“Fawty and Falce”: Sin, Sanctity, and the Heroics of Devotion in Late-Medieval English Literature

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I must say that I have been hampered somewhat in my ability to commiserate with those fellow academics whose dissertation process experience was negative, because my own thesis committee has been outstandingly responsive and supportive. Siobhan Craig, Andrew Scheil, and John Watkins, models of patientia all, have endured draft after draft of my work and responded swiftly with encouraging, improving insights. Needless to say, any infelicities, errata, or outright howlers that persist in the following pages are probably things they advised me against retaining.

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Working Group. BABEL’s conferences and causes continually renew my gladness that I am part of the community of medievalists.

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every stage of my coursework and doctoral candidacy . . . well, it doesn’t bear thinking on.

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any number of my enthusiastic rhapsodies about various saints, poems, and
scholarly skirmishes. And my daughter, Serena, who brings me the most joy, has
borne without complaint the air of faint distraction I’ve worn for too much of the
time that she has known me.

I dedicate this project to my wife, Brandy Lee, who has shown astonishing
restraint in never once remarking that a dissertation focused on imperfection
ought not have taken nearly so long from one with as much direct experience of it
as she knows me to have. She is, to borrow Malory’s words, “the moste valyaunte
and fayryst that I know lyvyng, or yet that ever I coude fynde.”
Abstract

This project makes the case for the narrative usefulness and importance of imperfection, by exploring the relationship between saints and heroes in late medieval English writing. It is easy to find examples of saints who are heroes (St. George slaying the dragon) and of heroes who become saints (Malory’s Lancelot dies with sweet smells emanating from his corpse, a sign of sanctity). But my project looks behind simple narrative and character function to address a deeper issue: what kind of hero/saint (or saint/hero) emerges from the later Middle Ages' pervasive skepticism about human perfectibility? Given that every medieval Christian was expected to grapple with knowledge of eternal accountability for sin, what are the limits of individual “greatness” and how are the saintly heroic and heroically saintly intertwined? My dissertation moves from knightly chivalry in the courtly romances *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, to the daringly nonconformist spirituality of a laywoman in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, to the feats of the folk anti-hero Robin Hood, celebrated in popular ballads, in order to trace the ways in which the heroic interpenetrates literary and religious writing. I argue that the late medieval heroic is characterized simultaneously by unity and rupture: it strives toward transcendent wholeness yet derives its vitality from a sense of fragmentation and frailty.
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INTRODUCTION

“scriptum est sancti eritis quia ego sanctus sum.”
- 1 Peter 1.16

“There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.”
- Leonard Cohen, “Anthem.”

In the popular Middle English romance Richard Coer de Lyon, King Richard wears his crusader cross as a totem “intended to offer protection against both creditors and assailants as [he and his knights] seek vengeance against God’s enemies in the Holy Land.”¹ This is a boisterously superlative hero, one who, the poet assures us, “nevere was founde coward!” (4). Richard is, in short, a winner. He triumphs at an exchange of blows, overpowers a lion with his bare hands and, once he has “prest out al the blood” (1106), proceeds to devour its heart. He even maintains his vigor by feasting (at first unwittingly but then unremorsefully) on the flesh of a defeated Saracen. The poem is a celebration of these victories, as well as his capture of Acre and massacre of Muslim prisoners, all performed in the service of and empowered by the cross he wears.

It is in response to poems such as these, which achieve what John Finlayson calls the now “unmodish . . . blending of heroic action with militant, Christian, nationalism,”² that the anti-hero has loomed large in recent studies of the medieval heroic ideal, to such an extent that it has produced a reactionary lamentation at the decline in the status of and interest in the hero qua hero, the “protector,” in the earliest sense of heros (ἥρως), who commands attention chiefly for his (almost invariably his) greatness, rather than for his

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faults. But this scholarly interest in auditing the heroic ideal for its deficiencies, constitutive of an ongoing effort to devalue the long-unchallenged merits of imperial and patriarchal power, both predicated largely on masculine violence, has not yet taken full account of the ways in which the anti-heroic reinforces the heroisms depicted in medieval literature. The four “case studies” presented in my dissertation demonstrate that weakness and error, far from limiting heroism, are in fact necessary conditions of late-medieval Christian heroes, and, not incidentally, of the exemplars which these admirable figures themselves either overtly admired or by which their literary depictions were more subtly informed.

This project’s concerns are theology and stories, and the interplay between them as they inform and reflect one another in the literature of late-medieval England. Jim Rhodes writes, “If vernacular theology transformed fourteenth-century English society,

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3 See, for example: Gloria Cigman, “The Medieval Self as Anti-Hero,” in Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature, ed. Leo Carruthers (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), 161–70; More recently, this collection of essays aims to call attention to how “morally ambiguous, antisocial or even downright sinister” the protagonists of medieval romance can be. Neil Cartlidge, ed., Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 1; Even before the publication of Cartlidge’s collection, Robin Waugh and James Weldon had identified “antiheroísm, both as a critical attitude and as a preference for a type of protagonist,” as among the factors responsible for the “loss of status and a generally unfavorable climate of reception for the warrior hero.” Waugh, Robin and James Weldon, ed., The Hero Recovered: Essays on Medieval Heroism in Honor of George Clark (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2010), 2.

4 Medieval studies first took up the question of the relationship between masculine identity and various forms of violence, aggression, and domination, both of women and of other men, in an influential trio of collections: Clare A. Lees, Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Dawn M. Hadley, ed., Masculinity in Medieval Europe (London: Longman, 1999); and Jacqueline Murray, ed., Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West (New York & London: Garland, 1999); Not just literary scholars, but also medieval historians looked to a variety of written sources, including popular romances, to try to assess how competition and combat structured the pattern of masculine identity not only for knights, but also, as Ruth Karras shows, for scholars and merchants. Ruth Mazzo Karras, From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); For a notable exception to these approaches, see Derek Neal’s attempt to decentralize violence from medieval masculinity and show the inadequacy of “patriarchy” as an explanatory concept by arguing for a much more nuanced medieval masculine self, one in which domestic and social virtues were of more normative importance than concepts like martial courage and chivalry. Derek G. Neal, The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
bringing to the fore new art forms and new intellectual movements as well as new spiritual currents . . . vernacular poetry was the instrument that gave shape and voice to the longings and the most deep-seated preoccupations of the people.” 5 The numerous and abiding theological concerns taken up in the Canterbury Tales, for example, “attest to the importance these issues had on the lives of the audience involved, both inside and outside the poem.” 6 One of these concerns was sin, its nature, origins, manifestations, and its consequences for individuals and their communities.

Compelling and guiding this thesis have been two questions. First, in an age which largely took for granted human sinfulness and corruption, how could anyone be good, let alone great? What idea of the heroic character is possible against a dominant view of humanity as essentially anti-heroic? How, in other words, could there be heroes? The plain fact that there is so obviously no shortage of them in the literature of the period leads to my second, somewhat thornier, question: how did readers respond to these depictions? In order to address these questions, my dissertation brings together the secular and the religious by reading late-medieval literary writing alongside hagiography and biblical narratives. By identifying the influence of exemplary but flawed biblical and saintly figures on the characterization of the heroic in secular poems and romances from the fourteenth and early fifteenth century, I suggest that saintly exemplarity yields a complex mode of heroism that strives toward a transcendent unity, but depends on a sense of fragmentation and fallibility. It is through the chinks in the armor, so to speak, that (what I will refer to simply as) the medieval Christian hero understood him or herself to be

6 Ibid.
divinely empowered, and this knowledge was mediated through people from biblical and hagiographical narratives who were similarly flawed.

The deeds and personalities of heroes have always sat somewhat uneasily beside Christian virtues, a dilemma described most famously by Augustine in his *Confessions*, when he recalls with disdain that “I was obliged to learn the wanderings of a hero named Aeneas, while in the meantime I failed to remember my own erratic ways.”

Notwithstanding Augustine’s dubiousness about the self as heroic and victorious, attempts to cast Christian saints and martyrs in a heroic mould began at least as early as the fourth century, in martyrologies and miracle stories. The late-antique and medieval “hero saint” has long since been identified, as has the so-called “saintly hero”; Sir Isumbras, Sir Gowther, Robert of Cisyle, and Guy of Warwick are examples of martial heroes who later undertake penitential pilgrimage, a genre that scholars have categorized variously as “secular hagiography,” “penitential romance,” “pious romance,” and “exemplary romance.”

But what of the hero who cannot be saintly, despite aspiring to holiness? My project elaborates on the understanding of the heroic holy person by offering devotion to holy exemplars not only as a source of power, but as a means by which personal weakness can be acknowledged. In *Richard Coer de Lyon*, Richard’s invocation of St. Martin before taking his turn in an exchange of blows—the same game at which the hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* suffers a momentary but humiliating lapse of courage—has such power that the king successfully break’s his

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opponent’s “cheke bon,” causing him to “fyl doun ded as ony ston” (867-68). If Richard Cour de Lyon is an example of a Christian heroism that deals with historical failures through a compensatory strategy of downplaying them,9 I suggest that there are others whose heroes do not, as Richard does, simply “[thank] God of hys grace / That hym kepte fro schame and harme” (1098-99), but rather acknowledge, or are forced to acknowledge, that an abiding potential for “schame and harme” is integral to their being.

Underlying this project is my sense that the assumption of human corruption was pervasive, and not merely an obsession of the clerical writers whose work provides so much of what we know or think we know today about the middle ages. Very often when we are dealing with a medieval poem, the best we can hope for, as Robert Boenig wrote in reference to the Old English Andreas, is to “catch a glimpse of an author’s intentions receding from us.”10 But if a poet’s purposes are borne beyond reach by time and the interventions of scribes, editors, and compilers, his or her preoccupations may still be perceptible, along with those of the surrounding culture; even what may seem to be the most profoundly personal records, such as Margery Kempe’s Book, are nonetheless social texts, constitutive of author, amanuensis, and the cultural environments in which all of this thinking and transmitting and writing took place. Clearly discernable in the literature


of the period is an eager fascination with what might very loosely be called “the human tendency to foul things up,” and with its possible spiritual causes, consequences, and solutions. One can say without too much risk of overgeneralizing the complex landscape of both high and late medieval philosophy and theology that one of the shared concerns, perhaps the shared concern, of the various contending currents, Augustinian, Lombardian, nominalist, or Thomist, was human nature.  

Determining the nature of the human will—created, fallen, and restored, its capacities and limits, and the role of grace in enabling obedience and, ultimately, salvation—were essential theological tasks. But these were not just abstract questions, reserved for scholastics. Helen Foxhall Forbes has recently written of Anglo-Saxon England, “theology was not detached from society or from the experiences of people who were not theologians, but formed an essential constituent part.” The age of Chaucer was no less obsessed with human failing, and saw it as a problem that could not easily be separated into doctrinal and practical categories. The Psalmist’s lament that, “I was conceived in iniquities; and in sins did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 50.7), was more than just poetic hyperbole to people who puzzled earnestly over whether wrongdoing was a matter of the will or transmitted through “manne’s sperm unclean,” as Chaucer’s Clerk puts it. As such, this concern bleeds across genre divisions, biblical and homiletic discourses of deep human imperfection

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11 Denis Janz describes anthropology as not only the center of Luther’s Reformation theology, but as integral to nearly all discussions of Christian doctrine that preceded it. See “The Theologico-Anthropological Question” and “The Configuration of Late Medieval Theology” in the Introduction to Denis R. Janz, Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983).


permeating the secular, which is, as Barbara Newman has recently argued, “always already in dialogue with the sacred.”

If this point, that sin was a preoccupation of medieval writers and readers, is one that seems so blindingly obvious as to need little elaboration—and certainly not at dissertation length—there is nevertheless a scholarly trend toward downplaying its thematic importance, laying claim to the perceived humanist inclinations of certain texts and asserting that the religious references in non-devotional literature are, by and large, perfunctory. Nicholas Watson, for example, rejects long-held scholarly assumptions about the moralizing purposes of the Gawain Poet by making the case that his poems deliberately ease the standards of spiritual perfection through a narrative strategy that downplays the contrast between holy exemplars and the presumed limitations of the poems’ readers:

One of the ways in which both Pearl and Cleanness are able to bring about their striking union of frankly rudimentary spiritual standards with a rhetoric of perfection is by rigorously excluding mention of the saints and martyrs whose heroism is regularly invoked by other religious texts. Apart from Christ, the Virgin Mary and the pearl maiden, the nearest thing to saints in the poems are the figures of Noah and Abraham, both of them comfortably married property-owners, who are not seen as people of exceptional virtue but as dutiful servants of God.

The Poet’s actual project, Watson argues is “the displacement of the traditional categories of Christian heroism (embodied in virgins, martyrs and preachers) to make way for a new set, embodied in a figure closer to the aspirations and capacities of the poet’s audience, Gawain himself.” Arguing that the poems of Cotton Nero A.x attest the movement

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16 Ibid., 311.
toward gentrification in the English church, Watson concludes, “Nowhere does a clerical author refashion his role as homilist to the point where his writing is so fully taken over—on a moral, social and aesthetic level—by the mores of his audience.”¹⁷ And Watson is not the only modern critic to reject the poem’s ostensible spiritual concerns. David Aers’s reading of the poem, about which I will have more to say in my first chapter, aligns with Watson’s inasmuch as he finds it reflective of the “virtually Christless Christianity” of its aristocratic context, but Aers finds the Poet even less concerned about sin and standards of perfection, save for an anxiety over homosexual behavior.¹⁸

Watson’s reading of *Sir Gawain* as an expression of vernacular theology whose behavioral expectations are pitched at the level of the laity it was intended to instruct does indeed provide an ingenious way between extremes, as well as an explanation for the poem’s “relative indulgence toward imperfection,”¹⁹ which seem somewhat surprising given the Pearl Poet’s abiding preoccupation with purity (neither the frolicsome sexual behavior of the court, nor Gawain, marked for all time by his emblem of penance, could be described as “wythouten spot”). A reading of the poem that casts the examples of “virgins, martyrs and preachers” as impossibly high overlooks the possibility that readerly identification with Gawain may have been possible due at least in part to the poem’s emphasis, however playfully presented, on sin and failure. The poem’s

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¹⁷ Ibid., 313.
charm and ability to engage us lies in its diminishment not of the standards of excellence Gawain must attain, but of his ability to maintain them.

Lest I seem, in making this argument, to be imposing a reductive, perhaps “Robertsonian,” reading of theological preoccupations onto the writers and readers of the period, I would add the further observation that many of these texts do not seem terribly interested in God himself. If it is no longer common to speak of the Middle Ages as “an age of faith,” one may still say that it was an obsessed with God, and yet if God is everywhere in the art and thought of the period, then that presence is sometimes so thoroughly suffused as to appear almost an absence. Andrea Hopkins observes of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight that “God rather takes a back seat in this romance. For a poem in which there is a considerable amount of religious observance on the part of the characters—people praying, attending Mass, making confession—God as a character is surprisingly, and conspicuously, absent from the text.” It is Gawain and his failure that intrigue the poet, the simple fact of his need for repentance, and not—as has so intrigued many of the poem’s critics—the intricacies of its formulae. Even Margery Kempe seems mostly interested to what God had to say to and about her. What these texts and their authors seem very concerned with is sin and failure, which often kept close company. And no surprise, for to be interested in these was, in effect, to be interested in oneself.


Hopkins notes “the ultimate retirement of God from active intervention” in the action of the poem. “When direct mentions of God, Mary, or the saints do occur, “it is noticeable that the poet avoids stating that [they have] actually done something” (210). For instance, at line 696, the narrator tells us that Gawain had no one but God to talk to on his journey. In the first place, we notice that it is Gawain who is doing the talking, and then we realize that this is actually a description of Gawain’s loneliness on his quest; the clear implication is that God is not very good company.” Hopkins, The Sinful Knights, 210–211 See also n.76 in Ch.1, below. David Aers likewise describes what he calls the “virtually Christless Christianity” of the world of the poem. Aers, “Christianity for Courtly Subjects,” 96.
It has been often observed that no form of the Greek ἥρως (heros) occurs in Middle English.\textsuperscript{23} The anti-hero too is of course a word wholly foreign to the literature of the period, but although its conceptually overdetermined status makes it a term that I introduce here only to discard for the most part in the chapters that follow, it was, at its most basic meaning of a central character who is unlike a conventional hero, and therefore challenges the conventions and expectations of the triumphant hero,\textsuperscript{24} an idea that most medieval people would likely have recognized.\textsuperscript{25} The age of Chaucer was as delighted as any other by the deeds of “super-humans,” and its literature is replete with admirable warriors, kings, martyrs, and saints drawn from a wide array of traditions and genres, classical, biblical, hagiographic, and chivalric, but it was preoccupied as well with flawedness, sinfulness, and error in people of high station as well as low, and looked to the failures of great men as guiding precedents for the maintenance of individual and corporate piety and, thus, well-being. It is fascinating to consider, for example, that beginning in the fourteenth century and up until a 1603 revision, the seven penitential Psalms of David, important to my first chapter, were used in the English coronation ceremony.\textsuperscript{26}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[23] Nor even in Old English, where possible analogues such as hæleð are as semantically ambivalent as the heroism of all martial heroes who, from Beowulf on, stand in the shadow of the cross. Guy Bourquin, “The Lexis and Deixis of the Hero in Old English Poetry,” in Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature, by Leo Carruthers, ed. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994).
\item[25] Gloria Cigman has suggested that there was something inherently anti-heroic in the medieval Christian psyche, wholly distinguishable from the pronounced lack of interiority which, she argued, was a requirement for the classical hero. Cigman, “The Medieval Self as Anti-Hero.”
\item[26] The Liber Regalis (London, Wesminster Abbey MS. 38) may date from as early as Edward the II’s coronation in 1308. Other sources suggest it may have been compiled in 1382 for use in the coronation of Richard II’s consort, Anne of Bohemia. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1489; The penitential psalms were removed in a revision of the coronation orders for the first Stewart coronation in 1603. For a side-by-side
\end{footnotes}
Not all saintly exemplarity is so “rigorously excluded” as Watson suggests of the works of the Gawain-Poet. Biblical and patristic discourses of imperfection, of the contrast between divine holiness and human error, run too deep, so thoroughly saturating the Poet’s worldview as to manifest themselves in what may appear to be fleeting, merely perfunctory allusions to saints. As Constance Hieatt has written, “Conventions are not by definition meaningless. If they were, there would be little left in literature that we could validly discuss.”27 That these allusions are in fact much more is the concern of my first chapter, which argues that, read in the context of influential late-antique and medieval theological writing, these references reveal just how deeply secular entertainments had internalized the discourses of sin and imperfection. Though Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has increasingly come to be regarded as a lighthearted comedy written to flatter and amuse courtly readers, its serious moral dimension remains perceptible. By highlighting the poem’s allusions to the moral failures of the biblical hero David, references that have been almost entirely overlooked by traditional source studies, and surveying Patristic commentaries and medieval retellings of the David story in order to show his development as an archetypal penitent, I demonstrate how Old Testament narratives concerning the corporate consequences for sin help to structure the poem’s themes and, ultimately, what I argue is a less frivolous attitude toward its hero’s failures than some scholars have recently concluded. These allusions to and parallels with the David story not only argue for a recovery of a reading of the poem as morally serious, but also invite productive comparisons to the Gawain-Poet’s handling of biblical material in his other works, which also reveal his

assumptions concerning sin’s corporate and enduring, even generational nature: a
problem as much narrative as theological, it both occludes clarity of vision and obstructs
resolution. Like the prophet Nathan, who called David to repentance, and the Green
Knight himself, who indicts the members of Arthur’s court for their failure to live up to
their self-professed ideals, the Poet, genial and gentle though he is, appears critical of his
courtly audience for its moral obtuseness.

If the discourses of imperfection run deep, as my first chapter establishes, so too
do the possibilities arising from this imperfection. Although late-medieval subjects may
have understood sinfulness as a state of being from which individuals could not extricate
themselves, balancing this grim doctrine is an accompanying hope, one Piers Plowman,
Langland’s allegorical voice of Repentance offers in vivid poetic terms: “al the
wikkednesse in this world that man myghte werche or thynke / Nis na moore to the mercy
of God than in[middles] the see a gleede [a coal in the sea]” (V.283-84). Flawedness and
failure do not foreclose the opportunity for admirable deeds, but rather invite mercy and
the possibility of divine empowerment.

Such is the case with the laywoman Margery Kempe, author of the first
autobiography in the English vernacular, The Book of Margery Kempe, and the subject of my
second chapter, which traces links between the adventures of St. Paul and what I call
Kempe’s “apostolic heroism.” Because studies of Kempe have been largely concerned with
the influence of female saints, little scholarly attention has been paid to the influence of Saint
Paul on her life and career, despite the numerous references made to him in the Book.
Kempe’s writing has been described as “auto-hagiography,” the memoir of a would-be
saint, but one might as fittingly call it an auto-apostolic narrative, the Pauline model of
spirituality and active evangelism providing for Kempe not only a key model of conversion but also a template against which her sense of mission, her boldness, and her resistance to societal expectation can be more fully understood and appreciated.

Comparison with Paul’s own all-too-humanness underscores the nature of Kempe’s own unique heroism, not despite but precisely because of what appear to be her profoundly un-heroic qualities and behavior. Her often anguished self-narration may indicate, as some critics have pointed out, a tragically fragmented self, but I argue that what she calls “hir owyn unstabylnes” [her own unstableness (1.4.345)] is a condition for her achievements and her admirability.

Kempe stands out among the subjects of my other chapters both in terms of gender and genre. In addition to being the only woman in my project, she alone is a historically real person. Given the scholarly disagreement about how to regard the historicity of Margery Kempe, as well as the possible generic dissonance her chapter might appear to cause in my dissertation, flanked as it is by distinctly fictional romances and ballads, a brief word may be in order here about my approach to her historicity. My argument proceeds on the assumption that we can respect what Felicity Riddy calls “the text’s unwillingness to conflate author, narrator, and protagonist,” while at the same time remaining open to the readings that can arise from what Robert Stanton recently called the “assumption that [Margery Kempe] was a real person [and] that she underwent

28 Margery Kempe did indeed exist, whether or not “Margery” was a fictional construct, as Lynn Staley has argued. Staley distinguishes between “Kempe” the historical woman and writer, an “Margery,” her fictional construct. Lynn Staley, Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Similarly, Felicity Riddy makes reference to the Book’s protagonist using the same term by which Margery describes herself, as “cretur.” The Book’s “cretur,” explains Riddy, is “the product of retrospection and writing: not a person, but a piece of text.” Felicity Riddy, “Text and Self in the Book of Margery Kempe,” in Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, eds. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 457.
experiences very like the ones we encounter in her book.” My argument does not help to solve the puzzles of either the Book’s authorship or factuality, but whether the text reflects events that (or as they) indeed happened, or instead records the desires of their author (and whether or not we “need” an author, as Riddy declares she does not\textsuperscript{30}), it is clear that Kempe needed exemplars. Paul provides one that helped her to create her own life story and authorize the activities it describes—including, at the last, self-narration, the formal writing down of her life.

I readily grant that, given the great importance of gender in shaping heroic identity, it may very well be that “anti-heroism” is, as Neil Cartlidge suggests, a phenomenon so essentially different from anti-heroism as to deserve its own distinct study.\textsuperscript{31} There exist plenty of other figures from the period, both fictional and real, whose professed devotion to Paul I might have used to demonstrate the fortifying effect of his example, but none nearly so dramatically as in the person of Kempe, whose remarkable transformation from inconsolably distressed young mother to a bold world traveler, presenting herself before abbots and bishops in a neo-apostolic mode, is all the more noteworthy precisely because she is a woman, and overcomes the socially-imposed limitations on her sex in addition to her other challenges. Her inclusion in this study is

\textsuperscript{31} Cartlidge writes that, “Just as medieval heroism is defined . . . by the particular opportunities and responsibilities typically associated with masculinity . . . so too it is perhaps a distinctively masculine set of failings that tend to shape the construction of anti-heroism.” Cartlidge, Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance, 5.
essential, giving fullest expression of the paradox inherent in St. Paul’s example of “strength perfected in infirmity,” which is at the heart of my project.32

My third chapter carries the concern with heroic fragmentation over to the well-known figure of Sir Galahad, the virgin knight. Scholars have taken his putative perfection at face value, but by going back to the French sources for the English romance most influential in popularizing him, and showing through a comparative reading how far his character in the English adaptation diverges from Galahad as he is originally presented, I show why he has come to seem so narratively unsatisfying to many modern Arthurians, and argue that although, by embodying the principle of transcendent unity, he appears to be an exception to the pattern of heroic imperfection, he is in fact a further illustration of the Pauline principle of strength through weakness and self-abandonment to the divine.

In the Tale of the Sankgreal section of his Morte Darthur, Thomas Malory's abridgments of the thirteenth-century French La Queste del Saint Graal have the effect of turning the pure knight Galahad from an exemplary Christian Everyman, reliant on grace, to something far more like an allegory of Christ himself. Malory is far less impressed by or interested in Galahad’s monastic virtues than with Lancelot’s secular chivalric ones, and by diminishing or doing away altogether with the Queste’s emphasis on Galahad’s contingence, making him so very holy that he surpasses either human sympathy or imitability, Malory can accentuate his preferred heroic aesthetic, one emphasizing the struggle inherent in maintain both heavenly and earthly values. I argue that Malory introduces into the Morte a kind of “secular Pelagianism,” for he replaces the complexity

32 Paul describes praying thrice for relief from the affliction of his unspecified “sting of the flesh.” In reply, God tells him, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for power is made perfect in infirmity. Gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2 Cor 12.9).
of the Cistercian model of personal sanctity, one which asserts the paradoxical freedom of the human will even while insisting on the necessary intervention of divine grace to incline the will toward righteousness and steady it there, with the complexity of the late-medieval system of personal honor, which holds in tension the similarly conflicting assumptions that nobility—and with it, potential for martial valor—are transmitted along bloodlines, but can also be revealed by deeds of martial valor. This is only a storyteller’s pretense, however, and I show that the heroic attitude Malory favors is undermined by clues from other adventures in the Morte that reveal struggle to be less efficacious than he would have it seem. Malory must make it appear as if his heroes succeed and fail by their own merits, and he relocates the maintenance of “worship,” his key value, from externally provided grace to the hero’s individual will, but the success or failure of the Morte’s heroes is ultimately governed by fate, rather than individual struggle.

Robin Hood, the subject of my fourth and final chapter, might be called the anti-Galahad, holding in common with him only a light conscience—Galahad because he is sinless, and Robin Hood because he is untroubled by his sins. Robin Hood is all-too-human, emotive, and sometimes gleefully violent. He is the furthest thing from saintly (notwithstanding some Early Modern claims for a kind of folk sanctity attached to him), and shows no signs of penitence. And yet, one of his defining characteristics is a firm dedication to the Virgin Mary, which he holds lightly alongside his perpetration of often thuggish violence and theft. In these ballads we can study the spirituality of a secular

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33 Kieckhefer identifies a tormented conscience as one of the hallmarks of medieval sanctity: “No doubt many modern readers find it easier to sympathize with Luther because he overcame his brooding preoccupation with sin, as few of the late medieval saints appear to have done or tried to do. For them, or at least for many of them, a life of continual affliction with guilt was a given: from their viewpoint they were in fact guilty, and they deserved the torment of recognizing that guilt.” Richard Kieckhefer, Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 134.

34 See Ch.4, n.113, below.
anti-hero, and I suggest that even here, in an only perfunctorily pious tradition that breaks
with the hagiographical convention of the penitent thief, discourses of imperfection have
been so thoroughly absorbed that vulnerability and abjectness are vital elements of Robin
Hood’s heroism.

Unlike the subjects of my previous chapters, the early ballads of Robin Hood ballads
are unremarkable for their formal literary quality. With the exception of the *Gest of Robin
Hood*, these rhymes are blunt, rough-hewn, and metrically imprecise. But these are qualities
that reflect their popularity and perhaps enabled their transmission as what *Piers Plowman*
calls “ydel tales at the ale” (5.5404). While there is no evidence that Margery Kemp’s *Book
had anything beyond a very narrow monastic readership, slipping into obscurity for centuries
before the recovery of a sole manuscript in the early twentieth century, ballads of Robin
Hood appear to have enjoyed a wide and enduring popularity in the fourteenth and fifteenth
centuries.35 Because of this popularity, much of the recent critical focus on Robin Hood has
concerned his social identity, the nature and level of his appeal within and between social
classes, and the extent to which it served as a marker of political unrest. I focus instead on the
spiritual aspects of this social identity, and suggest that one of the ways in which the outlaw
functions is as a reflection of the anxieties of his lay audiences. In these ballads are
theological assumptions far more rudimentary than anything at play in the works of the
sophisticated *Pearl* Poet, the *Book of Margery Kempe*, or the Cistercian authors of the
*Queste del Saint Graal*. The texts do not moralize, and Robin Hood is not an exemplary
penitential figure, but if the discourses of guilt are not as deeply felt here, a deep sense of

35 The manuscript of the *Book of Margery Kempe* (British Library MS Additional 61823), was at one time
in the possession of the Carthusian priory of Mount Grace in Yorkshire, and contains annotations in four
hands.
inadequacy is, and we can sense in Robin Hood’s devotion to Mary something of the powerlessness of his readership. He subverts the relationship so that pious devotion becomes homosociality—Mary serves as an invisible but potent member of the band of outlaws—but this act of appropriation attests the outlaw’s desperate need for an otherworldly system of justice within the lawless world of the greenwood. And this is, in a sense, the situation of his readership. Although outlaws presented a very real historical problem, readers may have found something attractive and identifiable, perhaps cathartic, in Robin Hood’s outbursts of retributive violence.

It has been decades since the prevailing assumptions about heroism’s static categories were such that Constance Hieatt was breaking with them when she asked, “Is heroism incompatible with repentance?” and argued that perhaps it was not.”36 But current approaches that implicitly divide protagonists according to whether their example is either identifiable or unattainably high—“virgins, martyrs and preachers”—risk a recursion to the stark division between classical and Germanic heroes, distinguished by their greatness, and the Aldhelmian hero-saint whose hallmarks are undisputed righteousness and unflinching courage.37 By offering personal weakness as a source of heroic energy and motivation, I want to reappraise the complex richness of the heroic holy person in medieval literature and, at least tentatively, beyond it. In my conclusion I

36 Hieatt, writing of the Chanson de Roland, argued that it was not, and, responding to earlier critics who held Christian virtues and epic heroism in discreet categories, argued for the possibility that “Roland may be both a true hero in the tradition of the Germanic epic and a good Christian according to the lights of his times.” Hieatt, “Roland’s Christian Heroism,” 421, 422.
37 G.F. Jones, for example, described the heroic type who, “like Byrhtnoth at Malden and the Burgundians at Etzel’s court . . . struggles manfully against fate and relies entirely on his own efforts rather than call on human or divine aid.” George Fenwick Jones, The Ethos of the Song of Roland (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963), 177.
will venture the possibility that discourses of shame might have served also as sources of agency and dignity.
CHAPTER 1

Obdurate Penance, Davidic Parallels, and the Problem of Sin in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

“Poetry is a good game—let us take it lightly. But it is also ‘liberty and power’—let us take it seriously.”
-Charles Williams

“Never alone / Did the king sigh, but with a general groan.”
-William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

“Everybody doin’ the mess around.”
-Ray Charles

A thin spray of bright blood across the snow marks the dramatic climax of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK* hereafter). Gawain, his neck merely grazed, leaps back from the chopping block, scrambles for his discarded armor, shakily but emphatically declares his debt of honor paid, and tenses to see whether or not the mysterious and terrifying Green Knight—no less so for showing himself so absurdly inexpert with his fearsome axe—will prove a gracious Shylock.¹ He does, and done with dealing out blows, supplies instead the poem’s dénouement: his verdant guise, so dreadful to behold when he appeared in Arthur’s court the year prior to propose an exchange of blows, is merely an enchantment. He is in fact lord of Hautdesert, the castle whose hospitality Gawain enjoyed during the three days preceding his ordeal, and husband to Lady Bercilak, whose seductions Gawain resisted, save one: the offer of a garter, magically protective to its wearer. Flushed with shame at this exposure, Gawain explodes with self-recrimination, then “kaght to the knot and the kest lawses,” seizing the knot of the garter and casting away the hateful symbol of his lapse in duty and courage.² But it is too late.

¹ Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* l. 2314.
² All translations, unless otherwise acknowledged, are my own, made with reference to glosses provided by Andrew and Waldron, hereafter cited by line number. Ibid. l. 2376.
The revelation not only unsnarls the poem’s plot, but loosens also the “endless knot” of Solomon blazoned on Gawain’s shield. He has only the cold consolation of realizing that he has taken his place beside Adam, Samson, Solomon, and David in a long lineage of heroes to be duped by women, before plodding home to the court to begin a term of lifelong public penance, the shameful garter symbolically displacing his “pure pentaungel” (2414-23; 664).

The stain of Gawain’s “blode blenk [white] on þe snawe” (2315), occurring just moments before he will confess his shame and declare his intended penance, and juxtaposed as it is with his allusion to King David, may recall for the alert reader an image from Psalm 50, or the Miserere, written, as the psalm’s titulus in the Vulgate claims, “When Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had sinned with Bethsabee.”

Here, the Psalmist expresses his hope that the God before whom he finds himself detestable will “sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed: thou shalt wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow” (Psalm 50.9). It is not unreasonable to conjecture that the Poet had in mind the metaphorical connection between white snow and spiritual purity, deriving as it did from the Miserere, widely considered throughout the middle ages the most important of the Psalms. Though the Psalms are not directly quoted in the works of the Gawain-Poet, Gawain makes direct allusion to the Psalmist himself, and the David story, I will argue, is important to SGGK. Attention to the compelling—and heretofore critically unremarked—narrative similarities that I will describe enables us to

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5 Kuczynski, *Prophetic Song*, 37.
reflect anew on the importance to the poem of both purity and penance, thus helping to address the question that has become central to critical interpretation of the poem, one Andrea Hopkins attempts to summarize: “Is [SGGK] a serious, moral, religious poem or not?”⁶ I will argue that it is. It is not merely that, of course, but for all the Poet’s splendid urbanity, undeniable humor, and ostensible lightness of tone, particularly in a conclusion that appears to offer a resolution befitting comedy, as Gawain is laughingly welcomed back to court and reintegrated among knightly brethren ready to join him in his penance, the Poet was not simply taking a holiday from heavily instructive religious poetry when he turned his attention from more obviously didactic biblical stories to the Matter of Britain. Consideration of how the David story works to inform SGGK helps both to reveal the Poet’s abiding preoccupation with sin and his conviction that it is not so easily remedied, and show that what is at stake in the poem goes beyond Gawain himself, the nature of whose faute (2488) has tended to preoccupy critical attention. These allusions to and parallels with the David story also invite productive comparisons with the Poet’s handling of biblical material in his other works, particularly Cleanness, which reveal assumptions concerning sin’s corporate and enduring, even generational nature: a problem as much narrative as theological, it both occludes clarity of vision and obstructs resolution. Like the prophet Nathan, who called David to repentance, and the Green Knight himself, who indicts the members of Arthur’s court for their failure to live up to their self-professed ideals, the Poet appears critical of his courtly audience, albeit more subtly, for their moral obtuseness.

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Sin and the Critics

*Sir Gawain* is plainly concerned with, among other things, the same problems that so consumed Augustine in his writings about David: the incongruity between high ideals and imperfect achievement, between faithfulness and failure, purity and sin—what in *Cleanneß* the Poet calls “fylþe”.

These have been the main thematic interests of the poem’s critics, as well, particularly the puzzling matter of Gawain’s sin—though with a slight twist, because, while the nature of David’s sin was unmistakable, Gawain’s is far less clearly defined. He had, after all, successfully, even “heroically,” in Nicholas Watson’s description, resisted the seductions of Lady Bercilak. For what reason, then, does he feel such profound shame that he will willfully undertake a lifelong penance, what Derek Pearsall calls “death by a thousand self-narrations”? For what precise sin is he atoning?

For more than half a century, scholars have offered various and contending

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7 For Augustine, David’s sin posed a tremendous quandary. How could such lechery and violence inhere in one considered a forerunner of the Messiah, and indeed even a type of Christ? Michael Kuczynski describes Augustine’s revulsion at the fact that one so very close to God, and specially anointed even from his youth, could be capable of such horrendous acts, and though Augustine insists on the historicity of those sins in his commentary on Psalm 50, he makes no effort to disguise either his horror of them, or what Kuczynski calls “his impulse to suppress the story” altogether. Augustine writes, “With grief indeed we speak, and with trembling; yet God would not have hushed what he wanted to be written down. I will say, then, not what I want to, but what I am obliged to say; I will speak not as someone exhorting you to imitation, but as someone instructing you to fear” (189-90). Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. D. Eligius Dekkers and Johannes Fraipont, eds. CCSL 38-40. Turnholt: Brepols, 1956. Kuczynski, *Prophetic Song*, 23.

8 Watson, “The Gawain Poet as a Vernacular Theologian,” 293.


10 The question originated in G.J. Englehardt’s observation on Gawain’s quandary during the final day of his sojourn at Hautdesert: Gawain has willfully placed himself in a new dilemma; he could not fulfill one compact without breaking the other. This, however, was a dilemma that Gawain chose not to face; he repressed it. Despite this full intention of committing sin, Gawain went to confession and sought absolution. He endeavored to safeguard his body by magic and his soul by a false confession. Thus, incongruously, the exemplar of piety took refuge in superstition and a false confession. G.J. Englehardt, “The Predicament of Gawain,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 16 (1955): 222; J.A Burrow developed this suggestion, arguing that by accepting the garter and failing to mention it to his host, Gawain not only perpetrates a breach of trawþe with the terms of both the beheading game and the exchange of winnings, but also, by giving a deliberately incomplete confession at Hautdesert prior to setting out for the Green Chapel, commits a mortal sin. While arguing the severity of Gawain’s sacramental abuse, Burrow goes on
responses to this question, one crucial to determining just what kind of poem this is, as Andrea Hopkins’ attempt to summarize the stakes of the debate demonstrates: “Is [SGGK] a serious, moral, religious poem or not? Does Gawain commit a mortal sin or a social faux pas? Is his acceptance and retention of the girdle more than a slight blot on his reputation as a peerless knight, or is it something we should laugh at good-naturedly, along with Arthur and his court?” A useful distillation of the argument, to be sure, but in fact, Hopkins’ question comprises two separate and separable questions, one concerning the precise character of Gawain’s sin; the other, the broader assumptions and aims of the poem itself.

She is not alone in so conflating them, and thus inferring the poem’s moral seriousness by the weight of Gawain’s misdeed. Until fairly recently, a great deal of SGGK scholarship has concerned itself with whether, how, and to what extent Gawain’s lapse constituted sin. Critics unconvinced that Gawain sinned mortally have to argue that Gawain’s “confession” to Bertilak at the Green Chapel constitutes an effective, if unorthodox, shriving, and that the poet guides us toward an understanding that by the end of the poem, Gawain is forgiven, even if he has not entirely forgiven himself. John A. Burrow, A Reading of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” (London, 1965), 104–12, 127–59; P.J.C. Field, responding directly to Burrow, agreed that Gawain’s failure in “trawþe” is “a breach of the whole chivalric-Christian complex of virtues,” but countered that “it is possible to commit a small sin against a large virtue,” and that by the penitential standards of the Poet’s day, Gawain’s sin ought to be recognized as venial rather than mortal: “We must conclude that breaking a secular promise over a possibly trivial matter in extenuating circumstances is a much less serious fault than committing adultery with no such excuse. And by putting the two temptations in the same scene, the Gawain-poet has contrived a strong contrast between them. Given his habit of meaningful juxtaposition, this seems to put Gawain’s lapse into perspective, and to place it firmly as a venial sin.” P. J. C. Field, “A Rereading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” Studies in Philology 68, no. 3 (July 1, 1971): 263, 269.

Hopkins, The Sinful Knights, 205.

These inquiries have often centered around the curious juxtaposition of Gawain’s confession and his subsequent good time with the ladies of Hautdesert (“And syþen he mace hym mery among þi fre ladyes, / With comlych caroles and alle kynnes joye” [1885-86]), and resolved themselves broadly into two camps, divided along the question of whether Gawain’s confession is false, and if so, whether it is deliberately false, and, if so, whether his later contrition at the Green Chapel constitutes a confession either needful or efficacious. Both sides have looked to the gusto of Gawain’s post-confession carousing as evidence for their respective positions: either his energy reflects a perilous insouciance, or a soul freshly relieved of sin. Tolkien, arguing the latter, contended that Gawain’s lightheartedness following his confession is evidence of its efficacy. Gawain is not frivolous; he has simply been unburdened of his sins. This line of reasoning
nevertheless sought to explicate his lapse within a category of sin that the Poet and his contemporary readership would have recognized. Francis Soucy, for example, argued that Gawain’s chief sin is inordinate pride in his reputation as a knight, and that he wears the garter in order to stave off future sins of pride.\textsuperscript{13} Taking an even lighter view of Gawain’s pride, Hopkins concludes, “The story of Gawain as we have it is the story of a young man who had grown rather too accustomed to his reputation as peerless and faultless, and is taken down a peg or two.”\textsuperscript{14} Her assessment is characteristic of more recent approaches to \textit{SGGK}, in that she downplays the severity of his sin, even questioning whether it deserves to be called “sin” at all, noting the poem’s avoidance of the word “synne” except in a sole reference to the mortal sin of adultery.\textsuperscript{15} “Sin and penance,” she argues, “are brought into the narrative, in vocabulary, symbols, and actions, but they do not have over-riding dominance in the thematic scheme of the poem.” Instead, they simply help the Poet to “trebl[e] the tests imposed on his hero, and vastly [expand] what could in other hands have been simply a straightforward adventure story.”\textsuperscript{16} Derek Pearsall, citing

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\textsuperscript{14} Hopkins, \textit{The Sinful Knights}, 217.  \\
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 215 n.27. The Middle English “synne,” she points out, is used only once, at l. 1774. Elsewhere, the Poet prefers to use misdeed, as well as faut, fals, fylpe, feintise, forfet, and surfeit. See also: Nicholas Watson, “The Gawain Poet as a Vernacular Theologian,” 293–94 Like Hopkins, Watson goes so far so far as to dismiss Gawain’s “sin” as no sin at all, arguing that Gawain’s sulking is so out of keeping with the slight nature of his lapse, and bears such a resemblance to “wounded self-esteem” that we cannot possibly take it seriously as actual, pious penitential regret.  \\
\textsuperscript{16} Hopkins distinguishes Sir Gawain from what she calls “penitential romances,” such as Ysumbras or Sir Gowther, whose heroic plots are heavily inflected by didactically religious themes. Sir Gawain, she explains, is not really a romance at all: “It takes up the forms and conventions of medieval romance, but it is not bound by them; it transcends generic definition. While its jeweled surface is as brilliant and scintillating as Gawain’s embroidered and bejeweled ‘vrysoun’, its ironies and ambiguities, its drama and directness evoke a wealth of cultural associations and grant us the rare pleasure of passage through a complete fictional word into which we step as strangers and from which we emerge with new insight into the human condition.” Hopkins, \textit{The Sinful Knights}, 209, 204–05.
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Hopkins, agrees that Gawain’s “harme” is “not a sin in the strict or indeed in any sense,” and that although “[t]he language that he uses bears a resemblance to the language of the confessional,” this is due to the fact that “any attempt to talk seriously about human behavior in late fourteenth-century English poetry is bound to take on a Christian colouring,” and that ultimately, “the resemblance is superficial.” David Aers argues the point more strenuously still. Noting, as many critics have, the swiftness with which the scene changes from Gawain’s seemingly earnest and efficacious confession at Hautdesert to making merry among the castle’s fair ladies, Aers contends that the juxtaposition signals neither the efficacy of the confession nor Gawain’s carelessness with regard to its possible illegitimacy, but rather a lack of concern on the part of the Poet himself about the place of sin and sacrament in a poem that Aers finds spiritually vacant, and reflective of the “virtually Christless Christianity” of the aristocratic world that produced it.

My argument, then, could be called somewhat reactionary, at least inasmuch as it suggests the possibility of recovering what earlier critics, despite differing over whether to read Gawain’s lapse chiefly in terms of lewte, truth, pryde, or covetous, have tended to take for granted: that “the poet knew well, cared about, and thought continuously in terms of the sacrament of penance.” Which is to say that he also thought seriously in terms of

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18 Aers, “Christianity for Courtly Subjects,” 96–97 Aers contends, in essence, that the poem abstracts the forms and symbols of Christianity from their potential for political transformation, assimilating them all-too-comfortably to the status quo of a courtly conduct largely unconcerned with justice and genuine Christian community, and requiring little but the maintenance of heterosexual norms. The only uncleanness actually indicted in the poem, he argues, is homosexuality, which risks exposing the guilty to “[d]ivine terrorism,” the “homophobic annihilating rage of God.” 99; 100.
19 Field, “A Rereading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” 259; Both Field and Burrow accepted and built on Robert W. Ackerman, who was among the first to describe Gawain’s pentangle in terms of penitential practice, noting that four of the five pentads associated with it appear frequently in vernacular literature such as the Cursor Mundi, Mirk’s Festial, and Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale, which offer discourses on the sins of the five wits and five fingers, as well as the five joys and five wounds, more commonly treated in medieval religious lyrics. “Perhaps because the attention of commentators has been focused on the
holiness and its violations, for which penance, from poena, or punishment, was a solution. The critical readings summarized above are indisputably compelling when approaching SGGK as a singularity. When considered in light of the same poet’s preoccupations elsewhere with purity, sin, and solutions for sin, however, it seems less adequate to call the poem’s use of the language of sin and penance mere set dressing.20

 obscure early history and the secret meaning of the pentangle, little heed has been paid to what the poet states explicitly to be the significance.” Robert W. Ackerman, “Gawain’s Shield: Penitential Doctrine in Gawain and the Green Knight,” Anglia LXXVI (1958): 256–57.

20 Blanch and Wasserman remark, “despite the fact that critics give almost universal lip service to the single authorship theory, the surprising lack of studies organized by themes or topics rather than by individual poems demonstrates what would seem an almost irresistible urge to, in the words of Pearl’s Jeweler/Dreamer, set each poem ‘segeley in synglure,’ placing the part over the whole.” My critical approach here is one that, among other things, attempts to take advantage of what they insist is “the potential of this widely acknowledged but critically underdeveloped premise--the unity and, hence, interrelations of the Cotton Nero poems . . . ” Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, “The Current State of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Criticism,” The Chaucer Review 27, no. 4 (1993): 407; Not all critics, it must be said, welcome readings of SGGK that are inflected by the Gawain-Poet’s other extant work. David Aers writes, almost as an afterthought, that “I do not think that the other poems in Cotton Nero A.x substantially change the picture emerging from my discussion of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the forms of Christianity it sustains.” These forms, he argues, are entirely anodyne, having nothing in common with the “poor Christ of St Francis and Piers Plowman (XI. 185-94, 232-42), or the teacher of love and kindness in the figure of the Samaritan (XVII.50-356) or the radical teacher of Lollardy.” It is a point earnestly and powerfully argued, but one predicated in large part on the same reductive assumption about sin that lead Aers to insist that the Poet’s primary notion of fyl ϩ e, apart from “open contempt of God,” is sodomy, such that “clannesse” constitutes little more than a vague maintenance of heteronormativity. Aers summarizes the poem’s normative ethical takeaway: “Certainly you don’t need to worry about the world in which most people lived, about the forms of justice in existing communities or about current debates on the role of the church. You should respect the general values of ‘honourmen’ but don’t feel bad about being a lot more pragmatic and a lot less perfectionist than Gawain.” Aers, “Christianity for Courtly Subjects,” 100; But in his focus on the “homophobic and annihilating rage of God against the people of Sodom,” Aers fails to account for the ten full lines in which the Poet warns of the wide range of faults for which, as Cleanness warns, a fellow may “forfete his blysse” (line 177). Ibid. The Poet condemns sodomy with notable vehemence, to be sure, but only after also warning against sloth, pompousness, boasting, pride, covetousness, treachery, crooked deals, perjury, man-slaughter, too much drink, theft, quarreling, robbery, false reasoning, disinheritance and depriving widows, breaking up marriages, whoring, treason, treachery, tyranny, defamation, and feigned laws. Such a list, which is more than a cursory nod either to the familiar seven deadly sins or the Decalogue, must surely be accounted for, and expands the parameters within which a discussion of wrongdoing in SGGK may be reasonably conducted. cf. Elizabeth Keiser, whose argument, as the title of her monograph, Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and its Contexts, suggests, is similar to Aers, and also Jim Rhodes, who acknowledges and follows Keiser’s argument up to a certain point, but departs by arguing that in Cleanness the poet works to “dislodge the discourse of cleanness from its association with sexual purity and make it instead a discourse centered on love and on ethics of human dignity.” Elizabeth Keiser, Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and Its Contexts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); See also: Rhodes, Poetry Does Theology, 95, and; Watson, “The Gawain Poet as a Vernacular Theologian,” 308–09.
Andrea Hopkins is correct to argue that sin and penance “do not have over-riding dominance in the thematic scheme of the poem,” but they are, I argue no less important to that scheme despite their subtlety, and discernible to readers attuned to resonances with other poems in which the Poet’s doctrinal concerns operate at the fore.21 That said, I agree with Hopkins, inasmuch as the Poet is less interested in Gawain’s sins than its critics have been. I want to point out that prominent though Gawain is, his is not the only soul in the poem, nor the only one in need of (both self and critical) examination—there is the entire court of Arthur awaiting news of the outcome of his adventure. In fact, I contend, it is only on the poem’s surface that Gawain functions as its protagonist. Read carefully from another perspective, he serves as spiritual barometer to the group of courtly subjects on whom the poem opens and closes.

Because the question of what is at stake in the poem has, as described above, tended to focus around Gawain himself and the nature and severity of his lapse, critical assessment of the court’s response to Gawain has been largely confined to attempts to take by it the measure of Gawain’s sin, as Field does: “Gawain's lapse is real but minor: he has won but he has not triumphed. Yet his achievement is substantial enough for Arthur's court to take the sign of what Gawain thinks is his shame as their badge of honor. Their humility lets them see that no man among them could be sure in such a test of gaining so much and losing so little.”22 In this reading, Gawain’s failure is the familiar heroic problem of hubris, to which the court’s mirth, seasoned with the wise humility of the knights’ collective experience, is a gentle corrective, and one the reader should sense is satisfyingly fitting:

22 Field, “A Rereading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*” 269.
From the exchange of winnings on, Gawain is seen to have sinned, and is not seen to be forgiven. [However,] Gawain's state is not one of mortal sin: a state which would destroy the integration proper to the end of comedy [emphasis mine], make most improper on the poem's scale of values the admiration which all the impartial and qualified judges feel for Gawain, and undercut our response to the final tableau.”

For Field, then, everything ends tidily enough. In some ways an understandable enough misreading, for no sooner has the poem suggested the gravity of Morgan’s plot and Gawain’s failure than it drowns them in the laughter of the court, as Gawain returns to the community of his “brother” knights, who lightly offer to join him in sporting the garter of penance. The intricacy of the poem’s tonal switchbacks risks leaving the reader in some doubt as to whether Gawain emerges from the chastity test “a moral victor,” or whether his apparent failure to maintain his *lewte*, or good faith, is best regarded as a sinful lapse of Christian steadfastness or “merely” a shameful deficit of Chivalric courtesy.

It is the ambiguity of such questions, of course, and the destabilizing effect of the poem’s narrative juxtapositions that help make up part of its enduring delight and attraction, and it would almost seem a lack of *courtaysy* on the part of the critic to attempt to spoil what the Poet intends as “a game that demands good players”—but that there is a greater seriousness behind the ostensible light-heartedness of the poem and the joyous portrait of Camelot in its spring. It is tempting to agree with Margaret Williams’ suggestion that, “the Poet’s *exemplum* is not negative as in *Cleanliness* but delightfully positive; Gawain carries off his victory without failing in charm or in good manners”—

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23 Ibid., 269. Emphasis mine.
and has only, at the finish, to realize it. A happy ending after all! But it will not do. As we will see, Gawain’s resistance to so easy a reconciliation suggests a certain alertness to the dangers of casually dismissing the demands of purity. In Field’s reading of the poem, this reluctance is part of the comedy: the rueful young hero arriving back at the court not with a magnificent treasure, rescued maiden, or captured knights, but with egg on his face and a garter about his person that clashes rather embarrassingly with the advertisement of perfection on his shield. But the story of Arthur is not a comedy, Cleese and company notwithstanding, and the Poet’s handling reflects as much.

Alex Mueller suggests that “the Gawain-poet approaches his Roman heritage in the manner of the poet of the alliterative Morte Arthure, who consistently attends to the underbelly of imperial expansion and undercuts the foundation of Arthurian rule.” The same might be said for the Poet’s attitude toward his Arthurian source material. Not that he is careless in his handling of it for his own purposes, but that he is skeptical of its uses as a myth of English triumph, choosing rather to attend to its lessons about the effects of imperfection on individuals and their communities; the lesson of Troy, that “civil and corporal fates are inextricable,” may be, for the poet, a lesson of Logres as well. For all that he is an eager storyteller, bursting with his tale, still the Poet seems nearly as uninterested as Milton will later claim to be in the “long and tedious havoc [of] fabl’d Knights,” with the details of “tilting Furniture, emblazon’d Shields, / Impreses quaint, Caparisons and Steeds; / Bases and tinsel Trappings, gorgious Knights / At Joust and

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28 Alex Mueller demonstrates the importance to SGGK of Trojan historical narratives, including John Clerk’s “Destruction of Troy,” which, he argues, suggests that “civil and corporal fates are inextricable,” the violated body of Hector metonymically signifying the city that bore him. Ibid., 15.
Torneament.”29 This is not to imply that in *SGGK*, as in the *Queste del Sant Graal*, storytelling is secondary to allegorical significance.30 The poem is, to be sure, “an outrage awenture of Arthures wonderes,” just as the Poet promises in its prologue, and he is eager to assure us, like any good folklorist, that we’ve come to the right place for tall tales, that *his* neck of the woods boasts the greatest share of marvels: “Mo ferlyes on this folde han fallen here oft,” he insists, “Then in any other that I wot, syn that ilk tyme” (23-24). But for all that, it is inadequate to call the poem merely a *ferly* of the sort Arthur is so keen to hear before tucking in to his Christmas dinner. One cannot help noticing that the Poet’s gorgeous and elaborate descriptions of Gawain’s war gear turn always toward the spiritually symbolic, and that he glosses over Gawain’s adventures en route to Hautdesert. “It were to tore [difficult] for to telle of þe tenþe dole” of the marvels Gawain encountered on his journey, laments the Poet, but by this point, more than seven hundred exquisitely-wrought lines into the poem, the reader knows better than to accept this modesty topos at face value, and can only wonder why the Poet should hurry his hero so through the fearful “wyldrenesse of Wyrale,” showing us nothing of Gawain’s deeds of arms against *wormez, wolues, wodwos, bullez, berez borez, and etaynez* (719; 701; 720-23). And though the Poet seems to thrill to the details of Bercilak’s hunting outings, these too are but counterpoint to the subtler emotional and spiritual tournament taking place in the bedchamber. There is humor in the “hunt” of Gawain, of course, but for all the wit with which the Poet invests his handling of the mythic material, that material trembles

30 Pauline Matarasso compares the “Queste” author to Chretien de Troy, but suggests that the former put a far greater premium on “sens” than “matiere”: “One can fairly say that he did not write a single paragraph for the pleasure of story-telling.” Pauline Matarasso, trans., *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 9.
always with the approach of betrayal and division within the court, and ultimately
Arthur’s death. Perhaps it is no accident that some of the most memorable of the poem’s
comic touches are of the rather grim variety: the lords and ladies kicking in astonishment
at the Green Knight’s head as it rolls the length of the feast bench; the *unheimlich*
moment when the lids of his “dead” eyes open and his lips part to address the court; the
ominous shriek of the axe on the whetstone performing a serenade to an already nervous
Gawain. These moments, which less resemble Chaucerian farce than some of the grimly
ironic asides spoken in the Icelandic Sagas, are no less delightful for their darkness, but
they perhaps serve to remind us, as I will discuss in the conclusion, that the apparent
unity and reconciliation of the final scene is illusory, and that Poet avoids the
unavoidably tragic aspect of Arthurian romance only by way of his own act of narrative
violence—by cutting the story short at Camelot’s apogee in its “first age” (54), and
effectively drawing the curtain on the first act in the broader three-act tragedy of the
Death of Arthur.

