

Apocalyptic Mentalities in Late-Medieval England

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APOCALYPTIC MENTALITIES IN LATE-MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

by

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ABSTRACT
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Marquette University, 2014

Apocalypticism, defined by expectation of an imminent End, assumes many forms and proves influential in the second half of the Fourteenth Century in England. Throughout my study, I demonstrate that a rich apocalyptic environment emerges in works of the period, including those of Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and the *Pearl*-poet. In this period, apocalypticism has provided explanations for plague, narratives that make evil more vivid, and arguments for urgent action. It gives contemporary phenomena special meaning. My study is organized around conspicuous centers of meaning that work reciprocally with the apocalyptic, simultaneously defining the End and defined by it. First, I center on death, which as a theological “last thing” in itself necessarily shares a sense of anxiety with the apocalypse. In connection with both death and apocalypse, fear and hope are often invoked. And as forms of death are tied to the apocalyptic, this means that data from the late-medieval world are used to tell a vivid story with implications for the future of daily life. My second chapter deals with how the meaning of the apocalyptic is interrelated with ecclesiastical authority. In an apocalyptic context, authority delineates not only power but also the important matters of good and evil. In this period in which notions of power and evil are intensely debated, apocalypticism proves adaptable to different circumstances and different perspectives while still remaining grounded in predictive ancient prophecy. Third, I maintain that the period’s still-developing practices of confession (which claim to regulate all human activity) are given a special urgency by the sense of impending doom. Then I close my study with an examination of how writing embodies a curious tension with the apocalyptic in mind: writing is confined to time, but it also must serve as a witness to eternal matters. The apocalypse, while it argues for ephemerality of earthly things, requires a qualified permanence of texts that spread its explanations and stories. Overall, I maintain that the richness and variety of apocalyptic meaning in this period is best understood through the apocalyptic’s interaction with key cultural terms, including mortality, authority, confession, and textual permanence.

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of an apocalypse can put the fear of God and the fear of death in us. And everyone fears death. In this project I set out to complicate the way by which we understand apocalypticism in the later Middle Ages. Throughout this study I continue to ask what the apocalypse—an unstable term—looks like. I focus on England in the later fourteenth century, and my approach incorporates cultural and textual phenomena evident in texts that we hold up as literary but whose apocalyptic meaning is still being debated. These works include those of Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and the *Pearl*-poet. I use these texts to draw out apocalyptic meaning that has been consistently overlooked in previous scholarship, while I also connect their work with other discourses from which they draw and which had deep effects on religious discourse in the period.

I structure my study around four rich centers of meaning—mortality, authority, confession, and textual permanence. As I do this, I show how the apocalyptic affects and is affected by these qualities. My study begins with death because, I maintain, death is a necessary first cognitive step in understanding the apocalypse. And the logical move from death to the apocalypse shows the apocalypse to approximate the semantic puzzle “the death of death,” a term on which my chapter hinges. Thus, as my project is concerned with how individuals in this period process the apocalypse, the primal experience of death is an important reference point. In the next chapter, the very social yet deeply religious implications of religious authority show another rich center of apocalyptic meaning. Religious authority is widely contested in this period that encounters the Papal Schism, interclerical conflict, and Wycliffism. One important component of this developing apocalyptic thread in the later Middle Ages is how the

necessary social exposure required by church work enables others to construe a person's claims to authority and patterns of behavior as apocalyptically evil. More broadly, this chapter presents a story of how in the apocalyptic moment clergy, laity, and those with claims in between use apocalyptic urgency to exercise their own kind of decisive judgment on matters of truth, power, good, and evil.

As language harnesses tremendous power in those first two major centers of meaning, so does it prove powerful in the final two that I examine, which are defined in terms of communication. I will show that confession, an increasingly important and contested religious practice in the late Middle Ages, is especially powerful as it shares concerns with the apocalyptic. These concerns include exposure (which I considered in the previous chapter) and also secrecy, vulnerability, and revelation. My final chapter considers the implications for posterity communicated by these texts. Writing, within an apocalyptic scheme, is limited to time, to the human activity worked out before the End. But it allows individual writers to transcend death as well as social and geographic separation from their audiences. Furthermore, texts may, given an apocalyptic imperative to revise and supersede what has been written before, seek (and occasionally achieve) a new sense of stability. The ambitious and deeply culturally engaged narrative projects of Chaucer and Gower illustrate this most clearly. As Chaucer and Gower assume their readers to be engaged with apocalyptic discourse, they invite readers textually to make more sense of the End.

All of these centers of meaning prove especially rich and complicated in this period. In order to tell this story of shifting and intensifying meaning, this study necessarily draws on a wide range of works and approaches that have traced significant

portions of the rich network of apocalyptic meaning available in the late Middle Ages. This study will seek to avoid key missteps that have been cited in studies of apocalypticism in recent decades. Among these missteps, those brought about by overapplication of sociological models have proven most controversial and have been countered. As Curtis Bostick rightly observes, various sociological approaches to late-medieval apocalypticism have not appreciated fully the deep religious meaning communicated from various factions within late-medieval Christianity.¹

Bostick's emphasis on differences of apocalyptic aims helps us begin to understand the diverse forms that apocalypticism can take in the late Middle Ages. He offers the terms "accommodative," "reformist," and "subversive" as categories for three general orientations toward ecclesiastical power (15-16).² Even so, apocalypticism is observable for its interaction with various phenomena, and in some cases the orientations posited by Bostick are less pronounced than in others. A many-faceted apocalypticism emerges through the preparation instilled in all of us through death and mourning, through Church practices that address death and other problems of meaning, through confessional culture, and through the implications of texts for posterity. As I am so deeply concerned with apocalyptic arguments and discourse, the seminal work of Stephen O'Leary on apocalyptic rhetoric has proven valuable, even as his focus is on later cultural phenomena. In my ultimate discussion of apocalyptic discourse I draw out those qualities that make the apocalyptic possible: narrative shape, secrecy, readers' permissiveness and/or suppression, writerly caution, and the need for posterity endemic to all writing but invoked uniquely in medieval Christian apocalypticism. And the wide-ranging

¹ See Bostick's analysis of "the sociological model" (3-4, 18).

² I consider these terms especially in my second and third chapters, given these terms' applicability to ecclesiastical authority and to the authority-dependent practices related to confession.

scholarship on medieval apocalypticism done by scholars including Bernard McGinn and Richard Emmerson has furthermore been foundational to the field and necessary for this study. The apocalypse deals with the sequence of events at the end of the age, including the ascent of Antichrist, the Second Coming, and the New Earth. Beyond the scholars already mentioned, scholars including Anne Hudson, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, and Fiona Somerset have discussed the late fourteenth century as a moment of profound concern with such matters.

Furthermore, a variety of recent textual work has helped to refine our understanding of Wycliffism and to conceive of late-medieval England as more dynamic than scholars ascribing all significant conflict to Wycliffites would have it. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton reminds us that “Wycliffism by itself . . . , as has become increasingly apparent, cannot sustain such a massive burden of literary, social, and political agency” (*Books under Suspicion* 3). Considering John Hall’s recent concern with apocalypticism that has social consequences, I will argue that the apocalyptic meaning evident in literature from his period in fact cannot be divorced from the social changes of the period.³

The necessary foundational scholarship to which I am indebted on death, authority, confession, and on the possibilities of texts will emerge in the respective chapters and is too numerous to cite here. However, it should be noted that much modern scholarship on England in this period has drawn from the work of W. A. Pantin who

³ To be sure, his period gets short shrift in Hall’s study, as is apparent in his list of social “shifts” (204-5). See in particular pages 49 and 200 in Hall for an indication of his emphasis on the consequential.

fruitfully sketched the fourteenth century as “an age of continuous controversies” (123).⁴ Taking into account those scholars who have sketched out fascinating histories of the transmission of apocalyptic traditions and that of those who emphasize the possibility of original or creative uses of apocalyptic thought, I may be seen to negotiate a middle ground between those fields of work. As I see my work, however, my approach is necessarily eclectic and makes use of a wide variety of deeply productive studies. As it is worth revisiting and considering the implications of apocalyptic rhetoric for power (those implications first studied at length by Norman Cohn), I will also suggest that apocalypticism can become a beast of its own will, feeding off a complex of already-existing images. It may serve self-interest or some stated purpose, but it may (due to the power of its images) also resist such interests.

In my study I focus on fields of meaning that lend themselves to the intensification and the continuation of such tension in spite of what we see in hindsight as disappointment, frustration, an End that never comes. As I approach the apocalypticism evident in late-fourteenth-century texts, I center on the subjects of death (which never comes), church authority (which is constantly chipped away at), and writing (which in spite of its pretensions is always incomplete). In this way I locate the apocalyptic in anticipation, in uncertainty, and often in miscommunication. Most importantly, this multifaceted apocalyptic environment presents apocalyptic views that are difficult to resist. Individuals have tremendous difficulty resisting the narrative patterns and social dynamics suggested by the apocalyptic.

⁴ Pantin’s masterfully compressed yet sufficiently vivid treatment of controversy includes such topics as apostolic poverty, ecclesiastical endowment, issues of the state’s and church’s powers, monasticism, scholasticism, and anti-intellectualism (123-35).

The study of the apocalyptic in the English literature of the late fourteenth century cannot boil down simply to the tracing of sources or to historicist (New and otherwise) readings of contemporary texts and artifacts. It needs to take into account the ways in which apocalyptic comes to be known. In my work I move from the primal reference point for an End—physical human death—and then through various forms of religious practice before finally considering how the apocalypse is harnessed in written communication of the period. Even as the apocalypse does not become known, something significant—the apocalyptic—becomes known. And this mode of the apocalyptic continues to fascinate us in religious and secular contexts alike. The apocalyptic is pervasive in the medieval texts I consider, and its imprints on culture and literature remain for us today.

CHAPTER ONE: THE PRIMACY OF DEATH

The story of the end of an age necessarily begins with the reference point of death. Death is variously interpreted in late-fourteenth-century literary texts as a concept that relates to the theological end of the age. Death, in that it is understood as part of a cycle of life, relates to the apocalyptic when the end of death is posited. Still, as death is understood in real time, as it is read in the late fourteenth century, it complements life: both death and the apocalypse communicate urgency, anxiety, and uncertainty. What is more unsettling, then—that one might see the Judgment before death, or that one might die first? As can be seen in a work as multivocal by design as *The Canterbury Tales*, apocalyptic overtones—ranging from the urgency of death in the Nun’s Priest Tale, to its supposed personification but actual abstraction in the Pardoner’s Tale—create a sense of importance for the living. Death is conceived from different perspectives and with different kinds of expectation. Can it be foreknown and (at least temporarily) averted, as in the Nun’s Priest Tale? Are we foolish or wise to encapsulate it as an object to be encountered, as the *riotours* of the Pardoner’s Tale do? Ultimately, as I will show in this chapter, apocalyptic meaning in this period intensifies in the conjunction of theological last things, matters as profound as death, Last Judgment, and eternal life. These interrelated concepts feed each other, facilitating markedly apocalyptic mentalities in late-medieval England.

The Reciprocity of Death and Apocalypticism

Near the end of the John’s Apocalypse, John speaks of a time when death is no more. This appears after the passing away of the first heaven and first earth.

Et absterget Deus omnem lacrimam ab oculis eorum et mors ultra non erit neque luctus neque dolor erit ultra quae prima abierunt.

[And God shall wipe away all tears from their eye: and death shall be no more. Nor mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow shall be any more, for the former things are passed away.] (Apoc. 21:4)⁵

This prediction raises many issues, including those of what deathlessness could look like, what passing away entails, and what the eradication of mourning, crying, and sorrow means for good and evil. This definition through absences suggests that death, which can be a physical reality but which also can be an abstract term, is hardly a more stable term than the apocalypse is. Death cannot be undone, except by this specific divine intervention that has been seen as an undoing of creation. As is evident here, death is tied to apocalypticism. And as will be suggested throughout this chapter, this relationship between the two is not of a simple character: the two may work coordinately or reciprocally, but one may also have an individual effect on the other. The teachings current in the late Middle Ages about life's end and about the age's end emerge from the foundation of eschatology developed within Judeo-Christian conceptions of history. This foundation is generally understood to be largely drawn from the book of Daniel and from John's Apocalypse. Even as Daniel and the Apocalypse are seen to advance "the 'legibility' of history and the imminence of the End," how exactly history is read has always caused some controversy (McGinn, "Introduction: John's Apocalypse" 9). Even within the professedly orthodox appearance of medieval Christianity, much diversity of opinion persists in the Middle Ages. In fact, the robustness of the apocalyptic

⁵ The Latin Vulgate text throughout this study follows the Weber edition published by the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft. For the sake of reasonable consistency with the Vulgate, Modern English biblical translations included are from the Douai-Rheims.

environment in the late Middle Ages substantially benefits from an already-established network of conflicting ideas. Although neither apocalypticism nor theologies of death are new to this period, they take forms uniquely suited to events and circumstances of this period.

As for death, part of the fluidity of the representation of death can be explained by the capaciousness and flexibility of the term death. Death seems simple enough (a term for the stoppage of life), but the term can be personified, can represent the even more abstract concept of negation, and even can connote spiritual causation, linking itself to terms including sin, evil, and the decay of creation. Along these lines, a long tradition of commentaries posits theological meanings of death's end in the aforementioned passage from John's Apocalypse. Some pivotal readings include those that specify the end of the devil (Origen's Homilies on Joshua 8.4) and the restoration of a fallen creation to a pure state (laid out in Augustine's *City of God*).⁶ Death permeates late-medieval apocalypticism in many ways, as Aberth has shown clearly in his *From the Brink of Apocalypse*, particularly in a period still traumatized by the first wave of the Black Death and the Plague's recurrences.⁷ Death brings with it instability, vulnerability, and confusion. As I explore death's connection to apocalypticism throughout this chapter, I will continue to return to the stresses and confusions brought by the concept of death itself and those caused by the notion of the death of death.

Several important texts are shaped by this instability and can also be seen to respond to it. The texts that I am examining most closely in this study—Chaucer's

⁶ Many examples from this long tradition, including selections from the Origen and Augustine texts mentioned here, are represented in William C. Weinrich's Revelation volume in the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series, 352-357.

⁷ Also see Phillippe Ariès' historical sketch of the changing social meanings of death in the West in his *The Hour of Our Death*.

Canterbury Tales, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, *Pearl*, and *Clanessse*—illustrate the changing meanings of last things and of death in particular. To be sure, there are important differences in the natures of these authors' engagement with religious culture and in the function of these texts. And premises of these works can show how these works lean toward the apocalyptic: the centrality of storytelling in the *Canterbury Tales*, the mechanics of dreaming in *Piers Plowman* and in *Pearl*, and the historical-interpretive project of *Clanessse* all problematize death and make the apocalyptic emerge in different ways. Furthermore, as I will suggest below, Langland, Chaucer, and the *Pearl*-poet through their use of figures of death illustrate the foundational status of death for the apocalyptic. Death helps to supply some of the suddenness of the apocalyptic and furthermore conditions persons to consider important markers in time.

Death teaches us limits. Additional ways by which apocalyptic meaning is communicated will be treated in a later chapter on the necessity of texts for the apocalyptic, but for our purposes in this chapter, it should be noted that these forms of communication and engagement may be seen to affirm life while they also struggle with what life's limitations are. The pilgrims cannot agree on what stories to tell in their allotted time or on the functions stories should have. Dreaming for Langland, to consider briefly another example, creates space for imagery that is otherwise inexplicable (not unlike biblical vision) but makes the importance of waking life all the slipperier. And the contested religious-political sympathies of the writers of all these texts, even as those sympathies are subject to speculation, have important implications for the unavoidable apocalypticism emerging in their texts. In all of these cases, however, the fascination

with an end stems from the limitations of life. Death is inseparable from apocalypticism and must be its start.

Apocalypse and Death: For the Living

To be sure, theologies of death and of the apocalypse are for the living, for it is the living persons who must consider, read about, and write about their own imminent deaths. And beyond that, the people of a given generation may feel a sense of self-importance if they perceive that they are witnessing special types or frequencies of death. If some have died and if these deaths have purpose in light of an eventual End, it stands to reason that those remaining have important work to do. Even with the sobering Augustinian caution that one should not obsess over the time of the End, persons across various social strata throughout the Middle Ages managed to read their own time as nearing the End.⁸ The connections between death and apocalypse are enhanced through suggestions of martyrdom, consolation, suffering, and plague. Furthermore, individuals' communications of the apocalyptic, as will be clear by the end of this chapter, frequently employ death in the abstract, invoking the death of an age or even the death of death. As these "deaths" will bleed together in this chapter, that is a necessary consequence of the umbrella term of death that is evident in the discourse of the period. Death, emerging frequently in these poetic texts, is a primary term necessary to comprehend the end of an age. Individual deaths and deadly natural calamities lend themselves to readings associated with the End.

The apocalyptic in death in many Christian cultures, that of medieval England included, is seen in the justification for suffering. Stephen O'Leary in his *Arguing the Apocalypse* traces this notion as far back as the second-century Christian thinker Irenaeus

⁸ On some factors enabling medieval individuals' making-vivid of apocalyptic history, see Fredrickson (36).

and shows the capacity of apocalyptic Christianity to change the meaning of death, suffering, and calamity:

Irenaeus' argument on behalf of the millennial kingdom illustrates the theodocical function of Christian eschatology: the narrative of the Apocalypse provides an explanation for evil that is "fitting" and "just." In the terminology of modern rhetorical theory, the millennium lends narrative coherence to the story of evil. The affliction and suffering of the community of believers will be redeemed when the earthly creation comes to its fulfillment. Placing one's faith and hope in the fulfillment not only provides a 'logical' solution to a theological dilemma; it also enables the believer to define any *apparent* evil or calamity as a positive good by situating it within the temporal frame of the mythic narrative. (42; italics O'Leary's)

Thus many apocalyptic narratives within this long tradition have proven resilient, capable of surviving even in spite of false predictions and in spite of misreadings of contemporary phenomena. Furthermore, one must realize, just as death and the apocalypse may have a reciprocal relationship, so must evil and the apocalypse. And as collectively as the apocalyptic is conveyed through language, it can also be deeply personal. The various occurrences of death and the frequent invocation of evil contribute to an individualized view of the apocalyptic. Since the cultural conditions understood as related to the apocalypse vary, views of the apocalypse may vary radically from individual to individual. As an especially traumatic phenomenon, death calls for individuals constantly to process it, to reinterpret it.

Death in Christian terms presupposes the continuity of daily life: deaths shall not (as seedtime and harvest shall not⁹) cease until the age's end. And death—as one considers so broad a category in a century of war, revolt, plague, even famine—not only has its meaning changed by a notion of a pending end but also affects the apocalypse itself. In the eighth vision of the B-text of *Piers Plowman*, the Antichrist (a marker of the End) has set the stage for Deeth. Deeth here is connected to something larger than himself.

Thanne mette thise men, er mynstrals myghte pipe,
 And er heraudes of armes hadden discryved lordes,
 Elde the hore; he was in the vauntwarde,
 And bar the baner bifore Deeth—bi right he it cleymede.
 Kynde cam after hym, with many kene sores,
 As pokkes and pestilences—and mucche peple shente;
 So Kynde thourgh corrupcions kilde ful manye.
 Deeth cam dryvyng after and al to duste passhed
 Kynges and knyghtes, kaysers and popes.
 Lered ne lewed, he lefte no man stonde
 That he hitte evene, that evere stired after.
 Many a lovely lady and [hir] lemmans knyghtes
 Swowned and sweltd for sorwe of Dethes dyntes. (B.20.93-105)

⁹ Genesis 8:22 is one text invoked to connect beginnings and ends, and it is one that appears proven in its assertion of always-evident data. In the Douai translation, “All the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, night and day, shall not cease” (Vulgate: “cunctis diebus terrae sementis et messis frigus et aestus aetas et hiemps nox et dies non requiescent”).

[Then these men met, before minstrels might pipe, and before heralds of armies had described lords, Old Age the hoary; he was in the vanguard, and bore the banner before Death—by right he claimed it. Nature came after him, with many severe sores, as diseases and pestilences—and many people killed; so Nature through corruptions killed full many. Death came driving after and struck all to dust, kings and knights, leaders and popes. Learned and unlearned, he left no person stand that he even hit, that ever stirred after. Many a lovely lady and her beloved knights swooned and perished for sorrow of Death's blows.]

Everything is caught up in the apocalyptic moment of this passage. Evil continues to get worse, and nature is in disorder. Personified Death is accompanied by multiple problems of nature, a reminder that, as Alford suggests, medieval theology of created matter asserts creation's contingency ("The Scriptural Self" 4). Death within an apocalyptic scenario is not only a matter of individual destiny; it is also possibly caused by signs of a world-end, which can take such sweeping forms as pestilence or cataclysmic earthquake.¹⁰ Death according to these terms is also a great equalizer of status, and it turns out that worldly statuses have, in terms parallel to the Beatitudes, been inverted.¹¹ A corrupt and disordered world calls for a reversal, some end to the corruption, some new order.

The Last Judgment and the finality of worldly activities tied to it may suggest a heightening of the deadly. Then, too, particularly in reformist strains of apocalypticism

¹⁰ See Bryon Grigsby's study, which addresses pestilential references in literature. See, too, Heist's study of the "fifteen days before Doomsday" tradition, as he maps out several configurations of physical signs of the end (a few key configurations appearing on 119-21). On the special "disaster syndrome" that may emerge as multiple disasters are read together, see Michael Barkun (83-84).

¹¹ To follow the generalization, the Beatitudes are often understood to be about reversals: reversals of things such as power, humility, and poverty. Muessig in her "Preaching the Beatitudes in the Middle Ages" notes the uses to which the Beatitudes were put in preaching in the later Middle Ages, particularly starting with the assumption of evangelical poverty (139).

(in various readings circulating in this period), are seen visions of restoring a sense of normal life, of restoring the power of death and the assumption of a long life, even in periods when circumstances contributed to statistically significant early deaths.¹² The apocalypse thus explains death, and death is invoked as evidence of the apocalyptic.

This type of engagement with death can help us to explore the reach of the apocalyptic in this period even when such apocalyptic topics as the Antichrist, the parousia, or the Last Judgment are not made explicit. The lack of direct reference to the more controversial applications of John's Apocalypse is one of the more puzzling tendencies of the late-medieval texts with which this study is concerned, especially of *Pearl*. As Ad Putter and others have suggested, the Apocalypse in *Pearl* may not be invoked as directly as a modern reader would expect.¹³ And still, I maintain, the apocalyptic cannot be disqualified from *Pearl*.¹⁴ Even if the work does not read like the literary genre of apocalypse, it is in fact apocalyptic. *Pearl*, after all, works too hard to reframe life and death in terms defined by the apocalypse. Cynthia Kraman, after laying out parallels between John's Apocalypse and *Pearl*, highlights an important distinction between the works:

What sets [*Pearl*] apart is that it takes into account the late medieval situation of living long after the promise or threat of last days, and uses the double frame of Romance time (repetition and cycles) and Apocalyptic

¹² Even though, as Platt demonstrates, the elderly were struck in higher numbers than the young, the conspicuousness of young death is worth noting (*King Death* 10).

¹³ Sandra Pierson Prior's *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet* and Tessa Morrison's "Seeing the Apocalyptic City in Medieval Art and Literature" break from the tendency of scholarship that denies the apocalyptic. Pierson Prior and Morrison notably make strong appeals to visual culture in order to do so. As Pierson Pryor says with regard to images constructed in the works of the *Pearl*-Poet, "Most of these images, both visual and verbal, are not just biblical, but more precisely apocalyptic" (13).

¹⁴ Putter in his *Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* makes a claim against the apocalyptic in *Pearl*, maintaining that "The *Gawain*-poet's use of Apocalypse stands out among these doom prophets for not being apocalyptic at all" (160).

time (eternity). *Pearl* is not an eschatology but a vision of both time and eternity, personalized into a literary work. (257)

Its focuses on individual death and individual mourning facilitate broader discussions of the nearness of the afterlife and the machinations of last things. Penn Szittyta further bolsters the case for apocalyptic teaching within *Pearl* as he aligns the Pearl-Maiden's story with that of the Church: "By a theological synecdoche, the Pearl-Maiden has an identity that is simultaneously singular and corporate, individual and ecclesiological" ("Domesday Bokes" 395). Thus the apocalyptic is apparent throughout the text of *Pearl*, even if it is a less obviously apocalyptic text than, say, the *Pearl*-Poet's profoundly judgment-minded *Clannesse*.

And regarding the special apocalyptic sense evident in *Pearl*, the rich temporal terms used by Kraman deserve further parsing. In considering the "late medieval situation," however, this expression of time tells only part of the story: one must balance Kraman's *after* with another preposition: *during*. Both emphases—the lateness of history and the presentness of the apocalyptic promise—are invoked in religious texts, in preaching, in conceptions of the moment. These two emphases apply to *Pearl*, as the work suggests not only awareness of final Judgment but also humans' limited time before Judgment.¹⁵ Where *Pearl* may not be explicitly apocalyptic, its implications for time lead its reader to begin to read time in apocalyptic terms. And it is death that makes this reading possible.

Such consciousness of apocalyptic time through death, while difficult to achieve in the first place, is also difficult to sustain. For this reason the dreamer needs such consciousness to be opened to him, and similarly the reader needs to be made privy to

¹⁵ For one example, stanza 59 (697-708, cited below) suggests the timing of Judgment.

what the dreamer saw. The elapsing of centuries in early Christian history may cause some to disregard the possibility of a literal apocalypse, or it may require caution and qualification. As a predominant qualifying force, the Augustinian tradition may be seen as retreating to allegory, to recapitulation and other ways of de-chronologizing the canonical Apocalypse.¹⁶ However, it may also lead to a re-examination of the terms tied to the apocalypse in terms even more specific than Kraman suggests. J. Stephen Russell in his study *The English Dream Vision* illustrates some connections to eschatology that are broadly suggested in *Pearl*:

What *Pearl* is is a deconstruction of the discourse of eschatology: a sophisticated presentation of a human discourse the purpose of which is to demonstrate the complete inefficacy of that discourse. Like the *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame*, *Pearl* attempts to bring human discourse to bear on a subject, only to discover human discourse to be inadequate as a medium. (160)

The apocalyptic is ultimately inseparable from the rest of medieval Christian theology. It can be downplayed and it can even, given the potential for controversy and condemnation for heresy, be avoided in communication. But in those latter cases its avoidance may bespeak its importance and its contentious nature more than widespread repetition of it would. As Russell suggests, the transcendence of heaven and the very articulation of doctrine through the primarily consoling poem each emphasize death's importance and its primacy. The cognitive and philosophical primacy of death applies throughout the history of apocalypticism. This primacy is especially important in the late medieval

¹⁶ To the concern of a canonical text that merits comparison to the late-medieval text, Pierson Prior underscores that “the [*Pearl*] dreamer’s vision is definitely inferior to the certain truth of Scripture. John’s vision is authoritative and reliable, but the narrator’s own dream is subject to doubt” (66).

period in England, a period in which not only death rates but also birth rates noticeably change, in which memory of the plague persists through lesser recurrences of the mid-century devastation.¹⁷ Death is impossible to ignore as it strikes closest, and it radically reshapes life when it happens with great frequency.

In *Pearl* humans' active engagement with death—their necessary processing of it—gestures toward the apocalyptic. Again, death cannot be undone, save through the theological promises of apocalypse, time's end, and afterlife. More immediately, death cannot be undone cognitively. Nor can revelation be cognitively undone: the all-encompassing idea that knowledge has been revealed displaces other explanations of phenomena. Against the critical tendency to divorce the material of *Pearl* from the apocalyptic, I maintain that in *Pearl*'s consoling, its working-out of the meaning of death, the poem begins the process of grappling with the apocalyptic. Meaning-making is essential to apocalypticism. And again, death is preparatory for the apocalyptic cognitively: as someone begins to understand death, that person has a foundation for understanding the more complex matter of the apocalypse. One cannot grapple with the apocalyptic without understanding death first. The dreamer's faith is in need of strengthening; he needs more meaning than he can tease out rationally and independently. Discussing *Pearl*, Elizabeth Kirk maintains, "to surround death with formal beauty is one of the tools to which human beings instinctively turn when we try to re-establish a framework of order after loss has reduced our world to chaos" (217).¹⁸ His response to

¹⁷ See Herlihy's *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*.

¹⁸ She continues: "*Pearl* and *The Book of the Duchess* are rare if not unique in the history of elegy in their recognition that mourning is not so much about what has happened to the dead person as about what happens to the living, what the survivor must do. *Pearl* in particular is distinctive in its acknowledgement of how complex a process is involved" (217).

death requires guiding, as does a person's anticipation of the end of an age. There is order, *Pearl* maintains, but it is an order that must be outlined and explained.

Still, an explanation of such an important matter may encourage more questions. Only through another's death does the dreamer begin to grasp a greater plan, a greater end than the end of one person's life. How imminent is the End in *Pearl*? The Pearl maiden's discourse takes the dreamer into John's vision:

“Maskelles,” quop þat myry quene,
 “Vnblemyst I am, wythouten blot,
 And þat may I with mensk menteene,
 Bot “makelez quene” þenne sade I not.
 Þe Lambes vyuez in blysse we bene,
 A hondred and forty þowsande flot,
 As in þe Apocalyppez hit is sene.
 Sant Johan hem sy3 al in a knot
 On þe hyl of Syon, þat semly clot.
 Þe apostel hem segh in gostly drem,
 Arayed to þe weddyng in þat hyl-coppe,
 Þe nwe cyté o Jerusalem. (781-792)

[“Flawless, unblemished, and without stain I am,” said that beautiful queen, and that I may maintain with honour, but I did not say ‘peerless queen.’ We are the brides of the Lamb in heaven, a company of a hundred and forty thousand, as it is seen in the Apocalypse¹⁹: St. John saw them all in a group. On the hill of Sion, that lovely mound, the apostle saw them in

¹⁹ John's *Apocalypse*, the book.

a spiritual vision, adorned for their wedding on that hilltop, the new city of Jerusalem.” (Trans. Andrew and Waldron)

Here the completion of heaven’s population is imaginable. John in his vision sees quite a bit more than is related in the *Pearl*-Poet’s retelling, and much scholarship on *Pearl* has shown how challenging it is to see much more than heaven in the poem’s treatment of last things. The vision makes the dreamer aware of an End before his time. It furthermore nods toward eternity, toward the elect’s enjoyment of heaven in a state of timelessness. And also in *Pearl* a discussion that begins with death requires an interrogation of not only death’s cause, but death’s resolution. As Russell suggests, *Pearl* is crafted out of the remnants of the discourse of last things. As such, *Pearl* seeks to remind its audience that the prospect of death—often imagined at a distance—can be imagined as much closer, and as creating an urgency approaching that of the Day of Judgment. And it is judgment that adds another layer to the notion of the death of death. The notion of an age’s end presupposes divine justice in that age’s ending. And that justice requires some manner of speculation and explanation of the negative qualities that must be undone. The negative terms *maskelles* and *vnblemyst* call attention to those qualities or actions (being flawed, blemishing) that must be undone, sidestepped, or prevented.

Such speculation on death, corruption, and other negative matters emerges from the poem in spite of the strong emphasis on the positive—purity. The poem has consolation at its center, but its consolation is not complete until the dreamer and reader have accounted for the less-than-perfect and filled in gaps of apocalyptic meaning. Within the vision of *Pearl* the dreamer is consoled: death is the starting point, and death’s

power is argued against. But the arguments bespeak an end of death, even as death is a necessary trouble in the present. The Pearl maiden's assurance for the righteous presents a promise of being judged innocent, but the explanation is anything but simple.

‘Anende ry3twys men, 3et sayt3 a gome,

David in Sauter, if euer 3e se3 hit:

“Lorde, þy seruaunt dra3 neuer to dome,

For non lyuande to þe is justyfyet.”

Forþy, to corte quen þou shal com,

Per alle oure causez schal be tried,

Alegge þe ry3t, þou may be innome

By þys ilke speech I haue asspyed.

Bot, he on rode þat bloody dyed,

Delfully þur3 hondez þry3t,

Gyue þe to passe, when þou arte tryed,

By innocens, and not by ry3te. (697-708)

[However, concerning just men, a certain man, David, says in the Psalter, if you have ever seen it: “Lord, never bring Your servant to judgement, for no living man is justified before You.” Therefore, when you have to come to the court where all our cases shall be called, if you plead right you may be refuted in argument by this same speech that I have noticed. But [may] He who died bloody on the cross, grievously pierced through the hands, grant you free to go when you are tried, through innocence and not [by

their righteousness]. (Trans. Andrew and Waldron; last phrase supplied by Anderson²⁰)]

The passage suggests a death of death, a puzzling term to which I will return later in this chapter. Here it calls for a negation of worldly corruption. It brings a sentiment attributed to David (who is unready to die as his son Absalom pursues him) under the justice worked out in the crucifixion. The universal fear of death central to the poem is countered by looking back to a sentiment of David, ever present to medieval Christians in the universalized sentiments of the Psalter. This cyclical sentiment holds true as long as normal cycles of life persist. The cycle depends on time continuing, on the End not coming yet. And the gestures back in time—to David and to the crucifixion—assume the Second Coming and the transcendence entailed by it.

Pearl in these terms suggests a death of death. Not only is one vulnerable (hence the need for consolation), but this vulnerability stems from one's whole environment being corrupted. The awareness of corruption calls for a negation of that worldly corruption. It brings a sentiment attributed to David (who is unready to die as his son Absalom pursues him) under the justice worked out in the crucifixion. And again, the universal fear of death central to the poem is countered by looking back to the sentiment of David, which is codified as a truth that holds as long as normal cycles of life persist. But the gestures back in time—to David and to the crucifixion—assume the Second Coming and the transcendence entailed by it.

²⁰ The following is from Anderson's gloss from his edition:

...not 'as of right,' which is the meaning of the phrase elsewhere in this section of the poem, but 'by their righteousness'), because, as the Maiden says in the words of the psalm, no one lives a life righteous enough to merit salvation. (286)

Again, for reference purposes, note that the standard Middle English text quoted here and elsewhere in this study is that of Andrew and Waldron's edition.

Death also enjoins the apocalyptic as it entails moral judgment or even highlights impending judgment. As intense forms of evil persist, individuals may deem conditions intolerable and call for divine intervention and apocalyptic resolution. But this personal judgment is of course problematic as it expresses one person's wishes concerning the body or soul of another. Preoccupation with death and preoccupation with the apocalypse both intensify under this sense of conflict. And such conflict may center on different matters of spiritual finality. Curses against body and soul, especially evident in the most combative of Chaucer's *Tales*, illustrate this well. Interpersonal "damning," for one gesture related to death and assuming a reality beyond the earthly and temporal, invokes judgment and calls for such divine intervention. For example, Chaucer's *Friar's Tale* develops conflicting senses of justice—that justice acknowledged by the Summoner as well as that acknowledged by the "devel." What is most interesting in *The Friar's Tale* is the ending—the deal that sends the summoner to hell and that approximates death.

"Now brother," quod the devel, "be noght wroth;

Thy body and this panne been myne by right.

Thow shalt with me to helle yet tonight,

Wher thow shalt knowen of oure privetee

Moore than a maister of dyvynytee." (III.1634-8)

[Now, brother," said the devil, "do not be angry: your body and

this pan are mine by right. You shall [go] with me to hell yet

tonight, where you shall know of our secrets more than a master of

divinity."]

Loss of earthly life can happen at any moment. And notably the devil of the tale calls attention to theological knowledge at this moment. Too much knowledge—particularly of evil—ends up being a disadvantage. The summoner of the tale has been taking for granted that he can live life on his own terms, and his end is more imminent than he had thought it was. The story presupposes divine (and diabolical) power to change things radically. And the presence of superhuman power contributing to the summoner-character's failure further diminishes human agency and humbles humans who feel in control of their lives. And just as death is unexpected, so is the apocalypse.

These jarring last things thus shape perceptions of reality. Representations of a person being hell-bound, even as they presuppose death and the continuance of cycles of life and death, nevertheless are enhanced by the pervasive assertions that cycles of life can be ended and set for eternity.²¹ Death delimits a life, and the apocalypse emphasizes even more how short and limited that temporal life is. In the face of a person's death or in the face of a world's end, one must be vigilant, remain spiritually engaged, and keep one's house in order. An important consideration as one inevitably approaches death is the theologically argued binary switch of faith and faithlessness. Chaucer's Parson expands on "[t]he fourthe point that oghte make a man have contricioun," that being sorrowful remembrance of "left" and "lorn" good. He reminds his listeners:

And therof seith God by the mouth of Ezechie, that "if the rightful man
returne agayn from his rightwisnesse and werke wikkednesse, shal he

²¹ For further semantic play that Chaucer may present regarding demonic terms, see Glending Olson's "Demonism, Geometric Naming, and Natural Causation in Chaucer's Summoner's and Friar's Tales." Tangential to my point above about knowledge, Olson points to the assumption that *daemon* originally meant "knowledge," a knowledge that Augustine argued to be disordered (251).

lyve?” Nay, for ‘alle the goode werkes that he hath wrought ne shulle
 nevere been in remembraunce, for he shal dyen in his synne.’ (X.235-7)²²
 [And thereof God says by the mouth of Ezekiel, that ‘If the righteous man
 returns again from his righteousness and commits wickedness, shall he
 live?” No, for “all the good works that he has done shall never be in
 remembrance, for he shall die in his sin.]

Sin is “dedly,” as the Parson repeats. The technical distinction between physical and spiritual death are conflated in the same term. The apocalyptic is particularly resonant as it is predicated on death and conjoined to it. To the person reminded of the reality of physical death, a term is posited that is just as bad, in fact worse. This, too, shows that constant vigilance is necessary. And yet this information is contained within what seems the most prosaic “tale,” which is more of a handbook.²³ The important matter of the End is hidden in plain sight.

Death—the immediate and physical kind—removes the things that do not eternally matter. The apocalyptic “birth pangs” of a new age have to be death pains first. But, to reiterate a point made above, death calls for interpretation by those expecting an End. Even as Philippe Ariès in *In the Hour of Our Death* has usefully charted developments in the social meanings of death in the West, any death of a person socially connected to others is an important event. Furthermore, death on any scale calls for the survivors to make sense of it, if only to become more keenly aware of one’s own mortality. Much of the work of interpretation has already been done and is gleaned from

²² Given the prosaic nature of the *Parson’s Tale*, I have opted not to stylize it line-by-line as poetry as I will do for the other *Tales* I discuss.

²³ On the genre of this “tale” (“handbook of penance”), see the headnote to the Parson’s Tale in the *Riverside Chaucer* (1956), Siegfried Wenzel’s “Notes on ‘The Parson’s Tale,’” and Richard Newhausers “The *Parson’s Tale* and Its Generic Affiliations.” See my analysis of the tale in Chapter Three below.

existing treatments of death. Medieval Christian treatments of death are varied: to state a few prominent points of cultural engagement, death is treated through funeral rites, in theological texts related to dying, and sacramentally. But it is also an opportunity for new meaning to be stated. Each death is a unique occasion for commemoration, insofar as commemoration entails individual reflection. Death (situated emphatically in a precise historic moment in John Bowers' reading) calls for social commemoration, even performance.²⁴ Ultimately, social interpretation assuming a reciprocal relationship between death and apocalypse accounts for a popularization of apocalypticism unique to this period.²⁵ The apocalyptic—in spite of its claims to secrecy—needs both to be passed from one generation to another and to foster communication in communities of the faithful.

As I have suggested, intersections of death and the apocalyptic are very often difficult to ascertain because they both bespeak similar urgencies, indeed urgencies tied to each other. Both involve some personal spiritual preparation. Individual death is the occasion for the preparation of the dying and the consolation the survivors. It is this need for consolation that the friar-character of *The Summoner's Tale* exploits: "His deeth saugh I by revelacioun" [His death I saw by revelation] (III.1854). The dying person's soul needs to be cared for, and the souls of the dead are a matter of concern for those surviving. But in a world seen as increasingly wicked, exemplary lives and deaths are increasingly important and are to be committed to memory.

²⁴ As Bowers suggests in his challenging reading of *Pearl*, the poet may be seen "diligently to encode the representation of loss in a field of religious and regalia symbolism that would have allowed interpretation toward wider public ends" (154). For a range of methodological considerations concerning historical scholarship on this difficult-to-place text, see Alan Fletcher's "*Pearl* and the Limits of History."

²⁵ I will treat some particulars of spoken and textual means of dissemination of apocalyptic messages in my chapters below on speech/confession and on textuality.

Saintly Action: Anticipating the End

This sense of exemplarity proves central to late-medieval culture. As one of the most powerful and prevalent centers of exemplarity in late-medieval Christianity, saint culture is defined by death and yet argues that it transcends death. And saint culture is rich with notions of physical, temporal, and spiritual proximity. To note one key trend in the Middle Ages, John Thiel explains how additional meaning radiates from the commemorative space of the shrine: “The practice of making the shrines into cemeteries assured the physical closeness of the dead to the saint on the day of judgment, an intimacy that, through the power of grace and ample hope, would allow the ordinary believer to participate in the martyr’s most favorable judgment” (71). The apocalyptic is necessarily seen as different from daily life, and the culture generated by saints’ cults and through hagiography constitutes one means by which the limits of daily life are understood.²⁶ Saint culture necessarily concerns itself with anticipation of the future, even when the apocalypse is understated.²⁷ And, as Matthew Woodcock establishes with regard to Chaucer and other late-medieval authors, saint-culture proves particularly useful as a font of morally suggestive meaning.²⁸ And this emphasis on exemplary behavior may even come from apocalyptic motivations of fear of an end or hope for relief from earthly life. The *Canterbury Tales* are told within a context of saint-commemoration, and this context bespeaks Christianized death. Gatherings centered on

²⁶ Sarah Salih is careful not to overstate the role of written stories within the larger domain of saint-culture: “For devotees, a saint’s identity might well be primarily based on a shrine, on the miracles performed there which showed the saint in action, and on the artworks which represented them” (5).

²⁷ Adding to their observations on the importance of miracle-working for saints, Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell note, “Prophecy and clairvoyance...were also compelling proofs of supernatural power” (147).

