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The Gawain-Poet and the Textual Environment of Fourteenth-Century English Anticlericalism

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The Gawain-Poet and the Textual Environment
of Fourteenth-Century English Anticlericalism

by Ethan Campbell

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
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Abstract

The Gawain-Poet and the Textual Environment of Fourteenth-Century English Anticlericalism

by Ethan Campbell

Adviser: Prof. Steven Kruger

The 14th-century Middle English poems Cleanness and Patience, homiletic retellings of biblical stories which appear in the same manuscript as Pearl and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, offer moral lessons to a general Christian audience, but the introduction to Cleanness, with its reference to men whom “prestez arn called,” suggests that a central feature of their rhetoric is anticlerical critique. Priests do not appear as exemplars but as potentially filthy hypocrites who inspire God’s harshest wrath, since their sins may contaminate Christ’s body in the Eucharist.

Using Cleanness’s opening lines as a guide, this dissertation reads both poems as a set of warnings and exhortations aimed particularly at clerics. Throughout Cleanness, priest-like characters such as Noah, Abraham, and Daniel struggle against ritual defilement, and Patience presents an extended example of a single character, the prophet Jonah, who shirks his duties as an absentee priest. These contextual readings situate the poems within the rich textual environment of 14th-century anticlericalism, including the works of archbishop Richard FitzRalph; poets John Gower, William Langland, and Geoffrey Chaucer; Oxford dissidents and Bible translators such as Nicholas Hereford; and, most notably, John Wyclif, the Oxford philosopher and preacher who inspired the heretical Lollard movement.
The opening chapters present an overview of the anticlerical tradition in England and a summary of the central issues driving critique in the late 14th century. Subsequent chapters present close readings of *Cleanness* and *Patience* which foreground congruences between the *Gawain*-poet’s rhetoric and the anticlerical polemic favored by his contemporaries. Since anticlericalism became identified in the late 14th century with heretical positions on the sacraments such as Donatism and Lollardy, this analysis pays close attention to the poet’s references to baptism, penance, and the Eucharist, and concludes that, though he embraces clerically administered sacraments as essential elements of the Christian life, he shares many of the Lollards’ concerns about priestly corruption and its effects. The final chapter gives a similarly contextual reading to the two “canonical” works of the poet, *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain*, in which references to the priesthood are often overlooked, yet, I argue, crucial to each poem’s meaning.
Several years ago, my sister and I received a memorable gift from our father: a handwritten journal in which he responded to various questions about his life and told stories about his childhood in rural Nebraska, many of which we had never heard before. To the question of when and where he had been baptized, he wrote:

I was baptized when I was 18 years old, after I graduated from high school. The baptism service was held at the Calamus River, on the ranch operated by Guy and Mary Boller. The minister was Rev. L—

. . . The last time I knew, the Rev. L— was in prison for sexual assault. I’m not sure—maybe my baptism doesn’t count!

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

What seems especially striking in my father’s case is that the institution in question was the Church of the Nazarene, a relatively “low-church” evangelical Protestant denomination with roots in the Wesleyan holiness movements of the 19th century. Worship services in this...
denomination do not follow a set liturgical format, and members tend not to hold a “strong” view of the sacraments, viewing baptism, for example, as primarily a public commitment ceremony undertaken by adults and Communion as a commemorative celebration. My father was planting his tongue at least partly in his cheek, therefore, when speculating that any kind of action, no matter how criminal or immoral, might invalidate what he viewed as a purely symbolic ritual.

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

Yet even the sacramental experience of contemporary Catholics is only a shadow of the reverence medieval Christians paid to their church’s sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 established the doctrine of transubstantiation as the church’s official position on the sacrament of the altar, and by the end of the 14th century, the practice of observing the miracle of bread and wine become Christ’s literal body and blood in the hands of a priest had become, as the historian Eamon Duffy puts it, “the high point of lay experience of the Mass” (96). Actually partaking of the elements, as opposed to simply watching the priest elevate them over the congregation, was an even more momentous occasion for most medieval
churchgoers, as it typically occurred only once a year and involved first undergoing the sacrament of penance, a three-step process of confession to a priest followed by prescribed works of penitential satisfaction, and finally absolution. Any revelation that the priests who heard these confessions, assigned these works of penance, performed absolutions, and miraculously transformed bread and wine into body and blood at the altar had engaged in activities medieval Christians believed to be mortal sin could not fail to be profoundly unsettling.

And yet the priesthood of the Western Christian church by the late Middle Ages, according to contemporaneous accounts from a huge range of writers, had become an outrageously corrupt institution. As the opening chapters of this dissertation will illustrate, parish priests and other forms of clerics in late 14th-century England—monks, friars, bishops, and popes, as well as lay officers of the church—were subject to vicious critiques from both parishioners and fellow churchmen, the latter often the most strident. Just a glance at the works of English literature from this period most often encountered by modern-day readers—the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland—reveals a fictional landscape teeming with lazy, gluttonous, greedy, lustful, even murderous clerics and church officials. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, to take the most famous example, depicts a Pardoner who offers absolution for sins in exchange for fees and attempts to sell fake religious relics to his fellow pilgrims, as well as a Friar who performs hasty marriages for young women he has impregnated, a fat Monk who prefers hunting and grooming his horse to praying, and a drunken Summoner, grotesquely disfigured by a disease caused by his lechery and, in his vocation as an officer of the ecclesiastical court, exceedingly craven and corrupt. The only exemplary figure among Chaucer’s rogue’s gallery of church officials is the Parson, a parish priest, yet even he at one point is accused by another character of heresy.
Langland’s critique, though less well-known to 21st-century readers, casts an even wider net, as he attacks every type of cleric with equal relish, from absentee benefice-holders who refuse to take up posts they have been assigned, to friars who angle for dishonest donations, to priests who are too lazy and dim-witted to care about the corruption before their eyes, represented by a lurid feast in which a friar devours mounds of sumptuous food while the allegorical character Clergie looks on. Parish priests are uneducated, Langland complains, whereas friars are overeducated, making the simple tenets of religion complex and leading youth astray; all of them, priests and members of religious orders alike, should be forcibly dispossessed of all worldly goods, to purge their venomous greed from the church. Even popes are in danger of hell, he asserts, as they encourage the practices of simony and pluralism among their flock. John Wyclif, perhaps the most well-known anticlerical critic of the 14th century besides Chaucer, took an even more extreme position—the contemporary papacy was the Antichrist, and the majority of clerks, priests, monks, and friars were servants of the devil.

As a result of this explosive combination of factors—doctrinal practices which elevated the priesthood to heights of divinely sanctioned authority, combined with an acute awareness of the institution’s corruption—led both Wyclif and his followers in the heretical movement known as Lollardy, along with many other English writers in the 14th century, to consider the same question my father posed, though in a much more serious fashion. If a priest is sinful, they asked, if in fact he is an ally not of God but of Satan, are the sacraments he consecrates rendered somehow less effective, even invalid? Do they no longer count?

The church’s official answer to this question was a resounding no. Such logic, according to medieval theologians, was a form of heresy—specifically, the heresy of Donatism, dating back to the time of St. Augustine, when a group of 4th-century schismatics refused to recognize
baptisms performed by priests who had collaborated with the Roman Empire in its persecution of Christians. For the medieval “Donatists” (unrelated in any way to the earlier group) the sacrament most pointedly at issue was the Eucharist. The church had long held, along with the Apostle Paul, that to partake of the consecrated bread and wine while in a state of mortal sin was to call God’s judgment down upon oneself (1 Cor. 11:29), but what if the one consecrating and serving the elements had mortally sinned? Might the consecration fail, or become tainted?

For his part, Wyclif approached this question hesitantly and inconsistently throughout his career, but his answer appears to have been yes (at least part of the time—the first chapter of this project will explore this complexity in more detail). As a result, Donatism appears among the list of 24 heretical and heterodox opinions compiled by the council of church officials who condemned Wyclif’s teaching at the Blackfriars synod of 1382, a determination which ultimately forced the Oxford philosopher into retirement. His Lollard followers were less hesitant—for the more radical among them, it was clear that a sinful priest could neither effectively baptize nor absolve nor consecrate eucharistic elements efficaciously. For the Lollards and their persecutors alike, however, this unorthodox opinion paled in comparison to the more radical heresy that would come to define the movement, a denial of the doctrine of transubstantiation altogether.

This dissertation project examines the ways in which one contemporary of Chaucer, Langland, and Wyclif approached the problem of clerical corruption and the philosophical and theological questions it raised. The Gawain-poet, anonymous author of the Middle English poems Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, was less explicit in his critiques of the medieval priesthood but no less strident, preferring to address themes of sin and corruption among spiritual leaders not primarily through direct critique but through an imaginative consideration of biblical characters with priest-like attributes. As a close contextual
reading of these works with a focus on the anticlerical textual environment in which they were produced makes clear, the Gawain-poet shared many of the same concerns as Wyclif and the Lollards, and a similar sense of their urgency and possible solutions. Just as clearly, however, he did not follow their lead into anti-sacramental heresy, but rather celebrated the sacraments of baptism, penance, and the Eucharist throughout his works as rituals essential to the Christian life. My primary goal throughout this project, therefore, is to determine as nearly as possible where the poet’s theology and rhetoric stand in relation to his anticlerical contemporaries, as well as to suggest fresh readings of these four poems which I hope will help to illuminate their poetic techniques, rhetorical strategies, and at times bewildering narrative structures to future students and scholars.

The first chapter reads closely the opening lines of the poem Cleanness, which contain the poet’s most explicit references to hypocritical priests who inspire God’s wrath, as well as a significant but for the most part critically overlooked depiction of a defiled sacrament. The second chapter outlines the history of anticlericalism in late 14th-century England, using Wyclif’s broad corpus of anticlerical polemic as a guide to the tradition’s central concerns and rhetorical themes. The next two chapters provide close contextual readings of the poet’s two biblically themed poems, Cleanness and Patience, in their entirety, positioning them within this rich textual environment of 14th-century anticlerical critique and controversy. The final chapter proposes new directions of inquiry for the poet’s two most frequently studied works, Pearl and Sir Gawain, which contain fewer and less pointed references to the Christian priesthood but nevertheless suggest intriguing possibilities when read contextually in a similar way to their biblical companions.
I have many people to thank for help in researching and writing this five-year project. For their inspiration, I want to thank three professors in particular: Traugott Lawler at Yale University, Nancy Black at Brooklyn College, and Steve Kruger at the CUNY Graduate Center. In Prof. Lawler’s seminar on the Gawain-poet my senior year as an undergraduate, I felt for the first time that I was part of a genuine community of scholars—in this case, a community of just five students and one teacher, sitting around a table slowly reading Middle English poetry aloud and puzzling through it together. His commitment both to serious scholarship and to the lives of his students continues to provide a model for the kind of professor I want to be. Several years later, Prof. Black’s graduate seminar on the Arthurian tradition rekindled an interest in the Gawain-poet which had lain dormant, and her enthusiastic teaching reminded me again what I love so much about medieval poetry.

Steve Kruger, my dissertation director, is responsible for introducing me to most of the works of literature I have considered in this dissertation. I encountered Langland and the Lollards for the first time, along with several other works I now consider required reading for any medievalist, such as John Mandeville’s Travels and The Siege of Jerusalem, in his course on racial and religious difference in Middle English literature. I took this course early in my teaching career, while in the process of applying to doctoral programs, and it has informed my classroom approach to a wide variety of literary works I have taught since, from Chaucer to Shakespeare and even Dickens. An independent study of Wycliffism and Lollardy under his direction in my last year of coursework covered nearly every text—poem, sermon, treatise, and satire—mentioned in my summary of the English anticlerical tradition in Chapter Two. Thank you also to Michael Sargent and Rich McCoy, my dissertation readers, who provided invaluable comments, questions, and suggestions as I wrote each chapter.
My deepest appreciation extends to The King’s College, my employer for the past ten years, and especially to its former provost, Peter Wood, who believed that the college should fully fund the PhD studies of a young man teaching its composition classes and literature surveys. Nine years later, as King’s has graduated its sixth group of Literature minors, I hope we can say the investment paid off.

I also want to thank the CUNY Graduate Student Research Grant program, which funded my travel to the British Library in London for manuscript research near the beginning of this project in the spring of 2010. Thanks also to the British Library and its incredibly supportive staff, as well as Jay Barksdale at the New York Public Library’s Wertheim Study, for providing assistance with research.

Finally, I couldn’t have completed this project without the love and support of my wife, Alice, and my two children, Jonah and Madeleine, who make everything worth it.
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Chapter One:

The Gawain-Poet and the Late-Medieval “Donatists”

At the conclusion of Pearl, the first poem in the manuscript which also contains Cleaness, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a man who has just awakened from a vision of his beloved daughter and Christ in heaven consoles himself by remembering that Christ dwells on earth as well. He resolves to commit the burial mound and its buried pearl to God and reminds himself of the Eucharist:

   And sythen to God I hit bytaȝte [committed],
   In Krystez dere blessyng and myn,
   That in the forme of bred and wyn
   The preste vus schewez vch a daye. (1208-10)¹

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

From the alliterative rhyming tetrameter stanzas of the elegaic Pearl, the manuscript moves into the unrhymed alliterative long-line homiletic poem known as Cleaness. There is no evidence, internal or external, to suggest that these two poems were composed in the order in which they appear in this manuscript, British Library Cotton Nero A.x, and no conclusive
evidence that they were even written by the same person, though most critics treat them as though they were. Nevertheless, whether the compiler of this unusual manuscript noticed it or not, the placement of these two very different poems together results in the poet’s two most significant references to the Eucharist—in fact, the only two direct references to the sacrament of the altar in the entire manuscript—appearing virtually back-to-back. In printed editions of the poems, they appear on successive pages, while in the manuscript they are separated by a single page with drawings of Noah’s Ark and Belshazzar’s Feast. Immediately after Pearl’s Dreamer describes the Eucharistic elements his “preste . . . schewez,” the Cleanness narrator in the next poem offers a harsh warning to the men whom “prestez arn called” (8), and suggests that their sinfulness could sully the very Mass the Dreamer presumably plans to receive.

First, the poet says that God is “wonder wroth . . . Wyth the freke that in fylthe folȝes hym after” (5-6)—extremely angry with the man who follows Him while living in a state of filth. Then, within the same sentence, he reveals a primary example of the type of man who would drive God to such extremes of wrath. The passage is worth quoting in its entirety:

Thay [the priests] teen vnto His temmple and temen to Hymseluen,

Reken with reuerence thay rychen His auter,

Thay hondel ther His aune body and vsen hit bothe.

If thay in clannes be clos thay cleche gret mede;

Bot if thay conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont,

As be honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylthez,

Then ar thay synful hemself, and sulpen altogether

Bothe God and His gere, and Hym to greme cachen. (9-16)

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

This opening warning also presents an image of priests performing what most 14th-
century Christians would consider their most important duty—administering the sacrament,
blessing the eucharistic bread and wine and thereby converting the elements into Christ’s “aune
body” and blood. But the image here in the introduction to Cleanness is tainted, in a way
calculated to disturb a pious late-medieval reader. Through the filth of their hands that “hondel”
God’s body, sinful priests “sulpen” (15), or defile, His “gere,” the elements and vessels used in
the Communion ritual.

If the poet were to conclude his polemic with this image of dirty hands and sullied altar
equipment, the lines would represent little more than a commonplace of 14th-century anticlerical
satire and critique, in which sinful priests, particularly those who engage in sexual sins, are
depicted with filthy hands, with the implied or explicit suggestion that those same hands will
touch the body and blood of Christ, or at least the vessels that contain them. For example, one
14th-century Franciscan preacher complains in a sermon:

Those priests who should be most spotless upon the breast of God
have now become most foul in the Devil’s service. For with those
hands with which at night they handle the prostitute’s flesh, with
those same hands, I say, in the daytime they handle the Flesh of
Salvation. (Owst 267)

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

> The priest is anointed with an unction on his head and hands. . . .
> In receiving his yoke, he makes the vow of chastity from that time
> forth, so that as a purer man, he may make his actions pure. . . .
> Alas! That a wicked hand, defiled by the pudenda of women,
> should touch God’s sacred objects on the altar! Christ abhors the
> deed [of] one who will handle the Lord’s body, yet be basely
> attracted by a harlot. Alas! Those who should be servants of
> Christ are now agents of the Devil. (Major Latin Works 155-56)

Gower does not, however, prescribe a penalty or describe any actual consequences for this
abhorrent action. Even when he is clear about the harsh punishments reserved for those who
touch sacred objects with defiled hands, he does not specify exactly what happens to the objects
themselves: “If anyone feels he is weak in respect to the vices, the law commands that he should
not consecrate bread to God. . . . one who approaches the altar when he is defiled shall deserve
the stroke of death” (158-59). Gower’s imprecision here is deliberate, and cautious—the claim
that unworthy administration or reception of the eucharistic host is a grave sin has a firm biblical
basis, in the Apostle Paul’s warning to the Corinthians, “For he that eateth and drinketh vnworthili,
etith and drinkith doom to hym” (1 Cor. 11:29),³ but the claim that the elements themselves
suffer damage or diminishment, as if after consecration they had become something less than the
perfect body and blood of Christ, was considered by the church to be a heretical position, one
which will be explored in more detail below.

Writing on the opening lines of *Cleanness*, Anna Baldwin finds a connection with a 14th-century text titled *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, an English translation of Friar Laurent’s 13th-century *Somme le Roi*. Baldwin observes that “Friar Laurent couples his praise of cleanness, as the poet does, with a warning to the unclean priest derived from I Cor. 11:29,” but notes that Laurent takes great care to avoid heresy in this passage, and “makes it clearer than the poet does that the sacrament itself remains undefiled” (133).

The opening lines of *Cleanness*, as Baldwin suggests, are not careful in this way at all. In fact, the poet makes clear in line 16 that it is not just the “gere,” the implements of eucharistic ritual, that are defiled, but God *himself*—the sinful priests “sulpen altogether / Bothe God and His gere” (15-16; italics mine). The priests who commit this shocking, seemingly impossible act of defiling God are those who “conterfete crafte and cortayse wont” (13)—in other words, they lack virtue and only pretend to a counterfeited form of wisdom (“crafte”)—and who are hypocritical, seemingly virtuous on the outside, but “inwith alle fylthez” (14). These and possibly other unspecified sins, according to the poet, actually sully Christ’s body and trigger God’s wrath. The sacramental elements are still transubstantiated and intact—they are still God’s “aune body”—but they have, apparently, in some unexplained manner and “altogether,” been rendered less fit for consumption by the communicants.

The word “sulpen” in line 15 actually appears as “sulped” in the manuscript, an apparent scribal error which renders the word as a past-participle verb and passive-voice modifier that ascribes the defilement not to God himself but to the priests. A modern English translation of the unedited line 15 would read, “They [the priests] are sinful themselves, and altogether defiled.” This reading makes sense if the line is viewed in isolation, but it renders the next line, “Bothe
God and His gere,” nonsensical. At least, it would require a massaging similar to Brian Stone’s 1988 translation of *Cleanness*, which follows the manuscript’s “sulped” and silently corrects the grammatical problem: “They [the priests] are sinful themselves and sullied altogether, / Hating God and his good rites, goading him to anger.” Stone’s footnote for these lines makes no mention of the added verb, “hating,” which alters their meaning, but he does note that “This is the only attack on corrupt churchmen in the whole work of the ‘Pearl’ poet” (77)—a statement which, the present study hopes to demonstrate, is true only in the most literal sense.

In their edition of the poem, Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron change “sulped” to the present-tense active “sulpen,” so that it governs the phrase “God and His gere,” and every other translator or critic commenting on these lines, besides Stone, has followed their recommendation. They explain the emendation in the manuscript as an illustration of “a scribal tendency to complete the sense of a line” (112 n.). Even the corrected lines are confusing, however, and the claim that God Himself is defiled by priestly sin is such an oddity, not to mention a clear step toward a heretical position, that another possibility may be that a careful scribe simply sought to correct what he believed to be a misstatement. The poet does not explicitly state that the sacramental elements contaminated by a priest’s filth are less efficacious in their sacramental role of imparting God’s grace than those administered by a “clean” priest, but the phrase “sulpen altogether”—to defile wholly, completely—seems at least potentially to imply as much. And this belief that sinful priests, even priests who had committed deadly sin and were destined for damnation, were incapable of administering efficacious sacraments was a heresy labeled by church authorities as Donatism, one which dated back to the time of St. Augustine of Hippo.

The Donatists of the 4th century refused to acknowledge the authority of priests and
bishops who had collaborated with the anti-Christian persecutions of Roman emperor Diocletian, for instance by handing over sacred texts for burning. Under the Christian emperor Constantine’s reign, these priests resumed their positions within restored churches, but the Donatists insisted that the compromised priests had lost their authority to administer the sacraments, in particular baptism. The writings of Bishop Donatus, from whom the movement took its name, are now lost, preserved only as quotations and paraphrases within Augustine’s polemic against him. In numerous letters and treatises from his early years as Bishop of Hippo—including a series of seven books on baptism entitled *De baptismo contra Donatistas* (ca. 400) and a popular song, “Psalmus contra partem Donati” (ca. 395)—Augustine weighed in on the controversy, declaring Donatism a heresy and arguing that a priest’s authority inheres within the office itself, not within the sinfulness or righteousness of the individual man.4

To call any medieval heretic or heresy “Donatist” is to mislabel it in a historical sense, but the medieval church fully endorsed the label as a theological descriptor. The so-called “Donatists” of the 14th century were as far removed from the heretics of the ancient world as they are from our own, but to the officials charged with uncovering and rooting out the heresy, its historical roots were less important than its place in the history of theological ideas. In his encyclopedic study of late-medieval heresies, Gordon Leff points out that Donatism was simply an old name for a new movement, which church authorities employed in order to argue that the movement’s ideas were unoriginal, and to link them to a past history of heresies already stamped out. Leff describes the “medieval style” of official condemnation as one which “brands many of the propositions with the name of an existing heresy, such as Pelagian, Donatist or Manichaean; these references tend to be largely formal and do not of themselves offer evidence for the source of the outlook” (311).
Historian Malcolm Lambert traces the medieval version of Donatism back to 11th-century Italy, and to widespread calls from laymen there for clerical reform—a religious and cultural situation that bears virtually no resemblance to the ancient movement’s origins in the reign of Constantine. Lambert also defines Donatism to include any teaching that asserted “the masses of unworthy clergy were invalid” (45), a definition which allows a wide variety of otherwise unrelated theological ideas to gather under a broad title.

Two separate articles in the anthology *Texts and the Repression of Medieval Heresy* (2003), edited by Caterina Bruschi and Peter Biller, provide examples of late-medieval Donatism in the centuries between the earliest beginnings traced by Lambert and the *Gawain*-poet’s era. First, Jessalyn Bird documents the efforts of Peter the Chanter’s “Paris circle” in the late 12th century to combat widespread lay heresy, which she says grew from the laity’s “native anticlericalism, cynicism, and donatism stemming from the corruption or ignorance of the local clergy and squabbles between bishops and burghers or noblemen over temporal jurisdiction” (Bird 46). The Paris circle placed a heavy emphasis “upon the verbal formula and office of the priest as the two main criteria for the mass’s validity,” in part because many parishioners had reached the general conclusion “that the masses of those who possessed concubines, sold their services, or celebrated in an irreverent, truncated, or sloppy manner were inefficacious” (55-56). In response, Peter the Chanter and his followers “stressed that confession and the eucharist . . . did not depend upon the minister’s unverifiable purity” (56). The second example comes from a period only a few decades prior to the *Gawain*-poet’s work. James Given observes that Bernard Gui, the famous French Dominican inquisitor, accused the Béguins, a lay monastic movement, of Donatism in his early 14th-century inquisitorial manual *Liber sententiarum*. The Béguins’ error, according to Gui, was “in asserting that those bishops and ministers of the Church who have
persecuted the Béguins have deprived themselves of all power to pass judgments or perform the sacraments” (Given 156). Gui dealt with a variety of heretical positions in his inquisitions against this particular group, and his response to Donatism appears to have been simply to identify it when he encountered it, typically among mendicants who rejected the authority of Pope John XXII (157).

It was not until the mid to late 14th century, however, that Donatism became a widespread accusation against the heterodox in England. According to Lambert, the “evidence of inquiries” from the early 15th century “shows that this was a relatively frequent heresy” in England, and one most often applied to John Wyclif and the Lollards (281). By this late date, however, most Lollards had followed Wyclif into more radical territory, and denied the doctrine of transubstantiation altogether.

Traces of Wyclif’s supposed Donatism can be found scattered throughout his scholastic works. For example, in the tract De Eucharistia (ca. 1379), Wyclif claims that one Mass may be despised and rejected by God, while another is accepted. He appeals to the logic that a Mass performed by a good priest must be better than one performed by a bad priest, who does not truly exemplify the union of Christ with the church (112). Note here that Wyclif does not actually assert that bad priests have no ability to consecrate the host or to effect the miracle of transubstantiation, but that righteous priests perform the sacrament better. In De Apostasia (ca. 1379), Wyclif expresses the view that the Pope and Cardinals may “sin mortally, and fall away from God” (200), and that those who do lack the spiritual essence (“modus essendi spiritualis”) to administer sacraments (219-20). In an article that asks the question “Was John Wyclif’s Theology of the Eucharist Donatistic?” Wyclif biographer Ian Christopher Levy, while declining to answer definitively, asserts that in this section of De Apostasia, Wyclif “enters into the
These extracts and others were attacked by Wyclif’s opponents in the years following his 1382 condemnation by the Blackfriars synod at Oxford, and the Blackfriars condemnation itself included the heretical statement, supposedly held by Wyclif and his followers, that “if a bishop or a priest is living in mortal sin he cannot ordain, or confect, or baptize.”7 The statement would certainly be heretical if Wyclif had, in fact, made it, but nothing quite like it appears in his extant works. One of Wyclif’s most well-known critics after his death, the Carmelite Thomas Netter, also repeatedly identified him as a Donatist, most notably in a tract entitled *Tractatus de ministro sacramentorum* (ca. 1415), though for the most part without quoting him directly.8

Without a “smoking gun” of the sort the Blackfriars synod and Netter surely combed Wyclif’s works to find, the question of whether Wyclif actually held to a Donatist position is a matter of debate. Levy, for example, though he acknowledges Wyclif’s drift into Donatist “territory,” also views as significant the fact that Wyclif never directly defended himself against the Blackfriars’ charge, though he did react promptly and vehemently to other items on their list. The omission leads Levy to speculate that Wyclif did not actually accept this doctrine as his own and thus felt no need to respond to it (*John Wyclif: Scriptural Logic* 306). Overall, Levy sees contradictions in Wyclif’s writing, as he at one moment expresses an orthodox position on the power of God to overcome priestly sinfulness in the sacraments, and at the next moment denies the power of sinful priests to administer sacraments effectually. Levy sees in Wyclif’s thought “a discernible movement in the direction of Donatism . . . closely linked to his rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation” (“Was John Wyclif’s Theology” 143). Wyclif tends to express a somewhat Donatist view in *De Eucharistia*, Levy argues, because he “does not believe the host has undergone a substantial change following consecration.” Since all hosts are identical with
respect to “the sanctity derived from the body of Christ . . . the sanctity derived from the blessing of the priest actually varies according to his own merit” (146-47). Levy concludes, “Perhaps scholars will have to be content to say that there were times when Wyclif had been orthodox, times when a Donatist, and other times still when he had walked a perilous path between” (153).

Alastair Minnis, in his survey of Donatist references throughout Wyclif’s works (for the purposes of comparing them with Chaucer), reaches a similarly circumspect conclusion. After citing a passage in De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae (ca. 1378), in which Wyclif argues that a priest who is openly a fornicator should not be considered a legitimate priest (III.5-6), Minnis writes, “Such a comment hardly inspires confidence in the sacraments administered by the immoral priest. Whether we are or are not dealing with actual Donatism here, that type of statement was asking for trouble, and Wyclif had plenty of enemies who were disinclined to give him the benefit of the doubt” (361, n. 91).

Herbert B. Workman, author of the most thorough biography of Wyclif to date, from 1926, views Wyclif’s thought on this matter as developing throughout his career. “At one time,” Workman writes, citing De Ecclesia (ca. 1378), Wyclif “maintained that ‘the foreknown even when in actual sin can administer the sacraments with profit to the faithful,’ though to his own damnation, Christ supplying all the defects of the priest; but in later years he maintained that the value depended on the character of the priest and the nature of his prayers, in a word on the priest ‘being consecrated of God’” (II.41). On this latter point, Workman cites the fourth chapter of De Eucharistia (ca. 1379), in which Wyclif indeed makes clear that the “value” or efficacy (“efficacius”) of the sacrament depends in part upon the character of the priest, and mentions sexual sins in particular as those that may render him unfit. \(^9\) \(^10\) In fact, the latter half of this chapter of De Eucharistia (112-15) deals entirely with the need for good priests and the dangers,
mostly unspecified but certainly including the damnation of the priests themselves, of sinful priests administering sacraments. Workman does not believe, however, that Wyclif intentionally took up a heretical position. Though he emphasized the inner character of a priest as an important factor in the quality of his Masses, according to Workman, “Wyclif himself never worked this out to the end.” It was only “in the hands of his disciples [that] the extreme position became a cardinal tenet of faith” (II.13).

Whatever we might say of Wyclif’s uncertain and inconsistent “Donatism,” many of his followers in the Lollard movement earned the label without question. “And so that prest that lyves better synges better masse,” declares a Lollard tract from the late 14th century (Arnold, ed., Select English Works III.425). The Lollard treatise Of Prelates states the negative corollary of this claim and takes it further: “a prest may be so cursed & in heresie that he makith not the sacrament” (Matthew, ed., English Works 102). Another tract entitled An Apology for Lollard Doctrines asks rhetorically about a priest who shirks his duties and “hath only the name of prest”: “whi not a simple prest that in merit is more at God, of mor merit, gefe mor worthi sacraments?” (Todd, ed., 30). And a sermon from the Wycliffite sermon cycle claims that evil priests may lose “uertu to mynystre ony sacramentis” (Gradon and Hudson, eds., IV.104). As might be expected, not every member of the Lollard movement throughout its half-century or so of prominence spoke with a unified voice on the issue of clerical and sacramental corruption, but most were concerned with the problem.

So what do all of this evidence of “Donatism” from Wyclif and his followers have to do with the Gawain-poet, and to his suggestion in the opening lines of Cleanness that God’s body is sullied by the hands of sinful priests? The imagery of filthy hands to represent sinful priests was commonplace enough among a wide range of writers, and considering the poet’s clear
commitment to the doctrine of transubstantiation, a key point of contention for Wyclif and his followers, it is not plausible to suggest that the author of *Cleanness* was of the same party as the Lollards or other heretics who earned the Donatist label in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. But for all of his orthodox statements about the Real Presence in the Communion, the poet certainly shared the radicals’ concerns about clerical corruption, and may have held common cause with them on other controversial issues as well.

The *Gawain*-poet was no doubt a rough contemporary of Wyclif’s, and his dialect marks him as a native of the West Midlands, likely Cheshire, about 100 miles southwest from Wyclif’s origins in North Yorkshire. Nothing else within the poems themselves, however, suggests a personal connection between them. The poet may have heard of Wyclif, of course, may even have heard him preach in Oxford or London during his career, which spanned from approximately 1358 to 1384, but this can only be speculation. One of the *Gawain* poems’ earliest editors, Israel Gollancz, identified their author as Ralph Strode, an Oxford philosopher who knew Wyclif (as well as Chaucer) personally. This identification, however, has since been discredited.

With dozens of scholars proposing a wide range of possible dates for the poet’s work, roughly 1360 to 1399, it seems equally likely as not that *Cleanness* and the other poems were composed after the Blackfriars synod condemned 24 of Wyclif’s propositions in 1382. In fact, a survey of the available evidence and arguments suggests most likely a late date of 1390-99 for *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain* and an earlier date range, from the late 1370s through the 1380s, for the biblical poems *Cleanness* and *Patience*, making the poet’s familiarity with at least part of Wyclif’s work a possibility, but his knowledge of its condemnation as heterodox less likely. Wyclif’s tract *De Eucharistia*, the first to present his full view of the Eucharist, was written at the earliest in 1379, at the midpoint of the range for the biblical poems. In any event, the
Gawain-poet could not possibly have known, while writing, of Wyclif’s eventual condemnation as a heretic by the Council of Constance in 1415, or of his posthumous burning in 1428, both of which took place after the Lollard movement was well underway.

Despite this lack of a definitive historical connection, however, Cleanness’s description of the Eucharist defiled by priestly hands, and the poet’s seeming lack of caution about the potential for accusations of heresy, finds at least one parallel with a work of much more radical anticlerical polemic, one that is unquestionably linked to Wyclif and Lollardy. The tract is entitled On the Seven Deadly Sins (ca. 1384), first edited in 1869 for the anthology Select English Works of John Wyclif, and originally attributed to Wyclif himself. Later editors, including Workman in 1926, assign the tract instead to Nicholas Hereford, one of Wyclif’s younger Oxford colleagues, who was imprisoned in Rome during Wyclif’s last years. Workman speculates that Hereford likely wrote the tract after returning to England from his imprisonment in the mid-1380s (II.135).

In the tract, Hereford explains how each sin afflicts the church, starting with the clergy, then moving on to the estates of knights and commoners. For example, under the heading of the deadly sin Avarice, he rails against pluralism, absenteeism, and simony among the clergy. Pluralists and absentee—those who accept benefices for multiple parishes and thus cannot personally attend to all of them—harm their flocks through “negligence of this offis” (Arnold, ed., III.151), as the members of neglected parishes are left without a priest to administer the sacraments personally and provide pastoral care. It is the simoniacal priest, however—the one who sells his spiritual offices for money—who actually does active harm to his parishioners as he administers the sacraments:

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

Hereford’s polemic grows even more vivid when he addresses the sin of Lechery, and he draws a portrait of the sacrament defiled by a lustful priest’s filthy hands which bears a striking resemblance to the opening lines of *Cleanness*, both in its imagery and in its disregard for the potentially heretical consequences of asserting that God’s body itself can be defiled or harmed:

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

Like the *Gawain*-poet, Hereford begins his broad discussion of sin by focusing on priests, specifically on their mouths and hands which administer the sacraments, and he highlights the question of what “despit” a lecherous priest might do to the eucharistic host, “Gods body.” The *Middle English Dictionary* defines the phrase “don despit” (as above, “dos more despit to Gods body”; “don despit to God”) as “to humiliate, insult, or injure, disparage, commit an outrage” (def. 3). This outrage or injury to the host, Hereford says, is similar to casting the consecrated
wafer into a lake, where clearly it could no longer be received. He also makes clear that whether the lecherous priests continue to administer the sacrament in this state of sin, or whether they refrain, either way they have done a disservice to the people who rely on the sacrament’s bestowal of grace, and have betrayed God Himself. Significantly, the sin which prompts this perspective on the sacrament, and inspires Hereford’s most vivid depiction of priestly filth, is lust, the same sin the Gawain-poet will use as the primary negative example in his homily on cleanness—as he depicts the people of Noah’s day engaging in bestiality and women copulating with demons (lines 265-80), the men of Sodom lusting violently for other men and attempting to rape the angels who visit Lot (833-84), and the Babylonian king Belshazzar giving his mistresses the status of ladies and allowing them to defile the sacred objects of Jerusalem (1349-1520), a scene which is clearly meant to recall the defiled eucharistic “gere” of the prologue.

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

Similarly to *Cleanness*, the tract makes multiple references to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, for a variety of purposes—for instance, to illustrate that priests who waste the “gostly seed” of good preaching through their absenteeism incur God’s wrath even more than the Sodomites, who wasted their “bodily seed” (144), or to provide vivid examples of the various forms of lechery (162). But more notable in connection to *Cleanness* are Hereford’s repeated references, in his discussion of nearly all the deadly sins, to “clennesse” as their alternative. God loves “clene travel” (clean work) rather than Sloth or mendicant begging (143). Priests should provide “gode ensaumple by clennesse of lif” (145) rather than Ire, and instead of practicing Lechery, “schulden gostly serve in clennes” their people (163). In meditating on Gluttony, Hereford notes the importance of keeping “a cleene soule” within the body’s “house of his death” (155). And of course, as mentioned above, the priest must keep his “mouthe and hondes” free from lustful filth to avoid polluting the Eucharist (164).

Like the *Gawain*-poet, and unlike many other Lollard writers, Hereford does not question the doctrine of transubstantiation in itself—the lustful priest actually “makes . . . Gods body,” and his offense against the eucharistic elements is compared to casting “Gods body . . . in tho lake.” For the most part, he avoids questions related to the sacraments. But the author, whether Nicholas Hereford or not, is unquestionably a Lollard, and the tract covers many of the themes and arguments common to Lollard polemic—against the voluntary poverty of mendicants and
fraternal orders in general (125-26, 130-31, 158), against the episcopal hierarchy that places bishops over parish priests (131), in favor of secular lords’ “dominion” and right to reclaim church endowments (131, 146, 154), an argument for pacifism (138-40), the association of the pope (most likely Urban VI) with the Antichrist (140-41), the importance of preaching as the chief duty of a priest (144), and against pluralism, absenteeism, and simony (151). Perhaps his most revealing complaint is against those secular lords and priests who “hyden Gods lawe, and pursuen prestis for prechyng of treuthe” (132), an apparent reference to the itinerant “poor priests” who preached Lollard doctrine, and perhaps also to those who disseminated copies of Wyclif’s English Bible, and were later persecuted under Archbishops William Courtenay and Thomas Arundel.

To draw parallels between Hereford’s tract and Cleanness is not to suggest that there is any biographical connection between their authors, but a thematic comparison of the two works—one by an entirely anonymous author, the other by a prominent figure in the Lollard movement—can help to illuminate the type of danger the Gawain-poet was skirting with his anticlerical polemic and description of sacramental defilement. Hereford’s intriguing and almost implausible career illustrates just how radical the themes the Gawain-poet deals with in Cleanness and Patience could become in the late 14th century, in the right hands.

Hereford’s biography suggests that for most of his career, he was a Lollard par excellence, one of Wyclif’s most eminent Oxford associates, along with Philip Repingdon and John Purvey. Two manuscripts of the Wycliffite Early Version of the English Bible (Cambridge MS Ee.1.10 and Bodley MS Douce 369) identify Hereford as a translator—in fact, he is the only translator of the Early Version to be cited by name in any manuscript—work that he may have participated in as early as his arrival at Oxford in 1372 (Fowler 154-55, 158). According to
Workman, after the Blackfriars synod condemned Wyclif’s teaching in 1382, “Hereford at once published two English tracts in which he reaffirmed six out the fourteen decisions condemned as erroneous” (II.133). These two tracts appear in Arnold’s Select English Works of John Wyclif (though Arnold himself admits that Wyclif’s authorship is unlikely) under the titles Lincolniensis (III.230-32) and Vita Sacerdotum (III.233-41). Both short works seethe with anger against Wyclif’s enemies among the friars, who are “Pharisees” and “Anticrist clerkes” (231). Hereford prophesies that “the reume of Englonde schal scharply be punyschid for prisionyng of pore prestis” (231) and calls on knights to lend military strength to their cause (232, 240). This militant rhetoric was apparently not unusual for the fiery Hereford—according to the contemporary chronicler Thomas Walsingham, he was “the most violent” of Wyclif’s supporters at Oxford (qtd. in McFarlane 102).

While the synod deliberated over the propositions culled from Wyclif’s writings, on May 15, 1382, Hereford delivered a defiant Ascension Day sermon in English in the churchyard of Oxford’s St. Frideswide’s priory (where Christ Church Cathedral stands today), a sermon summarized in Latin by a notary in the employ of Archbishop Courtenay (Bodley MS 240, pp. 848-50).19 These notes give a hostile but nevertheless clear picture of Hereford’s key beliefs—in brief, he echoed Wyclif’s teaching on secular lords’ dominion over clergy and pope, the need for disendowment of monks and wealthy clerics, the lack of Gospel authority for the friars’ voluntary poverty, and the evils of the fraternal orders in general. In the month that followed this sermon, after Wyclif’s forced retirement to his parish at Lutterworth, Hereford and Repingdon, in the words of historian John Dahmus, “proceeded to turn Oxford into a hotbed of Lollardy” (135). The effect of this activity was such that when representatives of the four fraternal orders wrote to John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and effective head of the English government, to
complain about their unfavorable treatment at Oxford (a letter preserved in the anti-Lollard collection *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*), they identified their “chief enemy” as “magister Nicolaus de Hereford” (294).

The ultimate consequence of this activity at Oxford and the friars’ complaints was that at a further meeting on June 12, the synod ordered Chancellor Robert Rigg to suspend Hereford and others “from preaching and disputing until they had purged themselves of heresy” (McFarlane 109; also see Workman II.283; Scase 11). Hereford and Repingdon travelled to London to petition John of Gaunt himself, but the Duke rejected their appeal, and the Oxford men resorted to nailing a list of their beliefs, recently declared heterodox, to the doors of St. Mary’s and St. Paul’s (Hudson, “‘Laicus Litteratus’” 231-32). On June 18, both were both found guilty of heresy. When Hereford failed to make a second appearance before Courtenay at Canterbury, he was excommunicated as well (Workman II.284-86; McFarlane 110-12). He fled to Rome, in a misguided bid to secure papal favor against his superiors in England, and was imprisoned for his trouble. Pope Urban VI gave him a lifetime prison sentence, but incredibly, he escaped in the midst of a popular uprising (unrelated to Wyclif or Lollardy) and made his way back to England, perhaps as early as 1384 (McFarlane 126).

After one or two years of secret preaching, writing, and hiding from the authorities, Hereford was finally arrested in 1386, and imprisoned in Nottingham Castle, but once again, he either escaped or was set free by the constable, Sir William Neville. He immediately joined the Lollard John Aston on a preaching tour of western England (Workman II.136), only to be arrested again in 1387. This time, he was imprisoned in Courtenay’s Saltwood Castle in Kent, and likely tortured (Workman II.136; McFarlane 128). He recanted his heterodox beliefs, and in return received numerous papal and royal favors for the rest of his life, including the
chancellorship of Hereford Cathedral in 1394 (Workman II.336). By the time the radical Lollard William Thorpe stood before Archbishop Arundel’s court in 1407, on trial for his life, “Nycol Hereforde” had apparently become a byword among the Lollards, as one who had once stood firm in the faith, but in exchange for riches and comfort now “enuenymed all the chirche of God” (Hudson, ed., *Two Wycliffite Texts* 505).

Ironically, Hereford may have distanced himself from the Donatism expressed in *On the Seven Deadly Sins* shortly before his recantation, in favor of a more individualistic view of the sacraments shared by many of the later Lollards. In the pamphlet *Twenty-Five Points* (Bodley MS Douce 273), a document presented to Parliament in 1388 which Hereford may have participated in writing (Workman II.136), the Lollard writers deny the charge of Donatism that bishops and friars have imputed to them. Their opponents accuse the “pore men” (Lollard “poor priests”) of teaching “that a preste in dedely synne nouther makis tho sacrament of tho auter, ne cristynes, ne ȝyves ony sacrament” (III.485). What the poor priests truly preach, according to the pamphlet, is this: “Cristen men sayne, that a preste beynge in dedely synne may make and ȝyve sacramentis to salvation of hem that worthily receyven hem, and consenten not to tho prestus synne. . . . But tho preste in this case mynystris to his owne dampnacion” (485). In other words, a priest’s sin does not invalidate the sacrament for anyone but himself—unless the communicants also know of his sin and partake, thus participating in it. If the priest’s fault is known to the public, “tho pepul owes nout to receyve sacramentus of hym, leste consent to his synne make hem parteners in peyne, nomely of open fornicacione, open covetyse and raveyne of pore mennus lyvelode . . . and of symonye” (486). As Workman puts it in his summary of the document, “On one point on which Wyclif spoke with two voices there is now certainty” (II.389): the worthiness of the recipient, not the priest’s spiritual cleanliness or filth, determines
the efficacy of the sacrament. If Hereford is, in fact, one of the authors of this statement, as well as the author of the earlier tract, then he must have modified or moderated his views in the years between 1384-85 and 1388. Or perhaps he worked out more fully a line of thought which had not greatly concerned him in earlier years—*On the Seven Deadly Sins* does not present a fully developed doctrine of the sacraments, after all, but uses the imagery of their defilement primarily as polemical tools.

The *Gawain*-poet offers no complete system of sacramental doctrine, either. He is not writing a theological treatise, but rather a series of vernacular paraphrases of Bible stories (in both *Cleanliness* and *Patience*), which are not necessarily intended for a solely clerical audience. But the thematic connections between his work and a radical like Hereford’s provides a dramatic illustration of the types of associations a 14th-century reader might have made when viewing even the relatively orthodox anticlerical critique of the *Gawain*-poet, especially if the poems are dated to the latter half of their potential range—that is, around the time of the Blackfriars condemnation of 1382, when Hereford composed his polemical sermons and tracts.

The present study does not attempt to claim that the *Gawain*-poet was a Lollard, or in sympathy with Lollards, or even necessarily aware of the Lollard movement, which may not have even existed at the time of the poems’ composition. The Lollards do, however, serve as an important, albeit late, manifestation of a tradition in which the *Gawain*-poet was also a participant—that is, the broad tradition of medieval anticlericalism, which in 14th-century England included prose writers such as William of Ockham and Richard FitzRalph, poets such as Richard Rolle, John Gower, William Langland, and Geoffrey Chaucer, and of course Wyclif, Hereford, and their followers. The *Gawain*-poet and the Lollards both composed their works within the same textual environment of 14th-century anticlericalism, though that environment
may have prompted them toward differing theological or political positions.

The phrase “textual environment” has been used without comment by so many scholars of the Middle Ages it hardly needs attribution, but the definition most germane to this study comes from Paul Strohm in *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (1992), in the chapter titled “The Textual Environment of ‘Lak of Stedfastnesse.’” In addressing the issue of non-traditional and unsanctioned forms of fealty and oath-taking, to which Chaucer’s short poem refers, Strohm writes, “The whole body of contemporaneous texts on this subject together with related ceremonials and performances, constituted an ‘environment’ or field conducive to the production and interpretation of yet more texts and more related actions” (58). Scholars of the *Gawain*-poet have used the same term to situate these poems within a variety of contemporaneous issues and debates. John Bowers, for example, cites Strohm in his article “*Pearl* in Its Royal Setting: Ricardian Poetry Revisited” (1995), in which he describes the textual environment of *Pearl* as it relates to the court and Cheshire connections of King Richard II.

The textual environment of 14th-century English anticlericalism, as it will be considered here, includes any satire, critique, polemic, or argument, whether theological or practical, against any form or level of the clergy, including parish priests, unbeneficed priests, members of monastic and fraternal orders, bishops, and popes—anyone with authority from the church to administer sacraments—as well as non-consecrating lay officers of the church, such as Chaucer’s Pardoner and Summoner. Strohm also notes that the first appearance of new social movements or practices “is often within hostile texts that seek to proscribe them or to regulate their effect,” but “however stigmatizing in intent, written treatment puts new tendencies into play, opens a discursive field within which they can be figured and refigured, promulgated both as textual and
social practice” (57). With this concept in mind, I will also consider as part of the textual environment of anticlericalism any type of clerical responses to these critiques, official or unofficial, in which the voices of the writer’s opponents are embedded in quote or paraphrase. This broad definition, of course, includes a staggering number of texts, even if we confine our study to the last three decades of the 14th century, when the Gawain-poet composed his poems. It includes relatively benign critiques such as Gower’s chiding of corrupt parish priests, or Wyclif’s bitter polemic against fraternal orders, as well as his arguments for the dispossession of monasteries and accusations against papal Antichrists. It includes the entirety of the massive Wycliffite sermon cycle, and nearly half of Chaucer’s narrators in The Canterbury Tales—Friar, Summoner, Pardoner, Monk, Nun’s Priest, perhaps even the Parson—as well as dozens of satirical characters within the tales themselves. And it includes hostile clerical responses to many of these provocations, from voices such as the Blackfriars synod and Thomas Netter, mentioned above.

Given such a rich, varied, and frankly overwhelming amount of material to consider, this study will use Wyclif’s life and anticlerical career as a touchstone and organizing principle, looking first at his major influences, then the arc of his own academic career, and finally at the early Lollards in his immediate sphere of influence. Arguably the most influential anticlerical writer of the 14th century besides Chaucer, Wyclif and his general principles intersect with a broad range of anticlerical writers from the same period, including the Gawain-poet.

Since the publication of Anne Hudson’s The Premature Reformation in 1988 kicked off a new era of interest in Wycliffite and Lollard texts, scholars have explored a variety of potential connections between the Lollard movement and the 14th century’s most well-known poets: Chaucer, Langland, and Gower. There can be little doubt about Gower’s opinions toward the
Lollards; he explicitly distances himself from the movement, even as he levels a harsh critique against priests in the prologue to the *Conféssio Amantis* (ca. 1390). Hudson herself claims that neither Chaucer nor Langland fully endorse a Wycliffite or Lollard position in their work, similar though their concerns may have been. Chaucer’s Parson in *The Canterbury Tales*, for instance, whom the Host accuses of being a “Loller” for his harsh stance against swearing (*CT* II.1173), is “without doubt no paid-up member of the Lollard party” (*PR* 391), Hudson writes, but at the same time Chaucer “has deliberately chosen to surround his Parson with a suggestion of Wycliffism” (392). In the same way, Hudson denies any actual connection between Langland and his Lollard contemporaries, despite the poet’s description of himself in *Piers Plowman* as “yclothed as a lollare” (C.V.2), among other references. She points out, however, that the poet and the heretics do share some common cause—for instance, the poem’s treatment of questions related to clerical temporalities and endowment (issues discussed in more detail in the next chapter) appears to be “closely in accord with Wycliffite thought” (*PR* 405). Hudson concludes that though *Piers Plowman* might be considered a “revolutionary” poem, “of clear sympathy with specifically and unequivocally Wycliffite positions its author, in any version, gives little sign” (408), and the poem’s later appropriation by Lollard satirists is merely an accident of history. She finds none of the distinctive characteristics of a Lollard text in any of Chaucer’s or Langland’s works, such as “the rejection of the ideals of monasticism and fraternalism. . . . Neither Chaucer nor Langland attack those ideals, however much they argue that contemporary reality betrays them” (*PR* 22).

Hudson’s cautious, equivocal language in discussing this issue has done nothing, however, to prevent a virtual cottage industry of Chaucer-Lollard and Langland-Lollard studies from springing up in the decades since *The Premature Reformation*. The great poets’ scattered
references to “Lollers” are simply too much for students of Lollardy to resist, despite the word’s employment as a general term of abuse in many other 14th-century texts. Wendy Scase, for example, in “Piers Plowman” and the New Anti-clericalism (1989), views Langland and Wyclif as participating together in a “new” anticlericalism that drew on older inter-clerical disputes between monks, friars, and secular clerics and combined them into a more generalized attack on all clergy. Andrew Cole’s Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer (2007) and Alastair Minnis’s Fallible Authors: Chaucer’s Pardoner and Wife of Bath (2008) both examine the issue of Wyclif’s heresy and argue that Chaucer was at least aware and interested in the possibilities that his radical ideas raised. Frances McCormack, in Chaucer and the Culture of Dissent (2007), focuses exclusively on The Parson’s Tale, situating it within a Lollard context and unearthing its supposedly Lollard subtexts. Recent studies have even compared Chaucer’s biblical references to the text of the Wycliffite Bible, in an attempt to determine whether Chaucer owned a copy—Craig Fehrman, in “Did Chaucer Read the Wycliffite Bible?” (2007) answers this question in the affirmative, and Amanda Holton, in “Which Bible Did Chaucer Use?” (2008), in the negative.

To date, however, virtually no research has been conducted into the links between the Gawain-poet and English anticlericalism of the 14th century. The gap is somewhat surprising, given the poet’s outburst of anticlerical sentiment at the opening of Cleanness, the possibility of reading those lines as Donatist, and even his connections with the northwest Midlands, a region in which Lollardy flourished after it moved out of Oxford. Perhaps the reason is simply that the poet never uses the word “loller” or “lollare,” or that he does not overtly attack the efficacy of sacraments such as the Eucharist and penance, as Lollards were well-known for doing. Whatever the reason, Anne Hudson summarizes the apparent critical consensus well. In mentioning a connection between Pearl’s theology of unmerited salvation and a similar view
espoused by Wyclif, she notes that the *Pearl* poems were “written by a north Midland author who has never been adduced as a possible Wyclif supporter” (*PR* 398).

The present study does not aim to prove Hudson wrong, or to claim that the *Gawain*-poet harbored secret Lollard sympathies. It does not even start with the assumption that the poet was aware of Wyclif’s early career or his later heresy—an assumption that would require a more fixed date for the Cotton Nero A.x poems and more certainty about the poet’s life than have yet been proven. What it does attempt to do is to situate the *Gawain*-poet’s work, in particular the homiletic poems *Cleanness* and *Patience*, within the textual environment of English anticlericalism in the late 14th century, somewhere on a spectrum between the pro-clerical position of the church and its defenders and the later Lollards’ full-throated denunciation of the entire clerical office and the sacraments.

To this end, the next chapter presents an overview of English anticlerical writing in the 14th century, a history which actually begins with the founding of the fraternal orders in the 13th century and the immediate controversy they sparked. From there, we will take a thematic (as opposed to chronological) approach to an overview of the issues that most concerned these anticlerical writers. These issues begin simply with concerns over clerical corruption and unfitness—standard worries over greed, sexual sin, hypocrisy, and lack of education, but also the more controversial issues of pluralism and alien benefices—issues which even the most rigorously orthodox critics, such as John Gower, felt the need to address.

At this point, Wyclif’s career will serve as a convenient model for the progression of anticlerical ideas which led logically, at least in the minds of his critics, to his ultimate break from the orthodox doctrine of the Eucharist. Wyclif displayed anticlerical tendencies in the very earliest of his works, but he took a further step—one also taken a few years earlier by the
secular cleric Richard FitzRalph—when he took the side of his patron John of Gaunt in what became known as the “dominion” controversy. In works such as *De Civili Dominio* (ca. 1375-76), *De Dominio Divino* (ca. 1375-76), and *De Ecclesia* (1378), Wyclif argues for the secular state’s absolute dominion over the church, including the pope, whom he increasingly begins to refer to as “Antichrist.” At first, Wyclif made an uneasy peace with his fraternal colleagues at Oxford, who agreed with him on many points, and he quotes freely from friars such as the Franciscan Robert Grossteste in his early work, including *De Universalibus* (ca. 1368-69). But his meditations on the issue of evangelical poverty, set forth in the third chapter of *De Civili Dominio*, and later expanded upon in works such as *Protestatio* (ca. 1378), *Libellus* (ca. 1378), and the tract *Thirty-Three Conclusions on the Poverty of Christ* (Loserth, ed., *Opera Minora* 19-73), made his break with them complete.

It was not until he had worked out these arguments, and shared labor with many other writers before him, that Wyclif took the step which would define him as a heretic thereafter. In Workman’s words, “After the autumn of 1378 Wyclif passed from political to theological revolt” (I.314), with the publication of *De Eucharistia* (ca. 1379; see note 9 below), a wide-ranging and often confusing treatise which appears to express at times a Donatist position toward the Eucharist, at times a position of consubstantiation, but at all points a strong skepticism, rooted in his Aristotelian philosophical realism, toward the church’s official position on transubstantiation. Wyclif’s position hardened, though it did not necessarily grow more well-defined, in later works such as *Confessio* (ca. 1381), *De Blasphemia* (ca. 1382), and *Trialogus* (ca. 1382)—this last essentially a summary of all the anticlerical, antipapal, anti-sacramental positions he had held throughout his life. It was up to his successors, Hereford, Repingdon, and others, to deny transubstantiation altogether, and finally, for a handful of the most radical Lollards like Hawisia
Moone in 1430 (Hudson ed., *Selections* 34-37), to deny every sacrament, including baptism, penance, and even marriage—the most extreme edge of the spectrum mentioned above.

After this history of the anticlerical tradition and a thematic overview of the issues that most concerned its writers, I will focus on *Cleanness* and *Patience* individually in Chapters Three and Four, to analyze their positions, both overt and implied, on those issues of central concern, and in Chapter Five extend the reading into *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain*. But first, we turn our attention to the broader textual environment of English anticlerical critique which preceded and ran parallel with the *Gawain*-poet’s works..
Chapter Two:
John Wyclif and the Textual Environment of 14th-Century English Anticlericalism

1. The Biblical Basis of Medieval Anticlerical Rhetoric

Anticlerical critique in the Judeo-Christian tradition traces its origins back to the foundations of the priesthood itself, in the Hebrew Bible. As Wyclif observes in his tract De Officio Regis (ca. 1378), the first priest mentioned in Scripture, though not explicitly identified as such, is Cain, who kills his brother Abel out of jealousy for offering better sacrifices and is marked forever with a curse (144).¹ In the Book of Exodus, God establishes the Levite priesthood through Moses’ brother Aaron, but He does so in anger, only after Moses declares himself unfit for the task (Ex. 4:10-16). “And the lord was wrothe aȝens moises,” reads verse 14 in the Later Version (LV) of the Wycliffite Bible,² thus establishing a connection between the priesthood and God’s wrath which runs throughout Scripture. This priesthood is later established more officially with the tablets of Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 25-31), tablets which also include regulations on priestly vestments (“hooli cloth,” 28:2) and consecration (“that thei be sacrid to me in presthood,” 29:1), as well as the forging of sacred objects including a “candelstik,” “cuppes,” and “lanternes” made of “clennest gold” (25:31-40), items the Gawain-poet will describe in lengthy detail in the Belshazzar’s Feast scene in Cleanness. At the same time that this legal transaction in Exodus takes place, however, the priests in question, led by Aaron, build a golden idol at the foot of the mountain (Ex. 32:1-6), an abomination which leads to Moses breaking the tablets (v. 19), rebuking Aaron, and rallying every Levite priest to kill “his brother his freend & neiȝebores” at God’s command (27-28). Finally, God Himself strikes the
people with a plague for this priestly malfeasance (35).

In the New Testament, the primary antagonists of Jesus during his ministry are members of this same order of priests, whom the Wycliffite LV calls “hiȝest prestis” or “princis of prestis”—or, in the Gospel of John, “bishopis”\(^3\)—and on whom Jesus calls down the curse of Cain and Abel (Matt. 23:35; Luke 11:50-51). Jesus establishes a new priesthood when he confers “the keies of the kyngdom of heuenes” on the Apostle Peter and says, “what euer thou schalt bynde on erthe: schal be bounde also in heuenes, and what euer thou schalt vnbynde on erthe: schal be vnbouneden also in heuenes” (Matt. 16:19). This is the moment, according to an ancient tradition still widely accepted in the 14th century, that Peter is established as the first pope of the Christian church, but no sooner has this momentous occasion taken place than the newly-minted leader of the Christian priesthood denies Jesus’ prophecy of death on a cross, prompting a fierce rebuke: “Sathanas go thou aftir me, thou art a sclaudre to me, for thou sauerist not tho thingis that ben of god: but tho thingis that ben of men” (16:23; see also Mark 8:31-33). Jesus ordains the Apostles in a somewhat different manner in John 20:22-23, when he breathes on them and says, “take ȝe the hooly goost,” then gives them the power to forgive or withhold forgiveness from sinners. But this scene, too, is followed immediately by one which reveals doubt among one of the new priesthood’s members, Thomas (20:24-29).

In the Pastoral Epistles, the Apostle Paul establishes further guidelines for the new priesthood within the rising church and delineates separate offices for bishops and deacons.\(^4\) Embedded within these passages, however, is the presumption that sin and corruption are constant threats for the men who seek these positions. In the first chapter of Titus, before listing the positive qualities a candidate for bishop should possess, Paul presents a detailed list of negative possibilities. The bishop must be, he says,
withoute cryme: an hosebonde of o wijf, & hath faithful sones: not
in accusacioun of leccherie, or not suget . . . Not proud, not
wrathful, not drunkelewe, not a smytere, not coueituous of foul
wynnyng . . . (1:6-7)

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul lists positive qualifications first, but the list of negatives is equally
suggestive. “[I]t behouith a bisshop to be withoute repreef,” he says (3:2), then lists the specific
dangers in public or private life which might ensnare him:

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

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

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

In summary, at several moments of its establishment in Scripture, priesthood comes under immediate attack for incompetence and corruption, both actual and potential, and as a vehicle for evildoers to infiltrate the church. Not surprisingly, these same biblical texts were often cited in the works of 14th- and 15th-century English anticlerical writers, and they became frequent flashpoints in anticlerical, antimonastic, and antifraternal debates.

For example, 19 of the 294 sermons in the so-called Wycliffite sermon cycle contain references to the Gospel passages cited above, and one, entitled *In Cathedra Sancti Petri* (Hudson and Gradon, eds., II.247-50), takes Matthew 16:19 as its entire theme. In typical Lollard fashion, this sermon interprets the “ston” on which Christ will “grownde hys chyrche” not simply as a reference to Peter and the popes who followed in his line, but as “Petre and eche man,” with the “keyes of the rewme of heuene” being delivered to “Petre with monye othre seyntus, for alle men that comen to heuene han thes keyes of God” (249). Another sermon in the cycle, which focuses on John 20 (I.433-37), explicitly connects Jesus’ bestowing of the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins in that passage to the “keyis of the chirche” and “power to bynden and lowsen” in Matthew. The sermon warns that in both cases, “bosterus [who] be certeyn at the furste that thei ben verrey vykerus of the hooly apostles” should be cautious, since
they may discover in their boasting that “thei ben none of hem to whom Crist ȝaf this power” (435). It goes on to inveigh against the abuse of papal indulgences and against the divided papacy itself, pointing out the absurdity of one pope attempting to “lowse[n] al that the tothur bond” (435). A significant portion of another sermon in the cycle (II.71-76) is devoted to an explication of the guidelines from 1 Timothy and Titus, which it describes as “twelue lawys . . . how God ordelyneth clerkis to leue” (73). A further three sermons make reference to the events of Exodus 32 and read them through the lens of contemporary clerical failures (I.309-12; I.637-42; II.178-85). One of these, the Sunday Epistle for the ninth Sunday after Trinity, compares the “foure sectis” of friars in their covetousness to the Israelite idolators, and suggests that these “newe ordris” run the same risk of God’s lethal wrath striking them down (I.639-40).

In a separate collection, edited by Anne Hudson under the title *The Works of a Lollard Preacher*, a sermon tract describes Cain as the original “possessioner” (a monk who owns property) and accuses the contemporary church of preferring Cain-like priests over those who care for their parishioners’ souls:

> and Caym the erthetyller is made the hirde or gouernour of sowlis. For it is not axyd in the chirche if he kan well teche, or if he kan wepe and weyle for synys, but ȝef he be Caym, that is, an erthetilyer that kan well till the londe. . . . And if it be axid of siche oone, “Where is the schepe that was bytaken to the?,” he answerith “Whether I am kepar of my brother?,” as thouȝ he sayde “What charge is to me of the sowlis, so that I haue well ordenyd for the temperall goodis?” (73, 75)

In a sermon entitled *De Oblacione Iugis Sacrificii*, the same preacher describes Peter’s
ordination and rebuke in Matthew 16, and compares him to “the rebel clerge that schuld [be] the
most obedient and seruiable parte in Cristis spouse, that is his chirche” (184). When Jesus links
Peter to Satan in 16:23, the Lollard preacher extends the metaphor to all priests, drawing from
the description of Satan as a hypocritical “angel of light” in 2 Corinthians 11:14 (quoted above),
and places foremost blame on the clergy for a variety of ills within the church:

So it is noo douȝte the wickid spouse and seruant, the clerge, the
grete renegat that I spake of before, is Sathanas transfigurid into an
angel of liȝt, for he is Cristis aduersarie under the name of most
holynesse, and most offendeth Crist and harmeth his chirche, and is
cause whi the glorious name of God is sclaundrid and blasfemed
among hethen folk, and whi the peple stumblith and fallith into
synne and aftur into helle. (185)

The sermon Omnis Plantacio, which runs parallel to the first tract cited above,6 draws from the
same biblical passage, as it compares “the clergie” to “Lucifer” and claims that “the foure
aungels at the hardist weie of Sathanas, bi ypocrisie transfigurid into aungels of liȝt” have come
to earth as “endowid clerkis, monkis and chanouns and freris” (139-40).

In the collection Lollard Sermons, edited by Gloria Cigman, a sermon for the Fourth
Sunday in Lent interprets Peter’s “keyis of the kingdome” as representing “power and kunnyng”
(188). Unfortunately, the writer laments, “many prestis taken the keyis of power and forȝeten the
key of kunnyng” (188). The next sermon, for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, examines the biblical
guidelines for “euery prechoure of the worde of God” (195), and discourses at length on the
above-mentioned passages from Titus and 1 Timothy, citing “Seint Poule,” who gave “a rule of
prestis and prechouris to Tite and Thimothie, his disciplis” (195-96).
Lollard sermons of the late 14th and early 15th century are filled with references not only to these biblical passages, which involve the explicit establishment of the priesthood in Scripture, but also with a handful of others that were given an almost exclusively anticlerical reading by medieval commentators—passages such as Matthew 7:15 and John 10:1-16, which speak of a “scheperde,” “theef,” “false prophetis,” and “wolues of raueyne” that savage the flock. Frances McCormack, in her survey of Lollard rhetoric and its connection to Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale, states that “metaphors of sheep and wolves abound throughout Lollard sermons and polemical tracts” (87). She cites 44 examples, 26 of them from the Wycliffite sermon cycle alone, impressive textual evidence which nevertheless only scratches the surface of the sermons’ literally hundreds of references to wolves and sheep. Indeed, three sermons in the cycle take these passages as their entire theme (I.252-55; I.438-42; III.237-38), and all are especially virulent in their attacks on negligent and incompetent priests, monks, and friars, three separate clerical categories among which the sermons make little to no distinction. Of the reference to “false prophetys” and “wolues of raueyne” in Matthew 7:15, one sermon says, “these wordys mowen ben aplied vnto false frerus” (I.252), and also “generally to prestys that seyn that thei han cure of mannys sowle” (255). “Bothe frerys, monkus and chanownes,” another sermon says, are “rauyschynge woluys” that attack the church from within (439, 441). This reading pushes the Gospel passages’ already anticlerical suggestions even further, depicting the various types of clerics not only as negligent shepherds who abandon their sheep but actually as wolves who attack them. “The manner in which these images differ from those in orthodox texts,” McCormack observes, “is that in Lollard texts the wolf that threatens the flock is usually the one whose duty is to guard it” (87).

All of these sermon collections, particularly the Wycliffite cycle, borrow ideas from
Wyclif’s Latin sermons and theological tracts (Hudson and Gradon, eds., I.50), ideas which in some cases were later deemed heterodox. According to the cycle’s editors, “the controversial nature of the subject-matter of this cycle is evident in almost every sermon,” so much so that “if a manuscript of the sermons came into the hands of the ecclesiastical authorities during the period 1380 to 1520, no difficulty would have been found in identifying the contents as heretical” (I.98). Wyclif used the same biblical passages in his attacks on priests, “possessioners” (monks), and friars. He devotes many pages to explications of Matthew 16:19—explaining, for example, in the first chapter of De Ecclesia (ca. 1378) that a priest or pope’s power to “bind and loose” has strict limits and only “remains where it is rightly exercised” (9). 8

In the tract De Simonia (ca. 1380), Wyclif explicitly compares modern-day bishops and priests to the “high priests” and “elders” who opposed Jesus. At the close of an argument in favor of clerical disendowment, Wyclif concludes:

Therefore, just as the high priests, the worst heretics themselves, condemned our Lord Jesus Christ for heresy, so the high priests of Antichrist are able to condemn and destroy Christ’s members because the latter universally reprove their sins and preach how the church can be helped licitly by being relieved of temporal possessions. And so the entire church should rise up against the elders, who seemed to rule the people, when drunk with greed they simoniacally prepare pseudo-pastors for themselves who are opposed to the people’s salvation and the truth of the Gospel. (152; 101) 9

In a passage from De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae (ca. 1378), Wyclif analyzes 1 Timothy 3:1-7, a passage which he says “completely covers all the necessary requirements for any bishop.” He
notes first that Paul’s term for “bishop” (*episcopus*) “includes every sort of priest,” and that “when the Apostle conveys this rule to Timothy he is actually instructing all succeeding bishops under a single wrapping” (293; II.181-82). In other words, the anticlerical critique of Scripture applies not only to the early church, but to contemporary priests as well. Shortly after making these observations, Wyclif cites a Chrystostom sermon on the same passage, which makes reference to Moses’ establishment of “bishops” at Sinai (294; II.183). The implication is that contemporary priests are just as liable for the critiques leveled against Israelite priests by Moses and God in the Old Testament as they are for those that Jesus and Paul aim against Christian priests in the New—an important point to keep in mind when we turn to the *Gawain*-poet’s interpretation of Old Testament stories in *Cleanness* and *Patience*.