Another problem for a wholly exculpatory reading of Gawain is the matter of the
“impartial and qualified judges,” whose admiration for Gawain Field finds convincing
and appropriate.31 The court has not shown itself particularly wise or competent
anywhere else in the poem, and I am not alone in responding very differently than Field
to its laughter, finding it less reconciling than eerily uncomprehending, not because its
members are so very wrong about Gawain—Field is very convincing on the point of
Gawain’s sin as venal rather than mortal—but because, as Jeffrey Cohen argues, they are
wrong about themselves:

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31 Cf. 1 and 2525.
Ready to share with the youthful court his somber realization . . . Gawain is rebuffed. The court listens to his speech and then erupts into laughter (2514). They fail to comprehend both his revelatory wound and the significance of his belt. They resolve that they shall all wear—men and women alike—his emblematic green girdle. Displayed on so many, the “token” loses its new power to signify difference or differentiation, and so the poem ends exactly where it began: with the siege and assault on Troy.\textsuperscript{32}

Thus, I find the situation of the poem to be almost precisely the reverse of what Field describes, by which I do not mean that Gawain has sinned mortally, but rather that his sin is not really the point. The problem at the heart of the poem is not that some particular iniquity has been perpetrated by an individual, but rather that the entire court is primed for a much greater sin, and in no spiritual condition to recognize it, even as one of their number comes, belatedly and feebly, to sense his own condition.\textsuperscript{33} A benign view of the court pays inadequate attention not only to the Arthurian source material, in which the integrity of Camelot is by no means assured, but also to the Poet’s assumptions about the corporate nature of sin, which can be inferred from the biblical narratives he retells in \textit{Patience} and \textit{Cleanness}, and alludes to, however interstitially, in \textit{SGGK}. Like the ancient founders catalogued in the poem’s opening genealogy, whose record is by no means one of undifferentiated success, the specter of these figures and their errors contribute to the theme of “blysse and blunder” which will be the pattern of Gawain’s adventure. Beneath the poem’s gaiety, their falls from grace augment the fatalistic sense that the days of

\textsuperscript{32} My reading of what the court’s reaction reveals about its misprision accords with Cohen’s, but I should make clear that his argument is dominantly psychoanalytic, and assumes that the hard-won epiphany Gawain fails in revealing to the young men and women of the court concerns “his painful passage into a manhood marked by inadequacy and interiorized violence.” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, \textit{Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, And The Middle Ages}, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 151.

\textsuperscript{33} Although my analysis approaches the poem and its characters from a largely theological perspective, it is not incompatible with Alex Mueller’s politically-oriented argument that the poem satirizes the nobility’s imperial aspirations and its convenient “chivalric amnesia” of the violence that both establishes and tends to conclude empire: “As a symbol of their forgetting, the girdle is borne by the knights proudly at the end of the poem, highlighting their refusal to recognize their ‘untrawpe.’” Mueller, \textit{Translating Troy: Provincial Politics in Alliterative Romance}, 17; 152.
“revel . . . and rechles merthes” in young Arthur’s court are numbered, and that it is only a short step back to the widespread “baret” (strife) that the poem’s prologue describes as the native condition of Britain after its founding (40; 21). And of the biblical heroes haunting the poem’s edges, none affords more generative comparisons than that of David.

Sir Gawain and the Psalmist

Scholars have not overlooked the similarities between the Book of Samuel and the story of Arthur. Both concern legendary monarchs for whom there is little other historical evidence, and present intriguing problems in terms of generic status, combining national myth, folklore, priestly propaganda, monstrous challengers, and political history. R.A. Shoaf refers to Arthur as he appears in the Alliterative Morte as “Britain’s David,” and it is generally acknowledged that almost any medieval tale involving giants owes at least something to Goliath and his challenger. Beowulf, for example, seems to bear the influence of the David story: Andy Orchard tallies “no fewer than twelve . . . points of overlap” between Beowulf’s fight with Grendel and David’s encounter with Goliath.

And indeed, Arthur, scion of Brutus, who cleared Albion of its gigantic natives, including the “particularly repulsive” Gogmagog, makes his entrance into English literature as a

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34 Indeed, it seems to be something of a scholarly pastime to seek biblical analogues and allegories in Sir Gawain, and of course in Arthur stories more broadly. R.A. Shoaf refers to Arthur as he appears in the Alliterative Morte as “Britain’s David”; various scholars have sought to identify the Green Knight with Christ, while Dale Randall argues that medieval readers would immediately have recognized the Green Knight’s demonic qualities! R.A. Shoaf, “The Alliterative Morte Arthure: The Story of Britain’s David,” The Journal of English and German Philology 81, no. 2 (April 1982): 204–26; Aers, “Christianity for Courtly Subjects,” 97; Dale B.J. Randall, “Was the Green Knight a Fiend?,” Studies in Philology 57, no. 3 (July 1960): 479–91.

35 Andy Orchard, A Critical Companion to “Beowulf” (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 142. See also pp. 143–45. Jeffrey Cohen explains that the giant-slaying hero template is an especially durable one, owing largely to David: “Because David fought a giant as the first step to assuming his identity as hero and king, so future heroes and future kings such as Arthur fight the same battle, triumph against the same monster, come of age through the same ritual of dismemberment.” Cohen, Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, And The Middle Ages, 32.
bane to giants as well as to Saxons, decapitating the giant of Mont-Saint-Michel in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*.36

But the reasons for David’s enduring influence are not limited to his legacy as a giant-slaying wunderkind; they are numerous, and should be self-evident to any reader familiar with his story: his rise from the unpromising position of youngest, shortest, and least-likely of his brothers set the template for the origin story of countless romance protagonists, and his endeavors not only as warrior and monarch, but as a poet, musician, songwriter, prophet, actor, and passionate friend and lover, ensured his appeal across a broad audience.37 Moreover, if there is a tendency among late medieval poets and writers to pattern the heroes of romances after biblical figures, there seems to be also a corresponding determination to project contemporary types and taxonomies back on those biblical heroes, never mind if they, like Caxton, who adds freely to his retellings of familiar narratives in his translation of *The Golden Legend*, “find it not in the Byble.”38 Hence David, glorious in victory and repeatedly merciful to his enemies, was easily assimilated into the pattern of courtly behavior, and there is ample evidence from fourteenth-century texts that David’s importance as an icon of chivalry had not declined in the Gawain-Poet’s own day.39

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37 See, for example his feigned madness in order to avoid recognition by Achish the king of Gath (1 Sam 21).
39 The reasons for David’s appeal as a chivalric exemplar are numerous. To take but one example, he twice has the opportunity to slay Saul while his pursuer is helplessly unaware, and twice spares him (1 Sam 24 and 26). William Langland, roughly contemporary with the Gawain-Poet, describes David in chivalric terms in Piers Plowman, as a king who “in his dayes dubbed knyghtes, / And dide hem sweren on hir swerd to serven truthe evere.” William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt, 2nd ed., Everyman (London: Everyman, 1995) 1.98-99; And the anonymous Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament, also thought to be of mid to late fourteenth-century provenance, extols David’s martial prowess in similar terms: “Then went David with scheld and spere / and styfly stud in mony a stowre. / Phylysteyns was he
It was natural for the David story was drawn into the dense pattern of scriptural signification that developed around the myth of Arthur. Both divinely-chosen hero-kings would bring great glory and great desolation to their kingdoms, while enduring as symbols of national pride and messianic hope—David the Christological prophet, ancestor, and forerunner, the “first and the last of the Jewish rulers”; Arthur, rex *quondam rexque futurus*—the once and future king.⁴⁰

On one level, then, it would be surprising, given the profound influence of the David story, and its appropriation by courtly and chivalric writers, to find Davidic allusions wholly lacking from a tale of Arthur, in which scriptural and spiritual patterns of signification are invariably present to a greater or lesser degree. Yet on another it is surprising that more has not been written concerning the story’s influence on *SGGK*, one of the best known Arthur poems at least in our own day, in which the hero’s shortcomings and subsequent compunction, contrition, and highly public act of lifelong penance are prominent features. Although considerable attention has been devoted to the symbolism of the pentangle on Gawain’s shield, which the Poet associates with Solomon, I find little discussion of the poem’s Davidic parallels apart from some cursory

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⁴⁰This striking juxtaposition of epitaphs appears in Shoaf (1982, 209 n.), who explains that the former phrase is used to describe David in the Shitah Hadashah, 2, as reported in Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1954), vi, 272.
comparisons of the Green Knight with Goliath.\textsuperscript{41} Admittedly, the influence of the Davidic material is less noticeable than in the alliterative \emph{Morte}; by the time we get to SGGK, the same movement has taken place that Nancy Freeman-Regalado describes occurring in French Arthur romances after the post-Vulgate \emph{Queste de Sant Graal}, away from scriptural glosses and nuanced allegorical figuration, which are “sloughed off to make way for expansion of adventure motifs.”\textsuperscript{42} The latter stages of this trend are certainly evident in \textit{SGGK}, which is far from being anything like an explicit allegory. The point is not, then, to attempt to trace the ways in which Gawain is a direct “type” of David, but rather how his actions, and the court’s response, might be interpreted in light of the Poet’s biblical knowledge.

That said, it is helpful first to pinpoint some of the ways in which the poem’s action corresponds to or at least appears to be inflected by the David story. The most immediately obvious similarities emerge in the beheading game, in which the derision of a giant intruder threatens to disgrace king and court, and forces a young champion to rise to the occasion and behead the interloper in single combat. Like Goliath of Gath, who challenges the recreant king Saul and his armies, the Green Knight’s first entrance into the world of the poem comes in the form of an intrusive challenge, his preternaturally large and powerful form filling the entrance to Arthur’s hall, as well as the uneasy space between the court and its idea of itself. Goliath is intimidating at a height of “six cubits and a span” (1 sam 17.4), and the Green Knight is described as being half giant at least,

\textsuperscript{41} See Richard Hamilton Green, “Gawain’s Shield and the Quest for Perfection,” \textit{English Literary History} 29, no. 2 (June 1962): 121–39; and Cohen, \textit{Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, And The Middle Ages}, 32; 73. See also n. 45, below.

and four times the size of any member of the Round Table. Both giants demand a challenger, and scoff when one is slow to appear: “Why are you come out prepared to fight?”, Goliath ridicules the reluctant Israelite army. “Am not I a Philistine, and you the servants of Saul? Choose out a man of you, and let him come down and fight hand to hand” (1 Sam 17.8). The Green Knight’s taunts take a similar form. Calling the knights, “bot berdles chylder,” he asks in mock-incredulity,

> What, is this Arthures hous . . .
> That al the rous rennes of thurgh ryalmes so mony?  
> Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,  
> Your gryndellayk and your greme and your grete wordes? (208; 309-12)

Such abuse demands an answer. It calls into doubt not only the martial bravery of individual soldiers, but worse, the honor and efficacy of lord and deity alike. And yet, shamefully, no challenger emerges. “Saul and all the Israelites hearing these words of the Philistine, were dismayed, and greatly afraid” (1 Sam. 17.11). Arthur’s knights are little better, “al stouned at his steuen and ston-stil seten” (all stunned at his voice and sitting stone-still [242]).

Even as the knights sit metaphorically petrified with fright, leaving their king poised to accept the Green Knight’s challenge, Gawain steps forward, volunteering in order to salvage the court’s honor. David’s motives are very similar. Though he pragmatically inquires, “What shall be given to the man that shall kill this Philistine?”, his main concern is to “take away the reproach from Israel.” “[F]or who,” he demands, “is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (1 Sam 17.26). Admirable bravery, to be sure, yet Saul despairs of David’s chances,
warning him, “Thou art not able to withstand this Philistine, nor to fight against him: for thou art but a boy, but he is a warrior from his youth” (1 Sam 17.33). Gawain’s guide to the Green Chapel does not give much for his odds, either, and cautions that the Green Knight,

is a mon methles, and mercy non uses
[ . . . . ]
Forthy I say the, as sothe as ye in sadel sitte,
Com ye there, ye be kylled, may the knyght rede,
Trawe ye me that trwely, thagh ye had twenty lyves
to spende. (2106; 2110-13)

The similarities in narrative method are striking, and suggest a poet who had attended closely to one of the most effective storytellers in the Hebrew Bible. Goliath and the Green Knight are impressive figures, and the details of their respective physical dimensions and armament make for arresting reading in and of themselves, but those facts and figures are as nothing to the force of a description told at second-hand by terrified witnesses:

Ther wones a wyye in that waste, the worst upon erthe,
For he is stiffe and sturne, and to strike lovies
And more he is then any mon upon myddelerde,
And his body bigger then the best fowre
That ar in Arthures hous . . .
[ . . . . ]
For alle the golde upon grounde I nolde go wyth the,
Ne bere the felawschip thurgh this fyrth on fote fyrre. (2098-2102; 2150-51)

Both the Deuteronomist and the Poet use this technique to great effect, conveying a powerful sense of the utter and desolate loneliness that a solo encounter with such a foe will entail, far from the support and good wishes of comrades.44 David hears the roar of

44 The “Deuteronomist” is the name commonly given to the author or school thought to have produced not only Deuteronomy, but also the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (collectively referred to as the Deuteronomistic history, or DtrH), and also the book of Jeremiah. Spieckermann, Hermann. “The Former Prophets: the Deuteronomistic history.” In Leo G. Perdue, The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 338.
Goliath’s challenges from the Israelite encampment opposite that of the Philistines, and descends into the valley of Terebinth between them to do battle with the giant. Gawain too must journey down into the bottom of a “brem valay” (wild valley) in order to reach the Green Chapel (2145). Though muffled with snow, it echoes with the shriek of the Green Knight sharpening his axe. There is something especially dreary, something grimly and hopelessly perfunctory, in the last-minute advice given to both David and Gawain to look well to their weapons as they approach the fight. Saul offers David his own ludicrously ill-fitting armor, before helplessly wishing him “the Lord be with thee,” much as Gawain’s guide to the Green Chapel urges him, “Haf here thi helme on thy hede, thi spere in thi honde,” before turning around and galloping home to safety.\textsuperscript{45}

But neither contest is, at its essence, a physical one, and conventional weapons will not avail. Gawain’s ordeal will not try his martial valor but his \textit{lewte}, or loyalty to the terms of his agreement, and David’s celebrated sling and “five smooth stones,” notwithstanding, it is his faith in divine protection that will be tested. He discards Saul’s armor, much as Gawain, despite his guide’s advice, will lay aside not only helmet and spear but also his knife and shield when he goes to meet the Green Knight, determined to accept the blow that is his due, “withoute dabate of bronde hym to were / other knyffe” (2041-42). Spiritual test or not, however, both warriors acquit themselves well enough in combat, David making good his threat to “take away thy head from thee,” and Gawain, in

\textsuperscript{45} 1 Sam 17.37; l. 2143. Derek Brewer very briefly notes the similarities of Gawain and David’s preparations for battle, noting that the topos of the “formal arming of the hero” is at least as old as the Iliad, and occurs “usually at a crucial moment in the development of the story. Brewer, Derek, “Armour II: The Arming Topos as Literature,” in \textit{A Companion to the Gawain Poet} (Bury St Edmunds: St Edmundsbury Press, 1997), 175–76.
the first of his two meetings, succeeding handily in striking off the Green Knight’s head at a single blow. Like David, he does so with the giant’s own weapon.\footnote{17.46}

The narratives diverge rather dramatically at this point, obviously, for whereas Goliath’s decapitation truncates his narrative as well as his person, the Green Knight’s beheading only gets the poem’s story underway. David presents Goliath’s head as a trophy to his king;\footnote{17.47} the Green Knight rather sardonically presents his own head to Arthur’s court, holding it by the hair as he reiterated the terms of the agreement—that Gawain should rendezvous with him at his Green Chapel one year hence to receive a blow in return—before taking his leave, head in hand, in an exit even more sensational than his entrance. This is a delightfully eerie twist on the giant-slaying motif, but one that does nothing to diminish Gawain’s reputation, albeit with possible consequences for that of the court. Arthur’s enthusiasm and graciousness toward his nephew bear little comparison to the mad jealousy of King Saul, of course, but the derisiveness of the Green Knight’s challenge, and the fearful reluctance of any member of the warrior aristocracy to rise in answer to it, calls into question the valor of the knightly community and, by extension, the strength of Arthur’s rule. “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands,” sings David’s suddenly-adoring public, and the murmuring of Arthur’s court following the Green Knight’s departure seems to betray an element of uncertainty about the conduct of the king as well as admiration of Gawain: “Who knew ever any kyng such counsel to take . . . ?” they wonder.\footnote{17.48}

\footnote{17.46} “... the Lord will deliver thee into my hand, and I will slay thee, and take away thy head from thee: and I will give the carcasses of the army of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air, and to the beasts of the earth: that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel” (1 Sam 17:46); “And as David had no sword in his hand, He ran, and stood over the Philistine, and took his sword, and drew it out of the sheath, and slew him, and cut off his head” (17.50-51).

\footnote{17.47} 1 Sam 17.57

\footnote{17.48} 1 Sam 18.8; 1. 682
Taken individually, the similarities I’ve noted are not conclusive of any deliberate parallels, but I suggest that they are far from accidental. That the references are fleeting is no matter; so too is our glimpse of Morgan, whose scheme sets the poem’s action in motion; so too are the poem’s twin allusions to Troy, a city that, as Alex Mueller explains, functioned for many Middle English alliterative poets as “a didactic and portable figure that represents the dire consequences of usurpations, sieges of cities, and the breaking of vows.”\textsuperscript{49} There is no question but that the David story likewise made up some of what John Finlayson calls “the literary baggage of a man of the fourteenth century,” and the Poet would have been well aware of the web of associations connected with David’s name, and the vibrations he set off by invoking it.\textsuperscript{50}

The influence of David’s example evidently weighs heavily on Gawain; it is he who utters the poem’s sole explicit reference to David. It is not David’s dazzling early career Gawain has in mind, however, but rather the darkest chapter of his later kingship, when a dalliance with Bathsheba and an unsuccessful attempt to conceal his responsibility for her pregnancy culminates in the murder of her husband Uriah, one of David’s most devoted soldiers.\textsuperscript{51}

Gawain’s reference to David, along with Adam, Solomon, and Samson, comes into the poem in direct connection with one of its primary themes: how a knight may successfully triumph over the sensual temptations of the world, and remain unstained by “cowarddyse and covetyse,” as well as the impurity of sin (2374). Bewildered at the unexpected outcome of his adventure, Gawain grasps for an explanation, closing on one

\textsuperscript{50} John Finlayson, “Definitions of Middle English Romance (1 of 2),” \textit{The Chaucer Review} 15, no. 1 (July 1, 1980): 45.
\textsuperscript{51} 2 Sam 11.12
that does not indict him alone. His failure, he decides, lay in falling for the age-old
cunning and temptation of women. Flushed with shame at having not only flinched at the
first approach of the Green Knight’s axe, but having then been exposed as “lakk[ing] a
lyttel” the virtues of “larges and lewte” (2366; 2381) becoming a knight of his renown for
accepting the protective power of a charmed garter from the seductive Lady Bercilak, he
ruminates that it was ever thus:

Bot hit is no ferly þaȝ a fole madde,
And þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe,
For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled,
And Salomon with fele sere, and Samson eftsones—
Dalyda dalt hym hys wyrde— and Dauyth therafter
Watz blended with Barsabe, þat much bale þoled.
Now þese were wrathed wyth her wyles, hit were a wynne huge
To luf hom wel, and leue hem not, a leude that couthe.
For þes wer forne þe freest, þat folȝed alle þe sele
Exellently, of alle þyse oþer vnder heuen-ryche . . .

But it is no marvel if I’ve been made a fool
And won to misery through the wiles of women,
For so was Adam of old by one beguiled,
And Solomon by several, and Samson too—
Delilah dealt him his fate—and David thereafter
Was deluded by Bathsheba, from which came much misfortune.
Since these men were vexed by womanly wiles, it would be a great benefit
To a man who could do so to love them well and believe them not.
For these men were of old the noblest, favored most excellently by fortune,
Among all others under heaven . . . (2414-23)

Did not Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David—all far worthier than himself, surely—
come to grief through the duplicity of women? The thing to do if one could, Gawain
muses, is to love one’s lady while remaining alert enough not to trust her.

It would seem that we are on familiar enough medieval misogynistic ground here:
women are identified with Eve as the timeless principle of temptation, knight and reader
alike learn a valuable lesson, and familiar biblical stories are recruited to help drive home
the point—albeit at the expense of those stories’ subtlety and, indeed, accuracy. Should it
come as any surprise that the poem’s use of the biblical material is almost comically reductive, bypassing the complex motivations, circumstances, and characters of each of the four men alluded to, flattening the four narratives in order to illustrate nothing but the culpability of women? Or that, in light of the salient details of the David story itself, Gawain’s conclusion—”To luf [women] wel, and leue hem not, a leude þat couþe”—seems absurd? Readers familiar with the account of David’s downfall in particular might well think so. Bathsheba was never David’s to “luf wel” in the first place, after all, and it was David, not Bathsheba, who initiated the ultimately murderous cycle of deceit in which she was little more than a passive agent.

From one point of view, Gawain’s summary explanation of his misfortune fits well enough with the poem’s structure, in which the only woman who does not constitute an obstacle to knightly honor is the Virgin Mary. The only other women identified by name in the highly masculine world of the poem are Guinevere, Lady Bercilak (nameless otherwise), and Morgan le Fay. Morgan is of course as pernicious a force as ever, and although it is difficult to determine whether Lady Bercilak’s motives are malicious or merely playful, she functions as little more than a highly ornamental mechanism for temptation. Even Guinevere, still virtuous and faithful to her king at the “first age” of his reign the poem describes, constitutes a potential impediment between Gawain and his efforts to salvage the court’s honor: even as Arthur stands poised to accept the Green Knight’s challenge, risking his person and the reputation of the entire Round Table by accepting a challenge better befitting a knight than a king, courtesy demands that Gawain first obtain the Queen’s permission before detaching himself from the banquet guests on the dais to take his lord’s place. There is, moreover, the possibility that the details of
these particular biblical accounts are of less importance than their likely familiarity to readers, that the Poet has simply reached for the most immediately recognizable stories, rather than those most precisely applicable to Gawain’s circumstances.\textsuperscript{52} Comparison of these four figures was of course a medieval commonplace.\textsuperscript{53}

And yet, these explanations fail to account for what strikes me as a rather facile use of biblical allusion by the same poet who showed such imagination, wit, and—above all—keen knowledge of the biblical literature in his retelling of biblical narratives

\textit{Patience} and \textit{Cleanliness}.

There would be little use in trying to exonerate the poet for reflecting the gender assumptions of his day, nor is that my purpose. But happily for readers reluctant to conclude only that the Poet here “lakked a lyttel” subtlety in his handling of the biblical material, I’d like to suggest this much, that Gawain’s reference to David’s sin works in more nuanced ways to inform what happens next.

Having terrified, shamed, and finally administered a salutary bleeding to Gawain, the Green Knight leans on his axe and waxes avuncular, suggesting that although Gawain

\textsuperscript{52} Andrew and Waldron paraphrase lines 2422-23 as, “I have mentioned only the most noteworthy examples of the stupefying influence of women on men.” Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, \textit{The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript}, 295 n.

\textsuperscript{53} Peter Abelard, for example, compares Samson to Adam, David, and Solomon in a similarly misogynistic rant in his Planctus Israel uber Samson. Greti Dinkova-Bruun. “Biblical Thematics: The Story of Samson in Medieval Literary Discourse.” in Ralph Hexter and David Townsend, eds., \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Latin Literature} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 368–69; In the French Queste del Saint Graal, Lancelot compares his failures to those of biblical heroes brought down through women. It’s a familiar list, save for the substitution of Absalom for David: “He told himself that the father of mankind had been deceived by woman, and Solomon, the wisest of the human race, and Strong-arm Samson the invincible, and Absalom, son of David, the fairest man the world had seen.” Enter Guinevere, “who had not made a good confession since she was first married.” (Apparently marriage, like knighthood, tends to lead even the most virtuous astray.) Matarasso, \textit{The Quest of the Holy Grail}, 142, 143; To take a more familiar example in the Middle English corpus, it seems a fair bet that Chaucer’s Monk would have gotten “round to addressing David and Solomon in his lugubrious list of tragic heroes, had not the Knight stopped him. Although his theme is tragedy and not womanly wiles, the Monk concludes his sketch of Samson’s “example old and plain” by warning “That no men tell their counsel to their wives / Of such thing as they would have secret fain, / If that it touch their limbs or their lives.” Chaucer, \textit{The Riverside Chaucer}. 
may have lapsed a bit in maintaining good faith, both as a guest of Bercilak and as party to the Green Knight’s challenge, his offence lay only in loving his life too much. No great sin, that, he concludes, and invites Gawain to his home for feasting and merry-making with the very women who had tricked him: Lady Bercilak and Gawain’s own aunt Morgan. The former, it turns out, is the Green Knight’s wife, and though Morgan’s intentions were malevolent, the Green Knight is at pains to explain that the whole thing was really all in good fun. Thematically and structurally, everything seems in place for resolution and reconciliation. The dénouement has occurred, secret identities and motives have been revealed, and Gawain has even been administered an informal shriving. The poem seems to have been moving toward this moment, the Green Knight’s good-natured laughter placing a sort of benediction on the scene, and on Gawain’s all-too-human shortcomings. But that is not what happens. Gawain is resistant to this resolution, and to the Green Knight’s proposal that to return with him to his castle. Not once but twice brushing aside the hearty invitations, Gawain accepts only the garter, which, he claims, he will wear as a mark of his shame, a memento peccati, in an act of lifelong penance.

It is here that a consideration of the aftermath of David’s sin is illuminating. Caxton paraphrases the story nicely:

And then said David to Nathan: Peccavi! I have sinned against our Lord. Nathan said: Our Lord hath taken away thy sin, thou shalt not die, but for as much as thou hast made the enemy to blaspheme the name of God, therefore the son that is born to thee shall die by death.  

The thing to notice here is that although the story of David shows repentance for sin to be both essential and restorative, enabling divine forgiveness and the re-establishment of covenantal relationships, repentance does not wholly efface the consequences for sin.

David’s child still dies. This point was not lost on medieval readers and interpreters of the story, who tend to explain David’s necessary suffering in terms of penance—despite the fact that the system of public penance did not emerge until the 3rd century, and the more familiar private penance was not established until the early 12th century, and then enjoined at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. For Augustine, David carried a “special authority as archetypal penitent,” and it was in no small part this special authority and its basis, the enormity of David’s fall from his high status, that led to his pervasive and enduring popularity in medieval commentaries, homilies, and poems. William Caxton, writing a century after the Poet, certainly interprets the aftermath of David’s sin in the familiar terms of the medieval penitential formula, even breaking off in his retelling of it to relate an additional “great penance.” In his fifteenth-century English translation and expansion of the *Legenda Aurea*, Caxton reports that David

...dolved him in the ground standing naked unto the head, so long that the worms began to creep in his flesh, and made a verse of this psalm Miserere, and then came out, and when he was whole thereof he went in again and stood so again as long as afore is said and made the second verse, and so as many times he was dolven in the earth as be verses in the said psalm of *Miserere mei deus*, and every time was abiding therein till he felt the worms creep in his flesh. This was a great penance and a token of a great repentance, for there be in the psalm twenty-one verses, and twenty-one times he was dolven.

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57 This account, for which there is no known source before Caxton, was told him, he claims, when he “once was beyond the sea riding in the company of a noble knight named Sir John Capons, and was also doctor in both laws, and was born in Malyorke, and had been viceroy and governor of Arragon and Catalonia, and that time counsellor unto the Duke of Burgundy, Charles.” Caxton, *The Golden Legend (Aurea Legenda)*, II:18–19. Nearly as extraordinary, if slightly less grotesque, is Caxton’s description of Solomon’s public self-flagellation: “It is said, but I fynde it not in the Byble, that Salamon repentyd hym moche of thys synne of ydolatrye, and dyde moche penance therfor, for he lete hym be drawe thurgh Jherusalem and bete hym self wyth roddes and scorgys that the blood Mowed in the syght of alle the peple.” Ibid., II:28.
After this ghastly interpolation, he once again takes up the biblical narrative, in which, “God took away [David’s] sin, and forgave it him, but the son that she brought forth died. And after this Bathsheba, that had been Uriah’s wife, conceived and brought forth another son named Solomon, which was well-beloved of God, and after David, Solomon was king.” Surely at this point, David’s moral debt is paid in full. But no—as with Gawain, David’s story seems to resist reconciliation, for as Caxton goes on to explain, “After this David had much war and trouble and anger . . .” Indeed, the remainder of David’s life as recounted in the Second Book of Samuel is a wearying series of dynastic strife and civil rebellions. Just so, Gawain’s term of penance will be lifelong. The stain of one’s offense (harme), he ruminates, “ones is tachched twynne wil hit never,” as both his scars and garter, twin “token[s] of untrawthe,” will persist in signifying (2512; 2509).

**Synecdochal Sin: Wrongdoing and Consequences in *Patience and Cleanness***

It is important to reiterate that *SGGK* cannot be called allegorical, and that I am not calling for a reading of Gawain as a “type” of David; Gawain, after all, resisted the sin to which David succumbed. The subtle but traceable influence of the David story on the poem does suggest, however, that the Poet’s understanding of the phenomenon of sin included assumptions about the nature of its consequences important for my reading of the poem as having greater moral heft and less optimism than critics have recently tended to assume: First, that there is a corporate aspect even to individual impurity, and second, that those effects on the community could be enduring. The two ideas are closely related, both owing something to the theology of atonement, the reconciliation of humanity with

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58 Ibid., II:20.
59 Ibid., II:19.
an absolutely righteous God by means of sacrificial death. This idea formed the blood-sacrifice system described in the Hebrew Bible, and in the New Testament saw Christ as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s messianic prophesy: “Surely he hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows . . . . But he was wounded for our iniquities, he was bruised for our sins: the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4-5). The corollary to this belief that an individual was required to assume the guilt of a community is that an individual was also responsible for contaminating it, a doctrine stated most succinctly in the first half of the Pauline formulation that “as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Cor 15.22). Once again it appears that “civil and corporal fates are inextricable.” This is a powerful idea, one with theological and political ramifications that are not always easy to untangle, and which are further complicated by the tension between the doctrine of atonement and the need for human penance. The absolute efficacy of Christ’s atonement was not questioned, as to do so would impugn the importance and purity of his death, but neither was the inevitability of human sin, and the need to pay for it after death in the form of purgatory. Hence, the second quality of sin, which both complements and clashes with the first: the obstinacy of its effects, both in sinners themselves, and in their

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60 Although “there has never been any official formulation in orthodox Christianity of the mystery of the Lord’s redemptive work,” the precise nature of the Atonement’s efficacy has been variously interpreted in terms of a ransom paid to Satan, of an elevation of humankind accomplished by Christ’s incarnation, of Christ as a representative rather than a substitute, etc. It is likely that the Pearl Poet’s understanding of atonement was similar to what was proposed by Anselm in Cur Deus Homo and refined by Aquinas. This view, dominant until the time of the Reformers, whose modifications were minor, saw the atonement not as a ransom from Satan, but as a “satisfaction” of Divine Justice; the infinite purity of God the Father, offended by the infinite offense of sin, required an infinitely pure sacrifice (God the Son). Cross and Livingstone, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 122–23.

61 The passage is cited in the Gospel of Matthew: “and all that were sick, he healed: That it might be fulfilled, which was spoken by the prophet Isaias, saying: He took our infirmities, and bore our diseases” (Matthew 8:16b-17).

offspring and communities. The enduring consequences for grave sins were thought to be such that in the early, public penitential system, established in the third-century church, one was a penitent for life, barred even after the granting of absolution from marriage and enrollment in the military. And many biblical narratives exemplify, if less hyperbolically, the well-known Deuteronomical passage concerning the children of prostitutes and Israel’s tribal enemies, who are cursed even “after the tenth generation” (etiam post decimam generationem). Moral spoilage, as the account of the great flood in Cleanness stresses, affects not only those “ḥat doten on ḫis molde” (who act foolishly in this world), but tends to corrupt all, “Fro ḫe burne to ḫe best, fro bryddez to tyschez” (286; 288). Penance, restoration, even divine forgiveness notwithstanding, the effects of impurity could linger in oneself or one’s offspring, such that certain consequences might be inevitable.

The David narrative bears powerful witness to both of these principles. It is striking to consider that although the Miserere is one of the most poignantly personal expressions of regret anywhere in the Hebrew Bible, the consequences of David’s wrongdoing implicate a much broader community, even beyond the child whose death was itself David’s prescribed penance; the following chapter, 2 Samuel 13, describes yet

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63 Not surprisingly, this system proved unsustainable, and gave way to what was, by the 12th century, an organized system of private penance. Cross and Livingstone, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 1250.
64 “A mamzer, that is to say, one born of a prostitute, shall not enter into the church of the Lord, until the tenth generation” (Deut. 23:2). This already hyperbolic proscription becomes yet more severe in the following verse: “The Ammonite and the Moabite, even after the tenth generation shall not enter into the church of the Lord for ever: Because they would not meet you with bread and water in the way, when you came out of Egypt: and because they hired against thee Balaam, the son of Beor, from Mesopotamia in Syria, to curse thee” (Deut 23:3-4). Two less severe expressions of the same idea occur in Exodus: “I am the Lord thy God, mighty, jealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Exodus 20:5); in the second instance, Moses addresses God as one “Who keepest mercy unto thousands: who takest away iniquity, and wickedness, and sin, and no man of himself is innocent before thee. Who renderest the iniquity of the fathers to the children, and to the grandchildren unto the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 34:7).
another sexual sin that will culminate in murder, when David’s eldest son, Amnar, rapes his sister Tamar. In retaliation for this incestuous violation, Tamar’s other brother, Absalom, murders Amnar, then flees the kingdom for his own safety, and his eventual return from exile will culminate in a failed coup attempt against his father the king. Robert Alter finds in this cyclicality both the structural genius of the storyteller and the strong implication of a causal connection, reinforcing the idea that David’s transgression with Bathsheba is directly linked with the familial and political chaos that follows.65

If the Poet did not intend to show Gawain’s minor sin of omission as precipitating the greater sins of the court in the same way as David’s brought strife to his kingdom, we are nevertheless not wrong in seeing it tropologically foreshadowed.66 Though there will be laughter and apparent reintegration back at the Round Table, as his fellow knights applaud his tale and sportingly offer to join him in wearing the garter, the light-heartedness of this conclusion is tinctured by what readers acquainted with what “is breued in þe best boke of romaunce” must know of what will befall Arthur’s house (2521). Incest, adultery, betrayal, and death will come to Logres. As with David, driven to plotting the death of one of his most loyal officers, Arthur will find that a woman has become between him and his finest knight, leaving the way open for insurrection by his own son—notably a product of incest. It is hard not to see an element of that ruin foreshadowed in Gawain’s unwillingness to participate in a facile reconciliation with Bercilak’s household, and in his sorrow as he takes his solitary way back to the court.

“[T]he ende [may] be hevy,” warns the narrator early on, and the thematic resonances of the poem provide reason to think he has more than the weight of the garter in mind. Just as Gawain’s reflections on the pernicious “wyles of wymmen” are undercut by the revelation that Morgan le Fay (no ordinary woman, she!) has been orchestrating the entire elaborate affair, the back-slapping joviality with which Gawain’s fellow knights offer to share in his shame are qualified by what both we and the Poet know of the obdurate nature of penance (2415).

If impurity constitutes an obstacle to reconciliation, it also obstructs the realization of that fact. Nicholas Watson suggests that “[Gawain’s] real error (like that of his more judgmental critics) may be his failure to recognize that . . . he cannot continue to treat his sin as unforgiveable.”67 This may be, but here again I want to emphasize (at the risk of including myself among those “more judgmental critics”) that the more crucial failing is that of the members of the court, who neither acknowledge the seriousness of Gawain’s lapse, nor recognize it as a possible signifier of a broader problem implicating them as well. It is this failure of recognition to which I now turn.

Purity, as the title of Mary Douglas’s seminal study Purity and Danger suggests, has long been closely linked with fear about the possible consequences of failing to maintain it. In many of the biblical narratives treated by the Poet, such consequences are described in terms of direct divine action: disobedience is an affront to holiness, which is “the attribute of Godhead,” and arouses God’s indignation, so that he either withdraws

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67 Watson’s broader argument is that SGGK joins in the theological daring of its time by nudging open the possibility of a specifically “vernacular theology,” with behavioral expectation pitched at the level of the laity it was intended to instruct. This reading, though not entirely persuasive, provides an ingenious way between extremes, as well as an explanation for the poem’s “relative indulgence toward imperfection.” Watson, “The Gawain Poet as a Vernacular Theologian,” 294.
his protective blessing from or invokes a curse on the offenders (or, as we have seen, other members of their community), resulting in disease, meteorological calamity, invasion, captivity, or exile, and ultimately death.68 This transparent causal mechanism is the one most obviously at work in Cleanness, in which the Poet shows us “prynne wysses / ḷat unclannes tocleues in corage dere / Of ḷat wynnelych Lorde ḷat wonyes in heuen” (three ways that uncleanness cleaves the noble heart of the gracious Lord who rules in Heaven [1805-06]). In retelling Christ's parable of the Great Banquet, and the Hebrew Bible stories of Noah and the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Belshazzar's feast, the Poet emphasizes the problem of impurity, and the overwhelmingly violent response it prompts. This is plainly “a universe in which men prosper by conforming to holiness and perish when they deviate from it.”69 But impurity may pose dangers apart from what is explicitly attributed to direct divine action. Douglas, commenting on the puzzling and seemingly arbitrary articles of Levitical law, makes an important distinction: “it is clear that the positive and negative precepts are held to be efficacious and not merely expressive: observing them draws down prosperity, infringing them brings danger.”70 In other words, something like what might be called (in a very general sense) “natural law” enforces the divine mandate to holy conduct.71 Indeed, the quality or state of being holy,
or “clean,” as the Poet calls it, is one that is in accord with the divine natural order.72 Douglas, after first establishing that the root of holiness as expressed in the Old Testament is “separateness,” describes “wholeness and completeness” as chief among the other ideas it comprises, and Elizabeth Keiser follows Aquinas in arguing that the Middle English word “clannesse” denotes “a bond between God and humanity based on an appreciation of the aesthetic possibilities to be enjoyed in the divine order of things.”73 Hence the Poet’s description in Cleanness of the Dead Sea, traditionally the site of the obliterated cities Sodom and Gomorrah, as possessing many strange properties, such that he insists of the place, “Alle þe costez of kynde hit combrez vchone” (it perverts all the qualities of nature [1024]). The travelogue of John Mandeville, from which the Poet drew most of the details of this description, tells that the waters of the Dead Sea are bitter with salt, yielding “a thing that men clepe [call] asphalt.”74 Iron floats on its surface, and no man can drown in its waters, yet feathers sink to the bottom. On its banks, trees give gorgeous-looking fruit, but inside are only “wyndowande askes” (windblown ashes).75 The Poet finds these aberrations alarming for the same reason he finds them fitting to

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72 It may be noteworthy that demons are referred to in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles as “unclean spirits” (spiritus inmundi). The Gospel of Matthew describes Christ’s commissioning of the disciples: “And having called his twelve disciples together, he gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of diseases, and all manner of infirmities.” The association here between “uncleanliness” and infirmity is unmistakable. Fylth is equated with unwholeness, aberrance, a state out of tune with the intended schema of divine order, such that Christ, the disciples, or, later, desert saints cast out spirits and with them sickness and disease. Matthew 10:1. See also: Mark 1:23-27; 3:11; 3:30; 5:2-13; 6:7; 7:25; 9:24; Luke 4:36; 6:18; 8:29; 9:43; 11:24; Acts 5:16; 8:7; The Apocalypse of St. John 16:13; 18:2 73 Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo, 63; Keiser, Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and Its Contexts, 23. I depart from Keiser’s argument, however, when she goes on to insist that the poet attributes the sin of sodomy not to violation of the natural law of procreation or to effeminacy, but rather to a hypermasculinity that offended courtly grace and decorum. 74 John Mandeville Mandeville, The Travels of Sir John Mandeville: The Version of the Cotton Manuscript in Modern Spelling, with Three Narratives, in Illustration of It, from Hakluyt’s “Navigations, Voyages & Discoveries,” ed. Giovanni (da Pian del Carpine of Antivari), Willem van Ruysbroeck, and Odorico (da Pordenone) (Macmillan, 1905), chap. XII. 75 Cleanness, line 1048. The image occurs in Mandeville, but predates him. See Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript, 154–55.
mark the grave of the Cities of the Plane: because they are “against kind,” as was, in the common explanation that he follows, the sin of sodomy for which the cities themselves were cursed.

The beliefs about the nature of sin that are made so explicit in *Cleanness* are implicit in *SGGK*, in which the language of knightly virtue largely replaces that of spiritual purity, and God as an active agent is nowhere to be found. Despite God’s conspicuous (and critically remarked on\(^\text{76}\)) absence from the poem, the problem and importance of cleanness loom no less large, and it might be accurate to say that what most intrigues the Poet in *SGGK* are the “natural” consequences of sin, unaided by explicit divine intervention. There is husbandly jealousy, for one; the Green Knight’s remarks as he raises his axe for the final stroke suggest that the beheading challenge might well have concluded rather more messily for Gawain had he behaved any less decorously with his host’s wife than befits a member of Arthur’s “hyȝe hode.”\(^\text{77}\) A less obvious consequence, however, and a more intriguing one, pertains to vision—that is, to spiritual sensitivity, knowledge, and recognition.

Frequently in both scripture and religious poetry, purity is linked with both physical and figurative sight. Julian of Norwich, in her *Shewings*, expresses her assurance

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\(^{76}\) Hopkins draws attention to the fact that, “[w]hen direct mentions of God, Mary, or the saints do occur, ”it is noticeable that the poet avoids stating that [they have] actually done something.” (Indeed, one might argue that if the poem does reveal a primary agent, it is Morgan!) This absence may be taken as evidence to support several very different readings. While Aers, for example regards these lacunae as evidence of the poem’s only surface interest in spiritual themes, Hopkins sees them as purposeful omissions, ones that reinforce a lesson repeated in the other three poems: ”Your own merit is never going to be adequate for your justification . . . . The copious abundance of God’s grace is necessary to supplement merit and supply the deficiencies of human frailty in order to achieve salvation, and it is always available to those who truly desire it. Ask, and it will be given unto you; knock, and the door will be opened. Gawain, when it comes to the point, does not ask.” Instead, she points out, he relies on magic. Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, 213 See also n.22 in Introduction, above.

\(^{77}\) “Halde þe now þe hyȝe hode þat Arþur þe raȝt / And kepe þy kanel at þis kest, þif hit keuer may!” (2296-97). Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” n. 2297f.
that “Jhesus, our very love, light, and truth, shall shew to all clen soules that with mekenes aske perseverantly this wisdom of Hym.”\textsuperscript{78} In \textit{Cleanness}, the Poet invokes “one amonge opher” of the eight beatitudes Christ commended in his Sermon on the Mount, this one “a ful cler speche” concerning “clannesse”:

\begin{verbatim}
Be habel clene of his hert hapenez ful fayre,  
For he schal loke on oure Lorde with a leue chere (25-28)

He who is clean of heart shall be fully blessed,  
For he shall look on our Lord with great delight.\textsuperscript{79}
\end{verbatim}

Repeatedly in \textit{Cleanness}, the Poet makes reference to this promise from the beatitudes, reiterating early in the poem that the pure will “see þy Sauior and His sete ryche” (176), and explaining midway through it that “þere He fyndez al fayre a freke wythinne, / With hert honest and hol, þat habel he honoure, / Sendez hym a sad syȝt: to se His auen face” (Where He finds a man all fair within, with honest and whole heart, that man he honors, and sends him a solemn sight: to see His own face [593-95]). The promise is repeated in \textit{Patience}, as well: “þay ar happen also þat con her hert clene, / For þay her Sauyour in sete schal se with her yȝen” (23-24). Not only, then, does purity facilitate insight, knowledge, and clarity, but it carries with it the promise of apprehending something of divinity itself.\textsuperscript{80}

Underscoring the point is the fact that the inverse seems to be true as well. The paraphrase of Matthew in \textit{Cleanness} continues, “to þat syȝt seche schal neuer / Þat any

\begin{footnotes}

\textsuperscript{79} The so-called Sermon on the Mount occurs in the Gospel of Matthew 5:1-11.

\textsuperscript{80} A glimpse only, it should be noted, and not the full glory of God. Pauline Matarasso reads Galahad’s death and ascension after witnessing the bodily emergence of Christ from the Grail as a confirmation of God’s warning to Moses in Exodus 33:20: “Thou canst not see my face, for there shall no man see me and live.” Matarasso, \textit{The Quest of the Holy Grail}, n. 87, p. 304.
\end{footnotes}
vnclannesse hatz on, auwhere abowte . . .” (to such a sight shall a man never attain who has any uncleanness about him anywhere, 29-30). As if the stains clotting one’s soul also act as spiritual cataracts, occluding insight and spiritual sensitivity, spiritual uncleanness is explicitly and repeatedly linked to misprision in the biblical sources on which the Poet draws. In scripture itself, St. Paul’s errors of belief are dramatically figured in physical terms when God blinds him as he travels toward Damascus to arrest converts to the young Christian church. After three days without sight, the prayers of Ananias of Damascus that Paul will be filled with the Holy Spirit have an equally dramatic effect: “immediately there fell from his eyes as it were scales: and he received his sight.”

Similarly, in the 13th century French Queste de Sant Graal (with which the Gawain-poet was almost certainly familiar82) we find King Mordrain smitten with blindness. Only in the presence of Galahad, “the lily of purity,” is his sight restored.83 So it is that the Poet warns in Cleanness, after itemizing a dirty laundry list of common “fautez,” that for committing them one may “þe Souerayn ne se,” and again, “neuer see Hym with syȝt for such sour tournez” (177; 178; 192). Both the positive and negative aspects of this point are exemplified in Cleanness’s retelling of the story of king Nebuchadnezzar, whose pride cost him his reason. Once returned to his senses, however, he exhibits both piety and self-knowledge that he had before lacked:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þenne He wayned hym his wyt, þat hade wo sufferd,} \\
\text{þat he com to knawlach and kenned hymseluen;} \\
\text{þenne he loued þat Lorde and leued in trawþe} \\
\text{Hit watz non oþer þen He þat hade al in honde. (1701-04)}
\end{align*}
\]

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81 Acts 9:3-9; 9:13-19
Then [God] restored his senses to him who had suffered woe,
So that he came to knowledge and knew himself;
Then he loved the Lord and truly believed
That none but [the Lord] held all in His hand.

Spiritual clarity in this case was achieved only through the purifying experience of suffering, what later commentators would define as a type of penance. And in *Patience*, the Poet describes a similar process at work in Jonah’s experience: “Now he knawez Hym in care þat couþe not in sele” (Now [Jonah] knew Him in sorrow who he could not in happiness” [296]).

This correlation between vision and purity, in which a paucity of the former indicts the latter, casts a new light on Gawain’s numerous and repeated failures of recognition, beginning with his own failure of self-knowledge. A subtly comic moment of self-misrecognition reinforces this problem. When Lady Bercilak welcomes Gawain to Hautdesert, declaring herself his servant, and very suggestively inviting him to have “Yowre awen won to wale” (take your own pleasure), Gawain is taken somewhat aback: “In god fayth . . . I be not now he þat ȝe of speken . . .” (1237-42). He protests a bit too much. Though he may “not now” be *that* Gawain, readers familiar with the Poet’s source romances would likely have caught the reason for Lady Bercilak’s eagerness. In post-Chretien verse-romances such as *Le Chevalier a l’Epee, La Vengeance Raguïdel, and La Mule sans Frein*, Gawain is frequently depicted as an amorous, if not necessarily

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84 Although I have not found another source discussing Gawain’s misprision in relationship to the pronouncements on purity and vision made in the Gospels and recited in “Cleanness,” I am not the first to identify it. R.A. Shoaf, who also sees the movement of the poem as a shift from Gawain the “pentangular” knight to a “girdle knight,” has examined the inability of Gawain and the court “to be adequately critical in their interpretations” of the poem’s array of ambiguous signs. Though acknowledging a certain inherent ambiguity in these signs and symbols, particularly the pentangle, Shoaf, like Francis Soucy, attributes Gawain’s blindness largely to pride, though of an intellectual rather than, as Soucy contends, a knightly variety. R.A. Shoaf, “The ‘Syngne of Surfet’ and the Surfeit of Signs in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” in *The Passing of Arthur: New Essays in Arthurian Tradition*, by Christopher Baswell and William Sharpe, eds. (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1988), 158.
adulterous, hero, and it may be that in showing him making “mery among þi fre ladyes” of Hautdesert immediately following his confession, the Poet gives us a glimpse of Gawain’s old habits. Gawain himself is not in on the joke, which, coupled with his resistance to his hostess’s charms, would seem to put him in a good light, morally speaking, were it not that his inability to see through the disguises of both Morgan and the Green Knight, or to recognize anything amiss in the garter (which may or may not be magical—a question never satisfied in the poem), seems to betoken a spiritual myopia. When the Poet asserts in Cleanness that just as the pure of heart “schal loke on oure Lorde,” the sinner whose heart is stained with impurity “to þat sȝte seche schal he neuer” (will never behold such a sight) (28; 29), he might almost be describing Gawain’s attempts elsewhere in the Arthur cycle to see romance’s highest symbol of the divine presence, the Grail. In the Queste de Sant Graal, Gawain is first among the knights to pledge himself to pursuing the sacred chalice, which had appeared all-too-briefly before the court on Pentecost:

[W]e are so blinded and beguiled that we could not see it plain, rather was its true substance hidden from us. Wherefore I for my part make here and now this vow . . . [to] pursue it . . . until I have looked openly upon the mystery we have but glimpsed this day, provided that I am capable and worthy of such grace.

He is neither, as it turns out, and his ultimate failure in beholding the holy sight makes an interesting point of comparison to his obliviousness in SGGK to the nature and sources of the peril surrounding him, as well what might be making him vulnerable to them. Rather than considering that his failure might be owing to his own spiritual condition, he is quick to blame the “wyles of wymmen,” rather in the way that, in the twelfth-century Roman de

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86 Matarasso, The Quest of the Holy Grail, 44.
Tristram, he laments that he has been malheur (unfortunate), after sheepishly admitting to the slaying of thirty-two knights during the Grail quest.87 Such a complaint discloses Gawain’s fundamental confusion about the nature of iniquity in the role of human affairs as the Poet understands it. The world of SGGK is not that of the anonymous Stanzaic Morte Arthur or, to a lesser extent, Malory’s Morte, governed more by wyrd or Fortune’s wheel than by Providence. In such a world, calamity is brought about by an adder and a slow-witted soldier, but in SGGK it is malevolent design, rather than mere happenstance, that initiates the adventure and brings about the near-calamity of Gawain’s ordeal.88 Gawain is wrong to attribute his failure to women, just as the court will be to minimize that failure. Both, in so doing, miss the point that the Poet seems exceedingly aware of: consequences for iniquity are inescapable.

For the most part, however, Gawain is correct in protesting that he is “not now” the unrestrainedly amorous knight of whom Lady Bercilak spoke. And neither is he the still more degenerate Gawain described elsewhere among the Poet’s Arthurian sources.89 That Gawain goes four years between confessions, provokes a monk to call him “a bad and faithless servant” (to which, in a moment doubly comic when compared to his confused encounter with Lady Bercilak, Gawain replies, “Sir, from what you say I deduce you know me well”), and spurns a holy hermit’s council that he accept a reconciling penance, complaining that “the hardships of penance would be more than he

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89 Beginning in the morally serious Queste, Gawain’s character grows more impulsively lecherous and violent, and more sinister, even treacherous, in the subsequent Suite du Merlin and the Prose Tristan. Brewer, “Sources I: The Sources of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” 244.
could brook.”  Instead, Gawain as we find him in SGGK is eager for penance, perhaps signaling that, like Nebuchadnezzar and Jonah, suffering has refined him, and begun a process that will likely do him further spiritual good. Indeed, in certain respects the Gawain of SGGK very much resembles Jonah, whose story the Poet retells in Patience. Though Gawain keeps his appointment at the Green Chapel, his disobediently self-serving lapse seems of a kind with that of the reluctant prophet Jonah’s, both stemming from the same failure of courage and faithfulness that sent Jonah fleeing his divinely-appointed duty to administer prophetic warning to the corrupt city of Nineveh. And the benignity of the Green Knight’s final pronouncements on Gawain as having simply “lakked a lyttel” are somewhat reminiscent of God’s parting injunction to Jonah in Patience:

Be noȝt so gryndel, godman, bot go forth þy wayes,
Be preue and be pacient in Payne and in joye;
For he þat is to rakel to enden his cloþez
Mot eftte sitte with more vnsounde to sewe hem togeder. (524-27)

Be not so ill-tempered, good man, but go forth on your way
Be faithful and be patient in pain and in joy.
For he who is too eager to rend his clothes
Must sit in worse rags yet to mend them.

A.D. Horgan, enumerating the structural parallels between SGGK, Pearl, and Patience, notes that all of them feature “a central character of high moral pretensions who falls short of an ideal of behaviour and is suitably rebuked by a figure of authority and made to seem foolish.”  Such a benediction as both Jonah and Gawain receive could indeed leave the reader with the sense that here is a protagonist who, now smarting from his lesson, is

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90 Matarasso, The Quest of the Holy Grail, 77; 80.
at worst “loveably naughty,” and support the reading of critics who, like Nicholas
Watson, conclude that Gawain’s chief fault “may be his failure to recognize that . . . he
cannot continue to treat his sin as unforgiveable.”92 The reading is indeed an appealing
one. But pace Horgan, I must point out that the Poet is also deeply engaged in biblical
narratives of heroes whose failures precipitate or prefigure far greater consequences than
merely being “made to seem foolish.” For the precise nature of Gawain’s sin is, as I have
said repeatedly, of only secondary importance to understanding the real focus of the
poem’s critique: the court itself. If it is difficult to assess the precise shape and limits of
Gawain’s culpability, formed as he is from the parts of so many disparate Gawains, the
failures of recognition on the part of Arthur and the court are more obviously damning.
Whereas in the Queste the court comprehends the failures of individual knights to
achieve the Grail quest as an “undying shame” to be borne collectively, the court in
SGGK misguidedly attempts to bear Gawain’s failure in a casual sartorial gesture, failing
utterly to recognize what Gawain, when he returns from his misadventure, is becoming at
least dimly aware of: the grave, corporate, and enduring consequences for sin.93 As with
Gawain, these effects argue some evidence of their cause: an insouciant impurity. And
Arthur himself does not emerge looking much better than the members of his court.

