

**OBJECTS AND ANXIETY IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH
WRITING**

by

Gabrielle Parkin

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

Spring 2014

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WRITING**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I lack the words to express the sincere gratitude I feel towards all those who mentored me during this process. My greatest debt goes to Jim Dean for his constant patience, gentle guidance, and persistent generosity. Thanks to my readers Julian Yates for his invigorating marginalia that challenged me to rethink the boundaries between the domestic and the divine, Miranda Wilson for her cheerful conversation, and Sarah Stanbury for her insightful reading and generous comments.

No scholarly project of this nature could take place without the support of wonderful librarians. Thanks to Rebecca Johnson Melvin who encouraged me to begin my work as a public scholar and for permission to use the images from the UD Book of Hours; to Linda Stein, Timothy Murray, Laurie Rizzo, and Susan Bryntenson, as well as everyone at UD's Morris Library, Special Collections, and Interlibrary Loan. Thanks also to the Rare Books Department at the Free Library of Philadelphia and the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at the University of Pennsylvania. Also a thanks to Karen Lurkhur of Mount St. Mary's University, Deborah Steinberger of UD's Foreign Languages and Literatures Department, and Jean-Luc Deuffic of the website *Pecia* for their help in translating and transcribing some medieval French. Finally, thanks to Dr Marigold Norbye of the London International Palaeography Summer School and Dr.

Michelle Brown of the London Rare Books School. Their excitement for the medieval book inspired my work on Books of Hours.

Thanks to the many people in my personal community for their endless support. To Matthew Kinservik and the whole Kinservik team for their never-ending kindness, Edward Larkin for his persistent encouragement, Tim Spalding for his down-to-earth advice, and Melissa Ianetta for help beyond the dissertation. I'd also like to thank the English Department, the Office of Graduate Studies, and DELPHI for their additional financial support of this project through travel grants and fellowships.

Endless gratitude to the members of my dissertation group and friends Jasmine Lellock and Sabina Amanbayeva for championing my successes and helping me think through my failures.

Thanks to all my friends and colleagues from UD, especially Ginny Garnett, Halina Adams, Chris and Meg LaCasse, Robert and Erica Klevay, Hannah Eagleson, Josh Calhoun, Joe Turner, Meg Meiman, Kyle Vitale, Kyle Meikle and Maryanne, Heidi Pierce and Chad Bieber, Kainoa Harbottle and Alison Klaum, Julia Oestreich, Melissa McDerby, and Lonnie Sarnell. Also a hoorah to Christine and Frank Cucciarre.

To those friends who reminded me of life outside of the academy thanks to Eva and Andy Mudrak (the saver of my hard drive on more than one occasion), Danielle Labbate, Zeenaz Ali, Roohe Husain, and Chris Alexander.

Thanks to my parents Jack and Dianne Lewis, my brother Jacob, and my grandmother Charlotte Gaylor for raising me to love ideas. Also thanks to John and Lesley Parkin for their kind support.

I dedicate this project to my husband Lance.

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ABSTRACT

In this study I demonstrate that medieval goods were active and often animated participants in the daily lives of medieval individuals. My project demonstrates how, rather than merely giving voice to dead objects, these lively “things” speak about the emotional, sensual, and experiential lives of late medieval men and women. By bringing together a group of seemingly disparate goods—Books of Hours, stone idols and invisible flowers, clothing, and skull cups—I argue that each object provides a spectrum of possible readings for users, who simultaneously interpreted objects as essential to a spiritual and communal existence, while also fearing that goods might inhibit the soul’s relationship with the divine. All matter was, in some way, linked with creation and the divine, and as a result objects inherently possessed degrees of agency that might affect the human user.

Chapter One considers how Books of Hours combine animal, plant, and stone matter and join them with prayers and illuminated images to instruct women in proper touching in this life and the next. In Chapter Two I consider worldly and mystical matter in Chaucer’s “Second Nun’s Tale” to demonstrate how looking at and touching manmade objects can ultimately limit knowledge of the divine. Though Chaucer provides an *exemplum* in the form of St. Cecile, who requires no contact with goods to realize her destiny of becoming an early Christian martyr, he ultimately concludes that, for less saintly individuals, it is impossible to ignore the senses, and particularly vision, when

forming belief. Chapters Three and Four discuss Margery Kempe's worldly and religious attire. I argue that Margery's clothes and tears become a form of livery that reinforces her relationship with the Heavenly household. As a result, her text itself is actually a narrative of cloth, in which she employs a sartorial vocabulary to understand her transition from mother to mystic. In Chapter Five, I focus on the tale of "Albinus and Rosemund" in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and consider how the substance or matter of an object has inherent power, even if it cannot be perceived immediately through senses. In that tale, the central object, a golden and bejeweled cup that was crafted from a human skull, controls the destiny of all the characters.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: MATERIAL READINGS IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL WORLD

Object Lessons: Medieval Matter and Theory

What you are about to read is a series of late medieval object lessons. Through discussions of the sensual and affective worlds of the English men and women who came in contact with these literary and real goods, each chapter demonstrates the multitude of ways that objects can be read in the late Middle Ages. It seems fitting to open this project with a familiar object study: Pygmalion and his statue. The story of Pygmalion has come to us from Ovid and been retransmitted and reinterpreted in every form of media we can think of including cartoons, films (*My Fair Lady* being the most famous), and plays. Just as popular in the Middle Ages, John Gower in his *Confessio Amantis* appropriates the myth of the craftsman from the thirteenth century *Romance of the Rose*, incorporating it into Book Four of his survey of the seven deadly sins. In Gower's text, we read of the great skill of Pygmalion who was able to craft the "ymage...Lich to a womman in semblance/Of feture and of contenance./So fairr yit nevere was figure."¹ Wrought from white ivory, with red cheeks and lips, Pygmalion "himself beguileth. For with a goodly

¹ G. C. Macaulay, ed. *The English Works of John Gower Volume 1*, EETS 81 (1900; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 4.378-81. All references to John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* are from this edition. Citations include book and line number.

lok sche smyleth,/So that through pure impression/Of his ymaginacion” he fell in love with the image.² The rest of the story is familiar; Pygmalion treats the statue as a human woman, feeding it and sleeping with the ivory creation in his bed. It is the goddess Venus who eventually hears his declarations of love and as the statue “lay in his nakede arm,/The colde ymage he fieleth warm/Of fleissh and bon and full of lif.”³ For many modern readers, Pygmalion’s plight is an object lesson about the dangers of fetishism. To love a “thing” too much is to be tricked by materiality. We should not feel for objects, for the physical is a distraction from the metaphysical.

Gower’s retelling of this material narrative is far less reductive. Inherent in Pygmalion’s desire is a question about the permeability of categories of life, matter, and objecthood. The statue, crafted with a skill “Above alle othre men,” not only teaches Pygmalion about the limits of bodies but the potential of matter.⁴ As Caroline Walker Bynum argues in her *Christian Materiality*,

acquaintance with medieval assumptions [about objects]—and attention to the ways in which they are different from ours—not only produces a more nuanced understanding of the Middle Ages but also unsettles some modern theorizing, at least insofar as that theorizing takes as self-evident the boundary between human and thing, part and whole, mimesis and material, animate and inanimate. Medieval theories...operated not from a modern need to break down such boundaries but from a sense that they were porous in some cases, nonexistent in others.⁵

² Macaulay, *The English Works of John Gower*, 4.387-90.

³ Macaulay, *The English Works of John Gower*, 4.421-23.

⁴ Macaulay, *The English Works of John Gower*, 4.375.

⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 284.

The subsequent flexibility of matter meant that objects could and often would affect the human subjects who perceived them. It was believed that sensual perception was an important and dangerous process, in which an object might alter the mind, or even damage the soul of the human subject. As the image of an object passed through the eyes and penetrated the mind it was understood to leave an impression upon the brain. Made up of chambers, the first of which was imagination, the mind accepted and stored sensory input that would eventually become the stuff of memory.⁶ Not passive, the object itself became responsible for producing this sensory and mental response. The human subject was thus responsible for learning how to negotiate these material experiences. The most important example of the power of objects is the Eucharist, which had dueling substances reflecting the body and soul: the grain from which it was produced and the body of Christ which it was transformed in to (though still in the guise of bread). Casting one's eyes upon the transubstantiated loaf was the most important and awe-inspiring moment of the Mass.⁷ To be in the presence of the Eucharist was to witness the manifestation of Christ and his body.

But as Pygmalion's story suggests, the Eucharist is not an isolated material incident. The statue of the woman impresses itself upon Pygmalion's mind, specifically his imagination. In touching and gazing upon the thing, the thing affects the human subject. This is not the "false attachment" of a fetishist, but instead one of many possible

⁶ For more on objects and memory see Mary J. Carruthers in *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Carolyn P. Collette, *Species, Phantasms, and Images: Vision and Medieval Psychology in The Canterbury Tales* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

⁷ Eamon Duffy, *Stripping the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 95-102.

ways to read the potential power of an object in the late Middle Ages. Reading things in medieval literature thus requires an interdisciplinary approach that embraces a multitude of possible questions; material narratives become a gestalt. In addition to thinking about Pygmalion's (and so Gower's readers') sensual experience, literature scholars might also consider the ivory used in the production of the statue, at once organic and dead, having been cut from an elephant. The skill of the craftsman is also important in this passage, as it is in many of Gower's object encounters throughout the *Confessio*.⁸ It is implied that, had the image failed to resemble a woman so exactly, it would have been less compelling. We might even include economic debates or conversations about the senses that I have already alluded to.

Since starting this project there has been a flurry of material culture scholarship, just as lively as the objects written about. Much of "thing theory," my own work included, begins with a debt to Bruno Latour whose actor network theory (ANT) posits not a human/object binary but instead a network of relations.⁹ By observing some of the individual threads in the network we can tell dynamic stories about its actors and actants. As Julian Yates explains in a discussion of the potential of object-oriented readings, we can follow

the passage of things themselves through human discourse, charting the networks or associations that form as things travel from hand to hand, in and out of texts, between and among different spheres of reference, describing a kind of Brownian motion of persons and things, each remaking the other as they are put to use, reanimating aesthetics as a contact zone in which the presence of things is

⁸ I develop Gower's use of objects in Chapter Five.

⁹ For example, Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

understood to manifest via the installed thoughts and feelings of their human screens.¹⁰

Tracking this “network of attachments” allows scholars to formulate new questions about how or why an object was used. More than just the economic and social-historical narrative of a thing, we can also posit questions that might give clues as to how it was experienced. Further, we can grant the object the agency that it so clearly possesses.

As humans, we cannot help but integrate objects into our physical and emotional lives. They are part of our larger community and as a result act upon us just as frequently as we perform with them. Pygmalion’s statue, and the desire that it inflames, is a dramatic but thoroughly medieval experience of the object world. The statue not only encapsulates Pygmalion’s desire to possess the thing that he has produced, but also illustrates his need for other actors in his “contact zone.” Narratives such as these help scholars to historicize affect so that reading emotion becomes a pragmatic rather than relational act. Recognizing affective responses that accompany goods will add nuance to our larger understanding of the literary object. The potential of this move towards affect in medieval studies is not driven by a desire for well defined and immovable “Truth.” Instead, affective and material culture scholarship offers the potential for readings that are interested in the myriad of potentialities in a single thing, rather than just their legally or economically determined functions. Such readings can bring us closer to understanding how the people who wrote and read these texts felt about their goods; we

¹⁰ Julian Yates, “It’s (for) You; or, the Tele-t/r/opical Post-human,” *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1/2 (2010): 228. See also Yates’ book *Error, Misuse, and Failure: Object Lessons from the English Renaissance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

can come to better know their spiritual, intellectual, and emotional lives through the artifacts of daily existence.

This move to imagine the agency of objects has been taken up by scholars like Bynum, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and Kellie Robertson. In work that might broadly be defined as part of the Speculative Realist movement, these scholars have sought to imagine new ways of reading matter and the status of objects in the Middle Ages. The parameters of this discussion are clearly laid out in *Speculative Medievalisms* in which the authors note that,

Speculation in these terms must be distinguished from practical guesswork or conjecture, and even more strongly from the kind of discourse that stays within the supposedly transparent definability of terms and facts. Speculation is, instead, the rigorous exploration of the potentialities of the perceivable, the very foundation and condition of experience and experiment, and thus a practice that must directly engage the risk of ‘conscious follies’ that the journal *Speculum* has historically precluded from itself.¹¹

Medieval narratives are eminently suited for such speculative readings if simply because the texts themselves invite such questioning. St. Augustine of Hippo demands that we confront the material world to find our way to the spiritual; dough and keys speak to us directly through riddles and command that we call their names; Chaucer makes his pilgrims into Knights and Franklins through their attire. As I shall demonstrate in each of my chapters, it was accepted that things had an individual power over users. Such acceptance does not suggest ease though, and indeed each of my human subjects express a degree of what might be called “object paranoia,” or discomfort with the independent potential that things can possess. Though owners of fine clothing and books might

¹¹ The Petropunk Collective, “Speculative Medievalisms: A Précis,” in *Speculative Medievalisms: Discography*, ed. The Petropunk Collective [Eileen Joy, Anna Kłosowska, Nicola Masciandaro, Michael O’Rourke], (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), viii.

receive pleasure and even spiritual fortification when interacting with their goods, there was also the ever-present fear that such objects tricked users, compelling them to contemplate the world rather than the divine.

While this move towards speculation has been both intellectually and stylistically energetic, it also comes with a number of criticisms. Chief among those who have expressed concern about speculative medievalism are D. Vance Smith and Andrew Cole. Both of these scholars offer thoughtful critiques of the style and content of object oriented scholarship. Smith acknowledges the value of affective methods of scholars like Carolyn Dinshaw, who links “touch and contingency in the service of destabilizing historical normativities.”¹² Nevertheless affect, according to Smith’s usage in this article, is a move to join the experiences of the past with the individual experiences of the present.¹³ The result, according to Smith, is a manufactured urgency on the part of the scholar: “The best of this work asks us to reconsider both the object of our knowledge and the ways in which we gain access to it, but the manufacture of urgency and relevance has come at the cost of a creeping anti-intellectualism.”¹⁴ Smith’s chief concern is with the overtly or potentially reflexive/reflective moves in current affect and object scholarship; the desire to use medieval narratives to tell us about ourselves. While I recognize the value of Smith’s wariness in this regard, his argument implies an assumption that scholarship should serve only one purpose: to communicate definitive readings. What medieval object study has encouraged is a creative though rigorous set of

¹² D. Vance Smith, “The Application of Thought to Medieval Studies: The Twenty-first Century,” *Exemplaria* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 86.

¹³ While I do employ affect theory in this project, my use of term refers to the history of affect rather than personal reflection.

¹⁴Smith, “The Application of thought to Medieval Studies,” 85.

alternatives to the traditional scholarly journal article/monograph. By redefining the subject/object relationship, material culture scholarship has facilitated a multitude of conversations, many of which are taking place in newer forums: academic blogs like *In the Middle*, open access publishing, and organizations like the BABEL Working Group. Thus, more traditional scholarship can be published next to experimental essays that take the guise of personal reflections upon modern/medieval spaces and things. In this context, the medieval texts helps to comment upon modern communities. The purpose is to bridge the space between the medieval and modern in hopes of exposing new paths to understanding how individuals in the late medieval ages experienced their world.

Andrew Cole has expressed similar concerns about the theoretical turn towards the material and seems most concerned about the flexibility of terminology. Distrusting the ways in which scholars attempt to grant agency to objects, Cole seems most worried that the object/human split reinitiates the problem of assigning consciousness to ourselves and to objects. To put it another way, in our attempts to redefine the boundaries between actor and agency, we face muddled definitions and are unaware of the limits of our own discourse.¹⁵ As the Pygmalion narrative suggests though, these definitions were inherently muddled in the Middle Ages as well. The line between living and inert was often permeable. And while object study is still working to determine the parameters of its discussion, this does not mean that the extant contributions fail to recognize what they are “thinking about.”¹⁶ All of the object-oriented scholarship I cite in this project are learned (in both tone and content) articles and books that provide nuanced and

¹⁵ Andrew Cole, “The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontologies,” *Minnesota Review* 80 (2013): 114.

¹⁶ Cole, “The Call of Things,” 116.

historically grounded arguments, supported by careful close reading. They use the same material to ask a different types of questions. Thus, while Cole and Smith provide important warnings—it is our duty to consider the limits of our own philosophies—much of the work in object-oriented studies is committed to the same intellectual rigor and quest for knowledge that Cole and Smith champion in their own scholarship.

Setting the Scene: Who Would Have Owned What?

The chapters that follow engage directly with a variety of theoretical and critical modes, and employ art historical, new historicist, and phenomenological critiques, as well as the speculative modes of thought to consider how those living in England between 1350-1450 might have seen, touched, and even smelled the objects they encountered in their daily lives. In each of my chapters the objects will speak. But they will be part of a larger chorus that includes not only their companion goods but also the individuals who might have owned them. Included also are voices of dissent, like those of the Lollards, who were especially nervous about the power of things in the human/object relationship.

I open this study with human centered questions: what would people have used in their daily lives? How would they acquire/encounter these goods? What kinds of people are we talking about anyway? I will begin by setting the historical and economic scene and then move on to a discussion of various types of people that made up the merchant and artisan classes of the late Middle Ages. These individuals, with increased access to money and luxury goods, occupy the majority of space in my project.

The date range is somewhat arbitrary, as all periodizations ultimately are, and encompasses the period immediately following the plague, at which time the value of labor gradually increased. While plague does not disappear in England until the advent of modern medical practices, the Black Death of 1348-1350 is famous for the overwhelming numbers of people throughout Europe who succumb. Killing about one third to half of Europe's population, England's population went from about 5 million in the early 1340s to 2.5 million by the end of the century.¹⁷ Those who survived could subsequently command higher wages. Accompanied by the revaluing of labor came the Great Rising of 1381 which both Chaucer and Gower would have been keenly aware of in both their personal lives and writing. This rebellion, which began as a tax revolt, consisted of a mixture of occupations and classes, and was comprised mostly of artisans. But one of a series of urban rebellions, these insurrections point not just to social unrest but the ever rising standards of living for merchants, craftsmen, and laborers, whose higher wages meant greater access to consumable goods.¹⁸

Within urban settings, the growing power of merchants and craftsmen could be seen in the realms of local politics, guilds, and religious fraternities. Margery Kempe, who occupies Chapters Three and Four of this project, was the daughter of John Brunham, a powerful merchant and mayor in Bishop's Lynn. John Kempe Sr., the father of Margery's husband John, also had important positions like royal tax collector and

¹⁷ Jeffrey L. Forgeng and Will McLean, *Daily Life in Chaucer's England*, 2nd ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2009), 7.

¹⁸ David Nicholas, *The Later Medieval City 1300-1500* (London: Longman, 1997), 126. See also Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

chamberlain.¹⁹ Associated with merchant, trade, and religious guilds, men and women of cities like Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn) not only desired moveable goods, but required such objects as visually readable markers for an otherwise largely illiterate community. Surplus income went to goods like clothing, fine food, spices, cooking implements, prayer books, and household textiles. Outside of the home, money might be spent on repairing and decorating the local parish church or providing money to the appropriate guild to provide for the poor. Further, hospitals and religious houses were supported by donations from the laity.²⁰

While there are economic similarities among different classes of merchants and artisans, there is not the homogenous sense of community that we might identify with a modern American understanding of the middle class.²¹ Thus, while I do employ that term occasionally in this project, it is more correct to group these individuals by the type of labor they perform, whether it is trade, goods production, or both. What unifies these groups for my purposes, is their desire to spend surplus income on luxuries like moveable goods. This interest in luxury ownership is not only to be found through archeological evidence and literature, but legislation as well. Sumptuary laws, first introduced in the 1330s, grow to encompass things like clothes by the 1360s.²² Hoping to regulate both

¹⁹ Deborah Ellis, "Margery Kempe and King's Lynn," in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed, Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 142.

²⁰ Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c. 1200-1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 209.

²¹ Roger A. Ladd, *Antimerchantism in Late Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-22.

²² Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 16; Paul

conspicuous consumption and spending on foreign goods, these laws are but one manifestation of the aristocratic concern for hierarchical regulation. If a merchant could afford to dress like a gentleman, what did that do to the gentleman who could only afford to dress like a merchant? And perhaps more important, how did the clothing act upon the wearer? Like all manufactured goods, clothes possess a degree of agency and can control the wearer as much as the wearer can control the clothes (take it on, pull it off, cut it, etc.).

With sumptuary legislation come complaints about the use of such luxurious items. For example the Parson, one of Chaucer's storytellers from *The Canterbury Tales*, devotes a significant portion of his sermon to the sin of pride and showy clothing. Not only is it wasteful, dragging loose textiles in the mud that might otherwise be used to clothe the poor, but it exposes and damages the body: "Allas, somme of hem shewen the boce [bulge] of hir shap, and the horrible swollen membres, that semeth lik the maladie of hirnia, in the wrappyng of hir hoses."²³ Described is the all too tight clothing of a man who exposes his "boce" or bulge which is likened to a hernia. Tight clothes affect the social and physical appearance of the wearer. Such is the price of fashion.

Not all money was spent on fancy clothes though, and just as often individuals used their income to acquire goods that might feed their souls. In addition to chipping in for a font at the parish church or paying for a new stained glass window, a lay person might also acquire books, whether the buyer could read or not. A famous example is John

Freedman, *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 45.

²³ Geoffrey Chaucer, "Parson's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 416-18, 422.

Claydon, who owned a handful of books including the *Lantern of Light* and a collection of sermons, both Lollard texts. Lollardy was a heretical sect that followed the teachings of John Wycliffe and denied the spiritual value of relics, images, the Eucharist, and even the Pope. Claydon, an illiterate skinner, had the books read to him by his servant. The reason we know about this London tradesman is that, unwilling to give up his manuscripts or reject their contents, he is burned as a Lollard heretic in 1415.²⁴ The objects themselves, in addition to their content, become an essential component of Claydon's spiritual identity and worth dying for as a result.

While we must assume that Claydon's books were destroyed, most individuals passed the contents of their households on through wills and gifting. Wills document the most valuable of such goods, including expensive gowns, bedclothes, and books. Such items might be given to family members, the parish priests, or to charitable institutions that could redistribute the wealth in exchange for prayers for the deceased.²⁵ For the merchants and craftsmen I will discuss in this project purchased goods, both new and used, were often acquired in urban centers. Supported by the agricultural activities of the surrounding suburban and rural communities, the urban craftsman and merchant had familiar store fronts and stalls in the center of town. Often grouped together—for example stationers (book sellers) were usually located in the streets surrounding a cathedral—objects could be sold off the pole, produced to order, or pre-made goods

²⁴ Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), 129 and 149.

²⁵ For examples of willed prayer books see Susan Groag Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Eler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 149-87.

might be augmented to suit a particular buyer.²⁶ In the loud market streets goldsmiths would compete for the attention of customers with the draper who could fit clothing on the premise or in the home. The same was true for food. Bakers, brewers, cooks, and others vendors would sell both raw materials for cooking and prepared hot food for passersby.²⁷ The medieval marketplace was a performative space for both people and objects and a successful merchant's wife and her son, for example, might wander through the stalls and shops and acquire a new buttons from the goldsmith, a lightly used prayer book for a soon-to-be daughter-in-law, and a quick lunch of roast thrush baked in a pastry.²⁸

The markets of late medieval England were also filled with a variety of domestic and imported wares. For example, available textiles might range from fine wools, an important English export in the period, to foreign silks from Spain and Italy.²⁹ Importing and exporting goods was common in the period, and while laws were frequently drafted to prevent important commodities like grain from leaving the country, wool and woad

²⁶ Off the pole refers to the poles on which goods were hung for display.

²⁷ Dyer, "Standards of Living," 198.

²⁸ For a discussion of purchasing practices in Italy see Susan Mosher Stuard, *Gilding the Market: Luxury and Fashion in Fourteenth Century Italy* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2006). For discussions of prepared food see P.W. Hammond *Food and Feast in the Middle Ages* (Dover, NH: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1993), 50; Martha Carlin, "Fast Food and Urban Living Standards in Medieval England," in *Food and Eating in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martha Carlin and Joel T. Rosenthal (London: Hambledon Press, 1998), 27-51.

²⁹ Rebecca Woodward Wendelken, "Silk: Silk in the British Isles," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles of the British Isles c. 450-1450*, ed. Gale Owen-Crocker, Elizabeth Coatsworth, and Maria Hayward (Brill: Leiden, 2012), 519. See also E. Jane Burns, *Sea of Silk: A Textile Geography of Women's Work in Medieval French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

were popular and lucrative exports in the period.³⁰ Thus, while the merchant and artisan classes make up a comparatively small part of the urban population, their desire to reinforce their social stature through purchasing power is an important part of the material narrative of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Looking Forward

This dissertation is part of a larger movement in literary studies to better understand the lived experience of medieval individuals. My assertion is that religious objects are not necessarily privileged goods, separate from domestic items, but instead part of a larger system of material interaction. Following the network of attachments connected to any relic or stone idol will ultimately lead the scholar away from the altar, to the quarry and the woad maker. As we see in the *Book of Margery Kempe*, the maker of woolen underpants can help the wearer to God. Things are things, whether religious or secular. Thus, while Bynum's monograph focuses on *Christian Materiality*, I would assert that she might just as accurately call it *Materiality*. The bodily, psychological, and craft processes (amongst others) are the same; people use stuff in similar ways.

My declaration of similitude is not meant to ignore or degrade the power of the religious or spiritual lives of the men and women of the late Middle Ages, nor is it meant to deny that different objects are used differently. This project does not question the validity of the declarations of faith by women like Margery Kempe or Saint Cecile, nor do I seek to trivialize their belief. I have worked to avoid imperial readings, which

³⁰ Kellie Robertson, *The Laborer's Two Bodies: Labor and the 'Work' of the Text in Medieval Britain, 1350-1500* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 107. See also Freedman who cites complaints about Italians taking England's money for spices (*Out of the East*, 161).

impose modern materiality onto premodern texts while simultaneously judging those behaviors inferior or quaint. They are just texts, and the people who lived them and wrote them are men and women with shared values and assumptions. And it is the shared conversation about the senses and the material world that this project works to draw out. As books of hours illustrate, the medieval world is one place, formed by God during the Creation. All things that come from the world derive from that moment.

What these chapters will demonstrate is the confusing and often paradoxical nature of the late medieval material experience. While different objects were produced for separate purposes (and have vastly different forms) they can still function for both users and viewers in similar ways: you would not wear a prayer book in the same way you wear a cloak—except when you do. Carrying a prayer book can be just as demonstrative (both spiritually and socially) as the right gown. A piece of cloth does not work as a drinking vessel, except when a cup-less thirsty person dips it into water and sucks away the fluids. While each object tells its own story, and is coded differently, they are all nevertheless part of a larger network of material experience.

All of the texts I work with in this project contain narratives that are driven by objects. Even books of hours, which are the subject of my first chapter, are the centerpieces of narratives of faith. While each chapter will tell the individual story of how an object was used and perceived, each of these narratives will reflect on discussions of the senses, especially touch and vision. Each chapter will also suggest a certain degree of dis-ease with the object world. While there is great pleasure and beauty to be had when, for example, caressing fine cloth, there is also the inherent danger associated with the love of things and the danger that poses to the soul.

In Chapter Two, I model an interdisciplinary reading of books of hours, observing the network of relations to demonstrate how one object might be used to discuss the larger history of use that surrounds it. Paying special attention to the University of Delaware's MS095 031, which I dub the Cinot Hours, I imagine the various ways that Jeanne Cinot, the original owner, might have used and been used by the text. By considering the history and handling of books of hours, as well as female literacy and educational practices, I argue that books of hours were in fact tools designed to help the user negotiate different types of touch in this life and the next. Produced from a variety of animal, mineral, and vegetable sources, prayer books not only encouraged tactile participation through their pages and images, but also helped users to avoid the pains of the spiritual flesh that awaited them in purgatory.

Chapter Three uses Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Second Nun's Tale," from the *Canterbury Tales*, to provide a counter narrative to the positive material encounters I describe through books of hours. Documenting the life of Saint Cecile, the tale demonstrates four possible ways of encountering the material world. Interested most in the dangers of looking at goods, the "Second Nun's Tale" demonstrates that the eyes must be trained to gaze through the material. Cecile's husband, Valerian, registers his faith first through his eyes. Converted by a vision of Pope Urban and a book, Valerian is ultimately granted visions of mystical goods—Heavenly flowers and coronets—that establish him as a saint. Valerian's brother, Tiburce, is also converted though through the less perfect sense of smell. Cecile requires no such sensual/material support and models for readers a saintly way of accessing the divine, one that is disconnected from the sensual world. Engaging in a verbal duel with Almachius, the Roman prefect who

demands that the saint stop preaching and acknowledge an idol, Cecile eventually finds herself semi-beheaded, preaching before a crowd of Christians who collect her blood. Turning this a-material saint into a relic, Chaucer complicates her narrative, demonstrating not only the inevitable draw of the material world, but also the importance of objects in the performance of faith.

Having established positive and negative material encounters, I move on to provide a more emotionally and spiritually complicated interaction with the material world. Chapters Four and Five are both devoted to the *Book of Margery Kempe* and clothing. From the opening chapter of Margery's *Book*, clothes feature heavily in the way Margery identifies herself as a woman, a citizen of Lynn, and as a mystic. The *Book of Margery Kempe* documents the life of a woman who, born into a wealthy merchant family in Bishop's Lynn, has visions of Christ and transforms herself from a mother of fourteen to a mystic. Chapter Four documents Margery's struggle to negotiate the clothing that she understands and loves with the conditional poverty and suffering that Christ wishes her to experience. From the first chapters of the *Book*, Margery identifies clothing as an essential part of her identity. Beginning with large hats and flashy cloaks made with multiple textiles and colors, Margery's attire and behavior were considered both ostentatious and loud by those within her community. As she adopts less flamboyant garments, Margery gradually learns to use clothing and be used by it. Placing Margery's array in the larger context of textile and fashion history, I argue that the mystic intentionally deploys clothing as a complicated vocabulary that speaks with her, for her, and against her.

Chapter Five continues this argument by focusing on Margery's white clothing and tears, which she adopts at Christ's request. Potentially heretical, white clothes carried with them a multitude of readings including claims to virginity as well as aligning the wearer with extreme religious orders. Though Margery was neither, those looking at her would encounter only a moment of confusion, incapable of reading Margery's strange attire. This becomes dangerous for the mystic as she is accused of everything from being a liar to a Lollard heretic. In adopting white though, I argue that Margery is in fact creating a type of livery that aligns her with Christ and the Heavenly household. Frequently mentioned in her narrative are conversations in which Christ reinforces Margery's place in Heaven, as a member of the family. Incapable of leaving off the familiar sartorial vocabulary of her upbringing, Margery understood the power that liveried clothing could have. Guilds and important families often employed gifts of textiles and food to indicate their relationship with the wearer. Margery's clothing works as just such a gift—it is granted to her by Christ and in wearing it she secures her place in Heaven. Even more important though are her tears, which she weeps loudly and profusely throughout the text. These, I argue, act as her ultimate adornment and work as a badge which is worn upon her face and body and replenished by Christ and her tear ducts. Thus, while cloth can be torn and worn out, Margery is able to continue producing her necessary tears, a gift which Christ directly grants her throughout the narrative.

Chapter Six serves as both a conclusion and a departure from my previous chapters. While the first five chapters focus upon the form of objects, this final chapter works towards an understanding of how substance can effect/affect users. Examining a cup made out of a king's head from Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, I consider how both the

skill of the craftsman and the way that the bone is manipulated ultimately destroy the owner, Albinus, his wife Rosemund, and his kingdom. Featured in the “Tale of Albinus and Rosemund,” in Book One which discusses the sin of pride, the skull cup becomes an example of the dangers of manipulating a substance so its original form can no longer be identified. Considering the ways that matter and form are aligned in Aristotle’s *Physics*, this work is the first extended essay devoted to the material culture of Gower’s *Confessio*.

While I have worked to open a multitude of new questions about these texts, there are, of course, many uncharted threads that will make themselves apparent in these object studies. Though unintentional, all of my chapters deal heavily with women’s material experiences. Pride is a common theme that is frequently used to combat the power of the object. And the Lollards rise occasionally in my narrative to help me articulate one type of opposition to the use of material religious goods in the period. Always the bridesmaid and never the bride, these medieval dissidents never quite get the chapter they deserve. These questions are three of many lingering strands in the ever-growing network of attachments that burst forth from each object and text. What unifies each of these seemingly disparate narratives though, is a persistent nervousness about the agency possessed by objects. Throughout the subsequent chapters I will not only seek to expose this anxiety, but also celebrate the diverse experiences of the material world represented in late medieval English writing

Chapter 2

READ WITH YOUR HANDS AND NOT WITH YOUR EYES: MEDIEVAL TOUCH, THE *PHILOBIBLION*, AND BOOKS OF HOURS

If a history could be written of touch, what would it embrace?...If such history could be written, why hasn't it? Touch lies at the heart of our experience of ourselves...Indeed, in many historical accounts the past is so disembodied that it appears little more than shadow play, a procession of ghosts who surely never felt the pinch of a shoe nor the cut of a sword. The omission of tactile experience is noticeable not only in the field of history, but across the humanities and social sciences. It seems that we have so often been warned not to touch that we are reluctant to probe the tactile world even with our minds.¹

-- Constance Classen

In his treatise on book collecting, *Philobiblon*, the fourteenth century Bishop of Durham, Richard de Bury, details some of the many ways readers can come in contact with manuscripts. Ever aware of the object's relationship to its user, de Bury notes that both people and books will "suffer the decay of mortality." The Bishop advocates for the continual rebirth of books:

because all the appliances of mortal men with the lapse of time suffer decay of mortality, it is needful to replace the volumes that are worn out with age by fresh successors...the Preacher says: *Of making many books there is no end*. For as the bodies of books, seeing that they are formed of a combination of contrary elements, undergo a continual dissolution of their structure, so by the forethought of the clergy a remedy should be found, by means of which the sacred book paying the debt of nature may obtain a natural heir and may raise up like seed to its dead brother.²

¹ Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), xi.

² Richard de Bury, *Philobiblon*, trans. E.C. Thomas, ed. Michael Maclagan (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1970), 147.

De Bury, a lover of books, renders the object alive in his description as he seeks to encourage the reproduction and distribution of textual knowledge. What he documents is not simply the words or ideas transmitted through parchment, but the container itself—the handling of the book. In this case, the use of the manuscript, combined with age, has created a need for a new edition. Readers have thumbed the mortal pages, wearing the “contrary elements” that comprise the book: the fleshy parchment and binding; the textiles that could cover the codex; the boards, glues, strings that would hold it together; and the inks and gold that would mark the pages. The manuscript is a location in which animal, mineral, and vegetable are joined and for individuals like de Bury, a place where the best elements of the world can be brought together; where human thought and sensual experiences, as well as the past and the future, are combined with pieces of nature.

As de Bury’s words suggest, the messages of creation are inherently bound to the “appliances of mortal men”—those things (in this case manuscripts) that humans have produced from the disparate materials of the world and manufactured to engender a greater understanding of God. Though they are the product of human labor, books are also containers for messages, and as Ryan Perry points out, “The physicality of books is usually displaced by ideological language—the book is *of* something which has no relationship to the book’s materiality...’of philosophy,’ ‘of Christ’s passion,’ ‘of history.’”³ Made from matter, bought, sold, loved, and discarded, many readers intend to look through the pages and binding to the ideas contained within. Lollard writers railed against “puple...erring in ymagis” because pictures trick users into believing that what

³Ryan Perry, “Objectification, Identity and the Late Medieval Codex,” in *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and Its Meanings*, ed. Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 318.

they see is the “lickenese of þingis in heuene”; the pictures and objects themselves will distract from the spiritual message contained within.⁴

But as manuscript users (both past and present) know, the container itself is a potent consumable, a lively object that is re-circulated amongst different users and communities. Scholarly treatises and lay books pass through innumerable hands as they make their way around the world. The resultant blending of “contrary elements” means that manuscripts are, for scholars and the laity alike, one of the most powerful symbols of the need to balance the world and the divine.

The question that lingers in de Bury’s treatise, and indeed for many book lovers, is not about the content of texts but tactile contact with them. Why is touching a manuscript an important and even dangerous experience? As this project demonstrates, medieval encounters with the object world were filled with contradictions, and none as apparent as the conflict between the pleasure of handling a manuscript and the fear of being lured in by the beauty of the object. The act of touching books reinforces the boundaries between the body and the soul. Elizabeth Robertson, in a discussion of the history of “feeling” explains that “the word seems to express the negotiation between inner and outer that occurs when someone touches something—an event that is *both* an activity of the senses and the mind or, more properly in a medieval context, the soul.”⁵ Feeling the parchment page with the skin of the hand is tactile evidence of the separation between the subject’s body and the manufactured object that is being handled.

⁴ Anne Hudson, *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 83.

⁵ Elizabeth Robertson, “*Noli Me Tangere*: The Enigma of Touch in Middle Ages Religious Literature and Art for and About Women,” in *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*, ed. Katie L. Walter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 32.

Simultaneously, such contact evokes a sensual and even spiritual response. For Katie Walter, skin “defines a border touching—the closest you can get to someone or something else—while remaining separate, individuated. Skin allows touches between the human, the divine and the animal, the dead and the living—makes them contiguous—without necessarily ending or changing one or the other.”⁶ Skin on skin contact, whether with loved ones or dead animals, evokes some kind of subjective response. At the same time, as de Bury’s withered books evidence, contact with the parchment will always produce change, no matter how small. Both the manuscript page and the human-skin surface are literally and metaphorically permeable. Skin is “that surface through which sin can enter; it is also a surface that holds the self in and protects its integrity from penetration by sin.”⁷

This chapter is about how one group, late medieval mercantile women, understood their haptic encounters with manuscripts, and the permeability of flesh and the soul. As I will show, late medieval prayer books, called books of hours (or primers as the English knew them), not only encourage the user to touch the pages, they also hope to train readers in how to touch books properly so that they might aid their souls in this world and the next. Touching trained the body and even prepared the spiritual form for the potentially painful haptic encounters of purgatory. Often opening with an image of John on the island of Patmos, readers witness the apostle as he records in his book the words that typically accompany the illumination, “In principio erat verbum”—in the

⁶ Katie L. Walter, “Introduction,” in *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*, ed. Katie L. Walter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

⁷ Robertson, “*Noli Me Tangere*,” 36.

beginning is the word.⁸ John is seated inscribing the book with one hand while touching the text with his other (fig. 1).



Fig. 1, St. John the Evangelist, University of Delaware Morris Library MS095.031, early sixteenth century

This image of textual production and touching frames the network of meanings and uses in books of hours generally. John scratches truth—the words spoken at the creation of the universe—into the already bound skin of an animal, reminding users that all Christians are ultimately people of a book. The apostle’s handing of the manuscript mirrors the work of the scribe and the reader who can touch and write upon these pages as John wrote upon his. Handling the manuscript page becomes one part of a larger performance of faith and comprehension. As the Apostle John’s example suggests, books of hours encouraged tactile readings of manuscripts and the world; Caroline Walker Bynum

⁸ University of Delaware Morris Library, MS095.031 (Book of Hours: Use of Noyon).

observes “the piety of the later period might be characterized as a turn to, rather than away from, the object.”⁹ Where there are objects there is the desire for bodily contact, making a study of touch crucial to the study of manuscript use and reception.

For modern scholars though, the history of touch has been difficult to define. A sense that is rarely documented, records of our ancestors’ haptic encounters are often either ignored or hidden within conversations about the other senses, primarily sight. Touch resists quantification and linguistic definitions.¹⁰ Carla Mazzio notes, “when humans touch there is a reciprocity of sensation at once physical and psychological that cannot be fully grasped.”¹¹ We touch and in turn are touched by objects, but what this moment of contact means is far more difficult to define. As Constance Classen’s words in the epigram to this chapter imply, there is a reticence to discuss touch in scholarly circles. Yet, at least in manuscript research, the study of touch is not quite so subjectively bleak. As Elizabeth Harvey explains in her work on early modern haptic encounters, “the sense of touch perhaps most frequently evokes the erotic or seductive... Yet tactility is also associated with authoritative scientific, medical, and even religious knowledge, and it often expresses in synecdochic form creative powers (the artist’s ‘touch’). Tactile contact is central to religious representation.”¹² The story of doubting Thomas is perhaps the

⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 19.

¹⁰Carla Mazzio, “The Senses Divided: Organs, Objects, and Media in Early Modern England,” in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Cultural Reader*, ed. David Howes (New York: Berg, 2005), 92.

¹¹ Mazzio, “The Senses Divided,” 86.

¹² Elizabeth D. Harvey, “Introduction: The ‘Sense of All Senses,’” in *Sensible Flesh*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1.

most frequently cited illustration of this impulse to seek confirmation through physical contact. As Robertson observes, medieval manuscript images often featured Thomas's hand probing Christ's wound, a potent and disarming reminder of the power of flesh on flesh contact.¹³ This is further reinforced through traditions like the king's touch which was thought to heal scrofula and other ailments.¹⁴ Divine contact materialized through relics, images, and other religious goods facilitated healing. As these examples demonstrate the history of contact between skin and object can, on some level, be recovered.

It is my contention that, more than just functioning as codological or art historical objects, books of hours can provide us with a detailed understanding of how late medieval individuals experienced their tactile world and how that experience informed their understanding of the afterlife and the divine. Through the work of scholars like Harvey, Michael Camille, and Mary Carruthers, it is possible to consider how books generally encouraged and participated in discourses about touching. Camille, in his work on the medieval book, has embraced sensual theories observing that everything from the text, to the margins, to the parchment itself is part of the manuscript experience.¹⁵ As he explains in an article on de Bury, "books as objects could become sites of subjectivity,

¹³Robertson, "*Noli Me Tangere*," 43.

¹⁴ Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. J.E. Anderson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

¹⁵ For example, see Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).

self-embodiment, and even perversion in fourteenth-century culture.”¹⁶ Owner portraits, inscriptions, and marginalia are but a few examples of how the handling of books in the late Middle Ages impressed upon the parchment the human subject. Carruthers, in her work on memory and medieval concepts of beauty, reminds us not only that late medieval manuscript users were people of the book, but also individuals who sought to understand Christ’s physical torment through their own haptic textual interaction.¹⁷

Outside of medieval scholarship, the work of sensual scholars in the field of sociology, like Classen, David Howes, and Mark Smith, have rightly established that all the senses are historically determined. As Howes explains, “The ‘senses,’ in fact, are not just one more potential field of study, alongside, say, gender, colonialism or material culture. The senses are the media through which we experience and make sense of gender, colonialism and material culture.”¹⁸ Late medieval or modern, we as readers are fundamentally bound to our bodies, and as a result to the ways in which our senses gather information about our environment. According to Smith, “Touching for early Christians... was linked to both pain and pleasure, less as a binary and more as a whole, a tactile continuum in which pain and pleasure were joined.”¹⁹ Books of hours document this spectrum of haptic encounters and further work to teach users how to perform more

¹⁶ Michael Camille, “The Book as Flesh and Fetish in Richard de Bury’s *Philobiblon*,” in *The Book and the Body*, ed. Dolores Warwick Frese and Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 38.