²⁸ According to Woodcock, “...there is not only an overlap between religious and secular discourses used to represent the numinous, superlative qualities of a hero/ine, but authors repeatedly play with the professed distinction between sacred and worldly heroism in order to increase the didactic efficacy of their works” (156).

saint-commemoration are designed to teach from examples and cannot help but center on human behavior and on the goals pursued in limited lifespans. But they also emerge from a belief in the transcendent within model believers' lives. As Emmerson and Herzmann have noted in their seminal work *The Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature*, some sense of apocalyptic calling and destiny appears in the very collective enterprise of the death-commemorating pilgrimage in the *Canterbury Tales*.²⁹ In performing something purportedly aiming at holiness, pilgrims or other devotees often fail.

Hope for transcendence of death is reasserted in the apocalyptic, but so are the notions of the pervasiveness of evil and the potential eternal death. So pervasive discourse about saintly behavior may yield to discourse about the unsaintly and its effects. Evil within apocalyptic fervor is seen as pervasive and quite likely irreversible. And this emphasis on evil of course is supposed to urge believers on to noble behavior. Moral consistency must be measured against apparent hypocrisy. In a clear case of unsaintly behavior, the Pardoner even tips his hand to his audience about his hypocrisy: "Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice / Which that I use, and that is avarice" ["Thus I can preach against that same vice that I use, and that is avarice."] (VI.427-8). The first line of this sentence establishes the evil lined up with his religious practice ("preche"), but the lack of contrition shown by *again* may be the most troubling. A lack of contrition denies the imperative to prepare for any form of divinely ordered and unexpected end, through natural death or otherwise. And eagerness to persist in sin (and vocal demonstration of it) may be the quality that makes him easiest to judge. The pilgrims can be read very

²⁹ In Emmerson and Herzman's study, see especially pages 155-61. Emmerson and Herzman here move from the concept of a pilgrimage to the specific pilgrimage sketched in the *Tales*: "Having argued that the pilgrimage cannot be understood fully if divorced from its eschatological implications, we believe that it necessarily follows that *The Canterbury Tales* must also be examined in terms of those implications as well" (157).

straightforwardly as imperfect humanity, parallel to the large company in *Piers'* field of folk, some committed to work and others to pride. They necessarily forget the fact that they have no control over their lifespans, or of broader conceptions of time. Hypocrisy and moral inconsistency create the obliviousness necessary for a crucial hour (of the end of a life, or of the end of an age) to be unknowable. Narrative death in the *Tales*, it can be argued, serves as a check against such forgetfulness, albeit a check couched in fiction. The notion of an end, as it is reemerges, suggests the prevalence of an apocalyptic narrative arc in the lives of all.

Saint culture not only argues for the efficacy of holiness in individual Christians in late medieval culture; it also suggests the limits of secular power, especially in narratives of cultural conflict. The apocalyptic furthermore involves the reading of large spans of history, spans containing very many deaths. Recounting of historic deaths emphasizes impurity and divine judgment, as in *Clannesse*. Death wipes out great power in the case of Nebuchadnezzar:

That ryche in gret ryalté regned his lyue,

As conquerour of vche a cost he cayser watz hatte,

Emperour of alle the erþe and also the saudan,

And als the god of the grounde watz grauen his name. (1321-4)

[That noble man ruled for his lifetime in great royalty, as conqueror of every region he was called caesar, emperor of all the earth and also the sultan, and also his name was inscribed as the god of all earth. (Trans.

Andrew and Waldron)]

Soon thereafter, the poet succinctly lets us know Nebuchadnezzar's accomplishments were for naught: "Bi a habel neuer so hyȝe, he heldes to grounde" ["However great a man he is, he falls to the ground" (Trans. Andrew and Waldron).] (1330). Nebuchadnezzar is utterly ineffective, unproductive, unexemplary, and unsaintly. Saint culture and the biblical narratives on which saint culture are based must offer not only saints but foils to those saints. Ancient narratives and narratives contemporary with a fourteenth-century audience (and all sorts of narratives in between) are necessarily conflated. They blend with each other to present a consistent texture of daily life that accounts for good and evil, miracles and punishment. Narratives of exemplary good and damned evil show a need for holiness.

Death and physical deterioration, as in the visually resonant late Nebuchadnezzar, are interpreted as one form of divine judgment just as transcendence of death on the surface of saint's stories marks a positive divine judgment. Wherever the power of God cannot be seen in secular power, God's power must be shown to exceed and deflate secular power. In the hagiographic *Second Nun's Tale*, the Second Nun gives us Cecilia's deflation of secular power as well:

Almachius seyde, "Ne takestow noon heede
Of my power?" And she answerde hym this:
"Youre myght," quod she, "ful litel is to dreede,
For every mortal mannes power nys
But lyk a bladdre ful of wynd, ywys,
For with a nedles poynt, whan it is blowe,
May al the boost of it be leyd full lowe." (VIII.435-441)

[Almachius said, “Do you not take any heed of my power?”

And she answered him this: “Your might,” she said, “is to be dreaded very little, for every mortal man’s power is nothing but like a bladder full of wind, surely, for with a needle’s point, when it blown, may all the boost of it be laid very low.”]

While the implications of the apocalyptic for power are treated in a later chapter, suffice it to say that death is often conceived of as a form of divine justice. There is a flattening of secular power and an emphasis on divine power. Or rather, it appears to be an assertion that power is only legitimized divinely. The narrative of the physical weakness and deterioration of evil rulers is to be contrasted with saintly narratives of posthumous action and incorruptibility, as is suggested by the preservers of Cecilia’s story. Overall, the reader is asked to acknowledge connections across Christian-framed history. An individual ruler may entertain thoughts of ruling forever but can never realize it.

Individual limitations of errant rulers, however, give way to the empowering of believing (and comprehending) subjects most commonly associated with hagiography and saint culture. Death can be transcended by those who believe, as they are engaged and as they comprehend. To think back to the question of saint-culture, hagiography calls for the reader to position the text and the saint in relation to her/himself as well as within a Christian (and therefore apocalyptic) scheme of history.

To be sure, various forms of saint culture seek to make audiences see their present realities as connected to historic saints.³⁰ Alford’s notion of the “scriptural self” can also

³⁰ Chester Scoville’s argument connecting saint-fascination to late-medieval religious drama suggests how integral to an understanding of medieval Christianity saints were: “...the central characters of the plays are the saints, the heroes, and the virtuous; and...the function of these central characters was...to unite the community of the audience for holy living” (7). Scoville offers a corrective to those he sees as over-

help to bring this notion into focus. Alford, in reading Bonaventure's *Life of Saint Francis*, finds a supreme example in which biblical comparisons are necessary and frequent reference points. On one hand, as I have suggested above, hagiography embodies exemplary living. But it also works through its use of the past for a strong argument about what the future should or will be. Hagiography thus operates by a typological logic, through gestures backward and forward. It argues for historical connections with the present and future. Friedrich Ohly highlights the "intensifying" quality of typology in this way:

The specific thing about typology lies in its synoptic view of what is divided in time, in the juxtaposition of two linked scenes out of the succession of time, in the rendering visible of a simultaneity of what is not simultaneous, in such a way that the old points to the new as a sort of intensification, always across the barrier of time and the historical appearance of Christ, as the center of the ages and as the turning point in the history of salvation. (40)

Auerbach, too, discussed this connection as he outlines figural interpretation: "The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life" ("Figura" 53).³¹ This time reference further

reading gruesomeness and villainy as central, and in doing so he asserts that many read early modern theatrical tendencies onto medieval biblical drama.

³¹ In his examination of this development of Christian history, Auerbach highlights the important reference points of the Incarnation and of the Second Coming:

Only the understanding of the two persons or events is a spiritual act, but this spiritual act deals with concrete events whether past, present, or future, and not with concepts or abstractions; these are quite secondary, since promise and fulfillment are real historical events, which have either happened in the incarnation of the Word, or will happen in the second coming. (53)

complicates the minimal typology laid out within the New Testament.³² Passages that claim the past and the future become fodder for increased speculation, increased linkages as medieval exegetes attempt to make sense of the past, present, and future. Apocalyptic interpretation may generate new meaning, arguing for previously unseen connections between scriptural texts. A very forceful generator of meaning in the late Middle Ages is Joachim of Fiore, in whose teachings some scholars find revised conclusions.³³ And in the generations after Joachim's deeply creative yet enigmatic conceptions of the apocalyptic, the Christian West has to deal with increasingly complicated and fiercely argued notions of time.³⁴

Connections between acts and deaths are often facilitated by the manner of telling. In Bonaventure's example, Alford notes that the material of the narrative is most often deeds, less so dialogue. Deeds, after all, matter, inspire repetition by others. Furthermore, Alford notes that hagiography-influenced culture is evident in lives such as that of Richard Rolle in which his sainthood is anticipated: "His biography, written in anticipation of his being canonized, is complemented by the autobiography of his own extensive writings. The evidence of one is qualified or reinforced by that of the other....he partly *staged* the chronology of his life, which appears to have been a series of calculated gestures" (14). What is related *post mortem*, Rolle and others of his

³² Ronald Reid has compared apocalypticism and typology thus:

Typology and apocalypticism differed in that the former involved biblical prophecies which *had been* fulfilled whereas the latter concerned those which were *yet to be*. However, both involved the same exegetical method, which presumed the historicity of scriptures and interpreted them as foretelling the future. (232)

³³ As Bloomfield suggests, we cannot assume that Joachim, for example, is a consistent thinker. Bloomfield maintains, "To put together his views in an orderly fashion does much violence to the reality of his vivid and inconsistent thought" ("Joachim of Flora" 261).

³⁴ Joachim stands out as a major thinker extending typological meaning in the Middle Ages. Bernard McGinn points out that, for Joachim, scriptural meaning is "far too deep and varied for any human interpreter to exhaust" and that Joachim allows for "the inexhaustibility of Scripture" (*Calabrian Abbot* 124).

contemporaries steeped in saint-culture must have realized, depends on some biography attesting to holiness for circumstantial evidence. Chaucer's pilgrims' hypocrisy and their distortions of themselves—the Pardoner's use of greed as theme and personal vice—often depend on references to the biblical and later Christian stories. The Pardoner seems to undercut the stories he tells: “Thanne telle I hem ensamples many oon / Of olde stories longe tyme agoon. / For lewed peple loven tales olde; / Swiche thynges kan they wel reporte and holde” [Then I tell them many examples of old stories from long ago. For unlearned people love old tales; such things they can well report and hold”] (VI. 435-8). However, his work depends on widespread assumption of the stories' historicity and moral applicability. The Pardoner tells, repeats, rhetorically spins, but he still appears doomed.

In hagiographic texts death is a step toward sainthood, and posthumous action—transcendence of death—is evidence of a person's worthiness for veneration. Death may coincide with the ending of a narrative, or so it seems: there is still the need for meaning-making, interpretation of death. Langland, in anticipating death, foresees what is to come. The saint-culture invoked in *Piers Plowman* and *The Canterbury Tales* gives us a glimpse of the apocalyptic implications of hagiography's necessary dissemination and devotion. As for *Piers*, Langland's gesture toward the *Legenda Sanctorum* in B.11.161 most tellingly invokes a variety of textual examples, assuming wide legitimacy of hagiographic texts, here following up on the knotted theological case of Trajan.³⁵ This awareness of saint narrative contributes, too, to Langland's sense of the world's decline.³⁶

³⁵ The inexhaustible textual references only begin to illustrate what Steven Justice has recently called *Piers*' “at once incompletely literary and oppressively textual” qualities (“Literary History and *Piers Plowman*” 52).

³⁶ On Langland's “sense of decline from pristine beginnings,” see Simpson (“Religious Forms” 103).

Such legends define death and seek to inspire future action. And saints are here invoked collectively, as the saintly subset of martyrs is invoked in John's *Apocalypse* 6:9-10:

Et cum aperuisset quintum sigillum vidi subtus altare animas
interfectorum propter verbum Dei et propter testimonium quod habebant.

Et clamabant voce magna dicentes usquequo Domine sanctus et verus non
iudicas et vindicas sanguinem nostrum de his qui habitant in terra.

[And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of
them that were slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they
held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying: How long, O Lord (Holy
and True), dost thou not judge and revenge our blood on them that dwell
on the earth?]

Already in John's vision the refuge that saints have found is to be contrasted with earth, here identified as a site of wickedness. In the present time of medieval apocalypticism, the contemporary prospect of martyrdom, but so is the established historical case.

Hagiographic memory, as evident in the *Second Nun's Tale*, brings to medieval audiences evidence of divine power over secular powers, over death, and over time. Persistent memory of Cecilia—the fact that her testimony survives—can answer the key question of Christian authority:

“Han noght oure myghty princes to me yiven,

Ye, bothe power and auctoritee

To maken folk to dyen or to lyven?...” (VIII.470-2)

[Have our mighty princes given nothing to me, yea, both power and
authority to make people die or live?]

A hierarchy of powers is suggested: temporal power may carry limited power over life and death, but it cannot approach divine power over life and death. Beyond the power over individual lives, then, is power over all of time and eternity. Martyrs like Cecilia broaden the frame of death to include eternity and in so doing may nudge others toward apocalyptic meaning. Furthermore, the notion central to the status of all martyrs—that they are witnesses via suffering—complicates the role of death in end-time schemes, as a key component of judgment in John’s Apocalypse is the avenging of martyrs. The imperfection of human exercises of authority can be seen as another factor that necessitates the final Judgment.

Another significant aspect of death colored by hagiography and reinforcing the apocalyptic is the suddenness with which it occurred. As Sarah Salih notes, in the case of many medieval saints sudden and unexpected death imbued a saint’s life with meaning, often increased the fervor with which that saint’s cult would act and would spread. The long-remembered death of Thomas à Becket, tying sudden violence to the cause of church authority, provides the impetus for the pilgrims’ movement. St. Thomas’ death becomes a reference point not only for Chaucer, but also for Gower in the *Vox Clamantis*, relating Thomas’ death to that of Archbishop Simon Sudbury in 1381.³⁷ Textual recollection of injustices against church authority is but one layer of memory-making in saint culture.

These few loci of religious meaning are the just the beginning of those death- and time-obsessed aspects of the *Canterbury Tales*. The *Tales* encompass many areas of medieval learning, including universal history, world-dating, astrology, and revelation.

³⁷ I.14, page 72ff in Stockton’s translation; lines 1001-1162 in Macaulay’s edition of the Latin (*Works*, Vol. 4).

Although variations of Christian apocalypse in this period exist and although many of these variations were in conflict with one another, they all shared a sense of collective destiny and an awareness of doom, but also with a hope and belief that a good God is in control. And as many die in war and in plague (recurring every generation past the mid-century mass Death), the importance of those remaining is heightened. Ultimately, while the *Canterbury Tales* are not doctrinal works, they are engaged enough with religious meanings of death and ends to be useful in the tracing of apocalyptic meaning.

As I have suggested already, the reciprocal—even symbiotic—relationship of death and the apocalypse is important to understanding many areas of late-medieval culture. Both death and the apocalypse define time, bespeak limits to life, and call for theological clarification within publicly Christian cultures. *Piers'* need for allegorization of abstract figures, *The Canterbury Tales'* pilgrims' inability to grasp theological matters that have been officially settled, and *Pearl's* narrator's struggle to comprehend death all show theological meaning as less stable, less easy to understand, and less easy to convey. Of the two Jerusalems that the Pearl-maiden reminds us of, it is only the New Jerusalem that is eternal: “In that other is noȝt bot pes to glene / that ay schal laste wiȝouten reles” [“In the other there is only peace to be gleaned, which will last forever without end” (Trans. Andrew and Waldron).] (955-6). Consolation—arguing against the apparent emptiness brought on by death—requires the pattern of death to end. Again, the two hard-to-grasp terms of death and apocalypse depend on each other. The inevitable reading of death and apocalypse together gives individuals cosmic and theological meaning, while it conversely relates the cosmic and godly to individuals.

Furthermore, the earthly life and passion of Christ cannot help but inform how medieval Christians would understand their own lives and apparent suffering, regardless of suffering's causes. The crucifixion and the process leading to that death are central to Christian theology. Death prefigures its reversal—resurrection—and without it meaning is lost. The very notion of an end though death is a cognitive step necessary to conceptualize its reversal or negation. And given the centrality of death and resurrection throughout the Christian tradition, any death is semiotically connected to Christology, as well as suggesting fallenness and subjection to judgment. *Piers* indeed is incomplete without Christ's intervention—not just as an echo of textual record, but as a permanent figure, jousting, office-holder.

Death in some cases is a marker of divine vengeance. In the most favorable (least damning) construction, death is a reminder of human sin and vulnerability. In *Clannesse* we get a sense of corruption that can be read in several ways. As has been noted widely, the impurities in such different stories as those of the Flood, Zedekiah, and Belshazzar requires a capacious understanding of purity and impurity. It can be read as universally occurring, as something endemic to human nature. It can also be read as cyclical or driven by historical type, well established not only in hagiography but also in texts compiling universalized (but Canon-dependent) history, such as the encyclopedic *Cursor Mundi*. In any event, the call for purity in *Clannesse*, largely through ancient Hebrew examples, certainly must apply to a late-medieval audience, an audience subject to divine judgment and subject to death, possibly both at once. As is demonstrated in the *Middle*

English Dictionary,³⁸ the word *clannesse* is a capacious enough term to describe a number of positive qualities, and an obvious enough marker to be seen as clothing:

If þay in clannes be clos þay clech gret mede;

Bot if þay conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont,

As be honest vtwyþ and inwip alle fylþez,

Then ar þay sinful himself, and sulpen altogeder

Bothe Gode and His gere, and Hym to greme cachen. (13-18)

[If they are enclosed in cleanness they obtain a great reward; but if they feign wisdom and lack courtesy, by being pure on the outside and all filth within, then they are sinful themselves and altogether defile both God and His utensils, and drive Him to wrath. (Trans. Andrew and Waldron)]

The *greme* (“anger”) here amounts to judgment. And in quick succession we see whole civilizations contaminated, including pre-flood beings not fortunate enough to make it into the ark. The destiny of entire peoples is at stake, so it is not merely the conscience of the individual Christian that is indicted by mention of sin and the expectation of purity.

Fascination with death enriched the apocalypticism circulating in the period as a sense of impending judgment affected how death was perceived. Ultimately, partly as the result of changing understandings of death, the apocalyptic became more central in daily life in this period.³⁹ Evidence—in forms visual, anecdotal, and recorded—intensified a widespread sense of world-ending. Laura Smoller has traced “apocalyptic

³⁸ The *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, is hereafter referred to as the *MED*.

³⁹ The often-invoked cause of plague seems traceable in some way to various social changes and to shifting meanings of death in the period. Colin Platt, anticipating objections that he is exaggerating plague’s role in various changes, makes his case: “Nevertheless, what chiefly stoked those tensions was a population collapse so immediate and so prolonged as to encourage even the most conservative of landowners to embrace change. In the last analysis, whether in the short term or long, what mattered was how many people died in the Black Death” (*King Death* 177).

echoes” assigned to many recorded occurrences, including “earthquakes, hail, and rains of toads and snakes” (170). Apocalyptic canonical texts are not self-contained: as interpreted throughout the Middle Ages, they require a broad epistemology and engagement with the world. Without question, all persons must watch for evidence, and many individuals turned to ways to preserve and retrace data that may be significant to the end of an age. With this aim, individuals need to connect spiritual and otherworldly matters with physical and earthly matters.⁴⁰ And as Miceal Vaughan has noted, the apocalyptic resonances of Nowel’s flood in *The Miller’s Tale* have basis in contemporary expectation and textual culture. Medieval thinkers continued counting backward, counting forward, gauging quantities (such as durations suggested in John’s Apocalypse), as well as recording their work for posterity. Apocalyptic textuality accounts for the deaths of individual writers: as long as death must persist, texts must cover gaps between individual students looking for the End.

In the transmission of apocalyptic meaning across so many deaths, how much meaning is lost in translation? Throughout the formative periods since the New Testament texts were written, meaning of the last things do not change entirely. They change incrementally. Throughout medieval (and subsequent) history terms such as death, second coming, judgment, and heaven take on added layers of meaning: these terms are understood with reference to things in the surrounding culture(s). Many varied areas of cultural activity might communicate a sense of urgency. As has been noted by various scholars, the final decades of the fourteenth century in England are marked by

⁴⁰ Michael Gorman puzzles over this range of meanings: “One of the most striking features of Revelation’s interpretation through the centuries is the concrete, this-worldly political character of so many of those readings” (26).

many forms of uncertainty attributable to evil.⁴¹ However, as has already been apparent, periods of extreme disorder call for theological explanation, assurance of divine control, assurance that this evil can be subjected to some divine historical order. One can think of how the Last Judgment and the finality of worldly activities entailed thereby suggest a heightening of death's implications—to the point that the deaths seen entail the decimation of a generation, the death of a world, and ultimately the end of a system and way of doing things. Such devastation proves crucial to *Piers Plowman* and requires continued exploration through the text's revision (and others' engagement post Langland with Piers as a folk figure). As I suggested in the opening of this chapter, John's Apocalypse offers death as something more complicated than the cessation of a life. Cast in broader terms, the discomfort associated with death is attributable to evil forces and indeed proves the dualism that forms the basis for early and medieval Christianity.⁴²

So again, this period's various instances of uncertainty are capable of apocalyptic resonances. Young death in particular, such as that which is seen in most readings of *Pearl* and invoked in various places of Chaucer's *Tales*, is a sign that can feed a sense of chaos, even as young death appears throughout human history. It is always jarring, most often unexpected. Young death, perhaps due to heightened violence or perhaps plague, heightens fears over when one must be spiritually accountable. Young death disturbs the continuity of life, may cut family lines off from procreation. Families' social prospects may diminish, and property may change hands. What is the preferred way of dealing with the prospect of young death, the vulnerability of even the most physically powerful?

⁴¹ See, for example, Norman Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millennium*, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton's *Reformist Apocalypticism and Books Under Suspicion*, Penn Szitty's *Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature*, and Richard Emmerson and Ronald Herzman's *Apocalyptic Imagination in Medieval Literature*.

⁴² See Emmerson's *Antichrist in the Middle Ages*, Bernard McGinn's introduction to *Visions of the End*, and Curtis Bostick's *Antichrist and the Lollards*. On the rhetorical importance of evil to apocalypticism, see O'Leary, particularly his section "Theodicy and the Topos of Evil," 34-44.

The Pardoner's Tale presents *riotoures* trying to do away with “thilke traitour Deeth,” in fact negate it on their own power. Of course they fail. *The Nun's Priest's Tale*—cast through the perspective of a too-young-to-die but seemingly powerless rooster—embodies fear, vigilance, even revelation. And in spite of the comic matching-up of Chanticleer's fate with that of powerful historic figures, the fear of young death is a very real one. But the invocation of the apocalyptic in a time of conspicuously irregular mortality might be seen paradoxically as a way of restoring a sense of normal life, of restoring conceptions of cycles of life and death as well as the assumption of a long life, even in periods when circumstances contributed to statistically significant early deaths. Some sense of recovery and resiliency, of course, is how English society is reshaped after the Plague. Some marginal stability makes possible new patterns of life, and yet new apocalyptic tensions emerge. And by the late fourteenth century, as a number of texts in this study have shown and will show, a society destabilized by irregular death becomes susceptible to seeing cosmic meaning in even more phenomena.

In late-medieval England, the specifics of many deaths have passed away. People must find ways to summarize, to collapse many deaths into a few terms, and such collapse is a literary necessity. But the erasure—the violence to memory—is something that must be undone by the apocalypse. Death must end, martyrs must be avenged, plagues must be remembered. And the meanings of all deaths and catastrophes must be asserted. This meaning-making must happen as survivors likely respond emotionally and as the most sober explanations seem inaccessible. *The Pardoner's Tale*, for all its prefatory diminishing of the teller's credibility, still makes its audience think hard about

undoing Death that was evident in the tale's Flanders. It still makes its audience remember the most horrific plague years in Europe.

In spite of the deaths of many recorders of significant information, there remains the promise that a generation will eventually witness the end. As many die in war and in plague (recurring every generation past the mid-century mass Death), the importance of those remaining is heightened. And again, each person's importance is heightened also as one reconsiders the taken-for-granted dualism central to the most dominant forms of medieval Christianity. In a society so threatened by social and environmental instability, the various apocalypticisms that emerge may very often be incompatible with one another.⁴³ Explorations of apocalyptic thought tend toward a strong dualism, labeling the other as evil and, in the terms that arise out of Christian exegesis, aligned with Antichrist. In fact, the concept can be variously interpreted, and the variation of meaning creates more anxiety about where evil is immediately apparent. Although it is not the objective of this study to cover exhaustively the important concept of Antichrist in the Middle Ages, I will briefly use this concept to illustrate the flexibility of the term, the extent to which a high-stakes term of the apocalypse is subject to diverse and conflicting interpretations: thinkers in one tradition will label a competing tradition as Antichristian, while that second tradition will label the first as Antichristian. Either you're with us, as the commonplace goes, or you're against us. An age in which the Antichrist is apparent is then assumed to be an age of increased evil, of deadly chaos. Evil is understood not only to embody the flagrantly antichristian and defiant, but it also dwells in subtle error, deception, and false-seeming.

⁴³ See Platt's *Medieval England: A Social History* and also his *King Death*

Finally, I must highlight the term of death and consider how the concept of the death of death bridges death and the apocalyptic. Undoing death is of course central to the basic claims of Christianity. Paul's pronouncement of victory over death is presented in the Vulgate as addressing *mors* "death" twice in I Cor 15:55: "Where O Death is your victory? Where O death/grave/*Sheol* is your sting?" Death, for Paul, is powerless, is not permanent. And we see this denouncement of death alongside a second, more slippery use of death in the term from Hosea 13:14. The passage from the Hebrew Scriptures, rendered into the Vulgate, is the classic articulation of the negation of death:

Ero mors tua, o mors

[“I will be your death, O death”⁴⁴]

This is a passage that emerges in *Piers Plowman*, albeit in the form John Alford has shown to be a liturgical.⁴⁵ The form uttered by Faith in B.18 of *Piers*, “O mors, ero mors tua,” is an expression of the effect of the crucifixion. But this formula, for all its simplicity, attracts a variety of intuitive uses ranging from teaching the undoing of death in salvation, to occasional consolation based on that teaching and even to teaching the future eradication of death. The death of death is a pervasive philosophical term, something that runs deeper than the references to Hosea and Paul. The death of death—if we are to understand that all death is to be eradicated—amounts to an apocalyptic

⁴⁴ For a philological curiosity beyond the scope of this study, see Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein's suggestion of how this “tautology” emerged in the Latin (84).

⁴⁵ See Alford's *Guide to the Quotations*, notes for B.17.114a on page 107 and B.18.35a on page 109. R. A. Shoaf states in his *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word*:

In Hosea, after the outcry against death, the voice goes on: “Because he shall make a separation between brothers. The Lord will bring a burning wind that shall rise from the desert, and it shall dry up his springs, and shall make his fountain desolate; and he shall carry off the treasure of every desirable vessel.” According to the commentaries, the one who “makes division among brothers” is the Devil or Hell or Death. (220)

undoing of life cycles. This confusing term proves to attract in audience members' minds a wealth of speculation about last things.⁴⁶

Death may point to the apocalypse as it provides a crucial term for understanding its instability. Several important texts are shaped by this instability and can also be seen to respond to it. Through texts such as the *Canterbury Tales*, *Piers Plowman*, *Pearl*, and *Clannesse*—death provides inroads for exploring the meaning and trajectory of life. But most importantly, the forms of apocalypticism emergent in this period attest to their reliance on death and their effect on how death was understood, responded to, and processed. Death and apocalypse, too often split up in taxonomies of Last Things, are inseparable and interdependent, and notably so amid the anxieties of the late fourteenth century.

Death and the apocalypse have a reciprocal—even symbiotic—relationship. While death is in some sense conceptually opposed to the End, death is also a sign of the End. The rider of the pale horse in John's Apocalypse (6:8) is named Death, and the End in the New Testament is also connected to wars, famine, and plague. What forms of death, one must ask, are apocalyptically significant? That question is not a simple one to answer, as meaning is constructed not only through a complex of stories and theological expositions and popular conceptions. All of these categories are essential to reading texts as wide-ranging as *The Canterbury Tales*, *Piers Plowman*, and *Pearl* although to varying degrees in each case.

It is worth noting how the relationship between death and the apocalypse contributes to the diversity of apocalyptic thought accessible in this period. As has been

⁴⁶ Mention of the death of death can bring together a variety of "last things." Milton McCormick Gatch illustrates that the passage had been connected to the Harrowing of Hell by as early and influential of an expositor as Gregory.

apparent in this chapter, various texts lead us to different places. There are different ways of negotiating death and the apocalypse. *The Canterbury Tales* makes us consider death within a story, whether death marks an end or whether it suggests a beginning or continuation. *Piers Plowman* positions old age (*Elde*) as a driving force toward the conclusion of the work, and makes us consider the urgency communicated by death and by the apocalypse alike. *Pearl*, a work often considered as less than apocalyptic, as being so narrowly fixated on death and heaven, and I make the case that the consolation of *Pearl* makes the apocalyptic unavoidable.

Therefore, apocalyptic meaning—particularly evident in what I have posited above as apocalyptic consolation in *Pearl*—exists in the conjunction of last things, the way that one reference point in Christian salvation history depends on another and begs further explanation. The notion of death’s annihilation or undoing or cessation—whatever figure one chooses to invoke—is how one comforts against its pain, argues against it, explains something bigger than it or beyond it. The capaciousness of meaning and the certain promise of *O death I will be thy death* (made explicit in *Piers Plowman*) cannot help but encourage readings beyond traditional forms of exegesis: death’s death bespeaks that normal cycles of life will be no more, that death will be nonexistent and unnecessary. Death’s death is the negation of a term, but it is also a deeply productive apocalyptic term in itself.

CHAPTER TWO: “PENULTIMATE THINGS”⁴⁷: ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY AT THE WORLD’S NEAR-END

As I have argued, uncertainty about the future, made particularly vivid through the figure of death, fueled a robust apocalypticism in England in the second half of the fourteenth century. Death, however, is just one of the important means by which people in the late fourteenth century in England came to understand the apocalypse. Apocalypticism gathers meaning not only from death but also from very living things, and things that suggest their own vitality. Late-medieval Christianity in its displays of power and in its practices offers strong evidence of apocalyptic mentalities. Apocalypticism is powerfully and conspicuously defined by conceptions of religious authority and by forms of religious practice. In this chapter I will show how religious authority and practice can be seen to give apocalypticism its legitimacy and its vitality. Literature of the period highlights the ways in which the experience of Christianity promoted thinking in an apocalyptic mode. The apocalyptic mode is profoundly dualistic.⁴⁸ As I will maintain in this chapter, the dualistic aspects of apocalypticism are especially apparent in contested knowledge and contested action. In the life of the mind and in visible action ecclesiology—how and why the business of Christianity must be conducted until the world’s end—is worked out. Competing ecclesiologies necessary cause conflict along these lines. While many in this period assert and perform orthodoxy, the exact location of good and evil are constructed by various individuals to suit their own understandings and ends. In what is seen as the near-End, temporal powers are

⁴⁷ As will be clear below, I borrow this term from Richard Kieckhefer’s “Meditating on Passion, Meditating on Judgment: The First and Second Comings of Christ in Medieval Imagination,” 67.

⁴⁸ See, for broad coverage of medieval apocalypticism as being defined in terms of dualism, McGinn’s *Visions of the End*. See, too, Curtis Bostick’s introduction to his *Antichrist and the Lollards*.

debated. Status has very real social consequences and contributes to very real conflicts. Apocalypticism takes special forms in this late-medieval environment as its claim to Last Judgment and decisive action is foreshadowed by various acts of human judgment related to religious authority.

Authority and the Apocalyptic: Power through Knowledge

The tension between the knowable and unknowable is one key factor defining the apocalyptic. As much as the imminence entailed by death and the apocalypse captivates minds, Matthew 25's warning that no one knows the hour of the age's end makes individuals account for their own knowledge and ignorance. Even as the vineyard parable of *Pearl* seems to point heavenward, the opening of Fitt 10 is also tied to divine foreknowledge, an echo of apocalyptic warnings: "The date of the daye the Lorde con know" (541). The exact end of the age is necessarily unknowable, and yet medieval Christians are chastised for not knowing enough about it. And knowledge about it is touted by those in power. Nevertheless, being in power and being in the know are not the same thing, and in this period various claims to knowledge translate into claims to power (or into a cutting-down of established power). These claims are necessarily unfulfilled.

As I will emphasize throughout this study, religious discourse has obvious ties to this world, and the same is true of religious authority.⁴⁹ Regardless of social standing, persons alive at a given time can only claim faith in last things, not sight of those things. And individuals find deep meaning as they act out of faith. In the gap between the assumption of the end and a knowable end, spiritual life is all the more significant. Although the Wife of Bath's claim to ignorance and her shaking-off of authority in her

⁴⁹ On the more specific implications of *written* communication being tied to worldly life and to time, see my fourth chapter.

prologue may be seen as a rhetorical ploy, it is a very necessary one: her power to interpret (and, indeed, to know) cannot be exercised publicly.⁵⁰ Still, I would maintain that her rhetorical move suggests some claiming of religious authority in earnest. She presents her own experience as a lay person having been married, but she has to temper her experience's value rhetorically, even as the Pardoner encourages her with "Ye been a noble prechour in this cas" (III.165). And the Pardoner embraces for himself the role of preacher more directly. The Pardoner's prologue presents a case where the speaker has tremendous rhetorical power even when certain truths seem stacked against him. The Pardoner knows very little content, but he knows *how* to persuade, and how to hold power over others. He knows that power very often lies in the fact of speaking a few Latin words ("to saffron with my predicacioun, / And for to stire hem to devocioun" (II.345-56)) and in being able to present a few relics, not necessarily in a deep understanding of those words or in those artifacts' actual history. Knowledge on the part of a speaker—particularly knowledge about how to relate an important religious message—entails power and control.

Still, the apocalyptic involves a large pattern of history: power involves not only that which is observed in society but also that which is true spiritually or cosmically. While on the one hand tales of uncertainty make readers and listeners vulnerable, on the other hand they may inadvertently invoke scenarios in which no one is in control—not even the tellers. *The Pardoner's Tale* concerns unpredictability, as does the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, and both tales hinge on impending personal doom. And the Summoner

⁵⁰ Clare Waters presents the Wife's complicated relationship with preaching thus:

She never once refers to herself as a preacher—partly, of course, because as a woman she cannot do so without drawing fire, but also because her character's very existence is predicated on the association of preaching with debased and dubious forms of speech. (166)

character in the *Friar's Tale* shows, too, the value of private knowledge and particularly how knowledge can be leveraged against the laity. This fictional summoner created by the Friar seeks out vulnerable persons for information about other vulnerable persons. The knowledge necessary for the ecclesiastical court rests within those who are less than privileged, even if that knowledge may be used against them. In this way, the story lays bare how information is used by the Church and how certain persons maintain their power. In so doing it suggests an increasingly transcendent order and power.

The possibility of a larger order than that which exists in official religious forms gives some persons governed by the Church an opportunity to aspire to some religious power of their own. This is especially clear in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer, in spite of this work's resistance of clear-cut anticlerical categories posited by scholars of late-medieval literature, succeeds in shifting some knowledge into the power of lay readers.⁵¹ Chaucer aggregates material critical of persons of various stations. What results is not at all a coherent view of how to see the Church and how to approach contemporary life; rather, the seemingly muddled bits of information give the readers enough information to form their own view of markedly religious medieval society. The variety of viewpoints decenter the work enough to divert from Chaucer the accusation that he is engaging in polemic, that he is inciting a specific controversy. With no absolutely clear authority figure in the *Tales*, readers are forced to question who can be trusted.

⁵¹ For just a few studies defined in terms of categories that can be seen to challenge tradition and orthodoxy, see Kathryn Kerby-Fulton's *Books under Suspicion*, Robert Lerner's *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages*, Penn Szitty's *The Antifraternal Literature in Medieval Literature*, and Wendy Scase's "*Piers Plowman*" and *the New Anticlericalism*.

This questioning of trust is important because the reliability, amount, and correctness of knowledge are especially at stake in the apocalyptic. But on what sources is knowledge based? The narrator and the readers of the *Tales* come closer to receiving omniscience than do the pilgrims, but they may likewise be given compromised information. But who is to say what is enough knowledge, and what is correct knowledge concerning ecclesiastical power or concerning the End?

The fourteenth century benefitted from a wealth of scholarly and popular speculation on the apocalypse, and in many cases learned, clergy-produced work opened up apocalyptic meaning that had largely been abandoned or suppressed. From one standpoint, speculation aimed at a knowable future represents a shift from Tyconian-Augustinian apocalypticism that proves cautious in its interpretation.⁵² In some cases, apocalyptic teachings effectively reverted to scandalous teachings that doctors of the Church had warned against, specifically regarding millenarianism. The millenarianism promoted by Joachim of Fiore in particular modeled ambitious reading of historical and contemporary data onto the story of the apocalypse.⁵³ However, from another standpoint, new possibilities were considered, and even when the possibilities looked old, they were applied anew, using data from the present time: schemes of apocalyptic timing, with data ranging from geophysical phenomena to political happenings to biblical writings to those of Church Fathers, argued that the proximity of the end of the age was knowable. Natural

⁵² Paula Fredriksen in her “Apocalypse and Redemption in Early Christianity” has laid out three main responses to teachings of apocalypticism, Tyconius and (late) Augustine falling into an allegorizing camp, distinguished from those who consider apocalyptic teachings invalid and those who would hyperliteralize and futurize. More precisely, Frederiksen attributes to Tyconius and Augustine “a reading of John that affirmed its historical realism while liberating it from the embarrassments of literal interpretation” (151). On the flexibility of Tyconius’ rules of interpretation, see Fredriksen’s “Tyconius and Augustine on the Apocalypse” (24-29).

⁵³ Still, John Hall underreads the historical awareness of Augustine when he makes the following contrast: “Augustine had wanted to reduce the apocalypse to spiritual metaphor. Joachim de Fiore, and those who followed in his wake, restored it to history” (64).

signs, as Laura Smoller has observed, became increasingly subjected to apocalyptic interpretation.⁵⁴ And corruption in powerful persons marks the world as a chief enemy of the faith. Corruption—which the Church is charged with addressing—is easy to point out in any time and place, but a unique confluence of signs of disorder in the late fourteenth century makes the Church all the more vulnerable. The memory of past difficulties and the experience of present difficulties—such visible forms as plagues, floods, famine—contribute to a sense of disorder in the late fourteenth century.⁵⁵ Such instability forms a central part of an apocalyptic environment in which authority is debated and carefully negotiated. Social instability, including that related to poverty, heresy, and expansion of different religious orders, provides a broad field of meaning through which instability is read as evil and as indicative of imminent doom.

Most importantly in this period, as memory of arguably apocalyptic phenomena exist or as apocalyptic interpretations are rooted in texts, information clearly connotes power. Competing epistemologies create competing messages with claims to truth. And authority is thought to be based on truth values. Authority is necessarily opposed to the less-than-authoritative, and throughout the Christian tradition the prospect of a false teacher—someone claiming authority but lacking it—has been presented as a necessary component of religious teaching. As various clerical orders and religious institutions

⁵⁴ Smoller points out that the interpretive caution in many cases fuels speculation that had been previously ruled outwilling definitively to announce that the world was about to end, fourteenth-century authors allowed their presentation to hover between dubbing the disease purely apocalyptic or purely natural. . . . In so doing, they left open the possibility that events might in fact be seen simultaneously as apocalyptic and resulting from natural causes, . . . In their very human reactions to plague, these writers reopened the door to naturalizing the apocalypse” (187).

⁵⁵ I must emphasize the role of memory (and, perhaps, misremembering) and historical distance in one’s capacity to read phenomena apocalyptically. Bryon Lee Grigsby’s challenging thesis that “instead of seeing the disease as a representation of God’s anger with man for his sins, literary authors begin to see the plague as a part of lived experience” suggests that experience alone may tend toward the de-theologizing of natural phenomena (125).

emerge throughout the Middle Ages, the central status of true teachers becomes even more complicated. Stark dualism among those working for the church is in some measure traceable to apocalypticism, particularly to continuing influence of Adso of Montier-en-Der's tenth-century narratization of ancient and early-medieval conceptions of the Antichrist. G. R. Evans traces the "adversariality in all things between good and evil" exemplified by Adso's influential tenth-century work *De ortu et tempore Antichristi* and works modeled after it" (18-19)⁵⁶. She lays out how contraries function within the view prevalent in Adso's treatment and those treatments that rely on Adso's framework:

[Good and evil] have opposing purposes and contrasting characteristics. Where they interact, they are capable of causing disturbance in human equilibrium, especially intellectually and morally.⁵⁷ (19)

Anything may be read as inherently good or evil, and the consequences of falling into evil and being aligned with evil at the age's end dictate that one must make quick judgments. And one may very well be labeled unfairly.⁵⁸ Limited human judgment may label evil falsely, and this labeling theoretically can be seen as evil. This adversariality is apparent in various of Chaucer's narrators, particularly in the conflict between the Friar and Summoner.

⁵⁶ To situate the Adsonian story clearly within this period, Curtis Bostick points to the survival of Adsonian apocalyptic in his study of Lollard presentations of the image of Antichrist. To illustrate the longer-running current of the Adsonian legend, McGinn in his *Antichrist* maintains that Adso's letter "set the standard Western view for centuries to come" (6), and in his introduction to Adso in his earlier *Apocalyptic Spirituality* anthology McGinn further attests to Adso's influence, even as the Adsonian text was presented pseudonymously as coming from "such prestigious authors as Augustine, Alcuin, and Anselm of Canterbury" (88).

⁵⁷ Evans continues: "That is the picture of things in which the face of dualism ultimately unacceptable to Christians persists, because it allows a power to evil which seems at odds with Christian belief in an omnipotent and wholly good God, and thus creates a powerful tension for our authors."

⁵⁸ For example, regarding Free-Spirit mysticism, Robert Lerner demonstrates wide misunderstanding of this movement within England in the late Middle Ages (*The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* 195n46).

