with their frequent personal experiences with priests, monks, and friars, even in some cases bishops and

archbishops. I will therefore limit my focus to those critiques aimed at church officials actually dwelling in England, with whom the writer could at least theoretically have had direct contact, from the local parish priest to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Strohm also notes that the first appearance of new social movements or practices “is often within hostile texts that seek to proscribe them or to regulate their effect,” but “however stigmatizing in intent, written treatment puts new tendencies into play, opens a discursive field within which they can be figured and refigured, promulgated both as textual and social practice.”⁴⁵ With this concept in mind, I will also consider as part of the textual environment of anticlericalism any type of clerical responses to these critiques, official or unofficial, in which the voices of the writer’s opponents are embedded in quote or paraphrase.

This broad definition, of course, includes a staggering number of texts, even if we confine our study to the last three decades of the fourteenth century, when the *Gawain*-poet composed his poems. It includes relatively benign critiques such as Gower’s chiding of corrupt parish priests along with Wyclif’s violent polemic against fraternal orders, as well as his arguments for the dispossession of monasteries. It includes the entirety of the massive Wycliffite sermon cycle, and nearly half of Chaucer’s narrators in *The Canterbury Tales*—the Friar, Pardoner, Monk, Nun’s Priest, perhaps even the Parson—as well as dozens of satirical characters within the tales themselves. And it includes hostile clerical responses to many of these provocations, from voices such as the Blackfriars council and Thomas Netter, mentioned above.

Given such a rich, varied, and frankly overwhelming amount of material to consider, this study will use Wyclif’s anticlerical polemic as a frequent touchstone, while also looking at his major influences, including FitzRalph, as well as the early Lollards who drew inspiration from his ideas. Arguably the most influential anticlerical writer of the fourteenth century besides Chaucer, Wyclif’s concerns and rhetorical strategies intersect with a broad range of anticlerical writers from the same period.

Since the 1988 publication of Anne Hudson’s *The Premature Reformation* kicked off a new era of interest in Wycliffite and Lollard texts, a host of scholars has explored a range of potential connections between the Lollard movement and the fourteenth century’s most well-known poets: Chaucer, Langland, and Gower. There can be little doubt about Gower’s opinions toward the Lollards—he explicitly distances himself from the movement, even as he levels a harsh critique against priests in

the prologue to the *Confessio Amantis* (ca. 1390). Hudson argues that neither Chaucer nor Langland fully endorse a Wycliffite or Lollard position in their work, though their interests often align. Chaucer's Parson in *The Canterbury Tales*, for instance, whom the Host accuses of being a "Loller" for his harsh stance against swearing (II.1173), is, Hudson writes, "without doubt no paid-up member of the Lollard party," but at the same time Chaucer "has deliberately chosen to surround his Parson with a suggestion of Wycliffism."⁴⁶ In the same way, Hudson denies any actual connection between Langland and his Lollard contemporaries, despite the poet's description of himself in the *Piers Plowman* C-text as "yclouthed as a lolare" (V.2), among other references. She points out that the poet and the heretics share some common causes—for instance, the poem's treatment of questions related to clerical temporalities and endowment is "closely in accord with Wycliffite thought."⁴⁷ Nevertheless, she concludes that little or no "clear sympathy with specifically and unequivocally Wycliffite positions" can be found in *Piers Plowman*, and the poem's later appropriation by Lollard satirists is merely an accident of history.⁴⁸

Hudson's cautious language in discussing this issue has done nothing, however, to prevent a virtual cottage industry of Chaucer–Lollard and Langland–Lollard studies from springing up in the decades since *The Premature Reformation*. The great poets' scattered references to "Lollers" are simply too tempting for students of Lollardy to resist, despite the *Middle English Dictionary*'s assertion that the word was employed as a general term of abuse for laziness, across a variety of fourteenth-century texts.⁴⁹ Recent scholarship has questioned the dictionary's assertion; in the introduction to his book *What Is a Lollard?* (2010), J. Patrick Hornbeck asks whether the term was "coined in the heat of the academic controversies in the University of Oxford in which John Wyclif and his followers played such a prominent role," or whether it was "a pre-existing term of abuse only retroactively applied to Wycliffites and their supporters," and after complicating the question in various ways, he comes to no clear answer.⁵⁰ Others have proposed that the term comes from the Latin *lolium*, "tares," a reference to the chaff burned in hellfire in Jesus's parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24–30), which would suggest a religious debate at its origin. Or its etymology might derive from a Middle Dutch word that means "to mumble."⁵¹

Whatever the truth of the matter, this etymological mystery has provided at least some encouragement in the search for connections between Chaucer, Langland, and their contemporary Wyclif. Wendy Scase, for

example, in *"Piers Plowman" and the New Anti-clericalism* (1989), views Langland and Wyclif as participating together in a "new" anticlericalism that draws on older inter-clerical disputes between monks, friars, and secular clerics and combines them into a more generalized attack on all clergy. The issue of Langland's relationship to Lollardy is contentious enough that *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* devoted a special section of six essays to the question in 2003, with scholars such as David Aers and Derek Pearsall arguing that no significant links between the two exist, and Andrew Cole and Fiona Somerset arguing that, whatever the actual relationship, reading Wycliffite sources alongside *Piers Plowman* can aid in understanding the poem.⁵²

Andrew Cole's *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (2008) and Alastair Minnis's *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (2008) both examine the issue of Wyclif's heresy and argue that Chaucer was at least aware of and interested in the possibilities that his radical ideas raised. Frances McCormack, in *Chaucer and the Culture of Dissent* (2007), focuses exclusively on *The Parson's Tale*, situating it within a Lollard context and unearthing its supposedly Lollard subtexts. At least two studies have even compared Chaucer's biblical references to the text of the Wycliffite Bible, in an attempt to determine whether Chaucer owned a copy—Craig Fehrman, in "Did Chaucer Read the Wycliffite Bible?" (2007) answers this question in the affirmative, and Amanda Holton, in "Which Bible Did Chaucer Use?" (2008), in the negative.

To date, however, no research has attempted to thoroughly document the links between the *Gawain*-poet and English anticlericalism of the fourteenth century, Lollard or otherwise. The gap is somewhat surprising, given the poet's outburst of explicit anticlerical sentiment at the opening of *Cleanness*, and the possibility of reading the rest of the poem and its companion *Patience* through its contextual lens—indeed, the poet almost seems to invite readers to do so. What the present study attempts, therefore, is to situate the *Gawain*-poet's work, more precisely than anyone has yet done, within the fertile and multifaceted tradition of English anticlericalism in the late fourteenth century, somewhere on a spectrum between the pro-clerical position of the church's defenders and the later Lollards' full-throated denunciation of the clergy as corrupt, their sacraments defiled and possibly void.

To this end, the next chapter presents an overview of English anticlerical writing in the fourteenth century, a history which actually begins with the founding of the fraternal orders in the thirteenth century and

the immediate controversy they sparked. From there, it will take a thematic approach to the issues that most concerned these anticlerical writers. These issues begin simply with concerns over clerical corruption and unfitness—standard worries over greed, sexual sin, hypocrisy, and lack of education, but also the more controversial issues of pluralism and alien benefices, issues which even the most rigorously orthodox critics, such as John Gower, felt the need to address.

Wyclif's career serves as a convenient framework in which to categorize and attempt to understand a variety of anticlerical ideas, if only because Wyclif expressed such a wide variety of ideas in the course of a three-decade academic career. He displayed anticlerical tendencies in the very earliest of his works, but he took a further step—one already taken a few years earlier by Richard FitzRalph—when he took the side of his patron John of Gaunt in what became known as the “dominion” controversy. In works such as *De Civili Dominio* (ca. 1375–1376), *De Dominio Divino* (ca. 1375–1376), and *De Ecclesia* (1378), Wyclif argued for the secular state's absolute dominion over the church, including the pope, whom he increasingly began to label as “Antichrist.” His relationship with the friars at Oxford also underwent a change during this time. At first, Wyclif made an uneasy peace with his fraternal colleagues, but his meditations on the issue of evangelical poverty, set forth in the third chapter of *De Civili Dominio*, and later expanded upon in works such as *Protestatio* (ca. 1378), *Libellus* (ca. 1378), and the tract *Thirty-Three Conclusions on the Poverty of Christ*,⁵³ forced a mutual break.

After he had worked out his arguments on dominion and poverty, drawing from the labor of many writers before him, Wyclif took the step which would define him as a heretic in the last five years of his life, casting doubt on the church's standard philosophical explanations for transubstantiation in *De Eucharistia* (ca. 1379). Wyclif's antagonism toward his opponents on this issue hardened, though it did not necessarily grow more well-defined, in later works such as *Confessio* (ca. 1381), *De Blasphemia* (ca. 1382), and *Trialogus* (ca. 1382)—this last a three-way philosophical conversation which effectively serves as a compendium of Wyclif's positions on a broad range of issues, and which translator Stephen E. Lahey argues was intended for an audience of “poor preachers” preparing to disseminate Wyclif's ideas.⁵⁴ A handful of radical Lollards in the years after Wyclif's death in 1384 took more definite and extreme positions on the Eucharist and other sacraments—for example, Hawisia Moone, in the course of her 1430 heresy trial, denied the existence of *every* sacrament including bap-

tism, penance, and even marriage.⁵⁵ Assuming that Moone was telling the truth about these beliefs, and that the inquisitor who recorded the trial's transcript fairly represented her statements, these would represent the extreme edge of the spectrum mentioned above.

It would be tempting to attempt to track the progression of Wyclif's and the Lollards' anticlerical ideas over time, as if they built upon each other in a logical manner, leading by clearly discernible steps from orthodox critique to anti-sacramental heresy. Many scholars in the twentieth century did make such an attempt, including Herbert B. Workman in his two-volume biography of Wyclif in 1926.⁵⁶ The conveniently neat movement from Wyclif's abstract theories about civil and divine dominion, to practical questions about poverty and the disendowment of monks and clerics, to doubts about the ability of sinful priests to consecrate the Eucharist, to doubts about consecration itself, and ultimately, with his Lollard disciples, to a type of anti-sacerdotalism that would question the necessity of a priestly class altogether, feels intuitive, and satisfies a desire to impose order on a half-century's worth of arguments and texts. However, the uncertainties of dating Wyclif's Latin works—even those that were originally composed without question before *De Eucharistia* and the Blackfriars condemnation may have been revised at a later date⁵⁷—render any such analysis speculative at best, and wildly misleading at worst. Meanwhile, the uncertainty of authorship with Wycliffite works in English is so complete that no modern scholar attempts to assign any English work to Wyclif whatsoever.

Even if Wyclif's entire corpus could be dated with precision and his English works identified, odd overlaps in the expression of various ideas would disrupt the tidy progression outlined above. For example, it seems highly likely that Wyclif rejected the possibility of material annihilation very early in his philosophical career, which would mean the arguments in *De Eucharistia* represent merely the working-out of the implications of a pre-existing Aristotelian philosophical commitment.⁵⁸ His arguments are frequently inconclusive, and often draw their energy from the rejection of opposing claims, which can make an exact accounting of his positively held beliefs difficult. His shifting attitudes toward the fraternal orders are also problematic, and seem to depend on whatever issue is at hand. His harsh anticlerical screeds in the later tracts are highly entertaining even for a modern reader, filled with vivid imagery and razor-sharp insults of his opponents—in *Trialogus*, for example, the friars are the “spongy feces [*spongiositatibus*] of the body of holy mother church”⁵⁹—but their argu-

ments are structured loosely, and it can be difficult to discern an organizing principle beyond the bitter polemic. Even his support and possible involvement in the Bible translation project at Oxford which came to bear his name, probably erroneously,⁶⁰ must have involved numerous colleagues and been underway for many years, possibly decades, well before Wyclif's turn to eucharistic philosophy and anticlerical polemic—in other words, it was not the logical end result of Wyclif's personal desire to undermine the authority of priests who read Scripture in Latin, as some writers on Wyclif from the previous century have suggested.⁶¹ At least, this could not have been the project's primary impetus, though it did play that role rhetorically for both the Lollards and their persecutors in later years.

The difficulties and uncertainties evident here, in attempting to track the progression of ideas from just one prolific anticlerical critic, are magnified exponentially when assessing a religious and political movement such as Lollardy. Recent scholarship by Somerset, Hornbeck, and others has demonstrated that many supposedly distinguishing features of Lollardy taken for granted by earlier historians and critics—such as a commitment to biblical translation, a specific theological view on the Eucharist, or a particular attitude toward monks and friars—are in fact contingent, and not always shared by texts which could otherwise be considered definitively Lollard in origin. The category of “Lollardy” is not always stable, Somerset observes, especially over time, and when assessing any particular text, “it is difficult to be sure where you are in the lollard corpus, and even harder to know where its edges are.”⁶²

Of course, these problems are magnified again to an almost infinite degree when tracing the contours of a tradition—fourteenth-century English anticlericalism—that spanned decades and involved hundreds of writers from varying perspectives, genres, and rhetorical modes. The most sensible approach for the overview that follows in the next chapter, therefore, is to organize the ideas under discussion thematically, rather than chronologically. It will be necessary, however, to begin with a brief history of the significant anticlerical debates leading up to the late fourteenth century, which influenced Wyclif and his contemporaries. In the chapters that follow, we will turn our attention to the individual poems of the *Gawain*-poet, which responded and contributed to this rich textual environment.

NOTES

¹ Piotr Spyra, *The Epistemological Perspective of the Pearl-Poet* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 91.

² Robert Blanch and Julian Wasserman, *From Pearl to Gawain: Forme to Fynisment* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1995), 100.

³ Gerald R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1961), 267. Owst notes that the manuscript, MS Grey's Inn Library 15, gives the preacher's name as "brother Staunthone," or Staunton, and that place-names throughout the sermon indicate a connection with Norfolk.

⁴ John Gower, *The Major Latin Works of John Gower*, tran. Eric W. Stockton (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1962), 155–56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 158–59.

⁶ All Middle English biblical quotations come from Conrad Lindberg's edition of the Later Version (LV) of the Wycliffite Bible, published in four volumes of the Stockholm Studies in English series from 1999 to 2004, under the title *King Henry's Bible: MS Bodley 277: The Revised Version of the Wyclif Bible*.

⁷ Anna Baldwin, "Sacramental Perfection in *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness*," in *Genres, Themes and Images in English Literature: From the Fourteenth to the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1988), 133.

⁸ Anderson, ed., *Sir Gawain*, note to lines 15–16.

⁹ Brian Stone, trans., *The Owl and the Nightingale, Cleanness, St Erkenwald* 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1988), note to *Cleanness* lines 7–16.

¹⁰ Andrew and Waldron, eds., *Poems*, note to lines 15–16.

¹¹ Marie Borroff, trans., *The Gawain Poet: Complete Works* (New York: Norton, 2011), 89, note 2.

¹² A full account of the Donatist schism of the fourth and fifth centuries, including a complete list of Augustine's works addressing the controversy, can be found in the entry for "Donatism" in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1967), IV.1001–03.

¹³ Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent, c.1250–c.1450* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 311.

¹⁴ Malcolm Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁶ John Wyclif, *De Eucharistia*, ed. Johann Loserth and F. D. Matthew (London: Trübner, 1892), 112. "Una talis missa est dampnabilis et Deo odibilis et alia est meritoria et Deo acceptabilis; ergo sunt valde dispares in valore; patet ex hoc quod ut sacerdos est Deo deacceptior est ministratio sua iniustior."

¹⁷ John Wyclif, *De Apostasia*, ed. Michael Henry Dziewicki (London: Trübner, 1889), 200, 219–20. "Similiter totum tale collegium potest peccare mortaliter, et per consequens potest deficere a credendo in deum."

¹⁸ Ian Christopher Levy, "Was John Wyclif's Theology of the Eucharist Donatistic?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53 (2000): 151.

¹⁹ Walter Waddington Shirley, ed., *Fasciculi Zizaniorum* (London: Longman, 1858), 278. "Quod si episcopus vel sacerdos existat in peccato mortale: non ordinat, conficit, nec baptizat."

²⁰ John Wyclif, *De Ecclesia*, ed. Johann Loserth (London: Trübner, 1886), 448.

"Videtur autem mihi quod prescitus eciam in mortali peccato actuali ministrat fidelibus, licet sibi dampnabiliter, tamen subiectis utiliter sacramenta."

²¹ This tract appears in the second volume of Thomas Netter's much longer work *Doctrinale antiquitatum fidei catholicae ecclesiae* (Farnborough, UK: Gregg Press, 1967), II.43–112. Alastair J. Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) identifies several quotations from the tract in which Netter explicitly accuses Wyclif of a Donatist position; for example, II.54–58, 60, 90, and 105.

²² See, for example, Levy, "Was John Wyclif's Theology of the Eucharist Donatistic?" 137–53; Ian Christopher Levy, *John Wyclif: Scriptural Logic, Real Presence, and the Parameters of Orthodoxy* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2003), 306–7; Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 20, 361, note 91; and Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 26–27, 196. Minnis canvasses Wyclif's works for traces of Donatism, for the purpose of drawing connections between the heresy and what he terms Chaucer's "profoundly anti-Donatistic poetics" (135). However, he tends to cite both Latin and Middle English works as if they were equally attributable to Wyclif. In my own survey of the evidence, I assume that Wyclif's Latin works may be confidently attributed, but that works written in Middle English, though they may express Wycliffite opinions and may have been assigned to Wyclif by early editors, were more likely written by Lollard followers or sympathizers than by Wyclif himself.

²⁴ Thomas Arnold, ed., *Select English Works of John Wyclif* (London: Macmillan, 1869–71), III.425.

²⁵ F. D. Matthew, ed., *The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted* (London: Trübner, 1880), 102.

²⁶ James Henthorn Todd, ed., *An Apology for Lollard Doctrines, Attributed to Wicliffe* (London: Camden Society, 1842), 30.

²⁷ Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon, eds., *English Wycliffite Sermons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), IV.104.

²⁸ Forshall, ed., *Remonstrance*, 117.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 122–23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 120.

³³ Arnold, ed., *Select English Works*, III.485.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, III.486.

³⁵ Forshall, ed., *Remonstrance*, 125.

³⁶ The range of 1370–1399 for all four of the *Gawain*-poet's works comes from a survey of numerous scholars, who have approached the question of dating from a variety of angles. For earlier dates, see Henry Lyttleton Savage (1956), C. E. Wright (1960), and W. G. Cooke (1989), all of whom place the poet's initial compositions from the 1340s to 1370s. For later dates, see John Bowers (1995), Ad Putter (1996), Susanna Greer Fein (1997), and Michael J. Bennett (1997), all of whom place *Pearl* and/or *Sir Gawain* in the late 1380s to 1390s. This period of time, Bowers observes, includes "the 'seven quiet years' of Richard's reign—1389 to 1396—when also Chaucer was at work on *The Canterbury Tales* and Gower's first version of *Confessio Amantis* had been completed at the behest of Richard II" (119). In general, those conjectures which draw on the poet's Cheshire connections, which appear unambiguously in the text, and on possible links with Richard II's reign seem the most convincing, and would place the poems' composition from the late 1370s through the 1390s, with a terminus at the end of Richard's reign in 1399.

³⁷ Anne Hudson, ed., *Doctors in English: A Study of the Wycliffite Gospel Commentaries* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 50–55. Subsequent references to this commentary will appear in parenthetical citations by line number.

³⁸ Arnold, ed., *Select English Works*, III.119–67; see also Herbert B. Workman, *John Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), II.135. Subsequent references to this tract will appear in parenthetical citations by page number from Arnold's edition.

³⁹ See Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 20–22; J. Patrick Hornbeck, *What Is a Lollard?: Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Fiona Somerset's introduction to *Feeling Like Saints*, 5–7. Hudson writes that "it seems reasonable to accept as Lollard any texts that set out Wyclif's views of the eucharist, of oral confession, and of the papacy. ... The definition of the church presents more uncertainties, but any tendency to doubt that the existing ecclesiastical hierarchy is part of the true church immediately opens suspicion of heresy. Episcopal enquiries reveal that condemnation of the worship of images and the practice of pilgrimage were two of the commonest methods by which Lollards were discerned" (21–22). Somerset also assesses Lollard writings by comparing them to Wyclif, but cautions that her use of the term "lollardy" (which she does not capitalize) should not be taken to imply "that lollard is a stable identity, nor that it applies in the same way to every reader or even every writer of lollard writings in ways that do not change over time" (16).

⁴⁰ For a summary of this debate, see Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 165–67. Lahey writes that most scholars concede that "an educated corps of preachers, likely also responsible for the Wyclif Bible, did champion his ideas throughout England in the 1380s" (167), but that prior assumptions about their numbers and about Wyclif's involvement have been sharply questioned.

⁴¹ Somerset, *Feeling Like Saints*, 282.

⁴² For a summary of each man's role in the Lollard movement before and after 1382, see Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 22. See also Workman, *John Wyclif*, II.283–86, for a recounting of Hereford's remarkable career.

⁴³ Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 58.

⁴⁴ See John Burrow, "The Two Confession Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Modern Philology* 57.2 (Nov. 1959): 73–79; and John Bowers, "Pearl in Its Royal Setting: Ricardian Poetry Revisited," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 17 (1995): 111–55.

⁴⁵ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 57.

⁴⁶ Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 391–92.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 405.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 408.

⁴⁹ See Hudson's discussion in *Premature Reformation*, 2–3. In the *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath et al. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1956–2001), the first cited use of the words *lollen* as a verb, meaning "to mutter, doze, sleep, etc.," *loller* as a noun, meaning "a lazy vagabond, an idler," and *lollaren* as an adjective, meaning "of an idler, lazy," come from the *Piers Plowman* A, B, and C texts, respectively, dated ca. 1376, 1378, and 1387. The dictionary points out, however, that even as early as the *Piers Plowman* C-text (ca. 1387), the word *lollen* could also be used "with punning reference to Lollards" (see def. 3b). The first example in the dictionary of the word *loller* to mean only and explicitly an English heretic is Chaucer's "loller in the wynd" reference from the epilogue of *The Man of Law's Tale*, ca. 1390.

⁵⁰ Hornbeck, *What Is a Lollard?*, 2.

⁵¹ J. Patrick Hornbeck, with Mishtooni Bose and Fiona Somerset, *A Companion to Lollardy*, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition vol. 67 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016), 15.

⁵² Andrew Cole, ed., "Special Section: Langland and Lollardy," in *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 17 (2003): 1–105. The section features articles by Cole, David Aers, Anne Hudson, Derek Pearsall, and Fiona Somerset.

⁵³ John Wyclif, *Opera Minora*, ed. Johann Loserth (London, 1913), 19–73.

⁵⁴ John Wyclif, *Dialogus*, tran. Stephen E. Lahey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17.

⁵⁵ Hawisia Moone's "Confession" appears in Anne Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 34–37.

⁵⁶ See Workman, *John Wyclif*, II.41–43. Workman draws a line from Wyclif's supposed Donatism to his denial of transubstantiation to his argument that laymen can consecrate the sacraments. He also extends the line beyond Wyclif to the later Lollards and ultimately to Martin Luther: "Wyclif was the harbinger of a premature spring, and the reform which he sought to bring about was then

impossible" (7). Also see Joseph H. Dahmus, *The Prosecution of John Wyclif* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 52–53: "From an attack on an unworthy priesthood, [Wyclif] would move against the institution itself. Then, if there were no priest, transubstantiation and the Mass, as well as the sacramental system, would have to go. From a denial of the pope's power to excommunicate, he would come to question the very necessity of having a pope." For a more recent example, see Richard Rex, *The Lollards* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 27–43, which gives a concise summary of what Rex views as Wyclif's theological development, starting in 1375–76 with Wyclif's contention in *De Civili Dominio* that no church official should own property, and concluding with his skepticism about the efficacy of the sacraments those officials performed.

⁵⁷ For a full account of the uncertainties regarding the production and transmission of Wyclif's works, see Anne Hudson, *Studies in the Transmission of Wyclif's Writings* (Aldershot, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), a compilation of older and newly published articles. Also see Lahey's summary of the issue in *John Wyclif*, 7–8: "We have no certainty regarding the dates of his works ... Further, it is entirely likely that Wyclif reworked the contents of all of his writings during the last years of his life in Lutterworth."

⁵⁸ See Hudson, *Studies*, X.69: "Wyclif's inability to accept transubstantiation had been an unavoidable implication of his philosophical standpoint from the early 1370s onwards." Also see Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 121: "the evidence suggests that he rejected annihilation as a possible physical option very early on."

⁵⁹ Quotes from Wyclif's *Trialogus* will be cited both in Lahey's English translation and in the Latin edition edited by Gotthardus Victor Lechler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869). Lahey translates the full quote cited here as follows: "They appear to be the spongy feces of the body of holy mother church as they generate ulcers from the four humors, residing with the other diseases" (346). The original: "Nam tanquam faeces quattuor humorum in corpore sanctae matris ecclesiae videntur in spongiositatibus ejus generando apostema et morbos alios residere" (441).

⁶⁰ For a summary of contemporary debates on the question of Wyclif's involvement in the Oxford Bible translation project, see Elemér Boreczky, *John Wyclif's Discourse on Dominion in Community* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 16; Mary Dove, *The First English Bible: The Text and Context of the Wycliffite Versions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2, 6–8; and David C. Fowler, *The Bible in Early English Literature* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1976), 154–58. Fowler observes that Bodley MS Douce 369 contains a note at Baruch chapter 3 which reads, "Explicit translacionem Nicholay de herford," and Cambridge University Library MS Ee.1.10 at the same point reads, "Here endith the translatioun of N, and now bigynneth the translacioun of J and other men." Fowler concludes, "The most that can be said, from manuscript evidence, is that the Early Version was made by Nicholas Hereford, J.____, and other men, and this is about as far as most modern writers on the subject have

ventured to go" (154–55). An earlier scholarly consensus identified John Purvey as the project's chief translator, and this remains a possibility, though it has been questioned. Dove's view "is that Wyclif instigated the project, that work began in the early 1370s, in the Queen's College, Oxford, and that Wyclif, Hereford, and Trevisa all played a part in the translation" (2). She points out that "the earliest unambiguous reference to John Wyclif as a translator of holy scripture" comes in Henry Knighton's *Chronicle* entry on the Wycliffite heretics, ca. 1390 (6), and that Wyclif's name "is not mentioned in any of the large number of texts arguing for or against an English Bible" prior to the early 1400s (8).

⁶¹ See Workman, *John Wyclif*, II.149–51: "Wyclif advanced to the position so characteristic of the later Reformation of distinguishing between the Bible and the teaching of the Church and its doctors. ... In his assertion of the authority of Scripture Wyclif was not alone. But Wyclif added a new doctrine, the right of every man, whether cleric or layman, to examine the Bible for himself."

⁶² Somerset, *Feeling Like Saints*, 5.

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Chapter 2

The Textual Environment of Fourteenth-Century English Anticlericalism

The Biblical Basis of Medieval Anticlerical Rhetoric

Anticlerical critique in the Judeo-Christian tradition traces its origins to the foundations of the priesthood itself, in the Old Testament. Wyclif observes in the tract *De Officio Regis* that the first priest mentioned in Scripture is Cain, who kills his brother Abel out of jealousy for offering better sacrifices.¹ In the book of Exodus, God establishes a more official Levite priesthood through Moses' brother Aaron, but He does so in anger, only after Moses declares himself unfit for the task (Exodus 4:10–16). “And the lord was wrothe azens moises,” reads verse 14 in the Wycliffite LV, thus establishing a connection between the priesthood and God's wrath which runs throughout Scripture.² This priesthood is established formally with the tablets of Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai, tablets which also include regulations on priestly vestments and consecration, as well as the forging of sacred objects including a “candelstik,” “cuppes,” and “lanternes” of gold (25:31–40), items the *Gawain*-poet will describe in lengthy detail in the Belshazzar's Feast scene in *Cleanness*. At the same time that this legal transaction in Exodus takes place, however, the priests in question, led by Aaron, build a golden idol at the foot of the mountain (32:1–6), an abomination which leads to Moses breaking the tablets (v. 19), rebuking Aaron, and rallying every Levite priest to kill “his brother his freend & neizebore” at God's command (27–28). Finally, God Himself strikes the people with a plague (35).

In the New Testament, the primary antagonists of Jesus during his ministry are members of the priesthood, whose titles the Wycliffite LV translates as “hizest prestis” or “princis of prestis”—or, in the Gospel of John, “bishops”³—and on whom Jesus calls down the curse of Cain (Matthew 23:35; Luke 11:50–51). Jesus establishes a new priestly order when he confers “the keies of the kyngdom of heuenes” on the Apostle Peter and says, “what euer thou schalt bynde on erthe: schal be bounde

also in heuenes, and what euer thou schalt vnbynde on erthe: schal be vnbounden also in heuenes” (Matthew 16:19). This is the moment, according to a tradition widely accepted in the fourteenth century, that Peter is established as the first pope of the Christian church, but no sooner has this momentous occasion taken place than the newly minted leader of the Christian priesthood denies Jesus’s prophecy of death on a cross, prompting a fierce rebuke: “Sathanas go thou afir me, thou art a sclandre to me, for thou sauerist not tho thingis that ben of god: but tho thingis that ben of men” (Matthew 16:23; see also Mark 8:31–33). Jesus ordains all of the Apostles in John 20:22–23, when he breathes on them and says, “take 3e the hooly goost,” then gives them the power to forgive or withhold forgiveness from sinners. But this scene, too, is followed immediately by one which reveals doubt among one of the new priesthood’s members, Thomas (20:24–29).

In the Pastoral Epistles, the Apostle Paul establishes further guidelines for the new priesthood within the rising church and delineates the offices of bishop and deacon.⁴ Embedded within these passages, however, is the presumption that sin and corruption are constant threats for the men who seek these positions. In the first chapter of Titus, before listing the positive qualities a candidate for bishop should possess, Paul presents a detailed list of negative possibilities. The bishop must be:

withoute cryme: an hosebonde of [one] wijf, & hath feithful sones: not in accusacioun of leccherie, or not suget ... Not proud, not wrathful, not drunkelewe, not a smytere, not coueitous of foul wynnyng... (1:6–7)

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul lists positive qualifications first, followed by a list of negatives which suggests a host of specific dangers which might ensnare a church leader in public or private life. The candidate for bishop, Paul writes, must be:

not 3ouun myche to wijn, not a smytere, but temperat, not full of chydyng, not coueitous, wel reulynge his hous & haue sones sugett with al chastite, for if ony man can not gouerne his hous: hou schal he haue diligence of the chirche of god[?] Not newe conuertid to the feith, lest he be born up in to pride, & falle in to doom of the deuel, for it bihouith him to haue also good witnessyng of hem that ben withoutforth: that he falle not in to reproof & in to the snare of the deuel. (3:3–7)

The lower office of deacon must be filled by those who are “chaast, not double tungid, not 3ouun myche to wyn, not suyng [pursuing] foul wynnyng [gain]” (8), and its candidates must pass a further test: “be thei preued first & mynistr so: hauynge no cryme” (10). Paul explains the reasons for his caution in choosing church officials, both in these passages and elsewhere: “For ther ben manye vnobedient & veyn spekers, & disseyuers” (Titus 1:10), and “false britheren [have been] brouzt yn, whiche hadden entrid to aspye oure fredom” (Galatians 2:4). He warns the bishops of the Ephesian church to keep watch over both themselves and “al the flock” because “y woot that aftir my departyng, rauyschyng wolues schul entre in to 3ou, & spare not the flock” (Acts 20:28–29). The entire church in Corinth, Paul says, has been deceived by priests masquerading as “grete apostlis” (2 Corinthians 11:5), but in reality:

suche false apostlis ben trecherouse werkmen, and transfiguren hem in to apostlis of crist. And no wondir, for sathanas him silf transfigurith him in to an aungel of lizt, therfore it is not greet: if hise mynistris ben transfigurid, as the mynistris of riztwisnesse, whos ende schal be aftir her werkis. (11:13–15)

To summarize: at every moment of their establishment in Scripture, both the Jewish and Christian priesthood come under immediate attack for incompetence and corruption, both actual and potential, and as a vehicle for evildoers to infiltrate the church. Not surprisingly, these same biblical texts were often cited in the works of fourteenth-century English anticlerical writers, and they became frequent flashpoints in anticlerical, antimonastic, and antifraternal debates.

For example, nineteen of the 294 sermons in the so-called Wycliffite sermon cycle contain references to the Gospel passages cited above.⁵ One of these, *In Cathedra Sancti Petri*, takes Matthew 16:19 as its entire theme.⁶ This particular sermon promotes the concept of a universal priesthood among the laity, as opposed to a separate professional class of clerics, and interprets the “ston” on which Christ will “grownde hys chyrche” not simply as a reference to Peter and the popes who followed in his line, but as “Petre and eche man,” with the “keyes of the rewme of heuene” being delivered to “Petre with monye othre seyntus, for alle men that comen to heuene han thes keyes of God.”⁷ Another sermon in the cycle, which focuses on John 20, explicitly connects Jesus’s bestowing of the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins in that passage to the “keyis of the chirche” and “power to bynden and lowsen” in Matthew. The sermon warns that

in both cases, “bosterus [who] be certeyn at the furste that thei ben verrey vykerus of the hooly apostles” should be cautious, since they may discover in their boasting that “thei ben none of hem to whom Crist 3af this power.”⁸ It goes on to inveigh against the abuse of papal indulgences and against the divided papacy itself, pointing out the absurdity of one pope attempting to “lowse[n] al that the tothur bond.”⁹ A significant portion of another sermon in the cycle is devoted to an explication of the guidelines from 1 Timothy and Titus, which it describes as “twelue lawys ... how God ordeyneth clerkis to leue.”¹⁰ A further three sermons make reference to the events of Exodus 32 and read them through the lens of contemporary clerical failures.¹¹ One of these, the Sunday Epistle for the ninth Sunday after Trinity, compares the “foure sectis” of friars in their covetousness to the Israelite idolators, and suggests that these “newe ordris” run the same risk of God’s lethal wrath striking them down.¹²

Fundamentum Aliud Nemo Potest Ponere, a late fourteenth-century polemical tract which appears to be an elaboration upon the sermon *Omnis Plantacio*, one of two sermons edited by Hudson under the title *The Works of a Lollard Preacher*, describes Cain as the original “possitioner” (a monk who owns property) and accuses the contemporary church of preferring Cain-like priests over those who care for their parishioners’ souls:

and Caym the erthetyller is made the hirde or gouernour of sowlis. For it is not axyd in the chirche if he kan well teche, or if he kan wepe and weyle for synys, but 3ef he be Caym, that is, an erthetyler that kan well till the londe. ... And if it be axid of siche oone, “Where is the schepe that was bytaken to the?,” he answerith “Whether I am kepar of my brother?,” as thou3 he sayde “What charge is to me of the sowlis, so that I haue well ordenyd for the temperall goodis?”¹³

The other sermon in Hudson’s volume, titled *De Oblacione Iugis Sacrificii*, describes Peter’s ordination and rebuke in Matthew 16, and compares him to “the rebel clerge.”¹⁴ When Jesus links Peter to Satan in 16:23, the Lollard preacher extends the metaphor to all priests, drawing from the description of Satan as a hypocritical “angel of light” in 2 Corinthians 11:14 (quoted above), and places foremost blame on the clergy for a variety of ills within the church:

So it is noo dou3te the wickid spouse and seruant, the clerge, the grete renegat that I spake of before, is Sathanas transfigurid into an angel of lizt, for he is Cristis aduersarie under the name of most

holynesse, and most offendeth Crist and harmeth his chirche, and is cause whi the glorious name of God is sclaunderid and blasfemed among hethen folk, and whi the peple stumblith and fallith into synne and aftur into helle.¹⁵

The “angel of light” passage is frequently used by these sermon writers as a shorthand for priestly hypocrisy. The *Fundamentum* tract contains three separate explications of the passage, every one of them reaching anticlerical conclusions,¹⁶ and the sermon *Omnis Plantacio* compares “the clergie” to “Lucifer” and claims that “the foure aungels at the hardist weie of Sathanas, bi ypocrisie transfigurid into aungels of liȝt” have come to earth as “endowid clerkis, monkis and chanouns and freris.”¹⁷ Clearly, the epistle’s image of satanic hypocrisy captured the imagination of these preachers, who employed it primarily as a critique of their clerical contemporaries.

Sermons of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries that directed criticisms at the priesthood tended to reference a handful of biblical passages like this one, which were given almost exclusively anticlerical readings by medieval commentators. To note one further example, Matthew 7:15 and John 10:1–16, which speak of a “scheperde,” “theef,” “false prophetis,” and “wolues of raueyne” that savage the flock, are referenced dozens of times in the Wycliffite sermon cycle and other anticlerical texts.¹⁸ Indeed, three sermons in the cycle take these passages as their entire theme, and all are especially virulent in their attacks on negligent and incompetent priests, monks, and friars, three separate clerical categories among which the sermons make little to no distinction.¹⁹ Of the reference to “false prophetys” and “wolues of raueyne” in Matthew 7:15, one sermon says, “these wordys mowen ben aplied vnto false frerus,” and also “generally to prestys that seyn that thei han cure of mannys sowle.”²⁰ “Bothe frerys, monkus and chanownes [canons],” another sermon says, are “rauyschyng woluy” that attack the church from within.²¹ This reading pushes the Gospel passages’ suggestions of clerical negligence even further, depicting various types of clerics not only as neglectful shepherds who abandon their sheep but actually as the wolves who attack them.

The wolf-disguised-as-sheep image, like the satanic angel of light, becomes in anticlerical texts another shorthand for hypocrisy among priests. The *Glossed Gospels* commentary on Luke 10:1–7, in which Jesus sends out missionaries and tells them, “Y sende ȝow as lambren among wolues,” links that passage’s image of wolves—in context, a reference to

the external dangers the missionaries will face as they travel and preach—to the internal danger of false prophets described as wolves in Matthew 7.²² The most dangerous threat to the church, the commentary says, is not the straightforward “ire of cruele men” (142), who after all might be converted to the faith, but rather the more subtle threat of hypocritical priests whose words and actions do not match: “Thei comen to 3ow in clothis of sheep but withinne thei ben rauyschyng wolues” (137–38). This reflection on false priests as wolves leads to some of the *Glossed Gospel of Luke*’s most lurid imagery:

Wher eretiks that aspien the fooldis of Crist shuelen not be lickened to thes wolues? Thou herist that sum man is seide a prest, thou knowist his raueyns: he hath the cloth of sheep and dedis of a theef, withouteforth he is a sheep, withinne he is a wolfe whiche hath no mesure of raueyns, whiche hath menbris hardid bi frost of ny3t, and fleeth aboute with bloody mouthe sekyng whom he shal deuoure. Wer it seme not to 3ow that he is a wolf which desireth to fille his woodnesse in deeth of feithful men bi cruelte vnable to be fillid of mannus deeth? (206–12)

The best defense against these wolves for the honest preacher is to follow Jesus’s command to the apostles in the next verse in Luke, and not carry an extra coat or satchel—in other words, to forsake “temperal godis” (219). But the all-consuming danger of hypocrisy, especially among priests, continues to loom large throughout the *Glossed Gospels*, for example in its interpretation of Luke 12:1, in which Jesus uses the image of “sourdough,” or yeast, to warn his disciples about the hypocrisy of Pharisees: “Crist clepith here sourdou3 ypocrisie as chaungyng and corrupyng ententis of men, in which it hath entrid, for no thing chaungith so vertues as ypocrisie doth.”²³

An important rhetorical maneuver that all of these biblically based critiques of the medieval priesthood have in common—with one another and, I will argue, with the *Gawain*-poet in his biblical poems—is the implicit link between the priests of ancient Israel, the priests and teachers who interacted with Jesus during his ministry, the priests of the early Christian church, and the clergy of fourteenth-century England. Wyclif himself gives license to his followers to make these types of contemporary biblical applications, as in his Latin sermons and tracts he continually compares modern-day bishops and priests to the “high priests” and “elders” who opposed Jesus. In *De Simonia*, he writes:

Therefore, just as the high priests, the worst heretics themselves, condemned our Lord Jesus Christ for heresy, so the high priests of Antichrist [the contemporary papacy] are able to condemn and destroy Christ's members because the latter universally reprove their sins.²⁴

In a passage from *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, Wyclif analyzes 1 Timothy 3:1–7, a passage which “completely covers all the necessary requirements for any bishop.” He notes first that Paul’s term for “bishop” (*episcopus*) “includes every sort of priest,” and that “when the Apostle conveys this rule to Timothy he is actually instructing all succeeding bishops under a single wrapping.”²⁵ Shortly after observing this connection between New Testament-era and contemporary bishops, Wyclif draws a further connection with Moses’ establishment of “bishops” at Sinai.²⁶

The implications of this strategy of biblical interpretation and argumentation are numerous. First, in the view of Wyclif and other polemicists with an anticlerical bent, the critiques of Scripture apply not only to the early church, but to contemporary priests, and to every possible type of cleric—parish priests, bishops, monks, and friars. In addition, contemporary priests are just as liable for the critiques leveled against Levite priests by Moses and God in the Old Testament as they are for those Jesus and Paul aim against Christian priests in the New—an important point to keep in mind when we turn to the *Gawain*-poet’s retelling of biblical stories in *Cleanness* and *Patience*.

Fraternal Orders and the Roots of Fourteenth-Century Anticlericalism

Like the anticlericalism of the Bible, which began the moment new priestly orders were established, the distinctive anticlericalism of fourteenth-century England can trace much of its roots to the early thirteenth century, with the establishment of a new type of clergy: the fraternal orders. The Order of Friars Minor, or Franciscans, founded in 1209, along with the Carmelites (late twelfth century), Dominicans (1216), and Augustinians (1256), the four largest orders, began as reform-minded organizations within the church. In a sense, they started as anticlerical movements themselves, a reaction against the corruption and poor education of the secular clergy,²⁷ but less than a generation after their respective foundings, each had fallen victim to accusations of exactly the same corruption they were committed to reform.

In an overview of the antifraternial polemic and satire that underlies Chaucer's depiction of the uniquely despicable Friar Huberd, Guy Geltner observes that fraternal orders were treated with suspicion virtually from the moment they set foot on English shores: "In 1224, the residents of Dover treated the newly arrived Dominicans as foreign spies," and a wide range of interested groups, "including Benedictine monks, secular clergymen, and those whose orthodoxy was challenged by some mendicant preachers," expressed their opposition.²⁸ In his book on the subject, *The Making of Medieval Antifraternism*, Geltner complicates the question of why the friars inspired such hatred by suggesting further possible explanations:

Scholarly consensus holds that the early friars sowed the seeds of their own destruction by promoting an ideal that was impossible to sustain over time. ... On the other hand, the prominent role played especially by Franciscans and Dominicans in inquisitorial, missionary, and other diplomatic activities brought them many antagonists, even beyond groups defined as heretical. There is much truth in both views, but even jointly they fall short of explaining the diversity of contexts and motivations for antimendicant hostility in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.²⁹

In *The Antifraternial Tradition in Medieval Literature*, Penn Szittyá cites more possible reasons for the mid-thirteenth-century explosion in anti-fraternial literature, which he views as mostly unwarranted or uninformed. Antifraternial attacks, Szittyá writes, were "more symbolic than realistic," disconnected from anything the friars "actually did in the world"; the problem was their "institutional novelty" and their "new and unique threat to the vested interests of certain ranks within the church."³⁰ Unlike monastic orders which shut themselves away from the world, the friars settled "almost invariably in cities rather than on the fields and pasture lands of the remote countryside," and as mendicants, "their begging made them independent of the moneys of the church."³¹ Perhaps the most compelling motive for antifraternial ire, however, is the one Szittyá saves for last: "The friars were ecclesiastical outsiders because they were papal orders. They received their authority and their mission directly from the popes, bypassing the hierarchy that constrained the clergy of the parishes."³²

As these historians make clear, early antifraternial critics came not from outside the church but from within it, from parish priests concerned not only with the friars' independence from "moneys of the church," but

their independence from any direct authority whatsoever. No secular clergyman of any rank, including bishops, had the power to discipline or expel an unwanted itinerant friar from a parish. Only friars within the same order, or the pope himself, held that authority—an arrangement bound to produce conflict. Thus, when Wyclif and other fourteenth-century antifraternals critics refer to the “new sects” or “new orders,”³³ they are not claiming that these 150-year-old institutions were established recently, but that they represent a novel form of clerical governance, unseen in the first 1,200 years of the church’s history.

In addition, the image of the wanderer rarely had positive connotations in fourteenth-century anticlerical literature, in particular the wandering friar who begs for alms rather than staying in one parish and working for tithes. In her study of the anticlericalism of *Piers Plowman*, Wendy Scase devotes a chapter to critiques of clerical wanderers, represented by the “gyrovague,” or false hermit, “whose apostasy from the rule was figured by his behaviour of going from house to house in search of hospitality, when he should have stayed in the cloister.”³⁴ The origins of this figure date back to the foundings of monastic orders, and it appears in the works of Church Fathers including Augustine and Jerome, but its presence in fourteenth-century contexts is typically linked with fraternal orders and voluntary mendicancy. For example, the Irish archbishop Richard FitzRalph argues that part of the problem with friars is that they have no settled place to live or work, no home: “And beggers haueth no wízt, that is a stidefast place, nother mowe ordeyne for hem-silf a stidefast place, for verrey beggers euereche day other as hit were euerech day, beth compelled to wende out of her place for nede.”³⁵

The “limiter,” or friar with a license to travel from town to town and beg within a specified district, is memorably skewered by Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, who says these wandering friars are as thick in the forest as fairies and elves once were:

For now the grete charitee and prayeres
 Of lymytours and othere hooly freres,
 That serchen every lond and every streem,
 As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
 Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
 Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
 Thropes [villages], bernes, shipnes [stables], dayeryes—
 This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.
 For ther as wont to walken was an elf

Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself ...
 Wommen may go sauflly up and doun
 In every bussh or under every tree
 Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
 And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.
 (III.865–77, 878–81)

The Wife concludes that women may travel more safely through the forest now that limiters have replaced these magical creatures, but by comparing the friar to an “incubus,” she slyly suggests that he may not be as sexually innocent as he seems. And indeed, the Friar who joins the company of Chaucer’s pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* is clearly a lecher who takes advantage of his position as a wanderer for sexual gain.

Not only friars but also unbeneficed secular clergy, whose numbers had swelled during mid-century outbreaks of the bubonic plague when services for the dead were in high demand, became another object of attacks against wandering beggars.³⁶ This broadening of a specifically antifraternial critique to include others in a similar position illustrates a movement common to the fourteenth-century anticlericalism, one which we will explore in further detail below—a line of attack initially aimed at friars expands to include other types of clerics, sometimes all of them.

According to Szittyá, the tradition of antifraternial critique begins with William of St. Amour, secular master of theology at the University of Paris in the 1250s, just a single generation after the founding of the Franciscan order.³⁷ St. Amour’s most well-known work—which was read over a century later by poet Jean de Meun, Oxford theologian Richard FitzRalph, and Wyclif,³⁸ and quoted in the Wycliffite theological encyclopedia *Rosarium Theologiae*—was entitled *De Periculis Novissimorum Temporum*, “On the Perils of the Last Times” (ca. 1256). St. Amour wrote this Latin tract in opposition to an apocalyptic prophecy titled *Liber Introductorius ad Evangelium Aeternum* (ca. 1254), by a Franciscan named Gerard de Borgo San Donnino.³⁹ San Donnino’s prophecy is no longer extant, but its central premise, drawing from the work of Joachim of Fiore, was that the New Testament would be supplanted by a Third Testament, or “Eternal Evangel,” and that the first sign of this coming new age had been the establishment of the fraternal orders. St. Amour refutes this claim—far from being the heralds of a new kingdom of God, he writes, friars are the wicked men that the Apostle Paul predicted would come in the last days, in 2 Timothy 3:1–8: “lovers of themselves, covetous, haughty, proud, blas-

phemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, wicked, without affection ... slanderers, incontinent ... without kindness, traitors, stubborn, puffed up, and lovers of pleasures more than of God."⁴⁰ He then organizes the critiques that follow under each of these categories and applies each specifically to the fraternal orders—those who are “disobedient to parents,” for example, are those who reject the authority of the church hierarchy.

In her analysis of *De Periculus*, Marie Borroff notes that “this earliest of the antifraternel treatises cited virtually all the [biblical] texts that were to reappear in the works of later writers,”⁴¹ and indeed the document provides a trove of biblical references beyond the apocalypticism of 2 Timothy. The biblical explication perhaps most interesting for its relevance to the *Gawain*-poet is St. Amour’s prophetic interpretation to the mysterious handwriting on the wall at Belshazzar’s Feast, from the book of Daniel: “Mene, Tekel, Phares” (Dan. 5:25). In the contemporary world, St. Amour writes, this cursed handwriting is represented by books of false teaching such as the Third Testament, and he predicts that through the corruption of the friars, the church will fall and become divided from true Christians, just as Daniel predicted that Belshazzar’s empire would fall and the Israelites would continue their exile under another foreign king. This interpretation of Belshazzar’s Feast as a prefiguration of God’s wrath against clerical corruption bears intriguing connections with the *Gawain*-poet’s rendering of the same scene in *Cleanness*.

St. Amour’s tract was condemned by Pope Alexander IV, who held the title Protector of the Order of Franciscans, in 1256, and was also refuted by St. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican. The eventual result for St. Amour, by papal decree, was condemnation of his works, excommunication, and banishment.⁴² Nevertheless, the antifraternel tradition he inaugurated and inspired, beginning with Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose* (ca. 1275) and its images of *Faus Semblant* (the false-seeming friar) and *Penetrans Domos* (“penetrators of houses”) from 2 Timothy 3:6, had, according to Szittyá, had a far-reaching influence into the next century.⁴³

Wendy Scase, in her assessment of the “new anticlericalism” represented by William Langland, argues that St. Amour’s disputes with the friars had an unintended consequence for writers of the fourteenth century—that it allowed for the same types of attacks to be leveled against all forms of clergy. According to Scase, the interclerical disputes of the thirteenth century had blurred into a more generalized anticlericalism in England by the late fourteenth century, when critics such as Wyclif, Chaucer, and Langland attacked all parties—popes, friars, monks,

seculars, and lay officers like the Pardoner and Summoner—with equal vigor, at times even seemingly at cross-purposes. This indiscriminate blending of various clerics can be seen clearly in the formulation of blanket condemnation frequently employed in Lollard sermons: “clerkis, monkis, chanouns, and freris.”⁴⁴ Scase concludes that antifraternel polemic was “probably developed with the limited objective of defending the priestly authority of one group of clerics, the secular clergy, against that of another group, the friars. But when political circumstances changed, it became the intellectual source for an anticlericalism which called into question the powers of *both* sides, and indeed, of all clerics.”⁴⁵

For example, St. Amour argues in *De Periculus* that bishops and parish priests are superior to friars in part because their numbers are limited by the number of positions available to them, whereas friars, appointed directly by the pope to no specific parish or bishopric, are theoretically unlimited in number. William Langland would echo this critique over a century later in the *Piers Plowman* B-text (ca. 1377–1379), though with a significant difference. Langland uses the same argument as St. Amour when the allegorical character of Conscience shouts at the friars, “ye wexen out of noumbre! / Hevene hath evene noumbre, and helle is withoute noumbre” (XX.269–70). But the implication of Conscience’s shout, Scase argues, is that “a proliferation of preachers was burdensome to the laity,” regardless of the source of their authority.⁴⁶ Though he is apparently defending the seculars, Langland implies that too much of *any* type of cleric will lead to bad consequences. His argument explicitly targets friars, but it could just as easily be deployed against unbeneficed secular priests, those who did not have cures but made their livings celebrating Masses for the dead.⁴⁷

St. Amour satirizes friars for their high learning and praises the simplicity of parish priests, whereas Langland attacks both groups from both directions—the friars for their learning and priests for their ignorance. In Passus XV of *Piers Plowman*, arguably the most anticlerical section of the poem, the character Anima laments that none of today’s clerics “kan ver-sifie faire ne formaliche enditen, / Ne naught oon among an hundred that an auctour kan construwe, / Ne rede a lettre in any language but in Latyn or in Englissh” (373–75). The cause of this woeful condition, ironically, is *overeducated* friars, “Doctours of decrees and of divinite maistres, / That sholde konne and knowe alle kynnes clergie” (380), but who instead make their teaching so complicated and convoluted that “Grammer, the ground of al, bigileth now children” (371). Anima concludes this section with the hope that faith without the help of a clerical education will be sufficient,

“that *sola fides sufficit* to save with lewed peple, / And so may Sarsens be saved, scribes and Jewes” (388–89). “Neither the learned nor the ignorant are defended” in this passage, Scase argues; “instead, an antisacerdotal view of salvation is suggested. Anima asserts that salvation is independent of priestly efficacy, for even non-Christians may be saved.”⁴⁸

Specific attacks on fraternal orders continued in the late fourteenth century, of course. “Men and women from many walks of life,” Guy Geltner writes, “from poets to prostitutes to peasants, lambasted and occasionally beat religious mendicants, even as the latter’s ranks swelled, their treasures grew, and their support by the established church and secular leaders remained stout.”⁴⁹ But from these roots a more generalized anticlerical critique had grown up and was in full flower by mid-century, when English theologians engaged in another related debate, one in which the friars themselves participated vigorously—the question of evangelical poverty.

Perspectives on Poverty

Wyclif was most likely influenced by St. Amour through the work of another writer he mentions in several of his tracts: “Richardus, Armacanus episcopus”;⁵⁰ that is, Richard FitzRalph, a prominent theologian, vice-chancellor of Oxford University in the 1330s, and the Archbishop of Armagh, in Ireland, from 1348 until his death in 1360. In his early work, Wyclif mentions FitzRalph alongside Thomas Bradwardine as “the two outstanding teachers of our order,”⁵¹ by which he means secular priests. In later works, Wyclif refers to the uncanonized FitzRalph as “Sanctus Ricardus,”⁵² a designation the later Lollards would also borrow.⁵³ In the preface to the only biography of FitzRalph published in the twentieth century, Katherine Walsh says that today “FitzRalph is primarily remembered as the impetuous ‘Armachanus,’ who pursued a vendetta against the mendicant friars and in doing so developed the—subsequently notorious—doctrine of dominion by grace.”⁵⁴ This doctrine maintained that God grants a measure of “dominion” (property and rights) to every believer, and that His granting of temporal and spiritual dominion to earthly authorities, from king to priest to pope, is contingent on their being cleansed from sin through the sacrament of baptism, staying free from mortal sin, and remaining continually pure through the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist. The doctrine stirred up controversy among FitzRalph’s Oxford colleagues in his own lifetime, but it became “subsequently notorious” primarily for its influence on Wyclif.