¹⁷ Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

¹⁸ David Howes, “Introduction: Empires of the Senses,” in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 4.

¹⁹ Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 97.

spiritually advantageous programs of touching. From traditional images of the Annunciation, which illustrate for users how to pray, to the smudges and marginalia which record more personal tactile and textual moments, books of hours served as multivalent touch containers.

My first section will consider Richard de Bury's *Philobiblon* and how one fourteenth century writer understood and recorded manuscript encounters. Though de Bury's library is not typical (he was an exceptional bibliophile with a collection of around 1,500 volumes) he does possess many of the habits of scholarly book users of the late Middle Ages. As a result, the *Philobiblon*, through discussions of good and bad reading practices, establishes how manuscript users might handle their books.²⁰ The Bishop's text also highlights the tension between the physical and the spiritual that individuals like Classen and Harvey have pointed out. While recording in detail the way that clerics and scribes mark the pages of manuscripts, de Bury is reticent to caress the pages himself and rarely documents the pleasures of touch. Instead, he focuses much of his work on recognizing abusive touching, which he identifies as the marking of pages with pens, dirty fingers, and other habits which in some ways alter the "lily" parchment of the document.²¹ But while de Bury has a divided relationship with the manuscript, loving the book as a vessel for knowledge while reticent to adore the manuscript itself, many lay book users were not quite as nervous about the materiality of their precious object. In my second section I will explore the various visual and textual programs that

²⁰ Michael Maclagan, "Introduction: Biographical," in *Philobiblon*, trans. E.C. Thomas, ed. Michael Maclagan (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1970), xxvi, n. 1. See also Nicholas A. Basbanes, *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 83-87.

²¹ de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 161.

encourage a philosophy and theology of touch in lay primer users. Looking at the illuminated images as well as the smudges and markings that stain the parchment pages, I will illustrate how these prayer books were spiritual manuals that helped users negotiate worldly and divine touch. In my final section I will step away from the parchment to focus on the spiritual body. Sections in books of hours, like the Office of the Dead, demonstrate how other-worldly touching might be mediated through the primer's prayers and images. Purgatory was a very real fear for many Northern Europeans during the period, and spiritual suffering was often imagined through descriptions of the body. Prayer books were tools to limit the suffering of the user and those he or she prayed for. The ultimate result is a material good that was designed to help individuals use, understand, and regulate touch in their daily lives and afterlife.

Makers and Unmakers: Richard de Bury and the *Philobiblon*

Richard de Bury's adoration of the book derives, in part, from its status as an object that links readers with the truths that mold human thoughts about God. Understanding that the primary function of books is to assist in creating phantasms, or mnemonic images which can then be interpreted by the intellect, de Bury notes that "all the glory of the world would be buried in oblivion, unless God had provided mortals with the remedy of books."²² Unrecorded, neither nature nor human memories are useful in accessing the divine. Drawing upon the works of scholastics like St. Thomas Aquinas, de Bury's interpretation of the textual object derives, at least in part, from larger conversations about materiality and the senses. The things of the world are, according to

²² de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 17.

Aquinas, perceived through both our physical senses and through a common sense. In his commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima* Aquinas explains that:

it is clear that flesh is not the ultimate organ for the sense of touch. For since discrimination occurs through the sense of touch, it would then be necessary for the discrimination between a tangible object and other sense objects to occur in the contact between flesh and the tangible object. But this discrimination is attributed to touch not in virtue of touch's being a proper sense, but in virtue of its being the basis of all the senses and its standing closer to the fundamental source of all the senses, which is the common sense.²³

Touch is not isolated to the skin but is common to "five wits" (five senses) and is the closest to the common sense or the primary source of all sensual experiences. The aim of this passage is to establish that all of the senses are in some way involved in touching.

Thus, while touch was considered the most bodily sense, and so the one most likely to lead men and women to error, all forms of sense perception included some type of tactile contact between the sensing organ and the perceived object. As Carruthers reminds us in her book of medieval aesthetics, taste, smell, and sight all have tactile components.

Touch is "common to all the other senses in that in each of the other senses there is contact between the sensed data and the sensing organ."²⁴ Vision in the period, as I shall discuss at greater length in my second chapter, was the contact between the rays emitted from an object and the human eye. Smells and tastes touched the nose and tongue. Books participated in this kaleidoscope of the senses. Readers can interpret creation and its important characteristics, preserved within the divine codex. Through the formation of opinions which derive, in part, from the experience of that object, the rational intellect forms responses so that God might be perceived and man can be saved. Returning to de

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *A Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. Robert Pasnau (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 311.

²⁴ Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 75.

Bury's argument, without the material presence of books we would not remember the history of our species or moments of failure through which we grow. Neither "king nor pope" says the Bishop, can "find any means of more easily conferring the privilege of perpetuity than by books."²⁵ The codex is the complete package. Through the careful study of books we can meet the dead, predict the future, and understand the laws of man and God.²⁶ Without the book, de Bury and his readers would not be able to touch their shared past or preserve themselves for future generations.

While the book becomes an empowered and personal object to men like de Bury, it is not simply "archive fetishism" or the mystification of the thing itself.²⁷ What Catherine Brown points out, and what I would like to emphasize in this project, is that to love a book, or indeed most objects, through the lens of a medieval user is not simply to fetishize it in Marxist or Freudian terms.²⁸ Instead, we must learn to perceive things differently. "Medieval readers don't read the way we do" explains Brown. Rather than impose modern reading practices upon medieval readers we might "learn to read from them, in that in-between state where polarities (subject/object, self/Other, now/then) are confused, where simultaneous, apparently conflicting truths can be equally in effect, where things really begin to live."²⁹ The Christian text, and books of hours in particular,

²⁵ de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 19.

²⁶ de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 17.

²⁷ I take this term from Catherine Brown's reading of Dominick La Capra in her article "In the Middle," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 557.

²⁸ For a discussion of medieval fetish see, William Pietz, "The Problem of Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (Spring 1987): 23-45.

²⁹ Brown, "In the Middle," 559.

mesh temporal and physical moments. Following the cyclical religious calendar, Christ is born each year, grows older, is crucified, and is resurrected. In books, images of Christ's body are not simply painted; the body is depicted as segmented and pierced, tortured and buried, born as flesh and as bread. Pain, pleasure, and aesthetic satisfaction are but the most rudimentary emotions that such texts produce in readers. Now and then is all one moment, encapsulated in a single manmade object.

The Bishop's opening chapter recognizes the power of books to contain these seemingly disparate temporalities and material worlds, and even seeks to render them as alive. He explains that, "In books I find the dead as if they were alive; in books I foresee things to come."³⁰ This "race of books" in de Bury's text is given voice through its material presence in the hands of those who abuse it.³¹ For example, we read of "The Complaint of Books against the Clergy" and "Books against Possessioners."³² Through elevated and tragic descriptions, books lament the abuses they experience at the hands of their users, awarding the object both agency and a clear and articulate voice. This impulse to note the liveliness of material goods is not unique to de Bury. Bynum, in her groundbreaking book on *Christian Materiality*, notes that

It is not accident that the late Middle Ages saw alongside virulent hostility to images not only an increasing awareness of the power of materiality but also a self-conscious understanding in iconography and craftsmanship that the stuff of which objects are made is part of their impact. This understanding involves more than a sense that matter is powerful, hence dangerous. It involves a sense that matter is per se living—a sense that much late medieval philosophical analysis was directed to exploring, controlling, even combating."³³

³⁰ de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 17.

³¹ de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 35.

³² de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 53 and 79.

³³ Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 121.

This combination of human labor and the vibrant thing which is created is described in detail by de Bury's books. "We suffer from various diseases," complain the books, "enduring pains in our backs and sides; we lie with our limbs unstrung like palsy...The smoke and dust by which we are continuously plagued have dulled the keenness of our visual rays, and are now infecting our bleared eyes with ophthalmia."³⁴ The spines have been broken, the pages fallen out, and the images and text damaged through use and careless storage. The books even recall their animal origins, observing that "We fall prey to the cruel shambles, where we see sheep and cattle slaughtered not without pious tears, and where we die a thousand times from such terrors as might frighten even the brave."³⁵ De Bury acknowledges the skins that are stretched, scraped, and cut to make the parchment page, only to be scraped again when the book is disassembled and recycled for reuse.³⁶ The stationers' quarters, typically around a town's cathedral, has become a shambles. As Carruthers reminds us, there is a "vigorous, if not actually violent, activity involved in making a mark upon such a physical surface as an animal's skin. You must break it, rough it up, 'wound' it in some way with a sharply pointed instrument. Erasure involved roughing the physical surface up even more."³⁷ In describing their pains,

³⁴de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 45.

³⁵ de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 47. For a discussion of parchment and early paper production see R.J. Lyall, "Materials: The Paper Revolution," in *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375-1475*, ed. Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 11-29.

³⁶ Because parchment was costly, pages could have the ink removed through scraping. This was a common practice and pages might be reused multiple times.

³⁷ Mary Carruthers, "Reading With Attitude, Remembering the Book," in *The Book and the Body*, ed. Dolores Warwick Frese and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 4.

illnesses, and fears of death, the books indicate an awareness of the physical properties that make up their construction. Books are born from the animals that died to facilitate their production. Holes, stitching and other flaws are common in all grades of manuscripts and can distract a reader from the writing.³⁸ The more a manuscript is used, “the more visible they become since handling the edges of the folios makes the veins, scars, scratches and holes in those areas of the parchment more pronounced.”³⁹ The page bleats its animal past to all users.

The result is that, different from early linen-paper printing or even modern books produced from tree-pulp paper, the disparate elements of medieval manuscripts facilitate a range of sensations.⁴⁰ Camille, in an article on the *Philobiblon*, articulates the difference by observing,

when I open a medieval manuscript, and this is different from opening a printed book, I am conscious not only of the manu-script, the bodily handling of the materials in production, writing, illuminations, but also how in its subsequent reception, the parchment has been penetrated; how it has acquired grease-stains, thumb-marks, erasures, drops of sweat; suffered places where images have been kissed away by devout lips or holes from various eating animals...Every book is a relic of countless bodily ejaculations.⁴¹

These leftovers of the human haptic network link the user to the object in an intensely personal way. The materials and labor represented by the pigments, pages, text, and even sometimes the binding, link past and future users of the book as each set of hands, lips,

³⁸ Sarah Kay, “Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 35.

³⁹ Kay, “Original Skin,” 35.

⁴⁰ For more on this see Joshua Calhoun’s article “The World Made Flax: Cheap Bibles, Textual Corruption, and the Poetics of Paper,” *PMLA* 126, no. 2 (March 2011): 327-44.

⁴¹ Camille, “The Book as Flesh,” 41-2.

and eyes add to the record of sensual contact. These tactile leftovers are not distractions but part of the manuscript's narrative and history, just as much as the theological or philosophical tracts they might record. They encourage the full range of sensory experience.

Material goods, and manuscripts in particular, were understood by many as explicitly sensual and affective devices that celebrated the elements of creation. Imagining books as the "Paradise of the world," de Bury describes "delightful libraries, more aromatic than stores of spicery" and the way that "truth...shines forth in books desires to manifest itself to every impressionable sense."⁴² Unsurprisingly, vision is celebrated as "the written truth of books, not transient but permanent, plainly offers itself to be observed, and by means of the pervious spherules of the eyes...enters the chamber of the intellect, taking its place in the couch of memory, where it engenders the eternal truth of the mind."⁴³ The material rays expelled by the book enter the eye through small permeable spheres and pass through the chambers of the brain to facilitate the pursuit of truth. The Bishop even discusses eating the books.⁴⁴ The purpose of this is not simply to create a metaphor of sensual contact between user and book, but to show how readers make the book a part of themselves. Brown, reading St. Augustine through Petrarch, explains this issue: "he says, make those texts familiar to you, and he means 'familiar' literally—make them as your family, your own flesh and blood. To make a text familiar

⁴² de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 85 and 19.

⁴³ de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 21.

⁴⁴ de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 41.

is to have it in your veins, to belong to and with it, to make it yours and visa versa.”⁴⁵ We must consume the text and accept contact, and in turn allow it to touch us. Tactility is not simply a metaphor—it is a necessary part of a need to make text and reader one.

What is implied in the Bishop’s love of books, though, is for him an uncomfortable adoration of the physical text. Similar to those who argue against images or the use of the senses in coming to know the divine, de Bury seems reticent to enjoy his books, for fear that his pleasure is too bodily. De Bury clearly recognizes the manuscript as a special category of object, but he is unwilling to acknowledge his pleasure when handling a book. Never does the Bishop describe caressing the pages or the implicit joy he feels when encountering a codex. Camille also notes the missing narrative of personal touch from de Bury’s treatise: “This avoidance of interaction with books throughout the treatise we might see as a psychic ‘blind-spot,’ a scotomization of any unwelcome perception of the object of desire...There are no actual books in this treatise on the love of books, only the echo of voices.”⁴⁶ This blind-spot is very real in a world where, for most, all of the senses actively participate to make meaning. “[I]t is fair to say,” according to Francesca Bacci, “that tactile apprehension of an object adds an epistemological dimension that informs and to some extent modifies the visually-acquired percept.”⁴⁷ Touching a thing augments and alters the vision of it; but while de Bury celebrates the voices of his ancient and modern authors he works to keep the actual container of their

⁴⁵ Brown, “In the Middle,” 559.

⁴⁶ Camille, “The Book as Flesh,” 44. To “scotomize” a perception is to delete it from memory.

⁴⁷ Francesca Bacci, “Sculpture and Touch,” in *Art and the Senses*, ed. Francesca Bacci and David Melchaer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 134.

words silent. Perhaps the trouble is that, as artist Rosalyn Driscoll puts it, “touching provides more sensory feedback; it brings us back to our selves, reminding us that we are bodies exploring other bodies and selves exploring other selves.”⁴⁸ In touching things we are also, necessarily, touching other people. While this is desirable for many, and I would argue an essential function of prayer books generally, for de Bury a reminder of our sensual and fleshy trappings is clearly unwanted. If “Touch is reciprocal, a two-way exchange,” then we can all too easily be affected by what we lay our hands upon, for that contact will touch us.⁴⁹ When being touched, the body cannot be escaped, which makes book users like de Bury question the status of his soul in the book/body haptic transaction.

De Bury’s most memorable complaint emphasizes his wish to keep the actual codex separate from his love of the book. Outlining not only his adoration of the manuscript but also his wishes that he be remembered by scholars after he dies, the Bishop describes the abuse of books by lazy and “headstrong” youths:

when the winter’s frost is sharp, his nose running from the nipping cold drips down, nor does he think of wiping it with his pocket-handkerchief until he has bedewed the book before him with ugly moisture...He does not fear to eat fruit or cheese over an open book, or carelessly to carry a cup to and from his mouth; and because he has no wallet at hand he drops into books the fragments that are left...Aye, and then hastily folding his arms he leans forward on the book, and by a brief spell of study invites a prolonged nap; and then, by way of mending the wrinkles, he folds back the margin of the leaves to the no small injury of the book...Then he will use his wet and perspiring hands to turn over the volumes; then he will thump the white vellum with gloves covered with all kinds of dust, and with his finger clad in long-used leather will hunt line by line through the page; then at the sting of a biting flea the sacred book is flung aside, and is hardly

⁴⁸ Rosalyn Driscoll, “Aesthetic Touch,” in *Art and the Senses*, ed. Francesca Bacci and David Melchae (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 109.

⁴⁹ Driscoll, “Aesthetic Touch,” 108.

shut for another month, until it is so full of the dust that has found its way within, that it resists the effort to close it.⁵⁰

The practices that de Bury laments here are those behaviors which emphasize the materiality of the codex itself. The physical remnants of use remain on the pages, marking for all future readers that their manuscript has a history of its own. Books become vessels of human fluids which can damage the pages. They contain the refuse of daily life and are even slumbered upon like a lazy lover which ultimately damages the “white vellum.” This book is then cast away by the distracted scholar, to have its back damaged. This is, of course, usual practice for a period that created its texts with marginalia in mind. Libraries were usually, as Camille explains, “a site of performance, where people left their traces in their books without fear of censure...Contemporaries would have found the Bishop’s tastes strange, not so much in his interaction with his volumes, but in his distance from them and in his desire to keep them closed.”⁵¹ Contact with the book reminds de Bury that the voices of these dead men of learning whom he finds “as if they were alive,” are in fact potentially flawed mortals.⁵² What de Bury seems to enjoy most is the pristine manuscript, unmarked by human contact.

De Bury’s distrust of the materiality of the manuscript also extends to lay users and books with images, which we must assume to include books of hours. The books complain that:

in us the natural use is changed to that which is against nature, while we who are the light of the faithful souls everywhere fall prey to painters knowing nought of letters, and are entrusted to goldsmiths to become, as though we were not sacred

⁵⁰ de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 157-9.

⁵¹ Camille, “The Book as Flesh,” 40.

⁵² de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 17.

vessels of wisdom, repositories of gold-leaf. We fall undeservedly into the power of laymen, which is more bitter to us than any death, since they have sold our people for nought, and our enemies themselves are our judge.

The books, and de Bury by relation, distrust the intentions and the abilities of the laymen who ultimately come to be an important part of the book market. Those semi- or illiterate laymen and laywomen want to articulate their faith, not just through written words, but with grand images and decorative motifs. Most prayer books, for example, have a few images, even if they are rough with little gold leaf. The distrust of the painted picture, and implicitly the layperson who needs the image to come to God, stems from an old debate about the use of images in teaching the unlearned. Images (both on parchment and in stone) become a “bok of errour to þe puple” according to Lollard critics.⁵³ I will take up this issue at some length in Chapter Two. For de Bury though, the desire for textual decor and accessible texts results in handing manuscripts over to the “enemy.” Unequipped to judge the value of a book, the layperson is accused of representing a fate worse than death, as they are unable to value the real purpose of the manuscript—those ancient voices whose wisdom takes years of dedicated faith and learning to decode. It is worth noting that a similar complaint is leveled against women, “that biped beast whose cohabitation with the clergy was forbidden of old.” They see “us alone of all the furniture in the house to be unnecessary,” and would want the income to be spent on more attractive and immediately useful objects like “twice-dyed purple” and robes.⁵⁴ And while we can recognize the Bishop’s reticence to celebrate women as part of a clerical

⁵³ Anne Hudson, *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 27. While de Bury predates these Lollard commentaries, conversations about the value and use of images were well established by his lifetime.

⁵⁴ de Bury, *Philobiblon*, 43.

tradition, they were nevertheless one of the most frequent users of ornate prayer books. In my next section I will consider how books of hours were used to teach these mothers and daughters their prayers and how to touch the divine.

Touching the World and Touching the Divine

If Richard de Bury believed that books' material status attracted too much attention to the container, only to distract from the meaning, users of books of hours understood the handling and caressing of books as an easier way to conceptualize the spiritual. The late Middle Ages saw an increased interest in both the Virgin Mary, to whom the bulk of the prayers in a primer were devoted, and to the humanity of Christ. As we can see through images of the holy family that typically adorn books of hours, late medieval Christians sought to understand the divine, in part, through a personal and affective experience with the cultural and even physical memory of Christ, Mary, and the saints. Book users sought to transcend time to understand the human elements of the divine, most especially Christ's suffering upon the Cross.

Books of hours represent one of the ways that this material understanding of the divine was articulated. Cathedrals, jeweled reliquaries, and sumptuous vestments were but a few of the ways that faith was channeled and celebrated in the period. Books of hours were part of this move to employ material goods to encourage faith. Developing from psalters, antiphonaries, and breviaries, the origin of primers is well documented. The gradual combination and blending of these different texts coincided with the rise of more independent lay devotional practices. Often called the "late medieval best-seller," primers were primarily produced so that laypeople, often women, might perform

shortened versions of the monastic offices of the day (*Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline*).⁵⁵ Texts included the Offices of the Virgin, psalms, selections from the gospels, and other prayers to local saints. While the bulk of the text would be in Latin, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw an increased number of vernacular rubrics for local saints and indulgences.

No static document, books of hours could be produced to meet the needs of each buyer. As de Bury implies in his text, the production of a single manuscript required the hands of many different skilled artisans. Manuscripts might be commissioned from a local stationer who would then disseminate the labor to parchmenters, illuminators, scribes, and the other individuals who worked together to create a text. While books could be as ornate and decorative as the patron desired, many books of hours were far more modest. One of the manuscripts that I will discuss in this section, MS095.031 housed at the University of Delaware, hereafter referred to as the Cinot Hours, represents an example of these less ornamental books. Buyers could, for example, acquire texts “off the peg” or ready made. Even these pre-made manuscripts might be augmented. For example, the John Browne Hours, which I will also discuss in this chapter is, according to Eamon Duffy a pre-made text, customized with details like a special binding and an owner portrait.⁵⁶ Different types of gold and illumination (or no illumination) could be added or subtracted to fit a middle class price point. Books of hours, though expensive, gradually became more accessible to a wider range of owners, including merchants and

⁵⁵ L.M.J. Delaisse, “The Importance of Books of Hours for the History of the Medieval Book,” in *Gatherings in Honor of Dorothy E. Miner*, ed. Ursula E. McCracken, Lilian M. C. Randall, and Richard H. Randall, Jr. (Baltimore: The Walters Art Gallery, 1974), 203.

⁵⁶ Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 21.

tradespeople. For example, there is a record of a bankrupted grocer in the 1390s who owned a book of hours worth 16d. To place this in perspective, a builder's salary, that of a skilled artisan, would be about 4d a day, indicating that such objects were not owned exclusively by the aristocracy.⁵⁷

How many people (and what types of laymen and women) owned such manuscripts is of course difficult to determine. Duffy documents about 800 manuscript *horae* made for the English market.⁵⁸ The first English *horae*, the de Brailes Hours, was produced in Oxford for a woman probably named Susanna.⁵⁹ And while these manuscripts are never exclusively women's texts, the de Brailes Hours is but the first example in a trend of female owned books. Women like Susanna acquired primers for their personal use and for members of their family. For example, the fifteenth century mystic Margery Kempe was the likely owner of a prayer book. Documenting one of her more visible miracles, Margery describes how she survived a roof collapse at St. Margaret's church in Lynn. This occurred while she was on her knees, "heldyng down hir hed and hir boke in hir hand, prayng owyr Lord Crist Ihesu for grace and mercy."⁶⁰ Margery's behavior demonstrates the regularity of this kind of activity. Carrying a prayer book to church and using it to aid both public and private devotion was, by Margery's

⁵⁷ Laurel Amtower, *Engaging Words: The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 30.

⁵⁸ Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, 3.

⁵⁹ Claire Donovan, *The de Brailes Hours: Shaping the Book of Hours in Thirteenth-Century Oxford* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 26.

⁶⁰ Sanford B Meech and Hope Emily Allen, eds, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, EETS 212 (1940; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 9.21. Note includes chapter and page number.

time, normal and continued to be a common practice throughout the period. While this “materialization of prayer” would come to be denounced by Protestants as an example of Catholic idolatry, it nevertheless represented one of the most common ways that a late medieval English person would understand and perform their devotion.⁶¹ Duffy notes that, by the sixteenth century, worshipers in urban congregations were just as likely to see a prayer book as beads in the hands of one of its members.⁶² In addition to observing the vast number of book owners during the later Middle Ages, Duffy also documents a fifteenth century Italian visitor who describes the common sight of worshipers reading aloud from prayer books during church services.⁶³ As these anecdotes suggest, significant numbers of people between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did own books, and if they owned just one it was most likely a book of hours.

While it is fair, and even essential, to observe the social and political value of owning a fine manuscript, this truth should not detract from the legitimate spiritual uses and intensely personal value of the texts. Margery’s handling of her book shows her public piety and relative wealth, but it is also a tool which she uses to negotiate her spiritual transition from mother to mystic. While Margery’s manuscript performance is somewhat dramatic, the opening inscription to the Cinot Hours reinforces the popularity of this impulse to handle devotional artifacts to facilitate prayer.

⁶¹ Peter Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible,” in *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies*, ed. Jennifer Anderson and Elizabeth Sauer. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 63, 67.

⁶² Duffy, *Stripping the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 213.

⁶³ Duffy, *Stripping the Altars*, 212.

Opening inscriptions are common in books of hours and the Cinot Hours, in many ways, is conventional. Similar to de Bury's *Philobiblon*, the Cinot book has a voice of its own. This book though does not complain about mistreatment but the potential for crime and its hopes for Jeanne, the user. The passage reads,

Je suis a Jenne fille Jehan Cinot
Vous priant nullement m'embler
En me rendant pairay le lot
Car sans heurez ne puyz Dieu prier.⁶⁴

I belong to Jeanne daughter of John Cinot
I pray you do not steal me
If you return me I will pay praise
For without these hours she cannot say her prayers.

While de Bury's actual books are largely missing from his text, replaced instead by the ghosts of dead authors and closed codices, the Cinot book begs not to be absent from its human. Pleading with the reader, it requests that if stolen it be returned to Jeanne the owner, for without the contents she cannot say her prayers. The book asks for the contact of human hands and hopes that it will be opened and that the different prayers consulted. The book's purpose is only realized if Jeanne holds this codex, and is able to flip through its pages. Thus, on a thick and heavy page is written the manuscript's tactile wish for its owner and its hope for her piety. The study of medieval manuscripts, and books of hours especially, is one that encourages haptic reading practices.

⁶⁴ MS095.031. Many thanks to Jean-Luc Deuffic of Pecia, Deborah B. Steinberger of the University of Delaware, and Karen Lurkhur of Mount St. Mary's University for their help with this translation. Any errors in translation or transcription are, of course, my own.

Literacy Practices and Women in the Later Middle Ages

One detail that made primers attractive as private devotional texts was the size of the manuscript and the ease of finding and accessing particular passages in the text—they were typically smaller than their breviary and psalter cousins. Prayer books were usually hand held and were not only for the spiritual fortification of the user, often the matron of the household, but also for the instruction of children. The word “primer” alludes to this use. Jeanne’s manuscript suggests the intimate relationship between prayer books and women’s literacy in the late Middle Ages. As I have already demonstrated, the word/text and sensual/material are unified experiences of the medieval codex. Reading such an object was both a physical and intellectual experience. Words are liminal by nature, says Tanya Pollard: “although they derive power from their status as abstract symbols, this power becomes associated with their material form, embodied in physical substances such as ink, paper, and the various particles of breath.” The result is the “body’s ... permeability to its linguistic environment.”⁶⁵ Works adhere to the surfaces that they are written upon, and become material as a result. If the combination of word and thing could not compel change, primers would have no function, nor would they be so popular amongst lay worshipers. Lay book users sought devotional texts that would help them understand and control their relationship with their physical and spiritual environments.

Aware of the material and creative power of words, late medieval readers experienced the manuscript as a bodily and intellectual process. The labor of the finger and the eye worked together to follow the scribal text. Reading their books aloud meant

⁶⁵ Tanya Pollard, “Spelling the Body,” in *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England*, ed. Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 171.

“metaphorically chewing over the words and digesting their meaning.”⁶⁶ Who had the skills to access texts in this way is of course far more difficult to know, and indeed the definition of literacy is a contentious issue for scholars of the later Middle Ages.⁶⁷ For example, what does Margery Kempe’s illiteracy mean? Is it simply that she did not know Latin or was she also unable to read the vernacular? Clearly exposed to important mystical and liturgical philosophers like Richard Rolle and Walter Hinton, Margery had memorized large selections of works that had been read to her. She certainly possessed a degree of textual literacy separate from her ability to read independently to herself. A woman using a prayer book in her private chamber would probably be reading or mumbling her prayers aloud. Yet these women would not have known Latin and would probably have had only the most basic ability to recognize the characters in their prayer books. As Mary Erler points out in her essay on devotional literature, scholars have observed that many individuals owned books for their “symbolic value as sacred objects” while “Other [scholarly] work has centered on the various forms which reading took. The distinction offered between phonetic and comprehension literacy, for instance, suggests

⁶⁶ Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, 19.

⁶⁷ M.T. Clanchy, “Learning to Read in the Middle Ages and the Role of Mothers,” in *Studies in the History of Reading*, ed. Greg Brooks and A.K. Pugh (Reading, UK: Centre for the Teaching of Reading, 1984), 34. For other voices in the conversation about literacy in the Middle Ages see Clanchy’s important, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993); Ralph V. Turner, “The Miles Literatus in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century England: How Rare a Phenomenon?” *The American Historical Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1978): 928-45; M.B. Parkes, *Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1991), 275-297; J.B. Trapp, “Literacy, Books and Readers” in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume III 1400-1557*, ed. Lotte Hellinga and J.B. Trapp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 31-43; Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

that Margery [Kempe], and others as well, could decode Latin syllable by syllable and pronounce it, though unable to read and understand silently.”⁶⁸ Being able to speak the words does not imply comprehension, and indeed it seems most likely that books of hours were not Latin teachers but cue books that would provide the necessary mnemonic trigger for familiar passages.⁶⁹ For example, prayers like the “Ave Maria,” were memorized in early childhood and so would not be included in full. Instead, an image or page might simply include an incipit or mnemonic key to the prayer which included only the first few words.⁷⁰ Like images and historiated initials, mnemonic triggers for psalms would be used, and indeed most could be recognized by their incipits.⁷¹ This familiarity would come from, in large part, the repetition of prayers and liturgical passages during church services.⁷² These discontinuous reading habits meant that users could flip through the pages and use visual cues to land their fingers upon the passages they desired.⁷³ These mnemonic triggers are present in most manuscripts, and in prayers books they were part

⁶⁸ Mary C. Erler, “Devotional Literature,” in *The Cambridge History of the Book, Volume III 1400-1557*, ed. Lotte Hellinga and J.B. Trapp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 498.

⁶⁹ For more on this see J.W. Adamson, “The Extent of Literacy in England in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries: Notes and Conjectures,” *Library* 4, no. x (1929): 166-168.

⁷⁰ Roger S. Wieck, *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life* (New York: George Braziller, 1988), 61. See also J.W. Adamson, “The Extent of Literacy in England,” 166.

⁷¹ Charity Scott-Stokes, *Women’s Books of Hours in Medieval England: Selected Texts Translated from Latin, Anglo-Norman French and Middle English with Introduction and Interpretive Essay* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 8.

⁷² Amtower, *Engaging Words*, 36.

⁷³ Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls,” 46, 48.

of a program that encouraged a different type of active reading that was more sensual and affective.

What attracted women to the primer was the focus on the Office of the Virgin and the practicality of the book as a handheld, and so private, devotional device. As Roger Wieck has noted, books of hours emerged as a popular genre “in an era of increasing secularization, to imitate the clergy.”⁷⁴ We find that,

In an age when rood screens blocked all but the most fleeting views of the Mass, when squints were pierced into walls in an effort to offer some glimpse of the Elevation of the Eucharist, when, in other words, the laity’s access to God was very much controlled and limited by others than themselves, Books of Hours bestowed direct, democratic, and potentially uninterrupted access to God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints.⁷⁵

Carrying a manuscript to Mass empowered the family in a very public way. Not only were others privy to the ownership of what could be a spectacular manuscript, users might also have been able to perform their own devotions as the Mass took place. Part of a burgeoning tradition of lay patronage, book owners could ensure that they were using their money to forward their spiritual lives while deriving great aesthetic pleasure from the texts themselves.⁷⁶ Late medieval merchants and artisans sought to supplement their faith and ambiguous social status with these kinds of objects.

The economic and social status of these new female book owners, like Susanna or Margery, is essential to the story of primers. While early users, like the owner of the de

⁷⁴ Wieck, *Time Sanctified*, 27.

⁷⁵ Roger S. Wieck, *Painted Prayers: The Books of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (New York: George Braziller, 1997), 14.

⁷⁶ Roger S. Wieck, “The Book of Hours,” in *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publication, 2001), 478.

Braile Hours, would have been wealthy aristocrats, by the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries books were in the hands of tradeswomen and mothers. Many boys and girls of the later Middle Ages had access to some kind of schooling with books. We know that, for example, the little boy in the song school of Chaucer's *The Prioress's Tale* had his "litel book" or his "prymer."⁷⁷ The martyr-to-be learns his prayers by "rote," or memorizing them without necessarily understanding their content. But while we can imagine that, had he lived, this little boy might have continued his studies and moved on to grammar and rhetoric, few children would have received such formal instruction. Girls, who had no hope to rise in the hierarchy of the Church, had little use of these skills.⁷⁸ Even nuns had almost no Latin education.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, this did not exclude women from forms of vernacular literacy, especially those who were apprenticed into trades or grew up in mercantile households.⁸⁰ Such knowledge was necessary for tradesmen and women who needed to oversee accounts and maintain their businesses. It is even possible that these tradespeople might have been able to write a bit, though writing and literacy were two distinctly different skills in the period. The ability to write was much less common than the ability to read. Caroline M. Barron notes that, "a London apprenticeship did offer to 'middle-class' girls a formal training, the opportunity to acquire a marketable skill, economic independence and a chance to live—and marry—

⁷⁷ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 516-7.

⁷⁸ Caroline M. Barron, "The Education and Training of Girls in Fifteenth-Century London," in *Courts, Counties, and the Capital in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Diana E.S. Dunn (Stroud, U.K.: Sutton, 1996), 141.

⁷⁹ Barron, "The Education and Training of Girls," 140-1.

⁸⁰ Barron, "The Education and Training of Girls," 142.

away from home.”⁸¹ Barron’s work focuses upon the women of London, and so does not represent the standard for the rest of England. Nevertheless, her work is suggestive in that it undermines the assumption that female literacy in the Middle Ages was negligible or non-existent. Further, we know that smaller towns were also “nurseries of literacy,” as Nicholas Orme points out.⁸² In these more urban environments were women who participated in material production and the tactile contact that comes with such labor. These women understood touch and cultivated that knowledge with and through prayer books.

Middle class women were expected to use primers as they guided the souls of their family. And part of their responsibility included teaching their children how to pray. Often gifts, especially given to brides, books of hours suggest a “vast audience with a shared mind-set.”⁸³ Women were expected to instruct their offspring in orthodox Christian values and the programs of books of hours provided both suitably serious material and even the addition of ABC rubrics to teach the young their letters and sounds.⁸⁴ As M. T. Clanchy observes, “Reading had to begin with important affirmations

⁸¹ Barron, “The Education and Training of Girls,” 144.

⁸² Nicholas Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen & Co, 1973), 43-4.

⁸³ Wieck, “The Book of Hours,” 478. It is worth noting that Books of Hours were not alone in their textual duties. Many vernacular treatises were also in circulation that provided instruction in prayer and devotion. See C. Annette Gris , “Women’s Devotional Reading in Late Medieval England and the Gendered Reader,” *Medium  vum* 71, no. 2 (November 2002): 209-25.

⁸⁴ Susan Groag Bell, “Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture,” in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 163. See also Clanchy, “Learning to Read in the Middle Ages,” 34-5.

of belief, and not with ‘The cat sat on the mat’ or some similar vacuous observation.”⁸⁵ That “affirmation” came, in part, from the holding of the book as much as from the vocalizations of the prayer. The touching of the book linked parents to children and present users to their ancestors. It was common for books of hours to be passed down or willed to children or grandchildren.⁸⁶ As Susan Groag Bell explains, “in their choice of books used as teaching aids, mothers could influence the lives of their daughters. In times when a single book was often the only literary possession, such a choice was indeed of paramount importance.”⁸⁷ Purchasing and using a book reinforced a pattern of behavior that was reproduced in future generations. Such activities are most apparent when considering the high numbers of prayer books that include family births and deaths. The inscribed pages become a lasting and tactile record of family history, one that includes both the marking of the text and the subsequent perusal.

Books of hours were a material record that linked female users to a community of worldly and otherworldly readers. Engaging with the disparate elements of the text, the female user becomes an active reader. As C. Annette Gris  has noted, “the late medieval female reader of devotional texts was a *gendered reader*, for she came to understand her gendered subjectivity through her reading—reading that enforces cultural norms of gender (and sex, class, and race) and transforms these gendered norms into a kind of empowerment for the reader.”⁸⁸ The process of physically manipulating the pages with

⁸⁵ Clanchy, “Learning to Read,” 34.

⁸⁶ Bell, “Medieval Women Book Owners,” 155.

⁸⁷ Bell, “Medieval Women Book Owners,” 179.

⁸⁸ Gris , “Women’s Devotional Reading,” 210.

her own fluids and prayerful responses, as well as with her hands and the hands of her family members, allowed the female reader to inscribe personal and textual authority upon the manuscript, just as the manuscript sought to write its own spiritual authority upon her person and soul. We can imagine engaged relationships with texts that foster sensual and affective reading habits that are not simply bound by the pursuit of abstract spiritual growth or well-meaning prayers. Instead, prayer books encourage a network of different textual performances. Rebecca Krug reminds us that, for the female reader, “her imaginative response to the written and visual texts involved a creative, positive action on her part, an attempt to process and evaluate evidence and apply it to her own situation.”⁸⁹ This is not simply a classroom definition of critical reading and thinking, but instead a whole body of imaginative experience in which the text quite literally allows the user to access another world—Heaven.

The tactile and sensual literacy inherent in primers is apparent in their most common prayers. To pray with the *Obsecro Te* or *O intermerata*, two intercessory prayers to Mary which appeared in most *horae*, is not just to pray for the Virgin’s help, but also to ask the Virgin to read the life of the one who prays, to determine if intercession is necessary. The final lines of the *Obsecro Te* read:

Sensus corporis mei regat et protegat, et a peccatis mortalibus me semper liberet,
et defendat usque in finem meum: hanc orationem suppliciter exaudiat, et
suscipiat, et vitam aeternam mihi tribuat. Audi, et intercede pro me dulcissima
virgo Maria mater Dei, et misericordiae, Amen.

⁸⁹ Rebecca Krug, *Reading Families: Women’s Literature Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 75. See also Felicity Riddy, “Women Talking About the Things of God’: A Late Medieval Sub-culture,” *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 107.

Rule and protect the senses of my body, and evermore deliver me from mortal sins, and defend me to my life's end: that he may graciously and meekly hear, and receive this prayer, and give me life everlasting. Hear and make intercession for me most sweet virgin Mary Mother of God, and Mercy. Amen.⁹⁰

Addressed to both the Virgin and Christ, the prayer asks for help to instruct the body's senses and further requests that Mary hear and respond to the prayer. She must listen to and understand the book user's request for help, and hopefully act. Touch is reciprocal, as the reader caresses images and passages to the Virgin in hopes of assistance, only to seek the sensual and spiritual contact of the Virgin in return. On a much simpler level, the prayer is also directed at the book itself. Filled with images of the Virgin, the text reminds the user of its presence in these spiritual transactions. The texture of the parchment as well as the quality of the illuminated initials, even with these typically unillustrated prayers, reinforces for readers like Jeanne that the material text is the medium through which she can acquire intercession—"without these hours [read here the book] she cannot say her prayers."

The illustrative programs become more than rubrics for prayer or meditative images, driven by the rules of sight alone. They become multi-textured worlds, receiving human contact as a way of facilitating spiritual touch. Images of the Virgin at prayer in scenes of the Annunciation are but the most popular and consistent of this program of female tactile piety in prayer books. As Bell points out in her influential essay, the gradual association with the Virgin and books grew with the increasing number of female book owners.⁹¹ While Mary started as a weaver, represented in a world outside the home,

⁹⁰ "Hypertext Book of Hours, Prayers," last modified May 20, 2006. <http://www.medievalist.net/hourstxt/prayers.htm>.

⁹¹ Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners," 173.

by the late Middle Ages she was typically seen reading in her bedroom.⁹² Often positioned with the book in her lap or on a lectern, Mary models for the female user how to perform private devotion. In the Cinot Hours, for example, Mary is supplicated, surrounded by a bed with sumptuous textiles and a green chemise book cover, draped over the wooden desk (fig. 2).



Fig. 2, The Annunciation of the Virgin, University of Delaware Morris Library MS095.031, early sixteenth century

The angel Gabriel, pointing his staff and one finger towards the Virgin, also gestures to the bed, suggesting what the dove only reinforces, that she will soon give birth to the son

⁹² David Linton, "Reading the Virgin Reader," in *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 254.

of God. As David Linton suggests, this scene and the resultant act of reading is eroticized in books of hours.⁹³ The staff, for example, is often read as a phallic symbol, and it is not hard to imagine the dove as emblematic of semen.⁹⁴ This is especially true in the Cinot image in which the doves seems almost to be sliding down the golden rays from Heaven towards the head of the spear, only to be implanted into the Virgin in the moment that immediately follows. The book is also womb height, and there is a green pillow behind her to which the angel points. Linton argues that the color green in these images can represent the upcoming change in the Virgin. Instead of Mary's virginity (usually represented with white) we are encouraged to read her fecundity and the traditional associations of growth that accompany the month of March, when this event would have occurred.⁹⁵ Linton also suggests the different ways that the book might be interpreted as female genitalia, when closed signifying chastity but when open "it should suggest *loss* of chastity or even wantonness, an implication which the tradition overlooks, preferring instead to assign the open book a meaning of piety or devoutness."⁹⁶

Aside from the implied erotics of this experience (I reflect on Bernini's "Ecstasy of St. Teresa" here), are the material artifacts of the Virgin's textual experience. Even more sumptuous in design is the depiction of the Annunciation in the Browne Hours.⁹⁷

Made in Belgium for patrons who resided in the north of England, the Browne Hours is a

⁹³ Linton, "Reading the Virgin Reader," 254.

⁹⁴ Linton, "Reading the Virgin Reader," 268.

⁹⁵ Linton, "Reading the Virgin Reader," 269.

⁹⁶ Linton, "Reading the Virgin Reader," 268.