The Adsonian tradition effectively builds on previous cognitive associations with Christ. As Kevin Hughes points out, the Tyconian-Augustinian reading of last things “is wary of any direct continuity between historical events and the apocalyptic end, favoring an Antichrist who is *immanent, internal, and deceptive*” (24, Hughes’ emphasis). Augustinian amillennialism, in spite of the caution it exercises in using contemporary data to make judgments about Judgment, in theory still maintains a sense of urgency. More willing to present a vivid and identifiable narrative, the Adsonian framing of a very personal Antichrist had tremendous capability to capture imaginations, as Richard Emmerson suggests in his linking of Adso’s work to hagiography (“Antichrist as Anti-Saint”). Along the same lines, Bernard McGinn credits Adso with “choosing a narrative rather than exegetical basis for his presentation of the Antichrist legend” (*Antichrist* 101). Due to its use of narrative, Adso’s work has greater appeal than more prosaic explanatory-exegetical discussions of the Antichrist do. Furthermore, vivifying narrative of Antichrist can be understood in relation to more exemplary forms of religious literature, and the narrative of Antichrist attracts a wealth of contemporary reference points.

The application of the rhetoric of Antichrist to figures working within the Church to some extent erodes those figures’ authority and calls attention to the way that the power is legitimized. Adsonian Antichrist rhetoric assigns a clear narrative to evil and humanizes it. Therefore the idea that some aspect of the world is corrupt is nothing new. Throughout the early history of Western Christianity, imperfections are quite routinely

explained in terms of sin.⁵⁹ However, the strong emphasis on an ever-present figure of Antichrist evidenced by evil is a major factor in the pathology of the apocalypse in the late Middle Ages. One of the ways that evil and heresy were explained was to ascribe others' activity to the Antichrist.⁶⁰

Beyond the life of the Antichrist, other forms of human activity in the late Middle Ages are vividly attributed to Antichristian influence. Concern with heresy and apostasy are heightened toward the end of the Middle Ages: believers are made to fear enemies within and are made to take seriously deviations and defections from the faith. And fear, which necessarily overpowers people and diminishes other feelings, may skew the experience of the apocalyptic toward the evil, toward negative things. According to this apocalyptic emphasis on pathology, evil becomes identifiable while good works and qualities become fuzzy, subject to debate. Even though the apocalyptic pretensions of individual writers pronounce a stark difference between good and evil, those writers' views frequently clash with each other's. The same boundaries of good and evil are not shared by everyone.

Not only is evil able to be identified easily, but also this evil must be handled carefully. One does not have much chance to counteract the evil, because the immanent End is tied to it. Only that which is most clearly tied to the Church can be seen as the most secure. However, the debate remains concerning which institutions within the Church represent its dogmatic mainstream or, to follow another metaphor, represent its purity. The Church must persist until the end.

⁵⁹ For diverging considerations of the historical development of teaching related to sin (particularly original sin), see Paula Fredriksen's recent *Sin*, Alan Jacobs' *Original Sin* (32) and Elaine Pagels' *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (117-19).

⁶⁰ See McGinn, *Antichrist*.

As I argued in the previous chapter, a sense of normal daily life ending was echoed frequently in the late Middle Ages, and the urgency suggested by that proposition required that the End be communicated by the Church. A rich and long-standing example of the communication of the end is found in the York Corpus Christi plays, which have their beginning in the second half of the fourteenth century, even as extant texts postdate this period.⁶¹ Religious meaning was communicated through the popular, accessible, and visible vehicle of the plays.⁶² The York Last Judgment play puts the following in the mouth of God:

Sethen haue þei founde me full of mercye,

Full of grace and forgiffenesse,

And þei als wrecchis, wittirly,

Has ledde þer liffe in lithirnesse.

Ofte haue þei greued me greuously,

þus haue thei quitte me my kyndinesse;

þefore no lenger, sekirlye,

Thole will I þare wikkidnesse. (Beadle, ed. 443)

[Since they have found me full of mercy, full of grace and forgiveness, and they as wretches indeed have led their life in wickedness. Oft have they grieved me grievously, thus have they repaid me for my kindness; therefore, no longer, truly, will I allow their wickedness.]

⁶¹ Indeed, the version of the Last Judgment that survives has changed from the prior version, attested as early as 1415, which contained Mary the mother of Jesus as a character (see Johnston and Rogerson's *York REED* volume). Clifford Davidson suggests in his study *From Creation to Doom*, "Mary above all represents mercy extended to the whole body of Christ—i.e., to the Church—and indeed the quality of *mercy* is the principle that is at the heart of the theatrical display" (178).

⁶² Tony Corbett's generalization (considering multiple cycles) that "[t]he plays are devotional in intention, part of the wave of devotional aids that swept fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England" proves a useful claim in connecting the plays to a surrounding culture attested to by other late-medieval religious texts (80).

God will no longer suffer their wickedness, and the apocalyptic moment emerges from humans grieving God grievously. The fact that normal order will persist is a function of God's grace and patience.⁶³ And the accusation that people are abusing the mercy of God should make any audience member afraid. Wickedness of course is a term that speaks to externalized evil, and we might assume that viewers of the Corpus Christi plays envision their neighbors' conspicuous signs of evil. And this appeal to filth and wickedness is also a means by which the speaker (corporately representing professions but also by obvious extension representing the Church) exercises power over the audience. Not unlike Chaucer's Pardoner, purveyors of messages in the Last Judgment play rely on the audience's sense of involvement with evil to keep them listening. But unlike the ventriloquized God of the York Plays, the Pardoner is suspect in assuming God's work for himself: he offers his credentials immediately "[t]hat no man be so boold, ne preest ne clerk, / Me to destourbe of Cristes hooly werk" ["that no man may be so bold, neither priest nor clerk, to disturb me from Christ's holy work"] (VI.339-40). Cries of urgent religious messages may be effective, but as such messages contradict each other or compete with each other, claims of urgency are subject to scrutiny. Contemporaries must ask, how holy and important is this work?

⁶³ Davidson points out that the Last Judgment is beyond the time of mercy but that "for those watching the play *it is still the time of mercy*, and their lifetimes will be the space in which they may so order their souls that they may at the Last Day be among the blessed" (178). Sarah Beckwith similarly notes that "grace is never hypostatized" but steers toward the bolder conclusion that the play "makes judgment as uncertain as possible so as to show it to be a genuinely divine mystery, which cannot be earned or presumed" (111).

The Ecclesiastical-Political Stakes of the Apocalypse

The Church carries out its work in the long period of daylight leading up to the end of time.⁶⁴ The power assumed by religious institutions—in interpreting texts, in exacting judgment, in proclaiming absolution, and in so many other sought-after activities—is at stake in the apocalyptic moment. Various impulses for action or inaction apply value judgments, particularly those related to the Church’s institutions and practices. For example, Lollards undermine a traditional priesthood and undercut some of the Church’s forms of income. And friars, seen to embody an ideal of apostolic poverty, encroach on the work of parish priests. As one assumes that the end is near, one must determine whether a religious institution or faction is a source of strength or weakness. The Church by the late Middle Ages consists of various organizational parts, and the complication to the structure caused by the friars is not soon forgiven or forgotten.

The fourteenth century proves to be a conspicuously late period for Christian history and also specifically for the Church. Many have expected an end before, and have been mistaken in that expectation. As Stephen O’Leary has shown through repeated examples in his rhetorical study of apocalypticism, the failure of prediction quite often makes believers reshift their belief: the prediction just has to be tweaked. And through this history of vision and revision, apocalypticism assumes an increasingly complicated structure, a structure in some ways visibly divided but in other ways visibly unified. Every period after the Ascension in antiquity shows an increased urgency, a greater longing for the End. And still, oddly enough, historical distance also gives those living long after antiquity a privileged vantage point and a capacity to categorize epochs and

⁶⁴ The often-invoked metaphor of daylight is drawn from John 9:4, “Me oportet operari opera eius qui misit me donec dies est venit nox quando nemo potest operari” (Rheims: “I must work the works of him that sent me, whilst it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.”).

bestow historical events with new meaning. And again, the passage of time allows for greater diversity of readings of the apocalypse.⁶⁵ Thus, this chapter considers how the increasingly complicated structure of the Church within late-medieval England and various conceptions of it strengthened apocalyptic conviction.

With an awareness of impending divine judgment, one must navigate carefully the politics and theology of division. An impulse to follow or create a division—to be different—may be read as discernment, as following the narrow path, but may also be read as inconsistency, insubordination, apostasy. And unity may be read as harmony but also as a lack of rigor, as lukewarmness. In either case, in a late and urgent moment, some action seems urgent. The question remains, at this near-end, whether steadfastness dictates maintaining the same social ties one is accustomed to or breaking them.

Important aspects of apocalypticism leading up to the parousia have been the focus of much scholarship on matters that Richard Kieckhefer qualified as “penultimate rather than ultimate concerns, in particular those having to do with Antichrist and the thousand years preceding the final dissolution.” He elaborates: “It is these penultimate events in salvation history that had the greatest political relevance, since Antichrist and his minions so conveniently lent themselves to identification with contemporary political figures...” (77). Controversies of authority have special meanings when they are understood as penultimate things. These meanings range from apostolic continuity, to the influence of Antichrist to apostasy to ultimate dominion. Readings of Scripture and contemporary data alike are subject to novel readings, even as they appeal to tradition.

⁶⁵ See Francis Gumerlock’s edition of medieval works arriving at very different conclusions concerning the seven seals of John’s *Apocalypse*. Gumerlock’s generalization on late-medieval shifts in interpretation is worth noting: “Ecclesiastical interpretations, dominant in early medieval exegesis of the seven seals, gave way to historical interpretations in the later Middle Ages” (17).

The poles of strictly “Augustinian” historically cautious amillennialism and of radical chiliasm can equally cause us to misjudge apocalypticisms imagined at any given time.⁶⁶ Add to this the dynamic of forestalled judgment that we see in Gower (who will be considered next) and his professed theology of division, and we begin to see an increasingly complicated power-based apocalypticism developed in the late Middle Ages. The time before the End—the more that it is extended—becomes the space of increasingly divergent yet productive apocalyptic speculation.

Divided We Fall: Gower, Apocalypti-Schism, and Further Divisions

Gower’s unique approach to the instability of his time can be traced in his engagement with the papal schism. The papal schism’s overlap with this period sets the stage for wide uncertainty. The papal schism of 1378-1417 de-centered the Church and fueled controversies over authority to which Christians in the West should defer. Gower unambiguously presented division as tied to evil:

...For Senne of his condicioun

Is moder of divisioun

And tokne whan the world schal faile

For so seith Crist withoute faile,

That nyh upon the worldes ende

Pes and acord away schol wende (1029-34).

[For Sin of its condition is mother of division and token of when the world shall fail. For Christ says without fail, that nigh upon the world’s end,

⁶⁶ My goal in this study is to highlight that various apocalyptic resonances—many formalized, many not—pervade late-medieval England. Elliot Kendall makes the generalization that “late medieval apocalyptic was predominantly chiliastic” (50). This position seems overstated, particularly in his application to Gower, as I will suggest below. Still, the position that most late-medieval apocalypticism was consistently affected by and aware of chiliasm holds true and informs the present study.

peace and accord shall go away.]

Here Gower is keenly aware of the pattern of division, a repeating narrative, as well as the reality of the specific End of the age. And these two are connected. Gower is careful to emphasize the biblical grounding for his theology of division.

Division, the Gospell seith

On hous upon another leith,

Til that the regne al overthrowe:

And thus may every man we knowe,

Division aboven alle

Is thing which makth the world to falle,

And evere hath do sith it began. (967-73)⁶⁷

[Division, the gospel says, lays one house upon another, until the kingdom overthrows and thus may every person we know, division above all is the thing that makes the world to fall, and ever has done since it began.]

Division is proven by the beginning marked by creation, as well as by the End. Division, for Gower, is a great wrong, a sign of faithlessness and of a lack of discernment. But it is perhaps most legible in visible social disorder. By arguing that division is so destructive as to destroy monarchic power, Gower grounds his position not only in the Gospel but also in terms of the theology of monarchic order and disorder extrapolated from ancient Hebrew history. Disorder in the house leads to disorder in the kingdom. The highest forms of worldly power can be compromised by such division. Gower presents an all-encompassing theory of power, a rule concerning Christian headship.

⁶⁷ References to Gower's *Confessio* in Middle English are to Peck's edition.

But it is also one that allows for historical continuity despite worldly power going through many cycles. Gower continues to track the history of destructive division through the Flood and the construction of the Tower of Babel. And most telling is how he builds on the prophecy of peacelessness quoted above:

And alle charité schal cesse
 Among the men, and hate encresce;
 And whan these toknes ben befallē,
 Al sodeinly the Ston schal falle,
 As Daniel it hath beknowe,
 Which al this world schal overthrowe,
 And every man schal thanne arise
 To Joie or ells to Juise,
 Wher that he schal for evere dwelle,
 Or straght to hevne or straght to helle. (1035-44)

[And all charity shall cease among people, and hate increase; and when these tokens happen, all suddenly the stone shall fall, as Daniel it has known, that all this world shall overthrow, and every person shall then arise to joy or else to bitterness, where he shall forever dwell, either straight to heaven or straight to hell.]

These terms laid out by Gower are as apocalyptic as it gets. Indeed Gower posits a sudden fall that will break the cycle of constant rising and falling of world powers. The heightening of destruction as the End approaches is clear enough for Gower. And he

grounds it in Danielic apocalypticism.⁶⁸ In spite of the necessary rupture in earthly life, the chaos brought about by division is in Gower's conception eternal. Harmony—or at least the best approximation of harmony available on earth—is found through unity under visible power. The greatest visible manifestation of power in the late-medieval Christian west is the Church. Still, even when power does not have all the trappings of the Church in the Christian West, it must still be legitimized by the Church.

As Gower emphasizes the judgment that is tied to division, he highlights impending judgment. Those who beget conflict through divisions will suffer division-caused conflict perpetually. But in earthly life division is seen as something that necessarily causes other divisions and confusion. For Gower the emergence of Lollardy at this divisive moment is no accident. Gower in particular sees Lollardy as tied to the Antichrist and as being pivotal in negative occurrences about to unfold in Christian history. The concern with Lollards as schismatics of course does not go away, the more that Lollard thought seeks to distance itself from mainstream religious practice. The theme of Lollardy causing division continues into the early fifteenth century, where *Friar Daw's Reply* obviously draws on the tensions of the fourteenth.

And so is the comounte treuli oppressid.

The sunne is eclipsid with al his twelve pointes

By erreure and heresie that rengnith in the Chirche.

Now is oure bileve laft, and Lollardi growith,

Envie is enhaunsid and aproched to preestes

⁶⁸ In late-medieval Europe Danielic apocalypticism is at times invoked to ground claims of living in the last days of the world. As Chris Given-Wilson notes in *Chronicles*, his study of late-medieval historiography, the scheme derived from Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2 provides one structure on which conceptions of English history were grounded. Given-Wilson points to this scheme and to the Six Ages of the World scheme as maintaining "that this was no 'middle' age, but the last age of the world" (116).

That shulden enforme her flok in ground of Goddis lawe,
 To love her God sovereynli and sithen her brothir. (Dean, ed., *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, lines 10-16)⁶⁹

[And so is the community truly oppressed. The sun is eclipsed with all its twelve points by error and heresy that reign in the Church. Now is our belief forsaken, and Lollardy grows, envy is enhanced and approached priests who should instruct their flocks in the foundation of God's law to love their God sovereignly and subsequently their brothers.].

The shepherds are corrupted, and so are the sheep in their care. *Friar Daw's Reply* continues.

Bot not for thanne now is taught hindring⁷⁰ of states,
 And pursuynge of poverte that Crist hath approved.
 Now is that seed of cisme sowen in the Chirche,
 The whete fadith with the floure, our fode is forto feche,
 Foxes frettid in fere wasten the cornes,
 And Cristes vine is vanishid to the verray rote. (lines 17-22)

[But not for then now is taught hindring of estates, and pursuing of poverty that Christ has approved. Now is that seed of schism sown in the Church, the wheat withers together with the nourishment it affords,⁷¹ foxes consumed by fear waste the corn, and Christ's vine is vanished to the very root.]

⁶⁹ In Dean, ed., *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*.

⁷⁰ *Sundering* is another option proposed by Heyworth (138).

⁷¹ The Heyworth edition's gloss, which I use in my translation: "The wheat withers together with the nourishment it affords, and we have no food" (138). As noted above, all texts cited above are from Dean.

Just so that the clear application to sin cannot be missed, Friar Daw pins envy on Lollardy. As Dean notes, the allusion to the story of Samson and the foxes of Judges 4-5 “is meant to convey general devastation.” However, the strongest emphasis is on growth: Lollardy is unwanted and parasitic while the growth of Christ’s church is inhibited by Lollardy.

Religious Power Constructed, Debated: Dueling Dualisms

Where corruption or other shortfalls are seen in the Church, new ecclesiologies are decisively forged or inadvertently arrived at. The earthly power of the Church and its need for change (and/or steadfastness) are central concerns of all of the chief strains of late-medieval apocalypticism, as McGinn argues in his his chapter “Apocalypticism and Church Reform: 1100-1500” in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*. Here McGinn categorizes medieval apocalypticism in capacious terms:

Apocalypticism can be thought of as constituting a broad stream of religio-political beliefs and practices that can be used by many different groups in a society (both high and low), as well as for a variety of purposes, both those that try to “reform,” and therefore generally support and strengthen societal order, and those that threaten or subvert it. (293)

Building on McGinn’s work, Bostick’s tripartite model of apocalyptic proposes that the apocalyptic has generally been used to justify existing authority against threats to that authority, to call for reform to the Church, or to subvert or displace the Church’s power.

Religious power, insofar as persons in power shift, is a moving target, as is religious practice. As may be illustrated in Wyclif’s public life, in those claiming to build on his work, and those understood by anti-Lollards to stem from his work,

negotiations of power conceived as reformist may very well take on a subversive character, or be seen in that way. Malcolm Lambert recounts a famous story of Wyclif and how certain friars related to him over time:

His stress on the need for poverty in the church and his attacks on the possessioner orders made him a natural ally of the friars, above all the Augustinians, who kept on terms with him longer than any other group. In 1377 four doctors from the mendicant friars were ready to defend Wyclif in St. Paul's. An Augustinian, Adam Stocton, described Wyclif on his copy of the *De potestate papae* as *venerabilis doctor*; only later was this crossed off in favour of *execrabilis seductor*. It was only with the eucharistic heresy that he was abandoned by the friars. (258)

Extreme favor and extreme disfavor hinge on certain doctrines, and heresy as a legal matter can be subject to the privilege of official records and therefore subject to human perception and construction.⁷² But most directly, this example shows the flexibility of theology in the apocalyptic moment and the capacity of the politics to change.

Facing a proliferation of religious messages, one might very well find comfort in the fact that others have already made sense of a seeming conflict, such as the conflicted roles of friars and parish priests. But one might just as easily see the need to react against a ready-made explanation. Established explanations are seen to be vulnerable, for example, in the Wife of Bath's appropriation of medieval exegesis and her own working-out of biblical lessons. Also within the *Canterbury Tales*, the Pardoner's claims to power

⁷² See Ian Forrest's work *The Detection of Heresy in Late Medieval England* for dissection of how heresy was defined and determined.

as well as the Carmelite claim to the tradition of Elijah and Elisha⁷³ are subject to questioning. And through individuals' objections, new forms of apocalypticism can be seen to emerge.

Reformism and Power

As I have begun to suggest, apocalypticism, despite having certain parameters, is fluid, and each instance of apocalypticism I sketch throughout this work amounts to some sort of hybrid. I trace this hybridity to textual constraints but also to a range of social concerns. I will get into the textual machinations of this apocalypticism in my closing chapter, but here I must address how reformist tendencies in apocalypticism—threats against the existing power—contributed to organizational instability for various parts of the Church. Reformism in its sense of reshaping and in its sense of correction (the two senses necessarily overlap and coincide) proposes that something must change.

Various attempts at ecclesiastical reform are traced to families of texts and *auctores*, either by careful attribution, by assumed authorship, or even by feigned authorship. Joachism is one of the many lenses through which authority was reimagined in apocalyptic terms in the Middle Ages. Regardless of the philological traceability of Joachite or Pseudo-Joachite⁷⁴ texts in late-medieval England, the rapid advance of the friars is fueled by Joachite prophecy. Friars are often seen as the physical embodiment of Joachite prophecy, a project whose credibility is tied to anecdotal evidence of fraternal corruption. The reputation of Joachim, however textually corrupted it may be, looms (especially for friars) in the late-medieval period. Even as Joachite texts are suppressed, the friars appear as Joachim's words incarnate.

⁷³ Invoked in *The Summoner's Tale*, III.2116. See *Riverside Chaucer* note (878).

⁷⁴ See Kerby-Fulton's *Reformist Apocalypticism* for the role of Pseudo-Joachite texts in late-medieval England.

Other traditions seen to provide lenses for spiritual life included Saint-Amourian antifraternality addressed by Penn Szitty, or the anticlerical strains that Wendy Scase explores in her *“Piers Plowman” and the New Anti-clericalism*. Scase corrects generations of assumptions of monolithic traditions and builds the case for anticlericalism uniquely fitted to the second half of the fourteenth century:

When we examine the careers and writings of anticlerical polemicists and of clerical apologists, and the disputes in which they were engaged, in the *Piers Plowman* period, we do not find simply a repetition of the earlier clashes, but debates modified by the new, wider, less stable, less predictable, more dangerous implications the old differences now had for all clerics. (Scase, “Piers Plowman,” 7)

The uniqueness of the debates speaks to unique conceptions and interrogations of various forms of ecclesiastical power. And the lack of predictability is the environment in which apocalypticism thrives—both in the genesis of reformist thought and in responses from on high to threats to Church authority. Evil is always invoked, but evil’s agents and manifestations are never exactly agreed upon; fear is likewise always evident to some extent, but the object of fear varies.

Perceiving Evil in the Moment

Those who are not Christian or who would thwart some professed Christian goal are to be feared within Christian apocalyptic. One factor making the apocalyptic especially powerful, as Kieckhefer suggests, is the fact that evil from authoritative scriptural and patristic texts can be tied to contemporary political figures. The figure of the Antichrist serves as the most powerful rhetorical figure through which dualism is

managed within the Church, without it, and along margins of it. The use of the term Antichrist is the most powerful way of marking evil in human activities.⁷⁵ As scholars including Emerson, McGinn, and Bostick have noted, the figure bridges the human and the supernatural.

The impending arrival of Antichrist is very often taken for granted and seen as a benchmark in the world's history, as is evidence of the mention of the presence of the Two Witnesses in the *Parlement of the Thre Ages*' treatment of Greek history:

Aftir this Sir Alysaunder alle the worlde wanne,
 Bothe the see and the sonde and the sadde erthe,
 The iles of the Oryent to Ercules boundes -
 Ther Ely and Ennoke ever hafe bene sythen,
 And to the come of Antecriste unclosede be thay never - (332-36)
 [After this Sir Alexander won all the world, both the see and the sand and
 the sad earth, the isles of the Orient to Hercules' boundaries—there Elijah
 and Enoch have been ever since, and they will not be released until the
 coming of the Antichrist.]

Within this historical scope, the Two Witnesses, Elijah and Enoch, highlight long expectation, vigilance but also patience. Late-medieval apocalypticism has the disadvantage of being historically detached from the oldest of predictions of the End recorded in the Hebrew and Christian traditions. Nevertheless, the late-medieval vantage point has the advantage of claiming and categorizing centuries of history.

⁷⁵ The linking of a general notion of Antichrist with a specific human Antichrist appears long in developing in early Christian history. For the distinction and for the genesis in the 2 Thessalonians tradition that leads to the personalization of the Antichrist, see Kevin Hughes' *Constructing Antichrist*.

Along with the extensive appropriation of and categorization of history that late-medieval apocalyptic entails, it also entails a long-standing priesthood, and it begs a genealogy tracing deeper and deeper back in time. Fraternalism is to be new but also grounded in apostolic poverty. It portends the end and connects with the present (especially apocalyptic) moment, and it also recovers truth traceable in the canon. The theology legitimizing the parish priest must not only trace itself back to patristic sources, Pauline prescriptions, and apostolic evangelism, but also to Levitical order and leadership. Religious leaders in the apocalyptic moment calls must make competing claims to chosenness. And along with that sense of chosenness must come some sense of being special, typically cast as purity.

The Model of Priestly Purity: Something Above “Above Reproach”

The strong preoccupation with signs of evil and the Christian teaching of universal human sinfulness leads one to ask continually, what is apparent sinfulness opposed to? Purity—a seemingly unattainable human goal—is nevertheless a standard invoked to various ends throughout the history of Christianity. The pastoral epistle of 1 Timothy is known for its prescription that those leading the Church be above reproach.⁷⁶ This provides the most conspicuous and well-known canonical grounding for notions of purity. Beyond this, clerical purity also has deep roots in Levitical law, as is apparent through texts such as *Clannesse*.⁷⁷ Spiritual purity’s exemplification in *Clannesse* proves to owe much to markers of status, as is clear when the poet early on alludes to the

⁷⁶ “Blameless” in the terms of the Rheims New Testament (1 Tim 3:2: “It behoveth therefore a bishop to be blameless, the husband of one wife, sober, prudent, of good behavior, chasted, given to hospitality, a teacher.”) and *inreprehensibilis* in the terms of the Vulgate (“Oportet ergo episcopum inreprehensibilem esse unius uxoris virum sobrium prudentem ornatum hospitem doctorem.”).

⁷⁷ Ties to Levitical grounding of priestly purity have been posited in Chaucerian scholarship as well. See Kaske’s “Summoner’s Garleek,” in which exegesis of Numbers 11:5 is traced.

Beatitudes' privileging of the pure in heart.⁷⁸ This is particularly true of status tied to the Church and to clergy. The very issue of purity—being spotless—has strong connections to social status for status in *Clannesse* and *Pearl*. Status is certainly important in power as displayed in the Church, and *Clannesse* in a few key moments specifically highlights priestly purity. In spite of theologians' assurances that impure priests' acts are efficacious, clergy are to set an example of purity.⁷⁹ Purity as applied to humans is often tied to exemplarity. As I suggested in the previous chapter, exemplarity, a cornerstone of saint culture, is often argued after the fact. However, contemporary examples emerge as well, in the Pearl-Maiden, whom we must assume to have lived recently, and contemporary clergy. However, the touting of contemporary, visible human models of purity lends itself to the perceptions of contradictions among laity and among competing clerical factions. The conspicuousness of priestly work, including speech, is a tremendous point of clerical vulnerability.⁸⁰ This vulnerability sheds light not only on the real priests idealized in orthodox terms but also on the relative convenience by which anticlerical satirists were able to impugn their human targets.

The Church and its workers are to set themselves apart not only by spiritual example, but in very physical terms, as the rules laid out in Leviticus 21:17-23 provide physical models for the priesthood even into the Middle Ages:

Loquere ad Aaron: homo de semine tuo per familias qui habuerit maculam,
non offeret panes Deo suo, nec accedet ad ministerium eius: si caecus
fuerit, si claudus, si vel parvo vel grandi, vel torto naso, si fracto pede, si

⁷⁸ Matthew 5:8.

⁷⁹ On late-medieval debates, see Minnis' *Fallible Authors*, as well as Ian Christopher Levy's "Was John Wyclif's Theology of the Eucharist Donatistic?"

⁸⁰ Clare Waters relates clerical speech and women's speech to each other, arguing that both were especially singled out in the late Middle Ages (167).

manu, si gibbus, si lippus, si albuginem habens in oculo, si iugem scabiem, si impetiginem in corpore, vel hirciosus. Omnis qui habuerit maculam de semine Aaron sacerdotis, non accedet offerre hostias Domino, nec panes Deo suo: vescetur tamen panibus, qui offeruntur in Sanctuario, ita dumtaxat, ut intra velum non ingrediatur, nec accedat ad altare, quia maculam habet, et contaminare non debet Sanctuarium meum. Ego Dominus qui sanctifico eos.

[Say to Aaron: Whosoever of thy seed throughout their families, hath a blemish, he shall not offer bread to his God. Neither shall he approach to minister to him: If he be blind, if he be lame, if he have a little, or a great, or a crooked nose, if his foot, or if his hand be broken, if he be crookbacked, or blear eyed, or have a pearl in his eye, or a continual scab, or a dry scurf in his body, or a rupture: Whosoever of the seed of Aaron the priest hath a blemish, he shall not approach to offer sacrifices to the Lord, nor bread to his God. He shall eat nevertheless of the loaves, that are offered in the sanctuary, yet so that he enter not within the veil, nor approach the altar, because he hath a blemish, and he must not defile my sanctuary. I am the Lord who sanctify them.]

Imperfections as small as *maculae*, blemishes, are significant. This preoccupation with corporeal imperfections is not lost in the medieval Christian priesthood and is invoked on many occasions in the Middle Ages. This section of Leviticus notably covers numerous aspects of human activity and perception. So many things can go wrong. Not only the disfigurement of the body is significant, but also any irregularity evident on the body

such as a scab or a blemish. The emphasis on the body may very well make one self-critical, but it also provides plenty of ways of seeing imperfections in others.

Since antiquity, this concern with imperfection continued to be applied with earnesty. The priestly perfection in medieval exegesis is constructed not only on prescriptions attributed to Paul, but also through the continuity assumed from the ancient Hebrew priesthood. As Ephraim Radner notes,

...medieval exegesis simply read off the Levitical prohibitions and warnings in these chapters as diverse elements that might signify the variety of potential ills attributed to priests. Each was explained through a malleable allegorical template. Hesychius, normalized in the *Glossa ordinaria* (Patrologia latina 113.358-59), for instance, takes the list in Lev. 21:18-21—blindness, lameness, mutilation, deformity, skin problems—and applies each defect to a particular vice or spiritual weakness (pride, ignorance, lassitude, indiscriminate moral perception, carnality, etc.). The constraints on marriage in Lev. 21 or the levels of familial approach to the food of the altar in Lev. 22 follow a similar line of application. (Radner 227)

Purity is therefore readily apparent, and visible imperfections are often seen to betray hidden spiritual ones. Physical qualities of the body show spiritual ones, and therefore spiritual life is capable of being read in physical features. Symmetry and consistency in history are constantly argued for: continuity of marriage and priesthood persist until the End. And the End can be determined because earlier things: Creation, institution of marriage, Fall, Flood, institution of priesthood, are all traced clearly and organized

systematically. Traditions of power and consistency may be asserted; however, power in the present may be considered more tenuous.

Visibly legitimate power and purity in the moment are hard to see and easy to disprove. Therefore, even though the obligation of purity applies to all, the figure of purity is one that puts clergy in a difficult position. Purity in the beginning of *Clannesse* is presented in the example of a priest, but the figure becomes increasingly complicated the more that it aggregates meaning. *Clannesse* very quickly moves on to articulate purity in the terms laid out by Christ in the Beatitudes:

“Þe habel clene of his hert hapenez ful fayre,
 For he schal loke on oure Lorde with a leue chere”;
 And so saytz, to þat syzt seche schal he neuer
 Þat any vnclannesse hatz on, auwhere abowte;
 For He þat flemus vch fylþe fe fro His hert
 May not byde þat burre þat hit His body neþe
 Forþy hyz not to heuen in haterez totorne,
 Ne in the harlatez hod, and handez vnwaschen.
 For what vrþly habel þat hyz honour haldez,
 Wolde lyke if a ladde com lyþerly attyred,
 When he were sette solempnely in a sete ryche,
 Abof dukez on dece, with dayntez serued?” (27-38, Andrew & Waldron)
 [“It turns out very well for the man with a clean heart, for he shall look on
 our Lord with a loved face.’—which is to say that anyone who is wearing
 any uncleanness anywhere about him shall never come to that sight; for

He who banishes all filth from His heart cannot endure the shock of its approaching Him. Therefore do not hurry to heaven in ragged clothes, nor in the hood of a beggar and with hands unwashed. For what earthly man who possesses high rank would be pleased if, when he was placed ceremoniously in a splendid throne, above dukes on the dais, served with delicacies, a fellow came meanly dressed?" (Trans. Andrew and Waldron)]

The sense of encouraging reversal commonly associated with the Beatitudes is dampened if the terms of purity—often with socioeconomic coloring—seem unattainable and foreign. The pure in heart, regardless of stature, are said to see God. As the commonplace goes, the exalted are humbled and the humbled exalted. The imagery, taken from a gospel, takes on fresh meaning in medieval England and necessarily uses the semiotics of noble/peasant as its frame of reference. Binaries such as sated/hungry, clean/dirty, and exemplary/unpresentable become the expressions of purity and impurity.

Cleanness, then, is transformative and readies one for the presence of God. Just as knowledge and ignorance are at stake in the apocalypse, so too is purity and impurity. Worldly power connotes power, stability, and preparedness. Everyone's power can be conventionally seen as lined up with *de facto* wealth/poverty and station. The discourse of poverty—to which I will return later in this chapter—lines up with unpreparedness, and the appearance and demeanor of nobility are inherently noble. The simple reassurance that the pure in heart shall see God is expanded by the writer of *Clannesse* to tie in images of class, images of appearance suggesting station, *de facto* power and privilege legitimized.

Again, the pathological orientation of apocalypticism is important here. The pathology of the apocalypse apparent in this period leaves room for persons to be condemned according to a variety of criteria, and the terms by which clergy are judged become extremely flexible. Although the means by which people are judged tend to make laypeople more vulnerable to judgment than clergy, it is not surprising that increasingly the laity come to use widely touted standards of purity to judge clergy.

Anticlerical and Interclerical Filth-Slinging: Economies of (Im)Purity

Contested power between clerical factions, a topic that emerges frequently in interclerical and anticlerical literature, can be tied to limited money, limits of other resources, limits of space, and the extent to which laypersons will entertain clergy's requests for religious services. But as clerical factions—parish priests and friars, to sketch two broad groups—have competing claims to legitimacy and embrace different rules, the conflicting standards of purity and correctness suggest a tight economy of purity. The forms of corruption suggested in *Piers Plowman* and in the *Canterbury Tales* lead one to think what exactly purity might look like in practice and how it might (or might not) be sustainable over a long period of time. And if the standard for clergy is to be above reproach, interclerical conflict that necessarily manufactures criticism of others minimizes unquestioned purity.

In some cases allegations of impurity may be seen as very local, but in other cases clerical problems may appear more systemic within the Church. The likely Lollard character Jack Upland, after laying out his understanding of historical orthodoxy,

expounds on the difference between Christian and Antichristian activity done in the name of the Church.⁸¹

And thus hath Crist taught bothe bi dede and bi word, as Holi Writ berith witnes in many placis, and thus was Cristis Chirche governed a thousand yeer and more. But Anticrist hath govun leve to leve al this and to do another maner. (Dean, *Six Ecclesiastical Satires* 119, lines 15-17)⁸²

[And thus has Christ taught that both by deed and by word, as Holy Writ bears witness in many places, and thus was Christ's Church governed a thousand years and more. But Antichrist has given leave to leave all this and to do another manner.]

Laypeople are caused to stray because leaders are made to stray. And this is happening at a late, millennially-defined moment. The Church, kept pure enough for upwards of a millennium, becomes impure as it comes "to do another maner": Jack speaks not of gradations of purity or teaching but of a qualitatively different manner. Furthermore, to underscore the pattern for which Jack argues, a sweeping historical generalization is necessary for this construction of a long period of consistent religious practice within the Church. An apocalyptic vantage point very often serves not only to cast doubt on the present but also to idealize the past. Furthermore, when one draws a strong contrast between a heterodox present and an orthodox past, one is privileging the historiography that argues for consistent and long-standing orthodoxy. The past exists in simple and pure terms while the present, accessible in many more forms of data, is impure because it is complicated.

⁸¹ Dean dates the work to "the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century" (*Six Ecclesiastical Satires* 115).

⁸² References to *Jack Upland* and to *Friar Daw's Reply* are to Dean's edition.

As the discourse continues, the terms in which corruption is cast depend on an ideal split between Church and world:

For he geveth leve to preestis of parischis bothe highe and lowe to leve preching and to do lewid mennes office; and yit thei takun hire of her parischis never the lasse as offringis and tithis and othere possessiouns dowid for almes, and as for worldli bisines. (17-21)

[For he gives leave to priests of parishes both high and low to leave preaching and to do lowly persons' office. And yet they take payment from their parishes nevertheless from offerings and tithes and other possessions given as alms, and from worldly business.]

Impurity, in Jack's construction, arises from letting spiritual matters become corrupted by "lewid mennes office" and "worldly bisines." The lewid men and all matters of the world are too visible. And furthermore, the priests are leaving the preaching and other duties with which they were charged. The ascetic separation that would keep the business of the Church purer may not be possible at all; this untouched religious authority and perfectly unworldly religious practice might only ever be argued and never realized. This construction of orthodoxy, in large, is a function of texts. Jack continues to frame heterodoxy in accessible terms, which we might see as a glimpse of an observer's perception of a priest's non-devotion. The presence of impurity seems to preclude any counterevidence that would suggest purity.

Thei marren many matins and massis with-out devossioun, and herto sacramentis schulen be soolde or els gete no man noon; and lest thei schulden studie in Goddis lawe, he hath ordeyned hem to studie in othere

dyvers lawis for the more wynnynge. And as anentis ensauple of prestis lijf in doynge, who doith more worldli werkis thanne thei, or more covytous, and suffre mai thei no wronge but if thei plete anoon, and of alle men thei mai worst suffre to be reprevd of her defaultis, be thei never so many. (21-27)

[They mar many matins and masses without devotion, and hereto sacraments shall be sold or else no man gets anything; and lest they should study in God's law, he has ordained them to study in other divers laws for the more winning. And concerning the example of priests' life in doing, who do more worldly works than they, or more covetous, and they may suffer no wrong if they plead at once, and they of all people may suffer the wordt to be reprevd of their defects, be they ever so many.]

Many parish priests who “marren many matins and masses with-out devossion” have been lead astray and are leading others astray. In this construction, they are compromising the Church's local leadership. Not unlike Gower's argument on division's profoundly destructive effects, here a series of effects are asserted to result from clerical corruption: services are performed heartlessly and the sacraments are simonized when they are not abandoned altogether. Certainly, documents and debates of the later Middle Ages attest to various religious services being monetized. But the argument raised against simony too often naively assumes a demonetized (and therefore “pure”) system of religious practice. Evil persons working in the name of the Church have, in Jack Upland's presentation, turned the Church's virtues into vices.

Situating simony in the context of the obvious and very public sins of apostasy and blasphemy, Wyclif presents the morality in this way:

Whereas apostasy is generally, according to its underlying principle, a turning away from religion by man, blasphemy, at its root, is a slandering of God's power; simony, however, according to its underlying principle, as a striving to destroy God's plan. (*On Simony* 29).

Simony in these idealized terms thus runs counter to creation but also to the trajectory of creation, which is headed toward final judgment. And beyond the assumption of apocalyptic evil in simony, individuals suspicious of simony may feel moved to mark simoniacs or inveigh against them out of apocalyptic necessity. Apocalypticism in the Christian tradition, for all its appearance as challenging or convoluted, makes use of very accessible and nearly universal human tendencies to distinguish oneself from the other, to privilege one's own (necessarily infrequent) perception, to lament what is lacking in the present while to cherish some ideal (often associated with the past).

The invocation of purity, however, is not only evident in broadly anticlerical rhetoric. It is also invoked against Lollards, against friars individually, and in defense of various clerical factions. Although all of the permutations of anticlerical, interclerical and proclerical rhetoric cannot be treated here, one might consider how the unique friar-against-Lollard dynamic suggested by Friar Daw's reply finds its own convenient terms. Friar Daw's Reply, dated to the early fifteenth century but directly engaged with Jack and speaking to concerns contemporary with the late fourteenth century, throws charges of evil back at Jack:

But, Jakke, bi my lewte, lowde thou lyeest,
 For telle me bi oure counseile: what lord hath ben confoundid,
 Or what prelat of ony pepil put in ony peril?
 But sith that wickide worme - Wiclyf be his name -
 Began to sowe the seed of cisme in the erthe,
 Sorowe and shendship hath awaked wyde,
 In lordship and prelacie hath growe the lasse grace. (68-74)
 [But Jack, upon my honr, you are lying loud, for tell me by our counsel:
 what lord has been confounded, or what prelate of any people put in any
 peril? But since that wicked worm—Wyclif is his name—began to sow
 the seed of schism in the earth, sorrow and destruction have arisen widely;
 in lordship and prelacy has grown the less grace.]

For Friar Daw Lollardy is far more insidious than anything that friars or other factions of
 the Church have been responsible for. But most telling is the framing of Wyclif as
 wormlike and the construction of Wyclif as a sower of schism and as someone who
 awakens evil qualities. Wyclif, in terms here paralleling the demonic, is an originator of
 evil. Daw continues:

Jak, thou seist with symonye the seven sacramentes we sellen,
 And preien for no men but yif thei wil paien.
 God wote, Jakke, thou sparist here the sothe,
 And er we departen us a-soundre, it shal wel be shewid.
 But oon is the sacrament that we han to dispensen
 Off penaunce to the peple whan nede askith. (75-80)

[Jack, who says with simony we sell the seven sacraments and pray for no people unless they pay, God knows, Jack, you here are avoiding the truth, and before we go our separate ways, it shall be evident. But there is one sacrament that we have to dispense, tht of penance to the people when need requires.]

The allegations of simony, dependent on convenient data, are ultimately false, according to Friar Daw. The truth consists not of a weighing of the evidence regarding simony but rather of the authority that the Church has independent of that debate. Central to the debate are questions of allegiance and orthodoxy: Who is to be trusted? Who is lying? Whose speech presents correct doctrine?

The late-fourteenth century texts known as “Sixteen Points on Which the Bishops Accuse Lollards” and the “Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards” further illustrate evidence of a crucial ecclesiological conflict.⁸³ The bishops’ Sixteen Points and the Lollards’ Twelve Conclusions attest to disagreement on the legitimacy of the Church and on who represents good or evil in this moment. These texts must be examined for what we can reasonably assume that they are—forceful constructions of others’ supposed false teaching. False teaching, however constructed, presupposes the falseness of the enterprise. And true and false are of course opposed in stark dualistic apocalyptic terms. False teaching is argued as cause for vigilance, and false teaching upon which power is constructed (or by which legitimate power is undermined) must be exposed, as the Bishops’ Sixteen Points and Twelve Conclusions attributed to the Lollards do.⁸⁴ This

⁸³ For both texts, see Anne Hudson’s *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, 19-29.