FitzRalph encountered practical problems with the fraternal orders almost immediately after settling in Ireland to take up his post as Archbishop in 1348. In Drogheda, a wealthy merchant city, FitzRalph preached sermons against citizens he called tithe-evaders and usurers, who routinely attempted to gain spiritual benefits through donations to the poor, but only *inter vivos*, after their own deaths. They were “doubtless encouraged by the friars in their midst” to this selfish action, since they were “the principal beneficiaries of such practices.”⁵⁵ FitzRalph argues in these sermons that to rob parish clergy of their divinely approved right to tithes, by giving their money to friars, is “a violent attack on divine lordship.”⁵⁶ In the spirit of John 10, he labels the friars *usurpatores atque raptores*, usurpers and thieves, and *mendicantes exempti qui decimas terrarum usurpant*, exempt mendicants who usurp the tithes of the land.⁵⁷ In 1350, during an official visit to Avignon, FitzRalph preached an antifraternal sermon in the presence of Pope Clement VI, in which he begged the pope to rescind the friars’ privileges and reform the structure of their orders. Clement did not take the recommended action, but the sermon supposedly led several cardinals at Avignon to commission FitzRalph to investigate the question of clerical dominion and poverty more thoroughly, and to report his findings. These events, the truth of which many historians have questioned,⁵⁸ are related by FitzRalph himself in the introduction to the resulting treatise, *De Pauperie Salvatoris* (“On the Poverty of the Savior,” ca. 1353–56).⁵⁹ A later sermon on the same theme, *Defensio Curatorum* (ca. 1357), was preached to Pope Innocent VI and translated into English by Wyclif’s Oxford colleague John Trevisa.

The conflict FitzRalph engaged in *De Pauperie Salvatoris* was related to the ways in which various forms of clergy earned income. The secular clergy received money from the tithes of residents within their parishes, and in exchange they took charge of the parishes’ pastoral care, by preaching, reading Masses, and performing sacraments, even to the poor who could not afford large donations. Monks, on the other hand, did not perform pastoral duties, and thus did not duplicate the work of parish priests, but they could receive income from property, land, and occasionally manual labor. As mendicants, however, friars theoretically could receive no income from either property or labor, and relied wholly on alms from the laity. In practice, these alms were typically donated by rich laymen in exchange for pastoral work—sermons, confessions, baptisms, burials, etc.—thus putting the friars in economic competition with seculars and in theological dispute with monks. In Book VII of *De Pauperie*

Salvatoris, FitzRalph describes in stark terms the conflict between seculars and friars in his Irish archbishopric. This portion of FitzRalph's treatise has not yet been printed in a contemporary edition, but G. R. Evans summarizes the original manuscript:

Clergy were turning actively to pastoral work and were finding the friars in their way, preaching literally "on their territory." ... His argument was that the work of the friars, coming into parishes to preach, was disruptive of the proper pastoral work of the parish priest, who should be hearing his people's confessions himself and doing his own preaching.⁶⁰

Unlike his antifraternial predecessor St. Amour, who came into sharp conflict with papal authorities, FitzRalph made his arguments directly to the popes of his day, dedicating *De Pauperie Salvatoris* to Innocent VI and claiming to have been commissioned by Clement VI. In addition, rather than simply arguing for the dissolution of fraternal orders, FitzRalph took a position that Wyclif would later follow, conceding that Francis, Dominic, and the other founders were genuinely saints, and that the friars had received their spiritual authority legitimately from the pope, but that "by acting as priests the friars wrongly asserted temporal or civil dominion."⁶¹ Anyone in a state of grace, according to FitzRalph, had a right to claim a measure of lordship, or dominion, over both spiritual and temporal goods, but by taking a vow of poverty, the friars had given up their claim to temporal possessions—to use the term FitzRalph and Wyclif shared, they had forfeited "civil dominion." As a result, according to FitzRalph, "pastoral care was denied to them, since for them it was a form of civil lordship, achieved and exploited by the assertion of rights under human law."⁶² Further, any attempt to assert dominion over temporal matters and claim pastoral privileges for themselves was evidence of envy or greed, and thus a sign that their spiritual authority, their "divine dominion," had also been lost. Thus, though the fraternal orders could, in theory, claim spiritual power directly from the pope, the reality for those friars in conflict with the seculars under FitzRalph's authority was that they had given up all claims to either divine or civil dominion, until they returned to the state of absolute poverty described in the rules of their founders.

FitzRalph's intention may have been simply to assert the seculars' preeminence over friars, but by linking dominion to a state of grace, he, like St. Amour before him, allowed his conclusions to apply not only

to friars but to all forms of clergy. Indeed, when Wyclif appropriated FitzRalph's theories in his own monumental works, *De Dominio Divino* and *De Civili Dominio*, he deployed them against a much larger group. According to editor Reginald Lane Poole:

[Wyclif] has added no essential element to the doctrine which he read in the work of his predecessor. All he has done—this is in the *De civili Dominio*—is to carry the inferences logically deducible from that doctrine very much further than the purpose of FitzRalph's treatise required him to pursue them, and very much further than, from all that is known of FitzRalph's character, it is in the least degree likely that he would have pursued them.⁶³

Wyclif argues, in *De Dominio Divino*, that God alone has absolute dominion over created things,⁶⁴ that fallen man is merely a steward of material possessions,⁶⁵ and that only the righteous in a state of grace truly have a claim to ownership and use of temporal goods. When a man falls into mortal sin, he forfeits both God's grace and his right to property, and because anyone can sin mortally at any time, no one has a permanent claim on any temporal possession.⁶⁶ Priests in Wyclif's theory, like the friars in FitzRalph, retain the spiritual power bestowed upon them by Christ in Matthew 16:19, but this power is largely theoretical: "No catholic will deny that the power of the keys is committed to the priest," Wyclif writes, "albeit he have none subjected to his power."⁶⁷ Righteous priests, like any Christian in a state of grace, may assert dominion, but this is an uncertain and tenuous state, even for the pope himself.

Wyclif uses the principles laid out in *De Dominio Divino* to argue, in *De Civili Dominio*, that no parish or order within the church has the right to a perpetual endowment,⁶⁸ since civil dominion among fallen humanity is by definition a temporary condition, and that secular authorities should dispossess the clergy of all endowments if they fall into mortal sin.⁶⁹ The contemporary church is especially prone to falling into sin, Wyclif asserts, because it has become simoniacal, amassing wealth through the sale of benefices.⁷⁰ In the third book of the treatise, his polemic against clerical greed becomes even more radical, as he argues that the only way to rid the church of simony is to dissolve *all* endowments and force clergy to return to a primitive state of poverty.⁷¹

In nearly all of his treatises and tracts that follow these two groundbreaking works, Wyclif's insistence on their central points becomes ever more strident. Wyclif's general argument against clerics holding any

form of civil dominion is laid out succinctly in a passage from *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, written one or two years after *De Civili Dominio*, in which the argument itself is used in a demonstration of the proper reading of Scripture. Wyclif considers three figures from the book of Judges—Othniel, Deborah, and Gideon—who chose spiritual devotion over political power, then concludes:

The priests of Christ, who ought to be vicars of the true vine, should not hold civil dominion, since they consecrate his body and blood to the delight of both God and mortals. Rather, as celebrants, they should bear in mind the one who did not deign to hold civil dominion. For the wine of contemplation that consoles the eye of the priest is evaporated by worldly status and oppressive power. If, in the age before the law, and apart from the example of Christ, a lay person might put aside political affairs for the sake of devotion, all the more ought the priests of Christ follow the example of their master in this way.⁷²

There are two key points to note about Wyclif's dominion argument in this passage, as it relates to the anticlerical critique in *Cleanness* and *Patience*. First, the priests' rejection of temporal political power is directly connected to their spiritual power as "celebrants" who have the ability to "consecrate his body and blood to the delight of both God and mortals." The implied corollary is that clerics who do not reject civil dominion are unfit as celebrants. Second, as already noted above, Wyclif asserts that it is possible to read examples of priests and even non-priestly leaders from the Old Testament (in this case judges) as models for contemporary Christian priests. In fact, when the ancient Israelites act virtuously, they serve not only as straightforward exemplars but as figures in an *a fortiori* argument. To paraphrase Wyclif: if the benighted, unconsecrated leaders who lived before the age of Christ had the ability to act properly, how much more should Christian priests, ordained and in possession of superior knowledge through the gospel, be expected to do so.

In succeeding tracts and treatises, Wyclif's ire against priests who claim civil dominion waxes to the point of physical violence, as he outlines the role that temporal lords have to play in disendowing the clergy, stripping them of all temporal goods, and taking back the donations they and their ancestors bestowed upon the orders. Langland echoes Wyclif's call for dispossession throughout the *Piers Plowman* B-text. After the Donation of Constantine, which granted the "venym" of civil dominion,

Langland says, the church needs a powerful, perhaps violent, antidote for its own good:

A medycyne moot [is needed] therto that may amende
 prelates,
 That sholden preie for the pees; possession hem letteth
 [hinders].
 Taketh hire landes, ye lordes, and let hem lyve by
 dymes [tithes];
 If possession be poison, and inparfite hem make,
 Good were to deschargen hem for Holy Chirches sake,
 And purgen hem of poison, er more peril falle.
 (B.XV.561–66)

Whereas their predecessor FitzRalph argued that reliance on tithes set the secular clergy apart from the friars, who unlawfully attempted to usurp them, Wyclif and Langland use the seculars' access to tithes as an argument for stripping priests of every other form of temporal possession.

Of the many disendowment arguments that appeared during this period, one that summarizes the conflict dramatically is the anonymous Latin tract *Dialogus inter Militem et Clericum*, a fictional dialogue translated into English by John Trevisa in 1387. A soldier (Miles) and a priest (Clericus) debate whether the pope or the king, and by extension soldiers or priests, have ultimate authority over earthly matters. The soldier is clearly meant to win the debate, as he is given approximately ten times as many lines as the priest—often the priest asks a one-line question and the soldier gives a page-length response—but at times the priest does ask questions the soldier has difficulty answering. In fact, the soldier's first line of dialogue indicates that he is not educated and cannot engage in academic complexities, a quality the reader is meant to see as a strength: "Ich am a lewed man & may nouȝt vnderstonde sotil & derk speche; therfore thou most take more pleyn maner of spekyng."⁷³ The soldier cites no Church Fathers or other authorities, except to say, "Ich haue herde of wise doctors" (6), but he quotes and paraphrases the Bible with ease, marshalling to his defense, for instance, the aforementioned Matthew 16:19:

Lo! thou herest openlich that Crist was nouȝt juge & deler ouer
 temporalte. But whanne the peple that he had fedde wolde have
 made hym kyng, he flyȝ from hem. Also in Petres commissioun he
 ȝaf hym nouȝt the keyes of the kyngdom of erthe, but the keyes of
 the kyngdom of heuene. Also the bischops of Hebrewes were suȝet

to kyngis, & kynges sett doun bishops. But forto knowe that Petre was Cristes vicarie in goostliche kyngdom of soules & nouȝt in temporal lordschipe of castels & of londres. (8)

For the most part, the debate proceeds amicably, but in a few places, the soldier speaks intemperately and threatens physical harm to the priest. In the following exchange, the priest compares the soldier to a barking dog, and the soldier extends the metaphor:

Miles. Ȝe stireth me & wakith me as hit were of my sleep, & makith me speke other wise than y thouȝt.

Clericus. Lete the hound wake & berke.

Miles. For Ȝe kunne nouȝt vse manhed suffraunce & pacience of princes, y trowe Ȝe schal fele berkyng & bityng. (19)

Overall, though the dialogue is rooted in the doctrine of dominion championed by FitzRalph and Wyclif, the soldier and priest are ultimately more concerned with the practical, political consequences of their respective theories, and they argue more from a common-sense assessment of hypothetical situations than with the abstract logic of Oxford disputations. The soldier offers Joash as an example of a biblical king who corrected corrupt priests (21), and the priest responds with the practical observation that kings themselves are often corrupt, including the king who currently reigns over them, either the elderly Edward III or infant Richard II (23). The soldier points out, with equal practicality, that since corrupt clergy routinely rob the church's wealth, a priest should not begrudge a "myld" king his legitimate share (24). The soldier's *coup de grace* is a simple observation from Scripture—that Christ himself, the perfect model of all priesthood, willingly put himself under the authority of the Roman Emperor, to the point of death (30). The soldier concedes, in response to the priest's objections on this point, that Christ still retained temporal dominion over the earth, and thus could have lawfully disobeyed the Emperor, but he argues that this prerogative was the result of Christ's unique kingship as the Son of God, which modern-day priests and bishops cannot claim:

for he is Goddes sone & the grete kynges sone. & as the kynges sone is gretter than the bischop, so is Goddes sone gretter than Emperour, & so that answer [his assertion of temporal authority in Matt. 17:24–27] was y-ȝeue for Crist & nouȝt for ȝow. (31)

In the end, the soldier concludes, as does Wyclif, that priests should lose their temporalities, "ȝoure catel & ȝoure power" (34), if they are corrupt

or unresponsive to the needs of their parishes. One implication of Wyclif's dominion theory, which the soldier in the *Dialogus* eventually concedes, is that rightful kings have virtually unlimited power over officials in the church. The soldier warns the cleric to "chastith 3oure tonge & knowle-chith that the kyng may be aboue customs, priuyleges, & fredoms while he is riztful kyng with ful power ... & therfore 3if 3e haueth y-seye ou3t redressed other chaungide in help of the kyngdom, suffre 3e hit pacientliche" (36–37). The only option for a priest, bishop, or even pope suffering under the seemingly unjust rule of a temporal lord or king is a Christ-like patience.

Church officials familiar with Wyclif's writing recognized this implication as well, even if he did not make it so explicit. When Pope Gregory XI issued bulls against Wyclif's "19 theses" on May 22, 1378, four were directly related to Wyclif's theories on dominion and calls for disendowment:

6. If God be, temporal lords may lawfully and with merit take from a delinquent church the blessings of fortune ...
7. Whether the church be in such a condition or not, is not for me to discuss, but for the temporal lords to investigate; and if such be the case, for them to act with confidence and seize her temporalities under pain of damnation ...
17. It is permitted kings to deprive those ecclesiastics of their temporalities who habitually misuse them ...
19. An ecclesiastic, indeed even the Roman pontiff, may lawfully be rebuked by those subject to him and by laymen, and even arraigned ...⁷⁴

Gregory's phrasing, which does not directly quote Wyclif at any point, contains what the pope clearly intended to be self-evident absurdities—for example, the image of "the Roman pontiff" being rebuked by a layman—which he believed were the logical endpoint of Wyclif's dominion arguments.

Gregory's bulls notwithstanding—and these came in the final year of that pope's life, on the eve of the Great Schism, which would divide the papacy for the next forty-five years—politically charged calls for clerical disendowment such as Wyclif's went largely unchecked until the summer of 1381, when the Peasants' Revolt converted them, in the minds of

Wyclif's opponents, from theoretical arguments into frightening reality. The Revolt was primarily economic in motivation, a response to the injustices of Parliamentary statutes that regulated labor,⁷⁵ but peasant rebels also targeted clerics whom they believed to support corrupt politicians, and the most high-profile victim of their murderous rage was Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury who also served as Lord Chancellor. One of rebel leader Wat Tyler's primary demands, as recorded by chronicler Henry Knighton, was "disendowment and dispersal of church goods."⁷⁶ Twenty years later, Thomas Netter accused Wyclif of being "the principal author" of the Revolt, and quoted rebel leader John Ball's confession "that for two years he was a disciple of Wyclif, and learned from him the heresies he himself had taught."⁷⁷ Though nearly every historian now agrees that Wyclif had little, if any, influence over the Peasants' Revolt, and certainly none that was intentional,⁷⁸ church authorities used the occasion to move swiftly against him, and given the clear thematic connections between his polemic and the rebels' demands, his political allies could do little to stop them. According to Workman, "The effect of the Rising on the fortunes of Wyclif was immediate and disastrous. Wyclif's alliance with John of Gaunt was ended, his political influence was gone, his policy of disendowment dead."⁷⁹

Of course, Wyclif himself was not yet dead, nor were his attempts to promulgate his theories. Whereas Langland appears to have toned down his disendowment rhetoric in the C-text revision to *Piers Plowman* after the Revolt,⁸⁰ Wyclif's only grew more passionate, for example in the tract *De Blasphemia*. Though he emphasizes that the murder of Sudbury was inexcusable, he lays ultimate blame for the revolt on the corrupted clergy. "How can an Archbishop occupy the position of Chancellor to the king, the most secular office in the kingdom?" he asks. "How can he convene the clergy ... unless as an arch-devil, gathering his little devils?"⁸¹ Wyclif attacks friars, monks, and secular clergy in turn, seemingly heedless of maintaining any consistency in his arguments against possession and mendicancy, and he concludes by suggesting that if peasants and nobles could find a common enemy in the clergy, dissension between them might come to an end.

Leaving aside the personal and professional consequences of such undiplomatic outbursts—consequences which included forced retirement to his rectory at Lutterworth—Wyclif's positions on the disendowment question complicated his views on several other issues. On the issue of evangelical poverty, which is closely linked to the question of civil

dominion, Wyclif at times appears to have a divided conscience. This sets him apart from his predecessor FitzRalph, and from his contemporary Langland, both of whom argued on the basis of Matthew 5:3 (“Blessid be pore men in spirit”) that voluntary begging and mendicancy was an abomination. In the *Defensio Curatorum*, as translated by Trevisa, FitzRalph is unequivocal on this point, arguing that poverty is originally a consequence of sin and thus not be taken up voluntarily or loved for its own sake:

Also noon effect of synne is worthi to be loued for hit-silf aloon
thou3 hit be loued in herte that is infect; but pouert is the effect of
synne; thanne pouert is nou3t worthi to be loued for hit-silf aloon.
That pouert is the effect of synne, y preue hit, for 3if oure forme
fader & moder [Adam & Eve] hadde neuer y-synned, schuld neuer
haue be pore man of oure kynde.⁸²

Langland’s view of poverty is more complex, and it shifts subtly in the mouths of various characters throughout *Piers Plowman*, but he seems to echo FitzRalph in his statement that there is “No beggere ne boye [knave] amonges us but if it synne made” (B.XI.203). In the same Passus, the allegorical character of Scripture teaches that only involuntary poverty, not the idleness of lay vagrants or mendicants, will lead to the virtue of patience, or “suffraunce,” which is “a soverayn vertue” (378). This genuine form of “poverté” is the only kind that should be praised, for “ther pacience is, moore parfit than richesse” (318).

The same argument against mendicancy was echoed by many anti-fraternal critics, though as Scase observes, “The conflict over Franciscan poverty is a subject of immense complexity, with a vast literature.”⁸³ The precise interpretation of the term “poverty,” and its proper use in practical contexts, led to conflicts among the various mendicant orders and ultimately to an internal split within the Franciscan order itself.⁸⁴ For the monastic orders and a faction of the Franciscans, poverty was a theoretical concept, a renunciation of legal ownership that still allowed for the use of land and property. For others, including some within the mendicant orders and many of their critics, poverty meant literal, material hardship, the renunciation of all but the most necessary items required for survival, a state which would obviously require the acceptance of alms, either through long-term patronage or begging. The attempt to procure these donations, critics such as FitzRalph and Langland alleged, put friars in competition with the genuinely, involuntarily poor, and almsgivers should reserve their charity for those who were truly forced to rely on gifts.

For those attempting to critique fraternal orders, monastic orders, and secular priests at the same time, these competing views of poverty could lead to logical inconsistencies. For instance, in his 1382 Ascension Day sermon, Nicholas Hereford simultaenously critiques the possession of the monks and the itinerant begging of the friars, arguing that the former should be disendowed and the latter reformed: "Monks and possessioners will never be humble until their possessions are taken away, nor will mendicant friars ever be good until their begging is prevented."⁸⁵ Monks must renounce possessions as the friars have done, and friars must renounce begging as the monks have done. How either group is to procure a livelihood, however, Hereford does not say.

Wyclif's views on the issue were more complex than any of the above-mentioned writers, in part because he approved of the theory behind evangelical poverty, and because he viewed Francis, Dominic, and the other founders of fraternal orders as undoubted saints. From Wyclif's perspective, it was the practical actions of later friars that had caused problems for the church, not the original intentions of their founders. In *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, Wyclif seems to have no problem, in principle, with monastic or fraternal vows of poverty, or even with the idea that "all Christ's priests should live on the temporal alms of the laity."⁸⁶ His critique is rather aimed at hypocrisy and the "quest for worldly power":

Who doubts that God especially hates the arrogance of the mendicants? Consequently, the laity are all the more obliged to keep an eye out for such deceit and withdraw their alms, taking back what their ancestors mistakenly bequeathed. For by the faith of Scripture it is certain that those powerful members of the clergy, whether taken as individual persons or a collective gathering, who dissipate the religion of Christ under the cloak of sanctity must either be punished here and now by their ecclesiastical superiors, or by the laity. If they are not, they will either be destroyed in a hostile act of devastation, or will amass their crimes only to endure the retribution of divine judgment.⁸⁷

Whether the vow of poverty is personal or communal, whether the order technically owns property or not, every order is subject to evaluation from the laity. If the order falls into sin and the church does not act, either the anger of temporal lords or the wrath of God himself will work to dispossess it. This wrath, Wyclif writes, will be comparable to the two most memorable scenes of destruction from the book of Genesis, the same scenes which will dominate the poem *Cleanness*: "the houses of the

religious orders, the bishops, and the priests ... will be allowed a certain measure of wickedness until that time comes when they must expect the retribution of divine judgment, as made clear by the punishment of the flood and that of Sodom.”⁸⁸

One can see clearly, in *De Veritate*, the logical process by which Wyclif proceeds from a general critique of clerical greed, to an argument for withholding tithes and alms, to an argument about dispossession which applies to every category of cleric. In fact, in one passage near the end of the first volume, Wyclif walks the reader through the steps of this logical argument:

First of all, one can discern that clerics are married to the world and thus to riches. ... One can secondly discern how the world would be wise to withdraw material alms from such men, since no one ought to enter into a yoke of matrimony with infidels by confirming such a monstrous marriage. Indeed, it is preferable that it be dissolved. Third, if God so willed it, these men of every clerical class, whose hearts are touched by the Holy Spirit, could be inspired with a contempt for the world, thereby taking up a life of evangelical poverty for the sake of Christ.⁸⁹

Wyclif does not describe explicitly in this passage how the clerics would be so “inspired,” but he has already made the argument for dispossession by temporal lords. In general, the dispossession arguments throughout Wyclif’s works are buttressed with theology, but like the debate between soldier and priest in the *Dialogus*, they always seem to begin with a practical observation or question. “*First of all*, one can discern that clerics are married to the world and thus to riches” (*italics mine*), and from that observation every plea for clerical disendowment flows.

In later writings, as his dominion and disendowment arguments grow more polemical, Wyclif alters his views of monastic “communal” poverty and allies himself more with the radical definition of poverty espoused by a faction of the Franciscans—one which defines poverty as literal hardship and allows lawful possession of only the necessities of life. Though he continues to critique the friars for hypocrisy and violation of their vows, he uses the theory behind those vows to critique monastic orders’ ownership of lands and perpetual endowments. Wyclif argues that “poverty would keep out from the ranks of the clergy those who take orders only for the sake of pay,” and he speaks idealistically about the “serene and evangelical attitude to be content with the bare necessities

of life,"⁹⁰ though he continues to attack the friars and to refer to them in the same terms as the divided papacy, as "Antichrist." His practical views on evangelical poverty, taken together with his theoretical positions on dominion, are thus complicated, at times inconsistent, and constantly subject to revision, depending on the target of the critique at hand.

The later Lollards also disagreed among themselves over which approach to take toward the issue of poverty, though all approaches were ultimately antifraternial—either a condemnation of contemporary friars for not following the original tenets of their order, or a condemnation of the four orders and their founders altogether. The sermon "The Rule and Testament of St. Francis" is an excellent example of the former, as it examines and praises the Rule itself, but excoriates those friars who have violated it. The critique extends even to clothes: "& so of clothing thei don aȝenst this reule in many maneres; for men seen that the kyng or the emperour myȝtte with worschipe were a garnement of a frere for goodnesse of the cloth."⁹¹ Another Lollard sermon describes the education friars receive in greed, against the original intentions of their founders:

There lerneth religiouse men, aȝen prophession of her ordre, to haue godes in propre there thei non schulden haue, and for to coueite officis to rake togedere goodes there thei scholde be pore and dede to the world. There lernen also in this cursid scole marchauntis and artificeres to be perfite in this lore, with sillis and with falsede, for to gete gode.⁹²

The *Gawain*-poet's attitude toward poverty, both involuntary physical hardship and spiritual poverty, is similarly complex, as we will see when we look closely at his explication of Matthew 5 and the "Dame Pouerte" scene from *Patience*. On the one hand, he rejects the argument of St. Amour, FitzRalph, and Langland that involuntary poverty is necessarily the result of sin, though like Langland he links involuntary poverty thematically with the virtue of patience, through the Beatitudes. At the same time, he does not appear to endorse voluntary mendicancy, choosing instead to endorse a view of poverty as an undeserved curse which God's grace can transfigure into an unearned blessing.

Clerical Education and the Preeminence of Preaching

As a philosopher, Wyclif found reasons early in his career to question the church's explanations for transubstantiation, and he did so in the treatise

De Eucharistia. However, in the same treatise, he also claims that the source of the church's contention over eucharistic doctrine is not genuine philosophical or theological disagreement, but greed and corruption coming from within: "Sin causes the destruction of the kingdom, but this originates from the Christian clergy in particular."⁹³ Indeed, it seems likely that in Wyclif's lifetime, a large number of clergymen, from popes to parish priests, really were scandalously corrupt. In 1352, FitzRalph preached a fiery sermon to his subordinate bishops at a provincial council in Ireland, enumerating with precision the sins for which they and the priests under their authority were guilty:

For there are in the church of God those bearing the name of prelate—the greater and the lesser alike—who are fornicators. Not only are they not the husbands of one wife ... but they are the adulterers of many mistresses, to the manifest scandal of our status. There are others, by name prelates, not pastors but more truly gluttons, who once or more every day are inebriated with such drunkenness, and give vent to such filthy and scandalous scurrilities, that those sharing a common life with them abhor their society, on account of their vile mode of living. Alas! Alas! Alas! with what wicked temerity do such dare to handle the most spotless sacraments of the Church. ... Others there are, plunderers in the Church of God, falsely called pastors, who from the goods of the churches—not only movable but immovable—provide for their own flesh and blood, namely their nephews and nieces—as they call the crowd of their own daughters and sons.⁹⁴

In addition to referencing four Deadly Sins in the course of this short passage (lechery, gluttony, ire, and avarice), as well as three of the Ten Commandments (against adultery, false witness, and theft), FitzRalph also draws attention to the "spotless sacraments" handled by these impure celebrants. Walsh observes that this list of clerical abuses was "the stock-in-trade of medieval preachers," but also points out that FitzRalph's "references to fornication and nepotists probably had a more direct application, and were specifically directed at elements either in his audience or under the jurisdiction of those present."⁹⁵ She speculates that he may have been addressing bishops from Gaelic Ireland in particular, where church regulations about clerical celibacy, and bans against clerics marrying and passing ecclesiastical benefices on to their sons, had not yet penetrated secular society.

A striking English parallel to FitzRalph's concern about Irish clerics fathering children and squandering church resources to provide for them

can be found in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*, a bawdy fabliau which contains a brief, damning accusation against the priesthood. The dupe of the story, the thieving miller Symkyn, has a wife whose father is secretly the parish priest, and this parson ensures the well-being and wealth of his children and grandchildren at the expense of the church. He gives Symkyn "ful many a panne of bras [brass]" at their wedding (l.3944) and plans to make their daughter "his heir, / Bothe of his catel and his mesuage [house]" (3978–79), in order to marry her "into som worthy blood of auncetrye" (3982) and make a lucrative alliance. After this outrageous description, the Reeve provides commentary:

For hooly chirches good moot ben despended
On hooly chirches blood, that is descended.
Therefore he wolde his hooly blood honoure,
Though that he hooly chirche sholde devoure.
(3983–86)

Though a fictional and likely exaggerated depiction of clerical avarice, these final words offer what Marie Borroff views as "a direct accusation unparalleled, to my knowledge, elsewhere in Chaucer's comic tales."⁹⁶ The Reeve's parson clearly fits the bill as one of FitzRalph's "plunderers in the Church of God" who provides for his own family "from the goods of the churches," caring more about his concubines, his children, and his own wealth and social status than he does about the material or spiritual welfare of his parish.

If Walsh's assessment of FitzRalph's sermon is correct, however, at the heart of the issues he addresses is first a lack of education among the clergy, a concern shared by many other critics. In *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, Wyclif imagines a utopian time in the early church in which leaders not only had greater faith than latter-day priests, but also more knowledge:

It seems certain that they [the Apostles] had more faith at that time than we do now or, as it happens, those who devise their own fiction. For these people know nothing of the Catholic church, much less her true privileges. The prelates do not even possess suitable knowledge of the individual sacraments.⁹⁷

Wyclif cites canon law which states that "archbishops and bishops are required to know both testaments, and consequently the entirety of Holy Scripture," and that a parish priest's spiritual duty to his flock "cannot

possibly be fulfilled without a knowledge of Holy Scripture. This is why it is essential that every spiritual shepherd have a knowledge of Holy Scripture above all else."⁹⁸ Though he expresses skepticism about Oxford's hair-splitting style of disputation, Wyclif also insists that all priests should receive a thorough education in theology, and advocates the regular examination of priests and bishops in literacy and biblical knowledge.

The reason clerical education is of such paramount importance, Wyclif insists repeatedly, is that the most important duty a priest has is preaching to his congregation, more important even than consecrating the Eucharist:

It is a far better thing ... that the people receive God's word than that a solitary person receive Christ's body. ... preaching is more effective in blotting out mortal sins than the Eucharist. ... Insofar as the aforementioned preached word is the truth, it is essentially God himself. As such, preaching it must be the most dignified work a creature can perform.⁹⁹

The preeminence of the preaching vocation is also stressed continually through the biblical commentary of the *Glossed Gospels*, invariably linked to warnings against evil or incompetent preachers. The commentary on Luke 10, in which Jesus sends apostles to preach in pairs, first draws a link between preaching and the cardinal virtue of charity:

The Lord sendith two disciplis to preche, that he stille shewe to vs bi this that he that hath not charite anentis anothere man oweth to receyue in no maner the office of prechyng. ... Sothely the Lord sueth his prechours, for prechyng cometh bifore, and thanne the Lord cometh to the dwellyng of oure soule whan wordis of monestying gon bifore, and bi hem the treuthe is receyued in oure soule.¹⁰⁰

When Christ says the fields of corn are ripe but the workmen are few, the commentary asserts, this does not mean the number of preachers is too few, but that many are too corrupt to perform this most important duty:

Lo, the world is ful of prestis, but netheles ful seldun worchere is founden in Goddis ripe corn. Forsothe we han take the office of prest, but we fillen not the werk of office. ... For ofte the tunge of prechoures is restreyned for her [their] owne wickidnes, ofte it is don for the synne of sugetis [subjects] that the word of prechyng is withdrawn fro souereyns.¹⁰¹

According to these critics and commentary writers, passive laziness or sloth is not the only vice to blame for the clergy's neglect of their education and preaching skills. Active sin also plays a role, particularly the sin of greed, a category of anticlerical accusation that deserves separate consideration.

Simony, Absenteeism, and Pluralism

The reason many priests are woefully undereducated, and thus unprepared for the duties of preaching and teaching, is primarily their own sloth, Wyclif says, but in *De Simonia*, he also blames simony, the practice of selling ecclesiastical offices to the highest bidder. Elders in the church who make appointments for money "sin simoniacally as the worst of heretics when because of temporal gain they raise up illiterates whom the people feel are ignorant or lazy in governing souls."¹⁰²

Greed is without question the Deadly Sin most often cited in fourteenth-century anticlerical texts, and it takes a wide variety of forms. It manifests itself, Wyclif writes, in the exaction of rents and "exemptions, privileges and dignities" available only to the clergy.¹⁰³ In the context of a larger disendowment argument, he claims that wealth is better off in the hands of the laity, who might be expected to use it more prudently. Greed can lead to clerical corruption, Wyclif says, and he uses lying, or remaining silent rather than speaking truth, as the prime example:

It appears that refusing to speak the truth is chiefly due to the danger of having one's temporal possessions taken away. Or else it attests to the cowardly and contemptible fear of angering someone who would be severely displeased by hearing the truth.¹⁰⁴

Wyclif's warning here is dramatized by Langland in a highly entertaining scene from *Piers Plowman*, in which a greedy confessor agrees never to criticize "lordes that lecherie haunten" and "ladies that loven wel the same" (B.III.53–54) and to preach that lust "is synne of the sevene sonnest relessed" (58), in exchange for a donation to glaze a stained-glass window. All four orders of friars, Langland says, "Prechyng the peple for profit of the wombe [stomach], / Glosed the gospel as hem [the people] good liked" (Pro. 59–60). For both Wyclif and Langland, a cleric's preaching and teaching ability is thus directly connected to the level of his greed.

Several other forms of clerical greed fall under the heading of simony, a broad term most commonly associated with the sale of spiritual

offices, but routinely applied to a wide variety of abuses. These include absenteeism, the neglect of a priest with cure of souls to discharge his duties while still collecting tithes or a benefice, as well as pluralism, the practice of holding ecclesiastical offices in multiple locations, thus ensuring one or more will be absent. Some English absentees were also aliens—appointees, especially for high-ranking offices such as cardinal and archbishop, who did not reside in England. To illustrate just how endemic these practices were in the fourteenth-century church, William Pantin observes that in 1366, there were 169 pluralists in London alone and 136 in the Lincoln diocese, with each pluralist holding an average of three benefices.¹⁰⁵ The non-resident rector who received the tithes of a parish he never visited “might be anything from the Keeper of the Privy Seal to a university student, or to a monastery or a college, and the work would be done by a substitute, a vicar or chaplain.”¹⁰⁶ Workman gives examples of benefices granted to children aged fourteen, thirteen, and “nearly six.”¹⁰⁷ Ironically, Wyclif himself was an absentee priest, at least in the early years of his career, as he held the prebend of the collegiate church in Aust in 1363 while studying at Oxford, and was cited for not providing a chaplain in his absence.¹⁰⁸ Lahey observes of this episode, “Holding several livings in different parishes was quite common, and had Wyclif been any other scholarly priest, such pluralism would have been unremarkable. Given Wyclif’s later vehement excoriation of the practice, it is difficult to understand why he engaged in it throughout his Oxford career.”¹⁰⁹

Hypocritical or not, Wyclif railed against these practices throughout the entirety of his career. “O, how happy it would be for England,” he writes in *De Civili Dominio*, “if each parish church had its own rector in residence and each estate its legitimate lord with a moderate household and family in residence ... but now mercenaries have civil and ecclesiastical dominion ... and the clergy are the principal cause.”¹¹⁰ He lists five types of spiritual work absentee clerics do not perform, and imagines the list as a sentence from God on Judgment Day: “You did not strengthen the weak, did not heal the sick, did not bind up the broken, did not bring back the abandoned, did not seek after the lost.”¹¹¹ The most significant problem with pluralism and absenteeism, as with lack of education, is that parishes are deprived of effective preaching, since the non-resident will typically supply an inferior vicar to take his place—or, if he does not, the parish will be deprived of preaching altogether. In a passage from *De Simonia* directed at monastic orders that have appropriated parish churches, Wyclif scoffs at the idea that prayer alone can replace the duty of preaching:

How, therefore, will those rectors respond on the day of judgment for souls whose tenths they enjoy if by preaching they did not direct them on the road to virtue and to God's law? . . . For prayer, particularly of a simoniac, cannot make up for the duty of preaching, because then God would be commanding preaching in vain. Nor is that pretext valid which claims that preaching is not necessary these days because the community knows Christ's truth sufficiently. The fact is indubitable that . . . never was there a greater need to preach the Catholic faith.¹¹²

In *De Officio Regis*, Wyclif attacks the practice of appointing alien benefice-holders, arguing that if they wish to hold an English benefice, they must live in England and swear loyalty to her king: "Suitable pastors should be provided, whose sheep know their words and deeds, and other pastors of a contrary condition, especially foreigners, should be fearlessly expelled."¹¹³ As one Lollard sermon puts it, using the standard biblical imagery, "no curat owith to leue his schepe vnkept among the wolues of helle."¹¹⁴

A separate but related category of alien bishops can be found in the papal practice of granting favored subordinates non-existent foreign sees, episcopal posts that existed in title only because they were located in Muslim lands, where the church had not maintained an official presence since the Crusades. The bishops assigned to these areas would theoretically serve as missionaries, but in practice, they would simply receive the benefice attached to the endowment. Wyclif makes no reference to this practice in his work, but Langland offers a harsh rebuke to these false title-holders. In a passage that resonates in intriguing ways with *Patience*, the character Anima makes the radical suggestion that these bishops-in-name-only should actually travel to the East and take up their posts:

Allas, that men so longe on Makometh sholde bileve!
 So manye prelates to preche as the Pope maketh—
 Of Nazareth, of Nynyve, of Neptalym and Damaske.
 That thei ne wente as Crist wisseth—sithen thei wilne
 a name—
 To be pastours and preche the passion of Jesus,
 And as hymself seide, so to lyve and dye:
Bonus pastor animam suam ponit ...
 And that is routhe for the rightful men that in the
 reawme wonyen,
 And a peril to the Pope and prelates that he maketh,
 That bere bisshopes names of Bethleem and of
 Babiloigne. (B.XV.491–96, 507–9)

The Latin verse in the middle of the passage is a familiar one, from John 10:11: “A good scheperde 3yueth his lijf for hise scheep.” Anima suggests that bishops should assume residence in their appointed sees, even in regions as deadly as Babylon, for the sake of the lost sheep who live there, the worshipers of “Makometh.” The “peril” she speaks of in the final lines is not the physical danger of martyrdom, but the spiritual danger that attends disobedience—it is perilous, in a spiritual sense, for bishops to remain absentees, even if not doing so means physical death. Among the biblical cities in the list which evoke the New Testament foundations of Christianity—Nazareth, Damascus, Bethlehem—Langland also includes the Old Testament city of Nineveh, a conscious reminder that the prophet Jonah also placed himself in “peril” for not taking up his post in a dangerous foreign land.

Wyclif defines simony to include the selling of sacraments, in particular the sacrament of penance. Since penance traditionally involved four steps—contrition, confession, absolution, and satisfaction—the process could be disrupted by clerical or lay abusers at several points. One widespread abuse, made famous by Chaucer’s Pardoner, was the sale of papal pardons or indulgences, which could reduce or eliminate the satisfaction a penitent would have to endure, either in this life or in purgatory. Likewise, the sale of relics, and saints’ cults more generally, viewed with skepticism by Wyclif and fiercely denounced by later Lollards, were part of a ubiquitous trade that enriched church and lay merchants alike. Though these critiques might be more accurately viewed as arguments against lay superstition in general, a strain of antimonasticism can be found in the Lollard passages against relics and pilgrimages, as practices encouraged by greedy monks seeking to enrich their monasteries.

Anticlerical critiques, however, were most frequently leveled against confessors who allowed for shortcuts in the penitential process in exchange for donations, and against monks and friars who refused to hear confessions altogether from penitents who were not wealthy. In the *Defensio Curatorum*, speaking of the covetousness of friars, FitzRalph lists three specific “peryls of the office of presthode,” duties of parish priests which bring in little or no income, and thus are shunned by the friars: “to folly children in help of curatours, & housle paryschons on Ester day and anoynt seke men at her ende day.”¹¹⁵ The anointing of the sick on their deathbeds, also known as extreme unction, was a sacrament that could potentially bring in money, but only if the dying man were rich, whereas caring for children was unlikely to be lucrative even in the best cases. As

for “houseling,” administering the Eucharist, on Easter Sunday, this was a task which necessarily involved hearing confessions from parishioners in advance. Such work was likely to be burdensome, since Easter was the day most parishioners fulfilled the requirement of annual confession and “taking their rights” at Communion,¹¹⁶ and unprofitable since the average parishioner could not afford a large donation. As FitzRalph indicates, there were many simpler, less work-intensive ways for the friars to gain “worldlich wynnyng & profit.”¹¹⁷

Wyclif, like his predecessor FitzRalph, saw much danger and potential for abuse in private confessions to a priest who would determine the form of the penitent’s satisfaction. In *Trialogus*, Wyclif argues that satisfaction is the aspect of penance which compares figuratively to the column holding a harp together—without it, the tuning pegs (contrition) and the strings (confession) lose their power to make music.¹¹⁸ He recounts the history of the practice of private confession, claiming it began with Innocent III, and argues that confession to God and to the wronged party is sufficient for forgiveness of sins. Despite his misgivings, however, he is not willing to advise the church to dispense with priestly confession altogether, or to severely curtail a priest’s power to determine satisfaction. “But although the third part [satisfaction] harms many and piles many evils on both parts, still it does much good for the church,” he writes, in many hypothetical situations he goes on to elaborate.¹¹⁹

Other fictional situations which express the same anxiety can be found in Langland’s greedy confessor from *Piers Plowman*, cited above, and in Chaucer’s Friar from the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, who tailors the requirements of his penance to the generosity of the penitent:

Ful swetely herde he confessioun,
And plesaunt was his absolucioun:
He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,
Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.
For unto a povre ordre for to yive
Is a signe that a man is wel yshryve; . . .
Therefore in stede of wepyng and preyeres
Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres.
(I.221–26, 231–32)

It is hardly surprising, given the economic exchanges centered around the sacraments, that clergy of all categories would be compared to merchants—though, according to one Lollard sermon, they are actually “more sotil and falsere.”¹²⁰

Wyclif concludes in *De Simonia* that the single answer to all of the problems that fall under the category of simony—the sale of benefices, unfair preferments, pluralism, absenteeism, and the abuse of sacraments—is clerical dispossession. “Endowment is the mother and nurse of heresy,” he writes. “For as long as endowment remains, which nurtures this heresy in the church, it would take a remarkable miracle to wipe out the heresy of simony.”¹²¹ Wyclif holds out hope that Pope Urban VI will correct these problems, but the “more likely remedy” is that temporal lords will take matters into their own hands and “plug up the font of simony” through dispossession.¹²²

Accusations of Sexual Sin

Accusations of clerical greed allowed for a variety of critiques, but the most lurid anticlerical attacks were those directed at lechery. In a sermon entitled “On the Leaven of the Pharisees,” a Lollard writer lists several ways to determine whether priests and friars are hypocrites—one sure sign, he says, comes when they vow chastity yet commit sexual transgressions. The sermon-writer’s description of the sexual sins to which priests are tempted includes virtually every transgression available to the medieval imagination: fornication with nuns, adultery with married women, sodomy with other priests, even the murder of women who resist their advances, coupled with false teaching designed to seduce women, justify their actions, and appease wealthy donors who wish to indulge the same vices. As such descriptions of sexual extortion and murder suggest, priests in this period were not immune even to accusations of criminal violence. The Lollard sermonist concludes with the observation that “siche lumpis of 3onge men,” fat and idle, have been gathered by the devil into the priesthood and now prompt both God and his saints to curse the entire earth:

3if thei bynde hem self to clene chastite bothe of body and soule
and of dede and wille, and here-with don fornycacioun and auoutrie
with wyues and nonnes, and slen wommen that with-stonden hem
in this synne; thei ben foule ypocritis. 3if thei don the cursed synne
of sodom with hem self, and seyn to nyse wymmen that it is lesse
synne to trespase with hem than with othere weddid men, and vndir
taken for the synne of the wommen, and norischen ryche men and
wymmen in lecherie and in auoutrie for monye and to haue here
owne lustis; thei ben cursid ypocritis and distroien cristendom.
It semeth the deuyll gedreth siche lumpis of 3onge men, fatte and

lykyng and ydyl, and byndith hem fro wyues, that men myȝten
haue bi goddis lawe, to maken false heiris and to for-do the kynde of
men and so to make the erthe cursed of god and alle his seyntis.¹²³

Note that these young men appear to be attracted to the priesthood not in spite of the vows they must take, but precisely because those vows will “byndith hem fro wyues,” and allow them to enjoy sexual license unfettered by family obligations, in a way that violates the very nature (“kynde”) of humanity. The writer does not make an explicit argument against priestly vows of celibacy here, but the implication seems to be that the vows create sexual hypocrisy and prompt some to enter the priesthood with evil motives. This line of reasoning, as well as the contention that sexual sins “make the erthe cursed of god,” will come into greater focus when we examine the *Gawain*-poet’s stories of the Deluge and Sodom and Gomorrah in *Cleanness*.

Another argument relevant to a reading of *Cleanness*, which combines the vices of greed and lust, is the connection medieval theologians commonly drew between sodomy and simony. In *De Simonia*, Wyclif cites “Parisiensis,” the late thirteenth-century Parisian William of Peraldus, as an authority for his argument on this point:

The Parisian in his treatise *On Avarice*, in listing eight reasons to detest this sin [simony], expresses its terrible nature by calling it spiritual sodomy. For just as in carnal sodomy contrary to nature the seed is lost by which an individual human being would be formed, so in this sodomy the seed of God’s word is cast aside with which a spiritual generation in Christ Jesus would be created. And just as sodomy in the time of the law of nature was one of the most serious sins against nature, so simony in the time of the law of grace is one of the most serious sins against grace.¹²⁴

As further evidence, Wyclif quotes Matthew 10:15, in which Jesus says it will be more bearable for Sodom on judgment day than for those who reject his teaching, a group Wyclif defines as clerical simoniacs. He defines “carnal sodomy” as any form of non-procreative sex in which “the seed is lost,” conduct especially worthy of God’s wrath in the ancient world, before his command to humanity to “Encreesse ye, & be ye multiplied & fille ye the erthe” (Genesis 1:28) had been fulfilled. The command is repeated to Noah and his sons after the Deluge (Genesis 9:1), when nearly all life is annihilated and those remaining bear the responsibility of repopulating the Earth.

The *Thirty-Seven Conclusions of the Lollards* echo Wyclif's perspective on sodomy and simony, first describing modern-day "prelatis or curatis that prechen not duli the gospel" in familiar terms as "Satanas transfigurid into aungil of light," then comparing them unfavorably to those who practice "bodili sodomie" by withdrawing their seed from women and thus failing to produce "a child in kynde":

But these weiward prelatis or curatis, that withdrawn the seed of Goddis word and of good ensauple fro the puple, withdrawn gostli seed and mateer bi which cristen soulis myghten and shulden be gendrid into euere lastinge blisse. ... Therefore as alle resonable men han greet abhominacioun of bodili sodomie as ful horrible synne ageens kynde, so thei shulden haue moche more abhominacioun of this withdrawynge of Goddis word and holi ensauple, and of symonie which is gostli sodomie and eresie.¹²⁵

In their thirty-seventh and final conclusion, the Lollard writers once again rail against simony and the "opin euelis" it produces, then take the connection with sodomy, and with the biblical city of Sodom, to its logical conclusion. They imagine the destructive wrath of God that awaits officials who persecute honest preachers (a reference to the "true priests" of Wyclif) who speak out against simony:

And if the forseid lordis and comouns suffren that disciplis of antecrist quenche the gospel of Crist and pursue at here desyr the verri prechouris therof, and holde hem in prisoun withouten due proces of the gospel, othir murthere hem priuili, I drede soore that at the dai of doom, men of Sodom and men of Gomor shulen haue lesse turment, than the prelatis, lordis, and comouns of oure rewme.¹²⁶

The final phrase about Sodom and Gomorrah receiving lighter punishment than a city or nation of greater evil is a common formulation in prophetic passages throughout the Bible; it appears notably in Jesus's curses on Capernaum and other towns that reject his disciples (Matthew 10:15, 11:23–24; Luke 10:12). This trope, together with the link between sodomy and simony outlined in the third article, leads the Lollards to their conclusion—the physical sin of Sodom received a harsh punishment, but the spiritual sin of the English church will be punished more harshly still.

Of course, the argument that simony had replaced sodomy as the sin most likely to trigger God's wrath did not prevent anticlerical critics

from also accusing priests of every imaginable type of sexual sin as well, as the sermon "On the Leaven of the Pharisees" quoted above illustrates. But the metaphorical link between physical sodomy and clerical simony is one to bear in mind as we approach the *Gawain*-poet's treatment of sexual sins, as well as his effusive praise of marital love, in *Cleanness*.

Movements toward Anti-Sacerdotalism

Though the Lollards, as we have seen, were often reckless in their polemic against clerical corruption, some writers took pains to avoid any suspicion of heresy even in their harshest critiques. Perhaps the best example of a self-consciously orthodox yet scathing attack on the clergy comes from the poet John Gower, in the prologue to his *Confessio Amantis* (ca. 1390–1393). Gower begins his collection of tales with an apology, and states that his reason for writing is that "The world is changed overal," and "love is falle into discord" (119, 121), a state of affairs he blames in equal part on civil authorities, the church, and the laity. Thus, approximately one-third of the prologue is devoted to recriminations against various church officials and clergy.

In former days, Gower claims, Pride was considered a vice among clerics (224), priests gave "grete almesse / To povere men that hadden nede" (226–27), and they were "chaste in word and dede" (228). Today, however, the church which should be "the worldes hele / Is now, men say, the pestilence / Which hath exiled pacience / Fro the clergie in special" (278–81). Gower accuses clerical officials of indulging "the vice / Which Simon hath in his office" (203–04), and of participating in a corrupt patronage system in the assigning of "bisschopriches" (208). Like Wyclif, he says that "poverté" is a priest's most honorable state, but unlike the recently condemned Oxford theologian, he does not draw on any particular theory of clerical dominion, asserting simply that priests should desire cures not for material gain, but for the "profit" they bring to "holy cherche" (295–96). In his attacks on pride and greed, Gower does not exempt those who would seek the papacy—"The Scribe and ek the Pharisee / Of Moises upon the See / In the chaïere on hyh ben set" (305–07)—but at no point does he question the elected pope's authority. And he uses the imagery from John 10 of "the wolf" attacking the flock (419), but unlike Lollard sermons in which wolves represent the clergy, in Gower they stand for heretics, whom the corrupted clergy are too weak to fight.

As he does with the tales in the *Confessio* as a whole, Gower links clerical vices to the Seven Deadly Sins, loosely organized in the categories of “pride” or “veine glorie” (224, 262), “lust” (230), “avarice” or “coveitise” (263, 315), “slouthe” (321, 342), and overindulgence “of the cuppe” (343). The last Deadly Sin to be mentioned is “Envie” (347), which Gower links to recent heresies:

And so to speke upon this branche,
Which proude Envie hath mad to springe,
Of Scisme, causeth for to bringe
This newe secte of Lollardie,
And also many an heresie
Among the clerkes in hemselfe.
It were betre dike and delve
And stonde upon the ryhte feith,
Than knowe al that the Bible seith
And erre as somme clerkes do. (346–55)

As if concerned about the potential direction his own anticlerical rhetoric might take him, Gower announces himself opposed to the “newe secte” of Lollards, an echo of the Lollards’ own description of “new” fraternal orders. He then traces Lollardy’s origins not to philosophical or theological objections, nor even to the anticlerical critiques at the heart of the movement, but rather back to the clerical error and “Scisme”—the divided papacy—that he believes inspired those critiques in the first place. The argument is ironic for many reasons: he is criticizing priests for leaving themselves open to criticism, and condemning an anticlerical movement within the context of an anticlerical polemic. But unironically, Gower is acknowledging with this argument that even legitimate, justifiable, orthodox critiques of priests, like his own, might lead one into heresy. With this caution in mind, Gower stresses at a later point that he is not speaking of the clergy as an entire class, but as individuals: “I wol noght seie in general, / For ther ben somme in special / In whom that alle vertu duelleth” (431–33). In the final lines of his section on the church, after a fierce denunciation of fat, gluttonous, incontinent priests, Gower suggests that his theme risks leading him down a dangerous path, and he concludes with positive words:

And natheles I can noght seie,
In aunter if that I misseye. ...
For thei [good priests] ben to the worldes ye
The mirour of ensamplerie,

To reulen and to taken hiede
 Between the men and the Godhiede.
 (470–71, 495–98)

At the end of his anticlerical screed, which shares many rhetorical features with Lollard polemic, Gower, self-consciously orthodox as always, stresses that regardless what level papal and priestly corruption might reach, regardless how many sins an individual priest might commit, the priesthood itself is a necessary part of the Christian life, an intermediary between God and man that can never be wholly discarded.

By the time the Blackfriars council had condemned Wyclif's teaching on the Eucharist and forced him into retirement, Wyclif had undertaken a more radical departure from the church's view of priesthood, gesturing toward the position Gower deliberately flees at the end of the *Confessio's* prologue. In his late short tracts, starting with *De Simonia*, Wyclif moves toward the position that a separate class of priests is ultimately unnecessary for salvation or the Christian life. In the final lines of *De Simonia*, after a lengthy and damning summary of the simoniacal corruptions of modern-day priests, Wyclif concludes: "We are forced to deny that essential relationship between our prelates and their subjects; indeed, when these are worthless like zeroes, Christ ordains any person in any manner and at any time he wishes."¹²⁷ In his analysis of these late tracts, Stephen Lahey argues that Wyclif's ruminations on predestination are what has led him to this point: "The very existence of the priestly office appears up for questioning. If we cannot know who is damned, and who is saved, why rely on a clerical class for sacraments? Indeed, why have any sacraments at all, if one's fate is eternally foreknown?"¹²⁸ Logical as this might sound, however, Wyclif never takes his arguments on predestination quite this far or this explicitly. Instead, he claims that he has reached his conclusions about the priesthood via a more practical route, by observing firsthand its corrupt state.

In a sermon on Matthew 23, in which Jesus attacks the Pharisees, Wyclif focuses on the way corruption has led to sacerdotal decline and, in some cases, a complete collapse of clerical authority. Since penance and the power of absolution have become commodities to be sold, Wyclif says, the impoverished penitent has no choice but to receive absolution directly from Christ himself, as Lazarus did.¹²⁹ If a priest confirms the action by supplying his own remission, so much the better, but this is not necessary. In the same way, in the late tract *De Blasphemia*, Wyclif asserts that

though penitence and some form of public renunciation of sin is necessary for all Christians, confession to a priest is optional, especially if that priest imposes unreasonable forms of satisfaction to extort money. "It is of no use, and is even hurtful, to confess to a simoniacal priest," he says, and if all priests available to a parishioner are tainted by simony, "he ought then to prefer to confess to one of the faithful laity."¹³⁰ In such a case, Wyclif says, a parishioner who is truly penitent before God may partake of the Eucharist with a clear conscience, without receiving priestly absolution; even if excommunication follows, the penitent may communicate spiritually and "rejoice in the persecution."¹³¹ Wyclif also argues that the requirement to attend confession annually is unjust, since such mandated Eastertime confessions are linked inevitably with donations, and serve only to enrich the church materially.¹³² The tract demonstrates Wyclif's growing insistence, in the face of clerical corruption, that the priestly class is unnecessary for the achievement of salvation and may even be a hindrance. Wyclif repeats this teaching on penance in *Trialogus*, arguing that private confession can be helpful if the priest is faithful but is ultimately not required for salvation, a position also echoed in conclusions 8 and 9 of the Lollards' *Thirty-Seven Conclusions*.¹³³

In a similar way, Langland in *Piers Plowman* strongly emphasizes the role of individual contrition, and the Dreamer claims that "a baptized man may ... / Thorugh contricion come to the heighe hevene" without the assistance of a confessor (B.XI.80–81). Note, however, the qualification that the contrite sinner must be baptized—to participate at least once in a sacrament requiring priestly administration.