⁹⁷ Free Library of Philadelphia, Widener 3 (Book of Hours, Sarum Use; The John Browne Hours).

fifteenth century manuscript produced for a rich merchant and his wife. The image reflects the wealth of its patron and Mary is surrounded by colorful, almost textile-like walls of her bedchamber.⁹⁸ Her book, like the one in the Cinot text, is also on a desk with a cloth covering. But in the Browne Hours both the lectern and the cloth are far more decorative and ornate—the podium is decorated with a carving and the cloth has been imprinted with gold. Mary is also posed differently, touching the corner of her prayer book as she prepares to turn the page, just as the angel Gabriel arrives to give her the news. Her hand is on her breast, in a gesture that suggests perhaps, surprise—“Me?” Gabriel, instead of a staff, holds a scroll on which is written “Ave gratia plena dominus tecum,” the incipit for the “Ave Maria.” As readers, we cannot help but strain our eyes wishing that we might occupy the image and see just what Mary might have been perusing in her text. Most likely, it will be a moment that predicts her revelation. Thus, as medieval readers hold their books they encounter the paradox of Mary, in a similar pose praying before a similar text.

The practical result of this reading experience is that Mary and the Heavenly pantheon became far more accessible to the late medieval book user. As L. M. J. Delaisse argues, these texts offer a “more humanized expression of religious feeling.”⁹⁹ In the Browne Annunciation, Mary remains the identification figure, centered and dressed in sumptuous blue garments, counter to the clerical vestments of Gabriel and God hidden in

⁹⁸ For a discussion of textiles integrated into manuscript images see Margaret L. Goehring, “The Representation and Meaning of Luxurious Textiles in Franco-Flemish Manuscript Illumination,” in *Weaving, Veiling, and Dressing: Textiles and Their Metaphors in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Kathryn M. Rudy and Barbara Baert (Turnout, Belgium: Brepols, 2007), 121-55.

⁹⁹ Delaisse, “The Importance of Books of Hours,” 203.

the corner. As Bell has explained, “Women played an important role in teaching, in translating, and in loosening the hierarchical bonds of Church control through their close, and private relationship to religious books.”¹⁰⁰ The power comes from God and the Angel but in this image it is Mary, who lives in a familiar world and sleeps in a familiar bed, to whom readers are focusing their devotion. The Virgin, of course, probably lives better than her readers (she is going to bear the Son of God after all) but her reading accoutrements would have felt familiar to the *horae* users.

Images throughout illustrated primers gesture towards medieval reading habits and the tactile materiality of the book. The opposing verso page in the Browne Hours, for example, depicts Christ in the Garden, kneeling before the image of the chalice just as his apostles sleep upon their books. Again eliding past and future, the apostles rest upon their own gospels whose bindings and clasps can be clearly seen. The process of binding also unifies the grown Christ with the revelation of his birth—when the book is closed these images the Annunciation and the Agony in the Garden will be pressed together, sharing the human fluids that might recently have touched the page. While perhaps not always as colorful as the books the saints slumber upon in the Agony scene, medieval bindings were a significant cost and often very ornate. Prayer books, as Clanchy reminds us and de Bury lamented, “belonged to the domestic sphere of the household, like bed linen, jewelry, and clothing.”¹⁰¹ This is the case because, in addition to being a valuable commodity in the household, the book is also produced from many of the same materials.

¹⁰⁰ Bell, “Medieval Women Book Owners,” 179.

¹⁰¹ Michael Clanchy, “Images of Ladies with Prayer Books: What Do They Signify?,” in *The Church and the Book*, ed. R.N. Swanson (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2004), 109.

Some might contain jewels or even the fragments of saints, turning book covers into reliquaries. The primer's binding, as is clear in the two images of Mary, were often covered in velvet or silk and secured with heavy clasps with decorated miniatures.¹⁰² The Browne Hours contains two such clasps, in which small images are inserted under clear glass which is then laid into what appears to be silver clasps. The smooth glass is both a visual and tactile break from the textured and text laden cover that is decorated with a Latin inscription, images of angels with their trumpets, and various birds and beasts. To further remind owners of their relationship with materials, production, and the divine, the inscription also includes the binder's name, Anthony de Gavere, a Flemish bookbinder.¹⁰³ In prayer books, Alexandra Walsham observes, "their tactile bindings bear comparison with beautifully carved rosaries and prayer nuts in the shape of medallions and pomegranates, which opened to reveal tiny intaglios of the Visitation, Annunciation, or Crucifixion."¹⁰⁴ Feeling the book instills feelings in the user. Certain technological advances also hint at the comforts that made such private devotional texts practicable. The fireplace chimney flue, first around in the fourteenth century, and eyeglasses allowed more people to read indoors for longer.¹⁰⁵ The experience of reading was thus often an intimate one, done in the comfort of the home.

¹⁰² Alexandra Walsham, "Jewels for Gentlewomen: Religious Books and Artefacts in Late Medieval and Early Modern England," in *The Church and the Book*, ed. R.N. Swanson (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2004), 124.

¹⁰³ "Free Library of Philadelphia, Widener 3, Notes," Free Library of Philadelphia, accessed May 27, 2013, <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/medievalman/detail.cfm?itemID=mcaw030000>.

¹⁰⁴ Walsham, "Jewels for Gentlewomen," 126.

¹⁰⁵ Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners," 152.

While the Virgin read to herself (literally and figuratively), the female book owner would read to Mary, Christ, and the saints, extending her literary community. Such reading practices produced not only prayerful but affective responses. Smudges and stains mark moments in which users employed books of hours to aid loved ones or themselves in times of illness or physical danger. For example, the image of Mary and the Adoration of the Magi in the Cinot Hours suggests such contact (fig. 3). The face itself is smudged, as is the paint around it. Some of the missing pigment remains on the recto page opposite. It is evident that, at some point, the face of Mary was wetted and it is very likely that this took place as the user either wept over or kissed the Virgin's face. Further, the image contains the Christ-child. It is possible that the cause for tears or kisses were hopes for a successful childbirth, or perhaps the sadness that results from an unsuccessful one. While such a conclusion is at best conjecture, this was common practice as evidenced by the Browne Hours in which the image of St. Margaret, the patroness of childbirth, bears the same signs of caress. In fact, Margaret's face is totally gone with no evidence of the pigments that previously made up her mouth and eyes. As noted by C. M. Woolgar in his study of the senses, "Kissing objects conveyed an intention of reverence or respect and beyond this at least a desire for the transfer of further powers. There was here a close connection between the spirit of the person kissing and the virtue or power of the objects kissed."¹⁰⁶ This impulse to kiss or touch the relics of saints was one that reinforced the idea that physical contact could alter the human subject. This is why, in the Middle Ages, one might swear on a book. In this

¹⁰⁶ C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 41.

context, it is not an understanding of the book's words that is essential but the belief that such contact, if betrayed, will affect the body and soul of the human subject.



Fig. 3, Adoration of the Magi and detail, University of Delaware Morris Library MS095.031, early sixteenth century

The kind of touch depicted in Annunciation scenes and manifested in the smudged faces of saints and the Virgin is both communal and private. Through contact with the book, the user touches what, for some late medieval book users, was almost a relic of the holy family. Indeed, items like pilgrim badges, silk curtains of cloth to protect miniatures, and small “ready-made” paintings, were attached to the pages of these manuscripts, indicating the potential a prayer book had as a reverential container.¹⁰⁷ Different textures affected and augmented the perusal of the text. Books would accompany owners on pilgrimage and cheap metal badges might be picked up, showing not only that the possessor visited that locale, but also retained some power of their former proximity to the holy shrine.¹⁰⁸ Also available on pilgrimage were small paintings or printed woodcuts to be used for domestic devotional practices. These images might be sewn into the manuscript, as with the Pavement Hours housed at the York Minster Library. In that book, the images are sewn at the top of the page. As a result they cover the text and must subsequently be lifted so that the prayers might be accessed.

¹⁰⁷ Amelia Grounds, “Evolution of a Manuscript: The Pavement Hours,” in *Design and Distribution of Late Medieval Manuscripts in England*, ed. Margaret Connolly and Linne R. Mooney (Suffolk, UK: York Medieval Press, 2008), 129; Hanneke van Asperen, “Praying, Threading, and Adorning: Sewn-In Portraits in a Rosary Prayer Book (London, British Library, Add. MS 14042),” in *Weaving, Veiling, and Dressing: Textiles and their Metaphors in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Kathryn M. Rudy and Barbara Baert (Trunout, Belgium: Brepols, 2007), 82; Christine Sciacca, “Raising the Curtain on the Use of Textiles in Manuscripts,” in *Weaving, Veiling, and Dressing: Textiles and their Metaphors in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Kathryn M. Rudy and Barbara Baert (Trunout, Belgium: Brepols, 2007), 182. Also see Margaret L. Goehring’s article for a discussion of how textiles, and subsequently texture, is incorporated into the images themselves (“The Representation and Meaning of Luxurious Textiles,” 121-55).

¹⁰⁸ Grounds, “Evolution of a Manuscript,” 129.

Incorporating new materials into a manuscript allows the user to take an active role in the production and performance of prayer and reading, which also helps to create an independent and unique program for salvation. Claire Sponsler has observed that, “the blurring of boundaries between religious and lay, public and private was a central feature of the subjectivities constructed by and through consumption in books of hours.”¹⁰⁹ It is worth remembering that books of hours are not sanctioned by the clergy, and while they were developed from liturgical manuscripts, the content and production of primers was purely a secular matter. Thus, the incorporation of additional images after binding allowed the owners to craft a text that responded to their particular needs. Printed and painted images purchased on pilgrimage and from peddlers, not only represented physical journeys but were often included as accessories to indulgenced prayers. For example, a woodcut of the *Arma Christi* is included in the Pavement Hours, with an indulgence rubric which promises 6755 years off from purgatory.¹¹⁰ This indulgence appears in English, and it was common for such prayers to be included in the vernacular. A popular image, the Man of Sorrows, depicted Christ’s wounded body pouring forth blood. Frequently incorporated into images of the Mass of St. Gregory, as it is in the Browne Hours, the image often accompanied indulgenced prayers and might grant tens of thousands of years of pardon to those destined for purgatory.¹¹¹ Katherine Kamerick argues that, “Indulgenced prayer book images bring together two tendencies in late

¹⁰⁹ Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 109.

¹¹⁰ Grounds, “Evolution of a Manuscript,” 132.

¹¹¹ Kathleen Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry in England 1350-1500* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 172.

medieval piety: the emphasis on vision and the amassing of earned rewards in a kind of spiritual treasure chest.”¹¹² The emphasis upon vision is important, but such images also demand a bodily and tactile response. At the most basic level, the user will probably supplicate themselves in prayer, thus coming in contact with the great variety of sensations assigned to that space—if in a church they will be exposed to the cold stone of the floor as well as increased contact with their own textiles. Unadorned rubrics often necessitated a trip to church to pray before an image.¹¹³ In both of these scenarios, the book links devotees to their physical environment and spiritual desires.

The Pain of Reading: Memories of Christ and Purgatory

If the Annunciation implies more erotic sensations, then the dismembered body of Christ is a reminder of the prayer book’s association with physical pain. In the Browne Hours, Christ’s body is broken up into six historiated initials. One shows his head on a cloth, the Veil of Veronica which is also depicted in miniature in one of the clasps. This veil, it is worth remembering, was used to wipe the blood and sweat off Christ’s face. The result of this contact was a cloth imprinted with his image. The other five initials illustrate the wounds Christ received at the crucifixion—each hand and foot and a further image of the wound to his side. Bodily torment is imagined in such images, along with the depiction of Christ before Gregory that I mentioned above. In that image, a small but lifelike version of Christ appears before Gregory, complete with all essential wounds, posed as though he was nailed to the cross. The torments of Christ, like the experiences

¹¹² Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art*, 179.

¹¹³ Richard Marks, *Image and Devotion in Late Medieval England* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 2004), 31.

of Mary, were essential to the affective experience of the Passion in the late Middle Ages. Margery Kempe behaves as if she were present at the crucifixion. The suffering of Christ and many of her tears were wept in memory of his physical torment. Christ's blood is the ink that records the passion and as a result, he writes humanity with and through his sacrifice.¹¹⁴ Bynum explains that, "Christ's parts are not only part and whole, they are also dying and alive, changing and defying change."¹¹⁵ The paradox of Christ's splintered body reminds the reader of pain while at the same time encouraging prayer that seeks relief from suffering. It also reinforces for the medieval user the decay of human flesh while simultaneously recalling the perfection of Christ's and the saints' bodies, that in death do not putrefy. The parchment page, or the inserted image sewn or pasted onto that page, recalls "the torments of mortal life and the blissful eternity to which it would lead."¹¹⁶ The skin of the page becomes a record of the mortality of a human container and the inner truth that it is meant to encompass.¹¹⁷ "As we read," says Kay,

we confront a surface with which we can identify because, as skin, it forms the basis of our own identity. This book-skin-self both protects us from the threat of...death and sexual drives, and exposes us to them—to what degree will vary according to the thematic context, the nature of the page, and our own disposition...For Christian readers the drama of death and redemption, enunciated in the contents of pious texts, is also enfolded in the original skin of the parchment book.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Stephen Kelly and John J. Thompson, "Imagined Histories of the Book: Current Paradigms and Future Directions," in *Imagining the Book*, ed. Stephen Kelly and John J. Thompson (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 3.

¹¹⁵ Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 94.

¹¹⁶ Kay, "Original Skin," 36.

¹¹⁷ Sara Kay's analysis of the life of St. Bartholomew in "Original Skin" takes up this issue in great detail.

¹¹⁸ Kay, "Original Skin," 64. See also Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

Christ, user, and book are joined through the experiences of tortured skin. Even the inserted painted and printed images pierce the flesh, joining different animals or even flax elements together, and suturing the page. This is also true, of course, for the mended holes that populate even the finest manuscripts. In books, like the Cinot Hours, these repairs are not flush with page (as in the Browne Hours) but bulky, adding a further tactile dimension. This repair occurs in a book that documents in detail the painful tearing of human flesh.

Book of hours and their haptic programs thus force users to equate their material experiences with their spiritual desires. These are not books that urge readers to bypass their bodies to experience the divine. Instead, users must recall the soul's place in its body. Owner portraits are the most obvious evidence of this; they inscribe the patron and their subsequent wealth upon an object. As Sponsler says of one image from the Tourotte Hours, "we can discern a vulnerable and anxious self, a subject kneeling precariously in an apocalyptic terrain, exposed to the mutability of time and the body, where domesticity offers no safeguard."¹¹⁹ Owner portraits made the use of the book highly subjective, and ultimately reflexive as the owners are impressed upon the scenes themselves. In the Browne Hours, the image of the married couple before Gregory and Christ, with John's merchant mark in the margin, is a visual reminder of their spiritual responsibilities. Together, through speech scrolls, the young and fashionably-dressed married couple say "Fiat misericordia tua, Domine, super nos, quemadmodum speravimus in te"— "O Lord, let thy mercy lighten upon us, as our trust is in thee," some of the final lines of the prayer *Te Deum*. Agnes and John are incorporated into the divine narrative, as are many similar

¹¹⁹ Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 107.

individuals depicted in owner portraits that force the users to contemplate their bodily mortality and their souls.

The purpose of this incorporation, as I suggested above, is the fear that death looms and with death the painful reality of purgatory. Only saints went directly to Heaven, which was a truth Margery Kempe was keenly aware of when she frequently sought confirmation from Christ of her grace.¹²⁰ If the soul was not suitably prepared for death, as was the case for most, purgatory was a certainty.¹²¹ Some visionaries, like St. Bridget of Sweden, had reported divine access to purgatory and in her *Liber Celestis* we read of her vision. In it, she witnesses the judgment of one soul whose worldly repentance was neither satisfactory nor honest. Observing that he had “no lufe to Gode” the soul accepts that he did “litill gude.”¹²² The domesman then gives the soul a punishment fit for his sins and Bridget observes:

Pan methoght þat þar was a bande bonden abowte his hede so faste and sore þat þe forhede and þe nodell mete togiddir. Þe eyn were hingande on þe chekes; þe eres as þai had bene brent with fire; þe brayne braste oute at þe nesethirles and hys eres; þe tonge hange oute, and þe teth were smetyn togyddir; þe bones in þe armes were broken and wrethyn as a rope; þe skyn was pullid of hys hede and þai were bunden in hys neke; þe breste and þe wombe were to clo[n]gen togiddir, and þe ribbes broken, þat one myght see þe herte and þe bowelles; the shuldurs were broken and hange down to þe sides; and the bonys were drawn oute as it had bene a thred of clothe.¹²³

¹²⁰ Duffy, *Stripping the Altars*, 341.

¹²¹ Weick, “The Book of Hours,” 508.

¹²² Roger Ellis, ed., *The Liber Celestis of St. Bridget of Sweden, Vol. 1*, EETS 291 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 297.

¹²³ Ellis, *The Liber Celestis*, 298.

Bridget's description of spiritual torment, imagined as bodily torture, is similar to the violence committed to de Bury's books. They too had their backs broken and their skin pulled off.

Life for medieval western Europeans was filled with the certitude that they would suffer divine justice for human error in the afterlife. Duffy describes purgatory as "an out-patient department of Hell, rather than the antechamber of Heaven."¹²⁴ This fear of purgatory in prayer books is materialized in the Office of the Dead, a section that appears in both lay primers and clerical missals.¹²⁵ "[I]t was important to know how to die well" explains John Harthan and this truth is materialized in the images that open the section.¹²⁶ Usually accompanied by a single illuminated image, manuscripts often featured either a burial or the resurrection of Lazarus. The Office of the Dead simply reinforced the ultimate program of books of hours: users should be concerned for their own souls and the souls of those who died. The Cinot Hours contains just such an image of Lazarus rising from his grave wrapped in his grave cloth. Like Bridget, Lazarus rejoined the world with memories of his time in the hereafter, a familiar narrative to those buyers of prayer books and one that provides a visual reminder for readers that they need to be conscious about the pain of the afterlife.¹²⁷ Further, he is often assimilated into the tradition of the risen Christ and the saved Jonah. The result is a text committed to

¹²⁴ Duffy, *Stripping the Altars*, 334. For a discussion of purgatory see also Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹²⁵ John Harthan, *Books of Hours and Their Owners* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 17.

¹²⁶ Harthan, *Book of Hours and Their Owners*, 17.

¹²⁷ Duffy, *Stripping the Altars*, 341.

rethinking worldly and spiritual touching. As Bynum notes, “it is the nature of objects to carry practices with them.”¹²⁸ Books of hours teach users how to negotiate their tactile world and, in turn, how to prepare for their imagined haptic afterlife.

¹²⁸ Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 226.

Chapter 3

CHAUCER'S SHRUG: IDOLS, RELICS, AND THE LIMITS OF THE MATERIAL IN THE "SECOND NUN'S TALE"

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a poem designed to challenge the boundaries between material performances of faith and the spiritual ideology that guides such activities. If books of hours provide narratives of positive sensual contact between the tangible and spiritual worlds, Chaucer complicates such trust in the material by pointing to the often paradoxical relationship between faith and the things that are employed to guide users to God. Setting his frame-narrative in the dewy spring of late April, Chaucer joins pilgrimage with the "array" and "degree" of each of his travelers (40, 41).¹ Implicit in Chaucer's introduction, and pilgrimage in general, is the assumption that the world is a place where men and women can look for hints of God. The Second Nun, whose "Tale" describes the life of Saint Cecile, is thus a suitable addition to Chaucer's conversation about the apparent boundaries that separate material and immaterial expressions of faith in late Middle Ages. Ostensibly a story about a third-century virginal saint who is killed for rejecting idolatry, Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale" is actually a narrative about the limits of both the material and immaterial when forming belief. Unwilling to concede to the demands of Almachius, the Roman prefect, who

¹ All references to the Geoffrey Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale" are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Line numbers are cited within the text.

desires that the young saint recognize a stone idol to Jupiter, Cecile is eventually martyred. While defending her early Christian belief, one unencumbered by the hierarchical and dogmatic issues of Chaucer's time, Cecile stresses that faith can only be found through spiritual sight; Almachius' reliance upon his worldly eyes thus makes him "lewd" (430). For Almachius, trusting worldly vision makes spiritual vision impossible.

But, as we might expect from Chaucer, there is far more going on than simply a proof that idols are bad; and his life of Cecile is much more than just a story of good faith versus evil "things." While Cecile's example seems to suggest that honest Christians should reject religious props, other characters in the narrative are not capable of forming belief before having a material/sensual encounter with the divine. Cecile is an a-material figure. I employ the prefix "a," rather than "anti" or "un," as a way of avoiding judgment; she simply functions outside of the material concerns of the object world. Cecile's model rejects the usefulness of religious goods but as we see through her followers, there can be some positive material encounters. Her first converts, Tiburce and Valerian, both need sensual experiences with goods to enact their conversion. And while these things are mystical, and not produced from earthly matter, they are nonetheless experienced by the senses as tangible goods. To further complicate Cecile's model of unworldly divinity is the fact that this a-material saint is ultimately transformed into a relic of blood and cloth reminding readers that relics, like idols, can easily move the eye away from Heaven and towards the worldly.

What the "Second Nun's Tale" provides is a series of object lessons, four of which I will discuss at length in this chapter. A narrative whose characters and events are influenced by different categories of goods—domestic and religious—the "Tale" forces

readers to question the privileging of religious objects. Chaucer's retelling of Cecile's *Vita* emphasizes for the reader the dangers of trusting sense perception and the material world. Leaving the audience with no obvious directive, I argue that Chaucer instead intends to suggest the inevitability of conflict: no one, excepting a saint of course, can faultlessly read the tangible world—goods will always have the potential to distract from a-material or even anti-material teachings.

Chaucer's adaptation of his source materials serves to strengthen Cecile's arguments against objects. In the *Legenda Aurea*, Tiburce and Valerian are first to engage Almachius in a debate about the ephemeral nature of material goods. Chaucer opts to follow another source, the Franciscan abridgement, and deemphasizes the brothers to make Cecile's martyrdom more triumphant. By limiting the role of Tiburce and Valerian, who in the *Legenda* make compelling arguments against using things to access faith, Chaucer turns these two young martyrs into less perfect saints. In the "Second Nun's Tale" their dependence upon the senses and the physical world as a way of accessing faith provides a startling contrast to Cecile's sensual void. Though she is often absent from the story, and given that her voice is not the only authority in the text, the events and morals of the "Tale" nevertheless derive from the saintly virgin. The result is that the life of Cecile becomes a battle against the material world, rather than simply an abstract struggle against idolatry. And while the Christian characters are often converted through some kind of sensual experience, usually connected with a mystical object, the "Second Nun's Tale" is ultimately a narrative that challenges the trustworthiness and value of religious goods (relics, crosses, etc) in producing and sustaining faith. Cecile not only

converts actively through her words but also passively through the objects that other figures, like Pope Urban and her guardian angel, use in the narrative.²

Typically, the “Tale” is discussed either in terms of its relationship to the source materials or as an exploration of female spirituality.³ Scholars have also considered the “Tale’s” relationship with other narratives in the Canterbury book.⁴ Only a handful of scholars have chosen to address the conflict between the material and the senses in the “Second Nun’s Tale.” Carolyn Collette’s work on Saint Cecile discusses the conflict between the spiritual and physical eye.⁵ She notes that “sight imagery in the tale is both literal and figurative, because sight is not just the ability to see clearly, but the ability to see the inherent value in things, to embrace the good and to cast away the chaff.”⁶ Thus those characters who convert, like Tiburce and Valerian, are capable of understanding

² For an excellent conversation about Cecile and her conversionary practices see David Aers and Lynn Staley’s *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), especially Chapter 5.

³ See Sherry L. Reames’s work “The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale,” in *Sources and Analogues of The Canterbury Tales* Vol. I, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 491-527, especially 516-27. For discussions of female spirituality see Carolyn Collette’s work on Mary and speech in her article, “Chaucer’s Discourse of Mariology: Gaining the Right to Speak,” in *Art and Context in Late Medieval English Narrative: Essays in Honor of Robert Worth Frank, J.*, ed. Robert R. Edwards (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), 127-147; Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer’s Women: Nun’s Wives and Amazons* (London: Macmillan Press, 1990), 150; Joseph L. Grossi, Jr., “The Unhidden Piety of Chaucer’s ‘Seint Cecilie,’” *Chaucer Review* 36, no. 3 (2002): 298.

⁴ The most popular comparison is between the “Second Nun” and the tale that follows in the Fragment, the “Canon’s Yeoman Tale.” One example is Bruce A. Rosenberg’s “The Contrary Tales of the Second Nun and Canon’s Yeoman,” *Chaucer Review* 2, no. 4 (1968): 278.

⁵ Carolyn Collette, “A Closer Look at Seinte Cecile’s Special Vision,” *Chaucer Review* 10, no. 4 (1976): 337-349.

⁶ Collette, “A Closer Look,” 338.

objects as spiritual signs rather than physical accoutrements. The “inherent value” that Collette points to is not only an abstract or purely intellectual value, but might also be read as the matter of the object. Collette explains that in the prologue to the narrative “we see that outward appearance and inner reality differ, that apprehending the physical outward *thing* is not the same as understanding the spiritual and inward *sign*.”⁷ But, as books of hours demonstrate, the inherent qualities of an object are intimately linked with the materials from which it was produced. The matter of an object helps to produce the larger spiritual message. Thus, while Collette’s discussion of signs is persuasive and I think that the objects in the narrative should, on some level, be understood as signs, I am not convinced that the figures in the narrative, excepting Cecile of course, are capable or desirous of totally bypassing the material to get to the sign.

More recently, Katherine Little and Elizabeth Robertson have argued for a materialist reading of the tale. Little notes that “Chaucer first locates St. Cecilia within the traditional interpretive unity of text and image (seeing=understanding), but then registers a discomfort with the visual that complicates the traditional mode (and anticipates the Wycliffite perspective).”⁸ Little’s argument points to ways that Cecile’s anti-thing lessons foreground the Lollard controversies of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which reject the practice of reading spiritual meaning into religious images. Elizabeth Robertson takes up the problem of the senses and the material, with an emphasis on smell rather than vision. She explains that the “sensually appealing” image of the flowers figure “religious experience as at once ineffable and profoundly

⁷ Collette, “A Closer Look,” 342.

⁸ Katherine Little, “Images, Texts and Exegetics in Chaucer’s ‘*Second Nun’s Tale*.’” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36 no. 1 (Winter 2006): 118.

embodied.”⁹ Her goal is to argue that individuals are converted through sensual rather than intellectual experiences. Extending Robertson’s and Little’s discussion of the material and the senses, I will argue that Chaucer is not registering “discomfort” with the visual, but instead demonstrating the complex reality of trying to form belief through the material encounters that occur in regular religious and domestic life.

The Image Debate

The “Second Nun’s Tale” offers a complex reading of some of the many arguments associated with the “image debate” of the late fourteenth century. The image debate is more than just an abstract conversation about pictures or metaphor. Images in the Middle Ages are material goods, and are most often sculpted figures, though they can refer to stained glass or pictures in books.¹⁰ Such images are not portraits but nevertheless are meant to have a certain degree of verisimilitude to the subject. What is apparent when reading discussions of images is that the line between the material and spiritual is unclear. The image will always have some kind of physical manifestation that is meant to be processed through and by its tangible presence. It is a thing, and the audience is meant to acknowledge its form and the materials used to construct it. As we would expect in a world where God’s presence is read through creation itself, the choice of materials can be just as important as the more abstract message that the image seeks to convey. Lapidaries, books that list the meanings and uses of particular stones, are but

⁹ Elizabeth Robertson, “Apprehending the Divine and Choosing to Believe: Voluntarist Free Will in Chaucer’s ‘*Second Nun’s Tale*.’” *The Chaucer Review* 46, no.1 (2011): 113.

¹⁰ Sarah Stanbury, “Visualizing,” in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 470.

one piece of evidence for the power and vibrancy of mineral matter.¹¹ But the problem was that images could be misunderstood. As Sarah Stanbury has noted in her study of late medieval images, it is “hard to make out, where legitimate *use* of an image for spiritual ends shifts into possession, and worship before images slips into idolatry, worship of the thing itself rather than the abstraction of which the thing directs us.”¹² Thus the lesson about idolatry in the “Second Nun’s Tale” does not teach individuals to reject a stone statue of Jupiter or even pagan idols generally; Chaucer’s audience required no such instruction, primarily because they did not usually have access to such materials. Instead the narrative wants readers and listeners to question how much they rely upon their senses when coming to faith.

The different points of this debate on images have long been discussed by scholars. One of the most famous early Christian critiques comes from Gregory the Great’s commentary about images in which he reminds Bishop Serenus of the value of such productions for teaching the unlearned.¹³ This sentiment is repeated in the early fifteenth century dialogue *Dives and Pauper* when Pauper explains to Dives that images have “been ordeynyd to been a tokene and a book to þe lewyd peple, þat þey moun redyn

¹¹ For more on lapidaries see Valerie Allen, “Mineral Virtue,” in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, DC: Oliphant Books, 2012), 123-152.

¹² Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 8.

¹³ Little, “Images, Texts and Exegetics,” 104. See also Lawrence G. Duggan’s “Was Art Really the ‘Book of the Illiterate’?,” *Word and Image* 5, no. 3 (July-September 1989): 227-251.

in ymagerye and peynture þat clerkys redyn in boke, as þe lawe sey3t, De con.”¹⁴ But Dives is warned that “3yf þu doo it for þe ymage or to þe ymage þu doist ydolatrie.”¹⁵ Dives’ warning is echoed in Stanbury’s words and in the various forms of material interaction presented in the “Second Nun’s Tale.”¹⁶ The ideal is to read like a clerk, so to move immediately past the object to the meaning behind it, the idea that is signified. But Pauper’s words also acknowledge that ignorant or “lewyd peple” need faith reinforced through some kind of visual representation or image just as clerks seek learning in books. It is not hard to see how the implications of this conversation are potentially destructive to the established Church. Fourteenth century England was dotted with religious buildings and pilgrimage sites and each of those locations was adorned with various images and religious objects. The church was not just a place of prayer, it was where people went to look at things. The wealth of the Church facilitated elaborate and detailed works of art in many different media. And as we shall see, the “Second Nun’s Tale” draws upon these familiar sights and smells while simultaneously critiquing their necessity.

Material forms of worship were not only seen as useful to “lewd” or ignorant folk but were also manifestations of the Church’s power. Images created separate from this ecclesiastical authority have no value, a lack which compelled some to ask why any

¹⁴ Priscilla Heath Barnum, ed. *Dives and Pauper*, EETS 275 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 82.

¹⁵ *Dives and Pauper*, 85.

¹⁶ Also important to this discussion is of course Aquinas’s twenty-fifth question in the *Summa* in which he addresses religious goods directly in terms of how they relate to the reverence of Christ. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. and ed. Colman E. O’Neill, vol. 50, *The One Mediator 3a. 16-26*, (London: Blackfriars, 1965), 184-205.

objects were deserving of veneration. Theologically, crosses and relics are sanctioned by their contact with Christ and the saints. The Eucharist and the other vestments of orthodox worship were understood to possess otherworldly power. Yet as William Pietz notes, “As became perfectly evident during the Protestant Reformation, to deny divine power to any material object per se was to deny the rightful power of the Catholic church as the mediating agent of human salvation in the material world.”¹⁷ The rise of the Lollard movement and subsequent critiques of the powers of the Church highlighted a concern about the line between idolatry and veneration. A Lollard work from the fifteenth century opens with the prayer, “Almyȝty God saue þi puple fro erryng in ymagis” and goes on to observe the conflict between the poor men represented in the pictures and the value of the images themselves:

And so of ymagis of pore apostlis of Crist, and oþer seyntis þat lyueden in pouert and gret penaunse, and dispiseden in worde and in dede þe foul pride and vanyte of þis karful lif, for þei ben peyntid as þoghe þei hadde lyued in welþe of þis world and lustus of þeire fleyshe as large as euere dide erþely man.¹⁸

A common Lollard critique, images and their subsequent materiality are perceived as manifestations of worldly pride and vanity. The author of this tract is also concerned about images misrepresenting the saints and apostles to the untrained masses. The image has more power to define the message than words alone and the author of this essay seems keenly aware that religious images—and by extension objects—are dangerous, not because they are empty, but because they are so full of meaning. The beauty of the

¹⁷ William Pietz, “The Problem of Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (Spring 1987): 30.

¹⁸ Anne Hudson, *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 83, 84.

painting tricks the observer into venerating the object and believing that the apostles were far more worldly than scripture describes. These painted displays of wealth not only justify the riches of the Church, leading to corruption according to the Lollard argument, they also trick the observer into thinking that their own worldly lifestyle is justified—that an adherence to material faith is in fact condoned by the Church, and by extension God. The author of this polemic thus offers a solution: “men shulden be more gostly and take lesse hede to siche sensible signes, as dyden þe apostlis of Crist þat, by schort tyme and rewlis of Goddis hestis and charite, ledden men to heuene wipouten siche newe peyntingis schewid by manus craft.”¹⁹ As Cecile will advocate, the best way to come to faith is through “gostly” practices or mental rather than “sensible” observations. Objects created through “manus craft” are immediately suspect, as they not only display their earthly substance (so in paintings, the pigments as well as the surface they are painted upon) but also the human labor involved in production. And while Little is right to note that the tale was very likely first written in the 1370s, so before the Lollard image debate, the problem of images was by no means confined to the last quarter of the fourteenth century.²⁰

Chaucer would have been aware of the image debate. As William Kamowski observes: “it is difficult to imagine our poet—an informed public man and debt borrower from others’ works—reiterating Wyclif’s notorious criticism of the Church without some cognizance.”²¹ And as we shall see as we analyze Cecile’s faith, versus the practices of

¹⁹ Hudson, *Selections From English Wycliffite Writings*, 84.

²⁰ See note 45 in Little, “Images, Texts, and Exegetics,” 130-1.

²¹ William Kamowski, “Chaucer and Wyclif: God’s Miracles Against the Clergy’s Magic,” *Chaucer Review* 37, no. 1 (2002): 6.

Almachius the Roman, the narrative outlines debates about how images construct different ideals of the Church. Chaucer's audience would have recognized Almachius as a critique of the religious messenger. To negotiate the complexity of the physical world and God, medieval Christians must trust that the clergyman, or in this case the saint, is actually concerned for their souls and not simply entrenched in worldly pursuits. We can read into Almachius's example that the Christian population must be brought together by spiritually sound personalities so that they are not drawn to faith through worldly authoritarian figures and the physical manifestations of power like the grand cathedral. Lynn Staley argues that Chaucer's "purpose was not singular but that he used the legend to present a picture of a church at once starkly simple and Christ-like and potentially compromised. It is a picture whose shadows are those of the Church as Chaucer experienced it."²² Staley's goes on to demonstrate how Cecile's "official" example, one which features her against the state rather than working within the "secular game" that the contemporary Church was so entrenched in, would have been disarming to his readers. Chaucer offers a version of Christianity that could have seemed "as radically simple as any image created by John Wyclif in this period."²³ The result is that "Second Nun's Tale" becomes part of Chaucer's "strategy of dissent" that "bespeak[s] the complexities of the problems he mediates and of his own position as an insider."²⁴

The Lollard rejection of religious images is only one extreme of this conversation and, as we have already seen, it was perfectly orthodox to have similar concerns about

²² Lynn Staley, "Chaucer's Tale of the Second Nun and the Strategies of Dissent," *Studies in Philology* 89, no. 3 (1992): 324.

²³ Staley, "Chaucer's Tale of the Second Nun," 330.

²⁴ Staley, "Chaucer's Tale of the Second Nun," 330.

the power of religious goods and the quality of those priests sanctioning the objects.

Turning to the “Second Nun’s Tale” we can see Valerian and Tiburce occupy this more flexible middle-ground in which objects and the senses are used, valued, and critiqued.

Lesson One. Lesser Spirituality: Materiality, the Senses, and Faith

Valerian and Tiburce access faith through sensual interactions with material goods. The brothers are converted independently at different moments in the text and their experiences illustrate a conventional motif in which spiritual objects are used by an individual to achieve or confirm their faith. Following a familiar pattern for many late fourteenth-century readers, Valerian and Tiburce are transformed through mystical, rather than manmade goods. The story begins with Valerian, and his initial conversation with Cecile establishes the importance of confirming faith through the senses, and particularly vision:

Valerian, corrected as God wolde,
Answerde agayn, “If I shal trusten thee,
Lat me that aungel se and hym biholde;
And if that it a verray angel bee,
Thanne wol I doon as thou hast prayed me;
And if thou love another man, for sothe
Right with this swerd thanne wol I sle yow bothe.” (162-7)

Chaucer makes this a subtly human moment and gives us a sense of the concern that a newly married man might have with his wife’s somewhat unorthodox, and at least for him, unpleasant request for marital celibacy. Clearly possessing the bud of faith within him, Valerian agrees to her terms if he is allowed to “biholde” the angel. Vision in the Middle Ages is typically regarded as the primary sense, the one that is most trusted but also most dangerous to the human subject. Certain medieval theories held that people

could be controlled by the things that they saw, giving the object a degree of agency over the viewer. There were theories about the divine qualities of light which suggested that objects emitted light rather than being illuminated by it, and in this model light has physical powers. As C. M. Woolgar notes in his history of the medieval senses, light's ability to interact with the human subject constitutes "direct contact, effectively touch, between the seen and the seer."²⁵ As readers seeking to contextualize Valerian's experience, we might recall the purpose of pilgrimage and consider how many individuals traveled hundreds or even thousands of miles just to cast their eyes upon a relic with the belief that seeing it would bring about healing. Caroline Walker Bynum notes the drive to sensually experience goods: "the material object is able not only to imprint the body but almost to inseminate it."²⁶ This phenomenological confirmation of faith might also be seen within the congregation observing Mass, where "beholding the elevated Host was often more highly valued than receiving the sacrament itself."²⁷ Looking at something was no passive act; vision did not simply serve to register information but could physically alter the individual who did the looking. The difference between the typical pilgrimage and Valerian's conversion, though, is witnessed through the presence of mystical rather than earthly goods.

Valerian's visit to the Christian community helps to train him in correct material readings. Visiting the poor population, Valerian has the opportunity to see a faithful

²⁵ C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 148.

²⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 111.

²⁷ Kamowski, "Chaucer and Wyclif," 10.

community that lacks the material benefits which he, as an aristocratic Roman, would take for granted. Walking along the Appian Way he must go to a town:

That fro this toun ne stant but miles three,
And to the povre folkes that ther dwelle,
Sey hem right thus, as that I shal yow telle.

Telle hem that I, Cecile, yow to hem sente
To shewen yow the goode Urban the olde,
For secree nedes and for good entente. (173-8)

Cecile acknowledges the poverty of Urban's followers to emphasize to Valerian that faith lies outside of material representations of wealth and power. Numerous scholars have noted the implicit critique that this passage, and the "Tale" itself, makes upon the early versus contemporary Church.²⁸ Not only is Cecile's Christianity devoid of the hierarchy and ritual that so defined faith in the fourteenth century, it is also missing the visual and material goods that make belief tangible.²⁹ But Valerian's miracles do not simply rely upon his spiritual senses. The miracles depicted in the "Second Nun's Tale" are examples of the power of the early Church, and the way that objects can be used without compromising faith. As Kamowski puts it, "Chaucer's miracles belong to a world lost. They disappear along with an earlier version of a vital Church—the miracle-working Church of the *Second Nun's Tale*...The miracles of the contemporary Church are all

²⁸ As Joseph L. Grossi, Jr. says, "More than a mere artifact, the purified religious devotion shown by Pope Urban, Cecilie, and her converts is meant to remind readers of papal Rome's true spiritual mission beneath the layers of secular acculturation" ("The Unhidden Piety," 299).

²⁹ As Eileen Jankowski notes, "In terms of Church history, Cecilia historically stands at the very beginning, her story highlighting the moment when Christians struggle to establish what is to become an extremely powerful institution" ("Chaucer's 'Second Nun's Tale' and the Apocalyptic Imagination," *Chaucer Review* 36, no. 2 [2001]: 129).

fake.”³⁰ Kamowski’s fake church is defined by narratives like the “Wife of Bath’s Tale” which feature the ““smells and bells’ and exorcisms” of friars.³¹

While Valerian, Tiburce and Maximus do not rely on the “smells and bells” of the later medieval Church, they nevertheless do need tangible, sensual experiences to help them understand the Christian message and come to believe it.³² Like the poor Christian population, the men learn to find faith without expensive religious goods. The passage above represents an a-material ideal and becomes a celebration of spiritual strength over material poverty, and a reminder that the vestments of the Church—crosses, cathedrals among other things—are not necessary for faith or conversion. It is not until the end of the narrative, when Cecile offers her home to Urban as a church, that a place of worship is even mentioned. Early Christianity was able to sustain the faithful without these materials, forcing the reader to ask why the contemporary Church is so reliant upon such devices. Yet as men raised in a pagan world, Tiburce and Valerian still rely upon their senses when coming to faith. Valerian’s miraculous visions thus help train him to read materiality in a different way.

The importance of seeing mystical goods is made explicit when by Valerian’s conversionary experience. Upon arriving in the town, Valerian declares the purpose of his trip and is immediately rewarded with a vision:

An oold man, clad in white clothes cleere,
That hadde a book with lettre of gold in honde,
And gan bifore Valerian to stonde.

³⁰ Kamowski, “Chaucer and Wyclif,” 11.

³¹ Kamowski, “Chaucer and Wyclif,” 11.

³² Though I have chosen not to discuss Maximus, his conversionary example is similar to that of Tiburce and Valerian.

Valerian as deed fil doun for drede
Whan he hym saugh, and he up hente hym tho,
And on his book right thus he gan to rede:
“O lord, o feith, o God, withouten mo,
O Cristendom, and Fader of alle also,
Aboven alle and over alle everywhere.”
These wordes al with gold ywriten were. (200-210)

The man reads to Valerian about God, Christ, and faith. Valerian stands before Urban when suddenly a man in white (St. Paul) appears holding what must be an open book. What Valerian sees is not the binding, which itself could have been imposing, but instead the words written in gold. As Little points out: “the value of the letters constitutes their materiality—twice we are told that the letters are gold. The meaning of those letters, what the old man reads, is sandwiched between this account of their material value, as if the spiritual value could not, in fact, be separated from its material presentation.”³³ Psalters and Bibles were commonly displayed in churches and these books would typically be opened to their most impressive pages, often canon tables or passages inscribed in gold writing.³⁴ In the light provided by windows and candles, the pages would have shone. But as Little points out, it is not just the power of the book but the substance on that manuscript, the gold, which so affects Valerian. The materials of the book are conspicuously on display for both the converted Roman and the audience. It is through a vision of these materials, combined with the impressive appearance of Paul, that Valerian is transformed from being a damned pagan to a Christian on the path to martyrdom. The

³³ Little, “Images, Texts, and Exegetics,” 119.