⁸⁴ As I cite these controversial lists, I seek primarily to establish that textual attestations to controversy exist. I must stop short of presuming these works to be as documentary as they have previously read. For a recent

exposure shows how power is seized through rhetoric, through the dissemination of messages, and through burgeoning literacy.

All of the Points frame heterodox Lollard teachings, all of which in some way translate into a minimization of ecclesiastical wealth and power. The Conclusions, spelled out more carefully than what we must imagine the Bishops' accusations were, attest to fierce debate over the power of the Church (and by extension the power of the individual):

Trewe cristen men schulden answere here aviseliche, trewliche and mekelich to þe poyntis and articlis þat ben put azens hem: aviseliche þat þei speike not vnkonnynge, trwliche þat þei speike not falseliche, and mekeliche þat þei speike not prowdeliche in her answere, and þan schal[1] be grace in þer speiking or answering be þe helpe of Crist. (Hudson, *Selections*, lines 50-55)

[True Christian people should here answer thoughtfully, truly, and meekly to the points and articles that are put against them: thoughtfully that they speak not unknowingly, truly that they speak not falsely, and meekly, that they speak not proudly in their answer, and then shall be grace in their speaking or answer by the help of Christ.]

Again, the dualism is implicit in claims of true and false teaching. This dualism is made especially clear in the Bishops' call for markedly "Christian" behavior in response to harsh claims. The legitimacy of power is determined in very absolute terms.

scholarly correction, see a critical reading of the Conclusions in Wendy Scase's "The Audience and Framers of the Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards."

Friar and Summoner: Framing Church Corruption

Many forms of instability, arising from many different sources but consistently threatening established order and making individuals feel vulnerable, contribute to apocalyptic mentalities within this period. Specifically considering ecclesiastical authority, one must imagine on how many fronts ecclesiastical authority is being called into question. This question is important insofar as marginally religious figures such as pardoners and summoners suggest how widely the Church's power is being asserted. In the *Canterbury Tales* the Pardoner shows his trade in indulgences to be transparently corrupt but also rhetorically very effective as he can point to the sins of all and then leverage secrets of sins against those who confided in him. Church workers' claims to be entitled to people's most compromising secrets implicate not only the indulgence trade in late medieval culture, but also upon practices of penance.⁸⁵ The summoner character of the *Friar's Tale* similarly uses his work to extort money from those, such as the widow, who can be maligned based on her circumstances. The Friar's summoner from the very beginning of the tale treats privacy and information as a commodity, effectively reversing the ideal pattern of confession as he aggressively accuses.⁸⁶ And he can be so aggressive at his work because of the official Church entity that he represents.

Chaucer's Summoner and Friar, uniquely pitted against each other, show ecclesiastical power as aggressive, as clearly opposed to the interests of many laypersons. These characters work for the Church, but they can be seen as more antagonistic than shepherdly. Ultimately, Chaucer's friars and summoners—those contained within tales and those telling them—all concern themselves with framing good and evil. Setting such

⁸⁵ On the exploitation of secrecy regarding confession in the late Middle Ages, see Beth Allison Barr's "Three's a Crowd," and also Karma Lochrie's *Covert Operations*.

⁸⁶ I will treat the implications of privacy in my chapter below dealing with speech and confession.

a moral agenda in its own right connotes power. And they extend their own limited claims to power to gain advantage over others. More specifically, they all judge, and they do so decisively and quickly. Quick and wide-ranging justice is practiced by the Summoner in particular. The Summoner's imperfections are apparent already in the *General Prologue*: "...As hoote he was & lecherous as a sparwe..." [As hot he was, and lecherous as a sparrow.] (I.626). The Summoner embodies hypocrisy very tellingly. As Seth Lerer observes, "Chaucer's Summoner abuses his position by associating himself with (and ultimately, getting money from) the very sexual transgressions that the church courts were supposed to punish" (264). The very real threat of someone being taken into church court extended across society and certainly would have resonated with those lay members within the company of pilgrims.

In indicting the work of summoners, the Friar makes a case for the illegitimacy of the enterprise in which a thinly veiled wrong is involved, tracing it back to its ecclesiastical authority. In the opening of the *Friar's Tale*, the scene is set by the invasiveness of the archdeacon's power, and the summoner is the extension of that power. And this power soon comes to encompass more and more aspects of life. In the opening indictment of the summoner's practices and the system of Church justice, the friar paints a hellish picture of a system that can ensnare just about anyone. Absent a long tradition of anti-summoner literature parallel to the understandably rich antifraternal tradition, the indictment of the summoner might seem unique to a few texts. As Jill Mann points out in her *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, the Chaucer may very well be drawing on the negative associations of summoners laid out in *Piers Plowman*. Still, a major point illustrated in the Friar's setup is that the texts are stacked against parishioners (especially

those who do not pay into the system very generously) and in favor of those who work for the church. People are made to feel guilty, and it is the willingness of people to be thus taxed and manipulated—through guilt—that makes the system work.

The authority of the Church, aggressively criticized and legitimized in the period, is all-encompassing. The Church has a great deal of control over human activities. Such an expanse of activity gives the summoner opportunity for manipulation and bribery, and the whole enterprise can even be taken as a form of thievery. This summoner character's corruption is most clearly seen in his exploitation of a sick widow:

“...May I nat axe a libel, sire somonour,

And answe're there by my procuratour

To swich thyng as men wole opposen me?”

“Yis,” quod this somonour, “pay anon—lat se—

Twelf pens to me, and I wol thee acquite.

I schal no profit han therby but lite;

My maister hath the profit and nat I...” (III.1595-1601)

[“May I not ask a libel, Sir Summoner, and answer there by my procurer

to such a thing as people will oppose me?” “Yes,” said this summoner,

“pay at once—let’s see—twelve pence to me, and I will forgive you. I

shall only make a little profit by it. My master makes the profit and not

I.”]

“This false theef, this somnour” (1348) has his work exposed as devilish, a charge that the real Summoner must reflect back at the Friar. As we entertain the image that the Summoner gives us in his prologue, we must imagine the friar objectively hell-bound (or

in an alternate demonic reading, hell-born) but also hell-oriented in motivation, through a double meaning of “So was the develes ers ay in his minde.” The broad claims of friars—seen as overstepping by parish priests and others—in the Summoner’s story are extended to the point of divinely inspired vision. The friar uses his claim to vision to exploit people and to tell them what they want to hear: “His deeth saugh I by revelacioun...I dar wel seyn that, er that half an hour / After his deeth, I saugh him born to blisse / In myn avision, so God me wise!” (III.1854, 1856-8). It should be noted that claims to revelation are here put in a friar’s mouth, and not spoken by the pilgrim. The friar of the *Summoner’s Tale* achieves a masterful balance between finding what he wants and telling people what they want to hear.

What people want to hear, of course, is that they are in good standing and that evil is chiefly outside of them. Some other person, or some other faction, or some foreign area of life is the problem. In a moment already understood as apocalyptic, people’s awareness of imperfections in others adds to hypersensitivity about evil. And there are plenty of conspicuous problems to be seen. The Friar, of course, is not immune from charges of conflict of interest and of taking advantage of laypersons either. The Friar presents a unique form of conflict in religious practice, as he resolves one problem (the difficulty or inapproachability of penance) by presenting another (exacting a high fee). To put it charitably, he comes across as morally compromised. As David Raybin reminds us, demonic references run throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, particularly in the *Friar’s Tale* (“Goddes Instrumentz” 94). The friar, characterized as “a wantowne and a merye” (208) and as “[s]o muchel of daliaunce and fair langage” (211) in the General Prologue,

is rendered simultaneously sympathetic and antipathetic for friendliness and loquaciousness.

Ful swetely herde he confessioun,

And plesaunt was his absolucioun:

He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,

There as he wiste to have a good pitaunce. (I.221-24)

[Full sweetly he heard confession, and pleasant was his absolution: he was an easy man to give penance, there as he expected to have a good pittance.]

Friars seem to be in any event susceptible to criticism. Therefore, very early on, the superficially positive social qualities of the Friar unravel to show that this look of happiness and this willingness to talk (and listen) freely has a cost.

Through the characterizations of the friar and other clergy or religious officers in the *Tales*, good and evil are effectively tied to money and the willingness to pay within the medieval sacramental system. The Antichristian in the *Summoner's Prologue* and *Tale* has been traced by Alan Fletcher in his study *Preaching, Politics, and Poetry in Late-Medieval England*, who shows the work's strong consistency with Lollard Antichrist rhetoric that was readily accessible when Chaucer was writing.⁸⁷ The Antichrist, as McGinn notes, "is first and foremost the great deceiver, the arch-hypocrite"

⁸⁷ Fletcher weighs pre-Lollard as well as Lollard possible connections with the demonic story in the *Prologue*:

It is therefore reasonable to suppose that the motif in the *Summoner's Prologue* had some Wycliffite resonance and currency by the time Chaucer was writing. It might be thought that arse-infesting friars would have been a natural enough way of depicting a particularly stinking group of heretics, especially when the raw materials from which Chaucer put his defensive conceit together may have already been traditional. It remains the case, however, that in the decade in which he wrote, the antimendicant polemic most nearly consonant with his chosen antimendicant collocation was coming from Lollard pens. (*Preaching, Politics, and Poetry* 288)

(*Antichrist* 5), and the Summoner works hard to heighten the sense that the Friar is deceptive and hypocritical. The tale, in spite of the seeming originality noted by some scholars⁸⁸, casts a wide net and indicts many friars by implication, arguably all of the orders. Just as the Church (archdeacons and summoners particularly) has much power over people through the ecclesiastical courts, the friar wields much power through confession⁸⁹—particularly by making confession uniquely accessible.

This friar-character of the *Summoner's Tale*, for starters, is preaching at a church (III.1714), foregrounding the turf wars that the ascendancy of the friars caused in late medieval Europe. The summoner also indicts the friars' commitment to building—they have more than sufficient shelter, as well as food:

“Yif me thanne of thy gold, to make oure cloystre,”

Quod he, “for many a muscle and many an oystre,

Whan othere men han ben ful wel at eyse,

Hath been oure foode, our cloystre for to reyse.

And yet, God woot, unnethe the fundement

Parfourned is, ne of our pavement

Nys nat a tyle yet withinne oure wones.

By God, we owen fourty pound for stones. (III.2099-2106)

[“Give me then of your gold, to make our cloister,” he said, “for many a mussel and many an oyster has been our food (when other men have been full well at ease) to raise our cloister, and yet, God knows, underneath, the

⁸⁸ Benson suggests, “The Summoner’s tale of a hypocritical friar has neither a known source nor any close analogues” (877). But that philological point aside, the tale relates to a rich antifraternal tradition in the later Middle Ages. Friars were the butt of jokes when they were not having outright venom directed at them. Penn Szittyta has sketched out a tradition of antifraternal literature traceable to William of Saint-Amour, but the friars made plenty of enemies wherever they went, even as they proved popular with some.

⁸⁹ See Chapter Three below for my extended discussion of the implications of confession and speech.

foundation is hardly formed, nor is there a tile of our pavement here yet within our dwelling. By God, we owe forty pound for stones.]

The infrastructure required by the friars is not at all cheap. And rather than circumventing the complicated and costly structures of the late-medieval church, the friar's supposed ethic of poverty adds to the cost. And to complicate matters further, the value in trade of the friars' services (and the friars' very worth) is at stake.

And yet such perceived value undercuts the ideal of apostolic poverty maintained by friars. The costs of fraternal activities are indicted in *Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, traceable to the late fourteenth century. In that text the Franciscan describes his way of living, at first grounding his work in modesty and poverty:

We hondlen no money but menelich faren,
 And haven hunger at the meate, at ich a mel ones;
 And haven forsaken the worlde and in wo lybbeth
 In penaunce and povertie, and precheth the puple,
 By ensample of oure life, soules to helpen;
 And in povertie praien for all oure parteners
 That gyveth us any good, God to honouren,
 Other bell other booke, or breed to our fode,
 Other catell other cloth to coveren with our bones,
 Money or money-worthe—here mede is in heven. (Dean, *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, lines 108-117)

But how much have they indeed forsaken the world? The ascetic split between spiritual and worldly is not so pronounced as friars would claim it to be. But in these

constructions of fraternalism—those found in the *Summoner's Tale* and those found in *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*—we are seeing projected corruption, performed hypocrisy. To drive home the point about the cost—indeed, largesse—of fraternalism, *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede* maintains that the work of the Friars Minor has some overhead. He continues:

For we buldeth a burwgh, a brod and a large,
 A church and a chapaile with chambers alofte,
 With wide windowes ywrought and walles well heye
 That mote bene portreid and paynt and pulched ful clene
 With gaie glittering glas, glowing as the sonne. (lines 118-122)

Simple poverty suddenly isn't very simple, and it entails certain comforts that many wouldn't enjoy. In the apocalyptic moment—any post-Antiquity moment awaiting the end—human behavior is important, and friars through apostolic example purport to be exemplars, figures approaching living saints. In these fraternal claims past and present (typically opposed/contrasted in apocalypticism, as I have suggested above) are combined. And this combination of the past and present—this heavy emphasis on tradition in spite of the perceived newness of the fraternal institution—strikes many as uneasy.

We overstep as interpreters of literature and history if we read these constructed friars—however similar to their real counterparts—as historical figures. But we must read the vivid narrative characterizations of friars as important points in the history of apocalyptic rhetoric. The fictional friars embody contradiction, hypocrisy, conflict of interest. In Chaucer, the Summoner's Friar's appeal gets worse by narrative design. The

Friar is keen on asking for nice food, and he responds to someone's claim of lack of food by asking for even more valuable goods. He asks for others to trade their own security, to give whatever last thing they have that represents a small amount of security. And just as a layperson contemplates losing everything for religious services, the Friar ups the ante: he invokes the apocalyptic and the prophetic.

“Now help, Thomas, for hym that harwed helle!

For ells moste we oure books selle.

And if yow lake oure predicacioun,

Thanne goth the world al to destruccioun.

For whoso wolde us fro this world bireve,

So God me save, Thomas, by youre leve,

He wolde bireve out of this world the sonne.

For who kan teche and werchen as we konne?

And that is nat of litel tyme,” quod he,

“But syn Elye was, or Elise,

Han freres been—that fynde I of record—.... (III.2107-17)

[Now help, Thomas, for him that harrowed hell! For otherwise, we must

sell our books. And if you lack our preaching, then the world goes all to

destruction. For whoso would deprive us from this world, he would

deprive the world of the sun. For who can teach and work as we can?

And that is not something recent, he said, but since Elijah was, or Elisha,

there have been friars—I find record of that.]

In the fictional friar's words, very much is resting on the preaching of the friars. They are uniquely equipped to teach and work: "For who kan teche and werchen as we konne?" They are irreplaceable. Their work's importance is grounded in biblical authority, in an ancient tradition. Their work is grounded, according to the Carmelite line that he uses, in the long tradition of biblical prophecy.⁹⁰ So anyone speaking to a friar is speaking to someone with a unique blessing (and sometimes gifted with foreknowledge). And if you would not give up your gold to forestall them giving up their books, you are getting in the way of the Gospel. The friar, narrowly focused on his own interests and unable to balance them with those of the many persons doing religious work in his country, makes an ambitious argument for his own superiority. It is an argument that rests on the friars offering something essentially the same as what ancient prophets offered. And in that vein, conflict can be justified. Being unpopular can be reconciled with truth.

The lack of sustainability of the fraternal enterprise was recognized in many corners of the late-medieval Christian West. Szittyá points out the antifraternal strains not only in the end of the B-version of *Piers Plowman* but also in the "bidders and beggeres" of the Prologue (line 41). The evil of the friars is seen in terms of not just speech but also action. Szittyá points out the rhetoric employed against an enterprise that involves begging:

As the minstrels pervert the true function of words, so able-bodied beggars, soliciting alms under false pretenses, undermine a social order founded on work. (257).

⁹⁰ On the Carmelite narrative tracing their history to Elijah and Elisha, see the note to line 2116 in the *Riverside Chaucer* (878).

But as is apparent in the condemnation of friars in *Piers Plowman*, fraternal disassociation from work can be easily seen as a departure from Christian virtue and a disassociation from the signs of the Church. Szittyá clarifies the indictment of friars as he expands on Sire *Penetrans Domos*:

He is no representative of any living friar but rather of an idea, or ideas, about friars....But he is also a symbol within the terms set uniquely by Langland's own poem. As a representative of the two signal features of the friars' life, mendicancy and the secular apostolate, he reflects the two major problems on which Langland has focused from the field full of folk: word and work, the right use of the divine gift of speech and the proper contribution of one's labor to the profit of human society. (284)

As much as friars have tried to define their work uniquely, they cannot prevent others from holding them to universally accepted standards of religious practice. They distinguish themselves from clergy and from laypersons, but in so doing they invite behavioral comparisons.

Friars seem more conspicuous targets than some other pilgrims simply because of their work out in the open and their need to engage with people whom they might not see frequently. Laypeople hesitate to trust friars, but friars might not know whom to trust either, given their broad exposure to society and itinerant practice. But broad exposure also correlates with broad access and a mobility that parish priests and other clergy do not enjoy. As the friar of the tale argues that he is better equipped than others (by implication, better than a parish priest), he also benefits from a mobility that other clergy do not have. He uses the convenience that he offers—he makes house calls, after all—to justify his

existence, even as he horns in on some work that others would have done otherwise. Although readers must take care to distinguish between the pilgrim Friar and the Summoner's friar for the sake of reference, readers of course are invited to read the two together. *The Friar's Tale* and *Summoner's Tale* work hand in hand because of how neatly the characters are to line up with the pilgrims. Unsympathetic pilgrim-storytellers join with the purportedly (but problematically) honest Chaucer to give us insights that the pilgrim Friar, again characterized in the General Prologue as offering a kinder, gentler confession, is all the more dangerous—in some theologians' eyes, at least—for making it so easy. Furthermore, through simony he has made confession (an emerging part of the sacramental system which will be discussed in the next chapter) a competitive enterprise by making a sacrament easier in exchange for money.

Ultimately, apocalypticism in this period intensifies through developing (some developing longer than others) conflicts regarding religious authority. And this is further intensified by social exposure and the capacity of individuals to judge. The authority of the Church is at stake in the apocalyptic: one must determine whether patterns of activity and teaching should change remain constant. The dualistic nature of apocalypticism furthermore has been used at various moments in the history of Christianity to define the legitimacy of power. Individual religious leaders can be seen as anti-Christian, and whole factions are idealized, questioned, or demonized in apocalyptic terms. This moment in England is witness to the continued conflict between such factions as parish priests and friars, between Wycliffites and those who come to question Wyclif, and among many other factions. Either you are with us or you are against us, as the

commonplace goes, and the prospect of an end to the world makes affiliation all the more important.

I began this chapter alleging that apocalypticism was further fueled through religious authority and religious practice. I remarked how the literature of the period highlights the ways in which the experience of Christianity promoted thinking in an apocalyptic mode. Instances of this apocalyptic mode being expressed through authority and practice are evident in, as I have shown, works as varying in aim and audience as the *Canterbury Tales*, *Clannesse*, *Pearl*, the *York Plays*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, the Lollard *Twelve Conclusions*, and the Bishops' *Sixteen Points*. Religious power and practice are conspicuously understood in terms of apocalyptic narratives, and the evidence dictates that we must understand not a monolithic late-medieval apocalypticism but rather various dynamic apocalyptic views evident in the forms of Christianity itself. Apocalyptic implications are more pervasive in the writings of the period than is generally acknowledged. As I will show in the next chapter, these broad concerns about authority and practice lead into more specific concerns about speech and confession. We must consider, then, not only how speech is curtailed and how a growing culture of required confession may make persons individually vulnerable, but also how speech itself is understood dualistically.

CHAPTER THREE: CONFESSION AND THE END

The Christian apocalyptic tradition through the Middle Ages has strong ties to confession, a practice that requires awareness of time as individual Christians look reflexively backward at sin and forward in hope. Concerns with confession and concerns with an End remain strong in texts ranging from the *Canterbury Tales* to pastoral literature, as sacramental confessional practice and apocalypticism vary or are in states of flux. The prospect of judgment, which is essential to the apocalypse, may make individuals turn to penance, a sacrament of which confession is a constituent part. Even as individual formalized penance develops in the medieval period, the apocalypse provides a strong conceptual basis for the consistency of the practice because it grounds the mechanics of penance in a sense of ancient tradition as well as contemporary practice. As the modern exponent of confession Bernhard Poschmann maintains, penitential practice assumes a transhistorical and apocalyptic imperative, showing an awareness of all history and defining itself in terms of the apocalypse. Poschmann makes a forceful case for penitential practice as an apocalyptic imperative:

The Apocalypse provides an instructive element to the apostolic teaching on penance. In the introductory letters the moral condition of the Church is depicted in a few bold strokes. Those who have been censured are required in the plainest terms to do penance. For less serious failings, even for those which of their nature lead to spiritual ruin, such as negligence and tepidity, all that is required is repentance and emendation (2:5; 3:1-5, 15-19). But the bishops must not tolerate grave sins, such as idolatry and unchastity, in their churches. They will be severely judged if

they do not take action against these offenders, i.e., if they do not expel them from the community (2:2; 2:14-16; 2:20). (18)

The strong association between penance and the End should come as little surprise. A close look at Apoc. 2:5, which Poschmann cites from a distance, shows how John's text resonates with the apocalyptic:

Memor esto itaque unde excideris et age paenitentiam et prima opera fac
sin autem venio tibi et movebo candelabrum tuum de loco suo nisi
paenitentiam egeris.

[Be mindful therefore from whence thou art fallen: and do penance and do the first works. Or else I come to thee and will move thy candlestick out of its place, except thou do penance.]

Here in his Apocalypse's letter to the angel of Ephesus, John invokes memory and expectation, as well as the threats of an end and of judgment. Layered on top of this is the social context of John writing to scattered churches, conveying divine correction in absolute terms. The principles of penance here are seen to argue for universal and systematic practice. John's Apocalypse has been frequently understood as invoking a broad and age-long ecclesiology and as delineating principles for conducting the business of the church and interactions among adherents to Christianity; as such, it was understood for centuries of late antiquity and Middle Ages to address the social realities of the church.⁹¹ Penitential practice thus has deep roots in the Christian tradition and accounts for a wide range of human activity. And it can seem an unstable way to respond to

⁹¹ As E. Ann Matter states, "All of the Apocalypse commentaries from the Carolingian world thus show the continuing assumption of the text as an allegory of the Church, and a continuing process of filtering specific interpretations from earlier commentaries to support that assumption" (49). Matter also, with a nod to Paula Fredriksen's "Tyconius and the End of the World" (74-75), is careful to note that this strong emphasis on present religious practice can be traced back as far as Tyconius (Matter 49n39).

human activity since it requires human activity itself. It responds to social realities as it redefines its own complicated social reality. In this chapter, the apocalyptic urgency I have sketched in the previous two will be explored through its connections to confession, a wide-ranging set of practices that includes the giving and receiving of officially sanctioned confession as well as practices of secrecy and revelation that stem from or react to it. Confessional culture, to be sure, is long in developing, and this chapter will illustrate the various layers of apocalyptic meaning accessible to Christians in the late fourteenth century, some of them emerging for the first time during that period and some being echoed from previous periods. The second half of the fourteenth century witnesses an intensity of apocalyptic thought amplified by confession particularly in its prefiguration of judgment. Confessional meaning-making is worked out in this period in clearly clerical literature but also through rich development in narratives presented in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in *Clannesse*, and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The notion of correction that anticipates final judgment pervades late-medieval English culture. From this vantage point, confession marks the uneasy middle stage of penance, a reemerging point of vulnerability that expresses the need and fear of an end. And for many people, as will become apparent later in this chapter, this simple chronology (or even narrative) of penance proves problematic or essential. It is also simultaneously powerful and unstable as it embodies speech and action, both of which are said to be consequential in this world and the next.⁹² Confessing Christians must accept all of these consequences on faith, as is argued in prescriptive manuals but as is

⁹² Julian Wasserman and Liam Purdon highlight the “performatory” within confession and show the problem it poses for representation: “Language as a symbolic act composed of signifiers is separate from that which it signifies. Yet with the special category of performatory language, this vital distinction collapses” (660).

also attested to by repetition, by popular practice. Not unlike apocalypticism, confessional fervor does not go away simply because an end has not arrived yet. Individuals must continuously struggle to make sense of what is to come and what they have done. The apocalypse and confession perpetuate themselves and each other, and they are uniquely equipped to do so in this period. Confession, projected from a variety of perspectives as a debatable, stabilizing, or reforming mechanism, also proves to be a site of corruption. Confession, as it becomes debated and expanded, attracts countless value judgments applied to speech. Confessing speech—variously characterized as based in contrition and sincerity—is viewed as increasingly important within an apocalyptic frame. In this chapter, it will be clear that the existence of conflicting views and forms of confession makes confession in this period especially powerful, volatile, and anxious about an End. Apocalyptic assumptions in the late fourteenth century work reciprocally with the developing practices of confession. And these connections are also tied to those I have drawn from death and ecclesiastical authority. Ultimately, I will show that confession, an increasingly important religious practice in the late Middle Ages, is a center of secrecy, vulnerability, and exposure, and embodies the apocalyptic in its requirement for revelation.

Urgency, Lateness and the Stakes of Confession

Penitential practice—confession particularly—has the potential to communicate all the guilt, uncertainty, and urgency of the apocalypse. The imperatives for penance and for works from Apoc. 2:3 are rendered thus in the mid-fourteenth century, in the biblical text of a parallel Middle English and Anglo-Norman apocalypse commentary:

Forþi biþenk þee what þou art. & do penaunce. & þe werkes þat þou dedest aforne. Oiþere bot hou do I shal come to þee sone. & remewe þee & þi Candelstik out of his stede bot 3if þou do penaunce. (Fridner 12)

[Therefore meditate on what you are and do penance and the works that you did before. Or else I will come to you soon and remove you and your candlestick out of its place unless you do penance.]

The imminence of coming is especially emphasized here. The added vernacular threat of coming *sone*, “soon,” here hinges on the exercise of penance.⁹³ The suddenness is even more apparent in the beginning of the third chapter, where the letter to the church of Sardis describes coming like a thief:

I wot wel þi werkes. ffor men seien þat þou art ded and þou lyuest. fforþi wake and conforme hem þat ben dyeande. I ne fynde nou3th 3oure werkes ful bifore god. & forþi biþenche þe hou þou haste herd & kepe it & do penaunce. And 3if þou ne wilt nou3th I schal come to þe als a þeef whan þou ne schalt wyte no word. (Fridner 21, citing Apoc. 3:1b-3)

[I know well your works. For men say that you are dead and you live. Therefore wake and conform them who have been dying. I find absolutely nothing of your works before God. And therefore conciser how you have heard and keep it and do penance. And if you do will do nothing I shall come to you when you shall know no word [of it].]

⁹³ The parallel Anglo-Norman text in this commentary supplies the adverb *tost* (having meanings including “soon” and “quickly”), which is certainly parallel to the *sone* of the Middle English translation.

Death, confession, and apocalypse are conjoined in the concepts of spiritual death, in the judgment of deeds, in the image of the thief.⁹⁴ In the power to assert another's spiritual death or to question one's own spiritual vitality resides the capacity for rebuke or self-correction. The commentary on this text reads as follows in the Middle English:

By þat þat þai hane þe name of good lyf and ben dede. bitokneþ þe ypocrites þat han werkes of holynesse. and þe entent yuel. hem he þretenþ þat he schal come as a þef. and bynyme hem her godes þat þei han.

[By which they have the name of good life and are dead. This means the hypocrites that have works of holiness and the evil intent. To them he threatens that he shall come as a thief, and take from them their goods⁹⁵ that they have.]

This identification of hypocrisy allows for conflict to be construed from different perspectives, and there are those who seized upon the contested state of penitential practice for correction as a sign of apocalyptic disorder. Credited with one such apocalyptic view that does not shy away from conflict, William of Saint-Amour, whose thirteenth-century antifraternalism was alive and well in late-fourteenth century England,⁹⁶ was careful to highlight in his interpretation of these same chapters, Apoc. 2-3, profound cause for fear as correction is resisted even as certain false persons will seem good:

⁹⁴ The Vulgate threat of coming as a thief, *veniam tamquam fur* (3:3) is widely argued to be parallel to the apocalyptic *fur* in the Vulgate of Matthew's version of the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:43).

⁹⁵ *Goods* here seems a better semantic fit than the defensible but less likely *gods*.

⁹⁶ See Penn Szittyá's *Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature*.

Quartum signum est quoniam, appropinquante fine seculi et adventu Antichristi, quidam qui apparebunt in ecclesia sanctiores. Et tamen facient quod displicet Christo [et] corrigentur per aliquos, iuxta visionem beati Iohannis de correctione ecclesiarum, Apo. II et III. Ipsi autem correctionem sustinere nolentes, suos correctores trident in tribulationem et procurabunt ut ab omnibus odio habeantur, et ut etiam aliqui ex eis occidantur. (Geltner 80)

[The fourth sign is that, with the approaching end of the era and the advent of the Antichrist, certain men will appear in the church to be holier. And yet they will displease Christ [and] will be admonished by others, according to the vision of the blessed John regarding the correction of the churches, Apoc. 2 and 3. Those men, however, refusing to endure correction, will cast their correctors into tribulation, cause them to be hated by all, and even have some of them killed. (trans. Geltner 81)]

Corruption is defined in broadly applicable terms: inconsistent morality, pervasive conflict, demonstrable violence. The letters of Apoc. 2 and 3 can be used as gauges and predictors of the state of the church, particularly as individuals fear or seek an end. And appearances of good can be deceiving. Hypocrisy, lax correction, and general heterodoxy appear as behaviors that are difficult to reverse, suggesting that these perceived threats are to be resisted when possible. And perhaps most tellingly in this prediction, many people will resist ecclesiastical correction, of which confession is a routine and important part. Confession thus may be seen as a sign of the Church functioning. And irregularities in confessional practice may suggest something is amiss.

Many of the contested or corrected aspects of confession depend on the timing of one's end or the world's End. The necessity of confession is affected by death and apocalypse. Furthermore, confession cannot be made without making public certain expectations about its own lateness. It can never come quite early enough: penitents lament the gap in time between transgression and confession. But it also comprises a set of practices that by themselves suggest late accommodations to patterns of sin. Confession, like apocalypticism, mirrors a world out of control, and even control is something commonly gauged according to a time frame: consider the rapidity of confession or of correction. In the late Middle Ages, some efforts to improve confession as a sacramental practice brought about unintended social and religious changes. Along these lines, Gina Brandolino notes the following:

Religious texts written in response to the Fourth Lateran Council to educate Christians so that they were able to make good confessions—a practice that afforded the church more power to intervene in the everyday lives of its faithful than it had before—paradoxically also provided Christians with opportunities to pursue more independent devotional practices. (406)

And the fact that confessional practice appears in a state of flux is further complicated by the fact that adaptations to confessional practice may make certain formalized aspects of practice appear “late,” even in its second century of heavily formalized practice stemming from Lateran IV.

Its variance and its late appearance both make it appear unstable. It is of contested necessity, but it also in official doctrine makes claims of deep and repeated

necessity. It must adapt to ever-shifting behavior, and it is also tied to scholarship and to official pronouncements of doctrine. To account for various theological constructions of penance and the contributions of scholasticism in particular, Lee Patterson has said that “penance was an event that had both a subjective and objective existence” (374). Special problems within penitential theology emerge, as Patterson further explains that “the Scholastics readjusted the focus of penitential attention and made the weighing of the remissive value of sorrow, whether by the priest or the penitent himself, both less delicate and less ultimate.”

Yet the memory of penance as more ultimate must still remain in such a widely commanded and now-ritualized practice. With that said, as Patterson accounts for shifting trends or new developments, one must still acknowledge coexistence of a variety of conflicting yet mutually exacerbating positions. The natural gap between theory and practice may also escalate any conflict that arises and may be seen to provide evidence of moral inconsistency in others. The same tendency to judge examined in the previous chapter applies here. The sense of apocalyptically-informed conflict intensifies as individuals cannot agree about the necessity and urgency of confessing. Even the most straightforward exercises of penance were called into question. In his study of the late-medieval genre known as the “form of conscience,”⁹⁷ Michael Cornett suggests a widely observed disconnect of confessional practice, a problem of tradition often apparent but frequently glossed over in arguments for confessional continuity:

Since the fall of man from Eden, sinning was the natural state of affairs;
confessing sins to a priest was not. By the time that the church ordained

⁹⁷ Known in other languages by various terms, including the French *examen de conscience*, as Cornett notes in his extensive list (8-9). For a further consideration of penitential literature, see the discussion below of constancy and change in penitential manuals.

that all Christians needed to confess their sins annually, what penitents were expected to say and what priests were expected to hear had to be taught. (3)

Preoccupation with penance necessarily requires instilling some new knowledge—and it also requires constant reminding and education. It was a focus of lay education, as examples in this chapter show. Even in its most conservative and stable manifestations, it is just as concerned with a spiritual endgame as those who, contrarily, would hold that it amounts to spiritual and social danger. And the constantly replenishing economy of sin causes this process to be constantly repeated, with the promise of finality that keeps one anticipating an end. One might maintain that the approaching end of the age paradoxically generates more need for confession, even though it would purport to do the opposite. Repetition can dull the conscience, but it also indicates perceived necessity. More frequent repetition may be a sign of increased apocalyptic engagement, of never knowing when one's life's end or the age's End will come. In fact, arguments for more-frequent-than-annual confession abound even as the practice of annual "Easter duty" is seen to crystallize following Lateran IV.⁹⁸ The lateness of various confessional practices, juxtaposed with the ancient grounding of confession that Poschmann and others maintain, may be understood in the late fourteenth century to connote improvement and clarity, a preparation of not just individuals but of the whole Church.

Authority and Vulnerability: Concerns Raised by/in Confession

Recent scholarship has drawn extensive connections between authority and confessional practice in the late Middle Ages, showing a wide variety of concerns shared

⁹⁸ See Guido's *Handbook* for one example, in which he reminds us that explicit confessional rules were simply written to counter those who failed to confess regularly: "Besides, that decretal was not issued for the negligent but against the negligent" (189).

by the two.⁹⁹ Confession, constantly aware of death and stemming from the Church, bespeaks urgency and accountability, both of which are matters central to the Last Judgment.¹⁰⁰ This is primarily evident in an individual's vulnerability, which includes the soul's vulnerability addressed by penitential practice and also one's vulnerability to her or his confessor. The sacramental process of penance (and auricular confession in particular) intersects significantly with apocalypticism as it anticipates an End and underscores religious authority. Nevertheless, apocalypticism can be constructed from a number of different perspectives, as Curtis Bostick reminds us, and it can also be geared toward the reform of the Church or the supplanting of religious institutions or practices.¹⁰¹ The conflict is readily apparent in an age when Wycliffism appears to chip away at the Church's formalized penitential practice.¹⁰²

Late-medieval Christians must ask then, can anyone in this world be trusted with one's most compromising secrets? In a less-than-favorable but still realistic construction of clerical power, the power afforded in religious terms and that promises spiritual benefits may increase the risk of social harm. Then again, from another standpoint, can anyone afford *not* to share such secrets and become absolved before it is too late? Is penitential practice changing too much, or is it not changing enough or in the right ways? All of these concerns are very real as individuals are confronted with eternal

⁹⁹ A thorough survey of secondary literature is provided by Masha Raskolnikov in her "Confessional Literature, Vernacular Psychology, and the History of the Self in Middle English" (especially pages 4-12).

¹⁰⁰ Recent studies by Cornett, Little, and Lochrie (*Covert Operations*) have variously traced the uniqueness of applications of confessional practice made in late-medieval England. For a sense of just some of the modern works finding meaning in the long history of Christian penitential practice, see (in addition to Poschmann, cited above) Anciaux and (more recently) Kidder.

¹⁰¹ Again, see Bostick's fruitful "tripartite taxonomy": apocalypticism can be usefully if broadly categorized into the accommodative, the reformist, and the subversive (15-16).

¹⁰² For a sketch of recent scholarship on Wyclif and those affiliated with him, and those accused of following him, see the introduction to Hornbeck, Lahey, and Somerset's recent *Wycliffite Spirituality* volume.

consequences and a fleeting world. And the broad classifications of medieval apocalypticism accounted for by Bostick can help us to understand these implications for power in confession. In particular, confession necessarily has implications for individuals' autonomy and for the clerics' power. And such various expressions of apocalyptic engagement may be subject to what Anna Lewis identifies as the "doctrinal flexibility" of the period.¹⁰³ The flexibility and the rhetorical facility with which meaning can be argued are especially important as confession is a conspicuous center of religious activity and of speech as well as a source of individual and social obligations for everyone.

Confession seeks to highlight the wrongs encountered in life, to make sense of an unfathomable amount of data. In the terms laid out by Chaucer's Parson, "every idle word" (X.157) should be accounted for; one is responsible for every small deed done.¹⁰⁴ Confession is a crucial part of this accounting for words and deeds. A wide variety of late-medieval English texts attest to this strong concern with cautious confessional speech, to the concern that words uttered aloud (even in confidence) have very real consequences. Confession, grounded in the repeated need for penance and the imminence of an end, takes on apocalyptic resonance as it connotes urgency and as it creates a moment and a space in which a penitent must be committed, honest, and forthcoming. Confession

¹⁰³Lewis explains, "The doctrinal flexibility of [certain works tied to Wycliffism] suggests that the boundaries between heterodoxy and orthodoxy had yet to be tightly drawn and points to the complexity of religious belief in the later Middle Ages" ("Rethinking the Lollardy of the *Lucidarie*," 210). Furthermore, J. Patrick Hornbeck summarizes "recent scholarly consensus" thus: "the notions of a monolithic Lollard movement and a linear dissemination of heterodox views from the academic to the popular context are vastly oversimplified, if not in fact simply inaccurate" (196).

¹⁰⁴ For the purposes of this study, I simply focus on the invocation of idle words as one widely invoked form of perceived wrong and as evidence of religion-grounded conflict. However, presenting a challenging and nuanced configuration of "idleness" with regard to Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, Adin Esther Lears suggests that idle talk may in some cases be seen as "confessional" while not necessarily "passive or unproductive" (207).

brings to bear a seemingly inexhaustible theology and may be seen as the ordering and application of countless theological teachings.¹⁰⁵ In true scholastic form, it becomes a matter of intense and detailed textual discussion. Again, the possibilities of its subject matter are endless. Confessional discourse, in its ability to put one on the spot, and in its measuring against perfection and completion, gains importance in an ending age. It represents scrutiny and inquiry that will not stop until the end of time. The reminder of the end of an age highlights that penitential practice should be a constant focus, even a mode that one should seek to assume.¹⁰⁶ Confessional engagement therefore requires first and foremost purposefulness of speech. And it makes this requirement even as individuals sense that they can never be purposeful and aware enough.

So what form(s) can a confessional engagement take? Confessional practice may mirror evils, and can be seen as a way of indicating—if selectively—prevalent sins. Furthermore, confession is uniquely equipped to address perceived evils that emerge within a given culture. The material or content of confession—that which is confessed—is necessarily variable. But beyond this, as many scholars have argued, confession has been observed to change with regard to form and response as well as to content.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ On the development of practices related to penance, Henrietta Leyser, drawing on Anglo-Norman sources, maintains the strain of apocalyptic urgency established prior to the fourteenth-century environment with which my study is primarily concerned:

Apocalyptic anxieties added urgency to the business of saving souls. From the early days of the church knowledge of the Lord's Prayer had been seen as fundamental for salvation. The Gospels themselves provided two versions of the prayer (Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4), but the seven petitions of Matthew's version, as opposed to the five of Luke's, gave added scope for heptamerologies, the seven-ness of things so beloved by medieval theologians, and it was this version which ultimately prevailed. Thus for Robert Grosseteste and his circle the 7 petitions could be aligned with the 7 deadly sins, the 7 virtues, and the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit. (9)

¹⁰⁶ Studies positing a confessional mode as such include Peter Brooks' *Troubling Confessions* as well as Thomas Docherty's recent *Confessions: The Philosophy of Transparency*.

¹⁰⁷ For a few studies exploring the development of penitential practice within late medieval England, see Lochrie (*Covert Operations*), Little, Cornett, Curry Woods and Copeland, and Haren, as well as *Handling Sin*, the influential collection edited by Biller and Minnis.

Concern over the stability of practice emerges in treatments of confession in the *Canterbury Tales*. This applies to the pilgrim Friar, to the Summoner's fictional Friar, to the Pardoner claiming to absolve, and of course to the Parson. The malleability of confessional practice helps us to understand the instability in the period. Significant conditions include many of those already treated in this study: class mobility after the Plague, various anticlerical and interclerical movements, Wycliffism, as well as various class-related changes, which can lead to a perception of increased sin or of novel sins. While social change or new ideas do not seem at first glance central to confession, confession does adapt to changing cultural conditions. Oddly enough, the lateness (again, the sense that the end of time can possibly arrive very soon) suggested by developments within penitential practice seems to run parallel to other long-brewing phenomena in medieval England—particularly with regard to conflicts in clerical authority, as I have argued in my second chapter.¹⁰⁸ As penitential practices are fine-tuned, overhauled, minimized, or resisted (all with implications for individuals and for the Church), the ground of penance is less stable.

Past, Present, and Proximity to the End

All actions done in the name of confession heighten an awareness of last things and add to the various forms of social instability that are read in apocalyptic terms. In particular, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the confession of Gawain directly after he receives the girdle shows the strong awareness of death and of Last Judgment promoted by confession:

Syþen cheuely to þe chapel choses he þe waye,

¹⁰⁸ W.A. Pantin in his *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* aligns the trajectory of post-Lateran IV confession with that of interclerical conflict (156-157).