2. William of St. Amour, Richard FitzRalph, and Wyclif on Clerical Dominion

The overall trajectory of Wyclif’s career as philosopher, theologian, and accused heretic—to the extent that it can be dated and tracked chronologically through his Latin works—can serve as a useful tool in attempting to categorize the wide and complex range of anticlerical arguments made by English writers in the 14th century. The apparent progression of Wyclif’s anticlerical ideas in these works, from a straightforward critique of clerical corruption early in his career, to his later denial of the doctrine of transubstantiation, to a radical anti-sacerdotalism which argued against the necessity of priests at all, can also assist in constructing a rough spectrum of 14th-century English anticlerical critique in general. Locating any one writer along Wyclif’s particular spectrum with precision is impossible, given that not all of his early ideas flow logically into his later ones, and that at times multiple ideas existed in tension, even confusion, within the same texts. Nevertheless, tracing the path of Wyclif’s career through his
sermons and treatises, and comparing his arguments with those of his immediate predecessors, contemporaries, and later disciples, may help to illuminate the contours and borders of the 14th-century anticlerical tradition within which the *Gawain*-poet was working.

Wyclif began his academic career at Oxford in the 1340s as a student of philosophy committed to Platonic Realism (Evans 53; Workman I.137-38), with only a secondary interest in theology, which he did not receive permission to study formally until 1363, two years after earning his Master of Arts (Evans 99; Workman xxxvii). His critiques of priests, when they appeared at all in this early period, were limited to commonplace objections against corruption. But Wyclif’s tone would make a sudden shift in the middle of his life—a shift one recent scholar calls a “hardly comprehensible change in his intellectual career between 1374 and 1378” and “the first notes of a new voice” (Boreczky 37, 39). According to biographer K.B. McFarlane, Wyclif’s treatise *De Benedicta Incarnacione* (“On the Blessed Incarnation”), “completed about 1370, was the last composition from the scholar’s pen that was not deliberately polemical” (59).

The change, nearly every biographer agrees, came in 1374, when Wyclif was called into service by the English government for a commission that “was to prove an intellectual turning point for him, the most significant in his life” (Evans 144). He joined a delegation to Bruges, in modern-day Belgium, whose purpose was to represent King Edward III in an dispute over Pope Gregory XI’s right to exact tribute from England (Dahmus 4-7; Evans 144-45; McFarlane 54-47; Workman I.240-56). An account of Wyclif’s arguments, as the sole theologian on the commission, can be found in the anti-Lollard anthology *Fasciculi Zizaniorum* (“Bundle of Weeds”) and in the short tract *Determinatio de Divino*. In effect, Wyclif asserts that the King may indeed deny the pope his tribute, if the funds are necessary for the nation’s defense (Shirley, ed., *FZ* 258-60). Upon his return from Bruges, Wyclif worked out his anti-papal arguments in a
more thorough manner, placing them on theological footings and extending their conclusions to the question of clerical dominion and disendowment, in his massive treatise *De Civili Dominio* (ca. 1375-76). His critiques of both popes, whom he ultimately labeled the “Antichrist,” grew increasingly sharper after this point, and eventually he also included the fraternal orders—a group otherwise sympathetic with his views on clerical poverty—in his vitriolic attacks on all forms of clergy. At the same time during this period, Wyclif drifted uncertainly toward what his critics labeled a Donatist position, questioning a sinful priest’s ability to administer sacraments such as baptism, absolution, and the Eucharist in an efficacious manner.¹²

Wyclif’s ultimate rejection of the church’s official doctrine on the sacrament of the altar—his contention that the physical elements of the Eucharist cannot be annihilated in the process of transubstantiation into Christ’s body and blood, and that the “accidental” qualities of bread and wine cannot exist without the “substance” to support them—was developed and argued most thoroughly a few years after *De Civili Dominio*, in the tract *De Eucharistia* (ca. 1379). The first three of the ten “Conclusions” declared heretical by the Blackfriars synod in 1382 are drawn directly from this tract, which would define Wyclif as a heretic for the remaining five years of his life:

1. That the substance of material bread and wine doth remain in the sacrament of the altar after consecration.

2. That the “accidents” do not remain without the “subject” in the same sacrament after consecration.

3. That Christ is not in the sacrament of the altar identically, truly, and really in His proper corporeal person. (Workman II.416)

Wyclif’s theological conclusions on this subject were driven ostensibly by his philosophical
commitments as a Platonic Realist, with his belief that “accidental” properties of physical objects, such as color, smell, or taste, could not exist without a metaphysical “substance” to support them. It is not difficult to conclude, however, given the trajectory of his theological ideas up to this point, that his increasingly strident antipapalism and anticlericalism, his hyper-awareness of corruption among friars, possessioners, and seculars alike, his ever-hardening stance against clerical dominion and endowments, and his wavering Donatism, may also have contributed to his ultimate denial of any priest’s ability to perform the miracle of transubstantiation. In the same way, though Wyclif may have played only a minor role in the Oxford Bible translation project that later bore his name (Boreczky 16; Dove 2, 6-8; Fowler 154-55; Workman II.170-71), it is easy to imagine the translators’, and later the Lollard heretics’, insistence on making an English Bible available to the laity may have grown from the same anticlerical seed, an attempt to break free from clerical mediation of Latin texts. In the tracts Wyclif wrote in the last four years of his life, all relatively short and all viciously polemical, he moves toward an anti-sacerdotal doctrine, contending that a separate class of priests is ultimately unnecessary for salvation or the Christian life.

The broad spectrum of Wyclif’s anticlerical ideas—straightforward critique of clerical corruption, arguments against papal privileges, advocacy of clerical disendowment and poverty, vicious attacks on monastic “possessioners” and mendicant friars alike, the suggestion that sinful priests may not administer efficacious sacraments, rejection of the church’s position on the Eucharist, support for English Bible translation, and finally a movement toward universal Christian priesthood—covers nearly the entire range of English anticlerical critique in the 14th century. The most extreme edge of that range, unreached by Wyclif in his lifetime, would come with the later Lollards, who continued the logical progression of Wyclif’s ideas with (in some
cases) a more thoroughgoing antisacramentalism, exemplified by such figures as Walter Brut and Hawisia Moone, and with the production of what Nicholas Watson calls “the impressively innovative tradition of . . . ‘vernacular theology’” (“Censorship” 823), well represented by the imprisoned William Thorpe, who in 1407 refused to debate Archbishop Arundel in Latin, but insisted upon speaking “opinli in Ynglische” (Hudson, ed., Two Wycliffite Texts 55), even on complex questions of theology.

Of course, Wyclif and his ideas did not simply materialize in 14th-century England without precedent. Before looking more closely at Wyclif’s anticlericalism and theological development, it will be helpful to examine briefly a few of his earlier influences.

Like the anticlericalism of the Bible, which began the moment new priestly orders were established, the distinctive anticlericalism of 14th-century England can trace much of its roots the early 13th century, with the establishment of a new type of clergy: the fraternal orders. The Order of Friars Minor, or Franciscans, founded in 1209, along with the Carmelites (late 12th century), Dominicans (1216), and Augustinians (1256), the four largest orders, began as reform-minded organizations within the church. In a sense, they started as anticlerical movements themselves, a reaction against the corruption and poor education of the secular clergy (Szittya 11), but less than a generation after their respective foundings, each had fallen victim to accusations of exactly the same corruption they were committed to reform. In The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature, Penn Szittya cites many possible reasons for the mid-13th-century explosion in antifraternal literature, which he views as mostly unwarranted or uninformed. Antifraternal attacks, Szittya writes, were “more symbolic than realistic,” disconnected from anything the friars “actually did in the world” (6); the problem was their “institutional novelty” and their “new and unique threat to the vested interests of certain ranks
within the church” (7). Unlike monastic orders which shut themselves away from the world, the friars settled “almost invariably in cities rather than on the fields and pasture lands of the remote countryside” (8), and as mendicants, “their begging made them independent of the moneys of the church” (8-9). Perhaps the most compelling motive for antifraternal ire, however, is the one Szittya saves for last: “The friars were ecclesiastical outsiders because they were papal orders. They received their authority and their mission directly from the popes, bypassing the hierarchy that constrained the clergy of the parishes” (9).

In other words, the earliest antifraternal critics came not from outside the church but from within it, from parish priests concerned not only with the friars’ independence from “moneys of the church,” but their independence from any direct authority whatsoever. No secular clergyman of any rank, including bishops, had the power to discipline or expel an unwanted itinerant friar from a parish. Only friars within the same order, or the pope himself, held that authority—an arrangement bound to produce conflict. Thus, when Wyclif, the Lollards, and other 14th-century antifraternal critics repeatedly refer to the “new sects” or “new orders,” they are not claiming that these 150-year-old institutions were established recently, but that they represent a novel form of clerical governance, unseen in the first 1,200 years of the church’s history.

According to Szittya, the “theologian who inaugurated the entire tradition” (x) of antifraternal critique was William of St. Amour, secular master of theology at the University of Paris in the 1250s, just a single generation after the founding of the Franciscan order (see also Borroff 13; Dawson 341-42). William’s most well-known work—which was read over a century later by poet Jean de Meun, Oxford theologian Richard FitzRalph, and Wyclif (Kerby-Fulton xxiv, xlv), and quoted in the Wycliffite theological encyclopedia Rosarium Theologiae—was entitled De Periculis Novissimorum Temporum, “On the Perils of the Last Times” (ca. 1256). St.
Amour wrote this Latin tract in opposition to an apocalyptic prophecy titled *Liber Introductorius ad Evangelium Aeternum* (ca. 1254), written by a Franciscan named Gerard of Borgo San Donnino. San Donnino’s prophecy is no longer extant, but its central premise was that the New Testament would be supplanted by a Third Testament called the Eternal Gospel (*Evangelium Aeternum*), and that the first sign of this coming new age had been the establishment of the fraternal orders. St. Amour refutes this claim directly from the start—far from being the heralds of a new kingdom of God, he writes, friars are the wicked men that the Apostle Paul predicted would come in the last days, in 2 Timothy 3:1-8: “lovers of themselves, covetous, haughty, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, wicked, without affection . . . slanderers, incontinent . . . without kindness, traitors, stubborn, puffed up, and lovers of pleasures more than of God” (*De Periculus* 20). He then organizes the critiques that follow under each of these listed categories and applies each specifically to the fraternal orders—those who are “disobedient to parents,” for example, are those who reject the authority of the church hierarchy.

In her analysis of *De Periculus*, Marie Borroff notes that “this earliest of the antifratal treatises cited virtually all the [biblical] texts that were to reappear in the works of later writers” (14), and indeed the document provides a trove of biblical references beyond the apocalypticism of 2 Timothy. In arguing against voluntary poverty, for example, St. Amour cites 1 Thessalonians 4:11, “Work with your own hands, as we commanded you” (*De Periculus* 32). Against mendicant begging, he interprets the “idlers” of 2 Thessalonians 3:6 as “those who concern themselves with other people’s business, wandering here and there” (31), and claims, “That the Lord begged, or his apostles, is nowhere found” in the Bible (33).

The biblical explication perhaps most interesting for its relevance to the *Gawain*-poet, however, is St. Amour’s refutation of San Donnino in chapter 8 of *De Periculus*, in which he
gives a prophetic interpretation to the mysterious handwriting on the wall at Belshazzar’s Feast, from the Book of Daniel: “Mene, Tekel, Phares” (Dan. 5:25). In the contemporary world, St. Amour writes, this cursed handwriting is represented by books of false teaching such as Evangelium Aeternum, and he predicts that through the corruption of the friars, the church will fall and become divided from true Christians, just as Daniel predicted that Belshazzar’s empire would fall and the Israelites would continue their exile under another foreign king (Szittya 30).

This interpretation of Belshazzar’s Feast as a prefiguration of God’s wrath against clerical corruption bears intriguing connections to the Gawain-poet’s rendering of the same scene in Cleanness.

St. Amour never mentions the fraternal orders by name, but his direct attack on the Franciscan San Donnino’s pro-fraternal ideas leaves no doubt about his sympathies. The tract was condemned by Pope Alexander IV, who held the title Protector of the Order of Franciscans, in 1256 (Szittya 17) and was also refuted by St. Thomas Aquinas, who was a Dominican (Pantin 123), prompting a reply from St. Amour in the form of another antifraternat tract, Collectiones Catholicae et Canonicae Scripturae (ca. 1265-66). For St. Amour, the eventual result of this conflict, by papal decree, was “banishment, the loss of his benefices, excommunication, and the condemnation of his writings” (Szittya 148). Nevertheless, the antifraternat tradition he inaugurated, with its images of Faus Semblant (the false-seeming friar) and Penetrans Domos (“penetrators of houses”) from 2 Timothy 3:6, had, according to Szittya, a “striking impact on poetry, particularly of the Ricardian era, written by some of England’s greatest poets” (5).

Wendy Scase, in her assessment of the “new anticlericalism” represented by William Langland, argues that St. Amour’s disputes with the friars had an even more important, though unintended, consequence for writers of the 14th century—that is, it allowed for the same types of
attacks to be leveled against all forms of clergy. Scase’s central argument is that the interclerical
disputes of the 13th century had blurred into a more generalized anticlericalism in England by
the late 14th century, when critics such as Wyclif, Chaucer, and Langland attacked all parties—
popes, friars, monks, seculars, and lay officers like the Pardoner—with equal vigor, at times even
seemingly at cross-purposes. This indiscriminate blending of various types of clerics and blanket
condemnation of them all can be seen clearly in the formulation frequently employed in Lollard
sermons: “clerkis, monkis, chanouns, and freris” (see Hudson, ed., *Works of a Lollard Preacher*
139-40; Hudson and Gradon, eds., I.439). According to Scase, antifraternal polemic from St.
Amour and others was “probably developed with the limited objective of defending the priestly
authority of one group of clerics, the secular clergy, against that of another group, the friars. But
when political circumstances changed, it became the intellectual source for an anticlericalism
which called into question the powers of both sides, and indeed, of all clerics” (16).

For example, St. Amour argues in *De Periculus* that bishops and parish priests are
superior to friars in part because their numbers are limited by the number of positions available
to them, whereas friars, appointed directly by the pope to no specific parish or bishopric, are
theoretically unlimited in number. Richard FitzRalph would echo this critique a century later in
the tract *Defensio Curatorum* (ca. 1357; pp. 59-60), as would William Langland in the *Piers
Plowman* B-text (ca. 1377-79), though with a significant difference. In Passus XX, Langland
uses the same argument as St. Amour when the allegorical character of Conscience shouts at the
friars, “ye wexen out of noumbre! / Hevene hath evene noumbre, and helle is withoute noumbre”
(269-70). But the implication of Conscience’s shout, Scase argues, is that “a proliferation of
preachers was burdensome to the laity,” regardless of the source of their authority (36). Though
he is apparently defending the seculars, Langland implies that too much of any type of cleric will
lead to bad consequences. His argument explicitly targets friars, but it could just as easily be deployed against unbeficed secular priests, those who did not have cures but made their livings celebrating Masses for the dead (Scase 143).

The same section in *Piers Plowman* contains a satirical scene of friars attacking the church (XX.228-386), and Scase demonstrates that Langland draws on St. Amour’s *Penetrans Domos* imagery for his depiction of the usurping friars. But the satire as a whole aims at a much wider target. The scene begins with Conscience crying out, “Help, Clergie, or ellis I falle / Thorugh inparfite preestes and prelates of Holy Chirche!” (228-29). As the phrasing of this cry indicates, “Clergie” is an allegorical figure that represents the entire range of learned men who have clerical training, and can indeed at times refer to the learning itself. It is thus no contradiction for Conscience to cry out to Clergie as a group for help in defending against priests and prelates as a subset of that group, and in the following lines, the fraternal orders respond to the call, led by their saintly founders Francis and Dominic. However, the friars who come after these saints come for the wrong reasons, not to protect Conscience but to compete with their fellow Clergie, the priests who are already “inparfite.” They wish “for coveitise to have cure of soules” (233), and thus they are quickly corrupted as the priests before them were, flattering the rich, violating their own vows of poverty, and prompting Conscience to wish they would experience true, involuntary poverty: “Lat hem be as beggeris, or lyve by aungeles foode!” (241). In other words, the friars in this scene are only one of many clerical groups that undermine “Unitee and Holy Chirche” (245). They may exacerbate Conscience’s original problem, but the root problems of greed and covetousness remain, unchecked by “persons and parissh preestes, that sholde the peple shryve” (281), which causes parishioners, in their ignorance, to “fleen to the freres” (285). In the end, Clergie cannot defend Conscience or the
Church against these usurping friars, and the “leche” that Conscience must call to shrieve him is neither “person or parissh preest, penitauncer or bisshop,” but “Piers the Plowman, that hath power over alle” (320-21), Christ himself. The scene ends with a renewed call for Clergie to “kepe the yate” against the friars (377), but there is no guarantee that he will do so, and Conscience again yearns for the help only Piers can bring.

Whereas St. Amour and his contemporaries took on what Scase describes as a “defensive anti-intellectualism” (41), satirizing friars of high learning and praising the simplicity of parish priests, a century later, Langland would simply attack both groups without prejudice. Either the parish priests are ignorant, he claims, or they have received the faulty education of the friars. In Passus XV of *Piers Plowman*, arguably the most anticlerical section of the poem, the character Anima laments that none of today’s clerics “kan versifie faire ne formaliche enditen, / Ne naught oon among an hundred that an auctour kan construwe, / Ne rede a lettre in any language but in Latyn or in Englissh” (373-75). The cause of this woeful state of affairs, ironically, is overeducated friars, “Doctours of decrees and of divinite maistres, / That sholde konne and knowe alle kynnes clergie” (380), but who instead make their teaching so complicated and convoluted that “Grammer, the ground of al, bigileth now children” (371). Anima concludes this section with the hope that faith without the help of a clerical education will be sufficient, “that sola fides sufficit to save with lewed peple, / And so may Sarsens be saved, scribes and Jewes” (388-89). “Neither the learned nor the ignorant are defended,” Scase argues; “instead, an antisacerdotal view of salvation is suggested. Anima asserts that salvation is independent of priestly efficacy, for even non-Christians may be saved” (44). This anti-sacerdotalism—the view that a separate class of priests is altogether unnecessary for Christian salvation or administration of the sacraments—would be echoed by Wyclif late in his career, and taken to a further extreme
by his Lollard successors.

Though the Carmelite theologian Thomas Netter would attempt to draw a direct connection between the heresies of St. Amour and Wyclif in his 1427 anti-Lollard work *Doctrinale fidei catholicae contra Wiclevistas et Hussitas* (Kerby-Fulton li), and though Wyclif himself mentions “Willelimus de Sancto Amore” as a philosophical predecessor in one of his late tracts (*Polemical Works* I.92), Wyclif was most likely influenced by St. Amour through the work of another writer he mentions in the same tract and several others: “Richardus, Armacanus episcopus” (91); that is, Richard FitzRalph, a prominent Oxford theologian, vice-chancellor of the university in the 1330s, and the Archbishop of Armagh, in northern Ireland, from 1348 until his death in 1360. In his early work, Wyclif mentions FitzRalph alongside Thomas Bradwardine as “the two outstanding teachers of our order” (Boreczky 58),\(^{19}\) by which he means secular priests, in opposition to monks and friars. In later work, Wyclif refers to the uncanonized FitzRalph in several places as “Sanctus Ricardus” (*De Eucharistia* 292; *De Apostasia* 36; *De Blasphemia* 232), a designation the later Lollards would also echo.\(^{20}\) In the preface to the only complete biography of FitzRalph published in the 20th century, Katherine Walsh says that today “FitzRalph is primarily remembered as the impetuous ‘Armachanus,’ who pursued a vendetta against the mendicant friars and in doing so developed the—subsequently notorious—doctrine of dominion by grace” (vii). This doctrine maintained that God grants a measure of “dominion” (property and rights) to every believer, and that His granting of temporal and spiritual dominion to earthly authorities, from king to priest to pope, is contingent on their being cleansed from sin through the sacrament of baptism, staying free from any mortal sin, and remaining continually pure through the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist. The doctrine became “notorious” primarily for its influence on Wyclif’s anticlericalism and the controversy it fueled long after
FitzRalph’s death, explored further below.

FitzRalph encountered practical problems with the fraternal orders almost immediately after settling in Ireland to take up his post as Archbishop in 1348. According to Walsh, his sermons from this period reserve their harshest critiques for Drogheda, a wealthy merchant city, whose citizens FitzRalph says are tithe-evaders and usurers who routinely attempt to gain spiritual benefits through donations to the poor, but only *inter vivos*, after their own deaths. They were “doubtless encouraged by the friars in their midst” (323) to this selfish action, since they were “the principal beneficiaries of such practices” (323). FitzRalph argues in these sermons that to rob parish clergy of their divinely approved right to tithes, by giving their money to friars, is “a violent attack on divine lordship” (324). In the spirit of John 10, he labels the friars *usurpatores atque raptores*, usurpers and thieves, and *mendicantes exempti qui decimas terrarum usurpant*, exempt mendicants who usurp the tithes of the land (“Two Sermons” 65). In 1350, during an official visit to Avignon, FitzRalph preached an antifraternal sermon in the presence of Pope Clement VI, in which he begged the pope to rescind the friars’ privileges and reform the structure of their orders. Clement did not take the recommended action, but the sermon supposedly led several cardinals at Avignon to commission FitzRalph to investigate the question of clerical dominion and poverty more thoroughly, and to report his findings. These events, the truth of which many modern historians have questioned (Gwynn 44; Scase 8; Walsh 366), are related by FitzRalph himself in the introduction to the resulting treatise, *De Pauperie Salvatoris* (“On the Poverty of the Savior,” ca. 1353-56). A later sermon on the same theme, *Defensio Curatorum* (ca. 1357), was preached to Pope Innocent VI (Szittya 129) and translated into English by Wyclif’s colleague John Trevisa, though it appears not to have had as much of an influence on Wyclif (Boreczky 43).
The conflict FitzRalph engaged in *De Pauperie Salvatoris* was related to the ways in which various forms of clergy earned income. The secular clergy received money from the tithes of residents within their parishes, and in exchange they took charge of the parishes’ pastoral care, by preaching, reading Masses, and performing sacraments, even to the poor who could not afford large donations. Monks, on the other hand, did not perform pastoral duties, and thus did not duplicate the work of parish priests, but they could receive income from property, land, and occasionally manual labor. As mendicants, however, friars theoretically could receive no income whatsoever from either property or labor, and relied wholly on alms from the laity. In practice, these alms were typically donated by rich laymen in exchange for pastoral work—sermons, confessions, baptisms, burials, etc.—thus putting the friars in economic competition with seculars and in theological dispute with monks. In Book VII of *De Pauperie Salvatoris*, FitzRalph describes in stark terms the conflict between seculars and friars in his Irish archbishopric. This portion of FitzRalph’s treatise has not yet been printed in a contemporary edition, but G.R. Evans summarizes the original manuscript:

> Clergy were turning actively to pastoral work and were finding the friars in their way, preaching literally “on their territory.” . . . His argument was that the work of the friars, coming into parishes to preach, was disruptive of the proper pastoral work of the parish priest, who should be hearing his people’s confessions himself and doing his own preaching. (Evans 154)

Unlike his antifraternal predecessors William of St. Amour and John de Pouilli (Scase 19; Sikes 223-40), both of whom came into sharp conflict with papal authorities, FitzRalph actually made his arguments directly to the popes of his day, dedicating *De Pauperie Salvatoris* to
Innocent VI and claiming to have been commissioned by Clement VI. In addition, rather than simply arguing for the dissolution of fraternal orders, FitzRalph took a position that Wyclif would later follow, conceding that Francis, Dominic, and the other founders were genuinely saints, and that the friars had received their spiritual authority legitimately from the pope, but that “by acting as priests the friars wrongly asserted temporal or civil dominion” (Scase 19).

Anyone in a state of grace, according to FitzRalph, had a right to claim a measure of lordship, or dominion, over both spiritual and temporal goods, but by taking a vow of poverty, the friars had given up their claim to temporal possessions—to use the term FitzRalph and Wyclif shared, they had forfeited “civil dominion.” As a result, according to FitzRalph, “pastoral care was denied to them, since for them it was a form of civil lordship, achieved and exploited by the assertion of rights under human law” (19). Further, any attempt to assert dominion over temporal matters and claim pastoral privileges for themselves was evidence of envy or greed, and thus a sign that even their spiritual authority, their “divine dominion,” had also been lost. Thus, though the fraternal orders could claim spiritual power directly from the pope in theory, the reality for those friars in conflict with the seculars under FitzRalph’s authority was that they had given up all claims to either divine or civil dominion, until they returned to the state of absolute poverty described in the rules of their founders. As Terence McVeigh summarizes it in his introduction to Wyclif’s De Simonia, “Fitzralph argued in the tract De pauperie Salvatoris for the restriction of papal privileges given to the friars and for the removal of their temporal possessions, claiming they had procured them under false pretenses. In his presentation of the concept of dominion, Fitzralph concluded that since only the just have a right to ownership, the friars forfeit their right because they are guilty of fraud” (7-8).

FitzRalph’s argument may appear simply to hold the friars to a high standard and assert
the seculars’ preeminence over them, but by linking dominion to a state of grace, FitzRalph, like St. Amour and de Poulli before him, inadvertently allowed his conclusions to apply not only to friars but to all forms of clergy. Indeed, when Wyclif appropriated FitzRalph’s theories in his own monumental works, *De Dominio Divino* (ca. 1373-74) and *De Civili Dominio* (ca. 1375-76), he deployed them against a much larger group of clergy. According to editor Reginald Lane Poole, Wyclif in these works

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

Wyclif argues, in *De Dominio Divino*, that God alone has absolute dominion over created things (I.10), that fallen man is merely a steward of material possessions (III.206), and that only the righteous in a state of grace truly have a claim to ownership and use of temporal goods. When a man falls into mortal sin, he forfeits both God’s grace and his right to property, and because anyone can sin mortally at any time, no one has a permanent claim on any temporal possession (206). Like the friars in FitzRalph’s formulation, priests in Wyclif’s theory retain the spiritual power bestowed upon them by Christ in Matthew 16:19, but this power is largely theoretical, and not the same as either divine or civil dominion: “No catholic will deny that the power of the keys is committed to the priest,” Wyclif writes, “albeit he have none subjected to his power” (I.9).²⁴ Righteous priests, like any Christian in a state of grace, may assert dominion, but this is
an uncertain and tenuous state, even for the pope himself.

Wyclif uses the principles laid out in *De Dominio Divino* to argue, in *De Civili Dominio*, that no parish or order within the church has the right to a perpetual endowment (I.250), since civil dominion among fallen humanity is by definition a temporary condition, and that secular authorities should dispossess the clergy of all endowments if they fall into mortal sin (266). The contemporary church is especially prone to falling into sin, Wyclif asserts, because it has become simoniacal, amassing wealth through the sale of benefices (326). In the third book of the treatise, in which Poole says Wyclif “quits the ground of theory and passes to the practical bearings of his subject” (xxxii), his polemic against clerical greed becomes even more radical, as he argues that the only way to rid the church of simony is to dissolve *all* endowments and force clergy to return to a primitive state of poverty (III.49-60). According to Wyclif, in a clever reversal of the concept of “charity” as bestowing goods upon the church, “It should be the work of charity to restore the hierarchy of the church to its pristine dignity; and this, if need be, the temporal lords should undertake” (II.18).²⁵

In nearly all of his treatises and tracts that follow these two groundbreaking works, Wyclif’s insistence on their central points becomes ever more strident. Wyclif’s general argument against clerics holding any form of civil dominion is laid out succinctly in a passage from *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, written one or two years after *De Civili Dominio*, in which the argument itself is used in a demonstration of the proper reading of Scripture. This section of the treatise deals with various metaphorical senses in Scripture—allegorical, parabolic, and fictional—and Wyclif cites Judges 9:8-15, a fable in which various trees refuse to accept kingship over the forest, as an example of “a similitude of fictitious device” (75; I.66).²⁶ He compares the three trees of the passage to three figures from the Book of Judges—Othniel,
Deborah, and Gideon—who chose spiritual devotion over political power. He then concludes:

And it seems to me that the final fictitious part indicates that the priests of Christ, who ought to be vicars of the true vine, should not hold civil dominion, since they consecrate his body and blood to the delight of both God and mortals. Rather, as celebrants, they should bear in mind the one who did not deign to hold civil dominion. For the wine of contemplation that consoles the eye of the priest is evaporated by worldly status and oppressive power. If, in the age before the law, and apart from the example of Christ, a lay person might put aside political affairs for the sake of devotion, all the more ought the priests of Christ follow the example of their master in this way. (76; I.68)²⁷

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

In succeeding tracts and treatises, Wyclif’s ire against priests who claim civil dominion waxes even to the point of physical violence, as he outlines in detail the role that temporal lords have to play in the process of disendowing the clergy, stripping them of all temporal goods, and taking back the donations they and their ancestors bestowed upon the orders. In summarizing the influence of FitzRalph’s and Wyclif’s polemics on the anticlerical environment of the late 14th century, historian May McKisack concludes, “Denunciations of ecclesiastical riches were not, of course, new; what was new was the attempt to find a metaphysical basis for anti-clericalism and at the same time to translate it into terms of political action” (289). For example, Langland echoes Wyclif’s call for dispossession throughout Passus XV of the *Piers Plowman* B-text with the similar argument that despoiling the clergy would actually constitute an act of charity. After the Donation of Constantine, which granted the “venym” (559) of civil dominion, Langland says, the church needs a powerful, perhaps violent, antidote for its own good:

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A medicyne moot [is needed] therto that may amende prelates,
That sholden preie for the pees; possession hem letteth [hinders].
Taketh hire landes, ye lordes, and let hem lyve by dymes [tithes];
If possession be poison, and inparfite hem make,
Good were to deschargen hem for Holy Chirches sake,
And purgen hem of poison, er more peril falle. (561-66)
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Whereas their predecessor FitzRalph argued that reliance on tithes (*decimas*) set the secular clergy apart from the friars, who unlawfully attempted to usurp them, Wyclif and Langland use the seculars’ access to tithes (“dymes”) as an argument for stripping priests of every other form
of temporal possession.

Of the multitude of Wyclif-style disendowment arguments that appeared during this period, one that summarizes the conflict dramatically is the anonymous Latin tract *Dialogus inter Militem et Clericum*, a fictional dialogue translated into English by John Trevisa alongside FitzRalph’s *Defensio Curatorum* in 1387 (Trevisa 1-38). A soldier (Miles) and a priest (Clericus) debate whether the pope or the king, and by extension soldiers or priests, have ultimate authority over earthly matters. The soldier is clearly meant to win the debate, and he is given approximately ten times as many lines as the priest—often the priest asks a one-line question and the soldier gives a page-length response—but at times the priest does ask questions the soldier has difficulty answering. In fact, the soldier’s first line of dialogue indicates that he is not educated and cannot engage in academic complexities, a quality the reader is meant to see as a strength, and which echoes the later Lollard insistence on speaking “openly” on theological questions: “Ich am a lewed man & may nouȝt vnderstonde sotil & derk speche; therfore thou most take more pleyn maner of spekyng” (1). The soldier cites no Church Fathers or other authorities, except to say, “Ich haue herde of wise doctors . . .” (6), but he quotes and paraphrases the Bible with ease, marshalling to his defense, for instance, the aforementioned Matthew 16:19:

Lo! thou herest openlich that Crist was nouȝt juge & deler ouer temporalte. But whanne the peple that he had fedde wolde have made hym kyng, he flyȝ from hem. Also in Petres commissioun he ȝaf hym nouȝt the keyes of the kyngdom of erthe, but the keyes of the kyngdom of heuene. Also the bischops of Hebrewes were suget to kyngis, & kynges sett doun bischops. But forto knowe that Petre was Cristes vicarie in goostliche kyngdom of soules & nouȝt in
temporal lordschipe of castels & of londes . . . (8)

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

Miles. ³e stireth me & wakith me as hit were of my sleep, &
makith me speke other wise than y thouȝt.

Clericus.  Lete the hound wake & berke.

Miles. For ³e kunne nouȝt vse manhed suffraunce & pacience
of princes, y trowe ³e schal fele berkyng & bityng. (19)

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

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

In the end, the soldier concludes, as does Wyclif, that priests should lose their temporalities,
“ȝoure catel & ȝoure power” (34), if they are corrupt or unresponsive to the needs of their
parishes. One implication of Wyclif’s dominion theory, which remains merely implied in
Wyclif’s own writing but which the soldier in the Dialogus willingly concedes, is that rightful
kings have virtually unlimited power over officials in the church. The soldier warns the cleric to
“chastith ȝoure tonge & knowlechith that the kyng may be aboue customs, priuyleges, & fredoms
while he is riȝtful kyng with ful power ... & therfore ȝif ȝe haueth y-seye ouȝt redressed other
chaungide in help of the kyngdom, suffre ȝe hit pacientliche” (36-37). The only option for a
priest, bishop, or even pope suffering under the seemingly unjust rule of a temporal lord or king
is a Christ-like patience.

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

6. If God be, temporal lords may lawfully and with merit take
from a delinquent church the blessings of fortune. . . .

7. Whether the church be in such a condition or not, is not for
me to discuss, but for the temporal lords to investigate; and if such
be the case, for them to act with confidence and seize her
temporalities under pain of damnation. . . .

17. It is permitted kings to deprive those ecclesiastics of their
temporalities who habitually misuse them. . . .

19. An ecclesiastic, indeed even the Roman pontiff, may
lawfully be rebuked by those subject to him and by laymen, and
even arraigned. (Dahmus 49-51)

Gregory’s phrasing of these theses, which channel the spirit of Wyclif’s arguments but are not
direct quotations from any of his major works, contains within itself what the pope clearly
intended to be self-evident absurdities—for example, the image of “even the Roman pontiff”
being rebuked by a layman—which he believed were the logical endpoint of Wyclif’s dominion
arguments.

Gregory’s bulls notwithstanding—and these came in the final year of that pope’s life, on
the eve of the Great Schism, which would divide the papacy into two or three rival claimants for
the next 45 years—politically charged calls for clerical disendowment such as Wyclif’s went
largely unchecked until the summer of 1381, when the Peasants’ Revolt converted them from
theoretical arguments into frightening reality. The Revolt was primarily economic in motivation,
a response to the injustices of Parliamentary statutes that regulated labor (Justice 75; Workman
II.237-39), but peasant rebels also targeted clerics whom they believed to support corrupt
politicians, and the most high-profile victim of their murderous rage was Simon Sudbury, the
Archbishop of Canterbury who also served as Lord Chancellor. One of rebel leader Wat Tyler’s
primary demands, as recorded by chronicler Henry Knighton, was “disendowment and dispersal
of church goods,” as well as “rationalization of the church hierarchy (one bishop thenceforth)”
(Justice 3). Twenty years later, Netter accused Wyclif of being “the principal author” of the Revolt, and quoted rebel leader John Ball’s confession “that for two years he had been a disciple of Wyclif, and had learned from him the heresies he had taught” (Shirley, ed., *FZ* 273).

Though nearly every historian now agrees that Wyclif had little, if any, influence over the Peasants’ Revolt, and certainly none that was intentional (Evans 192; Hudson, *PR* 68; Workman II.237), church authorities used the occasion to move swiftly against him, and given the clear thematic connections between his polemic and the rebels’ demands, his political allies could do little to stop them. According to Workman, “The effect of the Rising on the fortunes of Wyclif was immediate and disastrous. Wyclif’s alliance with John of Gaunt was ended, his political influence was gone, his policy of disendowment dead” (II.236).

Of course, Wyclif himself was not yet dead, nor were his attempts to promulgate his theories. Whereas Langland appears to have toned down his disendowment rhetoric in the C-text revision to *Piers Plowman* after the Revolt, Wyclif’s only grew more passionate. In defiance, he speaks directly in *De Blasphemia* of “the late revolt, when the clergy was punished for its own fault” (190), and argues that though the murder of Sudbury was inexcusable, “An Archbishop cannot be a Chancellor. It is the most secular office in the kingdom. How could he convoke the clergy, taken in the same snare of worldliness as himself, and excommunicated . . . unless as an arch-devil, calling to his little ones” (194). Wyclif attacks friars, monks, and secular clergy in turn throughout the tract, seemingly heedless of maintaining any consistency in his arguments against possession and mendicancy alike, and concludes the passage above by suggesting that “the goods of the clergy, i.e. of the poor, might compensate the temporal lords for their losses” in the Revolt (199), and that in this way, both peasants and nobles would be satisfied, united against a common enemy in the clergy, and dissension between them would come to an end.
Leaving aside the personal and professional consequences of such undiplomatic outbursts—consequences which, for Wyclif, may have included the 1382 Blackfriars synod verdict against him, a personal visit to Oxford from John of Gaunt, apparently to urge him to cease his controversial activity, and forced retirement to his rectory at Lutterworth for the remaining two years of his life—Wyclif’s positions on the disendowment question complicated his views on several other issues. On the issue of evangelical poverty, which is closely linked to the question of civil dominion, Wyclif at times appears to have a divided conscience. This sets him apart from his predecessor FitzRalph, and from his contemporary Langland, both of whom argued on the basis of Matthew 5:3 (“Blessed be poor men in spirit”) that voluntary begging and mendicancy was an abomination. In the *Defensio Curatorum*, as translated by Trevisa, FitzRalph is unequivocal on this point, arguing that poverty is originally a consequence of sin and thus not be taken up voluntarily or loved for its own sake:

Also noon effect of synne is worthi to be loued for hit-silf aloon
thouȝ hit be loued in herte that is infect; but pouert is the effect of synne; thanne pouert is nouȝt worthi to be loued for hit-silf aloon.
That pouert is the effect of synne, y preue hit, for ȝif oure forme fader & moder [Adam & Eve] hadde neuer y-synned, schuld neuer haue be pore man of oure kynde. (80)

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

The same argument against mendicancy was echoed by many antifraternal critics, though as Scase observes, “The conflict over Franciscan poverty is a subject of immense complexity, with a vast literature” (190-91, n.2), starting with St. Amour, who had argued that begging for one’s livelihood was a departure from the Gospels’ and Epistles’ commands that apostles perform manual labor. The precise interpretation of the term “poverty,” and its proper use in practical contexts, led to conflicts among the various mendicant orders and ultimately to an internal split within the Franciscan order itself (Scase 48-49). For the monastic orders and a faction of the Franciscans, poverty was a theoretical concept, a renunciation of legal ownership that still allowed for the use of land and property technically held by the pope. Pope John XXII dispensed with this technicality as it applied to the Franciscans in 1322 with his bull Ad conditorem, abolishing “the legal fiction by which the property of the Franciscans was vested in the Holy See,” shortly before dealing another blow to fraternal poverty theories with Cum inter nonnullos (1323), “which declared it heresy to assert that Christ and the Apostles had not owned any property” (Pantin 124). For others, including some within the mendicant orders and many of their critics, poverty meant literal, material hardship, the renunciation of all but the most necessary items required for survival, a state which would obviously require the acceptance of alms, either through long-term patronage or begging. The attempt to procure these donations, critics such as FitzRalph and Langland alleged, put friars in competition with the genuinely, involuntarily poor, and almsgivers should reserve their charity for those who were truly forced to rely on gifts.

For those attempting to critique fraternal orders, monastic orders, and secular priests at
the same time, these competing views of poverty—and the varied critiques of the specific forms of clergy that came with them—could lead to logical inconsistencies. For instance, in his 1382 Ascension Day sermon, Nicholas Hereford simultaneously critiques the possession of the monks and the itinerant begging of the friars, arguing that the former should be disendowed and the latter reformed: “Monks and possessors will never be humble until their possessions are taken away, nor will mendicant friars ever be good until their begging is prevented” (Scase 102). Monks must renounce possessions as the friars have done, and friars must renounce begging as the monks have done, but how exactly either group is to procure a livelihood Hereford does not say.

Wyclif’s views on the issue were more complex than any of the above-mentioned writers, in part because he approved of the theory behind evangelical poverty, and because he viewed Francis, Dominic, and the other founders of fraternal orders as undoubted saints. From Wyclif’s perspective, it was the practical actions of later friars that had caused problems for the church, not the original intentions of their founders. Even as late as De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae, written after his works on dominion, Wyclif seems to have no problem, in principle, with either monastic or fraternal vows of poverty. He quotes as authoritative Pope Nicholas III’s 1279 decretal, which affirmed the apostolic poverty of the Franciscans (1.386), and he uses a monastic order’s communal vow of poverty as a metaphor for the Christian life:

. . . it has been granted to us to be heirs with Christ, since “all things are given to us with him” (Rom. 8:32) by the title of grace. This is especially so when we have made our profession, entering into the joy of our most gracious abbot, just as one entering a religious community, which holds all things in common, thereby has all the
At a later point, Wyclif says he has “adduced from Scripture” that even parish priests, in addition to administering sacraments and teaching, should follow the lead of Christ and the saints and “live a poor life, devoid of property, thereby imitating Christ in this way. For having been placed in a wicked world, it is that much more necessary. Neither the change in times, nor a papal dispensation, excuses priests of Christ from this duty, but rather it serves to accuse them if they abandon it” (114-15; I.153). Granted, this line of thinking leads directly into an argument for clerical dispossession—if priests will not voluntarily renounce property, secular lords should force them into poverty—but nevertheless, Wyclif has no contention with the spirit behind the vows of the regular clergy, or with the idea that “all Christ’s priests should live on the temporal alms of the laity” (170; I.264). His critique of monks and friars is aimed at their hypocrisy and their “quest for worldly power”:

Who doubts that God especially hates the arrogance of the mendicants? Consequently, the laity are all the more obliged to keep an eye out for such deceit and withdraw their alms, taking back what their ancestors mistakenly bequeathed. For by the faith of Scripture it is certain that those powerful members of the clergy, whether taken as individual persons or a collective gathering, who dissipate the religion of Christ under the cloak of sanctity must either be punished here and now by their ecclesiastical superiors, or by the laity. If they are not, they will either be destroyed in a hostile act of devastation, or will amass their crimes only to endure the retribution of divine judgment . . . (310; III.33; italics mine)
Whether the vow of poverty is personal or communal, whether the order may technically own property and collect endowments from it or not, every order is subject to the same evaluation from the laity. If the order falls into sin and the church does not act, either the anger of temporal lords or the wrath of God himself will work to dispossess it. This wrath, Wyclif writes, will be comparable to the two most memorable scenes of destruction from the Book of Genesis, the same scenes which will dominate approximately two-thirds of the poem *Cleanness*. All of “the houses of the religious orders, the bishops, and the priests . . . will be allowed a certain measure of wickedness until that time comes when they must expect the retribution of divine judgment, as made clear by the punishment of the flood and that of Sodom” (311; III.34).37

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

First of all, one can discern that clerics are married to the world and thus to riches. . . . One can secondly discern how the world would be wise to withdraw material alms from such men, since no one ought to enter into a yoke of matrimony with infidels by confirming such a monstrous marriage. Indeed, it is preferable that it be dissolved. Third, if God so willed it, these men of every clerical class, whose hearts are touched by the Holy Spirit, could be inspired with a contempt for the world, thereby taking up a life of evangelical poverty for the sake of Christ. (196; I.368)38

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

In later writings, as his dominion and disendowment arguments grow more polemical, Wyclif alters his views of monastic “communal” poverty and allies himself more with the radical definition of poverty espoused by a faction of the Franciscans—one which defines poverty as literal hardship, and for mendicants allows lawful possession of only the necessities of life. Though he continues to critique the friars for their hypocrisy and violation of their vows, he uses the theory behind those vows to critique monastic orders’ ownership of lands and perpetual endowments. As McVeigh summarizes Wyclif’s argument in the tract De Simonia:

By holding possessions in principle, they violate the spirit of Christ and his apostles. They have received lands and temporal possessions from temporal rulers through lies and hypocrisy. One of their most heinous crimes is to appropriate churches, thus depriving parish priests and local parishes of necessary revenue. Once a church is appropriated by a monastic order, it remains forever with the order, even if its members are not performing the spiritual ministry properly, because a religious community is then its own patron dispensing the benefice to itself. (On Simony 15)
Wyclif argues in the same tract that “poverty would keep out from the ranks of the clergy those who take orders only for the sake of pay,” and he speaks idealistically about the “serene and evangelical attitude to be content with the bare necessities of life” (134; 86), though he continues to attack the friars and, in later work, refers to them in the same terms as the divided papacy, as “Antichrist” (Trialogus 272). His practical views on evangelical poverty, taken together with his theoretical positions on dominion, are thus complicated, at times inconsistent, and constantly subject to revision, depending on the target of the critique at hand.

The Gawain-poet’s attitude toward poverty, both involuntary physical hardship and spiritual poverty, is similarly complex, as we will see when we look closely at his explication of Matthew 5 and the “Dame Pouerte” scene from Patience (9-56). On the one hand, he rejects the argument of St. Amour, FitzRalph, and Langland that involuntary poverty is necessarily the result of sin, though like Langland he links involuntary poverty thematically with the virtue of patience, through the Beatitudes. At the same time, he does not appear to endorse voluntary mendicancy, choosing instead to endorse a view of poverty as an undeserved curse which God’s grace can transfigure into an unearned blessing. Though the passage makes no explicit reference to fraternal orders or alms-begging, its assertion of forced poverty as an inescapable route to the virtue of patience and thus to God’s blessing takes a specific, and potentially antifraternal, position in relation to 14th-century debates on the topic.

The later Lollards, seemingly following Wyclif’s lead, disagree among themselves over which approach to take toward the issue of poverty, though all approaches are ultimately antifraternal—either a condemnation of contemporary friars for not following the original tenets of their order, or a condemnation of the four orders and their founders altogether. The sermon “The Rule and Testament of St. Francis” (Matthew, ed., 39-51) is an excellent example of the
former, as it examines and praises the Rule itself, but excoriates those friars who have violated it. The critique extends even to the friars’ clothes: “& so of clothing thei don aȝenst this reule in many maneres; for men seen that the kyng or the emperour myȝtte with worschipe were a garnement of a frere for goodnesse of the cloth” (50). Another Lollard sermon describes the education friars receive in greed, against the original intentions of their founders:

There lerneth religiouse men, aȝen prophession of her ordre, to haue
godes in propre there thei non schulden haue, and for to coueite
officis to rake togedere goodes there thei schold e be pore and dede
to the world. There lernen also in this cursid scole marchauntis and
artificeres to be perfite in this lore, with sillis and with falsede, for
to gete gode. (Cigman, ed., 142)

The Wycliffite sermon cycle, for its part, takes the latter approach. The sermon for the 11th Sunday after Trinity (Hudson and Gradon, eds., I.264-67) commends only the order of “Crist”—that is, the faith common to all Christian believers—and denounces “othir newe sectis fownden by mannys wit” which “smache synne for errowr of the fyndere [founders]” (265), not allowing even the famous saints of the 13th century, Francis and Dominic, to escape criticism.

3. Transubstantiation, Clerical Corruption, and the Seven Deadly Sins

Eventually, the question every Wyclif biographer attempts to answer is how Wyclif progressed from these positions on dominion, disendowment, and poverty—opinions which created conflict with the church, but nothing more serious than Gregory XI’s bans of 1378 and temporary house arrest at Oxford—to an outright denial of the doctrine of transubstantiation. This denial is most fully expounded in De Eucharistia (ca. 1379), a treatise which led directly to
the 1382 Blackfriars condemnation and almost certainly the end of his academic career, as well as posthumous declarations of heresy by the Council of Constance in 1415 and the exhumation and burning of his bones by order of Pope Martin V in 1428 (McFarlane 82, 182; Workman I.xl). Wyclif’s heterodoxy in the tract is straightforward and clear: “For we must then conclude,” he writes, “that the perceived form, which we call the Sacrament, is not the flesh and blood of Christ. . . . The sacrament is the Host, and Jesus Christ is hidden therein in a supernatural manner” (23, 29). How did the Oxford philosopher and theologian move from a position shared by Richard FitzRalph and William Langland (discussed in more detail below), as well as many others who never ran afoul of English or papal authorities, to a heterodoxy that only the Lollard heretics, persecuted into near non-existence by the mid 15th century, would openly embrace?

One explanation, already mentioned above and de rigueur for Wyclif biographers even if they do not endorse it, is that his philosophical commitments as a Platonist, Realist, and anti-Nominalist led inevitably to the conclusion that, in Wyclif’s words, “an aggregate of accidents without substance” cannot exist (De Eucharistia 156). In other words, he simply could not reconcile Plato with official church dogma on the Eucharist, and this incompatibility was bound to create a break at some point, with a rejection either of his philosophy or of church doctrine (see Evans 53; Workman I.137-38). The problem with this view is that plenty of Platonic Realists before and during Wyclif’s career—including Wyclif himself, who as late as the tract De Ecclesie (ca. 1378) displayed no apparent doubt about the Eucharist, devoting an entire section to “the virtue of the sacramental food” (4), and who in his own words “once took great pains to make the doctrine of transubstantiation harmonize with that of the early Church” (De Eucharistia 52)—were emphatically not anti-sacramental heretics. Nor were the later
followers of Jan Hus in Bohemia, who carefully studied Wyclif’s philosophy and viewed him as an intellectual leader of their reform movement, but did not follow him into the same theological position on the Eucharist. As McFarlane puts it:

Those who regard the Lollard denial of transubstantiation as growing inevitably out of Wycliffe’s ultra-realism will find their refutation in the school of Prague. The Hussites saw no difficulty in stopping half-way along that route, in adopting the realism while discarding what are regarded as its logical consequences; that is to say, in occupying a position that for long satisfied Wycliffe himself. (158-59)

Another argument against the view that Wyclif’s heresy was motivated purely by philosophical concerns is that in De Eucharistia, though he does register philosophical objections, he does not replace the purported false doctrine with any specific alternative. In fact, he leaves open more than one possibility for belief about what happens at consecration. “The faithful take this matter variously,” he concedes, then allows that any one of three views on the sacrament may be lawfully held—that the bread is sacramentally Christ’s body, that it is figuratively Christ’s body, or that Christ’s body is literally in the host as a sign—so long as the physical elements are not annihilated and the bread and wine remain (230-31). He registers as many practical concerns with the doctrine as philosophical ones, and often these practical matters seem to drive his arguments, as they did explicitly with the disendowment controversy. He worries that “Philosophers and Pagans, seeing our hesitation, uncertainty, and wild imaginations on this point, will have nothing to do with us” (199) and objects that the church is introducing “a great number” of Latin terms into the English lexicon that only confuse the laity, and “have been
invented to increase devotion to the Sacrament,” such as “transubstantiation,” “conversion,” “identification,” and “impanation” (216).\footnote{44} Ironically, given the treatise’s title, he devotes more space to old debates about papal infallibility, dominion, and disendowment than he does to the direct question of transubstantiation. For instance, on the topic of prelates who persecute the faithful for supposedly heretical views on the sacraments, “their worldly possessions ought to be taken away from them, for the man who worships a deceitful sign rather than Christ’s body does not even deserve to live, still less to possess land, in our country” (183).\footnote{45} The source of all the church’s contention over eucharistic doctrine is not, Wyclif says, genuine theological disagreement, but rather simple greed: “As filthy lucre is the cause of all contestations, it is clear that our priests and prelates are the source whence all disunion amongst Christians proceeds” (De Eucharistia 322).\footnote{46}

Another potential explanation for Wyclif’s progression into heterodoxy comes from biographer Joseph Dahmus, writing in 1952. At the time of Pope Gregory’s bulls against Wyclif’s “19 theses” in 1378, Dahmus argues, he “had not as yet gone beyond an attack on what he considered practices which had become corrupted and abused” (52), but he would soon move to examine the theological basis of those corrupted practices. Wyclif’s later denial of the sacrament, Dahmus contends, was not the outgrowth of his Platonic philosophy, but rather the logical conclusion of his theological arguments against clerical dominion, a progression of thought he speculates that Gregory must have foreseen, even if Wyclif himself did not:

From an attack on an unworthy priesthood, he would move against the institution itself. Then, if there were no priest, transubstantiation and the Mass, as well as the sacramental system, would have to go. From a denial of the pope’s power to excommuncate, he would
come to question the very necessity of having a pope. It may have been partly in the hope of forestalling such a development, one which had often proved a natural step with earlier reformers, that Pope Gregory sought to call a halt to Wyclif’s activities. (52-53)

Other biographers have not always drawn such a direct connection between Wyclif’s early anticlericalism and his later heresy, but such a connection is implicit in attempts, almost universal among Wyclif biographies, to describe the details of the future heretic’s private life at a young age. The logic, usually unspoken, that drives these attempts is speculation that the root of Wyclif’s heresy lay dormant for many years within his anticlericalism, including his antifraternal attitudes, and that these must have stemmed from early personal experience. Workman spends much of his first volume scouring Wyclif’s childhood and youth for evidence of formative conflicts with priests, monks, or friars. He speculates that “Wyclif’s boyhood recollections of Richmond,” the largest town in the vicinity of his Richmondshire village, “would strengthen the conviction of his later life that the regulars were in many places far too numerous for the financial resources of the country” (I.31). Throughout his youth, his “native archdeaconry was always either held by an alien . . . or else became the perquisite of the king’s favored servants; whether one or the other alike absentee” (31), an explanation for his middle-aged polemic against pluralism and non-residence in benefices; “What with alien archdeacons of the semi-see of Richmondshire, and prince-bishops of Durham, rich beyond the dreams of avarice, Wyclif would grow up with a conception of a bishop against which his life was a long protest” (49). His antifraternalism, Workman imagines, was likely sparked by his very first visit to Oxford, as a teenager, where he would have noticed the wandering destitute clergy, including the pardoners selling relics, “his bulls commonly forged and always useless,” as well as “the friars, carrying
little portable altars, with which they entered into competition with the secular clergy” (55). G.R. Evans follows suit, in her more recent biography, with the additional information that “the religious orders were active in recruiting from the students in Oxford. The friars in particular were so keen to recruit in the universities that their efforts caused controversy and hostility, and Wyclif must almost certainly have resisted enticements to join them” (30). Both Workman and Evans use these early encounters to illustrate that Wyclif’s anticlerical attitudes must have predated, by decades, the development of his dominion and disendowment theories—demonstrating, more or less, that the tail of practical experience wagged the dog of theology.

When analyzing Wyclif’s eucharistic heresy, Workman contends, along with John Adam Robson and Elemér Boreczky, that Wyclif’s views are rooted in philosophy, and that “soon after he began the study of theology he abandoned a position that contradicted his philosophical tenets. . . . The student must remember that Wyclif did not come upon the problem of transubstantiation and then seek its philosophic explanation. On the contrary he was forced by his opponents to apply to the Eucharist his fully developed theory of realism” (II.33). Nevertheless, Workman assigns a very early date to Wyclif’s doubts on the Eucharist, as early as a hint about “the remanence of bread in the Eucharist” in his sententiary treatise, De Benedicta Incarnacione, ca. 1370, suggesting that Wyclif was formulating his heretical positions in secrecy for nearly a decade before revealing them with a flourish in De Eucharistia (I.140). Evans dates Wyclif’s eucharistic doubts even earlier, to the mid-1360s, and connects them with a personal rivalry against the Franciscan William Woodford, author of “Seventy Questions on the Sacrament of the Eucharist,” who disputed with Wyclif on the question of civil dominion, and whose “friendly rivalry” over the years turned to “sour mockery” (102). Woodford himself asserts, in a theological lecture delivered in 1381, that Wyclif’s loss of position as Warden of
Canterbury Hall in 1367—a political incident in which the new Archbishop of Canterbury, the Benedictine Simon Langham, removed all seculars from monastic schools—motivated his lifelong animosity toward religious orders. Woodford goes on to claim, in the same passage, that Wyclif’s anger at the mendicants was further stoked by a public attack the mendicants made on his teachings about the Eucharist (Shirley, ed., 517-18)—teachings which must have hinted at heresy even at that very early date, if not yet fully developed. McFarlane, pursuing a biographical explanation for the entire range of Wyclif’s thought, also seizes on the Canterbury Hall incident, as well as Wyclif’s failure to obtain either the prebend of Caistor at Lincoln in 1373, despite a promise from Pope Gregory, or the bishopric at Worcester. McFarlane thus chooses an explanation that other modern biographers mention but usually dismiss, the same explanation promoted by Wyclif’s 14th- and 15th-century detractors—that Wyclif was motivated by career failure, rivalries with other clerics, petty jealousy, and greed:

It is possible to believe in Wycliff’s absolute sincerity as a reformer while at the same time suspecting that a plum or two (and the Church had many at her disposal) even as late as the early 1370s might have shut his mouth forever. . . . As it was, a run of disappointments where he could legitimately expect recognition almost certainly helped to manufacture the violent eccentricity and outspokenness of his last decade. He was not deliberately slighted, but he had bad luck. By 1375 he was too sore for his silence to be bought, even if the bishops had realised the need. (26-27)

These personal, emotion-driven explanations for Wyclif’s career, though entirely speculative, have an imaginative appeal, in part because they furnish a psychological motivation
for what appears to the modern reader as academic suicide over theological hair-splitting. In addition, it seems likely that in Wyclif’s lifetime, a large number of clergymen, from popes to parish priests, really were scandalously corrupt. Anticlerical sermons of the period typically relied on the Seven Deadly Sins as a guide, and never failed to find numerous examples of every one among the clergy. In 1352, while Wyclif was working toward his Master of Arts, FitzRalph preached a fiery sermon to his subordinate bishops at a provincial synod in Ireland, detailing with almost pornographic precision the sins for which they and the priests under their authority were guilty:

For there are in the church of God those bearing the name of prelate—the greater and the lesser alike—who are fornicators. Not only are they not the husbands of one wife . . . but they are the adulterers of many mistresses, to the manifest scandal of our status. There are others, by name prelates, not pastors but more truly gluttons, who once or more every day are inebriated with such drunkenness, and give vent to such filthy and scandalous scurrilities, that those sharing a common life with them abhor their society, on account of their vile mode of living. Alas! Alas! Alas! with what wicked temerity do such dare to handle the most spotless sacraments of the Church. . . . Others there are, plunderers in the Church of God, falsely called pastors, who from the goods of the churches—not only movable but immovable—provide for their own flesh and blood, namely their nephews and nieces—as they call the crowd of their own daughters and sons. (Owst 244)
In addition to referencing four Deadly Sins in the course of this short passage (lechery, gluttony, ire, and avarice), as well as three of the Ten Commandments (against adultery, false witness, and theft), FitzRalph also draws attention, as the medieval Donatists and others did, to the “spotless sacraments” handled by these impure celebrants. Walsh points out that unlike a typical anticlerical sermon directed against priests in general, FitzRalph’s “references to fornication and nepotists probably had a more direct application, and were specifically directed at elements either in his audience or under the jurisdiction of those present” (330), and she speculates that he may have been addressing bishops from Gaelic Ireland in particular, where church regulations about clerical celibacy, and bans against clerics marrying and passing ecclesiastical benefices on to their sons, had not yet penetrated secular society. This personalized message aside, however, Walsh also observes that the list of clerical abuses, taken in the abstract, was “the stock-in-trade of medieval preachers” (330), which 14th-century congregations had come to expect.

One striking piece of evidence that FitzRalph’s concern about clerics fathering children and squandering church resources to provide for them was not an issue limited to the fringes of Ireland is Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Reeve’s Tale, a bawdy fabliau which contains a brief, damning accusation against the priesthood. The dupe of the story, the thieving miller Symkyn, has a wife whose father is secretly the parish priest, and this parson ensures the well-being and wealth of his children and grandchildren at the expense of the church. He gives Symkyn “ful many a panne of bras [brass]” at their wedding (I.3944) and plans to make their daughter “his heir, / Bothe of his catel and his mesuage [house]” (3978-79), in order to marry her “into som worthy blood of auncetrye” (3982) and make a lucrative alliance. After this outrageous description, the Reeve provides commentary:

For hooly chirches good moot ben despended
On hooly chirches blood, that is descended.

Therefore he wolde his hooly blood honoure,

Though that he hooly chirche sholde devoure. (3983-86)

Though a fictional and likely exaggerated depiction of clerical avarice, these final words offer what Marie Borroff views as “a direct accusation unparalleled, to my knowledge, elsewhere in Chaucer’s comic tales” (61). The Reeve’s parson clearly fits the bill as one of FitzRalph’s “plunderers in the Church of God” who provides for his own family “from the goods of the churches,” caring more about his concubines, his children, and his own wealth and social status than he does about the material or spiritual welfare of his parish.

The Deadly Sin of sloth enters anticlerical conversations in the context of priests who are uneducated. In *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, Wyclif imagines a utopian time in the early church in which leaders not only had greater faith than latter-day priests, but also a more thorough knowledge of the doctrines of that faith:

> It seems certain that they [the Apostles] had more faith at that time than we do now or, as it happens, those who devise their own fiction. For these people know nothing of the Catholic church, much less her true privileges. The prelates do not even possess suitable knowledge of the individual sacraments. (292; II.180)\(^{49}\)

Wyclif cites canon law which states that even “archbishops and bishops are required to know both testaments, and consequently the entirety of Holy Scripture” (288; II.158), and that a parish priest’s spiritual duty to his flock “cannot possibly be fulfilled without a knowledge of Holy Scripture. This is why it is essential that every spiritual shepherd have a knowledge of Holy Scripture above all else” (288-89; II.161).\(^{50}\) Though he expresses skepticism about Oxford’s
hair-splitting style of disputation, preferring instead a “logic which leads straight to the ultimate goal without any troubling ambiguities” (71; I.54). Wyclif also insists that all priests should receive a thorough education in theology, in order to serve the less educated laity: “In fact, it is appropriate for every Catholic to be a theologian, but especially the priest, inasmuch as he is of superior rank owing to a certain eminence” (300; II.234). Wyclif then goes on to advocate, using quotations from multiple decretals as support, the regular examination of priests and bishops in literacy and biblical knowledge. The reason clerical education is of such paramount importance, Wyclif insists repeatedly, is that the most important duty a priest has is preaching to his congregation. “It is evident that preaching God’s word is a more solemn act than consecrating the sacrament” (286; II.156), Wyclif says, years before he would deny the church’s doctrine of transubstantiation publicly:

> It is a far better thing . . . that the people receive God’s word than that a solitary person receive Christ’s body. . . . [P]reaching is more effective in blotting out mortal sins than the Eucharist. . . . Insofar as the aforementioned preached word is the truth, it is essentially God himself. As such, preaching it must be the most dignified work a creature can perform. (286-87; II.156-57)

The reason so many priests are woefully undereducated, and thus unprepared for the duties of preaching and teaching, is primarily their own laziness, but in *De Simonia*, Wyclif also predictably blames simony, the practice of selling ecclesiastical offices to the highest bidder. Elders in the church who make appointments for money “sin simoniacally as the worst of heretics when because of temporal gain they raise up illiterates whom the people feel are ignorant or lazy in governing souls” (153; 102), a fact Wyclif uses as further evidence for the
acceptability of withholding tithes.

The Deadly Sin of avarice takes perhaps the widest variety of forms in English anticlerical critique. The first is simple greed, which Wyclif says, in the context of an argument on civil dominion, manifests itself in the exaction of rents and “exemptions, privileges and dignities” available only to the clergy (Civ. Dom. II.21).\(^{55}\) In the same passage, he argues that wealth is better off in the hands of the laity, since “The lay folk have a use for wealth which the clergy have not, and can employ it prudently” (II.32).\(^{56}\) Simple greed can lead to straightforward corruption, Wyclif says in another context, and he uses lying, or remaining silent rather than speaking truth, as an example of a clerical sin primarily connected with greed:

> it appears that refusing to speak the truth is chiefly due to the danger of having one’s temporal possessions taken away. Or else it attests to the cowardly and contemptible fear of angering someone who would be severely displeased by hearing the truth, prompting senseless agreement to a lie which is contrary to the truth.

(On the Truth 186; I.318)\(^{57}\)

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

Several other forms of clerical greed fall under the broad heading of simony, a term most
commonly associated with the sale of spiritual offices, but one which Wyclif in his tract on the subject expands to include a wide variety of abuses. These include absenteeism, the neglect of a priest with cure of souls to discharge his duties while still collecting tithes or a benefice, as well as pluralism, the practice of holding ecclesiastical offices in multiple locations, thus ensuring that one or more will be absent. Some of these English absentee and pluralists were also aliens—appointees, especially for high-ranking offices such as cardinal and archbishop, who did not reside in England. To illustrate just how endemic these practices were in the 14th-century church, historian William Pantin observes that in 1366, there were 169 pluralists in London alone and 136 in the Lincoln diocese, with each pluralist holding an average of three benefices (36). The non-resident rector who received the tithes of a parish he never visited “might be anything from the Keeper of the Privy Seal to a university student, or to a monastery or a college, and the work would be done by a substitute, a vicar or chaplain. So we find a widespread system of sinecurism, absenteeism, and pluralism” (36). In addition, Evans observes that most of the doctors who examined Wyclif’s opinions at the Blackfriars synod “can be shown to be shameless pluralists and absentee” (95; see also Workman II.263-66), and Workman gives examples of benefices granted to children aged 14, 13, and “nearly six” (II.112). Ironically, Wyclif himself was an absentee priest, at least for a few early years of his career, as he held the prebend of the collegiate church in Aust in 1363 while studying at Oxford, and was cited for not providing a chaplain in his absence (Evans 95; Workman I.153). Apparently Wyclif corrected the problem, however, since he did not lose either the office or the benefice, and in 1368 retired both in favor of a vicarage at Ludgershall, closer to Oxford.

In any case, whether hypocritical or not, Wyclif railed against these practices throughout the entirety of his career. “Happy were it for England,” Wyclif writes in the early De Civili
Dominio, “if each parish church had its resident rector and each estate its resident lord with a moderate household, but it is far otherwise, and the clergy are the most to blame” (II.14). 58

Years later, taking Ezekiel 34:4 as his source text, Wyclif lists the five types of spiritual work absentee clerics do not perform, and imagines the list as a sentence from God on Judgment Day: “You did not strengthen the weak, did not heal the sick, did not bind up the broken, did not bring back the abandoned, did not seek after the lost” (On the Truth 296; II.227). 59 The most significant problem with pluralism and absenteeism, according to Wyclif, is that parishes are deprived of effective preaching, since the non-resident will typically supply an inferior vicar to take his place—or, if he does not, the parish will be deprived of preaching altogether. Wyclif scoffs at the idea that monastic orders who have appropriated parish churches can relieve themselves of the duty of preaching in favor of prayer alone:

How, therefore, will those rectors respond on the day of judgment for souls whose tenths they enjoy if by preaching they did not direct them on the road to virtue and to God’s law? . . . For prayer, particularly of a simoniac, cannot make up for the duty of preaching, because then God would be commanding preaching in vain. Nor is that pretext valid which claims that preaching is not necessary these days because the community knows Christ’s truth sufficiently. The fact is indubitable that . . . never was there a greater need to preach the Catholic faith. (On Simony 158; 107) 60

In De Officio Regis, Wyclif attacks the practice of appointing alien benefice-holders, arguing that if they wish to hold an English benefice, they must live in England and swear loyalty to her king: the King through his bishops should enforce the residence in all
parishes of learned and zealous curates. ... Foreign benefice-holders who do not reckon themselves subject to our Archbishop, and therefore are not bound to his oaths, must swear allegiance personally to the King, or lose their benefices. . . . Good pastors should be provided, and others, especially foreigners, fearlessly expelled. (163-64, 245)\textsuperscript{61}

As a later Lollard sermon puts it, using familiar biblical imagery, “no curat owith to leue his schepe vnkept among the wolues of helle” (Matthew, ed., 32).