There is a subtle preoccupation with the problems of kingship discernible in the
poem. Note the Green Knight’s approving acknowledgment that Gawain had, at least on
the first two days of their game of exchange at the castle “Al þe gayne þou me gef, as god

92 “Loveably naughty” is Margaret Williams’s description of Jonah as he appears in “Patience”: “The
combination (so frequent in medieval writing) of reverence and humor is brilliantly effected, and made
plausible by the author’s understanding of the feelings of God’s faulty, lovable messenger.” Williams, The
mon schulde” (You gave me all you gained, as a good man ought to, [2349]). This gnomic statement about what “a good man ought to” do calls to mind similar injunctions in Beowulf concerning a leader’s proper duties toward his retainers:

Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean,  
fromum feohgftum on fæder bearme,  
þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen  
wilgesiþas, þonne wig cume,  
leode gelæsten

Just so should a young man perform good deeds,  
Bestow fine gifts while in his father’s keeping,  
That when he is old, faithful companions, willing warriors,  
Will again remember him, should war approach

To the extent that scholars have been correct in identifying Davidic parallels in Beowulf, these instances remind us that one of David’s chief values as an exemplar to medieval readers was as a model of kingship.95 This same emphasis on the importance of kingly generosity, keeping oaths, and dealing justly even with the heirs of one’s political allies can be found in the record of David’s career.96 In the same way that the Beowulf poet fondly recalls of Scyld, “þæt wæs gód cyning” (There was a good king!),97 various refiners of the Arthur story used the legendary material to reflect on successful and unsuccessful models of authority.98 Just so, the Gawain-poet seems interested in the

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95 Orchard, A Critical Companion to “Beowulf,” 142; 143–45.
97 Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, Klaeber’s Beowulf, l. 11.
98 If Davidic resonances are not unexpected in an Arthur story, what is surprising is that many of the parallels I have tallied are not, as they are in the alliterative Morte, between David and Arthur. Rather, the eponymous Gawain is the center of the poem’s action, and just as the putative perfection that is Lancelot’s in Chrétien, and the chasteness that is Galahad’s in the Queste attach to him here, so too do some of the qualities of Arthur himself. The most visible of these is the image of Mary on the inner face of Gawain’s shield, the same image, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, borne by Arthur as he slew 960 Saxons at Mount Badon (Geoffrey of Monmouth, The History of the Kings of Britain, chap. ix).; Why, then, is it Gawain whose adventures in SGGK bear comparison with David’s career? Which is to say, why not Arthur? There are numerous possible explanations—one being that little explanation is required at all: no lack of precedent existed for the Poet to place Gawain at the center of his own romance. (Apart from the obvious episodic romances of Chretien, there is for example the Latin prose “Rise of Gawain” [de Ortu Waluuanii], composed in either the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Joseph J. Duggan, The Romances of Chretien de Troyes [Yale University Press, 2001], 1.) And again, the nature of the story as a quest tale demands someone besides Arthur as its focus; as we have seen, it is not for a king to do the work.
connection between personal sanctity, even that of the king himself, and broader civic consequences. When considered in light of both the cautionary and exemplary models of kingship the Poet describes in *Cleanness*, of Nebuchadnezzar’s disordered perception on the one hand, and the penetrating discernment of the sovereign in the Parable of the Great Banquet on the other, Arthur’s failures of recognition recall David’s moral blindness at the nadir of his kingship, and seem potentially indicative of greater underlying problems in Logres. In *Cleanness*, the Poet gives us a king who, if unappealing in his severity, is paradigmatic in his ability and willingness to scrutinize his subjects.

*Cleanness* relates a greatly expanded version of Christ’s Parable of the Great Banquet, in which a king sends his servants to invite the great and wealthy to his son’s wedding feast.99 When those subjects decline or make light of the invitation, the king extends the invitation to everyone, regardless of wealth or station. The feast is well attended, but when the king spots a beggar who has failed to properly clean or dress himself for the occasion, he orders his servants, in the words of the account in Matthew, to “bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the exterior darkness. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 22.13). The account is an allegorical representation of the kingdom of heaven, though the Poet seems less interested in parsing the soteriological fine points raised by its *significacio*, “For many are called, but few are chosen,” than in sounding a warning about the penalty awaiting those who disdain God by failing to prepare themselves suitably for heaven.100 What stands out for the purposes of this discussion is the Poet’s insistence in *Cleanness* on the uncompromising purity of God’s heavenly court, and God’s keen perceptiveness, as its king, in maintaining it:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Þer is no dede so derne þat dittez His yȝen;} \\
&\text{þer is no wyȝe in his werk so war ne so stykke} \\
&\text{þat hit ne þrawez to Hym þro er he hit þþȝt hau}.
\end{align*}
\]

99 This parable appears in both the Gospel of Matthew 22:1-14, and Luke 14:15-24, both of which the poet draws on for his lengthy retelling. See Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 113 n. to 49-160.

100 Matt. 22:14. Andrew and Waldron note that although the poet renders a paraphrase of the first part of the formula, “Multi enim sunt vocati,” he makes no mention of the second: “pauci vero electi,” thus, in their words, “illustrat[ing] his willingness to modify biblical texts to suit his purpose as precisely as possible.” Ibid., 118. n. .

of his knights. Though Arthur may relish tales of high adventure and marvelous deeds, he must remain home at the court while others achieve them. But whatever the Poet’s reasons, one effect is that the shift of those Davidic parallels from Arthur to Gawain, who is not a king, expands the range of potential exemplary significance beyond the issues of kingship to others, including that of personal sanctity.
For He is the groppande God, the grounde of alle dedez,
Rypande of vche a ring the reynyez and hert. (588-92)

There is no deed so dark that it escapes his eyes;
There is no man so clever in his work, so wary or stealthy,
That it does not fly swiftly to God before he has thought it.
For He is a searching God, the ground of all deeds,
Examining the longings and heart of every man.

No mortal ruler could help but come up short against this impossibly high model of
divine kingship. Nevertheless, Arthur’s failure to recognize the Green Knight as an
emissary of an enemy enchantress in the first place seems to confirm that visitor’s own
dubious assessment of Arthur’s adequacy as “gouernour of pis gyng”—which he
expresses, interestingly enough, by an act of feigned misrecognition, as he scans the rows
of knights at a pretended loss as to which of them could be the king (225; 224-31). In
welcoming the strange guest, Arthur of course satisfies the demands of courtly courtesy,
but also shows himself to be none too scrupulous in maintaining the court’s moral
hygiene, and perhaps adumbrates other instances of monarchical myopia whose
consequences will be greater, as when another misrecognition, this time of Morgan’s
sister, Morgause, will permit an incestuous union, and sire his deadliest enemy.

Moral blindness of this kind requires the strong medicine of purification through
penance, even as, paradoxically, it hinders compunction, or the recognition of that
impurity, which is a prerequisite for repentance. How then to provoke compunction? This
is the job of the prophet, the homilist, and the storyteller—the messenger who prophesies
truth to power through the medium of stirring exempla. Michael Kuczynski compares the
rhetorical mechanism of Nathan’s stories, the Psalms, and Christ’s parables, all of which
function as a rhetorical stratagem . . . to lead others to moral enlightenment. [They] succeed best with those who have a capacity for metaphor, for
understanding their own experiences when represented parabolically. Those who
are morally obtuse, like David himself in 2 Samuel 12 or the scribes and Pharisees
in the gospels, will have to be pressed toward self-understanding. They convict themselves by their lack of imagination.¹⁰¹

David’s imagination certainly appears to have atrophied by the time Nathan makes his entrance to bring him to account. Nathan tells of a rich landowner with many flocks of his own, who nonetheless selects for his table the lone sheep of one of his poor tenants, who “had nothing at all but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up, and which had grown up in his house together with his children, eating of his bread, and drinking of his cup, and sleeping in his bosom: and it was unto him as a daughter.”¹⁰² The story, remarkably affecting for its brevity, is of course an allegorical indictment of David’s enormous sin. It is telling that although David, himself a poet, is immediately sensitive to the story’s poignancy, he lacks the moral imagination to recognize the rich landowner as himself, the poor tenant as Uriah, and the unfortunate sheep as Bathsheba. Instead, “David's anger being exceedingly kindled against [the rich landowner], he said to Nathan: As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this is a child of death. He shall restore the ewe fourfold, because he did this thing, and had no pity” (2 Sam 12.5-6). It is left to Nathan to lead David to an understanding of the story’s significance. With devastating curtness, he tells the king, “Thou art the man” (2 Sam 12.7).

The moral obtuseness to which Kuczynski alludes might be said to describe both Arthur’s court and, to a lesser extent, Gawain himself. Gawain is certainly “pressed toward self-understanding” by his terrifying and humiliating ordeal, and arrives there with greater success at least than the members of the court, on whom his own narrative appears wasted. There is something of the prophet Nathan about the way Gawain

¹⁰¹ Kuczynski, Prophetic Song, 49.
¹⁰² 2 Sam. 12:3
functions as messenger to the court, much as he did in the *Queste*, where, despite his ultimate degeneracy, he is at least eager to bear such light as he can back to Camelot. Upon meeting a hermit who can interpret the allegorical meaning of a certain Castle of the Maidens, an adventure on which Gawain has just disgraced himself, the knight implores, “Ah! Sir, do tell me that meaning so that I may narrate it at court on my return.”¹⁰³ In *SGGK* as well, Gawain returns to the court laden with hard-won wisdom, and this time *he* is the allegorist, bearing in his own person the regrettable souvenirs of his ordeal. Can the Poet’s delight in irony be felt any more keenly than when he has Gawain enact for the court a wan parody of Chritological atonement?

Debe nirt in þe nek he naked hem schewed  
Þat he laȝt for his vnleuté at þe leudes hondes  
For blame. (2498-2500)

He bared his neck to show them the wound  
That he received at the knight’s hands for reproof  
Of his faithlessness.

Although I have not yet found it anywhere critically remarked, the scene seems to me to draw heavily on Christ’s appearance to the disciples following his Passion and resurrection:

Now when it was late the same day, the first of the week, and the doors were shut, where the disciples were gathered together, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst and said to them: Peace be to you. And when he had said this, he shewed [sic] them his hands and his side. The disciples therefore were glad, when they saw the Lord. (John 20.19-20)

The parallelism seems more than coincidental between Christ’s presentation of the Eucharist, prefiguring his wounded body and spilled blood, and Gawain’s shameful showing of his wounds:

This is my body, which is given for you . . . .

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This is the chalice, the new testament in my blood, which shall be shed for you. (Luke 20.19-20)

and

Þis is þe bende [band] of þis blame I bere in my nek.
Þis is þe laþe [wound] and þe losse þat I laȝt haue [have received]. (2506-07)104

The scene reads like an inversion of Christ’s triumphant return from his ordeal, Gawain displaying his own wound, along with the garter, to the wondering court—not as tokens of victory, but as symbols of his failure. There is even something that might be called Eucharistic in the court’s promise, before all sit to the feast, to follow Gawain in wearing the garter, their unity in imitation recalling Christ’s charge to his disciples, “hoc facite in meam commemorationem” (Luke 22.19).

Yet this apparent act of imitatio rings hollow. For Augustine, David’s sins rendered him a less than satisfactory forerunner of Christ, and Gawain’s imperfections make these Christological resonances at the poem’s conclusion similarly and obviously false. The shedding of his own “blode blenk on þe snawe” was only incidentally voluntary, and is, in any case, wholly ineffectual in its redemptive power. His wounds effect no atonement, but only underscore his impurity as a sacrifice. Any penance he will do cannot be on behalf of the court. David Aers is right to find in the poem a courtly order in which the sacraments have been almost literally exsanguinated of significance and efficacy, in which “the eucharist is assimilated to a discourse which has nothing to say about its role in cultivating union between fellow creatures in Christian

104 Adding some support to my suggestion that the ironic parallels between Gawain’s wounds and those of Christ are deliberate is the poet’s similar allusions to Christ’s passion and ressurrection in “Patience.” Following medieval commentators, the poet appears to stress the similarities between Jonah’s three days in the belly of the fish and Christ’s three days in hell. See Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript notes to l. 95f and 294 of “Patience.”
communities,” but he overlooks, I think, the Poet’s implicit critique of these developments.\textsuperscript{105} The court’s laughter reveals its members’ total incomprehension of the lesson inscribed on Gawain’s body, compounding what one critic calls the Green Knight’s earlier “rebuke to [their] lightheartedness.”\textsuperscript{106}

What are we to make, then, of the poem’s conclusion, which does not culminate, as biblical \textit{exempla} tend to, in a clearly-articulated \textit{applicatio}, but rather in laughter? The Poet himself tells a story that constitutes a critique to the courtly audience it was almost undoubtedly written to delight, and likely a specific court at that. He does not seem to have had in mind the “notionally universal audience” for which Hilton, Julian of Norwich, and Langland wrote. The elaborate, regionally-specific vocabulary of his poem points instead to a localized aristocracy.\textsuperscript{107}

Just as there is something of the prophet Nathan about the Green Knight, who counters the five perfections symbolized on Gawain’s shield by itemizing the five faults of the court, so too is there about the Poet. Yet, he cannot or will not fully discharge his prophetic role by making explicit the connection for his courtly audience. Instead, he curtails the narrative, gesturing obliquely at the troubles to come to the still young, still merry court. Despite the final stanza’s allusion to the destruction of past empires, is there not something facile in its conventional concluding couplet? “Now þat bere þe croun of þorne, / He bryng vus to His blysse!” If anywhere the Poet indulges in easy conventions, it is here. The pat reassurance is belied by what has just preceded it and by what we know will come afterward to the court, and also by the Poet’s own choice of biblical \textit{exempla},

\textsuperscript{105} Aers, “Christianity for Courtly Subjects,” 100.
\textsuperscript{106} Cohen, \textit{Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, And The Middle Ages}, 151; 144.
\textsuperscript{107} Watson, “The Gawain Poet as a Vernacular Theologian,” 296.
which not only show that impurity can occlude vision and understanding, but also obstruct resolution. Improperly atoned for, it festers, just as in the Poet’s description in Cleannes of the Dead Sea, where “dedez of depe duren þere set” (deeds of death endure there yet [1021]). Worse still, certain lingering effects may, as we have seen, be inescapable even after the penitential formulae have been followed.

To return finally to the Miserere, it may seem that David’s hopeful assurance of forgiveness in his prayer that God “wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow” stands in contrast to Gawain’s mournful rumination about the stain of wrongdoing: “ones [it] is tachched twynne wil hit never,” he tells the court upon his return (2512). But further consideration of both SGGK and the Book of Samuel, the source narrative for the David story, suggests an important element of truth in Gawain’s dour assessment: although contrition and penance may offer help for impurity, the consequences may be unavoidable. For David, who became for Augustine as fully exemplary a penitent as a he became for posterity a national warrior hero, penance effected forgiveness, but failed to spare his heirs and his kingdom the calamitous aftermath of his sin: The Vulgate connects this fourth and most famous of David’s seven psalms of contrition directly to the events described in 2 Samuel 11-12, in which David commits adultery with the Bathsheba, the wife of one of his officers, Uriah, and after an unsuccessful attempt to conceal her subsequent pregnancy, plots the death of Uriah in battle.108 Although Nathan’s narrative prompts David to repent, Bathsheba’s child dies, and betrayal and division will mark the reigns of David’s dynastic successors. Just so, although Gawain will wear both his scar

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108 For the development of a traditional link between David’s adultery and murder not only with Psalm 50, but with most or even all of the Psalter, see Clare L. Costley, “David, Bathsheba, and the Penitential Psalms,” Renaissance Quarterly 57, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 1235–77.
and belt as “token[s] of untrawthe” to the end of his days, the apparent harmony of the poem’s conclusion is in fact unstable, its recursive allusion to “þe segge and þe asaute” at Troy signaling the possibility of an eventual return to the originary instability narrated in the poem’s preface, likely foreshadowing the coming disintegration of Arthur’s court which the Poet otherwise avoids depicting.\textsuperscript{109}

David’s is not the only biblical narrative to suggest that although forgiveness and restoration are available to the truly penitent, the consequences for sin may nevertheless redound to succeeding generations; one further reference to \textit{Cleanness} reinforces the point as well. Whether one understands the dynastic transmission of sin in terms of “manne’s sperm unclean,” as Chaucer’s Clerk puts it, or simply the practical consequences of overindulgent parenting, the story of Nebuchadnezzar and his son showcases the problem.\textsuperscript{110} Though Nebuchadnezzar repents and is delivered from madness, his son Belshazzar is already tainted, and will be punished for it. The prophet Daniel, delivering a prophetic warning to Belshazzar, reminds him of his father’s contrition and restoration, contrasting it to the young heir’s own persistent impiety, which has culminated in his deliberate desecration of the captured temple vessels:

\begin{quote}
Þenne sone watz he sende agayn, his sete restored;
His barounes bôged hym to, blyþe of his come,
Haþerly in his aune hweþ his heued watz couered,
And so þeþly watz ȝarked and ȝolden his state.
But þou, Baltazar, his barne and his bolde ayre,
Seþ þese syngnes with syþt and set hem at lyttel,
Bot ay hatz hofen þy hert agaynes þe hyþe Drȝtyn,
With bobaunce and with blasfamye bost at Hym keste,
And now His vessayles avyled in vanyté vnclene . . . .\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

Then soon was he sound again, his throne restored;

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{109} 2509; cf. 1 and 2525.
\textsuperscript{110} The Canterbury Tales VII, l. 209. Chaucer, \textit{The Riverside Chaucer}.
\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Cleanness} 1705-1713
\end{flushright}
His barons bowed to him, glad of his return
His head was once again fittingly adorned
And his kingdom swiftly restored to him.
But you, Blatazar, his son and bold heir,
See these things and make little of them,
But instead set your heart against the high Lord
With arrogance and blasphemy casting boasts at Him,
And now with unclean vanity defiling His vessels . . .

The “iniquities of the father” persist in the son, as does its associated misprision; it is significant that Belshazzar requires the interpretive assistance of Daniel to decipher the eerie handwritten warning that appears on the walls during his feast.\textsuperscript{112}

Sin, it seems, constitutes a problem as much narrative as theological. Though it poses a storytelling opportunity—indeed, a necessity!—generating conflict and fueling plot, it also gums the storytelling gears, potentially obstructing resolution. How, then, to resolve this problem and achieve a satisfying ending? Interpreters of both David’s story and Arthur’s have handled this problem in various ways, but violence is the most obvious solution, rather in the vein of God’s use, in the stories retold in \textit{Cleanness}, of sanitizing measures ranging from torture, flood waters, and fire, to foreign invasion. Thus Caxton, writing later, added an extrabiblical penance on top of penance in his own retelling of David’s story, assigning him the gruesome penance of the worms, described above, in an attempt to square David’s high status with the enormity of his sin, and give a sense of proportion to the story.

Radically violent narrative measures might be well and good for the original biblical writers, but not all handlers of inherited narratives may have felt the creative luxury of eradicating and starting afresh, or adding further to the sorrows of their

\textsuperscript{112} See Exodus 20:5 and 34:7
characters. Nor, indeed, may they have desired it. If indeed the Poet was composing for a localized aristocracy, he shows a judicious tact in refraining from lingering over the court’s comeuppance. Too, he may have assumed that the delicacy of his method was suitable to the needs of his readers, who could recognize themselves in the travails of the well-wrought hero Gawain and the background of familiar biblical figures, and look to their own spiritual condition without being told, in effect, “Thou art the man!”

But there could be something more in the Poet’s reticence, something not unrelated to what draws us repeatedly to his poems. For all the urgency of the biblical warnings he reiterates, he seems alert to the danger that the messenger may, like Jonah, fail to heed the message himself, and become ridiculous in his over-moralizing. And

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113 In *Cleanness*, God surveys the disordered condition of creation and laments,

Me forpyneke ful much ðat euer I mon made
Bot I schal delyuer and do away ðat doten on his molde,
And fleme out of þe folde al þat flech werez,
Fro þe burne to þe best, fro brydde to fyschez;
Al schal doun and be ded and dryuen out of erþe
Þat euer I sett e saule inne; and sore hit Me rwez
Þat euer I made hem Myself . . .

I much regret that ever I made man
But I shall destroy and do away with all who act foolishly in this world
And cast out from creation all who wear flesh,
From men to beasts, from birds to fish;
All to whom I ever gave breath
Shall die and be driven out of earth; Sorely I rue
That I ever made them . . . (285-291)

114 Then too, depending on the poet’s concern for English hubris in conducting its affairs abroad as well as at more localized courts, R.A. Shoaf’s observation, writing of the Alliterative Morte, might apply: “given the war with the French which Edward III waged and the absolutist designs of Richard II, he [the anonymous poet of the Morte] hardly had to compose a roman a clef to chastise English pride in the late fourteenth century. It was after all self-evident.” Shoaf, “The Alliterative ‘Morte Arthure’: The Story of Britain’s David,” 212.

115 Nicholas Watson finds an element of self-deprecation in Patience’s description of the too-gryndel prophet, eager to see God’s wrath visited on the people of Nineveh and then sulking when they are spared: “What [Patience] 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. ... [I]t is hard not to see Patience as a kind of apology for the position of authority in which the poet, despite his status as a secular lord’s employee, is situated.” Watson, “The Gawain Poet as a Vernacular Theologian,” 310.
even beyond this, might it be too much to credit the Poet with a distinctly humane kind of sympathetic imagination? Jim Rhodes describes how “the narrator’s dismay over God’s violence in the Flood and Sodom episodes prompts him to wish for the intervention of Christ in the acts of the Father [such that later in] the poem, Christ’s love replaces the terrifying and vengeful image of the Father as he is depicted in the Old Testament episodes.”116 Perhaps there is something of that same “dismay” in the Poet’s reluctance to depict the violent consequences of sin at the conclusion of SGGK, where he declines to do more than hint at the looming violence of the Arthurian narrative. This narrative charity, however, is itself an abrupt truncation of a larger story, and cannot fully disguise the violence it purports to downplay. Divinity itself may turn a crown of thorns into a crown of eternal victory, but a penitent may not quite so easily make heraldry of his hair shirt, nor a playful but pious poet attempt to suggest as much to his readership without a final act of narrative violence.

116 Rhodes, Poetry Does Theology, 94–95. He goes on to explain that “the poet does not seek to blame God or to exonerate human beings from fault; he aims to dislodge the discourse of cleanness from its association with sexual purity and make it instead a discourse centered on love and on an ethics of human dignity.”
CHAPTER 2

“mech tribulacyon for cawse of hys wrytyng”: Saint Paul and the Apostolic Mission of Margery Kempe

“I beseech you, be ye followers of me as I also am of Christ.”
-1 Cor. 4:16

“All literature . . . is fan fiction.”
-Michael Chabon

St. Paul, Hindrance and Helper

In what is surely the most intriguing of the _The Book of Margery Kempe_’s nine direct references to “Seynt Powyl” (or “Powle,” as he is variously spelled throughout),¹ Christ reminds Kempe in a vision that at his direction Paul had once come to call on her:

Dowtyr, I sent onys Seynt Powyl unto the for to strengthyn the and comfortyn the that thu schuldist boldly spekyn in my name fro that day forward. And Seynt Powle seyd unto the that thu haddyst suffyrd mech tribulacyon for cawse of hys wrytyng, and he behyte [promised] the that thu schuldist han as meche grace ther agens for hys lofe as evyr thu haddist schame er reprefe for hys lofe. He telde the also of many joys of hevyn and of the gret lofe that I had to the. (I.65.3796-99)

It is fitting that Paul should have acknowledged the “tribulacyon” his “wrytyng” had caused her, for his exhortations about mutual deference, charity, and equality within the Christian community had been of far less consequence for the state of gender relations in medieval England, and western Christianity in general, than his statements about masculine primacy and authority.² Leavened though such teachings might have been

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¹ Paul is mentioned by name in the following places: I.17.902-05; I.18.975-78; I.21.1129-31; I.22.1188; I.52.2974-75; I.65.3796-3801; I.72.4112-13; I.87.5117-23; II.10.781-82.
² In arguing for the primacy of Christ over the exacting requirements of the Pentateuch, and the erasure of divisive disagreements within the community of first-century believers, Paul declares that “There is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3.28). See also Eph. 6.9. Paul’s most influential and problematic statements concerning female submission to masculine authority are in 1 Cor. 11.33; Eph. 5.22-23. For a summary of various recent perspectives on Paul, see Pamela Eisenbaum, “Is Paul the Father of Misogyny and Antisemitism?,” _Cross Currents_, no. 50.4 (Winter 2000): 506–24.
with parallel admonitions to husbands to “love your wives, as Christ also loved the church and delivered himself up for it” (Eph. 5.25), the practical consequence was that assumptions about what Chaucer’s Franklin calls “swich lordshipe as men han over hir wyves” had been greatly influenced by Paul’s androcentrism.\(^3\) Ironically, in addition to counseling obedience to husbands, Paul expressed dubiousness about marriage and recommended a celibate life of undistracted piety as ideal for those who could manage it.\(^4\) This attitude, mediated and intensified by the Patristic writers, became foundational to the Christian cult of virginity, thus placing many women, including Kempe, between competing directives to celibacy on the one hand, and, on the other, obedience to husbands who were, generally speaking, less enthusiastic about taking a vow of chaste marriage (it requires a death threat issued in a vision from Christ for Kempe’s husband, John, to refrain from “medele[ing] wyth” her [I.11.524]).

Simply as a wife and mother, then, Kempe lived daily in the pervasive cultural consequences of Paul’s writing, but he had also helped to erect significant barriers to public female speech and spiritual expression, and this is almost certainly what Kempe had in mind as the basis for Paul’s quasi-apology. Thirteen chapters prior to that passage, the Book describes how, while she was speaking at York Minster, “a gret clerke” of the Archbishop had stepped forward with a book “and leyd Seynt Powyl for hys party ageyns hir that no woman schulde prechyn” (I.52.2974-75). The text in question, a mere two verses from Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, was a supremely useful one for

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3 “The Franklin’s Tale,” in Chaucer, The Riverside Chaucer V. 473; All biblical citations taken from “Latin Vulgate Bible with Douay-Rheims and King James Version.”
4 1 Corinthians 7.8-9, 27, 32-35, 38. Paul had some precedent for this in Christ’s words on marriage in Matthew 19:3-12. See also: Revelation 14:3-5.
ecclesiastical authorities hostile to the vocal participation of women in preaching or even teaching publically.⁵

Let women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted them to speak but to be subject, as also the law saith. But if they would learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is a shame for a woman to speak in the church. (1 Cor. 14.34-35)

Against this patriarchal appeal to so weighty a church authority as Paul, Kempe responds that, having “no pulpytt,” she had not been preaching at all, but rather simply teaching, using only “comownycacyon and good wordys” (1.52.2976). Lynn Staley has shown how this semantic distinction reveals the subtle strategies by which Kempe negotiates the political and theological climate of the early fifteenth century, one dangerously alert to the faintest taint of Lollard “heresies,” which included a rejection of the ban on women preachers, and Isabel Davis argues that a similar subtle tactic takes place in Paul’s semi-apology, in which no less an authority than Christ himself affirms her close relationship with Paul.⁶ Though nothing is said in Kempe’s vision to suggest that Paul either retracts or emends his ban on women preachers, he does not need to, since Kempe has not confessed to preaching, per se. Rather, it is Christ who, speaking on Paul’s behalf, offers grace for her sufferings and hope of heaven.⁷ In this way, “instead of setting herself

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⁵ For additional discussion of the political and social context of these scenes, see Staley, Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions, 5–10; See also Rosalynn Voaden’s very useful discussion of how continental trends in women’s preaching and teaching may have influenced both Margery and the responses of her critics: Rosalynn Voaden, “Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing: Margery Kempe as Underground Preacher.,” in Romance and Rhetoric: Essays in Honour of Dhira B. Mahoney. Ed. Georgiana Donavin and Anita Obermeier. (Brepols: Turnhout, 2010), 109–21.


⁷ Notably, it is also Christ who later offers a description of marriage that, if it does not subvert the dominant paradigm of masculine authority, does extol equity as its ideal characteristic, and does so quite touchingly:
against the authorities whose writings justified patriarchal forms of power, Margery undermines them through collaboration, performing a nifty, destabilizing trick,” allying herself with someone whose doctrines might otherwise be her greatest impediment.  

Such analyses of Kempe’s strategies are insightful, but may risk obscuring evidence elsewhere in the Book that Paul provides much more than simply an obstacle to her preaching. Kempe frequently emphasizes her devotion to Paul, and I suggest that it is reductive to explain that devotion as no more than a shrewd alliance born out of necessity a “nifty, destabilizing trick,” like the Wife of Bath’s gleefully subversive gloss of Ephesians 5:25 to justify her promiscuity. Along with the Virgin Mary, St. Peter, and St. Katherine, Paul is one of the saints whom Kempe credits with helping her learn how to love and please Christ, and he appears to hold a special significance for her as an example of conversion. In one especially abject spasm of self-accusation before Christ, she deplores herself as “the most unworthi creatur that evyr thow schewedyst grace unto in erth” (I.21.1124-25). This echoes Paul’s lament that he is “not worthy to be called an apostle” (1 Cor. 15.9), and Paul features in Christ’s reassurance to her that it is just such people for whom his grace is sufficient: “Have mend, dowtyr, what Mary Mawdelyn was, Mary Eypcyan, Seynt Powyl, and many other seyntys that arn now in hevyn, for of unworthy I make worthy, and of synful I make rytful” (I.21.1127-31). The same trio of names, Magdalene, Mary of Egypt, and Paul, appears again in a sort of appendix to the Book, in the lengthy prayer with which Kempe claims regularly to have begun her

“For it is convenyent the wyf to be homly wyth hir husbond. Be he neyvr so gret a lorde and sche so powr a woman whan he weddeth hir, yet thei must ly togedir and rest togedir in joy and pes.” (I.36.2097-99)

8 Davis, “Men and Margery: Negotiating Medieval Patriarchy,” 50.

9 See, for example: Staley, Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions, 120; Kathryn A. Hall, “Teaching Margery Kempe in Tandem with The Wife of Bath: Lollardy, Mysticism, and ‘Wandrynge by the Weye,’” South Atlantic Review 72, no. 4 (Fall 2007) (n.d.): 59–72.
contemplation before the sacrament, thus suggesting that Paul occupied a place in her regular devotional practice. There, the three saints merit a mention of special gratitude in her prayer (II.10.781-82). Even granting that Kempe’s expressions of gratitude cannot always be accepted at face value (there is at least a whiff of disingenuous irony in the thanks she gives to the monks at Canterbury for so helpfully mortifying her pride with their insults [I.13]), her devotion to Mary of Egypt and especially to Mary Magdalene, the traditional patroness of sinners and weepers, are very much in earnest. Paul’s inclusion among them attests a special attachment, and supports a challenge to the idea that her devotion to Paul was prompted exclusively because of his problematic writings, rather than despite them.

**Scholarly Contexts, Auto-Hagiography, and Auto-Apostolic Narrative**

Many scholars have attempted to make sense of the *Book of Margery Kempe* using much the same approach by which Kempe herself gave shape and meaning to her life (1373-1439): by way of the many figures she admired, the holy virgins, martyrs, and mystics whose patterns of personal sanctity she sought—despite being the married mother of fourteen children—to follow. Accordingly, a great deal has been written about the

10 Although it has become somewhat customary to follow Lynn Staley’s absolute distinction between Kempe and Margery, the former “a writer who employed the fiction of the holy woman . . . as a persona” (Staley 1996, 10), the latter the constructed protagonist of that narrative fiction, I am not taking that approach here, useful though it may sometimes be, and will refer to the author and subject of the book as a singularity. Concerning the details surrounding the book’s “actual” authorship, I am intrigued yet remain cheerfully agnostic, deliberately choosing to accept the text largely on the terms in which it presents itself, and attempting to understand the story it tells by following the interpretive strategy recently articulated by Robert Stanton, who suggested that we be open to the readings that can arise from an “assum[ption] that [Margery Kempe] was a real person, that she underwent experiences very like the ones we encounter in her book, and that her spirituality was a combination of tradition and innovation.” Stanton, “Lechery, Pride, and the Uses of Sin in The Book of Margery Kempe,” 200; Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*; Staley makes her original and most extensive defense of the Margery/Kempe division in Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*; for a response against the dominance of Staley’s argument, see: Watson, “The Making of The Book of Margery Kempe.”
various holy women the Book cites as influences on the fitful, extraordinary pilgrimage of Kempe’s life, including St. Anne, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Egypt, St. Margaret, Julian of Norwich, Marie d'Oignies, Elizabeth of Hungary, and Saint Bridget of Sweden. Only very little scholarly attention has been paid, however, to the influence of Saint Paul on her life and career. Despite numerous direct references to him in the Book, scholars largely attuned to the specifically feminine aspects and challenges of Kempe's life and record have for the most part limited their commentary on Paul to the

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11 The Elizabeth of Hungary who wrote the Revelations which had an influence on Margery’s text was not in fact the same woman whose life appeared in The Legenda Aurea, The Gilte Legende, and Osbern Bokenham’s Legendys of Hooly Wummen. In the minds of medieval readers, however, the two Elisabeths were often conflated. Alexandra Barratt, “The Revelations of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary: Problems of Attribution,” The Library, 6th, no. 14 (1992): 1–11.


13 It has been slightly more than a decade since Sarah Salih noted how little scholarly attention had been paid either to the influence on The Book by the legend of St. Paul, or to “the apostolic aspects of Margery’s mature spirituality.” I find very little written since then concerning Kempe and Saint Paul. Salih, “Staging Conversion: The Digby Saint Plays and The Book of Margery Kempe,” 123; Anthony Goodman too, though briefly acknowledging Margery’s apostolic character, focuses mostly on the nature of her conversion. Goodman, Margery Kempe and Her World, 101; 131; Karma Lochrie briefly discusses the way in which Kempe appropriates the “holy foolishness” Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 1.19-20. Lochrie, Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh, 156–57; And Renate Kosinski mentions in passing that Margery’s manner of self-presentation resembles St. Margaret’s, which is itself like St. Paul’s: “This method of presenting visions dates back at least to the New Testament where Saint Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:2: ‘I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven-- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know.’ And then in verse 7 he reveals that it was he himself who had this vision: ‘In view of the extraordinary nature of these revelations, to stop me from getting too proud I was given a thorn in the flesh . . . ‘ [Kempe] introduces her first vision by saying ‘When this creature was twenty eyars old . . . ’, meaning herself.” Oingt, The Writings of Margaret of Oingt, 16 n. Genelle Gertz-Robinson describes how Anne Askew drew on the sermons of St. Paul and St. Stephen, and indicates that this strategy resembled Margery Kempe’s, though the discussion focuses primarily on Askew. Gertz-Robinson, “Stepping into the Pulpit? Women’s Preaching in The Book of Margery Kempe and The Examinations of Anne Askew.”
ways in which Kempe “suffyrd mech tribulacyon for cause of hys wrytyng,” specifically his injunction forbidding women to preach, and to the strategies whereby she carefully negotiates it in order to persist in her own outspoken vocation. But the Book repeatedly stresses Kempe’s devotion to Paul, and a study of his influence is important for reasons beyond the significant challenges that his doctrinal positions on female authority and sexual purity presented to holy women and those who sought, like Kempe, to be holy. In fact, I will suggest that Paul’s example actually helps to enable and authorize her public ministry—not only Paul the dead saint who appears and teaches her in visions, but also Paul the living apostle, whose deeds Kempe would have known well, and whose vocation, human weaknesses, and endurance under criticism and affliction in some ways anticipated her own.

Richard Kieckhefer has described the Book of Margery Kempe, with its ecstatic visions, journeys, fits of weeping, and confrontations with clerical authorities as “auto-hagiography”: the memoir of a would-be saint. One might, I argue, as fittingly call the Book an auto-apostolic narrative, the Pauline model of spirituality and active evangelism as related in the Epistles and the book of Acts, and retold in the Legenda Aurea and other medieval hagiographical and devotional literature, providing for Kempe not only a key model of conversion, as other scholars have noted, but also a template against which her sense of mission, her boldness, and her resistance to societal expectation can be better appreciated. If the life of a saint was often characterized by a decisive break with and

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14 All quotations taken from Staley, The Book of Margery Kempe and cited by book, chapter, and line number.
15 Kieckhefer, Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu, 6; Although Kempe’s reputation as the author of the first autobiography in the English vernacular seems now quite well established, not all scholars are satisfied with this generic designation. Rebecca Krug, for example, suggests that Kempe “wrote a treatise rather than an autobiography,” one which “teaches its readers
withdrawal from the world, the life of an apostle, “the man with a message,” as W.H. Auden put it, was active and outward, a conspicuous presence in, and often in conflict with, his community.16 Saint and apostle are hardly mutually exclusive categories, of course, but attention to the role played by the language and narratives of apostleship in shaping Kempe’s sense of self and mission helps to expand the context in which to consider her beyond the apparently self-sanctifying project of her writing, usefully complicating our assumptions about her perceived calling, and attuning us to the possibility that despite her apparent “failure” to achieve posthumous recognition as a saint, she fulfilled her apostolic vocation with greater success.

Thinking of Kempe’s life in apostolic terms by no means undermines or detracts from the exemplary significance of the various women she so admired, but rather affords an additional paradigm by which to appreciate her trials and adventures, her boldness and hardihood in the face of the same sort of difficulties Paul encountered—dangerous sea voyages, illness, and persecution for preaching—and to understand a little better the spirit in which she undertook them. Moreover, for modern readers eager to find a heroine in Kempe, comparison with Paul helps to underscore the nature of her own particular heroism, not despite but precisely because of what seem her profoundly un-heroic qualities and behavior, in particular what she describes as her own “unstablyness.” For all the severity of many of his writings, Paul also provides in his own person a model of “strength through weakness,” and discloses, perhaps more than any of the saints Kempe reveres, an all-too-humanness in tension with the promise of perfection to come, thus

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helping to validate her own public ministry despite the tension in which she herself exists, convicted of her unworthiness while yet “trustying to ben an eyr [heir] of joy and blisse” (II.10.633).

**Kempe’s Knowledge of Paul**

As the quotation forming the title of this chapter indicates, Kempe was only too-well acquainted with Paul’s teachings in regard to women, and there can be little doubt that she had a deep knowledge of the details of his life and other teachings as well. Holy men and women of the fourteenth-century were, as Kieckhefer puts it, “thoroughly absorbed in the lives of previous saints,” and Paul was hardly one of the more obscure ones.\(^\text{17}\) Kempe’s repeated complaints about her “hir not lettryd witte” (II.52.3030) do not ring entirely true, and not only because the binary notion of literacy as something that medieval people, particularly women, either did or did not possess fails to account for the complicated range of “text-based activities” in which they regularly participated.\(^\text{18}\) Jacqueline Jenkins has argued that it is rather unlikely that an urban woman of Kempe’s class would not have at least some facility to read and write in the vernacular, but the fact was that “[t]o be a reading woman, especially in the fifteenth century, was to court criticism”—and of a potentially dangerous variety, in light of the Lollards’ emphasis on

\(^{17}\) Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu*, vii He goes on to add, “Catherine of Siena insisted that when she strove to imitate the rigors of the desert fathers in her early youth she was imitating them on the basis of infused knowledge; she had not read about them herself, and had not been told about them. One may pardonably question her recollection, and speculate that she had picked up these ideas because they were in the air. With the growth of lay literacy and lay piety, townspeople had ready access to popular notions of how one became distinctively holy” (194).

\(^{18}\) Rebecca Krug resists the term “literacy,” with its implication that a person either is or is not literate, in favor of “literate practice,” in order to describe the variety of ways that medieval women engaged with texts and transmitted textual knowledge, often within the context of family groups. *Rebecca Krug, Reading Families: Women’s Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 7.
the authority of scripture above that of received orthodoxy and church officials.\textsuperscript{19} It is possible that the carefully constructed portrait of Kempe’s limited ability to read may have served to help manage the threat of accusations of heresy.\textsuperscript{20}

She would, of course, had other avenues by which to learn of Paul’s life and letters.\textsuperscript{21} Beyond providing influential literary tropes, Paul’s life, and in particular his conversion, formed a popular subject for medieval plays. One can well imagine the dramatic possibilities the role offered for a local or traveling actor to depict the unconverted Saul “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,” in the vivid language of the Vulgate (Acts 9.1).\textsuperscript{22} For the impressionable and affective Kempe, who had, upon hearing of “how owr Lord wept, than wept sche sor and cryed lowde” (I.58.3380), the effect of a dramatic enactment of Paul’s conversion must have been profound, had she indeed witnessed it.\textsuperscript{23}

In any case, despite Kempe’s avowed “defawte of redyng” (I.58.3393), the Book presents her as deeply familiar with the New Testament’s stories and theology, and it may perhaps be taken as a sign of her respect for the Vulgate that her pilgrimage to Rome

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\textsuperscript{21} Lisa Fagin Davis describes Paul’s pervasiveness in late-medieval iconography: “For the church-going populace, the depictions of St. Paul found in the church itself stood as a constant reminder of the example he set in life: in illuminated manuscripts, depictions of Paul emphasized the inestimable impact of his words and life on the Christian faith. From the earliest post-apostolic era images [through] the apex of manuscript illumination in the fifteenth century, the development of the iconography and narrative images of St. Paul reflects the constantly evolving interpretation of the importance of Paul’s life and writings to a constantly evolving Church.” Lisa Fagin Davis, “The Epitome of Pauline Iconography: BNF Francais 50, The ‘Miroir Historial’ of Jean de Vignay,” in A Companion to St. Paul in the Middle Ages, ed. Steven R. Cartwright (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 395.

\textsuperscript{22} Sarah Salih, taking her cue from Suzanne L. Craymer’s argument from various parallels with the Digby play of Mary Magdalen that The Book is a kind of imitatio Magdaleneae, looks to the Digby play of St. Paul to try to assess its possible influence on Kempe. Salih, “Staging Conversion: The Digby Saint Plays and The Book of Margery Kempe.”

\textsuperscript{23} She may or may not have; the evidence that she would have seen or even been aware of the Digby play of St. Paul is, as Salih explains, problematic and far from conclusive. Ibid., 133–34.
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included a stop at the church of Santa Maria Maggiore to pray before the relics of St. Jerome, who spoke to her soul (I.41).\textsuperscript{24} Even had she not learned of Paul’s deeds and teachings from her own reading, then certainly she came to know them “thow heryng of holy bokys and thow heryng of holy sermownys . . .” (I.59.3400).\textsuperscript{25} She declares, “Yf I had gold inow, I wolde gevyn every day a nobly for to have every day a sermown,” and she hurries eagerly to listen to the sermons of visiting preachers—albeit frequently interrupting them with her crying (I.58.3364-65; I.61).

The Book describes how, after the death of the Dominican anchorite who served as her confessor, a new priest arrived in Lynn who became sympathetic to her and read aloud “many a good boke of hy contemplacyon,” among them passages from the vernacular Bible with comments by the Church Fathers, likely including St. Jerome, St. Bridget’s Revelations, Walter Hilton’s Scale of Perfection, the Pricke of Love (thought

\textsuperscript{24} Goodman, Margery Kempe and Her World, 112.

\textsuperscript{25} Due perhaps to the densely theological character of the epistles, Paul is absent from some notable medieval texts. James H. Morey points out that Paul is nowhere to be found in the twelfth-century Historia Scholastica, produced by Peter Comistor at the University of Paris, was a major source for biblical vernaculars throughout both the continent and England. What it does record is narrative, and the Epistles are not easy stories to tell. Also, Paul makes but a single appearance in the Ormulum (ante 1200), and is entirely absent from the Northern Homily Cycle (c. 1300). However, Paul was widely known through the Vulgate, of which there were multiple translations in Middle English, most notably the Wycliffite Bible, translated in the late fourteenth century, whose 250 surviving manuscripts attest to its widespread popularity and influence. Also sermons: “Forty of Wyclif’s sermons are on Pauline themes, and he considers Paul to be an authority equal to the evangelists” (456). In one of his sermons, Wyclif writes, “And alýf the Holi Goos spekith ech word of holi writ, netheles Crist spake in Poul more plenteously and sutilli. And this moveth sum men to telle in Englishe Poulis pistelis, for sum men may betere wite herbi what God meneth bi Poul.” Thomas Arnold, ed., Select English Works of John Wyclif (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1869), 2:221, qtd. in; James. H. Morey, “Paul in Old and Middle English,” in A Companion to St. Paul in the Middle Ages, ed. Steven R. Cartwright, ed., vol. 39, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 457; Whether or not he is referring to his own translation is hard to say; there were at least two translations of the epistles prior to his own. But in any case, Paul’s life, with special emphasis on his conversion, was to found in collections of saints lives, including the South England Legendary and the Scottish Legendary, and in sermon cycles such as John Mirk’s Festial and the Speculum Sacerdotale. Ibid., 455–57.
at the time to be by St. Bonaventure), and Richard Rolle's *Fire of Love* (I.58.3389-92). These were—save for the vernacular Bible, forbidden to lay readers by Arundel’s *Constitutions* of 1409—all more or less unobjectionable texts, unlikely to arouse official concerns about heresy, and one can only imagine what other, less approved works might have been included among the innocuous-sounding but tantalizingly ambiguous “and swech other [other such],” with which she concludes the book list.

Whatever texts Kempe may or may not have had access to, it was in particular “Holy Scriptur” for which she claims to have “hungryd ryth sor” (I.58.3360). The fact that her knowledge was impressive enough to draw from the Archbishop of York’s clerks accusations of association with Lollards, the self-described “Bible men and women,” may be a useful indicator. “[W]ot we wel that sche hath a devyl wythinne hir, for sche spekyth of the gospel,” gasps one incensed clerk, after Kempe has defended her “comownycacyon and good wordys” by reference to scripture, and even cited Christ himself in order to argue that “the gospel gevyth me leve to spekyn of God” (I.52.2972). Though Staley describes Kempe’s knowledge of scripture as “sense for sense” rather than “word for word,” the *Book* cites scripture frequently, including a direct quotation from Paul’s letter to the Romans: “[A]ftyr the sentens of Seynt Powle,” she writes, “‘To hem that lovyn God al thyng turnyth into goodnes’” (I. 72, 4112-13). Allowance must of course be

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26 Cf. I.17.899-902. It may be notable that she appears to borrow the title of Rolle’s work, describing the violence of her devotional fits of weeping as stemming from the “fyer of lofe” for Christ that burned in her soul (I.28.1624).
28 Though she does not list it by name, the *Legenda Aurea* was almost certainly among these. Written in the late 13th century by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa, was translated into every European vernacular, and may have been, apart from the Bible, the most read book in the Middle Ages. Although its translation into the Middle English *Gilte Legende* did not take place until about 1438, only two years before Kempe’s death, it has been argued that other vernacular translations were available earlier in the century. Voaden, “Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing: Margery Kempe as Underground Preacher,” 119.
29 Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*, 120; Romans 8:28.
made for emendation and expansion by her clerical amanuenses, but if we accept Margery as she is presented in the Book, her knowledge of scripture was, if not exhaustive or always entirely accurate, impressive nonetheless.30

From the Acts of the Apostles she would have learned of Paul’s conversion and missionary journeys, and from the Epistles his doctrinal position on sin and salvation. Romans and Ephesians lay out the most important components of his theology, and Galatians provides additional chronology of his life, including his journeys, imprisonments, beatings, shipwrecks, miraculous escapes from human captors, earthquakes, and poisonous serpents—though it was left to extra-biblical tradition to fill in the story of Paul’s execution by beheading under Nero.31 Such was the life of an apostle, one who not only strove, as Kempe claimed to do in the Book’s prologue, to follow the “parfyth wey Cryst ower Savyowr in hys propyr persoone examplyd” (19-20), but to serve as an active ambassador in his name.

**Discipleship, Apostleship, & Sanctity**

Kempe’s constant theme throughout the Book is her own sanctification, and much has been written about her apparent desire to be numbered among the saints at her death. However, her life as it is described in the Book is overwhelmingly apostolic in character. Sainthood is, after all, bestowed or achieved posthumously; the living can only aspire towards it. Kempe would have been familiar with the Scale of Perfection, in which Walter Hilton wrote, “The bigynnyng of this contemplacioun may be felid in this lif, but

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30 Staley suggests that Margery’s mis-translations are not accidental, and that, like the Wife of Bath, she slyly subverts scripture for her own purposes. Ibid., 120 See also n.9, above.
31 For Paul’s own tally of the beatings and imprisonments he had endured, see most notably 1 Cor. 11.23-27; 33, and 2 Timothy 4.16-17. See also Acts 16.25-40; 28.3
the fulheed of it is kepid in the blisse of hevene.32 Before Kempe can take her place among the heavenly community of the saints, “the very special dead,” in Peter Brown’s phrase, she must undergo earthly trials, just as they did.33 And it is in these lived trials that The Book wears the influence of the recorded deeds, the “Acts,” if you will, of Paul and the apostles.

The meaning of the term “apostle” has not been static, and it is unlikely that a distinction between apostles and disciples, or between apostles and saints, was entirely clear in Kempe’s mind. The apostles were, after all, among the very first Christian saints and sometimes referred to as the “universal saints,” recognized across both Western and Eastern Christendom throughout late antiquity and the middle ages. In the New Testament the line between “apostle” and “disciple” is fluid, as this passage from the Gospel of Luke suggests: “And when day was come, he called unto him his disciples: and he chose twelve of them (whom also he named apostles)” (Luke 6.13). “Disciple” (μαθητής), meaning literally “a learner,” indicates a person “who follows one’s teachings,” and is used in the New Testament to refer to the adherents and imitators of various teachers, but especially to those of Christ, and chiefly to the twelve disciples.34 If “disciple” denotes following, to be an “apostle” (ἀπόστολος), derived from να ἀποστέλλω, “I send,” is to be specially called to follow in order to be literally “one sent

forth.” Christ himself is referred to as an “apostle” in the New Testament. In the same way that as “the high priest of our confession” he set the ideal pattern for every priest who followed him in mediating between humanity and the Godhead, so too, as God’s emissary to mankind, did he come to be regarded by the early church as the first apostle (Hebrews 3.1). Each of the four gospels gives some version of the so-called Great Commission, most famously in Matthew, in which the resurrected Christ instructs his remaining eleven disciples to go, to teach, and to baptize, spreading his ministry to “all nations” (Matt. 28.16-20). Tradition holds that following Christ’s ascension, the disciples were empowered by the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem, from which they dispersed across the known world to found the Apostolic Sees. As such, the word carries a sense of authority, and was given to leaders of the early church. Paul claimed the title for himself—albeit protesting in his letter to the church at Corinth that because of his past sins against the church, he was “least among the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle” (1 Cor. 15.9)—but perhaps because he was not among the original twelve disciples, his use of the term “apostle” is always specifically to designate missionaries.

The Book uses “disciple” and “apostle” interchangeably to refer to the twelve, as many medieval texts do, though its use of the two terms appears to mark the point of

35 Ibid., 30-31; See also: Cross and Livingstone, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 88.
36 The most famous version of the so-called Great Commission occurs at the end of Matthew: “And the eleven disciples went into Galilee, unto the mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And seeing him they adored: but some doubted. And Jesus coming, spoke to them, saying: All power is given to me in heaven and in earth. Going therefore, teach ye all nations: baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. And behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world” (Matt. 28:16-20). See also: Mark 16:14–18, Luke 24:44–49, Acts 1:4–8, and John 20:19–23. A similar commissioning is mentioned in the Gospel of Luke 10:1-24, this time concerning seventy or seventy-two (depending on the manuscript) of Christ’s followers, whom he appoints to go out in pairs as his witnesses to various towns. The text does not refer to them as either disciples or apostles, but they are usually called “disciples” in Western Christianity, and known as the Seventy Apostles in the Eastern church.
37 See 1 Cor 12:28
Christ's death, the former referring to the twelve as they accompanied Christ during his active ministry, and the latter indicating their status following his death and their empowerment by the Holy Spirit. When Kempe desires to see the site of the Last Supper, the *Book* refers to the twelve as “disciples”: at that place, “owyr Lord wesch hys disciplys fete . . . mad hys Mawndé wyth hys disciplys [and] fyrst sacryd hys precyows body in the forme of bred and gaf it to hys discipulys” (I.29.1667-71). But just a few lines later, as Kempe visits the site of the Pentecost, the wording changes to describe “the place ther the *apostelys* receyved the Holy Gost” (I.29.1676-77, emphasis mine). This is tolerably clear, but when Christ promises Kempe in a vision that he will “come to þi deyng with my blyssed Modyr & myn holy awngelys & twelve apostelys, Seynt Kateryne, Seynt Margarete, Seynt Mary Mawdelyn, & many oþer seyntys þat ben in Hevyn . . .” (I.22.1159-62), one wonders just where apostleship ends and sanctity begins. It is certainly not enough, although the *Book* seems almost to invite it, to distinguish “apostle” from “saint” along an axis of gender-specific characteristics, the masculine boldness of the apostle contrasting with the withdrawn, contemplative feminine.

Although the apostles were, with one notable extra-biblical exception, male, there obviously were and are saints of both sexes, and though the theme of a specifically

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38 The most telling reference comes almost at the end of her writing, in a sort of appendix in the final chapter of the second part of the *Book*, which relates a prayer Margery commonly uttered before the sacraments, in which she prayed “that God schulde illumynyn hir sowle, as he dede hys apostelys on Pentecost Day,” and induyn hir wyth the gyfts of the Holy Gost that sche myth han grace to undirstondyn hys wil and parformyn it in werkyng, and that sche myth han grace to wythstondyn the temptacyons of hir gostly enmiis and enchewyn al maner synne and wikkynynes. (II.10)

39 Sarah Salih discourages against uncritical acceptance of “[o]ur received picture of medieval female holiness,” particularly one expressed bodily, whether ecstatically or penitentially. This model “may owe as much to generic convention and clerical investment in a particular, circumscribed ideal of female holiness as to the women’s own interests.” Sarah Salih, “Margery’s Bodies: Piety, Work and Penance,” ed. in Arnold and Lewis, 2004, 164.

40 Mary Magdalene merited from medieval commentators the title “apostle to the apostles” for bearing the first witness of the resurrected Christ. See Gertz-Robinson, “Stepping into the Pulpit? Women’s Preaching in The Book of Margery Kempe and The Examinations of Anne Askew,” 143 n.
nuptial union with Christ tends to occur more frequently in the lives of female saints, holy men and women alike abjured marriage and sexual union on earth in favor of divine intimacy, identifying themselves with or as the “bride of Christ.”

A somewhat better distinction, then, might be between *dead* saint and *living* apostle (as Kempe says in a prayer, “ther is many a seynt in hevyn whech sumtyme was hethen in erde” [II.10]), the perfection of the apostle perfected only in death, but I would suggest that one of the reasons for Paul’s significance to the study of Kempe’s *Book* is that he usefully complicates the notion of sainthood. This is important, because the *Book* has come to be read as an example of the curious outlier genre “auto-hagiography.” Katherine J. Lewis insists that the *Book* “does everything it possibly can to present Margery as a saint, both in terms of her way of life and her intercessory powers.” And yet, although some of the annotations in the sole surviving manuscript and the nature of the extracts later selected for printing suggest that she enjoyed some posthumous recognition as a visionary, no cult of devotion outlived her to promote her installation in the calendar of officially approved saints, and though her *Book* now seems secure among the canon of important medieval texts, she herself was never recognized as a saint. This seeming “failure” has become in many ways one of the chief defining feature of her

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41 See Revelation 19.7; 21.2, 9 etc.
44 Portions of the Book were printed by Wynkyn de Worde in London, c. 1501, and again in 1521 by Henry Pepwell. For the history of the manuscript’s limited adaptation in print, see Allison Foster, “‘A Shorte Treatys of Contemplacyon’: The Book of Margery Kempe in Its Early Print Contexts,” in *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Arnold and Lewis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 95–112.
legacy, and one that organizes critical responses along a spectrum of sympathy for Kempe among the scholars who try to account for it. But perhaps there is less to account for than some have supposed, for to live a sanctified life was not necessarily “to be a saint,” in the strict sense of canonization. Sainthood in the fourteenth century “was perceived as part of a much wider notion of 'sanctity,’ itself best understood as having multiple dimensions, held together by the fundamental sense that the sanctified person both embodies and practices holiness.” There is to late medieval sanctity a “dual quality . . . involving embodiment as well as practice, produc[ing] a tension between 'blessedness' that comes from the outside, through the divine, and the 'righteousness' that is enacted, pursued, and perfected through one's life.” Rebecca Krug submits Kempe's Book as a site of this tension between blessedness and the pursuit of that blessedness by acts of righteousness, and I would add that Paul’s letters, too, give remarkable expression to this tension between what the divine mercy by which, he emphasizes, one is actually saved, and what he calls “works of justice which we have done” (Titus 3.5). Elsewhere Paul applies this distinction to his own apostolic vocation, indicating that it has been bestowed on him, not earned through his own efforts:

For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am.