³⁴ As Michael Camille explains in a discussion of large bibles, “They are, like a number of large lavish illuminated books in the Middle Ages, meant to be turned outwards for show, rather than privately opened to be read” (“Visual Signs of the Sacred Page: Books in The *Bible Moralisee*,” *Word and Image* 5 [January-March 1989]: 117).

golden letters and the message that they communicate dominate Valerian's sight and facilitate his later visions. But this book is a mystical good. Crafted to look familiar, at least to Chaucer's contemporary readership, the book is brought by Saint Paul and would not have been created on earth. Mystical goods and visions of Heavenly things are common in hagiographies and in narratives about aspiring saints like Margery Kempe or of Julian of Norwich. The precedent for such experiences would, in part, derive from the Agony in the Garden which was often depicted in books of hours with Christ looking upon a divine cup. But while such items are present physically in the narrative, they are often understood as insubstantial visions or illusions, perceived only by the individual they were meant for. The goods in the "Second Nun's Tale," as we have seen, are far more substantial. And it is this substance that the characters are drawn to.

This combination of substance and sensual experience is most apparent when we consider the lilies and roses that Valerian and Tiburce see and smell. Valerian receives from Cecile's angel a crown of flowers, a reward for his conversion, with the instruction that no one will see the crown unless they are similarly inspired:

Fro paradys to yow have I hem broght,
Ne nevere mo ne shal they roten bee,
Ne lese hir soote savour, trusteth me;
Ne nevere wight shal seen hem with his ye,
But he be chaast and hate vileynye. (227-31)

By limiting access to the crown of flowers, the angel delivers a message that such a sight is both a Heavenly reward and a powerful vision. Only faith makes it possible to understand the material and more abstract spiritual value of the flowers. Mystical goods, the flowers are formed from Heavenly matter, and as Robertson has pointed out they "act

as material conduits to the divine.”³⁵ Like the golden lettered book, the crown is materially present in the narrative. We read that the flowers will never rot and will always smell sweet. Once again, faith foregrounds vision, and the senses are rendered secondary to man’s ability to recognize spiritual truth. This object, physical for Cecile and Valerian, is differently material given the rules that typically govern things. Objects are normally defined through human contact and workmanship. Even natural goods like stone and wood are manipulated to make them useful for human consumption. The flowers are removed from this commodity and production relationship. Given as a prize from Heaven for good behavior, they are the result of God’s celestial gardens and not the gardens he placed on earth for man.

Assembled in Heaven to resemble a worldly product, these crowns of lilies and roses were not crafted by man out of earthly matter but by an angel from what we must assume was the stuff of Heaven. There is no human intervention in the production of this Heavenly commodity. Unlike man-made religious goods, which could be misinterpreted or even lead users into idolatry, the Heavenly mass of the flower crown makes its incorruptible elements apparent and proves itself to be a safe vessel to encourage Valerian’s faith. Collette suggests that, “In this tale a discourse of seeing and showing betokens understanding.”³⁶ This is only conditionally true. While Valerian’s belief is confirmed through his mystical observations, he is conditioned by his wife beforehand to be open to the experience. The same is true for Tiburce, Valerian’s brother, whose faith is confirmed before he is actually able to see the flowers. It is only through his brother’s

³⁵ Robertson, “Apprehending the Divine,” 113.

³⁶ Carolyn P. Collette, *Species, Phantasms, and Images: Vision and Medieval Psychology in The Canterbury Tales* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 148.

prayer, and Tiburce's own willingness to convert, that such a transformation is possible. These scenarios suggest that faith must come before sensual confirmation and that there must be some inherent willingness to believe that precedes the mystical experiences that will subsequently form and validate the subject's spiritual self.

We see these divine goods again in Valerian's interaction with his brother Tiburce. Desirous to convert his beloved sibling, Valerian meets him bearing the invisible coronet and Tiburce inquires about the smell of the lilies and roses. We read that "Withinne his herte he gan to wondre faste" (245). Tiburce then asks Valerian:

"I wondre, this tyme of the yeer,
Whennes that soote savour cometh so
Of rose and lilies that I smelle heer.
For though I hadde hem in myne handes two,
The savour myghte in me no depper go.
The swetee smel that in myn herte I fynde
Hath chaunged me al in another kynde." (246-52)

In a way similar to vision, smell has the power to alter one's "kynde." "Kind" does not simply mean appearance, but the very nature of Tiburce's being. The *Middle English Dictionary*'s definition of "kynde" emphasizes the physicality of the change.³⁷ The smell of the flowers, itself a combined spiritual and physical experience, alters Tiburce's faith and form in the same moment. Asking how he can smell lilies and roses when they are obviously out of season, Tiburce acknowledges the peculiarity of his experience. Had he simply held the flowers in his hands, the "savour" or smell would not have penetrated beyond his physical senses. Touching will not teach Tiburce the necessary spiritual lesson. Instead it is through smell, a process that requires a scent to enter the body, that

³⁷The first definition for "kinde" in the *Middle English Dictionary* defines the word as, "The aggregate of inherent qualities or properties of persons, animals, plants, elements, medicines, etc.; essential character; the nature of emotions, attributes, and the like."

Tiburce is able to embrace this fundamental alteration to his spirit and form. Tiburce thus relies upon his senses to access his soul, and these flowers provide a safe smell of Heaven, in contrast to the potentially distracting incense of the later Church.³⁸ Tiburce, like Valerian, finds safety through the sensual apprehension of mystical flowers. The saint that both men seek to follow, though, does not require these sensual experiences and in fact enacts a far more “gostly” performance of faith.³⁹

Lesson Two. Cecile’s More Perfect Faith

Cecile’s rejection of the material has precedents in the many documents that advocate a rejection of the body for the spiritual. Texts like the *Cloud of Unknowing* caution that the use of bodily senses will always be secondary to the spiritual: “Alle maner of bodely þing is wiþouten þi soule & beneþe it in kynde. 3e, þe sonne & þe mone & alle þe sterres, þof al þei be abouen þi body, neuerþeles 3it þei ben beneþe þi soule.”⁴⁰ In the case of *Cloud*, the contemplation of the physical, even creation itself, will always cultivate inferior interpretations of God. What the *Cloud* author advocates is a life of secluded meditation not suited for most. The “Second Nun’s Tale” is an example of this perfect state at work. Though Cecile comes from a wealthy family and is surrounded by goods, both mystical, as in the flowers, and earthly as with the property she redistributes

³⁸ For more on flowers and the smell of Heaven see Clifford Davidson, “Heaven’s Fragrance,” in *Iconography of Heaven*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), 110-127.

³⁹ Robertson, “Apprehending the Divine,” 119.

⁴⁰ Phyllis Hodgson, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling*, EETS 218 (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), 114. See also, Clifton Wolters, trans., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 128.

at the end of the narrative, she uses none of these items to establish, confirm, or reaffirm her faith. These goods are instead used by others to help convert and affirm the faith of those around her, including her husband and brother-in-law. Cecile's ultimate rejection of the physical comes during her confrontation of the Roman prefect Almachius, who demands she worship a state sanctioned idol of Jupiter. Refusing, Cecile is martyred. Cecile's desire to embrace the spiritual over the physical is not sustained by those around her.

Cecile is more than just an idealized female figure; she is a saint who, "Was comen of Romayns and of noble kynde,/And from hir cradel up fostred in the feith/Of Crist, and bar his gospel in hir mynde" (121-3). Unlike her husband Valerian and the others who are converted throughout the narrative, Cecile has the advantage of being Christian from the start. Cecile, we find, perpetually keeps the gospel and faith "in hir mynde" and never ceases "Of hir preyere and God to love and drede" (123, 125). From these lines we also know that she comes from a noble family who are, barring their religious beliefs, a part of the Roman elite and so affiliated with the rulers rather than the oppressed. The narrative gives Cecile the advantage of power, prestige, and wealth, which allows her to come to faith without the social and financial troubles of Urban's poor Christians. The conflict is thus not how she achieves her faith but what she chooses to do with it.

Cecile's choice is to adopt what Catherine Cox has called a "fanatical devotion to virginity."⁴¹ Willing to accept a married state, Cecile is committed to preserving the sanctity of her body. And while this rejection of the body might be perceived as a

⁴¹ Catherine Cox, *Gender and Language in Chaucer* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 65.

“punishment of female flesh,” such a body/soul separation is unsurprising given that the Second Nun is our narrator.⁴² Upon learning of her pending marriage to Valerian, Cecile prays to have her body preserved: “And for his love that dyde upon a tree/Every seconde and thridde day she faste,/Ay biddyng in hire orisons ful faste” (138-40). Accepting a doctrine of deprivation, Cecile is committed to a spiritual rather than physical relationship with Christ. In addition she wears a hair shirt under her wedding dress and while the “organs maden melodie” (136) on her wedding day, Cecile sings a private song to God in her heart, asking him to preserve her virgin body in its “unwemmed” or spotless form, “lest that I confounded be” (137). She is attentive neither to the pleasure of her gold robe nor the sounds of the music. Unlike Valerian and Tiburce, who require a physical relationship to form and define their faith, Cecile’s fear is that yielding to the senses will destroy the bodily and spiritual perfection she had worked to preserve. To be “confounded” is not to be confused or undone, but to be damned or destroyed.⁴³ The young bride’s fear is not the vanity of an aspiring saint but the actions of an individual frightened that she might compromise her very being, or to use Tiburce’s term, her “kynde.” Cecile cannot (and does not want to) back-track and live more in accordance with the typical role she might occupy as a Roman matron—aristocratic wife and mother. It is thus clear why, like many of her saintly contemporaries, Cecile refuses the pleasures of marital intercourse. Cecile’s formula is to reject the sensual to preserve the spiritual, and it is her subjugation of the body to the mind which allows the saint to preserve her

⁴² Cox argues that Cecile’s desire to preserve her virginity and so avoid sex on her wedding night might be understood as a moment where Cecile “torments her physical body” (*Gender and Language*, 65).

⁴³ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. 1 “confounden.”

virginity and facilitates the miracles that take place during her martyrdom at the end of the narrative.

And while many female saints, pilgrims, and mystics opt to fast and wear hair shirts in hopes of achieving spiritual cleanliness through pain, Cecile models a behavior that is consistently a-material—her faith and life are outside of the object world. Turning briefly to Margery Kempe, we can see one version of the alternative:

For sumtyme þat sche vndirstod bodily it was to ben vndirstondyn gostly, & þe drede þat sche had of hir felyngys was þe grettest scorge þat sche had in erde & specialy whan sche had hir fyrst felyngys, & þat drede made hir ful meke for sche had no joye in þe felyng tyl sche knew be experiens wheþyr it was trewe er not.⁴⁴

Margery's desire to understand the spiritual through the body was one shared by most individuals of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Books of hours, as we have already seen, are a testament to this need to connect faith to an object. Faith is not only linked to emotions like joy and dread, but the need to confirm them through "experiens." This experience is not only those mystical encounters with Christ but also her pilgrimages and the things that she made (tears) and saw in her life. Experience thus embodies the whole of the physical world and includes the senses. Surprising as it may sound (few call Margery normal), Margery's faith represents a normative experience for the period. Comparatively, Cecile's behavior is exceptional as she represents a perfect and consistent devotion to her faith that is accomplished without the help of material assistance. Even the saint's guardian angel seems to be a produced from her faith rather a creature/thing to reinforce it. Cecile's explains that her angel, "Is redy ay my body for to kepe" (154) and that Valerian will be struck down if he attempts to have sex with her. But as a reward for

⁴⁴ Sanford B Meech and Hope Emily Allen, eds, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, EETS 212 (1940; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 220.

Valerian's chastity we find that "if that ye in clene love me gye,/He wol yow loven as me, for youre clenness,/And shewen yow his joye and his brightnesse" (159-61). There is no evidence in these lines that the angel is anything but a byproduct of Cecile's faith, but we do learn that if Valerian accepts Cecile's work, he will be "shewen" both the joy and "brightnesse" of the angel. Valerian will experience both the joy of the angel and a visual manifestation of its holiness. And as I noted above, light or brightness carries its own material powers and manifestations. Thus Cecile's spiritual inspiration is almost exclusively drawn from her inherent and pre-existing faith, and as a result, unlike Margery and Valerian, her example advocates for a more thorough rejection of the world.

While the young maiden appears vulnerable as she prepares for her wedding, privately praying to God to help maintain her body and soul, the rest of the narrative features a very public figure with unwavering strength. Her chief duty is to teach Tiburce and Valerian to reject idols: "That alle ydoles nys but a thyng in veyn,/For they been dombe, and therto they been deve [deaf],/And charged hym hise ydoles for to leve" (285-7). Idols direct the attention of the faithful to, rather than through, the object. Unlike the mystical goods of the angel, an idol is crafted by man from worldly materials and does not have the power to either listen or communicate. Obvious though this observation might sound, the power of a religious good is to facilitate communication between the human subject and divine object. But the material object is incapable of doing the work that the subject might require, it can neither advise nor bear the greater duty of listening to the individual's words or confession.⁴⁵ One potential anxiety with this form of worship

⁴⁵ For an excellent discussion of confession in the period see Katherine C. Little, *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

for Christians is that it granted the thing the potential for life: “Indeed, Lollard insistence that images are dead voices an uneasy protest, for it also suggests that they might at any moment come to life.”⁴⁶ This same concern is echoed in Cecile’s warning to Tiburce when she cautions him that idols are deaf and dumb. Cecile’s need to remind her brother-in-law that objects lack human senses and abilities indicates that, on some level, Tiburce might think that the object possesses them. As Michael Camille notes in his *Gothic Idol*, saints were often idol killers, especially in collections like the *Legenda Aurea*. In the saints’ encounters with idols, the statues themselves would often come to life, as in the story of Saint Felix in which the idol flees to escape the saint’s destructive breath.⁴⁷ In the world of early Christian saints, pagan idols have the potential to be animated and possibly even respond to the prayers of followers. Far from simple or foolish, idols hint at the possibility of power, which is what makes them so threatening to converts like Tiburce and Valerian. Camille notes that “Idolatry seemed ridiculous to Christians because of this very lack of signification, this absence of reference beyond.”⁴⁸ Yet Cecile’s converts need to be trained to recognize the idol as empty, for at some point they did not see the object as stone but as an object that linked their experience with the pantheon of gods.

Anxieties about misreading idols also illustrate a potential weakness in the senses, particularly sight. Vision can be dangerous and there is a strong line of discourse which argued that physical things were inferior to the “invisibilia” or elements of the

⁴⁶ Stanbury, *Visual Object of Desire*, 107.

⁴⁷ Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 120.

⁴⁸ Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 14.

imperceptible world. As Collette has noted, “Sight was...deemed untrustworthy because it could easily be deceived by magic or by desire. To see what is really there as opposed to what they wish were there, humans had to exercise the will to prevent remembered mental images from altering or shaping what the eye sees in any one moment.”⁴⁹

Individuals unable to exercise their will would not only misinterpret their environment but would actually alter their reality by overlaying recalled mental images upon the material world. They would see their desire rather than the physical truth. Cecile, in her instruction, helps to modify Tiburce and Valerian’s visual registry to teach them to recognize objects as material and to rely more on their spiritual eye. But her lesson implicitly acknowledges the cultural and private power that a misunderstood idol can have.

The saint’s arguments about vision are foregrounded in the “Prologue” to the “Tale.” Cecile, in the short introduction at the end of the prologue that explains her name, is described as “Wantynge of blyndness” for “hir grete light/Of sapience and for hire thewes cleere” (100-01). Her name is also directly referred to as being “bright” three times (102, 112, 118) and “white” once (115). Like the angel, Cecile produces a vision rather than responding to one. To be wanting of blindness indicates that Cecile possesses the spiritual acumen and “sapience” to understand her soul’s calling. *The Middle English Dictionary* defines “blindness” as physical blindness, “blindness (of soul or intellect), inability to perceive (truth), stupidity, obtuseness” and “a deluded state or condition, delusion.”⁵⁰ The word is naturally playing off of the first definition which applies to the

⁴⁹ Collette, *Species, Phantasms, and Images*, 3-4.

⁵⁰ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “blindnesse.”

lack of vision. This phrase itself is a double negative; Cecile lacks a lack of vision. Yet if blindness can also function as a state of being and as a substitute for “stupidity” or “the inability to perceive truth” then it might be conceived of as a something closer to an illness, a thing which anyone who is not a saint might possess. And while Cecile does not rely upon physical vision, her name means “way for the blind” (the way to blynde), “For she ensample was by good techynge” (92-3). The inversion of physical sight for spiritual sight is, of course, at play in the narrative. But it is complicated by the converts’ need to visually confirm their faith before they fully embrace Christianity. Cecile seems to be the only figure that can move beyond the need to verify beliefs through senses.

In refusing to use things to bolster her personal faith, Cecile also rejects a sensual experience of creation. She does not need to register information visually nor does she use her other senses to help her understand God’s teachings. As Little has noted, Cecile de-emphasizes the visual sign in her teachings. Not only does she praise Tiburce for his rejection of idols but she instructs him in both the humanity of Christ and the Trinity:

“Right as a man hath sapiences three --
Memorie, engyn, and intellect also --
So in o beynge of divinitee,
Thre persones may ther right wel bee.”
Tho gan she hym ful bisily to preche
Of Cristes come, and of his peynes teche,

And manye pointes of his passioun;
How Goddes Sone in this world was withholde
To doon mankynde pleyn remissioun,
That was ybounde in synne and cares colde (338-47)

“Although St. Cecilia may be closely associated with the traditional unity of words and objects (such as garlands),” explains Little, “she does not limit the laity to material, bodily signs: when she explains the Trinity, she does not illustrate it with an analogy that

invokes an object to be visualized...but with abstractions.”⁵¹ While I agree that Cecile moves from one abstraction to another in the lines above (so from a description of the three mental faculties to the even less conceivable idea of the Trinity), she does begin with a description of the mind that relies upon man’s perception of the physical world.⁵² While these definitions were frequently debated in the period, it is generally understood that imagination, the first of the three chambers of the brain, is “a kind of clearinghouse for sensory input, a place of mental assimilation of experience of the world.”⁵³ The other two chambers help to refine this initial image but nevertheless require an experience of the world for interpretation. The mind cannot assign meaning without bodily experiences, which is, in this context, why Cecile uses such an example to explain the unfathomable, the Trinity, and why she further moves to explain Christ’s passion. The emphasis upon the humanity of Christ, an issue less important to the early Church but firmly entrenched in the beliefs of Chaucer’s audience, serves a couple of purposes in the narrative. Primarily, it foreshadows for Tiburce and subsequently the reader the martyrdom of Cecile and all those converted in the narrative. It also emphasizes the necessity of working for God in this world—a tangible example of the unfathomable and intangible concept of the divine. So while she does not require such definitions for

⁵¹ Little, “Images, Texts, and Exegetics,” 121.

⁵² This discussion relies upon medieval theories of memory which are best discussed by Mary J. Carruthers in *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Carolyn Collette also discusses memory in some detail and how it pertains to the Canterbury Tales in her *Species, Phantasms and Image*, 1-31.

⁵³ Collette, *Species, Phantasms, and Images*, 6.

herself, Cecile seems to acknowledge the value of the senses and the material in training her converts.

Lesson 3. Almachius and the Idol: Rocks, Stones, and Less Than Senseless Things

Chief antagonists of the “Second Nun’s Tale” are the Roman prefect Almachius and the idol that he adores. As a Pontius Pilate figure, Almachius has the duty to prosecute Cecile for her illegal actions. We can feel some sympathy for the Roman representative who, unlike the converts in narrative, has no chance of having the transitory experience of an angel or Heavenly flowers. Incapable of using his senses to perceive the divine, Almachius lacks the seed of Christianity, the potential for faith that Tiburce and Valerian seem to possess and are rewarded for. As Robertson notes, “Only those destined to be martyrs possess the refined senses capable of penetrating the spiritual realm.”⁵⁴ And while the prefect lacks the ability to perceive the spiritual, his senses are keenly tuned to read political and social signs. His worldly power depends upon the certainty of his political and spiritual position. To doubt his senses would undermine his position as prefect and a lifetime of work. They are what confirm for him the fact that Roman authority is total and that Jupiter, through his idol, must be worshiped. The function of this statue to Jupiter, and idols generally, is to remind the reader of the tenuous relationship between the physical world and spiritual truth.

A product of pagan religious values, the idol is crafted as a tool to affirm and access the existence and power of Jupiter. The narrative purpose is, as Grossi observes, to reveal “the absurdity of paganism” which he identifies as a “recurrent concern of the

⁵⁴ Robertson, “Apprehending the Divine,” 119.

saint's.”⁵⁵ This idol serves two functions in the tale: it represents the power of a pagan god and the absurdity of using objects as focal points for faith. As Pietz explains in an article on fetish: “Idolatry, in the narrow sense, was defined as the humanly willed manufacture and worship of artificial varieties of sacramental objects whose true essence was spiritual fraud.”⁵⁶ The materiality of the object, combined with the fact that it is not sanctioned by the correct religious authority, makes it an idol. But the definition remains an uneasy one, primarily because the sanctioning process in the Middle Ages was not quite so straightforward. For example, relics were rarely sanctioned by an ecclesiastical hierarchy before they became important objects of worship. Aviad Kleinberg explains that “Consumers decided to whom they would pray, which saints they preferred, and what sort of contractual bond they wished to establish with the saint, when they would attribute an unexpected salvation to the saint, and when they would ‘waste’ it (by calling it a coincidence, a natural process, or by attributing it to the direct intervention of God).”⁵⁷ The tenuous connection between the spiritual and physical, though, means that the object remains a distraction, a potential for spiritual fraud. In addition, the authority of sanctioning structures is called into question. Almachius is a Roman pagan worshiping state sanctioned idols.

And while I am arguing that Almachius’s faith might not be as superficial as we are meant to believe, the performance of faith before the Roman idol clearly does not require the commitment or confirmation through baptism that Christian faith seems to

⁵⁵ Grossi, “The Unhidden Piety,” 303.

⁵⁶ Pietz, “The Problem of Fetish, II,” 27.

⁵⁷ Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints’ Stories and the Western Imagination*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 42.

demand. The prefect's chief mechanism of social control, and his primary concern, is to compel the converted Christians to perform rites facing the stone statue. When Valerian and his brother are brought before Almachius, the prefect demands that they sacrifice to the idol of Jupiter and we read of a similar request when he finally confronts Cecile.

Almachius entreats that she "Do wey thy booldnesse" and that she

sacrifice to oure goddes er thou go!
I recche nat what wrong that thou me profre
For I kan suffre it as a philosopre;

But thilke wronges may I nat endure
That thou spekest of oure goddes heere (487-492)

One of many such pleas, Almachius asks that Cecile moderate her behavior and perform the necessary rites so that she will be able to leave. Willing to suffer as a "philosopher," Almachius explains that he does not care about the insults to his person but is unwilling to listen to Cecile condemn his god. Almachius in this scene seems more frustrated than empowered. Having listened to the arguments of a brazen noblewoman who responds directly and rudely to questions (432), Almachius requests that she simply follow the rules and acknowledge the city's god. The idol demands this performance of faith to retain its power and control over the population. The device is a mechanism of the state and a way of regulating religious experience. To do this the stone idol draws attention to its physical presence. As Nicolette Zeeman explains about the idol generally, it "refuses to be read as part of a larger sign system, drawing attention only to itself and to its own malleable materiality. In this sense, although highly material, it is 'nothing.'"⁵⁸ The

⁵⁸ Nicolette Zeeman, "The Idol of the Text," in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 44.

context of the idol (it is a representation of Rome's city god) is absent from this inherited hagiography and, for the late medieval reader, the idol becomes a container that demands foolish worship while at the same time reflecting eerily upon the performance of Christian faith. The result is that Almachius's faith looks startlingly superficial. While he may very well believe in Jupiter's authority, he is not really concerned that Cecile shares his view. He instead demands that she go through the motions, and pretend that she believes so that he can get on with his job and she can go on her way. This is the opposite of the doctrine of faith that Cecile has embodied throughout the narrative. In a world where flowers and smells can only be perceived through total faith in God, Cecile's desire for a "ghostly" relationship with Christ will not accept such superficial worship. Thus the idol not only proves itself to be a container of "nothing," adherence to it also prevents the faithful from developing a deeper, more spiritual relationship with the divine. The distraction of the idol stymies true faith.

The result is a confrontation between the saint and the prefect in which Cecile outlines in detail Almachius's failure to use his senses effectively:

"Ther lakketh no thyng to thyne outter yen
That thou n'art blynd; for thyng that we seen alle
That it is stoon -- that men may wel espyen --
That ilke stoon a god thow wolt it calle.
I rede thee, lat thyn hand upon it falle
And taste it wel, and stoon thou shalt it fynde,
Syn that thou seest nat with thyne eyen blynde.

"It is a shame that the peple shal
So scorne thee and laughe at thy folye,
For comunly men woot it wel overal
That myghty God is in his hevenes hye;
And thise ymages, wel thou mayst espye,
To thee ne to hemself mowen noght profite,
For in effect they been nat worth a myte." (498-511)

Cecile does not simply condemn Almachius for his love of an object. The saint rejects the methods the prefect uses to communicate with his god. Almachius is a man who sees and then believes; he recognizes the idol and subsequently chooses to venerate it. He is all too willing to accept that the spiritual can be manifested in a physical form. And in direct opposition to the faith-before-materiality that Valerian and Tiburce seem to possess, Almachius argues that one can experience the divine before possessing faith. Both his use of the idol and the state sanctioned performances of faith rely upon the human senses to give the idol authority. Kellie Robertson explains that, “deprived of its own voice” a rock or stone object is “continually ventriloquized in the service of shoring up human custom.”⁵⁹ As both contemporary and early modern images of the *Vitae* suggest, the idol and the god which it represents can appear animated, much like the stone figures that occupied churches throughout England. And like Robinson’s rocks, such stone creations became “a recognizable place to test where the material world ended and the immaterial began.”⁶⁰ These stone goods are “not merely passive objects of the human gaze, but active participants in shaping the mental reality of percipients, rocks have the capacity to organize humans who look at them.”⁶¹ Happy to embrace the communal properties of the stone, Almachius uses both the human labor inscribed upon the stone (it looks like Jupiter) and the substance of the object itself to reinforce Roman religious and social

⁵⁹ Kellie Robertson, “Exemplary Rocks,” in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, DC: Oliphant Books, 2012), 95.

⁶⁰ Robertson, “Exemplary Rocks,” 95.

⁶¹ Robertson, “Exemplary Rocks,” 106.

order. For the prefect, the substance and crafting of the stone functions as an access point to the divine.

Yet, as Cecile points out, in performing rites that appeal to worldly senses, sacrifices and burning of incense, Almachius seems to miss the connection with the spiritual. Cecile's instruction, that he touch and lick the stone, is a way of appealing to Almachius's lesser senses, since his loftier ones—sight, smell, and hearing—have clearly failed him. Like the stone, Almachius is deaf and dumb and unable to comprehend that God is found in Heaven and not in “these ymages” which neither he nor any other man can hope to profit from. In addition, Cecile also reflects that the images are incapable of helping themselves, simultaneously acknowledging the perceived independence of objects while also dismissing such goods as useless. Engaging in a fiscal rather than spiritual analysis, Cecile appeals not to Almachius's divine senses (he does not have any) but to his financial awareness. There is no profit and such goods are not worth a penny (“myte”). This is Cecile's last argument against such goods and referencing the marketability of the idol seems to be her final attempt to show Almachius the error of his senses and his philosophy. The object is a commodity and was produced by men to enter a market, even if it is a small one of similar idols. Part of its distracting power, the value of the idol is hinted at in Cecile's critique so that the observer does not understand the object as a container of symbolic or religious power, but instead sees matter, the material from which it was constructed. The prefect, like many late medieval readers of the tale, would have recognized that such an object could easily be a “locus of the divine.”⁶² And yet for Almachius, through this thing, the senses are led astray by earthly power and poor

⁶² Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 65.

instruction. As we have seen, the teachings of Cecile refute the idea that the divine can operate directly through matter.

The substance of the idol, rather than the meaning it is meant to represent, becomes its primary message. In an earlier part of the debate, Cecile twice notes that Almachius's words are "wood" (450, 467). Cecile is calling Almachius's judgment of the Christians mad or insane ("a wood sentence") and later uses the word as a verb to describe the prefects raging ("He stareth, and woodeth in his advertence"). In a narrative so critical of substance, the word wood links madness with materiality.⁶³ Almachius's behavior is defined by worldly substance rather than the reason that such an important civil servant should possess. What Cecile ultimately mocks is Almachius's inability to recognize the "irreducible materiality"⁶⁴ of the idol that he venerates. More than reading signs, we are engaging the very materiality of the objects themselves. Though their spiritual associations are important, the matter from which they are composed is equally so. The idol is carved by man to represent the image of a god and the prefect of a Roman town has no right to bless or venerate an object for worship. Almachius is not a priest, and his political powers are not religious, resulting in, according to Cecile's account, a gross miscalculation of power. She claims that the public whom Almachius seeks to control is not only aware of his idolatry but mocks him for it. Though he is unable to recognize the true God, seemingly because he uses his "outter yen" rather than his inward

⁶³ Scanning the entry on "wood" in Tatlock's concordance to Chaucer indicates that the poet did use the word as both the adjective and the noun that describes a tree or forest. John S.P. Tatlock and Arthur G. Kennedy, *A Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, and to the Romaunt of the Rose* (Washington, DC: The Carnegie Institution, 1927), 1079.

⁶⁴ William Pietz, "The Problem of Fetish, I," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring 1985): 7.

one, the people that he governs can. Yet in some ways this has suited him, for he can see the power of Rome all around. Nevertheless, his strong-arm tactics of compelling faith result in nothing more than a superficial acceptance of his god Jupiter, rather than a faith-based worship. And because the basis of his power seems to rest upon a communal worship of Jupiter, he is rendered impotent at Cecile's verbal attack. She asserts her religious and intellectual independence and refuses to worship the city's chief god, removing from the prefect his most important social-controlling mechanism. As Kleinberg reminds us, the medieval Church preserved many Roman institutional elements including rituals, clothes, and hierarchical structures. Almachius represents both a formerly glorious hierarchical power and one that is startlingly familiar.⁶⁵ As a result, the conflict between the celestial flowers and worldly idols underpins the struggle between Cecile's still forming church and Almachius's decaying paganism.

Lesson 4. Relics and Failure: A Moral to the Story

If using idols and other material goods to access the divine creates scorn and “folye,” what are we to make of the end of the narrative when Cecile is turned into a relic, and her house is recommissioned as a church? What is the moral of the story if such an a-material saint can be transformed into an object by her own flock? Are her goods privileged because they are from her, or are they just as problematic as the idol? In this final section, I will illustrate how the “Tale” attempts to acknowledge the danger of looking at and manipulating apparently privileged goods, like relics, and how, though counter to Cecile's teachings, such impulses are unavoidable.

⁶⁵ Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word*, 183.

Like the rest of the narrative, Cecile's sentence and martyrdom reinforce the power of witnessing and watching. The prefect demands that she be moved to her house and that they "Brenne hire right in a bath of flambes rede" (514-5). Hiding her away from the public eye, Almachius separates the aristocratic saint from her community and confines her in what must have been a fine house (her own). Almachius hides Cecile's suffering from the Christians, though his reason for doing so is not articulated. It could be out of respect for her family's social position, but equally it might be to hide the saint from her devoted flock so that they cannot see the pain he anticipated inflicting. Such a concern reinforces Almachius belief that a vision of worldly materials and events are not only memorable but can alter the person looking. Like the stone image, seeing a woman martyred is likely a moving sight that could instill fear or produce and reinforce faith in the observers. Nevertheless, Cecile refuses to become a hidden image of suffering and, placed into a burning cauldron, she continues denying her senses by staying in heat where she was "al coold and feeled no wo" (521). Her body is not affected by the flames and so Almachius must then opt for the more direct beheading of Cecile. But in prayer Cecile asks God for three days to preach and redistribute her household goods. She remains mostly beheaded, exposed to the view of the local population, with her neck "ycorven" and during this time we read that, "The Cristen folk, whiche that aboute hire were,/With sheetes han the blood ful faire yhent./Thre dayes lyved she in this torment" (535-7). Finally forced to yield her body's pain, Cecile preaches through the physical torment of a partial beheading. As Little has pointed out, "the word *seeing* and its synonyms quite simply disappear from the tale at this point. Although more conversions occur around the

dying body of Cecilia, nobody sees anything.”⁶⁶ And while it is true that the verb is absent from the text, startling because it was so present earlier, the implied vision of her suffering remains. This is a fleshy moment in which a woman with her neck grotesquely wounded manages to perform the miracle of preaching through torment. And in this process Almachius also creates a new orifice for Cecile, that of the wound in her neck which spills forth blood just as words come from her mouth. But it is Cecile’s blood, rather than her words, that attracts the attention of the gathered Christians. And it is through their eagerness to preserve the saint’s physical form, rather than the message that she verbally espouses, that her body becomes both spectacle and material relic.

For Chaucer’s contemporary audience, this is a familiar though likely unnerving problem. As Patrick Geary notes in his work on relics, such items were often considered to be alive, retaining something of the essence of the saint within the fibers of the linen.⁶⁷ And as Bynum explains, “The bones of saints are the saints by origin and descent; pictures of them are not.”⁶⁸ The same is true for Cecile’s blood, which is made available to the onlookers through her suffering. Unlike the stone idol or religious images generally, the relic could give the user unique access and facilitate direct communication with the given saint. Many books of hours of the late medieval period contain prayers

⁶⁶ Little, “Images, Texts and Exegetics,” 123.

⁶⁷ Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 153. For some helpful sources on pilgrimage, relics and reliquaries see: Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Howard Loxton, *Pilgrimage to Canterbury* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1978); Nancy Netzer and Virginia Reinburg eds., *Memory and the Middle Ages* (Boston: Boston College Museum of Art, 1995); Henk van Os, *The Way to Heaven: Relic Veneration in the Middle Ages* (Utrecht: Museum Catharijneconvent, 2000).

⁶⁸ Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 126.

which, if said before particular relics, might provide more intimate access to the saint than through just prayers alone.⁶⁹ Like the Eucharist, the ultimate relic, the remains of saints received gifts and indicated their feelings by bleeding or exuding odors.⁷⁰ And though Cecile's relics are not yet part of this system, historically it would not take long for such goods to find themselves stored away in elaborate reliquaries and showered with costly tokens of faith. So, while personal to those who acquire them, modest Cecile's blood trapped in scraps of spare cloth could have been destined for golden, glass, and bejeweled vessels displayed on the pilgrimage circuit.

Yet relics, as Geary notes, are themselves potentially empty goods: "Although, symbolic objects, they are of the most arbitrary kind, passively reflecting only exactly so much meaning as they were given by a particular community."⁷¹ Relics are meaningless outside the community that venerates them, especially if they lack a written record of their value. Without such an identifying text the relics become bones and fabric in boxes—passive objects with no (or at least different) power or intrinsic value. If such goods are stolen or moved to a new community, the objects must work new miracles to prove their saintly connection: "When a relic was stolen or sold, it was impossible to steal or sell its old function in its original location. Thus the theft could not result in the transfer of ideas or of religious or cultural values. In its new location it became an important symbol only if the society made it one, and this symbolism was necessarily a

⁶⁹ Kathleen Kameron, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry in England 1350-1500* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 180-83.

⁷⁰ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 153.

⁷¹ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 5.

product of that society.”⁷² Similar to Almachius’s idol, the materiality of the relic is on display to the viewer. Many reliquaries were constructed so that the relic itself could be seen surrounded by the gold and jewels of the reliquary itself. The pilgrims’ desire was to cast their eyes upon the actual object and see a piece of a saint. If accepted as genuine, these objects were considered conduits to the divine.

But, as Steven Justice has persuasively reminded us, belief and the experience of relics and miracles in the period was neither simple nor uncritical. Through a discussion of miracles, Justice argues that “the mind never settles into belief.” Miracles and the objects that facilitate them are never unanimously accepted nor do they strip the viewer of their logical faculties. As Justice explains through a discussion of Aquinas,

Though belief is evidently a cognitive and intellectual activity, it just as evidently is not the free course of cognition and intellect left to themselves...For what provokes the sharpest resistance of the mind is precisely the determination to hold it to a series of propositional commitments already undertaken, to keep it “under the sway of the will.”⁷³

Like the functions of memory and the senses that Cecile describes in her teachings, intellect, imagination, and thought must also be tamed and conditioned. Viewers of relics and religious items should be critical of the goods they see, and question and perhaps even dismiss the objects which claim (or are made to claim) power. And while this is the ideal which Cecile’s example aspires to, the messy reality is that these objects usually cannot inscribe their own saintly power. Unless the saint chooses to activate a particular relic through miracles, the good is destined to remain only what it is made of or produced

⁷² Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 7.

⁷³ Steven Justice, “Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?,” *Representations* 103, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 14.

from. The act of claiming Cecile's blood in this way not only condemns a part of her to misdirecting the attention of the some of the well meaning faithful, it also reminds readers of the difficulty in validating such objects.

The Pardoner provides a further reminder that legitimized sources can also produce and champion fraudulent relics. While describing his performance, the Pardoner mentions his "cristal stones/Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones—/Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon" (347-49). Revealing himself and his relics to be false, the Pardoner explains how he uses such materials to make a comfortable living by tricking the unwary and the desperate. Unlike Tiburce and Valerian, who have a trustworthy saint to interpret mystical goods, the late medieval man or woman is left with only the assurances of papal servants whose authority is questionable. The casual disrespect of the goods is also apparent in the Pardoner's cramming of the bones and clothes into jars.

Cecile's relics have yet to enter either the Pardoner's marketplace or the marketplace associated with pilgrimage and fine reliquaries, but Chaucer's audience, who could have visited the relics of Saint Cecile in Rome, would certainly have been aware of the problems associated with relics and their veneration. By turning her into a relic, the text seems to problematize her personal rejection of the senses and the material. While such items might be explained as mystical goods, capable of providing the user with a safe conduit to the divine, the textual reality is that Cecile's blood is held by some left-over scraps of fabric. These goods function as mementos of Cecile and her suffering. And as the Pardoner's example suggests, such goods can be misinterpreted just as easily as Almachius misunderstands his idol. Like the idol, these goods should have no meaning beyond their obvious physical materiality. And unlike the statue to Jupiter, which is made

of stone and so will retain its shape and subsequently its meaning for centuries, the scraps of bloody fabric decay at a much faster rate and are forever anonymous, relying upon the collector and subsequent owners accurate labeling, and reports of mystical encounters with the saint through the relic. Recalling Cecile's argument about idols, such goods should be transcended so that the viewer or user moves immediately past the spiritual to the physical.

This argument is similar to that of the Lollards who also distrusted the cost and display of pilgrimage and the subsequent worship of relics and images. In the same polemic against images mentioned earlier, the Lollard author explains how images and materiality are tied into pilgrimage. Joining images and reliquaries the author notes,

For summe lewid folc wenen þat þe ymagis doun verreyly þe myraclis of hemsilf, and þat þis ymage of þe crucifix be Crist hymself, or þe seynt þat þe ymage is þere sett for likenesse. And þefore þei syn 'þe swete rode of Bromholme', 'þe swete rode of Grace' ... but cleuen sadly strokande and kyssand þese old stones and stokkis, layying doun hore grete offryngis, and maken avowis riȝt þere to þes dede ymagis to come þe nexst ȝeer agayn, as ȝif þei weren Crist and oure Lauedy and Ion Baptist and Thomas of Caunterbery and siche oþer.⁷⁴

The passage conflates donations to relics with the images that would have surrounded them.⁷⁵ The message is that Christians should not give their money to objects but to the poor. Just as Cecile says in her teachings, the Lollard writer urges the reader to remember that it is not the physical representations of saints that perform miracles but their spirit. The expensive reliquaries that will eventually surround these saintly leftovers become a package of deceit, channeling the viewer's prayers and money to sustaining the object

⁷⁴ Hudson, *Selections From English Wycliffite Writings*, 87.

⁷⁵ See also the 12 conclusions of the Lollards, especially number eight, for a similar discussion of relics and images. Hudson, *Selections From English Wycliffite Writings*, 27.

rather than helping the needy. The author goes on to say that the saints would themselves be displeased with individuals wasting funds on maintaining their images and by extension relics.⁷⁶ To rely upon relics for a spiritual boon might be just as spiritually blind as Almachius is with his idol. These bits of cloth are destined to be used, like the statue to Jupiter, as social and political goods, in addition to objects of faith. Relics were used for swearing oaths and became highly political and communal objects as they were stolen and translated from one place to another.⁷⁷ As religious goods they were, like images, worldly manifestations of faith and were used to reinforce belief. Thus by collecting the saint's blood, the Christian folk not only turn the saint into a material good, they also create a series of objects that will eventually enter the potentially idolatrous religious marketplace of Chaucer's time. Pilgrims might even travel great distances, perhaps telling stories in a group, to visit the cathedral where the relics were kept. What the reader is left with is a strong rebuttal of object veneration in favor of an early Church approach to things; and of course the latent irony that the message comes from the life of a saint whose relics were subsequently venerated.

The final lines of the "Tale" reinforce the problems that any of Chaucer's readers would have to face when determining how to listen to their goods. The "Tale" finishes with Urban consecrating Cecile's home, which "into this day, in noble wyse,/Men doon to Crist and to his seint servyse" (552-3). The inevitability of this act, turning her extant dwelling into religious infrastructure, is I think the real "moral" to this story. Human experience can account for all of these lessons simultaneously and people can struggle

⁷⁶ Hudson, *Selections From English Wycliffite Writings*, 88.

⁷⁷ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 4.

with and act upon vastly different ideas and beliefs which are contradictory to one another. While late medieval Christians might learn from Cecile's example, and some lucky one might even catch a glimpse of mystical goods, the truth is that Chaucer's audience is most likely aligned with the relic makers and those who will redecorate the saint's home. Making do with what is left over, late medieval men and women cannot interpret their world without the senses and must hope that they are not led astray by either ecclesiastical authority or the goods that they have come to trust. This, I believe, is Chaucer's shrug: while readers can work to train their vision and smell to better perceive the divine, Chaucer's audiences are called upon accept the reality that there will always be the potential for distraction and that we cannot always know that what we are looking at is safe—an unpleasant prospect if, like Almachius, one's soul can so easily be led to error.

Chapter 4

MARGERY KEMPE'S DISSENTING TEXT(ILES) OR CHANGING CLOTHES, CHANGING LIVES

[The *Book of Margery Kempe*] I have suggested, is not to be categorized a priori as a religious treatise, a pious *vita*, but rather as a text negotiating and absorbing various genres and values (hagiographic, mercantile, and romantic).