A separate but related category of alien bishops can be found in the papal practice of granting favored subordinates non-existent foreign sees, episcopal posts that existed in title only because they were located in Muslim lands, where the church did not have an official presence. The bishops assigned to these areas would theoretically serve as missionaries, but in practice, they would simply receive the benefice attached to the endowment. Wyclif appears not to make any reference to this practice in his work, but Langland offers a harsh rebuke to these false title-holders. In a passage that resonates in intriguing ways with \textit{Patience}, the character Anima makes the radical suggestion that these bishops-in-name-only should actually travel to the East and take up their posts:

\begin{quote}
Allas, that men so longe on Makometh sholde bileve!

So manye prelates to preche as the Pope maketh—

Of Nazareth, of Nynyve, of Neptalym and Damaske.

That thei ne wente as Crist wisseth—sithen thei wilne a name—

To be pastours and preche the passion of Jesus,

And as hymself seide, so to lyve and dye:
\end{quote}
Bonus pastor animam suam ponit . . .

And that is routhe for the rightful men that in the reawme wonyen,

And a peril to the Pope and prelates that he maketh,

That bere bishopes names of Bethleem and of Babiloigne.

(B.XV.491-96, 507-09)

The Latin verse in the middle of the passage is again a familiar one, from John 10:11: “A good scheperde ȝyueth his lijf for hise scheep.” Anima is suggesting that bishops should assume residence in their appointed sees, even in regions as deadly as Babylon, for the sake of the lost sheep who live there, the worshipers of “Makometh.” The “peril” she speaks of in the final lines is not the physical danger of martyrdom, but the spiritual danger that attends disobedience—it is perilous, in a spiritual sense, for bishops to remain absentees, even if not doing so means physical death. Among the biblical cities in the list which evoke the New Testament foundations of Christianity—Nazareth, Damascus, Bethlehem—Langland also includes the Old Testament city of Nineveh, a conscious reminder that the prophet Jonah also placed himself in “peril” (Patience 114) for not taking up his post in a dangerous foreign land.

Wyclif also expands the definition of simony to include the selling of sacraments, in particular the sacrament of penance. Since penance traditionally involved four steps—contrition, confession, absolution, and satisfaction, the fourth step sometimes referred to as “penance” on its own—the process could be disrupted by clerical or lay abusers at several points. One widespread abuse, made famous by Chaucer’s Pardoner, was the sale of papal pardons or indulgences, which could reduce or eliminate the satisfaction a penitent would have to endure, either in this life or in Purgatory. Though pardoners were most likely to be lay officials collecting alms for a religious institution (Kellogg and Haselmeyer 253-62), satire written
against them could easily transition into an attack on more official representatives of the church, as Borroff points out in her reading of *The Pardoner’s Tale*:

> The statement that Christ’s pardon is best [VI.917-18], considered as part of what the Pardoner says after telling his tale, means that divine pardon exceeds in value those offered by dishonest Pardoners such as himself. Considered, however, as a statement put into the Pardoner’s mouth, without clear dramatic motivation, by Chaucer the poet, it takes on a wider and more dangerous meaning: Christ’s pardon excels not only those of fraudulent pardoners, but those of pardoners who serve as licensed and honest officials of the institutional church. This idea is, of course, thoroughly in accord with the views of Wyclif, who in one of his polemical treatises condemned *quaestores* as blasphemers, along with the members of all other ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. (67)

Likewise, the sale of relics, and saints’ cults more generally, though viewed with skepticism by Wyclif and fiercely denounced by later Lollards, were part of a ubiquitous trade that enriched church and lay merchants alike. Though these critiques might be more accurately viewed as arguments against lay superstition in general, a strain of antimonasticism in particular can be found in the Lollard passages against relics and pilgrimages, as practices encouraged by greedy monks seeking to enrich their monasteries.

Anticlerical critiques, however, were frequently leveled against confessors who allowed for shortcuts in the penitential process in exchange for donations, and against monks and friars who refused to hear confessions altogether from penitents who were not wealthy. In the
Defensio Curatorum, speaking of the covetousness of friars, FitzRalph lists three specific “peryls of the office of presthode,” duties of parish priests which bring in little or no income, and thus are shunned by the friars: “to folly children in help of curatours, & housle paryschons on Ester day and anoynt seke men at her ende day” (71). The anointing of the sick on their deathbeds, also known as extreme unction, was a sacrament that could potentially bring in money, but only if the dying man were rich, whereas caring for children was unlikely to be lucrative even in the best cases. As for “houseling,” administering the Eucharist, on Easter Sunday, this was a task which necessarily involved hearing confessions from parishioners in advance. Such work was likely to be burdensome, since Easter was the day most parishioners fulfilled the requirement of annual confession and “taking their rights” at Communion (Duffy 23, 93-95), and unprofitable since the average parishioner could not afford a large donation. As FitzRalph indicates, there were many simpler, less work-intensive ways for the friars to gain “worldlich wynnyng & profit” (71). Langland’s greedy confessor from Piers Plowman, cited above, is a fictional example of a friar who tailors the requirements of his penance to the generosity of the penitent, as is Chaucer’s Friar in the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales:

Ful swetely herde he confessioun,
And plesaunt was his absolucioun:
He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,
Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.
For unto a povre ordre for to yive
Is a signe that a man is wel yshryve; . . .
Therfore in stede of wepynge and preyeres
Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres. (I.221-26, 231-32)
It is hardly surprising, given the economic exchanges centered around the sacraments, that clergy of all categories would be compared to merchants—though, according to one Lollard sermon, they are “more sotil and falsere” (Matthew, ed., 156).

As might be expected, Wyclif concludes in *De Simonia* that the single answer to all of the problems that fall under the category of simony—sale of benefices, unfair preferments, pluralism, absenteeism, abuse of sacraments—is clerical dispossession. “Endowment is the mother and nurse of heresy,” he writes. “For as long as endowment remains, which nurtures this heresy in the church, it would take a remarkable miracle to wipe out the heresy of simony” (35-36; 7-8). Wyclif holds out hope that Pope Urban VI will correct these problems on his own, but says “this would be an unexpected and huge miracle.” The “more likely remedy” is that temporal lords will take matters into their own hands and through dispossession “plug up the font of simony” (141; 93).62

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

ȝif thei bynde hem self to clene chastite bothe of body and soule and of dede and wille, and here-with don fornycacioun and auoutrie with wyues and nonnes, and slen wommen that with-stonden hem in this synne; thei ben foule ypocritis. ȝif thei don the cursed synne of sodom with hem self, and seyn to nyse wymmen that it is lesse synne to trespase with hem than with othere weddid men, and vndir taken for the synne of the wommen, and norischen ryche men and wymmen in lecherie and in auoutrie for monye and to haue here owne lustis; thei ben cursid ypocritis and distroien cristendom. It semeth the deuyl gedreth siche lumpis of ȝonge men, fatte and lykynge and ydyl, and byndith hem fro wyues, that men myȝten haue bi goddis lawe, to maken false heiris and to for-do the kynde of men and so to make the erthe cursed of god and alle his seyntis.

(Matthew, ed., 6-7)

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

Another argument relevant to a reading of *Cleanness*, which manages to combine the Deadly Sins of avarice and lust, is the connection medieval theologians commonly drew between sodomy and simony. In *De Simonia*, Wyclif cites “Parisiensis,” the late 13th-century Parisian William of Peraldus (*On Simony* 45, n.25) as an authority for his argument on this point:

> the Parisian in his treatise *On Avarice*, in listing eight reasons to detest this sin [simony], expresses its terrible nature by calling it spiritual sodomy. For just as in carnal sodomy contrary to nature the seed is lost by which an individual human being would be formed, so in this sodomy the seed of God’s word is cast aside with which a spiritual generation in Christ Jesus would be created. And just as sodomy in the time of the law of nature was one of the most serious sins against nature, so simony in the time of the law of grace is one of the most serious sins against grace. (36; 8-9)\(^{63}\)

As further evidence, Wyclif quotes Matt. 10:15, in which Jesus says it will be more bearable for Sodom on judgment day than for those who reject his teaching, a group Wyclif defines as clerical simoniae. He defines “carnal sodomy” as any form of non-procreative sex in which “the seed is lost,” conduct especially worthy of God’s wrath in the ancient world, before his command to humanity to “Encreesse ye, & be ye multiplied & fille ye the erthe” (Gen. 1:28) had been fulfilled. The command is repeated to Noah and his sons after the Deluge (Gen. 9:1), when nearly all life is annihilated and those remaining bear the responsibility of repopulating the Earth. Of course, the argument that simony had replaced sodomy as the sin most likely to trigger God’s wrath in the Christian era, “the time of the law of grace,” did not prevent anticlerical critics from
accusing priests of every imaginable type of sexual practice and predicting God’s wrath for
them, as the sermon quoted above illustrates. But the metaphorical link between physical
sodomy and clerical simony is one to bear in mind as we approach the Gawain-poet’s
descriptions of bestiality and copulation with demons prior to the Deluge, his condemnation of
homosexual practices in Sodom, and his effusive praise of heterosexual love in Cleanness.

It is important to recognize that these types of anticlerical critiques, even at their harshest,
did not carry on their own any suggestion of heresy—in fact, some take great pains to avoid any
suspicion. Perhaps the best example of a self-consciously orthodox yet scathing attack on the
clergy comes from the poet John Gower, in the prologue to his Confessio Amantis. Internal
references to Richard II and dedications to Henry of Lancaster in some manuscripts place the
date of this work at ca. 1390-93 (Tiller 12), about ten years after Wyclif’s condemnation, but
while the Lollard movement was still in its infancy. Gower begins his collection of tales with an
apology, and states that his reason for writing is that “The world is changed overal,” and “love is
falle into discord” (119, 121), a state of affairs he blames in equal part on civil authorities,
church, and laity. Thus approximately one-third of the prologue is devoted to attacks on various
church officials and clergy.

In former days, Gower claims, Pride was considered a vice among clerics (224), priests
gave “grete almesse / To povere men that hadden nede” (226-27), and they were “chaste in word
and dede” (228). Today, however, the church which should be “the worldes hele / Is now, men
say, the pestilence / Which hath exiled pacience / Fro the clergie in special” (278-81). Gower
accuses clerical officials of indulging “the vice / Which Simon hath in his office” (203-04), and
of participating in a corrupt patronage system in the assigning of “bisschopriches” (208). Like
Wyclif, he says that “poverté” is a priest’s most honorable state, but unlike the recently
condemned Oxford theologian, he does not draw on any particular theory of clerical dominion, asserting simply that priests should desire cures “noght for pride of thilke astat” (293) or for material gain, but for the “profit” they bring to “holy cherche” (295-96). In fact, he seems to have little love for Oxford-style disputations in general, complaining that theologians who “argumenten faste / Upon the Pope and his astat ... dryve forth the day” with volleys that amount to little more than “yee” or “nay” (370-74). In his attacks on pride and greed, Gower does not exempt those who would seek, and gain, the papacy—“The Scribe and ek the Pharissee / Of Moises upon the See / In the chaiere on hyh ben set” (305-07)—but at no point does he question the elected pope’s authority. And he uses the imagery from John 10 of “the wolf” attacking the flock (419), but unlike Lollard sermons in which wolves represent the clergy, in Gower they stand for heretics, whom the corrupted clergy are too weak to fight.

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

And so to speke upon this branche,
Which proude Envie hath mad to springe,
Of Scisme, causeth for to bringe
This newe secte of Lollardie,
And also many an heresie
Among the clerkes in hemselve.
It were betre dike and delve
And stonde upon the ryhte feith,

Than knowe al that the Bible seith

And erre as somme clerkes do. (346-55)

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

And natheles I can noght seie,

In aunter if that I misseye. . . .

For thei [good priests] ben to the worldes ye

The mirour of ensamplerie,

To reulen and to taken hiede
At the end of his anticlerical screed, which shares many rhetorical features with both Wyclif’s polemic and Lollard writing of the same period despite his protests against the movement, Gower, self-consciously orthodox as always, confesses that regardless what level papal and priestly corruption might reach, regardless how many Deadly Sins an individual priest might commit, the priesthood itself is a necessary part of the Christian life, an intermediary between God and man that can never be wholly discarded.

4. Wyclif’s Anti-Sacerdotalism

Wyclif’s reflections on the practical aspects of clerical corruption may have contributed to his decision, in conjunction with his purely philosophical objections, to reject the doctrine of transubstantiation at approximately the mid-point of his academic career. But though this rejection would unquestionably create the most difficulty late in his career with church authorities such as the Blackfriars synod, by the time those authorities had condemned his work and forced him into retirement, Wyclif had undertaken an even more radical departure from the church’s view of priesthood, gesturing toward the position Gower deliberately flees at the end of the *Confessio*’s prologue.

In his late short tracts, starting with *De Simonia* (ca. 1380), Wyclif moves toward a position that Protestants in a later and different context would term “the priesthood of all believers,” the anti-sacerdotal belief that a separate class of priests is ultimately unnecessary for salvation or the Christian life. In the final lines of *De Simonia*, after a lengthy and damning summary of the simoniacal corruptions of modern-day priests, Wyclif concludes: “We are forced to deny that essential relationship between our prelates and their subjects; indeed, when
these are worthless like zeroes, Christ ordains any person in any manner and at any time he wishes” (162; 112).  

In his sermon on Matthew 23, a chapter in which Jesus attacks scribes and Pharisees, Wyclif focuses on the way corruption has led to sacerdotal decline and, in some cases, a complete collapse of clerical authority. Since penance and the power of absolution have become commodities to be sold, Wyclif says, the impoverished penitent has no choice but to receive absolution directly from Christ himself, as Lazarus did. If “Christ’s disciples declare remission afterwards,” so much the better, but this is not necessary (Opera Minora 318). In the same way, in the late tract De Blasphemia (ca. 1382), Wyclif asserts that though penitence and some form of public renunciation of sin is necessary for all Christians, confession to a priest is optional, especially if that priest imposes unreasonable forms of satisfaction in order to extort money. The sacrament of penance as it currently stands in the church, Wyclif says, “gives occasion to much simoniacal extortion” (De Blas. 129). “It is of no use, and is even hurtful, to confess to a simoniacal priest” (117), and if all priests available to a parishioner are tainted by simony, “he ought then to prefer to confess to one of the faithful laity” (125). In such a case, Wyclif says, a parishioner who is truly penitent before God may partake of the Eucharist with a clear conscience, without receiving priestly absolution; even if excommunication follows, the penitent may “rejoice and communicate spiritually” (145).  

Wyclif also argues that the requirement to attend confession annually is unjust, since such mandated Eastertime confessions are linked inevitably with donations, and serve only to enrich the church materially, not spiritually (126-27). The tract demonstrates Wyclif’s anti-sacramentalism, well established at this point, as well as his growing insistence that priests and sacraments are unnecessary for the achievement of salvation. Wyclif’s suggestion, albeit implicit, that the priesthood is an optional
office within the Christian church exists in strong tension with his concern that priests are abusing and defiling the sacraments—the two strains of thought pull logically in opposite directions, and he makes no attempt to resolve the tension.

Of course, Wyclif was not the only one of his contemporaries to make such suggestions, and to do so in logically inconsistent ways. According to Wendy Scase in her survey of anti-fraternal satire, though the genre had traditionally defended parish priests, “anticlerical revisions of the old tradition produced a satire which defended no priests of any kind. ... We even find it associated with forms of antisacerdotalism” (37). This “new anticlericalism,” according to Scase, did not represent the interests of any one form of clergy, but “at its most extreme, it calls into question the authority of any priest” (38). As an example of a text that veers at least tentatively toward anti-sacerdotalism, she cites the friar-confessor scene from the *Piers Plowman* B-text, in which Langland strongly emphasizes the element of individual contrition in confession, and the Dreamer claims that “a baptized man may . . . / Thorough contricion come to the heighe hevene” without the assistance of a confessor (XI.80-81), though the sacrament of baptism is still necessary, as “a barn withouten bapteme may noght be so saved” (82). As Scase points out, the C-text version of the poem removes this exchange, perhaps in response to or anticipation of anti-sacerdotal accusations, or perhaps simply to eliminate the logical conflict (39). Even more explicitly, Passus XV of the B-text features the character Anima expressing hope that “oure bileve suffiseth” without the need for priestly intercession: “That *sola fides sufficit* to save with lewed peple— / And so may Sarsens be saved, scribes and Jewes” (388-89). Scase translates and interprets the passage thus: “Neither the learned nor the ignorant are defended; instead, an antisacerdotal view of salvation is suggested. Anima asserts that salvation is independent of priestly efficacy, for even non-Christians may be saved” (44).
Wyclif’s anti-sacerdotal suggestions alongside his concern for sacramental defilement, and Langland’s assertion that even non-Christians may be saved through contrition alongside his insistence on the necessity of baptism, both illustrate the logical quandary that faced writers who wished to criticize priests for their corruption of the church and dismiss the entire institution at the same time. Later Lollards confronted the same conflict, but tended to resolve it with a stronger inclination to dispense with the current priesthood:

there is no more heresie than man to bileve that he is assoyled ȝif
he ȝeve hym [“thi confessour”] moneye, or ȝif he leye his hond on
thin heed, and seie that he assoyllith thee. Ffor thou moste by
sorowe of herte make aseeth to God, and ellis God assoylith thee
noȝt, and thanne assoylith noȝt thi viker. (Arnol d, ed., III.252)

In this conception of the sacrament of penance from an anonymous tract-writer, God alone is the one who chooses to absolve; the priest, to the extent that he does anything at all, merely confirms that choice. Wyclif never fully or consistently embraced this position—though he was driven to it on occasion, as in the Matthew 23 sermon cited above, through his consideration of extreme practical circumstances. It was up to those who followed him, who looked to his sermons and treatises for inspiration, to develop these anti-sacerdotal suggestions more thoroughly.

For the purposes of the present study, the actual reasons for Wyclif’s movement from boilerplate anticlerical critique, to FitzRalphian dominion arguments, to an inconsistent form of Donatism, to anti-sacramentalism, to an anti-sacerdotal dismissal of priests that his followers would expand—and indeed, whether or not these stages of Wyclif’s thought even occurred in this order—is less relevant than what authorities in the church believed about the relationships between these ideas. And what they believed was that all of them were tied together, not so
much steps on a path that had advanced Wyclif by degrees into heresy, but rather a conglomerate
of interrelated positions, all connected to ancient heresies and all equally inspired by Satan,
which proved he had been in rebellion from the earliest stages of his career.

The Blackfriars synod’s condemnation divided Wyclif’s propositions into ten that were
“heretical” and fourteen that were “erroneous,” but beyond those simple categories, it made no
distinction between degrees of error nor any attempt to organize them chronologically, sweeping
together statements that had been made in a wide variety of contexts throughout twenty years of
theological tract-writing. Within the “heretical” category, the anti-Eucharistic statement that
“Christ is not in the sacrament of the altar identically, truly, and really in His proper corporeal
person” comes just before the Donatist claim that “if a bishop or a priest be in mortal sin, he doth
not ordain, consecrate the elements, nor baptize”; broad anti-sacramental arguments which came
late in Wyclif’s career, against the necessity of confession and against the claim that Christ
ordained the Mass, immediately precede one of Wyclif’s earliest statements about the separation
of divine and civil dominion, that “God ought to obey the devil” (Workman II.416-17; Shirley,
ed., FZ 277-82). For any church official, clerical apologist, or anti-Lollard defender of
orthodoxy searching for signs of incipient heresy after 1382, any one piece of Wyclif’s complex
puzzle of ideas, from the most benign critique of open corruption to a straightforward denial of
church doctrine, would be enough to assume the whole.

5. Englishing the Bible

One final aspect of Wyclif’s career we have not yet addressed—in part because it runs
parallel to the progression of his anticlerical thought from the 1370s onward, rather than seeming
to be an essential step within it—but one which is clearly relevant to a study of the Gawain-
poet’s biblical poetics, is the issue of English translations of Scripture. The level of Wyclif’s personal involvement with the Oxford Bible translation project of the late 14th century is a matter of continual debate, with contemporary scholars tending to fix their positions in relation to Mary Dove’s view “that Wyclif instigated the project, that work began in the early 1370s, in the Queen’s College, Oxford, and that Wyclif, Hereford, and Trevisa all played a part in the translation” (2). David Fowler, summarizing the debates on this point, observes that only two Wycliffite Bible manuscripts (Cambridge MS Ee.1.10 and Bodley Douce 369) contain any attributions of authorship at all, to “N,” “J and other men,” and “Nicholay de herford.” Fowler concludes, “The most that can be said from manuscript evidence, is that the Early Version was made by Nicholas Hereford, J.____, and other men, and this is about as far as most modern writers on the subject have ventured to go” (154-55). The first reference to Wyclif as a translator appears only after his death, in the Augustinian canon Henry Knighton’s *Chronicle* (ca. 1390). The context is Knighton’s entry on Wyclif and his followers, which presents them as heretics dangerous to both church and laity:

Master John Wyclif translated from Latin into the English language—very far from being the language of angels!—the gospel that Christ gave to the clergy and doctors of the church, for them to administer sweetly as mental nourishment to laypeople and to the infirm, according to the necessity of the time and the people’s need. As a consequence, the gospel has become more common and more open to laymen and even to women who know how to read than it customarily is to moderately well-educated clergy of good intelligence. Thus the pearl of the gospel is scattered abroad and
Most debates over the orthodoxy or acceptability of the Wycliffite translations postdate any of the Gawain-poet’s works, the most significant document being Archbishop Thomas Arundel’s Constitutions of 1407-09, which required a license for the publication or ownership of any English translation of the Bible, and more than any other response to the Oxford translators sparked a flurry of counter-responses in succeeding decades (see Dove 36; Fowler 149; Ghosh 212-13; Lawton, “Englishing” 454; Watson, “Censorship” 824). But Knighton’s early contribution summarizes well the church’s primary objections: the English language is less suitable than Latin as a conduit for Scripture, the right and duty to convey Scripture to the people and interpret it belongs exclusively to the clergy, and the laity should only access the truths of Scripture as necessity demands, since they are incapable of understanding or rightly using the knowledge contained there. Within these concerns about the proper roles of English language, clergy, and laity also rings a note of anxiety about “laymen and even . . . women” gaining access to more education than the “moderately well-educated clergy,” perhaps diminishing the value of those clerics’ professional credentials.

From Wyclif’s perspective, the education of the laity Knighton describes, to match or exceed that of the clergy, is a positive development. As early as De Ecclesia, at least a year before Wyclif’s first overt denial of transubstantiation, and at least four years before the Wycliffite Early Version’s completion, he presents an antipapal argument for why every Christian should be thoroughly familiar with the Bible. In short, Scripture is “the glass by which heretics may be discerned,” including the pope, and it is the layman’s duty to determine whether the Pope’s commands are in accord with Scripture and therefore lawful to follow (41). As might be expected, Wyclif writes his most vigorous defense of biblical education in De Veritate
Sacrae Scripturae. Perhaps unexpectedly, though, his notes on Bible translation in this tract focus on the limits of any attempt at translation, and he argues that every biblical manuscript, even those in the original languages, are fallible to some degree, since they are imperfect “artificial signs by which man accesses the truths” contained within the perfect Book of Life (97; I.109)—an excellent example of Wyclif’s Platonic Realism brought to bear on a theological subject other than the Eucharist. There are parallels between Wyclif’s impending treatise on the Eucharist and De Veritate, however: just as the physical bread of Communion has no significance except as “the sacramental covering or vesture of Christ” (De Eucharistia 18), biblical manuscripts “are of no greater value than the beasts from which they were made. Their true worth rests in the sense and truth which they signify” (159; I.238). Even St. Jerome’s Vulgate translation, the source text for the Oxford translators, is itself imperfect. The degree to which it conforms to the perfect Book, Wyclif says, is determined “as much by the sanctity of his life, which Augustine recounts in his letter On the Holiness of Jerome, as by his expertise in the Hebrew language and the complete agreement of his translation with the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts” (157; I.234). Wyclif views the primary purpose of biblical education among the laity as protection from heresy, especially from those who style themselves leaders in the church: “Thus in order to prevent some pseudo-disciples from pretending that they have received their understanding directly from God, God established a common Scripture which is perceptible to the senses, by means of which the catholic sense should be comprehended” (203; I.380). In this respect, the author of the General Prologue to the Wycliffite Late Version agrees with Wyclif. In chapter 15, he claims that it is just this fear of being caught in heresy and other sins that motivates the prelates’ opposition to English translation, a negative force that will only be overcome by the desire of the laity to learn Scripture and the courage of translators in the face of
death: “For, thouȝ couetouse clerkis ben wode bi symonie, eresie and manie othere synnes, and
dispisen and stoppen holi writ as myche as thei moun, ȝit the lewid puple crieth aftir holi writ to
kunne it and kepe it with greet cost and peril of here lif” (Hudson, ed., Selections 67).

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

First it is to knowe that the beste translating is, out of Latyn into
English, to translate aftir the sentence and not oneli aftir the wordis,
so that the sentence be as opin either openere in English as in Latyn,
and go not fer fro the lettre; and if the lettre mai not be suid [followed]
in the translating, let the sentence euere be hoo l and open, for the
wordis owen to serue to the entent and sentence, and ellis the wordis
ben superflu either false. (68)

The ideal translation is one that conforms to “letter” and “sentence,” but if the combination is
impossible, the latter is preferable. This theory of translation is also espoused by Chaucer in the
prologue to his Treatise on the Astrolabe, in similar enough language to lead some scholars to
speculate that Chaucer must have read the Wycliffite Prologue (Cole 81; Fehrman 111-38), or at
least had an “awareness of the Bible debate, from the point of view of a practising translator”
(Dove 32; also see McCormack 180). The Oxford translators appear to have attempted both
translation styles separately in the two separate versions of the Wycliffite Bible, following the
“letter” in the Early Version, which closely adheres to Latin syntax sometimes at the expense of
intelligibility in English, and following the Prologue writer’s advice in the Late Version, which
more freely allows for changes in verb tense and word order. Dove argues that “the Earlier Version was never intended to be copied as a translation in its own right, but that the translators producing the Later Version lost control of what happened to the Earlier Version in the early 1380s,” observing that the General Prologue, with its “open,” “sentence”-based translation theory, is affixed only to copies of the Later Version, and that LV manuscripts outnumber the EV more than five to one (3).

Of course, neither Chaucer nor the Gawain-poet needed to know of the Oxford project to be familiar with the concept of English Bible translation. Numerous translations from Jerome’s Vulgate into Middle English predate the Wycliffite versions, though the Oxford translators did produce the first complete translation of the entire Bible. King Alfred commissioned a Pentateuch and Psalter in the 10th century and several other versions of Old Testament books, Psalms, and Passion narratives existed in pre-Conquest England, though the Old English dialects of these works had become mostly illegible to readers by the 14th century (Fowler 125). In Middle English, several verse adaptations of popular Latin abridgements of the Bible were produced, starting with Genesis and Exodus (ca. 1250), a rhyming metrical version of the Pentateuch’s narrative passages based on Peter Comestor’s Historia Scholastica, and Jacob and Joseph (ca. 1250), a portion of Genesis also set in rhyming couplets. The massive Cursor Mundi (ca. 1300) is a slightly later metrical poem which covers the entire Bible, as well as an apocryphal account of Jesus’ ancestry and childhood, in 29,555 lines. What is perhaps most interesting about these early Old Testament paraphrases, in the context of the Gawain-poet, is what they leave out. Genesis and Exodus and the Cursor Mundi thoroughly cover the three primary events in Cleanness—the Deluge, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Belshazzar’s Feast—and one scholar has attempted to demonstrate that Cleanness borrows imagery from the Cursor
(Horrall 6-11). But neither poem makes any mention of the Book of Jonah, in part because the Latin abridgements upon which they are based also omit it, with the exception of one apocryphal passage in Comestor’s *Historia* identifying Jonah as the widow’s son in 1 Kings 17 whom Elijah raises from the dead (Morey 34). As a result, by the year 1400, the only English translations of the Book of Jonah that had ever been written were the Wycliffite versions and *Patience*.

The many fragmentary attempts at Bible translation and paraphrase in Middle English also include several Gospel harmonies, Gospel commentaries with extensive quotations, a stanzaic Life of Christ composed at St. Werburgh’s Abbey in Chester (Fowler 146-47), a manuscript with an eclectic collection of Midland-dialect versions of Matthew and Acts and Southwestern versions of the Pauline and Catholic Epistles (Paues, ed.), which Workman speculates are Lollard in origin (II.173), and several manuscripts of the Apocalypse translated from Anglo-Norman, occasionally but not always exhibiting influence from the Wycliffite translations and sometimes bound together with Wycliffite EV Gospels.74

Next to the Gospels, the most popular subjects for Bible translators in the Middle Ages were the Psalms (Lawton 455). In English, the Surtees Psalter (ca. 1300), composed with metrical rhyming couplets, and the West Midlands Prose Psalter (ca. 1350), a version once falsely attributed to Richard Rolle, which features alternating lines in Latin and English (Bühlbring viii-x), are both translations of the complete Book of Psalms. But the most well-known English Psalter, extant in forty manuscripts, was the prose translation of the mystic Richard Rolle of Hampole (Fowler 145), completed shortly before his death in 1349. Rolle’s Psalter is a valuable resource for any student of medieval translation theory, because in addition to Latin and English verses on alternating lines, Rolle also includes commentary on each verse and occasionally on his reasons for particular translation choices. In general, he espouses the
same theory of “open” translation with an emphasis on overall meaning as the Wycliffites. In the Psalter’s prologue, he writes:

In this werke i seke na straunge ynglis, bot lyghetest and comonest, and swilk that is mast lyke til the latyn, swa that thai that knawes noght latyn, by the ynglis may com til mony latyn wordis. In the translacioun i folow the lettre als mykyll as i may. And thare i fynd na propire ynglis, i folow the wit of the worde, swa that thai that sall red it thaim thare noght dred errynge. (Psalter 4-5)

In addition to following the “sentence”—in Rolle’s words, the “wit”—of biblical passages as the Prologue to the Wycliffite LV would later advise, Rolle also conveys his intention to use the translation to help the uneducated laity learn Latin, a purpose to which Dove says the Wycliffite EV Bibles may have been employed by their owners, regardless of the translators’ intentions (63-65). Dove also observes that one manuscript of the Wycliffite Psalms “has each verse in Latin and in English, as in Rolle’s Psalter” (63), so a reader could follow the Latin text sung in a church service, while also keeping the English translation close at hand. Until the Wycliffite versions appeared forty years later, Rolle’s Psalter was, according to Margaret Deanesley, “the standard English version of the Psalms” (231).

We can only speculate about the motivations behind most Middle English Bible translations, since the translators themselves are anonymous, but Rolle makes clear in the Prologue that he wants to make the Psalms accessible to the English laity so they can obtain the “grete haboundance of gastly comfort and ioy” he has gained through his mystical experience, and “drope swetnes in mannys saule and hellis [pour] delite in thaire thoȝtis and kyndils thaire willes with the fyre of luf, makand thaim hate [hot] and brennand withinnen & faire and lufly in
cristis eȝen” (3). He shared this goal of lay access, implicitly outside of clerical control, with the Lollards, who produced their own editions of Rolle’s works in the late 14th century. In fact, nearly half of the extant manuscripts of Rolle’s Psalter contain Lollard interpolations in addition to Rolle’s own commentary (Fowler 145).

The life and career of Rolle is almost as far removed from Wyclif’s as it could possibly be for two 14th-century Oxford-educated men from the same region of northern England. In philosophical orientation, Rolle was a Nominalist under the influence of William of Ockham and Duns Scotus (Comper 40-41), directly opposed to Wyclif’s Realism, but more significantly for the purposes of comparison, Rolle seemed uninterested in academic disputation altogether. He left Oxford before completing a degree, and in the writing from his years as a hermit and mystic in Yorkshire, he “spends neither time nor labour in refuting heresies, or discussing points of doctrine” (Comper 47). What Rolle shared most with Wyclif, besides an interest in translation, was his anticlericalism. In the Melum Contemplativorum, perhaps his earliest work (Pantin 245), Rolle bitterly attacks those clergy and prelates “who sin grievously in regard to women,” and those who “have taken Holy orders, and go to women as wooers, saying that they languish for their love, and are near to fainting for the desire they have and the strife in their thought” (Comper 164). In his biblical commentaries, Rolle’s anticlerical asides share Wyclif’s animosity toward simony and the sale of sacraments, and the same concern that a priest’s primary duty is to preach. Rolle warns, in his Postillae on Job, “Woe be to the priests who with such zeal and clamour exact tithes and payments for sacraments, and take so little care of the souls of their parishioners. They are prompt to demand money, but seldom or never do they preach” (Comper 165; Horstman, ed., II.xxi). In Rolle’s case, however, his anticlericalism was often simply a reaction against critics who questioned a mystic’s authority to educate the laity through direct
access to God. Unlike Wyclif, Rolle felt a great affinity for the mendicant Franciscans, and he was “instrumental in spreading the doctrines of St. Francis in the north” (Comper 49), though he never joined the order himself. Rolle’s attacks on Oxford-educated priests also contained a strong current of anti-intellectualism that Wyclif could not match, despite his misgivings about the disputation system. “Alas! for shame!” Rolle laments in the *Incendium Amoris* (“Fire of Love”), “An old wife is more expert in God’s love, and less in worldly pleasure, than the great divine, whose study is vain” (*Fire* 31). He shows disdain for “those taught by knowledge gotten, not inshed, and puffed up with folded arguments” (142), and says that his own knowledge of Christ’s love did not come to him while “given without measure to disputation; but I have felt myself truly in such things wax cold, until putting a-back all things in which I might outwardly be occupied, I have striven to be only in the sight of my Saviour and to dwell in full inward burnings” (13). This aspect of Rolle’s ideology might furnish an additional explanation for the Lollards’ fascination with the Yorkshire mystic, since they too expressed anger, ironically, against the institution that had educated and employed the founder of their movement.

Many critics, starting with Carleton Brown in 1904, have detected thematic similarities between Rolle’s work and the mysticism of *Pearl* (see Watson, “*Gawain*-Poet” 303), including what Brown terms their shared “emancipation of the spirit from the bondage of scholastic theology” (142), though no one has yet found clear evidence that the *Gawain*-poet was influenced by Rolle directly. Interestingly, though, in his study of the *Gawain*-poet’s theology, Brown also quotes the opening lines of *Cleanness* and positions them within antimonastic critiques of the period: “In this protest against the vices of the religious orders, he is, of course, in entire accord with the author of *Piers Plowman*, with John Wyclif, and with many other of his contemporaries, who were heartily tired of the abuses and scandals connected with the monastic
and mendicant orders” (141). Brown does not propose any more specific connections between the *Gawain*-poet and these figures, but he sees their common ground as evidence of a “slowly gathering sentiment among the most intelligent and truly religious people of his time,” an anticlerical attitude which relied primarily on “appeals to common-sense” (141).

As we have already seen in the case of Wyclif, however, seemingly “common-sense” critiques of clerical abuses could leave the critic open to accusations of heresy—and from the church’s perspective by the late 14th century, the presence of one could be sufficient reason to suspect the other. Whether he knew it or not, by producing an English translation of Scripture for lay readers, and by prefacing it with an attack against priests who administer the Eucharist, the *Gawain*-poet was treading on slippery ground.

5. Conclusion

The preceding description of 14th-century English anticlericalism is by necessity summarized and simplified, but it provides at least a glimpse of the textual environment within which the *Gawain*-poet was working, ca. 1360-1399, when he set his pen to *Cleanness* and *Patience*. To condense the key aspects of this environment even further, the anticlerical rhetoric of the 14th century may be divided into the following categories:

1. Relatively “orthodox” critiques of standard clerical abuses, frequently linked to the Seven Deadly Sins. These abuses include drunkenness and gluttony; sexual sins such as fornication, adultery, and sodomy; violent crimes such as rape and murder; and practices motivated by envy and greed, such as nepotism, the simoniacal selling of pardons, indulgences, and other spiritual offices, competition between regular and secular clergy for tithes, and a host of unethical practices related to the church’s patronage system, including pluralism, absenteeism,
and the procuring of fictional benefices in non-Christian lands. This category also includes the lack of education among lower clergy, typically linked to the sin of sloth.

2. Opposition to papal and clerical attempts to infringe on the rights of temporal lords, rooted in FitzRalph’s and Wyclif’s theories on divine and civil dominion. This category includes antipapal critiques against English kings paying tributes to Avignon or Rome, antimonastic critiques against perpetual endowments, antifratal critiques against begging friars and almsgiving, arguments for the withholding of tithes from corrupt priests, support for clerical dispossession and disendowment, and in general the conclusion that genuine poverty and material hardship, as opposed to theoretical poverty that allows for possession by means of legal loopholes, is a preferable state for both secular and regular clergy.

3. In some cases, though on a limited and inconsistent basis for Wyclif and the Lollards, a Donatist assertion that mortal sin among clerics impairs their ability to administer sacraments efficaciously, in particular absolution and the Eucharist.

4. In some cases, including Wyclif late in his career and most of the Lollards, a denial of the doctrine of transubstantiation. The doctrine may be replaced by any one of several alternate theories, from Wyclif’s consubstantiation—along with his allowance of multiple conflicting views as equally lawful—to the outright denial of all sacramental efficacy, a view held by a small number of radical Lollards.

5. Anti-sacerdotal arguments, suggested by Wyclif in his later tracts and taken up more fully by the later Lollards, which contend that a separate class of priests is unnecessary, since all Christian elect belonging to the invisible Church Militant have an equal ability to administer sacraments and intercede with prayer.

6. An insistence on biblical and theological education among the English laity, for the
purpose of combatting the false teaching of popes and clerics, a project which necessitates English translations of Scripture, as well as sermons, treatises, and disputations on theological topics in English rather than Latin.

Throughout the following two chapters, which undertake a close reading of *Cleanness* and *Patience* through the lens of English anticlericalism, we will make reference to these general categories at those moments when the poet himself appears to gesture toward them. Keeping in mind as well the 14th-century church’s tendency to link the seemingly benign critiques of the first category to the potential heresies of those that follow, we return to the opening lines of *Cleanness*, and the poet’s most explicit critique of the “renkez of relygioun that . . . prestez arn called” (7-8).
Chapter Three:
The Anticlerical Poetics of *Cleanness*

1. What “Prestez” Are Called: The Opening Critique Revisited

To position the *Gawain*-poet more precisely among his contemporaries in the 14th-century English anticlerical tradition, the most obvious place to start is in the introductory lines of *Cleanness*. The poem announces itself as a work that will be highly critical of the clergy from the second sentence, which begins in line 5, though virtually no contemporary critic has attempted to read the poem from beginning to end through the lens of this announced theme.¹

We have already examined, in Chapter 1, the defiled Eucharistic elements that appear in this passage, as well as the poet’s potential brush with Donatism in lines 9-16. We return to the passage now in order to connect its language and imagery more fully with those writers who viewed sacramental defilement as a central concern in their critiques of various types of clerics.

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

The same critics who view \textit{Cleanness} as a form of sermon also typically weigh in on the question of whether the poet was himself a preacher or priest, and if so what type of clerical training he received and whether he may have been a member of a religious order.\(^4\) While this question might seem directly relevant to a study of the poet’s anticlerical opinions, in fact it is not of paramount importance. As the survey of anticlerical writers in the previous chapter demonstrates, those who presented harsh, even anti-sacerdotal critiques in the 14th century were in many cases parish priests themselves, such as John Wyclif, Nicholas Hereford, and John Trevisa, or higher-ranking officials such as Archbishop Richard FitzRalph, or those who were clerically trained but not practicing priests, such as the mystic Richard Rolle. On the other hand, they could also include poets who were highly educated but not necessarily clerics, such as William Langland (whose relationship to the clergy is unknown), John Gower, and Geoffrey Chaucer, while the later Lollards tended to be men and women with little to no formal education, such as William Thorpe and Hawisia Moone. Though there can be no question the \textit{Gawain}-poet was educated, and perhaps clerically trained, and thus not a member of this final category, his anonymity makes it possible that he could fit into any of the others.

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

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

The poet has both heard the lesson of God’s wrath against sin preached and read it himself in books. In the next line, he conflates these two forms of learning, saying, “Bot neuer ȝet in no boke breued [recorded/reported] I herde” (197) that God dispenses more wrath on any sin besides “fylthe of the flesch” (202). Though at least one critic argues that this passage indicates the poet is a low-ranking rather than a “hyȝe clerk,” and thus a “cleric in minor orders, employed in some administrative capacity” (Putter, *Introduction* 16-17), the narrator’s position in this passage is one of a hearer and reader, not of a preacher or writer, regardless of his real-life career. He is in the same position, within the poem, as a member of the congregation in a church service. This position becomes even more explicit in *Patience*, where the poet introduces his summary of the Beatitudes by saying, “I herde on a halyday, at a hyȝe masse, / How Mathew melede that his Mayster His meyny con teche” (9-10). At the same time, he refers to this biblical teaching as “the tyxte” (37) and of the story of Jonah as one that “holy wryt telles” (60), both of which imply he is working from a written text, and he does not hesitate to make interpretive statements “in myn vpynyoun” (40), as if he trusts his ability to read and reason from that text.

Whether or not the poet himself was a priest, the image of the narrator that emerges from these passages is of an educated and confident layman, a man on the receiving end of priestly actions,
both intellectual and sacramental. In his critique in the second sentence of *Cleanness*, he does not establish himself as an authority with the credentials to speak to other authorities, but rather as a congregant concerned with corruption trickling down from above. His intended audience, though it may include the clerics he seeks to reform, must include non-clerics as well, who will suffer the consequences of their leaders’ moral failings.

The last line of the opening sentence (4) indicates that the poem will also deal with “the contraré” of cleanness and fair forms of speech, and the second sentence introduces this oppositional theme in more detail. God, the poet says, is wrathful against “the freke that in fylthe fol3es Hym after” (6)—the man who follows God yet lives in a state of filth. This second sentence does not end at line 6, however. With the adverb “as” to start line 7, the poet presents his first example of the type of man who lives in filth while affecting to follow God: “renkez of relygioun that reden and syngen / And aprochen to Hys presens, and prestez arn called” (7-8). Several lines later, the poet will state that “If thay [the priests] conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont ... Then ar thay synful hemself” (13-15, italics added). But here in the opening sentences, there are no conditional words or phrases to soften the poet’s critique. The “prestez” are introduced here as an unindividuated group who will serve as the primary example of those hypocrites who trigger God’s most violent wrath. In fact, they are the first of only two contemporary illustrations of God’s wrath in the entire poem, the other appearing in an allegorical story about a “ladde” who offends an “vrthly hathel [man] that hyȝ honour haldez” by dressing poorly for his feast (35-36), a story so closely linked to the biblical Parable of the Wedding Feast which follows that it hardly seems contemporary at all.

Though the poet introduces the priests as examples of “filth,” his opening description of their function and duties is benign. They read and sing (7); they approach God’s presence (8);
and they “rychen” God’s altar (10), preparing it for the sacrament,⁵ at which the priests will “hondel ther His aune body” (11). After this wholly positive description of the priest’s role in the sacrament of the altar, a stark contrast from the “wroth” and “fylth” of lines 5-6, the poet introduces a conditional statement with the word “If” (12), which will divide priests into those who will receive “gret mede” (12) and those who “sulpen altogether / Bothe God and His gere” and drive Him “to greme” (16). The difference between these good and evil priests is that the former are “in clanness ... clos [clothed]” (12), while the latter “conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont, / As be honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylthez” (13-14). What drives God to wrath in this passage is not external dirtiness. Both groups of priests apparently have clean vestments; they are both “honest vtwyth,” on the outside, but only one is clothed in “clanness.” The problem is internal corruption masked by a clean exterior, a state expressed by a lack of the courtly quality “cortaysye” and by the phrase “conterfete crafte.” Anderson glosses the word “crafte” as “virtue,” and Andrew and Waldron define it as “wisdom,” both possibilities the MED supports (in definitions 1 and 2.a, respectively), while adding “An art, a handicraft” (def. 3), “A trade, an occupation” (def. 6.a), and “A skillful way of doing something” (def. 8.a). The term can also refer generically to any type of behavior (see def. 8.c), including sexual conduct, a meaning the poet has in mind later in the poem when God teaches the Sodomites a “kynde crafte” of love-making which they reject (697), and Lot offers to teach them “by kynde a crafte that is better” (865) with his daughters. By line 13, the term may not yet have acquired the sexual connotation the poet will give it later, but the sense is that the unworthy priests feign a virtue they do not truly possess, or that they practice an art, the administration of the Eucharist, with a skill that masks their internal corruption.
This latter possibility, that a hypocritical priest might consecrate the Eucharistic elements while harboring secret sins, especially a Deadly Sin such as lechery, was a particularly distressing one for anticlerical critics of the 14th century. A number of those critics who focused specifically on sexual sins and their defilement of the Eucharist, particularly John Gower, have already been explored in Chapters 1 and 2, but it is worthwhile to note here the anticlerical tradition’s concern with hypocrisy in general as a cancer that threatens to destroy the priesthood and eventually the entire church. In one of his late sermons, Wyclif writes that “A great increase in hypocrisy among the clergy is one of the distinguishing signs of the approach of the End. Among all sins permitted by God to exist in the church militant, it is the most greatly to be feared” (Polemical Works II.471-72).  According to Wyclif, “The hypocrisy of the priests increases even while laws are multiplied to oppose them,” and those clergy “who dissipate the religion of Christ under the cloak of sanctity must either be punished here and now by their ecclesiastical superiors, or by the laity. If they are not, they will either be destroyed in a hostile act of devastation, or will amass their crimes only to endure the retribution of divine judgment” (VSS III.33; On the Truth 310). As detailed in the previous chapter, Wycliffite sermonists echo Wyclif’s concern about hypocrisy in their frequent references to 2 Corinthians 11:14, in which Satan masquerades as an angel of light. The first book of Gower’s Confessio Amantis expresses the same general fear, as the allegorical character Genius describes hypocrisy with a wealth of oppositional images—“A man which feigneth conscience, / As though it were al innocence” (I.595-96), corn that hides weeds (602), a rose hiding thorns (603), a wolf disguised as a lamb (604-05), and “malice / Under the colour of justice / Is hid” (605-07). The practical example of hypocrisy Gower begins with, as the most pernicious, is that among the clergy, which he says takes root first with “these ordres” of friars (608). He describes the hypocritical friars, as the
Gawain-poet does the men who are “honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylthez,” with an image of deceitful clothing. The friars exhibit poverty and virtue on their exteriors, but this is only a cover for their material wealth and internal sin:

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

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

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

In Gower’s conception, the counterfeit light of corrupt friars and priests, which hides their internal darkness, eventually strikes the entire world blind. The Gawain-poet, in his foregrounding of priestly hypocrisy and the use of his own oppositional metaphor, cleanness versus filth, employs a strategy shared by critics from across the spectrum of the 14th-century anticlerical tradition, from Gower to Wyclif to the later Lollards.
What follows the warning to priests in *Cleanness* is an illustration of the reasons for God’s great hatred of spiritual filth, starting with a description of His “courte” (17) and “housholde” (18) and its spotless cleanness. The space where God dwells is “clene” (17) and “honeste” (18), with His servants the angels “enourled [surrounded] in alle that is clene” (19). Unlike the priests, whose inner and outer conditions may not match, the angels are clothed “Bothe withinne and withouten in wedez ful bryȝt” (20), and it becomes clear that these “within” clothes are actually the most important, as the poet translates the sixth Beatitude: “The hathel clene of his hert hapenez ful fayre, / For he schal loke on oure Lorde with a leue chere” (27-28). In the Wycliffite LV, this verse is rendered, “Blessid be thei that ben of clene herte: for thei schul se god” (Matt. 5:8). However, it is the lines that follow this introduction of the poem-sermon’s biblical theme which explain most clearly why God cannot tolerate any measure of filth in His presence. The poet starts by inverting the Beatitude:

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

The Beatitude states that those with clean hearts shall see God, and its corollary, the poet explains, is that those without inner cleanness will not. The reason is that God drives out all filth from His heart (31) and cannot abide any “burre”—a word the *Middle English Dictionary* defines as “an armed assault” or “a blow or stroke”—that strikes not only “His body” but even anywhere near (“neȝe”) it (32). Though the poet appears to have shifted to a broader audience
for this warning, with the generalized pronoun “he” (29), the image of God’s heart and body enduring an attack from the mere proximity of uncleanness, particularly from “handez vnwaschen” (34), recalls the “prestez” from the beginning of the passage (8), who “hondel” God’s “aune body” (11). These priests who defile the Eucharist with their figuratively dirty hands and earn God’s “greme” thus receive a specific punishment—they will not see the “syȝt” they “seche” (28), of God in His heavenly court.

It is important to note at this point that the word “prestez,” by the mid-14th century, could refer not only to parish priests, but to any cleric of any rank with the authority to administer sacraments, including monks and friars. The MED, in its first definition for “prest,” dating back to the earliest Middle English of the 12th century, describes a specific office: “A cleric ranking below a bishop and above a deacon; a priest functioning as a parish priest, chaplain, chantry priest, etc.” The next definition, which dates back almost as far (ca. 1160) and forward to the early 16th century, indicates that the term may also be used “in combination with other religious types, ranks, and orders.” A further definition, whose first citation comes from Laȝamon’s Brut (ca. 1275) and includes several citations from 14th- and 15th-century Wycliffite tracts, gives the term a much broader range: “In a more general sense: any officeholder in the Church.” These can include men of higher rank than a parish priest, including bishops, cardinals, and even the Pope himself, whom the MED points out is frequently referred to in Wycliffite tracts as “the priest of Rome.”

The actions of reading, singing, and handling God’s body in the sacrament of the altar appear to suggest the poet has primarily parish priests in mind. The stock phrase “reden and syngen” (or “syngen and reden”) is, according to the MED, a “meaningless rime tag” that means simply “to read aloud or chant during a church service,” and more specifically to celebrate a
Mass. But while cloistered monks and high-ranking ecclesiastics such as bishops and popes were unlikely to lead public worship services or administer the sacrament to laymen as regularly as parish priests did, the friars could and often did. In fact, as noted in the previous chapter, it was this competition with secular priests for tithes in exchange for administering sacraments that was the source of much of the vitriol that passed between the two groups. A few lines after this description, the poet warns the reader not to approach God either with torn clothes (“haterez totorne”), unwashed hands (“handez vnwaschen”), or a beggar’s hood (“harlatez hod”) (33-34). This final image is reminiscent of a friar’s hood, and the image of a wandering beggar may be pointed, in part, at the wandering friars whose voluntary poverty and alms-begging aroused such animated critique in this period. The overall depiction, in fact, appears similar to Gower’s hypocritical friars, cited above, who “clotheth richesse ... Under the simplesce of poverte” and wear “wyde furred hodes” (CA 612-13, 627). The MED confirms a connection between the “harlataz hod” and begging friars by giving the second definition of “hod” as “The hood of a priest or member of a religious order.” Of the fourteen citations for this definition that follow, six refer specifically to monks or friars—for example, Chaucer in The Romaunt of the Rose refers to mendicants as “beggers with these hodes wide, / With sleighe [sly] and pale faces lene, / And greye clothis not full clene” (7254-56). More than half of all the MED citations are similarly insulting toward various types of clerics, and include the quotation from Gower as well as the General Prologue of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, describing the Monk. The men whom “prestez arn called,” in other words, may include those who are called by other names as well.

The word “prest” occurs several times throughout the Gawain-poet’s works, and in most cases it refers literally to a Christian priest, an unspecified and nameless official who administers sacraments. For example, the Dreamer in Pearl sees Christ “in the forme of bred and wyn” as
they are administered by “the preste” in the poem’s closing lines (1209-10). In the transitional section of *Cleanness* that links the destruction of Sodom with Belshazzar’s feast, the poet briefly summarizes the life of Christ, then uses the image of a sullied pearl to describe a man “sulped in sawle” (1130); the solution to this problem, the poet says, is to “polyce [polish] hym at the prest, by penaunce taken” (1131). And Gawain, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, confesses and is “schrof” and “asoyled” by “a prest” before riding to meet what he thinks will be his death (1876-84). In these cases, the priest functions simply as an officer of the church, whose presence is required for sacramental efficacy—clearly the poet does not take a radical anti-sacerdotal position in any of these poems.

The poet also gives the title of priest to the pagan religious leaders of Nineveh (*Patience* 389) and to the Jewish religious authorities in his biblical stories, though neither of these are ever shown performing religious rituals. Among the atrocities of the Babylonian military captain Nebuzaradan in *Cleanness* are that Israelite “prestes and prelates” are “presed to dethe” (1249), with an alliterative and homophonic pun on the verb “presed.” The priests meet this fate along with women and children, with whom they are linked in their defenselessness—the poet lingers, in fact, on a bloody slaughter that takes place in the Temple of Jerusalem, in which “prestes,” “dekenes,” “clerkkes,” and “alle the maydenes of the munster” are together put to the sword (1264-68). As in the biblical sources he is drawing from (2 Chronicles 36:15-19 and Jeremiah 52:12-19), however, the poet does not express a sense of injustice at the deaths of these priests and Temple worshippers—they are merely the victims of God’s justifiable wrath against the sins of all Israel. In the end, it is not this slaughter which causes God to curse King Nebuchadnezzar, but rather a personal blasphemous boast (1657-68), and Babylon falls not because priests have
been murdered or the Temple plundered, but rather because the sacred vessels from the Temple are defiled at Belshazzar’s feast a generation later.

The linguistic and thematic connections the poet draws here between the priests of 14th-century England and the priests of ancient Israel—connections that begin but do not end with the word “prestez”—are similar to those advanced by Wyclif and other anticlerical critics of the period. These connections assume first that the role of contemporary Christian and ancient Jewish priests are essentially similar. Both serve as representatives of the people to God, intercessors, and administrators of God’s power to cleanse sin in the form of a sacrificial feast (Jewish Tabernacle/Temple sacrifices or the Christian Eucharist). Thus when the people become spiritually unclean and provoke God’s wrath, priests bear the brunt for their negligence in performing these rituals. In *Cleanness* (as in the biblical source), the priests and Temple worshippers are slaughtered en masse, while the rest of the nation is either taken into exile, “brothely [wretchedly] broȝt to Babyloyn” (1256), or left behind to farm and tend vineyards. By linking the two and demonstrating their similarities, the poet offers a warning to contemporary priests whom he sees in similar danger of provoking God’s wrath through their spiritual filth. This rhetorical strategy is reminiscent of many similar devices in 14th-century anticlerical literature, such as the Wycliffite sermons’ comparisons of Christian priests and friars to the Israelite idolators of Exodus, or Wyclif’s contention, in *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, that the critiques leveled against Jewish priests by Moses, Paul, and God in the Bible are applicable to modern-day Christian bishops.13

Though it has no etymological connection to the noun, “prest” is also an identical-sounding verb, the preterite or past-participle form of “pressen,” which has a variety of meanings similar to the modern English “pressed.” The *Gawain*-poet uses this verb twice in *Cleanness*—
in the phrase “presed to dethe” (1249), quoted above, and in the Parable of the Wedding Feast. In this introductory parable, the lord approaches a guest who is dressed inappropriately in dirty and torn clothing and accuses him of showing disrespect:

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

In this context, “prest” means either eager and zealous, or perhaps rushed or hurried, equivalent to the modern English “pressed for time.”

The lord accuses the man of miserliness and either haste or simply over-eagerness in his preparations, as well as foolishness for thinking the host would praise such poor clothing. But the word “prest” in conjunction with the phrase “aproche my presens” (147) also provides a verbal echo to the “prestez” who “aprochen to Hys presens” in the introduction, where the same three words make up an alliterative line (8). The guest thus stands accused of the same crime as the priests who have “sulped” God’s “gere” (a word that means both Eucharistic vessels and priestly vestments)—he has approached the presence of his lord, the allegorical figure of God, in clothing that has been figuratively “fyled” (136) with the filth of sin. As Ad Putter puts it in his reading of these lines, “This alternative sense of ‘priest’ is called up so that we signal its exclusion. ... the ‘prest’ guest stands accused for not being priestly: he has no respect for the holy, he is ‘prest’ in the wrong sense of the word” (Introduction 230).

The poet uses the same word in adverbial form when he describes Abraham and Sarah’s meal preparations for their three angelic visitors, though in this case their haste carries no negative connotations—Abraham instructs his wife “Prestly at this ilke poynte sum polment [soup] to make” (628). As with the previous citation, the word’s primary meaning indicates simply that
Abraham wants to prepare the food quickly. Again, however, the overall context of the scene prompts us to view Abraham as “priestly” in the religious sense of the term as well, as he prepares a fattened calf (629) and “therue [unleavened] kakez” of bread (635) for his guests, reminiscent of both Jewish and Christian sacrificial feasts. When he serves the meal, the poet writes that he “Mynystred mete byfore tho Men that myȝtes al weldez” (644), using a verb, “mynystred,” that can denote both the serving of food and the administration of sacraments.\(^\text{15}\)

God Himself is similarly referred to in *Pearl* as a “mynyster mete” (1063), in the Dreamer’s vision of the heavenly city, where neither church nor priest is necessary for direct communion with God.\(^\text{16}\) In *Cleanness*’s depiction of the ancient world, though God directly intervenes in humankind’s affairs, some form of intercession is nevertheless necessary, and so Abraham serves as the minister, interacting with God’s representatives on behalf of other people. To further emphasize his priestly role, when Abraham administers the food to the angels, he does so “with armez vp-folden” (643), a gesture of raising or extending the arms that recalls a priest’s elevation of the Host.\(^\text{17}\)

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

The word “freke” throughout both *Cleanness* and *Patience* shows no particular pattern to its usage when it appears in isolation.\(^\text{18}\) For instance, in *Cleanness*’s opening Parable of the Wedding Feast (51-160), the term is used to describe both the “wayferande frekez” who are invited to the lord’s feast (79), as well as the lord himself as he confronts the poorly dressed man
At the end of the parable, as the poet explains the story’s allegorical meaning, he refers to a generalized everyman who “forfete[s] his blysse” through sin as a “freke” as well (177).

Various forms of “freke” are used nineteen times in these two poems, to describe not only priests and parable characters, but also Adam (236, 245), people in the time of the Deluge (282), Noah and his three sons (540), the three angels who visit Adam (621), the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (725), Lot (897), the angels who destroy Sodom (919), Nebuchadnezzar (1219), the people of Babylon (1780), Belshazzar (1798), and Jonah (Patience 187, 483). In addition, the term can be used to describe people in general, for the purposes of illustration or comparison (Cleanness 177, 593, 1680; Patience 181).

What is more illuminating than simply looking at these repetitions of the word “freke” is to focus on those instances in which the word “freke” is paired with “fylthe.” In addition to line 6, this alliterative combination occurs on the same line at only one other moment in the poem, where it describes the Babylonian king Belshazzar. What enrages God most about Belshazzar’s blasphemous feast, the poet informs us, is “the fylthe of the freke that defowled hade / The ornements of Goddez hous that holy were maked” (1798-99). We will return to this scene to draw out a fuller comparison between Belshazzar and 14th-century priests, but note here simply the connection the poet draws between them not only in his choice of alliterative words but in the parallel image of a man defiling sacred objects as a result of his inward uncleanness.

The words “freke” and “fylthe” also occur in relatively close proximity at one other moment in the text, in the story of Adam’s fall from grace. The poet introduces the story by describing original sin as “the faut of a freke that faled in trawthe” (236). More than simply a breach of courtly honor (“trawthe”), however, Adam’s fault is one of uncleanness through physical contact, since God’s prohibition is on “the fryt that the freke touched” (245). The fruit
itself is a form of filth, and by touching it Adam sullies not only his own clean hands, but through them all of humanity. The fruit becomes “an apple / That enpoysened alle peplez” (241-42), and this poison touch leads directly to the “fylthe upon folde that the folk vsed” in the time of Noah (251). Again, the poet draws a thematic connection between contemporary priests and a biblical example of spiritual filth and defilement, both through parallel words and parallel images; the priests who “hondel” God’s body and defile it with dirty hands (11) are like their predecessor Adam, who “touched” the fruit (245) and defiled all of innocent humanity.

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

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

With this connotation of higher rank in mind, the poet’s use of “renke” throughout the remainder of *Cleanness* is perhaps predictable. The term appears in the plural only twice more, to describe the leaders of Sodom who react confusedly to the storm of burning sulphur that destroys their city (969), and to the noblemen of Babylon who run to catch wine in the sacred vessels of the Israelites (1514), and who are later slain in their sleep (1785). Neither of these groups of men are “renkez of relygioun” specifically, but they both suffer God’s “greme” (16), the wrathful fate promised to the unclean priests of the introduction, for the sake of their inward filth. The poet uses “renke” twice in the singular form as well, to describe Abraham (766) and Lot (786). In both cases, the context of the poet’s usage is a moment when the patriarchs are engaged in activities that could be considered priestly—as Abraham makes an intercessory plea for God to spare the people of Sodom for the sake of any righteous men who may live there, and as Lot greets and shows hospitality to the two angelic visitors who have come to judge the city. More specifically, Lot is leaning in the door of “a loge” (784), a word which probably refers to the city’s walls or fortifications, but also possibly a temple. In either case, his role in Sodom
appears to be one of guardianship, protection, and most importantly intercession—between the city and the outside world, and in this case between the city and God. The context also emphasizes his wealth and high rank—the “loge” and its gates are lavishly arrayed, as “ryal and rych” as “the renkes seluen” (786). Abraham and Lot truly are “renkez of relygioun”—as entertainers of angelic visitors, as men who speak more or less directly to God, and as representatives of people whom they view as under their spiritual protection. Unlike the other leaders of Sodom, or the nobles of Babylon, however, they are not defiled by inward filth and do not incur God’s wrath. To the extent that they are connected to the priests of the introduction with whom they share a title, it is as positive exemplars to the latters’ cautionary example.

The “freke that in fylthe folȝes Hym after” and the “renkez of relygioun” that “prestez arn called” are thus connected thematically to a number of significant figures throughout the poem, both positive and negative. In order as they appear in the poem, these include: the men invited to the Wedding Feast, Adam, Abraham, Lot, the priests of Babylon, and Belshazzar. Only one major character, Noah, is missing from the list thus far. Noah is never referred to literally as a “preste,” a “freke,” or a “renke,” but he nevertheless performs several priest-like actions, which we will explore further, along with the rest of these characters.

The argument that the Gawain-poet intends the critique of priests in the opening lines of Cleanness to serve as a guide for understanding the rest of the characters in the poem is one that has been advanced cursorily by a number of scholars, usually on their way to discussing other unrelated aspects of the poem, but until now it has been fully worked out only once, by Francis Ingledew in a 1992 Viator article entitled “Liturgy, Prophecy, and Belshazzar’s Babylon: Discourse and Meaning in Cleanness.” Another writer who views the opening scene as a lens through which to read the entire poem, though he does not actually conduct such a reading, is
John Gardner, in his 1965 edition of *The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet*. After analyzing the scene of Belshazzar’s feast, he concludes, “And so the poem comes full circle—as the poems of the *Gawain*-poet invariably do: Belshazzar is a type of the false priest mentioned in the opening lines. As a temporal king he represents discourteous secular as well as discourteous ecclesiastical power” (68). Charlotte Morse expands on Gardner’s claim by saying that both the Wedding Feast and Belshazzar’s feast “echo the opening exemplum of the good and evil priests who celebrate Mass at God’s altar ... The poet develops the contrast between good and evil priests through the two banquets, making the wedding guests types of the good priests and Belshazzar a type of the evil priests” (“Image” 203-04). Brian Stone, in his 1988 translation of *Cleanness*, which makes frequent but not often approving reference to Gardner’s work, sees the figure of the priest appearing as a “powerful surrogate” for God “at every stage in the poem at which God’s covenant with man is re-affirmed” (73). Stone’s view of this priestly surrogate, however, is wholly positive:

> His power is to conduct courteous ceremonies, at which the word of God is heard and interpreted for the benefit of Man. He is there when the Flood subsides, as Noah ... He is there as Abraham, feasting the God who is to promise his seed a mighty inheritance; he is there as Lot, presiding over the sacramental meal which ensures his survival and is a prelude to the destruction of the cities of the sodomites. And he is there in the spirit of the dead Solomon, whose piety and industry made the incomparably clean vessels of the Temple ... And he is there lastly as Daniel, to tell the last story of God’s vengeance and forgiveness. (73)
Stone’s summary of priestly main characters in the poem is useful, but he pointedly ignores all of the negative examples, such as Adam, Belshazzar, and the Babylonian sages, who appear equally priest-like in their actions, nor does he mention here the poet’s explicit critique of Christian priests in the opening lines. In fact, in his footnote on *Cleanness* 5-16, in which unclean priests defile the Eucharist, Stone observes merely that “This is the only attack on corrupt churchmen in the whole work of the ‘Pearl’ poet” (77, n.2). In much the same way, Anna Baldwin argues that “The shadow of the Mass lies behind every *exemplum*” in *Cleanness* (138), in a primarily positive way, though unlike Stone, she includes the opening critique and the threat of sacramental defilement in her discussion. Lynn Staley also draws a connection between the introduction and two of the poem’s main characters: “Along with the opening lines, which focus upon an impure clergy, and the portraits of both Noah and Abraham as pure figures of sacerdotal efficacy, the poem appears to castigate uncleam sacramental practices and to offer examples of proper worship” (14).

But for the most part, contemporary readers have tended to see something other than an anticlerical critique operating throughout the poem at large, even as they have argued that the overarching theme they perceive appears in the opening lines. J.J. Anderson, for example, claims that the poem’s primary concern is hypocrisy, illustrated through stark visual contrasts of cleanness and its opposite:

The leading idea of the [opening] passage is the leading idea of the poem. Not only is it worked out in the narratives, but it is repeated again and again throughout the poem in explicit, often flatly oppositional statements which reiterate the language and imagery of the opening passage ... There is a sense in which the poem never
goes beyond its opening proposition. At the same time the proposition gathers force, from the narratives and the discussions, with each reiteration. (“Rhetorical Strategies” 10-11)

Allen Frantzen, on the other hand, though he indicates that the clergy’s “authority dominates this stern and unyielding poem” (462), focuses most of his attention on the poem’s “touch” motif, which he says the opening description of the priests’ hands introduces. The term “gropen,” which is used of God and Jesus in lines 591 and 1102, “is also used elsewhere in Middle English penitential literature to describe pastoral duties of hearing confession, examining, and interrogating ... God’s groping recalls the poem’s introductory emphasis on priests who ‘hondel’ Christ’s own body and his ‘gere’ ‘utensils’ and who handle sins in confession; it also anticipates the healing touch of God” (453). In a similar way, Jeremy Citrome sees a “surgical metaphor” running throughout the poem, which begins with the image of the priests operating on God’s body with their hands:

... not only are we handled by a “gropande” God [591], but we, too, “groe” His body. The grace of Incarnation brings with it certain responsibilities, and the anxiety that Christ’s literal body in the form of the Host might be misused surfaces in much penitential literature. The poem thus is strewn with both negative and positive examples of hands and handling: the protagonists make proper use of their hands, the antagonists improper. (272)

Amity Reading argues most recently, in 2009, that the opening image of a defiled Eucharist introduces the theme, not of priestly corruption, but of ritual feasting:

The poem’s major narratives all explicitly draw on the spiritual
component involved in the preparation and consumption of the feast, including the initial act of sacrifice, and the reception of each is framed in the context of an interaction with the divine. ... The invocation of this particular sacrament within the poem’s opening lines, especially in the context of the importance of proper (clean) observance of the sacrificial ritual, sets the tone for the narratives that follow. (274, 279)

In a sense, these latter critics view the opening priestly imagery as deeply significant, a key to understanding the poem as a whole, but they attempt to fit it into a larger, more generalized theme (hypocrisy, touch, the Eucharist, feasting, etc.), rather than viewing it as a specific and straightforward announcement of the poet’s central concern—corruption of the contemporary priesthood and the risk of that corruption incurring God’s wrath.