Preuély aproched to a prest and prayed hym þere
 Þat he wolde lyste his lyf and lern hym better
 How his sawle shulde be saued when he schuld seye heþen.
 Pere he schrof hym schyrly and schewed his mysdedez,
 Of þe more and þe mynne, and merci besechez,
 And of absolucioun he on þe segge calles;
 And he asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene
 As domezday schulde haf ben diȝt on þe morn. (1876-84)

[Then he makes his way first of all to the chapel, approached a priest in private and asked him there if he would hear his confession and teach him better how his soul should be saved when he should pass away. He made a clean confession there and revealed his sins, the greater and the lesser, and begs for forgiveness, and asks the man [i.e. the priest] for absolution; and he absolved him reliably and made him as clean as if doomsday had been appointed on the next day. (Trans. Andrew and Waldron)]

The words of the confession are hidden from the reader, but the fact of the confession cannot be missed. Moving from leave-taking in the previous lines into confession, into the merry-making of the lines that follow these, confession is to be contrasted with publicly conspicuous practice:

And syþen he mace hym as mery among þe fre ladyes,
 With comlych caroles and alle kynnes joye,
 As neuer he did bot þat daye,.... (1885-7)

[And then he makes himself as cheerful among the noble ladies, with fine ring-dances and all kinds of joy, as he never did except on that day,....

(Trans. Andrew and Waldron)]

And disagreements regarding confession frequently stem from the visible nature of these practices (as with matters of authority noted in the previous chapter).¹⁰⁹ The Pearl-poet in writing *Gawain*, even as he makes no strong pronouncements on confessional practice, still suggests a struggle to see deeper meaning in the practice. Nicholas Watson in his “The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian” situates the theology undergirding *Gawain* within what is made more explicit in *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Clannesse*. As Watson shows, considered with other works in the manuscript, the ethic of confession in *Gawain* calls to mind the memory of a divine covenant, perhaps refracted through the memory of the narrator.¹¹⁰ Along these lines Watson has argued for an ethic of popular theology within *Gawain*. With reference to *Patience*, Watson constructs a theology in very accessible terms.

Like its predecessors in the manuscript, *Patience* shows how easily God forgives those who do penance, how he must be obeyed, and how his ways

¹⁰⁹ Robert Goltra and others go so far as to deem the confession invalid (see Goltra 9-12 and, for a generous yet compressed bibliographic sampling, Wasserman and Purdon 662n11, as well as the notes to Vantuono’s edition (See 221-23 for his notes for lines 1876-84)). The circumstances and brevity with which this confession is presented may speak to its orderliness or its properly observed confidentiality may certainly be constructed to suggest procedural incompleteness or what Charles Sleeth calls “a strangely unemotional manner” (175). To shift the ground of confession further in the work, Sleeth reads the chapel as part of a faery-world “deception” (178). Ann Astell, not as inclined as most readers to isolate the confessional scenes in her treatment of penance in the work (see her *Political Allegory* 191n88), instead reads the poem as more systematically expressing penitential need toward the end of Richard’s reign (117-137).

¹¹⁰ Watson emphasizes the covenantal has he works out the theology:

The God revealed in *Pearl* takes no notice of how hard individuals have labored, only of the ‘couenant’ (562) he established with them through the sacerdotal machinery of baptism, confession, penance and mass: a covenant by means of which those who live below the sphere of the ‘spotty’ moon, ‘mokke and mul’ though they are (1070, 905), can attain miraculously to the ‘wemlez, clene and clere’ pearl of salvation, so pure and precious that it resembles ‘[th]e reme of heuenesse clere (737, 735). (“The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian” 304-305)

(like his sense of humour, (443-78)) are strange. What it adds to its poetic partners is this implicitly self-deprecating picture of a prophet of wrath, who himself makes as great a demand on the divine patience as anyone because he has failed to learn the simple moral lesson he must preach.” (“The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian” 310).

When Gawain confesses after receiving garter, he seems to assume ease of forgiveness. This confession, understood by some to be questionable and unorthodox, on its face still illustrates some popular understanding of a need for penance.¹¹¹ This particular confession, elevated in importance as it is gauged against impending last Judgment, thus seems (if we concede its efficacy) all the more adequate if likelier death could come soon.¹¹² The story, which must be told here from a considerable distance in time, can be seen to highlight the seeming lateness of the apocalypse: preparation for an End can seem extreme and its claims hyperbolic only in the past, as we have certainty that it did not arrive.

As I have suggested, instances of confession and apocalypticism set in the past such as those apparent in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* still connect with other instances of confession and apocalypticism in late-medieval culture. And this holds true even if the conversations about confession often diverge, often have very different aims.¹¹³ The frequently polarized views of confession (and more broadly, penance) still

¹¹¹ Assuming a sort of middle ground between those who have been troubled by the confession and those who situate it within a logic defined by the poem itself, Mary Braswell maintains that “the narrator is decidedly tongue-in-cheek” at this juncture (97). Even Braswell’s construction presupposes some keen awareness of details of confession.

¹¹² As Ad Putter suggests, the impending meeting with the Green Knight may add an earthly resonance of judgment in this passage (*Introduction* 94).

¹¹³ The presumed divide between scholasticism-shaped texts and other texts is articulated by Lee Patterson: “Indeed, although scholastic sacramentalism made its way into clerical confessional manuals it found almost no presence in the vernacular works of fourteenth-century England” (375).

coexist.¹¹⁴ The Church argued variously for the correctness and urgency of confessional practice. The proliferation of texts arguing this confession and urgency serve as crucial (if conflicted) reference points for this practice required of everyone.

Such preoccupation with confession can be marked in the approaches to penance extant in penitential manuals and related literature.¹¹⁵ For example, the *Manipulus Curatorum* (*Handbook for Curates*) of Guido of Monte Rochen, which circulates widely in Western Europe and persists long after its early fourteenth century composition¹¹⁶ in Spain, acknowledges patristic divergences in confessional teaching, divergences that translate into contemporary differences. Guido's work succeeds in framing conflict so that future generations can embrace the theology of confession productively, but it also maps past disagreement. Given the variance in treatments of confession, crucial meaning would be missed if one fails to examine penitential practice in terms of survival, tradition, and stability. With one eye on practical theology and the other always on tradition, Guido maintains that the confession "was instituted in the new law by Christ" (183). Confession, as a necessary component and mechanism within penance, as a connector to institutions of power old and new, is here shown to address wrongs in practical terms. The roles of confessor and penitent are in considerable flux, as are methods of observation, surveillance, inquiry, even resistance. From a human perspective, confessional engagement (just like apocalyptic engagement) seeks a moving and/or fuzzy target. As the implications of confession for the individual, for itself as part of the

¹¹⁴ Hornbeck is careful to note confessional manuals among "points of contact between scholastic thought and local practice" in late-medieval England (36).

¹¹⁵ For an account of how the definition and study of literature of pastoral care was largely developed by the scholar Leonard Boyle, see Joseph Goering's "Leonard E. Boyle and the Invention of Pastoralia."

¹¹⁶ Thayer suggests a date of 1333 ("Support for Preaching" 123).

institution of penance, and for the institutional Church are brought to bear, it gets less stable and fuzzier for individuals.

Personal and Impersonal

However, individuals engaging with confession in the Middle Ages (as now) show conflicted meanings as it is read from multiple perspectives. Debates concerning change and continuity have been sketched out in various ways in recent scholarship. Abigail Firey suggests in the introduction to her recent edited *New History of Penance* a modified understanding of the sacrament, particularly as it developed in the Middle Ages:

The homey image of private confession, with the confessant and confessor in quiet colloquy, heads bend together, must be juxtaposed to that most impersonal, bureaucratic, centralized, and juridical of penitential institutions, the Apostolic Penitentiary of the Roman Catholic Church, where modern researches tread delicately around the seal of confession in order to help us understand how internationalized the standards and expectations for resolution of individual and particular penitential needs had become after the 12th century. (6)

These two poles both contribute to the reality of penance by the later Middle Ages.

These complications of confession effectively extend its reach. As confessional practice has developed by this period, it is a center of secrecy, vulnerability, and exposure.

Furthermore, it extended beyond the formal confessional act itself, which was already supposed to account for all human activity.

Other forms of social control and exposure within a religiously informed culture may just as easily assume functions like those of the official sacrament, as appears in the social power assumed by Chaucer's Pardoner and the Friar's summoner character. Since rubrics for confession necessarily cast a wide net and since speech itself can in so many ways be categorized as sin, confessional discourse indeed must accommodate any area of speech. Its roots are in less literate times but time in which speech assumed a wide range of functions and possibilities. As Peter Brooks puts it, "Confession as we know it originates in an oral culture, as a private verbal exchange that possesses mystery and power" (95). And as Susan Phillips has illustrated, confession comprises an important part of late-medieval culture, affecting (and affected by) a wide variety of speech practices (121). Confession opens one up to scrutiny to which one is otherwise not subjected, suggesting that any bit of information may be requested and required.¹¹⁷ The parsing of detail by confessors and those directing confessors translates to greater exposure for the penitent.

Confessing sins in great detail, after all, offers far less risk in the face of death and the apocalypse than not confessing does. Even in a work such as Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, where love-related confession may seem innocuous, confession-minded detail-hunting proves important. Even here the term *confession* is capacious and carries resonances of awareness of an end, deeply personal communication, copious detail, and required practice. Its ambiguity, its seeming replication, and its bleeding-over into other

¹¹⁷ This preoccupation with evil as marked by speech has been noted by Edwin Craun (*Lies, Slander, and Obscenity*) as well as by Sandy Bardsley, who situates preoccupation with speech-sins within a culture heavily influenced by Lateran IV:

Among these closely scrutinized and annotated sins were the Sins of the Tongue, regularly granted a chapter or more in the expansive and encyclopedic pastoral manuscripts that proliferated starting in the early thirteenth century. In England, the Church enforced its jurisdiction over speech not only from the pulpit and confessional but also by means of its courts. (146)

practices serve not to weaken it but to generally suggest a feared and meticulously stylized set of practices. Confessional protocols look ahead to behavior but are also based on centuries of observed behavior and anecdotal evidence. Individuals making the strongest case for official confessional practice appeal to the sense of a long tradition and to the necessity of continuity until one's end.

As time passes, too, confessional practices adapt to new cultural problems and perceived trends in sins. Thus priests must adapt to a number of cultural circumstances, as is apparent when Guido states, "Truly the priest should vary his questions according to the variety of those confessing" (235). Confession assumes a basic rhetorical form and assumes that the confessor is in power, but given this structure much of this form can be flexed, adapted to circumstances. The term *confessio* as it appears in the title of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* may suggest different shades of meaning and may be seen to connect with different objects of confession but in multiple senses suggests vulnerability, as Ardis Butterfield points out:

Translated as "The Lover's Confession" or equally "The Confession of the Lover" it can mean either a confession made by the lover, or one made about the lover. Even before we begin reading, then, we might be led to wonder whether the confession will be direct or indirect, in the first person or the third person, within the lover's control or at the lover's expense. Thinking about the nature of confession provides a further sense of potential ambiguity. The lover (whether directly or indirectly) could be making a simple admission that he is a lover (this is what being a lover is like); on the other hand (more enticingly) he might be about to express

something shameful or scandalous about being a lover. (“*Confessio Amantis* and the French Tradition” 165)

The *Confessio* presents an agglomeration of knowledge within a confessional framework.¹¹⁸ Peck in his introduction to the *Confessio* in his first volume connects confession and narrative:

Confession nurses by healing the cracks in the psyche which have come about through the degenerative anxieties of time and careless beholding.

The one confessing must find a narrative for his chaotic behavior, a “tale” that can be read and weighed by the interrogator. (7)

And even as, as Edwin Craun has shown, some of the corrective theological edge of orthodox auricular confession has been stripped away in key parts of the *Confessio*, it presents an intimacy and a long engagement with narrative details that encompass many areas of life.¹¹⁹ And in the tension it creates regarding what exactly is to be confessed, it proves to be malleable and to be capable of connecting to just about anything.

Confession attaches itself to various other discourses and practices, managing to control people even as it is flexible. The all-subsuming nature of confession becomes apparent in several other vernacular texts, particularly in the social implications I sketch out in Chaucer below. Confession and secrecy are inextricably linked and both deeply social, particularly as confession becomes increasingly formalized after Lateran IV and as

¹¹⁸ For Marjorie Curry Woods and Rita Copeland (in their “Classroom and Confession”), “Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* suggests how much classroom and confessional were bound up in medieval mentalities” (377).

¹¹⁹ Craun notes, in his examination of the *Confessio*’s tales of Constance and of Demetrius and Perseus, “Absent throughout the confessional sequence is the catechists’ usual way of claiming authority for his knowledge of verbal sin: the ‘sentence’ with its appeal to biblical texts, to a monastic exemplar like St. Bernard or to a Paris master like Thomas Aquinas” (*Lies, Slander and Obscenity* 153).

Pecham's Syllabus of 1281 includes penance in its program of lay education.¹²⁰ As Karma Lochrie reminds us, "Secrecy is never a solitary activity" (*Covert Operations* 3)¹²¹ Secrecy, in some cases necessary to confession and protected within its promise of confidentiality, nevertheless always bespeaks fear of revelation, the breaking of confidentiality.¹²² Confession, situated as a part of the still-developing sacrament of penance, is a practice that adapts to circumstances.¹²³ But it also highlights the very terms of evil by which impending doom is seen. Pierre Payer's work on the development of confessional literature shows how some of this foundation was laid: the rich literature from (roughly) 1150-1300 provided various foundations, various points of departure in theological discourse about penance.¹²⁴ Payer's assertion that the literature of penance of that earlier period is markedly new suggests a changing engagement with confessional

¹²⁰ The Pecham Syllabus marks an important post-Lateran IV development in England, particularly in as it requires teaching of the sacraments. For a concise contextualization of Pecham's Lambeth Constitutions of 1281, see Stephen Lahey's *John Wyclif* (10). For an outline of its components, see Jones 408-410.

¹²¹ Lochrie elaborates on this, beginning by quoting a phrase from Kim Lane Scheppele's *Legal Secrets*, 14: "'Secrets are always located in particular social contexts,' including the context of the medievalist and the Middle Ages, though it may not always seem particularly social" (*Covert Operations* 3-4).

¹²² Annemarie Kidder offers this sketch of how confidentiality was widely understood to work:

First, confession was to take place in private at every stage, and so were the acts of penance. Unlike in the public penitential practices up to the fifth century, there was no *exomologesis* or corporate knowledge of the sins committed and the congregation as a whole was not involved in the process. Even though the nature of some of the penance precluded secrecy, as in the case of prescribed fasting or excommunication, the penitential process itself leading up to the penitent's restoration to the church assemble and to the end of the discipline was kept private. (29)

¹²³ As Lochrie further maintains, "If confession was itself a hegemonic discourse of the Middle Ages, it was clearly a flexible one that could adopt various forms and adapt to various purposes in the literary texts that drew upon it."

¹²⁴ Payer situates confessional changes within a broader program of reform:

Lateran IV marked the culmination of earlier pastoral concerns and gave impetus to widespread pastoral renewal in the thirteenth century. It went some way in advancing the reform in faith and morals that was envisaged by Pope Innocent III in his letter of convocation, "to uproot vices and plant virtues, to correct excesses and reform morals, to eliminate heresies and strengthen the faith." This was initiated by mounting a frontal attack on heresy, by encouraging the education of the parish clergy, and by streamlining ecclesiastical disciplinary rules, for example by paring down the consanguinity rules from the unwieldy seventh degree of relationship to the fourth degree. The provision likely having the greatest effect on both clergy and laity and on the life of the Church generally was the well-known twenty-first canon requiring all Christians of both sexes once they had reached the age of reason to confess their sins at least once a year. (16)

practice precipitated by those texts. It, too, begins to account for diverging traditions and trajectories of penitential practice. To mark one general area of social change addressed through penance, sexual activity was marked as a particular site of corruption to be addressed through penance.¹²⁵ The pastoral literature over generations provides layers of textual responses to perceived change and plenty of fodder for those looking for change and signs of evil.¹²⁶

This literature continues to be influential into the late fourteenth century and accounts for divergence in penitential practice and for an undercutting of the perception that penitential (and specifically confessional) practice is standardized, uniform. This is because confessional literature necessitates more confessional literature.¹²⁷ This literature has effects on less prosaic texts as well. As Nick Gray illustrates, Langland in *Piers* seems familiar with some confessional literature (60). And the Parson's Tale, which I consider in more detail below, on its surface pushes for confessional regularity but in practice confession may not work so neatly. Whether or not it fits neat conceptions of confessional practice is but one concern; another is how popular it is and how much individuals are willing to participate in it frequently. Recent scholarship has complicated our understanding of Chaucer's points of reference regarding penitential matters. Henry Ansgar Kelly has recently suggested that Chaucer was exposed to not just those by

¹²⁵This is the focus of Payer's study. Elizabeth B. Keiser also examines how the priest-prescribed ethos of abstinence and moderation applied to sexual activity within confessional practice in the late Middle Ages (60-63).

¹²⁶Regarding the long development in the Western Church in the later Middle Ages to make lay and clergy alike identify and classify sins, see Tentler, 52-53.

¹²⁷ On the variety of extant fourteenth works and on their functions, see scholars ranging in emphasis from Payer to Kelly. See, too, Michael Haren, who examines at length the *Memoriale Presbiterorum* as "exclusively devoted to confessional technique" and as "a thoughtful application of the continental canonical tradition to the mid-fourteenth-century English scene by a puritanical though sensitive observer" (*Sin and Society in Fourteenth-Century England* 1). And on the Dominicans' dominance (more so than Franciscans) in penitential literature, see Fleming, *An Introduction to the Franciscan Literature*, 12.

Raymond of Peñafort and William Peraldus but also of “later developments” (239), teachings consistent with if not traceable to John Burgh’s *Pupilla oculi* and William Lyndwood’s *Provinciale*. What emerges in these later traditions, according to Kelly, is “a sense of moderation and common sense...in deciding the fine points of law and punishment at the close of the Middle Ages. Those qualities undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of frequent confession in the 14th century” (266). In principle, penance can be seen as aiming for stability in society and within the church, as well as the strengthening and restoration of the individual.

As it strengthens and restores, confession may function as a check against assumed instability. Instability in the apocalyptic moment may make confession more difficult, may show the pervasiveness of out-of-control sins. The confessions uttered by the sins in Passus 5 of the B-version of *Piers Plowman* bear this out. As is apparent in the mention of Roberd at the end of the cardinal sins’ confessions in this passus, confession and Doomsday are clearly connected., even if the exact temporal distance between the two is uncertain. Alongside the sins’ confessions, Roberd the Robber’s appeal shows this awareness of Doomsday:

But for thi muchel mercy mitigacion I biseche:

Dampne me noght at Domesday for that I dide so ille!” (B.5.470-471)

[But for your bounteous mercy I ask for mitigation: damn me not at

Doomsday for that I did so ill!”]

Confession addresses the prospect of judgment, indeed makes judgment comprehensible in worldly terms. And, again, death (typically more explicitly or intuitively tied with penance than Doomsday is) proves as a crucial starting point for seeing the end of an age

in worldly and tangible terms. The fact that death's inevitability and its implications for the body are invoked to penitential ends illustrate how central confessional discourse is to an individual's daily experience. In fact, various reference points from daily life add layers of meaning to confession in this period.

Frames of Confession

Various evocative metaphors for confession long predate this period and are well established in late-medieval England, and this variety of metaphors gives confessional practice much of its power. Composed slightly earlier than the period central to this study, the influential and textually diffuse poem *Prik of Conscience*, which connects one's death-day with the Day of Judgment in application to the individual soul, echoes the importance that had been afforded to penitential practice and specifically to auricular confession. In the *Prik of Conscience*, the sacrament of penance is stressed repeatedly in the discussion of the dreads of death.

For in heven may no soule be sene
 Tyl hitte of synne be clenud clene
 With penaunce here as clerkus wote
 Or in purgatory wyth fyre hote.

And soules that are clenud here
 With almesdede and penaunce sere
 Aungelles shul wysse hem the way

To heaven blys that lastuth ay. (III. 878-85, Morey ed.)

[For in heaven may no soul be seen till it is cleansed clean of sin with penance here as clerks have known or in purgatory with hot fire. And

soules that are cleansed here with almsdeeds and much penance angels
shall make known to them the way to heavenly bliss that lasts forever.]

Penitential practice in general and confession in particular are preparatory, and anticipatory. They cleanse endemic filth. As Gawain is made “clene” (1883), so are all the penitent. And in *Clannesse*, receiving penance is said to make one as pure as a pearl (1121-32). As I illustrated in my first chapter, death and the apocalypse—both related in their assumption of finality and their implications for the individual on earth—are both fueled by fear and hope. Fear and hope, both motivators, are enhanced by images such as those of fire, and penance is also made more vivid by analogy to the body.

To step back farther yet, the three main conceptual schemas of penance already present in early medieval Celtic penitentials—bodily health, “judgment and justice,” and “life-pilgrimage”—all underscore the apocalyptic (Connolly 164).¹²⁸ Yet confession is even more conceptually complicated and has attracted such a wide variety of metaphors and abstractions that in the thirteenth century¹²⁹ Robert Grosseteste in his treatise *Quoniam Cogitatio* assembles the following characterizations of confession:

So, confession is . . . the vomiting up (*euomitio*) of rottenness and poison;
the fulfillment (*effectus*) and demonstration (*ostensio*) of humility; the
removal (*ablatio*) of the veil that hides God from us; the concealment
(*absconsio*) of sin from the eyes of God; the coming forth (*processio*),

¹²⁸ Connolly explains his taxonomy:

1) The first symbol is that of disease and wholeness where sin is understood as illness, penance as curative and the confessor as healer or physician of souls. 2) The second is that of judgement and justice where sin is considered as offence, penance as reparation and the confessor as merciful judge or *animadversor*. 3) The third is the image of life-pilgrimage and suffering. Here sin is seen as a wandering from the right path, penance thus becomes re-orientation and the confessor is portrayed as a fellow-traveller, fellow-sufferer or *anamchara* [“soul friend”]. (164)

¹²⁹ F.A.C. Mantello and Joseph Goering propose an approximate composition date of 1240 (353).

with Lazarus, from the tomb; and a bringing forth (*deductio*) unto the eternal confession of God's praise. [Confession] is the revelation (*manifestatio*) that there is truth in us, the coming back (*reditio*) to God, the obtaining (*impetratio*) of forgiveness, the refuting (*euacuatio*) of the devil's accusation, the growing sweet (*indulcoratio*) of God, and the gathering up again (*recollectio*) of us from dissipation to wholeness. (qtd. in Mantello and Goering 343; translation, ellipsis, brackets, and parentheses theirs)

Connected to the many abstractions are the bodily metaphor of vomiting and other appeals to the physical. It is through the body that the work of the confessor—by analogy to medicine—is professionalized and spelled out in specific terms.

The health model already underscored in the mid-seventh-century *Penitential of Cummean* in particular communicates soul-health in very tangible terms, as is immediately clear.¹³⁰

Here begins the Prologue of the health-giving medicine of souls. As we are about to tell of the remedies of wounds according to the determinations of the earlier fathers, of sacred utterance to thee, my most faithful brother, first we shall indicate the treatments by the method of an abridgment.
(Trans. McNeill 99)

This parallel between soul-health and body-health continues to develop through Lateran IV's Canon 21, *Omnis utriusque sexus*. Leonard Boyle presents some implications of the health model:

¹³⁰ Dated by McNeill to c.650.

When dealing with souls, the Council said, the confessor should know them as well as any competent medical doctor is presumed to know the bodies he treats for injuries or illnesses. The confessor should not only be able to assign a suitable penance to penitents but just as a doctor does in the case of his patients, should be in a position also to suggest to the penitent just what is the cause of his or her trouble, and how best to prevent its recurrence. If, on his or her side, the penitent had to confess all sins as completely as possible, the priest for his part had to be as discreet and understanding as any doctor, diligently probing the penitent's character and background in addition to the circumstances of each sin. (32)¹³¹

Soul-care, thus professionalized, makes the layperson by definition unqualified and inexpert. If one concedes that physicians can achieve better results than one caring for oneself, then how much more the priest must be uniquely competent regarding the care of the soul.

Parallel to the very individual accountability and vulnerability required in apocalyptic Christianity, this model renders confession in very personal terms. This notion of healing, in its mapping of sin-countering mechanisms onto the body, underscores individual needs and the potential for continuance of sin to compound its damages if left untreated. Katherine Little's reading of Hawkin's confession in *Piers Plowman* further nuances these implications for healing and problematizes reform:

¹³¹ As Boyle further suggests, "There was nothing startlingly new in this new approach: the concept of *medicus animarum* was an old and indeed hackneyed one. What makes the approach important in the history of the *cura animarum* and of pastoralia is that this is the first time that the precise role of the confessor in relation to the penitent was authoritatively set before the church as a whole. Now, officially, the confessor must not only be a dispenser of penances but also a counsellor of souls" (32). See, too, Lochrie and Payer, as they assert the pervasiveness of the health model in the later Middle Ages.

Certainly Hawkin's confession emphasizes not so much the details of the sins, although it also relies on traditional accounts of the seven capital sins, as the process of recognition itself for everyone involved. This emphasis is clear in the way in which both Hawkin and the dreamer "take heed" (13.315, 318); in the dreamer's watching, "waitede wisloker" (13.342); and in perceiving, "Pacience parceyved" (13.354). In this second sequence, confession is the process by which one becomes aware of one's sins and sorrows for them, and although this process is certainly meant to reform the penitent (Hawkin wishes that he had never been born at the end of passus 14), that reform does not include the social world that he inhabits. Indeed, the dreamer awakes before a contrite (and absolved) Hawkin returns to the community. (26-27)

In Little's terms, the social corruption so often read as pessimistic within an apocalyptic scheme can still be accounted for even as individuals—even many of them—may be reformed. Reform, in fact, very often is defined by difference from the outside social world. This concern over a corrupt and even dying world is necessarily apocalyptic.

And as this is considered as connected to health, this is not to say that the health narrative resists the apocalyptic. Rather, it points to the discourses of the body, to centers of meaning that must also be affected by the apocalyptic, even as they fall outside the present study. Confession, thus affecting the individual in ways seen as parallel to health concerns, is seen as affecting people on the most intimate level and addresses spiritual pains or discomforts that work on their own inexplicable-to-humans terms. And although prophecy typically allows for negative terms of a covenant to be withdrawn, the threat of

a negative outcome must be always taken seriously.¹³² The apocalyptic, again, resists being disproven. And confession, like the Last Judgment whose hour is unknown, may be seen to build its layers of meaning because of uncertainty and ignorance: more and more persons are compelled to look for an end, to grasp for certain meaning.

Confession, as it requires repeated action while not knowing an exact end, psychologically mirrors apocalyptic mis-guessing. And, as time progresses, more and more cultural forms—including those of penitential practice—magnetically assume apocalyptic meaning.¹³³ The confessional assumption of impending judgment also has rich cultural resonances traceable to antiquity and developed already in the early Middle Ages, provides a font of meaning in later centuries. As Peter Brown has noted, “In the Christian imagination, the moment of death was an exact reflection, in miniature, of the terror of the last Judgment” (5).¹³⁴ However, in the moment, judgment seems absolute, irrevocable, and representative of monolithic Christendom. Confession emerges as a step in making oneself right with the Church and with God. Contrarily, it marks a step away from the world. Positioning an individual from the outside world thus provides a general impetus for introspection to identify evil that must be remedied. One’s usual life-patterns

¹³² This sense of withdrawal, negated or downplayed in some of the most vociferous forms of Christian apocalypticism referencing John, remains an important part of prophecy for many, particularly in late-medieval England for Gower.

¹³³ On the magnetic quality of apocalypticism, see McGinn’s “John’s Apocalypse and the Apocalyptic Mentality” (16).

¹³⁴ Brown continues, building on the work of Frederick Paxton, finding especially useful Paxton’s sense of the “liminal”:

Theologians might be able to keep the ‘particular judgment’ of the soul, after death, separate in their minds from the general Last Judgment of all resurrected souls and bodies at the end of time. But the fact that both were experienced as moments of intense and perilous ‘liminality’ telescoped the two judgments in the minds of believers. Both caught the individual at a dangerous time, stripped of all customary forms of definition: stripped of the body and of an entire social persona by death; rejoined to a body, but not yet attached to a society at the moment of the resurrection, the human person waited in a state of painful depletion before the throne of Christ (“Amnesty, Penance, and the Afterlife” 45, citing Paxton 6).

and environment must be resisted. Confession addresses and confronts evil deeds, practices deemed to be rooted in sin, as is especially apparent in the stated purposes in manuals. However, it also represents a discourse that is claimed by authors and that indeed can be claimed by individual confessing sinners.¹³⁵

To be sure, confessional practice is challenging to priests in ways that it is not to laypersons. And this tremendous pressure on priests has built up over centuries of penitential regulation and justification, again through the increased parsing of detail about how to care for souls.¹³⁶ In closing out his discussion of penance, Robert Mannyng of Brunne in his early fourteenth-century *Handlyng Synne*¹³⁷ explains how penance counters the demonic: "...For y shal telle þer of more / At shryfte whan y come þore. / God 3yue me grace so to telle / To shame alle þe fendes of helle"¹³⁸ Notably, Mannyng points to the judgment to which the less-than-careful priest is subject:

Pe prest wote neure what he menes

Pat for lytel curseþ hys parysshenes.

¹³⁵ With reference to confession within the *Canterbury Tales*, Jerry Root maintains that "the discourse of confession makes possible the manipulation of subjectivity" (102). Regarding the extent to which confession may entail power for the penitent, see Lee Patterson's *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, Katherine Little's *Confession and Resistance*, Masha Raskolnikov's *Body Against Soul*, and Robyn Malo's recent "Penitential Discourse in Hoccleve's *Series*."

¹³⁶ The legalism naturally caused by parsed-out detail must be accounted for, even considering Craun's very useful generalization: "Despite prescribed models, the priest had considerable latitude (and power) in directing any confession" (*Lies, Slander, and Obscenity* 134).

¹³⁷ Mannyng's work is a hybrid translation and adaptation of the Anglo-Norman *Manuel des Péchés* (modern edition with French apparatus by Arnould), as discussed by Klaus Bitterling in his introduction to the modern edition of another text derivative of the Anglo-Norman *Manuel*, the Middle English *Of Shrifte and Penance* (Bitterling 15-16).

¹³⁸ As Boitani notes in *English Medieval Narrative*,

There is, however, a fairly sharp limit to *Handlyng Synne*'s realism: it is as colloquial and detailed as one could wish, yet it belongs in the history of Western mimesis to a pre-individual, pre-psychological stage. Its characters are types, not, in fact, characters. They never go beyond those gestures that define them as examples of certain ways of behaving. They are frozen into sketches by the author's deliberate (and declared) refusal to violate pryvetee. (25)

Nevertheless, the narrative components present in *Handlyng Synne* are seen by Curry Woods and Copeland to "offer the penitent a certain relief from the pervasive control of the penitential system itself, providing a kind of distraction through the appeal of narrative" (396).

Pat yche shepherd 3yfl̃ no gode kepe

Pat betechep̃ þe wlfe hys shepe.

At þe last acounte shal he mysfalle

Whan he shal answeere for hem alle. (10889-94).

[The priest never knows what he means, that for little he curses his parishioners. That each shepherd gives no good keep that puts the wolf in charge of his sheep. At the last account he shall find misfortune when he shall answer for them all.]

The stakes of ecclesiastical politics discussed in the previous chapter are in sharp contrast here, as clergy must fear the ultimate misfortune. Also, the difficult working-out of sin in the sacrament of confession prefigures final judgment. Thus heavy responsibilities fall on the priest. Clergy are to guard what they say. They are instructed to speak in certain ways, but they are also uniquely empowered to speak. Their speech is made conspicuous through confessional practice.¹³⁹

The requirement of confession works hand in hand with structures of ecclesiastical authority that were considered in my second chapter. This requirement and the ecclesiastical power grounding it both take on special meaning in an ending age. And, in terms articulated by Karma Lochrie, the very fact that the power is questioned shows how theological meaning may be seen as contested and contingent:

Why should confession to a priest be necessary, in other words, if a sinner felt sorrow in her heart for her sin? The priest's interventionist role in the process of forgiveness was at stake, and the coordination of the personal

¹³⁹ This connects with late-medieval thinking on the capacity to preach, as has been discussed by Murphy (*Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* 269ff), Minnis (see *Fallible Authors*), and Fletcher (*Preaching Politics, and Poetry*).

and institutional roles in confession became necessary (*Covert Operations* 27).

The priest, who is commanded to assure confidentiality and in this way to be socially neutral, nonetheless makes penance socially complicated. This is readily apparent in the complications regarding confession that emerge with regard to Chaucer's Parson's seemingly exhaustive treatment of confession and the Friar's assumed authority. This, too, may be seen in the Pardoner's scandalously assumed claim to absolution (VI.387). The restoration promised in penance—and, essentially, one's right standing—must be mediated by an authority figure, and the Pardoner is willing to assume that role. Challenges from different directions thus make the work of the priests contested and conspicuous.

In confessional practice, the conspicuousness of authority—just how visibly those in a confessor role make their power known—is but one factor contributing to confession's intensification of apocalypticism in this period. Scrutiny of such conspicuous authority and visible forms is also important. As Katherine Little has established, a demonstrable shift toward emphasis on the speaking subjects of confession is borne out by late-medieval vernacular texts.¹⁴⁰ To build on Little's point, the modeling of confessional discourse or the channeling of it to non-penitential ends all serve to destabilize penitential practice, to make it look irregular. And it may have marks of difference in the first place, given the individuality of the penitent and the distinctiveness of what she or he might disclose. The irregularity of confession, as

¹⁴⁰ Katherine Little makes an important distinction regarding the textual emphases observed around the turn of the fifteenth century: "In contrast, the vernacular treatises, such as *Jacob's Well* (c. 1400-25) and the *Boke of Penance* (late fourteenth century), detail what is expected of penitents themselves and in this way draw attention to how penitents will (56) confess, will become speaking subjects" (55-56).

evident in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*, is precisely where many late-medieval thinkers make inroads in their attempts to delegitimize Church authority. The friar character of *The Summoner's Tale* fails to give laypersons in contact with him the sort of care they might expect, if only by analogy to parish priests. This is most evident in the pilgrim Friar's light handling of confession suggested in the General Prologue. The conflict created by Chaucer regarding friars' penitential practice in fact makes confessional discourse appear less orderly and stable.¹⁴¹ As Jerry Root has observed, the problematizing of confession through the Friar challenges the authority by which confession has been established and continues to be dispensed in the *Tales*.¹⁴²

Confession and Religious Politics

And friars' competition with parish priests in the market for confession makes more confessions logistically possible but also is cited to add a layer of uncertainty to confessions heard by friars. The friars contribute to increased frequency of penitential activity. Confession, in prominent medieval understandings of the sacrament of penance, is not only supposed to be administered by any priest but by one's specific priest.¹⁴³ This concern is echoed in Guido's *Handbook*: "Although all priests have the keys, as has been said, yet not all have the matter, that is, the parishioners among whom they may exercise the use of the keys, but only those to whom the care of souls is regularly committed, who

¹⁴¹ On the apocalyptic resonances asserted with regard to friars, see Szittyá's *Antifraternal Tradition* as well as Dean's *World Grown Old*, 72-81. On Langland's illustration of the friars' debatable poverty and motivation for the care of souls (including confession), see Aers, *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination* 48-51.

¹⁴² To exemplify how power within confession may be shifted, John Wall suggests that even in the Parson's Tale, which seems a markedly clerical text, there might be a nudge toward lay authority: "...Chaucer's adaptation is significant. Raymond's work was a handbook for priests to help them hear confessions, whereas the *Parson's Tale* bears the mark of having been adapted for the lay penitent who is to make his confession" (189). Furthermore, Root's comparison of Parson and Friar is instructive: "The Friar, in fact, takes up the same position as the Parson on the importance of a controlled and legitimate use of the confessional word. However, the Friar's assertions, unlike the Parson's, are immediately and dramatically juxtaposed with other competing social and individual voices" (98).

¹⁴³ On controversies of sacramental authority and jurisdiction, see Lea (I.307-8).

have the use of the power with respect to those whose care is committed to them” (194). This sense of order posits a place for each layperson and may be seen to address the competition for penance in the late-medieval period.

And while turf wars between parish priests and friars are waged, others abandon entirely assumptions of the need for specialists in confession. The very sense of right and wrong required by orthodox penitential practice becomes complicated as Wycliffism circumvents and indeed inveighs against formalized penitential practice. And the confessing role of the priest is indeed contested in this period not only by Wycliffism but by friars as well.¹⁴⁴ Little further notes, “One of the defining characteristics of Lollardy is the rejection of auricular confession” (49).

This pronounced rejection that holds steady from Wyclif on though his followers speaks to the apocalyptic resonance with which confession is seen. Curtis Bostick paraphrases Wyclif’s *Cruciata*:

Especially in these dangerous days, conceivably the last days, the faithful must be on guard against the ‘*pseudopapas*’ and their accomplices, that is, the ‘monks, canons and friars’ [599, 15-19]. These abettors of the Antichrist and abusers of the sacrament of penance appeared in the pontificate of Innocent III (1198-1216) when Satan was loosed” (67).¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ The controversies of ecclesiastical legitimacy related to Wycliffites and those related to friars are not without their connections. In citing Henry Knighton and his reference to the antifraternal apocalypticism of William of Saint-Amour found within Knighton, Andrew Cole points out that “antifraternalism gets a new target—the Wycliffites” (35). Cole cites page 249 of the Martin’s edition of *Knighton’s Chronicle* for its Amourian reference, “which some have applied to the mendicant friars, but which better apply to those new people, the Lollards.” And while Wyclif projects friars as a form of apocalyptically significant evil, Szittyia maintains that Wyclif’s extreme construction of friars in *De Fratibus* has no deep theological structure: “Its purpose is rhetorical, not exegetical, insult, not interpretation” (*Antifraternal Tradition* 176). Wyclif, it should be noted, consistently challenges the confession obligated by both priests and friars (Rex 47).

¹⁴⁵ Bostick here cites key passages in 2:598, 599, 622.

Practically, too, Richard Rex, synthesizes *De blasphemia* chapters 8-11, *Triologus* IV.23-4, and *De eucharistia et penitentia* 329-43:

His emphasis on the importance and inscrutability of predestination renders the medieval practice of auricular confession almost redundant, and certainly far from compulsory (though he allows that it can be helpful in particular cases). Contrition alone can secure forgiveness, but only the elect can be truly contrite. There is no need for confession to a priest, because neither priests nor anyone else can tell who is predestined, and thus who is truly contrite; nor, even among the contrite, could they possibly know how guilty and how contrite they were. Only Christ could truly absolve, and therefore priestly absolution was a devilish and blasphemous presumption. Even when it is useful, confession can be made just as well to a layperson or to God. Wyclif's hostility to auricular confession in practice was exacerbated by what he saw as its exploitation for immoral purposes and financial gain, as well as by its association with the friars. (46-47, 159n71)

In side-stepping and destabilizing shrift of mouth, Wyclif and others assume theological agency—the ability to situate right and wrong apart from official teaching. And as they do that, they also clearly allocate certain powers to Christ, a move that challenges presently upheld human authority in the Church.

The appropriate application of power was a chief concern of the larger Lollard movement, however limited it may have been.¹⁴⁶ A problem of power is presented in the ninth of the twelve Lollard Conclusions:

Be ix conclusiun þat holdith þe puple lowe is þat þe articlis of confessiun þat is sayd necessary to saluaciun of man, with a feynid power of absoluciun enhaunsith prestis pride, and ʒeuth hem opertunite of priui calling other þan we wele now say. For lordis and ladys ben arrested for fere of here confessouris þat þei dur nout seyn a treuth, and in time of confessiun is þe best time of wowing and of priue continuaunce of dedli synne. (Hudson 27, lines 114-20).

[The ninth conclusion that suppresses the people is that the articles of confession that is said to be necessary to people's salvation, with a feigned power of absolution enhances a priest's pride, and gives them opportunity of privy calling other than we will now say. For lords and ladies are arrested for fear of their confessors that they dare not say a truth, and in time of confession is the best time of vowing and privy continuance of deadly sin.]

These allegations have a certain currency toward the end of the period, regardless of their precise construction or composition.¹⁴⁷ Here “feigned” absolution suppresses laypersons in particular. Confession in these terms may be false, opposed to “treuth.”¹⁴⁸ Much of

¹⁴⁶ For some sense of limitations scholars have placed on a once more broadly conceived Wycliffite, see the works of Richard Rex and of Andrew Larsen listed below.

¹⁴⁷ For a discussion of the “framing” of the Conclusions, see Wendy Scase’s “The Audience and Framers of the Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards.”

¹⁴⁸ This elusive term, which has been explored at length by Richard Firth-Green (*A Crisis of Truth*), among others, in this context at least hinges on whether truth (in our sense) as opposed to falsehood is uttered in the confessional.

the machinery of the Church is challenged here and is seen to be aligned with deception, overestimation of human authority.

This concern is apparent in views articulated by Wyclif himself. As Stephen Penn points out, Wyclif has trouble accepting the three-part penitential theology wholesale, even if he can discuss confession on its own terms:

Underpinning [the traditional tripartite definition of penance] was the assumption that any or all of these three things represented the sacramental quiddity or *materia*, to which a generic label could be assigned. Wyclif's rejection of this formulation was grounded in a simple philosophical problem: it assumed that the sacramental *materia* consisted in three generically distinct parts, each of which was also distinct in temporal terms (since none of the three parts could exist simultaneously).
(284; brackets mine, parentheses Penn's)

Wyclif's penance may be seen to streamline it out of a genuine need and sense of urgency. These three parts embody their own chronology as confession itself orders sin and must be executed in advance of an end. Even so, Wyclif is concerned with confessional efficacy and indeed can allow for confession to be rightly done under clerical authority.¹⁴⁹ More importantly, Wyclif seems to consider penance as an organic whole, undoing the broad perception of penance as taxonomized through scholastic parsing of detail. As Wyclif assumes that teaching should be transparent, this reaction may be seen

¹⁴⁹ McCormack is careful to note that followers of Wyclif, despite raising some serious objections, were not as unequivocally opposed to auricular confession as has been thought (*Chaucer and the Culture of Dissent* 186). And as Penn further clarifies, "Wycliffe's penitential theology served to realign penance with the contrite subject, and hence to restore to him or her a freedom that had been obscured by the papal decrees of Innocent III. It was not his intention, however, to consign the priest to the realms of redundancy. A good priest, he recognized, might serve to assist the subject in his search for contrition of the heart, and, ultimately, for the forgiveness that could only be properly conferred by God" (286-87).

as a crucial clarification of oft-repeated teaching, a confession for confession. It appears motivated more by a fear of divine justice than by fear of consequences meted out by fellow humans, as is invoked in the ninth conclusion cited above. The implications of knowledge for power, as were apparent in the previous chapter and as will appear in the final chapter, are certainly important here.