--David Wallace ¹

Early in the *Book of Margery Kempe*, during a section devoted to explaining how Margery's confessor learned to trust her words and not his eyes, we read about a young man and his clothes. Having approached the priest-confessor decrying poverty and misfortune, the young man explains that, after taking holy orders, and through a series of unfortunate events, he inflicted serious bodily harm upon two people who were either dead or going to die from their wounds. Banned from fulfilling his vocation, the young man sought help and charity from the confessor. Believing the young man's good will and intention to be an honest priest, we read that the confessor gave "credens to þe 3ong mannys wordys," because "he was an amyabyll persone, fayr feturyd, wel faueryd in cher & in cuntenawns, sad in hys langage and dalyawns, prestly in hys gestur & vestur."²

Margery, of course, knows better and says that any charity should be directed towards

¹ David Wallace, *Strong Women: Life, Text, and Territory 1347-1645* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 110.

² Sanford B Meech and Hope Emily Allen, eds, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, EETS 212 (1940; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 24.56. All references to the *Book* are from this edition. Citations will include chapter and page number.

neighbors that the townsfolk already know and trust rather than strangers, “for many spekyn & schewyn ful fayr owtward to þe sygth of þe pepyl, God knowyth what þei arn in her sowlys.” And Margery is proven correct as the young man runs off with the priest’s money, never to be seen again.

This scene is typically read as evidence of Margery’s intensely regional attitudes and suspicion of those not from East Anglia. Central to this expression of distrust is an analysis of attire and vision. From the priest’s perspective, the young man appears trustworthy: his personality and language are pleasant, he knows how to flatter, and most importantly for this story, he looks like a priest. Both the young man’s gestures and his attire are appropriate for the role that he claims to occupy. Margery’s confessor, wishing to identify with one of his own, is persuaded to trust, even against good advice, because of behavior and attire. The moral of this story is clearly articulated in Margery’s warning: you should not trust what you see, especially when dealing with people, for they are able to hide their true intentions; only God can know their “sowlys.” But as I have already discussed in my previous chapter on idols and vision, objects too are just as capable of having their true intentions hidden. In that chapter the eye, and as a result the mind and rational faculties, was confused by objects that acted upon the person looking. Similarly, in the example of the young swindler, clothing helps to confuse the priest of Lynn who wants such goods to be stable signifiers, and learns the hard way that they are not.

As this example suggests, the *Book of Margery Kempe* is a narrative not only invested in appearance, but in the myriad of meanings assigned to attire. From the opening chapter, Margery punctuates her tale with descriptions of what she and other people wear upon their bodies. Though these objects are not always textiles, the semiotics

of clothing and adornments are, I will argue, essential to understanding Margery's transition from mother to mystic. Margery employs a vocabulary of attire to help her to negotiate her tumultuous spiritual transition. Through moments like the one discussed above, we find that textiles create and inform text. But while attire is clearly an important element in Margery's construction of world and self, scholars have not yet paused over the mystic's sartorial claims. The only exception to this is the work done to read the white clothing that appears later in the narrative, an issue that I will discuss in greater depth in the chapter that follows this one.³ What Margery's experiences illustrate, and what this chapter will demonstrate, are the reasons why Margery chooses to articulate her spiritual and worldly experiences through attire. And while scholarship to date has taken only a superficial interest in Margery's sartorial narrative, there is a rich body of scholarship on Margery's material circumstances. My first section will establish Margery's mercantile roots through those voices. The section that follows will discuss the historical circumstances of Margery's attire, including theories of clothing and textile technology, as well as the way that Margery begins her entwined sartorial and spiritual transition during the opening third of the book. The final section will demonstrate that, while Margery is fully capable of reading the world of attire, the language of clothing is ultimately a tool that can be grossly manipulated and misread by those the mystic encounters.

³ Gunnel Cleve, "Semantic Dimensions in Margery Kempe's 'Whyght Clothys,'" *Mystics Quarterly* 12, no.4 (1986): 162-70; Mary C. Erler, "Margery Kempe's White Clothes," *Medium Aevum* 62, no.1 (Spring 1993): 78-83; Michael Vandussen, "Betokening Chastity: Margery Kempe's Sartorial Crisis," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 41, no. 3 (July 2005): 275-88.

Lady of the Marketplace: Family, Class, and Bishop's Lynn

Margery's material experience is often articulated as a component of her East Anglian upbringing. As scholars such as Gail McMurray Gibson, John Goodman and Kate Parker have noted, Margery's behavior can be read as a product of her life in Lynn. Gibson has reflected upon Margery's performance of mysticism by observing the mercantile culture of Lynn and the culture of theatre in East Anglia. Goodman and Parker have written about continental and economic influences on both the development of Lynn and the development of Margery's experience as a mystic.⁴ East Anglia, and Lynn particularly, were burgeoning centers of lay piety driven by the wealth and patronage of regional cloth merchants.⁵ Fifteenth century East Anglia was a place filled with expressions of new money, with everything from small civic building projects like improving the system of wells for local inhabitants in Norwich, to new parish churches with elaborately decorated interiors.⁶ Increased social mobility meant that status, which was traditionally articulated by birth, could now be demarcated through new "visible and

⁴ Anthony Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, (New York: Longman, 2002) and Kate Parker, "A Little Local Difficulty: Lynn and the Lancastrian Usurpation," in *Medieval East Anglia*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 115-129. Essential studies of Margery include Lynn Staley's *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1991), and Sarah Beckwith's "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe," in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 195-215.

⁵ Gail McMurry Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 2.

⁶ Carole Rawcliffe, "Health and Safety at Work in Late Medieval East Anglia," in *Medieval East Anglia*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 133. Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, 26. See also Theresa Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 52.

acquirable markers of social identity.”⁷ Rising standards of living allowed more people to buy fancier clothes, and in Claire Sponsler’s words, this “puts...new styles within the reach of a fairly wide range of consumers, widening the scope of the fashions’ potential impact and linking them with deeper concerns about social and economic changes.”⁸ As a result those tools that previously could be used to demarcate social rank—clothing and other moveable goods—were no longer reliable. Richly made clothing and goods, previously for the elite only, were becoming widely available to rich merchants and artisans. Even poorer individuals might acquire fashionable attire on the burgeoning used clothing market.⁹

One result of this economic boom were the ever changing but seldom (or never) enforced sumptuary laws, created to limit these wealthy upstarts to prevent them from topping their social superiors in fashion. Drafted in response to clothing’s newly disruptive power, the first English sumptuary legislation appeared in 1336 and the first act addressing clothing specifically in 1363.¹⁰ This Act of Apparel specifically dealt with the ways that overspending on clothes impoverished the land and consumed the wealth of

⁷ Claire Sponsler, “Narrating the Social Order: Medieval Clothing Laws,” *CLIO: A Journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History* 21, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 266.

⁸ Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

⁹ Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 14-15.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that while the first laws appear in the 14th century there was earlier legislation to control the cost of beer and bread from the early 13th. This further extended to laws which regulated weights and measure to ensure accuracy. Thus these regulations, in part, grew from the intent to control the pricing and distribution of foodstuffs. See Frances Elizabeth Baldwin’s seminal and yet to be surpassed study on sumptuary law, *Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Regulation in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1926), 13-15.

the kingdom.¹¹ Acts of Apparel, of course, did not cease in the Middle Ages but they did remain concerned with regulating the cost of fashion and who had access to it. For example, in a 1463 sumptuary statute which limited the rights of the middling classes to dress as nobility, we find that individuals who must hold office, chiefly mayors and aldermen, were permitted to dress as esquires and gentlemen so that they could properly display their power.¹² Though this particular code is after Margery's lifetime, it does point to the importance of performing social roles through displays of material status, and especially through clothing. The 1363 law states that "merchants, citizens, burgesses, artificers, and handicraftsmen with incomes up to 500 pounds (...may dress in the manner of esquires and gentlemen with incomes of 100 pounds per year); and those with 1,000 pounds per year (...may dress as esquires and gentlemen with income of 200 pounds per year)."¹³ The rather significant gap between what merchants could afford and what they were allowed to spend is a telling reminder that such middling classes were expected to earn more than the landed aristocracy but that such wealth was not meant to be displayed publicly on their person. It is clear that such laws were working to "posit an imagined past in which the visible signs of identity coincided with innate identity."¹⁴ Nevertheless, the need to control what individuals wore suggests that significant numbers

¹¹ Margaret Rose Jaster, "'Clothing Themselves in Acres': Apparel and Impoverishment in Medieval and Early Modern England," in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles Volume 2*, ed. Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), 93-4.

¹² Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 16.

¹³ Sponsler, "Narrating the Social Order," 275.

¹⁴ Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 11.

of people used clothing to transgress those economic and class boundaries, thus confusing the onlooker.

Margery is aware of the power of rich clothing and was raised to appreciate what such goods can communicate. Margery's father, John Brunham, was a politically important and wealthy man. An influential merchant, John was both mayor of Lynn and MP multiple times while Margery was young.¹⁵ Margery thus grew up accustomed to the comforts and prestige attached to what might most easily be termed an upper middle class existence. As Jenny Kermode notes in a study of late medieval English merchants, the mercantile household's consumption of goods was "conspicuously greater than that of their crafts neighbours."¹⁶ Indeed, such families would have possessed a great variety of valuable furnishings and personal adornments that they would have passed on to their offspring or bequeathed to charities in their parish. Thus Margery's conspicuous consumption of goods in many ways befits her social and economic position. She was "socially prominent and well-to-do, a member of one of the most prominent families in one of England's richest towns" and subsequently was raised around and married into the best parts of the mercantile lifestyle, benefiting from her family's position.¹⁷ Margery's strong sense of familial pride is retained throughout the narrative, though it is most amusingly articulated during a tiff with her husband in which she scorns John Kempe's

¹⁵ Kim Phillips, "Lynn and the Making of a Mystic," in *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 18.

¹⁶Jenny Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverly and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19.

¹⁷ Sheila Delany, "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*" in *Writing Women: Women Writers and Women in Literature Medieval to Modern* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 82.

status: “sche was comyn of worthy kenred, —hym [John Kempe] semyd neuyr for to a weddyd hir, for hir fadyr was sum-tyme meyr of þe town N. and sythyn he was alderman of þe hey Gylde of þe Trinyte in N. And þerfor sche wold sauyn þe worschyp of hir kynred what-so-euyr ony man seyde.”¹⁸ Though Margery might have perceived her husband as less prominent than her father, John Kempe nevertheless came from a similarly powerful and important merchant family. Nevertheless, it was her duty to maintain the dignity of her family and household through material manifestations of power, including clothing.

Much scholarship has been devoted to describing Margery’s familial bonds and how those relationships translate into her spiritual life. Roger A. Ladd has noted the importance of Margery’s mercantile upbringing, and observes that the “reliance on holy poverty reflects in Kempe’s narrative...that she cannot cast off the anxieties of her estate-position as easily as she casts off her business failures.”¹⁹ Ladd defines the merchant-class as a unique estate and reminds us that “Having a family prominent in a town’s economic and spiritual life is not equivalent...to being ‘bourgeois’ in the Marxian sense or ‘middle class’ in the modern sense.”²⁰ While Ladd’s warning is important and helpful, Margery’s description of her community and material consumption is familiar in regards to ways of defining a middle class. She shares similar values to other members of her community, though her performance of those values might be more extreme. In addition Margery describes her ability to acquire, use, and be used by objects that enter a

¹⁸ *Book*, 2.9.

¹⁹ Roger A. Ladd, *Antimercantilism in Late Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 111.

²⁰ Ladd, *Antimercantilism*, 102.

marketplace. Thus while she is clearly of the merchant class, and struggles to negotiate that identity with her late-in-life conversion to mystic, Margery does seem to warrant the label 'middle class.' Indeed her narrative is important as a classed text for, as Sandra Bhattacharji explains, the *Book* "is a valuable example for us of the great mass of middle and lower classes... whose lives left few marks on the official documents of their day."²¹

While Ladd's critique of class is valuable, much of the earlier scholarship on Margery discusses her class and its relationship with the marketplace of faith. Many scholars have recognized Margery's "bourgeois lay identity" and the way that it interacts with both the late medieval marketplace and her relationship with Jesus.²² Clarissa Atkinson has observed that Margery's "God was less a bookkeeper than a merchant prince, but more than either of those, a parent and lover."²³ David Aers also notes Margery's mercantile tendencies: "Margery acts as one merchant with capital negotiating with another to buy a commodity."²⁴ Though Aers's discussion centers upon Margery's marriage, the negotiation for exchange is equally true with Margery and Jesus as it is with John Kempe and her. For example, Margery enters into a direct exchange with Jesus very early in her narrative. In an effort to avoid having sex with her husband, an act which she finds unpleasant and unclean, she attempts to barter with Jesus who responds:

²¹ Santha Bhattacharji, *God is an Earthquake: The Spirituality of Margery Kempe* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), 2.

²² Emma Lipton, *Affectations of the Mind: The Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval English Literature* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 129.

²³ Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 203.

²⁴ David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), 96.

“Þow must fastyn þe Fryday boþen fro mete & drynke, and þow schalt haue þi desyr er Whitsunday, for I schal sodeynly sle þin husbonde.”²⁵ This deal is therefore profitable for both Jesus and Margery. By depriving herself in one way, through fasting, Margery is able to get Jesus to agree to rob her husband of his libido. Sheila Delany ties Margery and the Wife of Bath directly to the Marxist bourgeois marketplace and commodity. She comments that “With Margery Kempe, one is kept constantly aware of the ‘cash nexus’; it pervades her consciousness as it pervaded her world, part of every human endeavor and confrontation. No one is immune from money consciousness.”²⁶ Margery’s “cash nexus” is not vague or undefined. She begins by identifying herself through her relationship to objects and their exchange value and retains this throughout her spiritual transformation.

Worn Transgressions: Margery’s Shifting Sartorial Claims

Jesus’s Mantle and Clothing Theories

Margery’s social, economic, and material status are only part of the story: they establish that she is likely to read the world through a particular set of material objects, values, and assumptions. Her experience of those goods is far more complex and illustrates the difficulty of trusting what the eye perceives. The opening chapter to Margery’s *Book* establishes that this is a narrative about vision, interpreting the seen, and clothing. Plagued by visions of devils following the birth of one of her fourteen children, Margery frets for her soul and is convinced to abandon her faith, even physically scarring herself: she “bot hir owen hand so vyolently þat it was seen al hir lyfe after.”²⁷ Margery

²⁵ *Book*, 9.21.

²⁶ Delany, “Sexual Economics,” 86.

²⁷ *Book*, 1.8.

is persuaded by what she sees and is only saved through an equally compelling vision of Jesus in which he asks why she has abandoned him when he never abandoned her. During that revelation, Jesus is described as the “lyknesse of a man, most semly, most bewtyuows, & most amyable þat euyr mygth be seen wyth mannys eye, clad in a mantyl of purpyl sylke.”²⁸ Jesus appears to her in a way that her earthly (rather than spiritual) eye can perceive. The mantle, which in previous centuries functioned primarily as an insulating layer, had turned into a ceremonial garment that in its most decorative state would be produced with silks, furs, and extensive embroidery.²⁹ Whether Jesus is wearing a full or half mantle we do not know, but it is clear that the dye and quality of the clothing is meant to emphasize his beauty and kindness as well as his place in the Heavenly hierarchy. Jesus’s garment is not made of a local material like wool or vegetable fibers but of purple silk (probably like the type from Italy or Spain), which though available in the period would have been costly.³⁰ Traditionally used by religious authorities and royalty in the West, the later Middle Ages saw cheaper silks available to the “upper bourgeoisie” with the result that sumptuary laws sought to limit access to

²⁸ *Book*, 1.8.

²⁹ Maria Hayward, “Mantle,” in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles of the British Isles c. 450-1450*, ed. Gale Owen-Crocker, Elizabeth Coatsworth, and Maria Hayward (Brill: Leiden, 2012), 362.

³⁰ Rebecca Woodward Wendelken, “Silk: Silk in the British Isles,” in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles of the British Isles c. 450-1450*, ed. Gale Owen-Crocker, Elizabeth Coatsworth, and Maria Hayward (Brill: Leiden, 2012), 519. See also E. Jane Burns, *Sea of Silk: A Textile Geography of Women’s Work in Medieval French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

fabrics to the nobility.³¹ Jesus's ability to wear such a garment not only helps to demonstrate his role as the son of God, it also reminds us that he need not worry about the way his clothing will react to a physical environment. Such a delicate material would be impractical for a traveling garment. It also emphasizes that seeing can be believing: according to the logic of the devils, her soul would have been damned as a result of her despair. It is only when Jesus enters the scene with a semiotically uncomplicated garment that Margery is able to re-access salvation. He is dressed as he might appear in the books of hours and Corpus Christi dramas, texts that many scholars have noted are incorporated into Margery's *Book*.³²

Even this apparently conventional use and description of attire is potentially problematic, as Margery would have understood. This is, after all, not a real world garment but one from a vision and a counter reading provided by groups like the Lollards illustrates how luxurious garb could even be read as inappropriate for the son of God. In a treatise against images, a Lollard writer complains that painters dress Jesus and the saints in costly clothing, counter to the holy retinue's more humble origins. There are many misleading images in books that: "tau3ten þat Crist was naylid on þe crosse wiþ þus myche gold and siluer and precious cloþis, as a breeche of gold endentid wiþ perry, and schoon of siluer and a croune frettid ful of precious iewelis; and also þat Ion Baptist was

³¹ Francoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, trans. Caroline Beamish (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 19-21, especially 21.

³² Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 191-218; Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, 47-65; Kathleen Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry in England 1350-1500* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 138-145; Coletti, *Mary Magdalene*, 79-84.

clopid wip a mantil of gold and golden heer.”³³ Like Jesus in Margery’s vision, Saint John is dressed in a glamorous mantle and Jesus is also overdressed for his crucifixion. This Lollard rebuke is another example of how Margery might have internalized the very image that the Lollards were so worried about.

Orthodox voices express similar concerns about linking morality to the cost of clothing. One homilist argues that: “if such coste and outrage in clothis were nocht synne, God wolde nocht so scharpliche i-spoke there azenst, as he ded in the gospel, of the riche man that was clothed in purpur and bys.”³⁴ The author reminds readers that clothes were invented to cover Adam and Eve’s original sin and should be associated with “our forme fadres schame and of oure owne.”³⁵ While there is no reason to assert that such statements are direct responses to Acts of Apparel, the questions about what clothing should and should not do remain the same. Can we, as Chaucer suggests in the “General Prologue” to the *Canterbury Tales*, tell of the “condicioun” and “degree” of a person through their “array”?³⁶ Is it represented accurately or, through imagining Jesus’s silk mantle, are we focusing on the wrong thing?

This potential misreading of images and fashion is so dangerous that the Lollard author argues that such books should be burnt or exiled. Such sartorial expression implies that physical wealth mirrors spiritual dignity, an issue that is understandably at odds with

³³ Anne Hudson, ed., *Selections From English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 84.

³⁴ Bis is dark grey or blue-gray pigment from ‘bis’ MED. G.R. Owst, *Literature and the Pulpit in Medieval England* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc, 1961), 411. See also Sponsler, “Narrating the Social Order,” 271.

³⁵ Owst, *Literature and the Pulpit in Medieval England*, 411.

³⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer, “General Prologue,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 38, 40-1.

Lollard ideologies which advocate for less dramatic representations and performances of faith. And while Margery's description of Jesus does seem generic, the fact that she follows this account with an analysis of her own worldly attire suggests that she is fully aware of the semiotics of clothing and the potential breakdown of meaning from one onlooker to the next.

Margery makes us aware that one of the difficulties of analyzing clothing is that garments do not always function as a transparent or even coherent language. Grant McCracken, grounding his study of clothes and language in linguistics and anthropology, has observed that clothing and its register of meanings is inherently muted and appears incapable of communicating the same range of information as language: "Unlike language, which establishes signs and the rules for their combination into messages, a system such as clothing gives no generative opportunity, and must therefore specify in advance any act of communication of the messages of which the code is capable."³⁷ According to Grant, clothing, unlike language, cannot independently create ideas and "messages" without the human subjects first agreeing upon a spectrum of meanings for that attire. If that conversation does not take place, then new types or styles of clothing will only create confusion. As a result for "the clothing code, novelty of the sort possessed by language is not an opportunity for communication but a barrier to it." McCracken's intent was to reinvigorate the discussion of textiles by questioning the assumption that it can function as a linguistic system. His argument is a useful reminder that, as Margery observes, clothing does not always conform to a clear system of codes

³⁷ Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 67.

and responses. Onlookers will not always understand what they see. At the same time, clothing is a communicative tool, and is far more flexible than McCracken states. As Roland Barthes reminds us, “In literature, description is brought to bear upon a hidden object (whether real or imaginary): it must make that object exist.”³⁸ In *The Fashion System*, a study on language and limits of fashion, Barthes also points out that language invariably augments the capabilities of clothing: “by its abstract character, language permits isolating certain functions...it endows the garment with a system of functional oppositions...which the real or photographed garment is not able to manifest in a as clear a manner.”³⁹ Language is coupled with object to create a package of information. Not just object or words alone, the combination of the two facilitates new meanings for the human actants and the clothes themselves. In the case of Margery’s garments, such a collection of data will compel a spectrum of readings from her audience, many of which are paradoxical and opposed to Margery’s intentions.

Ultimately though, those trained to read certain types of dress, as Margery’s confessor is, will invariably read clothes in a prescribed way. As a result, the attire that Margery adopts later in the text, chiefly her white clothes, becomes gibberish for many as the audience struggles to work out the intended meaning. I will address this issue in greater detail below. For now, it is sufficient to observe that clothing is multivalent and does not necessarily provide a barrier to communication: gibberish still communicates something, even if it is just a state of confusion or brief moments of information. Indeed,

³⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 12.

³⁹ Barthes, *The Fashion System*, 14.

in Margery's text clothing is a key tool to communicating how she and others in her period experienced change in their lives.

Change is quite naturally at the heart of any discussion of clothing and fashion. Garments must, after all, move on and off the body. Change is the thing that sumptuary legislation hopes to control. And it is this struggle to keep clothing the same, so to avoid changing fashion and changing sartorial expressions, that Jesus's mantle exemplifies. Such clothing becomes part of a moralized system, and as Catherine Richardson notes, these garments become "embroiled in ethical notions of 'honesty'."⁴⁰ The hope of most individuals was that clothing could communicate a clear and socially unambiguous message about the wearer's financial, social, familial, and moral status. But like most readings of material goods in the period, Margery Kempe teaches readers to question their eyes, the objects, or the individual who manipulates the goods. As Andrea Denny-Brown notes in her *Fashioning Changes*:

despite their associations with frivolity and vanity, clothing and fashion were often understood to be philosophically and phenomenologically significant objects of study, engaging weighty issues of their culture, often under the guise of superficiality and caprice. Through their association with change...clothing and fashion become important tropes for exploring the processes of material transience.⁴¹

This lesson about the complicated semiotics of attire is not just theoretical for the mystic: she is labeled everything from a dissolute woman to a heretic, is imprisoned, and even has her life threatened due to her behavior and sartorial decisions. Margery's attire becomes her way of subjugating her body for Christ.

⁴⁰ Catherine Richardson, "Introduction," in *Clothing and Culture, 1350-1650*, ed. Catherine Richardson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 3.

⁴¹ Andrea Denny-Brown, *Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High and Late-Medieval England* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 2.

On The Runway: Margery's Worldly Attire

Margery compels her audience to respond to her behavior and attire. In the chapter immediately following her description of Jesus's mantle, Margery uses her own clothes to narrate what sinful attire looks like and in this section I will perform some of the many readings that can derive from this frequently cited passage. In Chapter Two Margery sets up for the reader her sense of self before her spiritual conversion. Advised by both her husband and "other mannys" Margery is told that her behavior is misguided. In a frequently excerpted moment, Margery explains her vice:

And, whan þis creatur was þus gracyowsly comen a-geyn to hir mende, sche thowt sche was bowndyn to God & þat sche wold ben his seruawnt. Neuyr-þe-lesse, sche wold not leeuyn hir pride ne hir pompows aray þat sche had vsyd be-for-tym, neiþyr for hyr husbond ne for noon oþer mannys counsel. And zet sche wyst ful wel þat men seyden hir ful mech velany, for sche weryd gold pypys on hir hevud & hir hodys wyth þe typettys were daggyd. Hir clokys also wer daggyd & leyd wyth dyuers colowrs be-twen þe daggys þat it schuld be þe mor staryng to mennys sygth and hir-self þe mor ben worshepd.⁴²

As numerous scholars have observed, the primary purpose of this passage is to articulate Margery's error for the reader. Appearing before the section that establishes her genealogy, this description of Margery's sinful array serves as a material manifestation of her pride. It also points to the conflict between materiality and spirituality in the early fifteenth century. Margery is forced to negotiate the fact that she is "bowndyn to God," with the duty of maintaining her personal and family prestige through dress. Like Jesus's mantle, Margery understands clothes as a way of signifying her social and spiritual status. Her clothes, though, display externally the fact that she has not changed internally. The

⁴² *Book*, 2.9.

inclusion of “nevertheless” indicates that her clothes are not neutral objects but, at least for Margery, barriers to fully being “bound” to God. According to Denny-Brown, clothing in the period can function as, “at once allegorical and material, old and new, public and private, clothing stretches to encompass the overlapping and ever-changing experiences of the body, the intellect, and the soul.”⁴³ Margery does use her clothing in these ways. The garments also allow Margery to define herself as exceptional and give her a mechanism to document, in this case, her slowness to change. Even from this early point in her narrative she intentionally crafts herself as an object and “creature” to be consumed visually and also one that can control those who are watching.

One of the key issues in this passage is the gendered link between Margery’s “villainy” and her stylish attire. She not only spends too much on her clothing and wallows in the vanity and excess of her fashion choices, Margery also ignores her husband and uses her attire to assert control over her household and environment. An object intimately tied to social control in the period, Margery’s clothing becomes a powerful tool, used to capture and hold the sight of those around her. Of her gown we hear nothing, but Margery gives us ample evidence of her clothing worn outside the home. Asserting her independence, both from her husband and her community, Margery’s cloak, hat, and hood fashion her as both strong willed and transgressive. A woman like Margery would likely have been wearing a tight fitting gown and kerchief to cover her hair and probably her neck. This attire would have been suitable indoors but clearly was not impressive enough to be worth mentioning. Instead, Margery spends her time describing her cloak and headdress, garments that were both easily coded as status

⁴³ Denny-Brown, *Fashioning Change*, 5.

symbols and meant to be used outside the safe walls of her home. Margery's garments expose her to criticism, rather than protect her family virtue. Her choice to wander out of doors, even in the company of her husband, explicitly for the purpose of attracting public attention is a subtle reminder of the sexual life that Margery lives with her husband and links her clothing to unchaste sexual desire.⁴⁴ As scholars like Sponsler have observed, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries frequently produced texts that were critical of women using their clothes to "capture the male gaze."⁴⁵ And while male and female styles were very similar, women were often accused of using their apparel to wantonly attract men. Margaret Hallissy explains that a good woman remains under the protection of her husband, father, or son in "their private domestic sphere, the interior spaces of the house and garden, [where] women's chastity is safe." Hallissy also notes that, "the 'loose' woman is associated with completely unenclosed or at least penetrable space."⁴⁶ For Margery, of course, the confines of the house are far more complicated. The home is where she regularly takes pleasure in the body of her husband and undergoes spiritual assault. But the public perception of Margery as a woman transgressing both the boundaries of her home and her spouse is clearly presented in the text and is something that remains a consistent battle for Margery throughout her narrative. Thus the fact that she articulates her sin through her descriptions of outerwear seems to suggest that she is aware of the public space as one which is potentially dangerous.

⁴⁴ Dyan Elliott, "Dress as Mediator Between Inner and Outer Self: The Pious Matron of the High and Later Middle Ages" *Medieval Studies* 53 (1991): 294-5.

⁴⁵ Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 8.

⁴⁶ Margaret Hallissy, *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer's Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 89-90.

By studying her descriptions of outerwear we can also learn how Margery empowers the clothing for her own purposes and allows the clothing to use her. Through this process she maintains her social status and makes her neighbors jealous. As many scholars have observed, Margery constantly balances the praise and censure of the community of Lynn. Margery's hope is that her clothes will make her "worshepd" within the community. It is only through the words of her husband and neighbors that Margery learns that her behavior is excessive and "pompows." Margery's fashion choices serve, as clothing often can, to simultaneously define her position within her community and thus join her to it, while working to set her apart from her peers and give her a feeling of social superiority, a drive that is never lost in the text even towards the end of her life. Importantly though, the semiotics of clothing, and materiality in general, are familiar to Margery. Margery knows that she can use clothes to make herself "worshepd" just as the fine dress of her neighbors can instill envy in her. She uses these things, overtly, to affect those observing her, to manipulate the community's perceptions and thus control her social self. Esteem and reputation is, of course, one of the many uses of clothing in any period. One of Margery's chief duties would be to help maintain the prestige of her household, which would naturally be extended through to her choice of clothing and adornments. Margery states that she "wold sauyn þe worschyp of hir kynred what-so-euyr ony man seyde" and thus was unwilling to compromise the status through wearing less grand clothing.⁴⁷

Further, the piped hat that Margery describes was of a type frequently mentioned in sources as evidence of pride or lust. They are also featured in caricatures of the

⁴⁷ *Book*, 2.9.

argumentative and combative wife and were often depicted like the horns of a cuckold.⁴⁸

Margery's discussion of worldly attire illustrates the persistent concern in the late Middle Ages for the power of an object and its potential to be misused and misunderstood. What clothing historian and Chaucerian Laura Hodges says of the Wife of Bath's coverchiefs is equally true of Margery's horned head-gear. They are a

highly charged costume sign: they are literally a gesture of submission to her married and legal status...and to St. Paul's dictum that women's heads should be covered in church; economically the proclamation of a cloth-maker's community status and wealth; aesthetically the beautiful veiling of an attractive, seductive woman; and morally the announcement of a woman's pride, materialism, and by extension her unchastity.⁴⁹

Though Margery is never a cloth maker, her horned headdress is nevertheless a significant economic marker. As the Acts of Apparel help us understand, Margery is intentionally destabilizing communal and social boundaries through her clothing. And while her motivations change, Margery's need to use personal adornments as a way of illustrating her religious devotion and sense of self does not.

Aligned with the potentially transgressive nature of Margery's public garments are the realities of production versus the problem of novelty. The "made-to-fit" aspect of Margery's clothes is important to her construction of self and the way that others perceived her. As has been frequently observed by fashion scholars, the mid-fourteenth century saw great changes in clothing manufacturing as styles became more form fitting. Due in part to technological advances in tailoring and manufacturing processes, clothing

⁴⁸ Laura F. Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume: The Secular Pilgrims in the General Prologue* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 167; Hallissy, *Clean Maids*, 120.

⁴⁹ Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume*, 172.

ceased to be a rectangle of fabric draped over the body and became tailored for the individual purchasing the clothes.⁵⁰ As Peter McNeil explains,

Workshops began to separate from princely courts and disseminated high levels of specialization. The most skilful makers moved from place to place...spreading new aesthetics within portable objects such as tailored clothes, textiles, embroideries, illuminated books, statuettes and jewels. Fashions in dress were central to technological innovation and the culture of social legibility and hierarchical display that characterized the late medieval and Renaissance Europe.⁵¹

A tailor might come to the home and, having been provided with the necessary textiles from the draper's shop, would measure the subject and produce the clothes "to fit."⁵² This process is eluded to in the *Book* when Margery describes a good man who "bowt white cloth & dede makyn hir a gowne þerof & an hood, a kyrtyl, & a cloke. And on þe Satyrday, wech was þe next day, at euyn he browt hir þis clothyng & ʒaf it hir for Goddys lofe."⁵³ No small development, such styles could include embroidery, furs, and the use of multiple types of cloth in the same garment. As Susan Crane explains, "Until the fourteenth century, garments for all social levels used simple, geometric cuts that might conceal or reveal the body, but did not aspire to revise the body's contours."⁵⁴ Stitching and lacing could tighten the cloth once on the body but it is not until the

⁵⁰ Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 13. See also Naomi Tarrant, *The Development of Costume* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁵¹ Peter McNeil, "Introduction: Late Medieval to Renaissance Fashion," in *Fashion: Critical and Primary Sources Volume 1 Late Medieval to Renaissance*, ed. Peter McNeil (New York: Berg, 2009), ix.

⁵² Piponnier and Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, 30-1.

⁵³ *Book*, 44.104.

⁵⁴ Crane, *The Performance of Self*, 13.

fourteenth century when the availability of silks, furs, oriental fabrics, and tighter, more flexible weaving in northern European textiles made “cutting to fit” practicable.⁵⁵ As Sarah-Grace Heller, in her groundbreaking book on French dress has pointed out, it is possible to overstate the innovative importance of this English advance, pointing out that the French had similar textual discussions of fashion in the thirteenth century.⁵⁶ Still, the change in styles and clothing technologies were clearly potent for Margery as she negotiated the burgeoning late medieval clothing marketplace.

What Margery’s marketplace of attire points to is the flexibility of meaning when clothing becomes fashion. Ultimately, fashion occurs when the purchaser has the opportunity to customize their purchase and when clothing is able to move beyond functionality. As Margery demonstrates with her hats and outer garments, fashion starts at the point when garments are used to nuance a performance of self. Trends that started with the prince and his retinue quickly trickled down to the merchants and wealthier artisans. Such garments were not just clothing but showed the signs of the fashion that McNeil suggest. And while definitions of fashion alter from scholar to scholar, central to the term is a notion that clothing turns into fashion when there is change and a “tension between those interested only in novelty and those calling (usually in vain) for greater reverences for the past.”⁵⁷ Margery, in constantly changing her attire, becomes a shifting signifier that her audience struggles to keep up with. At the same time, as with the confessor’s young man, both Margery and the audience also wish to use fashion as a way

⁵⁵ Crane, *The Performance of Self*, 13.

⁵⁶ Sarah-Grace Heller, *Fashion in Medieval France* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 51-54.

⁵⁷ Heller, *Fashion in Medieval France*, 17.

of clinging onto long-established values and assumptions. While novel, Margery's outerwear is also a way of securing her relationship with the past, reinforcing her familial and social status. Frustrating as this apparent paradox is, fashion allows for such simultaneously conflicting meanings: "it does not change and vary along predictable, linear, rational lines. On the contrary, there is a very human quality to this force that defies simple containment or straightforward logic."⁵⁸ Margery's clothes, like her life, are made up of complex and often conflicting meanings.

Margery's mention of daggs thus runs right into a contemporary conversation about the difference between clothing and fashion technology. As clothing historian Margaret Scott has noted, dagged cloth, or cloth that has been slashed and cut into points often with layers of differently colored fabric underneath, was usually produced for men. Such slashing was often performed on the hems and cuffs and thus would reveal a little more of the woman's figure than was considered appropriate. She explains that women "had less freedom, as dagged hems were incompatible with female modesty."⁵⁹ Indeed, Denny-Brown notes the sexualized aspects of dagging, explaining that in Margery's example the "penetrative act is not the literal cutting of the garment, but the male act of looking through the feminine garment."⁶⁰ Such gowns were popular both in England and on the continent and were produced to be noticed:

⁵⁸ Heller, *Fashion in Medieval France*, 25.

⁵⁹ Margaret Scott, *A Visual History of Costume: The Fourteenth & Fifteenth Centuries* (Tiptree, Essex: Anchor Brendon Ltd, 1986), 17.

⁶⁰ Andrea Denny-Brown, "Rips and Slits: The Torn Garment and the Medieval Self," in *Clothing and Culture, 1350-1650*, ed. Catherine Richardson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 235.

The edges of *houppelandes* and hoods were slashed in various patterns, such slashing being called ‘dagging’ in English and in French ‘*decopeures*’. The almost ragged appearance of this form of dress could be complemented by literally thousands of tiny gold or silver plaques or bells hanging from one *houppelande*. Raising an arm, or taking a step, would have caused the slashed edges to move, each piece hanging slightly differently, while the metalwork ensured that every movement caused a musical clinking.⁶¹

Though Margery records no such clinking in her description, it is not difficult to imagine the mystic dressed in such noisy attire. Like her later tears, the cloak that she wears could possess a music all its own and such garments would have attracted attention through the tinkling that would have accompanied movement. And while Margery may be exaggerating, given that these memories were recorded long after the events actually took place, the styles do seem to correspond. Thus, Margery’s dagged and horned headdress, though excessive and physically imposing, would have matched Margery’s gown, which could have been equally dramatic.⁶² The function of such clothing was not just to communicate Margery’s pride but also to impress itself upon those watching and invade their senses.

Margery is not the only one to address the ripping and excesses of attire; in Geoffrey Chaucer’s the “Parson’s Tale” there exists a similar conversation about the cutting of fabric. In this prose guide to the seven deadly sins, the Parson explains that the sin of Pride can often be perceived through garments:

As to the first synne, that is in superfluitee of clothyng, which that maketh it so deere, to harm of the peple/[...there is] mucche pownsonyng of chisels to maken holes, so mucche daggyng of sheres;/ forth-with the superfluitee in lengthe of the forseide gownes, trailynge in the dong and in the mire, on horse and eek on foote,

⁶¹ Margaret Scott, *Late Gothic Europe, 1400-1500* (London: Mills and Boon, LTD, 1980), 83.

⁶² Scott, *A Visual History*, 17.

as wel of man as of womman, that al thilke trailyng is verrailly as in effect wasted, consumed, thredbare, and roten with donge, rather than it is yeven to the povre, to greet damage of the forseyde povre folk.⁶³

The Parson suggests that there is a limited quantity of cloth available for consumption and that using valuable furs and textiles only serve to increase the cost and limit the availability of fabric for “povre folk.” In addition, such clothes can be abused and dragged upon the ground to become threadbare and caked with dung. Excessive fabric carries with it all the waste of the road and shows evidence of not being cared for. Nicole D. Smith explains that such dagging and cuts also suggest that the wearer is not usefully protecting themselves from the weather.⁶⁴ The Parson’s critique is thus one which circles around the way that commodities indicate class. To have dung soaked clothing is something that would typically define an agricultural worker or dung-herder, not a wealthy merchant or aristocrat. Further, the Parson notes that even if such clothes were distributed to the poor, they would be inappropriate, given their estate. In a more flexible discussion of fabrics, E. Jane Burns explains the power of textiles, noting that, “costume, fabric, and textile work can be seen to participate in a complex system of fabrications that move constantly between individual bodies and the social sphere, between material objects and various cultural representations of them, creating a relational dynamic.”⁶⁵ The

⁶³ Geoffrey Chaucer, “Parson’s Tale,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 416, 418-19.

⁶⁴ Nicole B. Smith, *Sartorial Strategies: Outfitting Aristocrats and Fashioning Conduct in Late Medieval Literature* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2012), 144.

⁶⁵ E. Jane Burns, “Why Textiles Make a Difference,” in *Medieval Fabrications: Dress, Textiles, Clothwork, and Other Cultural Imaginings*, ed. E. Jane Burns (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 4.

Parson argues for clothing as a stable signifier but Burns's remark reminds us that such adornments can never be static; the object cannot be separated from its cultural context. In addition, there was a vibrant used clothing market in the later Middle Ages and it was easy to buy cheap knock-off clothes crafted and dyed to resemble finer velvets and silks.⁶⁶ In sum, captured in Margery's worldly attire is the complexity of the medieval fashion world and the ease at which the mystic might manipulate or redefine goods based upon need and desire.

Also embedded in Margery's description of fashion is the cumbersome nature of such garments; then as now, wearing classy gowns and dangling sleeves was not necessarily practical. For example, the sleeves of her cloak would be heavy from the extra fabric of the dagging. Tippetts could take many forms and might be long sleeves or, in Margery's case, a tail of fabric hanging from the back of her hood. The fabric was not only ornamental, and so for style rather than function, but like its sleeve counterpart could have been produced from fur or another fabric different from that of the hood itself.⁶⁷ Part of her pride is not just that she wears such expensive garb and attracts attention. Instead we are also meant to consider the type of attention she is attracting. Like Jesus's cloak, Margery is not clothed in a practical garment, but one that would restrict her arms enough that it would be difficult to perform physical tasks. In her desire to be admired she does not simply want people to recognize the cost of her clothing but

⁶⁶ Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 14-15 and 11-12.

⁶⁷ Robin Netherton, "The Tippet: Accessory After the Fact?," in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles Volume 1*, ed. Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), 117. See also, Sarah Thursfield, *The Medieval Tailor's Assistant: Making Common Garments 1200-1500* (New York: Costume and Fashion Press, 2001).

also how good she looks in it. She wants to be stared at and hopes to control people through the way that she captures and holds their sight.

From the beginning of the narrative Margery is keenly aware of the power and value of material goods like her clothing, what Delany refers to as the ever present “internalization of mercantile capitalism.”⁶⁸ Such an attention to the marketplace can be seen in Margery’s own version of “keeping up with the Kempes”:

Sche had ful greet envye at hir neybowrs þat þei schuld ben arayd so wel as sche. Alle hir desyr was for to be worshepd of þe pepul. Sche wold not be war be onys chastysyng ne be content wyth þe goodys þat God had sent hire, as hir husbond was, but evyr desyryd mor & mor.⁶⁹

Margery is clearly a consumer in this passage and it is obvious that she uses clothing to manipulate and control her neighbors. For Delany, this process is fundamentally destructive: “Despite her class position, and to some extent because of it, Margery is exposed to and has internalized the most damaging aspects of bourgeois society.”⁷⁰ And while the “internalization” of consumption is clearly depicted as problematic, it is also the way that Margery sees the world, facilitating her conversion and allowing her to understand the mystical tears that she weeps throughout the text. Also important in this passage is the response of her husband, whose own acquisition of goods is far less ostentatious. Clothes are not just economic signifiers or objects used to trade for favors and power. They are also, as all clothes are, gendered. While male and female clothing construction and fashion did not differ to the same degree that modern clothing does, Margery’s clothes are part of a gendered system of adornments. As Hallissy explains, “A

⁶⁸ Delany, “Sexual Economics,” 84.

⁶⁹ *Book*, 2.9.

⁷⁰ Delany, “Sexual Economics,” 84.

woman's clothing, in addition to reflecting Christian humility and chastity, was expected accurately to signify her estate, not her individual personality. Because a wife's estate was derivative, her clothing was expected to reflect the estate of the dominant male in her life, being precisely attuned to his social status and, most importantly, his budget."⁷¹ Margery's clothes reflect her estate correctly but they also expose the excesses of her personality— her pipes and dagged hood illustrates her wifely disobedience. Failing to attend to the wishes of her husband in this and other things (like setting up a brewery and mill for example) Margery's fancy clothes are not sanctioned socially, in part, because they are not acceptable to her husband.