Ingledew’s persuasive argument on this score begins with the observation that the opening lines of *Cleanness* fit into a familiar tradition, summarized in Chapter 2—the attempts by a multitude of writers in 14th-century England “to respond aggressively to the condition of the contemporary priesthood” (247). Though many critics, including some of those quoted above, have understood “the poem’s vocabulary of cleanness ... in terms of the general moral vocabulary of medieval Christianity,” Ingledew argues instead “that it proceeds unequivocally from the liturgical discourse of ordination and the eucharist, and that its use signals the poem’s concern with the priesthood” (247). Though the opening lines represent for many contemporary readers “a more or less casual moment in the poem’s introductory maneuvers, this passage is actually only the most explicit expression of a thematics of the priesthood that pervades the first thirty-four lines and imposes a liturgical significance on the poem’s major motifs” (248).
Ingledew observes, for example, that line 12, “If thay [priests] in clannes be clos thay cleche gret mede,” is echoed in one of the epistle readings for ordination rites, 1 Timothy 3:13: “Qui bene ministraverint, gradum bonum sibi acquirent” (qtd. in Ingledew 249)—in the Wycliffite LV translation, “For thei that mynystren wel schulen gete a good degre to hem silf.” And the poet’s shift in focus to the impeccably clean “angelez,” Ingledew says, demonstrates his continuing fidelity to “the controlling liturgical discourse. The angelic presence at the consecration was a matter of traditional emphasis” (251). The poet’s further shift into Old Testament exempla in the main body of the poem is a similarly traditional move, given that the concept of ritual cleanness is “embedded in the Levitical texts which, for the patristic writers, prefigured the Christian priesthood. More specifically, Leviticus’s detailed prescriptions for sacrificial ritual prefigured the eucharist, and the vocabulary of cleanness established itself especially in relation to the eucharist” (250). Ingledew moves forward through the rest of the poem, reading each of its central events through the lens of 14th-century priesthood. The guests at the Wedding Feast are clerical figures, whose clean or soiled clothes represent priestly vestments (252); the emphasis on sexual sins in the Deluge and Sodom scenes are directed at priests who commit similar transgressions, since “a complex associating these with the priest’s handling of the eucharist was a traditional commonplace that continued to be employed in contemporary attacks on the priesthood” (253); Lot’s wife, who contaminates the Eucharist-like bread she serves to the angels by adding yeast, establishes her as a “figure of such priests” as those who appear in the opening lines (255); the interlude which describes the life of Jesus “recalls priests to their proper exemplar in the one clean Priest, Christ” (257); and Belshazzar’s feast, with its lengthy description of the holy articles that are defiled, is a “parodic eucharist” (260) and “a black mass” (259). In fact, the final scene’s reference to “Satanas the blake” (1449)
is a reminder that 14th-century criticism “of the corrupt priest insists on his allegiance to the
devil. ... that is, it constructs an analogy between the fall of the angel and the fall of the apostate
priest,” an observation for which Ingledew cites, among others, Wyclif’s *De Ecclesia* and
Wycliffite sermons which make repeated reference to the “synagogue of Satan” (259, n.51).

The purpose of citing Ingledew at length here is not to demonstrate that he makes exactly
the same arguments as the present study—though many of his observations will be noted in later
discussion. His primary focus is ultimately on Belshazzar’s feast and “the conventions of
eschatological and post-Joachimist prophetic discourses” against the papacy it echoes (248),
texts which will not be addressed here. But Ingledew lays a useful foundation for a more
extensive look at the variety of characters in *Cleanness* who serve as negative or positive
examples of priestly attitudes and conduct. The first of these characters are a group of men and
women who actually serve as both—the well- and poorly-dressed wedding guests in Matthew’s
allegorical parable.

2. From Wedding Feast to Belshazzar’s Feast: Priestly Role Models and Cautionary Tales

As mentioned above, the only example the poet provides, besides priests, of a
contemporary individual incurring God’s wrath for uncleanness is the “ladde” (36) who attends a
lordly banquet in ragged clothing, whose description immediately follows those of the priests
and angels. Each piece of the lad’s wildly inappropriate attire is catalogued with humorous
detail: “Then the harlot with haste helded to the table, / With rent cokrez [leggings] at the kne
and his clutte [patched] traschez [rags], / And his tabarde [smock] totorne, and his totez [toes]
oute” (39-41). With this lad, the poet translates the relatively abstract concepts of sacramental
defilement by priests and God’s rage from the spotlessly clean heights of Heaven into a more
tangible, visual language. The poet has already used the terms “totorne” (33) and “harlatez hod” (34) to describe in figurative terms the spiritual filth that no one should dare bring into God’s presence. Now, rather than issuing another moral directive, the poet asks a seemingly offhand, common-sense rhetorical question, which has the effect of fixing these figurative terms more firmly in literal reality. What high-ranking lord or knight (“vrthly hathel”), the poet asks, “Wolde lyke if a ladde com lytherly [wretchedly] attyred” (36) to his feast? The poet answers his own question by imagining for readers exactly what would happen in such a case—the lad would be “Hurled to the halle dore and harde theroute schowued,” with “blame ful bygge,” and perhaps “a boffet” (43-44). After this insult, he would be forbidden to return, “On payne of enprysonment and puttyng in stokkez” (46).

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

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

The Parable of the Wedding Feast itself provides a further picture of the type of sinners whom the poet suggests make God particularly angry. The first is those who do not respond to His initial call, represented by the “renkez that me renayed habbe” (105) in the first round of invited guests. All of these invitees make believable excuses, which allow them to escape what seems a painful duty: “Alle excused hem by the skyly [excuse] he scape by moȝt” (62). The
first neighbor invited has “boȝt hym a borȝ” (63), purchased an estate, and must excuse himself in order “the toun to byholde” (64). He does not say he has actual business to attend to in this town—he simply wants to “behold” his possession. The second has a similar excuse: he has “ȝerned and ȝat”—yearned for, and then got—a team of “oxen” (66). Like the first man, he has no pressing business with these animals; he simply wants to “see hem pulle in the plow” (68).

These first two excuses represent extreme examples of the corruption material possessions can bring to their owners, who yearn for them inordinately and prefer the mere sight of material wealth over the physical presence of God. They are also notable extensions of the biblical text, in which the invited men simply depart, “oon in to his toun, anothir to his marchaundise” (Matt. 22:5). This type of critique obviously does not have to be limited to priests, but it parallels, in its depiction of the excessive absurdities and distractions of wealth—in particular, its distraction away from God’s presence in the sacrament—the imagery of critics such as FitzRalph and Wyclif, and satirists such as Langland, in their arguments for clerical dispossession. The third invitee says he has “wedded a wyf” (69), as he does in Luke 14:20 (though not in the Matthew text the poet says he is reading in line 51), but he offers no explanation for why this would prevent him from attending the feast. The poet may be expressing the relatively commonplace idea that marriage causes people to shirk spiritual duties—a warning that would not seem relevant to celibate priests—but he may also be thinking allegorically, as this invited man must attend his own wedding feast, a worldly banquet in contrast to the heavenly banquet of the Eucharist. In any case, the seemingly innocent excuses of those who reject the invitation ultimately stir up God’s wrath more, the poet says, than the willful sin of pagans who do not know Him. In his rage, the lord says of this first group of invited guests, “More to wyte [blameworthy] is her wrange then any wylle gentyl [Gentile error]” (76). Coupled with the
lord’s similarly outraged and outsized response against the ill-dressed man, whose error is punished much “harder” (50) than it would be in the real world, this statement provides the sense that those whom God calls to spiritual cleanness, and those who accept the invitation, are held to a higher standard than the “gentyls” who are not. The lord wants to bring guests inside “so that my hous may holly by halȝez [corners] by fylled” (104). The house will be filled “holly,” or wholly, with an echo on the word “holy” (spelled the same way in the MED), as well as a possible pun on “halȝez,” hallowed objects or saints. The people who enter the master’s house both fill it completely and consecrate it, making it holy, a new class of perfectly clean priesthood to replace those lured away by the temptations of the world.

As with the example of those who are distracted by wealth, the people who are called to this higher standard may include more than just literal members of the clergy—a fact the poet makes explicit at the parable’s conclusion, when he says that “alle arn lathed [invited] luflyly, the luther and the better / That euer wern fulȝed in font” (163-64). The concept as expressed by the poet has other biblical echoes, including Christ’s statement, “For to eche man to whom myche is ȝouen, myche schal be axid of hym” (Luke 12:148), but also the warning the Apostle James gives specifically to would-be leaders in the church, whom he says will be judged more strictly: “Mi britheren, nyle ye be maad many maistris, witynge that ye taken the more doom” (James 3:1). The ill-dressed man of the parable is held to the highest standard of all—unlike the ungrateful “renkez,” he accepts the lord’s invitation, and he follows the lord’s instructions to “be myry” (130) at the feast. But despite his outward seeming faithfulness, the man’s filthy clothes represent a great fault—the lord accuses him of not being “honestly arayed” (134); rather, he is “vnthryuandely clothed” (135) in garments that are “fyled with werkkez” (135). In his unthinking haste, the man “watz so prest to aproche my presens hereinne” (147) that he did not
dress or clean himself properly, in a verbal echo that recalls the priests of the introduction. Anna Baldwin, in her argument for reading sacramental imagery as the thread that ties *Cleanness*’s exempla together, provides another reason for seeing a connection between the ill-dressed man and men of religion. The use of dirty clothes as a metaphor for sin, she says, is a warning “particularly applicable to priests, whose vestments were frequently allegorized in this way in clerical handbooks,” including works by Hugh of St. Victor and Durandus, as well as the *Speculum Christiani* (132). Lynn Staley’s study of the “man in foul clothes” figure throughout several 14th-century texts reaches a similar conclusion:

... by the fourteenth century, the man is more than a figure for impurity; he has become a figure who can be used to interrogate the institutional church. Possibly his relevance to the state of the church also came by way of Chrysostom, who in his treatise *On the Priesthood* warned against allowing one arrayed in filthy garments to be admitted into the sacred mysteries, where he will handle God’s body. (1-2)

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

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

After his retelling and brief explication of the parable, the poet provides a list of sins which he says may prevent a soul from remaining “ful clene” (175) and cause a “freke [to] forfete his blysse” (177). The list sounds strikingly similar to the lists of priestly wrongdoing detailed in Chapter 2, but this similarity is mostly incidental, since the poet follows the traditional outline of the Seven Deadly Sins. The warning appears equally applicable to any reader, clerical or otherwise, against “slauthe” (178), “priyde” (179), “couetyse” (181), “mensclaȝt [manslaughter] and to much drynk” (182), “thefte and ... robborye” (183-84), and “marryng of maryagez” (186), among others. Staley notes that the list as a whole is one “to which any knave might aspire, but it is mainly a list of crimes of the privileged”—for example,
“tyrauntyré” (187) and “fayned lawez” (188)—and she includes priests within this class of
privileged sinners (Staley 9). In truth, however, only one of the crimes, listed under the category
of theft, “dysheriete [disinheriting] and depreye dowrie of wydoez” (185), describes an injustice
that monastic orders were uniquely positioned to commit, as they received endowments from
wealthy donors who might otherwise have left bequests to their families. Another sin, the
“marryng of maryagez” (186), appears to refer not only to adultery among married couples, but a
broader sense of sexual conduct that “mars” or devalues the sacrament of marriage, a claim that
could be leveled against priests, as it is for example by the Lollard sermonist mentioned in the
previous chapter, who accuses “lumps of ȝonge men, fatte and lykynge and ydyl” of becoming
priests for the express purpose of avoiding marriage, so they can “don fornycacioun and auoutrie
with wyues and nonnes” and “seyn to nyse wymmen that it is lesse synne to trespase with hem
than with other weddid men, and norischen ryche men and wymmen in lecherie and auoutrie for
mony” (Matthew, ed., 6-7)—a variety of specifically priestly actions that could all fall under the
category of “marryng of maryagez.” But for the most part, the poet’s list of spiritually unclean
sins is traditional and applicable, as Staley puts it, to “any knave.”

From this generic list, however, the poet moves directly into his tour of biblical history,
which makes up the bulk of the poem, and which contains several specific characters whose
conduct, and misconduct, mirrors the “prestez” both of the introduction and the 14th-century
anticlerical tradition at large. He begins with a description of Lucifer, who does not appear to
have any priestly attributes, but his primal rebellion is explicitly (and perhaps surprisingly)
excluded from the category of sins that drive God to extreme wrath:

\[\text{Is, hit watz a brem brest [terrible outrage] and a byge wrache [rage],}\]
\[\text{And ȝet wrathed not the Wyȝ; ne the wrec h saȝtled [reconciled],}\]
Ne neuer wolde, for wylfulnes, his worthy God knawe,

Ne pray Hym for no pité, so proud watz his wylle. (229-32)

Lucifer and the fallen demons are described in terms that deliberately contrast them with the priests of the introduction. They are not hypocritical, but rather openly rebellious—the angels once clothed in “fayre wedez” (217) become “fendez ful blake” (221) at the instant of their sin—and Lucifer endures God’s punishment without any promise or hope that he will ever repent or attempt to be reconciled to his maker. And God, in contrast to his “greme” against the priests and the ill-dressed man, is remarkably “wrathed not” against this “fyrste felonye” (205). Shockingly, the poet compares Satan himself in favorable terms to priests and others corrupted by uncleanness. The devil may have been “Hurled into helle-hole” (223), but God, the poet has already noted, “hates helle no more then hem that ar sowlé [soiled]” (168).

In a similar way, God’s anger against Adam’s sin and mankind’s fall is “Al in mesure and methe [moderation]” (247), in part because He plans in advance to mend the fault “with a mayden that make [match, mate] had neuer” (248)—the Virgin Mary. Despite the controlled nature of God’s wrath against Adam, however, he is signalled as a priest-like figure with several words at the outset of the Creation and Fall story. Adam, the poet says, is “ordaynt to blysse” (237), and “his place watz devised” (238) for him in Paradise for “the lenthe of a terme” (239), an unspecified length of time after which he will take the place of the fallen angels in Heaven (240). As in modern English, the verb “ordain” in Middle English means not only “to choose or appoint” in a general sense, but more specifically “to invest with holy orders” or “invest with (an ecclesiastical office),” when coupled with the preposition “to.” Adam is ordained to a position in his appointed place for a specific term, as if God were a bishop granting him a parish living for a term, at the end of which he will receive a promotion. Of course, Adam does not serve the
entirety of this term before falling into sin, and perhaps the most convincing evidence for the view that he represents a priestly figure is that he alone bears responsibility for this offense. Eve is present in the scene, of course, as one whose “eggyng” prompts Adam to “ete of an apple” (241), but her role is nearly as constricted as it could possibly be within the poet’s biblical bounds. As Elizbeth Keiser points out, the poet “makes no allusion to the idea that her transgression is symptomatic of the feminine appetite for pleasure and, indeed, assigns primary responsibility to Adam for having disobeyed in touching forbidden fruit” (70). Here is no theological discussion of the woman’s role in bringing sin into the world, no disquisition on the temptations of women or their proper submissive role in marriage. Rather, just as it is Adam alone who is ordained and set to inherit the angels’ forsaken home, so also is it Adam alone who “fayled in trawthe” (236), who is “inobedyent” (237), and who “enpoysened alle peplez” (242) through “the fryt that the freke towched” (245), a visual reminder of the earlier clerical contamination of the Eucharist, also through the mechanism of touch. Like a priest, Adam is responsible to some degree for the sins of the people over which he has spiritual authority, including Eve and his descendants. His wife appears only long enough to “egg” him, and she is no sooner mentioned than she is replaced by a much more significant female figure, the “mayden that make had neuer” (248), the Virgin for whose sake celibate priests forsake all other women. In fact, even as he moves forward to describe the world at large that has been corrupted by Adam’s sin, the poet focuses primarily on men, the “sunez” of their ancestor Adam (258), who enter the world as “the fayrest of forme and of face als, / The most and the myriest that maked wern euer, / The styfest, the stalworthest that stod euer on fete” (253-55), but whose beauty and strength becomes ever more diluted with each successive generation, until the “fylthe ... that the folk vsed” (251) covers the earth. The “ordained” man who should have been the progenitor and
leader of a race of clean angelic beings, bringing them to a heavenly inheritance and home—a priest, in other words, who should have led people to “aprochen to Hys presens ... teen vnto His temmple and temen to Hymseluen” (8-9)—instead becomes a leader who sets the human race on a downward path of corruption that can only end in God’s wrath and destruction.

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

In contrast, the other men on earth “controeued agayn kynde [nature] contraré werkez” (266). Again, the poet focuses his attention on the men of this ancient world, whose primary sin against nature’s law is “fylthe in fleschlych dedez” (265). The poet is not as specific in detailing what these deeds include as he will be in the story of Sodom’s destruction, but they are unquestionably sexual in nature. The sons of Adam “vsed hem vnthryftyly vchon on other” (267), a phrase which Michael Twomey and A.V.C. Schmidt view as a signal that “the sin of the race before the Flood ... is at least initially sodomy” (Schmidt, “Kynde Craft” 107, italics his; see also Twomey, “Cleanness” 203). Sodomy is a term defined by Thomas Aquinas and used by
many 14th-century religious writers, including Wyclif in *De Simonia*, as any “unthrifty” or non-procreative sexual practice, including masturbation, anal intercourse, and bestiality. As Allen Frantzen puts it, “sodomy encompassed diverse acts with a single common denominator: all thwarted conception” (451), and thus also violated the twice-stated biblical command to “Encreese ye, & be ye multiplied” (Gen. 1:28, 9:1). The poet does not depict God giving this command to Adam, as He does in Genesis, but renders it as “Multyplyez on this molde” (522) in God’s instructions to Noah after the Deluge, a brief reminder of the sexual actions that led to the world’s destruction. The poet is curiously opaque about the nature of these actions, but the ancient world performs them “vchon on other” (267), possibly a reference to homosexuality, assuming the poet is still describing only the “sunez” of Adam, “And als with other, wylsfully, upon a wrange wyse” (268), an apparent reference to bestiality. While it is true that “the deȝter [daughters] of the douthe [men]” (270) also participate in sexual misconduct, by copulating with “the fende” (269)—a singular term that in the next line refers to multiple demons—and begetting an evil race of “jeauntez” (272) whose crimes make God regret creating mankind, these women vanish at the same moment they appear. As with Eve, the poet avoids what seems an obvious opportunity to discourse on the particular vices or temptations of women and keeps his relentless focus on the men. The sons of Adam are the ones who “So ferly fowled her flesch” (269) and somehow cause the demons to look upon their daughters—perhaps the obscure logical connection lies in the fact that the human men do not appear to be sleeping with human women at all by line 269. In any case, the responsibility even for sexual activity in which they take no part falls upon those men who create the moral conditions that allow it. Schmidt observes that the poet “has here changed the order of events in his Biblical source ... What is striking is how he makes mankind’s prior wickedness, specifically sexual sin, the reason why the fiends are
attracted to the women” ("Kynde Craft" 111). And once the giants are born, their mothers are forgotten, and the perverse progeny stand alone as “men methlez and maȝty on vrthe” (273, italics added) who love violence and are renowned for their unspecified “lodlych laykez [loathsome practices]” (274). We will explore more thoroughly the connections between sodomy and the poet’s anticlerical critique in our discussion of Sodom’s destruction, where the citizens’ sexual conduct is described more tangibly; it is enough at this point simply to note Ingledew’s speculation that the poet’s emphasis on homosexuality and bestiality in the context of priestly misconduct “may not be entirely metaphorical” (253).

Though there is no hope for most of the corrupted human race in the Deluge, Noah serves as an exemplary priest for the group of people who is saved—namely, his own family, and through them the future generations on the earth. The Ark which holds them is traditionally associated with the church, as well as with ornamental conveyances for religious objects such as relics, an association the poet emphasizes by twice referring to the ship as a “cofer” (310, 339), glossed by Andrew and Waldron as “coffer, chest, jewel-box,” and as it floats on the water, the Ark rises up to the heavens, recalling the Host’s elevation in the sacrament: “The arc houen [raised] watz on hyȝe with hurlande gotez [rushing currents], / Kest to kythez vncouthe [countries unknown] the clowdez ful nere” (413-14). The poet thus adds the Eucharist to the already traditional association of the Flood with baptism, both of these metaphorical sacraments being administered by nature itself. Baldwin’s sacrament-focused reading sees yet another one present in this scene, as the poet links God’s wrath in the Flood to “the misuse of one sacrament—marriage—and as an antitype of another—baptism” (135). The Ark is also described as “a mancioun” (309), a word the Vulgate Bible uses for both the tents that housed Moses and the ancient Israelites in the desert and the heavenly dwellings Jesus promises his
disciples in John 14:2.\textsuperscript{27} The sense that these descriptive words in *Cleanness* provides is that Noah has constructed and captains a vessel that carries items consecrated to God’s service, the surviving remnant of people and animals, which he is responsible for preserving. The “lodezmon” (424), or pilot of this craft, the poet reminds us, is God Himself, but it is also in a sense Noah, who built the “cofer ... of tres, clanlych planed” (310)—even his carpentry was clean, and it is his continuing cleanness, his avoidance of the contamination of filth that destroyed the rest of the world, which ensures this consecrated ship’s safety. His rejection of the unclean raven who “fyllez his wombe” with “the foule flesch” of dead bodies (462) in favor of the clean dove as his chosen messenger gives a final emphasis to this sense of Noah as a superlatively clean representative of humanity.

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

> Bot Noe of vche honest kynde nem [selected] out an odde,
> And heuened [raised] vp an auter and halȝed hit f ayre,
> And sette a sakerfyse theron of vch a ser kynde
> That watz comly and clene: God kepez non other.
> When bremly [brightly] brened those bestez, and the brethe rysed,
> The sauour of his sacrafyse soȝt to Hym euen
> That al spedez and spyllez; He spekes with that ilke
> In comly comfort ful clos and cortays wordez:
> “Now, Noe, no more nel I neuer wary [condemn]
>Alle the mukel mayny on molde for no mannez synnez ...” (505-14)
Noah continues the spotlessly clean conduct for which God and the poet commended him at the beginning of the story, by offering an “honest,” “comly and clene” sacrifice that he “heuened ... and halȝed” himself, just as the Ark was “houen” (413) by the waves and consecrated to God’s service. And God responds in kind—in exchange for the “comly” (beautiful or proper) sacrifice, God speaks to Noah in “comly comfort ful clos,” as if he were a close friend, and with “cortays wordez,” a reminder that Noah is not one of the counterfeiting priests who “cortaysye wont” (13). His cleanness in offering the sacrifice at the altar leads directly and immediately to the “gret mede” promised from God to clean priests (12), including an unasked-for blessing: God promises never again to destroy all the earth for the sake of mankind’s sin. Though he has spoken no words of prayer, at least none that are recorded in the poem or its biblical source, the “sauour of his sacrafyse” alone is enough to extract a promise from God to mitigate His wrath—the same promise for which Abraham will have to plead at length in lines 713-76. In his cleanness, Noah plays the priestly role of intercessor, not only between God and the seven other people remaining on earth, but between God and all successive generations of humanity. He is, in a sense, the priest that God intended Adam to be, cleansing and blessing the people who come after him rather than contaminating them, as both their physical and spiritual progenitor. The poet’s omission of the subsequent biblical story of Noah’s drunkenness and cursing of his sons (Gen. 9:20-27) only underlines his role as a perfectly clean exemplar and counterpoint to Adam. So too his decision to exclude almost entirely Noah’s wife, who appears in 14th-century mystery plays as a comically shrewish woman who beats her husband.28

The remainder of God’s speech, which includes commands to “Multyplyez on this molde” (522) and till the soil, ends with the imperative for Noah to “rengnez ȝe therinne” (527), to reign over all the earth. The man who once ruled only himself in a masterless world is now
the master, and the “fowre frekez,” Noah and his sons, “of the folde fongez the empyre [take
imperial control]” (540). Noah possesses temporal and spiritual authority over literally every
living person in the world, a position which writers on the anticlerical side of 14th-century
dominion controversies repeatedly argued the church and its leaders should never hold—a
position which, in truth, provoked anxiety even when imagined theoretically. The poet is
careful, however, not to allow Noah’s powerful claim over the world to translate into any
contemporary context. He has already been at pains to establish the patriarch’s unique level of
worthiness and cleanliness, and now, immediately after describing Noah’s king-like authority, he
delivers a harsh warning to anyone who might wish to emulate him:

Forthy war [beware] the now, wyȝe that worschyp desyres
In His comlych courte that Kyng is of blysse,
In the fylthe of the flesch that thou be founden neuer,
Tyl any water in the worlde to wasche the fayly [in vain].
For is no segge vnder sunne so seme [seemly] of his craftez,
If he be sulped in synne, that syttez vnclene;
On spec of a spote may spede [cause] to mysse
Of the syȝte of the Souerayn that syttez so hyȝe. (545-52)
The poet warns that those who desire “worschyp”—either to receive praise and honor for
themselves or to praise and honor God—cannot indulge in even the smallest measure of fleshly
filth. No man is so skilled at “his craftez” to fool God or cause Him to ignore a “spec of a spote”
of sin. To “conterfete crafte” as the hypocritical priests attempt to do (13) is impossible, since
even a speck of filth causes the soul to “be sulped,” just as those priests “sulpen” themselves and
God (15), and this defilement causes the sinful man to “mysse” the “syȝte” of God enthroned in
Heaven, a reminder of the poet’s opening quotation of the sixth Beatitude and its negative corollary—that those whose hearts are not clean will not have “syȝt” (29) of God, who drives even the tiniest speck of filth away from His own heart (31). As the poet will restate in nearly identical language a few lines later, though He will never again destroy the earth, “The venym and the vylanye and the vycios fylthe / That bysulpez mannez saule in vnsounde hert” still provokes God to anger and brings punishment, “That he his Saueour ne see with syȝt of his yȝen” (574-76). These sinful men will miss not only the sight of Heaven but also the “worschyp” they desire, a word which in an English anticlerical context can mean divine or civil dominion—the MED entry, for example, cites a Wycliffite tract’s contention that kings should “bi worschipe of here staat constreyne here lyge freris and here othere clerkis ... to telle trewthe.” The poet does not make direct reference to the dominion controversy, but his great care in outlining a nearly impossible standard of righteousness immediately after describing a historically unique example of temporal-spiritual dominion would no doubt meet with approval from those anticlerical writers who promoted the concept of “dominion by grace,” starting with FitzRalph in De Pauperie Salvatoris (see Boreczky 43), then Wyclif in De Dominio Divino, both of whom argue that only a perfectly righteous man can assert dominion over temporal possessions, and that any sin compels him to forfeit that claim.30 Noah has reign over the entire post-diluvian world, but only as a result of his spotless righteousness, a state these writers emphatically agree does not describe the contemporary priesthood.

The dominion that Cleanness’s next priestly exemplar, Abraham, exercises appears to be significantly more constrained than Noah’s, though he too is described as a “goodmon” (611) and “swete” (640), one whom God considers a “frende” (642), and though he serves his angelic guests with all ritual propriety on a “clene clothe” (634). We have already explored several of
the ways Abraham’s actions toward his guests are priest-like, as he prepares a fattened calf and unleavened wafers, raises them as if in sacramental consecration, then “mynystre[s]” to his guests. To these observations we may add that Abraham washes their feet in a Christ-like manner (618), that he promises to “wynne [bring] Yow wyȝt of water a lyttel” (617), with a verb for carrying water that recalls both the water-wine of Christ and the wine-blood of Communion, and that the “morsel of bred” he serves is intended “to baume Your hertte” (620), as if it has properties of spiritual healing. Nevertheless, he must “biseche” (614) the three angels (a Trinity that fuses into a single God around line 669) to stay for the meal, in contrast to Noah, whom God approached with his plans for the Ark and spoke in “comly comfort ful clos” (512) without his seeming to ask. Though Abraham’s wife Sarah speedily prepares the divine meal according to her husband’s specifications, in contrast to Lot’s wife who will later complain and contaminate the bread with salt, she nevertheless fails a test of faith when the angels announce that she will bear a son at her advanced age—she temporarily becomes “Saré the madde” (654), laughing uncontrollably and then compounding the error by swearing “by hir trawthe” (667) that she did not laugh. Sarah’s failure of “trawthe” is clearly less serious than Adam’s (236), but this minor imperfection coincides with Abraham’s seemingly less intimate relationship with God than the patriarchs before him enjoyed, contributing to a general sense across these exempla that God is withdrawing Himself by degrees from mankind, from the “bliss” ordained for Adam in Eden, to the “comfort” of close friendship with Noah, and and now to a more formal master-servant relationship, in which Abraham must “beseech” an audience, then continually beg pardon as he makes requests—“Sir, with Yor leue” (715), he says, and later “tatz [find] to non ille / ȝif I mele [speak] a lyttel more that mul [dust] am and askez [ashes]” (735-36).

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

Amity Reading, attempting to discern a controlling metaphor for the poem, points out that the inclusion of Abraham’s lengthy negotiation with God is a non-sequitur if the poet’s main concern is sexual impurity and God’s wrath against it, and proposes instead the theme of sacrificial feasting, since it is Abraham’s ritual with the angels which allows him such intimacy with God: “And the meal achieves its purpose: after the successful conclusion of the feast, God once again addresses a faithful servant courteously and offers a reward for the spiritual purity signified by the ritual act” (284-85). Reading’s view has much to recommend it, but the two scenes make even better sense as a pair of exemplary actions by a model priest—Abraham performs a ritual purification with water, prepares a sacrificial meal, consecrates and administers it, then intercedes with God on behalf of the people, all functions the ideal 14th-century priest
would be expected to perform. As in the biblical source, Abraham continues his intercessory efforts, requesting mercy for progressively smaller groups of people, always with scrupulously polite and humble language, until God agrees to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if just ten righteous people are found there. For reasons unexplained in either the biblical or poetic version of the story, “thenne arest the renk and raȝt [reached] no fyrre [further]” (766). The poet does not attempt to explain why Abraham stops at ten—the actual number of righteous turns out to be four, if Lot’s family is included—but he is unwilling to let this exemplar fail at the model of priestly intercessory prayer he has depicted for the last 52 lines. So the poet gives Abraham a final plea that does not appear in the Genesis account:

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

As a conclusion to his lengthy bargaining, Abraham fixes no precise number on the “meke” people whom he thinks should be enough to win God’s “mersy”—instead, he asks for a general abatement in the harshness of the destruction, with the phrase “tempre Thyn yre,” and reminds God that his “lef brother” Lot lives in Sodom. As a singular noun, the “meke” for whom Abraham pleads refers to Lot, but it seems also to be a collective term that includes Lot’s family and any other righteous people Abraham does not know. His formal request for mercy becomes touchingly personal in this moment, and he makes an informal plea, without his customary apology, to spare his kinsman and any others he may have neglected to include in his bargaining.
The intercessory prayer which might otherwise have appeared a failure becomes a success, especially when viewed in conjunction with Abraham’s appearance after the cities’ destruction, when it is revealed that he has stayed awake all night hoping for Lot’s safety: “Abraham ful erly watz vp on the morne, / That alle naȝt much niye [anguish] hade nomen [endured] in his hert, / Al in longing for Lot leyen in a wache” (1001-03). God does not spare the cities—the formal conditions of the bargain are not met, as fewer than ten righteous people live there—but He does send a pair of angels to spare Lot, his daughters, and (at least temporarily) his wife. Abraham serves as a model, not of perfect sinlessness or freedom from doubt—Sarah’s laughter and divine rebuke preclude that interpretation—but of sacramental purity and its connection to a priest’s ability to offer effective petitions on behalf of people under his spiritual care.

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

Like Abraham, one of Lot’s priestly roles appears to be as an intermediary between the city and God. When he first appears in the poem, he is sitting before the city’s fortifications or temple (see the note on “loge,” above), apparently waiting to greet or challenge anyone who wishes to enter. But he directs his gaze inward as well as outward, inside the city, watching the men of city as they engage in some form of recreation: “As he stared into the strete ther stout men played” (787). The poet will reveal soon enough that the “japez” (864, 877) or games the Sodomites consider playful are not the “play of paramorez” (700) God says He has designed for “a male and his make” (703), but rather homosexual gang rape and sexual congress with supernatural beings, akin to the “japez ille” (272) of the demons who begat giants in Noah’s time. When the mob of men appears at his door to seize the angels, Lot “schrank at the hert” because “he knew the costoum” (850-51) of the city—he already knows, from past observation, what violent sexual game the men prefer. This fact lends special significance to the opening description of him watching Sodom’s men at “play.” At the moment he is introduced, Lot is not simply observing innocent recreation—he is watching over the city as its moral guardian, attempting to keep its citizens away from sinful activity. His most significant priestly role, the poet progressively reveals, is not administering sacraments or interceding through prayer, but rather preaching, teaching, and offering counsel. Unfortunately for the city, it is a role in which he is completely ineffective. As the men threaten to batter down his door, Lot stands before
them on his doorstep like a priest before a congregation and attempts to deliver a persuasive sermon: “Thenne he meled [spoke] to tho men mesurable wordez, / For harlotez with his hendelayk [courtesy] he hoped to chast [restrain]” (859-60). In the 12-line speech that follows, Lot offers to “kenne” (865) and “biteche” (871) them a better way of living, and though his method is dubious—he offers his daughters for the mob to “laykez [play] wyth hem as yow lyst” (872), in the hope that their female beauty will turn the men from their lust for male angels—the role he attempts to play in this moment is one of moral teacher. His “mesurable wordez” and “hendelayk” fail utterly, however, as the crowd reacts with violent resentment, giving Lot a clear statement that they have no wish to see him in a position of spiritual authority:

> “Wost thou not wel that thou wonez [came] here a wyȝe strange,  
> An outcomlyng [outsider], a carle [peasant]? We kylle of thyn heued!  
> Who joyned the be jostyse oure japez to blame,  
> That com a boy to this borȝ, thaȝ thou be burne ryche?” (875-78)

Though Lot is ultimately clean enough in God’s eyes to avoid the inevitable wrath and destruction, the measure of uncleanness represented by his wife’s contamination of the feast renders him completely ineffective as a priest or political leader. Despite his wealth and his position as one who welcomes and entertains guests to the town, Lot is still considered a “wyȝe strange,” an outsider among them. His attempts to offer guidance and counsel to the Sodomites have exactly the opposite of their intended effect, enraging rather than calming, and rather than growing spiritually enlightened, the men of Sodom are literally struck “blynde” (886) after the speech. In the same way, his attempts to urge the “two myri men” (934) who are betrothed to his daughters to flee are unsuccessful to the point of absurdity: “And thay token hit as tayt [joke] and tented [heeded] hit lyttel; / Thaȝ fast lathed [called] hem Loth, thay leȝen ful stytle” (935-
An urgent call for self-preservation that should spur them to action instead causes the young men to lie in bed, perfectly motionless, a parody of spiritual torpor. In contrast, when the angels “Prechande ... the peril” they face (942), the family’s response is immediate: “And thay kayre ne con, and kenely [quickly] flowen” (945). The spotlessly clean angels speak potent words that spur people to action, whereas Lot has not found the “Fayre formez ... in forthering his speche” which the poet promises to those who rightly “comende” cleanness (3).

Once Lot’s family is removed, leaving no intermediary between the cities and God’s wrath, Sodom and Gomorrah are completely destroyed, leaving only the Dead Sea, a freakishly unnatural location where nothing is as it seems. A lake of apparently normal water causes lead and human bodies to float and feathers to sink (1025-26, 1029-32), trees like “traytoures” produce fruit that looks “red and so ripe and rychely hwed” but is full of ashes (1041-48), and the image of a woman, Lot’s wife, appears to be “a stonen statue” (995) but tastes of salt—all physical manifestations of the hypocrisy practiced by those who are “honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylthez” (14).

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

“I compast [devised] hem a kynde crafte and kende hit hem derne [secretly],

And amed [esteemed] hit in Myn ordenaunce oddely dere,

And dyȝt [placed] drwry [love] therinne, doole [sex] alther-swettest,

And the play of paramorez I portrayed Myseluen,

And made therto a maner myriest of other:

When two true togeder had tyȝed hemseluen,

Bytwene a male and his make such merthe schulde come,

Welnyȝe pure paradys moȝt preue no better;

Ellez thay moȝt honestly ayther other welde [possess],

At a stylle stollen steuen [meeting], vnsteder [undisturbed] wyth syȝt,

Luf-lowe [love-flame] hem bytwene lasched so hote

That alle the meschefez on mold moȝt hit not sleke.” (697-708)

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

This passage, along with Lot’s speech to the Sodomites, has attracted by far the most critical commentary of any in Cleanness over the past fifty years, in part because its view of sexuality is so striking in comparison to other religious writing from the period. As Malcolm and Andrew observe, “This emphatic statement of the value of sexual love is a startlingly unusual attitude to find in a medieval homiletic poem—particularly as the poet gives these words to God” (141). Some have viewed the poet’s high praise of marital love as evidence that he was not a priest (Gardner, ed., 7; Keiser 60; Schmidt 109; Spearing, Gawain-Poet 73), or at least that his audience is not clerical (Keiser 53-54; Watson, “Gawain-Poet” 299), others as evidence that he is a priest charged with investigating sexual matters in confession (Frantzen 452-56) or preaching about them (Potkay, “Fecund” 106), displaying what one editor calls “a fascinated horror of sex” (Stone, ed., 61). But nearly all have noted the sharp contrast between the poet’s praise of heterosexual pleasure in marriage and his fierce condemnation of pleasure in homosexual intercourse, which appear in such close proximity that critical attempts to draw a logical connection between them are inevitable. Both are clearly linked as forms of sexual pleasure and play, but for the poet, the former is a glimpse of Heaven which has the power to counteract sin, the latter intolerable filth which God hates more than Hell (168).

Ad Putter, who does not view the poet’s “glorification of straight sex” as especially unusual, advises that it “cannot and should not be separated from the poet’s contempt for homosexuality; the praise of one goes hand in hand with the denigration of the other” (Introduction 208). Every other reader agrees, but how exactly are the two connected? Michael
Calabrese and Eric Eliason argue that the poet’s traditional but strenuous rejection of homosexual practice is necessitated by his decision to present pleasure and not procreation as the primary justification for marriage and sex: “from the perspective of medieval theology, the absence of the procreative argument from this passage is nothing short of astonishing. As a consequence of this omission—the absence of a procreative telos for sexual activity in the poem—a new sexual order based on pleasure emerges” (254). Since the standard theological objection to sodomy in this period is that “sterile homosexual acts violate nature,” and since the poet “offers no such rational appeal,” he must instead generate for the reader “feelings of physical revulsion to vilify such practices” (261-62). Elizabeth Keiser concurs with this reading, agreeing that the poet depicts sodomy in aesthetic terms “that stress its repulsive filthiness rather than its irrational sterility” (5), and that this requires “sanitizing” heterosexual intercourse as spotless and clean, a strategy in some ways at odds with traditional Christian teaching. She is is more inclined than Calabrese and Eliason, however, to view the praise of marital sex and corresponding attack against sodomy as logically complex rather than inconsistent. The primary argument of Keiser’s book-length study of *Cleanness*, in fact, is that the poet uses sexuality to renegotiate “differences between the secular and the sacred” and subvert “the distinctions between the two realms that clerical ritual and discourse manipulated”:

*Cleanness* provides images of the interpenetration of sacred and profane—not within the incarnate God-man, as we would expect, but within the human sexual body with which, in its longings and pleasures, the Creator is astonishingly implicated. ... The territory of greatest symbolic potential for defilement and profanation in the economy of the sacred and the profane, the very territory
represented in most clerical discourse as fraught with danger and especially in need of vigilant and unceasing control, the poet remaps as paradisal space, a physical medium where God loves and expects to be loved. The closeness of the Creator to the material world he prizes as his artifact involves as a corollary the danger posed when homosexually desiring men desecrate the masterpiece of nature, heterosexual loveplay. (181)

Jeremy Citrome disagrees with both of these readings, asserting that the poet actually does make a procreative argument for heterosexuality that medieval readers familiar with a Christian “theology of the body” would comprehend, undetected by most modern readers because “the poet assumes reproduction to inhere within the very terms of his discourse” (276). Citing a series of carpentry metaphors used by philosophers from Aristotle to the 14th-century pseudo-Albertus Magnus, Citrome argues that the phrase “kynde craft” (ll. 697, 865) refers specifically to procreative sex, and that “the praising of sexuality itself can be seen to resemble traditional medical discourses which took pleasure as a necessary component of the procreative process” (274). In addition, Citrome writes, the flame that “lasched so hote” between lovers in line 707 refers not only to sexual pleasure but to “the innate heat” that medieval medical texts claim “the body produces in order to create generative material” (276). In Citrome’s view, the poet’s sharp turn from blame to praise follows the logic of traditional anti-sodomitic discourse—he castigates sterile homosexuality, whose pleasure is merely the temptation of sin, then praises the fruitfulness of heterosexual intercourse, which is pleasurable by virtue of its fecundity.

But there is another possible explanation for the poem’s starkly differing treatment of competing forms of sexual pleasure, one which does not require the poet to be either logically
inconsistent, engaged in a complex aesthetic argument, or participating in an obscure procreative discourse. That is, with his praise of marital sexuality, the poet may be making an implicit argument against clerical celibacy. Keiser mentions this interpretation as a “reasonable” possibility in her reading of the passage, though she labels it “reductive” (51), focused as she is on the more ambitious claim that the poet is using sexuality to reconfigure Western Christianity’s longstanding “sacred-profane” dichotomy. This interpretation does, however, place \textit{Cleanness} relatively seamlessly within a strain of anticlerical discourse that was gaining increasing traction in the late 14th century.

Though it is by no means a universal theme among anticlerical writers, a subcurrent that runs beneath many Lollard texts in particular is the contention that the ban against clerical marriage and enforcement of celibacy actually promotes sexual sin and hypocrisy—the two faults with which \textit{Cleanness} is most concerned. Wyclif himself never argues directly against vows of celibacy, though he comments that “There would be fewer widows if possible husbands were not shut in the cloister” of religious orders (\textit{Opus Evangelicum} II.42).\textsuperscript{31} The Wycliffite treatise \textit{An Apology for Lollard Doctrines} examines the question of religious vows at length and concludes that they are wrongful when taken “more for lust of flesch ... than for honor and worship of God” (101), and compares the enforcement of mandatory vows to those of the false teachers of 1 Timothy 4:1-5, “forbeding men to be weddid, and abstening fro metis, that God hath maad to be tan of feithfulmen” (Todd, ed., 103). The accusation that sodomy is rampant among supposedly celibate students and professors at Oxford appears in the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible, in terms similar to \textit{Cleanness}’s treatment of the subject:

\textquote[Loke now wher Oxunford is in thre orrible synnes ... the ij [second]
orrible synne is sodomye and strong mayntenaunce thereof, as it is]
known to many persones of the reume, and at the laste parlement.

Alas! dyuynys, that schulden passe othere men in clennesse and hoolynesse, as aungels of heuene passen free men in vertues, ben moost sclaundrid of this cursid synne aȝens kynde. (Forshall and Madden, eds., I.51)

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

> The thirde conclusiun sorwful to here is that the lawe of continece annexyd to presthod, that in preiudys of wimmen was first ordeynid, inducith sodomie in al holy chirche ... Resun and experience prouit this conclusiun. ... Experience for the priue asay of syche men is, that the[i] like non wymmen. (Hudson, ed., *Selections* 25)

The Lollards’ eleventh conclusion likewise urges nuns and widows to reject “a uow of continece” and marry, in order to avoid the sins of abortion, infanticide, masturbation, and bestiality (28). The Lollard sermon “On the Leaven of the Pharisees,” quoted briefly above and more fully in Chapter 2 (Matthew, ed., 6-7), blames the injunction against clerical marriage for attracting the wrong type of priests, “lumpis of ȝonge men,” gathered by the devil, who are grateful that the church “byndith hem fro wyues,” allowing them to engage in all manner of sexual misconduct—“fornycacioun ... auoutrie with wyues and nonnes ... the cursed synne of sodem with hem self,” and “to maken false heiris.” These young men who have entered the
priesthood with evil motives also use the office to counsel “wymmen that it is lesse synne to
trespase with hem than with othere weddid men,” and to earn money by encouraging and then
absolving sins of the flesh. This state of deception, in which the external vow of celibacy covers
the internal corruption of sin, causes these men to become “cursid ypocritis and distroien
cristendom,” like Cleanness’s inwardly corrupt priests, and eventually their sins “make the erthe
cursed of god,” a phrase that calls to mind the poem’s imagery of God’s wrath destroying the
entire world and transforming Sodom and Gomorrah from “an erde [land] of erthe the swettest”
(1006) into the “corsed ... clay” (1033-34) of the Dead Sea.

The solution to the problems of sexual license and hypocrisy generated by the
requirement of celibacy is stated explicitly by the Lollards, and implicitly by the poet’s vision of
heterosexual intimacy elevated to the status of near-sacrament. That solution is the sexual
pleasure that takes place within marriage, which “alle the meschefez on mold” (708) cannot
disturb. A hypothetical 14th-century reader confronting the poet’s high praise of marriage on its
own terms—not via the philosophical, theological, or medical texts that Keiser and Citrome
bring to bear on it but solely through the central images already introduced: the world-ending
destruction caused by sexual sins such as bestiality and congress with demons, God’s wrath
against homosexuality in Sodom and Gomorrah, and Lot’s attempts to convert the Sodomites to
“kynde craft” through the enticement of sex with his daughters, along with God’s own statement
that the love-play He has ordained between “a male and his make” is impervious to any trouble
or corruption—would see a fairly straightforward logic at work. In short, the poet suggests that
the “kynde crafte” of marital sexual pleasure is not only pleasant in itself; it actively counteracts
the filth of sodomy, whether broadly or narrowly defined. And given that the poem’s first
example of spiritual filth are priests who “conterfete crafte,” this same hypothetical reader could
reasonably conclude that countering sodomy in the priesthood must start with providing priests access to the the divinely ordained “kynde craft” and to allow, or even compel, priests to marry.

If we accept the argument against clerical celibacy as a legitimate possibility in this passage, a number of other thematic and interpretive possibilities open up throughout the poem. We may notice more readily, for instance, that the poet gives all three of the exemplars of clean priestly conduct so far—Noah, Abraham, and Lot—the title of “godman” (341, 611, 677, 849), a term Andrew and Waldron gloss as “householder.” In other words, all three are prosperous married men with families, property, and domestic responsibilities not shared by 14th-century priests. Though two traditionally celibate exemplars, Christ and Daniel, will appear later in the poem, they have not yet appeared as the poet presents his praise of marital bliss, and when they do appear, the poet pointedly makes no mention of their celibacy—their spiritual cleanness apparently derives from another source.

We may also observe that the physical sodomy that so exercises the poet in the first two exempla can be allegorized, as it often was by other anticlerical writers, to represent simony, considered to be an even graver spiritual sin. As noted in Chapter 2, Wyclif draws a connection between sodomy and simony in *De Simonia*, claiming that “just as sodomy in the time of the law of nature was one of the most serious sins against nature, so simony in the time of the law of grace is one of the most serious sins against grace” (*On Simony* 36; *De Simonia* 9), and the Wycliffite tract *Fifty Heresies and Errors of Friars* states under the category of simony that “freris ben foule envenymed with gostly synne of Sodome, and so ben more cursid then tho bodily Sodomytis, that weren sodeynli deede by harde vengeaunce of god” (Arnold, ed., III.399). Monica Brzezinski Potkay also observes that “the sin of unnatural sexuality is frequently used by the authors of preaching manuals specifically as a metaphor for bad preaching: the bad preacher
is by definition one who fails to spread the seed of the Word of God” (“Fecund” 106). In this same vein, the Wycliffite sermon *On Prelates* warns that priests who “leuen [neglect] prechynge of the gospel” are not only hypocritical “sathanas transfigurid into an aungel of liȝt,” as in 2 Corinthians 11:14, but also “gostly sodomytis worse than bodily sodomytis of sodom and gomor” (Matthew, ed., 55). The poet’s repeated warnings against “filth of the flesch” in the first two-thirds of the poem may thus be read either literally or figuratively, in either case as extensions of the introductory warning against the filth of priests, and which lead into the most direct and extended representation of sacramental defilement in the poem, the sullying of holy vessels at Belshazzar’s feast.

The primary fault of the poem’s final negative example does not appear to be sexual in nature, as it is for the ante-diluvians and the Sodomites, though the catalogue of Belshazzar’s sins, such as “pryde and olipraunce [ostentation],” also includes “lust and ... lecherye and lothelych werkkes” (1349-50), and at his infamous feast, “mony a lemman” (1352) sits with him alongside his “wyf ... a worthelych quene” (1351). The joys of marital pleasure previously extolled by the poet have clearly not kept Belshazzar monogamous, though one might say the same for Abraham if the poet had told more of his biblical story. Perhaps the most significant feature of Belshazzar’s concubines is not their mere presence but the fact that he instructs fellow kings to “loke on his lemanes and ladis hem calle” (1370) and dresses them in clothes ironically reminiscent of the Wedding Feast parable, “clere concubynes in clothes ful bryȝt” (1400). Like Belshazzar himself and everything else about his sumptuous feast, the women are outwardly respectable and beautiful, but as the poet has repeated on numerous occasions, inner vestments are more important than outer clothing—this is a story from biblical history, after all, not an allegorical parable—and God’s anger is especially stoked by hypocrisy. The sin which
ultimately leads to Belshazzar’s and Babylon’s destruction is spiritual in nature rather than outwardly physical—it starts with idolatry, as it does for the Israelites (1161-68), and culminates in the defilement of holy vessels plundered from the Temple, cups and dishes and table ornaments used at a profane feast rather than for sacrifice and divine ritual. Both the idolatry and the defilement are described in turn as “filth” (1721, 1798), but it is clearly not the same physical “filth of the flesch” that triggered the Flood and Sodom’s destruction.

If the poet subscribes to the belief that spiritual sins deserve harsher punishment than physical sins, the position universally taken by writers concerned with simony, then the poem as a whole is bracketed by the two worst crimes it depicts: namely, the priests’ defilement of the Eucharist in the introduction and Belshazzar’s defilement of Temple vessels and other holy objects at the end. This perspective also provides something more than a simply chronological ordering to the biblical stories of God’s wrath. They appear in ascending order of seriousness, from Satan’s rebellion, which “wrathed not the Wyȝ” (230); to Adam’s failure, which merits vengeance “in mesure and methe” (247); to the Deluge and Sodom and Gomorrah, in which fleshly filth drives God to earth-altering destruction; and finally to Belshazzar’s spiritual filth, which leads not only to his nation’s downfall, but to a personal loss of “thyse worldes worschyp” (1802), a highly personal death in bed and display of his body, and the denial of “lykynges on loftie [in Heaven] ... To loke on oure lofly Lorde late bitydes” (1803-04). The poet speculates that Belshazzar will look upon God “late”—not until the Last Judgment, at which point he will be condemned. He receives the same punishment as that promised to everyone corrupted by filth, the loss of the sight of God in Heaven, but he is the only character we see actually receiving and serving this sentence—according to Keiser, “For the first time the poet condemns an Old Testament evildoer in terms that allude to eternal punishment” (206). God’s wrath against
physical sin is nothing to take lightly, as the poet illustrates with the Deluge and Sodom, but the ultimate spiritual sin of defiling God’s “gere”—practiced by the unclean priests and by Belshazzar—receives the ultimate spiritual punishment.

The prophet Daniel stands as a clean contrast to Belshazzar and a priestly exemplar in the final story, but the poet’s descriptions of Daniel are not nearly as detailed as those of another exemplary character—Belshazzar’s father, King Nebuchadnezzar. Two separate stories are told of Nebuchadnezzar in the poem, one by the poet-narrator as a preface to Belshazzar’s feast (1175-1332), and the other by Daniel during the feast (1642-1708), as he compares Belshazzar unfavorably to his father. Ironically, though it is Nebuchadnezzar and his forces who destroy the Jewish Temple and plunder its holy vessels, he is not singled out for destruction as his son will be a generation later. To the extent that Nebuchadnezzar is ever punished by God, it is for excessive personal pride, and unlike any other character in all of Cleanness, he is given a chance to reform after sinning and is fully restored to his former glory as king of kings, “his sete restored ... Haȝerly in his aune hwf [crown] his heued watz couered, / And so ȝeply [quickly] watz ȝarked [restored] and ȝolden his state” (1705, 1707-08). Belshazzar, on the other hand, receives an inescapable prophecy of doom on the same evening he meets his death. The primary difference between them, the poet observes as he begins the story, is the manner in which they handle the holy vessels that come into their possession: “Hov charged more [heavier] watz his [Belshazzar’s] chaunce [deed] that hem cherych nolde / Then his fader forloyne that feched hem wyth strenthe, / And robbed the relygioun of relykes alle” (1154-56). The king who does not cherish the relics and misuses them is held to greater account than the robber who stole them in the first place. Nebuchadnezzar serves, albeit unwittingly, as the agent of God’s justice against the idolatrous Israelite king Zedekiah, and when he encounters the holy vessels in the Temple, he
is struck by their beauty and “sesed hem with solemneté,” even praising “the Souerayn ... That watz athel ouer alle, Israel Dryȝten” (1313-14) as he does so. He carefully transfers them to Babylon and stores them in his treasury, “Rekenly, wyth reuerens, as he ryȝt hade” (1318), an echo of the Christian priests who approach the sacrament of the altar “Reken with reuerence” (10), and a clear statement by the poet that Nebuchadnezzar has an unassailable “right” to the treasures, since God has allowed him to take them. His son Belshazzar does not handle the relics comparably; he expresses “reuerens” only for himself, as he calls for neighboring kings and dukes to attend his feast, “And to reche hym reuerens, and his reuel herkken” (1369).

Nebuchadnezzar’s sack of Jerusalem is bloody, and the atrocities of his captain Nebuzaradan excessive—women and children die alongside defenseless priests and prophets—but he passes God’s test of cleanness because he handles the sacred vessels with appropriate respect, as if he were one of the good priests of the introduction in addition to being a pagan king, the scourge of God’s wayward people. After describing the Temple’s plunder, the poet makes no mention of Nebuchadnezzar’s later trials, but briefly summarizes the remainder of his life and reign, which God blesses extravagantly:

That ryche [king] in gret rialté rengned his lyue,
As conquerour of vche a cost he cayser watz hatte,
Emperour of alle the erthe and also the saudan,
And als the god of the grounde watz grauen his name.
And al thurȝ dome of Daniel, fro he deuised hade
That alle goudes com of God, and gef hit hym bi samples,
That he ful clanly bicnv his carp bi the laste,
And ofte hit mekned [humbled] his mynde, his maysterful werkkes.
Nebuchadnezzar reigns over “alle the erthe” and even appears to style himself “god of the grounde” without fear of idolatry. He becomes in effect like Noah before him, both a priestly and kingly ruler who is granted both spiritual and temporal dominion over the entire world, a state achieved because he “ful clanly” accepts the prophet Daniel’s teaching that “alle goudes com of God,” that his own mastery of the world is a gift that should prompt humility. In the end, he meets death not because of any wrongdoing, but simply because it is the fate of every man.

In their readings of the poem, Ingledew and Keiser push the idea of Nebuchadnezzar as a priest-like king further, in different but related directions. Ingledew views the poet’s descriptions of military action against Jerusalem in medieval terms as an act of dispossession, and Nebuchadnezzar as the image of an ideal king espoused by Wyclif, “who sought through disendowment to disengage the clergy and the papacy from administration of the political and secular order. ... The king’s task was to reform the English church, which would become an ecclesia regis” (277). This view provides at least a tentative explanation for the poet’s seemingly incongruous decision not to condemn Nebuchadnezzar for atrocities against the Israelite people, particularly the torture and murder of priests, while at the same time praising him for the respectful handling of inanimate vessels. Keiser, on the other hand, notes that the description of Nebuchadnezzar’s respect for the holy vessels has “no biblical basis,” but that through it “the poet ably dramatizes the salvific impact of God’s glory manifest in the material forms Solomon shaped, imbued as they are with divine clannesse. ... Nebuchadnezzar becomes the antithesis of the proud and idolatrous Zedekiah and thus in effect the spiritual successor to Solomon” (204-05). Though Nebuchadnezzar is more properly understood as a king than a
priest, the poet nevertheless uses his story to demonstrate the possibility, and indeed the
necessity, of a secular king exercising rightful dominion over a corrupt spiritual leadership.

When Nebuchadnezzar temporarily falls from pride—an addendum to the original story
which Daniel provides at a later point—his punishment is in effect a disendowment, a loss of
dominion, effected directly by God. As long as Nebuchadnezzar keeps “clos in his hert”
Daniel’s original teaching that “vche [every] pouver past out of that Prynce euen [directly],” then
“There watz no mon vpon molde of myȝt as hymseluen” (1654-56). But when he “förzetes” this
truth and states aloud, “I am god of the grounde” (1663)—the very same statement the poet
appeared to quote approvingly, or at least without condemnation, in line 1324—asserting that as
God is the creator of heaven and earth, so he is the creator of Babylon, he is transformed into a
wild animal, compared variously to a wolf, ass (1675), bull, ox (1682), horse (1684), cow (1685),
kite (1697), and eagle (1698). Rather than ruling over the earth and its creatures as Noah did, he
is reduced to the status of the animals on the Ark, over which all of humanity is given dominion.
Brzezinski makes reference to Augustine’s discussion of civil dominion in De Trinitate as she
observes that “Nebuchadnezzar is not content with the office of stewardship he, with all men,
received from God’s benediction of Noah. He exults in his own power, mistaking it, which is the
image of God’s power, to be divine power itself. For raising himself above his proper level in
the hierarchy of creation, he is punished by assuming a lower level, that of beasts” (177). To put
it in FitzRalphian or Wycliffian terms, Nebuchadnezzar attempts to claim lordship over that
which he has no right, and as a result loses even the ordinary level of dominion God grants to
every man. He is fully restored, however, through a process similar to the sacrament of
penance—through the “wo soffered” (1701) in his trial, he is enabled not only to “com to
knowlach” (1702) and intellectually assent that God is the one true creator and ruler, but he also
“loued that Lorde and leued in trawthe” (1703), with the implication that he has freely pledged his love and honor as a vassal to a feudal lord.

Nebuchadnezzar’s downfall is ultimately little more than a hiccup on the way to his eventual glory, and he is allowed this exalted status as a pagan king both because of his “clanly” responsiveness to Daniel’s teaching, and because of his “rekenly” reverent handling of the Temple relics, which inspire him to “wonder” (1310) and praise. Nebuchadnezzar appears not to understand the relics’ spiritual significance—he does not use them himself or allow Israelite priests to use them for their intended purpose in the Temple, but simply stores them in his treasury as valuable exotic objects. It is crucial for the reader to understand their significance, however, as the scene of Belshazzar’s defilement approaches. For the poet, the holy vessels are more than simply the items essential for Jewish Temple worship prescribed in Exodus 25-31, his primary biblical source for their physical description—they are also prefigurations of the “gere” used to administer the Christian Eucharist. In the introduction to Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar’s story, the poet remarks that God is outraged at the defilement of anything He has claimed as His own, whether a person or “bot a bassyn, a bolle other a scole [cup], / A dysche other a dobler [platter], that Dryȝtyn onez serued” (1145-46), all items resembling baptismal and Eucharistic implements, but all items which the poet immediately and explicitly connects to the lesson “that watz bared in Babyloyn in Baltazar tyme” (1149).

Throughout the story that follows, the poet alludes to this connection between Jewish and Christian sacrificial ritual repeatedly, most notably with his actual use of the word “guere” at the moment Belshazzar decides to use the Temple vessels for eating and drinking—“Nov is alle this guere geten glotounes to serue” (1505). Prior to that moment, in two passages describing the gear itself (1271-90; 1337-1498), the poet focuses on the cleaness and consecrated sanctity of
the implements, which were originally constructed by Solomon “Wyth alle the coyntyse
[wisdom, skill] that he cowthe clene to wyrke” (1287), and which include both “vesselment,”
cups and dishes, and “vestures clene,” priestly vestments (1288), later described as “clothes ful
quite [white]” (1440), the two primary definitions of the word “gere” as it relates to the
Eucharist. The containers which hold the Temple relics are referred to as “kystes” (1338) and
“coferes” (1428), terms which the poet has used previously on numerous occasions to describe
Noah’s Ark (310, 339, 346, 449, 478), and which can also refer to containers for relics and other
religious objects in a Christian context. Baldwin also sees a reference to the castle-like design
of pyxes, the locked boxes used to store consecrated wafers, in the description of covered cups
“as casteles arayed, / Enbaned [fortified] vnnder batelment with bantelles [coursings] quoynt”
(1458-59), with “fylyoles [turrets]” and “Pinacles” (1462-63) jutting from their rims (Baldwin
139). These connections between the Temple vessels, Noah’s Ark, and containers for the Host
are further solidified by the poet’s note that they “Houen vpon this auter watz” by Belshazzar
(1451), just as the Ark “houen watz on hyȝe” by the waves (413). The poet also emphasizes that
these articles have been consecrated by the hands of God’s priests, just as God’s gear is
“hondled” in the poem’s introduction—the brass altar and vessels upon it are twice described as
“blessed wyth bischopes hondes” (1445, 1718), the “ornementes of Goddez hous that holy were
maked” (1799); they are also “anoynted” (1446) and “presyous in His presens” (1496), and only
a few select men, “summe” of the Temple priests, are “anoynted” to handle them (1497).

The poet twice lingers on the Temple’s sacred candlesticks, first simply describing them
(1272-75), then depicting Belshazzar’s precise positioning of them at the center of his profane
table (1478-88). The important role of candles in various forms of medieval English Eucharistic
ritual is well covered in Eamon Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars*, in which he describes the
huge number of candles required to light the Easter “sepulchre,” containing a pyx with the Host and Crucifix, during and after Good Friday services (29-30), as well as the supposed “apotropaic power” of wax stumps and drippings from candles used in Candlemas and Easter services, which many laymen considered “sacramental” (17). Duffy’s observations about the importance of candles to Christian worship aligns with the poet’s description of the “mony morteres [bowls] of wax” at the base of the Temple’s great candelabrum (1487), positioned to catch the drippings, and his statement that “Hit [the candelabrum] watz not wonte in that wone [company] to wast no serges [candles] / Bot in temple of the trauthe trwly to stonde / Bifore the sancta sanctorum . . .” (1489-91)—even the anthropomorphic candle-holder itself does not like to see its candles wasted on pagans who do not appreciate their purpose. In each passage, the poet repeats the phrase “sancta sanctorum” (1274, 1491), a reference to the Temple’s Holy of Holies where the objects are meant to be used, but also, according to Ingledew, a reference to the Ordo Missae (order of the Mass) of Innocent III. The Ordo instructs the Christian priest to say the words “ut ad Sancta sanctorum puris mereamur mentibus introire” as he ascends to the altar, a phrase which Ingledew says “refers both to the literal holy of holies of Exodus, and to the eucharistic celebration” (259).

With few exceptions, the poet chooses to describe items from his Exodus source that have a clear traditional counterpart in Christian sacramental ritual, so that, as Ingledew puts it, “the reader’s horror at their desecration should be the greater” (140). According to Baldwin, Belshazzar’s sacrilege “is an act equivalent to a medieval witch’s defilement of the Host” (139), or in Ingledew’s words an “allegorical profanation of the eucharistic ritual ... a black mass” (259). A section of the poem which modern readers might view as indicative of a structural flaw—as the action-packed narrative of the Book of Daniel grinds to a halt to devote 182 lines to
a recitation of the ritual ornaments prescribed in Mosaic Law—is actually central to the poem’s thematic structure. Like the priest-king Nebuchadnezzar before him, Belshazzar has been entrusted with the care of God’s gear, but like the unclean Christian priests who earn God’s wrath, he has defiled it. His punishment is more personal and more eternal than any other in the poem, but all the same, it is entirely predictable: he is “corsed for his vnclannes” (1800), stripped of every shred of his former dominion, “of thyse worldes worthyp wrast out for euer” (1802), and denied the chance to “loke on oure lofly Lorde” (1804).

Of course, Belshazzar’s feast scene also features literal priests, the Chaldean “scoleres” (1554), “segges” (1559), and “clerkes” (1562, 1575, 1579, 1583) who fail to interpret God’s handwriting on the wall in Babylon. These false priests are little more than caricatures of spiritual blindness, but they provide an important parallel with their king, Belshazzar, and a contrast with Daniel, who supersedes them. Like Belshazzar, they serve gods that are so clearly false creations that their description borders on the ludicrous: “fals fantummes of fendes, formed with handes / Wyth tool out of harde tre ... And of stokkes and stones,” which Belshazzar and his priests nevertheless raise “on lofte” and call “stoute goddes” (1341-43). In a departure from his biblical source, apparently unwilling to accept that even ancient pagans could genuinely believe such foolishness, the poet allows himself a rare moment of absurdist humor as he describes Belshazzar’s reactions to unanswered prayers from the idols. If the “gods” begrudge him any request, “to gremen [anger] his hert, / He cleches to a gret klubbe and knokkes hem to peces” (1347-48). The earthly ruler becomes in this passage a comic parody of the almighty God, who is similarly driven to “greme” and drives filth from his heart by destroying His creation—but what this verbal echo also implies is that Belshazzar knows his gods are only created objects, which he is free to dispose of as he pleases. The poet indulges in further humorous asides as the
Chaldean priests call on these gods and attempt “demerlayk” (1561), magic tricks, to help them interpret God’s handwriting. Throughout the feast, the sages and lords alike have “gloryed on her falce goddes, and her grace calles, / That were of stokkes and stones,” untroubled by the fact that they are unresponsive, “stille euermore— / Neuer steuen [sound] hem astel [came out], so stoken is hor tonge” (1522-24). But when it becomes necessary to read “the scrypture” that the mysterious hand has “scraped wyth a scrof penne” (1546), the priests have only these eternally silent gods and empty “wyche crafte” (1560) to call upon, as the poet observes wryly, “And alle that loked on that letter as lewed [ignorant] thay were / As thay had loked in the lether of my lyft bote” (1580-81). Belshazzar promises a clerical office as reward to anyone who can solve the riddle: “He schal be prymate and prync of pure clergye” (1570), but in the end, the would-be interpreters are neither “pure” nor even properly “clergy,” as they are seeking guidance from gods they have created themselves. The wise “scoleres” Belshazzar thought he was calling to his aid are revealed to be not only laughably ignorant but spiritually evil, more akin to black magicians than pure clergymen, befitting a profane Mass to “Satanas the blake” (1449)—they are “warlaȝes” (1560), “Wychez and walkyries” (1577), and “sorsers of exorsismus” (1579), and when he understands the full extent of their uselessness, Belshazzar curses and threatens to hang them (1583-84).