Later Lollards took Wyclif's suggestion that private confession was unnecessary but potentially valuable and sharpened it, arguing that reliance upon a priest for absolution could be spiritually dangerous:

There is no more heresie than man to bileve that he is assoyled 3if he zeve hym [the confessor] moneye, or 3if he leye his hond on thin heed, and seie that he assoyllith thee. Ffor thou moste by sorowe of herte make aseeth to God, and ellis God assoyllith thee no3t, and thanne assoyllith no3t thi viker.¹³⁴

In this conception of penance, God alone is the one who chooses to absolve; the priest, to the extent that he does anything at all, merely confirms the choice.

It should be noted that most anticlerical critics who moved toward an anti-sacerdotal position, including Wyclif, typically did so in the con-

text of penance alone, not as it related to other sacraments like baptism and the Eucharist. However, a number of radical Lollards did question the necessity of priests in other areas of church practice. As noted in the previous chapter, Hawisia Moone in 1430 denied the existence of every sacrament, including baptism and marriage.¹³⁵ Another Lollard, Walter Brut, claimed to have volunteered a number of anti-sacerdotal beliefs at his heresy trial in 1393, including the idea that children did not need baptism, that “true baptism” did not require physical water but “faith and hope,” and that since the church allowed laymen to baptize *in extremis*, laypersons of either sex might in theory consecrate the Eucharist.¹³⁶ Moone and Brut occupy the extreme edges anti-sacerdotal thought, of course, but as we will see, the question of exactly who and what is required for the administration of sacraments hovers over several of the *Gawain*-poet’s scenes, including two significant depictions of absolution for the main character in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Englising the Bible

One final aspect of the fourteenth-century English anticlerical tradition, deeply relevant to a study of the *Gawain*-poet’s biblical poetics, is the issue of English translations of Scripture. The level of Wyclif’s personal involvement with the Oxford Bible translation project of the late fourteenth century is a matter of debate,¹³⁷ but several of his contemporaries, both allies and opponents, drew connections between Wyclif’s anticlerical concerns and his support for an English Bible. The first reference to Wyclif as a translator appears only after his death, in the Augustinian canon Henry Knighton’s *Chronicle* (ca. 1390). The context, significantly, is Knighton’s attack on Wyclif and his followers, whom he believes are heretics dangerous to both church and nation:

Master John Wyclif translated from Latin into the English language—very far from being the language of angels!—the gospel that Christ gave to the clergy and doctors of the church, for them to administer sweetly as mental nourishment to laypeople and to the infirm, according to the necessity of the time and the people’s need. As a consequence, the gospel has become more common and more open to laymen and even to women who know how to read than it customarily is to moderately well-educated clergy of good intelligence. Thus the pearl of the gospel is scattered abroad and trodden underfoot by swine.¹³⁸

Most arguments over the acceptability of the Wycliffite translations post-date the *Gawain*-poet's works, the most significant document being Archbishop Thomas Arundel's *Constitutions* of 1407–1409, which required a license for the production or ownership of any English translation of the Bible.¹³⁹ But Knighton's early contribution summarizes well the church's primary objections: the English language is less suitable than Latin as a conduit for Scripture, the duty to convey Scripture to the people and interpret it belongs exclusively to the clergy, and the laity should only access the truths of Scripture as necessity demands, since they are incapable of understanding or rightly using the knowledge contained there. Within these concerns about the proper roles of English language, clergy, and laity also rings a note of anxiety about "laymen and even ... women" gaining access to more education than the "moderately well-educated clergy," perhaps diminishing the value of those clerics' professional credentials.

From Wyclif's perspective, the biblical and theological education of the laity, to potentially match or exceed that of the clergy, was a positive development. For many of his Lollard followers, and perhaps for Wyclif himself, the project of lay education also involved sending out preachers and teachers, to reach the uneducated and to disseminate English translations of Scripture. The Wycliffite "poor priests" or "poor preachers" so prominent in Lollard rhetoric filled this role, though whether they represented a real movement or were mainly rhetorical figures for those with educational concerns remains an open question. Hudson argues that Wyclif began to develop the concept of this type of priesthood as early as 1372–1373, and that references to ideal priests in works such as *De Officio Pastoralis* (ca. 1379) "are most reasonably interpreted as indicating his interest in, even if not his initiation of, wandering preachers."¹⁴⁰ Stephen Lahey observes that, regardless of Wyclif's intentions, "an educated corps of preachers, likely also responsible for the Wyclif Bible, did champion his ideas throughout England in the 1380s,"¹⁴¹ and he argues that Wyclif had them in mind as a reading audience for his later tracts and treatises, including *Triologus*.¹⁴²

It is possible to view anticlerical attitudes in the fourteenth century and the new availability of religious texts in English as related phenomena which fed into each other. David Lepine, writing about Chaucer's Parson and his social context, provides a useful alternate perspective on the rise of anticlericalism in fourteenth-century England: "Rather than providing evidence of falling standards and increased corruption, as tradi-

tional Protestant explanations of the Reformation would suggest, these criticisms [of fourteenth-century priests] were the product of rising expectations resulting from increased lay literacy and piety.”¹⁴³ Lepine’s view suggests that the use of English in Bibles and other religious texts created a vicious circle—the Englished texts were both a response to clerical corruption and a factor that fueled increasingly harsh reactions to such corruption.

In *De Ecclesia*, Wyclif presents an antipapal argument for why every Christian should be thoroughly familiar with the Bible. Scripture, he says, is “the glass by which heretics may be discerned,” including the pope, and it is the layman’s duty to determine whether the Pope’s commands are in accord with Scripture and therefore lawful to follow.¹⁴⁴ In *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, Wyclif views the primary purpose of biblical education among the laity as protection from those who style themselves leaders in the church: “Thus in order to prevent some pseudo-disciples from pretending that they have received their understanding directly from God, God established a common Scripture which is perceptible to the senses.”¹⁴⁵ In this respect, the author of the General Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible—who may or may not have been involved with the translation itself—agrees with Wyclif. In chapter 15, he claims that it is just this fear of being caught in heresy and other sins that motivates the prelates’ opposition to English translation, a negative force that will only be overcome by the desire of the laity to learn Scripture and the courage of translators in the face of death: “For, thouȝ couetouse clerkis ben wode bi symonie, eresie and manie othere synnes, and dispisen and stoppen holi writ as myche as thei moun, ȝit the lewid puple crieth aftir holi writ to kunne it and kepe it with greet cost and peril of here lif.”¹⁴⁶

Knighton’s metaphor of the gospel becoming “open” to laypeople, though he intends it to be disparaging, is one the Wycliffite Prologue writer uses approvingly. The goal of the translator, the Prologue says, is to keep the overall meaning, or “sentence,” of a given passage at least as open as it is in the original Latin, if not “opener”:

First it is to knowe that the beste translating is, out of Latyn into English, to translate aftir the sentence and not oneli aftir the wordis, so that the sentence be as opin either openere in English as in Latyn, and go not fer fro the lettre; and if the lettre mai not be suid [followed] in the translating, let the sentence euere be hool and open, for the wordis owen to serue to the entent and sentence, and ellis the wordis ben superflu either false.¹⁴⁷

The ideal translation is one that conforms to “letter” and “sentence,” but if the combination is impossible, the latter is preferable. This theory of translation is also espoused by Chaucer in the prologue to his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, in similar enough language to lead some scholars to speculate that Chaucer must have read the Wycliffite Prologue, or at least had an “awareness of the Bible debate, from the point of view of a practising translator.”¹⁴⁸ The Oxford translators appear to have attempted both translation styles separately in the two separate versions of the Wycliffite Bible, following the “letter” in the Early Version, which closely adheres to Latin syntax sometimes at the expense of intelligibility in English, and following the Prologue writer’s advice in the Late Version, which more freely allows for changes in verb tense and word order.

The *Gawain*-poet did not need to know of the Oxford project to be familiar with English Bible translation. Numerous translations from Jerome’s Vulgate into Middle English predate the Wycliffite versions, though the Oxford translators did produce the first complete translation of the entire Bible. King Alfred commissioned a Pentateuch and Psalter in the tenth century and several other versions of Old Testament books, Psalms, and Passion narratives existed in pre-Conquest England, though the Old English dialects of these works had become mostly illegible to readers by the fourteenth century.¹⁴⁹ In Middle English, several verse adaptations of popular Latin abridgements of the Bible were produced, starting with *Genesis and Exodus* (ca. 1250), a rhyming metrical version of the Pentateuch’s narrative passages based on Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica*, and *Jacob and Joseph* (ca. 1250), a portion of Genesis also set in rhyming couplets. The massive *Cursor Mundi* (ca. 1300) is a slightly later metrical poem which covers the entire Bible, as well as an apocryphal account of Jesus’s ancestry and childhood, in 29,555 lines. What is perhaps most interesting about these early Old Testament paraphrases, in the context of the *Gawain*-poet, is what they leave out. *Genesis and Exodus* and the *Cursor Mundi* thoroughly cover the three primary events in *Cleanness*—the Deluge, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Belshazzar’s Feast—and one scholar has attempted to demonstrate that *Cleanness* borrows imagery from the *Cursor*.¹⁵⁰ But neither poem makes any mention of the book of Jonah, in part because the Latin abridgements upon which they are based also omit it, with the exception of one apocryphal passage in Comestor’s *Historia* identifying Jonah as the widow’s son in 1 Kings 17 whom Elijah raises from the dead.¹⁵¹ As a result, by the year 1400, the only

English translations of the book of Jonah that had ever been written were the Wycliffite versions and *Patience*.

The many fragmentary attempts at Bible translation and paraphrase in Middle English also include several Gospel harmonies, Gospel commentaries with extensive quotations, a stanzaic Life of Christ, a manuscript with an eclectic collection of Midland-dialect versions of Matthew and Acts and Southwestern versions of the Pauline and Catholic Epistles,¹⁵² and several manuscripts of the Apocalypse translated from Anglo-Norman, occasionally exhibiting influence from the Wycliffite translations and sometimes bound together with Wycliffite EV Gospels.¹⁵³

Next to the Gospels, the most popular subjects for Bible translators in the Middle Ages were the Psalms.¹⁵⁴ In English, the Surtees Psalter (ca. 1300), composed with metrical rhyming couplets, and the West Midlands Prose Psalter (ca. 1350), which features alternating lines in Latin and English,¹⁵⁵ are both translations of the complete book of Psalms. But the most well-known English Psalter, extant in forty manuscripts, was the prose translation of the mystic Richard Rolle of Hampole, completed shortly before his death in 1349.¹⁵⁶ Rolle's Psalter is an invaluable resource for any student of medieval translation, because in addition to Latin and English verses on alternating lines, Rolle also includes commentary on each verse and occasionally on his reasons for particular translation choices. Later Lollard writers were inspired by this commentary, and as a result, nearly half of the extant manuscripts of Rolle's Psalter contain Lollard interpolations.¹⁵⁷

In general, Rolle espouses the same theory of "open" translation as the Wycliffite Prologue writer, with an emphasis on overall meaning. In the Psalter's prologue, he writes:

In this werke i seke na straunge ynglis, bot lyghtest and comonest, and swilk that is mast lyke til the latyn, swa that thai that knawes noght latyn, by the ynglis may com til mony latyn wordis. In the translacioun i folow the lettre als mykyll as i may. And thare i fynd na propire ynglis, i folow the wit of the worde, swa that thai that sall red it thaim thare noght dred errynge.¹⁵⁸

In addition to following the "sentence"—in Rolle's words, the "wit"—of biblical passages as the Wycliffite Prologue would later advise, Rolle also conveys his intention to use the translation to help the uneducated laity learn Latin, a purpose to which Dove says the Wycliffite EV Bibles may have been employed by their owners, regardless of the translators'

intentions.¹⁵⁹ Dove also observes that one manuscript of the Wycliffite Psalms reproduces verses in both Latin and in English, as Rolle did, so a reader could follow the Latin text sung in a church service, while also keeping the English translation close at hand.¹⁶⁰ Until the Wycliffite versions appeared forty years later, Rolle's Psalter was, according to Margaret Deanesley, "the standard English version of the Psalms."¹⁶¹

We can only speculate about the motivations behind most Middle English Bible translations, since the translators themselves are anonymous, but Rolle makes clear in the Prologue that he wants to make the Psalms accessible to the English laity so they can obtain the "grete haboundance of gastly comfort and ioy" he has gained through his mystical experience.¹⁶² He shared this goal of lay access with the Lollards, who produced their own editions of Rolle's works, with additional commentary, in the late fourteenth century. By producing an English paraphrase of Scripture for lay readers, and by prefacing it with an attack against hypocritical priests, the *Gawain*-poet, wittingly or not, was participating in a broad project among many English writers to educate the laity in biblical literacy, a project which was presumed by its critics to have anticlerical or even heretical motivations, and which often adopted an anticlerical tone itself.

Conclusion

The preceding description of fourteenth-century English anticlericalism is by necessity condensed and simplified, but it provides a thumbnail glimpse of the textual environment within which the *Gawain*-poet was working, ca. 1360–1399, when he set his pen to *Cleanness* and *Patience*. To summarize even further: anticlerical rhetoric of the fourteenth century typically fell into one or more of the following categories, some of which overlap, and all of which are relevant for an understanding of the *Gawain*-poet:

1. Biblically based critiques which rely on the traditional idea that priests and priest-like figures from the Old and New Testaments can be figuratively linked to the contemporary priesthood in England. The Levite priesthood of ancient Israel, Old Testament judges and prophets, the high priests and Pharisees who persecuted Jesus, and bishops and deacons of the early Christian church are all figures from whom moral lessons, whether exemplary or critical, can be drawn and applied to medieval clerics. These critiques draw upon a series of common biblical images, including the satanic "angel of light"

and the “wolf in sheep’s clothing” to address the issue of clerical hypocrisy.

2. Interclerical critiques which originated as specifically antifraternial or antimonastic but expanded in the late fourteenth century to include all clerics, including secular parish priests. These include warnings against the dangers of wandering and/or begging, “possession” and material wealth, an overly subtle theological education, and the overproliferation of clerics in England.
3. Opposition to clerical attempts to infringe on the rights of temporal lords, rooted in FitzRalph’s and Wyclif’s theories on dominion and evangelical poverty. This category includes antimonastic critiques against perpetual endowments, arguments for withholding tithes from corrupt priests, support for clerical dispossession and disendowment, and in general the conclusion that genuine poverty and material hardship, as opposed to theoretical poverty that allows for possession by means of legal loopholes, is a preferable state for both secular and regular clergy.
4. Critiques of clerical ignorance and lack of education among parish priests, typically linked to the contention that preaching and teaching are the most important duties of a priest, even above administration of the sacraments.
5. Critiques of active clerical abuses motivated by greed, such as nepotism, the simoniacal selling of pardons, indulgences, and other spiritual offices, competition between regular and secular clergy for tithes, and a host of unethical practices related to the church’s patronage system, including pluralism, absenteeism, and the procuring of fictional benefices in non-Christian lands. These abuses can damage a parish’s ability to provide effective preaching and teaching to its parishioners and encourage corruption in the administration of sacraments, in particular the sacrament of penance.
6. Critiques of fleshly sins among the clergy such as drunkenness and gluttony; sexual misconduct such as fornication, adultery, and sodomy; and even violent crimes such as rape and murder. The “bodily” sin of sodomy is frequently linked to the “ghostly” sin of simony, which is considered worse, but sexual transgressions are treated as weighty matters in their own right, in part because they have the potential to sully the eucharistic sacrament, and they are

sometimes deployed in arguments against the requirement of clerical celibacy.

7. Suggestions of an anti-sacerdotalism which questions the need for a separate priestly class to administer sacraments, in particular the sacrament of penance. Wyclif moves in this direction late in his career; a small number of radical Lollards go further and deny all sacramental efficacy.
8. Insistence on biblical and theological education among the English laity, for the purpose of combatting false teaching among priests and religious orders, a project which necessitates English translations of Scripture, as well as sermons, treatises, and disputations on theological topics in English, and the dissemination of these texts.

The following chapters, which undertake a close reading of the *Gawain* poems through the lens of English anticlericalism, will make reference to these general categories at those moments when the poet himself appears to gesture toward them. To start, we return to the opening lines of *Cleanness*, and the poet's most explicit critique of the "renkez of relygioun that ... prestez arn called" (7–8).

NOTES

¹ Translations of Wyclif's Latin are my own, with assistance from the editorial notes of the works in question, except in the cases of *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, *De Simonia*, and *Dialogus*, which are translated, respectively, by Ian Christopher Levy as *On the Truth of Holy Scripture* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001); Terrence McVeigh as *On Simony* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992); and Stephen E. Lahey as *Dialogus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). In the passage mentioned here, from *De Officio Regis*, ed. Alfred W. Pollard and Charles Sayle (London: Trübner, 1887), Wyclif cites Augustine: "Adam was a king, according to Augustine's *Questions on the Old and New Law* chapter 106, and it is said that Cain was the first priest by reason of primogeniture" (144). The original reads: "Adam fuit rex secundum Augustinum De questionibus veteris et nove legis cvi capitulo, et Caym dicitur fuisse primum sacerdotem ratione primogeniture."

² Quotations from the Later Version (LV) of the Wycliffite Bible come from Conrad Lindberg's edition (see chapter 1, note 6). In order to keep all Middle English quotations consistent, I have replaced Lindberg's middle dots (·), which appear in the original manuscripts, and his backslashes (/), which indicate verse breaks, with commas.

³ For “higest prestis,” see for example Mark 8:31 and Luke 24:20. For “princis of prestis,” see for example Matthew 2:4, Mark 10:33, Luke 3:2, and John 12:10. For “bishops,” see John 7:45, 11:47, and 18:3.

4. It is standard practice in contemporary biblical studies to question or reject the traditional view that Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon). I cite him here because the Epistle texts themselves assert his authorship, and because medieval commentators without exception took the attribution for granted. In his analysis of 1 Timothy 3:1–7 (*On the Truth*, 292–94; *De Veritate*, II.180–83), Wyclif assumes Pauline authorship.

⁵ The index to Hudson and Graden, eds., *English Wycliffite Sermons*, vol. 5, pp. 408–16, lists twelve references to Matthew 16:19–23, four to Mark 8:31–33, and seven to John 20:22–29. These twenty-three references appear within nineteen separate sermons.

⁶ *Ibid.*, II.247–50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, II.249.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I.435. The sermon appears on pp. 433–37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I.435.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II.73. The sermon appears on pp. 71–76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I.309–12, I.637–42, II.178–85.

¹² *Ibid.*, I.639–40.

¹³ Anne Hudson, ed., *The Works of a Lollard Preacher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 73–74; Lambeth Tract, lines 385–88, 392–96. The sermon *Omnis Plantacio* and the tract *Fundamentum Aliud Nemo Potest Ponere*, which Hudson labels the “Egerton Sermon” and the “Lambeth Tract,” respectively, appear together in parallel format on pp. 1–153. *De Oblacione Iugis Sacrificii*, which Hudson labels the “Titus Tract,” appears on pp. 157–256.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 184; Titus Tract, lines 1083–84.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 185; Titus Tract, 1091–97.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 77, 97, 109; Lambeth Tract, 443, 735, 810.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 139–40; Egerton Sermon, 2976–80.

¹⁸ Frances McCormack, in *Chaucer and the Culture of Dissent* (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2007), footnotes forty-four examples of sheep-and-wolf imagery in Lollard sermons and tracts, 26 of them from the Wycliffite sermon cycle (87, notes 10–11; 199, notes 69–70). McCormack’s citations from Hudson and Graden, eds., *English Wycliffite Sermons*, appear on the following pages in the original collection: I.440, 441, 693; II.69, 268; III.67, 128, 153, 237, 238. She cites several references which are not listed in Hudson and Graden’s index to vol. 5, but the index also lists several references to the Gospel passages about wolves and false shepherds which McCormack does not: I.252–55, 617; II.16, 75, 83, 92, and 146.

¹⁹ The three Wycliffite sermons which take the wolf and sheep passages as their entire theme appear in Hudson and Graden, eds., *English Wycliffite Sermons*, I.252–55, I.438–42, and III.237–38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, I.252, 255.

²¹ *Ibid.*, I.439, 441.

²² Hudson, ed., *Doctors in English*, 20–33. Subsequent references to this commentary will appear in parenthetical citations by line number.

²³ *Ibid.*, 34–35; lines 16–18.

²⁴ Wyclif, *On Simony*, 152; *De Simonia*, 101. “Sicud ergo summi sacerdotes in se ipsis summi heretici dampnarunt dominum nostrum Jesum Christum pro heresi, sic summi sacerdotes antichristi possunt dampnare et extinguere membra Christi, propter hoc quod catholice reprobant peccata eorum.”

²⁵ Wyclif, *On the Truth*, 293; *De Veritate*, II.181–82. “Unde pro intellectu huius textus notandum est primo, quod sub nomine episcopi apostolus includit quemlibet sacerdotem. ... secundo notandum, quod apostolus tradens hanc regulam Thymotheo sub uno involucro informat quoscunque episcopos succedentes.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 294; II.183.

²⁷ Penn R. Szittyá, *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 11.

²⁸ Guy Geltner, “The Friar,” in *Historians on Chaucer: The “General Prologue” to the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Stephen Rigby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 156.

²⁹ Guy Geltner, *The Making of Medieval Antifraternalism: Polemic, Violence, Deviance, & Remembrance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5–6.

³⁰ Szittyá, *Antifraternal Tradition*, 6–7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

³² *Ibid.*, 9.

³³ Multiple descriptions of the four fraternal orders as “new sects” can be found in Wyclif’s eleven “Polemical Tracts against the Sects,” which make up volume 1 of Rudolf Buddensieg, ed., *Polemical Works in Latin* (London: Trübner, 1883), including one titled *De Quattuor Sectis Novellis* (241–90). The term “four sects” in these works can refer to the fraternal orders, but it also signifies four types of clergy: those with cure of souls, which include the Pope, cardinals, bishops, and endowed priests; the monastic orders; the Augustinian canons; and the mendicant friars. Wyclif refers to this fourth “sect” as the most recent and the most pernicious in its undermining of church and kingdom (252). He argues that the orders’ novelty means they do not have biblical foundations; Buddensieg summarizes the argument thus: “Christ, who knew best how to care for His Church, has not mentioned the Four Sects in His Gospel (or if He did, He blamed them); nor did St. Paul venture to found new ones. Only the office of deacon is upheld by Scripture, not the Four Orders; they should, therefore, be abolished” (235). In William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* B-text, Anima also refers to friars as “these newe clerkes” (XV.372). Another extended critique of the “newe sectus” of friars, comparing them to the Pharisees of the Gospels, can be found in Hudson and Graddon, eds., *English Wycliffite Sermons*, I.264–67.

³⁴ Wendy Scase, *“Piers Plowman” and the New Anti-clericalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 125.

³⁵ Richard FitzRalph, *Defensio Curatorum*, tran. John Trevisa, ed. Aaron Jenkins Perry (Oxford University Press, 1925), 60.

³⁶ See Scase, *Piers Plowman*, 143–44. Scase writes that during “outbreaks of bubonic plague, the unbeneficed secular clergy began to attract considerable political attention, and disapproval. The numbers of such priests swelled considerably during this period” (143). See also Alfred Kellogg and Louis Haselmayer, “Chaucer’s Satire of the Pardoner,” *PMLA* 66 (1951): 142.

³⁷ For summaries of the works of St. Amour and San Donnino, see Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 191–92; Marie Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals: Chaucer, the Gawain-Poet, and Beyond* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 13; and James Doyne Dawson, “Richard FitzRalph and the Fourteenth-Century Poverty Controversies,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 34 (1983): 341–42.

³⁸ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), xxiv, xlv.

³⁹ For an excellent summary of both *De Periculus* and *Evangelium Aeternum*, and the influence the debate between St. Amour and San Donnino had on anti-fraternalism across Europe, see Geltner, *Making of Medieval Antifraternalism*, 17–23.

⁴⁰ William St. Amour, *De Periculus Novissimorum Temporum*, in *Fasciculus Rerum Expetendarum & Fugiendarum* vol. 2, ed. Ortuinus Gratius and Edward Brown (London, 1690), 20. The translation I use here comes from Marie Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals*, 13–17. The original: “se ipsos amantes, cupidi, elati, superbi, blasphemii, parentibus inoboedientes, ingrati, scelesti, sine affectione ... criminales, incontinentes ... sine benignitate, proditores, protervi, tumidi, voluptatum amatores magis quam Dei.”

⁴¹ Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals*, 14.

⁴² Szittyá, *The Antifraternal Tradition*, 148; William A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 123.

⁴³ Szittyá concludes that St. Amour’s antifraternalism had a “striking impact on poetry, particularly of the Ricardian era” (5).

⁴⁴ For examples, see Hudson, ed., *Works of a Lollard Preacher*, 139–40; and Hudson and Gradon, eds., *English Wycliffite Sermons*, I.439.

⁴⁵ Scase, *Piers Plowman*, 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁹ Geltner, *Making of Medieval Antifraternalism*, 5.

⁵⁰ Wyclif, *Polemical Works*, I.91–92.

⁵¹ Boreczky, *John Wyclif’s Discourse*, 58. The passage Boreczky translates is from *De Dominio Divino*, ed. Reginald Lane Poole (London: Trübner, 1890), 115: “duo precipui doctores nostri ordinis.”

⁵² See Wyclif, *De Eucharistia*, 292; *De Apostasia*, 36; and *De Blasphemia*, ed. Michael Henry Dziewicki (London: Trübner, 1893), 232.

⁵³ Lollard references to “seynt Richard primat of irland” and “Seynt Richard of Armaw³” can be found in Arnold, ed., *Select English Works*, III.281 and Matthew, ed., *English Works*, 128, respectively. Nicholas Hereford also refers to FitzRalph as a saint in his infamous Ascension Day sermon of 1382, edited by Simon Forde in “Nicholas Hereford’s Ascension Day Sermon, 1382,” *Mediaeval Studies* 51 (1989), 205–41.

⁵⁴ Katherine Walsh, *A Fourteenth-Century Scholar and Primate: Richard FitzRalph in Oxford, Avignon and Armagh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), vii.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 323. Walsh’s summaries of FitzRalph’s sermons come from her examination of original manuscript sources. For those quoted here, she cites MS Bodley 144, fol. 63r and Oxford, St. John’s College, MS 65, fol. 52 v a–b.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁵⁷ Richard FitzRalph, “Two Sermons of Primate Richard FitzRalph,” ed. A. J. Gwynn, *Archivum Hibernicum* 14 (1949): 65.

⁵⁸ For examples, see Aubrey Gwynn, *The English Austin Friars in the Time of Wyclif* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 44; Scase, *Piers Plowman*, 8; and Walsh, *Fourteenth-Century Scholar*, 366.

⁵⁹ A complete edited version of *De Pauperie Salvatoris* does not yet exist. The first four books are included as an appendix to Reginald Lane Poole’s edition of Wyclif’s *De Dominio Divino*, the work upon which it had the most significant influence. FitzRalph relates the supposed history of the treatise’s commissioning by Clement VI on the opening page (273).

⁶⁰ G. R. Evans, *John Wyclif: Myth & Reality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 154.

⁶¹ Scase, *Piers Plowman*, 19.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Wyclif, *De Dominio Divino*, xlvi.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, I.10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, III.206.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, I.9. “Nam nullus catholicus negabit quin potestas clavium sit tradita sacerdoti, licet non habeat sue subditos potestati.”

⁶⁸ Wyclif, *De Civili Dominio*, ed. Johann Loserth, English notes by Reginald Lane Poole and F. D. Matthew (London: Trübner, 1900), I.250.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, I.266.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, I.326.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, III.49–60.

⁷² Wyclif, *On the Truth* 76; *De Veritate* I.68. “Quod sacerdotes Cristi, qui debent esse vicarii vitis vere, non debent civiliter dominari, cum conficiunt corpus eius et sangwinem, que letificant deum et homines, sed celebrantes debent memorari eum, qui non potuit civiliter dominari. Vinum enim contemplacionis,

consolans oculum sacerdotis per statum et potestatem exactivam vel secularem extiguitur. Si enim tempore ante legem sine exemplo Cristi persona laica deseruit civilitatem propter devocionem, multo magis sacerdotes Cristi sic facerent exemplo sui magistri.”

⁷³ John Trevisa, tran., *Dialogus inter Militem et Clericum*, ed. Aaron Jenkins Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), 1. Subsequent references to this commentary will appear in parenthetical citations by page number.

⁷⁴ Dahmus, *Prosecution of John Wyclif*, 49–51.

⁷⁵ See Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 75. See also Workman, *John Wyclif*, II.237–39.

⁷⁶ Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 3.

⁷⁷ Shirley, ed., *FZ*, 273. “Quod per biennium erat discipulus Wyclyff, et ab eo didicerat haereses quas docuit.”

⁷⁸ See Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 68; also Evans, *John Wyclif*, 192; and Workman, *John Wyclif*, II.237.

⁷⁹ Workman, *John Wyclif*, II.236.

⁸⁰ See Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, “*Piers Plowman*,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and David Lawton, “English Poetry and English Society, 1370–1400,” in *The Radical Reader*, ed. Stephen Knight and Michael Wilding (Sydney: Wild and Woolley, 1977). Kerby-Fulton suggests that as Langland revised *Piers Plowman* from B to C, “creeping political and ecclesiastical intimidation finally limited what he felt able to say on the subject of socio-political oppression and clerical abuse” (522), and Lawton concludes, “It is as if the C reviser were trying to protect the poem from allegations of Lollardy levelled against the earlier versions” (152). The standard dating of the B- and C-texts of *Piers Plowman* is not conclusive, however, and not all critics agree that Langland softens his rhetoric in the C-text. See also Andrew Cole, “Langland and the Invention of Lollardy,” in *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England*, ed. Fiona Somerset et. al. (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003), 38; and Scase, *Piers Plowman*, 77.

⁸¹ Wyclif, *De Blasphemia*, 194. “Quid, rogo, pertinet ad archiepiscopum occupare cancellariam regis, que est secularissimum regni officium? ... Numquid presul debet convocare clerum . . . nisi quod archidiabolus congregat minores diabolos.”

⁸² FitzRalph, *Defensio Curatorum*, 80.

⁸³ Scase, *Piers Plowman*, 190–91, note 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 102. The quotation is Scase’s translation of MS Bodley 240, p. 850: “monachi et possessionati nunquam erunt humiles donec auferantur possessiones eorum; nec fratres mendicantes vmquam erunt boni donec impediuntur mendicaciones eorum.” See also Forde, ed., “Nicholas Hereford’s Ascension Day Sermon,” 237–41.

⁸⁶ Wyclif, *On the Truth*, 170; *De Veritate*, I.264. "Quod omnes Cristi sacerdotes debent esse in temporalibus elemosinarii laicorum."

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 310; III.33; italics mine. "Quis enim dubitat, quin deus plus odit talium mendicorum superbiam? Et per consequens laici plus tenentur, cavere eorum mendacium subtrahentes suas elemosinas et auferentes progenitorum errores. Certum itaque est ex fide scripture, quod tales potentes in clero sive persone simplices sive persone collegialiter agregate, que religionem Cristi dissipant, sub pallio sanctitatis vel puniuntur hic per prepositos suos aut laicos vel destruentur per vastaciones hostiles vel congregant facinora in ulcionem divini iudicii."

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 311; III.34. "Domos religiosorum, episcoporum et aliorum sacerdotum . . . Est enim dare mensuram in scelere, usque ad quam oportet ulcionem divini iudicii expectare. Ut patet de punicione diluvii et Sodome."

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 196; I.368. "Primo discerni potest, quod clerici sunt coniugati cum seculo et per consequens cum mammona ... Secundo discerni potest, quomodo mundo divites debent a talibus prudenter subtrahere elemosinas corporales, cum nemo debet iugum ducere cum infidelibus confirmando matrimonium tam monstruosum, quin pocius dissolvendo. Tercio, si deus voluerit, possunt de omni genere clericorum hii, quorum corda spiritus sanctus tetigerit, animari ad mundi contemptum et induendum paupertatem ewangelicam propter Cristum."

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 134; I.86. "Ideo ad excludendum discolos qui nolunt laborare, sed porcionem inordinate exigere, securum est et ewangelicum de nudis vite necessariis contentari. ... Et servata ista lege pauci seducerentur per ingressum in religiones privatas pro comodo temporalium."

⁹¹ Matthew, ed., *English Works*, 50. The sermon appears on pp. 39–51.

⁹² Gloria Cigman, ed., *Lollard Sermons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 142.

⁹³ Wyclif, *De Eucharistia*, 322. "Item ... multiplicacio peccatorum est causa destruccionis regnorum, sed illa inter christianos potissime originatur a clero."

⁹⁴ Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, 244. The quotation is Owst's translation of the unedited manuscript British Library MS Lansdowne 393, fol. 63b.

⁹⁵ Walsh, *Fourteenth-Century Scholar*, 330.

⁹⁶ Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals*, 61.

⁹⁷ Wyclif, *On the Truth*, 292; *De Veritate*, II.180. "Et certum videtur, quod tunc habuerunt plus fidei quam nos vel forte illi, qui fingunt istam ficticiam. ignorant nedum ecclesiam catholicam, sed eius vera privilegia, et, quoad noticiam prelati debitam, singula sacramenta."

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 288–89; II.158, 161. "Quod requiritur in archiepiscopo et episcopo, quod sciat utrumque testamentum et per consequens totam scripturam sacram. ... sed hoc officium spirituale nullo modo potest perfici sine sciencia scripture sacre, igitur omnem spiritualem pastorem oportet precipue habere scienciam sacre scripture."

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 300; II.234. "Ideo oportet, omnem catholicum esse theologum, sed sacerdotem, in quantum superior secundum quandam excellenciam."

¹⁰⁰ Hudson, ed., *Doctors in English*, 20–33; lines 49–55.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, lines 87–90, 107–110.

¹⁰² Wyclif, *On Simony*, 153; *De Simonia*, 102. “Symoniace peccent tamquam summi heretici, quando propter lucrum temporale exaltant ydiotas quos populus sentit esse ignaros vel desides in regimine animarum.”

¹⁰³ Wyclif, *De Civili Dominio*, II.21: “exempciones, privilegiaciones et dignitates.”

¹⁰⁴ Wyclif, *On the Truth*, 186; *De Veritate*, I.318. “Tercio videtur, quod veritatis tacencia principaliter propter periculum subtraccionis comodi temporalis vel perturbacionis auditorii ex veritatis displicencia gravati testatur timorem servilem, dampnabilem et vecordem consensum mendacio contrario veritati.”

¹⁰⁵ Pantin, *English Church*, 36.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Workman, *John Wyclif*, II.112.

¹⁰⁸ Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 6; Evans, *John Wyclif*, 95; Workman, *John Wyclif*, I.153.

¹⁰⁹ Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 6.

¹¹⁰ Wyclif, *De Civili Dominio*, II.14. “O quam sanctum et fertile foret regnum Anglie si ut, olim quelibet parrochialis ecclesia haberet unum sanctum rectorem cum sua familia residentem, quodlibet regni dominium haberet unum iustum dominum cum uxore et liberis cum proporcionali familia residentem. ... Nunc vero mercenarii civile dominium ecclesiasticorum ... clerus est causa precipua.”

¹¹¹ Wyclif, *On the Truth*, 296; *De Veritate*, II.227. “Quod infirmum fuit, inquit, non consolidastis, et quod egrotum, non sanastis, quod fractum est, non alligastis, et quod abiectum est, non reduxistis, et quod perierat, non quesistis.”

¹¹² Wyclif, *On Simony*, 158; *De Simonia*, 107. “Quomodo ergo respondebunt rectores illi pro animabus, quarum decimis vescuntur, in die iudicii, si ipsas non rexerint viam virtutum et legem domini predicando? ... Oracio enim specialiter symoniaci non potest equivalere officio predicandi, quia tunc deus frustra ordinaret predicacionem. Nec valet ficticia qua dicitur quod nunc predicacio superfluit, cum communitas satis novit fidem Christi, quia indubie ... ideo nunquam fuit maior necessitas fidem catholicam predicandi.”

¹¹³ Wyclif, *De Officio Regis*, 245. “Quod omnino provideatur de pastoribus privatis ydoneis quorum voces et opera pastoralis oves cognoscant practice, et quod pastores specialiter alienigene condicionis contrarie timore excommunicacionis postposito detrudantur.”

¹¹⁴ Matthew, ed., *English Works*, 32.

¹¹⁵ FitzRalph, *Defensio Curatorum*, 71.

¹¹⁶ Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 23, 93–95.

¹¹⁷ FitzRalph, *Defensio Curatorum*, 71.

¹¹⁸ Wyclif, *Trialogus*, 259; IV.326.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 260; IV.327: “sed licit tertia multis noceat et multa mala utrique parti ingerat, verumtamen facit ecclesiae multa bona.”

¹²⁰ Matthew, ed., *English Works*, 156.

¹²¹ Wyclif, *On Simony*, 35–36; *De Simonia*, 7–8. “Nam stante dotacione que est forrix heresis huius ecclesie, miraculum foret insolitum quod heresis symonica extingatur.”

¹²² *Ibid.*, 141; 93. “Ideo secundum remedium probabilitati propinquius est: quod seculares domini informati a domino resistendo pape concorditer obturent scaturiginem symonie.”

¹²³ Matthew, ed., *English Works*, 6–7.

¹²⁴ Wyclif, *On Simony*, 36; *De Simonia*, 8–9. “Unde Parisiensis in tractatu suo De Avaricia narrando octo que faciunt ad detestacionem huius peccati, dicit in eius horrorem, quod est spiritualis sodomia. Sicut enim in corporali sodomia contra naturam semen perditur, ex quo individuum humani generis formaretur, sic in illa sodomia semen verbi dei deicitur, per quod in Christo Jesu spiritualis generacio crearetur. Et sicut sodomia fuit tempore legis nature contra ipsam naturam unum de peccatis gravissimis, sic symonia est tempore legis gracie contra ipsam gratiam gravissimum peccatorum.”

¹²⁵ Forshall, ed., *Remonstrance*, 6–7.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 162; 112. “Ideo cogimur negare ordinem illum essencialem inter prelatos nostros et suos subditos, ymo deficientibus illis ut cifris Christus ordinat quemcunque, quomodocunque et quandocunque voluerit.”

¹²⁸ Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 189.

¹²⁹ Wyclif, *Opera Minora*, 318.

¹³⁰ Wyclif, *De Blasphemia*, 117, 125. “Notemus ergo omnes prelatos symoniacos in penitencia induratos, et consideremus ex fide quod non prodest, sed obest sic talibus confiteri. ... et in talibus casibus ... debet homo confiteri fideli laico.”

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 145. “Quod si negatur subditis a prelato, adiecta excommunicacione et censuris aliis, gaudeat de persecucione.”

¹³² *Ibid.*, 126–27.

¹³³ Wyclif, *Triologus*, 259–60; IV.326–27; Forshall, ed., *Remonstrance*, 18–22.

¹³⁴ Arnold, ed., *Select English Works*, III.252.

¹³⁵ Hudson, ed., *Selections*, 34–37.

¹³⁶ Anne Hudson analyzes Walter Brut's case in “‘Laicus Litteratus’: The Paradox of Lollardy,” *Heresy and Literacy, 1000–1530*, ed. Peter Biller and Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 222–36. She provides a summary of Brut's stated beliefs on pp. 224–25.

¹³⁷ See chapter 1, note 60.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Dove, *First English Bible*, 6. Dove translates Henry Knighton, *Knighton's Chronicle, 1337–1396*, ed. Geoffrey Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 242: “Magister Iohannes Wyclif evangelium quod Cristus contulit clericis et ecclesie doctoribus, ut ipsi laycis et infirmioribus personis secundum temporis exigenciam et personarum indigenciam cum mentis eorum esurie dulciter ministrarent, transtulit de latino in anglicam linguam non angelicam. Unde

per ipsum fit vulgare et magis apertum laicis et mulieribus legere scientibus quam solet esse clericis admodum litteratis et bene intelligentibus, et sic evangelica margarita spargitur et a porcis conculcatur.”

¹³⁹ See Hudson, *Studies*, X.69; Dove, *First English Bible*, 36; Fowler, *Bible*, 149; Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 212–13; David Lawton, “Englishing the Bible, 1066–1549,” in *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 454; and Nicholas Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,” *Speculum* 70.4 (Oct 1995): 824.

¹⁴⁰ Hudson, *Selections*, 9.

¹⁴¹ Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 167.

¹⁴² Lahey, introduction to John Wyclif, *Dialogus*, 17.

¹⁴³ David Lepine, “The Parson,” in *Historians on Chaucer: The “General Prologue” to the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Stephen Rigby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 337.

¹⁴⁴ Wyclif, *De Ecclesia*, 41. “Et hec ratio quare oportet omnen catholicum cognoscere scripturam sacram. ... Sed vita et doctrina Christi sunt optimum speculum, ubi possunt hec discerni.”

¹⁴⁵ Wyclif, *On the Truth*, 203; *De Veritate*, I.380. “Et sic ne pseudo discipuli fingant, se immediate habere a deo suam sententiam, ordinavit deus comunem scripturam sensibilem, ad cuius sensum catholicum capiendum.”

¹⁴⁶ Hudson, ed., *Selections*, 67.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁴⁸ Dove, *First English Bible*, 32. See also Andrew Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 81; Craig Fehrman, “Did Chaucer Read the Wycliffite Bible?” *Chaucer Review* 42 (2007): 111–38; and McCormack, *Chaucer and the Culture of Dissent*, 180.

¹⁴⁹ Fowler, *Bible*, 125.

¹⁵⁰ Sarah Horrall, “Cleanness and Cursor Mundi,” *English Language Notes* 22.3 (Mar 1985): 6–11.

¹⁵¹ James Morey, “Peter Comestor, Biblical Paraphrase, and the Medieval Popular Bible,” *Speculum* 68.1 (Jan 1993): 34. Morey provides a comprehensive list of Middle English biblical translations and paraphrases in *Book and Verse: A Guide to Middle English Biblical Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). The only version of the book of Jonah he lists, besides *Patience* and the Wycliffite Bible, is *The Mirour of Mans Saluacione* (ca. 1429), which post-dates the *Gawain*-poet. It is a translation of the *Speculae Humanae Salvationis* (ca. 1310–24), a typological commentary on numerous passages of Scripture (112–18).

¹⁵² For a complete list, see Morey, *Book and Verse*. The translation of Matthew, Acts, and the Epistles mentioned here is edited by Anna C. Paues as *A Fourteenth*

Century English Biblical Version (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902).

¹⁵³ Eleven extant manuscripts of this text, known as *The Apocalips of Jesu Crist* (*AJC*), were collated and edited by Elis Fridner, under the title *An English Fourteenth Century Apocalypse Version* (Lund [Sweden], 1961). Five of these manuscripts also contain Wycliffite material. Fridner was apparently unaware of a sixth manuscript, which was analyzed by Matti Peikola in “Lollard (?) Production Under the Looking Glass: The Case of Columbia University, Plimpton Add. MS 3,” *Journal of the Early Book Society for the Study of Manuscripts and Printing History* 9 (2006): 1–23. The Plimpton manuscript is one of two, along with Bodley Laud Misc. 33, which exhibit Wycliffite appropriation; another, St. John’s College, Cambridge, MS G.25, contains portions of text from the LV. The exact nature and extent of the Oxford translators’ use of this early Apocalypse translation is a matter for debate—Fridner, for example, argues that *AJC* had little or no influence over the Wycliffite versions, while Peikola counters this assertion with evidence from the Plimpton manuscript’s formal features, and speculates that *AJC* served both as a placeholder in Wycliffite Bibles while the Apocalypse LV translation was being completed, and as an exemplar for the new translation. James Morey lists and describes all of the manuscripts containing *AJC* in Elizabeth Solopova, ed., *The Wycliffite Bible: Origin, History and Interpretation* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2017), 89–94.

¹⁵⁴ Lawton, “Englissing,” 455.

¹⁵⁵ Karl D. Bülbring, ed., *The Earliest Complete English Prose Psalter* (London: Trübner, 1891), viii–x.

¹⁵⁶ Fowler, *Bible*, 145.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Richard Rolle, *The Psalter or Psalms of David and Certain Canticles with a Translation and Exposition in English*, ed. H. R. Bramley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884), 4–5.

¹⁵⁹ Dove, *First English Bible*, 63–65.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 63. The manuscript is British Library Harley 1896.

¹⁶¹ Margaret Deanesley, *The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920, rep. 1966), 231.

¹⁶² Rolle, *Psalter*, 3.

Chapter 3

The Anticlerical Poetics of *Cleanness*

What “Prestez” Are Called: The Opening Critique Revisited

To position the *Gawain*-poet more precisely among his contemporaries in the fourteenth-century English anticlerical tradition, the most obvious place to start is in the introductory lines of *Cleanness*. The poem announces itself as a work that will be highly critical of the clergy from the second sentence, which begins in line 5, though virtually no contemporary critic has attempted to read the poem from beginning to end through the lens of this announced theme.¹ We have already examined the sullied eucharistic elements that appear in this passage, as well as the poet’s potential brush with Donatism in lines 9–16. We return to the passage now in order to connect its language and imagery more fully with those writers who viewed sacramental defilement as a central concern in their critiques of various types of clerics.

Prior to the explicit attack on priests, the first four lines of the poem lay out a philosophy that appears at first to be driven solely by poetic concerns, and perhaps directed at fellow poets. It states simply that whoever can “comende” the virtue of spiritual cleanness “kyndely” (naturally, in the proper way, or possibly with gladness)² will find “fayre forme” to aid in “forthering his speche.” This directive seems most relevant to the poet himself, and to his fellow artists, as they adorn their poetry with the “fair forms” of beautiful language. But it could just as easily apply to preachers, who encourage their audiences to practice Christian virtues through the compelling and persuasive speech of sermons. Many critics have taken note of the homiletic, sermon-like structure of *Cleanness* as a whole, paying particular attention to the tripartite structure of its exemplum,³ an observation which illuminates the dual role of this opening theological statement. It presents an abstract theological proposition (spiritual

cleanness leads to beautiful and effective speech), while presenting the poem itself as a tangible illustration of that proposition (a beautifully rendered and persuasive sermon).

The same critics who view *Cleanness* as a form of sermon also typically weigh in on the question of whether the poet was himself a preacher or priest, and if so what type of clerical training he received and whether he may have been a member of a religious order.⁴ While this question might seem directly relevant to a study of the poet's anticlerical opinions, in fact it is not of paramount importance. As the survey of anticlerical writers in the previous chapter demonstrates, those who presented harsh, even anti-sacerdotal, critiques in the fourteenth century were in many cases parish priests themselves, such as John Wyclif, Nicholas Hereford, and John Trevisa, or higher-ranking officials such as Archbishop Richard FitzRalph. On the other hand, they could also include poets who were highly educated but not necessarily clerics, such as William Langland (whose relationship to the clergy is unknown), John Gower, and Geoffrey Chaucer, while the later Lollards tended to be men and women with little to no formal education, such as William Thorpe and Hawisia Moone. Though the *Gawain*-poet was no doubt educated, and thus not a member of this final category, he could plausibly fit into any of the others.

The question more relevant to the current study is who exactly the poet imagined his audience to be, beyond the direct targets of his criticism. Just as in *Pearl*, where he describes Christ's body and blood as elements "The preste vus schewez vch a daye" (1210)—elements shown to him by someone else—so in *Cleanness* and *Patience* the poet again describes himself as the recipient of priestly ministrations, not their administrator. At the end of the introductory section of *Cleanness*, as he transitions into the story of Lucifer's fall from heaven, the poet takes note of where he found the theme that will underlie the stories that follow:

Bot I haue herkned and herde of mony hy3e clerkez,
And als in resounez of ry3t red hit myseluen,
That that ilk proper Prynce that paradys weldez
Is displeyd at vch a poynt that plyes [tends] to scathe
[sin]. (193–96)

The poet has both heard the lesson of God's wrath against sin preached and read it himself in books. In the next line, he conflates these two forms of learning, saying, "Bot neuer 3et in no boke breued [recorded/reported] I herde" (197) that God dispenses more wrath on any sin besides "fylthe

of the flesh" (202). Though it is possible the poet is a low-ranking clergyman, in opposition to "hyȝe clerkez," the narrator's position in this passage is simply one of a hearer and reader, not of a preacher or writer, regardless of his real-life career. He is in the same position, within the poem, as a member of the congregation in a church service. This position becomes even more explicit in *Patience*, where the poet introduces his summary of the Beatitudes by saying, "I herde on a halyday, at a hyȝe masse, / How Mathew melede that his Mayster His meyny con teche" (9–10). At the same time, he refers to this biblical teaching as "the tyxte" (37) and of the story of Jonah as one that "holy wryt telles" (60), both of which imply he is working from a written text, and he does not hesitate to make interpretive statements "in myn vpynyoun" (40), as if he trusts his ability to read and reason from that text. Whether or not the poet himself was a priest, the image of the narrator that emerges from these passages is of an educated and confident layman, a man on the receiving end of priestly actions, both intellectual and sacramental. He takes up a rhetorical position shared by many Lollard and other anticlerical writers of the fourteenth century, which Somerset terms "extraclergial"—he positions himself as outside the clergy, yet simultaneously in possession of a clerical education and the legitimacy that comes with it.⁵ In his critique in the second sentence of *Cleanness*, he does not establish himself as an authority with the credentials to speak to other authorities, but rather as a congregant concerned with corruption trickling down from above. His intended audience, though it may include the clerics he seeks to reform, must include non-clerics as well, who will suffer the consequences of their leaders' moral failings.

The last line of the opening sentence (4) indicates that the poem will also deal with "the contraré" of cleanness and fair forms of speech, and the second sentence addresses this oppositional theme in more detail. God, the poet says, is wrathful against "the freke that in fylthe folȝes Hym after" (6)—the man who follows God yet lives in a state of filth. This second sentence does not end at line 6, however. With the adverb "as" to start line 7, the poet presents his first example of the type of man who lives in filth while affecting to follow God: "renkez of relygioun that reden and syngen / And aprochen to Hys presens, and prestez arn called" (7–8). Several lines later, the poet will state that "*If* thay [the priests] conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont ... *Then* ar thay synful himself" (13–15, italics added). But here in the opening sentences, there are no conditional words or phrases to soften the poet's critique. The "prestez" are introduced here as an unindividuated group who will serve as the primary example of those

hypocrites who trigger God's most violent wrath. In fact, they are the first of only two contemporary illustrations of God's wrath in the entire poem, the other appearing in an allegorical story about a "ladde" who offends an "vrthly hathel [man] that hy3 honour haldez" by dressing poorly for his feast (35–36), a story so closely linked to the biblical Parable of the Wedding Feast which follows that it hardly seems contemporary at all.

Though the poet introduces the priests as examples of "filth," his opening description of their function and duties is benign. They read and sing (7); they approach God's presence (8); and they "rychen" God's altar (10), preparing it for the sacrament,⁶ at which the priests will "hondel ther His aune body" (11). After this wholly positive description of the priest's role in the sacrament of the altar, a stark contrast from the "wroth" and "fylth" of lines 5–6, the poet introduces a conditional statement with the word "If" (12), which will divide priests into those who will receive "gret mede" (12) and those who "sulpen altogeder / Bothe God and His gere" and drive Him "to greme" (16).⁷ The difference between these good and evil priests is that the former are "in clanness ... clos [clothed]" (12), while the latter "conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont, / As be honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylthez" (13–14). What drives God to wrath in this passage is not external dirtiness. Both groups of priests apparently have clean vestments; they are both "honest vtwyth," on the outside, but only one is clothed in true "clanness." The problem is internal corruption masked by a clean exterior, a state expressed by a lack of the courtly quality "cortaysye" and by the phrase "conterfete crafte."

J. J. Anderson glosses the word "crafte" as "virtue," and Andrew and Waldron, *Poems*, define it as "wisdom," both possibilities the *MED* supports (in definitions 1 and 2.a, respectively), while adding "An art, a handicraft" (def. 3), "A trade, an occupation" (def. 6.a), and "A skillful way of doing something" (def. 8.a). The term can also refer generically to any type of behavior (see def. 8.c), including sexual conduct, a meaning the poet has in mind later in the poem when God teaches the Sodomites a "kynde crafte" of love-making which they reject (697). By line 13, the term may not have acquired this sexual connotation, but the sense is that unworthy priests feign a virtue they do not truly possess, or that they practice an art, the administration of the Eucharist, with a skill that masks their internal corruption.

This latter possibility, that a hypocritical priest might consecrate the eucharistic elements while harboring secret sins, especially a Deadly Sin such as lechery, was a particularly distressing one for anticlerical critics

of the fourteenth century. A number of those writers who focused on sexual sins and their defilement of the Eucharist have already been explored, but it is worthwhile to note again here the anticlerical tradition's concern with hypocrisy—the false angel of light, the wolf in sheep's clothing—as a destructive threat to the priesthood and indeed the entire church. In one of his late sermons, in which he discourses on 2 Corinthians 11:14, the “angel of light” passage, Wyclif writes, “A great increase in hypocrisy among the clergy is one of the distinguishing signs of the approach of the End. Among all sins permitted by God to exist in the church militant, it is the most greatly to be feared.”⁸

The first book of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* expresses a similar fear, as the allegorical character Genius describes hypocrisy with a wealth of oppositional images—“A man which feigneth conscience, / As though it were al innocence” (I.595–96), corn that hides weeds (602), a rose hiding thorns (603), a wolf disguised as a lamb (604–5), and “malice / Under the colour of justice” (605–6). The practical example of hypocrisy Gower begins with, as the most pernicious, is that among the clergy, and he describes hypocritical friars, as the *Gawain*-poet does priests, with an image of deceitful clothing. The friars exhibit poverty and virtue on their exteriors, but this is only a cover for their material wealth and internal sin:

He [Hypocrisy] clotheth riches, as men sein,
Under the simplesce of poverte,
And doth to seme of gret decerte
Thing which is litel worth withinne. (612–15)

Not content to corrupt the “wyde furred hodes” (627) of the friars alone, Hypocrisy eventually spreads to the clergy at large:

And evere his [Hypocrisy's] chiere is sobre and softe,
And where he goth he blesseth ofte,
Wherof the blinde world he dreccheth.
Bot yet al only he ne streccheth
His reule upon religioun [religious orders],
Bot next to that condicioun
In suche as clepe hem holy cherche ...
So that semende of liht thei werke
The dedes whiche are inward derke. (619–25, 633–34)

In Gower's conception, the counterfeit light of corrupt friars and priests, which hides their internal darkness, eventually strikes the entire world blind. The *Gawain*-poet, in his foregrounding of priestly hypocrisy and

the use of his own oppositional metaphor, cleanness versus filth, thus employs a strategy shared by critics from Gower to Wyclif to the Lollards.