While the to-be mystic might have been a startling sight on the streets of Lynn, it is important to note that both her attire and the self-critique of her "villainy" are conventional. Just as she assumes that Jesus can use clothing to signify his power and prestige, Margery also knows through sermons and moral treatises, as well as the talk around town, that her fancy clothes must be morally questionable. Margery's description records a personal battle with her dangerous and powerful pre-conversion clothing, and in the early chapters of her narrative the clothes demonstrate that her transition to mystic will not be an easy one.

Hidden Textiles: Hair Shirts

What Margery seeks, ultimately, is to demonstrate her faith and stabilize her internal spiritual self through a sartorial system. The mystic's attempt to change her attitude towards fashion, and turn away from her fancy gowns, nevertheless produces a

⁷¹ Hallissy, *Clean Maids*, 114. See also Elliott, "Dress as Mediator," 279-308.

similarly disproportionate dress choice. Adopted in an attempt to scourge herself of her pride, Margery assumes a more subtle though equally eccentric hair shirt. Immediately following her rejection of the worldly, Margery describes her hair shirt:

sche gat hir an hayr of a kylne swech as men dryen on malt & leyd it in hir kyrtylle as sotylych and preuylich as sche mygth þat hir husbond xuld not aspye it, ne no mor he dede, & 3et sche lay be hym euery nygth in his bedde, & weryd þe hayr every day, and bar chylderyn in þe tyme.⁷²

Created from materials used to dry malt in a kiln, Margery's underclothes are possibly recycled from her failed brewery mentioned at the end of Chapter Two. Hiding the hair shirt from her husband and community, the rough garment appears to be Margery's attempt to reconsider her sartorial expressions in a less public, though equally conventional form. Such a garment is the opposite of the fashionable attire of the previous chapter. Her hair shirt would not be tailored or neatly sewn but instead cut roughly from a piece of coarse cloth. She opts for an object that functionally encloses her body, and acts as a barrier to pleasure and ease. The shirt is thus a constant reminder of sartorial and physical temptations while at the same time serving as a familiar good for Margery. Clinging to a sartorial vocabulary, Margery appropriates the hair shirt as a penitential tool to act upon her body. Usually worn by saints or individuals with the right to perform such extreme forms of piety (so aristocrats and monks), hair shirts were not in the closets of most good Christians. Meant to irritate the skin and retain filth and parasites like worms and lice, such garments were private and, as in the case of St. Thomas Becket, often discovered only after the death/martyrdom of the individual. Indeed, her reference to the fact that she bore children during this time is very possibly a passing comment on the visible skin irritation that such a garment would leave behind, a condition that her

⁷² *Book*, 3.12.

husband apparently failed to notice or concern himself with. Such a garment is indeed apt if the body itself is, as the *Ancrene Wisse* suggests, a vessel of filth and weakness.⁷³

And yet even with this traditional expression of religious piety, the audience must question the sartorial claims. Once again using clothing to ‘get one over’ on John, Margery ensures that her husband will not notice her personal chastisement. And while, as Sarah Salih points out, Margery does adopt the “moderate version” of physical penance, as continental hagiography includes descriptions of binding the flesh with twisted ropes, rubbing lice into self inflicted wounds, and sleep deprivation, such behaviors and garments were nevertheless abnormal for a merchant’s daughter.⁷⁴

So, while texts like the *Ancrene Wisse* mention hair shirts as penitential aids, writers like William Langland and Walter Hilton are more skeptical.⁷⁵ In Passus V of *Piers Plowman*, a section filled with moralized references to attire, we read that “Pernele Proud-herte platte hire to the earthe/And lay longe er she loked, and ‘Lord, mercy!’ cryde,/And bihighte to Hym that us all made/She sholde unsowen hir serk and sette there an heyre/To affaiten hire flessch that fiers was to synne.”⁷⁶ While we can accept that Pride

⁷³ “I þe licome is fulðe z unstrengðe.” J.R.R. Tolkien, ed, *The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe: Ancrene Wisse*, EETS 249 (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 142. See also the English translation by Hugh White, trans. *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoriesses* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 129.

⁷⁴ Sarah Salih, “Margery’s Bodies: Piety, Work and Penance,” in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 168-9.

⁷⁵ Interestingly, the *Ancrene Wisse* associates the bad smells of sweaty hair shirts with “heouenliche smealles.” The sweat, in addition to the caustic nature of the hair textile, is what seems to cause the discomfort. Tolkien, *The English Text*, 56, 195; White, *Ancrene Wisse*, 53, 175.

⁷⁶ William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: Everyman, 2001), V.62-66.

has adopted the behavior of a repentant sinner, the performance is quite dramatic and costumed with a familiar penitential garment. According to James Simpson, Langland uses Passus V to critique standard penitential manuals and we can see how *Pride* appropriates the hair shirt as a symbol of excess in devotion.⁷⁷ Hilton, in his *Ladder of Perfection*, also observes that objects like hair shirts can produce “spiritual pride”:

For the sake of this self-love and vain delight he will pray, keep vigils, fast, wear a hair shirt, and afflict himself in various ways, and will suffer these things lightly. Sometimes he will offer verbal thanks and praise to God, and even squeeze a tear from his eye, and think himself assured of salvation. But in reality he does all these things for love of his own praise, which he chooses and enjoys in place of love and joy in God.⁷⁸

Margery had Hilton read to her and so would have been familiar with this critique of penance. And indeed, she too interprets her behavior as excessive, describing this period as a time where she felt no pain, hated the pleasure of the world, and was stronger than any temptation: “Sche was smet wyth þe dedly wownd of veynglory & felt it not, for sche desyryd many tymes þat þe Crucifix xuld losyn hys handys fro þe crosse & halsyn hir in tokyn of lofe.”⁷⁹ Not just seeking Jesus’s favor, she hopes that he will animate her devotional prop and physically embody the crucifix. Hair shirts, though part of a system of religious garments meant to sanctify and validate the pious intentions of the wearer, only serve to facilitate a greater, though more inwardly directed, expression of the sin of pride. Like the fancy clothes of Chapter Two, which Margery hopes to use to secure the

⁷⁷ James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 59.

⁷⁸ Walter Hilton, *The Ladder of Perfection*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (New York: Penguin, 1957), 71.

⁷⁹ *Book*, 4.14.

status of her family and herself, Margery's hair shirt cannot be used to ensure her penance or adequately communicate her changing spiritual self.

What Margery desires is a set of clothes that can stabilize her shifting mystical experiences. Understanding the world through the products of man's labor and enterprise, Margery clings to material goods as a way of understanding and expressing her religious transformation. The problem within the text, and one that is supported by sumptuary legislation and the technological changes in fashion of the period, is that clothing cannot function as an easy religious or social signifier. Garments cannot demarcate status in the clear and distinct way that Margery desires, and Jesus provides her with no help.

Chapter Five begins Margery's movement away from using these conventional examples of sartorial self-invention and towards a life more guided by Jesus's fashion choices. Visiting during this two year period of temptation, at a moment of loud weeping, Jesus asks Margery quite directly why she is being so dramatic and gives her clear instructions: "dowtyr, þu hast an hayr vp-on þi bakke. I wyl þu do it a-way, & I schal 3ive þe an hayr in þin hert þat schal lyke me mych bettyr þan alle þe hayres in þe world."⁸⁰ Jesus recognizes Margery's hair shirt as an emblem of pride, and in an attempt to steer her back onto the course of righteousness tells her to remove the hidden garment. Jesus also tells her to "leue þi byddyng of many bedys and thynk swych thowtys as I wyl putt in þi mend."⁸¹ Traditional and easily understood objects of faith, Jesus says, are not suitable for Margery. Jesus sets up the parameters for the spiritual journey that Margery will take throughout the rest of the text by specifying which objects she should use: white

⁸⁰ *Book*, 5.17.

⁸¹ *Book*, 5.17.

clothes and tears. Instead of covert or traditional expressions of piety, she is to perform her faith more overtly so that she might “ben etyn & knawyn of þe pepul of þe world as any raton knawyth þe stokfysch.”⁸² The hair shirt thus fails not only because it is an expression of vanity but also because it is quiet and private. Rather than placing herself in confinement through her attire, Margery must expose herself to humiliation and abuse, as an object lesson of humility and spiritual submission. And while people continue to curse her during this period, in this case because she’s overly pious and constantly wants to be shriven and weep tears of selfish compunction, Jesus desires Margery to adapt her apparel to her performance.

Nevertheless, Margery finds it difficult to conform to Jesus’s request. Jesus wants Margery to learn how to do without familiar elements of the material and sartorial world. As he observes later in the text, “to byddyn many bedys it is good to hem þat can no bettyr do, & 3et it is not parfyte” but accepts that “for þu wilt byddyn many bedys whedyr I wil or not.”⁸³ Unable to do without the comfort of her prayer beads, Margery continues to use traditional devotional goods even after a direct vision that requests the contrary. It is also noteworthy that this moment occurs in the chapter where Jesus declares that he must be “homly” with Margery and “lyn in þi bed wyth þe.”⁸⁴ Like the hair shirt, the beads, whether intentional or not, act as a material stand against a man with whom she is intimate.

⁸² *Book*, 5.17.

⁸³ *Book*, 36.89-90.

⁸⁴ *Book*, 36.90.

Torn Clothes: When Garments Fail

If the clothing mentioned above (Jesus's cloak, worldly clothes and hair shirts) function, at least in part, as sartorial markers that conform to conventional narratives about textiles, the rest of the *Book* catalogues the ways in which Margery's audience misinterpret attire. In this final section I will address two brief moments when Margery describes clothing and how it is used. The result is that clothing is exposed as insufficient for communicating accurate information about Margery's intentions and faith.

Black Clothes and Ripped Gowns

Between abandoning her hair shirt and the period in which she adopts white clothes we hear little of Margery's daily attire. We must assume that she adopts age appropriate garments, dressing in the inconspicuous wimple and black clothes of an honest woman. What we do know is voiced as a contrast to her white clothing. A German priest, asking Margery to leave off her white clothes, requests that she "weryth a-geyn 3owr [her] blak clothys" and later in that chapter we learn from one of Margery's priestly enemies, "I am glad þat 3e gon in blak clothyng as 3e wer wont to do."⁸⁵ Black clothes in this case have a voice: for the German priest the black clothes communicate her willingness to subordinate her textiles and make them less conspicuous (though I will argue in my next chapter that she uses her tears to undermine this sartorial stability); for her enemy, the clothes indicate Margery's submission and sartorial passivity. In both cases though, the black clothes are Margery's version of a blank slate. They allow her to

⁸⁵ *Book*, 34.84-5.

emphasize other aspects of her religious experience, removing the conflict and difficulty that so often surrounds her garments.

Seeking to deemphasize her textiles during this middle portion of the text, Margery still manages to attract a great deal of attention through her mystical performances. Unsurprisingly, such behaviors are even more annoying than big hats and flashy gowns, objects which people could understand even if they did not approve. As a result, while on pilgrimage with other English people, Margery finds herself at the wrong end of a knife:

They cuttyd hir gown so schort þat it come but lytil be-nethyn hir kne & dedyn hir don on a whyte canwas in maner of a sekkyn gelle [sacking apron], for sche xuld ben holdyn a fool & þe pepyl xuld not makyn of hir ne han hir in reputacyon. Þei madyn hir to syttyn at þe tabelys ende be-nethyn alle oþer þat sche durst ful euyl spekyn a word. &, not-wythstondyng al her malyce, sche was had in mor worshep þan þei wher-þat-euyr þei comyn.⁸⁶

Margery's companions attempt to refashion the mystic through cutting and retailoring her gown. While this process may have taken place when Margery was not in her clothes, it seems just as likely that this is an assault upon her person. A parody of cutting clothing to fit, the fellow pilgrims augment what we must assume are Margery's sedate black clothes.

To state the obvious, cutting clothes to fit means that garments are measured and produced from smaller cuts of fabric. And indeed, daggs are an excellent example of this process, as sections of the top cloth would be cut and removed so that the lower, more colorful layer would be exposed. The result of such ostentation was not simply a visually

⁸⁶ *Book*, 26.62.

dramatic garment but also waste as the remaining pieces become less usable.⁸⁷ Denny-Brown explains that “The discourse of ‘cut clothing’...in many ways embodies the intricacies of late medieval clothing culture, merging as it does the material processes of a garment’s construction with its appearance and perceived morality, and hence revealing the fascinating multivocality of pre-modern fashion vocabularies.”⁸⁸ And while Denny-Brown is discussing dagging, and so high end garment production, the same is true for Margery’s torn gown, which is transformed by the pilgrims to reflect how they perceive Margery: as a fool and a socially frustrating woman. As a result, Margery’s ripped gown becomes an unintentional commentary upon the process of garment production as it is sliced and redesigned by Margery’s dissatisfied companions. Such a gown does attract attention, though perhaps not the kind that the pilgrims had hoped for. Margery once again attracts attention through her textiles as she travels, although we read that her clothing helps to make her the most “worshiped” of the group, an experience that must have been galling for the other pilgrims.

While the sartorial claim of the short destroyed garment should communicate that Margery is poor and lecherous, the mystic’s good intent clearly helps to reshape their meaning for those looking. Margery is able to communicate her true faith and intent to perform her pilgrimage duties for Jesus as he requested. Indeed, the *Book* problematizes the idea that clothing can usefully reflect economic and spiritual status. Wealth and poverty are defined by possessing or lacking clothing. During her period in Rome, after she has given away her worldly possessions, Jesus chastises Margery, explaining that she is not as impoverished as she thinks for she is not as “powr as I was whan I heng nakyd

⁸⁷ Denny-Brown, “Rips and Slits,” 226.

⁸⁸ Denny-Brown, “Rips and Slits,” 227.

on þe Cros for thy lofe, for þu hast clothys on thy body & I had non.”⁸⁹ True worldly poverty (rather than spiritual) is defined through the lack of fabric with which to adorn the body. Part of Jesus’s suffering in this passage is to be deprived of clothing leaving him physically vulnerable to the elements and the abuse of his body, and socially vulnerable as it leaves only his body exposed, replicating the image of the “Man of Sorrows.”⁹⁰ Thus to have clothing of any kind was to have the some form of income and social identity.

Historically, as Lynn Staley notes in her article about the man in foul clothes, dirty torn garments, especially worn by men standing before a person of greater status, often indicate some moral lapse. In *Cleanness* such attire is a clear indicator of sin.⁹¹ But as Staley also reminds us in her analysis of Julian of Norwich, for many late medieval individuals dirty or damaged clothing was far more than a straightforward metaphor.⁹² While in Jerusalem, Margery meets Richard, a humpbacked man who wore a patched cloak and whose clothes were threadbare.⁹³ When asked why his back was injured Richard responds that it was broken in sickness. She then asks Richard to guide her to Rome, as she has been told that a man with a broken back will guide her safely. Richard’s response is that Margery should rejoin her group as he has “no wepyn save a cloke ful of

⁸⁹ *Book*, 38.92.

⁹⁰ Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire*, 203.

⁹¹ Lynn Staley, “The Man in Foul Clothes and a Late Fourteenth-Century Conversation About Sin,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002): 8.

⁹² Staley, “The Man in Foul Clothes,” 32.

⁹³ *Book*, 30.76.

clowtys.”⁹⁴ Unlike what we might expect from Langland or even the Parson who interprets clothes as overt representations of the inner person, Margery appears to be far more flexible and does not seem to judge the deformed man for either his appearance or his lifestyle. Instead, Richard goes on to provide Margery with the assistance and support she will need to complete her journey. His cloak of “clowtys” or patches avoids the label that could be assigned to such a garment. Pieced together from other textiles, and perhaps even the leftovers of dagged *houppelandes*, the cloak does suggest the way that Richard must piece together his livelihood as a beggar. There is also something very telling about the fact that Richard’s most important garment, which substitutes as his only weapon, is constructed from the defunct clothes of others. If tears and daggs are ways of exposing the body and different layers of textiles, then Richard’s patches serve the opposite purpose, covering parts of his body that might otherwise be exposed. Such garments suggest the fragility of the body and textiles as well as the function of clothing as a social tool.

Richard’s cloak is intimately tied to the broken back that it covers. A poor beggar, Richard’s place in society is inherently liminal. As Irina Metzler points out in her study of medieval disability, the disabled of the late Middle Ages are caught between two states, as the body cannot be categorized as either healthy or ill.⁹⁵ She explains that “Poverty, illness and disability...were therefore regarded as natural occurrences and not intentional, divinely caused punishments.”⁹⁶ Metzler’s general observation coincides with

⁹⁴ *Book*, 30.77.

⁹⁵ Irina Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 6.

⁹⁶ Metzler, *A Social History of Disability*, 46.

Margery's behavior. Reading both Richard's cloak and his deformity as legitimate, Margery believes what she sees. But like Margery's prophecy about the young man in priestly clothes, the threadbare attire and marks of deformity can be also tricks. Langland, who is keenly interested in poverty and disability, warns against trusting one's eyes when looking at beggars and, in a sentiment very similar to Margery's warning to her confessor, we read, "[norisse] hem [beggars] with thi goodes. Love hem and lakke hem noht—lat God take the vengeaunce;/Theigh thei doon yvele, lat thow God yworthe."⁹⁷ Jennifer Gianfalla points out that in this passage that Langland warns us to beware what we see, for only God can know whether someone is truly disabled, unable to work, and therefore deserving of charity.⁹⁸ Indeed, in the later Middle Ages poverty was defined as "being in a state of non-work."⁹⁹ Thus the begging that Richard performs renders his own labor as liminal. It is neither work, nor is it stasis. At the same time, Metzler recognizes that people were perfectly capable of ascertaining whether the disability was true or not: "common people readily believed the evidence of their own eyes and could quite pragmatically differentiate between a physical impairment that was genuine, because it was so disabling, and an acted performance by a fraud."¹⁰⁰

Margery has the benefit of knowing that Richard is honest because of Jesus's prophecy, but Richard and his cloak also serve to articulate the way that clothing can

⁹⁷ Langland, *Piers Plowman*, VI.223-5.

⁹⁸ Jennifer M. Gianfalla, "'Ther is moore mysshapen amonges thise beggeres': Discourses of Disability in *Piers Plowman*," in *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. Joshua R. Eyler (Ashgate: Burlington, VT, 2010), 126.

⁹⁹ Metzler, *A Social History of Disability*, 165.

¹⁰⁰ Metzler, *A Social History of Disability*, 172.

indicate individual weakness. Richard lacks the power to control his life and he remains in between Margery and the people that condemn her. As a result, “Because poverty is a ‘marginal disability’ in the Middle Ages, beggars with disabilities suffer double disability because they are without agency to better their situations.”¹⁰¹ At the same time, Richard does know his place in the social hierarchy, something which is far more complicated for Margery and her merchant background, and he spends his days begging for his income. His patched clothing becomes an essential prop in establishing his credentials as impoverished foreign beggar (he is English). Neither Richard nor his clothing challenge this hierarchy, a tempting turn in a text that is often read as espousing Lollard sentiments.

In the “Plowman’s Tale,” torn clothing is used to suggest an imbalance in the social hierarchy. In the prologue of that tale we read that the plowman goes off on pilgrimage to Canterbury with “his tabarde and his staffe eke,/And on his heed he set his hat,/...his clothes that were to-rent/...And therefore was he fully shent.”¹⁰² And while, as James Dean points out in his excellent introduction to the tale, the prologue is probably later than the poem itself (the poem dating from around 1400 while the prologue is a later sixteenth century addition) it does suggest how ripped clothing might be read as politically dangerous.¹⁰³ Expressing Lollard sentiments, something Margery was also accused of, the Plowman displays “marks of extreme poverty” and can be read as demonstrating the “exploitation by the social classes above him” with “a ragged hemline

¹⁰¹ Gianfalla, “Ther is moore mysshapen amongst these beggeres,” 132.

¹⁰² James Dean, ed, “The Plowman’s Tale,” in *Six Ecclesiastical Satires* (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS, 1991), 58, lines 9-10, 20, 24.

¹⁰³ Dean, “The Plowman’s Tale,” 51.

or tears in the fabric.”¹⁰⁴ For the Plowman, ripped and poor clothing suggests the disparity between his religious experience and that of his wealthy betters. As the tale goes on to reinforce, the money of the Church is spent on bolstering the clergy and infrastructure, rather than servicing the laboring poor. Richard’s sartorial claims, while similarly powerful, are not quite as iconoclastic. Providing an important counterpoint to the fine clothes mentioned elsewhere in the text, Richard is not stirred by Margery to become something other than he is, a patched beggar. Indeed, the fact that Margery goes on to give away his few goods and the money he gets from begging (because Jesus told her to) works to emphasize Richard’s acceptance of his hierarchical place. In this case, as Kate Crassons points out, “the practice of voluntary poverty literally ends up exploiting the involuntary poor.”¹⁰⁵ His clothes help to reinforce and stabilize his own personal experience. At the same time, Richard’s cloak of patches also establishes for Margery’s reading audience that the external does not always mirror the internal. Richard is the positive counterpart to the thieving priest that began my narrative: he is an example of the worthy poor whose clothing fails to accurately represent his spiritual value.

Conclusion

As my discussion of attire in Margery’s *Book* suggests, clothing is a complex tool, used to simultaneously articulate for Margery and for the reader how a person can reconcile a difficult and potentially traumatic life change: mother to mystic. From Margery’s account of attire we learn that we should and should not believe what we see.

¹⁰⁴ Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume*, 221.

¹⁰⁵ Kate Crassons, *The Claims of Poverty: Literature, Culture, and Ideology in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), 201.

Crassons notes that “the production of a readable object is the quintessential goal for Kempe.”¹⁰⁶ And while she is referring to the *Book*’s manuscript, I think the same is true for Margery’s attire. She needs to read clothing, but at the same time recognizes how clothes are an incomplete language. In the next chapter, I will discuss Margery’s famous white clothes and tears, which I argue are intentionally used as personal adornments when textiles fail. Finishing this chapter though, it is worth making a final journey with Margery in her worldly attire.

During a trip to Canterbury, while being publicly despised by passersby and holy men, Margery was confronted by an “eld monk” who took her by the hand, demanding to know her motivations. Before narrating her response, Margery notes that the monk “had ben tresowrer wyth þe Qwen whyl he was in seculer clothyng, a riche man, & gretly dred of mech pepyl.” Though Margery defends herself with the “story of Scriptur,” the monk declares, “I wold þow wer closyd in a hows of ston þat þer schuld no man speke wyth þe.”¹⁰⁷ In the case of the monk, Margery defines and possibly even questions his power through his change in attire. He does not begin his life in humble attire and his habit seems to continue his presumptuous sartorial claims. Though she goes through a similarly significant transition in her own life, shifting from expensive worldly clothing to equally startling white clothes, Margery recognizes the change as potentially dishonest—she does not admire the monk for his cross-dressing. We can only assume that, as treasurer to the queen, this now monk was thoroughly committed to increasing and controlling her private income and not forwarding a life purely committed to Jesus, as his monkly garb

¹⁰⁶ Crassons, *The Claims of Poverty*, 216.

¹⁰⁷ *Book*, 13.27.

would want. Clothing, plus knowledge of the wearer, seems to make the monk's claim, and thus his power to regulate Margery, fraudulent. His wealth and the "dred" of the people are here aligned with the power of his position and his clothes clearly worked to reinforce and impress that power upon those who looked upon him.¹⁰⁸

His monkish habit, though, follows a set of rules that align him with the Church. What the monk does not recognize is that Margery's tears serve the same purpose. Not cloistered, Margery has few ways of demonstrating her faith through a familiar sartorial vocabulary. So, she employs weeping, and her tears are so powerful that the monk wants her cloistered in a house so that none can speak to her. Her words and performance, and most importantly her tears, are perceived as extremely dangerous. They are confusing and a challenge to his more sartorially traditional authority. Thus, in her struggle to find a familiar vocabulary to help her become a visionary and mystic, she comes to familiarize herself with a new system of attire: white clothes and tears. And though they appear like gibberish to people like the monk, she learns to perform her faith with and through them. Further, as I shall go on to show in the next chapter, they ultimately make her part of Jesus's household of pampered suffering.

¹⁰⁸ This is not the only occasion that Margery observes expensive priestly garb. When she encounters the Bishop of Worcester's men they are adorned in a similar way to her own worldly attire of Chapter Two: "&, whan sche cam in-to þe halle, sche saw many of þe Bischopys men al-to-raggyd & al-to-daggyd in her clothys" (*Book*, 45.109). The cost of the clothing is implicit in the description and while she perceives their excess as sinful and devilish, she herself is not averse to recognizing the price of good clothing.

Chapter 5

“[C]lothed by God in fanciful costume”¹: WHITE CLOTHES, TEARS, AND LIVERY IN THE *BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE*

During Margery Kempe’s visit to Assisi, the mystic describes her encounter with a famous white cloth: the veil of Mary. Entering a church Margery sees, “owyr Ladys kerche wech sche weryd her in erth wyth gret lygh & gret reuerens. Pan þis creatur had gret deuocyon. Sche wept, sche sobbyd, sche cryed wyth gret plente of teerys & many holy thowtys.”² Tears and textiles are brought together in this passage as the sight of Mary’s garment induces one of Margery’s famous bouts of weeping. What compels Margery’s reaction is not just the cloth itself (embroidery being a famous product of this Italian town), or its status as a relic, but the fact that it was part of Mary’s closet. A garment that was worn upon the Virgin’s head, the “kerche” was said to be the cloth used to swaddle the Christ child and was also linked to her despair at Calvary.³ There was a

¹ Sanford B Meech and Hope Emily Allen, eds, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, EETS 212 (1940; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), n.32.17, 273. Citations of the *Book* are from Book I unless otherwise noted and include chapter and page number. This references the German mystic Adelheid Langmann but is equally suited to Margery and her garments.

² *Book*, 31.79.

³ It is worth noting that this parallels a vision from earlier in the narrative in which Margery asks Mary for some white cloth so that she might herself swaddle the Christ baby (*Book*, 6.18-19). For an excellent discussion of the “kerche” see Gail McMurry Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle*

further belief that the cloth might have used to cover Christ's loins during the crucifixion. Thus the "kerche" could have been exposed to a range of Heavenly fluids: the milk and tears of the Virgin as well as Christ's blood. Potentially encoded with all of these different worn moments, the veil functions as a used piece of clothing as much as it is evidence of Christ on earth. The kerchief of Mary plunges Margery into moments and memories of the divine household as she weeps in recollection of the Son's suffering. Used textiles help the mystic to experience the divine.

As this example suggests, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a narrative in which materiality and spirituality are articulated as a unified experience. While describing her "ghostly" circumstances Margery also instinctively articulates her interactions with goods. A text populated by references to the material details of her life, Margery's *Book* dwells most upon textiles and fashion. As the often dramatic and costly attire of the opening chapters illustrate, Margery sees the world through, what Laura Hodges calls, "costume rhetoric."⁴ The merchant's daughter understands her world through goods and trade. As my previous chapter demonstrates, the process of becoming a mystic is, for Margery, intimately tied to the way she defines herself and others through attire. In this chapter I will show how Margery's white clothing and tears are not just mystically

Ages (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 51-54, 52. See also Annemarie Weyl Carr, "Threads of Authority: The Virgin Mary's Veil in the Middle Ages," in *Robes of Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 59-93; Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), especially chapter 6 which deals with Margery's *Book*, and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, "'Pray with Tears and Your Request Will Find a Hearing': On the Iconology of the Magdalene's Tears," in *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, ed. Kimberly Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 201-28.

⁴ Laura F. Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume: The Secular Pilgrims in the General Prologue* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000).

encoded items, but are in fact part of a larger sartorial vocabulary that she uses to negotiate her difficult, and at times dangerous, transition from mother to mystic. Never abstracted or removed from the individual to whom they belong, Margery describes both clothes and the person wearing them through an attention to the semiotics of array. Thus as we read Margery through her descriptions of textiles and livery, Margery too reads the people she meets through their garments. By attending to the objects that occupy Margery's narrative, we as readers better understand the material world that she navigated, as well as the often fraught conversations about textiles and household goods that circulated throughout the later Middle Ages.

While Margery Kempe's personal and public reading of clothes are often interpreted as evidence of her worldly tendencies, her gradual movement towards a mystical life is usually understood as one that struggles to mediate the apparent paradoxes that exist around wealth, poverty, and the divine. Most scholars do agree that Margery retains a sense of self as a commercial and/or mercantile lady.⁵ David Aers argues that the "market's permeation of religious consciousness can be seen in Margery's conversations [with Christ] as clearly as in her approach to pardons."⁶ Sheila Delany notes that while Christ "denounces such concern for lucre...it is nonetheless the backdrop to Margery's religious devotion."⁷ Roger Ladd has interpreted Margery's reoccurring attempts to balance the material and the mystical as a "fracture between her two identities

⁵ See Chapter Three for a discussion of this scholarship.

⁶ David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), 80.

⁷ Sheila Delany, "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*" in *Writing Women: Women Writers and Women in Literature Medieval to Modern* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 86.

as merchant and mystic.”⁸ While I agree that Margery does clearly find it difficult to leave her former life as lady of the town, I do not think that such a conflict need necessarily be read as a moment of fracture in which Margery’s sense of self is split. Instead, as David Wallace deftly puts it, “Margery renounces ‘the world’ with considerable fanfare as she turns to religious life. But commercial consciousness cannot be renounced: it supplies the categories she thinks through; it is integral to her very being.”⁹ Margery cannot help but see her religious life through the same commercial, mercantile, and social categories that she grew up with.

That these categories are articulated through and by clothing is not surprising given Margery’s propensity for empowering textiles. If her hats, cloaks, and worldly goods serve to define her behavior and materially manifest her spiritual turmoil as she works to figure out what her mysticism is meant to look like, her white clothes and tears serve as the best garments for the job. This chapter will complete the project I began in Chapter Three and argue that the materiality of Margery’s white clothes and tears are essential to understanding her spiritual development. As I will suggest, whether unintentional or a narrative construction, Margery’s interest in attire is one that shows change and growth throughout the *Book*, and as a result sartorial descriptions help to describe and inscribe meaning upon Margery’s experience and her person. She writes about them just as the textiles work to weave her identity. Jesus, of course, also has some control over Margery’s crafting of self and as a result the mystic’s attire ceases to be just any kirtle and cloak and functionally becomes a form of livery that is used to align

⁸ Roger A. Ladd, *Antimerchantism in Late Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 110.

⁹ David Wallace, *Strong Women: Life, Text, and Territory 1347-1645* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 93.

Margery with the Heavenly household. More effective are her tears which, unlike textiles, will neither wear out nor be confiscated by skeptical worldly authorities. These wet products become Margery's most consistent and evocative form of livery. As a result, Margery comes to interpret and articulate her mystical experiences with familiar material goods, creating a semiotics of clothing that helps her to craft and understand her visionary experiences.

The first section of this chapter will discuss how scholars have understood the white clothes and how such garments might fall into the category of livery. My second section will move on to tears. Considering both affect studies and contemporary debates about tears, I will go on to demonstrate how these liquid goods should not only be read as a garment or adornment, but might also be understood as a livery badge. Ultimately, tears serve as the best dress for Margery, as they are worn and thus take on a familiar sartorial form, while at the same time communicating more information than woven textiles. In short, her tears speak in terms that her woven garments cannot. I hope that, through focusing on Margery's "worn world," we might not only come to understand these references that are so frequently ignored in her narrative, but that as readers of her experiences we might be better able to understand how Margery is able to navigate her often tumultuous mystical life.¹⁰

¹⁰ I take this phrase from the article by Peter Stallybrass, "Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning, and the Life of Things," in *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, ed. Dan Ben-Amos and Liliane Weissberg (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 27-44.

White Clothes and Livery

Margery begins her encounters with white attire in Chapter 13 when Jesus requests that she alter her wardrobe in exchange for safe passage while on pilgrimage to the Holy Land.¹¹ Employing a familiar sartorial vocabulary and presenting Margery with what seems like a contradiction, Jesus explains that he will protect her body if she clothes herself in white, garments that Margery knows can ultimately endanger her person. Jesus explains to her that: “I xal kepe þe fro alle wykked mennys power. And, dowtyr, I sey to þe I wyl þat þu were clothys of whyte & non oþer colowr, for þu xal ben arayd aftyr my wyl.”¹² Margery knows that Jesus’s request is not an easy one. Beyond the fact that she must acquire white garments, she knows that she will be abused and questions Jesus about this directly: “A, der Lord, yf I go arayd on oþer maner þan oþer chast women don, I drede þat þe pepyl wyl slaw[n]dyr me. Þei wyl sey I am an ypocryt & wondryn vp-on me.” She will, dressed in all white, look different. And looking different is quite dangerous for a woman whose behavior and personality are already so dramatic. Given Margery’s cryings, tears, and public performances of piety, adding white clothes to her repertoire clearly makes her an even more startling sight, especially for those not aware of her intentions. Comfortable enough with Jesus to question his request, Margery shows that she is no “negative” mystic but instead remains practical when it comes to such material problems.¹³

¹¹ Margery’s white clothes are first introduced in Chapter 13 and are last mentioned in Chapter 52.

¹² Kempe, *Book*, 15.32.

¹³ For a discussion of the difference between positive and negative mysticism see Janet Wilson’s discussion in “Communities of Dissent: The Secular and Ecclesiastical

Margery is accustomed to framing her conversations with Jesus and her community through a language of the marketplace. Thus, while this vision is of course an intensely spiritual moment, it nevertheless takes the form of a transaction in which goods and services are traded. Carolyn Dinshaw refers to Margery's clothes in this circumstance as a "bargaining chip," wearing white clothes in exchange for the money and security she needs for the pilgrimage.¹⁴ Margery, an astute reader of clothing, knows that wearing such an outfit will subject her to the slander of her peers. It seems important that this, rather than the difficulty of obtaining permission to acquire such clothes, is her first reaction. As with her worldly attire, Margery registers her white clothes first through how "pepyl" will respond. Margery's implicit assumption is that such people can only react to her negatively; she suggests that by continuing in her less ostentatious black clothing she will be able to pass as an uncontroversial Christian woman. But Jesus's intention is that she should suffer and as a result quiet and unassuming attire will not suit the developing mystic. It is necessary that the white clothes do things to Margery and to the people that see her.

He Sees, But Does Not Observe: White Clothes, Scholars, and a Priest

Margery confuses her contemporaries who desire that both she and her textiles conform to uncomplicated and familiar social narratives. While visiting the York Minster, Margery is confronted by a priest who, like many, "scornyd hir, & despysed

Communities of Margery Kempe's Book," in *Medieval Women in their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 155.

¹⁴ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 144.

hir.”¹⁵ Depressed by the constant slander she suffered from people who distrust her intentions, we read of Margery’s assault, when the priest “takyng hir be þe coler of þe gowne, seyde, ‘Þu wolf, what is þis cloth þat þu hast on?’” Margery stands silent, refusing to defend herself. Instead, a group of “Childer of þe monastery goyng be-syde seyde to þe preste, ‘Ser, it is wulle.’”¹⁶ Unsure of how to read Margery’s white garments, the priest is hostile to the mystic’s intentions and demands, rather than inquires, into the true meaning behind her array. It seems apparent by his aggressive response that the priest prefers clothing that can more quickly and easily be decoded. Discussing objects generally Catherine Richards explains that a “focus on systems of objects is potentially very significant for a largely pre-literate culture in which material culture was used to articulate a vast range of meanings.”¹⁷ Like Chaucer’s Parson or sumptuary legislation, the priest seeks easily readable attire that identifies Margery’s social sphere and intentions. As Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass have noted in a study of Renaissance fashion, the process of adopting and publicly wearing clothes worked not only to define the person but also their function within a group:

this opposing of clothes and person was always in tension with the social practices through which the body politic was composed: the varied acts of investiture. For it was investiture, the putting on of clothes, that quite literally constituted a person as a monarch or a freeman of a guild or a household servant. Investiture was, in other words, the means by which a person was given a form, a shape, a social function, a “depth.”¹⁸

¹⁵ *Book*, 50.120.

¹⁶ *Book*, 50.120.

¹⁷ Catherine Richardson, “Introduction,” in *Clothing and Culture, 1350-1650*, ed. Catherine Richardson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 7.

¹⁸ Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.

As we have seen from Margery's ever-shifting sartorial self, clothing in the late Middle Ages is perhaps much more flexible than Jones and Stallybrass suggest. Nevertheless, Margery's white clothes do serve to help define her person, though unlike Stallybrass and Jones's categories, her attire creates more confusion than it does certainty on the part of her audience.

But what did the priest see and what do her clothes look like? We know from a reference to their production later in the text that Margery is given a hood, kirtle, and cloak of white cloth.¹⁹ Further, it is very possible that at some point she has some kind of mantle. The hood, which would have been worn over a linen kerchief, was a basic traveling garment complimenting her traveling cloak. The kirtle, also known as a cotehardie, would have been an overgown also made for the outdoors.²⁰ According to clothing historian Robin Netherton, the garment is rarely described in medieval sources but seems to be a large or loose construction and was frequently fur lined.²¹ Netherton argues that it is not the fitted woman's dress that modern scholars suggest but is instead more commonly associated with male fashion. The *Middle English Dictionary* confirms this definition of a "kirtel" by observing its function as a type of outerwear that would have been worn with a hood or under a mantle or pilch.²² Thus Margery's garments, like

¹⁹ *Book*, 44.104.

²⁰ While neither the most accurate nor the most recent discussion of medieval fashion, Herbert Norris does bring together the terms kyrtel/cotehardie in his, *Medieval Costume and Fashion* (1927; repr., New York: Dover, 1999), 419.

²¹ Robin Netherton, "Cotehardie," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles of the British Isles c. 450-1450*, ed. Gale Owen-Crocker, Elizabeth Coatsworth, and Maria Hayward (Brill: Leiden, 2012), 150-1.

²² A pilch is a fur lined outer garment.

her worldly array of Chapter Two, are designed to be worn outside the home and seek to define her in a potentially (and often) hostile space.

The priest does not respond to the design of Margery's clothing, which appears to be perfectly appropriate for a woman of her age. Instead, he is offended by the garment's color. Similarly, what little scholarly work has been on Margery's sartorial choices has focused on the color of her mystical garb. Gunnel Cleve reminds readers that white suggests virginity and purity, and that the mantle and ring that she adopts serve as signs of widowhood. The problem, of course, is that the mystic is neither of these categories: her husband is still alive and she has given birth to fourteen children, none of which were miraculous. Mary C. Erler develops this idea a little further, linking Margery's garments with that of a nun's before donning the habit (which was usually not white). Erler also, I believe mistakenly, links Margery's attire to that of a worldly bride.²³ It is not until the nineteenth century that white dresses becomes standard at Western weddings and while some brides did, of course, choose to wear white, there seems to be less evidence that it was traditional practice during the late Middle Ages.²⁴ For example, Jan Van Eyck's famous 1434 *Arnolfini Portrait* features not only a woman with pipes upon her head (though more modest than Margery's) but also a green wedding gown. Erler's larger point, though, is that Margery is appropriating white clothes as intentionally divisive objects:

Both meanings which inhere in the white clothes -- spiritual virginity and spiritual validation -- imply claims which transgress familiar categories, and which can

²³ Mary C. Erler, "Margery Kempe's White Clothes," *Medium Aevum* 62, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 79.

²⁴ Francoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, trans. Caroline Beamish (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 109-11.

only be countenanced if seen as divinely authorized. Spiritually, Margery chose to remain a source of division and a scandal, in large part through her insistent redeployment of the socially accepted symbolism of clothing.²⁵

Erler is right to emphasize these two categories of white clothes but as I shall go on to demonstrate they were by no means the only options for Margery or her audience. If Margery is intentionally redeploying familiar garb, she is doing so with an awareness of a broader range of potential meanings. It seems more likely that clothes, like most objects, have a great deal of power on their own and become actors, doing much of the meaning making themselves. White garments are more than just a “public symbolic statement of virginity.”²⁶ Essentially, I am hesitant to grant Margery quite as much agency as Erler does. I would argue that we need to track the “network of attachments” of these clothes to determine a triangle of relations: how she used them, how other people read them, and how they used her.²⁷

Dyan Elliott provides a historically grounded discussion of Margery’s white attire, embedded in a larger argument about dress and piety in the late Middle Ages. Observing that Margery tends to fluctuate between extremes when it comes to her sartorial choices (worldly clothes to white clothes), Elliott reads Margery’s mystical palate as an example of “Spiritual social climbing.”²⁸ Elliott also points out that the

²⁵ Erler, “Margery Kempe’s White Clothes,” 81.

²⁶ Erler, “Margery Kempe’s White Clothes,” 79.

²⁷ I borrow this term from the work of Bruno Latour and his highly influential *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²⁸ Dyan Elliott, “Dress as Mediator Between Inner and Outer Self: The Pious Matron of the High and Later Middle Ages” *Medieval Studies* 53 (1991): 294-5.

authorization of clothing is essential for Margery, as she seeks permission from bishops and implicitly from her husband.²⁹

Michael Vandussen is also interested in the problems of virginity, widowhood, and sartorial semiotics, explaining that Margery tended to “elide chaste marriage and chaste widowhood” in her narrative.³⁰ His chief concern is the process of sanctioning white clothes, which he argues, never occurs in the text. Citing mystical precedents for such attire—for example Marie d’Oignies, a recognized influence on Margery’s life who was also clothed in white by God—Vandussen compares the process of reading mystical clothes to exegesis:

Exegesis may be fine for Scripture (though dangerous for a lay person to perform) but, as Margery discovers, Church and secular authorities are more reluctant to accept and endorse her allegorisation of clothing. This does not stop her from trying, and the same type of exegesis does seem to explain her actions, however incompatible they may be with accepted Christian practice.³¹

What I believe Vandussen describes in this moment is the semiotic breakdown as the clothing communicates only gibberish to people like the priest. The priest’s question is thus not just an expression of anger but most likely suggests genuine confusion. What is this white cloth? As Margery rarely explains her sartorial choices or the reasons for her tears, (she keeps those answers in her “sowle”) the clothes are left to speak for themselves. And while we know that these garments are for her “the clothing of heaven,”

²⁹ Elliott, “Dress as Mediator,” 296.

³⁰ Michael Vandussen, “Betokening Chastity: Margery Kempe’s Sartorial Crisis,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 41, no. 3 (July 2005): 275 and note 7. pg 286.

³¹ Vandussen, “Betokening Chastity,” 282.