At first glance, Daniel does not appear to have any tremendous advantage over the rival priests, though this is mainly the result of his being so thinly described in comparison to the biblical text, which reveals his character through multiple stories and prophecies. When introduced in the poem, he is simply “dere Daniel ... that watz deuine [a diviner] noble” (1302), one of “moni a modey [proud] moder-chylde” (1303) brought to Babylon in exile. The queen recommends him for his past success in helping Nebuchadnezzar with a similar problem—“He
devysed his dremes to the dere trawthe” (1604)—but this talent does not immediately distinguish
him from the “Deuinores of demorlaykes that dremes cowthe rede” (1578) among the Chaldean
priests. His primary priestly advantage appears to be simply that he is not an idolator, and unlike
the obsequious priests, he is willing to speak the truth that Belshazzar already seems to know,
that his idols are “lese [false] goddez that lyf haden neuer, / Made of stokkes and stonez that
neuer styry [stir] moȝt” (1719-20). Also unlike the black magicians, his appearance and actions
are repeatedly described as “clean”—to Nebuchadnezzar “he expowned clene” truths (1606); his
prophecies are “cler” (1618); he salutes Belshazzar “clanly” as he approaches (1621); and when
he diagnoses the king’s spiritual condition, he focuses not on his foolish idolatry but on his
uncleanness—he has “avyled” the holy vessels with “vanyté vnclene” (1713) and provoked “the
Fader of heuen” with acts of “frothande fylthe” (1721). The poem does not specify, however,
exactly what makes Daniel clean and therefore what allows him to access such prophetic power.
The biblical narrative highlights Daniel’s abstinence from alcohol and meat (Dan. 1:8-16), and
the Book of Isaiah refers to the future Babylonian exiles as “chast” (Is. 39:7), but no mention of
either of these qualities appears in the poem. Daniel is merely clean in an undefinable way, and
the queen notes that he “hatz the gost of God” in his “sawyle” (1598-99) and “the sped of the
spyryt, that sprad hym withinne” (1607).

The poet has already used three previous exemplars of clean priestly conduct—Noah,
Abraham, and Lot—to illustrate three of the primary duties of an effective priest: administration
of sacraments, intercessory prayer, and preaching. Now, through Daniel, he adds a fourth: the
reading, translation, and interpretation of Scripture. Belshazzar promises Daniel a great reward
“if thou redes hit by rȝt and hit to resoun brynges” (1633)—if he can first comprehend the
mysterious letters on the wall and then give them a reasonable interpretation. He even provides
Daniel precise instructions for how to do so: “Fyrst telle me the tyxte of the tede [tied-together] lettres, / And sythen the mater of the mode mene me therafter” (1634-35)—he wants the words’ narrow definitions first, and then their more general meaning or “mater,” what the Wycliffite Bible translators term the “wordis” and the “sentence,” respectively (Hudson, ed., Selections 68). And Daniel obliges, delivering first a general introduction in which he compares Belshazzar unfavorably to his father and condemns him for defiling the Temple vessels (1642-1724), then taking “vch fygyure” (1726) of the three-word phrase one word at a time and explaining both their definitions and their larger significance (1725-40). His reward, ironically, is not only a promotion to the rank of duke but a set of priestly vestments, “frokkes of fyn cloth ... in ful dere porpor [purple]” (1742-43). As always in Cleanness, however, external clothing proves worthless in comparison to the cleanness of internal vestments, and the new king Darius invades that very night, slaughters Belshazzar’s noblemen, and renders Daniel’s promotion meaningless.

Another movement within Cleanness that reaches its logical end in this final story is God’s continual withdrawal from interaction with the human race. The reason Scriptural reading and interpretation is important for Daniel in a way it was not for the previous priestly exemplars is that God speaks to Daniel through writing, not orally as He did for Noah, Abraham, and Lot, and He appears as a disembodied hand, which the poet further divides into “paume” and “fyngres” (1533), rather than as the full-bodied angels visiting Abraham and Lot. By the end of Belshazzar’s story, though God is still present and active, He has no physical presence at all, but appears merely as “the gost of God” (1598) or a “spyryt” (1607) within Daniel. In this sense, Daniel is the most closely connected of all of Cleanness’s biblical characters to the 14th-century priests the poet addresses in the introduction, but the radical reduction of his role from the biblical original indicates that the poet intends the narrative primarily to be Belshazzar’s, and the
story primarily to be a warning rather than an encouragement to the contemporary priesthood.

The final story also concludes the poem’s overarching theme, connected to Luke 12:48 and James 3:1, that those who are called by God and entrusted with greater knowledge are held to a higher spiritual standard than others. Just as the unclean priests hypocritically reject their own teaching, or as the wedding guest neglects to wear proper clothes after receiving his invitation, so Belshazzar witnesses but dismisses the reverent and penitential example of his father. To put it simply, God expects him to know better. The poet introduces the story of Belshazzar with a discourse on the life of Christ (further analyzed below) and a warning that God is enraged “more traythly [ferociously] then euer” (1137) by the soul which cleanses itself through “schryfte” and “penaunce” only to become “sulped” by sin once more (1130-31). Earl Schreiber’s analysis of structural elements in Cleanness explains how this theme plays out in Belshazzar’s story, and how it relates to the life of Christ:

Belshazzar’s sin was especially grievous and the “chaunce” was “charged more,” because he neglected the wise and holy Daniel, and he had the immediate and human example of his father, who safeguarded the holy relics, fell through pride, but ultimately acknowledged God. For those living in the New Dispensation and having the example of the incarnate Christ and the instruction of the Bible, the “chaunce” is charged even more. The story of Belshazzar following the poet’s narration of the coming of Christ is not a chronological imperfection, but an apocalyptic warning to those who would reject the perfect example of clanennes, and the medium of this warning is the poet, the analogue to Daniel. (150)
The other “analogue to Daniel” Schreiber does not mention, of course, are contemporary priests, who offer the laity spiritual cleanliness through the sacraments of Eucharist and penance.

By prefacing Belshazzar’s story with a harsh warning about repeated sin, as well as with the example of Christ, the poet subtly employs an argument common in anticlerical critique, as Wyclif does in De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae, using supposedly benighted Old Testament figures to shame the more enlightened Christian priests. “If, in the age before the law,” Wyclif writes, “and apart from the example of Christ, a lay person might put aside political affairs for the sake of devotion, all the more ought the priests of Christ follow the example of their master in this way” (On the Truth 76; I.68).34 With the example of Christ as their guide, contemporary Christians and priests in particular truly have no excuse for anything less than scrupulously clean conduct and the spiritual purity required to administer efficacious sacraments.

In the end, the poem comes full circle, as all of the Gawain poems do. Unlike the other three works in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, it does not do so with an exact verbal repetition of the first line,35 but with a thematic echo of the introduction. In “thrynne wyses,” the poet says, he has demonstrated that “vnclannes” cannot dwell near the “corage [heart] dere” of God (1805-06), and he repeats the biblical theme which began the poem, a rewording of the sixth Beatitude’s promise: “And those that seme [seemly] arn and swete schyn [shall] se His face” (1810). The final lines are not precise repetitions of anything that has come before, but their words are familiar: “That we gon gay in oure gere that grace He vus sende, / That we may serue in His syȝt, ther solace neuer blynnez [ends]” (1811-12). This final exhortation includes terms which earlier in the poem were connected with priests or priestly figures—it was God’s “gere” that unclean priests defiled (16) and Daniel wore when he proved himself a true prophet (1568); those who “serue” have included the angels (18), Abraham and Lot serving sacramental meals to
divine representatives (639, 829), priests offering sacrifices in the Jewish Temple (1146), and even the black magicians of Babylon, who “serue Satanas the blake” in a profane Eucharist (1449). But the exhortation is also expressed with two repetitions of the inclusive pronoun “we”—we will wear God’s gear if He will send us grace; we will serve in His sight with neverending bliss as the angels do. The poem’s repeated warnings against filth and God’s apocalyptic wrath are directed primarily at the poet’s clerical contemporaries—at least, the numerous connections he makes between the openly anticlerical critique in the introduction and every exemplum that follows argue strongly for that view—but its positive promises of cleanness and heavenly bliss are open to all readers, including the poet himself.

3. The Filth-Cleansing Contradiction of Christ

The one section of the poem we have so far neglected, though not for any lack of importance, is the 97-line transition between the destruction of Sodom and Belshazzar’s feast (1052-1148), which includes advice for remaining spiritually clean derived from Jean de Meun’s Romance of the Rose (1052-68), a summary of Christ’s life and discourse on his purity (1069-1108), an allegory of penance with the soul represented as a pearl (1109-1132), and the aforementioned warning against repeated sin after penance (1133-48). “Transition” may not be an ideal term for a biography of Christ within a medieval religious poem, though this is the label William Vantuono gives it as he outlines Cleanness’s sermon structure, even as he concedes that other critics may object to his calling the section a “minor exemplum” (29). Morse, on the other hand, views the scene as central to the poem’s structure—she divides the poem into eight sections and places “the Christ-event” in a section she titles “The Center of History” (Pattern of Judgment 129) and calls it “the pivot around which the rest of the poem turns” (“Image” 202).
Schreiber agrees: “This section is not a digression (as many readers claim) but rather a major unifying element of the poem” (146). But regardless where one locates this section in the formal structure of the poem, a full consideration of the poet’s depiction of Christ as a part of Cleanness’s anticlerical poetics is best saved for last, since the poet uses the scene to perform a remarkable rhetorical maneuver which the final exemplum does not, one which revises, or at least seriously complicates, the poem’s central theological framework. Whereas Belshazzar’s feast extends in a fairly straightforward manner the themes of the two major exempla that precede it, albeit with a focus on spiritual rather than sexual sin, the depiction of Christ in the transitional section radically reimagines the spiritual dynamic of the opening warning against priestly defilement of the Eucharist, and demands that the reader rethink the relationships between God’s wrath, God’s body, humanity, cleanness, and filth, both fleshly and spiritual, as they operate throughout the entirety of the poem.

The poet begins this section with a restatement of the central desire repeatedly expressed throughout the poem—“to be couthe [known] in His courte” (1054) and “To se that Semly in sete and His swete face” (1055). The only sure way to reach the sixth Beatitude’s goal of seeing God’s face, the poet repeats, is to “clene worthe [be]” (1056). He then offers what he says is the best “counsel” he can on this point, by turning to “Clopyngnel” (1057), the love poet Jean de Meun. As a male lover wins over a reluctant lady by imitating the behavior she most loves, so must the person who seeks to see God “dele drwrye [lovingly] wyth Dryȝtyn” (1065), conforming to the model of perfection He has provided in the life of Christ. The poet’s use of courtly love poetry in the service of religious devotion is intriguing for many reasons, not the least of which is the metaphorical comparison of God to a fickle lady who starts as “wyk” (1063), disagreeable or difficult, and must be wooed into love—especially since the poem never
depicts God at any point outside of these lines as changing His mind after initially being ill-favored toward a supplicant. (One possible exception is Nebuchadnezzar, though the Babylonian king’s trials appear to be more the result of deliberate and corrective punishment, rather than anger or disdain God must be talked out of.) But the tradition of drawing moral and even theological lessons from secular romantic literature was well established at this point in English literary history, as evidenced by Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, and its appearance here is not likely to reveal anything significant about the poet’s theology or his relationship to the clergy, as some have argued (see Gardner, ed., 7; Putter, *Introduction* 12). The poet’s purpose in citing Clopyngnel’s advice is simply to introduce the concept of spiritual conformity through imitation of an example, and from there to introduce the ultimate exemplar, who demonstrates perfect cleanness in every area of his life. From priestly models whose virtues are emphasized while their less imitation-worthy qualities—Noah’s drunkenness and cursing, Abraham’s concubines and lack of faith, and problematic details about both of their wives, etc.—are either downplayed or unmentioned, the poet now introduces a model whose perfection needs no editorial assistance.

Nevertheless, the poet does cut significant elements out of the Gospel accounts of Christ—in particular, he focuses exclusively on Jesus’ life, with no mention of his death or resurrection. He starts with the Nativity (1069-88) and concludes with a description of Jesus breaking bread (1105-08), recalling the Last Supper, the foundation of the Eucharistic meal, and perhaps also the post-Resurrection meal Jesus shares with two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), but the Crucifixion which awaits the conclusion of the former and the Easter miracle which forms the background of the latter are both elided. Keiser is not the only critic to comment on the strangeness of these omissions, particularly in the context of late-medieval spirituality and its persistent emphasis on Christ’s Passion, but she goes the furthest in viewing it
as a flaw in the poem, since the power of the sacrament the poet invokes in the bread-breaking depends on the literal breaking of Christ’s body on the cross:

Omitting the traditional centrality of the Passion of Christ, the poet’s story of *clannesse* incarnate celebrates the flesh in a curiously sensuous yet abstract way. ... lacking the suffering of Christ, this sacrament lacks the dynamic for transformation associated with contemplating God’s incarnate (and hence shockingly costly) grace. What is omitted from the Incarnation is the empowering of the sacred by conceptualizing, and experiencing, the interpenetration with the profane where its symbolic force is most acute. Avoiding the Crucifixion, the poem locates no other metaphorical site for transformation and so generates no imaginative energy for the subjective process of modeling oneself as a lover of Christ in response to his love. (191, 195-96)

The image of Jesus breaking bread perfectly, “blades wythouten” (1105), is a clear reference to the Eucharist, with Christ as the image of the perfect priest, cleanly administering the sacrament. But Jesus in the moment of bread-breaking at the Last Supper is more than just the server of the sacramental meal—as his own words suggest, and as later Christian theology establishes more clearly, he *is* the meal, literally. The priests in *Cleanness* do not handle mere bread; they “hondel ther His aune body” (12), and if they are unclean, they “sulpen altogeder” not just the bread, wine, and other Eucharistic implements but “Bothe God *and* His gere” (16; italics added). Christ models the perfect priest in his clean actions, and in his clean body he is also the perfectly carved piece of bread—both God and His gear are perfectly unsoiled in this bread-breaking moment.
It is important to remember the literal connection between Christ’s body and the Communion wafer as we look back to the beginning of the passage to see exactly how that body is depicted, and what physical qualities it has. At his birth, Christ’s newborn body “ne vyolence maked” (1071) for his mother—he causes Mary no pain. The “schepon” or cattle-shed where he is born is compared to a “schroude-hous” (1076), the vestry or sacristy where priests prepare themselves for service, in part by donning sacred vestments. The birth itself becomes a church service of sorts, with animals gathered around the altar-like “bos [stall]” (1075), and angels serving as the choir, “with instrumentes of organes and pypes, / And rial ryngande rotes and the reken fythel [fiddle]” (1082), and always the “Barne [child] burnyst so clene” (1085) before their eyes as a type of Host. Both the “corse” in which “He watz clos” (1070), Mary’s body, and his own body are so clean they command immediate and full dominion over all the world around them, as Noah did over the animals after the Deluge—“bothe the ox and the asse ... knewe Hym by His clannes for kyng of nature” (1087).

The baby Jesus’ perfect cleanness and rule over nature continues into adulthood—“ȝif clanly He thenne com” at his birth, the poet says, “ful cortays therafter” in later years (1089)—but then the poet makes a statement that indicates Christ is bound by the same rules of cleanliness as the priests of the introduction, and that his reaction to filth is the same as God’s, who cannot abide its blow and drives it from His heart (31-32). The poet says that Christ in his life “ful lodely ... hated,” held a strong disgust, for “alle that longed to luther [evil]” (1090), and that by virtue of his noble nature “nolde neuer [never would] towche / Oȝt that watz vngoderly other ordure [filth] watz inne” (1091-92). Like the God who flooded the earth and rained fire on Sodom because He could not abide their filth, Jesus never touches anything filthy, evil, or “vngoderly”—base or vile, with an echo of the term “ungodly.”
In the very next line, however, starting with the conjunction “Ȝet” (1093), the poet completely reverses this claim. He explains that as a divine healer, Jesus actually did touch many people who were covered in physical or spiritual filth. Jesus may still hate the filth “ful lodely”—the poet does not confirm or deny this original statement—but he certainly does not meet the poet’s description of one who “nolde neuer towche” it. A major guiding principle of Jesus’ life as it has just been presented, that he avoids touching all filth, and the guiding principle of the poems’ parables and two major exempla so far, that a righteous person should similarly avoid even a speck of contamination, are contradicted by Jesus’ actions:

Ȝet comen lodly to that Lede [leader], as lazares monye,

Summe lepre, summe lome, and lomerande [stumbling] blynde,

Poysened, and parlatyk, and pyned [wasted] in fyres [inflammations],

Drye folk and ydropike, and dede at the laste,

Alle called on that Cortayse and claymed His grace. (1093-97)

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

The poet begins by describing the way Christ heals with his words—“He heled hem wyth hynde speche” (1098)—a further reminder after the scene of Lot’s failed attempt to preach to the
Sodomites that the ideal preacher speaks powerful and effective words, but also a suggestion that Christ does not need to touch the unclean people in order to cleanse them. He does touch them, however, in the very next line: “For whatso He towched also tyd tourned to hele, / Wel clanner then any crafte cowthe devyse. / So hende watz His hondelyng vche ordure [filth] hit schonied [shunned]” (1099-1101). Christ’s healing touch renders filth clean, even cleaner than the sacramental “crafte” of the priests in the introduction—not surprising, perhaps, given that he is the original source of the sacraments and image of the perfect priest. What is remarkable about this description, though, is the image of filth fleeing from Christ’s approach and shunning his “hondelyng.” The earlier image of God casting filth away from Himself and His heart being unable to bear even its approach (31-32) is precisely reversed, replaced with an image of God, in the person of Christ, striding toward filth in the world and transforming it. No longer is cleanliness a fragile condition that must cast out filth or flee lest it be sullied—it is now the dominant force that overcomes filth, which must flee before it. As Calabrese and Eliason observe in this passage, “The quality of Christ’s cleanness is such that it, rather than dirt, is communicated by touching” (267).

This startling reversal of the poem’s central conceit prompts the reader to reconsider all of the depictions of God’s wrath that have come before, beginning with His “greme” against the priests who “sulpen altogeder / Bothe God and His gere” (15-16). If Christ’s body truly has the filth-chasing and cleansing power as depicted in the Incarnation scene, that same power should theoretically be available through the sacrament of the altar, where priests handle and communicants receive “His aune body” (11). So why, in the introduction, rather than praising that body’s ability to cleanse any defilement, does the poet worry about the body itself becoming defiled? One possible answer is that the poet is simply being theologically inconsistent in a
careless way, and that the Incarnation scene contains a flaw that threatens the unity of the poem. This is effectively Keiser’s view, though it represents only one of many flaws she finds in the scene. Another possibility is that the poet views the body within the sacrament as somehow less—less real, less powerful, less efficacious, etc.—than the body of Jesus present on earth during his life, though this would clearly be a heretical position, and unlikely given the poet’s high view of the sacrament demonstrated in both *Cleanness* and *Pearl*.

The most likely possibility is that the poet actually does intend for the theological ground to shift in this passage, not for the purpose of undermining the images of God’s wrath that have come before, but in order to dramatize the uniqueness of the Incarnation and complicate and enrich his picture of God’s judgment by including within it the mystery of the sacraments. Sandra Pierson Prior, for example, focuses her reading of *Cleanness* on the word “Yet” in line 1093, as a turning point in which the poet uses Christ to reverse the pattern of “the preservation of the pure and holy and the guarding against violation” and replace it with the image of “a clean enclosing within a corrupt world ... a clean breaking into an unviolated enclosure” (75-76). Calling the Incarnation passage a poetic “tour de force,” Prior recognizes that the contradiction reorients the poem’s theological framework, but she views this reorientation as a positive development, the poet’s attempt to “transcend” the terms of his original argument:

... not only does the Incarnation passage transcend historical event and more particularly historical past, it also transcends the explicit messages given in the rest of the poem. This passage ignores and even contradicts *Cleanness*’s emphasis upon religious, dietary, sexual, and moral purity. The Incarnation passage specifically denies the *contraré* insistence that the unclean can never approach
God (since the filthy and grotesque quite explicitly limp right into the divine banquet—1093-96), and finally, it does not focus solely upon God’s intervention in human history or upon his unilateral, unequivocal, and direct acts of judgment and purification. (141)

Though the Incarnation passage, as Prior observes, contradicts the poem’s opening thesis that unclean people cannot see God, the poet nevertheless attempts to reassert that thesis at the end of Christ’s biography. After the description of Jesus cleanly breaking bread without a knife, the poet concludes with a rhetorical question: “Thus is He kyryous [skillful] and clene that thou His cort askes: / Hov schulde thou com to His kyth [home] bot if thou clene were?” (1110). The question appears to reverse once again the relationship between cleanness and filth in the poem—rather than Christ driving away filth with his touch, filth once again becomes a defilement to be kept at a distance from God’s court. In short, the filth-cleansing character of Christ appears for only a relatively brief moment, in lines 1093-1108, and it is bracketed by two assertions of a competing conception of God’s character, the wrathful destruction and casting-out of filth which guides the rest of the poem.

But there is something more than a simple contradiction taking place in these lines, as the poet’s subsequent emphasis on the sacrament of penance reveals. Though God apparently cannot endure filth, at the same time He provides a remedy for it: “penaunce” (1116, 1131) and the “water of schryfte” (1133), which will “polyce” a defiled soul as surely as a tarnished pearl is polished by soaking it “wyth wourchyp in wine” (1127). The pearl-dipped-in-wine metaphor explicitly describes penance—a sacrament that involves several steps over a period of time, including contrition, confession, a series of prescribed works for satisfaction, and eventually shrift or absolution, though these steps are conflated in the metaphor into the single action of
polishing—but the image of the wine cup and a wafer-like round pearl implicitly adds the Eucharist as well to the poet’s sacramental imagery. Its connection to the Eucharistic ritual described in the introduction is also emphasized by the poet’s use of the same verb, “sulp / sulped” (1130, 1135), to describe defilement—only now, rather than the Eucharist being sullied by the secret sin of a priest, it is the sacrament of penance, administered by “the prest” (1131), which removes the soul’s filth. In both the Eucharist and penance, a sacramental mystery is at work, a paradox in which God stands as both judgmental and merciful, demanding punishment for a wrong and then providing satisfaction for the punishment Himself. Most notably in the Eucharist, as it functions in the poem, the body of Christ is both the holy object whose defilement stirs God to “greme” (16) and the holy cleanser which removes defilement, soothes God’s wrath, and proves “that Mayster is mercyable” (1113).

Keiser, who views the poem’s treatment of the sacraments as a failure generally for neglecting the Crucifixion as the source of their power, argues that this metaphor, “the easy removal of a superficial layer of soil from an essentially unflawed object,” is insufficient to describe “the effort and costliness of spiritual transformation afforded by the sacramental grace of penance” (197-98), as 14th-century Christians would have experienced it. What Keiser views as a flaw, however—that the penitential process as depicted by the poet is simply too easy—may be exactly the effect the poet intends. If God can abide no speck of filth, if it in fact drives Him to murderous wrath, then no reader, nor even the poet himself, truly has any hope of seeing God, given the historical and observable fact of humanity’s many imperfections. The poet uses the first-person plural voice as he asks, “Nov ar we sore and synful and sovly vchone; / How schulde we se, then may we say, that Syre vpon throne?” (1111). No one will see God’s throne, the central desire expressed throughout the poem, under the conditions the poem has just depicted in
its biblical histories—that is, the incompatible combination of God’s extreme wrath against filth and mankind’s extreme filthiness. Any solution to this insurmountable difficulty, especially one that purports to be available to the entire human race, is almost certain to appear illogical or paradoxical. The defilement of the human soul, the pearl-and-wine metaphor suggests, is something that happens naturally and unavoidably, a normal aspect of post-lapsarian human life; the defilement of the pearl representing one’s soul can even happen by “chaunce” (1125, 1129). But the metaphorical remedy is equally natural, even simplistic, “by kynde” (1128). The sight of God can only be attained through perfect cleanness, a demonstrable impossibility, but God provides to the poet’s contemporary Christian readership a means to become clean that is staggeringly simple. The new dynamic of God’s judgment and mercy introduced by Christ’s filth-cleansing power not only shifts the poem’s theological paradigm, but it alters the direction of its homiletic message as well, from a call to avoid physical and spiritual filth for fear of judgment from God, to a call to approach God through the sacraments for the purpose of cleansing filth.

This call comes with a warning, however, one which serves as the introduction to Belshazzar’s feast. Those who participate in the sacrament of penance and wash their souls clean must take extra care not to sin again, as this betrayal “entyses Hym to tene [punish] more traythly [ferociously] then euer, / And wel hatter to hate then hade thou not waschen” (1137-38), just as His wrath burns hotter against Belshazzar for rejecting the lessons of his father. Keiser views this addendum to the recommendation of penance as yet another of the poem’s flaws:

... a reasonably thoughtful medieval reader could not be expected to take literally the notion that yearly administrations of penance would not cleanse mortal sins repeated after the sinner had been
shriven. ... Soiling the soul once it has regained all its baptismal
purity by the sacramental grace of penance is represented here as
virtually an unforgiveable evil. ... The result is that God’s clannesse
loses its cosmic power to resolve and reorder the sinful state of
humankind. (200)

Spearing takes a more charitable view of the poet’s intentions for this final warning, pointing out
that it serves as an effective introduction to Belshazzar’s feast and that God’s increased anger
over repeated sin is simply a sign that, as the poet has repeatedly stressed, “he cannot abide the
defilement of any vessel consecrated to his service” (“Purity” 295). Spearing’s view appears the
more reasonable when considered in light of Cleanness’s anticlerical poetics, particularly its
repeated insistence on a special class of righteous people who, like the wedding banquet guests,
are held to a higher standard of cleanness. The priestly class is similarly a vessel consecrated to
God’s service, and as we have already seen, when it harbors inner filth and threatens to defile the
sacraments, it earns the extremity of God’s wrath. The final warning about post-penitential sin
is, in this sense, a further if subtle warning to those who would presume to administer the
sacraments. From the perspective of the communicant receiving bread and wine of Communion
or the penitent receiving the water of shrift, these sacramental elements are purifying; from the
perspective of the minister, they are in danger of defilement and in need of protection.

One final effect produced by the Incarnation passage’s focus on Christ’s filth-cleansing
body is that it removes any question of heresy from the poem’s introduction. Though the poet
gestures toward the Donatist position that a priest’s sins can thoroughly defile, “sulpen
altogeder” (15), Christ’s body and thus render the sacrament ineffective, his depiction of that
same body cleansing “whatso He towched” so that “vche ordure hit schonied” (1100-01),
demonstrates that this position is an impossibility, and the urging of penance along with a metaphorical image of the Eucharist that immediately follows indicates that the poet has in mind not only Christ’s body during his earthly life but sacramental bread and wine as well. These two passages, separated by one thousand lines, hold in tension two seemingly contradictory but equally important energies—on the one hand, the poet’s observation of a corrupt and sinful clergy whose faults he feels compelled to decry, and on the other hand, his high view of the sacraments, ordained by God and animated by His literal presence, which cannot be diminished or corrupted by the men who administer them, regardless of their sinful deeds. To carry that view of the incorruptible, sin-cleansing sacraments to its logical end would remove any necessity for critiquing the priesthood at all (the unstated but clear position of church authorities such as the Blackfriars synod), whereas to attack clerics so forcefully as to suggest they are corrupting the sacraments and harming their flocks (the position Blackfriars officials accused Wyclif of holding) or that a special class of priests is unnecessary (the position of some radicalized later Lollards), would leave one open to accusations of heresy. So the poet finds a balance between the two—uneasily and perhaps contradictorily, and not altogether to the liking of critics like Keiser, but with plenty of precedent throughout the English anticlerical tradition.

Similar ironic tensions can be seen across a broad range of 14th-century writers, who attempt to balance harsh anticlerical critique with their denial of positions that could be deemed heretical, and as they appropriate arguments and rhetorical strategies from sources they would otherwise disavow. This occurs perhaps most strikingly with John Gower, who, as the previous chapter details, uses the prologue of his *Confessio Amantis* to attack priests and friars using the same inflammatory terms as the Lollards, while simultaneously attacking the Lollards for their heresy, ultimately performing a rhetorical maneuver wherein he pins the blame for Lollardy’s
existence on the very clerics the Lollards are also criticizing. In the same vein, the critic Judy Ann Ford observes that John Mirk’s *Festial*, a collection of 14th-century English sermons for parish priests, is rigorously orthodox in its view of the sacraments and priestly authority and denounces heresy in general terms, but that Mirk’s sermon illustrations “seem almost Lollard in the amount of agency conferred on lay characters” (14), as they depict priests as corrupt or marginal, and Christ as a figure one can approach without need of an intermediary.

In the field of religious drama, Lauren Ethel Lepow identifies several anti-Lollard elements in the 14th-century Towneley mystery cycle, but notes that the plays are also “an effective apologia for precisely those orthodox beliefs that the Lollards most frequently called into question. Simultaneously it provides the audience with a version of the ‘Englished Bible,’ the lay hunger for which the Lollards had also recognized and tried to appease” (142). As I have argued myself in a 2011 *Fifteenth-Century Studies* article, the miracle play known as the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* openly mocks its foolish, negligent, and drunk parish priest, raises the specter of clerical abuse with both this character and a bishop who appears at the end, then stages a sacramental miracle in which neither priest nor bishop are directly involved. Yet despite these strong anticlerical overtones, the Croxton *Play* manages to avoid any hint of heterodoxy:

Using the representations of these ecclesiastical figures as a starting point, we may view the play as containing a strong ironic tension in its treatment of the priesthood. The playwright clearly opposes Lollard views on the eucharist, and presents a triumphal vindication of the Real Presence in Communion—a miracle that requires at least preliminary action from a priestly celebrant—while simultaneously acknowledging and expressing sympathy
with Lollard critiques of the clerisy. (2)

Moving into the 15th century, Nicholas Love’s popular and carefully orthodox *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, Kantik Ghosh observes, also appropriates Lollard language in order to respond to what Love views as legitimate concerns of the movement, such as its desire for accurate transmission of biblical texts, while simultaneously attacking and dismissing it as heretical. Ghosh argues that Love’s *Mirror*, along with several other self-consciously orthodox 15th-century texts, “is ultimately uneasy in its response to Lollardy, so that an overt rejection of Lollard assumptions and aims coexists with a complex and uncertain accommodation of certain primary hermeneutic emphases of the heresy” (148).

*Cleanness* performs the same complex and uncertain balancing act between two forces that threaten equally to topple the poem. Though we cannot know exactly what level of knowledge the *Gawain*-poet had of his contemporary Wyclif, or if he knew anything at all about the later Lollard movement, the poem’s complex advance and retreat from its opening suggestion of sacramental contamination by a corrupt priesthood suggests that he is at least aware of the possible dangers, and making deliberate attempts to keep what he may or may not know as a Lollard position at arm’s length, even as he embraces the anticlerical rhetoric at its heart.

A focus on *Cleanness*’s anticlerical concerns, introduced in its opening lines, extended through its portraits of priestly figures both good and evil, and complicated by the interlude of Christ’s Incarnation and the sacraments, obviously does not explain every difficulty presented by 1812 lines and more than a dozen named characters—it remains a uniquely complicated and at times disturbing work of literature. A reading that focuses on the poem’s anticlericalism, however, does offer potential resolutions to several key questions and cruxes posed by contemporary critics, including the extreme length of its descriptions of Abraham’s bargaining
with God and the sacred vessels at Belshazzar’s feast, the relationship between the poet’s high praise of heterosexual and sharp denunciation of homosexual intercourse, and the contradiction between Eucharistic defilement and Christ’s filth-cleansing power, to name several this chapter has covered. An anticlerical focus also provides convenient entry into the next poem in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, *Patience*, in which the poet pursues many of the same clerically-directed themes and adds number of others, through 531 lines devoted to a single priestly exemplar, the prophet Jonah.
1. Introduction: Reading *Patience* as Anticlerical Critique

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

In fact, the only appearance of the noun “prest” in the poem refers to “vche prest and prelates alle” in the pagan city of Nineveh, whom the Ninevite prince instructs to “faste frely for her falce werkes” (389-90) along with other citizens in the face of God’s wrath—and even these, since they receive orders from the prince and are mentioned as just one of many groups fasting, do not appear to be leading the city in its religious revival. Carol Virginia Pohli, who argues that the *Gawain*-poet is himself a cleric, observes that the citizens who hear Jonah’s message also include “bacheleres” (366); as in modern English, this word can mean either an unmarried man or a student who has completed a course of study, such as a bachelor of divinity who has not yet taken holy orders.¹ The title can also refer to a young man’s chivalric status as a squire, an aspirant to the knighthood, or a knight of the lowest rank. Pohli reads it as a reference to the priesthood, “an alliterative choice and perhaps a personal concern of the poet” (6), but if the poet has priests in mind here and not simply young men, they are in exactly the same position as the “prest and prelates alle”: merely hearers of Jonah’s message, not spiritual leaders.
The poet occasionally refers to the poem’s main character, the Hebrew prophet Jonah, as a “renke” (351, 431, 490), the same term *Cleanness* uses for priests and priest-like “men of rank,” but *Patience* just as often uses the generic terms “freke” and “segge,” and more often simply “prophete” (62, 85, 225, 282, 285, 303, 327). In addition, Jonah is not shown performing any rituals for other characters in the poem that could be construed, even metaphorically, as sacramental. He administers neither the literal Eucharist nor figurative cakes of bread, as Abraham does in *Cleanness*; he does not douse anyone with water baptismally; he hears no confessions. Though the Ninevites do participate in works of penitential satisfaction, the citizens take these upon themselves—their cries for mercy go directly to God, and God alone provides absolution, even against Jonah’s will.

Nevertheless, *Patience* does feature what the more explicitly anticlerical poetics of *Cleanness* do not: a strong central character who receives the poet’s exclusive attention for 531 lines, longer than any single set piece in the previous poem, and one who serves as God’s representative to a specific group of people, in a story whose central theme is the proper response to God’s call in the life of a spiritual leader. Though Jonah himself does not administer sacraments—in part because he shows no interest in doing more than delivering the bare minimum of God’s words to a people he hates and fears—sacramental imagery is nevertheless present throughout the poem, as Jonah undergoes a figurative baptism in the sea, a watery death and resurrection, and a literal confession, repentance, and absolution directly from God. He also performs several actions which, while not sacramental, are certainly priest-like: he travels as a missionary to a foreign land under threat of persecution, he composes and performs prayers of both petition and thanksgiving, and perhaps most relevantly, he preaches with astounding success. In addition, both Jonah and the narrator himself in the poem’s introduction endure
poverty, which the narrator credits with developing the title virtue of patience. The fact that in both cases their poverty is involuntary may help us understand the poet’s perspective on the poverty debates which so many antifraternal and anticlerical critics engaged in the 14th century.

In the same way that reading *Cleanness* within the textual environment of 14th-century English anticlericalism can help to illuminate aspects of its complex structure and the priestly attributes of central characters such as Abraham and Daniel, so too reading the extended exemplum of Jonah in *Patience* with a careful eye toward the poet’s anticlerical contemporaries can lead the reader in intriguing and illuminating interpretive directions, and further help to locate the poet on the spectrum of various 14th-century anticlerical positions and beliefs. As he does in *Cleanness*, and like many other anticlerical writers of the 14th century, the *Gawain*-poet frequently uses Old Testament figures to serve as either models or negative examples of behavior for contemporary priests. In Jonah’s case, he serves as both, as the poet explores multiple facets of his character—rebellion and obedience, complaint and praise, resistance and submission—which depict him as a cautionary figure, but in some ways as an exemplar as well.

The poet’s approach to Jonah, and to the contemporary priesthood with whom the prophet shares both flaws and virtues, can be helpfully compared to William Langland’s approach to clerical figures in *Piers Plowman*, and is similarly complex. Langland, like the *Gawain*-poet, is harshly critical of every possible type of cleric, from monks to friars to secular priests, but even at its most biting and satirical his critique is constructive, in that he expresses the desire that priests, monks, and friars would turn from their errors and return to the more innocent state that marked the founding of their orders and their original calling. Langland’s rhetoric is thus a complex combination of condemnation and exhortation, even seeming at times self-contradictory, an anticlericalism that supports an ideal vision of the clergy. The *Gawain-*
poet’s stance toward the priesthood in *Patience*, I will argue in this chapter, has much in common with Langland’s—Jonah’s fulfillment of his prophetic and priestly duties literally saves the day in Nineveh, underlining the importance of these roles, but his deep flaws and disobedience nearly derail the project, and the poet shows little mercy in his attacks, which parallel in many ways the critiques leveled against his clerical contemporaries.

Since a reading of this kind relies in part on the poem’s connection to the more explicit anticlerical critique that precedes it in the manuscript, I will begin with a brief survey of parallels between *Cleanness* and *Patience* and the critical opinions on textual and thematic connections between them. Ultimately, however, my focus will remain on the clerical and sacramental imagery the poems share—both with each other and with other works of 14th-century English anticlerical writing. Next, I will look specifically at the introduction to *Patience*, in which Dame Poverty, an allegorical figure derived from the Beatitudes, is described as the “playfere” (45) or playmate of Dame Patience, and its contribution to 14th-century debates about voluntary and involuntary poverty. Next, I will read Jonah’s flight from God’s call as an expression of the poet’s views on absenteeism, pluralism, and simony among contemporary priests, and in the fourth part of the chapter examine his role as a preacher. The final section will advance a reading of the poem’s conclusion which views Jonah as a priest-like figure who has been dispossessed of all earthly goods, most significantly his “hous” made of “grene graciouse leues” (450, 453), and rendered a homeless wanderer. This final scene comments in complex ways on the poem’s earlier themes of clerical dispossession, and links to the introduction’s commentary on poverty. Each section will thus advance us sequentially through *Patience*, from introduction to conclusion. But first we look backward, to the poem’s predecessor in the manuscript.
2. *Patience* as a Coda to *Cleanness*: Clerical and Sacramental Imagery

Most contemporary critics view the works in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript as sharing a single author, if only for the sake of convenience. For example, W.A. Davenport states openly in his 1978 study of the *Gawain*-poet, “In writing this book, I have assumed that the four poems were written by one man and I have ignored the need to demonstrate the idea” (2). However, criticism and statistical analyses from the late 19th century forward have posited a variety of possible relationships among the four poems: a single author (Andrew and Waldron, eds., 16; Cooper and Pearsall 382; Derolez 41; Gollancz, ed., *Pearl* xlii; Turville-Petre 33); two authors, with *Pearl* as an outlier for its poetic structure and vocabulary (Kjellmer 98), or *Sir Gawain* as an outlier for its relatively non-religious theme and variant pronouns (Tajima 198); or even three or more authors (McColly and Weier 69-70). Yet another contention is that the *Gawain*-poet composed not only these four poems but a fifth as well, the alliterative *St. Erkenwald*, from a separate manuscript (Gardner 86-87; Peterson 53; Savage, ed., xlvi-xlv; Stone, ed., 248). This last speculation in particular came increasingly into question in the mid-20th century, as earlier assumptions about the significance of shared vocabulary were revisited and revised. As Thorlac Turville-Petre details in *The Alliterative Revival* (1977), English alliterative poems of the 14th century, even those by authors from entirely different regions, tend to share similar clusters of words, as well as “a number of favourite topics . . . such as the battle scene, the violent storm at sea, the precise descriptions of dress, of feasts and the like” (27), diminishing the significance of similarities in word choice when determining authorship. As Malcolm Andrew concludes in his summary of *Gawain* authorship theories, scholars have become “increasingly aware that parallels in vocabulary and phrasing are unreliable indicators of common authorship, as appreciation of the formulaic nature of alliterative verse develops” (“Theories” 23-24).
Of course, all four poems are linked in the sense that they appear in the same manuscript with illuminations from a single artist’s hand. *Cleanness* and *Patience* are even more closely linked than usual in this way, as the manuscript page F.82a contains the last eleven lines from *Cleanness* (1820-12) on the top third of the page and an illustration of Jonah from *Patience* on the bottom two-thirds. The common maritime theme in the stories of Noah and Jonah also contributes to a greater share of similarities in the images for the poems—for instance, the fish that swims beneath Noah’s Ark and eats a smaller fish on F.56a has the same head and mouth as the whale that swallows Jonah on F.82a, and the Ark and Jonah’s ship are the same in construction, color, and even size relative to their human passengers. These types of similarities, however, tell us little beyond the fact that the compiler of the manuscript apparently viewed these two poems, and indeed all four, as thematically parallel.

Nevertheless, despite these complications and substantial differences between the two middle poems of the manuscript—namely, their widely divergent lengths, with *Cleanness* at 1,812 lines and *Patience* at 531, with an attendant difference in narrative structure and levels of complexity—not a single scholar of the *Gawain* poems in the past 130 years has attempted to prove that these two were written by separate authors. In addition to parallel themes, virtually identical construction of poetic lines seems to settle the case. For example, A.C. Spearing, after listing several “substantial reasons” for claiming a common author for all four poems, including the poet’s use of “traditional synonyms for man as wyw, tulk, and hathel” to describe God, and his recurring “use of the pearl as an image of purity” (*Gawain-Poet* 33), concludes that though nothing definitive can be asserted about the manuscript as a whole, one connection seems clear:

Of the four poems, it is perhaps easiest to suppose that *Patience* and *Purity* are by the same author. They are both in long
alliterative lines without any form of rhyme, and they are both homilies which treat of a virtue specified in the Beatitudes by giving examples from the Old Testament of the punishment of its opposing vice. (36)

Even William McColly and Dennis Weier’s 1983 statistical report on the Cotton Nero poems and St. Erkenwald, which concludes that “the existence of a so-called Pearl- or Gawain-poet . . . is impossible to demonstrate through a statistical analysis of internal evidence,” and which posits three to five separate authors (69), concedes that Cleanness and Patience are the “closest together” in sentence structure and vocabulary and “homogeneous in form,” and thus the most likely of all five poems to share a common author (70).

Though these textual connections argue strongly for shared authorship, more significant for the present study are the numerous thematic links between the two poems. Many critics have found thematic unities among all four poems in the manuscript, and in so doing have drawn interesting parallels between the biblical poems at its center. In his introduction to one of the first editions of Cleanness in 1921, Israel Gollancz speculated about how its companion Patience may have come about:

While planning his work [Cleanness], the poet meditated on other Biblical instances of God’s anger, and in pondering on the subject of Nineveh he became more interested in the problem of Jonah than in any homiletic exposition as to why the Ninevites escaped from their threatened punishment. Hence, I think, came his decision to treat of the prophet by way of exemplifying the duty of resignation and obedience to the Divine Will. (xix)
In another influential reading of the manuscript as a unified whole, Sandra Pierson Prior sees the four works as following “the basic pattern and variations of providential history . . . whether so because of the author, or a perceptive compiler” (15). The pattern for which Prior argues is a circular one which begins and ends with the modern world:

In the beginning we have a vision of the End (Pearl); next we proceed to stories from the beginning of history (the Genesis accounts of Adam, Noah, and Abraham in Cleanness); then we move on through later biblical history (Daniel in Cleanness and then Jonah in Patience); and finally we end with a fictional account of a “modern” Christian and his society (Gawain). (15)

In Prior’s reading, Patience not only dramatizes one event in the long progress of salvation history, but takes as its title and theme the quality God himself must display as he waits for that history to unfold. The progression that occurs from Cleanness to Patience, she argues, is from “apocalypse” to “prophecy,” as it becomes possible for a doomed people like the Ninevites to save themselves from God’s wrath through repentance, in way that seems impossible for the Babylonians at the end of Cleanness, and as the role of the prophet shifts from Daniel, who merely reports the coming of God’s irresistible wrath, to Jonah, whose words signal warning and prompt acts of penance which lead God to turn aside (147-48).

Other thematic links between Cleanness and Patience can be found in abundance upon a parallel reading. For example, both poems cite and either partially or completely translate the Beatitudes (Cleanness 23-28; Patience 9-28), both name “clannesse” as the virtue identified in the sixth Beatitude (Cleanness 26; Patience 32), both personify this virtue and others with feminine pronouns, and both refer to the Sermon on the Mount in which the Beatitudes appear as
a teaching that “Mathew melede” (*Cleanness* 51; *Patience* 10), to name four connections that occur in the poems’ introductions alone. In addition to the Beatitudes, each poem also features a direct translation of Psalm 93:7-10 (*Cleanness* 582-86; *Patience* 121-24).³ Though the two Psalm translations are not closely matched in vocabulary or form—for example, the *Cleanness* version begins with a description of God creating eyes and then ears, whereas *Patience* shows Him creating ears before eyes—the fact that this short and relatively obscure passage appears in two poems which, despite their biblical themes, do not contain an overabundance of directly translated verses, seems more than coincidental.

One example of a word which appears only in *Patience* and *Cleanness*, and which carries great thematic significance in both, is “bour,” whose range of definitions can best be demonstrated by looking at its multiple uses in the poems. Its first appearance in the introductory section of *Cleanness* describes the chamber where the lord in the Parable of the Wedding Feast sits, as distinct from the great hall where the guests are feasting—when the lord decides to move among his guests, he “bowez fro his bour into the brode halle” (129). In the allegorical sense of the parable, which the poet explains, this “bour” becomes heaven, the place where God dwells and from which He “bowez,” or descends, in order to judge the people in the “brode halle” of the earth. The word appears again in *Cleanness*, in a somewhat different sense, as God gives Noah instructions for building the Ark; the “hallez” contained within the ship should include “Bothe boskenz [dividing walls] and bourez and wel bounden penez” (322). In this sense, the “bourez” are not only rooms for the animals but protective spaces against the storm and sea raging outside. Though the poet does not explicitly read the Noah’s Ark story in an allegorical sense, it seems clear that the “bour,” like the Ark itself, represents divine grace, a place of safety against God’s wrath. In the same way, the word later describes the stable or
manger that holds the infant Jesus, a clean space protected from the filth of animals. Though the Holy Family’s surroundings are poor, the poet says, “Watz neuer so blysful a bour as watz a bos [cow-stall] thenne” (1075). In the next line, the poet draws the comparison, discussed in the previous chapter, between the cleanness of this humble “bour” and a “schroude-hous” (1076), the room where a priest dons vestments and prepares sacramental vessels, and since in this case the cow-stall houses the body of Christ, it recalls specifically the vessel or monstrance that holds the eucharistic wafer. Shortly after this point, in the same interlude between major exempla, the word “bour” takes on even more allegorical weight. A pearl “blyndes of ble,” loses its luster, “in bour ther ho lygges” (1126), and must be washed clean in a cup of wine. On a literal level, the “bour” is a jewelry box, but in the allegory of the pearl as the human soul which the poet makes explicit, the “bour” represents its container, the body, which manifests outward signs of internal corruption. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, the image of a round white object dipped in wine also recalls the Eucharist, in which case the “bour” becomes a container for the host—perhaps the “schroude-hous” mentioned earlier, or the pyx where wafers are housed, or the monstrance in which they are displayed.

The *Middle English Dictionary*, citing *Cleanness* and *Patience* four times in three separate definitions for the word, notes all of the literal meanings mentioned above—“a shelter, den,” “an inner room; esp., a bedroom,” “a storeroom,” and “a stall for animals, a kennel”—and uses other sources to list a wide range of figurative possibilities—“the Virgin Mary’s womb or body,” “the heart as the dwelling of God,” “heaven,” “a grave.”* In summary, the word “bour,” like many other words and images in *Cleanness*, accumulates meaning as the poem advances. It begins as a literal description of a room, or a place of refuge, or a container, but ultimately comes to signify a variety of spiritual concepts such as heaven, the church, the sinful body of man, and
The word “bour” appears only twice in the shorter span of *Patience*, in both cases describing a temporary place of refuge for Jonah, but its range of meanings becomes similarly complex. The first bower is a place he finds upon entering the whale’s belly, upon which the poet remarks, “Ther in saym [grease] and in sorȝe that sauoured as helle, / Ther watz bylded his bour that wyl no bale suffer” (276). The poet’s tone in these lines is sarcastic—Jonah has steadfastly refused to endure suffering and now has finally found his “bour,” his refuge, in hell. However, *Cleanness*’s sense of the word as a genuine place of safety on a ship seems operative here too, given that Jonah does not drown; in fact, he eventually finds a corner where the hellish filth cannot reach him, which the poet compares to “the bulk of the bote ther he byfore sleped” (292). The “bour” thus carries a dual significance, as a place “bylded” by God for Jonah—it is the site of both his punishment for sin and his salvation. The second “bour,” in line 437, which Jonah begins to build himself and God completes as a leafy woodbine for shelter from the sun, functions in a similar way. Jonah views it as a place of safety and comfort, from which he can observe the city as it is destroyed by God’s wrath. In the end, however, the city is not destroyed, and Jonah’s “bour” is destroyed by a worm. Rather than the city being burned by fire, Jonah himself is scorched by the sun, which God commands to “brenne as a candel” (472) over Jonah’s head, forcing him into yet another act of penitential suffering that sets the stage for God’s, and the poet’s, final lesson in the last 50 lines.

Malcolm Andrew, commenting on the word’s significance in *Patience*, notes that it tracks “the sequence of Jonah’s spiritual crises: crucial patterns of rebellion, acquiescence, and rebellion again. . . . The three ‘bowers’ [ship, whale, and woodbine] represent a sequence of sin, repentance, and repeated sin” (“Biblical” 67). The same progression cannot be said for the
word’s development in *Cleanness*, but what the two poems share is a sense of its ironic potential, linked to ironies within the Christian sacraments themselves. In *Cleanness*, the first bower represents heaven, a place of feasting and bliss, the hoped-for destination of all righteous humanity, but it is also the location from which God descends to pass judgment on sin. Later instances of bowers are linked to the human body, the site of physical corruption, as it is hopelessly bound by original sin and causes the soul to degrade (it is significant that the pearl in *Cleanness* 1125-32 is not stained by an external agent or action, but simply loses its luster from neglect while lying in the bower). At the same time, the “bour” of Christ, his broken yet undefiled physical body, redeems fallen humanity through the sacrament of the altar. The bower, in other words, embodies both sin and salvation, as corrupted human flesh is restored through the glorified flesh and blood of Christ.

In *Patience*, Jonah’s two bowers recall the irony of a different sacrament, penance, as they are locations simultaneously of refuge and of physical pain. Jonah finds salvation in the “bour” of the whale (a word which echoes the “bouel” [stomach] of line 293), even as he suffers punishment there for his disobedience. This concept characterizes the irony not only of penitential satisfaction, in which avoiding the pains of hell is achieved through the endurance of pain on earth, but an irony of the entire poem’s central theme—that the pain of physical suffering produces the bliss of spiritual patience.

The idea that *Cleanness* and *Patience* each concern themselves with a particular sacrament, and that this demonstrates a thematic link between them, has been posited by a number of critics, none more forcefully than Anna Baldwin in an article titled “Sacramental Perfection in *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness*.” As the title indicates, Baldwin includes *Pearl* as one of the “three religious poems” sharing a common author, and whose images of perfection
“are derived from the sacraments”:

Pearl celebrates baptism and the Mass; Patience the sacrament of penance; and Cleanness, besides celebrating all the sacraments except for confirmation and extreme unction, also indicates how the priest should fit himself for transforming material substances into channels for God’s grace. (125)

According to Baldwin, the progressive steps of the Ninevites’ penance in Patience, from hearing Jonah’s message of judgment, to the prince’s contrite weeping, his confession of “alle his wrange dedes” (384), and finally the citizens’ extreme acts of satisfaction in wearing sackcloth and ashes and undergoing a fast that includes even newborn babies (391) and animals (392-94), “would have suggested to a medieval audience the Lenten fast which followed the signing with ashes on Ash Wednesday, and ended in the yearly act of confession at Easter” (Baldwin 131). What is missing from this depiction of penance, however, is any description of the priest who in a medieval Christian context would be required to hear the confessions, prescribe the terms of satisfaction, and speak the words of absolution.

Of course, the poet’s source for this story, the Book of Jonah, does not take place in a medieval Christian context. As much as he might resemble a contemporary priest, and as much as the poet might highlight those resemblances in his retelling of the story, Jonah remains an Old Testament prophet whose primary function is to deliver God’s message of judgment and receive a lesson in judgment and mercy for himself. To expand his role to include, for example, hearing confessions from the Ninevites and urging specific forms of satisfaction upon them, would be to alter the story in ways clearly unfaithful to the text. All the same, if Baldwin is correct, and the “medieval audience” she imagines truly would perceive links between the Ninevites’ fast and
Lent, or between their sackcloth-and-ashes contrition and the sacrament of penance, the same audience would be sure to notice the absence of priests as the citizens repent, take penance upon themselves, and are absolved by God. The poet has taken care to draw parallels between this ancient Hebrew story of a city’s repentance and a medieval Christian sacrament, but he cannot extend the analogy all the way, to the one element that would make the sacrament officially valid in a medieval context.

What makes the absence of priests in this scene interesting in the context of the poet’s anticlerical contemporaries is that several of them make the argument that the Christian sacrament of penance does not require priestly intervention, and that genuine contrition and private confession to God are sufficient for absolution. This was a highly unorthodox view, of course; Wyclif himself held positions like it only late in his career and inconsistently, but even these were enough for the Blackfriars synod to include the following statement in their list of “heretical” condemnations: “That if a man be duly contrite, all outer confession is for him superfluous and invalid” (Workman II.416). As with others of Wyclif’s arguments, the later Lollards expanded upon his radical view of the sacrament, as illustrated by several of their “Sixteen Points” from ca. 1400:

The secunde: that schrift of mouthe is not nedeful to helthe of soule, but only sorowe of hert doth awey euery synne. . . .

The sexte: that neither pope nether bischopp e may graunt any pardoun, but the lest prest hath as myche power to graunte suche pardoune as the pope.

The seuent: that ther schulde be bot oo degre aloone of prestehod in the chirche of God, and euery good man is a prest and
hath power to preche the worde of God. . . .

The tente: that is that prestis weren not ordeyned to sey massis or mateynes, but onli to teche and preche the worde of God.

(Hudson, ed., Selections 19)

What this excerpt demonstrates is that in 14th-century England, a denial of the priest’s role in confession and penance was typically found alongside a denial of the priest’s role in administering the Eucharist—indeed, the two ideas were inextricably linked in Lollard documents like the “Sixteen Points.” The sense conveyed by most Lollard position statements, and by lists of condemnations by their opponents, is that the movement’s primary concern is the sacrament of the altar, and its views on all of the other sacraments follow from that first principle. If, then, we accept that Cleanness and Patience share a common author and are thematically linked, the poet’s harsh opening words for priests who threaten the integrity of the Eucharist argue strongly against his holding an anti-sacerdotal view of any other sacrament, including penance. In this case, the simplest explanation of the poet’s decision appears to be the best—he declines to include priestly involvement in his depiction of a biblical example of penance because he is following the lead of his source.

A much more damning critique of Jonah, as both prophet and priest, is his failure to give the Ninevites any opportunity to repent. Rather, he offers them only condemnation and despair, a shrinking of the medieval priest’s proper role as the dispenser of God’s grace through the sacraments, but also a perversion of his role as a prophet in the story’s original context, a point made clear in God’s rebuke of Jonah for failing to show “mercy withinne” (523).

Another striking shift from Cleanness to Patience in addressing the issue of priesthood is the fact that the narrator of Patience identifies himself explicitly and repeatedly as a layman, one
who has received teaching from the church that he is now passing along to the reader, and who
works as a servant to an earthly lord. The *Cleanness* narrator, as discussed in the previous
chapter, effectively operates as both a preacher who reads and interprets the biblical text for an
audience, and as a listener who attends church services to hear what priests have to say. “I haue
herkned and herde of mony hyȝe clerkez,” he says in preface to the poem’s first major
exemplum, “And als in resounez of ryȝt red hit myseluen” (193-94). A few lines later, he
conflates the two actions of reading from a text and hearing it preached, as he imagines books
speaking to him: “Bot neuer ȝet in no boke breued [declared/told] I herde . . .” (197). A similar
conflation takes place in *Patience*, as the narrator refers to the story of Jonah as one that “holy
wryt telles” (60), as if the Bible is speaking aloud. But the narrator’s self-presentation in
*Patience* is much more precise, as he depicts himself as a congregant receiving religious
instruction aurally at a public service on a specific day—his lesson on the Beatitudes is one “I
herde on a halyday, at a hyȝe masse” (9). He later refers to the Beatitudes as “the tyxte” (37) and
offers “myn vpynyoun” (40) on their interpretation, suggesting he is more than a passive listener,
but he does not, as in *Cleanness*, overtly state that he has “red hit myseluen.”

The shift from primarily reading to primarily listening to the biblical text is subtle, but the
narrator of *Patience* goes much further in distancing himself from the priesthood, by assigning
himself another occupation. Whereas the narrator of *Pearl* describes himself repeatedly as a
“jueler,” and in *Cleanness* his vocation is unclear, the narrator of *Patience* is clearly a servant.
More specifically, he serves as a messenger to a “lege lorde” who orders him “to ryde other to
renne to Rome in his ernde” (51-52). Moreover, as the poet uses this description of an
unpleasant errand in the context of discussing involuntary poverty and unavoidable suffering, the
lord appears as one whose will cannot be denied by his servants—the narrator is “made” (54) to
follow his command, and resistance can only bring on “grame [trouble]” (53) and “thenne thrat [threat] moste I thole [endure] and vnthonk [displeasure] to mede” (55). The narrator appears to be practically enslaved to his lord, a state which is necessary for the metaphor of God as irresistible liege-lord to work. Though it is true, as Ad Putter observes, that the mention of Rome as the destination for his errand might indicate the narrator is “a cleric in minor orders, employed in some administrative capacity” (17), the point about his low-ranking status still stands. If he is a priest or otherwise clerically educated, he occupies the lowest possible position in the church’s hierarchy; and even among servants, he would be among the lowest ranked. “Messengers were such impecunious and insignificant figures,” writes John Scattergood, “that their poverty practically ensured their safety as they travelled” (129), a point illustrated by a passage in the *Piers Plowman* C-text (C.XIII.32-65), in which a “messanger” and “marchaunt” travelling together suffer contrasting fates at the hands of robbers.

In summary, the narrator identifies himself as the lowest of low-ranking servants, he complains of his poverty, and he listens to public sermons, which he passes along to the reader with personal asides and practical advice about the endurance of suffering. All of these qualities indicate that he wishes the poem’s audience to view him foremost as an impoverished layman, not a priest, whatever religious insight he may have—and regardless what clerical training or position the *Gawain*-poet himself might possess.

This rhetorical trope, in which an obviously well-educated sermonist presents himself as a member of an economic class that would not normally be educated, can be found across all types of anticlerical writing in the 14th century. Though many leading anticlerical writers were themselves priests or even high-ranking church officials (Wyclif, Hereford, Trevisa, FitzRalph), and virtually all besides the later Lollards were clerically educated (Chaucer, Gower, Rolle, and
possibly Langland), the strategy of presenting oneself as a plain-spoken pious layman had the advantage of distancing the writer from the priesthood he wanted to critique and creating the appearance of independence from a potentially corrupt church hierarchy. It is a crucial position for Wyclif to take, for example, in his passages of advice to “poor priests,” and in fact the irony of the uneducated teacher is embedded within the concept of the poor priesthood itself. These priests, whose activities were attacked by opponents such as Thomas Netter after Wyclif’s death, were itinerant preachers who supported themselves not through tithes, endowments, or payment for clerical services, as parish priests, monks, and friars did, but through manual labor—in other words, they practiced other vocations to meet their material needs and performed their ministry as a voluntary service. Anne Hudson notes that Wyclif began to develop the concept of this type of priesthood as early as 1372-73:

That Wyclif himself was only the unwitting and unwilling father of the Lollard movement can also be challenged: references within his writings are most reasonably interpreted as indicating his interest in, even if not his initiation of, wandering preachers, “poor priests” or “true priests” . . . Wyclif’s view was not bounded by the schoolroom, as both his followers and his opponents recognized.

(Selections 9)

With this development, in theory and in practice, of a working-class priesthood operating apart from the usual institutions of education and ordination came a degree of anti-intellectualism which necessitated for Wyclif a rhetorical distancing from the educated clerisy, despite the fact that he was one of them, as well as from the university which had educated and employed him. A similar irony applies to the later Lollards as well, as they distanced themselves from the
clergy, Oxford, and Latin learning, all the while lionizing their movement’s supposed founder, an Oxford theologian and cleric who wrote only in Latin. Hudson calls this latter problem “the paradox of Lollardy,” and uses the trials of two Lollard leaders, Walter Brut and William Swinderby, in the late 14th century to illustrate it. Brut, a radical Lollard from Hereford, was examined by bishop John Trefnant several times from 1390-93, and though an edited version of his lengthy trial was translated into English and popularized by its inclusion in John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* two centuries later, the original documents are in Latin. Like the Gawain-poet in *Patience*, who depicts himself as a humble servant listening to a sermon even as he delivers a sermon in highly literate poetic lines, Brut decries Latin learning while putting his own learning brilliantly on display. Hudson notes that Brut “knows the biblical tropes of humility, and of inadequacy with words, and so allies himself with Isaiah and with Daniel . . . But his claim that *non cognovi litteraturam* (I know no letters) is controverted by his practice” (“Laicus” 225), as he cites nearly 200 biblical passages from memory and refers to canon law eleven times. Notably, he does not cite patristic authorities, and dismisses them when cited by Trefnant, but Hudson argues this “is evidently not the result of ignorance but of conviction” (226), as he wishes to base his arguments on scriptural authority alone. In the same way, Swinderby, a parish priest on trial in the diocese of Lincoln in 1389 after being denounced by three friars, also “described himself as *bot sympully lettered* but, though his preference in his surviving texts was for English rather than Latin, his arguments were scarcely less erudite than Brut’s” (227). Swinderby’s refusal to engage his interrogator in Latin recalls William Thorpe’s refusal to acknowledge even Latinate English terms like “transubstantiation” in his trial with Archbishop Arundel in 1407, and his sly use of a strategic anti-intellectualism:

I preie ȝou, ser, that ȝe wol declare here opinli in Ynglische . . .
forthi that ȝoure axinge passith myn vndirstondinge, I dar neither
denyte ne graunte it, for it is scolemater aboute whiche I neuer
bisied me for to knowe in. And therfor I committe this terme

*accidentem sine subiecto* to tho clerkis which deliten hem so in
curious and so sotil sofestrie. (Hudson, ed., *Two Wycliffite Texts* 55)

Despite its leaders’ claims to be “poorly lettered” men, Hudson says, “The Lollard heresy was in origin learned, indeed academic. However much it took up ideas and attitudes that had a long medieval history, its immediate source was the thought of John Wyclif. . . . The advantages of book learning were plain to the early university-trained dissidents from the start, and these advantages were evidently transmitted” to their less-educated followers (“Laicus” 228, 231).

Wendy Scase documents the same anti-intellectual strategy as it appears in many Wycliffite, Lollard, and other 14th-century works, in particular Langland, and pairs it with what she calls the “clerical aside,” in which a pastor preaching to the laity temporarily admonishes his colleagues before turning back to his broader audience. What the *Gawain*-poet appears to utilize in *Patience*, however, is what Scase terms the “anti-intellectual impasse” or “lewed stalemate,” in which a writer with obvious clerical training presents himself as a member of the uneducated laity in order to critique his peers:

The common factor linking these rhetorical features is that of a difficulty over establishing the relationship between an anticlerical speaker and “clergie.” Where the speaker admits to “clergie,” or uses clerical language and literary procedures, then he is often self-consciously and guiltily “clerical”—as with the clerical aside. The presence of the device points up the rhetorical problem, but is
reasonably successful as a way of establishing that the anticlerical speaker is not elsewhere speaking as a cleric to clerics. However, where the speaker establishes a rejection of “clergie” through anti-intellectualism, or unfavourable contrast of clerics with the “lewed,” then this is sometimes associated with rhetorical breakdown . . . Sometimes embarrassment concerning the identity of the speaker or confusion over the poet’s identity are symptoms. (167)

The precise identity of the Gawain-poet, and the question of his status as cleric or layman, is impossible to determine, but his moral arguments in Patience do not appear to suffer from a “rhetorical breakdown” as Scase describes here, perhaps because his assertion of a specific alternate vocation, that of the messenger servant, is so clear and emphatic. As he begins his story of the priest-like prophet Jonah, the narrator establishes definitively that he is not the same type of spiritual leader, while simultaneously asserting that they share a central human experience in common—they are both men who receive orders from a higher authority and must choose either patient obedience or complaint.

For the narrator of Patience, placing himself at a greater remove from the priesthood than he did in Cleanness allows him to make a personal connection with lay readers through shared experience, a connection largely absent from the previous poem. J.J. Anderson calls this homiletic technique “somewhat whimsical” (15), but ultimately recognizes its virtues as a persuasive strategy:

The Cleanness narrator keeps a greater distance, addressing the reader from a position of cut-and-dried authority. He maintains a didactic style and a clear boundary between teacher and listener,
frequently using the imperative and the second-person pronoun . . .

At the end of *Patience* the narrator does not direct the lesson to the reader but takes it to himself, returning to his account of himself in the prologue. . . . The aim in *Patience* is evidently not to frighten the reader into submission but rather to seek to persuade him to see the rightness of the narrator’s point of view, and the rhetoric is reflective and ironic rather than explicit and didactic, inviting the reader to share the narrator’s experience and to engage with him in considering the manifold and subtle ways in which the story of Jonah illuminates the nature of the virtue of patience and the need to practise it. (16)

Ad Putter agrees with this assessment of the narrator’s position in relation to the reader and describes another one of its advantages:

> The moral about patience may of course also apply to members of the audience, but this view equally compels one to notice that the narrator has placed himself on a par with his audience, showing no sign of the special authority which Basevorn [author of the 14th-century manual *The Form of Preaching*] attributed to the homilist. By appearing to listen to his own *exemplum*, the poet effectively abolishes the distance that separates the speaker of the sermon from its hearers. (104)

The poet’s rhetorical strategy creates yet another advantage that Anderson and Putter do not mention. It allows his lay audience to view the lessons of Jonah from two distinct
perspectives—first, they can recognize their own experiences and reactions to suffering in Jonah’s, and secondly, they can view him from afar as a priestly figure, a representative of their own spiritual leaders whose many failures are dramatized in the story and then condemned both by the voice of God and the voice of the narrator, who speaks as one of them. As with Wyclif’s poor priests and the Lollards’ educated anti-intellectualism, the poet asks the audience to participate in a paradox—to internalize Jonah’s spiritual conflict as their own, and at the same time hold him at arm’s length as the subject of anticlerical critique.

3. Two “Playferes”: Patience and 14th-Century Poverty Debates

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

The poet begins by translating the first of the Beatitudes from the Gospel of Matthew, which he calls “happes” (11), in the following way: “Thay arn happen that han in hert pouerté, / For hores is the heuen-ryche to holde for euer” (13-14). Like the six Beatitudes that follow it, this a relatively free but faithful translation of the Vulgate. The Wycliffite LV renders it similarly: “Blessid be pore men in spirit: for the kyngdom of heuenes is heren”; in both cases, the spiritual virtue in the first half of the verse is poverty of the “heart” or “spirit,” and the reward is heaven’s “ryche,” or kingdom. When the poet reaches the eighth “hap,” however, he departs significantly from the Vulgate text, with a phrase Malcolm Andrew calls “his only
significant deviation from his source” (“Biblical” 47): “Thay ar happen also that con her hert stere, / For hores is the heuen-ryche, as I er sayde” (27-28). The blessing comes to those who can “steer their hearts,” an image in accord with the poem’s nautical theme, which will emerge more fully when Jonah embarks on a ship, but one which bears no resemblance to the first half of the verse on which it is based: “Blessid be thei that suffren persecucioun for riȝtwisnesse: for the kyngdom of heuenes is heren” (Matt. 5:10). In this case, the reward of heaven’s kingdom is the same in each translation, with the addition only of the poet’s “as I er sayde,” a reminder to the reader that the eighth Beatitude offers the same reward as the first, a connection the poet will elaborate upon in the following verses. But the virtue that leads to this reward, in the poet’s rendering, focuses on the internal ability to restrain, control, or guide one’s heart toward God, to cite several definitions of the verb “steren” in the MED, rather than to suffer external persecution. Of course, the two concepts are not entirely unrelated—the idea that persecution cultivates endurance and self-control seems natural enough, just as physical poverty cultivates patience in the poet’s later formulation—but the poet does not draw them together in any explicit way here. Only a reader already familiar with the verse would follow his logic, or even note the change at all, perhaps a further indication of the type of reader he intends to speak to—primarily lay, accustomed to suffering and hardship, possibly uneducated, but nevertheless intimate with the biblical text, if only orally and in translation.