Narrating and Teaching Confession

Many in the late Middle Ages feared confessional obligation, but others found comfort in it. Individuals may have communicated their sins out of fear of social consequences or out of hope of absolution. People in late-medieval England who are conditioned to view daily life in terms of Christian morality are awash in stories of sin, stories that they are obligated by the church to relate to a member of the clergy. To return to an example quoted above, Gower's expansive *Confessio Amantis* situates confession within a context of teaching through narration. And yet, as the Prologue suggests, teaching is qualified as the work by Gower's "somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore" (19). Confession suggests something long and drawn out. Gower's qualification may suggest it is less than methodical, but it also may suggest a method that is elusive, making the reader shut out from the clerical logic of the process. Furthermore, as Peck illustrates, the confessor-penitent dynamic is used to address matters of love under such a capacious rubric that it rivals that of sin-engaged confession.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ From Peck's introduction:

...In order to help Amans see beyond his infatuation, Genius will, as the poem progresses, ultimately instruct him in all the humanities. The climax of his argument is Book 7, in which he explains the education of a king, lessons in governance which Amans must learn if he is to reclaim and rule the lost kingdom of his soul. Genius knows that love founded on mutuality, on what both Gower and Chaucer (among others) call "common profit," is the only love that is consistently satisfactory. Although Genius' understanding of higher love is limited, he can appreciate it as history has revealed it, just as Jean de Meun's Genius appreciates without fully understanding the "beau parc" of the good

Bot for als moche as I suppose
 It sit a prest to be wel thewed,
 And schame it is if he be lewed,
 Of my presthode after the forme
 I wol thi schrifte so enforme,
 That ate leste thou schalt hier
 The vices, and to thi matiere
 Of love I schal hem so remene,
 That thou schalt knowe what thei mene.
 For what a man schal axe or sein
 Touchende of schrifte, it mot be plein,
 It nedeth nocht to make it queinte,
 For trowthe hise wordes wol nocht peinte:
 That I wole axe of thee forthi,
 Mi sone, it schal be so plainly,
 That thou schalt knowe and understonde
 The pointz of schrifte how that thei stonde." (I.272-288)
 [But for as much as I suppose it befits a priest to be well trained¹⁵¹, and it
 is a shame if he were to be unlearned according to the form of my

shepherd with its "fontaine de vie" toward the end of *Roman de la Rose*. Most certainly he can see from his natural vantage point that in the events of human behavior the love of Cupid is inconstant and that that of Venus usually ends in mockery. History demonstrates that this is so. That Venus would send Amans to Genius is understandable, however, in that she owes her very existence to the phenomena of time and nature over which Genius has perceptual jurisdiction. (xv-xvi)

¹⁵¹ As the *MED* suggests, *wel thewed* also may carry the meaning "well mannered," although the root verb *theuen* also carries primary meanings of "to instruct morally" or "to train."

priesthood I will so inform¹⁵² your confession that at least you shall hear the vices, and I shall relate your material to love, so that you may know what they mean. For what a person shall ask or say dealing with confession, it might be plain, it needs not be made craftily, for truth will not paint his words: What I will ask of you therefore, my son, it shall be [asked] so plainly that you shall know and understand the points of confession as they stand.]

Gower's gesture to love mirrors the greater meaning-making objective of confession. This passage shows the importance of knowledge and training, the ability to make sense of what is confessed. Clergy elicit confessions by the promise of clarity and a justification of the necessary risk. Confession thus brings with it a rhetoric of benefits and obligations. It is defined not only by its product and intent but also by its obligations, its expectations of the penitent.¹⁵³

As is suggested by some indictments of confessional practice, auricular confession in this period often assumes much control over human activities, control that is readily apparent in the taxonomies given in handbooks. It effectively undoes any privacy a person enjoyed prior to the confession, and it does so in the name of healing, which is but one layer of meaning among many. Following the Council, key developments drew out layers of social as well as personal meaning from confession. The layers of meaning come across as so vivid within the *Canterbury Tales* that some have been led to speculate on an aging Chaucer's reshaping of the narrative in a

¹⁵² On Gower's *enforme* meaning "to teach according to an ideal pattern, with the aim of forming the recipient of the teaching," see Simpson's *Sciences and the Self* (4).

¹⁵³ As Karma Lochrie notes, "Confession did not begin in 1215 with the Fourth Lateran Council's passing of Canon 21, *Omnis utriusque sexus*, but its regulation, codification, and formulation as a discourse did" (*Covert Operations* 24).

penitential vein.¹⁵⁴ In *The Parson's Tale* the fear of Judgment is presented as motivation to contrition, and it is aligned alongside the pains of hell.¹⁵⁵

The thridde cause that oghte moeve a man to Contricioun is drede of the day of doom and of the horrible peynes of helle. For as Seint Jerome seith, “At every tyme that me remembreth of the day of doom I quake; / for whan I ete or drynke, or what so that I do, evere semeth me that the trompe sowneth in myn ere.: ‘Riseth up, ye that been dede, and cometh to the juggement.’” O goode God, muchel oghte a man to drede swich a juggement, ““ther as we shullen been alle,” as Seint Poul seith, “biforn the seete of oure Lord Jhesu Crist”; whereas he shal make a general congregacioun, whereas no man may been absent. For certes there availleth noon essoyne ne excusacioun. (X.157-63)

[The third cause that might move a person to contrition is dread of the Day of Doom and of the horrible pains of hell. For as St. Jerome says, “At every time that I remember the Day of Doom I quake, for when I eat or drink, or whatever I do, it always seems to me that the trumpet sounds in my ear.: ‘Rise up, you who are dead, and come to the judgment.’” O good God, a person ought to dread such a judgment, “there as we shall all be,”

¹⁵⁴On the notion of an older Chaucer compensating for the rest of the work by ending with the Parson, see Dean’s “Chaucer’s Repentance”: “The theme of penitence... is precisely what one might expect as the conclusion to an ambitious Ricardian narrative, especially if there is a pilgrimage and if the narrator includes a characterization of himself as old and sick” (72). Charles Muscatine situates Chaucer’s movement as a shaper of narrative within a range of feeling:

We see that some moods came on him late, and others were abandoned early; that he may have been tempted here, and that he resisted temptation there. Apart from his perception and sympathy with life, Chaucer’s great virtue is morale. It is a morale that is based, not on a doctrinaire conservatism, but on a felt acquaintance with all the alternatives (144).

¹⁵⁵ For evidence of the pains of hell’s long-established association with penance, see Stephen Pelle’s work with early medieval Latin and Old English sources (173-74, 177).

as St. Paul says, “before the seat of our Lord Jesus Christ”; whereas he shall make a general congregation, whereas no one may be absent. For certainly there avails no procedural delay¹⁵⁶ nor excuse.]

Such a “cause” tied to the future creates a narrative and shows again how much the apocalyptic is entangled with the everyday. As Emerson and Herzman rightly point out, the terms advanced by the Parson need not and ought not to reduce meaning of the rest of the *Tales*. But they also need not, as they are manipulated by Chaucer, suggest a reduction in confessional meaning or priestly agency.¹⁵⁷ And even if the *Parson’s Tale* is not given the privileged position that others have given it (a position I do not quite see), it presents for readers the very present spiritual and social tensions of confession in this apocalyptic environment.¹⁵⁸ Once again, all are subject to confession just as all are subject to the Last Judgment.

And nat oonly that oure defautes shullen be jugged, but eek that alle oure werkes shullen openly be knowe. And, as seith Seint Bernard, “Ther ne shal no pledynge availle, ne no sleighte; we shullen yeven rekenynge of everich ydel word.” Ther shul we han a juge that may nat been deceyved ne corrupt. And why? For, certes, alle oure thoghtes been discovered as to hym, ne for preyere ne for meede he shal nat been corrupt. (X.164-66)

¹⁵⁶ As the MED notes, the legal sense of *essoyn* used here suggests “an excuse offered, for non-appearance in court at the appointed time.”

¹⁵⁷ For another view, see Karen Winstead’s recent assessment: “Chaucer reduces radically both the presence of the priest in the text and the importance of oral confession in the penitential process” (240).

¹⁵⁸ Emerson and Herzman maintain that the *Parson’s Tale* “serves as a fitting conclusion to the entire poem. To understand it as such is not [to quote Kolve’s *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 82] ‘to read the whole of *The Canterbury Tales* in the light of the Parson’s Tale, as though all the other narratives were merely partial expressions of truth.’ It is, instead, to recognize that the Parson’s introductory comments and sermon make explicit the eschatological perspective that infuses *The Canterbury Tales* by virtue of the fact that it is a pilgrimage poem” (159; bracketed attribution follows 217n31).

[And not only that our shortcomings shall be judged, but also that all our works shall openly be known. And, as St. Bernard says, “There shall no pleading work, nor any stratagem; we shall give reckoning of every idle word.” There we shall have a judge who may not be deceived or corrupted. And why? For, certainly, all our thoughts are discovered as to him, neither by entreaty nor by gift can he be corrupted.]

In presenting handbook material and not exactly a tale, Chaucer’s Parson is undoing an important social goal of tale-telling.¹⁵⁹ In the collective “oure” there may be seen an appeal to this social goal, but judgment presented thus is very personal. His move away from narrative clashes with the communicative aims suggested by the Host, aims that lack the corrective impulse of “textbook” penance. The Parson, given the opportunity, intends his discourse to motivate and correct his immediate audience. The handbook, spoken as a tale, seems less than authentic as speech, but in its relentless claims for orthodoxy it presents a regularity against which other utterances—even in poetry—seem irregular, faulty. Pastoral literature, particularly as it is preceded by such a mixed bag of other genres, makes the topic of confession unavoidable, as does the Retraction that follows it. Through the Parson’s Tale, a social ethic of meaningful communication (and against idle words) emerges in the need to communicate matters of the soul. One must be truthful and productive in the face of the end of an age. And the threat of a unique moment of Last Judgment brings together a broad population, even though all persons are to be forcibly sorted and have their fates dictated to them.

To reiterate the purposefulness of language within confession: Each person must account for “every idle word,” every deed no matter how small. And the apocalyptic

¹⁵⁹ See the note above on the genre of this “tale.”

trumpet should be sounded in minds preemptively. All are to be ready in the present age, the age of ecclesiastical power. As penance has been institutionalized, people's most sinful thoughts—the necessary recognition of corruption—makes them vulnerable to the Church. Chaucer's pilgrims seem individually vulnerable, un-cared for. Mary Braswell highlights this concern when she suggests the implicit need for some confessor(s) within the *Tales*: "If Chaucer gathers several identifiable sinners together in the context of a pilgrimage, it is logical to ask whether he has appointed a confessor for them" (104). None of the pilgrims who might seem to be confessors prove very effective at it.¹⁶⁰ As confessional practices are sketched throughout the *Tales*, confession seems less and less stable. The emphasis on being vulnerable in the world is pervasive in the guidelines espoused by the Parson. Lines 1062-63 further emphasize the necessity of being "shriven in this present life": "Men sholden eek remembren hem of the shame that is to come at the day of doom to hem that been nat penitent and shriven in this present lyf. / For alle the creatures in heven, in erthe, and in helle shullen seen apertly al that they hyden in this world." Nothing can be hidden, and all is to be revealed and narrated by individuals, lest doom be revealed before wrongs can be confessed.

The apocalyptic vulnerability inherent in confessional speech itself pervades the discourses of the *Canterbury Tales*, as is apparent in Chaucer's narratorial interventions and particularly in prologues and other utterances between tales. The Friar and Summoner provide an effective sketch of a culture shaped by confession and its rules and expectations for speech. In indicting the work of summoners, the Friar challenges the

¹⁶⁰ In Braswell's reading (see 104ff) Harry Bailly is advanced as a confessor of sorts, although such a reading may too easily claim all tales as confession. On how the host's engagement of pilgrims (if we concede it is confession) connects with judgment, see Rodney Delasanta's "The Theme of Judgment in *The Canterbury Tales*," a work upon which Braswell draws. Contrarily, Jim Rhodes' reading more convincingly casts the "outward journey" (and the host's work) as "play," as geared toward "a love and appreciation for the things of this world and a desire to affirm the things of this life" (176).

legitimacy of the enterprise in which a thinly veiled wrong is indicted by the ecclesiastical courts, tracing it back to its ecclesiastical authority. As I showed in my second chapter, the opening of the Friar's tale shows how the network of clerical power has extended even to court officials such as summoners. And his making-public of sins shows the extreme vulnerability faced by those who admitted to various sins.

Whilom ther was dwellynge in my contree
 An erchedeken, a man of heigh degree,
 That boldely dide execucioun
 In punysshynge of fornicacioun,
 Of wicheckcraft, and eek of bawderye,
 Of diffamacioun, and avowtrye,
 Of chirche reves, and of testamentz,
 Of usure, and of simonye also.
 But certes, lecchours dide he grettest wo;
 They sholde syngen if that they were hent;
 And smale tytheres weren foule yshent,
 If any persoun wolde upon hem pleyne.
 Ther myghte asterte hym no pecunyal peyne.
 For smale tithes and for smal offrynge
 He made the peple pitously to synge,
 For er the bisshop caughte hem with his hook,
 They weren in the erchedekenes book.
 Thanne hadde he, thurgh his jurisdiccoun,

Power to doon on hem correccioun. (III.1301-1320)

[Once there was dwelling in my country an archdeacon, a man of high degree, who boldly did execution of punishing of fornication, of witchcraft, and also of pandering, of defamation, and adultery, of church robberies, and of testaments, of usury, and of simony also. But certainly, lechers did he wrong the most; they were made to sing if they were apprehended, and small tithers were horribly injured, if any person would complain about them. No monetary punishment could escape him. For small tithes and for small offerings, he made the people to sing piteously, for before the bishop caught tem with his hook, they were in the archdeacon's book. Then had he, through his jurisdiction, power to impose correction on them.]

The Friar, in telling of this fictional summoner, paints a hellish picture of a system that can ensnare just about anyone. But from another standpoint, there is a wide array of evil acts that have slipped through the self-reporting penitential system. The diagnosis of sins closely tied to confessional practice is here geared toward condemning and not reconciliation. Sins are identified not by the individual through introspection but by an ecclesiastical court official. Sins are here conspicuous—damnable for being visible to others—but also possibly trumped up.

Such practices of the ecclesiastical courts are parallel to those sanctioned within penitential manuals.¹⁶¹ Raymond of Peñafort in part 31 of his *Summa de paenitentia*

¹⁶¹ As Elizabeth Fowler explains, confessions is indeed analogous to the work borne by the ecclesiastical courts:

By the end of the [twelfth] century, confession was considered to be a formal legal jurisdiction complementary to that of the external forum of the ecclesiastical courts, and

reaffirms that the confessor has a duty to pry for details of sins, to determine such qualities as “through whom” a sin is done, “how often,” “why,” and “when.” Some of the points necessary to narrate are laid out by Raymond:

Per quos, scilicet, mediators et internuntios, quia omnes tales sunt participes criminis et damnationis, et ipse est reus et obligatus pro peccatis eorum. Item, per quos, id est, cum quibus, et pro quibus, et contra quos. (edition of X. Ochoa and A. Diez, presented in Newhauser 555)

Through whom: namely, though mediators and go-betweens, since all such people partake in the crime and its punishment, and the penitent himself is answerable and responsible for their sins. Likely, through whom, i.e., with whom, for whom, and against whom. (trans. Newhauser 554)

Accounting for such narrative details and bringing judgment into markedly apocalyptic time additionally shake people out of their sense of security.¹⁶² Still, a major point illustrated in the Friar’s setup is that the texts are stacked against parishioners (especially those who do not pay into the system very generously) and in favor of those who work for the church. People are made to feel guilty, and it is the willingness of people to be thus taxed and manipulated—through guilt—that makes the ecclesiastical court system work. The excesses of the court system in the tale may be seen as extensions and perversions of the penitential system. They show how confessional narratives may be abused, solicited, even fabricated. To return to the Parson for comparison, he, as

the distinction between the internal and external form was the primary institutional division of the canon law. (49)

On implications of penitential politics later than this period, see Sarah Beckwith’s “Medieval Penance, Reformation Penance” (196-7).

¹⁶² On what Patterson terms the “contritionist bias” of Raymond’s *Summa*, see *Chaucer and the Subject of History* 375.

exhaustive and exhausting as his treatment of penance is, seems to require a conspicuous conceptual rigor absent in the Friar's simple (but costly) penance. The narratives elicited of the penitent are one important concern, but the story of how the confession was made and heard in an orderly fashion may be equally important.

If one considers the Friar as one confessor, certain circumstances (beyond his status as friar) suggest irregularities in his administration of sacramental penance. The Friar-pilgrim within the *Tales* is cast as having questionable character. Characterized as “a wantowne and a merye” (208) and as “[s]o muchel of daliaunce and fair langage” (211) in the General Prologue, he is rendered simultaneously sympathetic and antipathetic for friendliness and loquaciousness. I will repeat the lines discussed earlier in the study:

Ful sweetly herde he confessioun,

And plesaunt was his absolucioun:

He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,

There as he wiste to have a good pitaunce. (I.221-24)

[Full sweetly he heard confession, and pleasant was his absolution: he was an easy man to give penance, there as he sought to have a good pittance.]

Very early on, the seemingly positive social qualities of the Friar unravel to show that this look of happiness and this willingness to talk (and listen) freely has a cost. His judgment seems clouded by the potential for material gain. Furthermore, he may be seen to dilute the sacrament of penance as he leverages individuals' discomfort with how it is administered elsewhere.

Confessional speech subjects one to judgments human and divine. The Friar for his free use of language and the simplicity with which he approaches confession may be seen as just as easy to fault and judge as the Pardoner is. The moral compromise suggested in the *General Prologue* carries over to the *Tale* itself, enough so to clearly delineate evil. As David Raybin has demonstrated, demonic references run throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, particularly in the *Friar's Tale* ("Goddes Instrumentz" 94). The Friar himself is quick to characterize the Summoner (and summoners) as evil. The summoner character of the *Friar's Tale* in particular is not to be trusted in his broad dealings with people. Such an expanse of activity gives this summoner opportunity for manipulation and bribery, and the whole enterprise can even be taken as a form of thievery. And it stems from an elaborate sin-seeking system that is larger than the ecclesiastical courts in which summoners work. The Friar's summoner's corruption is most clearly seen in his accusatory exploitation of the sick widow quoted earlier in this study (III.1595-1601). On the other side of that conflict within the *Tales*, the *Summoner's Tale's* friar's vision serves as a counterpoint to the comedic vision presented by the Summoner in his prologue. The prologue and tale together thus highlight the earth-bound nature of the pilgrims, their vantage point, and the challenge of living in faith and not with sight of Last Things. Most importantly, they are abusers and victims of confessional speech. Here speech—and especially talk about Last Things—uncovers apocalyptic uncertainty and earthly vulnerability in many sites other than confession.

As we have seen, the risky business of confessing is central to the *Tales*. The very narrative-sharing premise of the *Tales* may be seen to mirror confession in its effects, even as its aims purport to resist confession. These persons in their roles as pilgrims (just

as when they are penitents) are put on the spot, are forced to communicate as everyone is on a religious undertaking. And many on the pilgrimage will judge their orthodoxy or heterodoxy as they speak. Speech of any kind, even storytelling, is anything but an innocent diversion. And confession's seriousness must be asserted all the more. Confession, again, is often viewed in terms of annual "Easter duty," but in spite of the seemingly minimal obligation, for at least one short session annually, the obligation is unavoidable, maximal. The assumed delay in confession—the ability to put it off for up to a year—is nonexistent on the pilgrimage. Stories are necessarily political, necessarily personal. And even the retreat into the hypothetical, anonymous, or playful does not rule out connections to the various real-world confessional practices surrounding the audience. Perhaps here the project can be seen to unravel: How can one assume that these various people would participate in the same sort of speech practices? Some, the Parson included, might counter that it is more about edification, by something as practical as confession, than about enjoyment. The prevalence of confessional speech goes a long way in explaining the widespread social vulnerability and conflict apparent within the work. By foregrounding speech and situating vulnerability therein, the *Canterbury Tales* highlight how speech be used—and also used *against* one. The dialogue between the Friar and the Summoner not only illustrates the inherent conflict between different factions of medieval church and society, but it also lays bare the weaknesses of categories of people for a broad audience.

Within confession, just as naturally in purportedly unorthodox extensions of confession as within the clearly administered sacramental practice, there appears a strong sense of judgment. And in the term proposed by Claudia Ratazzi Papka, texts of this

period (including the *Tales*) may be seen as “fictions of judgment.”¹⁶³ The apocalypticism of the late fourteenth century centers on justice, specifically the notion that justice is meted out by God in due time. And even as theology may define due time objectively, apocalypticism is intensified as due time and just punishment are processed by individual humans subjectively.¹⁶⁴ This creates considerable variability, even as apocalypticism is a social reality: one person’s judgment is modeled on others’ judgments. As Chaucer in particular invites us to judge by presenting such contradictory perspectives in the tales, the *Tales* allow readers to participate in forms of judgment and to observe others judging.

As I have suggested, this judgment, in addition to objectifying speech, also uses the immediacy of speech to seize power. Human and divine judgment are at stake in how speech has been employed. It is not insignificant that the Reeve asserts his own microauthority in “quitting” as he appeals to divine majesty:

A gylour shal hymself bigyled be,
 And God, that sitteth heighe in magestee,
 Save al this compaignye, grete and smale!
 Thus have I quyrt the Millere in my tale. (I.4321-24)

[One who guiles shall be guiled himself, and God, who sits high in majesty, save all this company, great and small. Thus have I repaid the Miller in my tale.]

The undoing of the first “gilour” reverses some power within the work, even though there is little to say that the Reeve is any more deserving of credit than the Miller. The

¹⁶³ See, too, her “The Limits of Apocalypse.”

¹⁶⁴ As Stephen O’Leary notes regarding time, “The human experience of time is not always and everywhere the same, but is subject to discursive manipulation” (44).

necessarily forced ending (what is quitting if not decisive, after all?) presumes its own sense of justice and completion. Endings here, as with the apocalypse, are elusive. In the *Canterbury Tales* justice surfaces in the elusive notion of a completed and rightly told tale. And yet justice in these terms is subjective, contestable, never resolvable. The closure evaporates in little time as tales continue to be told, none of which restores any sense of authority consistent with the premises of competitive and communal telling that initiate the Tales.

Here again, subtleties of storytelling betray apocalypse-tinged subtleties of rhetoric and power. And, as I have suggested throughout my study, the apocalyptic is not limited to the explicitly dogmatic and exegetical. Various other discourses, each with their own senses of control and direction, have considerable bearing on stories that are told.¹⁶⁵ While narrative speech—particularly for Chaucer—may seem a retreat to entertainment, to a thought-experiment, or to some other seemingly innocuous end, it cannot shake off all the trappings of the world in which its imaginer lived. Within this dynamic, clerical speech brings its own set of complications. Edwin Craun in *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity* discusses the Parson's tale, focusing how the Parson's words are substantive and why circumstantially they are urgent:

An eschatological atmosphere in the prologue lends urgency to the Parson's insistent choice of nakedly moral discourse rather than "empty fables" for this audience. The pilgrims are approaching some kind of end

¹⁶⁵ Firth-Green (*Poets and Princepleasers*) and Steiner (*Documentary Culture*) have dealt with, for example, relationships between legal and poetic discourses. Recently, Staley has explored the extent and limits of political influence in Ricardian England:

Though these princely powers, along with their ambitions and disappointments, have passed, the voices of the poets they sought to command have not. We have been left with literary texts of great beauty and subtlety; they also constitute the fragments of a conversation about the terms of lost languages of power by those commissioned to figure powers they at once elaborated and scrutinized. (*Languages of Power* 262-3).

for both a journey and the game of storytelling. The day is waning...¹⁶⁶
(218)

What is substantial within confessional discourse, in these terms, is that which is aimed heavenward, that which fears hell, and that which is profoundly apocalyptically aware. In these terms, one is aware and engaged, and yet necessarily unsure, and always waiting.

The apocalypse, at its appointed time, appears disordered to those who do not know the hour to expect it. It overshadows clerical practice in its presentation of unknowable judgment: the penitential resolution may fit certain patterns, but its precise resolution is subject to the judgment of the clergy. Debate and quitting run counter to the order imposed by proper confession, as well as the harmony or at least harmlessness the pilgrims might have assumed in the tale-telling enterprise from the outset. The *Friar's Prologue* lays the groundwork for the conflict that is to follow, as the Host's requirement that "we wol have no debaat" is quickly disregarded (1288).¹⁶⁷ "Debaat" can be seen as a generic shift, a move from the supposed safety of tale-telling. As the MED suggests, this term aligns with "quarrel," "disagreement," "brawling," "opposition," "resistance"—in other words, a broad array of interpersonal conflict. However, it also marks an important change in the dynamic of each tale: multiple speakers, even as they make the speaking more entertaining, do so in a way that the company of pilgrims is strained. The Friar's

¹⁶⁶ As Craun continues, the vice of the idle word is again apparent:

The narrator refers to Libra, a figure of divine judgment (and justice), and the Parson prays for the grace to show his fellow pilgrims "the wey, in his viage, / Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage / That highte Jerusalem celestial" (X.49-51). In the pastoral tradition of "empty words," warnings about imminent divine judgement usually accompany injunctions to avoid telling fables. "Empty word," as a type of verbal sin, stems from Jesus' warning in Mt. 12:36, quoted in all chapters on the type: "omne verbum otiosum, quod locuti fuerint homines, reddent de eo rationem in die iudicii" [every idle word that men shall speak, they shall render an account for it in the day of judgment]. (218; Craun's brackets and translation)

¹⁶⁷ Hines points out that line 3.834, *A frer wol entremette hym everemo*, "might be paraphrased as 'A friar must always shove his oar in.'" (164).

summoner's evil is largely due to how he uses speech.¹⁶⁸ On the other side of that conflict, the friar of the Summoner's Tale achieves a masterful balance between finding what he wants and telling people what they want to hear. Speech, particularly that about consequential matters of confession and judgment, assumes power and demarcates the (il)legitimacy of power. Most glaringly, power may be attributed to various kinds of evil, and in effect created by such attribution. As confession proves to be yet another rich and often overlooked cultural site (in addition to death and ecclesiastical power) through which individuals can encounter the apocalyptic, it helps to fuel the good-versus-evil tension that makes late medieval apocalypticism work.

Again, confession, an increasingly important religious practice in the late Middle Ages, is a center of secrecy, vulnerability, and exposure, and embodies the apocalyptic in its requirement for revelation. Furthermore, as Edwin Craun and others have noted, sins of the tongue show the restrictions on speech prevalent in this period as well as the implications of the very act of speaking, and of the presumption to speak on religious matters. This connects with late-medieval thinking on the capacity to preach, as has been discussed by scholars including James Murphy and Clare Waters.¹⁶⁹ This developing practice, in some cases more pastorally and productively administered than in others, works on an impulse to come clean, an impulse that is hard to unlearn.

Confessional practice in this period, as I have shown in this chapter, embodies the apocalyptic in its sense of fear and hope, its collapsing of time to put individuals on the

¹⁶⁸ As Gaelan Gilbert puts it, "In the tale, a disguised fiend instructs a corrupt summoner in the nuances of speech genres, secretly aiming to secure the summoner's damnation. To carry out his plan, the fiend teaches a voluntarist hermeneutic that his own fluid onto-morphology—"in divers art and in diverse figures" (*CT* III.1486)—can later misappropriate" (52).

¹⁶⁹ See Murphy's *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* as well as Waters' *Angels and Earthly Creature*, where she illustrates that, even at their most purportedly positive, many medieval *artes predicandi* prove exclusionary (21-22).

spot, and even in its capacity to demarcate good and evil in a particular moment. It mirrors the urgency and immediacy of the apocalyptic and urges individuals to subject themselves to a series of small but serious judgments. Furthermore, it may lead some to question the stability and consistency of clerical practices (and, by extension the Church's authority) while its machinations are mimicked or taken advantage of. Perhaps most importantly, it encompasses so many aspects of late-medieval life that its effects are impossible to account for—and it does this while it is invoked as the means by which wrongs are accounted for. The tension created by a practice acting out judgment while ignorance of when death will occur (let alone the apocalypse) is also played out in the apocalyptic functions of text, which I will explore in my next chapter: just as not all who pose as confessors are trustworthy, not all texts can be trusted to relay messages discreetly across generations and within a sympathetic audience. If spoken confession embodies power and vulnerability, then power and vulnerability may be embodied by written texts with just as little certainty. And yet, as I will show, key apocalyptically engaged texts in this period aspire to a stability that transcends that of spoken discourse and of previous texts.

CHAPTER FOUR: TEXTUAL PERMANENCE AND EPHEMERALITY

So far in this study I have examined three rich centers of apocalyptic meaning attested to in writings in late-medieval England. Death, authority, and confession all appear contingent as one believes that the end of normal life is approaching. But to these centers of meaning we must add writing itself. Writing, just as all of the other centers of meaning studied up to this point, is affected by apocalyptic concern with the trajectory of daily life. For this reason, as I see it, texts of the period quite frequently call attention to their own status as texts. And the act of writing, as it is made conspicuous, makes us reconsider its functions, duration, and importance.

Apocalypticism in particular requires a consciousness of the recording and shaping of texts. And this self-consciousness becomes especially foregrounded as the Middle Ages develop. Brian Stock notes the following in *Listening for the Text*:

One element that must be reckoned with in any discussion of the history of orality and literacy is self-consciousness, in particular the consciousness of change. The subjective awareness of change is a potent factor in bringing about new ways of looking at things. It is also one of their most obvious consequences. (145)

These broad observations are certainly useful as we consider the changing meaning of texts in this period. Change, particularly in ways of composition and ways of reading, is invoked frequently in texts of late medieval England. As I will argue in this chapter, lurking under the surface in many of these texts is an anxiety over the power and limitations of writing itself. In an apocalyptic framework, how permanent or ephemeral is writing? If time is to be no more, then writing, being tied to time and to daily life,

diminishes in significance.¹⁷⁰ Still, as anyone writes, she or he assumes that writing lasts longer than she or he does. Even if daily life has an end, one's earthly life may easily end first. Then, in one additional turn considering the apocalyptic, one must use writing to make information available for those who survive us.

Thus, in the very act of writing rest assumptions tied to the apocalypse, particularly regarding how needful the conveyed information is and how long the world is to persist. Apocalypticism is about urgency, but it is also about waiting. Apocalypticism cannot resolve questions about the age's end immediately and thus must create space between the here and the hereafter. This middle space is negotiated effectively by several influential texts of the period, including Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, as well as more explicitly devotional vernacular works. Apocalyptic engagement with texts and awareness of what writing accomplishes especially emerges as texts are framed by their professed authors. The apocalyptic qualities evident in this period are thus not determined merely by a sense of urgency or by the capacity to judge, as others have argued.¹⁷¹ Rather, they are seen most clearly as one considers a variety of related concepts, concepts that include textual tradition, contingent revelation of knowledge about the end, and the capacity of time's end to render writing meaningless. Several texts from this period nod toward the apocalyptic in their assumptions of fragile posterity. However, this future is complicated: it can be assumed to be not very long, but it will likely extend beyond individual writers' lives. Writers in the Christian West, after all, have access to the work of a long tradition of

¹⁷⁰ Two foundational discussions related to time and eternity include Augustine's *Confessions* XI and Question 10 of Aquinas' *Summa*.

¹⁷¹ For just a few deeply productive studies addressing apocalyptic urgency in the period see Justice's *Writing and Rebellion*, Kerby-Fulton's *Books Under Suspicion*, and Papka's "Fictions of Judgment."

apocalypticists whom time has long surpassed. And even as certain texts communicating doom or making strong claims to prophecy are suppressed, a wide variety of these texts still circulate. Furthermore, writing, as part of daily life, itself will become obsolete. As I will show in this chapter, the imminent apocalypticism of the late fourteenth century in England manages to hold in tension written communication's permanence and its ephemerality. As is evident in the perceived value, duration, and function of various texts (especially evident in Chaucer and Gower), those texts embody the apocalyptic mentalities of this period. To show this, I will proceed through several factors affecting the sense of permanence or ephemerality in texts affected by the apocalyptic, moving generally from those concerns pertaining to the work of the apocalyptic writer to those that emerge when a text achieves the longevity that apocalyptic awareness requires but also substantially qualifies.¹⁷²

Seers, Seer-like Writers, and Their Credibility

The perception of apocalyptic lateness in the late Middle Ages is in some very important ways tied to the purported bearer of information. The central apocalyptic role throughout a broad tradition of early Christian apocalypticism is that of the seer, one who knows what is to come.¹⁷³ As John Markley has shown, the role of the seer in ancient Judeo-Christian apocalyptic literature emerges principally as an exclusively selected person who typifies the limits of human cognition in knowing mysteries about the end while exhibiting a strong emotional reaction to the news conveyed (108-112).¹⁷⁴ As

¹⁷² The focus of my project here is on the anticipation of texts' future effects.

¹⁷³ Parallels exist, too, in a wide range of eschatologically-oriented literature, as has been shown by Carol Zaleski, even as she discusses the dynamic of the guide (52ff). This role is fluid, to be sure, and my goal here is to sketch out some of the terms approximating an ancient apocalyptic seer to show some similarity with authorial roles assumed in the late Middle Ages in England.

¹⁷⁴ Markley is careful to set John's *Apocalypse* apart from other ancient apocalypses:

Markley puts it, “The emotional and physical humanity of apocalyptic seers emphasizes the contrast between the heavenly realm and the normal realm of humanity” (113). The seer or visionary her- or himself may, too, stand out socially, as Kathryn Kerby-Fulton observes that “medieval audiences came to expect a portrait of a social outsider who had rejected all worldly comforts and concerns” (*Reformist Apocalypticism* 202). As will become clear later in this chapter, the apocalyptic rhetor’s exclusive claim to knowledge becomes more complicated as she or he is not merely a social outsider but an outsider in textual terms.¹⁷⁵ Through sophisticated reading and writing moves and through access to languages and texts the writer sets her- or himself apart.

But even more apparently, the special status of the apocalyptic writer is tied to age. When age is a conspicuous quality of the writer, the text may be implication serve to stand in for a seer who will not live long enough to tell about the failing word. The text will not last forever, but it is permanent enough to communicate essential knowledge to future generations. The common perception of the seer as old or nearing death has roots as old as the example of John and is also related to the fact that many of the literary figures of the period are producing their most enduring work toward the end of their lives. Gower is a prime example of this. As Ardis Butterfield and others have explained, this emphasis on the end of the writer’s life certainly emerges in Gower’s *Confessio* (“Articulating the Author”). In the *Confessio*’s last book, Gower exposes himself as Amans, once Genius appeals to Venus and once Venus appears to Gower:

...And as it were halving a game

The book of Revelation is anomalous among first- and second-century C.E. apocalypses in the way that it almost entirely mutes John’s cognitive humanity. In other words, John’s cognitive humanity is never exhibited through his questions and pronouncements, and he never asks for an interpretation of what he sees. (101)

¹⁷⁵ On the perspective of the apocalyptic rhetor, see O’Leary’s *Arguing the Apocalypse*.

Sche axeth me what is mi name.

“Ma dame,” I seide, “John Gower.” (8.2319-21)

[And as it seemed half a game,

She [Venus] asked me what my name is.

“My lady,” I said, “John Gower.”]

The deity draws Amans/Gower out and leaves no question who this person privy to special information is. Venus’ advice for Gower then seemingly undoes him, proves him to have found a sort of futility in his long session with Genius:

Forthi my conseil is that thou

Remembre wel hou thou art old. (8.2438-39).

[Therefore my counsel is that you remember well that you are old.]

As Butterfield comments, “[t]he fourth Gower—Gower as narrator—is harder to isolate, since in a sense he emerges only through that double shock that Amans is at once the author, and old” (“Articulating the Author” 80). While on the one hand this revelation may seem to negate the long work that preceded it, this revelation may also make it all the more valuable for others—those younger who are able to heed the work’s advice on love. Gower as an individual seeking out information may seem foolish, but as a writer he is not foolish at all. His audience, foregrounded in his prologue (as I will discuss below), legitimizes him as the human font of information, as does the text itself. As Gower is specified, so is his audience. The Latin verse closing the work contains a wish that the work remain with the British well into the future.¹⁷⁶

Qui sedet in scannis celi det vt ista Iohannis

¹⁷⁶ For the sake of this study, I focus simply on Gower’s naming of the British people. For recent analysis of the more complicated cultural references in Gower’s recensions and the work’s addresses to Richard and to Henry Bolingbroke, see Irvin (esp. 57-62), Skúlason, and Coley’s *Wheel of Language*.

Perpetuis annis stet pagina grata Britannis.

[May he who sits in the throne of heaven grant that this page of John remain for all time pleasing to the Britains. (Trans. Galloway in Peck ed.)]

More than one condition must be met for this wish to be granted. In the apocalyptic terms Gower has sketched out, it requires a forestalling of divine judgment, a continuation of time. With this, it requires his text to persist, to be preserved for a wide audience. His text, it is wished, should last as long as time does. Perhaps it might go without saying that Britain should as well.

Since the apocalypse marks the end of time, the very assumptions writers must hold about the functions and durations of texts are in part determined by the apocalyptic. Texts themselves are subject to apocalyptically bordered time, to the period of normal human activity. Mary Carruthers in *The Book of Memory* addresses the functional aspects of even seemingly decorative elements of books containing religious meaning—books that we must presume are designed for good, long lives. She states, “One should consider them as images which serve to remind readers of the fundamental purposes of these books...—books that are made for study and meditation, to be mulled over” (323). But in turn, texts themselves affect the apocalypticism of the period in the particular issues that arise in the textual consciousness of the period: the privileging of the individual seer-like perspective, the capacity and necessity of texts to contain and stand in for other texts, and the role of the active and engaged readers assuming their own unique apocalyptic perspective. And apocalypticism, after all, as it has been concretized in Western Christian cultures has been deeply textual. Even as it has intersected with visionary experiences, that reporting of the vision often persists in textual records.

With an awareness of the End, individuals must then ask, how must they appropriately respond? Within texts that have an apocalyptic drive, there is a tension between the need call for urgent action and the call for restraint. Judith Lieu in her sketch of apocalyptic textuality shows the importance of the individual author.

...[V]isionary or auditory experience is necessarily predicated upon the individual, thus creating a conceptual gap between that experience and the possibility of its immediate reception by a wider audience. Exacerbating this, whereas in other literary genres, including the gospel or apologetic text, the transmission from the original eyewitness(es) to a new audience, who themselves become part of the authoritative tradition, is easily handled (Luke 1.1-4),¹⁷⁷ apocalyptic presupposes that the visionary uniquely chosen and has been equipped for an experience that cannot be readily be transferred to others.¹⁷⁸ The anxiety this generates is reinforced by the repeated theme of the visionary's imminent death or translation (2 Bar. 32.4-9, 76). (238)

This notion of the apocalyptic seer has classically been applied to John on Patmos, but a status of seer or soothsayer deriving from John's status by extension may be claimed by any writer in the Christian apocalyptic tradition. As the variety of sources considered throughout this chapter will show, some sense of seerlike apocalyptic authority can persist widely, even in a period in which visionary work is scrutinized.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Textual references in Lieu's original. The Luke passage here, used by Lieu as a point of contrast with the apocalyptic, emphasizes not the newness of information but rather an impulse to verify or corroborate what has already been said.

¹⁷⁸ Lieu here cites Stone, *Fourth Ezra* 374.

¹⁷⁹ The controversies regarding visionary writing in this period are outside the scope of this study. For a few considerations of "non-biblical vision" in late-medieval England largely through the lens of Hildegard of Bingen's work, see Kerby-Fulton's chapter "Extra fidem scripture" in *Books under Suspicion*, 188-204.

What happens, though, in the moment as writers have competing claims to revelation? These notions of authenticity drawn from the ancient world continue to show currency in the Middle Ages as Christian canonical texts reframe biblical narrative and even mimic it. The logic evident in such direct forms of narration as gospel and hagiography thus extends readers' consciousness of life beyond their immediate social frame of reference. They argue truth through claimed straightforwardness and through affiliation with what is already held up as authoritative. Texts thus use their illusion of permanence to nudge readers toward provocative claims about past, present, and future. In many cases the text itself plays an important role in legitimizing apocalyptic readings of the end, readings that might prove controversial.

And very often a text is held up as superior to speech. The first six lines of Gower's *Vox Clamantis* (before grounding the vision in the examples of Daniel and Joseph) make this case:

Scripture veteris capiunt exempla futuri
 Nam dabit experta res magis esse fidem.
 Vox licet hoc teneat vulgaris, quod sibi nullum
 Sompnia propositum credulitatis habent,
 Nos tamen econtra de tempore preteritorum
 Certius instructos littera scripta facit.
 [Of ancient books those yet to come take heed,
 For thing experienced commands belief.
 Though common gossip holds the firm belief
 That dreams do not contain a shred of truth,

The written word assures the opposite

And tells us what has happened in the past.] (Carlson and Rigg 24-25¹⁸⁰).

Again, the written word's supposed truth is leveraged here, given precedence over what is spoken or what is merely grasped by the mind. Physical texts give substance to something as hazy as a dream. Writing transforms dreams into visions more worthy of belief. And writing is all the more powerful as it contains experience. Then, too, with the precedence of previous visions, particularly those considered canonical,¹⁸¹ Gower's text is taken more seriously than it might be otherwise.