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45 Katherine J. Lewis, for example, speculates that the pantheon of female saints considered “British” simply had “no gap for the Book to fill,” and so “no need for a St Margery” who may have been “intended to plug a perceived gap in female English sanctity by providing a saint who was Katherine, Bridget, Mary Magdalene and others all rolled into one.” Lewis, “Margery Kempe and Saint Making in Later Medieval England”; In John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis, eds., A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 215.


47 Ibid.

And his grace in me hath not been void: but I have laboured more abundantly than all they. Yet not I, but the grace of God with me. (1 Cor 15.9-10)

Paul, who predates and stands apart from the notion of sainthood toward which Kempe apparently strove, acknowledges on the one hand the reality of a divine calling, and on the other, the impossibility of ever really living up to it through his own merits. This is important for anyone who looked to Paul as an exemplar, as Kempe clearly did, inasmuch as it seems to foreclose the question of human perfectibility while upholding the possibility of a life of divine service, and thus easing us away from a notion of holy living as something one either did or did not achieve.

**Apostolic Vocation**

Though Kempe follows the Book of Acts and many medieval writers in using “apostle” to refer to the twelve disciples, it is the Pauline sense of apostolic vocation that I have in mind here. Unquestionably, Kempe thought of herself as a disciple in the sense of being a learner and follower, and her visionary conversations with Christ have about them an intimacy that matches (and in their conjugal imagery certainly exceeds) that enjoyed by the disciples. In her more public adventures and confrontations, however, her self-identification is clearly with the apostles:

sche cam to Lyncolne, and ther sufferd sche many scornys and many noyful wordys, answeryng agen in Goddys cause wythowtyn any lettyng, wysly and discretly that many men merveyled of hir cunnyng. Ther wer men of lawe seyd unto hir, “We han gon to scole many yerys, and yet arn we not sufficient to answeryn as thu dost. Of whom hast thu this cunnyng?” And sche seyd, “Of the Holy Gost.” Than askyd thei, “Hast thu the Holy Gost?” “Ya, serys,” seyd sche, “ther may no man sey a good worde wythowtyn the gyft of the Holy Gost, for owr Lord Jhesu Crist seyd to hys disciplys, ’Stody not what ye schal sey, for it schal not be yowr spiryt that schal spekyn in yow, but it schal be the spiryt of the Holy Gost.’” And thus owr Lord gaf hir grace to answer hem, worschepyd mote he be. (I.55.3195-3204)
The lines she quotes are from Matthew’s account of the great commissioning, with its accompanying promise of the aid of the Holy Spirit:

Behold I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves . . . . And you shall be brought before governors, and before kings for my sake, for a testimony to them and to the Gentiles: But when they shall deliver you up, take no thought how or what to speak: for it shall be given you in that hour what to speak: For it is not you that speak, but the spirit of your Father that speaketh in you. (Matthew 10.19-20)

Kempe thus alludes directly to the commissioning of the apostles at Pentecost, and to the spiritual power and authority vested in them at the descent of the Paraclete, the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that the disciples would be given the authority to baptize and to both forgive sins and withhold forgiveness. Those of us disposed to feel kindly toward Kempe may be glad that she prudently never went so far as to attempt to baptize anyone, but clearly, by pointing to the Holy Spirit as the source of her eloquence on God’s behalf, she identifies herself as a co-claimant with the apostles of that power and authority and one who is actively carrying on their mission, in much the same way that the Legenda Aurea describes Mary Magdalene before the governor of Marseilles, sanctioning both her right to preach and her ability to do so well by appealing to the example and authority of St. Peter: “I am ready indeed to defend [my faith] . . . because [it] is strengthened by the daily miracles and preaching of my teacher Peter, who presides in Rome!”

So, by using the language of apostleship to describe Kempe’s life, I mean to draw attention to her sense of calling and her response to that calling, not by retreating from the world but by going out into it as an active witness, missionary, and preacher,courting

if not actively provoking confrontation with the authorities of her day. These are aims markedly different from those of Mary of Egypt, Julian of Norwich, and many of the other holy women Kempe identifies by name, eremites and anchoresses who may have attracted admiring visitors, but who cultivated spiritual union with Christ primarily or exclusively through retreat from the world. Though Kempe’s visions, her extreme devotion to prayer, confession, self-mortification through fasting, and (sporadically) chastity, are familiar enough saintly behaviors, the “otherworldliness” that characterizes the lives of holy men and women eludes her. Kempe’s behavior may repeatedly alienate and isolate her, but she is nevertheless a “creature” very much of the world, ensnared by marriage and motherhood in a network of secular social commitments, and unable to break with them by withdrawing into a coenobitic or eremitic life, or even, at the end, by dying a martyr's death. Not that marriage or motherhood necessarily precluded holiness,

50 The word “missionary,” which does not occur anywhere in the Book, requires some definition. Ian Wood acknowledges how wide a range of activities “mission” has been used to describe, and distinguishes between “mission,” “Christianization,” and “conversion.” He restricts his use of the term “mission” to mean mission to the pagan, “that is, mission as envisaged at the end of Matthew’s Gospel,” preferring “Christianization” to describe evangelizing within officially or at least nominally Christian communities, and using “conversion” to mean spiritual change in an individual. Ian N. Wood, The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe, 400-1050 (Harlow, England; New York: Longman, 2001), 3. But even these are, as Wood admits, imperfect distinctions, and it must be added that Paul’s missionary journeys, after all, comprised preaching to pagans, planting churches among the newly-converted, and ministering to and stabilizing the faith of church leaders. The events described in The Book of Margery Kempe take place in an England that had been officially Christian since the late sixth century, so to describe her work as “missionary” expeditions is admittedly imprecise. It would probably be most accurate to describe her preaching as of the reforming variety.

51 Notable exceptions would of course include St. Katherine of Alexandria, the eloquent orator, and Mary Magdalene, whom the Legenda Aurea describes evangelizing worshipers at a pagan temple in Marseilles. de Voragine, The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints; See also: Gertz-Robinson, “Stepping into the Pulpit? Women’s Preaching in The Book of Margery Kempe and The Examinations of Anne Askew,” 143–44.

52 Kieckhefer writes that, “Integral to the notion of sainthood in Christianity is a tension between the imitability and the ‘otherness’ of the holy personage.” Kieckhefer, Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu, 190; And Rebecca Krug notes that “the Book diverges from saints’ lives in its insistence on showing that rejection of the world is an ideal that can be approximated but never fully achieved in this life,” whereas, in stories of virgin martyrs, “the break between saint and the world is decisive and complete.” Krug, “The Idea of Sanctity and the Uncanonized Life of Margery Kempe,” 131.
particularly in the later middle ages, which witnessed increasingly passionate veneration of the Mother of Christ, as well as the emergence of saints like Bridget of Sweden, herself married and the mother of eight children. But as Clarissa Atkinson reminds us, although “Birgitta's care for and Christian instruction of her children were represented as exemplary . . . such virtuous behavior did not make her a saint; that status was derived from her relationship with Christ and Mary, not with husband and children. Only exceptional qualities and circumstances allowed some extraordinary mothers to overcome the many obstacles to sanctity.” However “extraordinary” the quality of Kempe’s motherhood, the obstacles in question proved too much for any claim to sainthood she or her amanuenses might have hoped to make. But if she could not reject the world, she could go into it, not merely on a pilgrimage or two, as Bridget made to Santiago de Compostela, but in a way that resembled the Legenda Aurea’s description of Paul, “caught up amidst the crash and clatter of the world, not settled, like John, in the quiet and peace of the desert.” Like Paul, who supported himself and his evangelizing journeys as a tentmaker, Kempe tried her hand at a number of secular occupations including brewing and milling, albeit with limited success, and among her various spiritual disciplines, stabilitas loci did not feature prominently. Following her conversion,

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53 Atkinson writes, “The holy motherhood of the later Middle Ages was a new phenomenon: after about the thirteenth century, for women of the upper classes, marital and maternal status not only did not preclude holiness, but actually provided a public stage for saintly behavior.” Clarissa W. Atkinson, “Epilogue,” in Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (New York & London: Garland, 1995), 356.
54 Ibid., 357.
56 See Acts 18:1-3; 20:33-35; Philippians 4:14-16; 2 Thessalonians 3:8
she will become a kind of Penelope run off to sea (albeit one who will ultimately return to the hearth to tend her invalid husband), and Christ’s promise to her before her first fearful voyage across the English Channel proves prescient: “I schal go wyth the in every contré and ordeyn for the; I schal ledyn the thyder and brynge the ageyn in safté . . .” (I.15.729-31).

**Margery’s Conversion & Commissioning**

Although never describing herself as an apostle, she echoes Paul’s lament that he is “not worthy to be called an apostle” (1 Cor. 15.9) in her description of her own wretched state (“I am the most unworthy creatur that evyr thow schewedyst grace unto in erth” [I.21.1126]), prompting Christ to proffer Magdalene, Mary of Egypt, and notably, Paul, as examples of the possibility of redemption and salvation. Indeed, one of the obvious ways in which her life resembles Paul’s is in her conversion experience, which shares with his an abrupt definitiveness that, as Sarah Salih has pointed out, is unusual among accounts of female holy women. Paul’s dramatic repentance was so remarkable, Vorágine explains in the *Legenda Aurea*, that it is celebrated when the conversions of other saints are not: “No sinner, no matter how grievous his sin, can despair of pardon when he sees that Paul, whose fault was so great, afterwards became so much greater in grace.”

Accordingly, Paul’s dramatic repentance formed the template for the conversion narratives of countless others to follow. Both the commonplace “having a ‘road to Damascus’ moment,” and the description of sudden illumination as “the scales falling from one’s eyes” derive from the ninth chapter of Acts, which describes Paul’s blinding.

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by a bright light and loud voice that interrupt his attempt to find and arrest members of
the early Christian church rumored to be in Damascus. After several days of fasting and
prayer, Paul is visited by a disciple named Ananias, who at divine prompting lays hands
on him and prays for the restoration of his sight, at which point something resembling
“scales (squamae) fell from his eyes” (Acts 9.18). It is at this point that Paul’s baptism
takes place, followed by the immediate commencement of his preaching career.

That Kempe, like Paul, is addressed directly by Christ (“Dowtyr, why hast thou
forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?” [I.1.173]) and witnesses a brightness like
lightning at the moment of her conversion, elements extremely common in
hagiographical conversion narratives, is worthy of little attention. But there are other
parallels, more subtle. Salih has described several of them.59 Focusing primarily on the
ways in which Paul served as a model of conversion, she explores the insight that Kempe
provides a rare exemption to the medieval pattern of distinction between male and female
conversion: the former abrupt, the latter gradual, and often in a manner in keeping with
their previous inclination toward holiness, usually in the form of chastity. In most cases,
“conversion only confirms the saint's unarticulated but pre-existing commitment to Christ
and virginity,” but although Kempe's attainment of celibacy takes place over the long
period of time required to obtain her husband's consent, the Book gives no indication that
her desire for celibacy was lifelong, as was commonly the case with female saints, and
her life is marked by sudden, dramatic, theophonic ruptures, watershed moments that
change her way of life externally—rather than bringing it into conformity with her own
longstanding inclinations. Paul's conversion on his way to Damascus is of course of the

abrupt variety, and Kempe’s life is similar in that it does not begin, as so many vitae do, with either a serenely beatific childhood or an early childhood conversion (it was said of St. Nicholas, for example, that even “in hys kradul” he fasted Wednesdays and Fridays, “þe whiche dayes he wolde soke [nurse] but ones in þe day”).60 Instead, her “sudden, overwhelming conversion experience” occurs well into her adult life, following a spell of deep despair following the birth of one of her children.61

These are not the only similarities. As with Paul’s conversion experience, hers comprises not only the standard formula of compunction and contrition, but also a commissioning, one of several times she would be “chargyd and comawndyd in hir sowle” (I.18.926) to undertake a particular assignment:

Lord Cryst Jhesu seyd to hir sche schuld no mor chyldren beryn, and therfor he bad hyr gon to Norwych. And sche seyd, “A, der Lord, how schal I gon? I am bothe feynt and feble.” “Drede the not, I schal make the strong inow. I byd the gon to the vykary of Seynt Stefenys and sey that I gret hym wel and that he is an hey chossyn sowle of myn, and telle hym he plesyth me mech wyth hys prechyng and schew hym thy prevytés and myn cownselys swech as I schewe the.” (I.17.865-70)

The news that she would bear no more children is an interesting inversion of the Annunciation to the Mary, and the parallels to the broader pattern of commissioning (often though not necessarily as an accompaniment to conversion) set by other biblical heroes, saints, and apostles are plain enough. Like Moses, the Virgin Mary, the Disciples, and Paul, Kempe experiences a sudden angelic or divine appearance which, like Moses’s burning bush or Paul’s “great light,” precipitates the pronouncement of a commission, whereupon she protests her inadequacy, prompting greater reassurance from God that he

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will provide strength equal to the task. However, the experience Kempe describes resembles Paul’s in several points in particular. She is instructed to present herself to the Vicar of St. Stephens and relate the things that have been revealed to her, much as Paul’s conversion is confirmed and completed by a visit with the disciple Ananias. Moreover, her commission is apparently confirmed and reiterated by a visit from Paul himself, as Christ reminds her in the passage discussed above: “Dowtyr, I sent onys Seynt Powyl unto the for to strethyn the and comfortyn the that thu schuldist boldly spekyn in my name fro that day forward” (I.65.3796-97). And speak boldly she does!

Be bold, be bold: Margery the Missionary

Though there is scholarly disagreement on whether or not Kempe’s public teaching and admonishing ought to be called preaching, and precisely what degree of physical danger her activities would have placed her in, few would disagree that, as John Arnold puts it, she “picked a perilous time to be wandering the country, dressed for effect, whilst

62 Cf. the responses of Moses and the Virgin Mary to their divinely-appointed missions:

And Moses said to God: Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? [. . . .] I beseech thee, Lord, I am not eloquent from yesterday and the day before; and since thou hast spoken to thy servant, I have more impediment and slowness of tongue.” (Exodus 3:11; 4:10)

[Mary protested,] How shall this be done, because I know not man? [. . . .] And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.” (Luke 1:34, 38)

63 Karma Lochrie argued that Margery’s evasive strategy is not mere sophistic cleverness, but makes use of a distinction between “teaching” and “preaching” that was accepted by contemporary orthodox texts, and would have been recognized as such by her accusers. Lochrie, Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh, 111; Isabel Davis insists that the charges of Lollardy the Book recounts owed less to the appearance of heretical beliefs in Kempe’s language than to behaviors that flew in the face of what was considered appropriate for her gender. Davis, “Men and Margery: Negotiating Medieval Patriarchy,” 37; John Arnold, though downplaying the danger of actual burning Kempe would have faced, agrees with Davis that because Kempe was a woman, she was doubly susceptible to accusation, but stresses that any unlicensed preaching was a concern. Despite the fact that Henry Bowett, Archbishop of York, appeared to go along with her distinction between preaching and teaching, it was still a perilous one to make; “many people wanted her to be a heretic, and attempted to make that ascription stick.” Arnold, “Margery’s Trials: Heresy, Lollardy, and Dissent,” 76.
spreading the word” among a population that tended to have only a hazy notion of what ought to constitute heresy.\(^6^4\) Despite the danger, the Book emphasizes repeatedly the style in which her public ministry is carried out: “boldly”! Various forms of the word occur nearly a dozen times in The Book to describe Kempe’s manner, all of them after two separate instances early in the text in which she is commanded by Christ both to “boldly clepe [call] me Jhesus, thi love, for I am thi love and schal be thi love wythowntyn ende,” and to “Drede the not but speke boldly in my name in the name of Jhesu” (I.5.374-76; 12.599-600). She takes these commandments to heart, and thereafter delivers her exhortations and rebukes with superlative confidence, speaking “boldly and mytily . . . ageyn swerars, bannars, lyars and swech other viciows pepil, ageyn the pompows aray bothin of men and of women. Sche sparyd hem not, sche flateryd hem not, neithyr for her gifty, ne for her mete, no for her drynke. (II.10.595-98)”

It is interesting to consider the ways in which this style diverges somewhat from Christ’s own. Christ is her primary authority for speaking as she does; when challenged by the Archbishop of York for teaching in his diocese, she replies, “sir, me thynkyth that the gospel gevyth me leve to spekyn of God,” citing Christ’s blessing (at least in Kempe’s version of the encounter) of a woman who had addressed him with a “lowde voys” (I.52.2969-72).\(^6^5\) But although Kempe draws on Christ’s rhetorical strategies in her affinity for parables and her use of questions to evade entrapment under examination, she seems to have a difficult time maintaining a wholly “Christlike” meekness or mildness of

\(^{64}\) Arnold, “Margery’s Trials: Heresy, Lollardy, and Dissent,” 80–81.
\(^{65}\) Kempe takes liberties in her paraphrase with the substance of Christ’s response to the woman. See Staley, Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions, 119–120.
speech, let alone emulating the dignified silence he showed before Pilate. It is often hard to gauge with confidence Kempe’s tone when she is addressing critics, but many of her retorts (“God make yow a good man” [I.55.3236]) and her parables, such as the one about the bear who ate pear blossoms and then vilely excreted them, used to indict a hypocritical priest, might fairly be interpreted as indulging more than a trace of spleen that, however justifiable in their context—and delightful to read—could not be called entirely meek. In this, she less resembles Christ than Paul, who was capable of a sly sarcasm that Augustine admired.

Subtleties of tone aside, her boldness certainly owes a great deal to the model of the apostles, Paul foremost among them. The New Testament records two separate apostolic prayers for boldness, the first preceding the descent of the Holy Spirit on the twelve at Pentecost, after which “the place was moved wherein they were assembled: and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost: and they spoke the word of God with confidence.” For “confidence” the Vulgate gives *fiducia*, denoting not only trust but also assurance and courage. The same term appears in Paul’s prayer, or request for prayer, in his letter to the Ephesians, “that speech may be given me, that I may open my mouth with confidence [*fiducia*], to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in a chain: so that therein I may be bold [*audeam*] to speak according

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66 Mark 15.1-5. On one occasion, returning to London from Calais, Kempe does endure in silence the taunts of “sum dissolute personys” who recognize her and accuse her of false modesty—but this seems to owe less to her patience than to her embarrassment, “in as mech as sche was not clad as sche wold a ben for defawte of mony,” and her desire to go on her way as inconspicuously as possible, with a handkerchief disguising her face (II.9.550-55).

67 I.52.2976-3011


69 Acts 4:29-31
as I ought.”⁷⁰ The boldness (from audere: to intend, to dare, or do bravely) with which Paul carries out his preaching, exhortations, and disputations is emphasized again and again in the Acts of the Apostles and in his letters, and presented as paradigmatic to those who would follow his example. To the Corinthians, Paul acknowledges “that confidence wherewith I am thought to be bold” (2 Cor. 10.2), and to the church in Philippi he reports that “many of the brethren in the Lord, growing confident by my bands, are much more bold [abundantius audere] to speak the word of God without fear.”⁷¹

The biblical emphasis on the apostles’ confidence was not lost on medieval exegetes. The *Legenda Aurea*, for example, emphasizes repeatedly and at length the boldness of Paul’s preaching: “John’s attitude regarding Herodias [whom John had rebuked] was indeed very courageous, but Paul rebuked not one or two or three but many persons in similar positions of power, and tyrants far fiercer than any of them.”⁷²

Boldness, Voragine makes perfectly clear, is an essential requirement for preaching:

Anyone who assumes that office [of preaching] must be not soft or lax but strong and firm in all circumstances. No one ought to aspire to the duties of that high office unless he is ready to expose his soul to a thousand deaths and dangers . . . No one who yearns to govern, no one destined to fight the wild beasts or to perform as a gladiator in the arena, no one at all needs a soul and spirit so prepared to face danger and death as does the one who undertakes the office of preaching. Nowhere are the perils greater or the adversaries more cruel, nowhere are the stakes of the contest the like of those faced by the preacher: he is offered heaven as reward, hell as punishment.”⁷³

Perhaps it is noteworthy that Kempe is indeed offered heaven as a reward: In two separate visions Christ assures her that she will be spared the pains of purgatory: “I have behygth [promised] the that thu schuldyst noon other purgatory han than slawndyr and

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⁷⁰ Ephesians 6:19-20
⁷¹ Phil 1:14
⁷³ Ibid., 363.
speche of the world” (I.22.1168; cf. I.63. 3711). Much of the “slawndyr and speche” she will endure results from her attempts at preaching, though much of the violence she encounters, or at least the threat of it, is more than merely discursive. When Kempe runs afoul of the monks at Canterbury, for example, she responds to their criticism with the story of a man who, at the urging of his confessor, performed a year-long penance by hiring critics to accompany him everywhere and chide him continually for his sins. This done, he found himself one day surrounded by important men who genuinely despised him, and said as much. His response, Kempe continues, as he “stod among hem as I do now among yow, despysyng hym as ye do me,” was simply to laugh, for as he tells them, “I have many days put sylver owt of my purse and hyred men to chyde me for remyssyon of my synne, and this day I may kepe my sylver in my purs, I thank yow alle.” Just in case the point of this little exemplum isn’t clear, Kempe concludes, “Rygth so I sey to yow, worshepful serys, whyl I was at hom in myn owyn contré day be day wyth gret wepyng and mornyng, I sorwyd for I had no schame, skorne, and despyte as I was worthy. I thank yow alle, serys, heylë what forenoon and aftyrnoon I have had resonably this day, blyssed be God therof” (I.13.633-48). She then makes her exit (with, one imagines, her head chin at a defiant angle), but the scandalized monks pursue, decrying her as a Lollard and threatening to burn her.

Whether or not this story she tells seem to us less like a parable, told in what Sarah Beckwith calls “an irritating albeit Christlike fashion,” than like a rather cheeky retort to her abusers, the faux humility of its theme more than sublimated by its sarcasm, the confidence implicit in Paul’s charge to her that she “schuldist boldly spekyn in [Christ’s] name” (I.65.3796-97) is well-placed, for by her own account, at least, Kempe
was not only a bold speaker but also an effective one; another time, she wins approval from Henry Bowet, the Archbishop of York, who deems her scatological story of the bear and the pear blossoms a good one, and the priest who was the object of her story’s criticism allows that “this tale smyth me to the hert,” and asks that she pray for him (I.52.3210-11).74 Near the end of her Book she concludes that her speaking had “profityd rith mech in many personys” (II.10.598-99).

**Thorns in the Flesh: Pride and Vainglory**

All this talk of Paul is not meant to skirt the obvious fact that at the very center of Kempe’s piety is of course Christ himself, both the source and the aim of her attempts to cultivate purity, charity, and patience.75 Kempe’s aspiration, she declares in the Book’s prologue, is “to entren the wey of hy perfeccyon, whech parfyth wey Cryst ower Savyowr in his propyr persoone examplyd” (19-20), and she attempts to emulate that example in innumerable ways, large and small. It is no accident, for example, that many of the important events in Kempe’s life are described as taking place on a Friday, the day of Christ’s Passion.76

But being Christ-like is, in a word, difficult, the way of “hy perfeccyon” always on the horizon and beyond reach, and although Christ as he is presented in the Book comes across as wonderfully gentle and accessible—it is he who visits and comforts

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74 For extended discussions of the substance of Kempe’s parable and her examination before the archbishop in light of 15th century concerns over Lollardy, see Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, 107–13; See also Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*, 5–10.

75 John Arnold concludes from his analysis of the Book’s interrogation scenes that they attempt “to present the reader with a certain image of repression, the primary purpose of which is to frame Kempe’s experiences as akin to the mocking and scourging of Christ.” Arnold, “Margery’s Trials: Heresy, Lollardy, and Dissent,” 88; See also: Sarah Beckwith, *Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 80–83.

Kempe, who assures her of his love for wives and mothers as well as virgins, and who appears to authorize many of her unconventional activities—Paul was, in many ways, the more imitable. Though his doctrines might be sometimes severe, and his accomplishments and spiritual athleticism daunting, his letters reveal glimpses of the underlying imperfections, the all-too-human man who felt both the physical and emotional toll of his vocation; he acknowledges not only hunger, cold, and pain, but also resentment, impatience, and frustration, both with the fractiousness of the churches he shepherded, and at his own inability to exceed the limits of his corporeality. Though Kempe strove after transcendence, she was nonetheless a creature very much of this world, and it is the sublunary qualities and of Paul to which I want to suggest she was drawn, especially those that resembled her own. Like Kempe, Paul too recounts his repeated efforts to overmaster his passions, struggling with the temptations of lechery, pride, and vainglory, and undergoes ridicule for the apparent foolishness of his behavior.

Although both Paul and Kempe claim to have been empowered by the Holy Spirit, another sort of divine endowment came unsought, and it was neither great Solomonic wisdom nor the strength of Sampson, but rather temptation, weakness, illness, and hardship:

ower mercyfulle Lord Cryst Jhesu havyng pety and compassyon of hys handwerke and hys creatur turny wholety into sekenesse, prosperyté into adversyté, worship into repref, and love into hatered. (Prologue, 15-17)

Like Paul, Kempe wrestles at length with the temptations of the flesh. What has received far less scholarly attention is the fact that Kempe’s “original sin,” so to speak, was one that Paul acknowledges is of particular concern to those, like himself and like Kempe,
Utter 107

granted theophonic visions and inspiration: that of pride and “veynglory.” Vainglory must be distinguished from other species of pride. Kempe’s vainglory is of a more subtle and really more interesting variety than run-of-the-mill vanity or the desire for public fame or glory (both of which she also struggles with [I.2]). Though keenly attuned to the responses of those around her, it is not so much the praise of people that she seeks—indeed, she seems to depend on the derision of critics as a sign that she is fulfilling her divine mandate; rather it is her insatiable thirst for God’s love that becomes an insidious form of pride. Rosalynn Voaden describes it as an extension of Margery’s competitiveness: “There is a sense of triumph in the ways in which she demonstrated Christ’s esteem for her.” For example, after she witnesses a Eucharistic miracle, Christ confides that “My dowtyr Bryde [Bridget of Sweden], say me neuyr in this wyse” (I.20.185-86).

Bridget herself does not appear to have suffered much from the temptations of this form of pride, and Katherine is presented in the frankly rather uninteresting manner of much early hagiography as impervious to the temptations of any kind of pride. In John Capgrave’s Middle English verse retelling of her life, she disdains an admiring emperor’s offer of a silver statue made in her image, admonishing her listeners that “To trosten in

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77 For one of the few extended analyses of Kempe’s vainglory, including a helpful differentiation between it and pride, see Stanton, “Lechery, Pride, and the Uses of Sin in The Book of Margery Kempe.”
78 Kempe’s vanity has been remarked on in relation to Mary Magdalene, who was also vain. Voaden: “In some of the mystery play cycles it was as much [Magdalene’s] passion for luxury and sensuality as her overt sexual behavior which condemned her. She knew about precious ointment. She loved fine clothes; she was depicted in stained-glass windows and church paintings wearing a luxurious red robe, and having long flowing hair.” Rosalynn Voaden, “Beholding Men’s Members: The Sexualizing of Transgression in The Book of Margery Kempe,” in Medieval Theology and the Natural Body, York Studies in Medieval Theology, I (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 1997), 185.
79 Ibid., 186.
fame and in veynglory / It is but feynyng a fekyl flatery.”  

But Voragine lists pride among the three chief sins from which Paul was converted, along with “wanton boldness” and an understanding of the Law “according to the flesh,” and although the blinding light on the road to Damascus brought him “down to lowly humility,” the more subtle menace of vainglory took its place. Paul alludes vaguely to being shown the “third heaven,” where he was given “secret words which it is not granted to man to utter” (2 Cor. 12.1-4). Kempe too “knew and undyrstod many secret and prevy thyngys whch schuld befallen afterward be inpiracyon of the Holy Gost” (Prologue 41-42), but does Paul one better by bearing visionary witness not only to the ascension of her “sowle” into heaven, but to its marriage there to the Godhead before a host of heavenly witnesses (I.35). Sufficient grounds for pride, it would seem, and earlier she makes the really quite astonishing admission that “Sche thowt that sche lovyd God mor than he hir. Sche was smet wyth the dedly wownd of veynglory and felt it not, for sche desyryd many tymes that the crucifix schuld losyn hys handys fro the crosse and halsyn hir in tokyn of lofe” (I.4.305-07).

It is as a result of these sins that Paul and Kempe claim to be visited with the remedy of salutary suffering. Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” discussed further below, functions as a sign of the sufficiency of divine grace, but its principal purpose is one he describes in his second letter to the church at Corinth: “And lest the greatness of the revelations should exalt me, there was given me a sting [stimulus] of my flesh, an angel of Satan, to buffet me” (2 Cor. 2.). Kempe too reports that it was “grett bodyly

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sekenesse” by which her “pompe and pryde [were] cast down and leyd on syde”
(Prologue 22).

“That Which I Hate, I Do”: Tears and “Unstabylnes”

Truly, Paul seems to stand out among Kempe’s most beloved exemplars for the similarity of the spiritual offenses under which both of them labored. Moreover, the often injudicious and uncontrolled nature of her behavior, which seems to have been as intriguing and alienating to many of her contemporaries as to modern readers,\(^82\) may be to some extent explicable in light of Paul’s example: “For I think that God hath set forth us apostles . . . We are made a spectacle to the world and to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake . . .” (1 Cor. 4.9-10a). Kempe was certainly an heir to this tradition of holy foolishness, most vividly in the form of her famous tears.\(^83\) Where the better part of saints' lives begin with assurances that the saint exhibited signs of serenity and blessedness from childhood, the Book opens almost immediately with Kempe's mental breakdown, and exhausting—if often ecstatic—weeping. So powerful was her devotion to Christ that she often announced her presence “wyth gret wepyng, boistows sobbyng, and lowde crying that many man merveyled ful meche what hir eyled [what ailed her]” (I.51.2853-54).

According to medieval tradition, Paul too had the mixed blessing of holy weeping, and though the *Legenda Aurea* praises his tears, it also suggests that even Paul

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\(^82\) William Provost writes, “In her own time she was the source of much trouble to . . . her fellow citizens of Lynn, her traveling companions, her husband, her son, her daughter-in-law, her amanuensis, and various of the ecclesiastic and civil officials with whom she had contact. And she is troublesome to us, modern readers of her book, as we try to comprehend the life and personality which that text offers us.” Provost, “Margery Kempe and Her Calling,” 3.

was overcome by them: “The pains that Job suffered in his body, Paul suffered in his spirit: a sadness more poignant than any sorrow consumed him when anyone fell into sin, so that torrents of tears flowed ceaselessly from his eyes not only by day but by night.”

If, in the fierce daring of St. Katherine, Kempe was given a masculine model of courage, in Paul she had an exemplar whose tears are described in distinctly feminine terms. Chrysostom describes how, in his weeping at the sins of others, Paul “was afflicted more sorely than a woman in labor and said: My little children, of whom I am in labor again until Christ be formed in you.” Theologians have offered many theories as to the nature of Paul’s mysterious “thorn in the flesh,” but none, so far as I am aware, have offered his unbidden tears as a possibility. There is little textual evidence to suggest it, admittedly, but I will note the similarity between Paul’s response to his thorn and Margery’s to her tears. Just as Paul prayed to be relieved of his ailment, Margery asked, “yyf it be thy wil, take thes cryingys fro me,” but is denied (I.77.4300-01).

More than any of her other behaviors, Margery’s unrestrainable “roryng” (I.28.1579) served to mark her difference, alienating her even from fellow pilgrims to holy sites in and around Jerusalem, who finally refuse to travel or even dine with her, leaving her to “ete hir mete be hirselse alone” (I.28.1703). Modern readers could perhaps be excused for sympathizing with the exhausted pilgrims who simply wanted to enjoy

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85 Ibid.
86 Theories have ranged widely, from the suggestion that Paul’s “thorn” refers to his persecutions, to epileptic fits, to weakness of vision resulting from the “bright light” that appeared to him at his conversion, to an uncontrollable temper, or to temptations to impiety or even unbelief. Matthew George Easton, “Thorn in the Flesh,” Easton’s Bible Dictionary (T. Nelson and Sons, 1897); Another compelling comparison, in light of John Shelby Spong’s argument that Paul’s “thorn” refers to repressed homosexual desire, which he (Paul) strongly condemns acting on, might be to Margery’s own mysterious and unnamed sin, “a thyng in conscyens” that she was loathe to confess” (I.1.135), and that seems to have consumed her during the early years of her life. John Shelby Spong, Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture (Harper Collins, 2009), 116–119.
one meal without Margery drowning out any hope of conversation with her sobs, and soaking the tablecloth with her tears. But lookers on were not the only ones wondering “what hir eyled”; one of the most poignant impressions one gets from a reading of the Book is that Kempe was often a mystery even to herself, agonizingly aware of the instability that characterized not only her various sudden turns of fortune, but the tempestuous state of her inner life, which was, she writes in the prologue, “lech unto the reedspyr whch boweth wyth every wynd and nevyr is stable les than no wynd bloweth” (13-14). While she is able to characterize the upset of her business ventures—the inexplicable failure of her beer to ferment or her mill horses to pull the grind wheel—as salutary miracles, wrought by God to temper her covetousness and pride, the accounts she gives of her various emotional, mental, and spiritual disturbances suggest a woman deeply influenced by societal attitudes concerning female volatility, and as self-reproachful as any of her critics, who deride both her tears and exultations as evidence of madness, demonic possession, or both. Not everyone scorns her tears, of course; among her admirers is Jerome, who appears during her pilgrimage to his relics and effusively expresses his regard for her spiritual gift of weeping (I.41). Nevertheless, so distressing to her is her own inconstancy that, in its throes, she views even the cruel rejection of a former would-be seducer as an admirable example of resolve, and retreats from the humiliating encounter “al schamyd and confusyd in hirself, seyng hys stabylnes and hir owyn unstabylnes (I.4.344-45). This episode initiates one of a series of cycles of compunction and contrition in her life, in which the steadying influence of divine

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87 Genelle Gertz-Robinson suggests that Kempe’s “bellowing,” a phenomenon distinct from her tears, which develops in the Holy Land and manifests itself despite her mighty efforts to contain it, as one such site of limited self-knowledge. Gertz-Robinson, “Stepping into the Pulpit? Women’s Preaching in The Book of Margery Kempe and The Examinations of Anne Askew,” 447.
presence and reassurance is a constant refrain. Following conversation with Christ and the saints, she is “gretly stabelyd in hir feith,” and can trust “stabely and stedfastly” in the divine origin of her visionary experiences (I.87.5110-13). As we have seen, however, to be sanctified is not necessarily to be perfected, and even divine communion often overcomes what little self-control she has:

Than was hir sowle so delectablewyd wyth the swet dalyawns of owr Lorde and so fullfilled of hys lofe that as a drunkyn man sche turnyd hir fyrst on the o syde and sithyn on the other wyth gret wepyng and gret sobbyng, unmythy [unable] to kepyn hirselfe in stabilnes for the unqwenchabyl fyer of lofe whech brent ful sor in hir sowle. (I.41.2310-14, emphasis mine)

This paradoxical tension and inner division is the story of Kempe’s life: stability in instability; strength through weakness; pleasure in sadness; sins at once tempting and horrifying; love of God leading her subtly to the temptations of vainglory.

The temperate equanimity after which she constantly strives is very much like what Paul describes as befitting an apostle. Writing to his protégée Timothy, Paul exhorts him to “Preach the word: be instant [prepared] in season, out of season: reprove, entreat, rebuke in all patience and doctrine,” adding that he ought to “labour in all things, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil thy ministry. Be sober” (2 Timothy 4.2; 5). Of course, these qualities describe an ideal rather than a wholly livable reality, not just for Kempe, but even for Paul himself. Predicting his death, Paul wrote, “I have fought the good fight: I have finished my course: I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4.7), and although this anticipatory epitaph, written near the end of life, might be a fair tribute to his labors and devotion, and bespeak the completion of his sanctification to come—in death, he is one of those by whose visits Kempe’s faith is “gretly stabelyd”—a steady, integrated wholeness did not necessarily characterize his life. Despite his repeated assertion that the
“old man” of his sinful self had been “crucified with [Christ] . . . to the end that we may serve sin no longer” (Romans 6:6), his frustration with his own inconstancy is palpable in the very next chapter of the epistle.\(^{88}\)

For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Romans 7.22-5)

Citing this passage, Rosalynn Voaden declares that “Paul's struggle is Margery's, and his despairing words could as well be hers.”\(^{89}\) Only late in her life, after she had “continuyd hir lyfe thorw the preservyng of owr Savyowr Crist Jhesu mor than twenty-five yer . . . weke be weke and day be day,” does Kempe seem to have attained some measure of the stability she sought (II.87.5104-06).

One of Paul’s attractions for her, then, may have been the way in which he modeled remarkable achievements despite very human shortcomings. Much as Bridget helped to authorize Kempe to aspire toward holiness despite being a wife and mother, Paul’s example may have helped enable her to “boldly go” where few women of her day dared, in part by validating her audacious critique of the spiritual condition of others, even priests and bishops, despite her misgivings about her own weaknesses.

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\(^{88}\) See also: Ephesians 2:15; 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-11
Provost, “Margery Kempe and Her Calling.”

Appointed to Death

While Kempe’s career of public preaching embodies the strategies and risks of a courageous apostolic engagement with worldly authorities, her reaction to suffering when she encounters it is, on the face of it, somewhat less impressive, for her boldness is balanced by great physical weakness and fear of pain. Apparent liabilities for an apostle, it would seem, but the abjection of her complaints actually bears comparison with Paul’s description of his own privations—more so than with the triumphal stoicism of many of the holy women she admired.

It is hard to overstate Paul’s importance to the cult of suffering as a devotional form. Christ had urged that to be a disciple was to “deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9.23), but Paul exceeds the imagery, suggesting that through self-mortification one could be “crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:29), thereby given even more striking expression to an idea that was to act so powerfully upon the imagination of much of Christendom. The image appears repeatedly in hagiography, as does the “thorn in the flesh,” which Paul used metaphorically to refer to an unnamed affliction that appears to have troubled him for the duration of his active ministry (2 Cor. 12.7).90

In fact, this thorn became a literal reality in the self-mortification practices of late-medieval and early modern holy people like Jane Mary of Maille, who stuck a long thorn into her head in response to a sudden “great compassion” for Christ's passion, and wore it

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through Passion Week, until it fell out on Holy Thursday, leaving no scar, and Rose of Lima, who secretly wore a metal crown of “thorns” beneath her wimple that was discovered, upon her death, to have grown into her scalp.91

Unlike Rose of Lima, Paul did not always bear his afflictions in silence. In Romans 15, Paul quotes from the “suffering servant” passage in Isaiah (52.13-53.12), interpreting Isaiah’s prophesies to refer to Christ, and thus, by identifying his own ministry with those Hebrew verses, suggesting that he, like, Christ, is “Despised, and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with infirmity” (Isaiah 53.3). And elsewhere he writes, “[. . .] I think that God hath set forth us apostles, the last, as it were men appointed to death. We are made a spectacle to the world and to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake . . .” (1 Cor. 4.9-10a). Clearly, Paul does not consider this easy work. Little wonder, for according to tradition, all of the twelve save St. John died violent deaths,92 and God’s commissioning of Paul does not suggest that his apostolic career will be much easier than that of all the others, beginning with St. Stephen, who were martyred: “this man is to me a vessel of election, to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9.15-16). And suffer he does. Though he reminds the church in Rome that “[w]e glory also in tribulation, knowing that tribulation worketh patience” (Romans 5.3), his tone moves easily from triumphant to downright plaintive:

Even unto this hour we both hunger and thirst and are naked and are buffeted and have no fixed abode. And we labour, working with our own hands. We are reviled: and we bless.

91 The former story is related in Kieckhefer, though he does not mention the possible connection to Paul. Kieckhefer, Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu, 119.
92 Cross and Livingstone, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 89.
We are persecuted: and we suffer it. We are blasphemed: and we entreat. We are made as the refuse of this world, the offscouring of all, even until now. (1 Cor. 4:11-13)

Early medieval hagiography would depict suffering far less realistically, emphasizing, at the expense of anything like verisimilitude, the Christian’s ability to overcome adversity. The Late Antique martyrs in Aldhelm’s De Virginitate come across as cold and remote, invested with divine power in a way that removes them not only from pain but from human empathy. St. Margaret of Antioch, for example, who Kempe admired, grows impatient with the sympathetic tears of witnesses to her execution. A modern reader comes away with a sense that her gruesome tortures were not so much painful as exasperating to her (making her, it would seem, either ideally or dreadfully suited for her job as patroness of laboring women, inasmuch as she seems beyond the reach of pain herself). Not so with Paul, whose sufferings extra-biblical sources make little attempt to gloss over or in any way minimize, perhaps because he is not shy about itemizing them:

Of the Jews five times did I receive forty stripes, save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once I was stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I was in the depth of the sea. In journeying often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils from my own nation, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils from false brethren. In labour and painfulness, in much watchings, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. (2 Cor. 11.24-27).

There is far more of Paul than of Margaret about Margery, who, like Paul, suffers sickness, the privations of travel, including bad weather and dangerous sea voyages, and at least the threat of violence (including, unlike Paul, rape), and does not do so altogether stoically. The Book is replete with descriptions of the verbal abuse she elicits, such as

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94 For a tally of the beatings and imprisonments Paul endured, see most notably 2 Cor. 11.23-27; 33, and 2 Timothy 4.16-17. See also Acts 16.25-40; 28.3.
when, returning home to Lynn from her travels, “sche suffryd meche despite, meche reprefe, many a scorne, many a slawndyr, many a bannyng, and many a cursyng” (I.55.3232-34). The episode recalls Christ's remark that no prophet is accepted in his hometown, but the catalog of mistreatment is much like Paul's.95

Bold though she may be in her oratory, Kempe is no Joan of Arc. Even in her middle age, when we might expect experience to have toughened her, or to have cultivated in her some sense of transcendence of the limitations of her body, she is not physically brave. Instead, and in contrast to descriptions of earlier saints, many of whom laugh or seem hardly to notice as the flesh is ripped from their bodies, Kempe is, as Rosalynn Voaden puts it, “profoundly and consistently aware of herself as a physical, fleshly being, an amalgamation of appetites and sensations.”96 This awareness manifests itself repeatedly in a variety of ways throughout the Book, both in her desires and in her fears. When, at Cawood, the Archbishop orders her fettered for heresy, she has to hide the trembling of her hands, which “tremelyd and shakyd wondirly,” beneath her mantle (I.52.2929-30). And when preparing to set out on pilgrimage, she is preoccupied with her own safety and comfort, and hopes not to catch “vermyn” from her poor fellow pilgrims (II.6.410). While Julian of Norwich prayed for illness and for three wounds, and Bridget of Sweden celebrated Fridays by dripping hot wax on her hands, and further mortified her flesh with tight cords knotted around her waist and knees, Kempe prays that God might

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95 Cf. Luke 4.24. Hometowns aside, Kempe appears to have made herself unwelcome even several counties away. The mayor of Leicester, for example, seventy-five miles from King’s Lynn, is unimpressed by her credentials as the daughter and wife of reputable men, and threatens to arrest her: “A,” seyd the meyr, “Seynt Kateryn telde what kynred sche cam of and yet ar ye not lyche, for thu art a fals strumpet, a fals loller, and a fals deceyver of the pepyl, and therfor I schal have the in preson” (I.46.2624-27).

96 Voaden, “Beholding Men’s Members: The Sexualizing of Transgression in The Book of Margery Kempe,” 176; Rebecca Krug, too notes that, for Margery, “her spiritual condition is very much contingent on her physical state. She interprets the former in terms of the latter.” Krug, “The Idea of Sanctity and the Uncanonized Life of Margery Kempe,” 133.
intervene to prevent her becoming seasick (Christ later advises her to avoid looking at the waves, which isn’t bad advice).  

In her apparent weakness, she carries out one of the functions of late medieval holy men and women, who were, on the whole, less indifferent to suffering than their forbears. Kieckhefer explains, “Keenly aware of God's aid in coping with afflictions, the saints become more sensitive than they would otherwise be . . . . In that way they carry out the Pauline theme of strength perfected in weakness: were it not for their vulnerability, they would be less effective signs of divine aid.” This seems to be especially true of the holiness of women, in which “we find an implicit underestimation of the woman and a reinforcing ambivalence: the weaker the woman, the greater God's grace.” An apt description of Kempe, who, protestations of being “bothe feynt and feble” notwithstanding (I.17.867), manages to endure a great deal, including a lengthy bout of “the flyx,” or dysentery, which the Book describes at length in rather alarming detail: her abdominal pains were “so hard and so scharp that sche must voydyn that was in hir stomak as bittyr as it had ben galle, neythyr etyng ne drynkyng whil the sekenes enduryd but evyr gronyng tyl it was gon” (I.56.3247-49).

That she manages to turn these sufferings into opportunities for pious reflection on Christ’s passion is not unusual; what sets Kempe apart from many of the holy women she admires is that while she endures her share of bodily suffering, she does not seem

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quite so eager to seek it. Though for a time she undertakes extreme fasts and dutifully wears her hair shirt, “[s]ooner or later in her devotional praxis, bodily chastisement . . . was relinquished in favour of the spiritual chastisement of harsh words and verbal attacks which that relinquishing helped to provoke.”

She entreats, “for thy gret peyn have mercy on my lityl peyne; for the gret peyne that thu suffredyst gef me not so meche as I am worthy, for I may not beryn so meche as I am worthy” (I.56.3252-54). Once again, she is offered the reassurance of divine grace for her suffering, but not its removal.

More intriguingly still, and in contrast to the otherworldly, rather haughty confidence of the virgin martyrs, both Kempe and Paul record their profound emotional suffering: “drede” of her “felyngys” is the “grettest scorge” that she experiences (II.89.5237-38). Indeed, one might almost argue that it is the strength of Kempe’s imagination, rather than any real frailty of her body, that is her true weakness. Again and again, her fears undermine or qualify her best intentions, most notably when it comes to the ultimate identification with the apostles: martyrdom. Though she embraces martyrdom in theory, she admits hoping for the “softest” death she can think of:

Sche ymagyned in hirself what deth sche mygth deyn for Crystys sake. Hyr thowt sche wold a be slayn for Godlys lofe, but dred for the poyn of deth, and therfor sche ymagyned hirself the most soft deth, as hir thowt, for dred of inpacyens, that was to be bowndyn hir hed and hir fet to a stokke and hir hed to be smet of wyth a scharp ex for Godlys lofe. (I.14.678-81)

In the type of death she imagines, decapitation, she follows Paul—as did of course the lion’s share (if you will) of virgin martyrs, but usually only after being subjected to various tortures and disfigurements, often for days on end.

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Others had followed Paul to death far more willingly than Kempe, and it was credited to them as heroism. The apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, written in Asia Minor and Greece during the second and third centuries, constitute a very early set of virgin martyrs, what Karen Winstead calls “chastity stories.” In one of these, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, an Iconian girl of noble birth, Thecla, is moved by Paul’s preaching on virginity to spurn her arranged marriage and become a Christian. Her outraged parents and suitor agitate for Paul’s imprisonment and seek her death, but rather than relent, she willingly follows Paul into prison and then to the place of execution, where only a series of miracles spare her life.\(^{101}\) No miraculous intervention spared St. Katherine, whose manner of death resembled Paul’s, and from whose truncated neck flowed milk mixed with blood, a sign of divine favor that, according to her hagiographers, was shown also to Paul.\(^{102}\)

Putting Kempe’s story in dialogue with apostolic narratives brings into relief her quite different and far more relatable brand of heroism, one that consisted not in a stoical indifference to suffering, still less in the audacious eagerness to die that so many of the saints in martyrologies seem to evince, but rather in a willingness to die, despite a fierce love of life, with all of its pleasures and hardships both. As Augustine assured his listeners in one of his later sermons, “I know you want to keep on living. You do not

\(^{101}\) We do not know whether Margery would have had any opportunity to become acquainted with the Acts of Paul and Thecla, but its depiction of Paul’s effect on women is interesting in light of the evident influence of his example on Margery. Whether despite or because of the fact that he teaches celibacy and asceticism, women are drawn to follow him, and they draw tacit authorization to breach gender and religious boundaries. The titular Thecla preserves her virginity by fighting off a lascivious nobleman with her bare hands, and when for these actions she is sentenced to be eaten by wild animals in the arena, she seizes an opportunity to baptize herself by jumping into a vat of hungry sea creatures. Karen Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 7–8 Winstead draws on The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M.R. James, ed. J. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 364-74.

\(^{102}\) See notes to lines 16-43 in Prologue. Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine*. 
want to die. And you want to pass from this life to another in such a way that you will not rise again as a dead man but fully alive and transformed. This is what you desire. This is the deepest human feeling; mysteriously, the soul itself wishes and instinctively desires it.” The heroism of the martyrs, then, consisted in this: “They really loved this life, yet they weighed it up. They thought of how much they should love the things eternal; if they were capable of so much love for things that pass away . . . “103 In just this way, Kempe really seems to love life and its physical comforts, despite its abundant opportunities for suffering. The Book records her love of rich garments (even her later obsession with the white robes of holy virgins seems like an extension of her weakness for clothes), as well as her enjoyment of good food, of cakes, beer, preferring “good pyke” over less tasty red herring (II.9.566). In light of this, it is a mark of her devotion and courage that even though she does not face martyrdom for her unorthodox activities, she is willing to—or is at least at pains to try to assure herself that she would be.

Conclusion: In Search of a Hero[ine]

The Book of Margery Kempe is not a romance, but it could be said to narrate, in the way of that genre, an individual’s quest for “‘true’ identity,”104 and in some ways that quest has continued, for added to the many challenges confronting Kempe is that of being the hero of her own story in a text that relied so heavily on the assistance of masculine scribal authority for its material existence, and teems with larger-than-life figures, presided over by Christ himself. Just as Paul undergoes a dramatic change of identity from the

103 Qtd. in Brown, Augustine of Hippo: A Biography, 435–36.
persecuting “Saul” to become God’s hero-errant, Kempe moves from the antagonist to the protagonist of her story, but of what sort, exactly? Gloria Cigman, writing of Middle English anti-heroes, searches in vain for a representative female example:

my gender-specific use of the term ‘anti-hero’ stems from the fact that I am aware of no anti-heroines in Middle English writings. Have I missed anyone? Certainly I find no animate interior experience in either the sustained narrative of the idealised St Cecilia or the dense crowd of heroic martyrs to chastity who parade so rapidly through the mind of Dorigen in her distress.\(^\text{105}\)

Has she missed anyone? I wonder. Cigman makes no mention of her, but Kempe, ever self-reproachful, might have been inclined to embrace that designation.

Few scholars today, however, would likely be so uncharitable. Since the discovery in 1934 of what is now known as British Library MS Additional 61823, containing the only extant complete text of the Book, criticism has moved from “largely harsh and negative” to overwhelmingly sympathetic, appreciative, and valorizing.\(^\text{106}\)

Nicholas Watson is characteristic in finding that the “persecuted, maladroit, self-justifying figure” of the weeping Kempe ultimately comes across as secondary to “the self-assured and coherent teacher the Book also reveals to us.”\(^\text{107}\)

Readers eager to herald her as the hero of her book have focused on various aspects of her life in order to frame the nature of that heroism,\(^\text{108}\) but have tended

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\(^{105}\) Cigman, “The Medieval Self as Anti-Hero,” 164.


\(^{108}\) For example, Anthony Goodman writes, her role “was a painful, heroic one, a mission to give strident testimony both by the staithes and markets of her native town and along the far-flung highways and byways of Christendom” Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 122; and Genelle Gertz-Robinson frames Kempe’s heroism in gnostic terms: “Kempe wins biblical knowledge through hardship, and continues to endure that hardship through her engagement with publics who disapprove of her possession and use of such knowledge. One might ultimately say that the Book makes heroic both the pursuit of education and the practice of such skills once they have been acquired.” (Gertz-Robinson 473) Gertz-Robinson, “Stepping into the Pulpit? Women’s Preaching in The Book of Margery Kempe and The Examinations of Anne Askew,” 473.
overwhelmingly to do so in ways that prioritize her sex as her main defining characteristic. Even her most ardent scholarly admirers couch their appreciation in the social circumstances of and expectations for her gender, and the ways she various endures, resists, outwits, and circumvents them. Understandably so, for in light of her historical moment, Kempe’s sex might indeed be her most noteworthy feature, justly coloring her struggles with additional poignancy, and adding great weight to her achievements.

But assessment beside Paul, a male exemplar, permits a fresh and perhaps salutary movement away from what has been the dominant trend of approaching Kempe within a heavily-gendered context. Attention to Paul’s life in relation to Kempe’s forecloses the possibility of subsuming her emotional volatility, conflictedness, and inconsistency—what she calls her “unstablynes” (I.4.345)—within a specifically gendered category of behavior.

Felicity Riddy has argued, “The present in which the Book was first written in the early 1430s was one in which its elderly protagonist fulfilled the role of Martha—of active domestic service—while the life that the text creates and yearns for is that of Mary—of contemplative interiority.” It is a poignant picture she paints, and important for its attentiveness to what must have been the wearying toil and tedium of Kempe’s daily routine of caring for a senile, incontinent husband while also endeavoring, in whatever form it may have taken, to get her remembrances committed to parchment. But

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109 Terence Bowers, for example, in his very useful consideration of the significance of Margery’s perigrinations, foregrounds the ways in which her travel narrative is valuable for the ways in which it anticipates and exemplifies the social value of other, later, women’s travel writing. Terence N. Bowers, “Margery Kempe as Traveler,” *Studies in Philology* 97, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 28.

by setting these phenomenological difficulties in opposition to the “contemplative interiority” for which Kempe supposedly yearns and describes in the narrative of her adventures, Riddy creates a reductive picture of those desires and of Kempe’s sense of mission. The constraints that this highly-gendered construct imposes on our thinking about Kempe begin to emerge when we recall that although this Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus and Martha, was indeed the archetype of the devoted disciple, she was also conflated with the Magdalene, who medieval saints’ lives describe in far less domesticated terms. Following Christ’s ascension, she becomes a fiery preacher, traveler, and missionary to Marseilles identifying herself with and taking her apostolic authority from Peter.\textsuperscript{111} Recognizing Kempe’s apostolic sense of mission serves to correct the idea that her overarching aim was for contemplative devotion, and that her actions were somehow a response to the frustration of that desire, for the apostolic vocation Paul modeled demanded active, outward engagement with the world as an \textit{extension} of contemplative devotion.

Moreover, putting Kempe in dialogue with Paul usefully complicates the discussion of both sanctity and gender; just as Kempe had in the unflinching oratory of St. Katherine female precedent for traditionally masculine behavior, in Paul she had male precedent for emotional volatility, weakness, and feelings of unworthiness and self-loathing.\textsuperscript{112} Kempe sighs that “many man” exclaimed to her perplexedly, “Eythyr thu art

\textsuperscript{111} The Legenda Aurea describes Mary Magdalene before the governor of Marseilles, sanctioning both her right to preach and her ability to do so well by appealing to the example and authority of St. Peter: “I am ready indeed to defend [my faith] . . . because [it] is strengthened by the daily miracles and preaching of my teacher Peter, who presides in Rome!” de Voragine, \textit{The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints}, 377; Gregory the Great conflated Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and the “sinful woman” of Luke 7:36-50, an assumption followed by Western Christian interpreters and commentators until the 20th century. Cross and Livingstone, \textit{The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church}, 1049.