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

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

Bot syn I am put to a poynt [condition] that pouerté hatte [is called],
I schal me poruay [equip with] pacyence and play me with bothe,
For in the tyxte there thyse two arn in teme layde,
Hit arn fettled [arranged] in on forme, the forme [first] and the laste,
And by quest of her quoyntyse [wisdom] enquylen [obtain] on mede.
And als, in myn vpynyoun, hit arn of on kynde:
For theras pouert hir proferes [presents herself] ho nyl be put vtter,
Bot lenge [dwells] wheresoeuer hir lyst, lyke oth er greme [like it or not];
And theras pouert enpresses, thaȝ mon pyne thynk,
Much maugré [despite] his mun [complaint], he mot nede suffer;
Thus pouerté and pacyence ar nedes playferes.

Sythen I am sette with hem samen, suffer me byhoues;

Thenne is me lyȝtloker [easier] hit lyke and her lotes [manners] prayse,

Thenne wyther [resist] wyth and be wroth and the wers haue. (35-48)

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

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

And here-agains no creature on lyve,

Of no degree, availleth for to stryve.

Thanne is it wysdom, as it thinketh me,

To maken vertu of necessitee . . .

And whoso gruccheth ought, he dooth folye. (I.3039-42, 3045)

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

Be preue [steadfast] and be pacient in payne and in joye;

For he that is to raken [hasty] to renden his clothez
Mot efte sitte with more vnsounde [trouble] to sewe hem togeder.

Forthy when pouerté me enprecez and paynez innoȝe

Ful softly with suffraunce saȝttel [reconcile] me bihouez. (525-29)

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

The poet’s argument on its face is simple, but the larger context of 14th-century poverty debates in which it appears is dauntingly complex. His decision, for example, to start with the phrase “in hert pouerté” (13), but then to shift the meaning of “poverty” in the first Beatitude to a physical rather than a spiritual condition, cuts against the grain of a long tradition of interpretation that judged Jesus’ words as referring primarily to spiritual poverty. Most prominently, St. Augustine, in his De Sermone Domini, claims that in the Vulgate’s phrase “Beati pauperes spiritu,” the controlling word is “spiritu,” and that Jesus refers to humility, an inner state that often but not always coincides with physical hardship (4). The Gawain-poet is clearly familiar with at least part of Augustine’s body of work—Spearing contends that the poet’s linking of the first and eighth Beatitudes and assigning them the virtues of poverty and patience, respectively, in itself demonstrates a familiarity with Augustinian interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount, which he most likely encountered through the 13th-century Speculum Morale (Gawain-Poet 76)—but he just as clearly reaches different conclusions about the meaning and significance of “poverty.” Ad Putter summarizes Augustine’s position:

Poverty in spirit meant humility. It applied to material poverty only if it was inwardly accepted. Hence, poverty borne not voluntarily but out of necessity was not redemptive but damning. . . . In opposition to the Stoics, for whom patience, constancy in
prosperity and adversity, was simply man’s most reasonable and
dignified response to the lamentable fickleness of Fortune,
Augustine elaborated a doctrine of patience that posited God both
as the source of suffering and as its end. He insisted that the
suffering that counted as blessed was suffering “for the sake of
righteousness,” which Augustine glossed as suffering borne with
God and the afterlife in mind. Tolerating suffering for other
reasons—and again the idea was to become a commonplace—was
no true patience. (110)

Putter refers as well to Augustine’s short treatise on patience, De Patientia, though this work in
some ways resists his generalization that “poverty borne not voluntarily but out of necessity was
not redemptive but damning.” In De Patientia, Augustine cites both the “poor in spirit” and the
materially “needy and the poor” among those potentially “worthy of the name of this virtue”
(531). The inclusion suggests that Augustine may not have disagreed entirely with the Gawain-
poet’s position on the issue, but he nevertheless issues a harsh corrective to those who would
argue that the mere endurance of physical hardship engenders virtuous and lasting patience, a
corrective which warns against precisely the motivations that the Gawain-poet expresses:

Whence even if it chance them that they do bear up under any
hardships or difficulties, either that they may not displease men, or
that they may not suffer worse, or in self-pleasing and love of their
own presumption, do with most proud will bear up under these
same, it is meet that concerning patience this be said unto them,
which concerning wisdom the blessed Apostle James saith, “This
wisdom cometh not from above, but is earthly, animal, devilish.”

For why may there not be a false patience of the proud, as there is a false wisdom of the proud? (531)

Augustine concludes the treatise by defining the “poor of Christ” in purely spiritual terms: “Of these poor, as yet believing, not yet beholding; as yet hoping, not yet enjoying; as yet sighing in desire, not yet reigning in felicity; as yet hungering and thirsting, not yet satisfied: of these poor, then, ‘the patience shall not perish for ever’” (536). Richard Rolle expresses the same idea in English in his “Form of Perfect Living”: “For if that thou loue pouerte, and despisest richesse and delites of this world, and hold thi self vile and pouer, and that thou hast noght of thi self bot syn, for this pouert thou shalt haue richesse withouten end” (Prose and Verse 21).

From these Augustinian treatises, it might seem reasonable to label the Gawain-poet’s resigned attitude toward inevitable poverty and his pragmatic decision to embrace patience as Stoic, though in a 14th-century context, it would be more accurate to view it merely as a secular form of applied ethics—as Putter labels it, a “secularization of patience” (113)—which simply does not take Patristic commentary on the Beatitudes into account. Putter notes that the poet’s view is “not unlike the Stoic ideal of patience as the most reasonable response to life’s inevitable changes of fortune,” and says that this ideal under various different names “had by the later Middle Ages become more acceptable than it had been for Augustine,” citing moral compendia such as the 12th-century Moralium Dogma Philosophorum, which freely uses pagan philosophers to “formulate a secular ethics for the layman” (113). Elizabeth Keiser views the poet’s position as simply practical as well: “The narrator’s association of himself with two such imperious ladies as Poverty and Patience suggests less of the high playfulness of Francis of Assisi’s idealization of Poverty as his beloved than a practical stoicism born of personal
experience: it is simply futile to try to avoid suffering if you are poor” (218).

But it would also be accurate to label the poet’s position as anti-fraternal, since friars were the most vocal about supporting Augustinian and Franciscan views on poverty. Anderson notes that the poet’s rhetoric in *Patience* “involves blurring the distinction between the spiritual poverty of the first beatitude and the physical poverty which the narrator says he has to endure” (15). “Blurring” is an apt term in this context, but a problematic one as well, since the distinction between these two forms of poverty, and strenuous attempts on the part of interested parties to delineate them clearly, without blurring, was precisely what was at issue in 14th-century debates over clerical poverty.

An Augustinian emphasis on the spiritual quality of poverty, and a denial of the virtues of involuntary material poverty, was standard in particular for fraternal orders, which had a stake in viewing their own vows of voluntary mendicancy as superior, and themselves as the inheritors of heaven’s kingdom. This interpretive tradition among the friars, and the counter-tradition of their 14th-century detractors who viewed mendicancy as an abomination, is covered in detail in Chapter 2, but it is useful to note that though the *Gawain*-poet’s description of poverty does not appear here as part of an explicitly anticlerical critique, a nearly identical position was used by many of his contemporaries in the service of explicit attacks upon fraternal mendicancy.

William of St. Amour, the original anti-fraternal critic of the 13th century, argues that voluntary begging violates biblical commands that apostles perform manual labor, such as 1 Thessalonians 4:11: “worche with youre hoondis, as we han comaundid to you.” Following suit, both FitzRalph and Langland contend that only the involuntary poor deserve to be given alms, as they are representatives of Christ himself in another teaching from the Gospel of Matthew, the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matt. 25:31-46). Those who willingly beg for alms without
need, however, should be denied. As noted previously, FitzRalph’s *Defensio Curatorum* (1357) reaches this conclusion through the argument that poverty is originally a consequence of sin, which should not be willingly taken up or loved as a virtue in itself:

> Also noon effect of synne is worthi to be loued for hit-silf aloon
> thouȝ hit be loued in herte that is infect; but pouert is the effect of synne; thanne pouert is nouȝt worthi to be loued for hit-silf aloon.

> That pouert is the effect of synne, y preue hit, for ȝif oure forme fader & moder [Adam & Eve] hadde neuer y-synned, schuld neuer haue be pore man of oure kynde. (80)

Following this same logic, FitzRalph’s Fourth London Sermon, *Nemo Vos Seducat*, a point-by-point response to a number of critiques lodged against him by frairs, argues that Christ “was always or continuously poor, not because he loved or desired poverty for its own sake, but because the restriction of his natural lordship compelled it” (qtd. in Scase 55). Put another way, Christ’s poverty was not merely spiritual but material, and though it was God’s will, it was in a sense involuntary, and he did not embrace it as an absolute good. Therefore, almsgivers should give only to those who are genuinely poor against their will, not to voluntary mendicants. He spells out the argument even more directly in the first six of his nine conclusions against the friars in *Defensio Curatorum*:

1. Oure Lord Ihesus, in his conuersacioun of manhed, alwey was pore, nouȝt for he wolde & loued povert by-cause of hitself.
2. Oure Lord Ihesus neuer beggide wilfullic he.
3. Crist neuer tauȝt wilfulliche to begge.
4. Oure Lord Ihesus tauȝte that no man schuld wilfulliche begge.
5. no man may redilich & holiliche wilful beggyng vpon hym
take, euermore to holde.

6. hit is nouȝt of the reule of frere menours, wilful begginge to
kepe & holde. (39-40)

In his elaboration of the fourth point, FitzRalph attempts to delineate which types of poor people
are genuinely poor against their will and which are not, and advocates withholding alms from
those who feign sickness or disability. In explicating Jesus’ command to the host of a feast in
Luke 14:12-14 to invite guests who “haueth noȝt whereof thei mowe quyte [repay] hit to thee,”
FitzRalph advises that “pore men that beth stalworthe and stronge schulde nouȝt be cleped to the
feeste of beggers, for thei mowe quyte hit with her trauail. . . . Also by his sentence of dome &
decree, Poul seith: ‘Who that wole nouȝt trauaile schal nouȝt ete’” (88). In FitzRalph’s polemic,
these “faitours,” or falsely needy, are interchangeable with the friars, since in both cases their
begging steals resources that might have donated to the truly poor. The ultimate implication of
his conclusions appears near the end of the treatise: “He that taketh vpon hym sich beggerie,
maketh hym-silf vnable to the office of prest & to ech holy ordre” (91). Wyclif would echo this
sentiment decades later, aptly summarized by the Blackfriars synod’s 23rd Conclusion against
him: “That friars are bound to obtain their living by the labour of their hands, and not by
begging” (Workman II.417)

FitzRalph’s picture of Jesus in the Defensio parallels the poet’s depiction of himself in
Patience—both are members of the involuntary poor, not choosing a state of penury willingly
but embracing it as a virtue when it comes. At a later point in the Defensio, FitzRalph describes
hearing a friar preach on the four degrees of poverty, and “that the ferthe degre is of most
parfriȝtnesse of the gospel & is to haue no-thynge in this worlde in propre nother in comyn but
begge with Crist. & that sawe sclaundrith the staat of ȝow & of vs alle that beth in lowere degre” (70). The friars’ preaching on “perfect poverty,” in other words, actually slanders those who are in poverty against their will, a group FitzRalph addresses and includes himself within through the pronouns “ȝow” and “vs alle”—the same group to whom the *Patience* narrator preaches, and to which he claims he belongs.

The primary difference between FitzRalph and the *Gawain*-poet on this issue is that the poet does not carry his claim about the virtues of involuntary poverty any further forward, into an indictment of the mendicants’ voluntary poverty. The poem’s introductory observations about poverty are the same as those that FitzRalph and others in the antifraternal tradition took as a logical first step, but the poet is simultaneously standing on the foundations of the tradition while apparently choosing to position himself at a distance from it. For all of the congruences between his work and these critics, he does not follow their logic to its next step or to its end, with harsh and specific anticlerical attacks. He does not explicitly reject such attacks, a fact which opens up the poem’s discussion of poverty to many interesting possibilities, but simply declines to make them as he moves the story of Jonah forward.

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

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

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

In contrast, Langland refers to the Virgin Mary as a “pure [perfectly] povere maide and to a povere man ywedded” (247)—truly poor, not by choice but by the circumstance of God’s will. Though not every Christian can have exactly this kind of poverty—otherwise none would be left to donate alms and “povere peple to plese” (183)—Scripture advises that in honor of Christ’s “povere apparaille and pilgrymes wedes” (234) that everyone, rich or poor, should “apparaille us noght over proudly—for pilgrymes are we alle” (240), and instead wear “poore clothynge” (244).
Scripture says that God and “alle the wise that evere were, by aught I kan aspye, / Preisen poverte for best lif, if paciense it folwe” (254-55). These lines summarize succinctly Langland’s argument in this section of the poem—a number of states might be termed “poverty,” but the kind that deserves praise, which leads to the best life, is genuine material hardship that leads to patience. In this way, involuntary poverty resembles the voluntary practice of penance—both of which, “poverte or penaunce,” Scripture advises Will to “paciently ytake” (261).

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

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

If preestes weren wise, thei wolde no silver take

For masses ne for matyns, noght hir mete of usureres,

Ne neither kirtel [tunic] ne cote, theigh thei for cold sholde deye . . .

*Spera in Deo* [Trust in God] speketh of preestes that have no spendyng silver

That if thei travaille truweliche and truste in God almyghty,

Hem sholde lakke no liflode, neyther lynnen ne wollen.

Thanne nedeth yow noght to nyme silver for masses that ye syngen.

(281-83, 285-88)

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

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

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

A more simplistic view of the poverty debate, though set in a highly creative form, can be
found in the satirical tract entitled “Epistola Sathanae ad Cleros” (ca. 1400), in which a letter
written in the voice of Satan ironically attacks “thes lewid Lollers” and praises “the lyvys of your
prelatis and your clarkis, and of all your religious, and specially of yow,” the friars (Hudson, ed.,
Selections 92). Satan praises the friars in particular for departing from the principles of their
founders, who lived “a poore lyf in mekenes aftur Crist” and met their physical needs “by mans
almes without beggery” (91). Now the friars not only “kepe no pouerte nor lowlynes of hert, but
alonly in countenance and faynyng wordis and colour,” but they actually follow Satan’s teaching
in holding that the genuinely poor are less worthy of grace—they are most concerned with “how
thei xuld increase in riches, and hate comon beggers and poore men, and that thei schuld not be
poore in dede” (92). The virtuous Lollard belief, of course, is that the involuntary poor are the
most deserving of alms, but Satan’s friends the friars intentionally feign poverty in order to steal
from them.

Wyclif’s views on poverty, like his views on divine and civil dominion more broadly, are
far less straightforward than FitzRalph’s, Langland’s, or the Lollard satirist’s, in part because the
body of Wyclif’s works is so much larger and spans several decades, over which time his
thinking on the issue of poverty subtly shifted. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, Wyclif in his earlier works, up to at least *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (ca.1378), voices approval for the theory behind fraternal mendicancy and urges secular clerics to consider voluntary dispossession, revering the founders of the fraternal orders as saints and attacking only what he views as a corruption of their ideals among contemporary friars. In his later polemical tracts, however, Wyclif’s attacks on both monks and friars become more strident, and he critiques at once the communal poverty of monks and the itinerant begging of friars. Though he never defines “poverty” as an involuntary state alone, leaving open the possibility that “men of every clerical class, whose hearts are touched by the Holy Spirit, could be inspired with a contempt for the world, thereby taking up a life of evangelical poverty for the sake of Christ” (*On the Truth* 196; *De Veritate* I.368), he does reach the conclusion in later tracts that only a forceful disendowment of monasteries, dispossession of priests, and a denial of alms to friars who are not truly poor can bring about necessary reform in a corrupt church. Only an enforced poverty, he argues in *De Simonia* (ca. 1380), “would keep out from the ranks of the clergy those who take orders only for the sake of pay,” and bring in those who have the “serene and evangelical attitude to be content with the bare necessities of life” (*On Simony* 134; *De Simonia* 86). In a later sermon, he says that “a restoration of the Church to this primitive privilege of poverty in which the clergy should possess no more than would enable them to discharge their spiritual duties, with all appropriations and endowments at an end [is] the medicine needful for extinguishing the poison of the devil” (Workman II.14-15; *Sermones* II.269).

The *Gawain*-poet, of course, though he shares FitzRalph, Langland, and the later Wyclif’s perspectives on poverty in the abstract, does not maneuver them so openly into an anticlerical direction. He praises involuntary poverty, and his assertion that it is an inescapable
route to the virtue of patience and God’s blessing is a typical starting point for anti-fraternal critiques within 14th-century poverty debates, but he participates fully in only the first half of what Scase calls the “audacious new poverty polemic in which poverty is praiseworthy but voluntary mendicancy reprehensible” (58). He clearly rejects the Augustinian idea that involuntary poverty is necessarily a sinful condition, and instead links it thematically with the virtue of patience, as Langland does, through the Beatitudes. At the same time, though the passage does not condemn the voluntary mendicancy of the fraternal orders, neither does the poet endorse it, and he subscribes to a view of poverty that would be difficult to reconcile with it, as an unlooked-for curse which God’s grace can transfigure into an unearned blessing. He makes no direct reference to friars or other clerics, but he transitions from his discussion of poverty and patience to a depiction of an itinerant prophet, called by God to a vocation not unlike that of a wandering friar or missionary priest. Jonah eventually comes to obedience, finds God’s mercy, and achieves greater wisdom not through a voluntary renunciation of worldly goods, but through an enforced state of impoverishment and pain, similar to the narrator’s. Jonah’s painful circumstances—on the storm-tossed ship, inside the hellishly stinking whale, scorched beneath the worm-eaten bower—represent God’s attempts to shake him out of his sin and corruption, akin to the forceful dispossession FitzRalph, Wyclif, and Langland imagined a virtuous king, in this case “the hyȝe Heuen-Kyng” (257), inflicting on his priests for their own good.

4. The “Perils” of Priesthood: Jonah as Absentee

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

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

“If I bowe to His bode [command] and bryng hem this tale,
And I be nummen [taken] in Nuniue, my nyes [trouble] begynes:
He telles me those traytoures arn typped [extreme] schrewes;
I com wyth those tythyges, thay ta me bylyue [immediately],
Pynez me in a prysoun, put me in stokkes,
Wrythe me in a warlok [fetters], wrast out myn yȝen.
This is a meruayl messsage a man for to preche
Amonge enmyes so mony and mansed [cursed] fendes,
Bot if my gaynlych God such gref to me wolde,
For desert of sum sake that I slayn were.
At all peryles,” quoth the prophete, “I aproche hit no nerre.” (75-85)
Even as he makes his way to the port of Joppa and finds a ship to board, Jonah continues to
dwell on the dangers of Nineveh in his mind, and on God’s apparent unconcern for his fate:

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

Because the poet has put the reader in the position of hearing Jonah’s thoughts, and because
those thoughts dwell only on panicked fear and mistrust of God’s concern, the prophet’s final
complaint about knowing in advance that God would be merciful, which the poet maintains
nearly verbatim from his biblical source (413-20), is rendered even more absurd and ironic.

When Jonah asks, “Watz not this ilk my worde that worthen is nouthe [now come to pass], / That
I kest [spoke] in my cuntré?” (414-15), we know with a certainty the Bible does not provide that
Jonah has neither said nor thought any such thing.

Medieval commentaries, however, tend to take Jonah’s final complaint more or less at its
word, and to construct a reading of his character that emphasizes his typological connection to
Christ, a connection Jesus himself introduces in Matt. 12:38-41 and Luke 11:29-32, where he
compares Israel unfavorably to Nineveh and his own three days in the grave to Jonah’s three
days in the whale. Of course, the Gawain-poet is responsive to this interpretation of Jonah as
well, but he uses it not to explain or excuse Jonah’s behavior but to emphasize his extreme
distance from the ideal of Christ. Jonah’s nightmare of being crucified naked on a “rode” (95-
96) reminds the reader of Christ but at the same time separates Jonah from him—“Jonah’s
rejection both of the mission and the cross,” John Friedman writes, “indicate clearly that we are
to see the prophet failing at being Christ rather than merely prefiguring him” (104). Rather than
embracing death on a cross as Christ did, he runs from it in mortal fear.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate how far the poet’s treatment of Jonah departs from the standard 14th-century interpretive tradition is to compare it to the recently translated “Ordinary Gloss on Jonah,” a synthesized compendium of glosses that range from ancient Church Fathers to 12th-century commentators, and which its translator Ryan McDermott calls “the most widely used edition of the Bible in the later Middle Ages and well into the sixteenth century” (424). McDermott cites *Patience* as one of many medieval works influenced by the Gloss, but the poem shows little trace of the Gloss as a source, unless as an interpretation the poet deliberately decides to reject. The commentators quoted by the Gloss give an entirely sympathetic reading to Jonah’s reasons for fleeing, not enumerated in the biblical text but rooted in Jonah’s final complaint: “When by means of illuminating prophecy Jonah saw the sinners of the city of Nineveh about to obtain the mercy of God, he did not want to go to proclaim the destruction of Nineveh because he did not want to seem to preach false things” (426). They describe this view of Jonah’s as false and a human failing, since he is “ignorant of the dispensation of God, who desires the salvation of men converting to him more than [their] destruction” (426-27), but it is a far cry from the *Gawain*-poet’s image of a prophet merely afraid of persecution. In *Patience*, Jonah is a coward; in the Gloss, he has “suffered something human” (427); his failure is theological, as he holds an incomplete understanding of God’s nature.

The Gloss also draws on a multitude of typological comparisons between Jonah and Christ—he prefigures “the passion of the Lord by his shipwreck” (427); his name means “dove,” the image of the Holy Spirit that descended on Jesus; he is sent to Nineveh as Christ “is sent to the world” (427); he flees his homeland as Christ departed from heaven for “the sea of this world” (428), etc. As the number of commentators and their allegories multiply, they at times
contradict one another—for example, “the world” is represented variously by Nineveh, Tarshish, and the sea; both Jonah and Nineveh are compared in different contexts to Cain (428); and in one of the compendium’s more unusual moments, the typology shifts away from Jonah and Christ becomes the worm that eats the woodbine (437)—but in virtually every instance, the comparisons excuse Jonah from any serious wrongdoing. In one very sympathetic reading, the prophet is given the ability to foretell Christ’s salvation for the Gentiles, an event he knows will bring condemnation to the Jews, and he resists bringing good news to the Gentiles of Nineveh on behalf of his own people:

Because the spirit revealed it to him, the prophet knew that the repentance of the nations was the fall of the Jews, and so the lover of his homeland does not so much begrudge Nineveh as he desires that his people not perish. . . . He feared that once the Gentiles were converted by his preaching, the Jews would be completely abandoned in his own lifetime, and for this reason he fled. (428)

The Gloss further indicates that for the same reason, Jesus himself offered a token resistance to God’s inescapable will: “Before his passion, Christ had in a certain sense tried to escape obeying God, when he says, ‘It is not good to take the bread of the children.’ [Matt. 15.26]. And again, ‘Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me.’ [Matt. 26.42]. But after his Resurrection, willingly leaving behind the faithless ones, he preaches to the world what had been commanded before the passion” (434). The first quotation from Matthew refers to Jesus’ initial reluctance to perform a miracle for a Samaritan woman, since he has come first for the children of Israel; the second refers to his apparent reluctance to die on the cross, while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. When the Gloss reaches the opening verses of Chapter 3, after Jonah
has been released from the whale and God’s command comes to him for the second time, a
commentator writes, “All of this is fitting for Christ according to the form of a servant: that he is
ordered; that he obeys; that he does not want it; that he is compelled once again to want it; that
the second time he follows the Father’s will” (434). In a similar way, Jonah’s outraged response
to Nineveh’s salvation, that God should “take my soule fro me; for deth is betere to me than lijf”
(4:3), is linked to Christ’s deliberate offering of his life to save others: “‘Alive, I was not able to
save one tribe of Israel; I will die and the whole world will be saved.’ . . . Beautifully Jonah—
that is, suffering—is troubled even unto death because he endured many things, to the extent he
was able, so that the people of the Jews might not perish” (436).

In summary, for the commentators compiled in the Ordinary Gloss, even the qualities that
most mark Jonah as a sinner and negative exemplar from the beginning of the biblical story—his
disobedience and anger—are read into the allegory as Christ-like attributes. Neither Christ nor
Jonah is ever described in the Gloss as fearful; the possibility is never even broached. In other
commentaries the poet may have consulted, the likelihood of Jonah’s fear may be raised, but
only to be dismissed in favor of a more allegorical, or at least more sympathetic, reading. For
example, Marbod of Rennes, a 12th-century French bishop of whose work the Gawain-poet was
“fully aware” (Putter 132), writes in his commentary on Jonah, Naufragium Jonae Prophetae:

Perhups, he did not go to prophesy because he feared his fate.

Because as the messenger of news that would aggrieve the people,
he might be killed, or beaten, or put to the sword, or perhaps burned
at the stake. But he is not strong who fears the throes of death so
much that he prefers the love of life to the art of dying nobly. Nor
does the person who does not obey God in trust really believe in
him. *This reason does not therefore become our prophet.* But he knew God; that he tries to call back to him, and quickly has mercy if someone renounces his former evil ... This is what the missionary, who survived the abyss, feared: that he would have lied if what he had announced would not happen. (qtd. in Putter 132; italics his)

Marbod draws a rhetorical contrast here between “the love of life” and “the art of dying nobly,” one shared by anticlerical critics who would accuse the clergy of sloth, but Marbod refuses to apply the critique to Jonah, dismissing it out of hand as unworthy of the prophet.

Other stark differences between the Ordinary Gloss’s and Patience’s depiction of the prophet abound. For example, a commentator observes that both Jonah and Jesus slept on ships during storms, in Jesus’ case just before the miracle that calms the wind and waves: “in the midst of storms—that is, his passion and cries on the cross—[and] submerged in hell, he might save those whom he was neglecting, it would seem, by sleeping on a ship” (428-29). Though the Gloss also cites several authorities who interpret Jonah’s sleep to signify “man languishing in the slumber of his going astray,” it also justifies his behavior somewhat with the claim that “he sleeps not out of insouciance but out of melancholy” (429). Either way, its sober depiction is far from the panicked Jonah of Patience, who “watz flowen for ferde [fear] of the flode lotes [noise] / Into the bothem of the bot, and on a brede [board] lyggede” (183-84), and who, once he does fall asleep, slobbers and snores comically, prompting the sailor who is sent to find him to kick and wish him awakened by a devil: “Slypped vpon a sloumbe-selepe, and sloberande he routes [snores]. / The freke hym frunt with his fot and bede hym ferk vp: / Ther Ragnel [a devil] in his rakentes [chains] hym rere [rouse] of his dremes!” (186-88). When Jonah is thrown overboard, the Gloss commentators depict him as willingly, even eagerly, embracing his fate in the sea,
“Not fighting back, but stretching out his hands through the will of God” (431), whereas *Patience* shows the sailors seizing him forcibly “by top and bi to [toe]” (229), the whale swallowing him while “the folk yet haldande his fete” (251), and Jonah continuing to panic at the likelihood of death, “malskred [bewildered] in drede” (255). Lastly, over the course of several verses, the Gloss quotes an interpretation of the story as a sacramental allegory, in which Jonah, like Christ, is both “victim and priest” (434), both administering a sacrifice on behalf of a sinful people and providing the sacrifice itself, his own body which is consumed. While this interpretation might have provided the poet an opportunity to add eucharistic imagery to a story that already includes explicit references to penance and the imagery of baptism, the idea is nowhere present in the poem. When the whale swallows Jonah, the poet compares the animal’s size to a “munster,” or church building, but within the metaphor, Jonah’s body is not a eucharistic wafer but merely a speck of dust: “As mote in at a munster-dor, so mukel [large] wern his chawlez” (268). On nearly every count, the *Gawain*-poet rejects, whether deliberately or not, the persistent typological interpretations of the Gloss, finding in the prophet a fully human rather than divine character, regardless of his spiritual authority.

The most significant aspect of Jonah’s humanity in the first half of the story is his fear, for physical dangers which his imagination enumerates in detail: prison, stocks, fetters, gouged-out eyes, and death on a cross. Jonah describes these imagined torments collectively as “nyes” (76), troubles or injuries, and as “peryles” (85). He uses the latter term to describe not only what the Ninevites but also God might do to him, as he considers that God may secretly intend this very outcome, to punish him for an unknown sin—perhaps, he thinks, “‘God such gref to me wolde, / For desert of some sake [fault] that I slayn were. / At alle peryles,’ quoth the prophete, ‘I aproche hit no nerre’” (83-85). The “perils” of God’s wrath for fleeing, Jonah calculates, will be
lesser than the perils of obedience, especially if God plans to martyr him. The poet emphasizes
the irony of this attitude by repeating the word in an editorial aside when Jonah boards the ship:
“Lo, the wytles wrechche! For he wolde noȝt suffer, / Now hatz he put hym in plyt of peril wel
more” (113-14). It turns out the “wytles” Jonah has made a grave miscalculation: the perils of
resisting God’s commands are “wel more” than those of physical persecution in Nineveh.

This type of argument, in which the physical dangers of humiliation, injury, or death are
compared rhetorically to the spiritual, often eternal consequences of disobedience to God—
Marbod’s argument above, though he declines to apply it to Jonah—forms a significant sub-
theme within the 14th-century tradition of offering condemnation or advice to wayward spiritual
leaders, particularly those office-holders who have neglected their callings by becoming
simonists, pluralists, absentees, or holders of alien benefices. In addition to being similar in
structure to the Gawain-poet’s accusations against Jonah, these arguments often use a similar
vocabulary, including the word “peril” to describe the risks associated with faithful clerical
service. Trevisa’s translation of FitzRalph’s Defensio Curatorum, for example, attacks the
covetousness of friars who sell their clerical services to obtain wealth and “privileges” at the
expense of parish priests, who have a duty to perform those services for tithes alone:

Also hit semeth that freres infecte hem-self with the synne of
couetise in procuringe of these priuyleges; first for thei procured
nouȝt othere priuyleges in helpe of othere peryls of the office of
presthode, as to folly children in help of curatours, & housle
paryschons on Ester day and anoynt seke men at her ende day.
And these dedes myȝt be as medeful as the othere; but these thei
lefte & procuride priuyleges, to the whiche longeth worldlich
FitzRalph’s objection here is that friars receive payment for the least difficult of clerical tasks, namely the baptisms and burials of rich donors, without enduring the “peryls” of the office, which defines by listing several unsavory tasks of a parish priest—working with children, hearing numerous confessions for penance on Easter, and anointing the sick. He also pointedly includes among these tasks the funeral services of “pore dede mennes bodyes for to burie,” and compares the friars to “vulturs” who “smelleth [the] mete” of rich men’s corpses and flock to them (72). Rather than encounter the perils of working with the poor for little material reward, the friars seek easy riches: “Y trowe nouȝt that sithe the world was first made, was an esyere wey, more slyȝ & wyly to gadre riches, than by the forseide priuyleges with the obligacioun of beggerie sothlich other y-feyned” (72).

Anticlerical writers marshalled similar arguments against what historian William Pantin describes with plentiful examples from the late 14th century as “a widespread system of sinecurism, absenteeism, and pluralism” (36). Annates, or benefices reserved for papal appointment, were almost always filled in England by alien office-holders and paid for by papal taxes levied on local bishoprics as well as on the royal treasury. McFarlane explains that these annates “were an important item in the papal budget. . . . The princely incomes drawn by certain favoured cardinals, usually the pope’s own kinsmen, from a score of valuable benefices which they never visited in person, were a just cause of scandal” (50), and particularly so in England, where opposition to them took on a patriotic as well as religious character. “Thus a bishopric or archdeaconry would be held by a royal or papal official,” Pantin writes, “and the bishop’s or archdeacon’s work would be done by a substitute” (35-36). Though canon law dating to the Lateran Council of 1215 severely restricted the practice in theory (Pantin 39), nevertheless “in
the cathedral chapter, many a canon would be non-resident, and his place in the choir would be
taken by a vicar-choral. In many parishes, the tithes would go to a non-resident rector, who
might be anything from the Keeper of the Privy Seal to a university student, or to a monastery or
a college, and the work would be done by a substitute, a vicar or chaplain” (36). “Most
mischievous of all,” writes Workman, “were the instances of pluralism where the offender was a
mere boy, an abuse which roused the wrath of Wyclif” (II.111-12). Pantin notes that chroniclers
of English history “were particularly outspoken critics in the days before the Lollard menace
tended to close the ranks of the clergy” (71), but even after this point, a diverse group of
religious and secular writers such as Wyclif, Trevisa, Chaucer, and Langland continued to press
the issue, with rhetoric akin to FitzRalph’s in attacking those who neglected the more difficult
responsibilities of priesthood.

In *De Veritate*, Wyclif accuses absentee clerics of neglecting the work of Christ to which
they have been called, and to which God will hold them accountable on Judgment Day for the
dangers their flocks suffered as a result: “You did not strengthen the weak, did not heal the sick,
did not bind up the broken, did not bring back the abandoned, did not seek after the lost” (*On the
Truth* 296; II.227).14 In *De Simonia*, he describes pluralism and absenteeism as an especially
pernicious form of simony, since it robs parishes not only of material wealth but of strong
preaching, as the substitute office-holder is typically an inferior speaker or one who neglects to
preach altogether. These absentee priests, as well as monks who refuse to preach publicly in
favor of a private contemplative life, are condemned for ignoring the spiritual peril of their
charges in favor of physical comfort. In the end, Wyclif argues, they will be held responsible for
the lost souls in their care, and the dangers of hell to which they subjected their parishioners will
become their own:
How, therefore, will those rectors respond on the day of judgment for souls whose tenths they enjoy if by preaching they did not direct them on the road to virtue and to God’s law? . . . For prayer, particularly of a simoniac, cannot make up for the duty of preaching . . . (On Simony 158; 107).15

In a sermon on Luke 10 from the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle, which Hudson titles “The Duty of the Priesthood,” and which is based in part on Wyclif’s sermon on the same passage (Sermones II.159-65), the poor priest tells his fellow preachers that, though Christ “tellith hem the peril before” of their vocation, and it is “this perelous goyng that makith it more meedful,” in fact the “couetise of prestis is moche more perilous in this caas” (Hudson, ed., Selections 120-21). For while the physical deprivations of ministry might force preachers “to trauele as Poul dide, or to suffre wilfulli hungir and thirst . . . but coueitise of wickid prestis blemischith hem and the peple” (121). The physical dangers are real, and prove the worth of their preaching enterprise, but the spiritual risks may cause more serious damage.

A more subtle example of this argument comes in Chaucer’s depiction of the Parson, a wholly positive exemplar whom we are told at his introduction is “in adversitee ful pacient” (I.484), and who eagerly performs the duties FitzRalph says the friars shirk, even at great discomfort and physical risk: “But he lefte nat, for reyn ne thonder, / In siknesse nor in meschief to visite / The ferreste [furthest] in his parisshe, muche and lite [great and small]” (492-94). Though the income from his impoverished parish’s tithes is small, he refuses to abandon his flock even temporarily to supplement his wealth by singing at a chantry in London, knowing the great danger they might fall into during his absence:

He sette nat his benefice to hyre
And leet his sheep encombred in the myre
And ran to Londoun unto Seinte Poules
To seken hym a chaunterie for soules,
Or with a bretherhed to been withholde;
But dwelte at hoom, and kept wel his folde,
So that the wolf ne made it nat myscarie;
He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie. (I.507-14)

For the Parson, the physical risks of enduring poverty as a “povre persoun” among “povre
parisshens” (478, 488) do not compare to the spiritual risks of leaving them to figurative wolves.
Chaucer’s unqualified praise for the Parson, who refuses to participate in even the mildest and
most justifiable form of pluralism and absenteeism, serves as a clear rebuke to those who do.
Langland offers a more direct critique in the Prologue to Piers Plowman, as he describes a group
of priests from poor parishes who beg their bishop “To have a licence and leve at London to
dwelle, / And synge ther for symonie, for silver is swete” (B.Pro.85-86). In the even more blunt
words of a later Lollard sermon, “no curat owith to leue his schepe vnkept among the wolues of
helle & ride with grete coost to ferre placis for pride, enuye or coueitise of worldly clerkis”
(Matthew, ed., 32).

As discussed more fully in Chapter 2, a more unusual category of absentees, but one
directly relevant to the depiction of Jonah in Patience, is that of bishops appointed to non-
existent foreign sees. These bishops in name only would theoretically serve as missionaries to
the Muslim regions where their bishoprics were located, but in practice they simply received a
papal benefice—a sinecure that did not require even the bare minimum of finding a local
replacement. In the Piers Plowman B-text, Langland rebukes these false beneficers through the
character Anima, who suggests that if they receive payment as missionaries, they should endure the “perils” of missionaries, by attempting to convert the Muslims in their care:

   Allas, that men so longe on Makometh sholde bileve!
   So manye prelates to preche as the Pope maketh—
   Of Nazareth, of Nynyve, of Neptalym and Damaske.
   That thei ne wente as Crist wisseth—sithen thei wilne a name—
   To be pastours and preche the passion of Jesus,
   And as hymself seide, so to lyve and dye:

   *Bonus pastor animam suam ponit* [The good shepherd giveth his life] . . .

   And that is routhe for the rightful men that in the reawme wonyen,
   And a peril to the Pope and prelates that he maketh,

   That bere bisshopes names of Bethleem and of Babiloine. (491-96, 507-09)

The list of foreign cities for which the Pope “maketh” imaginary bishoprics is deliberately chosen by Langland, each one the scene of a biblical character’s courage in preaching to hostile unbelievers—Nazareth and Bethlehem, the childhood homes of Jesus, where “no profete is resseyued” (Luke 4:24) and Christ preaches at the risk of his life (Matt. 13:54-58, Mark 6:1-6, Luke 4:28-30); Naphtali, hometown of the prophet Tobias from the Apocryphal Book of Tobit (1:1), who pursues a demon across the foreign lands of Nineveh (1:11) and Media (1:16); Damascus, site of the Apostle Paul’s conversion and staging point for his extensive missionary travels (Acts 9:1-22, 26:20); Babylon, city of exile for the heroic Israelites Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego throughout the Book of Daniel; and of course Jonah’s Nineveh. These cities, Anima suggests, are no more physically dangerous for Christian missionaries now than they were in the time of the biblical prophets, and the spiritual peril of the men there who have
believed “so longe on Makometh” is at least as great as that of their pagan forebears. The “peril” she references in line 508 does not refer to either of these, however, but rather to the spiritual danger that attends the beneficers who accept these appointments, as well as the Pope who offers them. The word carries the same ironic tone as it does in *Patience*—like Jonah, who has imperilled himself by fleeing from peril in a foreign land, these bishops risk spiritual death with their unwillingness to sacrifice their physical lives for a faraway flock.

In the opening scenes of *Patience*, Jonah represents an absentee of the worst kind. He is not merely greedy or overcommitted or at a physical remove from the people he has been called to serve. Unlike the recipient of an alien benefice or non-existent office, he has not simply received payment for work he does not intend to do; unlike a pluralist, he has not accepted a position it is physically impossible for him fill. With his flight, he actively refuses a direct assignment from God for work that is eminently possible, simply because it is disagreeable and risky. He refuses the call because he does not trust God, an untenable position for one who would serve as His representative. The remedy for his mistrust and disobedience involves a dramatic irony, as God instills a sense of trust in Jonah by first imperilling him physically and only then providing a means of salvation. Inside the whale, “he watz sokored by that Syre that syttes so hiȝe” (261), an ironic echo of Jonah’s earlier terror that the “Syre [who] syttes . . . on sege so hyȝe” (93) is too lofty to care about his life and has marked him for crucifixion. When Jonah expresses a clear sense of remorse and requests that He “Haf now mercy of Thy man and his mysdedes” (287), God provides the “hyrne” (289) which keeps him afloat and alive in the whale’s hellish belly, until at last Jonah voices the “prayer ful prest” (303) in which he promises to make the ultimate sacrificial gift of his life in God’s service:

“Bot I dewolutely awowe . . .
Soberly to do The sacrafyse when I schal saue worthe [am saved],
And offer The for my hele a ful hol gyfte,
And halde goud that Thou me hetes [commands]: haf here my trauthe.” (333-36)

Jonah’s response to the pain God has inflicted upon him is significantly more than the narrator’s passive and resigned decision to praise rather than complain about poverty in the poem’s introduction; his is an active eagerness, expressed by the word “prest,” to pursue his vocation as God’s mouthpiece. While writers in the Ordinary Gloss imagine Jonah embracing his fate the moment he enters the sea, an interpretation that keeps his typological parallel to Christ intact, the poet imagines that he must first pass through the hellish torments of a penitential process before reaching his final spiritual state—not of fleeing from God, not of defeated acceptance of irresistible powers outside his control, but of an active and vigorous return to the errand he forsook. He has emerged from sleep and drowning and death to the height of action and life, as he receives God’s call again and responds so promptly he reaches Nineveh within the same day: “Then the renk radly [quickly] ros as he myȝt, / And to Niniue that naȝt he neȝed [neared] ful euen” (351-52). As Scattergood observes, this accords with a recurring theme in medieval penitential manuals, that patience is “a countervailing moral virtue against the sin of sloth . . . as well as more traditionally against anger” (127); or as Chaucer’s exemplary Parson explains in his tale, the “vertu that is called fortitudo” or “long suffraunce” is the remedy “agayns this horrible synne of Accidie [Sloth]” (X.727-29). The patience Jonah acquires (at least temporarily—his encounter with the worm-eaten woodbine has yet to occur) does not merely help him to endure suffering passively, but prompts him to a zealous obedience in defiance of the fear of death that motivated him earlier, and without a clear promise of reward, in stark contrast to absentee clerics of the 14th-century anticlerical tradition who reap the material benefits of spiritual office without
enduring suffering or perils.

In the *Gawain*-poet’s retelling, Jonah’s painful experience in the whale offers a remedy for a multitude of sins, including his mistrust of God, fear of persecution, disobedience, anger, the greed that motivates absenteeism, and the sloth that sustains it, represented by Jonah’s slobbering sleep. All of these failings, which include three of the seven Deadly Sins, have the same cure in the poem—a forcible impoverishment and subsequent reliance on God’s mercy. As with the poet’s earlier take on poverty, he draws no explicit connection between Jonah’s situation and the theme of clerical dispossession, but Jonah is clearly a priest-like figure, and the rhetoric and imagery the poet uses to describe his transformation is similar enough to those who do openly advocate dispossession to place him squarely in the tradition of 14th-century anticlerical critics such as FitzRalph, Langland, Wyclif, and the Lollards. What further connects him to the latter two, and to their advocacy of itinerant “poor priests,” is his depiction of Jonah’s post-conversion preaching, which we will examine next.

5. The Lore Locked Within: Jonah as 14th-Century Preacher

The two illuminations for *Patience* that appear in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript depict Jonah being swallowed by the whale (F.86a), then preaching to a small group of Ninevites (F.86v). Despite the illustrator’s tendency to ignore or misread portions of the text, as when he fails to make the Green Knight’s skin green in *Sir Gawain* (F.94v), he appears in this case to have correctly intuited Jonah’s two most significant actions in the poem—first the process of his penance which begins in the whale, and second his response to God’s mercy immediately after his repentance, as he takes on his fullest priestly role and follows God’s call to preach.

When God initially commands Jonah to travel to Nineveh at the beginning of *Patience,*
He first tells him not to speak—“Nym the way to Nynyue wythouten other speche” (66)—then indicates that His plan is for Jonah to spread a message that God will reveal to him only after he arrives: “And in that ceté My saȝes [sayings] soghe alle aboute, / That in that place, at the poyntr, I put in thi hert” (67-68). God does express His plan to “venge Me” on Nineveh’s “vilanye and venym” (71), but the precise content of Jonah’s speech to the condemned city is apparently one that God will determine in the moment, “at the poyntr,” and “put” into his heart externally.

When Jonah’s call to prophesy to Nineveh comes for the second time and he accepts, provided God will “lene me thy grace” (347), God’s description of the process by which His word will come to Jonah and pass through him undergoes a significant change: “Ris, aproche then to prech, lo, the place here. / Lo, My lore is in the loke, lauce [loose] hit therinne” (349-50). The word “loke,” passive form of the verb “louken,” means to enclose or lock, as with the door of a room or prison, and the MED cites a variety of figurative possibilities as well, including the setting of a stone in jewelry, burial in a grave, and “God’s will” or “secret counsel” hidden in a person’s heart, the definition which the dictionary gives to its usage in Patience 350. The same definition suggests another interesting possibility as well, that the item locked away is a “story” that has been “fixed (with letters), embodied (in letters).” In this second calling, the message that Jonah is to preach is not one that God will place into his heart from the outside, but a secret that already exists there; it waits only to be unlocked, revealed, or converted into words. Perhaps the most important aspect to note about this change from the first calling to the second is that nearly the reverse takes place in the biblical source; God tells Jonah to “go in to Nynyue, the greet citee, and preche thou in it the prechyng which Y speke to thee” (3:1), a command that is actually more prescriptive than the original “preche thou ther ynne” (1:2). In Patience, God begins by dictating His message to Jonah, and ends by giving him at least the appearance of
more freedom, allowing him to shape into tangible, embodied words the abstract message he finds within himself.

Though Jonah’s reception of God’s message changes from the first call to the second, his delivery of it still accords with God’s initial command—he responds without speaking at first, but makes the “journey ful joynt [completely] . . . Er euer he warpped [spoke] any worde to wyȝe that he mette” (355-56). Then when he reaches Nineveh, “he cryed so cler that kenne [understand] myght alle / The trwe tenor of his teme [theme]” (357-58). The “tenor” or general sense of his message, and the ability for it to be understood by everyone, seems here to be more important than the precise words that he chooses to use; the final message, after all, is essentially Jonah’s own translation or interpretation of the pre-existing “lore” (350) that he has loosed from his own heart. The poet’s introduction to the speech that follows, “he tolde on this wyse” (358), leaves some doubt about whether even the poet himself is quoting Jonah’s words directly, or rather conveying only its “wyse,” or manner, as well as its “trwe tenor.” The message itself takes two lines to quote Jonah’s one-verse sentence in the Bible (3:4), then expands upon the theme of God’s judgment and destruction:

“Ȝet schal forty dayez fully fare to an ende,
And thenne schal Niniue be nomen to noȝt worthe;
Truly this ilk toun schal tylte to grounde;
Vp-so-doun schal ȝe dumpe depe to the abyme,
To be swolȝed swyftly wyth the swart erthe,
And alle that lyuyes hereinne lose the swete [lifeblood]. (359-64)

Jonah’s imagery of the city physically overturning, with the phrases “tylte to grounde” and “Vp-so-doun,” then sinking into an “abyme” to be swallowed by the earth, are an expansion on the
Vulgate’s “subvertetur” in verse 4, which the Wycliffite LV translates “turned vpsodoun.” The key difference, however, is that the Vulgate’s single word could be interpreted figuratively, and in fact was, by St. Jerome as cited in the Ordinary Gloss:

Nineveh, which was evil and well built, was overturned not with respect to its standing fortifications and buildings. The city was overturned in the destruction of its customs. And although what those men had feared did not happen, when Jonah prophesied the future, what he had predicted at God’s command did happen after all. (McDermott 435)

Though Nineveh is not “overturned” physically, it is upended spiritually and culturally, making Jonah’s brief prophecy in the biblical text technically true. With this in mind, part of Jonah’s disappointment and rage at God’s mercy might be read as the result of his misunderstanding his own prophecy. In Patience, however, Jonah has actually predicted events that will not happen—it would be impossible to read his elaborations on the biblical text, that the “toun schal tylte to grounde” (italics mine) and be swallowed by “the swart erthe,” as anything other than physical destruction, and his further statement that “alle that lyuyes” in the city will die is also not found in the biblical prophecy, which speaks only of the city as a collective entity being overthrown. The language Jonah uses in Patience echoes the language of God’s vengeance that appears at various points in Cleanness, which in every case describes literal physical destruction. “The abyme,” for example, describes the hell that Satan falls into (214), the chasm that swallows up Sodom and Gomorrah (963), and the Flood that destroys the earth in Noah’s day (363), which is also several times described as “depe” (374, 384, 416). When Jerusalem is destroyed by the Babylonian army, the city is “drawen to the erthe” (1160) and “swolȝed” by the enemy’s sword
Whether because Jonah has misinterpreted the message, or whether God truly has “wende [turned] of His wodschip” (404) as the prince hoped he would and changes His mind later, what Jonah finds when he unlocks the “lore” in his heart and translates it into words is the detailed, lurid language of physical destruction and death which do not come to pass. As Jonah himself puts it at a later point in the poem, when he rages at God for saving the city: “I hade worded quatsoeuer I cowthe / To manace alle thise mody [proud] men that in this mote dowellez” (421-22). Jonah “worded” the prophecy within him as strongly and as literally as he could, not for the purpose of prompting repentance, but “to manace” the men he views as irredeemably evil.

Despite its ultimate untruthfulness, its promise of destruction with no terms of penance or hope for mercy, and even the ill will of the prophet who delivers it, the effect of Jonah’s preaching is immediate and remarkable: “This speche sprang in that space and spradde alle aboute / To borges [citizens] and to bacheleres that in that burȝ lenged [lived]” (365-66). Not only does the speech provoke a response in the people who hear it directly; it “springs up” and fills the physical space around the prophet as if it is a natural force, independent of the meaning or intent of his words, and it spreads to people in the city of its own accord, apparently even to people who did not hear the words themselves. In the poem, Jonah delivers the long version of his sermon only once, but he repeats a summary of it in the line, “The verray vengaunce of God schal voyde this place!” (370). Though he sees that the Ninevites are “chylled at the hert” (368) with dread—or perhaps because he enjoys their terrified reaction—he “sesed not ȝet” (369), but continues to repeat the summary version of his message until the prince of Nineveh decrees an extraordinary fast and time of repentance.

The sermon’s effect on its listeners does not appear to rely on the skill, much less the
intentions, of the man who delivers it, nor even on their hearing the words firsthand. As with the storm and the whale, God uses the forces of nature to accomplish His purpose—or at least a process that seems natural, as the speech spreads through the physical space of the city like a rush of wind or water. That Jonah’s words might work apart from any virtue of their speaker is an entirely orthodox concept, one which could apply to sinful priests speaking words of consecration which are nevertheless efficacious, but it also accords with the Oxford Bible translators’ and the Lollards’ sense of the primacy of God’s word over any other human action, including sacramental ritual, and the word’s ability to instruct apart from any interpretive explanation, part of their justification for producing an English Bible directly accessible to the laity. “But wite ye, worldly clerkis and feyned relygiouse,” Chapter 13 of the Wycliffite Bible Prologue warns, “that God bothe can and may, if it lykith Hym, speede symple men out of the universee, as myche to kunne Hooly Writ as maistris in the univerité.” As might be expected, Wyclif discourses on these themes at length in *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*:

> It is evident that preaching God’s word is a more solemn act than consecrating the sacrament, since only one person receives the word of God when accepting the body of Christ. It is a far better thing, therefore, that the people receive God’s word than that a solitary person receive Christ’s body. . . . preaching is more effective in blotting out mortal sins than the Eucharist. . . . Insofar as the aforementioned preached word is the truth, it is essentially God himself. As such, preaching it must be the most dignified work a creature can perform. (*On the Truth* 286-87; II.156-57)\(^\text{17}\)

In an allegorical reading of the Battle of Jericho, Wyclif compares the preacher’s voice to a
trumpet, through which God destroys the enemy’s walls, but with this warning against pride:

Consider it a trumpet, though it is not because you are more than you are that you possess a voice of this sort, since you are but a mere organ of the Bridegroom’s voice. Therefore, let not the preachers be proud of their voices, since it is Christ who is speaking through them. (282; II.152)\(^{18}\)

In Jonah’s case, his preaching is not only the most effective action in helping the Ninevites to “blot out mortal sins,” but quite literally the only action he performs on their behalf, and his words carry power in spite of their speaker’s understanding and attitude.

Nicholas Watson acknowledges that the poet’s “indifference to interiority and his insistence (despite his writing a whole poem on the virtue of patience) on the primacy of word and deed over thought and feeling” have some congruence with Lollard thought, though ultimately he argues that the poet’s “closest points of contact are . . . with the more matter-of-fact religiosity embodied in pastoral works such as those being produced in almost the same part of England, no more than two decades after his time, by John Mirk” (“Gawain-Poet” 296). “For all the complexity of his artistry and the sophistication of his personal background,” Watson writes, “the view of the Christian life to which he gives expression is for the most part conscientiously simple” (297). Setting aside the fact that the view of Christianity promulgated by Wyclif’s poor priests was “conscientiously simple” as well, the comparison with John Mirk’s Festial is interesting, in part because Mirk’s popular 14th-century English sermons, like the Wycliffites’, as well as Jonah’s and the Gawain-poet’s, are unabashedly pitched to the impoverished laity. As Judy Ann Ford argues, they “seem almost Lollard in the amount of agency conferred on lay characters” (14), and their illustrations frequently depict priests as marginal when not overtly
corrupt, and Christ as a figure who can be approached without a clerical intermediary. Jonah’s sermon is Mirk-like in this sense, that it connects its listeners, whom the poet stresses come from every walk of life—“borges and . . . bacheleres” (365), “burnes and bestes, burdez and childer, / Vch prynce, vche prest, and prelates ale” (388-89)—directly to God’s word and will, and prompts them to make an unsolicited attempt at penance, without the mediation of either their own priests or the prophet who warned them of judgment.

Of course, Jonah is not the only character in *Patience* who preaches a sermon of sorts. The narrator presents his opening exegesis of the Beatitudes as something he heard in a sermon intended for a public congregation, “on a halyday, at a hyȝe masse” (9), most likely the feast of All Saints on November 1st, which includes the Beatitudes in its liturgical readings (Hill 103-04), and he uses the aside “as I er sayde” (28), as if he is speaking orally to his audience. Malcolm Andrew notes that the shift from textuality to orality is a function of the poet’s decision to translate from Latin to English, and observes that “in many Middle English devotional texts and translations speech is associated with vernacular appropriation of Latin texts, and orality may itself be a trope for vernacular authorship” (“Theories” 40, n.11). This shift mirrors the experience of the layperson at a holiday mass of the kind the narrator says he attended—the priest’s sermon is in English, though the biblical text he refers to and may quote from is in Latin. In addition, many critics, most notably William Vantuono, have analyzed the poem’s structure as a homily, which Vantuono says was the simplest and most popular sermon structure in the Middle Ages (“Structure” 402). Friedman agrees that the poem “was probably conceived by its author as a type of popular sermon, perhaps directed as an example of the genre to an audience of preachers” (100), as it follows the recommendations of “contemporary handbooks for the composition of sermons” (103). Richard Newhauser describes the basic outlines of the “popular
sermon” or homily the poet may be using as a model:

This type of pulpit discourse developed in the early Middle Ages and remained in use even after the form of the modern, or university (or scholastic), sermon had become popular. The homily demanded of the preacher merely a retelling of the gospel pericope of the day and the addition of any exegetical or moral lessons he cared to draw from it. Homilies were not highly structured forms and at times contained only the gospel narrative followed by its exegesis. (260)

Ordelle Hill argues that the poet makes “unmistakeable reference to the preaching mission of the fourteenth century” (103), not just through the poem’s structure but in his selection of Jonah as the character to embody its themes, and that character’s connection to works with an unmistakeable clerical audience. For example, Hill cites Peter Comestor’s Ad Praelatos as a 12th-century example of a polemic that targets the Jonah story specifically at preachers. Comestor, Hill writes, “reminds the prelates of the familiar translation of the name Jona, although for Comestor, ‘dove’ does not refer only to the Holy Spirit but also to the church and to the ordinary preachers (or teachers), who are under the supervision of the prelates” (107), and in an interpretation of the storm scene reminiscent of the Gawain-poet’s own, “Jonah’s retreat to the bottom of the boat signifies the inferior ecclesiastic who cannot remain steadfast while danger exists. . . . Jonah’s sleep is the sleep of corruption into which the clergy may fall” (107).

In response to the claim that any of this evidence—the poem’s structure, its priestly main character, parallels to contemporary preaching manuals, etc.—serves as proof that the poet has an audience of preachers in mind, Derek Pearsall raises the reasonable objection that “diagnosis
of the prospective audience of a poem is a very subjective business indeed. . . . *Patience* has much to do with the necessity of preaching, but that does not mean it is designed for an audience of preachers, any more than *Pearl* is designed for an audience of bereaved fathers” (50). Indeed, a well-structured sermon with such an overt appeal to poor laymen as appears in the poem’s introduction seems just as likely to be directed to a lay audience as to other practitioners of the craft; or perhaps to an audience similar to Wyclif’s “poor priests,” whose goal was to appeal primarily to the uneducated.

But whether the primary audience of the poem as a whole is clerical or lay—though the bulk of evidence indicates it is more likely the latter—Jonah’s undeniable status as a priestly figure in the story means that his superlative success at converting the Ninevites through a sermon may be taken as evidence for the poet’s views on the marks of effective preaching. The first of these marks is the structure of Jonah’s sermon, which matches Newhauser’s description of a traditional medieval homily, quoted above. He begins with the “pericope,” a statement of the sermon’s theme—in a 14th-century context, this would consist of a reading of the biblical text at hand, or a simple summary of it—followed by an elaboration, and ending with “a conclusion which restates the opening theme” (Putter 103). The poem as a whole follows this structure, of course, but Jonah’s seven-line homily follows it even more strictly within a shorter space. The summary statement to start, “thenne schal Ninieue be nomen to noȝt worthe” (360), is restated at the end, “The verray vengaunce of God schal voyde this place!” (370), then repeated multiple times more, as Jonah “sesed not ȝet, bot sayde euer ilyche [constantly] . . .” (369).

In Jonah’s case, it is the elaboration at the center of his sermon that has the most potential to lead him into error, a danger that a variety of medieval critics frequently associated with popular preaching. The Ordinary Gloss, for example, cautions biblical exegetes against
undertaking lightly the task of extending allegories too far, particularly with a book like Jonah, which is full of tempting allegorical possibilities:

Although Jonah, according to the interpretation, displays the figure of Christ himself, it is not necessary for us to strive to refer to the whole sequence of the story to Christ by allegory, but only those things that are able to be understood clearly without the risk of interpretation. (McDermott 427)

Wyclif and the Lollards, among others, repeatedly warn against “glossing,” a term which could mean either simply an exegetical interpretation or a deceitful form of over-interpretation, which was a rich target of mockery by satirists such as Langland and Chaucer. Scase observes that though St. Francis prohibited “glossing” in favor of “a simple, unintellectual realisation of the gospel,” by the 14th century, “a central charge against friars, and more generally against any clerics who resisted the new interpretation of poverty, was that of ‘glosing’” (79-80). Friars from “alle the foure ordres,” Langland claims, “Glosed the gospel as hem good liked; / For coveitise of copes construwed it as thei wolde” (B.Pro.60-61). The greedy friar in Chaucer’s satirical Summoner’s Tale does more than simply interpet the biblical text as he likes—he ignores the pericope altogether and composes a sermon entirely of elaborated gloss:

I have to day been at youre chirche at messe,
And seyd a sermon after my symple wit—
Nat al after the text of hooly writ,
For it is hard to yow, as I suppose,
And therfore wol I teche yow al the glose.
Glosynge is a glorious thyng, certeyn,
For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn. (III.1789-94)

Later in the same tale, he attempts to persuade a donor of the superiority of his fraternal order using the first Beatitude, “Blessed be they that povere in spirit been” (1923), but appears to have little familiarity with the biblical text except through a secondhand interpretation, a fact that does not prevent him from preaching on it at length: “I ne have no text of it, as I suppose, / But I shal fynde it in a maner glose” (1919-20).

Wycliffite writers found less humor in the situation, but were similarly obsessed with the supposed “glosing” of friars, monks, and ordinary priests, and urged their own not to stray far from the unadorned text. Wyclif himself, though he urged priests to “speak with special clarity” and explain the Bible rather than “merely reciting the texts” (On the Truth 42; I.4), also writes that priests should “put aside duplicity and adapt our speech to the general understanding of those with whom we are communicating” (55; I.24), advice that could apply equally to Jonah and the Gawain-poet. “The Duty of the Priesthood,” from the Wycliffe Sermon Cycle, repeats several times the claim that the friars, “pseudefreris,” and “anticristis prestis” are preaching “fablis,” and urges “trewe prestis to preche the gospel freli withoute cuylet [collecting alms] or ony fablis or flatryng” (Hudson, ed., Selections 120). A Wycliffite tract written in support of English Bible translation argues that a vernacular Scripture will allow “the prechour [to] schewith it truly to the pepel . . . For, if it schulde not be writen, it schulde not be prechid” (Hudson, ed., Selections 101). In other words, preachers should stay as close to the biblical text as possible in their sermons, and a text translated into the same language as the sermon will make the attempt easier. With a Latin Bible, the tract says, clerics who have “a craft of gret sotilte” might hide God’s “lore” from the common people, since they “wolden that the gospel slepe safe . . . thei prechen sumwhat of the gospel, and glosen it as hem liketh” (101). The message is
locked away in Latin, just as it is locked inside Jonah before he looses it with words the Ninevites understand, and converting the Bible to English will reduce the necessity for potentially erroneous glosses or elaborations. Another Wycliffite tract, this one primarily anti-papal in theme, worries that “Antecristis clerkis . . . glose hem [the Old and New Testaments] aftir her owne wille,” and with papal support, “the wordis of thes glosatouris passith Goddis lawe” (Arnold, ed., III.258). And another Wycliffite sermon, “Of Mynystris in the Church,” which makes a radical argument for the expunging of all clerical offices besides parish priests and deacons, calls on “trewe men” to actively counter or “aȝen-calle this glose” of popes and friars, either by demonstrating “that it is fals, or ellis techith a beter” (Arnold, ed., II.403). For a minister who preaches a gospel beyond or against the simple “wordis of Crist . . . Crist ȝeveth him not this power”; to gain back spiritual power and authority, a pastor should “trowe more to juste dedis than to bullis in this mater” (403).

The depiction of Jonah as a preacher is congruent at several other points with Wyclif’s and the Lollards’ descriptions of the preaching vocation. A strong thematic current running through all of the texts cited above and others in the same tradition is that preaching is the most important responsibility of a priest—not administering sacraments, hearing confessions, praying, visiting the sick, or any other clerical duty. The Apology for Lollard Doctrines holds “that ilk [every] prest is holdun to preche. . . . for ilk man is olden to do thing that Crist enjoynith him to do. And it semith bi witnes of seyntis, that Crist enjoynith ilk prest to preche, and than he is bounden ther to. . . . Werfor the prest, going in and out, dieth if he go with out the sound of preching” (30-31). By the time the document “Sixteen Points on which the Bishops Accuse Lollards” appears (ca. 1400), what started as an insistence on the primacy of preaching has become a more exclusive claim: “that prestis weren not ordeyned to sey massis or mateynes, but
onli to teche and preche the worde of God” (Hudson, ed., Selections 19; italics mine).

The Gawain-poet does not make the claim that preaching is Jonah’s only responsibility to the Ninevites, but it is unquestionably his most important, and what the Apology phrases in figurative terms, that the priest “dieth if he go with out the sound of preaching,” in Jonah’s case becomes literal—he will likely die at God’s hands if he does not do it. Malcolm Andrew notes that the poet’s additions to the biblical story indicate “that the repentance of the Ninevites was the episode which least engaged the poet’s imagination or seemed least relevant to his concerns” (“Biblical” 50), since he does not go much further than the biblical account in that section. Andrew goes on to say that the woodbine scene is the most relevant by this measure, but the process of the Ninevites’ penance and recovery also seems significantly less important to the poet than the process of Jonah delivering the message to them, a 14-line elaboration on a single verse of Scripture. As mentioned earlier, Jonah does not administer the sacrament of penance which the city takes upon itself, and he performs no other priestly function in Nineveh besides delivering his seven-line homily. In the end, the city is saved through the direct intervention of God alone.

Watson, who believes the poet’s audience is primarily aristocratic and that “the poems present a view of the sacramental system they expound as existing purely for the convenience of aristocrats who employ priests to see to their salvation in much the way they employ stewards to see to their households” (“Gawain-Poet” 312), sees Jonah’s diminished role in the Ninevites’ penance and redemption as holding special significance:

From the viewpoint of aristocratic lay readers, who learn here that the spiritual authority of the preacher entails neither special status before God nor any claim to earthly power—Jonah’s direct
influence over the lives of the people of Nineveh is shortlived—
nothing could be more reassuring. (310)

Of course, it is possible to agree with Watson’s conclusion about the Gawain-poet’s view of the limited authority of the priesthood, without necessarily accepting his premise that the poet is primarily addressing aristocratic readers or trying to comfort them in their complacency. The poet clearly presents himself at the start of the poem as impoverished, and he praises material poverty in a manner that could only make aristocratic readers, even provincial ones of the kind Watson has in mind, somewhat uncomfortable. But his depiction of Jonah withdrawing to the city’s outskirts as the citizens save themselves truly does accord with the position of a variety of anticlerical critics of the 14th century, that a priest’s most important duty lies not with the sacraments but with preaching and teaching, and that the effectiveness of these actions lies exclusively in God’s hands. In any case, Jonah abdicates whatever measure of spiritual authority he has in Nineveh, not just by departing immediately after his message is delivered, but by actively hoping for the city’s destruction and raging against God when it is not forthcoming. In the end, he loses not only this authority but also the only material possession that truly matters to him, in the poem’s final scene.

6. Jonah Dispossessed

As in the biblical story, the final scene of the poem is an argument between Jonah and God over a “wodbynd,” the term the poet uses on eight occasions to describe the wooded shelter that protects Jonah from the sun as he waits in anticipation for God to destroy the city. Other terms for this shelter include “bour” (437), whose significance has already been discussed, “lyttel bothe [booth, arbor]” (441), “lefsel [leaf-bower]” (448), “a hous” (450), and “gay logge” (457);
in every case, it is described as a temporary place of refuge, begun by Jonah “the best that he myȝt, / Of hay and of euer-ferne and erbez a fewe” (437-38), then completed by God “of His grace” (443) through nature, as leaves that grow overnight expand it into a “brod . . . boȝted [vaulted]” chamber (449). The woodbine is such a comfortable place that Jonah wishes “hit were in his kyth [country] ther he wony [live] schulde, / On heȝe vpon Effraym other Ermonnes hillez: / ‘Iwysse, a worthloker won to welde I neuer keped [kept, wanted]’” (462-64). He wishes he were back home, in Ephraim or Hermon, and able to “welde” or “kepe” the woodbine as his permanent residence. Jonah’s cry is a subtle reminder that he is currently exiled from his home in Israel, and it provides an extra-biblical explanation for the woodbine’s extreme importance to him. God denies Jonah his wish, however, not only by declining to destroy the repentant Ninevites and deprive them of their home, but also by sending a worm to destroy the temporary home He built for Jonah. The prophet responds with “hatel anger” (481), so outraged that he asks God to end his life: “‘Why ne dyȝttez Thou me to diȝe?  I dure to longe’” (488).

Pohli views this reaction as a consequence of Jonah’s unique “spiritual predicament . . . homelessness.” His deepest desire, she says, is “for a permanent, literal shelter like the ideal, eschatological one circumscribed by Beatific virtue in the prologue” (Pohli 8)—which includes, for example, the “heuen-ryche to holde for euer” (14) promised to the poor and patient, and the “worlde” which the meek are promised to “welde” (16). But from the perspective of a 14th-century anticlerical critic who advocates clerical dispossession, or alternatively a mendicant friar who voluntarily renounces possession, this is precisely what Jonah should not desire as a priest and man of God. The spiritual home should be his greatest reward, and his physical home is to be left behind. Jonah’s yearning for a permanent, physical dwelling is a yearning for the security of material possessions, which God may choose to completely deny him. From the perspective
of the anticlerical tradition in which the poem participates, God has taken up the role of secular
lord in the dispossession scenario urged by Langland:

Taketh hire landes, ye lorde, and let hem lyve by dymes [tithes];
If possession be poison, and inparfite hem make,
Good were to deschargen hem for Holy Chirches sake,
And purgen hem of poison, er moore peril falle. (B.XV.563-66)

At the end of *Patience*, God performs the same action that Langland, as well as FitzRalph,
Wyclif, the Lollards, and other anticlerical critics advised kings to perform on their priestly
subjects—he forcibly removes the “poison” and “peril” of material comfort the woodbine
represents and compels Jonah to deal with Him directly. And He does so because He desires for
Jonah the same outcome that His threat of destruction extracted from the Ninevites—that his
subject would “cum and cnawe Me for Kyng” (519).