Gower inserts other textual complications that make his work more resilient than previous texts and difficult for later writers to encapsulate. As Ardis Butterfield shows, various writers of the late Middle Ages negotiate different terms for their work, pushing responsibility on others or accepting credit or responsibility at strategic moments. ("Articulating the Author" 91-92)¹⁸² A writer's ethos is constructed by the sources—which might be imagined as part of the writer's textual experience—as well as that material that appears to be presented originally. The suggestion of previous texts legitimizes the text at hand.¹⁸³ And the fact that information was found and thus assembled adds credibility, connects it to something already established.¹⁸⁴ Compilation

¹⁸⁰ Trans. Rigg. Note that the Carlson edition opts for the title *Visio Anglie*.

¹⁸¹ As I noted above, Gower proceeds to ground his vision in the visions of Daniel and Joseph, two authorities who are also considered in the *Nun's Priest's Tale's* wide-ranging, if dizzying, consideration of the authority of dreams (Daniel and Joseph being mentioned in Chaucer's *Tales* at VII.3128-30).

¹⁸² Butterfield's study expands beyond England and accounts as well for Machaut, Boccaccio, and others.

¹⁸³ As Kurt Olsson has observed with regard to Gower, "his activities of compilation do not weaken, but energize his authorship" (5).

¹⁸⁴ For the *Confessio*, Olsson points to a number of examples of information being found:

Genius is a *compiler* who often names his sources, but even when he does not, he reminds us that his stories are 'found': 'Ovide telleth in his bok' (1.333), 'In Metamor it telleth thus' (1.389), 'in the tale of Troie I finde' (1.483), 'I find ensample in a Cronique' (1.759), 'I finde in the bokes write' (1.2458), 'Among the bokes of latin / I finde write' (2.3187-88). Gower's point, of course, is not merely to show that Genius is one of those

in these terms might be considered more of a mechanism than a structure.¹⁸⁵ Piero Boitani has characterized Chaucer's composition in the *Tales* as "burst[ing] the formal structure of religious collections wide open with his artifice of a pilgrimage that is no longer a function of Christian life but an artifice of gathering tales" (*English Medieval Narrative* 27).

And yet tales are gathered so that they might be appropriated, reframed, expanded upon. Within the context of the pilgrimage, we should see this moving gathering of pilgrims as the event, the object, and not the shrine itself. The *Tales*, connecting with our very powerful impulse to tell stories and relate to them, becomes the center, creates urgency. Stories on the whole may harness this sense of immediacy quite easily. To give us a stronger sense of an additional resonance stories had in this period, Fiona Somerset has recently sketched out her claim that engagement with stories typifies Lollards' "feeling like saints": "Narrative is for lollards an important tool for evoking and sustaining appropriate emotion, as a means to train the will toward living in virtue" (*Feeling Like Saints* 139). Somerset thus situates important meaning not just in the surface of texts, but in the responses commanded by these texts.

Even more powerfully, Gower in the *Confessio* and Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales* embody sophisticated forms of commentary, as scholars have noted.¹⁸⁶ Rita Copeland's profound claim about Genius in the *Confessio* bears repeating:

Genius allows the text, in a sense, to interpret itself: while his function is the same as a gloss interposed between blocks of text..., Genius as

'who these olde bokes rede / Of such ensamples' (2.2140-41); by such references the poet opens his work out of the field of books, to a literary heritage.'" (6)

¹⁸⁵ On our need as readers to move beyond simplistic structural/architectural conceptions of the text, see John Ganim's *Style and Consciousness*.

¹⁸⁶ See Rita Copeland's *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation* 204-208 on Gower, as well as Davenport, who situates "the machinery of commentary" in Chaucer's *Tales* (see below in this chapter).

interpreter is also part of the fictive narration that contains and governs the presentation of the tales. He is as “textual” as the tales that he narrates.

(*Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation* 205)

Characters, we come to learn, can and must be read, and texts have character. Chaucer and Gower may suggest that other texts are malleable and manipulable, but are the future lives of the texts that they create easy to control? Not so much. Key late-medieval authors’ careful manipulation of powerful stories present us with texts that resist paraphrase and appropriation by others. In the urgency of this late, apocalyptic moment, an author—Chaucer and Gower being notable examples—may give us texts that are difficult to reshape without disrupting the intricately constructed levels of meaning. Their grand projects mixing tales and advice attempt to supercede other tales and other bits of advice, as I will suggest throughout this chapter.

The Urgent Text: Texts Making Readers

And while urgency (as I have suggested above) can be overstated in relation to the apocalypse, it nevertheless is important. It connects the writing with life in a period when human experience becomes even more central to writing.¹⁸⁷ As is clear in many texts of the period, urgency works against idleness. And since all of Christian history is claimed by the apocalyptic, idleness’ evil is enhanced as it necessarily means denying the reality of the apocalypse. It denies urgency as well as accountability. One place where idleness is singled out is the prologue to Chaucer’s *Second Nun’s Tale*:

And though men dradden nevere for to dye,
 Yet seen men wel by resoun, doutelees,
 That ydelnesse is roten slogardye,

¹⁸⁷ See Ganim, *Style and Consciousness*, 48ff.

Of which ther nevere comth no good n'encrees;
 And syn that slouthe hire holdeth in a lees
 Only to slepe, and for to ete and drynke,
 And to devouren al that othere swynke,
 And for to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,
 That cause is of so greet confusioun,
 I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse
 After the legende in translacioun
 Right of thy glorious lif and passioun,
 Thou with thy gerland wroght with rose and lilie –
 Thee meene I, mayde and martyr, Seint Cecilie. (VIII.15-28)

[And though men dread to die, yet people see well, doubtless that Idleness
 is rotten Sluggardy, of which there never comes no good or profit; and
 since that sloth holds her in a leash. Only to sleep and to eat and drink,
 and to devour all that others earn, and to put us from such idleness, it is
 cause of such great confusion, I have here done my faithful duty.
 According to the legend in translation rightly of your glorious life and
 passion, you with your garland made with rose and lily—you I mean,
 virgin and martyr, Saint Cecilia.]

In this way making explicit the connection between idleness and communication, the
 Second Nun argues for the virtue or readerly (and writerly) work. Furthermore,
 translation itself is quite often a conspicuously stated textual act. Its mention affects
 readers' understanding of the text at hand, and it may then affect readers' expectations of

other texts. In the passage above, the “translacioun” is argued by the Second Nun to have been done faithfully, consciously, even as Chaucer here and elsewhere presents translations that vary from the sense-for-sense ideal associated with the Middle Ages.¹⁸⁸

Conscious Translation

Translation, as it comes to be understood in the Middle Ages, is deeply productive or, as Rita Copeland puts it, “a powerful form of exegetical action” (*Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation* 184). This is a large part of what makes Chaucer and Gower’s texts so elusive and so resilient as other texts seem more ephemeral. The very language gap that necessitates translation challenges the would-be writer in the target language to read the text afresh and to connect it to the target culture. As Nicholas Watson notes with regard to this period, “as the English language self-consciously invents itself in these texts as England’s sole vernacular from the late fourteenth century on, the intransigence of the medium of English... can more and more come to the fore as requiring divine providence, deep learning, or extravagant translatorial inventiveness, to overcome” (“Theories of Translation”). By the late fourteenth century and early fifteenth century, translation was recognized—at least by practitioners those in charge afraid of the social consequences of vernacularization—as something more complicated than when it was urged in Pecham’s program of lay education in the thirteenth century.¹⁸⁹

Chaucer’s use of translation is especially complex. Regarding the function of Chaucer’s translation, Lynn Staley notes, “His translation serves as a particularly intelligent and well-focused interpretation of a text, a reading that offers a picture of the

¹⁸⁸ Tim Machan establishes Chaucer’s deviation from Jerome’s sense-for-sense standard. As he points out, for the *Second Nun* and other texts, “Chaucer has gathered the ‘senses’ from two different texts and thereby created by implication his own source and thus his own sense” (“Chaucer as Translator” 58). Machan points to Sherry Reames’ “The Sources of ‘Chaucer’s Second Nun’s Tale.’”

¹⁸⁹ In addition to the resources on Pecham’s Syllabus cited above, see Ian Johnson’s recent application of Pecham’s “ecclesiastical imperative” to lives of Christ (18-19).

church as composed of individual relationships (based on personal conversions) that replace the conventions of secular society” (“Chaucer’s *Tale of the Second Nun*” 326).

This is entirely consistent with a predominant association of translation with exposition in the Middle Ages.¹⁹⁰ With an eye on theory, Roger Ellis has characterized Chaucer’s work of translation thus:

...Chaucer’s practice, as opposed to his theorizing, is regularly radical, and points to his assumption of authorial roles even when he professes to be functioning as a *fidus interpres*.¹⁹¹ The most striking instance of this comes when several of his pilgrim-narrators presume to contest the issue with the sources from which they are translating. We have already seen this happen in the prologue to the Wife of Bath’s Tale. It also happens in the prologue to the Clerk’s Tale, whose narrator casts a coolly critical eye over the Petrarch text he is proposing to translate and cutes most of its prologue as “impertinent”.... (“Translation” 454)

This “radical” reality, though, is not what Chaucer projects to his audience. Emphasizing sources in the first place can be considered a conservative posture. As sources are mentioned, the author claims to connect to prior knowledge. Chaucer is able to present stories without reducing them to merely his invention.Carolynn Van Dyke has argued with regard to the *General Prologue* that Chaucer “plays [an]...unassertive role as shaper of the text” (237).¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ See Rita Copeland’s *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*. Ian Johnson, too, rightly highlights “the dominant conception of translation in the later medieval period, when it was seen as something akin to commentary or exposition” (15).

¹⁹¹ The oft-cited phrase appears in Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, lines 133-34.

¹⁹² She continues: “He does not of course merely transmit facts, as the persona will pretend to do in the mock apology, but he deviates little from rhetorical and formal conventions” (237).

Even when he places sources aside, he presents himself as cautious. In the *General Prologue* he seems reasonable and unobtrusive in what he does:

Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
 To telle yow al the condicioun
 Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
 And whiche they weren, and of what degree. (I.37-40)

And yet this role, when viewed across the larger project, is *played*, amounts to Chaucer's projection of himself. This role, assumed for the time being, effectively changes as his text falls out of his control. After all, he claims to use his text just to relate how people are. Hidden in this initial plans are his need to judge, his use of other sources, and the effect that those factors will have on his readers.

As Chaucer must be aware, engagement with sources as his text outlives him will affect his work's meaning. William Rossiter has argued with regard to the *Clerk's Tale* that the "sources" cannot be simply forgotten but affect the meaning we are to see.¹⁹³ To be sure, the humanist (and frustratingly enigmatic and apocalyptic) project of finding meaning between Chaucer's text and his "sources" is still developing. For one matter, Chaucer's credibility as a writer is at stake in how he translates. This is particularly true as his frequent borrowing of sources requires such frequent translation. Barry Windeatt shows an important implication of Chaucer at least pretending to be a *fidus interpretes*: "The guise of the slavishly faithful translator is variously exploited by Chaucer as an

¹⁹³ Rossiter here is quoting Roland Barthes, *Image—Music—Text* (160), which he engaged with a few pages previous. "...Boccaccio's tale, Petrarch's translation, and Chaucer's translation of that translation (which may have been directly influenced by the Boccaccian original, according to some commentators) constitute what may be termed the Griseldan intertext, with all of the attendant problems and complexities concomitant with that 'vast stereophony'" (169). He highlights Barthes' operative statement of the intertextual: "The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text" (Barthes 160, qtd. in Rossiter 166).

enabling device. If translation includes so much, little faith is broken, and pretending to be translator rather than author can help evade problems of authority in boldly innovative adaptations” (“Geoffrey Chaucer” 141). As Windeatt’s analysis reminds us, translation requires much more than linguistic competence. It involves gaining the reader’s trust, and even maintaining the reader’s trust when the surface meaning is proven not what it seemed to be. Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales* gives us a special kind of text that transcends the limitations of earlier devotional and formulaic works. In Stephanie Trigg’s formulation, Chaucer and Gower “invent a new kind of author role in English, using and adapting the vocabulary of the academic prologues” (*Congenial Souls* 53). Therefore, such rich texts as the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio* accomplish this while harnessing the terms of more formulaic literature.

The space that enabled Chaucer (and Gower) to assume his special author role and to produce this type of text was made in part by the social mobility of this time period in England. As one important factor, writers in this period assumed a special social and legal status. As Kellie Robertson has shown, writers’ work in late-medieval England needed to find a special niche after labor laws that were instituted after the plague.¹⁹⁴ As such, their work became more conspicuous. The late Middle Ages saw significant changes in how texts were constructed and in what resources were available to writers. As Chris Given-Wilson suggests, the production of chronicles, largely produced by monks in the thirteenth century, became more of the domain of secular clerks in the

¹⁹⁴ Robertson generalizes, “Poets were not (to our knowledge) regularly hauled before local peace commissions, though the work of travelling pilgrims, preachers, and university students—fellow labourers in the immaterial vineyards—was regularly surveyed under these increasingly stringent laws” (445). In spite of this, as she goes on to establish, authors whose work has survived have shown an awareness of the new designations of work, and records exist of clergy and university students being burdened to prove the necessity of their work as they moved from place to place.

fourteenth century (*Chronicles* 16).¹⁹⁵ These factors at least begin to account for how vernacular and lay writers became increasingly influential in late-medieval England, a trend of which Chaucer is keenly aware.

Chaucer, as we can see already, is careful to foreground multiple authorial acts for which he is responsible, even if his labeling of them does not exactly line up with what he is doing. As David Wallace points out, Chaucer's role as writer is essential: "Through the business of finding the *felaweshipe*, then, Chaucer comes to employ his particular skills and hence to claim *his* specific social function" (*Chaucerian Polity* 82). Also, as Wallace points out, his role as *auctor* is in some ways shared with, as well as established by, the Wife of Bath: "She is herself imbued with knowledge of the techniques of clerkly exegesis, knowledge that allows her to actively interrogate rather than passively receive the terms of clerkly and antifeminist critique" (82). She is even bold enough to get into what Paul "dorste comanden" regarding a chaste life:

Poul dorst nat comanden, atte leeste,

A thyng of which his maister yaf noon heeste. (III.73-74)

[Paul dares not command, at least, a thing about which his master gave no command.]

Authority effectively rests not only in stating commands but in delineating what is not commanded. In this period in which the meanings of writers and writing shift, Chaucer especially shows how individual interpreters put their own mark on the text. Beyond this, individual interpreters necessarily impose their own assumptions concerning the posterity of texts. As a practical matter, texts come to be seen as the most reliable means of apocalyptic dissemination. Even as this has been true throughout the history of Judeo-

¹⁹⁵ Given-Wilson here cites a "brief revival of monastic writing around 1380" (16).

Christian apocalyptic thought, this sense of textual continuity intensifies in a period of ascendant literacy.

Written Apocalypticism at a Time of Textual Proliferation

The more that apocalypticism becomes text-based, the more that seeking truth becomes a matter of writing. Complex text-oriented cultures may consist of coexisting overlapping, lingering, and late-arriving texts. As Fiona Somerset has recently observed with regard to “Lollard pastoralia,” even where texts do not at first glance scream a political identity, the culture may consist of “creative adaptation, rather than careful reproduction of an authorial original” (“Textual Transmission” 89). As will become later in the examples drawn from the *Canterbury Tales*, textual manipulations (subtle and not-so-subtle) show that writing is indeed powerful, even as its power is harnessed variously for different ends. So it isn’t all about the author and the author’s conspicuous work in an apocalyptic context. Previously existing textual traditions provide much of the machinery authors may use in an apocalyptic vein. This holds true, for example, as hagiographic texts—texts that coexist with Chaucer and Gower—have for centuries managed to encapsulate the works of someone who may have acted virtuously out of a sense of urgency, and whose exemplary behavior may communicate similar urgency to the audiences hearing such stories. Hagiography negotiates the past, present, and future. Through claims to the supernatural (particularly posthumous miracles) it categorically leverages a saint’s awareness of what happens after one’s life. This period’s multi-layered engagement with saints proved deeply productive throughout the Middle Ages and managed to promote vernacular literacy in religious matters into the following century. This occurred even as a wide variety of vernacular religious texts were

restricted in England.¹⁹⁶ At stake in these texts is the epistemology of supernatural information, something very much debated in the context of Wycliffism. And yet, even as rich possibilities existed in the supernatural events of miracle stories, so too were miracles in some ways challenged as the Middle Ages progressed. As Chris Given-Wilson points out, the inclusion (or exclusion) of miracles in chronicles in the later Middle Ages becomes especially conspicuous. As miracles seem to be avoided in some chronicles,¹⁹⁷ they are rhetorically powerful in others, providing what Given-Wilson calls “Godwitness testimony” (*Chronicles* 38). This in particular emphasizes divine control over human activity and over time. And as narratives continue to be collected and repackaged in the late Middle Ages, newly adapted hagiographic and other religiously-grounded texts re-establish authority with their definitive image of the past and implications for the present and future.

The Unforgiving Pardon and the Manipulable Document

Another rich field of meaning for texts is in official and ecclesiastical pronouncements. The fact that the meaning of official pronouncements is subject to debate in this period is perhaps most evident in discourse of last things apparent in indulgences. Chaucer’s Pardoner makes his claims to judge clear in his prologue. And as he does this, he introduces (and makes himself vulnerable to) debate on one’s credibility, on merit, and on the force of texts to support a person. To step back a bit, in allowing us to read the Pardoner’s extended discourse in which his own works, Chaucer stimulates a robust discussion about the possibilities (for success and for abuse) of

¹⁹⁶ As Sanok maintains, “the sweeping reforms of the early fifteenth century that outlawed much vernacular religious writing in England did not limit the composition or translation of hagiography” (27). See, too, Watson’s “Censorship and Cultural Change” (833), which Sanok cites.

¹⁹⁷ Given-Wilson cites in particular *The Chronicle of Adam Usk*.

spoken and written communication. The mark of the Pardoner, particularly in the prologue to his tale, may require more of the reader than that of any of the other pilgrims. Here in the *Pardoner's Prologue* he not only shows the sleight of hand that can be practiced in communication, but he also invites the reader to engage with the text. Something is amiss, and the reader has to piece together the problems with the Pardoner's presentation of religious teaching. As I argued in my previous chapter, the particularly confessional character assumed by much spoken communication in the period assumed an apocalyptic urgency and immediacy. However, while writing by its nature embodies the ephemeral, in an apocalyptic context writing may be seen as occupying a position that is somewhat ephemeral, somewhat permanent.

In a time when there already exists much confusion and disagreement about ecclesiastical authority, Chaucer's Pardoner makes references to authority even more confusing for the laity. But through this confusion, Chaucer offers an intensive rhetorical education. It starts with addressing who this corrupt handler of spoken and written communication is. The Pardoner, though he is not clergy, assumes a role of disseminator of religious messages (as opposed to a most lay receivers of religious meaning) and sets himself far enough above some others in the company. His concern with power and his seeming carelessness about spiritual matters would seem to disqualify him from preaching. He runs counter to the broad requirements for motivation given in Robert of Basevorn's fourteenth-century preaching manual:

Let the preacher see to it above all that he have a good purpose for his sermon—such as the praise of God, or His saints, or the edification of his neighbor, or some such object deserving eternal life. If, secondarily, he

also includes another purpose—that he be famous, or that he gain something temporal, or the like—he is an adulterer of the Word of God, and this is considered a mortal sin. (125)

In the light of this fairly intuitive guidance, the Pardoner would be spiritually in trouble. The *Prologue* not only lays his intentions bare but also presents a deeply compromised message. The Pardoner makes claims to powers that most laypersons do not have access to, although he is officially defined as lay. And, as Gregory Gross has pointed out, the Pardoner is keenly aware of the limitations of priests and uses those limitations to his own advantage (166-67). The grey area he exploits exists not only because of the logistical necessities caused by the promotion of indulgences but also because he makes it for himself. Swanson lays out the laxity enjoyed by pardoners as they were supervised only minimally:

Pardoners existed on the periphery of the church's structures. They had no formal place in its hierarchy, no rank in clerical orders. While clerics appear as questors, and might be actively involved in indulgence distribution, over time it is probably that the trade became increasingly laicized. Being so much on the edge, ancillary, pardoners also slipped out of sight for the church's legislators: no prescriptive texts fully establish the pattern of a pardoner's life. (*Indulgences in Late Medieval England* 181)

From medieval and modern perspectives, Swanson's observation means that Pardoners were "peripheral" because they were not contained by and were not the focus of certain texts. But their outsider status has a very different effect from that of the apocalyptic seer. In fact the Pardoner is the false prophet *par excellence*.

The Pardoner and his work—both easy to see as apocalyptic evil—are especially subject to a scrutiny that proves textual.¹⁹⁸ So this Pardoner in the *Canterbury Tales* proves to be a major object of study and must be scrutinized as a text himself, if readers are to resist him. In this midst of the company of pilgrims, Chaucer’s Pardoner is in no way “out of sight.” Why then is this Pardoner not confronted directly regarding obvious abuses? And if we follow that the Pardoner is presented believably, how can he be reasonably effective selling pardons and relics as he gives away so much of his *modus operandi*?

“Lordynges,” quod he, “in chirches whan I preche,

I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche,

And ryngge it out as rounde as gooth a belle,

For I kan al by rote that I telle.

My theme is alwey oon, and evere was—

Radix malorum est Cupiditas.

First I pronounce whennes that I come,

And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some.

Oure lige lordes seel on my patent,

That shewe I first, my body to warente,

That no man be so boold, ne preest ne clerk,

Me to destourbe of Cristes hooly werk. (VI.329-340)

[Lords, said he, in churches when I preach, I pain myself to have a high

speech, and ring it out as decisively as a bell goes, for I know by rote

everything that I tell. My theme is always one, and always has been—

¹⁹⁸ See Stephen O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*.

“The love of the money is the root of evil”—First I pronounce where I came from, then I show my bulls, all and some, our liege lord’s seal on my patent, that I show first, in order to protect my body, that no man would be so bold, neither priest nor clerk, to disturb me from Christ’s holy work.]

The text on which the Pardoner depends provides him a form of protection as well as legitimizing his work as “hooly.” His texts temper the reaction that many would have to avoid him at best, harm him at worst. These texts—present on the pilgrimage—effectively serve as characters themselves. Oddly enough, it is the Pardoner who is most “read,” and his formulaic texts that are less subjected to interpretation than he is.

The Pardoner’s legibly nefarious practice requires that one ask the question, can a message be trusted in the hands of the untrained?¹⁹⁹ His seeming relegation of Latin to superficiality and not to specific theological meaning (“And in Latyn I speke a wordes fewe,” 344) suggests that the necessary Latin is easy enough to perform for a lay audience. Latin is a mark of superiority but not a font of deep meaning for him. Limited repetition does not a language make. He is furthermore not homiletically trained. The very fact that his “theme is alwey oon, and evere was” shows his narrow focus. His work embodies a very practical theology, a conspicuously non-traditional one, and the indulgence for its claims and physicality effectively mirrors and rivals services offered within the sacramental system, as in his scandalous offering of absolution. He uses superficial speech, preaches against greed while proving himself guilty of it, uses the seal on the letter patent to intimidate, and imputes on Christ work that is theologically

¹⁹⁹ This alerts us to the broad concern in the later Middle Ages about what made priests fit or unfit and the efficacy of their sacraments, a topic too knotted to cover in this study. Again, for the matter as it was addressed by Wyclif in this period, see Ian Christopher Levy’s “Was John Wyclif’s Theology of the Eucharist Donatistic?”

questioned. As he points to the authority bestowed through the bulls (336) by way of a whole host of contemporary religious authorities²⁰⁰ he connects himself to a very real contemporary power structure. He points to living persons whose power supersedes that of anyone else in the company. Furthermore, through repetition he is saying things seemingly consonant with what people in the Church have been saying. And as his discourse is committed to a text, this prologue offers a tightly drawn picture of clerical corruption and its demonstrable evil. The texts he holds prove ambiguous, and he on the whole is conflicted. Even as texts connect him to some who are in power, the exact terms of that connection are not even necessarily clear to him as the theology of pardons is subject to debate. Overall, he suffers from being as disconnected by texts as he is connected by them.

The Judgment of the Text

His vulnerability to texts is especially apparent when one considers that by textual means the Pardoner is made easier for any literate person to judge. Readers can see that he wins at the expense of those to whom he preaches—at monetary expense and at the expense of reputation.²⁰¹ Again, it is by Chaucer's text—by committing the spoken sermon or pitch to writing—that the Pardoner is undone. By “preaching” he assumes authority, and by this public speech he becomes someone that many listen to. Preaching in this period, too, becomes an act over which considerable ink is spilled. As theologians continue in late scholasticism to use texts to delineate what sermons should be and as sermons come to be modeled on textual examples, preaching necessarily becomes more

²⁰⁰ The text points to popes, cardinals, patriarchs, and bishops (342-43).

²⁰¹ This is not to say that he gets what he wants among the company of pilgrims. Eugene Vance is right to note the Pardoner is somewhat ignorant of the rhetorical situation: “Because he underestimates the indignation his discourse causes among his fellow pilgrims, he does not anticipate either the retaliation that awaits him or the positive example of humble eloquence that will be given by the Nun's Priest” (733).

deeply affected by texts.²⁰² And the fact that the Pardoner is subject to textual scrutiny by lay and clergy alike points to the diversity of ways in which textual practices lend themselves to judgement.

But the fact that the Pardoner also judges must not be lost, as it too speaks to how permanent this prologue's presumed forms of judgment are. To accomplish what he wants, the Pardoner also relies on the very binding—perhaps permanent and likely on some level textual—consequences of his exposure of behavior. He uses the vulnerability entailed by religious correction and by social knowledge within a local community. Religious correction, as I have suggested earlier in this study, should help the individual soul, but the Pardoner leverages social knowledge against individuals who would oppose him.

For though I telle noght his proper name,

Men shal wel knowe that it is the same,

By signes, and by other circumstances.

Thus quyte I folk that doon us displesances;

Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe

Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe. (VI.417-422)

[For thought I do not tell his proper name, people shall well know that it is the same, by signs, and by other circumstances. Thus I verbally avenge folk who do harm to us; Thus I spit my venom under the guise of holiness, to seem holy and true.]

Such “seeming” is exposed as false the more that this admission is read. Just as anyone collecting money on the Church's behalf can be maligned along with the Pardoner, so

²⁰² See Mirk's *Festial* and Cigman's *Lollard Sermons* collection as examples.

may anyone offering counsel on the Church's behalf. By admitting to wrongs and by mirroring wrongs that others too are guilty of, he might presume to put himself above correction. This move may save him from extended scrutiny and protection. The Pardoner undoubtedly persists after the pilgrimage and his corruption is assumed to persist in reality—if fragmented across countless acts of corruption. But so too do textual responses to this evil persist, Chaucer's framing work being one of them. Thus documentary evidence—here Chaucer's text of the *Pardoner's Prologue*, elsewhere pardons and written records of correction—is essential to the apocalyptic environment of late-fourteenth century writing. It provides a necessary check against speech that leaves no physical evidence.

The “Charter of Christ”: Reconfiguring the Familiar

Also noteworthy for its purportedly grounding in documentary reality is the “Short Charter of Christ,” in which the perspective of Christ is assumed in legal charter form. As Emily Steiner has noted, “fictive legal documents” such as this “represent the point at which the stuff of documentary culture (charters, seals, coffers) and its agents (grantors, notaries, witnesses) were being translated into the rhetoric and ideologies of popular piety” (*Documentary Culture* 193). For the “Short Charter,” its complexity as literature and its rhetorical power owe to its ability to harness different genres and invoke rhetorical moves in novel ways. Readers are presented with essentially biblically verifiable information, but they are expected to process these facts through a voice different from that of a canonical source.

Wytnes the dey that turnyd to nyght

And the sone that withdrew hys lyght.

Wytnes the erth that than dyde quake

And the stones that all to-brake.

Wytnes the vayle that than dyd ryve,

And dede men that rosse fro deth to lyve.

Wytnes my moder and Seynt John

And other that ther were, many one.

In wytnes of that yche thyng,

Myn awne sele therto I hyng. (Shuffelton ed., lines 21-30)

[Witness the day that turned to night, and the son that withdrew his light.

Witness the earth that then did quake, and the stones that all broke up.

Witness the veil that did split, and dead people who rose from death to life.

Witness my mother and St. John and many others that were there. In

witness of each of these things, I attach my own seal²⁰³.]

The repeated command to “witness” makes the reader accountable for reading the text and acting on that reading. The “charter” thus immediately brings certain obligations for the reader, forcing her or him to confront the crucifixion sequence. As Emily Steiner has pointed out, the extant Charters of Christ in Middle English communicate a fascination with the culture of legal documents in the period. Moreover, these pretended charters serve most tellingly as a hybrid of different forms of communication accessible to the period. Even as the crucifixion sequence seems to be unchanged, it is merely the textual representation of it that has changed. Readers are supposed to witness those things that otherwise might be mere words on the page or mere words read aloud. In particular in lines 23-26 the reader is supposed to witness those expressions of divine power over

²⁰³ As would be done on a legal document.

nature that continued to be echoed in apocalyptic rhetoric throughout the Middle Ages: the quaking earth, breaking stones, broken veil, and rising dead emerge as supernatural events that we are to entertain seriously, to almost experience. The Charters of Christ thus reframe the canonical and familiar.²⁰⁴ This apocalyptic textual function turns the biblical narrative into a vision of sorts. These texts argue for the permanence of the contained story, a story that attests to divine power, including the divine capacity to judge.

Textual Memory-Making, Belief-Making

Texts may make more permanent other things as well, including the content of dreams and overwhelming phenomena such as plague. The ability of texts to transfix readers and to point to impossible-to-capture extratextual realities is quite evident in *Pearl*. David Coley has recently argued that *Pearl* may be understood as text connected “to the ongoing rupture of the pestilence” (“*Pearl* and the Narrative of Pestilence” 215).²⁰⁵ Coley maintains that language has been thoroughly affected by the plague and considers plague’s resonances within *Pearl*’s language of physicality. Even if we do not concede the strong associations with the plague in *Pearl* that Coley maintains, we should consider the extent to which texts bear some memory of plague.²⁰⁶ This happens not only through the discourse of physical description but also (and perhaps more importantly)

²⁰⁴ This concern with reframing and reconfiguring other texts is considered in more detail below.

²⁰⁵ Coley establishes many of *Pearl*’s functions, showing how difficult the work is to define: “Equal parts elegy, allegory, apocalypse, social commentary, and courtly production, the enigmatic *Pearl* is unusually well situated to register an event that resonated broadly across familial, social, and spiritual lines” (217). Although the issue of pestilence has not been picked up much in studies of *Pearl*, Coley points to some exceptions in *Pearl* scholarship that have addressed pestilence: Freidl and Kirby’s work and also Katherine Terrell’s article, the latter of which denies any such connection.

²⁰⁶ Coley admirably situates this memory in meaning reminiscent of pestilence: “The presence of so many words in *Pearl*’s second stanza with so consistent a set of double (or triple) meanings—*spot, clot, moul, bolne, bele*—allows the poem to sustain a semantic register that undoubtedly, if indirectly, alludes to the bodily marks of pestilence. Equally important, however, *Pearl*’s lexical richness—an example of the “ornamental verbal ‘density’” so prized in Middle English alliterative poetry and a lingering textual marker of the poem’s courtly milieu—begins to connect the pestilential semantic register with the poem’s broader thematic concerns” (222-23).

through eschatological discourse. Furthermore, this is evident in the very strong impulse in this period for written texts to serve as cultural memory. Still, this memory is but an approximation of the larger reality worth seeking. Jessica Brantley has recently argued the following regarding what the written text accomplishes:

The poem of *Pearl*, constructed around the physical image of the spotless jewel, exposes the necessity of joining allegorical speculation with tangible particulars. *Pearl* provides a key site for exploring the ways in which even the most otherworldly medieval text can be embedded in medieval culture, for it relies on the idea of the artifact not simply for its impetus, but also for its continuation and aftermath. (192)

Within the poem, the pearl itself is seen to transcend high forms of writing and learning: “Ne Arystotle nawþer by hys lettrure / Of carped þe kynde þese propertéz” [“...nor did Aristotle through his learning speak of the nature of these special virtues.”] (751-2; trans. Andrew and Waldron). The ineffability that Peter Bogdanos has expounded on is central to *Pearl*. Bogdanos’ reading of *Pearl* encapsulates the poet’s pretension to a sort of biblical textual power:

...[H]e borrows or, rather, daringly appropriates the anagogic telos of the Bible and makes it the dramatic denouement of his own private experience. He claims to have seen what John the Apostle saw. He claims to have actually encountered the sacred prototype of anagoge itself, the New Jerusalem. Can a poet imitate God’s way of writing more closely than this? (11)

Writing thus proves secondary to what it discusses. And here the object—heaven—ties together the writer’s perception with John’s writing on Patmos (and John’s perception). Writing serves as a semi-permanent witness to things that speech is entirely incapable of encapsulating. This is clear early in *Pearl*, where what the dreamer perceives far exceeds even the best things he has perceived in daily life:

Ȝet þoȝt me neuer so swete a sange

As style stounde let to me stele. (19-20)

[“Never yet did a song seem to me to have such sweetness as a moment of peace let steal over me” (Trans. Andrew and Waldron)]

This brief experience proves but a foretaste. It overwhelms him, but it gives him enough of an impression to commit it to textual form. As a text, at least this foretaste can be revisited, reconsidered. Another early example from the poem illustrates how the purportedly inexpressible still manages to become expressed in a very material, textual way:

More of wele watz in þat wyse

þen I cowþe telle þaȝ I tom hade,

For vrbely herte myȝt not sufyse .

To þe tenþe dole of þo gladnez glade. (133-36)

[“There was more delight in that scene than I could describe even if I had time, for an earthly heart could not have sufficient capacity for the tenth part of those glad joys.” (Trans. Andrew and Waldron)]

The text, which will provide this dream with more permanence than it otherwise would have, is still limited. The writer’s heart and his capacity simply to write things down

limit the resultant text. Writing in this way is very clearly tied to temporal human reality, contained within preapocalyptic time. The text, just as the reader's brief dream-experience, has to survive until time is no more. It proves more permanent than the more important (yet also more fleeting) apocalyptic insight it conveys. And when it cannot convey, it must at least approximate, offer an impression, and witness to a reality greater than itself.

Texts Containing Other Texts

Even as writing is secondary to reality, it becomes more complex as it seeks out that reality. For many medieval writers, seeking out this reality involves seeking out even more texts. The development of literature in a markedly apocalyptic mode in this period is certainly coordinate with a strong awareness of the increasing number of texts available to readers of the period. This is especially evident as writers conspicuously fold other texts into their own. As I have suggested already, the very work of text-manipulation (in its various forms, including compiling and translating) affects the credibility of the apocalyptic writer and often distinguishes her or him from her or his audience. The very incorporation of multiple sources within a text promotes apocalypticism. This has been modeled in the long Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition, marked by new recorded visions, subject to constant updating while staying connected to a broader written spiritual tradition. The fact that texts reframe the material of previous texts is itself a key aspect of apocalyptic textuality. Judith Lieu highlights "the important role played within apocalyptic by the reinterpretation of earlier Scripture—the text behind apocalyptic." Lieu elaborates on this level:

The text behind apocalyptic is an integral part of the production of the apocalyptic text itself. Indeed, this may be quite precisely so: it has been convincingly argued that the study of the texts was often the stimulus for apocalyptic revelation or for heavenly ascent, perhaps through particular techniques, including meditation. Functionally, this relationship means that apocalyptic is able to address the problem that arises when ownership of the authoritative text becomes contested or when different ways of reading come into conflict. The intrinsic claims of apocalyptic revelation provide a superior, authoritative reading; on the other hand, they can also serve to delegitimise alternative readings. (245)

Texts making apocalyptic claims therefore effectively seize power for themselves, seize the reader's attention and sympathies in ways that other texts may not. This occurs in non-devotional texts as well as in more devotional ones. As we have considered Chaucer's dynamic translation and compilations already, we can see that what Chaucer does is not as important as survives him.²⁰⁷ What Chaucer claims becomes an important part of the message that will survive him.

Texts and Stability

Gower, too, very consciously folds into his work a series of texts that predate his work. However, Gower seems to envision his own apocalyptic text as more stable than Chaucer's, if only because he is willing to advance moral warning clearly and without

²⁰⁷ For an account of how Chaucer's work and legacy was shaped after his death, see John Bowers' *Chaucer and Langland*.

Chaucerian indirection. From what is largely a view from the top,²⁰⁸ Gower through texts approaches the apocalyptic in a way that legitimizes power and finds doom in the actions of the marginalized. For the privileged, Gower, apocalyptic degeneration thus involves persons falling short of his conception of human potential. To underscore power in the face of the apocalypse, Gower's perspective, his judgment, his exclusive claims to information are all in the foreground. In a gesture toward the stability and the grand vantage point assumed of texts, the Prologue of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* calls special attention to what has appeared in texts previously, what survives from an earlier time.

Of hem that writen ous tofore
 The bokes duelle, and we therefore
 Ben tawht of that was write tho:
 Forthi good is that we also
 In oure tyme among ous hiere
 Do wryte of newe som matiere,
 Essampled of these olde wyse,
 So that it myhte in such a wyse,
 Whan we ben dede and elleswhere,
 Beleve to²⁰⁹ the worldes eere
 In tyme comende after this.

[Of them that wrote for us already, the books dwell, and we therefore are
 taught of what was written then; Therefore it is good that we also in our

²⁰⁸ On Gower's favoring of the already privileged, see Arner, as well as Peck's "John Gower and the Book of Daniel." See too, David Coley's *The Wheel of Language*, where he points out Gower's conception of books as being necessary to celebrate the virtuous and privileged (186).

²⁰⁹ Peck's gloss of *beleve to* from his edition: "be left behind for." Peck suggests (and rightly so) that this is the verb *bileven* for which the *MED* gives a range including "be left for," "to let remain," and "to remain." Clearly, this verb, used in this context, highlights the persistence of the text well into the future.

time among us here do write some material afresh, drawn from these old ways, so that it might in such a way, when we are dead and elsewhere, be left behind for the world's ear in time coming after this.]

Stories, as Gower suggests, need to be retold. Texts need to be reshaped, and new texts need to be added. Old material is freshened (in the most favorable construction), and it may also be substantially altered or even misrepresented. This sense of newness is especially important as the presumed age of the world (or the late stage of time) are highlighted. As James Dean argues, "By internalizing the idea of the world grown old, the writers of the later Middle Ages made it new" (*The World Grown Old* 324). In the case of ambitious constructions such as Gower's *Confessio Amantis* or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, literature that is aware of the apocalypse produces more literature aware of the apocalypse, each manifestation arguing for its own supremacy and urgency.

Again, the prospect that a writer's message is useful beyond her or his death is key. Gower makes an urgent appeal for stability, a stability that he might not necessarily live to see. Consistent with Lieu's terms of apocalyptic textuality, Gower's elaborate text is constructed with an awareness of those who might read the text beyond the writer or author-compiler's life. Gower shows his awareness of the importance of producing his text "[i]n oure tyme among ous hier." An apocalyptic sense of time, as I have suggested already, depends not necessarily on an end that will be seen during one's lifetime, but it acknowledges the definiteness of an end. Furthermore, as A. J. Minnis notes, "Chaucer treats his fictional characters with the respect that the Latin compilers had reserved for their authors" (*Medieval Theory of Authorship* 203).²¹⁰ Chaucer shows us very clearly

²¹⁰ Norman Hinton's general definition of *compilation* is useful: "a work which arranges *auctoritates* in such a way as to produce materials for a discussion of moral or ethical issues" (28). Arthur Barr's recent

what texts can do, how authority is constructed. This even applies to texts considered formulaic, texts often passed over today and taken for granted as predictable, functional in their time.²¹¹ Philosophical considerations of time as created and endable and of impending judgment contribute to the understanding of texts' function and duration in this period.

As one key example of this vividly conceived sense of history, Gower's engagement with Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the *Confessio's* prologue highlights apocalyptic time. As Lynn Arner has noted, this passage has profound implications for Gower's apocalyptic awareness of past and future (74). Gower's setup of this section is instructive:

Bot in this wise a man mai lere

Hou that the world is gon aboute,

The which wel nyh is wered oute,

After the forme of that figure

Which Daniel in his scripture

Expondeth, as tofore is told. (868-73)

[But in this way a person may read how that the world has gone about,

which well night is worn out, according to the form of that figure, which

Daniel in his book of Scripture expounds, as is told before.]

In presenting this text, Gower importantly claims the story as his own. As Russell Peck has noted, here "Gower has shifted the voice of the prayer from Daniel to himself, but the

definition, however, more challengingly centers on the reader's perspective (10-11). See, too, Minnis' "Late-Medieval Discussions of *Compilatio*."

²¹¹ See Michael Van Dussen's recent argument about the impact of networks of communication during the ecclesiastical-political shakeup of the papal schism, even evident in *compilationes* (191).

point of underscoring “hou that this world schal torne and wende” is the same (“John Gower and the Book of Daniel” 173-4). In fact, Gower’s shifting to himself underscores his status as seer-like, with an exclusive vantage-point of apocalyptic developments.

Furthermore, Lynn Arner notes the progression:

According to the dream’s logic (reflected in the shift from a golden age to a silver age, to a bronze era, to an epoch of iron mixed with clay), the passing of time represents a movement into an increasingly less glorious, less desirable state of existence. (78)²¹²

Reading Gower and reading the statue-body of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream thus must set the readers at some kind of an advantage. And yet, as James Dean argues with regard to this statue-form, “is an emblem of mankind’s original and continuing culpability for the world’s ‘health’ and for the mutations of empire” (*The World Grown Old* 261). The fragility of humanity is argued throughout Gower’s work—especially evident in the *Vox clamantis* and the *Confessio amantis*, so any small check against human weakness can forestall judgment or strengthen the few who are apocalyptically aware.