\textsuperscript{112} Whether or not Kempe, in her travels, deliberately invited comparisons to Katherine, she reports that the mayor of Leicester was unimpressed by them: “A,” seyd the meyr, “Seynt Kateryn telde what kynred sche
a ryth good woman er ellys a ryth.wikked woman” (I.47.2667-68). One of Paul’s most influential contributions to Christian theology was the suggestion that even the sanctified believer, regardless of gender, was, in fact, both of those things.
CHAPTER 3

Hallowed but Hollow: Perfection and the Aesthetics of Heroism in Malory’s Galahad

“Pelagianism is a creed for heroes, but Augustine's emphasis on original sin and the consequent absolute dependence of every one of us on the grace of God gives hope to the waverer, the backslider, the slacker, the putz, the schlemiel.”

- Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin: A Cultural History*

“This seems more error than knight errantry”
- Josh Ritter, “Galahad”

Introduction

If Margery Kempe alienated her contemporaries by her often unsuccessful efforts at cultivating an otherworldly holiness, garnering as many accusations of hypocrisy and heresy as admirers, she nonetheless became, as I argued in my last chapter, heroic in the attempt. The Grail hero Galahad, by contrast, immortalized in English literature by Sir Thomas Malory about three decades after Kempe’s death in 1438, risks alienating readers with the very *success* of his quite unearthly holiness. What this demonstrates is the importance of the hero’s dependence. Galahad, I argue, is an exception that helps to prove the rule that imperfection is a necessary condition for medieval Christian heroism.

By emptying the sense of dependence originally integral to the heroism of Galahad in the thirteenth-century French *Queste del Saint Graal*, the *Morte Darthur* leaves a chrysalis so very holy and brittle that Lancelot benefits by comparison.

The fact that no book-length studies have been devoted to Galahad, save for one published dissertation in 1932, suggests either that scholars do not quite know what to

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1 Sister Mary Louise Morgan, *Galahad in English Literature* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1932); Pauline Matarasso’s study of biblical symbolism in the Queste is largely centered around Galahad, but she is studying the French text largely in isolation, and makes no mention whatsoever of Malory’s handling of him. Pauline Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry: A Study of the Queste Del Saint Graal* (Geneve: Librairie Druz, 1979), 33–95.
do with Galahad, or perhaps that they do not much care, his virtues so patent as to
preclude the need for much inquiry. As the principle of unity and wholeness, impeccable
within and without, Galahad's armor presents no chink for scrutiny, nor his personality
(such as it is) anything but smooth contours for scholarly purchase.

There is a moment in *The Once and Future King*, T.H. White’s self-described
“footnote” to Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, that encapsulates the trouble with Galahad as an
imitable exemplar. Arthur, at table with Lancelot, who has just returned from his failed
attempt to achieve the Grail, ventures on the subject of Lancelot’s son:

“I know hardly anything about Galahad, except that everybody dislikes him.”
“Dislikes him?”
“They complain about his being inhuman.”
Lancelot considered his cup.
“He is inhuman,” he said at last. “But why should he be human? Are angels
supposed to be human?”

The complaint expressed in this exchange echoes not only Galahad’s fellow knights, but
also some critics and readers (the present one among them) who regard the *Morte* with
abundant admiration and appreciation, but find that Galahad’s “austere virtue excludes
humanity.” It also offers one disquieting possibility as to why: perhaps we, like the more
worldly-minded members of the Round Table, are insufficiently “angelic” to understand
or appreciate an ascetic, virginal figure who represents, as one critic puts it, “a monastic
ideal of Christian chivalry . . . so otherworldly that secular readers have difficulty relating
to it.” Perhaps. But rather than shuffling off to confession, I want to take this modern

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3 Matarasso, *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, 17. Quotations from Matarasso’s introductory essay and notes
will be cited in the footnotes; quotations from the Queste del Saint Graal, cited parenthetically by page
number, are from her translation, with occasional reference to the Old French in Pauphilet’s edition, on
which Matarasso’s translation is based; Albert Pauphilet, ed., *La Queste Del Saint Graal* (Paris: C.F.M.A.,
1923).
4 James I. Wimsatt, “Type Conceptions of the Good Knight in the French Arthurian Cycles, Malory and
critical distaste for Galahad as my starting point for inquiring into the nature of sanctity and heroism in the *Morte Darthur*, and suggest that what Arthurian critics and artists since at least the nineteenth century have responded negatively toward, namely his “inhuman” affect, attests the *success* of Malory’s method, which is to bracket a version of personal sanctity that he finds less compelling than Lancelot’s. By emphasizing Galahad’s perfections and downplaying the “everyman” qualities he possesses in the *Queste*, Malory is able to accentuate the more narratively productive and aesthetically appealing heroism of Lancelot, founded on willful struggle rather than self-abandonment to providence.

One especially enduring question in the scholarly debate over Malory and his sources has concerned the ratio of emphasis in the *Morte*’s themes: earthly chivalry, with its emphasis on courtly love, versus spiritual excellence, the purity of chaste, transcendent love, and ultimately fitness for heaven. From at least Chrétien forward, Arthurian romance had accommodated both of what James Bruce called, nearly a century ago, “the two great ideals that distinguish the Middle Ages—the idea of chivalry and the ideal of the Christian church . . .”⁵ Allied uneasily, if all-too-effectively, in the Crusades, these (often conjoined) twin ideals continued to work themselves out in medieval romantic literature, in which one and then another would dominate, along with instances of something like armistice, if not, as Bruce asserts, harmony.⁶ But what of the *Morte*

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⁶ For Bruce, the early thirteenth-century Middle High German romance Parzival represents the height of that reconciliation. He writes that, whereas in the Queste “the ideal of chivalry, in a spirit of the narrowest asceticism, is completely subordinated to that of the Church . . . in [Wolfram’s Parzival], with a sane recognition of their respective values, the two are combined in perfect harmony.” Ibid., I and II (Second edition with a supplement by Alfons Hilka): I.335.
Darthur? In it, Balyne swears an oath of vengeance, vowing both “to God and knyghthode” (1.80), but which of the two Malory prioritizes has been a matter of much deliberation. Derek Brewer, for example, finds little incongruence between the imperatives of Christianity and what he calls “ideal Arthurian chivalry”: “[f]or Malory—and we shall never understand him if we do not understand this—there is no essential incompatibility between the values of Christianity and those of the High Order of Knighthood, or ideal Arthurian chivalry.” But it would appear that “misunderstanding” of what was manifest to Brewer has been rampant, for read as a whole, the Morte seems to be so overwhelmingly focused on secular chivalric values that many critics have been unconvinced that its Christian language and themes are very much more than perfunctory. His Tale of the Sankgreal in particular seems like merely an interruption with little lasting consequence for Arthur or the court, a palimpsest of the thoroughly spiritualized French Queste del Saint Graal that he had appropriated and overwritten, and the debate over whether Malory’s Grail quest is merely one more marvel among many, or a dubiously successful attempt to synthesize the two sets of values, persists up to the present.

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9 Richard Barber, for example, seems to take for granted that “The Grail adventure is [merely] one more of the marvels of Arthur’s time, even if it does lead to a wholly spiritual conclusion: and when Lancelot attempts to achieve the Grail, Malory emphasizes his relative success rather than his complete rejection at the last and crucial moment.” Barber, The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief, 218–19.
10 While acknowledging the difficulty of evaluating Malory’s originality without access to a presumed French original, lost to us, from which the branches of the thirteenth-century Arthurian Prose Cycle drew, Eugene Vinaver nevertheless begins his commentary on the Tale of the Sankgreal by declaring that it is “the least original of his works” Vinaver, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, III.1534.
11 See, for example, this newly-published collection of essays reassessing Eugene Vinaver’s decisive evaluation of the Morte as overwhelmingly concerned with secular chivalric, rather than Christian, values: D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. and Janet Jesmok, eds., Malory and Christianity: Essays on Sir Thomas Malory’s
In this scholarly tournament to claim Malory for either heaven or for earth, much has been made of his treatment of Lancelot, seen as key to understanding where the weight of the Morte’s priorities lies. Malory’s recuperation of Lancelot, his softening of the presumably Cistercian Queste’s harsh criticism of his adultery, is well documented, but little has been written about how those changes are accompanied by significant adjustments to Galahad, who becomes correspondingly less recognizably human. This handling of so integrally religious a hero, I will argue, serves as its own indicator of Malory’s priorities, and I will also show that it is largely to Malory’s Galahad, reduced from his finely-wrought source material, of which we have only the thirteenth-century French Queste del Saint Graal, that subsequent Arthurian artists and critics have responded with distaste or indifference, for the Tale of the Sankgreal’s compression of its French source to only a little more than a third of its original size, while yielding a much brisker tale, and one altogether more inviting to readers whose taste is for battle and

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_Morte Darthur_ (Western Michigan University: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013); See also Barbara Newman’s argument that the Morte is, as she calls it, “double coded,” such that “when Malory is forced to choose between sacred and secular values, he chooses both, just as he did when forced to choose between a Christian and a pagan end for King Arthur. His is not a coherent vision, but a capacious one. He will have heaven and earth, Avalon and Glastonbury, fin’amor and saintly penance.” Newman, _Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred_, 92; 92–109.


13 The assumption, still widely held, that the French Queste is deeply suffused with Cistercian spirituality and represents a didactic monastic appropriation of chivalric romance is based on Albert Pauphilet’s very influential argument in Albert Pauphilet, _Etudes Sur La Queste Del Saint Graal_ (Paris: Champion, 1921), 53–84; It has been argued in response, however, that the Queste was not a subversion of chivalry to religious ends but rather written as a continuation of the Vulgate romances, intended to exalt the knightly class by creating, in effect, “a messianic chivalry, pre-destined, worthy of approaching, almost without intermediaries, the mysteries of the faith and of achieving knowledge of the divine” Jean Frappier, “Le Graal et La Chevalerie,” _Romania_ 75 (1954): 170; For a summary of this and other responses to Pauphilet, see Jill Mann, “Malory and the Grail Legend,” in _A Companion to Malory_, ed. Archibald and Edwards (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 207–08.

14 Malory drew on no fewer than four Grail romances, according to P.J.C. Field. Nonetheless, the scholarly consensus is that the French Vulgate Cycle’s La Queste del Saint Graal was the key text. P. J. C. Field, “Malory and the Grail: The Importance of Detail..” in _Grail, the Quest and the World of Arthur_, by Norris J. Lacy, ed., Arthurian Studies 62 (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 145–47.
marvels rather than theological exposition, has the effect of making its chief hero, Galahad, into what Pauline Matarasso calls a mere “cardboard saint.”\(^{15}\) The problem, as I will show, is not so much that Malory presents Galahad either as saintly (the Winchester Manuscript’s rubrication of his name, along with those of Arthur and other knights, notwithstanding)\(^ {16}\) or, as T.H. White’s Lancelot describes him, “angelic,” but rather that Malory presents him as divine, for whereas the Queste’s Galahad is, for all his high symbolism, recognizable as a type of the individual pilgrim soul, the Sankgreal prunes away his humanity, leaving a messianic hero who is a more direct but less meaningful allegory than his French counterpart, an almost parodic Christ in armor, devoid of either human feeling or the possibility of failure.

Malory not only includes Galahad, but gives him his own titled chapter in the Tale of the Sankgreal, a distinction denied him in the Queste. One could argue that he redacts so much of the Queste simply because it bores him (in the same way, presumably, that it bores those who make this suggestion), but I do not think Gawain speaks for Malory when he complains of the Grail adventure, “Truly, I am ny wery of thys Queste, and lothe I am to folow further in straunge contreyes” (2.941). Besides, the effect of those abridgments, as we will see, is only to make Galahad more perfect, more aloof, and thus duller. Why not then exclude him from the poem altogether by, for example, consolidating Lancelot and Galahad, and thus allowing his favorite knight to embody both kinds of heroism? No doubt the answer is in part the same reason that elements of obviously pagan Welsh myth survive alongside the Bernardine theology in the Queste: those elements of the story were too well-known to be discarded. More than that, though,

\(^{15}\) Matarasso, The Quest of the Holy Grail, 17.
\(^{16}\) See: Whetter, “Malory’s Secular Arthuriad,” 178, n. 49.
Galahad is useful to Malory inasmuch as he provides a separate vehicle to deal with a distinctly spiritual aspect of heroism, and to deal with it in such a way that Malory’s preferred heroic model, Lancelot, becomes more compelling by contrast.

It is not, then, that these changes are the result of a hack job, of Malory’s drawing his story “brefly . . . oute of Freynshe” a little too hastily (2.1037). Nor, I think, does it do justice to describe him, as Emile Legouis has, “like a marveling child, trying to tell faithfully what he has heard and not entirely understood.”¹⁷ What Malory’s treatment of Galahad may represent is not a lack of understanding so much as a lack of interest in the mode of heroism he embodies, one that requires total surrender to divine grace as its external source of power. Thus, what appears to be the special distinction of giving Galahad his own chapter in fact has the effect of decentralizing him somewhat from the story’s thematic heart. The Queste relates the adventures of Gawain, Percival, Lancelot, and Bors each in his own respective section; Galahad, so central to the Queste that he permeates the whole, does not require one. Malory provides him his own titled chapter in the Sankgreal¹⁸ not to distinguish him, but rather to bracket and thus the more easily turn away from a model of sanctity he finds unconvincing, and instead to valorizes a heroic posture characterized by manly individual struggle. Aesthetically appealing though this posture might be, however, I argue that it does not, in the end, accord with the Morte Darthur’s theamics of fateful inevitability. Unconvincing though Galahad is, he is less convincing, in the face of the looming death and dispersal coming to Camelot, than the

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¹⁸ Winchester MS., ff. 389r-399r
idea that even the most heroic will can successfully counter the fate in which its own imperfection participates.

**The Trouble with Galahad**

William Caxton’s preface to his 1485 printed edition of the *Morte Darthur* explains that it was written, among other reasons, “for to passe the tyme,” and what remains even after Caxton’s abridgments is more than sufficient to pass a great deal of time indeed.\(^{19}\) Still, it is well established that in writing the *Morte*, Malory was guided by a principle not only of inclusion but also exclusion. Unlike earlier Arthur stories in English, such as Henry Loveliche’s slavish and overlong translation, in 1450, of Robert de Borron’s *Estoire del Saint Grail*,\(^{20}\) Malory drew from many sources, but did so selectively; though Caxton would make additional editorial cuts to his edition of the *Morte*, those were to a synthesis of Arthur stories that Malory had already compressed, and nowhere more mightily than in his abridgment of the French *Queste*. His editorial method has been variously celebrated, disparaged, and endlessly analyzed in a scholarly quest to try to determine whether it was, in fact, consistently methodical, and to establish the range and identities of his sources and the nature of his aims.

One thing about which many seem to have agreed recently, however, is Galahad. So perfect is he, so aloof in the face of danger and temptation alike, that, as T.H. White’s Arthur puts it, “Everybody dislikes him.” Well, if not *everyone*, certainly a great number of critics and Arthurian artists. Whatever Galahad’s usefulness within the spiritualized

\(^{19}\) Vinaver, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1.cxlvi.

landscape of the allegorical *Queste*, a work so “abstract and systematic [that in it one can scarcely] find ten consecutive lines written simply for the pleasure of telling a tale,” in the *Morte* he seems insufficiently developed, a vestigial placeholder from Malory’s source. One nineteenth-century critic complained, “Galahad achieves at last the adventure there is no reason he should not have achieved at the outset, dies—‘et praeterea nihil’ [and then, nothing]; the ‘epic’ goes on as if nothing had happened . . .”

Karen Cherewatuk calls him “so perfect that he bores readers,” and indeed, the efforts of Malory’s heirs to the Arthurian material, that is, of poets and writers, comprise an intriguing range of attempts to make sense of—and deal with the narrative challenges presented by—a flawless hero. The *Morte* constitutes the last attempt in English to retain the aura of perfection and sanctity around Galahad without overtly calling into question either its veracity or desirability, but others would do so soon enough. Tennyson’s Galahad in the *Idylls of the King* is perhaps the only one to remain putatively perfect, the model Victorian gentleman (or, read less charitably, a “little prig”), but rendered as a blank cipher, so pure as to be empty. (It is this absence of identity, in one reading of the *Idylls*, that motivates his Quest.) For Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Galahad was “entirely too holy to embody a powerful, primitive hero: his masculinity is too controlled by a kind of secular sainthood which weakens male’s potency as much as the loss of manliness itself.

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as in castration or emasculation,” and thus Dinadan, rather than Galahad, became for Rossetti the perfect medieval hero. In John Erskine's novel *Galahad: Enough of his life to Explain his Reputation* (1926), Galahad's motivation comes not from God but from Guinevere—though on a purely spiritual level. T.H. White's Galahad in *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940), far and away the most sensitive, imaginatively sympathetic of the modern iterations, is angelically, off-puttingly inhuman. Matt Cohen's short story “Too Bad Galahad” (1972) illustrates the problems of its perfect hero, a tragi-comically pathetic Galahad who does his best to “swear and kill and wench with the rest of the knights . . . [but] could never really get into it,” and lacks even “the vanity to fortify himself by recognizing that it was his perfection that caused him to be unpopular”. Thomas Berger’s novel *Arthur Rex* (1978) features an androgynous Galahad who sleeps through most of the battle, rising at last only to mistake Lancelot for a Saxon soldier and killing him before being killed himself. And, of course, there is *Monty Python and the Holy Grail’s* Sir Galahad the Pure (1975), who, in actor Michael Palin's hilarious caricature, is “rescued” by his brother knights from the lovely maidens of the Castle Anthrax just as he is beginning to like the idea of allowing them to compromise his chastity en masse. Galahad maintains his virtue far more sympathetically in Ruth Lehmann’s Galahad novel, *Blessed Bastard* (1997), which humanizes its hero using much the same narrative strategy as Nikos Kazantzakis’ *The Last Temptation of Christ*: by depicting a man with a powerful awareness of what he is giving up in following his high calling, who can imagine only

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too well the comforts of the human love he ultimately rejects.\textsuperscript{29} By contrast, Josh Ritter’s funny, ribald song “Galahad” tells the story of a priggishly abstemious young man who, the angel guarding the Grail suggests, may not have fully considered the range of earthly pleasures available.\textsuperscript{30}

What emerges from these examples is that it is only through injections of comedy or ambivalence that modern inheritors of the figure of Galahad have managed to make him interesting, and always at some expense to either his perfection, his sincerity, or both.\textsuperscript{31} The prevailing desire, it seems, is for a more \textit{human} hero, one more prone to temptation if not necessarily to failure, and thus more relatable. What may be surprising to realize is that of the two Galahads, the French and the English, the former is in some notable ways the more obviously human. In what is, so far as has been determined, his originary context in the French \textit{Queste}, Galahad is certainly a Christological “type,” resonant with the symbolism and greatness of Christ, but he is not only that; as several critics attuned to the multivalences of the Cistercian method of allegory have pointed out, he also functions as a vision of “a mortal man who, clothed in grace, walked undaunted to

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} Lehmann, \textit{Blessed Bastard: A Novel of Sir Galahad}.
\item \textsuperscript{30} In Ritter's song, the angel guarding the Grail inquires of Galahad why he would desire to achieve it at the cost of abandoning forever all of earth's carnal pleasures:

\begin{quote}
In Heaven there's no lamb chops, no Queen Guineveres for hand jobs, 
Marijuana, Kenny Rogers or ecstasy. 
No pillaging, no rape; Perhaps you've come by some mistake to me. 
This seems more error than knight errantry.
\end{quote}

After Galahad contemptuously orders the angel to silence and drinks from the Grail, the angel smokes a cigarette while waiting to be sure the knight is dead, then puts on the knight’s discarded boots and armor and heads, smiling, for the door. Josh Ritter, “Galahad,” MP3, \textit{To the Yet Unknowing World}, 2011, http://www.joshritter.com/to-the-yet-unknowing-world/.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Among notable twentieth-century Arthurian writers, only Charles Williams, in his verse cycles \textit{Taliessin Through Logres} and \textit{The Region of the Summer Stars}, does Galahad retain the perfections of the source material, and that is because Williams is trafficking in allegory himself, rather than in living and breathing figures. And Galahad is a force, not a personality, more impersonal than most of the figures in Williams’ \textit{Arthuriad}, which is saying something. See: Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis, \textit{Taliessin through Logres, The Region of the Summer Stars, and Arthurian Torso} (W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1974).
\end{itemize}
his goal,”32 “the pilgrimage of the soul toward ecstatic union,”33 “an image of the normal Christian man in tranquil possession of his end.”34 I will discuss at length the ways in which he becomes, in Malory's hands, less of a Christian than a Christ-figure, but it is not difficult to show, first, that he also becomes a less recognizably “mortal man.”

The “Cardboard Saint”

The Grail section of Malory's Morte Darthur retains the adventure of its sources, and removes a great deal else. Many of these cuts are certainly fortunate from the perspective of any reader who values brisk narrative over medieval theological subtlety, for the most immediately obvious cuts, and responsible for the greatest savings in the Sankgreal's length, are to the elaborate and often repetitive homiletic explanations of holy hermits, who seem as thick as the trees in the forests they populate in the pages of the Queste.

True, an elaborate symbolic significance underlies much of the apparent tediousness in the Queste’s repetitive foreshadowings and summaries,35 but these omissions are rarely mourned; Pauline Matarasso's praise for the Queste’s use of scriptural language—”supple yet precise, carefully weighted, rich in overtones”—as one of its principal delights, is rare among critics, and probably rarer still among students and other readers who prefer adventure to homily, and there is no denying that Sankgreal profits from these redactions

32 Morgan, Galahad in English Literature, 171.
35 For example, it might seem as if any one of the trio of elaborate homilies to which Lancelot much listen in sequence should be sufficient to inform and motivate his repentance. And indeed, Lancelot readily acquiesces to first one, then a second, and still a third hermit who entreats and hears his confession. This all seems very tiresome, but the narrative is entirely aware of its own repetitiveness, for it acknowledges that Lancelot was laying down "the burden of his story as he had told it twice before" (150). This sequence is, I suggest, a deliberate parallel to the rehabilitation of Peter following his three denials of Christ. Three times Christ asks him, “Do you love me? (John 21:15-17).
in more than just its pacing. For example, Malory’s omission of an early scene in which Bors and Lionel marvel at Galahad’s resemblance to Lancelot has the effect of prolonging the mystery of the young newcomer’s identity, albeit only briefly (1.854). Moreover, Malory’s aggressive abridgments help to bring the Grail Quest into tonal conformity with the so-often gorgeous understatement characterizing the rest of the *Morte*.37

However, Malory's compression and redaction of so much of his source material’s lengthy explication could not help but have other, less happy consequences for the remaining narrative—at least that part of it featuring Galahad. Malory’s Galahad is not without his defenders, but they are few, and to me their assessments seem, frankly, somewhat misjudged. Mary Morgan finds Malory’s Galahad “far more accessible to the humble ranges of human understanding,”38 and Fiona Tolhurst argues that “Malory’s emendations create a character significantly less singular and ethereal than the Vulgate Galahad.”39 What has not been pointed out, however, is that Malory’s editorial brush covers over nearly all the flashes of real pathos animating Galahad’s French counterpart. Galahad stands out as a stark exception to what C. David Benson describes as Malory’s

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38 Morgan, *Galahad in English Literature*, 89.
39 Fiona Tolhurst reads Malory’s elevation of Lancelot as part of a broader “compression of the hierarchy of the Arthurian knights,” which she sees as a means rather than an end in itself, part of an overall movement in the Morte away from “the monkish Christianity of the French Queste toward a more practical, secularized theology,” but a theology nonetheless. Against Vinaver’s description of Malory’s impatience with a Grail Quest that he sought as much as possible to secularize, Tolhurst argues that Malory in fact cared a great deal about showing the possibility of God’s favor for earthly ventures, and was attempting to create a complex—albeit awkward—conflation of earthly with spiritual chivalry by modifying rather than eliminating the spiritual values of his source. Fiona Tolhurst, “Slouching towards Bethlehem: Secularized Salvation in *Le Morte Darthur,*” in *Malory and Christianity: Essays on Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,* ed. Hanks and Jesmok (Western Michigan University: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), 139; 141.
“direct and emotional” response to his characters; instead of presenting them for our moral evaluation, as so many medieval writers did, Malory “repeatedly appeals to our hearts rather than to our heads.”40 This is not the case with Galahad. If Malory’s Lancelot seems, as Vinaver describes him, “a faithful friend” to Bors,41 his Galahad comes to seem unreliable, and self-assured to the point of callousness. Tolhurst rightly points out that Malory discards Galahad’s “unfeeling” refusal to be accompanied by Melias,42 but the humanizing effects of this change are more than overshadowed by the ones that follow, in which Galahad comes off as far less capable of human sympathy and tenderness than his French counterpart.43

The Queste describes, for example, how “sick at heart” Galahad is to encounter the gravely wounded Sir Melias in the forest. “[S]hocked and grieved” at the young knight’s condition after his disastrous first joust, “and ready to do whatever he could to help,” Galahad carries the wounded man “as gently as he could” to a nearby abbey for healing. This concerned response is a fitting continuation of the tender-heartedness he had demonstrated earlier toward Melias, whose pleas to be knighted had “moved [him] to compassion” (61). In Malory’s hands, however, the tone of the story is very different, for while upping the carnage (Galahad avenges Melias by parting the offending knight not only from his hand, as in the Queste, but his entire arm [2.885]), he mutes the emotions. Galahad, who had never wanted a traveling companion to begin with, knights the young squire with no mention of any motivating compassion, and though “dresse[ing] [Melyas]

43 Matarasso, while not commenting on Malory at all, describes La Queste as “reveal[ing] . . . much tenderness in [Galahad’s] relations with his father, with Melias the squire, with his companions Bors and Perceval, and with Perceval’s sister . . .” Matarasso, The Quest of the Holy Grail, 17.
softly on his horse” and bringing him to the abbey, he does not do so before first
regarding his injuries and saying, “Sir Melyas, who hath wounded you? Therefore [it]
had been better to have rydden the other way” (2.884). An astute but ill-timed analysis of
the newly-made knight’s misfortune, it would seem, and more than a little unfeeling. Nor
is Galahad overly concerned about the horrible wound King Bagdemagus receives while
jousting for a mysterious shield against the white knight—a joust Bagdemagus had
undertaken at Galahad’s request, no less (Queste 54; 56). In the Sankgreal Galahad says
only, “blessed be good fortune!” as he learns that he is meant to wear the shield for which
Bagdemagus had “ascaped hard with the lyff” (2.879).

The Sankgreal downplays not only Galahad’s capacity for sympathetic emotions
but also for happy ones, giving none of his joy at encountering his fellow knights King
Bagdemagus and Sir Uwayne (Queste 53), and while he joins Bors and Percival in
weeping for joy at seeing one another when they are reunited aboard the miraculous ship
in the Queste (211), Malory notes only that Bors and Percivale receive him “with grete
joy,” leaving out any mention of Galahad's reaction (2.983). And in the same scene of the
Queste, Galahad confesses to Bors and Percival that “my coming was more [Percival’s
sister’s] doing than my own. For I never passed this road before, and never did I think to
hear of you, my friends, in so strange a place as this.” And, “At this they all began to
laugh” (212). Needless to say, Malory’s Galahad is not a mirthful one, and the scene is
absent from the Sankgreal. Absent also are small flourishes of courtesy, for although in
the Sankgreal he declares his devotion to Percival's sister, saying, “Damesell, ye have
done so muche that I shall be your knyght all the dayes of my lyff” (2.995), he does not,
as in the *Queste*, add, “And my heartfelt thanks to you for all that you have told us” (237).

Further distinguishing the *Sankgreal* is its excision of Galahad’s evident desires and uncertainties, two of his most human qualities in the *Queste*. Malory omits Galahad’s performance of an exorcism at an abbey cemetery, and along with it his evident uncertainty about what is required of him to complete the adventure; twice he asks whether there are additional steps he should take, and when assured by the assembled monks that he has been successful, he immediately asks to know “the occasion of these mysteries” (62-63). Indeed, it is largely through Galahad’s eager interrogation of all he meets that the narrative of the *Queste* proceeds. “I have a keen desire to learn,” he declares (61), and repeatedly requests the identity, history, and custom of the people and places he encounters, his careful questions suggesting a sincere humility and a spiritually exemplary desire for understanding. Moreover, he “marvels” when explication is offered (71, 76), with the effect that he seems a sort of Bunyan-esque pilgrim, making his progress with calm faith but very little knowledge, relying totally on incremental revelation from God and his earthly ministers.

All of this is absent from the *Sankgreal*, in which Galahad moves from one adventure to the next with laconic self-assuredness, asking few questions along the way. Malory discards Galahad’s earnest desire to know the story of the shield he acquires (*Queste* 58), and instead has the white knight simply volunteer the story, unbidden (879). Again and again, Galahad appears as much in command of the situation as any of the sermonizing, know-it-all hermits. “I know well I was never none of the best,” laments Lancelot (863), and against this, his son’s implacable confidence—arriving at court with
an empty scabbard, so sure of his successful appointment with the sword in the stone, and riding out on the quest conspicuously lacking a shield (in striking contrast to Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*)—seems downright cocky by comparison.

In the same way, it is interesting to consider the coming of Galahad in comparison with Arthur's “annunciation.” As Arthur demonstrates the ease with which he can repeat his feat of pulling the sword free of its stone at the tournament in London, Sir Ector and Kay alarm the boy by falling on their faces before him. “Alas!” he cries, “Myne own dere fader and broder, why knele ye to me?” The revelation that he is “of an hyper blood” than his foster father only further embarrasses and flusters him (I.14). It is a beautifully drawn and deeply human scene, one recalling the surprise anointing of the shepherd boy David over his older, stronger brothers, and countless heroic “secret identity” revelation scenes, in which the announcement of the hero's noble, divine, or otherwise miraculous origin creates an immediate, poignant distance between (usually) him and the life and family he has always known. Just so, it would seem fitting for Galahad to react with a boy's sheepishness or bewilderment upon realizing his own high parentage, to say nothing of his Christological ancestry. But much in the same way that such a scene forms no part of the biographical portrait of Christ in the canonical gospels, neither the *Queste* nor the *Sankgreal* gives us a similarly human encounter between Lancelot and Galahad. Instead it is Lancelot who learns that Galahad is his son, and in Malory’s telling that occasion is yet one more in which Galahad appears coolly knowledgeable and aloof during a situation in which everyone else, including Lancelot, is groping for understanding.
Indeed, if the Sankgreal depicts his emotional register as cool toward his fellow knights, it seems downright chilly toward his father. To Bors, Galahad says in parting, “salew me unto my lorde sir Launcelot, my fadir, as as sone as ye se hym bydde hym remembir of this worlde unstable” (2.1035). This is a substantial departure from the Queste, in which his final message to Lancelot is not as a spiritual mentor to a novice, but as a son to a father: “Bors,” he asks, “as soon as you see Sir Lancelot, my father, greet him from me” (283).

From Christian to Christ-Figure: A Collapsing of Allegory

Despite disagreement over just how much emphasis Malory intended to place on the spiritual value of the Sankgreal, relative to his enthusiasm for more sublunary values such as chivalry and martial brotherhood, there is general agreement that it bears the obvious marks of having been the work of a layman, with a layman's impatience with and limited knowledge of theological subtlety.44 Whatever else the unknown author of the Queste may have been, he was almost certainly “not a layman,”45 and in the Cistercian conversion of existing Arthur stories into spiritual allegory, is intended to lift readers' minds from earthly chivalry to heavenly holiness,46 a figure like Galahad cannot exist but as allegory, figuring, among other things, the Holy Spirit (his armor red like the fire of the Paraclete at Pentecost, as Percival’s aunt explains [100]), as well as the New Testament superseding the “incompleteness” of the Old Law symbolized in his father.47 Certainly, some of the borrowed elements of Celtic mythology are made to fit more than

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44 Felicity Riddy, Sir Thomas Malory (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 115.
45 Matarasso, The Quest of the Holy Grail, 23.
46 Though see n.12, above.
a little feebly within a pattern of scriptural significance, but at least as far as Galahad is concerned, it was not that the writer of the Queste stitched needless layers of scriptural symbolism onto a good story, but that Malory stripped it away, and could not do so without at least some damage to the garment. Little wonder that what remains, “freed” from so much of the careful symbolic, scriptural, and theological context in which he had been embedded by the authors of the Queste, has won few admirers.

It might seem odd, then, for me to suggest that one of the shortcomings of the Sankgreal’s Galahad is that he is, in another way, too allegorical, or perhaps I had better say, too direct an allegory. The French Queste, though imbuing Galahad with many divine qualities so as to function as a type of Christ, makes plain that he is also representative of the individual Christian, reliant on Grace. That distinction disappears in the English Galahad, who seems no longer a Christian pilgrim, but something much closer to Christ himself. Here again, Malory’s method of containment is at work. What he is in fact up to, I suggest, is to attach the kind of heroism that Galahad symbolizes to the familiar figure of Christ, who can be admired and worshiped, but not, on a practical level, emulated. In one respect, then, Galahad's failure as a vital character in the Sankgreal is a matter of genre: he is a highly allegorical figure made to inhabit a romance that, while certainly symbolic, had abandoned much, if not quite all, of what was by then the somewhat antiquated allegorical approach of its thirteenth-century source; Jill Mann is

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49 See Matarasso’s argument on this point, which, if accepted, “disposes of accusations of allegory arbitrarily grafted on, which stem from a tendency to see only that allegory which is explicit in the hermits’ homilies. If the Queste is seen as the New Testament of chivalry fulfilling the Old Testament typified in the Josephus sections it gains immensely in literary unity.” Matarasso, The Redemption of Chivalry: A Study of the Queste Del Saint Graal, 242.
50 See: Morgan, Galahad in English Literature, 171; Matarasso, The Redemption of Chivalry: A Study of the Queste Del Saint Graal, 38; Sister Isabel, SLG, “The Knights of God: Citeaux and the Quest of the Holy Grail,” 57.
certainly right to say of the curiously ambiguous relationship between events and their interpretation in the *Morte* that what Malory leaves of the *Queste*’s glosses are not elaborate enough to create allegory per se,\(^{51}\) but I would contend that where Galahad is concerned, they are close enough so as to flatten his character considerably.

Fiona Tolhurst describes a flattening of the spiritual hierarchy taking place in the *Sankgreal*, as Malory elevates Lancelot while “gently shif[ing] Galahad lower on the spiritual ladder.”\(^{52}\) But in another way, Malory gives Galahad a tremendous promotion by removing the *Queste*’s explicit reminder that he is not, in fact, Christ, and that his coming “must be compared to the coming of Jesus Christ, in semblance only, not in sublimity” (64). This distinction between “semblance” and “sublimity” points to the medieval tradition of allegorical reading that Dante, in his epistle to Can Grande della Scala, famously described as “polysemous,” or “of many senses,” thus permitted simultaneous interpretation on several levels of meaning.\(^{53}\) Were Galahad a pure didactic allegory, in which an idea is developed “by having some concrete equivalent stand for” it, we could expect to substitute the name “Christ” for “Galahad” without confusion, which of course we cannot;\(^{54}\) the *Queste* makes clear that he is, after all, descended from Christ, and so cannot be Christ. But that fact does not preclude his existing as a typological representative of Christ on an allegorical plain. The nature and point of an allegorical figure, as Rosamund Tuve explains, is that rather than “stand[ing] for” ideas, it

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\(^{52}\) Tolhurst, “Slouching towards Bethlehem: Secularized Salvation in *Le Morte Darthur*,” 141.

\(^{53}\) This “four-fold method” of interpretation, which had originated with the earliest Bible commentators, comprised the “literal,” “typological,” “tropological,” and “anagogical” levels. Joseph A. Strayer, ed., *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (New York City: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1989), 1:178–88.

“embodies [them] and thereby makes them manifest.”\textsuperscript{55} Thus, it is as a messianic hero that Galahad performs, as Christ did, an exorcism in a cemetery,\textsuperscript{56} but “as creature, and not as figure” that he beholds Christ revealed in the Grail Mass, dies a real death, and goes to his eternal reward.\textsuperscript{57} By insisting that the relationship between Galahad and Christ is analogical—corresponding “in semblance only, not in sublimity”—the *Queste* is able “to integrate to a quite unprecedented degree the literal and allegorical levels, suggesting that the first partakes in a particular way in the powerful meaning embodied in the second.”\textsuperscript{58} An example of this method at work occurs in the form of a tournament whose spiritual symbolism a holy anchoress interprets for Lancelot, but only after clarifying, “depend upon it, whatever you saw was but as it were a figuration of Jesus Christ. The jousting, however, without any question or deception, took place between mortal knights, who themselves were far from realizing its full significance” (158). The text insists, in other words, on both the literal and typological significance of its events.\textsuperscript{59} If the self-consciousness of this method is inelegantly heavy-handed, it is at least efficient: Galahad can be made to bear layers of scriptural significance while at the same time showing readers an ideal representative of the individual Christian sojourner, and this tropological,

\textsuperscript{56} Matthew 8; Mark 5; Luke 8
\textsuperscript{57} Matarasso, *The Redemption of Chivalry: A Study of the Queste Del Saint Graal*, 20.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{59} It should be noted, if it is not already apparent, how quickly allegory can become a liability to narrative. The anchoress explains that what those mortal knights signified, in their opposing black and white array, was the Grail quest, in which “earthly knights, being those in mortal sin, and the true knights, the righteous men unsoiled by sin’s defilement, together began the Quest of the Holy Grail: this was the tournament that they engaged in” (159). Since the Quest is itself an allegory, the tournament that represents it is an allegory of an allegory—and at this point the text begins to feel ouroboric and disorienting. Malory spares his readers from this, at least.
or moral value is reinforced by the literal level of allegory, which, as I will explain further on, stresses that even Sir Galahad’s greatness relies wholly on God.

Galahad responds to the hermit’s explanation of his ontological status in the *Queste* by declaring, with a humility that is a little comic in its understatement, that “he had never thought the adventure held so high a meaning” (65). Readers of the *Sankgreal* are left not knowing quite what to think, for after Malory sweeps away all of these fine distinctions with his excision of that clarifying passage, we can only assume either that Galahad’s primary function is indeed as a Christ-figure, or that Malory is being a little careless about defining that function in his narrative. It is difficult to tell what Malory intends him to signify, and the resulting semiotic ambiguity may help to explain the cognitive dissonance that Galahad creates, for stripped of meaning even as he is promoted to a messianic hero, elevated to still greater holiness at the expense of the literal level of the story, the one in which Sir Galahad the human knight lives and moves and has his being, he becomes at once over and under-invested with meaning: holier but more hollow.

Like the Templars, whose chaste values inspired his creation and substitution for Percival as the hero of the Grail quest, Galahad is a warrior cenobite, but more than that, “he moves on a semi-divine plane and typifies Christ himself; indeed, he is merely Christ in armor.” Herein lies the problem, for the Christ-hero must be distinguished from the Christian hero, and this Malory fails to do, with the result that Galahad does not work very well as either. The critic’s use of “merely” here is tellingly suggestive of the dissatisfaction felt by scholars and Arthurian storytellers alike at the way in which

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60 Bruce, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance: From the Beginnings down to the Year 1300* vol. I, 421.
Malory’s Galahad comes across as a sign whose significance far exceeds his capacity to signify. The effect is as if water were made to stand in for sacramental wine. Such an unhappy miracle would be at the expense not only of the taste and pleasure of the symbolic vehicle, but also—since the ground of the wine's metaphorical connection to blood, its richness and redness, had been removed—its usefulness as a symbol. Just so, Malory's Galahad feels both insipid and uninspiring, neither flavorful nor symbolically resonant. Like Sampson’s hair, Galahad’s virginal cleanness is one of the symbols of his power—but Sampson’s hair is not terribly interesting without Sampson, nor is Galahad’s purity without a recognizably human bearer.

One might even go so far as to describe Galahad as a kind of literary perpetration of the Docetic heresy: a form of Gnosticism that affirmed Christ's divinity at the expense of his humanity, regarding him as spirit with only the illusion of flesh. By all appearances devoid of even the possibility of fear, temptation, or other emotions, Galahad’s sole visceral reaction comes when “behold[ing] the spyrytuel thynges” of the Grail mass, at which his “flesshe beganne to tremble ryght hard” (2.1034). Indeed, even the mute Grail seems to manifest more of Christ’s humanity, for as “both chalice and ciborium,” at once the cup of the Last Supper, “its secrets . . . the mystery of the Eucharist unveiled” and the vessel that received the flow of the crucified Christ’s blood, it is a more satisfying allegory of the incarnation inasmuch as it, at least, holds real blood. Whereas Christ prays fiercely that the “cup” of suffering and death may pass

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61 The term is used to describe a loosely related set of beliefs that circulated in the early church concerning the reality of Christ’s sufferings. One belief that arose was that Christ’s sufferings were illusory; another was that his body itself was merely a phantasm. “Docetism,” Cross and Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 493.
from him, sweating blood as he does so, Galahad quite blithely accepts the host at his final mass and makes brief preparations for his subsequent death without the appearance of even a second thought. Sacrificing nothing but a life to which he is signally unattached, he is less a messianic “type” than a caricature of the incarnation, and as such is neither narratively nor theologically very compelling.

This is, I suspect, as Mallory would have it. When, near the end of the adventure, Galahad and Lancelot are briefly reunited, both texts express the happiness of the meeting, but before allowing as how “no tunge can telle what joy was betwyxte them,” Malory adds a very distinguishing detail: upon first recognizing Galahad, Lancelot does not, as in the *Queste*, “haste[n] to kiss him with arms outstretched” (258). Instead, Malory tells us, “he kneled downe and askyd hym hys blyssynge” (2.1012). This deferential gesture, the father yielding to the son, is actually a final additional sign that Galahad’s purity more closely resembles divinity than simply human goodness, and in this way Malory prohibits the sanctity of the son from interfering with that of the father, for it is on another plane altogether. The *Queste* shows Galahad to be the fulfillment and culmination of the father’s promise, the new covenant of the foretold Messiah fulfilling and also surpassing the prophesies and law of the Old Testament, but though Malory follows his source in having Galahad greet his father, crying, “be ye wellcom! For ye were the beginner of me in thys worlde,” he does not go on to show, as the *Queste* does, that in the son is the correction and perfection of what will be surpassed in the father. Quite the reverse, for while Galahad’s ascension provides the climax of the *Queste*, it provides for Malory the convenient removal of a competing mode of personal sanctity.

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63 Luke 22.42
that he finds not wholly believable, and a heroism, wholly contingent on grace, that he
finds not entirely interesting.

Achilles Entire: The Soporifics of the Flawless Hero

The apotheosis I have described brings us at last to Malory’s most important innovation
in the Morte’s Galahad: his invulnerability. Blood is proof, after all, of mortality. A
Middle English vernacular sermon attempts to Christianize the pre-Christian hero
Alexander by having him react in horror to his followers’ attempts to worship him, and to
show them their error he displays a fresh battle wound: “ye sey all that I am the grete
Goddes sonne of heven. But this wounede that I sufffure sheweth well that I am a man and
not a God.”64 Galahad does not bleed, as does Percival’s sister, a feminine parallel to his
own perfection, and Malory takes no pains to suggest that this invulnerability is owing to
anything so much as the implicit divinity he has carefully built up. And this is a problem.
Never mind that Galahad is apophatic, abstemious, aloof—all of this makes him merely
unsympathetic, and pales in comparison to a larger problem: he is boring. For a romance
that wears, as Arthur does, an “egir countenans” as it approaches the scenes of battle, and
tallies quite literally ad nauseum the cost in “blode and brayne” of each tournament and
war (1.29, 34), it is a narrative liability for one of its central heroes to prevail so reliably
each and every time with no sense of struggle, no acknowledged possibility of injury or
failure, nor, at the least, even a persuasive account of the grounds of his greatness.
Malory supplies none of these. Galahad is simply the terror of any given joust, a sure bet
to “bete abacke all the knyghtes” and to do so at no risk of injury to himself (2.981-82).

What this bodily invulnerability reveals, of course, is that Galahad is the principle of unity, of holy wholeness, “his bodily invulnerability,” in Jill Mann’s words, “function[ing] as the outward testimony of an inner perfection.” He is no more liable to sexual temptation than he is vulnerable to swords or lances, and this integrity serves to indict the disharmony in Camelot’s individual members, and the court as a whole. As a monk warns Lancelot in the Queste, “not one of those who have embarked on [the Quest] will come away without dishonour unless he be truly shriven,” and for that reason he should not pursue it further “should [his] heart be not entire” (144, my emphasis) [get the French]. And to Bors, yet another hermit warns, “I should by no means recommend you to labour longer in this Quest if you are not all you should be” (177). This emphasis on unity remains a central theme in the Morte, in which Malory identifies a want of wholeness as the start of all the trouble with Uther in the first place. Uther complains, “I am seke for angre and for love of fayre Igrayne, that I may not be hool” (I.8, my emphasis). Later, his death will provoke a similar problem in the realm itself, which, for want of a single, unifying ruler, risks descending into fractiousness and disunity—the state toward which the Round Table drives throughout the entire Morte Darthur, and cannot ultimately avoid. But though Malory retains and seems to admire the single-mindedness and unity exemplified in Galahad, he appears unconcerned about its source, reducing it to the point of tautology: Galahad is whole because he has been so chosen, and fit to be the chosen one because he is whole.

This is not so in the Queste, however. There, in a vital scene that Malory completely removes, we learn that Galahad’s wholeness is not independently maintained.

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65 Mann, “Malory and the Grail Legend,” 211.
That critical conversation comes after Lancelot has sustained a major failure at the Grail chapel and is being treated to the severe hospitality of a garrulous hermit, who “[takes] advantage of his presence to exhort him ceaselessly with homily and discourse” for a full three days and nights (134). If ever one expected a rash slaying, it would be here, but Lancelot’s misadventures have made him contrite, and he patiently abides the incessant sermon. A good thing, too, for in the course of it the hermit provides him, and the reader, with crucial exposition concerning Galahad’s origins and the nature of his apparent perfections: “This knight is the paragon who in his lifetime shall exemplify the sum of earthly chivalry. And when by dint of his achievements he shall live wholly in the spirit, he will slough off the garment of the flesh and join the company of the knights of heaven” (134). This much, the hermit explains, was Merlin’s prophecy. But he goes on to add his own, which imposes an important qualification to how we are to think about Galahad’s achievements: “None the less, for all it is true that this knight has now a greater share of valour and hardihood than any other, you may be sure that if he gave himself to mortal sin—from which Our Lord preserve him in his pity—he would get no further in this Quest than any ordinary knight” (134, my emphasis). What stands out from the hermit’s discourse is the fact—a surprising one, surely, to those readers familiar primarily with Malory—that although Galahad is far from ordinary, that does not place him entirely above risk; the greatness for which he is destined remains in tension with at least some possibility of failure, of succumbing to mortal sin. His perfection is contingent, and without total self-abandonment to the divine, the greatest knight could well become as great a sinner. For all that Malory seems to have viewed Galahad’s perfection as diminishing Lancelot, and revised accordingly, in the Queste it is at least to
some degree the other way around: Lancelot's failure serves to check Galahad's perfection by initiating the lesson that there but for the grace of God goes Galahad—and, by extension, all of the Queste’s readers, whose righteousness is presumably far less stabled than that of the ideal knight.

**Logres Family Values: Earthly and Spiritual Worship**

It remains to be addressed why Malory alters Galahad’s character and reduces his role in the Morte. By dealing with and then ushering Galahad so effectively offstage, what is he making room for? It should go without saying that one thing Malory is not doing is trying to expunge Christianity from the world of his story. His use of Galahad to bracket much of the spiritual thematic significance from the inherited material is not some crude apotropaic gesture; he may have chased some of the more garrulous hermits from the forests of Logres before setting his own adaptation there, but it seems to me that this is not owing to any real anticlericalism on his part. God is far from absent from the landscape of the poem, the state of the soul is shown to be an abiding concern for nearly all of the characters, and if there is something a little rote about his use of religious themes and language, that may attest over-familiarity rather than disregard, to say nothing of contempt. He was no doubt in earnest when he wrote, at the end of the Morte, “When I am deed, I praye you all praye for my soule” (3.1260), it is just that he is not especially interested in the precise mechanism of that soteriological process, and so does not choose to explore it in his romance. What does interest him is the admirable striving of his heroes—but not of the kind Galahad is exemplifying: if Galahad forms a central part of the Queste’s illustration of the struggle to maintain the integrity of one’s bodily virtue
and eternal soul, the *Morte*'s main concern is with the struggle for earthly *worshyp*, or honor, and Lancelot is its apogee.

In Beverly Kennedy’s tripartite description of knighthood as comprising distinct Heroic, Worshipful, and True ideals—"briefly characterized from their origin as either feudal, courtly, or religious," respectively—*worshyp* subsumes and exceeds feudal, heroic values, and though deeply ethical in its concerns, tends to be more pragmatically tied to earthly chivalric than to heavenly (or “True”) values. As such, cutting across the multi-leveled Malorian value system as it does, “worship” is what David Wallace calls “perhaps the key Malorian value,” the most fundamental basis of admiration in the Arthurian moral economy, evoking esteem from good characters as well as hatred from the bad ones. Arthur himself is the paragon of worshipfulness, and for that reason is, as the traitorous Accolon explains, “the man in the worlde that [Morgan] hatyth moste, because he is moste of worship and of prouesse of ony of hir bloode” (I.145).

Malory’s obvious awareness of the tenuousness of earthly worship contrasts sharply with his far more vaguely drawn assumptions about the maintenance of spiritual “worship.” Raluca Radulescu points out that Malory appears acutely aware of the potential risks of “disworship” for landowners who neglected their social duties or fail to listen to good advice. Merlin, she notes, issues such a warning at the knighting of Sir

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68 As Accolon’s remarks suggest, “worship and prouesse” are linked. “Honor” or “nobility” are the words in modern English that might come nearest the meaning of “worship,” and as they do today, the adjective “noble” had various meanings in Middle English, and could refer to three kinds of greatness: outstanding character qualities or great deeds; moral excellence; birth or exalted rank in society. *worship(e)* (n.) 1-3. Frances ed. McSparran, “Electronic Middle English Dictionary,” 2001, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/.
Gawain and Sir Torre, when he cautions against failing to undertake the adventure of a lady present at the feast:

‘Nay,’ seyde Merlion, ‘ye may nat leve hit so, thys adventure, so lightly, for thes adventures muste be brought to an ende, other ellis hit woll be disworshyp to you and to youre feste’ (I.103, emphasis hers).

And Arthur himself attests to the provisional nature of worship when he makes all of the knights of the Round Table swear an oath “never to do outerage nothir mourthir [nor murder], and allways to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of their worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore . . .” (1.120). But while stressing that chivalric virtues must always be carefully maintained, Malory’s attitude toward spiritual security is more blasé. Merlin warns, “there shall no man sitte in tho placis but they that shall be moste of worship. But in the Sege Perelous there shall nevir man sitte but one, and yf there be ony so hardy to do hit he shall be destroyed, and he that shall sitte therein shall have no felowe” (1.102). Though the greatness of Galahad plainly exceeds the worshipfulness of even the best knights of the court, the source and footing of that status goes largely unquestioned. By dispensing with the Queste’s revelations about the contingency of that greatness, Malory not only undercuts much of Galahad’s vitality as a character, but also forestalls much further inquiry into how his moral integrity and martial strength are maintained.

It is instead in the person of Lancelot that Malory chooses to explore the means by which the various aspects of an admirable exemplarity are held together. That Lancelot embodies all of these is made eloquently clear in the panegyric uttered over his body by his brother Sir Ector, in one of the Morte’s final and most stirring scenes:

‘A, Launcelot!’ he sayd, 'tho were hede of al Crysten knyghtes! And now I dare say,' sayd syr Ector, 'thou sir Launcelot, there thou lyest, that thou were never
matched of erthely knyghtes hande. And thou were the curtest [most courteous] knyght that ever bare shelde! And thou were the truest frende to thy lovar that ever bestrade hors, and thou were the trewest lover, of a synful man, that ever loved woman, and thou were the kyndest man that ever strake wyth swerde. And thou were the godelyest persone that ever cam emonge prees of knyghtes, and thou was the mekest man and the jentyllest that ever ete in halle emonge ladyes, and thou were the sternest knyght to thy mortal foo that ever put spere in the reeste.’ (3.1259)

Galahad may have symbolized the principle of unity, but with his story contained through brisk telling, and his person removed through the beatific death of his body and ascent of his soul, Malory could devote himself to showing how all of the virtues of both “Crysten knyghtes” and “erthely knyghtes” inhered in a “synful man,” who did not ascend in the way of Galahad, but who made his way, often painfully but manfully, across the earth on journeys “that followed no set course” (*Queste* 268). This kind of picturesque heroism, clearly more interesting to its author, was perhaps more exciting to his readership of “jentylmen and jentylwymmen” (3.1260). I will have more to say further on about whether or not this mode of willful heroism was, in fact, available to them.

Galahad is useful to Malory as a point of contrast to the values he wishes to make more appealing. In the *Queste*, Bors and Percival fail to unsheathe a miraculous sword, and press Galahad to try his hand, “for our failure is the gage of your success in this adventure” (213) ([*Car nos savons bien que vos acheverez ceste aventure, a ce que nos I avons faille*]70); in the Sanckgreal it seems to be the other way around, Galahad’s role being not so much to achieve the Grail as to point up the fact that the other knights did not, and one reason that Galahad rankles is that he serves as a foil to more immediately sympathetic heroes, creating a moral dissonance that modern critics have found unconvincing. Malory himself would likely have agreed with the Victorian critic who

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70 Pauphilet, *La Queste Del Saint Graal*, 203.
Utter 157

protested. “It is hardly too much to say that the morality, such as it is, of sinful Lancelot is truer [and] more human . . . than that of sinless Galahad.”\(^7^1\) If Lancelot seems unduly chastised in the *Sankgreal* for his sins of the flesh, it was not for want of authorial sympathy with him; as has been much discussed, Lancelot has a far better time of it in Malory’s care than in that of the Cistercian author of the *Queste*, who took Lancelot’s adultery with Guinevere as an opportunity for extensive development of the themes of chastity and of penance for its violation.\(^7^2\) Malory’s treatment of Lancelot is rehabilitative, for he assures us, as the *Queste* never does, that despite Lancelot’s sins, “yett shall he dye ryght an holy man, and no doute he hath no felow of none erthly synfull man lyvyng” (2.948). Later, Lancelot is permitted to perform the miraculous healing of Sir Urry, and later dies amid an odor of sanctity.\(^7^3\) Readers who continue past the *Sankgreal* and “redeth [the] book of Arthur and his knyghtes from the begynnyng to the endynge” (3.1260) will find the indignity of his failure at the Grail Mass redeemed in its final pages. Following his death, Lancelot lies in state for fifteen days: “And ever his vysage was layed open and naked, that al folkes myght beholde hym; for suche was the custom in tho dayes that al men of worshyp sholde so lye wyth open vysage tyl that they were buryed” (3.1258). With this description, original to Malory, he reverses the humiliation Lancelot underwent at his spiritual nadir, when he lies for twenty-four days.

\(^{7^1}\) Nutt, “From a Review of Rhys’s 1886 Edition of Part of Malory’s Morte Darthur; Academy, 29 (20 March 1886), 195-6,” 237.

\(^{7^2}\) A good summary of critical responses to Malory’s treatment of Lancelot’s sexual sins is provided in Corey Olsen, “Adulterated Love: The Tragedy of Malory’s Lancelot and Guinevere,” in *In Hanks, Jr., and Jesmock, Eds.*, n.d., 30–31. Olsen himself makes the argument that “Malory, conscious of the apparent contradiction, insists both on the virtue of Lancelot and Guinevere’s love and on the genuineness of their repentance and religious zeal at the end.”