What follows the warning to priests in *Cleanness* is an illustration of the reasons for God's great hatred of spiritual filth, starting with a description of His "courte" (17) and "housholde" (18) and its spotless cleanness. The space where God dwells is "clene" (17) and "honeste" (18), with His servants the angels "enourled [surrounded] in alle that is clene" (19). Unlike the priests, whose inner and outer conditions may not match, the angels are clothed "Bothe withinne and withouten in wedez ful bryzt" (20), and it becomes clear that these "within" clothes are actually the most important, as the poet translates the sixth Beatitude: "The hathel clene of his hert hapenez ful fayre, / For he schal loke on oure Lorde with a leue chere" (27–28). In the Wycliffite LV, this verse is rendered, "Blessid be thei that ben of clene herte: for thei schul se god" (Matt. 5:8). However, it is the lines that follow this introduction of the poem-sermon's biblical theme which explain most clearly why God cannot tolerate any measure of filth in His presence. The poet starts by inverting the Beatitude:

As so saytz, to that syzt seche schal he neuer
That any vnclannesse hatz on, auwhere abowte;
For He that flemus [drives out] vch fylthe fer fro His
 hert
May not byde that burre [blow, shock] that hit His
 body neze.
Forthy hyze not to heuen in haterez [clothing]
 totorne,
Ne in the harlatez hod [beggar's hood], and handez
 vnwaschen. (29–34)

The Beatitude states that those with clean hearts shall see God, and its corollary, the poet explains, is that those without inner cleanness will not. The reason is that God drives out all filth from His heart and cannot abide any "burre"—a word the *MED* defines as "an armed assault" or "a blow or stroke"—that strikes not only "His body" but anywhere near ("neze") it. Though the poet appears to have shifted to a broader audience for this warning, with the generalized pronoun "he" (29), the image of God's heart and body enduring an attack from the mere proximity of uncleanness, particularly from "handez vnwaschen" (34), recalls the priests from the beginning of the passage who "hondel" God's "aune body" (11). These priests who defile the Eucharist with their figuratively dirty hands and earn God's

“greme” thus receive a specific punishment—they will not see the “syzt” they “seche” (29), of God in His heavenly court.

It is important to note that the word “prestez,” according to the *MED*, could refer to any cleric below the rank of bishop, including monks and friars. However, the actions of reading, singing, and handling God’s body in the sacrament suggest the poet has primarily parish priests in mind. The stock phrase “reden and syngen” (or “syngen and reden”) is a “meaningless rime tag” that means simply “to read aloud or chant during a church service,” and more specifically to celebrate a Mass.⁹ But while cloistered monks and high-ranking churchmen were unlikely to lead public worship services or administer sacraments as regularly as parish priests did, the friars could and often did. In fact, as noted in the previous chapter, it was this competition with secular priests for tithes in exchange for administering sacraments that was the source of much of the vitriol that passed between the two groups. A few lines after this description, the poet warns the reader not to approach God with torn clothes (“haterez totorne”), unwashed hands (“handez vnwaschen”), or a beggar’s hood (“harlatez hod”) (33–34). This final image is reminiscent of a friar’s hood, and the image of a wandering beggar may be pointed, in part, at wandering friars practicing voluntary poverty. The overall depiction appears similar to Gower’s hypocritical friars who “clotheth richesse ... Under the simplesce of poverté” and wear “wyde furred hodes” (*Confessio Amantis*, 612–13, 627), or Chaucer’s *The Romaunt of the Rose*, which refers to mendicants as “beggars with these hodes wide, / With sleighe [sly] and pale faces lene, / And greye clothis not full clene” (7254–56). So the men with dirty clothes whom the *Gawain*-poet calls “prestez” might be called other names as well.

The word “prest” occurs several times throughout the *Gawain*-poet’s works, and in most cases it refers literally to a Christian priest, a nameless official who administers sacraments. For example, the Dreamer in *Pearl* sees Christ “in the forme of bred and wyn” as they are administered by “the preste” in the poem’s closing lines (1209–10). In a transitional section of *Cleanness* that briefly summarizes the life of Christ, the poet uses the image of a sullied pearl to describe a man “sulped in sawle” (1130); the solution to the problem is to “polyce [polish] hym at the prest, by penaunce taken” (1131). And Gawain, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, confesses to “a prest” before riding to meet what he thinks will be his death (1876–84). In these cases, the priest functions simply as an officer of the church, whose presence is required for sacramental efficacy.

The poet also gives the title of priest to the pagan religious leaders of Nineveh (*Patience* 389) and to the Jewish religious authorities in his biblical stories, though neither of these are ever shown performing religious rituals. Among the atrocities of the Babylonian military captain Nebuzaradan in *Cleanness* are that Israelite “prestes and prelates” are “presed to dethe” (1249), with a homophonic pun on the verb “presed.” The priests meet this fate along with women and children, with whom they are linked in their defenselessness—the poet lingers, in fact, on a bloody slaughter that takes place in the Temple of Jerusalem, in which “prestes,” “dekenes,” “clerkkes,” and “alle the maydenes of the munster” are together put to the sword (1264–68). As in the biblical sources he is drawing from (2 Chronicles 36:15–19 and Jeremiah 52:12–19), the poet does not express a sense of injustice at the deaths of these priests and Temple worshippers—they are merely the victims of God’s justifiable wrath against the sins of all Israel.

The linguistic and thematic connections the poet draws here between the priests of fourteenth-century England and the priests of ancient Israel are similar to those advanced by Wyclif and other anticlerical writers. The connections assume first that the role of contemporary Christian and ancient Jewish priests are essentially similar. Both serve as representatives of the people to God, intercessors, and administrators of God’s power to cleanse sin in the form of a sacrificial feast (Jewish Tabernacle/Temple sacrifices or the Christian Eucharist). Thus when the people become spiritually unclean and provoke God’s wrath, priests bear the brunt for their negligence in performing these rituals. In *Cleanness* (as in the biblical source), the priests and Temple worshippers are slaughtered en masse, while the rest of the nation is either taken into exile, “brothely [wretchedly] broȝt to Babyloyn” (1256), or left behind to farm and tend vineyards. By linking the two and demonstrating their similarities, the poet offers a warning to contemporary priests whom he sees in similar danger of provoking God’s wrath through their spiritual filth. Though it has no etymological connection to the noun, “prest” is also an identical-sounding verb, the preterite or past-participle form of “pressen,” which has a variety of meanings similar to the modern English “pressed.” The *Gawain*-poet uses this verb twice in *Cleanness*—in the phrase “presed to dethe” (1249), and in the Parable of the Wedding Feast. In this introductory parable, the lord approaches a guest who is dressed inappropriately in dirty and torn clothing and accuses him of showing disrespect:

Thow art a gome vngoderly [vile] in that gown feble;
 Thou praysed me and my place ful pouer [poorly] and
 ful gnedre [miserly],
 That watz so prest to aproche my presens hereinne.
 Hopez thou I be a harlot thi erigaut [cloak] to prayse?
 (145–48)

In this context, “prest” means either eager and zealous, or perhaps rushed or hurried, equivalent to the modern English “pressed for time.”¹⁰ The lord accuses the man of miserliness and either haste or simply over-eagerness in his preparations, as well as foolishness for thinking the host would praise such poor clothing. But the word “prest” in conjunction with the phrase “aproche my presens” (147) also provides a verbal echo to the “prestez” who “aprochen to Hys presens” in the introduction, where the same three words make up an alliterative line (8). The guest thus stands accused of the same crime as the priests who have “sulped” God’s “gere” (a word that can mean both eucharistic vessels and priestly vestments)—he has approached the presence of his lord in clothing that has been figuratively “fyled” (136) with the filth of sin. As Ad Putter puts it in his reading of these lines, “This alternative sense of ‘priest’ is called up so that we signal its exclusion. ... the ‘prest’ guest stands accused for not being priestly: he has no respect for the holy, he is ‘prest’ in the wrong sense of the word.”¹¹ The aural connection underscores that he has acted similarly to the priests who inspire God’s wrath.

The poet uses the same word in adverbial form when he describes Abraham and Sarah’s meal preparations for their three angelic visitors, though in this case their haste carries no negative connotations—Abraham instructs his wife “Prestly at this ilke poynte sum polment [soup] to make” (628). As with the previous citation, the word’s primary meaning indicates simply that Abraham wants Sarah to prepare the food quickly. Again, however, the overall context of the scene prompts us to view Abraham as “priestly” in the religious sense of the term as well, as he and Sarah prepare a fattened calf (629) and “therue [unleavened] kakez” of bread (635) for the guests, reminiscent of both Jewish and Christian sacrificial feasts. When Abraham serves the meal, the poet writes that he “Mynystred mete byfore tho Men that my3tes al weldez” (644), using a verb, “mynystred,” that can denote both the serving of food and the administration of sacraments.¹² God Himself is similarly referred to in *Pearl* as a “mynyster mete” (1063), in the Dreamer’s vision of the heavenly city, where neither church

nor priest is necessary for direct communion with God.¹³ In *Cleanness's* depiction of the ancient world, though God directly intervenes in humankind's affairs, some form of intercession is nevertheless necessary, and so Abraham serves as the minister, interacting with God's representatives on behalf of other people. To further emphasize his priestly role, when Abraham administers the food to the angels, he does so "with armez vp-folden" (643), a gesture of raising or extending the arms that recalls a priest's elevation of the Host.¹⁴

But "prestez" is not the only term the poet uses to describe priests in the opening lines of *Cleanness*. They are also "the freke that in fylthe folzes Hym after" (6) and "renkez of relygioun that reden and syngen" (7). Both "freke" and "renke" can be used as generic terms for "man," but a closer study of their use throughout *Cleanness* yields further connections between the contemporary priests and their counterparts in the biblical scenes.

Throughout both *Cleanness* and *Patience*, the word "freke" shows no particular pattern to its usage when it appears in isolation.¹⁵ For instance, in *Cleanness's* opening Parable of the Wedding Feast (51–160), the term is used to describe both the "wayferande frekez" who are invited to the lord's feast (79), as well as the lord himself as he confronts the poorly dressed man (139). What is more illuminating is to focus on those instances in which the word "freke" is paired with "fylthe." In addition to line 6, this alliterative combination occurs on the same line at only one other moment in the poem, where it describes the Babylonian king Belshazzar. What enrages God most about Belshazzar's blasphemous feast, the poet informs us, is "the fylthe of the freke that defowled hade / The ornements of Goddez hous that holy were maked" (1798–99). We will return to this scene to draw out a fuller comparison between Belshazzar and fourteenth-century priests, but note first the connection the poet draws between them not only in his choice of alliterative words but in the parallel image of a man defiling sacred objects as a result of his inward uncleanness.

The words "freke" and "fylthe" also occur in relatively close proximity at another moment in the text, in the story of Adam's fall from grace. The poet introduces the story by describing original sin as "the faut of a freke that faled in trawthe" (236). More than simply a breach of courtly honor ("trawthe"), however, Adam's fault is one of uncleanness through physical contact, since God's prohibition is on "the fryt that the freke towched" (245). The fruit itself is a form of filth, and by touching it Adam sullies not only his own clean hands, but through them all of humanity.

The fruit becomes “an apple / That enpoysened alle peplez” (241–42), and this poison touch leads directly to the “fylthe upon folde that the folk vsed” in the time of Noah (251). Again, the poet draws a thematic connection between contemporary priests and a biblical example of spiritual filth and defilement, both through parallel words and parallel images; the priests who “hondel” God’s body and defile it with dirty hands (11) are like their predecessor Adam, who “towched” the fruit (245) and defiled all of innocent humanity.

More remarkable is the poet’s use of “renke,” a term which carries a connotation of hierarchical position. “Renkez” are literally men of rank, and “renkez of relygioun” are thus men in a position of authority in the church. The *MED* defines “rink / renke” first in military terms, as “A warrior, knight, soldier,” an emphasis that fits well with the *Gawain*-poet’s general strategy of linking Christian virtues to courtly or knightly conduct—for instance, by accusing the filthy priests in *Cleanness* of lacking “cortaysye” (13), or by personifying the virtues in *Patience* as “Dames” (31–33) to whom a knight owes fealty, or describing God’s mercy as a form of “gentryse” (398). The *MED* also notes that “renke” can be used as a “term of address for God,” a form the *Gawain*-poet uses just once (*Patience* 323), or in place of the honorifics “lord” and “sir.”¹⁶

Even without the dictionary’s citations, however, we can see from its uses in *Cleanness* that the poet intends “renke” to carry the suggestion of a higher rank than the average run of humanity. For example, in the Parable of the Wedding Feast, the lord describes the wealthy men who reject his first invitation as “thyse ilk renkez that me renayed [refused] habbe” (105), and “mony renischche [strange] renkez” are among those whom the lord’s servants bring to the feast after a second invitation (96). After being rejected by the neighboring landowners known to him, the lord apparently first expands his guest list to include men of rank from more distant lands. This second wave of guests also includes “bachlerez” (86), a word suggestive in its own right, since it can refer not only to young unmarried men, but more specifically to aspirants to knighthood or university students preparing for the priesthood.¹⁷ The poorer and less influential guests the lord invites as a last resort to fill his banquet hall are given a variety of labels, but they no longer include any “renkes”—they are “gomez” (99), “folk” (100), “peple” (111), “sunez” (112), “clene men” (119), and, in the case of the poor man who is punished for wearing dirty clothes, a “thral” (135) and “burne” (142, 149).

With this connotation of higher rank in mind, the poet's use of "renke" to describe the leaders of Sodom (969) and noblemen of Babylon (1514, 1785) is predictable. Both of these groups suffer God's "greme" (16), the wrathful fate promised to the unclean priests of the introduction, for the sake of their inward filth. The poet uses "renke" twice in the singular form as well, to describe Abraham (766) and Lot (786). In both cases, the context of the poet's usage is a moment when the patriarchs are engaged in activities that could be considered priestly—as Abraham makes an intercessory plea for God to spare the people of Sodom for the sake of any righteous men who may live there, and as Lot greets and shows hospitality to the two angelic visitors who have come to judge the city. More specifically, Lot is leaning in the door of "a loge" (784), a word which may refer to the city's walls or fortifications, but also possibly a temple.¹⁸ In either case, his role in Sodom appears to be one of guardianship, protection, and intercession—between the city and the outside world, and in this case between the city and God. The context also emphasizes his wealth and high rank—the "loge" and its gates are lavishly arrayed, as "ryal and ryche" as "the renkes seluen" (786). Abraham and Lot truly are "renkez of relygioun"—as entertainers of angelic visitors, as men who speak directly to God, and as representatives of people under their spiritual protection. Unlike the other leaders of Sodom or nobles of Babylon, they are not defiled by inward filth and do not incur God's wrath. To the extent that they are connected to the priests of the introduction with whom they share a title, it is as positive exemplars to the latter's cautionary example.

The "freke that in fylthe folzes Hym after" and the "renkez of relygioun" that "prestez arn called" are thus connected thematically to a number of significant figures throughout the poem, both positive and negative: the men invited to the Wedding Feast, Adam, Abraham, Lot, the priests of Babylon, and Belshazzar. Another major character, Noah, is never referred to as a "preste," "freke," or "renke," but he nevertheless performs several priest-like actions, which we will explore further, along with the rest of these characters.

The argument that the *Gawain*-poet intends the critique of priests in the opening lines of *Cleanness* to serve as a guide for understanding the rest of the poem is one that has been advanced cursorily by a number of scholars, usually on their way to discussing other unrelated aspects of the poem. John Gardner, after analyzing the scene of Belshazzar's feast, concludes, "And so the poem comes full circle—as the poems of the *Gawain*-poet invariably do: Belshazzar is a type of the false priest mentioned in the

opening lines. As a temporal king he represents discourteous secular as well as discourteous ecclesiastical power.”¹⁹ Charlotte Morse expands on Gardner’s claim by saying that both the Wedding Feast and Belshazzar’s feast “echo the opening exemplum of the good and evil priests who celebrate Mass at God’s altar ... The poet develops the contrast between good and evil priests through the two banquets, making the wedding guests types of the good priests and Belshazzar a type of the evil priests.”²⁰

For the most part, though, contemporary readers have tended to see something other than an anticlerical critique operating throughout the poem at large. Anna Baldwin, for example, argues that “The shadow of the Mass lies behind every *exemplum*” in *Cleanness*, in a primarily positive way despite the opening critique.²¹ J. J. Anderson claims that the poem’s primary concern is hypocrisy, illustrated through visual contrasts of cleanliness and filth,²² and Allen Frantzen focuses on the poem’s “touch” motif, which he says the opening description of the priests’ hands introduces.²³ In a similar way, Jeremy Citrome sees a “surgical metaphor” running throughout the poem, which begins with the image of the priests operating on God’s body with their hands,²⁴ and Amity Reading argues that the opening image of the Eucharist introduces the poem’s main theme, not of priestly corruption, but of ritual feasting.²⁵ In general, these critics view the opening priestly imagery as deeply significant, a key to understanding the poem as a whole, but they attempt to fit it into a larger, more generalized theme (hypocrisy, touch, the Eucharist, feasting, etc.), rather than viewing it as a specific and straightforward announcement of the poet’s central concern—corruption of the contemporary priesthood and the risk of that corruption incurring God’s wrath.

Until now, the only critic who has presented a full reading of the poem using the initial warning to priests as an interpretive guide is Francis Ingledew in a 1992 *Viator* article entitled “Liturgy, Prophecy, and Belshazzar’s Babylon: Discourse and Meaning in *Cleanness*.” Ingledew’s persuasive argument begins by observing that the opening lines of *Cleanness* fit into a familiar tradition—the attempts by a multitude of writers in fourteenth-century England “to respond aggressively to the condition of the contemporary priesthood.”²⁶ Though the opening lines represent, for many contemporary readers “a more or less casual moment in the poem’s introductory maneuvers, this passage is actually only the most explicit expression of a thematics of the priesthood that pervades the first thirty-four lines and imposes a liturgical significance on the poem’s major motifs.”²⁷ The poet’s shift to Old Testament exempla in the main body of

the poem is a traditional move, Ingledew argues, given that the concept of ritual cleanness is “embedded in the Levitical texts which, for the patristic writers, prefigured the Christian priesthood. More specifically, Leviticus’s detailed prescriptions for sacrificial ritual prefigured the eucharist, and the vocabulary of cleanness established itself especially in relation to the eucharist.”²⁸ Ingledew moves forward through the rest of the poem, reading each of its central events through the lens of fourteenth-century priesthood. The guests at the Wedding Feast are clerical figures, whose clean or soiled clothes represent priestly vestments; the emphasis on sexual sins in the Deluge and Sodom scenes are directed at priests who commit similar transgressions while handling the Eucharist; Lot’s wife contaminates the Eucharist-like bread she serves to the angels by adding yeast, which establishes her as a “figure of such priests” as those who appear in the opening lines; the interlude which describes the life of Jesus “recalls priests to their proper exemplar in the one clean Priest, Christ”; and Belshazzar’s feast, with its lengthy description of the holy articles that are defiled, is a “parodic eucharist” and “a black mass.”²⁹

Ingledew’s argument ultimately focuses on a different set of texts than the present study—he is concerned primarily with prophetic and apocalyptic discourses that critique the papacy—but he lays a useful foundation for a more extensive look at the variety of characters in *Cleanness* who serve as representatives of priestly attitudes and conduct. The first of these is a group of men and women that provides both positive and negative examples—the well- and poorly-dressed wedding guests in Matthew’s allegorical parable.

Wedding Feast to Belshazzar’s Feast: Priestly Exemplars and Warnings

As mentioned above, the only example the poet provides, besides priests, of a contemporary individual incurring God’s wrath for uncleanness is the “ladde” (36) who attends a lordly banquet in ragged clothing, whose description immediately follows those of the priests and angels. Each piece of the lad’s wildly inappropriate attire is catalogued with humorous detail: “Then the harlot with haste helded to the table, / With rent cokrez [leggings] at the kne and his clutte [patched] traschez [rags], / And his tabarde [smock] totorne, and his totez [toes] oute” (39–41). With this lad, the poet translates the relatively abstract concepts of sacramental

defilement by priests and God's rage from the spotlessly clean heights of heaven into a more tangible, visual language. The poet has already used the terms "totorne" (33) and "harlatez hod" (34) to describe in figurative terms the spiritual filth that no one should dare bring into God's presence. Now, rather than issuing another moral directive, the poet asks a seemingly offhand, common-sense rhetorical question, which has the effect of fixing these figurative terms more firmly in literal reality. What high-ranking lord or knight ("vrthly hathel"), the poet asks, "Wolde lyke if a ladde com lytherly [wretchedly] attyred" (36) to his feast? The poet answers his own question by imagining for readers exactly what *would* happen in such a case—the lad would be "Hurled to the halle dore and harde theroute schowued," with "blame ful bygge," and perhaps "a boffet" (43–44). After this insult, he would be forbidden to return, "On payne of enprysonment and puttyng in stokkez" (46).

The imagery of imprisonment and stocks will reappear during the Parable of the Wedding Feast, when the ill-dressed man is punished in lines 154–60. In the parable, however, the man actually *is* thrown into the lord's dungeon and placed "stiffly in stokez" (157) for what appears to be a first offense, in contrast to the "vrthly hathel" of this opening illustration, who simply throws out the presumptuous intruder and warns him not to return. The poet's preliminary sketching of a contemporary scenario, one identical in virtually every respect to the parable's, imagines a less severe outcome for what in the parable will become a metaphor for hell itself, as the man is thrown into a prison where "doel [sorrow] euer dwellez" (158), with "Greuing and gretyng ... Of tethe" (159–60). The poet appeals first to a social situation readers are likely to find reasonable and realistic, in preparation for the seemingly less reasonable, and perhaps unrealistic, actions of the lord in the biblical parable. In his introduction to the poem, Brian Stone puts it bluntly: "The punishment of the man without a wedding garment is not to be understood literally, as this would make the host of the parable, and hence God, appear monstrously cruel."³⁰ The poet makes this mandatory allegorical reading clear to the reader by employing a comparison which explains and mitigates the lord's apparent cruelty and the apparent incongruence between the parable and reality. The lord in the parable is not, in fact, an "vrthly hathel," but rather the King of Heaven: "And if vnwelcum he [the ill-dressed lad] were to a wordlych prynce, / 3et hym is the hy3e Kyng harder in heuen" (49–50). If an "earthly" or "worldly" ruler is enraged by the presence of physical filth,

how much more will God, the infinitely greater and spotlessly clean ruler, be driven to wrath by spiritual uncleanness.

The poet's first three descriptions of the sinners who provoke God to wrath follow a discernible progression—from contemporary "prestez," whose literal actions in the sacrament of the altar lead either to God's blessings or anger, to the figurative contemporary lad whose impropriety provokes an earthly ruler to a harsh but measured response, to a wholly allegorical man whose actions drive an allegorical lord representing God to pursue extreme justice in the form of hellish imprisonment. The third example is in a sense an extension of the first, with the lad forming a thematic bridge between the two. God's most extreme wrath, represented allegorically by an outraged lord, is reserved for those who bring spiritual filth into His presence—not the lad whose transgression is relatively minor and serves as a figurative example, but those who handle God's real body in the Eucharist and have the potential to defile it.

The Parable of the Wedding Feast itself provides a further picture of the type of sinners whom the poet suggests make God especially angry. The first is those who do not respond to His initial call, represented by the "renkez that me renayed habbe" (105) in the first round of invited guests. All of these invitees make believable excuses, which allow them to escape what seems a painful duty: "Alle excused hem by the skyly [excuse] he scape by mo3t" (62). The first neighbor invited has "bo3t hym a bor3" (63), purchased an estate, and must excuse himself in order "the toun to byholde" (64). He does not say he has actual business to attend to in this town—he simply wants to "behold" his possession. The second has a similar excuse: he has "3erned and 3at"—yearned for, and then got—a team of "oxen" (66). Like the first man, he has no pressing business with these animals; he simply wants to "see hem pulle in the plow" (68). These first two excuses represent extreme examples of the corruption material possessions can bring to their owners, who yearn for them inordinately and prefer the mere sight of material wealth over the physical presence of God. They are also notable extensions of the biblical text, in which the invited men simply depart, "oon in to his toun, anothir to his marchaundise" (Matt. 22:5). This type of critique obviously does not have to be limited to priests, but it parallels the imagery of critics such as FitzRalph, Wyclif, and Langland in their arguments for clerical dispossession. The third invitee says he has "wedded a wyf" (69), as he does in Luke 14:20 (though not in the Matthew text the poet says he is reading in line 51), but he offers no explanation for why this would prevent him from attending the feast. The poet

may be expressing the relatively commonplace idea that marriage causes people to shirk spiritual duties, but he may also be thinking allegorically, as this invited man must attend his own wedding feast, a worldly banquet in contrast to the heavenly banquet of the Eucharist

In any case, the seemingly innocent excuses of those who reject the invitation ultimately stir up God's wrath more, the poet says, than the willful sin of pagans who do not know Him. In his rage, the lord says of this first group of invited guests, "More to wyte [blameworthy] is her wrange then any wylle gentyl [Gentile error]" (76). Coupled with the lord's similarly outraged and outsized response against the ill-dressed man, whose error is punished much "harder" (50) than it would be in the real world, this statement provides the sense that those whom God calls to spiritual cleanness, and those who accept the invitation, are held to a higher standard than the "gentyls" who are not. The lord wants to bring guests inside "so that my hous may holly by halkez [corners] by fylled" (104). The house will be filled "holly," or wholly, with an echo on the word "holy" (spelled the same way in the *MED*), as well as a possible pun on "halzez," hallowed objects or saints. The people who enter the master's house both fill it completely and consecrate it, making it holy.

As with the example of those who are distracted by wealth, the people who are called to this higher standard may include more than just members of the clergy—a fact the poet makes explicit at the parable's conclusion, when he says that "alle arn lathed [invited] luffly, the luther and the better / That euer wern fulȝed in font [baptized]" (163–64)—but they are nevertheless judged more strictly than others. This concept has biblical echoes, such as the warning the Apostle James gives to would-be leaders in the church, whom he says will take on more punishment: "Mi britheren, nyle ye be maad many maistris, witynge that ye taken the more doom" (James 3:1). The ill-dressed man of the parable is held to the highest standard of all—unlike the ungrateful "renkez," he accepts the lord's invitation, and he follows the lord's instructions to "be myry" (130) at the feast. But despite his outward seeming faithfulness, the man's filthy clothes represent a great fault—the lord accuses him of not being "honestly arayed" (134); rather, he is "vnthryuandely clothed" (135) in garments that are "fyled with werkkez" (135). In his unthinking haste, the man "watz so prest to aproche my presens hereinne" (147) that he did not dress or clean himself properly, in an echo that recalls the priests of the introduction. Lynn Staley's study of the "man in foul clothes" figure throughout several fourteenth-century texts reaches a similar conclusion:

By the fourteenth century, the man is more than a figure for impurity; he has become a figure who can be used to interrogate the institutional church. Possibly his relevance to the state of the church also came by way of Chrysostom, who in his treatise *On the Priesthood* warned against allowing one arrayed in filthy garments to be admitted into the sacred mysteries, where he will handle God's body³¹

The allegorical man represents, at least in part, an externalization of the internal spiritual state of the priesthood described in the introduction, and the poet uses a similar vocabulary throughout both passages to describe the two. The priests may be "honest vtwyth" (14), but inside they are like the ill-dressed man, not "honestly arayed" (134). Like him, they have responded to an invitation and now dwell among "Clene men in com-paynye" (119); for a time, they can masquerade as one of them, but since in reality they "conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont" (13), their deception is seen by God, just as the ill-dressed man's filth is "fande with his [the lord's] y3e" (133). Neither are "in clannes ... clos" (12) but rather are "inwith alle fylthez" (14), and they both earn the same punishment—as the ill-dressed man "gremed" his figurative "grete lorde" (138), so too the priests drive their literal God "to greme" (16). What exactly this "greme" consists of for contemporary priests is never described in literal terms, but the biblical echoes in the lord's description of his "dougoun" where "doel euer dwellez" (158) are clear enough to indicate the poet has an eternal hell in mind.

At the same time, the poet is also explicit in reiterating that, as critical as he might be of those who administer sacraments—as much as they might deserve a non-allegorical eternal dungeon—their offices are still required for the maintenance of the church and Christian life. The "alle" who are invited to Christ's heavenly feast does not truly include everyone, but only those who are "fulzed in font" (164), those who have received baptism, a sacrament which under normal circumstances can only be administered by a priest. The warning the poet gives in the parable to those who clothe themselves with spiritual filth may be properly understood as anticlerical, linked to the introduction, but it is not anti-sacerdotal.

After his retelling and brief explication of the parable, the poet provides a list of sins which he says may prevent a soul from remaining "ful clene" (175) and cause a "freke [to] forfeite his blysse" (177). The list sounds strikingly similar to the lists of priestly wrongdoing detailed in chapter 2, but this similarity is mostly incidental, since the poet follows

wedez" (217) become "fendez ful blake" (221) at the instant of their sin—and Lucifer endures God's punishment without any promise or hope that he will ever repent or attempt to be reconciled to his maker. And God, in contrast to his "greme" against the priests and the ill-dressed man, is "wrathed not." Shockingly, the poet compares Satan himself in *favorable* terms to priests and others corrupted by uncleanness. The devil may have been "Hurled into helle-hole" (223), but God, the poet has already noted, "hates helle no more then hem that ar sowlé [soiled]" (168).

In a similar way, God's anger against Adam's sin and mankind's fall is "Al in mesure and methe [moderation]" (247), in part because He plans in advance to mend the fault "with a mayden that make [match, mate] had neuer" (248)—the Virgin Mary. Adam is signalled as a priest-like figure with several words at the outset of the Creation and Fall story—he is "ordaynt to blysse" (237), and "his place watz devised" (238) for him in Paradise for "the lenthe of a terme" (239), an unspecified length of time after which he will take the place of the fallen angels in heaven (240). As in modern English, the verb "ordain" in Middle English means not only "to choose or appoint" in a general sense, but more specifically "to invest with holy orders" or "an ecclesiastical office."³⁴ Adam is ordained to a position in an appointed place for a specific term, as if God were a bishop granting him a parish living for a term, at the end of which he will receive a promotion. Of course, Adam does not serve the entirety of this term before falling into sin, and perhaps the most convincing evidence for the view that he represents a priestly figure is that he alone bears responsibility for this offense. Eve is present in the scene, of course, as one whose "eggyng" prompts Adam to "ete of an apple" (241), but her role is nearly as constricted as it could possibly be within the poet's biblical bounds. As Elizabeth Keiser points out, the poet "makes no allusion to the idea that her transgression is symptomatic of the feminine appetite for pleasure and, indeed, assigns primary responsibility to Adam for having disobeyed in touching forbidden fruit."³⁵ Here is no theological discussion of the woman's role in bringing sin into the world, of the temptations of women or their proper submissive role in marriage. Rather, just as it is Adam alone who is ordained and set to inherit the angels' forsaken home, so also is it Adam alone who "fayled in trawthe" (236), who is "inobedyent" (237), and who "enpoysened alle peplez" (242) through "the fryt that the freke towched" (245), a visual reminder of the earlier clerical contamination of the Eucharist, also through the mechanism of touch. Like a priest, Adam is responsible to some degree for the sins of the people over which he has

spiritual authority, including Eve and his descendants. His wife appears only long enough to “egg” him, and she is no sooner mentioned than she is replaced by a more significant female figure, the “mayden that make had neuer” (248), the Virgin for whose sake celibate priests will forsake all other women. In fact, even as he moves forward to describe the world at large that has been corrupted by Adam’s sin, the poet focuses primarily on men, the “sunez” of their ancestor Adam (258), who enter the world as “the fayrest of forme and of face als, / The most and the myriest that maked wern euer, / The styfist, the stalwortheist that stod euer on fete” (253–55), but whose beauty and strength becomes ever more diluted with each successive generation, until the “fylthe ... that the folk vsed” (251) covers the earth. The “ordained” man who should have been the progenitor and leader of a race of clean angelic beings, bringing them to a heavenly inheritance and home—a priest, who should have led people to “aprochen to Hys presens ... teen vnto His temmple and temen to Hymselfen” (8–9)—instead becomes a leader who sets the human race on a downward path of corruption that can only end in God’s wrath and destruction.

After Adam’s departure from the poem, the people of the world live “withouten any maysterz” (252), an anarchic situation in which a priest-like leader must emerge to prevent God’s wrath from destroying all of humanity. That leader, of course, will be Noah, the poem’s first example of clean conduct in a person since the good priests of the introduction. The poet introduces Noah as a man who is “Ful redy [obedient, willing] and ful ry3twys, and rewled hym fayre” (293–94). In a world without masters, Noah is capable of ruling over himself. Later, God says that Noah “in reysoun hatz rengned and ry3twys ben euer” (328)—he has reigned over himself and his family with reason, a quality that operates not in opposition but in conjunction with nature, whose law it is possible to “clanly fulfyllen” (264).

In contrast, the other men on earth “controeued agayn kynde [nature] contraré werkez” (266). Again, the poet focuses his attention on the men of this ancient world, whose primary sin against nature’s law is “fylthe in fleschlych dedez” (265). The poet is not as specific in detailing what these deeds include as he will be in the story of Sodom’s destruction, but they are unquestionably sexual in nature. The sons of Adam “vsed hem vnthryftyly vchon on other” (267), a phrase which Michael Twomey and A. V. C. Schmidt view as a signal that “the sin of the race before the Flood ... is at least initially *sodomy*” (Schmidt’s italics).³⁶ As detailed in chapter 2, sodomy is a term defined by Thomas Aquinas and other fourteenth-

century writers as any non-procreative sexual practice, including masturbation, oral sex, and bestiality. As Frantzen puts it, “sodomy encompassed diverse acts with a single common denominator: all thwarted conception,”³⁷ and thus also violated the biblical command to “Encrease ye, & be ye multiplied” (Genesis 1:28, 9:1). The poet does not depict God giving this command to Adam, but renders it as “Multypleyez on this molde” (522) in God’s instructions to Noah after the Deluge, a brief reminder of the sexual actions that earlier led to the world’s destruction. The poet is curiously opaque about the nature of these actions, but the ancient world performs them “vchon on other” (267), possibly a reference to homosexuality, “And als with other, wylsfully, upon a wrange wyse” (268), an apparent reference to bestiality. While it is true that “the dezter [daughters] of the douthe [men]” (270) also participate in sexual misconduct, by copulating with “the fende” (269)—a singular term that in the next line refers to multiple devils—and begetting an evil race of “jeauntez” (272) whose crimes make God regret creating mankind, these women vanish at the same moment they appear. As with Eve, the poet avoids what seems a clear opportunity to discourse on the particular vices or temptations of women and keeps his relentless focus on the men. In fact, he even identifies the sons of Adam as the ones who “So ferly fowled her flesh” (269) and thereby caused the demons to look upon their daughters. It is unclear exactly how the men’s befouled flesh causes the women to sin, but perhaps the logical connection lies in the fact that these men do not appear to be sleeping with human women at all by line 269. In any case, the responsibility even for sexual activity in which they take no part falls upon those men who create the moral conditions that allow it. Schmidt observes that the poet “has here changed the order of events in his Biblical source ... What is striking is how he makes mankind’s *prior* wickedness, specifically sexual sin, the reason why the fiends are attracted to the women.”³⁸ And once the giants are born, their mothers are forgotten, and the perverse progeny stand alone as “*men methelez and mazty on vrthe*” (273, italics mine), who love violence and are infamous for their “lodlych laykez [loathsome practices]” (274). Though this treatment of sexual sins in the antediluvian world is clearly meant to be read at least partly as a metaphor for any type of destructive sin, its relentlessly male-centered focus within the broader context of priestly misconduct lends credence to Ingledew’s argument that the poem’s warnings against sodomy, specifically homosexuality, “may not be entirely metaphorical.”³⁹

Though there is no hope for most of the corrupted human race in the Deluge, Noah serves as an exemplary priest for the people who are saved—namely, his own family, and through them the future generations on the earth. The Ark which holds them is traditionally associated with the church, as well as with ornamental conveyances for religious objects such as relics,⁴⁰ an association the poet emphasizes by twice referring to the ship as a “cofer” (310, 339), glossed by Andrew and Waldron as “coffer, chest, jewel-box,” and as it floats on the water, the Ark rises up to the heavens, recalling the Host’s elevation in the sacrament: “The arc houen [raised] watz on hyze with hurlande gotez [rushing currents], / Kest to kythez vncouthe [countries unknown] the clowdez ful nere” (413-14). The poet thus adds the Eucharist to the already traditional association of the Flood with baptism, with both of these figurative sacraments being administered by nature itself. The Ark is also described as “a mancioun” (309), a word the Vulgate Bible uses for both the tents that housed Moses and the ancient Israelites in the desert and the heavenly dwellings Jesus promises his disciples in John 14:2.⁴¹ The sense that these descriptive words in *Cleanness* provide is that Noah has constructed and captains a vessel that carries items consecrated to God’s service, the surviving remnant of people and animals, which he is responsible for preserving. The “lodezmon” (424), or pilot of this craft, the poet reminds us, is God Himself, but it is also in a sense Noah, who built the “cofer ... of tres, clanlych planed” (310)—even his carpentry was clean, and it is his continuing cleanness, his avoidance of the contamination of filth that destroyed the rest of the world, which ensures this consecrated ship’s safety. His rejection of the unclean raven who “fyllez his wombe” with “the foule flesch” of dead bodies (462) in favor of the clean dove as his chosen messenger gives a final emphasis to this sense of Noah as a superlatively clean representative of humanity.

When the Ark finally settles on dry land, in line 501, the associations between Noah and the clean priests of the introduction become even more explicit. His first action after opening the door is to select a number of clean animals for sacrifice:

Bot Noe of vche honest kynde nem [selected] out an
odde,
And heuened [raised] vp an auter and halzed hit fayre,
And sette a sakerfyse theron of vch a ser kynde
That watz comly and clene: God kepez non other.

When bremly [brightly] brened those bestez, and the
 brethe rysed,
 The sauour of his sacrafyse so3t to Hym euen
 That al spedez and spyllez; He spekes with that ilke
 In comly comfort ful clos and cortays wordez:
 “Now, Noe, no more nel I neuer wary [condemn]
 Alle the mukel mayny on molde for no mannez synnez
 ” (505–14)

Noah continues the spotlessly clean conduct for which God and the poet commended him at the beginning of the story, by offering an “honest,” “comly and clene” sacrifice that he “heuened ... and hal3ed” himself, just as the Ark was “houen” (413) by the waves and consecrated to God’s service. And God responds in kind—in exchange for the “comly” sacrifice, God speaks to Noah in “comly comfort ful clos,” as if he were a close friend, and with “cortays wordez,” a reminder that Noah is not one of the counterfeiting priests who “cortaysye wont” (13). His cleanness in offering the sacrifice at the altar leads directly and immediately to the “gret mede” promised from God to clean priests (12), including an unasked-for blessing: God promises never again to destroy all the earth for the sake of mankind’s sin. Though he has spoken no words of prayer, at least none that are recorded in the poem or its biblical source, the “sauour of his sacrafyse” alone is enough to extract a promise from God to mitigate His wrath—the same promise for which Abraham will have to plead at length in lines 713–76. In his cleanness, Noah plays the priestly role of intercessor, not only between God and the seven other people remaining on earth, but between God and all successive generations of humanity. He is, in a sense, the priest that God intended Adam to be, cleansing and blessing the people who come after him rather than contaminating them, as both their physical and spiritual progenitor. The poet’s omission of the subsequent biblical story of Noah’s drunkenness and cursing of his sons (Gen. 9:20–27) only further emphasizes his role as a perfectly clean exemplar and counterpoint to Adam. So too the poet’s decision to exclude almost entirely Noah’s wife, who appears in fourteenth-century mystery plays as a comically shrewish woman who beats her husband.⁴²

The remainder of God’s speech, which includes the commands to multiply and work the land, ends with the imperative for Noah to “rengenez 3e therinne” (527), to reign over all the earth. The man who once ruled only himself in a masterless world is now the master, and the “fowre frekez,” Noah and his sons, “of the folde fongez the empyre [take impe-

rial control]" (540). Noah possesses temporal and spiritual authority over literally every living person in the world—a position which writers on the anticlerical side of fourteenth-century dominion controversies repeatedly argued the church and its leaders should never hold—in truth, the idea of church officials wielding temporal power provoked profound anxiety even when only imagined theoretically. The poet is careful, however, not to allow Noah's powerful claim over the world to translate into any contemporary context. He has already been at pains to establish the patriarch's unique level of worthiness and cleanliness. Now, immediately after describing Noah's king-like authority, he delivers a harsh warning to anyone who might wish to emulate him:

Forthy war [beware] the now, wy3e that worschyp
desyres
In His comlych courte that Kyng is of blysse,
In the fylthe of the flesch that thou be founden neuer,
Tyl any water in the worlde to wasche the fayly [in
vain].
For is no segge vnder sunne so seme [seemly] of his
craftez,
If he be sulped in synne, that syttez vncleue;
On spec of a spote may spede [cause] to mysse
Of the syzte of the Souerayn that syttez so hy3e.
(545–52)

The poet warns that those who desire "worschyp" cannot indulge in even the smallest measure of fleshly filth. No man is so skilled at "his craftez" to fool God or cause Him to ignore a "spec of a spote" of sin. To "conterfete crafte" as the hypocritical priests attempt to do (13) is impossible, since even a speck of filth causes the soul to "be sulped," just as those priests "sulpen" themselves and God (15), and this defilement causes the sinful man to "mysse" the "syzte" of God enthroned in heaven, a reminder of the poet's opening quotation of the sixth Beatitude and its negative corollary—that those whose hearts are not clean will not have "syzt" (29) of God. As the poet will restate in nearly identical language a few lines later, though He will never again destroy the earth, "The venym and the vylanye and the vycios fylthe / That bysulpez mannez saule in vnsounde hert" still provokes God to anger and brings punishment, "That he his Saueour ne see with syzt of his y3en" (574–76). These sinful men will miss not only the sight of heaven but also the "worschyp" they desire. The poet does

not make direct reference here to the dominion controversy, but his great care in outlining a nearly impossible standard of righteousness immediately after describing a historically unique example of temporal-spiritual dominion would no doubt meet with approval from those anticlerical writers who promoted the concept of “dominion by grace,” starting with FitzRalph in *De Pauperie Salvatoris*, then Wyclif in *De Dominio Divino*, both of whom argue that only a perfectly righteous man can assert dominion over temporal possessions, and that any sin compels him to forfeit that claim.⁴³ Noah has reign over the entire post-diluvian world, but only as a result of his spotless righteousness, a state these writers emphatically agree does not describe the contemporary priesthood.

The dominion that *Cleanness*’s next priestly exemplar, Abraham, exercises appears to be significantly more constrained than Noah’s, though he too is described as a “goodmon” (611) and “swete” (640), one whom God considers a “frende” (642), and who serves his angelic guests with all ritual propriety on a “clene clothe” (634). We have already explored several of the ways Abraham’s actions toward his guests are priest-like, as he prepares a fattened calf and unleavened wafers, raises them as if in sacramental consecration, then “mynystres” to his guests. To these observations we may add that Abraham washes their feet in a Christ-like manner (618), that he promises to “wynne [bring] Yow wy3t of water a lyttel” (617), with a verb for carrying water that recalls both the water-wine of Christ and the wine-blood of Communion, and that the “morsel of bred” he serves is intended “to baume Your hertte” (620), as if it has properties of spiritual healing. Nevertheless, he must “biseche” (614) the three angels (a Trinity that fuses into a single God at around line 669) to stay for the meal, in contrast to Noah, whom God approached with his plans for the Ark and spoke in “comly comfort ful clos” (512) without his asking. Though Abraham’s wife Sarah speedily prepares the divine meal according to her husband’s specifications, she nevertheless fails a test of faith when the angels announce that she will bear a son at her advanced age—she temporarily becomes “Saré the madde” (654), laughing uncontrollably and then compounding the error by swearing “by hir trawthe” (667) that she did not laugh. Sarah’s failure of “trawthe” is clearly less serious than Adam’s (236), but this minor imperfection coincides with Abraham’s seemingly less intimate relationship with God than the patriarchs before him enjoyed, contributing to a general sense across these exempla that God is withdrawing Himself by degrees from mankind, from the “bliss” ordained for Adam in Eden, to the “comfort” of close friendship with Noah, now

to a more formal master–servant relationship, in which Abraham must “beseech” an audience, then continually beg pardon as he makes requests, “Sir, with Yor leue” (715).

It turns out to be these requests, however, more than his making sacrifices or serving sacrament-like meals, that constitute Abraham’s most significant priestly actions in the story. Though Lot is depicted later as an intermediary between God and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, here it is Abraham the outsider who acts as an intercessor for the “re3tful” people of the cities (724)—a group whose size he unfortunately does not know. In his conversation with God, Abraham notes first that in the destruction planned for Sodom, “the wykked and the worthy schal on wrake suffer” (717), and that this type of injustice “watz neuer Thy won [custom] that wro3tez vus alle” (720). Through praise, he acts as if to remind God of His own praiseworthy attributes, in this case His history of mercy, and to prevent Him from acting in opposition to them. “That nas neuer Thyn note [custom] ... That art so gaynly a God and of goste mylde” (727–28), he says, apparently unaware of the scene of world-ending wrath readers of the poem have just experienced—that the God “that wro3tez vus alle,” in Abraham’s phrase, is the same “Wy3 that wro3t alle thinges” from the introduction, who is “wonder wroth” (5) at even a speck of filth. But his rhetorical strategy works, as far as he dares to push it.

Amity Reading, attempting to discern a controlling metaphor for the poem, points out that the inclusion of Abraham’s lengthy negotiation with God is a non-sequitur if the poet’s main concern is sexual impurity, and proposes instead the theme of sacrificial feasting, with Abraham as a servant whose ritual courtesy toward the angels allows him such intimacy with God.⁴⁴ Reading’s view has much to recommend it, but the two scenes make even better sense as a pair of exemplary actions by a model priest—Abraham performs a ritual purification with water, prepares a sacrificial meal, consecrates and administers it, then intercedes with God on behalf of the people, all functions the ideal fourteenth-century priest would be expected to perform. As in the biblical source, Abraham continues his intercessory efforts, requesting mercy for progressively smaller groups of people, always with scrupulously polite and humble language, until God agrees to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if just ten righteous people are found there. For reasons unexplained in either the biblical or poetic version of the story, “thenne arest the renk and razt [reached] no fyrr [further]” (766). The poet does not attempt to explain why Abraham stops at ten—the actual number of righteous turns out to

be four, if Lot's family is included—but he is unwilling to let this exemplar fail at the model of priestly intercessory prayer he has depicted for the last 52 lines. So the poet gives Abraham a final plea which does not appear in the Genesis account:

Meke [merciful] Mayster, on Thy mon to mynne
 [think] if The lyked,
 Loth lengez [dwells] in 3on leede [place] that is my lef
 [beloved] brother;
 He syttez ther in Sodomis, Thy seruaunt so pouere,
 Among tho mansed [cursed] men that han The much
 greued.
 3if Thou tynez [destroy] that toun, tempre Thyn yre,
 As Thy mersy may malte [soften], Thy meke to spare.
 (771–76)

As a conclusion to his lengthy bargaining, Abraham fixes no precise number on the “meke” people whom he thinks should be enough to win God’s mercy—instead, he asks for a general abatement in the harshness of the destruction, with the phrase “tempre Thyn yre,” and reminds God that his “lef brother” Lot lives in Sodom. As a singular noun, the “meke” for whom Abraham pleads refers to Lot, but it seems also to be a collective term that includes Lot’s family and any other righteous people Abraham does not know. His formal request for mercy becomes touchingly personal in this moment, and he makes an informal plea, without his customary apology, to spare his kinsman and any others he may have neglected to include in his bargaining. The intercessory prayer which might otherwise have appeared a failure becomes a success, especially when viewed in conjunction with Abraham’s appearance after the cities’ destruction, when it is revealed that he has stayed awake all night hoping for Lot’s safety: “Abraham ful erly watz vp on the morne, / That alle nazt much niye [anguish] hade nomen [endured] in his hert, / Al in longing for Lot leyen in a wache” (1001–3). God does not spare the cities—the formal conditions of the bargain are not met, as fewer than ten righteous people live there—but He does send a pair of angels to spare Lot, his daughters, and (at least temporarily) his wife. Abraham serves as a model, not of perfect sinlessness or freedom from doubt, but of sacramental purity and its connection to a priest’s ability to offer effective petitions on behalf of people under his spiritual care.

Lot’s intercessory effectiveness, as revealed in the following exemplum, is far more limited than either Noah’s or Abraham’s, a condition

linked to the relative impurity of the feast he offers the angels who visit him. In keeping with the poem's general sense that God is moving progressively further away from humanity, only two angels visit Lot, in contrast to the three who feasted with Abraham, and the poet refers to them as "aungels" (782, 795, 895, 937, 941), a continual reminder that they are only representatives; unlike the young men who visited Abraham, they will not allow Lot to converse directly with God. Lot must "byseche" (799) them to stay, as Abraham did, and urges them "longe wyth lufflych wordez" (809) to enter his house for the evening rather than remaining outdoors. The actions Lot performs with the angels mirror the priestly conduct Abraham performed in the previous scene—he washes their feet (802), his wife welcomes them (813), and he instructs her to make unleavened bread (819–20)—with one major exception. Despite Lot's instructions to serve the angels food "wyth no sour [leaven] ne no salt" (820), his wife resentfully adds these ingredients and "wrathed oure Lorde" (828). The angelic guests take no notice of this secret sin—rather than confronting her as God did Sarah, they remain "gay and ful glad, of glam debonere" as they eat (830)—but the spiritual contamination the seasoned food represents entails serious consequences for Lot as a spiritual leader, beyond the obvious consequence of losing his wife later to the poetic justice of being turned into a pillar of salt.

One of Lot's priestly roles appears to be to act, like Abraham, as an intermediary between the city and God. When he first appears in the poem, he is sitting before the city's fortifications or temple ("loge"), apparently waiting to greet or challenge anyone who wishes to enter. But he directs his gaze inward as well as outward, watching the men inside the city as they engage in some form of recreation: "As he stared into the strete ther stout men played" (787). The poet will reveal soon enough that the "japez" (864, 877) or games the Sodomites consider playful are not the "play of paramorez" (700) God says He has designed for "a male and his make" (703), but rather homosexual gang rape and sexual congress with supernatural beings, akin to the "japez ille" (272) of the demons who begat giants in Noah's time. When the mob of men appears at his door to seize the angels, Lot "schrank at the hert" because "he knew the costoum" (850–51) of the city—he already knows, from past observation, what violent sexual game the men prefer. This fact lends special significance to the opening description of him watching Sodom's men at "play." At the moment he is introduced, Lot is not simply observing innocent recreation—he is watching over the city as its moral guardian, attempting

to keep its citizens away from sinful activity. His most significant priestly role, the poet progressively reveals, is not administering sacraments or interceding through prayer, but rather preaching, teaching, and offering counsel.

Unfortunately for the city, it is a role in which he is completely ineffective. As the men threaten to batter down his door, Lot stands before them on his doorstep like a priest before a congregation and attempts to deliver a persuasive sermon: “Thenne he meled [spoke] to tho men mesurable wordez, / For harlotez with his hendelayk [courtesy] he hoped to chast [restrain]” (859–60). In the 12-line speech that follows, Lot offers to “kenne” (865) and “biteche” (871) them a better way of living, and though his method is dubious—he offers his daughters for the mob to “laykez [play] wyth hem as yow lyst” (872), in the hope that their female beauty will turn the men from their lust for male angels—the role he attempts to play in this moment is one of moral teacher. His “mesurable wordez” and “hendelayk” fail utterly, however, as the crowd reacts with violent resentment, giving Lot a clear statement that they have no wish to see him in a position of spiritual authority:

Wost thou not wel that thou wonez [came] here a wy3e
strange,
An outcomlyng [outsider], a carle [peasant]? We kylle
of thyn heued!
Who joynd the be jostyse oure japez to blame,
That com a boy to this bor3, tha3 thou be burne
ryche?” (875–78)

Though Lot is ultimately clean enough in God’s eyes to avoid the inevitable wrath and destruction, the measure of uncleanness represented by his wife’s contamination of the feast renders him completely ineffective as a priest or political leader. Despite his wealth and his position as one who welcomes and entertains guests to the town, Lot is still considered a “wy3e strange,” an outsider among them. His attempts to offer guidance and counsel to the Sodomites have exactly the opposite of their intended effect, enraging rather than calming, and rather than growing spiritually enlightened, the men of Sodom are literally struck “blynde” (886) after the speech. In the same way, his attempts to urge the “two myri men” (934) who are betrothed to his daughters to flee are unsuccessful to the point of absurdity: “And thay token hit as tayt [joke] and tented [heeded] hit lyttel; / Tha3 fast lathed [called] hem Loth, thay le3en ful styлле” (935–

36). An urgent call for self-preservation that should spur them to action instead causes the young men to lie in bed, perfectly motionless, a parody of spiritual torpor. In contrast, when the angels “Prechande ... the perile” they face (942), the family’s response is immediate: “And thay kayre ne con, and kenely [quickly] flowen” (945). The spotlessly clean angels speak potent words that spur people to action, whereas Lot has not found the “Fayre formez ... in forthering his speche” which the poet promises to those who rightly “comende” cleanness (3).

Once Lot’s family is removed, leaving no intermediary between the cities and God’s wrath, Sodom and Gomorrah are completely destroyed, leaving only the Dead Sea, a freakishly unnatural location where nothing is as it seems. A lake of apparently normal water causes lead and human bodies to float and feathers to sink (1025–26, 1029–32), trees like “tray-toures” produce fruit that looks “red and so ripe and rychely hwed” but is full of ashes (1041–48), and the image of Lot’s wife appears to be “a stonen statue” (995) but tastes of salt. All of these strikingly ironic images might be read as physical manifestations of hypocrisy, being “honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylthez” (14), just as the “sour” which Lot’s wife added to the angels’ bread (820) might be linked to the “sourdough” of the Pharisees’ hypocrisy in Luke 12:1.