Given the inevitability of divine Judgment in medieval Christian apocalypticism, this advantage is limited, given that knowledge of one’s place in history points to the end of history. Furthermore, this awareness of time’s finitude acknowledges the necessity of

²¹² In analyzing the Prologue, Lynn Arner explains the apocalyptic implications of the moment in this way: The placement of Gower’s England at the end of history creates several effects. First, this placement works to generate a sense of crisis, a sense that readers are living in a desperate time and that society is on the verge of collapse. This message is underscored by the image of the stone descending the hill, landing on the statue’s toes, and grinding the figure into powder. This is the fate that threatens Gower’s England. The apocalyptic tone accompanying this image and the subsequent use of imminent destruction position late medieval England at the end of a long line of history, tottering on the edge of abyss. By locating society in such an undesirable predicament, the text prompts readers to support conservative groups in society, namely, groups who attempt to conserve or maintain social relations and the distribution of wealth and power, as opposed to those who might attempt to change the social power. (78)

preserving information for future generations. Preserving information for the future is invoked powerfully in the opening of Thomas Favent's often-cited account of the 1386 Parliament, "History or Narration Concerning the Manner and Form of the Merciless Parliament":

Since, by custom, ancient and long durations fatally seep away from human beings' fleeting present memories, urgent reason has admonished me that, in however childishly inept a way, I should undertake to compose for posterity an account in formal written proceedings of certain extraordinary events that not long ago transpired in England. Let it not be disgusting to bring to mind and commit to memory such things which, if every diligent reader would heed, he would have a mirror, in part, for more easily avoiding adversities, scandals, and the dangers and burning torments of death. I will not therefore allow it to remain delighting in the secret den of silence, how a monstrous sin of this sort, starting from certain people who were smothered in the embers of avarice and burdened by the weight of crimes, thereafter raced through England. (Trans. Galloway 231).

The account dwells on moments that seem to typify irreparable damage, even doom. And it makes very clear the obligation of readers in posterity to heed warnings and to take note of important lessons. It allows for the extension of time before the world ends, and it acts on the chance that it may reach a reader who may effect change. As such, it provides—as a sort of textual-communicative crap shoot—a strong warning of temporal consequences of wrongdoing, as it hits to a broader panoptic moral judgment. It

envisions communication in this conflicted moment as best done formally, directly, publicly. And even more to Favent's point, this account allows for the possibility that future readers—even those of some distant generation—may be more receptive and aware than those of the present generation. It shows the value of historical documents to connect with those in the future whom the recorder will never meet.

Path to the Foreseeable Future: “Going” and Writing the Middle Way

Still, forcefulness and directness are only effective under certain conditions and may very well limit or alienate readers. What Gower and Chaucer undertake in their respective grand narrative-interpretive projects requires a more sophisticated rhetorical engagement in order to reach readers well into the future. In order to make sure that readers stay interested enough to continue the chain of information into the future, Gower must balance rhetorical strategies. Gower characterizes his work as negotiating a “middel weie”:

Bot for men sein, and soth it is,
 That who that al of wisdom writ
 It dulleth ofte a mannes wit.
 To him that schal it aldai rede,
 For thilke cause, if that ye rede,
 I wolde go the middel weie
 And wryte a bok betwen the tweie,
 Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore,
 That of the lasse or of the more
 Som man mai lyke of that I wryte. (Prol. 12-21)

[For people say, and it is true, that even one who writes all from wisdom, it often dulls a person's wit. To whoever should read it all day, for the same cause, if that you read, I would go the middle way and write a book between the two, somewhat of *lust*, somewhat of *lore*, that more or less some person may like what I write.]

Gower is profoundly concerned with continuity and with permanence. After all, he concedes that any text is subject to the intermittent attention of the readers. He is creating a text that can sustain future readers' intentions and sharpen "a mannes wit." He is here promising to reward the individual reader as he subtly nudges the reader to get her or his attention. Then, too insofar as the potential loss of readers is analogous to apostasy, a potentially apocalyptic falling-off, this text marks engaged readers as special. As Isabel Davis explains, "in opening up strange indeterminate, intermediate and unmapped textual spaces, he constructs within the poem the autobiographical motive: the social indeterminacy of his bureaucratic *milieu*" (95). "The "middel weie," while it may sound conventional or easy, is in fact a complicated negotiation that ultimately highlights Gower's work as an author. Regarding the broader concern with "lust" and "lore," as Sian Echard and others have observed, Gower shows an awareness of the oft-invoked formula *prodesse et delectare* drawing from Horace's *Ars Poetica* and the long medieval engagement with ancient rhetoric.²¹³ This also reflects the *suavitas* of Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*.²¹⁴ Sweetness, for Augustine, has a function in learning.²¹⁵

²¹³ Introduction, *A Companion to Gower*, 4. This is also highlighted by Olsson (31). On the changing role of Horace's *Ars poetica* in the late Middle Ages, see Copeland, "Horace's *Ars Poetica*," esp. 15-16, 26-29.

²¹⁴ As Olsson puts it, "This *suavitas* is, according to some medieval witnesses, the distinctive feature of poetic utterance, and it is, according to others, the source of its great rhetorical power" (31). See, too, Mary Carruthers' "Sweetness" on medieval notions of *suavitas* and *dulcedo*.

²¹⁵ See *De doctrina christiana* 4.23: "Sicut autem saepe sumenda sunt et amara salubria, ita semper vitanda est pernicioza dulcedo; sed salubri suavitate vel suavi salubritate quid melius? Quanto enim magis illic

The fact that this requires a balanced and carefully constructed statement cannot be emphasized enough. One can, after all, favor readers to the detriment of a necessary apocalyptic message. Gower in the prologue to the *Confessio* has to anticipate and account for the wishes of others as he hopes that “Som man mai lyke of that I wryte.” As Peck is careful to note in his introduction, Gower’s *middel weie* has not only rhetorical but also ethical components (13-15). Some sense of pleasure or satisfaction must precede learning in order for anything to be learned. Chaucer’s indulgence in “myrthe and solaaas” in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* poses another problem entirely (VII.714). Yet pleasure in the extreme may be seen to be dangerous. Robert de Gretham in the mid-thirteenth century was one of many in the Christian West who maintained that popular entertainments often proved inherently dangerous. This is clear in the Middle English rendering of his *Miroir*.²¹⁶

Many men hyt ben þat han inwylle to heren rede romaunces & gestes. þat is more than ydelschyp, & þat I wol wel that alle men hit wyte. Ffor þey ben controued þorw mannes wytte þat setten her hertes to folyes & trofles. As þe lyer doþ, he makeþ his speche queyntlyche þat hit may ben delysious to mannes heryng for þat hit scholde be the better listened. Ffor Salamon seyþ he had enquired & sowþt all þingus undur sunne, & þen he fond in al nothing by uanyte but þat þing þat falles to Goddes worschyp and to note of mannes sowle. (Blumreich 1)

appetitur suavitas tanto facilius salubritas prodest.” [“We often have to take bitter medicines, and we must always avoid sweet things that are dangerous: but what better than sweet things that give health, or medicines that are sweet? The more we are attracted by sweetness, the easier it is for medicine to do its healing work.”] (ed. and trans. Green 204-5).

²¹⁶ Composed 1250-60 in Anglo-Norman and rendered into Middle English in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century (Blumreich xiii).

[There are many men that have great desire to hear romances and geste read. That is more [*i.e.*, worse] than idleness, and that I deeply wish that all men know it. For they are “composed through the wit of men that set their hearts to follies”²¹⁷ As the liar does, he makes his speech cleverly that it may be appealing to man’s hearing so that it should be better understood (lit., “listened”). For Solomon says that he had inquired and sought all things under the sun, and then he found all nothing by vanity except that thing which falls to God’s worship and to take note of the human soul.]

Gretham is deeply concerned with how dangerous stories can be and how certain texts and stories can detract from virtue and wisdom. If certain texts persist, says Gretham, they will persist as temptations, stumbling-blocks. And yet these texts require more texts by way of response. Writing under the influence of apocalypticism, one must assume that warning and corrective writings are more permanent, less ephemeral, than those promoting evil. As the number of texts and the numbers of the literate increase in late-medieval England, textual competition and exclusion may be seen as necessary.

This is different from another equally apocalyptic approach—attempting to present an integral apocalyptically aware text that contains and reframes previously disseminated challenging or insufficient writings. Gower’s larger project in the *Confessio* systematizes and fixes a wealth of source material for a conflicted generation. Gower’s balancing of *lust* and *lore*, considered above, is part of the process of redesigning content in contemporary terms yet with an eye on the future. The crafting of

²¹⁷ The clear phrasing and clarification of syntax quoted here is owed to the notes of Collette and Garrett-Goodyear.

texts proves edifying for its readers and keeps its readers engaged, aware.

Apocalypticism in any form carries with it some moral impulse. Moral teaching—even in a purportedly moral, didactic, even theological work—proves largely dependent on the structure of narrative. In setting up the long *Confessio*, Gower emphasizes his own work, and also the possibility that only a few readers out of many might respond favorably. Only a minority of readers will likely stick with his work.

Of course these different tendencies may be blended just as well, and some balance slightly different from Gower's or Chaucer's may be seen as the ideal. Meaning is fragile in an apocalyptic environment, and individual apocalypse-aware writers must find their own strategies to solidify and perpetuate their messages. A Gowerian but also more condemning ethic of communication is invoked in the opening lines of Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love*:

Many men there ben that with eeres openly sprad so moche swalowen the
 deliciousnesse of jstes and of ryme by queynt knyttyng coloures, that of
 the goodnesse or of the badnesses of the sentence take they lytel hede or
 els none. Sothely, dul wytte and a thoughtful soule so sore have myned
 and graffed in my spyrites that such craft of endytyng wol not ben of myn
 acqueyntaunce. And for rude wordes and boystous percen the herte of the
 herer to the inrest poynte and planten there the sentence of thynges so that
 with lytel helpe it is able to spring, this boke, that nothing hath of the great
 floode of wyt ne of semelych colours, is dolven with rude wordes and
 boystous, and so drawe togyder to maken the catchers therof ben the more
 redy to hent sentence. (I.Prol.1-11).

[There are many men who, with ears spread open, so much swallow the deliciousness of jests and of rhyme, by quaint knitting colors,²¹⁸ that of the goodness or of the badness of the meaning²¹⁹ take they little heed, or else none. Truthfully, dull wit and a thoughtful soul so sore have mined and planted/grafted in my spirits that such craft of writing will not be of my acquaintance. And, for rude and crude words pierce the heart to the inmost point, and plant there the sentence of things, so that with little help it is able to spring, which has nothing of the great flood of wit nor of pleasing colors is dug/buried with rude and crude words, and so drawn together to make the catchers thereof all the more ready to grasp the meaning.]

For Usk and for Gower, the very mention of readers being attentive to varying degrees signals that some readers achieve a higher status than others. Apocalypticism demands that readers be vigilant and discerning. Literacy (and the various perceived levels thereof) is the understated but equally important first step toward vigilance and discernment. Gower's text and Usk's have some role in judging the reader. Usk, like Gower, is quite willing to highlight the rude and the unpolished. As he does this, he also places some responsibility on the reader for seeing good and bad values in literature.

Prologues and the "Lewed"

With this climate of apocalyptic concern with texts established, some consideration of its longer development is in order. That several of these key concerns

²¹⁸ Wogan-Browne et al. note this to mean "elaborate figures of rhetoric binding the work together" (*Idea of the Vernacular* 32n2).

²¹⁹ *Sentence*, given its wide semantic range, is translated broadly here, although it should be noted that it often connotes serious, morally affirming meaning, particularly as Chaucer uses it with *solaas*. On the range Chaucer's usage attests to, see Koff (76-79).

have been long in developing before Gower and Usk does not make them any less fitting in the late fourteenth-century apocalyptic environment. Texts of the late Middle Ages are quite often framed by prologues telling readers how to read, what to make of the text. Gower's Prologue is but one of many from this period that show a profound concern for what the text is and what it should accomplish. This wide concern with the ends of reading holds true, even as Gower and Chaucer demand more sophisticated work on the point of their readers. Some brief examples from earlier and more devotional texts are worth considering for comparison. Around 1340, Dan Michel in presenting his translation, the *Ayenbite of Inwit*, presents a text for "lewede men":

Nou Ich wille þat ye ywyte hou hit is ywent,

Pet þis boc is ywrite mid Engliss of Kent.

Þis boc is ymad vor lewede men,

Vor vader and vor moder and for oþer ken,

Ham vor to berþe vram alle manyere sen,

Pet inne hare inwytte ne bleve no voul wen.²²⁰

[Now I wish that you know how it has gone, that this book is written in Kentish English. This book is made for common people, for father and mother and other kin, to deliver them from all manner of sin, that in their conscience they believe no foul thought.]

What happens in one's text is very real because what happens in one's conscience ("inwytt") is very real. Here, as in some later examples presented above, the text is a response to sin. Where there is sin, there must be texts. Furthermore, where sin increases,

²²⁰ Lines 8-13 from Morris ed. (262), modernized punctuation and glosses from Treharne's *Old and Middle English* (615).

so must texts increase. Most importantly, this text is presented as safe and pure. Microcosmically, texts can be centers of evil, but they can also be sanctuaries. Beyond this passage, the cradle-to-grave value of the book is true as Michel wishes that God “ondervonge his saule huanne þet he is dyad” [seize his soul when he [the human] is dead] (18). For this to happen, the text must last longer than this individual human.

As several other earlier late-medieval vernacular examples in *Idea of the Vernacular* collection illustrate, a rich field of theory of the implications of writing develops in the late Middle Ages in England (Wogan-Browne et al.). Beyond the necessary continuity required in reading, so too is efficiency important as one is aware of the end of the age. The prologue to the *Pore Caitif* certainly bears this out:

This tretyse compiled of a pore caityf and nedy of gostly help of al cristen peple, by the gret mercy and help of God shal teche simple men and wymmen of gode wille the right way to heven, yf thei wille besye hem to have it in mynde and to worche thereafter, withouten multiplicacion of many bokes. (Wogan-Browne et al. 240)

[This treatise compiled by a poor captive and needy of spiritual help of all Christian people, by the great mercy and help of God shall teach simple men and women of good will the right way to heaven, if they will busy themselves to have it in mind and to work for it, without multiplication of many books.]

The goal of spiritual teaching—not at all uncommon in medieval literature—is here enhanced by its urgency to educate those without access to many books. It fills a need in

a period of growing literacy. As writers encourage continuous engagement, they are improving on what has been done before, updating previous texts and adapting them to the immediate setting. Importantly, too, it suggests that other texts may be seen as less necessary. And it can be read just as well as embodying an apocalyptic urgency and an impetus to strengthen individuals in faith as a challenging period threatens to distract them from religious practice. The *Pore Caitif*, aware that texts are proliferating, argues that persons should not be concerned with books for books' sake.

Such devotional texts, too, aware of other texts, seek to improve on other texts and to reframe matters for present audiences. This is certainly true as certain vernacular religious texts may undermine the work of previous authorities, even as they argue that previous authorities are important by frequent reference. This work, too, must be read in the context of the repeated attempts at lay spiritual education in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the class shifts and growing literacy of the fourteenth century (and beyond), a wide program of education, increasingly must consider the possibility of literate spiritual instruction for persons to whom it previously was inaccessible. English programs of lay education, in particular traceable to Pecham's 1281 Syllabus, brought attention to the needs of marginalized and lower-class Christians. The urgency to address certain classes and people of certain regions also emerges predictably enough in English vernacular literature.

Various vernacular religious-education texts express a clear concern with meeting spiritual needs all across society and all across the lifespan. This concern likewise

appears in Robert Mannyng of Brunne's early-fourteenth-century *Handlyng Synne*.

Mannyng's concerns, too, echo those of Gretham from over a century earlier.²²¹

Of þys clerkys wyle y nouȝt seye;

To greue hem y haue grete eye,

For þey wote þat ys to wetyn

And se hyt weyl before hem wretyn.

Þat may be weyl on englyssh told,

To telle ȝow þat y may be bold.

For lewed men y vndyrtoke

On englyssh tonge to make þys boke,

For many beyn of swyche manere

Þat talys and rymys wyle bleþly here

Yn gamys, yn festys, & at þe ale,

Loue men to lestene trotouale,²²²

Þat may falle ofte to velanye

To dedly syne or outhur folye. (37-50)

[Of these clerks will I say nothing; To grieve them I have great eye, for they knew what it is to weep and see it written before them well, that may be well told in English, to tell you that I may be bold, for unlearned people I undertook to make this book in English, for there are many of such manner who will gladly hear tales and rhymes here, in games, at festivals,

²²¹ Fiona Somerset in *Feeling Like Saints* points to a common strain seen in Gretham and Mannyng typified by "complaints about laypeople spending their time on the wrong sorts of reading" (143).

²²² The *MED* gives these definitions: "(a) Vain talk, idle tale-telling; also, a trifle; a piece of foolishness; (b) a deceit, trick, delusion."

and at the alehouse, men love to listen to trifles, who may often lapse to villainy, to deadly sin, or other folly.]

Mannyng's translation here emphasizes to the English vernacular audience particular dangers related to textual culture. There are many very specific evils that emerge, even within what is understood as a Christian society. Literacy, or even oral sharing of literate knowledge, provides some hope against instability visible within society. Texts are seen to have a transformative effect on all of society, starting with those who read but also for anyone who comes into contact with those who read. If the oral culture is permeated by questionable art forms, more devout communicative practice can counteract them.

Ancient Stories through the Prism of Late-Medieval Literacy

Even if the textual awareness of the thirteenth and early fourteenth century nods toward the apocalyptic, the awareness becomes more pronounced with the social changes and concomitant growth in literacy witnessed in the late fourteenth century. This time of apocalyptic instability coincides with a wider lay population reading and writing, participating in discourse that move beyond the merely commercial or functional (including those intimating the apocalyptic).²²³ Texts may in this way be seen as consistently connected to oral culture, if the various values of oral and written communication are in flux. Again, this mirrors a broader tendency toward increased lay involvement in religious activities in the later Middle Ages. Emphases upon literate learning develop in the late Middle Ages. The emphasis on high learning appears in Mirk's sermon on St. Katherine of Alexandria, where humility and learning are juxtaposed:

²²³ On the long story of this extension of various literate acts deriving from functional literacy, see Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record*.

But thogh scheo were common of so hygh blode, for Goddys sake scheo sette noghte be the pompe of the worlde, but sette hur herte alle in oure Lorde Jhesu Criste. Wherefore whan scheo hadde ben at scole, and was lerud at the fulle and cowed spyton wyth any clerke that come to scole,...
(Reames, *Middle English Lives* 211)

[But though she had come of such high blood, for God's sake she set [herself] not according to the pomp of the world, but she set her heart on our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore when she had been at school and was educated completely and could debate with any clerk who would come to school,....]

This passage, leading up to her rebuke of the emperor, elevates her as simultaneously learned, bold, and devout. And in this short description we are made to imagine the immense possibilities of learning, even if her being high-born gave her a distinct advantage. Learning here precedes effective action. And if in the England of Mirk's time a high sense of rhetorical power is harder to obtain than Mirk suggests it is, this goal nevertheless provides an encouragement for people to read. This is often done equally as powerfully with texts offering ancient reference points.

The apocalyptic sense prevalent in the period proves to be connected to literacy itself. Invocations of literacy appear throughout a wide variety of texts engaging with Christian-historical and biblical material. As scholarship on the hagiography of this period has suggested, the popularity of ancient saints far outweighs that of more recent saints. Saint-culture in this sense may be seen as necessarily conservative, emphasizing the near-canonical and favoring those saints who bear interest across a wide geographic

area. The apocalyptic needs to make sense of all of history, needs to make connections across vast spans of time and across geographic and linguistic barriers. As Russell Peck suggests, the emphasis on learning in the *Pistel of Swete Susan*²²⁴ may be seen to promote personal advancement through reading. The story of Susanna from the book of Daniel makes literacy a sign of power:

Thei lerned hire letrure of that langage:

The maundement of Moises they marked to that may²²⁵

(18-19)

[“They taught her letters in that language. The commandments of Moses they taught to that maiden.”²²⁶]

Ancient stories thus provide some examples of reading, impelling contemporaries to seek strength in reading. In this specific case it contributes to her moral foundation, and it gives her a moral compass prior to the extreme temptation she will face. This passage and most of the *Pistel* themselves prove to be expansions of the text of the traditional book of Daniel.²²⁷ A special form of literacy proves even more powerful in the story of Belshazzar’s feast in *Clannesse*.²²⁸ The failure of even the Chaldean scholars to read the writing on the wall leads to the elevation of Daniel. Daniel’s translation also brings with it a solution for problems to Belshazzar’s power, should Belshazzar subject himself to divine guidance.

²²⁴ Peck in his TEAMS edition *Heroic Women from the Old Testament in Middle English Verse* dates the work to the late fourteenth century (73).

²²⁵ “They taught her letters in that language. The commandments of Moses they taught to that maiden.”

²²⁶ Translation effectively supplied by Peck’s edition, with second sentence given verbatim in 82n2.

²²⁷ This thirteenth chapter is cut out by Protestants and others. On the central question of the *Pistel*’s relation to the chapter from *Daniel*, see Morey, who finds only three passages (37, 43, and 58, accounted for in about 10 of the poem’s 364 lines) reflected directly in the poem (199).

²²⁸ A less inventive use of biblical narrative than the *Pistel*. Morey notes, “Approximately four-fifths of the lines are biblically based” (200).

Derfly þenne Danyel deles þyse wordes:

“Ryche kyng of þis rengne, rede þe oure Lorde!

Hit is surely soth þe Souerayn of heuen

Fylsened euer þy fader and vpon folde cheryched,

Gart hym grattest to be of gouernoires alle,

And alle þe worlde in his sylle welde as hym liked.

Whoso wolde wel do, wel hym bityde,

And quos deth so he dezyre, he dreped als fast;

Whoso hym liked to lyft, on lofte watz he sone,

And quoso hym liked to lay watz lo3ed bylyue. (1641-50)

[Daniel then boldly uttered these words: ‘Great king of this

realm, may our Lord guide you! It is certainly true the Sovereign of

heaven always aided your father and took care of him on earth, caused

him to be the greatest of all rulers, and to control all the world at his

wish as it pleased him. Whoever he wished to do good to, good came

to him, and whoever’s death he desired, he put to death immediately;

whoever it pleased him raise, he was soon on high, and whoever it pleased

him to lay low was immediately humbled....” (Trans. Andrew and

Waldron)]

In this example, as in the ones cited directly above, the shift in power in the story centers on literate knowledge—its limitations, its abuses, its objectives. The *Pearl*-Poet here shows Daniel, as an outsider in the story of Belshazzar’s feast, emerging as the only one capable of understanding. In this case, understanding transcends mere textual knowledge,

as the Chaldean scholars fail to decipher the writing on the wall. The revealed text within the text, however, proves true only insofar as it bears theological truth. Revelation here is key: Not all reading leads to correct understanding. And words have importance at a time of conflict: a correct understanding based on understanding of written language leads to other desired outcomes.

Chaucer's Prologues: Plenty of Directions, Plenty of Indirection

At the same time these changes related to literacy happen, Chaucer gives his readers some insight into complicated textual cultures, equipping them to understand (if not participate in) parts of religious culture that were previously inaccessible to them. Chaucer's prologues are important to this new-found accessibility. Chaucer's prologues lay out texts with elaborate but also mutually contradictory (or individually, self-contradictory) aims. The multivocal *Canterbury Tales* invite readers to a wealth of possibilities of reading, even though Chaucer is not in complete control of every form that others' reading may take. Rosemarie McGer's position on the function of the text intriguingly shows a text's limitations:

“Reading lessons”...continue as we progress through the *Canterbury Tales*. Through the accumulated points of view afforded by the collective or retrospective structure of the poem, we gain the perspective needed to understand that our best attempts to discover the truth about an issue must remain on the level of appreciating ambiguity until we escape temporality and gain the perspective of eternity. (153)²²⁹

²²⁹ McGer further suggests that “...no human creation (the *Canterbury Tales* included) is truly closed because it exists between Creation and Judgment or, more specifically, after the Fall but before the final Revelation of the Logos” (153).

Prologues prove rich sources of possibilities for textual functions, as Davenport observes in the prologues of the individual *Tales*. Some of this can be traced to what Davenport characterizes as “part of the machinery of commentary” (35).²³⁰ Chaucer is providing features reminiscent of sophisticated religious textual communities²³¹ but with new applications. He thus constructs texts that foster awareness of themselves and, perhaps more importantly, that show the possibilities of textual communication in this period. And, as Davenport notes, the prologues emphasize the individual—often very markedly apocalyptic—perspective. They embody the conflict of narrative as do the tales that they precede. They put tales at odds with each other in truth claims. And they all underscore the fallible human perspective that must be aware of the apocalyptic but that can only grasp it imperfectly. This is consistent with a quality of apocalyptic textuality laid out by Lieu and cited above. A series of narrators, each to some degree unreliable (but all unreliable for different reasons), de-centers the work. And this de-centering is enhanced by the roles of narrator and pilgrim that Chaucer ties to himself.²³²

A number of scholars have fruitfully explored the implications of these roles. As Lisa Kiser discusses “the narrator’s stance as an artless transcriber,” she highlights the

²³⁰ Davenport elaborates:

The prologues are part of the machinery of commentary which turns the work as a whole into a multi-layered narrative. We do not read merely a sequence of short stories but are invited to consider what each story is trying to be and how it is received. The prologues, as a result, vary a good deal in length, content, function and complexity. If we start from *The Man of Law’s Prologue*, which has a mixture of elements relevant to the immediate context and others which are inexplicable or which seem unnecessary, then one type of prologue we can recognise is in more than one part or style... (35-36)

²³¹ Here, too, see Stock, *Listening for the Text*.

²³² On various ways that the problem of Chaucer’s voice has been approached recently, see Zieman.

gulf between the narrator Chaucer and the actual Chaucer (*Truth and Textuality* 117). Chaucer thus is allowing for possibilities for his text that contemporary readers would otherwise not acknowledge of texts. As Jim Rhodes posits with regard to the self-deprecatingly stories Chaucer assigns himself in the *Tales*, “Based on the *Thopas* and the *Melibee*, it would seem that the whole thrust of the *Canterbury Tales* is to free poetry from such delimiting categories as romance escapism and moral didacticism” (172). Arguing for a markedly Chaucerian “poetics of disguise,” Esther Casier Quinn maintains the following:

Seemingly self-effacing, he establishes his authorial presence in his repeated use of the pronoun “I,” his references to “Geffrey,” to “Chaucer,” and to his own “bok” and “bokes.”

Furthermore, the narrator Chaucer in introducing the pilgrims in the *General Prologue*, makes readers think of textual space and the conditions of writing: he will speak of the “condicioun” of each pilgrim “whil I have tyme and space, / Er that I ferther in this tale pace... [while I have time and space, before I proceed further in this tale] (I.35-36). John Ganim notes a key technical development in this period: key narratives in the late fourteenth century claim more space for original content, managing to live in the moment, to transcend preset structures and formulae.²³³ This flexibility is enjoyed to a high degree by Chaucer. Lisa Kiser, commenting on the conspicuously arbitrary selection of details in the *General Prologue*, shows rightly the result, that “[n]o human recorders of truth are

²³³ Ganim in particular singles out Chaucer and the *Gawain*-Poet as exhibiting marked differences from various thirteenth-century authors. See pages 48 and 76-77 for the proliferation of detail typified in *Gawain*'s style: “It requires an act of almost devotional intensity on the reader’s part to distinguish between significant and gratuitous detail, between the shimmer of jewelry and the aura of sanctity” (*Style and Consciousness* 77).

to be trusted at their word” (*Truth and Textuality* 121). Chaucer proves elusive in intention, and more importantly his text does.

Texts Converting Readers: Readers Approaching Writerly Status

Chaucer promotes an apocalypse-tinged textual awareness by adopting a wide variety of possibilities of writing and reading. Texts may seek to accomplish various goals, and readers have at their disposal a number of strategies in order to engage with texts. One example of this is in the Miller’s Prologue. Here, those offended might “[t]urne over the leef and chese another tale”:

M’athynketh that I shal reherce it heere.

And therefore every gentil wight I preye,

For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye

Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce

Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,

Or elles falsen som of my mateere.

And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,

Turne over the leef and chese another tale;

For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,

Of storial thing that toucheth gentillesse,

And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.

Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys. (I.3170-3181).

[It occurs to me to recount it here, and therefore every noble person I pray, for God’s love, judges not that I speak of evil intent, but that I might recount all their tales, be they better or worse, or else misrepresent some

of my material. And therefore, whoever does not want to hear it, turn over the page and choose another tale, for he shall find enough, great and small, of historical thing that deals with nobility, and also morality and holiness.

Do not blame me if you choose amiss.]

This section qualifies certain readers with “every gentil wight,” later calling special attention to the quality of “gentillesse.” This prologue also allows for a variety of tales, “be they better or worse.” More importantly, rather than control what appears on the page, Chaucer seems to push aside responsibility for the dicey matter of what might offend a reader. Nevertheless, this possibility of offense opens the door to the reader’s empowerment. As the reader is given the option to “[t]urne over the leef and chese another tale,” that reader is given a power akin to that of the writer or compiler. Here most tellingly, the reader thus has the capacity to negotiate the text, to take control of it. Chaucer furthermore gives readers access to a variety of genres and styles, thus destabilizing the texts he presents. Readers thus must not be passive receivers of information but rather must engage with texts critically. Comparisons between texts are suggested, if the differences are hard to see on the surface of tales themselves.

Divergences from moral poetry are by design. Chaucer anticipates objections already in the *General Prologue*.¹ In discussing lines I.725-42, Megan Murton states the following:

The narrator here presents himself as reluctantly fulfilling a difficult obligation: according to the teachings of Plato and Christ, he must report every tale honestly, even if this means being party to ‘vileynye’ and rude speech. As in Jean [de Meun]’s apology, the narrator’s elaborate

seriousness in justifying bad language is funny, but there is again an important question behind the humour: in this case, the question of the author's moral accountability. While Jean's narrator claims to have a historian's intent, Chaucer's narrator explains his situation in moral terms: he takes accurate reporting to be a matter of integrity and faithfulness. It might therefore seem that this narrator is prepared to accept, with much anxiety and comical earnestness, the moral responsibilities of the medieval author. (51)¹

This sense of fidelity is balanced, of course, with other concerns at stake in the writer's credibility. In the Clerk's Prologue we hear of the high style one would use when communicating with a king. This is done as Petrarch's death and powerlessness is highlighted: the immense efforts necessary for the text are mentioned even as a writer, dead, no longer matters in a sense. Having relegated Petrarch to the dead and seemingly irrelevant, the Clerk identifies him:

“Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete,
 Highte this clerk, whos rethorike sweete
 Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie,
 As Lynyan dide of philosophie,
 Or lawe, or oother art particuler;
 But Deeth, that wol nat suffre us dwellen heer,
 But as it were a twynklyng of an ye,
 Hem bothe han slayn, and alle shul we dye.
 “But forth to tellen of this worthy man

That taughte me this tale, as I bigan,
 I seye that first with heigh stile he enditeth,
 Er he the body of his tale writeth,
 A prohemye, in the which discryveth he
 Pemon and of Saluces the contree,...” (IV.31-44)

[Frances Petrarch, the laureate poet was the name of this poet, whose sweet rhetoric illumined all Italy with poetry as Legnano did with philosophy, or law, or other specialized skill; but Death, that wil not allow us to dwell here, as if it were but a twinkling of an eye, has slain them both, and we shall all die. But to tell more of this worthy man who taught me his tale, as I began, I say hat first wih he style he employs, before he writes the body of his tale, a proem, in which he describes Piedmon and the region of Saluces.]

In this crucial case, the text is shown to have surpassed the writer. Thus conscious of texts, this prologue foregrounds for the reader a number of issues, but it also gives the reader encouragement to challenge the superficial message vis-à-vis those issues. The sense of authority apparent in the attribution to Petrarch lays bare how authority is constructed. And the prologue here calls attention to another prologue: texts tell us how to read them, but we have to assess individually how reliable those instructions are. In the light of the Miller’s Prologue’s challenges to credibility, the Clerk’s Prologue can be questioned as well. One suspect text may make readers suspicious of others. If one can take control of one tale, one might just as well do the same with others. In both of these examples, the reader is encouraged to stand outside the text and to isolate its component

parts. As Laura Ashe has argued with regard to the closing of the *Clerk's Tale*:
 “Implicitly, he is saying, a tale may not stand alone. A tale is opaque and incomplete without its being actively deciphered; that is to say, it must be given meaning by the participation of its interpreter” (936). Once again, in presenting texts that are hard to encapsulate, he achieves for them longevity.

Chaucer and Gower: Substance, Length, Longevity

Even if Gower does not promote this stance that seemingly defers core meaning to the reader, he does encourage a strong (and I would argue, apocalyptic) engagement with his text. In so doing, he manages to encourage his readers to set themselves apart (parallel to how the apocalyptic writer must distinguish her/himself). Gower's singular prologue to the long *Confessio*, more straightforward than any of the prologues Chaucer gives us, nevertheless shows us that, even in a text's instructions (what the editors of the *Idea of the Vernacular* collection fruitfully fit under the heading “literary theory”) a text admits tremendous limitations. We do not know how the text will be received, and part of that owes to conditions of a doomed world.

And for that fewe men endite
 In oure Englissh, I thenke make
 A bok for Engelondes sake,
 The yer sextenthe of Kyng Richard.
 What schal befalle hierafterward
 God wot, for now upon this tyde
 Men se the world on every syde
 In sondry wyse so diversed,

That it wel nyh stant al reversed,

As for to speke of tyme ago. (Prol. 22-31)

Gower foregrounds three concepts here: change, uncertainty, and divine will. Only God knows what is to become of a word divided. This division is elsewhere in the prologue attributed to the Antichristian and appears a function of apocalyptic dualism. What time will bring is unclear, but Gower sees fit to write in the moment. And Gower's prologue on the whole, calling attention to the shaping and experimentation of the text, necessarily affects how we must see that text. Even if Gower's invocations to divine authority are more straightforward than Chaucer's, and even if his sense of the apocalyptic may seem more unified than the conflicted and contradictory views emerging from the *Canterbury Tales*, the apocalyptic still makes writing simultaneously necessary and yet of uncertain effect and accuracy. Writing, for Gower, is something done out of a sense of duty, something that is done quite purposefully, yet something that requires experimentation, trying-out. Any Christian apocalypticism (particularly as it must be defined by a certainty in an end of daily life and aware that "time shall be no more") embodies this contradiction.

Gower's middle way adapting to the needs of readers in order to save the message, still allows for some increasingly subjective reading practices, though not to the radical extent that Chaucer's prologues do. We see not only *sentence* and *solaas*, *lust* and *lore*, but are opened up to a variety of other categories. We are not mere receivers of information but are capable of organizing and processing texts for ourselves. Chaucer executes a number of complicated textual acts within the tales, including problematically putting immoral words in others' mouths and attributing compelling rhetoric to the

superficially unlearned. All this he does as he claims less-than-satisfying tales for himself and engages in consistent self-deprecation. He reduces himself to nothing in his texts, and he is nothing without his texts.

Closing, No End in Sight

So what happens when Chaucer purportedly wraps up his texts? Chaucer, who seems to concede some power to the reader, does make some radical gestures in claiming power for himself as he brings his work to a close. Finally, textual functions, effects, and truth values are argued in closing as well as they are argued in prologues. This is especially true as Chaucer must provide some sense of closure in his own work. A well-known example is Chaucer's ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*. The ending of the *Troilus* situates the work in relation to contemporaries but also appealing to the Christian God:

O moral Gower, this book I directe

To the and to the, philosophical Strode,

To vouchen sauf, ther need is, to correcte,

Of youre benignites and zeles goode.

And to that sothfast Crist, that starf on rode,

With al myn herte of mercy evere I preye,

And to the Lord right thus I speke and seye:... (V.1856-62)

[O moral Gower, this book I direct to you and to you, philosophical Strode, to vouchsafe, and if need be, to correct of your good deeds and your noble passions. And to that truthful Christ, who died on the cross, with all my mercy of heart I pray, and to the Lord right thus I speak and say:...]

The appeals to good, to mercy against judgment, and to protection from evil all situate the text in a time of uncertainty. And the ending, which is assumed to define the preceding work, challenges his audience with characterizations of Gower and Strode, characterizations that appear tongue in cheek. The certainty and closure a reader may seek in conclusion are thus compromised. If a text, as we saw through various prologues, calls attention to itself at its beginning, it must also be equally self-aware at its other end.

But as closure seems insincere in the *Troilus*, so too it is problematized in Chaucer's *Retraction*, which compactly yet enigmatic makes us question the truth value of his entire body of work. Chaucer's profound engagement with God and world as he offers closure of course is not only seen in the *Tales*. The *Retraction* to the *Canterbury Tales* provides such a sweeping claim to completeness that it is suspect. It is cast in a penitential vein seeming to echo the long and conspicuously textual. In Judith Ferster's construction, "Chaucer submits himself and his poem to the only authoritative interpretation, God's judgment" (156). Postponed judgment is certainly called for in the *Tales*. And this is especially important as judgment has proven so problematic throughout the *Tales*. The incomplete work and the various problematic narrators cannot be resolved even by the Host.²³⁴ His *retracciouns* suggest contrition, but this happens through a remarkable act of textual compression:

Wherfore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me
that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; and namely of my
translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my
retracciouns:.... (X.1083-84)

²³⁴ Thomas Reed suggests, "At least as it was originally conceived, the work is headed toward the 'authoritative' judgment of Harry Bailly.... Debates like the one between the Monk and the Nun's Priest are, even as the poem stands, tentatively resolved by Harry's judgments-in-passing." (387).

Through writing Chaucer seeks out forgiveness that violates the late-medieval impulse to confess in specific terms and to take responsibility for specific sins.

As Rosemarie McGerr has argued, Chaucer's tendency to retract suggests strong ties to Augustine's. Augustine's *Retractationes* embody his concerns for his own mortality, his capacity for error, and his anxiety over the completeness of his work. For Augustine, there is a more than a nod toward confession, correctness, and completeness.

When I reviewed these writings of mine, I found that I had composed ninety-three works in two hundred thirty-two books. I did not know up to that time whether I was going to write others and, on the insistence of my brethren, I published this review of them in two books before beginning to reexamine my letters and my sermons to the people, the former dictated, the latter spoken. (trans. Bogan 271)²³⁵

Though Augustine shows a supreme awareness of his own texts, Chaucer does not seem as intent on cataloguing his work. He makes a gesture toward responsibility but does not approach specific confessions, perhaps as the truth-value of so much of what he has written is debatable in the first place. Robert Boenig maintains that in Chaucer's Retraction "the closure is that of the loss of control leading to fragmentation and silence. The author, the archcontroller, who has, godlike, called *The Canterbury Tales* into being, can no longer write" (170).²³⁶ But equally importantly, he makes no specific confessions

²³⁵ Bogan note p271: The translation of the last lines is based on the reading established by Knöll in his edition of the *Retractationes* in CSEL on the evidence of a critical examination of the manuscript tradition, namely, *antequam epistulas et sermons in populum, alias dictatas alios a me dictos, retractare coepissem...*" (271n3).

²³⁶ He continues: "Words fail him. He speaks of 'the defaute of myn unknownyge' (X, 1082), quoting, of course the term invented by Pseudo-Dyonisius and Englished by the *Cloud*-author as 'unknowing.' He wishes he could have 'seyd better' (X, 1082). He forgets a large portion of his *oeuvre* when he wishes to retract individual works—'and many another book, if they were in my remembrance' (X, 1087)" (170-71). Regarding the *Cloud*, Boenig maintains that "[The *Cloud*], as is Chaucer's Retraction, a sad picture of an

that would seriously undermine what he has already written. Textually and publicly at least, his work is left intact. The *Retraction* works because it is incomplete.

On Texts and Ends

Huppé expounded on the importance of a retraction or confession as one considers “last things.” He maintains the following regarding Chaucer’s *Retraction*:

His intention has never been other than to reveal the truth, but art is of the world, and he wishes not to carry worldly baggage with him on his eternal pilgrimage—or the burden of a reader’s misconceptions which may ‘sownen into synne.’ His *Retractions* serves his own purpose or renunciation, and once more as a reminder to his readers of the necessity to read the *Tales* for its sentence. (237)

Chaucer, like Gower, acknowledges the risk inherent in writing something that will succeed him. More importantly, he acknowledges that his text will find and may influence readers that he would never otherwise encounter. His brief retraction, however, suggests a resolution that parallels too-easy penance. It shows the power that a text can have in succinctly solving a problem through rhetoric. And yet, unlike Augustine, Chaucer ignores or sidesteps the details of the text. The text is capable of organizing a wealth of details—details that would be lost in oral communication. Succinctness in confession in this way allows a complicated and apocalyptically-tinged oeuvre to exist in perpetuity, without correction. In some sense, the short *Retraction* communicates less of a need for forgiveness. Chaucer, it would seem, has through texts avoided a tremendous amount of offense and sin. In Huppé’s terms, the “baggage” Chaucer takes with him is

inert writer who can no longer control his words. But in the world of the mystics, of course, failure is paradoxically success, particularly failure of language” (172).

minimal. In fact, Chaucer's *Retractions*, if overdone, can thoroughly clash with his role as observer and recorder of the pilgrimage.

But it can also clash with other texts, or at least fall short of acknowledging their complexity, their shades of meaning. If, as I have suggested already, Chaucer and Gower are the prime examples from this period of creators of persistent and dominant apocalyptic texts, we should not be surprised that Chaucer's work remains incapable of being confessed, corrected, and encapsulated, even by himself.

The climate of apocalyptic textual engagement sketched in this chapter at least begins to account for the staying power of the period's strongest narrative works. Seer-like exclusivity has special implications for that purported seer's text, and that writer's work is hard to replicate once the unique apocalypticism of the period is surpassed by something else. And a particularly ominous sense of the future seems to have emerged as texts and readers grew at such a rate that even many of the most literate could not account for the shifts in what reading, writing, and the vernacular meant. But to underscore an emphasis of this final chapter, through the role of the purportedly visionary but necessarily textually represented and engaged seer perspective apocalypticism is most clearly shaped to the cultural circumstances of late-medieval England. Linked to time as a terminable concept but transcending the time of writing, the texts from this period are perhaps at their most apocalyptic as they change meaning outside of their authors' control. And they are also apocalyptic at their most tentative, preparing themselves to be permanent but knowing that they are not.

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