\(^{7^3}\) Fiona Tolhurst argues that Lancelot’s isn’t the only rehabilitation in the Morte, but that “Gawain, the Vulgate’s exemplar of how not to seek the Grail, becomes less blameworthy for his failure to do penance . . . [and] []ike Gaiwan, Perceval and Bors improve under Malory’s pen.” Tolhurst, “Slouching towards Bethlehem: Secularized Salvation in *Le Morte Darthur*,” 141.
in a state of punitive paralysis at the Castle of Corbenic after having attempted, against
divine orders, to steal a glimpse of the Grail mass (*Queste* 263-65; *Morte* 2.1016-17). No
longer a cautionary sight to the alarmed people of Corbenic, he is a man of great
“worshyp” whom “al folkes” line up to see.

Malory also allows Lancelot to breathe as a character in ways the *Queste* was less
interested in. Vinaver describes a notable occurrence of this in the conclusion of the
*Sankgreal*, to which Malory adds a tender scene between Bors and Launcelot that makes
the latter “appear in all his human greatness, undiminished by his experiences in the
course of the Grail-quest.”  

Despite his somewhat ambiguous spiritual state,

Lancelot remains to the end the dominating figure, and because he is spared the
impersonal fate of a condemned sinner, he develops into something approaching a
living character. No doubt, he speaks like a man who knows the significance of
the mysteries which have been revealed to him. But his last promise to Bors—
‘never to depart in sundir' while their lives last—comes primarily from a faithful
friend . . .”

By describing Lancelot’s elevation, Vinaver calls unintended attention to the fact that, as
I have shown, this treatment comes at the expense of Galahad, who becomes flatter and
less human in inverse proportion to Lancelot's enlarged humanity. Most of what Vinaver
calls the “colour” with which Malory embellishes Lancelot is drained from Galahad.
Lancelot’s heaving sobs, “as he had bene a chylde that had bene beatyn” after he heals
Sir Urry, cannot help but eclipse any warmth remaining in Malory’s reduced figure of
Galahad (2.1152).

Thus is Lancelot made more sympathetic, but in terms of admirability, the
difference between the two comes down to effort, and its quality. Galahad is sustained by

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75 Ibid.
an outward Grace, and the result is that in him all virtues are perfectly united and aligned with the geometrically precise balance of the pentangle on Gawain’s shield in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Lancelot too pursues all of these qualities, as his funeral oration reminds us—but far more messily, haltingly, and with enormous lapses. This has something to do with the locus of his motivation, which Malory endeavors to show is internal. For all that earthly love of Guinevere and heavenly love of God inspired him, his heroism is largely a triumph of his will.

**The Aesthetics of Heroism: Malory’s Secular Pelagianism**

The attitude I am describing Malory as prioritizing might usefully be compared to Pelagianism, which also valorized the individual will over grace, and it is significant that Malory removes those portions of the *Quest* that are rigorously anti-pelagian in their insistence that righteousness comes down to a mysterious and somewhat paradoxical joint operation of divine grace acting on the will to yield itself freely. What remains emphasizes the importance of the individual hero’s willful struggle.

Beverly Kennedy has described the world of Malory’s *Morte Darthur* as governed by what was, for its time, a more-or-less orthodox negotiation between the two extremes of Pelagianism on the one hand and Augustinian predestinarianism on the other.\(^76\) In this so-called “semi-Pelagianism,” divine will does not overcome human decision-making to direct actions and outcomes, but operates with it. This understanding of Providence is one that allows room for human free will, for sin and its consequences, and for Boethian fortune and misfortune. I agree with her that all of these elements are

very much in play in the *Morte*—but I want to point out some ways in which Malory prioritizes the Pelagian attitude, which valorizes the individual will over grace, and then to venture some parallels between the underlying theological assumptions in the *Morte* and Mallory’s narrative strategy, as it concerns his handling of the idea of individual greatness and heroism.

Pelagianism, associated with the rigorous, ascetic morality espoused by the late-fourth and early-fifth century Britian Pelagius, and sometimes called, a little misleadingly, “the English heresy,” held that individuals could take the initial and crucial steps towards salvation by their own efforts, apart from Divine grace. In essence, “Be good! You can do it if you try hard!” This line of thought concerning righteousness prompted a not very supportive response from Augustine, who argued that it neglected to account both for humankind’s corrupt nature, and the importance of divine grace in redeeming us *despite* that corrupt nature, and though Pelagianism was branded heretical in the fifth century, it would flare up here and there in various forms throughout the middle ages, inviting responses from ecclesiastical authorities more in line with Augustine’s view.

There is, in fact, a strong anti-Pelagian strain in the *Queste del Saint Graal*. Dolores Frese has gone so far as to suggest that among the *Queste’s* numerological and

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77 What was called “pelagianism” came together, along with other various elements, many of them ascetic, under the name of the late 4th and early 5th century British theologian Pelagius. Though officially condemned as heresy and seemingly settled at the second Council of Orange in 529, the debate broke out periodically through the Middle Ages, and was reignited in greater heat than ever in the sixteenth century, and condemned yet again at the Counsel of Trent. Cross and Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1248–49.

78 Peter Brown describes the Pelagian controversy as representing “the last, concluding phase of the long debate between Christianity and classical culture . . . the victory of Augustine’s notion of grace over Pelagius’s notion of freedom (with its roots in classical, Stoic thought) signaled the end of the ancient world in Western Europe.” Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 497.
allegorical patterns can be found a thinly-concealed biography of Augustine.\textsuperscript{79} Be that as it may, the Queste clearly takes a dim view of the efforts of individuals who do not surrender wholly to divine will and aid. In its depiction of the temptation of Percival, for example, one line of rhetorical attack smacks of what Pauline Matarasso calls her gloss of the passage, “the well-known English tendency toward Pelagianism.” Seeking to sway Percival from his patient reliance on God, his satanic temptress exclaims, “there is nothing worse in my opinion than people who refuse to help themselves” (126).\textsuperscript{80} This line does not appear in any form in the Morte. Indeed, reading the Queste alongside the Tale of the Sankgreal, one is struck by how consistently Malory discards those portions of the French Quest that are most rigorous in their insistence on the limits of free will and on the importance of the external support of grace.

The Queste includes a paraphrase of Christ's parables of the Talents (Matt. 25.14-30), a story helpful to understanding the Queste’s nuanced attitude toward human perfectibility, which is not quite so absurdly drawn as Malory’s caricature of the perfect knight Galahad could lead one to assume. In the parable of the talents, a master distributes unequal talents, or sums of money, to three of his servants, later rewarding or punishing them depending on whether they invested or buried what they had been given. A hermit retells this story to Lancelot in the Queste in order to reprimand him for squandering his extraordinary God-given abilities. Though this passage is harsh in its assessment of Lancelot, it is also pragmatic in its acknowledgment of a typological spectrum, running from lesser to greater giftedness. This parable balances the ideas that

\textsuperscript{80} Citations are to Matarasso, The Quest of the Holy Grail and to ; Vinaver, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, cited by volume and page number.
all are not inherently equal in their gifts, but that all are nevertheless responsible for what they have been given, and may, with good stewardship, earn promotion in the kingdom of heaven, like the servants who were told, in the *Questa*’s paraphrase, “Come here, thou good and faithful servant, and be numbered among the members of my household” (87). Uninterested in the fine interrelation between grace and free will implied in the passage, Malory does not explore this theme, but instead omits the parable and every scrap of the theology developed in association with it.

Another telling omission occurs in the *Sankgreal*’s account of Sir Bors, who encounters yet another hermit, who launches into a discourse on the importance of confession, underscoring in the process the Pauline theme of the inadequacy of good works without submission to grace. Bors listens patiently to the sermon, and responds by saying that it all seems about right to him, and he'd like to go ahead and confess now, please. But the monk is in no hurry, and inquires Bors's identity. Upon learning it he exclaims that, just as a good tree brings forth good fruit, so the union of Bors' father, who is “among the most virtuous men I ever saw,” and his worthy mother, Queen Evaine, *ought* to have yielded better fruit (178). But Bors turns out to be a bit of a theologian himself, and protests,

> for all that a man stems from an evil stock . . . this gall is changed to sweetness the moment he is anointed with the holy chrism; therefore it seems to me that it is not the fathers and mothers that determine whether a man be bad or good, but his own inclinations. A man’s heart is the helm of his ship and steers it where he lists, to harbour or to hazard. (178)\(^81\)

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\(^81\) Bors’ reply, interestingly, challenges these assumptions rather in the way that Balin’s will challenge those of the Lady Lyle of Avalon concerning the transmission of the quality of gentleness (q.v. 156, below).
The Hermit's reply corrects Bors on a subtle but crucial point: “At the helm there stands a master who holds and governs it and turns it where he would; so it is too with the human heart. For a man's good works proceed from the grace and guidance of the Holy Ghost, the evil from the enemy's seduction” (178). Malory omits all of this theological parsing, and in so doing bypasses its lesson, which Matarasso glosses: “man's liberty is partial rather than entire, in that he needs grace to will the good as well as to accomplish it.”

Admittedly, Malory cuts a great deal of monkish commentary in adapting the *Queste*, and it could be argued that these particular passages I have described were not deliberately bowdlerized, but simply happened to be gathered up along with a lot of other turgid stuff by Malory’s editorial scythe. But here it’s important to notice what Malory does keep. Amid all the homiletic discourse Malory trims, he spares assertions on the importance of the individual will, as when Lancelot is told, “the sonne shall nat beare the wyckednesse of the fader, nor the fader shall nat beare the wyckednesse of the sonne, but every man shall beare hys owne burdon” (2.931). And though the passage continues, “therefore beseke thou only God, and He woll helpe the in all thy nedes,” it is not the external support of God that, in the Malorian schema, makes for an interesting hero.

Illustrating the exchange of values that has taken place in the *Sankgreal* is the *Queste*’s use of *aventure* to express spiritual themes in the same way that Malory uses “grace” to express secular ones. Pauline Matarasso notes how the *Quest*’s author “uses the concept of the *aventure* as a symbol of providence just as precisely and consistently as he uses the Holy Grail as a symbol of mystical experience.” So, the theologian invests the secular

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83 Matarasso, *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, 162 n.44.
with spiritual meaning in order to emphasize the role of providence; the more secular-minded Malory does just the reverse, using the language of providence, or grace, but leaning away from its primary meaning of “God’s grace” (MED 1a), and more toward its connotation of “good fortune” (MED 3c).84

“[P]raye for my soule,” Malory entreats his readers, but it is interesting to recall here that he also retains, from amid all the doctrinal explanation he dispenses with in the *Queste*, two instances in which Lancelot’s similar requests for prayer are met with assertions that no one’s prayers avail the sinner so much as his own.85 The Cistercian author is not rejecting the efficacy of intercessory prayer, but instead reminding the reader that individuals are, through grace, given a role to play in their own salvation.86 This is the part of the process that interests Malory, who downplays grace, and emphasizes the *struggle*, so crucial to a good story.

And that is the point I am driving toward. Malory is not a theologian but a storyteller, and in keeping with his prioritization of earthly over spiritual *worshyp* he downplays underlying elements of determinism and replaces divine grace with the more aesthetically-satisfying struggle of willful heroes. Accordingly, he intensifies the sufferings of Lancelot, the paragon of earthly worship, while at the same time attenuating the fine balance upholding Galahad’s righteousness until it seems to be no struggle at all. So it is that while aboard Solomon’s ship in the *Queste*, the other Grail knights urge Galahad to take up the Sword of the Strange Belt, King David’s blade, with a pommel decorated by Solomon. All signs, they agree, point to him as its rightful claimant. But

85 *Queste* 154, 259; *Sankgreal* 2.931, 2.937
Galahad hesitates. “Let me first make good my right to it. For none may have the sword who cannot grip the pommel. So if I fail you will have proof that it is not meant for me” (237). The same episode in Malory admits of no possibility of failure. Though Galahad deigns to make the courteous remark that “hit longith no more to me than hit doth to you,” he does not hesitate to claim it, but says, “Now latte me begynne to Grype thys swerde for to gyff you corrayge” (2.995). His success in the venture carries great weight in the *Queste*, in which Percival’s sister says, “I assure you, you were not by rights a knight until you were girded with the sword which was brought to this land for you alone” (237). The hero has encountered a test, proven himself worthy in its undertaking, and so advanced in stature. But Malory removes this speech, and the episode becomes yet one more perfunctory triumph for a hero who, for Malory, requires no such proofs, but was always already the chosen knight, and serenely assured in his godlike abilities.

Actual ordeals and tests of worth he reserves for Lancelot. An interesting example concerns the bodily penance that Lancelot is made to do. In the *Queste*, a series of confessions lead him up what Matarasso terms the “slow ascent” of his soul’s repair, and after a time his ascetic privations cease to cause him suffering.87 Having renounced the flesh, his flesh cannot pain him, and so although he sleeps on the hard ground and wears a hair shirt, “he had been driven to the point where he found greater pleasure and beauty in the chafing garment and unyielding earth than in anything he had experienced theretofore” (155). But such a moment never arrives in the *Sankgreaal*, which describes how “the heyre prycked faste . . . And greved hym sore, but he toke hyt mekely and

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87 Ibid., 134.
suffirde the payne” (2.931). Whereas Malory’s Galahad gives no appearance of either struggling or suffering, Lancelot suffers, and is the more admirable for bearing it bravely.

Once again, I hope it is obvious that I am not trying to suggest that Malory was a latent pagan, or that the *Morte* harbors anything like actual Pelagian ideas, insofar as they concerned the precise workings of Grace on the sanctifying and salvific process. Indeed, I am not assessing his theology at all, but rather attempting to describe the heroic attitude or posture he favored, one that eschews the assistance of outer forces. Hence his subordination of grace to individual freedom, and hence too the *Morte*’s handling of the problem of human perfectibility.

My use of the term “posture” is deliberate, for having seen how Malory uses Galahad as a foil by which to help accentuate Lancelot’s heroic attitude, I want to qualify that argument a little by suggesting that it is indeed only a posture, that Malory is not, in fact (for lack of a better term) Pelagian in his handling of his heroes, who, as a few key examples will demonstrate, do not succeed or fail solely on the strength of their will, but proceed or falter according to qualities or defects largely inherited. They must *appear* to bear their own weight—and our readerly interest along with it—but ultimately the heroic posture he favors is undermined by clues from other adventures in the *Morte* that reveal struggle to be less efficacious than he would have them appear on the surface. Although he replaces grace with the more narratively-productive struggle of wilful heroes, heroic success or failure in the *Morte* is ultimately governed by fate.
The Grounds of Greatness: Worship, Destiny, and Freedom of the Will

One of the consequences of my argument is to suggest a reassessment of Galahad; he may be inimical to modern tastes for a variety of reasons, but the bad reputation he has lately acquired for being merely a religious bore is complicated by an awareness of the elements from the Queste narrative that Malory elides. Another is to call into question the view of Malory as offering a secular alternative to the stringent spirituality of the Queste that is obviously more progressive, realistic, and accessible. Harry E. Cole has described Malory’s “common-sense approach to goodness,” an approach Fiona Tolhurst describes as Malory’s “practical Christianity.” 88 But for Malory, heavenly worth is closely tied to the more terrestrially inclusive “worship” that reveals it, and I want to suggest that by offering, in Lancelot, a humbler, earthly path to greatness than his impossibly pure and unattractively remote Galahad embodies, Malory is merely replacing a kind of practicality already present in the Queste. He is at pains to show to his courtly readership that more than a monastic path to salvation—or “worship” (a distinction that is so often elusive in the Morte) is available to them, but the Queste had done so as well. Each of its knightly Questers represents a different pattern of spiritual success and errors, and if those who fail in achieving the Grail are reprimanded and shamed for their shortcomings, they are not, at least, shown to be damned for them; even sinful Lancelot returns to Camelot a better man for his failure, and is “hailed with the greatest joy by all and sundry” (268). The Queste does not sanctify him, as Malory implicitly does, by granting him the performance of a miracle, but what it does do is to acknowledge, in ways that the Morte does not, that there are different types of people, gifted along a spectrum of

abilities and inclinations. Galahad is an ideal picture of the individual Christian sustained
by grace so that he is unmoved by temptation, and if Malory seems to find this an
unrealistic ideal, the *Queste* does so as well, for its intense preoccupation with the sins of
Lancelot, as well as of Percival, Bors, Gawain, and others, and the formulae for
confession and repentance, signals its appreciation of the fact that spiritual heroics of so
excellent a type as Galahad are the exception, rather than the rule. In fact, I argue, it is
Malory who is less “practical” on this point, for the *Morte* repeatedly maintains at least
the pretense, a narratively-convenient one, that greatness, albeit of an earthly rather than a
spiritual kind, is widely available to young hopefuls of strong will—despite the fact that,
as I will show, their stories tend to reveal other, external causes for their success, having
more to do with fate than heroic fortitude.

One early site of this tension in the *Morte* over the grounds of individual worth
occurs in the tale of *Balin le Sauvage*, throughout which problems of identity occur and
many names are withheld, culminating in Balin’s tragic misidentification of and mortal
wounding of his beloved brother.89 From the outset, the story is concerned with the
question of what makes a worthy knight, and with how—and whether—such worth can
be ascertained by looking. Yet another sword challenge opens the adventure, this time
issued by the Lady Lyle of Avalon, who declares herself in need of a knight who is “a
passyng good man of hys hondys and of hys dedis, and withoute velony other trechory
and withoute treson,” for only such a one can remove the sword that “doth me grete
sorow and comberaunce” (1.61-62). Further elaborating on the job description, she warns

89 Malory seems to share Balan and Balyne’s wariness of nameless knights, for among his editorial habits is
one of “eliminating anonymous characters,” of which there are many in the French sources. Vinaver, *The
Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3.1313n.
any would-be champions, “beware ye be nat defoyled with shame, trechory, nother gyle, for than hit woll nat avayle . . . for he muste be a clene knyght withoute vylony and of jantill strene [gentle strain] of fadir syde and of modir syde” (I.62, my emphasis). The notion that personal excellence was derived from noble parentage was as old as Aristotle, who had described greatness of character (magnanimitas) and the potential for heroic deeds as residing naturally in high-born men, and this attitude was unchallenged in the late middle ages, which by and large assumed the heredity transmission of gentility and worship, with all the qualities it comprises. However, Malory appears to want to question this establishment view, for Balyn responds to the Lady, “A[h], fayre dame, worthynes and good tacchis [habits or conduct] and also good dedis is nat only in araymente, but manhode and worship within a mannes person; and many a worshipfull knyght ys nat knowyn unto all peple” (I.63). A pretty speech, and one that certainly seems spoken on behalf of the unlanded and untitled. Vinaver comments that this attitude “is as characteristic of Malory as it is remote from the attitude of knighthood implicit in the great orders of chivalry established in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,” whose “distinguishing feature was the substitution of courtly apparel for the moral and practical aims of knightly behavior.” But although Malory’s attitude elsewhere in the Morte seems to be, on the surface, that anyone can make good, the hierarchy he gestures at upsetting tends to reassert itself when the truth is revealed about the successful fair unknowns who have achieved a measure of greatness, and they turn out to have been “of jantill strene” all along.

Such ambiguity inheres in the tale of Torre and Pellinor, in which Aryes the cowherde asks a boon of Arthur on the king's wedding day, that he would make his son Torre a knight. “Hit ys a grete thynge thou askyst off me,” hedges Arthur (1.99), suggesting how aberrant a request this is. But Torre stands tall among his supposed brothers, all of whom “were shapyn mucche lyke the poore man . . .” (1.100). As impressive as Lancelot in stature (and in contrast to the David story, in which the young shepherd boy is remarkable for being the shortest of his brothers), Torre “was nat lyke [Aryes] nother in shappe ne in countenaunce, for he was mucche more than ony of them” (1.100). Sure enough, as Merlin reveals, the cowherd is not Torre's father at all, and Merlin's assessment echoes the more elitist attitudes of Malory’s day about the foundations of an honorable identity: “he ought to be a good man for he ys com of good kynrede as ony on lyve, and of kynges bloode” (1.100-101). Torre’s disposition toward knighthood further confirms that nature has indeed trumped nurture. As Aryes explains to the king,

I have thirtene sonnes, and all they woll falle to what laboure I putte them and woll be ryght glad to do laboure; but thys chylde woll nat laboure for nothynge that my wyff and I may do, but allwey he woll be shotynge, or castynge dartes, and glad for to se batayles and to beholde knyghtes. And allwayes day and nyght he desyrith of me to be made knyght. (1.100)

What puzzles Aryes the cowherd only confirms the Lady Lyle of Avalon’s ideas about received gentleness, for although Torre might have initially appeared to be without title or pedigree, he turns out to have been noble all along, and accordingly gifted in stature and inclination.

The tension here is not out of step with Malory’s time, even though, as Rosemary Horrox explains, fifteenth-century attitudes toward the foundation of individual merit were shifting toward the possibility of acquiring it:
[An] essentially pragmatic perception of hierarchy was commonplace in the later middle ages. “Manners makeeth man” is a proverb recorded from at least the mid-fourteenth century. It now tends to be taken as a pithy expression of the importance of courtesy—good manners—but this was not what it meant to a medieval hearer. In the mid-fifteenth century it was recorded as “Ever manner and clothing maketh man”; in other words an individual is defined by what he wears and how he behaves. Of course there remains a potential ambiguity here. The proverb could carry the elitist assumption that if someone pretends to be what he is not, his behavior will betray him.92

The Tale of Sir Gareth, who comes to Camelot disguised as a kitchen boy and becomes a great knight, is a supreme example of how this ambiguity resides in the Morte but tends to tip toward the importance of birth. It is the more “elitist” meaning of the proverb Horrox discusses that Kay appears to have in mind when he abuses Gareth, whom he nicknames Beawmaynes, or Fayre Handys: “I undirtake he is a vylayne borne, and never woll make man, for and he had be com of jantyllmen, he wolde have axed horse and armour, but as he is, so he askyth” (1.294-95).

What Kay's scorn reveals is his belief that a gentleman would have known to behave like a gentleman, and to request the articles befitting someone of his status. That he fails to do so marks him as a born “vylayne”—a peasant. That Malory gives this articulation of a rigid estates theory to the ever-churlish Kay might seem like a rejection of that attitude, but it is precisely this view of inherited excellence that the story will wind up affirming.

Lancelot's rejoinder to Kay, by contrast, is with the ostensibly gracious sentiment that even though Gareth comes with no recommendation save his own, “I dare ley my hede he shall preve a man of grete worshyp” (1.295). Lancelot's treatment of the newcomer, Malory tells us, shows off his “grete jantynesse and curtesy,” and his apparent large-mindedness in holding open the possibility that Gareth will prove himself

greater than expected seems to express the spirit of possibility in the *Morte*, whose central hero-king is himself a fosterling, his high origins unknown even to himself until their sensational revelation when he pulls the sword from the stone. Gareth’s story delights us for precisely this reason: because we suspect how mistaken Kay is, and our delight is heightened further by the distressed but sharp-tongued damsel Lynette, who comes to Camelot asking help in rescuing her sister, Llyonesse, from the Red Knight of the Red Lands, but scorns to accept it from so unlikely a source as Gareth. “Fy on the,” she scolds Arthur, “shall I have none but one that is your kychyn knave?” and turns on Gareth with exquisite nastiness: “What dost thou here? Thou stynkyst all of the kychyn, thy clothis bene bawdy of the grece and talow . . . . What art thou but a luske, and a turner of brochis, and a ladyll-waysher?” (1.297; 300). Of course, Gareth ends up proving more than up to the task, defeating a series of impressive knights before rescuing and marrying Lyonesse.

The Cinderella-like trajectory of Gareth’s story is in keeping not only with the *Morte*’s central hero, Arthur, but also Lancelot and Galahad, who are in the direct lineage of David, the shepherd boy who emerged from obscurity to become Israel’s greatest warrior-king. Before setting eyes on David, the prophet Samuel is impressed by the stature of his older brother Eliab, but God corrects him, “Look not on his countenance, nor on the height of his stature: because I have rejected him, nor do I judge according to the look of man: for man seeth those things that appear, but the Lord beholdeth the heart” (1 sam 16:7).

The lesson of Gareth’s story might seem to be, then, that potential greatness resides in anyone. But much of this seeming egalitarianism falls away on closer
inspection. The unexpected heroism of David, and of the Arthurian heroes who in some respects exemplify them, is not really unexpected after all, but turns out to have been entirely contingent on either heredity, divine election, or both. So too Gareth, whose pedigree is far more impressive than he initially lets on. Had Gareth indeed been a mere orphan fosterling, as Kay surmises, brought up “in som abbey” before growing to unexpected greatness in Arthur's court, then Lancelot's prediction would seem more prescient (1.295). As it is, however, Kay's mocking critique is more accurate than the narrative gives him credit for, though not for the reasons he thinks: no hero is going to emerge from a mere stranger who shows up on the king's doorstep with neither references nor heraldry. The fact is that Gareth is already a hero, or at least has most of the potential heroic equipage he needs to come into his own. Soon enough, Kay and the rest of the court learn that Gareth not only shares in an aristocratic bloodline—he is the youngest son of King Lot, and thus “nere kyn to” Arthur and Gawain (1.295)—but he has been equipped all along with horse, armor, and “all thyng that neded hym in the rycheste wyse” (1.297). All the while he has been washing dishes, his war gear has been standing by in the wings, looked after by his dwarf for use the moment need arises. Like Prince Hal, Gareth has been himself all along, whatever “base contagious clouds” may have for a time obscured his excellence from the world; the first thing we learn about him is that he is “the goodlyest yonge man and the fayreste that ever they all sawe . . . . Large and longe and brode in the shuldyrs, well-vysaged,” and possessing “the largyste and the fayreste handis that ever man sye” (1.293), suggesting a Beowulfian grip. In short, Gareth looks like a hero, and Kay's nasty little plan for him serves to foreshadow the confirmation of that fact: “into the kychyn I shall brynge hym, and there he shall have
fatte browes every day that he shall be as fatte at the twelve-month thee ende as a porke hog” (1.295). Whether he realizes it or not, Kay recognizes in Gareth a proto-hero, and it will take more than the force of Kay’s mockery to keep him down. Kay's intention to fatten him up amounts to sabotage, the corpulent suppression—or at least disguising—of his obvious strength and impressive frame. This in turn gives rise to a different reading of Lancelot’s apparent graciousness toward the young stranger. Lancelot may not be holding out the possibility that the young man will make something of himself, but instead hedging his bets that he will turn out to have been a man of renown all along. Kay has been wrong before, as Lancelot seems to enjoy pointing out to him: “Yett beware,” he warns Kay, “so ye gaff the good knyght Brunor, sir Dynadans brothir, a name, and ye called hym La Cote Male Tayle, and that turned you to anger afterwarde” (1.295). Our reading of Lancelot's intent turns on what he means by “worshyp” when he says, “I dare ley my hede he shall preve a man of grete worshyp” (1.295). Malory uses the term freely to mean both the ground of or condition for one's honor (OED I.1.b.) or martial valor (OED I.1.d). The latter, of course, can be proven and so achieve a measure of the former, but it would seem that Lancelot has the latter meaning in mind here, for that is the sense in which Kay uses it when he contrasts sir Brunor's admirable appetite for “worshyp” with what Kay characterizes as Gareth's appetite for “mete and drynke and brotthe” (1.295). Do we believe Lancelot when he later says, after it has been revealed that Gareth is Gawain's brother, “evir me thought ye sholde be of grete bloode”? (1.299). Probably, and that undermines what we may have thought was Lancelot's rather anachronistic egalitarian sentiment, and Malory’s approval of it. Thus, when Lancelot says to Kay, “full lytyll knowe ye of what byrthe he is com of, and for what cause he com to the
courte” (1.299), he is not warning against elitism but against presumptuousness. The
story’s lesson is not that lesser folks can grow up to be whatever they please; rather it is
the lesson of Ovid's Baucis and Philemon: the poor strangers at your door might be
Jupiter and Mercury in disguise, so welcome everyone with charitable courtesy.93

There's nothing truly anti-determinist, anti-hierarchical, or “Pelagian” at all, then,
about the tale of Sir Gareth. Its lesson is not that just anyone can saunter in, demand
boons of Arthur, and later emerge as a great knight; the dwarf who stands outside holding
Gareth’s horse could not have hoped to receive a similar welcome. Kay's treatment of
Gareth is cruel, but his ideas about human potential are no different than those of anyone
else's in the court: blood is destiny. It may be granted to a poor rustic on a “lene mare”
that his son be knighted (1.99); a stranger may enter the court as a kitchen boy and
emerge as a great knight; indeed, a fosterling may become high king. But the son of the
cowherd will turn out to have been the son of King Pellinore; the dishwasher will reveal
himself as the brother of Sir Gawain and already rich in weapons, wanting only
knighthood to put an official stamp on his greatness; and the young fosterling will turn
out to have been the son of King Uther all along. Malory may appear to affirm the
possibility of social mobility (not out of the question in the fifteenth century94), but then
always undercuts it by revealing that the aspirant was already of high station. This
manner of heroic exemplarity, it would seem, is one available only to those who are
themselves already fated for greatness.

Anthony S. Kline, University of Virginia Library, 2000, VIII: 611–678,
94 See: Rosemary Horrox, Fifteenth Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late-Medieval England,
60.
The lesson of the *Queste*, by contrast, is in many ways more hopeful, and certainly more forthright. The hermit’s explanation to Lancelot of Galahad’s reliance on grace is but one among many places where the *Queste* expresses dubiousness about human perfectibility. Easily missed amid the *Queste*’s many homilies are other clues that both reinforce the contingency of Galahad’s excellences and provide a means of application to readers. Malory seems to have missed them, or not much to have cared, for readers of the *Sankgreal* are spared most of the variations (none of them, to modern eyes, terribly riveting in their variety) on the Cistercian theme of virginity, but they are also deprived of biblical exempla that help to explain the character of Galahad and the other knights, and, by extension, the character of the individual Christian’s relationship to the sanctification symbolized by the Grail Quest. I have mentioned already Malory’s omission of the parables of the Talents, with its suggestion of a spectrum of giftedness, and from his compression of the explication of the story of Adam and Eve—a *felix detrectio*, from a narrative perspective, of one of the most turgid passages in the *Queste*—he leaves out remarks that further stress the idea that there is a typological hierarchy of culpability as well as merit. Gone is Perceval’s sister’s explanation that “it was right that [Adam] should be held more culpable than his wife, for she was of a frailer nature, having been fashioned from the rib of man” (223).

In one respect, then, the *Queste* presents the more compassionate vision, for if all are equally capable, as Malory makes the pretense of asserting, then all are accountable. Moreover, the parable of the wedding feast (Matt. 22.1-14), also shed from the *Queste* in translation to the *Sankgreal*, provides hope even for those with humbler destinies, or

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95 Most notably, Malory removes a long discourse on virginity in connection with the whiteness of the Tree of Life (*Queste* 222-29).
those who, like Lancelot, were “invited,” but failed, in his sinfulness, to answer, and so
absented himself from destined glory. Still another hermit, upon seeing that Lancelot is
only learning at second hand of the Grail knights' discovery and claiming of the sword of
David, exclaims, “Now in all truth can you call yourself ill-fated when you were absent at
the culmination of this high adventure, and those three knights were there, who once were
held of lesser worth than you” (256). Matarasso’s gloss explains the connection of
Lancelot’s situation to the parable: “In this high quest, the soul's return from exile to the
Jerusalem of the saints, here exemplified in the parable of the wedding feast, there is
apparently little hope for Lancelot, the guest without a wedding garment, condemned to
be cast into outer darkness.” Nevertheless, the hermit offers hope, assuring the
sorrowful knight, “whatever you did in the past, I do believe that if from now on you kept
from mortal sin and from transgressing your Maker's law, you could still find compassion
and mercy in Him who is the source of all compassion and who has already called you
back into the path of truth” (256). Lancelot again makes a clean confession and thus
resumes the slow ascent toward a state of fitness for the feast, his garment a hair shirt, his
appetite to be sharpened by abstaining from meat and wine. The path so offered might not
be an altogether appealing one for Malory or his readers, but it had the advantage, at
least, of being widely available to all, regardless of station or pedigree.

All this Malory passes over in silence, and its omission from the *Sankgreal*
participates in the transformation Galahad undergoes from an individual striver whose
apparent perfection is buoyed only by his reliance on divine grace, to a symbol of
perfection toward which no one could realistically hope to attain. This change is not only

from saintly-but-still-human-pilgrim to “cardboard saint,” but from a spiritual vision that is acutely aware of the limits of human perfection and on guard against what could be called “Pelagian” ideas to the contrary, to one that seems insouciantly, if not duplicitously, optimistic about the capacity of the will.

Of course, Malory is not a theologian, but a storyteller, and it makes good narrative sense for the *Morte* to downplay its underlying element of determinism. For the story of Gareth to work, we must be on the side of the underdog rather than the bullying, snobbish Kay, and to be delighted by Kay's comeuppance, we need to have been pulling for Gareth to show himself as more than a dishwasher. Whatever his own views about the immutability of hierarchical walls, social or spiritual, Malory is a skillful enough storyteller that he holds out the tantalizing possibility that a young hero could conceivably scramble over them. He is having his cake and eating it, too—but so too are his readers, who are afforded not only the pleasure of beholding the Cinderella-like ascent of the up-and-coming champions, but also the satisfying revelation of their noble backgrounds. From this we can see yet more reason Galahad fails to satisfy narratively. Because we already know, and must know, of Galahad’s high heritage, and his foreordained greatness, Malory cannot extend to him the thing that makes the story of Gareth a success: the pleasant fiction (whether genuinely held or not) that hierarchy may not be unassailable, and that destiny may not be fixed.97

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97 All Malory can try to do is build just a little more suspense into the revelation to Lancelot that he is Galahad’s father, a scene noteworthy for being one of the few instances in which an episode from the *Queste* is extended rather than compressed. In Malory, it is the second hermit, rather than the first, who tells Lancelot that Galahad is his son. This comes as news to Lancelot. "'Sir,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'ye sey that good knyght ys my sonne?" (2.930), and we get to enjoy the revelation just a bit more for its having been postponed.
For Arthur and his heroes, at least, destiny is indeed fixed. Although Malory presents a hopeful countenance, like the *Gawain* Poet, whose concluding promise of “blysse” to come seems belied by his dark hints of recurrent siege and assault, everything in the *Morte Darthur* is driving toward the catastrophe announced in its title, and the inevitability of the “Dolorous Death and Departing” of the companions of the Round Table is tied to the imperfection of its heroes, who cannot ultimately will a better outcome.

**Conclusion: Exemplarity and the Christian Romance Hero**

In the *Inferno*, the damned Francesca da Rimini reports through her tears to the Pilgrim Dante that it was through reading a romance of Lancelot that she and her lover, Paolo Malatesta, fell into the tempest of passion they must inhabit eternally:

> One day we read, to pass the time away, of Lancelot, of how he fell in love;
> [ . . . . ]
> Time and again our eyes were brought together by the book we read; our faces flushed and paled.
> To the moment of one line alone we yielded: it was when we read about those longed-for lips now being kissed by such a famous lover, that this one (who shall never leave my side) then kissed my mouth, and trembled as he did. Our Galehot [i.e. “go-between”] was that book and he who wrote it. That day we read no further.”

At least in Dante’s view, Lancelot’s flaws have the effect of destabilizing others, his helplessness to Guinevere’s charms exercising an unhealthy exemplarity over the readers of his story.

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Malory’s Galahad will pose no such danger to readers of the *Tale of the Sankgreal*. Malory delights us, but his Galahad does not move us, either towards hell or heaven. For all that Caxton insists on the *Morte’s* value as offering spiritually-edifying examples “by whyche we may . . . after thys shorte and transitory lyf to come unto everlastyng blysse in heven . . .”, so perfectly integrated a hero as Malory delivers cannot exemplify Christian heroism in the same way that a chagrined, penitent Sir Gawain or an unstabyl Margery Kempe can, whose strength was, as Paul wrote, perfected in weakness.

Although the adventure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is, as I have argued in my first chapter, one that tests the spiritual merit of its hero’s vaunted multifold perfections, the *Gawain* Poet had the good sense not to impose those tests on a hero whose success could never be in doubt. Thus Lancelot, the paragon of chivalry, is made to sit idly by with the rest of the court, awaiting news of the outcome of Gawain’s adventure, and Galahad makes no appearance whatsoever in the poem. Instead, the poet combines the attributes of both in Gawain, a character who had behaved disgracefully in earlier romances, and neither his Lancelot-like martial prowess nor his Galahadian resistance to the charms of his seductive hostess can ultimately mask his all-too-humanness when it comes down to literally laying his neck on the line, and it is that imperfection that provides—depending on one’s reading of the poem—either its comedy, its moral, or both. Heroism in most temporal or cultural contexts relies on at least the possibility of imperfection or failure. Specifically in the Christian medieval context, in

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100 Paul describes praying thrice for relief from the affliction of his unspecified “sting of the flesh.” In reply, God tells him, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for power is made perfect in infirmity. Gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2 Cor 12.9).
which human depravity was taken for granted, and perfectibility thought to be achievable only posthumously and through divine aid, instability is a condition of a recognizably biblical heroism, what I called in my second chapter, in reference to Margery Kempe, “apostolic heroism,” in which one exceeds the limitations of one’s perceived state of corruption by means of divine aid. It is through the fissures and rifts, the chinks in the armor, so to speak, of these heroes, that they are divinely empowered. Malory’s Galahad, who literally “embodies the Grail values” and is “inner wholeness” personified, lacks a channel for such empowerment.  

Not so Lancelot, who in the Morte as in the French Queste is rebuked for his unsyker (unstable) quality. Malory emphasizes Lancelot’s instability rather than his pride, which is, along with adultery, his chief fault in the Queste, for though assuring us that Lancelot will, despite his sins, “dye ryght an holy man,” he laments, “And nere were that he ys nat stable, but by hys thoughte he ys lyckly to turne agayne, he sholde be nexte to encheve hit sauff sir Galahad, hys sonne; but God knowith hys thought and hys unstablenesse” (2.948). The problem persists upon his return to the court: Lancelot returns from the Queste, having seen “as much as ever saw ony synfull man lyvynge” (2.1046), and immediately finds himself torn between Guinevere's eagerness to resume their love affair, and what he had borne witness to. He explains futilely to the queen, “wyte you well, madam, it may nat be yet lyghtly forgotyn, the hyghe servyse in whom I dud my dyligente laboure” (2.1046). Karen Cherewatuk attempts to explain the nature of his fragmentation by way of a brief comparison with Margery Kempe. For Cherewatauk,

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the fact that Kempe refers to herself throughout her Book in the third-person, as a
“creatur,” suggests

a tragic fragmentation of self: Margery fails to integrate her sexual being into her
religious worldview. Malory’s Lancelot likewise is riven, but for the opposite
reason: He cannot integrate his religious self into the sexualized Arthurian world.
With Lancelot, Malory’s audience can offer the prayer oft misquoted from
Augustine, “Give me chastity, Lord, but not yet.”

Although Galahad forms no part of Cherewatuk’s argument, her interesting juxtaposition
of these two figures helps to suggest the problem with Malory’s Galahad: he has no self,
at least to the extent that the inner self is formed by conflict between competing drives.
As the very embodied principle of unification, he is untroubled by such turmoil, hence his
much-remarked inhuman chilliness, unwarmed by the deep, shifting tectonic stresses of
desires in opposition. If, as St. Augustine asserted, Desiderium sinus cordis: “it is
yearning that makes the heart deep,” especially yearning after completeness and an
“absent perfection,” then Galahad, it would seem, lacks depth, for he already embodies
perfection when making his first entrance before the marveling eyes of Arthur’s court,
and though he ably pursues the Grail and the completion it represents, he gives little
evidence of desiring it, but seems to move through his perfect paces as an automaton.

John Stevens makes a useful distinction between two heroic types: the epic hero
and the romance hero. The epic hero is never at a loss as to what is happening to him.
“He lives in a known land, contends against declared enemies”; the understanding of the
romance hero, by contrast, is less sure. He quests for he knows not what. In keeping with
the often enigmatic nature of romance, he is “like a man fighting ghosts in a mist . . . [he]
is involved in a mystery; he is on a quest but does not know what he has to look for; he is engaged in a struggle but does not know who his adversary is.”\textsuperscript{105} Jill Mann, applying the latter description to Gawain in \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight}, elaborates on it by emphasizing the \textit{passivity} central to the romance hero, whose heroism reveals itself in a “willingnes to hazard himself, to shed the protection of his armour, to surrender physical control,” trusting himself to \textit{aventure}, or the whim of fortune.\textsuperscript{106} This is neither stoicism nor mere inertia, but rather an “active” surrender of control when action would be an easier choice. Although the \textit{Queste}'s Galahad is fastened on a very clear aim in the form of the Grail and the mystical union with God that it symbolizes, in his progress toward that goal he resembles the romance hero Stevens describes, for always his questions reveal his ignorance of the adventures he encounters, even as his readiness to submit to whatever test or journey awaits him, but relying on divine providence rather than \textit{aventure}. The metamorphosis he undergoes at Malory's hands could be called a change from a romance hero to an epic hero, for he proceeds through the \textit{Sankgreal} like an automaton, confident and devoid of questions. In both versions, for example, the company of the Grail approach Castle Carcelois, at which point Percival's sister warns them of imminent danger. But while it is Bors who assures her in the \textit{Queste} that “He who brought us off the rock will deliver us from here at His good pleasure” (238), it is Galahad who utters the same line in the \textit{Sankgreal} (2.996). Malory seems to spare no opportunity to invest him with a blind confidence.


\textsuperscript{106} Mann, “Sir Gawain and the Romance Hero,” 107.
Thus, Galahad embodies unity, but at great cost to his exemplarity. Readers may not run the risk of being led astray by Galahad, but they will not be much edified by him, either. There is something about Lancelot’s instability that is, in its own way, exemplary, for it is, of course, this very weakness, revealed in the hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and lamented by Margery Kempe, that lends human color, narrative interest, and, indeed, theological depth to the narratives. Gloria Cigman’s observation that “only a being with neither the emotions nor the introspection that comprise the inner self can be a hero” does not apply here.\(^\text{107}\) It might be an apt and insightful description of a type of “epic” hero, but also points to a key difference between the classical or feudal hero, and the more specifically Christian Romance hero, dependent on Grace, that I am endeavoring to describe.

CHAPTER 4

“Thys ys bot ryght weke gere”: Dismas, Devotion, and Desperation in the Early Robin Hood Ballads

“The entry level for national myth is high. It’s not that the mythical hero must have some basis in historical fact . . . . [but rather] that any individual must be able to interrogate their own memory to assemble their own version of the myth.”

-James Meek¹

“Quid enim Hinielodus cum Christo?”

-Alcuin

Introduction

My previous chapters have shown how pervasive discourses of sin and imperfection paradoxically form the foundation for Middle English heroes by undermining their traditionally heroic qualities. I have examined Gawain’s failure, shame, and penitence in light of the Davidic allusions in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, explicated the Pauline unworthiness and concomitant boldness of Margery Kempe, and shown, by way of contrast, how the Morte Darthur pares away any sense of dependence originally integral to the heroism of Galahad, leaving so rigid an allegory of holiness as to make him fit a little awkwardly within the de-allegorized world of the Morte’s Grail Quest narrative. The subject of this final chapter is the spirituality of a much more distinctly secular hero, one whose attractions to his contemporary readership had as much to do with his spiritual weakness as with his moments of comically martial haplessness.² The ballads show how discourses of

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² I use the term “secular” cautiously. One of the basic assumptions of my thesis, after all, is that there was virtually no space within what is broadly called “Christendom” in the Middle Ages for the truly non-sacred. As Barbara Newman recently put it, “What sets Renaissance humanism apart from medieval humanism is neither a love of the classical nor a penchant to mock the holy, for both had been alive and well for centuries. It is rather the imaging of a secular realm that could, but did not necessarily, engage in any way with the sacred.” Newman, Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred, ix.
imperfection and powerlessness could be absorbed even within texts largely uninterested in anything beyond a very pragmatic theology.

It will become evident how dense with significance was the image of the thief, and of Robin Hood’s name, which could denote not only a virtuosic archer and a pious hero, faithfully devoted to the cult of the Mother of God, but also an “infamous cutthroat.” To the extent that the disparate ballads can bear reading as a set of coherent, unified texts, Robin Hood must be called an anti-hero, but one whose anti-heroics are, once again, founded in an evident weakness and need for external help. Unlike the Psalmist, Gawain, Paul, or Kempe, Robin Hood shows little interest in confession or repentance. Nevertheless, he is piously devoted to the Virgin Mary, and I argue that what this extremely popular genre reflects about its contemporary readership has something to do with recognition of the limits of individual power. Although the ballads divorce penitence from the trope of the penitent thief by in many ways coopting and secularizing the Virgin Mary (beginning the process by which she will, in sixteenth-century retellings, eventually become Maid Marian), I argue that resonances linger with Dismas, the penitent “good thief” hung at Christ’s right hand in the gospel of Luke, and although the need for repentance is low on the list of the ballads’ rudimentary theological assumptions, there is still something about the centrality of Mary’s transcendent moral presence in an otherwise lawless universe that demands explanation. I suggest that just as Robin Hood’s devotion to Mary accords with the contemporary fascination with the saints, his vulnerability reflects the anxieties of his readers.

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The opening refrain of the early Robin Hood ballad, *Robyn and Gandelyn*, is, “Robyn lyeth in grene wode bowndyn.”⁴ This cryptic first line serves to forecast Robin lying dead in a shroud as a result of the poem’s events, and will be repeated as the poem’s concluding line, as well. It is moreover an apparent analogue to the opening lyric of the fifteenth-century song “Adam lay ybounden,” which draws on the third chapter of Genesis in its description of the fall of humanity.⁵ There, the bonds confining Adam are those of sin; his death, the metaphorical death of sin.⁶ St. Paul described the corporate nature of this original sin: “And as in Adam alle men dien, so in Crist alle men schulen be quykenyd” (1 Cor. 15.22). *Robyn and Gandelyn* does not develop the allusion, but it hints at an important feature of this stage of the Robin Hood legend: he is earth-bound. Just as the greenwood in which he roams freely is perforce a site of confinement as well, so there is an essentially worldly quality to his piety, which aids him in his mortal life without seeming to concern itself much about the state of his soul or its eventual fate.

More than any of the other heroes discussed in my project, Robin Hood is tied to this world, and does not strain to transcend it by achieving forms of divine union. In contrast to the penitent Gawain and the self-abasing Margery Kempe, Robin Hood is with only a very few exceptions an impenitent sinner, a contrast made only more stark when we consider that his lapses from contemporary standards of morality—or even acceptable conduct for a late-medieval outlaw—make him by far the most morally problematic of the figures I have so far discussed. Gawain flinches at the axe, but is immediately ashamed, not only because his brief

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⁴ Although Dobson and Taylor caution that “by no stretch of the imagination can the ‘Robin’ of this lyric be properly identified with the Robin Hood of the other ballads,” Knight and Ohlgren point to its “clear continuities with some features of the Robin Hood saga.” R.J. Dobson and J. Taylor, eds., *Rymes of Robin Hood* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 256; Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 227.
⁵ British Library MS Sloane 2593, ff.10v-11
⁶ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 233 n.1.
appearance of cowardice is effectively an unchivalric breach of terms in the game to which he had agreed to participate, but because it suggests that his heart, “funden fautlez” (found faultless) theretofore, is not enough set on the heavenly (640). His patroness, Mary, whose image is emblazoned on the inside of his shield, fills him with courage. For him to “lakk a lyttel” at the crucial moment, then, is to betray a possible lack of faith in his heavenly lady, and in the power of heaven itself (2366). Robin Hood, by contrast, is firmly situated in the greenwood. To be sure, he is pious, devoted to the Virgin Mary and the Godhead; in A Gest of Robin Hood, he performs daily mass for God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and for Mary, and in Robin Hood and the Monk he is so determined to hear mass after a long absence that he ventures from the safety of the forest over the protests of his men and at no little risk to his life and theirs. But although the mass in which he desires to participate is a spiritual ritual, this and other ballads reveal his aims and concerns to be overwhelmingly earthly. He does not, like Galahad, yearn for heaven. At the end of the Gest, he grows weary of courtly life, abandoning it to return to his home in the forest, and though he declares his intention to visit the shrine of Mary Magdalene, a noted penitent, he neither takes orders, like Lancelot, nor attempts anything like Margery Kempe’s struggle to improvise a life for herself as a secular contemplative, the trials of her active life eased by hope of heaven. Though there is nothing in the ballads to suggest that Robin Hood’s devotion to the Virgin Mary is less than fervent.

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7 At þis cause þe knyȝt comlyche hade
   In þe inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted,
   Þat quen he blusched þerto his belde neuer payred. (648-50)

For this cause the comely knight had
In the inner half of his shield her image painted,
So that when he looked on it his courage never waned. (translation mine)

8 Pearsall points out that Robin’s “quixotic and dangerous” act of devotion to Mary endangers not only his life but those of his men, as well. Derek Pearsall, “Little John and the Ballad of Robin Hood and the Monk,” in Helen Phillips, Ed., 2005, 44.
and genuine, he shows little interest in help beyond that which she can provide for him here, on earth, in this life.

This very terrestrial piety, I suggest, yields its own clues about the nature of his appeal, both to reform-minded readers for whom the ballads might have furnished homiletic material, and to those who were, like Robin Hood, pragmatically selective in their devotional practice. To develop this argument, I will show how Robin Hood, who epitomizes the frequently reiterated trope of the virtuous outlaw, both participates in and deviates from a long textual tradition of biblical and saintly narratives with their origin in Dismas, the thief who repented and was saved by Christ on the cross, and other roadside robbers whose devotion to the Virgin won them special favor despite their crimes. For all that the early Robin Hood tradition seems animated by rebellion and freedom, there’s another way in which his condition is no different from that of Dismas, Langland’s Robert the Robber, and other thieves of legenda and hagiography: frequently overcome and captured in the stories, he becomes an abject, helpless, guilty, condemned figure. But despite what he shares in common with these outlaw brethren, including a strong devotion to Mary, his exemplarity stops short of contrition and repentance. Unlike Dismas, who pleaded to the dying Christ, “remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23.42), Robin Hood is soteriologically insouciant.

Nowhere is the ballads’ selective approach to the motifs of the penitent thief tradition more evident than in their inclusion of physical violence, which Robin and his men carry out with impunity and without chagrin, even against innocent bystanders. Although it has been

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9 Thomas Ohlgren’s important recent work on the manuscript contexts of the ballads suggests that several of the early ballads might have been found suitable for use as sermon exempla by the sixteenth-century priest who owned them. Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M. Matheson, Robin Hood: The Early Poems, 1465-1560. Texts, Contexts, and Ideology. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), chap. 1.
recently suggested that the violence of the ballads is consonant with contemporary “miracle of the Virgin” stories, I will discuss manuscript evidence suggesting that this vicious excess was more problematic to at least some late-medieval readers than critics have surmised. A Latin charm against thieves and an accompanying illustration of a rooster prefacing the manuscript of *Robin Hood and the Monk* invoke the crimes of Dismas and the unwarranted violence of Peter, respectively, revealing the disparity between the biblical and hagiographical origins of the abject thief motif, which question violence, and a popular ballad tradition that celebrates it, or at least removes it from the context in which it serves to precipitate repentance.

In sum, I argue that the early Robin Hood ballads, including, most importantly, *Robin Hood and the Monk* (c. 1465),10 *Robin Hood and the Potter* (c. 1468),11 and *A Gest of Robin Hood* (c. 1450),12 rewrite the biblical and hagiographical tradition of penitent thieves on which they draw, depicting the power of heavenly patronage while minimizing its duties, thereby appealing to readers who are, so to speak, just pious enough—pragmatically observant of dominant religious practices, but nonetheless situated firmly in the concerns of the secular world. Even Robin Hood’s Marian devotion, which is a feature only of the early ballads, is “ybounden” to the earthly concerns of the ballads, so that Robin Hood’s devotion and her reciprocal faithfulness is but an extension of his bonds of fellowship with his men.

10 Although the usual date assigned to the poem is 1450, Ohlgren and Matheson have recently asserted that this is about fifteen years too early. Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M. Matheson, *Early Rhymes of Robin Hood: An Edition of the Texts, Ca. 1425 to Ca. 1600* (Michigan State University, 2013), 3.
11 Ohlgren and Matheson have recently argued for a reassessment of the date of the manuscript of “Robin Hood and the Potter,” from 1503 to 1468. Ibid., 24; Ohlgren and Matheson, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems, 1465-1560. Texts, Contexts, and Ideology.*, 74–75.
12 Holt has recently suggested c. 1450 to be a “safer date” than 1400 (1995, p. 30). Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 80.
While the exact origins of the Robin Hood legend must remain elusive, my argument has applications for assessing his late medieval social identity; by showing how the ballads rewrite the sacred through the secular, I account for the suppleness of the early Robin Hood’s roguish brand of anti-heroism, whose violence could provide illicit thrills in tavern songs while at the same time supplying to a moral imagination like Langland’s an exemplary means of describing the processes of grace and redemption.

Robin Hood is at once wilder and weaker than the heroes of the three previous “case studies.” Like Margery Kempe, Robin Hood is audacious: Stephen Knight, writing broadly of the Robin Hood tradition across the centuries, suggests that “[t]he simple but powerful adjective bold sums up this hero, suggesting physical and ethical courage and success in his encounters with strong, oppressive enemies.”13 But the early ballad tradition describes Robin Hood’s physical strength as unreliable, leaving him frequently dismayed after being overpowered in hand-to-hand combat. Through his various mishaps, tragic and comic by turns, Robin Hood reveals areas of personal weakness, vulnerability, and even cruelty, and in the process vexes the distinctions between heroic and hapless in much the same way that his “heroic outlaw” status blurs the line between virtue and vice. And these imperfections, physical and spiritual, may not be incidental to his appeal to late medieval readers. In contrast to Dismas, as well as to Gawain and the other subjects of my previous chapters, the early Robin Hood does not strain to achieve or even emulate the spiritual athletics of biblical heroes and popular saints, but is instead firmly situated in this world. Stories of wilde Robin Hood continually reaffirm his piety while showing a marked lack of interest in other spiritual themes. He is no archetypal penitent, but his myth is nevertheless

13 Knight, Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography, 1.
“infected” with the theology of imperfection and the need for grace, such that his fallibility is one of the conditions of his heroic appeal. As such, he is a site of imaginative possibility for the wayward, the outlawed, the socially exiled and without hope of help, exposed to the full weight of institutions of legal authority that may or may not have been just. We can at least speculate that for people such as these, prudently wary of civic power and the clerical authority to which it was allied, the early Robin Hood’s brand of heroism, which looked heavenward for help while remaining fixedly “ybounden” to the world, might well have seemed very reasonable and appealing.

**Critical Background and Methodology**

Any attempt to address Robin Hood’s social identity or the nature of his readerly appeal must begin with what would seem to be a simple enough question: Just who *is* Robin Hood? The very protean quality that has made Robin Hood endlessly identifiable to readers also complicates the scholarly hunt, changes across time and the messy corpus of texts making it difficult to isolate a discreet or stable figure from among the multiplicity of Robin Hoods.¹⁴ Perhaps it befits an infamous outlaw that we take his measure by the fleeting shadow he casts; we know he was there, but can only half glimpse him through the dense thicket of time, for the earliest surviving references to him do more to establish his legend’s existence and popularity than to reveal its shape.