But it is not Lot’s failure as a priestly figure that causes this outbreak of wrath, however impotent his words might be to prevent it. The fault of Sodom and Gomorrah that drives God to “greme” (947) is described in the same terms as the “fylthez” of the hypocritical priests (14), the “fylth of the flesche” God drives from His heart (202), and the “fylthe in fleschlych dedez” of the antediluvians (265)—though it is detailed more precisely here than in any exemplum thus far. “Thay han lerned a lyst [practice] that lykez me ille,” God tells Abraham, “That thay han founden in her flesch of fautez the werst: / Vch male matz his mach a man as hymselfen, / And fylter follyly in fere on femmalez wyse” (693–96), an unmistakable reference to homosexual intercourse. In the Genesis account of this exchange, God speaks only of the cities’ generic “synne” (Genesis 18:20), and even within the account of the Sodomites’ attempted rape, it is unclear whether sexual sin is the primary reason God has decided to destroy the cities. For God’s explanation in *Cleanness*, the poet borrows imagery from other passages of Scripture, in particular Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, where a list of sins that lead to “vncleanness” includes “men in to men wrouyten filthehed” (Romans 1:27). What is most surprising about God’s lament for Sodom and Gomorrah, however, is not his specific identification of homosexuality

as their primary fault, but His description of the sexual ethic they *should* be practicing, an encomium to the pleasures of heterosexual love unparalleled in Middle English religious poetry:

I compast [devised] hem a kynde crafte and kende hit
 hem derne [secretly],
 And amed [esteemed] hit in Myn ordenaunce oddely
 dere,
 And dyȝt [placed] drwry [love] therinne, doole [sex]
 alther-swettest,
 And the play of paramorez I portrayed Myseluen,
 And made therto a maner myriest of other:
 When two true togeder had tyȝed hemseluen,
 Bytwene a male and his make such merthe schulde
 come,
 Welnyȝe pure paradys moȝt preue no better;
 Ellez thay moȝt honestly ayther other welde [possess],
 At a styлле stollen steuen [meeting], vnstereȝ
 [undisturbed] wyth syȝt,
 Luf-lowe [love-flame] hem bytwene lasched so hote
 That alle the meschefeȝ on mold moȝt hit not sleke.
 (697–708)

The “play of paramorez” He has devised for “true” couples who have tied themselves together in matrimony is literally the “myriest”—merriest, most pleasing, most beautiful—action a person can perform, God says in this passage. It not only represents but practically equals the bliss of heaven, since “pure paradys” itself may not prove to be more pleasant, and it appears to have a sacramental power over sin, since all the “meschefeȝ” in the world cannot quench its fire.

This passage, along with Lot’s speech to the Sodomites, has attracted by far the most critical commentary of any in *Cleanness*, in part because its view of sexuality is so striking in comparison to other religious writing from the period. As Andrew and Waldron observe, “This emphatic statement of the value of sexual love is a startlingly unusual attitude to find in a medieval homiletic poem—particularly as the poet gives these words to God.”⁴⁵ Some have viewed the poet’s high praise of marital love as evidence that he was not a priest,⁴⁶ or that his audience is not clerical,⁴⁷ others as evidence that he is a priest charged with investigating sexual matters in confession⁴⁸ or preaching about them.⁴⁹ But nearly all have noted the sharp contrast between the poet’s praise of heterosexual pleasure in mar-

riage and his fierce condemnation of pleasure in homosexual intercourse, which appear in such close proximity that critical attempts to draw a logical connection between them are inevitable. Both are clearly linked as forms of sexual pleasure and play, but for the poet, the former is a glimpse of heaven which has the power to counteract sin, the latter intolerable filth which God hates more than hell (168). But how exactly are the two connected?

Michael Calabrese and Eric Eliason argue that the poet's traditional but strenuous rejection of homosexual practice is necessitated by his decision to present pleasure and not procreation as the primary justification for marriage and sex: "from the perspective of medieval theology, the absence of the procreative argument from this passage is nothing short of astonishing. As a consequence of this omission—the absence of a procreative telos for sexual activity in the poem—a new sexual order based on pleasure emerges."⁵⁰ Since the standard objection to sodomy in this period is that "sterile homosexual acts violate nature," and since the poet lodges no such objection, he must instead generate for the reader "feelings of physical revulsion to vilify such practices."⁵¹ Elizabeth Keiser concurs with this reading, agreeing that the poet depicts sodomy in aesthetic terms "that stress its repulsive filthiness rather than its irrational sterility,"⁵² and that this requires "sanitizing" heterosexual intercourse as spotless and clean, a strategy in some ways at odds with traditional Christian teaching. Jeremy Citrome disagrees, asserting that the poet actually *does* make a procreative argument for heterosexuality that readers familiar with medieval medical terminology and a Christian "theology of the body" would comprehend.⁵³

But there is another possible explanation for the poem's starkly differing treatment of competing forms of sexual pleasure, one which does not require the poet to be either logically inconsistent, engaged in a complex aesthetic argument, or participating in an obscure procreative discourse. That is, with his praise of marital sexuality, the poet may be making an implicit argument against clerical celibacy. Keiser mentions this interpretation as a "reasonable" possibility in her reading of the passage, though she labels it "reductive."⁵⁴ In either case, it does place *Cleanness* relatively seamlessly within a particular strain of anticlerical discourse among the poet's contemporaries.

Though it is by no means a universal theme, a current that runs beneath many Lollard texts is the contention that the ban against clerical marriage and enforcement of celibacy actually promotes sexual sin and hypocrisy—the two faults with which *Cleanness* is most concerned.

Wyclif himself never argues against vows of celibacy directly, but he does write in *Opus Evangelicum* that “women are deprived of possible husbands, who have shut themselves in the cloister of religious orders.”⁵⁵ The Wycliffite treatise *An Apology for Lollard Doctrines* examines the question of religious vows at length and concludes that they are wrongful when taken “more for lust of flesh ... than for honor and worschip of God,” and compares the enforcement of mandatory vows to those of the false teachers of 1 Timothy 4:1–5, “forbeding men to be weddid, and abstening fro metis, that God hath maad to be tan of feithfulmen.”⁵⁶ The accusation that sodomy is rampant among supposedly celibate students and professors at Oxford appears in the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible, in terms similar to *Cleanness*:

Loke now wher Oxunford is in thre orrible synnes ... the ij [second] orrible synne is sodomye and strong mayntenaunce thereof, as it is knowen to many persones of the reume, and at the laste parlement. Alas! dyuynys, that schulden passe othere men in clenness and hoolynesse, as aungels of heuene passen free men in vertues, ben moost sclaudrid of this cursid synne azens kynde.⁵⁷

Most notably, the third of the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards*, a document nailed to the doors of Westminster Hall and St. Paul’s in 1395, draws together its opposition to religious vows and its observations about sexual sin and links them, claiming that clerical sodomy is prevalent throughout the church and pinning the blame on vows of celibacy:

The thirdd conclusion sorwful to here is that the lawe of continence annexyd to presthod, that in preiudys of wimmen was first ordeynid, inducith sodomie in al holy chirche ... Resun and experience prouit this conclusiun. ... Experience for the priue asay of syche men is, that the[i] like non wymmen.⁵⁸

The Lollards’ eleventh conclusion likewise urges nuns and widows to reject “a uow of continence” and marry, in order to avoid the sins of abortion, infanticide, masturbation, and bestiality.⁵⁹ The Lollard sermon “On the Leaven of the Pharisees,” examined in chapter 2, blames the injunction against clerical marriage for attracting the wrong type of priests, “lumpis of zonge men,” who are grateful that the church “byndith hem fro wyues,” allowing them to engage in all manner of sexual misconduct, including fornication, adultery, and “the cursed synne of sodem with hem self.”⁶⁰ These young men also counsel “wymmen that it is lesse synne to trespass with hem than with othere weddid men,” and earn money by encouraging

and then absolving sins of the flesh. This state of deception, in which the external vow of celibacy covers the internal corruption of sin, causes these men to become “cursid ypocritis and distroien cristendom,” like *Cleanness*’s inwardly corrupt priests, and eventually their sins “make the erthe cursed of god,” a phrase that calls to mind the poem’s imagery of God’s wrath destroying the world and transforming Sodom and Gomorrah from a land “of erthe the swettest” (1006) into the “corsed ... clay” (1033–34) of the Dead Sea.

A solution to the problem of sexual incontinence is suggested by the poet’s vision of heterosexual intimacy elevated to the status of near-sacrament. The sexual pleasure that takes place within marriage is powerful enough that “alle the meschefeze on mold” (708) cannot disturb it. A hypothetical fourteenth-century reader confronting the poet’s high praise of marriage on its own terms—not via the philosophical, theological, or medical texts that Keiser and Citrome bring to bear on it but solely through the central images already introduced: the world-ending destruction caused by sexual sins such as bestiality and congress with demons, God’s wrath against homosexuality in Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot’s attempts to convert the Sodomites to “kynde craft” through the enticement of sex with his daughters, and God’s statement that the love-play He has ordained between “a male and his make” is impervious to any trouble or corruption—would see a fairly straightforward logic at work. In short, the poet suggests that the “kynde crafte” of marital sexual pleasure is not only pleasant in itself; it actively counteracts the temptation of sodomy. And given that the poem’s first example of spiritual filth is priests who “conterfete crafte,” this same reader could reasonably conclude that countering sodomy in the priesthood must start with providing priests access to the the divinely ordained “kynde craft” and allowing them to marry.

If we accept the argument against clerical celibacy as a legitimate possibility in this passage, a number of other thematic and interpretive possibilities open up throughout the poem. We may notice more readily, for instance, that the poet gives all three of the exemplars of clean priestly conduct so far—Noah, Abraham, and Lot—the title of “godman” (341, 611, 677, 849), a term Andrew and Waldron gloss as “householder.” In other words, all three are prosperous married men with families, property, and domestic responsibilities not shared by fourteenth-century priests. Though two traditionally celibate exemplars, Christ and Daniel, appear later in the poem, the poet pointedly makes no mention of their celibacy—their spiritual cleanness apparently derives from another source.

We may also observe that the physical sodomy that so exercises the poet in the first two exempla can be allegorized, as it often was by other anticlerical writers, to represent simony, considered to be an even graver spiritual sin, or other forms of clerical corruption and neglect. As noted in chapter 2, Wyclif draws a connection between sodomy and simony in *De Simonia*, claiming that “just as sodomy in the time of the law of nature was one of the most serious sins against nature, so simony in the time of the law of grace is one of the most serious sins against grace.”⁶¹ Monica Brzezinski Potkay also observes that “the sin of unnatural sexuality is frequently used by the authors of preaching manuals specifically as a metaphor for bad preaching: the bad preacher is by definition one who fails to spread the seed of the Word of God.”⁶² For example, the Wycliffite sermon *Of Prelates* warns that priests who “leuen [neglect] prechyng of the gospel” are not only hypocritical “sathanas transfigurid into an aungel of liȝt,” as in 2 Corinthians 11:14, but also “gostly sodomytis worse than bodily sodomytis of sodom and gomor.”⁶³ The poet’s repeated warnings against “filth of the flesch” in the first two-thirds of the poem may thus be read either literally or figuratively, in either case as extensions of the introductory warning against the dangerous filth of priests.

If the poet subscribes to the belief that spiritual sins deserve harsher punishment than physical sins, the position universally taken by writers concerned with simony, then the poem as a whole is bracketed by the two worst crimes it depicts: namely, the priests’ defilement of the Eucharist in the introduction and Belshazzar’s defilement of Temple vessels and other holy objects at the end. This perspective also provides something more than a simply chronological ordering to the biblical stories of God’s wrath. They appear in ascending order of seriousness, from Satan’s rebellion, which “wrathed not the Wyȝ” (230); to Adam’s failure, which merits vengeance “in mesure and methe” (247); to the Deluge and Sodom and Gomorrah, in which fleshly filth drives God to earth-altering destruction; and finally to Belshazzar’s spiritual filth, which leads not only to his nation’s downfall, but to a personal loss of “thyse worldes worschyp” (1802), a highly personal death in bed and display of his body, and the denial of “lykynges on lofte [in heaven] ... To loke on oure lofly Lorde late bitydes” (1803–04). The poet speculates that Belshazzar will look upon God “late”—not until the Last Judgment, at which point he will be condemned. He receives the same punishment promised to everyone corrupted by filth, the loss of the sight of God in heaven, but he is the only character we see actually receiving and serving this sentence. God’s wrath

against physical sin is nothing to take lightly, as the poet illustrates with the Deluge and Sodom, but the ultimate spiritual sin of defiling God's "gere"—practiced by the unclean priests and by Belshazzar—receives the ultimate spiritual punishment.

The prophet Daniel stands as a clean contrast to Belshazzar and a priestly exemplar in the final story, but the poet's descriptions of Daniel are not nearly as detailed as those of another exemplary character—Belshazzar's father, King Nebuchadnezzar. Two separate stories are told of Nebuchadnezzar in the poem, one by the poet-narrator as a preface to Belshazzar's feast (1175–1332), and the other by Daniel during the feast (1642–1708), as he compares Belshazzar unfavorably to his father. Ironically, though it is Nebuchadnezzar and his forces who destroy the Jewish Temple and plunder its holy vessels, he is not singled out for destruction as his son will be a generation later. To the extent that Nebuchadnezzar is ever punished by God, it is for excessive personal pride, and unlike any other character in all of *Cleanness*, he is given a chance to reform after sinning and is fully restored to his former glory as king of kings, "his sete restored" (1705). Belshazzar, on the other hand, receives an inescapable prophecy of doom on the same evening he meets his death.

The primary difference between them, the poet observes, is the manner in which they handle the holy vessels that come into their possession: "Hov charged more [heavier] watz his [Belshazzar's] chaunce [deed] that hem cherych nolde / Then his fader forloyne that feched hem wyth strenthe, / And robbed the relygioun of relykes alle" (1154–56). The king who does not cherish the relics and misuses them is held to greater account than the robber who stole them in the first place. Nebuchadnezzar serves unwittingly as the agent of God's justice against the idolatrous Israelite king Zedekiah, and when he encounters the holy vessels in the Temple, he is struck by their beauty and "sesed hem with solemneté," even praising "the Souerayn ... That watz athel ouer alle, Israel Dryzten" (1313–14). He carefully transfers them to Babylon and stores them in his treasury, "Rekenly, wyth reuerens, as he ryzt hade" (1318), an echo of the Christian priests who approach the sacrament of the altar "Reken with reuerence" (10), and a clear statement by the poet that Nebuchadnezzar has an unsailable "right" to the treasures, since God has allowed him to take them. His son Belshazzar does not handle the relics comparably; he demands "reuerens" only for himself, as he calls for neighboring kings and dukes to attend his feast, "And to reche hym reuerens, and his reuel herkken" (1369). Nebuchadnezzar's sack of Jerusalem is bloody, but he passes God's test of

cleanness because he handles the sacred vessels with appropriate respect, as if he were one of the good priests of the introduction in addition to being a pagan king, the scourge of God's wayward people. After describing the Temple's plunder, the poet makes no mention of Nebuchadnezzar's later trials, but briefly summarizes the remainder of his life and reign, which God blesses extravagantly:

That ryche [king] in gret rialté rengned his lyue,
 As conquerour of vche a cost he cayser watz hatte,
 Emperour of alle the erthe and also the saudan,
 And als the god of the grounde watz grauen his name.
 And al thurȝ dome of Daniel, fro he deuised hade
 That alle goudes com of God, and gef hit hym bi
 samples,
 That he ful clanly bicnv his carp bi the laste,
 And ofte hit mekned [humbled] his mynde, his
 maysterful werkkes.
 Bot al drawes to dyȝe with doel vpon ende:
 Bi a hathel neuer so hyȝe, he helde to grounde.
 (1321–30)

Nebuchadnezzar reigns over “alle the erthe” and even appears to style himself “god of the grounde” without fear of idolatry. He becomes in effect like Noah before him, both a priestly and kingly ruler who is granted dominion over the entire world, a state achieved because he “ful clanly” accepts the prophet Daniel's teaching that “alle goudes com of God,” that his own mastery of the world is a gift that should prompt humility. In the end, he meets death not because of any wrongdoing, but simply because it is the fate of every man.

In his reading of the poem, Ingledew pushes the anticlerical possibilities of this passage further, viewing the poet's descriptions of military action against Jerusalem as an act of dispossession, and Nebuchadnezzar as the image of an ideal king espoused by Wyclif, “who sought through disendowment to disengage the clergy and the papacy from administration of the political and secular order. ... The king's task was to reform the English church, which would become an *ecclesia regis*.”⁶⁴ This view provides at least a tentative explanation for the poet's seemingly incongruous decision not to condemn Nebuchadnezzar for atrocities against the Israelite people, particularly the torture and murder of priests, while at the same time praising him for the respectful handling of inanimate vessels. Though Nebuchadnezzar is more properly understood as a king than

a priest, the poet uses his story to demonstrate the possibility, indeed the necessity, of a secular king exercising rightful dominion over a corrupt spiritual leadership.

When Nebuchadnezzar temporarily falls as a result of pride, his punishment is itself a type of disendowment, effected directly by God. As long as Nebuchadnezzar keeps “clos in his hert” Daniel’s original teaching that “vche [every] pouer past out of that Prynce euen [directly],” then “There watz no mon vpon molde of myzt as hymseluen” (1654–56). But when he “forzetes” this truth and states aloud, “I am god of the grounde” (1663)—the very statement the poet appeared to quote approvingly in line 1324—he is transformed into a wild animal, compared variously to a wolf, ass (1675), bull, ox (1682), horse (1684), cow (1685), kite (1697), and eagle (1698). Rather than ruling over the earth and its creatures as Noah did, he is reduced to the status of the animals on the Ark, over which all humanity is given dominion. To put it in FitzRalphian or Wycliffian terms, Nebuchadnezzar attempts to claim lordship over that which he has no right, and as a result he loses even the ordinary level of dominion God grants to every man. He is restored through a process similar to the sacrament of penance—through the “wo suffered” (1701) in his trial, he is enabled not only to “com to knowlach” (1702) and intellectually assent that God is the one true creator and ruler, but he also “loued that Lorde and leued in trawthe” (1703), with the implication that he has freely pledged his love and honor as a vassal to a feudal lord.

Nebuchadnezzar’s downfall is ultimately little more than a hiccup on the way to his eventual glory, and he is allowed this exalted status as a pagan king both because of his “clanly” responsiveness to Daniel’s teaching, and because of his “rekenly” reverent handling of the Temple relics, which inspire him to “wonder” (1310) and praise. Nebuchadnezzar appears not to understand the relics’ spiritual significance—he does not use them himself or allow Israelite priests to use them for their intended purpose in the Temple, but simply stores them in his treasury as valuable exotic objects. It is crucial for the reader to understand their significance, however, as the scene of Belshazzar’s defilement approaches. For the poet, the holy vessels are more than simply the items essential for Jewish Temple worship prescribed in Exodus 25–31, his primary biblical source for their physical description—they are also prefigurements of the “gere” used to administer the Christian Eucharist. In the introduction to Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar’s story, the poet remarks that God is outraged at the defilement of anything He has claimed as His own, whether a person or “bot

a bassyn, a bolle other a scole [cup], / A dysche other a dobler [platter], that Dryȝtyn onez serued" (1145–46), all items resembling baptismal and eucharistic implements.

Throughout the story that follows, the poet alludes repeatedly to this connection between Jewish and Christian sacrificial ritual, most notably with his use of the word "guere" at the moment Belshazzar decides to use the Temple vessels for eating and drinking—"Nov is alle this guere geten glotounes to serue" (1505). Prior to that moment, in two passages describing the gear itself (1271–90; 1337–1498), the poet focuses on the cleanness and consecrated sanctity of the implements, which were originally constructed by Solomon "Wyth alle the coyntyse [wisdom, skill] that he cowthe clene to wyrke" (1287), and which include both "vesselment," cups and dishes, and "vestures clene," priestly vestments (1288), the two primary definitions of the word "gere" as it relates to the Eucharist. The containers which hold the Temple relics are referred to as "kystes" (1338) and "coferes" (1428), terms which the poet has used previously on numerous occasions to describe Noah's Ark (310, 339, 346, 449, 478), and which can also refer to containers for relics and other religious objects in a Christian context.⁶⁵ Baldwin also sees a reference to the castle-like design of pyxes, the locked boxes used to store consecrated wafers, in the description of covered cups "as casteles arayed, / Enbaned [fortified] vnder batelment with bantelles [coursings] quoynt" (1458–59), with "fylyoles [turrets]" and "Pinacles" (1462–63) jutting from their rims.⁶⁶ These connections between the Temple vessels, Noah's Ark, and containers for the Host are further solidified by the poet's note that they "Houen vpon this auter watz" by Belshazzar (1451), just as the Ark "houen watz on hyȝe" by the waves (413). The poet also emphasizes that these articles have been consecrated by the hands of God's priests, just as is "hondled" in the poem's introduction—the brass altar and vessels upon it are twice described as "blessed wyth bischopes hondes" (1445, 1718), the "ornementes of Goddez hous that holy were maked" (1799); they are also "anoynted" (1446) and "presyous in His presens" (1496), and only a few select men, "summe" of the Temple priests, can handle them (1497).

The poet twice lingers on the Temple's sacred candlesticks, first simply describing them (1272–75), then depicting Belshazzar's precise positioning of them at the center of his profane table (1478–88). The important role of candles in various forms of medieval English eucharistic ritual is well covered in Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars*, in which he describes the huge number of candles required to light the Easter

“sepulchre,” containing a pyx with the Host and Crucifix, during and after Good Friday services, as well as the supposed “apotropaic power” of wax stumps and drippings from candles used in Candlemas and Easter services, which many laymen considered sacramental.⁶⁷ Duffy’s observations about the importance of candles to Christian worship aligns with the poet’s description of the “mony morteres [bowls] of wax” at the base of the Temple’s great candelabrum (1487), positioned to catch the drippings, and his statement that “Hit [the candelabrum] watz not wonte in that wone [company] to wast no serges [candles] / Bot in temple of the trau-the trwly to stonde / Bifore the *sancta sanctorum* . . .” (1489–91)—even the anthropomorphic candle-holder itself does not like to see its candles wasted on pagans who do not appreciate their purpose. In each passage, the poet repeats the phrase “*sancta sanctorum*” (1274, 1491), a reference to the Temple’s Holy of Holies where the objects are meant to be used, but also, according to Ingledew, a reference to the *Ordo Missae* (order of the Mass) of Innocent III, which instructs Christian priests to say the words “*ut ad Sancta sanctorum puris mereamur mentibus introire*” as they approach the altar to consecrate the Eucharist.⁶⁸

With few exceptions, the poet chooses to describe items from his Exodus source that have a clear traditional counterpart in Christian sacramental ritual, perhaps an attempt to heighten the Christian reader’s level of outrage to match God’s. According to Baldwin, Belshazzar’s sacrilege “is an act equivalent to a medieval witch’s defilement of the Host,”⁶⁹ or in Ingledew’s words an “allegorical profanation of the eucharistic ritual . . . a black mass.”⁷⁰ Thus, a section of the poem which modern readers might view as a structural flaw—as the action-packed narrative of Daniel grinds to a halt to devote 182 lines to ritual ornaments—is actually central to the poem’s thematic structure. Like the priest-king Nebuchadnezzar before him, Belshazzar has been entrusted with the care of God’s gear, but like the unclean Christian priests who earn God’s wrath, he has defiled it. His punishment is more personal and more eternal than any other in the poem, but all the same, it is entirely predictable: he is “coursed for his vnclannes” (1800), stripped of every shred of his former dominion, “of thyse worldes worchyp wrast out for euer” (1802), and denied the chance to “loke on oure loffy Lorde” (1804).

Of course, Belshazzar’s feast scene also features literal priests, the Chaldean “scoleres” (1554), “segges” (1559), and “clerkes” (1562, 1575, 1579, 1583) who fail to interpret God’s handwriting on the wall in Babylon. These false priests are little more than caricatures of

spiritual blindness, but they provide an important parallel with their king, Belshazzar, and a contrast with Daniel, who supersedes them. Like Belshazzar, they serve gods that are so clearly false creations that their description borders on ludicrous: “fals fantummes of fendes, formed with handes / Wyth tool out of harde tre ... And of stokkes and stones,” which Belshazzar and his priests nevertheless raise “on lofte” and call “stoute goddes” (1341–43). In a departure from his biblical source, apparently unwilling to accept that even ancient pagans could genuinely believe such foolishness, the poet allows himself a rare moment of absurdist humor as he describes Belshazzar’s reactions to unanswered prayers from the idols. If the “gods” begrudge him any request, “to gremen [anger] his hert, / He cleches to a gret klubbe and knokkes hem to peces” (1347–48). The earthly ruler becomes in this passage a comic parody of the almighty God, who is similarly driven to “greme” and drives filth from His heart by destroying His creation—but what this verbal echo also implies is that Belshazzar *knows* his gods are only created objects, which he is free to dispose of as he pleases.

When God’s writing appears on the wall and it becomes necessary to read “the scrypture” that the mysterious hand has “scraped wyth a scrof penne” (1546), the priests have only these eternally silent gods and empty “wycheecraftes” (1560) to call upon. The poet observes wryly, “And alle that loked on that letter as lewed [ignorant] thay were / As thay had loked in the lether of my lyft bote” (1580–81). Belshazzar promises a clerical office as reward to anyone who can solve the riddle: “He schal be prymate and prynce of pure clergie” (1570), but in the end, the would-be interpreters are neither “pure” nor even properly “clergy,” as they are seeking guidance from gods they have created themselves. The wise “scoleres” Belshazzar thought he was calling to his aid are revealed to be not only laughably ignorant but spiritually evil, more akin to black magicians than pure clergymen, befitting a profane Mass to “Satanas the blake” (1449)—they are “warlazes” (1560), “Wychez and walkyries” (1577), and “sorsers of exorsismus” (1579), and when he understands the full extent of their uselessness, Belshazzar curses and threatens to hang them (1583–84).

At first glance, Daniel does not appear to have any tremendous advantage over the rival priests, though this is mainly the result of his being so thinly described in comparison to the biblical text, which reveals his character through multiple stories and prophecies. When introduced in the poem, he is simply “dere Daniel ... that watz deuine [a diviner] noble” (1302), one of “moni a modey [proud] moder-chylde” (1303)

brought to Babylon in exile. The queen recommends him for his past success in helping Nebuchadnezzar with a similar problem—"He devysed his dremes to the dere trawthe" (1604)—but this talent does not immediately distinguish him from the "Deuinores of demorlaykes that dremes cowthe rede" (1578) among the Chaldean priests. His primary priestly advantage appears to be simply that he is not an idolator, and unlike the obsequious priests, he is willing to speak the truth that Belshazzar already seems to know, that his idols are "lese [false] goddez that lyf hadn neuer, / Made of stokkes and stonez that neuer styry [stir] mozt" (1719–20). Also unlike the black magicians, his appearance and actions are repeatedly described as "clean"—to Nebuchadnezzar "he expowned clene" truths (1606); his prophecies are "cler" (1618); he salutes Belshazzar "clanly" as he approaches (1621); and when he diagnoses the king's spiritual condition, he focuses not on his foolish idolatry but on his uncleanness—he has "avyled" the holy vessels with "vanyté vnclene" (1713) and provoked "the Fader of heuen" with acts of "frothande fylthe" (1721). The poem does not specify, however, exactly what makes Daniel clean and therefore what allows him to access such prophetic power. The biblical narrative highlights Daniel's abstinence from alcohol and meat (Daniel 1:8–16), and the book of Isaiah refers to the future Babylonian exiles as "chast" (Isaiah 39:7), but no mention of either of these qualities appears in the poem. Daniel is merely clean in an undefinable way, and the queen notes that he "hatz the gost of God" in his "sawyle" (1598–99) and "the sped of the spyryt, that sprad hym withinne" (1607).

The poet has already used three previous exemplars of clean priestly conduct—Noah, Abraham, and Lot—to illustrate three of the primary duties of an effective priest: administration of sacraments, intercessory prayer, and preaching. Now, through Daniel, he adds a fourth: the reading, translation, and interpretation of Scripture. Belshazzar promises Daniel a great reward "if thou redes hit by ryzt and hit to resoun brynges" (1633)—if he can first comprehend the mysterious letters on the wall and then give them a reasonable interpretation. He even provides Daniel precise instructions for how to do so: "Fyrst telle me the tyxte of the tede [tied-together] lettres, / And sythen the mater of the mode mene me thereafter" (1634–35)—he wants the words' narrow definitions first, then their more general meaning or "mater," what the Wycliffite Bible translators term the "wordis" and the "sentence," respectively.⁷¹ And Daniel obliges, delivering first a general introduction in which he compares Belshazzar unfavorably to his father and condemns him for defiling the Temple vessels

(1642–1724), then taking “vch fygure” (1726) of the three-word phrase one word at a time and explaining both their definitions and their larger significance (1725–40). His reward, ironically, is not only a promotion to the rank of duke but a set of priestly vestments, “frokkes of fyn cloth ... in ful dere porpor [purple]” (1742–43). As always in *Cleanness*, however, external clothing proves worthless in comparison to internal cleanness, and the new king Darius invades that very night, slaughters Belshazzar’s noblemen, and renders Daniel’s promotion meaningless.

Another movement within *Cleanness* that reaches its logical end in this final story is God’s continual withdrawal from interaction with the human race. The reason reading and interpretation is important for Daniel in a way it was not for the previous priestly exemplars is that God speaks to Daniel through writing, not orally as He did for Noah, Abraham, and Lot, and He appears as a disembodied hand, which the poet further divides into “paume” and “fyngres” (1533), rather than as the full-bodied angels visiting Abraham and Lot. By the end of Belshazzar’s story, though God is still present and active, He has no physical presence at all, but appears merely as “the gost of God” (1598) or a “spyryt” (1607) within Daniel. In this sense, Daniel is the most closely connected of all of *Cleanness*’s biblical characters to the fourteenth-century priests the poet addresses in the introduction.

As with all of the *Gawain* poems, the closing lines of *Cleanness* link back to the opening lines, though not through precise verbal repetition. Rather, the poem’s conclusion contains a thematic echo of its introduction. Unlike the other three works in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, it does not do so with an exact verbal repetition of the first line, but with a thematic echo of the introduction. In “thrynne wyses,” the poet says, he has demonstrated that “vnclannes” cannot dwell near the “corage [heart] dere” of God (1805–06), and he repeats the biblical theme which began the poem, a rewording of the sixth Beatitude’s promise: “And those that seme [seemly] arn and swete schyn [shall] se His face” (1810). The final lines are not a precise repetition of the opening passage, but their words sound familiar: “That we gon gay in oure gere that grace He vus sende, / That we may serue in His syzt, ther solace neuer blynnez [ends]” (1811–12). This final exhortation includes terms which earlier in the poem were connected with priests or priestly figures—it was God’s “gere” that unclean priests defiled (16) and Daniel wore when he proved himself a true prophet (1568); those who “serue” have included the angels (18), Abraham and Lot serving sacramental meals to divine

representatives (639, 829), priests offering sacrifices in the Jewish Temple (1146), and even the black magicians of Babylon, who “serue Satanas the blake” (1449). But the exhortation is also expressed with two repetitions of the inclusive pronoun “we”—*we* will wear God’s gear if He will send us grace; *we* will serve in His sight with neverending bliss as the angels do. The poem’s repeated warnings against filth and God’s apocalyptic wrath appear to be directed at the poet’s clerical contemporaries, but its positive promises of cleanness and heavenly bliss are open to all readers, including the poet himself.

The Filth-Cleansing Contradiction of Christ

The one section of the poem we have so far neglected is the 97-line transition between the destruction of Sodom and Belshazzar’s feast (1052–1148). This section includes advice for remaining spiritually clean (1052–68), a summary of Christ’s life and discourse on his purity (1069–1108), an allegory of penance with the soul represented as a pearl (1109–32), and a warning against repeated sin after penance (1133–48). “Transition” may not be an ideal term for a biography of Christ within a medieval religious poem—Morse calls it instead “the pivot around which the rest of the poem turns”⁷²—but a full consideration of the poet’s depiction of Christ as a part of *Cleanness*’s anticlerical poetics is best saved for last, since the poet uses the scene to perform a remarkable rhetorical maneuver which the final exemplum does not, one which revises, or at least seriously complicates, the poem’s central theological framework. Whereas Belshazzar’s feast extends in a fairly straightforward manner the themes of the two major exempla that precede it, albeit with a focus on spiritual rather than sexual sin, the depiction of Christ in the transitional section radically reimagines the spiritual dynamic of the opening warning against priestly defilement of the Eucharist, and demands that the reader rethink the relationships between God’s wrath, God’s body, humanity, cleanness, and filth, both fleshly and spiritual, as they operate throughout the entirety of the poem.

The poet begins this section with a restatement of the central desire repeatedly expressed throughout the poem—“to be couthe [known] in His courte” (1054) and “To se that Semly in sete and His swete face” (1055). The only sure way to reach the sixth Beatitude’s goal of seeing God’s face, the poet repeats, is to “clene worthe [be]” (1056). He then offers what he says is the best “counsel” he can on this point, by turning to “Clopynghel”

(1057), the love poet Jean de Meun. As a male lover wins over a reluctant lady by imitating the behavior she most loves, so must the person who seeks to see God “dele drwrye [lovingly] wyth Dryȝtyn” (1065), conforming to the model of perfection He has provided in the life of Christ. The poet’s use of courtly love poetry in the service of religious devotion is intriguing for many reasons, not the least of which is the metaphorical comparison of God to a fickle lady who starts as “wyk” (1063), disagreeable or difficult, and must be wooed into love—especially since the poem never depicts God at any point outside of these lines as changing His mind after initially being ill-favored toward a supplicant. (One possible exception is Nebuchadnezzar, though the Babylonian king’s trials appear to be more the result of deliberate and corrective punishment, rather than anger or disdain God must be talked out of.)

The tradition of drawing moral and even theological lessons from secular romantic literature was well established at this point in English literary history, as evidenced by Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, and its appearance here is not likely to reveal anything significant about the poet’s theology or his relationship to the clergy. The poet’s purpose in citing Clopyngnel’s advice is simply to introduce the concept of spiritual conformity through imitation of an example, and from there to introduce the ultimate exemplar, who demonstrates perfect cleanness in every area of his life. From priestly models whose virtues are emphasized while their less imitation-worthy qualities—Noah’s drunkenness, Abraham’s lack of faith, problematic details about their wives, etc.—are either downplayed or unmentioned, the poet now introduces a model whose perfection needs no editorial assistance.

Nevertheless, the poet does cut significant elements out of the Gospel accounts of Christ—in particular, he focuses exclusively on Jesus’s life, with no mention of his death or resurrection. He starts with the Nativity (1069–88) and concludes with a description of Jesus breaking bread perfectly, “blades wythouten” (1105–8), recalling the Last Supper, the foundation of the eucharistic meal, and perhaps also the post-Resurrection meal Jesus shares with two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), but the Crucifixion which follows the former and the Easter miracle which precedes the latter are both elided. His broken body is still present in the scene, however, since Jesus in this moment of bread-breaking is more than just a perfectly clean priest and server of the sacramental meal—as his own words suggest, and as later Christian theology establishes more clearly, he *is* the meal, literally. The priests in *Cleanness* do not

handle mere bread; they “hondel ther His aune body” (12), and if they are unclean, they “sulpen altogether / Bothe God *and* His gere” (16; italics added). Christ models the perfect priest in his clean actions, and in his clean body he is also the perfectly carved piece of bread—God and His gear are perfectly unsullied in this bread-breaking moment.

It is important to remember this literal connection between Christ’s body and the Communion wafer as we look back to the beginning of the passage to see exactly how that body is depicted. At his birth, Christ’s newborn body “ne vyolence maked” (1071) for his mother—he causes Mary no pain. The “schepon” or cattle-shed where he is born is compared to a “schroude-hous” (1076), the vestry or sacristy where priests prepare themselves for service, in part by donning sacred vestments. The birth itself becomes a church service of sorts, with animals gathered around the altar-like “bos [stall]” (1075), and angels serving as the choir, “with instrumentes of organes and pypes, / And rial ryngande rotes and the reken fythel [fiddle]” (1082), and the “Barne [child] burnyst so clene” (1085) before their eyes as a type of Host. Both the “corse” in which “He watz clos” (1070), Mary’s body, and his own body are so clean they command immediate and full dominion over all the world around them, as Noah did over the animals after the Deluge—“bothe the ox and the asse ... knewe Hym by His clannes for kyng of nature” (1087).

The baby Jesus’s perfect cleanness and rule over nature continues into adulthood—“3if clantly He thenne com” at his birth, the poet says, “ful cortays thereafter” in later years (1089). But then the poet makes a statement that indicates Christ is bound by the same rules of cleanliness as the priests of the introduction, and that his reaction to filth is the same as God’s. “Alle that longed to luther [evil],” the poet says, “ful lodly [with disgust] He hated” (1090), and by virtue of his noble nature, he “nolde neuer towche / O3t that watz vngoderly other ordure [filth] watz inne” (1091–92). Like the God who flooded the earth and rained fire on Sodom because He could not abide their filth, Jesus never touches anything filthy, evil, or “vngoderly.”

In the very next line, however, starting with the conjunction “3et” (1093), the poet completely reverses this claim. He explains that as a divine healer, Jesus actually *did* touch many people who were covered in physical or spiritual filth. Jesus may still hate the filth “ful lodly”—the poet does not confirm or deny this original statement—but he certainly does not meet the poet’s description of one who “nolde neuer towche” it. A major guiding principle of Jesus’s life as it has just been presented, that he avoids

touching all filth, and the guiding principle of the poems' parables and two major exempla so far, that a righteous person should similarly avoid even a speck of contamination, are flatly contradicted by Jesus's actions:

3et comen lodly to that Lede [leader], as lazares
 monye,
 Summe lepre, summe lome, and lomerande
 [stumbling] blynde,
 Poysened, and parlatyk, and pyned [wasted] in fyres
 [inflammations],
 Drye folk and ydropike, and dede at the laste,
 Alle called on that Cortayse and claymed His grace.
 (1093–97)

These supplicants who are stricken with leprosy, dropsy, and other types of inflammations or burns, and those who have become dead bodies, are ritually unclean according to Mosaic Law (see Leviticus 13:1–46 and Numbers 19:11–22). Moreover, as Andrew and Waldron point out in their gloss, “The diseases specified here include those normally regarded in the Middle Ages as resulting from unclean or incontinent living.” The unclean people come “lodly,” bearing loads, but Christ does not react to them “lodly,” with disgust, as he does to the filth described three lines earlier. Instead, he heals them and makes them clean.

The poet begins by describing the way Christ heals with his words—“He heled hem wyth hynde speche” (1098)—a further reminder after the scene of Lot's failed attempt to preach to the Sodomites that the ideal preacher speaks powerful and effective words, but also a suggestion that Christ does not *need* to touch the unclean people in order to cleanse them. He does touch them, however, in the very next line: “For whatso He towched also tyd tourned to hele, / Wel clanner then any crafte cowthe devyse. / So hende watz His hondelyng vche ordure [filth] hit schonied [shunned]” (1099–1101). Christ's healing touch renders filth clean, even cleaner than the sacramental “crafte” of the priests in the introduction—not surprising, perhaps, given that he is the original source of the sacrament. What is remarkable about this description, though, is the image of filth fleeing from Christ's approach and shunning his “hondelyng.” The earlier image of God casting filth away from Himself and His heart being unable to bear even its approach (31–32) is precisely reversed, replaced with an image of God, in the person of Christ, striding *toward* filth in the world and transforming it. No longer is cleanness a fragile condition that

must cast out filth or flee lest it be sullied—it is now the dominant force that overcomes filth, which must flee before it.

This startling reversal of the poem's central conceit prompts the reader to reconsider all of the depictions of God's wrath that have come before, beginning with His "grene" against the priests who "sulpen" the Eucharist (15–16). If Christ's body truly has the filth-chasing and cleansing power as depicted in the Incarnation scene, that same power should theoretically be available through the sacrament of the altar, where priests handle and communicants receive "His aune body" (11). So why, in the introduction, rather than praising that body's ability to cleanse any defilement, does the poet worry about the body *itself* becoming defiled? One possible answer is that the poet is simply being theologically inconsistent in a careless way, and that the Incarnation scene contains a flaw that threatens the unity of the poem. This is effectively Keiser's view, though it represents only one of many flaws she finds in the scene.⁷³

The more likely possibility is that the poet actually intends for the theological ground to shift in this passage, not for the purpose of undermining the images of God's wrath that have come before, but in order to dramatize the uniqueness of the Incarnation and complicate and enrich his picture of God's judgment by including within it the mystery of the sacraments. Sandra Pierson Prior, for example, focuses her reading of *Cleanness* on the word "3et" in line 1093, as a turning point in which the poet uses Christ to reverse the pattern of "the preservation of the pure and holy and the guarding against violation" and replace it with the image of "a clean enclosing within a corrupt world ... a clean breaking into an unviolated enclosure."⁷⁴ Calling the Incarnation passage a poetic "tour de force," Prior recognizes that the contradiction reorients the poem's theological framework, but she views this reorientation as the poet's attempt to "transcend" the terms of his original argument: "This passage ignores and even contradicts *Cleanness's* emphasis upon religious, dietary, sexual, and moral purity. The Incarnation passage specifically denies the *contraré* insistence that the unclean can never approach God (since the filthy and grotesque quite explicitly limp right into the divine banquet)."⁷⁵

The Incarnation passage does seem to contradict the poem's opening thesis that unclean people cannot see God, but the poet nevertheless attempts to reassert that thesis at the end of Christ's biography. After the description of Jesus cleanly breaking bread without a knife, the poet concludes with a rhetorical question: "Thus is He kyryous [skillful] and clene that thou His cort askes: / Hov schulde thou com to His kyth [home] bot

if thou clene were?" (1110). The question appears to reverse once again the relationship between cleanness and filth in the poem—rather than Christ driving away filth with his touch, filth once again becomes a defilement to be kept at a distance from God's court. In short, the filth-cleansing character of Christ appears for only a moment, in lines 1093–1108, bracketed by two assertions of a competing conception of God's character, the wrathful casting-out of filth which guides the rest of the poem.

But there is something more than a simple contradiction taking place in these lines, as the poet's subsequent emphasis on the sacrament of penance reveals. Though God apparently cannot endure filth, at the same time He provides a remedy for it: "penaunce" (1116, 1131) and the "water of schryfte" (1133), which will "polyce" a defiled soul as surely as a tarnished pearl is polished by soaking it "wyth wourchyp in wine" (1127). The pearl-dipped-in-wine metaphor explicitly describes penance—a sacrament which involves several steps over a period of time, including contrition, confession, prescribed works of satisfaction, and eventually shrift or absolution, though these steps are conflated in the metaphor into the single action of polishing—but the image of the wine cup and a wafer-like round pearl implicitly adds the Eucharist as well to the poet's sacramental imagery. The poet specifically draws a connection to the eucharistic ritual described in the introduction with his use of the same verb, "sulp / sulped" (1130, 1135), to describe defilement—only now, rather than the Eucharist being sullied by the secret sin of a priest, it is the sacrament of penance, administered by "the prest" (1131), which removes the soul's filth. In both the Eucharist and penance, a sacramental mystery is at work, a paradox in which God stands as both judgmental and merciful, demanding punishment for a wrong and then providing satisfaction for the punishment Himself. Most notably in the Eucharist, as it functions in the poem, the body of Christ is both the holy object whose defilement stirs God to "greme" (16) and the holy cleanser which removes defilement.

Keiser, who views the poem's treatment of the sacraments as a failure generally for neglecting the Crucifixion as the source of their power, argues that this metaphor, "the easy removal of a superficial layer of soil from an essentially unflawed object," is insufficient to describe "the effort and costliness of spiritual transformation afforded by the sacramental grace of penance."⁷⁶ What Keiser views as a flaw, however—that the penitential process as depicted by the poet is simply too *easy*—may be exactly the effect the poet intends. If God can abide no speck of filth, if it in fact drives Him to murderous wrath, then no reader, nor even the poet him-

self, truly has any hope of seeing God, given the observable fact of humanity's many imperfections. The poet uses the first-person plural voice as he asks, "Nov ar we sore and synful and sovly vchone; / How schulde we se, then may we say, that Syre vpon throne?" (1111). No one will see God's throne, the central desire expressed throughout the poem, under the conditions the poem has just depicted in its biblical histories. Any solution to this insurmountable difficulty, especially one that purports to be available to the entire human race, is certain to appear illogical or paradoxical. The defilement of the human soul, the pearl-and-wine metaphor suggests, is something that happens naturally and unavoidably, a normal aspect of post-lapsarian human life; the defilement of the pearl representing one's soul can even happen by "chaunce" (1125, 1129). But the figurative remedy is equally natural, "by kynde" (1128). The sight of God can only be attained through perfect cleanness, a demonstrable impossibility, but God provides the poet's Christian readership a means to become clean that is staggeringly simple. The new dynamic of God's judgment and mercy introduced by Christ's filth-cleansing power not only shifts the poem's theological paradigm, but it alters the direction of its homiletic message as well, from a call to avoid physical and spiritual filth for fear of judgment from God, to a call to approach God through the sacraments for the purpose of cleansing filth. This call comes with a warning, however, one which serves as the introduction to Belshazzar's feast. Those who participate in the sacrament of penance and wash their souls clean must take extra care not to sin again, as this betrayal "entyses Hym to tene [punish] more traythly [ferociously] then euer, / And wel hatter to hate then hade thou not waschen" (1137–38), just as His wrath burns hotter against Belshazzar for rejecting the lessons of his father. This addendum to the recommendation of penance appears reasonable when considered in light of *Cleanness's* anticlerical poetics, particularly its repeated insistence on a special class of righteous people who, like the wedding banquet guests, are held to a higher standard of cleanness. As we have seen, when priests harbor inner filth and threaten to defile the sacraments, they earn the extremity of God's wrath. The final warning about post-penitential sin is, in this sense, a further if subtle warning to those who would presume to administer the sacraments. From the perspective of the communicant receiving bread and wine of Communion or the penitent receiving the water of shrift, these sacramental elements are purifying; from the perspective of the minister, they are in danger of defilement and in need of protection.

One final effect produced by the Incarnation passage's focus on Christ's filth-cleansing body is that it removes any question of heresy from the poem's introduction. Though the poet appeared to gesture toward a Donatist position in saying that a priest's sins can thoroughly defile, "sulpen altogeder" (15), Christ's body, his depiction of that same body cleansing "whatso He towched" so that "vche ordure hit schonied" (1100–01), demonstrates that this position is an impossibility, and the urging of penance along with a metaphorical image of the Eucharist indicates that the poet has in mind not only Christ's body during his earthly life but sacramental bread and wine as well. These two passages, separated by one thousand lines, hold in tension two powerful energies—on the one hand, the poet's observation of a corrupt and sinful clergy whose faults he is compelled to decry, and on the other hand, his high view of the sacraments, which cannot be diminished or corrupted by the men who administer them, regardless of their sinful deeds. *Cleanness* performs a complex balancing act between these two forces which, if either were allowed to overcome the other, might threaten to topple the poem. The poet's complex advance and retreat from his opening suggestion of sacramental contamination by a corrupt priesthood suggests a desire to embrace the all-encompassing power of sacramental ritual to overcome all evil, while warning of the uniquely destructive evil of those who perform the ritual.

A focus on *Cleanness*'s anticlerical concerns, introduced in its opening lines, extended through its portraits of priestly figures both good and evil, and complicated by the interlude of Christ's Incarnation and the sacraments, obviously does not explain every difficulty presented by these 1,812 lines—it remains a uniquely complicated and at times disturbing work of literature. A reading that focuses on the poem's anticlericalism, however, does offer potential resolutions to several key questions and cruxes posed by contemporary critics, including the extreme length of its descriptions of Abraham's bargaining with God and the sacred vessels at Belshazzar's feast, the relationship between the poet's high praise of heterosexual marital love and sharp denunciation of homosexual intercourse, and the contradiction between eucharistic defilement and Christ's filth-cleansing power. An anticlerical focus also provides convenient entry into the next poem in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, *Patience*, in which the poet pursues many of the same themes through 531 lines devoted to a single priestly exemplar, the prophet Jonah.

NOTES

¹ The single exception I have found is Francis Ingledew's "Liturgy, Prophecy, and Belshazzar's Babylon: Discourse and Meaning in *Cleanness*," *Viator* 23 (1992): 247–79, discussed at further length below. Monica Brzezinski Potkay, in "Cleanness on the Question of Images," *Viator* 26 (1995): 181–93, also compares the poem to several Wycliffite and Lollard documents, but for the purposes of analyzing the poet's view on the use of images in Christian practice, not his anti-clericalism.

² The *MED* gives a range of definitions for the adverbial form of "kinde," as it does for the noun and adjectival forms as well. Definition 1.(a) for "kindeli" is "According to the regular course of nature ... naturally, by nature." Further definitions in use during the fourteenth century include 3.(a) "In the approved manner, properly, correctly, truly, accurately," 3.(b) "Rightly, justly, appropriately," 3.(c) "Readily, easily, as a matter of course," 3.(d) "Thoroughly, completely, effectively, well," and 4.(a) "Kindly, pleasantly, gladly, lovingly." The *MED* cites the first line of *Cleanness* under 3. (b), in which case the line would translate to "Whoever can commend cleanness in the right way..." Even if this categorization is accurate, it does not close off the wider range of meanings the word would have had for a fourteenth-century reader. For example, the poet may be encouraging his readers to commend cleanness not only in the most correct way, but also with gladness and in an easy, natural manner.

³ Numerous critics have noted the homiletic structure of *Cleanness*, starting with Carleton F. Brown in "The Author of *Pearl*, Considered in Light of His Theological Opinions," *PMLA* 19.1 (1904), who argues that "*Cleanness* and *Patience* are undisguisedly homiletic, both in purpose and method" (126). Several studies from the later twentieth century examine the poem's homiletic structure in more detail, including Michael Means, "The Homiletic Structure of *Cleanness*," *Studies in Medieval Culture* 5 (1975); Earl G. Schreiber, "The Structures of *Clan-nesse*," in *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Bernard S. Levy and Paul E. Szarmach (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1981), William Vantuono, "A Triple-Three Structure for *Cleanness*" (1984); and Monica Brzezinski, "Conscience and Covenant: The Sermon Structure of *Cleanness*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 89.2 (Apr 1990), which argues that "*Cleanness*'s structure is coherent insofar as it conforms to the rules for composing a university sermon" (166). Richard Newhauser, "Scriptural and Devotional Sources" in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 1997), provides a concise summary of this consensus: "if *Patience* is modeled on the relatively simple form of the homily, in *Cleanness* one finds the poet's reflection of the much more complex structure seen in the university (or scholastic) sermon" (263). Though all of these scholars share a general agreement about the poem's genre and tripartite structure, they reach a variety of conclusions about the poet's purpose for employing it, from suggestions that he

is a priest himself providing a sermon model for other preachers to follow, to the claim that he is poeticizing a sermon he heard as a layman.

⁴ Critics who identify the *Gawain*-poet as a priest include Carleton F. Brown (1904), Ordelle Hill (1968), Michael Means (1975), Anna Baldwin (1988), who argues that the poet's audience is primarily clerical, and Nicholas Watson (1997), who argues that the intended audience is provincial aristocratic laymen. Editors of the *Gawain* poems who are skeptical of this identification include E. V. Gordon (*Pearl*, 1953) and John Gardner (*Complete Works*, 1965), who summarizes his argument thus: "The theory that the poet was a priest has very little to recommend it. It is true, as Professor Gollancz has observed, that all of his poems except *Gawain* are explicitly religious and show a general knowledge of exegetical typology and Scholastic philosophy, and that even the *Gawain* explores a religious theme; and it may be true that the fact that the poet had a daughter need not work against an identification of the poet as a priest. But ... it seems unlikely that a man who was a priest himself would speak of 'God who, in the form of bread and wine, / The priest reveals to us every day'; and the poet's intimate knowledge of—and obvious interest in—courtly flirtation, among other things, may also argue against his identification as a priest" (7).

⁵ Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Somerset defines extraclergial writers as those who "distance themselves from the institutional clergy they criticize and ally themselves with the laity, yet continue to employ the kinds of sophisticated argument that grant them clerical legitimacy ... presenting themselves as outside the clergy, yet if anything more ostentatiously learned than the typical clerical writer" (12–13). The category contains both clerics and laymen, and both Wycliffites and their opponents; among others, Somerset examines William Langland, John Trevisa, the Lollard *Twelve Conclusions* and their opponent Roger Dymmok, and William Thorpe.

⁶ Andrew and Waldron, eds., *Poems*, 111, note on "rychen," line 10: "Both Gollancz and Menner read *rechen*, glossing respectively 'approach' and 'touch.' The second letter is blurred in the MS, but it is possible to make out the tops of two downstrokes; whereas these could not have formed an *e*, they could well have formed a *y*. Thus *rychen* is a more likely reading. *OED rich*, v.2, sense 5, gives 'arrange, prepare (a thing),' which is more satisfactory than either of the meanings suggested for *rechen*."

⁷ For a close reading of these lines, and a consideration of the defiled sacrament they appear to depict, see chapter 1.

⁸ Quoted in Penn Szittyá, *Antifraternal Tradition*, 170–71. Szittyá is translating and paraphrasing a passage from Wyclif, *Polemical Works*, II.470–72. Part of the original passage reads as follows: "Unde inter omnia peccata, que deus umquam permisit esse in ecclesia militante, peccatum ypocricis est magis fugibile."

⁹ The note on "reden and syngen" comes from the *MED* entry for "reden, v.," definition 2b.(a). Though the *Gawain*-poet does not appear to use the phrase disparagingly in line 7, it can be used in other anticlerical contexts to describe

the meaningless or ineffective work of bad priests. For example, Hawisia Moone refers to priests dismissively as “singemesses ... lecherous and couetouse men, and fals deceyvours of the puple” whose work consists of “sotel techyng and prechyng, syngyng and redyng” (Hudson, ed., *Selections*, 35).

¹⁰ See the *MED* entry for “prest, adv.” definitions 1.(a) “Immediately, at once, promptly, right now” and 2. “Eagerly, willingly; earnestly, zealously.” The verb form “pressen” also offers the following definitions: 6.(a) “To proceed with haste, urgency, or force; press forward, push ahead, rush” and 6.(b) “~ to, to hasten toward a goal; press forward to (sb., sth., a place), hasten to, hurry to.” Also possibly operative in this case, given the lord’s anger at the ill-dressed man’s presumption, is definition 8.(a), “To push oneself forward presumptuously, proceed insistently, venture.”

¹¹ Putter, *Introduction*, 230.

¹² See the *MED* entry for “ministren, v.” definitions 1a.(b) “To serve at the table; serve or supply (food or drink)” and 3. (b) “To administer (a sacrament); perform (religious offices).” The *MED* cites *Cleanness* 644, “Mynystred mete byfore tho men,” for 1a.(b).

¹³ The full context of the stanza in *Pearl* 1057–68 emphasizes that no “Kyrk ... Chapel ne temple” (1061–62) is necessary in heaven, since God and Christ the sacrificial Lamb are present, which leads Andrew and Waldron to emend the manuscript’s “mynyster” to “mynster,” meaning church or temple. The emendation makes line 1063 fit well with the two preceding lines, but either word fits equally well in the stanza as a whole—neither a minister nor a physical church building is necessary in God’s presence.

¹⁴ For a physical description of what a typical elevation of the Host would look like in this period, see Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 91.

¹⁵ Thorlac Turville-Petre, in *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1977), discusses several words that are used almost exclusively in Middle English alliterative poetry, and almost exclusively in alliterative positions within the line. He quotes *Cleanness* 139–50, a section within the Parable of the Wedding Feast, as a sample of poetry that is rich with these types of words, and he includes “freke” among them, along with “gome,” “menskez,” “burne,” “busked,” “brothe,” and “hurkelez” (82–83). He says these words “became a characteristic element in the alliterative style, but they remained ‘metrical’ words. The feeling seems to have been that they were words introduced into the poetic vocabulary to satisfy a metrical need, and therefore they could not be used freely where the alliterative pattern did not call for them” (83).