The peril Jonah faces at the end of the poem is no longer physical danger—the whale
episode is behind him, and despite his discomfort and wish to die, the scorching sun above the
woodbine is not a mortal threat. Nor is it any longer the spiritual danger of outright
disobedience—Jonah has delivered God’s message with astounding results, and God has asked
nothing further of His prophet by way of direct action. However, his slothful lounging above the
city, represented once again by the “sloumbe-slep sloughe” he “slydez” into (466), and his “hatel
anger” (481) at its remaining while his woodbine is destroyed, are both sins which patience is
traditionally meant to counter, yet they remain, a final source of danger for the prophet who has
otherwise managed to escape it. His lack of patience at the end threatens to undo whatever
spiritual gains he has made in the course of the poem, a self-inflicted injury the poet describes
with a metaphor: “For he that is to rakel [hasty] to renden his clothez / Mot efte sitte with more
vnsounde [trouble] to sewe hem togeder” (525-26). Like the poem’s final lines, in which the narrator reminds the audience once again of his physical poverty and restates the opening line, these too hark back to the poem’s introduction, in which another word for trouble, “grame” (53) describes what the narrator will bring upon himself if he grumbles against his poverty or resists his lord’s will. The danger Jonah faces at the end is not the wrath of God or the Ninevites, which he has feared from the beginning, but his own wrath, driven by his desire for material comfort, and fallen on his own head.

The effects and consequences of this sin are apparently invisible to Jonah, and require extreme means to conquer, beyond mere argument or threat. Even as God points out the absurdity of Jonah’s wish for death in response to losing “so lyttel” (492), Jonah shouts back, “Hit is not lyttel . . . bot lykker to ryȝt” (493). God continues to press the issue, pointing out the absurdity of Jonah’s clinging to a possession he hardly worked for: “Thou art waxen so wroth for thy wodbynde, / And trauayledez neuer to tent hit the tyme of an howre” (497-98). As in the biblical story, we do not see Jonah’s reaction to this statement, nor to God’s final argument that He has more reason to care for Nineveh than Jonah does for the woodbine, but what the poet does reveal, in an addition to the biblical text, is that God sends Jonah away with a final lesson and dismissal: “Be noȝt so gryndel [angry], godman, bot go forth thy wayes, / Be preue [steadfast] and be pacient in payne and in joye” (524-25). Many editors conclude God’s speech with closed quotation marks at line 523, an approximation of where it ends in the Bible, and attribute these lines to the narrator, but others extend God’s words further, before the narrator definitively returns with the first-person voice in line 528. Malcolm Andrew, for example, places closed quotation marks at 523 in the version he edited with Ronald Waldron, but in a later article argues for moving them to 527 (“Biblical” 74, n.54). In fact, the attribution is unclear,
and perhaps deliberately so. Either God or the narrator, who share the same perspective at this point in any case, gives these final words of advice to the “godman”—Jonah, or the lay reader, or the contemporary priest whom Jonah represents; any one of them could be addressed with this title—and expects that he will now “go forth” to practice his newly acquired virtue.

The “godman,” in other words, is forced into a position of exile, far from home and having lost his temporary dwelling, called now to “go forth thy wayes” without clear direction, and uncertain whether he will face “payne” or “joye,” knowing only that steadfast patience is the most practical response to his situation. The final result of Jonah’s trials, in the words of John Scattergood, has been “to make him more like the narrator” (133), a poor wandering messenger, like a servant.

Interestingly, the image of the wanderer is not one that often has positive connotations in the 14th-century anticlerical tradition. Scase devotes a chapter to this type of critique, represented by depictions of the “gyrovague,” or false hermit, “whose apostasy from the rule was figured by his behaviour of going from house to house in search of hospitality, when he should have stayed in the cloister” (125). The origins of this figure date back to the earliest foundings of monastic orders, and can be found in the works of Church Fathers including Augustine and Jerome, but its appearance in 14th-century contexts is typically linked with fraternal orders and voluntary mendicancy. For example, FitzRalph in the Defensio Curatorum argues that part of the problem with friars is that they have no steadfast place to live or work, no home: “And beggers haueth no wiȝt, that is a stidefast place, nother mowe ordeyne for hem-silf a stidefast place, for verrey beggers euereche day other as hit were euerech day, beth compelled to wende out of her place for nede” (60). As they pass from door to door, FitzRalph says:

    thei . . . doth aȝenus Cristes owne sentence that sente his disciples
to preche the gospel, & seide: “Passe ȝe nouȝt from hous to hous”

[Luke 10:7]. Also thei doth aȝenus another scripture that seith:
“Voide & war that thou be noȝt herberwed from hous to hous”

[Sirach 29:30]. Bot thei goth so about from court to court & from hous to hous, for her cloystre schulde nouȝt be her prison. (60-61)

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

For now the grete charitee and prayeres
Of lymytours and othere hooly freres,
That serchen every lond and every streem,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thropes [villages], bernes, shipnes [stables], dayeryes—
This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.
For ther as wont to walken was an elf
Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself
In undermeles [late mornings] and morwenynges,
And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges
As he gooth in his lymytacioun. (III.865-77)

Scase observes that not only friars but unbeneficed secular clergy, whose numbers had swelled during mid-century outbreaks of the bubonic plague when services for the dead were in
high demand, also “began to attract considerable attention, and disapproval” in this period (143). Archbishops Islip and Sudbury repeatedly set penalties for the practice of demanding high wages for clerical services, issuing maximum wage laws and requiring priests to accept offers for cure of souls. In a series of decrees from 1360 to 1378, in which both Archbishops attempted to curb clerical vagrancy, “priests were forbidden to leave their dioceses without the bishop’s permission” (144). Langland’s treatment of poverty and dispossession in Passus XI of the *Piers Plowman* B-text makes reference to these regulations and argues that priests should have sufficient “title” (288-90) to provide for life’s necessities and prevent their wandering, just as FitzRalph before him argued that no priest can be expected to remain in his parish “without suffisaunt title of mete, & drynke, & cloth” (92).

Yet another category of wanderer prevalent in 14th-century debates over itinerant teaching and preaching was the wandering hermit, a contemplative who travelled abroad rather than remaining in a cell. Langland, who opens *Piers Plowman* with a description of himself “In habite as an heremite unholy of werkes, / Wente wide in this world wondres to here” (B.Pro.3-4), actually has much praise for hermits later in the poem, but only for those who stay home: “As ancrens and heremites that holden hem in hire selles, / Coveiten noght in contree to cairen [wander] aboute / For no likerous [luxurious] liflode hire likame [body] to plese” (Pro.28-30). Even a hermit whom most agreed was not “false,” the mystic and ascetic Richard Rolle, who relied on charity for only the barest physical needs, came in for criticism for his excessive mobility. According to Nicholas Watson, Rolle’s detractors criticized his frequent movement from cell to cell, and he defended himself with evidence from Scripture and church history, claiming “that the Desert Fathers changed cells in search of quiet and were criticized by the wicked on that account” (47). In *The Fire of Love*, Rolle refers to his condition as “exile” and
says, “The holy lover of God shows himself neither too merry nor full heavy in this habitation of exile, but he has cheerfulness with ripeness” (45), an attitude not far from what the narrator of *Patience* seems to wish for Jonah and his audience. But Jonah is not forced to leave his home or driven out of the woodbine “in search of quiet,” as Rolle says of the Desert Fathers. Rather, he is driven out in order to preach a message from God and face the risks of persecution, the very opposite of silent contemplation in an anchorite or hermit’s cell. Jonah’s sleep under the woodbine, Prior argues, is part of a “general retreat from the world” which the poet condemns (155), and Hill views his retreat into the silence of the woodbine “as an escape from the active preaching of God’s Word” (109). In fact, Hill claims, all of Jonah’s forced wandering in *Patience* could be read as the poet’s reaction against “a growing interest in the contemplative life during the fourteenth century” (109, n.19), a reaction shared, in some sense ironically, by many of those who would also argue that clerics should be stripped of their possessions.

These condemnations of wandering and begging, and the plea for sufficient payment to be given to priests who stay home, illuminate a tension that surfaces occasionally among those who argue for clerical dispossession and simultaneously oppose the friars. On the one hand, the poison of the corrupted clergy can only be purged by stripping them of all material possessions; on the other, they must not wander as beggars. In Nicholas Hereford’s 1382 Ascension Day sermon, this tension rises to the surface in his conclusion: “Monks and possessioners will never be humble until their possessions are taken away, nor will mendicant friars ever be good until their begging is prevented” (Scase 102), leaving only the possibility of tithes for those who have secured a living, and manual labor for the rest, a sentence that would no doubt severely curtail their clerical activities. As the Lollard satirist quoted above puts it, they should live “by mans almes without begging” (Hudson, ed., *Selections* 91), a fine distinction in terms that reads
nearly as a contradiction. Yet this is the solution advocated by most of the 14th-century anticlerical rhetoric in whose textual environment the Gawain-poet participates—a state of humble poverty and possibly physical labor imposed involuntarily by the king, just as God imposes it on Jonah.

Though the Gawain-poet’s statements about the Eucharist in Pearl and Cleanness place him at a significant distance from Wyclif and the Lollards theologically, his depiction of Jonah as a priestly figure in Patience conveys a view of poverty and clerical dispossession they likely would have shared, and the poet is deeply sympathetic with their concerns about corruption of the priesthood. The contemporary most similar to him in this respect is William Langland, who, while working within the same form of alliterative long-line poetry but the substantially different genre of allegorical dream vision, shares the poet’s concern with clerical sinfulness and suggests, albeit in his own more direct way, the same remedy.
Chapter Five:

Anticlerical Directions in Pearl and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

1. Introduction: Turning to the Canon

Any scholar who approaches Cleanness and Patience is no doubt keenly aware that these two poems are not the “canonical” works of the Gawain-poet. Evidence of an overwhelming preference for Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Pearl among both researchers and undergraduate-level teachers can be established with even a brief glance at recent academic publications and course descriptions. For example, a search of the Modern Language Association’s International Bibliography database reveals that approximately 180 peer-reviewed books, book chapters, and articles have been published in the past 20 years which name either the Gawain-poet or one of the four Cotton Nero A.x. poems in the title. Many of these address more than one poem, but nearly 60%—107 publications—focus primarily on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Pearl comes in a distant second, with 37 titles (21%), but this number still nearly doubles Cleanness and Patience combined, with only 20 peer-reviewed publications citing one or both of these biblical poems in the title.

Evidence on the frequency with which these works are taught at the college level is more difficult to gather, but a small sampling of elite institutions suggests similar percentages. For instance, a survey of current course offerings at the English departments of the eight Ivy League universities reveals that in the 2013-14 academic year, six schools offered a total of eleven courses whose descriptions mentioned either the Gawain-poet or one of his works. Among these, Sir Gawain is specifically mentioned in five (45%), Pearl in three (27%), and Cleanness
and *Patience* in none. Despite my own professional interest in both biblical poems, my classroom teaching choices also reflect this trend. In English poetry survey courses over the past ten years, I have taught *Sir Gawain* on five occasions, *Pearl* twice, and *Patience* only once. I have not yet attempted to teach *Cleanness* in its entirety, having only mentioned it in passing and taken brief looks at its passage in praise of marriage.

Many of the reasons for *Cleanness*’s neglect in college classrooms (and there are many) likely have to do with its formal qualities and an instructor’s assessment of students’ academic preparedness. The poem is long at 1,812 lines, its narrative structure is not dramatic nor even immediately recognizable to experienced scholars, good translations of its obscure language are hard to come by, and it assumes a breadth of biblical and theological knowledge not typically available to undergraduates except through copious footnotes. Of course, many of these same critiques could be leveled against *Sir Gawain* and *Pearl*, or other English literature survey staples like *Paradise Lost*. But perhaps a more significant reason for the poem’s neglect is its content: the poet’s celebration of God’s violent, hellish judgment, and in particular his overt homophobia and harsh condemnation of a variety of sexual practices. Using the word “homophobic” to describe *Cleanness*’s Sodom and Gomorrah scene is not an accusation so much as it is merely a factual statement—the poet expresses nothing but raw disgust and fear at the thought of same-sex desire, a level of fear the Genesis account itself does not share. The prospect of addressing complex themes of sexual identity, transgression, and religious judgment with undergraduates, via a text that is already difficult in numerous other ways, is no doubt daunting for many teachers. Ad Putter in his *Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* expresses this critical distaste and pedagogical reluctance well—after noting that *Cleanness*’s rhetorical
strategy against homosexuality is to make the reader feel it as “a pain in the bowels,” he concludes, “We might for once be better off not trying to be this text’s ideal readers” (236).

Such avoidance is deeply unfortunate, however, since a reading of Cleanness can contribute greatly to a student’s understanding not only of the poet’s 14th-century literary environment, in which biblical paraphrases, commentaries, and sermons dominated the textual landscape, but also an understanding of the poet’s artistry and thematic concerns in the other “canonical” poems. If nothing else, Cleanness remains a landmark of Middle English biblical poetry, as one can sense immediately from reading other poetic paraphrases of the Bible from roughly the same period, such as Genesis and Exodus (ca. 1250), Cursor Mundi (ca. 1300), or The Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament (ca. 1410), none of which come close to matching the Gawain-poet’s artistry and complexity.

Elizabeth Keiser also laments this state of affairs in the introduction to her book-length study of Cleanness’s sexual ethics. “Read as an innovative ethical vision in an original theopoetic mode, Cleanness is much more interesting than most of its modern audience has imagined,” she writes, in part because it “includes one of the most powerful accounts of the joys of love in all of English poetry” (1-2). Cleanness’s arguments against transgressive sexuality, including same-sex coupling, and in favor of heterosexual bliss in marriage, Keiser claims, actually lie at the center of what should be most appealing to contemporary readers about the poem, since they are “astonishingly untraditional” (47); they appeal to aesthetics rather than logic, and are radically innovative in comparison to the procreation arguments of earlier theologians, in a way that actually allows for their appropriation into a more inclusive sexual ethic. The poem’s depiction of the “virtual sacramentality of heterosexual erotic attraction” (173), Keiser argues, elevates Cleanness to the level of “a romantic landmark in religious
discourse” (175), without precedent or replication within its literary and theological era. There is literally nothing quite like God’s hymn to marriage in *Cleanness* 697-708 to be found anywhere else in medieval English poetry. Most importantly, however, according to Keiser, a thorough reckoning with these arguments as well as with the poem’s views of divine judgment, penance, and atonement is crucial for a complete understanding of what she calls “the more theologically complex and religiously satisfying artistry of *Patience, Sir Gawain*, and *Pearl’* (13).

The sense of missed opportunity Keiser feels with *Cleanness* seems even more acute in the case of *Patience*, a work perhaps more unjustly overlooked by teachers of Middle English poetry. Much shorter and with a more consistent dramatic thrust from beginning to end, *Patience* does not share any of the above-mentioned flaws of its companion, except perhaps the absence of an excellent and readily available translation. My single recent experience teaching the poem (in the fall of 2013), supplemented by a rough translation of my own, has convinced me to make it a staple of my English poetry survey, as it illustrates succinctly not only how much the poet, like his medieval contemporaries including Chaucer, relies on biblical imagery and themes to construct a satisfying dramatic narrative, but also how much freedom he exercises in elaborating upon or even altering biblical texts as they suit his literary needs.

As the preceding chapters have argued, viewing these works of the *Gawain*-poet as participants in the vibrant textual tradition of 14th-century English anticlericalism is an important first step for any reader seeking to understand more fully the poems’ narrative structures and rhetoric. As previously noted, however, this step has not yet been taken by scholars on any significant scale, despite the fact that the study of John Wyclif, the Lollards, and other anticlerical writers, as well as their potential connections to the poetry of Chaucer and Langland, has become something of a cottage industry among medievalists, and a popular graduate and
undergraduate course topic. In the aforementioned survey of Ivy League courses, for example, Wyclif and the Lollards are mentioned just as often as *Sir Gawain* in medieval literature course descriptions. Situating *Cleanness* and *Patience* within the textual environment of 14th-century English anticlerical critique and controversy, in addition to helping to illuminate these relatively neglected poems, may thus have the welcome side benefit of revitalizing their study, both in classrooms and in published scholarship.

A further question to ask is whether *Pearl* or *Sir Gawain* can be situated within this anticlerical textual environment in a similar way. Does the critique that is so explicit in *Cleanness* and more implicit but undoubtedly present in *Patience* emerge at all in the two “canonical” poems? And can viewing the ways that *Cleanness* and *Patience* participate in a broader anticlerical tradition help to illuminate otherwise obscure thematic elements within *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain* as well?

The answer, I argue with this final chapter, is a qualified yes. The canonical poems do not contain the same level of either explicit or implicit critique of the priesthood, but members of the clergy do appear in both poems, occasionally in surprising contexts. The urgent anticlerical concerns of the biblical poems may have lessened in importance for the poet in these presumably later works, but his fundamental attitudes toward the priesthood have not undergone any apparent change, and their undercurrents can still be detected even in works which relegate priests to the margins. We begin an exploration of those attitudes and undercurrents with the first poem in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, *Pearl.*
2. The Late-Arriving Priest of *Pearl*

For all of its religious imagery and themes, *Pearl* makes no references to priests, or to the institutional church at all, until the poem’s last five lines (1208-12). These lines, which together with the warning to priests in the opening lines of *Cleanliness* contain the only direct references to the Eucharist in all of the *Gawain*-poet’s works, are deeply significant for understanding the poem’s thematic structure, and we will address them at the end of this analysis. But the reason for the absence of references in the rest of the poem is that the Dreamer simply has no need for an institutional intermediary in his dealings with God, a point both he and the Pearl Maiden make repeatedly.

Near the midpoint of the poem, the Maiden considers the role of baptism in salvation, particularly for innocent infants who die before they are guilty of any but original sin (649-60). Immediately afterward, she also considers the role of penance in the life of a sinful adult who is a repeat offender, “that synnez thenne new” (661-64). But despite the discussion of these sacraments, the priest or priests officially required to perform them remain in the shadows, unmentioned at any point by the Maiden or by the narrator, a phenomenon David Aers terms the “silent marginalization” of the church’s role in loss and mourning throughout *Pearl* (73). This marginalization led one of *Pearl*’s earliest critics, Carleton Brown, to speculate that the poet’s “attitude toward religious matters was evangelical rather than ecclesiastical” (140). As Brown observes, *Pearl* never mentions the church as an institution, never references prayers to the saints, pointedly avoids arranging the elect in the New Jerusalem into any sort of hierarchy, and never appeals to patristic authority or tradition, as do virtually all theological works of this era. Even in the poem’s opening stanzas, immediately after the Dreamer loses his Pearl, it is the “kynde of Kryst,” the nature of Christ himself, who “me comfort kenned [offered],” and with
whom he has “fyrce skyllez [arguments]” about his loss and the proper response to it (54-55). A few lines later, it is “Godez grace” alone that removes his soul from his body and takes it on a journey to heaven (63).

To be sure, the ministrations of priests are not the only things the poet declares useless or unhelpful in the face of his grief and God’s glory. For instance, he also denies the ability of poetry itself to capture the beauty of his heavenly vision: “The derthe [splendor] therof for to deuyse [describe] / Nis no wyȝ worthé that tonge berez” (99-100). Whether the author of this poem was a priest himself or merely a poet, he did not exempt his own profession from impotence and inadequacy in his meditation on God’s sufficiency apart from human efforts. His direct, unmediated vision and communication with God, which gives all credit to undeserved grace, implicitly denies the necessity of priestly intercessors in a way that a number of 14th-century anticlerical critics would have championed, but the vision is actually even more radical than that. Any human virtue or action, the poem says—wealth, wisdom, love, even “cortaysye” and good “manerez” (382)—is rendered meaningless in the face of God’s will. Like Jonah in Patience, the Dreamer has no choice but to follow it: “Thou moste abyde that He schal deme” (348). The Book of Revelation, which the poem quotes at length in its descriptions of heaven, shares this theme as well. The sun and moon, for example, are not needed in the heavenly realm, in the poet’s rendering of the biblical passage: “Of sunne ne mone had thay no nede; / The Self God watz her lombe-lyȝt, / The Lombe her lantyrne, withouten drede; / Thurȝ Hym blysned the borȝ al bryȝt” (1045-48). God does not need intermediaries to work His will, and even the natural processes of the world can be accomplished apart from nature.

When the Dreamer’s heavenly vision begins, the poet reveals what the reader has likely suspected from the start—that the “perle” this “joylez juelere” has lost is not literally a precious
stone but a person, more specifically a young girl, likely the Dreamer’s infant daughter, as evidenced by his statements that “Ho watz me [more] nerre then aunte or nece” (233) and she “lyfed not two ȝer in oure thede [land]” (483), not even long enough to learn the “Pater ne Crede” (485). The Pearl Maiden, as most critics of *Pearl* name her, has matured rapidly in her heavenly home, as she now walks and talks intelligently and is arrayed in fine clothing. Nevertheless, even after these revelations, the Dreamer continues to refer to the Maiden as a “pearl,” and the Maiden describes herself as locked inside a small enclosure which enhances her beauty and worth, like a jewel in a setting. This enclosure is literally a “gardyn gracios gaye” (260), but the Maiden repeatedly describes both it and herself in figurative terms: she is “in cofer [jewel-box] so comly clente [enclosed]” (259), inside “a forser [casket]” (263), or a “kyste [chest] that hyt con close” (271). This vocabulary echoes several scenes from *Cleanness*, in which the same terms for the enclosure (“cofer” and “kyste”) are used to describe Noah’s Ark as well as containers used to hold Temple relics, and in which the pearl set in an enclosure or “bour” (*Cleanness* 1126) represents the human soul inside the body, and perhaps the Eucharist inside its monstrance or other container. Similar to the interlude in *Cleanness*, which features a sullied pearl dipped in wine for cleansing as a representation of penance, the very image of the round white pearl of *Pearl* may recall the eucharistic host. As Anna Baldwin observes in her study of sacramental imagery in the *Gawain*-poet, the Dreamer explicitly compares his Pearl to “the reme of heuenesse [heaven] clere,” in that “hit is wemlez [flawless], clene, and clere, / And endelez rounde” (735, 737-38), imagery which “must have suggested to some of the poem’s readers the symbolism of the Eucharistic wafer” (Baldwin 129). Perhaps most interestingly, the Dreamer at one point describes both the Maiden herself and the words she speaks together as jewels: “A juel to me then watz thys geste, / And juelez wern hyr gentyl sawez” (277-78).
her body and her words become sacred objects to him, as if she were Christ himself at the Mass, present both in the words of Scripture and in bodily form in the eucharistic bread and wine. The poet does not present anything resembling a positive anticlerical critique in his dream vision; nevertheless, he does depict a revelatory religious experience which in its language and imagery reflects church practice, but from which virtually every aspect of the actual church is absent.

A number of Pearl’s readers have concluded that this absence of the institutional church in the process of spiritual regeneration is a mark of the poet’s heresy on questions of original sin and grace. For example, the infants approaching the throne in 626-27 appear to baptize themselves, as “thay dyssente” into the water of their own will rather than relying on God’s grace passively, a vision which critic Richard Tristman calls “a Pelagian position” (285). But the Pearl Maiden does not deny original sin, the central contention of the Pelagian heresy, or the need for God’s unmerited grace apart from human action. If anything, it is the Dreamer who expresses this heretical position, when he argues that God must reward labor proportionally for the sake of fairness, an assertion David Aers calls “a breathtakingly confident Pelagianism” (71). The Maiden counters the notion in part with a retelling of Christ’s Parable of the Vineyard, in which a lord pays all of his vineyard workers the same single penny regardless how much time they have worked, and whose central lesson is that “Ther is no date of Hys godnesse . . . For al is trawthe that He con dresse [ordain], / And He may do nothynk but ryȝt” (493, 495-96). Marie Borroff gives this parable a sacramental reading, observing that “the daily penny was identified not only with salvation but with the daily bread of the Lord’s Prayer, which in turn was identified with the communion wafer,” and that recognizing these connections allows us to “see that the blessed souls are in fact in a state of eternal communion with the divine presence” (123). To connect the image of vineyard workers receiving their radically egalitarian penny wages directly
from a lord with the sacrament in which every communicant receives a single wafer of Christ’s body from the hands of a priest might appear as yet another example of the poet’s exclusion of the priestly office—the lord of the vineyard, who represents God, clearly needs no intermediary to distribute his gifts in this retelling of the parable.

But one does not have to interpret symbolic imagery in this subtle manner to discover the Pearl Maiden’s view of the Eucharist, baptism, and penance, or the relative importance of the priests who perform them, in the same section of the poem. Her consideration of these sacraments, all of which normally require priestly involvement, comes in the eleventh five-stanza section exactly at the poem’s midpoint (601-60), immediately after the Parable of the Vineyard. Significantly, these stanzas take as their repetitive concluding line “For the grace of God is gret inoghe” (612; see also 624, 636, 648, and 660). They argue, in summary, that though mankind is guilty of original sin through Adam’s transgression, God provides a remedy in “ryche blod” and “water” (646-47), both springing from Christ’s “brode wounde” on the cross (650). For the Christian remembering Christ’s sacrificial death, his blood is present in the eucharistic wine, and though the Maiden does not make this obvious connection explictly, she does say that “the water is baptem” (653). As the repeated tagline states, God’s grace is enough to allow both of these elements, blood and water, to overcome the stain of sin. As soon as God’s children are born, “In the water of baptem thay dyssente” (627)—as noted above, they descend on their own without any apparent help from a priest—and God’s grace alone keeps them pure. God’s grace is enough even for the sinners who appear in the first stanza of the poem’s next section, who “synnez thenne new” (662), so long as they repent and “byde the payne therto” (664). The repentance, pain, and “contryssyoun” (669) that follow their repeated sin are clear references to the
sacrament of penance, though again the poet does not depict a priest assigning works of satisfaction, but rather the penitential pains appear to arrive either naturally or directly from God.

This repeated assertion of the sufficiency of God’s grace, coming at a place where the role of clerically performed sacraments is under consideration, expresses a central theme of the poem, and may provide at least one answer to the question of why no priests appear within it. If God can promote to the status of queen of heaven a two-year-old girl, who is not yet old enough to understand the “Pater ne Crede” (485), the most basic tenets of the faith, then human involvement at any level of spiritual growth or service would appear to be radically unnecessary, even in the case of sacraments that would most seem to require it. God can simply provide grace directly if He chooses, just as he provided religious instruction to the Maiden, without the need for mediating tools, including consecrating priests, preachers, teachers, or even the Bible itself. The point is underlined further when the Dreamer at last sees the heavenly city of Jerusalem and, after exhaustively cataloging its fine jewels and noting that God’s light supplies the place of sun and moon, he next notices a conspicuous absence: “Kyrk therinne watz non ȝete, / Chapel ne temple that euer watz set; / The Almyȝt ye watz her mynster mete” (1061-63). Church buildings have no place in the heavenly city, because God Himself supplies the place of the temple, and “the Lombe the sakerfyse” (1064); by extension, priests are no longer necessary either, as God fills their role as well, both “minster” and “minister.”

In conjunction with her meditation on the sufficiency of God’s grace apart from human actions, the Pearl Maiden also delivers a set of warnings against pride and self-righteousness. Her recounting of the Parable of the Vineyard (497-572) could in a general sense be read as a warning to priests and other officers of the church, since the central message of the parable is that those who have served or suffered for God for a longer period of time should not expect a
greater reward than newcomers to the faith, and in fact should take care not to lose the reward they are promised. This message accords well with Wyclif’s idealistic vision of the “ghostly church,” in which priests, bishops, and popes all hold the same rank, and seemingly unlikely souls, including children and those whom the “visible church” deems unrighteous, may achieve salvation, while officers of the visible church might be damned. As G.R. Evans summarizes Wyclif’s view, “the true Church was invisible, even to its members. . . . Wyclif permitted himself the triumphant observation that the Pope cannot know he is among the elect and so it cannot be certain that any given claimant to the papacy is actually a member of the Church at all” (218). Anne Hudson notes that this claim, which became more insistent among the Lollard writers who followed Wyclif, was considered heretical by the English church, and that after Arundel’s Constitutions in 1409, “any tendency to doubt that the existing ecclesiastical hierarchy is part of the true church immediately opens suspicion of heresy” (Premature Reformation 21-22).

The mystic Richard Rolle, imagining heaven in ways similar to Pearl, uses this sense of radical equality and the mystery of who belongs to God’s ghostly church as reason to refrain from passing judgment on earth, even on religious leaders who are celebrated for their holiness:

Some-while it fallis that he is better in goddis dome [judgment] that man demes iuel then some that man demes gode. Mani are honest with-oute & vnclene with-in; some werdli & dissolute & holi with-in as goddis priue frendes. And some beris thaim in mannis sight as angels, & in goddis sight thai styink as synful wrecsis; and some semes synful til mannnes dome & are ful dere til god almighti, for thaire indre [inner] berynge is heuenli in goddis bright sight. Therfore deme we nane other bot vs-selfe. (Yorkshire Writers 153)
As might be expected, the concept could also be taken in much more openly anticlerical directions, including by the Gawain-poet himself. As Chapter 3 has already explored, the poet uses imagery similar to Rolle’s to describe hypocritical priests as “honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylthez” (*Cleanliness* 14), whose presence in the church is dangerous. The Lollard Wiliam Thorpe, on trial for heretical opinions before Archbishop Arundel, refused to recognize the authority of any priest or church official, including Arundel himself, without first determining whether he was likely to be a member of the invisible “holi chirche of Crist”: “I wole submitte me oonli to the rule and gouernaunce of hem aftir my knowynge whom, bi the hauynge and vsynge of the forseide vertues, I perceyue to ben the membris of holi chirche” (Hudson, ed., *Two Wycliffite Texts* lines 291-99). In a passage with closer connections to the Pearl Maiden’s version of the Vineyard Parable, the author of the Lollard “Sermon of Dead Men” interprets the “peny” paid to the vineyard workers as representing “the eendles blis of heuen” (Cigman, ed., lines 994-95), where there is no social rank and every person’s glorified body is the same age and equally bright with beauty. The sermonist’s description of the radical equality among these souls takes on, however, in a way that *Pearl*’s does not, a particularly anticlerical and antifraternal tone. In heaven, unlike the earthly church, “There is no willing aftur worship, ne desire after degre, but yche man holdith him apayed of the state that he is inne” (1112-13). Spiritual education is not bestowed automatically, as it is for the Pearl Maiden, but it too is radically equalized—books of learning normally available only to monks and friars “shal neuer be claspid vp, ne closid in cloyster, but as opun to one as to another, for that is oure Lordis ordre” (1152-54), a standard critique of fraternal covetousness for secret knowledge.

The Dreamer of *Pearl* does not take the Parable of the Vineyard in any of these anticlerical directions, but rather interprets it—interestingly, given the discussion of involuntary
poverty in *Patience*—as a message in praise of “pore men” (573), whom he views the late-arriving workers as representing. The parable thus becomes, in the story’s context, not only a lesson to the Dreamer about heavenly rewards given to young people such as the Maiden, but also a lesson to the reader about God’s preference for the poor, which carries with it an implicit word of caution for the rich. The Dreamer argues back with a biblical passage that seems to contradict the parable: “In sauter,” he says, referring to Psalm 61, “is sayd a verce ouerte / That spekez a poynyt determynable: / ‘Thou quytez vchon as hys desserte, / Thou hyȝe Kyng ay pertermynable [supreme in judgment]’” (593-96). In other words, the Dreamer argues from the Psalm, God *should* give people what they have earned and deserve; otherwise, a person might actually work more and receive less in the kingdom of God, which would be unfair.

The Maiden’s response to this seemingly reasonable point is to observe that the terms “less” and “more” do not have the same meaning in the realm of heaven: “‘Of more and lasse in Godez rych,’ / That gentyl sayde, ‘lys no joparde [danger, uncertainty]’” (601-02). Applied to the question of poverty, these lines put her earlier praise of “the poor” into a somewhat different perspective. God does not necessarily *prefer* the poor so much as He simply does not consider “poor” or “rich” to be valid categories in His kingdom. With a single statement, the Maiden appears to sweep away every complexity of the long-standing controversies about voluntary and involuntary poverty, possession, and mendicancy, which so obsessed 14th-century clerical and anticlerical writers alike, and which the *Gawain*-poet himself engaged in the introduction to *Patience*. According to the Maiden, these are debates in which God Himself is simply not interested, perhaps a reflection of the poet’s own opinion at this point in his career, despite his arguments elsewhere in the manuscript about the spiritual benefits of poverty.
By the closing lines of the poem, however, it has become increasingly clear that regardless how much the Dreamer learns about heaven and God’s will, or whether he alters his views on poverty, spiritual equality, or the sufficiency of grace, he will simply not be satisfied with the assurances of the Pearl Maiden, or with the reality of his life on earth, to which he is about to return. The Maiden has educated him, defeated him in argument about the rightness of her station in heaven, but she has not truly comforted him, helped him to mourn, or given him resources to deal with the loss that awaits him once more. When the vision ends, he will have to leave both heaven and the Maiden behind and confront an empty world which contains neither.

The concluding stanzas of the poem, however, make clear that the world to which the Dreamer returns is not truly empty. His first hint that there may be an answer to his problem, that the joys of heaven might be available on earth as well, comes in the middle of the Maiden’s extended description of her new life and home, and the role of “the Lamb” in blessing heaven’s inhabitants: “The Lombe vus gladez, oure care is kest [cast out]; / He myrthez vus alle at vch a mes [meal]. / Vchonez blysse is breme [intense] and beste, / And neuer onez honour ȝet neuer the les” (861-64). The Lamb shares daily feasts with his people in heaven, which bring them mirth and gladness, cast out their cares, and honor everyone equally. Even without the word “mes” in line 862—etymologically distinct but a verbal echo of “messe,” or Mass—and the imagery of the slain Lamb as Christ’s body from the Book of Revelation, these repeated feasts clearly seem to be the heavenly equivalent of the Eucharist. Indeed, the Dreamer himself later uses the figurative image of young women in a church service to describe the stately procession of the Maiden with other queens in heaven: “mylde as maydenez seme at mas, / So droȝ thay forth with gret deýl” (1115-16). This procession even includes, as would a Mass in the Dreamer’s earthly world, “ensens [incense] of swete smelle” (1122), a “songe” from an angelic choir
(1124), and an elevation of Christ’s body and blood, the portion of the medieval church service Eamon Duffy describes as “the high point of lay experience of the Mass” (Duffy 96), as the Lamb processes before the maidens and displays “His quyte [white] syde” and “blod outsprent” (1137), and the image infuses each congregant “with lyf” (1146). These descriptions serve as a reminder, to both the Dreamer and reader, that for all of the stark differences and seeming paradoxes of heaven, there is in fact one way in which it is similar to earthly life—in both, Christ makes himself present and satisfies his people through a ritual feast. What the saints enjoy in heaven is equally accessible to everyone on earth.

This revelation remains only implied until the final stanza, after the Dreamer wakes in the garden once more and feels a “longeyng heuy” (1180), as if he is imprisoned in a “doel-doungoun” (1187). The Dreamer first rebukes himself for his over-eagerness in approaching God, not knowing his place, which he thinks has deprived him of a vision of God Himself: “To that Pryncez paye hade I ay bente, / And ȝerned no more then watz me geuen, / And halden me ther in trwe entent . . . [then] drawen to Goddez present, / To mo of His mysterys I hade ben dryuen” (1189-91; 1193-94). His foolish “yearning” has cost him, he thinks, an invitation to sit in God’s presence and access to further mysteries, and for a moment his “joye watz sone toriuen [torn apart]” (1197), and he tastes bitter disappointment.

But only for a moment. In an abrupt shift in tone, as if determined to end the poem on a positive note, the Dreamer says he has found God to be, “bothe day and naȝte, / A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin” (1203-04)—this despite the fact he did not actually get to see God in the vision or talk directly with Him, and despite remaining in a state of grief. But perhaps the shift is not truly as abrupt as it first appears. The Dreamer’s vision of God as a personal friend, one who approaches him directly and offers him comfort, has appeared earlier in the poem, before his
conversation with the Pearl Maiden or the heavenly vision ever took place. In a passage mentioned earlier in this discussion, notable for its absence of any references to the institutional church, the “kynde of Kryst me comfort kenned [offered],” but “my wrecched wylle in wo ay wraȝte” (55-56)—in other words, Christ himself offered comfort to the Dreamer in the first throes of his grief, but he chose to reject it and persist in his sorrow, at which point he “felle vpon that floury flaȝt” (57) and began to dream. The precise nature of the “comfort” Christ offered is never made clear, but the reference to God at the poem’s conclusion as a “frende ful fyin” is a reminder that the entire dream vision itself has been a form of comfort, and an indication that the Dreamer is prepared to accept Christ’s ministrations in whatever form they come. He is still “For pyty of my perle enclyin [lying prone]” (1206), but in the very next line he gives over the memory of his pearl: “to God I hit bytaȝte [committed]” (1207). In a figurative sense, he picks himself up from the ground and turns his attention to the ways in which Christ offers every person on earth a form of comfort, through his physical presence.

At this point come the poem’s final lines, with the poet’s first explicit reference to the Eucharist and the first reference of any kind to a priestly intermediary between himself and God: “In Krystez dere blessyng and myn, / That in the forme of bred and wyn / The preste vus schewez uch a daye” (1208-09). The miraculous vision of heaven, in which the wounded Lamb displays his wounds and feeds his saints in perfect harmony, has become literally quotidian, a routine performed on a daily basis, not by God Himself in a chapel-less heaven, but by a human priest in an ordinary church building. The repeated reference to God’s friendship at the end is a reminder to the Dreamer that the quotidian miracle of the Eucharist, and with it the presence of Christ himself, has always been available to him, though perhaps overlooked for its very availability and ordinariness.
This is not to say that for the Dreamer, or for the poet, the Eucharist is an incomplete or unsatisfying means of grace. Lawrence Beaston, in making a claim for the poet’s supposed Pelagianism, argues that the sacrament involves a distancing from the divine:

. . . the sense of the narrator’s distance from God is intensified when he suddenly awakes from his dream to find himself in his earthly surroundings . . . No longer within sight of the divine throne, he is left with only slender links to God, the “bred and wyn” (1209) of the Eucharist. These elements, whether they are symbols or substances of Christ, stand in the place of one who is not totally present, thus reinforcing the sense of God’s distance. (26)

But unless the poet has taken a radical Lollard approach to the sacraments and rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation altogether, Christ is “totally present” in the eucharistic elements—if he were not, the poet would have little reason to be concerned that “His aune body” might be sullied by filthy hands (Cleanness 11)—and the Dreamer has no reason not to be fully satisfied, as he claims he is. These “slender links” to God, as Beaston describes them, are in fact God’s presence in the body of Christ. The feeling of distance from God, far from being intensified, is assuaged at the end of Pearl, with the reminder that Christ’s comfort, friendship, and physical presence have been on offer to the Dreamer from the poem’s opening lines.

There are, however, substantial differences between the miracle of the Eucharist and the heavenly vision the Dreamer has left behind. The first is that the vision of the elevated host is communal, a miracle shown “vus” (1210), to us rather than to a single man. The heavenly city alone is a glorious enough sight that any “bodyly burne” would lose his life to look upon it (1090)—to say nothing of an unfettered view of God Himself which the Dreamer is denied—but
all people are welcome to participate without fear in the earthly sacramental ritual. The other significant difference is that the earthly sacrament is delivered to the community by “the preste,” a human intermediary. A central contention throughout the entirety of *Pearl* is that under extraordinary circumstances, and in the realm of heaven, God can perform for Himself any task He deems necessary—He can offer direct pastoral comfort to a grieving father, give instant maturity and an advanced theological education to a child too young to recite creeds or prayers, promote any person to the status of heavenly royalty, and perform any sacrament without human assistance, from baptism to penance to Communion with the body and blood of Christ. In this sense, the entire class of priests could be deemed unnecessary, a point made tentatively by Wyclif late in his career and repeatedly by the later Lollards. But the poet does not take this vision in an anti-sacerdotal direction, as the more radical of his contemporaries did. In the ordinary run of things, the final lines remind us, God uses priestly representatives to perform the tasks we have just seen Him accomplish alone in the Dreamer’s extraordinary vision. These representatives are left unmentioned until the final five lines of *Pearl*, leaving the poet no room to consider possible complications or concerns related to their involvement. His silence might indicate a straightforward trust in the office of the parish priest, or perhaps simply an awareness that the present poem has reached its end thematically, and a more complete consideration of the potential dangers of human involvement in sacramental mysteries would have to be reserved for another work. Whether this work came before or after *Pearl*, however, is itself a mystery.

Without more information about how the Cotton Nero A.x poems were composed or the manuscript compiled, it is impossible to know why *Cleanness* follows *Pearl* (especially since *Pearl* appears to be a more accomplished effort) and whether the close proximity of the manuscript’s only two direct references to the Eucharist is intentional, on the part of either poet
or compiler, or merely coincidence. Regardless, the transition from one poem to the next would produce a jarring, unsettling effect on a reader approaching the manuscript as it is arranged—the first narrator finds comfort in the bread and wine shown to the congregation by the priest, then the next narrator questions the purity of those same elements, which the sinful priest may have sullied. Though *Pearl*'s Dreamer is fully comforted, fully satisfied with the quotidian miracle of the Eucharist, and virtually unaware of the priest’s involvement, the *Cleanness* narrator cannot mention any action in the Mass service—reading and singing (7), preparing the altar (10), or consecrating the host (11)—without also imagining the “fylth” of those who perform them (6), the sullying of “bothe God and His gere,” and God’s subsequent wrath (15-16). The shift from heaven to earth, from extraordinary to everyday, which so comforts the Dreamer at the end of *Pearl*, is by contrast a source of anxiety for the narrator of *Cleanness*. He immediately throws into doubt the conclusion *Pearl* has labored to reach for more than a thousand lines, and troubles, in retrospect, the seemingly untroubled addition of a potentially sinful third party in the poem’s final lines.

3. The Devilish Priest of *Sir Gawain*

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the least overtly “religious” of the four poems in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript, draws its inspiration not from sermons or biblical commentaries but primarily from the rich tradition of Arthurian courtly romances. The narrator claims, as in *Cleanness* and *Patience*, that the story he tells is one he originally heard spoken aloud, “with tonge” (32), and it is also closely connected with a holy day, as its central scenes take place during the Christmas season. In this case, however, the story is not a sermon but a “laye . . . I in toun herde” (30-31), a location that could mean literally a town or city, or possibly the court.³
The story also appears, according to the narrator, in a traditional written version, “stad [set down]
and stoken [fastened, enclosed] . . . In londe so hatz ben longe,” but these “lel [true] letteres” are
not the words of Scripture, but simply those of the “stori” itself, “stif and stronge” (33-36). “The
bok as I herde say” (690), as the narrator puts it in a phrase that echoes the biblical poems, is not
the “holy writ” of Cleanness and Patience but simply a book.

The poem is by no means free from religion, however, either thematically or in its literal
references to Christian religious practice. In a manner wholly unlike the biblical poems, priests
play a visible role, if somewhat in the background, throughout the story, particularly in its two
central indoor locations. Both Camelot in the opening scene and Bertilak’s household later in the
poem are depicted as places which observe religious festivities in grand, over-the-top style.
Apparently not content to celebrate Christmas for only the traditional twelve days between
December 25 and the Feast of the Epiphany in early January, the revelers at Camelot have
already been feasting for a “ful fiften dayes” (44) when Arthur announces his intention to see a
great feat or hear a wondrous tale for the New Year. In their first appearance in the poem,
“clerkez” raise a “loude crye” of “Nowel” (64-65) to mark the end of the Christmas season and
start of the New Year’s feast. Their role appears to be to give official religious sanction to the
seemingly non-stop celebrations—they “chant” in the chapel between feasts (63), mark the
advent of holidays on the liturgical calendar, and preside over festivities that practically overlap
with each other. At least one cleric is accorded a high place at the feast, “Bischop Bawdewyn”
who “abof biginez the table” (112), a phrase which Andrew and Waldron gloss as “sits in the
place of honour,” and explain thus: “When the host sat at the end of the table the guest of honour
would occupy the first place on his right at the ‘top’ of the long side.” Significantly, this place of
honor in Bertilak’s household is given to the “olde auncian wyf” (1001), who turns out to be
Morgan le Fay. In other words, where Camelot honors a high-ranking officer of the church, Bertilak does the same for a practitioner of black magic, though for all practical purposes the activities at each Christmas celebration are the same. In A.C. Spearing’s reading of these scenes, he describes the feasting, as well as the violent hunts that are part of the entertainment at Bertilak’s castle, as both secular and sacramental:

[Feasting is] a kind of social sacrament, a symbol of the vital bonds by which society is held together. A feast is not simply eaten, it is enacted as a kind of social ritual, in which everything must be done with propriety, according to a set pattern. . . . The meal must begin at the right time; the social hierarchy must be reflected in the seating; the very washing of hands before the meal is a significant act, a rite of purification, to be performed “worthily.” (Spearing, *Gawain-Poet* 8)

The priests who are present at the performance of these secular sacraments are not so much consecrating them in a religious sense as they are simply presiding over them, granting them the official sanction of the church.

These priestly figures at Camelot fade even further into the background during the Green Knight’s entrance and exchange with Gawain. Despite the moral dimensions the beheading game will turn out to have, it appears at first to be an entirely non-religious, knightly concern. The priests return to view in a scene which takes place a year later—a year which is structured by the liturgical calendar and holidays such as Easter, Michaelmas, and All Saints’ Day—as Gawain prepares for his fatal journey and “herknez his masse / Offred and honoured at the heȝe auter” (592-93). This ritual is important since after he embarks, Gawain will be fully alone with no intercessor, “Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp [talk]” (696), except possibly the
Virgin Mary, to whom he also prays. As he nears the end of his journey, Gawain’s primary concern is not his own safety but the question of whether “I myȝt here masse” on Christmas Day (755). Gawain’s prayers, which include the “Pater and Aue / And Crede” (757-58), as well as crying for his sins (760) and a petition that “Cros Kryste me spede” (762), are remarkably expedient, as almost immediately Bertilak’s castle appears and Gawain’s search for both a Christmas Mass and the Green Knight’s home finds its objects.

The priestly office and view toward feasting in Bertilak’s household, as mentioned, is remarkably similar to those in Camelot, as Gawain discovers the entire house feasting not only at Christmas but during Advent as well, traditionally a season for fasting. The kitchen observes the letter of this fast in abstaining from red meat, but not its penitential spirit, as it serves “double” portions of every kind of “fischez, / Summe baken in bred, summe brad [grilled] on the gledez [embers], / Somme sothen [boiled], summe in sewe [stew] sauered with spyces, / And ay sawes [sauces] so sleȝe [subtle] that the segge lyked” (890-93). When others at this sumptuous table refer to “this penaunce” (897), the line can only be read as humorously ironic, and indeed Gawain is soon laughing and making “much merthe” (899).

Despite their excessive feasting, both Camelot and Bertilak’s castle clearly take religious rituals seriously, as evidenced by the presence of priests in both locations. “Chaplaynez” appear at the end of Bertilak’s feast (930) to ring bells in the chapel and lead guests to a “hersum [solemn] euensong” service (932), where Gawain and his hosts “seten soberly samen [together] the seruise quyle” (940). Their solemnity at this religious obligation does not last long, however. “On the morne” of Christmas Day, “vch mon mynez [remembers] that tyme / That Dryȝtyn for oure destyné to deȝe watz borne” (995-96), but this sober morning reflection immediately gives way to the castle’s raucous celebration, complete with “dayntés mony,” “messes [meals] ful
quaynt” (998-99), “mete . . . myrthe . . . joye” (1007), wine drinking (1025), and dancing to “dere carolez” (1026) played by an array of musical instruments (1016-17), in addition to the courtly love-talk between Gawain and the lady of the house, in an apparently round-the-clock party that continues through “Sayn Jonez day” (1022) on December 27th. As at Camelot, reminders of religious obligation such as chanting, bell-ringing, and attendance at Mass, serve largely as transitions from one festivity to the next.

In this sense, the role of priests in 

Sir Gawain

supports the contention of Nicholas Watson, David Aers, and others that the poem, like the 

Gawain-

poet’s other works, takes as its audience a group of readers Aers calls “courtly subjects” and Watson calls “‘active’ rather than ‘contemplative’ Christians—lay people who live ‘in the world,’ rather than being separated from it like monks or hermits” (“Gawain-Poet” 293). The central quality of this group, Watson says, is that they may aspire to perfection but unlike the contemplatives can never attain it, “but must expect to live their lives in a cycle of venial sin, repentance and penance, and perhaps spend time in purgatory before finally attaining heaven. Despite his high ideals, Gawain, by the nature of his profession, belongs to a group theologians termed the mediocrer boni, rather than the spiritual elite known as the perfecti” (293-94). In fact, Watson contends, a large degree of Gawain’s distress after his failure to perfectly pass the Green Knight’s test stems from his failure to recognize to which group he belongs.

With that said, Gawain does make a remarkable attempt throughout the poem to remain pious and pure. After the lengthy Christmas celebration, while Gawain stays as a guest at Bertilak’s castle, both Bertilak and Gawain attend Mass in the chapel every day until the New Year (1135, 1311, 1414, 1558, 1690, and 1876-84), a highly unusual practice for non-monastic Christians in the 14th century. Bertilak may have some cause for this extreme level of piety,
given that his daily hunting adventures involve incredible levels of danger—for example, he fights hand-to-hand with a wild boar that has broken the backs of his best hunting dogs (1563), and Bertilak’s companions fear for his life (1588)—but Gawain faces no such mortal danger at this point in the story. In fact, what danger he does face—Lady Bertilak’s sexual advances, which must be parried as courteously as possible—actually adds a layer of irony to his otherwise pious-seeming church attendance. Every morning, Gawain first holds an extensive courtly conversation about love and then receives kisses from Bertilak’s wife in his bed, actions whose supposed innocence are belied by the fact that Gawain refuses to tell Bertilak the source of the kisses he exchanges with him (1395-97), then immediately after each game of love-talking and temptation, Gawain rushes off to Mass. After the first temptation, he “boȝez [goes, vaults] forth, quen he was boun [ready], blythely to masse” (1311), a desperately happy rush to the chapel the poet surely intends to be humorous. Gawain’s eagerness to worship so quickly after the second temptation even takes on a sexual double entendre, given its proximity to his laughing, kissing, and “layk[ing] [playing] longe” (1554-55) in bed with the lady: “Then ruthes [rouses] hym the renk and ryses to the masse” (1558).

Gawain’s fourth and final attendance at Bertilak’s chapel is the subject of much critical commentary—as David Aers describes it, “a substantial literature, a veritable encyclopedia of scholastic teaching on confession and penance” (“Christianity” 96)—in part because the poet describes Gawain’s confession and absolution there in great detail, and in part because it seems to contain a contradiction:

Sythen cheuely [quickly] to the chapel choses he the waye,
Preuély [privately] aproched to a prest and prayed hym there
That he wolde lyste [hear] his lyf and lern hym better
How his sawle schulde be saued when he schuld seye hethen [go hence].

There he schrof hym schyrly [completely] and schewed his mysdedez,

Of the more and the mynne [less], and merci besechez,

And of absolucioun he on the segge calles;

And he asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene

As domezday schulde haf ben diȝt [ordained] on the morn. (1876-84)

Every element of this scene accords with standard practice for the sacrament of penance.

Though the services Gawain attended on previous occasions were public celebrations of Mass, this time he meets with a priest privately, shrives himself by confessing every misdeed he can remember, no matter how small, then receives absolution from the priest, who “assoils” him so completely that he has nothing to fear even if death should come the very next day—as Gawain, of course, believes it will.

The complication in the context of the story, however, is that the reader knows Gawain has not, in fact, confessed every misdeed, “the more and the mynne,” but has concealed from Bertilak the acquisition of his wife’s green girdle, in violation of the rules of their exchange game. The priest does not appear to assign any works of penitential satisfaction to Gawain—or at least none that could not be performed immediately, such as a monetary contribution or recital of prayers. Had Gawain revealed in confession that he had stolen from Bertilak (with the assumption that withholding a promised gift is a form of stealing), his penance would surely involve restitution before absolution could take place.

“Though the poet does not notice it,” Israel Gollancz states in an editorial note to his 1940 edition of the poem, “Gawain makes a sacrilegious confession” (123). Gerald Morgan, in an article 45 years later devoted solely to the question of “The Validity of Gawain’s Confession,”
agrees that Gawain’s confession before the priest in Bertilak’s chapel is insufficient, though not technically “sacrilegious,” and he denies Gollancz’s contention that the poet did not notice. Rather, Morgan argues, the poet recognizes that Gawain’s decision to conceal the gift from both Bertilak and the priest is a “sin of passion” borne of ignorance of the future, not a “sin of malice” that must be confessed for his absolution to be valid (11). The key is Gawain’s innocent motive, the desire to save his own life, which the Green Knight himself later recognizes as a mitigating circumstance when he says, “Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf—the lasse I yow blame” (2368). At least one critic, John Burrow, argues that Gawain actually does confess his fault in the confession scene, but that the absence of any of the penitential acts mentioned above renders the priest’s absolution invalid:

[Gawain] realizes that he has sinned in agreeing to conceal the gift of the girdle from Bertilak, against his promise; but, though, presumably, he confesses this, he neither makes restitution ("restituat ablata") by returning the girdle nor resolves to sin no more ("promittat cessare"). . . . This fact is quite enough to invalidate a confession, according to all contemporary writers on the subject. ("Two Confession Scenes" 74-75)

In an extensive footnote to this section in their edition of Sir Gawain, Andrew and Waldron summarize the critical debate over the scene and offer their own conclusion:

Probably the most satisfactory solution is that it is only in retrospect, when he sees its full significance, that the concealment becomes a grave moral fault for him. At the time, to violate the rules of a parlour game . . . would hardly have seemed a sin at all. (275, n.)
Indeed, several moments in the text suggest that the participants in this “parlour game” view it as merely a jest. Their agreement is sealed at the beginning not with a formal vow but merely with a drink (1112), and afterward they both laugh when speaking of it (1398, 1409, 1623, 1668). On the other hand, the Green Knight later speaks of the game with deadly seriousness and explains that Gawain’s life was actually at stake in its outcome—it is no more a “game” than the beheading exchange at the start of the poem, which Gawain “no gomen [game] thoȝt” (692) as he rode toward certain death.

What every one of the critical assessments of Gawain’s chapel confession have in common (with the exception of Gollancz, who alone believes the poet simply did not notice the contradiction) is that they all rely heavily on the critic’s assessment of a later, more fraught moment of penance in the poem, which takes place in another type of chapel—the Green Chapel, outdoor home of the Green Knight. This penitential scene, which occurs in conjunction with the Green Knight revealing himself to be an enchanted Bertilak, includes all three critical elements of the sacrament: Gawain feels contrition, as he blushes and is “agreued for greme [mortification]” (2370) and “schrank for schome [shame]” (2372); he confesses aloud his sins of “cowardyse” (2379) and “couetyse” (2380), admitting that “Now am I fawty and false” (2382); and he embraces the Knight’s demand for penitential satisfaction, in the form of the ax’s nick on his neck. Gawain also takes on the penance of wearing Lady Bertilak’s green girdle over his armor for the rest of his life, as an eternal “syngne of my surfet” (2433) to “lethe [humble] my hert” (2438), but this is a self-imposed humiliation, not demanded by the Knight and laughed at by members of the court at Camelot. Before Gawain decides to impose this additional requirement on himself, the Green Knight forgives him for his transgressions, in a manner consistent with the sacramental echoes throughout the entire scene. It is this moment specifically
which has proved most intriguing and vexing for critics of the poem, especially when viewed together with the earlier “official” scene of penance, and which also contains the poem’s strongest and most interesting potential connections to its English anticlerical contemporaries:

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Thenn loȝe [laughed] that other leude [i.e., the Green Knight] and luflyly sayde,
“I halde hit hardily hole, the harme that I hade.
Thou art confessed so clene, beknowen of thy mysses,
And hatz the penaunce apert of the poynes of myn egge,
I halde the polysed [cleansed] of that plyȝt and pured as clene
As thou hadez neuer forfeted sythen thou watz fyrst borne. (2389-94)
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The formula is nearly identical to the earlier priestly absolution. The Knight uses the verb “halde [consider]” rather than “sette” (1875) and “polysed” rather than “asoyled” (1883), words which at least two critics view as marking a difference between a formal declaration of absolution and an informal layman’s judgment (Burrow, Reading 132; Borroff 98), but the spirit of both pronouncements is the same, as Gawain is washed clean of every sin, not just those of immediate concern he has just confessed, and is now pure as a newborn baby, ready for God’s judgment.

The rhyming echo between the lines “clene / morn” in 1883-84 and “clene / born” in 2393-94 further suggests the poet intends a thematic link between the two penitential scenes.

The complication in this case, of course, is that Bertilak is not a priest, nor any official of the church, but a layman. In fact, his playing the role of priest in the guise of the Green Knight is especially ironic given an earlier description from the servant who escorted Gawain to the Green Chapel. The Green Knight, he says, is a merciless man with no respect for any person, and especially not for clergy: “For he is a mon methles [ruthless], and mercy non vses, / For be hit chorle other chaplayn that bi the chapel rydes, / Monk other masseprest, other any mon elles, /
Hym thynk as queme [pleasant] hym to quelle [kill] as quyk go hymseluen” (2106-09). Helen Cooper notes that this list of knights, priests, and churls covers “the three estates that composed medieval society,” and thus suggests “that Gawain is on his way to meet a personified Death, with whom no one can survive an encounter” (288). This assessment is certainly accurate, though the inclusion of “knights” in the list is only implied by the servant’s earlier mention of “armes” as useless against the Green Knight (2104), but the number and variety of clerics listed alongside the single “chorle” is nevertheless striking, reminiscent of Wyclif’s and Lollards’ repeated anticlerical formulation “clerkis, monkis, chanouns, and freris.” Chaplains (the word used earlier for the singing and bell-ringing priests in Bertilak’s chapel), monks, and parish priests who consecrate the Mass all fall under his sword—but now he acts as one of them.

The Green Chapel itself contributes to the irony of the Green Knight as a priest-like figure. Bertilak’s servant describes the Knight as “a wyȝe” (2098), “a mon” (2106), and a “borelych [large] burne” (2148), as a human and not a monster, but he expresses deep fear not only of him but of his dwelling, which he describes as “the place . . . ful perelous” (2097). When Gawain enters the “chapel,” the narrator first describes it not as a church building but as a forest glade within a craggy valley, which contains “nobot [nothing but] an olde caue, / Or a creuisse of an old cragge” (2182-83). The discovery of this unusual form of chapel prompts Gawain to imagine his adversary in something other than human terms: “‘We! Lorde,’ quoth the gentyle knyȝt, / ‘Whether this be the Grene Chapelle? / Here myȝt aboute mydnyȝt / The dele [devil] his matynnes telle!’” (2185-88). This suspenseful comparison of the Green Knight with the devil, reciting monastic prayers at midnight, comes at the end of a stanza, in the rhyming “bob-and-wheel.” But Gawain’s description of the Green Chapel, which infuses the landscape with terror
in a way the narrator’s straightforward physical description does not, as well as his comparison
of the Green Knight with Satan, is far from over, as he continues at length into the next stanza:

“Now iwysse,” quoth Wowayn, “wysty [desolate] is here;
This oritore [chapel] is vgly, with erbez ouergrowen.
Wel bisemez the wyȝe wruxled [adorned] in grene
Dele [to perform] here his deuocioun on the Deuelez wyse;
Now I fele hit is the Fende, in my fyue wyttez,
That hatz stoken [forced on] me this steuen [meeting] to strye [destroy] me here.
This is a chapel of meschaunce, that chekke [bad luck] hit bytyde!
Hit is the corsedest kyrk that euer I com inne!” (2189-96)

To be sure, this extended image of the Knight as the devil performing evil devotions in a cursed
church exists only in Gawain’s imagination, on the brink of what he thinks will be his death.
Though Gawain never revises the image with an alternate description, he does offer a Christian
blessing to the Knight— “the Wyȝe hit yow ȝelde / That vphaldez the heuen and on hyȝ sittez”
(2441-42)—after finding him to be chivalrous and merciful. All the same, the image of the
Green Knight as devil lingers as he performs the priestly absolution over Gawain (the two are
separated by 193 lines), and the “perilous” physical location remains, perhaps part of the reason
Gawain departs from the Green Chapel as quickly as possible without staying to meet Morgan le
Fay or Lady Bertilak (2471).

So what would a 14th-century reader have made of this unusual sacrament, performed by
such an unsettling figure in this terrifying place? As noted, every scholar who considers the
validity of Gawain’s first absolution relates it in some way to the second, and weighs in on its
merits as well. “Bercilak, being a layman, has no power of absolution,” Burrow states flatly, and
the scene in the Green Chapel is “a pretend secular confession” (Reading 132-33). On the other hand, he argues, this faux confession “complements and, as it were, completes the first at exactly that point at which we have seen it to be deficient,” namely in demanding true contrition from the penitent and providing him with works of penitential satisfaction (“Two Confession Scenes” 75). In Burrow’s summary, the first confession follows proper form but does not meet the proper “internal conditions” in the penitent’s soul, whereas in the more genuine second confession, the “external conditions” of church sanction are not met. Burrow ultimately decides that in a poetic context, the latter does not matter so much: “At this point . . . theological terms are no longer appropriate, for the Green Knight is a figure from the world not of theology but of poetic myth” (76). Gerald Morgan argues similarly that though Gawain’s first confession is technically “valid,” his full penance cannot take place until the scene in the Green Chapel, which serves as a “model of penitence” (18), involving all three steps of the sacrament—confession, satisfaction, and absolution.

So far, however, there have been only two scholars (to my knowledge) who have explored, however briefly, the question of the two confession scenes in Sir Gawain in the context of the textual environment of 14th-century English anticlericalism, which as we have seen was deeply concerned with precisely the questions these scenes raise—who is eligible to perform the sacraments, what role the performer and recipient play in the sacrament’s efficacy, whether it is possible for a sacrament to be “sullied” by sins of the priest, and ultimately whether a separate class of priests is necessary at all for the Christian life. The first to look at the confession scenes from this contextual perspective is David Aers, in his chapter entitled “Christianity for Courtly Subjects” in A Companion to the Gawain-Poet (1997); the other is Marie Borroff, in her chapter on Sir Gawain in Traditions and Renewals: Chaucer, the Gawain-Poet, and Beyond (2003).
Aers’s consideration of the Green Knight’s absolution comes in the context of an argument about the Gawain-poet’s intended audience, whom he proposes to be “courtly Christians,” similar to Watson’s “active Christians,” who observe the forms of religious piety but subsume them under what they consider the more significant rituals of social life, a process Aers describes as ultimately corrupting for the church’s sacraments, in particular the sacrament of penance, which becomes, in Cleanliness especially, “abstracted from all concern with justice and the political orders which facilitate or obstruct this virtue” (100). In approaching the two penitential scenes in Sir Gawain, Aers frames a series of questions to fit his thesis:

If there is a question here, it runs as follows: could a canonically sound confession and absolution be both licit and spiritually quite worthless, irrelevant? And if so, is Gawain’s an example of this, one symptomatic of a massive gap between orthodox claims about the sacrament of penance and spiritual realities? Could it be that the fusion of “chivalric” and “Christian” values has consequences less than helpful on the journey to the creature’s end? Could such a fusion have transformed the sacrament of penance into a therapeutic social form devoid of sacramental power . . . ? (96)

Aers’s questions here imply their own answers, which reflect his central contention—the values of Christianity and chivalry are incompatible, and the attempt to synthesize them devalues the rituals of the former, to the point that though Gawain’s first absolution might be superficially valid, it is practically useless for his spiritual life. An equally compelling question, however, might ask from the opposite direction: is a canonically unsound confession and absolution (the one administered by the Green Knight) necessarily worthless and irrelevant in its entirety, or
might it, too, potentially serve as a vessel for God’s grace in Gawain’s life? The answer to this question would appear to be yes—Gawain’s life is spared, his dishonest actions have been discovered and forgiven, and he has resolved to sin no more, all seemingly positive outcomes of the Knight’s absolution, whatever one may think of his excessive self-imposed penance later.

More interestingly, however, Aers raises the possibility that the poet’s view on the efficacy of a non-church-sanctioned sacrament might be connected—by astute medieval readers and nervous church officials—to the heretical positions of the Waldensians and Wycliffites. Again he asks a leading question to make his point: “Could the Gawain-poet’s relations to his culture include some elusive convergences with such critical views on the late medieval church and its sacramental powers?” (97).

In addressing this question to the Green Knight’s absolution more specifically, Aers begins by noting a point that Wyclif makes repeatedly about the sacraments, and which was relatively uncontroversial in the mid-14th century—that in practice, an “emergency” confession and absolution in extreme circumstances was considered acceptable by church authorities. However, Aers claims, “the challenge of Wycliffite ideas and practices in later fourteenth-century England gave such strands of orthodoxy a very different resonance”; specifically, it connected them to “the doctrine that absolution can only be licit if it is declarative of God’s prior and quite independent forgiveness, a doctrine incorporated in a cluster of beliefs profoundly subversive of the Roman church” (98). To place these “profoundly subversive” beliefs in context, Aers makes reference both to Arundel’s Constitutions (1409), as the point at which the English church sharply restricted expressions and even explorations of ideas connected to the Wycliffites and Lollards, and to the Lollard William Thorpe’s trial before Arundel after the publication of the Constitutions, in which Thorpe defends his radical position on confession in
part by pointing to this very same practice of emergency confessions. Of course, Thorpe’s argument merely appropriates the practice for its own rhetorical purposes; his true position on the sacrament of penance is that a sinner “schulde not schryue him to a man but oonli to God . . . tho preestis that taken vpon hem to asoyle men of her synnes blasfemen” (Hudson, ed., *Two Wycliffite Texts* lines 1828-29, 1897-98). But its very use by members of a heretical movement, even in such an obviously distorted form, Aers argues, meant that the “emergency confession to a layman” theme would have been scrutinized far more carefully by skittish church authorities. Decades before the *Constitutions*’ publication, however, a timeframe which likely includes the composition of the *Gawain*-poet’s works:

> . . . it was possible for those belonging to the elite to have, and show, sympathy with positions that challenged the church’s power and authority . . . In these contexts, it becomes plausible for someone to suggest that the *Gawain*-poet might have entertained some perspectives that could be unfolded in directions incompatible with Catholic orthodoxy. (98)

Though Aers’s claim is couched in the most circumspect language possible, and though he ultimately determines that the poet does *not* make any further move in this direction (at least not in *Sir Gawain*), the possibility he raises is intriguing. Especially given the poet’s overt criticism of the priesthood in *Cleanness* 5-16 and his critical depiction of priestly figures throughout *Cleanness* and *Patience*, all of which bear congruences with the sometimes heretical works of his ant clerical contemporaries, Aers’s twice-removed suggestion that the poet’s perspectives in *Sir Gawain* were critical of the church and its leadership is certainly more than plausible.