Margery's onlookers, like the priest, are understandably skeptical of such implicit and seemingly presumptuous claims.³²

Clearly though, as Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen suggest in the notes to the *Book*, Margery considered herself to be "a maiden in her soul" and was "fond of considering herself a martyr."³³ Numerous scholars have argued that Margery's *Book* has many of the characteristics of a saint's life, and that Margery seems to want canonization herself. As Jesus explains repeatedly and in some detail, the wearing of white will facilitate a suffering that will ultimately help her to internalize and communicate his teachings all the more. Politically, white clothing was quite problematic in England itself. As Janet Wilson writes "The wearing of white was tolerated on the continent, but was controversial in England where it was associated with closed religious orders like the Carthusians or with radical forms of continental piety such as the sect of the Flagellants which was proscribed in 1399."³⁴ Clothes in this context become a symbol of protest.³⁵ Dinshaw associates Margery's white clothes with the frequent accusations of Lollardy, noting the instability of the clothes as a symbol: "Perhaps Margery's white clothes were considered not only sanctimonious but also something of a foreign 'contagion,' something she might have brought back with her from her

³² Vanduessen, "Betokening Chastity," 283.

³³ *Book*, n.32 , 273. See also Janet Wilson's work on white clothes as "associated with martyrdom, special virtue or holiness" in her "Communities of Dissent," 170.

³⁴ Wilson, "Communities of Dissent," 170.

³⁵ Eluned Bremner, "Margery Kempe and the Critics: Disempowerment and Deconstruction," in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 120.

continental travels.”³⁶ Her white attire, though not necessarily heretical, is also seen by some as characteristic of the types of behaviors associated with the Lollards. Though the Lollards were not accused of wearing white, they were intentionally functioning outside of social norms in England, associated “not only with hypocrisy and pride but with disruptiveness both social and sexual.”³⁷ Margery’s behavior was, for many of her contemporaries, equally marginal and it is perhaps unsurprising that she is often accused of being a Lollard.³⁸

With such a range of potential readings, it is not difficult to understand the priest’s confusion. White clothes carry a shifting and often contradictory set of potential meanings. Nevertheless, what he clearly does not accept is that Margery is the recipient of divine revelations from Christ.

Children and Gifts of Textiles

If the priest is just interested in the color of Margery’s clothes, the children in the same passage read the actual objects themselves. Out of the mouth of babes comes a material and symbolic reading of Margery attire, one that more accurately describes her intentions. The children undercut the priest’s abuse by correctly observing the materials from which the garments were made. Ignoring the social implications of the priest’s “what,” the children instead offer a precise and obvious observation: it is wool. The garment is, for these still developing literal readers, no more than the material from which

³⁶ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 145.

³⁷ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 146.

³⁸ The word “lollard” seems to function more as a derogatory or dismissive term in the *Book*, rather than an actual label for her beliefs.

it was produced. At the same time, the textile also becomes Margery's defense. No wolf, Margery is instead a sheep, clothed in the attire befitting one of the Christ's flock and household. And like a sheep, whose fate might not only be to provide wool but also parchment onto which scripture can be written, Margery's person, through her attire, is inscribed with messages from Jesus. The children read the clothes and not the color. For Margery's textual audience, who acknowledge both the priest's and the children's interpretation of the clothes, the result is a joining of the tangible and the symbolic in Margery's white garments.

The mystic, of course, is no simple sheep in Christ's herd and his repeated requests to Margery that she wear white are only one of the indications that such garments function as livery. Margery's visions, like that of Jesus's birth, illustrate there is no family that Margery wishes to more closely align herself than that of the Heavenly household. In Chapter 86 Jesus actually describes this literally, explaining that all the holy virgins, including Mary Magdalene, will "arayn þe chawmbre of þi sowle wyth many fayr flowerys & wyth many swete spicys þat I myth restyn þerin."³⁹ Beginning with the way the room will be decorated and scented, Jesus then moves on to the physical comforts and textiles that are also in her soul. She will see "a cuschyn of gold, an-oper of red veluet, þe thryd of white sylke" which the Father, Son, and Spirit will sit on respectively.⁴⁰ Once again, color and textile are joined as Jesus explains the hierarchy of comfort: gold equals power; the red velvet is in memory of his blood and because he

³⁹ *Book*, 86.210.

⁴⁰ *Book*, 86.210.

“bowt þe [Margery] so der”; the white silk is for purity, chastity, and love.⁴¹ Jesus confirms for Margery her place in Heaven and in it the mystic is not only a member of the Son of God’s household, but the Heavenly family itself resides comfortably in her soul. Thus on earth she eventually embraces a form of attire that will communicate in a material way her relationship with Jesus.

It is also through the acquisition of goods that we see Christ reinforcing for Margery the combined importance of the material and the spiritual. After returning home from pilgrimage, Margery seeks to obtain what we must assume is a new set of white clothing. Having established during her visit to Rome that she adopted white clothes during several periods of her travel, and asserting in Chapter 37 that she wore them, “ever after,” Margery again seeks confirmation from Jesus that she should continue wearing them in England. Margery demands a sign from Jesus who says that he will provide one if she adopts white. Seeing the great storm that Jesus predicted, Margery “purposyd hir fullych to weryn white cloþis, saf sche had neiþyr gold ne syluer to byen wyth hir clothyng.”⁴² Jesus’s response is, “I xal ordeyn for þe,” and he provides her a man who buys her “white cloth & dede makyn hir a gowne þerof & an hood, a kyrtyl, & a cloke. And on þe Satyrday, wech was þe next day, at euyn he browt hir þis clothyng & ʒaf it hir for Goddys lofe, & meche mor goodnes dede to hir for owr Lordys lofe, Crist Ihesu be hys reward & haue mercy up-on hys sowle & on alle Cristen.”⁴³ In this chapter Margery is also gifted 40 pence with which she purchases a “pylche” or furred coat for her next

⁴¹ *Book*, 86.211.

⁴² *Book*, 44.104.

⁴³ *Book*, 44.104.

pilgrimage to Santiago.⁴⁴ The worldly reality of Margery's clothes is narrated not only through their cost (2 nobles) but also through the process of production. These clothes were clearly "made to fit" and were produced within a 36 hour period.⁴⁵ It is also worth noting that the monetary gifts of both of these men are quite significant. A noble is a gold coin and worth approximately 6s. 8d., the equivalent of one day's wage for a lord or about \$300 dollars now. The forty pence used to buy the pilch is about 3.5 shillings or \$150.⁴⁶ Piponnier and Mane also note that the tailor and cutter's fee contributed little to the cost of the garment.⁴⁷ The money is invested in the material itself, in the life, and the memory of the cloth. The mystic has, with those two sets of garments, spent almost half a year of a laborer's salary.⁴⁸ Margery, of course, is not a laborer, and while the cost of the attire is striking, it is probably a familiar expenditure for the merchant's daughter. Thus unlike the typical servants' livery, which would be valued significantly more than their official wage, Margery is negotiating within a familiar price-point.⁴⁹ Margery's "currency of clothes" serves as both a form of incorporation and a payment.⁵⁰ While such information may seem trivial, especially given the difficulty in calculating such

⁴⁴ *Book*, 44.106.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of clothing production see, Peter McNeil, "Introduction: Late Medieval to Renaissance Fashion," in *Fashion: Critical and Primary Sources Volume 1 Late Medieval to Renaissance*, ed. Peter McNeil (New York: Berg, 2009), ix.

⁴⁶ This information comes from Jeffrey L. Forgeng and Will McLean's calculations on cost of living during latter half of Chaucer's time, from their book *Daily Life in Chaucer's England*, 2nd ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2009), 94.

⁴⁷ Piponnier and Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, 83.

⁴⁸ Forgeng and McLean, *Daily Life in Chaucer's England*, 95.

⁴⁹ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 20.

⁵⁰ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 22.

equivalencies, such numbers help to demonstrate the importance that Margery places upon clothing as well as reinforcing the reality that her poverty is self induced. The Jesus of Margery's *Book* is not opposed to material ownership, as is evident when he explains to Margery that people, "wolde haue good to leuyn wyth as is leful to hem."⁵¹ Each person, including wealthy merchants, may be properly and usefully defined by their ownership of goods. More importantly, in this text the possession of material wealth does not condemn the soul. Kate Crassons, working to define Margery's peculiar form of poverty, argues that,

Christ consistently intervenes to rescue Kempe from the neediness he enjoins on her in the name of his own poverty. Paradoxically, Christ seems to make Kempe's voluntary poverty possible because he ordains for her every need. As Christ himself goes on to explain, he rewards Kempe's love in a material fashion that seems to differ only in degree from his generous treatment of the rich.⁵²

As a result, "Kempe's poverty ironically reinforces the commercial pressures she seeks to abandon."⁵³ The market-value and acquisition of these real world textiles is not ignored as Margery articulates how she strives to survive as a mystic ex-merchant. Ultimately, both items result from the monetary gifts of benevolent men. But while these benefactors provide Margery with cash to acquire the clothes, it is in actuality Jesus that provides the gift of livery.

As the cost also suggests, the gifting and distribution of textiles in the late Middle Ages is highly significant for both the giver and the recipient. Cloth endowments

⁵¹ *Book*, 65.160.

⁵² Kate Crassons, *The Claims of Poverty: Literature, Culture, and Ideology in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), 206.

⁵³ Crassons, *The Claims of Poverty*, 179.

suggested not only the wealth of the patron but the importance of the wearer within that individual's household or guild.⁵⁴ Liveries were more than gifts, while at the same time not abstracted payments for services. As Joanna Crawford points out, "the significance of a grant of clothing was not equivalent to its monetary value. Rather, payments, gifts, and distributions of clothing bound individuals to each other, or individuals to a group, in a variety of socially useful and culturally important ways."⁵⁵ The use-value of the white clothes is far more significant than their cost as Margery employs the garments in church the next day, taking communion in white and suffering the same shame and reproof "thankyd be God of alle."⁵⁶ The function of Margery's white garments are to facilitate a gradual alignment with Christ's household in the way livery might be used to indicate social associations in the period. More accurate than the term vestment and more specific than just labeling her white outfit clothes, livery takes into account Margery's persistent mercantilism throughout the narrative, reinforced by the ever-present language of exchange.

Not limited to clothing, livery is anything given to a servant or retainer as an allowance for services or to illustrate affiliation.⁵⁷ The charlatan book dealer in Margery's narrative, for example, when questioned about his origins, claims that he came

⁵⁴ Frederique Lachaud, "Liveries of Robes in England, c. 1200-1330," *The English Historical Review* 111, no. 441 (April 1996): 288.

⁵⁵ Joanna Crawford, "Clothing Distributions and Social Relations c. 1350-1500," in *Clothing and Culture, 1350-1650*, ed. Catherine Richardson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 154.

⁵⁶ *Book*, 44.104.

⁵⁷ Lachaud, "Liveries of Robes in England," 279.

from Penteney Abbey and that he receives a “lyuery” from that establishment.⁵⁸ As Barry Windeatt indicates in his edition of the *Book*, this livery is more likely to be a gift of food and possibly other provisions and would not be limited to clothing.⁵⁹ And indeed, there is an essay to be written about Margery’s frequent references to food and its function as an endowment of Christ.⁶⁰ Often livery did take the form of some kind of cloth grant from a superior to a subordinate and indicated to those looking that the wearer was affiliated with a particular household or guild. As clothing coded deeply, in a similar way to Margery’s earlier worldly attire, livery not only indicated a relationship with a particular household, craft or trade guild, but as Brian Gastle observes, it was also important in religious and social guilds, indicating the wearer’s social and economic standing within that organization.⁶¹ Margery’s white livery is a visual cue as to the affiliations of the recipient. Materiality in this context also provides a sense of continuity for Margery.

Cloth affiliations were highly charged in the period and Margery would have been familiar with the power of such textiles through watching her father’s and husband’s experiences. Indeed, many members of Margery’s community would have been incorporated in some way through social, guild, or religious livery. Susan Crane explains that, “dress had moral, legal, and class significance throughout English and French culture, and regulating dress was understood to facilitate projects as vital as salvation,

⁵⁸ *Book*, 24.58.

⁵⁹ Windeatt translates “lyuery” as “an allowance of food.” See B. A. Windeatt, ed. and trans., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 93.

⁶⁰ For example Chapters 5 and 26.

⁶¹ Brian Gastle, “Breaking the Stained Glass Ceiling: Mercantile Authority, Margaret Paston, and Margery Kempe,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 128.

civic integration, and interpersonal harmony.”⁶² As a mayor and alderman, as well as an important merchant, Margery’s father would have worn and probably helped to distribute liveries. These garments would not usually be worn all the time but instead on ceremonial religious and communal occasions.⁶³ Such textiles thus create a “networks of obligation” between the wearer and a guild or household.⁶⁴ As Stallybrass and Jones explain, “Payment in cloth and clothing was a form of bodily mnemonic, marking the wearer’s indebtedness to master or mistress. The liveried body, even though the livery was rarely marked as such, stitched servants’ bodies to their households.”⁶⁵ At its most extreme, some might argue that such attire made the wearer “someone else’s creature,” suppressing the identity of the recipient.⁶⁶ And indeed, as Crane has noted in her discussion of Maying rituals and livery, putting on a different set of textiles can be equivalent to “putting on a mood” or adopting an affect appropriate for the situation and community.⁶⁷ Conceptualized in this way, clothing is almost insidious, controlling the behavior and mood of wearers as they seek to conform to a particular group. Margery’s worldly clothes function in this way, creating for the to-be mystic an identity that is, for her community and husband, overly demonstrative and pompous. But within that control is the comfort of belonging, something which Margery struggles to find as she seeks to

⁶² Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 11.

⁶³ Lachaud, “Liveries of Robes in England,” 292.

⁶⁴ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 20.

⁶⁵ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 11.

⁶⁶ Crane, *The Performance of Self*, 40.

⁶⁷ Crane, *The Performance of Self*, 40.

balance worldly scorn with the spiritual guarantees that Jesus grants her due to her sartorial choices. Such garments thus create, represent, and reinforce a set of behaviors and values championed by the leader or group as a whole.

Margery's struggle with her white garments also points to a contemporary conversation about the distribution of textiles and the ways that liveried objects and behaviors were not always socially acceptable. One of the chief criticisms of livery was that it licensed independent actions, and that such activities would automatically become sanctioned through attire.⁶⁸ Some might commit crimes, only to seek protection through their livery. Others charged that liveried garments created "presumption and overweening pride" in servants and retainers.⁶⁹ In most cases, this refers to noble liveries, rather than guild or religious gifts, but the stigma of livery was significant enough for legislation to be issued to curb what was seen by some as "a disorderliness and 'informality'" that "characterized livery distribution and clothing payments."⁷⁰ Guilds were also under attack at the end of the fourteenth century, and "Both the wearing of livery and the accumulation of property by guilds were dangerous signs of power wielded by the growing middle class."⁷¹ The legal accusation was that liveries were distributed in a haphazard way, with objects like hats, badges, and insignia being given to opportunistic "little men" who sought to align themselves with a master, thus increasing the retinue and power of

⁶⁸ Crane, *The Performance of Self*, 11.

⁶⁹ Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 63; Crawford, *The Claims of Poverty*, 158.

⁷⁰ Crawford, "Clothing Distributions and Social Relations," 155.

⁷¹ Sarah Herndon, "Chaucer's Five Gildsmen," *Florida State University Studies* 5 (1952): 40.

the household.⁷² As a result, liveries were held as suspect, so much so that Sarah Hearndon has argued that the abuse of livery, combined with the idea that religious guilds might have participated in the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, could account for the scant description of the guildsmen in the *Canterbury Tales*.⁷³

The paranoia that surrounded the power of such garments is especially apparent as Margery negotiates her way through Leicester, encountering a mayor who “was hir dedly enemy.”⁷⁴ Believing that Margery’s behavior and clothing is an indication of her insincerity, the mayor reiterates the problem of trusting the senses, “In fayth, sche menyth not wyth hir hert as sche seyth with hir mowth.”⁷⁵ He rebukes her and says many “vngoodly” things “whiche is mor expedient to be concelyd þan expressyd.” Once again, Margery refuses to explain her garments, providing just the equivalent of her name and serial number. She tells the mayor of Leicester of her husband and children, and reinforces that she has a great love of God, but refuses to justify her sartorial choices, stating “Syr...ȝe xal not wetyn of my mowth why I go in white clothys; ȝe arn not worthy to wetyn it.”⁷⁶ Instead, she will explain herself to the worthy clerks that seem more willing to listen to her claims. Speaking out of turn or to individuals who will neither believe nor understand is, for Margery, a pointless exercise. The mayor is not interested in her defense, nor does she believe he deserves to access the details of her revelations

⁷² Crawford, “Clothing Distributions and Social Relations,” 156-7.

⁷³ Herndon, “Chaucer’s Five Guildsmen,” 39; Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume*, 135.

⁷⁴ *Book*, 48.115.

⁷⁵ *Book*, 48.115.

⁷⁶ *Book*, 48.116.

through an explanation of her attire. The clothes will teach him nothing, and once again garments cannot easily and clearly communicate the mystic's intentions. Her white attire acts as a direct threat to a society that identifies "its good with goods."⁷⁷

For Margery though, this breakdown in communication is also clearly purposeful, as she is able to usefully contain her message, manipulating attire (rather than language) to control access to her mystical experience. Karma Lochre addresses this problem in relation to the body: "If mystical desire to utter always exceeds the power to utter God, the divine remains unread as well as unuttered. It is the fissure between flesh and word, utterance and desire which initiates the reader's rapture."⁷⁸ What Lochre describes of Christ's body is also true of Margery's mystical garb. The mystic can never fully communicate the intensity of her experiences. It is the semiotic liminality—the space between recognition and understanding—that Margery's dissenters find problematic. Margery's discussion of speech, listening, and understanding in Chapter 48 also emphasizes that there is no perfect language to communicate mystical experience. To be a mystic is to have privileged access to the divine. Words and objects alone will not translate those experiences, though they may serve to define them for the mystic. It is not the job of Margery's clothes to simply convey her mystical visions and intent. (It is the role of the clerical authorities to validate, communicate, and interpret meaning in such texts). Instead, the mystic's livery must do work for the visionary herself, reinforcing for Margery her role as Christ's servant. Such garments are animated, and have the "ability

⁷⁷ Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), 71.

⁷⁸ Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1991), 75.

to 'pick up' subjects, to mold and shape them physically and socially, to constitute subjects through their power as material memories. Memories of subordination...memories of collegiality...memories of love...memories of identity itself."⁷⁹ Margery is made a mystic through her white livery and tears as much as through her visions and trials.

What the mayor fears is the potential power that Margery's white livery can convey to the women of Leicester. The mayor complains that, "I wil wetyn why þow gost in white clothys, for I trowe þow art comyn hedyr to han a-wey owr wyuys fro us & ledyn hem wyth þe."⁸⁰ Similar to accusations by authorities following the Revolt of 1381, in which members of religious guilds were accused of participating in the insurrection, Margery's white clothes are seen to destabilize the female community.⁸¹ Uncontrolled but still communicative, religious attire threatens the mayor as he fears that Margery will act as the pied-piper with a dress and lead the local women away, distracting them from their duties at home and in the community. The result is that the mayor threatens to imprison her and confiscates her traveling bag, forcing Margery to again visit the Bishop of Lincoln to obtain a letter validating her sartorial claims. The mayor will closet away both Margery's body and the objects that she uses to craft herself. And while his response seems extreme, the mayor empowers Margery's attire as much as he questions her intentions.

⁷⁹ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 2.

⁸⁰ *Book*, 48.116.

⁸¹ Herndon, "Chaucer's Five Gildsmen," 39.

The mayor is of course right to read Margery's textiles as independently empowered, and Margery herself seems to read them in a similar way. While her white livery does expose her to scorn throughout the narrative, she does eventually become comfortable with its necessity. In Book II, she describes a trip to London,

clad in a cloth of canvas as it wer a sekkyn gelle as sche had gon be-3ondyn þe se. Whan sche was comyn in-to London, mech pepil knew hir we a-now; in-as-mech as sche was not clad as sche wold a ben for defawte of mony, sche, desiryng to a gon vn-knowyn in-to þe tyme þat sche myth a made sum chefsyawns, bar a kerche be-for hir face. Not-wythstondyng sche dede so, sum dissolute personys, supposyng it was Mar. Kempe of Lynne, seydyn, þat sche myth esily heryn þes wordys in-to repref. "A, þu fals flesch, þu xalt no good mete etyn."⁸²

Margery is, in this scene, a woman who is incorrectly dressed and whose attire fails to conform to social expectation. The group recognizes her by name, gesturing to her fame (or notoriety) within her home country. Seeking to hide herself from passersby, it is Margery's lack of livery or incorporation that facilitates scorn on this occasion. For Lynn Staley this illustrates a version of Margery in which she "presents an image of community that severely questions the shared values and activities by which corporate entities define themselves."⁸³ Pointing to Margery's dressing and eating habits, Staley cites moments like this as "a crude inversion of medieval sumptuary preoccupation" as the public respond "harshly to Margery's humble manner of dressing."⁸⁴ As a result "unity can be conformity" which ultimately stifles individuals outside the group.⁸⁵ Had Margery been attired as expected, dressed in the livery of her Lord, the Londoners would

⁸² *Book*, II.9.243.

⁸³ Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, 59.

⁸⁴ Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, 54.

⁸⁵ Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, 59.

have registered Margery's behavior as correct, though that does not ensure that they would have approved. Still, Margery would have conformed to expectation.

These liveried textiles give Margery the ability to recraft her identity to conform to her difficult visionary lifestyle. Peter Stallybrass describes a "cloth society" as one in which cloth is a form of currency and incorporation, by noting that as cloth "exchanges hands, it binds people in networks of obligation. The particular power of cloth to effect these networks is closely associated with two almost contradictory aspects of its materiality: its ability to be permeated and transformed by maker and wearer alike; its ability to endure over time."⁸⁶ Cloth absorbs meaning and that meaning becomes memory for the wearer. More than a social signifier, the power of cloth is that it can soak up smells, rips, and evidence of its occupants as they move through the world. Thus, like Margery's torn gown of Chapter 26, the garment does not simply symbolize a set of relations or a particular social group; it embodies the experience of being a part of that community. Margery's text is a collection of mnemonic moments in which objects and individuals are used to recall, for her and ultimately for her audience, the experiences of Christ, most often his suffering. Textiles, like her white livery or the veil which began this chapter, are saturated with the fluids and stains of human experience. As Stallybrass and Jones succinctly say, "fashion fashions, because what can be worn can be worn deeply."⁸⁷ Margery's white livery constitutes more than just a covering for her body. It is a legitimized part of her, and also one that is ordained by Jesus thus providing her with the comfort of sartorial certainty. The problem with clothes is that Margery must

⁸⁶ Stallybrass, "Worn Worlds," 30.

⁸⁷ Jones and Sallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 3.

constantly seek new sets as they wear out or disappear from the text. People like the mayor of Leicester can confiscate Margery's goods or garments might be cut from her body, as happens during her first continental pilgrimage. What Margery requires, and what she gets from Jesus, is a more consistent badge of livery, that of her tears.

From Textiles to Tears—Christ, Margery, “the higher wetness and the lower wetness”⁸⁸

Tears become an integral component of Margery's apparent bid for sainthood and her particular form of mysticism. Mentioned throughout the text, she frequently wears her tears upon her person as she moves throughout the world. Her garments, we must imagine, are soaked in them. Typically, the scene is depicted like this: Margery is among a new community. She then sees something that reminds her of Jesus/Mary/her visions. Finally she describes her encounter: “so swet, so holy, and so devowt þat þis creatur myt not oftyn-tymes beryn it but fel down & wrestyd wyth hir body and mad wondyrful cher & contenawns wyth boystows sobbyngys & gret plente of terys...& þerfor mech pepyl slawndryd hir.”⁸⁹ Through her mystical performance, Margery links tears with joy and despair simultaneously. She is, after all, contemplating the suffering of Christ which eventually leads to grace. As a result, pain and pleasure are united through a single object: a tear. And yet “people” do not recognize or trust Margery's intentions. They see her, as many modern scholars have, as hysterical. While they would not have brought psychoanalytic theory to bear against the mystic (we must assume that the Freuds of her

⁸⁸ Tom Lutz, *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 39.

⁸⁹ *Book*, 17.40.

day would have commented on her cold/wet nature) her contemporaries clearly found Margery's public display of emotions, like her attire, difficult to process.

In this final section I will take up the problem of Margery's tears and argue that they can be read and defined, like textiles, as a set of objects that Margery uses to negotiate her spiritual and worldly life. Though ephemeral, Margery's tears are bartered, traded, and like any good liveried object, gifted to her by her Lord. Like her clothes they are worn upon her person, covering her face and body. The ultimate adornment, Margery's tears baffle and frustrate medieval and modern audiences who find her lachrymose products confusing and uncomfortable. Tears signal for readers an extreme emotional response, one usually sequestered to a private room or community. Margery's tears though are public and designed to be showed and shared with both her familiar community and complete strangers. Like her white livery, in which the color has been more discussed than the cloth, the tears are often bundled with Margery's loud and performative weeping. In this chapter though, I would like to consider the output of her "cryings" to think about how she uses these products of her tear ducts to complete her mystical transition.

Margery's tears are perhaps the most memorable and certainly most referenced objects in the narrative. Beginning in Chapter Three, the early tears are those of selfish reflection and result from a fear of damnation. These are ultimately rejected by Jesus in Chapter Five when he asks Margery why "wepyst þow so sor?"⁹⁰ Critical of the quality of her tears, and aware of her intent, Jesus instead explains that he will give Margery a hair shirt on her heart and he shall "flowe so mych grace in þe" that everyone will be

⁹⁰ *Book*, 5.16.

amazed.⁹¹ Grace circulates inside and outside of Margery in an almost humoral way as she takes in and stores Jesus's visions only to expel them through her eyes.⁹² Jesus's words are also suggestive of the often sexual natural of mystical experiences, as the title of this section further reinforces. The "flowe" moves into Margery, impregnating her with grace and speaks to the generative power of fluids when aligned with the spiritual. The most potent reminder of the power of "wetness" might be the Virgin's tears poured out at the foot of the cross. These tears give birth to the Church as she witnesses Christ's death.⁹³ Tears, blood, milk, and other bodily fluids contain a power independent of the individual who produces them. Objects, like the now-lost relic of La Trinité, displayed the tears of Jesus, "as a reminder of Christ's humanity—not just of his compassionate nature, but also of his human body, which exuded material fluids."⁹⁴ A mobile reliquary, Margery serves a similar role, displaying Jesus's tears upon her body and textiles, soaking them up and displaying them for passersby. Tears are a physical channel between herself and her Jesus.

Much of the work done on Margery's tears has focused on their relation to patristic traditions and as an extension of her body. With precedents in Franciscan affective piety and continental female mystics, Margery's doctrine of compunction has been discussed extensively by scholars who identify them as traditional and proscribed

⁹¹ *Book*, 5.17.

⁹² Elina Gersman, "Introduction: 'Going They Went and Wept': Tears in Medieval Discourse," in *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History*, ed. Elina Gertsman (New York: Routledge, 2012), xii.

⁹³ Gertsman, "Introduction," xii-xiii.

⁹⁴ Gertsman, "Introduction, xi.

tools that Margery's uses to lead her to prayer and grace. These scholars emphasize the sensual and emotional elements of Margery's divine experience. Sandra J. McEntire, in her study on the "Doctrine of Compunction," explains that tears were frequently perceived as a valuable and often necessary way to express individual spirituality.⁹⁵ "Compunction then," observes McEntire "although closely allied to mourning and signified by tears, is not based on any natural event, but is an essentially affective response to God's grace acting on the human disposition."⁹⁶ The tradition itself meant that tears were produced through an act of God as opposed to an independent response: "Thus, even though the desire to weep is itself a grace, desire alone is insufficient to produce these tears. Again the exterior sign results from the interior activity of God's grace."⁹⁷ Margery requires Jesus to instill her body with cryings and tears, a need that she is keenly aware of throughout the latter portions of her text. Santha Bhattacharji focuses on vision, observing the way that "the envisioning of Christ's suffering widens from specific meditations on him in her mind's eye to the actual beholding of him in the people and events around her."⁹⁸ Weeping and the teary product become ways of

⁹⁵ Sandra J. McEntire, *The Doctrine of Compunction in Medieval England: Holy Tears* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 4. See also her "The Doctrine of Compunction From Bede to Margery Kempe," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England, Exeter Symposium IV*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987), 78-90.

⁹⁶ McEntire, *Doctrine of Compunction*, 37.

⁹⁷ McEntire, *Doctrine of Compunction*, 42.

⁹⁸ Santha Bhattacharji, "Tears and Screaming: Weeping in the Spirituality of Margery Kempe," in *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, ed. Kimberly Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 237.

communicating her grace to others while also serving as a mechanism to process her own experiences.

Many scholars have also identified the semiotic potential in Margery's tears. Dhira B. Mahoney argues that they are "beyond language: her sobs substitute for the words she cannot find."⁹⁹ The result of the tears is, for Mahoney, a "separateness through bodily action," isolating Margery from her observers almost like an anchorhold.¹⁰⁰ The tears then become, for Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "nonlinguistic utterances" pouring out of her body rendering Margery liquid further allowing her to control those watching.¹⁰¹ My goal is to add to, rather than negate, these readings. Margery certainly gets a "direct line to God"¹⁰² as Mahoney says, through her tears and she certainly does, as Cohen notes, "speak across class"¹⁰³ to the various audiences that see her weeping.

At the same time the tears are things themselves, bartered and traded in a similar social and spiritual marketplace to Margery's clothes. Jesus tells Margery that they are a "ȝyft" and that he gives "sum-tyme smale wepyngys & soft teerys for a tokyn þat I lofe þe."¹⁰⁴ As Clarissa Atkinson argues in her work on the subject, "Margery's tears were, among other things, her religious capital, wealth that she could and did share with other

⁹⁹ Dhira B. Mahoney, "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power Over Language," in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 40.

¹⁰⁰ Mahoney, "Margery Kempe's Tears," 40.

¹⁰¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 163.

¹⁰² Mahoney, "Margery Kempe's Tears," 41.

¹⁰³ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 177.

¹⁰⁴ *Book*, 84.205 and 77.183.

people.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, the tears are one of the types of objects that Jesus refers to when he speaks to Margery about her “goods.” Jesus notes that Margery often says in her mind that “riche men han gret cawse to louyn me wel, & þu seyst ryth soth, for þu seyst I haue 3ouyn hem meche good wher-wyth þei may seruyn me & louyn me...I xhal 3evyn þe good a-now to louyn me wyth, for Heuyn & erde xulde rapar faylyn þan I xulde faylyn þe.”¹⁰⁶ Unwilling to condemn her fellow merchants or other individuals who acquire wealth, Margery states that comfort does not harm the soul, nor does it prohibit individuals from giving back to Christ. Jesus, attempting to once again satisfy Margery about her spiritual status, confirms her reading of worldly wealth, ultimately “redefining poverty as a state that is largely divorced from material deprivation...the text significantly complicates the value and meaning of poverty by presenting it as a condition that, at least for Kempe, readily leads to immediate possession of material goods.”¹⁰⁷ Margery must still have her goods and Jesus will not deny her. This is one end of a complicated and fraught conversation in the period, which attempts to reconcile worldly materiality with spiritual security. Fellow mystics like Richard Rolle are more skeptical of the rich, arguing that, “Þei treuly þat ryches hepys, & knawys no3t to whome þai gedyr, in þame haueynge þer solace, some-tyme in myrth of heuenly lufe ar not worþi to be gladded, þof all þai fene, be deuocion not holy bot similate.”¹⁰⁸ No one with earthly comfort is entitled

¹⁰⁵Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 59.

¹⁰⁶ *Book*, 63.157.

¹⁰⁷ Crassons, *The Claims of Poverty*, 193.

¹⁰⁸ Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love and The Mending of Life or the Rule of Living*, ed. Ralph Harvey, EETS 106 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1896), I.2.4. Book, chapter and page number are cited for all subsequent references.

to Heavenly comfort. Margery references Rolle's work and is desperately concerned about the status of her soul and its relation to the material world. But while Rolle was an Oxford trained hermit, Margery is a woman who must craft and repurpose a less, or at least different, textual tradition of material piety.

Through tears and clothes, Margery seeks to maintain her social self while crafting associations with a more feminine performance of mysticism. Susan Dickman, in an essay on Margery's continental models, notes that "Medieval women as a group gravitated toward images of continuity—they are sisters, mothers and brides of Christ—and in their elaboration of such images, women typically insist on their concrete, sensuous meanings."¹⁰⁹ Margery's tears and attire serve this purpose, linking her with well-established traditions and spiritual history. Though Margery seems loud to both medieval and modern readers, she is part of a category of women, as figures like the Wife of Bath suggest. At the same time, Margery's behavior is not average. Caroline Walker Bynum's explains that "Late medieval women, like men, saw a rupture with ordinary worldly life as a mark of religious commitment. The miraculous abundance of tears given to Margery Kempe, her white clothes, and her hard-won continence were a lay equivalent of the vows, veils, and convent walls that set nuns apart from society."¹¹⁰ Margery's tears, like her clothing, serve to simultaneously help her maintain a sense of personal continuity while creating a necessary rift between herself and her contemporaries.

¹⁰⁹ Susan Dickman, "Margery Kempe and the Continental Tradition of Pious Women," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall July 1984*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Suffolk UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1984), 161.

¹¹⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 280.

Tears naturally differ from clothes as they are produced by and stream from the body. Thus, while clothes are manufactured by others with non-human materials, tears are produced from the labor of Margery's tear ducts and as a result link her liquid products with problems of vision. At the end of the *Book*, during a section devoted to relating detailed conversations with Jesus, we read:

þat as many men & women myth be turnyd be hys prechyng as þu woldist þat wer turnyd be the teerys of thyn eyne and that myn holy wordys myght sattelyn as sor in her hertys as thu woldist that thei schulde sattelyn in thyn hert. And also thu askyst the same grace for alle good men that prechyn my word in erth that thei myght profityn to alle resonabyl creaturys.¹¹¹

Jesus communicates Margery's hopes back to her through her tears. The products of the eye, Jesus implicitly links the tears to vision and the difficulty of evaluating what is perceived through the senses. Margery's audience struggles to trust their eyes when they witness these mystical props, and question the sincerity of her performance. For Margery though, tears are the liquid cement that allows Jesus's words to settle in her heart. Margery "profits" from these sensual objects, and through them she indicates not only her sincerity but submission to Christ in the marketplace of faith.¹¹²

Margery's marketplace is both earthly and spiritual, and requires patience to navigate. Not only does Margery profit from her trading of these Heavenly goods for favors, but Jesus also repurposes Margery's used tears. Explaining to Margery that all the saints in Heaven are available at her call, Jesus tells the mystic that even the angels love her tears: "Myn awngelys arn redy to offyrn thyn holy thowtys & þi preyeris to me & þe

¹¹¹ *Book*, 86.212.

¹¹² On submission see Lyn A. Blanchfield, "Prolegomenon: Considerations of Weeping and Sincerity in the Middle English," in *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History*, ed. Elina Gertsman (New York: Routledge, 2012), xxiv.

terys of thyn eyne alos, for þi terys arn awngelys drynk, & it arn very pyment to hem.”¹¹³ Jesus addresses the ‘literal’ consumption of Margery’s tears by angels as they drink them like spiced wine (pyment). As earthly goods though, Margery uses these objects to affect herself, those who see her, and her larger community. Margery’s tears, as part of her larger performance of a mystic, help to make her famous throughout England. As I have already described, Margery is noteworthy enough that pedestrians in London can recognize a costume change. The community of Lynn also appreciates having a visionary in the town. We learn that Margery is frequently called to pray for the sick and dying, though those individuals may have cursed her while in health.¹¹⁴ The tears in this context serve as gifts to her community very similar to the endowments given by wealthy patrons to parish churches and hospitals. Kathleen Kamerick observes, “By the fifteenth century, what parishioners saw at church (apart from the Mass itself) was the result of their own efforts and those of their parents. The altars, paintings, stained glass, and statues that adorned the late medieval English church reflected the parishioners’ religious desires and their means.”¹¹⁵ Tears are Margery’s contribution to the parish and yet another manifestation of her material-spiritual prosperity. Considered alongside stained glass and altars, the tears are just as materially potent. Like any other item they are produced, have a use-value and like so many goods at this point in the late Middle Ages, enter the marketplace to be exchanged.

¹¹³ *Book*, 65.160-1.

¹¹⁴ *Book*, 23.53.

¹¹⁵ Kathleen Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry in England 1350-1500* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 9.

That Jesus grants these mystical goods to Margery helps to further emphasize their sartorial status. Traded and bartered like the attire throughout the rest of the text, we might see these goods as a “devices” or decorative accessories. To extend Sarah Salih’s discussion, which identifies Margery’s “cryings” as a pilgrim badge, Margery’s tears might take on a similar role.¹¹⁶ If we consider the tears as items worn to indicate her intimacy with Jesus’s passion, as badges might be worn to indicate the individual’s experience of a particular place or relic, we can see that they do not simply represent the suffering of Christ or Margery’s personal sin. Tears are neither transparent symbols, nor do they simply function as historical or doctrinal artifacts. Instead, Margery’s teary badges or devices work like livery to align her with Christ’s household. One might even imagine that within the tears that Jesus has given Margery is inscribed his sacrifice as well as the potential for salvation.

Margery would have been well aware of the power and danger of livery badges and devices. Much of the anti-livery conversation during the final decades of the fourteenth century focused on badges. They were cheap, easy to distribute, and still served to align the wearer with a particular group or household. These *signa*, according to Paul Strohm in his discussion of fourteenth century livery legislation, were issued by lords whose servants, “buoyed up by insolent arrogance” were able to “practice various extortions in the countryside.”¹¹⁷ While Margery’s contemporary audience would not necessarily have made the connection I am making here, these objects do, for Margery,

¹¹⁶ Sarah Salih, “Margery’s Bodies: Piety, Work and Penance,” in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 173.

¹¹⁷ Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow*, 63.

serve to associate her with Christ and provide her with a more secure and reliable set of devotional goods. Such *insignia* are similar to the *signa* or token that Rolle mentions in his *Fire of Love*. Rolle references Jesus's request that "Als a token sett me in þi hart."¹¹⁸ The token or insignia draws a metaphor from the objects of signification which work to link women and men to Christ, while at the same time acting as semi-legible tools of interpretation. These tears, like badges, are mnemonic devices whose primary purpose is to link the bearer with the represented household. Such insignia also facilitate certain types of behaviors that are necessary to honor the household. Jesus reinforces this link between tokens and tears when he asks "Wher is a bettyr token of lofe þan to wepyn for þi Lordys lofe?"¹¹⁹ The tears are the best "token" Margery can use to express her devotion to her Lord.

Though a worn gift, Margery's tears often appeared at inopportune times and must have been unsettling to the witnesses, if only because she would have been all wet. Margery records periods of weeping that lasted up to two hours, which must have left the collars and fronts of her garments, along with her surrounding area, saturated.¹²⁰ Her fellow pilgrims, for example, express distress at Margery's table manners. They were "most displesyd for sche wepyd so mech & spak alwey of þe lofe & goodness of owyr Lord as wel at þe tabyl as in oþer place."¹²¹ The problem for her companions is not just that Margery is loud, but that she is shedding tears at the wrong time. Such devotional

¹¹⁸ Rolle, *Fire of Love*, I.18.40.

¹¹⁹ *Book*, 64.158.

¹²⁰ *Book*, 7.19.

¹²¹ *Book*, 26.61.

behaviors are meant for pilgrimage sites and are not welcome in an area designated for eating and relaxation. In a space where food is picked up directly with one's hands from a communal bowl, Margery's tears would be an unwelcome addition to the meal.¹²² The table is, after all, a place where one should control fluids and bodily functions: licking lips and spitting were not welcome.¹²³ Tears, we must imagine, fall into a similar category. Though tokens of her relationship with Jesus, the tears appear unsavory to many who share meals with the mystic.

Nevertheless, tears are ephemeral goods that evaporate and dry up, often against Margery's will. Unlike textiles which retain their presence and material status, even when torn or hidden away, Margery's tears have a liquid problem: they are biological, overwhelmingly personal, renewable, but most importantly temporary. Blood and milk can leave traces on human and material surfaces but tears will not linger upon skin or stain (unless they fall on silk). Separated from their person, tears simply become salt water. No matter what relic keepers claim, tears cannot be effectively preserved outside of the tear ducts. Thus, Margery must constantly renew her watery claims to sainthood.

Frequently, during periods of dryness, Margery pleads and barter with Jesus to return to her the flow of wetness. In Margery's words: "And, 3yf þu wylt, Lord, þat I sese of wepyng, I prey þe take me owt of þis world. What xulde I don þerin but 3yf I myth profityn?"¹²⁴ It is in these moments that Margery seems to suffer the most, lacking

¹²² For a brief discussion of eating see Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 2.

¹²³ Daniela Romagnoli, "'Mind Your Manners': Etiquette at the Table," in *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Jean Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, trans. Clarissa Botsford, Arthur Goldhammer, Charles Lambert, et. al. (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 334-5.

¹²⁴ *Book*, 57.142.

“despair’s antidote, weeping.”¹²⁵ Her life is defined by her lachrymose projections, much in the same way it is crafted by her attire. With and through tears she is able to assert her independence from her husband and her community. She is not able to gain the same degree of power over Jesus. Separated from the one set of goods that confirm and reinforce her behavior and belief, Margery expresses her need for the tears Jesus provides. He reminds her:

And þerfor, dowtyr, I am as an hyd God in þi sowle, and I wythdrawe sum-tyme þi teerys & þi deuocyon þat þu xuldist thynkyn in thy-self þat þu hast no good-nes of þi-self but al goodness comyth of me...For þes arn not þe Deuelys 3yftys, but þei arn my gracys & my 3yftys, and þes arn myn owyn special 3yftys þat I zeue to myn own chosyn sowlys.¹²⁶

Unsurprisingly for the son of God, Jesus understands his power over Margery and chooses to exercise this power at his discretion. Tears are his special gifts, given only to a select few that he knows will join him in Heaven. Margery’s personal suffering is thus an important part of the production of those teary goods, and Jesus seems to rely upon her occasional questioning and despair to aid in their manifestation. He needs her to occasionally question her own spiritual security, though he often reiterates her Heavenly destiny throughout the text. Nevertheless when Margery’s tears are returned to her, there comes with them a sense of personal relief as well. Like the comfort provided by livery badges, this relief is created in part from the tangible connection with Christ.

Tears in Margery’s *Book* are thus objects that function similarly to the textiles that appear throughout her text. Wearing them, Margery becomes a walking reliquary,

¹²⁵ Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Coda: Transmitting Despair by Manuscript and Print,” in *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History*, ed. Elina Gertsman (New York: Routledge, 2012), 253.