¹⁶ See the *MED* entry for “rink,” definitions (a), (b), and (c). *Cleanness* spells the word “renk” or “renke” on every occasion except one, in which the alternate “ring” is used to denote all men whose hearts are searched by God (592).

¹⁷ See the *MED*, definitions 1. (b) “A young unmarried man”; 2. “An aspirant to knighthood”; and 5. “One who has taken the lowest degree (in a particular subject) conferred by a university,” for example “bachelor of divinite.”

¹⁸ See the *MED*, definitions 1. (c) “A siege tower, fortification” and 2.(c) “A temple, shrine.”

¹⁹ John Gardner, ed., *The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 68.

²⁰ Charlotte Morse, “The Image of the Vessel in *Cleanness*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 40.3 (Spring 1971): 203–4.

²¹ Anna Baldwin, “Sacramental Perfection,” 138.

²² J. J. Anderson, “Rhetorical Strategies in *Cleanness* and *Patience*,” *Leeds Studies in English* 29 (1998): 10–11.

²³ Allen J. Frantzen, “The Disclosure of Sodomy in *Cleanness*,” *PMLA* 111.3 (May 1996): 451–64. Frantzen observes that the term “gropen,” which is used of God and Jesus in lines 591 and 1102, “is also used elsewhere in Middle English penitential literature to describe pastoral duties of hearing confession, examining, and interrogating ... God’s groping recalls the poem’s introductory emphasis on priests who ‘hondel’ Christ’s own body and his ‘gere’ ... and who handle sins in confession; it also anticipates the healing touch of God” (453).

²⁴ Jeremy Citrome, “Medicine as Metaphor in the Middle English *Cleanness*,” *Chaucer Review* 35.3 (2001): 272.

²⁵ Amity Reading, “‘The Ende of Alle Kynez Flesch’: Ritual Sacrifice and Feasting in *Cleanness*,” *Exemplaria* 21.3 (Fall 2009): 274, 279.

²⁶ Ingledew, “Liturgy,” 247.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 248.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 252–60. Ingledew writes that the final scene’s reference to “Satanas the blake” (1449) is a reminder that fourteenth-century criticism “of the corrupt priest insists on his allegiance to the devil. ... that is, it constructs an asteonology between the fall of the angel and the fall of the apostate priest,” an observation for which he cites Wyclif’s *De Ecclesia* and Wycliffite sermons which make repeated reference to the “synagogue of Satan” (259, note 51).

³⁰ Stone, tran., *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 50.

³¹ Lynn Staley, “The Man in Foul Clothes and a Late Fourteenth-Century Conversation about Sin,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002): 1–2.

³² *Ibid.*, 9.

³³ Matthew, ed., *English Works*, 6–7.

³⁴ See the *MED*, “ordeinen, v.,” definitions 4.(a), the general sense of choosing or appointing; 4.(b), the word’s more specific application to kings, priests, and monks; and 4(g), which notes the phrase “ordeinen to” as referring to ecclesiastical office.

³⁵ Elizabeth Keiser, *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and Its Contexts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 70.

³⁶ A. V. C. Schmidt, “*Kynde Craft* and the *Play of Paramorez*: Natural and Unnatural Love in *Purity*,” in *Genres, Themes, and Images in English Literature*,

ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Tübingen, Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988), 107. See also Michael Twomey, "*Cleanness*, Peter Comestor, and the *Revelationes Sancti Methodii*," *Mediaevalia* 11 (1985): 203.

³⁷ Frantzen, "Disclosure," 451.

³⁸ Schmidt, "*Kynde Craft*," 111.

³⁹ Ingledew, "Liturgy," 253.

⁴⁰ For associations with the church, see the *MED* entry for "ark(e)," definition 3.(a) "Noah's ark" and 3.(b) "Used *fig.* of Holy Church." For associations with religious vessels, see *MED* definition 1.(a) "A trunk, chest, or case of any size for storing or carrying valuables of any kind," for example "relics."

⁴¹ The word the Wycliffite LV uses in all of these instances (Exodus 17:1, Numbers 33:1, and John 14:2) is actually "dwellyngis," but the Vulgate uses "mansiones." The *MED* confirms this usage for "mansioun" in definition 3.(c) "A dwelling place in heaven, a heavenly mansion."

⁴² If the *Gawain*-poet was connected with the county of Cheshire, he may have seen the Chester version of the Deluge play, in which Noah's wife appears as a comically disobedient figure. See Hermann Deimling, ed., *The Chester Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press SS, 1892, 1926), 48–63. For similar depictions of Noah's wife, who is never named, see also Richard Beadle, ed., *The York Plays* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), 83–90, and Martin Stevens and A. C. Cawley, eds., *The Towneley Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1.25–48. Beadle traces the tradition of the wife's disobedience to an "Eastern legend" in which she is a counterpart to Eve, as the devil uses both women to introduce sin into the world. Since both Eve and Noah's wife are all but invisible figures in *Cleanness*, the *Gawain*-poet is clearly not relying on this tradition.

⁴³ Editors Reginald Lane Poole and F. D. Matthew characterize *De Civili Dominio* as an elaboration of "two principles ... namely that the wicked have, properly speaking, no lordship, and that the righteous actually possess the whole universe" (I.49).

⁴⁴ Reading, "The Ende," 284–85: "And the meal achieves its purpose: after the successful conclusion of the feast, God once again addresses a faithful servant courteously and offers a reward for the spiritual purity signified by the ritual act."

⁴⁵ Malcolm and Andrew, eds., *Poems*, 141.

⁴⁶ Gardner, ed., *Complete Works*, 7; Keiser, *Courtly Desire*, 60; Schmidt, "*Kynde Craft*," 109; A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 73.

⁴⁷ Keiser, *Courtly Desire*, 53–54; Nicholas Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 299.

⁴⁸ Frantzen, "Disclosure," 452–56.

⁴⁹ Monica Brzezinski Potkay, "*Cleanness's* Fecund and Barren Speech Acts," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 17 (1995): 106.

⁵⁰ Michael Calabrese and Eric Eliason, "The Rhetorics of Sexual Pleasure and

Intolerance in the Middle English *Cleanness*,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 56.3 (Sept 1995): 254.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 261–62.

⁵² Keiser, *Courtly Desire*, 5.

⁵³ Citrome, “Medicine,” 276.

⁵⁴ Keiser, *Courtly Desire*, 51.

⁵⁵ John Wyclif, *Opus Evangelicum*, ed. Johann Loserth (London: Trübner, 1895), II.42.

“Et sic ex petulancia spoliando visitant feminas viduatas, cum stante Cristi ordinancia forent mariti plurimi coniugati, qui iam sunt ad claustrum religionis infundabilis.”

⁵⁶ Todd, ed., *Apology*, 101, 103.

⁵⁷ Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden, eds., *The Holy Bible* (Oxford, 1850), I.51.

⁵⁸ Hudson, ed., *Selections*, 25.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁰ Matthew, *English Works*, 6–7.

⁶¹ Wyclif, *On Simony*, 36; *De Simonia*, 9. “Et sicut sodomia fuit tempore legis nature contra ipsam naturam unum de peccatis gravissimis, sic symonia est tempore legic gracie contra ipsam graciā gravissimum peccatorum.”

⁶² Potkay, “*Cleanness*’s Fecund and Barren Speech Acts,” 106.

⁶³ Matthew, *English Works*, 55.

⁶⁴ Ingledew, “Liturgy,” 277.

⁶⁵ For “cofer,” see the discussion earlier in this chapter. For “kyst,” see the *MED* entry for “chest(e),” alternately spelled “kist(e),” definition 4.(b) “Noah’s Ark” and 4.(c) “A pyx.”

⁶⁶ Baldwin, “Sacramental Perfection,” 139.

⁶⁷ Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 17, 29–30.

⁶⁸ Ingledew, “Liturgy,” 259.

⁶⁹ Baldwin, “Sacramental Perfection,” 139.

⁷⁰ Ingledew, “Liturgy,” 259.

⁷¹ Hudson, ed., *Selections*, 68.

⁷² Morse, “Image,” 202.

⁷³ Keiser, *Courtly Desire*, 191–98.

⁷⁴ Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1996), 75–76.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁷⁶ Keiser, *Courtly Desire*, 197–98.

Chapter 4

The Reluctant Priest of *Patience*

Reading *Patience* as Anticlerical Critique

Patience, a dramatic retelling of the biblical book of Jonah and the shortest of the Cotton Nero A.x poems, does not feature any explicit attacks on contemporary priesthood, as the opening of *Cleanness* does. Neither does it contain any direct depiction of Christian priests administering sacraments, unlike *Pearl* and *Cleanness* with their references to the Eucharist, or *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain* with their treatments of confession and penance.

In fact, the only appearance of the noun “prest” in the poem refers to “vche prest and prelates alle” in the pagan city of Nineveh, who pray and fast along with other citizens in the face of God’s wrath—and even these, since they receive orders from the prince and are mentioned as just one of many groups fasting, do not appear to be leading the city in its religious revival. The poet occasionally refers to the poem’s main character, the Hebrew prophet Jonah, as a “renke” (351, 431, 490), the same term *Cleanness* uses for priests and priest-like “men of rank,” but *Patience* just as often uses the generic terms “freke” and “segge,” and more often simply “prophete” (62, 85, 225, 282, 285, 303, 327). In addition, Jonah is not shown performing any rituals for other characters in the poem that could be construed, even figuratively, as sacramental. He administers neither the literal Eucharist nor cakes of bread, as Abraham does in *Cleanness*; he does not douse anyone with water baptismally; he hears no confessions. Though the Ninevites do participate in works of penitential satisfaction, the citizens take these upon themselves—their cries for mercy go directly to God, and God alone provides absolution, even against Jonah’s will.

Nevertheless, *Patience* does feature what the more explicitly anticlerical poetics of *Cleanness* do not: a strong central character who receives the poet’s exclusive attention for 531 lines, longer than any single set piece in the previous poem, and one who serves as God’s representative to a

specific group of people, in a story whose central theme is the proper response to God's call in the life of a spiritual leader. Though Jonah himself does not administer sacraments—in part because he shows no interest in doing more than delivering the bare minimum of God's words to a people he hates and fears—sacramental imagery is nevertheless present throughout the poem, as Jonah undergoes a figurative baptism in the sea, a watery death and resurrection, and a literal confession, repentance, and absolution directly from God. He also performs several actions which, while not sacramental, are certainly priest-like: he travels as a missionary to a foreign land under threat of persecution, he composes and performs prayers of petition and thanksgiving, and perhaps most relevantly, he preaches with astounding success. In addition, both Jonah and the narrator himself in the poem's introduction endure poverty, which the narrator credits with developing the title virtue of patience. The fact that in both cases their poverty is involuntary may help us understand the poet's perspective on the poverty debates which so engaged antifraternal and anticlerical critics in the fourteenth century.

In the same way that reading *Cleanness* within the textual environment of fourteenth-century English anticlericalism can help to illuminate aspects of its complex structure and the priestly attributes of central characters such as Abraham and Daniel, so too reading the extended exemplum of Jonah in *Patience* with a careful eye toward the poet's anticlerical contemporaries can lead the reader in intriguing and illuminating interpretive directions, and further help to locate the poet on the spectrum of various fourteenth-century anticlerical positions and beliefs. As he does in *Cleanness*, and like many other anticlerical writers of the fourteenth century, the *Gawain*-poet frequently uses Old Testament figures to serve as either models or negative examples of behavior for contemporary priests. Jonah ultimately serves as both, as the poet explores multiple facets of his character—rebellion and obedience, complaint and praise, resistance and submission—which depict him primarily as a cautionary figure, but in some ways as an exemplar as well.

The poet's approach to Jonah, and to the contemporary priesthood with whom the prophet shares both flaws and virtues, can be helpfully compared to William Langland's approach to clerical figures in *Piers Plowman*, and is similarly complex. Langland, like the *Gawain*-poet, is harshly critical of every possible type of cleric, from monks to friars to secular priests, but even at its most biting and satirical, his critique is constructive, in that he expresses the desire that priests, monks, and friars

would turn from their errors and return to the more innocent state that marked the founding of their orders and their original calling. Langland's rhetoric is thus a complex combination of condemnation and exhortation, even seeming at times self-contradictory, an anticlericalism that supports an ideal vision of the clergy. The *Gawain*-poet's stance toward Jonah in *Patience* has much in common with Langland's treatment of the priesthood—Jonah's fulfillment of his prophetic and priestly duties literally saves the day in Nineveh, underlining the importance of these roles, but his deep flaws and disobedience nearly derail the project, and the poet shows little mercy in his attacks, which parallel in many ways the critiques leveled against his clerical contemporaries.

Since a reading of this kind relies in part on the poem's connection to the more explicit anticlerical critique that precedes it in the manuscript, I will begin with a brief survey of parallels between *Cleanness* and *Patience* and the textual and thematic connections between them, with a particular eye toward the clerical and sacramental imagery the poems share. Next, I will look specifically at the introduction to *Patience*, in which Dame Poverty, an allegorical figure derived from the Beatitudes, is described as the "playfere" (45) or playmate of Dame Patience, and its relationship with fourteenth-century debates about voluntary and involuntary poverty. Next, I will read Jonah's flight from God's call as an expression of the poet's views on absenteeism, pluralism, and simony among contemporary priests, and in the fourth part of the chapter examine his role as a preacher. The final section will advance a reading of the poem's conclusion which views Jonah as a priest-like figure who has been dispossessed of all earthly goods and rendered a homeless wanderer. This final scene comments in complex ways on the poem's earlier themes of clerical dispossession, and links to the introduction's commentary on poverty. Each section will thus advance us sequentially through *Patience*, from introduction to conclusion. But first we look backward, to the poem's predecessor in the manuscript.

Patience as a Coda to *Cleanness*: Clerical and Sacramental Imagery

Most contemporary critics view the works in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript as sharing a single author, if only for the sake of convenience. However, criticism and statistical analyses from the late nineteenth cen-

ture forward have posited a variety of possible relationships among the four poems: a single author; two authors, with *Pearl* as an outlier for its poetic structure and vocabulary, or *Sir Gawain* as an outlier for its relatively non-religious theme and variant pronouns; or even three or more authors.¹ Yet another contention is that the *Gawain*-poet composed not only these four poems but a fifth as well, the alliterative *St. Erkenwald*, from a separate manuscript.²

Of course, all four poems are linked in the sense that they appear in the same manuscript with illuminations from a single artist's hand. *Cleanness* and *Patience* are even more closely linked than usual in this way, as the manuscript folio 82a contains the last eleven lines from *Cleanness* (1802–12) on the top third of the page and an illustration of Jonah from *Patience* on the bottom two-thirds. The common maritime theme in the stories of Noah and Jonah also contributes to a greater share of similarities in the illuminations—for instance, the fish that swims beneath Noah's Ark and eats a smaller fish on folio 56a has a nearly identical head and mouth to the whale that swallows Jonah on folio 82a, and the Ark and Jonah's ship are the same in construction, color, and even size relative to their human passengers. These types of similarities, however, tell us little beyond the fact that the compiler of the manuscript apparently viewed these two poems, and indeed all four, as thematically parallel.

Nevertheless, despite complications and substantial differences between the two middle poems of the manuscript—namely, their widely divergent lengths, with *Cleanness* at 1,812 lines and *Patience* at 531, with an attendant difference in narrative structure and levels of complexity—not a single scholar of the *Gawain* poems in the past 130 years has argued that these two were written by separate authors. In addition to parallel themes, virtually identical construction of poetic lines seems to settle the case. A. C. Spearing, after listing several “substantial reasons” for claiming a common author for all four poems, concludes that though nothing definitive can be asserted about the manuscript as a whole, one connection seems clear:

Of the four poems, it is perhaps easiest to suppose that *Patience* and *Purity* are by the same author. They are both in long alliterative lines without any form of rhyme, and they are both homilies which treat of a virtue specified in the Beatitudes by giving examples from the Old Testament of the punishment of its opposing vice.³

In an influential reading of the manuscript as a unified whole, Sandra Pierson Prior sees the four works as following “the basic pattern

and variations of providential history ... whether so because of the author, or a perceptive compiler.”⁴ The progression that occurs from *Cleanness* to *Patience*, she argues, is from “apocalypse” to “prophecy,” as it becomes possible for a doomed people like the Ninevites to save themselves from God’s wrath through repentance, in way that seems impossible for the Babylonians at the end of *Cleanness*, and as the role of the prophet shifts from Daniel, who merely reports the coming of God’s irresistible wrath, to Jonah, whose words prompt acts of penance which lead God to turn aside.⁵

Other thematic links between *Cleanness* and *Patience* can be found in abundance upon a parallel reading. To name four connections that appear in their introductions alone: both poems cite and either partially or completely translate the Beatitudes (*Cleanness* 23–28; *Patience* 9–28), both name “clannesse” as the virtue identified in the sixth Beatitude (*Cleanness* 26; *Patience* 32), both personify this virtue and others with feminine pronouns, and both refer to the Sermon on the Mount in which the Beatitudes appear as a teaching that “Mathew melede” (*Cleanness* 51; *Patience* 10). In addition to the Beatitudes, each poem also features a direct translation of Psalm 93:7–10 (*Cleanness* 582–86; *Patience* 121–24).⁶ Though the translations themselves differ—for example, the *Cleanness* version begins with a description of God creating eyes, whereas *Patience* shows Him first creating ears—the fact that this short and relatively obscure passage appears in both poems seems more than coincidental.

One example of a word which appears only in *Patience* and *Cleanness*, and which carries great thematic significance in both, is “bour,” whose range of definitions can best be demonstrated by looking at its multiple uses in the poems. Its first appearance in the introductory section of *Cleanness* describes the chamber where the lord in the Parable of the Wedding Feast sits, as distinct from the great hall where the guests are feasting—when the lord decides to move among his guests, he “bowez fro his bour into the brode halle” (129). In the allegorical sense of the parable, which the poet explains, this “bour” becomes heaven, the place where God dwells and from which He “bowez,” or descends, in order to judge the people in the “brode halle” of the tearth. The word appears again in *Cleanness*, in a somewhat different sense, as God gives Noah instructions for building the Ark; the “hallez” contained within the ship should include “Bothe boskenz [dividing walls] and bourez and wel bounden penez” (322). In this sense, the “bourez” are not only rooms for the animals but protective spaces against the storm and sea raging outside. Though the poet does

not explicitly read the Noah's Ark story in an allegorical sense, it seems clear that the "bour," like the Ark itself, represents divine grace, a place of safety against God's wrath. In the same way, the word later describes the stable or manger that holds the infant Jesus, a clean space protected from the filth of animals. Though the Holy Family's surroundings are poor, the poet says, "Watz neuer so blysful a bour as watz a bos [cow-stall] thenne" (1075). In the next line, the poet draws the comparison, discussed in the previous chapter, between the cleanness of this humble "bour" and a "schroude-hous" (1076), the room where a priest dons vestments and prepares sacramental vessels, and since in this case the cow-stall houses the body of Christ, it recalls specifically the vessel that holds the eucharistic wafer. Shortly after this point, in the same interlude between major exempla, the word "bour" takes on even more allegorical weight. A pearl "blyndes of ble," loses its luster, "in bour ther ho lygges" (1126), and must be washed clean in a cup of wine. On a literal level, the "bour" is a jewelry box, but in the allegory of the pearl as the human soul which the poet makes explicit, the "bour" represents its container, the body, which manifests outward signs of internal corruption. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, the image of a round white object dipped in wine also recalls the Eucharist, in which case the "bour" becomes a container for the host—perhaps the "schroude-hous" mentioned earlier, or the pyx where wafers are housed, or the monstrance in which they are displayed.

The *Middle English Dictionary*, citing *Cleanness* and *Patience* four times in three separate definitions for the word, notes all of the literal meanings mentioned above—"a shelter, den," "an inner room; esp., a bedroom," "a storeroom," and "a stall for animals, a kennel"—and uses other sources to list a wide range of figurative possibilities—"the Virgin Mary's womb or body," "the heart as the dwelling of God," "heaven," "a grave."⁷ In summary, the word "bour," like many other words and images in *Cleanness*, accumulates meaning as the poem advances. It begins as a literal description of a room, or a place of refuge, or a container, but ultimately comes to signify a variety of spiritual concepts such as heaven, the church, the sinful body of man, and the glorified body of Christ.

The word "bour" appears only twice in the shorter span of *Patience*, in both cases describing a temporary place of refuge for Jonah, but its range of meanings becomes similarly complex. The first bower is a place he finds upon entering the whale's belly, upon which the poet remarks, "Ther in saym [grease] and in sorze that sauoured as helle, / Ther watz bylded his bour that wyl no bale suffer" (276). The poet's tone in these lines is sarcas-

tic—Jonah has steadfastly refused to endure suffering and now has finally found his “bour,” his refuge, in hell. However, *Cleanness*’s sense of the word as a genuine place of safety on a ship seems operative here too, given that Jonah does not drown; in fact, he eventually finds a corner where the hellish filth cannot reach him, which the poet compares to “the bulk of the bote ther he byfore sleped” (292). This recollection of Jonah’s earlier hiding place, on the ship that was besieged by a divine storm, is a reminder that Jonah actually likes to be alone—outward-facing charity and responsibility to a community causes him discomfort. The “bour” thus carries a multifaceted significance—it is the location to which he flees in his self-centered sin, the site of punishment for that sin, and his salvation, a place “bylded” by God, all at once.

The second “bour” (437), outside the city of Nineveh where Jonah has made as little human contact as possible, plays a similar multiplicity of roles. Jonah begins to build this shelter himself, then God completes it as a leafy woodbine that can protect him from the sun. Far from viewing this bower as merely a space for physical safety, however, Jonah intends to use it as a place of comfort from which he can observe the city as it is destroyed by God’s wrath. In the end, the city is not destroyed, but Jonah’s bower is destroyed by a worm. Rather than the city being burned by fire, Jonah himself is scorched by the sun, which God commands to “brenne as a candel” (472) over Jonah’s head, forcing him into yet another act of penitential suffering that sets the stage for God’s, and the poet’s, final lesson.

Malcolm Andrew, commenting on the word’s significance in *Patience*, notes that it tracks “the sequence of Jonah’s spiritual crises: crucial patterns of rebellion, acquiescence, and rebellion again. ... The three ‘bowers’ [ship, whale, and woodbine] represent a sequence of sin, repentance, and repeated sin.”⁸ The same progression cannot be said for the word’s development in *Cleanness*, but what the two poems share is a sense of its ironic potential, linked to ironies within the Christian sacraments themselves. In *Cleanness*, the first bower represents heaven, a place of feasting and bliss, the hoped-for destination of all righteous humanity, but it is also the location from which God descends to pass judgment on sin. Later instances of bowers are linked to the human body, the site of physical corruption, as it is hopelessly bound by original sin and causes the soul to degrade (it is significant that the pearl in *Cleanness* 1125–32 is not stained by an external agent or action, but simply loses its luster from neglect while lying in the bower). At the same time, the “bour” of Christ, his broken yet undefiled physical body, redeems fallen humanity

through the sacrament of the altar. The bower, in other words, embodies both sin and salvation, as corrupted human flesh is restored through the glorified flesh and blood of Christ. In *Patience*, Jonah's two bowers recall the irony of a different sacrament, penance, as they are locations simultaneously of refuge and of physical pain. Jonah finds salvation in the "bour" of the whale, even as he suffers punishment there for his disobedience. This concept characterizes the irony not only of penitential satisfaction, in which avoiding the pains of hell is achieved through the endurance of pain on earth, but a central irony of the entire poem—that the pain of physical suffering produces the bliss of spiritual patience.

For the Ninevites in the poem, penance follows a progression, from hearing Jonah's message of judgment, to the prince's contrite weeping, his confession of "alle his wrange dedes" (384), and finally the citizens' extreme acts of satisfaction in wearing sackcloth and ashes and undergoing a fast that includes even newborn babies (391) and animals (392–94). This sequence of events might suggest the Lenten fast, which concludes with confession at Easter,⁹ but what is missing from this depiction of penance is any description of the priest who in a medieval Christian context would be required to hear the confessions, prescribe the terms of satisfaction, and speak the words of absolution.

Of course, the poet's source for this story, the book of Jonah, does not take place in a medieval Christian context. As much as he might resemble a contemporary priest, and as much as the poet might highlight those resemblances in his retelling of the story, Jonah remains an Old Testament prophet whose primary function is to deliver God's message of judgment and receive a lesson in judgment and mercy himself. To expand his role to include, for example, hearing confessions from the Ninevites and urging specific forms of satisfaction upon them, would be to alter the story in ways clearly unfaithful to the text. All the same, the absence of any faithful spiritual guide for the Ninevites as they conduct their own penance is noticeable, as is Jonah's failure to embrace other priest-like responsibilities. A much more damning critique of Jonah, for instance, is his failure to give the Ninevites any opportunity to repent. He offers them only condemnation and despair, a shrinking of the medieval priest's proper role as the dispenser of God's grace through the sacraments, but also a perversion of his role as a prophet in the story's original context, a point made clear in God's rebuke of Jonah for failing to show "mercy withinne" (523).

Another striking shift from *Cleanness* to *Patience* in addressing the issue of priesthood is the fact that the narrator of *Patience* identifies

himself as one who has received teaching from the church that he is now passing along to the reader, and who works as a servant to an earthly lord. The *Cleanness* narrator, as discussed in the previous chapter, effectively operates as both a preacher who reads and interprets the biblical text for an audience, and as a listener who attends church services to hear what priests have to say. He has both “herkned and herde of mony hyze clerkez” and “red hit myseluen” (193–94). A few lines later, he conflates the two actions of reading from a text and hearing it preached, as he imagines books speaking to him: “Bot neuer zet in no boke breued [declared/told] I herde ...” (197). A similar conflation takes place in *Patience*, as the narrator refers to the story of Jonah as one that “holy wryt telles” (60), as if the Bible is speaking aloud. But the narrator’s self-presentation in *Patience* is more precise, as he depicts himself as a congregant receiving religious instruction aurally at a public service on a specific day—his lesson on the Beatitudes is one “I herde on a halyday, at a hyze masse” (9), perhaps the feast of All Saints, which includes the Beatitudes in its liturgical readings. He later refers to the Beatitudes as “the tyxte” (37) and offers “myn vpy-nyoun” (40) on their interpretation, suggesting he is more than a passive listener, but he does not, as in *Cleanness*, overtly state that he has “red hit myseluen.”

The shift from primarily reading to primarily listening to the biblical text is subtle, but the narrator of *Patience* goes further in distancing himself from the high-ranking clergy when he mentions his occupation—he serves as a messenger to a “lege lorde” who orders him “to ryde other to renne to Rome in his ernde” (51–52). Moreover, as the poet uses this description of an unpleasant errand in the context of discussing involuntary poverty and unavoidable suffering, the lord appears as one whose will cannot be denied by his servants—the narrator is “made” (54) to follow his command, and resistance can only bring on “grame [trouble]” (53),¹⁰ and “thenne thrat [threat] moste I thole [endure] and vnthonk [displeasure] to mede” (55). The narrator appears to be practically enslaved to his lord, a state which is necessary for the metaphor of God as irresistible liege-lord. As Putter observes, the mention of Rome as the destination for his errand might indicate the narrator is “a cleric in minor orders, employed in some administrative capacity,”¹¹ but if so, he occupies the lowest possible position in the church’s hierarchy. Even among the servants to a lord, he would be among the lowest ranked. “Messengers were such impecunious and insignificant figures,” writes John Scattergood, “that their poverty practically ensured their safety as they travelled,”¹² a point illustrated by

a passage in the *Piers Plowman* C-text (C.XIII.32–65), in which a “mes-sanger” and “marchaunt” travelling together suffer contrasting fates at the hands of robbers.

In summary, the narrator identifies himself as a low-ranking servant, he complains of his poverty, and he listens to public sermons, which he passes along to the reader with personal asides and practical advice about the endurance of suffering. All of these qualities indicate that he wishes the poem’s audience to view him foremost as impoverished and servile, whatever education or religious insight he may have—and regardless what clerical training or position the *Gawain*-poet himself might possess.

This rhetorical trope, in which an obviously well-educated sermonist presents himself as a member of an uneducated economic class, can be found across all types of anticlerical writing in the fourteenth century, among any writer who wished to create the appearance of independence from a corrupt church hierarchy. It is a crucial position for the Lollards to take, for example, in their passages of advice to “poor priests,” and in fact the irony of the uneducated teacher is embedded within the concept of the poor priesthood itself. Lollard writers tended to distance themselves from the priesthood, Oxford, and Latin learning, all the while lionizing their movement’s supposed founder, an Oxford theologian and cleric who wrote in Latin.

Somerset terms this rhetorical position “extraclergial”—standing outside the clergy while borrowing its legitimacy¹³—while Hudson draws attention to the position’s irony in calling it “the paradox of Lollardy,” and uses the trials of two Lollard leaders, Walter Brut and William Swinderby, in the late fourteenth century to illustrate it.¹⁴ Brut, a radical Lollard from Hereford, was examined by bishop John Trefnant several times from 1390–1393, and an edited version of his trial transcript was translated from Latin to English and popularized by John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* two centuries later. Like the *Gawain*-poet in *Patience*, who depicts himself as a humble servant listening to a sermon even as he delivers a sermon in highly literate poetic lines, Brut decries Latin learning while putting his own learning brilliantly on display. Hudson notes that Brut “knows the biblical tropes of humility, and of inadequacy with words, and so allies himself with Isaiah and with Daniel ... But his claim that *non cognovi literaturam* (I know no letters) is controverted by his practice,”¹⁵ as he cites nearly 200 biblical passages from memory and refers to canon law eleven times. Swinderby, a parish priest on trial in the diocese of Lincoln in 1389 after being denounced by three friars, also describes himself as “bot sym-

pully lettered,” through according to Hudson, “his arguments were scarcely less erudite than Brut’s.”¹⁶ Swinderby refuses to engage his interrogator in Latin, recalling William Thorpe’s refusal to acknowledge Latinate English terms like “transubstantiation” in his trial with Archbishop Arundel in 1407, as well as Thorpe’s strategic anti-intellectualism:

I preie 3ou, ser, that 3e wol declare here opinli in Ynglische ... forthi that 3oure axinge passith myn vndirstondinge, I dar neither denye it ne graunte it, for it is scolemater aboute whiche I neuer bisied me for to knowe in.¹⁷

Despite its leaders’ claims to be “poorly lettered” men, Hudson says, “The Lollard heresy was in origin learned, indeed academic,”¹⁸ and drew from the quintessentially academic work of Wyclif.

Wendy Scase documents the same anti-intellectual strategy and pairs it with the “clerical aside,” in which a pastor preaching to the laity temporarily admonishes his colleagues before turning back to his broader audience. What the *Gawain*-poet appears to utilize in *Patience* is what Scase terms the “anti-intellectual impasse” or “lewed stalemate,” in which a writer with obvious clerical training presents himself as a member of the uneducated laity in order to instruct them, as a trusted peer rather than a higher-ranking authority.¹⁹ As he begins his story of the priest-like prophet Jonah, the narrator establishes that he is not the same type of spiritual leader, while also asserting that they share a central human experience—they are both men who receive orders from a higher authority and must choose either patient obedience or complaint.

For the narrator of *Patience*, placing himself at a greater remove from the priesthood than he did in *Cleanness* allows him to make a personal connection with lay readers through shared experience, a connection largely absent from the previous poem. “By appearing to listen to his own *exemplum*,” Putter observes, “the poet effectively abolishes the distance that separates the speaker of the sermon from its hearers.”²⁰ The poet’s rhetorical strategy creates another advantage, in that it allows his lay audience to view the lessons of Jonah from two distinct perspectives—first, they can recognize their own experiences and reactions to suffering in Jonah’s, and secondly, they can view him from afar as a priestly figure, a representative of their own spiritual leaders whose many failures are dramatized in the story and then condemned by the voice of God and the voice of the narrator, who speaks as one of them. As with Wyclif’s poor priests and the Lollards’ educated anti-intellectualism, the poet asks the audience to

participate in a paradox—to internalize Jonah’s spiritual conflict as their own, and at the same time hold him at arm’s length as the subject of anti-clerical critique.

Two “Playferes”: *Patience* and Fourteenth-Century Poverty Debates

The poet establishes his connection to a lay audience, a figurative connection to Jonah’s spiritual predicament, and his distance from the hierarchy of the church, all with the revelation that he is a servant to a liege lord, an authority with whom he does not always agree. But the narrator does not describe his occupation as a servant solely for these purposes; the description comes as part of an argument about the relationship between the material hardship of poverty and the spiritual virtue of patience.

The poet begins by translating the first of the Beatitudes from the Gospel of Matthew, which he calls “happes” (11), in the following way: “Thay arn happen that han in hert pouerté, / For hores is the heuen-ryche to holde for euer” (13–14). Like the six Beatitudes that follow it, this a relatively free but faithful translation of the Vulgate. The Wycliffite LV renders it similarly: “Blessid be pore men in spirit: for the kyngdom of heuenes is heren”; in both cases, the spiritual virtue in the first half of the verse is poverty of the “heart” or “spirit,” and the reward is heaven’s “ryche,” or kingdom. When the poet reaches the eighth “hap,” however, he departs significantly from the Vulgate text, with a phrase Andrew calls “his only significant deviation from his source”²¹: “Thay ar happen also that con her hert stere, / For hores is the heuen-ryche, as I er sayde” (27–28). The blessing comes to those who can “steer their hearts,” an image in accord with the poem’s nautical theme, but which does not translate directly the first half of the verse on which it is based: “Blessid be thei that suffren persecucioun for riȝtwisnesse: for the kyngdom of heuenes is heren” (Matthew 5:10). In this case, the reward of heaven’s kingdom is the same in each translation, with the addition only of the poet’s “as I er sayde,” a reminder to the reader that the eighth Beatitude offers the same reward as the first, a connection the poet will elaborate upon in the following verses. But the virtue that leads to this reward, in the poet’s rendering, focuses on the internal ability to restrain, control, or guide one’s heart toward God, to cite several definitions of the verb “steren” in the *MED*,²² rather than simply to suffer persecution. Of course, the two concepts are not entirely unrelated—

the idea that persecution cultivates endurance and self-control is natural enough and traditional, just as physical poverty cultivates patience in the poet's later formulation—but the poet does not draw them together in any overt way here. Only a reader already familiar with the verse would follow his logic, or even note the change at all, perhaps a further indication of the type of reader he intends to speak to—laymen, accustomed to suffering and hardship, possibly uneducated, but nevertheless intimate with the biblical text, if only orally and in translation.

After reciting the eight Beatitudes, the poet assigns “ladyes” (30) to each of them. The first is “Dame Pouert” (31), who matches the “in hert pouerté” of the first Beatitude, and the eighth is “Dame Pacyence” (33), whose virtue was earlier described with the image of steering one’s heart. The poet clearly has a direct translation of the Vulgate’s “*beati qui persecutionem patiuntur*” in mind when he presents Dame Patience, and though he does not present a translation on the page, he once again expects the audience to know the verse already, perhaps even to hear the Latin word for suffering, “*pator*,” in its third-person plural future tense form, “*patiuntur*,” as he converts it to the English “patience.” To suffer persecution and to have patience, the poet demonstrates, are concepts inextricably linked at the most fundamental level of the language itself. It becomes clear at this point that by altering the verse in line 27, he was not attempting to remove its description of suffering and patient endurance, but rather was expanding upon it—the truly patient man is one who experiences physical pain but can endure it with self-control, who both suffers and exercises sufferance.

The poet’s argument does not remain at this level of understated wordplay for long, however. In the lines that follow his introduction of the allegorical ladies, he draws attention to the text’s explicit connection between poverty and patience, and with resignation concludes that since he has no choice but to experience one of the Beatitude’s virtues, he may as well practice two and be doubly blessed:

Bot syn I am put to a poynt [condition] that pouerté
 hatte [is called],
 I schal me poruay [equip with] pacyence and play me
 with bothe,
 For in the tyxte there thyse two arn in teme layde,
 Hit arn fettled [arranged] in on forme, the forme
 [first] and the laste,
 And by quest of her quoyntyse [wisdom] enquylen
 [obtain] on mede.

And als, in myn vpynyoun, hit arn of on kynde:
 For theras pouert hir proferes [presents herself] ho nyl
 be put vtter,
 Bot lenge [dwells] wheresoeuer hir lyst, lyke other
 greme [like it or not];
 And theras pouert enpresses, tha3 mon pyne thynk,
 Much maugré [despite] his mun [complaint], he mot
 nede suffer;
 Thus pouerté and pacyence arn nedes playferes.
 Sythen I am sette with hem samen, suffer me byhoues;
 Thenne is me lyztloker [easier] hit lyke and her lotes
 [manners] prayse,
 Thenne wyther [resist] wyth and be wroth and the
 wers haue. (35–48)

Despite the playful tone throughout this passage—the ladies are “playferes,” or playmates, and in what seems happy resignation he will “play me with bothe”—the persistent repetition of words for states of discomfort or torment (“greme,” “enpresses,” “pyne,” “mun,” “suffer,” “the wers”) indicate that his state is truly painful. In the lines that immediately follow, the poet will provide the more detailed illustration of himself as a put-upon servant messenger for a liege-lord, before transitioning into the story of Jonah, but his social status is already clear enough in this generalized description. Whereas patience is a virtue he chooses to “poruay” (36), or take upon himself willingly, he has not chosen to endure poverty—she actively “proferes” (41) herself to him. Any descriptions of how he reached this impoverished state are placed in the passive voice—“I am put to a poynt” (35); “I am sette with hem samen” (46)—as if he has no personal agency in determining his condition. The involuntary nature of his situation is not a unique case, the poet argues, but is a crucial part of poverty’s nature. She dwells “wheresoeuer hir lyst” (42), whether she is invited or not, and “enpresses” herself (43) upon anyone she chooses, ignoring the complaints, “mun,” of those she has deemed “mot nede suffer” (44). Indeed, once she has arrived, she cannot be driven away or “put vtter” (41), at least not by any means the poet describes here, and for himself, he has decided that to “wyther” (48) or resist will be worse than useless. His conclusion, for himself and every reader suffering poverty, is to practice a non-resisting form of patience, not only to endure poverty without complaint, but even to “lyke” it, “play” with it, and “her lotes prayse” (47), as if it were a high-ranking lady to be entertained chivalrously.

Given that poverty is a virtue one does not choose willingly, closely entwined with patience, and that having “alle” of the Beatitude virtues “were the better” than just one (34), the poet argues that the practice of patience for those already in material poverty is simply the most logical course of action. He does not attempt to inspire his readers or condemn them, or to make any emotional argument, but appeals merely to their practicality, with a simple deductive argument and a playfully resigned tone, a strategy similar to that of Theseus’s concluding speech in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, which considers that Jupiter’s will cannot be gainsaid:

And heer-agayns no creature on lyve,
Of no degree, availleth for to stryve.
Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me,
To maken vertu of necessitee ...
And whoso gruccheth ought, he dooth folye.
(I.3039–42, 3045)

It also resembles an argument the Maiden in *Pearl* makes shortly after her introduction, that the Dreamer has little choice but to endure his loss and reconcile himself to life without her: “And loue ay God, in wele and wo,” she says in response to one of his frustrated outbursts, in an echo of Job 2:10, “For anger gaynez the not a cresse. / Who nedeþ schal thole [suffer], be not so thro [impatient] ... Thou moste abyde that He schal deme” (342–44, 348). In *Patience*, the poet repeats the introductory lesson once more in the poem’s conclusion, with the illustration of a man who tears his clothes in impatience and only makes his impoverished condition worse, with a final reminder that poverty is more than an abstract concept for him:

Be preue [steadfast] and be pacient in payne and in
joye;
For he that is to rakel [hasty] to renden his clothez
Mot efte sitte with more vnsounde [trouble] to sewe
hem togeder.
Forthy when pouerté me enprecez and paynez inno3e
Ful softly with suffraunce sa3ttel [reconcile] me
bihouez. (525–29)

Though the poet urges the poor to suffer their fate “softly,” rather than sing praises to poverty, his advice at the end is essentially the same as at the beginning, and just as pragmatic.

The poet's argument is, on the face of it, simple, but the larger context of fourteenth-century poverty debates in which it appears is dauntingly complex. His decision, for example, to start with the phrase "in hert pouerté" (13), but then to shift the meaning of "poverty" in the first Beatitude to a physical rather than a spiritual condition, cuts against the grain of a long tradition of interpretation that judged Jesus's words as referring primarily to spiritual poverty. Most prominently, St. Augustine, in his *De Sermone Domini*, claims that in the Vulgate's phrase "Beati pauperes spiritu," the controlling word is "spiritu," and that Jesus refers to humility, an inner state that often but not always coincides with physical hardship.²³ The *Gawain*-poet is clearly familiar with this concept, if not with Augustine's original text—Spearing contends that the poet's linking of the first and eighth Beatitudes and assigning them the virtues of poverty and patience, respectively, in itself demonstrates a familiarity with Augustinian interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount²⁴—but he just as clearly reaches different conclusions about the meaning and significance of "poverty." Putter summarizes Augustine's position, in opposition to the Stoics of his own day, to be that "poverty borne not voluntarily but out of necessity was not redemptive but damning," and tolerating suffering for any reason besides "for the sake of righteousness" is "no true patience."²⁵ The poet's rejection of this position leads Putter to describe his view as "not unlike the Stoic ideal of patience as the most reasonable response to life's inevitable changes of fortune,"²⁶ and Keiser, too, views the poet's position as "a practical stoicism born of personal experience: it is simply futile to try to avoid suffering if you are poor."²⁷

But it would also be accurate to label the poet's position as anti-fraternal, since friars were the most vocal about supporting Augustinian and Franciscan views on poverty. An emphasis on the spiritual quality of poverty, and a denial of the virtues of involuntary material poverty, was standard for fraternal orders in particular, which had a stake in viewing their own vows of voluntary mendicancy as superior, and themselves as the inheritors of heaven's kingdom. This interpretive tradition among the friars, and the counter-tradition of their detractors who viewed mendicancy as an abomination—St. Amour, FitzRalph, and Wyclif chief among them—is an important aspect of English anticlericalism. Though the *Gawain*-poet's description of poverty does not appear here as part of an explicitly anticlerical critique, a nearly identical position *was* used by many of his contemporaries in the service of attacks upon fraternal mendicancy.

For example, William Langland takes a FitzRalphian view in Passus XI of the *Piers Plowman* B-text, a section that deals with poverty, patience, and material possessions in general, and which openly attacks the “freres” throughout as hypocrites who act “lik thisse woweris [wooters] / That wedde none widwes but for to welden hir goodes” (71–72). His critiques of the friars, however, always keep in view the ideal of the fraternal orders, which Langland embraces and continually contrasts with their corrupted reality—his antifraternality is not only or strictly oppositional, but also exhortatory. The allegorical character Scripture instructs Will that in a perfect, unfallen world, there would exist no physical poverty, and even in the real world, it exists only by the will of God, who wishes to see all men share their goods with those in need. Christ “comaundth ech creature to conformen hym to love / And principally povere peple,” Scripture says, and this is a mutually beneficial exercise, since “hir preieres maye us helpe” (180–81, 183), a spiritual power the poor possess since Jesus himself was once one of them. This ideal state of affairs is impossible to achieve, however, because of mankind’s sin, and rather than helping one another as brothers, rich and poor find themselves at odds:

Almighty God myghte have maad riche men, if he
wolde,
Ac for the beste ben som riche and some beggeres and
povere.
For alle are we Cristes creatures, and of his cofres riche,
And bretheren as of oo [one] blood, as wel beggeres as
erles. ...
No beggere ne boye [knave] amonges us but if it synne
made. (196–99, 203)

Voluntary or fraudulent beggars like the friars further complicate the situation by masquerading as poor when in fact they are rich, and because their chief goal is earning money through their supposedly spiritual vocation, they deliberately ignore Christ’s call to serve the poor first. This accusation is lodged most explicitly by the wicked character Coveitise of Eighes, who ironically attempts to encourage Will by telling him, “For whiles Fortune is thi frend freres wol thee love ... And preien for thee pol by pol if thou be *pecuniosus* [rich]” (55, 58).

In contrast, Langland refers to the Virgin Mary as a “pure povere maide and to a povere man ywedded” (247)—truly poor, not by choice but by the circumstance of God’s will. Though not every Christian can

have exactly this kind of poverty—otherwise none would be left to donate alms and “povere peple to plese” (183)—Scripture advises that in honor of Christ’s “povere apparaille and pilgrymes wedes” (234) that everyone, rich or poor, should “apparaille us noght over proudly—for pilgrymes are we alle” (240), and instead wear “poore clothyng” (244). Scripture says that God and “alle the wise that evere were, by aught I kan aspye, / Preisen poverte for best lif, if pacience it folwe” (254–55). These lines summarize succinctly Langland’s argument in this section of the poem—a number of states might be termed “poverty,” but the kind that deserves praise, which leads to the best life, is genuine material hardship that leads to patience. In this way, involuntary poverty resembles the voluntary practice of penance—both of which, “poverte or penaunce,” Scripture advises Will to “patiently take” (261).

Perhaps the most significant parallel between this passage in *Piers Plowman* and *Patience* is Will’s continual insistence that his own poverty is not merely an abstraction. After Coveitise of Eighes suggests he confess to a friar, who will love and pray for him “whiles Fortune is thi frend,” Will laments, “Fortune [is] my foo ... And poverte pursued me and putte me lowe” (61–62). As a result, the friar-confessors he visits view him with suspicion, especially after he expresses loyalty to his parish priest—“a fool thei me helden, / And loved me the lasse for my lele [loyal] speech” (69). Eventually, he wins their attention, and their absolution, by promising to patronize their order for his own burial service when he dies, the only potentially worthwhile promise a destitute man can give them.

Like the *Gawain*-poet, Langland presents himself rhetorically as a man suffering physical penury; he depicts this state as unavoidable through his personification of poverty, and he asserts that its sole virtue is its ability to cultivate patience within himself and others. Unlike his contemporary, however, Langland does more at this stage of the discussion than merely treat the theme of patience abstractly or transition into a biblical story. Instead, he uses his personal and theological insights about poverty to mount a direct attack against the specific abuses of corrupt priests and other clerics. “Whoso wele be pure parfit moot possession forsake” (274), he states, then shows in practical terms how clerical dispossession can be effected:

If preestes weren wise, thei wolde no silver take
For masses ne for matyns, noght hir mete of usurers,
Ne neither kirtel [tunic] ne cote, theigh thei for cold
sholde deye ...

Spera in Deo [Trust in God] speketh of preestes that
 have no spendyng silver
 That if thei travaille truweliche and truste in God
 almyghty,
 Hem sholde lakke no liflode, neyther lynnen ne
 wollen.
 Thanne nedeth yow noght to nyme silver for masses
 that ye syngen. (281–83, 285–88)

Langland's praise of involuntary poverty leads him to make a somewhat shocking pronouncement at the start of this passage—that parish priests should rely on tithes alone and not possess “spendyng silver,” even if such a state leads them to freeze to death for lack of a coat (“theigh thei for cold sholde deye”). He follows this extreme statement with an immediate assurance that those who trust God truly will not lack the necessities of life—“linen or wool” for clothing in particular—but the bold claim that priests should be willing to die to avoid wrongful possession lingers.

Langland digresses after this point into an indictment of various episcopal and priestly failures, including their lack of education, then concludes the section with something of an apology to the reader: “This lokynge on lewed preestes hath doon me lepe from poverté— / The which I preise, ther pacience is, moore parfit than richesse” (316–17). He presents the anticlerical critique here as a “lepe” that has distracted him, though in fact it flows naturally from his views on poverty and possession. He returns in the final line to an abstract consideration of patience, but his more tangible attacks on specific clerical sins are not erased or easily forgotten.

In the end, Langland's complex anticlericalism has as its object an ideal vision for all types of clerics and in fact all mankind—that all would share their goods with those in need, no one would dress proudly, everyone would think of themselves as pilgrims, clerics would forsake possession, and God would provide for all. He depicts the early apostles in ideal terms, for example, as “povere pilgrymes” who “preyed mennes goodes” (B.XI.245), as the ideal version of itinerant beggars, though elsewhere he condemns the friars for their begging. His critique is anticlerical, anti-fraternal, and antimonastic, but with the goal of re-establishing the true clergy, fraternity, and monasticism.

A more simplistic view of the poverty debate, though set in a highly creative form, can be found in the satirical tract entitled “*Epistola Sathanæ ad Cleros*” (ca. 1400), in which a letter written in the voice of Satan

ironically attacks “thes lewid Lollers” and praises “the lyvys of your prelatys and your clarkis, and of all your religious, and specially of yow,” the friars.²⁸ Satan praises the friars in particular for departing from the principles of their founders, who lived “a poore lyf in mekenes aftur Crist” and met their physical needs “by mans almes without beggery.”²⁹ Now the friars not only “kepe no pouerte nor lowlynes of hert,” but follow Satan’s teaching in holding that the genuinely poor are less worthy of grace—they are most concerned with “how thei xuld increase in riches, and hate comon beggers and poore men, and that thei schuld not be poore in dede.”³⁰ The Lollards believe that the involuntary poor are the most deserving of alms, but Satan’s friends the friars intentionally feign poverty in order to steal from them. The solution to this problem is a dispossession that would force involuntary poverty on the entire hierarchy of the church—disendowment of monasteries, dispossession of priests, and a denial of alms to friars who are not truly poor. Wyclif puts it succinctly in one of his late sermons: “The medicine necessary for extinguishing the poison of the devil” is a return to the church’s “primitive” state of poverty.³¹

The *Gawain*-poet, of course, though he shares these perspectives on poverty in the abstract, does not maneuver them so openly into an anti-clerical direction. He praises involuntary poverty, and his assertion that it is an inescapable route to the virtue of patience and God’s blessing is a typical starting point for antifraternal critiques, but he participates fully in only the first half of what Scase calls the “audacious new poverty polemic in which poverty is praiseworthy but voluntary mendicancy reprehensible.”³² He clearly rejects the Augustinian idea that involuntary poverty is necessarily a sinful condition, and instead links it thematically with the virtue of patience, as Langland does, through the Beatitudes. He subscribes to a view of poverty that would be difficult to reconcile with voluntary mendicancy—as an unlooked-for curse which God’s grace can transfigure into an unearned blessing. He makes no direct reference to friars or other clerics, but he transitions from his discussion of poverty and patience to a depiction of an itinerant prophet, called by God to a vocation not unlike that of a wandering friar or missionary priest. Jonah eventually comes to obedience, finds God’s mercy, and achieves greater wisdom not through a voluntary renunciation of worldly goods, but through an enforced state of impoverishment and pain, similar to the narrator’s. Jonah’s painful circumstances—on the storm-tossed ship, inside the hellishly stinking whale, scorched beneath the worm-eaten bower—represent God’s attempts to shake him out of his sin and corruption, akin to the forceful dispossession

Wyclif, Langland, and others imagined a virtuous king, in this case “the hyȝe Heuen-Kyng” (257), inflicting on his priests for their own good.

The “Perils” of Priesthood: Jonah as Absentee

In contrast to his treatment of the Beatitudes, in which the poet significantly alters only one-half of a single verse, the opening lines of his retelling of the book of Jonah involve a radical rethinking of the prophet’s motives for fleeing from God’s command to preach at Nineveh. At the moment he makes the decision, the biblical text says only that “Jonas roos for to fle” (1:3). Jonah himself complains after God spares the city that he ran because “Y woot, that thou, God, art meke and merciful, pacient, and of merciful doying, and foryyuyng on malice” (4:2)—in other words, he wanted to see the city destroyed but knew from the start that God would not do it. However, the text does not in any way make clear whether Jonah’s claim is truthful; in fact, his rhetorical question, “Lorde, Y biseche, whether this is not my word, whanne Y was yit in my lond?” (4:2), might sound a humorous note to the reader who remembers that Jonah said nothing in response to God’s call in the first chapter.

In *Patience*, Jonah’s reason for fleeing is a simple human failing—he is afraid, and perhaps with good reason. God himself describes the Ninevites as “wykke” (69), full of “malys” (70), “vilanye and venym” (71), and Jonah seconds this description with an imagined scenario of what they might do to a preacher:

“If I bowe to His bode [command] and bryng hem this
tale,
And I be nummen [taken] in Nuniue, my nyes
[trouble] begynes:
He telles me those traytours arn typped [extreme]
schrewes;
I com wyth those tythyges, thay ta me bylyue
[immediately],
Pynez me in a prysoun, put me in stokkes,
Wrythe me in a warlok [fettters], wrast out myn yȝen.
This is a meruayl messsage a man for to preche
Amonge enmyes so mony and mansed [cursed] fendes,
Bot if my gaynlych God such gref to me wolde,
For desert of sum sake that I slayn were.
At all peryles,” quoth the prophete, “I aproche hit no
nerre.” (75–85)

Even as he makes his way to the port of Joppa and finds a ship to board, Jonah continues to dwell on the dangers of Nineveh in his mind, and on God's apparent unconcern for his fate:

“Oure Syre syttes,” he says, “on sege [seat] so hy3e
In his glowande glorye, and gloumbes [frowns] ful
lyttel
Tha3 I be nummen in Nunniue and naked dispoyled,
On rode [cross] rwly torent with rybaudes [ruffians]
mony.” (93–96)

Because the poet has put the reader in the position of hearing Jonah's thoughts, and because those thoughts dwell only on panicked fear and mistrust of God's concern, the prophet's final complaint about knowing in advance that God would be merciful, which the poet maintains nearly verbatim from his biblical source (413–20), is rendered even more absurd and ironic. When Jonah asks, “Watz not this ilk my worde that worthen is nouthe [now come to pass], / That I kest [spoke] in my cuntré?” (414–15), we know with a certainty the Bible does not provide that Jonah has neither said nor thought any such thing.

Medieval commentaries on the Bible, however, tend to take Jonah's final complaint more or less at its word, and to construct a reading of his character that emphasizes his typological connection to Christ, a connection Jesus himself introduces in Matthew 12:38–41 and Luke 11:29–32, where he compares Israel unfavorably to Nineveh and his own three days in the grave to Jonah's three days in the whale. Of course, the *Gawain*-poet is responsive to this interpretation of Jonah as well, but he uses it not to explain or excuse Jonah's behavior but to emphasize his extreme distance from the ideal of Christ. Jonah's nightmare of being crucified naked on a “rode” (95–96) reminds the reader of Christ but at the same time separates Jonah from him. “Jonah's rejection both of the mission and the cross,” John Friedman writes, “indicate clearly that we are to see the prophet failing at being Christ rather than merely prefiguring him.”³³ Rather than embracing death on a cross as Christ did, he runs from it in mortal fear.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate how far the poet's treatment of Jonah departs from the standard fourteenth-century interpretive tradition is to compare it to the “Ordinary Gloss on Jonah,” a synthesized compendium of Latin glosses that range from ancient Church Fathers to twelfth-century commentators, widely cited by writers across the spectrum of fourteenth-century religious debate. Ryan McDermott, translator of the

Jonah Gloss into English, cites *Patience* as one of many medieval works influenced by it,³⁴ but the poem shows little trace of the Gloss, unless as a source for interpretations the poet deliberately decides to reject. The commentators quoted by the Gloss give entirely sympathetic readings to Jonah's reasons for fleeing, starting with the Prologue, which says, "When by means of illuminating prophecy Jonah saw the sinners of the city of Nineveh about to obtain the mercy of God, he did not want to go to proclaim the destruction of Nineveh because he did not want to seem to preach false things."³⁵ The Prologue goes on to describe this view of Jonah's as false and a human failing, but it is a far cry from the *Gawain*-poet's image of a prophet merely afraid of persecution. In *Patience*, Jonah is a coward; in the Gloss, he has "suffered something human";³⁶ his failure is theological, as he holds an incomplete understanding of God's nature.