Borroff approaches the confession scenes with the full knowledge that they have already
been chewed over by a multitude of critics, and that her contribution to the debate will likely do little more than echo another’s. She quotes Burrow’s early dismissive critique at length, and notes, “It is a commonplace of the criticism of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that the drama acted out at the Green Chapel both ought and ought not to be read as a confessional scene” (97). For her own part, she considers the Green Knight’s statement of absolution, in which he says, “I *halde* the polysed” (2393, emphasis hers) to be not an official declaration of pardon but rather a “lay judgment,” one which the poet nevertheless prompts the reader to believe:

> Nonsacramental and hence nonauthorized though they may be,
> many if not most readers of the poem have nonetheless found the Green Knight’s judgments satisfying. They are, indeed, the only considered judgments the poem provides. Sir Gawain’s own anger and agonizings are exaggerated and, to the degree that they are so, slightly comic. (98)

Borroff also supplies a contemporaneous analogue to the Green Knight’s speech, which provides a strong reminder of the poem’s intensely anticlerical environment. She quotes a set of nearly identical words “spoken by another confessor the validity of whose role is subject to question” (97), Chaucer’s Pardoner. At the conclusion of his tale, the Pardoner promises the company of Canterbury pilgrims, “I yow assoille, by myn heigh power, / Yow that wol offre, as clene and eek as cleer / As ye were born” (VI.913-15).

The Pardoner’s words, in the context of his prologue and tale, are clearly satirical. None of the pilgrims takes up his offer to hear their confessions and “assoille yow, bothe moore and lasse” (939), and though no one directly contradicts his claim to have the power to cleanse sins (to do so might invite an accusation of heresy or unbelief), the Host immediately afterward
denies the efficacy of his relics (946-55), which the Pardoner claims have the same power.

Borroff’s invocation of the Pardoner in connection with the Green Knight does more than provide a glimpse of his confessional formula’s satirical possibilities. It also serves as a reminder that the Knight is only one of many non-priests who could assume the official authority to absolve sins. Pardoners were not always clerics, and were not required to hold any specific office or education—in many cases, they were simply lay officials collecting alms on behalf of a religious institution in which they were not themselves members (see Kellogg and Haselmeyer 253-62). Larry Benson’s editorial note in *The Riverside Chaucer* describes them as “professional fund raisers . . . who would undertake to obtain pardons, and, with the permission of the archdeacons of the dioceses (who required a fee), travel about a given area, appearing in churches to offer their indulgences to those willing and able to pay” (824). Benson adds, if the Pardoner’s own words had not made this clear enough, that “the system was easily abused.”

Another group granted a special papal dispensation to travel within a “limitation” and hear confessions in exchange for alms were the friars, whose economic competition with parish priests is described at length in Chapter 2. Unbeneficed priests could also travel to perform sacraments, with permission of the diocese. Yet another approved group, mentioned above, were laymen *in extremis*. True, the Green Knight is not a parish priest, but he does not necessarily need to be to perform an absolution with the church’s sanction, and to complicate matters, his position as a magical, possibly fiendish creature makes his spiritual status unclear.

The Lollards, of course, believed as Hawisia Moone declared that “confession shuld be maad oonly to God and to noon other prest, for no prest hath poar to remitte synne ne to assoile a man of ony synne” (Hudson, ed., *Selections* 34). But only the most radical among them contended that priests were wholly unnecessary, or that receiving absolution from anyone at any
time was by definition sinful. William Thorpe, for example, when asked by Arundel’s officials on what occasions priests are necessary, concedes: “Ser, if a man fele himself so distroublid with ony synne that he can not bi his owne witt voide this synne, withouten counseile of hem that ben hereinne wyser than he, in suche a caas the counseile of a good preest is ful nessessarie” (Hudson, ed., *Two Wycliffite Texts* 83). Thorpe’s advice to sinners here is to confess and trust in God alone for absolution, but for especially intractable sin to seek the counsel of a priest known to be wiser than oneself and good. Do not blindly trust the assoiling power of just any priest with the institutional authority to bestow it, Thorpe warns, because he might not be wise and good—but do not trust yourself alone, either. The *Gawain*-poet might offer similar advice to the hero of his poem. Neither the official nor the unofficial absolution provides Gawain with the assurance that he is forgiven and his soul is safe—in neither case does he truly feel as sinless as when he “watz fyrst borne”—but when he relies solely on his own judgement, he prescribes for himself a penance beyond all reasonable bounds.

It is also important to note, on the subject of the trustworthiness of religious authorities, that the highest ranking religious authority in Bertilak’s house—the one who sits at the place of honor which in Camelot is held by a bishop, who leads the procession into the chapel for the Christmas celebration, where she again is accorded great honor, and who attends Mass with the same frequency as the others—is Morgan le Fay. She possesses the “koynyte [wisdom] of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned” (2447) from a “conable [excellent] klerk” (2450), qualities which appear at first glance to be holy and priest-like. But her learning is actually “the maystrés of Merlyn” (2448), and her magic is not performed for the service of others, but rather to make herself a “godes” (2452) and to revenge herself on Arthur’s house by startling Guenevere with the Green Knight’s appearance “and gart [frighten] hir to dyȝe” (2460). She is the Arthurian
world’s tangible example of the priests described by the narrator of *Cleanness*, who “conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont, / As be honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylthez,” and who drive God to extreme “greme” (13-16). She is the cause of every evil or unpleasant event that takes place throughout the story, and her unveiling by Bertilak reveals that Gawain’s spiritual struggle is not entirely a problem of his own making. He has dwelt for a week in a house filled with deceivers feigning piety, he has been tricked for obscure reasons into committing an obscure and doubtful sin, he has confessed to and been absolved by a doubtful priest, and he has prescribed for himself a doubtful penance, which in the poem’s final scene cuts him off to a degree from the joyful community with which he was so perfectly joined at the start of the poem.

To read the entire 2530-line poem through the narrow lens of these 15 lines (the two confession and absolution scenes) and few scattered references to priests might seem myopic at first, but these brief moments of priestly and sacramental description can serve as entry points into a useful perspective on the poem in its entirety, one which views its central theme as a critique of religious deception and hypocrisy in the same vein as *Cleanness*. The poem’s social world, in which priests serve only the useful but relatively impotent role of presiding over secular celebrations and marking the passage of time, is also a world in which, as the poem’s first stanza portentously concludes, “oft bothe blysse and blunder [turmoil] / Ful skete [quickly] hatz skyfted [shifted]” (19)—where good and evil can, and often do, suddenly change places. A Christmas feast full of merriment becomes a horror with a single ax stroke; the beautiful passing of a year in the natural world becomes a march toward unnatural death; seemingly playful games suddenly turn out to be deadly serious. In perhaps the most physical example of a sudden emotional turn, when no one in Arthur’s court responds to the Green Knight’s challenge and he laughs at them, the king is literally blasted in the face with shame—“The blod schot for scham
into his schyre [white] face / and lere [cheek]” (317-18)—but just as instantly, as the stanza’s long lines turn to short trimeters in the wheel, the shame shifts to anger and reckless abandon. “He wex as wroth as wynde” (319), the poet writes, as if the shot of shame has been blown away by a windy gust, and Arthur steps up to meet the Knight’s challenge himself.

It is no surprise, then, as the narrative from its opening scene has primed the reader for sudden reversals of all kinds, that the Green Knight’s identity turns on a dime in the poem’s concluding stanzas. In fact, his transformation from fearsome supernatural beast to kindly lord and priest proves too sudden for Gawain to bear, as he declines the invitation to meet his aunt and his former temptress (2471). Though the Green Knight turns out to be not a monster or devil, but rather a gracious host, a moral teacher, and perhaps a kinsman (the fact that Gawain’s aunt lives in his household suggests that Bertilak may be a distant uncle or cousin), Gawain is not prepared to face on new terms any of the people who have deceived him, at least not so soon after their unveiling and sudden change in identity. Instead, he departs for Camelot, and the poet concludes their parting scene with a note that the Green Knight will now ride “Whiderwarde-soeuer he wolde” (2478). He may return to Bertilak’s castle, or he might not; his destination remains a mystery, just as his origins and identity remain obscure, illuminated hardly at all by the revelations about Morgan’s scheme and the temptation game. The reader, too, has been deceived; we also are victims of Morgan’s hypocritical attempt “to assay the surquidré [pride]” of Camelot (2457), and like Gawain we may be uncertain how to move forward to an understanding of this bewildering tale. In this case, looking to the central themes of the Gawain-poet’s more “religious” works may provide a key.

God’s wrath, as Cleanness and Patience amply demonstrate, is destructive enough when visited upon ordinary laymen, who are called merely to observe God’s laws and partake of His
sacraments; it is even worse when God must mete out judgment upon those with a higher calling, the patriarchs, prophets, and priests who administer and teach those laws and consecrate those sacraments. In those cases, His wrath is genuinely world-ending, ripping apart families, communities, cities, and even the entire earth. For Gawain, the use of occult magic and trickery to perform spiritual functions normally reserved for priests—the examination of virtue, the conviction of sin, and the ritual confession, satisfaction, and absolution of that sin through a sacramental process—leads him into negative consequences, though these may not seem as dire as a flood that covers the earth or fire that destroys cities. The trick merely causes Gawain to overreact to his relatively minor transgression, to take on an extreme penance not sanctioned by the church, and to refuse to accept forgiveness fully, in a manner at odds with a Christian view of atonement and absolution. But Gawain is not the only one affected by this perversion of the priestly office—it has broader implications for the social and political communities of which he is a part. Family ties are severed between himself and his aunt, and the animosity between the sorceress and Arthur’s court can only grow stronger and more dangerous for the realm. Bonds between the court and Gawain himself become strained as well, as Arthur and the “lordes and ladis that longed to that Table . . . laȝen [laugh] loude” at Gawain’s expressions of shame (2514-15), and as they attempt unsuccesfully to include him once more in their perpetual celebration.

The poem does end on a happy note, with Gawain accorded “the renoun of the Rounde Table” for posterity (2519), and his story recorded “in the best boke of romaunce” (2521), though the poet offers no glimpse of Gawain’s perspective on his own fame. But he concludes by calling back to the description of Bretayn’s ancient founding in the poem’s opening stanza, placing the story into the larger context of national political history, then expressing his trust in Christ with a blessing: “Now that bere the croun of thorne, / He bryng vus to his blysse! Amen”
The poet has little choice but to leave in God’s hands any possible correction for the religious, familial, social, and political ruptures Gawain’s story has exposed, all of them caused by the machinations of two false priests. The “greme” of God’s wrath triggered by hypocritical priests at the start of what may have been the Gawain-poet’s first poetic effort can be remedied only by Christ’s sacrificial death and the laughter of those who forgive, at the end of the poet’s final work.
Endnotes

Chapter One

1. Quotations from the four MS Cotton Nero A.x poems come from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter, UK: U of Exeter P, 1996), with a few alterations. Andrew and Waldron retain the manuscript’s use of the thorn (þ), which I have changed in every case to a “th.” They make other editorial changes to the manuscript, however, which I have followed, such as capitalizing all nouns and pronouns which refer directly to God, and changing the yogh (ȝ) to “z” when it occurs at the ends of words. All other uses of the yogh, even in places where the modern “gh” could be substituted, are left intact. I have followed these general guidelines as they relate to thorns, yoghs, and capitalization in all of the other Middle English texts quoted in this study as well. For the Cotton Nero A.x poems, I also consulted Israel Gollancz, ed., *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience and Sir Gawain: Reproduced in Facsimile from the Unique Ms. Cotton Nero A.x in the British Museum* (1923); J.J. Anderson, ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience* (1996); a color scan of the manuscript available on CD-ROM at the British Library’s Manuscript Room; and a color facsimile of the manuscript available on the Web through the University of Calgary’s *Cotton Nero A.x. Project*, with commentary by Murray McGillivray (2012).

2. For a summary of the authorship debates concerning the poems in Cotton Nero A.x, see Malcolm Andrew, “Theories of Authorship,” in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (1997), 23-33. Andrew summarizes the results of several statistical studies on the poet’s use of individual words, clauses, alliteration, meter, line length, and passive verb forms, from Goren Kjellmer (1975), Rene Derolez (1981), William McColly and Dennis Weier (1983), and R.A. Cooper and Derek A. Pearsall (1988). All of these studies, according to Andrew, “confirm the common authorship of the three poems written entirely or predominantly in the alliterative long line—*Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *SGGK* [*Sir Gawain]*” (32). In this study, I refer to the author or authors of all four poems as “the Gawain-poet.” As the above-mentioned sources point out, a preponderance of internal evidence points to the conclusion that the same poet wrote *Cleanness* and *Patience*, and nearly every scholar writing on the subject has attributed *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to this poet as well. The question of *Pearl’s* authorship is more challenging, though not as relevant to the present study. The overwhelming critical consensus for the past 130 years, however, has been to treat all four poems in Cotton Nero A.x as composed by the same author.


4. A full account of the Donatist schism of the 4th and 5th centuries, including a complete list of Augustine’s works addressing the controversy, can be found in the entry for “Donatism” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967), IV.1001-03. The entry makes no reference to the medieval version of the heresy but does provide a broad definition of its central beliefs: “an exaggerated insistence on the holiness of the minister in the confection of sacramental rites” (1001).

5. Wyclif’s conclusion in this section of *De Eucharistia* (Johann Loserth and F.D.
Matthew, eds., 1892), in the original Latin: “Una talis missa est damnabilis et Deo odibilis et alia est meritoria et Deo acceptabilis; ergo sunt valde dispare in valore; patet ex hoc quod ut sacerdos est Deo deaccepcior est ministracio sua inustior” (112).


7. The original Latin from the Fasciculi Zizaniorum (Walter Waddington Shirley, ed., 1858) reads, “Quod si episcopus vel sacerdos existat in peccato mortale: non ordinat, conficit, nec baptizat” (278). The translation I have used here comes from Alastair Minnis, Fallible Authors: Chaucer’s Pardoner and Wife of Bath (2008), 20. Minnis canvasses Wyclif’s works for traces of Donatism, for the purpose of drawing connections between the popular heresy and what he terms Chaucer’s “profoundly anti-Donatistic poetics” (135). However, he tends to cite both Latin and Middle English works from the late 14th century as if they were equally attributable to Wyclif. In my own survey of the evidence, I assume that Wyclif’s Latin works may be confidently attributed, but that works written in Middle English, though they may express Wycliffite opinions, and may even have been assigned to Wyclif by early editors, were more likely written by Lollard followers or sympathizers than by Wyclif himself.

8. This tract appears in the second volume of the much longer work Doctrinale antiquitatum fidei catholicae ecclesiae (1967), II.43-112. Minnis identifies several quotations from the tract in which Netter explicitly accuses Wyclif of a Donatist position; for example, II.54-58, 60, 90, and 105.

9. Workman’s quotation is his own translation from Tractatus de Ecclesia (Johann Loserth, ed., 1886), 448. The original Latin: “Videtur autem mihi quod prescitus eciam in mortali peccato actuali ministrat fidelibus, licet sibi damnabiliter, tamen subjectis utiliter sacramenta.” Wyclif repeats the point with similar language in 456-57.

10. The original Latin from De Eucharistia Tractatus Maior (Johann Loserth, ed., 1892): “efficacius est sacramentum huiusmodi in sacerdote bono quam malo” (113). In the next sentence, Wyclif instructs laymen not to heed the teachings of “presbiteri notorie fornicantis.”

11. The identification of the Gawain-poet with the County of Cheshire derives primarily from place names in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight—for example, after passing through northern Wales, Gawain spends Christmas Eve in “the wyldrenesse of Wyrale” (701), identified as the Wirral peninsula, historically part of Cheshire. Studies of the poems’ dialects have confirmed this locale, with more or less degrees of certainty, as at least a linguistic home for the poet himself. According to Angus McIntosh in “A New Approach to Middle English Dialectology” (1963), “the Cheshire origin of the Gawain-poet is well attested by the poet’s dialect, which has been localized near Holmes Chapel in east Cheshire” (2). Thorlac Turville-Petre in The Alliterative Revival (1977), while noting that “allowance must be made for the possible influence of a literary standard associated with a poetic tradition and differing in some respects from the local dialect, and also for the possibility that the author himself may have migrated from another district,” nevertheless places the poems’ origins “either in SE Cheshire or just over the border in NE Staffordshire” (30). King Richard II’s long-standing connection with the County of Cheshire, among other things a center of recruitment for his private standing army, has been noted by several writers on the Gawain-poet and the Alliterative Revival. Ad Putter, for example, in An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet (1996), notes that “Richard II’s policies, which brought Cheshire into unprecedented political prominence, coincide strikingly with the flowering of alliterative poetry from this region, and it is not unlikely that the same
circumstances that thrust the north west Midlands upon the national scene in the drama of Richard II’s final years contributed to the confident cosmopolitanism of alliterative poetry from the area, and to its evident vogue in later-fourteenth-century London” (32). Also see Nicholas Watson, “The Gawain-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian,” in Brewer and Gibson, eds., A Companion to the Gawain-Poet (1997). Watson contrasts the poet’s northwest Midlands dialect with the central Midlands dialect of the Wycliffite Bible and Nicholas Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ. Whereas the Wycliffites and Love were aiming for as wide a lay audience as possible, Watson argues that the Gawain-poet’s “ornate, and regionally specific, vocabulary” was aimed at “a provincial aristocracy” (296). The evident connection between the poet and Cheshire has also served as the basis for Michael Bennett’s Community, Class, and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (1983), and for the chapter dedicated to Sir Gawain in Robert W. Barrett Jr.’s Against All England: Regional Identity and Cheshire Writing, 1195-1656 (2009).

12. Workman writes, “One of the few certainties of Wyclif’s life is that he was a Yorkshireman of the North Riding” (I.22). Workman concludes that Wyclif spent his youth in the village of Wycliffe in Richmondshire (29), and further speculates that he travelled in young adulthood to Richmond, a small city whose archdeaconry was continually held in this period by pluralists and alien absenteeees, a fact Workman views as significant in the development of Wyclif’s later anticlerical opinions (29-31).

13. In a treatise that argues vigorously against Strode’s Thomistic philosophy, Wyclif nevertheless calls him “reverend master and dearest friend” (Opera Minora 398). Gollancz argues for Strode as author of the Gawain poems in his 1891 edition of Pearl (1-lii), on the basis of a 15th-century note on Strode in the Merton College library at Oxford: “Radulfus Strode nobilis poeta fuit et versificavit librum elegiacum vocatum Fantasma Radulphi.” Gollancz identifies this unknown poem, Fantasma Radulphi, as Pearl. “Though it be possible to make a plausible surmise,” Gollancz concludes, “one must acknowledge that the question still remains unanswered” (lii).

14. Challenges to Gollancz’s identification of the Gawain-poet as Ralph Strode came almost immediately after its 1891 publication. J.T.T. Brown, in an untitled article for The Scottish Antiquary (1897), argues that Strode the philosopher (who was well-known enough to be cited by Chaucer in Troilus and Criseyde) and Strode the poet were different men (8). Carleton Brown rejects the Strode hypothesis altogether in his 1904 article “The Author of The Pearl, Considered in the Light of His Theological Opinions,” and accuses Gollancz of taking “a pretty long leap . . . without corroborative evidence” (146). By 1932, Coolidge Otis Chapman, summarizing critical opinion on “The Authorship of the Pearl,” could quickly dismiss the Strode identification on the first page (346), and virtually every scholar since has done the same. See also Malcolm Andrew’s brief discussion of this issue in “Theories of Authorship” (see note 2 above), 28. One interesting exception to this consensus, however, is Workman, who cites Gollancz’s identification uncritically in his two-volume biography of Wyclif (1926). Workman acknowledges that two Strodes may have existed, but discusses them as if they are one: “With Strode the lawyer Wyclif had some dealings in a case in 1374 in which they acted together. But between the two in later life there would be little sympathy apart from a common love for the Bible and hatred of all vice. Lawyer, poet, logician—if the identification be correct—Strode was an unusual combination of qualities” (II.126-27). Workman then proceeds to analyze Strode as if his identification as the Pearl poet is certain (“Strode’s life was wrapped up in his child,” etc.) and pushes the shaky connection to extreme lengths.
15. The broad range of 1360-1399 for all four of the Gawain-poet’s works comes from a survey of numerous scholars, who have approached the question of dating from a variety of angles. W.G. Cooke gives Sir Gawain and the Green Knight a possible date range of 1330-60, on the evidence of references to costume and architecture, in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Restored Dating” (1989). No other scholar comes close to proposing so early a composition, though C.E. Wright (1960) uses paleographical analysis to give the Cotton Nero manuscript a half-century range, 1348-1400. Henry Lyttleton Savage, in The Gawain-Poet: Studies in His Personality and Background (1956), proposes the similarly broad range of 1363-1400, then narrows the likely date of Sir Gawain to a relatively early 1377-79, as he links the poet to the English career of Frenchman Enguerrand VII, Lord de Coucy, husband to Edward III’s daughter Isabella. Carleton Brown, in his 1904 study of the poet’s theology, gives Pearl a date of 1370, and concludes that “this poem would fall in the period of theological ferment, before Wyclif’s opinions had thoroughly developed and been denounced as heretical” (144). Ad Putter, in An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet (1996), suggests that “the most revealing clue comes from Cleanness, where the poet probably used Mandeville’s Travels for his descriptions of the Dead Sea and the vessels at Belshazzar’s feast. . . . This would place Cleanness in the last decades of the fourteenth century. . . . Going about as far as the evidence allows, the Middle English Dictionary dates the Gawain-poet’s works to about 1390” (3). In “Pearl in Its Royal Setting; Ricardian Poetry Revisited” (1995), John Bowers writes, “My sense ... is that Pearl was composed about 1395, toward the end of what Harold Hutchison has called the ‘seven quiet years’ of Richard’s reign—1389 to 1396—when also Chaucer was at work on The Canterbury Tales and Gower’s first version of Confessio Amantis had been completed at the behest of Richard II” (119). Michael J. Bennett draws connections to Richard II as well in his chapter on “The Historical Background” in Brewer and Gibson’s A Companion to the Gawain-Poet (1997), noting similarities between events in Sir Gawain and the king’s Christmas and New Year’s celebrations at Lichfield, which included a hunting lodge called Beaudesert, in the West Midlands county of Staffordshire, in 1397-98 and 1398-99. Bennett also makes reference to the nearby Holy Well of St. Winifred, named for a saint whose decapitated head was miraculously restored (87), and to a 1397 story of an opponent of the king whose body stood up after its beheading (88). If Bennett’s suggestion that Sir Gawain was written as a tribute to Richard is accurate, then the end of Richard’s reign in 1399 makes a logical terminus to the Gawain poems’ range. Susanna Fein (1997), however, directly refutes claims for a late-Ricardian Pearl on metrical grounds, arguing that the poem marks a historical transition point between earlier 12-line alliterative poetry and later “pseudoballads” with the same rhyme pattern. Fein ultimately dates Pearl in the range of 1375-85 (393). A handful of critics have also suggested dates that extend into the reigns of Henry IV or even Henry V—for example, Carolyn King Stephens in “The ‘Pentangle Hypothesis’: A Dating History and Resetting of ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’” (2006)—but these seem unlikely, both for reasons of dialect and, for the biblical poems, Archbishop Arundel’s ban on unauthorized Bible translations in the Constitutions of 1407-09. In general, those conjectures which draw on the poet’s Cheshire connections, which appear unambiguously in the text, as well as those which link Pearl and Sir Gawain to the later years of Richard II’s reign, seem the most convincing, and place those poems’ composition in the 1390s. Cleanness and Patience almost certainly came earlier in the poet’s career, though it seems likely they were written during Richard’s reign as well, which would place them in the late 1370s or 1380s. The Wycliffite Bible translation project took place during this same time, as did the “period of theological ferment” mentioned by Carleton Brown, but these congruences,
though compelling, are not my reason for using these dates.

16. On the date of De Eucharistia, see Johann Loserth and F.D. Matthew’s discussion in De Eucharistia Tractatus Maior vii-ix, lx-lxii; see also Workman I.xxxvii-xl; G.R. Evans, John Wyclif: Myth and Reality 186; and Stephen Penn, “Wyclif and the Sacraments” 255. The consensus is that Wyclif composed the treatise sometime between late 1379 and early 1382.

17. The editor of Select English Works of John Wyclif, Thomas Arnold, gives a somewhat flimsy explanation for his attribution of Wyclif as author of the Seven Deadly Sins tract—he admits that it is written in a western dialect Wyclif did not otherwise use, but claims that the passage on the church endowment controversy simply “sounds like the voice of Wyclif; as does the rough humour in the comparison of the feats of a knight to those of a hangman” (III.119). What Arnold does not take into account, however, is that though the tract shares Wyclif’s views on issues such as mendicant poverty and the dominion controversy, it goes further than Wyclif ever did in outlining and promoting a Christian argument for pacifism (see, for example, 138-40).

18. Bodley MS Douce 369 contains a note at Baruch chapter 3 which reads, “Explicit translacionem Nicholay de herford.” Cambridge University Library MS Ee.1.10 does not cite Hereford’s full name, but at the same point contains a note which reads, “Here endith the translatioun of N, and now bigynneth the translacioun of J and other men.” David Fowler, in The Bible in Early English Literature (1976), concludes, “The most that can be said, from manuscript evidence, is that the Early Version was made by Nicholas Hereford, J.___, and other men, and this is about as far as most modern writers on the subject have ventured to go” (154-55).

19. Wendy Scase, in “Piers Plowman” and the New Anti-clericalism (1989), offers a fairly thorough analysis of this sermon, though her account is fragmented, since she focuses on thematic connections between Piers Plowman and 14th-century anticlericalism as a whole. She does, however, helpfully translate sections of Bodley MS 240 (which is itself a translation) from Latin into modern English—see, for example, pages 7, 10-11, 32, 100-102, 107, 110, and 131.

20. The English translation comes from editor Walter Waddington Shirley’s marginal notes. The full quotation reads as follows: “Haec autem omnia simul, et alia hujusmodi plurima criminosa nimium et blasphema, quidam apud nos vocatus magister Nicolaus de Hereford . . .”


22. See Hudson’s discussion in The Premature Reformation 2-3. The Middle English Dictionary offers little in the way of further guidance on this question, though the first cited use of the words lollen as a verb, meaning “to mutter, doze, sleep, etc.,” loller as a noun, meaning “a lazy vagabond, an idler,” and lollaren as an adjective, meaning “of an idler, lazy,” come from the Piers Plowman A, B, and C texts, respectively, dated ca. 1376, 1378, and 1387. The dictionary points out, however, that even as early as the Piers Plowman C-text (ca. 1387), the word lollen could also be used “with punning reference to Lollards” (see def. 3b). The first example in the dictionary of the word loller to mean only and explicitly an English heretic is Chaucer’s “loller in the wynd” reference from the epilogue of The Man of Law’s Tale, ca. 1390. The only other 14th-century examples of related words being used in reference to the heresy come from John Gower, in the Confessio Amantis, ca. 1393 (Lollardi, def. 1a) and the Calendar of Close Rolls of Richard II, ca. 1395 (Lollard, def. 1a, and Lollardri, def. 1).

23. Richard Rex, in his brief social history The Lollards (2002), 27–43, gives a concise summary of what he views as Wyclif’s theological development, starting in 1375-76 with Wyclif’s contention in De Civili Domino that no clergyman should own property, the earliest
statement mentioned in the Blackfriars synod’s 1382 condemnation. Rex draws connections between Wyclif’s early denial of clerical dominion, his later attacks on fraternal orders and the divided papacy, his eventual suspicion of any type of clerical authority, and ultimately his skepticism about the efficacy of the sacraments those authorities performed. Wyclif’s skepticism was bolstered by his longstanding commitment to philosophical realism, but he did not fully apply it to theological conclusions until the treatise De Eucharistia (ca. 1379), at which point, Rex claims, Wyclif’s pattern of thought had reached its culmination.

Chapter Two

1. English translations of Wyclif’s Latin come from either the introductions or side-notes of the works in question, except in the cases of De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae and De Simonia (see notes 9 and 10 below). In every case, the page number in parentheses refers to the original Latin passage. In the passage mentioned here, Wyclif cites St. Augustine: “But according to S. Augustine Adam was a king, and it is said that Cain was the first priest…” (144). The original reads: “Sed pro antiquitate notandum quod Adam fuit rex secundum Augustinum De questionibus veteris et nove legis cvi capitulo, et Caym dicitur fuisse primum sacerdotem racione primogeniture…”

2. Quotations from the Later Version (LV) of the Wycliffite Bible come from Conrad Lindberg’s edition, published in four volumes of the Stockholm Studies in English series from 1999 to 2004, under the title King Henry’s Bible: MS Bodley 277: The Revised Version of the Wyclif Bible. In order to keep all Middle English quotations consistent, I have replaced Lindberg’s middle dots (·), which appear in the original manuscripts, and his backslashes (/), which indicate verse breaks, with commas.


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


6. The sermon Omnis Plantacio and the tract Fundamentum Aliud Nemo Potest Ponere, which Hudson labels the “Edgerton Sermon” and the “Lambeth Tract,” respectively, appear together in parallel format on pp. 1-153 of The Works of a Lollard Preacher. De Oblacione Iugis Sacrificii, which Hudson labels the “Titus Tract,” appears on pp. 157-256. De Oblacione contains four separate explications of the “angel of light” passage from 2 Cor. 11:14 (starting on lines 443, 735, 810, and 1091; the last is the one quoted here), all of them anticlerical. The concluding section of Omnis Plantacio contains two further references to the same passage (lines 2433 and 2979, the latter quoted here). Clearly, the epistle’s image of satanic hypocrisy captured the anticlerical imagination of this particular preacher, as it did for many others.

7. McCormack’s citations from the English Wycliffite Sermons, which appear in four
separate footnotes (McCormack 87, n.10-11; 199, n. 69-70), can be found on the following pages of Hudson and Gradon, eds.: I.440, 441, 693; II.69, 268; III.67, 128, 153, 237, and 238. McCormack cites several references which are not listed in the index to Hudson and Gradon, vol. 5, but the index also lists several direct references to the Gospel passages about wolves and false shepherds that McCormack does not: I.252-55, 617; II.16, 75, 83, 92, and 146. The remaining citations come from F.D. Matthew’s anthology, The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted—a collection which, as McCormack observes, contains few if any works that can actually be attributed to Wyclif.

8. Wyclif quotes from Pope Leo’s Decretal 24: “Petri privilegium, ubicunque ex ipsius equitate fertur iudicium.”

9. All English quotations from De Simonia come from Terrence McVeigh’s translation, On Simony. Citations include page numbers both from this translation and from Dr. Herzberg-Fränkel and Michael Henry Dziewicki’s Latin edition. The original quotation from the passage cited here is as follows: “Sicud ergo summi sacerdotes in se ipsis summi hereticis dammarunt dominum nostrum Jesum Christum pro heresi, sic summi sacerdotes antichristi possunt damnare et extinguere membra Christi, propter hoc quod catholice reprobant peccata eorum et predicant quomodo ecclesia potest licite per exoneracionem temporalium adiuvari. Tota itaque ecclesia debet insurgere contra senes, qui videbantur regere populum, quando avaricia debriati symoniace parant sibi pseudopastores contra salutem populi et fidem evangeli.”

10. All English quotations from De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae come from Ian Christopher Levy’s translation, On the Truth of Holy Scripture. Citations include page numbers from this translation and volume and page numbers from Rudolf Buddensieg’s Latin edition. The original quotation from the passage cited here is as follows: “unde pro intellectu huius textus notandum est primo, quod sub nomine episcopi apostolus includit quemlibet sacerdotem. ... secundo notandum, quod apostolus tradens hanc regulam Thymotheo sub uno involucro informat quoscunque episcopos succedentes.” Wyclif’s reference to Chrysostom follows on p. 183.

11. In dating Wyclif’s works, I have followed Workman’s chronology (I.xxxvii-xl) and also consulted Williel Thomson’s The Latin Writings of John Wyclif. Though Thomson cautions that any precise dating of Wyclif’s works is a “chimerical expectation” (40), he assesses the available evidence and suggests a chronology which differs from Workman’s in only a few details. Hudson, in “Cross-Referencing in Wyclif’s Latin Works” (Biller and Dobson, eds., The Medieval Church 193-215), more pessimistically points out that without knowing the precise order of Wyclif’s extant Latin texts, any work of textual analysis is speculation. With this caution in mind, I have attempted to outline the trajectory of Wyclif’s career broadly, without subscribing to a precise order of dating. I also begin with the assumption, held by virtually all scholars of Wyclif after the 19th century, that no extant works in English can be reliably attributed to him.

12. Wyclif’s inconsistent Donatism—a label applied by his critics, including the Blackfriars synod and Thomas Netter—is treated more fully in the previous chapter. For traces of the Donatism Wyclif’s critics found in his work, see De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae (ca. 1378) III.5-6; De Eucharistia (ca. 1379) 112, 114; De Apostasia (ca. 1379-80) 200-01; and Shirley, ed., Fasciculi Zizinorum 278 (a statement attributed to Wyclif in the Blackfriars condemnation of 1382). Also see Levy, “Was John Wyclif’s Theology of the Eucharist Donatistic?”; Levy, John Wyclif: Scriptural Logic 307; and Workman II.13, 41.

13. These include De Simonia, De Apostasia, and De Blasphemia (ca. 1379-80), the final three works in Wyclif’s so-called Summa Theologiae, a twelve-volume collection compiled by
15th-century editors. Other short tracts from this period include *Confessio* (ca. 1381), *De Citationibus Frivolis* (ca. 1383), *De Quattuor Sectis Novellis* (ca. 1384), and several more works in Rudolf Buddensiegs’s anthology *Polemical Works in Latin*. The much longer treatise *Triologus* was also written ca. 1382, but it is essentially a recapitulation of Wyclif’s theological ideas, sometimes quoted directly from earlier works, and thus not fully original. According to all extant manuscripts, Wyclif was also at work on the lengthy *Opus Evangelicum* when he died in 1384 (Evans 206; Workman II.31), but it seems unlikely, after he had suffered at least two strokes in 1382 and 1384 (Evans 210; Workman I.xl), that he was working alone: “The long stretches of patristic quotations are not Wyclif’s usual style, and it is not impossible that we can see here the marks of the assistance of Horne or Purvey” (Evans 206-07).

14. As noted in the previous chapter, Moone’s radical Lollardy in 1430 denied every sacrament, including baptism and marriage (Hudson, ed., *Selections* 34-37). Walter Brut’s case is summarized and discussed by Hudson in “‘Laicus Litteratus’: The Paradox of Lollardy” (1994). On trial under Bishop Trefnant in 1393, Brut volunteered the following set of beliefs, which Hudson labels as “in many ways extreme: the eucharist was primarily a memorial, papal pretensions to powers of absolution, along with the pontiff’s claims to temporalities, demonstrated his identity with antichrist, war and legal execution were against the Christian insistence on charity, oaths were illegal, the children of baptised parents themselves needed no baptism and true baptism consisted not in material water but in faith and hope, the just layman and, more outrageously to his readers, the just laywoman was a priest and had a duty to preach publicly, and, most flagrantly of all, since the church allowed that a layperson of either sex might *in extremis* baptise, there was not outright bar to the possibility that a woman might consecrate the host” (224-25).

15. Multiple descriptions of the four fraternal orders as “new sects” can be found in every one of Wyclif’s eleven “Polemical Tracts against the Sects,” which make up volume 1 of Buddensiege, ed., *Polemical Works*, including one titled *De Quattuor Sectis Novellis* (241-90). The term “four sects” in these works can refer to the fraternal orders, but it also signifies four types of clergy, according to Wyclif’s categorization: those with cure of souls, which include the Pope, cardinals, bishops, and endowed priests; the monastic orders; the Augustinian canons; and the mendicant friars. Wyclif refers to this fourth “sect” as the most recent and the “most pernicious” in its undermining of church and kingdom (234, 252). He argues that the orders’ novelty means they do not have biblical foundations: “Christ, who knew best how to care for His church, has not mentioned the Four Sects in His Gospel (or if He did, He blamed them); nor did St. Paul venture to found new ones. Only the office of Deacon is upheld by Scripture, not the Four Orders; they should, therefore, be abolished” (235, 265-69). In the *Piers Plowman* B-text, Anima also refers to friars as “thise newe clerkes” (XV.372). A later example of an extended critique of the “newe sectus” of friars, comparing them to the Pharisees of the Gospels, can be found in Hudson and Gradon, eds., *English Wycliffite Sermons* I.264-67.

16. Translations of passages from *De Periculus* come from Marie Borroff, *Traditions and Renewals: Chaucer, the Gawain-Poet, and Beyond* 13-17. Original quotation: “se ipsos amantes, cupidii, elati, superbi, blasphemi, parentibus inoboedientes, ingrati, scelesti, sine affectione, . . . criminatores, incontinentes, . . . sine benignitate, proditores, protervi, tumidi, voluptatum amatores magis quam Dei.”

17. “operemini manibus vestris sicut praecepimus vobis.”

18. “illi qui aliena negotia curant, vagantes hac & illac . . . Quod autem Dominus vel mendicaverit, vel ejus Apostoli, nusquam reperitur.”
19. The passage Boreczky translates is from *De Dominio Divino* (ca. 1373-74): “duo precipui doctores nostri ordinis” (115).

20. Later Lollard references to “seynt Richard primat of irland” and “Seynt Richard of Armawȝ” can be found in Arnold, ed., *Select English Works of John Wyclif* III.281 and Matthew, ed., *The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted* 128, respectively. Nicholas Hereford also refers to FitzRalph as a saint in his infamous Ascension Day sermon of 1382 (MS Bodley 240, pp. 848-50), detailed in the previous chapter.

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

22. A complete edited version of *De Pauperie Salvatoris* does not yet exist. The first four books are included as an appendix to Reginald Lane Poole’s edition of Wyclif’s *De Dominio Divino*, the work upon which it had the most significant influence. The passage in which FitzRalph relates the supposed history of the treatise’s commissioning by Clement VI appears on the opening page: “Dudum felicis recordacionis dominus Clemens papa sextus, sui regimini anno octavo, venerabilibus duobus in theologia doctis doctoribus ac michi pusillo negocium quoddam inter duos precipuos mendicancium ordines cum omni possibili diligencia annis plurimis laceratum, rerum in fomentum mortalitatis humane a sapientissimo suo ac summo bono Artifice creatarum proprietatem contingens, sive dominium, possessionem, atque ius ipsis rebus utendi . . .” (273).

23. The quotation here is Evans’s paraphrase. Book VII of *De Pauperie Salvatoris* has not yet been edited.

24. “Nam nullus catholicus negabit quin potestas clavium sit tradita sacerdoti, licet non habeat sue subditos potestati.”

25. “Unde inter cetera opera caritatis foret hoc unum precipuum, yerarchiam ecclesiasticam que debet esse supremi ordinis, si implicacione negociorum secularium degeneret, reducere ad pristinam dignitatem. Sed et sic debent domini temporales in casu ex suis legibus propriis, ut patebit posterius.”

26. “locucio similitudinaria ficta . . .”

27. “et ex ultima parte ficticie videtur michi notari, quod sacerdotes Cristi, qui debent esse vicarii vitis vere, non debent civiliter dominari, cum conficiunt corpus eius et sangwinem, que letificant deum et homines, sed celebrantes debent memorari eum, qui non potuit civiliter dominari. Vinum enim contemplacionis, consolans oculum sacerdotis per statum et potestatem exactivam vel secularem extigwitur. Si enim tempore ante legem sine exemplo Cristi persona laica deseruit civilitatem propter devocionem, multo magis sacerdotes Cristi sic facerent exemplo sui magistri.”

28. The translation is from Workman, II.236-37. Original quotation: “et ibi confitebatur publice eis quod per biennium erat discipulus Wycclyff, et ab eo didicerat haereses quas docuit.”

29. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton suggests that as Langland revised *Piers Plowman* from B to C, “creeping political and ecclesiastical intimidation finally limited what he felt able to say on the subject of socio-political oppression and clerical abuse” (“*Piers Plowman*” 522). And David Lawton concludes, “It is as if the C reviser were trying to protect the poem from allegations of Lollardy levelled against the earlier versions” (“English Poetry” 152). See also Andrew Cole, “Langland and the Invention of Lollardy” 38 and Wendy Scase, “*Piers Plowman* and the New Anti-clericalism” 77.

30. “Quid, rogo, pertinet ad archiepiscopum occupare cancellarium regis, que est
secularissimum regni officiam? Numquid superest in tam lata provincia episcopo occupacio spiritualis? Numquid presul debet convocare clerum anathematicum, quia contra legem dei et hominum et secularissimis regis officiis implicatum, sed sub gravi dei malediczione ad contrarium obligatum? Non videtur aliud, nisi quod archidiabolus congregat minores diabolos.”

31. “Igitur debet regnum satisfacere dominis secularibus iniuriatis de bonis Christi ditissimi atque suorum pauperum . . .”

32. The quotation is Scase’s translation of MS Bodley 240, p. 850: “monachi et possessionati nunquam erunt humiles donec auferantur possessiones eorum; nec fratres mendicantes vmquam erunt boni donec impediantur mendicaciones eorum.”

33. “quomodo dato nobis herede Cristo omnia nobis donantur cum eo ex titulo gracie et specialiter, quando professi sumus intrantes in gaudium abbatis nostri gratissimi, sicut intrans religionem habentem omnia in comuni habet omnia bona illius religionis.”

34. “et sic debent vivere exproprietarie vitam pauperem instal Cristi eo, quod mundo in maligno posito instat maior necessitas. Ideo nec temporis variaqio nec papalis dispensacio excusat sacerdotes. Cristi ab isto debito, sed accusat pocius, si dimittunt.”

35. “quod omnes Christi sacerdotes debet esse in temporalibus elemosinarii laicorum . . .”

36. “Quis enim dubitat, quin deus plus odit taliu mendicorum superbiam? Et per consequens laici plus tenetur, cavere eorum mendacium subtrahentes suas elemosinas et auferentes progenitorum errores. Certum itaque est ex fide scripture, quod tales potentes in clero sive persone simplices sive persone collegialiter aggregate, que religionem Cristi dissipant, sub pallio sanctitatis vel punishentur hic per prepositos suos aut laicos vel destruentur per vastaciones hostiles vel congregant facinora in ulcionem divini iudicii . . .”

37. “domos religiosorum, episcoporum et aliorum sacerdotum . . . Est enim dare mensuram in scelere, usque ad quam oportet ulcionem divini iudicii expectare. Ut patet de punicione diluvii et Sodome.”

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

39. “Ideo ad excludendum discolos qui nolunt laborare, sed portionem inordinate exigere, securum est et evangelicum de nudis vite necessariis contentari. . . Et servata ista lege pauci seducerentur per ingrossum in religiones privatas pro comodo temporali . . .”

40. “Ex quibus patenter patet quod illa species sensibilis quam sacramentum dicimus non est corpus Christi nec sanguis. . . . Dicunt enim quod sacramentum tantum et non pars Christi est hostia consecrata, sed Christus insensibiliter absconsus est sub illa.”

41. “quod ipsa est globus sacrorum accidencium sine subjecto.”

42. “Unde licet quondam laboraverim ad describendum transsubstantiacionem concorditer ad sensum prioris ecclesie . . .”

43. “Notandum quod multiplex est variacio loyce fidelium in ista materia . . .”

44. “In qua materia philosophi et pagani derident nimirum nostrum ficticiam de incertitudine et variacione circa quidditatem hostie consecrate” (199). “Hic dicitur primo quod multe rime reperte sunt ad colendum false hoc sacramentum, ut patet de transsubstantiacione, de conversione, de ydemptificacione et de inpanacione” (216).

45. “quod episcopi acute prosecuntur errores dogmatisantes in ista materia, cum instanter
persecuti sunt evangelisantes quod domini temporales debent exonerare eos a temporalibus auferendis in casu quo eorum ponderacio ceca undique sit nociva.”

46. Original quotation: “Item . . . multiplicacio peccatorum est causa destruccionis regnorum, sed illa inter christianos potissime originatur a clero . . .”

47. “Et haec contra religiosos possessionatus et praelatos expulsus fuerat de aula monachorum Cantuariæ, nihil contra possessionatos attentavit quod esset alicujus ponderis; et priusquam per religiosos mendicantes reprobatus fuit publice de haeresibus de sacramento altaris, nihil contra eos attentavit, sed posterius multipliciter eos diffamavit.”

48. The quotation is Owst’s translation of the unedited manuscript British Library MS Lansdowne 393, fol. 63b.

49. “et certum videtur, quod tunc habuerunt plus fidei quam nos vel forte illi, qui fingunt istam ficticiam. ignorant nedum ecclesiam catholicam, sed eius vera privilegia, et, quoad noticiam prelato debitam, singula sacramenta.”

50. “quod requiritur in archiepiscopo et episcopo, quod sciat utrumque testamentum et per consequens totam scripturam sacram. . . . Item ad pastorem in quantum huiusmodi spectat minandi, pascendi et defendendi officium, sed hoc officium spirituale nullo modo potest perfici sine sciencia scripturae, igitur omnem spiritualem pastorem oportet habere scienciam sacrae scripturae.”

51. “Ista ergo logica, que tam recte ducit ad finem ultimum sine tumultuososis ambagibus, est certissima.”

52. “Ideo oportet, omnem catholicum esse theologum, sed sacerdotem, in quantum superior secundum quandam excellenciam.”

53. “quod predicacio verbi dei est actus solemnior quam confeccion sacramenti . . . Igitur multo plus est, popupum recipere verbum dei, quam uniam personam recipere corpus Christi. . . . quod predicacio delet mortalía efficacius quam eucaristia. . . . Dictum autem verbum predicatum est veritas et per consequens essencialiter Deus ipse. Ideo eius predicacio est opus dignissimum creature.”

54. “symoniace peccent tamquam summi heretici, quando propter lucrum temporale exaltant ydias quos populus sentit esse ignaros vel desides in regimine animarum.”

55. “exempciones, privilegiaciones et dignitates.”

56. “Et sicut spina nichil activis oculis nocet, illis qui manibus vel pedibus non urerent, sic occupies circa temporalia vel culpa macularum gravaret clericis qua excusacione obligacionis et ignorancie laycos non ligaret.”

57. “Tercio videtur, quod veritatis tacencia principaliter propter periculum subtraccionis comodi temporales vel perturbationis auditorii ex veritatis disprincicia gravati testatur timorem servilem, damnabilem et vecordem consensum mendacio contrario veritati.”

58. “O quam sanctum et fertile foret regnum Anglie si ut, olim quelibet parochialis ecclesia haberet unum sanctum rectorem cum sua familia residentem, quodlibet regni dominium haberet unum iustum dominum cum uxore et liberis cum proporcionali familia residentem. . . . Nunc vero mercenarii civile dominium ecclesiasticorum indignantes . . . clerics est causa precipua.”

59. “quod infirmum fuit, inquid, non consolidastis, et quod egrotum, non sanastis, quod fractum est, non alligastis, et quod abiectum est, non reduxistis, et quod perierat, non quesistis.”

60. “quomodo ergo respondebunt rectores illi pro animabus, quorum decimis vescentur, in die iudicii, si ipsas non rexerint viam virtutum et legem domini predicando? . . Oracio enim
specialiter symoniaci non potest equivalere officio predicandi, quia tunc deus frustra ordinaret predicacionem. Nec valet ficticia qua dicitur quod nunc predicacio superfluit, cum communitas satis novit fidem Christi, quia indubie ... ideo nunquam fuit maior necessitas fidem katholicam predicandi.

61. “quod rex ordinet per suos episcopos ut in cunctis suis ecclesiis parochialibus resideant curati qui sint docti et animati in officio pastorali. . . . Cum igitur beneficiatus talis transmarinus non reputat se subjectum nostro archiepiscopo videtur quod vel veniret in persona sua faciens fidem regi ut domino, vel careret tali regis beneficio. . . . quod ommino provideatur de pastoribus privatis ydoneis quorum voces et opera pastoralis oves cognoscant practice, et quod pastores specialiter alienigene condicionis contrarie timore excomunicacionis timore excomunicacionis postposito detrudantur.”

62. “Nam stante dotacione que est fotrix heresis huius ecclesie, miraculum foret insolitum quod heresis symoniaca extinguat” (7-8). “. . . sed illud foret inopinatum et immensum miraculum. Ideo secundum remedium probabilitati propinquius est: quod seculares domini informati a domino resistendo pape concorditer obturent scaturiginem symonie . . .” (93).

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

64. “Ideo cogimur negare ordinem illum essenciale inter prelatos nostros et suos subditos, ymo deficientibus illis ut cifris Christus ordinat quemcunque, quomodocunque et quandocunque voluerit.

65. “Christus eciam in persona propria suscitavit Lazarum de sepulcro et mandavit postmodum suis apostolis solvere ipsum ab institis quibus sensabiliter est ligatus.”

66. “Item, talis confessio adinventa dat occasionem presbitero symoniace perquirendi pecuniam” (129). “Notemus ergo omnes prelatos symoniacos in penitencia induratos, et consideremus ex fide quod non prostet, sed obest sic talibus confiteri” (117). In the following quotation, Wyclif cites Augustine for the assertion that the laity may hear confessions if all available priests are simoniacal or otherwise in mortal sin: “Et in talibus casibus, secundum doctrinam Augustini (ibidem) debet homo confiteri fideli laico, dimissis sacerdotibus sic suspectis” (125). “Quod si negatur subditis a prelato, adiecta excommunicatione et censuris aliis, gaudeat de persecutione . . .” (145).

67. The quotation is Dove’s translation from Geoffrey Martin’s edition of Knighton’s Chronicle: “Magister Johannes Wyclif evangelium quo Cristus contulit clericis et ecclesie doctoribus, ut ipsi laycis et infirmioribus personis secundum temporis exigenciam et personarum indigenciam cum mentis eorum esurie dulciter ministaret, transtulit de latino in anglicam lingua non angelicam. Unde per ipsum fit vulgare et magis apertum laicis et mulieribus legere scientibus quam solet esse clericis admodum litteratis et bene intelligentibus, et sic evangelica margarita spargitur et a porcis conculcatur” (242).

68. “Et hec racio quare oportet omnen catholicum cognoscerre scripturam sacram. . . . Sed vita et doctrina Christi sunt optimum speculum, ubi possunt hec discerni . . .”

69. “Sed quinto modo sumitur scripture sacra pro codicibus, vocibus aut aliis artificialibus, que sunt signa memorandi veritatem priorem . . .”
70. The full context of this phrase is an argument that men “eternally foreknown to be reprobate” cannot eat Christ’s body, even though they may partake of the Host: “An unworthy communicant does not break Christ’s body with his teeth; what he breaks is the sacramental covering or vesture of Christ; and we must carefully distinguish between the sacrament and its subject, which is Christ’s body.” The original reads: “non quod indignus visibiliter premit dentibus corpus Christi, sed quod visibiliter premit dentibus sacramentum corporis Christi et sanguinis. Illud enim sacramentum valde distinguetur a corpore Christi quod est res huius sacramenti.”

71. “quod nulli singulares codices sunt pocius quam bestie de substancia fidei pro se ipsis, sed sensus vel veritas, quam signant, quia tunc illis combustis vel aliter pereuntibus perit fides.”

72. “Et idem videtur de translacione Ieronymi, quam approbat sanctitas vite sue, quam recitat Augustinus in epistola De Sanctitate Ieronymi, percia in ligwa hebreu et concurs complecio translacionis sue cum hebreis et grecis codicibus in tantum . . .”

73. “Et sic ne pseudo discipuli fingant, se immediate habere a deo suam sentenciam, ordinavit deus comunem scripturam sensibilem, ad cuius sensum catholicum capiendum deus non potest diciere . . .”

74. James Morey, in a presentation at Oxford University in May 2014, provided details on six manuscripts containing this text, which he titles The Apocalips of Jesu Crist, along with Wycliffite material. Two of them are independent translations: Bodley Laud Misc. 235, which appears with Matthew EV, and British Library Royal 17.A.xxvi, which appears with John EV. Two others exhibit influence from the Wycliffite LV: Columbia University Plimpton Add. 03 and Bodley Laud Misc. 33. And one contains portions of text from the LV: St. John’s College, Cambridge, G.25. The difficulty of determining the extent of Wycliffite influence on any of these manuscripts is illustrated by the British Library’s catalogue note for Royal 17.A.xxvi, which says this version of the Apocalypse was “assigned to Wycliffe by Forshall and Madden . . . but the comment is simply a version of the 13th cent. Anglo-French Apocalypse-gloss . . . and the translation of the text, although akin to the two Wycliffite versions, is not identical with either of them.”

75. The manuscript is Harley 1896, in the British Library.

76. “Vae presbiteris qui tanto zelo et clamore de cimas et ea quae ad altare pertinent exigunt et de animabus parochianorum tam parvum curant; instanter petunt pecuniam sed raro aut nunquam proferunt sermonem . . .”

Chapter Three

1. The single exception is Francis Ingledew’s 1992 Viator article entitled “Liturgy, Prophecy, and Belshazzar’s Babylon: Discourse and Meaning in Cleanness,” discussed at further length below. Monica Brzezinski Potkay, in “Cleanness on the Question of Images” (1995), also compares the poem to several Wycliffite and Lollard documents, but for the purposes of analyzing the poet’s view on the use of images in Christian practice, not his anticlericalism.

2. The Middle English Dictionary gives a range of definitions for the adverbial form of “kinde,” as it does for the noun and adjectival forms as well. Definition 1.(a) for “kindeli” is “According to the regular course of nature ... naturally, by nature.” Further definitions include 3.(a) “In the approved manner, properly, correctly, truly, accurately,” 3.(b) “rightly, justly, appropriately,” 3.(c) “readily, easily, as a matter of course,” 3.(d) “thoroughly, completely,
effectively, well,” and 4.(a) “Kindly, pleasantly, gladly, lovingly.” All of these definitions were in use during the Gawain-poet’s lifetime and appear in multiple citations from the mid to late 14th century. The MED cites the first line of Cleanness under 3.(b), “rightly, justly, appropriately,” in which case the line would translate to something like “Whoever can commend cleanness in the right way ...” Even if this categorization is accurate, however, it does not close off the wider range of meanings the word would have had for a 14th-century reader. For example, the poet may be encouraging his readers to commend cleanness not only in the most correct and appropriate way, but also with gladness and in an easy, natural manner.

3. Numerous critics have noted the homiletic structure of Cleanness, starting with Carleton Brown in 1904, for whom “it seems moderately clear that the writer was an ecclesiastic,” and who argues that “Cleanness and Patience are undisguisedly homiletic, both in purpose and method. ... Cleanness and Patience, being wholly homiletical in purpose, raise no questions of doctrine” (126, 130). William Henry Schofield, also writing in 1904, argues that the poet is likely a priest and refers to the “earnest, didactic, homiletic purpose in all his works” (157). In 1970, A.C. Spearing, arguing that Cleanness and Patience are by the same author, cites as evidence the fact that “they are both homilies which treat of a virtue specified in the Beatitudes by giving examples from the Old Testament of the punishment of its opposing vice” (Gawain-Poet 36). Several studies from the late 20th century examine the poem’s homiletic structure in more detail, as evidenced by their titles: for example, Michael Means’s “The Homiletic Structure of Cleanness” (1975), Schreiber’s “The Structures of Claneness” (1981), Vantuono’s “A Triple-Three Structure for Cleanness” (1984), and Brzezinski’s “Conscience and Covenant: The Sermon Structure of Cleanness” (1990), which argues that “Cleanness’s structure is coherent insofar as it conforms to the rules for composing a university sermon” (166). By 1988, Brian Stone in his translation of Cleanness could cite a scholarly consensus that “The poem is in fact a single homily on a grand scale, containing three main exempla which provide the structure” (48). Richard Newhauser’s article on “Scriptural and Devotional Sources” from A Companion to the Gawain-Poet (Brewer and Gibson, eds., 1997) provides a concise summary of this consensus: “… if Patience is modeled on the relatively simple form of the homily, in Cleanness one finds the poet’s reflection of the much more complex structure seen in the university (or scholastic) sermon. Briefly described, the formal characteristics of this type of pulpit address included the statement of a theme (generally a Scriptural passage containing the message of the sermon) and the progressive development of the theme by various divisions and subdivisions. These elements could also be augmented at the beginning of the sermon by the addition of a protheme (often a further Scriptural authority expanding on the theme)” (Newhauser 263). Though all of these articles share a general agreement about the poem’s genre and tripartite structure, they reach a wide variety of conclusions about the poet’s purpose for employing it, from suggestions that he is a priest himself providing a sermon model for other preachers to follow, to the claim that he is poetizing a sermon he actually heard as a layman attending Mass.

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

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

6. The translation is Penn Szittyà’s, from The Antifratal Tradition in Medieval Literature 170-71.

7. “Unde crescente ista sacerdotum ypocrisi multiplicate sunt leges eis opposite ... quod tales potentes in clero ... que religionem Cristi dissipant, sub pallio sanctitatis vel punientur hic per prepositos suos aut laicos vel destruentur per vastaciones hostiles vel congregant facinora in ulcionem divini iudicii.”


9. See the MED entry for “bir” (“burre” is an alternate spelling), definitions 2.(a) and 2.(b). The first definition for the noun “burre” is a botanical term for the burdock or cocklebur, but the Gawain-poet never uses the word elsewhere in this sense, whereas he does use “bir/burre” on several occasions to signify a blow or a gust of wind—the MED cites Pearl (176), Patience (7, 148), and Gawain (290, 2322).

10. Definitions for “prest” come from the MED entry for “preste, n.(3).” Entries n.(1) and n.(2) refer not to priests at all, but to sheets of paper and monetary loans. The four quotations from n.(3) come from definitions 1a.(a), 1a.(b), and 1c.(a). The more expansive, and historically later, definition quoted below is from 4.(b).

11. The note on “reden and syngen” comes from the MED entry for “reden, v.,” definition 2b.(a). Though the Gawain-poet does not appear to use the phrase disparagingly in line 7, it can be used in other anticerlical contexts to describe the meaningless or ineffective work of bad priests. For example, the Lollard Hawisia Moone refers to priests dismissively as “singemesses ... lecherous and couetouse men, and fals deceyvours of the puple” whose work consists of “sotel techyng and prechyng, syngyng and redyng” (Hudson, ed., Selections 35).

12. The first definition of “hod” in the MED, 1.(a), is “A hood for men or women attached to an outer garment or worn as a separate head-covering with or without attached shoulder cape.” The definition quoted here, which specifically denotes hoods worn by members of religious orders, is 2.(a).

13. These connections are documented in Chapter 2. See, for example, Hudson and Gradon, eds., I.309-12, I.637-42, and II.178-85; and Wyclif, De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae II.181-83 (On the Truth 293-94). Also see further discussion below.

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

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

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

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

18.  In The Alliterative Revival (1977), Thorlac Turville-Petre discusses several words that are used almost exclusively in Middle English alliterative poetry, and almost exclusively in alliterative positions within the line. He quotes Cleanness 139-50, a section within the Parable of the Wedding Feast, as a sample of poetry that is rich with these types of words, and he includes “freke” among them, along with ”gome,” “menskez,” “burne,” “busked,” “brothe,” and “hurkelez” (Turville-Petre 82-83). He does not focus on the word “freke” at length at any point in his study, but he says of these words in general that they “became a characteristic element in the alliterative style, but they remained ‘metrical’ words. The feeling seems to have been that they were words introduced into the poetic vocabulary to satisfy a metrical need, and therefore they could not be used freely where the alliterative pattern did not call for them. The implication of this must be that these words continued to be regarded as out of the ordinary” (83).

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

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

21.  See the MED, definitions 1.(e) “a siege tower, fortification” and 2.(c) “a temple, shrine.”

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

23.  See the MED, “maister, n.,” definitions 1.(a) “A high official, civil or military; a governor, ruler, leader”; 1.(b) “applied to god, Christ, a heathen god”; 3.(a) “One who directs the formal education or training of children or youths, a schoolmaster, tutor”; 3.(b) “a learned man, scholar, sage”; 3.(c) “an authority in a branch of learning”; and 4.(a) “A spiritual director, religious instructor.”

24.  See the discussion on anticlerical accusations of sodomy, and their metaphorical link to simony, in Chapter 2. The relevant passage from De Simonia is I.8-9 (On Simony 36).
25. See the MED entry for “ark(e),” definition 3.(a) “Noah’s ark” and 3.(b) “used fig. of Holy Church,” which includes a citation from Piers Plowman C.XII.246.

26. See the MED, definition 1.(a): “A trunk, chest, or case of any size for storing or carrying valuables of any kind,” for example “relics.”

27. The word the Wycliffite LV uses in all of these instances (Ex. 17:1, Num. 33:1, and John 14:2) is actually “dwellyngeis,” but the Vulgate uses “mansiones.” The MED confirms this usage for “mansioun” in definition 3.(c) “a dwelling place in heaven, a heavenly mansion.”

28. Considering that the Gawain-poet displays a familiarity with the county of Cheshire in Gawain 691-712, he may have been most likely to see the Chester version of the Deluge play (Deimling, ed., The Chester Plays 48-63), in which Noah’s wife appears as a comically disobedient figure. For similar depictions of Noah’s wife, who is never named, see Beadle, ed., The York Plays 83-90 and Stevens and Cawley, eds., The Towneley Plays I.25-48. In contrast, the N-Town Play, also known as the Ludus Coventriae, depicts Noah’s wife as virtuous and submissive (Spector, ed., The N-Town Play I.41-50), and her dialogue is virtually indistinguishable from Noah’s own. Beadle traces the tradition of the wife’s disobedience to an “Eastern legend” in which she is a counterpart to Eve, as the devil uses both women to introduce sin into the world. Since both Eve and Noah’s wife are all but invisible figures in Cleanness, the poet, deliberately or not, is clearly not relying on this tradition.

29. The citation appears under “worship)e, n.” definition 6. “Sovereignty; power, authority; dominance.” The quotation comes from a Wycliffite tract on the clerical dominion controversy entitled De Dominio Divino (not to be confused with Wyclif’s Latin treatise of the same name), printed in Matthew, ed., English Works 284-93.

30. “Wyclif’s fundamental premise” in both De Dominio Divino and De Civili Dominio, according to G.R. Evans, “is that only those in a state of grace, the virtuous, can legitimately exercise dominion over others, or over things” (157), and editors Reginald Lane Poole and F.D. Matthew characterize the entirety of De Civili Dominio as an elaboration of “two principles ... namely that the wicked have, properly speaking, no lordship, and that the righteous actually possess the whole universe” (I.49).

31. “et sic ex petulancia spoliando visitant feminas viduatas, cum stante Cristi ordinancia forent mariti pluri mariti, qui iam sunt ad clastra religiosis infundibilis tracti ...”

32. “Et sicut sodomia fuit tempore legis nature contra ipsam naturam unum de peccatis gravissimis, sic symonia est tempore legic gracie contra ipsam gracione gravissimum peccatorum.” See Chapter 2 for a longer quotation from this passage.

33. For a discussion of the word “cofer,” see above and n. 26. For “kyst,” see the MED entry for “chest(e),” alternately spelled “kist(e,” definition 4.(b) “Noah’s Ark” and 4.(c) “a pyx.”

34. “Si enim tempore ante legem sine exemplo Cristi persona laica deseruit civilitatem propter devotionem, multo magis sacerdotes Cristi sic facerent exemplo sui magistri.”

35. Compare the opening and closing lines from Pearl, “Perle plesaunte, to prynces paye” (1) / “Ande precious perlez vnto His pay” (1212); Patience, “Pacience is a poynt, tha hit disples ofte” (1) / “That pacience is a nobel poynt, thay hit disples ofte” (531); and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, “Sithen the sege and the assaut watz sesad at Troye” (1) / “After the segge and the asaute watz sesad at Troye” (2525), the last full line before the five-line “bob and wheel” at the end.
Chapter Four

1. See Middle English Dictionary, “bachelere,” definition 5: “One who has taken the lowest degree (in a particular subject) conferred by a university; ~ of divin (divinite), ~ of lawe, ~ of phisik, ~ in medicines.” Andrew and Waldron gloss “bacheleres” as “young men,” which follows MED definition 1. For meanings related to chivalric status, see definitions 2, 3, and 4, in particular 2: “An aspirant to knighthood, a novice in arms, a squire.”

2. See MED, “prest, (adv.)” definition 1(a): “Immediately, at once, promptly, right now” and definition 2: “Eagerly, willingly; earnestly, zealously.” The MED gives Patience 303 as the earliest citation under definition 2.

3. Psalm 93 in the Vulgate and Wycliffite editions of the Bible, which follow the numbering of the Greek Septuagint text, becomes Psalm 94 in later editions which follow the Hebrew Masoretic text, including the King James Version.

4. MED “bour,” definition 1(b), “a shelter, den” cites Patience 276 and 437; 2(a), “an inner room; esp., a bedroom” cites Cleanness 129; and 2(c), “any kind of small room or compartment; a storeroom, a stall for animals, a kennel” cites Cleanness 322. Figurative uses from other sources appear under definitions 3(a), (b), (c), and (d).

5. Though Andrew refers to Jonah’s place of refuge on the ship as a “bower,” the poet does not actually use this word to describe it. Jonah is found sleeping in a “derne,” a hiding place, at “the bothem of the bot” (182, 184).

6. Though they appear similar, “grame” is a different word from “greme,” or wrath, God’s response to priestly filth in Cleanness 16. The MED’s entries for both words give similar definitions, including such synonyms as anger, hatred, injury, harm, grief, and sorrow. The etymology of “grame,” however, is traced to the Old English gram a, and “greme” to the Old Norse gremi.

7. Forshall and Madden note that some manuscripts substitute “riȝtfulnesse” for “riȝtwisnesse” in this verse. The distinction between the two is not meaningful for the present discussion, especially since the Gawain-poet does not use either word in any of his works.

8. The translation is Scase’s. A printed edition of Nemo Vos Seducat is not available, but Scase quotes the original Latin from MS Bodley 144: “semper seu continuo pauper erat non quia propter se paupertatem dilexit aut voluit set quia restrictio sui dominii naturalis id egit.”


10. See Chapter 2, note 39.

11. “Medicina necessaria ad extinguendum venenum diaboli foret totum clerum exproprietarium facere et ordinationem Christi primevam quoad suam ecclesiam innovare.”

12. Though the Gawain-poet does not use the word “peril” again after line 114 of Patience, the Wycliffite Bible uses the phrase “in peril” to describe the state of the storm-tossed ship in both Jonah 1:4 and Luke 8:23, a translation of the Vulgate “periclitabatur.”


14. See Chapter 2, note 60.

15. See MED “louken, v.(1).” For definitions related to locking, see 1(a), (b), and (d); for enclosure, see 2a.; and for the figurative uses of jewelry setting and burial, see 2b.(a) and (c).
The MED cites Patience 350 under definition 2b.(d), “of words, lore, God’s will, secret counsel: enclosed (in sb., in someone's heart or breast, etc.) . . . of a story: fixed (with letters), embodied (in letters).”

16. “patet secundo, quod predicacio verbi dei est actus solemnior quam confeccio sacramenti, cum tantum sit unum recipere verbum dei sicut corpus Cristi, igitur multo plus est, populum recipere verbum dei, quam unicum personam recipere corpus Cristi . . . predicacio delet mortalía efficacius quam eucharistía. . . . dictum autem verbum predicatum est veritas et per consequens essencialiter deus ipse. ideo eius predicacio est opus dignissimum creature.”

17. “quasi tuba considerens, quod non a te plus, quam es, habes vocem huiusmodi, sed es nudum organum vocis sponsi. sic enim non superbirent predicatores de voce eius, qui loquitur in eis, Cristus.”

18. “ideo exponendo illos oportet loqui sincerius, quia aliter non forent expositores, sed nudi recitatores.”

19. “sic ergo debemus iuxta sensus comunes communicancium aptare sermones nostros duplicitate postposita timendo.”

20. See Chapter 2, note 32.

Chapter Five

1. See the discussion of these words in Chapter 3, especially notes 26 and 33.

2. According to the Middle English Dictionary, “mes” definition n.(2), which means food, meal, or feast, derives from the Old French and Latin “missus.” The word “messe,” or Mass, derives from the Old French and Medieval Latin “missa,” as well as from Old English.

3. The alternate definition of “toun” as “court” is provided by Andrew and Waldron’s glossary (352), which specifically references Sir Gawain 31. The definition does not appear in the MED’s entry for “toun.”

4. See the discussion of this formulation, which appears in various forms throughout Wyclif’s work, the Wycliffite sermon cycle, and other Lollard documents, in Chapter 2.
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