¹⁴ The title of Douglas Gray’s essay, “Everybody’s Robin Hood,” suggests the way in which that outlaw’s enduring popularity derives at least partly from an ambiguity and versatility that permits almost anyone to identify with and thus appropriate him: “Robin Hood ‘belongs to’ everybody, and everybody sees himself or herself as Robin Hood, ‘the hero that lives in you all.’” Douglas Gray, “Everybody’s Robin Hood,” in *Helen Phillips, Ed.*, n.d., 22.
Although Robin Hood’s textual history begins in the fifteenth century, it reflects an earlier oral tradition, but a very murky one. Between the reference to “rymes of Robyn hood” in Piers Plowman, written around 1377, and the earliest surviving manuscripts of Robin Hood “rymes” themselves—which may or may not be ones to which Langland had access—there is a gap of at least decades, possibly as much as a century. What those earliest references indicate is that his popularity was already well established by the last quarter of the fourteenth century, but owing to Robin Hood’s fragmentary textual history, the nature of that popularity is difficult to define. Foucault’s observation that “[w]hatever the kernel of its reality, the legendary is nothing else, finally, but the sum of what is said about it” rings true here—except that the “reality” sought by Robin Hood scholars has ceased to be the supposed “historical Robin Hood” pursued by nineteenth-century folklorists. That effort that has been replaced by attempts to trace instead that Foucauldian “sum” itself, the nature of the legendary Robin Hood as he existed on the lips and in the imaginations of medieval

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15 J.C. Holt stresses the importance of this time period, explaining that, “The surviving stories can only be properly understood with this interval in mind. They spring, not from the point of origin of the legend, but from different stages in its growth. They emphasize different aspects of Robin’s activities. They introduce different characters [and] reflect different audiences . . . . Composition and repetition were intermingled. Each tale contains both old and new components . . . . Hence these robust simple stories constitute singularly delicate and complex evidence about Robin, what he was thought to have been, and about the social context in which the telling of his tales was born and nurtured.” James Clarke Holt, Robin Hood, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 16.


17 Attempts to establish Robin Hood’s historicity, something Early Modern historians tended to take for granted, date from the nineteenth century. W.F. Prideaux, for example, theorized that the early Robin Hood ballads derive from an older, longer English romance, now lost, trimmed by minstrels to fit popular tunes, and re-infused with “historical reminiscences” of the hero of that romance, who he argues was the historical outlaw noble Fulk Fitz Warine, who fell out of favor for a time with King John. “Who Was Robin Hood?”, Notes and Queries, 7th series, II (1886), 421-4. Reprinted in Stephen Knight, in Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 51–58; Only as recently as 1997 did R.B. Dobson declare that “The time has surely come when it is no longer profitable to search for a late thirteenth- or fourteenth-century forest outlaw whose real name was Robin Hood.” R.B. Dobson, “Robin Hood: The Genesis of a Popular Hero,” in Hahn, ed., n.d., 77. Dobson’s essay is a revised version of a paper presented in Oct. 1997 at a conference at the University of Rochester entitled, “Playing with Transgression: Cultural Transformations of Robin Hood.”
people, and perhaps in early texts now lost to us, and in so doing to establish his social identity. Is the “authentic” Robin Hood part of the peasant yeomanry or an outlaw whose disaffection puts him in conflict with the peasantry, and if his loyalties do not lie with the peasantry (for in the early ballads they do not seem to), are they ultimately with his brothers of the outlaw community, the church whose corruption he violently opposes, or with the monarchy? What level of society can claim credit for the legend’s birth, and did the readership for these stories of resistance to power comprise mostly commoners or also the privileged? As I have said, clear answers to these questions are difficult to come by, so convoluted is Robin Hood’s textual and reception history, even before the profusion of Robin Hood texts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the dramatic changes his character undergoes in its alteration from outlaw commoner to dispossessed noble.

My approach to the challenge of locating Robin Hood’s social identity accords to some extent with Sean Field’s suggestion that “considering a ‘pre-Reformation’ rather than a reconstructed ‘original medieval’ Robin Hood . . . circumvents some of the thorniest

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18 Timothy Jones remarks that “[m]ost historians of medieval outlaw narratives have concentrated on Robin Hood and the expression of peasant discontent, to the exclusion of other texts,” and a similar preoccupation dominates Robin Hood studies itself, in which the long-running quest for a historical Robin Hood has been largely replaced by what Douglas Gray calls the continuing argument “over the nature of the radical ‘protest’ (and indeed its existence) in the earlier tradition.” Timothy S. Jones, “Oublié Ai Chevalerie”: Tristan, Malory, and the Outlaw-Knight,” in Robin Hood, Medieval and Post-Medieval, by Helen Phillips, ed (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 79; Gray, “Everybody’s Robin Hood,” 25; Alan Fletcher argues that “Class strife and rebellion are a notable energy source in tales attached to [Robin Hood].” Alan J. Fletcher, Preaching, Politics and Poetry in Late-Medieval England (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 155; For a concise description of this debate, see: Jeffrey L. Singman, Robin Hood: The Shaping of the Legend (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 144–45. An important component of the debate concerns the nature of the tales’ readership. For a useful discussion of the evidence for their reception history, see Singman 29-55.


20 Dobson and Taylor provide an excellent survey of how the rough Robin Hood of the ballads was reshaped in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century into a gentrified and far more respectable figure. Dobson and Taylor, Rymes of Robin Hood, 36–53.
interpretive problems associated with the tales.” Instead of attempting to “capture” a portrait of the outlaw by retroactive inference, I argue that the corpus of extant early ballads, lean though it is, yields three characteristics whose consistent presence both unifies those disparate texts and distinguishes the early Robin Hood from later versions. In contrast to the quite uncomplicated altruistic goodness and graceful athletic heroism of the post-Reformation Robin Hood, the early Robin Hood (as I shall call the pre-Reformation Robin Hood) is characterized by weakness and unreliability in a fight, by an often savage violence (perpetrated either by him or by his men), and by a strong devotion to the Virgin Mary.

The hero who emerges from this trio of unifying tropes, I suggest, is one whose identity lies in the very tensions they form, one for whom weakness and imperfection is a source of power, because it forces reliance on his heavenly patroness. My chapter’s title, taken from the fifteenth century ballad Robin Hood and the Potter, suggests this paradoxical interdependence between imperfection and greatness: “Thys ys bot ryght weke gere” (this is but very weak gear) (200). The bow on which Robin Hood is forced to rely is a poor one, which makes his demonstration of unerring accuracy all the more impressive when “[s]o ney on to the marke he went, / He fayled not a fothe” (203-04). His skill with the bow notwithstanding, the archer himself is described in the earliest extant ballads as not much stronger an instrument than his weak weapon; Robin Hood may not often “fayle” at hitting his mark, but it is his solid defeat in hand-to-hand combat with an arrogant potter at the beginning of the tale that lands him in the position of having to shoot with an inadequate bow in the first place. And he has worse luck yet with weapons in another early ballad, Robin

22 Notable exceptions occur in Robin Hood’s comical failure at the pluck buffet contest in The Gest of Robin Hood, discussed further below.
Hood and the Monk, in which his sword breaks in his hand mid-fight, resulting in his arrest and imprisonment.23 “Now am I weppynlesse,” he exclaims, and in the context of sudden and unexpected failure, this sounds quite a bit like Sir Gawain’s dismayed cry, “Now am I fawty and falce” (2382).24 The moment serves to reveal the limitations of Robin Hood’s strength to the reader, but whereas Gawain’s exposure in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight clears the way for a redemptive show of penance, the corpus of early Robin Hood texts makes dramatic and sometimes comic use of Robin Hood’s faults while deprioritizing repentance, confession, and penitential restitution. Nor, as I will now discuss, does Robin express any chagrin for the terrific excess of violence in the texts which often spills over to harm innocents.

“Wheder he be yoman or knave”25: Historical Contexts and the Ballads’ Violence

The concluding lines of the early Robin Hood poem, A Gest of Robyn Hood (c.1450), provide what might seem a fitting epitaph for the famous outlaw:

Cryst have mercy on his soule,
That dyded on the Rode!
For he was a good outlawe,
And dyde pore men moch god. (1821-24).

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23 I use “ballad” advisedly. There has been much debate over generic boundaries, terminology, and the history of the ballad’s development relative to the minstrel tradition, much of it provoked by David Fowler. David C. Fowler, A Literary History of the Popular Ballad (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968); Richard Firth Green has recently challenged Fowler’s assertion that written ballads can tell us little about prior oral traditions. Green argues that ballads copied down even in more recent times can indeed offer much to the medievalist about the oral traditions anterior to them. Richard Firth Green, “The Ballad and the Middle Ages,” in The Long Fifteenth Century: Essays for Douglas Gray, ed. Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 163–84; For the purposes of this chapter, I follow Douglas Gray’s suggestion that we “consider adopting ‘a short verse narrative’ as a working definition.” Gray eschews pedantry, assuring us that, “As with other forms, early terminology here is highly flexible: among other words used are ‘ryme,’ ‘song,’ ‘talking,’ ‘tale,’ ‘gest.’” Gray, “Everybody’s Robin Hood,” 33.


25 Robin Hood and the Monk, l. 292
This poem would prove an important source for later adaptations of the Robin Hood legend, including Ben Jonson’s pastoral drama, *The Sad Shepherd* (c.1630), and the concluding benediction prefigures the theme of “robbing the rich to give to the poor” that would become Robin Hood’s hallmark characteristic. But in fact, the final line of this poem is the sole mention in the extant early ballads of Robin Hood doing anything to help the poor. Although he eventually developed into a figure so refined and courteous as to constitute a kind of rural counterpart to courtly chivalry, the outlaw celebrated in medieval ballads and denounced from medieval pulpits was far more self-interested, and a much more “wilde felow” all around; if the point needed driving home, the monk who describes Robin and his men in these terms in *Robin Hood and the Monk* has his head struck off by Little John almost immediately afterward (179).

Scottish philosopher John Major’s glowing tribute, given in his history of Britain published in 1521, gives an early description of the hero as he would come to be known to post-Reformation readers:

> About this time it was, as I conceive, that there flourished those most famous robbers Robert Hood, an Englishman, and Little John, who lay in wait in the woods, but spoiled of their goods those only that were wealthy. They took the life of no man, unless he either attacked them or offered resistance in defence of his property. . . . He would allow no woman to suffer injustice, nor would he spoil the poor, but rather enriched them from the plunder taken from the abbots. The robberies of this man I condemn, but of all robbers he was the humanest and the chief.

Here are many of the familiar elements, most especially his admirable character and his liberality to the poor with wealth stolen from the rich. Major would not be the last to

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27 This appears to be one and the same monk, but see Sean Field’s argument in n. 51, below.
emphasize Robin Hood’s honorable qualities, and in the hands of subsequent historians, pseudo-historians, and storytellers, his outlawry became increasingly romantic, his conduct chivalric, his manner courteous, his loyalties worthy. From this, it is easy to understand why Robin Hood came to be so strongly linked, retroactively, to the Peasant Revolt of 1381. Rodney Hilton argued in the mid-twentieth century that the common people recognized Robin Hood as a representative of their cause, a story allied with the spirit of their grievances.

But as Mary Grace Duncan points out, “many criminals whom noncriminals admire . . . do not ‘steal from the rich to give to the poor’ or in any sense behave as instruments of justice.” It is ironic that Robin Hood, now widely taken for granted as the very archetype of what Eric Hobsbawm influentially described as the “social bandit,” the folk hero whose unlawful exploits reflect social realities and popular resistance to injustice, did not, in his earliest incarnations, fight on anyone’s behalf but his own and that of a very small group of associates. This early Robin Hood might better be called an “antisocial bandit,” for though

29 These loyalties would take on a distinctly nationalist cast as, beginning in the eighteenth century, he begins to embody an idealized quintessential “Englishness,” of plain-dealing Saxon values against the perfidiousness of Norman sophisticates, and defender of Maid Marion’s virtue against the same. Stephen Knight identifies the early nineteenth century as the culmination of this process. During the years 1918–19 in particular, the independent work of John Keats, Sir Walter Scott, and Thomas Love Peacock instilled Robin Hood with idealized values of national identity, masculinity, and the natural world. Knight, Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography, 100–116.
30 Joseph Ritson, writing in the late eighteenth century, recruited him as a champion of liberty and equality: “a man who, in a barbarous age, and under a complicated tyranny, displayed a spirit of freedom and independence, which endeared him to the common people, whose cause he maintained.” Joseph Ritson, Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs and Ballads Now Extant Relative to the Celebrated English Outlaw (To Which Are Prefixed Historical Anecdotes of His Life) (London: Egerton and Johnson, 1795), I. 28. And see n.113, below.
31 Hilton, “The Origins of Robin Hood.”
it has been shown that he featured prominently among the popular folk heroes participating in the “democratization of chivalry” beginning in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{34} The fact is that Robin Hood as he first appears in the early ballads was a far from admirable character, whose heroism is not easily recognizable as traditionally valorous, let alone chivalric.

This dubious heroism confronts us especially in the violence and rapaciousness of the early ballads. There, Robin Hood’s criminal vocation does not have about it the romantic aura, or what Stephen Knight calls “the inherent dignity of the gentrified outlaw,” that characterizes the post-Reformation Robin Hood.\textsuperscript{35} Medieval readers would have had ample context to recognize about Robin Hood something more thuggish than skampish, because thieves posed a very real and even existential problem. Cultural historians have described the grimly practical threat that banditry posed in the middle ages to the property and lives of just about anyone wishing or needing to travel any distance from the safe confines of home.

“[R]eal bandits robbed from the peasants as well as the nobles and clergy,” Barbara Hanawalt explains, “because the ordinary people were better targets for daily necessities such as beer and bread. Nor were the bandits altruistic in sharing their loot.”\textsuperscript{36}

Much literature of the period imparts a sense of the pervasiveness of theft in all its forms, not only violent banditry but also subtler forms of graft. \textit{Piers Plowman}, for one, takes thievery into its survey of social ills besetting late fourteenth-century England’s “fair feeld ful of folk” (1.17), dealing extensively with the social problems and spiritual consequences of

\textsuperscript{34} Lesley Mickel, “Royal Self-Assertion and the Revision of Chivalry: The Entertainment at Kenilworth (1575), Jonson’s Masque of Owls (1624), and The King’s Entertainment at Welbeck (1633),” \textit{The Modern Language Review} 109, no. 4 (October 2014): 960.

\textsuperscript{35} Knight, \textit{Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography}, 100.

dishonest gain in many forms. There, the confession of the allegorized figure of Covetousness reads like a primer on fraud and petty theft, cataloguing and condemning deceitful practices including stretching cloth, weighing scales, passing off thin ale as a more expensive draught, rifling the luggage of sleeping lodgers, lending at usurious rates, and cheating at currency exchange (5.188-295). To the extent that Langland’s poem reflects social reality, we must surmise that such practices were as common in fourteenth-century England as at any time before or since. It would be more judicious, of course, to say that Piers Plowman offers a perception of its social reality, but either way the point is the same: duplicity seemed rampant, and if it were not enough to worry about bribery and corruption in high levels of society, such as Lady Mede represents, there was plenty to worry about for those of lower station who, if they were not worth bribing, still presented ample inducement to robbers and swindlers.

Robin Hood, for all his occasional daring do, was not above mere hucksterism of the kind Covetousness describes. It is by means of fox-like trickery rather than force that he carries off the wealth of his enemies in many of the early ballads. But at this stage he is not yet a fully-realized champion of the people, and though he relieves rich abbots, bishops, and merchants of their wealth, redistributing it becomes a part of the tradition only later. In fact, in Robin Hood and the Potter the only gold he distributes is to the wealthy Sheriff of Nottingham’s wife. “Dam, for mey loffe and ye well thys were, / Y geffe yow here a golde ryng.” (“Dame, if you will wear it for love of me, I’ll give you this gold ring” [240-42]). He does sell the titular potter’s wares to all comers at ruinously low prices, but this, like the gift of the ring, is to ingratiate himself with the sheriff’s wife rather than to benefit the ordinary

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37 See passus 2-4
buyers. The story ends with two additional acts of generosity toward the wealthy: Robin sends the sheriff’s wife a white palfrey (with her fuming husband atop it, freshly robbed of his own horse and money), and gives the Potter the enormous sum of £10 for the two shillings’ worth of pots Robin had practically given away. Robin’s prodigality with the Potter’s wares, it turns out, was not to spite the Potter, but only to further his plan of positioning himself close enough to the sheriff to lure him into the forest, where he is at the outlaw’s mercy. The Potter, Robin graciously declares in the final stanza, is welcome to the woods any time.

Only in later stories did Robin Hood resist authority in an effort to regain his own lost position within its structure. Centuries before the earliest datable Robin Hood texts, stories of dispossessed knights and noblemen enjoyed popularity, and these share many features that would later become central to the Robin Hood tradition. Robin Hood’s gentrification, as a dispossessed nobleman, would be a long stride in the direction of making him a more respectable and conservative figure. But in the early ballads his origins are humble and distinct from the nobles whom he harasses. Pay before you leave, he instructs a knight in A

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38 The Gesta Herewardi, composed in the mid-twelfth century, tells of the historical Hereward the Knight, outlawed and banished by William I. He takes to the forest with a band of outlaws, and aided by his deadly bow, avenges his slain brothers, wins royal pardon, and reclaims his confiscated family estate. Another real historical figure, the French nobleman Eustache the Monk (c. 1170–1217), inspired an Old French poem in a manuscript dated around 1284, which describes his wrongful dispossession by the Count of Boulogne, and the measures he took to avenge himself, including forest-based raids on the Count and his men, disguises, and forms of trickery so strongly resembling specific events in the fifteenth-century “Gest of Robyn Hood” that Knight and Ohlgren conclude that Eustache is almost surely one of its sources. Lost lands and a royal falling-out also vex a noble-turned-outlaw in the fourteenth-century Anglo-Norman ancestral romance Fouke le Fitz Waryn. The prose account survives in a miscellany dated c. 1325–40, based on a lost thirteenth-century version in verse, and describes Fouke’s rebellion against King John, with aid from a lieutenant, John de Rampaigne. Not until 1521 would King John become a feature of the Robin Hood tradition, when John Major’s Historia Majoris Brittaniae relocated Robin Hood to the twelfth-century—inspired, perhaps, by the story of Fouke le Fitz Waryn. Knight and Ohlgren, Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales, 3–4.

39 As Knight and Ohlgren point out, “If, like Fouke, [Robin Hood] opposed a bad king as a dispossessed lord, then his resistance was in a real sense in support of the existing structures of authority.” Ibid., 4.
Gest of Robyn Hood, for “It was never the maner, by dere worthi God, / A yoman to pay for a knight” (147-48). Thus, perhaps, his lack of *noblesse oblige* in the early ballads.

But whether or not Robin Hood was of the peasantry, he was not necessarily always fighting for them, and behind even the more lighthearted antics of the early ballads looms the constant threat of violent force. In his description of the outlaw’s roughness, at least, the treacherous monk of *Robyn Hood and the Monk* speaks truly:

> For Robyn Hode hase many a wilde felow,  
> I tell you in certen;  
> If thei wist ye rode this way,  
> In feith ye shulde be slayn (*RHM* 179-182)

A reportedly common fifteenth-century proverb, “Good even, good Robin Hood,” suggests menace rather than neighborly goodwill. Joseph Ritson describes it as evoking a sense of “civility extorted by fear.”

It is fear, more than admiration or hope, that Robin Hood’s name incites in the early ballads to those who hear it. *A Gest of Robin Hood* (c.1450), though the least bloody of the early ballads, is evidently aware of the violence of the Robin Hood tradition and uses it to good effect to convey the stature of the hero’s legend. Twice in the poem, Robin’s visits from the forest into town occasion panic in the townspeople who see him and his men. In the first instance, we are told that the populace “cryed out on Robyn Hode” (1181), which John Bellamy ventures to interpret as “raising the hue and cry against Robin Hood, and in that case

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40 Robin Hood’s description here as a yoeman is typical (see, for example, “Robin Hood and the Potter,” which describes him as a “god yeman” [13]). This was long taken to mean a rustic [See Knight 1994, 55]. But more recent scholarship has cast even this into some doubt. James Holt, who argued for a significant readership of Robin Hood tales among rural feudal households, pointed out that “yeoman” could refer not only to a peasant freeholder but also to an official of some position within a great house. Holt, *Robin Hood*, 120.

41 Ritson, *Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs and Ballads Now Extant Relative to the Celebrated English Outlaw (To Which Are Prefixed Historical Anecdotes of His Life)*, I:xxxvii; Qtd. in Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography*, 7.
the town constables had to make an arrest.\footnote{John Bellamy, \textit{Crime and Public Order in England in the Later Middle Ages} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 93 Qtd. in Knight and Ohlgren, n.1181.} Robin Hood’s second visit to town clarifies the nature of the citizenry’s concerns. Upon seeing the king shooting alongside Robin Hood in an archery tournament at the edge of town, the people fear for the king’s life as well as for their own safety, for, as they murmur to one another, “Come Robyn Hode to the towne, iwys / On lyve he lefte never one” (1711-12). Their terror of this reportedly merciless outlaw is such that they begin to evacuate the town:

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Full hastily they began to fle,
Both yemen and knaves,
And olde wyves that myght evyll goo, [who could not easily walk]
They hypped on theyr staves. [hopped on their crutches] (1713-16)
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Knight and Ohlgren comment on what “seems a sharp form of opposition in these scenes between forest and urban values . . . [suggesting] a stronger sociopolitical conflict than the usual notion of Robin Hood as a universal hero.”\footnote{Knight and Ohlgren, \textit{Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales}, n. 1713. And though Knight and Ohlgren do not discuss it, lines 1417-24 indicate the same. The king makes inquiry in order to adjudicate a conflict between the sheriff on the one side, and Sir Richard of the Lee and Robin Hood on the other, and though the poem does not tell us what the people say in reply, what the king learns is bad enough, apparently, that he decides against the outlaw and his ally:}

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He [the king] asked men of that countré
After Robyn Hode, And after that gentyll knyght,
That was so bolde and stout.
Whan they had tolde hym the case
Our kyng understode ther tale,
And seased in his honde
The knyghtes londes all. (1417-24)
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Later events in the poem seem to undermine the severity of these dire reports, for the king changes his mind about Robin Hood and even joins the outlaw for a time in the forest, and nowhere in the Gest is Robin Hood shown indulging in the kind of wanton violence implied in the townspeople’s testimony. What we see in several other ballads is a very different story, though, and shows that although the Gest itself does not confirm that the townspeople had cause for alarm, their fears of Robin Hood were in fact well founded.
does not hew to what was by then the largely-established tradition of Robin Hood as, in the words of the *Gest*, “a good outlawe” (l. 1823), for in the *Progress*, the people of Nottingham are taught fear. Purporting to explain Robin’s outlaw origin story, the poem tells how a fifteen-year-old Robin Hood responds to the harassment of fifteen foresters by shooting them down—smilingly—in what Knight and Ohlgren call “an orgy of self-defence.” The violence continues as the people of Nottingham attempt to capture Robin, who does not spare them. In the melee that follows, “some lost legs, and some lost arms / And some did lose their blood” (67-68). Robin Hood slips away into the greenwood, and the poem ends on a somber note as the survivors bury their dead:

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They carryed these forresters into fair Nottingham,
As many there did know;
They digd them graves in their church-yard,
And they buried them all a row. (71-74)
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Although the uncertain provenance of both poems makes theories of influence difficult, it is tempting to speculate that the frightened people of the *Gest* are recalling the events recorded in *Robin Hood’s Progress to Nottingham*. Although the *Progress* constitutes what appears to be an uncharacteristically late example of the rough and dangerous Robin Hood, rather than the genteel, dispossessed do-gooder depicted in the Munday plays, its appearances in several similar versions in both written and printed form in the seventeenth century suggest a

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44 The Munday plays of the same century feature an outlaw who is safer almost to a fault. Knight and Ohlgren describe how Munday heavily redacted the violence of the ballads on which he drew: “… almost all the exciting action of the myth has gone because judged too vulgar; the only fight that occurs is between Prince John and the friar; the final recognition and re-establishment scene beloved of stage and screen is here simply that of Robin, not the returning King; the forest is never seen as a world of freedom and possible resistance, just as a site of aristocratic shame: Robin’s ‘downfall’ is his degradation from noble status and having to take to the woods. In terms of action, the fighting outlaw has become as passive as King Arthur at his most nobly inactive.” Ibid., 298.


46 Although Knight and Ohlgren argue, pace Child, who calls it “a comparatively late ballad” (III, 175), that Robin Hood’s *Progress to Nottingham* “represents a story that was certainly known by the time of the Sloane Life of Robin Hood [British Library Sloane 780] in the late sixteenth century.” Ibid.
common original, lost and of unknown date. In any case, its savage tone echoes the violence of other surviving Robin Hood ballads.

In *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborn*, for example, we see both Robin and Little John committing frightful violence, including Robin’s grisly slaying and disfiguring of the titular Guy. The vividness of the description is all too effective. Having decapitated Guy, Robin picks up the head “by the hayre,” sticks it on the end of his (Robin’s) bow, and proceeds to carve up his enemy’s face with a knife so thoroughly “That hee was never on a woman borne / Cold tell who Sir Guye was” (163; 169-70). The same poem shows Little John, too, getting his man at last, and in a distinctly unchivalric fashion. In the poem’s abrupt concluding stanza, Little John shoots the fleeing sheriff in the back, putting “an arrow broade” through his heart (233).

The most startling and potentially troubling violence occurs in *Robyn Hood and the Monk*, believed to be the earliest of the extant Robin Hood stories. There we see not only Robin’s rather arrogant and degrading treatment of Little John, but also the shocking violence of a double beheading that includes an innocent boy among its victims. As the tale

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48 The provenance of this poem is uncertain, but likely dates from the mid-fifteenth century. Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 169.

49 Though it must in fairness be said that the sheriff and his men had attempted to shoot a fleeing Will Scarlett in the same ungallant manner earlier in the poem, later editors did not find that fact exoneration of Little John’s behavior; when Thomas Percy printed “Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne” in Reliques of English Poetry in 1765, he bowdlerized the ending so that rather than killing the sheriff with an arrow to the heart, Little John “shott him into the back-syde.” Thomas Percy, ed., *Reliques of English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets (Chiefly of the Lyric Kind), Together with Some Few of Later Date*. (London: Dodsley, 1765), vol. I:186.

50 Though Little John urges caution, Robin Hood insists on risking his life to attend mass, and Derek Pearsall finds in this behavior an arrogance and disregard for the safety of his men. Pearsall, “Little John and the Ballad of Robin Hood and the Monk.”
opens, Robin Hood laments that he has not heard mass in far too long, and takes the risk of venturing from the safety of the forest to visit a church in an unnamed town, where he is recognized by a bad monk and betrayed to the sheriff. A fight ensues, and although a missing page at this point in the manuscript robs us of the details of the brawl, Robin Hood ends up arrested and imprisoned, so that Little John and Much the Miller’s son must don disguises in order to rescue their chief and, in the process, avenge his capture. It might be one thing for Little John to kill the corrupt monk in retribution for putting his “maister” in harm, even as the wretched man cries for mercy, but when Much the Miller’s son follows up by swatting off the head of the monk’s little page boy, who was an innocent witness, simply “[f]or ferd [fear] lest he wolde tell” (206), we have ventured into some very dark shade within the merry greenwood. Derek Pearsall describes it well:

Little John stands by and is party to the deed, reminding us of a world of brutal and unsentimental saga-heroes in which decency, a respect for the lives of the innocent, what we usually call a sense of honour and fair play, are not part of the code of behaviour in the way we might expect—the world of Achilles, not Hector, of Egil Skallagrimsson not Kjartan, of Heremod not Beowulf, of Dirty Harry not Philip Marlowe.52

It would appear that we are not dealing in these early tales with romance per se, and the heroes of this ambiguous genre fulfill a different set of expectations and operate according to different rules.53

51 For the most recent attempt to reconstruct the scene using codicological forensics, see: Ohlgren and Matheson, Robin Hood: The Early Poems, 1465-1560. Texts, Contexts, and Ideology., 62–63.
53 Nancy Mason Bradbury addresses the problem of genre in order to contextualize the violence in the bloody story belonging to the cycle of Robin Hood tales, The Tale of Gamelyn, which is situated on the blurry line between romance and outlaw tale. While acknowledging the startling ferocity of its quite literally bone-splintering violence, she argues that it is not gratuitous, and that Gamelyn is “not the anti-hero of a chivalric romance, but rather the genuine hero of a vehemently anti-clerical, mildly anti-chivalric, and deeply anti-authoritarian popular tale.” Nancy Mason Bradbury, “Gamelyn,” in Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature, ed. Neil Cartridge (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 130.
But other scholars have found these eruptions of violence far less dissonant with their literary contexts. Thomas Ohlgren takes them in stride, and implies that medieval audiences would have found them *de rigueur* as well. He argues that “Little John’s retributory actions against the vengeful monk are not inconsistent with those of a popular story-type frequently used in sermons: miracles of the Virgin Mary.” He compares the violence in *Robin Hood and the Monk* to the gruesome punishment of the unrepentant Jews in Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale*, drawn and hanged by a Christian mob for their murder of a young boy.

This is in one respect an insightful comparison, one that draws attention to the frequency of such associations in homiletic and secular literature alike and thus helps to guard against presentist, reactionary readings of these instances of medieval piety juxtaposed with violence. But two things complicate Ohlgren’s reading of Little John’s actions. The first has to do with the fact that the pogrom in *The Prioress’s Tale*, like the violence in nearly all miracle of the Virgin stories, is clearly retributory: a heathen antagonist (usually Jewish or Saracen) persecutes a Christian or group of Christians, and is punished for it. But as Sean Field points out, it is not at all clear from the text of *Robin Hood and the Monk* that the monk Little John waylays and kills in the same one who initially betrayed Robin Hood. And the second victim, entirely innocent, is himself a little boy, likely the same age as the seven-year-old Christian boy murdered in *The Prioress’s Tale*, and almost assuredly a Christian himself.

The second argument against an uncritical reading of this and other violent scenes in the early ballads is the fact that at least some medieval readers appear to have found them problematic. As I will discuss, a Latin charm against thieves and an accompanying drawing in a

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manuscript collection containing *Robin Hood and the Monk* invokes the crimes of Dismas and, possibly, the unwarranted violence of Peter, suggesting the unfavorable ways in which at least one priest may have regarded the violence of the early ballads. Before that, however, I turn to a brief discussion of the historical-literary context of outlawry and clerical attitudes toward Robin Hood. These will help reveal how Robin Hood’s unrepentant violence forms part of a larger deviation from the trope of the penitent thief devoted to Mary.

“a traytour, and a thefe”: Biblical Background and Clerical Attitudes

Douglas Gray includes Lucifer and Cain, “the great rebels against God,” in the outlaw tradition, and given the social circumstances I have already described, it seems likely that when Langland describes robbery as *Luciferis Aunte* (5.477), his readership would not have found the hyperbole unapt. Certainly they would have recognized the biblical overtones. The low moral status of thieves was made amply plain in the New Testament, where they serve in parables and sermons as a go-to metaphor for sinfulness, unexpected disaster, and even Satan himself: “Treuli, treuli, Y seie to you, he that cometh not in by the dore in to the foold of scheep, but stieth bi another weie, is a nyyt theef and a dai theef [. . . . ] A nyyt theef cometh not, but that he stele, sle, and leese; and Y cam, that thei han lijf . . .” (John 10.1-10). Paul warns that God’s eschatological return to judge the wicked will come as unexpectedly as a “thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5.2). The violence of thieves catalyzes the action in one of the most well-known of Christ’s parables, that of the Good Samaritan, which commences with a violent assault by roadside bandits: “A man cam doun fro Jerusalem in to Jerico, and fel among theues” (Luke 10.30). And the language of thievery intensifies Christ’s excoriation

of the currency exchangers who have set up shop in the synagogue: “It is writun, That myn hous is an hous of preyer, but ye han maad it a den of theues” (Luke 19.46).

Not all of the thieves that medieval readers would have been familiar with from the Bible are metaphorical. When the Gospel of Mark needs a narrative episode to underscore Jesus’s righteousness and the injustice of his execution, it is an outlaw, Barabbas, who serves as counterpoint. The gospel accounts describe a custom in which the Roman governor of Judea releases a prisoner as a show of largess. Although the governor Pontius Pilate attempts to release Jesus in this manner, the crowd refuses, calling instead for the release of Barabbas, and the execution of Christ. Although it is unclear from the different gospel accounts precisely with what crime Barabbas was charged, the gospel of John calls him a *latro*, or robber, and for many readers and listeners in the middle ages, at least, this designation was solidified by vernacular translations such as Wycliffe’s, which identifies him as a “theef” (John 18.40). 57

More damming yet is the gospel of John’s use of “theef” to describe Judas, whose feigned concern for “nedi men” (needy men) conceals an avaricious heart (John 12.6). Medieval poets and preachers had many uses for the disciple-turned-betrayer. Though Dante uses him to epitomize treachery, other contemporary writers emphasize that greed and theft numbered among his crimes, focusing on Judas’s objection to the waste of costly perfume Mary uses to anoint Jesus’s feet. Like a would-be Robin Hood (of the Early Modern and Modern type), Judas protests that the expensive fragrance could better have been sold and the money given to the poor, but the gospel narrator reveals his duplicity: “But he seide this

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57 The gospel of Matthew calls Barabbas a “notorious criminal,” and the other three gospels associate him with violent insurrection against the occupying Roman forces. Matt. 27.16, Mark 15.7, Luke 23.19, John 18.40
thing, not for it perteynde to hym of nedi men, but for he was a theef, and he hadde the
pursis, and bar tho thingis that weren sent” (John 12.6). John’s gospel is alone in so explicitly
ascribing greed to Judas as his primary motivation in this story, but cupidety became one of
Judas’s main traditional traits in medieval descriptions of his life and sins.58 The Golden
Legend’s retelling of “The Passion of the Lord,” for example, gives greed as the prime cause
of Judas’s betrayal of Christ for the price of thirty pieces of silver.59

It should be obvious from all this that thieves could serve medieval moralizers as a
convenient shorthand for wickedness. When Langland rolls all of the seven deadly sins into a
representative composite in Piers Plowman, the result is neither a fornicator nor a murderer
but rather a thief, one Robert the Robber (5.462). Not surprisingly, the “official” attitude
toward Robin Hood tales tended to be overwhelmingly negative, and if Robin Hood’s early
legend is one more spoken of than speaking, we have enough to be able to note two
competing strands in its reception history, between clerical denunciation on the one hand and
popular acclaim on the other.

Scottish chronicler Walter Bower, who took for granted Robin Hood’s historical
reality, described him, in his revisions (c. 1440) to John Fordun’s Scotichronicon, as a
famosus sicarius, or “infamous cutthroat,” and scorned the “foolish people [who] are so
inordinately fond of celebrating [him] in tragedies and comedies.”60 In sermons, too, Robin
Hood’s name signified idleness and worthlessness. Doubless the clergy who denounced
Robin Hood did not fail to notice that many of his victims were churchmen. In A Gest of

58 For more on the complex and conflicting depictions of Judas in medieval literature and drama, see
Richard Axton, “Judas in Middle English Literature,” in Religion in the Poetry and Drama of the Late
Middle Ages in England, by Piero Boitani and Anna Torti, eds. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 179–97;
A still more expansive discussion is given in Susan Gubar, Judas: A Biography (New York: Norton, 2009)
See especially 14, 25, 83-89.
60 qtd. in Knight, Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography, 5.
Robyn Hood, Robin tells his men that corrupt monks and bishops should be their number one target for robbery: “These bisshoppes and these archebissoppe, / Ye shall them bete and bynde; (57-58). The certain way to draw Robin Hood out of hiding, a forester assures the king, is to “walke downe by yon abbay, / And gete you monkes wede,” for he will not be able to resist raiding a party of monks (1471-72). Sure enough, by dressing “Ryght as he were abbot-lyke” (1487), the king is able to confront the incorrigible poacher of his deer.

Often, however, pastoral complaints seem to have less to do with the anticlerical content of the tales than about the effect of their popularity, which eclipsed the more edifying learning that parishioners ought to have been doing. Though Ohlgren makes a convincing case that the themes of Robyn Hood and the Potter might have been found suitable for use in sermon exempla by the sixteenth century secular priest whose copy of the manuscript was bound alongside The Pryck of Conscience, this was certainly not the chief aim of the earlier Robin Hood stories, which are far from didactic. Our first glimpse of Robin Hood in English literature, in Piers Plowman, attests the dismay with which reform-minded medieval writers regarded his influence. There, it is an allegorical personification of Sloth who is a Robin Hood fan, and “ydel tales” are blamed for leading both churchmen and their parishioners to neglect their prayers and other important duties. Robin Hood gets first mention as an example of these of “ydel tales at the ale” (5.5404):

I kan noght parfitly my Paternoster as the preest it syngeth,  
But I kan rymes of Robyn hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre.  

I cannot say my paternoster perfectly, as the priest sings it,  
But I know rhymes of Robin Hood and Randolph, Earl of Chester.

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Sloth has not only been inordinately fond of these outlaw “rymes,” but apparently memorized them as well, for he admits that although “I kan noght parfitly my Paternoster as the preest it syngeth,” he “kan”—that is, “knows”—the rhymes. However these verses were recited, whether spoken, sung, or chanted with musical accompaniment, they were not courtly entertainment, but a popular part of the minstrel tradition.63 This slothful priest, then, has been playing the part of a minstrel, enjoying and perhaps reciting them himself, and not only in taverns, but even in the church itself, for as he confesses, “I am occupied ech a day, holyday and oother, / With ydel tales at the ale and outherwhile [sometimes] in chirches” (5.403-04).64

Langland’s attitude might almost be a preview of clerical reformist attitudes toward Robin Hood stories more than a century later. In The Obedience of a Christian Man (1528), Tyndale mentions Robin Hood in his castigation of Catholic priests who forbid laity to read the Bible while at the same time condoning their enjoyment of popular romances.65 Hugh Latimer’s opinion of Robin Hood was no better. In the sixth of seven sermons preached before King Edward VI in 1549, he complained that he’d witnessed the deleterious effects of

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63 For a discussion of this debate as it concerns the earliest Robin Hood poems, see: David C. Fowler, “Rymes of Robin Hood,” in Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism, ed. Stephen Knight (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 59–76 Fowler gives additional evidence supporting the much earlier conclusions of E.K. Chambers that the earliest Robin Hood ballads were probably “given in a chanting tone, and perhaps with some musical accompaniment,” but not sung. E.K. Chambers, English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 148.

64 “Ydel tales” refers specifically to gossip, but in the context of his confession of the outlaw tales only seven lines earlier, would appear to include secular rhymes as well. See: Susan Phillips, Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2007).

65 “Fynally that this thretenyng and forbiddynge the laye people to read the scripture is not for love of youre soules (which they care for as the foxe doeth for the gysse) is evidence and clerer then the sonne in as moch as they permitte and force you to reade Robyn hode and bevies of hamptom, Hercules/hector and troylus with a tousande histories and fables of love and wantons and of rybaudry as filthy as herte can thinke to corrupte the myndes of youth with all, clen contrary to the doctrine of Christ and of his apostles.” Qtd. in Ohlgren and Matheson, Robin Hood: The Early Poems, 1465-1560. Texts, Contexts, and Ideology., 186.
“Robyn hoodes day” on church attendance during a visit about ten years earlier to a parish in the Worcester diocese, where he found the church door “faste locked” on what a lone parishioner told him was “Robin hoodes daye.” Latimer was not amused: “It is no laughing matter my frends, it is a wepyng matter, a heauye matter, a heauy matter vnder the pretence for gathering for Robyn hoode, a traytour, and a thefe, to put out a preacher, to haue hys office lesse esteemed . . .”

Slightly earlier, Robin Hood had garnered a mention in the marginal commentary (denoted with brackets, below) to a fifteenth-century sermon manuscript archived in the Hereford Cathedral Library:

Many of these ley pepyll dispise presthode, ne they take none hede to pe Scripture of almyӡti God. Thei take more hede to these wanton proficijs, as Thomas of Arsildowne [and Robyn Hoode], and soche sympyll maters, but pei ӡefe not so fast credens [to] the prophettis of God, as Isaye, Jeremye, David, Daniel and to al the twelve prophetis of God.

The spiritual danger that idle distractions like tales of Robin Hood posed is summed up pretty neatly in this sermon’s Latin citation of Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians, with accompanying vernacular translation, which I give here: “Se ӡe how warly ӡe shall go. Not as unwise men but as wise men. For thyne dayes ben ivell” (Ephesians 5.15-16).

Underlying the tension between popular regard and clerical denunciation, two other aspects of the late medieval Robin Hood tradition are in conflict: his sinfulness and his pious devotion. These are key ingredients in the “penitent thief” tradition on which the ballads draw.

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66 Qtd. in ibid., 186–87.
68 Ibid., 162.
and which, I argue, they rework for the benefit of audiences whose concerns are, like Robin Hood’s, more immediate.

With an understanding of the both the ballad tradition and the historical-literary context of outlawry now in mind, we return at last to the matter of Robin Hood’s violence, and the way it signals an important deviation from the trope of the thief whose encounter with members of the holy family inspires devotion and repentance.

**Dismas and the Trope of the Penitent Thief**

The evident darkness of the associations I have so far described, in which thieves serve to signify wickedness or unexpected calamity, is complicated by a competing medieval tradition in which thieves exemplify the possibility of redemption and rehabilitation. Adding to the rich multivalence of the outlaw is the fact that the image of a ravaging thief even occurs in biblical and extra-biblical narratives to describe Christ himself. The *Golden Legend*’s account of the resurrection and harrowing of hell draws on multiple metaphors simultaneously in order to give a vivid description of the enormity of the redemptive action being performed. Quoting the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, Jacobus applies to Christ this startling description: “The lion is come up out of his den and the robber of nations has roused himself” (Jer. 4.7).\(^69\) Christ is at once a righteous judge and a ruthless raider, one who comes to reclaim damned souls as his own, storming past “dark gatekeepers” who whisper fearfully that he comes “to take from us what is ours.”\(^70\) Hell, personified, shudders at news of his approach, asking of Satan, “Is he the one who restored Lazarus, *who was mine*, to life?”\(^71\)

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\(^{70}\) Ibid., 54.224.  
\(^{71}\) Ibid., emphasis mine.
Metaphorical robbers aside, Barabbas is not the last actual “theef” in the story of the Passion. There are also the two thieves crucified at either side of Christ, one belligerent, the other penitent. Their story is very briefly related in the gospel of Luke:

And aftir that thei camen in to a place, that is clepid of Caluerie, there thei crucifieden hym, and the theues, oon on the riyt half, and `the tother on the left half. [. . . .] And oon of these theues that hangiden, blasfemyde hym, and seide, If thou art Crist, make thi silf saaf and vs. But `the tothir answerynge, blamyde hym, and seide, Nether thou dredist God, that art in the same dampnacioun? And treuli we iustli, for we han resseuied worthi thingis to werkis; but this dide no thing of yuel. And he seide to Jhesu, Lord, haue mynde of me, whanne thou comest `in to thi kyngdom. And Jhesus seide to hym, Treuli Y seie to thee, this dal thou schalt be with me in paradise. (Luke 23.33; 39-43).

These few verses are the full extent of the two thieves’ presence in the canonical scriptures, but that was enough to germinate a late-antique and medieval tradition that would grow up around them. The second-century pseudopigraphical Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the fourth-century apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, the sixth-century Arabic Infancy Gospel of Christ, and the Golden Legend all give elaborated versions of their lives.72

“Dismas,” adapted from the Greek δύση, meaning “sunset” or “dying,” is the name given to the penitent thief in the Gospel of Nicodemus, which gives the unrepentant thief’s name as Gestas. They are called Dumachus and Titus in the sixth-century Arabic Infancy Gospel, which relates an origin story for the pair. The two thieves lie in wait beside a desert road with a band of other robbers, the rest of whom are sleeping. Joseph, Mary, and the infant Christ approach, in flight to Egypt from the wrath of Herod. For reasons the Infancy Gospel does not explain, Titus beseeches his companion to spare these travelers, and pledges money from his own purse in exchange for keeping silent and not waking the other robbers. For

these efforts to protect the holy family, Mary blesses him and prophesies that he will be received on Christ’s right hand. At this point, the infant Jesus breaks in to affirm that, yes indeed, he will be crucified in thirty years’ time, at which point Titus (following an apparent recidivism into crime) will hang at his right hand, and Dumachus on his left, and Titus will precede him into paradise.\textsuperscript{73}

The trope of the penitent thief proliferated in the middle ages, and even a cursory browse among the stories in the collected saints’ lives in the \textit{Golden Legend} would give one to think that any saint worth his \textit{odor sanctitatis} has converted a would-be robber or two. The Life of St. Felix tells of how men who came at night to steal from his garden were compelled miraculously to work in it until dawn. St. Felix greeted them in the morning, whereupon they confessed and left forgiven.\textsuperscript{74} The \textit{Golden Legend’s} life of St. Martin records a similar incident. Crossing the Alps to visit his parents, he is set upon by robbers, but comes to no harm, for and once again a showdown ensues between a pair of robbers over the victim’s fate, one holding back the sword arm of his fellow before the blow can land on the godly man’s head. Martin preaches to and converts this robber, who “put him back on the road and afterward finished his days in praiseworthy living.”\textsuperscript{75} And the \textit{Golden Legend’s} “The Annunciation of the Lord” describes the conversion of a bad knight after a lifetime of highway robbery.\textsuperscript{76}

Robbers were not only converted by saints, but could themselves be sites of special blessedness. Though Dismas was never officially canonized, Christ’s assurances to him that,\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{74} de Vorágine, \textit{The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints}, 19.92.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 166.679.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 51.201–202.
“this day you will be with me in paradise” were taken to mean that his salvation was assured, and that he could therefore be invoked as a saint.77

A connection between Robin Hood and his larcenous forebear, Dismas, was obvious to at least some members of his late-medieval readership. The background of the outlaw tradition, and the frequently bloody excess of Robin Hood’s criminality in particular, are the basis for Langland’s allusion to him in Piers Plowman. There, the successful shriving of the seven deadly sins culminates in an eighth confession, one that blurs somewhat with Sloth’s, as the poet introduces “Roberd the Robbere” and describes his tearful and desperate show of contrition:

Roberd the Robbere on Reddite loked,
And for ther was noght wher[with], he wepte swithe soore.
And yet the synfulle sherewe [rouge] seide to hymselfe
“Crist, that on Calvarie upon the cros deidest,
Tho Dysmas my brother bisoughte thee of grace;
So rewe on this Rober[d] that Reddere ne have,
Ne nevere wene to wynne with craft that I knowe;
But for thi muchel mercy mitigacion I biseche:
Dampne me noght at Domesday for that I dide so ille!’ (5.462-471)

This abrupt appearance of Robert Robber makes for one of the more difficult passages in the B-Text, for Langland does not make clear his relationship to the other seven deadly sins, but his criminal vocation requires little explication.78 “Robert’s men” was a colloquial

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78 Wenzel attributes the lack of clarity in the passage to “unclarity in Langland’s thought” on the subject of acedia, owing to an “unresolved tension between adherence to tradition and a conception, or at least an emphasis, of his own.” Siegfried Wenzel, The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 146. I do not wish to founder on the debates over Piers Plowman’s authorship or textual variants here, so suffice to say that whether the ambiguity of the Robert the Robber passage is owing to the uncoordinated revisions of multiple authors or to a possible
description for thieves in the fourteenth century, and Robert the Robber is a stock character, an archetypal composite of a criminal. A.V.C. Schmidt, dismissing an earlier critic’s suggestion that Robert the Robber is “an eighth sin” or “a generic name for a slothful waster,” insists instead that he functions as a composite of all sinful humanity: he “sums up all sinners as those who are ‘in debt’ to God: all have ‘stolen’ like the thief Lucifer (5.477) and must beg mercy from the crucified Saviour.”

Like usury, which medieval commentators condemned and compared with sodomy as an unnatural “breeding” of wealth, theft violates natural law, the law of kind. “Thow art an unkynde creature,” Repentance accuses Covetousness (5.269). Sloth’s crimes place him in the same great spiritual jeopardy, for as Langland’s Christ teaches, to act with “vnkyndenesse” is to sin against the Holy Spirit. There is a certain dire irony, then, in Sloth’s admitted love for outlaw tales, for the dastardly exploits to which he thrills are the very ones he is committing himself. His confession includes passages that Langland could

“unceality” on the part of Langland alone, there is sufficient evidence nonetheless that medieval readers recognized him as a stock composite of dishonest actions at a low social level.

79 Holt, Robin Hood, 156; There is evidence that “Robin Hood” too was a stock alias used by thieves, though whether the name gave rise to the hero or vice versa is uncertain. Dobson and Taylor, Rymes of Robin Hood, xxi–xxii.

80 The term “Robert’s men” even appears in an Act of parliament, once in 1331 and confirmed again in 1385, intended to correct the “robberies, homicides and felonies done in these time by people that be called Roberdesmen, Wastours and Drahlacche [Drawlatch].” Edward III c.14, SR 1.268; first noted Skt; qtd. in Andrew Galloway, The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman, vol. 1: C Prologue-Passus4; B Prologue-Passus 4; A Prologue-Passus 4 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 77.


82 And in fact, Piers Plowman authorship debates in the early twentieth century included much discussion of Robert the Robber’s shift in location between the A/B and C texts, from under the scene of the confession of Sloth in the former (B.5.461-76; A.5.233-50) to the earlier confession of Covetousness in the latter (C.6.315-29). There was much speculation as to whether a later author or authors might have deemed Sloth a less appropriate place than Covetousness for all the associations that Robert the Robber carried with him of dishonesty. Galloway, The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman, 1: C Prologue-Passus4; B Prologue-Passus 4; A Prologue-Passus 4:76–77.

83 17.204-34, 248-60. Qtd. in David Aers and Lynn Staley, Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 75.
just as easily have placed in the parched mouth of Covetousness. The waste of talent, opportunity, time, and the edifying available, all of this is an affront to—and robbing of—their giver, as well as of his parishioners and employers.

Importantly, Sloth confesses his love for outlaw tales in the same breath that he confesses to having broken vows, failed to perform the penance he was assigned, and never felt real contrition:

I have maad avowes fortye, and foryete hem on morwe;
I parfournede nevere penaunce as the preest me highte,
Ne right sory for my synnes was I nevere. (5. 398-400)

In the scene that follows, he will reverse each of these errors, making an earnest vow of lengthy penance in order to show that his remorse is genuine (5.449-61). One reference in that vow and another in the scene immediately following are call-backs to his confession. Having admitted earlier to time wasted on tales of Randolph, Earl of Chester, Sloth now vows penance by “bi the Rode of Chestre” (5.460) (the Cross of Chester), and it is here, on the heels of that vow, Langland, who has already alluded to outlaws Robin Hood and Randolf, introduces the two additional robbers: Robert the Robber, a composite of all the previous sins, will himself appeal to the penitent thief Dismas, whom he calls “my brother” (5.466) to show that absolution is possible through divine grace even to thieves unable to make material restitution.

84 E.g., If I bygge and borwe aught, but if it be ytailed,
I foryete it as yerne, and yif men me it axe
Sixe sithes or severe, I forsake it with othes;
And thus tene I trewe men ten hundred tymes.
And my servaunts som tyme, hir salarie is bihyn:
Ruthe is to here the rekenyng whan we shal rede acountes,
So with wikked wil and wrathe my werkmen I paye! (5.423-29)

85 Schmidt notes that the location alluded to is “formerly on Rood Eye (Cross Island) in the Dee at Chester.” Langland, The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17, 428.
Langland’s skillful poetic inversion of images introduced earlier not only recruits Sloth’s sin in the depiction of its salving, but sets up a network of thematic resonances between robber figures who can only cry, like Dismas, “Dampne me noht at Domesday for that I dide so ille!” (5.471). “[T]her is no man just,” as Wycliffe’s fourteenth-century translation renders the stern doctrine of Paul, “ther is noon that doith good thing” (Romans 3.10;12). Theologically speaking, all people are outlaws, transgressors of divine law through inherited guilt and volitional sin. The question Piers Plowman poses to its readers by alluding to Dismas and, by association, Gestas, the “good and bad” thieves, is, what kind of outlaw will you be? One who craves pardon or goes unrepentant into hell? And if the former, how is pardon to be won? Langland insists on the necessity of restitution while at the same time upholding its impossibility, presenting his readers with references to thieves who could not pay for their crimes except through tears of contrition.

The allusion to Dismas in Piers Plowman is not the last association between Robin Hood and the thieves on the cross. An additional textual connection between the two thieves occurs in the form of a Latin charm, entitled Contra ffiores et latrones, in Cambridge MS Ff.5.48, folio 10v. Jack Baker draws our attention to the fact that the manuscript in which this charm against thieves and robbers appears, a fifteenth-century household book belonging to the secular priest Gilbert Pilkington, contains the earliest known Robin Hood ballad, Robin Hood and the Monk. Read alongside each other, Baker suggests, these two texts not only

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87 About one year before Baker’s article, Ohlgren and Matheson mention the presence of the Latin charm, noting only that it appears to be a later addition, “inspired perhaps by the outlaw tale Robin Hood and the Monk, which is on folios 128v-135v.” Ohlgren and Matheson, Robin Hood: The Early Poems, 1465-1560. Texts, Contexts, and Ideology., 215 n.15.
show the “unmistakable fear of robbery (and the steps taken to ward off robbery)” in the late middle ages, but also offer hints about the ambiguity of Robin Hood's character.\textsuperscript{88}

Baker transcribes and translates the ten-line Latin charm, whose opening five lines contain the relevant allusion to the thieves:

\textit{Contra ffurres et latrones}

\begin{verbatim}
Disparibus meritis pendent tria corpora ramis
Dismas et Gesmas medio divina potestas
Summa petit dismas sed tendit ad infima iesmas
Nos et res nostras servet divina potestas
\end{verbatim}

Against thieves and robbers

On account of disparate merits, three bodies hang from boughs
Dismas and Gesmas, and Divine Power in the middle
Dismas reaches toward the highest [heaven], but Gesmas stretches toward the deepest [hell]
Let Divine Power protect us and our possessions\textsuperscript{89}

Because many of the manuscript's texts are mutually reinforcing, “serving to offer practical instruction ranging from prognostication to basic religious conduct,” Baker feels justified in speculating that “perhaps the manuscript compiler, possibly even Gilbert Pilkington himself, perceived the correspondence between Robin Hood and this charm.”\textsuperscript{90}

The parallels Baker identifies between the Latin charm and \textit{Robin Hood and the Monk} are compelling, even if his argument that Little John's exclamation “Be Hym that dyed on tre’ (l.125) immediately evokes our charm” may be a little overstated, given the pervasiveness of similar expressions across the ballads.\textsuperscript{91} More persuasive is the connection

\textsuperscript{88} Baker, “Christ’s Crucifixion and ‘Robin Hood and the Monk’: A Latin Charm against Thieves in the Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.5.48,” 72.
\textsuperscript{89} Baker provides the entire text of the poem along with his own English translation on pp. 79-81.
\textsuperscript{90} Baker, “Christ’s Crucifixion and ‘Robin Hood and the Monk’: A Latin Charm against Thieves in the Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.5.48,” 81.
\textsuperscript{91} It occurs in the Gest on lines 405, 439, 1227, 1363. Knight and Ohlgren call it simply a metrical “line-filler.” Knight and Ohlgren, \textit{Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales}, 49 n.14 In light of Baker’s assertion, it is
he draws between a manuscript illustration of a rooster facing a lion, appearing just beneath the charm, and a line in Robin Hood and the Monk in which “the cok began to crow” (l.287) as John and Much flee the city with Robin Hood, whom they have just freed from the sheriff’s prison. Baker finds this “the clearest connection between the poem and the charm” (83), and reminds us that the cock’s crow is described in medieval bestiaries as having the power to ward off thieves.92

If indeed the unknown scribe who prefixed Contra ffures et latrones to the manuscript collection intended to draw a connection between the crimes of Dismas and Gestas and the violence perpetrated in Robin Hood and the Monk, he was not necessarily the first to do so. The poet himself makes use of biblical allusions that indict the use of violence even in defense of the holy. When he wrote “the cok began to crow” (l.287), the poet may well have had in mind the only cock crow mentioned in the Bible, which occurs following Peter’s three denials of Christ, related in all four of the canonical gospels.93 Baker mentions this scene only briefly and with little explication, but its significance as a point of reference for Robin Hood may lie in the way it exposes the falseness of Peter, who had insisted that “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will” (Matt. 26.33). After Jesus has been arrested and is being interrogated, Peter fulfills his lord’s prophetic reply that Peter would deny even knowing him three times before the cock crows.94 Given the acts of violence and

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92 The sixth verse of St. Ambrose’s fourth-century hymn, Aeterne rerum conditor, describes the cock’s crow as signaling the limit of a violent thief’s power: “Gallo canente, spes redit, / Aegris salus refunditur, / Mucro latronis conditur, / Lapsis fides revertitus . . . ” Baker provides his own translation: “Singing, the cock renews hope, / health is restored to the ill, / the sword of the robber is sheathed, / the one having gone astray returns to faith.” Baker, “Christ’s Crucifixion and ‘Robin Hood and the Monk’: A Latin Charm against Thieves in the Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.5.48,” 77–78.
duplicit from which the three thieves in *Robin Hood and the Monk* are fleeing—John and Much have killed the monk and his young page, concealed the bodies, and then killed Robin's jailor—it may be that the poet himself is acknowledging an element of contradiction in the behavior of the pious men whose audacious escape the poem celebrates.