The Gloss also draws on a multitude of typological comparisons between Jonah and Christ—he prefigures "the passion of the Lord by his shipwreck"; his name means "dove," the image of the Holy Spirit that descended on Jesus; he is sent to Nineveh as Christ "is sent to the world"; he flees his homeland as Christ departed from heaven for "the sea of this world," etc.³⁷ As the number of commentators and their allegories multiply, "the world" is represented variously by Nineveh, Tarshish, and the sea; both Jonah and Nineveh are compared in different contexts to Cain; and in one of the compendium's more unusual moments, the typology shifts away from Jonah and Christ becomes the worm that eats the wood-bine³⁸—but the comparisons invariably excuse Jonah from any serious wrongdoing. In one sympathetic reading, the prophet is given the ability to foretell Christ's salvation for the Gentiles, an event he knows will bring condemnation to the Jews, and he resists bringing good news to the Gentiles of Nineveh on behalf of his own people:

Because the spirit revealed it to him, the prophet knew that the repentance of the nations was the fall of the Jews, and so the lover of his homeland does not so much begrudge Nineveh as he desires that his people not perish. ... He feared that once the Gentiles were converted by his preaching, the Jews would be completely abandoned in his own lifetime, and for this reason he fled.³⁹

The Gloss further indicates that for the same reason, Jesus himself offered a token resistance to God's inescapable will, for example in the Garden of Gethsemane. For the commentators compiled in the Ordinary Gloss, even the qualities that most mark Jonah as a sinner and negative exemplar from

the beginning of the biblical story—his disobedience and anger—are read into the allegory as Christ-like attributes. Neither Christ nor Jonah is ever described in the Gloss as fearful; the possibility is never even broached.

In other commentaries the poet may have consulted, the likelihood of Jonah's fear may be raised, but only to be dismissed in favor of a more allegorical, or at least more sympathetic, reading. For example, Marbod of Rennes, a twelfth-century French bishop whom Putter argues the *Gawain*-poet must have read,⁴⁰ writes in his commentary on Jonah, *Naufragium Jonae Prophetæ*:

Perhaps, he did not go to prophesy because he feared his fate. Because as the messenger of news that would aggrieve the people, he might be killed, or beaten, or put to the sword, or perhaps burned at the stake. But he is not strong who fears the throes of death so much that he prefers the love of life to the art of dying nobly. Nor does the person who does not obey God in trust really believe in him. *This reason does not therefore become our prophet.* But he knew God; that he tries to call back to him, and quickly has mercy if someone renounces his former evil ... This is what the missionary, who survived the abyss, feared: that he would have lied if what he had announced would not happen.⁴¹

Marbod draws a rhetorical contrast here between “the love of life” and “the art of dying nobly,” one shared by anticlerical critics who would accuse the clergy of sloth, but he refuses to apply the critique to Jonah, dismissing it out of hand as unworthy of the prophet.

Other stark differences between the Ordinary Gloss and *Patience's* depiction of the prophet abound. A commentator observes that both Jonah and Jesus slept on ships during storms, in Jesus's case just before the miracle that calms the wind and waves, and that Jonah “sleeps not out of insouciance but out of melancholy.”⁴² This sober depiction is far from the panicked Jonah of *Patience*, who “watz flowen for ferde [fear] of the flode lotes [noise] / Into the bothem of the bot” (183–84), and who, once he does fall asleep, slobbers and snores comically, prompting the sailor who is sent to find him to kick him and wish him awakened by a devil:

Slypped vpon a sloumbe-selepe, and sloberande he
 routes [snores].
 The freke hym frunt with his fot and bede hym ferk vp:
 Ther Ragnel [a devil] in his rakentes [chains] hym rere
 [rouse] of his dremes! (186–88).

When Jonah is thrown overboard, the Gloss commentators depict him as willingly, even eagerly, embracing his fate in the sea, “Not fighting back, but stretching out his hands through the will of God,”⁴³ whereas *Patience* shows the sailors seizing him forcibly “by top and bi to [toe]” (229), the whale swallowing him while “the folk 3et haldande his fete” (251), and Jonah continuing to panic at the likelihood of death, “malskred [bewildered] in drede” (255). Lastly, over the course of several verses, the Gloss quotes an interpretation of the story as a sacramental allegory, in which Jonah, like Christ, is both “victim and priest,”⁴⁴ administering a sacrifice on behalf of a sinful people and providing the sacrifice itself with his own body. While this interpretation might have provided the poet an opportunity to add eucharistic imagery to a story that already includes explicit references to penance and baptism, the idea is nowhere present in the poem. When the whale swallows Jonah, the poet compares the animal’s size to a “munster,” or church building, but within the metaphor, Jonah’s body is not a eucharistic wafer but merely a speck of dust: “As mote in at a munster-dor, so mukel [large] wern his chawlez” (268). On nearly every count, the *Gawain*-poet rejects the persistent typological interpretations of the Gloss, finding in the prophet a fully human rather than divine character, regardless of his spiritual authority.

The most significant aspect of Jonah’s humanity in the first half of the story is his fear, for physical dangers which his imagination enumerates in detail: prison, stocks, fetters, gouged-out eyes, and death on a cross. Jonah describes these imagined torments collectively as “nyes” (76), troubles or injuries, and as “peryles” (85). He uses the latter term to describe not only what the Ninevites but also God might do to him, as he considers that God may secretly intend this very outcome, to punish him for an unknown sin. Perhaps, he thinks, God wishes him dead “for desert of some sake [fault],” and he resolves: “‘At alle peryles,’ quoth the prophete, ‘I aproche hit no nerre’” (84–85). The “perils” of God’s wrath for fleeing, Jonah calculates, will be lesser than the perils of obedience, especially if God plans to martyr him. The poet emphasizes the irony of this attitude by repeating the word in an editorial aside when Jonah boards the ship: “Lo, the wytles wrechche! For he wolde no3t suffer, / Now hatz he put hym in plyt of peril wel more” (113–14). It turns out the “wytles” Jonah has made a grave miscalculation: the perils of resisting God’s commands are “wel more” than those of physical persecution in Nineveh.

This type of argument, in which the physical dangers of humiliation, injury, or death are compared rhetorically to the spiritual, often

eternal consequences of disobedience to God—Marbod's argument above, though he declines to apply it to Jonah—forms a significant theme within the fourteenth-century tradition of offering condemnation or advice to wayward spiritual leaders, particularly those office-holders who have neglected their callings by becoming simonists, pluralists, absentees, or holders of alien benefices. In addition to being similar in structure to the *Gawain*-poet's accusations against Jonah, these arguments often use a similar vocabulary, including the word "peril" to describe the risks associated with faithful clerical service. John Trevisa's translation of FitzRalph's *Defensio Curatorum*, for example, attacks the covetousness of friars who sell their clerical services to obtain wealth and privileges at the expense of parish priests, who have a duty to perform those services for tithes alone:

Also hit semeth that freres infecte hem-self with the synne of couetise in procuringe of these priueleges; first for thei procured nouȝt othere priuyleges in helpe of othere peryls of the office of presthode, as to folly children in help of curatours, & housle paryschons on Ester day and anynt seke men at her ende day. And these dedes myȝt be as medeful as the othere; but these thei lefte & procuride priuyleges, to the whiche longeth worldlich wynnynȝ & profit in oon maner wise other othere.⁴⁵

FitzRalph's objection is that friars receive payment for the least difficult of clerical tasks, namely the baptisms and burials of rich donors, without enduring the "peryls" of the office, which he defines by listing several unsavory tasks of a parish priest—working with children, hearing numerous confessions for penance on Easter, and anointing the sick. He pointedly includes among these tasks the funeral services of "pore dede mennes bodyes for to burie," and compares the friars to "vulturs" who "smelleth [the] mete" of rich men's corpses and flock to them.⁴⁶

Anticlerical writers marshalled similar arguments against what William Pantin describes with plentiful examples as "a widespread system of sinecurism, absenteeism, and pluralism."⁴⁷ Annates, or benefices reserved for papal appointment, were almost always filled in England by alien office-holders and paid for by papal taxes levied on local bishoprics as well as on the royal treasury. K. B. McFarlane explains that these annates "were an important item in the papal budget. ... The princely incomes drawn by certain favoured cardinals, usually the pope's own kinsmen, from a score of valuable benefices which they never visited in person, were a just

cause of scandal,”⁴⁸ and particularly so in England, where opposition to them took on a patriotic as well as religious character.

In several of his works, many quoted in chapter 2, Wyclif accuses absentee clerics of neglecting the work of Christ to which they have been called, and to which God will hold them accountable on Judgment Day for the dangers their flocks suffered as a result. These missing priests, as well as monks who refuse to preach publicly in favor of a private contemplative life, are condemned for ignoring the spiritual peril of their charges in favor of physical comfort. In the end, Wyclif argues, they will be held responsible for the lost souls in their care, and the dangers of hell to which they subjected their parishioners will become their own: “How, therefore, will those rectors respond on the day of judgment for souls whose tenths they enjoy if by preaching they did not direct them on the road to virtue and to God’s law?”⁴⁹ In a sermon on Luke 10 from the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle, which is based in part on Wyclif’s sermon on the same passage,⁵⁰ the poor priest tells his fellow preachers that, though Christ “tellith hem the peril bifore” of their vocation, and it is “this perelous goyng that makith it more meedful,” in fact the “couetise of prestis is moche more perilous in this caas.”⁵¹ For while the physical deprivations of ministry might force preachers “to trauele as Poul dide, or to suffre wilfulli hungir and thirst ... but coueitise of wickid prestis blemischith hem and the peple.”⁵² The physical dangers are real, and prove the worth of their preaching enterprise, but the spiritual risks may cause more serious damage.

A more subtle example of this argument comes in Chaucer’s depiction of the Parson, a wholly positive exemplar who we are told at his introduction is “in adversitee ful pacient” (I.484), and who eagerly performs the duties FitzRalph says the friars shirk, even at great discomfort and physical risk: “But he lefte nat, for reyn ne thonder, / In siknesse nor in meschief to visite / The ferreste [furthest] in his parisshe, muche and lite [great and small]” (492–94). Though the income from his impoverished parish’s tithes is small, he refuses to abandon his flock even temporarily to supplement his wealth by singing at a chantry in London, knowing the great danger they might fall into during his absence:

He sette nat his benefice to hyre
And leet his sheep encombred in the myre
And ran to Londoun unto Seinte Poules
To seken hym a chaunterie for soules,
Or with a bretherhed to been withholde;

But dwelte at hoom, and kept wel his folde,
 So that the wolf ne made it nat myscarie;
 He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie.
 (I.507–14)

For the Parson, the physical risks of enduring poverty as a “povre persoun” among “povre parissheis” (478, 488) do not compare to the spiritual risks of leaving them to figurative wolves. Chaucer’s unqualified praise for the Parson, who refuses to participate in even the mildest and most justifiable form of pluralism and absenteeism, serves as a clear rebuke to those who do. Langland offers a more direct critique in the Prologue to *Piers Plowman*, as he describes a group of priests from poor parishes who beg their bishop “To have a licence and leve at London to dwelle, / And synge ther for symonie, for silver is swete” (B.Pro.85–86). In the even more blunt words of a later Lollard sermon, “no curat owith to leue his schepe vnkept among the wolues of helle & ride with grete coost to ferre placis for pride, enuye or coueitise of worldly clerkis.”⁵³ As discussed in chapter 2, a more unusual category of absentees, but one directly relevant to the depiction of Jonah in *Patience*, is that of bishops appointed to foreign sees established in the era of the Crusades but no longer under control of the church. These bishops in name only would theoretically serve as missionaries to the Muslim regions where their bishoprics were located, but in practice they simply received a papal benefice—a sinecure that did not require even the bare minimum of finding a local replacement. In the *Piers Plowman* B-text, Langland rebukes these false beneficers through the character Anima, who suggests that if they receive payment as missionaries, they should endure the “perils” of missionaries, by attempting to convert the Muslims in their care:

Allas, that men so longe on Makometh sholde bileve!
 So manye prelates to preche as the Pope maketh—
 Of Nazareth, of Nynyve, of Neptalym and Damaske.
 That thei ne wente as Crist wisseth—sithen thei wilne
 a name—
 To be pastours and preche the passion of Jesus,
 And as hymself seide, so to lyve and dye:
Bonus pastor animam suam ponit [the good shepherd
 giveth his life] ...
 And that is routhe for the rightful men that in the
 reawme wonyen,
 And a peril to the Pope and prelates that he maketh,
 That bere bisshopes names of Bethleem and of
 Babiloigne. (491–96, 507–09)

The list of foreign cities for which the Pope “maketh” imaginary bishoprics is deliberately chosen by Langland, each one the scene of a biblical character’s courage in preaching to hostile unbelievers—Nazareth and Bethlehem, the childhood homes of Jesus, where Christ preaches at the risk of his life (Matthew 13:54–58, Mark 6:1–6, Luke 4:28–30); Naphtali, hometown of the prophet Tobias from the apocryphal book of Tobit (1:1), who pursues a demon across the foreign lands of Nineveh (1:11) and Media (1:16); Damascus, site of the Apostle Paul’s conversion and staging point for his extensive missionary travels (Acts 9:1–22, 26:20); Babylon, city of exile for the heroic Israelites Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego throughout the book of Daniel; and of course Jonah’s Nineveh. These cities, Anima suggests, are no more physically dangerous for Christian missionaries now than they were in the time of the biblical prophets, and the spiritual peril of the men there who have believed “so longe on Makometh” is at least as great as that of their pagan forebears. The “peril” she references in line 508 does not refer to either of these, however, but rather to the spiritual danger that attends the beneficers who accept these appointments, as well as the pope who offers them. The word carries the same ironic tone as it does in *Patience*—like Jonah, who has imperilled himself by fleeing from peril in a foreign land, these bishops risk spiritual death with their unwillingness to sacrifice their physical lives for a faraway flock.

In the opening scenes of *Patience*, Jonah represents an absentee of the worst kind. He is not merely greedy or overcommitted or at a physical remove from the people he has been called to serve. Unlike the recipient of an alien benefice or non-existent office, he has not simply received payment for work he does not intend to do; unlike a pluralist, he has not accepted a position it is physically impossible for him fill. With his flight, he actively refuses a direct assignment from God for work that is eminently possible, simply because it is disagreeable and risky. He refuses the call because he does not trust God, an untenable position for one who would serve as His representative. The remedy for his mistrust and disobedience involves a dramatic irony, as God instills a sense of trust in Jonah by first imperilling him physically and only then providing a means of salvation. Inside the whale, “he watz sokored by that Syre that syttes so hyze” (261), an ironic echo of Jonah’s earlier terror that the “Syre [who] syttes ... on sege so hyze” (93) is too lofty to care about his life and has marked him for crucifixion. When Jonah expresses a clear sense of remorse and requests that He “Haf now mercy of Thy man and his mysdedes” (287), God

provides the “hyrne” (289) which keeps him afloat and alive in the whale’s hellish belly, until at last Jonah voices the “prayer ful prest” (303) in which he promises to make the ultimate sacrificial gift of his life in God’s service:

Bot I dewoutly awowe ...
 Soberly to do The sacrafyse when I schal saue worthe
 [am saved],
 And offer The for my hele a ful hol gyfte,
 And halde goud that Thou me hetes [commands]: haf
 here my traathe. (333–36)

Jonah’s response to the pain God has inflicted upon him is significantly more than the narrator’s passive and resigned decision to praise rather than complain about poverty in the poem’s introduction. His is an active eagerness, expressed by the word “prest,” to pursue his vocation as God’s mouthpiece. While writers in the Ordinary Gloss imagine Jonah embracing his fate the moment he enters the sea, an interpretation that keeps his typological parallel to Christ intact, the poet imagines that he must first pass through the hellish torments of a penitential process before reaching his final spiritual state—not of fleeing from God, not of defeated acceptance of irresistible powers outside his control, but of an active and vigorous return to the errand he forsook. He has emerged from sleep and drowning and death to the height of action and life, as he receives God’s call again and responds so promptly he reaches Nineveh within the same day: “Then the renk radly [quickly] ros as he myzt, / And to Niniue that nazt he nezed [neared] ful euen” (351–52). As Scattergood observes, this accords with a recurring theme in medieval penitential manuals, that patience is “a countervailing moral virtue against the sin of sloth ... as well as more traditionally against anger.”⁵⁴ Or as Chaucer’s exemplary Parson explains in his tale, the “vertu that is called fortitudo” or “long suffraunce” is the remedy “agayns this horrible synne of Accidie [Sloth]” (X.727–29). The patience Jonah acquires (at least temporarily—his encounter with the worm in the woodbine has yet to occur) does not merely help him to endure suffering passively, but prompts him to a zealous obedience in defiance of the fear of death that motivated him earlier. He also serves with no clear promise of reward, in stark contrast to absentee clerics of the fourteenth-century anticlerical tradition who reap the material benefits of spiritual office without suffering its perils.

In the *Gawain*-poet’s retelling, Jonah’s painful experience in the whale offers a remedy for a multitude of sins, including his mistrust of

God, fear of persecution, disobedience, anger, the greed that motivates absenteeism, and the sloth that sustains it, represented by Jonah's slobbering sleep. All of these failings, which include three of the seven Deadly Sins, have the same cure in the poem—a forcible impoverishment and subsequent reliance on God's mercy. As with the poet's earlier take on poverty, he draws no explicit connection between Jonah's situation and the theme of clerical dispossession, but Jonah is clearly a priest-like figure, and the rhetoric and imagery the poet uses to describe his transformation places him squarely in the tradition of fourteenth-century critics who did advocate dispossession, from FitzRalph to Langland, Wyclif to the Lollards. What further connects him to the latter two, and to their advocacy of itinerant "poor priests," is his depiction of Jonah's post-conversion preaching, which we will examine next.

The Lore Locked Within: Jonah as Fourteenth-Century Preacher

The two illuminations for *Patience* that appear in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript depict Jonah being swallowed by the whale (fol. 86a), then preaching to a small group of Ninevites (fol. 86v). Despite the illustrator's tendency to ignore or misread portions of the text, as when he fails to make the Green Knight's skin green in *Sir Gawain* (fol. 94v), he appears in this case to have correctly intuited Jonah's two most significant actions in the poem—first the process of his penance which begins in the whale, and second his response to God's mercy immediately after his repentance, as he takes on his fullest priestly role and follows God's call to preach.

When God initially commands Jonah to travel to Nineveh at the beginning of *Patience*, He first tells him not to speak—"Nym the way to Nynyue wythouten other speche" (66)—then indicates that His plan is for Jonah to spread a message that God will reveal to him only after he arrives: "And in that ceté My sazes [sayings] soghe alle aboute, / That in that place, at the poynt, I put in thi hert" (67–68). God does express His plan to "venge Me" on Nineveh's "vilanye and venym" (71), but the precise content of Jonah's speech to the condemned city is apparently one that God will determine in the moment, "at the poynt," and "put" into his heart externally.

When Jonah's call to prophesy to Nineveh comes for the second time and he accepts, provided God will "lene me thy grace" (347), God's

description of the process by which His word will come to Jonah and pass through him undergoes a significant change: “Ris, aproche then to prech, lo, the place here. / Lo, My lore is in the loke, lauce [loose] hit therinne” (349–50). The word “loke,” passive form of the verb “louken,” means to enclose or lock, as with the door of a room or prison, and the *MED* cites a variety of figurative possibilities as well, including the setting of a stone in jewelry, burial in a grave, and “God’s will” or “secret counsel” hidden in a person’s heart, the definition which the dictionary gives to its usage in *Patience* 350.⁵⁵ The same definition suggests another interesting possibility as well, that the item locked away is a “story” that has been “fixed (with letters), embodied (in letters).” In this second calling, the message that Jonah is to preach is not one that God will place into his heart from the outside, but a secret that already exists there; it waits only to be unlocked, revealed, or converted into words.

Perhaps the most important aspect to note about this change from the first calling to the second is that nearly the reverse takes place in the biblical source. In his second calling in the biblical story, God tells Jonah to “go in to Nynyue, the greet citee, and preche thou in it the prechyng which Y speke to thee” (3:1), a command that is actually more prescriptive than the original “preche thou ther ynn” (1:2). In *Patience*, God begins by dictating His message to Jonah, and ends by giving him at least the appearance of more freedom, allowing him to shape into tangible, embodied words the abstract message he finds within himself.

Though Jonah’s reception of God’s message changes from the first call to the second, his delivery of it still accords with God’s initial command—he responds without speaking at first, but makes the “journey ful joynt [completely] ... Er euer he warpped [spoke] any worde to wy3e that he mette” (355–56). Then when he reaches Nineveh, “he cryed so cler that kenne [understand] myght alle / The trwe tenor of his teme [theme]” (357–58). The “tenor” or general sense of his message, and the ability for it to be understood by everyone, seems here to be more important than the precise words that he chooses to use; the final message, after all, is essentially Jonah’s own translation or interpretation of the pre-existing “lore” (350) that he has loosed from his own heart. The poet’s introduction to the speech that follows, “he tolde on this wyse” (358), leaves some doubt about whether even the poet is quoting Jonah’s words directly, or rather conveying only its “wyse,” or manner, as well as its “trwe tenor.” The message itself takes two lines to quote Jonah’s one-verse sentence in the Bible (3:4), then expands upon the theme of God’s judgment and destruction:

3et schal forty dayez fully fare to an ende,
 And thenne schal Niniue be nomen to noȝt worthe;
 Truly this ilk toun schal tylte to grounde;
 Vp-so-doun schal ȝe dumpe depe to the abyne,
 To be swolȝed swyftly wyth the swart erthe,
 And alle that lyuyes hereinne lose the swete
 [lifeblood]. (359–64)

Jonah's imagery of the city physically overturning, with the phrases "tylte to grounde" and "Vp-so-doun," then sinking into an "abyne" to be swallowed by the earth, are an expansion on the Vulgate's "subvertetur" in verse 4, which the Wycliffite LV translates "turned vpsodoun." The key difference, however, is that the Vulgate's single word could be interpreted figuratively, and in fact was, by St. Jerome as cited in the Ordinary Gloss:

Nineveh, which was evil and well built, was overturned not with respect to its standing fortifications and buildings. The city was overturned in the destruction of its customs. And although what those men had feared did not happen, when Jonah prophesied the future, what he had predicted at God's command did happen after all.⁵⁶

Though Nineveh is not "overturned" physically, it is upended spiritually and culturally, making Jonah's brief prophecy in the biblical text technically true. With this in mind, part of Jonah's disappointment and rage at God's mercy might be read as the result of his misunderstanding his own prophecy.

In *Patience*, however, Jonah actually predicts events that will not happen—it would be impossible to read his elaborations on the biblical text, that the "toun schal tylte *to grounde*" (italics mine) and be swallowed by "the swart erthe," as anything other than physical destruction, and his further statement that "alle that lyuyes" in the city will die is also not found in the biblical prophecy, which speaks only of the city as a collective entity being overthrown. The language Jonah uses in *Patience* echoes the language of God's vengeance that appears at various points in *Cleanness*, which in every case describes literal physical destruction. "The abyne," for example, describes the hell that Satan falls into (214), the chasm that swallows up Sodom and Gomorrah (963), and the Flood that destroys the earth in Noah's day (363), which is also several times described as "depe" (374, 384, 416). When Jerusalem is destroyed by the Babylonian army, the city is "drawen to the erthe" (1160) and "swolȝed" by the enemy's

sword (1268). Whether Jonah has misinterpreted the message, or whether God truly does turn away from “His wodschip [fury]” (404) as the prince hopes he will, what Jonah finds when he unlocks the “lore” in his heart and translates it into words is the detailed, lurid language of physical destruction and death which do not come to pass. As Jonah himself puts it at a later point in the poem, when he rages at God for saving the city: “I hade worded quatsoeuer I cowthe / To manace alle thise mody [proud] men that in this mote dowellez” (421–22). Jonah “worded” the prophecy within him as strongly and as literally as he could, not for the purpose of prompting repentance, but “to manace” the men he views as irredeemably evil.

Despite its ultimate untruthfulness, its promise of destruction with no hope for mercy, and the ill will of the prophet who delivers it, the effect of Jonah’s preaching is immediate and remarkable: “This speche sprang in that space and spradde alle aboute / To borges [citizens] and to bachel-eres that in that burȝ lenged [lived]” (365–66). Not only does the speech provoke a response in the people who hear it directly; it “springs up” and fills the physical space around the prophet as if it is a natural force, independent of the meaning or intent of his words, and it spreads to people in the city of its own accord, apparently even to people who did not hear the words themselves. In the poem, Jonah delivers the long version of his sermon only once, but he repeats a summary of it in the line, “The verray vengauce of God schal voyde this place!” (370). Though he sees that the Ninevites are “chylled at the hert” (368) with dread—or perhaps because he enjoys their terrified reaction—he “sesed not ȝet” (369), but continues to repeat the summary version of his message until the prince of Nineveh decrees an extraordinary fast and time of repentance.

The sermon’s effect on its listeners does not appear to rely on the skill, much less the intentions, of the man who delivers it. As with the storm and the whale, God uses the forces of nature to accomplish His purpose—or at least a process that seems natural, as the speech spreads through the physical space of the city like a rush of wind or water. That Jonah’s words might work apart from any virtue of their speaker is an entirely orthodox concept, one which could apply to sinful priests speaking words of consecration which are nevertheless efficacious, but it also accords with the Wycliffite Bible Prologue writer’s sense of the primacy of God’s word over any other human action, including sacramental ritual. “It is evident that preaching God’s word is a more solemn act than consecrating the sacrament,” Wyclif writes:

Preaching is more effective in blotting out mortal sins than the Eucharist. ... Insofar as the aforementioned preached word is the truth, it is essentially God himself. As such, preaching it must be the most dignified work a creature can perform.⁵⁷

In an allegorical reading of the Battle of Jericho, Wyclif compares the preacher's voice to a trumpet, through which God destroys the enemy's walls, but with this warning against pride: "Consider it a trumpet, though it is not because you are more than you are that you possess a voice of this sort, since you are but a mere organ of the Bridegroom's voice. Therefore, let not the preachers be proud of their voices, since it is Christ who is speaking through them."⁵⁸ In Jonah's case, his preaching is not only the most effective action in helping the Ninevites to "blot out mortal sins," but literally the *only* action he performs on their behalf, and his words carry power in spite of their speaker's understanding and attitude.

Of course, Jonah is not the only character in *Patience* who preaches a sermon. The narrator presents his opening exegesis of the Beatitudes as something he heard in a sermon intended for a public congregation, "at a hyze masse" (9), and he uses the aside "as I er sayde" (28), as if he is actually speaking to his audience. Andrew argues that the shift from textuality to orality is a function of the poet's decision to translate Scripture from Latin to English, and observes that "in many Middle English devotional texts and translations speech is associated with vernacular appropriation of Latin texts."⁵⁹ This shift mirrors the experience of the layperson at a holiday mass of the kind the narrator says he attended—the priest's sermon is in English, though the biblical text he quotes from is in Latin. Richard Newhauser describes the basic outlines of the "popular sermon" or homily the poet may be using as a model:

This type of pulpit discourse developed in the early Middle Ages and remained in use even after the form of the modern, or university (or scholastic), sermon had become popular. The homily demanded of the preacher merely a retelling of the gospel pericope of the day and the addition of any exegetical or moral lessons he cared to draw from it. Homilies were not highly structured forms and at times contained only the gospel narrative followed by its exegesis.⁶⁰

Jonah's own successful homily follows this structure, though in a radically condensed space. He begins with the "pericope," a statement of the

homily's theme, followed by an elaboration, and concluding with a restatement of the opening theme. The poem as a whole follows this structure, but Jonah's seven-line homily follows it even more strictly. The summary statement to start, "thenne schal Niniue be nomen to noȝt worthe" (360), is restated at the end, "The verray vengauce of God schal voyde this place!" (370), then repeated multiple times more, as Jonah "sesed not ȝet, bot sayde euer ilyche [constantly]" (369).

In Jonah's case, it is the elaboration at the center of his sermon that has the most potential to lead him into error, a danger that a variety of medieval critics frequently associated with popular preaching. The Ordinary Gloss, for example, cautions biblical exegetes against undertaking lightly the task of extending allegories too far, particularly with a book like Jonah, which is full of tempting allegorical possibilities:

Although Jonah, according to the interpretation, displays the figure of Christ himself, it is not necessary for us to strive to refer to the whole sequence of the story to Christ by allegory, but only those things that are able to be understood clearly without the risk of interpretation.⁶¹

Wyclif and the Lollards, among others, repeatedly warn against "glossing," a term which could mean either simply an exegetical interpretation or a deceitful form of *over*-interpretation, which was a rich target of mockery by satirists such as Langland and Chaucer. Scase observes that though St. Francis prohibited "glossing" in favor of "a simple, unintellectual realisation of the gospel," by the fourteenth century, "a central charge against friars, and more generally against any clerics who resisted the new interpretation of poverty, was that of 'glosing.'" ⁶² Friars from "alle the foure ordres," Langland claims, "Glosed the gospel as hem good liked; / For coveitise of copes construwed it as thei wolde" (B.Pro.60–61). The greedy friar in Chaucer's satirical *Summoner's Tale* does more than simply interpret the biblical text as he likes—he ignores the pericope altogether and composes a sermon entirely of elaborated gloss:

I have to day been at youre chirche at messe,
And seyde a sermon after my symple wit—
Nat al after the text of hooly writ,
For it is hard to yow, as I suppose,
And therfore wol I teche yow al the glose.
Glosyng is a glorious thyng, certeyn,
For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn. (III.1789–94)

Later in the same tale, he attempts to persuade a donor of the superiority of his fraternal order using the first Beatitude, "Blessed be they that povere in spirit been" (1923), but appears to have little familiarity with the biblical text except through a secondhand interpretation, a fact that does not prevent him from preaching on it at length: "I ne have no text of it, as I suppose, / But I shal fynde it in a maner glose" (1919–20).

Wycliffite writers found less humor in the situation, but were similarly critical of the supposed "glosing" of friars, monks, and priests, and urged their own not to stray far from the unadorned text. Wyclif himself urges priests to "speak with special clarity" and explain the Bible rather than "merely reciting the texts,"⁶³ and writes that priests should "put aside duplicity and adapt our speech to the general understanding of those with whom we are communicating,"⁶⁴ advice that could apply equally to Jonah and the *Gawain*-poet. A Wycliffite tract written in support of English Bible translation argues that a vernacular Scripture will allow "the prechour [to] schewith it truly to the pepel ... For, if it schulde not be writen, it schulde not be prechid."⁶⁵ Preachers need a text they can read and interpret as they write their sermons, and a text translated into the same language as the sermon will make the attempt easier. With a Latin Bible, the tract says, clerics who have "a craft of gret sotilte" might hide God's "lore" from the common people, since they "wolden that the gospel slepe safe ... thei prechen sumwhat of the gospel, and glosen it as hem liketh."⁶⁶ The message is locked away in Latin, just as it is locked inside Jonah before he loosens it with words the Ninevites understand; converting the Bible to English will reduce the necessity for potentially erroneous glosses or elaborations. Another Wycliffite sermon, "Of Mynystris in the Church," which makes a radical argument for the expunging of all clerical offices besides parish priests and deacons, calls on "trewe men" to actively counter or "a3en-calle this glose" of popes and friars. For a minister who preaches a gospel beyond or against the simple "wordis of Crist ... Crist 3eveth him not this power"; to gain back spiritual power and authority, a pastor should "trowe more to juste dedis than to bullis [papal bulls] in this mater."⁶⁷

The depiction of Jonah as a preacher is congruent at several other points with Wyclif's and the Lollards' descriptions of the preaching vocation. Running through all of these texts is the idea that preaching is the most important responsibility of a priest—not administering sacraments, hearing confessions, praying, visiting the sick, or any other clerical duty. The *Apology for Lollard Doctrines* holds "that ilk [every] prest is holdun to

preche. ... for ilk man is olden to do thing that Crist enjoynith him to do. And it semith bi witnes of seyntis, that Crist enjoynith ilk prest to preche, and than he is bounden ther to. ... Werfor the prest, going in and out, dieth if he go with out the sound of preching.”⁶⁸ By the time the document “Sixteen Points on which the Bishops Accuse Lollards” appears (ca. 1400), what started as an insistence on the primacy of preaching has become a more exclusive claim: “that prestis weren *not* ordeyned to sey massis or mateynes, but *onli* to teche and preche the worde of God” (*italics mine*).⁶⁹

The *Gawain*-poet does not make the claim that preaching is Jonah’s *only* responsibility to the Ninevites, but it is unquestionably his most important, and what the *Apology* phrases in figurative terms, that the priest “dieth if he go with out the sound of preching,” in Jonah’s case becomes literal—he will likely die at God’s hands if he does not do it. The actual process of the Ninevites’ penance and recovery seems less important to the *Gawain*-poet than the process of Jonah delivering the message to them, a fourteen-line elaboration on a single verse of Scripture. Jonah performs no other priestly function in Nineveh beyond delivering this seven-line homily, but in the end, the city is saved through it. The poet’s later depiction of Jonah withdrawing to the city’s outskirts as the citizens save themselves also accords with the position of a variety of anticlerical writers in the fourteenth century, that a priest’s most important duty lies not with the sacraments but with preaching and teaching, and that the effectiveness of these actions lies solely with God.

Jonah Dispossessed

As in the biblical story, the final scene of the poem is an argument between Jonah and God over a “wodbynd,” the term the poet uses on eight occasions to describe the wooded shelter that protects Jonah from the sun as he waits in anticipation for God to destroy the city. Other terms for this shelter include “bour” (437), whose significance has already been discussed, “lyttel bothe [booth, arbor]” (441), “lefsel [leaf-bower]” (448), “a hous” (450), and “gay logge” (457). In every case, it is described as a temporary place of refuge, begun by Jonah “the best that he my3t, / Of hay and of euer-ferne and erbez a fewe” (437–38), then completed by God “of His grace” (443) through nature, as leaves that grow overnight expand it into a “brod ... bo3ted [vaulted]” chamber (449). The woodbine is such a comfortable place that Jonah wishes “hit were in his kyth [country] ther he wony [live] schulde, / On he3e vpon Effraym other Ermonnes hillez: /

'Twyse, a worthloker won to welde I neuer keped [kept, wanted]'" (462–64). He wishes he were back home, in Ephraim or Hermon, and able to "welde" or "kepe" the woodbine as his permanent residence. Jonah's cry is a subtle reminder that he is currently exiled from his home in Israel, and it provides an extra-biblical explanation for the woodbine's extreme importance to him. God denies Jonah his wish, however, not only by declining to destroy the repentant Ninevites and deprive them of their home, but also by sending a worm to destroy the temporary home He has just built for Jonah. The prophet responds with "hatel anger" (481), so outraged that he asks God to end his life: "Why ne dy3ttez Thou me to dize? I dure to longe" (488).

Carol Virginia Pohli views this reaction as a consequence of Jonah's unique "spiritual predicament ... homelessness." His deepest desire, she says, is "for a permanent, literal shelter like the ideal, eschatological one circumscribed by Beatific virtue in the prologue"⁷⁰—which includes, for example, the "heuen-ryche to holde for euer" (14) promised to the poor and patient, and the "worlde" which the meek are promised to "welde" (16). But from the perspective of a fourteenth-century advocate of clerical dispossession, or alternatively a mendicant friar who voluntarily renounces possession, this is precisely what Jonah should *not* desire as a priest and man of God. The spiritual home should be his greatest reward, and his physical home is to be left behind. Jonah's yearning for a permanent, physical dwelling is a yearning for the security of material possessions, which God may choose to completely deny him. In this case, God has essentially taken up the role of secular lord in the dispossession scenario urged by Langland:

Taket h hire landes, ye lordes, and let hem lyve by
 dymes [tithes];
 If possession be poison, and inparfite hem make,
 Good were to deschargen hem for Holy Chirches sake,
 And purgen hem of poison, er moore peril falle.
 (B.XV.563–66)

At the end of *Patience*, God performs the same action that Wyclif and other anticlerical critics advised lords to perform on their priestly subjects—he forcibly removes the "poison" and "peril" of material comfort the woodbine represents and compels Jonah to deal with Him directly. And He does so because He desires for Jonah the same outcome that His threat of destruction extracted from the Ninevites—that his subject would "cum and cawe Me for Kyng" (519).

The peril Jonah faces at the end of the poem is no longer physical danger—the whale episode is behind him, and despite his discomfort and wish to die, the scorching sun above the woodbine is not a mortal threat. Nor is it any longer the spiritual danger of outright disobedience—Jonah has delivered God’s message with astounding results, and God has asked nothing further of His prophet by way of direct action. However, his slothful lounging above the city, represented once again by the “sloumbe-slep sloughe” he “slydez” into (466), and his “hatel anger” (481) at its remaining while his woodbine is destroyed, are both sins which patience is traditionally meant to counter, yet they remain, a final source of danger for the prophet who has otherwise managed to escape it. His lack of patience at the end threatens to undo whatever spiritual gains he has made in the course of the poem, a self-inflicted injury the poet describes with a metaphor: “For he that is to rakel [hasty] to renden his clothez / Mot efte sitte with more vnsounde [trouble] to sewe hem togeder” (525–26). Like the poem’s final lines, in which the narrator reminds the audience once again of his physical poverty and restates the opening line, these too hark back to the poem’s introduction, in which another word for trouble, “grame” (53) describes what the narrator will bring upon himself if he grumbles against his poverty or resists his lord’s will. The danger Jonah faces at the end is not the wrath of God or the Ninevites, which he has feared from the beginning, but his own wrath, driven by his desire for material comfort, and fallen on his own head.

The effects and consequences of this sin are apparently invisible to Jonah, and require extreme means to conquer, beyond mere argument or threat. Even as God points out the absurdity of Jonah’s wish for death in response to losing “so lyttel” (492), Jonah shouts back, “Hit is not lyttel ... bot lykker to ry3t” (493). God continues to press, pointing out the absurdity of Jonah’s clinging to a possession he hardly worked for: “Thou art waxen so wroth for thy wodbynde, / And trauayledez neuer to tent hit the tyme of an howre” (497–98). As in the biblical story, we do not see Jonah’s reaction to this statement, nor to God’s final argument that He has more reason to care for Nineveh than Jonah does for the woodbine, but what the poet does reveal, in an addition to the biblical text, is that God sends Jonah away with a final exhortation: “Be no3t so gryndel [angry], godman, bot go forth thy wayes, / Be preue [steadfast] and be pacient in payne and in joye” (524–25). Many editors conclude God’s speech with closed quotation marks at line 523, an approximation of where it ends in the Bible, and attribute these lines to the narrator, but others extend God’s

words further, before the narrator definitively returns with the first-person voice in line 528. Andrew and Waldron, for example, place closed quotation marks at 523 in their edition, but in a later article, Malcolm Andrew argues for moving them to 527.⁷¹ In fact, the attribution is unclear, and perhaps deliberately so. Either God or the narrator, who share the same perspective in any case, gives these final words of advice to the “godman.” He is forced into a position of exile, far from home and having lost his temporary dwelling, called now to “go forth thy wayes” without clear direction, and uncertain whether he will face “payne” or “joye,” knowing only that steadfast patience is the most practical response to his situation. The final result of Jonah’s trials, in Scattergood’s words, has been “to make him more like the narrator,” a poor wandering servant.⁷²

As noted in the overview of anticlerical themes in chapter 2, the image of the wanderer is not typically a positive one for writers in the fourteenth century, in particular the wanderer who begs for alms unnecessarily. Yet this is the solution to the problem of a materially corrupt priesthood advocated by most anticlerical writers participating in the same textual environment as the *Gawain*-poet—a state of humble poverty imposed involuntarily by a king or temporal lord, as God imposes it on Jonah. The poet is far distant from Wyclif and the Lollards theologically, but his depiction of Jonah as a priestly figure in *Patience* conveys a view of poverty and dispossession they likely would have shared, and the poet is deeply sympathetic with their concerns about corruption of the clergy. The contemporaneous writer most similar to him in this respect is William Langland, who, while working within the same form of alliterative long-line poetry but the substantially different genre of allegorical dream vision, shares the poet’s concern with clerical sinfulness and suggests, albeit in his own more direct way, the same remedy.

NOTES

¹ Support for the single-author theory comes from Andrew and Waldron, eds., *Poems*, 16; Cooper and Pearsall, “The *Gawain* Poems: A Statistical Approach to the Question of Common Authorship” *Review of English Studies* 39 (Aug 1988): 382; Derolez, “Authorship and Statistics the Case of the Pearl-Poet and the *Gawain*-Poet” *Occasional Papers in Linguistics and Language Learning* 8 (Aug 1981): 41; Gollancz, ed., *Pearl*, xlii; and Turville-Petre, *Alliterative Revival*, 33. Support for the two-author theory, with *Pearl* as an outlier, comes from Göran Kjellmer, *Did the “Pearl Poet” Write Pearl?* (Gothenburg Studies in English,

vol. 30. Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1975), 98; or with *Sir Gawain* as an outlier, Matsuji Tajima, "Additional Syntactical Evidence Against the Common Authorship of MS. Cotton Nero A.X." *English Studies* 59.3 (1978): 198. Support for three or more authors comes from William McColly and Dennis Weier, "Literary Attribution and Likelihood-Ratio Tests: The Case of the Middle English Pearl-Poems." *Computers and the Humanities* 17.2 (June 1983): 69–70.

² See Gardner, ed., *Complete Works*, 86–87; Clifford Peterson, "Pearl and St. Erkenwald: Some Evidence for Authorship" *Review of English Studies* 25.97 (Feb 1974): 53; Henry Lyttleton Savage, *The Gawain-Poet: Studies in His Personality and Background* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), xlviii–lxv; and Stone, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 248.

³ Spearing, *Gawain-Poet*, 36.

⁴ Prior, *Fayre Formez*, 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 147–48.

⁶ Psalm 93 in the Vulgate and Wycliffite editions of the Bible, which follow the numbering of the Greek Septuagint text, becomes Psalm 94 in later editions which follow the Hebrew Masoretic text, including the King James Version.

⁷ *MED* "bour," definition 1(b), "A shelter, den" cites *Patience* 276 and 437; 2(a), "An inner room; esp., a bedroom" cites *Cleanness* 129; and 2(c), "Any kind of small room or compartment; a storeroom, a stall for animals, a kennel" cites *Cleanness* 322. Figurative uses from other sources appear under definitions 3(a), (b), (c), and (d).

⁸ Malcolm Andrew, "Biblical Paraphrase in the Middle English *Patience*," in *Manuscript, Narrative, Lexicon*, ed. Robert Boenig and Kathleen Davis (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2000), 67.

⁹ See Baldwin's sacrament-focused interpretation of this scene in "Sacramental Perfection," 131.

¹⁰ Though they appear similar, "grame" is a different word from "greme," or wrath, God's response to priestly filth in *Cleanness* 16. The *MED*'s entries for both words give similar definitions, including such synonyms as anger, hatred, injury, harm, grief, and sorrow. The etymology of "grame," however, is traced to the Old English *grama*, and "greme" to the Old Norse *gremi*.

¹¹ Putter, *Introduction*, 17.

¹² John Scattergood, *The Lost Tradition: Essays on Middle English Alliterative Poetry* (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2000), 129.

¹³ Somerset, *Clerical Discourse*, 12–14

¹⁴ Hudson, "Laicus Litteratus," 222–36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁷ Hudson, ed., *Two Wycliffite Texts*, 55.

¹⁸ Hudson, "Laicus Litteratus," 228, 231.

¹⁹ Scase, *Piers Plowman*, 167.

²⁰ Putter, *Introduction*, 104.

²¹ Andrew, "Biblical Paraphrase," 47.

²² The *MED* cites *Patience* 27 for "steren, (v.1)" definition 2.(a): "To restrain (sb.), control (one's heart or emotion)." For the concept of guiding someone to God, see definition 1(b): "direct (sth. toward sb. or God)." Also see definitions 1(c) and (d), which list further figurative spiritual uses for "steren."

²³ Augustine, *De Sermone Domini*, ed. A. Mutzenberger (Turnhout: Brepols, 1967), 4.

²⁴ Spearing, *Gawain-Poet*, 76.

²⁵ Putter, *Introduction*, 110.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁷ Keiser, *Courtly Desire*, 218.

²⁸ Hudson, ed., *Selections*, 92.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

³¹ John Wyclif, *Sermones*, ed. Johann Loserth (London: Trübner, 1887–90), II.269.

"Medicina necessaria ad extinguendum venenum diaboli foret totum clerum expropriarium facere et ordinacionem Christi primevam quoad suam ecclesiam innovare."

³² Scase, *Piers Plowman*, 58.

³³ John Friedman, "Figural Typology in the Middle English *Patience*," in *The Alliterative Tradition in the 14th Century*, ed. Bernard Levy and Paul Szarmach (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1981), 104.

³⁴ Ryan McDermott, tran., "The Ordinary Gloss on Jonah," *PMLA* 128.2 (Mar 2013): 424.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 426.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 427.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 427–28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 437.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 428.

⁴⁰ Putter, *Introduction*, 132.

⁴¹ Quoted in Putter, *Introduction*, 132; italics his.

⁴² McDermott, tran., "Ordinary Gloss," 429.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 431.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 434.

⁴⁵ FitzRalph, *Defensio Curatorum*, 71.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁷ Pantin, *English Church*, 36.

⁴⁸ K. B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (London: English Universities Press, 1952), 50.

⁴⁹ Wyclif, *On Simony*, 158; *De Simonia*, 107.

⁵⁰ Wyclif, *Sermones*, II.159–65.

⁵¹ Hudson, ed., *Selections* 120–21.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵³ Matthew, ed., *English Works*, 32.

⁵⁴ Scattergood, *The Lost Tradition*, 127.

⁵⁵ See the *MED* "louken, v.(1)." For definitions related to locking, see 1(a), (b), and (d); for enclosure, see 2a.; and for the figurative uses of jewelry setting and burial, see 2b.(a) and (c). The *MED* cites *Patience* 350 under definition 2b.(d), "Of words, lore, God's will, secret counsel: enclosed (in sb., in someone's heart or breast, etc.) ... of a story: fixed (with letters), embodied (in letters)."

⁵⁶ McDermott, tran., "Ordinary Gloss," 435.

⁵⁷ Wyclif, *On the Truth* 286–87; II.156–57.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 282; II.152. "Quasi tuba considerens, quod non a te plus, quam es, habes vocem huiusmodi, sed esnudum organum vocis sponsi. Sic enim non superbirent predicatorum de voce eius, qui loquitur in eis, Cristus."

⁵⁹ Andrew, "Theories of Authorship," 40, note 11.

⁶⁰ Newhauser, "Sources," 260.

⁶¹ McDermott, tran., "Ordinary Gloss," 427.

⁶² Scase, *Piers Plowman*, 79–80.

⁶³ Wyclif, *On the Truth*, 42; *De Veritate*, I.4. "Ideo exponendo illos oportet loqui sincerius, quia aliter non forent expositores, sed nudi recitatores."

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 55; I.24. "Ideo exponendo illos oportet loqui sincerius, quia aliter non forent expositores, sed nudi recitatores."

⁶⁵ Hudson, *Selections*, 101.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Arnold, *Select English Works*, II.403.

⁶⁸ Todd, ed., *Apology*, 30–31.

⁶⁹ Hudson, *Selections*, 19.

⁷⁰ Carol Virginia Pohli, "Containment of Anger in the Medieval Poem, *Patience*," *English Language Notes*, n.s., 24.1 (Sept 1991): 8.

⁷¹ Andrew, "Biblical Paraphrase," 74, note 54.

⁷² Scattergood, *Lost Tradition*, 133.

Chapter 5

The Late-Arriving Priest of *Pearl*

ANY SCHOLAR WHO APPROACHES *Cleanness* and *Patience* is no doubt keenly aware that these two poems are not the “canonical” works of the *Gawain*-poet. Evidence of an overwhelming preference for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl* among both researchers and undergraduate-level teachers can be established with even a brief glance at recent academic publications and course descriptions. However, a reading of *Cleanness* and *Patience* can contribute greatly to a student or scholar’s understanding not only of the poet’s fourteenth-century literary environment, in which biblical paraphrases, commentaries, and sermons dominated the textual landscape, but also an understanding of the poet’s artistry and thematic concerns in the other “canonical” poems. If nothing else, they remain landmarks of Middle English biblical poetry, as one can sense immediately from reading other poetic paraphrases of the Bible from roughly the same period, such as *Genesis and Exodus* (ca. 1250), *Cursor Mundi* (ca. 1300), or *The Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament* (ca. 1410), none of which come close to matching the *Gawain*-poet’s artistry and complexity.

As the preceding chapters have argued, viewing these works of the *Gawain*-poet as participants in the vibrant textual tradition of fourteenth-century English anticlericalism can be an important first step for a reader seeking to understand more fully the poems’ narrative structures and rhetoric. A further question to ask is whether *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain* can be situated within this anticlerical tradition in a similar way. Does the critique that is so explicit in *Cleanness* and more implicit but undoubtedly present in *Patience* emerge at all in the other two poems? And can viewing the ways that *Cleanness* and *Patience* participate in a broader anticlerical tradition help to illuminate otherwise obscure thematic elements within *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain*?

The answer, I hope the final two chapters of this book will demonstrate, is a qualified yes. The canonical poems do not contain the same

level of either explicit or implicit critique of the priesthood, but members of the clergy do appear in both poems, occasionally in surprising contexts. The urgent anticlerical concerns of the biblical poems may have lessened in importance for the poet in these works, but his fundamental attitudes toward the priesthood have not undergone any apparent change, and their undercurrents can still be detected even in works which relegate priests to the margins.

For all of its religious imagery and themes, *Pearl* makes no references to priests, or to the institutional church at all, until the poem's last five lines (1208–12). These lines, together with the warning to priests in the opening lines of *Cleanness*, contain the only direct references to the Eucharist in all of the *Gawain*-poet's works. As such, they are deeply significant for understanding the poem's thematic structure, and we will address them at the end of this chapter. But the reason for the absence of references in the rest of the poem is that the Dreamer simply has no need for an institutional intermediary in his dealings with God, a point both he and the Pearl Maiden make repeatedly.

Near the midpoint of the poem, the Maiden considers the role of baptism in salvation, particularly for innocent infants who die before they are guilty of any but original sin (649–60). Immediately afterward, she also considers the role of penance in the life of a sinful adult who is a repeat offender, “that synnez thenne new” (661–64). But despite the discussion of these sacraments, the priest or priests officially required to perform them remain in the shadows, unmentioned at any point by the Maiden or by the narrator, a phenomenon David Aers terms the “silent marginalization” of the church's role in loss and mourning throughout *Pearl*.¹ This marginalization led one of *Pearl*'s earliest critics, Carleton Brown, to speculate that the poet's “attitude toward religious matters was evangelical rather than ecclesiastical.”² As Brown observes, *Pearl* never mentions the church as an institution, never references prayers to the saints, pointedly avoids arranging the elect in the New Jerusalem into any sort of hierarchy, and never appeals to patristic authority or tradition, as do virtually all theological works of this era. Even in the poem's opening stanzas, immediately after the Dreamer loses his Pearl, it is the “kynde of Kryst,” the nature of Christ himself, who “me comfort kened [offered],” and with whom he has “fyrc skyllez [arguments]” about his loss and the proper response to it (54–55). A few lines later, it is “Godez grace” alone that removes his soul from his body and takes it on a journey to heaven (63).

To be sure, the ministrations of priests are not the only things the poet declares useless or unhelpful in the face of his grief and God's glory. For instance, he also denies the ability of poetry itself to capture the beauty of his heavenly vision: "The derthe [splendor] therof for to deuyse [describe] / Nis no wyȝ worthé that tonge berez" (99–100). Whether the author of this poem was a priest himself or merely a poet, he does not exempt his own profession from impotence and inadequacy in his meditation on God's sufficiency apart from human efforts. His direct, unmediated vision and communication with God, which gives all credit to undeserved grace, implicitly denies the necessity of priestly intercessors in a way that a number of fourteenth-century anticlerical critics would have championed, but the vision is actually even more radical than that. *Any* human virtue or action, the poem says—wealth, wisdom, love, "cortaysye," or good "manerez" (382)—is rendered meaningless in the face of God's will. Like Jonah in *Patience*, the Dreamer has no choice but to follow it: "Thou moste abyde that He schal deme" (348). The book of Revelation, which the poem quotes at length in its descriptions of heaven, shares this theme as well. The sun and moon, for example, are not needed in the heavenly realm, in the poet's rendering of Revelation 21:23–24:

Of sunne ne mone had thay no nede;
 The Self God watz her lombe-lyȝt,
 The Lombe her lantyrne, withouten drede;
 Thurȝ Hym blysned the borȝ al bryȝt. (1045–48)

God does not need intermediaries to work His will, and even the natural processes of the world can be accomplished apart from nature.

When the Dreamer's heavenly vision begins, the poet reveals what the reader may well have suspected from the start—that the "perle" this "joylez juelere" has lost is not literally a precious stone but a person, more specifically a young girl, likely the Dreamer's daughter, as evidenced by his statements that "Ho watz me [more] nerre then aunte or nece" (233) and she "lyfed not two ȝer in oure thede [land]" (483), not even long enough to learn the "Pater ne Crede" (485). The Pearl Maiden, as most critics of *Pearl* name her, has matured rapidly in her heavenly home, as she now walks and talks intelligently and is arrayed in fine clothing. Nevertheless, even after these revelations, the Dreamer continues to refer to the Maiden as a "pearl," and the Maiden describes herself as locked inside a small enclosure which enhances her beauty and worth, like a jewel in a setting. This enclosure is literally a "gardyn gracios gaye" (260), but the Maiden

repeatedly describes both it and herself in figurative terms: she is “in cofer [jewel-box] so comly clente [enclosed]” (259), inside “a forser [casket]” (263), or a “kyste [chest] that hyt con close” (271). This vocabulary echoes several scenes from *Cleanness*, in which the same terms for the enclosure (“cofer” and “kyste”) are used to describe Noah’s Ark as well as containers used to hold Temple relics,³ and in which the pearl set in an enclosure or “bour” (*Cleanness* 1126) represents the human soul inside the body, and perhaps the Eucharist inside a holy vessel. Similar to the interlude in *Cleanness*, which features a sullied pearl dipped in wine for cleansing as a representation of penance, the very image of the round white pearl of *Pearl* may recall the eucharistic host. As Anna Baldwin observes in her study of sacramental imagery in the *Gawain*-poet, the Dreamer explicitly compares his Pearl to “the reme of heuenesse [heaven] clere,” in that “hit is wemlez [flawless], clene, and clere, / And endelez rounde” (735, 737–38), imagery which “must have suggested to some of the poem’s readers the symbolism of the Eucharistic wafer.”⁴ Perhaps most interestingly, the Dreamer at one point describes both the Maiden herself and the words she speaks together as jewels: “A juel to me then watz thys geste, / And juelez wern hyr gentyl sawez” (277–78). Both her body and her words become sacred objects to him, as if she were Christ himself at the Mass, present both in the words of Scripture and in bodily form in the eucharistic bread and wine. The poet does not present anything resembling an anticlerical critique in his dream vision; nevertheless, he does depict a revelatory religious experience which in its language and imagery reflects church practice, but from which virtually every aspect of the actual church is absent.