¹²⁶ *Book*, 84.205.

displaying for contemporary and reading audiences the God-given products of her tears. As Rolle notes, tears and the contemplative life do not provide instant gratification: “Lyfe treuly contemplatyfe of any man is þis vale of teris vnto a lytil is not parfityly gettyn.”¹²⁷ Rolle’s argument is that it takes time and patience to succeed in a contemplative life. Tears, like white clothes, are adopted into a particular sartorial vocabulary that Margery develops throughout the course of her life to adapt to the tumultuous role of mystic. Ending at the beginning, it is worth reflecting on the scribal claims outlined in the Proem. From that early moment in the text, it is apparent that Margery’s primary drive is to understand the confusing experiences that punctuated her years. The scribe explains, “Thus alle þis thyngys turnyng vp-so-down, þis creatur whych many 3erys had gon wyl & euyr ben vnstable was parfythly drawen & steryd to entren þe wey of hy perfeccyon, wech parfyth wey Cryst ower Savyowr in his propyr persoone examplyd.”¹²⁸ Clothing, livery, and tears are the objects and vocabulary that Margery uses to right her upside-down world.

¹²⁷ Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, I.20.45.

¹²⁸ *Book*, Proem.1-2.

Chapter 6

CODA: OBSCURED MATTER IN GOWER'S *CONFESSIO AMANTIS*

To oversimplify a bit, one might say that to a modern theorist, the problem is to explain how things “talk”; to a medieval theorist, it was to get them to shut up.
-- Caroline Walker Bynum¹

The purpose of this project has been to demonstrate the lively nature of things in the late Middle Ages. Not static or simple cultural artifacts, manmade goods in the Middle Ages were flexible: Margery Kempe blended text, textiles, and tears, Richard de Bury's books bleated their complaints as the skin pages were scraped and sewn, and fabric was empowered and transformed into a relic by the application of Cecile's blood. Medieval goods were not stable containers of meaning, but things that possessed the power to control the senses of the human users or viewers. As Caroline Walker Bynum observes, “the primary problems were, on one hand, controlling the agency objects literally had and, on the other, preserving access to the truly transcendent (and beyond all change) when the only stuff available to humans was matter—by definition labile, changeable, and capable of act.”² The conflict, according to Bynum's words in my epigram, is that objects simply will not “shut up.” Margery Kempe's clothes are as loud as she is, and claim equal attention from onlookers. They demand—‘hear me, I am

¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 283.

² Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 283.

orthodox for some, heretical for others, a relic of Eve’s sin, the product of the combined labor of tailor and sheep, and so much more.’

Domestic goods were worn, reused, gifted, willed to family, friends, and the parish, and had long lives, bringing with them the history of their users as well as traces of their origins. To repeat Richard de Bury’s words from my first chapter, the Bishop calls for textual recopying so that “the sacred book paying the debt of nature may obtain a natural heir and may raise up like seed to its dead brother.”³ The joining of “contrary elements”—the sheep parchment, mineral and vegetable inks, etc.—helped to birth the next edition, at once child and brother. Through the materials used in production, the object becomes a progenitor of future volumes.

Craftsmen dwell in the background in all of these chapters. Shaping matter like wood, stone, and metal into domestic and religious goods, the artisan is the silent partner in many of these transactions between person and object. In this final chapter, I will turn my attention to craftsmen and the lively matter that they manipulate to produce their wares. Rather than providing a summary or conclusion to the project, I would instead like to suggest the next logical step in a discussion about objects, and direct my attention through the goods themselves to the substance that was used in production. It is my argument that reading matter (the base elements from which an object is produced) is just as important as reading form, and I will use this chapter to begin outlining some of

³ Richard de Bury, *Philobiblon*, trans. E.C. Thomas, ed. Michael Maclagan (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1970), 147.

preliminary questions that can help us to better understand the “vibrant” nature of substance in late medieval England.⁴

Recognizing the life of matter in the late Middle Ages can seem problematic in our time of cheap and abundant goods. In the modern West, objects are commodities and disposability is one of their most desirable characteristics. For many people, to love a thing, to fetishize it, is to suggest a relationship with the objects that is unhealthy in the modern world. Our lives are, after all, populated with things, and while we can use kitchen appliances and books, we should not assume that they have a special, independent power over us. To do so might lead to hoarding, and make it difficult to make the ultimate but necessary sacrifice of a good—to throw it in the dumpster. To address this opposition, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen juxtaposes the twentieth century notion of the material with the medieval in his article, “The Sex Life of Stone.” During a discussion of art theory, he notes that modern notions of the object reject matter’s independence, assigning “vibrancy” to biological organisms: “Matter can be the receptacle for this vibrancy but cannot innovate such expressiveness or intensifying possibilities on its own.”⁵ To illustrate the medieval contrast, Cohen shares the example of diamonds in John Mandeville’s *Travels*, which are capable of sexual reproduction: “there growth togedere the male and the female and arn norysched of the dew heuene. And they gendere and conseyue as it were othere litel childeren in here kynde, and so they multyplye and

⁴ This word references Jane Bennett’s influential discussion of “vital materiality” in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁵ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “The Sex Life of Stone,” in *From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe*, ed. E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 30.

growyn fully and swerly.”⁶ Exotic locales and conditions render these stones different from the more familiar English or western European rocks. The *kinde*, or nature, of these stones is not passive, awaiting human actants to give them value and meaning, but inherently “vibrant” as the diamonds grow and reproduce.⁷ Such an activity does not, as Kellie Robertson reminds us, amount to animism: these stones do not possess consciousness.⁸ Nevertheless, there is an essence to matter—both inorganic and organic—that is more than just symbolic or commercial. For both de Bury and Mandeville, and indeed most medieval people, objects were far more than disposable commodities; they were filled with life.

As my project has demonstrated though, to recognize that matter and goods are vibrant is not to suggest that everyone was at ease with their world of objects. In all of my chapters, I have argued the writers, readers, and characters were nervous about the way the object world might affect their bodies and souls. Cecile resists the material world, only to be turned into an object of symbolic, economic, and real power; Margery seeks a set of clothes that will align her with the Heavenly family, but must endure pain and mistrust on the part of her audience. To address this “object paranoia” more directly, I would like to end my project with a discussion of the “Tale of Albinus and Rosemund” from Book One of John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. I turn to Gower because, while the *Confessio* is filled with material goods, scholarship has tended to elide these objects with

⁶ M.C. Seymour ed., *The Bodley Version of Mandeville’s Travels*, EETS 253 (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 85.

⁷ “The Sex Life of Stone,” 30-31.

⁸ Kellie Robertson, “Exemplary Rocks,” in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2012), 98.

their human or moral subjects, recognizing them only as symbolic or metaphorical. While there are isolated exceptions, no sustained discussion of the material world of Gower's *Confessio* has yet been undertaken. Retaining the spirit of inclusivity I have worked to sustain in this project, I do not wish to negate these metaphorical readings. Instead this chapter will demonstrate that Gower's interest in textual labor and moral corruption, major themes in the poem, are developed by frequent references to matter and goods production.

Briefly, Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is an eight book poem (plus Prologue) that records the confession of Amans, an older man who is in love with an uninterested young woman. Genius, the confessor, is a priest of Venus and works to instruct Amans in how to avoid error in love by detailing various permutations of the seven deadly sins, which occupy seven of the books. Book Seven is a guide to princes, inserted between the sections on gluttony and lechery. Composed of tales, discursive lessons from Genius, and exchanges between Amans and his confessor, the poem illustrates for its audience what the sin of love looks like. Employing both human and material actors, Gower uses his many references to stones and manufactured objects, as well as abstract discussions of alchemy and sensual responses, to illustrate the pleasures and dangers associated with trusting the senses to derive meaning from the material world.

One of the conventions of Gower scholarship is that issues, like the problematic uses of matter, can be identified throughout the long poem. In contrast to early and mid-twentieth century work, which detached the tales from the larger frame (as is common practice with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*), current scholarship needs to produce unified

readings that account for all eight books.⁹ Peter Nicholson, in his monograph on *Love and Ethics in Gower's Confessio Amantis*, observes that, "perhaps the biggest challenge that the tales pose is to account for their relation to the overtly moral frame in which they are set."¹⁰ "Moral Gower" is frequently dismissed by modern readers who see his lines as simple and Amans's confession laborious. But the "challenge" that Nicholson identifies does not produce a simple moral poem but instead one that is problematic and often disturbing. And while I will be working primarily within Book One, I argue that Gower intentionally weaves these troubling material encounters into his narrative as part of his larger lesson to Amans.

For example, the "Tale of Mundus and Paulina" describes how the chaste and beautiful Paulina is tricked into having sex with the duke Mundus, who disguised himself as the god Anubis. Mundus reveals himself to the maiden the next day, and Paulina immediately reports the incident to her husband. The lusty duke is not physically punished, but is merely banished, and the moral of the story is that it is hard to control one's passions when in love. What is punished (other than the two priests who aided Mundus) is the image of Isis that she traveled to see. On pilgrimage with other women, Paulina was first seen by Mundus as she visited the fertility goddess's temple.¹¹ In response to her outrage, the townspeople "drown [draw it] out" to purge the temple of

⁹ A contained survey of this early work is Peter Nicholson, ed. *Gower's Confessio Amantis: A Critical Anthology* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1991).

¹⁰ Peter Nicholson, *Love and Ethics in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 77.

¹¹ G. C. Macaulay, ed. *The English Works of John Gower Volume 1*, EETS 81 (1900; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 1.800-806. All references to John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* are from this edition. Citations will include book and line number.

the image “Whos cause was the pelrinage”; the people will punish the object that was the aim of Paulina’s journey and which ultimately facilitated her rape.¹² This revolt against the image seems to inspire two readings. The first, aligning with contemporary concerns about idolatry, reminds readers that they should not unquestioningly trust their eyes. Mundus’s disguise and the image itself are not trustworthy objects of the gaze; instead they trick the eyes and subsequently facilitate corruption. The second reading reminds readers of the inherent power of a material artifact. To cleanse the temple and drown the image is to recognize that the artifact in some way betrayed the community. It failed to channel the power of Isis who, presumably, would have defended Paulina if present in the idol. In this case, the anger is not directed towards an empty good, but one that failed to do its duty. Instead of an easy moral, the “Tale of Mundus and Paulina” is part of a poem that, as Diane Watt argues, “deliberately encourages its audience to take risks in interpretation, to experiment with meaning, and to offer individualistic readings.”¹³ Like the image, the poem is not a safe text but one that encourages a thoughtful and cautious engagement with the human and material subjects.

Watt’s argument might seem in conflict with the vast majority of Gower scholarship which, as Nicholson’s comments suggest, recognizes the voice of the author clearly in the text. To state it another way, Gower tells readers overtly about his social, political, religious, and moral concerns and links them directly to fourteenth century attitudes and events. While it would be wrong to read any poem as a simple reflection of an author’s ideas, Gower’s voice is hard to ignore. As Larry Scanlon argues, Gower uses

¹² Macaulay, *The English Works*, 1.1040-41.

¹³ Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xii.

his concerns regarding the moral decline of humanity to organize the *Confessio*: “Following the usual conceit of the estates-satire, Gower argues throughout that the present is in a state of moral crisis unknown in the past. But he also suggests, more implicitly, that the older forms of sustaining moral authority are now less efficacious than they once were.”¹⁴ The *Confessio* is at once a tract on love and a discussion of how social, political, and religious life have been corrupted through the passage of time. Nevertheless, as the “Tale of Mundus and Paulina” demonstrates, this moral authority is neither clear nor clean in many places. While the image of “Mundus and Paulina” can easily be read alongside Chaucer’s “The Second Nun’s Tale” as a commentary on the contemporary materiality of the Church, it is also morally and materially messy: the power of the image itself to attract and abandon users is startling when considered next to Mundus’s behavior.

The “Tale of Mundus and Paulina” is but one example of how sensual (especially visual) perception can fail if someone chooses to object to deceive others. The “Tale of Albinus and Rosemund” provides one such example; a skull is polished, covered in gold and jewels, and used as a cup. In this story, it is the inability of Rosemund, the queen and wife of Albinus, to recognize that the cup has been produced from the head of her father that ultimately causes the downfall of the household and the story’s main characters. As we shall see in the next section, the obscured matter of the skull cup reveals a potential problem of the senses which are unable to discern the truth of an object when it has been produced to deceive.

¹⁴ Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum in the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 251.

Scholarship on the “Tale of Albinus and Rosemund” frequently recognizes the cup as an important symbolic and metaphorical object—what Robert Yeager calls Gower’s “object model.” Yeager explains that the author “could manipulate objects to give them symbolic value and psychologically revealing significance. His use of them to heighten the effectiveness of his exemplifying stories is an extension of that practice” and as a result “the ‘object model’ serves to provide a focus to retain and learn from Gower’s point.”¹⁵ Objects throughout the *Confessio* are overtly didactic and provide Genius with textual matter to instruct Amans in the avoidance of sin and the ways of love. This object model does more than turn things into containers for didacticism. Gower is keenly aware of both the methods and materials used in the production of worldly goods. Elliott Kendall recognizes these goods through their position in the household, noting, “The material culture and politicized exchanges of the great household feature in scores of tales told by confessor Genius, and frequently occupy the literal level of allegorical and metaphorical language in the tale collection’s frame narrative.”¹⁶ Goods, like people, are the literal and narrative details that form a lordly household, and Gower frequently inserts gifted objects (like the Trojan Horse of Book One) and prestige goods (like Albinus’s cup) in the tales as a way of providing an object lesson for the reader. The reason we should not trust Greeks bearing gifts is not abstract; it is a giant horse forged from bronze by the “crafti werkman Epius” filled with soon-to-be marauding soldiers.¹⁷

¹⁵ R. F. Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 135-36.

¹⁶ Elliott Kendall, *Lordship and Literature: John Gower and the Politics of the Great Household* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁷ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 1.1087-91.

As the reference to Epius suggests, Gower's objects are aligned with labor, and less frequently the individual responsible for production. Gower's interest in craftsmanship is personal, the result of his own labor as a writer, and social as he considers the roles of merchants and craftsman as they manipulate and alter matter to form the goods that will eventually be sold and used. The Prologue opens with Gower acknowledging his craft as he produces the poem itself. Aware that composing text is ultimately the production of a material manuscript, Gower explicitly aligns his work with the product. In the incipit to the Prologue, Gower recalls that "bokes schewen here and there,/Wherof the world ensampled is" and declares his aim to "wryte a bok/After the world that whilom tok/Long tyme in the olde daies passed."¹⁸ He will "wryte and do my businesse,/That in som part, so as I gesse,/The wyse man mai ben avised."¹⁹ Gower will write of the world long ago to help readers better understand the world that is. In doing so, he hopes that he might advise the "wyse man" who might ponder the words and meanings in his poem. Part of the "businesse" that Gower will do in this context is to produce the material object that will then become a series of copies. His labor is not an abstract composition process, but literally the act of inscribing text upon parchment. As Brian Gastle observes about the Prologue, "it is worth noting that Gower, who elsewhere seems so removed from the workaday life of his contemporary London environment, here at the beginning of the *Confessio* will acknowledge his own work as a form of cultural

¹⁸ Macaulay, *The English Works*, Prologue.46-47, 53-55.

¹⁹ Macaulay, *The English Works*, Prologue.63-5.

and political production.”²⁰ There is of course also a literal manufacture of the manuscript, and the *Confessio* came to be reproduced multiple times as Gower transferred his support in writing from Richard II to Henry IV. Scholars have noted that the metaphor of textual labor can be read as one of the unifying themes of the eight book poem. The poem is both an object lesson in reading and a discussion about how reading objects can affect the senses and the soul. As objects like the skull cup illustrate, Gower challenges his readers to question their own relationship with the senses and craftsmanship as Amans is forced to reconcile his behavior towards his unresponsive love. Not shying away from the problematic and often dangerous matter that composes the objects of his text, Gower recognizes the inherent power of material substances and the potential misuses of such matter when manipulated by skillful craftsman.

Adulterated Matter

The urge to break objects down to their constituent elements is reminiscent of the practices of alchemy, and in Book Four of the *Confessio* Gower provides a comparatively optimistic discussion of the potential uses of natural elements in craft. While narratives like Chaucer’s “Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale” use craft practices like alchemy as a way of tricking the senses of the unwitting, Gower recognizes that the manipulation of the elemental world is potentially useful to both individuals and the common profit. Honest craft makes obvious the materials used in production. Looks should not be deceiving and appearance and content should align. The corruption of matter is perhaps most apparent

²⁰ Brian Gastle, “Gower’s Business: Artistic Production of Cultural Capital and the Tale of Florent,” in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, John Hines, and R.F. Yeager (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 187.

when Gower outlines the work of metal smiths and alchemists. Though not an author noted for his interest in detailed descriptions of the merchant class, Gower does discuss merchants and the wool trade, as well as the process by which goldsmiths adulterate metals in his *Mirror de l'Omme*. As Roger Ladd observes, Gower aligns goods production with alchemy and complains that goldsmiths contaminate the purity of the metal.²¹ Margery Kempe reminds us in her vision of golden cushions that gold is a powerful substance, associated not only with financial success but with spiritual power as well.²² Altering the metal not only adds impurities into a valuable substance, thus fooling the buyer, it also alters the inherent power of the matter itself.

At the same time, not all alchemists were corrupt or obsessed with gold, and in the *Confessio* Gower provides an optimistic counter-narrative to the depiction of alchemy as a false science. Rather than condemning outright the alchemist, whose primary duty is to alter the *kinde* or essential state of substance, Gower validates the activity, recognizing true alchemy as a virtuous labor that looks to purify rather than adulterate material. Like the act of writing, the labor of the alchemist can be understood as textual, as Stephanie L. Batkie points out. Discussing Book Four of the *Confessio*, Batkie asserts, “labour (both textual and material) is critical to Gower’s characterization of alchemy as a remedy for the sin of Sloth but also to the larger confessional framework of the poem. Through alchemy Gower shows his audience how to become virtuous readers who are able to

²¹ Roger A. Ladd, *Antimerchantism in Late Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 52 and 68.

²² Sanford B Meech and Hope Emily Allen, eds, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, EETS 212 (1940; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 86.210.

materially change themselves through the abstract and immaterial world of the text.”²³

The alchemy of reading, according to Batkie, is “its continual requirement of inward, transformational reading.”²⁴ This alchemy is a virtuous labor that helps individuals become better readers. Alchemy fails when it is driven by a love of riches, distracting alchemists from the real science.

Book Four takes up alchemy directly, referring to alchemical processes (distillation, sublimation, etc) as well as the desired products, the three philosopher’s stones. The third, a mineral stone, purifies metals so that “al the vice goth aweie/Of rust, of stink, and of hardnesse.”²⁵ After cleaning these elements, the mineral philosopher’s stone has the power to “Transformeth al the ferste kynde/And makth hem able to conceive/Through his vertu.”²⁶ The “ferste kynde” are the original elements of the matter being transformed which, if altered through honest alchemy, will be transmuted into a more virtuous substance. As Batkie explains, “Virtue becomes a reified quality that flows from the Stone to the base matter in the alchemical exchange, and, more importantly for Gower, it increases in quality with every use.”²⁷ The result is the gold and silver of alchemical legend.

²³ Stephanie L. Batkie, “‘Of the parfite medicine’: *Merita Perpetuata* in Gower’s Vernacular Alchemy,” in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, John Hines, and R.F. Yeager (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 157.

²⁴ Batkie, “‘Of the parfite medicine’,” 162.

²⁵ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 4.2556-7.

²⁶ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 4.2560-62.

²⁷ Batkie, “‘Of the parfite medicine’,” 159.

The integrity of the alchemist or craftsman, as well as the virtue of the process itself, is essential to transmutation. Further, altering constituent elements was implicitly associated with the divine. As James Simpson reminds us, God is responsible for the matter of creation: “It is clear that in this act of artistic formation God produces not merely an external shape or form, but also that he gives the elements their distinctive, proper form, the quality by which they are defined...God informs the soul as the artist shapes his matter, using a divine exemplar to reproduce an imitation of the divine.”²⁸ The inherent qualities that Simpson mentions remain with matter even as it is manipulated by the artist whose act of creation mirrors that of God’s. In Gower’s work, the human artisan will use the substance of creation to produce an inferior product. In this case, the alchemist, writer, and craftsman alike change God’s elements and recombine them to alter both form and substance. But as Gower points out, the corruption of time also produces potentially corrupted art and readers. In presenting the role of the artist and the material in both its ideal and sinful forms, Gower forces his audience to consider how they read the object world. As Watt explains, “Gower offers his readers (medieval, modern, and postmodern) an imaginative participation in the sinful condition of humanity and an aesthetic experience of the disorder of the world.”²⁹ The material world of his poem is just as paradoxical as that of fourteenth century England. As all the texts in this project illustrate, to seek a unified reading of the object world is inherently problematic because objects function in so many ways. Gower reflects upon this material conflict by allowing objects to retain their often conflicting meanings: the image of “Mundus and

²⁸ James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille’s Anticlaudianus and John Gower’s Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

²⁹ Watt, *Amoral Gower*, xiii.

Paulina” is *both* a rejection of the materiality of idolatry and a recognition of the vibrancy of crafted goods. No simple celebration of a long lost golden age, the *Confessio* considers the act of the craftsman and most importantly the effect that altered or obscured matter can have upon an unsuspecting user.

Gower forecasts the difficulty and danger of interpreting the matter of an object in the *Confessio*'s Prologue. Recounting the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, in which the biblical king saw on a “Stage” a “wonder strange ymage” of a monster with a head and neck of gold; breast, shoulders, and arms of silver; trunk and legs to the knees of brass; legs of steel; and feet of clay or pottery.³⁰ Entreating the biblical Daniel to interpret the dream, the prophet observes that the monster predicts how the world will change and become corrupted.³¹ Social and political responsibilities are linked with the both unsullied elements (gold and silver) and alloyed substances (brass, steel, and clay) to illustrate how corrupt matter aligns with the “corruption of time.” According to Russell Peck,

This idea of man's accountability is crucial to the plot of the *Confessio*. As men become increasingly forgetful of their original harmonious position in God's scheme they become more like the divided and crumbling feet of the monster, which, Gower suggest, represent the latter days of war and civil strife as well as the schism within the church.³²

Matter and corruption are aligned within the human form of the monster. Nevertheless, the monster's body is more than just a metaphor; it indicates to readers that the poem will

³⁰ Macaulay, *The English Works*, Prologue.603-14.

³¹ Macaulay, *The English Works*, Prologue.625-30.

³² Russell Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1978), 3-4.

deal with the great variety of literal and material objects that are confronted daily by the senses and that ultimately come to form or alter the body and soul.

The World of Perception: Senses, Sin, and the Material in Book One

Nebuchadnezzar's Dream is but the first sensual/material encounter in the *Confessio*. Providing a phenomenological theory for the tales that follow, the priest of Venus instructs Amans that he should be cautious of his senses. Amans says that Genius,

bad me that I scholde schrive
As touchende of my wittes fyve,
And schape that thei were amended
Of that I hadde hem misdispended.
For tho be proprely the gates,
Through whiche as to the herte algates
Comth alle thing unto the feire,
Which may the mannes Soule empeire [harm].³³

This passage cautions readers about the dangers of misunderstanding the senses in both poetry and the physical world. Amans must confess to Genius the misuse of his senses, and the ways in which he has allowed these sensible experiences to enter his body and harm his soul. Urged to protect his heart from the misdirection of the senses, especially vision and hearing, Genius acknowledges the inherent power of the things that are perceived. The body is imagined as a citadel, in which the gates of the senses open to the fair of the heart or human experience (Peck glosses it as “our dealings” and “market-fair”).³⁴ Imagined as a commercial space, it is possible to misspend or abuse the senses as in the market-fair that is our soul. The body becomes a vibrant economic power and

³³ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 1.295-302.

³⁴ Russell Peck, ed., *John Gower Confessio Amantis*, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS, 2006), 81.

Amans reminds the reader that, in human experience, perceptions are traded for memory and knowledge, however sinful those experiences might be.

As Amans learns throughout the poem, the “five wits” must be overtly trained and governed, for if they are left to their own devices they will misdirect the mind and soul. The eye is called a “thief/To love” that “doth ful gret meschief.”³⁵ The only way to be certain that no sin can enter is to lock the gates of the eyes and ears: “Than haddest thou the gates stoke.”³⁶ And, if successful, all five senses will follow: “Tho tuo, the thre were eth to reule:/ Forthi as of thi wittes five/I wile as now nomore schryve,/Bot only of these ilke tuo.”³⁷ Peck argues that the danger is, in part, related to the poem as object which is abstracted when it becomes the stuff of memory: “his poem will become phenomena for the reader’s eye and ear, brain food which may nourish the alert reader’s intelligence.”³⁸ The danger, according to Peck, is that Amans needs to defend himself against the “prejudicial interpretations his desires impose upon what the senses convey.”³⁹ Eyes and ears become dangerous and even out of control organs of the human body which, if not governed carefully, will lead their owner astray. The senses make the body porous. Sensations and images translated from the external world to the interior of the mind become mnemonic stuff; and such information eventually forms knowledge. This knowledge, as Peck observes during a discussion of Hugh of St. Victor, “is in itself a *kind*

³⁵ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 1.319-20.

³⁶ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 1.538.

³⁷ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 1.543-47.

³⁸ Russell Peck, “The Phenomenology of Make-Believe in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. R.F. Yeager (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1998), 56.

³⁹ Peck, “The Phenomenology of Make-Believe,” 56-7. See also Watt, *Amoral Gower*, 98.

of sin, a perversion of what *is* that causes instability and anxiety in the human heart. Yet knowledge can also provide a way back toward home. Knowledge creates a world apart from what is, a world in the brain—a world of its own. Knowledge is thus paradoxical.”⁴⁰ Gower’s lesson to readers is that the senses must be tempered and questioned, for to accept sensation unquestioningly is to admit sin into the heart and soul. Thus, for Gower and the majority of his readers, the brain is not a world apart but one that is subject to the experiences of the body. The world of the mind cannot be formed without the world of the flesh.

Not limited to a metaphor about poetry, Genius’s warning also includes the objects that come to populate each of the stories, most of which cannot be trusted. The objects that fill the *Confessio* are dangerous because they affect the senses. In the “Trump of Death,” the king orders made a particular “trompe of bras” which is given to a “certain man” who will use it “with a sterne breth” to trick his brother into believing that he has been condemned to death by the king’s whim.⁴¹ In retelling the tale of Deianira, Hercules, and Nessus, Gower depicts the ancient hero suffering a death by venomous fire when he adorns himself in Nessus’s “scherte” which “mai nocht twinne,/For the venym that was therinne.”⁴² Gower deploys a classic tale to demonstrate that sensual contact with an object always carries potential danger. Envisioning a situation in which the senses must be shut up totally, Gower states in his Latin prologue that the senses are, “Que viciosa manus claudere nulla potest” or gates “which no-vice-weakened hand can

⁴⁰ Peck, “The Phenomenology of Make-Believe,” 53-4.

⁴¹ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 1.2127-30.

⁴² Macaulay, *The English Works*, 2.2291-2294.

keep shut.”⁴³ It is sin that opens the defenses and makes individuals vulnerable to the whims of the senses, and ultimately the whims of the objects which are perceived. The very best men and women will not need to yield to their ears and eyes. But as Gower recognizes in his Prologue and in these opening lines on the wits, the majority of humankind is incapable of keeping the gates of their senses shut. Vibrant matter will penetrate the body and mind; and the production of knowledge is inherently material.

“Drink With Thy Father”: Repurposing the Skull

Gower’s discussion of the senses is largely bound to what can be immediately perceived, but as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, substance retains its power even when its form is not recognizable. The danger of most objects lies in the ways they obviously play upon the senses—the sight of Almachius’s idol and the sound of Margery’s tear-production are both dangerous but are nevertheless easily accessible assuming that the body is not disabled in some way. The skull cup of “Albinus and Rosemund” provides a counter-narrative to this easy description of the senses, in which imperceptible matter retains its power to act upon the human actant. A tale denouncing the evils of boasting, the action of the story is driven by and responds to the circulation of an ornately-rendered cup that was formerly the skull of an enemy king Gurmond.

Defeating Gurmond in battle, Albinus cuts off the king’s head:

he ne smoth his hed of thanne,
Wherof he tok away the Panne,
Of which he seide he wolde make
A Cuppe for Gurmoundes sake,
To kepe and drawe into memoire

⁴³ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 1.iv. The translation is Andrew Galloway’s from Peck, *John Gower Confessio Amantis*, 80.

Of his bataille the victoire.⁴⁴

By cutting off the top of Gurmond's head and reworking it into a cup, Albinus makes a statement about the power of individual substances. No second degree reminiscence will be suitable. Neither a stone nor the sword he used to slay the king would suffice for his mnemonic device. Defeated, Gurmond not only loses his life and his kingdom, but is also reduced to a household good and like Gower's poem, the cup becomes a mnemonic trigger for its owner; it is a sophisticated keepsake in which he can store the memories and associations of his battle and victory. At the same time, it is made from the matter that once enclosed another king's memories and quietly retains something of its original owner as it is cut apart and reworked into the decorative object that it eventually becomes. The skull cup becomes a porous object, one that problematizes the boundary between the human/material. Though turned into an inanimate object, the king's brain "panne" will continue to act on his behalf even as it ceases to be a growing part of the human body and becomes a piece of tableware.

It is the hidden substance of the skull that is most evocative in this narrative. As with Gower's discussion of alchemy, matter is both powerful and easily corrupted by human craft. Form and matter are intimately linked in the period as were organic and inorganic matter. Reflecting upon stone, Kellie Robertson observes that,

Some alchemical texts even posit a "mineral soul" responsible for the apparent liveliness of magnets and amber. Such an understanding of the interconnectedness of all material bodies suggest that the allegorical readings of stones found in lapidaries were not mere analogies; rather, in a physical world where the rock and the human differ more by degree than by kind, where the divide between the

⁴⁴ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 1.2471-76. Though there are a few sources for this text, Gower most likely draws it from Godfrey of Viterbo's *Pantheon* reprinted in "Pantheon," in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptorum* Vol. 22, ed. G. Waitz (Hanover: Hahn, 1872), 214-16.

material and the immaterial was not yet so indelible, the reciprocity of moral lessons was underwritten by an ontological connection manifest in the *scala naturae*.⁴⁵

The natural world provides its own lessons as the substances that occupy the world school human users in the meanings and morality of creation. Aristotle, whose writings on the natural world circulated widely in the Middle Ages, explains that there is potential in all matter and it is through form that original substance ultimately gains its nature. Bone, for example, has inherent qualities that will make it grow, what Aristotle might call “motion and change.”⁴⁶ As Aristotle explains, “That which is potentially flesh or bone has not yet gained its own nature, and is not a natural object, until it has acquired the form which enables us to define what the thing is and to define it as flesh or bone.”⁴⁷ Form and substance (which is an “underlying thing”) come to define the nature of an object.⁴⁸ Robertson reminds us that this Aristotelian hylomorphism joins matter and form together “in such a way that neither properly precedes the other. Matter is not merely inert stuff because it contains within it the potential susceptibility to form; likewise, form as actuality is not wholly “immaterial” because a given form is limited by a predisposition to certain types of matter.”⁴⁹ As a result, bone and stone—organic and inorganic matter— are ultimately empowered by a combination of that which it derives

⁴⁵ Robertson, “Exemplary Rocks,” 99-100.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Physics*, 35.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, 34.

⁴⁹ Kellie Robertson, “Abusing Aristotle,” in *Speculative Medievalisms: Discography*, ed. The Petropunk Collective [Eileen Joy, Anna Kłosowska, Nicola Masciandaro, Michael O’Rourke], (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 169.

from and the form it ultimately takes. Nevertheless, after taking its initial form, bone remains bone. It is not transformed into some alternate matter simply because it is reworked by craftsman.

As Aquinas observes in his commentary on *Physics*, there is an important difference between that form which arises from “germination” and that which arises from “art.” “Therefore,” says Aquinas, “as this form, which does not arise through germination, is not nature but art, so the form which arises from generation is nature. But the form of a natural thing does arise through generation, for man comes to be from man. Therefore the form of a natural thing is nature.”⁵⁰ Gurmond’s skull was generated from his parents and grew as he developed. Though devoid of sensual characteristics, like for example skin, the skull nevertheless is a natural form and is not the result of craft. Art, as Aristotle uses the term, is produced by manual labor through the combination or application of external sources.⁵¹ What is implied by Albinus’s deception though, is that a natural form retains the essence of its original substance: a skull does not cease to be a skull because it no longer encloses a king’s brain. By reworking the organic matter that once grew within Gurmond, Albinus not only crafts a “grim symbol of his own mortality,” he also works to obscure the true nature of a potent object.⁵²

The potential power of bone was well established in the Middle Ages. Relics, which were often fragments of bone from saints, retained some essence of their original

⁵⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics*, trans. John P. Rowman (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1999), 82.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Physics*, 33.

⁵² Nicholson, *Love and Ethics in Gower’s Confessio Amantis*, 144.

owners. It was believed that the saint would be attracted to the remnants of their worldly existence and that the possession or even sensual perception of such an object could heal the sick or injured. As Patrick Geary has noted, “The earthly presence of such a sacred body was thus a pledge or deposit left as physical reminder of salvation to the faithful.”⁵³ The leftover matter of the saint continued to act on behalf of the owners or the onlookers. Not silent body parts, these bones demonstrate their miraculous potential through healing and responding to prayers. At the same time, as I discussed in Chapter Two, relics without context are simply scraps of bone—raw rather than spiritually coded matter. Medieval reliquaries serve to identify the matter with its original owner as well as that individual’s significance. For example, Henk van Os describes a skull of a French bishop heavily engraved with images and a coat of arms. According to Os, “The skull was intended to ensure that the power of memory continued to exercise its force over the beholder. The name of your predecessor had to be consecrated *ad immortalitatis memoriam*, for a perpetual memory.” Os goes on to refer to this activity as “institutionalized ancestor worship.”⁵⁴ Like all relics, the skull does act as a mnemonic device. But its power derives most from the fact that it is a recognizable skull—organic matter that is usually abandoned at death repurposed as an artistic material.

The appropriation of human matter as an artistic medium was then, as it is now, problematic. As Geary reminds us, bodies are typically the site of corruption. Discussing the circulation of relics, Geary notes that

⁵³ Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 33.

⁵⁴ Henk van Os, *The Way to Heaven: Relic Veneration in the Middle Ages* (Utrecht: Museum Catharijneconvent, 2000), 93.

The most eagerly sought after relics of the medieval period—bodies or portions of bodies—were superficially similar to thousands of other corpses and skeletons universally available. Not only were they omnipresent and without intrinsic economic value, they were normally undesirable: an ordinary body was the source of contamination, and opening graves or handling remains of the dead was considered abhorrent.⁵⁵

Contact with the non-saintly dead was to invite illness and disease. While many saints demonstrated their postmortem power by exuding pleasant odors after death and resisting decay, the everyday person understood that their bodies would eventually be broken down and consumed by the earth, only to rise again at the resurrection.

The interest in the body reflected by Albinus's cup not only illustrates the "late medieval preoccupation with death," but also the way that the death makes both the body and the soul of the departed individual vulnerable. Books of hours illustrate this phenomenon with both their program of prayers and the images that open the Office of the Dead. A collection of prayers spoken by both priests and the laity, the Office of the Dead was used at funerals to pray for the recently departed soul. In the Cinot Hours, this section begins with a depiction of the Raising of Lazarus, a common illustration in such works. Lazarus sits up in his grave, draped loosely in his burial shroud, which covers only his head, right leg, and genitals (fig. 4).⁵⁶ Christ, standing before the apostles on the right, confidently performs the miracle.

⁵⁵ Patrick Geary, "Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 174.

⁵⁶ Geary, "Sacred Commodities," 174.



Fig. 4, Raising of Lazarus, University of Delaware Morris Library MS095.031, early sixteenth century

Behind Lazarus is a secular figure, dressed in more contemporary late medieval attire. Flushed, with red cheeks, the man covers his face with his large and luxuriant sleeve, indicating both surprise and disgust. This moment precedes Lazarus's account of the afterlife, and users of the book at once see the vulnerability of the body in the grave and the inevitable disgust that such bodies have for others. At death, the unanimated flesh is no longer able to defend itself, and so becomes subject to the whims of those left behind.

Gurmond's skull documents this vulnerability. "The cup is evocative of the harsh realities of a militaristic society," says Yeager, "and of the coarse and humiliating forms

its triumphs could exact on the defeated.”⁵⁷ The other prize of war, which Albinus is happy acquires, is the king’s daughter Rosemund, and they come to “love ech other wonder wel.”⁵⁸ While she knows that her husband has slain her father, she is not aware that he subsequently made his head into a cup. Thus in peace and comfort they lived until Albinus called for a great feast to celebrate their prosperity. At the feast he took pleasure at looking at the cup which was present in the hall. The narrator notes that Albinus rejoiced within his heart:

...and tok a pride,
And sih the Cuppe stonde aside,
Which mad was of Gurmoundes hed,
As ye have herd, whan he was ded,
And was with gold and riche Stones
Beset and bounde for the nones,
And stod upon a fot on heihte
Of burned gold, and with gret sleihte
Of werkmanschipe it was begrave
Of such werk as it scholde have,
And was policed ek so clene
That no signe of the Skulle is sene,
Bot as it were a Gripes Ey [griffin’s egg].⁵⁹

Urging Rosemund to “Drink with thi fader,” Albinus then boasts to those attending the feast of his that he has tricked his wife into drinking from her father’s head:

“prouesse/...Which of the Skulle hath so begonne.”⁶⁰ Refusing to respond immediately to her husband’s actions, Rosemund instead contemplates the cruelty of his bragging, disturbed by the fact that Albinus had “picked out hire fader brain,/ And of the Skulle had

⁵⁷ Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic*, 148.

⁵⁸ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 1.2489.

⁵⁹ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 1.2533-45.

⁶⁰ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 2551, 2560-62.

mad a Cuppe.”⁶¹ Resolving to take revenge, she tricks a knight of the kingdom, Helmege, to help her slay her husband. Then, fleeing the kingdom, both Rosemund and Helmege seek refuge in another Duke’s dominion, only to be slain by that ruler when they reveal their reason for exile. The moral of Gower’s story, according to Genius, is that pride and boasting can destroy both love and kingdoms. As Peter Nicholson observes, this is one of the “grimmiest” tales of the *Confessio* because of both the cup and Albinus’s behavior. Nicholson notes, “there is not a single redeeming character as Albinus’ victory, his marriage, and everyone around him, including Rosemund, are corrupted by his Boasting.”⁶² Boasting is materialized in the cup, which becomes a tangible representation of Albinus’s pride overwhelming his duty to common profit. Read from the cup’s point of view though, it is the power of the skull that ultimately acts upon the audience.

What Albinus’s trick suggests is that even the unidentifiable matter of the cup can seek its revenge; Gurmond will win the day. Like the tradition of relics already discussed, the cup manifests itself as dangerous when it is identified as a skull. Simultaneously, it is the workmanship of the cup, not the cup itself, which causes the greatest distress. Had the skull remained a skull, the trick would not have been possible. Like the adulterated metals of the alchemist, it is the attempt to hide the natural form and substance of the former king’s “panne” that ultimately harms both Albinus and Rosemund. Albinus’s true underlying boast is not that he killed the king, which everyone already knew, but that he has the power to manipulate matter (or cause it to be manipulated by craftsman) so that the original materials are no longer apparent. He can alter that which God gave form. The

⁶¹ Macaulay, *The English Works*, 2566-68.

⁶² Nicholson, *Love, Ethics, and Gower’s Confessio Amantis*, 144.

cup, which represents the wealth and resources of a grand king, is itself a material sign of Albinus's power.

Further, the artisans were so skilled that they could change the character of the object. No longer was the cup the part of a man. It is instead "begraved" and "policed" to the point where it no longer looks like a skull but instead has an eggshell finish. The griffin's egg, as John Burrow observes in an article on the subject, is a goblet made from the eggs of ostriches.⁶³ The name comes from the fact that the eggs were large and that the vessels were typically covered with gems and precious metals, substances often associated with griffins.⁶⁴ Os observes that, according to bestiaries, "the ostrich hatches its eggs using the warmth of the sun. This made them a striking symbol for the virgin birth of Christ. Ostrich eggs were intriguing objects, implicit with significance and thereby utterly suitable to be used as reliquaries."⁶⁵ Albinus's reworking of the skull makes a variety of claims that the object itself cannot substantiate. It is not a fancy import, nor does it carry with it the meaning that an ostrich egg might for the medieval reader. Instead, it is an object lie: a good that has been created with the intention of deceiving and even harming its users. The senses are incapable of reading the material's signs as they have been removed, and are subsequently tricked into believing that the cup is just what it claims. The obfuscation of materials can be read as Albinus's way of controlling those at his feast, including his wife who drinks from the cup.

⁶³ John Burrow, "The Griffin's Egg: Gower's *Confessio Amantis* I 2545," in *Chaucer to Shakespeare: Essays in Honour of Shinsuke Ando*, ed. Toshiyuki Takamiya and Richard Beadle (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), 83.

⁶⁴ Burrow, "The Griffin's Egg," 83.

⁶⁵ Os, *The Way to Heaven*, 117.

By decorating the skull so carefully, Albinus is able to superficially manipulate the material quality of the skull itself. Such workmanship trespasses on the boundary between what should be controlled and created solely by God and what man can craft. The lesson of the skull cup in “Albinus and Rosemund” is a warning about objects on many different levels. The observers of the object must be cautious and not find themselves drawn in by great riches or fine workmanship. The skull cup and the *Confessio* as a whole is yet another cautionary tale about how easily mankind can be fooled and corrupted by the skillful manipulation of the material world and the senses.

As I hope this project has demonstrated, the literary world of the late medieval England thrummed with domestic and religious goods. My object here has been to uncover a handful of literary examples, to better understand how men and women of the late Middle Ages experienced their daily lives. Though the texts selected and the methodological approaches used reflect my training as a literature scholar, I hope that by engaging a variety of fields—anthropological studies of clothing, sociological studies of “things,” and scientific studies of the senses, just to name a few—demonstrates the value of speculative reasoning in literature scholarship.

For many wandering the streets of cities and towns in fourteenth/fifteenth century England, the object world was a place of both pleasure and consternation. Painted stone images could give form to the Christ depicted, and pleasure to the eye as the viewer contemplated the craft and painting. Simultaneously, the stone itself could be a confusing distraction. Are we adoring the statue and human craftsmanship, or the unfathomable divinity that it seeks to represent? Conscious that their material goods could and would do things to them, men and women were capable readers of things. Investigating goods

like clothes, books, and stone not only teaches us *what* people saw, smell, touched, heard, and tasted in their daily lives, but also why they cared.

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