The gospel of John adds a detail to the account of Peter's denial that is noteworthy in light of the poem's decapitations. One of the men to demand of the increasingly-nervous Peter, “Did I not see thee in the garden with him?” is “a kinsman to him whose ear Peter cut off” (John 18.26). The incident this question alludes to took place at the moment of Jesus’s arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, where Peter had drawn a sword and attacked one of the high priest’s men, identified in John 18.10 as Malchus. Jesus's response to this show of defense had been to rebuke Peter and order him to put his sword away, and, in the gospel of Luke, to miraculously heal the man's ear.95 However faint, this possible allusion to the story of Peter and Malchus, which calls into question the suitability of violence as an expression of zealous devotion, seems well suited to the bloody jailbreak that Little John has just arranged for his own master.

Although the poem’s happy conclusion appears to fulfill John's prediction that “No wyckud deth shal he [Robin] dye” (136), there remains, as Baker argues, “certainly a great deal of ambiguity surrounding the way in which one should interpret [the actions of Robin and his men] . . . especially because the religious tone seems to contrast with those acts of violence that fall outside of the bounds of good outlawry.”96 John is devoted both to Christ and to Robin Hood, who himself appears wholly sincere in his service to “Oure

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95 John 18:10-11; Luke 22.49-51
96 Baker, “Christ’s Crucifixion and ‘Robin Hood and the Monk’: A Latin Charm against Thieves in the Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.5.48,” 83.
Lady” (133). This serves to situate Robin Hood within the tradition of the penitent thief specially devoted to Mary, but does not necessarily justify or exonerate his actions, especially given that the ballads neglect an integral component of that tradition: penitence.

Repentance and rehabilitation, are, after all, the unmistakable theme of the Dismas story, and the reason for Langland’s allusions to him in *Piers Plowman*. It is not difficult to identify the turpitudes that bind Robin Hood into textual brotherhood with thieves from the biblical and hagiographical tradition, but any attempt to make a clearing in the greenwood in which to bring their similarities fully into light must ask whether the parallels extends to repentance and rehabilitation.

It must be answered that they do not, but the situation is nonetheless complicated. Robin Hood’s tradition, as I have shown, comprises both the thief condemned and the thief redeemed, and as such he is a site of tension between pious virtue and damnable sin. Like Gesmas in the Latin charm against thieves, some of his actions seem to “[reach] toward the deepest,” and though, like Dismas, he “reaches for the highest” in his devoted piety, the poems do not feature contrition or penitence among their dominant themes. Peter, upon hearing the cock crow and recalling Jesus's words, “went outside and wept bitterly” (Matthew 26.75), and Robert the Robber, “[wept] faste water with hise eighen” (*Piers Plowman* 5.473). But neither John nor Robin Hood weep bitter tears of contrition in *Robin Hood and the Monk*; instead, the outlaws reunite in the forest to feast on venison pasties and ale (a complementary pairing, as the poet helpfully notes [135-36]). Only once in the early ballads does he perform an act of penance. Growing restless as a member of the king's court at the end of the *Gest of Robin Hood*, Robin asks leave to go
to “a chapel in Bernysdale,” which he built in honor of Mary Magdalene (1757-68). The shift in allegiance, from Mary, pure virgin of heaven, to Mary the reformed harlot, signals the penitential nature of his intended retreat. However, this marks the only instance in any of the extant early ballads that Robin Hood expresses regret for the life he has led. Although Robin Hood is not an exemplar of contrition and repentance, he is a recipient of mercy and grace. Every Robin Hood ballad shows how Robin Hood, like Dismas, is caught and helpless to escape the heavy penalty for his crimes, and if the ballads—which are not, after all, devotional literature—have little interest in using Robin Hood as an exemplar of penance, they nonetheless show devotion and gratitude as the fitting response to divine aid. But what I want to draw attention to is the form in which this grace is mediated. These are alehouse ballads, in which the precise meaning of grace is, unsurprisingly, not developed with anything like systematic rigor. Here, much as in Morte Darthur, the language of providence is used in ways that blur the line between the meaning of “God’s grace” (MED 1a) and its connotation of “good fortune” (MED 3c). Frequently the former takes the latter form, and the economic metaphors Langland develops to convey spiritual indebtedness and divine forgiveness become very literal here. It was not at all unusual, of course, in either insular or continental legenda, for the Virgin to involve herself materially in human affairs, but those interventions were customarily performed in order to bring sinners to salvation. Here, Mary does not

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97 What’s more, he declares that he will not eat, drink, or sleep for seven days, and make his journey “barefote and wolwarde,” that is, wearing wool. This implies not only a rejection of the unsatisfying luxuries of courtly life, but also a show of penance, the wool garment reminiscent of a hair shirt. Knight and Ohlgren argue, “To walk barefoot with wool next to the skin implies penance rather than poverty.” Knight and Ohlgren, Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales, n. 1767.


99 Adrienne Williams Boyarin explains that “Mary’s unparalleled power and the belief that she could contend with the Devil, win back a damned soul, and undo a bad contract became part of what defined her role in Christian salvation” beginning in Anglo-Saxon England and continuing through to Middle English...
intercede for Robin Hood’s soul. Instead, her favor toward the earth—"bowndyn" Robin Hood takes only immediately practical forms, including physical protection and material wealth.

“Ryght Weke Gere”: Robin Hood in Need

Both *Robin Hood and the Potter* and *A Gest of Robin Hood* spare among their concluding lines a prayer for Robin Hood’s soul. The closing couplet of *RHP* asks, “God haffe mersey on Roben Hodys solle, / And saffe all god yemanrey!” (322-23), and the *Gest* adds, Cryst have mercy on his soule, / That dyded on the Rode!” (1821-22). To close with a *Kyrie eleison* was of course a commonplace, but here it raises an interesting question: of just how much mercy did Robin Hood’s soul stand in need? Barbara Hanawalt argues that Robin Hood is not shown even “to recognize the existence of a vengeful God.”100 The texts support her claim, for it is true that the ballads seem almost entirely uninterested in soteriology. Ironically, however, Robin Hood nearly always needs saving. Recurrent in Robin Hood stories is what Stephen Knight calls the “meets his match” motif, in which Robin Hood fails to triumph in tests of skill or man-to-man combat.101 Sometimes these failures are owing to insufficient physical strength; other times Robin Hood or one of his men are simply thwarted by happenstance. Thomas Ohlgren notes that Robin customarily offers a “felishepe” to reconcile himself and whomever has gotten the better of him,102 but the fellowship on which he most relies is with the Virgin Mary, to whom he cries unabashedly for aid.

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The “meets his match” scenes often involve the failure or near-failure of weapons. In *Robin Hood and the Potter*, Robin Hood has to make do with a poorly made bow, and there, it underscores his heroism that his marksmanship is none the worse for having to rely on “ryght weke gere” (200). Elsewhere, however, it is Robin Hood himself who turns out to be the inferior instrument. In *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Robin Hood’s sword shatters in his hand, resulting in his capture:

His sworde upon the schireff hed  
Sertanly he brake in too;  
“The Smyth that the made,” seid Robyn,  
“I pray to God wyrke hym woo!  
“For now am I weppynlesse,” seid Robyn,  
“Alasse! agayn my wyll;  
But if I may fle these traytors fro,  
I wot thei wil me kyll.” (111-118)

The poem offers no reason for the sword’s failure, but whatever the cause, whether the blade was defective or improperly wielded (or the sheriff’s skull too hard), Robin appears to blame the steel’s poor quality, angrily cursing its forger by wishing that God would “Wyrke hym woo.” Rather than magnifying his heroic status, either by showing off his enormous strength or forcing him to confront his enemies unaided, Robin Hood’s misadventure serves instead to reveal his insufficiency.

“For now am I weppynlesse,” seid Robyn,  
“Alasse! agayn my wyll (115-16)

Physically outmatched, Robin Hood is faced with the grim realization that he cannot achieve a good outcome on his own. He must subordinate his own “wyll” to that of a greater power.

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103 I speculate that the poem may support this reading, which seems the most obvious, after all, in a later description of another sword with which Little John arms Robin after breaking him free from prison: “He gaf hym a gode swerd in his hond, / His hed ther with to kepe” (283-84). It is possible that this “gode sword” (good sword) is meant to recall us to the one whose apparent poor quality helped contribute to Robin’s capture.
The scene’s importance may not be immediately visible, in part because of the more obvious comedic levels on which it is certainly working. There are undeniable farcical elements to the hero’s inadvertently breaking a weapon, and doing so over the skull of the obtuse villain. Audiences to stagings of the various popular Robin Hood plays would no doubt have been entertained by both the slapstick violence and Robin Hood’s subsequent frustration. Of the early texts, *A Gest of Robin Hood* does the best job setting up the comedy of the “meets his match” motif. At one point in the poem, the outlaws treat a captured abbot—actually the king in disguise—to the spectacle of an archery game in which the losers will forfeit their bows and “win” a blow to the head. When Robin shoots poorly, missing the target by “[t]hre fyngers and mare” (1412), it gives the king, long vexed with Robin’s exploits and assaults on his deer, an opportunity to “folde up his sleve” (1628) and serve Robin a royal ear-ringer: “And such a buffet he gave Robyn, / To grounde he yede full nere” (1629-30). The king enjoys this game so much that, later, after he and his courtiers have traded their black cowls for green hoods and effectively joined Robin’s men, he and Robin continue to play throughout an afternoon, Robin continuing to get the worse end of it:

And many a buffet our kynge wan
Of Robyn Hode that day,
And nothynge spared good Robyn
Our kynge in his pay. (1697-1700)

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104 Numerous critics have noted the poem’s effective use of comedy and irony. Knight and Ohlgren report that “[b]oth Child and Gray find the Arthur references light-hearted (III, 51; 1984, pp. 26-27), and Gray also sees irony in the play on Mary as a faithful guarantor, as well as more direct comedy in Little John’s buffoonish cloth measuring (lines 290-97) and his cartoon adventures both against and with the sheriff’s cook (1984, pp. 27-29).” Qtd. in Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 85, with reference to Francis James Child, *English and Scottish Ballads*, 8; 4 vols. (Boston, 1857) ; and Gray, “The Robin Hood Poems.”

105 This game is identified a bit further on in the poem as “plucke buffet” (1695), which Dobson and Taylor describe as “An archery competition with the forfeit of receiving a ‘pluck’ or knock for missing the target.” Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robin Hood*, 110.
The economic vocabulary adds to the good-natured irony. Robin, who has been a creditor up to this point the poem, preoccupied with having his loan to Sir Richard of the Lee repaid, is now in the position of “paying” (i.e. receiving a blow from) the king for each missed shot.

But there are more serious shades to the *Gest*, whose violence becomes less funny over the course of the poem, culminating in Robin’s death by poisoning at the hands of a treacherous abbess. And the scene of Robin’s failure in *Robin Hood and the Monk*, despite its comedy, reveals something more thematically serious about the hero’s unworthiness. “Now am I weppynlesse,” laments a stunned Robin Hood, and in this context of sudden calamitous failure, this sounds very much like Gawain, who exclaims, “Now am I fawty and falce!” (2332).

Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer
Of trecherye and vntrawþe . . .
I biknowe yow, knyȝt, here stylle,
Al fawty is my fare (2332-36)

Now am I faulty and false, who was always so fearful
Of disloyalty and lies . . .
I confess to you, knight, in this place,
My deed is most dire

The emotional valences of the scenes are quite different, of course, for while Gawain is stricken with shame, accepting his own falseness and proceeding to beg the Green Knight for a suitable penance to perform, Robin Hood has just *disavowed* personal responsibility, instead placing the blame squarely on the blade and its smith.106

These revelations of the limitations of Robin Hood’s heroism do not, as they do in *Sir Gawain* (and the biblical David narrative which, as I argue in my first chapter, informs that

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106 Despite the contrast in their reactions, the main difference in the two scenes has to do with the hero’s own perception. Gawain, unlike Robin Hood, recognizes this as a moment of exposure, though he too spares a moment to curse an object that played a part in his undoing. Ripping off the green belt and hurling it to the ground, he cries, ‘Lo! þer þe falssyng, foule mot hit falle! (“See there my falsehood, foul may it fall!”’). Though acknowledging the turn of events as just, this is tinged with bitterness, and the sense that he has been betrayed.
poem), clear the way for a moment of truer heroism, redeeming the exposure of falseness. What his failure in battle does serve to highlight is both the power of the Virgin Mary, whom the poem credits with aiding in his rescue, and her faithfulness in rewarding his devotion.

Unfortunately, almost immediately after Robin breaks his sword there is a break in the manuscript that deprives us of approximately forty-eight lines. But whatever the details of Robin’s capture, captured he is, and the remainder of the poem is concerned with the machinations of his rescue by Little John and Much the Miller’s son, carried out under the auspices of Mary. Little John confidently declares that his master

\[
\ldots \text{has servyd Oure Lady many a day,}
\]
\[
\text{And yet wil, securly;}
\]
\[
\text{Therfor I trust in hir specialy}
\]
\[
\text{No wyckud deth shal he dye. (133-36)}
\]

Though Robin Hood’s rescue comes, as we have seen, at the cost of considerable collateral damage—the blood of the monk, the jailor, and the innocent little page—nevertheless its success is clearly intended to demonstrate “the myght of mylde Mary” (140).

The early poem Robyn and Gandeleyn also demonstrates Mary’s efficacy, this time in helping to avenge Robin’s death at the hands of one Wrennok of Donne. Enraged at the death of his friend, Gandeleyn challenges Wrennok to an exchange of arrow shots, and when it is his turn, declares:

\[
\text{“Now hast thou govyn me on beforn,”}
\]
\[
\text{Al thus to Wrennok seyde he,}
\]
\[
\text{“And throw the myght of our Lady}
\]
\[
\text{A bettere I shal yeve the.” (60-64)}
\]

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\footnote{107} Knight and Ohlgren, Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales, n. 120.
And indeed, Gandeleyn shoots through his target’s “grene certyl” and cleaves his heart in twain, thus avenging Robin while simultaneously attesting “the myght our Lady.”

A similar crisis of heroic inadequacy remedied by saintly patronage occurs in *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, which appears in a seventeenth-century folio manuscript but was likely based on a ballad dating from the fifteenth century. In this poem, the hero’s weaknesses once again play a critical role in propelling the narrative, though this time Little John finds himself in need of help as well.

There are hints that here, as in the earlier ballads, Robin Hood is the less physically able of the pair, for as they approach a stranger in the forest, Little John cautions his chief to stand back.

> “Stand you still, master,” quoth Litle John,  
> “Under this trusty tree,  
> And I will goe to yond wight yeoman,  
> To know his meaning trulye.” (31-34)

From Robin’s response, it is clear that he senses an implied indictment of his own physical readiness to encounter the stranger, and he resents it strongly, replying with some force,

> A, John, by me thou setts noe store,  
> And thats a farley thinge;  
> How offt send I my men beffore,  
> And tarry myselfe behinde?

> “It is noe cunning a knave to ken,  
> And a man but heare him speake;  
> And itt were not for bursting of my bowe,  
> John, I wold thy head breake. (35-42)

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108 This conclusion is very similar to *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne,* which describes the death of the Sheriff in nearly identical terms, though this time it is Little John who, “with an arrow broade, / Did cleave his heart in twin” (231-34), and he credits not Mary but “Christs might in heaven” (210).

109 The poem appears in the mid-seventeenth century manuscript, British Library Add MSS. 27879. For a discussion of the likely date of the ballad on which it was based, see Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 169.
This quarrel leads to a falling out between the two, and divides the narrative as well. The poem leaves Robin Hood poised to confront the stranger, and follows Little John to the town of Barnesdale, where he discovers two of Robin's men slain and Will Scarlett in flight from the sheriff's men. John unshoulders his longbow to intervene, and takes aim at the sheriff. But once again a weapon proves unreliable. This time it is John's bow that breaks, rather than Robin's.

“Yett one shoote Ile shoote,” sayes Little John,  
“With Crist his might and mayne;  
Ile make yond fellow that flyes soe fast  
To be both glad and faine.”

John bent up a good yeiwe bow,  
And fetted him to shoote;  
The bow was made of a tender boughe,  
And fell downe to his foote.

“Woe worth thee, wicked wood,” sayd Litle John,  
“That ere thou grew on a tree!  
For this day thou art my bale,  
My boote when thou shold bee!” (55-66)

The shot is spoiled, and John's arrow misses the sheriff, killing one of his men instead. The weapon's failure leads to his capture. In *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Robin Hood was no match for the combined might of the sheriff's men, and here it is John who is overpowered and bound.

The pattern established earlier with Robin Hood holds here as well. Since the poem emphasizes Little John's areas of imperfection and weakness, it is also Little John's devotion that comes to the fore, though, as in Robin Hood and the Monk, it is to Christ rather than to Mary that he makes appeal:

“Thou shalt be drawen by dale and downe,”  
quoth the sheriffe,  
“And hanged hye on a hill.”
“But thou may fayle,” quoth Litle John,  
“If itt be Christs owne will.” (78-82)

John had of course called on Christ before, as he drew his bow, but this time his invocation proves more effective. Later in the poem, when Robin Hood finally arrives, disguised as Guy of Gisborne, John will immediately recognize his master and, perceiving that his rescue is at hand, credit Christ's power for it. “Now shall I be loset” [loosed], quoth Litle John, / “With Christs might in heaven” (209-210).

Robin Hood, meanwhile, has been having much better luck with his bow back in the greenwood than had John at Barnstow. Challenging the stranger to his customary archery contest, Robin bests the stranger, forcing him to divulge his name. He is of course the eponymous Guy of Gisborne, Robin's rival. Discarding both pretense and longbows, the two thieves immediately attack each other with fists and knives, and in the brutal fray Robin Hood yet again gives the advantage to his opponent through sheer clumsiness:

Robin was reachles [reckless] on a roote,  
And stumbled at that tyde,  
And Guy was quicke and nimble with-all,  
And hitt him ore the left side. (151-154)

The pattern is as before. On the brink of defeat, Robin Hood can no longer rely on his own strength and skill, and calls upon the Virgin.

“Ah, deere Lady!” sayd Robin Hoode,  
“Thou art both mother and may!  
I thinke it was never mans destynye  
To dye before his day.” (155-158)

Robin’s prayer is effective, for in the next lines, Robin is back on his feet and swiftly concludes both the poem and Sir Guy’s life with a final sword stroke.

Robin thought on Our Lady deere,  
And soone leapt up againe,  
And thus he came with an awkwarde [back-handed] stroke;
Good Sir Guy hee has slayne. (155-162)
Thus ends the rhyme, with no further clues as to whether the poet would have us think that Robin was simply inspired by thoughts of Mary, like a knight thinking on his lady at tournament, or infused with miraculous strength. Either way, the talismanic function of her name and its bolstering effect on his masculine physicality is evident.

**From Mary to Marion**

Hopefully, it is clear by now how multivalent was the image of the thief, and of Robin Hood in particular. Timothy Jones describes versatility as one of the hallmarks of the outlaw hero, “a character whose story grows up along a border of values,” and “champion[ing] an ‘us’ against an often more powerful ‘them,’ . . . such that when ‘the ‘us’ and ‘them’ of the original historical context disappear, the outlaw can survive by being relocated to a new border.” Robin Hood undergoes several such relocations, most notably in the plays of Anthony Munday, when he begins to reflect strongly Protestant values. Thomas Ohlgren considers the long gap between *A Gest of Robin Hood's* first publication in 1495, and its second printing forty-five years later, and suggests that it may have been due to Protestant press censorship. When Robin Hood tales do reemerge, the Virgin Mary becomes Marion; corrupt ecclesiastics become corrupt Catholic officials, and Robin Hood becomes a scourge of the wealthy and champion of the poor.

Helen Phillips describes Robin Hood as a significant part of the folklore tradition that arose in post-Reformation England, one she describes as “a safe type of medieval heritage, one suitable for a newly Protestant nation when Catholic festivals and the cults of local saints

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110 Jones, *Outlawry in Medieval Literature*, 127.
and shrines had been banned."

112 In other words, the suppression of saints’ lives and other Catholic writings made room for the reemergence of other English folk figures, including Robin Hood, who were less ideologically suspect than the saints they replaced. 113

Although this later, “safer” Robin Hood may have been no less objectionable in the eyes of Protestant reformers like Tyndale and Latimer, he was certainly less morally ambiguous than the Robin Hood of the ballads. No longer did he harm innocents or decapitate churchmen. Corrupt ecclesiastics remained a prime target, of course, but they are more recognizably Catholic. As Robin Hood becomes desacralized in the later poems, a corresponding tonal shift is perceptible among his enemies, the ecclesiastics becoming somewhat more cartoonish even as the sheriff becomes more menacing. In the early ballads it is, broadly speaking, the other way around: the sheriff, although an abiding threat, is “often almost-comic.” 114 By the time of the Munday plays in the sixteenth century, a strain of specifically Protestant anti-clericalism is abundantly evident. Robin Hood’s enemies, who up to this point had always included corrupt clerics, now become more identifiably Catholic,

113 A late eighteenth-century survey of surviving Robin Hood ballads, songs, and proverbs makes a case that he enjoyed what amounted to a popularly-bestowed sainthood in the late medieval and early modern era. Though allowing that he was “not actually canonised,” Joseph Ritson enumerates the reasons for his “indisputable claim” to sanctity nonetheless, including “the miracles wrought in his favour, as well in his lifetime as after his death, and the supernatural powers he is, in some parts, supposed to have possessed.” The civic saint Ritson describes here is one tamed and suitable within the “safe type of medieval heritage” Helen Phillips praises (Phillips 9):

he obtained the principal distinction of sainthood, in having a festival allotted to him, and solemn games instituted in honour of his memory, which were celebrated till the latter end of the sixteenth century; not by the populace only, but by kings or princes and grave magistrates; and that as well in Scotland as in England; being considered, in the former country, of the highest political importance, and essential to the civil and religious liberties of the people, the efforts of government to suppress them frequently producing tumult and insurrection. His bow, and one of his arrows, his chair, his cap, and one of his slippers, were preserved, with peculiar veneration, till within the present century; and not only places which afforded him security or amusement, but even the well at which he quenched his thirst, still retain his name . . . (L.xi-xiv).

their corruption presumed a priori. The later the text, the more vice-ridden and buffoonish become the corrupt friars to whom he deals justice.\textsuperscript{115}

Accompanying this shift in the nature of Robin Hood’s enemies comes a change in his allegiances. William John Thoms introduced a collection of nineteenth-century romances featuring Robin Hood and Maid Marion by declaring that, “Every hero . . . must have some ‘ladye of his love’ to inspire him with courage in the hour of danger and be at all times the goddess of his idolatry . . .”\textsuperscript{116} Readers of the early ballads would know better, however, for there Robin has no human love interest; the “goddess of his idolatry” is much closer to being an actual goddess: Mary, high queen of heaven. Maid Marion would not enter the legend until the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, partly in connection with the May Games.\textsuperscript{117} These “solemn games,” as Ritson calls them, were likely lacking in solemnity, despite their ostensible purpose of observing the feasts of Saints Philip and James. Whether or not some of those celebrations bore a closer resemblance to the fertility rites of antiquity, as Protestant reformist writings would have us believe, it is noteworthy that not only Protestant but also Roman Catholic authorities attempted to suppress them, in part because Marion’s relationship with Robin was neither courtly nor chaste.

\textsuperscript{115} For example, Mary Blackstone suggests that Tuck’s opening line, “Deus hic! Deus hic! God be here!,” in the late sixteenth-century play “Robin Hood and the Friar and Robin Hood and the Potter” is not only comically questionable Latin but an indication that he is drunkenly hiccoughing. Blackstone, Mary A., ed., \textit{Robin Hood and the Friar. PLS Performance Text 3}. (Toronto: Poculi Ludique Societas, 1981), 28.


\textsuperscript{117} Elizabethan playwright Anthony Munday identified Maid Marian with the historical Matilda, daughter of the baron Robert Fitzwalter, who had to flee England because of an attempt to assassinate King John in the early thirteenth century. And she appears variously as Marian, Marilda, and Matilda in William Leek’s \textit{The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntington. Otherwise called Robin Hood of merrie Sherwodde: with the lamentable Tragedie of chaste Matilda, his faire maid Marian}, published in quarto in London in 1601. See Knight and Ohlgren’s edition, based on the Malone Society’s edited text in facsimile type (1965 [1967]) of William Leake’s 1601 quarto printing, prepared by John C. Meagher, in Knight and Ohlgren, \textit{Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales}. 
So carnal a relationship as this could hardly be further from Robin’s reverence for Mary in the early ballads. Stephen Knight, describing the pervasiveness and variety of retellings of the Robin Hood myth, writes that “[o]nly figures bearing the full power of religion seem to have more meanings and manifestations.”¹¹⁸ But in the early ballads, Robin Hood does bear at least a portion of religious power, or, more accurately, reflects it, for in his devotion to the cult of Mary, he is pious almost to a fault. As we have seen, it is Robin Hood’s insistence on venturing from the safety of the forest and going to mass that costs him his freedom and very nearly his life in Robyn Hood and the Monk, but the source of the conflict is also the solution, for the poem credits Mary with rewarding his loyal veneration.

As Little John confidently declares,

He has servyd Oure Lady many a day,
And yet wil, securly;
Therfor I trust in hir specialy
No wyckud deth shal he dye. (133-136)

Happily for the outlaw, Little John’s confidence in Mary’s favor proves well-founded, and he carries out Robin Hood’s rescue beautifully, albeit bloodily.

If the ballads are somewhat ambiguous in their attitude toward Robin Hood’s violence, their attitude is more clearly approving when it comes to the ways in which Robin and his men prioritize devotion to heaven and to one another over obedience to the crown. But that disobedience is pragmatic and strategically selective, rejecting worldly authority but not the world. The “worldliness” of the ballads’ commitments draws even the Virgin Mary into the homosocial bonds of outlawry.

¹¹⁸ Knight, Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography, xii.
Marian Devotion and the Brotherhood of Outlaws

Robin Hood’s frequent vulnerability may reflect a social reality about the condition of late medieval outlaws. I have discussed already the jeopardy in which medieval people felt themselves to be, thanks to the pervasiveness of robbery. Timothy Jones, in his study of outlawry in the Middle Ages, describes the vulnerable state of the outlaw, as well. Official outlaw status meant one was not only the object of the law’s violence, but also deprived of its protection, exposed, in many cases, to unofficial retribution that could be perpetrated with impunity.  

Sheltering felons was proscribed in English law codes beginning in the eleventh century, and continued as a major legal issue through the fourteenth century. Hence the fictional outlaws’ flight to the greenwood. Hence too their devotion to spiritual authorities that transcended earthly political and ecclesiastical institutions.

Little wonder, then, that Robin’s and John’s loyalties to Mary and Christ, respectively, work to strengthen some earthly bonds even as they dissolve others. On the one hand, these devotional postures provide a transcendent ideal of which the outlaws’ own unity, and Robin’s graciousness toward women travelers through the forest, is an imitation. If Robin’s relationship with his men resembles the loyalty of thane and knight for their lord and king, respectively, it is also rather like that of the disciples for Christ. Indeed, Robin Hood

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119 Although the Northampton Statute under Edward III in 1328 made it illegal to kill outlaws, outlawry remained a legal status until 1879 for civil offenses and until 1938 for criminal. Jones, Outlawry in Medieval Literature, 23–25.

120 Ibid., 125.

121 Robin’s allegiance to Mary appears to shape his outlawry in a manner that, if only here, conforms with the chivalric code in its reverent treatment of all women: “Robyn loved Oure dere Lady: / For dout of dydly synne, / Wolde he never do compani harme / That any woman was in” (37-40). And in Robin Hood and the Potter we learn that ”For the loffe of owre ladey, / All wemen werschepyd he” (11-12).
and the Monk mentions Robin traveling with his men in groups of twelve.\textsuperscript{122} The loyalty of Robin's band reflects his own devotion to God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and especially Mary, whom he loves “allther moste” (above all) (36), for as the poem relates, it is his “gode maner” to hear a mass daily for each of the three before dining.\textsuperscript{123} On the other hand, heavenly devotion and loyalty within the brotherhood of thieves exceed bonds of kinship, and trump obedience owed even to the king.\textsuperscript{124}

In the Gest, Robin professes himself a king’s man—but one who slays the king’s deer without a qualm. Presented unexpectedly with the king’s seal, Robin makes the appropriate gestures of respect:

\begin{quote}
Robyn coud his courteysy,  
And set hym on his kne. [kneeled down]  
"I love no man in all the worlde  
So well as I do my kynge;  
Welcome is my lordes seale (1539-43)
\end{quote}

Ironically, Robin’s show of respect for the crown’s authority, vested in an “abbot” he has just waylaid in the forest—actually the king in disguise—who bears the royal seal, takes the form of destruction of royal property, for he poaches more than the usual number of what he had acknowledged a few lines earlier were the “kynges dere” (1507). Robin and Little John claim to be good and loyal subjects, who “served our kynge with al theyr myght” (1567), but the outlaws’ treatment of the king in disguise, treated to a dinner of his own venison, essentially repeats their treatment of the sheriff, hosted to a feast served on his own stolen plate.

\textsuperscript{122} “Take twelve of thi wyght yemen,  
Well weppynd, be thi side.  
Such on wolde thi selfe slon,  
That twelve dar not abyde.” (31-34)
\textsuperscript{123} ll. 29-36
\textsuperscript{124} Douglas Gray remarks the importance of the Gest’s mention that the wicked prioress of Kirklee “nye [near] was of hys [Robin’s] kynne” Gray, “Everybody’s Robin Hood,” 38.
When the king reveals himself at last and grants Robin and his men amnesty on the condition that they leave the wood and join him at court, Robin accepts, but with a proviso that suggests he does not fully yield:

“I wyll come to your courte,
Your servyse for to se,
And brynge with me of my men
Seven score and thre. (1660-64)

According to Knight and Ohlgren, “[t]he idea of Robin holding an alternative lordship, with his own retinue, is clear.”

Robin Hood and the Monk seems not in the least perturbed by its heroes’ breach of faith with the king. Quite the contrary, the poem goes out of its way to praise Little John's fealty to his original master, Robin Hood. Earlier in the poem, as part of Robin Hood's rescue, John had ingratiated himself to the king's service. The king sounds wounded as he ruminates on all that he had given to John:

“I made hem yemen of the crowne,
And gaf hem fee with my hond;
I gaf hem grith,” (339-41)

But John's tricky betrayal of the king had been in faithful service to Robin Hood, and the rest of the king's speech, which had begun “In an angur hye” (331), takes on a tone of grudging admiration as he praises that loyalty:

“He is trew to his maister,” seid oure kyng;
“I sey, be swete Seynt John,
He lovys better Robyn Hode
Then he dose us ychon.
“Robyn Hode is ever bond to hym,
Bothe in strete and stalle;
Speke no more of this mater,” seid oure kyng,
“But John has begyled us alle.” (346-54)

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125 Knight and Ohlgren, Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales, n. 1663.
The reference to “swete Seynt John,” notable as “the disciple whom Jesus dearly loved,” is appropriate, given not only John’s faithfulness to his earthly master but also his expressions of devotion to Christ earlier in the poem, and helps to reinforce the exoneration of Little John, and thus of Robin Hood, his master, on whose behalf and for whose benefit the violent and duplicitous actions of the jailbreak and pardon were carried out. If outlaws are “false felons[s],” as the poem’s eponymous monk alleges, Little John has shown himself to be worthily true. The story highlights not only the outlaw’s loyalty to his chief, but Mary’s faithfulness in aiding one who “has servyd Oure Lady many a day” (133).

**Conclusion: Desperation, Adoration, and the Paradox of Desacralization**

The opening of Psalm 56, the penultimate penitential Psalm, is given in the Vulgate as, “Miserere mei deus, miserere mei: quoniam in te confidit anima mea,” which the Wycliffite Bible translates as, “God haue thou merci on me, haue thou merci on me; for my soul tristith in thee . . .” To this, Richard Rolle adds in his translation of the Psalter, “in the[e], not in it selfe, trayst my soule.” Through what Gloria Cigman calls “this willing displacement of the self, Rolle’s David acknowledges the grandeur of God and his subjugation to a force beyond the control or understanding of an earthly king: this is an admirable man, but a recognizable fourteenth-century anti-hero.” Robin Hood, roaming the lawless greenwood, acknowledges the authority of earthly kings only on his own

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126 This description, traditionally assumed to describe John, appears only in the Gospel of John, where it occurs six times: John 13.23; 19.26; 20.2; 21.7; 21.20.
127 Derek Pearsall argues that Little John is actually the true hero of this ballad. Pearsall, “Little John and the Ballad of Robin Hood and the Monk.”
terms, but he is far from free, still subject to forces beyond his control or understanding. Appreciating this powerlessness and vulnerability, and the anxiety arising from them, enriches our understanding not only of Robin Hood’s antiheroic actions, but also the ballads’ popularity.

One of my project’s implications for Robin Hood scholarship concerns the ongoing critical assessment of the “radical” nature of Robin Hood and the protest capacity of the early ballads. Where Colin Richmond, for example, argues that Robin Hood’s “yeoman” identity signaled a kind of radical freedom, my argument suggests a way in which he exemplified a radical subservience, his power and freedom contingent on self-abnegation. Like Piers Plowman, whose readers “have never been able to agree on whether—or when—to call the poem reactionary or revolutionary or mainstream,” early rhymes of Robin Hood appear to throb with revolutionary energy, deriving their narrative heft from opposition to unjust authority, which probably accounts most for the durability of the outlaw’s popularity. And yet, their conclusions seem to champion loyalty and submission to heavenly and (select) earthly lordship. Robin Hood’s repeated near-failures show why, for he is incapable of autonomous heroism.

I am not the first to notice that the paragon of outlawry is, in some ways, a deeply conservative figure, conscientious of and deferential to the social hierarchy that he

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130 See my section on Critical Background and Methodology, above.
133 As Stephen Knight writes, "Modern or medieval, the references [to Robin Hood] all have the same focus: [he] represents principled resistance to wrongful authority—of very different kinds and in many periods and contexts. Knight, Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography, xi."
To the bankrupt Sir Richard in *A Gest of Robyn Hood*, the outlaw is the very picture of courtesy. He wonders at the knight’s lean purse—a mere ten shillings—and the poor quality of his clothes: “Moche wonder thinketh me / Thy clothynge is so thin” (175-76). Ever mindful of custom, Robin Hood chides the knight lest he fail to pay for the rich feast they had enjoyed together in the green wood, reminding him of the duties befitting their respective social stations: “It was never the maner, by dere worthi God, / A yoman to pay for a knight” (147-48). But upon learning that the knight has been wrongfully dispossessed, Robin is scandalized, vowing not to touch a penny of the knight’s remaining ten shillings, and even to lend him money:

“If thou hast no more,” sayde Robyn,  
“I woll nat [take] one peny, 
And yf thou have nede of any more, 
More shall I lend the. (157-60)

In a reversal of Robin’s earlier reminder to the knight to show the largesse owed by the nobility, Robin now proposes to send some of his own wealth back up the social ladder. This offer underscores Robin’s own courtesy, described earlier in the poem, and but it also discloses a kind of anxiety about an interruption of the social order. By refilling the knight’s purse he can perhaps reestablish the social configuration within which nobles are wealthy enough to be preyed upon by forest outlaws without reducing them to less than noble status. Later in the poem, after the Virgin Mary has aided in repaying Robin’s loan to Sir Richard two-fold, the outlaw insists the knight take the extra one hundred pounds

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134 Eric Hobsbawm writes, “Insofar as bandits have a ‘programme’, it is the defence or restoration of the traditional order of things ‘as it should be’ (which in traditional societies means as it is believed to have been in some real or mythical past). They right wrongs, they correct and avenge cases of injustice, and in doing so apply a more general criterion of just and fair relations between men in general, and especially between the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak. This is a modest aim, which leaves the rich to exploit the poor [and] the strong to oppress the weak.” Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, n.d.), 26.
so that he can re-equip himself in a manner befitting his social station. “[M]ake thy selfe no more so bare, / By the counsell of me,” Robin advises (1115-16).

Robin Hood’s behavior in these scenes exemplifies the tension Derek Pearsall sees at work in the earlier ballads, “between, on the one hand, a voice of serious medieval radicalism, a re-thinking of the bonds of ‘fellowship,’ and an unsentimental approach to banditry, and, on the other, a slide towards endowing the ‘social outlaw’ with a more conventional morality and an aristocratic persona to match his righteous worldview . . .”135 By showing how Robin Hood’s devotion sustains him in the ballads, my project reveals the ways in which Robin Hood’s quite un-revolutionary deference to at least some aspects of civic order is of a piece with his submissiveness, albeit strategic and pragmatic, before the hierarchy of heaven, as well.

In the same way that Robin Hood represents a site of negotiation over social power, the complicated morality of the tales attests also the permeability between the sacred and secular. If the “wilde felow” of the early ballads is actually more conservative than the later, “distressed gentleman,” that irony is matched by another: the civic saint that the post-ballads Robin Hood became, one tamed and suitable within a “safe type of medieval heritage,”136 is a figure who, though certainly more admirable, is also one whose humanity is less recognizably flawed. “[O]f all robbers he was thye humanist,” was John Major’s early sixteenth century assessment, but it is interesting to consider how Robin Hood’s trajectory from that point forward leaves behind the anti-heroically human

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135 The summary description is Phillips’s, from the Introduction to Phillips, Robin Hood: Medieval and Post-Medieval, 14; See: Pearsall, “Little John and the Ballad of Robin Hood and the Monk.”

elements as his character improves.\textsuperscript{137} There is a certain irony in this metamorphosis from a violent protagonist whose deficits must be aided by the mercy of the saint to whom he is devoted, to one who stands in little need of any grace at all. In Robin Hood’s literary evolution from thug to dispossessed noble, he becomes in many respects a more acceptably Protestant hero. This more civilized Robin Hood is sanitized of papist sympathies, of devotion to the cult of Mary, and also of the egregious excess of violence and pride that make necessary that devotion to a patroness who happens to specialize in intercession for sinners. In other words, as Robin Hood’s devotion to a saint diminishes, he himself becomes saintlier. A patron to the downtrodden, always vigilant, receptive to appeals for help, and generous to offer rescue when all else has failed, the post-Reformation Robin Hood exemplifies selflessness and good actions, performing feats of daring as acts of virtuous charity. Desacralized and sanitized of saintly allegiances, this outlaw hero is essentially the embodiment of a largely unquestioned altruism, his acts of charity arising from a “motiveless benignity” (with apologies to Coleridge). The appeal of this kind of hero is undeniable; the enduring success of his legend speaks for itself. Yet ironically, he becomes in this process of “reformation” a hero whose greatness rests largely on his own merits, and as such, ceases to exemplify one of the Reformation’s foremost theological priorities: it was by grace above all, Luther and company would insist, that the helpless sinner could hope for aid. One wonders whether the criminally disposed, or anyone in a position to cry, with Langland’s Robert the Robber, “Dampne me noht at Domesday for that I dide so ille!” (5.471), would have been able to identify as well with the later Robin Hood, relieved of the early ballads’ fascinating tension between

\textsuperscript{137} Major, \textit{A History of Greater Britain As Well England and Scotland}, 156–67; qtd. in Knight and Ohlgren, \textit{Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales}, 28.
piety and imperfection. His recasting from anti-hero to hero may have broadened his appeal, but made him somewhat less identifiable to a certain segment of society, whose actions or circumstances placed them on the wrong side of political and ecclesiastical power.¹³⁸

I reiterate that the Robin Hood ballads, “infected” though they might be with doctrines of dependence, are not spiritual allegories or covert lessons in the efficacy of repentance. Thomas Ohlgren’s important recent work on the manuscript contexts of the ballads suggests that several of the early ballads might have been found suitable for use as sermon *exempla*,¹³⁹ and it may well be that inherent to the *solas* of Robin Hood’s heroics there is sufficient *sentence* for the moralist to go to work on; though Langland’s Sloth was not well-versed in saints lives and the gospels, stories of “Roberd the Robbere” provide their own lesson about the efficacy of tearful repentance. But though a moralist like Langland can contort even the fun of ale-house ballads into the stuff of a sobering sermon, drawing readerly attention back to the hagiographical origins of the outlaw stories, the fun persists. There is no denying the exhilaration one feels at the ballads’ eruptions of violence, a lingering trace of what their late-medieval readers no doubt enjoyed as well. Might these scenes also have performed a kind of catharsis, the bloody excess of Robin Hood’s retributive outbursts expressing and providing release for the sense of powerlessness shared by the anti-hero and his readership?

¹³⁸ Medieval homiletic literature makes clear that the problem with Robin Hood stories went beyond their anti-clericalism or the fact that they provided a time-wasting alternative to church attendance. As Alan J. Fletcher explains: “Robin Hood might at first seem little more than a favourite whipping-boy, one regularly brought out whenever the medieval preacher was intent on castigating profitless pastimes. But in a sermon concerned to present a picture of a harmonious society, Robin Hood is a particularly apt exemplar of precisely what was to be avoided; in the fifteenth-century he generally appears to have connoted a yeoman marauder, someone with whom the anti-social and even criminally disposed might be inclined to identify.” Fletcher, *Preaching, Politics and Poetry in Late-Medieval England*, 153–54.

The benefits of saintly devotion in the ballads include not only strength for the weak, but also nobility for the ignoble. Apart from physical danger and outright risk to life, outlaws suffered separation from the larger civic community, and saintly patronage could confer not only the hope of protection from physical danger, but also something like dignity, the recognition and restoration of humanity to outlaws who often had little more standing in the eyes of the law than animals. Outlaws are metaphorically linked with wolves throughout English and Germanic literature, as when, in Gemelyn, a “wolves-heed was cried” after the hero makes his escape to the forest. Thus, the outlaw was metaphorically—and, in outlaw stories featuring lycanthropy, literally—“transformed from a human being who had broken the law and might be reclaimed, into a wild beast that threatened human society by its very nature and deserved to be exterminated.” Small wonder, then, either the outlaws’ violence, or the fervency of Robin Hood and Little John’s loyalties to Mary and Christ, respectively. Both are understandable—and, to the ballads’ readers, by no means irreconcilable—responses to a dangerous and incomprehensible world.

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140 l. 700. “The Tale of Sir Gamelyn” survives as an ill-fitting supplement to “The Cook’s Tale” in some twenty-five manuscripts of The Canterbury Tales, though its authorship is a mystery. Gamelyn’s place among the outlaw tales, recognized since at least the nineteenth century, has only been confirmed by more recent scholarship. Child, English and Scottish Ballads, xxv; See: Bradbury, “Gamelyn,” 129 n.3. 141 Jones, Outlawry in Medieval Literature, 27. Jones notes, for example, Sigmundr and Sinfjotli’s transformation into wolves in Volsunga Saga.
CONCLUSION: *PLŪS QUAM IMPERFECTUM*

“Total independence is a myth in most cultures, but it was a less important myth in the Middle Ages than in many others.”
- Ruth Karras

“Nietzsche [referred to Christianity] as a religion ‘for slaves and women.’ He thinks this is an insult. It’s a compliment.”
- Francis Spufford

Carolyn Dinshaw has remarked that the desire for wholeness, for an idea of originary, prelapsarian plenitude, is central to the Christian account of history.¹ This desire produces its own tensions and contradictions, of the kind constitutive of the Christian heroism I am attempting to define. Heroic identity, always culturally-constructed, depends on the individual’s ability to distinguish himself or herself from others in that culture. The heroic type I am describing, however, depends on something that most assumed or were taught to assume they had in common: their sinfulness and unworthiness. And this paradox is contingent on another: strength through weakness, embodied most fully, perhaps, in St. Paul, whose example of “strength perfected in infirmity” is in many ways at the heart of my project.²

If Christ formed the paradigm of spiritual perfection against which all medieval exemplars would be measured,³ no less vital is the example of imperfection embodied so well in the penitent thief at his right hand, known to tradition as Dismas, whose importance to the early ballads of Robin Hood I have discussed above. It is repentance

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² Paul describes praying thrice for relief from the affliction of his unspecified “sting of the flesh.” In reply, God tells him, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for power is made perfect in infirmity. Gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2 Cor 12.9).
³ If this self-evident point needed further demonstration, Peter Clemoes identifies thematic and narrative elements of Christ’s passion important to the description of Anglo-Saxon heroes including, of course, the hero-Christ of “Dream of the Rood,” but also Guthlac and Beowulf. Peter Clemoes, “King and Creation at the Crucifixion: The Contribution of Native Tradition to ‘The Dream of the Rood’ 50-6a,” in *Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature*, ed. Leo Carruthers (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), 31–43.
and devotion to the person of Christ that makes possible Dismas’s redemption. His self-abandon, through the most extreme example of eleventh-hour repentance, opens for him the gates of paradise. It would be hard to describe his utterly abject plea for mercy as heroic, yet it forms, in its way, an instance of *imitatio Christi*, a repetition, helplessly performed, in parallel with the volitionally self-sacrificing savior. His words register his recognition of this fact: “we han resseiued worthi thingis to werkis; but this dide no thing of yuel” [We have committed things worthy of our fate, but this man has done nothing wrong] (Luke 23.41). This declaration suggests that there is, along with the thief’s desperation, an element of admiration that draws him to the dying man beside him and motivates his confession and entreaty for forgiveness. It is noteworthy that early medieval writers found Dismas worthy of admiration, too, so that the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, and later the *Golden Legend*, describe the swift arrival of Dismas to heaven, apparently at the vanguard of those redeemed by Christ’s harrowing of hell, his entrance into glory so sudden that it appears to interrupt Enoch and Elijah in mid-conversation about their pending return to Earth and martyrdom at the hands of Anti-Christ. The three of them, Enoch, Elijah, and Dismas, form an interesting triptic, for in bypassing purgatory, Dismas shares, in a way, in the most distinctive and well-known feature of Enoch and Elijah, neither of whom died an earthly death, but were instead caught up to

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4 The *Golden Legend*, in a passage taken almost verbatim from the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, describes the scene in detail. Bearing the sign of the cross on his shoulders, he approaches the prophets and announces, “I was a robber and was crucified with Jesus. I believed that he was the Creator and I prayed to him and said, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Then he said to me, Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise; and he gave me this sign of the cross, saying, Carry this, walk into paradise. If the angel on guard doesn’t let you go in, show him this sign of the cross and say to him, Christ, who is now dying on the cross, sent me over. And when I did this and told the angel, he opened at once and led me in, placing me on the right side of paradise.” de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, 54.224; Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation.*, 189–90.
heaven. Dismas does not avoid death, but does bypass purgatory, and could be described as a victorious penitent, a close observer to Christ’s triumph over sin, Hell, and death.

This argument, that it is through self-abnegation and even bodily suffering that the medieval Christian compensates for his or her own weakness, instability, and other imperfections, perceived or actual, presents certain problems, which previous medieval historians and literary scholars have not been shy to point out. David Aers, for example, has declared himself unconvinced by Caroline Walker Bynum’s argument that imitation of Christ's sufferings had the effect of empowering women in particular, since they already embodied the materiality of Christ's flesh, which, as she describes it, “did womanly things, it bled food and gave birth to new life.”

5 Women recognized that “their flesh could do what his could do: bleed, feed, die, and give life to others.”

6 Bynum argues that in thus identifying themselves with Christ, appropriating and modeling his feminine and maternal qualities, late-medieval women mystics subverted the misogynistic logic of their culture and appropriated patriarchal power. But David Aers argues that what Bynum describes in such valorous terms was, in fact, merely suffering in ways constructed by and approved within the dominant patriarchal ideology, which actually benefitted from the often self-injurious expressions of affective piety.

7 Richard Kieckheffer provides a reframing of this debate, albeit in a passage written prior to it. He points out that direct imitation of bodily suffering was, for most readers, men and women alike, far from the point: “It surely made little difference to the hagiographers whether their readers underwent suffering of the same kind as the saints.

6 Ibid., 222.
Whatever the specific provocation, the saintly patience that was elicited could inspire an attitude of submission within the devout reader.” And where Aers regards submission primarily as a mechanism of control, Kieckheffer suggests that sublimation of this type could also constitute a positive social and individual good:

Nor did the hagiographer need to worry about the dangers of exaggerated passivity: vigorous attack on the sources of adversity was the natural human inclination, and it was this that needed to be counterbalanced. Towns bloodied with civil strife and family feuds did not need a call to active redress of evil as urgently as they needed a reminder that patient endurance is noble and meritorious. Those afflicted with diseases for which there was no effective cure might despair of God's aid and lose sight of the meaning in their lives unless reminded that active response was not called for, and that they could win merit precisely by patient submission.

It is perspectives such as Kieckheffer’s that have shaped my thinking about human frailty, as it manifests itself in the literary depiction of heroes who seem, on the surface, slightly more than human. Though I am far from innocent of interest in the themes that preoccupy what Steven Justice calls a “scholarly generation fascinated to the point of bemusement with the mechanisms of medieval coercion,” nonetheless I find that discourses valorizing frailty and weakness as “noble and meritorious” become less troubling when we acknowledge the limits of help available for suffering. Medieval medicine is far from the concerns of my thesis, but thinking about *patentia* in the context of disease at a time when medical interventions were sorely limited, before even the Early Modern rediscovery of Galenic anatomical knowledge, reorients our thinking.

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9 Ibid.
10 Justice, “Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?,” 87.
11 For a summary of the landscape of medical knowledge at the close of the fifteenth century, see Mary Lindemann, *Medicine and Society in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 86–87.
about the supposed oppressiveness of texts that encouraged readers to internalize discourses of forbearance and patience. Strategies of patient endurance did not always hinder recourse to other solutions, but rather formed a solution when no other recourse was available. The devotion to the Passion that developed in the later Middle Ages signaled, as Kieckheffer explains, the feeling that suffering was “the specific means God has chosen both for Christ's redemptive work and for the sanctification of those who imitate Christ.”12 Some saints went out of their way to seek opportunities to mortify the flesh (and here Aers’s arguments about the extremes of affective devotion are more persuasive13), but even their most ardent lay admirers presumably had enough to bear without seeking out additional means of suffering. For them, the hagiographic example of patient endurance had the advantage of turning necessity into a virtue, dignifying both the act of suffering and the frail body experiencing it.

There is a moment in Piers Plowman that I read as a rather poignant instance of the way in which this kind of thinking dignified the mortal, suffering, and putatively sinful body. Here, Langland describes Christ’s incarnation and death in knightly terms: “And al that Marc hath ymaad, Mathew, Johan and Lucas / Of Thyne doughtie st dedes was doon in oure armes” (B Text, 5.500-501). Langland imagines “Sir Jesus” riding out to perform his “doughtiest deeds” in the weak, imperfect armor of the human form. Within such a worldview, imperfection furnishes its own opportunity for admirable achievement. “Thys ys bot right weke gere” (this is but very weak gear [l.200]), Robin Hood complains in “Robin Hood and the Potter,” after he is made to compete in an

12 Kieckhefer, Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu, 89.
13 He writes, “The abjections that [Bynum] explicates as subversive might be better viewed, to put the matter starkly, as themselves a product of modes of piety designed to make ther practioners objects of control—albeit, perhaps, sometimes, or often, ecstatic ones.” Aers and Staley, Powers of the Holy, 36.
archery contest with a bow whose quality he immediately recognizes as inferior. But it is this same handicap that makes his demonstration of virtuosic accuracy all the more impressive. The pattern of “strength perfected in weakness,” if it did nothing else, provided an opportunity for the weak and unworthy to identify with heroism on the basis of their own weakness and unworthiness.

The “best of late medieval piety,” according to Barbara Newman, is captured in “Guenevere’s wistful meditation that ‘as synfull as ever I was, now ar seyntes in hevyn.’”14 And yet, the paradox of strength perfected in weakness permitted something more than just hopefulness for perfection deferred. Not even the most ardent modern readers of comic books today would, in their right mind, attempt to leap into flight from the top of a tall building, but the feats of spiritual heroes, the saints, were, at least in theory, more widely available.15 Margery Kempe provides a vivid example of a medieval subject who not only awaited perfection, but allowed imperfection to serve as a condition for deeds achieved in life. There has been debate over the extent to which Kempe can be said to have been “in her right mind,” but even if one accepted the diagnoses of those critics inclined to pathologize her and read the Book as a document of mental illness,16 one would still have to account for the fact that she apparently succeeded in that fragile state to imitate the saints she admired, at least inasmuch as she convinced a good number

14 Newman, Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred, 106.
15 Though medieval writers distinguished between deeds that should be imitated (imitanda) and those that should merely be marveled at (miranda) as manifestations of divine power, the line between them was always being negotiated. See Kieckhefer, Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu, 12–14.
16 Mary Farley, for example, suggested that Kempe suffered from histrionic personality disorder. Mary Farley, “‘Her Own Creature’: Religion, Feminist Criticism, and the Functional Eccentricity of Margery Kempe,” Exemplaria, no. 11 (1999): 1–21; For a response to this and similar attempts to diagnose Kempe and some of her contemporaries, see Juliette Vuille, “‘Maybe I’m Crazy?’ Diagnosis and Contextualisation of Medieval Female Mystics,” in Medicine, Religion, and Gender in Medieval Culture, ed. Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015).
of her contemporaries of the veracity of her signs of holiness, and played the role over the course of a lifetime.

Simply on her own merits, Kempe was unquestionably a heroic woman, but comparison with St. Paul serves to show that she also participates in a broader tradition of Christian heroes who are locked in a pitched struggle not only with the temptations, perils, and enemies of the world, but also with themselves. Much ink has been spilled considering Kempe’s achievements alongside those of other female mystics, but her life, whose structure Timea Szell describes as moving from “woe to weal and weal to woe,”\(^\text{17}\) might just as reasonably be compared with the somewhat hapless hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, who follows a thematic pattern of “bliss and blunder.” If, as Sarah Salih says, “continuity is more characteristic than rupture” in the lives of saints, Margery's un-canonized life might be called one of rapture and rupture, the vicissitudes of her life repeatedly “thyngys turnyng up so down” (Prologue 17-18).\(^\text{18}\) Kempe’s inner struggle, the self in conflict with itself, coming in the tradition of Paul and Augustine, gives the narrative its psychological depth, and makes Kempe an identifiable—albeit often exasperating—heroine. She is vacillating, self-contradicting, and sometimes self-sabotaging, and whether or not twenty-first century readers sympathize with the terms and belief structure in which Paul articulates his inner struggle for righteousness, the dilemma of the struggle for dominance between factions of the discontinuous self is surely relatable. Kempe’s experience of it makes her for us an even more profoundly sympathetic, more human, hero than many of the exemplars to whom she herself looked.

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\(^{17}\) Szell, “From Woe to Weal and Weal to Woe: Notes on the Structure of *The Book of Margery Kempe*.”

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