A number of *Pearl*’s readers have concluded that this absence of the institutional church in the process of spiritual regeneration is a mark of the poet’s heresy on questions of original sin and grace. For example, the infants approaching the throne in 626–27 appear to baptize themselves, as “thay dyssente” into the water of their own will rather than relying on God’s grace passively, a vision which critic Richard Tristman calls “a Pelagian position.”⁵ But the Pearl Maiden does not deny original sin, the central contention of the Pelagian heresy, or the need for God’s unmerited grace apart from human action. If anything, it is the Dreamer who expresses this heretical position, when he argues that God must reward labor proportionally for the sake of fairness, an assertion Aers calls “a breathtakingly confident Pelagianism.”⁶ The Maiden counters the notion in part with a retelling of Christ’s Parable of the Vineyard, in which a lord pays all of his vineyard workers the same single penny regardless how much

time they have worked, and whose central lesson is that “*Ther is no date of Hys godnesse ... For al is trawthe that He con dresse [ordain], / And He may do nothynk but ryȝt*” (493, 495–96). Marie Borroff gives this parable a sacramental reading, arguing that the penny is connected to the “daily bread” of the Lord’s Prayer as well as the eucharistic wafer, demonstrating that the souls in heaven are “in a state of eternal communion with the divine presence.”⁷ To connect the image of vineyard workers receiving a penny directly from a lord with the sacrament in which every communicant receives a single wafer from the hands of a priest might appear as yet another example of the poet’s exclusion of the priestly office—the lord of the vineyard, God, clearly needs no intermediary to distribute his gifts.

But one does not have to interpret symbolic imagery in this manner to discover the Pearl Maiden’s view of the Eucharist, baptism, and penance, or the relative importance of the priests who perform them. Her consideration of these sacraments comes in the eleventh five-stanza section exactly at the poem’s midpoint (601–60), immediately after the Parable of the Vineyard. Significantly, these stanzas take as their repetitive concluding line “*For the grace of God is gret inoghe*” (612; see also 624, 636, 648, and 660). They argue, in summary, that though mankind is guilty of original sin through Adam’s transgression, God provides a remedy in “*ryche blod*” and “*water*” (646–47), both springing from Christ’s “*brode wounde*” on the cross (650). For the Christian remembering Christ’s sacrificial death, his blood is present in the eucharistic wine, and though the Maiden does not make this obvious connection explicit, she does say that “*the water is baptem*” (653). As the repeated tagline states, God’s grace is enough to allow both of these elements, blood and water, to overcome the stain of sin. As soon as God’s children are born, “*In the water of baptem thay dys-sente [descend]*” (627)—as noted above, they descend on their own without any apparent help from a priest—and God’s grace alone keeps them pure. God’s grace is enough even for the sinners who appear in the first stanza of the poem’s next section, who “*synnez thenne new*” (662), so long as they repent and “*byde the payne therto*” (664). The repentance, pain, and “*contryssyoun*” (669) that follow their repeated sin are clear references to the sacrament of penance, though again the poet does not depict a priest assigning works of satisfaction, but rather the penitential pains appear to arrive either naturally or directly from God.

This repeated assertion of the sufficiency of God’s grace, coming at a place where the role of clerically performed sacraments is under consideration, expresses a central theme of the poem, and may provide at least one

answer to the question of why no priests appear within it. If God can promote to the status of queen of heaven a two-year-old girl, who is not yet old enough to understand the “Pater ne Crede” (485), the most basic tenets of the faith, then human involvement at any level of spiritual growth or service would appear to be radically unnecessary, even in the case of sacraments that would most seem to require it. God can provide grace directly if He chooses, just as he provided religious instruction to the Maiden, with or without His usual mediating tools, including consecrating priests, preachers, teachers, or even the Bible. The point is underlined further when the Dreamer at last sees the heavenly city of Jerusalem and, after exhaustively cataloging its fine jewels and noting that God’s light supplies the place of sun and moon, he next notices a conspicuous absence: “Kyrk therinne watz non 3ete, / Chapel ne temple that euer watz set; / The Almyzty watz her mynster mete” (1061–63). Church buildings have no place in the heavenly city, because God Himself supplies the place of the temple, and “the Lombe the sakerfyse” (1064); by extension, priests are no longer necessary either, as God fills their role as well, both “minster” and “minister.”

In conjunction with her meditation on the sufficiency of God’s grace apart from human actions, the Pearl Maiden also delivers a set of warnings against pride and self-righteousness. Her recounting of the Parable of the Vineyard (497–572) could in a general sense be read as a warning to priests and other officers of the church, since the central message of the parable is that those who have served or suffered for God for a longer period of time should not expect a greater reward than newcomers to the faith, and in fact should take care not to lose the reward they are promised. This message accords well with Wyclif’s idealistic vision of the “ghostly church,” in which priests, bishops, and popes all hold the same rank, and seemingly unlikely souls, including children and those whom the “visible church” deems unrighteous, may achieve salvation, while officers of the visible church might be damned. Wyclif even argues in the opening pages of *De Ecclesia* that “no vicar of Christ [the pope] can presume to call himself the head of the church ... nor even one of its members.”⁸

The mystic Richard Rolle, imagining heaven in ways similar to *Pearl*, uses this sense of radical equality and the mystery of who belongs to God’s ghostly church as reason to refrain from passing judgment on earth, even on religious leaders who are celebrated for their holiness:

Some-while it fallis that he is better in goddis dome [judgment]
 that man demes iuel then some that man demes gode. Mani are
 honest with-out & vnclene with-in; some werdli & dissolute & holi
 with-in as goddis priue frendes. And some beris thaim in mannis
 sight as angels, & in goddis sight thai stynk as synful wrechis; and
 some semes synful til mannes dome & are ful dere til god almighti,
 for thaire indre [inner] berynge is heuenli in goddis bright sight.
 Therfore deme we nane other bot vs-selfe.⁹

As might be expected, the concept could also be taken in more openly anticlerical directions, including by the *Gawain*-poet himself. As chapter 3 has already explored, the poet uses imagery similar to Rolle's to describe hypocritical priests as "honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylthez" (*Cleanness* 14), whose presence in the church is dangerous. In a passage similar to the Pearl Maiden's version of the Vineyard Parable, the author of the Lollard "Sermon of Dead Men" interprets the "peny" paid to the vineyard workers as representing "the eendles blis of heuen,"¹⁰ where there is no social rank and every person's glorified body is the same age and equally bright with beauty. The sermonist's description of the radical equality among these souls takes on, however, in a way that *Pearl's* does not, a particularly anticlerical and antifraternal tone. In heaven, unlike the earthly church, "There is no willing aftur worship, ne desire after degre, but yche man holdith him apayed of the state that he is inne."¹¹ Spiritual education is not bestowed automatically, as it is for the Pearl Maiden, but it too is radically equalized—books of learning normally available only to monks and friars "shal neuer be claspid vp, ne closid in cloyster, but as opun to one as to another, for that is oure Lordis ordre,"¹² a standard critique of fraternal covetousness for secret knowledge.

The Dreamer of *Pearl* does not take the Parable of the Vineyard in any of these anticlerical directions, but rather interprets it—interestingly, given the discussion of involuntary poverty in *Patience*—as a message in praise of "pore men" (573), whom he views the late-arriving workers as representing. The parable thus becomes, in the story's context, not only a lesson to the Dreamer about heavenly rewards given to young people such as the Maiden, but also a lesson to the reader about God's preference for the poor, which carries with it an implicit word of caution for the rich. The Dreamer argues back with a biblical passage that seems to contradict the parable: "In sauter," he says, referring to Psalm 61, "is sayd a verce ouerte / That spekez a poynt determynable: / 'Thou quytez vchon as hys desserte, / Thou hyze Kyng ay pertermynable [supreme in judgment]'" (593–96).

In other words, the Dreamer argues from the Psalm, God *should* give people what they have earned and deserve; otherwise, a person might actually work more and receive less in the kingdom of God, which would be unfair. Josephine Bloomfield points out that the Dreamer's argument is not a new one, nor is it necessarily heterodox, having been advanced by no less a church father than Saint Jerome, who "insists that the placement of human souls in the heavenly hierarchy must partially rest on the divine judgment of the physical acts (even the prebaptismal acts) of human bodies when they were on earth."¹³ For the Dreamer, some form of social and ecclesiastical hierarchy, on earth as well as in heaven, not only seems reasonable; it is a fact of life, pointless to fight.

The Maiden's response to this seemingly reasonable point is to observe that the terms "less" and "more" do not have the same meaning in the realm of heaven: "'Of more and lasse in Godez ryche,' / That gentyl sayde, 'lys no joparde' [danger, uncertainty]" (601–02). Applied to the question of poverty, these lines put her earlier praise of "the poor" into a somewhat different perspective. God does not necessarily *prefer* the poor so much as He simply does not consider "poor" or "rich" to be valid categories in His kingdom. With a single statement, the Maiden appears to sweep away every complexity of the long-standing controversies about voluntary and involuntary poverty, possession, and mendicancy, which so obsessed fourteenth-century clerical and anticlerical writers alike, and which the *Gawain*-poet himself engaged in the introduction to *Patience*. According to the Maiden, these are debates in which God Himself is simply not interested, perhaps a reflection of the poet's own opinion at this point in his career, despite his arguments elsewhere in the manuscript about the spiritual benefits of poverty.

By the closing lines of the poem, it has become increasingly clear that regardless how much the Dreamer learns about heaven and God's will, or whether he alters his views on poverty, spiritual equality, or the sufficiency of grace, he will simply not be satisfied with the assurances of the Pearl Maiden, or with the reality of his life on earth, to which he is about to return. The Maiden has educated him, defeated him in argument about the rightness of her station in heaven, but she has not truly comforted him, helped him to mourn, or given him resources to deal with the loss that awaits him once more. When the vision ends, he will have to leave both heaven and the Maiden behind and confront an empty world which contains neither.

The concluding stanzas of the poem, however, make clear that the world to which the Dreamer returns is *not* truly empty. His first hint that there may be an answer to his problem, that the joys of heaven might be available on earth as well, comes in the middle of the Maiden's extended description of her new life and home, and the role of "the Lamb" in blessing heaven's inhabitants: "The Lombe vus gladez, oure care is kest [cast out]; / He myrthez vus alle at vch a mes [meal]. / Vchonez blysse is breme [intense] and beste, / And neuer onez honour 3et neuer the les" (861–64). The Lamb shares daily feasts with his people in heaven, which bring them mirth and gladness, cast out their cares, and honor everyone equally. Even without the word "mes" in line 862—etymologically distinct but a verbal echo of "messe," or Mass¹⁴—and the imagery of the slain Lamb as Christ's body from the book of Revelation, these repeated feasts clearly seem to be the heavenly equivalent of the Eucharist. Indeed, the Dreamer himself later uses the figurative image of young women in a church service to describe the stately procession of the Maiden with other queens in heaven: "mylde as maydenez seme at mas, / So dro3 thay forth with gret delyt" (1115–16). This procession even includes, as would a Mass in the Dreamer's earthly world, "ensens [incense] of swete smelle" (1122), a "songe" from an angelic choir (1124), and an elevation of Christ's body and blood, as the Lamb processes before the maidens and displays "His quyte [white] syde" and "blod outsprent" (1137), as the image infuses each congregant "with lyf" (1146). These descriptions serve as a reminder, to both the Dreamer and reader, that for all of the stark differences and seeming paradoxes of heaven, there is in fact one way in which it is similar to earthly life—in both, Christ makes himself present and satisfies his people through a ritual feast. What the saints enjoy in heaven is equally accessible to everyone on earth.

This revelation remains only implied until the final stanza, after the Dreamer wakes in the garden once more and feels a "longeyng heuy" (1180), as if he is imprisoned in a "doel-doungoun" (1187). The Dreamer first rebukes himself for his over-eagerness in approaching God, not knowing his place, which he thinks has deprived him of a vision of God Himself: "To that Pryncez paye hade I ay bente, / And 3erned no more then watz me geuen, / And halden me ther in trwe entent ... [then] drawn to Goddez present, / To mo of His mysterys I hade ben dryuen" (1189–91; 1193–94). His foolish "yearning" has cost him, he thinks, an invitation to sit in God's presence and access to further mysteries, and for

a moment his “joye watz sone toriuen [torn apart]” (1197), and he tastes bitter disappointment.

But only for a moment. In an abrupt shift in tone, as if determined to end the poem on a positive note, the Dreamer says he has found God to be, “bothe day and nazte, / A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin” (1203–04)—this despite the fact he did not actually get to see God in the vision or talk directly with Him, and despite remaining in a state of grief. But perhaps the shift is not truly as abrupt as it first appears. The Dreamer’s vision of Christ as a friend who offers him comfort has appeared earlier in the poem, before his conversation with the Pearl Maiden or the heavenly vision ever took place. In a passage mentioned earlier in this discussion, notable for its absence of any references to the institutional church, the “kynde of Kryst me comfort kenned [offered],” but “my wreched wyll in wo ay wra3te” (55–56). The *MED* cites line 55 in its definition 1.(b) for “kinde,” “the nature of Christ,” and Andrew and Waldron translate the line as “the nature of Christ taught me comfort.” An alternate reading of “kynde of Kryst” might draw on the *MED*’s definition 10.(c), “kindred, kinfolk,” or “cristen kinde,” Christians. One way or another—either directly, through knowledge of his nature, or through others who know him—Christ offered comfort to the Dreamer in the early lines of *Pearl*, while he was in the first throes of grief, but he chose to reject it and persist in his sorrow, at which point he “felle vpon that floury fla3t” (57) and began to dream. The precise nature of the “comfort” Christ offered is never made clear, but the reference to God at the poem’s conclusion as a “frende ful fyin” is a reminder that the entire dream vision itself has been a form of comfort, and an indication that the Dreamer is prepared to accept Christ’s ministrations in whatever form they come. He is still “For pyty of my perle enclyin [lying prone]” (1206), but in the very next line he gives over the memory of his pearl: “to God I hit byta3te [committed]” (1207). He picks himself up, literally and figuratively, and turns his attention to the ways in which Christ offers every person on earth a form of comfort, through his physical presence.

At this point comes the poem’s final lines, with the poet’s first explicit reference to the Eucharist and the first reference of any kind to a priestly intermediary between himself and God: “In Krystez dere blessing and myn, / That in the forme of bred and wyn / The preste vus schewez uch a daye” (1208–09). The miraculous vision of heaven, in which the wounded Lamb displays his wounds and feeds his saints in perfect harmony, has become literally quotidian, a routine performed on a daily basis,

not by God Himself in a chapel-less heaven, but by a human priest in an ordinary church building. The repeated reference to God's friendship at the end is a reminder to the Dreamer that the quotidian miracle of the Eucharist, and with it the presence of Christ himself, has always been available to him, though perhaps overlooked for its very availability and ordinariness.

This is not to say that for the Dreamer, or for the poet, the Eucharist is an incomplete or unsatisfying means of grace. Lawrence Beaston, in making a claim for the poet's supposed Pelagianism, argues that the sacrament involves a distancing from the divine, since the Dreamer after he awakes "is left with only slender links to God, the 'bred and wyn' (1209) of the Eucharist. These elements, whether they are symbols or substances of Christ, stand in the place of one who is not totally present, thus reinforcing the sense of God's distance."¹⁵ But unless the poet has taken a radical Lollard turn and rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation, Christ *is* "totally present" in the eucharistic elements—if he were not, the poet would have little reason to be concerned that "His aune body" might be sullied by filthy hands (*Cleanness* 11)—and the Dreamer has no reason not to be fully satisfied, as he claims he is. These "slender links" to God, as Beaston describes them, are in fact God's presence in the body of Christ. The feeling of distance from God, far from being intensified, is assuaged at the end of *Pearl*, with the reminder that Christ's comfort, friendship, and physical presence have been on offer to the Dreamer from the poem's opening lines.

There are, however, substantial differences between the miracle of the Eucharist and the heavenly vision the Dreamer has left behind. The first is that the vision of the elevated host is communal, a miracle shown "vus" (1210), to *us* rather than to a single man. The heavenly city alone is a glorious enough sight that any "bodyly burne" would lose his life to look upon it (1090)—to say nothing of an unfettered view of God Himself which the Dreamer is denied—but all people are welcome to participate without fear in the earthly sacramental ritual. The other significant difference is that the earthly sacrament is delivered to the community by "the preste," a human intermediary. A central contention throughout the entirety of *Pearl* is that under extraordinary circumstances, and in the realm of heaven, God can perform for Himself any task He deems necessary—He can offer direct pastoral comfort to a grieving father, give instant maturity and an advanced theological education to a child too young to recite creeds or prayers, promote any person to the status of heavenly royalty, and

perform any sacrament without human assistance, from baptism to penance to Communion with the body and blood of Christ. In this sense, the entire class of priests could be deemed unnecessary, a point made by some of the anticlerical writers quoted in chapter 2. But the poet does not take this vision in an anti-sacerdotal direction. In the ordinary run of things, the final lines remind us, God uses priestly representatives to perform the tasks we have just seen Him accomplish alone in the Dreamer's extraordinary vision. These representatives are left unmentioned until the final five lines of *Pearl*, leaving the poet no room to consider possible complications or concerns related to their involvement. His silence might indicate a straightforward trust in the office of the parish priest, or perhaps simply an awareness that the present poem has reached its end thematically, and a more complete consideration of the potential dangers of human involvement in sacramental mysteries will have to be reserved for another work—*Cleanness*, which follows *Pearl* in the manuscript. Whether it came before or after *Pearl* in order of composition, however, is a mystery.

Without more information about how the Cotton Nero A.x poems were composed or the manuscript compiled, it is impossible to know why *Cleanness* follows *Pearl* (especially since *Pearl* appears to be a more poetic effort) and whether the close proximity of the manuscript's only two direct references to the Eucharist is intentional, on the part of either poet or compiler, or merely coincidence. Regardless, the transition from one poem to the next would produce a jarring, unsettling effect on a medieval reader approaching the manuscript as it is arranged—the first narrator finds comfort in the bread and wine shown to the congregation by the priest, then the next narrator questions the purity of those same elements, which sinful priests may defile. Though *Pearl*'s Dreamer is fully comforted, fully satisfied with the quotidian miracle of the Eucharist, and virtually unaware of the priest's involvement, the *Cleanness* narrator cannot mention any action in the Mass service—reading and singing (7), preparing the altar (10), or consecrating the host (11)—without also imagining the potential “fylth” of those who perform them (6), the sullying of “bothe God and His gere,” and God's subsequent wrath (15–16). The shift from heaven to earth, from extraordinary to everyday, which so comforts the Dreamer at the end of *Pearl*, is by contrast a source of anxiety for the narrator of *Cleanness*. He immediately throws into doubt the conclusion *Pearl* has labored to reach for more than a thousand lines, and troubles, in retrospect, the seemingly untroubled addition of an intermediary third party in the poem's final lines.

NOTES

¹ David Aers, "The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 73.

² Brown, "The Author of *Pearl*," 140.

³ See chapter 3, note 65.

⁴ Baldwin, "Sacramental Perfection," 129.

⁵ Richard Tristman, "Some Consolatory Strategies in *Pearl*," in *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 285.

⁶ Aers, "The Self Mourning," 71.

⁷ Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals*, 123.

⁸ Wyclif, *De Ecclesia*, I.5. "nullus vicarius Christi debet presumere asserere se esse caput ecclesie sancte catholice ... non assereret se esse aliquod membrum eius." See also Workman, *John Wyclif*, II.8–9; Evans, *John Wyclif*, 218; and Lahey's chapter "Predestination and the Church," in *John Wyclif*, 169–98, especially 171–72.

⁹ Richard Rolle, *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole and His Followers*, ed. Carl Horstman (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1895), 153.

¹⁰ Cigman, ed., *Lollard Sermons*, 207–40; lines 994–95.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1112–13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1152–54.

¹³ Josephine Bloomfield. "Stumbling Toward God's Light: The *Pearl* Dreamer and the Impediments of Hierarchy," *Chaucer Review* 45.4 (2011): 392.

¹⁴ According to the *MED*, "mes" definition n.(2), which means food, meal, or feast, derives from the Old French and Latin "*missus*." The word "messe," or Mass, derives from the Old French and Medieval Latin "*missa*," as well as from Old English.

¹⁵ Lawrence Beaston, "The *Pearl*-Poet and the Pelagians," *Religion and Literature* 36.1 (Spring 2004), 26.

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Chapter 6

The Devilish Priest of *Sir Gawain*

SIR GAWAIN AND THE Green Knight, the least overtly religious of the four poems in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript, draws its inspiration not from sermons or biblical commentaries but primarily from the rich tradition of Arthurian courtly romances. The narrator claims, as in *Cleanness* and *Patience*, that the story he tells is one he originally heard spoken aloud, “with tonge” (32), and it is also closely connected with a holy day, as its central scenes take place during the Christmas season. In this case, however, the story is not a sermon but a “laye ... I in toun herde” (30–31), a location that could mean literally a town or city, or possibly the court.¹ The story also appears, according to the narrator, in a traditional written version, “stad [set down] and stoken [fastened, enclosed] ... In londe so hatz ben longe,” but these “lel [true] letteres” are not the words of Scripture, but simply those of the “stori” itself, “stif and stronge” (33–36). “The bok as I herde say” (690), as the narrator puts it in a phrase that echoes the biblical poems, is not the “holy writ” of *Cleanness* and *Patience* but simply a book.

The poem is by no means free from religion, however, either thematically or in its literal references to Christian religious practice. In a manner wholly unlike the biblical poems, priests play a visible role, if somewhat in the background, throughout the story, particularly in its two central indoor locations. Both Camelot in the opening scene and Bertilak’s household later in the poem are depicted as places which observe religious festivities in grand, over-the-top style. Apparently not content to celebrate Christmas for only the traditional twelve days between December 25 and the Feast of the Epiphany in early January, the revelers at Camelot have already been feasting for a “ful fifteen dayes” (44) when Arthur announces his intention to see a great feat or hear a wondrous tale for the New Year. In their first appearance in the poem, “clerkez” raise a “loude crye” of “Nowel” (64–65) to mark the end of the Christmas season and start of the New Year’s feast. Their role appears to be to give official religious

sanction to the seemingly non-stop celebrations—they “chant” in the chapel between feasts (63), mark the advent of holidays on the liturgical calendar, and preside over festivities that practically overlap with each other. At least one cleric is accorded a high place at the feast, “Bischop Bawdewyn” who “abof biginez the table” (112), a phrase which Andrew and Waldron gloss as “sits in the place of honour,” and explain thus: “When the host sat at the end of the table the guest of honour would occupy the first place on his right at the ‘top’ of the long side.” Significantly, this place of honor in Bertilak’s household is given to the “olde auncian wyf” (1001), who turns out to be Morgan le Fay. In other words, where Camelot honors a high-ranking officer of the church, Bertilak does the same for a practitioner of black magic, though for all practical purposes the activities at each Christmas celebration are the same. In Spearing’s reading of these scenes, he describes the feasting, as well as the violent hunts that are part of the entertainment at Bertilak’s castle, as both secular and sacramental, “a kind of social sacrament, a symbol of the vital bonds by which society is held together. ... A feast is not simply eaten, it is enacted as a kind of social ritual, in which everything must be done with propriety, according to a set pattern.”² The priests who are present at the performance of these secular sacraments are not so much consecrating them in a religious sense as they are simply presiding over them, granting them the official sanction of the church.

These priestly figures at Camelot fade even further into the background during the Green Knight’s entrance and exchange with Gawain. Despite the moral dimensions the beheading game will turn out to have, it appears at first to be an entirely non-religious, knightly concern. The priests return to view in a scene which takes place a year later—a year which is structured by the liturgical calendar and holidays such as Easter, Michaelmas, and All Saints’ Day—as Gawain prepares for his fatal journey and “herknez his masse / Offred and honoured at the he3e auter” (592–93). This ritual is important since after he embarks, Gawain will be fully alone with no intercessor, “Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp [talk]” (696), except the Virgin Mary, to whom he also prays. As he nears the end of his journey, Gawain’s primary concern is not his own safety but the question of whether “I my3t here masse” on Christmas Day (755). Gawain’s prayers, which include the “Pater and Aue / And Crede” (757–58), as well as crying for his sins (760) and a petition that “Cros Kryste me spede” (762), are remarkably expedient, as almost immediately Bertilak’s castle appears and Gawain’s search for a Christmas Mass and for the Green Knight’s home finds its objects.

The priestly office and view toward feasting in Bertilak's household are markedly similar to those in Camelot, as Gawain discovers the entire house feasting not only at Christmas but also during Advent, traditionally a season for fasting. The kitchen observes the letter of this fast in abstaining from red meat, but not its penitential spirit, as it serves "double" portions of every kind of "fischez, / Summe baken in bred, summe brad [grilled] on the gledez [embers], / Somme sothen [boiled], summe in sewe [stew] sauered with spyces, / And ay sawes [sauces] so sleze [subtle] that the segge lyked" (890–93). When others at this sumptuous table refer to "this penaunce" (897), the line can only be read as humorously ironic, and indeed Gawain is soon laughing and making "much merthe" (899).

Despite their excessive feasting, both Camelot and Bertilak's castles clearly take religious rituals seriously, as evidenced by the presence of priests in both locations. "Chaplaynez" appear at the end of Bertilak's feast (930) to ring bells in the chapel and lead guests to a "hersum [solemn] euensong" service (932), where Gawain and his hosts "seten soberly samen [together] the seruise quyle" (940). Their solemnity at this religious obligation does not last long, however. "On the morne" of Christmas Day, "vch mon mynez [remembers] that tyme / That Dryztyn for oure destyné to deze watz borne" (995–96), but this sober morning reflection immediately gives way to the castle's raucous celebration, complete with "dayntés mony," "messes [meals] ful quaynt" (998–99), "mete ... myrthe ... joye" (1007), wine drinking (1025), and dancing to "dere carolez" (1026) played by an array of musical instruments (1016–17), in addition to the courtly love-talk between Gawain and the lady of the house, in an apparently round-the-clock party that continues through "Sayn Jonez day" (1022) on December 27th. As at Camelot, reminders of religious obligation such as chanting, bell-ringing, and attendance at Mass, serve largely as transitions from one festivity to the next.

In this sense, the role of priests in *Sir Gawain* supports the contention of Nicholas Watson, David Aers, and others that the poem, like the *Gawain*-poet's other works, takes as its audience a group of readers Aers calls "courtly subjects" and Watson calls "'active' rather than 'contemplative' Christians—lay people who live 'in the world,' rather than being separated from it like monks or hermits."³ The central quality of this group is that they may aspire to perfection but unlike contemplatives can never attain it, and must rely frequently on the sacrament of penance and possibly settle for the hope of purgatory after death, rather than immediate

heavenly bliss. “Despite his high ideals,” Watson writes, “Gawain, by the nature of his profession, belongs to a group theologians termed the *mediocriter boni*, rather than the spiritual elite known as the *perfecti*.”⁴ In fact, he contends, a large degree of Gawain’s distress after his failure to perfectly pass the Green Knight’s test stems from his failure to recognize to which group he belongs.

That said, Gawain does make a remarkable attempt throughout the poem to remain pious and pure. After the lengthy Christmas celebration, while Gawain stays as a guest at Bertilak’s castle, both Bertilak and Gawain attend Mass in the chapel every day until the New Year (1135, 1311, 1414, 1558, 1690, and 1876–84), a highly unusual practice for non-monastic Christians in the fourteenth century. Bertilak may have some cause for this extreme level of piety, given that his daily hunting adventures involve incredible levels of danger—for example, he fights hand-to-hand with a wild boar that has broken the backs of his best hunting dogs (1563), and his companions fear for his life (1588)—but Gawain faces no such mortal danger at this point in the story. In fact, what danger he does face—Lady Bertilak’s sexual advances, which must be parried as courteously as possible—actually adds a layer of irony to his pious-seeming church attendance. Every morning, Gawain first holds an extensive courtly conversation about love and then receives kisses from Bertilak’s wife in his bed, actions whose supposed innocence are belied by the fact that Gawain refuses to tell Bertilak the source of the kisses he exchanges with him (1395–97). Then immediately after each game of love-talking and temptation, in perhaps another telling sign of his inward state, Gawain rushes to Mass. After the first temptation, he “boʒez [goes, vaults] forth, quen he was boun [ready], blythely to masse” (1311), a desperately happy rush to the chapel the poet surely intends to be humorous. Gawain’s eagerness to worship so quickly after the second temptation even takes on a sexual double entendre, given its proximity to his laughing, kissing, and “layk[ing] [playing] longe” (1554–55) in bed with the lady: “Then ruthes [rouses] hym the renk and ryses to the masse” (1558).

Gawain’s fourth and final attendance at Bertilak’s chapel is the subject of much critical commentary—as Aers describes it, “a veritable encyclopedia of scholastic teaching on confession and penance”⁵—in part because the poet describes Gawain’s confession and absolution in great detail, and in part because it seems to contain a contradiction:

Sythen cheuely [quickly] to the chapel choses he the
 waye,
 Preuély [privately] aproched to a prest and prayed hym
 there
 That he wolde lyste [hear] his lyf and lern hym better
 How his sawle schulde be saued when he schuld seye
 hethen [go hence].
 There he schrof hym schyrly [completely] and schewed
 his mysdedez,
 Of the more and the mynne [less], and merci besechez,
 And of absolucioun he on the segge calles;
 And he asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene
 As domezday schulde haf ben diȝt [ordained] on the
 morn. (1876–84)

Every element of this scene accords with standard practice for the sacrament of penance. Though the services Gawain attended on previous occasions were public celebrations of Mass, this time he meets with a priest privately, shrives himself by confessing every misdeed he can remember, no matter how small, then receives absolution from the priest, who “assoils” him so completely that he has nothing to fear even if death should come the very next day—as Gawain, of course, believes it will.

The complication in the context of the story, however, is that the reader knows Gawain has not, in fact, confessed *every* misdeed, “the more and the mynne,” but has concealed from Bertilak the acquisition of his wife’s green girdle, in violation of the rules of their exchange game. The priest does not appear to assign any works of penitential satisfaction to Gawain—or at least none that could not be performed immediately, such as a monetary contribution or recital of prayers. Had Gawain revealed in confession that he had stolen from Bertilak (with the assumption that withholding a promised gift is a form of stealing), his penance would surely involve restitution before absolution could take place.

“Though the poet does not notice it,” Israel Gollancz states in an editorial note to his 1940 edition of the poem, “Gawain makes a sacrilegious confession.”⁶ Gerald Morgan, in an article forty-five years later devoted solely to the question of “The Validity of Gawain’s Confession,” agrees that Gawain’s confession before the priest in Bertilak’s chapel is insufficient, but he denies Gollancz’s contention that the poet did not notice. Rather, Morgan argues, the poet recognizes that Gawain’s decision to conceal the gift from both Bertilak and the priest is a “sin of passion”

borne of ignorance of the future, not a “sin of malice” that must be confessed for his absolution to be valid.⁷ The key is Gawain’s innocent motive, the desire to save his own life, which the Green Knight himself later recognizes as a mitigating circumstance when he says, “Bot for 3e lufed your lyf—the lasse I yow blame” (2368). Another critic, John Burrow, argues that Gawain actually *does* confess his fault in the confession scene, but that the absence of any prescribed works of satisfaction renders the priest’s absolution invalid—Gawain “neither makes restitution (‘restituat ablata’) by returning the girdle nor resolves to sin no more (‘promittat cessare’). ... This fact is quite enough to invalidate a confession, according to all contemporary writers on the subject.”⁸

In an extensive footnote to this section in their edition of *Sir Gawain*, Andrew and Waldron summarize the critical debate over the scene and offer their own conclusion, that Gawain recognizes his fault in keeping the girdle only in retrospect, but that “At the time,

to violate the rules of a parlour game ... would hardly have seemed a sin at all.”⁹ Derek Pearsall comically imagines Gawain attempting to confess that he has broken the rules of this game: “‘Will you get out of here and stop wasting my time!’ thunders the priest.”¹⁰ And indeed, several moments in the text suggest that the participants in this “parlour game” view it as merely a jest. Their agreement is sealed at the beginning not with a formal vow but merely with a drink (1112), and afterward they both laugh when speaking of it (1398, 1409, 1623, 1668). On the other hand, the Green Knight later speaks of the game with deadly seriousness and explains that Gawain’s life was actually at stake in its outcome—it is no more a “game” than the beheading exchange at the start of the poem, which Gawain “no gomen [game] tho3t” (692) as he rode toward certain death. As Pearsall aptly concludes: “It is a real conundrum.”¹¹

What all of the critical assessments of Gawain’s chapel confession have in common (with the exception of Gollancz, who alone believes the poet simply did not notice the contradiction) is that they all rely heavily on an assessment of a later, more fraught moment of penance in the poem, which takes place in another type of chapel—the Green Chapel, outdoor home of the Green Knight. This penitential scene, which occurs in conjunction with the Green Knight revealing himself to be an enchanted Bertilak, includes all three critical elements of the sacrament: Gawain feels contrition, as he blushes and is “agreued for greme [mortification]” (2370) and “schränk for schome [shame]” (2372); he confesses aloud his sins of “cowardyse” (2379) and “couetyse” (2380), admitting that “Now am I fawty

and false" (2382); and he embraces the Knight's demand for penitential satisfaction, in the form of the ax's nick on his neck. Gawain also takes on the penance of wearing Lady Bertilak's green girdle over his armor for the rest of his life, as an eternal "syngne of my surfet" (2433) to "lethe [humble] my hert" (2438), but this is a self-imposed humiliation, not demanded by the Knight and laughed at by members of the court at Camelot. Before Gawain decides to impose this additional requirement on himself, the Green Knight forgives him for his transgressions, in a manner consistent with the sacramental echoes throughout the entire scene. It is this moment specifically which has proved most intriguing and vexing for critics of the poem, especially when viewed together with the earlier "official" scene of penance, and which also contains the poem's strongest and most interesting potential connections to its English anticlerical contemporaries:

Thenn lo3e [laughed] that other leude [i.e., the Green
Knight] and luffly sayde,
"I halde hit hardily hole, the harme that I hade.
Thou art confessed so clene, beknowen of thy mysses,
And hatz the penaunce apert of the poynt of myn egge,
I halde the polysed [cleansed] of that ply3t and pured
as clene
As thou hadez neuer forfeget sythen thou watz fyrst
borne. (2389–94)

The formula is nearly identical to the earlier priestly absolution. The Knight uses the verb "halde [consider]" rather than "sette" (1875) and "polysed" rather than "asoyled" (1883), words which at least two critics view as marking a difference between a formal declaration of absolution and an informal layman's judgment,¹² but the spirit of both pronouncements is the same, as Gawain is washed clean of every sin, not just those of immediate concern he has just confessed, and is now pure as a newborn baby, ready for God's judgment. The rhyming echo between the lines "clene / morn" in 1883–84 and "clene / born" in 2393–94 further suggests the poet intends a thematic link between the two penitential scenes.

The complication in this case, of course, is that Bertilak is not a priest, nor any official of the church, but a layman. In fact, his playing the role of priest in the guise of the Green Knight is especially ironic given an earlier description from the servant who escorted Gawain to the Green Chapel. The Green Knight, he says, is a merciless man with no respect for any person, and especially not for clergy:

For he is a mon methles [ruthless], and mercy non vses,
 For be hit chorle other chaplayn that bi the chapel
 rydes,
 Monk other masseprest, other any mon elles,
 Hym thynk as queme [pleasant] hym to quelle [kill] as
 quyk go hymselfen.” (2106–09)

Helen Cooper notes that this list of knights, priests, and churls covers all three “estates” of medieval society,¹³ but the inclusion of “knights” is only implied by the servant’s earlier mention of “armes” as useless against the Green Knight (2104). The number and variety of clerics listed alongside the single “chorle” is striking, reminiscent of Wyclif’s and the Lollards’ repeated anticlerical formulation “clerkis, monkis, chanouns, and freris.”¹⁴ Chaplains (the word used earlier for the singing and bell-ringing priests in Bertilak’s chapel), monks, and parish priests who consecrate the Mass all fall under his sword—but now he acts as one of them.

The Green Chapel itself contributes to the irony of the Green Knight as a priest-like figure. Bertilak’s servant describes the Knight as “a wyȝe” (2098), “a mon” (2106), and a “borelych [large] burne” (2148), as a human and not a monster, but he expresses deep fear not only of him but of his dwelling, which he describes as “the place ... ful perelous” (2097). When Gawain enters the “chapel,” the narrator first describes it not as a church building but as a forest glade within a craggy valley, which contains “nobot [nothing but] an olde caue, / Or a creuisse of an old cragge” (2182–83). The discovery of this unusual form of chapel prompts Gawain to imagine his adversary in something other than human terms: “‘We! Lorde,’ quoth the gentyle knyȝt, / ‘Whether this be the Grene Chapelle? / Here myȝt aboute mydnyȝt / The dele [devil] his matynnes telle!’” (2185–88). This suspenseful comparison of the Green Knight with the devil, reciting monastic prayers at midnight, comes at the end of a stanza, in the rhyming “bob-and-wheel.” But Gawain’s description of the Green Chapel, which infuses the landscape with terror in a way the narrator’s straightforward physical description does not, as well as his comparison of the Green Knight with Satan, is far from over, as he continues at length into the next stanza:

“Now iwysse,” quoth Wowayn, “wysty [desolate] is
 here;
 This oritore [chapel] is vgly, with erbez ouergrown.
 Wel bisemez the wyȝe wruxled [adorned] in grene

Dele [to perform] here his deuocioun on the Deuele
 wyse;
 Now I fele hit is the Fende, in my fyue wyttez,
 That hatz stoken [forced on] me this steuen [meeting]
 to strye [destroy] me here.
 This is a chapel of meschaunce, that chekke [bad luck]
 hit bytyde!
 Hit is the coreddest kyrk that euer I com inne!"
 (2189–96)

To be sure, this extended image of the Knight as the devil performing evil devotions in a cursed church exists only in Gawain's imagination, on the brink of what he thinks will be his death. Though Gawain never revises the image with an alternate description, he does offer a Christian blessing to the Knight—"the Wyȝe hit yow ȝelde / That vphaldez the heuen and on hyȝ sittez" (2441–42)—after finding him to be chivalrous and merciful. All the same, the image of the Green Knight as devil lingers as he performs the priestly absolution over Gawain (the two are separated by 193 lines), and the "perilous" physical location remains, perhaps part of the reason Gawain departs from the Green Chapel as quickly as possible without staying to meet Morgan le Fay or Lady Bertilak (2471).

So what would a fourteenth-century reader have made of this unusual sacrament, performed by such an unsettling figure in this terrifying place? As noted, every scholar who considers the validity of Gawain's first absolution relates it in some way to the second, and weighs in on its merits as well. "Bercilak, being a layman, has no power of absolution," Burrow states flatly, and the scene in the Green Chapel is "a pretend secular confession."¹⁵ On the other hand, he argues, this faux confession "complements and, as it were, completes the first at exactly that point at which we have seen it to be deficient," namely in demanding contrition and works of penitential satisfaction.¹⁶ In other words, the first confession follows proper external form but the inner condition of Gawain's soul is not moved, whereas the second confession is more genuine and sincere but does not follow proper form or have church sanction. Burrow ultimately decides that in a poetic context, the latter does not matter so much, since "the Green Knight is a figure from the world not of theology but of poetic myth."¹⁷ Morgan argues similarly that though Gawain's first confession is technically "valid," his full penance cannot take place until the scene in the Green Chapel, which serves as a "model of penitence."¹⁸

To my knowledge, the only two scholars who have explored, however briefly, the question of *Gawain's* two confession scenes in the context of fourteenth-century English anticlericalism—which as we have seen was deeply concerned with precisely the questions these scenes raise—are Aers (1997) and Borroff (2003). Aers's consideration of the Green Knight's absolution comes in the context of an argument about the poet's intended audience, which he proposes to be "courtly Christians," who observe the forms of religious piety but subsume them under the rituals of social life, a process Aers describes as ultimately corrupting for the sacrament of penance in particular. In approaching the two penitential scenes in *Sir Gawain*, Aers frames a series of questions to fit his thesis:

If there is a question here, it runs as follows: could a canonically sound confession and absolution be both licit and spiritually quite worthless, irrelevant? And if so, is Gawain's an example of this, one symptomatic of a massive gap between orthodox claims about the sacrament of penance and spiritual realities? Could it be that the fusion of "chivalric" and "Christian" values has consequences less than helpful on the journey to the creature's end? Could such a fusion have transformed the sacrament of penance into a therapeutic social form devoid of sacramental power?¹⁹

Aers's questions here imply their own answers, which reflect his central contention—the values of Christianity and chivalry are incompatible, and the attempt to synthesize them devalues the rituals of the former, to the point that though Gawain's first absolution might be superficially valid, it is practically useless for his spiritual life. An equally compelling question, however, could be asked from the opposite direction: is a canonically *unsound* confession and absolution (the one administered by the Green Knight) necessarily worthless and irrelevant in its entirety, or might it, too, potentially serve as a vessel for God's grace in Gawain's life? The answer to this question would appear to be yes—Gawain's life is spared, his dishonest actions have been discovered and forgiven, and he has resolved to sin no more, all positive outcomes of the Knight's absolution, whatever one may think of Gawain's excessive self-imposed penance later.

Aers also raises the possibility that the poet's view on the efficacy of a non-church-sanctioned sacrament might be connected to the heretical positions of the Waldensians and Wycliffites. He notes a point that Wyclif makes repeatedly about the sacraments, and which was relatively uncontroversial—that an "emergency" confession and absolution in

extreme circumstances could be considered acceptable by church authorities. However, Aers claims, “the challenge of Wycliffite ideas and practices in later fourteenth-century England gave such strands of orthodoxy a very different resonance”; specifically, it connected them to “the doctrine that absolution can only be licit if it is declarative of God’s prior and quite independent forgiveness, a doctrine incorporated in a cluster of beliefs profoundly subversive of the Roman church.”²¹ To place these “profoundly subversive” beliefs in context, Aers makes reference to the Lollard William Thorpe’s trial before Archbishop Arundel, in which Thorpe defends his radical position on confession in part by pointing to this very same practice of emergency confessions. Of course, Thorpe’s argument merely appropriates the practice for its own rhetorical purposes; his true position on the sacrament of penance is that a sinner “schulde not schryue him to a man but oonli to God ... tho preestis that taken vpon hem to asoyle men of her synnes blasfemen.”²² But its use by members of a heretical movement, even in such an obviously distorted form, Aers argues, meant that the “emergency confession to a layman” theme would have been scrutinized far more carefully by skittish church authorities. “In these contexts,” Aers concludes, “it becomes plausible for someone to suggest that the *Gawain*-poet might have entertained some perspectives that could be unfolded in directions incompatible with Catholic orthodoxy.”²³

Though Aers’s claim is couched in the most circumspect language possible, and though he ultimately determines that the poet does *not* make any further moves in this direction, the possibility he raises is intriguing. Especially given the poet’s overt criticism of the priesthood in *Cleanness* 5–16 and his critical depiction of priestly figures throughout *Cleanness* and *Patience*, Aers’s twice-removed suggestion that the poet is critical of church leadership in *Sir Gawain* as well is more than plausible.

As Borroff approaches the confession scenes, she supplies another contemporaneous analogue to the Green Knight’s speech, one which provides a strong reminder of the poem’s intensely anticlerical environment. She quotes a set of nearly identical words “spoken by another confessor the validity of whose role is subject to question”—Chaucer’s Pardoner.²⁴ At the conclusion of his tale, the Pardoner promises the company of Canterbury pilgrims, “I yow assoille, by myn heigh power, / Yow that wol offre, as clene and eek as cleer / As ye were born” (VI.913–15). The Pardoner’s words, in the context of his prologue and tale, are clearly satirical. None of the pilgrims takes up his offer to hear their confessions and “assoille yow, bothe moore and lasse” (939), and though no one directly contradicts his

claim to have the power to cleanse sins, the Host immediately afterward denies the efficacy of his relics (946–55), which the Pardoner claims have the same power.

Borroff's invocation of the Pardoner in connection with the Green Knight does more than provide a glimpse of his confessional formula's satirical possibilities. It also serves as a reminder that the Green Knight is only one of many non-priests who could assume the official authority to absolve sins. Pardoners were not always clerics, and were not required to hold any specific office or education—in many cases, they were simply lay officials collecting alms on behalf of a religious institution in which they were not themselves members.²⁵ Another group granted a special papal dispensation to hear confessions in exchange for alms were the friars, whose economic competition with parish priests is described in chapter 2. Unbeneficed priests could also travel to perform sacraments, with permission of the diocese, and another approved group, mentioned above, were laymen *in extremis*. Lord Bertilak is far from being a parish priest—and in his guise as the Green Knight, he is even further—but he does not need to be to perform an absolution with the church's sanction.

Only those writers on the extreme radical fringes of fourteenth-century anticlerical critique argued that priests were wholly unnecessary, whether for the sacrament of penance or any other aspect of the Christian life.²⁶ Even the aforementioned William Thorpe, when asked by Arundel's officials on what occasions priests were necessary, conceded: "Ser, if a man fele himsilf so distroublid with ony synne that he can not bi his owne witt voide this synne, withouten counseile of hem that ben hereinne wyser than he, in suche a caas the counseile of a good preest is ful nessesarie."²⁷ Thorpe's advice to sinners is to confess and trust in God alone for absolution, but for especially intractable sin to seek the counsel of a priest known to be wiser than oneself and good. Do not blindly trust the cleansing power of just any priest with the institutional authority to bestow it, Thorpe warns, because he might not be wise and good—but do not trust yourself alone, either. The *Gawain*-poet might well offer similar advice to the hero of his poem. Neither the official nor the unofficial absolution provides Gawain with the assurance that he is forgiven and his soul is safe—in neither case does he truly feel as sinless as when he "watz fyrst borne"—but when he relies solely on his own judgement, he prescribes for himself a penance beyond all reasonable bounds.

It is also important to note, on the subject of the trustworthiness of religious authorities, that the highest ranking religious

authority in Bertilak's house—the one who sits at the place of honor which in Camelot is held by a bishop, who leads the procession into the chapel for the Christmas celebration where she is accorded great honor, and who attends Mass with the same frequency as the others—is Morgan le Fay. She possesses the “koyntyse [wisdom] of clergie, bi craftes wel lerned” (2447) from a “conable [excellent] klerk” (2450), qualities which appear at first glance to be holy and priest-like. But her learning is actually “the maystrés of Merlyn” (2448), and her magic is not performed for the service of others, but rather to make herself a “goddes” (2452) and to revenge herself on Arthur's house by startling Guenevere with the Green Knight's appearance “and gart [frighten] hir to dyȝe” (2460). She is the Arthurian world's tangible example of the hypocritical priests described by the narrator of *Cleanness*, who “conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont, / As be honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylthez” (13–14). She is the cause of every unpleasant circumstance Gawain finds himself in throughout the story, and her unveiling by Bertilak reveals that Gawain's spiritual struggle has not been entirely a problem of his own making. He has dwelt for a week in a castle whose seemingly pious lord and lady have been deceiving him, he has been tricked for obscure reasons into committing an obscure sin, he has confessed to and been absolved by a doubtful priest, and he has prescribed for himself a doubtful penance, which in the poem's final scene cuts him off to a degree from the joyful community with which he was so perfectly joined at the start of the poem.

To read the entire 2530-line poem through the narrow lens of these 15 lines (the two confession and absolution scenes) and few scattered references to priests might seem myopic at first, but these brief moments of priestly and sacramental description can serve as entry points into a useful perspective on the poem in its entirety, one which views its central theme as a critique of religious deception and hypocrisy in the same vein as *Cleanness*. The poem's social world, in which priests serve only the useful but relatively impotent role of presiding over secular celebrations and marking the passage of time, is also a world in which, as the poem's first stanza portentously concludes, “oft bothe blysse and blunder [turmoil] / Ful skete [quickly] hatz skyfted [shifted]” (19)—where good and evil can, and often do, suddenly change places. A Christmas feast full of merriment becomes a horror with a single ax stroke; the beautiful passing of a year in the natural world becomes a march toward unnatural death; seemingly playful games suddenly turn out to be deadly serious. In perhaps the most physical example of a sudden emotional turn, when no one in Arthur's

court responds to the Green Knight's challenge and he laughs at them, the king is literally blasted in the face with shame—"The blod schot for scham into his schyre [white] face / and lere [cheek]" (317-18)—but just as instantly, as the stanza's long lines turn to short trimeters in the wheel, the shame shifts to anger and reckless abandon. "He wex as wroth as wynde" (319), the poet writes, as if the shot of shame has been blown away by a windy gust, and Arthur steps up to meet the Knight's challenge himself.

It is no surprise, then, as the narrative from its opening scene has primed the reader for sudden reversals of all kinds, that the Green Knight's identity turns on a dime in the poem's concluding stanzas. In fact, his transformation from fearsome supernatural beast to kindly lord and priest proves too sudden for Gawain to bear, as he declines the invitation to meet his aunt and his former temptress (2471). Though the Green Knight turns out to be not a monster or devil, but rather a gracious host, a moral teacher, and perhaps a kinsman (the fact that Gawain's aunt lives in his household suggests that Bertilak may be a distant uncle or cousin), Gawain is not prepared to face on new terms any of the people who have deceived him, at least not so soon after their unveiling and sudden change in identity. Instead, he departs for Camelot, and the poet concludes their parting scene with a note that the Green Knight will now ride "Whiderwarde-soeuer he wolde" (2478). He may return to Bertilak's castle, or he might not; his destination remains a mystery, just as his origins and identity remain obscure, illuminated hardly at all by the revelations about Morgan's scheme and the temptation game. The reader, too, has been deceived; we also are victims of Morgan's attempt "to assay the surquidré [pride]" of Camelot (2457), and like Gawain we may be uncertain how to move forward to an understanding of this bewildering tale. In this case, looking to the central themes of the *Gawain*-poet's more "religious" works may provide a key.

God's wrath, as *Cleanness* and *Patience* amply demonstrate, is destructive enough when visited upon ordinary laymen, who are called merely to observe God's laws and partake of His sacraments; it is even worse when God must mete out judgment upon those with a higher calling, the patriarchs, prophets, and priests who administer and teach those laws and consecrate those sacraments. In those cases, His wrath is genuinely world-ending, ripping apart families, communities, cities, and even the entire earth. For Gawain, the use of occult magic and trickery to perform spiritual functions normally reserved for priests—the examination of virtue, the conviction of sin, and the ritual confession, satisfaction, and absolution of that sin through a sacramental process—leads him into

negative consequences, though these may not seem as dire as a flood that covers the earth or fire that destroys cities. The trick merely causes Gawain to overreact to his relatively minor transgression, to take on an extreme penance not sanctioned by the church, and to refuse to accept forgiveness fully, in a manner at odds with a Christian view of atonement and absolution. But Gawain is not the only one affected by this perversion of the priestly office—it has broader implications for the social and political communities of which he is a part. Family ties are severed between himself and his aunt, and the animosity between the sorceress and Arthur's court can only grow stronger and more dangerous for the realm. Bonds between the court and Gawain himself become strained as well, as Arthur and the “lordes and ladis that longed to that Table ... laȝen [laugh] loude” at Gawain's expressions of shame (2514–15), and attempt unsuccessfully to include him once more in their perpetual celebration.

The poem does end on a happy note, with Gawain accorded “the renoun of the Rounde Table” for posterity (2519), and his story recorded “in the best boke of romaunce” (2521), though the poet offers no glimpse of Gawain's perspective on his own fame. But he concludes by calling back to the description of Bretayn's ancient founding in the poem's opening stanza, placing the story into the larger context of national political history, then expressing his trust in Christ with a blessing: “Now that bere the croun of thorne, / He bryng vus to his blyse! Amen” (2529–30).

The poet has little choice but to leave in God's hands any possible correction for the religious, familial, social, and political ruptures Gawain's story has exposed, caused by the machinations of two characters in deceptive disguise. The “greme” of God's wrath triggered by hypocritical priests at the start of what may have been the *Gawain*-poet's first poetic effort can be remedied only by Christ's sacrificial death and the laughter of those who forgive, at the end of the poet's final work.

NOTES

¹ The alternate definition of “toun” as “court” is provided by Andrew and Waldron's glossary (352), which references *Sir Gawain* 31. The definition does not appear in the *MED*'s entry for “toun.”

² Spearing, *Gawain-Poet*, 8.

³ David Aers, “Christianity for Courtly Subjects: Reflections on the *Gawain*-Poet,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 91–101; Watson, “*Gawain*-Poet,” 293.

⁴ Watson, "Gawain-Poet," 293–94.

⁵ Aers, "Christianity for Courtly Subjects," 96.

⁶ Israel Gollancz, ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 123.

⁷ Gerald Morgan, "The Validity of Gawain's Confession in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 36.141 (1985): 11.

⁸ Burrow, "Two Confession Scenes," 74–75.

⁹ Andrew and Waldron, eds., *Poems*, 275, note.

¹⁰ Derek Pearsall, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Essay in Enigma," *Chaucer Review* 46.1–2 (2011): 255.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹² John Burrow, *A Reading of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"* (London: Routledge, 1965), 132; Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals*, 98.

¹³ Helen Cooper, "The Supernatural," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 288. The significance of listing every estate, Cooper argues, is that "Gawain is on his way to meet a personified Death, with whom no one can survive an encounter."

¹⁴ See chapter 2, note 44.

¹⁵ Burrow, *Reading*, 132–33.

¹⁶ Burrow, "Two Confession Scenes," 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁸ Morgan, "Validity of Gawain's Confession," 18.

¹⁹ Aers, "Christianity for Courtly Subjects," 96.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²² Hudson, ed., *Two Wycliffite Texts*, lines 1828–29, 1897–98.

²³ Aers, "Christianity," 98.

²⁴ Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals*, 97.

²⁵ See Kellogg and Haselmayer, "Chaucer's Satire of the Pardoner," 253–62.

²⁶ For example, see Hawisia Moone's "Confession" in Hudson, ed., *Selections*, 34–37: "confession shuld be maad oonly to God and to noon other prest, for no prest hath poar to remitte synne ne to assoile a man of ony synne" (34).

²⁷ Hudson, *Two Wycliffite Texts*, 83.

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